



FREE  
REPORT

# MANITOBA'S CONSERVATION HOT SPOTS

Rare remnant expanse of **tallgrass prairie** (Mike Grandmaison) in southern Manitoba.

## Special Places for *All of Us*

**C**lear rivers that run through lush greenery and remote sparkling lakes nestled in untouched wild forests can still be witnessed in Manitoba. **We Manitobans are fortunate to have wild and natural areas around us.** That nature is part of our identity, something that we cherish. Even if we never visit a park to see rare wildflowers blooming, even if we don't spot a wood bison slip through the trees or a group of woodland caribou traverse across a bog, we all value wild areas because we know they exist. We understand that 500,000 birds converging in one place is special (as they do in the Saskatchewan River Delta) and this place then becomes special to us. It's even been scientifically demonstrated<sup>1</sup> that connecting with nature is linked to happiness: **wilderness feeds our emotional well-being.**

Mental well-being is just one of the benefits of nature. Manitoba encompasses a diverse array of ecosystems, a dynamic set of living creatures interacting with their environment. Within each ecosystem there is a diverse biology. On the southern plain, trembling aspen shoots fight for light among the tall grasses and wildflowers, while regular fires

and floods revitalize the land. This biodiversity, this variety in the web of life, is a critical component of a healthy environment. Manitoba still has great expanses of intact ecosystems; representative samples of wild lands that existed for millennia before industrial development occurred. In an undisrupted ecosystem, the interaction between plants, animals, water cycles, weather, and temperature all maintain a delicate balance. The importance of balance is easy to see: biodiversity is a result of healthy intact natural areas, healthy ecosystems are a result of the continuing presence of natural biodiversity, and a healthy Manitoba is a result of this biodiversity.

Naturally occurring processes in a functioning ecosystem are what make a healthy environment for us, and these are known as **ecosystem services**. Simple examples are Manitoba's forests pulling carbon dioxide and pollutants

out of the air while expelling oxygen, or lowland bogs filtering our water. Other ecosystem services that are naturally provided for Manitobans include weather stabilization, climate change mitigation, carbon storage, pollination, and erosion prevention.

We rely on these ecosystem services—byproducts of healthy and natural wild areas—to maintain our own health. Nature in Manitoba, across all of our ecosystems, is valuable to our lives.

By looking at certain species, like woodland caribou, a quick snapshot

of the health of an ecosystem can be seen. The presence of woodland caribou in their home ranges in Manitoba indicates that their forest is largely undisturbed and healthy. These "indicator species" like the woodland caribou, are usually the most sensitive or most visible of a whole group of species that rely on healthy ecosystems to survive. Similar to the **canary in the coalmine**, if this species dies off, the ecosystem is in trouble, and the rest of the species in the group are likely to be suffering<sup>2</sup>. Attending to the needs of endangered species in Manitoba is pointing us in the direction we need to go to preserve healthy ecosystems and biodiversity.

**Many natural areas in this province remain intact today, but there is an ongoing push for development in our wild lands, while water and air pollution threatens them from a distance.**

Read on and learn about some of the hottest spots in Manitoba where preservation will make a big difference for important plants, animals, and ecosystems. If we want our kids to hold nature dear, we must leave a natural legacy for future generations. Now is our chance.

The **short-eared owl** (Art Wolfe) is classified as a species of special concern in Canada, and has been seen during breeding season in the Saskatchewan River Delta. The **wood bison** (Roberta Olenick) herd in the Chitek Lake area is one of only five free-range herds in the world.



# Working to Preserve Manitoba's Natural Heritage

Manitoba's patchwork of protected areas preserves natural wonders like the rich wetland beauty of the Delta Marsh Wildlife Management Area, backcountry destinations such as Mantario Lake in the Whiteshell, and remote expanses of forests, rivers and lakes like those found in Sand Lakes Provincial Park. Unfortunately, many special places don't have the protection that is necessary to preserve them. In order to pass on our province's natural heritage to ensuing generations, a clear vision and a goal for future protected wild and natural areas should be established. To start, here are five hot spots that all Manitobans can work to preserve.

## Saskatchewan River Delta★

Straddling the Manitoba-Saskatchewan border near The Pas is one of the largest freshwater deltas on earth. The Saskatchewan River Delta (SRD) is a collection of lowland grass plains and bogs, with lazy streams meandering between black spruce-tamarack forests and ridges covered in white pine, aspen and birch. The SRD is both



Clearwater Lake (Mike Grandmaison) is on the northern edge of the Tom Lamb Wildlife Management Area, part of the lower Saskatchewan River Delta.

unmatched for quality wildlife habitat in Manitoba as well as one of the most important areas for migratory bird breeding, staging and migration in North America. Whooping cranes pass through the SRD on their way north to their breeding grounds, while the yellow rail, rusty blackbird, and peregrine falcon are other protected bird species that frequent the SRD. It's been estimated that half a million ducks and geese use the SRD for breeding.<sup>3</sup> The delta also provides habitat for the secretive and threatened woodland caribou.

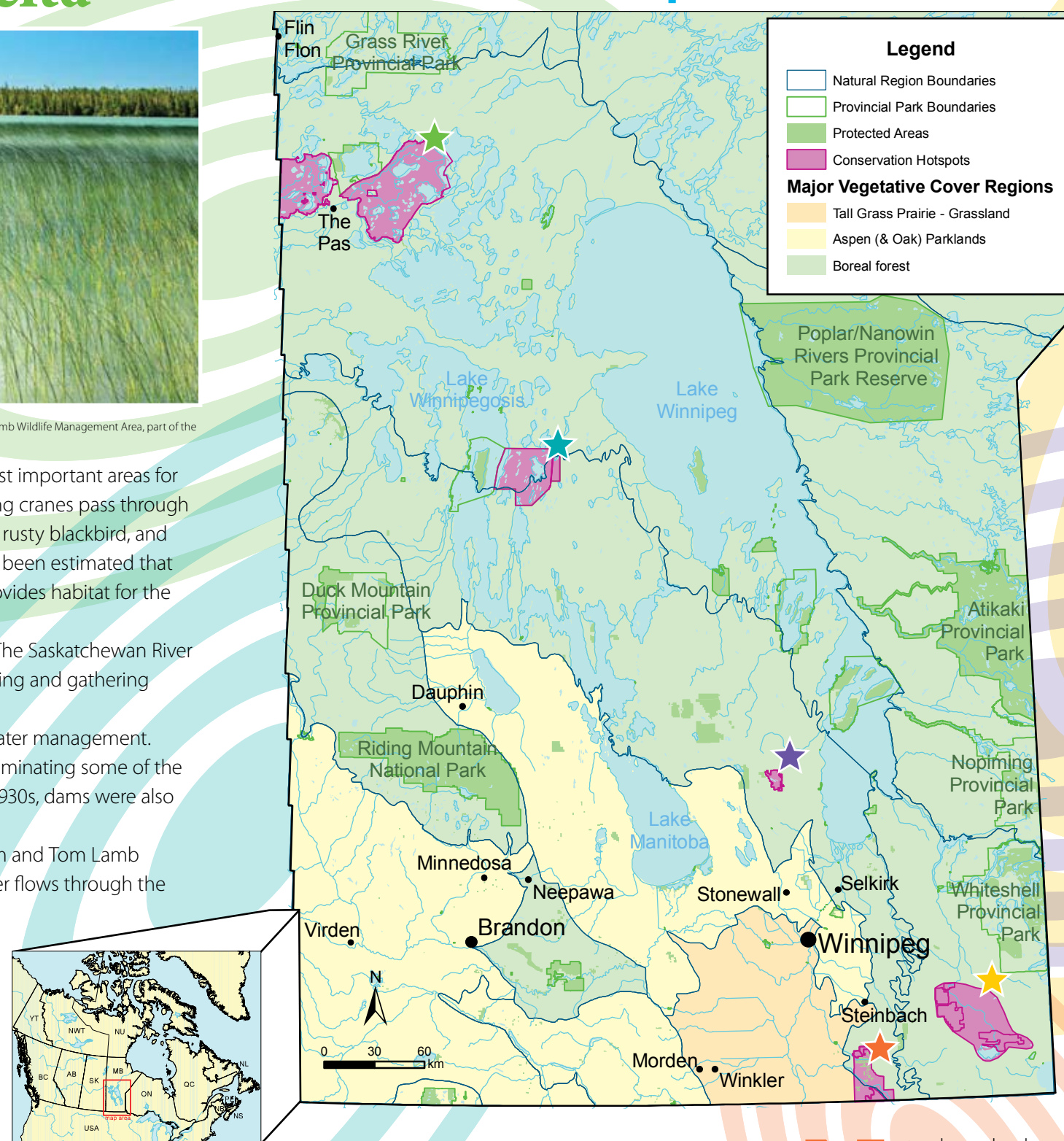
The Opaskwayak Cree Nation are the original inhabitants of this region. The Saskatchewan River Delta is culturally significant to the community, and traditional hunting, fishing and gathering activities in the SRD continue today.

For decades, a major threat to the Saskatchewan River Delta has been water management. Hydroelectric dams on the Saskatchewan River have affected water flow, eliminating some of the natural flood cycles that redistribute nutrients throughout the area. In the 1930s, dams were also built to improve muskrat habitat for trapping.

Much of the SRD in Manitoba is encompassed by the provincial Sakeram and Tom Lamb Wildlife Management Areas. Today, ongoing work is aimed at ensuring water flows through the delta are returned to a natural flood cycle.

Other threats remain for this treasured wildlife haven, as industrial logging and mining are still allowed in the area. Given the startling decline in migratory bird species across North America, maintaining the SRD as a healthy ecosystem is an important responsibility.<sup>4</sup>

## Conservation hot spots in Manitoba



## Whitemouth River Area★

Clear river waters in southern Manitoba are a rarity, but on the edge of the flats where the plains meet the Lake Country, the Whitemouth River offers a chance to keep one river clean.

Starting out of Whitemouth Lake in southeast Manitoba, the Whitemouth River is surrounded by extensive peat bogs for 40 kilometers as it wanders north and encounters development. The rare Ram's-head Lady's-slipper can be found in the region. Water clarity in the first reaches of the Whitemouth is the sort that old folks still talk about, as a natural clarification occurs as the Whitemouth River traverses the untouched lowlands. An endangered fish, the Carmine shiner makes its home in clear and clean rivers, and is found almost exclusively in the Whitemouth River. The peat bogs are a valuable tool in addressing a changing climate, as they take in more carbon than they give off, and store it for thousands of years.<sup>5</sup>

Some threats to the Whitemouth River include agricultural encroachment and run-off, as well as water drainage plans that could cause siltation. Peat mining operations have started in the area, and could impact the waterway. In the spring of 2009, the Manitoba government protected a section of the Whitemouth River Bog close to where it drains into the Winnipeg River, and this is a welcome step. To maintain clear water flows in Manitoba, to preserve rare species, and to mitigate climate change, the upper section of the Whitemouth River and surrounding bog should be protected.



The Ram's-head Lady's-slipper (Mike Grandmaison), a rare orchid, has been found in the Whitemouth River area.

## Fish Lake Area★

A wild and natural plant refuge in a sea of managed lands is a perfect description of the Fish Lake area. Situated between Lake Winnipeg and Lake Manitoba in the Interlake Plains eco-region, the Fish Lake area has the rare characteristics of a 'calcareous fen'. (While fens and bogs are both peatlands, they differ in that fens are typically spring-fed, and a calcareous fen is richer in nutrients and has a more neutral acidity than a typical peatland.) The rich, spring-fed peatlands host a unique plant community, a home for uncommon flora such as Showy Lady's-slipper, English sundew, and smooth twigrush.

Currently there is no protection for the Fish Lake fen, although there is local interest in protecting the area. The biggest threats to the area are waterflow control, conversion of the land to agricultural usage and mining. As with other peatlands, the Fish Lake area is a carbon sink, making protection of this area an important step to mitigate climate change.



Red-headed woodpeckers (Robert McCaw), a threatened species, make their home in the Fish Lake area, where you can also find the Showy Lady's-slipper (Mike Grandmaison).



## Gardenton Pasture, Pansy Pasture Region★

Natural grasslands, meadows and wooded bluffs once dominated the plains of North America, with wildflowers blooming in succession through the summer as the tall grasses grew up to seed. Butterflies and birds flitted through the flora, while herds of grazing animals razed the plants and then moved on to greener places. Yearly flooding replenished nutrients to the soils and grass fires kept woody trees from establishing themselves. Today, very little remains of those natural ecosystems—less than 25% of the Tallgrass Aspen parkland eco-region is in a natural state, and less than 1% of native tallgrass prairie remains.<sup>6</sup>

At 2,000 hectares, the Tallgrass Prairie Preserve in southern Manitoba near the U.S. border is a tiny haven of protection for tall-grass species. Scattered over discontinuous sections, the Preserve is a pale shadow of what a protected area for these rare ecosystems should be. While most of the land across southern Manitoba is privately owned and used for agriculture (with the exception of some private conservation agreements) several pieces of public land surround the Tallgrass Prairie Preserve.

The 5,213-hectare Gardenton Pasture to the southeast and the 3,057-hectare Pansy Pasture to the north offer a diverse sampling of ecosystems once found across the Tallgrass Aspen Parkland ecoregion, from poplar bluffs to wet meadows to upland tallgrass prairie. Riddell's goldenrod, Western Prairie fringed orchid, Small White Lady's-slipper, and the Western Silvery Aster are all endangered plants found in the region, as are the Dakota Skipper and Powershiek Skipper butterflies.<sup>7</sup>

The entire region faces similar threats—inappropriate fire regimes, water level management, and agricultural encroachment. Expanding the Tallgrass Prairie Preserve with the inclusion of the Gardenton and Pansy Pastures will offer a better chance to protect uncommon ecosystems and rare biodiversity.



Tallgrass prairie (Mike Grandmaison) between the Gardenton and Pansy Pastures.

## Chitek Lake Park Reserve★

Chitek Lake Park Reserve, on the eastern shore of Lake Winnipegosis in the Interlake region, is a special place worthy of special care. Nominated for protection by the Skownan First Nation, the area is an intact and roadless transition zone, where lakes are surrounded by the aspen parkland of the south blending into the boreal pine and black spruce forests of the north. The soil is a blend, too, with sections of deep organic material broken up by glacial mineral soil deposits. The resulting biological diversity, unfettered by development, makes the 1,003-square-kilometer Chitek Lake Park Reserve truly unique. Threatened woodland caribou can be found in the region, and in 1988, wild wood bison were released into the Park Reserve. The wood bison herd has grown to over 100 animals, and it is hoped the herd may reach 400. This makes the Chitek Lake Park Reserve the only place in Manitoba where five species of ungulates exist—wood bison, woodland caribou, moose, elk and white-tailed deer.

For the people of Skownan First Nation, Chitek Lake is an integral part of their lives. In addition to fishing, hunting, trapping and plant gathering, the area contains many sacred and special sites for this community.

The current interim status on the Chitek Lake Park Reserve prohibits logging and mining in the area but protection expires in September 2009. Another five-year period of interim protection will provide time for further planning for this area.



Meandering streams and lowland forests, like this one in the Interlake, can be found in the Chitek Lake Park Reserve (Eric Reder).

# Painful Policy on Protection

## Trying to move forward while going backward on Protected Areas

In 1990, the government of Manitoba agreed to protect at least 12% of the province from development by the year 2000, and in 2007, scientists asked that at least 50% of the boreal forest be protected.<sup>8</sup> Unfortunately, there is only a little over 8% of the province protected right now. In 2008, for the second year in a row, a technical Protected Areas Audit conducted by Manitoba Wildlands found a net loss in protected areas in the province.<sup>9</sup> If you exclude Caribou River Provincial Park, which had already been established when the current government came to power, only 105,000 hectares have been permanently protected during their nine-year tenure. That's less than 0.2% of the province!<sup>10</sup>

While other jurisdictions such as Nova Scotia are actively pursuing a goal, albeit a modest one of 12% protected areas, Manitoba's 'protected areas' vision is blurry.

Most people think our provincial parks are protected from industrial development; however, they are not. In other countries

and provinces, a park is considered a protected area, but not in Manitoba. The recent announcement of a ban on commercial logging in parks is only a partial step forward, as commercial logging is still encouraged in Duck Mountain Provincial Park, and in one park with a logging ban—Grass River—a logging road proposal bisecting the park is currently at Environmental Licensing for approval. Our parks are not protected areas, as mining in parks is still encouraged (and often financed by incentive programs from the government).<sup>11</sup>

The first step in protecting land in Manitoba should not be asking whether the mining industry supports the plan, but that is the case right now. Essentially, commercial interests control protection decisions on public lands. Even if the mining industry does support protection for an area, the process might not go forward,

as the government department responsible for increasing protected areas is unable to handle the work. There are over 100 areas being considered for protection right now, which includes 4 million hectares already approved for protection by the mining industry.<sup>12</sup>

The vision that is long overdue for a healthy Manitoba must include a timeline and a goal for the amount of fully protected area in this province, as well as the resources and political will to reach that goal. This is what all Manitobans should expect from their government.



Western prairie orchid (Mike Grandmaison), Short-eared owl (Jim Flynn), Monarch butterflies (Rolf Kraiker), Woodland caribou (Art Wolfe), Wood bison (John E. Marriott).

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## Manitoba must protect these 5 hot spots by 2010!

**We need action now!** Protecting the areas listed in this paper would increase our protected areas by almost one percent, a modest but significant goal. Sustained action by the government is needed to preserve Manitoba's biodiversity and ecosystem services.

If you want to preserve our rich natural heritage, write to Premier Doer. Tell him how much you support protection *now* for more wilderness. Let him know how strongly you feel the government should protect these 5 conservation hotspots (at least!) by the end of 2010: **the Saskatchewan River Delta, Chitek Lake Park Reserve, the Whitemouth River area, the Fish Lake area, and the Gardenton and Pansy Pastures.**

make your voice heard  
Premier of Manitoba  
**Gary Doer**

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## Resources

- Opaskwayak Cree Nation**  
Box 10880  
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(204) 627-7100  
[opaskwayak.ca](http://opaskwayak.ca)
- Skownan First Nation**  
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Skownan, MB R0L 1Y0  
(204) 628-3373
- Manitoba Wildlands**  
(204) 944-9593  
[manitobawildlands.org](http://manitobawildlands.org)

## Credits

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**Design:** Sue Fox, Gil Aguilar.  
**Mapping:** Geoff Senichenko.  
**Photos:** As noted.

**Western Canada Wilderness Committee**  
Vol. 28, No 2, Spring 2009. Canadian Mail Product Sales Agreement No. 0900567. Posted in Vancouver for free distribution. Printed in Canada on recycled newsprint with vegetable-based inks.  
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Published by  
**Wilderness Committee – National Office**  
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