

Chappice Lake

Important Bird Area Conservation Plan

Dawn Dickinson
Chappice Lake IBA Group



Society of Grassland Naturalists



Fish & Wildlife



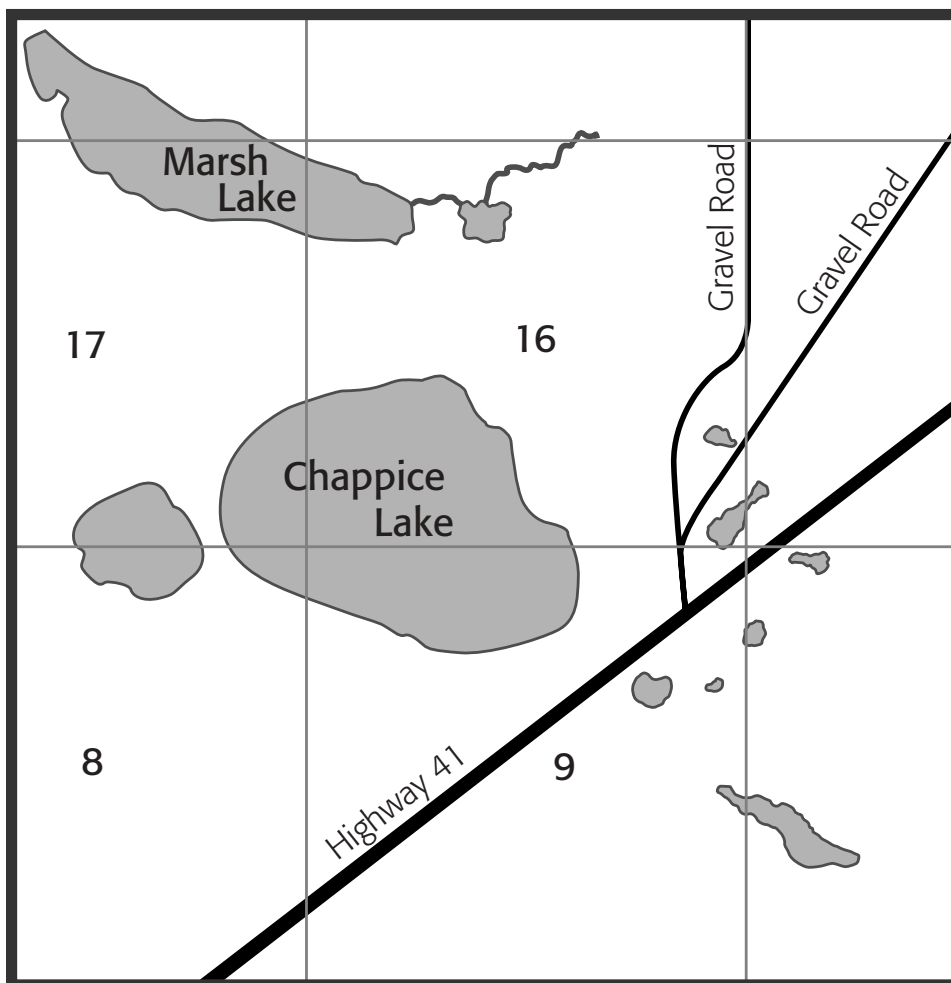
Public Lands

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1. INTRODUCTION

Chappice Lake is a permanent saline lake in the mixed-grass prairie region of Alberta, situated about 20km northeast of Medicine Hat and 15km southeast of the South Saskatchewan River (50 10' N, 110 22' W). Survey evidence showed this lake to be a critical staging area for migrating shorebirds as well as a nesting area for piping plover. Accordingly, Chappice Lake was identified as an Important Bird Area (IBA – CAA B112G) in 1998 . The IBA includes the south half of sections 16 and 17, T.14, R.3. W. 4., the north half of section 8 and those lands in the north half of section 9 that lie west of Highway 41 (Figure 1). The lands surrounding the lake are native prairie partly owned and partly leased by Cavan Ranches for grazing.

Figure 1. Map of Chappice Lake.



2. IBA PROGRAM

The IBA program is an international initiative coordinated by BirdLife International, a partnership of member-based organisations in over 100 countries seeking to identify and conserve sites important to all bird species. Through the protection of birds and habitats, they also promote the conservation of the world's biodiversity. The Canadian BirdLife partners are the Canadian Nature Federation and Bird Studies Canada. The lead partner in Alberta is the Federation of Alberta Naturalists (please see Appendix A for more on the Partners). The Canadian IBA program is part of the American IBA program which includes the United States, Mexico, and 17 countries in Central and South America.

The goals of the Canadian IBA program are to:

1. identify a network of sites that conserve the natural diversity of Canadian bird species and are critical to the long-term viability of naturally occurring bird populations;
2. determine the type of protection or stewardship required for each site, and ensure the conservation of sites through partnerships of local stakeholders who develop and implement appropriate on-the-ground conservation plans; and
3. establish ongoing local involvement in site protection and monitoring.

The following are internationally agreed on categories:

1. sites regularly holding significant numbers of an endangered, threatened, or vulnerable species;
2. sites regularly holding and endemic species, or species with restricted ranges;
3. sites regularly holding an assemblage of species largely restricted to a biome;
4. sites where birds concentrate in significant numbers when breeding, in winter, or during migration.

Chappice Lake falls into this last category having significant numbers of shorebirds during spring migration and, to a lesser extent, during fall migration. Also it has, until quite recently, regularly held significant numbers of nesting piping plover—classified as an endangered species in both Canada as a whole and in Alberta under the Alberta Wildlife Act..

3. SITE DESCRIPTION

Chappice lake is a shallow (< 1 m) hypersaline lake situated in a meltwater channel at a point where several such channels converge (Vance and Mathewes 1994). The lake lies over a buried bedrock valley filled with glacial deposits, which may act as an aquifer influencing lake levels. However, the major source of recharge is from shallow groundwater flow (Birks and Remenda 1999). The lake lies at an elevation of 731 m asl in an internally drained basin of about 156 km² (Birks and Remenda 1999). The surface area of the lake is about 2.1 km² but has varied over the years, as has the shoreline of approximately 7.0 km. A small basin at the west end was formerly connected to the main basin, but with declining lake levels has become separated. (Figures 2 & 3).

Formerly the lake was fed by a stream from the northeast, but after construction of a weir by Ducks Unlimited in 1978 little surface water now flows into the lake from the stream. However, a marsh has developed along its course suggesting significant sub-surface flow beneath the stream channel, with groundwater inputs minimising the effects of the weir on lake levels (Birks and Remenda 1999). Although there is no surface outflow from the lake, analysis of groundwater at various points below the lake indicates some groundwater outflow. Evaporation from the surface usually exceeds annual precipitation consequently the springs recharging the lake are of vital importance. Analysis of groundwater inflow to the lake, over 38 years, has shown that inflow has often been greatest in times of drought (Birks and Remenda 1999). However, from 1970 to 1985, total lake area was reduced by 27% with lake drawdown apparently hastened by construction of the 1978 weir (Vance et al. 1993). In the severe drought year of 2001, which followed two other drought years, there was little water evident in Chappice Lake. However, areas of seepage were still wet and large numbers of birds were concentrated at these sites in early June (J.Nicholson pers. comm.). Water levels recovered in 2002, although not to pre-1970 levels.

The lake itself supports a community of pondweed (*Ruppia maritima*). Plant communities around the lake follow a soil salinity gradient in concentric bands (Vance and Mathewes 1994). The lake shore is sandy, locally pebbly, with extensive alkali deposits (Wershler, 1989; and 1992) and is unvegetated, except for sparse patches of salt meadow grass (*Puccinellia nuttalliana*) in groundwater seeps. Farther from the shore, soil salinity is still high as indicated by red samphire (*Salicornia europaea*), seablite (*Suaeda calceoliformis*) and salt meadow grass (Vance and Mathewes 1994). Seeps along the south and east backshores support wet meadows, with shallow water and wet mud (Wershler, 1989, and 1992). Bullrush (*Scirpus pungens* and *Scirpus nevadensis*) and alkali grass (*Distichlis stricta*) provide most of the plant cover. Above this zone is dry mixed-grass prairie with prickly pear cactus indicating its aridity. Scratch grass (*Muhlenbergia asperifolia*), an uncommon species, has also been found here (Wershler 1992). A marshy area along the former stream channel in the north east reflects a less well-defined salinity gradient because of intermittent freshwater discharge (Vance and Mathewes 1994). A few cottonwood trees on the north backshore have provided nesting sites for ferruginous hawks (Wershler, 1990). Uplands provide habitat for Richardson's ground squirrel and many ground-nesting grassland birds.

Figure 2. Airphoto of Chappice Lake in 1969



Chappice Lake
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Figure 3. Airphoto of Chappice Lake in 1998



Chappice Lake
Important Bird Area
Conservation Plan

4. IBA SPECIES

Chappice Lake has at times supported globally significant numbers of staging shorebirds during spring migration. In the spring of 1988, 4,500 sanderling and 3,000 Baird's sandpiper were observed (Wershler 1990) comprising respectively 2% of N. American population (sanderling) and 1–2% of global population (Baird's sandpiper). Peak numbers of shorebirds were recorded at 10,992 (Dickson and Smith, 1991). Twenty three species of shorebirds have been recorded at Chappice Lake with migrants staging in both spring and fall (Tables 1 and 2). A single snowy plover was also observed in the 1980s (Wershler pers. comm.). In addition, piping plover—listed as an endangered species by COSEWIC as well as under the Alberta Wildlife Act—has nested at Chappice Lake for at least two decades (Wershler, 1989; Prescott, pers. comm. Horch, unpublished data), (Table 3). Numbers appear to have fluctuated substantially, but this may in part be due to irregular coverage of surveys over the years.

Other species of concern that have been observed at Chappice Lake, or in surrounding grasslands include: burrowing owl (endangered), Sprague's pipit (threatened), ferruginous hawk (vulnerable), and long-billed curlew (vulnerable).

5. LAND STATUS AND USE

Cavan Ranches has deeded land on the west side of the lake (Sections 8 and 17, T. 14, R. 3, W.4), and leases Crown lands for grazing around the rest of the lake (Sections 9 and 16, T. 14, R. 3, W. 4). The area is grazed for two months from late March to late May. Highway 41 cuts through Crown land close to the southeast shore. Several wells produce sweet gas. Energy leases are held by the following companies: Enco Plus, Direct Energy, Search Energy, and Nexen Drilling.

Table 1. Shorebirds observed at Chappice Lake between May 15 and June 28, 1987–2002.
(P. Horch unpublished field records).

Species	87	91	92	93	94	95	96	97	98	99	00	01	02
black-bellied plover								1					
semipalmated plover		1											
piping plover			2	4	2	2							
killdeer				4		8			22	7			
American avocet	100+	65	5	8	16	73			4	8	22	4	
greater yellowlegs													
lesser yellowlegs	3			3		1							
willet	1	2	2	3	8	7		4	4		4	2	
upland sandpiper		1	1		2	4							
long-billed curlew		2											
marbled godwit	1	4	1	10	4	14				3	4	3	2
sanderling		400+	100+	45		11	12	12	34		6		33
semipalmated sandpiper	9	22	3	21		3			3		200+	50+	
western sandpiper		5	4	4									
least sandpiper	4	2	3				2	1		8	12		5
Baird's sandpiper	2	130+	5	850+		24	3	8	5	2	10	16	50+
pectoral sandpiper	7	8	1	31		5		1			4	4	
stilt sandpiper													
short-billed dowitcher										3			
long-billed dowitcher						1				5			
common snipe	1												
Wilson's phalarope	200+	47	10	38	8	22			12	11	2	18	16
red-necked phalarope				4				7					

Table 2. Shorebirds observed at Chappice Lake between July 2 and September 7, 1985–1998.
(P. Horch unpublished field records)

Species	85	88	89	90	91	98
semipalmated plover	6		1			
piping plover				2		
killdeer				8		1
American avocet	200+		3	16	1	40
greater yellowlegs	3				20	
lesser yellowlegs	17			1	40	8
willet	5			4	5	1
upland sandpiper						
long-billed curlew						
marbled godwit					1	4
sanderling			2		3	
semipalmated sandpiper	23		15	1	45	10
western sandpiper			1		1	
least sandpiper	22			2	9	6
Baird's sandpiper	10	4	40+	24	62	100+
pectoral sandpiper	150+	16		1		3
stilt sandpiper	3					3
short-billed dowitcher	2					
long-billed dowitcher	18					
common snipe						
Wilson's phalarope	300+			57	11	78
red-necked phalarope	6					

Table 3. Observations of Piping Plover at Chappice Lake.
(Data from Biodiversity Species Observation Data Base;
P. Horch unpublished Field records, J.P. Goossen, 1992).

Year	Month Day	Number	Breeding evidence
1978	July 8	2	1 young of year
1984	May 18	5	1 nest
1985	April 27	3	
	August 2	6	
1986	May 30	17	6 nests and 12 eggs
1987	June 7	11	2 nests
	June 25	8	
1988	July 29	3	
1989	June 5	15	1 nest and 4 eggs
	July 6	10	1 nest and 2 young of year
1990	May 28	12	
	May 31	5	
	June 7	9	
	July 2	2	
	July 3	5	
1991	May 29	2	
	July 4	3	1 nest and 4 eggs
1992	May 23	2	
	no date	5	4 young of year
1993	May 15	4	
	June 5	4	
	July 5	10	5 nests and 14 eggs
1994	June 6	2	
	July 14	1	1 nest
1995	June 13	2	
1996	June 3	1	
1997	June 23	2	
1998	May 25	0	
1999	May 22	0	
2000	May 23	0	
2001	May 21	0	
2002	June 6	0	

NB. Survey methods did not include a search for nests .

6. CONSERVATION INITIATIVES

Over the years the Cavan family has maintained the native prairie surrounding the lake in excellent condition; the hypersalinity of the lake and the salt tolerant vegetation near its shores is generally unattractive to cattle, so that trampling of shorelines has not been a problem. Water for cattle is available from dugouts and the Ducks Unlimited freshwater lake (Marsh Lake) to the northwest. Cavan Ranches also require that gas companies restrict their access to existing roads; may no longer take water from the lake for drilling, but must obtain it from sources outside the area, and must dispose of drilling mud elsewhere. No recreational use of ATVs is allowed.

In 1991, Chappice Lake, together with Sam Lake and surrounding uplands were identified as an Environmentally Significant Area (ESA) of provincial significance (Cottonwood Consultants 1991).

In 1996 Chappice Lake was nominated under the Special Places Program. The Cavan family, Public Lands and Grasslands Naturalists all supported the nomination, however, it did not meet the minimum size requirement and accordingly was not approved.

In 1999, in view of escalating energy developments in southeastern Alberta, Grasslands Naturalists requested that Public Lands consider putting reservations on sensitive Crown lands in the region including several lakes. A “flood hazard” protective notation (PNT) was placed in March 1999 on Crown lands at Chappice Lake below 725 m asl. (See Appendix A for details). The lake lies at an elevation of 731 m asl. (Many Island Lake topographical map, 1975). Subsequently, in August 2000 a further “endangered species” protective notation was placed on approximately 30 acres of shoreline (Appendix A).

The Piping Plover Recovery Team has prepared a recovery plan for piping plover in Alberta, which was approved in April 2002 by the Minister. Sharing of information regarding Chappice Lake has been discussed with Dr David Prescott, the Recovery Team chair. An International Piping Plover Census has been conducted across North America every five years since 1991 (Prescott, 2001). This census has included Chappice Lake.

The Chappice Lake Important Bird Area Group was formed locally and held its first meeting on August 26, 2002. Members presently include Cavan Ranches (Colleen and Warren Cavan), Grasslands Naturalists (Dennis Baresco, Michael O’Shea, Dawn Dickinson), Alberta Sustainable Resource Development, Public Lands (Bruce Cairns) and Fish and Wildlife Division (Joel Nicholson). The Group discussed an early draft of the Conservation Plan. The Plan will evolve with continued input by members as additional information is obtained.

7. POTENTIAL CONSERVATION ISSUES

Of potential concern to conservation of the IBA in order of importance are:

1. Activities which would deplete or contaminate groundwater within the drainage basin, which in turn would affect recharge of the lake. Shallow groundwater is considered to be especially vulnerable to depletion or contamination within the Palliser Triangle (Remenda and Birks 1999). Effects of depletion would be exacerbated by extended periods of drought.
2. Possible disturbance of staging and/or nesting birds by:
 - a. an increase in bird watching, or other recreational activities.
 - b. industrial activities in exploration and/or extraction of natural gas.
3. Extraction of sand, gravel or water for road maintenance.

8. PROPOSED ACTIONS TO ADDRESS IDENTIFIED ISSUES

1. **Depletion/contamination of groundwater.** Further information is needed to evaluate current use of groundwater in the basin. As a start, data will be obtained by a member of the Group, by October 15, on current water licences in the immediate vicinity of the IBA. Exploration for and development of sweet gas has been and continues to be extensive in the region. More information on drilling practices and possible effects on groundwater both within and outside the IBA are needed; potential sources of information will be identified at the Group's next meeting.
2. a. **Disturbance of staging and/or nesting birds by recreational use.** Although birding is a rapidly growing recreational pursuit in Alberta, to date few birding groups visit Chappice Lake, and most (all?) are careful not to disturb birds. The Group felt that Cavan Ranches could monitor use and if it seems to be becoming a problem the Group could then discuss options. On site signage was not considered necessary at this time. Hunting is limited to members of the Cavan family. Recreational use of ATVs has not been allowed by Cavan Ranches.
- b. **Possible disturbance of staging and/or nesting birds by industrial activity** associated with energy developments. The "Flood Hazard" PNT which is confined essentially to the lake, and does not exclude surface access, provides little protection from such disturbance since it is not specific to the wildlife habitat values of the lake. The importance of extending protection from industrial disturbance through perhaps a "Non-Game Bird Habitat" PNT will be discussed with the Wildlife and Public Lands branches of Alberta Sustainable Resources during October.
3. **Potential extraction of sand, gravel or water for road construction.** Gravel sources are more readily available locally elsewhere in the region. The Group felt that any application for extraction in the IBA was very unlikely.

9. OPPORTUNITIES FOR RESEARCH AND EDUCATION

The Chappice Lake IBA provides local opportunities for education through programs at the Medicine Hat Police Point Interpretive Centre (managed jointly by Grasslands Naturalists and the City of Medicine Hat). The research studies noted in Section 3 and the census/survey data in Section 4 provide valuable information on the dynamics of a hypersaline lake and on bird use over the past twenty years. Additional data on birds will be obtained, after the Conservation Plan is approved, from the Federation of Alberta Naturalists' data base and current bird atlas project. However, an inventory of aquatic and shoreline invertebrates in relation to fluctuating water levels is needed to better understand changing abundances of shorebirds. Universities will be contacted in October to see whether a graduate student might be interested in an aquatic invertebrate research project at Chappice Lake. Any remaining errors or omissions are the responsibility of the author.

Springs and seepages often provide habitats for rare plants. Alberta Natural Heritage Information Centre (ANHIC) has been contacted for any data the Centre may have on rare plant and animal species at Chappice Lake.

Monitoring of shorebirds, including piping plover, will be continued annually in spring and, if possible, also in July/August to obtain more information on the significance of the Lake to fall migration of shorebirds. Grasslands Naturalists will discuss piping plover survey protocol and coordination of surveys with Wildlife Division this winter. Liason will also be maintained with the Piping Plover Recovery Team with sharing of data and expertise.

The potential for obtaining funds to set up an interpretive display and program on Chappice Lake, at the Medicine Hat Police Point Interpretive Centre, will be explored with Dr. Prescott in October. An interpretive display and program could be presented to both rural as well as city schools .

Members of the Chappice Lake IBA Group feel that obtaining further information on the significance of the site and making this available locally to rural and city audiences is key to realising the Group's vision that the integrity of Chappice Lake will be maintained in perpetuity.

10. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I gratefully acknowledge the following individuals who contributed to the preparation of this Conservation Plan. Cleve Wershler, Dave Prescott, Dan Sturgess and Phil Horch provided records of observations; Chappice Lake IBA Group members Colleen and Warren Caven, Dennis Baresco, Michael O'Shea, Joel Nicholson, and Bruce Cairins gave generously of their time; George Newton provided direction and assistance with production of the final document, and along with Cleve Wershler and Dave Prescott reviewed an earlier draft.

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APPENDIX A. IBA PARTNERS

BirdLife International

A pioneer in its field, BirdLife International (BL) is the first non-government organization dedicated to promoting world-wide interest in and concern for the conservation of all birds and the special contribution they make to global biodiversity. BirdLife operates as a partnership of non-governmental conservation organizations, grouped together within geographic regions (e.g. Europe, Africa, Americas) for the purpose of planning and implementing regional programs. These organizations provide a link to on-the-ground conservation projects that involve local people with local expertise and knowledge. There are currently 20 countries involved in the Americas program throughout North, Central and South America.

For further information about BirdLife International, check the following web site: <http://www.birdlife.net/>.

The Canadian Important Bird Areas Program has been undertaken by a partnership of two lead agencies. The Canadian Nature Federation and Bird Studies Canada are the Canadian BirdLife International partners.

The Canadian Nature Federation (CNF)

The Canadian Nature Federation is a national conservation organization with a mission to be Canada's voice for the protection of nature, its diversity, and the processes that sustain it. The CNF represents the naturalist community and works closely with our provincial territorial and local affiliated naturalists organizations to directly reach 100,000 Canadians. The strength of our grassroots naturalists' network allows us to work effectively and knowledgeably on national conservation issues that affect a diversity of ecosystems and human populations in Canada. The CNF also works in partnership with other environmental organizations, government and industry, wherever possible.

Our approach is open and cooperative while remaining firm in our goal of developing ecologically-sound solutions to conservation problems. CNF's web site is <http://www.cnf.ca>

Bird Studies Canada (BSC)

The mission of Bird Studies Canada is to advance the understanding, appreciation and conservation of wild birds and their habitats, in Canada and elsewhere, through studies that engage the skills, enthusiasm and support of its members, volunteers, staff and the interested public. Bird Studies Canada believes that thousands of volunteers working together, with the guidance of a small group of professionals, can accomplish much more than could the two groups working independently. Current programs collectively involve over 10,000 volunteer participants from across Canada.

Bird Studies Canada is recognized nation-wide as a leading and respected not-for-profit conservation organization dedicated to the study and understanding of wild birds and their habitats. Bird Studies Canada's web site is <http://www.bsc-eoc.org>.

Federation of Alberta Naturalists (FAN)

The Federation of Alberta Naturalists is a provincial conservation organization, founded in 1970. FAN is an affiliate of the Canadian Nature Federation and is composed of corporate clubs and individual members.

The objectives of FAN are:

- to encourage Albertans to increase knowledge and understanding of natural history and ecological processes;
- to provide a unified voice for naturalists on conservation issues;
- to promote field meetings, conferences, nature camps, research symposia and other activities; and
- to promote the exchange of information among clubs and societies.

FAN publishes *Alberta Naturalist* four times a year.

Phone: (780) 427-8124

Fax: (780) 422-2663

Website: www.fanweb.ca/

APPENDIX B. CHAPPICE LAKE (GOVERNMENT OF ALBERTA) PROTECTIVE NOTATIONS (PNTs)

The following are excerpts lifted from the Activity Reports of the two PNTs on Chappice Lake, Alberta.

Activity Number:	PNT 990067	Area: 133.061 (ha)
Status:	Active/Disposed	328.801 (acres)
Service Owner:	MEDICINE HAT EAST OFFICE-PUBLIC LANDS DEPT. OF SUSTAINABLE RESOURCE	
Managed by:	MEDICINE HAT EAST	Key Land ID: NW-09-014-03 W4

Reservations	Code	Description
Reservation Purpose:	0152	FLOOD HAZARD AREA
Restriction:	5	NO SURFACE SALE DISPOSITIONS
Exceptions:	710	SEE COMMENTS

Comments/Remarks:

CHAPPICE LAKE. THIS AREA HAS A HISTORY OF PERIODIC FLOODING. NO NEW ABOVE GROUND INSTALLATIONS OR LAND SPRAYING PERMITTED ON SITES BELOW 725 METRES IN ELEVATION, ADDITIONAL ELEVATION AND PROTECTION MAY BE REQUIRED AT SOME LOCATIONS. DIRECTIONAL DRILLING AND PADDING MAY BE CONSIDERED ON A SITE SPECIFIC BASIS. CONSTRUCTION AND ACCESS PLANS ARE REQUIRED AND WRITTEN APPROVAL OF THESE PLANS MUST BE OBTAINED PRIOR TO ENTRY. NEW ACCESS PERMITTED UNDER DRY OR FROZEN GROUND CONDITIONS ONLY.

ACTIVITY NUMBER:	PNT 010289	AREA: 12.141 (HA)
Status:	Active/Disposed	30.001 (acres)
Service Owner:	MEDICINE HAT OFFICE – FISH AND WILDLIFE DEPT. OF SUSTAINABLE RESOURCE D.	
Managed by:	MEDICINE HAT EAST	Key Land ID: SE-13-09-014-03 W4

Reservations	Code	Description
Reservation Purpose:	0470	RARE AND ENDANGERED SPECIES HABITAT PROTECTION AREA
Restriction:	4	NO SURFACE DISPOSITION
Exceptions:	710	SEE COMMENTS
	720	REFER TO FILE

Comments/Remarks:

EXISTING DISPOSITIONS WILL BE HONORED AND RENEWED SUBJECT TO SITE SPECIFIC RESTRICTIONS AS REQUIRED TO PROTECT ENDANGERED SPECIES. NO NEW SURFACE DISPOSITIONS PERMITTED. FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT NATURAL RESOURCE SERVICES – MEDICINE HAT AT (403)528-5228
