



As Albertans, we can't help but feel secure in our province's growth, development and bright economic future. But as conservationists, we strive to find ways in which we can coexist with our neighbours in the natural world, to minimize the ecological impact of development and bring cautious forethought to discussions surrounding land use and expansion of urban areas.

Conservation's

Securing a Prize Piece of Alberta's Wetlands

■ *by Nicole Nickel-Lane*



Lisa Monsees

Such is the situation with Golden Ranches, a sprawling 1,509-acre property bordering North Cooking Lake just 27 kilometres east of Edmonton. Privately owned and operated as a working ranch since 1950, the family has agreed to hold the land for the conservation community to try and purchase before they put it up for sale. This represents a once-in-a-lifetime conservation opportunity that has captured the attention of numerous local and national land trust organizations including Alberta Conservation Association (ACA), the Alberta Fish and Game Association (AFGA), the Beaver Hills Initiative¹, Ducks Unlimited (DUC), Edmonton and Area Land Trust (EALT), Nature Conservancy of Canada (NCC), and Strathcona County.

These organizations have partnered in an attempt to save an internationally significant piece of Canada's Prairie Pothole Region for Albertans. "It's a challenging, exciting exercise in open communication among the partners and the willingness to try something new," says NCC's Juanna Thompson. "For a project of this magnitude, we need to take a creative, outside the box approach to ensure everyone's priorities and goals are met. But all the partners share the same essential conservation objective: to protect this prize piece of Alberta's wetlands."

¹ The Beaver Hills Initiative consists of numerous conservation groups, government agencies and industrial partners with interests in protecting the ecology of the Cooking Lake Moraine. More information on the Beaver Hills Initiative can be found at www.beaverhills.ab.ca/initiative/partners.html.

“It’s not that often that a conservation opportunity unites seven organizations. For there to be so much common ground there has to be something special about the place,” explains AFGA’s Brad Fenson.



The missing link

While Golden Ranches is an area more than worthy of protection in and of itself, its location makes it such a valuable opportunity for conservation in the province: the property essentially links Elk Island National Park and Blackfoot Grazing Reserve to the north with Ministik Bird Sanctuary to the south, thereby creating a conservation corridor of some 377 square kilometers. Miquelon Lakes Provincial Park and the Strathcona Wilderness Centre are also close neighbours to this corridor. “It’s not that often that a conservation opportunity unites seven organizations. For there to be so much common ground there has to be something special about the place,” explains AFGA’s Brad Fenson. “It is located right within key areas already designated and ties everything together so well.”

slightly embarrassed to admit – stumped by the names of wildflowers and falcons just minutes from our doorstep. Just goes to show how nature never ceases to awe and surprise even us so-called expert enthusiasts.

Golden Ranches presents a wonderful opportunity for the million-plus area residents to have free, convenient access to one of the largest protected areas in the province – literally minutes from Edmonton. The site will be unique in that it will support a broad range of low impact visitor activities without the limited access and designated use restrictions of neighbouring protected areas. This low impact, minimal management approach will also help conserve the habitat in its most natural state.

Golden Opportunity

Home on the ranch: who lives here?

Golden Ranches is located within the Cooking Lake Moraine Natural Area (CLM), an area with a lengthy pedigree of conservation designations. CLM is located in the Prairie Pothole Region of Canada, an area internationally known for its highly productive wetlands, and therefore falls within the North American Waterfowl Management Plan (NAWMP) program boundaries. CLM has already been designated a high priority conservation area by the partnering organizations. Golden Ranches specifically lies within the North American Wetlands Conservation Act targeted area, providing important habitat for migrating and nesting waterfowl.

The property features an impressive eight kilometers of shoreline, a haven for diverse rare avian species and globally significant migratory birds. The upland riparian area, grassland and mature forest also support a broad range of wildlife. The wonder of Golden Ranches is that this abundance of wildlife has remained largely intact in spite of its present-day function as a working ranch.

The partners have already begun to piece together this enormous conservation project with the recent purchase of two quarters of land on the shores of Cooking Lake. Suncor Energy provided early endorsement and financial support of this project.

Recreational opportunities

Golden Ranches is a place that simply invites you to slow down for a while and enjoy the tranquility and space the property has to offer. Even during the brief hour spent on site, we witnessed several varieties of waterfowl on the shores of Cooking Lake and found ourselves –

The recreational and educational opportunities presented by Golden Ranches are almost endless and are sure to be of value to numerous user groups and individuals. Visitors will have front-row access to some of the best bird watching in Canada, including migratory birds such as various waterfowl, song birds and birds of prey. Upland, the property’s grassland and mature forest provides the opportunity to witness big game such as moose, white-tailed and mule deer. Foot access for recreational opportunities including hunting will also be made available. The long-term stewardship of the project will be more fully defined in a Property Management Plan to be co-authored by all project partners.



Because the property is so close to the congested city life that we live in day-to-day, Golden Ranches is an easy, convenient way for area residents to access nature and connect to the outdoors.

Common pink wintergreen, Golden Ranches.

Make a donation

Alberta Conservation Association is accepting donations on behalf of the partners.

To donate online, visit www.ab-conservation.com or call toll-free 1-877-969-9091.

2010 Camry Toyota raffle ticket proceeds are also going toward the purchase of Golden Ranches. Purchase your ticket through Alberta Conservation Association.

A lasting legacy for the community and the environment

There is never any shortage of species to protect or habitat to conserve, but all Golden Ranches project partners agree that fostering collaborative working relationships is its own kind of conservation in action: through sharing the workload and leveraging fundraising dollars, agencies are able to maximize their resources to help as many ecologically sensitive areas and species as possible.

For corporations and the general public, Golden Ranches represents a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for a tremendous gift to the community and the environment that will be enjoyed by countless generations. But the reward of a conservation initiative of this magnitude has its price. Whether ACA and the partner organizations are successful in securing this vast expanse of Alberta's wetlands depends on our collective success in securing significant corporate and private donations. Fortunately, there are numerous incentives already in place for the project including federal Eco Gifts Program tax benefits for corporate donations and 3:1 dollar matching programs for private donations.

Because the property is so close to the congested city life that we live in day-to-day, Golden Ranches is an easy, convenient way for area residents to access nature and connect to the outdoors. As long as nature continues to be something that happens 'out there' we stand no hope of reaching a deeper understanding of the wonder of it, nor of educating our children of the importance of healthy ecosystems and the need to protect and invest in the natural world that surrounds us. The proximity of Golden Ranches is therefore perhaps its greatest attraction, and what makes it most worthy of our immediate attention and action.

For more information on Golden Ranches, please contact: Brad Fenson, Alberta Fish and Game Association at 780-437-2342. ■

Lisa Monsees

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