

Tour Agenda: Skaha Bluffs Conservation Area

When: March 18th (12:30 to 4pm)- lead by representatives of the Ministry of Environment, The Land Conservancy and the Nature Conservancy

Where: A rendezvous location on the lower end of Smythe Road has been chosen (see attached map). Cars will remain at this location and a hiking tour will lead up Gillies Creek valley, approximately 1 ½ km to the Skaha Conservation Area. *If there is no lingering winter snowpack we may be able to drive the access road to the main parking area at Skaha Bluffs (however, it is unlikely that the main road to the Bluffs will be open, so we have to park below and walk up the access road)

What to bring: Please wear sturdy footwear (snow may be lingering along the hike up and on the trails) and drinking water. There are toilet facilities located in the Skaha Conservation Area. Binoculars and camera (optional) and a sense of adventure (not optional!)



THE NATURE OF THE BLUFFS

Grasslands are a rich but vulnerable landscape. On the eastern slopes of Skaha Lake, rolling hills of bunchgrass, sparse Ponderosa Pine forests and rugged rocky outcroppings offer a refuge for an abundance of plants and animals.

Many grassland species face an uncertain future as their habitat is destroyed and fragmented by human development. Some of these, such as Bighorn Sheep, are still a common sight. Others, like the Night Snake, are more elusive. Yet all rely on this landscape for survival. Without it, they will no longer be elusive; they will simply be gone.

SOME OF SKAHA'S RARE SPECIES



Bighorn Sheep
(*Ovis canadensis*)

With the males' distinctive horns and their ability to balance on impossibly small cliff ledges, Bighorn Sheep are iconic of these grasslands. The animals depend on a mix of open grassland and rugged, rocky terrain for their survival. The open fields provide food, while the cliffs offer a safe refuge from less agile predators.

During the fall, head butting competitions between males can be spectacular, with the winners earning first pick of mates. Come spring, ewes retire to the relative safety of the cliffs to give birth.

Habitat loss and periodic epidemics of disease have had a serious impact on Bighorn Sheep populations in this province. Conservation efforts are helping to restore sheep populations in this area, but their long-term stability requires further habitat protection, especially that which connects existing protected spaces.



Night Snake
(*Hypsiglena chlorophaea*)

The Night Snake is one of the rarest of all snakes in Canada, where it lives only in the South Okanagan Similkameen.

Little is known about this nocturnal creature. Researchers believe Night Snakes share much of the same habitat and climate as Western Rattlesnakes, even hibernating together in communal dens (called hibernacula).

Night Snakes feed on frogs, lizards and insects, immobilizing their victims with venom that runs down grooves in modified teeth at the back of their jaw. This venom is not known to be poisonous to humans.



Interior Western Screech-Owl
(*Otus kennicottii macfarlanei*)

Hiking through these grasslands at dusk, you are more likely to hear an Interior Western Screech-Owl than see one. Their call is a run of whistled hoots that speed up like a bouncing ball. But with perhaps only 200 of this subspecies left in BC, even hearing one is something to celebrate.

The range of Interior Western Screech-Owl is restricted to the Southern Interior and Kootenays, where they frequent stream or lakeside woodlands, nesting in tree-holes abandoned by other birds. They pass the night hunting a wide variety of small animals, at times taking prey even larger than itself, such as rabbits or ducks.

Urban and agricultural development has compromised much of this owl's habitat in BC. Now provincially endangered, the Interior Western Screech-Owl needs the protection of its breeding and foraging habitat if it is going to survive in this province.



Flat-topped Broomrape
(*Orobanche corymbosa mutabilis*)

The hot and dry conditions of BC's low elevation grasslands require a tenacity for survival that is well-illustrated by Flat-topped Broomrape.

This graceful, purple-hued plant can be found on dry grassy slopes populated with Big Sagebrush, where it has developed a unique relationship with its neighbours. Attaching itself parasitically to the roots of a host plant, the Flat-topped Broomrape "steals" nutrients and water through a special organ in its roots.

Like many sensitive grassland plants, Flat-topped Broomrape faces an uncertain future as development pressures threaten to destroy and fragment its habitat.



BC Parks



Skaha Bluffs Field Tour

