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**Number 6**

**Winter 2015**

*Upcoming Events*

**AGM**

**The 2015 FCCPAS AGM** will be held on **Saturday April 25, 2015** beginning at 10:00 a.m. at the Dog Greek Community Gymnasium. A brief business session will be followed by a light lunch (\$10) and an afternoon hike into Churn Creek PA, assuming the weather cooperates! If you are a member or just interested, please come. Contact Ordell Steen (oasteen@shaw.ca) if you have questions or would like to become a director.

*Activities Update*

**Hikes in 2014**

**Hairy Fish Lake to Browns Lake.**

On the last day of May, 12 members enjoyed a beautiful day walking in grasslands along the sides of lakes and streams in the valley of BC and Browns lakes. In addition to watching birds and checking plants, we visited the historic log structures of the Brown ranch and the Bishop ranch and the site of first school house in Empire Valley.



*Checking the old Bishop brothers barn*



*On the shores of BC Lake*

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# Activities Update continued

## Black Dome Road to Koster Lake.

In late June, about 10 members enjoyed a leisurely hike to Koster Lake (previously known as China Lake) from the Black Dome Road, near Grinder Creek. We enjoyed watching birds, checking plants, examining the dam recently built by BC Parks, exploring an old range cabin on the north side of the lake, and looking for remnants of an old lumber mill on Koster (China) Creek.

## Churn Flats

In mid September, nearly 20 members walked through the Churn Flats grasslands on the south side of Churn Creek. From the rim of Churn Creek canyon we had impressive views of the deep canyon and its striking geological features, including ancient land slumps. As many discovered, there is cactus there.



*Looking down onto the "slump terrain" (an ancient, massive land slump) and no-grazing benchmark area above Churn Creek.*

**Hikes Planned for 2015.** We expect to offer additional hikes in 2015 to explore the newly mapped trails of the protected area. Our first **hike will be on April 25**, in the afternoon following the AGM. Current plans are to walk from the calving barns east across the Eagle Tree area. We will inform all members by e-mail of this and additional hikes as dates and locations are confirmed.

## Churn Creek Gateway Trail Grand Opening

On September 6, about 25 people gathered near the entrance to the Protected Area to celebrate the completion of the fully accessible Churn Creek Gateway Trail. Representatives of the Cariboo Regional District, BC Parks, Thompson-Nicola Regional District, Stswecem'c Xgat'tem First Nation and Friends of Churn Creek participated in the ribbon cutting and tour of the trail. Lunch included hot bannock and a decorated cake - preceeded, of course, by speeches.



*Ribbon cutting*

*On the new trail at an interpretive sign prepared by the Friends of Churn Creek*



# Project Updates

## Churn Creek Gateway Trail

The Churn Creek Gateway Trail Site construction was completed in 2014 with production and placement of eight interpretive signs along the loop trail and gravelling of the parking lot. With its fully accessible trail, information kiosk, facilities, and many interpretive signs this site is a valuable introduction to the protected area. Stop in and check it out - we think you will enjoy your visit. Thank you to our many funding partners and volunteers who made this project a reality.

*The Gateway trailhead sign was installed by Friends of Churn volunteers.*



*Gravelling the parking lot. A French drain was installed at the entrance to the lot to reduce surface runoff onto the lot.*

**Grassland Condition Monitoring.** A principal project of the FCCPAS in 2014 was the assessment and monitoring of grassland ecological conditions within Churn Creek Protected Area. Volunteer assistance was provided to a contractor who monitored vegetation plots established more than 12 years ago. In addition, a total of 57 new plots, using the Grassland Conservation Council of BC method for rating grassland ecosystem health, were established. These plots were used to assess predominant grassland ecosystem conditions in 2014 and can be used in the future to monitor long term trends in ecosystem conditions. (See *Feature Article* for further information).

**Partnership agreement signed with BC Parks.** A recently signed partnership agreement formalizes our relationship with BC Parks in terms of our activities within the Protected Area. A key benefit to us is that the Province provides liability insurance against claims arising from injury while members undertake approved projects.

**Proposal for Ecosystem Restoration Submitted.** The FCCPAS directors have submitted a proposal to the Habitat Conservation Trust Fund to restore grasslands of the High Lake Benchmark area by removing tree encroachment from the grasslands. We have not yet received their decision on whether or not they will fund the project.

## Membership and Donations

It is the time again to renew your membership. Consider encouraging a friend to join because without a strong membership base, FCCPAS cannot continue to conduct valuable projects within the protected area.

FCCPAS is a charitable society and receipts for income tax purposes can be provided for all donations other than membership. Membership fees remain at \$20. Membership forms are available on our website ([www.friendsofchurn.ca](http://www.friendsofchurn.ca))

# Assessing Grassland Conditions in Churn Creek Protected Area

The management plan for Churn Creek Protected Area (CCPA) states that the principal role of the protected area is “to conserve and restore nationally significant grasslands and wildlife populations while maintaining a viable, year-round working ranch.” The plan identifies specific grassland restoration objectives and recognizes that innovative practices may be required to achieve them.

Prior to the Empire Valley Ranch becoming part of CCPA in 1998, intensive livestock use resulted in significant areas of degraded grasslands in many pastures. The relatively high elevation “Specialty Pastures”, which were private land, were especially impacted.

In order to determine if restoration objectives provided in the management plan are being achieved under new range management practices, BC Parks established a network of grassland vegetation plots in 2000 and monitored them in 2005 and 2014. At each time, the grasslands were assessed in terms of how similar the plant community had become to the “climax” grassland, i.e. the plant community which would potentially develop on the site in the absence of grazing. The most recent monitoring (2014) of about 25 plots indicates that grassland conditions have improved only slightly or not at all, except in some designated no-grazing benchmark areas.



*Assessing grassland condition in CCPA*

In 2014, the Friends of Churn Creek Protected Area Society (FCCPAS) established an additional 57 grassland monitoring plots, using a method developed by the Grassland Conservation Council of BC for rating ecosystem health. The plots were selected to represent predominant grassland conditions within 16 principal pastures of CCPA. In this method, grassland condition ratings are based on indicators of ecosystem health such as abundance of key bunchgrass species, amount of litter on the soil, and evidence of soil stability. One advantage of the method is that it does not require specialized plant identification skills.

The plots established by FCCPAS confirm that areas of healthy grasslands are present in all zones and nearly all pastures of CCPA. However, nearly 60% of the plots selected to represent predominant conditions were rated as greatly or moderately altered. Upper Grasslands, and especially those in the Specialty Pastures and Wycott Flats area, remain the most substantially altered by livestock use but large areas of the Middle and Lower Grasslands were also rated as greatly or moderately altered. Four of the 16 pastures which were examined have large areas of slightly or virtually unaltered grasslands while eight have major areas of substantially altered grasslands. The report prepared by FCCPAS recommends that range management practices in several pastures should be evaluated to determine if additional options may be available for enhancing the rate of grassland recovery. The report is available for viewing at [www.friendsofchurn.ca](http://www.friendsofchurn.ca).