

# CHAMPIONS

## FOR OUR COMMON FUTURE

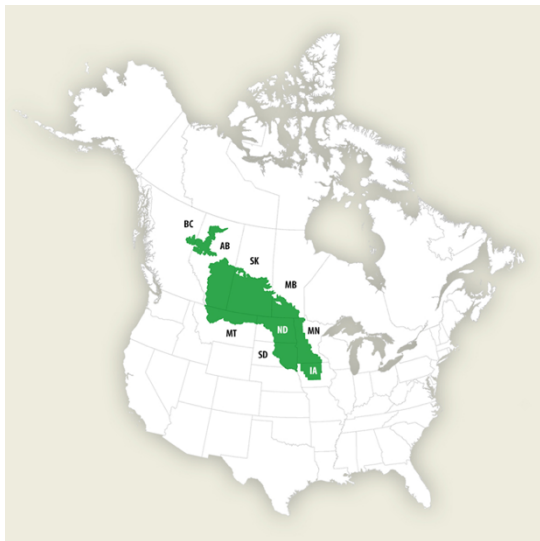
*Ordinary people taking extraordinary action*

### WETLANDS: DISCOVERING WONDERS CLOSE TO HOME

Barbara Hanbidge's parents had six children, so money was tight. This meant that options for activities for the children were limited, so they opted for frequent nature walks and camping trips. As a result, Barb grew up loving nature. She was particularly drawn to water and the life that it supports. Her love of nature led her to study Biology at university where she decided that she wanted to focus her efforts on the world's biggest bodies of water – oceans. But circumstances conspired against her. Instead, she researched wildlife in Saskatchewan and Manitoba and devoted her life's work to protecting very small, but very important, bodies of water – prairie wetlands.

After finishing her master's degree, she accepted a position at Ducks Unlimited Canada (DUC). This work opened her eyes to the wonders of wetlands, as well as the threats that they face. She was hooked and so stayed with DUC for 30 years. She worked in several roles, from engaging farmers to protect wetlands, to negotiating the purchase or lease of land to protect duck nesting habitat near wetlands, to developing educational materials. The common thread was the protection of Saskatchewan's rapidly diminishing wetlands.

Wetlands are one of the most productive ecosystems on the planet. Over 10,000 years ago kilometre high glaciers from the last ice age melted and left behind millions of shallow depressions which hold



water, known as prairie potholes or wetlands. Most of Saskatchewan's agricultural land is in the Prairie Pothole Region (PPR) which is within the once largest expanse of grassland in the world -- the Great Plains of North America. The PPR spans southern Alberta, Saskatchewan and Manitoba and extends into North Dakota, South Dakota, Iowa, Minnesota and Montana.

The PPR accounts for only 10% of North America's total waterfowl breeding habitat area, yet it produces 50-80% of the continent's waterfowl populations (Renton *et al.*, 2015). Wetlands provide habitat for 12 of the most common North American duck species. They are also home to about 600 species of plants and animals, more than 50 of which are species at risk, such as the burrowing owl and the piping plover.

In addition to providing critical habitat to plants and animals, wetlands provide important services to humans. Activities like hunting, fishing and birdwatching all rely on healthy wetlands. Wetlands filter water to keep it clean and healthy, and buffer against over-land flooding. Wetlands sequester carbon, which is critical to controlling climate change.

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Despite their importance to ecosystem health, wetlands continue to be the most threatened landscapes on the planet. In Canada we have approximately 25% of the world's remaining freshwater wetlands but research indicates that up to 90% have been lost (Campbell and Rubec, 2003). In Saskatchewan over 4,047 hectares (10,000 acres) of wetlands are lost every year, primarily due to agricultural drainage.

Barb is now retired, and wetlands remain close to her heart. On her family's own Heritage Farm near Swift Current, no wetlands are drained and if they are dry, they are not cultivated. In the bigger picture, however, Barb recognizes that there are many barriers to protecting wetlands. For instance, Saskatchewan is the only prairie province that does not have a wetland policy, and the economics of agriculture do not support protecting wetlands. On the positive side, Barb sees that awareness of the importance of wetlands continues to grow, largely thanks to concerned citizens and organizations. Hopefully this increased understanding will drive change to protect wetlands.

*This column is a collaborative project of the Saskatchewan Environmental Society and the Regional Centre of Expertise on Education for Sustainable Development – RCE Saskatchewan.*



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**Saskatchewan Environmental Society** is a non-profit, registered charity that is committed to supporting sustainable living and sustainable resource use in Saskatchewan. We work with, and on behalf of, communities, organizations, businesses, and policy makers to encourage informed decision-making that moves us towards sustainability. SES's current action

areas include sustainable energy and climate solutions, water protection, resource conservation, biodiversity preservation, and reduction of toxic substances. Our work in Saskatchewan is carried out in Treaties 2, 4, 5, 6, 8, 10, and our office is in Saskatoon on Treaty 6, the traditional territory of Cree peoples and the homeland of the Métis Nation. Learn more at: [www.environmentalsociety.ca](http://www.environmentalsociety.ca)



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