

Spotlight ON Species

Antelope Brush: Okanagan Old Growth Critically Imperiled

It may not command the profile of an old growth rainforest, but it is no less fragile and even more threatened.

What is an Antelope-brush needle-and-thread shrub steppe grassland?

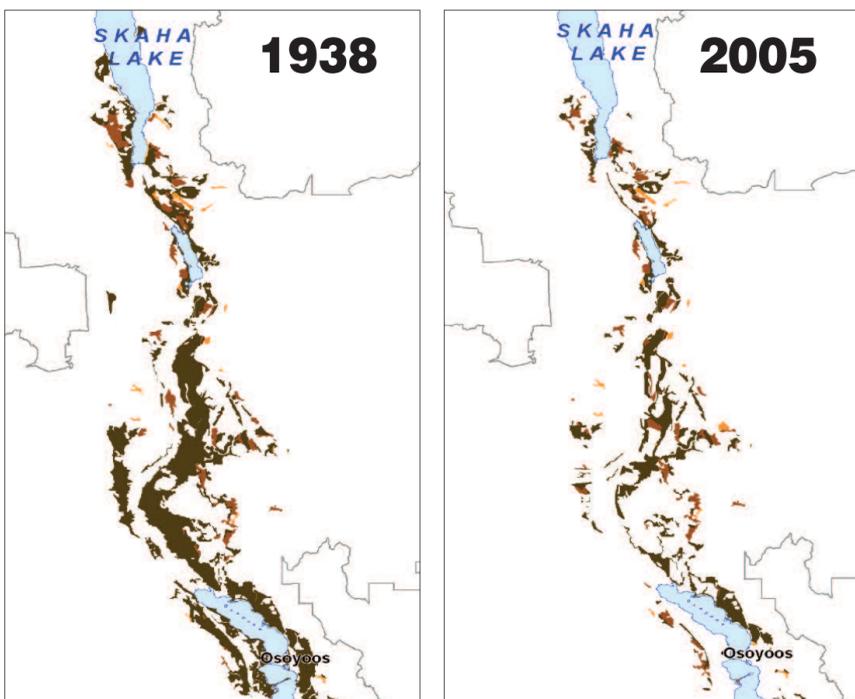
Grasslands, or steppes, are ecosystems dominated by grasses. In the South Okanagan and Similkameen our grasslands are scattered with sagebrush and different native bunch grasses such as bluebunch wheatgrass, needle-and-thread grass and sand dropseed. Antelope-brush needle-and-thread shrub steppe grasslands are a less common type of grassland, extending mainly from Osoyoos to Skaha Lake. They are characterized by the large, often gnarled looking Antelope-brush.

The tiny three-lobed leaves of this shrub are a nutritious source of food for deer and bighorn sheep. In the spring, each shrub is covered with thousands of fragrant yellow flowers that fill the desert air with perfume.

*"The Antelope Brush was and still is very important to the syilx (Okanagan) nation. In the days of old, one of the many uses of **cqAYasqÁolÁstn** (antelope brush) was that our ancestors used it as a fire starter. The leaves and small branches are very light, portable and combustible. It was always carried in the winter time to easily start a camp fire. The inner silky material from behind the bark of an old Antelope bush was burned in a Ram's horn and a live ember was placed inside the horn and covered with leather. This provided the syilx people with a portable lighter that could carry a live ember for days. Because of its combustibility, burning as easily as grease, it was commonly called grease wood."*

– Richard Armstrong

DID YOU KNOW: 68% of South Okanagan antelope-brush habitat has been destroyed since 1938.



Courtesy of Ted Lea

The greatest loss has been due to intensive agricultural expansion and intensive urban development.

Most of the remaining areas are in poor condition due to damage by off-road vehicles, invasive plants and intensive grazing.

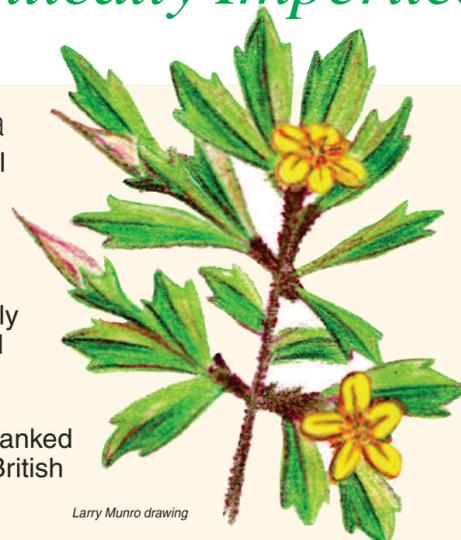
Immediate human actions are required before these plant communities and the species that depend on them no longer exist in Canada. The choices we make regarding land use, development and agricultural practices will have an impact on the future health of our quality of life, our unique ecosystems and the species that rely on them.

Latin Name: *Purshia tridentata*

Common names: Local names are black sage and greasewood

The Antelope-brush belongs to the rose family. This shrub is usually less than three metres tall and has bright yellow flowers in the spring.

Conservation status: ranked as Critically Imperiled in British Columbia.



Larry Munro drawing

Some of the mammals, plants, birds, reptiles and amphibians that are found in the South Okanagan Antelope-brush ecosystems are:

| Name | Conservation Status | |
|---------------------------|---------------------|------------|
| | Federal | Provincial |
| Badger | Endangered | Red List |
| Tiger Salamander | Endangered | Red List |
| Burrowing Owl | Endangered | Red List |
| Pallid Bat | Threatened | Red List |
| Behr's Hairstreak | Threatened | Red List |
| Night Snake | Endangered | Red List |
| Grand Coulee Owl-Clover | Endangered | Red List |
| Great Basin Spadefoot | Threatened | Blue List |
| Western Rattlesnake | Threatened | Blue List |
| California Big Horn Sheep | | Blue List |
| Lark Sparrow | | Red List |
| Great Basin Gopher Snake | Threatened | Blue List |

What you can do to protect the remaining antelope brush:

- ✓ Convert existing farms and orchards to vineyards rather than destroying antelope-brush habitat.
- ✓ Direct development away from antelope-brush grasslands and work to preserve existing antelope-brush parcels in your area.
- ✓ Butt out! Fires started from carelessly discarded cigarettes annually destroy antelope-brush habitat.
- ✓ Where possible, restore and maintain natural habitat on your property. Visit www.soscp.org
- ✓ Avoid introducing and spreading invasive weeds. Visit www.rdos.bc.ca and www.weedsbc.ca
- ✓ Adopt Best Management Practices for off-road vehicles. www.grasslands.bc.ca
- ✓ Work with the conservation community www.soscp.org

Retaining native habitat is good for agriculture

Antelope-brush habitat and other areas of native vegetation are a refuge for beneficial insects that prey on agricultural pests species. Research has shown that damage from cutworms is highest on extensive areas of land that has been cleared of native vegetation. Whereas vineyards and fields bordered by antelope-brush habitat and other natural habitats have significantly less problems with insect pests.

Spotlight ON ...

Behr's Hairstreak : A picky butterfly?

Latin name: *Satyrrium behrii*

The Behr's Hairstreak butterfly is dependent on antelope-brush as it is the only known larval food plant for this species.

Adults nectar (drink) on buckwheat and yarrow which are two other common plants in the antelope-brush needle-and-thread grass shrub-steppe ecosystem.

Butterflies are important pollinators. They are also good indicators of the ecological quality of a habitat, as they are important components of the food chain, particularly as larvae.



Larry Munro drawing

Pallid Bat: Protecting grapes from insects

Latin name: *Antrozous pallidus*

They DO NOT eat grapes but love insects living in vineyards.

Like all bats in the Okanagan, Pallid Bats eat only insects. They forage over antelope-brush grasslands but also fly over agricultural land often catching insects on the ground or from the foliage of trees and shrubs. These beneficial bats help control insects so are a friend to farmers.



Daniela Rambaldini Photo

Kit's Activity: Answers from last edition



If you want to see local endangered species that are hard to find in the wild, the Penticton Museum's Natural History Gallery is the place to be! The live amphibarium is home to such antelope brush-dependent animals as the Spade-foot Toad and the Tiger Salamander. Also on hand is the Grassland diorama with examples of grassland flora and fauna like Antelope Brush, Sage brush, a Burrowing Owl and a Badger. The Penticton Museum is open year-round from Tuesday to Saturday, 10 – 5pm.



Environment Canada
Canadian Wildlife Service

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Service Canadien de la faune



South Okanagan Similkameen CONSERVATION PROGRAM

