Southern Alberta's river ecosystems and native grasslands are rapidly disappearing

And, that's not good for anyone.

Join us, before it's too late.

Western Sky Land Trust

Albertans Partnering To Protect Southern Alberta's Most At-Risk Ecosystems

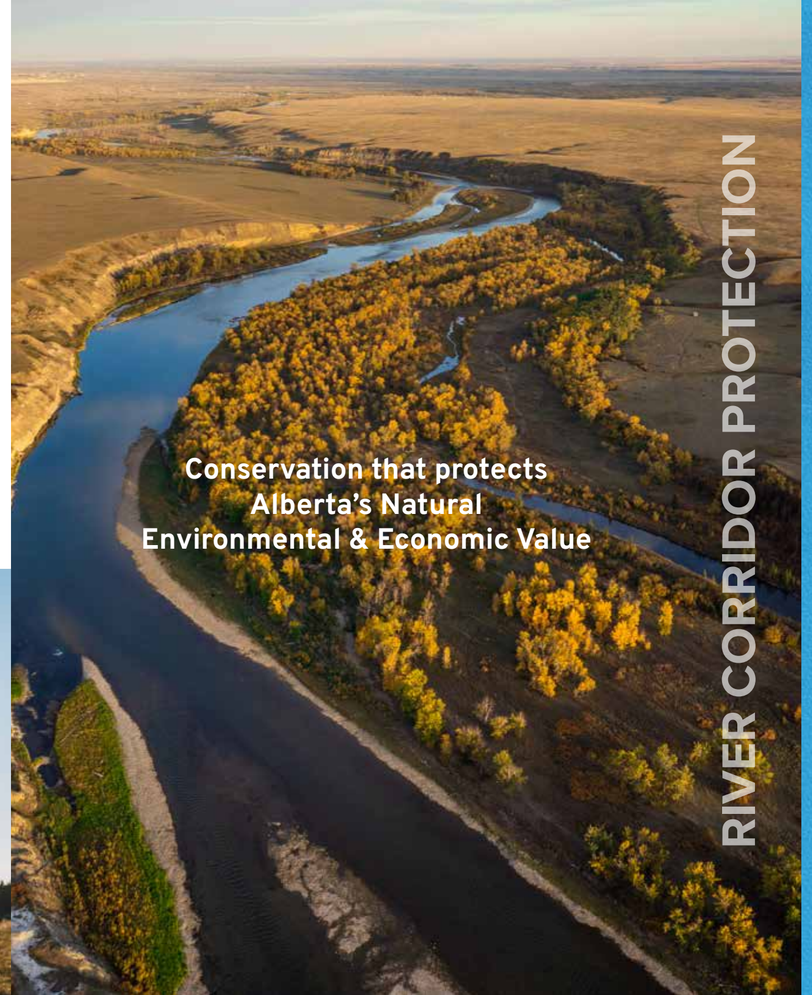
Founded in 2005, **Western Sky Land Trust** is a community-based charitable organization with a **distinctly hands-on, boots-on-the-ground approach to conservation.**

We protect **southern Alberta's most at-risk ecosystems — primarily on private, working lands** where the majority of critical habitat exists.

What began with **safeguarding vital rivers** and source water has grown to include **the urgent protection of native grasslands** — one of the most endangered ecosystems in the world.

Our work is grounded in trusted relationships, **using consultation, evaluation, and voluntary agreements with landowners** (like conservation easements) **to secure lasting conservation outcomes.**

Western Sky accepts donations of land, holds conservation easements, and raises funds to conserve lands.



Conservation that protects Alberta's Natural Environmental & Economic Value

RIVER CORRIDOR PROTECTION

Protecting the rapidly disappearing ecosystems surrounding southern Alberta's major rivers and tributaries:

Protects drinking water at the source
Filters sediment, nutrients, and contaminants before they reach rivers supplying drinking water

Reduces flood damage (urban + rural)
Natural vegetation slows and absorbs peak flows — lowering downstream flood risk

Prevents costly erosion
Stabilizes riverbanks, protecting farmland, infrastructure, and pathways

Keeps water cooler and healthier
Shade from native vegetation supports fish populations and aquatic life

Supports ranching resilience
Managed riverside areas improve livestock health, reduce bank loss, and protect long-term land value

Creates wildlife corridors
Connects fragmented habitats—critical for species movement across developed landscapes

Delivers high return per acre protected
Small riverside green zones have outsized impact on entire watershed health

Western Sky Land Trust's
Bow & Beyond Initiative

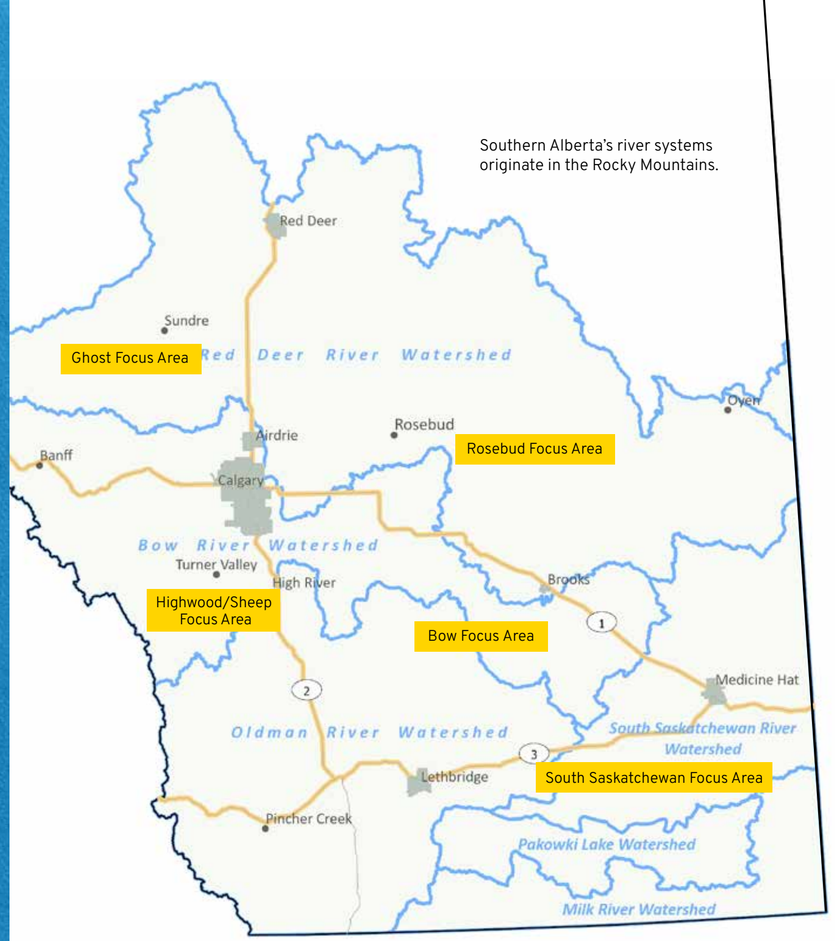
In 2010, Western Sky created the **'Bow & Beyond'** Initiative, in an effort to promote **voluntary land conservation along the Bow River and its tributaries.**

This initiative has **already yielded several substantial conservation projects** and **more are currently underway.**

Goal
To **conserve "irreplaceable" river ecosystems** in perpetuity.

Initial Focus Areas & Beyond
The initiative focuses on the Bow River and its major tributaries upstream of the Siksika First Nation reserve to Banff National Park and the Eastern Slopes. **Our efforts have now expanded beyond this initial area** to include additional important southern Alberta river ecosystems **– and now critical native grasslands that are also in immediate danger of disappearing.**

Overall Impact
To date, Western Sky has now **partnered with landowners to protect close to 30,000 acres of natural and working landscapes in southern Alberta.**

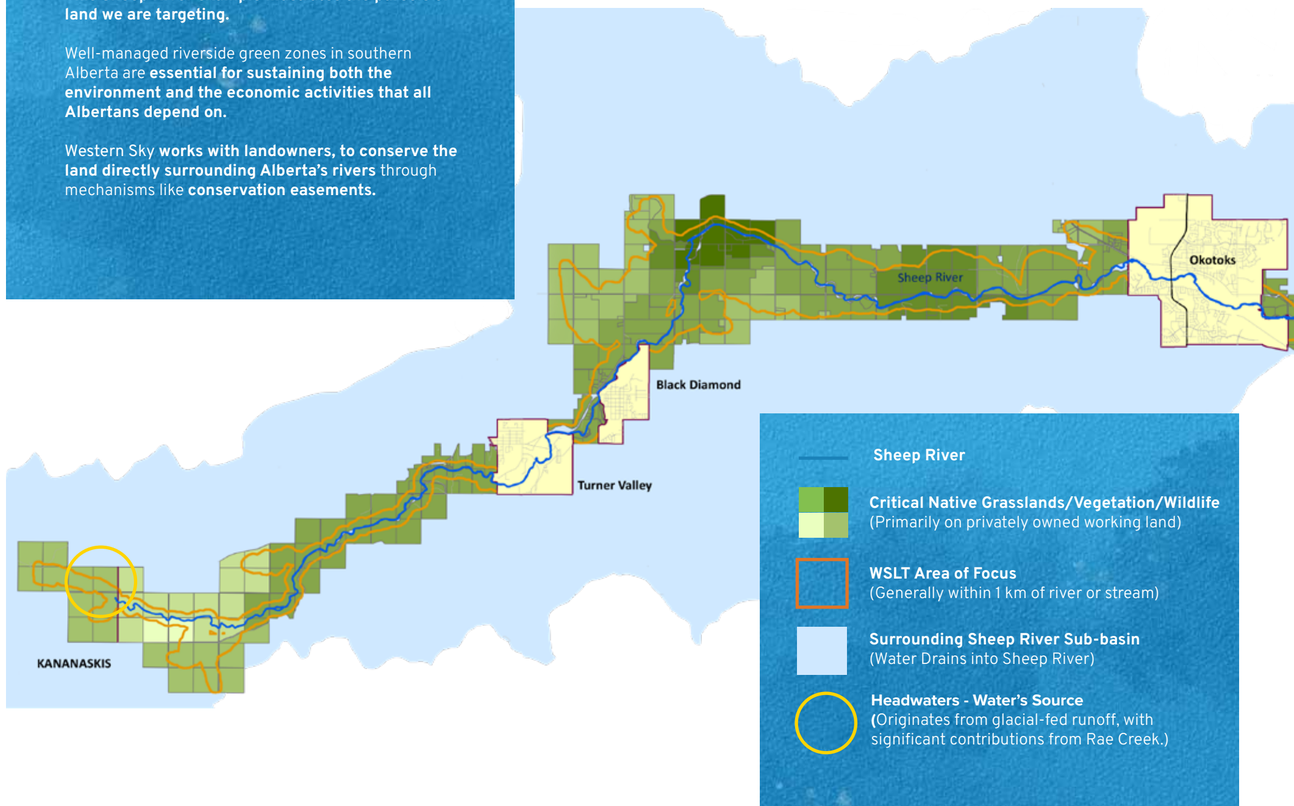


What River Ecosystem Protection Looks like

This Sheep River example illustrates the parcels of land we are targeting.

Well-managed riverside green zones in southern Alberta are **essential for sustaining both the environment and the economic activities that all Albertans depend on.**

Western Sky **works with landowners, to conserve the land directly surrounding Alberta's rivers** through mechanisms like **conservation easements.**



NATIVE GRASSLANDS PROTECTION

Most people will never set foot on Alberta's native grasslands. But they depend on them every day.

More than **80% of Alberta's prairie grasslands have already disappeared,** making what remains among the rarest and most fragile landscapes in North America.

These grasslands store **vast amounts of carbon in their soils, protect critical watersheds, support ranching communities,** and **provide irreplaceable habitat for species at risk** including the Greater Sage-Grouse, Burrowing Owl, Swift Fox, Ferruginous Hawk, and Sprague's Pipit.

What makes this landscape unique is that much of it still survives because of the stewardship of ranching families. These grasslands exist largely on privately owned working lands, not in parks or public reserves.

Western Sky works directly with landowners to protect these landscapes through **voluntary conservation agreements that keep land privately owned and working.**

Through the **Prevailing Winds Initiative,** Western Sky aims to conserve **up to 100,000 acres of intact prairie in southeastern Alberta by 2030,** protecting some of the largest remaining grassland landscapes in Canada.

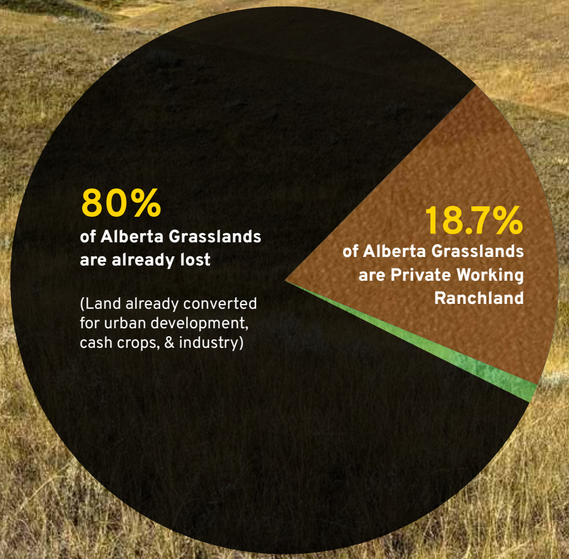
But time is short. Once native prairie is broken, the complex ecosystems that evolved over thousands of years may never fully return.

The opportunity before us is rare: to protect one of Canada's last great grassland landscapes while it is still intact.

Unbelievably, 80% of Alberta's Grasslands have already been lost

Only 1.3% of the remaining grasslands are currently protected.

2016-2021
Alberta lost 735,000 acres of native grassland –
equal to **433 acres**/day
or **305 football fields**/day
Source: Statistics Canada



Alberta's Remaining Grasslands are on Private Working Land

The majority of remaining native grasslands are privately owned or leased for cattle grazing – making 'voluntary stewardship' critical to conservation.

1.3%
of Alberta Grasslands are protected by the national and provincial parks and other publicly protected lands.

Currently, Western Sky Land Trust is working through voluntary partnerships to protect southern Alberta's native grasslands

Western Sky's **Prevailing Winds Initiative,** aims to secure over 100,000 acres of southeast Alberta grassland by 2030 – prioritizing working ranch landscapes and long-term stewardship.

Since 1970 populations of birds that live primarily in native grasslands have **declined by 90%.**

Over **60 species** that depend on the Canada's grasslands **are at risk.**

Western Sky helps **protect and preserve diverse ecosystems, supporting wildlife habitats** and maintaining ecological balance.

Environmental & Economic Value

Protecting southern Alberta's Native Grasslands before they're all but gone:

Secures food systems
Keeps working ranchland intact—supporting local beef production and rural economies

Stores carbon where it's most stable
Deep-rooted native grasses lock carbon underground for decades

Protects biodiversity
One of Canada's most endangered ecosystems — home to species like burrowing owl and pronghorn

Builds drought resilience
Native grasses retain moisture far better than cultivated land

Prevents irreversible loss
Once native prairie is broken, it cannot truly be restored to original condition

Supports water systems indirectly
Healthy grasslands reduce runoff and erosion into rivers and reservoirs

Maintains Southern Alberta's identity
Open landscapes, ranching heritage, and iconic views that define the region

Once broken, these important river ecosystems and native grasslands cannot be meaningfully restored

What's driving the loss:

- Rising land values and development pressure
- Subdivision of large, intact ranches
- Generational transitions without viable succession plans

The result is fragmentation:

- Smaller parcels
- Disrupted ecosystems
- Reduced agricultural viability

And the impacts extend far beyond rural areas.

Southern Alberta's rivers and native grasslands are among the most endangered ecosystems in the world

Why It Matters (Even If You Live in the City)

When grasslands disappear, the consequences show up everywhere:

Food Systems

- Loss of working rangeland reduces long-term agricultural resilience
- Increased reliance on higher-input, less stable production systems

Water Systems

- Native grasslands absorb and filter water naturally
- Their loss increases flood risk, runoff, and infrastructure strain

Climate

- Prairie soils store significant amounts of carbon
- Disturbance releases that carbon and reduces future storage capacity

This affects all Albertans – urban and rural.
It's key to our survival as human beings.

We depend on this land more than most people know. It's critical for our source water, food supply, and climate resilience.

Impact in Action:
Rosebud River Conservation

The Rosebud River Conservation Area is an over 8,000-acre protected ecological zone in Alberta's Badlands, east of Calgary, aimed at preserving native fescue grasslands, river areas, and wildlife corridors

Featuring steep coulees, it protects crucial habitat for species at risk, with Western Sky Land Trust, in partnership with local land owners, managing the area against development pressures.

RIVER & GRASSLAND PROTECTION

Rosebud River Conservation Area
Protecting a living watershed

Before protection
A fragile prairie river corridor at risk of fragmentation –threatening wildlife movement, water quality, and long-term ecosystem health.

After protection
25+ km of connected river corridor protected and stewarded – supporting continuous wildlife movement, healthier waterways, and resilient grassland ecosystems.

Impact
Landscape-scale conservation that protects biodiversity and safeguards downstream water systems for southern Alberta communities.

Impact in Action:
Gray Park Natural Area

The Gray Park Natural Area, located in Diamond Valley, Alberta, is a protected riparian landscape and Foothills Parkland ecoregion managed through a partnership involving the Western Sky Land Trust, the Town of Diamond Valley, and a donation from the estate of Gordon Gray.

Its conservation focus is on maintaining the ecological integrity of the Sheep River watershed, fostering biodiversity, and providing a resilient habitat against climate-related threats like flood and drought.

RIVER & GRASSLAND PROTECTION

Gray Park Natural Area
Turning land into legacy

Before protection
Privately held land with ecological value but limited public access, awareness, or long-term conservation certainty.

After protection
A donated and protected natural area now supporting ongoing education programs and community access – connecting students and visitors directly to land stewardship.

Impact
Transforms a gift into lasting conservation, education, and community engagement – building the next generation of stewards.

Make no mistake – this is a crisis

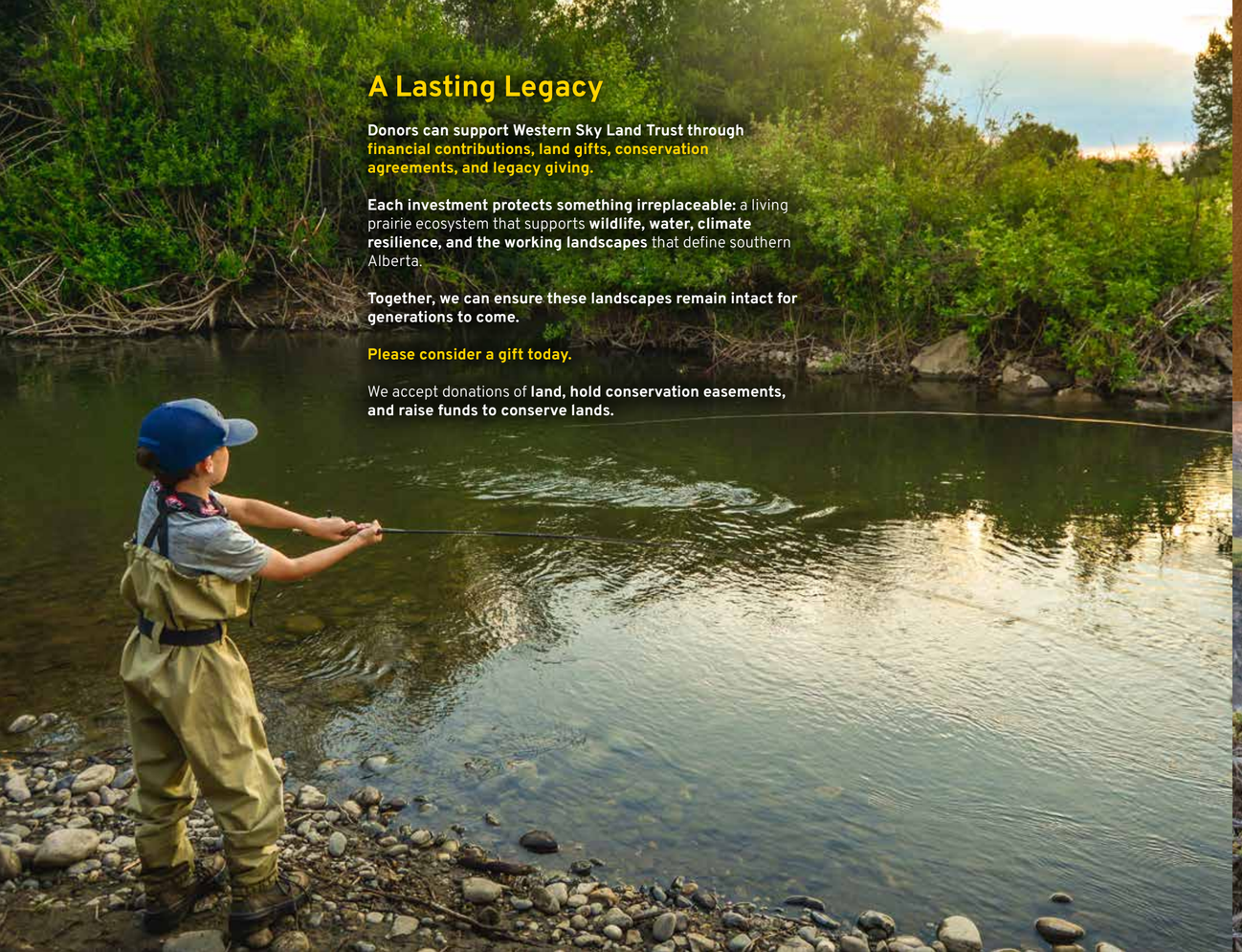
That is why our team is working hard every day with volunteers and partners to protect southern Alberta's river corridors and native grasslands.

The environmental and economic benefits are clear – and compelling

Protecting river corridors and working grasslands through conservation easements is one of the most cost-effective, permanent land protection strategies available.

This means **measurable, lasting impact with efficient use of capital** – at a moment when timing is critical.

WESTERN SKY LAND TRUST



A Lasting Legacy

Donors can support Western Sky Land Trust through financial contributions, land gifts, conservation agreements, and legacy giving.

Each investment protects something irreplaceable: a living prairie ecosystem that supports **wildlife, water, climate resilience, and the working landscapes** that define southern Alberta.

Together, we can ensure these landscapes remain intact for generations to come.

Please consider a gift today.

We accept donations of **land, hold conservation easements, and raise funds to conserve lands.**

Monetary Donations

Cash donations are used to "champion the conservation of environmentally sensitive lands" and support river corridor and native grassland protection.

Usage
Funds support **land securement, stewardship,** and **ongoing conservation planning** in southern Alberta

Gifts of Land

Land donations typically take two forms, both of which are eligible for tax receipts based on fair market value

Conservation Easements
The **donor retains ownership and use** (e.g., ranching) but **voluntarily restricts future development.** Western Sky **holds the "easement" and is responsible for monitoring it forever.**

Fee Simple Donation
The **donor transfers full ownership to Western Sky,** which then **manages the land for permanent protection.**

Western Sky also **works closely with landowners** to identify if their property qualifies for **additional tax benefits** through the **Ecological Gifts Program.**

Western Sky Land Trust

Albertans Partnering To Protect Southern Alberta's Most At-Risk Ecosystems

If southern Alberta's river ecosystems and native grasslands quietly disappear, they will take decades to recover — if they can recover at all.

Together, we can ensure these crucial ecosystems remain intact for generations to come.

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(Registered Charity Number: 86241 1634 RR0001)

The Western Sky Land Trust is an Alberta-based organization dedicated to the permanent conservation of natural and cultural heritage in southern Alberta.

Vision

Achieving a significant, measurable, and lasting conservation impact in southern Alberta.

Mission

Conserving open and natural landscapes for their ecological, agricultural, scenic, recreational, and heritage values.

Western Sky works in partnership with landowners to preserve and maintain these landscapes for future generations.

Western Sky Land Trust

Albertans Partnering To Protect Southern Alberta's Most At-Risk Ecosystems