

The Trumpeter

A Publication of the Friends of Elk Island Society
Spring, 2004



Website: <http://www.elkisland.ca>

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Fun in the Sun – Family Ski Day!

by Dee Patriquin

Beautiful weather, blue skies and perfect snow – the ideal cure for late winter cabin fever! Many seemed to agree: close to 200 people joined the Friends of Elk Island at Tawayik Lake for Family Ski Day this year. Conditions were excellent and within a short time the trails and staging area were filled with skiers, walkers, dogs and even a few dogs pulling skiers!

Mountain Equipment Co-op again this year generously provided free equipment rentals, and many took advantage of the opportunity to try a new sport. By noon, snowshoers were weaving through trees and over the lake, exploring areas inaccessible during the warmer summer

months and discovering the ups (and sometimes downs) of 'walking with big feet'.

The recently set trails were in great shape and encouraged both novices and more experienced skiers to head for the trails, for a short ski down the Oster Lake Road, or for a longer, more scenic tour round the Shirley Lake or Tawayik loops. The well-packed Oster Lake Road and Tawayik Trail also offered great hiking and some simply took advantage of the warm day to go for a stroll.

While sunshine is a great cure for winter cabin fever, the best results come when enjoyed with warm drink and food. FEIS board members and volunteers kept a steady supply of hotdogs and hot chocolate ready at the cook shelter for breaks



This young skier definitely shows this was a true "family ski day".

in the activity, and a warm fire provided a nice spot for a rest. Donuts and hot coffee donated by Tim Horton's were also much appreciated. As the sun dipped down (a bit later than it has of late), tired but happy participants slowly headed for home, ending a wonderful winter break.

Be on the lookout for notice of the FEIS Annual General Meeting In June 2004

Visit our website (www.elkisland.ca), see the next Trumpeter
and watch your mailboxes!!!

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Christmas Bird Count

by Mark Degner

For many people Boxing Day, December 26, means rushing to the malls to find that special item on sale for the "lowest price of the year." However, for others it means getting up early and heading to Elk Island National Park (EINP) to partake in the annual Christmas Bird Count (CBC) sponsored by the Friends of Elk Island Society (FEIS).

The Elk Island National Park CBC is one of about ten counts in the Edmonton area and 1,800 in North America. Although the entire Park is included in the EINP CBC, the count is not confined to the Park's boundary. The counting area is actually a 24 km circle with its center near Tawayik Lake, covering about 450 square km. In addition to the participants who were counting inside the park, a number of people from the Edmonton Bird Club and the Edmonton Natural History Club counted birds outside the Park. Since each CBC is done every year it provides biologists with valuable long-term bird species and population trends.

When I arrived at the count headquarters just after 9 am, a number of participants looking for birds were in their area. Throughout the morning, people came to register; some were experienced birders who have been to many CBCs and for others it was their first time. Three women who registered while I was at the center said that they had come out because they were looking for something fun to do outside while enjoying nature.

In the afternoon I headed to the Hayburger trail to see what birds I could find. The hike started slowly. In fact, I was starting to think it should be called the Christmas Mammal Count. I saw as many mammals as I did birds on my four-hour hike. The highlight of the hike was spotting a Great Grey Owl in a tree at head height, about 20 meters from the trail. I got a great look at it through my binoculars as it just sat there looking back at me.

After hiking the Hayburger trail, I went back to the count headquarters where other participants were sitting around totaling up the birds they had seen, telling each other about their sightings and enjoying some hot coffee and chili provided by FEIS.

Although I haven't seen the results of the count, from all reports the 2003 CBC was a success. The weather was great; lots of birds and mammals, including a couple of Great Gray Owls, were seen; and the participants, myself included, had great fun roaming around the park. I want to thank all of the volunteers who helped at the count headquarters, Pierre Cardon for organizing the count and all the participants for coming out. If you are looking to start a new Boxing Day tradition, come out and participate in the 2004 Christmas Bird Count. It is a great way to spend the day.



This is NOT a Great Grey Owl, but rather a Great Horned Owl, another common sighting in the Beaver Hills area!

Have you bought your membership for someone special? Jeanette Strong (standing) decided to buy her Mom, Mary Crozier (seated), an FEIS membership as a Christmas gift. So, remembering that FEIS memberships are only \$10.00 for individuals, \$15.00 for families, check your list of upcoming birthdays!



Our sincere thanks to STAPLES, Sherwood Park, for their support of The Trumpeter

An Englishman's Spring

Rick Watts, Chairman of the Friends of Elk Island, reminds us that many Canadians had another home before they came to join us. Rick takes a few minutes to remember spring in the south of England and to remind us that spring, will indeed, come to Alberta.



Wood frog chorus – a common sound of spring in the Aspen Parkland.

I'm sitting in my front room staring out at a foot of snow and temperatures below -40°. The dog won't go out and the chickens huddle together under a heat lamp, having not laid an egg for weeks. Inevitably my mind wanders towards spring and I'm hit by the first pangs of homesickness since arriving here in Alberta almost three years ago.

Now don't get me wrong, I love it here in 'knob and kettle country' on the doorstep of Elk Island National Park and the Cooking Lake Blackfoot Provincial Recreation Area. Consider also that the Canadian spring has its own charms that I wouldn't miss for the world. Where else would we await those first warm rays in April with such anticipation? Where else would we venture out in shirtsleeves even though there were six inches of snow on the ground? (Perhaps we English are mad after all?) And where else would you be able to watch the brown 'cold-scorched' earth turn such a won-

derful verdant green in just a few weeks?

There are other delights in springtime too, such as woodpeckers drumming out their territories and the cacophony of rampant frogs performing unmentionable springtime acts in the puddles of melt-water beside the house – so loud in their passion that nighttime

can seem a welcome break from the din!

But, I miss the flowers. We have spring flowers here in Alberta, but it's not the same. There are no snowdrops pushing their flowery heads above the snow, announcing that spring is around the corner. No yellow celandines stretching their buttery faces towards the early March sun. No carpets of bluebells springing up in April to be replaced by the delicate wood anemones bobbing in the summer breeze. Springtime in the South of England is a heady transition from white, through yellow, to blue and back again to white.

Yes, I miss the flowers. But I take delight in the melting of the lakes, the chorus of the wood frogs and the emergence of the dragonflies. It's good to be in Alberta in the springtime.

Interested in Hiking in EINP?

Each spring the wardens in EINP conduct searches of the Park to locate the remains of ungulates that died during the previous year.

Mortality rates are always difficult to determine for wildlife species, yet that knowledge plays a crucial role in helping Park managers understand the health and demographics of the elk, moose, deer and bison populations. This knowledge, in turn, is used to determine the number of

animals to be removed from the Park each year and plays a vital role in monitoring for the presence of disease, predators and general herd health.

If you like to hike, contact the park to be scheduled into a Spring Mortality Survey. These surveys require large numbers of people to travel in a line through the park, searching the ground for evidence of mortalities. It's a fun way to see regions of the park not regularly travelled. The

surveys will take place on each Saturday (the 10th, 17th and 24th of April) and will require about 4 hours of your time. Contact Wes Olson after April 5th, at 992-2962 if you wish to participate, or for more information.

Please see Wes' article on the EINP Bison Roundup on page 5 for more information about this exciting opportunity.

New Trailhead Signs to Brighten EINP

by Colleen Gering

Have you seen the Moss Lake trailhead sign lately? Over the years it has deteriorated and become unattractive and confusing. It will be one of the signs replaced in the Elk Island National Park (EINP) trail system by early summer. The new sign is bright, colourful and includes a trail map oriented to the direction the visitor is facing. There is a brief interpretive text along with a legend, images and a park map indicating where you are in the park.

The other trails which will sport new trailhead signs by summer in 2004 are the Hayburger, Tawayik Lake, and the Simmons/Shirley Lake trails. Each sign will highlight a fea-

A Walk Along Hayburger Trail

by Ola Cupial, Visitor Services EINP

On a pleasant day last summer, I ventured out on a warm, breezy evening in search of a trail to appease my restless feet.

I decided on Hayburger trail in Elk Island National Park, a 12 km loop through aspen parkland, spruce bogs and the unexpected gazes of a herd of bison. The hike was not grueling but rather resembled a leisurely stroll on a wide, well-groomed grassy path. Elk Island is one of the most user-friendly parks, when measured by the boots on one's feet.

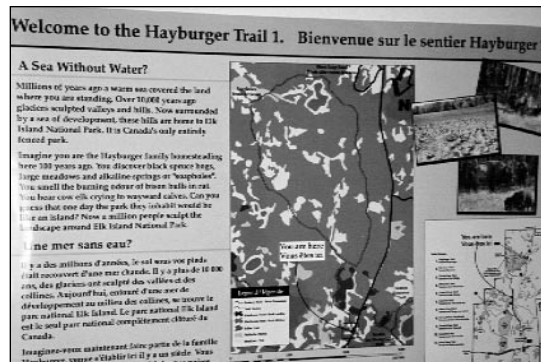
Hayburger takes you along a cathedral-like channel of trees, gentle dips, rolling topography and entrances into wide clearings where the plains bison herds can often be seen.

I had several encounters with the mightiest ungulate in the

ture of that trail, and also the significance of EINP within the national park system. For example: "Look down for 'pearl necklace' droppings of elk. Listen for bugling bulls. Run your hand through the grass they graze on. Today, hundreds of elk flourish here. They are a source for reintroducing herds across North America."

Come out and enjoy a fresh look to some of the fascinating hiking, skiing and snow shoeing trails in this part of Alberta. Support and be proud of Elk Island National Park as it continues to improve services for visitors.

New trailhead sign for Hayburger Trail.



park, the bison. If you find yourself in a similar situation, a few tips to remember are recommended by the Park staff. It is a good idea to stay about 50-75 m from the bison, and avoid confrontations in closed meadows and clearings as the bison may feel that you've burst their personal bubble and consequently have nowhere to run. Lastly, if "Charlie" (as they are affectionately called around these parts) decides he would like to share the path with you instead, walking around him (and this may or may not involve bushwhacking) is a good recommendation.

Keeping the above in mind, bison are beautifully majestic beasts, our very own version of the lions in the African savannah. Nothing is more heart-pounding and breathtaking an experience as the thunderous

roar of dozens of bison hooves galloping and frolicking through a clearing. The remaining thick cloud of dust hangs in the air as proof of their might. It's an experience one does not forget and, at that moment in time, it seems as though you've temporarily been transported to a safari scene.

I invite you to drive, bike or ride a bus to Elk Island National Park next time you experience itchy feet and a hunger for some natural therapy.

If Hayburger has sparked your interest, the trailhead is located 7.5km from the south entrance gate (north from Hwy. 16). A word of warning from this avid hiker is to head right towards the trailhead and let not ye be fooled by the well-traveled bison path on your left. Hope to see smiling faces and busy feet out on the trails this summer!

The EINP Bison Roundup

by Wes Olson

The winter of 2003-2004 saw the completion of both the plains and wood bison handling operations. These roundups are conducted bi-annually to gather data on current herd structures, herd health, and to remove from the Park those bison considered surplus to the Park's carrying capacity.

The plains bison roundup took place during late November 2003. In total, 490 plains bison were put through the facility. Every animal was weighed, aged, sexed and if missing, an ear tag applied. There were 37 bison left free-roaming in the Park, most of which were adult bulls. Combined, this represents a park plains bison population of 527 in the fall of 2003. On December 13, 132 bison were removed from the Park, leaving 395 prior to the spring 2004 calving season. There should be around 120 calves produced this spring, for a summer population of 515 plains bison.

Fifty calves were taken into southern Saskatchewan to a new conservation program known as the Old Man On His Back. This former ranch owned by Sharon and Peter Butala was recently purchased by the Nature Conservancy of Canada, and the 50 calves are the nucleus of a new population. This is the first time in Canada that plains bison have been returned to the mixed grass prairie on lands that are set aside for conservation.

Rocky Mountain House National Historic Site and Waterton Lakes National Park also benefited from the roundup, with the addition of replacement breeding bulls to their herds. The remainder of the surplus bison were sold through public auction at Grunows Auction near Wainwright, Alberta. The sale proceeds go directly to the costs associated with the roundup.

The wood bison roundup in early January 2004 accounted for 364 wood bison. This was the most successful roundup in recent decades with only 5 bison left free-roaming in the Park. A total of 113 bison of various ages and sexes were selected for removal, with 15 of these des-



Wood Bison numbers should be back up to around 313 head in Spring 2004.

tined for the Heart Lake First Nations wood bison herd. The rest were also sold through Grunows Auction. The spring pre-calving population is estimated to be around 245 wood bison, and with the addition of about 68 calves in the spring of 2004, the herd should be back up to around 313 head.

Both subspecies were impacted by the drought of recent years through higher than normal mortality rates. The Park ponds and lakes are all well below normal in depth and surface area, and as a result all wildlife species find it difficult to obtain water. In many cases bison, elk and moose have been found mired in the mud along wetland shores. Their heavy weight causes them to sink into the mud and become trapped. Over the past couple years, in excess of 50 plains and wood bison are suspected to have died from this and other causes.

If any members of the Friends of Elk Island are interested in getting some exercise this spring, the Warden Service is planning to conduct searches of the Park to determine the over-winter mortality of ungulates. This will take place as soon as the snow cover has gone but before the ice melts on the wetlands and lakes. Interested people will then line up and walk across-country, identifying every ungulate mortality they observe. If you are interested in participating in the spring mortality survey, call Wes Olson at 992-2962.

Tracking in a Winter Wonderland

by Glynnis Hood

Remember that cold snap in January? How cars wouldn't start, water mains broke, and roads were beyond drivable? Well out in the woods in Elk Island National Park a brave group of hikers joined wildlife biologist Dee Patriquin for a wonderful couple of hours of wildlife tracking along the Amisk Wuche trail. We started the walk with temperatures rapidly dropping below -20°C , but everyone dressed for the weather and was ready to go.

Dee started her walk in the parking lot with her dog Sheba who made several different gaits in the fresh snow. So often the animal is long gone once we come across the track and Sheba was able to give us an instant demonstration as to how different gaits change the pattern of the track. First, Dee held Sheba at a walk, then a trot and finally a full-out run. All good training for the group as we headed out on the trail while Sheba slept off her workout in the truck.

Immediately, we came across a coyote track that had meandered on and off the trail. We were able to see how it moved from curious wandering to directed walking. As we continued along the trail through an area of marsh, a large hoofed animal had made a large path through the snow beside the boardwalk. As the group proceeded, Dee added several clues to the mystery until finally we were able to determine that an elk had recently walked our way. Its feeding area where it had pawed through the snow to grass was the

final clue. All the while, a porcupine watched us from a nearby aspen tree.

For the rest of the walk a pileated woodpecker followed us along the trail and gave us a tremendous performance. It is the largest species of woodpecker in the Park and this one had the personality and the looks of Woody the Woodpecker. It was the perfect opportunity to see how some of the birds in the park survive the harsh winter months.

As we entered the coniferous forest on the east side of the trail, the animal tracks changed. Red squirrel tracks were abundant because of the nearby spruce cones. The waddling track of a porcupine was evident as indicated by the sign of its heavily quilled tail being dragged through the snow. Snowshoe hare tracks were also present as seen by the imprint of their large hind feet placed ahead of their smaller front feet. Dee told us this was a typical jumping gait, which she had demonstrated earlier at the parking lot.

The tracks and Dee's commentary on winter ecology told us much about how Elk Island's wildlife survive winter, and what better day to see just what extremes in weather they must endure. Dee was the perfect guide, ready to strap on snowshoes only to show us how prey try (in her case unsuccessfully) to outrun predators such as coyotes. After the walk, the group made its way over to the Park's interpretative theatre for hot drinks and Timbits because, after all, humans have winter survival tricks too!



We Get E-Mail!

Greetings!

I have just returned from the Winter Tracking Guided Walk, and in my opinion it was a great success in spite of the lousy weather and roads (actually the weather in the Park was relatively nice with just a light snow falling and no wind). In addition to Dee, the

hike leader, Glynnis and myself, there were 8 people who showed up for the event. Dee gave a superb presentation that was very informative and educational. From watching and talking to the people who participated, they all seemed to really enjoy it. After the hike everyone went to the theatre for hot drinks and Timbits

which Glynnis had provided and set up.

I want to thank Glynnis for doing the arrangements for the hike and having provided the hot drinks and snack. I also want to give an extra special thanks to Dee for leading a great hike. It was really informative and enjoyable.

Mark

Elk Report for EINP

by Rob Kaye

As part of an ongoing program in Elk Island National Park to reduce elk numbers (and prevent over grazing of habitat) each year, Park wardens were busy again this past winter trapping and handling elk. The Park translocated 89 elk into the central-eastern slopes of the Rockies in the Nordegg and Brazeau River areas north-west of Rocky Mountain House in January. An additional 123 elk captured in the Park are planned to be translocated into the same general area in March.

Bait hay is placed into large pens to capture elk each winter. Captured elk are then moved to a large facility in the Park where they await handling. All elk are checked for general health, disease tested, administered broad spectrum internal and external parasitic medication, weighed and tagged. While waiting for shipment in the Park facility pens, the elk are fed high quality hay to help sustain their weight. An electrolyte solution containing minerals and carbohydrates is also included in their drinking water to reduce stress and dehydration.

The Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation (a non-profit conservation group) works closely with the Park on all elk relocation projects by providing both financial and logistical support. The University of Alberta and Alberta



Elk in alleyway awaiting handling.

Fish & Wildlife, are undertaking a research project in conjunction with the releases this year. The objectives of this research project are as follows:

(a) to determine habitat and predation factors which influence the success (both retention and survival) of released elk. The intention is to provide recommendations on how to optimize selecting release sites that will promote translocated elk integration into resident populations of elk.

(b) to determine how translocated elk adapt to a new environment by comparing habitat use, movements, survival, and reproduction of the translocated elk to resi-

dent elk in the area.

(c) to participate in an international study (Alberta, Ontario, Yellowstone, Wisconsin) that is looking at elk movements and population growth across landscapes at different spatial scales.

(d) to evaluate the success of a 'hard release' in foothills habitat.

The Park also plans to reduce elk numbers next winter and Park management is presently reviewing options for reducing elk numbers into the future. Possible elk translocations have not been finalized at this time for next year but include areas of native elk habitat in Alberta, Ontario, Tennessee and North Carolina.

Membership Form

Name: _____

Address: _____

Phone number: _____ Fax number: _____ E-mail: _____

Individual membership (\$10.00): _____ Family membership (\$15.00): _____

Donation: _____

If you are donating \$25.00 or more, please indicate whether or not you would like us to send you a tax receipt. Send your Membership Form and payment to: Friends of Elk Island Society Box 70, 9920-63 Avenue Edmonton, Alberta T6E 0G9 (780) 988-4842

Friends of Elk Island Society

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**Services to
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**Supporting
Science-Based
research**

**Special
Events**

Sales Outlet

Mission Statement — Friends of Elk Island Society

The Friends of Elk Island Society is a non-profit, charitable organization that co-operates with Parks Canada to promote understanding, appreciation and respect for Elk Island National Park. The FEIS fulfills this mission by participating in conservation, science-based research, the operation of a sales outlet, special events and providing services to its members.

The FEIS raises funds and administers donations to further the objectives of the Society.

RESEARCH REVIEW

A special publication of the Friends of Elk Island Society, sharing the projects funded by FEIS

Living on the Edge: Squirrels in the Aspen Parkland

by Neil Darlow

Neil Darlow, a Ph.D candidate at the University of Alberta, has been studying squirrels in the Aspen Parkland for the past 2 years, with the assistance of funding from the Friends of Elk Island Society. Neil says, "This project would not have succeeded without the strong support of the Friends of Elk Island Society (FEIS). Research support has always been a strong mandate of FEIS, and members can be heartened that their personal support for FEIS is used in such a positive fashion to help us understand more about our environment and give the Park the best scientific information available to appropriately manage the Park's ecosystems."

The North American red squirrel, *Tamiasciurus hudsonicus*, occupies a rather unique role in society. As a member of the rodent family, some people see them as nothing more than large rats with bushy tails, pilfering farmers' seed, and gnawing at farm buildings and residences.

However, one thing that can be said about squirrels is that virtually everyone has, at one time or another, had an encounter with one. You may have been awakened early in the morning by an annoying squirrel right outside your tent, or had to go after your dog that was chasing a squirrel, or merely watching as the pesky little things navigate a bird feeder placed exactly where you thought they couldn't get to. Squirrels are one of just a few animal species that both rural and urban people are intimately familiar with. Coupled with their undeniable charisma and cunning skills, squirrels have a special place in many people's hearts. In addition to this societal role, squirrels are useful animals for ecologists such as myself to study. They're small and easy to capture and we already know a lot about their role in ecological communities.

Interestingly though, virtually all of our information on red squirrel ecology comes from studies in the Boreal forest of Canada.

As many of you know, Elk Island National Park is actually situated in the transition zone

known as Aspen Parkland, between the Northern Boreal forest and the prairies to the south. Scientists have only recently paid more attention to the Aspen Parkland, and the Beaverhills area of central Alberta in particular, as a great place to do ecological research. As a result, we know relatively little about the Parkland and that makes research a little harder. Squirrels are a good example of this.

Being a common species, people often think that we must know everything there is to know about squirrels. Well, in part, they're right. We know from a lot of previous research that Boreal red squirrels feed primarily on white spruce cones. Spruce trees usually produce a small number of cones each year. However, once in a while, the trees 'mast', producing thousands of cones in that year. Squirrels survive on these cones through much of the year, especially during the winter. Here in the Beaverhills however, squirrels live in areas composed of trembling aspen and balsam poplar, with just a small amount of white spruce found primarily around rural residences or in shelterbelts. Of the 22% of the land that is still forested, a mere 5% of that is spruce, with the remaining 95% being poplar.

So how then do squirrels make a living in the Aspen Parkland? Do we find them only around the small amounts of spruce in people's yards, or do we find them in



Juvenile squirrel in aspen tree, "living on the edge."

all of the wooded areas of the Beaverhills?

One component of my graduate work at the University of Alberta is to find out where squirrels live in the area, and why they choose certain areas and not others. Armed with a bag full of chemicals, a length of sewage pipe and some butcher paper, I have spent two years visiting over 200 woodlots across the Beaverhills area in search of squirrels. 'What on earth would he be doing with all that equipment?' I hear you ask. Well, looking for squirrels in spruce habitat is really very easy. Most people are at least somewhat familiar with the variety of vocalizations that squirrels make. You can also see where they store their spruce cones, in areas called middens. In poplar-dominated areas however, it's a whole other ball game. The squirrels are secretive,

and you rarely hear them calling even if you get up close to them. They don't have large middens. Instead, they have a large number of small food storage sites scattered throughout their territory. They also nest in really inconspicuous holes, primarily in poplar trees. So even finding signs of squirrels in these woodlots is often quite challenging. Landowners that I work with are often really surprised when I report that they have squirrels living on their property.

One easy, if time consuming, way to find squirrels is to use a technique called trackplating. This is where the sewer pipe and the butcher paper come in. We stick some peanut butter at one end of the sewer pipe and line the bottom with the butcher paper. An ink pad at the entrance dyes their paws so that the squirrels leave their footprints on the paper. In this way I can identify which areas have squirrels living in them and which don't. With that information I can then look for similarities in areas with and without squirrels in terms of the characteristics of the habitat and surrounding landscape.

We've made some interesting discoveries so far. In locations without white spruce, squirrels are only found in areas with abundant beaked hazelnut, a shrub fairly common throughout the Beaverhills. Beaked hazel shrubs produce edible and nutritious hazelnuts in mid-late summer.



Hey, that's MY breakfast!

Unfortunately for many of the human inhabitants of the Beaverhills, the squirrels and other animals collect these nuts and store them before they're ripe enough for us to pick. Squirrels likely use them as their winter food source, in lieu of the spruce cones that they normally require. Unfortunately for the squirrels, hazel is also a favorite food source for both wild and domestic ungulates such as deer, moose and bison so squirrels have to compete with other wildlife for this critical food.

Interestingly though, the ungulates often don't eat the nuts, merely the twigs and stems. However, the plants respond to this heavy grazing by limiting their production of nuts. So merely having beaked hazel in an area often isn't enough for squirrels. The hazel need to be tall and bushy as these are the shrubs that produce lots of nuts. Unfortunately this isn't the case in much of Elk Island due to the large number of ungulates.

So how does this community work? How does browsing affect the other members of this ecosystem? What about the birds and other small mammals that also feed on the hazel nuts? The truth is we don't know yet. We can only speculate and follow up these ideas with more scientific studies. In the past several years the density of ungulates has dropped significantly in the Park, as a result of Park management activity. I expect that as a result of the reduction in ungulate browsing, the hazel will be able to grow more, leading to increased nut production and potentially an increase in the squirrel and other small wildlife pop-



Radio-collared squirrel (listening to NUTS-FM???)

ulations within the Park. Only time will tell, however if this truly is the case.

So, even though they're not as large and dominating as bison, squirrels in their own way, are quite charismatic. Not only that, but through scientific studies we can use these smaller animals to help us understand the effects that we have on our surroundings. Hopefully this will allow us to design our management activities in such a way as to benefit the whole ecological community, both within the Park and in the surrounding Beaverhills.

To find out more about the habits and habitat use of red squirrels in Elk Island National Park, join Neil on April 23, 2004 for an FEIS guided hike through some prime, and some not-so prime habitat for squirrels. Watch our website, www.elkisland.ca, for time and details of the event.