

ARBI meets AFGA and ACA on Pronghorn project 2010

The Aeolian Recreational Boundary Institute (arbi) is an artist collective headquartered in Calgary that emerged in early 2009 to facilitate ongoing study into borders, boundaries and all forms of barriers that act as disruptive forces in the natural world. The institute works with organizations involved in the remediation of the negative impact that human intervention has had on existing ecosystems—like barbed wire fencing. A 2007 artist retreat near Lundbreck, Alberta resulted in a landscape intervention that was documented in photographs and exhibited briefly as a digital art installation called “you guys brought the fences” in Philadelphia at the Stella Elkins gallery, Tyler School of Art in May 2009.

This project effectively launched arbi and in the summer of 2009 the four founding members of the institute took advantage of opportunities to work in the field with conservationists from the Nature Conservancy of Canada (NCC) to help remove fences and structures from areas where free-ranging animals needed continuous migration corridors. Two collaborations at Bulka and near Waterton allowed arbi members to contribute meaningful volunteer labour spooling wire, pulling fence posts and dismantling windbreak fences and other abandoned structures while exploring the aesthetic implications of the work of restoring the land to its natural state. The Waterton project resulted in a temporary found object installation of discarded wood materials from the day’s labours, which was a meditation on the unique landscape of plains meeting mountains. After viewing, the installation was collapsed and returned to the wood piles that were to be removed or burned by the landowner.

More recently, the Alberta Fish and Game Association and Alberta Conservation Association’s pronghorn corridor project caught the attention of arbi. Subsequently, AFGA’s Martin Sharren and T.J. Schwanky confirmed the institute’s participation in fencing projects for the summer of 2010, starting on the July 10–11 weekend on Raymond Pearson’s ranch 20 km south of Orion, Alberta on Hwy 887.

The four arbi members plus two associates set up a base camp at the Cypress Hills campground, an hours drive northeast of the worksite. Saturday morning the arbi motorcade set out to find the Pearson ranch. With the main road from Cypress Hills washed out from the June rainstorms, the group found detour routes on gravel range roads that afforded breathtaking views of lush coulees, a reservoir and wildlife sightings. We arrived at the designated meeting place late to find the AFGA/ACA crew waiting graciously for us. The weekend’s objective was to staple in a previously-strung smooth wire strand at 18 inches from ground and to respace and fasten the top three barbed wire strands on four miles of fencing that were impeding pronghorn movements north to south and east to west. Required tools included fencing pliers, good hammers and tool belts or aprons to hold new and old fence staples. Other crew members had ATV’s to move supplies along the fence row in two separate locations on the Pearson ranch over the two days. The crews split up into functional groups and the work began. Mercifully, the weather was mostly overcast and breezy, helping to keep the overabundant swarms of mosquitoes at bay. The arbi crew quickly learned the rhythm of the work—remove staples, measuring stick, lift wire, staple, measure, lift, staple...

and on it went the group leapfrogging each other in mild detour routes on gravel range roads that afforded breathtaking views of lush coulees, a reservoir and wildlife sightings. We arrived at the designated meeting place late to find the AFGA/ACA crew waiting graciously for us. The weekend’s objective was to staple in a previously-strung smooth wire strand at 18 inches from ground and to respace and fasten the top three barbed wire strands on four miles of fencing that were impeding pronghorn movements north to south and east to west. Required tools included fencing pliers, good hammers and tool belts or aprons to hold new and old fence staples. Other crew members had ATV’s to move supplies along the fence row in two separate locations on the Pearson ranch

we accomplished the objective by about 3 pm.

Our second weekend was August 14–15 on Martin Krippel’s ranch, about 50 km east of Foremost, south of Hwy 61 on Range Road 75. Base camp for the 4 arbi volunteers was the Foremost campground, which proved to be a soggy experience with heavy rain on Friday the thirteenth. At the project meeting place on Bayotte Britschgi’s farm Saturday morning, a larger group of over a dozen individuals—staff of AFGA and ACA, and volunteers—was assembled, all keeping a weather eye on the fast-moving clouds. All the smooth wire had been strung on the projected 10 miles of fencing, so the work was expected to go fast. And indeed it did, as the work groups spread out along various sections of fence. The forecast was for clouds with occasional rain showers, and again the light breezes and cool weather kept the bugs away.

These two weekend projects gave arbi members a first-hand knowledge of the extensive cross-border pronghorn migration routes in southern Alberta. Direct participation in projects initiated by other organizations will continue to be a mainstay of arbi’s activities. It is hoped that the institute’s presence will have a positive impact on these important conservation efforts and result in better understanding of the issues surrounding man-made boundaries, borders and barriers and how they influence the natural world.

Arbi wishes to thank AFGA’s Martin Sharren and T.J. Schwanky, ACA’s Blair Seward, Reg from Lethbridge, and all the other dedicated volunteers we had the privilege of meeting on the two weekends.

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