



Ducks Unlimited Canada
CANADA'S CONSERVATION COMPANY

Feature Profile

IN SEARCH OF CROCUSES

Holidays are a special time for the Samoil family whose roots are firmly planted in the soil of their family farm near Vegreville. The four siblings who were raised on the farm, along with assorted husbands, children and grandchildren gather from far and near for a meal at the farmhouse and follow it with a long walk across their land.

In winter, they look for rabbits, deer and other wildlife as they forage. In summer they pick berries and look for wildflowers. In fall they spot waterfowl staging for their flight south. In spring, it's a trip to Crocus Hill where they search for the first hardy spring crocuses and enjoy the hill top view of their land, including the meadow where deer come to drink from the slough or graze on native grasses like prairie wool.

This land has never been plowed and it is a natural preserve for the flora and fauna of the Akasu landscape, the wetlands area connecting to Sickman Lake. More importantly, its 385 acres now form a conservation easement, donated in perpetuity by the Samoil family to Ducks Unlimited Canada.

“Our father bought this land in the 1930’s and raised us kids there,” recalls Kathleen Tomy. “Though three of us now live in the city, we still value the land and have many family reunions out there. As we grew older, we decided to do something permanent to keep it in its natural state, rather than have it ploughed up and drained by some future owner who didn’t care about wetlands or wildlife.”

Many discussions ensued and Ducks Unlimited Canada (DUC), one of the oldest and largest conservation associations in Alberta, seemed a natural choice as partner. The Samoil’s donation became the first conservation easement agreement made with DUC Alberta. This legal agreement protects the property from land use changes while the ownership remains private. Though the property can be sold to others, it cannot be developed, broken or drained.

Denis Gauvreau, DUC’s conservation specialist in St. Paul, worked on the agreement with the family over three years and planned the dedication ceremony that took place this June. Thirty members of the Samoil family and their friends and neighbours gathered for the unveiling of a large sign (located on Highway 631 at the se corner of the intersection), barbeque and guided hike through the preserved meadow.

In Fall 2005, Ducks Unlimited Canada built a weir on the meadow to try to restore a 20 acre wetland, drained by drought and the destruction of a nearby beaver dam. “The deer are already starting to come back there,” says Kathleen,” though we need snow to really fill it. However the deer no longer have a protected corridor all the way to the lake – land closer to the lake which was not owned by our family was recently bulldozed and cleared of trees and bushes. Actions like that or the thoughtless tearing up of land by dirt bikes and ATVs convinced us to do our part to preserve habitat.”

DUC’s Gavreau thinks the Samoil Conservation Easement may be one of the last preserves for native habitat left in the Akasu landscape. “Alberta’s natural wilderness sites are disappearing at an alarming rate. The Samoils have left a valuable heritage, not just for their family, but for all Albertans. This land will now stay in its original state forever.”

DUC Alberta is currently working on several donated or paid conservation easement agreements (CEs) in the central aspen parkland. Don Watson, Head of Habitat Retention, says, “Individual landowners have their own reasons for wanting to protect their land as a legacy. For DUC, it comes back to our core business, habitat retention, and that means land securement. CEs are really about long-term land use planning and they enable Albertans to make a real commitment to habitat preservation.”

For information, go to www.ducks.ca or call (403) 328-3529.

Ducks Unlimited Canada is a private, not-for-profit, Canadian organization. Since 1938 DUC has positively influenced more than 24.9 million acres (over 10 million hectares) of wetland and upland habitat for the benefit of waterfowl, other wildlife and people. DUC has 8,600 active volunteers and 150,000 supporters who respect and enjoy Canada’s great outdoors.