

The Trumpeter

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



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

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Join us at the FEIS 20th Annual General Meeting

This year will be the 20th Annual General Meeting (AGM) of the Friends of Elk Island Society. To help us celebrate this milestone and continue the work of the Society, we invite you to our AGM on Tuesday, June 8, at 7:00 p.m. at Grant MacEwan College, City Centre Campus (10700 - 104 Avenue, Edmonton) in room 6-152.

The AGM is an opportunity for each of our members to contribute to the success of the Society by addressing, debating and voting upon issues with important implications for the Society, by voting in new board members, and maybe more importantly, the AGM gives you, our members, an opportunity to voice your opinions about what we do and how we do it.

The past year has been a very busy one for FEIS. There have been a number of successful special events, such as Family Ski Day, and a number of Guided Walks, including the recent Owl Prowl, that have taken place in the Park over the past year. We have provided funding for important research in the Park and surrounding area, including a Beaver survey to help deter-

MARK YOUR CALENDAR:

Friends of Elk Island Society
Annual General Meeting
June 8, 2004 7:00 p.m.

mine the impact of the recent drought on the Park's Beaver population. Regular issues of "The Trumpeter", the FEIS newsletter, and the FEIS website keep our members and the general public informed about the Society's activities and the Park. This past summer FEIS operated a Gift Shop/Information Centre in the Park and we are getting ready to open it up again this summer.

This year a number of the Board members complete their term, so there will be several vacancies on the Board which we hope to fill at the AGM. If you have some time that you can spare to help ensure that the Society continues to be successful in meeting its goals, then we encourage you to put your name forward for election to the Board. In particular, we are looking for people with interest and skills in business planning, running events and legal matters but even if your interests lie out-

side these areas, we encourage you to put your name forward.

Over the past few months the Board has been reviewing the Society's bylaws, since they have not been revised for many years. As a result of this review, a number of amendments to the bylaws will be presented at the AGM and then you, our members, will be asked to vote on them.

As a special presentation, Board member Mark Degner and his wife Leslie will give a talk and slide presentation on "Galapagos National Park, Ecuador" where they have visited in the past few years. Both Leslie and Mark are professional photographers, so in addition to hearing about their experiences and learning about the Galapagos Islands, you will have the opportunity to see some spectacular images from the islands.

Come to the AGM to hear about all of the things that have happened over the past year, and learn about some of the activities and events that are going to occur in the upcoming year – our 20th Anniversary. The FEIS Board looks forward to seeing you on June 8th.

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Fire Strikes EINP!

“March winds and April showers bring May flowers”, is an old promise of all spring has to offer. The saying doesn’t mention that a dry spring may also bring fire. However, that is just what happened at Elk Island National Park.

The fire was reported at 8 pm on Friday, April 30 at the southern extremity of the Hayburger Trail. By the following morning, the fire was approximately 50 hectares (ha) in size. The Hayburger Trail and the Bison Loop Road were closed to the public.

Incident Commander Steve Otway chose a strategy to encircle the fire by burning a fireguard that encompassed approximately 750 ha. The plan quickly changed, however, when the fire jumped the northern end of the fireguard. Fire crews had to create another fireguard farther into the park. The fire grew to approximately 1100 ha. by 8 pm on May 1 and was 20% contained. Moss Lake Trail and the Sand Hills Management Road were closed on May 1.

The fire was finally successfully contained in an area bounded by the Bison Loop Road, the Parkway, the east boundary of the Park, and the Sand Hills Management Road

on Sunday, May 2. Snow and rain helped to control the blaze, which covered nearly 3000 ha.

The fire continued to smolder for several days as officials monitored hotspots. They estimated the smoke may last as long as a few weeks.

Parks Canada crews from Banff, Jasper, and Waterton Lakes National Parks joined Elk Island staff in their efforts. The province provided six bull dozers and personnel from the Chipman, Bruderheim, Lamont, and Strathcona County fire departments joined the fight.

The good news story is: Fire means renewal! Ecologically speaking, fire is a natural part of the system. It has been compared to resetting the biological clock. This fire will serve several purposes, including cleaning up the fuel that has accumulated over many years without fire, and instigating fresh new growth. The

new growth is prime grazing for the ungulates. The bison can already be seen grazing nearby the burned areas - just waiting for the green-up that they know always follows a fire!



The fire at Elk Island Park, from the ground (above) and from the air (below).



Eva Paul

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

FEIS Welcomes Robert Sheldon, New Superintendent

The Friends of Elk Island Society had the pleasure of welcoming Superintendent Robert Sheldon as he assumes his role as Superintendent of Elk Island National Park.

Robert was born in Nanaimo, BC and grew up in Nova Scotia. "My dad worked for the Department of Fisheries so it was one coast or the other," he says.

Following his graduation, with degrees in History and Languages, Robert entered a summer work program in Switzerland, and then joined Parks Canada. He spent the next five years as a site interpreter at Fort Royal and Fort Anne National Historic Sites (NHS), in southwestern Nova Scotia.

He gained more experience with short stints at Province House NHS, Charlottetown, Prince Edward Island and Grand Pré NHS, Grand Pré, Nova Scotia.

"In 1994, I was accepted into the National Parks Management Trainee Program," adds Robert. "The intent of the Program is to enable people in the lower levels of the organization to qualify for middle management positions. It basically consisted of a series of assignments with increasing levels of responsibility as well as eight weeks of formal training over the five years."

During his first three years as a trainee,



Meet Robert Sheldon, new Superintendent at Elk Island National Park.

Robert completed assignments in Newfoundland, the Parks Canada National Office in Ottawa and with Canadian Heritage. He accepted his first assignment at Riding Mountain National Park, where he served as finance manager, from the fall of 1998 to 1999.

"After Riding Mountain I went to the Rideau Canal National Historic Site for six months," says Robert. "Then I was offered the position of Superintendent at the Sault Ste Marie Canal NHS for the last six months of the management trainee program. I was appointed Superintendent and was there for a little more than two years."

His next move was back to Riding Mountain as Communications and Visitor Services Manager from July 2002 until April 2004, when he joined Elk Island National Park as Park Superintendent.

The Friends of Riding Mountain National Park (FRMNP) are a very active group. They do a number of things, including funding research. They have two sales outlets and provide interpretation programs in the summer.

The FRMNP sell little stuffed wolves and the proceeds go to a specific timber wolf program. They call the toys "Tim Berwolf." It sounds like Robert Sheldon will feel right at home with the FEIS Trumpeter Swan project.

The Trumpeter is a regular publication of the Friends of Elk Island Society.

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The Trumpeter can also be found on our website:
www.elkisland.ca

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Alisa Peckham

Do you know WHOOO this is? Read on - story on page 6

A Photographer's Experience of Elk Island National Park

by Dale Hudjik

If, as the famous quote says: "No man is an island", then perhaps a man could be like an island that is not an island. Elk Island National Park has been an important part of my life since I first saw it. Its quiet places have been a refuge for me and although it is a rugged place, it has an understated beauty of the kind that one appreciates more and more each time one visits it.

On my personal migration westward, Elk Island Park was a stopover before reaching Edmonton. My little boy, who wasn't even a year old, was intrigued by the sounds of the dry spring grasses blowing in the wind and overjoyed for the stop on the long, and to him, unending ride along the Yellowhead highway.

Once I was settled in Edmonton, my first visits to Elk Island Park were to go hiking. I chose some of the shorter trails initially, but eventually explored longer walks. I remember taking my two-year-old boy for walk along Amisk Wuche Trail after a long winter. It was an absolute joy for both of us, and I had a hard time keeping up with him as he ran and enjoyed the place with the sheer delight that only children know.

My first experience of the amazing light in Elk Island Park was watching a beautiful sunset on Lake Astotin. It seemed to be a place especially designed for watching sunsets. Not only did the islands in the Lake and the occasional call of a coyote provide a dramatic setting, but the beauty of the sunset was doubled in the reflections of gently rippled water of the Lake.

But that is the showy attractiveness of the Park; its real beauty is much more subtle and something probably not observed by

many people. Its deeper splendor is shown, not when the sun sets, but when the sun rises. Early on a summer morning, perhaps between 3:30 and 4:30 a.m. when the weather conditions are just right and a thick fog blankets the entire Park, the struggle of the sun to shine through as it rises creates hues that cannot be seen anywhere else.

But the crescendo of magnificence is not, as would be otherwise expected, reached in the summertime, nor the springtime; it is on a frosty winter morning when the Park's light is the most dramatic. For then, on a morning with thick fog, when there seems to be no difference between the snow on the ground and the haze in the air, the morning sun makes everything glow an almost pure white. It is scenes like this that cannot be described simply with words but must be seen in person to be fully appreciated.

I'm a photographer. I take all sorts of photographs for all sorts of reasons, but the place that challenges is me the most, and one of the places that also rewards me the most, is Elk Island Park with its stunning light. I've had to sacrifice sleeping in many mornings to be there at the right times, but I have always felt that this investment has been worth the return I have received in interesting photographs.

I am also a very happy person now, and I certainly am not an island: I have another little boy who was born in the spring whom I will eventually be able to take to the Park. After he was born I took some time off of work to help look after him, and in a free moment I could not help but take off to the Park early in the morning to take photographs and this is when I had my "Elk Island Adventure."

That morning, I came across a

large spider web that was covered with pearls of dew. I was busying myself setting the exposure and focusing the camera when I heard huffing, puffing and snorting coming from behind me. I was on a bend of the Moss Lake Trail and a bison was running along, oblivious to my presence. I had only a couple of seconds to decide what to do. The dew drenched spider web was in a thick bush of honeysuckle and wild roses, but I held my camera up over my head and walked straight thorough them and stood beside a tree.

Unfortunately the bison didn't just stomp on right by, but instead stopped, turned his big head, looked at me, and snorted some more. There wasn't much for me to do but to stand still. Eventually, the bison snorted one last time, and disappeared down the trail.

When I began to breathe again, I walked the couple of meters back to the trail but I could see no sign of him. I was thankful that I came off from the incident with only a few scratches from the rose bushes.

I am looking forward to exploring more of the Park and I know I will see and photograph things that I never would have expected. Certainly, when I share these experiences with others I know that I am not an "island" but I have truly enjoyed visiting one, Elk Island National Park.

Dale Hudjik is an Edmonton-based photographer who enjoys sharing beautiful and unusual images of Western Canada with people in as varied places as Tunisia and Iran. Dale has corresponded about photography with people in over 60 countries. Dale's work will be exhibited this year at the Muttart Conservatory, the Provincial Museum of Alberta and other venues. Inquires regarding showings can be set to him via email atdale@spunwithtears.com or by calling (780) 504-1083. You can view a constantly updated on-line exhibit of his work at:

<http://www.spunwithtears.com>.

EINP Welcomes New Residents

New tenants have taken up residence in Elk Island National Park (EINP). Park management welcomes the newcomers, but some of the earlier residents do not agree. In fact, some of them feel personally threatened...and with good reason. The recent arrivals are cougars.

Thousands of moose, elk, deer and bison have lived in the predator-free confines of the park for generations. Coyotes rarely threaten these big animals and are more likely to feed on small animals and whatever they can scavenge.

A research paper entitled (First Sighting of Cougar in EINP, in review), authored by Park Wardens Glynnis Hood and Tim Neufeld, documented cougars in and adjacent to EINP since February 2003. Cougar sightings have not previously been recorded in the Park since it became a protected area in 1906, although they were likely in the Beaver Hills region prior to colonization.

On February 8, 2003 Neufeld saw an adult cougar approximately 10 km south of EINP in the southern area of the Cooking Lake-Blackfoot Grazing Reserve. In March, a conservation officer saw the track of a larger cougar and a much smaller cougar together near the boundary of the Provincial Recreation area and EINP. The sightings continued inside and adjacent to EINP into 2004.



When Park Warden Tim Neufeld came across a recently killed elk, he was not surprised that investigation show the elk had been killed by a cougar.

EINP has approximately 13 ungulates per square km (elk, moose, plains bison, wood bison, white tailed deer and mule deer). The Park is also home to a large beaver population and small animals such as porcupines and squirrels. Coyotes, the only large predator, do not control the ungulate population.

Park officials regularly remove live bison and elk from the Park to reduce grazing intensity. These officials have long sought an acceptable means of introducing predators into the Park. The populations of moose, deer, elk and bison have continually expanded beyond the carrying capacity of the Park. Each year hundreds of animals were shipped to other areas of Canada and the United States to reduce those populations.

“A cougar kills a deer or elk every 10 to 14 days,” says Neufeld. “A single cougar in the park would kill as many as 40 animals in a year. If the cougars take up permanent residence in the park, they would be a valuable means of population control. The movement of cougars into the park is another instance of nature adapting to new opportunities and available resources.”

When Owls Prowl at Night

Owl Prowls have proven to be a popular event with visitors to Elk Island National Park (EINP). Weather conditions, including the near blizzard on March 27, did not keep 45 people away from the planned event. The weather did, however, mean that owls would not likely respond to taped calls.

Owl Prowl leader, Heather Hinam, MS, Graduate Student, Ecology, Department of Biological Sciences, suggested that the Friends of Elk Island Society (FEIS) postpone the second portion of the evening event. She offered to lead another prowl on April 17.

Most of us agreed. Heather provided a short but extremely interesting talk on owls and played the

recorded calls of various owls. The group then moved to Tawayik Lake for hot chocolate and hot dogs.

The weather was much more cooperative on April 17 when Heather and another crowd of nearly 50 people gathered at the Information Center. Heather's presentation was, again, extremely interesting and informative. The group moved from the Center to the Tawayik Lake area, then carpooled out on the Park trails.

The owls not only responded to calls but also put in an appearance. The group saw a Great Gray Owl at the corner of Hwy 831 and Tawayik Lake Road. They heard a Great Horned Owl call from north of the Hayburger Trail and saw another

Great Horned Owl at the Astotin Lake turn-off. The owl flew in response to Heather's calls but did not answer them. They also encountered many moose, deer, elk, bison and a few porcupines, as coyotes howled a serenade.

“All in all, it was a great night,” says Heather. It was also a very satisfied group that returned to the Tawayik Lake kitchen to swap stories, ask Heather questions, and refuel with hot dogs and hot drinks.

Hopefully, Heather will be back again to lead visitors on another Owl Prowl. It seems even the owls look forward to her visits.

Living the Night Life – Discovering the Secrets of the Saw-whet Owl

By Heather Hinam

For the last two years, I've worked with a bird that most people have likely never seen. But, if you spend anytime in and around Elk Island National Park in the spring, it's very possible that you've heard it. The bird is the Northern Saw-whet Owl (*Aegolius acadicus*). The second smallest owl in Alberta, this secretive little bird is a common, but difficult-to-find resident of the boreal forest and aspen parkland. Being about the same size as a robin, saw-whet owls are masters of camouflage, and can blend into the dense tangle of branches that commonly surround their roosting locations. But if you travel through the forest at night in the early spring, it's hard to miss its loud repetitive whistle echoing over the trees.

Northern Saw-whet Owls sound nothing like what most people assume a typical owl sounds like. They don't hoot. In fact, their name stems from the opinion of early ornithologists that their alarm call sounded like a saw being sharpened, or whetted. In more modern contexts, one could liken the most common call used by these little birds to the repetitive beep of a large truck backing up. In fact, the call can sound so mechanical that residents of Edmonton's river valley have called the police once or twice to report "suspicious vehicles" in the forested ravines of their backyard.

Though they seem to be ubiquitous little birds, you do tend to find saw-whets in certain places more often than others. Individuals of the species prefer older forests with a mix of large-diameter hardwoods for nesting and dense conifers or willows for roosting during the day. Like all other owls, saw-whets don't build their own nests. They're known as secondary cavity nesters, meaning that they like to set up housekeeping in holes in trees that were built by somebody else. Pileated Woodpecker holes are a favourite.



Heather holding an adult female saw-whet owl.

Andrew Forrest

Before the snow is even off the ground, males move into a territory and seek out one or two potential nesting sites, then do their best to entice a female to mate with by calling through the night, sometimes from within the candidate hole. Once paired, the female settles down in the nest, laying four to six eggs at a rate of one every two days. After the second egg is laid, she starts incubating, hunkering down on the eggs for nearly 24 hours a day. Incubation lasts about a month. After the chicks hatch, she continues to brood the young until they are nearly 20 days old.

During this period, the male spends all his time hunting, bringing back enough food for the female and stockpiling extra for when the chicks hatch. Their diet consists mostly of small mammals, with Red-backed Voles and Deer Mice making up the bulk of the menu. But saw-whets are also fairly skilled bird hunters and have been known to bring back chickadees and sparrows for the young. I once found the tail-feathers of a Cedar Waxwing in the nest, a bird almost the same size as the owl himself!

Once the chicks are old enough to keep themselves and each other warm, the female leaves the crowded, rather messy, nest. She usually takes off for a well-deserved break, but if the food supply is scarce she may take up hunting duties with her mate until the young fledge and leave the nest themselves.

Because they need nesting cavities and dense forest for cover, saw-whets may be especially sensitive to the breaking up of the forests in the aspen parkland for development and agriculture. As forest patches get smaller and farther apart, it may put a strain on the male, making it harder for him to hunt and more difficult to bring food to the young. If the young don't get enough nourishment during their development, they may end up fledging in poor

condition, making survival harder. Breaking up the forest may also make it harder for the young to move away from the nest when it's time to fledge, putting further strain on their condition.

These issues are what I've been investigating over the last two years. As cavity-nesters, saw-whets will readily use nest boxes instead of natural holes, making them easier to study. Still, there are a lot of challenges to working with a nocturnal bird. First and foremost, it screws up your sleeping patterns. Through a combination of radio tagging and a lot of standing around in the dark on country roads, I've managed to map out the nightly movements of the males while they are foraging for their young. By calculating things like home range size and how often the males feed their chicks, I have discovered some interesting patterns. It seems that in areas with only a little forest cover, males are restricted in their movements and can only maintain small home ranges which may not be enough to properly support the young. As forest becomes more abundant, males can spread out more and take advantage of greater resources.

I'm also interested in discovering how the newly fledged young handle their environment. I've gone about this by radio-tagging the juveniles and following them as they move away from their nest. The kids move through their habitat a lot more slowly than their parents and it's relatively easy to map out their progress by checking on their location every couple of days. After following

a number of juveniles through the forests, I've begun to notice a pattern. Juveniles tend to stay close the nest longer in areas where forest is more abundant. This could be for a number of reasons. The greater amount of resources may make it easier for them to postpone migrating and stock up on much-needed energy reserves before trying to make a go of it on their own.



Andrew Forrest

Saw-whet owl doing its "I'm a branch" pose.

Over the past two years, we've learned a lot about these secretive little birds, but we still have much to discover. So my assistant and I will be spending the nights this summer standing on roadsides throughout much of Strathcona County and to the north of the city. We'll be tracking birds and measuring their progress in the hopes of learning a little more about the potential effects human-caused changes on this one of many residents of the boreal forest and aspen parkland.

WHOO was on Page 3? A juvenile saw-whet owl ready to fledge - photo by Alisa Peckham.

Friends of Elk Island Society 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

**Participating
in
Conservation**

**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

Beaver Populations Census, 2003 by Wes Olson, Senior Park Warden

Every three years the staff at Elk Island conduct a park-wide survey of the park's beaver population. This aerial survey is conducted with a helicopter so that all beaver lodges can be inspected at close range. During the survey in the fall of 2002 there were just under 1200 lodges identified within the park boundaries. Not all lodges are created equal, though, and the data collected on this flight indicated that only about 16% of the lodges were active or had beaver living within them. This was down from the high occupancy rates of the mid 1990's when upwards of 60% of the lodges were active. Why the decline?

Several factors have played a role in the decline of this population. The severe drought of recent years has reduced the depth of all ponds and lakes in the region to the point where many beaver had their food caches frozen into the ice. As a result, they starved to death in the lodge. In other cases, they were able to gnaw a hole through the wall of the lodge and for some time were able to forage in the adjacent forests. It did not take long, though, for the local coyote population to dis-

cover these vulnerable animals and many lodge occupants were killed by predators. The beaver were also hit with a disease known as Tuleremia – a disease of rodents and hares. Several large drainage systems throughout the park were devastated by this disease, with the total eradication of local populations.

The survey conducted during October 2002 documented the state of the population following the worst drought in 137 years. This survey captured data on such topics as the spatial distribution of the active colonies and the relative "quality" of the ponds throughout the park. The opportunity to document the reaction by beaver to a summer with relatively normal precipitation during 2003 presented itself, and with funding from the Friends, another aerial survey was conducted during the latter part of October 2003. This survey was done outside of the normal three year rotation, and could not have been undertaken without the support of the Friends of EINP.

The survey indicates that the decline in lodge occupancy observed over the past several years is continuing. The



Parks Canada, EINP

2002 survey found that 16% of the total lodges in the park had beaver living in them, compared to 12% in 2003. This is compared to the occupancy rate of 54% in 1989-90 when the beaver population reached its maximum level (Figure 3).

Of the 1226 beaver lodges known to exist in EINP, only 145 (12%) were occupied, 4% had been maintained but no food cache constructed, and 17% were still structurally sound but were unoccupied. The remainder were either in such a state of disrepair as to make them unusable, or had disappeared from the landscape since the previous survey (Figure 2).

The relative quality of ponds improved over the course of the year, with

•The Trumpeter Summer, 2004•

increased water depths adjacent to beaver lodges. This, in turn, contributes to the recovery of the species, as new or improved habitats were available for dispersing juveniles or for entire colonies to relocate. There was considerable movement by beaver across the landscape with several active lodges abandoned, abandoned lodges re-occupied, and new lodges constructed. Units 3, 4, 10 and 18 had disproportionately higher occupancy rates than elsewhere, while Units 11 and 13 no longer supported beaver colonies (Figure 1).

While the situation is not as grim for the over-winter survival of many colonies as it was during the winter of 2002-2003, there will probably still be a significant over-winter mortality in 2003-2004 due to low water levels. This continued trend will see beaver living in sub-optimal ponds succumb, while those in good quality habitat/terrain will survive. Good quality habitat in EINP is wherever there is terrain relief. The knob and kettle topography of such Beaver Survey Units as 3, 4, 10 and 18 will continue to provide ideal habitat. These optimal pond systems will then act as sanctuaries; refugia to which the beaver population will contract in an attempt to survive the onslaught of drought, predation and disease. When conditions improve, they will expand again into areas of sub-optimal habitat, which are presently devoid of beaver. This knowledge in turn will affect management decisions related to prescribed fire, water management, and ungulate management in the park.

Beaver are a keystone species in EINP and their activities (or lack of them) have long term impacts on a host of other wildlife and vegetation resources within EINP.



Parks Canada, EINP

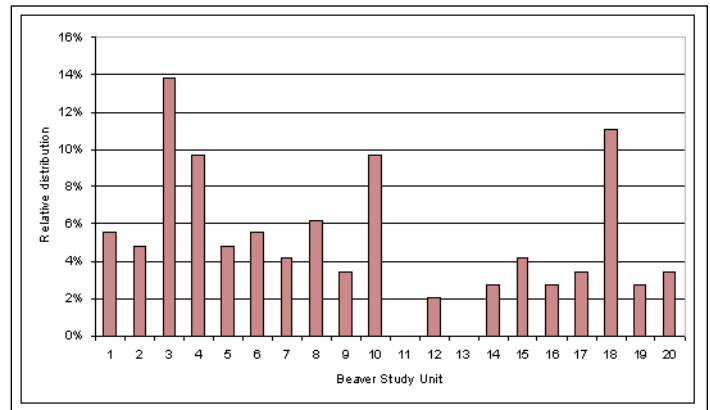


Figure 1. The relative distribution of active beaver lodges in EINP, by Beaver Study Unit, October 2003.

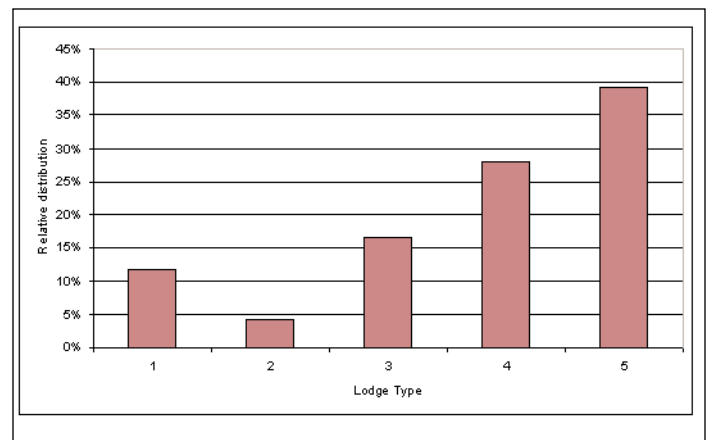


Figure 2. The relative distribution of beaver lodges, by lodge type, October 2003. (Type 1 = active; Type 2 = maintained but no food cache; Type 3 = sound but not maintained; Type 4 = unsound and not maintained; and Type 5 = gone from the landscape)

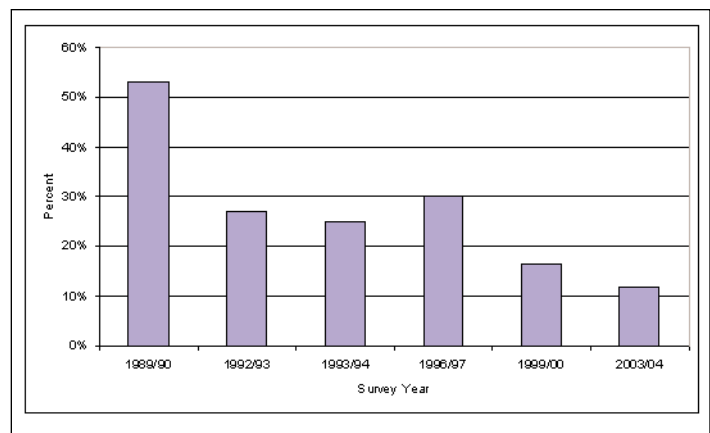


Figure 3. The change in the percent occupancy of beaver lodges from 1989 to 2004. This is the percent of total lodges with beaver living in them.