

Reader's Digest
Canadian Places – Ann and Sandy Cross Conservation Area
By Bruce Masterman

The schoolchildren from Calgary brim with excitement as they start their springtime hike on the Ann and Sandy Cross Conservation Area.

With backpacks filled with lunches and notepads, the 11- and 12-year-olds scamper along a shale-covered trail down a long steep hill. Suddenly, a sharp-eyed girl named Meagan Tyler spots a delicate velvety mauve flower with bright yellow centre poking up through the still-brown grass. It's a prairie crocus, an early harbinger of spring in southwestern Alberta. She drops to the ground and goes nose-to-petal while snapping images with her digital camera. "I've never seen such a pretty flower," she says.

A few minutes later, the Grade 5 and 6 students from Erin Woods Elementary School mill around at the bottom of a grass-covered hill quietly sketching, writing in their journals or burning off energy. A pair of northern harrier hawks float above a stand of poplars. Songbirds sing as they flitter about. On the hilltop far above, a mule deer gingerly steps out of the trees and stands still, watching the students. Somebody spies the doe and announces it, sparking a mad scramble for one of two sets of binoculars. As the deer watches the students watching her, a jumbo jet approaching Calgary International Airport cruises by directly above.

From here, the jet is the only hint this place is less than two kilometres from a city of one million people. From the top of the hill, however, it's a completely different view. To the northeast lies the jutting city skyline of imposing glass and concrete office buildings, residential development spreading around them like a bleeding wound.

At 4,800 acres, the Ann and Sandy Cross Conservation Area is a natural oasis in a desert of development. Home to many kinds of wildlife – including elk, moose, deer, black bear, coyotes, beaver, red-tailed hawks and great horned owls – and about 300 plant species, it's a natural open classroom.

"This is such a special place," observes teacher Lesley Halpen. "It's a place for the kids to make a connection between them and their environment."

Rancher Sandy Cross began developing his own connection back in 1945, when he bought two sections of land to start a farm that eventually grew to nine sections (5,760 acres). Born Alexander Rothney Cross in 1914, Sandy was one of seven children of two famous Western pioneers. His mother, Helen Rothney Macleod, was the youngest daughter of Colonel James Macleod, commissioner of the North-West Mounted Police. His father was A.E. Cross, rancher, brewer, legislator and one of the so-called Big Four businessmen who bankrolled the first Calgary Stampede in 1912.

Cross cherished his land, not for its monetary value but for its ability to sustain crops, cattle and, most importantly to him, the wildlife. In the mid-1980s, he became concerned about the growth of Calgary, which had grown almost tenfold in population since 1945. He also worried about the proliferation of country residences gobbling up prime farm and ranch land around his property.

After a lot of thought and advice from friends, in 1987 Cross donated 2,000 acres to the Alberta government, conditional on the land being preserved forever and used for

environmental education. It was the largest donation of private land for conservation purposes ever made in Canada.

A cash endowment from Sandy and his wife, Ann, matched by donations from corporations, allowed the development of an interpretive centre and more than 20 kilometres of hiking trails. Since the Ann and Sandy Cross Conservation Area opened in 1991, more than 62,000 schoolchildren and thousands of adults have participated in educational programs designed to teach them to be better environmental stewards.

In 1996, Cross donated another 2,800 acres. Although the land can never be developed, its 2007 value as a single block has been estimated as high as \$72 million. But, for Sandy Cross, it was never about the money. “The almighty dollar is not everything,” he told me once with a grin and sparkle in his eye. “There’s other things in life besides money.”

Education manager Kelly Small says the real payoff is the reaction of youngsters when they visit for the first time. Many city-raised children see their first hawk or deer, and enjoy their first hike, during trips to the conservation area. They discover how their actions can have an impact on nature, and learn to not litter and to not pick flowers. And, Small notes, children go from thinking animal droppings are gross to being excited at knowing how to identify a species from them. “It’s wonderful to see them get so excited about nature,” she says.

The field trip seems to be having its intended impact on this group of young students. Stephanie Patterson, 12, sitting cross-legged on the grass and writing in a journal, says it’s impossible not to get caught up in the beauty and serenity of the place. “You can hear nature and the birds, and you’re part of it.”ⁱ

IF YOU GO:

The one and only public access to the Ann and Sandy Cross Conservation Area is off Highway 22X southwest of Calgary. There is no highway signage. Drop-in visits are discouraged, complying with Sandy Cross’s wish to minimize impact on the land and wildlife. Visitors must book in advance by phoning 403-931-1042 or visiting www.crossconservation.org.

ⁱ Interview on site: Student is available through teacher Lesley Halper (see iv)