

# A TRIP TO ALFORD LAKE

*Bob Heyde*

Over a dozen outfitters recently played a major role as sponsors of a unique experience for 15 native students from Gift Lake Métis Community School. The Grade 7 and 8 students spent three days at Alford Lake – a wonderful facility managed through the Alberta Hunter Education Instructors' Association (AHEIA). There, they received intensive instruction in wildlife conservation and identification, firearms safety and shooting, archery, fly fishing, map and compass navigation.



Two years ago, the community of Gift Lake was instrumental in demonstrating their concern for moose populations north of Lesser Slave Lake. Following a presentation made in conjunction with APOS and Fish and Wildlife, several meetings were arranged with other native groups in the same area (Peavine Métis Settlement and Whitefish First Nations). All three communities rallied together to raise money for the 2001 aerial survey of WMU 544 – and with supplemental money from two chapters of Safari Club International and the APOS Legacy Fund - \$30,000 of commitment was turned over to Fish and Wildlife. It was a wonderful example of what can be accomplished through the combined concerned efforts of First Nations, Métis Settlements, Fish and Wildlife, SCI, APOS, and individual outfitters.

The field trip to Alford Lake was a logical follow up. Gift Lake students were introduced to yet another player in the big picture of hunting and wildlife management – AHEIA. They enjoyed the awesome facilities including: small heated cabins, a spacious meeting room, complete kitchen and dining facilities, and an education trailer loaded with wildlife exhibits. The firearms range fascinated the native youth, but ironically, it was archery which captivated much of their attention.

Michael Short spent Monday with the class, in two different capacities – fly fisherman and reporter. For young people whose participation in fishing has traditionally meant using nets, watching Michael cast a fly like through the air was definitely puzzling at first. However, he captivated many of the kids with the art of tying flies. And, the time spent tying and casting gave Michael ample opportunity to explain to his converts why someone would go to all of the trouble to make these tiny hooks and whip them through the air, only to catch a fish and let it go. It was a message of conservation which was certainly new to some of them.

“Let’s Go Outdoors” (Michael’s radio show) then gave the students the opportunity to express some of the things they had learned. As their teacher, it was interesting to watch students who normally can’t stop talking, look into a small microphone and suddenly become speechless. It made me want to install a whole classroom of the things!! However, the concept of conservation was again reinforced – as the students realized that what they were learning was important enough to be played on the big city radio station of 830 CHCF.



Despite some nasty spring weather, all students completed the safe handling and live firing on the gun range. Many took advantage of the opportunity for additional target and trap shooting opportunities. Alford Lake staff were most accommodating, and the teenagers certainly benefited from their knowledge. After three days of AHEIA hospitality, we commenced the journey home.

The return trip included a stop over in Jasper. There, students learned two more valuable lessons. First, they were amazed by the number of elk they saw. Questions of “Why isn’t anyone shooting them?” gave yet another opportunity to explain the role of hunting and conservation. Without a doubt, the message was starting to sink in.

The second lesson was learned at the youth hostel we stayed at. It took some prompting, but soon the kids found themselves visiting with people from countries all around the world. They talked with folks from England, Germany, Austria, Hong Kong, Japan, etc. Over and over they heard what a beautiful country we have. Some of the kids began to realize what a special place Alberta is, and why people would want to come here. That gave me the opportunity to explain another aspect of the role of outfitting – and why outfitters, as much as anyone else, appreciate the need for conservation.

One final lesson was learned at the intersection of Highway 33 and 2. Fish and Wildlife, together with the RCMP had a Checkstop in place. It was Friday afternoon around 5, and I had just spent 6 long days with 15 teenagers. The last thing I needed was to be held up at a check stop. I recognized the local Fish and Wildlife officer, and called him over. He joked with us a moment, and waved us through. When the students asked how I knew him, I was able to explain the importance of enforcement in wildlife management. It was the last of many discussions revolving around wildlife issues – and collectively, an extremely meaningful exercise for my students.

The aboriginal community is a major player in wildlife management. Unfortunately, their participation in conservation initiatives is far from what it could be. Education is clearly an essential component if that is to change. And the outfitting community deserves credit for making this initiative happen. Every single student told me that this was the best trip they had ever taken. And, they all expressed an interest in doing it again next year. On their behalf, I’d like to express our gratitude to those who made this experience possible:



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|--------------------------|---|
| Don Ayers                | Don Ayers Outfitters                    |
| Terry Birkholz           | Alberta Wilderness Guide Service        |
| Richard Houweling        | Wild Kakwa Outfitters                   |
| Dollard Dallaire         | North Alta Ventures                     |
| Jordy McAuley            | Jordy McAuley Outfitting Ltd.           |
| Weldon Prosser           | Northern Wilderness Outfitters Ltd.     |
| Kelly Semple             | South Paw Outfitters Ltd.               |
| Neil Beeman              | Saddle Mountain Outfitters Ltd.         |
| Glenn Brown              | Blue Bronna Guiding & Outfitting        |
| Don Lind                 | South Peace Outfitters                  |
| Todd Loewen              | Red Willow Outfitters                   |
| Richard Page             | Alberta Trophy Hunter & Outfitters Inc. |
| Bryan Radke              | Athabasca River Outfitters Inc.         |
| Ryk Visscher             | Ryk Visscher’s Bowhunting Adventures    |
| The Staff at Alford Lake | AHEIA                                   |
| APOS                     | Legacy Fund                             |

