

CHAPTER SIX

Hard Times and Good Times, 1930–1950

I eat my own lamb
My chickens and ham
I shear my own fleece and I wear it,
I have lawns, I have Bow'rs
I have fruit, I have Flow'rs
The lark is my morning alarmer.

From: *Any fool can be a farmer*
Henry Brewis, Hay Lakes

The year 1930 was a significant one for western Canadians, marking the end of the lengthy “autonomy” negotiations between Ottawa and the prairie provinces on the transfer of authority over natural resources from Ottawa to the provincial capitals. This transfer was expected to provide an important stimulus to regional development, but the stock market crash of 1929 put a severe damper on economic life in western Canada, as elsewhere, and a year later nobody knew just how severe the Depression would become. The Parliamentary Speech from the Throne in February referred to the “temporary slackness” in the economy. In April, the soon-to-be-defeated Prime Minister, Mackenzie King, still felt confident that unemployment insurance was not a measure required in the current circumstances.¹

The effects of the stock market crash did not begin to register in full force on western farmers until 1931. Long after the Depression, residents of the Beaver Hills such as John L. Blackburn offered their views on the consequences of the severe years of the early 1930s. Blackburn’s father was originally from Lancaster County in Pennsylvania. Having followed his brothers to Alberta,

he settled with his family near Tofield in 1911. He successfully tamed some 255 acres, following which his son took up land at Lavoy, near Vegreville. Two years into the Depression, the younger Blackburn recalled that “the price of grain dropped lower than it had been since the Alberta Wheat Pool started operations in 1923.”² Capital had dried up across the country with the result that between 1929 and 1932 the Gross National Product fell by about 42 per cent.³ Many lost their farms altogether in the rural areas. “One of the great hardships,” said Blackburn, “was the humiliation of not being able to make payments due to the banks, mortgage companies and farm machinery companies.”⁴ One of his fellow farmers in the Beaver Hills, Henry Schroeder, recalled the Dirty Thirties on the Trent Ranch: “One poor crop after another and no other income – nothing with which to make payments on the land...gradually the people gave up. Some went to the Debt Adjustment Board to get straightened away; one by one, they left the ranch. My father alone chose to stay rather than to move again.”⁵ For those who could hang on to the land, there was at least the advantage of being able to eke out a subsistence living. John Blackburn again:⁶

It was possible only because we lived on a farm. We grew our own beef, pork and chicken. We also produced eggs, butter, cream and vegetables. Once a year we took wheat to the mill at Vegreville and came home with ten one-hundred pound sacks of flour. Our fruit consisted of raspberries and rhubarb grown in the garden, and wild saskatoons and chokecherries, which we picked each summer.

Such capacity to live off the land was captured in *Anyfoolcanbeafarmer*, a witty piece of doggerel by Henry Brewis, a Scottish-Canadian farmer from Hay Lakes. Robert Shroeder remembered his father “sending a cow to market just before Christmas one year and getting a cheque for sixty-six cents after trucking and expenses. Can you wonder at Santa Claus sort of sneaking by that year?”⁷ Even transportation was not as reliable. These were the years of the “Bennett Buggy.” The new horseless carriages, for reasons of expense, were now being ingeniously readapted to a horse-drawn state.

Accounts such as these reveal the adaptability of prairie people in hard times, but they also demonstrate that the specifics of locality were also important in allowing some to get by on agriculture subsistence. Moisture was not totally lacking in the hills region as it was in many other pockets of the prairies to the east and south. In his analysis of the weather that made the thirties “dirty,” James Gray wrote: “It was never wholly bad everywhere at once. However, within the Palliser Triangle – from Lethbridge to Battleford to Melita – it was bad all the time.” Alberta came off best. Except for “the disaster years of 1933 and 1936” its central and northern areas tended to escape much of the drought.⁸

The political response of Albertans to the Great Depression is well known. The call for radical reform was taken up by a Calgary school teacher and preacher, William Aberhart, who guided his new Social Credit party to power in 1935. The Social Credit movement of that time bore a closer resemblance to the programmes of the socialist CCF in Saskatchewan than did its later manifestations. The early emphasis of “Bible Bill” Aberhart’s movement was on collective economic security through the stimulation of individual buying power. While he drew his strength from the older areas of southern Alberta, peopled heavily by British and American settlers, his appeal was also relatively strong in the newer districts of more recent European immigration, even if his religious message was unfamiliar. Elements of the argument of Social Credit, although served up in an unusual format, might still appeal to a Ukrainian or Finnish worker of socialist or even communist persuasion. The secret and significance of his political appeal have been subjects for debate ever since.⁹

John Blackburn had his own explanation for Aberhart’s success. The result of the election of 1935 “came as quite a surprise to almost everyone” because few had “openly acknowledged that they intended to vote for Social Credit.” This applied to Blackburn’s mother-in-law, a Mrs. Olson, a woman of solid Norwegian pioneer background. Blackburn thought it “incredible that after practising such rugged independence throughout her life” she could then

‘support a party that promised a handout of twenty-five dollars a month.’¹⁰ Mrs. Olson pondered her reply to this suggestion and then said: “I listened to our premier Mr. Reid, over the radio, and he said there was nothing the government could do about the Depression. Mr. Shaw, the leader of the Liberal Party, said there was no solution; that we would have to wait and stick it out until times got better. When I listened to Mr. Aberhart, he said he would try something to bring better times.”¹¹ This was the short answer from many of the working people on the farms and in the towns of the Beaver Hills: Aberhart was offering hope.

Aberhart’s was not the only answer being suggested, particularly in the National Halls of many of the Ukrainian communities where left-wing proponents had made strong headway. Among the heavy Ukrainian population around Two Hills, the affiliations were reported as follows in 1937: 50 per cent Ukrainian Greek Catholic; 15 per cent Greek Orthodox; 10 per cent Seventh Day Adventists; and 25 per cent members of the Ukrainian Labour and Farm Temple, an affiliate of the Communist Party of Canada.¹² A penchant for radicalism, often attributed by many to the Ukrainian community as a whole, was of course only very partial. The actual suggestion however, induced its own reaction in the form of such conservative and main-stream organizations as the United Loyalists of Canada which took form in the Vegreville-Mundare area in 1931. There was, in fact, a strong push from the political left in many of the settlements, mounted against conditions which were seen to be a product of both bad capitalist management and overt discrimination. The trial of the “Mundare Ten” in 1934, in connection with local efforts to boycott grain shipments from the local elevators, was just one of many violent incidents which do not show up in many of the local histories.¹³

It was a measure of the desperation of the times that the federal Conservative Government had attempted to experiment with social programmes bearing a similarity to the “New Deal” legislation sponsored in the United States under the Roosevelt administration after 1932. This happened, with increasing momentum, under the

leadership of the wealthy lawyer and businessman from Calgary, Robert B. Bennett. At the provincial level, Aberhart got into trouble for advocating the printing of certificates (so-called “funny money”) as a way of putting more spending power into the hands of Alberta consumers. In the view of many progressives, the more acceptable approach was to turn to the ideas of the British economist, John Maynard Keynes, who advocated that, in certain circumstances, those in power should attempt to spend society out of debt through formal government initiatives and adjusted monetary policies. Bennett was not entirely hostile to this approach, but the reform pictures he painted were not executed with bold enough strokes. They remained tentative, tending more towards relief than reform. Bennett was turned out of office before much in the way of results could be noticed from the efforts of his administration.¹⁴

Elk Island National Park became one of many public land units designated as settings for relief projects for the unemployed. Work camps were set up there as early as the fall of 1931. In late 1932 the *Lamont Tribune* reported that forty men had been “transported from Edmonton...the nucleus of 200 men to be so engaged this winter.” They “will receive \$5.50 per month, 50 cents of which



Road Construction, Elk Island National Park, 1930s

will go towards hospital dues." At Elk Island, the tasks included much underbrush clearing to open up grazing habitat for bison, elk and moose, as well as work on a new road right of way to the south end of the park.¹⁵ Sharing the cold winter with so many large beasts did not sit well with many of the men. A reporter in Lamont wrote that there was trouble on one occasion, for "about six agitators" were "stirring up unnecessary strife." Superintendent Coxford ordered them to return to Edmonton, where they were soon joined by fourteen others.¹⁶ Still, the camps did carry on for some years and the workers completed a considerable range of park improvements.

Relief projects made other improvements in the hills. At Cooking Lake, an air base was developed in 1935 through a special programme coordinated by the Corps of Royal Canadian Engineers and the Directorate of Civil Aviation. The object was to improve the national distribution of airports and related facilities.¹⁷

The persisting general economic strife of the times led community leaders to think more systematically about local development and public works of a more commercial and recreational kind. In 1933, J.B. Harkin, Commissioner of National Parks, attended a round



Air Base, Cooking Lake, 1938

table meeting at Elk Island with representatives of various local organizations, including the Edmonton Chamber of Commerce and the Elk Island Park Association. Discussion centered on projects for Elk Island and other sites of interest to regional tourism promoters. Harkin and his Chief Engineer, James Wardle, were supportive of many of the proposals, but they informed the assembly that the financial restraints of the times would cause delay and that all projects would have to be reviewed within the context of general government policies.¹⁸ New cottage and recreational facilities were built in the later 1930s, particularly around Sandy Bay on Astotin Lake. Locals who since the 1920s had been advocating for addition of a golf course to Elk Island were pleased to see such a project brought to completion in 1935.¹⁹ The Agape church camp was added to the south side of Astotin Lake in the same year.²⁰ These were some of the more visible achievements of the relief camp work programme.

A limited opening up of the park to free enterprise was encouraged as a result of discussions, but of the few efforts made in this direction, not many turned out favourably, even after the war. There were leased sites for two bungalow camps, a restaurant,



The beach and recreation area, Astotin Lake, 1940s

service station and a dance hall at Sandy Bay, but none proved profitable owing to the limitations of local demand, which was mostly restricted to weekends. The main recreational successes enjoyed by the park over these two decades remained associated with its setting as a place for special events such as group picnics, church events and youth camp activities.²¹

In those quieter times, when transportation and outings required more of an effort, the park clearly played a strong role in the social life of the surrounding communities, reflected in the founding of a citizen's cooperative organization, the Elk Island National Park Association, in 1934.²² Interested local citizens and their political representatives gradually introduced new initiatives. In 1949 a gathering was held "for the purpose of organizing a committee which would help plan certain improvements within the Elk Island National Park."²³ Dr. A.E. Archer of Lamont was the main voice in this committee and an early group achievement was the completion of a replica of a typical Ukrainian homestead near Astotin Lake.²⁴ The effort anticipated the later establishment of the Ukrainian Heritage Cultural Village east of Elk Island.

Science and Nature in the Beaver Hills

Since 1906, the Beaver Hills had gradually gained a reputation as a refuge for birds and wildlife, but the management of the lands associated with these resources progressed unevenly, often along intuitive as well as experimental and scientific lines. The popular imagination is easily drawn to the life histories and drama of big game animals, but there were many other life forms in the hills of interest to naturalists. Beaverhills Lake, in particular, became one of the main theatres of enquiry for an important natural scientist of mid-twentieth century Canada, William Rowan. He was born at Basel, Switzerland in 1891, and took advanced degrees at the University of London. Rowan visited a ranch in southern Alberta in 1908 and this may have influenced his decision to come to the University of Manitoba in 1919. A year later he accepted a position

at the University of Alberta, where he established the Zoology Department, which he chaired until his retirement in 1956.²⁵

Rowan was greatly interested in avian studies. Much of his research on the ecology of bird behaviour was conducted at Francis Point on the southern shore of Beaverhills Lake. Early in his university career he argued for a field station at that location but to no avail. He did manage to negotiate collecting and hunting rights with the owner, Daniel Francis. After extolling the virtues of Beaverhills Lake to colleagues in England, he was commissioned to prepare a series of illustrated articles on Alberta waders.²⁶ In one of these articles, Rowan praised the qualities of Francis Point as a place for research, one that has “proved so extraordinarily fruitful that I have worked but little elsewhere.”²⁷ Those who collaborated with Rowan acknowledged the way in which he balanced artistic and scientific impulses. The close student of bird life in the Beaver Hills, Robert Lister, noted that Rowan “illustrated much of his scientific and popular writings with delightful pencil and pen-and-ink sketches” and that “his notebooks are full of life-like-drawings of birds and mammals made in the field.”²⁸

Rowan continued to make his mark over the years, despite having to continually justify his “field work” to Henry Marshall Tory, the President of the University. Tory, a man of scientific achievement himself, was of the opinion that field work was not a prerequisite of science.²⁹ To Rowan and his international colleagues, then attempting to develop the young study of ecology, Tory’s view on field work was anathema. Rowan opened up communication with some of the best minds of the day: George Bird Grinnell, Sir Julian Huxley and Charles Elton. These colleagues all admired his work and attempted to further his career, despite the stubbornness of Tory.³⁰ Rowan’s main contributions were in bird anatomy, migration theory and the nature of population cycles. His elaborate studies of crows, partially undertaken in the Beaver Hills, issued in several papers and provided the basis for his important book *The Riddle of Migration* (1931).



William Rowan and raven

Rowan's interests in the natural world extended beyond birds. He got involved in what came to be called the bison-transfer issue of the 1920s. This came about following the discovery of an isolated population of Wood Bison in the Alberta-Northwest Territories border region. The point for debate was the appropriateness of

shipping some of the excess Plains Bison north from the Buffalo Park at Wainwright, Alberta, into terrain where they might mix with and infect the isolated northern Wood Bison, a slightly different form of the species.³¹

The activities of Rowan and his associates provided a stimulus for others, and reflected a growing desire for various forms of concerted conservation and education action. More Canadians were becoming concerned with wildlife. They started to give attention to organizational matters, to the development of a domestic body of theory concerning conservation management, and to the tapping of local pools of expertise for educational purposes.³² By the onset of the Great Depression, Alberta citizens had formed organizations oriented towards outdoor field studies such as the Alberta Fish and Game Association, founded in 1929. President C.A. Hayden stated: "I firmly believe that your association has justified its existence" and that it will "be responsible for the creation of one of the finest fish and game countries in the world."³³ There was reason for optimism. The 1920s had been years of high water in central Alberta and the records kept of fish taken around Beaverhills Lake provided a rationale for the confidence of the new fish and game president. Throughout the 1930s, Rowan continued to take an interest in the requirements of sound conservation policy, as did many of his fellow naturalists and ecologists.³⁴ An active hunter himself, he devoted considerable attention to the education of hunters and public policy makers who too often, he felt, had little understanding of the interrelations of wildlife species. They thus fell into erroneous thinking about the role of predators. His arguments grew out of his extensive studies on wildlife population cycles.³⁵

There were others besides Rowan who took a passionate interest in the flora and fauna of the Beaver Hills, men such as C.G. Harold, Frank Farley and H.B. Conover of Chicago's Field Museum.³⁶ Local journalist and creative naturalist Robert Lister was a steady force in the cause of promoting field work. He helped found the Edmonton Bird Club and recorded local natural history achievements.³⁷ Having arrived in Tofield in 1920 from his native Norfolk,

he later recalled the first impression made on him by Beaverhills Lake:³⁸

The lake lay flat as glass under the heat of the afternoon sun. The haze shimmering above the water veiled the far shore so that one looked out over what appeared to be a strangely quiet sea. Only where the wavelets lapped listlessly on the mud and sand was there any motion and from where they rippled in the wrack came a strong stench of rotten weeds. This was my first look at Beaverhills Lake and I was not impressed.

It would take some time for the lake to begin to exercise its magic upon Lister, who became one of its great observers and defenders.

In the offices of the Canadian civil service, intimations of the new ecological thought developed roughly in parallel with U.S. experience. Hoyes Lloyd had been hired by the National Parks Branch in 1918 to administer the Migratory Birds Convention Act.³⁹ Under the direction of Harkin, park officers started to question the traditional view taken of predators. For example, in 1920 the official predator list still identified the following species: "Puma, wolf, coyote, lynx, bear (if nuisances), gopher, porcupine, eagle, hawk, woodpecker and blue heron (for eating geese eggs)." This list was greatly reduced in 1924, particularly with respect to birds. In 1925, Harkin released a statement which set out a comprehensive philosophy for the conservation of species in the National Parks, confirmed later in that year by the Department of the Interior.⁴⁰

By 1930 the developing science of ecology had helped produce a much more focused body of wildlife management practices. In this body of practice, the name of the American, Aldo Leopold, came to the fore. His book, *Game Management* (1933) became a landmark of the literature, for it revealed a shift in attention from pure field recording towards theory. He argued that earlier attempts "to apply biology to the management of game as a wild crop" soon disclosed the fact that "science had accumulated more knowledge of how to distinguish one species from another than of the habits, requirements, and interrelationships of living populations." Until recently, he said, science could tell us "more about the length of a

duck's bill than about its food, of the status of the waterfowl resource, or the factors determining its productivity." It had now become more realistic. "Scientists see that before the factors of productivity can be economically manipulated, they must first be discovered and understood."⁴¹

These were just some of the critical ideas starting to circulate among park and wildlife managers in the early 1930s. An ecological viewpoint was strongly evidenced in William Rowan's growing preoccupation with conservation and the wildlife cycle. A host of professional organizations and journals started to appear seeking to criticize and revise past practices with the precision of science.⁴²

In addition to completion of the Federal-Provincial "autonomy" agreements for transfer of natural resource lands, the year 1930 was also significant for passage of a new National Parks Act. Elk Island National Park was given increased protection as a result, but it was also the start of a new *modus operandi* in which managers found it necessary to deal with provincial agencies and authorities with respect to the planning and coordination of adjacent public lands. Negotiating land additions to the western parks would henceforth

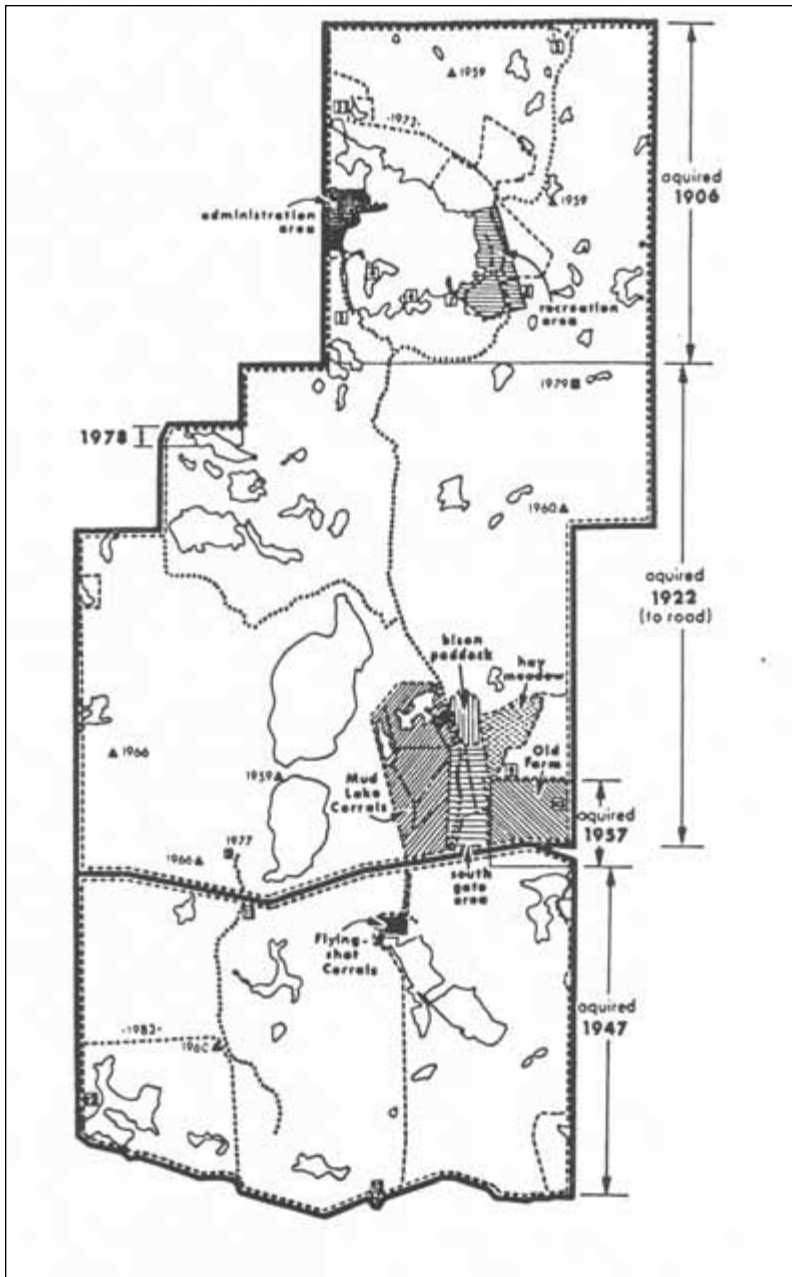


Birds in flight over Beaverhills Lake

be more complex, involving the give and take characteristic of Federal-Provincial relations.⁴³

These new political relationships, combined with developments in ecological thought, began to impact the administration of Elk Island. Archibald Coxford's long tenure as park superintendent came to an end in 1935. His successor was appointed in the fall of 1936 in the person of Dr. B.I. Love, a veterinarian by profession. The early years at Elk Island had required the rough and ready skills of practical men of the field. It now seemed fitting to turn the park over to a manager trained in the sciences. The next quarter century saw considerable experimentation in wildlife management procedures, accompanied by attempts to rationalize earlier policies. It was a period when theories of wildlife carrying capacity were invented, debated and contested. Early in Love's tenure, a southward expansion of the land base of Elk Island National Park was negotiated with the Province of Alberta.⁴⁴

Harkin's adjustments to conservation policy between 1925 and 1935 were appropriate beginnings for the redress of some of the specific conflicts developing in the National Parks. These conflicts were frequently of a kind in which conservation aims ran afoul of recreational demands. At Elk Island, wildlife conservation had to be achieved on a fairly small and confined land unit without the normal cross-country flow of wildlife. This particular condition was aggravated by the growing isolation of Elk Island from the agricultural lands surrounding it. Given the borderless manner in which ecosystems operate, this isolation was only partial; but it also reinforced what managers had sought to achieve, ever since the first years of the Elk Park, for close attention had always to be given to the agricultural interests and actions of landed neighbours. With the addition of a bison conservation programme, the question of just what constituted a valid carrying capacity for the park was regularly posed. In 1936, John Buie, an inspector with the Department of Agriculture, recommended a reduction of the ungulates by a half.⁴⁵ The question was complicated by the restricted and



Expansion of Elk Island National Park to 1948

fenced range of the park in which cross-boundary movement of large ungulates was generally restricted to deer.⁴⁶

A second source of conflict, closely related to the conditions imposed by the first, came about as a natural side effect of the rapid growth in scientific thinking about animal ecology and disease control that commenced in the 1880s. Relations with neighbours were especially important on the question of communicable animal diseases. Understanding prevention methods for hoof-and-mouth disease, rabies and tuberculosis were major preoccupations of park managers. In time, it became clear that certain animals diseases were particularly hard to monitor and eliminate, and that the degree to which it was possible to do so had much to do with the promotion of proper range conditions and animal proximity.⁴⁷ The shrinking range conditions in the vicinity of Elk Island were directly contrary to what was required, according to developing post-1930 theories of wildlife ecology and carrying capacity. Free of natural predator control, the continually growing ungulate populations at Elk Island had to be contained by one means or another. One obvious solution was to add to the amount of available range. Thus, in 1947 the park underwent its second major expansion with the addition of some twenty-four sections of the Cooking Lake Forest Reserve along the southern boundary.⁴⁸ The expansion was based on a



Blackfoot Grazing Association, 1948



Cattle grazing in the Cooking Lake-Blackfoot Recreation Area, which shows the mix of terrain conditions characteristic of the Beaver Hills region.

complex set of land transfers between Canada and Alberta, ending negotiations that Dr. Love had initiated ten years earlier.⁴⁹

Another approach to controlling wildlife numbers involved the direct marketing of meat from slaughtered animals, through contracts to major meat-packing houses.⁵⁰ From the mid-1920s through the 1960s, Elk Island National Park was committed to a form of ranching, as a necessity, and staff had gradually put in place all the necessary support facilities, including in-park agriculture. Similarly, the early experiment in cattle grazing known as the Blackfoot Stock Association continued in various forms on what were now Provincial lands.⁵¹

World War II interrupted the national conservation momentum, but in 1947 the Canadian Wildlife Service was formed to bring greater focus and more systematic attention to wildlife issues.⁵² For the previous thirty years, officials of the National Parks Branch had administered the statutes relevant to wildlife protection. The new unit was given broader powers and responsibilities, and the estab-

lishment of this branch indicated that wildlife was starting to be seen in landscape contexts other than those of just parks and wildlife sanctuaries.⁵³ Its establishment was in part a recognition of the excellent advisory work accomplished by such eminent field biologists as A.W.F. Banfield, Ian McTaggart Cowan and J.D. Soper. The Canadian Wildlife Service would play an important role in the postwar Elk Island National Park.