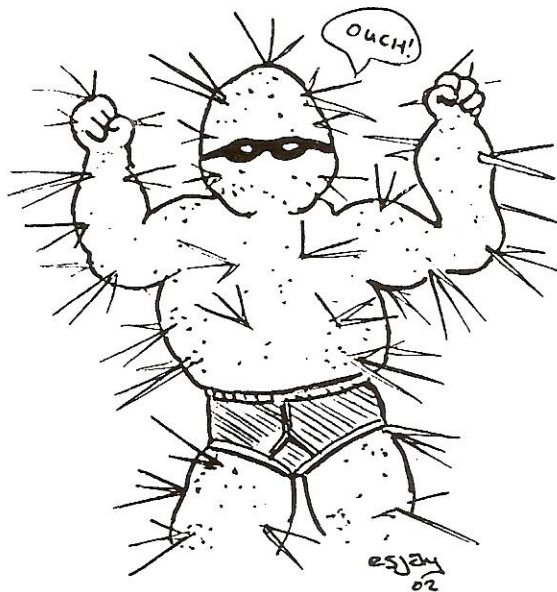


OPUNTIA

51.5A

BY NIGHT, HE WAS OPUNTIAMAN!

BY DAY, HE WAS MILD-MANNERED REGINALD SNITT.



ISSN 1183-2703

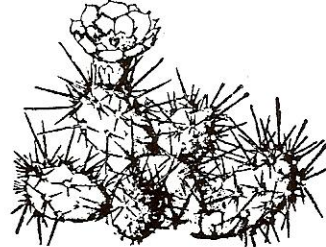
OPUNTIA is published by Dale Speirs, Box 6830, Calgary, Alberta, Canada, T2P 2E7. It is available for \$3 cash for a one-time sample copy, trade for your zine, or letter of comment. Americans: please don't send cheques for small amounts to Canada as the bank fee to cash them is usually more than the amount. US\$ banknotes are acceptable in Canada at par value; what we gain on the exchange rate we lose on the higher postage rate to USA. Do not send mint USA stamps as they are not valid for postage outside USA and I don't collect them.

Whole-numbered OPUNTIA's are sercon, x.1 issues are reviewzines, x.2 issues are indexes, and x.5 issues are perzines.

COVER ART CREDIT: Steve Jeffery, 44 White Way, Kidlington, Oxon OX5 2XA, England

I ALSO HEARD FROM: Diane Bertrand, Chester Cuthbert, Rodney Leighton, Babynous, Scott Crow, Carolyn Clowes, Sheryl Birkhead, Lloyd Penney, Henry Welch, Violet Jones, Elaine Rounds

[Editor's
remarks
in square
brackets]



FROM: Teddy Harvia
12341 Band Box Place
Dallas, Texas 75244-7001

2001-11-02

Sheryl Birkhead's cover art for OPUNTIA #48.5B is delightful. Her cartoon style gives the opuntia charming personality, softening its natural prickly facade. Very Disneyesque. Now why didn't I think of putting eyes on my drawings?

FROM: Harry Warner Jr
423 Summit Avenue
Hagerstown, Maryland 21740

2001-11-05

The events of September 11 seemed to have little or no effect on my mail service. I needed to mail only one good-sized package, and it was accepted at the post office without questioning about its

contents. I didn't compare postmark dates with dates of arrival for incoming mail, but there were no periods of several days with no mail at all, and professional periodicals came on the day of the week they normally arrive. The local post office escaped any false reports of contaminated mail, although the warnings that the federal government sent out through the news media seem to have been misinterpreted in some instances. One woman showed up at police headquarters in the greatest agitation, carrying a large envelope she had just received in the mail. She told the man at the desk that she had read the warning about mail with an unfamiliar return address and brought it in because she didn't know anyone at the return address. It was a piece of bulk mail distributed by Publishers Clearing House.

FROM: Lois Klassen 2002-01-07
Box 74540, Kitsilano
Vancouver, British Columbia V6K 4P4

We had a weekend in Calgary in November 2001. While walking from the Delta Hotel to a restaurant on Macleod Trail, we were forced to walk around two isolated letterboxes that were spotlighted and surrounded by decontamination, police, and fire department vehicles and personnel. Inside the yellow tape border, the boxes looked cold, lonely, and completely innocent.

FROM: Russ Forster 2001-12-05
23145 Melrose Avenue
Eastpointe, Michigan 48021

There are a number of my friends who are upset with the USA's bullying, militaristic response as we are with the horrific events which preceded it. We are unheard and invisible, and will put ourselves in risk of being labelled traitors and terrorists ourselves. I'm proud of individuals here but not the warmongers and weekend patriots. How is it up your way?

[About the same. On the one side, there are naive people who think it is all just a misunderstanding and we should sit down and talk out the problem with the terrorists. As if. On the other extreme, Canadian flags are on back-order in every store, and instant patriots everywhere. The Princess Patricia regiment and the JTF2 elite commandos are now busy in the mountains of Afghanistan with the other Allies.]

[In December 2001, the Canadian government tabled the Anti-Terrorism Act, Bill C-36, in the House of Commons. There were a lot of critics of this Act claiming it destroys civil liberties, but unlike 99% of them, I looked it up in HANSARD. The relevant text reads as follows:

Sec. 83.01: Terrorist activity means

- (b) *an act or omission, in or outside Canada,*
 - (ii) *that intentionally*
 - (e) *causes serious interference with or serious disruption of an essential service, facility, or system, whether public or private, other than as a result of advocacy, protest, dissent, or stoppage of work that is not intended to result in the conduct or harm ... and includes a conspiracy, attempt, or threat to commit any such act or omission.*

Bill C-36 also restricts financing of terrorist groups. Peaceful protest is still allowed, and the Minister of Justice went out of her way to emphasize the point.]

FROM: Ned Brooks
4817 Dean Lane
Lilburn, Georgia 30047-4720

2001-11-05

I suppose the anthrax attack affected me more than the World Trade Center catastrophe in daily activities. My sister actually microwaved some mail but for too long; it caught fire and a new credit card was ruined. Of course no one would send her or me anthrax, but several people have now gotten it from mail that was contaminated by going through contaminated sorting machinery.

I wipe the mail with a Swiffer cloth (one of those household 'dust magnet' things) and wash my hands after.

[I haven't bothered decontaminating my mail from eastern USA. Five people have died from inhalation anthrax and eighteen exposed but not fatally so, and none after the first flurry of letters. Meanwhile, more people die of meningitis or E. coli daily from contact with schoolchildren or eating in hamburger joints.]

Did you see the 34-cent stamp with a vaguely Xmas-tree shape made of Arabic curlicues? It's in the USPS catalogue and must have been printed before September 11. I don't think they will sell a lot of them; I wonder if they would actually sell any now if you sent for them.

[The American post office issued a commemorative stamp for Eid, the Islamic festival, just before September 11. From what I read in the philatelic press, they remained on sale as normal stamps, although in many places one had to ask for them specifically as they were put under the counter after the attacks. The design shows Arabic calligraphy in the rough shape of a Christmas tree. Apparently many Americans used them for their Christmas cards under the impression that it was one of those abstract Christmas designs the USPS is so fond of. I got a few on my mail from south of the border.]

FROM: Robert Lichtman
Box 30
Glen Ellen, California 95442

2002-01-31

[Re: Canadian taxes] I take it there's no home mortgage interest deduction like there is here in the States. On the face of it, your taxes seem pretty reasonable, but you don't mention the accursed VAT or GST that takes a big additional bite out of all consumption. If you factored that in, your tax structure would be more regressive than ours down here. Do you have any idea how far beyond the "19% effective tax" the consumption tax would push your overall tax?

[No home mortgage interest deduction here, although mortgages can be deducted as an expense for revenue property. The Goods and Services Tax is the federal 7% sales tax. It is equivalent to the VAT of Britain, but the then Tory government that introduced into Canada didn't have the courage to call a spade a spade. It replaced a 15% manufacturers' tax. Alberta has no provincial sales tax, but other provinces, like American states, have additional sales taxes at various rates. The federal government gives low-income earners a rebate on their GST, which reduces the regressive nature of the tax. I don't know what other provinces do with their sales taxes. In Alberta, therefore, the only consumption tax we pay is 7% GST.]

FROM: Joseph Nicholas
15 Jansons Road
Tottenham, London N15 4JU, England

2001-11-04

[Re: taking firewood out of parks] Another point worth making alongside the ecological one is ownership. The fact that the wood is on public property doesn't make it anybody's; it belongs to the municipality. In England, local councils frequently prosecute householders for interfering with street trees (cutting off overhanging branches, attempting to poison the whole tree) outside the curtilage of the property on the grounds that they are damaging the council's property, and the councils always win. This is not to say that street trees can't be managed, but applications for work to be done should be directed accordingly, not by-passed by DIY enthusiasts with saws and spare afternoons.

[We have the same problems in Calgary. It is difficult to make people understand that public property is not theirs to do as they please just because they are part of the public. Not just taking firewood, but also 'pruning' boulevard trees in front of their houses (butchering them and leaving stumps) or cutting them down because they don't want to rake leaves.]

LIFE IN COWTOWN

by Dale Speirs

Calgary-Fried Squirrel.

2001-10-21

Sunday morning of my weekend shift as the Parks Dept. Trouble Call Supervisor. I was doing a routine security check on the various depots as a fill-in job in between call-outs. Driving into Bowness Park, I saw a power line lying along the side of the road.

I knew it was the power line because it was still attached by one end to the transformer at the top of the pole. Electrical lines are always highest on utility poles, and telephone and cable lines at the bottom. This downed line had broken on the upstream side of the power line, that is closest to the incoming electrical supply. The fallen line was therefore dead, and safe to approach. Had it broken at the downstream pole, it would have been a live line, buzzing and sparking on the ground.

I thought it might have been a windstorm that snapped it. Calgary is continually plagued by cold-front storms whipping down from the north and colliding with maritime air masses trundling out of the west over the mountains. But as I walked up to the fallen line, I saw a dead squirrel lying at the base of the pole where the break occurred. The squirrel was almost melted in half along its belly. The obvious conclusion was that it had climbed one line too high,

and connected a circuit that not only killed it
with umpty-thousand volts but also broke the line.

-6-

There was no power in the depot building, and when I went over to the concession stand and talked to the lady just opening up, she said the same thing. I called Enmax, the city-owned electrical utility, and the dispatcher said he would rumble a truck out.

And so he did. Squirrel-caused power outages are common in Calgary, so much so that Enmax has a category for them in its statistics. Normally though, most of them happen in the spring and involve baby squirrels. This one was an adult, which surprised me because usually they don't climb any higher than they have to and prefer to travel along the telecommunication lines further down.

The Sounds Of Silence.

2001-11-29

I was born hard of hearing. When I was a teenager in the late 1960s, I was fitted with a hearing aid, but I gave it up after a few years because it didn't seem to make any difference. The hearing aid not only amplified the voices of people I was talking to but also the background noise, so I still couldn't make out what they were saying.

For the last thirty years, I have been annoying people by making them repeat themselves louder. Normally my hearing loss is small enough that I only have to do this with people who mumble or who have accents. British or Australian accents give me the most trouble because they are slurred or mumbled. Slavic accents are not so bad, if not too thick. Germanic accents are no problem at all because the consonants are clear and sharp. Chinese accents (Calgary has a large Cantonese population) are very difficult for me to understand because they are mostly open-mouth sounds.

In recent years, I had noticed that my left ear was gradually declining and by a few months ago it was completely deaf. It got to the point that if I was talking with anyone I would face left and almost stick my right ear against their mouth to hear what they were saying. Finally I went to the doctor. After a week's unsuccessful trial with medication, he did an outpatient operation which solved the problem completely. My hearing returned to what it was before, about 75% of normal.

Strolling out of the clinic, I realized what a noisy place the world is. Traffic noise, the wind, people chattering, equipment humming, ventilation equipment rumbling. I still had trouble conversing because, once again, the background noise got in the way. The quieter world of deafness seemed much nicer. There is something to be said for the sounds of silence.

Bud Olson 1925-2002

In the early 1970s I did a lot of fossil hunting in southeastern Alberta, crisscrossing the treeless prairies and badlands between the Red Deer River and Onefour. The latter is so named because it is one township north of the American border and four townships west of the Saskatchewan border. The prairies are dotted with numerous hamlets and place-names (a place-name is a settlement too small to be called a hamlet; it is usually two or three farmhouses at a crossing). One such hamlet is Iddesleigh, on the south bank of the Red Deer River just outside the badlands.

Just before Iddesleigh was the cattle ranch of the Olson family. The patriarch was Bud Olson, whom I only met once, when I stopped at his house to ask permission to cross his land to the badlands. As I walked up to the door, I was met by a pack of Australian bluehounds. Very friendly dogs. Too friendly, as they left me covered with pawprints (it had recently rained and the ground was still muddy) and slobbered all over me. The other reason I remember him is that when I was fossicking on his land, I slipped just as I jumped across a gully. I fell forward face first, instinctively put out my hand to break the fall, and put it into a clump of *Opuntia polyacantha* (pricklypear cactus) with the full weight of my body driving the spines into my palm. Decades later, I still cringe at the memory.

Bud Olson came to the door and graciously granted me permission. At that time he was a cabinet minister in the Trudeau government, having previously spent a decade as a Social Credit M.P. before crossing the floor of the Commons in 1967 to join the Liberals. He was later appointed to the Senate and served briefly as the government leader there. Olson had supported Jean Chretien in his unsuccessful bid for the Liberal leadership in 1984, and again in 1990 when Chretien finally won.

After Chretien became Prime Minister in 1993, he rewarded Olson with appointment as Lieutenant-Governor of Alberta, a slap in the face for the provincial Tory government. A Lieutenant-Governor is the Head of State of a province or territory and represents the Queen of Canada in her absence. (The Head of State of the federal government is the Governor-General. There is no such thing as a Governor, and the title Lieutenant-Governor should not be confused with the American one, which is an elected official.)

Olson's immediate predecessor was Gordon Towers, who had also been a Socred but later jumped to the Tories. Towers had been appointed while the federal Tories were in power but had completed his 7-year term of office. Now as it happens I knew Towers as a friend of the family. My father had been a Social Credit candidate back in the early 1970s. At one point, Dad ran in a federal election against Tory Joe Clark, who later became Prime Minister for a brief interregnum. Dad also helped out

Towers' campaign. Towers was a nice man but a backwoods farmer who tended to be stiff and pompous, with not much of a sense of humour.

A Lieutenant-Governor is mostly a figurehead. His only real duty is to give Royal Assent to provincial legislation, without which they are not law. The rest of the time he wanders around the province cutting ribbons and seeing what the lumpenproletariat are up to. The highlight of the Alberta social season is the New Year's Levee (the Governor-General also gives one in Ottawa) where every citizen has the right to attend a tea-and-cakes and meet the Lieutenant-Governor in a reception line. No invitations are required; anybody can walk in off the street and shake His Excellency's hand. The Levee was, until Olson showed up, always held at Government House in Edmonton, the capital of Alberta.

Olson picked his first fight by asking the Tory government why he should give Royal Assent to any spending by special warrants, which are expenditures approved by resolution of cabinet without reference to the Legislature. His bigger fight was with Towers, who didn't like Olson's man-of-the-people act. Olson really stirred up Towers when he moved the New Year's Levee to Medicine Hat, the principal city of Olson's riding and considerably closer to Idlesleigh than Edmonton. Towers then went ballistic when he discovered that Olson's niece did the

catering. The two men exchanged hot words and very unparliamentary language. Olson cheerfully suggested pistols at dawn to settle the matter. It was the most excitement that Lieutenants-Governor had created in decades, sort of like the Anglican Ladies' Auxiliary Handicraft, Tea, and Bake Sale turning into a drunken brawl with silver-haired matrons tearing each other's dresses.

Both men are dead now. Towers went several years ago, and Olson died February 14, 2002, in Medicine Hat.

The Queen Mum.

2002-03-30

Saturday of the Easter long weekend and I was doing security checks on Parks depots throughout the city. This is a fill-in job between trouble calls, but it had been a very quiet weekend so far. At 11h05 I was westbound over the Glenmore Reservoir causeway when my cellphone rang. It was an off-duty foreman who had been listening to the CBC Radio 2 hourly news at home. Did I know that Buckingham Palace had just announced the passing of Queen Elizabeth the Queen Mother?

Since she had been a Queen Consort of Canada, this meant all flags would be lowered to half-mast. I called on the two-way radio to the weekend shift at Olympic Plaza downtown to get those flags at half-mast, while I turned around and drove to

Memorial Park to lower its flag. This park is just south of the downtown core. It has most of Calgary's public statuary, such as the Victorian horseman honouring the Boer War veterans, and a nearby plinth for the two world wars.

I once saw Queen Elizabeth II (she came to Edmonton to open the 1978 Commonwealth Games when I was a university student there), and my mother once saw Princess Margaret (when the Royal Flight helicopter landed in a school field at Red Deer) but neither of us saw the Queen Mum. But she was a part of both our generations, the war-time generation of my mother, and the older Boomer generation of mine, who had no personal knowledge of the war but knew lots of returned veterans in family and neighbours.

There was no rush to lower flags for the death of Princess Margaret a few weeks ago, since she was not accorded official status. She was a example of someone bypassed by history, a trendy jetsetter in her younger days but only a forlorn grand dame in her final years. We were sad for her but no one slowed down in Calgary.

No sooner did we raise the flags back up after the Queen Mum's funeral than we had to lower them again, this time for the four Canadian soldiers killed in Afghanistan.

Every spring, as the snow is dried off by chinook winds, which are hot winds out of the nearby Rocky Mountains, Calgary has grassfires. Nose Hill Park, a natural prairie covering most of northwest Calgary, had its first burn of the year, covering about 8 square kilometres on its north side. The park, about 2,000 hectares in size, is now completely surrounded by houses. It is a traditional spring rite in Calgary for half the population to rush over to viewpoints and gawp at the water bombers and firefighters struggling to control the blaze. Very annoying, especially since I was taking a trouble call at the far side of the city when the wall of cream-coloured smoke reared up above the city. By the time I rushed back over to Nose Hill, all the good viewpoints were taken.

The firefighters had great difficulty controlling the flames due to the strong gusting winds of an oncoming cold front storm. The next morning, 5 cm of snow blanketed the city and doused any remaining grassfire embers. I was then kept busy cleaning up trees run over by errant drivers who refused to believe that snow was any reason to slow down. However the day after that the snow was all gone due to a chinook wind. Then I had to clean up trees run over by drunk drivers celebrating the first weekend of warm weather this year. What baffles me is that in 22 years of urban forestry, I only see trees run over on straightaways or in the

Fortunately the polar front returned on Monday, albeit without snow. If you don't like Calgary's weather, just wait a day; something else will come along. This is actually the normal type of erratic spring weather for the foothills. Polar fronts sliding down from the north collide with maritime lows coming out of the Pacific over the mountains. If they collide north of Calgary, we get warm weather. If they collide south, we get cold but little snow. If they collide above the city (which is 40 km by 30 km in size), we either get heavy snow as the moist maritime air rides up over the polar cold air, or a cold front storm if the polar front ploughs overtop the maritime air. If the maritime air came over British Columbia, we get about 5 cm of snow. If it comes out of the American Pacific Northwest, we get 15 cm.

Calgary's sprawl is so great that it is common for one end of the city to be under a blizzard while the other is basking in sunshine. I live 5 km from the downtown core but my neighbourhood is considered to be part of the central city.

Roads To Riches.

2002-04-30

My day off work. I took the #7 bus downtown to run some errands. As I got on the bus, the driver had a rosary in his hand. I kept a worried eye on him. He drove with his left hand, and

worked the beads with his right hand. Traffic is getting bad in Calgary.

Transportation matters in Calgary, which is Canada's answer to Los Angeles when it comes to low-density urban sprawl. In the municipal election last year, a new mayor was elected, Dave Bronconnier. The incumbent mayor, Al Duerr, who had been regularly re-elected with 97% of the vote, decided to retire after he got into a fight with striking bus drivers in the spring of 2001. Calgary Transit was shut down for two months, and the drivers basically lost, getting the same contract they had been originally offered. But 20,000 votes of drivers, their families, and friends, could not be ignored in the election a few months later, so Duerr chose to leave with a perfect record.

His replacement in the Establishment, popularly known to Calgarians as the Beige Brigade, was alderman Bev Longstaff. She campaigned on a platform of more of the same, only more so. Bronconnier, also an alderman, ran for mayor on a platform of "build more freeway interchanges this instance". She went down in flames, and he was swept into office. The new Council was not unaware of the mood of the electorate, and agreed to fast-track three new interchanges where the City already owns the land and could start immediately. The new interchanges will, of course, just shove the traffic jams down to the next intersection. We learn nothing from history or Los Angeles.

The Great White North Redux.

2002-05-06

Calgary always gets snow in May, not because of our latitude but because of our altitude. The official altitude is 1 km above sea level, but that is taken at City Hall Plaza, which is on the valley floor of the Bow River. Most of the city is on the prairie plateau about 100 metres higher, and the new suburbs in the west are 300 metres higher up into the foothills. So we always get a few flurries of wet snow once a week or so until Victoria Day, but it never sticks.

When I finished my weekend shift last night, it had been snowing but nothing spectacular had accumulated. During the night, the snow intensified and Calgary woke up to 40 cm of snow. This is laughable to people in the Great Lakes area who get metres of snow at a time but here it was enough to paralyze the city. Fortunately it was my day off work. I took a leisurely start to the morning, doing a few odd jobs (one of which was stuffing envelopes with OPUNTIA #51.1A). But I did have some errands to do downtown and then wanted to go up to the University of Calgary Library for some research and check my e-mail (I don't have it at home).

I waddled down to the corner where I take the #7 bus directly downtown. Waddled, because normal walking was too slippery,

so I had to keep each footfall to the outside of my track. Nobody had shoveled their sidewalks, me included, since it was still snowing heavily. I walked down the middle of the street where a few vehicle ruts made the going slightly easier. At the bus stop I looked up the street for the bus. I saw its silhouette through the snow only a half block away, but the problem was that it was going to stay a half block away for the next several hours. The bus had spun out leaving the previous stop, slid backwards into the gutter, and was now at right angles across the street, blocking it completely. The pavement had only a very slight curve at the road edge, just enough to make water run off the asphalt into the gutter, but that adverse camber might as well have been a mountain for a bus spinning its tires on ice.

The alternative bus going downtown from my neighbourhood is #13, which crosses in front of where the #7 was stuck. It went by as I watched, and I realized too late that I should have grabbed it. I started up the avenue to the #13 stop. Before getting there, another #13 came by, heading in the opposite direction. I figured I might as well ride it to the end of the line and loop back instead of getting snowed on.

And so I did. The driver didn't pull over to the curb. He stopped in the middle of the street and I hopped over the ploughed snow and climbed up into the bus. In the 22 years I have lived in the neighbourhood, I have only ever taken #13 downtown, never in

the opposite direction to the end of the line.

I had the vague idea that it looped back around not far from my house at the Mount Royal College campus. Not so, as it continued on out into the foothill suburbs. But it was my day off and my time was nothing, so I enjoyed the ride. At the far end where the #13 route turns around and comes back into civilization, there was another bus spun out and at right angles. It was also a #13, and we picked up its hapless passengers after carefully edging past it.

On the return loop, now heading into the downtown, we passed my house again and the #7 bus still blocking the cross street. On its way downtown the #13 goes through the Mount Royal district, which is an old hill dissected by several coulees. The bus driver charged in and out of the coulees at full speed. He shouted back at us passengers clinging to our seats, "If I stop, I'll never get going". Not a voice was raised in protest. The main reason was that we were all waiting for the next shoe to drop, for we all knew what lay on the other side. Mount Royal is on the edge of the Bow River valley escarpment, and we were about to descend a very steep and winding road into the downtown core.

The bus jerked as the driver shifted into low gear. As one, every passenger leaned forward and stared tensely out the front window while the bus slowly inched its way down the slope. About a third of the way down, on the first curve, the rear end of the bus began

to slip sideways. We held our breath, and I am not speaking figuratively here. The driver caught the skid and the bus straightened out. We all exhaled. On the second curve, the bus was moving at less than a walking pace. We held our breath again. At the bottom, there was an audible sigh of relief, and a few passengers applauded.

Funnily enough, two blocks into the flat valley floor, the bus spun out against the gutter. The driver worked the gears back and forth for a couple of minutes, and finally we were moving down the street again, albeit at a 45-degree angle. And so into the downtown core. As we exited at our stops, each of us heartily congratulated the bus driver on a job well done. And we meant it.

The punch line to this story is that today is the first day of Emergency Preparedness Week (May 6 to 12) in Calgary. The opening ceremonies had to be cancelled because nobody could get to the site.

Spring Has Sprung.

2002-05-29

We've had a few more snowfalls since the big dump, but for the last week, temperatures have been much better. Room temperature by day, just above freezing at night. Spring was very late this year, and trees are only just now putting out buds.

I had a half-day clear today, and decided to make a quick run out to the near side of the Kananaskis mountains, only an hour's drive west. I chose Elbow Falls as my destination, the reason being that I have seen it many times in autumn when the Elbow River is low but never at spring flood. And so out to the mountains, wending my way through the upscale suburbs en route, then the village of Bragg Creek, then the Tsuu T'ina tribal reserve, and finally into the Kananaskis mountains. This is the eastern side, with no direct connection to the western valley where the G-8 summit is being held.

There had been a considerable amount of soil slumping on some of the lower slopes over the winter, and almost no flowers graced the scenery. A late spring indeed. I passed a herd of deer grazing in a meadow. Just as I pulled into the parking lot at Elbow Falls, a light sprinkle developed, but I had my cowboy hat, so no problem. The waterfalls were not only not as impressive as I thought they might be in spate, but were distinctly less so than at autumn. The reason was that flooding had filled the plunge pool to within a metre or so of the lip of the waterfall. Even though the water was massive compared to autumn, it was only tumbling a short distance down and looked more like low rapids.

Not much to look at, so I got back in the car and drove on up into the valley headwaters. The sprinkle intensified to a drizzle as I

gained altitude. I slowed down partly because the road was slick from the drizzle and partly because there were deer licking the asphalt for road salt. The drizzle intensified to rain and wet snow as I drove up into the ponderosa pine forests. The heights of the snow-capped mountains were shrouded in grey rain.

A pair of young mooses (plural?) were grazing at the roadside as I drove up to the trailhead at Forgetmenot Pond. It was too wet to walk up the trail, so I drove to the end of the road, romantically named Loop E. Coming back around the far side, it was easier to see over the cliffs at the river below as the forest had been burned out a few years ago. Strangely enough, I found the only speed bump I have ever seen in the Rocky Mountains. Were the rangers worried someone might hit a moose?

Ladybug, Ladybug, Fly Away Home.

2002-05-30

I was leaving the downtown core on the #7 bus heading back home when I saw the black smoke to the south. It looked close enough, and being an inveterate rubbernecker, I hopped off the bus and walked down Macleod Trail. The column of smoke was a thin one but as I walked towards it, the smoke spread out sideways and huge gouts of flame began showing. As I got closer, I saw that it was a multi-building townhouse complex in the Erlton district, directly across Macleod Trail from the Stampede rodeo grounds. The fire had started in a building under

construction, and the strong winds that blow regularly through Calgary had quickly spread the flames. As I walked down Macleod Trail, a steady flow of fire engines screamed past me, followed by a secondary stream of police cruisers. Vehicles on the road had to keep pulling over to clear the traffic. I heard a crunch behind me and turned about to see a 1-ton truck tear the wheel off a compact car. Both had been moving to the curb to make way for the fire trucks, and one had gotten too close to the other, hooking the other's wheel.

I followed the Elbow River pathway, which went past the west side of the burning complex. Huge crowds were already gathering, and the constables were busy stringing yellow police-line ribbon to keep them back. I could see the central building where the fire started, and a second one to the west had several units already burning. Each building in the complex had about fifty townhouses. They were all brand-new luxury units for the upper-income yuppies working downtown who wanted to walk to work. I watched them being built over the past few years as I walked by on the riverbank, and had always said to myself that I would never live in one of them because of the fire hazard. The buildings are five stories tall, flat roofed (the better to catch and hold wind-blown embers), and built completely out of particleboard walls and cedar roof shingles. Not a concrete party wall in any of them. Now they were burning one by one, flaming like Roman candles.

A third building, to the east of the burning central one, seemed clear but as I watched, the wind blew embers into the cedar shingles. Soon they began smouldering, then flames flickered up, and fifteen minutes later the third building was wreathed in smoke. A steady pour of water from a dozen ladder trucks did nothing to diminish the fires. Even if they stopped the fire, the flood of water will destroy all the lower units. The building was soon completely invisible in the swirling black smoke.

Near the second burning building, a yuppie came running up to the fire line and pointed excitedly at his car. The firefighter let him through, and a minute later the man was driving his Baby Benz out to safety. As he drove past us, we saw that the rear taillights and bumper had softened and melted from the heat. The constables came by and moved us back a bit more, this time telling us to stay clear of the overhead power lines. One power pole near the condos was already burning. Every fifteen minutes a tremendous bang reverberated from the condos, as a homeowner's propane barbeque exploded on a balcony. (I found out later than one such explosion blew a firefighter off his ladder; incredibly, he survived the fall with only a bruised arm.)

I heard scattered applause to my right and turned to look. A firefighter had brought out a tabby cat from one of the burning units. The grateful homeowner ran out from the crowd and took charge of his pet. I always thought that was a newspaper cliché,

but it really does happen. "Look!", someone in the crowd shouted, and I turned to my left to see a fourth building break out in flames on the shingles. A few homeowners in that building could be seen trying to throw water up onto the roof from their balconies. Down at street level, a constable worked his way methodically along the building, ringing doorbells to rouse anyone within. If no answer, he kicked in the door and went inside to verify if anyone was there. His partner came along from the other direction, except that instead of kicking in doors to gain access he was smashing in windows with a leather-gloved hand, then reaching inside to turn the doorknob.

As much as I wanted to stay and watch the excitement, I had to get to an appointment, so I started down the river pathway to my home about 5 km southwest. But the bridge was cordoned off. A constable said it was because a natural gas line ran under the bridge and they were worried about the spreading flames overheating it. I turned back north and trudged the long way around to the far side, moving clockwise around the complex.

Macleod Trail was now shut down completely by police. The Salvation Army, which handles initial disaster response in Calgary, was driving in trucks with tents and emergency supplies for the hundreds of people now homeless. The rush hour was just starting, and for southbound commuters, it was going to be a long

trip home. I grumbled to myself because it appeared that since I couldn't get across the river to walk home, I would have to take a packed train to the south end of the city and then double back to my neighbourhood on the #72 bus.

My grumbling stopped as I walked past a couple hugging on the sidewalk. The wife was crying in his arms and the husband was staring up in a daze at the burning building they had called home. It was fully involved, with nothing left but the struts and spars, rapidly crumbling in the sheets of flames. Dozens of other homeowners stood about, talking on their cellphones to family and friends while watching the flames. I heard snatches of their conversations as I walked by, as they made arrangements to stay the night elsewhere or borrow a car. The luckier ones had a few shopping bags of their possessions with them, all they had been able to save. Most occupants had been at work when the fire started and had no chance to save anything. One or two had been off work but were out jogging when the fire began and didn't even have their wallets. No driver's licence, no credit cards to charge to for a few days, nothing to prove they existed.

By the time I came around the far side of the complex to the train station, a fifth building had begun burning. The third building was now fully involved on the top two floors. The trains were still running, since the station was on the far side of Macleod Trail, which is a eight-lane road at that point. Waiting on the raised

platform, us commuters were transfixed by the fire, of which we had a perfect view.

The flames stretched four city blocks, leaping back and forth from building to building as the winds gusted about. I counted six buildings on fire, which would be roughly 250 homes. The condo streets were littered with burned-out cars. Is this what Bosnia looked like? Or Palestinian cities?

The train was jammed solid, hot and airless, and slow moving, but I wasn't complaining. I still had a home to go to. The #72 bus wasn't quite as packed, but it was slow going in the rush hour. I got off at my stop, and as I walked to my house I could see the smoke of a hundred homes in the distance.

