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D A R K W O O D S
S T O R Y



ANY YEARS AGO, AS THE COLD WAR STALKED EUROPE, A GERMAN DUKE LOOKED WESTWARD FOR A HAVEN FOR HIS family. He found it in British Columbia – in an immense tract of land he called Darkwoods. The Duke fell in love with Darkwoods and its towering mountains, cool water, trees of all shapes and sizes and animals that roamed freely through the abundant land ...

The years passed, and as the Duke grew older, the time came to entrust the land to new owners. He searched for someone who would keep Darkwoods in one piece, and protect its ecological treasures. They must cherish the land as he had. The Duke chose the Nature Conservancy of Canada (NCC) as the next in line to steward Darkwoods into the future.

A CONSERVATION STORY

Our conservation tale may make a good bedtime story – but it is fact rather than fiction. This summer NCC undertook the biggest private land conservation project in Canadian history. After three years of negotiations it acquired Darkwoods: the once private refuge of His Royal Highness Duke Carl Herzog von Wurttemberg of Germany is now a haven for dozens of species at risk. Rarely does private property of this size and ecological richness become available for conservation.

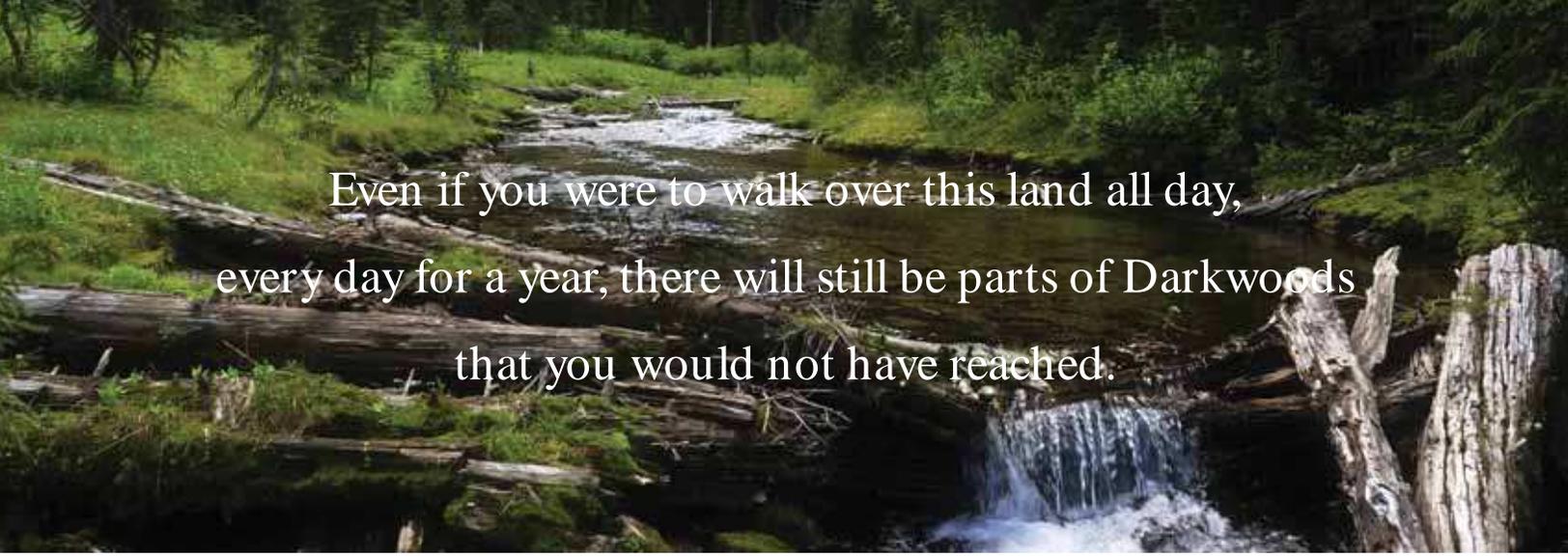
Darkwoods is situated between the towns of Nelson, Salmo and Creston in the West Kootenay region of British Columbia. It spans an area equivalent to the size of the island of Montreal – 550 square kilometres of majestic icy mountain peaks, alpine tundra, rare old-growth forests, biologically rich valley bottoms and lovely lakefront lands. Here wildlife, including one of the last herds of

Mountain Caribou in the world, finds refuge (see the back cover for our Featured Species article on Mountain Caribou).

For many years, the Duke had run a small-scale sustainable timber harvest under his company, the Pluto Darkwoods Corporation. It was modelled after progressive forestry practices in Europe. “Despite the timber harvest, this ecosystem still maintains a lot of important natural values – and there aren’t a lot of places like that in these parts,” says Dave Hillary, NCC program manager for the Rocky Mountains Area. “It encompasses everything that comes to mind when you think about the Rocky Mountains and Canada – fresh air, snow caps, sparkling water, Grizzly Bears, old-growth trees...the works.”

NCC’s founders had big dreams for protecting nature, but one wonders if they ever imagined anything like Darkwoods. “The securement of Darkwoods wouldn’t have been possible five years ago,” says Hillary without hesitation. “NCC just didn’t have the capacity and the relationships in place to do it. But now, we’ve reached the point where we can work simultaneously at all levels – nationally, provincially and locally – and that enables us to be proactive with spectacular opportunities like these. Who knows what we could do in another 10, 15 or 20 years?”

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every day for a year, there will still be parts of Darkwoods
that you would not have reached.

DARKWOODS STREAM: PHOTO BY TIM ENNIS/NCC.

Because of its sheer scale, “the vastness of Darkwoods means that it hosts a diverse cross-section of ecosystems and supports habitat for an estimated 29 provincially rare species,” explains Hillary. “It supports an abundance and diversity of wildlife that smaller, fragmented pieces of land simply could not.” These habitats shelter a wide range of wildlife, including bears, wolves, Cougar, Lynx and Moose.

Darkwoods contains some of the most diverse forests in British Columbia, including priceless old-growth stands of vanishing interior temperate rainforest. Because they receive most of their moisture from snow, these “snow forests” are biologically unique, yet we know very little about them. Conserving Darkwoods provides an unprecedented opportunity to expand our knowledge about one of the world’s rarest ecosystems. The area also plays a critical role in preserving freshwater systems throughout the South Selkirk Mountains, influencing 17 separate watersheds, numerous streams and over 50 lakes. The forests of Darkwoods act as natural water filters and purifiers, ensuring fresh water for countless species of plants and animals, including humans.

Darkwoods will directly connect an existing network of parks and wildlife management areas. This creates a contiguous protected area of more than 250,000 acres (101,171 hectares) – enough for wide-ranging animals like Mountain Caribou and Grizzly Bear to roam freely. “Even if you were to walk over this land all day, every day for a year, there will still be parts of Darkwoods that you would not have reached,” muses Pat Field, NCC’s Darkwoods program manager.

Protected landscapes of great scale and topographical diversity also allow plants and animals to adapt to global climate change, and the immensity of Darkwoods serves this purpose well. If temperatures change, wildlife will have the chance to migrate to different latitudes or elevations and continue to thrive. Also, the Darkwoods forests have been managed in a sustainable way for decades, and maintain an immense carbon store in their soil and

trees. Conservative estimates suggest that over two million tonnes of carbon are stored in Darkwoods. If released, this would be equal to the CO2 emissions of almost 500,000 Canadians.

Already, the conservation of Darkwoods has many researchers excited about the opportunities it offers. NCC has been approached by teams of scientists who are interested in projects such as conducting silviculture trials at low and high elevations, understanding the impact of protecting under-represented ecosystems or examining old-growth habitat and the role it plays in carbon sequestration.

As with all NCC properties, securing the land is only the first part of the challenge. The next step is to develop a comprehensive management plan to care for the land on an ongoing basis, with the help of local partners. These stewardship plans are varied and dynamic, evolving with the changing needs of the property. Pat Field will be working with NCC staff and the local community to develop a management plan for Darkwoods. “We have the opportunity to prove we can be leaders in developing a conservation economy that will protect the area’s biodiversity, including its unique Mountain Caribou.”

THE ENDING

Every good story needs a “happily ever after,” but the ending for the Darkwoods story is still being written. NCC has acquired the property with support of its partnership with the Government of Canada under the Natural Areas Conservation Program. It has also received a generous Ecogift donation from the Pluto Darkwoods Corporation. However, NCC is still working to ensure this magnificent land has the support needed to secure it for the future.

In coming months we’ll report back as we begin to write the next chapter in the Darkwoods story. 🌱

Darkwoods

BY THE NUMBERS

136,000

acres (55,000 hectares)

70%

of total area covered in forests

50+

lakes and numerous streams

9

nationally threatened species

29

provincially at-risk species

46

Mountain Caribou

10+

different tree species