



Finding Beauty After the Flood

Text and photography by Dr. Robert Berdan

Bragg Creek and Kananaskis are among some of the most beautiful places to visit and photograph near Calgary, but the recent flooding has noticeably damaged roads, bridges, homes, businesses, and dramatically changed the landscape. As a nature photographer, I generally look for and try to capture beauty with my camera. But after the flood I really wondered if it would be possible to capture beauty within the devastation of the flood. Not easily defined, beauty can mean different things to different people. But sometimes, if I am lucky, I can capture thought-provoking images to enjoy the privilege of sharing them with others.

Driving south to Bragg Creek on Highway 22, the first thing that caught my attention was a pattern in the mud around the Elbow river bridge. There used to be a small pond on the west side of the highway, surrounded by trees. The trees are still there, but the pond is gone, and in its place I found dry, cracked mud that formed polygons about a foot in size. Small plants and grass are growing both on and in between the caked mud. On closer inspection, I noticed small depressions created by individual raindrops on the surface of the mud. I pulled out my camera, tripod, a macro lens and took some pictures. For some images I cropped tightly on the patterns, while in others I left the tree stumps at the top of the



*This spread, above:
the sheer size and quantity of debris
left behind on the Elbow Falls river bank
provides an indication of the height
reached by the raging river.*

*Top right and middle:
when incorporated correctly, a beautiful
sunrise or sunset reflecting off a flowing
river can bring spectacular colours to
any scene.*



frame to provide a sense of scale and orientation. I jumped back in my jeep and headed down the road.

At the junction of Highway 22 and Highway 66, I turned right toward Kananaskis and drove toward Elbow Falls. After entering Kananaskis, I came to a bridge where Highway 66 used to cross the Elbow River. A large section of the bridge and river bank was missing, with a temporary single-lane bridge now allowing visitors in and out. The damage to the bridge demonstrates how powerful the river can be during a flood. I took several photos of the entire bridge and then began to examine the scene more closely. I first noticed the rusty girders supporting part of the bridge, and how debris had gathered around them. I used a telephoto lens to isolate the girders and show some of the trees in



This page: the serenity of a newly formed pond on Elbow River contrasts with earlier turmoil that destroyed a large part of the bridge above it.

Below: temporary rusty girders supporting the damaged bridge act as vertical partitions for the scene beyond.

the background. I returned again the next day at sunrise to see if I could capture the bridge in more colourful light. Sometimes sunrise can produce spectacular light, while other times it can be a dud. The morning I set up my camera the light was good, but not spectacular. As the sun rose higher in the sky, I photographed a colourful reflection of the damaged bridge in a quiet pool of water. The tranquillity of the scene conveys stark contrast to what the river must have been like during the flood.

Very close to the bridge lies Allen Bill Pond, or at least what used to be a pond, which was a popular place to go fishing,

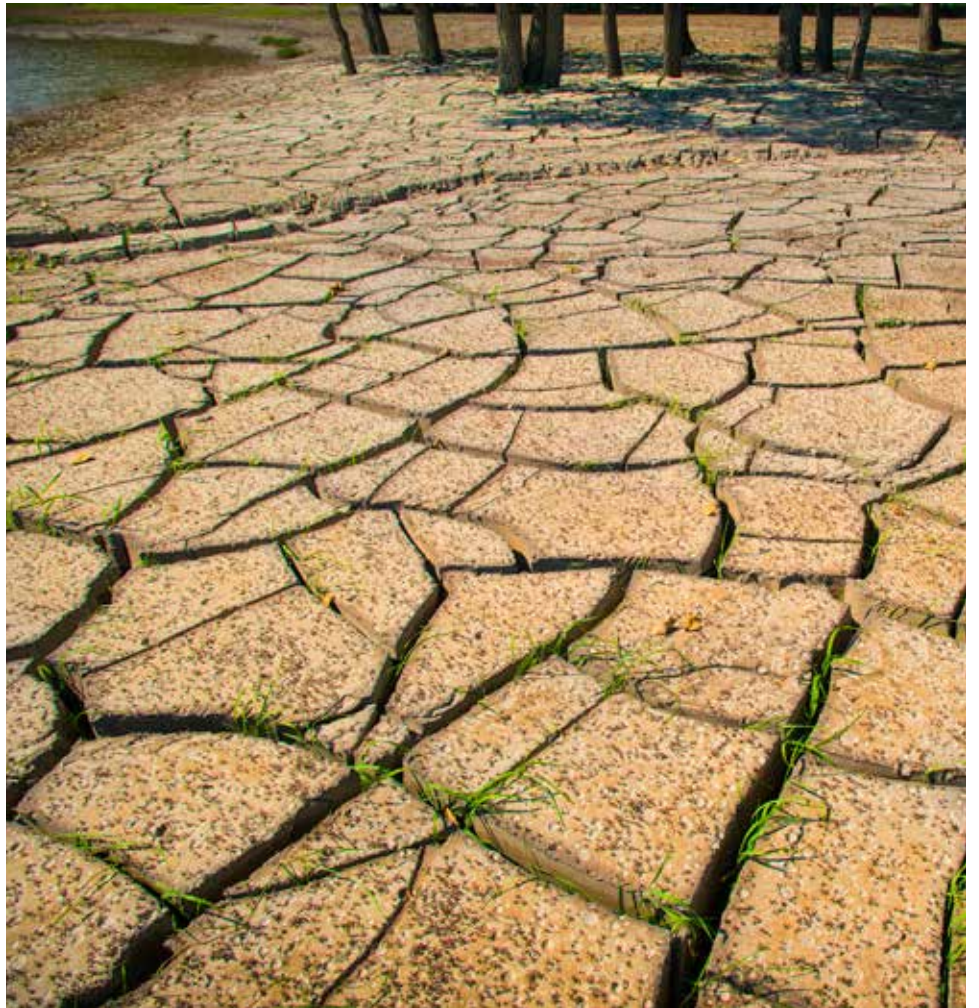
photograph birds such as common loons, and watch kids throw stones. As I walked downstream toward the Elbow River bridge, I turned back and photographed the full moon in the sky above. Across the river, my eye was attracted by a red glow reflecting off a distant sand bank. Later that afternoon in the parking lot, I noticed beautiful cloud formations and decided to create a black-and-white image to emphasize the form and structure of the clouds. I also took several photos where the parking lot turn-about was washed away by the river. While the pond is no longer there, this area is still an attractive location to stop, take photographs and spend some quality time.





The chaotic pile of woody debris has a haphazard, almost "modern art" appeal.

A few kilometres further into the park, I stopped to visit Elbow Falls. The parking lot appeared unscathed, but when you approach the waterfalls you begin to see the changes caused by flooding. The pathway and benches along the river are completely gone, and one of the picnic tables can be seen in the river just above the falls. The pathways around the falls are littered with sand, roots and debris. From the top of the pathway, the waterfalls and



This page, above and right: Small grass and plants indicate new growth already sprouting between the cracks in the mud. Looking closer shows individual raindrops captured by the mud.

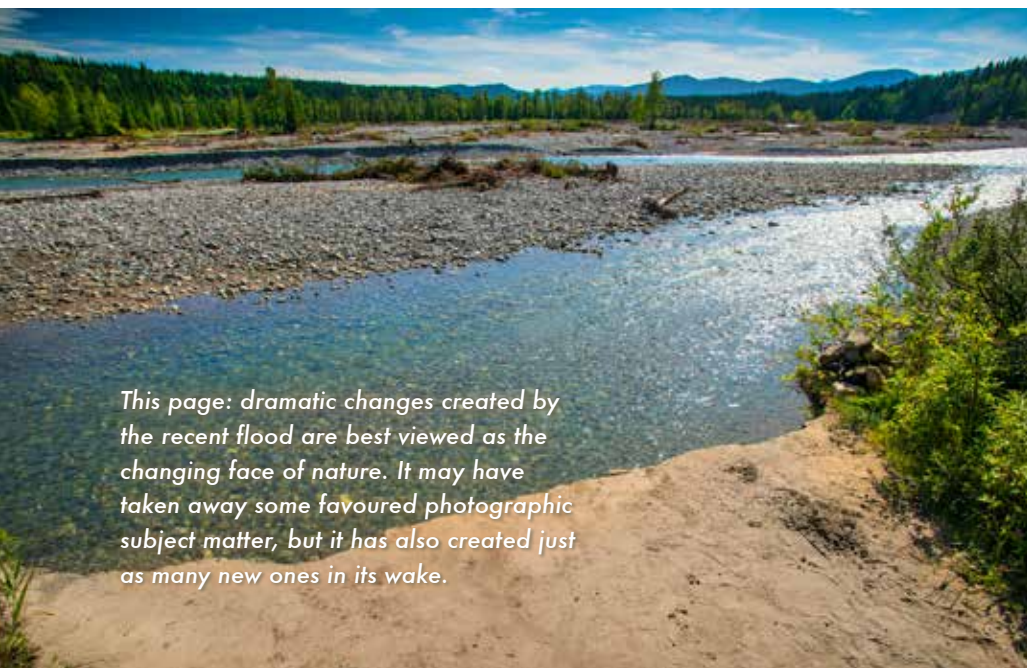


the background are still scenic, but what was once forest is now a cobblestone floodplain.

While driving toward Forgetmenot Pond, I photographed a mule deer beside the road. From the highway, I also captured a view of the river valley showing how the Elbow flood plain has been widened and littered with dead pine trees (top left). With flood damage around Forgetmenot Pond being fairly minor, I turned around and headed back to Bragg Creek.



On the way back I first turned left onto Highway 758, leading to the Bragg Creek Provincial Park, but couldn't proceed further because of a barrier and, moreover, didn't see anything inspiring enough to photograph. The truth is that photographers spend most of their time looking and hunting for something worthy to take a picture of, which is exactly what makes photography so challenging. I turned around and headed back to Bragg Creek along White Avenue (758), where the Old Bragg Creek Trading post used to be. I parked across from the Bavarian Inn Restaurant and walked until I couldn't go any further due to construction. I was struggling to find something beautiful to shoot, and resorted to taking some shots of the extensive woody debris piled up next to the road. Photography is all about looking and seeing, and while it helps to know and understand your camera, the camera is just a tool that does what it's told. Seeing is the most challenging aspect of photography, which is why this was one of the most stimulating assignments I have been given. ■



Dr. Robert Berdan has been a valued photography and article contributor for this magazine since its inception in 2009. To learn more about Robert's photography and his services please visit his web sites:

- www.canadiannaturephotographer.com
- www.360vrmultimedia.com
- www.scienceandart.org

This page: dramatic changes created by the recent flood are best viewed as the changing face of nature. It may have taken away some favoured photographic subject matter, but it has also created just as many new ones in its wake.

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