

WEEKEND

BORNEO TEEMS WITH WILDLIFE

Creatures of sea and sky abound **D8**



ATWOOD GETS GRAPHIC

New release a departure **D3**

SASKATOON STARPHOENIX SATURDAY, SEPTEMBER 3, 2016

SECTION D



Once cell towers became operational in the area in December 2015, Black Lake band councillor John Toutsaint was able to use his cellphone even while fishing. Though Toutsaint owned a cellphone prior to 2015, he couldn't use it until he drove 200 kilometres south to Points North. PHOTOS: ANDREA HILL

GETTING CONNECTED

After waiting more than 26 years, cellular service is saving and changing lives in the remote communities of Black Lake and Stony Rapids, **Andrea Hill** writes.

BLACK LAKE John Toutsaint was driving home on an unseasonably warm New Year's afternoon when the wreckage loomed in front of him.

A car travelling along the icy road connecting the northern Saskatchewan communities of Black Lake and Stony Rapids had plowed into an oncoming half-ton truck with such force that it ripped in half.

Bits of metal littered the road. The driver of the car had been thrown from his seat and lay metres from his mangled vehicle, covered in snow.

Toutsaint threw his truck into park, punched on the emergency lights and ran toward the debris. The Black Lake First Nation band councillor brushed snow off the motionless driver, sure he was dead, and was amazed to discover he was still breathing.

Toutsaint fished in his pockets, found his phone and dialed 911.

His call for help would have been impossible weeks earlier. Cell service didn't come to Black Lake and Stony Rapids until late December 2015, more than 26 years after cellphones first became operational in the province.

Work on the steel towers that would eventually bring cell service to the 1,400 residents of Black Lake and the 300-some people living 20 kilometres away in Stony Rapids began less than a year ago. Even as the structures grew upward, gradually becoming part of the rugged northern Saskatchewan landscape, many living there didn't believe they were finally getting cell service.

Rumours had flown for years

that cellphones would one day ring in the remote communities roughly 1,000 kilometres north of Saskatoon. But the incredibly high cost of getting workers and equipment so far north to build cell infrastructure on the unforgiving Canadian Shield had always proved an insurmountable obstacle.

When the two towers were finally complete and the switch flipped, people were euphoric.

"All of a sudden, our cellphones started dinging with text messages and everything," Stony Rapids School principal Kevin O'Brien recalled. "The excitement level was as high as you can imagine."

It was the end of a two-year, \$6-million effort to bring cell service to four communities along Lake Athabasca. As part of the efforts spearheaded by Crown corporation SaskTel and supported by Athabasca Basin Development (which invests in northern Saskatchewan businesses) and Huawei (a private information and communications technology company), cell service was also switched on in Fond-du-Lac and Wollaston Lake in September 2015.

At last, the remote reaches of northern Saskatchewan were connected to the rest of the world.

"I think it's the best thing that's happened here," says Black Lake First Nation business manager Terri-Lynne Beavereye.

Beavereye, like many in the Dene community, had owned a cellphone for years, but couldn't use it to send texts or make calls until she drove 200 kilometres south to Points North, a pit stop en route to La Ronge.

SEE CELLULAR ON **D2**



Even as the cell towers grew upward, many residents of Stony Rapids and Black Lake still didn't believe they were getting cellphone service.



With cell towers operational in Black Lake and Stony Rapids, 99 per cent of the Saskatchewan population now has cellular coverage. PHOTOS: ANDREA HILL

'IT'S CHANGED THE PACE HERE'

CELLULAR FROM D1

"All of a sudden, I would go beep-beep-beep-beep," she recalls. Dozens of week-old texts and voice mails would appear on her phone from business contacts who hadn't remembered — or couldn't believe — her phone didn't work at home.

This year has brought a lot of changes for Beavereye. It's become easier for her to communicate with business contacts, friends and family members. She had to invest in pants with pockets so she can carry her cellphone at all times. She works more because she can be reached outside the office.

"I don't know if it's for the better, but it's changed the pace here," she says. "People can't hide anymore."

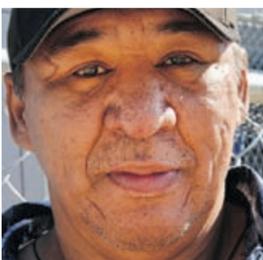
The tight-knit community has changed in other ways, too. People are more often seen with their heads down, noses buried in their phones. Kids who used to dash across the crushed gravel streets to meet friends are doing so less and less.

"Now a lot of them are doing it from the comfort of their bedrooms and living rooms," says Gloria Sutherland, vice-principal of Father Porte Memorial Dene School in Black Lake. "People are still interacting, but I think they're probably spending a lot more time now using their electronics."

With cell towers operational in Black Lake and Stony Rapids, 99 per cent of the province's popula-



Students at Black Lake's Father Porte Memorial Dene School are spending more time indoors now that they have cellphones, says vice-principal Gloria Sutherland.



John Toutsaint

tion now has cell coverage. The one per cent without includes those travelling along the 200-kilometre stretch of Highway 905 that winds from Black Lake to Points North.

"If you have a flat tire or something happens, you're completely on your own. So there's still that problem," Sutherland says.

People making the trek north or south pack food, warm clothing and emergency kits in case the worst happens because it could

be hours before another vehicle trundles along to provide help.

People say cell coverage along Highway 905 would make the journey safer and the need will grow as more people travel to and from Black Lake next year when ground breaks on the Tazi Twé hydroelectric project, which will be the province's first power production facility entirely on First Nations land.

Despite those concerns, SaskTel spokesman Greg Jacobs says there



Terri-Lynne Beavereye

are no plans to expand service along this route.

It's sad news for Toutsaint, who knows how cell service along northern roads saves lives.

On that January afternoon when he stood amid the wreckage, phone in hand, he marvelled at how much worse things could have been.

If he had come across the scene just two weeks earlier, he would have had to jump back into his truck and drive 20 minutes to the Stony Rapids RCMP detachment for help. Instead, he stayed at the scene and an ambulance arrived 30 minutes later.

The injured driver was airlifted to Saskatoon, where he began a slow recovery. Two occupants of the half-ton truck were taken to the Stony Rapids Hospital with minor injuries. Toutsaint tucked his phone in his pocket and continued home.

"Cell service here is good," he says. "Now we want to upgrade it to save lives in the future."

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Residents of Black Lake enjoy a warm summer day at the beach.

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