

MUSKRATE EXPRESS

WILLIAMS LAKE FIELD NATURALISTS
MARCH • APRIL 2008 NEWSLETTER





The newsletter for the:
Williams Lake Field Naturalists
1305A Borland Road, Williams Lake BC, V2G 5K5

Membership fees: Family (\$27) or single (\$22) memberships can be mailed to the above address. Please include your address and phone number with your membership fee. For more information about the club please contact Fred McMechan at 392-7680 or e-mail Fred_McMechan@telus.net

Executive of The Williams Lake Field Naturalists: president Fred McMechan, vice-president Jim Sims, secretary Kris Andrews, treasurer Katharine VanSpall and directors Nola Daintith, Ordell Steen, Anna Roberts, Rob Higgins, Rick Dawson and Cathy Koot

Editors: If you have comments, suggestions or articles for the Muskrat please contact Margaret Waring (398-7724), Jim Sims (296-3636) or e-mail simsj@telus.net

Annual General Meeting Report

Thanks to all who attended the AGM. The pot luck supper was superb once again. The entertainment "Stump the Naturalists" was enjoyed by all. Fred did his best to limit the business part of the meeting. Thanks goes out to the members of the executive for all their efforts on our behalf last year. Thanks also to all of them for allowing their names to stand as candidates for this years executive. They were unopposed so your new executive is the same as last years and is listed above. Thanks also to our staff Sue, Jenny and Sandra for the fine job they have been doing. If anyone is interested an Annual Report has been prepared. Copies are available at the Nature Centre, contact Sue at 398-8532

Annual Yard and Plant Sale

Saturday May 10th Sale is from 9:30am to 1:30pm at the Nature House at Scout Island
The annual yard and plant sale has been delayed for a week in hope that Spring will arrive. Please start to gather your goodies for the sale. Baked goods are always welcome along with yard sale items. If you have plants please label neatly to make them more attractive. A description of vegetables would also be handy. Margaret will be looking for volunteers for setup and pricing on Friday night as well as sale persons for Saturday morning. If you want to help please give her a call at 398-7724.

Conservation Update

One of the strongest recommendations to come out of the Conservation Strategy Forum in January was that we create a salaried sustainability coordinator position for each sub-region -- Cariboo North (centered in Quesnel), Cariboo Central (centered in Williams Lake) and Cariboo South (centered in 100 Mile House) -- as well as a regional coordinator to work with all three. These coordinators would facilitate sustainability information and programs, and promote

cooperation across all levels of the community: citizen, industry/business, academia, local governments, and non-government organizations. The first step has been taken towards this goal as the Conservation Society has obtained funding through Cariboo Chilcotin Beetle Action Committee to establish the regional coordinator position.

Members of the WLFN are part of the new local Sustainable Community Advisory Committee convened by the City of Williams Lake. This group has met twice and formulated terms of reference, which are now before the joint City/Regional District committee. The city will look to the Sustainability Committee for suggestions and expertise in fulfilling its commitment under the BC Climate Action Charter to become carbon-neutral by 2012.

One of the committee's first tasks will be to survey what programs and initiatives have already begun, identify gaps and develop an achievable, practical sustainability plan for the Central Cariboo.

Discussions are also underway to open a dialogue on retention planning in the forests. The Strategy recommended maintaining landscape level connectivity and key habitats during salvage logging of Mountain Pine Beetle-impacted forests. Habitat, hydrology, and medium-term reforestation are all at stake. Operational foresters employed by industry are the ones making critical decisions in this area, and it's important that the conservation community understand and attempt to influence the parameters being used. Anyone interested in participating in these meetings with on-the-ground operational foresters working for the licensees, please let Sue or Jenny know.

Scout Island Nature Centre Update

It is spring. Today a flock of pelicans settled on the marsh much to our delight and the first mosquito is harassing me as I write this report. Last Friday a grade 5/6 class from 100 Mile School was here to practice birding and enjoyed the return of the yellow headed blackbirds. The day was even more special because Kris Andrews shared her birding skills with all. Sue continues to have great fun "playing" with the classes that come for a full day of enjoying the outdoors. This week two grade 11 classes will try their hand at birding and tree identification. Schools are already booking for the spring program and 2 summer staff will be hired this week to start the first week in May. You can get a copy of the spring school program (programs also available to community groups) in the first week of May. Ian Higgins is back on staff and the Nature House will now be open on the weekends. We have also had two great Katimavik volunteers join us, Keeton from Nova Scotia and Roxanne from Quebec. They have been helping with the planting in the river valley and turning our compost piles. If you have time, go down to the river valley below Surplus Herbies and see the great work being done around the new ponds located there. Richard Case and a team of people have been planting native trees, shrubs and water plants. The 2007 Scout Island Nature Centre Report is now complete. If you would like a copy pick one up at the Nature Centre or Sue can email you one shemphill@wlake.com.

Growing Alpine Flowers Workshop

Saturday June 14 2008 1-4 pm
At Moose House (Sue and Jurgen's Home)
Outside of Horsefly (hour drive from Williams Lake)

Alpine plants flower freely and are beautiful, compact, and perfect for small and container gardens. Many are easy to grow and water wise (if you set your garden up for them) and need minimum of care once established.

Come learn from expert, Jurgen Hornburg, who has been raising plants from seed for a number of years. He will show you how to prepare soils, establish various types of gardens, and cultivation techniques.

Call or Email to Register and get directions. Car Pooling encouraged
shemphill@wlake.com 398 8532 or 620 3408

There is also an extensive organic vegetable and fruit garden that you can wander around in and get ideas from.

American White Pelican

American White Pelicans were first observed on Williams Lake in July of 1991. Since then they have been regular visitors to Williams Lake from late March to early September. This year they arrived back on April 10th. They were observed loafing at the East end of the lake on the sand bar at the mouth of the San Jose River. They also were seen flying over Scout Island. This photo of Pelicans at Scout Island last summer shows a one year old immature pelican in the lead with a gray crown. It is followed by a breeding adult with the characteristic bump on the bill. The bump appears on the bill in the spring and disappears at the end of the breeding season. Pelicans will not breed until the third year and they usually raise a single chick.



Pelicans on Williams Lake

The American White Pelican is a colony nester. In British Columbia the only nesting colony is located on Stum Lake north of Alexis Creek. The colony is located on one of the small rocky islands on the lake. Pelican colonies are sensitive to disturbances such as boating, low flying aircraft, loud noises such as gun fire, humans and predators. The nest is usually a small indentation in the bare earth and therefore the eggs are often broken if the adults are disturbed. For this reason the Pelican is a red listed species and is legally designated as a species at risk in British Columbia. Stum Lake is completely surrounded by White Pelican Provincial Park established in 1971 to protect the colony. Pilots have been advised not to fly below 600 m over the colony from May to August. Fishing, trapping hunting, boating, and the discharge of firearms are not permitted between



Pelican Colony on Stum Lake

March 31st and August 31st.

Pelicans are fish eaters and have chosen to raise their young on a lake with very few fish. For this reason the adults must leave the lake and travel to foraging lakes to find food for their young. Some of these lakes are over 150 km from Stum Lake. They feed on fish such a chub, shiners, northern pike minnow, fish that live in warm shallow water. They do not dive for fish like the Brown Pelican instead they catch fish by thrusting the bill into the water and usually catch one fish at a time. They will often fish in groups of 10 or more birds. They will form a semi-circle and by splashing with flapping wings will herd a school of fish into shallow water were they can be easily caught. Most of the feeding is done in the early morning or in the evening. The rest of the day they can be found loafing and preening. Counter to common beliefs the Pelican does not carry the food back to the colony in the bill pouch. The food for the young must be regurgitated. The pouch is used to catch fish, hold the regurgitated fish for the young, and for courtship displays.



Pelican ready to land on Williams Lake

The mate that remains on the nest incubates the egg, broods the young in cold weather, provides shade when it is warm and protects them from predators. The nest is about 60 cm across and may be made up of a mound of soil, plant material and debris with a hollow in the middle. They will lay one or two eggs and most of the time will only rear one chick. The breeding adult will faithfully be replaced by its mate every one to three days.



Pelicans on nest

On lakes such as Williams Lake the Pelicans have become used to human activity and will have a higher tolerance to our presence than on more remote lakes. It is important not to disturb the adults while on foraging lakes. The long flight to and from Stum Lakes requires a well fed and rested adult. Future management practices will continue to emphasis protection of nesting and foraging Pelicans from human disturbances. New roads provide more opportunities for people to view and disturb foraging birds. Drastic changes to the water level at Stum Lake could provide a land bridge to the mainland, providing access to the colony by predators such as coyotes. The current status of Pelicans in BC is encouraging and hopefully we can manage our activities to ensure that the American White Pelican will continue to survive and grace us with their visits to Williams Lake.

Breeding Bird Atlas

This is an attempt to condense the Atlas Manual into 2 pages to provide you with a brief overview of how things will work. The full Atlas manual should soon be available at:



<http://www.birdatlas.bc.ca/english/index.jsp>

This is a 5 year (breeding season) project starting in 2008. Each survey area comprises of a 10 Km x 10 km square based on the UTM grid system. There are 388 survey squares in the Cariboo Region. The expectation is that only 5% of the squares for this region will be adequately covered (This averages about 4 squares per year and I'm quite sure we can do better than that)

The primary method of surveying each square for evidence of breeding is:

- By spending a minimum of 20 hours in the field surveying each square for the highest level of breeding evidence by species, covering off as many different habitat types as possible. Breeding evidence for only one pair per species is required. From there, an estimate of the number of breeding birds per square is made. A second method for recording casual observations is also available.

An alternate survey method can be used in addition to the above. This is used as an indicator of relative abundance:

- By completing 15, five minute point counts per square. All birds seen or heard during the five minutes are counted. The point locations have already been randomly selected and mapped along existing roads. This type of survey is optional and should only be undertaken if you have the knowledge and experience to identify a high proportion of birds by ear.

Breeding evidence is categorized as "possible", "probable" and "confirmed".

<http://www.birdatlas.bc.ca/bcdata/codes.jsp?lang=en&pg=breeding>

Within each category is an ascending order of evidence types. For example, under 'confirmed' breeding, NB (nest building) would be trumped by NY (nest with young). In each case for each species, you are looking for the highest level of breeding evidence. Within a category, lower levels of evidence previously recorded can then be removed and replaced by the higher level. Forms and protocols for each method have been established. After having signed on and received a password you can enter your data on line (preferred) or submit the forms for processing.

Only one person will be assigned to each square (they can have as many helpers as they need). Squares have been prioritized for this year and additional priorities will be assigned in subsequent years to ensure that fair representation for the region is maintained.

A checklist of birds known to breed within the region has been provided and the objective under the primary survey method will be to provide the highest level of evidence for as many species on the list as possible. After 20 hours, it has been determined that most of the species that are available have been surveyed and additional time does not greatly increase the list and therefore does not maximize effort.

Even though the squares are assigned to individuals, anyone who notes breeding activity within that square can submit casual observation data to add to the survey of that square. Check to see that breeding evidence at this level for this species has not already been entered.

You have 5 years to complete a square. It is preferable to complete a square within a season and move on but new species or higher evidence can be added at any time within the 5 seasons.

Within the checklist, some species have been flagged as rare or colonial nesting species for which some additional documentation is required. The checklist is not a fixed document and can be amended as needed.

The alternate survey method (point count) may or may not provide direct evidence for breeding and is used as a secondary method to illustrate bird distribution within the region during the breeding season.

To locate survey squares within the Cariboo Region, go to:

<http://www.birdatlas.bc.ca/bcdata/mapviewer.jsp>

Click on the box marked Atlas Squares in the *visible layers* column on the right hand side. Click on the *zoom in* tool (top left) then click within Region 26. Wait for the new map to be created then repeat until you can see the square numbers. Find the approximate area that may be of interest to you and continue to zoom in until most of the features are visible. If you go too far – use the *zoom out* or the black arrow button. The last map will have 40 points marked. These are the randomly generated points for the Point count survey of which you will use 15 (explanation to follow)

Please make note of a square or squares that are of interest to you and let me know.

Thanks

Phil Ranson

Cariboo Region Coordinator

BC Breeding Bird Atlas

Bird Sightings from the Williams Lake Area April 17, 2008

The spring thaw has been a busy one around Scout Island this year. The cooler weather has kept the higher elevation lakes frozen solid while Williams Lake has had considerable open water. This has forced migrating waterfowl to find refuge in the Williams Lake valley and has provided great waterfowl viewing.

The first **Common Loon** was reported in floatplane bay on April 5th. The **American White Pelicans** arrived back to the east end of Williams Lake on April 10th. They were also seen flying over Scout Island.

A **Great Blue Heron** arrived back at Scout Island on March 28th. On April 5th the Herons were reported back at the Big Lake rookery.

Trumpeter Swans were first reported flying over Springhouse on Monday February 25th. They didn't arrive at Williams Lake until the following Wednesday when 8 were at the outlet with 9 **Canada Geese**. Another two Swans were flying over still frozen Big Lake on February 29th. The first Canada Geese were 14 seen over Two Mile Flats in Quesnel on February 26th. By March 21st the Trumpeter Swans were departing with only a few remaining. On the other hand the Canada Geese numbers were continuing to increase with a few thousand using the wetlands along Mission Road.

The first week of March was a good week for spring migrants. Lots of new waterfowl arrived at the Williams Lake outlet. A Common Merganser March 2nd, a male Barrow's Goldeneye on March 5th. By March 8th Bufflehead, several Pintail and a Ring-necked Duck had arrived. These



Eurasian Green-winged Teal

were on March 9th with a pair of Canvasback and a flock of Wigeon containing a couple of male Eurasian Wigeon. The first **Wood Duck** arrived back on March 21st along with the first. The highlight on March 23rd was the discovery of a **Eurasian Green-winged** or '**Common**' Teal. This bird is very similar to the American Green-winged except it has a white bar on the flank (see picture provided by Phil) in place of the vertical white shoulder crescent of the American. A closer look at the head will reveal a prominent buffy outline to the green face patch not as evident in the American. On March 27th there were about 800-1000



Hybrid Wigeon

American Wigeon grazing below the cattle pens on Mission Road. Included in the flock were anywhere from 14 - 19 male **Eurasian Wigeon**. Also 3 male Eurasian Wigeon at Scout Island including this hybrid. Kris has sent a good comparison picture of **Greater and Lesser Scaup** taken on April 4th. Note that the crown peaks well after the eye on



Greater and Lesser Scaup

the Lesser (which also shows a notch) and over or before the eye on the Greater. This difference is best used when the birds are at rest; when diving the crowns can be flattened. Kris found an unlikely migrant: "Janet and I were skiing around Scout Island on the morning of February 24th about 11:00 am and on the way back around the east end on the north side before the footbridge I saw a bird head in the ski track. It was a poor weak female Lesser Scaup". The bird was sent to rehab.

On March 2nd it was reported that the Fox Mountain **Merlin** had arrived back. It was busy checking out nesting sites again. A winter with a squirrel free feeder to the Merlin's tenacity and they are welcomed back. The Rose Lake Merlin arrived back on March 12th. The pair was observed mating on April 10th. They have been busy putting the run on a pair of crows that were hoping to build a nest in a neighbours spruce tree.

On March 10th a very early flock of 50 **Sandhill Cranes** flew over Pine Valley heading North West. By April 11th local Sandhill cranes were starting to return to traditional nesting areas.

On March 28th a **Red-breasted Sapsucker** was reported in a North Lakeside yard. A **Say's Phoebe** was calling from the sagebrush below the Dog Creek Bluffs on March 2nd. On February 24th a **Horned Lark** was at the Loran site on highway 20 and another five on a small bare patch of grassland above Farwell Canyon. Lee sent along a photo of one of the Big Lake **Blue Jays** taken on March 28th. Lee's brother is feeding them peanuts. These birds will make a nice record for the breeding bird Atlas.



Big Lake Blue Jay

Tom in 100 Mile House also has a **hybrid Chickadee** at his feeder that appears to be Mountain crossed with a Boreal Chickadee.

The first four male **Mountain Bluebirds** were found on Mission road on March 8th. By February 29th Robins were reported to be widely dispersing in the area. On March 14th a **Spotted Towhee** arrived at a North lakeside feeder. **Red-winged Blackbirds** were reported on the move as early as February 24th with singing birds reported by Charlene at Big Lake, Beverly at Springhouse and Lynn above South Lakeside. The first **Western Meadowlark** was reported at Scout Island on March 5th. On the following Saturday several were heard singing along Mission Road.

A flock of forty **Rosy Finches** were feeding on a roadside cut at Riske Creek on February 24th. A male **Cassin's Finch** at an 11th Avenue yard became the target of an unsuccessful Sharp-shinned Hawk attack on March 2nd. A few **Common Redpolls** a lingering behind. At Rose Lake a dozen still come to the feeder each morning.

Jim Sims

Field Trip List 2008

Alkali Lake April 20th trip leader Fred McMechan (392-7680)

Meet at Scout Island Nature Centre at 9:00am to arrange car pooling. Enjoy this annual field trip to view bird species along the road to Alkali Lake. Be sure to bring a lunch with hot beverage, your binoculars or spotting scope. Birding will be done from the road so expect minimal walking.

Chilanko Marsh May 17th trip leader Jim Sims (296-3638)

Meet at Puntzi Lake Tanker Base at 9:30 am on Saturday morning (allow a minimum of 2 hours driving time from Williams Lake) or contact Jim if you want to meet him at the marsh on Friday night and camp out for the night. This is an annual species count conducted on the marsh and the surrounding riparian zone. The marsh provides an opportunity to see most of the water fowl that are summer residents on Chilcotin lakes and marshes. Join us for a casual day long walk around the ponds as we search out the variety of bird species around the marsh. Following the birding you are welcome to gather at Jim's Eagle Lake cabin for Saturday night. There will be a pot luck supper Saturday evening and a pancake breakfast Sunday morning. Please call Jim for more details if you plan on participating. I have included the full traditional schedule in this description. If my health deteriorates in the spring the plans may alter announcements will be made close to the event.

Churn Creek Grasslands May 31st Ordell Steen (398-5017)

Hike through grasslands to spectacular overlooks of Churn Creek canyon. View spring plants, birds, dramatic geological formations, and a sagebrush ecosystem altered by a prescribed fire. Meet at 7:00 a.m. at Scout Island Nature Centre. Bring plenty of water and a lunch.

San Jose River June 6th Margaret Waring (398-7724) or Rick Dawson (392-3370)

This is an evening paddle and picnic up the San Jose River at the East end of Williams Lake.

This area is thick with interesting birds, some aquatic mammals and luscious vegetation. Meet at Scout Island with your boat, PFDs and picnic supper at 6:00 pm.

Saline Ponds on Becher's Prairie June 11th Sue Hemphill (398-8532)

Please meet at 5pm at Scout Island to arrange car pooling. Eat before you leave or bring a supper with you. This will be a late evening trip to study the Saline Pond plants and birds

Birding in the Williams Lake River Valley June 15th Phil Ranson (398-7110)

Meet at 8:00am in the lower parking lot. Join with Phil for a morning walk in the river valley. Learn some of the bird songs of the many birds that will be nesting in the valley at this time of the year.

Early Morning Birding at Scout Island Nature Centre June 22nd Cathy Koot (392-4250)

Meet at the Nature Centre at 8:00 am and join Cathy for a morning walk around the Nature Centre and an opportunity to identify the many different species that will be nesting there.

Eureka Peak July 26th Sue Hemphill and Jurgen Homburg (398-8532)

Meet at the Horsefly Bridge at 8:00am. Join Sue and Jurgen for a hike into the alpine on the north end of Eureka Peak located in the Cariboo Mountains near the headwaters of the Horsefly River. There will be an elevation gain of close to 1500 feet so be prepared for a healthy hike. This trip is planned to coincide with the peak of the alpine flower season so bring your plant book to help with identification. The steeper East side of the Eureka ridge is home to a large mountain goat herd and they can often be seen from the top of the ridge. Be sure to pack a hearty lunch and trail mix as well as good rain gear as you are in the rain belt of the Cariboo Mountains. Streams on the hike up as well as the plateau are dependent on snow melt and rain fall so you should bring a water bottle. Good foot wear is imperative and gaiters could be an asset as the vegetation will be very deep and most likely wet. The last part of the drive is over rough logging access roads so high clearance vehicles should be used. Car pooling will be arranged at Horsefly. If you wish you are welcome to camp over Saturday night but your guides will most likely be returning home Saturday evening.

Ducks Unlimited Nest-Boxing Aug. 10th Katharine VanSpall (398-7028 daytime) or (392-4447 evening)

Join DU staff member Katharine to check duck nest boxes at a local wetland (TBA). Take a peek inside several boxes to learn what kind of critter has been using them and the fate of duck nests of various species. The day may include: checking & maintaining the boxes, identifying bird eggs & nests, bird-watching, recording the species of animals and plants observed at the wetland, and possibly canoeing or kayaking depending on the interest of the group.

Duck nest-boxes are often found to contain not just duck nests but also nests of swallows, robins, starlings, and kestrels; as well as squirrel "nests" or sign of predators such as mink, marten or bears.

Learn more about the why's and how-to's of duck nest-boxing!

Paddle with the Salmon Sept. 14th Margaret Waring (398-7724) or Rick Dawson (392-3370)
Meet at Scout Island with your canoe/kayak, lunch, PFD and extra clothes at 9:00 am for this “paddle with the salmon” ending at Horsefly bay on Quesnel Lake. It is very neat to be in the river with the salmon and see all of the other life in and around the river at this time. This is mostly a relatively easy drift, but includes a few slightly more exciting stretches that could tip your canoe if not approached correctly. River paddling experience is required for at least one person in each boat.

Hike the South Side of the Chilcotin River to Big Creek September 27th Ordell Steen and Jim Sims (296-3638)

Meet at Scout Island at 7:00am. Join Ordell and Jim for a Fall hike in the grasslands. We will start at Farwell Canyon and hike up river to Big Creek. The trip starts with a steep climb up from the valley floor. Bring your lunch and water bottle and enjoy the amazing views along the way.

Junction Sheep Range Provincial Park October 19th Fred McMechan (392-7680)

Meet at Scout Island at 8:00am. Bring a lunch, water bottle and you binoculars for this annual day long drive and hike into the park. This will be at the peak of the Big-horned Sheep rut so look forward to seeing the sheep and perhaps you will be lucky and see or hear some head-bu

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WILLIAMS LAKE FIELD NATURALISTS MEMBERSHIP

Name(s): _____

Address: _____

Phone: _____ email _____

Cost: Family membership \$27 _____ Single membership \$22 _____
(Membership cheque made out to Williams Lake Field Naturalists. A charitable receipt will be given)

I have included a donation of _____ to the Scout Island Nature Centre Fund Raising Campaign
(Please provide a separate cheque made out to Scout Island Nature Centre)

Please mail completed form and cheque to:
Williams Lake Field Naturalists - 1305A Borland Road - Williams Lake, BC - V2G 5K5