

# MUSKRAT EXPRESS

WILLIAMS LAKE FIELD NATURALISTS  
APRIL 2011 NEWSLETTER





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

**Membership fees:** Family (\$30), single (\$25) or student (\$10) memberships can be mailed to the above address. Please complete the membership and waiver forms available at the Nature Centre (250) 398-8532, [muskrat@midbc.com](mailto:muskrat@midbc.com) or the web site below. For more information about the club please contact Fred McMechan at 392-7680 or e-mail [Fred\\_McMechan@telus.net](mailto:Fred_McMechan@telus.net)

**Williams Lake Field Naturalists Website** <http://www.williamslakefieldnaturalists.ca>  
**Scout Island Nature Centre Website** <http://www.scoutislandnaturecentre.ca>

**Executive of The Williams Lake Field Naturalists:** president Fred McMechan, vice-president Jim Sims, secretary Ordell Steen, treasurer Katharine VanSpall and directors Nola Daintith, Ordell Steen, 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 (296-3638) or e-mail us at [muskrat@midbc.com](mailto:muskrat@midbc.com)

## **Annual Scout Island Nature Centre Banquet Report**

On April 8<sup>th</sup> we celebrated another grand banquet. Unfortunately we missed some of you and hopefully we will see you back next year. By the way we did enjoy eating your dessert and Joanne even handed out the odd goodie bag of leftovers. Thanks to Fred for keeping us entertained, to Anna for the lovely bouquets, to the United Church for hosting us, to Carl for his news from “The Nature Trust” and to Rob for providing a chance to be “Optimistic for the Future”.

Sage Birchwater has provided a great description of the evening along with some awesome photos at <http://welcometowilliamslake.ca/index.php/events/local-events/3453-nature-trust-of-bc.html>



**Photo by Sage**

Rob has also provided his reflections on the values of Scout Island at <http://communities.canada.com/vancouver/blogs/birdwatch/default.aspx>

## **SPRING YARD AND GARDEN SALE**

Saturday May 7<sup>th</sup> is the date set for the 2011 Sale

It is Spring Yard and Garden Sale time and I hope you can help. The money we earn goes toward a bursary for a graduating secondary school student in Williams Lake and education programs at Scout Island.

**HOW CAN YOU HELP?** You could clean and clear shelves, closets, cupboards and basements, searching for and gathering treasures to donate for others to purchase! Contributions to sales have included baking, unique and useable clothing, outdoor and camping equipment, books and videos and CDs and DVDs, dishes and kitchen equipment, gardening supplies, tools, pictures, toys, and whatever you no longer use or want and think someone else might! Seedlings, bedding plants are popular. Try dividing some of your perennial plants as the ground thaws! Both plants and manure have proven top sellers!

**Donations for the sale are dropped off at the Nature Centre on Friday Evening May 6th**

**If you would like to help at the sale or have any questions please contact me (Margaret Waring) at 250 398 7724.**

### **BC Nature Spring Conference and AGM Notes**

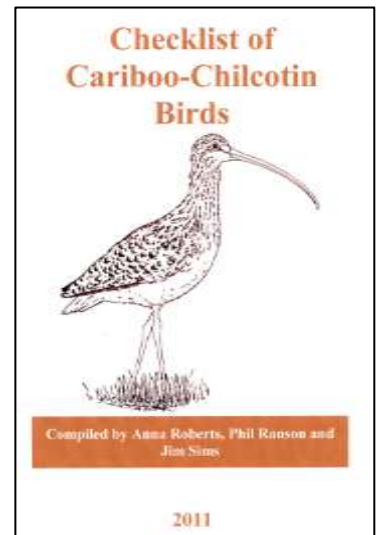
By: Fred

In the few weeks before this event we will be busy completing the planning and coordination of the variety of services which will be provided. Thank you to all our members who have been involved with committees, and who have volunteered to be presenters and field trip leaders.

Registrations have been coming in, especially in the last part of March and the first part of April. Early registration took place until April 8. Registration may also occur after this date by completing the registration form and sending in the payment by cheque to: Williams Lake Field Naturalists, BC Nature AGM , 1305A Borland Road, Williams Lake BC, V2G 5K5.

### **Cariboo Chilcotin Checklist of Birds**

The new edition of our checklist is now in the hands of the publisher and may be available by the middle of next week. It will be on sale for \$3.00 at the Nature Centre. A .pdf copy of the document is available from Jim and I hope it will soon be available on our web site. The last checklist was produced in 1992 and had 288 species. The new checklist has 310. The new checklist has been produced with the aid of a computer program and the data can be updated at any time. Phil has already threatened to change a few of the dates given this year's arrivals. An electronic version of the checklist is also available. The computer program features a photo gallery of local photos with description details, a sample bird call, a comment for each species and all of the information in the booklet. The program can also create a word document copy of the checklist booklet.



Thanks to Wayne Campbell for his advice on the booklet, to Anna for all her efforts to make sure Phil and I got it right and for producing the original checklist that was the source of the majority of the data, to Phil for updating the data and adding the comments and tolerating my many visits to install program corrections and to many birders from throughout the Cariboo Chilcotin for providing their bird sightings. We are still looking for more photos for the electronic checklist so please keep them coming. They can be sent to Phil along with your bird sighting reports.

### Scout Island Nature Centre Report April

Spring is showing everywhere at Scout Island. The lake is noisy with returning and migrating ducks and gulls. Even a heron is trying to find food in the still, very cold water. The birds at the feeder are pure entertainment while we eat our lunch.

Twelve curious and energetic children took part in the Spring Break program March 15-17. The weather cooperated and we spent most of each day outside. We watched birds at the feeders, fed the ants on the ant hills, did worm experiments (the head is the most sensitive and the middle the least sensitive), used fox walking to sneak up on each other, explored every trail and played lots of games. The favorite activity (apple for the day) by far was climbing under the island bridge to fetch sticks and throwing them off the bridge. Everyone's onion (least favorite thing about the day) on the last day was that it was the last day.

One set of brothers announced to their mother that they were staying at the Nature Centre for the night. Children do need to be outside playing and we are working to spread this message in many ways. Do you remember the great Katimavik volunteers we had for 6 years. Maxine Guillemette, who volunteered with us in 2008, came back to help with the spring break program.



**Spring Break Children gather to see what Sue has found**

A wonderful crew of volunteers completed another new section of boardwalk on the Willow Trail. This should mean that the trail will be "walkable" even at high water this spring. The funding for this section also came from TD Friends of the Environment Foundation. They are great partners as we repair the trails. If you are banking with TD on April 21, say hi. We will have a display in the bank that day. On a not so pleasant note, the island suffered some vandalism last weekend. Two benches, a sign and some railings were smashed. Fred cleaned it up quickly so as to not encourage others to try such a stunt. Keep your eyes open when you are walking at Scout Island as that what helps to keep the area safe.



**Ray, Fred, Jim and Roger Ready to leave after the first day's work is done**

Speaking of volunteers, I have been having some great high school students in helping. They are painting, building new quizzes, and helping to take care of the live creatures. These students are working on creating a new display related to the Marsh web of life. You should stop in and see this early in May and greet the new summer staff. There will be four university students starting May 2 (Ian Higgins, Milana Cecco, Kacie Young, and Connor Dolighan). These young people will begin the spring school programs that first week.



If you would like to see the Scout Island nature Centre 2010 annual report including the financial statement, please go to the website. It will be posted there soon.  
[www.scoutislandnaturecentre.ca](http://www.scoutislandnaturecentre.ca)

## **Quesnel Climate Action Group Holds Regional Forum**

WLFN members Lisa Bland, Richard Case, Mary Forbes, Marg Evans and Jenny Noble attended an inspiring forum in Quesnel on April 9. Interested participants from Prince George to 100 Mile House gathered to consider our communities' preparedness for the inevitable changes already taking shape due to declining fossil fuel supplies.

Keynote speaker Tamara SunSong of the Victoria Transition Town group outlined the evidence for and impacts of peak oil, then described the pro-active process that many communities around the world have begun via the Transition Towns movement. Basically, Transition Towns are communities in which a critical mass of citizens have agreed to start preparing for the new realities of prohibitively expensive transportation, scarcity of supplies and disintegrating economies.

Tamara outlined the process of becoming an official Transition Town as a format for building resilience. That process is very flexible and encourages communities to design their own projects based on local conditions and the passions of the people involved. Many communities choose to address food security as one of their first priorities, but energy self-sufficiency, local economies, and transportation alternatives are popular initiatives as well. Take a look at [www.transitionnetwork.org](http://www.transitionnetwork.org) or google transition towns for more info.

After a bag lunch break (with optional political discussion with NDP and Green candidates) local groups summarized their relevant activities. This segment really opened our eyes to just how much is going on to make this region more resilient. Williams Lake was well represented by the Conservation Society and Potato House Society, but unfortunately the Food Policy Council wasn't able to be present.

Break-out groups then met to brainstorm next steps and reported back to the whole group. A well-organized and information-packed day sent everyone away with lots to think about. The Williams Lake participants decided to meet the following week to discuss how we go forward from here.

Richard Case [rcase@laketown.net](mailto:rcase@laketown.net). He's been instrumental in presenting awareness films and bringing the Transition Town concept forward. If you are concerned about the future and want to get involved in doing something about it, he'd like to hear from you.

## **Two more Owl myths From Canadian Wildlife March/April 2010**

**Myth: Owls can pinpoint the location of a sound with unmatched accuracy.**

**Reality: While owls have excellent pinpointing abilities, humans are actually better.**

Owls have long been believed capable of pinpointing the sound of prey and zeroing in on it, a capacity that relies on two sources of auditory information: the difference in the loudness perceived by each ear and the time lag between when a sound reaches one ear as opposed to the other. Generally, when the loudness of a sound is the same in both ears and there is no time difference between your right and left side, the sound is directly on front of you or directly behind you. The perception pinpoints the sound in the horizontal plane; humans can do this with

an accuracy of within one degree. Then there's the vertical plane, which helps us determine whether the sound is coming from a high or low position.

Researchers tested a trained barn owl in complete darkness, and found it could pinpoint the source of a sound with an accuracy of within two degrees in the horizontal plane and four degrees in the vertical plane. It located sounds and frequencies between 7,000 and 8,000 Hz most accurately. As remarkable as this capability may seem, humans are actually able to pinpoint the horizontal position of sound within one degree and the vertical position within roughly two degrees. The greater distance between the openings of our ears may give us an advantage over owls.

**Myth: Owls have extremely sharp eyesight, enabling them to see in the dark.**

**Reality: Thanks to the wide dilation of their pupils, owls do see well in low light.**

Now that we've established that owls have good but not super naturally good hearing, let's take a look at their powers of sight. When people see owls flying at night, they often assume these birds have extraordinary nocturnal vision far beyond that of diurnal birds and humans. Once again, the truth is filled with unexpected surprises.

The main reason we find the darkness so hard to handle isn't because we are physiologically incapable of seeing in low light, but because we never give ourselves enough time to allow our eyes to fully adapt to their full nocturnal potential. The high levels of light produced by lamps and ceiling fixtures blanch out the sensitive cells, called rods, in the retina at the rear of our eyeballs. If you step outside where there are no lights, it takes time for the rods of the retina to recover and regain sensitivity before you can see well again.

Researcher Graham Martin was curious about the sensitivity of an owl's eyes to the dark of nighttime. He spent many months training European tawny owls, a close relative of the North American barred owl, to respond to visual stimuli of different strengths in exchange for a food reward. He determined that the visual sensitivity of the owl was about 100 times greater than that of the pigeon, but only 2-3 times greater than the average human. Furthermore, since visual sensitivity in the human population varies, Martin concluded that some individual humans may have more sensitive eyes than some individual tawny owls. Owls' eyes are so sensitive to low-level light because their pupils can dilate more than they can in a human eye. The larger pupil size logically projects a brighter image on the owl's retina.



Barred Owl (photo by Dave Dickson)

## Sagebrush Buttercup

By Jim Sims

Most of us are wandering around Scout Island looking up to see if we can find a new bird species for 2011 but maybe we should spend some of that time looking down at the ground. Anna shared with me that the Sage-brush Buttercup is now in bloom in the grassland native plants garden at Scout Island. Anna has gathered grass lands plant and used them to create a grasslands garden at Scout Island. She located the garden on some disturbed soil that was a result of the creation of the wheel-chair trail that connects the Nature House with the parking lot near the boat launch. As each plant produces blooms she identifies it with a small sign. Next time you visit why not spend some time checking out this wonderful feature of Scout Island.



This Buttercup is one of the early flowering species. The yellow petals of the perennial Sagebrush Buttercup are 4 to 15 mm. The basal leaves are 2 to 5 cm and are often shallow 3 lobed. The stem leaves are entire or 2 to 3 lobed. The stems are rarely greater than 15 cm. It is usually found in open areas, sagebrush, meadows, and grasslands to rocky soil in conifer forests, generally in well-drained soil. The buttercup is toxic to eat (including to horses and livestock), and can cause mild burning or blistering skin if handled. The Okanagan-Colville Indians of the Pacific Northwest used sagebrush buttercups placed on a piece of meat as poisoned bait for coyotes, and rubbed flowers or whole plants on arrow points as a poison. The toxin is unstable, and destroyed by boiling or drying.

Children all over the world play the "Do you like butter?" game, checking if the golden yellow flowers reflect off their pals' chins. Please don't test this with Anna's flowers!



## Spring Bird Sightings from the Williams Lake Area

By: Phil Ranson

As might be expected, many bird species are a little late in returning but despite the weather the urge to migrate is filling the open water at Williams Lake with good numbers of waterfowl and geese are already sitting on their nests.

Some recent sightings of particular interest at Scout Island include a Eurasian Collared Dove seen by Kris in the dead Ponderosa Pines on April 12th. This is the first report for the island for this species which is rapidly expanding into central and northern BC. From the first sighting in this area on May 5, 2008, the Collared Dove was believed to have nested at Alkali Lake last year and one was reported on the Narcosli Christmas Bird Count last winter. How far and rapidly the expansion will proceed is unclear as is the effect this will have on other species with which it



shares habitat.

Visitors from Asia are also becoming a regular part of our spring avifauna with Eurasian Wigeon showing up increasingly regularly at Scout Island with the first flocks of American Wigeon. Hybrids of these species can also be seen leading to speculation that Eurasian Wigeon must now be breeding within the continent and possibly within the Cariboo Chilcotin. Males have been seen in the 100 Mile area and the Chilcotin well into the breeding season. Despite the increasing number of spring sightings, there are very few fall observations suggesting that these birds must take an alternate route in fall migration.

Likewise, Eurasian Green-winged Teal have appeared twice this spring with one in the oxbows in the Williams Lake River Valley and another recent bird in the Scout Island marsh on April 12. Aside from the obvious field mark of the lack of white vertical shoulder crescent, replaced by a horizontal white stripe in the Eurasian, other more subtle plumage difference can be noted if the bird is viewed closely as was the river valley individual. The thin yellow border to the green eye stripe is quite prominent in the Eurasian, extending down to the bill and the plain gray breast and flanks of the American Green-winged Teal are replaced by chequered gray vermiculations. A bird showing traces of both types of plumages was believed to be a hybrid was at Alkali Lake on March 20.



American and Eurasian Green-winged Teal

## Williams Lake Field Naturalist 2011 Field Trip List

**Alkali Lake** April 17<sup>th</sup> 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.

**Three Wednesday Evening “hump-day holidays” Recreation Trips** May 4, May 18 and June 8 trip leaders Rick Dawson (392-3370) and Margaret Waring (398-7724)

Meet at 6:00 pm at Scout Island with the essential gear for each of the following activities. These three evenings will feature easy recreational outings using three different modes of movement, biking for the first trip, walking on the second, and lake paddling on the third. On the May 4<sup>th</sup> bike trip, after meeting at Scout Island, we drive down to the last parking lot in the Williams lake Creek Valley. From there we will bike down to the Fraser River and back looking at the birds and trees on the way. On May 18<sup>th</sup> walk the trail along the rim of Fox Mountain. On June 8<sup>th</sup> voyageur canoe paddle at Rose Lake.

**Chilanko Marsh** May 20<sup>th</sup> to 22<sup>nd</sup> 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. Bring a tent or camper as there is limited space available (the sauna will be warmed up). There will be a pot luck supper Saturday evening and a pancake breakfast Sunday morning. Sunday we will take a walk along the shore of Martin Lake. Please call Jim for more details if you plan on participating.

**Birds at Scout Island** June 5<sup>th</sup> trip leader Cathy Koot (392-4250)

Join Cathy for an early morning of birding at Scout Island from 7:30 to 10:00. Scout Island is home to some of the best birding opportunities in the Cariboo Chilcotin so take advantage of this opportunity to identify and learn more about our local birds. Beginners are welcome.

**Birding in the Williams Lake River Valley** June 12<sup>th</sup> Phil Ranson (398-7110)

Meet at 8:00am in the lower parking lot (Frizzi Road past the transfer site and down into the river valley). 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.

**Niut day hike** July 24<sup>th</sup> lead by Jim Sims (296-3638)

Hike to the alpine on a recently renovated trail (Butler Ridge Trail) on the north end of The Niut Range overlooking the West Branch of the Hornathko River. Please meet at the Horn Lake Recreation Site at 9:00 am sharp on Saturday morning. There will be a short stretch of steep road that may require high clearance but will not need 4 wheel drive. The hike is on a new fairly well marked trail that leads to the ridge top. The trail gains about 2000 feet in elevation and is a steady uphill hike. Bring a hearty lunch with extra snacks, good hiking boots, binoculars camera sunglasses and screen as well as rain gear. Walking sticks are a great asset especially for the long trip down. You may want to turn it into a camping weekend. There are lots of recreation campsites in the area that could be used if you wish to camp out on Friday or Saturday nights.

**Due to the difficult nature of this hike we require that you register by phoning Jim or email the Muskrat.**

**Eureka Peak** Saturday Aug 13<sup>th</sup> 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 be returning home Saturday evening. **Please phone or email the Muskrat to register so you can be informed if a change must be made.**

**Grassland riparian hike** August 28<sup>th</sup> Ordell Steen (398-5017)

This will be a short hike on the grasslands south of the junction of the Chilcotin and Fraser rivers along the west side of the Fraser (the old River Ranch). It will include a stop at an ancient pithouse village site with several house pits and a hike down along a deciduous tree-shrub riparian area through the grasslands to the Fraser River. All or only a portion of the hike can be done as we will return by the same route. The area will be accessed through Farwell Canyon and by the Poison Lake road, which will probably require high clearance vehicles. Meet at the Nature Centre at 7:30 a.m. Contact Ordell Steen (250-398-5017) if you require additional information.

**Junction Sheep Range Provincial Park** October 22<sup>nd</sup> Fred McMechan (392-7680)

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