

MUSKRAT EXPRESS

WILLIAMS LAKE FIELD NATURALISTS
JANUARY 2013 NEWSLETTER

FEB 9TH

FIELD TRIP + POTLUCK
SNOW + STAR OUTING
2 PM

★
★
★
ASTRONOMY NIGHT
SINC
JAN 26 6PM



FEB 6 PRESENTATION BY WYATT KLOPP

MTN PINE BEETLE - CLIMATE CHANGE + THE
RISING BIOENERGY SECTOR



Where have all
the pine trees gone?
The young beetles ate them
every one.
Where have all the pine
beetles gone? ...





The MUSKRAT EXPRESS

JANUARY 18, 2013

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, muskratexpress@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

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, 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 muskratexpress@midbc.com

2013 Fees

Thanks to all of you who have been on time with the payment of your fees for 2013. This has been a great help to all of us responsible for sorting out the membership. If you have been negligent this is a friendly reminder that the 2013 membership fees are now overdue. When paying your fees please be certain to complete the membership forms that were provided with the December 2012 newsletter, or can be obtained from the Nature Centre or from the website above.

Astronomy Night

Date: January 26, 2013 from 6:00-8:00pm

Location: Scout Island Nature Centre

Hosted by Young Naturalists Club leader Mary Forbes with guest speakers Lynn and Steve Capling. This is another of the monthly family evenings held at the Nature Centre at the end of each month. Come out and enjoy another evening of star gazing with Steve and Lynn.

Remember to dress warmly!

Mountain Pine Beetle, Climate Change and the Rising Bioenergy Sector

A presentation by **Wyatt Klopp** former SINC summer staff member and currently M.Sc. Candidate Natural Resources and Environmental Studies, *University of Northern British Columbia*

B.Sc. Biology, *University of British Columbia Okanagan*

February 6th at 7:30pm in the Scout Island Nature House

The effects of the most recent mountain pine beetle epidemic is something many BC residents are now all too familiar with...and for good reason. The unprecedented magnitude and severity of the mountain pine beetle attack has, and will continue, to impact society, the economy, and the environment for decades to come. While many recall the 'sea' of red-staged pine stands on the landscape and vulnerability of the forest industry, this presentation will focus on the grey-staged pine stands, their impact on climate change and attempts to strengthen the bioeconomy.



Wyatt working on his research

Snow and Star Field Trip

Saturday Feb. 9 2pm (Horsefly area 1 hour from town)

Meet at Sue and Jurgen's to enjoy the snow--(ski, snow shoe, sled, walk). There will be a potluck at 4pm at Sue's. After the meal we will move to Bill and Maggie's down the road from Sue and Jurgen's. Bill has an observatory set up with two telescopes. If it is a clear night, he will help us enjoy the stars. There is a warming hut for between observation warm ups, but come dressed to keep warm. For more information or directions contact Sue 398-8532/620-3498 or shemphill@midbc.com

Annual Fund Raising Banquet Plans

The 2013 banquet will take place on Friday April 5th at St. Andrews united Church. Our guest speaker will be Briony Penn a naturalist, journalist and educator who has been very involved with "Taking Children Outside", a very timely topic. More details will be provided in the February newsletter.

From Julianne Trelenberg we have notice of the following Young Naturalists events

Great Backyard Bird Count

Date: February 16, 2013 from 1:00-3:00pm

Location: Scout Island Nature Centre

Hosted by YNC Leader Julianne Trelenberg with guest speaker Cathy Coot

Blue Bird Boxes

Date: March 30, 2013 from 1:00-3:00pm

Location: Scout Island Nature Centre

Hosted by YNC Leader Mary Forbes.

45th Williams Lake Christmas Bird Count – December 16, 2012

Submitted by Phil Ranson

A total of 3648 birds of 55 species were counted on December 16th. By Dec 19th, the total had risen to 56 species following confirmation of a bird never before recorded on a Christmas bird count anywhere in Canada. The only counts reporting the species so far this year are Reserva El

Jaguar, Nicaragua and Williams Lake BC.

But first, a report written the day after the count.....

We had 31 people in the field and received 15 feeder reports. We had fairly wide coverage of the key areas but of the 450 sq km count area it's probably only realistic to census about 20% with the remainder mostly inaccessible plateau forest. For a change we managed to sandwich in a good weather day between snow and wind.

I don't think many claimed to have had a banner day but the total is above our 10 year average of 53. Inexplicably, we were nearly one thousand birds down on last year when we only had 49 species (a little more analysis would probably reveal something) and down on the 10 year average of 4150 birds.

We didn't find the Snowy Owl which had been at Scout Island and S. Lakeside a couple of days before but it did make the 'count week' list. There were 7 other species that got this consolation prize, mostly water birds which decided to get while the going was good. The lake was about 30-40% open but the ice on the ends had pushed in quite a bit overnight and it contained few birds. A couple of Greater Scaup were only the second time on the count but most of our duck species were found on the river, sewage lagoons or ponds below the lower parking lot. 20 Green-winged Teal were a count high on the river.

There were no new species on the count but a Chestnut-backed Chickadee and White-breasted Nuthatch at a Fetter's Drive feeder rarely make the list, as does the Fox Sparrow at the Scout Island feeder. Other 45 year count highs were (unfortunately) Rock Pigeons and House Sparrows, and 10 Snipe equaled their best. Without doubt the most unusual find of the day was 64 American Tree Sparrows found by Cathy at Sugarcane. This aggregation was a BC count high with possible contenders, Oliver-Osoyoos only managing 20. There were no real bad misses but this was only the 5th time we haven't had Ruffed Grouse.

The assessment of the most unusual find of the day was about to change!

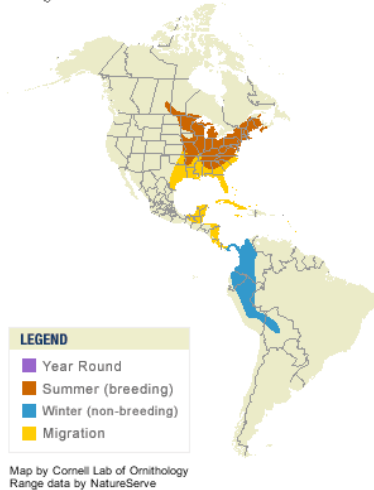
At the post-count gathering, Fred took a feeder report from Marion Corless at Terra Ridge who reported an unusual bird in her mountain ash tree, and could someone call her. I phoned the next day and Marion described a bird similar to, but larger than a winter Goldfinch. She had a camera ready by the window and she would let me know if she saw it again. She phoned on the evening of the 18th and said the bird had returned and thought it was a Western Tanager – but with some red feathers in the tail. The next morning with high winds and blowing snow I showed up at #68 Terra Ridge with little expectation of seeing the bird. Marion, who is a very sharp 91 years old, had her field guides out and was scrutinizing all the tanager species but kept returning to the Scarlet Tanager. I could only suspect she noted my mild amusement. As I headed back to my vehicle to pick up binoculars and camera, a tanager dropped down from the upper level town houses, between the buildings and into the mountain ash – and it wasn't a Western. After many anxious moments when the bird would disappear for 10



The Scarlet Tanager at Marion's Feeder
Photo by Rita Proulx

minutes or more and then return, I was finally able to get a good look - dark wings, no wing-bars, large bill and tellingly, a faint red wash to the under and upper tail coverts. I went back to Marion's door to tell her I had seen it and it was a **Scarlet Tanager**. "Well that's what I told you," she replied.

Scarlet Tanager
Piranga olivacea



To confirm how rare this is here is a distribution map for the Scarlet Tanager taken from www.allaboutbirds.org (The Cornell Lab of Ornithology). The map shows that they should not even be in British Columbia or even Alberta during the summer months and that it should have been spending Christmas in South America.

You might also be wondering why this bird is called the **Scarlet** Tanager after all Rita's photo shows a fairly drab yellow coloured Tanager. This is what you would see if you were visiting southern Ontario in July and you found a breeding male Scarlet Tanager (again taken from www.allaboutbirds.org).



The full tally of the birds observed during the count is included at the end of the newsletter.

Missed the January 8th Film Night?



Spirit Bear from "SPOIL" video

Both of the films presented on the Northern Gateway Pipeline Proposal are worth viewing. "SPOIL" is an absolutely stunning film featuring photography by some of the world's most famous wildlife photographers. It is worth watching just for the photography but hopefully you will also get the message. The video can be viewed on line via this youtube site www.youtube.com/watch?v=S3bKmz4od3g. The other video "On the Line" follows the travels of Frank Wolf and his friend Todd McGowan as they bike, hike and kayak the route of the pipeline from the oil fields of Alberta to Kitimat. This video is available in DVD format from the Nature Centre. You can arrange to view the DVD by contacting Sue or Fred.

Do you have a lovely photo taken at Scout Island Nature Centre?

Please consider sharing the use of some of your eye-catching photos for use on Scout Island Nature Centre greeting cards. Small batches of cards are printed for use by the Nature Centre, and are available for sale at the Nature House as well. Photographer's names will be acknowledged for all photos used. We are seeking digital images of animals, plants, people enjoying nature, and scenery in different seasons and locations throughout the various habitats. Please email your photo(s) (do not reduce the file size please) to cathykoot@telus.net. This is an on-going project, so please keep us in mind as you take photos in future. Thanks from Cathy!

Scout Island Nature Centre Report

By Sue Hemphill

December started out with the annual Earth Friendly Holiday Event. The Nature house was hopping with people of all ages making wreathes from rags or from all the natural vegetation that was collected, doing bark art, painting bird feeders, and more. There was a special children's corner, where children could make gifts in secret and then wrap them. We stretched the event over Friday evening and all day Saturday. To keep everyone's energy up there was food donated by individuals and the Food Coop. We have to say thank-you to all the volunteers from the Field Naturalists, Cariboo Chilcotin Conservation Society and the Williams Lake



An Artistic Bird Feeder



One of Jurgen's awesome feeders following the application of decorations.

Environmental Society for making this "Healthy by Nature" event a great success. I would like to give a special thank-you to Jurgen Hornburg who cut out 30 bird feeders and Dave Bannister who assembled all of them. The people who painted them and the birds that will feed from them will enjoy these art pieces. If you have a favorite "holiday" craft idea and would like to help others do it for our 2013 Green Holiday Event, contact me. We are always looking for new craft ideas that use recycled materials or natural materials. I also can't forget to thank Shary Stephen and Rick Dawson for the wonderfully clean windows at the Nature House. The winter sunshine has never been so bright!

The rest of December was quiet, but the action has started again. The great snow we have now is perfect for our "Snow Fun" programs and classes are already booking. I hope the snow stays. We will be offering programs at the Nature Centre and at the schools. If you know teachers or leaders of community groups that want to have a winter nature program, send them our way. We are offering Snow Fun, Birds in Winter, and Be a Bone Detective.

It is also the time that I start looking for summer staff. Several of last year's staff will be returning, but I will have 1-2 spaces to fill. If you know a university student interested in biology and/or teaching, have him/her send me a resume and a cover letter. They should look at our website to see the school and community programs we offer. That will give them an idea of the work they would be involved in. Have them include a cover letter explaining what skills they have that would help them be a "teacher naturalist" for the Nature Centre.

Here is an idea from Bernd Heinrich's "Winter World"—a most wonderful book. If you want to be reminded that spring really will come, try this. Starting now and through March, pick some twigs of trees and shrubs and bring them home. Stick them in a jar of water. The buds will be coaxed to open (forced) way before they would out in the cold. Twigs of aspen, cottonwood and willow will flower and shed their pollen and then beautiful bright green leaves will come out. If you get twigs from a soapberry, you will get the beautiful tiny green flowers. An added bonus will be the delightful spring smells that will fill the room you have them in.

If you are down at Scout Island and it is a quiet day at the Nature House, stop in for a cup of tea

and a sit at the library window. The birds at the feeders are delightful and so close. You may also want to take a look at some of the wonderful books we have. Remember, as members you can borrow them.

Congratulations Sue on the recognition of the outstanding contributions you have made to our community. The environmental programs you provide to the youth of our community are truly inspiring (us old folks benefit from them as well). On December 18th Sue was presented with The Queen Elizabeth II Diamond Jubilee Medal. Well done Sue!

Great Blue Heron

Researched by Jim Sims



Great Blue Heron on SINC loafing log
Photo by Phil Ranson

Back in late December I had an email from a club member asking if the bird she had seen on the ice near Scout Island could have been a Great Blue Heron. I assured her that it was and in fact two Herons were recorded during the 2012 Christmas Bird Count, the one on the ice at Scout Island as well as the one that Fred and I had seen below the ponds in the lower creek valley. During the week between Christmas and New Year's my sister and I were walking along Allpress road at Rose Lake when we looked up at a Crow that was calling as it flew overhead. Another bird caught our eye as it flew over some trees that blocked its full view. When it flew out into the open it was another Great Blue Heron. It squawked at us once and then continued on its way flying west looking for some open water. The relative frequency graph for the Heron taken from the Checklist of Cariboo Chilcotin Birds shows the Heron is a rare visitor



(thinnest solid line 1 to 6 birds) through December and from January to mid-March is occasional (dotted line more than 6 reports but not every year). During the winters of 1970, 1973 and 1974 Herons were reported throughout the winter in the Williams Lake Creek Valley.

Great Blue Herons are colony (rookery) nesters and we have a few of their colonies within the region. The rookery is most often located high off the ground in trees, where large stick nests are constructed. These Rookeries will usually have more than 20 nests. One of these rookeries is located at Big Lake on the property of Maureen and Ordie Jones. I talked with Maureen and she provided me with this description of the activity around the rookery.

“In the spring of 2012 fifteen birds returned on April 15th. This return was earlier than normal, perhaps due to some warmer weather we had in early April. A couple of days later the numbers increased to over 50 and after that a few more returned each day until there were enough to occupy the approximately 60 nests. From the first return the colony is a very busy and very, very noisy site. Last year's young attempt to take over the natal nest but their parents want it for themselves so they aggressively drive off the young birds until they give up and find a nearby tree to start their our nest. Each year the adults will do some nest restoration and branches are added to the nest. Branches are removed from the tree in the vicinity of the nest to provide a clear flight to the nest and to provide a better view of approaching predators. If the nest fails the adults will often attempt another brood and this can happen as many as three times. Once the

young hatch the colony becomes even louder (24 hours a day) and the call is anything but musical. One of the adults will always remain at the nest while the other is away looking for food. If a predator such as an Eagle is in the area the adult on the nest will give a screeching call that signals the danger and a call for help to Herons feeding close by. These birds quickly return to the rookery and attempt to drive off the intruder. Unfortunately the intruder is often accompanied by a companion. One will distract the defenders while the other sneaks in from behind and grabs a meal. I find a large number of fish heads on the ground. For some reason the young do not eat the heads of the fish. As the young mature they begin to venture out of the nest onto the nearby branches where they begin to spread their wings in preparation for flight. The adults will encourage this by landing on a nearby branch with a mouthful of food. Over the next couple of days the trips in and out of the nest get more ambitious until they eventually fly. The young can then be found along the shore of the lake along with their parents who begin to teach the young how to feed for themselves. This year the colony was abandoned on August 2nd. It is always a relief once the colony is vacated and we can once again hear the singing of the many songbirds in our yard. The rookery was established on our property around 1995. I think it had been on a property that was being subdivided about that time and I think the removal of trees and the construction commotion resulted in the move. I think I have heard from neighbours that there had always been a rookery in the vicinity of Big Lake.”



A young Heron tests its wings while the sibling rests in the nest at the Big Lake Rookery

I found it interesting to note that “The Birds of British Columbia” vol. 1 (publish 1990) does not report any breeding records of Great Blue Heron in the Cariboo Chilcotin region. There would have been a rookery within the region at that time but had not been officially reported. There are other known Rookeries in the region now.

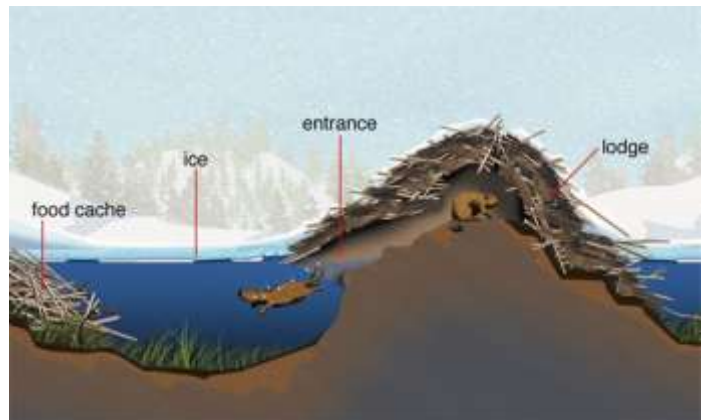
During the summer season Herons can be found in wetlands throughout the region, usually singly. Look for them in marshes, along streams or the shallow shores of lakes. They may be observed wading with very deliberate slow steps or standing as still as a fence post. The flexible neck will often be held in a tight S position either resting or coiled ready to strike if a fish gets too close. A strange sight is to find them roosting on a very small branch of a coniferous tree sometimes in small groups up to a half dozen birds, a very strange place to find such a large bird. When in flight, the Great Blue Heron is often confused with the Sandhill Crane, both are very large birds with slow wing beats and very long legs hanging out behind. However the Great Blue Heron holds its neck in the tight “S” position while flying, holding its head back against the body. In sharp contrast the Sandhill Crane flies with a fully extended very long neck. The Sandhill Cranes are frequently seen in flocks that will be very large during migration. The Heron will usually be a solo flier but may be found in small flocks up to 10 during migration. Maureen reported that the colony is active throughout the night. This is thanks to a high

percentage of rod-type photoreceptors in their eyes that improve their night vision and allows them to continue to hunt for food after nightfall. Great Blue Herons have specialized feathers on their chest that continually grow and fray. The herons comb this “powder down” with a fringed claw on their middle toes, using the down like a washcloth to remove fish slime and other oils from their feathers as they preen. Applying the powder to their under-parts protects their feathers against the slime and oils of swamps. My fly-tying friends would like to get their hands on some of those feathers, but fortunately it is illegal to possess them.

References: Checklist of Cariboo Chilcotin Birds, www.allaboutbirds.org and The Birds of British Columbia Volume 1

Where do all our Beavers go during the winter?

Once the lake freezes over the beaver spends most of its time semi-hibernating within the lodge. We have several beaver lodges around Scout Island. The beaver builds the lodge out of mud and sticks. Inside the lodge there is a dry platform that is above the level of the water in the lake. The lodge provides protection from Wolves and Coyotes during the winter. Most predators find it too difficult to dig through the tangle of mud and branches. The lodge is entered via an underwater tunnel. A food cache of branches will be stored under water close to the lodge. The food cache will be used throughout the winter as the food source for the family. The thick fur



protects the beaver during these winter “polar bear” swims. They also excrete an oil that is rubbed over the fur to help keep the it dry. One should always be careful when walking near a beaver lodge during the winter. The activity of the beaver can often create thin ice near the tunnel into the lodge. This beaver, followed by a kit is bringing food back to the lodge by the bridge to the island. Perhaps these twigs were added to the winter food supply and are now nourishing the family.

The kit was likely born in April or May and learned to swim within 30 minutes of birth. It will stay with the parents, living in the lodge until it is 2 years old. It will then be kicked out and forced to leave the territory of its parents and establish its own lodge.

Beavers are vegetarian and eat non-woody plants such as cattails shoots during the spring and summer. Later in the summer they switch to scrubs and trees. They only eat the bark of the trees. When we look around Scout Island and see all of the chewed up trees we may falsely assume they are eating the woody part of the tree. One reason for chewing up the woody portion of the tree is that their teeth continue to grow throughout their lives and the gnawing wears down the teeth, a requirement for their survival as the large incisors can grow up to 4 feet in one year.

A busy pair of beavers that are building a dam as well as a lodge can take down as many as 400 trees each year. Beavers like us humans are capable of having a very big impact on the environment through the removal of trees, the construction of dams that create ponds and the affect the dam has on the water flow in streams.

Our View of the Night Sky – January-February 2013.

Planet Review

Venus is disappearing into the sunrise. Saturn is now visible near midnight. Jupiter is visible overhead in the early evening in the constellation Taurus and is moving lower to the southwest and west in the later evening.

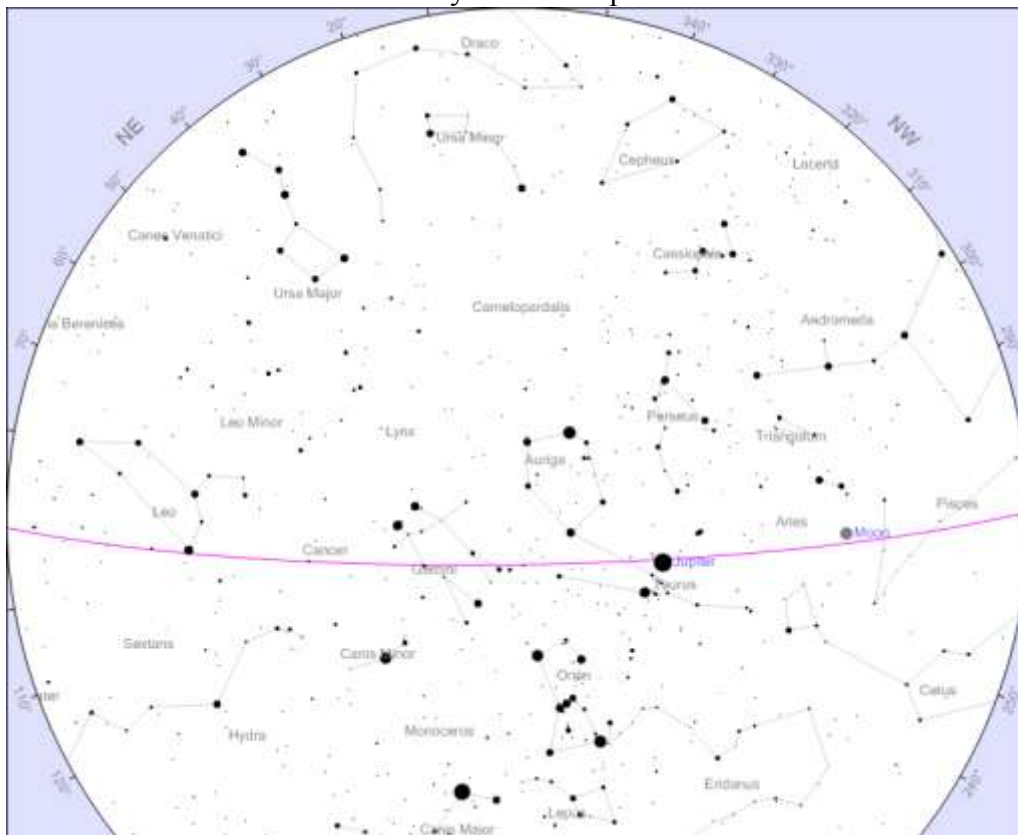
Asteroids 1 Ceres and 4 Vesta are visible near the constellation Taurus. They are dropping in magnitude but are still visible in binocs. For more info check out:

<http://www.skyandtelescope.com/observing/objects/asteroids/Ceres-and-Vesta-July-2013-148149915.html>.

Meteor showers

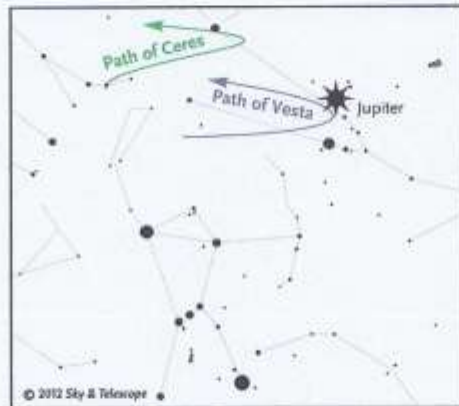
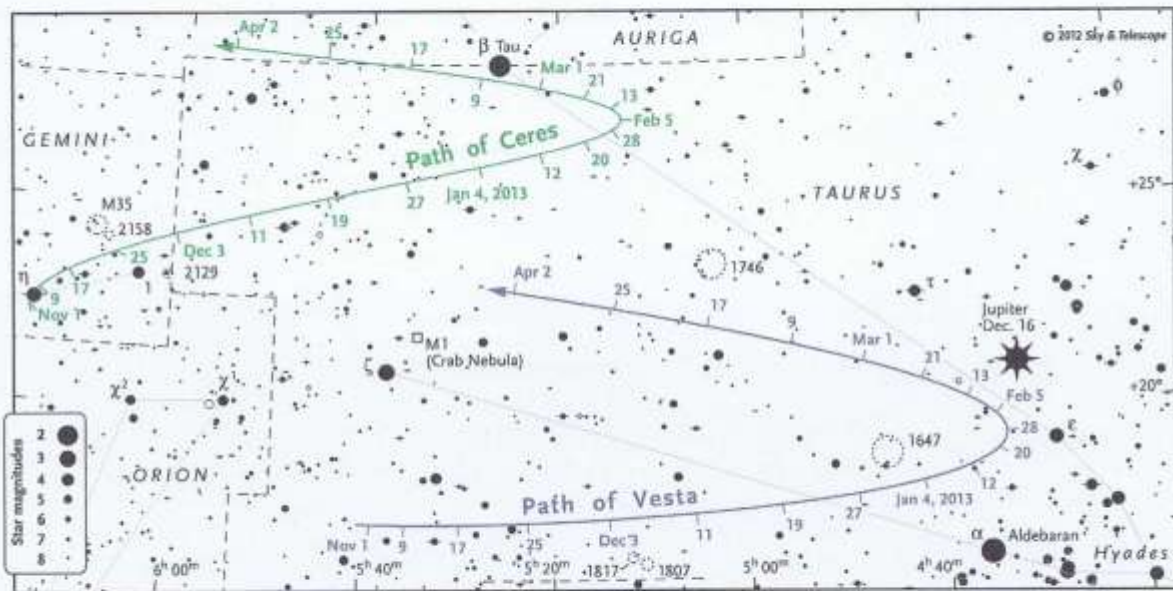
The next forecast meteor shower is the Lyrids on April 22. While not one of the year's strongest showers, and rendered even weaker by strong light from a nearly full Moon, you may see a few meteors per hour emanating from a radiant near the Hercules-Lyra border. As with the Quadrantids, this shower puts on a fairly brief performance - one that this year favors observers across North America, especially those on the West Coast.

February 2013 Star Chart
Set for February 15 at 8:00 p.m. PST



Courtesy of: www.Heavens-Above.com

Ceres and Vesta, November, 2012 – March, 2013



The tick marks are for 0 hours Universal Time on the dates indicated. This moment falls on the evening of the previous date in the time zones of the Americas.

Courtesy of: www.skyandtelescope.com

Thanks to all who have contributed to another Muskrat. A special thanks to Phil for all his efforts in the coordination of all the Christmas Bird Counts and to Maureen Jones for her information on the Heron Rookery. You can expect the next edition in late February. We will feature more details on the banquet and more upcoming programs.

Williams Lake Christmas Bird Count - Dec 16, 2012

Mallard.	112	
Green-winged Teal.	20	CH
Greater Scaup	2	
Common Goldeneye	6	
Hooded Merganser	5	
Great Blue Heron	2	
Bald Eagle.	29	
Northern Harrier	1	
Red-tailed Hawk	2	
Rough-legged Hawk.	4	
Merlin	3	
Wilson's Snipe.	10	=CH
Rock Pigeon	483	CH
Eurasian Collared-Dove	1	
Mourning Dove	2	
Northern Pygmy Owl	4	
Downy Woodpecker.	23	
Hairy Woodpecker.	27	
Northern Flicker	48	
Pileated Woodpecker.	22	
Northern Shrike	1	
Gray Jay.	20	
Steller's Jay	1	
Black-billed Magpie.	10	
American Crow.	399	
Common Raven.	325	
Black-capped Chickadee.	221	
Mountain Chickadee.	222	
Chestnut-backed Chickadee	1	
Red-breasted Nuthatch.	35	
White-breasted Nuthatch	1	
Brown Creeper.	6	
American Dipper.	19	
Townsend's Solitaire.	30	
American Robin	2	
Varied Thrush	1	
European Starling.	44	
Bohemian Waxwing.	298	
Am Tree Sparrow	64	CH
Fox Sparrow	1	
Song Sparrow.	27	

White-throated Sparrow	1	
White-crowned Sparrow	1	
Dark-eyed Junco.	88	
Scarlet Tanager	1	*N*
Red-winged Blackbird.	14	
Brewer's Blackbird	4	
Pine Grosbeak.	61	
Purple Finch	1	
House Finch.	228	
Red Crossbill	1	
Common Redpoll	142	
Pine Siskin	4	
American Goldfinch.	26	
Evening Grosbeak.	1	
House Sparrow.	541	CH
Total Species = 56	3646	

CH Count High, N New to count

Count week species
Trumpeter Swan
American Wigeon
Ring-necked Duck
Barrow's Goldeneye
Ruffed Grouse
Pied-billed Grebe
Western Grebe
Snowy Owl