

# MUSKRAT EXPRESS

WILLIAMS LAKE FIELD NATURALISTS  
JANUARY 2017 NEWSLETTER



**- FEB 18 -**  
FAMILY BACK YARD  
BIRD COUNT  
**- 7PM MARCH 3RD -**  
WHY DO BLUE BIRDS  
LAY BLUE EGGS?  
**- FRI APR. 7<sup>TH</sup> AGM -**  
**- FRI APR. 21<sup>ST</sup> -**  
BANQUET

Will the ice  
crack if I go  
out to clean  
Wood Duck  
Houses?

I'm off to look  
for Blue Birds +  
play outside!



MEW



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@shaw.ca](mailto:muskratexpress@shaw.ca) 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 Christie Mayall, secretary Ordell Steen, treasurer Katharine VanSpall and directors Nola Daintith, Cathy Koot, Peter Opie, Ray Hornby, Brian Chapman, Don Lawrence and Chris Coates



**Editors:** Thanks to all of you who have contributed to this edition of the newsletter. Please expect your next edition of the newsletter near the end of February or early March. As many of you are aware I (Jim) continue to be very busy with the new home I'm building at Eagle Lake. My birding activities have been limited and this has resulted in some difficulty finding a new bird species



with a story to share with all of you. It was many years ago that I started doing these articles and I am beginning to find that the bird I was hoping to feature has already been shared with you in an earlier newsletter. Perhaps some of you can help out with an article of your own and it does not have to be restricted to a bird.

### Family Great Backyard Bird Count at Scout Island – February 18

The annual Great Backyard Count (GBBC) is coming on February 17-20, 2017. On Saturday February 18, 2017 from 10am-12pm local bird expert Cathy Koot and environmental educator Paula Laita will be leading the GBBC event at Scout Island for families and children. We will be learning how to identify the birds at local feeders and the importance of the GBBC as a citizen science event. We will do a short bird ID introduction and count birds at the feeders. We will also have time for a birding walk and games!

This is a FREE Family event that you have to register for as there is limited room. For registration, please call 250-398-8532.

If you don't come to this event, you can still participate counting birds at your own backyard on February 17-20 and submitting the information on the GBBC website: <http://gbbc.birdcount.org/>.

The Great Backyard Bird Count is a joint partnership between Audubon and the Cornell Lab of Ornithology, with Bird Studies Canada as the official Canadian partner. The GBBC is an annual four-day event that engages birdwatchers of all ages across North America in counting birds to create a real-time snapshot of where the birds are. Anyone can participate, from beginners to experts. You can count for as little as 15 minutes on a single day, or for as long as you like each day of the event. It's free, fun, and easy - and it helps the birds!

<http://www.birdscanada.org/volunteer/gbbc/>.



## Why do bluebirds lay blue eggs? *Research on mountain bluebirds in the Alkali Lake and Dog Creek area*

An evening program presented by Jeannine Randall on Friday March 3<sup>rd</sup> at 7:00 pm

Jeannine recently (August 2016) graduated from UNBC with an MSc in Natural Resources and Environmental Studies - Biology. The research that she undertook for this degree was all carried out in grassland/rangeland habitat between Alkali Lake and Dog Creek using Sandy Proulx's nest box trail (with his permission). Her research focused on the ornamental traits of female mountain bluebirds, in particular, whether blue-green eggshell colour might be an informative trait that advertises female condition and investment to their mates.



## AGM, Williams Lake Field Naturalists - Announcement

The Williams Lake Field Naturalists AGM will be held on Friday, April 7, at the Scout Island Nature House. The proposed evening program will include a pot-luck supper, the AGM business meeting and a nature presentation. More details will be provided in the next newsletter.

In the AGM meeting the election of directors will take place. If you wish to volunteer and stand for a position please contact Fred McMechan at 250 392 7680 or by email, [fred\\_mcmechan@telus.net](mailto:fred_mcmechan@telus.net).

## BC Nature Conference/AGM

The BC Nature Conference will be held in Lillooet May 4 to 7. The Lillooet Naturalist Society has organized this event and it will include many interesting field trips and presenters. Details about the registration and the events can be found in the BC Nature spring edition magazine or on the Lillooet Naturalist website, [www.lillooetnaturalistsociety.org](http://www.lillooetnaturalistsociety.org). Registrations have started and over 80 people have already registered. The maximum registration has been set at 200. Some of the field trips are already full. So if you plan to attend you should consider registering soon.

## Scout Island Nature Centre Banquet - Announcement

This fund raising banquet will be held on Friday evening, April 21, in the St, Andrew's United Church. The guest speaker will be Ken McKenzie, a local biologist. The title of his presentation will be "Grouse in the Cariboo – Observations and Speculations" More details on the banquet will follow in the next newsletter.



### Notes from the Executive

By Fred McMechan

The following are highlights from the executive meeting on January 18, 2017:

1. A cheque for \$150 will be donated to Bird Studies Canada for help with the administration of the Christmas Bird Count. Bird Studies Canada is the national organization which coordinates the Christmas Bird Counts throughout Canada
2. The representative to attend and represent our club at the BC Nature Conference in May will be Fred McMechan
3. Our executive decided to support an increase in annual dues to BC Nature of \$2. The annual fee paid to BC Nature is covered within our annual club dues. The dues to BC Nature help to cover costs such as services by BC Nature at the provincial level, insurance costs to provide insurance for our members and to provide the BC

Nature magazine . At the BC Nature AGM in May a motion will be placed before the directors to have an increase in fees for the 2018 year.

4. New information plaques have been prepared to recognize individuals, organizations and businesses, who assisted through in-kind donations, financial assistance or the donation of materials, for the construction of the walkways and bridges at Scout Island. These plaques will be attached at each location during the next few weeks.
5. Several business items about the operation of the Scout Island Nature Centre were discussed. These are covered elsewhere in the newsletter.

### Scout Island Nature Centre

By Sue Hemphill



What a month of weather extremes. The - 24 to -26 slowed the grade 7, home school and nature k groups down, but only because it took so long to put so many clothes on. I couldn't recognize who was who with all the scarves and hats on. But everyone was outside exploring, skating, sledding, building quinzhees, making snow angels... despite the cold—just for shorter times. Then it warmed right up as if it was spring and that meant snow people could be made, but they disappeared quickly. The ice is still safe, so it is off to Hare Island to play hare and fox. The fun doesn't stop.

There will be a Nature Writing program the week of March 27-31 for ages 7-13. More details will be out soon.

We will be hiring 2-3 summer staff this year. If you know of a university student with at least one year of university completed, have them send me a resume' including references and a cover letter as to why they would like to work at Scout Island [shemphill@xplornet.com](mailto:shemphill@xplornet.com) He/she should be interested in nature, taken biology in high school and enjoy working with children. It will be full time work for May-August.

### Yellow Billed Loon (*Gavia adamsii*)

I have just returned from a week of work at my cabin at Eagle Lake. On Monday afternoon I took a drive down to Tatlayoko Lake. I was hoping to find Swans on the lagoon at the mouth of the Hormathko River. Recently there has been an exchange of emails around Swans on Phil's birding email group and I wanted to expand the Swan sightings. Unfortunately the lagoon was frozen solid so there were no Swans around. I have seen them there in the past.

I went onto the north beach and enjoyed the awesome winter views down the lake. Way in the distance I could just barely make out a speck moving around and diving well down the lake. A few distant photos peaked my interest, it was a Loon but the bill looked large and I was hoping it might be something different. The road continues on beside the lake so I drove further down the lake in hopes of getting closer. Unfortunately it remained well off shore and continued to move down the lake ahead of me. I took a few very questionable photos that might indicate I was seeing a Yellow-billed Loon. This is probably the best I have (really pushing it). I have included Phil's thoughts for you to consider: *Even with the fuzzy photos I would say they show all the characteristics of a YBLO. The upturned tilt to the head and bill, the flat topped 'double crowned' look. the dark auricular patch and the dark line running from the gape (OK squint a bit)*



My questionable photo of a YBLO



Here is one from the internet for comparison

Yellow Billed Loons are casual visitors in the Cariboo Chilcotin with only 4 confirmed sightings. One of note stayed on Williams Lake from Dec 22<sup>nd</sup> to 27<sup>th</sup> in 1999. Most sightings in the province are of juvenile birds in the winter on the large non-frozen lakes of the Okanagan. Tatlayoko Lake does not freeze during most winters and is a short distance from the ocean through the Hornathko River Valley to Butte Inlet, a natural bird migratory route.

The Yellow Billed Loon is closely related to the Common Loon but is slightly larger and of course has a yellow bill in the breeding season. It is an Arctic Breeder and prefers to spend winters off the wild North West Coast of North America seldom being found south of Canada. This explains why we have so few records.

Perhaps this will encourage some of you to venture west and check out some of the open waters of the large unfrozen West Chilcotin Lakes such as Tatlayoko and Chilco, who knows what might show up since these locations see so few visitors. Maybe you can confirm with a much better photo that I did indeed see a Yellow Billed Loon. If you fail to find a Swan or a Loon you will certainly be rewarded with some of the Chilcotin's most spectacular views.



Looking South on Tatlayoko Lake

## From “What the Robin Knows” by Jon Young

This book is available at the Nature House.

Train Your Senses  
Page 57-61

With bird language, you're at the mercy of your senses. Don't leave home without them. Our tutelage begins with our eyes, since sight is the sense humans rely on first. “Owl vision” is the ultimate achievement. “Wide-angle vision” might be technically more accurate, but I believe that



imitating a creature universally identified with keen eyesight helps us utilize more of our brains. Many indigenous trackers with extraordinary tracking and bird language skills are also prone to imitation. This isn't hard science. This is my sense of things after thirty years of experience with both bird language and cultural approaches to mentoring. Others have seconded that hypothesis. Owls have evolved eyes so large that they have actually outgrown their sockets and are “frozen” in place. They can locate prey even on the darkest nights. Thus “owl vision” it is in this book.

Here's an exercise: Look straight ahead and imagine that your eyeballs are so large that they're stuck and cannot move. To look at, or focus your eyes on, any object, you will have to move your entire head. Now look straight ahead and pick a point or object on which you can train your eyes without moving. Hold that spot as your focal point. If your eyes wander off, bring them back. Always return to that spot. While staring at that point and without moving your eyeballs, notice how you can also see some of the context around that spot—part of the ground or floor, maybe some of the ceiling, maybe stuff on the surrounding wall. This is your peripheral vision coming into play. Build on it by adding to your peripheral awareness the farthest thing you can see to the extreme left...to the extreme right...as far above the focal point as possible...or as far below the focal point as possible...all without moving your eyeballs from your focal point. By focusing hard on one point, you can actually see much more throughout your field of vision. Now turn your head, change your focal point, and reengage your peripheral vision. This is actually a meditation, in a way, and you can practice it anywhere, anytime. In your sit spot, engage owl vision in moments of deep baseline, when nothing seems to require close attention. Absorb the scene as a whole. This connection is invaluable.

When you have the hang of owl vision, add in the equivalent kind of hearing, which I call “deer hearing,” in honour of that animal’s incredible auditory receptors, which swivel and turn to catch the slightest sound before any possible danger approaches. Among beginners, there’s a natural tendency to concentrate on the loudest (and therefore often the closest) birds. This tendency would be okay if it didn’t usually preclude hearing the quieter birds and vocalizations. In the beginning, most people can hear the wind or flowing water, but probably only as a solid wall of sound. They can pick up loud, obtrusive sounds and a collective category they might label “bird sounds,” punctuated now and then by a discreet “song.” That’s about it. Now in your mind, “prick up” your ears. “Twitch” them. Imagine how they feel. In your sit spot, listen to the silence between the sounds, so that you can hear the more easily missed companion calls and the quieter birds such as juncos. I always try to listen “farther” than I can see. This mental image helps some people extend the range of their hearing.

By listening to the silence, you’ll hear more of everything. An enhancement of this exercise is to concentrate on the farthest and quietest sound in front of you, then to the left...and the right...behind...above...*below*(where even worms and insects moving in the litter at your feet make a little noise, and in time you will hear it).

With keen peripheral hearing, no matter how far away and subtle the bird calls may be, they will jump to your ears. Am I contradicting my usual advice to first learn one bird well? Not really. Learning the robin first doesn’t mean learning the robin to the exclusion of the other birds. (*Oh, wow, I’m really into bird language now because I can hear that robin so well.*) Even on the first day, go deeper. Listen to the silence and hear all the sounds around you. There will be many in your sit spot.

I always find it instructive to ask new people how many airplanes they heard while sitting in their sit spots.

“Three?” one might ask hesitantly, after a pause.

I may have asked a more experienced individual with a nearby sit spot to be sure to pick up the planes. I turn to her and say, “How many?”

“Seven,” she replies.

“No way! I can hear a *plane*. There were three,” the new student argues.

“No, there were seven.”

The next day, I put that same student in charge of counting planes in his sit spot, and his count goes up.

This exercise may seem silly, even counterproductive, when the main idea is to hear birds. But the main idea is not to hear *birds*. The main idea is to hear *everything*. If you don’t notice the planes, what else are you missing? So I like the plane exercise. I like differentiating between the sounds made by the wind as it flows through the branches, the shrubs, the grass—all of them different. Use your ears like radar, sweeping all around you, through 360 degrees, and also up and down. Even in the bedroom in the dead of night, there’s plenty to hear. Silence itself has a sound, and listening to it is good practice for picking up the junco’s tiny tunes and alarms.

While you are seeing and hearing at your sit spot, you are also sitting on the ground or in a chair, maybe leaning against a tree, and your hands are touching something. What? Feel it! Our skin is the largest organ of the body for a reason. Use it. Is the ground cold? Is a rock or a piece of bark poking you? Is any part of your body crying for attention? What’s the feeling inside your shoes, or the feeling of the ground beneath your feet? Can you feel moisture? Is the sun shining on your face? Can you feel its heat? If you can hear the wind, you can also feel it. I call this “raccoon touch,” because a raccoon earns a living with its sense of touch. Have you ever watched one investigate the rocks at the edge of a pond? Its little hands touch and turn, reach under and around each rock, hoping for a tasty morsel. All the while, its eyes are directed elsewhere, often into distant space, not really looking at what its hands are exploring.

Learning bird language is all about training, and the right balance in training. If you awaken *all* of your senses, the connections happen faster, understanding is richer, and your bird language experience becomes more and more compelling.

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 Walk the Walk

Actually, the best time to don your keen awareness is *before* you enter the sit spot. The owl doesn't leave its roost and just blunder blindly into the trees, and the cat doesn't leave the porch for the bushes in a hurry. From its silent and invisible perch, the owl surveys the landscape with those incredible eyes and listens with ears that are as remarkable as the deer's. It sees and hears the squirrels, the mice, and deer crunching the leaf litter, the muskrat digging and feeding, the rustle of the wind blowing in the sedges and the cattails. You could do worse that emulate the owl. At the very least, pause to collect yourself as you approach the sit spot. Take a deep breath, hold it for a second or two, then exhale and relax. Engage your owl eyes, your deer ears, your raccoon skin. Smell and taste the air like a dog. Think of yourself as a lazy surveyor. Definitely do not think, *Hey, look at me! I', successfully sneaking around in the woods like a cat!* Sneaking provokes alarms. Besides, *you're* going to sneak up on a junco or a fox? Somehow I doubt it. Let's release the kind of naiveté from our mindset. Instead, you're the lazy surveyor getting paid by the hour, with all the time in the world on this beautiful afternoon. Empty your mind of everything except awareness.

## 49th annual Williams Lake Christmas Bird Count

From Phil Ranson

The 49th annual Christmas Bird count was undertaken by the Williams Lake Field Naturalists on Dec 18th. Conditions had moderated after a cold spell that saw the lake and most of the river freeze over. The 35 observers in the field had to contend with a fresh overnight snowfall and moderate winds but nothing unexpected for the time of year.

The total number of birds was on the low side coming in at 3867 which is below the 10 year average. The species total however tied with the third best of 58. There were no new species but several difficult to find birds were uncovered including a Northern Hawk Owl in Pine Valley; a Rusty Blackbird at Scout Island and nine Snow Buntings in Chimney Valley. Twelve White-throated Sparrows were found at bird feeders. This is the highest number recorded for this species following a previous high of 5 set last year. This increase in numbers probably reflects the recent range expansion of this bird as a breeding species into the central Cariboo. Many of the northern breeding finches which often winter here in good numbers were seen in very low numbers including Common Redpolls and Pine Grosbeaks. These 'irruptive' species can vary from absent one year to abundant the next. The Evening Grosbeak, a familiar bird at feeders was not seen again this year. 638 were recorded on the 1989 count but numbers have been dwindling ever since. Reasons for the decline are unknown, however numbers reported in the new year are picking up. Thanks to all who participated and to Fred for once again holding the post-count potluck.



## Our View of the Night Sky – February 2017.



By Steve Capling

### Planet Review

Mercury is visible low in the dawn twilight through to the end of February before being lost in the Sun's glare at the end of the month.

Venus continues to shine brightly in the early evening in the western sky after sunset. Venus is currently in a crescent phase - see if you can see this through your scope.

Mars is visible as a reddish 'star' low in the evening in the constellation Pisces.

Jupiter rises in the east after midnight in the constellation Virgo. It is the very bright object you can see at dawn. During February it becomes motionless as it starts its retrograde movement - look for it being stationary above Spica.

Saturn is low in the dawn sky.



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### Member's Moment from Kath VanSpall



#### “Interesting” What is it?

My friend Fred Blewett and I came across these pillars of ice on the frozen Tupper River, south of Pouce Coupe, BC, while hunting elk in the area in December. There were two sets of pillars, one with multiple columns, and a second one that was a single pillar by itself with smaller lumps of ice and snow at its base. The multiple columns were just a bit taller than Fred. Both sets were located immediately downstream of what appeared to be a frozen beaver dam, which can be seen running across the river at the foot of the “sculptures”, as we took to calling them. The taller set was, amazingly, approximately 6 feet tall! The single pillar was hollow at the top and resembled an elephant's trunk when looked down on from above. All were covered in snow and ornately decorated with icicles and fragile flakes of frost, a combination I'm sure produced by the extreme cold of the previous two weeks, plus whatever mysterious forces created the pillars in the first place. I assume perhaps pressure from the higher water level behind the beaver dam, combined with leaks in the dam and extreme cold weather, produced upwellings that froze slowly into the pillar formations; but I would be curious to hear whether other members have ever seen something similar, or have knowledge as to how these might have come about.

“Member's Moment” is an opportunity for you to share a special scene, plant, animal, bird or outdoor activity that you have enjoyed and photographed here in the Cariboo Chilcotin (or elsewhere). A chance for you to encourage other members to get outdoors and find their own special moments close to home and perhaps share them with all of us. For each newsletter the editors will select one or two photos for inclusion in the newsletter based on the quality of the photo as well as the interesting paragraph you must provide. We will save all submitted unused moments in hopes they may find a place in a future edition. Please email your full resolution photo and paragraph to the [muskratexpress@shaw.ca](mailto:muskratexpress@shaw.ca). A special thanks to Kath for your winning entry.

**Christmas Bird Count 2017 Results**

Mallard.	62
Green-winged Teal.	2
Common Goldeneye	6
Bald Eagle.	21
Sharp-shinned Hawk	1
Accipiter species	1
Northern Harrier	1
Red-tailed Hawk	9
Rough-legged Hawk	4
Golden Eagle	4
American Coot	5
American Kestrel	cw
Merlin	2
Wilson's Snipe	1
Rock Pigeon	459
Eurasian Collared Dove	9
Mourning Dove	3
Northern Pygmy Owl	3
Northern Hawk Owl	1
Short-eared Owl	2
Belted Kingfisher	1
Downy Woodpecker.	27
Hairy Woodpecker.	25
Northern Flicker	40
Am 3-toed Woodpecker	1
Black-backed Woodpecker	1
Pileated Woodpecker.	13
Northern Shrike	3
Gray Jay.	6
Steller's Jay	2
Black-billed Magpie.	27
American Crow.	478

Common Raven.	276
Black-capped Chickadee.	255
Mountain Chickadee.	142
Red-breasted Nuthatch.	112
White-breasted Nuthatch	1
Brown Creeper.	2
American Dipper.	27
Golden-crowned Kinglet	1
Townsend's Solitaire.	22
American Robin	cw
European Starling.	206
Bohemian Waxwing.	479
Spotted Towhee	3
Song Sparrow.	37
White-throated Sparrow	12
White-crowned Sparrow	1
Dark-eyed Junco.	143
Red-winged Blackbird.	30
Brewer's Blackbird	1
Rusty Blackbird	1
Snow Bunting	9
Pine Grosbeak.	2
House Finch.	179
Red Crossbill	290
White-winged Crossbill	13
Common Redpoll	29
Pine Siskin	43
American Goldfinch.	62
House Sparrow.	269
	TOTAL 3867
	Species 58