

A Brief History of the Williams Lake Field Naturalists Club 1971 - 2007

by Fred McMechan

The Williams Lake Field Naturalists Club (WLFN) was formed in 1971. In that year Elton Anderson of the Federation of BC Naturalists (FBCN) came to Williams Lake to encourage local naturalists to form a club. The first executive of the WLFN was Anna Roberts-president, Winnie Bennie-vice president and Carole Thompson, secretary-treasurer. The WLFN became the fourteenth club of the FBCN and was incorporated under the Society Act of British Columbia in 1977.

The principal focus of the WLFN since its inception has been to increase awareness and understanding of the world of nature in the Cariboo-Chilcotin. Every year the club has provided nature education programs for school and pre-school aged children at Scout Island Nature Centre as well as several indoor and outdoor programs for adults. The club has also promoted the conservation and wise management of natural areas in British Columbia, especially in the Cariboo-Chilcotin, and has been involved in many land use planning processes.

Many people from the Williams Lake area have served on the executive of the WLFN. In the 1970s, presidents were Anna Roberts, Larry Hollbrook, George Barker and Jim Hilton. From 1978 to the present Fred McMechan has served as the president. Treasurers who managed the finances for extended periods were Karen Willies, Jean Oke, Lorna McLagan, Audrey Stromberg, Nola Daintith and Katharine VanSpall. Winnie Bennie was the secretary from the early 1970s to 1992. Since then the secretaries have been Maureen Dunlop, Lyn Konowalyk, Nola Daintith, Charlene Smythe and Kris Andrews. Members who acted as vice presidents at various times are Frances Vyse, Ordell Steen and Jim Sims. Many acted as directors for two or more years; they include Margaret Waring, Bette McLennan, Ordell Steen, Anna Roberts, Michaela Waterhouse, Kristi Iverson, Cathy Koot and Rob Higgins.

The "Muskrat Express", the newsletter of the WLFN, was first published in the late 1970s and continues to inform membership several times per year of natural history, conservation, land use planning, and Scout Island Nature Centre news. The editor until 1998 was Fred McMechan and since then editors have been Jim Sims and Margaret Waring. Articles on birds and bird sightings have been in every issue along with topics on management and operation of Scout Island Nature Centre. Jean Waite wrote an article entitled "Bird Sightings in the Williams Lake Area" until 1992 when Jim Sims took over. Linda Durrell contributed an article on bird sightings near her home along the Chilcotin River from the early 1980s until 2005. Information in these articles has increased provincial understanding of bird migrations.

Over the years, the club has presented many natural history awareness programs for the public at the Scout Island Nature House and at an annual spring banquet. Presentations have been made by club members as well as invited speakers from many parts of British Columbia. In 2006 a series of six programs was presented to the public including "An

Introduction to Cariboo Birds" by Cathy Koot, "Bats of the Cariboo-Chilcotin" and "Butterfly Watching" by Anna Roberts, "Ants" by Rob Higgins, and "Grasslands of the Cariboo-Chilcotin" and "Forests of the Cariboo-Chilcotin" by Ordell Steen. Members that have made presentations to the Elder College on behalf of the WLFN include Cathy Koot, Anna Roberts, Phil Ranson, and Jim Sims.

Every year the WLFN organizes a series of natural history oriented field trips into the Cariboo-Chilcotin for members of the club and usually led by members of the club. Areas visited frequently include Alkali Lake in the early spring; Chilanko Marsh in the Chilcotin; the Williams Lake River Valley and Scout Island Nature Centre; the Chilcotin grasslands at Riske Creek, Junction Sheep Range Provincial Park and Churn Creek Protected Area; various Cariboo-Chilcotin lakes; and alpine areas such as Eureka Peak in the upper Horsefly River valley.

The WLFN has developed several guides to the natural history of the Cariboo Chilcotin, which are available to the public at Scout Island Nature House. These include "Cariboo Field Checklist of Birds" (1976) and "Checklist of Cariboo Birds" (1992) prepared by Anna Roberts and Martin Gebauer. The first plant guide for the Williams Lake area, "Some of the Plants on and Near Scout Island" was prepared by Jean Waite in 1977. Gina Roberts, Naomi Roberts, and Anna Roberts prepared several guides including "Vertebrates of the Williams Lake Valley", "Common Butterflies of the Cariboo-Chilcotin", "Ants in the Cariboo-Chilcotin", "Trees and Shrubs in the Williams Lake Valley" and "The Wet Sock Guide to Living Things in the Water". Several additional guides have been prepared by Gina Roberts specifically for children.

The WLFN has been a member since 1971 of the Federation of BC Naturalists (now BC Nature) which is the provincial organization that provides a unified voice for naturalist clubs in BC. The WLFN hosted the annual general meeting of the FBCN in 1978, 1988 and 2001. In 2005 the WLFN hosted a FBCN nature camp at the Gavin Lake Forest Education Centre. Nature-oriented field trips included visits to the UBC Research Forest, Beaver Valley wetlands, Quesnel Forks and the Chilcotin grasslands. WLFN members who led field trips or otherwise assisted with this event included Kris Andrews, Fred McMechan, Cathy Koot, Michaela Waterhouse, Richard Case, Sue Hemphill, Pat Teti, Ordell Steen, Kristi Iverson, Ken McKenzie, Rob Higgins and Joanne Wright.

Each year since 1971, the Christmas Bird Count for the Williams Lake area has been organized by the WLFN. Club members and others tally numbers of birds by species along designated routes and at backyard feeders. The Christmas Bird Count is a North America-wide event; results are sent to Bird Studies Canada who coordinates the counts in conjunction with the National Audubon Society in the USA. Each year, the Williams Lake count is announced and results reported in the Williams Lake Tribune. Coordinators for the Williams Lake count have included Anna Roberts, Bette McLennan and Phil Ranson. The public is always invited to participate.

The Bluebird House Project was initiated in 1978 on the grasslands near Riske Creek with a goal to increase the bluebird population in the area. Large numbers of bluebird

houses have been put out and are being maintained and monitored annually by club members. The initial objective was to increase the bluebird population as a biological control for grasshoppers and their consumption of grassland plants. The project was initiated under the direction of the Becher's Prairie Resource Management Committee and funding was provided by the Federal government to construct and install bluebird houses. There has been a dramatic increase in the bluebird population since inception of the project. Anna Roberts has coordinated the project for the WLFN and studied the best placement and design of houses. Other monitors have included Bette McLennan, Libby Abbott, Chris Coates, Margaret Waring, Rick Dawson, Steve Howard, Jean Oke, Loyd Csizmadia, Michaela Waterhouse, Bev and George Butcher, Leo Rankin, Connie Haussler, Christine Constabel, Jim Sims, Ordell Steen, Pat Teti, Fred McMechan, Roger Hamilton, Kris Andrews, Denise Deschene, Sandy Proulx, and Fred and Winnie Bennie.

Public appreciation and non-motorized use of the Williams Lake River Valley has long been promoted by the WLFN. In the early 1970s, a government grant was obtained by the WLFN for cleanup and construction of a trail in the upper valley. In 1975 the WLFN submitted a report entitled "The Williams Lake Creek Valley: A Conservation Proposal" prepared by George Barker, Winnie Bennie, Carole Thompson, Anna Roberts, Frances Vyse and Mike Yates. The report included a set of recommendations to preserve the natural values of the valley, disallow physical disturbances such as gravel removal, and construct a public access trail. In 1978 the Ministry of Environment prepared "The Williams Lake Creek Valley Land Use Plan" which addressed many of the WLFN recommendations. In 1988 the WLFN participated in the planning process that resulted in the establishment of a Ministry of Forests and Lands Recreation Reserve in the valley. Input was also provided to the preparation of the Williams Lake Rotary Trail Plan which resulted in construction of the present trail system. In 2001 and 2002 the WLFN contributed to the plan initiated by the City of Williams Lake to manage the trail system in the valley.

The WLFN has been involved in many other land planning processes. In the 1970s, the WLFN contributed to a report to establish and manage the Junction Wildlife Management Area. In those same years, a proposal was developed to establish a provincial park on the Snowshoe Plateau. Club members who prepared this proposal were Alan Vyse, Carole Thompson, Jim Hilton, Tom Mackenzie, John Morrison and Anna Roberts. In the 1990s the WLFN was active in the development of the Cariboo-Chilcotin Land Use Plan. Members also represented the club in the development of management plans for Bowron Lakes, Cariboo Mountains, Cariboo River, Junction Sheep Range, Ts'yl-os, Flat Lake, and Itcha-Ilgachuz provincial parks, and Churn Creek Protected Area.

Since 1997 the WLFN has given a bursary to a graduating high school student who plans to attend a university or college to further their education in the biological sciences. A plant and yard sale each spring provides funds for the bursary amount. Winnie Bennie coordinated the sale each year until 2007 when Margaret Waring volunteered to be the coordinator.

Scout Island Nature Centre

Operation, development, and maintenance of the Scout Island Nature Centre have been a major focus and contribution of the WLFN since 1977. The WLFN operates the Nature Centre in partnership with The Nature Trust of BC and the City of Williams Lake, based on a 1977 sublease between the WLFN and the Williams Lake Town Council. This sublease was based on the conditions of the main lease agreement between the Town and The Nature Trust of BC, the land conservancy which owns most of the Nature Centre property.

The elected executive of the WLFN has functioned each year as the administrative body for operation of Scout Island Nature Centre. Securing funds for operation of the Nature Centre is a principal task of the executive and the Nature Centre coordinator. Funds are needed to:

- employ staff, including the coordinator, teacher naturalists, preschool teachers, bookkeeper and janitor;
- carry out repairs or improvements to the Nature House and Nature Centre area; and
- purchase educational services and supplies.

Funds have come from public fund raising appeals, annual Nature Centre banquets, fees-for-service from the City of Williams Lake, grants from provincial and federal agencies, grants from foundations, donations from local businesses, and a donation box at the Nature House.

A large number of volunteers and employees have contributed to operation and development of the Nature Centre and its programs. The WLFN has employed coordinators, teacher naturalists, university students, and preschool teachers. People who have been key to the development of the educational programs, training of the teacher-naturalists, and planning and development of the Nature Centre include:

- Frances Vyse, coordinator from 1977 to 1985, made significant contributions to early development of the Nature Centre;
- Jean Wellburn was the first teacher naturalist from 1978 to the early 1990s and started the program for preschool children called "Spiders, Snakes and Frogs" and initiated "Discovery Preschool", the nature-oriented preschool, in 1979;
- Bette McLennan was a teacher naturalist and coordinator in the 1980s;
- Anna and Gina Roberts were coordinators from the late 1980s to 2003;
- Sue Hemphill has been the coordinator from 2003 to the present;
- Margret Onneken and Marcia Aitkin have been pre-school teachers since 1993;
- Fred McMechan and Jim Sims have coordinated and done much of the planning and physical work to develop and maintain Nature Centre structures.

Services provided by the WLFN at the Nature Centre include:

- nature education programs for school classes;
- "Nature Fun", a summer nature program for children;
- operation of "Discovery Preschool", a nature oriented pre-school;

- nature programs for the general public;
- operation and development of the Nature House as a nature interpretive centre;
- welcoming tourists to the Nature Centre;
- construction and maintenance of trails, walkways, bridges interpretive kiosks and wildlife viewing structures at the Nature Centre;
- preparing written materials and displays about the natural history of the Cariboo-Chilcotin;
- planting native trees, shrubs and flowers to enhance the natural habitat;
- weed management at the Nature Centre; and
- input to protecting the west end of the lake and the marsh for their natural values.

In 1980 Gary Runka of G.G. Runka Land Sense outlined the ecological, educational and other values of the Nature Centre wetlands in a report prepared for the WLFN. A principal recommendation of the report was to establish an Order-in-Council Reserve on the wetlands to legislate their protection and management. After public meetings and approval by the City of Williams Lake, application for a Reserve was made by the WLFN in 1983. On January 4, 1984 the Cabinet of B.C. approved this Reserve through Order-in-Council #8.

A management plan for the Nature Centre was developed by the WLFN in 2002 and 2003. Jane Perry facilitated input from club members as a basis for writing the plan. The main objectives outlined in the management plan are to:

- expand nature educational programs for students and the general public;
- expand services for visitors, including tourists, to the Nature Centre;
- maintain or enhance the natural integrity of the Nature Centre's habitats; and
- encourage public use of the Nature Centre without jeopardizing the natural environment.

In 1988 the WLFN received the “Minister's Environmental Award” in environmental education from the Ministry of Environment and Parks. This award was in recognition of the nature education programs at Scout Island Nature Centre and was presented at Government House by the Hon. Bruce Strachan, Minister of Environment & Parks, and Lieutenant Governor Bob Rogers. Fred McMechan received the award on behalf of the WLFN.

In the early 1990s the Scout Island Nature Centre was recognized as one of the principal wildlife viewing sites in British Columbia under the Wildlife Watch program of the Ministry of Environment. Large numbers of people visit the Nature Centre each year, many of whom are tourists from all parts of Canada and many from other countries.