

# MUSKRAT EXPRESS

WILLIAMS LAKE FIELD NATURALISTS  
NOVEMBER + DECEMBER 2009 NEWSLETTER

CHRISTMAS BIRD COUNT  
SUNDAY DEC 20TH.



TAKE A WINTER WALK  
LOOK FOR A HAWK  
STUDY A ROCK  
TRY OUR DELUXE NEW BOARDWALK



## The MUSKRAT EXPRESS

NOVEMBER 27, 2009

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

**Membership fees:** Family (\$30), individual (\$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 or [muskrat@midbc.com](mailto:muskrat@midbc.com). For more information about the club please contact Fred McMechan at (250) 392-7680 or e-mail [Fred\\_McMechan@telus.net](mailto:Fred_McMechan@telus.net)

**Williams Lake Field Naturalists Web Site** <http://www.williamslakefieldnaturalists.ca>

**Executive of The Williams Lake Field Naturalists:** president Fred McMechan, vice-president Jim Sims, secretary Bev Frittenburg, treasurer Katharine VanSpall and directors Nola Daintith, Ordell Steen, Beverly Anderson, 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)

### **Important Membership News - Please Read**

In the fall the executive of our club decided to adopt: 1) a new "Membership" form and 2) a new "Informed Consent and Assumption of Risk" form, one for individuals or families, and another dedicated one for family members under 19 years of age (children) or dependent adult family members. The membership form will require personal information and an acceptance of terms and conditions to be a member. The informed consent and assumption of risk form document is a clear legal statement that a person signing is aware of the risks in joining activities and assumes full responsibility of those risks. It covers all regular activities as outlined and replaces the previous Waiver of Liability form which our club used for our activities. These two forms were endorsed by BC Nature this year and will be used by clubs which wish to use them. Through the efforts of the Kamloops Naturalists and their director, Frank Dwyer, to obtain legal advice these forms were developed and kindly offered to the other BC Nature clubs. This year the Kamloops Naturalists adopted these forms. These forms have been accepted by their members. They received legal advice from a lawyer with a highly reputable Ontario firm which has provided advice for naturalists clubs and sports groups ( information about this firm can be found on their website, [www.sportlaw.ca](http://www.sportlaw.ca) ).

We will be sending out both forms by either email or by Canada Post. The forms will be in attachments for emails and will be back to back on a single sheet for mail-outs. If a family has children a separate dedicated sheet will be provided. The forms should be read carefully, signed and returned to our club as directed. Please also include your membership fees. We will also include a 6 page report in a "question and answer format" which Frank Dwyer has kindly permitted for circulation. It provides more background information on the forms and reasons for

the decision to use these forms. Please note that there is a third form, the Waiver of Liability form, which will be used for activities which pose significantly larger risks; this form will be signed by participants and will be a stand-alone document for the specific activity.

If you have any questions or concerns about these forms please contact Fred McMechan at (250) 392-7680 or at [fred\\_mcmechan@telus.net](mailto:fred_mcmechan@telus.net)

Please note that our membership fees for 2010 are as follows: 1) individual - \$25. 2) family - \$30. 3) student - \$10. A motion to approve these fees was passed at our AGM earlier this year. The main reason for the increase was to match the increase for our BC Nature membership.

**\*Note\*** Due to confusion that may arise with the use of the new membership and waiver forms the forms have **not** been attached to the newsletter. The forms and further clarification will be provided in an additional mailing. Please read this material and complete the new forms and mail them to keep your membership current.

## **Williams Lake Christmas Bird Count – Sunday December 20<sup>th</sup>, 2009**

Count coordinator: Phil Ranson (398-7110)

I know Christmas Bird Counts are annual but they seem to be arriving quicker than they used to. Having said that, I can't for the life of me remember last year's details so I'm glad the Audubon Society have an easily retrievable database for all the counts at [http://cbc.audubon.org/cbccurrent/current\\_table.html](http://cbc.audubon.org/cbccurrent/current_table.html) (under option 'C', enter BCWL and click on 'Find Count'. Click on 'Williams Lake [BCWL]' to highlight, then click on 'Make a Table').

The 2 Boreal Owls were new to the count last year and were without doubt the highlight of the day which helped push our total to 63 species; a remarkable 5 species higher than our previous best. Also encouraging was to get 26 observers into the field on such a frigid day which isn't a high total by any means but marks an upswing in the number of participants in the last few years. There is obviously a correlation between number of observers, area covered and birds seen so we're hoping for a good turnout this Christmas if we hope to even come close to last year's number.



**One of Last Year's Boreal Owls**

The count this year is on Sunday, December 20<sup>th</sup> (first Sunday in the count period). I'll be contacting the regulars who have participated over the last few years and we'll try and maintain the same boundaries – subject to any better ideas. We are unlikely to get complete coverage of our 24Km circle so there is always room for more participants - whether you consider yourself a novice or an expert; whether you want to go it alone (not recommended in winter) or join a group; whether you prefer to walk, ski, skidoo or sit in the comfort of a heated vehicle; whether you want to spend dawn 'til dusk or can just spare a morning.

Bird feeders in the count area contribute a significant proportion of our totals and if 'none of the above' applies to you but you have a feeder you can watch for a while and provide an estimate of the birds, then I'd love to hear from you. If you have friends with feeders, please contact them and let them know about the count and who to contact (see below).

Christmas bird counts among other popular bird surveys have become known as ‘citizen science’ where we can all contribute in some small way towards a better understanding of bird populations. Although not ‘scientifically rigorous’, if enough data is collected from our counts using a standard survey protocol over a long enough period then the information we can provide to organizations such as Bird Studies Canada and the Audubon Society can be freely shared with the scientific community where it is used to not only determine population trends but to promote the conservation effort and possibly be used in ways we have not yet imagined.

If you have any questions about the Williams Lake count, please give me a call at 398-7110 or email [ranson1@telus.net](mailto:ranson1@telus.net) . The post count gathering and pot luck will again be at Fred McMechan’s at 1225 Moon Ave., (392-7680) where feeder watchers can phone in their reports after 6:00 p.m.

### **Attention History Buffs and Nature Lovers!**

Love to talk about your area of expertise? Would you like someone new to share your passions and stories with? Need a hiking or bird watching partner or some afternoon company on the trail? Mary Forbes is currently writing 3 interpretive walks & hikes for the City of Williams Lake to offer in the Active Living Guide for Spring 2010 and is looking for knowledgeable local contacts to provide the personal experiences and background details Mary will need your help to make these programs a success.

Please contact Mary ASAP if you would like to be a part of this research project. (250) 855 8443 or [mmmforbes@yahoo.ca](mailto:mmmforbes@yahoo.ca)

### **October Writing Workshop at the Nature House**

By: Jenny Noble

A dozen whirring brains, suspended over a dozen waggling pens, paused from time to time to scan stored vocabularies for just the right words. “Don’t worry about crafting the perfect sentence the first time. Just get it out, keep it flowing. You can revise it later; it’s all about revision.”

Good advice from an experienced author. At the “Spawning Stories, Hatching Change” writing workshop on Oct 24, TRU instructor and WLFN member Barbara Bearman goaded, challenged, encouraged, amused and nurtured the nature-lovers’ efforts. She shared the words of authors from Stephen King to Flannery O’Connor on the wondrous craft of writing. She talked about the decisions about viewpoint, audience, style and tone that give a piece coherence. A variety of exercises stimulated us to step outside our habitual approaches. Then we physically stepped outside, senses alert, to watch for something remarkable that we could then try to convey in words. A short discussion of ecological footprint concepts helped focus attention on the power of writing to persuade and influence.

Participants left with ideas for their personal nature stories, and Barbara’s offer to read developing pieces and mentor their developing authors. We look forward to including some in the collection of narratives we’ll be presenting to Williams Lake and sharing with other rural communities in the new year.

We hope also that some of our members will want to contribute their nature stories, even if they haven't participated in the writing or song-writing workshops. How have you been moved by nature, and how do you see humans threatening or supporting it? How has your connection to nature influenced your behaviour, and what would you like to see others do? Feel free to contact Sue or Jenny if you have an idea you'd like to develop, or perhaps something you've already produced and are ready to share.

### Where have all the salmon gone?

By: Jennie Noble

It may turn out that many factors combined to cause the disappearance of nearly 9 million sockeye salmon from this year's Fraser River runs, but the Georgia Strait Alliance makes a very strong case that Coastal fish farms played a major role. Ruby Berry, GSA's Salmon Aquaculture Program Coordinator, and Salmon Aquaculture Campaigner Michelle Young presented that case at the Nature House on Nov 18.

Representatives from local conservation groups, DFO, First Nations and media heard about studies showing sharp declines in wild fish populations following establishment of open net-cage farms. There are many potential sources of mortality, including high nitrogen levels due to waste; escaped Atlantic salmon eating wild juveniles; disease transmission from the highly-concentrated penned population, and toxic chemicals industrial chemicals. However the major culprit seems to be sea lice. Ruby explained that sea lice are a naturally-occurring parasite on adult fish, and in small numbers do little harm. Since adult and juvenile migratory routes do not typically overlap, lice rarely infect the vulnerable smolts. With up to a million fish being raised in pens, though, lice populations explode near shore and find a ready food source in the departing young. Consuming mucus, skin, muscle and blood, they are almost always fatal. A telling piece of evidence: areas along Vancouver Island's outer coast and the whole of Alaska's, where there are no fish farms, sea lice mortality in juveniles is not a problem.



Smolt with sea lice

The Georgia Strait Alliance is calling for immediate closure of 5 fish farms in the channel north and east of Quadra Island so that migrating juveniles will have at least one route that does not bring them in contact with highly-concentrated penned Atlantic salmon populations. Longer term, they urge that all fish farming be restricted to closed containment systems that keep waste out of the surrounding waters and prevent sea lice contact with wild populations.

We're very pleased that GSA is reaching out to Interior groups to work on this shared threat to our vital salmon populations. To read more about the problem and their work, sign an online petition and find out what else you can do, here's their web address:

<http://www.georgiastrait.org/>.

A remarkable film will be released next week on the Global impact of salmon farming, here is the trailer: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eggrGn0V0fg>

## Scout Island Nature Centre Report

By: Sue Hemphill

Winter is settling in at the Nature Centre. There are a few late migrating species including swans, but for the most part it is the winter birds that are at the feeders that cheer me up each day. Our new Katimavik volunteer, Eric Burdon also enjoys watching the birds as he works in the library. Eric also helped Pete (nursery worker and volunteer), plant the last trees of the season and put the nursery to bed for the winter. They also did some late collection of thistle heads—any that were missed by our wonderful summer weed warriors. Thank-you to all that helped with control of weeds this year.

I also want to thank the wonderful crew that installed deer fencing and then planted trees inside these enclosures. So far this is working, as there has been no damage to the new trees like last year. We know the fencing may be intrusive to the view of people enjoying the Nature Centre, but we just need to think about the trees that will be there in 30 years for the next generations of people and other “wildlife” to enjoy.

This was the third year for the Students Working and Learning in Their Watersheds. It again included a 2 day field trip for high school students. Science teachers Christie Mayall and Laura Storochuk brought 17 grade 10-12 students (who had applied for the program) to the Horsefly River on September 21. They were met by Sue Hemphill (Scout Island Nature Centre), Roy Argue (Fisheries and Oceans) and Sam Albers (UNBC grad student). They watched the reduced sockeye runs spawn in the river and in the spawning channel. Sam Albers, UNBC research student, got the students into the water with him weighing salmon carcasses. They were back in the water tossing fish over the fence and helping to count eggs left in spawned out female sockeye. We all stayed overnight at the Quesnel River Research Centre. The next day students were back in the water helping to net the Chinook that eggs and sperm were harvested for the Salmonids in the Classroom program that SINC leads and for a genetic study being done by Wendy Tymchuk, PhD, Fisheries and Oceans Canada. There was a lot of learning happening by these students but also:

- Hip waders are now the latest in “cool” fashion
- Knee deep in water and doing something with live or dead fish is the preferred task

I am pleased to announce that we will have a new educator/interpreter joining the staff in January –Mary Forbes. She grew up in Williams Lake and remembers coming to the Nature Centre as a child. Mary has a degree in archeology and has worked both as an archeologist and a parks interpreter. She has many ideas for new programs and activities for the Nature Centre.

**One more reminder that the Nature Centre is still looking for a used upright freezer and a MP3 or ipod to use for bird calls.**

## Volunteering at a Bird Banding Station

By: Audrey Hoeg

For the past three years Nils and I have volunteered at the Tatlayoko Lake Bird Observatory (TLBO) located on the Tatlayoko Lake Ranch in the west Chilcotin. The ranch and other neighbouring properties are owned by the Nature Conservancy of Canada and are protected as a

Nature Preserve. The Bird Observatory is a monitoring station for migratory birds flying through the Tatlayoko valley and so far has been operating in August and September catching the fall migration.

Birds are monitored in three different ways:

1. Birds are caught in mist nets, measured and banded.
2. A census of birds in the area is carried out each morning.
3. Casual observations of birds seen from the banding station.

The information gathered on the birds is shared with other bird observatories across Canada providing information on the numbers of each species. As a volunteer I have carried out several different tasks. The first year my main job was scribing – recording the data from each bird that is caught in the nets. The two certified banders do all the actual measurements and the banding. As they measure each bird they give the scribe about twenty pieces of information to be recorded, including the band number, name of species, age, sex, length of wing and weight and these must be recorded neatly, accurately and quickly. As soon as the bander has finished the measurements on a bird it is released.



**Flycatcher: banded and ready for release**

We were shown how to extract birds from the mist nets and had a chance to try removing a few. When the bird is removed from the net it is placed very carefully into a soft cloth bag that is closed with a drawstring. The birds must be handled gently but also quickly. Sometimes this is very difficult as they are so entangled in the net. If a volunteer is having difficulty extracting a bird they must call on the radio for help as it is very stressful for the birds to be handled too much.

The second year was a very bad year for bears and many nets were ripped, some with very long tears, with multiple side tears. That year I learned how to mend nets. That year they also had a computer at the banding hut for the recording of the information, a great improvement on the hand scribing required the year before. This year Nils learned how to enter the information into the computer leaving me free to do more extractions from the nets. I also had a few nets to mend but we had very few bears this year.

The mist nets, twelve of them, are set up facing in slightly different directions along a path that is about a mile in length. When you do a 'net run' you check every net for birds, removing those that you can handle but calling for help if there are large numbers of birds in a net. You want to remove the birds as quickly as possible and get them back to the banding hut so that they can be processed within the shortest time – and this means walking quickly. Some mornings I did 5 to 8 net runs and was pretty tired by the time we quit at around 1:30 pm (we started at 8 am).



**The Banding Hut**

The Tatlayoko valley is very beautiful - a wonderful place to spend a week. We were there in September this year a lovely time of the year, although it was a bit frosty some mornings. One morning on our way to the banding hut we saw a herd of twelve deer, five of them bucks, which varied from single spikes to a five-pointer. Other wildlife frequenting the area around the banding hut and along the net run, includes chipmunks, squirrels and snowshoe hares and sometimes bears. On our trip out we saw a mama bear and a cub by the side of the road, both of them fat and roly-poly.

Contact information for Tatlayoko Lake Bird Observatory:

Peter Shaughnessy, Tatlayoko Project Manager

Nature Conservancy of Canada

Box 21

Tatlayoko Lake, BC V0L 1W0

250-476-1170

[tatlayoko1@xplornet.com](mailto:tatlayoko1@xplornet.com)

[www.natureconservancy.ca](http://www.natureconservancy.ca)

you may also be interested in these two web links

TLBO blog: <http://tatlayokobirds.wordpress.com/>

NCC web page about TLBO:

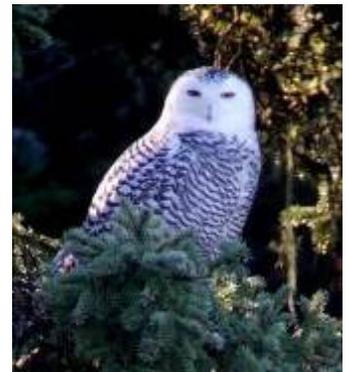
[http://www.natureconservancy.ca/site/PageServer?pagename=bc\\_ncc\\_tlbo](http://www.natureconservancy.ca/site/PageServer?pagename=bc_ncc_tlbo)

## **Bird Sightings from the Williams Lake Area**

### **Fall 2009 Report**

by: Phil Ranson

White-throated Sparrows again appeared in significant numbers this fall with small groups throughout October and singles still showing up at feeders. Singing birds in the Beaver Valley area this spring have all but confirmed their new breeding status in the region. A White-fronted Goose which showed up at Scout Island with a flock of Canada Geese in early October is being seen; most frequently at the Stampede Grounds. A Snow Goose arrived about the same time but did not linger. A Snowy Owl appeared in Anna's yard at the end of S. Lakeside on Remembrance Day and stayed long enough for a single photograph.



**Snowy Owl Photo  
by:Kris Andrews**



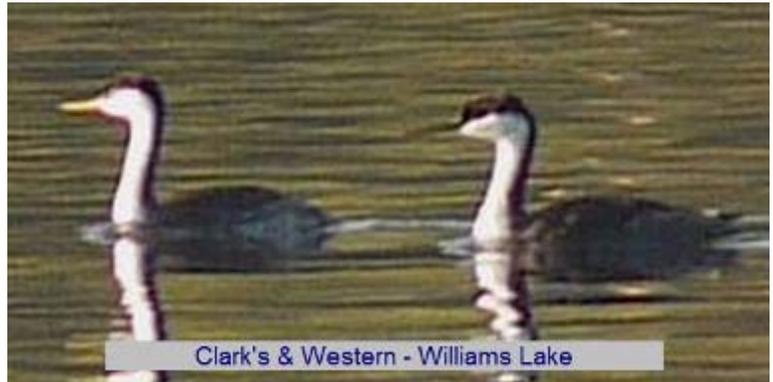
**We have the Transmitter  
Photo by: Sandy**

Members of the Field Naturalists assisted in the recovery of one of 2 transmitters which were transplanted in Barrow's Goldeneye and used by the Canadian Wildlife Service to track their movements over the past couple of years. Satellite signals indicated that two Goldeneye's had died in the Becher's Prairie area and members of the CWS were not available to retrieve these expensive transmitters and asked for assistance. Armed with the GPS coordinates and a signal tracking receiver, Kris, Sandy, Sharon and Phil recovered one transmitter by a small pond on the Stack valley Road.

Unfortunately the second transmitter located in the Roundup Lake area had lost power and no signal could be found. Information gathered during the life of

the transmitters indicated that the birds wintered in the Coastal inlets, returned to the Cariboo to breed with post breeding dispersal taking some birds over the Rockies into northern Alberta and well into the NWT in one instance.

On October 24<sup>th</sup>, a Clark's Grebe was reported from Callanan Lake, north of Riske Creek. This sighting represented the first record for this species in the region and probably the most northerly in the province. These Grebes are primarily found in the Great Basin with scattered records as far north as the Salmon Arm, Western Grebe Colony. Shortly before this, Kris had taken a photo of a group of Western Grebes on Williams Lake, one of which she thought resembled a Clark's Grebe. A re-examination of the photo would indicate that it was indeed that species. Note the eye on the Clark's (left Grebe) is surrounded by white whereas on the Western the eye is surrounded by black. You can also note that the bill on the Western is dark (dusky yellow) compared with the bright yellow on the Clark's. Perhaps we need to be taking a closer look at the Western Grebes now that we have confirmed rare visits by the Clark's Grebe.



**Cropped from Kris' photo**

Pacific Loons were seen on Williams Lake (1), Roundup Lake (2) and Lac la Hache (2). A significant number of Swans were along the Dog Creek Rd corridor in early November with about 300 (mostly Tundra) on Vert Lake, east of the Dog Creek Airstrip. One with a neck collar indicated it had been banded on the Alaska Peninsula. Some late fall date records occurred recently with an immature Chipping Sparrow at Soda Creek; a Swamp Sparrow spending 3 days in the Scout Island Marsh and an abnormally late Cliff Swallow also over the marsh on November 7<sup>th</sup>. Other swallow sightings around the same time through central BC indicate that this may have been a northward movement on the strong SE winds rather than late lingering birds.

Contact Phil at 398-7110 or via email [Muskrat@midbc.com](mailto:Muskrat@midbc.com) to submit bird sightings or to be added to Phil's birders list to receive regular email reports on Cariboo Chilcotin bird sightings.

### **Friends of Scout Island Nature Centre Fund Raising Drive 2009/10**

With the approach of colder weather, much of the wildlife at SINC is employing its adaptive strategies: summer birds have left for warmer places, and migrants from farther north are stopping by to rest and feed. Our cold-blooded neighbours are wriggling into their cozy places or topping up their antifreeze, while the colour drains from leaves and grasses.

There's no dormancy period in the Nature House, however! Schools in the "Salmonids in the Classroom" program are welcoming the sockeye salmon eggs and enjoying the lessons Sue brings along with them. Patricia Spencer and her lucky Nature Journeys kids have completed

another delightful session. Winter will see us continuing our story-making project “Spawning Stories, Hatching Change” with several school groups and creative individuals.

Donations to Scout Island have helped make it possible for us to provide nature education to 3,200 students over the past year. Our fun school holiday and youth group programs engaged several hundred more in observing nature, learning nature crafts, and active outdoor games. These experiences nurture the love of the outdoors that’s so essential to developing children’s environmental awareness.

Friends’ support has also made possible more plantings of native shrubs and trees along the North Marsh, installation of a new boardwalk over wet sections of the Willow Trail, fencing to exclude cattle from sensitive riparian areas in the WL River Valley, and Scout Island’s major role in the Horsefly Salmon Festival.

*Thank you to all who have helped with these improvements!!*

By donating to Scout Island Nature Centre, **you will help us ensure these opportunities continue and**

- *receive a biannual Newsletter that keeps you informed of the upcoming programs and special events at the Nature Centre*
- are allowed to borrow books from the Nature House Library
- are invited to suggest programs you would like to see offered
- receive a charitable receipt for your donation

Most important, our Friends ensure that Scout Island Nature Centre can continue to offer the *tonic of wilderness* to all the community (people and wildlife)

--  
I have enclosed a donation of \$30\_\_\_ \$50\_\_\_ \$100\_\_\_ \$200\_\_\_ \$300\_\_\_ other\_\_\_\_\_

**Name**\_\_\_\_\_

**email**\_\_\_\_\_

**postal address**\_\_\_\_\_

Please send the newsletter by email \_\_\_by post \_\_\_

**A donation to the Nature Centre in a friend or family member's name makes a great holiday gift!** We will send you a beautiful card that you can give to the recipient acknowledging your gift to the Nature Centre in their name.

I am making a donation of \_\_\_\_\_as a gift. Please send me a card that I can give to the recipient.

Please make your cheque payable to Scout Island Nature Centre Fund and mail it to

Scout Island Nature Centre  
1305 A Borland Rd.  
Williams Lake BC V2G 5K5