

# MUSKRAT EXPRESS

WILLIAMS LAKE FIELD NATURALISTS  
JANUARY 2015 NEWSLETTER

I like weasels  
and mice!

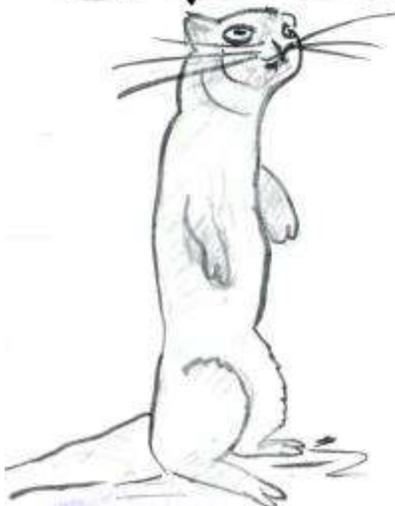


is it a comet?  
or a meteor?



maybe they  
see January's WOLF  
Moon?

Do GREAT GREY OWLS  
like LEAST WEASELS?



ASTRONOMY  
EVENING,  
SAT JAN 24 6-8PM



WOLF RESEARCH  
in the Chilcotin  
WED JAN 21 7PM



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, secretary Ordell Steen, treasurer Katharine VanSpall and directors Nola Daintith, Cathy Koot, Peter Opie, Ray Hornby, Brian Chapman, Don Lawrence and Christie Mayall



**Editors:** Thanks to all of you who have contributed to this edition of the newsletter. Please expect your next edition of the newsletter in late February. If you have comments, suggestions or articles for the Muskrat Express please contact Margaret Waring (398-7724), Jim Sims (296-3638) or e-mail us at



[muskratexpress@shaw.ca](mailto:muskratexpress@shaw.ca)

## Wolf Research in the Chilcotin

Wednesday, Jan.21 7:00pm  
Scout Island Nature Centre  
Info: 398-8532

Join us to hear how Wolf Awareness International researcher Sadie Parr investigates the diet and feeding ecology of these essential top predators.

Are wolves responsible for recent cattle, moose and horse declines? How can we best use limited conservation resources to prevent livestock and wildlife predation?

Wolf Awareness International is currently engaged in a Wolf Feeding Ecology Study in the Nemaiah-Brittany Triangle area, in cooperation with the Xenigwet'in community, Valhalla Wilderness Society and Friends of the Nemaiah Valley, in order to inform planning, management and conservation decisions and to facilitate coexistence between wolves and their human neighbours.



Photo by P. Dettling

## Free Family Astronomy at Scout Island Saturday January 24<sup>th</sup> 6pm-8pm

Saturday, January 24<sup>th</sup> at 6pm join local community astronomers Steve and Lynn Capling at the Scout Island Nature for stories and stargazing until 8pm. There will have plenty of stellar stuff to gander at with your naked eye, binoculars or with a telescope. **If the weather outside is inappropriate for stargazing, the event will be moved indoors with games and activities.**

Everyone and all ages welcome, no registration is required.

**Bring:** WARM clothes (and gloves!), Binoculars (Scout Island have some



available to borrow), Lawn chairs or something to lay down on. **Please do not bring a flashlight or headlamp**

*A very large telescope is provided but you are welcome to bring along your own, more telescopes make this event even better!*

Call Scout Island Nature House if you have questions about this special event call 250.398.8532 or email [themaryforbes@gmail.com](mailto:themaryforbes@gmail.com)

## Scout Island Nature Centre Annual Fund Raising Banquet

The annual fund raising banquet for the Scout Island Nature Centre will take place on Friday, April 24, at St. Andrew's United Church. The guest speaker will be Briony Penn. Details about the banquet will be provided in the next newsletter."

## BC Nature Magazine Available Online

From Cathy Koot; your membership director

Are you a WLFN member who is not receiving the BC Nature magazine so as to reduce paper use? As a member of our club, and therefore a member of BC Nature, you can still read all the excellent natural history related articles released quarterly via the BC Nature Website. BC Nature is a federation of local natural history groups and represents over 53 local nature clubs throughout BC. Its purpose is to:

- Provide naturalists and nature clubs of BC with a unified voice on conservation and environmental issues
- Foster an awareness, appreciation and understanding of our natural environment, that it may be wisely used and maintained for future generations
- Encourage the formation and cooperation of nature clubs throughout BC
- Provide a means of communication between naturalists in BC.

### How to Access the Online Magazine:

1. Obtain your official numeric password. If you do not receive the magazine by choice, please email the office to request one ([manager@bcnature.ca](mailto:manager@bcnature.ca)). Otherwise, refer to your existing magazine label – see example below:

**123456** (Password on the top left of your label)

**Smith, John** (Member Login – Type exactly as on the label, including punctuation)

1234 Anywhere St.,  
Big Town, BC V00 000

2. Go to "Members Only" on the BC Nature Website ([www.bcnature.ca](http://www.bcnature.ca)) and input your Member Login and Password. These can be saved by using the "Remember Me" button, so that you don't have to keep inputting this information on future visits.
3. Once logged in, use the tab on the members only area that states "Publications" – new editions of the magazine are posted at the same time that the magazine goes to the printers.

This "Members Only" area of the website is constantly evolving with additions being made constantly, so visit often and learn wonderful things about nature and naturalists in BC!

**A friendly reminder that your 2015 membership was due back on January 1<sup>st</sup>. Forms can be obtained from the website, at the Nature Centre or with last month's mailing of the December newsletter.**

## Volunteer Opportunity: Williams Lake Air Quality Roundtable Chair

The Williams Lake Air Quality Roundtable is currently looking for a new Chair.

### Duties of the Chair position include:



- Chairing bi-annual (November/May) meetings of the Air Quality Roundtable
- Representing the Air Quality Roundtable at outside events relevant to air quality
- Working with the Administration Assistant to the Air Quality Roundtable to ensure members and communications are up-to-date

**Skills/qualifications required include:**

- Meeting facilitation
- Communications (email, phone, etc.)
- An interest in issues related to air quality
- Neutrality (i.e. not a current employee of government or industry)

Airshed Management Planning in Williams Lake is a process aimed at improving local air quality. It is overseen by a volunteer, multi-stakeholder committee – the Williams Lake Air Quality Roundtable - and its goal is to tackle virtually all sources of air pollution through the implementation of the Airshed Management Plan.

The goals of the Airshed Management Plan and the Air Quality Roundtable are to:

- Ensure that identified contributing sources are using the best technology available to treat air emissions
- Use Pollution Prevention Plans to systematically reduce point and fugitive sources of industrial pollution
- Encourage dust control measures at strategic locations in the airshed
- Facilitate better regulation of all types of burning
- Suggest innovative approaches to reducing emissions from all types of motor vehicles

If interested please contact Jane at [info@breatheasywilliamslake.org](mailto:info@breatheasywilliamslake.org)

For more information please refer to the Williams Lake Air Quality Roundtable’s website [www.breatheasywilliamslake.org](http://www.breatheasywilliamslake.org) or contact Jane at the email address above.



**Scout Island Nature Centre News**

From Sue Hemphill

Scout Island has purchased 2 types of new binoculars for the kids to use at the Nature Centre.

The Vortex Raptor 8.5 x 32 and Kowa YF 8 x 30 were bought at Vancouver Telescope. They replace the well-worn 'Bushnells' which were probably responsible for several cases of temporary blindness. I tried them both out at the back feeder and was particularly impressed with the Kowa's. They retail for around \$130 - \$150, so are at the low end as far as optics go but seem to be excellent value.

**The purchase was made possible because of a generous donation from the Lioness Club of Williams Lake, Thank-you**



**We can actually see the birds now.  
Grade 7 Environmental Education students make good use of new binoculars**

The snow is certainly a welcome sight. It means, we can once again offer Snow Fun programs at the Nature Centre and at schools. Paula and Mary are leading those. I am busy with the Grade 7’s, getting classes ready for the Earth Challenge, and very soon going out to the classes with salmon. The salmon are almost ready to eat.

The grade 7 Outdoor Ed. Class is back. They are focusing on winter ecosystems. First each got up close to a local mammal (dead one that is) to appreciate how it could live in our area. Then we went out looking for signs of the animals as well as to do some math (more fun done in the snow than at a table. The new snowshoes were really appreciated and thank –you to Red Shreds for the great deal they gave us.



I hope all the chocolate lovers are enjoying your chocolate. We again made a good profit on the sales (\$1300). Thank-you to all!

Once again, it is time to talk to university students that might want to be Teacher Naturalists at Scout Island Nature Center May-August this year. If you know of a possible candidate, please have them email me their resume and cover letter [shemphill@netbistro.com](mailto:shemphill@netbistro.com).

## 2014 Williams Lake Christmas Bird Count

By: Phil Ranson

The Williams Lake Field Naturalists held their 47th annual Bird count on Dec 14th under moderate conditions with a light snow early on, then temperatures at Valley bottom warming up to about zero. With 40 field participants covering 20 routes, the total count was surprisingly low with only 3096 birds comprised of 46 species. This is the lowest number of birds since 2002 and 4 species below the 20 year average. Undoubtedly the heavy snow and deep freeze of early December cleared out many of the lingering birds but this void is often filled by the arrival of the northern finches which wasn't the case this year.

This wasn't a local phenomenon however with many other counts in the interior experiencing similar results. Bird populations can be cyclic and fluctuate widely year to year based on weather, food supply, breeding success and probably several factors which we are not aware of, so too much shouldn't be read into a single year's count. Bohemian Waxwing numbers alone can double the size of the count and estimates in early December around Williams Lake ranged between 2000 and 4000 birds. By count day, the mountain ash berry supply was mostly depleted and the birds had moved on and only 114 were recorded on the 14th

Unusual this year was that there were very few unusual or unexpected birds which will add interest and often excitement to the count. The few exceptions were 3 Rusty Blackbirds, which are designated as a species of special concern in Canada, found in Chimney Valley. This is only the third time they have appeared on the count. Also a little unusual and could very easily have been missed, were a family of 3 adult and 2 juvenile Trumpeter Swans in flight south of the Airport.

As with just about every count, there are always some species that appear in record numbers despite the overall results; Northern Flickers have been showing a more or less consistent increase over the term of the count and this year's total of 68 was well above last year's previous high of 50 birds. The numbers of Gray Jays, sometimes called 'Canada Jay' or 'Camp robber', fluctuate widely year to year but this year's total matched the previous high of 31 set in 1987. One of our more spectacular raptors, the Golden Eagle, is never a common species and the 4 birds seen along the Fraser is one better than the previous high set in 2000 and 2007.

Another bird that is increasing not only on the count but also as a breeding species in the region is the White-throated Sparrow. Seldom observed west of the Rockies fifty years ago, this dapper little sparrow with the instantly recognisable song was found at feeders at Scout Island, N. Lakeside and at Terra Ridge.

Many thanks to all who participated and to Fred for once again hosting the post-count Potluck.

**Least Weasel (*Mustela nivalis*)**

By: Kris Andrews

I belong to the Association of Professional Biologists as a retired member, and got this email regarding Least Weasel. I have been sure for a number of years that I have seen least weasel tracks in winter in the snow around the Bulrush Boardwalk and sometimes the causeway. I had taken photos of the tracks, so sent a couple I still had in my photo files to Helen Davis. She didn't seem convinced that that's what they were, but without a ruler to give scale and in the deeper snow, it is really hard to tell who made the tracks.

Anyway I got lucky the day before the WL Christmas Bird Count. Denise Deschene phoned me and said there was a strange finch at the SINC feeder. I decided I would go down to have a look. I thought it was a good chance to check out the SINC bird feeder the day before count day in case there were no shows for WTSP etc on count day. Denise and I and Mark were watching the feeder out the window of the Nature Centre, when Mark said "What's that white thing".

Of course there was no snow on the ground yet and the "white thing" was very visible on the green lawn and brown leaves. The white thing was a weasel with a very short tail going in and out of the insect tower that the Pre School teacher, Karen, had built in the fenced area in front of the Nature Centre to attract insects. I was excited wondering if it was a Least Weasel, then remembered I had one of my old zoom cameras around my neck. Trying to get pictures with it was difficult as it is old and doesn't work well anymore. But the little weasel spent about 5 minutes exploring the insect towers and making brief excursions to the base of the bird feeder. Luckily I did manage to get a few photos, albeit, bad ones, but good enough for the records. I then went and got the book on Mammals of Canada from the SINC library and looked up weasels. The Least Weasel has no black hairs on the tip of its tail as do the Ermine and Long tailed Weasel. When I checked the photos there were no black hairs visible on the tip of this weasel's tail.



Photo by Kris

I sent copies of the photos to Helen Davies and she agreed that it was a Least Weasel. I then got Larry Davis's email and sent them to him as well. He responded that over the next few weeks he would be designing a DNA hair snare that he wanted to deploy around the area where the Least Weasel was spotted. Since then I have walked in the upper WLR Valley and have come across a lot of tracks in the snow that I think are possibly Least Weasel and sent photos of them to Helen Davis. Helen Davis and Rich Weir felt they were either Ermine or a jumping mouse. Larry Davis thought they could be Least Weasel. Unfortunately it has snowed a lot since then and I have not seen any more tracks there. It will be interesting to see what if any confirmation of the occurrence of Least Weasel in and around Scout Island and the WLR Valley can be made if Larry's prototype for catching hair works. Maybe other members of the WLFN have also seen Least Weasel tracks around the area or can download the information sheet and keep a look out for potential sign that they could report.

*(The following from an email from Rich Weir)*

Did you know that BC is home to the least weasel (*Mustela nivalis*), which is the smallest carnivore in the world, often weighing-in at under 100 g (about the same size as a large chocolate bar)? In fact, it is believed the smallest least weasel subspecies - the rixosa subspecies - lives here in BC. Least weasels can be distinguished from short-tailed weasels (aka ermine) and long-tailed weasels by their smaller size, much shorter tail and lack of black hairs on the tip of their tail. Unfortunately, very little is known about this amazing little carnivore in our province, as they are very secretive and don't leave a lot of obvious sign in the bush.

We don't have even the most basic data on the distribution or abundance of least weasels in the province, therefore, we are asking biologists to pass along any observations that they may have had of this creature throughout the years.

Although least weasels seem to be uncommon, they may occasionally get caught in small mammal traps. Their tracks may be encountered in snow in the winter time, but conditions need to be ideal to detect their tracks.

If you have any sightings, capture records, or tracks of least weasels, please contact Helen Davis ([hdavis@artemiswildlife.com](mailto:hdavis@artemiswildlife.com); toll-free 1 888 223 4376). We would be most appreciative of any information that you have on this incredible micro-carnivore!

Cheers,

Rich Weir

Richard D. Weir, R.P.Bio. | Carnivore Conservation Specialist

Ecosystems Branch, Ministry of Environment PO Box 9338 Stn Prov Govt | 4th Floor, 2975 Jutland Road Victoria, BC | V8W 9M1 | 250.356.8186

## Great Grey Owl (*Strix nebulosa*)

Researched by Jim Sims

(Checklist of Cariboo Chilcotin Birds, Birds of BC Vol. 2 and [www.allaboutbirds.org](http://www.allaboutbirds.org) )

This seems to be the winter of the Owl as we are seeing daily reports of Owl sightings of several different species, Short eared at Scout Island and Mission Rd., Hawk Owls on the Dog Creek Rd. Snowy Owl down by 100 Mile a day ago and Great Grey Owls from all over the place. The sightings have resulted in many excellent photos and sightings being shared on the cariboo-chilcotin-birds google group. I am feeling left out by all of this as I'm not seeing any of these Owls East of Williams Lake where I spend most of my time. A big thanks to all the reports and photos that have prompted me to share some of the facts I have discovered about the Great Grey Owl.

The Checklist of Cariboo Chilcotin Birds designates the Great Grey as a year round uncommon owl (expect to find 1 to 6 individuals per locality in the right habitat) and it is a nesting resident. They can be seen feeding during the day during the winter months and when feeding young.



Lubna's Chimney Valley Great Grey  
Photo by Sandy Proulx



Another Hunting Great Gray on the  
Dog Creek Rd. Photo by Jon

The Great Grey is our largest owl in both wing span and height, however it is all fluff and feathers and underneath it is relatively light. Both the Great Horned and Snowy Owls outweigh it by a significant amount. It has similar features to a Barred owl (earless and round face) however it is significantly larger, has yellow eyes compared to dark eyes and has a distinct white bowtie. The Russian common name is "Bearded Owl" and refers to this feature.

They prefer forested habitat near meadows, road sides and bogs where they can hunt for small mammals, their main food source. They are often observed perched like the one above as they watch for and listen to prey below them. As well as hunting from sight they will also hunt by sound hovering over the snow and then plunging down to grab their prey below the snow. Adults will consume up to a third of their weight daily.

Usually nesting in abandoned hawk and eagle nests or on tree stumps, great gray owls are devoted parents. When prey is scarce, females will starve themselves to maximize food for their chicks, losing up to a third of their own body weight. Their sacrifices are rewarded with remarkably high breeding success rates. Breeding pairs in North America successfully fledge 70-80 percent of their young.