

MUSKRAT EXPRESS

WILLIAMS LAKE FIELD NATURALISTS

NOVEMBER + DECEMBER 2019 NEWSLETTER

CHRISTMAS BIRD COUNT

SUNDAY DEC 15TH.



I am ready
for the
6PM
Potluck
at
Fred's



Have the Bohemian
Waxwings
arrived
for
winter?





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

Membership fees: Family (\$35), single (\$30) 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 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

2020 Fees are due January 1st The new forms are attached. We are working on an online payment process but unfortunately it is not finalized. As soon as this is available you will receive an email along with instructions. Please submit your membership on time.

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: presidential Team Margaret Waring (Chairperson), Don Lawrence (Scout Island affairs) and Ordell Steen (Communications/liaison), secretary Nola Daintith, treasurer Katharine VanSpall and directors Peter Opie, Ray Hornby, Francis McCoubrey, Jean Oke, Kathie Hamm, Don Lawrence and Fred McMechan



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 January. If you have comments, suggestions or articles for the next Muskrat Express please contact Margaret Waring (398-7724), Jim Sims (296-3638) or e-mail us at muskratexpress@shaw.ca



From Jim at Eagle Lake Winter has been slow arriving out here this year. The cold of the last few days has caused the last of the waterfowl to depart. Today I went for a walk along the lake trail and was thrilled by the musical sound of the ice jingling like bells as the gentle waves collected the ice along the shore. Just enough snow to start checking out the silent night visitors. All along the shore there were tracks of the Long-tailed Weasel and the many rabbits. Today I found a couple of sets of wolf tracks on the lake trail.

No new rare birds for Eagle Lake this newsletter, just getting the usual feeder birds that includes the single Boreal Chickadee. I'm feeding a female Hairy Woodpecker and a male and female Downy. It is interesting to have these 2 species so close on the feeder. It makes it easy to see the subtle differences, the larger size of the Hairy with its bill as long or longer than its head, the horizontal strips under the undertail of the Downy. Both of these woodpeckers are feeding on the sunflower seeds more often than the suet. I've been watching the Downy hoping for some good pictures. It will take a single seed and fly off to a nearby Aspen. It finds a knot and wedges the seed into the cavity and hammers at it until the seed opens and the seed is eaten. This is different than the Chickadee that holds the seed with a foot while it opens the seed. I noticed the Downy was spending a fair bit of time on one the feeder posts after it picked up a seed. Then the feeder rotated and I discovered what the Downy was doing. It had chiselled a small hole in the post and was using this instead of making the short flight to the aspen. Was this a demonstration of an intelligent woodpecker building and using a tool?



**Downy Woodpecker
Eating Sunflower seed**

I received an email message from Avery Bartels one of the bird banders from the Tatlayoko Lake Bird Observatory. He sent this link

<https://tatlayokobirds.wordpress.com/migratory-bird-count/> to the bird counts from the valley. Have a look at the report on the 2019 observations and banding, very well presented and interesting. A visit to the valley should be on every birder/naturalist wish list for 2020.

2nd Showing of An Evening in the Karakoram

With Sean and Lubna

December 12th at 6:30

At the United Church

The Nature Centre was the scene of a packed house the evening of October 25th when Lubna Khan and Sean Donahue took their audience on a trek through the Karakoram to see K2 in the northern areas of Pakistan. Cumin cookies and Chai tea complemented a wonderful evening of big mountains, exotic birds and travails in a landscape that holds no mercy. Despite the allure of 8000m peaks, the stories of the people and their generosity was the real treat.

From the moment they arrived in Islamabad, the capital city of Pakistan, the generosity of the Pakistani People made their trip through that amazing landscape unforgettable.

The audience donated over \$400 to support Nature Centre programs – talk about generosity! Ordell Steen, Margaret Waring and Sue Hemphill went out of their way to help with set-up for the presentation.

Sean and Lubna are planning a second show at the United Church 1000 Huckvale Place (same venue as the Naturalists Banquet) Thursday December 12. Doors open at 6:30, show starts at 7:00. There is no admission fee; however, any and all donations appreciated.

Proceeds will go to supporting desperately poor Balti families who make a meager living serving as porters and cooks for trekkers and climbing expeditions in the north of Pakistan.

Williams Lake Christmas Bird Count

By Phil Ranson

The 52nd annual count will be held on Sunday December 15th this year. Most of our regulars have been contacted but the initial response indicates that we are likely to be short of participants to make up parties for all our usual locations. If you haven't joined us in the past and would like to, please contact Phil (see below).

Last year we counted over 6000 birds of 53 species. Almost 40% of that total was made up of Bohemian Waxwings. New to the count were 2 Gadwall and 10 Cedar Waxwings, which brought the combined number of species for the count up to 121. We also had count highs for several species including Lesser Scaup, Common Goldeneye, Bald Eagle and Eurasian Collared Doves, with close to record numbers of Bohemian Waxwing, Dark-eyed Junco and Pine Siskin with 717 birds. So far this winter there is not a Siskin to be found.

Also last year, we had alarmingly low counts for all our regular woodpeckers; Hairy, Downy and Pileated Woodpeckers and Northern Flicker, which seemed at odds with the perceived ample food supply due to insect and fire damaged trees. It will be interesting to see if these numbers have rebounded.



Cedar Waxwing new CBC species in 2019

You can assist with the count by joining teams in the field or counting birds at your feeder, which can make up a significant proportion of our numbers and often involve species missed in the field. All feeder count information can be phoned in to Fred McMechan at 392-7680 after 6:00 PM on count day where Fred will once again be hosting the post-count potluck at 1225 Moon Avenue.

For more information on the Williams Lake Christmas Bird Count please contact Phil Ranson at 250 398-7110 or ranson1@telus.net.

Potluck Supper and Social Gathering

Friday January 24th 6:00pm SINC

Why not spice up your January and enjoy a warm winter evening?

We can set aside a table for hot spicy dishes and I am sure there will be other delicious unique non spicy items too! It all depends on you! Come connect with friends and meet some new ones. This would be an ideal time to renew your membership if you have not yet done so. We hope to see you at this New Year January Gathering.

Notes from the Executive

By Ordell Steen



A **strategic planning committee** of the board, chaired by Frances McCoubrey, is working to develop a new, revised strategic plan for Scout Island Nature Centre. The committee met with Diane Wright for assistance to develop the plan, and will be seeking input from WLFN membership and the public.

One goal under discussion is developing and enhancing First Nations' perspectives on nature at the Nature Centre. The WLFN has again provided a **student bursary** for a graduating Lake City Secondary School student going on to post-secondary education in a biology related field. Profits from the Scout Island annual yard and garden sale support the bursary.

On-going efforts to apply "**Fire Smart**" guidelines at the Nature Centre have included moving the shed behind the caretaker's house further from the house and installing new propane tanks and line (paid for by the City). Planning is on-going for making other changes including a new wheelchair entrance and porch for the Nature House and changes to the Nature House structure.

Construction of the City's **new pedestrian bridge** from the City owned lot on the "R.C. Cotton" property to crown land at the west end of Scout Island Nature Centre is complete. The bridge structure was lifted onto its cement footings on November 6 and since then the approaches to the bridge have been completed and the wood decking and siding have been added to the bridge frame. A gate has been placed on the bridge and it will remain locked until next spring.



WLFN directors have been in frequent communication with City staff and TRU Engineering staff (principal contractor) to minimize potential detrimental impacts to Scout Island. Principal concerns

have included the potential spread of knapweed from the R.C. Cotton side to Scout Island, where there currently is no knapweed, and prevention of after-hours access and resulting potential vandalism to Scout Island Nature Centre. Directors have met on-site and in the office with City staff, a Regional District invasive plant specialist, and TRUE staff to discuss options for limiting knapweed spread and other issues. Recent discussions have included 1) restoration of the Butterfly Trail which was damaged during transport of gravel to the construction site, 2) revegetation of disturbed areas near the bridge, including grass seeding and planting of native trees and shrubs, 3) procedures and times for locking of the gate on the bridge, and 4) on-going measures to reduce the spread of knapweed to Scout Island. Measures to control the spread of knapweed are limited by the large abundance of knapweed on the R.C. Cotton side and restrictions on soil excavation on that site. Discussions regarding items 2 - 4 are on-going and we thank City and TRUE staff for their cooperation.

If you have any questions on these or other topics the directors are addressing, or input regarding activities of the board, please contact any director.



Scout Island Nature Centre

By Sue Hemphill

Friends of Scout Island Nature Centre Fund Raising Drive for 2019-2020

As you know, donations from our members and the public fund a significant proportion of all of our programs. Your donations make it possible for us to have nature mentors to lead classes, community groups, our school break nature fun programs and have a nature house full of life of all kinds.

Why not make the donation in the name of a friend or family member?

Email shemphill@xplornet.com to let us know if your donation is a gift to someone else. We'll send you an original card that you can use to announce your gift.

Mail checks to Scout Island Nature Centre, 1305 A Borland Rd. Williams Lake BC V2G 5K5

All the best of the holidays to you and those you share them with. And remember to spend some time in Nature, the greatest gift of all



Walk for Wildlife—you need to look everywhere

Walk for Wildlife was one of our family programs. They looked for animals and their signs: tracks, homes and habitat, scat, and food and played games of course.

Student Leadership Conference

By Bill Gilroy



On October 26, 15 students from across BC, participants in the student leadership conference hosted by School District 27, descended upon Scout Island. Their aim was to provide service to the community. After an introduction to Scout Island and the Nature House, the students divided into three groups and rotated through invasive weed pulling, as well as learned about Citizen Science through birding and collecting aquatic invertebrates. The invertebrate collection activity was led by Jeff Voght, a local grade 12 student who is in the process of completing an independent studies project on aquatic invertebrates. A comment from one of the visiting students: “This is the best nature house I’ve ever been to!”



2019’s Salmon Trip

On September 25th the Greenologists from Lake City Secondary, Columneetza Campus, joined members of the Enviro Club from the Williams Lake Campus for three days of on the go, hands on learning at Gavin Lake. This trip, called the “Salmon Trip” typically has students working with the Department of Fisheries and Oceans to harvest 2-3 Chinook Salmon which is the beginning of the Stream to Sea Program that many classrooms around the District take part in. Once salmon that are ready to spawn are caught the eggs and milk are taken from the salmon. At the UNBC

Research Center out by Likely the eggs and milk are united and the process begins. Later the eggs are transported to Scout Island before being taken out to classrooms around the District where lessons are taught on the salmon's life cycle and importance in the Fraser River Watershed. Students then care for the salmon as they watch the salmon grow from eggs to alevin to fry to par. In the spring another lesson takes place and students take part in releasing the young salmon back into the wild.

This year's trip was in jeopardy due to the slide along the Fraser River making it difficult for salmon to bypass and return to their traditional spawning grounds. However, teachers at both campuses, Scout Island personnel, and DFO supporters for the program were determined to overcome this obstacle and keep the essence of the "Salmon Trip" alive. So although a harvest was not possible for students this year the learning about, and discussion of, what makes a healthy watershed, its importance, uses, and the balance needed to keep our watershed healthy became the focus of the trip. With students from both the senior and junior campuses involved in the trip some of the sessions were geared specifically for the senior students, others for the junior students, and still others for both groups to work together. The senior students proved to be excellent role models and mentors for the juniors, and the juniors thrived on the opportunities presented by the seniors.



Both groups participated in a hike along a fire guard, a canoe trip down Gavin Lake (seniors), canoe lesson and paddle (juniors), a lesson on salmon dissection where seniors often passed opportunities on to the junior students, the introduction of small mouth bass to the Beaver Valley lake chain and the detrimental effect of this species on interior ecosystems, and visiting and learning about sustainable/eco-friendly ranching, all of which tied into this year's theme of watersheds.

In addition to the above, senior students were enlightened on the abundant and diverse fungi on the Gavin Lake trails, a session on invertebrates run by one very knowledgeable grade 12 student, and a presentation on the state of this year's salmon run in the Fraser River watershed.

A hike to look at the parts of the Gavin watershed for the junior students soon also turned into a game of who could find the most unique fungi along the trail with students stopping to examine shapes, colours, textures and sizes of the various fungi found. Junior students were also enthralled and full of questions during a presentation on bats ... A whole new appreciation for these flying mammals!

Although all three days were packed full of exciting learning experiences, with little down time, listening to students' discussions about the day's events and their overall feelings on the trip, it is safe to say that this is a trip that students are not soon to forget!

A Student's Reflection

Every year the LCSS Greenologists and Enviro Club members have the opportunity to participate in a very important Salmon Trip that takes place just outside of Williams Lake. The primary focus is catching and harvesting the sperm and eggs from one female and male Chinook salmon. This harvesting of the sperm and eggs is crucial as it provides important data for the Quesnel River Research Centre, provides hands on learning experiences for students on the trip, and provides classrooms with fertilized eggs so that they may participate in the Stream to Sea Program (where students get to see the salmon eggs hatch and develop in their classroom).

This year, however, was a year unlike any other. Many have heard of the disastrous rockslide that was found in late June of this year. However, not many know just how damaging it was to the already diminishing Chinook salmon population. Due to the salmon population being drastically low this year, participants learned about the effects of the

rockslide instead of harvesting eggs and sperm for the classroom program (Alternative arrangements have been made by DFO to keep the classroom program going).

With the rockslide not being discovered until late June it was already too late to save all the returning salmon. The rockslide created a five meter waterfall that the salmon were unable to pass, and if steps were not taken, the whole run would be lost. The DFO, First Nations fishing crews and archaeological monitors, field and support staff from the BC Wildfire Service, biologists, rock scalars, and many others, got to work immediately to try to save the salmon. Although an option to use a salmon cannon was discussed, ultimately, the act of lifting the salmon over the waterfall and upstream by helicopter was decided as the best source of action.

While the helicopters were at work, approximately 1, 500 salmon were transported daily, but this was still not enough. Crews worked desperately at safely transporting and demolishing rock to provide safer and easier paths that would allow the salmon to pass the waterfall naturally. By September 4th, the rockslide was small enough and the water levels were low enough that salmon were able to naturally pass the waterfall.

This year, it was expected to have about 4 million sockeye, 5 million pink salmon, 40 000 Interior Fraser Coho and about 30, 000 chinook returning, however, the rockslide greatly affected these numbers. The pinks were fortunate with a count of 8 million pinks recorded at Mission, putting them higher than what was expected and hopefully increasing the odds of more pinks making it through the slide. Unfortunately, the rest of the salmon were not so fortunate. Through the course of September and October, currently 275, 000 sockeye were counted to having passed the slide (whether by helicopter or naturally). The coho and chinook populations are currently still unknown due to a later migration and poor weather conditions when counting has occurred. With the aid of a helicopter, approximately 17, 400 salmon were transported upstream to spawn, and by September 26, 240 000 salmon had passed over the Big Bar slide naturally. While everyone is incredibly grateful for the salmon that have returned to spawn, it can no longer be denied just how serious our declining salmon population has become and how one natural disaster could end the run forever.

While we may not have salmon around us year long, salmon are still a crucial part of our environment and provide our area with several benefits. For example, salmon are a food source for not only humans, bears, and eagles, but for at least 137 different species that depend on the marine-rich nutrients that the wild salmon provide. The salmon help enrich the diversity in our watersheds and their presence is a key indicator on the health of our rivers. Salmon support tens of thousands of jobs and economies within Canada and are seen as the life-sustaining centerpiece of First Nations culture, along with being a large portion of their diet. By protecting the salmon, you, in turn, are protecting the forests, food, water, communities, and economies of Canada.

On the Salmon Trip students were able to hear first-hand just how important the salmon population is to our area, and what action individuals can take to help give a voice to the salmon. Overall, it was an unforgettable experience that will affect not only the students that went on this year's trip, but the salmon returning in years to come.

Ali Waterhouse
Grade 12
Lake City Secondary



By Steve Capling

Our View of the Night Sky: December 2019.

Planet Review

Mercury is visible in the morning twilight very close to the horizon in the east until it disappears around December 25th.

Venus is visible in the west in the evening at twilight. Remains low in the western evening sky through Dec. There will be conjunctions with Saturn on Dec. 10 & 11th and the waxing crescent moon on the 29th.

Mars is visible in the morning twilight close to the horizon in the east.

Jupiter is visible with difficulty in the evening low in the southwest sky. It fades into the sunset by mid-month.

Saturn is visible with difficulty very low in the evening sky in the south-west then fades into sunset early in the month.

For those wanting to know more accurate rise and set times for the Planets check out this website:

<https://www.timeanddate.com/astronomy/night/canada/williams-lake>

Annular Solar eclipse. December 26th. **Not visible** from western N. America.

Moon

New Moon - Dec. 26th, Jan. 24th.

Full moon - Dec. 12th, Jan. 10th.

Winter Solstice - Dec. 22nd.

Meteor Showers:

The Geminids. Peak on the nights of Dec. 13 & 14th, unfortunately under bright moon conditions. The Geminids are a very reliable shower if you watch at the peak time of night (centered on about 2 a.m. for all parts of the globe). The meteors tend to be bold, white and quick. This shower favors Earth's Northern Hemisphere, but it's visible from the Southern Hemisphere, too. The curious *rock comet* called [3200 Phaethon](#) is the parent body of this shower

The Ursids. Night of Dec. 21/22nd. The Ursids have a sharp peak on the morning of Dec. 22, meaning that observers will see many more meteors on that day than on days before or after. Look at the sky in the morning on the 22nd, after midnight and as late as possible before sunrise. The meteor-shower radiant, which the meteors will appear to be flying away from, is near the bowl of the Little Dipper ([Ursa Minor](#), near the celestial North Pole), and the radiant will climb higher in the sky in the pre-dawn hours. The Ursids are associated with Comet 8P/Tuttle, which was discovered in 1790 and then re-discovered by Horace Tuttle in 1858.

New comet becoming visible. (Sort of): A team of astronomers from Yale University in Connecticut imaged [Comet 2I/Borisov](#) on Sunday (Nov. 24) using the Keck Observatory in Hawaii, revealing the object's tail to be nearly 100,000 miles (160,000 kilometers) long. This comet has also been referred to as C/2019 Q4.

The comet was discovered in late August by amateur astronomer Gennadiy Borisov. Analysis of the object's speed and trajectory revealed that it came into our solar system from afar, making it the second known interstellar interloper after the [mysterious body 'Oumuamua](#), which was first spotted in October 2017.

Amateurs might be able to observe Borisov over the coming weeks as well, but will need at least an 8-inch telescope under pristine, dark skies.

Evening Sky Map – courtesy of Skymaps.com.

For a printable sky chart try this web site - Skymaps.com/downloads.html - scroll down the center of the page to the download button. "December 2019: Northern Edition (PDF)". At the end of the month it changes to show the next month's chart.

The Skymaps chart also has a useful list of what is visible with the eye, binoculars and telescopes.