

MUSKRAT EXPRESS

WILLIAMS LAKE FIELD NATURALISTS
JANUARY 2020 NEWSLETTER



I am off to warm up at the hot + spicy pot luck
FRI JAN 24th 6 PM
I will pay my membership + buy the new book too!

Shhh!
I am reading

Great Book

Best Seller for sure!

NEW
SCOUT ISLAND

SCOUT ISLAND



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

A friendly reminder that your membership fees were due on January 1st. Jim apologises for not attaching the 2020 forms to the emailed December newsletter. Hopefully he has not forgotten this time. Forms are available online at the club website below.

Joyce Lawrence (your membership chair) is pleased to announce that membership forms and fees can be dealt with on line. If you have access to editing pdf files the completed form can be saved (please include your name in the name of the saved file ie. Membership-Sims.pdf). Or you can print the forms and scan the completed form. The completed form can then be emailed to Joyce at joycemembership@shaw.ca Fees can be paid through an e-transfer, snail-mailed or dropped at the Nature Centre. To pay by e-transfer use Joyce's email. The account is set up for automatic deposit so no password is required. This is a secure process.

Williams Lake Field Naturalists Website <http://www.williamslakefieldnaturalists.ca>
Scout Island Nature Centre Website <http://www.scoutislandnaturecentre.ca>

Directors of The Williams Lake Field Naturalists: Co-President 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 late February or early March. If you have comments, suggestions or articles for the next Muskrat Express please contact Margaret Waring (250-398-7724), Jim Sims (778-764-2752) or e-mail us at muskratexpress@shaw.ca



Note: The printing of the newsletter has become significantly more expensive and will no longer be provided in colour. It is possible that the cost could end up exceeding the individual membership fee. If you are still receiving a paper copy please consider if it is essential and if not please request an email copy on your 2020 membership form and make us aware of the change.

Our Newsletter can be longer and more interesting. A while back we introduced a section called "Member's Moment". For the past several editions we have had no submissions. I find this confusing when we see all your awesome photos posted to the Cariboo Chilcotin Bird Group and your postings to Facebook. Why not send us a picture along with a short story. Help us fill the Muskrat with interesting stories and pictures.

From Jim at Tern Inn, Brrrrr! It has been -40 for too long now but I have still managed to get out doors for a few walks each day. Fortunately, there has been some sun and no wind to make walks tolerable. Since I sent the last newsletter I have lost my best companion for the past 12 years, Smedley is missed. I will honour his memory by keeping his email address active and will read all the messages you send to him. I'm looking forward to getting my new puppy, Niut on my trip to town tomorrow. He will be a Springer Spaniel and unlike Smedley he is a bird dog. The Grouse had no fear of Smedley but I expect Niut will require some extensive training.

His training will have to begin early as the Ptarmigan have returned to Eagle Lake from the summer in the mountains. I found one on Tuesday shortly after I found this set of tracks along the shore of the lake 3 km east of the house. Note the landing plunge into the snow and the take-off angel wing-marks. At first, I thought it was just another Ruffed grouse that made a mistake as the tracks were very distinct and usually the Ptarmigan tracks are smudged out as it is more likely to shuffle through the snow. But then this was entirely the wrong habitat for the Ruffy. Its dark camouflage is suited for the forest not out here in the open. On the other hand the Ptarmigan in its winter white dress is ideally suited for the snow



I continued on into the next bay and immediately found the more familiar Ptarmigan smudged tracks all along the beach. I soon found the bird roosting in the snow.

Note the lack of a red slash above the eye. I did approach a bit too close and the bird flushed from the roost and flew a short distance. When it flew, I had a clear view of the all-white tail that identifies it as a White-tailed Ptarmigan. I was out again on Wednesday and the bird was on the move. It travelled along the shore, moving in short flights to the west over 4 km. I found a few sets of tracks, one a 100 m east of home and another 100m west of home but by time I found the last set 500 m to the west it was getting late and cold and I figured it was moving way too fast for me to catch it. I found one more old set of tracks even further along the beach on my walk yesterday but they were a day old and covered with fresh snow. No other sign of the Ptarmigan.



Today I started out again and quickly found new tracks and the roosting bird just west of Memorial point 300 m from the dock. I continued along the beach for another kilometre and walked around What Was Bird Island. There were extensive fresh tracks on the east side of the old island where the ptarmigan had been feeding. A close look at the better pictures I took today with my big camera revealed that this was a different Ptarmigan as it has black under the tail and also has a more obvious red slash above the eye. This is a Willow Ptarmigan. Wonder where Tuesday's White-tailed went. Maybe Niut will help me track it down on Sunday.



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New Year Potluck Supper Friday night, January 24th

Let us create and enjoy a warm January winter evening.

Potluck supper at Scout Island Nature House at 6 PM on Friday night January 24.

I would like to encourage you to invite a guest, a colleague from work or a family you know to join our potluck. Bring a neighbour, invite someone new to town or someone who is interested in the Field Naturalists.

We will hopefully be dining on spicy dishes, hot dishes and maybe even hot spicy dishes. Non spicy items and desserts are welcome and will be enjoyed too! Come connect with WLFN Members, bring a guest and renew your membership. We are working on some form of entertainment.

Annual Yard and Garden Sale

From Margaret

I think it is too early and a bit too cold to be out in your garden but you could start dividing some of your indoor plants or considering what seeds to order or plant in the spring. Are you studying seed catalogues yet? While waiting to get out to your garden it is a good time to clean out a closet or a box or a room or even a basement and pack a box or 2 in preparation for the Spring 2020 Yard and Garden Sale. The Sale will take place early in May. We have already committed to providing another bursary for a graduating grade 12 student next year. I hope you are able to help.



Notes from the Directors

By Ordell Steen

City’s new bridge from RC Cotton site to Scout Island. WLFN directors have had several communications and meetings with City staff regarding the new bridge. Two concerns with potentially significant impacts to Scout Island that have been the focus of most discussions, are 1) after-hours (when causeway gate is closed) access to Scout Island via the bridge and unseen by the caretaker, and 2) the potential for spread of knapweed from the RC Cotton side to Scout Island via the new bridge. Although a lockable gate was part of the original bridge design, it is no longer considered an option by the City due to the public safety risks recently identified by risk assessment professionals. As a result, other options for controlling or at least monitoring after-hours access are being studied and discussed for approval by the City and the WLFN directors. We look forward to a workable solution. Although the City cancelled the planned December opening of the bridge, they hope to have an opening celebration before spring.

The WLFN directors have been working with the City to identify measures to limit the spread of knapweed by people and pets crossing the new bridge. Options to control the knapweed near the foot of the bridge on the RC Cotton side are limited by proximity to the lake, the restrictions against any excavation of RC Cotton site soils due to chemical contamination, and the large amount of knapweed on properties adjacent to the City property. Knapweed on adjacent property would invade the City property unless controlled on those properties as well. Current proposed efforts include barriers to prevent vehicle access to the areas of knapweed and fences and signs to encourage pedestrians to avoid walking through the knapweed. Longer term measures to eliminate the knapweed are being explored.

Scout Island Spring Banquet. The 2020 Scout Island Nature Centre Banquet will be on April 17. Frank Ritcey, wildlife photographer and frequent guest on CBC Radio (NxNW), will be our featured speaker. WLFN directors are currently arranging and working on the many parts that are required for a successful banquet. More information will be provided in the next Muskrat newsletter.

Other Activities. Directors are continuing to work towards a new strategic plan for Scout Island Nature Centre. More information on this will be provided as the approach is more fully developed. Directors are also working to identify plans for making the benefits of Scout Island Nature Centre and its programs better known to the wider community. The fire smart program at Scout Island is progressing with some recent changes to the area under the north side of the Nature House. A sign identifying the Nature Centre as a demonstration area for fire smart treatments has been prepared by Bill Gilroy and Ken Day.

If you have any questions or concerns regarding activities of the WLFN directors, please contact Margaret Waring, chairperson, or any other director.



Scout Island Nature Centre

By Sue Hemphill

In December, Kacie Young stepped in as teacher of the Nature K as Kirsten Hamm



went on medical leave. Everyone is pleased to see Kacie back. She has a lot of outdoor education experience at Scout Island-as summer staff and then as Nature K teacher at Scout Island spring 2017.

Literacy inside and outside—Which do you think is the most fun?



Scout Island “For the Birds” craft table was busy as usual at the Earth Friendly Holiday event in early December. The owl ornaments are always a hit. Thank-you to Jurgen Hornburg for cutting out all the parts for suet feeders and for members of the Enviro group for putting them together. Students from the Grade 7 Outdoor Education class and the Greenologists came out to help both days of the event.

There has been some interesting wildlife reported at Scout Island this year. We had a moose and calf show up intermittently over the summer. There was a close sighting of a badger near the Nature House. In December, there were clear tracks of racoons discovered by Shane White, local wildlife biologist. Over the last month there have been many coyote tracks. There is definitely a band of coyotes

hunting our hares this year. Keep your eyes open next time you walk the trails.

Special Skills Needed at the Nature House

- Do you like to do hand sewing? We have lots of small nets that we use for dipping invertebrates. The frames are fine but they need new netting. Are you up for the challenge? You can take them home to work on.
- We want to make a “stream” of fish going from our ocean tank to our lake tank. The wooden fish are made and painted. We need a creative way to attach them—perhaps on a river of bright cloth. Come see me if you would like to try this challenge.

There are still lots of good chocolate bars and baking chocolate left for sale. It is really fresh and will keep well all year if you keep it cool. Stop in and help support Scout Island as well as your chocolate fix.

Scout Island Nature Centre is hiring Summer Staff—Teacher Naturalists If you are or know of a university student interested in biology and/or teaching please have her/him send me a cover letter stating why he/she would like to work at the Nature Centre, a resume, and references. They should be interested in nature, have taken biology in high school and enjoy working with children. They can email me if they would like more information about this great summer job.

Wage Rate Per Hour \$17.50 40 hours/week 14 weeks between May 1 and Aug. 23 **Resumes and cover letters due Feb. 5th**

52nd Annual Williams Lake Christmas Bird Count

By Phil Ranson

The December 15th Christmas bird count was conducted by the Williams Lake Field Naturalists under near ideal conditions. Light winds and a mix of sun and cloud with airport temperatures showing steady at -7°C kept things relatively comfortable for the 35 counters in the field.

There were no new species on the count this year and the final tally stands at 4,158 birds, about 300 less than the 10 year average, while the species number stood at 51, again slightly below average.

Any expectations for a bumper count had been tempered by the lack of the usual northern finches which can invade the area in winter, and the seeming scarcity of Bohemian Waxwings which have boosted the numbers considerably in past years. Although there were a surprising number of Waxwings found (488), the forest finches, specifically the 2 species of Crossbill and Redpolls were no-shows, and others like the Pine Grosbeak



Red-tailed Hawk

and Pine Siskins were only seen in low numbers.

The big story of the count was the record numbers of field raptors headlined by a phenomenal 14 Northern Harriers. The best we've managed in the previous 51 counts was two. Red-tailed Hawk numbers were 3 more than the previous high of 9, and the arctic breeding Rough-legged Hawks also more than doubled their previous best with 9. It can only be speculated that a combination of low snow cover, relatively mild weather and a healthy rodent population accounts for this increase.

Paradoxically, we didn't see any owls which has happened only once before in the past 20 years and made all the more strange by the 10-12 Short-eared Owls reported from Riske Creek only a few days before.

Other count highs and part of a continuing trend were the 5 Spotted Towhees and 120 American Goldfinches. Towhees have only become regular on the count in the past decade, while Goldfinches have only occurred annually since 1999. Another record high count was the 713 Rock Pigeons up from the previous high of 483.



Spotted Towhee

Woodpecker numbers have rebounded some from last year's lows but Downy Woodpeckers are still well below normal. The 18 Steller's Jays seemed like a surprising number, but was surpassed in the records by the 27 counted in 1995.

Thanks to all the participants, especially those that traveled from out of town, and all the feeder watchers who phoned in their reports. Many thanks to Fred McMechan for once again hosting the post-count potluck.

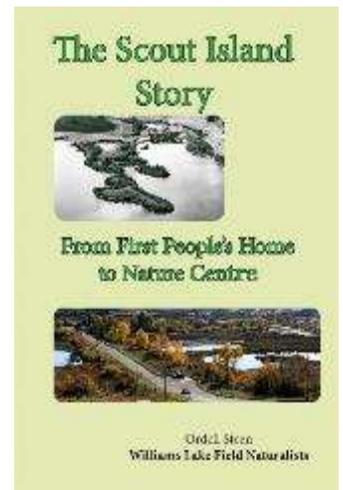
New WLFN book on history of Scout Island

From Ordell

The Williams Lake Field Naturalists recently published a small book on the history of Scout Island, from First Nations occupation to development of the Nature Centre. The back cover of the book states: "This is a story of three small islands at the west end of Williams Lake in central British Columbia. Primarily a Nature Centre today, the small islands were once part of an ancient Secwepemc village site from which the people were wrongfully displaced by early settlers. Prosperous farms serving the gold rush developed rapidly in the 1860's. In the 1960's, the value of Scout Island as a natural area was widely recognized and the islands were purchased from the Town of Williams Lake by the Second Century Fund (The Nature Trust of BC.). Scout Island Nature Centre was born. Dedicated volunteers have made it an outstanding nature centre where school children experience hands-on nature learning and many people continue to enjoy a natural area, rich with wildlife, in an urban setting."

Thank you to Anna Roberts, Fred McMechan, Jean William, and others who shared their memories and knowledge.

The book will be available at Scout Island Nature Centre, the Open Book, and (after January) the Station House Gallery.





Our View of the Night Sky: January 2020.

By Steve Capling

Happy New Year!

Planet Review

Mercury is too close to the Sun to be visible for most of January. It becomes visible low in the west in the evening twilight very close to the horizon at the end of January. Mercury is visible until about the middle of Feb.

Venus is visible in the south-west in the evening at twilight. It is visible higher in the south-western evening sky through February.

Mars is visible in the morning twilight close to the horizon in the east. In February it is very low in the morning twilight. There is a (very) close encounter with the waning crescent moon Feb. 18th and viewers can see Mars re-appear from behind the moon around 4:30 a.m.

Jupiter is too low to be visible in early January. Later in January it becomes visible in the morning twilight in the south-east. In mid-February it becomes the bright centerpiece in a trio of planets with Mars and Saturn.

Saturn is lost in bright twilight for the month. It emerges in the dawn twilight early in February. The waning crescent moon passes close to it on Feb. 20th.

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>

Zodiacal Light - Feb. 11th - visible after evening twilight for the next two weeks from a dark sky.

Moon

New Moon - Jan. 24th, Feb. 23rd.

Full moon - Feb. 9th, Mar. 9th (largest of 2020).

Evening Sky Map – courtesy of Skymaps.com.

For a printable sky chart try this web site - [Skymaps.com/downloads.html](https://www.skymaps.com/downloads.html) - scroll down the center of the page to the download button. “January 2020: 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.