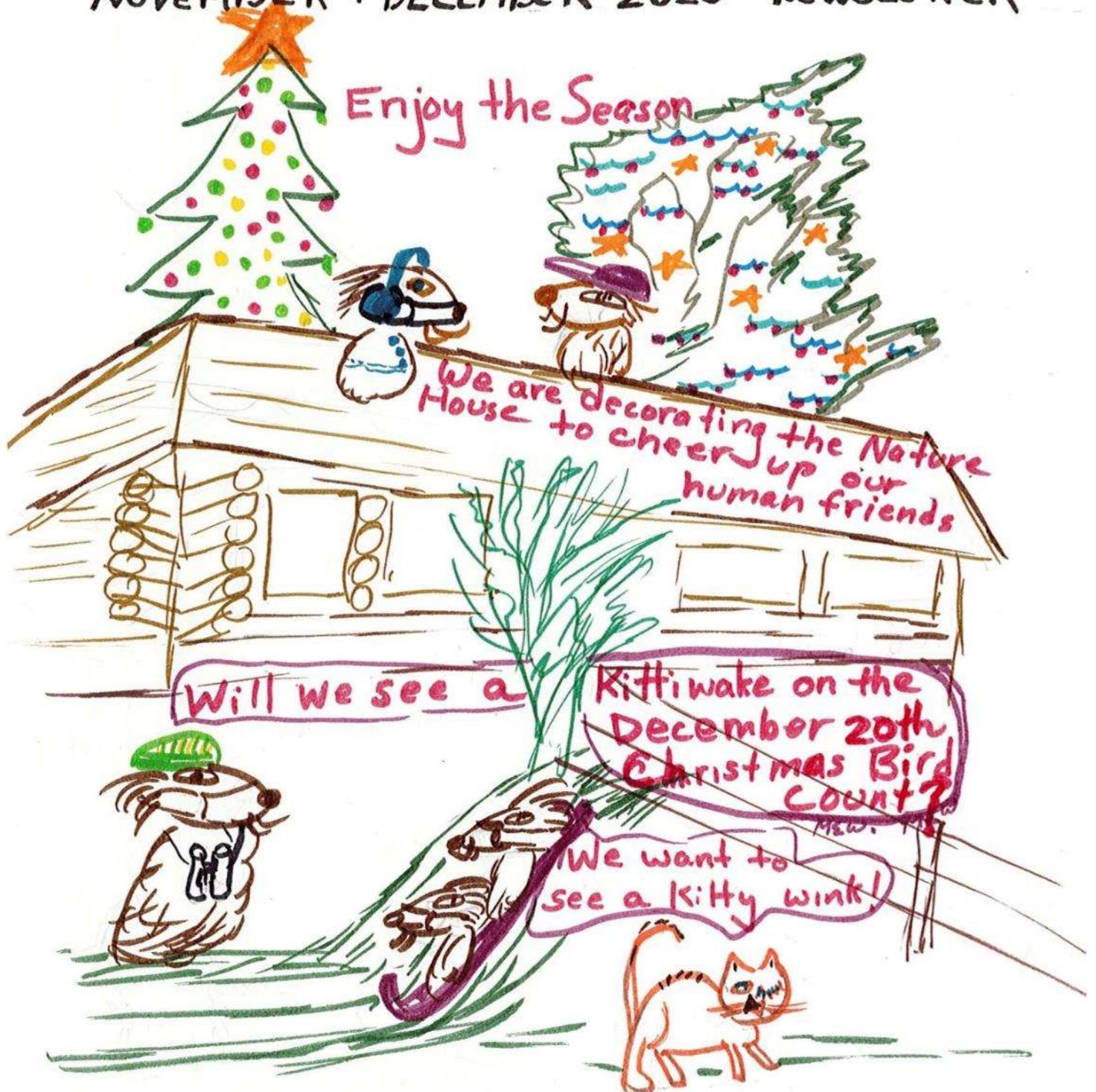


# MUSKRAT EXPRESS

WILLIAMS LAKE FIELD NATURALISTS

NOVEMBER + DECEMBER 2020 NEWSLETTER





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](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) **Membership expires on January 1<sup>st</sup> 2021 so it is time to consider renewing for 2021. Forms have been attached and can also be downloaded from the club website below. Our membership Chair Joyce will appreciate a timely submission. Thanks**  
**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, Cathie Hamm, Don Lawrence, Sean Donahue 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 near the end of January. If you have comments, suggestions or articles for the next Muskrat Express please contact Margaret Waring (398-7724), Jim Sims via e-mail at [muskratexpress@shaw.ca](mailto:muskratexpress@shaw.ca)



From Jim at Eagle Lake Winter is starting to settle in here in the Chilcotin although it does not feel like it today. On Saturday evening Niut and I were thrilled to listen to the chimes of broken ice along the east edge of the new ice covering on the lake, a good east breeze was breaking on the edge of the ice. On the same evening walk as we turned to come back in the moon-light we noticed how high the winter constellation Orion is getting in the sky. By the way we refers to my best friend Niut who keeps me company on all these walks. He did pause to listen to the chimes but the paws did not stop long enough to enjoy Orion. We just have feeder birds around now with the exception of a this Pygmy Owl that has been entertaining David over at the Lodge. Hoping for a much safer 2021 and a return to field trips and programs at SINC for all of you.



## Williams Lake Christmas Bird Count

By Phil Ranson

The 53rd annual count will be held on Sunday December 20th. A decision was made to go ahead with the count as we feel we are able to do it safely, comply with the provincial requirements and still enjoy the outdoors. However, it is likely to be a smaller and more low-key event. Most of our teams will be from the same household or are single observers. We would encourage more walking and less vehicle travel where possible. We will still have room for people who could cover off smaller areas on foot. One highlight of the count we will forego this year is the traditional post count pot-luck at Fred McMechan's.

Birds counted at feeders make up a significant proportion of our totals so we would encourage anyone with a feeder to report on what they saw. It would also be helpful if you could advise anyone in your neighbourhood to do the same. If you are able to help out or would like to know more about the count, please contact Phil at 306-7110 or [ranson1@telus.net](mailto:ranson1@telus.net)



### Scout Island Nature Centre Nature Kindergarten update

By Kacie Young and Tanya Johnson

The Nature K's have been keeping us on our toes this year. They have been extremely eager to learn what Kindergarten is all about, especially Kindergarten at Scout Island. We have been exploring what animals do in winter including the following strategies used by animals: adaptation, migration and hibernation. We have had the privilege of seeing a very speedy and elusive weasel making an appearance in a few of our favorite play spaces. The weasel is now completely white, versus its brown summer coat, except for the very tip of its tail. The tip is black. The kindergarteners think it's sneaky that the tip stays black to fool predators. The students have been watching with enthusiasm as it runs through the dogwood along our back fence.



We have also noticed many migrating birds. Some of the migrators spend their summers here and others were passing through, like the trumpeter swans. The students watched the trumpeter swans feeding, landing on the lake and flying overhead. At this moment, the classroom favorite is the year-round resident, black-capped chickadee. The students enjoy making nests for the chickadees and have even been making soups for the chickadees in the mud kitchen. But by far their favorite thing is waiting with sticks by the bird feeders hoping one will land that they can keep as a class pet.

We have also been looking for signs of animals in winter including animal tracks and scat. The students circle their favorite tracks in hopes of others seeing what they've found. They have also been following tracks to make stories about what the animal was doing or where the animal was going. What 5-year-old can't resist checking out animal poop and sharing the news with their friends.

Scout Island is the perfect place for us to watch the changes that are happening in our local environment especially as we change to a new season. We regularly check the lake edge in a few different places. We use sticks to check the thickness of the ice. A fun activity that we've been doing lately is throwing soft snowballs out on to the ice. It gives us a perspective of the thin ice layer. Rocks are cool to use too- some skip and slide a long way. Some rocks break through the ice very quickly and sink. We love breaking ice! Oh, the shapes we can find. Some are so small and others are so big that you need a friend to help you drag it out of the puddle. We've even found ice wrapped around beaver sticks and small stumps. The Kindy's have discovered that when you pull the ice from the stumps, you have this cool hollowed out tube. They have been using the tubes to play telephone or even as telescopes.



We can't forget the snow! It's getting pretty scarce around the Island but we do have fun in it. We have investigated the snowflakes with magnifiers, made our own tracks, written our names and numbers, built snowmen and of course, made snow angels. One of the biggest highlights is the snowbanks. They are looking rather small and rocky these days but with a little luck, they'll get bigger soon!

We aren't always the quietest group on the Island so we are extremely thankful for the Scout Island staff, Field Naturalists and Community Members that share this amazing place, their sightings and stories with us.

**Our Fall at Scout Island**

*by Jaxson Dikur, Wyatt Mason, Nathan Green, Thoren Jansen and Tristen Place  
[Mr. Kruus Outdoor Ed 7 Class]*

The first time we came to Scout Island, we volunteered to move some pieces of boardwalk that had floated away in the flooding. We also pulled some invasive plants near the new bridge. We outsmarted the map 😊 in our initial orientation. On another visit we improvised stretchers. We had to use our shirts, so the dog walkers passing by had a little shock... Mr. Gilroy explained his rock collection, and showed us Willy and his Corn Snake. This autumn we've played Oh Deer!, Sardines, Blind Caterpillar, Mystery Tree, Animal Sculptures, and other stuff.

On a snowy day we tried to hike to Signal Point with Denise (and Daisy). An epic snowball fight erupted. We also tried four different ways to build stretchers using found materials by the North Marsh Trail.

Today we are finishing our Secwepemc pine needle baskets with Dancing Water. Without Scout Island our Thursdays outside wouldn't be complete.

**Friends of Scout Island Nature Centre  
Fund Raising Drive for 2020-2021**

What a year 2020 has been! Covid presented challenges, but the Scout Island staff came up with ways to provide nature programs safely.

Sharing aquatic invertebrates while social distancing. The staff social distanced but had groups of students, children or families that were part of pods that could be tracked if a problem arose—none did all spring or summer.

Then there were the floods—**Three of them.** Volunteers came in to save the bridge, clear debris and scrub off boardwalks. The last flood has lingered with the highest



water we have ever seen here in November. There is heavy damage to all of the boardwalks and there will be no chance to fix them until later in 2021.

The community really showed their need for the solace of nature all spring and summer. The trails (that weren't flooded) were busy every day with people birding, bathing in the "green" and relaxing.

The water is lower now but 1/2 of the Willow Trail boardwalks are broken and not walkable any longer.

That brings me to our **Fund-Raising Drive for 2020-2021.** As you know, donations from the community fund a significant proportion of all of our programs. Your donations make it possible for us to have nature mentors to engage all ages with nature and have a

nature house full of life of all kinds. This year those donations are especially needed to make possible the boardwalk repairs while continuing to offer programs.

**You can donate by check or by e transfer.** (Log into your personal online banking and send an Interac e transfer to [SINCdonations@shaw.ca](mailto:SINCdonations@shaw.ca). Please create a password for the transfer and email that password to our treasurer at [SINCdonations@shaw.ca](mailto:SINCdonations@shaw.ca)). Mail checks to Scout Island Nature Centre, 1305 A Borland Rd. Williams Lake BC V2G 5K5

Either way you will receive a receipt for a charitable donation.

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

Email [shemphill@xplornet.com](mailto:shemphill@xplornet.com) to let us know if your donation is a gift to someone else. We will send you an original card that you can use to announce your gift. If it is a gift of \$250 or more, we can send you a handmade wooden shoehorn made by Jürgen Hornburg. Each feels wonderful to hold and to ease your foot into your shoe.



We wish you a quiet, safe holiday with time to enjoy those you are able to be close to.  
Remember to spend time in Nature, the greatest gift of all

**Black Legged Kittiwake** (*Rissa tridactyla*)

By Jim Sims

A new bird species for Eagle Lake and the Cariboo Chilcotin. Recently I received an email from John Woods, our local reviewer of email records. John informed me that 2 other reviewers had found a misidentified record of a rare Mew Gull that I had submitted to Ebird on July 11<sup>th</sup>, 2019. John agreed with the other reviewers. I looked over my photos and the reviewer's comments and agreed with their comments. My Mew Gull sighting has been changed to a Black-legged Kittiwake which is a first sighting of this species in the Cariboo Chilcotin.



I have occasionally seen the Mew Gull here at Eagle Lake and originally thought this small white-headed gull with an all yellow bill was a Mew Gull. I recall the day as it was one of my better birding days of early summer. I had drifted past the rock that the bird was sitting on and could have reached it with the end of the paddle, it never stood up or flew away to reveal its black legs. If I had seen or better photographed the legs I would have recognized it as something new as the Mew Gull has drab yellow legs. It did open its mouth and yelled at me and this revealed a bright red tongue and lips that show in the above photo. The inside of a Mew Gull's mouth is a dull red-orange. The bill shape, down curve is different from the Mew Gull's straighter bill. This gull also has a rounder head shape and a much shorter neck.

The Kittiwake is a truly pelagic seabird gull spending virtually all of its life over the open ocean except during breeding. They can be found along both the east and west coast of North America. The nesting is done in large colonies mainly on cliff ledge sites along the coast or on coast islands.

The big question is how did this single Kittiwake get so far from the habitat it belongs in? Did it follow some of the other gulls I saw that day (California and Bonaparte's)? Was it blown inland by a coastal storm? I hope it made it back home to its mate and chicks.

## **Our View of the Night Sky**

By Bill Irwin

Hello, my name is Bill Irwin and I will be continuing this column after the sad loss of Steve Capling, who wrote it for some time.

I live at Bells Lake, 16 km town side of Horsefly. We have a roll-off roof style observatory beside the lake here and have had numerous observing sessions with different groups. My main instruments are a 5" refractor and a 12.5" reflector on a split ring equatorial mount (Same as Mt Palomar just way smaller). I hope the present readership of the Muskrat will become part of the observing circle.

I've read that in these Covid times, telescope sales are up and there is a renewed interest in backyard star gazing. In these days of robot rovers, Hubble deep space photos and lavishly executed TV documentaries why would anybody go out into their backyard at night and look up?

The problem with all the wealth of astronomy information is that at some point you really don't have any place to put it. Only by being out and actually looking at the sky do you develop the perspective that allows all that great data to fall into place.

Seeing Saturn for the first time in a backyard telescope has nothing like the detail of a Cassini probe photo, yet for most people it is a stunning moment they will never forget. It's because you are actually looking at it and for that moment you know where it is. The size and direction of space starts to map in your brain. Getting a sense of the motions of the planets and the extent of the Milky way, the subtle colour and brightness variations and patterns of the stars is deeply moving. Just try to pronounce all those Arabic star names!

It's been an exciting year for planets, culminating in the favourable opposition of Mars back in October. While not at its closest, Mars was much higher in the sky, which frees the image from the turbulence seen when looking thru the atmosphere at low angles. In my 5" refractor I was able to see the polar caps, the blue tinge of Mars' atmosphere, and the dark albedo features such as Syrtis Major. Using a larger telescope might have shown a bit more detail, but only rarely as the image is usually in turmoil. At its largest, the image was over 22 arcseconds across. The full moon is around 1800 arcseconds, so you can see that Mars is a challenge. By the end of Dec mars will fall below 10 arcsec and details will not be visible. But it will be back in around 2 years.

The Geminid meteor shower will peak of the night of Dec 13. The shower has been gaining in strength as the earth's orbit intersects the debris stream more centrally each year. It now is capable of surpassing the August 11th Perseids. The moon will be out of the way this year as well, of course there's always the weather to contend with. Astronomy takes some dedication.

At solstice, around Dec 23rd there will be a very close conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn, low in the southwest at dusk. At 6 arc min of separation, it will be possible to see them both in the same telescope field and of course that's Venus in the dawn sky in the east.

My observatory has a heated warm room and we also have the "starcamp tent" which has a stove in it as well as other creature comforts. Ac power is onsite as well. I hope that interested people will contact me once the Covid threat has abated. The sky is quite dark here and the lake seems to stabilize the seeing. In spring, there is no end of bird activity! I can be contacted at 250 620 0596 or [irwin8sound@gmail.com](mailto:irwin8sound@gmail.com).

## Great Backyard Bird Count

(mark this on your 2021 calendar)

Thanks for all you do to raise awareness and appreciation of the world around us. Not only have birds kept us entertained during this world-wide pandemic, but they have also made us feel happier and less stressed. We think your members will enjoy the upcoming Great Backyard Bird Count in February. Not only does it provide a break from daily worries, it is a fantastic opportunity for your members to contribute to Citizen Science, no matter where they are – from the safety of their own home or favourite birding location.



The Great Backyard Bird Count is a 4 day annual event that provides a snap shot of where birds are around the world. It is taking place Feb 12-15, 2021. Last year there were 6,942 species recorded and 268,674 checklists submitted!

We ask people to count birds for at least 15 minutes on one or more days of the count and enter their sightings at [BirdCount.org](https://www.birdcount.org). The information gathered by tens of thousands of volunteers helps track changes in bird populations on a massive scale. Birds Canada is proud to be a partner in the Great Backyard Bird Count, along with the [Cornell Lab of Ornithology](https://www.cornell.edu/ornithology/) and the [National Audubon Society](https://www.nationalaudubon.org/).

Here is a link to the [instructions](https://www.birdcount.org/learn/annual-results/) and to last year's results <https://www.birdcount.org/learn/annual-results/>. We're pleased to announce that we have a New Look for the Great Backyard Bird Count website. This year we've redesigned our webpages to help you quickly find resources to make your count a success!

Please share the information with your group and with anyone else who may enjoy participating. Best wishes for the holiday season and Happy New Year!

Kerrie Wilcox  
Canadian Coordinator, **Great Backyard Bird Count**  
Birds Canada  
[888-448-2473 ext 134](tel:888-448-2473)  
[www.birdcount.org](https://www.birdcount.org)

## Something for all of us to Consider in these Challenging Times

The anthropologist invited the children from the African tribe to play one game. He placed a basket of fruit near the tree and announced, addressing the children: "The one of you who reaches the tree first will be rewarded with all sweet fruits." When he signaled to the children to start the race, they locked their hands tightly and ran together, and then they all sat together and enjoyed the delicious fruit. The astonished anthropologist asked the children why they all ran together, because each of them could enjoy the fruit for himself. To which the children replied: "Obonato". Is it possible for one to be happy if everyone else is sad? "Obonato" in their language means: "I exist because we exist."

"Years ago, anthropologist Margaret Mead was asked by a student what she considered to be the first sign of civilization in a culture. The student expected Mead to talk about fishhooks or clay pots or grinding stones.

But no. Mead said that the first sign of civilization in an ancient culture was a femur (thighbone) that had been broken and then healed. Mead explained that in the animal kingdom, if you break your leg, you die. You cannot run from danger, get to the river for a drink or hunt for food. You are meat for prowling beasts. No animal survives a broken leg long enough for the bone to heal.

A broken femur that has healed is evidence that someone has taken time to stay with the one who fell, has bound up the wound, has carried the person to safety and has tended the person through recovery. Helping someone else through difficulty is where civilization starts, Mead said."

**Member's Moment from Don and Joyce Lawrence****After a long walk on a hot day it is Time for a Cool Nap**

Two springs ago, we were fishing a large lake on a calm hot June day. Out of the trees came a medium sized grizzly bear. He walked very casually along the beach as we trolled in our boat beside him. After a kilometer or so, the heat must have been too much because he then laid down for a sleep with his back foot in the lake. We slowly putted away leaving him to his nap.

“Member’s Moment” is an opportunity for you to share a special scene, plant, animal, bird or outdoor activity that you have enjoyed and photographed here in the Cariboo Chilcotin. A chance for you to encourage other members to get outdoors and find their own special moments close to home and perhaps share them with all of us. For each newsletter the editors will select one or two photos for inclusion in the newsletter based on the quality of the photo as well as the interesting paragraph you must provide. We will save all submitted unused moments in hopes they may find a place in a future edition. Please email your full resolution photo and paragraph to the [muskratexpress@shaw.ca](mailto:muskratexpress@shaw.ca). A special thanks to Don & Joyce.