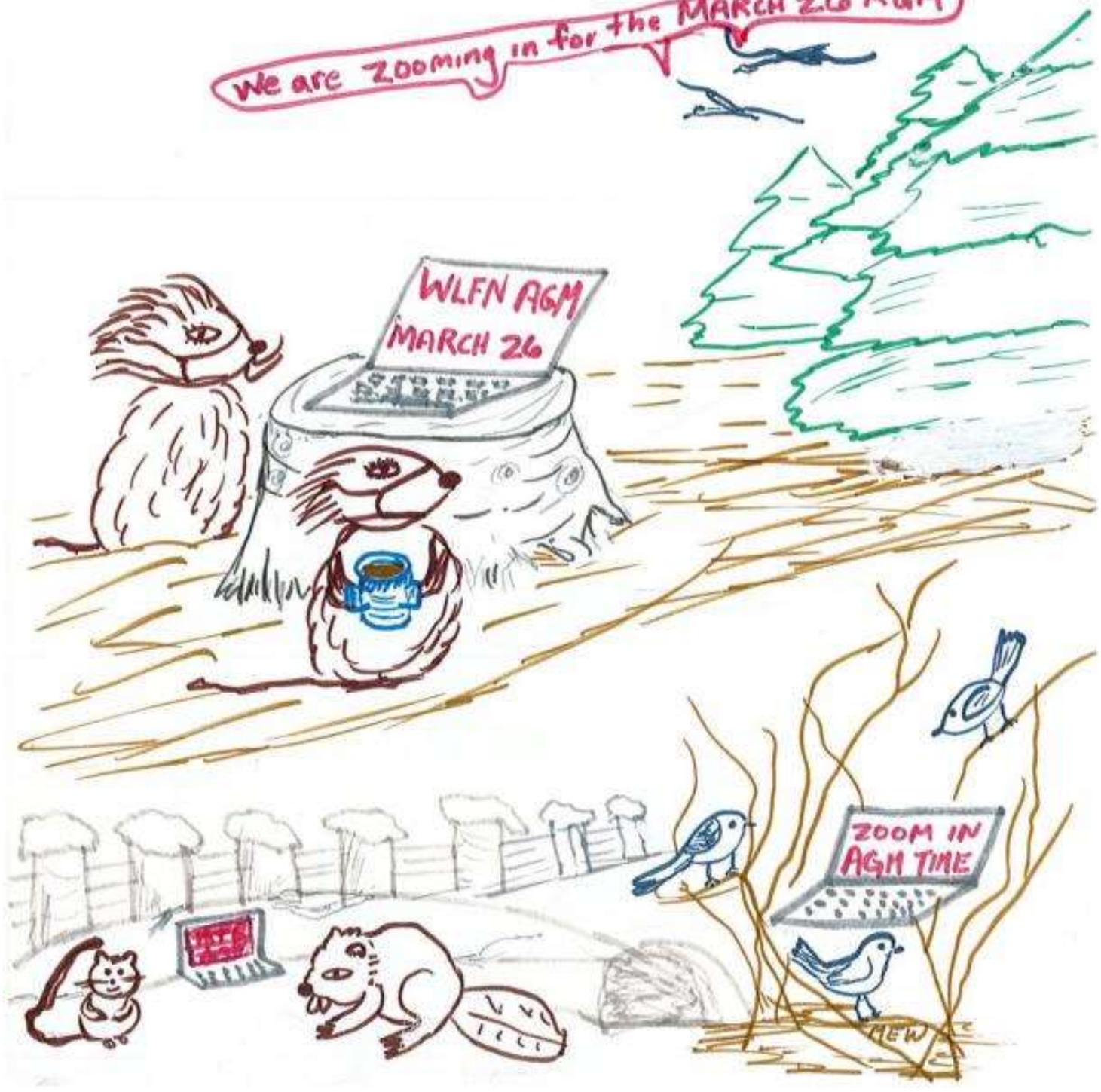


# MUSKRAT EXPRESS

WILLIAMS LAKE FIELD NATURALISTS

JANUARY + FEBRUARY 2021 NEWSLETTER

We are zooming in for the MARCH 26 AGM





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)

**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 in late March. 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](mailto:muskratexpress@shaw.ca)



### **Christmas Bird Count**

By Phil Ranson

The 53rd annual Williams Lake Christmas Bird Count was held on December 20th, a day which may well be remembered by the 30 counters for the mild weather, bright afternoon sunshine and the temperature at Williams Lake Airport reaching a record high 4.8°C for the date. The Lake was mostly ice free and for probably the first time in count history, kayaks were seen on the water and used by Peter Opie on the count.

The long-held belief that good weather doesn't necessarily make for a good bird count held reasonably true once again with a fairly average count for recent years with 5015 birds counted of 53 species.



**Blue Jay**  
By Phil Ranson

**Anna's Hummingbird**  
By Phil Ranson  
Two new birds were recorded on the count for the first time; an Anna's Hummingbird coming to a Gibbon Street feeder, and a Blue Jay which has been visiting feeders in the Flett Road area for several weeks. This brings the aggregate number of birds recorded on the 53 counts to 123 species. There were few other surprises on the count and still some concern with our regular woodpecker numbers remaining low, although rebounding marginally from the disastrous count in 2018. In contrast, the Northern Flicker was counted with a record high number of 83 which is 14 higher than the previous high set in 2014.

With access to the Williams Lake river valley restricted and high water levels, several species normally seen were not counted this year. There

were no American Dippers seen for only the third time in the count's history. Green-winged Teal, which were often found in the river backwaters also went uncounted.

Despite the open water, particularly the Scout Island marsh, the diversity of water birds had been thinned out considerably by the late fall cold snap. There was however, a record number of Common Goldeneye present in smaller groups throughout the lake. The only other noteworthy high count was for the introduced House Sparrows which made their presence known by their spring like chirping from the hedgerows around town.

## **Notes from the Executive**

By Margaret Waring

Notes for the Newsletter from a Co-President

We had a Directors Meeting February 8<sup>th</sup> (by Zoom of course.)

Review of past activities and planning for the future occurred. I want to let you know, remind you and thank you for all the recent and ongoing work that has been done by members of the club, directors, community groups and other volunteers. We have an outstanding team of dedicated people. We thank you.

I share with you the following information and plans from our meeting. Please contact me (Margaret Waring) or any other director if you have questions or contributions. I can be reached by email at [mewaring@hotmail.com](mailto:mewaring@hotmail.com) and telephone 250 398 7724. Our next directors meeting is scheduled for March 10<sup>th</sup>.

## **ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING (AGM)**

Our **AGM will take place by ZOOM on FRIDAY Evening MARCH 26<sup>th</sup>**. We hope you will be able to participate. We will begin at 6:30 PM, gathering people together with a presentation of slides and stories reviewing activities of the past year. This might include an advertisement for the best hip waders of the year. These were the ones that did not leak when floating bridges were rescued during the spring floods. The official annual general meeting will take place at 7PM with brief reports from the Executive and the yearly election of directors. The meeting will be followed by a second presentation at 7:30 PM.

Our tradition is to gather for a potluck supper and the last large social gathering I attended was last year's supper, AGM and Sage's presentation just before the Covid shutdown. This year instead of bringing a dish for a potluck you could share a picture of the gourmet dinner that you prepare for this year and can enjoy at home as you virtually attend the AGM. We realize not everyone has a computer or connection to the internet but maybe you can arrange something for the evening with this advanced notice. We encourage all members, guests and potential new members to attend the AGM. A quorum of members is required for the meeting and most importantly your support, your input and suggestions are appreciated.

## **FIELD TRIP LIST**

I think members look forward to the yearly field trip list, maybe not quite as much as getting out to explore favourite areas, visit new places and learn more about the Cariboo Chilcotin. We are looking for someone to organize the meeting and create the list of trips. Let me know if you would like to do this. There would be help available if you need.

A meeting will be planned and everyone is encouraged to attend and contribute. A list of Field Trips will be created. We hope to have a list for the spring newsletter. We will comply with the provincial Covid orders for the time so details will be updated as restrictions are changed. Please provide suggestions and ideas of trips you would like to see on the list. Offers to be a contact person or a leader for a trip are essential for creating the list. Please share your ideas and interests.

## **PLANT SALE**

Plans are underway for a spring outdoor plant sale. If you are able, please start some seeds to create plants to contribute. We are famous for our tomato plants but herbs and berries and many other items are popular and usually all are sold out. This sale will occur early in May and like other events, details will be defined by Covid rules and regulations at the time. Our plant sales are the source of funds we contribute for a yearly grade 12 bursary.

**MEMBERSHIPS**

Have you paid your membership for 2021? This was due at the start of the year. We do not want to lose you and we know you want to continue receiving this newsletter! Encourage your friends to sign up too.

**SCOUT ISLAND NATURE HOUSE**

Have you been to take a look at the beautiful new entrance, the door and the ramp? Have you noticed the new fire smart metal roof? This past weekend I enjoyed watching the birds at the feeders next to the Nature House. The yellow in the Pine Siskins and American Gold Finches was beautiful. The Nature House is closed but you can take a look at the outdoor additions and walk on the trails. It is wonderful to see all the people that are out and about walking and exploring.

**Scout Island Nature Centre**

By Sue Hemphill  
Scout Island Nature  
Centre News

Despite restrictions due  
to Covid, there has

been a lot of action at the Nature Centre. There are even more people walking the trails this winter. I am not sure why but it is lovely to see all the smiling faces enjoying nature. Even the coyotes are visiting more, and this week took a deer down on the far island. Bill and Kim have been busy with some new ways providing nature to school classes (see their Muskrat contributions), Mary will start providing programs outside at the Nature Centre starting next week. The Nature K is busy every day inside and out (a lot). The two Outdoor Education grade 7 classes are here regularly doing a lot of birding.



Everyone can now come in through the beautiful new front door. We will do a more formal thank-you to everyone involved shortly but I thought you might like to see how the Nature K feel about the new entrance.

**Time to Hire Teacher Naturalists**

Scout Island Nature Centre is hiring Summer Staff—Teacher Naturalists. If you know of a university student interested in biology, environmental studies, and/or teaching please have her/him send Sue 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 Sue ( [shemphill@xplornet.com](mailto:shemphill@xplornet.com) ) if they would like more information about this great summer job. **Applications due by Feb. 19**

**Watching and Feeding Winter Birds in the Cariboo**

**Brought to you by Scout island Nature Centre and Bill Gilroy**

Several teachers have contacted us at Scout Island asking about winter bird watching and feeding. Indeed, winter is a great opportunity to view and learn more about birds that overwinter in the Cariboo, especially because it's relatively easy to attract them to within easy viewing proximity with feeders, which we typically put away during the warmer months. Following is some basic information you can share with your students about winter bird adaptations, which species you're most likely to see and how to set up and observe birds at feeders. At the end of this document is an

outdoor game you can try with your class that connects with the theme of this bulletin.

Winter is difficult for most birds that do not migrate to warmer regions. It's cold and food is not as readily available. Birds need to also adapt physically and behaviourally to survive. Let's talk about physical adaptations to dealing with the cold first.

**FEATHERS AND FAT:** Many overwintering birds add extra feathers and fat in preparation for winter. On cold days, you can see how birds fluff out their feathers to add extra insulating air space next to their bodies. Wet feathers can prove disastrous in cold weather, but with the wet winter weather, how do birds stay dry? The answer lies in the oil-producing glands birds have. They preen to coat their feathers in this oil to **waterproof and insulate their down feathers.**

**FEET:** Actually, birds do get very cold feet: the surface temperature of their toes may be barely above freezing even as the bird maintains its core body temperature above 100°F (38°C). But most birds don't succumb to frostbite because there is so little fluid in the cells of their feet, and their feet are mostly tendons and bones with little muscle or nerve tissue.

Birds also have a countercurrent heat exchange system in their legs and feet—the blood vessels going to and from the feet are very close together, so blood flowing back to the body is warmed by blood flowing to the feet. The newly cooled blood in the feet lowers heat loss from the feet, and the warmed blood flowing back into the body prevents the bird from becoming chilled. And because bird circulation is so fast, blood doesn't remain in the feet long enough to freeze.

**BODY TEMPERATURE:** Chickadees are famous for being able to go into a state of semi-hibernation during cold nights. Their body temperature plummets and energy requirements are reduced. In the morning they warm up through shivering and start their busy foraging day.

**BEHAVIOURAL ADAPTATIONS:**

Birds will make use of the sun's rays to warm their bodies. On cold days, you will see them either sitting on their feet or taking turns pulling one foot then the other up next to their bodies. Birds also avoid the wind by perching or roosting on the lee side of tree trunks.

Some birds, such as chickadees and nuthatches, collect and hide food. They remember the location of hundreds of individual seeds. Some birds, such as grouse, collect and hold seeds or buds in the "crop," a sort of storage bag from which the seed can be digested though the night to supply energy and warmth.

A few birds, such as grouse and common redpolls, plunge into deep snow for the night. Even during the coldest weather, temperatures under the snow are much warmer than the air above.

On cold nights, many bird species cluster together to help keep each other warm. Birds will also roost next to tree trunks that have been warmed by the sun during the day. Others will retreat to nest boxes or tree hollows to keep warm.

**FEEDING BIRDS:**

**Salmonella Warning:** Every few years, some finch species experience what is called an "irruption," when huge numbers that normally winter further north surge southward in search of food. Concentrated bird numbers make them more susceptible to disease, especially where they tend to gather at feeders. There have been many reports this winter about members of the finch family contracting salmonella at feeders. These include mainly pine siskins and house finches. Signs of salmonella include:

- Listless, lethargic birds on the ground or on branches
- Birds just sitting with a "fluffed up" appearance
- Rapid breathing
- Shivering
- Watery eyes



**Red-breasted Nuthatch**

**BC SPCA Recommendation:** If you spot a sick bird at your feeder or in the area, the B.C. SPCA recommends you immediately remove and clean your bird feeders to help curb the disease. To clean your feeder, first discard any

remaining seed, then use soap and water, brushing in the small spaces. Wash it once more with a 10 per cent bleach solution before rinsing and air-drying.

### **SETTING UP A FEEDER:**

Choose a spot that has access to trees and bushes so birds will have cover to move to and from the feeder

We recommend using a feeder that minimizes spillage, such as a tube/silo feeder. Open platform feeders can become dirty and carry more disease. **BLACK OIL SUNFLOWER SEED IS A GREAT ALL-ROUND CHOICE TO USE FOR YOUR FEEDER.**

It's a good idea to provide a daily supply fresh supply of water. The birds will love it!

### **WINTER BIRD ACTIVITIES FOR CHILDREN:**

Draw birds! Use library books, bird guides or the internet. Have students make drawings of the common feeder birds so that they will be more likely to recognize them when they come to your feeder. The internet is full of bird crafts and activities; a quick search will yield results



**Here is one to try**  
Black-capped Chickadee

### **For the Birds**

By Loyd Csizmadia

It is February 13, 2021. The Arctic air which has delivered unseasonably frigid temperatures is weakening. By 8AM, it had warmed up to minus 25 C. Unfortunately, grey layers of dreary cloud have obscured the blue, blue sky. Arctic air has its benefits. I love the sun and the way it makes the wind-sculpted snow glow soft and white. Cold and sunny days can be truly beautiful.

Of course, I can hide in my warm home. Our wildlife, on the other hand, must fluff their feathers or their fur, and regular food is essential. Cold and famine are merciless killers.

Michaela and I have four well-stocked, well-maintained feeders. Normally we have only one. This year, however—in addition to our resident chickadees, nuthatches, and single song sparrow—flocks of other seed-loving birds have been enjoying our hospitality. At first, these small flocks simply passed through. But beginning in January, more and more began to stay. At one point, Michaela and I could count hundreds waiting in the treetops, mostly siskins, but also many goldfinches, and at least nine redpolls. Our resident birds were overwhelmed, so I added two more feeders, one using the surface of a large boulder and another smaller feeder suspended beneath the roof of our front verandah. The feeder over the verandah has become incredibly popular. It is sheltered and hangs near a branchy lilac. Below the feeder is a long railing about 3.5 inches wide. And below that is the dry linoleum porch. I fill the enclosed feeder with sunflower seeds. I also dribble lines of Finch Feed along the railing. Different birds have different needs. The redpolls appreciate the narrow, linear nature of the railing. All nine birds feed in an orderly row. Once in a while they switch places, and on occasion there is a minor squabble between neighbours. The other birds leave the railing to the redpolls, but when a redpoll flies into the lilac to wipe his bill on a branch, a siskin or a goldfinch might briefly fill the gap.

For the most part, the siskins and goldfinches prefer the hanging feeder, probably because they love sunflower seeds. These birds have a peculiar habit of emptying the entire feeder onto the porch where dozens of their buddies jostle one another like dancers on a crowded floor. It is very entertaining. By tossing the seed onto the porch, I could save them a step, but where would be the fun in that? The whole business is rather messy, but the birds feel safe. If I located the feeder anywhere else, the hungry Shrike would kill more than his share. There are already three other feeders around the yard, and daily the Shrike swoops at them out of the sky like a Stealth Missile. The Shrike is deadly-quick and accurate.

Yes, there is another feeder. This fourth feeder (which is really our second feeder) became necessary after the snow arrived in November. That is when a wingless creature called the Mule Deer learned how to take advantage of our only feeder at the time. Up until 2017, deer rarely visited our yard once the crab apples were gone. But a massive forest fire and the subsequent “salvage” logging of what used to be one large, productive winter range left many families of deer struggling to survive. (The attached air photo reveals their situation (Photo Courtesy of Google Earth, 2019). I live near the yellow pin labelled “base.”)

Mule Deer are amazing problem-solvers. They are also good observers. When the matriarch learns a new skill, the younger deer soon imitate that behaviour and adapt it to new situations.

The first time I watched a deer walking upright on her two hind legs, she was picking crab apples. Initially, I was impressed. I even gave this matriarch an honorary name: Split-Ear. But when a member of her group figured out that she could use the same skill to raid my bird feeder, I became annoyed. The offender I named Notched-Ear. (Check out the picture of Notched-Ear applying her new skill.)



By mid-November, Notched-Ear was consuming most of the sunflower seeds meant for the birds. It was my turn to do a little problem solving. Luckily, a dump of wetter-than-usual snow provided the material I needed to build two snow structures: one I call Fort Feed-Less and the other Mount Not. Fort Feed-Less was fun to build. Michaela, my resident expert on Mule Deer, told me to incorporate curves into the design. As you can see in the photo, I did, and so far, so good. The entrance is now gated as well.

Mount Not is also made of snow. My idea was to construct a feeder that would be too high for Notched Ear to reach. The steep sides I coated with water which formed a hard and slippery skin.

Mount Not Version 1, too short

I admit to being giddy with excitement when Notched Ear and her baby encountered my fortresses. She, however, was not amused. After a quick peek at Fort Feed-Less, she wandered over to Mount Not and ate some spilled seed. Scenting the abundance in the feeder, she paced about and pondered the structure. Next, she stood on her hind legs. Then she tried to climb Mount Not at various locations. Her frustration was becoming quite visible. She even walked up to the window where I was gloating and gave me a look that said, " AND I thought we were friends!" I shrugged and suggested she go elsewhere. Then I wandered off to cook dinner.

Notched Ear did not give up. I guess all her failed efforts to climb the icy sides of the mound chipped off the frozen veneer and exposed the softer snow underneath because the next time I checked the feeder, there she was, clinging to the side of the mound just long enough to lick a few seeds into her mouth. Her determination deserves applause. My jaw dropped as I watched her ascend the mound over and over by bending her front legs and stuffing one, sometimes two knees into the soft spots. Then she flopped her long neck onto the deck of the feeder, extended her tongue, and swept what she could into her mouth before losing grip.



That evening, Notched Ear earned every seed. I wondered if her baby was watching.

The next day, I built a taller, steeper structure. This worked. Over the months, however, I had to redesign Mount Not a few times, not because of the deer, but because of the sun and gale- force winds.

Here is Version 3, which eventually collapsed due to sun and wind:



Currently, Mount Not looks like a true fortress. What it lacks in beauty, it makes up for in strength. And up until the recent cold snap, Notched Ear did not test this barrier.

On February 11<sup>th</sup>, hunger encouraged her to try. She achieved limited success, reaching some but not all the seed. Considering the



extreme weather, I accepted a compromise.

But there are limits to my tolerance. Early one morning around 2AM I awoke to what sounded like a bar room brawl on my verandah. No breaking glass thank goodness but plenty of scuffling and sliding and furniture flying. Notched Ear's baby, realizing that the birds had left a mess of seeds on the porch, climbed the stairs and stepped from the wooden stairs onto the linoleum decking. What a surprise that must have been! Her feet slipped out in



four directions and over she tumbled. Thinking baby had learned her lesson, I ignored the matter. But the next night there was a repeat performance, only less violent. Hearing nothing more, I went back to sleep. In the morning light, however, I discovered that she had licked up about half of the spilled seeds. Her balance was improving. I would have to sweep the porch before sunset.

One evening around dinner time, baby surprised me with an early visit. While she stared hungrily at an ornamental fig tree inside the house, I got my camera. Unable to reach the luscious greenery through the picture window, she began licking seeds

off the decking. I snapped more photos as the seeds rapidly disappeared. When every last seed rested in her tummy, she cautiously stepped across the linoleum without slipping. The porch was sparkling clean, so I named her Hoover. There is now a barrier between Hoover and the spilled seeds. So far so good. No doubt there will be more to tell. For now, I will leave you with a photo of Hoover. I hope you like them.

Cheers,  
Loyd Csizmadia

## **Astronomy article, spring issue.**

By Bill Irwin

Spring is approaching, although at this writing an Arctic front is well in place. I suppose the cold air is a precious commodity in these days of global warming, but it will pass, as will the winter stars.

Orion, the most spectacular of constellations, is still due south at dark, constantly doing battle with Taurus the bull to the west and followed by his hunting dogs, Canis major and minor to the east. Together with Gemini, more overhead, this grouping with its collection of bright stars, is one of the most prominent features of the night sky. This includes Sirius, the brightest, Betelgeuse, the biggest (of the bright ones) and Rigel which after Deneb, is the most powerful of the bright naked eye stars. There is also a winter milky way which is not as bright as the summer one because we are looking at the outward arm and not back towards the galactic centre. Using binoculars, you can sweep down past Gemini and thru Monoceros down to the horizon. There is a richness of stars and faint fuzzies in the disc of the galaxy that makes Summer and Winter the time to look at things like open clusters, dark and bright nebulae, globular clusters and planetary nebulae that are all within the Milky way Galaxy. In Spring and Fall, we are looking outwards, perpendicular, from the disc and the interesting objects are other galaxies.

The summer stars tend to persist well into wintertime, whereas the winter stars disappear fairly rapidly into the west as Spring comes. This is due to the fact that it gets dark later each night in spring so the stars have progressed to the west that much more. This is added to the constant 4 min a day westward drift due to our revolution around the sun.

The full moon in Spring does not have the same celebrity as the Harvest moon in fall either. While the moon's motion along the zodiac is a constant 13 degrees every day, the angle of that path is shallow in fall and steep in Spring as it meets the horizon. The full moon rises around 20 minutes later each night in Fall and an hour and 20 minutes later in Spring, so it doesn't stay on the scene for very long this time of year.

Leo the lion, rising in the east is a sure sign that Winter is waning. The prominent reverse question mark with the bright star Regulus as the dot outlines his mane and a bright triangle to the east his hindquarters. Another cat for the dog to bark at. Further east and more south Virgo will be coming into view. The area between and including Leo and Virgo is known as the realm of galaxies. Some of the biggest and brightest belong to this area, from the Leo triplets at the feet of the lion to the massive M87 elliptical, with its super massive black hole core and giant jet, to my favourite, the Sombrero in Virgo with its magnificent dust lane around the middle.

These galaxies are not that easy to see, usually appearing telescopically as gray smudges. It's an acquired taste but it usually results in "I can't believe I didn't see that before" on a second look. You need dark moonless nights to pick out these objects especially from a less than black background. A larger telescope can see a lot more and there are cameras that can greatly enhance the light gathering ability of your scope and offer a quasi-real time view. For a lot of observers that don't have the dark skies we have here in the Cariboo, this is the only option.

Mars will still be quite visible in Taurus this coming season. Jupiter and Saturn will gradually become more visible in the morning sky. Remember Pluto, got demoted from full planet status, it's still up there moving into Capricorn. A difficult observation in even my 12 1/2 inch reflector.

Hope to see you out here at the observatory some time when small gatherings are allowed. Reach me at [irwin8sound@gmail.com](mailto:irwin8sound@gmail.com) or 250 620 0596.

