

MUSKRAT EXPRESS

WILLIAMS LAKE FIELD NATURALIST
JANUARY — 2023 NEWSLETTER



WILL WE BE GOING OUT
IN THE RAIN
OR THE SNOW?



LOTS TO GO OUT FOR:

- * FEB 15 PROGRAM
- * MARCH 31ST POTLUCK TAGH
- * APRIL 21ST BANQUET

DO WE WALK
IN THE MUD OR ON THE ICE?





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 **Friendly reminder your memberships fees were due on January 1st and if you have not paid they you are overdue. Membership details are available in the December newsletter as well as the club website below**

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, Jean Oke, Cathie Hamm, Sean Donahue, Lara Roorda 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 early in March. If you have comments, suggestions or articles for the next Muskrat Express please contact Margaret Waring (398-7724), Jim Sims (778 764-2752) or e-mail us at muskratexpress@shaw.ca



From Jim at Tern Inn where there are no Terns at this time of the year but we are looking forward to their return as the days lengthen and are warming. In Spite of this we do have a winter visitor that should be much further south. Clay from across the lake contacted me a few weeks ago with a report of a mid-sized songbird that was feeding with his cows. The next day he sent me a photo that confirmed he had a Horned Lark at the ranch. On Saturday I visited the cows and found the Lark right where Clay said I would.

This is the first January sighting of a Horned Lark in the Cariboo Chilcotin. During the non-breeding season they are usually found in larger flocks often mixed with other species and sometimes even with cows in feedlots. They prefer open areas that are usually free of snow where they feed on seeds and small insects. This Lark would normally winter in the southern most areas of the province in open coastal or grassland habitats.



Horned Lark Photo by Jim Sims

They are a nesting species in the Cariboo Chilcotin and can be found breeding in the grasslands as well as in alpine areas. They nest on the ground in open areas that have sparse grasses. During migration they can be found in large flocks along roadways and in the open grasslands of the region.

Thanks to Clay for being curious and reporting this rare winter visitor.

Notes from the Director's Meetings.

By Margaret Waring



Happy New Year to all our readers.

Time for me to send a note to you and let you know some of the activities of the Directors.

We had a Director's meeting Wednesday evening, 11th January 2023.

Some planning for spring events occurred. We are working to have at least one club activity every month. We are wanting some of these evenings and events to be for members and by members. Your attendance, input and ideas are important and very welcome.

In December Jenny Howell did an interesting presentation on water use and supply in Williams Lake. This past week Ordell provided information on identifying plants you can find on Scout Island and where they grow and some current and traditional uses of them. Cookies and tea and discussion were enjoyed after the presentations. Ordell made some delicious cookies and I learned they are from one of Fred's recipes! Next gathering is about California Bighorn Sheep and on February 15th.

Directors are working on updating and reviewing agreements and contracts in place and are creating written data for other areas. This sounds like a policy and procedure manual and makes me think of work. I need to say I have found Policy and Procedure manuals to provide useful guidelines.

ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

Date selected is **Friday March 31st**. Please note the date and we hope you are able to come. It is planned to be a social, friendly and informative event. The evening will start at 6PM with a Potluck supper and will be followed by an Annual General Meeting and a program/activity. More details in your next newsletter. Please contribute any ideas you have for the event to me (Margaret).

ANNUAL FUND RAISING BANQUET

Plans are underway for **Friday night, April 21st**. Frank Ritcey has agreed to be our speaker and the United Church Hall and caterers are booked and Joanne is creating the desserts. Another date to put into your calendar. Posters and tickets and more announcements to come.

55th Annual Williams Lake Christmas Bird Count

By Phil Ranson

The Williams Lake Field Naturalists hosted their 55th annual Christmas bird count on Sunday, December 18th. The wind chill made for unpleasant conditions for counters in the field, particularly when handling binoculars with temperatures in the mid-minus 20's and winds holding steady at 10-15 km/hr. The only open water to be found apart from a few postage stamp riffles through the river ice was at the sewage lagoons where the few remaining ducks took refuge.

Despite the less than favourable weather, there was a good turnout of participants with 34 counters in the field and another 18 reporting from their bird feeders. Conditions were difficult for birds and counters alike and not surprisingly numbers were down. Found on the day were 4341 birds of 46 different species. The total number of birds was only 300 below the average in recent years, while the species total was 7 below the average of 53.



Sharp-shinned Hawk
Photo by Darrell Barron



Ruffed Grouse
Photo by Liz Twan

There were no new species this year and only the Ruffed Grouse was seen in record numbers with 19 counted, handily beating the previous high count of 11 set in 1977. Very few other birds were seen in above normal numbers; the Dark-eyed Junco with 444, was their third best total, while Red Crossbills and Pine Siskins fared well, taking advantage of the good Douglas fir cone crop, with 222 and 381 respectively.

On the other end of the scale, Chickadee numbers, both Mountain and Black-capped, plummeted to their lowest numbers in 30-40 years. The 118 Black-capped Chickadees was the lowest number since 1983 while the 66 Mountain Chickadees was the fewest since 1994. Reasons for this decrease are unclear. There were concerns expressed by local birders in the fall at the scarcity of chickadees and it's unlikely that the current cold weather was a major factor in the decline of these hardy little birds.

Absent this year were two of the irruptive northern forest species; the Pine Grosbeak and the Common Redpoll, which can show up in high numbers in winter, or not appear at all. Another winter visitor from the boreal forest, the Bohemian Waxwing which showed up in record numbers last year, was still the most numerous single species with 751 counted, but well short of last year's astronomical 4889.

Many thanks to the counters in the field, particularly those who travelled from out of town, and those who called in the numbers from their bird feeders. **Full results at the end of the newsletter.**

The Boardwalk Story

By Sean Donahue

In the spring of 2020 record high water levels left the network of boardwalks at Scout Island completely or partially destroyed. Then for good measure, a second high-water event in the spring of 2021 completed the job.

The Bulrush Trail boardwalk was completely destroyed, the Willow Trail boardwalk partially destroyed while the Otter Point boardwalk was largely spared. The Scout Island website shows the location of these trails <https://scoutisland.ca>.

In deciding what to do about the damage a sub-committee consisting of four generous volunteers - Don Lawrence, Ray Hornby, Ray Getzlaf and Sean Donahue were tasked by the Board of Directors with developing options for repairing the boardwalks.

In the end, due to cost constraints, the Board decided to remove the remnants of the Bulrush Trail boardwalk and leave the trail as seasonal use only, repair the damaged section of the Willow Trail and replace the Otter Point boardwalk. Although the Otter Point boardwalk was spared significant flood damage, time had taken a toll.

Ray Getzlaf volunteered invaluable civil engineering support; and with his expertise, it became apparent the boardwalks were vulnerable to flood damage due to years of gradual frost jacking of the supporting piles. That finding led us to the option of using steel screw piles that resist the force of frost and buoyancy no matter how deeply submerged the boardwalks would become during spring flooding (fingers crossed).



The damaged Willow Trail



Don Lawrence surveying Bulrush Trail

Well life would have been so easy if all we had to worry about was the engineering. Because we were working below the high-water mark, we required Provincial authorization. That meant we had to complete an archeology survey, an environmental management plan, a certified engineered design and First Nations consultation. Intrepid committee members even got their feet wet once in a while.

The Williams Lake First Nation was very supportive of our project; responding with help with the archeology and in moving our project through the consultation process. Provincial Government officials and biologists were also supportive. I must mention the City of Williams Lake. We had to access the Willow Trail through an area near the City wells; and they quickly approved our plan.

So; if you were wondering why it took two years for a new boardwalk, behind the scenes there was a ton of work, including raising funds (thank you Sue Hemphill).

Well, the day finally did arrive with piling installation commencing October 17th.

The volunteer support throughout this project was incredible! The piling contractor, Reece Hoath from Techno Metal Post in Prince George was the hardest working individual I've ever worked with. It was no wonder frost and flooding lifted the original pilings; some of the new screw piles went down 15' to achieve the engineering specs.

The wooden beams and stringers were supplied by Leading Edge Lumber from Horsefly at a very reasonable cost. The finished lumber for the railings was generously donated by West Fraser. After the pilings were installed, the rest of the boardwalk construction was completed entirely by volunteers.

Here is a list of those who volunteered to help with various phases of the project (my apologies in advance if I've forgotten someone):

Don Lawrence
Ray Hornby
Ray Getzlaf
Ordell Steen
Rodger Hamilton
Rick Dawson
Peter Opie
Fred McMechan
Katherine VanSpall

Glen Davidson
Fernando Correia
Bill Lloyd
Martin Kruus (and some of his students)
Leo Rankin
Lubna Khan
Betty Donahue



Reece Hoath installing pilings



Volunteers working on the boardwalk



Isn't it beautiful?

Next up is Otter Point. We plan on replacing that boardwalk during the fall of 2023.

Enjoy Willow Trail during your next visit to Scout Island!



Mountain Bluebirds for Christmas?

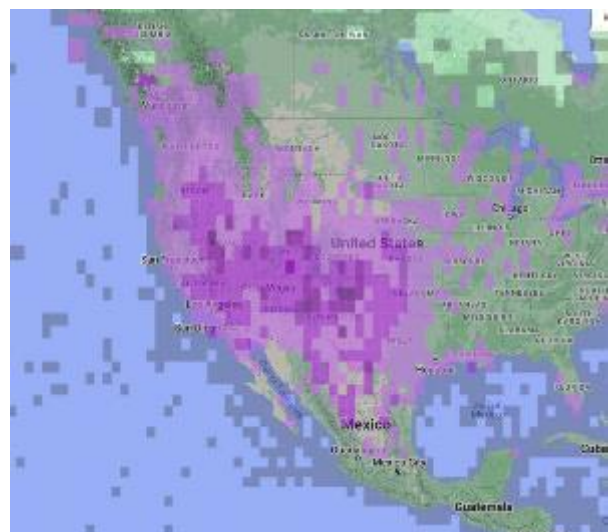
By Loyd Csizmadia
Bluebird Program Coordinator
Williams Lake Field Naturalists
lmccsiz@gmail.com

Did you see a Mountain Bluebird during the Christmas Bird Count? If so, you were not in Williams Lake. According to the Editing Checklist of Cariboo Chilcotin Birds, a Mountain Bluebird has never been recorded during our count. The same checklist, however, does say that two males and a female were recorded along Signal Point Road on November 15th 2011. To the chagrin of some bird counters, they had vanished by November 29th, well before Christmas.

If you want the company of Mountain Bluebirds during Christmas break, you'll have to head south, but not as far as you might think. According to Melissa Hafting, eBird reviewer for the Cariboo region, small numbers overwinter in Vancouver, the Fraser Valley, the Okanagan and on Vancouver Island. She even has a photo of some roosting in a nest box in Osoyoos along with some Western Bluebirds.

Realistically, if a Mountain Bluebird is on your Christmas Wishlist, then you will have to journey further south than Vancouver. According to an up-to-date eBird map for November through February, the highest concentrations of Mountain Bluebirds can be found well away from the coast in the lower elevations of Nevada and New Mexico (darkest purple regions on the map to the right).

Open savannah-like stretches of the pinyon-juniper forests of New Mexico can be dense with Bluebirds during the winter. Pinyons are low-growing, rounded, drought tolerant pine trees. These are mixed with various species of juniper, shrubs, and grasses, of which



the Rocky Mountain Juniper, Big Sage, Rabbitbrush, and Needle and Thread Grass would be most familiar to the Williams Lake Field Naturalists. If you take the trouble to visit New Mexico this winter, look for junipers. Insects are less plentiful in the winter, so Mountain Bluebirds and many other berry-eating birds aggregate in locations heavy with blue and red juniper berries. Do any Bluebirds from the Cariboo region migrate to New Mexico? Possibly. Melissa Hafting says that banded birds from BC have been recorded in Arizona, which borders on New Mexico. Most of our banded Bluebirds, however, winter in southern Oregon. Many banded BC birds have also been found in the sparse creosote bush of southwestern California.

Of course, if you are patient, the Mountain Bluebirds will soon be back in Williams Lake. The earliest record for a Mountain Bluebird is February 18th 2015, when a single male was spotted on the Dog Creek Prairie. Eight days later, on February 26, a small flock arrived in Canoe Creek, eight to be exact. Normally, according to data posted on the Editing Checklist, serious numbers of Bluebirds do not return until the middle of March, so if you have a Bluebird Route, there is plenty of time before the required cleaning and maintenance of nest boxes.

By the way, if any club members involved in the Bluebird Program are collecting data on their nest boxes but have not yet mailed me their numbers, please do. And to anyone who has not yet mailed me their time volunteering in the program, Sue needs this data to apply for funding.

Cheers,



Scout Island Nature Centre

By Sue Hemphill

November and December were busy for Martin. He got all of the salmon fry settled in their tanks at schools before the really cold weather set in. Classes came to the Nature House for winter ecology programs enjoying the fresh snow. He will continue with winter ecology programs through January and February up on Bull Mountain with classes who come to ski. Mary and Martin will also do winter programs at the Nature House. December 9 and 10, Martin, Sue and Ella helped 10 groups create Earth Friendly holiday gifts at the nature House—Roosting boxes, owl ornaments and “cookie” bird ornaments.

Tales and Trails is every Wednesday from 10:30-11:30. This is a program for 0-5 year olds and their caregivers lead by Naomi Weil. It begins with a story (a Tale) and then a walk and exploring.



Wilber Saunders has been busy photographing all the wildlife enjoying winter at Scout Island. You can see his pictures and videos on the Scout Island Facebook page.



Ms Isnardy's kindergarten class knows just what to do on the ice.

January 21, Martin and Suzanne from Cariboo Chilcotin Partners for Literacy hosted a Family Day at Scout Island for Marie Sharpe's kindergarten classes. There was a scavenger hunt outside and lots to look at inside.



The Williams Lake Field Naturalists Presents:

A Free Family Event at Scout Island

Saturday, February 25th: 1 - 3 pm

Great Backyard Bird Count

Learn to identify those fascinating feathered visitors with Environmental Educator Martin Kruus. Short ID intro with frozen and stuffed specimens to compare with bird books. Count birds at the Nature House feeders and play a game to learn about the different types of beaks that birds have.



Harris's Sparrow: Kris Andrews Photo

If you cannot come to this event, you can still be a citizen scientist by counting birds at your feeders from February 17 - 20, 2023 and submitting your findings:

<https://www.birdcount.org/participate/>

Help create a real-time snapshot of where the birds are!

Info: 250-398-8532

martinkruus@shaw.ca

Northern Flicker: All About Birds.org



Williams Lake Christmas Bird Count Results December 18th, 2022

1	Mallard	7
2	American Wigeon	1
3	Common Goldeneye	6
4	Ruffed Grouse	^19
5	Bald Eagle	10
6	Sharp-shinned Hawk	2
7	Northern Goshawk	1
8	Red-tailed Hawk	4
9	Rough-legged Hawk	2
10	Northern Saw-whet Owl	1
11	Merlin	3
12	Rock Pigeon	587
13	Eurasian Collared Dove	13
14	American Coot	1
15	Downy Woodpecker	9
16	Hairy Woodpecker	26
17	Black-backed Woodpecker	3
18	Northern Flicker	58
19	Pileated Woodpecker	17
20	Northern Shrike	3
21	Canada Jay	5
22	Black-billed Magpie	9
23	American Crow	597
24	Common Raven	194
25	Black-capped Chickadee	*118
26	Mountain Chickadee	*66

27	Red-breasted Nuthatch	30
28	Townsend's Solitaire	8
29	American Robin	15
30	Varied Thrush	4
31	European Starling	42
32	Bohemian Waxwing	751
33	Spotted Towhee	1
34	American Tree Sparrow	2
35	Song Sparrow	38
36	Harris's Sparrow	1
37	White-crowned Sparrow	1
38	Dark-eyed Junco	444
39	Red-winged Blackbird	22
	Brewer's Blackbird	cw
40	House Finch	118
41	Red Crossbill	222
42	White-winged Crossbill	2
43	Pine Siskin	381
44	American Goldfinch	57
45	Evening Grosbeak	1
46	House Sparrow	439
		4341

^ Count high

* Low count

cw Seen within Count week