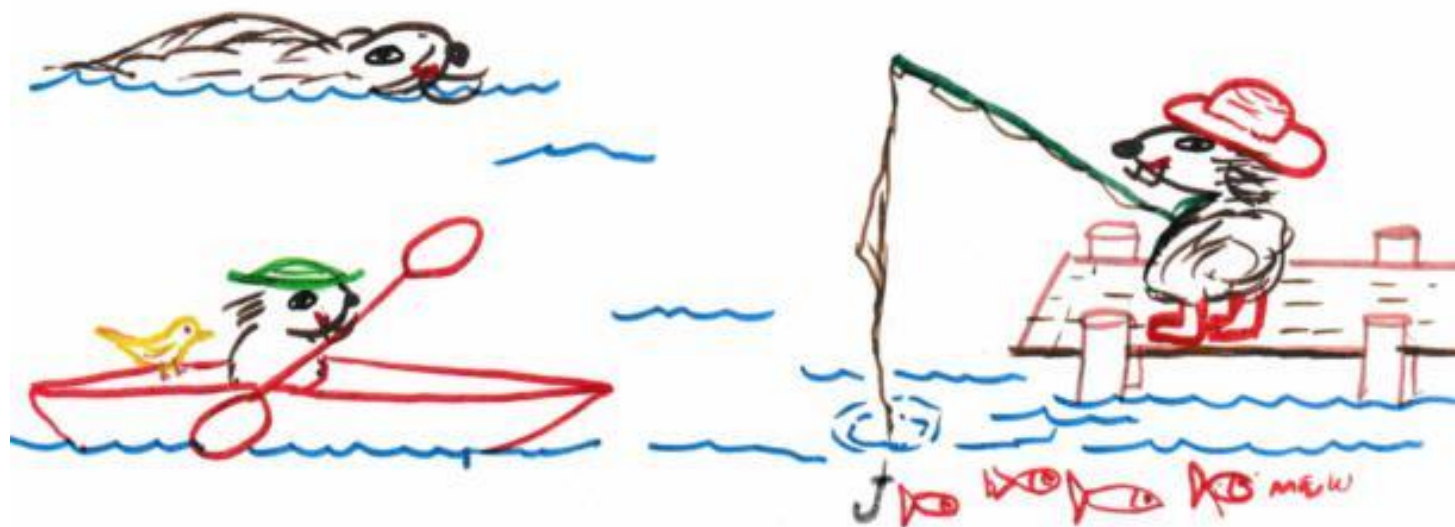


# MUSKRAT EXPRESS

WILLIAMS LAKE FIELD NATURALISTS

MAY + JUNE 2024 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 Margaret Waring at (250)398-7724 or e-mail [muskratexpress@shaw.ca](mailto:muskratexpress@shaw.ca)

**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:** president Margaret Waring secretary Nola Daintith, treasurer Sue Hemphill and directors Peter Opie, Ray Hornby, Jean Oke, Cathie Hamm, Lara Roorda, Katharine VanSpall, Michaela Waterhouse, Kim Zalay, Natalie Swift, and Ken Day



**Editors:** Thanks to all of you who have contributed to this edition of the newsletter. Please expect your next edition of the newsletter late in September. If you stop receiving the newsletter please contact the editors. We always welcome your comments, suggestions, articles and Member's Moments. Please contact Margaret Waring (398-7724), Jim Sims (778 764-2752) or e-mail us at

[muskratexpress@shaw.ca](mailto:muskratexpress@shaw.ca)



### From Jim at Eagle Lake's Tern Inn

As I sit here in front of the computer putting the finishing touches to the last newsletter before the summer break I am looking out at another cool cloudy drizzly day. Niut is curled up in front of the fireplace and the Purple Finches on the feeder are wishing they could join him. After the promise of another fire ravaged summer, it has been a great relief to have a much cooler and damper spring than expected. While I am on the topic of Finches, for a few days in late May I enjoyed having 3 species at the feeder, Purple, Cassin's and House. This was the first time I saw the House Finch at Eagle Lake.



**Harlequin Duck**



**Western x Clark's Grebe**

There have been some other interesting sightings at the inn this year. Back in May a Whimbrel had been reported and then a couple of days ago I saw and heard it near the South Islet. In the spring Whimbrel is an "Occasional" species in the Cariboo, that is a few sightings but not every year. On June 16<sup>th</sup> this Harlequin Duck was feeding along the shore in front of the Inn. They nest on the shores of fast flowing alpine streams and the male will leave the female once nesting starts. I will see one every 2 to 3 years. Such a beautiful bird. A Barrow's Goldeneye nested in an old Flicker cavity on an Aspen tree about 4 metres from the Deck. Always amazing to watch a duck fly in and out of a tree. She is now a proud mother of 5 little Chicks out on the lake. The rarest and most exciting observation was a hybrid Western x Clark's Grebe. Thanks to Ebird's Mel for helping my brother and I identify it.



**Barrow's Goldeneye ready to fly**

A report from Tern Inn is not complete without mentioning the very rare nesting Arctic Terns. The 3<sup>rd</sup> pair that disappeared early last spring did not return so again this year we are down to 2 pairs. There are 2 nests, one on the South Islet and the other on the rocky shoal east of Goose Island. I am expecting chicks from the South Islet any day. I enjoy the almost daily challenge of trying for a Tern photo while the Tern is busy doing something interesting. This male was busy scolding Niut for chasing the minnows from the Tern's favourite fishing hole. As soon as Niut took a break the Tern plunged into the water and came up with a fish for its mate. He is a much better fisher than Niut is.



**Arctic Tern Catches a Minnow for its Mate**

The nearby Tatlayoko Lake Bird Observatory will begin band birds in the first week of August. Songbird banding continues until the end of September. Saw-whet Owl banding starts early in September and continues into the second week of October. Visitors are most welcome and the banders are exceptional hosts. The banding is funded by donations so please consider this if you visit the station. For more details check out the website [Tatlayoko Lake Bird Observatory | Tracking songbirds as they migrate south through BC \(wordpress.com\)](https://www.tatlayokolakebirdobservatory.com/Tracking-songbirds-as-they-migrate-south-through-BC)

## **Yard Sale 2024**

By Margaret Waring

This turned out to be a very successful event. Saturday morning started out with a birthday cake for Jean Oke. The weather was great, no rain or wind storms and not too hot. Most sales and activity occurred outside except for some books, paintings, pictures and a few other items inside. The lovely boxes of homemade gingersnap cookies were gone before I checked on them. There were almost no left-over plants. Some plants were sold as the donors carried them in from their vehicles. Leo had a neighbour moving and we thank them for the many donations she made.

I usually name all the wonderful people that helped but it would fill more than a page of the newsletter. Many, maybe all, club members contributed to the sale. We also had contributions and visits and generous shopping by community members. I am happy to think all those workers were enjoying themselves, working, shopping, selling and visiting.

I received several comments and thanx from shoppers. One person told me that this is always her favourite sale. Thank you, all for your help setting up, cleaning up, donating, selling and shopping. It was a nice day and you did a great job.

Our dedicated workers and donors sorted and organized Friday night. Saturday morning we loaded things outside and prepared for shoppers. The cleanup was the fastest and most efficient I remember. We donated left overs to two thrift stores in town, Salvation Army and Caroline's Closet. We gave some items to the SPCA and the Anglican Church Free Store and to the ALS Society for their future sale. Any leftover books were donated to the Rotary Club for their book sales. Nothing that I know of was taken to the dump or a share shed this year.

Profit from the sale was \$2741.20. I always hope that we are able to earn enough to cover our bursary which we increased to \$1500. last year. We did it and more!

Thank you.



## Alkali Lake Field Trip Report

By Peter Opie

On a lovely mid-April day a convoy of intrepid birders ventured forth into nature along the Dog Creek Road. First stop: Westwick Lakes where we spied an amazing array of waterfowl as well as long-billed curlew and sandhill cranes. Next stop: Two Mile Lake with more ducks. Then wandered along Alkali Creek to the Ranch peering into the riparian shrubbery. At Alkali Lake we were pleased to find more waterfowl and a beaver. Lastly, a reduced number of diehards pushed on to the Dog Creek Bluffs where, although we saw no raptors, were delighted to find a yellow-bellied marmot and a band of bighorn ewes that were willing to pose for us. I believe that we logged over 40 bird species that day, thanks in a large degree, to eagle-eye Lubna.



## Last Chance Natural and Cultural History Hike Report

By Peter Opie

We were favoured with pleasant weather for this well-attended hike. We were honored and privileged to be accompanied by Esk'temc Guardians. This allowed a wonderful exchange of knowledge. Together we investigated a patch of "Indian potato" or spring beauty in full flower. What we all came to agree was that this was most likely at one time planted and cultivated as it does not grow naturally anywhere nearby or at such a low elevation. Then we took a leisurely stroll through glades and open grassland between aspen copses and spruce bottom and upland fir forest. Lots of early wildflowers and birds, even some raucous Clark's nutcrackers. After lunch, some returned to investigate a site of an ancient winter village and a few ventured further to find the rock ledges with the Fraser view. It was well worth the extra effort to arrive at this astounding location looking down to Iron Rapids and Riske Creek. This site, on top of basalt columns, has been used by generations for fasting and vision quests. Truly inspiring even without fasting. All in all a memorable day. We expressed our thanks to the Guardians and believe that this furthered the establishment of a trusting relationship with the people of Esket.



## Churn Creek Field Trip Report

By Peter Opie

There turned out to be a big crowd for this event with Naturalists, researchers, Park Rangers and a rep from the Grassland Conservation Council. The research topics under investigation were fire history and the role of wildfire in Douglas-fir and grassland ecosystems in Churn Creek Protected Area. Professor Jill Harvey of TRU is supervising students looking at fire frequency in the area as evidenced by serial fire scars on old fir trees, ecosystem recovery after the recent (2021) wildfire and periodicity of forest encroachment onto grassland. After a short presentation at the calving barn campsite in a chilling wind, we quickly warmed up with a brisk hike uphill to Airport Flats. There we had a chance to understand the varying intensity of the burn and early stages of succession. On top of the Flats we had panoramic views and could appreciate the mosaic of forest and grassland, the extent of forest encroachment as well as areas the Friends of Churn Creek had removed encroachment and



are attempting to replicate a "natural" grassland and open-forest landscape. There was good discussion and information sharing and we all benefited from this field tour. Many thanks to Jill Harvey and her students.

### **A Non-birder Goes Birding**

By Kay Knox

"Some Williams Lake Field Naturalists are going birding at Chilanko Forks on the May long weekend," fellow WL Wanderer Kris mentioned to me. "Interested?" Seldom one to refuse an exploration of the great outdoors, I accepted. "Some stay overnight," she continued, "but a day trip suits me better." I would have been happy to drive, but it was long-term member Jean who picked Kris and me up at 6:30 am on Saturday, May 18<sup>th</sup>. Appropriately enough, a dozen pelicans were on hand in the Scout Island Nature reserve to see us off.

Our 2-hour drive into the Chilcotin had its own special sightings like the herd of cattle being moved across the highway to greener pastures. Four-wheelers, dogs, and riders on horseback had everything under control as calves walked tentatively towards our car before circling past. An adult held a lead rope attached to one saddled steed - carrying their newest "apprentice" perhaps 3-4 years old.

Wildlife was limited to a squirrel surviving its game of chicken, 3 deer cropping new grass in a huge field, and a bear galloping across the road to disappear in the underbrush. Many of the once verdant rolling hills have been blackened by the fires of recent years, but spring growth on deciduous trees always challenges me to see just how many colours of green can exist in nature. Oh, and fog had our careful driver slowing down, diminishing the view at the rest stop, and there were a few exclamations about the snow pellets!

We encountered little traffic and were happy to see 2 gas stations; commenting on these, the ranches, cattle, and widely spread human habitation had the km quickly disappearing behind us. Turning towards the Puntzi Airtanker Base, we soon found the others who had come out the previous day, most with some sort of camping accommodation. These birders had made an early start, noting 63 species. "You've already taken all the good ones," joked Jean.

Those extensive marshes, developed by Ducks Unlimited and now, like Scout Island, under the auspices of The Nature Trust of BC are a pretty scene with many interconnected ponds and waterways. Sometimes these birders use canoes to get closer to the action, but uncertain weather and cool temperatures forbade that this time. "On other occasions we've worn shorts, tank tops and a slathering of sunscreen," several told me. Leaving the vehicles (and one artist) beside the airstrip, we strolled down to be close to the bulrushes. A circular seating area nearby was ignored: these 10 or so birders knew exactly what they were doing!

Hikers and Wanderers progress at "slow/fast" rates. For birders, I quickly discovered, the pace is "slow/stop" to look through multi-sized binoculars and scopes, and to listen! Jim had his iPad with 2 apps in use: e-bird to record the bird sightings and Merlin record and identify birds singing and to play requested bird songs, while Jean often consulted her bird book.



**Rare Stilt Sandpiper and Long-billed  
Dowitchers Photo**

**by Lubna Khan**

Picture this: dry bulrushes outlined large bodies of water whose colour changed between blue and grey, birders in their colourful wintry jackets moving slowly alongside, cameras and binoculars dangling when not in use. Tiny wildflowers greeted almost every step. Two dogs dashed thither and yon, while a few horses, too curious about us humans to be dubbed wild, came in and out of the picture. But no mosquitoes!

I too stopped to look and listen, trying (as is usual) to identify the few birds I recognized by sight. But that was secondary to my realization of the numbers of different sounds filling the air around us. The water rippled between patches of bulrushes, unseen "duckie things!" ignoring the watchers. Not a muskrat or a beaver showed up although new cuttings told a different story. Near where we stopped for elevenses on the way over and lunch coming back was a sizeable beaver lodge.

Although not capable of being involved in the process of identifying birds, listening to the conversations around me was fascinating. Minute details were noted, some names describing features of species made sense, others had me wondering how such a tiny bird came by that long or unusual title.

One final treat took us farther along that gravel road running parallel to Puntzi Mountain Airstrip and a hidden, more distant Highway 20. Still in the Nature Conservancy, an abandoned ranch saw us strolling among old, well-constructed wooden buildings on cement foundations. Perhaps built by Norwegian settlers, the peninsula of land reaches out into the marsh. An artesian well at the entrance spouts a seemingly endless supply of fresh water.

Tearing ourselves away from these relics, two nearby pelicans, and the others who would stay around at least one more night, we retraced our route to Williams Lake. After all that, what else could we do except treat ourselves to fine dining?

## **Marsh Madness**

By Lara Roorda

The Williams Lake Field Naturalists and Scout Island staff partnered with the City of Williams Lake and numerous other organizations to bring Marsh Magic to the people of Williams Lake. Between 10am and 2pm on June 9<sup>th</sup>, somewhere between 250 and 300 individuals joined in to explore, learn and celebrate the magic of our unique and dynamic marsh at Scout Island. The event included more than a dozen stations involving crafts, displays, educational stations and activities. Upon arrival at the nature house, participants were given a passport identifying the numerous stations and organizations and a central map was available for reference. It was wonderful to see families, adults and children alike enjoying the event. All in attendance were welcome to enter the draw for a gift basket of eco-friendly treasures and a big congratulations goes out to Michael Moses who won the basket draw!! Response to Marsh Magic (which occurred during both Bike to Work/School week and Oceans Day) was overwhelmingly positive. Two of my personal favorite quotes overheard included; "This was the best day EVER grandma!" and "Those creatures were AMAZING!" (when emerging from the Ocean tank demonstration). Huge thank you to all who contributed to make this event possible including the many, many volunteers, Scout Island staff, local business contributing to the gift basket (Beaver Valley Feeds, City of Williams Lake) and the numerous organizations that manned the stations (TRU, CCPL, UBC Research Forest, Williams Lake Orienteering Club, Air Aware, Invasive Species Council of BC, Stream of Dreams, Go by Bike, City of Williams Lake, WL First Nations). It is so fantastic for our community to be able to come together and celebrate our healthy lake and marsh at a magical place like Scout Island that is so central for Williams Lake and accessible to all.



**Michael Moses with the gift basket**

## **Notes from the Director's Meetings.**

By Margaret Waring President



Your new Directors have been getting together and meeting and working on your behalf.

We have had three Director Meetings since the Annual General Meeting and hope now to take a break from meetings until September.

A significant part of our time goes toward Scout Island. A new item from Scout Island needing attention now is bridge replacement. You may have noticed a sign on the Otter Point Bridge that not more than 8 people should be on the bridge

at one time. We have begun working toward replacement of this bridge. Darryl from Celtic Engineering is a great resource. He has meet with us and is working on a quote and plan. The next step will be fundraising for the replacement.

We have nominated Sue Hemphill, our retiring Executive Director for a community volunteer award with the Canadian Volunteer award program.

We are working on our last newsletter edition until fall. We thank all the members sending in their contributions for the newsletters. Loyd Csizmadia, our blue bird coordinator has written a number of articles for our newsletter and the Williams Lake Tribune.

Enjoy the rain we are getting now. As well as decreasing the fire risk and watering the grasslands, forests and our gardens it helps Jim stay indoors to complete this newsletter.

We have some tentative evening presentations for the fall. Suggestions and ideas are always welcome.

We hope you have been able to get out and enjoy some of the excellent Field Trips. Be sure to thank the dedicated field trip leaders. I challenge you to consider organizing a field trip next year to an area that interests you.



## **Scout Island Nature Centre**

By Sue Hemphill

The Scout Island Nature Centre has a dedicated team of summer staff helping to educate visitors and maintain the Nature House. Cheleine Doyle, a psychology student, is putting her people skills to use as a program leader, guiding groups of children through interactive nature activities. Adrien Zimmerman, an Integrated Science student, uses her broad scientific background to teach classes about the local flora and fauna. Madi Riplinger, a biology student, works to keep the plant displays updated, and to monitor the salt tank. Complementing the team is a UBC teaching student, Carly Wardell who is observing the nature education programs in action, learning valuable techniques to apply in her future work. Jaimie Piercy from UBC also joined us for three weeks in May. Together, this passionate team of young naturalists is helping to foster a love of nature in the community.



## **Bluebird Program Update May 23, 2024**

Loyd Csizmadia, Bluebird Program Coordinator for WLFN

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Two recent experiences reminded me about why we should not clean nest boxes after the third week of April. The first occurred on April 25th, about four weeks ago.

I wanted to know if any Mountain Bluebirds occupied the bird houses on Jacobson and Hilltop Roads where I manage about ten nest boxes. Traditionally, Tree Swallows have dominated the route, but last year I recorded one successful Mountain Bluebird nest. Having seen three pairs of bluebirds in the area this spring, I decided to take a peek. To my delight, Box A at Station 1 appeared to contain Mountain Bluebirds. In my excitement to confirm this, I failed to realize that the bluebirds were defending against a take-over attempt by some Tree Swallows.

Opening the box confirmed that the bluebirds were constructing a nest, but at the same time, I unintentionally scared the male and female away. Within seconds of closing the front and leaving the station, a Tree Swallow entered the box and positioned itself to defend the hole. What had I done? Mountain Bluebirds might be larger, but a Tree Swallow is really vicious when challenged. Which brings me to the second experience.

Last week I observed a fierce battle over one of the bird houses in my yard. Two newly arrived Tree Swallows were attempting to displace another pair of Tree Swallows already occupying the nest box near my garden. Part of the battle involved aerial attacks, aggressive efforts to control the entrance, and eventually what looked like a fight to the death on the ground that lasted at least a minute. In the end, the pair that had been in the box for a couple of weeks successfully defended their home.

The viciousness of the altercation disturbed me. There were other empty boxes nearby. What caused such a violent contest over this particular box? Is it possible that the swallows which successfully nested in that box last year returned to discover a trespass? Have any of you witnessed a similar altercation?

As for the displaced Mountain Bluebirds at Station 1, I checked on May 22nd. There are Tree Swallows in both boxes. In the photos below, Tree Swallows occupy Box 1B on the left; and—because of me--Tree Swallows occupy Box 1A on the right. Two pairs of Mountain Bluebirds remain in the area: one appears to have a nest; the other seems to be searching.



My take-away from all of this is that after the third week of April, there is a lot of volatility. It is best to stay away from your route until the situation stabilizes some time in late May.

### **Collecting Data on the First Broods (May 29<sup>th</sup> to June 14<sup>th</sup>)**

That being said, the first week in June is a different matter. It is the best time to gather data on eggs and young. It would be useful to establish some standardization to the process, including when data is gathered. May 29<sup>th</sup> to June 14<sup>th</sup> is the ideal window for first broods. After June 14<sup>th</sup>, some Mountain Bluebirds are likely sitting on fresh eggs, so we are into second broods. Not only that, but between June 14<sup>th</sup> and 30<sup>th</sup>, there is a greater risk of premature flight because many broods will be over 14 days old.

So, what should you do if some nestlings escape to the ground?

Immediately close the box and block the main entrance (I carry a clean, dark-coloured 35cm by 35cm microfibre cloth, just in case). Carefully catch and gently return the escapees to the darkened box. Wait at least 10 minutes before slowly removing the cloth. If you cannot catch the escapees or if the nestlings fly into a nearby tree, leave them. The parents will feed and protect them. If you are collecting data, write 16 to 21 days old and note the number of birds that escaped prematurely.

Happily, in the 35 years that Michaela and I have been collecting data on Becher's Prairie, this has never happened. And we open over 50 nest boxes two, sometimes three times in a nesting season. It would be interesting to hear from someone who has experienced premature fledging; in particular, why do you think it happened?

By the way, if anyone is interested in gathering data on second broods, it is best to do so between July 1<sup>st</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup>. Of course, any data is good data. No matter when it is gathered or how it is recorded, I appreciate everything you send: email, photos, maps, nest cards, sheets of paper—whatever! Keep up the good work.

Cheers,  
Loyd



**SCOUT ISLAND NATURE CENTER**

# Summer Programs!

**Nature Fun:** (Mon, Tue, Thu, Fri)  
**Ages:** \*4-8    **Cost:** \$15 per session  
\*(4-year-olds must be entering kindergarten of fall 2024)  
**Select time:** morning 9:30 AM-12 PM **OR** afternoon 1-3:30 PM  
**Select day(s):** Mon, Tue, and Thu (morning or afternoon),  
and Fri (morning only)

**Art in Nature:** (Wed)  
**Ages:** 9-13    **Cost:** \$25 per session  
**When:** Wednesdays from 8:30 AM-4:30 PM  
Art activities, exploring, observations, games, and more!

**Weekly Themes:**  
July 3rd-5th: Surprise Week!  
July 8th-11th: Feathered Friends (birds)  
July 15th-18th: Secret Life of Plants  
July 22nd -25th: \*\*Art and Building (all day session 9-3:30)  
**\*\*Age restricted session: 8-13 year-olds only please**  
July 29th-August 2nd: Grossology  
August 6th -8th: Wonderful Water  
August 12th-16th: Bug Buddies  
August 19th-22nd: Magnificent Mammals

**To register, please email us at [scoutisland@shaw.ca](mailto:scoutisland@shaw.ca)  
or call at (250) 398-8532**

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