

MUSKRAT EXPRESS

WILLIAMS LAKE FIELD NATURALISTS
NOVEMBER + DECEMBER 2024 NEWSLETTER

Ice is coming. We might
need to leave soon and
miss all the fun.
Happy Winter

Will we see a
S.E. Asian Horn B.?
on the
Dec 15
CHRISTMAS
BIRD COUNT!

COMING SOON
ARIZONA
BIRDS
JAN 25
COTTONWOOD
GAME
CAMERAS
FEB 27

CHRISTMAS
SHOP FOR
CALENDARS
DEC 5TH

Chris Shepherd is
coming to the Nature
House Thursday
Dec 5th - 7PM
to tell us about
the Horn Bills



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) you must include an additional \$5 if you request a paper copy of the BC Nature magazine. 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 Margaret Waring at (250)398-7724 or e-mail muskratexpress@shaw.ca

***** 2025 memberships are due on January 1st, 2025. Forms are attached please complete the forms and submit your fees on time.**

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 Cathie Hamm and directors Peter Opie, Ray Hornby, Jean Oke, Sue Hemphill, 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 January. 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



From Jim at Tern Inn: The firewood shed is full, Eagle Lake is beginning to freeze and there is some white on the ground. The Bohemian Waxwings are back and are eating the Rose Hips in the front yard before I can use them for tea. The bands of Trumpeter Swans have marched off to the coast.

Eagle Lake attracts more rare birds than just the rare breeding Arctic Terns and October saw another very special rare visitor. A Wood Thrush was confirmed on October 22nd when the bird struck my kitchen nook window. I took a picture of the stunned bird as it recovered on the ground below the window. The Thrush flew away before I could get down from the deck to check it out. I submitted the photo to E-bird as what I mistakenly thought was a Swainson's Thrush. Within a few minutes I received an email from Mel our E-bird reviewer. She excitedly explained to me that the bird was a Wood Thrush, an Eastern Thrush species and that this was only the 3rd sighting in British Columbia.



Recovering Wood Thrush

The distribution map from "All About Birds" shows how far this bird was from its territory and that it should have been in Mexico. The Wood Thrush is distinguished by its strong white eye ring, reddish brown head and back, black spots on a white breast and white markings on the cheeks. Like our similar Swainson's Thrush, it is seldom seen, and more often heard and also has a beautiful flute like song. It is a bird of the forest and can be found on the forest floor scratching the leaf litter as it searches for insects

It turned out that it had been here for a while and Neighbours had been watching it for over a month. It had been visiting a dirt pile from an excavation. There were a few Strawberry



Blite plants growing on top of the bank and the Thrush was feeding on the red berries. A week later the neighbours returned to find the bird blocking their driveway. Chauni picked the bird up and moved it out of the way. I was called over and got this much better photo. We expect it had hit a window at their house and was recovering from the window strike. The bird hopped away scratching at the leaf duff and did not fly.



Now that Woodie had been seen again the sighting created a bit of a stir in the birding world. We had visitors from Quesnel, Sandy came out from Williams Lake and a couple of birders from the lower mainland made all night drives to try and add the bird to their life lists. Sandy and one of the southern birders were successful on the last day of October. It had recovered from the second window strike and was observed flying and did not let us get close as it hopped away scratching in the Kinnikinnick and eating the berries. We had a few cold nights after the sighting and it was not seen again. Hopefully it got the bearings right this time and is now in Mexico.

Thanks to Chauni and Randy for tolerating the birders wandering around their cabin. Thanks also to Melissa Hafting who corrected my E-bird report. Without your expertise Woodie would have remained just another boring Swainson's Thrush and Eagle Lake would have missed this awesome rare visitor.

Hornbills

Protecting the Gardeners of the Forests

An evening program by Chris Shepard

December 5th 7pm at Scout Island Nature Centre

WLFN annual Christmas Bird Count

Williams Lake Field Naturalists will be conducting their 57th annual Audubon Christmas Bird Count on Sunday, Dec 15th.

It's going to be hard to match last year's count which had a record number of species, record numbers of counters in the field, relatively mild (above freezing) weather and a wide-open William Lake.

PROTECTING THE GARDENERS OF THE FOREST

HORNBILLS

Hornbills are found only in Asia and Africa. These amazing birds ensure the health of the rainforests as seed dispersers but unfortunately, they are in trouble. Find out more about their unique behaviours, the vital role they play in the forests, the threats they face, and what you can do to help them.

JOIN DR CHRIS R. SHEPHERD
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, MONITOR CONSERVATION RESEARCH SOCIETY
IUCN SSC HORNBILL SPECIALIST GROUP MEMBER

Where: Scout Island Nature House
When: Thursday, 5 Dec 2024, 7:00pm
Cost: Free. No pre-registration required

monitor
Scout Island Nature Centre
Williams Lake Field Naturalists



A late cormorant in the channel at Scout Island. Nov 13, 2021

Last year's 69 species recorded by the 45 counters in the field and 17 feeder watchers was 7 higher than the previous best set in 2008. Open water on the lake lead to a significant increase in the water birds usually seen in winter and accounted for 2 new birds on the count; a Double-crested Cormorant and a Canvasback.

Count co-organisers, Sean Donahue and Lubna Khan are busy finalizing the field team selections for the various routes on the 24km diameter (458 sq.km) count circle centred in Boitanio Park. There is generally a core group of 25-30 people who regularly attend with the remainder made up of out-of-town birders, those giving it a try for the first time or returning to the count after an absence.

Filling all the routes is always a challenge and even with full coverage there is still well over 50% of the land area which for all practical purposes is inaccessible. Luckily the majority of wintering birds choose to occupy more or less the same habitats that we choose to

live in, and efforts to access the back-country wouldn't add greatly to our count (although it would be interesting to find out what's out there in the depth of winter)

At the present time (end of November) we are still in need of filling several of the core - around town, routes. If you haven't already been contacted and would like to take part in the count, whether on your own or in a group, please contact Sean at donahue9@telus.net or (250) 267-2800.

Peter Opie and Dr. Skye Rufford have kindly offered to open their home again for the post count gathering and potluck.

Birds of Arizona

Another Evening Program by Leo Rankin and Connie Haeusler

January 23 7pm at Scout Island Nature Centre

Leo Rankin and Connie Haeussler are avid birders who enjoy travelling and discovering birds wherever they go. They have visited Arizona 9 times and since retirement have escaped the winter with their travel trailer, hiking, enjoying the desert landscapes, and finding as many birds as they can.

Their slideshow highlights the state parks, national parks and other natural areas of Arizona and the birds that live there.

Game Camera Photos from Cottonwood

An Evening Program by John Messier:

February 27 7pm at Scout Island Nature Centre

Bats

April 3 7pm at Scout Island Nature Centre

Earth Friendly Christmas

The event is to be held at the Cariboo Arts Center (Old Firehall) **Friday December 6th** from 6 to 9 pm and **Saturday December 7th** from 11 am until 2 pm.

Scout Island will be hosting a table at the Earth Friendly Christmas event, organized by the Cariboo-Chilcotin Conservation Society. We will have three bird themed crafts: Owls crafted of ponderosa pine cones etc., bird feeders to assemble and paint (Thank you Jurgen!), and bird tree ornaments made of salt dough to paint.

Everyone is welcome, and all activities are free. There will be some music and some light food and drink. Wreath making, weaving, and pottery are some of the favourite activities.

If you would like to volunteer for an hour to help families succeed in their crafting and decorating, let Martin Kruus know.

Donations of homemade healthy finger foods (e.g. baked goods), bread, and/or soup are welcome - please list all ingredients and let Martin know.

There will also be a Giving Tree and Food Drive bin for gift and sustenance donations.



Notes from the Director's Meetings.

By Margaret Waring President

Since my note to you in our last newsletter we have had 2 full meetings with the directors and quite a few smaller group meetings.

One project, led by Ken Day, that we are working on, is creating policies for the Field Naturalists and Scout Island. This has initiated discussions regarding the difference between the Field Naturalists and Scout Island. This has also been an ongoing topic for many years. It has taken me time to understand and it is confusing.

My understanding is the Williams Lake Field Naturalists is a club and one of the club's functions is overseeing the management of Scout Island. The club has different events such as field trips and education programs. To help confuse the separation, sometimes these club events occur in conjunction with Scout Island and take place at the Nature House. The Club participates in events in the community, Cariboo Chilcotin region and province. We organize the blue bird house projects and provide a bursary for a graduating secondary school student from the proceeds of the spring yard sale we hold. Williams Lake Field Naturalists are a member group of Nature BC.

Managing Scout Island (owned by Nature Trust of BC) is a task taken on by our Naturalist Club. Nature Trust has a lease agreement with the City and the City has a sublease with the Field Naturalists. Thus, we take care of Scout Island in conjunction with the City of Williams Lake and Nature Trust of BC.

The bank accounts and finances of the two groups, the Field Naturalists and Scout Island, are kept separate. Scout Island has charitable status and accepts donations for projects and we issue income tax receipts for the donations and provide the required information to CRA (Canada Revenue Agency). Scout Island has staff with the Executive Director being an employee of the board of directors and is supervised by the board.

Please let me know if you agree with my summary or have a different view or other information to offer. We are looking for clarification and also help. Anyone wanting to help with policy writing?

We have a change in the executive. Sue Hemphill has stepped down as treasurer and Cathie Hamm is taking over. I thank both of these members for their time and dedicated service.

It is membership renewal time. Our club functions on a calendar year from January to December. When you renew, please be aware our memberships fees remain the same. There is an extra charge of \$5. from Nature BC if you want to receive their magazine as a paper copy by mail. We understand we might have some difficulties with member renewals due to the mail strike.

Needed is someone to take over the membership job from Cathie who has taken over as treasurer. Are you interested in doing the membership? Please let me know, please volunteer.

I would like to end this note sharing with you that I have recently enjoyed some lovely walks on the trails at Scout Island watching birds and especially the Blue Herons on the lake. The newly built trails and other paths are beautiful. The leaves have fallen off the trees and ice is starting to form. Our Club and Scout Island has many dedicated, skilled and caring people. Let's put on our scarves and mitts and go for a walk. I hope you are able to get out and enjoy the Christmas bird count and potluck supper on Dec 15th. We are lucky to have such a beautiful area to enjoy.

Any questions or comments? Is there an area where you would like to help? Please let me know.

Margaret Waring

mewaring@hotmail.com and 250-398-7724



Scout Island Nature Centre

Kim Zaley is putting together a schedule for volunteers willing to help out with snow removal around the Nature House during heavy dumps. The response from past volunteers has been low so we are letting all of you know of our need for help. We are flexible on commitments, but in the past individuals volunteer for a week between Dec 15-Mar 15. For working folks, being able to commit to a weekend is also helpful. We are also putting together an on-call list for those that may want to help out occasionally in the evenings or if we get slammed by Mother Nature.

For further questions or to be added to a snow removal list individuals can contact Kim.

Thanks Kim Zalay 250-296-3220 (home) 250-305-6227 (cell)
kim_mzalay@hotmail.com



Cozied Up for Winter: Scout Island's Honey Bees

By: Dr. Megan A. Taylor

As many of you may be aware we have two bee colonies on the rooftop of the Nature House at Scout Island. These little hard workers were purchased as a mini hive (nucleus colony, commonly called a "nuc") back in May. I like to tell people it's basically the new young queen and her colony's first apartment, it's small. As the colony grows, they begin to outgrow their tiny apartment and beekeepers can either provide them a bigger home, or watch half the colony fly away in a swarming event – a little soul crushing if they're your bees, but swarms are a blast to catch!

Bees can either reproduce sexually – little description needed although it's an interesting story – or through colony fission, aka swarming. This is a long-winded way of me getting to the point: that's why we now have 2 full sized colonies on the rooftop. They swarmed, I managed to catch it, and moved the new colony off site so the young queen could mate with other boys (drones) beyond her immediate neighbourhood. It can take a bit of work (especially if the bees have their own plans that they didn't share with you), but in the end you get more colonies.

Scout Island's bees did very well this past summer but I didn't take off any honey as they started with almost nothing, quadrupled in size, and I wanted them to have what they produced to get through winter. Which leads me to the point of this article – what do bees actually do in winter? Well, like most things honey bee related, it's pretty darn interesting. Some may think they all die-off except the queen, others may think they hibernate like a bear – the reality is actually even cooler (pardon the pun).

One needs to think of honey bees as a single organism, a "superorganism" and as such, thermoregulate as a single unit. During the winter, the worker bees will generate heat by rapidly shivering their thoracic muscles, although appearing to be at rest. Additionally, similar to penguins in Antarctica, as ambient air temperatures begin to drop, the bees begin to form a cluster, the colder the outside temp, the tighter the cluster. Amazingly, honey bees will keep that core cluster temperature relatively stable around 35 °C! The larger the bee cluster (that is, the more bees there are), the better their chance is of surviving the winter; more bodies equals more heat.

Honey bee colonies have a thermoneutral zone from about +10 to -10 °C at which their metabolic rate is minimal and stable. However, once those outside temperatures begin to dip below that thermoneutral zone, the metabolic rates of the cluster begin to rise linearly. As such, long periods of cold temperatures can seriously affect the colony's survival. Therefore, it's not only important they have enough food to make it through winter, they also need a large enough population so individual bees can break cluster temporarily to retrieve food from other parts of the colony. It's no wonder they make such a high energy food!

Proper overwintering is critical and starts as early as late summer/early fall by making sure the bees going into winter are strong and healthy (minimal pests, pathogens) and have enough food stores. Additionally, beekeepers in colder climates can do a little extra by insulating their bees for winter. I've kept bees in several locations around the globe from Ontario, to the southern US, to New Zealand, but this will be the farthest north I've ever kept them. So, I may be babying them a bit but after talking with local beekeepers, I decided to get insulating wraps for them (a "bee cozy"), moved them out of the direct wind, faced them south, and surrounded them with strawbales. There's always something new to learn about honey bees. Fingers crossed they make it!



Above: Scout Island's rooftop bees all ready for winter. I moved them out of the direct wind placing them next to the stairwell, added a few strawbales, and insulated each one with a "bee cozy".

Annual Fieldtrip to the Junction Sheep Range, October 26, 2024

By Loyd Csizmadia

When you have lived in the Cariboo for as long as my wife and I, you wait. It doesn't matter that the Field Trip write-up says "meet at 8AM." By 8:20, however, if nobody shows, go home. At 8:02, Peter arrived. Then Karen (she had mistakenly been waiting for us at the A&W). Soon, we had 7, including ourselves, with Jean, Sue, and Fernando driving in by 8:15. I almost kissed the sky when Fernando pulled up in a 4x4 crew cab sporting all-terrain tires. Now the annual sojourn into the Junction Sheep Range could proceed all the way up the muddy hill to the cairn overlooking the rutting grounds.

The Junction Sheep Range is approximately 90 kilometers from Williams Lake, so we broke up the journey with a few asides. Our first was a cluster of ponds about 9 kilometers down the Farwell Road, where migratory birds gather. On this occasion, our group was captivated by Trumpeter Swans, nearly 70 in all. Some were dabbling for aquatic plants or insects, their bottoms bobbing skyward as their long necks reached downward into the water. Others socialized in small groups, murmuring, grunting and softly honking while dipping their heads and arching their necks. Others still floated alone, some preening, some resting, and some watching us watching them.

We also observed an unusual situation when four swans attempted a synchronized takeoff. The lead bird raised its wings slightly, as if to test the wind; then it fully extended them upwards while paddling hard enough to lift its large body above the water's surface. The other swans followed suit, and in mere seconds, four massive birds were running over the pond, their powerful wings smacking the water right up until lift-off. That's when the unexpected collision occurred. The left wing of the third swan hammered the fourth, and the trailing bird veered sideways and crashed onto the muddy shore. The lead birds carried on, and the downed swan hobbled back to the pond and...dare I say...sheepishly, even hesitantly, paddled back to the flock. Without a doubt, there was nothing to trumpet about after that embarrassment!

Suddenly, a new group flew into sight, distracting me from the humiliated bird's predicament. Landings are lovely to watch, so, through my camera, I tracked the approaching flock of Trumpeter Swans. Initially, their necks were stretched straight out, their body-feathers tight against the torso, and their webbed feet folded and tucked beneath tail feathers. After circling two and a half times, the swans unfolded their feet, slightly relaxed their legs, and prepared to lose altitude.

At this point I chose the two lead swans. They approached the pond's surface, gliding gracefully on outstretched wings, legs slightly splayed pointing back, but ready to click forward into landing position. This happened at the same moment the tail feathers fanned out, and a second later, the outstretched feet touched smoothly down, gradually sinking out of sight beneath the churning water as the wings formed two cupped parachute-sails before folding away against each bird's body. "WOW!"



Perfect Landings for Two Trumpeter Swans
(Photo by L. Csizmadia)

For our next side-trip, Michaela suggested a quick detour down to the Chilcotin River. Last year we spotted a ram above one of the switch-backs. Besides, everyone was curious about the effects of a massive outburst flood that surged down the Chilcotin River around August 5th, seven days after a debris



California Bighorn Sheep among the Sages of Farwell Canyon
(Photo by L. Csizmadia)

flow 30 meters high, 600 meters wide, and roughly 1000 meters long blocked the river, creating an 11-kilometer lake full of fallen trees and other debris. According to DFO, two more minor slides blocked the river in September, and additional slides along the lower river channel would very likely occur, endangering the public. Therefore, stopping within 300 meters of the Chilcotin River is currently prohibited. So, we didn't see much of the damage, even from the bridge. We did however, encounter a magnificent ram on one of the switchbacks. (Nice work Michaela!)

He was only 100 meters above us and in no hurry to move on. Cameras were ablaze. We could have ended the field trip right then and there, and it was barely 10AM. Tiring of us, he nonchalantly disappeared up a steep gully. I wondered if he were headed for the rutting grounds to challenge the dominant ram Michaela and I had

spotted the day before on the benches below the cairn. The dominant ram had been grazing with a couple of ewes. Hardly a harem, but everyone agreed that a little head butting would really ice the cake on this field trip.

Bouncing our way back uphill over stretches of mind-boggling washboard, we rendezvoused at the BC Parks kiosk. According to the kiosk map, the cairn was 15 kilometers away, at an elevation of 800 metres. Sadly, the benches below 800 meters were closed to the public, so our group would not be hiking through the rutting grounds to the rocks above Caboose Rapids as we have done for many, many years. On the plus side, the road into the park was surprisingly dry, and the hill that had been so slick the day before was no obstacle. Still, there were some good-sized puddles. In one of these, reddish, greenish, orange reflections caught my eye. I stalled the procession so we could admire a flock of 8 Red

Crossbills on the muddy edge sipping clean water. At close quarters, their peculiar crossed bills were easily observed. I have often watched these birds hanging upside down on conifers while extracting seeds from cones. Their powerful bite and specialized bill lever the cone's scales and expose the seeds inside. Today, however, I watched something new.

Drinking when your mandibles curve in opposite directions requires skill. In this situation, the lower mandible acted like a ladle. After each bird scooped a helping of water, it leveled the beak momentarily, and then angled its head as if to gargle. The tongue seemed to push the water back when the head was leveled, and gravity assisted with swallowing when the head was tipped back. I also noted that some upper mandibles crossed left and others right. I wonder if one is more common?



Red Crossbills Gather for a Drink
(Photo by Loyd Csizmadia)

Hoping that all 8 Crossbills had visited the puddle, we climbed back into our trucks, and I quietly apologized to the birds as my tires muddied the water. With no further stops, we arrived at the cairn around lunch time. What a shame the lower benches were closed to the public, because 10, maybe 11 sheep caught my eye. I snapped some photos "for the record." Only the field naturalists with good binoculars would be able to enjoy the herd from this distance. I hadn't thought to bring a scope.

There was one ram. The rest were ewes. Someone mentioned a lamb, but we couldn't confirm this from where we stood. The absence of lambs does not bode well for the future of the herd. According to Senior Wildlife Biologist Chris Procter, M.ovi is the main threat to the survival of California Bighorn Sheep living along the Fraser River.

M.ovi, short for *Mycoplasma ovipneumoniae*, is a pathogen that causes bronchopneumonia in all ages of wild sheep. If left unchecked, it can kill an entire herd. Approximately 17 bands of bighorn sheep live between Lillooet and Williams Lake. In the 1990's there were about 2400 animals. Today, there might be 800, and among those remaining, some carriers of the pathogen remain at large. With a limited budget that is 95% funded by private partners and First Nations, Ministry biologists are doing the best they can, but it costs a lot of money to locate, test, and remove all of the infected ewes. As of 2023, 40 carriers of M.ovi in 8 bands south of the Chilcotin River have been shot. To find the carriers, 258 sheep had to be captured and tested. Between 2024 and 2028, 305 more ewes in 9 bands will need to be tested, and the infected ones removed. Without treatment, infected and uninfected ewes will give birth on the same lambing range. When infected mothers nuzzle their babies, these lambs will be infected; and through nose-to-nose contact with other lambs, M.ovi will enter the nursery group. Lacking a fully developed immune system, most lambs will succumb to the disease, typically suffocating on their own mucus. The good news is that the treatment works. Chris Procter believes that within eight years time, sheep populations along the Fraser River could rebound to 1990's levels.

Back at the cairn, our group thoroughly searched the landscape for lambs, but to no avail. Even if we had seen one lamb among ten ewes, this would be a poor result. More promising was a sighting by Lara Roorda and Shelly Peel on October 22nd. While hiking in Farwell Canyon, they spotted 1 ram, 4 ewes, and 3 lambs. No doubt there are others out there. We will have to wait until Chris Procter updates the *Fraser River Bighorn Sheep Disease Mitigation Program Report* for 2024. I will provide an update when I can.

Then it happened! A large, single ram appeared on the landscape below us. He had come to challenge the dominant male for control of the ewes. As the challenger waited on the open, rolling landscape above the herd, the ewes turned to stare. Even from way up near the cairn where we all stood, he was an impressive sight. The smaller ram among the ewes didn't stand a chance, but he didn't yield either. He climbed the slope to where his adversary waited and attempted to stare him down. Suddenly, the bigger ram reared and head-butted his opponent. The smaller ram turned away after only one strike, conceding defeat.



An Ewe and her Lamb in Farwell Canyon
(Photo by Shelly Peel)

It was interesting to observe the transfer of power. The defeated ram kept his backside to the victor while appearing to eat. Eventually, the new alpha male dismissed him and approached the herd, but he did so cautiously. I have read that there is a transition period during which the new male must win the respect of the ewes. If the ewes doubt his fitness or question his dominance, they will resist his efforts to mate, or--on rare occasions--reject him outright. Looking at the photo I snapped of the ewes watching the defeated male leave the area, it appears they are willing to give the new guy a chance. Perhaps we will see a few more lambs next year!



**Group Watches as Defeated Ram Leaves the Area
(Photo by Loyd Csizmadia)**

The future of California Bighorn Sheep living along the Fraser River is of concern to the Williams Lake Field Naturalists. Annually, for at least 30 years, our members have hiked the Junction Sheep Range, basking in its natural beauty while hoping for a glimpse of rams in rut. On March 8, 2023, our club invited Senior Wildlife Biologist Chris Procter to talk about the decline in Fraser River bighorn sheep. Since then, he and former provincial coordinator for the BC Sheep Separation Program Jeremy Ayotte have co-authored a paper titled *Fraser River Bighorn Sheep Disease Mitigation Program 2023 Progress Report*. Published in December 2023, it gives reason to be cautiously optimistic about the future. Their mitigation has to work. A Junction Sheep Range without sheep is unthinkable.



**This year's trip included Michaela, Fernando, Karen, Jean, Sue,
Peter, and Loyd (the photographer)**