

MUSKRAT EXPRESS

WILLIAMS LAKE FIELD NATURALISTS

JANUARY + FEBRUARY 2025 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) 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

We are still looking for a volunteer membership person. The volunteer does not need to be a member of the club executive. If you are interested in helping us fill this position please contact Margaret above.

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 in March. 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



Guest Speakers!



Scout Island & The Williams Lake Field Naturalists Presents:

Leo Rankin and Connie Haeussler

"ARIZONA SNOWBIRDS: Birding and Hiking in Southern Arizona"



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.

Leo and Connie's slideshow highlights the state parks, national parks and other natural areas of Arizona and the birds that live there.

When: Thursday, January 23rd, 2025 at 7:00PM

Where: In the Nature House at Scout Island Nature Centre
1305A Borland Rd. Williams Lake, BC

Cost: FREE!

We hope you can join us for this presentation!

Woodlot Wildlife

a SINC program on February 27th at 7:00pm
By John & Hazel Massier

John & Hazel Massier have lived on a rural/remote forested acreage surrounded by Crown land along the Cottonwood River northeast of Quesnel within the traditional territory of the Lhtako Dene for over forty years. In 2016 they set up the first of a series of motion activated cameras within 1.5 kilometres of their front door and since then have amassed thousands of short videos and still photos of much of the fauna they share the area with. From grouse to grizzlies and from woodpeckers to wolves they invite you come out and share some of their favourites from the past nine years.



Christmas Bird Count Report

By Phil Ranson

Williams Lake Field Naturalist held their 57th Annual Christmas Bird Count on December 15th. Temperatures remained a little above zero at the lower elevations and with mostly cloudy skies and Williams Lake 95% open, conditions looked favourable for a good count. However freezing rain the day before had left the back roads with a layer of ice which made for treacherous conditions, and even to the abandonment of one of the assigned routes.

At the end of the day, the 34 participants in the field (down from 45 last year) had counted 3475 birds of 65 different species. This proved to be the second highest species total, only a little behind the 67 recorded last year. The number of birds counted however was over 1000 less than the 20 year average but was not unexpected by the field teams who remarked on the day's scarcity of birds.

Three new species were seen to bring the combined number of species seen over the 57 years of the count to 129. New birds seen this year were a lone Tundra Swan, a Yellow-billed Loon and two Virginia Rails. The Tundra Swan is not entirely unexpected in a mild winter, but the high-Arctic breeding Yellow-billed Loon which winters along the Pacific coast of Alaska and BC has only a handful of records for the Cariboo Chilcotin region. As this year, those that are seen have been exclusively first winter birds.



Yellow Billed Loon
Photo by Sandy Proulx

The Virginia Rail, although not uncommon during the breeding season is not well adapted to spending winters in sub zero conditions and needs unfrozen wetland to survive. Fortunately for this pair, they found the small patch of spring fed marsh in the lower river valley which stays open in all but the harshest of winters, which incidentally is the same location as the only previous two winter records.

Other notable birds found on count day were a Long-tailed Duck, a Common Loon, and a second consecutive count day Double-crested Cormorant on Williams Lake. A late report of an Anna's Hummingbird coming to a heated feeder on Eagleview Road was only the second on the



Virginia Rail Photo by Lubna Khan

count. Another late report of a Blue Jay coming to a feeder in the Flett Road area was surprisingly in the same area as the first Blue Jay count record in 2020. The 8 Sharp-tailed Grouse tallied on Fox Mountain is only our 4th count record and the first time more than a single bird has been reported.

The only species we would normally expect and missed this year was Pine Siskin for only the second time in 20 years. Although there was generally a downward trend in bird numbers, it was encouraging to see that woodpecker numbers seem to be rebounding after several years of decreasing numbers. Hairy and Pileated Woodpeckers in particular seem to be benefiting from fire killed and diseased conifers.



Sharp-tailed Grouse

Full Results at the end of the newsletter.

Many thanks to Peter and Skye for once again hosting the post-count potluck.



Notes from the Director's Meetings.

By Margaret Waring President 250 398 7724 and mewaring@hotmail.com

I start this note by saying we would like to thank Frances Wilmeth and Kim Aeby for donating an excellent telescope and tripod to the Nature Centre for use in student astronomy evenings. I would also like to thank all the directors, staff, club members and community for the many things they do to support the Williams Lake Field Naturalists and Scout Island Nature Centre.

Since our last newsletter we had two meetings of the board of directors, December 10th, 2024 and January 14th, 2025. The next meeting is scheduled for February 11th, 2025.

We recently had several successful events. The Christmas Bird Count on Dec 18th was organized by Sean, Phil and Lubna. Peter and Skye hosted the evening potluck where we shared dinner and bird reports and stories. We had an interesting evening presentation by Chris Shepard at the Nature House.

We have more events coming up (Birds of Arizona on January 23rd, Cottonwood trails on February 27th and a potluck supper and annual general meeting on March 28th).

Committees of Directors have met with the Williams Lake First Nation to share planning regarding the North Marsh trail in front of the Osprey Nest Restaurant. Next week we will have our quarterly meeting with the city and another meeting with school district personnel planning for the future.

We are planning some infrastructure projects with the most significant being the replacement of the bridge to Otter Point. We are looking for funding for the project. Our first grant for this project has come from Community Forests. Donations are needed and welcome.

KEYS TO OPEN THE NATURE HOUSE have been changed. The four outside doors are all working and can be opened by the same key. We have provided Caretaker, Staff, President and Treasurer with keys. The City also has a key and paid for the change from the operation fund they have for us. Your past Nature House Keys will not work anymore and we do not need them returned. The Block House key remains the same. If you need a key for the Nature House for an event you can sign one out for the time period it is needed.

Please be sure you have renewed your membership so we can continue to send you emails and newsletters and field trip information.

I hope you have been able to spend time outside and enjoy some winter walks.

We want to keep you up to date with happenings in your club and we appreciate you sharing your ideas, support and input.

POTLUCK SUPPER AND ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

Please mark **Friday March 28th 5:30 PM** on your calendar and plan to head to the Nature House to visit friends, meet new people and support our club.

The Potluck supper will occur before the AGM and we have some door prizes and ideas for fun and games for the evening too.

After a potluck supper we will have our AGM. We will present brief reports about the past year and provide an opportunity for you to share your ideas and ask any questions you may have. We will have an election for Directors for the next year. We invite your input. Kim Zalay (kim_mzalay@hotmail.com) has volunteered for the nomination committee. Please let her know if you need information about being a director and want to give it a try! We are also looking for someone to take over memberships. You do not need to be a director to do this or come to meetings.

“Knowing Nature”, A Personal Perspective on a Motto

by Ordell Steen



The motto of BC Nature, the federation of BC Naturalists clubs, begins with “Know Nature...”. I am not certain what the authors of the motto meant specifically by these two beginning words, but through all of the many meanings people have shared on what it means to “know nature”, I believe, it is one of the most important goals of our times. The importance of knowing and connecting with nature is receiving much attention these days as we consider solutions to numbing social and individual ills. Medical doctors now prescribe quiet listening time in nature to heal debilitating illnesses, both mental and physical. Separation from nature has brought us many ills.

Each person, and certainly each naturalist and nature scientist, probably has their own interpretation of the words “know nature”. But in this time of Naturalist membership renewal and reflecting on the motto, I would like to offer my personal, though certainly not unique, perspective on what the words mean to me.

Many authors have given us powerful stories about knowing nature. Favourites of mine include writings that merge and interplay knowledge from western science with a more spiritual, heartfelt, and personal way of knowing: books such as Kimmerer’s “Braiding Sweetgrass..”, (recently published in a version adapted by Monique Smith for young adults), Lopez’s “Arctic Dreams”, MacFarlane’s “Underland”, Leopold’s “A Sand County Almanac” and numerous writings, stories, and other tellings by indigenous persons about knowing the land and honouring “all our relations”.

For these writers, knowing nature is clearly more than knowing nature as objects, collecting lists of species, determining which are rare and which common, how they group themselves, and which are most impacted by human related disturbances, although this information is important. Knowing nature comes when we are amazed and quieted by the wonders of nature, and fully open to listening with heart and spirit in a way unconstrained by the false sense of being separate from or dominant over nature. It is a conversation with other beings, living or not, with whom we share the earth, each thriving in our own way. Each species, as well as each human culture, has great stories to tell us about thriving on the land and sharing it with others.

Science is an important language to help us listen to nature. Through science-based technology we learn stories which show that each species, like ourselves, is a wonder of creation and that we are all related. Science brings us stories that demonstrate that all beings are much more complex and rich and more like ourselves than we sometimes think. So knowing nature is to better know ourselves. Science also shows us that the landscapes we occupy are only moments in a geological flow of time that dwarfs our lives. Seeing the shapes of the land as process rather than state brings them alive. The rocks, like the plants and animals, have a world of stories to tell.

Many authors who describe “knowing nature” refer to cosmologies of indigenous people as examples. Indigenous

peoples of the world, including the Secwepemc, recognize knowing as being of both a visible, tangible, and reasoned world which is readily communicated through language and, secondly, a much more encompassing spirit world which is pervasive but not readily expressed in words or reason but greatly expands our knowing. Knowing nature as spiritual world is available to all who respectfully and openly listen and connect to all beings. Although indigenous people needed their science-based knowledge of the habits of other being, it was also essential to connect in spirit with other beings for success as a hunter and collector. Restricting knowledge to only the visible, measurable world, limits our knowing to only a small segment of our being.

Recently, on a warm summer day when I was looking for grassland photographs to collect, I laid face-down on an undisturbed grassland slope near Riske Creek. The smell of the black soil richness and decaying plants filled my senses and I thought about the thousands of beings living in a handful of soil at my face. Bluebunch wheatgrass bunches towered above my view as I wandered visually among the individuals we call *Cladonia*, *Peltigera*, *Tortula*, *Erigeron*, *Potentilla*, *Antennaria*, *Comandra*, and *Achillea*. *Peltigera* was in its favoured realm, relatively undisturbed by human activity. Remains of decaying plants covered much of the soil while beetles and spiders and ants traveled on trails through it to somewhere important to them. It was a vibrant world of interdependent beings. I drew in deep breaths. At least some of the oxygen I took in was surely provided by the complex biochemical skills of the individuals around me. I released carbon dioxide into their world and for a moment I fully understood that I was part of a shared world, sharing the same air to sustain us all. I said thank you to those around me and paused for awhile in honour of all the beings who provide for my survival and well-being in this world. I knew the rest of nature, all our relations, was ok in providing for the needs of humans as long as we are respectful, thankful, reciprocate and do not take more than we need.

On another summer day, I walked into an ancient Douglas-fir forest at the edge of the grassland. Large, gnarly trees with great girth and huge branches nearly all bore scars of past fires. Beneath the widely spaced ancient trees grew a greater density of much smaller trees, each vigorously reaching for the sky and knowing little of the history of the ancient ones. Were the small trees connected to and being sustained by the ancient trees as Simard tells us in “Finding the Mother Tree”? Were the ancient trees passing on something of their struggles? The ancient trees had long stories to tell that the youngsters hardly knew of, a time when the ancient ones struggled to survive in the ground fires. But now they were passing life on to the younger ones. Nearly all of the ancient ones was also a home to a rich community of birds, insects and other beings. The enthusiastic young ones seemed to me to know little of this. The ancient ones need to be left in peace, not only for themselves but also for all of the other creatures making them a home.

Many believe it is a human need to know nature as a beautiful place we are all part of. Although nature can be viewed as objects that we can study and document, it is also as a place of spiritual richness which we can enter when we open our minds and hearts to listening. When we know nature in this way and recognize that we are all part of creation, we have a strong desire to guard, conserve and use nature as wisely as we can. To know nature does not tell us we cannot use it for our needs but it gives us the desire to use it wisely and with respect and not take more than we need. Some indigenous stories say it is the job of humans among all creatures to protect other beings and use the land wisely, in honour of all our relations who give their gifts to us. As each of us renew our membership with the Field Naturalists and BC Nature, I am reminded of the motto: “Know nature and keep it worth knowing”.

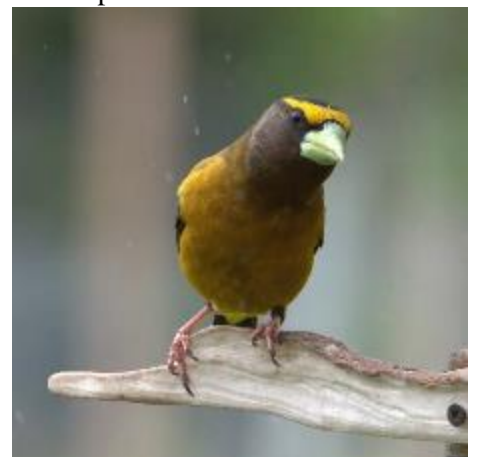


Bird fever!

Birds Bring Colour to Our Cariboo Winter

By Loyd Csizmadia

I love the colours of our Cariboo winter. The reds are electric, the oranges are intense, the lime green is exotic, and the occasional golden glimmer in the trees stirs a kind of fever.



Evening Grosbeak

With binoculars clamped to our eyes, Cariboo birders pan the forests, the fields, and the feeders for red heads and breasts, orange flashes of wing and tail, lime-green beaks and golden streaks of feathers, each person dreaming of that lucky strike: the colour that shouldn't be there.

For me, that colour would be blue. Azure to be exact. That is the vibrant hue of a male Mountain Bluebird. Alas, this rare blue nugget does not brighten our Cariboo winter. According to the Editing Checklist for Cariboo-Chilcotin Birds, there is no record of a Mountain Bluebird in December or January. The same checklist, however, does say that two males and a female were recorded along Signal Point Road on November 15th 2011; but they had vanished by November 29th. This is the only record.

If you want the company of Mountain Bluebirds during our winter breaks, 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.

Realistically, if a Mountain Bluebird is high on your New Year's Wishlist, then you will have to journey further south than Vancouver. According to an up-to-date eBird map, from 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. For example, about 3000 kilometers from Williams Lake, the 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 Cariboo folk. 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 bluish-purple juniper berries.

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.

In the meantime, there are plenty of colourful birds that do regularly visit our area. And these birds are highly photogenic. This morning outside my window, for example, I saw the blazing red crest of a Pileated Woodpecker, the bold orange plumage under a Northern Flicker's wings and tail, the distinctive lime green of an Evening Grosbeak's robust bill, and lots of golden-yellow finches in the Crab Apple tree. Am I sad there are no Mountain Bluebirds? Not terribly. For me, Mountain Bluebirds are the harbingers of Spring. I wouldn't want it any other way.



Pileated Woodpecker

57th Annual Williams Lake Christmas Bird Count

1	Trumpeter Swan	3
2	Tundra Swan	1
3	Mallard	73
4	Ring-necked Duck	6
5	Greater Scaup	1
6	Lesser Scaup	5
7	Long-tailed Duck	1
8	Bufflehead	15
9	Common Goldeneye	32
10	Barrow's Goldeneye	4
11	Hooded Merganser	1
12	Common Merganser	11
13	Ruffed Grouse	2
14	Sharp-tailed Grouse	8
15	Pied-billed Grebe	5
16	Red-necked Grebe	1
17	Rock Pigeon	633
18	Eurasian Collared Dove	10
19	Anna's Hummingbird	1
20	Virginia Rail	2
21	Common Loon	1
22	Yellow-billed Loon	1
23	Double-crested Cormorant	1
24	Great Blue Heron	2
25	Golden Eagle	2
26	Sharp-shinned Hawk	1
27	Bald Eagle	20
28	Red-tailed Hawk	2
29	Northern Pygmy-Owl	4
30	Am. Three-toed Woodpecker	2
31	Black-backed Woodpecker	3
32	Downy Woodpecker	16
33	Hairy Woodpecker	32
34	Northern Flicker	67
35	Pileated Woodpecker	23
36	Merlin	1
37	Northern Shrike	3

38	Blue Jay	1
39	Canada Jay	17
40	Black-billed Magpie	27
41	American Crow	475
42	Common Raven	180
43	Black-capped Chickadee	251
44	Mountain Chickadee	234
45	Bohemian Waxwing	215
46	Red-breasted Nuthatch	162
47	European Starling	83
48	American Dipper	1
49	Pacific Wren	1
50	Townsend's Solitaire	39
51	American Robin	5
52	Evening Grosbeak	53
53	House Sparrow	376
54	Pine Grosbeak	10
55	House Finch	133
56	Purple Finch	2
57	Redpoll	15
58	Red Crossbill	14
59	White-winged Crossbill	50
60	American Goldfinch	55
61	Dark-eyed Junco	42
62	White-throated Sparrow	1
63	Song Sparrow	19
64	Spotted Towhee	1
65	Red-winged Blackbird	17
	65 Species	
	3475 individuals	

 New to count
 Count high

Count week species:*

Red-breasted Merganser, Short-eared Owl, Great Gray Owl, Steller's Jay, Brown Creeper

*Seen during count week. Not on count day.