

THE PARKLAND NATURALIST



MAY–AUGUST 2023

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Eastern Bluebird



Gray-crowned Rosy Finch



Male Wood Duck

The Hastings Lake Dead-End Effect Strikes Again!

A few years ago you might recall me writing about all the cool birds seen at Hastings Lake. One good sighting led to another. This was how I started the piece:

“Have you ever heard of the Patagonia Picnic Table Effect? I'm not sure who coined the phrase or exactly what birds were involved, but it's a legendary birding phenomenon. It started when a rare bird was reported at a highway rest stop near Patagonia, Arizona. The report drew numerous birders to the same spot and the extra eyes ended up finding more cool birds. The more rarities that were found, the more coverage the spot got, creating a kind of feedback loop. The name Patagonia Picnic Table Effect was coined and became part of birding lingo.”

I ended the article asking where the HLDEE would strike next. Well, to a certain degree it did strike again this past June north of Bruderheim.

This area has had some attention from local birders for a while now. Several years ago, participants on a club field trip discovered nesting Lark Sparrows, a species most of us would associate with southern Alberta. But they've been reliably returning to the Bruderheim area every year. They've also been found near Opal and other areas – so maybe not as “southern” a species as we thought.

Over the last 3 or 4 years there have been some other good birds. Vince Cottrell found a female Eastern Bluebird paired up with a Mountain Bluebird. Colleen Raymond spotted a Gray-crowned Rosy-Finch when doing a Christmas Bird Count. There were some occasional sightings of Wood Ducks. All of which are really good birds, especially at a local level.

In a way, it's kind of odd. The area is a patchwork of industrial sites, agricultural fields, and a few natural areas. A lot of the habitat is sandhills with Jack Pine. A good bit of it has burned in the past 10 years. There are patches of live forest, a few wetlands, and lots of open area. To me, it doesn't really look like a haven for rare birds.

Personally, I learned about the area while doing the Fort Saskatchewan Christmas Bird Count over the last 20 years or so. There was a really nice mature forest in what used to be the Astotin Natural Area. It was a good spot to pick up kinglets, creepers, and the like for the count. Then the government transferred the NA to industry –

though I still snuck in for a few years. Then a fire took out the mature trees, but the general area still produced a few nice birds from time to time.

Over the past year I started putting up some trail cameras and saw some interesting critters such as fishers, lynx, and raccoons on the cameras. This past June, while going to check the cameras, I noticed a pair of Bluebirds nesting in a cavity in a power pole. For several weeks I just drove by, not looking closely and not wanting to bother them. Then one day on the way out I took a closer look at the female. She had some orangey colour, and when I looked at photos later, her wing structure looked good for an Eastern Bluebird. This spot was about 2 km from where Vince found an Eastern 3 years earlier.

About a week later, David Grinevitch took a couple of friends, Patrick Goa and Nikolas Robinson, out for the Bluebird. While watching the Bluebird, they spotted a very cool red bird, a Summer Tanager! Compared to the other birds mentioned, this was a true rarity on a provincial level. It's the 10th record for Alberta, and it drew birders from all over the province. Lots of people saw the bird, though, unfortunately, it was erratic in its appearances and several people missed it. One birder from Calgary made two trips up and spent a couple of long days but had no luck. Luckier folks drove up while other birders were looking at the bird and didn't have to wait at all.

So, we had another version of the Patagonia Picnic Table Effect out by Bruderheim. If you send enough birders out to one spot, there's a chance they'll make some interesting discoveries. I'll end this like the previous piece – wonder where the HLDEE will strike next?

Gerald Romanchuk

All photos by Gerald Romanchuk

On the Cover

Summer Tanager, photo by Gerald Romanchuk

President's Message



Our President, Brian Stephens

I hope everyone has been having a good birding year. The number of rare birds in the Edmonton area this year has been exciting, with good reporting and lots of people getting chances to see them. Our second annual May Species Count went well in spite of smoky conditions and a slightly lower participation. We also had good participation in the World Migratory Bird Day at Big Lake.

A fun picnic was held at Goldbar Park this July, with over 30 participants enjoying a warm if smoky get-together. It was very nice to meet in person after the past years' restrictions, and to share experiences.

We expect to have a diverse speaker program coming up and have been collaborating with other organizations to seek out speakers. We will continue to use the Zoom platform, which allows participation by people from outside the Edmonton area. Thanks to Nature Alberta for making available the enhanced Zoom account.

We are also considering how to revitalize our outdoor program by offering more diverse trips, including those that are car-based, and recruiting trip leaders.

Brian Stephens



American Coot (male, breeding plumage), Telford Lake, photo by Brian Stephens

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Northern Leopard Frog Conservation Program Update

Success! Zookeeper Wayne Woods got his wish when the resident “assurance” population of Northern Leopard Frogs successfully bred this year at the Edmonton Valley Zoo (EVZ), with a little help from human technology: hormone injections and artificial insemination. (See the article on pages 2–5 of *The Parkland Naturalist*, May–August, 2023.)

Of the 277 tadpoles that Wayne and fellow zookeeper Makayla Ohlmann escorted to their Creston Valley Wetlands ancestral home near Kimberley, B.C., 100 were Zoo-born and -raised. The rest were “head-started” after having been obtained as egg masses collected from the endangered Rocky Mountain frog population in Creston, B.C., and raised to large tadpole stage at the Edmonton facility. Moreover, EVZ was the only member of the Northern Leopard Frog Conservation team, consisting of the Vancouver Aquarium, Wilder Institute/Calgary Zoo, Creston Valley Wildlife Management Area, and B.C. government, to release tadpole offspring from their locally resident adult frogs.

This positive result deserves congratulations and helps to justify the continuance of the Zoo’s in-situ conservation program. Lessons learned are applicable to re-introducing these frogs elsewhere, such as in Alberta, where they have declined over the last few decades.

Patsy Cotterill

Reference

https://www.edmonton.ca/attractions_events/edmonton_valley_zoo/northern-leopard-frog-breeding-program



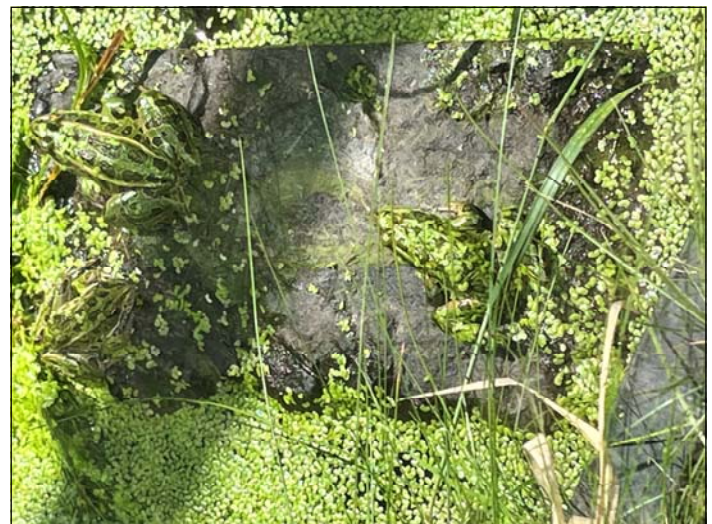
Northern Leopard Frog eggs in petri dish on May 13, 2003, at the Edmonton Valley Zoo, photo by Makayla Ohlmann



***Lithobates pipiens*, photo by Kris Kendell**



Tadpole-raising tubs at Edmonton Valley Zoo



***Adult overwintered frogs at EVZ*
*Two photos above by Patsy Cotterill***

Edmonton's National Urban Park – Is it a Good Idea? It Depends...

Edmonton's proposed National Urban Park is currently under discussion by the City, an Indigenous Group, and Parks Canada, with members of the Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society, the North Saskatchewan River Valley Conservation Society (NSRVCS), and the Edmonton River Valley Conservation Coalition also part of the negotiations.

River valley lands are considered the most likely candidate for the park. Mayor Amarjeet Sohi has stated that Edmonton would retain ownership and control of any created national park, and access would remain free. Parks Canada has declared that it would not be administratively involved.

So why did Sohi make this statement? Apparently, it was made at a Council meeting in response to further lobbying from the Edmonton Mountain Bike Alliance, whose members remain nervous that they may lose part of their extensive network of valley mountain biking trails – some of them unsanctioned – if restrictions were to be applied.

Edmonton Journal columnist Keith Gerein has speculated that Edmonton could probably do better by its river valley without the need for federal intervention. At least one *Journal* correspondent has expressed displeasure at the notion of being told what to do by the feds. Another correspondent expressed displeasure with the City's stewardship of the river valley. As usual, though, the majority of Edmontonians remain silent on the issue although, in fairness, this could be due in part because so little is known about the proposal. (Except that City Council has voted to proceed with the planning phase, without obligation. Nothing new here. The City is constantly making plans, a good many of which never see the light of day!)

Gerein has a point. What is the point of having a national urban park if the status quo is going to prevail, which is what Sohi seems to be suggesting?

We have heard nothing about regulations but, according to a Parks Canada spokesperson, the main goals of an urban national park would be conservation, connecting people with nature, and reconciliation with Indigenous peoples. No doubt Edmonton would love an infusion of federal dollars with no strings attached, but if there is no regulatory oversight, what guarantee is there that this money will be spent on achieving these goals – in particular, the goal of conservation?

We could use some basic infrastructure, such as washrooms and shelters, which would improve public access

to the adequate trail system we already have. We could do with a whole lot of educational programming and certainly much more interpretive signage, especially in sensitive areas that harbour some fascinating plants and wildlife but are vulnerable to trampling. But what about funding some proper scientific research to see how the river valley is faring ecologically, what its carrying capacity is, and whether it is sustainable under current and future levels of usage? What about monitoring, reclamation, and restoration?

I'm with the group of people who would welcome more regulations – as well as more money being spent appropriately on the river valley – because I think the present level of the City's stewardship is completely inadequate. I also think that the suggestion of former MP Linda Duncan of the NSRVCS, an enthusiastic supporter of the park if it's done properly, is a good one: to form a group of various independent stakeholders who would provide oversight of the park.

Patsy Cotterill

***Note:** The City of Edmonton wants your input into the benefits and challenges of a National Urban Park. Share your thoughts, ideas, and concerns about what an Edmonton and Area National Urban Park could look like via a survey open from September 26 until October 10 at <https://engaged.edmonton.ca/nationalurbanpark>.*

References

<https://edmontonjournal.com/opinion/columnists/keith-gerein-does-edmonton-need-an-urban-national-park-to-cherish-its-river-valley>

Edmonton North Saskatchewan River Valley News: <https://mailchi.mp/b501017897ce/river-valley-news?e=515a3ffeb8>

National Urban Park Initiative: https://www.edmonton.ca/city_government/initiatives_innovation/national-urban-park



**Photo by
Patsy Cotterill
July 7, 2023**

The area around an old river oxbow in Whitemud Creek Park South contains some interesting natural riparian vegetation but, unfortunately, few people see it and appreciate it. The conundrum is that if more people were to enter this area, it would soon become degraded. Maybe the answer is to encourage more use of Edmonton's Natural Area Parks (see Conservation Atlas Key, https://www.edmonton.ca/city_government/environmental_stewardship/natural-area-parks), and build more boardwalks.

The Big Day: Beasts of Birdin' 2023

Brown Thrasher



Have you ever decided to record as many bird species as possible in a 24-hour period? Many of us have embarked on a journey with this goal in mind, participating in one of birding's most beloved events, the Big Day. Typically, we set this goal with a specific county or hotspot as the field of play. But what if you traversed the whole province? That is exactly what David Scott, Daniel Arndt, Gavin McKinnon, Peter Thompson, and I did on June 11, 2023.

On June 4, 2012, Yousif Attila and Stu Mackenzie set the Canadian Big Day record when they recorded 226 species between Cold Lake and Waterton in a single 24-hour period. Recording this tally is the perfect mix of skill, preparation, and luck. The five of us decided to see if we had enough of all three to take a run at the record, opting for a route starting at Cold Lake and ending in Crowsnest Pass. A lot of planning goes into a Big Day of this magnitude. The most important decision? A catchy team name. Luckily, this is where I excel, perhaps more so than in the birding, and the Beasts of Birdin' were born. Peter created vast spreadsheets, listing all the possible species and where we might find them. Each of us scouted a portion of the route to pin down reliable locations for hard-to-find species. Peter then used all this information to create a by-the-minute scheduled route. Deviating from that plan may gain a species or two but might lose you five at the end of the day. We also decided to abide by the American Birding Association Big Day Rules, the

most treacherous being that only 5% of the species recorded could be seen or heard by less than the full party. With five birders, getting every person on every bird is difficult and would lead to situations like running into a gas station bathroom to yell at two guys to hurry up because there's a Downy Woodpecker on a power pole out front. Napping in the car? Not an option.

With our plan in place, we met up in Calgary on June 10 and headed north to Cold Lake. Driving along Highway 21 east of Red Deer Lake, we stumbled upon a vagrant Red-Headed Woodpecker taking off from a roadside power pole, an Alberta lifer for a couple of us and a good omen for the following day. After napping the whole evening, we checked out of the hotel at 11 p.m., a perfectly normal thing to do, to drive to our starting location at Moose Lake Provincial Park for a midnight start. Just minutes before the clock struck twelve, we had multiple Common Nighthawks calling overhead.

Midnight. Silence. Seriously. The nighthawks vanished. I told our group we'd pick one up at Blood Indian Park twelve hours later to control our collective sobbing. However, we picked up our first three birds in the dark – Spotted Sandpiper, Red-necked Grebe, and the sounds of young Black-backed Woodpeckers coming from a waist-level nest cavity discovered roadside earlier in the week. The early hours were eerily devoid of bird songs, which can go all night on their breeding grounds. However, we

picked up most of the expected marsh birds on the way to Primrose Lake Road and even had 4 Barred Owls and 2 Northern Saw-whet Owls calling from different directions at one stop. At 3 a.m., song started like someone hit a switch. We picked up most of our needed breeding songbirds of the boreal forest and ended our Cold Lake portion of the day around 7 a.m. with 112 species. A late Black-bellied Plover at Charlotte Lake was our only migrant shorebird of the day.

A stop at Kehewin picked up Ruby-throated Hummingbird and Great Crested Flycatcher, both difficult species to come across. Even common birds such as House Finch were a welcome sound, as the bird heard passing by Elk Point was our only one on the day. Soon we were flying towards the badlands. Blood Indian Park hosted Ferruginous Hawk, Brown Thrasher, and, just as we were leaving, my prophesized Common Nighthawk glided by at 12:45 p.m. Unfortunately, the Northern Mockingbird I found at the location on my scouting day was nowhere to be found. The Jenner Rodeo Grounds provided Rock Wren, Lark Sparrow, Spotted Towhee, and Yellow-breasted Chat. Admittedly, our luck started to turn for the worse in the prairies, as the birds didn't cooperate around Tide Lake. We did collect Burrowing Owl, Chestnut-collared Longspur, and Thick-billed Longspur, but dipped on a few species we really needed.

Heading west towards the mountains, we grabbed Eurasian Collared-Dove, Caspian Tern, and Ring-necked Pheasant around Brooks and a flock of Turkey Vultures in Lethbridge. The weather was starting to turn, and we had to combat some rain and storms the rest of the evening. Despite the rain, we picked up a variety of moun-

tain specialities between Burmis and Tent Mountain Road, including Cassin's Vireo, Clark's Nutcracker, Cassin's Finch, Fox Sparrow, Willow Flycatcher, Black-Headed Grosbeak, several warblers, and the nice surprise of Wood Duck and Sharp-shinned Hawk. The rain strengthened and we decided to head back to Lethbridge and try for Great Horned Owl at a local park. Sadly, time expired, and no owl.

After cross-referencing our lists and making sure they matched, it was time to face the music. Had we come close to our goal of 227? Well.....no. However, the 183 species recorded over 1,000 km was the biggest day any of us had completed in Canada and the biggest first attempt at the cross-Alberta route by any group, and it provided us with great insight for next year (yep, we're hooked). All five of us managed to see or hear 96.7% of the birds recorded, falling within the 5% range. Admittedly, our chosen day was a little late in June, missing migrant shorebirds completely, but this was our only option due to work commitments. Our biggest misses? Cinnamon Teal, White-faced Ibis, Long-billed Curlew, White-breasted Nuthatch, and Yellow-bellied Sapsucker. Ouch. A tiring experience for sure, but one we look forward to completing annually. Our group members may differ depending on where life takes us, but our inaugural trek will be remembered for the good times, great birds, and a relative lack of the conflict one might expect after 24 straight hours in a car with five people. Most importantly, we raised \$1,500 for Birds Canada as part of the Great Canadian Birdathon fundraising campaign!

Andy Ross

Photos by Andy Ross



Common Nighthawk

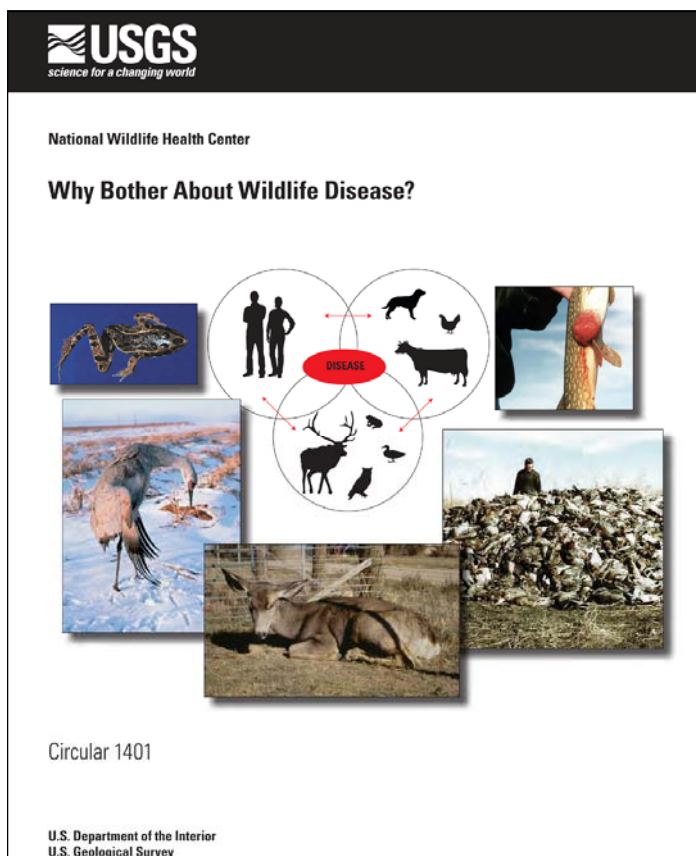
Armchair Naturalist

The place where club members review books about natural history they found particularly rewarding. Some of the recommended books may be borrowed from the Edmonton Public Library (EPL). To check on the availability of books in printed and electronic formats, go to epl.ca and click on "Search."

Curl up with one of the recommended books and escape into the wonderful world of nature!

Why Bother About Wildlife Diseases?

By Dr. Milton Friend, published by The Government of Canada, 2014



Read this brilliant book. It's online (<https://pubs.usgs.gov/circ/1401/pdf/circ1401.pdf>), and it covers the importance of zoonoses, which are infectious diseases transmissible from animals to humans, and vice versa (Coronavirus is a zoonosis). Dr. Friend notes that there are approximately 870 species of infectious organisms you can get from wildlife. As an aside, with this many infectious organisms out there, if you don't wear plastic

gloves when handling or touching animal or bird species or their parts, you are flirting with serious diseases, some of which can kill you.

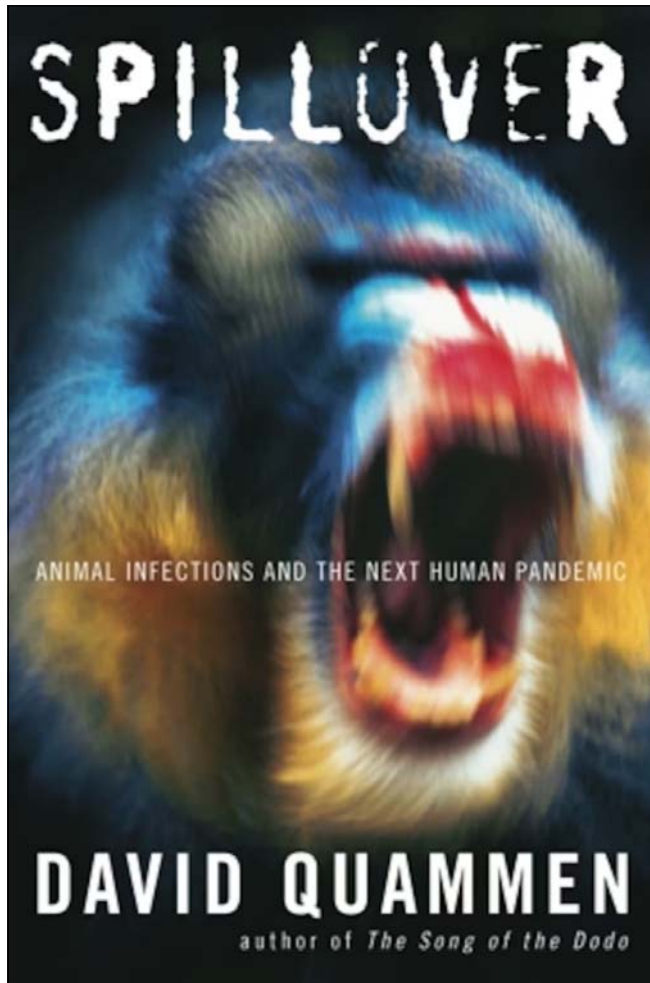
The book has numerous examples of zoonoses, and it describes how these zoonoses are emerging and resurging at rates never seen before. As I skimmed through this book, a passage that relates to Coronavirus caught my eye.

Dr. Friend includes a quote from *Spillover: Animal Infections and the Next Human Pandemic*, by David Quammen, published in 2012. The quote is eerily predictive, and remember, it was published over a decade ago. "The 'Next Big One' [highly virulent pandemic that sweeps across the world] is not only possible but probable.... it will almost certainly be a zoonotic disease...that emerges from wildlife, and will most likely be a virus." Indeed, the Coronavirus did emerge from wildlife, and it obviously is a virus.

Dr. Friend notes that these growing numbers of infectious agents have an adaptive advantage over us, and they are crossing over what we used to believe were species barriers and getting to us, and to other wildlife. He also notes that 75 percent of emerging zoonoses around the world came from wildlife. As you know, the Coronavirus reportedly came from bats in China.

A prime example is West Nile virus, which was first found around New York City in 1999, and is now found worldwide in 294 bird species and 25 mammal species. It has killed hundreds of thousands of birds, of which hawks, owls, and crows are especially vulnerable. Of interest is the fact that West Nile virus is playing a role in the downward trend of Ruffed Grouse populations.

Recommended by Dr. Dave Samuel



Spillover: Animal Infections and the Next Human Pandemic

By David Quammen, published by W. W. Norton, 2012

A masterpiece of science reporting that tracks the animal origins of emerging human diseases, *Spillover* is “fascinating and terrifying ... a real-life thriller with an outcome that affects us all (Elizabeth Kolbert, author of *The Sixth Extinction*).

“The emergence of strange new diseases is a frightening problem that seems to be getting worse. In this age of speedy travel, it threatens a worldwide pandemic. We hear news reports of Ebola, SARS, AIDS, and something called Hendra that is killing horses and people in Australia – but those reports miss the big truth that such phenomena are part of a single pattern. The bugs that transmit these diseases share one thing: they originate in wild animals and pass to humans by a process called *spillover*...[The author] tracks this subject around the world. He recounts adventures in the field – netting bats in China, trapping monkeys in Bangladesh, stalking gorillas in the Congo – with the world’s leading disease scientists. He takes the reader along on this astonishing quest to learn how, where from, and why these diseases emerge, and he asks the terrifying question: What might the next big one be?” (Review in Google Books)

Spillover has an Amazon Review rating of 4.7/5.0 and is available on Kindle as well as in paperback and hard-cover.

I am looking for more reviews of good nature books to share! To suggest a book review, go to the ENC website, click on “Member Entrance,” and log in using the password you received with your membership. Use “Contact us!” to provide your submission, e.g., in the “Comment” section write “Parkland Naturalist book review,” describe the book you’d like to recommend, click “Submit,” and I will get in touch with you.

Thank you. **Karen Lindsay**

Editorial Notes

This issue features a variety of interesting articles and photos, including a review of our Outdoor Program, which has expanded under the capable leadership of Chris Rees and Janice Hurlburt. Many thanks to Chris and Janice and all the field-trip volunteers who provide leadership and information along the way. Welcome to Kimberly Fulton, our new Outdoor Program Director.

Many photos submitted for ENCNatureTalk trip reports are also used in the *Parkland Naturalist*. While low-resolution submissions are fine for online reports, we need high-resolution photos for the printed version of our magazine. We want to feature your best photos both online and in the *PN*, so when you submit a picture for an online field report, please also send a high-resolution jpg to Dawne Colwell at the email address below!

The deadline for submissions to the September–December issue is November 30, 2023. Please email articles and photos to Dawne Colwell at colwelld@shaw.ca.

Edmonton Nature Club Picnic in Gold Bar Park

On July 9, we had our first “party” since the pandemic! The weather cooperated and we had a wonderful gathering of just under 40 club members.

We swapped stories, had great conversations, and maybe heard one or two puns from the two master pun-makers themselves. If you don’t know who that is, here is your hint: their names begin with “V” and “W”. Everyone was given the task of creating their own name tag, and if there had been a prize for creativity, Sean would have been the winner!

Thanks to the generosity of several club members, we also handed out some door prizes – Lynn and Arnold Maki, Kim Blomme, and Melissa Penney, you all rock!

Hope to see you all again at a future get-together!

Toby-Anne Reimer

All photos by Toby-Anne Reimer

Some Creative Name Tags





Five Healthy Habits for your Backyard Habitat

Making our yards more wildlife friendly can seem like a daunting task. But making some small changes is often all it takes to get the ball rolling. Below are five habits you can adopt to make your yard more attractive to birds and other wildlife with very little effort.

1. Turn off Outdoor Lights.

Outdoor lights can add ambience to a patio while you have company. But leaving them on all the time is disruptive to birds, moths, amphibians, and bats. Instead of leaving patio lights on all evening and night, try turning them on only when you are sitting outside. If you have outdoor security lights, consider switching to motion-sensor lights that turn on only when necessary. The research on the ways that light pollution negatively affects wildlife is extensive. Take a moment to learn more at: <https://darksky.org/resources/what-is-light-pollution/effects/wildlife-ecosystems/>.

Pictured here is the motion-sensor light at our back door. It turned out to be great for wildlife in an unexpected way. This robin family raised back-to-back broods this summer for a total of five fledglings!



2. Plant Native Plants.

I'm sure all of you can think of at least one plant that is underperforming in your garden. It's time to replace it with a native species! Native species thrive in our unpredictable weather and require very little care. They save you money on water, don't need fertilizer, and attract many beneficial insects to your yard. Why are these insects so important? They are nature's authentic bird food! If you want nesting birds, they need insects. If you want migrants stopping by on their way north or south, they need insects to help them pack on weight for their harrowing journey. If you want to see butterflies, moths, bees, and cool bugs you've never heard of hanging around in your garden, you need native plants. Even if you simply want more pollinators so your vegetable or fruit garden has a higher yield, native plants are the way to go! This bumblebee is enjoying the colourful and easy-to-grow Gallardia (Blanket Flower).



All photos by Melissa Penney

3. Offer Clean Water.

You might wonder why I put “clean” water in the header. It’s not that I think you are intentionally putting out dirty water for birds, but with our busy lifestyles we sometimes forget to clean bird baths or dump them out after a heavy rain. Birds remember. If you want birds to keep coming back and staying for longer visits, keep the water fresh and the bird baths clean. It does make a difference. Clean drinking water is essential for bird health, and so is having clean feathers. I often see products advertised for “thirsty bees.” Our native bees don’t drink water, so don’t bother with fancy little vessels marketed for bees. Butterflies would rather have a little mucky mud puddle to get the minerals they need for reproduction instead of a water dish. This Red-breasted Nuthatch loved to dunk its head many times directly into the stream of water.

4. Don’t Use Pesticides.

A healthy habitat has some leaves that have been munched on. You will not have birds if you are getting rid of their food! You will also have no pollinators if you are killing their larva. If you have plants that no bugs want to eat or lay eggs on...then you’ve got the wrong plants in your garden! Most plants survive our native bugs nibbling on them with no problem. Native plants will attract beneficial insects that often eat the insects that are causing problems. Let’s use aphids as an example. Birds love to eat aphids from the underside of leaves. Syrphid Flies (a great pollinator) lay their eggs near aphid eggs so that when they hatch, they eat the aphids. If you take away the aphids, you take away a food source for birds and syrphid fly larva. And you have also inadvertently killed other beneficial insects that you probably did not know were there. Here are two Woolly Tailed Marsh Flies (a kind of Syrphid Fly) making more Syrphid Flies.

5. Safely Keep Dead Wood.

One of the key things missing in our urban habitats is dead wood. Trees that have to be removed for safety of people and buildings are a completely different matter. But if you have a dying tree, consider leaving it where it stands. Not only do birds excavate dead trees (“snags”) for nesting, but the snags are also essential nesting spots for native bees and wasps that burrow into the wood. These are tiny, non-aggressive insects that are integral to our ecosystems. We were told twelve years ago that this birch tree was dying and should be cut down. But we chose not to remove it. Instead, we gradually removed limbs that could fall and damage property. In these cavities, I have seen Northern Flickers, Red-breasted Nuthatches, Black-capped Chickadees, Downy Woodpeckers, and a Northern Flying Squirrel.



Melissa Penney

Outdoor Program, April–July, 2023

Thank you to all our activity leaders. During this time period, we were able to offer thirteen city walks and three field trips to Elk Island National Park. Members also participated in the Edmonton and Area May Bird Count that was facilitated by Brian Stephens. We were able to transition from our Covid Protocols pre-registration requirements to an open members-only participation in May. City walks are intended to allow members to explore local parks and learn about the wildlife that may be present in these urban habitats. Field trips allow members to explore a bit further afield outside the city. Full reports of the walks and field trips are available on the ENC Nature Talk (ENCnaturetalk@groups.io | Home) and can be filtered by a hashtag (#tripreport).

Whitemud Creek North – Wayne Oakes

Wayne led six walks in Whitemud Creek North – on April 4, April 22, May 9, May 20, June 6, and June 24. Participants expressed a sincere thank-you to Wayne for sharing his intimate knowledge of the ravine and nature that inhabits it. The reader is directed to see Wayne's detailed reports on ENC NatureTalk. We provide a minimal attempt below to summarize Wayne's excellent reports.

Date	April 4	April 22	May 9	May 20	June 6	June 24
# of Bird Species	17	22	36	31	28	37
Highlights	Chipmunk, Ring-billed gulls	Red-tailed hawk, catkins	Spotted sandpiper, High-bush cranberries	Spotted sandpiper, Belted kingfishers	Least Flycatcher, berries	Yellow evening primrose



Ring-billed gulls



Least Chipmunk



Red-tailed Hawk



Spotted Sandpiper

*Least Flycatcher**High-bush Cranberry**Yellow Evening Primrose**All photos by Wayne Oakes***Whitemud Creek South – Ted Hogg**

Ted led walks in Whitemud Creek south of the ski hill on April 12 and May 9. On the April walk the group observed 15 bird species and the highlights were 2 Red Crossbills, 2 Merlins, and a large flock of Bohemian Waxwings. Mammals included a Coyote, Red Squirrels, and a group of Least Chipmunks.

*Whitemud Creek Bridge, photo by Ted Hogg**Merlin, photo by Delores Steinlicht*

On the May walk the group saw 22 bird species. The sightings included a good variety of new spring migrants, including a flyover of 36 Greater White-fronted Geese, a female Belted Kingfisher, a singing male Purple Finch, and Eastern Phoebe preparing to nest. The group also heard several Yellow-rumped Warblers, Song Sparrows, and Boreal Chickadees, all at close range, but hidden in the spruce trees. Mammal sightings included Red Squirrels, Least Chipmunks, a Muskrat, and an unusually tame Snowshoe Hare in its spring colours.



Eastern Phoebe



Snowshoe Hare

Photos by Ted Hogg

Mill Creek East – Toby-Anne Reimer

On April 27, Toby-Anne led a walk in Mill Creek East, the part of the creek west of 34 Street to 50 Street. The group recorded 15 species of birds. The highlights were two Pileated Woodpeckers as they worked their way around the base of a tree and a fallen log, a Yellow-rumped Warbler, and a Ruby-crowned Kinglet. At the end of the walk several of the group went to Jackie Parker Park and observed the Black-crowned Night-Herons that nest in the park.



Black-crowned Night-Heron
Photo by Toby-Anne Reimer

Lois Hole Provincial Park – Brian Stephens

Brian led a World Migratory Bird Day walk at Lois Hole Provincial Park on May 2. The group observed 31 bird species. Highlights include a Swainson's Hawk, Swamp Sparrow, Osprey, Sora, Forester's Terns, Cinnamon Teal, and for a participant from Nova Scotia a Northern Shoveler, which are very uncommon Down East.



Barn Swallows



Sora

Photos by Brian Stephens

Clifford E. Lee – Delores Steinlicht

Delores led a walk in the nature sanctuary on May 18. The sign at the entrance clearly states: "This is not an urban park." It is a nature sanctuary that has a history back to at least 1977. Water levels in the sanctuary have been high for the last several years, so many formerly treed areas are still flooded. Participants observed 36 bird species on the walk; the highlight was a Yellow-headed Blackbird, which is the symbol for the sanctuary.

Yellow-headed Blackbird
Photo by Delores Steinlicht



Hermitage Park – Delores Steinlicht

Delores led a walk in Hermitage Park on May 25. The group observed 40 bird species. Highlights included a nesting Red-necked Grebe, Belted Kingfisher, Great Blue Heron, Swainson's Hawk, several Double-crested Cormorants, a Forster's Tern, and a Gray Catbird. A Black and White Warbler and an Orange-crowned Warbler were heard.



Gray Catbird



Great Blue Heron

Photos by Delores Steinlicht

Forest Heights – Vince Cottrell

Vince led a walk at Forest Heights on June 2. The group recorded 21 species of birds. The highlight was a pair of Hooded Mergansers on the river. Other birds observed included robins, juncos, Yellow Warblers, Red-eyed Vireos, White-throated and Song Sparrows, Common Mergansers, Goldeneyes, American Wigeon, Mallards, and California Gulls.



Photo by M. Zhou



*Hooded Mergansers
Photo by Faye Smith*

Elk Island National Park, Moss Lake – Sean Evans

Sean led a walk on the Moss Lake Trail in Elk Island National Park on June 4. The highlight bird for the walk was a Chestnut-sided Warbler. Other birds included Yellow Warblers, Black and White Warblers, Common Yellowthroat, Red-eyed Vireos, Ovenbirds, Tennessee Warblers, Mourning Warblers, and Orange-crowned Warblers.



Elk Island National Park



Chestnut-sided Warbler

Photos by Sean Evans

After the walk several participants headed east to Chipman and were rewarded with sightings of Willet, Marbled Godwit, Sedge Wren, some Sprague's Pipits displaying, a Loggerhead Shrike, Western Meadowlarks, and a handful of Bobolinks.

Elk Island National Park Butterflies – Don Delaney

Don led walks in Elk Island National Park on July 15 and July 22, looking for butterflies. The group recorded 13 butterfly species on July 15 and 9 species on July 22. We really appreciated Don adding these walks to our ENC Outdoor Program, and sharing his brilliant photos with species identifications.



Milbert's Tortoise Shell



Mourning Cloak

Photos by Don Delaney

Janice Hurlburt and Chris Rees, Outdoor Program Directors

Urban Partridge

The Gray Partridge is a pigeon-sized chicken-like bird. Originally found in Eurasia, it was introduced to North America as a gamebird in the early 1900s. The original release birds came from Hungary, so hunters call them Hungarian Partridges or “Huns.” In Alberta, the first releases were in the Midnapore area in 1908. The birds are very prolific, with females laying up to 22 eggs, so by 1913 a hunting season was allowed in Alberta. The birds are most commonly found in agricultural fields, open areas, and stubble fields, feeding on waste grain and seeds. In the summer they include insects in their diet. Coveys of a dozen or more birds are formed in the fall. Salt and Wilk observe that in the winter, they often seek the shelter of straw stacks and windbreaks about farms. The birds burrow into the snow and create mostly open-topped tunnels as they scratch for food. An observer may see just heads poking up above the snow in the middle of a stubble field. Based on eBird reports, in both Calgary and Edmonton the birds seem to have adapted to urban living.



Gray Partridge covey at John Fry Park

In Edmonton, Gray Partridges are often found in industrial parks. There seem to be resident coveys in Parsons and Strathcona Industrial Parks and further south into the Edmonton Research Park. I had seen a family group on the Mill Woods Golf Course in 2016, but at that time I thought the golf course was similar to an open pasture.

My first real encounter with Gray Partridges in urban Edmonton was in 2019 after a tip alerted me to birds in John Fry Park, adjacent to the Parsons Industrial Park. On my first visit on January 4, 2019, the birds were feeding under some spruce trees, close to the club house. As is usual, they ran away as I approached. On my second visit, on January 21, 2019, the birds were feeding in tunnels in the snow on the boulevard adjacent to the park. Several flew or ran a short distance but then immediately started to burrow into the snow. Not wanting to disturb the birds too much, I left the area. In the fall of 2019, I encountered another covey west of the Alberta Grain Terminal. The birds were feeding in a grassy open lot. As I drove up, they ran along a back alley and hid under a car parked in the back yard of a home. As I drove down the alley, the birds ran between two houses. I circled the block and found them under a spruce tree in the front yard of the home. Not wanting to disturb the birds any further, I left.



Gray Partridge at the Alberta Grain Terminal



Juvenile and adult on Mill Woods Golf Course, 2016

My most interesting encounter was on March 6, 2023. This was in the Strathcona Industrial Park, south of Whitemud Drive and west of 91 Street. I had been in the area several times and had seen a covey that was sometimes beneath spruce trees or flushed from the roadside. At this time of year the birds are starting to pair off. As I entered on 93 Street, three birds flew west across the road and hid beneath some spruce trees. I stopped my vehicle and the birds started to move around, eventually mulling around in an industrial yard. Two more birds flew west across 93 Street and landed near the birds in the industrial yard. Suddenly there was a lot of running, chasing, and crowing “keerack” calls. Two birds left, flying east across 93 Street, landing under some spruce trees. A male on the west side continued to look agitated, displaying his chestnut belly patch. The two birds on the east side proceeded to scratch and feed around a spruce tree. After a few minutes they moved north to another patch of spruce and seemed to settle down to rest.



Gray Partridge at the Alberta Grain Terminal

All photos by Chris Rees

Several photographs showed the birds were feeding on the fallen spruce needles. As noted previously, Gray Partridges are herbivores and insectivores. They feed mainly on seeds, but also on cereals and grass leaves, and in the summer they supplement their diet with insects. Feeding on spruce needles may be part of the process of adapting to our sparse winters. The Spruce Grouse is a native game bird that is known to regularly feed on spruce needles and buds, especially in the winter.

It is interesting that although these birds were imported because they could survive in agricultural landscapes, they have now, like humans, adapted to live in an urban environment.

Chris Rees

Reference

Salt, W. Ray, and A. L. Wilk. *The Birds of Alberta*. Government of Alberta, 1958.



Male crowing



Male displaying his colours



Gray Partridge feeding on spruce needles



Spruce Grouse, a native gamebird that also feeds on spruce needles