THE PARKLAND NATURALIST

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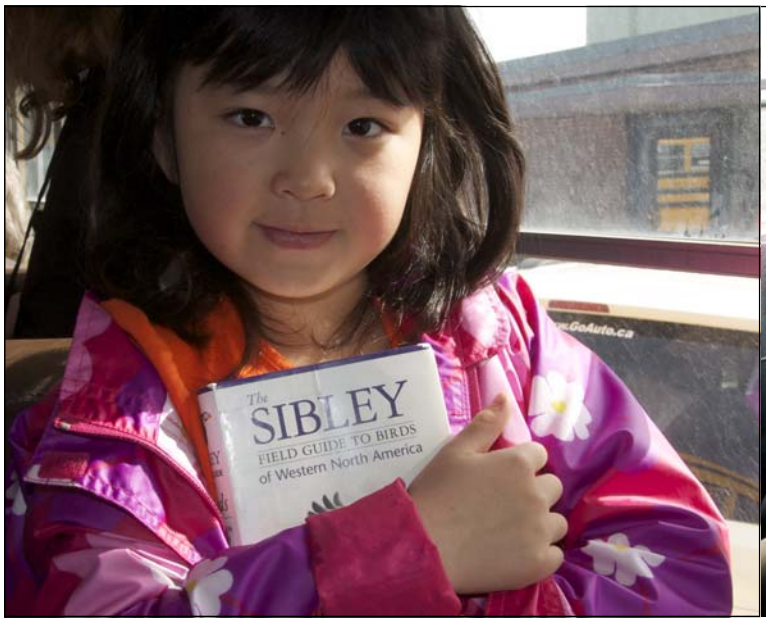

Photos above: Young Naturalists, by Jana Sneep

Dr. Glynnis Hood, Photo by Gerald Romanchuk

Ray Cromie's owl demonstration, Photo by Angela Cheung

Young Naturalists' Corner: 2013 Snow Goose Chase

Shortly after the 2012 Snow Goose Chase, I had an email from Bob Parsons, the Edmonton Nature Club's Snow Goose Chase Coordinator, who had invited me to the Chase in the first place, and who does so much of its organization. He had an idea for 2013, to include a Young Naturalists' Corner, and asked if I could help with the organization beforehand and then work at the table. I thought it was a wonderful idea and had been planning for the table since last May.

On Saturday, April 27, there were some terrific displays at the Tofield Community Centre, including four live raptors from the Edmonton Valley Zoo; Alberta's own John Acorn, the celebrated naturalist and entomologist whose enthusiasm on Saturday was infectious; a Bugs & Beetles wetland display; an incredible variety of touchable animal pelts from trapper Bill Abercrombie of Alberta Trapline Adventures; Royal Alberta Museum ornithology curator Jocelyn Hudon with the always fascinating mounted bird specimens (including a beautiful Scarlet Ibis); a table from the Beaverhill Bird Observatory; a display of various live and preserved reptiles and amphibians (including some of the preserved ones in water for the kids to touch); and a display of bird and animal carvings from the Boag Lake Carving Studio.

Bob Parsons, Andrea Franko, and Charlotte Wasylik
Photo by Gerald Romanchuk

Considering it was our first year, the Young Naturalists' Corner seemed to be very popular with all the kids and their families. In fact, there were nine buses of kids and families, so it was almost overwhelming at times with so many people. Bob arranged for Andrea Franko, a student at Nellie McClung School, to help out, along with our mothers, and also Petra Rowell, the executive director of Nature Alberta, with whom we shared the space.

We had some great door prizes to give away, including two new children's birding and nature books, *Look Up!: Bird-Watching in Your Own Backyard*, written and illustrated by Annette LeBlanc Cate, and *The Kids' Outdoor Adventure Book: 448 Great Things to Do in Nature Before You Grow Up*, by Stacy Tornio and Ken Keffer. Petra and Nature Alberta donated a number of things, including several plush toy Ord's Kangaroo Rats! I also brought from home a deer skull and a pair of shed antlers (both from White-tailed Deer), things that the kids could touch and pick up.

We all answered questions from kids and their parents, about how to start your own local nature club for the summer, where to find nature in the city, and how to join Nature Alberta's Young Naturalists Club program (for kids aged 5–13). They loved guessing what animal had shed the antlers and holding the antlers on top of their heads. Lots of the kids asked, "What are these books for?" or "Where can we get them?" So we told them that the books, which you can find at the library or a bookstore, are great for learning more about the animals they would see, and experiences they would have, at the Chase.

Bob did a wonderful job organizing everything and also taking time to help me with the Young Naturalists' Corner. Thank you again, Bob, for everything – especially for asking to me to be part of such a wonderful day. It's an honour to be asked to join everyone who works so hard to put on such an amazing experience.

Charlotte Wasylik

On the cover

Grey Wolf, Photo by Keith Lengle

President's Message

Our President, Stephen Copen

And a good, good day! I would like to share with you what I've experienced working with the members of our executive team and what they all have been able to achieve for us since my last article in the October–December 2012 *Parkland Naturalist*.

Your executive is a great team of volunteers who bring their expertise, passion, and commitment to the roles, goals, and objectives set for the club. We are always looking for energetic volunteers to assist us in making our club valued by our membership for the programs offered. If you are interested, contact any of our executive or committee chairs.

Our 2012/2013 **Monthly Indoor Program** at King's College, chaired by Alan Hingston with support from Past President Ron Ramsey, was a great success. Seven speakers shared their knowledge on topics ranging from bison, birds, and foraging plants to Arctic and glacial ice. On February 15, 2013, a presentation by two naturalists who travelled through the Northwest Passage attracted 160 people, with seating in the aisles. Usually, about 100 people attend the monthly meetings. Alan is currently finalizing the monthly programs for 2013/2014. Gerry Fox ensures our refreshment table is well stocked, while James Fox and Marc Demers man the welcoming table.

Total contributions to our donation box were about half what they have been in previous years, but all donations are greatly appreciated, as they help defer the cost of renting the college facilities and paying for refreshments. For 2013/2014 we remain at King's College but hope to improve our speaker sound and better anticipate the possibility of overflowing due to topic popularity. I hope to continue surveying you at the indoor program to determine how we can improve our programming. Many non-members attend each indoor event; we'll be looking at how to entice them into joining the club.

What can I say about one of our most popular annual events other than **spectacular**! The **Snow Goose Chase** choreographed by the venerable Bob Parsons and his tireless crew of volunteers had another hugely successful weekend in April. The preparation, solicitation and use of donations, cooperation of the Town of Tofield, and the hours contributed by these dedicated folks are warmly appreciated, as evidenced by the smiles and enthusiasm of the participants. As stated by the Executive Director of Nature Alberta, *"Hi, Bob – It was indeed a great weekend and the Nature Alberta Directors all really enjoyed the event and appreciated the amount of effort the ENC puts into organizing it."*

Unfortunately, 15 pairs of binoculars were stolen before the Snow Goose Chase, but with the generosity of members at the door of the indoor program and of the Wildbird General Store we were able to purchase a number of replacement sets. Thanks to Lu and Jaynne of the Wildbird General Store for their unwavering support of the ENC.

About 100 people attended our **Annual Banquet** at the University of Alberta Faculty Club on the Easter long weekend. James Fox did another superb job in ensuring that the organization and the food and guest speaker were top drawer. James has decided to relinquish the banquet duties in 2014, so we need banquet and ticket coordinators. Two annual awards were presented to two distinguished members. Hubert Taube was awarded the Robert Turner Appreciation Award for his years of organizing and managing the website, and Hardy Pletz was the recipient of the Edgar T. Jones Conservation Award.

Gerald Romanchuk, one of our four executive directors, chairs the Communications Committee. Our new website shows the creative geniuses behind it, including Ann Carter and James Fox, both executive directors, and Gerry Fox, John Jaworski, and Hubert Taube. Hubert, our webmaster for so many years, graciously turned over the role to Ann Carter, who is coordinating the new website with John Jaworski. Our Facebook page has not been very successful, and we may be minimizing our involvement with it. The **Yahoo Online Discussion Group**, led by Gerry Fox, has over 100 followers and provides up-to-the-minute news on birds and events.

With the ever-increasing costs of mailing *The Parkland Naturalist*, we may have to go to an online pdf publication, as many other organizations have done, or charge an added premium for those who want a hard copy mailed to them. We reviewed the complimentary distribution of the *PN* and have revised the mail-outs to ensure all copies are directed to those who use them.

Harry Stelfox and Ron Ramsey have been working with the City of Edmonton on its biodiversity program, and other members are working with the Royal Mayfield Golf Club for the Audubon Cooperative Sanctuary Program designation. Other activities include the Annual Brooks and Milk River May Species Counts.

Nature Network is published five times a year and offers our members a schedule of field trips and study groups. For information about ENC trips past and future, please go to our new website (edmontonnatureclub.org), click on the Field Trip tab, and then on Newsletter. Lisa Priestley and Morvyn Patterson work behind the scenes to ensure the *NN* material is collated and the newsletter is published. James Fox, our e-mail coordinator, sends out event notices to all members with active e-mail. If you want to lead or participate in a club event, contact our new Field Trip Coordinator, Janice Hurlburt.

A recent cooperative activity with the Young Naturalists Club was by all accounts a huge success.

ENC was a founding member of the Edmonton and Area Land Trust, and we continue to be involved in a number of ways. We were also one of six founding members of Nature Alberta, which has provided a number of services to its members, including insurance coverage. Recently ENC has purchased its own coverage because the Nature Alberta policy did not cover events such as the Snow Goose Chase. We hope to rejoin Nature Alberta when its policy coverage meets our needs.

We have over 290 single and family memberships, with a total of approximately 430 individual members. Your executive reviewed membership categories, including honorary and life memberships, and has decided to keep the present categories and not pursue the life category. Our low membership fees will remain the same for now, with the option of buying several years at a time.

The **Annual General Meeting** for ENC members took place on September 20, with about 50 people in attendance. For 2013/2014 our executive remains the same as last year. New committee chairs include Colleen Raymond, Bug and Spider Group; Janice Hurlburt, Field Trip Coordinator; and Karen Lindsay, Bird Study Group. Steve Knight joins Gerry Fox as an additional Online Discussion Group moderator, and Jack and Pauline DeHass are the new Mailing Committee Coordinators. Thank you to the committee chairs who have recently stepped down from their positions and to the volunteers who have stepped in to take their places. The 2012 AGM Minutes were accepted, as was the Treasurer's Report. James Fox and Mark Demers will be auditors for the 2013/2014 season.

I have enjoyed this first year as president and hope to be able to offer improved services and adventures to our members in the coming year.

Stephen Copen

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Box 1111, Edmonton, AB T5J 2M1

http://www.edmontonnatureclub.ca

Executive

President – **Stephen Copen** 710-6736

Past President – **Ron Ramsey** 437-4155

Treasurer – **Cecilia Rodriguez** 761-4686

Recording Secretary – **Jaye Lee** 476-3113

Membership Secretary – **Brian Stephens**
bjstephens@shaw.ca

Executive Director – **Gerald Romanchuk**
991-6521

Executive Director – **Hendrik Kruger** 293-6833

Executive Director – **James Fox** 318-6811

Executive Director – **Ann Carter**
ann55john@yahoo.com

Membership

Applications may be downloaded
from the ENC website.

Membership Rates: Adult/family: $30/year
Seniors: $20/year
Students: $20/year

Advertising rates

Business Card	$15/1 issue	$40/3 issues
Quarter page	$30/1 issue	$80/3 issues
Half page	$45/1 issue	$125/3 issues
Full page	$80/1 issue	$225/3 issues

Committee Chairs

Website Coordinators – **Ann Carter / John Jaworski**
ann55john@yahoo.com / djjango@yahoo.ca

Parkland Naturalist – **Dawne Colwell** 484-9340

Nature Network – **Lisa Priestley** 918-4804

Nature Network – **Morvyn Patterson** 679-0513

Plant Study Group/Natural Areas –
Patsy Cotterill 481-1525

Field Trip Coordinator – **Janice Hurlburt**
janicehurlburt53@gmail.com

Bird Study Group – **Karen Lindsay**
kdlinds@telus.net

Bug and Spider Study Group – **Colleen Raymond**
costan@shaw.ca

Nature Alberta Representative – **Lu Carbyn** 481-2274

Programs/Communications – **Ron Ramsey** 437-4155

Monthly Programs – **Alan Hingston** 459-6389

Mailing Committee Coordinators –
Jack and Pauline DeHaas jdehaas@airsurfer.ca

E-mail Coordinator – **James Fox** 318-6811

Banquet/Refreshments – none

Refreshment Coordinator – **Gerry Fox**
gfoxedm@telusplanet.net

Online Discussion Group – **Gerry Fox / Steve Knight**
gfoxedm@telusplanet.net / Steve@PerformanceSystems.ca

Snow Goose Chase – **Bob Parsons** 488-1344

Christmas Bird Count – **Kim Blomme** 640-3767

Edmonton and Area Land Trust –
Raquel (Rocky) Feroe 421-0975
Jaye Lee 476-3113

(all area codes: 780)

Annual Snow Goose Chase, April 27 and 28, 2013

This year's event was again held on the last weekend in April. Not many articles for previous Chase outings refer to a frozen Hastings Lake, snow-covered trails at Francis Viewpoint, water run-off in Kallal Meadow, and exceptionally high water levels at Amisk Creek bridge! Some of the gravel and dirt roads east of Beaverhill Lake were washed out in places, so getting around this area where most of the migrating Snow Geese were located was a challenge for many of the buses on the afternoon run. Steve Knight's bus drove twice through a menacing wash-out, while all the other buses turned around!

The main geese location was east of Mundare Beach (East Viewpoint), so the buses did not have to go all the way to Holden this year. Overall, I think most buses saw close to 40 bird and waterfowl species, which was slightly down from previous years. Late spring migration and cold weather played their part.

Stops were made in the morning to view the exhibits in the Tofield Community Hall, the avocets at Parsons Quarry, and the ducks in the extensive wetlands east of the town by the soccer fields, and to visit with Ray Cromie, whose owl banding demonstration at the hockey arena was a very popular stop for everyone.

An enthusiastic army of close to 80 volunteers assisted in another great Chase; special mention must go to the fifteen or so University of Alberta students, who were all great volunteers. Please come back next year!

Thanks to Janice Hurlburt and the Nature Club's Communication Committee, the new Snow Goose Chase website (http://www.snowgoosechase.ca/) generated a lot of interest from volunteers and facilitated booking online this year.

Volunteer scouts followed bird movements in the Beaverhills area for the week prior to the Chase. On the morning of the Chase, walkie-talkie radios and cell phones were charged up and handed out so geese and swan locations were well tracked and documented.

In her customary courteous, determined fashion, Barb Rowe looked after the bookings for the three buses for the paying public. Once again, buses were all booked solid.

The Chase had great leaders on all the buses. Steve Knight and others complimented Dawne Colwell for the excellent maps and thought that the bus organization was top class.

A special thanks must also go to Vanita in the Tofield town office, who again was so full of enthusiasm and willingness to make great suggestions. She had a team of six students from the local high school helping out in the morning at various locations. Treva Piekema helped with the set-up, as well as talking to local media.

Obviously the club could not do all this without our sponsors and supporters. The main sponsors are listed on the Snow Goose Chase website, but other organizations helped out too, so a special "thank you" to everyone.

The Inner-City Buses

Fourteen different Edmonton groups packed into nine buses; inner-city school children, low-income families, refugees, and Grade 4 students from Oliver and Stratford schools enjoyed the Chase event. Local Tofield and Ryley schools also were involved in the Saturday morning activities. The Tofield Community Hall was packed most of the morning for the many exhibits and activities. The Valley Zoo hawks and owls demonstration was very well received, as was the Peregrine Falcon from Alberta Fish and Wildlife. The Royal Alberta Museum tables attracted the usual attentive audience, which wondered at the snakes, scorpions, and spiders on display. Exhibits devoted to Mike Jenkins and local pond life, fossils, bird carving by a northern Alberta group, and trapping with Bill Abercrombie also created much interest. The display that caught everyone's attention was the Nature Alberta Young Naturalists' table, ably attended by two great young naturalists, Charlotte and Andrea, with their families. We will definitely bring them back next year!

Snow Goose Chase Videos

Two excellent videos are available on YouTube at the following addresses:

www.youtube.com/watch?v=8-F-fKr-GW4

www.youtube.com/watch?v=Pztm0PoO9fQ

Photo by Jana Sneep

Snow Goose Chase volunteer Randal Hoscheit and a Young Naturalist attach a bluebird box to a post.

Greeting "Colonel Slade" the Barred Owl

Photos by Angela Cheung, Snow Goose Chase Volunteer

Letters from Participants

Here are some brief comments from some of the children's letters that I received:

Dear Bob the Birdman.

My second year doing the chase, loved all the game and the swings at the hockey area. The owl with Mr Cromie was very lively, I want one.

Christine, aged 8

Dear Bob Chase.

My first time on the outing, met the Nature Nut and had my picture taken. Want to be on TV too just like him.

José, from Colombia

Hi Bob Chase.

Great time in Tofield, saw all the geese and swans. The food was great, can we have hot dogs next year?

Justin, from the inner city group, aged 10

Dear Mr Bob.

Thought the beaver talk was fun but got wet in the wetland walk. I will always remember Andrea my bus leader. She was fun, can she come next year too?

Anthea, from Edmonton

Photos by Jana Sneep

Bob Parsons

Family FUN Night

The Edmonton Nature Club recently had an opportunity to reach out to the future when the Young Naturalists Club invited it to sponsor a Family Nature Night (FNN). The clubs partnered to provide a fun-filled event for 70 participants comprised of families with young children.

Initiated last summer, the FNN program provides access to free outdoor nature programs in Edmonton. On July 10, 2013, we hosted the program in Hawrelak Park. Groups were guided through activity stations manned by ENC volunteers. The activities followed a bird theme, as requested by the YNC, and each station included an educational component delivered through child-friendly activities.

Within a timeline of 1½ hours the children and their parents were exposed to lots of new information. Real bird artifacts were available for hands-on exploration, wing design was explained, and the kids built a bird craft using the wing style of their choice. Each group chose a location for a birdhouse during a forest walk, a bird adaptations game was all about beak shapes and function, and a lakeside lesson focused on using binoculars and viewing scopes. The friendly ducks were a big hit!

Once the final stars were stamped on the station passports, the volunteers, children, and parents all said they enjoyed the evening. We may have sparked some new naturalists!

Ann Carter

For more information about the Young Naturalists Club, go to http://naturealberta.ca/youth/young-naturalists-club/.

Photos by Jana Sneep

Photos by Ann Carter

EALT Celebrates 5 Years of Conservation Successes

In June 2013, the Edmonton and Area Land Trust (EALT) was honoured to win the 2013 Emerald Award for Not-for-Profits. This prestigious award recognizes leaders in exemplary environmental stewardship, and is a validation of 5 years of EALT's hard work on conservation, partnerships, and community support.

Mayor Stephen Mandel said, "On behalf of my Council colleagues I would like to congratulate the board and staff of the Land Trust on receiving this most deserved honour." Since the Trust began operations in 2008, it has secured for conservation five ecologically valuable pieces of land worth approximately $5 million. It also has recruited volunteers to monitor and steward the properties and been engaged in a range of educational activities and partnerships.

Accepting the Emerald Award from Kara Flynn, VP of Government and Public Affairs, Syncrude

In March, EALT held a 5th Anniversary Event celebrating its range of conservation successes. Highlights of the evening were an introduction from Steve Young, MLA for Edmonton-Riverview, and a joint presentation about our Pipestone Creek property, with assistance from partner Brad Rabiey, co-founder of The Carbon Farmer, volunteer Vicki Trombley, and EALT Board Member Marg Reine. In addition, Gerald Romanchuk, a local nature photographer, showcased many of the beautiful species that can be found on EALT's lands.

American Robin, Photo by Gerald Romanchuk

EALT is very grateful to our donors and volunteers for all their support. We are proud of what we've accomplished in only 5 years, and look forward to the next 5 and beyond. If you're interested in joining us for our Nature's Nourishment fundraiser, visit http://www.ealt.ca/naturesnourishment.

Pam Wight, Executive Director of the EALT

Edmonton Nature Club Indoor Meeting, April 19, 2013

Dr. Martin Sharp, Professor and Chair of Earth and Atmospheric Sciences at the University of Alberta, was the speaker at our last meeting of the indoor season. His talk, "Rapid Glacier Change in Canada's North," described some of his research on changes in glacier extent in the Canadian Arctic, the dynamics of these changes, and their relationship to climate change. Martin set the scene by showing a number of pictures of icecaps and glaciers which provided clear evidence of retreat. He talked about the practicality of conducting research in the Arctic and the contrast between modern transportation (Twin Otter aircraft and skidoos) and traditional Inuit sledges. At their camp on the Devon Island ice cap at 1900 m above sea level, temperatures are typically -35 ºC overnight in April, creating conditions in which it is difficult for researchers to work and instruments to function.

Photos by Martin Sharp

Turning to the science, Martin explained the processes of glacier change through a mass balance in which glaciers "grow" through snowfall accumulation but "lose" mass through melting and runoff and calving of icebergs. These dynamics change from year to year, with glacier change following climate change. By coring 20 m through the glacial ice, a history of change over the last 50–60 years can be developed. As an example, studies of glaciers in the Queen Elizabeth Islands indicate their mass balance was steady between 1960 and 1990 but that they have been losing mass since then. Through sophisticated technology using satellites, Martin was able to quantify the volume and mass changes in all glaciers in the Queen Elizabeth Islands from year to year. These glaciers thinned on average by 0.38 m/year between the fall of 2003 and 2009. These trends vary: between 2004 and 2006 there was a slight increase in glacier mass but a much larger rate of loss in mass (61 Gt/yr) between 2007 and 2009.

A picture emerges of snowfall changing to ice more quickly, faster glacier flow, and shrinking, thinning, and greater loss of glacier mass that is mainly due to more rapid melting. The 5-year mean summer air temperature between 2005 and 2009 in the Arctic was 1.1–1.3 ºC warmer than it was between 2000 and 2004, and the length of the melting season is increasing, leading to more negative mass balances. These mass changes affect sea level, which is rising at about 2.5 mm/yr, which doesn't sound like much; however, 145 million people world-wide live within 1 m of sea level, and the rate of sea level change is predicted to increase.

While the large ice caps (Greenland and Antarctica) are relatively stable, there has been a 3443 square kilometre reduction in the extent of glaciers in Canada's north between 1960 and 2000. Changes in glaciers are most pronounced on Ellesmere Island (59% of that total), Devon Island (18%), and Baffin Island (10%). After the large ice sheets in Antarctica and Greenland, glacier changes in the Canadian Arctic are the source of the greatest increase to sea level world-wide at the present time. It is encouraging to know that the University of Alberta, through Martin and his team, is at the forefront of Arctic research at this time when so many changes are taking place.

Alan Hingston

Chasing Birds

The Miquelon Mangler

The mainstream media has ignored the story. Local authorities aren't doing anything about it. But a personal investigation reveals that a serial killer is stalking the beach of Miquelon Lake.

Mr. L. Pipixcan

A short walk down the beach revealed the evidence. Body parts of at least 10 victims were found. Preliminary forensic identification reveals that the victims include a Mr. L. Pipixcan and family.

Several survivors of the attacks remained near the beach. Most showed little sympathy towards the victims and none would give a statement or even acknowledge that a crime had been committed. A large number of Mr. Pipixcan's family remained on the scene as well. Some other potential witnesses seemed very nervous but wouldn't talk. Those present included Mr. P. Squatarola, Mr. R. Americana, Ms. T. Flavipes, Ms. T. Semipalmata, Mr. L. Haemastica, and Mr. and Mrs. L. Fedoa.

The attacks were particularly vicious. All that was left of most of the victims were their outer extremities. Most of the bodies had been consumed. Articles of outer covering were left blowing around in the breeze. The most recent and most gruesome set of remains had the victim's decapitated head displayed on the beach.

Who would do these sorts of things? What kind of creature would perform these predatory attacks? One source, speaking on conditions of anonymity, said he's seen a Mr. F. Peregrinus lurking around the area. This suspect has a record of preying on unsuspecting victims. Members of his family have a similar reputation.

Until an arrest is made, all those frequenting the beach at Miquelon Lake are advised to be on the lookout for Mr. Peregrinus and members of his family. It seems unlikely that this voracious serial killer will stop his attacks any time soon....

Gerald Romanchuk

The Prime Suspect

Mr. F. Peregrinus

The Crime Scene

San Diego Birding Festival, February 28–March 3, 2012

My brother Art and I attended this festival for the second time and were just as pleased as we were the first time. They do a great job of organizing the event and offer so many trips it is hard to choose among them. We narrowed them down to four, leaving us lots of time to look around on our own, which is how we prefer to do it. All their trips are in buses and have excellent guides who are great at finding and identifying stuff but sometimes have a little trouble estimating times – there's so much to see.

I won't bore you with everything we saw, but will mention the highlights.

Our first day was to the North Lagoons, a very pleasant walk down a very nice canyon. We saw Anna's Hummingbirds every 10–12 metres perched on top of shrubs (common on every trip we took) and my first-ever California Quail and California Thrasher. A California Gnatcatcher and numerous Northern Mockingbirds, Scrub Jays, and California and Spotted Towhees entertained us the whole way. Once we got to the lagoons we noticed a huge presence of Wigeons and Coots, which were common all through the trips, as were huge numbers of Willets, Whimbrels, and Marbled Godwits. A small flock of Snowy Plovers was on the beach, and Greater and Lesser Yellowlegs were seen on the way back to the bus. The only Egrets present were the Snowy and Greats, no Little Blues, which are our favourites. The highlight of this trip was watching a Clapper Rail taking a bath not 10 metres from us – plus meeting Franklin the resident Desert Tortoise, who was being fed the fruits of the cactus by the Marina Village staff.

Whimbrel*, *Photo by Gerald Romanchuk

Our second day took us to the Coastal National Refuges, which was a repeat for us, but the trip takes you into a salt plant that is being phased out and there is no entry except with the National Refuge people. There are a series of ponds with different levels of saline and different life on all of them. We saw numerous duck species, not in great numbers, then a pond of possibly thousands of Pied-billed Grebes. Double-crested Cormorants have taken over a dredging barge and are using it as a nest site. Ospreys are nesting on a platform, a Merlin practically buzzed us, and a Peregrine was on a distant power line. Royals and Black Skimmers were our first terns of the trip. Black-necked Stilts, Long-billed Curlew, Dunlins, Short- and Long-billed Dowitchers, and a Surf Scoter, Spotted Sandpiper, and Brant Geese rounded out our visit to these ponds. Then we left for the Tijuana Slough, with two highlights – a hummingbird nest with four little beaks poking out and another Clapper Rail encounter. I was standing on a little footbridge over a stream when a Clapper Rail walked about 2 metres along the shore, then swam across the stream and proceeded to walk along the other shore, dipping in and out of the reeds.

The third day trip was Birding Along the Border – which provided 108 species! It's hard to note the highlights for this one, but I will start with the Magpie Jay, a neat bird they are not allowed to count because it is a released bird from Mexico and they estimate there are only about thirty or so of them. We decided we could count it because we don't report to anybody! It shows characteristics of both species but the crest and tail are longer and it has curls on its head. Three Yellow-crowned Herons in a tree were also a nice treat, as were the Eastern Phoebe and Hepatic Tanager. We stopped at a butterfly garden and saw a sky full of raptors playing in the breeze, including Red-shouldered and Red-tailed Hawks and Turkey Vultures. Cooper's and Sharp-shinned Hawks and White-tailed Kites were seen sitting in trees. Ponds had lots of Cinnamon Teals, Pintails, Shovelers, Green-winged Teal, Ruddy Ducks, Canvasbacks, and Scaup; one Common Moorhen; and some Blue-winged Teal which other participants got very excited about, as they apparently do not get these in great numbers. A beautiful sight was three Egrets standing together – a Cattle, a Snowy, and a Great – which would have made for a super picture. Our only Reddish Egret of the trip was seen on the way back.

The last trip was to Torrey Pines State Reserve, a 2000 acre area of very varied terrain. The reserve is named for the tree, which is huge and very beautiful but you would not want one in your yard, as their needles are about a foot long and drop fairly regularly by the look of the ground below them. Our first walk was on a side road under a freeway. I thought it was going to be terrible, but we were pleasantly surprised. Numerous Bewick's Wrens were nesting on the cement structure that holds up the freeway and five Black-crowned Night Herons were sitting out in the open at a pond, not worried about the sound of traffic or us. As a topper to all this we saw two White-tailed Kites doing their fabulous kiting for a good twenty minutes, and they were so close binoculars were not required. We then proceeded down toward the ocean and saw lots of waterfowl on the way. We drove up toward the visitor centre and did a short walk towards the ocean, but very high up; a Peregrine Falcon flew from its nest right below us.

We do not normally attend the banquets, but this one featured Dr. John Fitzpatrick, Louis Agassiz Director of the Cornell Lab of Ornithology, and he sounded interesting. He was a terrific speaker and as well as talking about the vital roles birds continue to play in fostering conservation of natural systems and how we as humans can learn from them, he talked about eBird and how it is being used worldwide and is providing terrific data. He himself got a lifer on this trip because of this input,

which is so much more precise and timely than any of the suggested ranges in the field guides. So for those of you providing input to eBird, he appreciates you.

We have some favourite places of our own and try to visit them often. Famosa Slough right in San Diego has always given us lots of variety and this time was no different. We saw Little Blue Herons, a Black-crowned Night Heron, another Clapper Rail, Snowy and Great Egrets, lots of ducks, and a number of Willets.

The mouth of the San Diego River is always good, and it's close to the Marina Village Conference Center, where the Festival is based. We stop here a lot and are always entertained. It has a road that is used only by birders and runners, so it is very quiet. Being tidal, with lots of food, it attracts lots of Little Blue Herons and Snowy and Great Egrets, plus dozens of waders. An interesting sight was a Snowy Egret walking along stirring up good eats for the four Common Mergansers that were right beside it going up and down the shore. Our favourite campground – Campland on the Bay – got us our largest flock of Black Skimmers, as well as an albino Mallard.

We took a side trip northeast of San Diego to another reserve (Dos Picas Park) and saw our only Green Heron of the trip, plus a female Wood Duck that was travelling with a group of Mallards. On the drive there we saw Western Meadowlarks and a Roadrunner.

Anyone who was at the festival should have seen a Summer Tanager, as it was camped out in an evergreen outside the centre and came out every once in a while to feast on bees from a nest in the center's sign.

We try to not make the article sound like a gigantic bird list – but it's hard given the variety that San Diego sees. If you're interested, next year's festival is February 27–March 2, 2014, and information can be found at http://www.sandiegoaudubon.org/events/bird-festival.

Jaye Lee

Black-crowned Night Herons, Photo by Gerald Romanchuk

Conservation Corner: Edmonton Civic Elections

In the weeks preceding Edmonton's civic elections on Monday, October 21, 2013, council and mayoral candidates will be participating in forums throughout the city. Edmonton Nature Club board member Patsy Cotterill suggests the following questions that ENC members can ask to determine candidates' positions on environmental matters.

To what extent do you think the city's natural areas contribute to the quality of life in Edmonton?

Are you aware of Edmonton's Natural Area Systems policy and the city's obligations as a signatory to the International Council for Local Environmental Initiatives?

- To what extent do you think these initiatives to protect biological diversity are important?
- Would you be prepared to devote resources to these initiatives, given that the city is currently facing considerable debt?

Supplementary information for forum participants

Funding is needed to finance a comprehensive survey and monitoring of biodiversity in existing natural areas, acquisition of natural areas in the three growth segments of the City – northeast, southeast, and southwest, construction of natural corridors to connect natural areas to enhance their viability, and management of these natural areas.

Questioners could point out that we are not talking about trails in the river valley here, which essentially benefit people's health, but actual protection of our biological and geological resources and ecosystem services.

Given the city and region's continued rapid growth and expansion, would you support the creation of a greenbelt (no-growth zone) through regional planning to preserve good farmland and sensitive natural areas?

What is your understanding of the Edmonton and Area Land Trust?

- Do you think it is an important means of protecting natural environments in the Edmonton area?
- Would you support continued significant funding for it?

Supplementary information for forum participants

Information about Edmonton's Natural Area Systems policy is available at http://www.edmonton.ca/environmental/documents/Revised_Administrative_Directive_-_Policy_C531_updated_Dec._10.pdf

For more general information, visit http://www.edmonton.ca/environmental/natural_areas/strategy-biodiversity-protection.aspx

Patsy Cotterill

Searching for wolves in western Alberta was frustrating until routine poison controls were halted.

The first wolf tracks I ever found date back to the summer of 1960. It was a memorable occasion, for at that time wolves had been poisoned practically into extinction in all of western Alberta, including the national parks. The location of my find was the upper Baker Creek valley of Banff National Park. However, once I got back home after the day's hike and checked the animal track diagrams in a handbook, I wasn't sure anymore of what exactly I had seen. The footprints of cougar and wolverine looked quite similar to those of a wolf. The next weekend I again hiked up the steep Baker Creek trail and carefully measured the tracks, until I was confident that these indeed were made by a wolf.

Finding a second set of wolf tracks had to wait until March 1961, when a naturalist friend and I ventured into the remote forests northwest of Rocky Mountain House. Checking the margins of a snow-covered bush road for tracks, we were elated to locate fresh sign of a pack of eight. It was an important discovery. On the way in, we had stopped by the office of the regional wildlife officer to inquire about wolves. He had not seen a track in years, but during the 1950s he had personally poisoned 78 wolves in the area. Perhaps to please us, he added that he had nothing against the wolf. "In fact, I like them better than people."

Photo by Brian Genereux

For more details on Dick Dekker's wolf observations, see his books:
1985. *Wild Hunters*. CWD publication, Edmonton. ISBN 0-919091-16-4
1997. *Wolves of the Rocky Mountains: From Jasper to Yellowstone*. Hancock House Publishers, Surrey, BC. ISBN 0-88839-416-0
2002. *Wildlife Adventures in the Canadian West*. Rocky Mountain Books, Calgary, AB. ISBN 1-894765-36-2

Before driving back home to Calgary, my companion suggested that we report our find to the wildlife officer. It turned out to be a grave mistake. Two weeks later, back at the same location, I was saddened to find a wooden sign nailed to a roadside tree: "Attention! Poison Baits." Staked on the ice of a nearby lake lay the head and neck of a horse. The meat had been treated with *ten-eighty*, a lethal pesticide commonly used for carnivore control in Alberta.

Later that year, I embarked on a summer of exploration to the Yukon and Alaska. Finding wolves was paramount on my list of things to do, and in that regard the trip was a success. However, my wilderness adventure ended abruptly in a canoe accident that could easily have cost me my life.

The long-held dream of closely observing wolves in the wild was eventually realized in Jasper National Park. But the first time Irma and I hiked into the park's remote Willow Creek district, in June of 1965, we were shocked to find out what was still happening to the region's wolves.

Upon our arrival at the backcountry station, warden Norman Woody, who lived all year in his log cabin, said that he had seen eight wolves on Rock Lake last winter, when he set out on snowshoes to walk the nine miles back to his cabin. But the next day, he got a phone call from the district forest ranger, who reported that seven of the wolves had died on a poison bait.

Some time after our trip, I met with the Rock Lake ranger. Apart from the wolves poisoned on the lake in the winter of 1964/65, he said that a trapper, who had been hired by the Alberta Forestry Department to set out wolf baits, had been shocked by the number of animals poisoned near Eagle's Nest Pass in adjacent Wilmore Wilderness Park. Due to deep snow, he had been unable to collect and remove the lethal carrion until well into spring. When he finally got there, the number of dead wolves was a surprise. "We did not know there were so many," said the ranger. In addition, the ground was littered with the carcasses of other carnivores and scavengers, including wolverines, grizzly bears, and eagles.

This was the way wolf control was handled in the poison years. However, things improved after 1966 due to widespread public protests against the wolf kills, coupled with a change in thinking among wildlife managers. Routine poison controls were all but stopped, and the wolves reacted with a vengeance, so to speak, by becoming more common than ever.

Unfortunately, in recent years, the pendulum has swung back again to control, particularly in western forests where caribou have been in decline, mainly as a consequence of ever-widening habitat destruction. Wolves became an expendable scapegoat. In my view, the sad thing is that there has been very little opposition to the use of poison baits, not even from provincial naturalist organisations.

Dick Dekker

Finding wolf sign in central Alberta is rare, and their footprints can be difficult to tell from those of a large dog.

Partly because of my long and often frustrating quest for wolves, as related on the previous pages, coming across their sign is always a thrill. Like other naturalists, I used to think of the wolf as a symbol of unspoilt wilderness, a place where indigenous animal and plant associations are still intact and have not yet been disrupted by human activities, an increasingly scarce environment in today's world. However, if given the chance, wolves are ever ready to expand their range into settled regions, including farmland and towns.

After the termination of routine poisoning, the wolves of western Canada have greatly increased in number and yearlings are known to disperse over long distances. So, it should not be surprising that some roam far south and east of their usual breeding range. This is indeed the case, but to recognize them as wolves can be difficult because they come in a variety of pelage colours and may resemble a coyote or domestic dog, and size is an unreliable criterion in field sightings.

Personally, I have yet to see an animal that looks like a wolf in the Edmonton area, but others have. On April 22, 2005, the *Edmonton Journal* carried a detailed letter from Paige Hacking, who lives on an acreage just north of Devon, not far from the North Saskatchewan River valley. Under the title "Trust me, there are wolves out there," her story gives a very plausible account of a close encounter with two wolves.

More recently, a wolf-like canid was photographed at Big Lake, and there are a number of current reports from Elk Island National Park and the adjacent Blackfoot grazing reserve. In 2012, according to information supplied by the wildlife officer stationed at Vegreville, a pack of seven or eight was active in a grazing lease near Two Hills. Eventually, three wolves were trapped and two others shot near the carcass of a calf they had killed. Wolf control measures also have been taken in the Buck Lake grazing lease near Wetaskiwin.

My records of wolves in central Alberta are limited to finding their tracks, which resemble those of their domestic cousin. However, the front foot of a large male wolf leaves a bigger print than that of any dog. Oval in shape, it can spread to 9–10 cm wide by 11–13 cm long. Tracks of that size can be attributed with certainty to a wolf, particularly if they are not associated with the presence of people.

I have found the odd track of maximum size near Wabamun and on the southeast shore of Cooking Lake. Some years ago, wolf-like tracks of a smaller format were common on the banks of the North Saskatchewan River between Edmonton and Fort Saskatchewan. One day I met the local coyote trapper and asked whether he had ever found wolf sign. The answer was positive. He had actually seen one. In reply to my question whether the animal's colour was black or grey, he replied, "Both! There are actually two wolves around here."

Although I have continued to walk the same river bank trail, I have not come across any more wolf sign for a while. But I keep on looking.

Dick Dekker

Photo by Wes Bradford

Parkland Plant Notes

"MyPond" – Acheson Field Pond

Wetland Prejudice and Preferences

Never judge a wetland by a single visit! I learned this lesson from an experience with a wetland in the Schonsee area of northeast Edmonton. I first visited it on September 28, 2002, at the request of the city's conservation coordinator. The area was then so dry that you could walk across it without getting your runners wet; only the short tussocks of coarse sedges such as Awned and Little Bottle Sedges, and big patches of weedy Golden Dock, gave any sign that it was a wetland. On July 4 the following year, when I decided to take another look, the area was a lake, home to miscellaneous waterfowl and shorebirds. Not only would I have needed hip-waders to cross it, but I quickly abandoned an excursion around its periphery because of the merciless dive-bombing of territorial Black Terns. In subsequent years I found the Schonsee shorelines to vary greatly in exposure, from variable expanses of mud with differing plant communities to flooding into adjacent fields. The area now bears little resemblance to its former natural self, apart from location; it has been tamed and aesthetically landscaped into a constructed wetland, with huge loss of plant biodiversity. The city cites drainage requirements as the reason for the transformation, but I think it equally likely that posh new neighbourhoods wouldn't tolerate Schonsee's natural vagaries, from a messy wasteland of dried marsh one year to an unpredictably high waterline in another. Development and nature are often not compatible, and it seems the latter always loses!

Acheson Field Pond

It could also be said that one should never judge a wetland by visiting in a single season. Water levels vary according to the time of year, and accordingly so does the visible inventory of its flora and fauna. Both aphorisms apply to possibly my favourite local wetland, a shallow pond on the west side of Edmonton, in Parkland County. It is roughly oval in shape, measuring about 60 metres from west to east and 65 to 85 metres from north to south. It lies in a depression in a field which is part of the sand-dune system extending from west of Highway 60 and south of Stony Plain Road east through the Enoch Reserve and south to the Devon area. Acheson Field Pond, as I call it, varies from being dry enough to be ploughed and sown to crop in one year to a green oasis with almost a full suite of typical wetland species in another. In the very dry year of 2009 I could find only a few weedy species that frequent wet soil among the crop stalks; in wet years such as 2012 and 2013 more than 35 species of emergent, aquatic, and mud-loving species were present.

Acheson Pond looking north, Photo by Jason Teare

Scouler's Popcorn Flower and Clammy Hedge-hyssop

I made my first visit to Acheson Field Pond in 2004, and I have been checking on it at least once or often several times a year ever since. A friend and I had been accustomed to walking down a road allowance south from Stony Plain Road to look at a very deep pond, surrounded by trees, which we called the Sinkhole Pond. It was home to four plant rareties, including Ducksmeal (*Wolffia* species; smaller than Duckweed or *Lemna* spp.) and to skittish waterfowl that didn't take kindly to invasion of their shady sanctum. On May 28, 2004, as we were walking back from the Sinkhole, I decided to take a closer look at the field pond. No crop had yet been sown, and the access was easy. On the bare shore were some plants with a few tiny white flowers that I didn't at first recognize. On closer investigation and with some better specimens I later identified them as Scouler's Popcorn Flower (*Plagiobothrys scouleri*). Coincidentally, I had come across this plant for the first time in August of the previous year, growing in mulch used to landscape a small viewing area at the edge of Poplar Lake in north Edmonton. (The mulch had apparently been brought in by the contractor from somewhere in the south, possibly the Calgary area. Indeed, Scouler's Popcorn Flower is not uncommon in saline flats and moist sandy ground in southern Alberta.) On July 23 that same year I discovered another plant on this shoreline, a species formerly on the province's rare plant tracking list, Clammy Hedge-hyssop (*Gratiola neglecta*). Although uncommon, I recognized it at once because a few years earlier I had found large patches of this species growing in a similar shallow pool on sandy soil in what is now the Hamptons residential area in west Edmonton. I was very pleased to see it again, even though it was present in very low numbers that year, and I decided that my Acheson Pond was definitely worth keeping an eye on in the future. (It also motivated me to approach Parkland County to see if they would preserve both wetlands in Acheson as part of their natural area inventory. They have since agreed to preserve the Sinkhole Pond, but not the field pond.)

Scouler's Popcorn Flower, Photo by Patsy Cotterill

A check of the Internet reveals that the Latin name, *Plagiobothrys*, for this genus of numerous species (particularly so in California) refers to the transverse (*plagios*) pits (*botrys*) on the tiny fruits or nutlets. These nutlets are grouped into fours (which is typical of its family, the borage family), and develop at the base of tiny white funnel-shaped flowers. The simple leaves bear stiff white hairs, also characteristic of the Boraginaceae. The stems are much branched from the base and because the flowers are formed in the leaf axils the stems can continue to elongate from the apex, a type of growth called indeterminate. This explains why the plant, in the years when it is abundant, can form extensive mats, metres wide, on the outer zones of the wetland. By

late summer these mats are softer than the most expensive pile carpet to walk on! Bright green when it is in flower (end of May to end of July) Scouler's Popcorn Flower turns grey-green as it matures and eventually becomes black and brittle by the end of the season. As an annual, it relies upon its seeds to reproduce, and since it reappears year after year, even after very dry years, I presume it maintains an extensive seed bank at Acheson.

Clammy Hedge-hyssop is well-named because the gland-tipped hairs on the upper parts of its stem and leaves make it extremely sticky to the touch. Formerly a member of the foxglove family, Scrophulariaceae, it has now been placed in the Plantaginaceae, the plantain family. It is somewhat reminiscent of a weedy, less showy version of monkey-flowers (*Mimulus* spp). Its pale yellow tubular corolla is about 1 cm long, and its fruit capsule about half that length. Like Scouler's Popcorn Flower, it is an annual and its numbers vary according to seasonal conditions.

Two More Unusual Species!

This year, the abundant precipitation in both winter and summer has made it a banner year for Acheson Pond. When I first visited, on July 2, there was a broad empty band around the wetland, where clearly it had been too wet in spring for the farmer to sow his wheat. Hence in 2013 the wetland is the largest I have seen it in the decade I have been monitoring it. The wetland appears from a distance as a basin of subtly differing shades of green at the base of a cultivated slope. Only when you get really close do you see the dark blue patches of open water amid the green. This year there has been so much open water that lacking hip waders I haven't been able to wade across it, stopping when the water reached calf level! I've rejoiced to see the abundance of my two favourites, Scouler's Popcorn Flower and Clammy Hedge-hyssop. But this year has also brought a bonus in the appearance of two species new to the list I compile. One, Marsh Speedwell (*Veronica scutellata*), is more common further north. (American Brooklime, *V. americana*, is the speedwell usually encountered in the marshes round here.) Another, an exciting first discovery for me, is Waterwort (*Elatine triandra*), a provincially rare plant. Diminutive and prostrate, it forms compact dark-green cushions on very wet mud, over which it creeps by rooting at the stem nodes. On my third visit, on July 26, I found at least 11 small patches of it on the south side of the pond, often in the company of other mud-loving plants, Vernal Water-starwort (*Callitriche verna*) and Needle Spike-rush (*Eleocharis acicularis*). As an annual, its persistence is precarious, but I am hoping it will reappear in subsequent years if conditions permit.

Wetland Zonation

In wet years such as 2012 and 2013, the distinct if imprecise zones of vegetation surrounding shallow wetlands are particularly evident. These correlate presumably with varying tolerances for water level. In Acheson the outermost zone is almost invariably occupied by a broad band of tufts of Crawford's Sedge (*Carex crawfordii*), followed by a swathe of Rough Hair Grass (*Agrostis scabra*), its massed red-purple panicles resembling a shock of hair. Within this is a zone of Pale Persicaria (*Polygonum lapathifolium*) with spikes of whitish-green flowers and often a dark blotch in the centre of its lance-shaped leaves. This is followed by a broad band of luxuriant Slough Grass (*Beckmannia syzigachne*), with scattered among it the characteristic orange and green slender spikes of Short-awned Foxtail (*Alopecurus aequalis*). Closer to the centre of the pond and usually standing in water is the handsome Common Tall Manna Grass (*Glyceria grandis*), whose large, diffuse, purple-grey panicles lend a distinct colour to this zone, together with stiff dark green patches of creeping spike-rush (*Eleocharis palustris*). I counted 16 tufts of the Common Cattail (*Typha latifolia*) in this zone, so far lacking flowers. I was not happy to see them, as the rhizomes of *Typha* can grow very rapidly, forming extensive stands that crowd out other species. I have read that they are adapted to grow at relatively low oxygen levels, so that if water levels decline due to drought their growth is inhibited by too much aeration. If this is the case, then it is possible the drought years serve a useful function by keeping cattails at bay and maintaining the status quo with the existing community.

Occupying a wide central area of the wetland are three dominant species: Broad-leaved Water-plantain (*Alisma plantago-aquatica*), Narrow-leaved Bur-reed (*Sparganium angustifolium*), and Northern Manna Grass (*Glyceria borealis*). The branched, diffuse inflorescences of the Water-plantain and the Northern Manna Grass create a sort of haze over the middle of the pond, which is light-green in colour. Here and there among the *Alisma* is its fellow family member in the Alismataceae, Arum-leaved Arrowhead (*Sagittaria cuneata*), a sprawling semi-aquatic plant with arrowhead-shaped leaves that may stand erect or float on water. Most of the species that grow in standing water (the grasses, spike-rushes, bulrushes, *Typha*, *Alisma*) are tall, with plenty of aerial green tissue to supply oxygen to the submerged roots. Such emergents often have the adaptation of spongy air-filled tissue in their stems and underground parts that serve as reservoirs of oxygen.

Creeping Mud-lovers versus Dominating Emergents

In contrast, the mud-inhabiting species tend to be of low, prostrate, and mat-forming habit, and occupy the outer, muddy but drier zones of the pond. Scouler's Popcorn Flower inhabits the outermost reaches of the wetland and as noted can form a continuous band several metres wide when abundant. However, it can also occur in wetter areas provided they are open, penetrating the zone of Slough Grass and Pale Persicaria. The same is true of the woolly brown-headed composite, Low Cudweed (*Gnaphalium uliginosum*), often a persistent weed of moist depressions in fields. Clammy Hedge-hyssop occurs sporadically in this same zone, or forms extensive patches in good years, such as this one. Vernal Water-starwort forms bright-green mats on open mud, but also occurs more centrally, rooted in the mud below open water, where it produces two kinds of leaves, linear submerged ones and thicker oval leaves that float on the water surface. All these plants, along with the new-found Waterwort, are annuals, relying on fast growth during the summer and good seed production and germination to maintain their populations. In contrast, the tall emergents are perennials, whose underground organs such as rhizomes and bulbous stem bases can survive winter and droughty summer seasons, thus assuring them of more stable populations. They too, of course, can produce abundant seed to add to the seed bank.

A number of species occur within the various zones of dominants in lesser numbers and/or with much smaller biomass. Water Smartweed (formerly *Polygonum amphibium*, now I believe *Persicaria amphibia*) is an ungainly, sprawling perennial (unlike its close and more common annual cousin, Pale Persicaria) whose leathery leaves are often badly bitten by insects, presumably beetles. It occupies the interface between mud and water, and where it is submerged its leaves float on water. A more terrestrial form, with hairy leaves that appear not to be insect-infected, also occurs sporadically at Acheson. Care must be taken to distinguish the leaves of Water Smartweed from those of a pondweed, *Potamogeton gramineus*, whose floating leaves are similarly thick, glossy, and long-oval. A true aquatic, this pondweed is very evident this year with the extensive water, but I have yet to see flowers on it.

Slender Small Bedstraw (*Galium trifidum*), which finds a niche scrambling among the more robust members of the wetland community, is a common marsh plant and is almost invariably present at Acheson. Surprisingly for its lack of biomass it is a perennial, although no doubt it produces plenty of seeds.

Patsy Cotterill

"MyPond" – Acheson Field Pond will be continued in the September –December issue of *The Parkland Naturalist.*

The Grassland Tour, 2013

Brooks/Lake Newell May Species Count, May 18–19

Enthusiasm was high as over 40 participants from throughout Alberta (and British Columbia) checked into Tillebrook Provincial Park, our customary HQ for the annual Brooks May Count. Now in its 15th year, the count was again sponsored by Cenovus, TransCanada Pipelines, and Ducks Unlimited Canada. The count is a joint Edmonton/Calgary initiative and over eight clubs were represented again this year, with the usual high ratio of very experienced birders! Early scouting by the Fox boys and Brian Stephens, prior to the long weekend, seemed to indicate a slow start to the spring migration northwards. James remarked that on the preceding Tuesday he counted only four species of birds in the campsite. The scouts were able to confirm good road conditions in most areas. Most reservoirs were topped right up (so no sand bars or gravel spits), most ponds had average water levels, and temperatures were cool during scout week.

Burrowing Owl*, *Photo by Gerald Romanchuk

Weather conditions during count weekend were not too bad, with partly clearing skies, some scattered showers, light to moderate winds, and temps ranging from 6 to 20 ºC. The final total was 167 bird species, which is just above the average for the 15-year count. There were the customary eight zones, each zone having a captain and a band of willing spotters. Many participants were returnees, of course, so it was easy for me to split up the zones. On Saturday evening we held the usual social, and all present were keen to talk about their birding and plant study day. Saturday highlights included a Long-eared Owl out by Bantry Reservoir, at least two Burrowing Owls in the Rolling Hills section, close to 50 Whimbrel, an Osprey, and one lone Tundra Swan. Hawk numbers were good, and I should mention record numbers of Black-necked Stilts (125) as well as Wilson's Phalarope (1143). Various door prizes were handed out, and the annual Shoveler Award went to Gerald Romanchuk, who had some slight problems running off the muddy trails close to Tide Lake!

No new species were recorded this year. Missing birds included Turkey Vulture, Cooper's Hawk, Sanderling, Peregrine Falcon, Ruddy Turnstone, Pectoral Sandpiper, Short-eared Owl, Violet-green Swallow, Western Tanager, and Le Conte's Sparrow. Unusual species included Purple Finch, Common Nighthawk, Hairy Woodpecker, Bobolink, Mountain Bluebird, American Pipit, and Swamp Sparrow, a fair indication of the slow and late migration. Both Marsh and House Wrens were low in numbers, as were American Bittern (4), Ring-necked Pheasant (16), Goldfinch (5), and many of the usual warblers, namely Black and White, Blackpoll, and Common Yellowthroat.

Looking at the high numbers spotted over the past four years, mention should be made of 152 Pine Siskins, 161 Sprague's Pipit, 18 Lark Sparrow, 135 Cinnamon Teal, 6400 Black-bellied Plover, and 79 Spotted Sandpiper. All in all it was a very good count, with exceptional totals from Zone 8, the Medicine Wheel Project, and the area around Bantry 1 and 2. Full results will be posted on both the Nature Calgary and Edmonton Nature Club websites.

Bob Parsons

The Grassland Tour, 2013

Milk River/Writing-on-Stone May Species Count, May 25–26

Twelve keen and experienced birders gathered at Writing-on-Stone, our traditional count headquarters. The weather forecast looked fair after some mid-week showers. The coulees were all full, and Pakowki Lake was almost overflowing again this year. There was not quite so much field water this year, but the regular spots provided good shore bird viewing areas. The Manley team spent the Saturday in the Pinhorn Grazing Reserve; Donna and Arthur Wiekowski travelled the 500 along the Montana border; Earle Covert concentrated on Coutts and Milk River townsite; and Ken Orich and Toby-Anne and Jordan Reimer took care of Crow Indian Lake, Vernon Flats, and Etzikom Coulee. On Sunday we all concentrated on areas to the east of the zone, including Pakowki Lake.

Generally, road conditions were excellent compared to the mud fiasco of last year. There was a lack of reed growth again this time around, so it was tough to spot Bitterns, and Black-crowned Night Heron and Marsh Wren numbers were down. The total for the weekend was 147 species, which equals the second highest total ever.

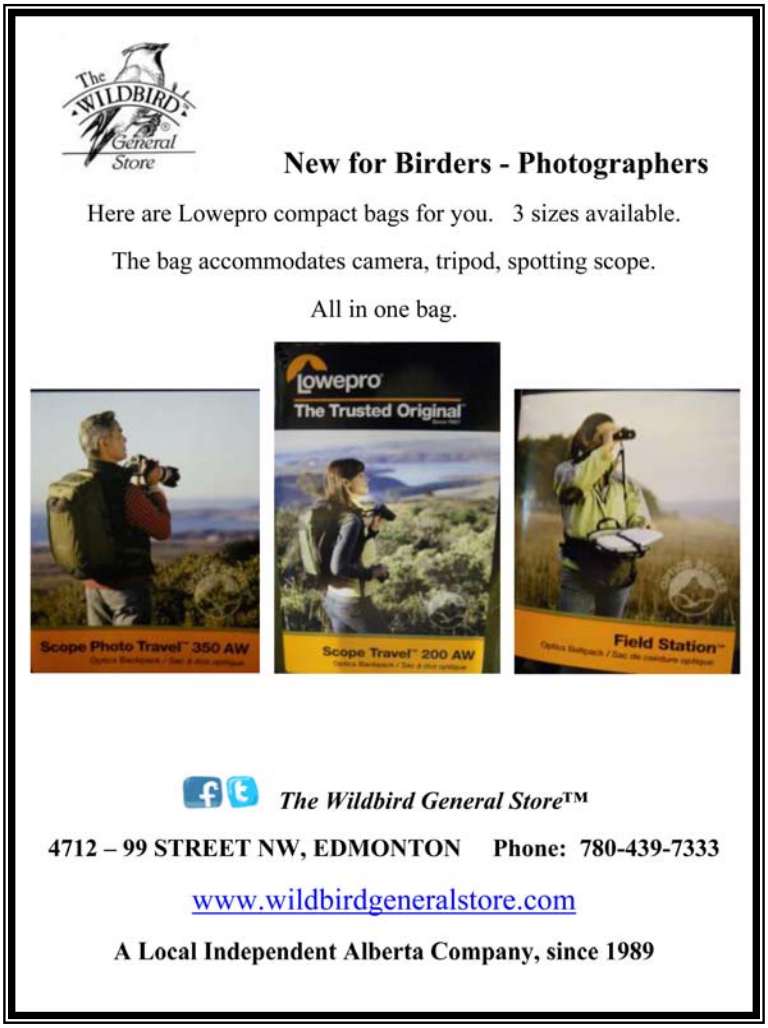
Bird species missing this year included Warbling Vireo, Grasshopper Sparrow, Ruby-crowned Kinglet, Black-capped Chickadee, and Red-necked Grebe. Unusual species seen included 5 Barrow's Goldeneye (Pinhorn), I Snow Goose, 1 Yellow-breasted Chat (always seen count week!), Bullock's Oriole, Cassin`s Vireo, and 2 American Pipit.

Species seen in low numbers were Short-eared Owl (1), Pied-billed Grebe (1), Horned Grebe (2), Marsh Wren (13), and Canvasback (40). The high numbers list looks pretty impressive and includes 284 Sanderling, 60 Marbled Godwit, 438 Red-necked Phalarope, 776 Gadwall, and over 1000 Northern Shoveler. American Avocet (450) was exceptional, along with 24 Long-billed Curlew and 16 Red-tailed Hawk.

I popped in to see Tom and Lois Gilchrist, who provided me with an excellent dinner and a nice cold beer! Many thanks to our sponsors Cenovus, TransCanada Pipelines, and Ducks Unlimited Canada. We could not do all this without your terrific support.

Bob Parsons

Bullock's Oriole, Photo by Gerald Romanchuk



Dr. Gail Michener's Lecture at the ENC Annual Banquet

The Sex Life of the Single Richardson's Ground Squirrel

It was my pleasure to introduce Dr. Gail Michener, Professor Emeritus of Biological Sciences at the University of Lethbridge, at the Edmonton Nature Club's Annual Banquet held at the Faculty Club on March 30, 2013. Dr. Gail Michener was born in Wisbech, Cambridgeshire, England, but grew up in Australia, where she obtained a B.Sc. (Honours) in Zoology from the University of Adelaide, South Australia, in 1967. She came to Canada in 1968, where she first saw Richardson's ground squirrels and thought them to be "neat little critters." While personally fascinated by them, she quickly found that little was known about them despite their abundance on the prairies around Lethbridge. She said, "Canadians could tell me all sorts of ways to kill them, but they couldn't tell me anything about their basic biology. It was not known when the ground squirrel mated, how long their gestation period was, and how many litters a year they produced or how long they lived." That has all changed as a result of the long-term ongoing behavioural-ecology research project conducted by Dr. Michener at three sites over a 40-year period in southern Alberta.


Courtesy of Bernie Wirzba

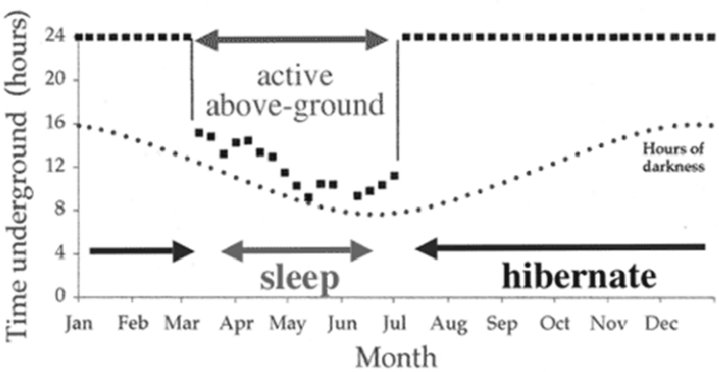
Firstly, Gail put us right on a common mistake and one piece of historical information. I don't think anybody present at the banquet would dream of calling a Richardson's ground squirrel a "gopher" after hearing her admonishment. The ground squirrel is named in honour of Sir John Richardson, the surgeon-naturalist on two British naval expeditions charged with mapping the arctic coast of British North America (now Canada). In May 1820, during the overland part of the expedition, John Richardson explored along the Saskatchewan River to Fort Carlton, where he collected specimens of a new rodent species. He sent these specimens back to England, where they were named in his honour in 1822.

Dr. Michener's talk was subtitled, "Why male and female Richardson's ground squirrels live and love at a different pace." She then provided a fascinating description of what she has learned of their behavioural ecology and social organization, based on her study of a population of Richardson's ground squirrels located 40 km north of Lethbridge.

A year in the life...

Richardson's ground squirrels spend the majority of their lives in underground burrows. Depending on age and sex, hibernation lasts for 4 to 8 months, during which time the squirrel is underground 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. In the active season, the burrow system is used for sleeping, copulation, and raising young, and as a refuge from inclement weather and most predators. Hibernating adult female Richardson's ground squirrels are continuously underground from July through February. In the active season, time spent sleeping decreases with increasing day length, reaching a minimum of 9–10 hours sleep in May and June.

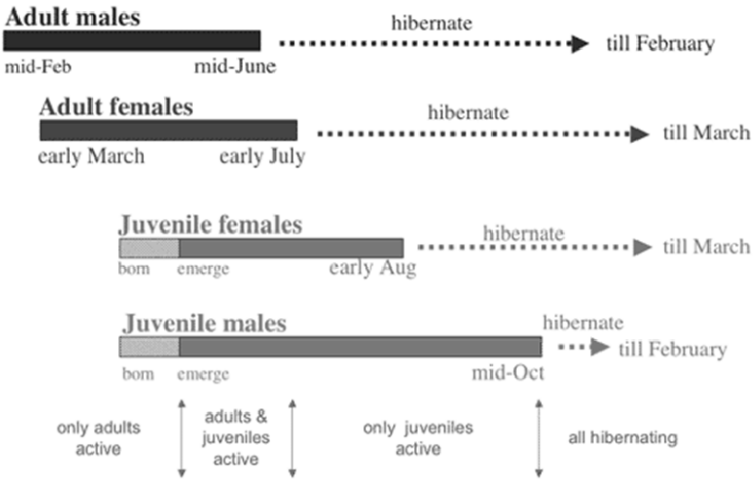
Annual activity cycle



© Gail R. Michener

By catching and marking all the ground squirrels to age and sex them, Dr. Michener was able to individually identify all the animals in her colony, enabling her to follow their life history, kinship, and reproductive success. Dr. Michener discovered that in southern Alberta, adults and juveniles, males and females, are active during different times of the season and all age and sex classes are simultaneously active for only a few weeks in May and June.

Emergence Periods



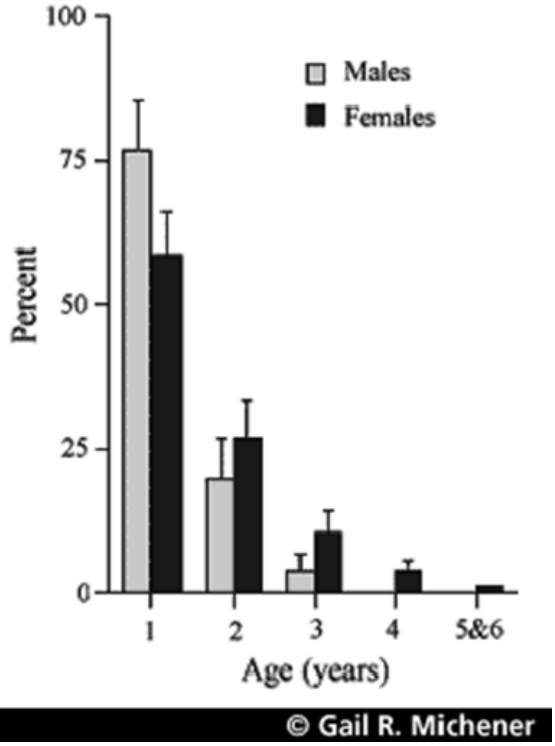
© Gail R. Michener

Richardson's ground squirrels emerge from hibernation early in spring, with males emerging about 2 weeks before females. At emergence, yearling ground squirrels of both sexes are sexually mature and classified as adults. Yearlings outnumber older adult squirrels, with 80–90% of adult males and 60–70% of adult females in the population being yearling adults. After the emergence of litters in May, the population includes all age and sex classes of squirrels for a short time. Then, adult male Richardson's ground squirrels enter hibernation in early June, leaving only adult females and juveniles in the active above-ground population. Adult females enter hibernation about 2 weeks after males, usually in late June and early July, and normally all adult Richardson's ground squirrels are in hibernation by late July. This now leaves juveniles as the only active squirrels in the population. Juvenile females enter hibernation in August, but their brothers stay above ground until October.

It's not a long life....

Survival of Richardson's ground squirrels differs between males and females, with males experiencing much higher mortality than females throughout their lives. Only 5–15% of juvenile male Richardson's ground squirrels survive their first year and reach adulthood. As adults, males have about a 25% chance of surviving each succeeding year and so male Richardson's ground squirrels rarely attain the age of 3 years. In contrast, 35–45% of juvenile females survive to adulthood, and adult females have a 50% chance of surviving each subsequent year. Female Richardson's ground squirrels often live 3 or 4 years, with a few surviving as long as 5 or 6 years. Of many thousands of free-living Richardson's ground squirrels followed by Dr. Michener, one female survived to 7 years and one male to 4 years.

The age distribution of adult males and adult females in a population of Richardson's ground squirrels



The majority of adult males are 1-year-olds and none are older than 3 years. The majority of adult females are 1- and 2-year-olds and a few are as old as 5 and 6 years. Data are presented as average + SD percentage in each age class (n = 5 years).

...and it can be nasty and brutish...

The difference in life-span between male and female Richardson's ground squirrels is attributable to the different reproductive strategies adopted by the two sexes. Juvenile males are forced to pursue the high-risk strategy of dispersal, emigrating from their natal area to an unfamiliar location where they encounter ground squirrels that are not their own kin. Dispersal has the reproductive advantage of avoiding inbreeding but incurs the disadvantages of traversing unfamiliar territory, exposure to predators, contact with machinery or vehicles while crossing roads, and attack by resident ground squirrels as they attempt to settle in a new location. Adult male Richardson's ground squirrels experience extreme pressures during the mating season due to competition for access to fertile females. Males engage in vigorous fights, and the resulting wounds and stress can cause fatalities.

You should have seen the loser: an adult male Richardson's ground squirrel with injuries on the face, limbs, and feet due to fights with other males during the mating season.

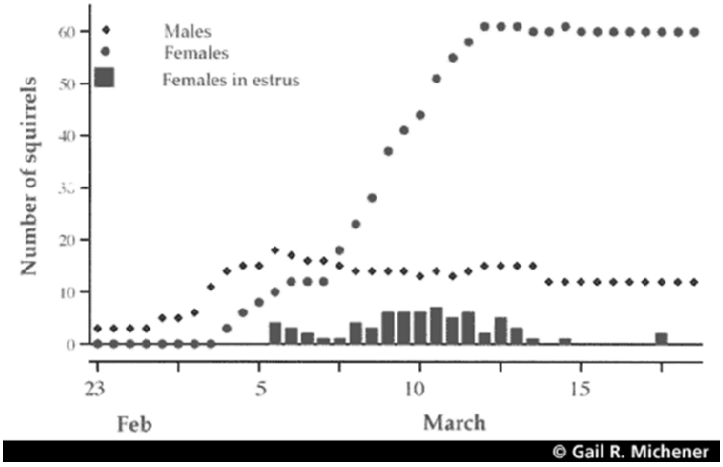
...and to the winner the prize.

Richardson's ground squirrels are not sexually mature until they emerge from their first hibernation season, when they are about 11 months old. They are seasonal breeders, with mating restricted to a 2- to 3-week period in early spring. Once females begin to emerge from hibernation, males defend areas that change on a daily basis as each male attempts to maximize his proximity to females that are in heat on that day.

Female Richardson's ground squirrels enter estrus shortly after emergence from hibernation, and they usually mate on their third or fourth day out of hibernation. Each female mates on only one day during the mating season and each female's estrous period lasts only about 2–3 hours. During this time the female mates with 1 to 4 males.

A major characteristic of populations of Richardson's ground squirrels is the seasonal change in sex ratio of the population. In spring, the above-ground population initially consists only of adult males. Once females begin to emerge, they quickly outnumber males by more than 3:1. Throughout the mating season, mortality of males greatly exceeds that of females due to fierce competition between males. At the end of the mating season, females outnumber males by 10:1 or more.

Numbers of adult male and adult female Richardson's ground squirrels resident each day from late February to late March



The subset of emerged females in estrus each day is indicated by the solid bars. Although the population sex ratio (= total number of females per male) was female-biased from 10 March onwards, the number of females in estrus per male was male-biased on every day of the mating season.

Although there is an abundance of adult females in the population, males compete vigorously and aggressively for mates. Even though there are more females, because only females in estrus are available for mating, and each female is in estrus for only 1-3 hours on a single afternoon of the year, estrous females are a commodity in demand. When viewed in this manner, males outnumber estrous females on almost all days of the mating season, hence the fighting. Gail Michener has recorded one male that fathered 51 offspring over his lifetime, whereas there are many that never get to pass their genes on to the next generation of ground squirrels.

Acknowledgements

Dr. Michener's talk was superbly presented, taking our members through her research findings and including several amusing anecdotes. The story she described of the life history of the Richardson's ground squirrel was remarkable. The charts in this article and much more information on her research (and that of her graduate students) may be found on her website: http://research.uleth.ca/rgs/index.cfm.

Alan Hingston

EDITORIAL

"Those who can, do. Those who can do more, volunteer." There have been many changes to the Committee Chairs recently. Without the time and energy of volunteers, it would be impossible to achieve the goals of the Edmonton Nature Club.

I would like to thank Pat and Dick Clayton for their work as Mailing Committee Coordinators and for their sound advice regarding *The Parkland Naturalist* mailing, distribution, and costs. Pat and Dick were responsible for all the mailing for the club. For more on Pat and Dick's contributions, please see below.

Thank you to the authors and photographers who have contributed to this issue of *The Parkland Naturalist*, and to Judy Johnson for her excellent copy editing. Jack and Pauline DeHaas are the new Mailing Committee Coordinators. Welcome and thank you for volunteering.

I hope you enjoy this issue of *The Parkland Naturalist*. All submissions should be in by November 30, 2013, for inclusion in the next issue.

Dawne Colwell, editor PN (colwelld@shaw.ca)

Pat and Dick Clayton

Pat and Dick Clayton have been involved in most aspects of the Edmonton Natural History Club and now the Edmonton Nature Club since the 1970s. Pat held many positions within the club and during her presidency worked to form the Wagner Natural Area, where she continues to be active to this day. There are very few people in the naturalist community who do not know Dick and Pat. They have worked with the Federation of Alberta Naturalists (Alberta Nature) as board members and volunteers in various capacities. Dick was involved with the Clifford E. Lee Nature Sanctuary from its inception and acted as the treasurer until the late 1990s. His dedication and hands-on work at the sanctuary were always appreciated. The Sanctuary has a bench in his honour on the Woodland Flower Trail. Some people like to be out front and noticed for their work, but Pat and Dick work quietly on many fronts for many naturalist organizations and we owe them both a huge thanks for all they have done to protect and preserve nature in our province. Thanks, Pat and Dick, for all your contributions to ENC and other organizations.

To read more about Pat and Dick, see page 117 in *Preserving Our Natural Environment: Celebrating the Centennial of the Edmonton Nature Club*, published by the ENC in 2009.

Marg Reine

“You Yellow-bellied Sapsucker!”

Usually found acting on their own, these guys are a real piece of work. I first noticed these interesting birds early one morning in May. In a sparsely populated area near Cold Lake where everybody should still have been fast asleep, I kept hearing very loud banging on metal, like some misguided individual pounding in pilings for another overpass. After four or five irritating sessions about twenty minutes apart, I just had to investigate. I carried my camera with me in case taking evidence of some misadventure became necessary. Turned out that the culprit was a male Yellow-bellied Sapsucker trying to punch a hole in the back of the only STOP sign within miles. With all the noise he was making I was able to walk right up within six feet and snap his photo. He did stop very briefly, but when he realized I wasn’t the mate he was looking for, he just carried on.

For several years, my wife Joan and I owned an acreage in the boreal forest on the west side of Cold Lake. Our next-door neighbours had a nesting pair of sapsuckers on their lot. A sure sign that spring had arrived was the repeated hollow sounds made by the male Yellow-bellied Sapsucker banging on their cabin chimney. It must have been the affirmation of spring’s arrival that helped us actually enjoy this disturbance of peace and serenity. Then one weekend we decided to build a tool/storage shed in the woods behind our cabin. It was a 10-foot-square wooden shed, the outside shell of which we completed during our two-day retreat. We left it completely closed in but empty pending our return in five days. We returned to find the south-facing wall riddled with holes. No, not bullet holes, small holes amazingly similar to woodpecker works of art. Tapping on the walls ourselves caused a hollow drumming sound because the building was empty. Now, we don’t have any surveillance video footage, but it’s pretty easy to connect the dots, pun intended. The damage was actually an easy fix with a layer of recycled tarpaper and a layer of house wrap, so the incident was actually quite humorous in the end.

My research on research done by real scientists revealed that the loud Morse code signals made by male Yellow-bellied Sapsuckers are part of their breeding behaviour designed to attract a mate. Go figure! Sapsuckers, as their name suggests, chisel series of holes in aspen trees to create wells that collect sap and trap insects. They also have a nasal cat-like meow, which we have heard many times over the years. This indeed is a very interesting bird with unique behaviour patterns.

Del Huget

Photo by Del Huget

Field Trip Reports

Unfortunately, there wasn't any space for most species lists in this issue of *The Parkland Naturalist*. When space is available, the species lists will be included. To view the field trips with the species lists, visit the Edmonton Nature Club's web page: edmontonnatureclub.org under Field Trips/Trip Reports.

Walk at Strathcona Science Park, August 25, 2013

About 16 of us got up early Sunday morning for a walk through the Strathcona Science Park. The birding was okay, with a total of 32 species. The best birds were probably Philadelphia Vireo and Magnolia Warbler.

The decision about what to do after our walk was pretty easy after Curtis and Michelle Manly's Dunlin report came in. So... a bunch of us hit the Whitemud and headed west for the shorebird spot on 628. The first of the group that got there saw the Dunlin. The last three, including me, missed the darn thing! After some time going over every bird there about 20 times, we went over to Curtis and Michelle's for a visit. Thanks for the hospitality, guys!

Gerald Romanchuk

Going for ice cream, Photo by Gerald Romanchuk

Buff-breasted Sandpiper, Photo by Gerald Romanchuk

St. Albert Warblers and Spruce Grove, August 24, 2013

A group of us birded the area around St. Albert and Spruce Grove (north and west of Edmonton) today, with a focus on finding warblers and shorebirds. Warblers were a bit slow, but we had very good luck with shorebirds at the end of the day. We started out at Lacombe Lake Park in St. Albert and then moved to the Grey Nuns Spruce Lot before heading to Jack and Pauline DeHaas's beautiful garden for lunch. Some of us kept going and headed towards Spruce Grove to look for shorebirds at the slough on the north side of Secondary Highway 628 just east of its junction with Sandhills Road. The highlight there was a single Buff-breasted Sandpiper. Though not everyone saw all the birds, we tallied 59 species for the day.

Martin Sharp

Winged Creatures Field Trip, August 17, 2013

Over 25 avid birders, butterfliers, and dragonfliers came out on Saturday for our first "Winged Creatures" field trip. The idea was to broaden our focus a bit and look at some things besides birds. We managed to ID 73 bird species and saw 7 different dragonflies and 6 butterflies. We still need to work out the ID on some of the butts and dragons.

We started out at a muddy pond just north of Bittern Lake. While checking out a few shorebirds, our first dragon of the day, a Black Meadowhawk, came up and obligingly perched on one of the scopes.

From there we cruised over to Miquelon Lake. Shorebird numbers were pretty decent. We picked up 18 species, with a total of 20 shorebirds for the day after a couple of other stops. Hudsonian Godwit was a lifer for a few members. A few juvenile Short-billed Dowitchers gave us reason to talk about exciting stuff such as internal markings on the tertials. Amazing that anyone stayed awake after that discussion!

We caught a few butterflies. One Copper, possibly a Purplish Copper, was seen and caught. But ol' gorilla fingers let it get away before we could get a photo. Got a nice look at a few Meadowhawks. Caught a couple of Variable Darners and we were able to talk about the striping on the side of the thorax – almost as exciting as talking about tertials!

After a nice lunch break we tried a walk through the woods, hoping for some migrating warblers, but didn't have much luck. Only a few Chickadees and a Yellow Warbler. The heat and humidity were starting to get to people. A suggestion of a hike out to Miquelon 2 didn't generate much enthusiasm. Going for ice cream got a much better response!

The group broke up from there. A few of us made a quick stop at Joseph Lake on the way home. Not a lot there, but we did pick up a Baltimore Oriole, a few Tennessee Warblers, a Harrier, and a Bald Eagle.

Gerald Romanchuk

Turkey Vulture Excursion, August 15, 2013

Six of us enjoyed a great day with Dr. Wayne Nelson and his able assistant Alora tagging Turkey Vultures on Thursday near Athabasca. Of special interest is that one of the two locations we visited is the northern-most known nesting site known of Turkey Vultures on the planet.

The first location was what one imagines a Turkey Vulture (TUVU) site to be like. While the old homestead building was only about 50 yards off the road we had to struggle through a tangle of windfalls, prickly roses, nettles, and thistles. The outer walls of the hand-hewed log building were still very sturdy; however, the interior walls, floors, and ceilings were rotten, soggy, stinking, and looked ready to collapse. Fortunately, Wayne has much experience with catching uncooperative young birds. They are not tagged until about 60 days of age (they fledge at 65–70 days) so that the coloured and numbered patagial tag can be properly attached without damage to the wing. These kids, as Wayne calls them, are quite large (six-foot wing span already and a nasty-looking large beak).

None of us had seen this procedure before and it was fascinating.

The second site would be what you could call a turkey taggers dream. It was at a working farmyard (although the home is not occupied at present) and located in a modern garage with an attic and access doors on each end. We parked our vehicles next to the building and some of us set up lawn chairs on the freshly mowed grass. It was like being on a picnic. There were two young birds at this spot and we were equally enthralled to watch all the weighing, measuring, tagging, etc. The young birds make a noise (possibly as predator protection) that sounds like a combination of hissing, humming, and a sack full of rattlesnakes.

Anyone spotting wing-tagged vultures or other birds should report the sighting with tag colour (and number if possible) to www.reportband.gov.

On our return to Edmonton we stopped at Long Lake Provincial Park to check for Mew Gulls (no luck with that).

Thanks again to Dr. Wayne and Alora Nelson for a very enjoyable and educational trip.

Gerry Fox

Dry Island Buffalo Jump, July 6–7, 2013

We had a successful two day-trip to central Alberta, visiting Slack Slough in Red Deer, Dry Island Buffalo Jump, Tolman Badlands, various lakes and sloughs between Tolman and Hanna, and then various sites between Hanna and Castor, where we wrapped things up. All told we saw 97 species, the highlight of which were 2 Whooping Cranes, which were, remarkably, at exactly the same location where we saw 2 Whooping Cranes on the same weekend last year. Nine of us got great views of the birds both on the ground and flying.

Martin Sharp

Mira Furgoch birding at Dry Island Buffalo Jump, Photo by Ann Carter

Turkey Vulture Banding, Photos by Brian Stephens

Field Trip Reports

Southern Alberta Birding, June 21–23, 2013

On Friday, June 21, 10 of us headed east to Holden, where we met up with another member, and then headed south to Big Knife Provincial Park to meet another.

Big Knife greeted us with light rain but we did a short hike through from the day use area. Ruby-crowned Kinglet, several warblers, and a Spotted Towhee were the highlights.

We continued south along 855 to Hanna and then east to 884 south from Youngstown to Big Stone and the Blood Indian Creek Reservoir Park. The rain had let up so we spent about an hour there. Brown Thrasher, Ferruginous Hawk, and Bullock's Oriole were highlights, with the Bullock's Oriole unexpected and a life bird for most of us. A Common Nighthawk was seen in the distance. Along the way up to Big Stone we had a variety of waterfowl, and Big Stone added Common and Forster's Terns. Sprague's Pipit was heard singing above us. Just south of Big Stone, a Short-eared Owl was perched on a fence post.

We stopped at the campground east of the Red Deer River, crossing just north of Jenner. A Rock Wren was calling from far above, and a Lark Sparrow was seen lower down. So with the weather holding, we were now picking up more of the grassland species.

We followed along the western edge of the Suffield military reserve with a couple of short stops, which included our first Chestnut-sided Longspur. We arrived fairly late in Medicine Hat and called it a day.

On Saturday, June 22, we were joined by one more member and started our birding in Cypress Hills at Elkwater with a walk through the campground and up one of the trails, then along the lake edge. Up in the forest above the campground we found a Dusky Flycatcher and out on the lake a White-winged Scoter. We tried the Rodeo Grounds for Lazuli Bunting with no luck. On the plateau to the west we heard the pink-sided variety of Dark-eyed Junco.

We then headed south to Wildhorse, expecting to find mainly grassland birds. Where RR 23a meets TWP 12, a surprise awaited, as the first section just north of Wildhorse had an extensive wetland bustling with waterfowl including Sora, American Bittern, Yellow-headed and Red-winged Blackbirds, Black Terns, Marbled Godwit, Wilson's Phalarope, and even a Pied-billed Grebe. The whole area was exceptionally green. Downside? – a few million voracious mosquitoes that engulfed us every time we stopped.

The area had abundant Lark Buntings: every stop would have a dozen or more. In one spot a fox (or perhaps a young coyote) was being mobbed as it seemed to be searching through the sage for nests. We picked out Brewer's and Grasshopper Sparrows, Chestnut-collared Longspurs, a lone Bobolink, Brown Thrasher, Loggerhead Shrike, and both Eastern and Western Kingbirds. We did not find McCowan's Longspur, even though a month ago there were hundreds. Someone who had been in the area earlier in the day found just one.

On our return to the highway at TWP 15A we were greeted by a run of horses trailed by 2 very small donkeys. The latter stopped to visit.

On the highway back north we hit a Common Nighthawk haven, several resting on the top of fence posts and one hunting. We counted 12 in a 3-kilometre stretch.

We knew Medicine Hat was implementing an evacuation plan for the river valley, so we were not able to visit the river valley parks on Sunday. The group separated, with some working their way back to Edmonton and others going southwest. Over the 2 days we had 76 species on Friday and 91 on Saturday, with a combined total of 112 species.

Brian Stephens

Polyphemus Moth, Photo by Dawne Colwell

Fort Saskatchewan Prairie, June 15, 2013

In spite of a gloomy forecast, twelve of us went with Richard Knapton to the Fort Saskatchewan Prairie and areas along the North Saskatchewan River nearby.

We kept out of the wind for the most part, exploring the woodlands and grass areas. We saw lots of interesting short-grass prairie plants and a Polyphemus Moth that appeared to have just hatched and was drying out its wings. Over by the river, we were caught by a brief torrent before a break that let us follow the river to the west.

We spotted or heard 29 bird species, but missed some which were quiet and elusive in the woods. We finished up around 11:00 as the weather turned worse.

Thanks to Richard for bird, bug, and plant ID.

Brian Stephens

South Whitemud Creek and McTaggart Sanctuary, June 9, 2013

It was a cool and sometimes breezy late morning walk for 9 of us in the Mactaggart Sanctuary. We entered the Sanctuary from the 119 Street access just north of Anthony Henday Drive. Highlights of our walk included Least Flycatcher and Red-tailed Hawk at their nest sites, a muskrat up close in the backwater of an active beaver dam, oyster mushroom on poplar snag, and the recently shed exoskeletons from at least two freshwater crayfish. Unfortunately, we missed the American Redstart female seen during our scouting trip the previous evening. Twenty three bird species were observed, plus 19 species of shrubs and wildflowers.

Harry and Teresa Stelfox, with assistance from
Amy and Dallas Johnson

Bloody, Battered, & Bruised: Elk Island Century Day, June 8, 2013

After years of carrying around a first-aid kit for ENC field trips, we finally had use for it on Saturday. But that's getting carried away; I should start at the beginning…

Yesterday we had 30 people out for the Edmonton Nature Club's annual trip out to Elk Island National Park. The goal was to find 100 species.

We worked our way up the parkway, through the bison loop and over to Tawayik Lake, picking up lots of expected birds. Near the viewing platform, we waited for a Sedge Wren, that had been seen earlier this week, to show up. The wren took its sweet time, but while we waited both American Kestrel and Yellow-headed Blackbirds were spotted. Both can be tough to get in the park. The wren finally popped up and everyone got a great look.

Further up the parkway, we checked various wetlands. Besides the usual suspects, we heard both LeConte's and Nelson's Sparrows and a Mourning Dove blasted past.

Next stop was the Sandhills Trail. The first part of the hike went smoothly; we couldn't find Chestnut-sided Warbler, but did get Mourning Warbler. Heading back towards the road, we decided to go off-trail and cut over towards a livelier patch of spruce. We lucked out and got Magnolia and Cape May Warblers.

Then there was the somewhat questionable decision to go a bit further towards a black spruce bog. Several of us had been over there before, but this year it was quite a bit wetter than in the past. Most of us made it over the first wet patch and kept our feet dry. The rest of our normal route was even wetter. This was where things started to go bad. The group started to split up looking for a way around the wet spots and we ended up in about four smaller groups – all looking to make their way back to the parkway.

The group I was with ended up running into a huge downed spruce tree. Getting over and around it is where the "Bloody, Battered, & Bruised" part came in. Eventually we made it back to the vehicles and had to do a roll call to make sure no one got left in the bush.
With everyone mostly in one piece, we went over to Astotin Lake for lunch. We scoped both sides of the lake, picked up ducks and grebes, etc., then went out the west gate to a spot where Brian had heard Virginia Rail. The rail didn't cooperate, but we lucked out when an American Bittern started calling.

By this time it was about 3:00 in the afternoon and we were at 96 species. We drove down the west edge of the park and slowly added species; House Sparrow, then Vesper Sparrow. Purple Martin made 99. Then the question was posed: Which species would be our 100th? I was accused of cheating when I said "Bluebird" about a minute before we rolled up to one.

We probably could've worked at finding a few more birds, but by then most of us were pretty burnt out. Some of the folks went home, but a bunch of us went back into the park for a relaxing wiener roast.
After a nice meal and a few hours of rest, nine of us decided to make a run for some rails. We went back out the west gate and as soon as we pulled up to Brian's spot, the Virginia Rail was kicking up a storm. Then it was over to a spot on RR 182 just north of the Yellowhead where Michael had found a Yellow Rail. It took a while, but finally we heard one calling faintly a ways off from the road.

By the time we got back to the park gate it was 11:30 p.m. A very long day, but well worth it! Getting up at 3 a.m. this morning to do my Breeding Bird Survey route is a whole different story.

Species List

Common Loon
Horned Grebe
Eared Grebe
Red-necked Grebe
Pied-billed Grebe
Western Grebe
American White Pelican
American Bittern
Canada Goose
Mallard
Gadwall
American Wigeon
Northern Shoveler
Blue-winged Teal
Green-winged Teal
Canvasback
Redhead
Ring-necked Duck
Lesser Scaup
Common Goldeneye
Barrow's Goldeneye
Bufflehead
Ruddy Duck
Turkey Vulture
Northern Harrier
Broad-winged Hawk
Red-tailed Hawk
Red-tailed Hawk (Western, 7)
Bald Eagle
American Kestrel
Merlin
Ruffed Grouse
Virginia Rail (1)
Sora
American Coot
Spotted Sandpiper
Wilson's Snipe
Franklin's Gull
Ring-billed Gull
Black Tern
Mourning Dove
Ruby-throated Hummingbird
Belted Kingfisher
Yellow-bellied Sapsucker
Downy Woodpecker
Hairy Woodpecker
Northern Flicker
Pileated Woodpecker
Alder Flycatcher
Least Flycatcher Eastern Phoebe
Eastern Kingbird
Warbling Vireo
Philadelphia Vireo
Red-eyed Vireo
Black-billed Magpie
American Crow
Common Raven
Purple Martin
Tree Swallow
Barn Swallow
Black-capped Chickadee
Red-breasted Nuthatch
White-breasted Nuthatch
Brown Creeper
House Wren
Sedge Wren
Marsh Wren
Golden-crowned Kinglet
Mountain Bluebird
Hermit Thrush
American Robin
Gray Catbird
European Starling
Cedar Waxwing
Ovenbird
Black-and-white Warbler
Tennessee Warbler
Mourning Warbler
Common Yellowthroat
Cape May Warbler
Magnolia Warbler
Yellow Warbler
Yellow-rumped Warbler (Myrtle)
Chipping Sparrow
Clay-colored Sparrow
Vesper Sparrow
Savannah Sparrow
Le Conte's Sparrow
Nelson's Sparrow
Song Sparrow
Lincoln's Sparrow
Swamp Sparrow
White-throated Sparrow
Dark-eyed Junco
Rose-breasted Grosbeak
Red-winged Blackbird
Yellow-headed Blackbird
Common Grackle
Brown-headed Cowbird
Baltimore Oriole
American Goldfinch
House Sparrow

Plus
Yellow Rail
Also note the following seen by single observers. Our group rule was that any bird had to be seen by two people.
Hooded Merganser
Veery
Swainson's Thrush

Gerald Romanchuk

Veery, Photo by Gerald Romanchuk

Field Trip Reports

Long Lake Provincial Park, June 2, 2013

In spite of a gloomy forecast and light rain, 12 of us made our way to Long Lake Provincial Park, arriving around 9 a.m. We had a 3-hour window of limited light rain, followed by a deluge for a couple of hours and clearing up after that. We walked the trail from Loop E to Loop B and through the campsites in Loop B and back, and later explored the range road west of the park.

Lots of hidden birds calling, but few chances to get a look, with the exception of a Cape May Warbler that perched in the open, Golden-crowned Kinglet flitting through the conifers, a Barred Owl (looking wet) quietly watching us before calling to and joining its mate, a pair of Yellow-bellied Sapsuckers right in front of us, a Belted Kingfisher, a Dark-eyed Junco (who sounded more like a Palm Warbler than a Junco), and in the afternoon, a cooperative Philadelphia Vireo.

We only found a couple of Least Flycatchers (no other flycatcher species), and did not find Black-throated Green Warbler (which is typically common in the B Loop). On the other hand, we heard Connecticut Warbler, lots of Yellow and Yellow-rumped Warblers, Ovenbirds, and Black and White, Tennessee, Mourning, and Orange-crowed Warblers. We thought we might have heard a Nashville Warbler, but could not confirm.

We saw a total of 54 species in the Long Lake area. As we were coming back to highway 831, two of our party spotted a pair of Sandhill Cranes in a field, but they flew before the rest of us caught up.

Brian Stephens

Red-eyed Vireo, Photo by Gerald Romanchuk

Whitemud Ravine South, June 4, 2013

On a pleasant evening, 13 of us walked Whitemud Creek from Snow Valley to the Westbrook Trail. The bird activity was relatively quiet, but we heard or saw 30 species.

We had nice views of Red-eyed Vireo and Eastern Phoebe.

We examined the cliffs visible to the west from the trail between the Aspen Gardens and Westbrook junctions for swallows. This area had some years ago a lot of Northern Rough-winged Swallows, but since a major collapse, has mostly Bank Swallows now. The swallows were feeding in the air just above us and the lighting was good for picking out the Bank Swallows' distinctive breast band. We were not able to ID any Rough-winged, however.

Gerald noticed a different type of hole in the cliff face that was a Belted Kingfisher burrow. It is larger than the swallow openings and had two distinct parallel lines vertically below the opening. Belted Kingfishers can build burrows up to 2 metres deep!

At one of the ox-bow ponds we spotted a female Goldeneye and chicks. A few of us went on to Landsdowne hoping to see Common Nighthawks, but no luck there. We saw 30 species in all.

Brian Stephens

Hermitage Park, May 28, 2013

The weather forecast and storm clouds were threatening, but about 15 or so of us headed out for a walk around Hermitage Park. Luckily we managed to stay dry and enjoyed a pleasant evening.

The birding was fairly routine. Most migrants seem to have gone through – the birds we saw were residents. Some highlights were a Peregrine Falcon perched on the railroad bridge, a Bald Eagle on the other side of the river, and a few "scoops" of pelicans cruising over the park.

James recorded 35 species for eBird.

Gerald Romanchuk

Devonian Botanic Garden and Clifford E. Lee Nature Sanctuary, May 25, 2013

Our party of 11 enjoyed a pleasant morning stroll through the Garden. Although they were perhaps a bit quieter than normal for the fourth weekend in May, we did identify a total of 38 bird species. We had very nice views of a small raft of Ring-necked Ducks, were teased by a Red-breasted Grosbeak playing peek-a-boo in the shrubs, saw a Sora tiptoe through the dried cattails, and spotted a Northern Waterthrush. The Japanese Garden held a far Eastern Phoebe (naturally).

We ended our visit in the Butterfly House, marvelling at the exotic winged creatures there.

After visiting the Devonian Botanic Garden, six participants continued to Clifford E. Lee Nature Sanctuary, where the song of a Baltimore Oriole pulled us onto the trail just as the rain started. After peering at 22 species through wet binoculars, we called it a day.

Ann Carter

Shorebirds in the Tofield Area, May 12, 2013

Eighteen of us visited the Tofield area in pursuit of shorebirds. We visiting the Quarry, Rowan's Route from the soccer field on the east edge of town to Kallal Meadows, Amisk Creek, Holden, and finally areas north along RR 171 to TWP 520 and Mundare Beach.

The numbers of shorebirds were small, but a nice variety. We saw 15 species over the whole area, with Long-billed Dowitchers the most common. We also saw 5 species of grebes and Black Tern and Common Tern.

We were surprised to find south of Holden a significant mixed flock of geese, include 120 Ross's Geese, Snow Geese, Greater White-fronted Geese, Canada Geese, and Cackling Geese.

East of Mundare beach we came across a mixed flock of Lapland Longspurs and Horned Larks, 4 Yellow-bellied Sapsuckers, and for a few of us near the end, a Great Horned Owl. We also saw 6 species of sparrow, including our first Clay-colored Sparrow (Francis Point).

Our total species for the day was 86, although some may have been missed.

Brian Stephens

St. Albert, May 11, 2013

Sixteen of us visited Lacombe Park, Big Lake, Fairhaven, and Murray Marsh. Although it started quite cool, by noon the temperature was well up, as was the wind.

Lacombe Park gave us 2 warblers (Yellow-rumped and Orange-crowned), Swainson's Thrush, Western Tanager, Chipping Sparrow, Forster's Tern, and Osprey, among others. After negotiating past the flooded trail to the Big Lake Viewing platform and John E. Poole, we picked up several Savannah and Song Sparrows, Red-winged Blackbirds, Yellow-headed Blackbirds, Grackles, and Red-necked and Eared Grebes. The lake was relatively quiet and most of the small islands that had been congregation points were now underwater.
We moved to Fairhaven for lunch. Along the way some saw Eastern Phoebe and Spotted Sandpiper. At Fairhaven we were treated to Purple Finch, Yellow-bellied Sapsucker, Boreal Chickadee, and Great Blue Heron.

After lunch we moved up to Murray Marsh (north end) and found a small collection of shorebirds: Marbled Godwit, Semipalmated Plover, Least Sandpiper, Pectoral Sandpiper, and Baird's Sandpiper, plus Wilson's Phalarope.

On the way back a few of us saw Double-crested Cormorants and at the MacDonald's parking lot, a White-crowned Sparrow.
In all, 68 species were seen by at least two participants.

Brian Stephens

Whitemud Creek, May 8, 2013

Sixteen of us walked the Whitemud trails from Fox Drive to Snow Valley starting at 7:00 p.m., with the last of us returning around 9:45. The area has been quiet, with few songbirds, but we had some nice surprises. Two Barred Owls were calling early on. At least 4 Red-tailed Hawks cruised the ravine, and one nest was found. Things got more exciting with a Raven chasing a Turkey Vulture (a first-ever sighting for Whitemud Ravine). A bit latter, we had a Sharp-shinned Hawk being harassed by a Broad-winged Hawk (the latter being another first-ever sighting for Whitemud Ravine). Our combined list for Whitemud Ravine is now 152 species over the years.

While checking out the Red-tailed Hawk nest, we were treated to a Pileated Woodpecker entering a nest hole for the evening. A Yellow-Rumped Warbler (Myrtle) came over for a look at us, giving excellent views, and a White-crowned Sparrow was spotted foraging along one of the boardwalks. In two places, Dark-eyed Juncos were heard or seen. Common Mergansers, Common Goldeneye, Mallards, and Canada Geese were the only waterfowl sighted.

We also had a mystery bird calling just after sunset – it was reminiscent of a Western Wood-Pewee but it was higher pitched and not burry sounding. No one had heard a call like this before. We checked out raptor calls as well. After much discussion, we thought perhaps it was a Blue Jay making imitative calls. We couldn't get a look at the bird, but a songbird-sized bird flew from high up and the calling stopped. So although we had a small list (22 species), it was a most interesting evening.

Brian Stephens

Chickakoo Lake, May 4, 2013

Twenty of us visited the wetlands near Glory Hills Road and Hwy 16, Chickakoo Recreation Area, and finished up at the DU Interpretive Trailhead at Big Lake. The wetlands provided a variety of ducks, loons, Red-winged Blackbirds, snipe, grebes, a Great Blue Heron, and our first Tree Swallows of the day. Overall in this area the main lakes large and small were still mostly frozen.

We took a walk through Chickakoo, which was quite quiet. Nevertheless, we heard Ruffed Grouse at two locations, Hairy and Downy Woodpeckers, 2 Song Sparrows, White-Breasted Nuthatches, and back near the parking area, an Osprey.

After lunch we headed north. Along the way 2 Savannah Sparrows were sighted, We stopped to watch Tree Swallows and a pair of Mountain Bluebirds who seemed to be defending 2 nest boxes from the swallows. Nearby, 3 Killdeer were spotted. We had several Red-Tailed Hawks and 2 Northern Harriers.

We avoided Murray Marsh because, as of Friday, work was being done to repair the road after it flooded earlier in the week. At Big Lake we marvelled at the height of the water, which completely covered the trail and parking area. The nearby golf course is partly flooded as well. In the past 12 years I have never seen the lake this high. The group saw 37 species.

Brian Stephens

Wilson's Snipe, Photo by Janice Hurlburt

Tofield and Holden Area, April 21, 2013

Fifteen of us birded the area around Tofield, Ryley, and Holden today. A cool (-2 º C) but sunny day, with a wind with a definite edge to it. We were surprised by the amount of open water, and signs that there had been more in the past few days. Migration was definitely under way (at last), and although we found no swans or Snow Geese today, we did find 38 birds.

Martin Sharp

A Fort Saskatchewan Prairie Bouquet

Ever wanted to walk through a prairie meadow full of native wildflowers? Unfortunately, this is becoming harder to do, but at the Fort Saskatchewan Prairie it is still possible. The Fort Saskatchewan Prairie is located in Fort Saskatchewan on the south bank of the North Saskatchewan River. The main entrance is southwest of the Red Coat Landing Boat Launch, next to the River's Edge Wetlands and behind Vale Terrace Crescent. There are only three remaining preserved native grasslands in the Capital Region; the Fort Saskatchewan Prairie is one of them.

On a sunny day in early July, the open meadow is a bouquet of many colours. The colours change with the seasons, depending upon what is blooming, so visiting the prairie any time between May and September is always worthwhile. For our bouquet we'll start with the white flowers. The Low Milkweed (*Asclepias ovalifolia*) has clusters of delicate white flowers. If you wish to see Monarch Butterflies you have to find milkweed because the larvae feed almost exclusively on it and accumulate toxic chemicals from the plant into their bodies. Milkweed is not common in the Edmonton area, but it grows at the Prairie, particularly along the meadow edge by the aspen forest.

Another poisonous plant with white flowers is the Spreading Dogbane (*Apocynum androsaemifolium*). The genus name means "against dogs." Like milkweeds, dogbanes are poisonous and have a milky sap in their stems. The White Cinquefoil (*Potentilla arguta*) is another white addition to our prairie bouquet. *Potentilla* comes from the Latin "potens" which means powerful. The potentillas are members of the rose family and generally have yellow flowers.

Yellow flowers add a bright splash of colour, and there are many fine examples here. The Yellow Evening Primrose (*Oenothera bienni*) has showy yellow flowers on a long stalk which grows in its second year. The flowers open at night to attract nocturnal moths and other insects. The Yellow False Dandelion (*Agoseris glauca*) is very similar to its more common cousin but it is taller and the leaves are nearly toothless.

Another fine addition to the bouquet is the Western Wood Lily (*Lilium philadelphicum*). This floral emblem of Saskatchewan is becoming rare because of overpicking and attempts to transplant it. Picking it removes leaves which then cannot make food for the bulb, and the plant does not transplant well. The beautiful Gaillardia or Brown-Eyed Susan (*Gaillardia aristata*) is a favourite garden perennial commonly sold under the name of "blanketflower." The plant is named for a French botanist, Gaillard de Marentonneau.

Another popular garden perennial is the Wild Blue Flax (*Linum lewisii*). Flax and the Bluebell or Harebell (*Campanula rotundifolia*) contrast nicely in our prairie bouquet. Flax is grown for its seed, oil, and linen fibres. Wild Blue Flax is named in honour of Merriwether Lewis of the famed Lewis and Clark expedition that explored the American West in 1802. The bluebell is a famous symbol of Scotland. *Campanula* is from the Latin for bell.

Adding more deep colour to our bouquet are the Giant Hyssop (*Agastache foeniculum*), Western Wild Bergamot (*Monarda fistulosa*), and Purple Prairie Clover (*Petalostemon purpureum*). Both Giant Hyssop and Bergamot are members of the mint family. Mints are one of the easiest plant families to identify because of their square-shaped stems and leaves that are opposite each other on the stem; they often have an aromatic smell. The Giant Hyssop is a tall plant with showy spikes of blue-purple flowers. The genus name, *Agastache* means "much spike." *Foeniculum* means "like fennel." Wild Bergamot is another tall aromatic mint. The name *Monarda* honours Nicolas Monardez, who described many North American plants. Both Giant Hyssop and Bergamot can be used to make teas. Purple Prairie Clover is a member of the pea family with purple flowers that are not of the typical pea family shape.

Many more flowers could have been added to our prairie bouquet. The Fort Saskatchewan Prairie is a special place that we are fortunate to have in our area and one that is well worth a pleasant ramble.

Sources

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Kathleen Delaney-Mpulubusi

If you have any photos you'd like to share, please send them to the editor, Dawne Colwell, at colwelld@shaw.ca

A Fort Saskatchewan Prairie Bouquet, Photos by Don Delaney

Low Milkweed

Spreading Dogbane

White Cinquefoil

Yellow Evening Primrose

Yellow False Dandelion

Western Wood Lily

Gaillardia

Wild Blue Flax

Harebell

Giant Hyssop

Western Wild Bergamot

Purple Prairie Clover

Members' Photos

Common Nighthawk, Photo by Del Huget

Female Cherry-faced Meadowhawk, Photo by Judy Johnson