

THE PARKLAND NATURALIST



JANUARY-APRIL 2014

A PUBLICATION OF THE
EDMONTON NATURE CLUB

<http://www.edmontonnatureclub.ca>



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Prairie Falcon



Gyrfalcon



Prairie Falcon captures Pigeon



Juvenile Gyrfalcon captures Pigeon



Adult and Juvenile Gyrfalcon



Prairie Falcon and Common Raven

Airshow at the AGT

The Alberta Grain Terminal (AGT) located just north of the Yellowhead Highway between 127 Street and the St. Albert Trail in Edmonton provides a unique opportunity to observe Gyrfalcons and Prairie Falcons preying on the Rock Pigeons that find shelter in the structures and food in the form of spilled grain around the tracks. The Gyrfalcons and Prairie Falcons typically arrive in late November and leave by the middle of March.

The presence of ravens adds another element of interaction in the air space around the terminal, as they try to rob these falcons of their prey, often initiating spectacular aerial battles.

The falcons also battle each other. A Gyrfalcon will not tolerate the presence of another Gyrfalcon or a Prairie Falcon in the area. Occasionally other raptors such as Bald Eagles, Northern Goshawks, and Merlins are present, adding more drama to the scene.

The images on this page and the cover page illustrate some of the action one can see at the Alberta Grain Terminal in Edmonton.

Don Delaney



On the cover

Prairie Falcon and Gyrfalcon, Photo by Don Delaney

The feral pigeons at the Edmonton granary have provided birdwatchers with a unique opportunity to see falcons in action.

It isn't the most scenic environment for birding, but the magnificent Gyrfalcon – formerly a rarely seen winter visitor to the Edmonton region – is among seven species of birds of prey that have been observed in action at the Alberta Grain Terminal (the granary). Twenty years ago, expert birder Jim Lange was first to report a Gyrfalcon there. An employee of CN, Jim was familiar with the hundreds of feral pigeons, now renamed Rock Doves, feeding on spilled grain along the rails. Jim could see the granary from his home just north of the railway. In 1995 he wrote a remarkable story in the *Edmonton Naturalist* (23, 2:12-13) titled "Observing Gyrfalcons from the Living Room Sofa."

With a lifetime interest in the hunting habits of birds of prey, I was always keen to hear about Jim's latest sightings, but it wasn't until December 1998 that I finally decided to take a look myself. At that time I was crippled by a severe case of spinal stenosis caused by lifting a very heavy block of tree trunk. For about half a year, while out for a walk, I had to sit down after every

fifty steps or so to let the pain in my leg subside. As far as nature studies were concerned, I was quite ready to sit for hours in a parked car at the busy corner of St. Albert Trail and the Yellowhead freeway, hoping falcons would show up at the granary.

From 1998 to 2000, Jim and I cooperated in collecting data on the hunts and kills of the Gyrfalcons and Prairie Falcons, both of which had become winter visitors at the granary.

My data were obtained during 37 days in 1998–1999 and on 7 days the following winter. In total Jim and I tallied 141 attacks on pigeons by the Gyrs and 104 attacks by their smaller cousin, the Prairie Falcons. An attack was defined as a completed attempt by a falcon to capture a pigeon, which was then either seized in the air or narrowly evaded the falcon's clutches. Attacks could include a single swoop or a short pursuit and one or more additional passes.

With a success rate of 26%, the Prairie Falcons proved to be

more than twice as deadly as the Gyrs, which caught, on average, only one prey in each of ten or eleven attacks. Furthermore, their respective hunting methods showed interesting differences. The Gyrs had plenty of speed and power but were short on accuracy. Flying between the buildings, they often approached by stealth. At their sudden arrival, the pigeons flushed and the falcon attempted to seize one at random as it shot through the mass of birds. If the attack failed, the falcon rose steeply with the momentum of its speed until it stalled and curved back down again for another swoop through the flock. As local birder Bob Gehlert remarked, the Gyr's hunting style reminded him of a pendulum. By contrast, the Prairie Falcons

were more agile and their aim more accurate. Winging or sailing well above the tightly packed flocks of pigeons, they selected one particular target and often seized it in a single precise stoop.

On January 4, 1999, Gordon Court and I watched a Prairie Falcon capture four pigeons in four attacks over a time span of about 20 minutes. Three times the falcon carried its catch to an adjacent parking lot, but soon

abandoned the carcass at the approach of vehicles. Its fourth pigeon was taken away to a distant plucking location.

The superior speed and climbing power of Gyrfalcons reached their full potential when they pursued high-flying Mallards outside Edmonton city limits. For details of these hunts, see the publication by D. Dekker and G. Court in the *Journal of Raptor Research* (2003, 37:161–163).

Observations on Gyrfalcons and Prairie Falcons hunting pigeons were described by D. Dekker and J. Lange in the *Canadian Field-Naturalist* (2001, 115:395–401).

Dick Dekker

The above publications are included as chapters in Dick Dekker's book *Hunting Tactics of Peregrines and other Falcons*, available from the Nature Alberta bookstore.



Gyrfalcon and Feral Pigeons, Photo by Don Delaney

Edmonton Nature Club Announcements

Volunteer Needed

We are currently seeking a **treasurer**. It is very important that we fill this position!

Duties include keeping the financial records of the club and providing a report when requested. The position requires recording deposits rather than making them. Our current treasurer will provide guidance as required. As a member of the executive, the treasurer is encouraged to attend our meetings whenever possible. Typically there are seven meetings per year, September through April.

For more information on this or other volunteer positions, please email Ann Carter at ann55john@yahoo.ca.

Thank you,
The Edmonton Nature Club

Volunteer Opportunity

One or more volunteers are required to fill the position of count coordinator/compiler for the Strathcona Christmas Bird Count (CBC). The Edmonton region has nine local counts, and each contributes to providing an accurate view of our winter bird scene, as well as promoting a healthy winter activity.

The Strathcona count, now in its 24th year, began in 1988 and after a brief hiatus has been held annually since 1995. We have a strong support base of approximately 95 participants, divided between feeder watchers and bush beaters, and a unique urban/rural split encompassing most of the county. We also have had excellent media support before and after the count from *The Sherwood Park–Strathcona County News*.

I have been involved with the Strathcona Count since 2000, first as zone 5 captain and since 2008 as count compiler. My personal and family life has, of course, changed over the years and I am now unable to commit my time to this position. I have enjoyed supporting the Strathcona Christmas Bird Count, meeting like-minded neighbours, and sharing birding tales with new friends.

Please contact me if you are interested in assuming the very rewarding position of count coordinator for the Strathcona CBC.

Jim Goodwin
19 Meadowood Crescent
Sherwood Park T8A 0L6
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good_one@telusplanet.net

Editorial

Please be sure to read the President's Message on page 6 for important new information regarding *The Parkland Naturalist*. Our club magazine will be available to all current members on the Edmonton Nature Club website, edmontonnatureclub.org. Scroll down and click on the logo on the right side of the home page. You will need the password to log on. Beginning in September 2014, members who wish to receive a hard copy of the magazine will be charged \$15 to cover the costs of printing and mailing three issues a year.

Gerald Romanchuk just posted the news on the ENC Yahoo Discussion Group Site that Ray Cromie was awarded the prestigious Loren Goulden Memorial Award at Nature Alberta's annual banquet on April 12, 2014 (see: <http://naturealberta.ca/programs/awards-scholarships/>). Congratulations, Ray!

The Edmonton Nature Club held its annual banquet on March 29, 2014. Thank you to our banquet coordinator Toby-Ann Reimer and all the other volunteers who contributed to this event, and to the donors of door prizes. Thanks also to Alan Hingston for arranging for our banquet speaker, Chris Fisher. Alan's report is on page 16, and photos from the banquet are on page 15. Congratulations to Pam Wight, who received the Edgar T. Jones Conservation Award for her work with the Edmonton and Area Land Trust, and our past president Ron Ramsey, who received the Robert Turner Volunteer Appreciation Award for his many contributions to the Edmonton Nature Club.

Thank you to the authors and photographers who submit their work for all of us to enjoy, and to volunteers Judy Johnson (copy editor) and Jack and Pauline DeHaas (mailing and distribution), who contribute their time to make sure you receive your copy of *The Parkland Naturalist*. The deadline for submissions for the next issue (May–August, 2014) is July 31, 2014.

Dawne Colwell, PN editor. Please send submissions to colwelld@shaw.ca

President's Message



Our President, Stephen Copen

And a good, good day! Are you enjoying spring that has sprung? Soon all the birds will flock back and the flowers will shoot up. Don't forget the bugs and spiders as well.

The Edmonton Nature Club, through its volunteers, provides a great variety of experiences, opportunities, and materials to its members, including the following:

- Websites – ENC and Snow Goose Chase
- *The Parkland Naturalist*
- Field trips
- Study groups
 - Birds
 - Bugs and Spiders
 - Plants
- Monthly Indoor Meetings
- Annual Banquet
- Snow Goose Chase
- Participation in stakeholder meetings with the City of Edmonton
- Assisting the Royal Mayfair Golf and Country Club in attaining Audubon Status
- Involvement in Nature Alberta activities, including the Young Naturalists Club
- Support for the Edmonton and Area Land Trust
- Awards
- Christmas Bird Count
- And so much more!

The ENC was created in 2004 by the joining of two clubs, the Edmonton Natural History Club and the Edmonton Bird Club.

Membership categories were designated as Senior (\$20/year), Student (\$20), Individual (\$30), and Family (\$30). Membership fees have not changed since 2004, although ENC expenses have increased. According to the Consumer Price Index, \$30 in 2004 is equivalent to less than \$26 today in terms of purchasing power. Mailing costs have more than tripled and continue to increase.

The previous executive took steps to reduce our expenditures rather than increase membership fees by moving the indoor meetings to King's College, holding executive meetings in the Wild-bird General Store, and the like. We are at a point where if we cut more costs, services to members will be affected.

Beginning in September 2014, we are introducing a user-pay strategy relative to *The Parkland Naturalist*. Members who want a hard copy rather than or in addition to access to the online version will be required to pay an additional \$15 yearly to cover printing and mailing. *Nature Network* will no longer be printed, as notices of all events are provided on our ENC website and emailed regularly to members. The very few members who don't provide email addresses can arrange to receive a hard copy, but in most cases will be charged for it.

Even with these cost-cutting and user-pay approaches, the club is operating in a deficit position. Donations at our indoor meetings and membership fees allow us to reduce the deficit, but there is no guarantee on the amount of donations, which cover less than 50% of the costs of our indoor programs.

Your executive has approved the following motion to be tabled for members' approval at our Annual General Meeting in September, 2014:

It is moved that existing membership categories be replaced by two categories:

1. *Student membership*
2. *Household membership*

With prices being (1) \$20 and (2) \$40.

If approved, this change will take effect September 1, 2015.

Contact any member of the executive if you wish to express an opinion or obtain more information before our Annual General Meeting at King's College on Friday, September 19, 2014. Refreshments are at 7:00 p.m., with the meeting beginning at 7:30 p.m.

I encourage all members to attend the meeting to get the full details of why these proposed changes are so necessary to keep the club afloat and to expand the services we provide.

Enjoy your summer, take a walk in the natural richness of Edmonton and its surroundings, and join other members on a field trip. Then come to the AGM in September and help the ENC continue to provide awesome experiences for its members!

Stephen Copen

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<http://www.edmontonnatureclub.org>

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Treasurer – **Cecilia Rodriguez** 761-4686

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

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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.ca

Membership

Download applications from the
ENC website or contact us at our
mailing address.

Membership Rates for 2013/14:

Adult/family: \$30.00/year
Seniors: \$20.00/year
Students: \$20.00/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

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Jaye Lee 476-3113

(all area codes: 780)

The 2013 Edmonton Nature Club Edgar T. Jones Conservation Award is Presented to Pamela Wight

At the Edmonton Nature Club Annual Banquet on Saturday, March 29, 2014, Marg Reine presented Pamela Wight with the Edgar T. Jones Award for her many contributions to the conservation of nature in the Edmonton area. The letter nominating Pamela for this award appears below.

I would like to nominate Pamela Wight for the Edmonton Nature Club's 2013 Conservation Award. This award is given to someone who has made a significant contribution to the knowledge, appreciation, or conservation of the natural history of the Edmonton region. Pam certainly falls into this category. She has worked for over six years establishing the Edmonton and Area Land Trust to conserve land in the Edmonton area.

Pam has a strong background in conservation, with a master's degree in biophysical and socio-economics, as well as certification in environmental management and planning. Pam has worked with the private sector and industry, governments, universities, and not-for-profit and community organizations, and as a tourism and parks planning consultant. She represented the City of Edmonton on the coordinating committee of the Alberta Conservation Strategy (authoring the technical strategy for this committee) and is on the board of the Land Stewardship Centre of Canada and the International Ecotourism Society.

Through her business, Pam Wight & Associates, started in 1974, Pam has consulted with aboriginal organizations, the private sector, and local, national, and international governments and non-

governmental organizations. She has worked in every global geo-region. Her clients have included the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), the International Trade Center, World Wildlife Fund, and Conservation International.

As Pam said when she became executive director of the Edmonton and Area Land Trust, "The exciting aspect of this initiative for me is that it so well matches my personal interests and background and experience, and provides an opportunity to vigorously pursue my life-long interest in conservation through practical measures to realise this, in a City which I very much care about, and in which I have been a long-time resident."

Like Edgar T. Jones, Pam has always been active in conservation-related areas, so I feel she is very deserving of our Edgar T. Jones Conservation Award.

Submitted by Marg Reine



Pamela Wight and Marg Reine
Photo by Janice Hurlburt



Photo by Gerald Romanchuk

Ron Ramsey Receives the Edmonton Nature Club 2013 Robert Turner Appreciation Award

At the Edmonton Nature Club Annual Banquet on Saturday, March 29, 2014, Marg Reine presented Ron Ramsey with the Robert Turner Volunteer Appreciation Award for his many contributions to the Edmonton Nature Club. The letter nominating Ron for this award appears below.

We would like to nominate Ron Ramsey for the Robert Turner Volunteer Appreciation Award. This award is given to someone who has made a significant volunteer contribution to the Edmonton Nature Club.

Ron has been a member of the Edmonton Nature Club for many years. After his retirement from a busy general practice in medicine he was able to become more involved with the Edmonton Nature Club and its field trips. He was interested in pursuing his birding interests and still meets with the birding morning coffee group.

Ron has participated in many areas of the club. He was the program coordinator for two years. This provided opportunities for him to become more involved with club members and the running of the club. He also looked after the flyer distribution and notified media about upcoming meetings. Ron and his wife Marlene organized the pre-meeting refreshments for many years, picking up the donated coffee and bringing treats. Ron then took on the presidency for four years and became totally immersed in club activities.

Ron approached the presidency with the same commitment and dedication demonstrated in his previous jobs. He conducted more meetings via email to cut

down on the monthly executive meetings and enlisted many volunteers into club positions.

It is people like Ron, and the many before him and the many who will follow, who have made our club what it is today and what it will be into the future –

for another hundred years of our history! In his current role as past president, Ron is helping new board members to understand our club and its past.

We want to express our appreciation for all that Ron has done for the Edmonton Nature Club and to thank Marlene for her support in enabling him to contribute so much to the club.

Submitted by Marg Reine and Ann Carter



*Ron Ramsey receives his award from Marg Reine
Photo by Janice Hurlburt*

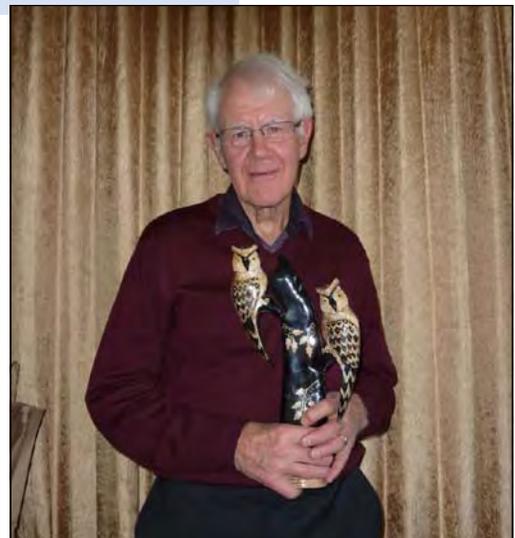


Photo by Gerald Romanchuk

Parkland Plant Notes – Weeds, Part 1

Weeds: the enemy is us!

Aagh! I suppose you could say I have a love-hate relationship with weeds. I spend most of my spring and summer killing them by the thousands, in my own garden and in the municipal and provincial natural areas in which I do stewardship duties. Why? Weeds are not wanted in my yard where I am experimenting with growing native shrubs and herbaceous plants, or in the local nature reserves where they have infiltrated natural ecosystems. In both situations the original native vegetation has been exterminated or compromised by human agency: digging and dumping, or by foot, horse, or vehicle traffic, providing the opportunity for weeds to invade and establish. At the same time the irony of what I am doing does not escape me. Why am I trying to beat nature at her own game? These weeds are growing in disturbed ground – and it is entirely *natural* that they should be growing there. Disturbance – even when it has natural causes, such as flood, fire, avalanche, rock falls, or erosion – creates natural habitat for weeds. So the more I do my murderous work, pulling or uprooting or spraying weeds, the better I make it for them, or at least for their successors.



Common Groundsel is a common annual weed of temperate climates. This one was growing on a sandy shore at Pigeon Lake, possibly an escapee of garden refuse.

rosettes of leaves to compete with the grass for their spot in the sun and soil. From that observation I gained my first inklings of ecology: that plants live in communities and have relations with their neighbours. Perhaps more importantly, I realized that they don't just sit in the ground and grow. They have strategies for survival and, above all, they are *in it for themselves!*

Agricultural weeds and ecological weeds

Weeds are typically defined in anthropocentric terms as plants that interfere with the purposes of humans. (This is not surprising, of course, since, as I say, we send mixed messages to weeds; we at once strive to exterminate them *and* create ideal

Nevertheless, though they are thieves of my time, I have a soft spot for weeds. As a city dweller since the age of seven, I have a long association with the weeds of urban or semi-urban waste places. I made my first study of plant morphology with the aid of a library book and common groundsel (*Senecio vulgaris*) as my model, a weed I pulled by the thousands from my parents' inchoate garden in a new subdivision in Liverpool, U.K. I had a sort of revelation the day when my biology teacher pointed out that lawn weeds, such as common daisy, hawkbeard, and dandelion, formed flat

conditions for their growth.) Most legislation to control weeds is geared to preventing agricultural losses from reduced crop yields or impoverished pasture. However, in recent decades what might be called ecological weeds are coming under fire, plants which invade and sometimes overwhelm native ecosystems. A well-known example is purple loosestrife (*Lythrum salicaria*); in eastern North America it has turned wetlands purple in its abundance and has stifled native wetland vegetation, with detrimental effects also on wildlife. This, though it is only an incidental component of wetlands in its native Europe. Alien grasses are perhaps the most pernicious destroyers of native grassland in North America, but aggressive aquatics such as Eurasian water milfoil and water hyacinth and a long list of shrubs and trees are also unfriendly to natural communities. Here smooth brome (*Bromus inermis*), an introduced forage grass from Asia, which doesn't even make it to the legislative lists, is a major cause of grief for those of us looking after prairie remnants. It is well suited to our climate and occurs just about everywhere that grass can grow: native grasslands, fields, roadsides, parks, the steep banks of the North Saskatchewan River. Attempts to kill it off using herbicide require constant repetition. Nisku Prairie, a municipal reserve with native grasses such as plains rough fescue and intermediate oat grass and a host of wildflowers, is a case in point. When the brome has died the bare patches it leaves become host to annual weeds such as stinkweed (*Thlaspi arvense*) and hemp-nettle (*Galeopsis tetrahit*) more than desirable natives, and they are followed by even more undesirable weeds, perennials such as creeping thistle (*Cirsium arvense*) and perennial sow-thistle (*Sonchus arvensis*), which, like smooth brome, get a stranglehold by means of underground rhizomes, and demand further herbiciding.

In North America native plants are defined as those that existed on the landscape prior to European settlement. Many weeds are aliens (that is, native to somewhere else), although by no means all: native plants can have weedy characteristics too.

Biological characteristics of weeds

Even though weeds in natural plant communities, as much as in crops, are "plants in the wrong place," I have never been happy with this definition. It is *so* anthropocentric, not least in its moral overtones. Weeds are in the right place as far as *they* are concerned. In my view, weeds are best recognized in terms of the characteristics they share. One characteristic is this preference I've already mentioned for disturbed ground as opposed to closed, consolidated, native vegetation. This contrast is readily evident again at Nisku Prairie, where in the weedy disturbed area near the gate the soil is loose and open and friable; in the prairie proper to the west you literally need a saw to saw through the dense-rooted web of native herbs and grasses.

Many weeds are good colonizers, able to spread by virtue of

good reproductive strategies, by seed or rhizomes or both. Annuals, which rely solely upon seed production and germination to propagate themselves, produce abundant seed and often have good dispersal mechanisms. If they do not, they have usually capitalized on human activities, agricultural or horticultural, to get themselves dispersed. They may have short life-cycles, producing several generations of seed in a single year. (The common groundsel of my childhood can produce three to five generations a year in mild climates.) Annual weeds occur by necessity in annual crops, where the vegetation is removed at harvest time; only in pastures, lawns, and old fields do perennial weeds have an opportunity to develop the underground food-storage organs of rhizomes and deep roots that will power new growth after the winter. The weed history of a cultivated field that was fairly recently incorporated into Wagner Natural Area is illuminative. With the field no longer under cultivation, in a matter of a few years its weeds have changed from annuals such as black bindweed (*Polygonum convolvulus*) and mustards (*Brassica* species) to perennials, creeping thistle and dandelions. (If the ground is disturbed again, some annuals will reappear, springing up from their seed bank in the soil, along with the established thistles.) Other attributes that adapt weeds to their situation have to do with self-compatibility, the ability of a plant to be fertilized by its own pollen. (One can imagine how advantageous this self-sufficiency would be to a lonely arrival on a piece of recently bared ground.) If plants require cross-pollination they are likely to use wind as a pollen distribution mechanism or to rely on generalist (i.e., common) rather than specialist insect vectors.

Perhaps some of their most important characteristics are invisible ones: physiological adaptations such as efficient photosynthesis and tolerance of adverse conditions. Many perennial weeds have additional sets of chromosomes, over and above the normal two sets (one maternal, one paternal) of sexual diploid plants. Such *polyploidy* often confers robustness and allows its owners to expand over much wider geographic ranges than their diploid counterparts. Some plants also possess another characteristic, a special type of reproductive mechanism that allows them to produce seeds without the need for fertilization. The resulting clones may have the ability to spread far and wide, sometimes into extreme environments. Dandelions (*Taraxacum* species) are a good example.

Many of our North American weeds are aliens, having been brought here deliberately (as garden ornamentals) or inadvertently (as agricultural weeds) from Eurasia by settlers whose first occupation was land disturbance. However, native species can have weedy characteristics too, especially those that are good colonizers by virtue of vegetative propagation and excellent seed production and dispersal. Canada goldenrod, fireweed, and common yarrow spring to mind as examples, and should be introduced with caution into the garden because of their ability to spread.

The good side of weeds

We do well to recognize that weeds have many good qualities, from both ecological and human points of view. Their colonizing ability enables them to occupy bare soil, reducing erosion and preparing the ground for the invasion of longer-lived, more slowly reproducing species in a process called succession. Their

decay improves the soil by providing organic matter for soil micro-organisms. Deep-rooted weeds can bring nutrients up from deeper soil layers, making them available to shallower-rooted plants. The British nature writer Richard Mabey, in his excellent book *Weeds*, calls this, more poetically, a healing of wounded landscapes. Weed flowers provide pollen and honey for insects, and when we destroy this source of food, perhaps we should be careful to replace it.

I have already mentioned the botanical learning opportunities that weeds present to urbanites (they are highly accessible for picking and study, unlike native plants which in settled areas are often confined to nature reserves). Weeds also make excellent research subjects. The lowly European thale cress (*Arabis thaliana*) gained scientific fame as the first plant to have its (small) genome fully sequenced; it is still a popular guinea-pig for molecular studies of plant traits. And, of course, weeds can be eaten. This was done much more so in the past, but even now eating weeds for personal nourishment and weed control has its advocates.

Okay, I'm ambivalent about weeds. I try to control them when they thwart my goals too much, while recognizing that this is likely an exercise in futility. At the same time I can appreciate their excellent adaptive biological properties, and the greater understanding of the natural world they afford me. But what do other people think? With our burgeoning fear of aggressive aliens, in some cases well justified, will we conduct a witch-hunt on them and impoverish ourselves in the process? I suggest we take a nuanced approach. After all, judged by our own human values weeds deserve to be lauded, not vilified: they are clever, competitive, risk-taking, productive, and fecund. In a word, successful. Sometimes, we just have to act smarter ourselves.

I will explore further fascinating facets of weeds in a future article.

Patsy Cotterill



Hemp-nettle is a common annual weed of field edges, disturbed ground, roadsides, and woodland clearings. It can germinate in large numbers and form extensive patches. These plants were growing in profusion in a burnt-over forest near Lesser Slave Lake.

Chasing Birds

The Great Egrets of Big Lake

For this issue I'm going Hollywood. Since I have no new ideas, I'm recycling some old material. The following article, from 2007, is one of the first I wrote for what was then the Nature News. I think it'll be new to quite a few of our current members. For others, I hope it brings back some memories.

The "Big News" from Big Lake during the summer of 2005 was the successful nesting of a pair of Great Egrets. While these birds have been spotted in our province with some regularity, this was the first time they've been recorded breeding in Alberta. I personally put in 106 hours over 41 days monitoring the progress of these large white birds. I also had the opportunity to observe several egret observers. The following is a diary covering the highlights from a season of egret watching.

Early June: I got a call from St. Albert's birding guru, Dave Nadeau, who told me about some Great Egret sightings. Ludo Bogaert, who frequents wetlands on the north side of Big Lake, had spotted an egret out there. Two other St. Albert birders, Dan Stoker and Percy Zalaski, followed up on Ludo's sighting and saw two egrets in the same area.

June 10: Met Dave Nadeau, Terry Thormin, and Jim Morrison on Meadowview Drive. We drove down an oil company access road, turned off on a grassy trail, and stopped where the trail dead-ended at a large wetland. Within a few minutes we saw a Great Egret fly up. The egret was carrying a stick, which it gave to a second egret. They appeared to be building a nest near the top of a clump of willow trees. We also saw a third egret in the willows. This sudden abundance of Great Egrets was both thrilling and shocking at the same time.

The willow clump where the egrets were seen also contains a colony of Black-crowned Night Herons. We thought the Night Heron colony might have attracted the egrets to the site. Several heron species nest colonially, so this sounded like a pretty good theory.

June 16: The egrets were still nest building. The birds were moving around a lot, but at one time I was sure there were four egrets in the willows at the same time. The third and fourth egrets seemed to be building a nest as well. When I called Dave to report the fourth egret, I could hear the disbelief in his voice. I think that he thought I was hallucinating. I'm still hurting over his lack of faith. I can't sleep. It's hard to eat. Well... maybe it's not that hard to eat!

Sharon Ranson, bless her heart, told me later that she thought she had seen four egrets as well. When I told Dave I had a witness, I could tell that he still had his doubts... aah, the pain!!!

Late June and early July: I left the egrets alone while they were incubating. Dave and some of the other St. Albert birders checked up on them from time to time, but were careful to keep their distance.

July 13: I could see one egret on its nest. Later in the evening two other egrets flew into the willows. Several young Black-crowned Night Herons were out of their nests and actively climbing around in the willows. There was a lot of other bird activity at the nest site. Pelicans, Cormorants, Great Blue Herons, Harriers, and Red-tailed Hawks all fly over. The calls and songs of Bitterns, Soras, Snipe, Common Yellowthroats, and Song, Swamp, Lincoln's, LeConte's, and Nelson's Sharp-tailed Sparrows all ring out from the surrounding wetlands.

July 20: Dave called and said it looked like one of the egret chicks had hatched. I asked him if he was sure! When I got out to the nest site I could see at least one and possibly two downy chicks. A screen of leaves in front of the nest makes it difficult to see clearly.

The young Black-crowned Night Herons are very active and very noisy. They constantly beg for food and when an adult comes to feed one, the young aggressively attack it. They're so obnoxious that I'm not sure I would feed them if I were their parent!

July 27: Saw three egret chicks on the nest. Too scared to call Dave.

August 1: Very windy today, but luckily it was blowing in the right direction. The leaves in front of the nest were blown away enough that I could see FOUR chicks in the nest. I called Dave to report the news. I could hear that same old doubt in his voice again.... "Are you sure?" I couldn't believe he thought I'd have trouble counting past three. I didn't even have to use a second hand! I was extremely pleased to e-mail him a photo that clearly showed four egret chicks. I didn't even gloat. Well... not a whole lot.

I also saw the adults make a shift change at the nest. The incoming bird fed the chicks while the other one flew off to forage. The third and fourth adult egrets seem to have abandoned their nest and have disappeared.

August 4: First time that I got to the nest and neither of the adults were there. They came in to feed the chicks four times between 5:30 and 9:00 p.m. When an adult came in to feed, it would regurgitate food directly into the chick's mouth.

August 6: Met Javen Green, a keen young birder from the Breton area, along with his mother and brother, on Meadowview Drive. When we got to the nest, one of the adults was feeding the chicks. It seemed a bit unfair that he got to see a feeding as soon as he got there. Most days I have to wait at least an hour! Hopefully I don't sound too bitter.

August 8: When I got to the nest, Ludo Bogaert and Albert Karvonen were there. Albert had his big video camera set up and was filming a feeding. Apparently they didn't have to wait long either!

August 10: The gate on Meadowview Drive was locked! This meant I had to suffer the hardship of a 20-minute walk to the nest site. I was concerned that I might start wasting away if I

started getting that much exercise.

Things were pretty quiet around the nest. Most of the songbirds have quit singing. I did see a Merlin chasing shorebirds around.

August 16: Sweet relief! The gate was open. I was still recovering from walking the other day.

Met Jim Morrison at the nest. We saw two feedings. Both times when an adult came in with food, the smallest chick was attacked by its siblings and pushed out of the nest. According to the books this is common behaviour for herons and egrets. The average number of young to fledge from a nest is two. So far these egrets seemed to be doing pretty well, but things didn't look good for the fourth chick.

August 21: All four chicks were still in the nest. They were very active. Lots of wing flapping, and they seemed to be trying to catch insects in their bills. The smallest chick still didn't seem to be getting any food from the adults. Some of the birders were calling this guy "the runt," but I thought that seemed a bit degrading. I called it "number four," Maybe that wasn't much better, but I really didn't like the sound of "the runt."

The adult female seems to be "testing" the chicks when she comes in to feed them. She feeds them a bit, then flies about 3 metres away. When none of the chicks left the nest and flew over to be fed, she returned and finished feeding.

August 24: Number four is still hanging in there. When one of the young (doesn't seem right to call them chicks anymore) was doing some wing flapping, it half flew/half walked to a branch 2 metres from the nest. A couple from St. Albert who read about the egrets in the local newspaper came out and saw a feeding about 5 minutes after they got there. Beginners' luck strikes again!

August 28: The gate was locked again. I must be getting into better shape – I made it to the nest in 19 minutes! Two of the young were very active. They were making short hopping flights along the top of the willows. They'd return to the nest quickly when an adult came in with food.

August 30: Quite a crowd of people at the nest tonight. At one point eight of us were there. I left early; the light was bad and the mosquitoes were worse.

September 5: Saw one of the young take an extended flight south of the willows and drop into the wetlands.

Two juvenile Northern Harriers were cruising around. They seemed to be quite playful. They took passes at each other and a perched crow, and one of them swooped down on a young egret that was perched on top of the willows.

September 7: Two of the young flew away from the nest and out of sight. When the male came to the nest with food, they both returned.

Saw a flock of American Pipits fly over.

September 12: When I got to the nest there was only one young egret there. Within a half hour the second and third young returned to the nest. When an adult came in with food,

the fourth young returned as well.

A group of Rusty Blackbirds was foraging in the wetlands and a large flock of Barn Swallows flew over.

September 19: No egrets on the nest. Shortly after I got there, one of the young flew up near the nest and an adult came in to feed it. I didn't see any of the other egrets.



September 25: Saw two of the young and the adult male fly in to the nest for a feeding.

American Tree Sparrows and Dark-eyed Juncos were moving through the willows. Flocks of Snow and White-fronted Geese flying over were some other signs of fall.

October 4: I saw one egret north of the willows. The last few days, there's been no guarantee of seeing any egrets, as they haven't been returning to the nest. Most often I would see them flying out over the wetlands.

When I decided to walk into the willows to take a closer look at the nest I flushed a Great Horned Owl. A few days later, Betty Fisher and Barb Wyatt found a pile of white feathers a little ways west of the nest site. They appeared to be egret feathers and they showed signs of Great Horned Owl predation. Unfortunately, there was no way to know if these feathers were from one of "our" egrets. I wondered if an owl took one of the other egrets that attempted to nest. Maybe that's why the second nest failed.

October 11: Very quiet today, didn't see much except two egrets flying around and a Northern Shrike near the nest.

October 15: Dave led an Edmonton Nature Club field trip around St. Albert today. He brought the group out to the nest site. We saw two egrets south of the willows.

This was the last day I went to the site. The past four months have been a ton of fun. Watching the progress of these birds and all the other bird life in the area was extremely rewarding.

There were a few more egret sightings over the next few weeks. People were starting to wonder if the egrets were going to get away before winter set in. I'm sure they were smart enough to leave before freeze-up.

The other big question was whether the egrets would return to nest again next year. There were a few scattered reports of egret sightings around Big Lake in 2006, but they didn't nest at the same site again. Apparently a pair of egrets did nest at Hastings Lake. Betty Fisher, Barb Wyatt, and Marg Reine saw an egret on a nest at the heronry on the west side of the lake. Later in the summer of 2006, birders were reporting as many as seven egrets in the Hastings Lake area. Were any of these the birds the same ones that nested at Big Lake the year before? We'll never know for sure, but it'll be very interesting to see if these graceful white birds expand their range and start to nest regularly in our area.

Gerald Romanchuk



Great Egret Photos by Gerald Romanchuk

ENC Communications

When I first joined the old Edmonton Bird Club, one of the things I always looked forward to was getting the *Nature Network* in the mail. Those orange sheets were my passport to all kinds of cool things – field trips to places where I'd never been, stimulating presentations, and special events.

Times do change, though. I still love participating in what are now Edmonton Nature Club activities. But with all the advances in technology, there are other ways to keep up to date with club events. The ENC website is a fantastic resource. The calendar function lets me see what's happening with the click of a mouse. I can also set the calendar in an "agenda" format to see a list of events similar to those shown in *Nature Network*. The list can be expanded with details and printed if I want a hard copy.

I've always been a bit of a gadget freak and love devices such as Blackberries and iPhones. Every time *Nature Network* came out, I'd manually enter all the events into the smart phone so I'd have everything at my fingertips. Now, I can easily subscribe to the ENC calendar and everything on the web is automatically put on my phone. I don't have to do a thing!

A large number of club members are receiving an electronic version of the *Nature Network*. This is great, saving paper, postage, and of course, club funds. We seem to

be approaching the day when a paper schedule such as *Nature Network* becomes unnecessary.

In the pre-Internet days, the printed schedule was our only option. However, since each issue of *Nature Network* covered several months, activities had to be planned two or more months before each issue. It wasn't always easy for the field trip coordinator to persuade potential leaders to commit to trips this far in advance. Events could be missed and errors made. In comparison, electronic methods of communication enable the ENC to set up field trips at short notice and quickly announce any necessary changes in dates or venues. Members with Internet access find it easy to locate ENC events on the web calendar and keep up to date by joining the ENC email list.

This being said, we definitely don't want to leave anybody in the dark. We'll continue to produce a printed version of *Nature Network* for as long as necessary. But if you are comfortable with a computer, we encourage you to use the online calendar. Go to edmontonnatureclub.org and click on "Calendar" in the black bar near the top of the page. You also have the option of printing your own newsletter-style list of events from the website calendar. Look for "TUTORIAL" near the top of the calendar page.

Gerald Romanchuk

Edmonton Nature Club Annual Banquet, March 29, 2014



GR

**Banquet Coordinator
Toby-Ann Reimer**



GR

**Gerry Fox, Karen Lindsay, Art Hughes,
Colleen Raymond, and Hardy Pletz**



JH

Chris Fisher



GR

Pauline DeHaas



GR

Chuck Priestly



Fran Clements and Gerald Romanchuk



JH

Ron Ramsey



GR

Alan Hingston introduces Chris Fisher

Photos by Gerald Romanchuk (GR) and Janice Huriburt (JH)



GR

Walter Harris



GR

Alf Scott, Ron Ramsey, and Hubert Taube

Edmonton Nature Club Annual Banquet, March 29, 2014

Chris Fisher: See the World through Birds

A sold-out audience heard plenty of stories from our well-travelled guest speaker, Chris Fisher, at the annual banquet held at the Faculty Club on the University of Alberta campus on March 29, 2014. Chris is well known in Edmonton, as he was a graduate in wildlife ecology from the University of Alberta and a student of Professor Jim Butler. In 1998 and 1999 he was president of the Edmonton Natural History Club before it merged with the Edmonton Bird Club in 2004 to form the present-day Edmonton Nature Club (ENC).

Chris is better known to members of the naturalist community as the author of 17 books and field guides, including the best-selling *Birds of Alberta* co-authored with John Acorn, which alone has sold tens of thousands of copies. Chris also has written, filmed, and produced television and documentary films, including *The Nature Nut*, to continue the John Acorn connection.

In the last 15 to 20 years, Chris has travelled the world as a lecturer, naturalist, and tour leader. In this capacity he has visited 164 ports of call, mainly with Holland America cruise ships, visiting 65 countries. Chris took the banquet audience on a tour of the world and its birds: from the Baltic

to Cape Horn to Antarctica and back to Alberta, via Australia. The variety of birds and settings was astounding. Along with the wonders he has seen and recorded, Chris provided insights into what he observed and understood as a result of these experiences. It was “edutainment” at its best. Chris now lives in Calgary, and I wish to thank him and his wife Selena for travelling to Edmonton to speak at our banquet.

The Faculty Club provided an enjoyable buffet meal, although the latter parts of Chris’s presentation were again spoiled by noise from revellers in the upstairs room and the lobby. Toby-Ann Reimer did a great job as MC, keeping everything and everyone on schedule. Ann Carter (and husband Jan – you had to be there) took care of the tickets and payments. Door prizes were kindly provided by the Wild-bird General Store, Wild Birds Unlimited, Gerald Romanchuk, Jordan Lange, and Strix Ecological Consulting. A particular thank you, on my part, to Wild Birds Unlimited for loaning a projector for our use. Kudos to the award winners: Pam Wight (Edgar T. Jones Conservation Award) and our past president Ron Ramsey (Robert Turner Appreciation Award). Last but not least, Pauline DeHaas again tickled my funny bone with her story of the coyote and the Mallard decoy.

Alan Hingston



Chris Fisher with friends

Edmonton Nature Club Indoor Meetings

The Galapagos Islands: A Reality

At the indoor meeting held on February 21, 2014, Ludo and Ria Bogaert described how they finally made their long-hoped-for trip to the Galapagos Islands a reality. Ludo is best known as the artist who painted several of the very popular dioramas at the Royal Alberta Museum before his retirement in the early 1990s. In his introduction, Alan Hingston was able to show through museum archive photos how painstaking and time-consuming that project had been. Amusingly, when Ludo started to speak, he showed a notice of his last talk to the Edmonton Bird Club, dated November 1971!

Following in the footsteps of Darwin, Ludo and Ria travelled in greater style and comfort as participants in an Alberta Motor Association (AMA) President's Cruise. Ludo diplomatically did not provide the cost of the trip when asked that question by a member of the audience. However, this was, as Ludo described it, "a once-in-a-lifetime experience."

Their trip started in Quito, where Ludo and Ria were shown straddling the equator with a foot in each hemisphere. Then they boarded the ship to visit several of the fabled islands, with a number of Frigatebirds following the ship's wake. Ludo showed numerous photos of species endemic to the Galapagos, notably the Galapagos Hawk. Marine Iguanas and Galapagos Sea-lions were common on the beaches, and the mother and young pups made for a particularly appealing portrait. I knew there were penguins on the Galapagos Islands, but it still came as something of a surprise to see them bobbing around in warm water on the equator. Ludo demonstrated the courtship of the Blue-footed Booby, during which the pair perform a high-stepping 'look-at-my-awesome-feet' dance. The bright blue feet of these silly-looking seabirds were captured in Ludo's photos, although the hole in the webbed foot of one of the boobies had me wondering how that might have occurred.

Sprinkled among the endemics were a surprising number of bird species familiar to us in Alberta or on the west coast. Shorebirds such as Oyster Catcher, Whimbrel, and Ruddy Turnstone call at these islands on their migration. The most surprising photo for me was of a pair of Yellow Warblers. I'm used to seeing them in shrubby vegetation, whereas on the Galapagos the backdrop was black lava on a beach.

Thank you, Ludo and Ria, for sharing your photos and tales of the many interesting sights to be seen on the Galapagos Islands.

Alan Hingston



Galapagos Crab



Galapagos Sea Lion with pup

Photos by Ludo Bogaert

Edmonton Nature Club Indoor Meetings

The Peace-Athabasca Delta

Dr. Kevin Timoney's presentation on January 17, 2014, highlighted the interconnectivity of physical and biological systems in the Peace-Athabasca Delta. The delta covers an area of approximately 5,600 square kilometres of rich wildlife habitat in the northeast corner of Alberta; 80% of the delta is within Wood Buffalo National Park.

Dr. Timoney divided the Peace-Athabasca Delta into three geographic areas:

1. Open-drainage lake areas of Lake Athabasca, Lake Claire, Mamawi Lake, and Richardson Lake
2. Peace Delta
3. Athabasca Delta

Connectivity is Key

The large open drainage lakes are always connected to active river channels and occupy the lowest elevations of a shallow bowl. Both deltas, the Peace to the north and the Athabasca to the south, are composed of active and relict areas. The discharge of the Peace River is about four times that of the Athabasca; however, the Athabasca Delta is the more active of the two. The Peace Delta is essentially inactive because the river bypasses the delta at most times of the year and, instead, contributes its sediment load to the delta on Great Slave Lake. Water from the Peace River flows south into the Peace-Athabasca Delta only at times of peak flow on the Peace River or well-below-average levels of Lake Athabasca. In consequence, the present Peace Delta is a mosaic of mudflats and marshes that flood periodically, semi-active basins, and closed drainage basins that rarely receive water. In contrast, the Athabasca River deposits its sediment at delta fronts on Lake Athabasca and Mamawi Lake. Sands and coarse silts are deposited at the mouth, while finer silts are carried out into the lake or continue to flow to the Slave River. The northern end of the Athabasca Delta has grown by 2 kilometres between 1992 and 2011.

Changes in Water Level

The Peace-Athabasca Delta is of low elevation, typically 209 to 220 metres above sea level. Given the flatness of the terrain, changes of 20 to 60 centimetres in lake or river water level can cause major changes in flow direction and volume. Channels can back-flood or reverse flow direction depending on the relative water levels of the contributing rivers and intermediary lakes. In the case of the Peace-Athabasca Delta, the fluctuations of the water regime are particularly complex. For example, the water contributions of two major rivers can cause the effects of flow variation to be dampened when the river flows are opposite in effect, but accentuated when the

flooding of the two catchments occurs simultaneously. Local natural effects such as ice jams, seiches (raised levels caused by strong winds), and beaver activity can change the water regime over large areas. Dr. Timoney described how humans also had affected the water flow in the delta through engineered measures such as damming the Peace River at the Bennett Dam in British Columbia, constructing weirs, and excavating a cut-off which prevented the capture of the mainstream Athabasca River by another river.

The changes in seasonal water levels are the life-blood of the delta. The ebb and flow of the water brings about nutrient cycling, habitat and landscape diversity, and the variety of flora and fauna. Of the approximately 5,600 square kilometres of delta, about half are covered by water consisting of a mosaic of lakes, ponds, marshes, wet-meadows, and shrubby wetlands. Higher ground is typically forested or dry grasslands, while peatlands occur in bedrock depressions or ancient delta lands that no longer flood. The delta's lakes are generally shallow, nutrient-rich, basic, and alkaline, containing high concentrations of major ions. As a consequence the flora is typical of prairie sloughs and wetlands rather than the peatlands characteristic of the boreal forest.

The Past is the Key to the Present

Dr. Timoney described the history of the delta since the last glacial period 9300 BP. Since the retreat of the ice, isostatic rebound, the rising of the earth's crust in response to the removal of the weight of ice, has played an important role in creating the shallow basin and the location and extent of the two principal deltas.

Analysis of sediment cores and tree rings provides evidence of historical flooding and vegetation growth. Studies of these flood bed sediments indicate an average flood frequency of one flood every 16 years. In medieval times (around 1250) the area was prone to flooding due to ice jams. Similarly, ice jam floods were more frequent during the 20th century than at most other times in the last millennium.

In recent years it appears that evapo-transpiration has increased and recent climate-driven declines in water level may persist as both snowpack and glacier contributions in the Peace and Athabasca headwaters continue to decline. At Fort Chipewyan the local annual temperature has increased by 0.3 °C, while annual snowfalls have declined 12–16 cm per decade since the early 1960s. We can anticipate that a drying climate will be associated with an increased risk of fire activity.

Effect on Wildlife

Dr. Timoney cautioned that “a drying delta does not necessarily mean a dying delta.” The trend towards drier plant communities may have begun as early as 1930 and continues to the present. The annual harvest of muskrats has declined significantly over the last 50 years. It is anticipated that the annual harvest numbers would be an indicator of abundance and that muskrat abundance would generally follow high water and growth of marsh vegetation. Similarly, numbers of waterfowl have declined for most species from the 1950s to the 1970s, although the trend in the delta is consistent with regional trends outside the delta. He noted that what may be bad for one species could be good for another, “that if conditions do not favour muskrats, perhaps they may be beneficial for wood bison.” The numbers of bison in 2007 were about three times the estimated population in 1920.

Human Activity

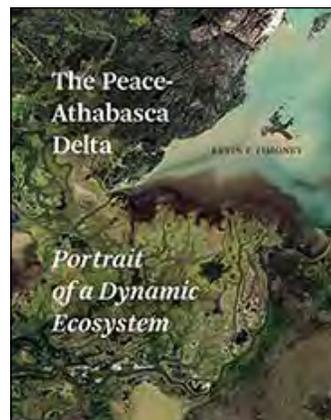
Dr. Timoney demonstrated that the drying of the Peace-Athabasca Delta was not due to the Bennett Dam, which was constructed on the Peace River just over the B.C. border in the early 1960s and filled between 1968 and 1971. Although subsequent changes in water levels, vegetation, and wildlife were attributed to dam construction, the period during which the reservoir was filled coincided with a dry period and the “dynamic delta,” with hydrology changing in response to climate, was only just starting to be understood. Dr. Timoney, however, was critical of certain other engineering measures, notably the excavation of a cut-off through a meander on the Athabasca River main stream in 1972 to prevent the flow being captured by the Embarras River. This had the consequence of preventing the possible formation of a dynamic new delta accompanied by the hydrologic and geomorphic processes that lead to biologically productive habitats.

In his closing remarks, Dr. Timoney drew attention to the large-scale industrial activity upstream in the Fort McMurray area in the vicinity of the Athabasca River. Effects are anticipated on air, water quantity and quality, wildlife, landscape and habitat, and human health. Although these effects are attenuated with distance from the delta, they carry high future risks for the complex ecosystem that is the Peace-Athabasca Delta.

Alan Hingston



Described by Patsy Cotterill as his “magnum opus” and by Lu Carbyn as a “tour de force,” Dr. Kevin Timoney’s book The Peace-Athabasca Delta: Portrait of a Dynamic Ecosystem is a comprehensive, scientific, and well-illustrated portrait of the Peace-Athabasca Delta. Published by the University of Alberta Press in 2013, it is available through the Wildbird General Store and the University of Alberta Bookstore.



Edmonton Nature Club Indoor Meetings

New Insights into Edmonton Butterflies, and the Role of the Naturalist



What could be better than thinking about butterflies on the first day of spring, and who better to talk to the ENC on that topic than John Acorn?

The final ENC indoor meeting of the 2013/2014 season took place on Friday, March 21. Colleen Raymond, Coordinator of the Bug and Spider Study Group, began the session by briefly outlining why butterflies are important to naturalists:

- They are indicators of healthy environments and ecosystems and are used by ecologists to study the impacts of climate change and habitat loss and fragmentation.
- They pollinate flowers and plants and are a food source for birds and other animals.
- They are beautiful to look at, challenging to photograph, and exciting to capture and release.
- Butterflies are fun to identify, count, and report on.

After those comments, Colleen introduced John Acorn, who is well known to the ENC. John has been a butterfly enthusiast since he started his own butterfly collection at the age of five. (We later learned that this involved having his mother iron the butterflies between sheets of waxed paper.) John wrote the first published field guide on Alberta butterflies, *Butterflies of Alberta*, published by Lone Pine in 1995 and still in print. John is a core member of the Alberta Lepidopterists' Guild, a group that encourages and supports the appreciation and study of butterflies and moths. Colleen noted that John was recently awarded the 2013 Entomological Foundation Medal of Honor in recognition of his outstanding contributions. This well-deserved award received a warm round of applause from the large audience in attendance.

Using family photos, video, and digital images, John traced the development of his own interests and described how technology has changed entomology in recent years. He noted the evolution from collecting, to butterfly watching with close-focus binoculars, to photography with digital cameras. In John's opinion, the biggest advance has been digital photography, which allows amateur entomologists to record their sightings and have them identified on sites such as eButterfly by experts such as himself. For those interested in using nets to capture species for observation, John showed how to correctly hold a butterfly with the front edges of the wing pinched between thumb and index finger; this does not damage the butterfly, as the scales are more resistant at the leading edge of the wing.

Fourth of July Butterfly Counts were initiated in the United States and subsequently adopted in Canada, appropriately, as Canada Day Counts (July 1st). John compared them to Christmas Bird Counts, noting that the numbers of butterflies were much more variable. After asking, "Is this data useful?" he showed a graph of European Skippers, which were present in high numbers in some years and absent in many others. They have a short flight season and had not "disappeared"; they just were not flying on the day of the count. In brief, this type of data depends on the weather and what butterflies are on the wing during a single day.

John then described how he has started doing "Pollard Walks," fixed-route walks (transects) done on a regular (weekly) basis under reasonable weather conditions. Transects are typically 2–4 kilometres long, take between 45 minutes and 2 hours, and are divided into sections corresponding to different habitats. Regular surveys of fixed routes under standard conditions enable researchers to compare species and their numbers from year to year.

John has been doing Pollard Walks in MacKinnon Ravine since 1999 and plotting the data on graphs, which he used to explain some of his findings:

- Silvery Blues are a common species. His data showed when they emerged, how numbers reached a peak and declined, and the number of individuals. The results varied substantially in different years, but with over 10 years of data, John could account for the differences.
- Bronzed Coppers have disappeared from his Pollard Walk route because the area no longer meets their habitat needs, having changed from marsh to willow succession.
- Common Alpines and Arctic Skippers also have declined and disappeared, as their habitat has become too dry. The Common Alpines came back in 2012 when moisture conditions improved, but John noted that the return of butterflies may take several years.
- In 2012, a great year for butterflies, John recorded 36 species (the previous high was 26) and 1,860 individuals (the previous high was 686). He noted there were three big peaks for species: first Silvery Blues, then European Skippers, and finally, Cabbage Whites.

Since 1967 John had seen only one Monarch butterfly in Alberta until 2012, when winds from the southeast brought huge numbers, the likes of which local entomologists had not seen before. Last year was not a great year for butterflies, as there were no migrants. John asked the question, “What sort of year will 2014 be?” He will get his answer from continuing to undertake his Pollard Walk surveys.

John strongly encouraged local naturalists to report their sightings on eButterfly and showed how easy it is to do so. In thanking John, Colleen recounted how she had taken part in the Butterfly Big Year contest sponsored by the Alberta Lepidopterists’ Guild in 2013 and found the experience to be motivating, educational, and fun. She reported 41 species, taking second place in the contest, and proudly showed the audience her prize – a life-cycle print of a Mexican Bluewing butterfly.

Alan Hingston

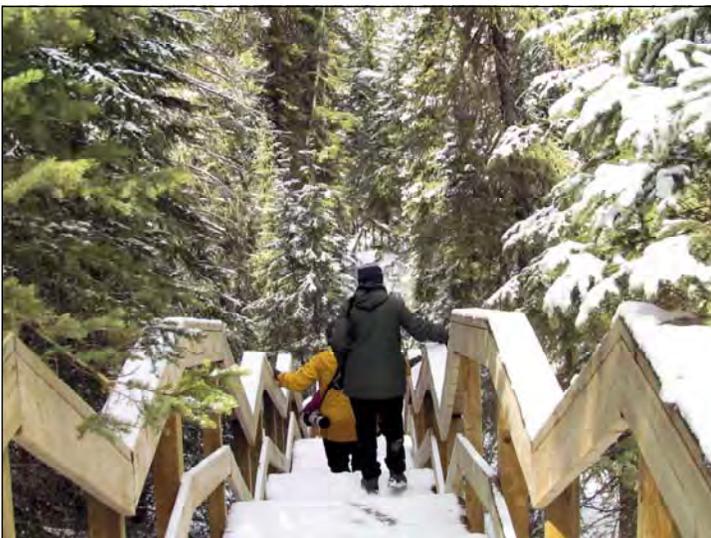


Monarch Butterfly, Photo by Janice Hurlburt

Field Trip Reports



Rough-legged Hawk, Photo by Dawne Colwell



*Skunk Hollow at William J. Bagnall Recreation Area
Photo by Ann Carter*

Foothills Area, April 12, 2014

Fourteen of us set off in light snow to bird the region west of Highway 22 south of Cremona. The snow persisted until late morning and then things cleared off for a beautiful sunny day. Most lakes and sloughs were frozen over when we passed them on our way south, but many had opened up, at least partially, by our return journey, and waterfowl and gulls were more evident as a result. The foothill forests were at their best with a dusting of new snow, even though the roads were turning soggy by late afternoon.

We started birding seriously after Olds, finding our first Mountain Bluebirds, Red-tailed Hawks, and ducks to the south of Highway 27, and then Bald Eagle and Rough-legged Hawks on Highway 22. At Cremona, we picked up flocks of north-bound American Robins and Tree Sparrows when we stopped for gas. From 22 we headed west through Bottrell, south on Horse Creek Road, and then west and north on Grand Valley Road, completing a circuit back via Perrenoud Natural Area, William J Bagnall Recreation Area, Water Valley, and Winchell Lake to Highway 22 and home.

We saw the following 33 species during the day, including some vestiges of winter birds and many new arrivals.

- | | |
|-------------------|------------------------------|
| Tundra Swan | Hairy Woodpecker |
| Canada Goose | Northern Flicker |
| Mallard | Northern Shrike |
| Northern Pintail | Black-billed Magpie |
| American Wigeon | American Crow |
| Green-winged Teal | Common Raven |
| Ring-necked Duck | Black-capped Chickadee |
| Common Goldeneye | Mountain Chickadee |
| Bufflehead | Golden-crowned Kinglet |
| Bald Eagle | Mountain Bluebird |
| Red-tailed Hawk | American Robin |
| Rough-legged Hawk | European Starling |
| Ring-billed Gull | American Tree Sparrow |
| California Gull | Dark-eyed (Oregon) Junco |
| Herring Gull | Dark-eyed (Slate Gray) Junco |
| Rock Dove | Bohemian Waxwing |
| Downy Woodpecker | |

Martin Sharp

Field Trip Reports

Hawrelak Park, April 6, 2014

Fourteen of us walked from Picnic Shelter 1 past the feeders and part-way to Keillor Road. The weather was pleasant – initially cloudy but clear later. The trails were a mixture of ice, slush, and mud (in places).

Although we mainly got the regulars, Gerald caught the call of a Townsend's Solitaire. We got quite good looks at it as it perched on different branches of dead trees. One of us saw a Common Merganser flying down river.

A Merlin was flying near a couple of Ravens on the way back. On the river there was limited open water, but we picked out Common Goldeneye and Mallard. We also had nice looks at a female Pileated Woodpecker working its way at ground level along several trees.

We saw the following 19 species:

Canada Goose	American Crow
Mallard	Common Raven
Common Goldeneye	Black-capped Chickadee
Merlin	Red-breasted Nuthatch
Ring-billed Gull	White-breasted Nuthatch
Rock Pigeon	Townsend's Solitaire
Downy Woodpecker	Bohemian Waxwing
Pileated Woodpecker	Dark-eyed Junco
Blue Jay	House Finch
Black-billed Magpie	

Brian Stephens



Whitemud Ravine Walk, March 22, 2014

Twenty-one of us did the walk from Fox Farm to Snow Valley. The morning started off quite cool, but warmed up as the walk went on. We did not find any owls, but had a moment of excitement when Shirley Coulson was attacked by a bloodthirsty chickadee.

We saw the following 15 species. Thanks to Brian Stephens for keeping track.

Downy Woodpecker	Red-breasted Nuthatch
Pileated Woodpecker	White-breasted Nuthatch
Northern Flicker	Brown Creeper
Blue Jay	Townsend's Solitaire
Black-billed Magpie	Bohemian Waxwing
American Crow	Dark-eyed Junco
Common Raven	Pine Siskin
Black-capped Chickadee	

Don Delaney

Medicine Hat Sage Grouse Field Trip, March 14–16, 2014

Participants on this southeastern Alberta trip were based in Medicine Hat, setting out early each morning in search of the prairie icon Sage Grouse. Eleven club members started Saturday morning in the dark with foggy conditions as we set out down the Black and White road headed for Manyberries. (By the way, we can't find out why that road is called that and would be interested if anyone knows.)

The trip was advertised as a four-wheel-drive-only outing, and thinking about it earlier in the week I was confident this would not matter, given recent warm and dry weather. I was almost immediately proven wrong as we drove out on a trail leading into a sagebrushy coulee bottom. There actually was still some snow around, including the ruts in the road, lots of melt going on, running water in several areas, and those awesome wet clingy prairie soils. I guess my perfect record is intact, never having been to a Sage Grouse territory without serious logistical problems getting into and out of their habitat. In this case we had made it through the mud-bog entrance, through various snow and ice patches and some smaller snow drifts which lulled me into overconfidence. I gunned it through the next snow patch, getting a literal sinking feeling as my Explorer kept getting lower and slower until the eventual complete bog-down and drop into deep snow. This was despite 4-wheel drive and snow tires. Gerald tells me it is better to get stuck at the beginning of a snow patch, as you can dig yourself out and back out without high centring, whereas I used the mud strategy of gunning it in hopes of getting through the patch. Anyhow thanks to Karen's excellent shovel (way better than mine) and determined work involving two tow ropes, Gerry's Explorer, Randy and John shovelling like crazy, and the rest of the group pushing really hard we managed to carry on a bit further, this time sensibly stopping before the next patch of trouble. After a short walk James spotted a dark lump which proved to be a lone male Sage Grouse. He was hard to spot and unless you knew where to look he was very easy to miss. Within only a few minutes he flew to the right when several of us happened to look away and he completely disappeared. By the way, there is always another ridge in sight in Sage Grouse country and I'm pretty sure the birds are always just over the ridge that you turn back from without crossing.

As it turned out, that was the only Sage Grouse we could locate during the entire trip, which is consistent with several recent strike-out weekends I have experienced the last several years. They are very hard to find, with current numbers in Alberta thought to be in the 60–75 range. One can't help hoping that recent measures the government was forced to undertake after a court case will result in a better breeding success this year and forward.

Saturday afternoon was marked by mud-bogging the "crazy road network" northeast of Manyberries to get ourselves back over to the Cypress Hills, with special credit to Karen's sideways hill technique with excellent recovery versus Hendrik's slalom approach that worked equally well. The day was capped with an awesome moonset and the next morning started with a great moonrise. Several trip members remarked how wonderful and beautiful these prairies are, and I totally agree. The rest of our time was spent counting a ginormous number of Rough-legged Hawks, the always present Golden Eagles, Anne's bazillion Great-horned Owls, a few of the prairie regulars such as Horned Larks and Sharp-tailed Grouse, and the start of many water-fowl returning.

Final note: Gerald remarked that our vehicles started out white, white, blue, gold, and green, but as we drive back all are a nice matching shade of tan. Also, by the way, the Calgary East bypass Stoney Trail is now open!

Steve Knight

Those muddy spots in the road were pretty “interesting.” We stopped near Manyberries so the squeegee crew could clean the windows.



The group scans the prairies.



On some trips, it’s been easy to talk a group into stopping for a coffee, or maybe an ice cream. This bunch wanted to go to a saloon! The Southern Ranchman’s Inn in Manyberries has an awesome western flavour. And great burgers. And cold beer!



On Sunday I found some grouse tracks and droppings in the snow. The snow was so crusty that I was able to scoop out a footprint that had a dropping in it.

Steve Knight and Hendrik Kruger closely inspected the dropping.



But they wouldn’t make the critical test – tasting to see if it tasted like sage! The one thing we forgot to do was smell it. I talked to a friend who is experienced with Sage Grouse, and he said the droppings do have a definite scent of sage. He looked at the picture and thinks it is likely from a Sage Grouse.

The only bird shots I took all weekend were some swans:



Thanks to everyone for a great time!

Gerald Romanchuk

Photos by Gerald Romanchuk

See Gerry Fox’s report on the next page.

Medicine Hat Sage Grouse Field Trip, March 14–16, 2014

The following anecdote is in response to Steve's request to provide some memorable events from the ENC's recent southern Alberta birding excursion. Several of our vehicles and members were able to get an earlier start than the rest on Friday morning and planned to check out various locations for early spring migrants. We were also on the lookout for Eurasian Collared-Doves, as they can be difficult to find in the Edmonton area.

We were not having much success with that when we decided to turn into the hamlet of Enchant for a pit stop. Public washrooms were scarce; however, the local hotel pub was open. While we were waiting for members to straggle back out, one of our group spotted a dove flying across the main street. We all quickly abandoned our vehicles with doors ajar and jumped out. As we were walking down the centre of the streets we could see several residents looking out their windows, no doubt wondering what this ragamuffin group was up to, peering through binoculars and wildly gesticulating as we strolled along. We kept hearing doves cooing but could not spot them in the tress which lined the streets.

That's when we noticed John, who was across the street, doubled up with laughter. He pointed at a young boy, about 7 years old, on a bicycle, who was following us and making cooing sounds as he moved along. John gave the tyke a big "two thumbs up" and he pedaled away with a huge smile on his face. That solved the mystery as to where the cooing was coming from. Shortly thereafter we did locate several doves, so our quest was a success.

While jotting this down I was tempted to change the word "straggle" to "stagger" to spice up the story but felt that would be using too much poetic licence.

Gerry Fox



Hermitage Park, March 9, 2014

It was a lovely warm day for a walk in a park. Thirty-six of us assembled at Hermitage Park to see what we could find there. We had a very close fly-past by a Bald Eagle and saw fishing robins, a nicely perching Merlin, a Townsend's Solitaire, and a Common Merganser with Mallards and Common Goldeneye on the river.

Brian Stephens kept track of our list of 14 species.

Mallard	Pileated Woodpecker
Common Goldeneye	Blue Jay
Common Merganser	Black-billed Magpie
Bald Eagle	Common Raven
Merlin	Black-capped Chickadee
Rock Pigeon	Townsend's Solitaire
Downy Woodpecker	American Robin

Don Delaney

Owl Prowl and Opal, February 15, 2014

Lead by Alan Hingston and Peter Demulder, we were fortunate enough to see two Snowy Owls northwest of St. Albert. There were 25 people in 9 vehicles, which was a reasonably-sized group for travelling the country roads. One of the Snowies was willing to let our motley crew creep fairly close before flying off to the middle of a field. It was a thrill to see one that had very few markings on it (presumably an adult male).

Thanks, Alan and Peter, for leading us to this beautiful bird.

Five of the vehicles from the morning's Snowy Owl Prowl continued on from Morinville to the Opal area. We saw a Rough-legged Hawk along the Lily Lake Road before reaching the Half Moon Lake community. We popped in to see if any feeders were active and found a nice group of Evening Grosbeaks. We meandered up and down the Range Roads north of Township Road 590 looking for owls. No luck. But we found Boreal Chickadee, Ruffed Grouse, and eventually a Gray Jay, among others. With no owls evident we headed south past Highway 28 to a spot that had a Northern Hawk Owl in the past (West of Opal Road on Township Road 572): it was there, perched in the distance. It hunted once, devouring a mouse or vole, and shortly after, hunted again. This time it appeared to take its prey elsewhere, possibly to cache. From there we headed home.

Janice Hurlburt



Photos by Janice Hurlburt

We saw the following 13 species in the Opal area.

Ruffed Grouse	Black-billed Magpie
Rough-legged Hawk	Common Raven
Rock Pigeon	Black-capped Chickadee
Northern Hawk Owl	Boreal Chickadee
Downy Woodpecker	Red-breasted Nuthatch
Gray Jay	Evening Grosbeak
Blue Jay	

Brian Stephens

Fort Edmonton Loop, February 9, 2014

It was cold out there, no doubt about it, but five of us braved the conditions. We decided to walk the back half of the Fort Edmonton loop, walk to the Fort Edmonton footbridge, and then double-back on the trail we walked in on. While we were at the footbridge deciding whether or not to cross, we had a nice long look at a **Prairie Falcon** flying north to south. If it hadn't been for that moment of indecision we might have missed it. That was definitely the highlight. We then crossed over to the north side of the river, walking to the foot of the Wolf Willow stairs. The sun came out and it was a wonderful return trek. Apart from the Prairie Falcon, it was business as usual, with the most numerous species by far being the Black-capped Chickadee. Last year we had Pine Grosbeak and Common Redpolls along this trail but they were sadly lacking, as expected.

We saw the following 8 species:

- | | |
|---------------------|-------------------------|
| Prairie Falcon | Common Raven |
| Downy Woodpecker | Black-capped Chickadee |
| Blue Jay | Red-breasted Nuthatch |
| Black-billed Magpie | White-breasted Nuthatch |

Janice Hurlburt



White-breasted Nuthatch
Photo by Janice Hurlburt



Mallard, Photo by Dawne Colwell

Oleskiw River Valley, February 1, 2014

Six of us set out on this chilly morning. The weather was sunny, with a temperature of -14 °C.

Turning left into the large meadow we walked into the riparian poplar forest and followed the trail through the length of this strip of forest along the river. We saw an abundance of snowshoe hare, mouse, vole, squirrel, coyote, and deer tracks in the snow. In some areas there were many bird tracks. There were fruits still on the highbush cranberry bushes and some animals were using them as a source of food. We also saw evidence of beaver and porcupine. After the forest we came to a wide trail leading to the river and saw flagged trees at the location where we believe the City of Edmonton will build the new Terwillegar footbridge. Returning along the edge of the meadow we noticed American Robins on some compost piles, looking healthy and well fed! Further along the trail we met someone photographing four coyotes "hanging out" at the foot of the old poplar trees in the middle of the meadow. While walking along the edge of the escarpment we saw a remote camera set up for a university student's study of coyotes.

We are continually perplexed as to the reasoning behind the city's plan to cut a trail through this strip of beautiful old riparian poplar forest when it could go through the meadow to avoid the needless destruction of this important wildlife habitat.

We counted 9 species:

- | | |
|---------------------|-------------------------|
| Downy Woodpecker | Black-capped Chickadee |
| Pileated Woodpecker | White-breasted Nuthatch |
| Northern Flicker | American Robin |
| Black-billed Magpie | Bohemian Waxwing |
| Common Raven | |

Shirley Coulson

Mill Creek, January 18, 2014

At 9:00 a.m. a couple of us arrived at Mill Creek to check out the state of the trails. Fortunately, although it was below freezing, the trail surfaces were not as icy as we had feared. At the roadside we spotted American Robins, House Finch, and House Sparrow, along with Magpies, Blue Jays, and Dark-eyed Juncos.

Nine of us headed into the south branch, picking up more Black-capped Chickadees and nuthatches, and a Downy Woodpecker. An irritated chickadee soon guided us to a Northern Saw-Whet Owl. Just after a male Mallard was spotted on the creek, we saw a single Bohemian Waxwing – pretty odd to find just one by itself.

We explored further north toward the river without seeing any new birds and returned around 11:30 p.m., having seen the following 14 species:

- | | |
|------------------------|-------------------------|
| Mallard | Red-breasted Nuthatch |
| Rock Pigeon | White-breasted Nuthatch |
| Northern Saw-whet Owl | American Robin |
| Downy Woodpecker | Bohemian Waxwing |
| Blue Jay | Dark-eyed Junco |
| Black-billed Magpie | House Finch |
| Black-capped Chickadee | House Sparrow |

Brian Stephens

Goin' to Burstall!

Where is Burstall, you might ask, and why would anyone go there? Burstall is in southwest Saskatchewan, and it was one of the best options other than Leader or Sefton (all towns of about 300 people or fewer) as a base for our visit to the Great Sandhills Ecological Reserve. The reserve covers about 1,900 square kilometres and contains active sand dunes some 15 to 18 metres high. Visitors can climb on the dunes and even slide down them. Local shops will sell you a crazy carpet! The plant life is interesting, and the prairie birds are ever present.

We spent a day and half exploring the dunes, which are about a half-hour drive from Burstall. The weather was reasonably nice but windy. You had to be careful with your camera, as sand was blowing everywhere. We climbed on the dunes and also hiked along the birding trail between them. The dunes are always moving, creating an ever-changing landscape. On the wind-swept edges you can see where the sand is covering up old growth, and on the non-windy sides new growth is taking hold.

Some of the prairie sand-dune flora was in bloom, including a lot of leguminous plants: Locoweed, Vetches, Golden Bean, and Sweetclovers. The Sagebrush was very common, as were Pasture Sage and Prairie Sage in various forms of bud or flower. Sand Dock was the most colourful plant, after these legumes, with its bright red pods and leaves. Another legume, Psoralea, a scruffy-looking plant with tiny flowers, is often found on the dune edges trying to hold on to the sand and grow. When they are dry and blowing around, Psoralea and Pasture Sage are commonly known as Tumbleweed.

Among the shrubs and other plants we found some Prickly Cacti, but they were pretty small. The shrubs were mostly Silverberry and Juniper and shrubby Saskatoons and Chokecherries. It was early in the season, and I am sure that by mid-summer it would be interesting to see what other plants were in bloom. Most of the trees were Cottonwoods, and they were few and far between.

The area around Great Sandhills is prairie habitat with open fields, windrows, and lots of potholes full of water. This was great, as many of the wetlands

had birds in them. Now I know where all the Pintails and Redheads hang out, along with Blue-winged Teals! There were a number of other ducks, but not many of any individual species except the aforementioned three. Shorebirds included Avocets, Killdeers, and Wilson's Phalaropes.

Swainson's Hawks were often soaring overhead, as well as the occasional Ferruginous Hawk. While driving by the farms and potholes we saw Marbled Godwits, Long-billed Curlews, Upland Sandpipers, Savannah and Vesper Sparrows, Chestnut-collared Longspurs, Horned Larks, and some Lark Buntings and Lark Sparrows, along with a plethora of Western Meadowlarks and Western Kingbirds. All in all, we saw about 90 species of birds over the three-day trip. We probably missed some, as only one of us is a birder! Apparently Leader, Saskatchewan, has a birding festival with a birding route in this area as well as along the South Saskatchewan River near Estuary. Before we left I inquired about a bird list or route map, but the town office and people in charge were AWOL.

There were many signs of Badger and Fox dens. We thought some of the abandoned ones might contain Burrowing Owls, but didn't find any during return trips to the most likely locations.

The area was also good for mammal sightings. We saw Red Fox, White-tailed Deer, Moose, and at least six and as many as nine Pronghorn Antelope a day, as well as Coyotes and ground squirrels.

After a busy day we checked ourselves for ticks, which seemed to be plentiful, and then enjoyed a relaxing barbeque while listening to the Meadowlarks (who never seemed to stop singing), the Mourning Doves, and the Nighthawks. It was an interesting area to visit – goin' to Burstall provided us with many pleasant surprises.

Marg Reine



Cottontail rabbits, photo by Hil Reine



Burstall Hotel



Pronghorn Antelope



Sand Dune



Wildflowers
Sand Dock (left)
Golden Bean (right)

Photos by Marg Reine

Members' Photos



*Wood Duck and Mallards
Photos by Janice Hurlburt*



Wood Duck at Gold Bar Park, Photo by Janice Hurlburt