

THE PARKLAND NATURALIST



SEPTEMBER-DECEMBER 2014

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EDMONTON NATURE CLUB

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Lincoln's Sparrow



Clay-colored Sparrow



Sharp-shinned Hawk



Tennessee Warbler



Red Crossbill (male)

All of the photos were taken by Janice Hurlburt in her back yard. Two more photos are on the back cover.

The Accidental Birder

Here is how I fell into birding 7 years ago. It was a confluence of two main events.

First, we moved to a new house near the river valley, with large windows looking out on a back yard full of a variety of mature trees – providers of cones, seeds, insects, and fruit.

Second, after the move I developed a dizziness condition. So I was essentially housebound for 10 months and had moved from a 5-species yard to a 45-species yard. How could I not take notice?

Here are some of the things our yard has taught me:

Irruptions: The first summer, our yard was full of Pine Siskins (one day there were 80 of them) and I thought this is what we could expect each summer. Wrong. Since then they have been only occasional visitors. One winter it was Redpolls (60 daily, and near the end of the season, 120). We had a small flock of Red Crossbills hang out for a couple of weeks one summer, an event so far never repeated.

Surprise Visitors: Sitting in the right place and looking out the window at the right time, I have spotted a Northern Shrike and a Townsend's Solitaire, both for just a fleeting moment. I also spied a couple of rubies – a Ruby-crowned Kinglet and a Ruby-throated Hummingbird.

Intentional Birding: As I began to learn more (through short courses and walks with ENC), I started to take a closer look. What I had assumed were all House and Chipping Sparrows

turned out to include Lincoln's, Clay-colored, White-throated, White-crowned, and American Tree Sparrows. This past August I was on the lookout for warblers on the move and saw Tennessee and Yellow Warblers.

Raptor Attractors: And of course, all of this bird activity is bound to bring in the occasional raptor. The Redpolls drew the attention of a Sharp-shinned Hawk and the waxwings brought in the occasional Merlin.

Treats: We were fortunate to have American Goldfinch overwintering in our yard last year, adding a touch of variety to the regulars. And after having sat empty for a number of years, our Alberta Grain Elevator birdhouse was home to a pair of nesting House Wrens this past summer.

Ongoing Joy: But I'd have to say that my favourite birds are the large woodpeckers – the Northern Flickers with their spots, barring, and flashes of yellow, and the Pileated Woodpeckers with their pterodactyl look. Though they visit regularly, it's a thrill every time.

So far I've managed to get photos of 44 species of the birds that have come into our yard (to see them go to http://www.pbase.com/janice_hurlburt/backyard_project_birds&page=all).

I wonder what number 45 is going to be? I'll just have to keep watching.

Janice Hurlburt



Boreal Chickadee



Northern Flicker (male)

On the cover
Pileated Woodpecker, Photo by Janice Hurlburt

President's Report, Fall 2014

Welcome, new and returning members! You can expect many things to remain the same and some things to change in the upcoming months as we stretch to meet club needs and objectives.

Over the past year 500 ENC members have enjoyed an abundance of offerings thanks to our dedicated volunteers. Janice Hurlburt and a team of leaders offered 42! nature walks and field trips. The always popular presentations at King's University College showcased a wide variety of topics. Those evenings are organized by Alan Hingston, our program director, while Gerry Fox provides the refreshments. Dawne Colwell put together *The Parkland Naturalist* magazine, filled with enlightening articles and beautiful photographs. Colleen Raymond, Karen Lindsay, and Patsy Cotterill hosted a combined total of 13 engaging study group sessions. The website is visited about 3,000 times every month. Many chose to purchase or renew their membership online; this is quick and cost effective. Our online discussion group, moderated by Gerry Fox and Steve Knight, is thriving. Through the next year members can look forward to more of these opportunities to "learn, explore, and enjoy."

Of special note: Bird Study and Bug Study audiences have grown beyond the capacity of the J. Percy Page Centre, making it necessary to change the venue for those groups. Starting in January, they are moving to King's University College. Plant Studies remain at J. Percy Page.

Members attending the AGM reviewed details of club activities and finances, and all questions posed were answered during the meeting. Recognizing challenges the club faces with an annual cost of regular operating expenses equalling about \$68 per membership when we collected only \$20 or \$30 for annual memberships, the members voted overwhelmingly in favour of updating the club memberships as tabled by the previous executive.

As of September, 2015, all existing membership categories are replaced by the following:



Our President, Ann Carter

1. Student membership at \$20 per year (*full-time student with a valid student ID from a recognized educational institution*)

2. Household membership at \$40 per year (*any number of people living at the same mailing address*)

The increase in membership revenue, along with your generous donations, will provide a better financial footing for the club. Personally, I think a \$40 membership is a great deal considering what the club offers. (I recently paid \$19 for two tickets to attend a movie, no refreshments!) Of course, the value of engaging people in learning about our green spaces and natural world cannot be measured.

On the topic of our green spaces, we would like to have a few more city nature walks during the year. If you walk a trail that you enjoy, please consider sharing it with our

members. As a leader you are not expected to identify every species of bird/plant/bug. Speak with any executive member or contact Janice at janicehurlburt53@gmail.com.

Annual Events Coming this Spring

Banquet: Saturday March 28, 2015, at the Sawmill Banquet Centre. **Please note the change in venue!** Watch your email or visit the website for further information and ticket sales.

Snow Goose Chase: Saturday/Sunday May 2/3, 2015. Please visit the Chase website at snowgoosechase.ca for further information.

Thank you to the outgoing executive members, Stephen Copen, Brian Stephens, and Cecilia Rodrigues, for their contributions to the club. We also appreciate the work done by Jaye Lee. The current executive list can be found on page 5. Welcome to Diane Barrett, John Jaworski, and Stan Nordstrom. It's my pleasure to work with this team on your behalf!

Members may contact the executive using the General Inquiries link on the ENC website home page, bottom left.

Respectfully submitted by Ann Carter, ENC President

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Membership

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

Membership Rates for 2014/15:

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

Nature Appreciation Weekend



Photo by Jana Sneep

The Edmonton Nature Club offered a diverse weekend program of activities at Miquelon Provincial Park in August. Dozens of members registered to participate as campers or day trippers.

We pitched our tents on Friday evening, and after Janos managed to get into his trailer (thanks to those who provided tools) we gathered at the campfire to finalize program details. Those able to stay awake until full dark were treated to a vast starry sky. Thanks to Karen Lindsay for reminding us that the park is a dark night preserve. The frosty air encouraged all to retire early and nobody left a sleeping bag to see the vocal young Great Horned Owl that prowled the campsite for over an hour. Later in the night coyote song replaced owl calls.

Day trippers arrived early Saturday morning to observe the songbird banding crew in action. Janos Kovacs, Toby-Anne Reimer, Jordan Lange, and Art Hughes opened the mist nets at sunrise. Although the number of birds banded was low, we all got a great view of the techniques employed. Favourites included a tiny Tennessee Warbler and an Ovenbird. The indignant Yellow-bellied Sapsucker was most amusing!

Viewing conditions being good, Gerald Romanchuk led an excursion to the lake in search of shorebirds. We weren't the only ones interested in shorebirds. Posing perfectly on her perch, Ms Merlin was painstakingly plucking the feathers from her prey. Everyone except Gerald (who was camera-less) was able to get a great photograph. Eventually we continued on with the walk. Ray Cromie stayed in the parking lot to watch the Merlin. He told us it ate everything except the two feet, one of which we collected from under the tree to confirm the bird was the only Sanderling we saw.

As we inched our way along the water's edge, small numbers of several species challenged members' identification skills. The opportunity to view birds in close proximity was welcome and we were able to have lots of discussion and make good comparisons. By the time we made our way back to the campsite everyone was ready for lunch and a bit of rest.

Most of the members stayed awake during the afternoon shorebird ID session. We learned that identification is a process that takes close observation while watching for clues that include behaviour and comparisons of size and structure. Moulting patterns mean fall plumages may make individuals of the same species look quite different. Apparently Short-billed Dowitchers show more orange pattern on the interior of their tertials, but first you have to age the bird....

For the next item on our program, we dragged everyone out of the dimly lit shelter and into the bright sunshine, where Bruce Christensen explained techniques for catching butterflies. Nets and jars in hand, the now-alert group spread out for a good time of running around in the field. Eventually we returned to the

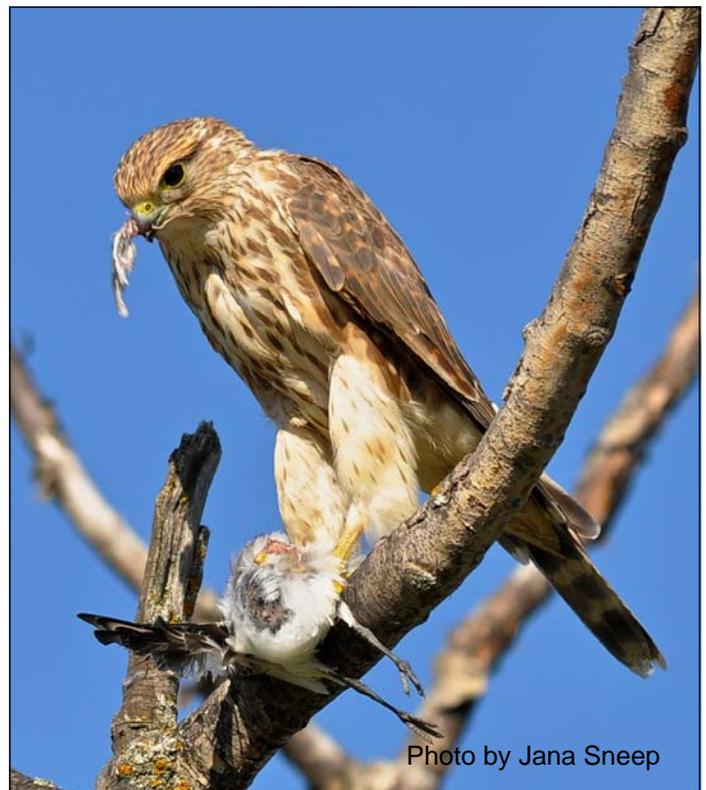


Photo by Jana Sneep

group site with our captives. Gerald concentrated on dragons and damselfly, Bruce helped us identify the butterfly species, and then our specimens were released. We had a Hornet Moth, Spruce Sawyer beetle, Variable Darners, and at least eight types of butterflies. Bruce seemed excited about the Alfalfa Butterfly.

Hubert Taube found several clumps of the plant known as Indian Pipe, *Monotropa uniflora*. He explained that “it’s a saprophyte, meaning it’s a flowering plant in most ways except it lacks chlorophyll; therefore it cannot photosynthesize and depends on the forest soil and litter for its nourishment.” Hubert said that according to *Wild Flowers of Alberta*, by R. G. H. Cormack (1967), it is found in dimly-lighted coniferous woods, which contradicts our experience, as we found it in relatively open deciduous aspen forest. Thanks for those plant notes, Hubert!

Supper was roasted over a crackling campfire and the relaxed setting encouraged members to engage in conversation on a wide range of topics. Naturally some good stories and laughs were shared. Just after sunset, most took an evening stroll while bats swooped overhead. The highlight was “our” young owl silhouetted against the night sky. This was much better than rolling out of a sleeping bag to see it at 1:00 a.m.!

But the day wasn’t over yet. Colleen Raymond and Bruce Christensen set up moth sheets before the night walk, and we returned to find a nice variety of those winged creatures. The long, active day sent many folks to their tents at this point. A few die-hards remained around the fire past midnight, telling tall tales and making visits to the moth sheets. They were rewarded with some beautiful Cat moths. Gary Anweiler of the Alberta Lepidopterists’ Guild says, “For those who don’t know what a ‘Cat’ is, it is short for *Catocala*, the genus of large noctuid moths also known as Underwings because the upper or ‘over’ wings are grey or brown mottled bark mimics and the hind or ‘underwings’ are a striking black-banded bright red, orange, or pink that produces a ‘startle’ effect when they are flushed.” Our species list included *Catocala relictata*, *Catocala unijua*, *Catocala briseis*, and two types of *Papaipema*. Gerald stated he has the complete list.



**Photo by
Gerald Romanchuk**

The catch of the night? A Giant Water Bug. This “assassin bug” was a marvel. Some people wanted to get closer... even touch it...but as a hand stretched toward the huge shape Bruce cautioned the group, explaining that a bite would be very painful and could lead to dissolving flesh and a need for medical attention. The beetle suddenly launched itself towards us!! The guys screamed so loudly they woke those who had retired for the evening. (A few of the ladies screamed as well.) According to Pam Dayton, “the screaming laughing combo was very therapeutic,” adding, “When Vince Cotterill and I locked eyes mid-scream, his were as big as saucers!”

After a well-deserved night’s sleep we welcomed back some of the day-trippers for the four-hour expedition to Miquelon 2. A rolling trail through aspen forest led to the large open area of mostly dry lakebed. Viewing scopes showed numerous “flings” of shorebirds, enticing us through the vegetation and onto the stretch of recently dried (and not so dried) mud flats. Fortunately, the effects of the recent extended bout of high temperatures allowed us to get out close to the birds. It was difficult to check every individual for rarities, but we applied identification tips and tricks from the presentation of the previous day to find most of the expected species.

The weekend was a great success due to the active involvement of all participants. Special thanks to the leaders and presenters who provided the program.

Our total number of bird species for the weekend was 85. Bird and butterfly species lists can be found at <http://entripreports.blogspot.ca/2014/08/report-from-miquelon.html>.

Ann Carter



**Dowitcher, Photo by
Janice Hurlburt**



***Catocala briseis*, Photo (left)
by Colleen Raymond**

**Photo below
by Ann Carter**



Nature Appreciation Weekend



Peeps, Photo by Vince Cotterill



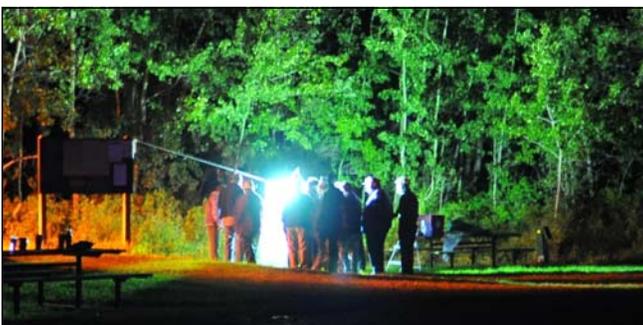
Mushroom, Photo by Toby-Ann Reimer



Tennessee Warbler, Photo by Dawne Colwell



Jordan Lange with a Yellow-bellied Sapsucker, Photo by Ann Carter



Catching moths (left) and enjoying the sunset at Miquelon Lake (right), Photos by Jana Sneepe

My Search for the Elusive Moss's Elfin

For the past few years, after completing my annual Milk River/Writing-on-Stone May Species Count, I have headed west on the 500 towards Cardston, Pincher Creek, the Crowsnest Pass, and my favourite area, the South Castle River just south of Beaver Mines Lake. I should add at this point that I am your typical citizen scientist, self-taught in all things nature, these days more of a bug guy than a birder! I do not use all these fancy Latin names like Norbert Kondla and Gary Anweiler do – I prefer Bearberry or Umbrella Plant...not *Arctostaphylos* and *Eriogonum*!

I try to spend a few days exploring the old road that runs alongside the South Castle River. I camp at Beaver Mines Lake. It's easy to get to from Pincher Creek and a local store sells gas and the basic groceries. My reason for butterflying in this quiet, unspoiled area is because I am always on a mission to find a Moss's Elfin. Barb Beck and Norbert Kondla have been kind enough in the past to help in my search, and I would never have visited this area had it not been for them.

About six years ago, I heard about Prairie Bluff, about an hour's drive to the east of Beaver Mines Lake, which is south of Beauvais Lake Provincial Park. This is one of two locations in Alberta where a sighting of Moss's Elfin (*Callophrys mossii*) has been confirmed. Barb and Jim Beck found the butterfly in question during a count there. Nowadays, it is hard to access the hilly area due to gas and oil development, and I am never sure my knees could handle the inclines! I am not a mathematician, but I would say the slopes are 60–70 degrees, so quite steep.

The second location is Windsor Mountain, directly south of Beaver Mines Lake. From Beaver Mines Lake, it takes about an hour to reach Windsor Mountain on the old South Castle Road. The lower slopes are close to the road, so are easy to attain. I was there last year in very nice weather and it did not take me long to discover that a certain amount of scrambling was going to be involved.

There was not much flying around in the variable vegetation, but I am sure I found Bearberry!

I did come across a few Elfin bugs but was not sure which species I was collecting. I was pretty sure I had hit the mother lode, but when I visited Norbert later, I found I had completely missed my target. From there and the surrounding area, close to the river, I had found only Brown and Hoary Elfin! Norbert said I should have been further up the slopes in order to find my elusive *mossii*. That rocky ridge looks pretty high up, but at least I now know where I am headed the next time I visit.

Bob Parsons

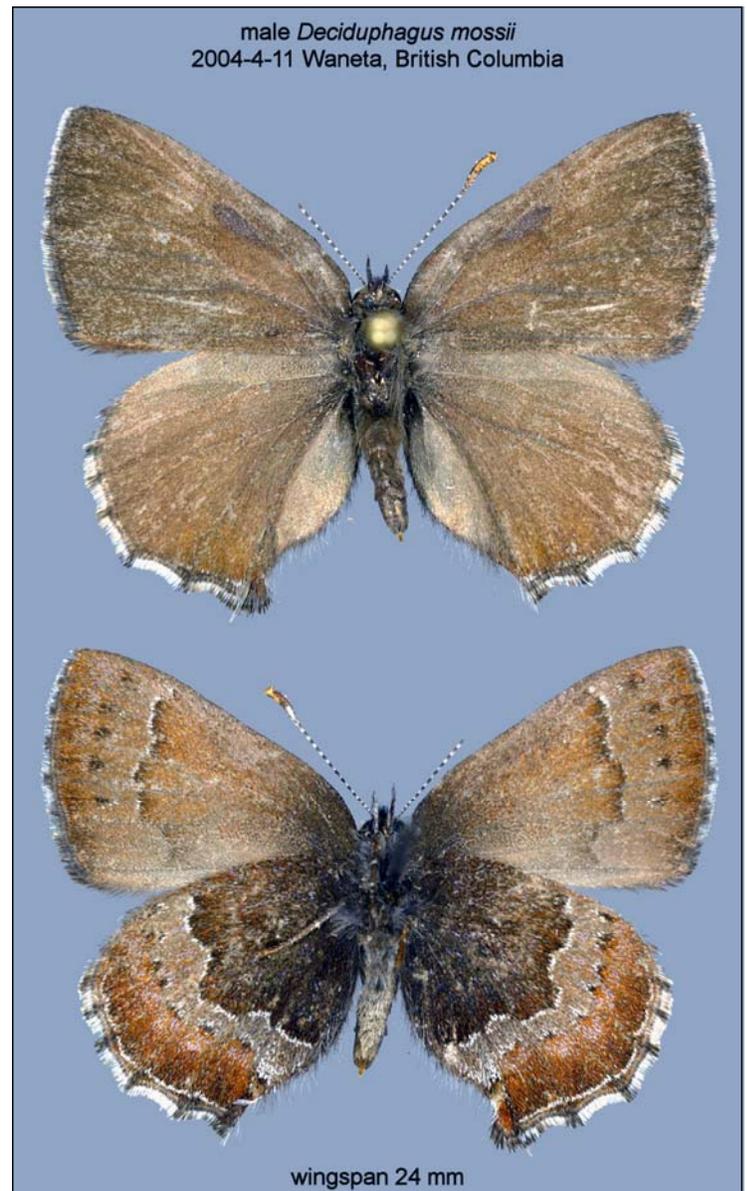


Photo by Norbert Kondla
is of a BC subspecies of the Moss's Elfin Butterfly

Chasing Birds

Loonie Tunes

The next time I see a winter loon I may just look away. They cause so many headaches! By “winter loon,” I mean any loon in non-breeding plumage – juveniles and winter-plumaged adults, basically all the loons we see in the fall birding season. As a group they pose a lot of ID challenges.

The last few years, the ENC has run into a few of these troublemakers, most recently on a trip out to the Cold Lake area this fall. We were looking for a reported Yellow-billed Loon. We got out to the spot and saw a loon. When we looked at it through binoculars, many of us got a first impression that looked good for YBLO. By the time we dug out scopes and cameras, the stupid bird had drifted further out. We spent hours chasing around looking for better viewpoints and a closer look. At one point Steve managed to get a few decent but long-range photos. By this time some doubts were starting to creep in.

The next day Steve posted his shots online. Every opinion that came in said our bird was a Common Loon. Disappointing to hear, but it did make sense. In hindsight it was easy to see how we were fooled. First, by high expectations. Yellow-billed was reported and we all really wanted to see one. Second, by a slightly different-looking individual. Most of us had a vision in mind of what a Common looks like. This bird looked a little different and it was easy to jump to the conclusion we all wanted.

A couple of years earlier we had another encounter of the loonie kind. This time it was on a club trip out at Seba Beach. We found a smallish dark-looking winter

loon. I led the charge in thinking it could be a Pacific. It just didn't look like the Commons I'm used to. This bird came in relatively close and we got some pics. Opinions from the online birding community were not quite unanimous, but it became clear the bird was a Common. I took a small amount of solace from the fact that at least one really high-end birder thought it was a Pacific.



Mystery Loon 1. This is the bird we thought could be a Yellow-billed. It looks paler than many Commons, with buffy or brownish tones. Most Commons tend to look a bit darker, with bluish-gray tones. In warm afternoon light, the bill looked yellowish. The one definitive mark is the colour of the culmen, the upper ridge of the upper bill. The Common's culmen is dark to the tip; the Yellow-billed's is pale on the outer end. This loon is a Common.

Common Loon, Photo by Steve Knight



Juvenile Common Loons, Photo by Steve Knight

So what's going on with these birds? Or more accurately, what's going on with the people trying to ID them? There are several groups of birds that are tough. Immature gulls can be almost impossible. Juvenile sparrows can make people want to throw their binos as far away as possible. And like I said at the beginning, the next time I see a winter loon I'll be tempted to just turn away.

Seriously, though, one of the big problems is distance. The damn things are usually a long way off. I've been pushing for the ENC to buy a boat! The distance makes it easy to play mind games with details that aren't really there.



Mystery Loon 2. This is the loon that looked like a Pacific. It's dark and looks smaller than most Commons. Though the bill looks a bit small, it's not really small enough for a Pacific. The best definitive field mark is the pattern on the side of the neck. Unfortunately, the bird's posture here makes it tough to judge the neck markings, but most experts would call it a Common.

Another problem is that many of us are birding by impression. We have an image in mind of what a Common Loon should look like. When a loon doesn't quite fit that image, we try to turn it into something "better." I think birding by general impression serves me pretty well about ninety percent of the time. But when you combine individual variation in a species with distance and sprinkle in some high expectations, it's a recipe for mis-identification.

So...the lesson is to put in the time looking for definitive field marks. It's more work, but if you can't see a solid field mark, it's probably best to leave the bird as a "loon species." Or you could just whip the scope right past any loon on the lake. Or maybe just stay home during winter loon season....

Gerald Romanchuk



Pacific Loon. Note the sharp line down the side of the neck. Common would have a single or double indentation of whitish back into the dark hindneck.

Photos by Gerald Romanchuk

Are you a 50-year ENC member?

The ENC executive would like to present an award to those members who have continuously participated in the activities of the ENC and its predecessor clubs – the Edmonton Bird Club and/or the Edmonton Natural History Club – for 50 years.

This requires you to cast your mind back. If you remember being a club member at the time of the British pop invasion and the Beatles' appearance on the Ed Sullivan show, then you qualify...and I'd like to hear from you. If you were a member of the club in the late sixties, say around the time of Woodstock and the summer of love, then I'd still like to hear from you, although you won't be eligible for the award...not just yet!

In the ENC history, *Preserving Our Natural Environment* (2009), Marg Reine interviewed several longstanding members and noted, "It is their dedication that creates the club's legacy." We'd like to honour your 50-year dedication, and I'd also like to hear your memories and experiences as a club member.

If you are eligible or know a member you think qualifies, please provide details to Alan Hingston (780-459-6389) or hingston@telusplanet.net.

The Peace-Athabasca Delta

ENC members will recall the presentation given by Kevin Timoney on January 17, 2014, and reported in the *Parkland Naturalist* issue of January–April 2014. His presentation focused on his book, *The Peace-Athabasca Delta: Portrait of a Dynamic Ecosystem*, published in 2013 by the University of Alberta Press. The book has been favourably reviewed in many places and received a number of awards. Recently, Dr. Timoney was awarded the Lane Anderson Award – a top prize for the very best science writing in Canada. Kevin won in the adult book category for a work judges called "masterful" and "all-encompassing." Winning authors receive \$10,000. Many congratulations to Dr. Timoney.

Edmonton Nature Club Indoor Meetings, Fall 2014

Mike Jenkins, Edmonton: City of ~~Champions~~ Mosquitoes



Mike Jenkins, Biological Sciences Technician with the City of Edmonton, was our first speaker of the indoor meetings season on October 17, 2014. Edmonton's mosquito abatement program started in 1953 and currently costs approximately \$1.3 million each year. Mike's duties include supervising the surveillance laboratory and monitoring mosquito populations and life cycles. While the main goal of the program is to reduce nuisance species, the City also monitors species that could carry diseases such as West Nile virus.

Life Cycle of the Mosquito

The mosquito goes through four stages in its life cycle: egg, larva, pupa, and adult. Mosquitoes lay eggs in either temporary standing water or low-lying areas that become flooded. They spend winter in the egg stage, and spring species are stimulated to hatch by depletion of the water's oxygen content caused by renewal of bacterial action in snow-melt ponds. The eggs are capable of withstanding subzero winter temperatures; some mosquito eggs can lie dormant for 10 years or more before hatching. The larvae (wigglers) live in water and come to the surface to breathe, feeding on microorganisms and organic matter in the water. Following their fourth moult, the larva changes into a pupa. The pupal stage is a resting non-feeding stage, but pupae are still mobile, tumbling through the water with a flip of their tails. After a few days the pupal skin splits and the adult mosquito emerges. Blood feeding and mating occur a couple of days after the adults emerge. The duration of each stage depends on both species and temperature. Cool water temperatures promote relatively slow larval development, as long as a month for completion of the aquatic stages.

When and Where to Spray

The number of mosquitoes in Edmonton depends on the weather. Standing water as a result of heavy winter snowfall or significant spring rain provides suitable habitat for mosquito development. The City monitors the number of adult mosquitoes using light traps to determine species and population trends and provide long-term comparative data. Other techniques include carbon-dioxide-baited traps that are used to monitor for mosqui-

toes at outdoor events and species that can carry West Nile virus.

The decision whether or not to spray is based more on dip tests for larvae in puddles and ditches than on numbers of adults. Areas of temporary water in fields, roadside ditches, and areas of long wet grass are the prime target areas for spraying.

Controlling Mosquito Numbers

The most successful method for reducing mosquito populations is to control them at the larval stage when they are most vulnerable. The main species targeted is the aptly named *Aedes vexans*, the dawn and dusk ankle-biters. These are controlled within the City's 1,400 square kilometre mosquito control area by applying larvicides to temporary and semi-permanent water bodies. For speed and efficiency, 90% of the treatment is contracted to helicopter companies that use dry granular larvicide formulations. More local habitats, such as ditches along road allowances, are treated by equipment mounted on vehicles or ground-based crews that use sprayers to deliver the larvicide. Surrounding municipalities, including Sherwood Park and St. Albert, have not sprayed since the elimination of provincial grants in the 1990s. A reservoir of mosquitoes in the surrounding areas presents problems for Edmonton, as the mosquitoes are attracted from outlying areas into the city at night. In one study, the City marked mosquitoes with dye and released them near Villeneuve (west of St. Albert). Some marked mosquitoes were found in light traps in the North Saskatchewan River valley up to 25 km from where they were released.

That Itchy Feeling and West Nile Virus

Most mosquitoes live for only a few days, during which time the female needs to draw blood as a source of protein for egg development. As the female is taking blood she is injecting an anti-coagulant (blood thinner) to start and keep the host's blood flowing. Reaction to the anti-coagulant saliva causes the itching.

In 2003, the first year West Nile virus appeared, there were 10 human cases in the Edmonton area and 16 fatalities across Canada. West Nile virus is an infection of birds that is spread to humans and other animals by the bite of an infected mosquito. Mosquitoes become carriers of this virus by taking a blood meal from an infected bird. The province initiated a three-year funding program for mosquito vector detection and source reduction. Should conditions be suitable for *Culex tarsalis*, the sole carrier of the virus among the 36 species of mosquito found in Edmonton, the City increases its monitoring. Should the

threat of disease-carrying mosquitoes be present, the City will step up control of adult mosquitoes. However, the majority of control is of nuisance mosquitoes (e.g., *Aedes vexans*), and larval control is adequate to reduce populations over 90% in breeding sites the City is able to spray.



Mid-August 2014

ENC members will recall the infestation of August 2014 when hordes of mosquitoes severely restricted outdoor activities in the Edmonton area for a week or more. The number of mosquitoes caught in City light traps was high compared to catches since 2010, approximately 3,000 females in mid-August 2014 compared to the next highest count of 1,000 females in mid-July 2011. The City's trap numbers showed numbers of nuisance mosquitoes not seen since the 1980s. The reason, of course, was that temperature, rain, and humidity levels provided ideal conditions for rapidly breeding mosquitoes. The City intensified its treatment of mosquito habitat in the hopes of preventing larvae from hatching. In any event, the outbreak did not last long, as cooler temperatures followed by overnight frost put an end to the mosquito activity.

For more information about mosquitoes in Edmonton, see http://www.edmonton.ca/for_residents/pest_management/mosquitoes.aspx.

Alan Hingston

Dr. Margo Pybus, Bats of Alberta: Sorting Fact from Fiction



Our presentation on November 21 was an interactive question and answer session hosted by Margo Pybus, the Provincial Wildlife Disease Specialist responsible for wildlife disease surveillance and management programs at Alberta Fish and Wildlife. Margo holds a PhD in Wildlife Parasitology from the Univer-

sity of Alberta and is an adjunct professor in the Department of Biological Sciences. She has an abiding interest in bats and shared her knowledge and enthusiasm for these denizens of the night with us.

“Imagine” a Bat

Margo asked us to close our eyes and imagine a bat. What words came to mind? Soon words such as “furry,” “skin-like wings,” “brown,” and “small,” were being tossed around. Margo agreed that, yes, most bats are small and furry. They also are mammals; females have mammary glands and feed their young milk. Of about 4,000 species of mammals world-wide, about 1,000 are

bats. Margo noted that bats are mammals of the order *chiroptera*, meaning “flying hand,” descriptive of the skin stretched over the bat's four “fingers.” Bats are the only mammals capable of true and sustained flight, unlike flying squirrels, which can only glide.

How Bats Live

Surprisingly, bats can live for 30 or more years. A bat tagged as an adult in Cadomin Cave in 1976 was seen most recently in 2012. Bats are able to decrease their metabolism, heart, and breathing rate when temperatures are low to achieve a state of torpor when their food, mostly insects in Alberta, is not available. Once a killing frost occurs, bats in Alberta either hibernate or migrate. Consequently, bats are seen in Alberta only between early May and the middle or end of September. Even during the day in summer, bats spend most of their time hanging upside down asleep to conserve energy.

Young bats are born on about Canada Day, though mating occurred as a result of a swarming period at the hibernaculum the previous August. The females are not pregnant for that length of time, as it would be too onerous to grow a fetus over winter in a torpid condition; sperm is stored in the female's body and pregnancy occurs as a result of delayed implantation. The females are pregnant for 2 months, approximately May and June, before giving birth. The young take 3–4 weeks to learn to fly, spending all that time with the female, both roosting in the hibernaculum and flying attached to their mothers at night.

How Bats See and Catch Insects

Bats distinguish objects, including insect prey, using a highly-developed sonar or echo-location system. Ultrasonic waves produced in rapid pulses are bounced off objects in the vicinity of the bat. Interpretation of the returning sound waves (the echo) enables the bat to determine the distance, speed, direction, size, shape, and surface texture of the object in an extremely precise manner. Insects may be caught in the bat's mouth or by using its wings. Individual bats may catch and consume 900 small insects in an hour, but they prefer larger-bodied insects such as beetles and moths.

Bats in Alberta



Nine (possibly ten) species of bats are found in Alberta. They live in a variety of habitats, including boreal forest, western foothills, and prairie parklands; they are less numerous in the mountains and prairies. They often occur along rivers and in cities, settings that are likely to attract nocturnal insects. They may live in caves, buildings, and

trees. The two species most likely to be encountered in Alberta, the Big Brown Bat and Little Brown Bat, are colonial. The remaining species, such as the larger Hoary Bat, are more likely to be solitary.

Within buildings, bats commonly live in eaves and attics, walls, roofs, and chimneys, and behind soffits and fascias. They prefer small dark spaces that are poorly ventilated and will heat up to 40 °C during the day. They need an existing access point to these roost sites, such as a crack or vent, as they cannot make or enlarge an opening. It is illegal in Alberta to disturb a bat hibernaculum between September 1 and April 30. It is impossible to “attract” bats, but it is possible to assist their relocation. At St. Margaret’s Church near Hastings Lake a colony of bats was persuaded to leave the church roof and take up residence in six nearby bat houses, approximately 50–100 bats to each house, by selectively screening their entry points on the church roof.

Threats

There is growing concern about the relatively high mortality of bats around wind-energy facilities. These fatalities appear to be caused not by bats hitting rotating blades of the turbines but by the low air pressure they create, which ruptures capillaries in the bats’ lungs. A new threat to bat populations is white-nose syndrome (WNS), caused by a fungus that affects the naked parts of bats. First documented in New York State in the winter of 2006/07, WNS has spread rapidly across the eastern United States and Canada and as far south as Mississippi. It is present in five Canadian provinces. Bats with WNS act strangely during the cold winter months when they should be in torpor, flying outside in the day or clustering near the entrances of the hibernacula. An estimated 7 million bats have died in eastern North America, with the death rate close to 100% in some hibernacula. Scientists are investigating the dynamics of fungal infection and transmission in bats and searching for a way to control it.

For additional information in bats in Alberta, go to <http://esrd.alberta.ca/fish-wildlife/wild-species/mammals/bats/default.aspx>.

Alan Hingston

*Mike Jenkins and Dr. Margo Pybus,
Photos by Jim Brohman*

*Culcidae Mosquito and Little Brown Bat,
Photos by Terry Thormin*

Parkland Plant Notes – Weeds, Part 3

Natives and Non-natives: The Importance of Discrimination in Plants

Human migration and travel, and global trade, have meant a huge increase in the spread of alien species across the world. If we are to control these aliens where they cause damage to both human enterprise and natural ecosystems, we must first be able to recognize them. In Alberta in recent years there have been three developments aimed at identifying alien plants as a first step to controlling them: the updating of the provincial Weed Control Act, the creation of the Alberta Invasive Species Council (formerly the Invasive Plant Council of Alberta), and various efforts to educate land managers and the public.

Alberta's latest (2010) Weed Control Act now includes environmental weeds (those that have the capacity to detrimentally affect natural ecosystems) as well as agricultural ones, and places plants in two categories requiring differential action: Prohibited Noxious Weeds and Noxious Weeds. Many of the species on the former list haven't reached Alberta yet or are present in such small numbers that it seems feasible to eradicate them should they appear. On the principle that prevention is better than cure, they must be removed before they become established, let alone naturalized. Species on the noxious list may never be entirely eliminated but because of their characteristics and behaviour attempts must be made to control them. Municipalities can exercise discretion in adding other plants to their noxious list. Of course many other weed species (e.g., common dandelion) do not make these lists; it may be undesirable or unrealistic to control or remove them, depending on the circumstances. Examples of local Prohibited Noxious Weeds include garlic mustard (*Alliaria petiolata*), which has recently become established in the ravines in Mill Creek and which the City of Edmonton's Community Services' Environmental team has been pulling with the help of volunteers, and purple loosestrife (*Lythrum salicaria*), another import from eastern Canada, which has invaded some of our wetlands and creeks. The latter is being targeted by local entomologists with a leaf-eating beetle (*Galerucella calmariensis*) as a method of bio-control.

Noxious weeds are better known because they are so common; they include such familiars as Canada thistle (*Cirsium arvense*), perennial sow-thistle (*Sonchus arvensis*), leafy spurge (*Euphorbia esula*), toadflax (*Linaria vulgaris*), dame's-rocket (*Hesperis matronalis*), and scentless chamomile (*Tripleurospermum inodorum*).

The Alberta Invasive Plant Guide (2012), available online, provides excellent illustrations and descriptions of species on both lists, and just this summer Daniel Laubhann of Community Services' Integrated Pest Management, in collaboration with Athabasca University, launched an app for the identification and recording of weeds on the provincial list.

A problem with helping the general population become weed-savvy, even with the use of pictorial aides, is that native plants resembling weeds may be misidentified and wrongly targeted. It could be tragic if giant hogweed (*Heracleum* *mantegazzianum*) were to be confused with our abundant and

harmless cow parsnip (*Heracleum maximum*). The former is a spectacularly tall native of Central Asia which has spread widely in Europe and has a bad reputation for causing dermatitis and eye problems, but which to my knowledge hasn't reached Alberta, while the latter is a common component of our moist forests. Tall buttercup (*Ranunculus acris*) has several native relatives (congeners) that live in similar moist situations.



Fireweed (*Chamerion angustifolium*) has apparently been confused with Purple Loosestrife.



Purple Loosestrife (*Lythrum salicaria*) in a fen near Pigeon Lake.

Other examples where confusion may occur involve plants that are unrelated but superficially similar. For instance, fireweed (*Chamerion angustifolium*), a native healer of burnt woods and disturbed ground, often occurring in large numbers following immediate disturbance, such as tree removal, has been confused with purple loosestrife (*Lythrum salicaria*), the alien from Europe that can alter wetland ecosystems by forming monotypic stands. Their differing habitats should be a tip-off, and once the two have been distinguished they are not likely to be further confused.

Discrimination becomes more difficult when the native and non-native species are very closely related. A confusing pair are the blueburs, western stickseed, *Lappula redowskii* (a.k.a. *L. occidentalis*), which is native to western North America and a plant of dry, open prairies and deserts, and European stickseed, non-native *L. squarrosa* (a.k.a. *L. echinata*), readily found on dry, disturbed ground around town. The former has a single row of prickles on the four nutlets that form its fruit, the latter a double row, with little star-like tips. In general, non-natives occur in disturbed habitats, natives in well-established plant communities with other native plants. But note that European stickseed also occurs in overgrazed prairies. Fortunately, in this case the distinction is of more interest to botanists learning their trade than of practical significance for weed control.

Common Reed



Native Common Reed (*Phragmites communis* subsp. *americanus*) at Islet Lake Staging Area, Strathcona County.

Distinction as to origin (with implications for invasiveness) becomes even more difficult when the native and the alien are merely varieties of the same species. The tall freshwater marsh or estuarine grass Common Reed (*Phragmites australis*) is a case in point. It was formerly considered a single species with a circumpolar distribution, but recently botanists have recognized a subspecies *americanus*. As its name implies, it is native to North America. It is morphologically distinct from a subspecies *australis* which is native to many parts of the world but is thought to have only arrived in Canada (in the Maritime Provinces) in the early part of the 20th century. The two subspecies can be told apart visually because the lower parts of the stems of *americanus* are red compared to yellowish-brown in subspe-

cies *australis*, and the natives have longer lower glumes (parts of the flower cluster). Given that the subspecies are so similar in ecology (both are colonial, forming reed beds), is it even important to make a distinction? Do they affect the ecosystem and wildlife differently? As with other species that are well-behaved components of communities in their home countries but turn aggressive in foreign ones, subsp. *australis* has been implicated in the rapid expansion of Common Reed across Canada. (Since it occurs also in ditches, its rhizomes can be easily transported by ditch maintenance equipment, a good example of how highway expansion is a current major contributor to the spread of many weeds.) While Common Reed does provide some habitat for native wildlife, it is allelopathic (producing chemicals from its roots that inhibit the growth of other plants), resulting in loss of diversity of natural wetland species. Currently subsp. *australis* appears to be most problematic in Ontario, but there is concern that it may spread to our duck-factory prairie pothole sloughs, causing them to dry up! (The species is not on Alberta's Noxious list. I have checked the populations I know of at Clifford E. Lee Nature Sanctuary and at Islet Lake in Cooking Lake–Blackfoot Reserve, and both belong to subsp. *americanus*.) Interestingly, in its native Europe, Common Reed is readily suppressed by livestock grazing.

This species also provides an example of the dangers of conducting a witch-hunt on weeds without properly identifying them. According to a report in the March 2014 issue of *Botanical Electronic News* a coastal property owner in BC was informed that his Common Reed populations would be destroyed by authorities from the BC Ministry of Forests, Lands and Natural Resource Operations because they were non-native and noxious. The owner resisted, maintaining they provided important bird habitat; he did some research and had the plants' DNA tested. They turned out to be subspecies *americanus* and were spared. As applied to plants, discrimination is always a good thing!

The Problem of Widespread Species?

What happens when a single species is native to the Northern Hemisphere, i.e., it occurs naturally in both Eurasia and North America and there are no morphological characters to provide a clue to the different provenances? Would we be able to detect whether we had non-native populations present among our native ones? And would it matter? Examples of such widely distributed species are yarrow (*Achillea millefolium*), fireweed (*Chamerion angustifolium*), common duckweed (*Lemna minor*), and Kentucky bluegrass (*Poa pratensis*). However, none of these species present practical problems for weed control, although given their invasive (weedy) natures we may want to think twice before planting them in native gardens or in restoration projects.

Kentucky Bluegrass

Let's take a closer look at Kentucky bluegrass, the familiar common lawn and pasture grass. *Flora of Alberta* states that "introduced and native elements, which are indistinguishable, occur in our area." Since most of the prairie remnants (that is, unploughed patches of native prairie) I've come across locally have a large component of Kentucky bluegrass I'd assumed



Kentucky Bluegrass (*Poa pratensis*) at Gibbons Prairie.

that these plants were native. Not so, my range specialist friends tell me. The non-native populations are so widespread and so well-poised to invade any grassland that even in undisturbed prairies they are likely alien. According to the international Invasive Species Specialist Group, this sod-forming species reduces biodiversity and suppresses seedling growth of other species in a variety of ways, including altering nitrogen and carbon cycling and other soil properties. A land manager or restoration crew would therefore be ill-advised to plant Kentucky bluegrass in an effort to rehabilitate degraded prairie to a

biologically diverse and authentic community. Plains rough fescue (*Festuca hallii*) is the traditional native grass of Alberta's parkland and mixed-grass regions and the hallmark of undisturbed prairie remnants but, once it has been removed, it cannot easily be regenerated, and no other native grasses are obvious replacements. On the other hand, Kentucky bluegrass does provide food for a range of native animals, including insects.

Richard Mabey, writing in *Weeds*, has cleared up one mystery for me. I often wondered why *Poa pratensis*, known as smooth meadow-grass in Britain, where it is a fairly minor component of grassy places, came by the common name of Kentucky bluegrass in North America. Apparently, when settlers first came to eastern North America their cattle wiped out the susceptible native grasses, which were then replaced by the European grasses the settlers also introduced, grasses that had the advantage of millennia in which to adapt to livestock grazing. *P. pratensis* was one of these, and it grew in such large patches that its bluish flower heads lent a blue haze to grassland landscapes at flowering time. Somehow or other the state of Kentucky became especially associated with this grass. One can see this beautiful visual effect even in meadows in Edmonton's river valley where Kentucky blue grows luxuriantly and, unknown, is left to flower.

In a fourth instalment I will delve into some of the philosophical aspects of native versus non-native species and communities, the contribution of alien species to biodiversity, and the push-back that is beginning against the destruction of alien communities in the interests of restoring original, native ones.

Patsy Cotterill

Photos by Patsy Cotterill

Editorial

Results from the Christmas Bird count will not be published in *The Parkland Naturalist* as the count is at a later date than usual this year. Results will be available on the Edmonton Christmas Bird Count website at www.edmontonchristmasbirdcount.ca or under Events on the ENC website edmontonnatureclub.org after they have been compiled.

Christmas bird counters include both bush beaters and feeder-watchers. Some back yards have an amazing variety of birds – read about one of these back yards in our cover story, “The Accidental Birder,” by Janice Hurlburt.

If you are tired of the cold, you might escape by reading Brian Stephens's article on page 30 about birding in southeast Arizona. Imagine yourself in the 40 °C heat of the desert.

Field trip reports are available in full, including species lists, at the ENC website under Field Trips/Trip Reports.

I wish to thank the authors and photographers who have contributed to this publication. Articles and/or photos can be sent to the editor at the email address below for inclusion in our magazine, which is published three times a year. Judy Johnson is the copy editor for the *PN*. Jack and Pauline DeHaas are in charge of mailing and distributing hard copies. Their work is very much appreciated.

The deadline for the next issue of *The Parkland Naturalist* is March 31, 2015.

Field Trip Reports

Short-notice “Twitcharama,” December 14, 2014

Well, the plan sounded good... Run a crazy twitcharama trip looking for some of the cool birds being seen lately. Stuff like the Eastern Bluebird in Morinville, the Steller’s Jay near Sundance, and maybe even some small owls near Evansburg.

Things started to derail by Wednesday. Several people happened to go out to Morinville that day. They saw most of the St. Albert birding mafia out there, but there was no sign of the bluebird. The folks hosting it hadn’t seen it since Tuesday. As far as we know, it hasn’t been seen again.

So that shortened the trip. Didn’t have to go to Morinville. I’d gone scouting out by Evansburg on Saturday and wasn’t expecting to see any small owls – the usual Pygmy Owl rule is you never see one at the same place twice – but I lucked out and saw two.



So... talked to Ray Cromie and he agreed to meet the group out there Sunday morning. We dragged 25 people out there and, drum roll please, could not find any darn Pygmy Owls!!!

Ray and John Moore did see both a Goshawk and a Barred Owl while waiting for us. We explored around a bit and Karen spotted a Great Gray. We tried to catch it, but a nameless person botched the attempt and the bird flew off into the woods. Then Colleen Raymond saw a cooperative Ruffed Grouse that ended up being surrounded by a million photographers. Shortly after-



wards Connor Charchuk spotted a second GGOW that also slipped away on us. Otherwise we saw some common winter birds. One mild surprise was picking up a few crows at a farm on the way back to the highway.

Then it was time to head towards Sundance for one last chance at a twitch. We drove by the yard with all the feeders that the Steller’s Jay had been visiting. Someone near the back of the convoy (sorry, can’t remember who) saw the bird. We all piled out and the stupid bird slipped off. It was seen again a few times, but we kept having trouble getting it for everyone. When I was about ready to give up, it finally settled in at the feeder and gave everyone a good look.



Continuing on towards Kapasawin, we finished off with a Great Horned Owl sunning itself and snoozing out in the open and a cooperative Bald Eagle.

We saw 20 species and got at least one good twitch and a few nice birds, so it turned out to be a half-decent day. I just learned one hard lesson: there are a few birds whose names cannot be mentioned before you go looking. You probably need to totally remove them from your mind. Only

then will you be allowed to find one of those small, little owls!

Gerald Romanchuk

Photos by Gerald Romanchuk

Feeder Watch, Rio Terrace Backyard, November 30, 2014

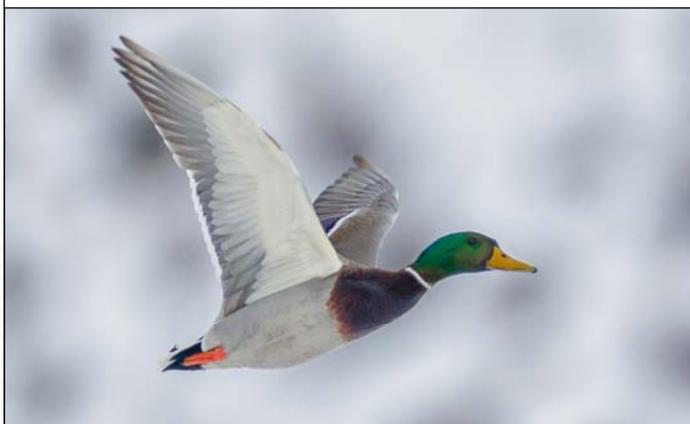
On a chilly morning with the temperature sitting at -25°C , eight of us braved the cozy fire and comfy chairs in my living room/dining room to watch birds coming in to the various feeders. Even the snowplough gods smiled upon us, the streets having been cleared at 4:30 a.m. With the sun shining brightly, it was a perfect morning to be inside, enjoying good company, eating nibblies, and watching birds. We saw 2 Pileated Woodpeckers fly by, but none came into the yard while the group was there. Of course, one flew in earlier in the morning and came back an hour after everyone left and is currently hanging out as I write this report. The other species missed by the group was the Boreal Chickadee, which made a mid-afternoon appearance. But we saw House Finch (tons), House Sparrows (loads), Red- and White-breasted Nuthatches, Black-billed Magpie (7 coming in to the peanut wreath), a puffy Blue Jay, Black-capped Chickadees, and Downies. A couple of Ravens did a fly-by, and we spotted a flock of Waxwings in a neighbour's yard.

Janice Hurlburt

Goldbar Park, December 6, 2014

Upon arriving at the parking area east of the sewage ponds, a few of us saw a pair of raptors circling over the river: a Northern Goshawk and a Sharp-shinned Hawk. Good start for a pleasant morning. Thirty-one people made up the group at 10:00 a.m. when we headed down to the riverside trail. The only waterfowl seen were Mallards, but a Bald Eagle sailed by at one point and the Northern Goshawk did a low-level loop, skimming the treetops over the group. We continued east to the footbridge to Rundle Park before heading up the trails on the south hillside. Pine Grosbeaks greeted us partway up. On the topmost trail a Northern Shrike was spotted. A Merlin also flew across. As we spread out across the topmost trail the lagards spotted a Pileated Woodpecker while the main group saw a robin. On the lower trail as we neared the end, an accipiter flew in and perched, leading to a spirited discussion of the differences between Sharp-shinned and Cooper's Hawks. I'm not sure this dispute was resolved. We sighted 20 species, with the highlights being the raptors.

Brian Stephens



Exploring Oleskiw Trail Options, November 18, 2014

Despite poor weather conditions (overcast skies, about -10°C , slight breeze) and a conflicting Edmonton CFL game, seven people came out to explore the various trail options through Oleskiw Park, from the Fort Edmonton footbridge to the future Terwillegar footbridge.



Photo by Hubert Taube

We appreciated the participation of Karen Kennedy of the City of Edmonton's Trails, Paths and Routes Advisory Committee, who will have input in the decision-making process.

Going in, we followed option #6: first along the edge of the riparian forest and then through the forest by the single-track trail along the river; on our return, we followed option #5 (along the escarpment). Option #5 is the alignment preferred by ENC for the planned asphalt trail.

Patsy Cotterill, our expert botanist, identified the dominant tree species: balsam and aspen poplar; major understory species: dogwood, high-bush cranberry, chokecherry, saskatoon, hazelnut, Canada buffalo-berry, common juniper; forbs and grasses of interest: burnet saxifrage, asters, bedstraws, goldenrods. The rare bristle-leaved sedge in the southern portion of the forest was undetectable due to snow cover.

Tracks of deer and coyotes were everywhere, both in the meadow and in the forest; at the river's edge we saw evidence of fresh beaver activity; and in the distance, a pack of coyotes was howling. We observed 6 species of birds.

Hubert Taube

*Mallard, Photo by
William Labbe*

Field Trip Reports

Opal and Fort Saskatchewan Areas, November 22, 2014

Eleven members of the ENC (with questionable judgement!) headed up north on snowy, icy roads. We drove around Ft. Saskatchewan hoping for Snowy Owls, but dipped on the big white birds. Main things of note out there were a few flocks of field-feeding Mallards and Canada Geese.

Pushing on north towards Opal, we looked hard for big grey birds but didn't have much luck. All the owls seen were either plastic or ceramic! Did see Pine Grosbeaks in several places and a handful of Evenings at the Halfmoon Lake Village. Also had Gray Jays, Boreal Chickadees, etc., at various stops, plus a flock of Redpolls north of Opal.



Evening Grosbeak, Photo by Janice Hurlburt

Part of the group got a good look at a Long-tailed Weasel. The lead vehicle, which missed the weasel, saw a big White-tail buck as a bit of consolation.

By noon we had covered a lot of the common owling spots with absolutely no luck. It was time for an executive decision. Choices were to go for a hike in one of the Natural Areas or continue driving with a slim chance of finding an owl. It wasn't too hard to convince the group to do the latter, so we kept going northeast. Went through a lot of good owl country but still couldn't find any – even ran out of plastic owls.

We got close to Newbrook, which was about as far out as I wanted to go, but there were two last roads I wanted to check. So we split up the group, with two vehicles heading a mile or two north and two heading east. My vehicle took the north road and about a mile down we heard a crackling transmission from Brian on the east road. It was a bit hard to make out what he said, but two words came out nice and clear, "Great" and "Gray." At about this time we found out that Great Gray Owl would be a lifer for two ladies in my car. The excited yelling

from Grace and Colleen made it very clear how keen they were to see one. My ears are still ringing from the loud "Turn around, TURN AROUND." Also got severely chastised for picking the wrong road!

Anyways, we caught up with the others patiently waiting for us a little ways from a Great Gray up in a spruce tree. The ladies got a look at their lifer and finally seemed to calm down. And then I still heard complaints that one of them hadn't seen the owl's face! I thought it was an awesome display of leadership skills putting folks in the right spot to find an owl. Also explained that sending the others down the road first was just being generous with the owl-finding glory.

We had started to head back south towards Thorhild when the leader came through again with a second GGOW perched across a small field. This one was even facing the right way! It was getting on in the afternoon and the roads weren't getting any better, so we started heading back to Sherwood Park all safe and sound and 2 owls richer.

Gerald Romanchuk



Photographers, Photo by Gerald Romanchuk



Great Grey Owl, Photo by Janice Hurlburt

Whitemud Ravine North, November 15, 2014

Twenty-six members of the ENC learned some cold hard lessons on a frosty morning down at Whitemud. They learned serious stuff about keeping up with the group and not falling behind. Most of us have seen the nature shows where a herd of bison is attacked by wolves. It's often the animals lingering behind that get hit.

Now, I'm not comparing ENCers to a herd of bison, well... mostly I'm not. But at one point a few stragglers fell behind. Then the rest of us heard the howling. It was extremely eerie. A large pack of coyotes was going crazy somewhere behind. It got us wondering which of the oldest or slowest of the stragglers might have fallen to the pack.

On a more serious note, we did learn the value of solid leadership. Our illustrious leader was able to put one of the group in the exact position needed for him to find a Barred Owl. Kudos to John C. for a great bit of spotting. We were just talking about having seen one in the past at that spot when he said, "There it is!" I thought he was yanking my chain, but he finally got me on the bird, and yeah, there it was! The owl was a lifer for several people and was a big hit.

A little further down the trail the leader came through yet again! He called for a stop just in time for Ann to spot a woodpecker. A good one – it turned out to be a Black-backed, yet another lifer for several of the newer birders in the group.

We did manage to find the stragglers, rescue them from the wild predators, and drag them back to the vehicles. (More realistically, we got everyone back to the parking lot all smiling and happy after a good walk.)



White-breasted Nuthatch
Photo by William Labbe

A few of us continued up to the Grain Terminal. Three of us were sitting there, freezing, *watching pigeons* fly around for about an hour. Then Colleen rolls up after running an errand. Within 2 minutes, she gets to see a Gyr attack the pigeons. Totally not fair! The falcon made a few half-hearted attacks, circled around a bit, then flew off to the east. A good end to good trip.

Gerald Romanchuk



Barred Owl, Photo by Dawne Colwell



Photo by Henry Sanders

Field Trip Reports

Hawrelak Park, November 8, 2014

I'm sorry to announce that the ENC is getting out of control! Today's walk at Hawrelak was leaderless. Chaos was the rule of the day. Birders wandered aimlessly in whatever direction they felt like. Some even started looking at spiders!

Though there wasn't a leader, there was no shortage of people who didn't mind telling others where to go. So... just a warning in case you see a trip listed with the leader as TBA.

Despite the wintery conditions and icy roads, 14 of us showed up. We started off with a nice group of Pine Grosbeaks feeding in the trees near Picnic Shelter 1. Somehow the leaderless group made its way together down the trail south of the pedestrian bridge.

The birding was pretty routine: woodpeckers, chickadees, nuthatches. The only non-wintery birds we saw were the Mallards on the open water and a few Ring-billed Gulls flying overhead. At one point we noticed a group of chickadees foraging low at ground level, often picking at the snow. Shortly after we noticed quite a few spiders floating down on a streamer of silk and landing on the trail. We saw at least three fairly distinct kinds and hope Colleen will help us figure out what they were. Most of them were quite small, but Brian found a bigger one. It was dark and about the size of a sunflower seed. I'll blame the next thing that happened on the lack of a leader. It occurred to me that one of the chickadees might like some fresh meat, so I did a bit of cruelty to spiders and held it up for one of the tame park chickadees. A bird came to my hand and looked at the curled-up spider. The chickadee then looked at me with an expression that said, "What kind of seed is that?" and then snatched the unfortunate spider and took it away and ate it. No other creatures were harmed during this trip!

Gerald Romanchuk

Pine Grosbeak
Photo by Gerry Fox



Orb Weaver,
Family Araneidae
Photo by
Colleen Raymond



Bonnyville and Cold Lake Areas, November 1, 2014

Eleven of us headed out bright and early – okay, maybe not so bright, but definitely early, for some birding out east towards Cold Lake. We picked a pretty nice day, mostly sunny, fairly calm, with the temperature up to 10 °C in the afternoon at Cold Lake.

During a pit stop in Smoky Lake we saw a large flock of waxwings across the highway feeding on berries. Also a flock of starlings with what looked like blackbirds mixed in. Couldn't get a good enough look to be sure if they were Rusty or not. It's always hard to get a good look at a bird when the directions include "down by the cabbage." Never heard that one before!

Continuing east we scoped out lots of ducks on Upper Mann Lake – all routine stuff. Then Steve and I drove past a hawk on the highway - it was, of course, on his side of the car. First radio report was "maybe a Rough-leg." When we got everyone turned around, the next report was, "It's an eagle, Bald Eagle." When we stopped, the bird flushed directly away from us. The next call was "juvenile Golden!" Then it perched, facing away from us. It started to look small for an eagle. Someone said, "Maybe a dark Red-tail?" The bird then dropped into the ditch to attack prey. It became clear that this hawk was going full circle. It was a Rough-leg!

A stop at Moose Lake produced a few more ducks and gulls. The day list was starting to build up. On the way out we'd decided to have a pool on the number of birds and mammals we'd see. Guesses ranged from pessimists in the low 20s to the optimists in the mid 30s. James called it from the beginning. He said he'd win easily with the high number and he did, even without the swans we didn't stop to ID and the probable Pine Grosbeak that didn't call a second time.

Jessie Lake in Bonnyville produced enough birds to give James a lock on the pool. Lots of ducks. A flock of Cackling Geese flew in demonstrating their different call. Lots of waxwings, robins, etc., plus a small flock of Redpolls.

We went over to Bear Trap Lake, where a few interesting loons had been reported this week. At a viewpoint on the east side, Ann spotted a loon through binoculars that looked really good for a Yellow-throated. It had a big yellowish bill, a pale face, and a buffy brownish colour on the face and upper parts. Of course, by the time we got scopes and cameras out, the damn bird had drifted quite a ways out. We spent the next several hours looking for other viewpoints and struggling with distant looks at the loon. Had lots of debate and scoured all the books. Steve got a few distant photos that we hope will help to confirm this bird one way or the other. One thing we all agreed on was that it didn't look like most of the Commons we are all familiar with. Whether the field marks are clear enough to call it a Y-B is another story. A few of the group were sure there were two loons out there.

After we finally gave up on that thing we went over to Cold Lake Provincial Park. The bay at the boat launch was beautifully calm, making it easy to scan for birds on the glass-like water. We saw distant ducks and grebes and three obviously Common Loons.

Over at Kinosoo Beach in town several gulls were loafing around, and more distant grebes and loons were out on the lake. By this time it was getting on in the day and we started heading back. We drove off into an amazing sunset and picked up our last bird of the day near Vilna – a Great Horned Owl.

We had a nice dinner in Smoky Lake, continued the debate/argument about the loon, and got everyone safely back to the city before 10 p.m. Now it's time to pressure Steve into producing some pics so we can continue the Great Loon Debate!

Gerald Romanchuk



Cold Lake Provincial Park



Bohemian Waxwing

Photos above by Gerald Romanchuk

Wabamun Area, October 25, 2014

Twenty-one of us battled the gales to visit Keep Hills, Sundance, Seba Beach, Fallis, Wabamun Provincial Park, and Genesee.

Good birding! **Martin Sharp**



These folks (above) did some real strenuous birding. Others got out in the bush and followed Mike Greeney for a tour around his place at Seba Beach.



Photos by Gerald Romanchuk

Field Trip Reports

Wakamao and Cross Lakes, Saturday, October 18, 2014

Over 25 birders enjoyed a nice fall day checking out the bird action north of the city. Going towards Morinville and Legal, things were pretty quiet. We checked quite a few flocks of starlings, but couldn't find any blackbirds.

We finally saw a couple of raptors on the north side of Wakamao. The "two-bird theory" was fully in place when we stopped. I was looking at a distant buteo, but the others in my car asked if it was a Bald Eagle. I wondered what was in their coffee, but it turned out they were looking at a different bird. It was indeed an adult Baldie. Mine turned out to be a Rough-leg.

As we continued north, we picked up a covey of Gray Partridge. Birders in the lead vehicle were told that cool birders call them "Huns" after the old name, Hungarian Partridge. Also saw a Ruffed Grouse in another farm yard and a Hooded Merganser and Greater Yellowlegs on a dugout. Most of us had our first Snow Buntings of the season. A couple hundred of them kept circling over a small wetland. We saw assorted ducks and a Great Blue Heron as we continued on towards Cross Lake.

We reached Lu Carbyn's property near Cross Lake only half an hour late for lunch and had a nice visit. Lu had a fire going for us, and we took a short walk around. Most of us got sightings of Boreal Chickadee, Golden-crowned Kinglet, and Brown Creeper. Thanks to Lu for the hospitality!

We scoped Cross Lake and got Common Loon, Red-necked Grebe, Buffleheads, and Goldeneye, plus a very distant gull we weren't quite sure about. On the trail to George's Point we had more chickadees, creepers, and kinglets and a couple of inquisitive Gray Jays. Donna had lagged behind and after we started back we came up on her studying a Three-toed Woodpecker. Good thing for slow-pokes!

On the way back 15 of us took a swing through the Opal area. It can be tough to manage large numbers of unruly birders, so I usually try to weed out as many as possible. Using the very dusty roads I managed to get rid of two of the vehicles. Somehow they did find us again before any owls were spotted. Gonna have to work harder on my technique!

Another thing a good leader will do is make sure the group has a decent communication system. To that end I had two radios in my vehicle – just in case of any malfunction. Turns out that those radios work better when you turn them on. Somehow both got shut off, probably a subconscious reaction to listening to Steve on the other end. I was happily chatting away on a turned-off radio when I noticed the group had stopped half a mile back. When I finally figured out what was going on, we heard that a Great Gray Owl had flown in between the second and third vehicles. By the time we got back it was gone, but we saw a Great Horned Owl in a tree behind us.

Somehow got everyone back to the city about 15 minutes past the late end of the ETA. Guess we'll see if I'm asked to lead any more trips!

Gerald Romanchuk



Snow Buntings, Photo by Janice Hurlburt



Looking for Loons, Photo by Ann Carter



Campfire at Lu Carbyn's, Photo by Henry Sanders

Saw-whet Owl Banding, October 11, 2014

In the late afternoon 26 of us gathered at Hardy Pletz's acreage near Wetaskiwin to observe Northern Saw-whet Owl banding. Before dark we explored the trails along the creek and watched the very busy feeders. A Flying Squirrel was seen flying! We spotted a Common Redpoll at the feeders – a sign of their return this year after their absence this past winter? Several people saw or heard Evening Grosbeaks.

As darkness approached Colleen set up a moth sheet, just in case. Later in the evening, it looked to have at least 3 moth species and a crane fly.



Saw-whet Owl, Photo by Gerald Romanchuk

We heard a Great Horned Owl not far off. It called again closer and was spotted near the top of a poplar overlooking fields to the north. Gerald's very strong lamp gave us excellent views before the owl headed out over the fields.

The nets were deployed after sunset. The first check produced 2 Saw-whets! Hardy showed how ultraviolet light helps determine the age of the bird by revealing differences in the wing feathers. The first bird flew away immediately on release, but the second spent some time perched low down on a spruce before heading off. A very successful trip.

Brian Stephens



**Flying Squirrel
Photo by
Gerald Romanchuk**

Murray Marsh, Ducks Unlimited Interpretive Trail, and Grandin Pond, October 4, 2014

Ten of us visited Murray Marsh, the Big Lake Interpretive Trail, and Grandin Pond on this outing. Just after we stopped on the road to the dike we were greeted by a Marsh Wren singing in the Cattails very close to the road. Others were observed farther back.

A flock of about 200 Rusty Blackbirds flew into the area, pausing in the reeds before flying off. A larger flock was scoped in the fields past the west end of the dike. (Yesterday I observed a single flock of at least 500 on the road and adjacent cattails.)

A flock of 7 Tundra Swans flew overhead from the east and over the marsh before circling back and giving us a close fly-by before heading south.

There were American Tree Sparrows in the bushes at the start of the dike and 6 Dowitchers and Yellowlegs at the west end, as well as a Merlin perched on a fence post and a good look at a Rough-legged Hawk as it flew over the fields to the west.

On the Big lake Interpretive Trail we saw a small flock of about 20 Rusty Blackbirds, 2 Northern Harriers, and a Wilson's Snipe at the south end of the trail. On returning to our cars, we observed a Northern Shrike in a bush near the parking lot. It flew over the trail and hovered briefly before heading west and away from us.

At Grandin Pond we had a very close observation of a male Hooded Merganser in brilliant plumage. It was swimming with the Mallards around the observation deck.

Don Delaney

Hooded Merganser, Photo by Don Delaney



Field Trip Reports

Elk Island, September 14, 2014

Around 25 ENCers went out to Elk Island for some fall birding today.

Things started out pretty frosty in the morning, around 1 °C, but it warmed up nicely to 18 °C by the afternoon. Overall things were fairly birdy. Flickers, robins, and other songbirds were obviously moving through. We checked quite a few mixed flocks being led around by chickadees; the only warblers found were Yellow-rumped and Orange-crowned, though a few tantalizing call notes slipped by without a sighting and positive ID.

Waves of White-fronted Geese flew by high overhead most of the day. A few flocks of Sandhills cruised past waaaaaaaaaaaay up high.

We didn't see a ton of raptors – couple of Red-tails, a Harrier, an accceptor that we didn't all agree on (but the list keeper gets the final say!). People in a couple of cars got a quick look at a nice dark morph Broad-winged Hawk.

The group did get to witness one of the best pishing performances ever! it's not unusual to get chickadees or warblers or sparrows to come in to some pishing. But pishing in a flock of Pelicans? That takes a real master-pisher! Don't want to name names, but his initials are GR.

Ten of us stayed out for a wiener roast – enjoyed the nice day and the company. After several of the group left, Brian and I got phone calls. I didn't recognize the number and didn't bother answering – thought it might be work-related. Brian wisely answered. It was Karen. She drove out towards the north gate and found a couple of good birds. The five of us left ended the day with a pair of Trumpeter Swans.

Gerald Romanchuk



American White Pelicans, Photo by Janice Hurlburt

Whitemud Evening Walk, September 10, 2014

We met at 6:00 p.m. at the Fox Drive access. As we were gathering, an American Kestrel began hunting in the area. It stayed around for about 20 minutes, often perching in good view. Sixteen of us started out along the trail in cool weather. It was quite quiet most of the time but we did hit small pockets of activity, including a fairly large flock of White-throated Sparrows working through the low bushes stream-side. A flock of American Robins was foraging in the treetops across the creek in another spot when first a Northern Flicker and then a Pileated Woodpecker showed up. Surprisingly, one of the robins took a run at the Pileated. In spite of a couple of rainy days, we did not hear or see any warblers.

On our way back we collected some additional participants, returning with 24 people!

Brian Stephens



American Kestrel, Photo by Janice Hurlburt



White-throated Sparrow, Photo by Gerald Romanchuk

Fall Songbirds in St. Albert, September 6, 2014

Around 25 of us, including 2 visitors from Nova Scotia, visited Lacombe Park, White Spruce Lot, and John E. Poole wetlands in the St. Albert area from 8:15 a.m. to 1:30 p.m. The day began cool with not a lot of activity, but as the sun warmed the trees we hit several pockets of songbirds. We spotted 8 species of warbler, although not everyone got a look at all of them as the birds were moving and feeding very quickly. The Spruce Lot was quieter than Lacombe, but a Great Horned Owl made a quick pass through the trees (there was successful nest there this year) and a Peregrine Falcon was perched high up in a dead tree.

Over at John E. Poole, interest focused on the Virginia Rail. A few people caught a glimpse and although it ventured out momentarily in another spot it dashed back out of sight before we could actually focus on it. We did get good looks at Wilson's Snipe and Solitary Sandpiper.

Brian Stephens



Virginia Rail, Photo by Janice Hurlburt

Hermitage Park, August 28, 2014

Twenty keen birders took a walk through Hermitage Park. It turned out to be a decent night for warblers and raptors. We walked out towards the south end and heard some chickadees calling. A little bit of pishing brought out a nice mixed flock. Between this flock and one a little further down, we came up with 8 species of warbler. We probably missed a few; there were a lot of birds flitting around that we couldn't get on.

Two raptors cruising over us turned out to be young Peregrines. We could see a small raptor perched near the river and tried to turn it into a Kestrel, but it was a Merlin. As we walked up to it, Brian Stephens spotted a pair of Bald Eagles sitting beside each other halfway up a tree.

The rest of the walk was pretty quiet. We added a few more species and got back to our cars before dark—sure starting to notice how much shorter the days are getting!

Gerald Romanchuk



Merlin, Photo by Gerald Romanchuk



American Redstart, Photo by Gerald Romanchuk

Christmas Bird Count

The 115th Audubon Christmas Bird Count ran from December 14, 2014, to January 5, 2015, with Edmonton's 66th count slated for December 21. Edmonton continues to hold the record for the largest number of participants in North America! Last year, we also had the highest counts for Downy Woodpeckers (474), Pileated Woodpeckers (65), Black-billed Magpies (2,745), Black-capped Chickadees (4,841), Red-breasted Nuthatches (613), and White-breasted Nuthatches (377). In all Canadian counts, 291 species were recorded in 2013. Calgary tallied the highest diversity for Alberta with 63 species, followed by below-average counts at Medicine Hat (48 species) and Edmonton (46 species).

Edmonton's count is divided into 16 zones. Each zone is led by a zone captain who coordinates "bush-beaters" (people who walk the zone) and "feeder-watchers" (people who count birds that come to their feeder throughout the day). Some captains start their day before sun-up to "prowl for owls"! At the end of the day, we all gather for a pot-luck dinner and the tally begins! The zone captains report their totals for the overall Edmonton count. Level of effort is also reported (number of bush-beaters and feeder-watchers, distance travelled, and time spent). Over the next few weeks, totals are finalized and any unusual sightings are verified. Then the totals are sent to Bird Studies Canada and forwarded to Audubon for national compiling.

The Audubon Christmas Bird Count is one of the oldest and most influential Citizen Science programs. Christmas Bird Counts provide critical data on population trends. Audubon Society President David Yarnold says, "CBC data are becoming increasingly important not only in documenting current climate change but also in predicting the future effects of climate change on North American bird populations."

It's important work, but it's also fun! What a great way to spend a day!

Visit the Edmonton Nature Club Christmas Bird Count website: edmontonchristmasbirdcount.ca.

Kim Blomme, Edmonton Christmas Bird Count compiler



Pine Grosbeak, Photo by Gerald Romanchuk

Pikas

Pikas belong to the order *Lagomorpha*, which also includes rabbits and hares. Pikas are often referred to as “Rock Rabbits.” They spend their summer and early fall months building “haystacks” that provide the food necessary when they live under the snow in winter. The top photo below shows a Pika at work on its cache of plants, which can include hedsarum, gooseberry, willow, buffalo berry, lupine, vetch, dwarf huckleberry, evergreen sprigs, grasses, and sedges. They also collect Marmot and Coyote droppings which they store and consume, pre-

sumably to satisfy some nutritional requirement.

An easily accessible place to view Pikas is Rock Glacier in Peter Lougheed Park in Kananaskis Country. From Hwy 1 turn onto Hwy 40 and travel south for 65 kilometres. Look for the trailhead sign on your left. There is a small roadside parking lot and a short walk up to the interpretive trail. This location is just below the Highwood Pass summit.

Don Delaney



Pika Photos by Don Delaney

Birding Southeast Arizona

Southeast Arizona – essentially from Tucson to Nogales and east to the New Mexico Border – offers a special birding experience. Several types of desert habitat in the valleys shade upward through canyons into “sky island” mountain habitats. The region has 10 different habitats, each harbouring different species. Two of these are limited extensions of Mexican habitats, so some Mexican species just make it across the border, although not every year. Many of the canyons that go from low-elevation to high-elevation habitats have sycamore trees that provide many nesting holes where branches have come off.

More than 400 species could be found depending on time of year: in late spring when we went, about 250 are possible. During the 3 weeks we were there, we saw 184 species. Sixty of these were life birds for me, but many more were re-sightings of species I had seen only once before some 30 years ago.

My sister and I worked our way through the region from late May to mid-June. We followed the standard bird tour itinerary except that we added a couple of days to each of the locations where a birding tour might spend one day or sometimes just a morning. This gave us lots of time to explore, find birds, and as it turns out, avoid the mid-day sun! The temperatures were running 5 °C higher than normal with mid-day temperatures running 38–42 °C. It took us a few days to accept that both the birds and we needed shaded areas and not much movement in the afternoons. This worked out, as many of the birding “hotspots” (LOL) have sites with feeders and shade.

We visited sites around Tucson, Madera Canyon, Patagonia, California Gulch, Sierra Vista (three of five canyons), and the Chiricahua Mountains (from Portal on the east side).

Hummingbirds are a specialty of the area. We discovered quickly that the standard ones (Black-chinned, Broad-billed, and Magnificent) were widespread but that other species were most likely being seen at just one location. For example, Lucifer, Violet-crowned, and White-eared Hummingbirds were present at one spot each, while Blue-throated and Broad-tailed were at just a couple. We saw 10 of the 15 possible species; two of the possible species did not arrive in Arizona until later in the year, closer to what the locals call “the monsoon.”

Owls, nightjars, and poorwills are another group that can be very local. The first afternoon at Madera Canyon we were told to check with the owner of Madera Kubo B&B for the location of a Whiskered Screech Owl. I assumed we would need to hike somewhere at night, but she pointed across the road to a sycamore tree – and a Whiskered Screech Owl! It was in a day roost hole and while we were there was visible most days.

While we were photographing the screech owl, another birder alerted us to a Buff-collared Nightjar at the base of the canyon. We assumed it was calling after dark and were 10 minutes late: the bird had stopped calling. We went back the next night early. We were first there, but as the magic time approached a stream of birders arrived. We were with a lady who had heard it the night before but was still hoping for a chance to see it. As 7:45 approached everyone got quiet, and on cue the calling started. It called continuously for 6–7 minutes. After a pause, the calling started about 100 yards away. Again a pause, and another 100 yards further on: no one saw it move, but the description of its behaviour as hunting through mesquite bush after dark close to the ground makes seeing it unlikely. The birder’s handbook online shows little is really

known about this species. It is considered very rare north of the border, so we were quite privileged to find it in the only location where it was seen this year.

As we wandered about at night in Madera Canyon we found Common Poorwill and Elf Owl and heard a distant Mexican Whip-poor-will. In the Chiricahua Mountains we got a headlight view of the Mexican Whip-poor-will along with a “serenade” of a pair of males dueling with song – once one started, another would start trying to overwhelm the calls of the other – the calls got louder and faster as they went – not something on the recordings with Sibley’s! The “eyeshine” in the headlights was so intensely red that we thought someone had put emergency lights on the roadside before we saw the bird fly to the other side of the road. Also in the Chiricahuas, we were treated to a view of a male and female Elf Owl exchanging calls and trading places in their nest hole in a sycamore tree.

A major attraction of SE Arizona is the Elegant Trogon. It seemed that it could be found in most places where there were sycamore groves. But in spite of its size it is not a demonstrative bird – described in one handbook as remaining completely motionless in the leaves of sycamore trees. We heard one once in Madera Canyon, but couldn’t see it, and dipped on it at most other locations. Finally in the Chiricahuas, we got to a site about 7:00 in the morning and could hear one. When we walked closer we found it sitting on a dead branch in the open calling to its mate.

Many of the specialties of the region are not abundant. In the Chiricahuas we also sighted a Short-tailed Hawk, another scarce bird; only a dozen or so have been sighted this year. However, we were not able to track down Black-capped Gnatcatcher – one spot had a nest but the young had fledged a few days before, and it was the only pair in that canyon. We made a special visit to California Gulch (within a couple of kilometres of the Mexican border) with a guide to find the Five-striped Sparrow.

I mentioned above the phenomenon called “the monsoon” – roughly mid-July to the end of August when thunderstorms produce large volumes of rain, but we had begun to wonder where birds were getting water at other times. Most streams away from the valley bottoms were dry or had at most damp spots with occasional puddles. I’m not sure I have an answer, but we did see birds exploiting human sources such as a dripping tap. Man-made water sources (wastewater treatment and holding ponds) typically lower down are critical for many species such as the Black-bellied Whistling Duck, which we found at a shrinking pond near Rio Rico. We encountered shorebirds such as Long-billed Curlew, White-faced Ibis, and American Avocets at the wastewater ponds near Wilcox. In the Sonoran desert habitat around Tucson, we saw several species such as Pyrrhuloxia, Black-throated Sparrow, and House Finch feeding on the fruit of Saguaro cactus.

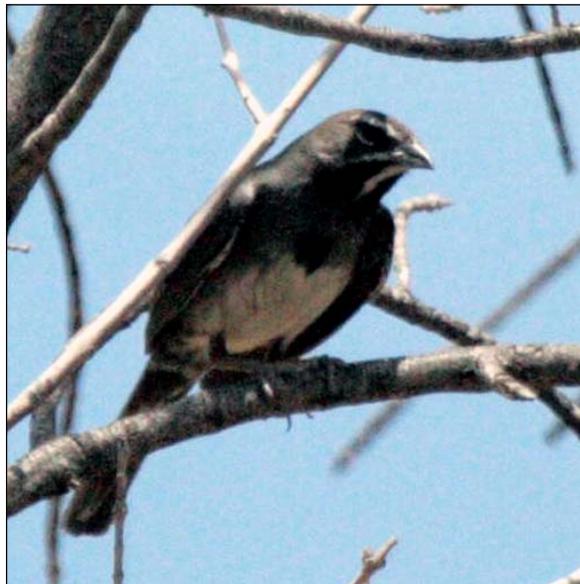
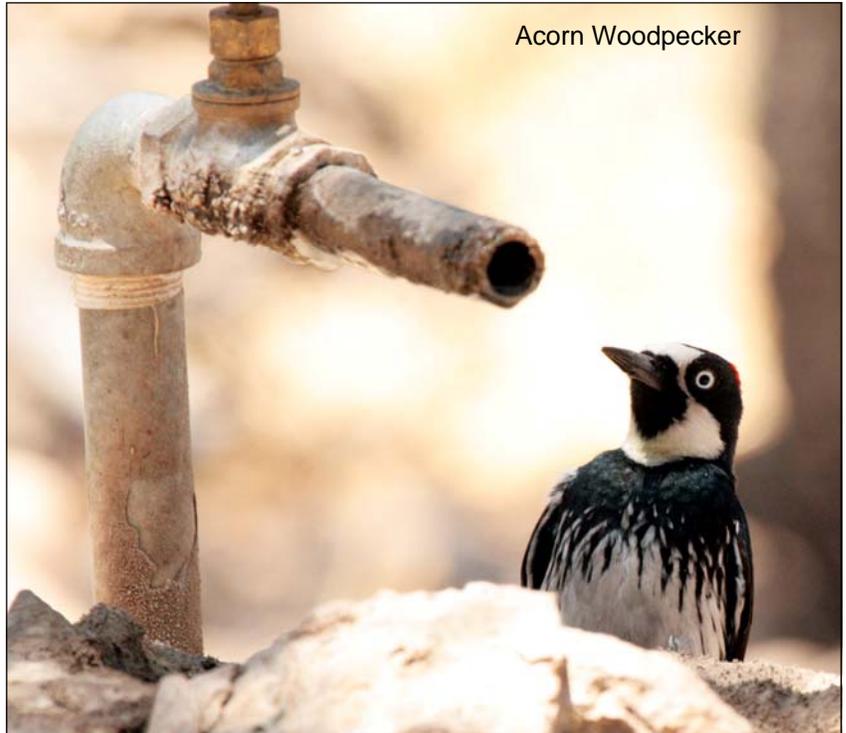
If you are thinking of visiting this area, two important resources are:

Birds of Southeastern Arizona. Richard C. Taylor. R.W. Morse Company. Olympia, Washington. 2010. This has individual species accounts with seasons and altitude/habitat graphs.

Finding Birds in Southeast Arizona. David Stejskal and G. H. Rosenberg. Tucson Audubon Society. 8th ed, 2011 (or more recent). This has detailed information on specific birding sites, including access and restrictions.

E-Bird and the Tucson Audubon website provide information on current sightings. If you are planning to stay at some of the birding lodges, it's best to book by the end of March.

Brian Stephens



Right, Five-striped Sparrow
Far right, Elegant Trogon

Photos by Brian Stephens

Members' Photos



Common Redpoll (l), House Wren (r), Backyard photos by Janice Hurlburt



Pika, Photo by Don Delaney