

THE PARKLAND NATURALIST



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Inside this issue

A Birthday Bittern	3	Indoor Meetings, Winter 2015 / 2016	14
Avard Sefton Mann	4	The Sounds Birds Make and What They're Telling Us	20
President's Report	5	Chasing Pelagics	22
ENC Awards – 2016	8	Field Trip Reports	24
Parkland Plant Notes	11	ENC Annual Banquet	30



Great Blue Heron (top), American Bittern (bottom left), Marsh Wren (bottom right), Photos by Ludo Bogaert

A Birthday Bittern

Over the years I have tried to get a glimpse of that elusive bird, the American Bittern. Without much success, I may add. However, as “birdwatchers” we just keep at it, and that I did.

While birding along the interpretive trail northwest of St. Albert in early May, I could hear that distinct call coming from somewhere out in the vast expanse of bullrushes and cattails. It’s a good thing we have other birds to keep ourselves occupied with – Northern Harriers doing their courtship flights; Marsh Wrens singing their hearts out from the tops of old tattered cattail heads, setting up territorial boundaries.

Closer to home we have the John E. Poole wetland in St. Albert, with a nice boardwalk zig-zagging through the centre of the area. Nature enthusiasts, photographers, dog walkers, and joggers can now enjoy viewing a wetland from within, so to speak, although I doubt that the joggers see or hear much with their headsets on.

It is this wetland we are going to focus on. For the past three years I have been hearing that intriguing call of the American Bittern here. It sounds like an old-fashioned hand-operated water pump, hence the folk name “slough pumper.” Sometimes it sounds so close you can almost “grab” it, but as for seeing the bird, NO!

Once in a while, when looking for soras, I do see a bittern flying in, at the last moment, just before it drops into the cattails, which in this time of year are ochre and pale brown, with lots of shadows, exactly the colours a bittern has. It could be standing right there, at the edge of this tangle with its neck and head stretched straight up. If it doesn’t move, you would never see it.

In 2014 I met a walker who stopped me with a question. “You are a birdwatcher, right? Can you tell me what kind of bird this is?” He pulled out his smart phone and

showed me an image. I could make neither head nor tail out of it and asked him if he could enlarge it. As if by magic, he moved a finger over the face of the phone, and what do I see? A bittern.

Unfortunately, it was a dead bittern. It shocked me. I told him what it was and a bit more about the bird itself that he did not know, not surprisingly for a non-birder. I asked him where he had found it and he said it was just off the trail near the Enjoy Centre, where he disposed of it near a garbage can. Wasting no time, I walked to the spot and found the bird. My suspicion about the bird’s demise turned out to be correct. The overhead power lines running alongside the wetland were most likely the cause. It had a large gash alongside its neck. What a shame, they are so beautiful.



“I had to laugh when I saw this image, definitely no selfie.”

Photo by Dale Scott

This year I have a more uplifting story on our local birdlife. After the spring snowmelt runoff and no rain to speak of, the water level of Big Lake and consequently the Sturgeon River got lower and lower. This resulted in more exposed shoreline, which in turn attracted birdlife, especially waders. Great Blue Herons were observed standing right in the middle of the river, catching Northern Pike with amazing success. The bittern was heard again and sometimes seen flying

into this wetland. By the third week in July a few Sunday walkers reported having flushed a bittern from Nadeau Pond. It flew north toward the river.

Since I was on my way back, I thought of taking a look at the rudimentary canoe and kayak launching area below the Bless shelter. That idea turned out to be a good one.

I scanned the opposite edge of the river through my binoculars and spotted the bittern about 100 metres away. It is now or never, I told myself. Slowly working my way through the dewy wet grasses I tried to get opposite the bittern. The results of this effort were some far-away pic-

On the cover, American Bittern, Photo by Ludo Bogaert

tures and two soaking wet shoes. Good thing I had my sitting box with me. This box allowed me to get right up to the water's edge. This way I could look across the river without interfering bullrushes and keep a low profile, although I slowly sank down into the mud. I think you get the picture!

Sightings like this do not go unnoticed. Several of my photographer friends got nice images. During the following days I kept checking on the bittern's whereabouts and noticed a pattern. There were actually a pair of birds foraging near the river. They would feed for some time and then fly away toward Big Lake, only to return a while later and do exactly the same thing. They had to be feeding young somewhere. I developed a plan – if I could get my kayak on the river and sit quietly along the shore, I would have a chance to get a bit closer.

One early morning in the beginning of August I went for it. While unloading the kayak I noticed another person drive up. It happened to be someone I knew, by the name of Dale Scott. He walked down to the river but was back in a flash. “Ludo,” he said, “The bittern is there,” and back he went. I wheeled the kayak to the river just in time to see the bittern fly away. Perfect timing.

Getting launched was a bit of a task. Because of the low water I was barely floating. With a kayak, that tells you something. I sat in muck. With enormous effort I managed to get to where I could paddle a bit.

Looking over my shoulder I saw a bittern fly by me and land exactly where I hoped it would go. Now I was caught off-guard and froze, sitting as low as possible in my boat. Everything went into slow-motion. I started to take pictures but could not keep my eyes off this beautiful bird. By now I had reduced the distance by half, at least.

The bittern went about its business as usual, seemingly unconcerned about my presence. With long strides it walked along the edge of the vegetation, dotted with the white flowers of Arrowhead plants, picking insects from the vegetation and catching small sticklebacks. At times it would disappear into the vegetation only to come out again several metres farther down. With the least possible movements I followed the bird, getting closer and closer. It could not go any better. Suddenly the bittern turned and jumped into flight, going south toward Big Lake as it had so many times before.

Satisfied with the results, I returned to the launch site. Something on the shore caught my eye. It was Dale. He had sat there all that time, watching me closing the gap and taking photos. He was almost as happy as I was.

To top it off, this happened on my 80th birthday, and I could not have wished for a nicer present.

Ludo Bogaert

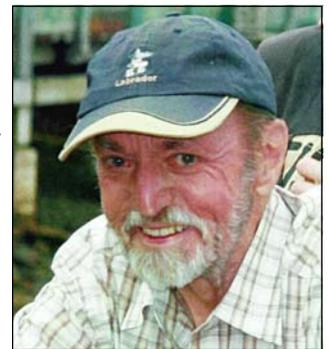
Avard Sefton Mann

Av Mann passed away peacefully on February 26, 2016, at the age of 88. Av was an active member in the Edmonton Bird Club, participating in many Christmas Bird Counts in Edmonton, most often in my zone when I was Zone Captain for the southwest zone 10. He also helped me in monitoring the Edgar T. Jones Natural Area on Hastings Lake, when the Edmonton Bird Club was the official Steward for that natural area.

Av received the Robert Turner Recognition Award for 2003.

Dave Ealey

Photo provided by Av's family



Editorial

The annual ENC Banquet was another success thanks to **Toby-Anne Reimer**, Banquet Coordinator, and to **Alan Hingston**, who arranged for **Kevin Van Tighem** to be the speaker. Congratulations to all the Award winners.

Ludo Bogaert celebrated his 80th birthday last year. Ludo has submitted many interesting articles to our magazine over the years, and we wish him a belated Happy Birthday. Please see Ludo's "birthday" article on page 3.

The deadline for submissions to the next issue of *The Parkland Naturalist* is July 31, 2016.

Dawne Colwell, PN Editor

President's Report, Winter 2016



Our President, Ann Carter

A new ENC group is born! Named the **Land Stewardship Group**, it enables interested club members to participate in specific projects at local conservation properties. Currently we have three locations under consideration: Larch Sanctuary within the city, Bunchberry Meadows adjacent to Edmonton, and Coates Property in Leduc County. We expect ENC projects to include field trips, surveys of flora and fauna, placement and monitoring of wildlife cameras, and sound recordings. Details about activities and opportunities will be emailed to members as they become available. Guided by the Edmonton and Area Land Trust, our first LSG project involves building, installing, and monitoring bird nest boxes. Donations received in memory of Ray Cromie will be directed to this project.

Thanks to **Kim Blomme** and her team, we hosted another successful Christmas Bird Count last December. Hundreds of observers tallied 55 species and over 27 thousand birds. Due to costs and environmental concerns, we are reviewing the number of paper brochures mailed and considering other options for the 2016 CBC.

Once again, **Alan Hingston** organized a great program over the past indoor season. Large numbers of club members enjoyed excellent speakers on nature topics ranging from Alberta's changing climate to Peregrine Falcons in Alberta to the world of mites and midges. Well done, Alan! Thanks also go out to **Gerry Fox** for setting up refreshments for us every month.

Karen Lindsay (birds), **Colleen Raymond** (bugs/spiders), and **Patsy Cotterill** (plants) have been providing an assortment of study group topics, thanks to enthusiastic presenters. Of special note is the increasing attendance at Plant Study meetings. The room at Percy Page Centre was filled for Derek Johnson's talk on the Clyde Fen – there was a lot of interest in attractive, insect-devouring plants! Our classroom sessions finish up in April, allowing more time for outdoor application of what we've learned. **Hubert Taube** reported that the **Conservation Group**, working with the City of Edmonton, has gained a commitment to upgrade signage in White-mud Ravine. Members of the ENC participated in placing the original signs many years ago, and we hope to include portions of the old installation where possible.



Round-leaved Sundew, Photo by Derek Johnson

Dozens of members enjoyed our annual banquet, arranged by **Toby-Anne Reimer** and **Alan Hingston**. Good food, good company, and an excellent presentation by Kevin Van Tighem on "Land Use

and Shrinking Rivers” made for another successful evening.

Congratulations

Five very deserving individuals received ENC awards this year! Working within the club and the community, these folks have demonstrated dedication, integrity, quality, and caring in their volunteer work. Congratulations to **Jim Lange, Gerald Romanchuk, Steve Knight, Judy Johnson, and Marc Demers**. Details are available on page 8.

Recent Club Highlights

Jim Brohman’s presentation on seabirds in the Shetlands was very well received. His humorous anecdotes about the few humans and many birds present on the islands kept the large audience completely engaged.



Photo by Steve Knight

Loved those puffin photos!

The Bird Study session on birdsong led by **Connor Charchuk** gave us lots of new information. Some bird surveys are moving to sound recordings to obtain scientific data, rather than relying exclusively on visual observations. Connor suggested some equipment for hobbyists, and I’ve seen some recording devices being raised on recent field trips as we try this new technology. **John Acorn** and **Martin Sharp** added to this topic, showing what can be done with high-end equipment. It’s not always about specific bird identifications; the soundscape of a particular habitat as a whole also can be enlightening.

Our Partners

Nature Alberta has joined Nature Canada in support of a new initiative to keep cats safe and save bird lives. For information, visit catsandbirds.ca.

Edmonton and Area Land Trust has secured a new property known as Coates. This eighty acre area is located north of Calmar in Leduc County and is now protected for everyone forever. Visit ealt.ca for details.

Future Events

The **Nature Appreciation Weekend** will be at Miquelon Provincial Park August 12–14. Mark your calendar.

Our **Annual General Meeting** will be held in September. All members are invited to attend.

Respectfully submitted by **Ann Carter**,
President, Edmonton Nature Club

Questions or concerns? Members may contact the executive using the General Inquiries link on the ENC website home page, bottom right at edmonton-natureclub.org.



Loesel's Twayblade Orchid, Photo by David Fielder

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Membership

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

Membership Rates for 2015/16:

Household: \$40.00/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

ENC AWARDS – 2016

The Chickadee Award

This year we're pleased to honour two "unsung heroes." These dedicated volunteers have worked diligently to benefit the club and its members.

Judy Johnson has been assisting with our magazine, *The Parkland Naturalist*, for several years. As the copy editor, Judy does her job with care and concern, ensuring all the authors' messages are clearly heard.



Judy Johnson, Photo by Jim Brohman



Marc Demers, Photo by Gerry Fox

Marc Demers sat at the welcome table for all our program speaker presentations. Over many years he provided information and a smile to everyone attending. Marc also assisted with the club's annual financial audit.

Nominations submitted by Dawne Colwell and James Fox, respectively; details provided by the ENC Awards Committee



The Robert Turner Appreciation Award

Steve Knight was presented with this award in recognition of the significant volunteer contributions he's made over a number of years, in multiple ways, by providing his expertise and guidance to the club and its members.

"Steve has been a member of our local natural history clubs for about 20 years. In that time he's been a constant, positive presence at field trips, meetings, and other club events. Steve has led numerous field trips. He's been a guide on the Snow Goose Chase buses since the beginning of that event. He's given presentations to the club. He's volunteered to store equipment at his home. Steve volunteers on several bird counts. And most recently he's joined with Gerry Fox to run and moderate the club's Yahoo Group.

"Several club members have commented on Steve's cheerful willingness to help out anybody having technical difficulties, especially with their camera. If you need someone to 'twiddle' with your camera settings, Steve's your man!"

Gerald Romanchuk

"I knew Robert Turner personally, and remember his dedication of a significant portion of time to club activities. He was particularly involved in setting up field trips. Steve has shown the same kind of long-term commitment to something that he believes in."

Lu Carbyn



Steve receives his award, Photo by Alan Hingston

The Great Gray Owl Outstanding Service Award

Jim Lange is the very deserving recipient of this award, given as special recognition to an ENC member who has demonstrated decades of outstanding dedication and service to the club.

“Jim has been an active member of our three local natural history clubs since 1979. He’s served on the executive of all three clubs. For several years he was on the executive of both the Edmonton Bird Club and the Edmonton Natural History Club at the same time. Jim organized field trips for both clubs during those years and was actually president of both clubs during the same year!

Jim has done numerous other jobs for our clubs: liaison between EBC and ENHC, club representative on the Nature Alberta board, and banquet organizer, to name just a few. When the EBC and ENHC started the merger process, Jim played an integral role, taking on “exciting” tasks such as writing new bylaws!

“Jim has been a big part of the Snow Goose Chase since its inception, and Tofield’s Snow Goose Festival before that. He’s led countless bus tours, organized scouts, and pored over the maps setting up bus routes. And filled up his lunch plate with mashed potatoes!

“For some of us in the club who’ve been around for Jim’s field trip—leading days, Jim was well known for taking us on looooooooooong hikes. If you went on a Jim Lange trip you knew you were in for a walk. He’s the reason the term “birdless death-march” came about! But seriously, going out with Jim we saw a lot of great birds and we also learned a lot about wildlife tracks, plants, butterflies, and other aspects of natural history. And we learned where all the Fall Dinners were held and how to pile up as many mashed potatoes as possible!”

Gerald Romanchuk



Jim Lange (left) receives the Great Gray Owl Outstanding Service Award from Gerald Romanchuk

Photo by Steve Knight

The Edgar T. Jones Conservation Award

It was with great pleasure that we announced **Gerald Romanchuk** as the recipient of this award given in recognition of an individual who has made a significant contribution to the knowledge, appreciation, or conservation of the natural history of the Edmonton region.

“A very broad spectrum of people are interested in nature. Some find a special fancy for birds. But simply being interested in birds does not necessarily lead to pursuing birdwatching as a hobby. A smaller percentage of individuals get caught up in the process of wanting to learn more and become birdwatchers. People have the choice of going it alone and, over many years, acquire the necessary skills to get good at it. Others get started, but simply cannot devote the amount of time necessary to perfect the technical aspects of becoming a good birder. If I meet any such person I will tell them to go on a field trip with the Edmonton Nature Club – there you can learn a great deal without investing many years of trial and error. When that happens, I keep my fingers crossed that the leader in charge of the trip is going to be Gerald Romanchuk.

“Over the years Gerald has shown the patience, the aptitude, the dedication, and the desire to become a master in the technical aspects of bird identification. And he genuinely likes people. That is clearly evident in the way he unselfishly gives of his time and shares his knowledge with birders at all levels of experience and abilities.

“The contribution that Gerald’s efforts have made to citizen science is enormous. However, that contribution goes beyond just mentoring people on field trips. He has been very generous in sharing his photographs for educational purposes. The quality and repertoire of Gerald’s photos are the very best available in Alberta at this time.

“Gerald Romanchuk has also been a solid supporter of both the former Bird Club and Edmonton Natural History

Club, and now the Edmonton Nature Club. He served in various capacities as president, board member, and editor of *The Parkland Naturalist*.”

Lu Carbyn

“Mentored by Edgar T. Jones, Gerald Romanchuk learned his lessons well and, like E.T. Jones, he inspires and teaches others, as well as making contributions to citizen science by gathering and submitting data on birds.

“Since joining the Edmonton Nature Club in 1998, Gerald has led groups through our Edmonton parks as well as out to the Alberta borders, pointing out the magnificence and diversity in our part of the world, all in his relaxed, humorous manner. He is remarkable in his generosity, freely sharing his time and knowledge with enthusiasts of all levels of experience. Whether it’s an ENC event, an evening at a local seniors’ centre or working with the City of Edmonton’s Master Naturalist program, Gerald provides a quality experience for participants.

“Quick to recognize a teachable moment, Gerald constantly provides guidance and detailed information at every opportunity. Gerald forced me ;) to learn things, and I’m sure many can say the same. As an example, he kept inquiring about my four-letter bird codes until I got them (mostly) right! And there’s something about the tertial feathers on a Dowitcher...

“Also like Edgar T. Jones, Gerald is an artist. Carefully crafting his photographs, he goes on to share his work, inspiring folks to appreciate nature and observe it more closely.

“Although Gerald does admit he fed a spider to a chickadee on an ENC nature walk, he is very deserving of the conservation award for his years of contributions to the knowledge and appreciation of the natural world in the Edmonton region.”

Ann Carter



Gerald Romanchuk, Photo by Steve Knight

Parkland Plant Notes – Willows: All You Ever Wanted to Know

Plants of the North

Probably none of the early harbingers of spring in northern climes is heralded more than pussy willow – the appearance of strings of white, fuzzy beads along the young shoots of willows in March and April.



Old western shining willow tree at Big Island, SW Edmonton, June 19, 2015.

Willows (genus *Salix*) number some 400 species worldwide, and are plants of the northern hemisphere in Eurasia and North America (including Greenland). Of these, Canada has approximately 127 recognized species, varieties, and hybrids; Alberta's share is 37 discrete species, excluding varieties and hybrids. Deciduous shrubs and trees, willows may form extensive commu-

nities around wetlands, along watercourses, in depressions in meadows and fields, and in ravines and peatlands, and are often well represented as individuals in moist forests. Thus they are important components of ecosystems.



Young shoot of false mountain willow showing the relatively broad leaves of this species and well-developed stipules at their bases. Wagner Natural Area, August 6, 2014.

Characteristically, willows have elongated, lance-shaped leaves, pointed at the tip and often toothed, although in some species the leaves are ovate or round. Also typical of the genus is the presence of small leaf-like appendages called stipules at the base of the short leaf stalks.



Male catkins of beaked willow showing stamens in various stages of opening. Rio Terrace, May 22, 2009.



Young female catkins of beaked willow showing green ovaries topped by stigmas. Hodgson Wetland, May 23, 2014.

Reproduction in Willows

The male and female flowers are borne on separate plants, a phenomenon called dioecy. The flowers of both sexes are tiny, lack sepals and petals, and are crowded on an axis which elongates to form an erect catkin. Each male flower consists

of 2–7 stamens (depending on species) inserted at the base of a white-hairy scale along with a nectar-bearing gland. The female flower consists simply of a single ovary and a nectar gland, also inserted on a hairy scale. It is the hairiness of these scales that gives the catkins their “pussy” look when they first begin to push off the single bud scale covering the flower bud. The ovary develops into a bottle-shaped capsule containing many minute seeds each equipped with a “parachute” of white hairs. Floating masses of these seeds on air produce the “willow fluff” so evident in late spring or early summer.

Willows are insect-pollinated, their nectar attracting various kinds of insects, and their abundant pollen early bees. This is in contrast to the poplars (*Populus*), the other main genus in the willow family (*Salicaceae*) in Canada. Poplars have pendent rather than erect catkins and their flowers are pollinated by wind. I have a large Drummond’s willow (*Salix drummondiana*) in my back yard, grown from a cutting I made from a shrub growing in Wedgewood Ravine, which literally hums with visiting insects on a warm day in spring. The seeds of both willows and poplars are, however, dispersed by wind.

Willows have a well-developed fibrous root system which can sometimes be seen when the bank of a stream is eroded away, exposing those of a bank-side shrub. The roots’ enthusiasm for seeking water is well known to Edmonton householders who happen to have old, leaky sewer pipes!

Importance of Willows to Other Organisms

As well as providing nectar and pollen as part of a pollination strategy, willow foliage provides food for a number of lepidoptera, including our common mourning cloak butterfly. In 2011 there was a population explosion of the willow leaf



Pussy willow (*Salix discolor*), showing catkins dispersing seeds and young tender leaves. Wagner Natural Area, May 22, 2010.

miner moth, *Micrurapteryx salicifoliella*. Thousands of willow shrubs, especially noticeable as one drove northwards, had turned brown by late summer, their leaves chewed up by the larvae. The epidemic was probably caused by warm winters, allowing more adults to overwinter, and warm, dry summers, allowing longer time for the larvae to develop. Although these infestations do not appear to be fatal to the willows, despite adding to their drought stress, they may reduce the value of browse for moose and other animals in the far north. Many types of aphids suck the leaf and stem juices of willows, and are in turn tended by ants for their honeydew. In the Edmonton area, the willow and poplar borer, *Cryptorhynchus lapathi*, seems to be a problem. The adult weevil lays its eggs in the bases of willow stems of a certain size and the resulting larvae feed on the woody internal tissues until the punky stem collapses and falls prostrate on the ground. This insect also causes nasty sap-bleeding wounds in mature aspen, making them prone to fungal infections.

The human uses of willows are legion: as a medicine (salicin is a precursor of salicylic acid which as acetylsalicylic acid becomes Aspirin), in basketry, in carpentry, for fishing nets and “diamond willow” walking sticks. In more recent years willows have been grown for biomass or biofuel, for biofiltration and sewage waste management, and for reclamation.

Some Notable Local Willows

While as a genus (*Salix*) willows are easy to recognize (ah, yes, it’s a willow), as with many genera with numerous, superficially similar, species, distinguishing individual species can take some investment of time and practice. It is possible to recognize most willow species by eye once learned, and they can be keyed out using vegetative characters, as flowers are often not available. The Canadian guru of willows, Dr. George W. Argus of Ontario, has developed an electronic key that allows you to use the characteristics you have in hand to progressively eliminate species until you arrive at an identification.

Although most willows occur in wet situations, differences in habitat can be a great help in identification. Of the 14 species of willow in Alberta that occur in primarily mountain habitats, the dwarf species arctic willow (*Salix arctica*) and snow willow (*Salix nivalis*), the latter with tiny, round leaves and minute catkins, are readily recognizable both by habit and by alpine habitat. Barratt’s willow (*Salix barrattiana*) forms dense grey-green patches on subalpine and alpine meadows both below and above the treeline. Drummond’s willow and tall blueberry willow (*Salix pseudomyrsinites*) line the mountain creeks and rivers.

Closer to home, sandbar willow (*Salix interior*) forms colonies of thin-stemmed shrubs with very narrow leaves along the floodplains of Whitemud Creek. Hungry willow (*Salix famelica*), a bushy shrub with greyish-yellow stems and delicate pointed leaves, is also common along our watercourses, as is pussy willow (*Salix discolor*), which can also grow successfully on somewhat higher ground, for example on top of embankments or in woods. The relatively low willows with glowing red stems that you see forming patches in fields at this time of year will likely be basket willow (*Salix petiolaris*). One of the commoner upland species of willow is beaked willow (*Salix bebbiana*). One of the most beautiful sights in spring is a



Extensive patches of grey-green Barratt's willow (*Salix barratiana*) on the west slope of Cardinal Divide, August, 2012.

male beaked willow bush, a mass of yellow when the stamens are open and shedding pollen (a stage known as anthesis). I don't understand why more people don't plant this species in their yards as an ornamental! (Beaked willow forms extensive patches in the fescue foothills south of Turner Valley and since willow seeds require moist bare ground or mud in which to germinate, I have always been curious as to the conditions under which these willows established. The hills are rain-soaked, but nevertheless well-drained, and densely clothed in fescue grass.) Also particularly attractive is a tall-growing willow with exceptionally long, dark-green pointed leaves and bottle-brush-like male catkins, western shining willow (*Salix lasiandra* var. *lasiandra*), which grows along watercourses, seepages, or floodplains. The back channel of Big Island, in southwest Edmonton, supports many young bushes that have apparently germinated following flooding of the channel.

Visitors to Wagner Natural Area should be able to find two low-growing willows, Athabasca willow (*Salix athabascensis*) and hoary willow (*Salix candida*), which help to make up the string vegetation between the fen pools. Hoary willow is easily recognizable, as its narrow leaves have a dense white felt beneath and distinctly white-hairy capsules. Taller willows with a penchant for peatlands include flat-leaved willow (*Salix planifolia*), false mountain willow (*Salix pseudomonticola*), and balsam willow (*Salix pyrifolia*), the last most easily found around the black spruce bogs of Elk Island National Park.

Three willows, all trees and native to Eurasia, are widely grown in Edmonton: laurel willow (*Salix pentandra*), rather similar to the native shining willow; crack willow (*Salix xfragilis*), as its name suggests, rather prone to shedding a heap of branches in a storm; and the less common white willow (*Salix alba*), whose cultivars and hybrids have given rise to the popularly cultivated weeping willows.

May is Willow Flower Month

Starting in 2014, phenology guru and Plant Watch coordinator Elisabeth Beaubien, Varina Crisfield of the Alberta Biodiversity Monitoring Institute, and I tagged a number of willow species in Whitemud Creek Nature Reserve near Fox Drive (an area that includes a calcareous seepage, thus increased willow diversity). Our objective is to observe flowering and fruiting times, leaf emergence and development, and general health of the shrubs over several years. Results so far confirm what we surmised: that willows don't all flower at once, but in a definite, if overlapping, sequence according to species, chiefly throughout the month of May. Pussy willow and flat-leaved willow are the earliest, followed closely by tree-like willow (*Salix arbusculoides*) and false mountain willow, all shedding pollen in early May. In all these species the flower catkins arise directly from the twig before leaf emergence and are said to be precocious. Our later species, flowering in late May to early June, included beaked willow, sandbar willow, and western shining willow, all species in which the catkins are borne on leafy twiglets and the leaves have opened by the time of anthesis.

Although many willow species can be propagated as cuttings, and some species can even root from detached branches, most reproduction occurs by seed. Willows' early-flowering, early-fruiting strategy presumably has the advantage that the seeds are dispersing at the same time as the bare soil and moisture needed for their germination are available following spring floods. The latest-flowering species of all is the peatland denizen, autumn willow (*Salix serissima*). This species flowers in June and its fruits persist through autumn, conspicuous as cottony white tufts scattered amongst the leafless branches. Since peatlands are often continuously wet, opportunities for germination are presumably independent of flooding.



Autumn willow (*Salix serissima*) in Wagner Natural Area, showing seeds dispersing on October 25, 2005.

Willows deserve our curiosity, respect, and appreciation as important players in our northern ecosystems.

Patsy Cotterill

Indoor Meetings, Winter 2015 / 2016

One Hundred Years in the Life of a Forest in Central Alberta

Dr. Lu Carbyn was our Birds of Christmas speaker on December 19, 2015. Lu and his wife Jayne Carre are well known to club members as owners of the Wildbird General Store and sponsors of the Edmonton Christmas Bird Count since 2001. In 2011, Lu and Jayne bought a property located 130 km north of Edmonton and immediately south of Cross Lake. For this parcel of land, which consists of two quarter-sections, Lu was interested in its present-day biodiversity, how it has changed in the last century, and what it might look like in one hundred years. Although the property is “natural” habitat, Lu was aware it had been highly modified by previous occupants.

Using a series of historical maps and aerial photos as illustrations, Lu showed that back in 1920 the land was accessed only by hunters and trappers. From 1929 until 1942, the area was homesteaded, and there is evidence of clearing and burning bush in or-

der to grow grain and hay. Through the 1960s there was increased clearing for farming in this boreal forest/agriculture transition zone, although Lu’s property was a temporary summer retreat, with its owners absent for most of the year. By the 1980s the aerial photos show numerous “straight lines” with considerable evidence of oil and gas wells and seismic survey cut lines in the area. Both quarters were selectively logged between 1994 and 2002. More recently, adjoining land to the north of Lu’s property has been cleared for ranching. The remnants of historic activities remain on Lu’s two quarters, but in 2015 there is evidence of naturalization of some areas of his property: areas cleared in the 1950s for grazing have now reverted to forest by secondary growth, and former hayfields along creeks are now swamps as a result of beaver activity.

Lu and his students have undertaken three years (2012–2015) of breeding bird surveys, recording the number of singing males (number of territories) on his property. The ten most numerous species of breeding birds are as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Species abundance as shown by numbers of displaying males, 2012–2015

Species	2012	2013	2015	3-year total
Tennessee Warbler	16	8	21	45
Red-eyed Vireo	14	5	9	45
Ovenbird	9	5	11	28
Yellow-rumped Warbler	7	5	8	20
White-throated Sparrow	7	4	8	19
Chipping Sparrow	8	4	5	17
Ruby-crowned Kinglet	8	1	5	14
Hermit Thrush	7	1	1	9
Rose-breasted Grosbeak	4	1	4	9
Clay-colored Sparrow	2	2	4	8

Although the east quarter has more diverse habitat, including mature jack pine and a broad band of wetlands along a meltwater channel, it has fewer species and individuals. Rare and endangered species on the property included Olive-sided Flycatcher and Connecticut Warbler, a rare moth, and two species of rare fern: lance-leaved grape fern and leather grape

fern. Lu was keen to compare the fauna of his property with that of ranchlands, which are the predominant land use in the area. His surveys of an adjoining ranching property revealed only half the number of bird species, ten, and these were common species such as Savannah, Clay-colored, and Song Sparrows and House Wrens.



*Connecticut Warbler - one of the rare species found on Lu's property.
Photo by Gerald Romanchuk*

Seabird Photography in the Shetlands

Jim Brohman presented the first indoor meeting of the new year on January 15, 2016.

The Shetland Isles are located 160 km north of mainland Scotland, and their capital, Lerwick, is closer to Bergen, the capital of Norway, than it is to Edinburgh, the Scottish capital. The Shetlands are an archipelago with over one hundred islands, of which fifteen are inhabited. There are four main islands, in addition to Shetland Mainland (which contains the capital Lerwick); the largest islands are Unst, Yell, and Fetlar. The cliffs on these islands and on the innumerable small rocky islets provide important breeding sites for seabirds in the north Atlantic.

Jim noted some of the unique features of the Shetland's lifestyle: the rental car was tiny, the passenger

ferry was often little more than a dinghy, and the roads were narrow and more suited for hiking than driving. Jim's description and photos showed that the landscape was rugged, treeless, and very green, and the weather was, how best to describe it...cool. At least the natives were friendly.

Shetland is of great interest to the naturalist. Seabirds are particularly numerous, as Shetland is the main breeding ground for many species. An estimated 100 million seabirds breed there. Jim and his wife visited a number of important sites protected as nature reserves, including Sumburgh Head, Hermaness, Noss, and Keen of Hamar. They visited the Broch of Mousa, an Iron Age round tower, to view Storm-Petrels nesting in the walls. The birds return to their nest sites at night to avoid marauding gulls and skuas. Twenty-one seabird species breed on the

Indoor Meetings, Winter 2015 / 2016 (continued)

islands, and easily observed species include puffins, gannets, guillemots, kittiwakes, fulmars, cormorants, skuas, and petrels.

Jim's presentation focused on four species: Northern Gannet, Atlantic Puffin, Great Skua, and Northern Fulmar. He brought specimens from the Royal Alberta Museum, which together with his excellent photos, illustrated some of the adaptations to a life

spent largely at sea. For example, tubenoses (e.g., Northern Fulmar) can drink seawater and excrete excess salt from an enlarged nasal gland at the base of the bill. All these species are colonial nesters; to be successful, a colony must be free of ground predators such as rats and cats. Jim noted concerns over the supply of sand eels, a major food source for young puffins, which are diminishing as the Atlantic Ocean water temperatures are increasing.



Jim Brohman and friend (an Arctic Skua a.k.a. Parasitic Jaeger), Photo by Steve Knight

Management and Recovery of the Peregrine Falcon in Western Canada

On February 19, 2016, Provincial Wildlife Status Biologist Gordon Court told us the sorry story of the decline of Peregrine Falcons in Alberta until they were extirpated in the 1960s, and the extraordinary efforts made to bring about their recent recovery. Gord noted that coming close to losing a species has happened before and could happen again, unless the lessons of previous episodes are learned.

The decline in peregrines occurred as a result of the introduction of organochlorine pesticides after World War II. These substances don't exist naturally but are compounds containing carbon, hydrogen,

and chlorine that were developed as nerve poisons toxic to insects. These toxins have various formulations and include DDT, Lindane, Heptachlor, Aldrin, and PCBs. They have characteristics that are both beneficial and negative, depending on the circumstances. They are very stable (the half-life of DDT is sixty years) and they are easily dispersed, being fat soluble. These are good properties for killing the larvae of insects such as mosquitoes that are vectors for malaria which, historically, has caused the death of millions of people.

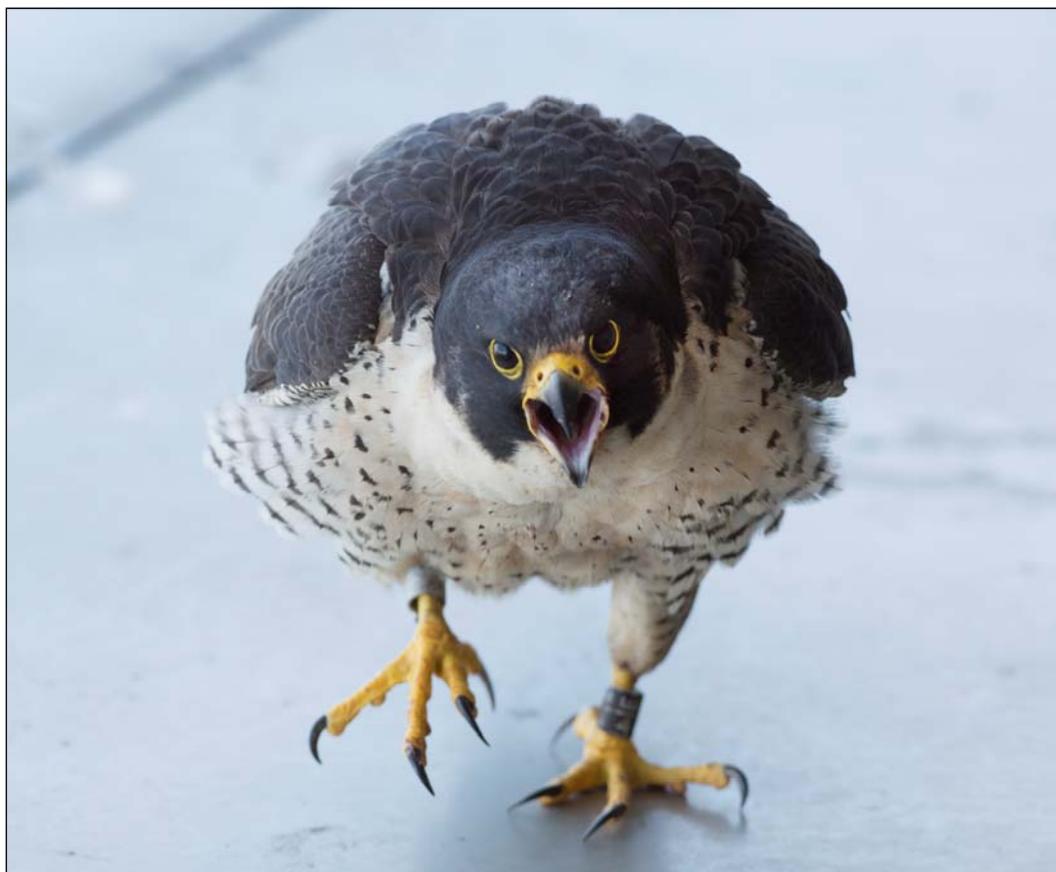
However, in the food chain these same chemical characteristics cause the toxin to biomagnify within certain species. The "problem" was discovered by accident. Pigeon fanciers in the UK were losing pi-

geons and suspected they were being taken by predatory falcons. The researcher they called upon to investigate, Derek Ratcliffe, visited a number of peregrine nest sites and found that adult birds were present but were not rearing any young. The peregrines did not cause the loss of racing pigeons, The peregrines were laying eggs, but they were not hatching because the eggs were being broken during brooding. Ratcliffe compared the eggshell thickness of these broken peregrine eggs with those in museum collections dating from 1870 to 1975 and found that after 1947 the thickness of eggshells changed, coincident with the introduction of DDT. There is an inverse relationship between DDE (a breakdown product of DDT) and eggshell thickness. The accumulation of only 15–20 ppm in the body fat of a peregrine causes it to lay thin-shelled eggs.

By 1970 only one pair of peregrines was left in Alberta, and the government decided to undertake a captive breeding program based at Wainwright. Gord accorded due credit to the Canadian Wildlife Service staff, notably Phil and Helen Trefry and Ursula Banasch, who discovered how to hatch the

eggs and then care for the offspring before they could be released from hack boxes. The program was successful in that hacked birds started coming back, not to cliff nest sites, but to downtown high-rises. Many club members remember the pair (Bow and Arrow) on the Telus building in Edmonton in 1981. The following year, a second pair nested in Calgary, coincidentally also on a Telus building.

Although Canada banned the use of DDT in 1969 and the United States banned it in 1972, pesticide use continued in South American countries where peregrine prey species overwintered and accumulated these toxins. However, GC analysis of tissue samples showed that as the DDE levels came down, the productivity levels of the peregrines increased, and a good growth rate in peregrine populations has occurred since the 1980s. From a single pair in 1970, the provincial population now totals 70 pairs. Peregrines have been taken off the endangered species list. Today they breed mostly on structures such as bridges, high-rise buildings, and power-plant stacks. It will be interesting to see, as numbers increase and there is competition for nest sites, whether they reoccupy the river bluff nest sites of their ancestors.



A hostile Peregrine parent, Photo by Gordon Court

Indoor Meetings, Winter 2015 / 2016 (continued)



Conserving Natural Areas

On March 18, 2016, Stephanie Weizenbach, Outreach Coordinator with the Edmonton and Area Land Trust (EALT), took us on a virtual tour of five of the seven properties that are managed by EALT. The Trust conserves local natural areas to benefit people, wildlife, and the environment. It accepts donations of ecologically significant land through a transfer of ownership or a conservation easement, an agreement between the landowner and EALT registered on the land title. Property transfer can sometimes be the result of an ecogift, resulting in a tax credit to the landowner for donating ecologically significant property for conservation purposes. The effects of these arrangements are numerous and wide-ranging, including protection of the environment, preservation of our cultural and natural heritage, and aesthetic, physical, and emotional benefits for people who visit these areas.

Stephanie used various media to describe the five properties:

Coates Property. Although this area is not yet open to the public, we were treated to a video captured by drone of rugged Willow Creek, a tributary of the North Saskatchewan River southwest of Devon.

Glory Hills. Stephanie showed photos of a variety of flora and fauna to demonstrate the range of species and habitat in this area north of Stony Plain, in the County of Parkland.

Pipestone Creek. Using historic aerial photos, Stephanie showed how the scars of gravel mining from the 1960s have been mitigated by planting over 30,000 native trees, mostly white spruce, trembling aspen, and balsam poplar. Stephanie elaborated on some of the difficulties

in managing properties that are accessible to quadders and snowmobilers, whose activities create ruts, cause erosion, and damage the planted trees. EALT hopes to limit future incursions by building fences and posting signs. Pipestone Creek is located southeast of Edmonton in Wetaskiwin County near Coal Lake.

Boisvert's Greenwood. Stephanie showed a series of photos taken by members of Images Alberta Camera Club to highlight the seasonal beauty of the aspen parkland northeast of Morinville. She noted that geocaching attracts families to the property, and the EALT encourages this activity.

Golden Ranches. Located in the Cooking Lake area, this is the best known of the EALT properties. It is also the largest, at 565 ha (1400 acres). Several other owners are involved, including Alberta Fish and Game, Nature Conservancy Canada, Alberta Conservation Association, and Ducks Unlimited. In a process similar to that undertaken at Pipestone Creek, over a quarter of a million trees have been planted by The Carbon Farmer, a cooperative arrangement that works well for both the EALT and the company. Noxious weeds can be a problem in conservation properties, and Golden Ranches is no exception. Stephanie described the measures necessary to eradicate thistles and prevent the seeds from spreading when these plants are cut and pulled.

"Conservation is a community effort" was the message of Stephanie's presentation. She noted that although EALT has only three staff members, over 150 volunteers contribute over two thousand hours annually. Mark Tempest, ENC member and EALT volunteer, described the variety of tasks he has performed: clearing barbed wire, cutting weeds, locating nest boxes and loon nesting platforms, pounding posts...the list goes on. Mark said that "more hands make light work" and encouraged ENC members to volunteer.

ENC President Ann Carter noted that our club was a founding member of the EALT. An ENC endowment fund for Land Conservation and Stewardship exceeded its initial goal of \$10,000 recently, and the

ENC hopes it will continue to grow. Our club also has established a Land Stewardship Group to enhance the work done by the EALT. ENC efforts might focus on three properties: Larch Sanctuary, Coates Property, and Bunchberry Meadows. Ann suggested that members could contribute by building, installing, and monitoring nest boxes; organizing field trips to EALT properties; doing plant surveys; and installing trail cameras.

For further information, visit www.ealt.ca.

Alan Hingston



Some of the many EALT volunteers who contribute over 2,000 hours of work every year, Photo by EALT

The Edmonton Nature Club will build, install, and monitor nest boxes inscribed "Remembering Ray Cromie" on EALT properties.



Photo (right) by Ann Carter

The Sounds Birds Make and What They're Telling Us

The Bioacoustics Unit is a joint venture between the Alberta Biodiversity Monitoring Institute (ABMI) and Dr. Erin Bayne from the University of Alberta. The group's vision is to use acoustic signals to survey bird communities in order to better understand anthropogenic impacts in Alberta. Here's how it works:



Autonomous Recording Unit (ARU)

We start with a box. Usually it's a green box weighing about 4 pounds, with microphones sticking out of either side. This device is called an autonomous recording unit, which inevitably gets shortened to ARU (pronounced ah-roo). Beneath the earthy green plastic lid live a computer, a clock, and some SD card slots. This is where the magic happens. Recording schedules are designed for each device (granted, most are on the same schedule), which tell the ARU when to turn on and start recording, and how long to record for. When it switches on, the microphones start collecting acoustic data. That data is saved to SD cards to await further analysis. Without these ARUs, none of what we do in the Bioacoustics Unit would be possible. Our group owns about 500 of these devices, which we hope to deploy to over 1,000 locations this year.

Next, we need a study design. Where are these ARUs going to go? How many are we going to use? How far apart will they be? There is a plethora of possibilities with these units, and understandably each project uses a slightly different approach. The most interesting usage of these units, in my opinion, comes from the research of my coworker, Scott Wil-

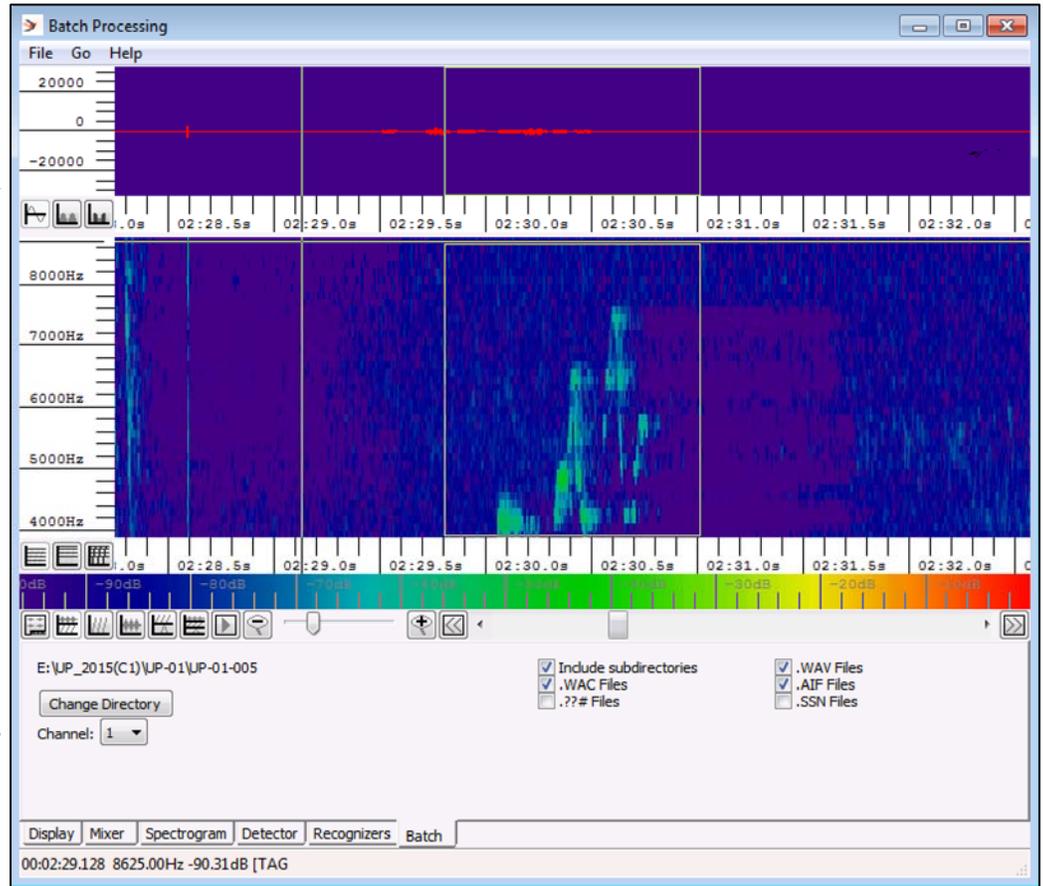


MSc Student Scott Wilson

son (MSc student). Scott uses a grid of ARUs placed closely together, all synchronized to the exact same time. When these units are recording, any bird that vocalizes within this grid will be heard by multiple ARUs, but that sound will reach each ARU at ever-so-slightly-different times. Using the time that vocalization reached each ARU allows Scott to triangulate the exact positions of birds – very cool stuff!

Once we've finished hiking through forests, bogs, and fens planting the ARUs on trees, and then hiking back to recover them (I won't go into detail on how difficult that process actually is), we're left with mountains of recording data. My supervisor, Dr. Erin Bayne, has calculated that our lab has somewhere in the neighbourhood of 16 years of acoustic data! More than any team of researchers could ever get around to listening to, of course, so we need a design to sample just a portion of the data in order to answer the questions we're most interested in. The Bioacoustics Unit contains a team of about ten individuals who can identify just about any bird in the province based on the sounds it makes – we call ourselves the "listeners." It's our job to slap on a pair of headphones, sit at our desk, grab an oversized cup of coffee, and grind through as many hours of these recordings as we can. Me personally? In the 2 years I've been doing this I've gone through about 250 hours of recordings! What we do, exactly, is simple. We record everything we hear in a recording, and transcribe it into a database.

To supplement the data we get from listening, our lab is also investigating how we can use automated computer programs to do some of this work for us. Using software called SongScope, we are building automated recognizers for many Alberta species. The advantage of these programs is that we can utilize the entirety of acoustic data collected from ARUs (yes, all 16 years of it), because computers are much faster at analyzing this data than we are. The downside to automated recognizers is that they are not particularly accurate and are likely to miss a lot of birds that humans would be able to hear. This tradeoff, and how to optimize our use of these recognizers, is being researched by undergraduate student Mike Bodnar.



The automated recognizer thinks this Swainson's Thrush is a Brown Creeper.



Connor Charchuk deploying an ARU in Northern Alberta

So what have we learned so far from this research? Dan Yip is a PhD student in our lab who has figured out how far away we can hear various bird species, which is crucial information for everyone's research. Logan McLeod is a MSc student who has been studying the Yellow Rail in northeastern Alberta. Based on our ARU information he has produced an estimate that there may be as many as 600 breeding pairs of Yellow Rail in this region, much more than previously thought. Julia Shonfield, a PhD student looking at how industrial noise affects habitat use by several species of owls in northern Alberta, is using computer recognizers to detect owls on the recordings. And I'm working on solving the mystery of how bird communities are structured by forestry practices.

If you have any questions regarding the research we are conducting, please do not hesitate to email me at ccharchu@ualberta.ca. You can also visit our website at <http://bioacoustic.abmi.ca>.

Connor Charchuk

Photos supplied by the author

Chasing Pelagics

“ALBATROSS!!! At 5 o’clock.” The calls rang out. Alright, that’s what I’m on this boat for! Now, which direction is 5 o’clock again? I can never remember those stupid clock directions. Once I got turned the right way and got onto that loooooong-winged bird, I was pumped. Albatross is one of those iconic birds you just HAVE to see.

I was out on the Pacific Ocean off of Ucluelet, BC, sailing on the MV Francis Barkley, a big, solid ship, on a pelagic birding tour. Albatross is one of the pelagic birds that you pretty much have to get a ways out on the open ocean for. You just don’t see them – and Shearwaters and Storm-Petrels, and Skuas – from dry land. Especially an ol’ prairie boy who doesn’t wander too far from home!

Never having been out to sea before, booking on to a pelagic trip seemed like quite an adventure. One of the big worries, though, was keeping control of my cookies. You don’t want to miss lifers because you’re tossing said cookies. Steve Knight had an extra scopolamine patch that he gave me. It really did the trick – didn’t feel any queasiness at all. The only problem now is that I don’t know if I can do a pelagic without it.

Steve and I have done two trips out of Ucluelet and racked up a few lifers. The albatross we saw on both trips was a Black-footed Albatross. It’s the most likely one out there. There’s a very slight disappointment with that species; it’s one of the smallest. They have a wingspan of about 2 m. Wingspan on larger



Black-footed Albatross

species such as Wandering Albatross can be over 3 m. But any albatross is still impressive.



Pink-footed Shearwater

Over the two trips we saw five species of Shearwaters. Sooty is the common one. Pink-footed seemed to be fairly regular. Buller’s is very distinctive – we saw one or two on each trip. Short-tailed seems rarer, and it’s a tough ID to make, very similar to Sooty. Another one we picked up was Flesh-footed Shearwater, again similar to Sooty, but not that hard to pick out.



Northern Fulmar

It was hard to figure out one of the other tubenoses – Northern Fulmar. On the first trip we saw dozens. They escorted the ship most of the way out and back in. And we saw all three colour forms. On the second trip we only saw one dark bird. Steve and I must

have sounded very experienced when, based on one trip, we told his brother he'd see tons of them. Then he barely got a glimpse of the one out there.

Another group of tubenoses was kind of frustrating. Storm-Petrels are very small and never seemed to come very close to the boat. If you hear someone call out any of them, you'll want to try to get on them as soon as you can. Phalaropes were similar – small birds far away. Tough to separate the common Red-necked from Red Phalaropes at a distance. I still don't have a Red on my list, though Steve claims to have seen one!

Steve got another bird on me. He was hanging around on a different deck and had a distant Tufted Puffin pointed out to him. But I did get one back on

skuas, the three Jaegers, were seen on both trips. Especially on the last trip, we got great looks at several Pomarines.

You get an escort of gulls as you pull away from the harbour, mostly Glaucous-winged and California. Then the challenge is to pick out other species: Herring, Thayer's, Mew, etc. There's a good chance of picking up some of the smaller gulls such as Bonaparte's and Sabine's. And for everyone but Steve, maybe a Kittiwake!

Some of the most unexpected birds for a pelagic were on the second trip. It was extremely foggy and a bunch of small passerines were flying around out there, including White-throated Sparrows and Yellow Warblers. And quite rare for the West Coast, a



Rhinoceros Auklet

him on the last trip and saw a Black-legged Kittiwake that he missed.

A person sees a few of the alcids out there as well. Some, including Rhinoceros Auklet and Pigeon Guillemots, you can often see right in the harbour. Others, such as Common Murre, Marbled Murrelet, and the like, are usually seen further out.

One bird that always raises a stir on the boat is South Polar Skua. We never got real close looks, but on both trips we got long, distant views of the distinctive pirate with white wing markings. The smaller

Chestnut-sided Warbler actually landed on the ship. It was caught, taken back to land, and released. It was a bit sad, but still interesting to see a little warbler flying out over the ocean get swallowed up in one shot by a gull.

All in all, a pelagic trip is a great adventure. Lots of potential lifers, some challenging situations, and some new ID challenges. Well worth the effort!

Gerald Romanchuk

Photos by Gerald Romanchuk

Field Trip Reports

Scouting Tour: Tofield and Beyond, April 17, 2016

A cheerful convoy of 30 birders braved many miles of dusty roads through the parched farmland around Tofield and Holden. The perfect weather kept us in the field far beyond the advertised finish time. We often separated into two groups, each taking its own path to the next planned stop.

Waterfowl were definitely on the move. Several flocks of Greater White-fronted Geese flew low over us at Amisk Creek bridge. Large numbers of Canada Geese and a couple of smaller groups of swans and Snow Geese were spotted high in the sky. During the day we enjoyed good views of newly returned spring migrants such as Red-winged Blackbirds, Mountain Bluebirds, Green-winged Teal, Red-tailed Hawks, Lesser Yellowlegs, and a single Ruby...er...Ruddy...Duck.

At one point, our group decided on a mad dash to pick up Cackling Geese for some folks looking for "lifers." We managed to flush the entire pond before the second bunch of birders joined us. Felt bad for Liz, she picked the wrong group!



Alberta Spring



Holden Park

After a picnic lunch stop at the park in Holden (complete with duck pond) we headed even further east and found a small number of distant Snow Geese in a wetland. The large flock of

Tundra Swans in front of them seemed more impressive.

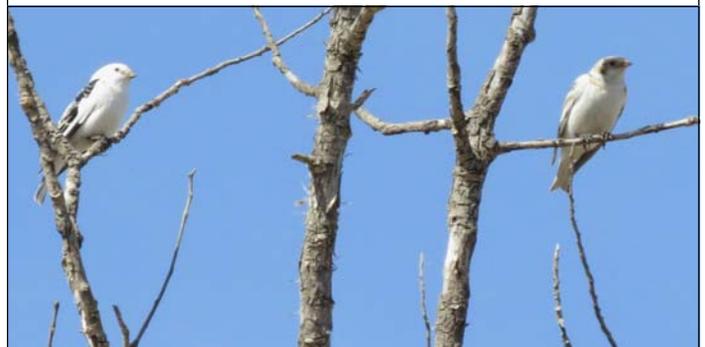
Fortunately, while heading back westward, Ann managed to mix up our route notes, accidentally bringing the group into perfect position to spot Eurasian Wigeon lurking in the backwater of a roadside pond. Attempting to return to the planned route, we stopped to scan at Parson's Pond, where Martin quickly identified a Dunlin, even though he hasn't seen one for 25 years! Can that be right?? We phoned the other group and it didn't take long for dust to appear on the horizon as they sped to join us for that one.



Rough-legged Hawk

The best birds, according to the participants, were Dunlin, American Avocet, Eurasian Wigeon, Cinnamon Teal, Barrow's Goldeneye, Green-winged Teal (they're beautiful!), Snow Goose, Cackling Goose, American Pipit, and Rough-legged Hawk. There was also a good moment with a small group of very confused Snow Buntings.

Although bird numbers were fairly low, with hotspots few and far between, the variety was good and we ended the day with a total of 58 species.



Snow Buntings Searching for Snow?

Thanks to all the folks who generously carpoled, shared their scopes, and pointed out birds to create a great day of group birding!

Ann Carter and John Jaworski

Photos by Ted Mcken

Whitemud Ravine, March 20, 2016

Sunday, March 20, was the first day of spring and appropriate for a group of very relaxed ENC members to take our casual nature walk up the Whitemud Ravine. Trip leaders John and Jean Chapman arrived early to check out the river and noted a couple of good finds: a Northern Shrike and a Merlin facing each other from opposite treetops. There also seemed to be considerable activity on the thin strip of open water on the other side of the river.

On the way down from the parking lot to the river, a large porcupine was making the most of the early sun halfway up a cottonwood tree. By the time the group made it to the river we were pleased to see the Shrike still in the same tree preening in the sunshine and vocalizing against the roar of the Whitemud traffic. The Merlin, no longer in its tree, reappeared to make a brief fly-pass for our benefit. The river gave us a large number of Canada Geese, good numbers of Common Goldeneye, and several Common Mergansers. Regrettably, no gulls could be found on the river, but both Ring-billed and California Gulls were spotted overhead later in the day.

As we all set off up the Whitemud trail one of the first birds seen was a Brown Creeper. It kept us transfixed for a while as we tried to keep up with it flying from tree to tree and overhead. Proceeding up the trail we started to meet the more common species: Black-capped Chickadees bombing us for hand-outs, Red-breasted and White-breasted Nuthatches, Black-billed Magpie, and several Blue Jays calling. Several times, we stopped to watch the antics of Ravens “talking” to each other and enjoying their aerobatics. One pair was breaking off sticks and flying back and forth to their nest-building up high on the pipeline tower. A pair of Canada Geese perched nearby on the rail, patiently waiting for the nest to be completed so they could make claim to it.



Photo by Ann Carter

It was easy to see how the birds were taking advantage of the warm spring morning. A female Great Horned Owl was enjoying her southern exposure while patiently sitting on the nest. Dark-eyed Juncos were singing and sifting through the undergrowth, with Pine Siskins constantly present, White-winged Crossbills worked their bills on the last of the spruce cones lying on the ground, and a juvenile Bald Eagle was flying slowly off into the distance. Overhead were both large and smaller flocks of Bohemian Waxwings. When a large group



Pine Siskin



White-winged Crossbill

*Photos above by “Local Legend” Gerald Romanchuk**

landed in a tree we were unable, even with careful scrutiny, to find any Cedar Waxwings present.

Although Pileated and Downy Woodpeckers were plentiful, it was the end of the day before we saw a Hairy Woodpecker, then we counted three in rapid succession. To end the day we observed a single House Finch, and House Sparrows and Rock Pigeons in the parking lot completed our day’s list of 29 species.

John and Jean Chapman

*We had an interesting encounter on the trail with Zac Peetsma, who was leading a crowd of John Acorn’s University of Alberta students. After greeting us, Zac gleefully turned to his group to introduce “Local Legend Gerald Romanchuk”!! Someone had to adjust his hat after that.;

Ann Carter

Field Trip Reports

Pre-Owling Tour around Beaverhills, March 12, 2016

It was still March, after all, well known as the worst month of the year, but the weather was very nice, so a surprising number of 28 birders went birding anyway. We headed east of Elk Island and took a little loop north of Yellowhead, made for the east side of Beaverhills, and checked out Mundare Beach and Francis Point.

We saw lots of Canada Geese, Starlings, and corvids. What else would you expect in March? We also picked up a Great Horned Owl on a nest, but that was not too unexpected. Vince Cottrell tried to ruin my prediction of a boring day by spotting a male Mountain Bluebird. We got the convoy turned around and everyone got a good look – first of the year for most of us.

Just got the group going again and John Jaworski started causing trouble. He claimed to have seen an alleged Meadowlark. So, we turned the whole convoy around again and went back and heard the story of how it had been on the fence post, but it just dropped down. Sure it did! We've all heard that one before! But just before I completely lost patience, Georges Blouin spotted the bird and we all got our FOS Meadowlark. Good work, guys!!!

Over the years, we've heard all kinds of comments and bad jokes over the radios on club trips. Never thought I'd hear "Watch out for the Pot-bellied Pig." The thing was walking down the road and when one car slowed down, it almost went under and wouldn't get away from the tire. There was a lot of talk about bacon and recipes for pork – especially when the obnoxious critter tried to attack our club president when she attempted to shoo it out of the way.

Over by Mundare Beach we saw a few distant Buteos, likely Rough-legs, and a distant flock of Pintails. Another migrant we saw in large numbers was American Tree Sparrow. We ran into wave after wave of them, several hundred altogether, as well as quite a few of them at the feeders at Francis Point. We ran out of time and didn't have a chance to walk down to the blind, but it looked like a few more Rough-legs were out there.

Due to awesome planning, we made it back to the restaurant in time for a nice dinner before Brian's owling. We had a reasonable afternoon of March birding with a great group and great weather.

Gerald Romanchuk

**Ann Carter with a Pot-bellied Pig (right),
Photo by Gerry Fox**

Night Owling, March 12, 2016

Our group of 18 headed out from Ardrossan to Elk Island at about 7 p.m. to listen for and perhaps see owls. We worked our way up the west side of the park starting along RR 210 to where it dead-ends. This is a location where Ray Cromie had a number of nest boxes. Aside from coyotes and geese, we picked out a distant Northern Saw-whet calling. Either there were more than one or it was moving around, but it did not come in close enough to see.

We continued northward, watching for owls on fence lines and power poles along TWP 534 to RR 211 and then east on TWP 540. We had a surprise road crossing by striped skunks; several of us were able to see two of them – with tails up – hustling along the ditch and into the woods on a side road.

Back along the west park boundary we stopped at TWP 540 and RR 205 and listened again. It seemed that everywhere we stopped we could pick up a distant Saw-whet. We kept on north along 205 as it winds through some small lakes, past Elk Island Retreat as far as TWP 550. There is a good conifer and boggy area just south of 550 which Ray often visited. We heard more Saw-whets calling, and a distant Great Horned Owl.

We then headed east along TWP 550 across the north boundary of the Park. Again we heard Saw-whet and Great Horned Owls, but saw no roadside visitors.

Finally we headed south on RR 195 and the east boundary, with a couple of stops. One of these gave us a pair of Great Horned Owls talking back and forth, but still not near the road. A last stop at the southeast corner of the park had another Great Horned, but a Ruffed Grouse drumming close to the road attracted attention.

Over the evening from 7:30 to 10:30 we heard at least 8 Northern Saw-whets, 6 Great Horned Owls, the Ruffed Grouse, and Canada Geese.

Brian Stephens





White-winged Crossbill

DC

Hawrelak Park, February 28, 2016

A sunny morning found 19 of us walking the trails around Hawrelak Park towards Keillor Road and back. There was a fair amount of activity around the parking lot – Pine Grosbeak, Downy Woodpecker, lots of Common Redpolls, Pine Siskins, and Black-capped Chickadees. As we passed the south end of the lake, a lone Canada Goose was feeding on the exposed grass and probably wondering what happened to the water. With the first night below zero for a few days, the open water on the river and the lake was frozen over.

In the woods along the Keillor Road trail we found Hairy Woodpecker, Pileated Woodpecker, Boreal Chickadee, and one of the highlights, a Townsend’s Solitaire. We spotted flocks of Bohemian Waxwing flocks several times, but the big numbers were in the air. As the weather cooled and stormy skies moved in, we heard a Brown Creeper nearby in the conifers by the lake. After a lot of looking, we finally spotted it.

We had a total of 19 species, which is pretty good for a winter’s day in Edmonton.

Brian Stephens



Canada Goose, Photo by Janice Hurlburt



Townsend’s Solitaire

DC

Millcreek Ravine, February 20, 2016

A pleasant day for a walk in the section of Millcreek near 76 Avenue – not too cold, not windy, and occasional light snow. The trails were not especially icy as eight of us explored the woods. In the past chickadees have found owls for us, but not today. Instead, a group of ruffian Magpies and Blue Jays chased a Sharp-shinned Hawk about. When it perched it appeared to have some damaged tail feathers, but after a rest, it did a bit of preening and put them back in place.

A very large flock of Bohemian Waxwings led to a discussion of counting versus estimating, but we settled on about 1,000. We also had a largish flock of House Finches gathered in some bushes, and that count was more precise at 36. Two pairs of Mallards were on the creek, which had flowing water. We saw signs of a Black-backed or Three-toed Woodpecker but could not find one today.

A few juncos, Pine Grosbeaks, and White-winged Crossbills, along with the winter regulars, rounded out the list at 17 species, which is pretty good for a winter day.

Brian Stephens



Sharp-shinned Hawk, Photo by Gerald Romanchuk

Field Trip Reports

North to High Level, February 13–15, 2016

On Saturday, February 13, we headed towards High Level. We left Westlock bright and early, and our first Great Gray Owl on the highway near Chisolm was a good omen. We continued through Slave Lake and on towards Red Earth Creek, picking up our first Hawk Owl, plus a Black-backed Woodpecker at the same spot.

We saw another Hawk Owl north of Red Earth, but not much else until we got close to Fort Vermillion. There we picked up a few Sharp-tailed Grouse feeding in a weedy field. We took the John D'Or road east a ways, but had no luck and headed in to High Level for the night.



Sunday morning we birded the agricultural area around High Level, hoping for ptarmigan, but we dipped, didn't even see tracks anywhere. So we continued north towards Zama City. Steve and I thought that since we were going to be within about 100 km of the NWT it would be cool to step over the border. That decision almost caused a mutiny. Some of the participants have experienced Steve's side trips before. They were worried he wouldn't turn around until he got to Yellowknife! But Steve signed a sworn statement and we headed for the border, seeing 2 Great Grays on the way.



We stopped at Indian Cabins for a break. Any place that sells gas, liquor, and fireworks has to be a good place to stop!

After dragging Steve back across 60 we headed south. On the Zama road we picked up another Great Gray Owl and then a pair of Northern Hawk Owls displaying a lot of courtship behaviours, following each other from tree to tree and vocalizing.

We took a road south towards the Hay-Zama wetland. There's a large willow flat area there that we hoped might be good for ptarmigan, but still no luck. We did pick up another Great Gray on the way to the highway.

Monday morning we tried the roads around High Level again and found 2 Snowy Owls, flocks of Snow Buntings, Redpolls, and a bunch of Sharp-tails doing some lekking on a snowy field.



On the way south on highway 88, we saw 3 more Great Grays, a Ruffed Grouse, and a Northern Hawk Owl. We ended up with 8 Great Grays, 5 Hawk Owls, and 2 Snowies, reasonable owl numbers. Grouse put on a poor show except for the Sharp-tails, and mammals were almost a complete no-show. But we had a good group and had a great time, just exhausted after 2,300 km in 3 days!

Gerald Romanchuk

Photos above by Gerald Romanchuk



Photo by Gerry Fox

Before we moved on Steve managed to get stuck. Next time you see him, ask him about the "Columbo Turn."

Keephills, Sundance, and Seba Beach, January 10, 2016

A big crowd of over 30 birders headed west today for some top-up-the-winter-list birding. Starting at Keephills, the first thing we noticed was that despite temperatures much warmer than yesterday, the stiff breeze was pretty darn chilly! Some nice birds were out there, swans and a variety of ducks, but it didn't take much convincing to leave the wide open, exposed spots.

As we were leaving Keephills, we were treated to great views of a Golden Eagle kiting in the wind. Heading over to Sundance Meadows, we watched the feeders for a while and saw a bunch of nice birds – woodpeckers, chickadees, grosbeaks, etc., but nothing uncommon. And only two out of eleven vehicles had to be pushed out of the subdivision!

Then it was on towards Seba Beach for a lunch break and a visit to Mike Greeney's place. There aren't many places where you can drop in unannounced with a mob of 30 birders and be welcomed with open arms! Here's Mike on the far left welcoming part of the group.



Photo by Gerald Romanchuk

We'd barely said "Hi" to Mike when we heard some Blue Jays going crazy. Some of us charged into the woods and found a bunch of birds busy mobbing something. We tried for quite a while, but just couldn't find the "mobbee."

A few folks did see a Three-toed Woodpecker, and the group all enjoyed Mike's hospitality and the great birds at his feeders.

We took a run down to the Jackpine Grazing Reserve to look for a Great Gray Owl I'd seen yesterday, but couldn't find it, which was about par for the course with our owls for the day. We couldn't find either of the Hawk Owls that had been seen on the Wabamun CBC the week before either. So we headed home owl-less, but most of us were happy with 26 species of New Year birds.

Gerald Romanchuk



The Welcome sign at Mike's, Photo by Janice Hurlburt

Hermitage, January 30, 2016

Saturday morning 24 of us gathered at Hermitage Park for a walk that united the University of Alberta Wildlife Society and the Edmonton Nature Club. Thanks to all those who joined us!

We started our walk by checking out the feeders, where we found Pine Grosbeaks, House Sparrows, Chickadees, and Dark-eyed Juncos. Opposite the feeders (to the south) we got great looks at a Townsend's Solitaire, and then quickly realized that, untrue to their name, there were two of them. The pair of solitaires were chasing each other and even hanging out in the same tree, which begged the question of whether the first bird was a male or female. We walked the riverside loop around one of the big ponds where the birding was rather quiet, but we did see plenty of Common Goldeneyes and Mallards out on the river. A small patch of spruce had a Golden-crowned Kinglet flitting about and calling within it.

We made our way to the off-leash park, where a bit of open water on the Kennedale Wetland had about 6 Mallards on it. A male Common Merganser and more Goldeneyes and Mallards were on the river in front of the power plant. Walking back, we saw a flock of about 10 European Starlings. We ended off the day with good looks at a few American Robins feeding on sticklebacks at one of the ponds, for a total of 24 species.

Connor Charchuk



American Robin, Photo by Don Delaney

ENC Annual Banquet

About 105 guests attended our annual banquet on April 9, 2016. Sawmill Banquet Center provided a plentiful and varied selection of delicious salads, entrees, and desserts, and brought in a special order of the Edmonton and Area Land Trust benefit brew from Phillips Brewing Company. The beer was a big hit, selling out before the dinner started.

This year we gave out three club awards. The Robert Turner Appreciation Award was presented to Steve Knight, Jim Lange was the recipient of the Great Gray Owl Outstanding Service Award, and Gerald Romanchuk was presented with the Edgar T. Jones Conservation Award. Each recipient had that momentary look of shock on his face as his name was called, but they all recovered quickly to give us a small taste of some of the stories they could tell of the adventures they have had with the club.

Congratulations to you all!

Kevin Van Tighem gave the main presentation. He described how our water sources are affected by many things, from the way we harvest trees to the way we use or misuse the land for recreation. Kevin also entertained us with readings from his book *Heart Waters* and left us with a positive message of hope.

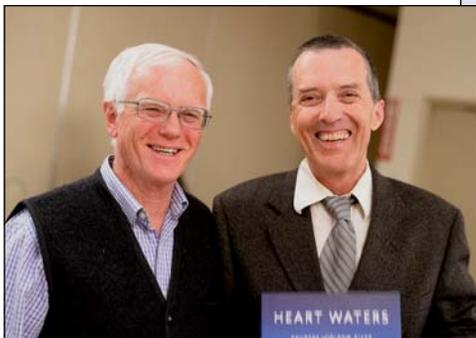
More great door prizes again this year! Thanks to The Wildbird General Store, Wild Birds Unlimited, Gerald Romanchuk, Donna Bamber, Kevin Van Tighem, and Jordan Lange for their generous donations.

Toby-Anne Reimer, Banquet Coordinator



Toby-Anne Reimer with some of the door prize winners

All photos by Steve Knight



Geoff Holroyd and Kevin Van Tighem



Kevin Van Tighem receives a framed photo donated by Gerald Romanchuk



Ann Carter and John Jaworski



Peter and Dierdre DeMulder



Alan and Angela Hingston



Dick and Pat Clayton



Jim Lange



Lu Carbyn



Dave Ealey



James Fox



Emily Gorda



Stephanie and Marc Tempest



Door Prizes

ENC Annual Banquet 2016



Brian Stephens and Art Hughes



Gerry Fox and Vince Cottrell



Donna Bamber and Shirley Hessler



Toby-Anne Reimer and Art Hughes



Steve Knight and Gerald Romanchuk

Photo by Alan Hingston

Photos by Steve Knight unless otherwise indicated