

THE PARKLAND NATURALIST



MAY-AUGUST 2016

A PUBLICATION OF THE
EDMONTON NATURE CLUB

<http://www.edmontonnatureclub.ca>



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Atlantic Puffin (bill loaded with sandeels, bottom), All Photos by Jim Brohman

The Atlantic Puffin



My wife and I had the opportunity to go on a trip of a lifetime to Scotland and a quick Google search of “seabird colonies” prior to our departure made Shetland (also known as the Scottish Shetland Islands) a must-visit location! Shetland comprises a group of small subarctic islands located 160 km northeast of the northernmost tip of Scotland (the village of John o’ Groat). The Shetland Islands are considered to be one of Europe’s last wildernesses. Here seabird colonies flourish in the breeding season where the erosion of the red sandstone cliffs has left ledges readily utilized by species such as Northern Gannets, Guillemots, and Northern Fulmars. Other species, such as the Atlantic Puffins, choose to nest in burrows on the grassy slopes on top of the cliffs. Puffins were readily accessible for viewing and photographing at some of the seabird colonies. The key bird sanctuaries of Shetland are called Noss, Hermaness, Mousa, and Sumburgh Head.

Sumburgh Head, located on the southern tip of “Main Island,” was the most accessible sanctuary for viewing a puffin colony and we were thrilled to see these seabirds with penguin-like colouring up close as they went about their natural behaviour: courtship displays, preening, feeding, hunting, and avoiding predators, their chief predator being the Greater Skua – a gull-like bird that nests adjacent to the cliffs on the lush moorlands.



Greater Skua, a formidable predator

The Atlantic Puffin (*Fratercula arctica*, meaning “little Arctic brother” – from Latin, referring to the black and white plumage pattern which resembles a monk’s robe) is a pelagic, pigeon-sized seabird of the Auk family. It was the most popular of the 24 true seabirds that occupy the island cliffs during the breeding season (May–August). The Atlantic Puffin is the only species of puffin in the Atlantic Ocean; however; there are two other species in the Pacific Ocean (Tufted Puffins and Horned Puffins).

On the cover, Atlantic Puffin’s courting display (“billing”), Photo by Jim Brohman

Unlike most of the other seabirds, which have a rather drab colouration (black above and light below), the Atlantic Puffins are boldly marked during the breeding season with a red and black bill, black crown and back, pale grey cheeks, white underparts, and bright orange feet! Interestingly, during autumn and winter all these bright features are lost and they take on the drab appearance which provides optimum camouflage for seabirds.

Atlantic Puffins are highly gregarious and monogamous. They dig adjacent burrows approximately one metre long on the green cliff tops, using their powerful bills as shovels. Apparently they show remarkable nest-site fidelity and will defend the site with great vigour! Puffins lay a single egg and the incubation period is approximately 6 weeks. After 6 weeks the nestling is fully fledged and makes its way to the ocean below under the cover of darkness (avoiding the watchful eye of the Greater Skuas or “bonxies”). Once in the ocean, the nestling swims out to sea and does not return to the colony for

several years. The nestling is fully functional – it can fly, surface dive, pursue and catch fish under water, migrate, and find its way back to the colony to mate and nest in 2–4 years. This is an example of nature trumping nurture!

Puffins are surface divers and actively pursue fish under water by flapping their half-open wings. Their primary food sources in the nutrient rich waters around Shetland are sandeels and sprats that travel in shoals. Puffins have specialized bills with a Velcro-like grip that allows them to carry many fish caught successively underwater.

The puffin’s narrow, delta-shaped wings are a compromise to enable both air and “water” flight. To maintain

lift the wings require a rapid turnover (approximately 400 beats per minute) that allows them to fly at 80 km per hour low over the water to follow a direct path to their food sources. Puffins may be able to communicate the location of food to other members of the colony.

The largest Atlantic Puffin colony is in Iceland, where 60% of the world’s puffins are found. Another large colony is found at the Witless Bay Ecological Reserve south of St. John’s, Newfoundland. Puffins are also found in the Atlantic from Northern Europe to Maine.

Puffins spend the fall and winter widely spread out over the Atlantic Ocean (15–30 million square miles) feeding, resting on the surface, and weathering some of the most violent storms on earth. As a result, very little is known about their behaviour and diet at sea.

A face-to-face encounter with these beautiful seabirds during the breeding season is an unforgettable experience. They allow for close viewing atop spectacular sea cliffs as

they go about their natural behaviour before returning to the sea for the rest of the year. Atlantic Puffins are highly adapted for life at sea and are extremely resilient, but the full impact of global warming and commercial fishing on their primary food source (sandeels) has not been elucidated. The colonies around Shetland are managed by the Scottish Natural Heritage to ensure they remain free of terrestrial predators such as cats and rats that can devastate a colony.

Jim Brohman



Atlantic Puffin about to enter the nesting burrow

President’s Report, Spring/Summer 2016



Our President, Ann Carter

The Edmonton Nature Club is a busy, multi-faceted organization. Over the past year the board has been successful in bringing many elements of the club together into a more unified group.

Thank you to the elected officials of the club for their good work:

Recording Secretary **Diane Barrett**, Membership Secretary **John Jaworski**, Treasurer **Stan Nordstrom**, and Executive Directors **Colleen Raymond**, **Gerald Romanchuk**, **Hendrik Kruger**, and **James Fox**. We are assisted by board members who lead specific activities and events, and those who bridge the gap between ENC and associated groups.

- Our objectives, as adopted by the membership, are to:
- Develop an awareness of and encourage an interest in the natural environment.
 - Encourage the study of the natural environment.
 - Promote the establishment and maintenance of natural areas and nature reserves; conserve and protect species, communities, and other natural features of interest.
 - Cooperate and collaborate with groups having objectives similar to those of the ENC.
 - Promote the preservation of the environment.

For the full text, including details of how we are directed to meet these objectives, visit <http://edmontonnatureclub.org/club-objectives.html>.

Recent Club Highlights

Congratulations to Bob Parsons and his team on their 18th annual Snow Goose Chase held last April. The event was again fully funded by grants and direct donations. ENC sponsors this event by recruiting volunteers for a wide variety of supporting roles, promoting the event, facilitating local donations through the ENC’s status as a non-profit organization (NPO), providing equipment and insurance, and keeping financial records.

Participants in the ever-popular Century Day at Elk Island National Park were a nice mix of new and long-term club members. Led by Gerald Romanchuk, the group met the target of 100 bird species just in time for supper.



**Eastern Phoebe nestlings,
Century Day at Elk Island National Park
Photo by Ann Carter**

Members Making a Difference

Due to the generosity of volunteer leaders and organizers, we are able to offer nature walks and field trips throughout the year. Thank you to **Janice Hurlburt**, **Brian Stephens**, **Colleen Raymond**, **Connor Charchuk**, **Don Delaney**, **Gerald Romanchuk**, **Hubert Taube**, **John and Jean Chapman**, **John Jaworski**, **Lu Carbyn**, **Martin Sharp**, **Patsy Cotterill**, **Sean Evans**, and **Steve Knight**. These folks cheerfully adapt to all the vagaries of nature.



**Rainy day at Long Lake Provincial Park
Photo by Ann Carter**

Coming Attractions

Our indoor program speaker series and the study groups will soon be resuming. Details are posted in the website calendar as they become available. Your topic suggestions are welcomed, and members are encouraged to participate as presenters to the various study groups.

Mark your calendars: the Edmonton Christmas Bird Count (ECBC) is scheduled for December 18th. We'll be looking for feeder watchers and bush beaters to count

urban birds and help us hold our world record as the "count with the most participants"! Detailed information is available at edmontonchristmasbirdcount.ca.

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

Contact the executive through General Inquiries, website home page, bottom right at edmontonnatureclub.org.

Conservation Corner

On August 10 and 13 Patsy Cotterill and Hubert Taube, representing the ENC, attended duplicate workshops on the City of Edmonton's Environmental Sensitivities Project. This involves a model developed by the City of Edmonton's Office of Biodiversity and Solstice Canada (a consulting company) to map and rank areas of greater or less sensitivity or value within the City of Edmonton with the goals of achieving ecological connectivity, preservation, and restoration. The idea of the workshops was to seek input from members of the public (and City employees from other departments) to evaluate the model. There was an impressive amount of expertise in the room represent-

ing various environmental fields, and the model received considerable constructive criticism.

The exercise is part of the City's ongoing attempts to improve the operation of its natural systems policy and the ecological functionality of the city by informing urban planning as the city expands. A report on the model was anticipated by the end of September 2016, but the timing and content of the report may change as the contributions from environmental experts during the public workshops are considered.

Patsy Cotterill

Editorial

I hope you enjoy this spring/summer issue of *The Parkland Naturalist*. It has something for everyone: birds, bugs, botany – and even mammals, in the Bio-Blitz story (page 10) and members' photos (back cover).

We welcome two new authors in this issue. Jim Brohman wrote our cover article on Atlantic Puffins, and Lisa Priestley reports on the ENC inventory of flora and fauna on the property she and Chuck Priestley recently purchased near Ministik Lake.

Patsy Cotterill's column features asters found in Alberta. In this issue (page 14), she outlines the characteristics of the aster family, with a focus on white-flowered species. The second part of her article, on blue, violet, and mauve asters, will be published in our next issue. An item on goldenrods may appear later. See pages 16 and 17 for Patsy's key to the identification of local aster species.

Bob Parsons describes this year's Snow Goose Chase (page 8) and Grassland Tours (page 9). Thank you, Bob, for the dedication and hard work that make these events possible! We are also grateful to the many volunteers who share the workload.

Nature Appreciation Weekend at Miquelon Lake was another big success. Be sure to read the "official" report by Ann Carter on page 18 and Gerald Romanchuk's version on page 12. Thanks to Ann and the enthusiastic ENC members who organized this event.

Alan Hingston's report on the April 15th Indoor Meeting is on page 21. Alan has a remarkable talent for finding interesting speakers and topics to present to our club and community.

Over the past four months we enjoyed many field trips, including some with new destinations and leaders. There wasn't space to include all of the August trips this time; look for them in the next issue.

Want to know more about the sparrows you encountered on Big Lake Interpretive Trail? Don Delaney describes seven species in his informative article and photos on pages 30–31.

Once again, thank you to everyone who contributes to our magazine. The deadline for submissions to the September–December issue is November 30, 2016.

Dawne Colwell (colwelld@shaw.ca)

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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

Snow Goose Chase, 2016

Most readers are familiar with the Chase; one only has to read through past reports to see what a great success this event is every year. The format has not changed much over the years, and this Chase was no different on the surface. Behind the scenes, some changes were carried out successfully, namely a much improved planning committee and more delegation from me. A group at Tofield Unity Church looked after the packed lunches, and their price was very reasonable, as they were aware that many participants on the buses were children from low-income families, inner-city youth, recent immigrants, and refugees. Their support was much appreciated.

Another change was that we lost Fred Martin this past year. Fred lived in St. Albert, and through his efforts a local food store has donated juice packs, cookies, granola bars, and rice crispy squares to previous events. This year we had to purchase nearly all the snacks, which made quite a dent in our budget.

The Edmonton Nature Club is not a Registered Charity that can provide tax receipts to donors to the Snow Goose Chase, so in the past we have relied on Nature Alberta, which does have this status. In the future, Nature Alberta will be doing the main Snow Goose Chase fundraising with TD Bank's Friends of the Environment, and as a result will obviously have a bigger say in how the Chase will be run. I intend to be around for another two years if asked, but have decided to retire as Chase coordinator in 2018. I have been involved with the Chase for close to 20 years, so it is time for someone else to take over, with the help of an enthusiastic planning committee.

Many thanks to all the volunteers who made this year's event such a success, and of course a big thank you to our many sponsors and supporters. The Club could not run this event without you all!!

Bob Parsons

Photos by Gerald Romanchuk

Tribute to Fred Martin and Ray Cromie



Grassland Tour, 2016

Brooks/Lake Newell May Species Count May 20–21

We had another enthusiastic turnout of close to 36 participants, with the usual big attendance from Nature Calgary members and the customary representation from Medicine Hat, Lethbridge, Vilna, Red Deer, Edmonton, and other parts of Alberta. The rainy weather leading up the long weekend count made a few important birding areas inaccessible to all vehicles: Kininvie Marsh, Medicine Wheel DU Project, Tide Lake West access, and some areas of Circle E. Many of the roads into these areas are only just driveable in dry conditions, so the wet weather prior to the count sure did not help! As usual the ten zones were well scouted-out and participation for a good count was high despite the cool temperatures and cloudy conditions. The reservoirs were all topped up, but many ponds and sloughs were quite dry this year after the banner year of 2015. Tillebrook Provincial Park was headquarters for the count again this year, and the Brooks Royal Canadian Legion hosted our evening activities. TransCanada Pipelines continues to sponsor our counts down south, and I am grateful for their great support.

An early spring migration might have affected the final tally, but it appears that a total of 168 species (just about average) was recorded for this year's Brooks Count. Results can be found on the Calgary and Edmonton club websites. We were extremely fortunate to have some renowned birders taking part this year; without them, and their cameras, we might have missed some of the rarer recorded species. Unusual species included Virginia Rail and Hammond's Flycatcher, and some migrating warblers were seen during count week. A flock of 40 American Golden Plovers was a highlight too, also 3 Snow Geese and a Townsend's Solitaire, all good sightings.

High records this year included 442 Swainson's Thrushes, 3 Gray-cheeked Thrushes, Violet-green and Tree Swallows, and Spotted Sandpiper. Missing species included Short-eared Owl, Burrowing Owl (count week only), and Le Conte's Sparrow. Species counted in fairly low numbers due to early migration, dry wetland conditions, and/or hard-to-access areas included Whimbrel (3), Marsh Wren, Avocet, Black-necked Stilt, and Willet. Habitat loss contributed to the low number of Soras (28). A big surprise was Swainson's Hawk, only 70 instead of the usual 120 or so. Low numbers of Buffleheads and Chestnut-collared Longspurs were also noted.

Bob Parsons

Milk River/Writing-on-Stone May Species Count May 27–29

Another great count: 9 participants saw close to 130 species, which is about average for this annual count held right on the Montana border. Weather conditions were quite good, roads were in fair shape, and there was plenty of water in most of the ponds, sloughs, and coulees. Ken Orich from Lethbridge did an amazing job counting the main coulees, namely Crow Indian Lake, Etzikom, and the area beneath the Hutterite Colony that flows into Pakowki Lake. We were all fortunate on Sunday to meet up with Ken at lunchtime and observe 3 Clark's Grebes from the bridge area. Earle Covert and his wife did a fine job counting in Coutts and the Milk River township. Have to think Earle knows his way around with his eyes shut, he knows the area so well! Everyone missed Bobolinks this year. For a count party in the Pinhorn Grazing Reserve, one of highlights was a group of 27 first-year Swainson's Hawks.

Twenty-seven Ferruginous Hawks was a count record. We also counted 85 Eastern Kingbirds and over 600 Brewer's Blackbirds over the 2-day period. Unusual species seen included a Snow Goose, Common Mergansers, Nighthawks (2), Broad-winged Hawks (2), and a Belted Kingfisher. Low numbers are of interest too, and they included only 13 Ibis this year compared to 100 in 2015. Baird's Sparrow and Lark Bunting looked like late arrivals this year. This grassland area of southern Alberta is prime habitat for Sprague's Pipit, but only one was heard. Some really surprising absentees include Bobolink, American Bittern, Upland Sandpiper, Burrowing Owl, and McCown's Longspur. The latter is a real surprise; they had to be there, but we missed them.

As usual, I counted Verdigris and Bonaparte Lake. A strong northerly wind was blowing down Verdigris but I counted over 400 Eared Grebe and close to 350 Coots, all close up to the dike. To be honest, I had a hard time keeping my spotting scope upright and was glad to be out of there! Bonaparte Lake is always fun, but there were no big sand bars and mud flats this year. Last year I counted close to 60 Sanderlings there, but not this time around. We saw good numbers of "peeps," over 80 American Avocets, and a varied assortment of ducks, including many Redhead and Canvasback.

I was made to feel very welcome by one of the Hutterite colonies. I stop by with a bottle of red wine wrapped in a newspaper for Joe almost every year! My arrival in a 4 x 4 creates a lot of interest, and it is a fun 30 minutes.

So, another good count, sponsored by TransCanada Pipelines. Try to attend next year!

Bob Parsons

Ministik Area Bio-Blitz

Lisa and Chuck Priestley moved onto a 42-acre property just northeast of Ministik and south of Hastings Lake two years ago. They invited the Edmonton Nature Club to the property on June 12, 2016, to help with a bio-blitz to inventory as much as possible of the flora and fauna.

The first group arrived bright and early at 7:15 a.m. and enjoyed muffins and fruit along with coffee and juice while scouting out the birds around the pond. Some pelicans flew over in formation to welcome the second group of surveyors at 8:00, and we had added 25 species to our bird list. Our group consisted of birders, entomologists, botanists, and naturalists. Dave Lawrie brought some great bug collecting equipment, and our children Sam (10) and Kate (9) immediately became his trusty followers.

We spent the day walking the trails listening and looking for birds, plants, and animals, and sharing nature stories.

Our species list below was exciting to compile by the end. Fifty-seven species of birds were observed; new species detected included Lincoln's and Le Conte's Sparrows, Common Nighthawk, and Western Wood-Pewee. A Great Crested Flycatcher and Great Horned Owl were heard in the evening. We also observed eight species of mammals, three species of herptiles, 17 species of insects, and 41 species of plants.

We appreciate help from Mary Blair, David Bradley, Loney Dickson, Janos Kovacs, Dave Lawrie (a.k.a. "Physics Dave"), Caitlyn Low, Manna Parsey, Colleen Raymond, Toby-Anne Reimer, and Brian Stephens. A special thanks to Physics Dave and Loney for taking the time to get our kids totally excited about insects!!

Lisa Priestley

All photos by Chuck or Lisa Priestley

Left to Right, Back: Manna Parsey, Colleen Raymond, Dave Lawrie, David Bradley, Loney Dickson
Middle: Lisa Priestley, Brian Stephens, Toby-Anne Reimer, Janos Kovacs; **Front:** Kate Priestley, Sam Priestley



Dave, Loney, and Brian identify insects for Sam and Kate



Mary and Caitlin Low catch butterflies with Dave Lawrie



Bird Species

Gadwall
 Mallard
 Blue-winged Teal
 Northern Shoveler
 Green-winged Teal
 Ring-necked Duck
 Bufflehead
 American White Pelican
 Broad-winged Hawk
 Cooper’s Hawk
 Red-tailed Hawk
 Ruffed Grouse
 Sora
 Spotted Sandpiper
 Wilson’s Snipe
 Franklin’s Gull
 Ring-billed Gull
 California Gull

Black Tern
 Great Horned Owl
 Common Nighthawk
 Downy Woodpecker
 Western Wood-Pewee
 Least Flycatcher
 Great Crested Flycatcher
 Eastern Phoebe
 Tree Swallow
 Barn Swallow
 Purple Martin
 Warbling Vireo
 Red-eyed Vireo
 American Crow
 Black-capped Chickadee
 White-breasted Nuthatch
 House Wren
 American Robin
 Swainson’s Thrush

Gray Catbird
 Cedar Waxwing
 Common Yellowthroat
 Yellow Warbler
 American Redstart
 Ovenbird
 Connecticut Warbler
 Rose-breasted Grosbeak
 Chipping Sparrow
 Clay-colored Sparrow
 Le Conte’s Sparrow
 Lincoln’s Sparrow
 Song Sparrow
 White-throated Sparrow
 Red-winged Blackbird
 Brown-headed Cowbird
 Baltimore Oriole
 Purple Finch
 Pine Siskin
 American Goldfinch

Amphibian/Reptile Species

Striped Chorus Frog
 Wood Frog
 Plains Garter Snake

Mammal Species

Beaver
 Coyote
 Deer
 Deer Mouse
 Meadow Vole
 Moose
 Northern Flying Squirrel
 Red Squirrel

Insect Species/Families

Boreal Bluet (Danselfly)
 Darkling Beetle
 Elderbug
 European Skipper
Formica sp. (Ants)
 Green Lacewing
 Greenish Blue
 Mosquito
Pterostichus sp. (Carabid)
 Seven-spot Ladybug
 Syrphid Fly
 Tenebrionidae
 Tiger Swallowtail

Two-striped Grasshopper
 Variable Darner
 Water Spider
 Weevil
 Virginia ctenucha moth
 Hover flies
 Horse fly
 Hobomok Skipper butterfly
 Western Tailed Blue butterfly
 Longhorn Beetle

Caitlin and Kate identify a caterpillar



Kate with two Tiger Swallowtails



Sam with Plains Garter Snake



Chasing Birds – Campfire Naturing

Was that a bird? No one recognized the sound. What would be calling like that at midnight? Maybe an owl? A bunch of us left the comfort of the campfire and went chasing after the mysterious sound in the dark.

The noisy critter kept moving and we kept chasing. At one point it seemed to be right above us, but we just couldn't find it in the flashlights. By this time we were fairly sure it was the begging call of a young owl, but we just couldn't pin it down to a species. At one point a truck stopped on the road near us. They had to be wondering who was crashing around in the bushes with lights shining in all directions, but after a few seconds they pulled away. Probably Park staff realized it must have been that crazy bunch from the Edmonton Nature Club who had the group campsite booked.

Sadly, the mystery bird got away from us, so we headed back to the campfire. We didn't go back empty handed, though – we spotted a flying squirrel gliding across the road. No owls, but a nocturnal mammal was a decent consolation. We were out at Miquelon Lake for the ENC's Nature Appreciation Weekend. It was a great chance to camp out with other club members and enjoy a couple of nights around the campfire.

One of the best things about having a campfire is cooking dinner over it. Everybody loves a wiener-roast! Or, as our new Ozzie member calls it, a sausage-sizzle. Somehow I'd gotten pressed into picking up food and supplies for my friend Steve Knight and myself. Was sure I had MORE than enough food for two adults. It turns out Steve is a bottomless pit. By the time he finished sizzling sausages on the first night, he was well into supplies meant for night two!

That first night was beautiful and clear. By the time Steve finished eating (which took quite a while!), the moon and a few planets were visible. Since we had a



bunch of spotting scopes handy, we decided to set 'em up and take a close look. It was very cool to actually see the rings of Saturn! Apparently a few meteors also were seen, but some people were always looking the wrong way!

While cooking dinner both evenings, we were constantly listening to the noisy begging of young Sharp-shinned Hawks. The birds were a presence all weekend, a bit of a mixed blessing. You don't often have more than brief glimpses of Sharpies, so getting good looks at the birds, watching them bathing, squabbling, practising flying, and getting fed was real treat. But with those expert bird hunters around, we didn't get many other birds in camp.

On the second night, Steve and I begged and scrounged some food for dinner. The best result of our pitiful efforts was a fantastic piece of pie that Janos's wife

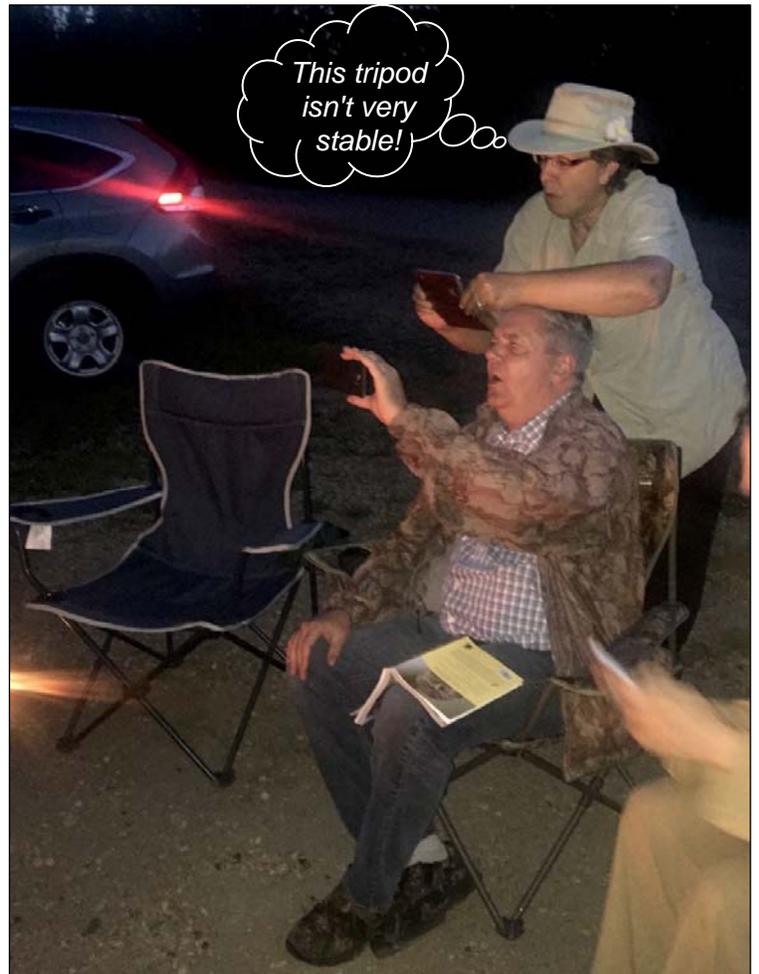


Sharp-shinned Hawk

Joannie had baked for him. Sincere apologies (not!) to those who were too late getting to the fire. Colleen set up her moth sheet. It's always interesting to check out what shows up, in this case lots of moths and a variety of insects.



Sitting around the fire between sheet-checks (does that sound weird?) gives a lot of time for conversation. We ended up going around the circle and sharing how and when we all got into birds and nature. A few were always interested, they'd been influenced by parents who were birders. One person got into birds through photography, another through friends working on a university

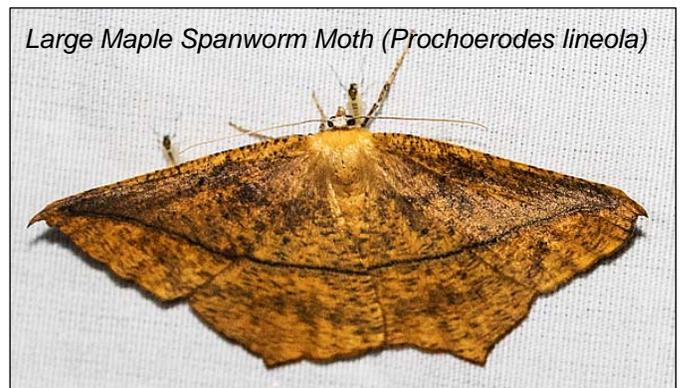


Steve Knight and Ann Carter taking photos with their phones

project. A few more took up the interest later in life after a close encounter with an interesting bird. Eventually the topic got interrupted by a strange call in the night....

All in all, it was a great weekend, with quality time around the campfire and lots of cool sights and sounds. Hope to do it all again next year!

Gerald Romanchuk



Photos by Gerald Romanchuk

Parkland Plant Notes – Be a Star and Know Your Asters

August and September constitute what I call the blue-and-gold season, the time when the predominant colours in our grasslands and forests are the blue of asters and the yellow of goldenrods, both members of the Aster family of flowering plants, the Asteraceae. Several people have told me that they have trouble identifying and distinguishing asters, so I thought I would try to profile some of our common species and provide a simple key to them.

Part 1 of this article discusses the attributes of the Asteraceae family, followed by descriptions and photos of white-flowered asters encountered in our valleys, parks, and grasslands. Part 2, to be published in the next *Parkland Naturalist*, focuses on local species with blue, violet, or mauve flowers. In a future article I may profile our local goldenrod species.

Note that although our species retain “aster” in their common name, the genus *Aster*, as for example represented in the *Flora of Alberta* (Moss, ed. by J.G. Packer, 1983), has been split up into no fewer than seven genera. This rearrangement in classification results from better techniques to investigate their relationships, such as molecular biology, DNA analysis, and chromosome counts. (Life just gets more complicated, doesn't it?) Whereas *Flora of Alberta* lists 20 species, the current classification encompasses 23 species. Here I'll look at 14 species that are commonly encountered in our Parkland Natural Region.

But first, let's back up a bit. Everyone should be able to recognize the Asteraceae family. Although it is one of the two largest plant families on earth, very diverse with thousands of species, it has one characteristic that distinguishes it from almost all other families: its “flowers” consist of tiny individual flowers (florets) which are grouped together on a variously shaped receptacle to form a flower head. Thus what may look from a distance to be a single flower is actually a composite of these florets. (The earlier family name was Compositae.) Each flower head is enclosed for part of its length by one or more rings of usually greenish bracts that form a cup-shaped involucre.

Florets are basically of two types, ray florets and disc florets. The “ray” of ray florets consists of five tiny joined petals which fan out except at the very base into a flat strap or ligule. They may make up the entire flower head, as in the dandelion, or may be confined to the periphery of the flower head, as in daisies, fleabanes, and asters. Disc florets have the five tiny petals joined into a tube, which flares into five minute lobes at the top. These often occupy only the centre or disc of the flower head as in the three groups named above, and such flower heads are said to be radiate. If the flower head is composed entirely of disc florets, it is said to be discoid.

Male parts of the florets (which are lacking in some female-only florets) consist of five pollen-producing anthers joined into a tube also; the female parts consist of a two-branched style, emerging above the anthers in bisexual florets, and an ovary which ripens into the fruit, an achene, containing a single seed. The achene is crowned by a pappus, which may be difficult to distinguish in some species, but is commonly visible as

a ring of teeth, scales, or bristly hairs, all of which aid in seed dispersal.

Our asters are tall, leafy perennial members of the Asteraceae family, with radiate heads (i.e., with central disc florets and peripheral ray florets); the rays are usually white, blue, or purple depending on the species, and in most species are quite showy, serving to attract pollinators. The pappus of hairs is white, purplish, or brownish. Asters flower in mid- to late summer and many are found in moist habitats, although there are subtle differences in the degree of moisture they require. The term “aster” means “star” and refers to the star-like radiate heads; the genus *Aster* gave the family its name.

Asters are sometimes confused with fleabanes, the genus *Erigeron*, which also have radiate heads with often purple, pink, or white rays. Most of our local fleabanes are shorter, more spreading plants with fewer, larger heads than asters and leaves best developed towards the base. They flower somewhat earlier than the asters. However, the technical difference is that the involucre bracts of fleabanes touch but do not overlap to cup the flower head, whereas in asters the bracts are usually in more than one row and in some species overlap like tiles on a roof. With a bit of attention you will soon find it easy to distinguish fleabanes from asters by eye.

The one aster that could be easily confused with a fleabane is, funnily enough, the only species that has remained in the *Aster* genus in our flora, alpine aster, *Aster alpinus*.

(Only two *Aster* species remain in the whole flora of North America. The other species is non-native.) Alpine aster does not occur in our area but as its name suggests occurs in dry, mountain habitats (e.g., Cardinal Divide) and foothills (e.g., Kootenay Plains, Kananaskis). It is a short, single-headed, single-stemmed, or slightly tufted plant with pale purple or mauve ray florets; hairy green bracts with purple tips in a more or less single row form the involucre.



Alpine Aster



Rayless Alkali Aster

Now for the species that no longer fall into the genus *Aster*. Let's separate out two species that are quite distinctive.

Rayless alkali aster, *Symphyotrichum ciliatum* (formerly *Aster ciliatus*) is unique among our asters in being an annual with a taproot. (A feature of annuals readily discernible in the field is that they are easily pulled up.) The rays of this aster are either absent or short but the heads show a dash of white inside the green involucre and when the fruits are ripening the abundant white pappus is obvious. This species grows in dense stands on the shores of lakes, especially saline ones, such as Miquelon, North Cooking, and Wabamun Lakes, but can also be found in ditches and along roadsides.

All other Alberta species are perennials.

Marsh alkali aster, *Almutaster pauciflorus* (formerly *Aster pauciflorus*) is a rare species in the province and distinctive-looking. I have seen it only on very saline lakeshores, such as those in eastern Alberta in the Dilberry Lake Provincial Park area. The narrow leaves are distinctly longer towards the base and hairless; the linear upper leaves, flower heads, and involucre are covered in tiny, whitish glands (viewed with a hand lens). Ray florets are white or mauve and the involucre bracts are green.

Let's take a look at other white-flowered asters in our area.

Flat-topped white aster (*Doellingeria umbellata*, formerly *Aster umbellatus*) stands out as a tall, leafy aster of moist woodlands or woodland edges forming patches from shoots arising from its long rhizomes. The large, long-ovate leaves are numerous along the stems, and the several flower heads, with white rays and yellow discs, form a flattish-topped cluster as the name suggests. Generally rare in Alberta, this species is fairly common in our local woods. Look for it in the North Saskatchewan River valley, Riverlot 56 Natural Area in St. Albert, and elsewhere.



Flat-topped White Aster

Two rather similar white-flowered asters are the tufted white



Tufted White Prairie Aster



Creeping White Prairie Aster

prairie aster (*Symphyotrichum ericoides*, formerly *Aster ericoides*) and the creeping white prairie aster (*Symphyotrichum falcatum*, formerly *Aster falcatus*), both of drier, grassland habitats. The characteristic feature of these two species is that their involucre bracts have tiny spines at their tips, as do their narrow leaves. Tufted white prairie aster is tufted as its name implies, and branched, with smaller leaves on the branches, and many small white flower-heads. Creeping white prairie aster bears fewer, rather larger flower heads on single stems arising from rhizomes, and the leaves are somewhat grey-green and hairier. In both, the bracts are clearly overlapping (like roof tiles) and have whitish bases and green, often diamond-shaped, upper portions, a feature that is seen in other *Symphyotrichum* species.

Rush aster, a.k.a. boreal aster, *Symphyotrichum boreale* (*Aster borealis*) is a slender, narrow-leaved plant with single stems arising from creeping rhizomes and typically bearing single heads. Its characteristic habitat is open fens, as it is almost invariably found in soils influenced by calcareous groundwater. The rays can also be pinkish or pale blue but are most often white. The involucre bracts are green with white edges and bases and are clearly overlapping. Somewhat branched forms could be mistaken for small specimens of western willow aster (see below), but the habitat is helpful in making the distinction.

Western willow aster (*Symphyotrichum lanceolatum*, formerly *Aster hesperius*) is a taller, branched, leafier, generally more



Western Willow Aster

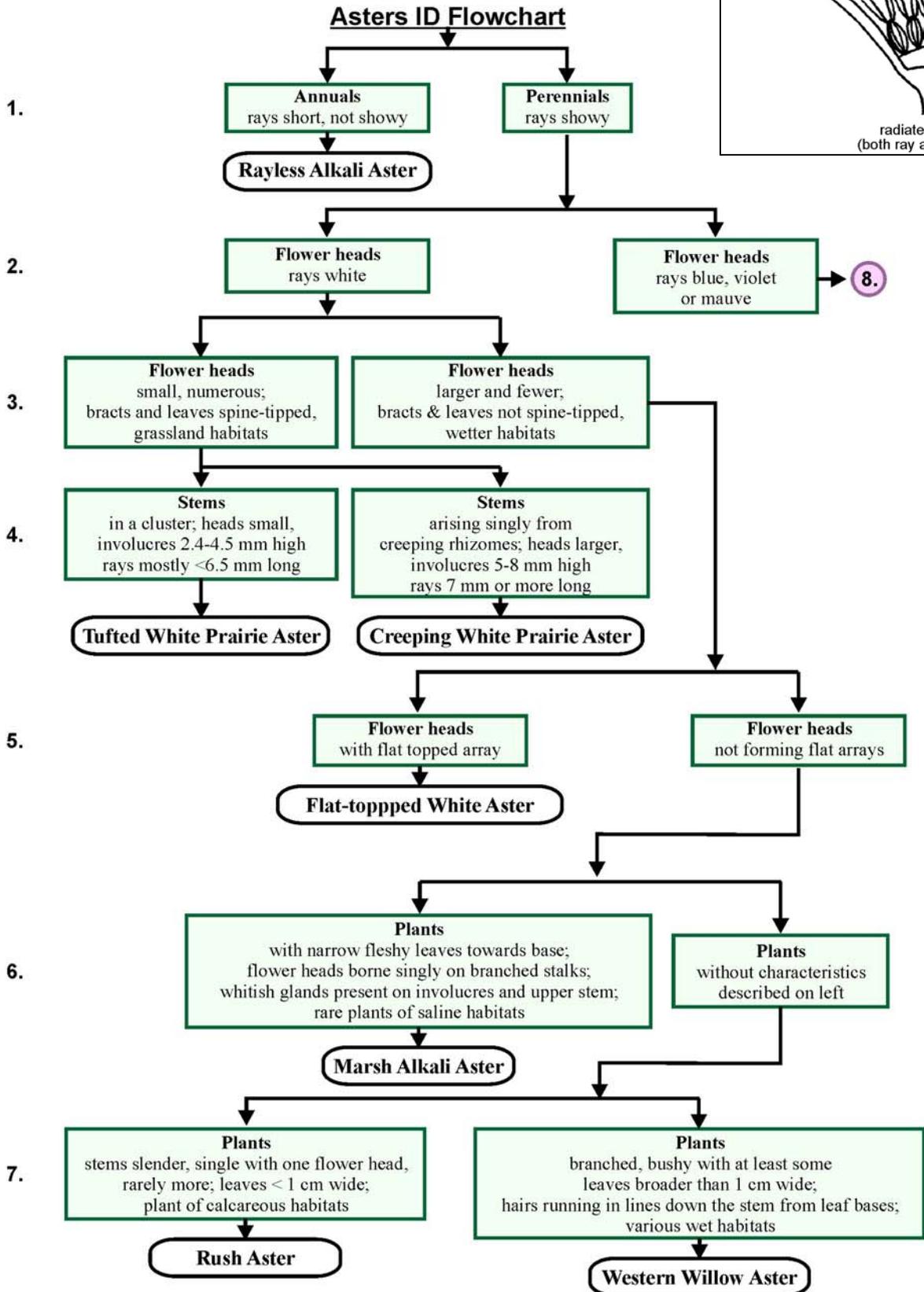
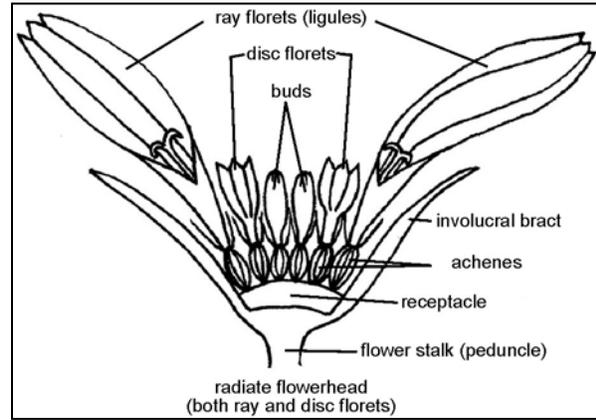
robust version of rush aster, but it is much more common, growing in all kinds of wet habitats such as wetland shores, willow swamps, ditches, and wet meadows. Its rays can be white or mauve, so it could be considered under the blue-rayed species. Involucre bracts are green and white-edged, as in rush aster. Two varieties apparently occur in Alberta, but until recently only the single species *Aster hesperius*

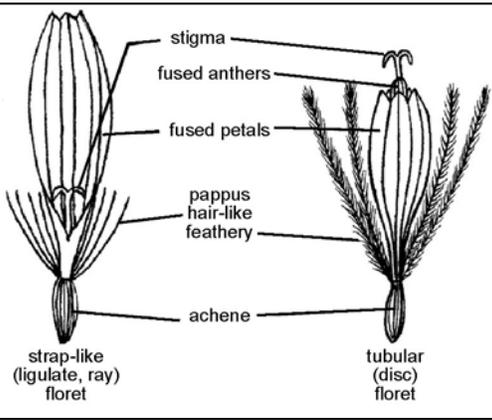
(without varieties) was recognized so these have not yet been distinguished by field botanists.

This article continues in the September–December *Parkland Naturalist* with descriptions and photos of Alberta asters with blue, violet, and mauve flowers.

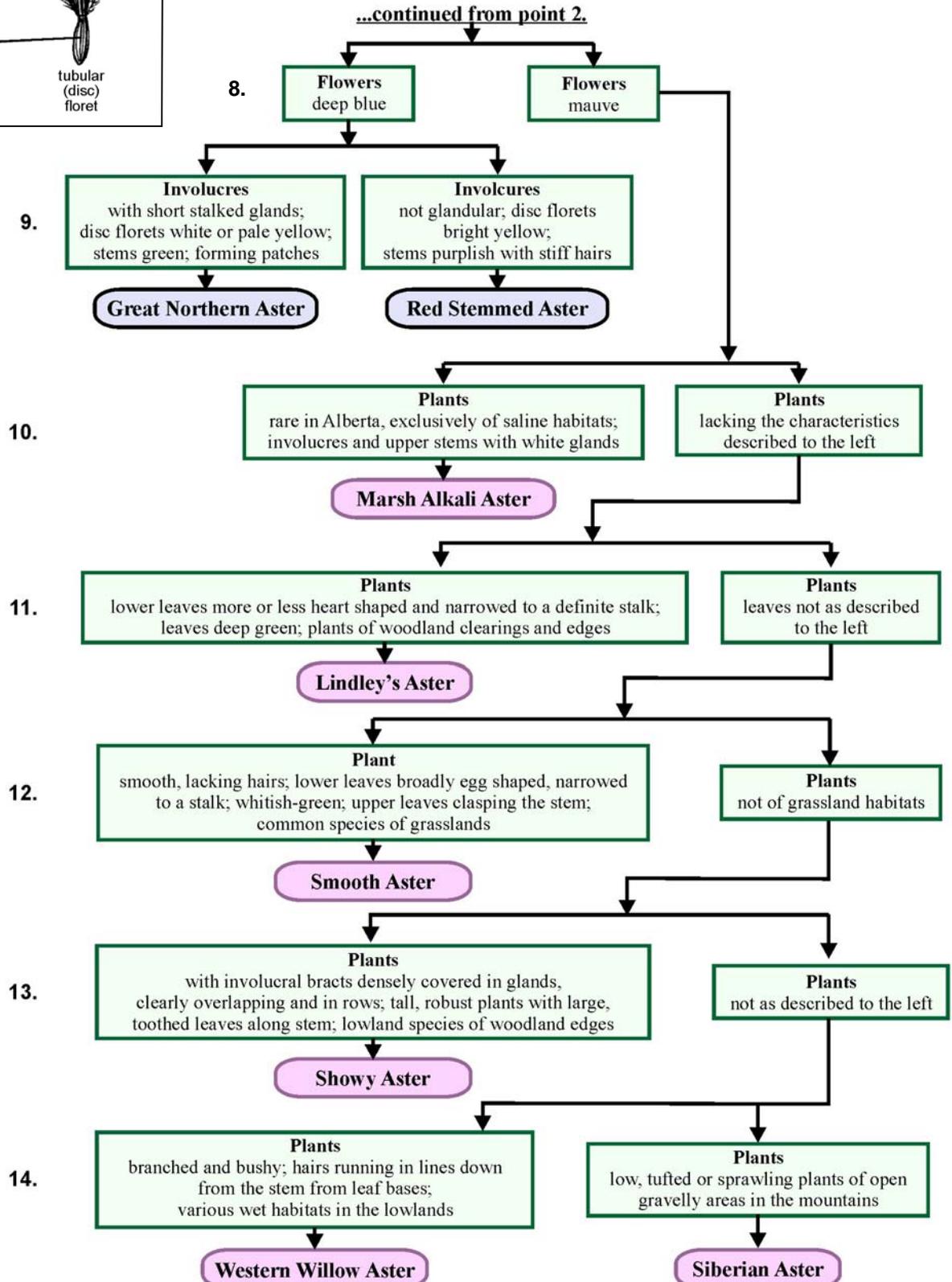
Patsy Cotterill

Diagrams (top right, p. 16; top left, p. 17) from "Illustrated Key to the Asteraceae of Alberta" by Linda Kershaw. (published with permission)





Flowchart information provided by Patsy Cotterill



Nature Appreciation Weekend, 2016

Our major attraction was the resident family of five Sharp-shinned Hawks. The antics of the birds as they flew over our campsite throughout the weekend were highly entertaining! The adults encouraged the youngsters to be swift and ferocious. We witnessed mid-air prey exchanges where the adults flew in to drop a fresh kill near the also in-flight juveniles. And there were mock attacks between the adults and their offspring, all talons out!

Park staff said this summer has been a raptor-rama for them. Along with the Sharpies we saw Cooper's, Broad-winged, and Goshawks. This likely affected songbird numbers. The nets set on Saturday morning were birdless. Sunday morning we had the reward of capturing one of the young Sharp-shinned Hawks which Janos Kovaks and his assistant, Jordan Lange, happily banded. (See photo on page 20).

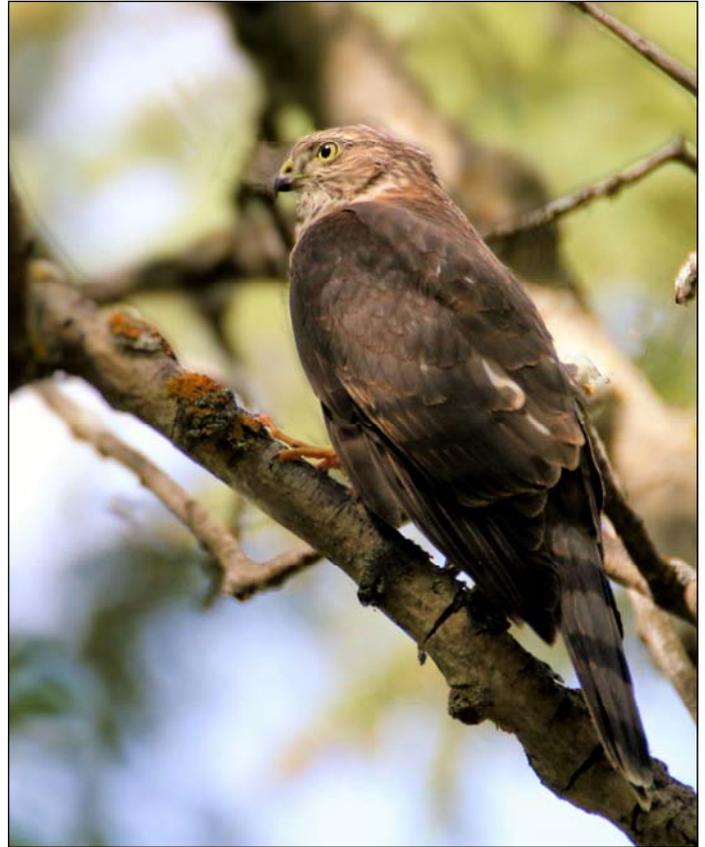
The very short list of songbirds in our campsite included a hummingbird. It ignored the feeder but checked out the red fuel bottle on Jiri Novak's camp stove. A few campers caught glimpses. Pushed to ID the bird, folks said it was large. I immediately concluded that it must be a Magnificent Hummingbird, as that was the species I chose for the Discussion Group's "new reported species" contest. Sadly, nobody agreed with me and we settled on Ruby-throated.

Friday night's sky was clear, allowing views of the Perseid meteor shower, and we set up scopes to scan the moon and planets. Most remarkable was the crispness of Saturn and its rings; they looked just like clipart. Waiting for a turn at the scope we amused ourselves by trying out the constellation phone app, not only on the stars, but also on various club members. We located a pair of Pisces.



Constellation phone app, Photo by Ann Carter

Saturday's walk for shorebirds found that number of birds to be small as well. The lake level was higher than in recent years, limiting the usual mud flats. The highlights were a single Black-bellied Plover and a Willet hanging with a small group of sandpipers and Avocets. There were several collections of



Juvenile Sharp-shinned Hawk, Photo by Sean Evans

feathers beneath our boots. The excursion extended far beyond the area we typically cover, but after some bush-whacking, Gerald Romanchuk eventually managed to lead us back to camp for lunch.

From Colleen Raymond's afternoon presentation we learned that Alberta has five major butterfly families. We put our bug nets to good use and were able to capture specimens of two of these groups for use in the photography workshop. From the Brush-foot family: Common Wood-Nymph, Milbert's Tortoiseshell, and Mourning Cloak. From the Whites family: Cabbage White and Clouded Sulphur. We also caught some dragons and damselflies.



**Clouded Sulphur Butterfly
Photo by Gerald Romanchuk**



Meadowhawk Dragonfly, Photo by Ann Carter

Gerald Romanchuk and Steve Knight guided us through some photography field exercises. The basic advice from Gerald is to be smarter than your camera! Turn off the auto setting and choose your numbers to achieve the desired exposure and depth of field. We found this particularly helpful when photographing subjects against the sky, when a camera’s auto settings would make it too dark. And the simple trick of moving slightly to change the background produced better results.

Steve explained that a simple camera accessory allows your SLR camera’s telephoto lens to focus more closely to a subject than it otherwise would. A close-up lens, while technically a lens, looks more like a filter and screws into the front of your lens the same way. For this reason they are also called close-up filters or supplementary filters. They allow you to be close to your subject, but not as close as with a macro lens. We picked up some really nice detail on our bug and plant subjects using all the suggested techniques.

Emily spotted an interesting critter over by the water drip, one of the six species of Rove Beetle in Alberta. Because of its “scorpion-like” behaviour, no one touched it, and turns out that was a good idea because it can cause a severe dermatitis. Reviewing the photo, John Acorn commented this one was “a beauty.”
 Brian Stephens



Rove Beetle, Photo by Brian Stephens

Once the heat of the day started to subside, we gathered for supper campfire. On Friday, Steve Knight (with some help from Connor Charchuk) had severely depleted Gerald’s cooler in search of the best wurst. After all that taste testing, Saturday’s menu was fairly limited, but there was enough to fuel an

evening walk. A few individuals, going completely rogue, ignored the scheduled time and route to engage in more tramping through the bush, this time by flashlight. The investigating park rangers decided they were a harmless bunch, while the target, a young Great-horned Owl, got away.

Colleen set up a light behind a sheet to attract moths. Along with the moths we noted some more cool-looking insects.



**Eupithecia stellata Moth
 Photo by Gerald Romanchuk**



Garter Snake, Photo by Dissan Jayasumana



Jumping Spider, Photo by Brian Stephens

Over the weekend, the birders identified 57 species within the park. Sunday's songbird walk beside the Grebe pond found a good number of birds, including nice looks at a Magnolia Warbler, a Rose-breasted Grosbeak, Red-eyed Vireos, and three Western Tanagers. Perhaps the fruiting bushes there made it a hotspot. When the bright red fruit of bunchberry caught our eyes, Hubert Taube pointed out that all the ones with berries had six leaves, as compared to the others, with only four.

Members enjoyed the opportunity to spend time together outdoors at Miquelon Provincial Park. They participated as campers or day trippers and selected the activities of interest to them. We also had local folks join us on Saturday. Very warm, sunny weather slowed the pace a bit this year as groups gathered in the shade to talk birds, bugs, and plants. Thanks to all the folks who came out and made the event a success!

Ann Carter



*Miquelon Provincial Park (top), Photo by Laurie Shrimpton
Native Narrow-leaved Hawkweed (*Hieracium umbellatum*) (bottom left), Photo by Ann Carter
Goldenrod (bottom centre), Photo by Gerald Romanchuk
Jordan Lange with young Sharp-shinned Hawk (bottom right), Photo by Brian Orr*



Indoor Meeting, April 15, 2016

Under the Microscope – A closer look at Alberta’s midges and mites

Cheryl Tebby and Ashley Thorsen, Royal Alberta Museum technicians working on the Alberta Biodiversity Monitoring Institute (ABMI) project, showed us how their painstaking work fits into the bigger picture of the ABMI project. The ABMI is a long-term ecological research and monitoring program designed to track ecosystem change throughout the province over many decades in order to reveal how biodiversity responds to landscape and global changes. The basic survey comprises 1,656 sites, 20 kilometres apart, evenly spaced on a grid pattern across Alberta. Sites are sampled every five years using standardized sampling protocols to cover a broad range of species and habitats, both terrestrial and aquatic. At each location, ABMI technicians record the species that are present and measure a variety of habitat characteristics. For species that cannot be identified in the field, such as midges and mites, ABMI taxonomists located at the Royal Alberta Museum sort, identify under the microscope, and archive samples to collect the Institute’s species-level dataset.

Midges are small two-winged flies that are often seen in swarms near water or marshy areas where they breed. They do not bite, but look like mosquitoes, particularly when forming mating swarms, and they will congregate around a high point. I encountered such a swarm the week before the talk while walking along the Poole Wetland boardwalk in St. Albert. I was surrounded by a swarm of midges which initially I mistook for mosquitoes. They have regular insect life stages: egg, larval, pupal, and adult. The adult stage is very short-lived. Midges are an integral part of the wetland food chain and the larvae are an important food source for fish. Bloodworms, either frozen or freeze-dried and fed to aquarium fish, are midge larvae of the chironomid genus. Midge larvae are important indicator organisms, as their presence, absence, or relative abundance can indicate pollution levels. Their fossils are widely used to assess paleo-habitats, for example, changes in oxygen levels over time.

Cheryl described the collection of chironomids in which the sample from the sieve is washed into a Marchant box “to separate bugs from stuff” and randomly sample the organisms which are then transferred into a Petri dish. Slides of specimens are prepared and examined under a dissecting microscope. The daunting task of identifying chironomids to family or genus level depends on using a key named after its author, John Epler. Chironomid larvae have a sclerotized (hardened) head capsule on a narrow cylindrical body. The majority of the characters used for larval identification are found on the head capsule. Cheryl gave us a quick primer on larval morphology and terminology, and we were ready to identify (key out) our specimen. The Epler key is a dichotomous key running through a number of statements making choices that (hopefully) lead eventually to the correct identification. Our larval specimen belonged to the chironomus genus and would be one of approximately a hundred species in that genus.

Ashley Thorsen told us about her complementary studies on oribatid mites, members of the arachnid (spider) class belonging

to the acariformes (*acari* is Greek for “too small to be divided”). There could be a million species of acariformes, of which only 50,000 are known and named. They are almost universal in their distribution; examples include spider mites on household plants, feather mites on birds, and ticks. Chiggers are a larval form of mite.

Oribatid mites inhabit soil, mostly feed on fungi, and are an important component of the soil community. For ABMI monitoring they are good bio-indicators, as they have high species diversity and are abundant in a number of different habitats. They reproduce slowly, so numbers fall sharply after a negative environmental impact, and they are good paleo-ecological indicators because they preserve well. Soil samples are collected by soil coring, bagged, and stored in coolers. The specimens are extracted using heat and light; mites seeking cooler and darker conditions fall into a funnel and are collected. Mites are identified to family level by examining specimen slides under a scanning electron microscope. Researchers compare a number of key identification features to illustrations in the *Almanac of Alberta Oribatid*, an online resource of the Royal Alberta Museum. In response to a question, Ashley noted that to identify a mite to species level, it would be necessary to use DNA bar-coding, which would be very expensive.

Since 2007, ABMI taxonomists and technicians have processed nearly half a million specimens, including lichens, bryophytes (moss and liverworts), aquatic invertebrates including chironomids, and mites. Many of the identified species represent new scientific records for the province and, occasionally, new Canadian records. In 2013 six new mite species were described.

For further information on the Alberta Biodiversity Monitoring Project, go to www.abmi.ca.

Alan Hingston



Boreal Box Mite
Photo by David Walter,
Royal Alberta Museum (RAM)



Chironomid larva
Photo by Cheryl
Tebby, RAM



Chironomid larva (right)
Photo by R. Hinchcliffe
RAM

Field Trip Reports

Buffalo Lake and Rochon Sands Provincial Park, August 6, 2016

No egrets, no regrets!

Eighteen of us toured to the south on Saturday in search of a Great Egret. A few of them have been hanging out at Rochon Sands for the past several weeks.

We made a few stops on the way down, picking up a White-faced Ibis and several other birds near Bittern Lake. A pit stop at Coal Lake was very birdy, and a wetland near Edberg was really good for shorebirds. Great to get a direct comparison of Long- and Short-billed Dowitchers. It looked like a lunch stop on the east end of Buffalo Lake was going to be completely bird-less, but a few flycatchers and waxwings saved my bacon.

Down at Rochon Sands we walked the marshy shoreline. We saw lots of birds, but no tall white heron-types. Did get a nice look at between 1 and 3 bitterns (depending on who you trust!), several ibises, stilts, warblers, etc.



White-faced Ibis, Photo by Stan Deregowski

Finally gave up on the egrets and had a long, heated debate on whether or not failure should be rewarded with an ice cream. Democracy won out and we stopped for a treat, picking up several birds while we waited for everyone to get their order in.

We went over towards the Narrows and then picked a random road to head over to hwy 21 and a gas station. One of the cars was running on fumes. We happened upon a great little pond and got 14 species of shorebirds at the one spot, ending up with 19 shorebird species for the day.

At one point all the birds lifted off at once. The call to watch for a raptor was put out. Within seconds a Peregrine came stooping down and attacked the birds. After several short little attacks, the falcon singled out a phalarope and kept going at it. The little phalarope kept diving underwater at the last second to save its life. The Peregrine kept pushing the attack for quite a while, but eventually gave up and flew over to a fence post to rest.

It was really awesome to get such a good, relatively close look

at a hunting sequence like that. There were differing opinions on the outcome: some were cheering for the falcon, others were pulling for the prey to get away.

Overall, despite completely dipping on the egrets, we had a really good day and saw 91 species. Thanks to all the participants, especially Sean for doing all the eBirding. And apologies to Vince for the title of this report!

Gerald Romanchuk

Rampart Wetlands, July 27, 2016

After severe thunderstorms in the afternoon, 14 of us had a pleasant evening at the Rampart Wetlands. A few people actually couldn't get across Edmonton to join us because of the aftermath of the storm on the south side of the city.

We spent close to 2 hours circumnavigating the wetland, keeping a close eye out for a Green Heron previously found here. Although we didn't spot it, the sharp eyes found Sora, Black-crowned Night-Heron, Killdeer, Spotted Sandpiper, and Wilson's Snipe in the reeds. A variety of waterfowl, including quite a few juveniles, were out on the ponds. The trees and bushes along the slopes of the wetland harboured lots of song birds.

We saw a total of 30 species.

Brian Stephens

John E. Poole Wetland and Big Lake Interpretive Trail, July 2, 2016

Thirty-two of us met at the Lois Hole Centennial Provincial Park at 8:30 this morning. A walk along the boardwalk, a stop at the viewing platform, and a walk past the Nadeau pond produced a list of 43 species, including a very vocal Swamp Sparrow that gave some of the group a very close look.

We then re-grouped at the Big Lake Interpretive Trail. This walk produced a list of 31 species, including 12 we observed at the boardwalk earlier. After subtracting these, our total for the outing was 62 species.

Highlights of the Interpretive Trail part of the outing included good looks at Sedge Wren, Le Conte's Sparrow, and Nelson's Sparrow. All were very vocal and fairly close to the edge of the trail. I thank those who brought their spotting scopes. It was a little muddy and really buggy, but we had a good time out there.

A special thanks to Dawne Colwell for keeping the list for us today. She was busy!

Don Delaney



Elk Island Century Day, June 18, 2016

This past Saturday we ran our annual Century Day at Elk Island. Didn't need a weatherman to tell it was supposed to be a nice day – the turnout of close to 50 birders and a convoy of 13 cars told it all. A few more than last year when it was cold and rainy!

We made our way up the parkway, stopping at trailheads and wetlands and picking up birds at most stops. At one point we even recruited a new club member when another birder out on her own asked if she could join us. It was kind of nice to run into someone interested in birds – usually we only meet civilians who are only into looking for large mammals.

The Sandhills Trail was pretty good, and most of the group got a good look at a Western Tanager. We heard a Blue-headed Vireo and got a few warblers, including Yellow-rumped, Magnolia, Mourning, and Redstart.

We stopped at Astotin Recreational Area for lunch and a walk. The group demonstrated some awesome spotting skills by picking up a Bald Eagle perched on the soccer goal. The thing was really approachable and the whole group got a good look.



It was pretty interesting to see how many tourists thought it was a real bird!

After lunch, we went north and east out towards Chipman. We'd got into the 90s and needed a few more birds. We picked up one bird after another: Northern Pintail, Sedge Wren, Willet, Pied-billed Grebe, etc., and got up to 98. Heading back towards the park, we saw a Meadowlark. Then just like several other years, our 100th bird was a Mountain Bluebird.

Shortly after we added a Kestrel, and back in the park a Broad-winged Hawk made a total of 102. By then it was close to 5:00 and a lot of the group were ready to go home. A bunch of us found a picnic site and set up for a wiener roast. Or as our new member, who turned out to be an Australian, called it, a sausage sizzle!

Close to dusk, the handful of us still out there had a bit of an adventure. A large bull bison had sauntered into the Moss Lake parking lot where we were relaxing around the campfire. At first it looked like he was eyeing up Colleen's car! But it really seemed like he wanted to head down the trail, but was nervous about all the people around. He finally nosed his way towards

us (we were set up only yards away from the trail) and when a car drove past behind him, he took off like a shot and galloped down the trail!

We had a really nice day. Missed a lot of common birds, but found some good ones and passed the target of 100.

Gerald Romanchuk

Photo by Gerald Romanchuk

Ministik Lake Bio-Blitz, June 12, 2016,

Field Trip led by **Brian Stephens and Colleen Raymond**

Please see the article on page 10.

Halfmoon Lake, July 9, 2016

Fourteen people participated in this integrated field trip. It was a perfect summer day, with temperatures in the low to mid-twenties and not a drop of rain.

In the morning (10:30–12:30) we went to the west part of the Natural Area; in the afternoon (1:30–5:00) to the east portion. Our guides were Richard and Vera DeSmet of the Rainbow Equitation Society, who are stewards of this Provincial Natural Area.

Shirley Coulson kept track of birds; Colleen Raymond, of insects; and Patsy Cotterill, of plants.

All participants were very impressed by the view from the lookout point at the southwest corner of the Ghost Horse Hills. Noteworthy was the prevalence of Orange-crowned Warblers, singing strongly and sitting on exposed tree branches almost like flycatchers. Surprisingly, no woodpecker species were observed.

Readily seen were the advertised plant species of ground pine (a.k.a. round-branched tree-clubmoss, *Lycopodium obscurum*, *Dendrolycopodium dendroideum*, etc.) and spotted coralroot (*Corallorhiza maculata*), a myco-heterotrophic orchid (parasitizing on the mycelium of fungi).

We also admired the western wood lily (*Lilium philadelphicum*), still in full bloom in shaded areas, and wild calla (water arum, *Calla pallustris*) at the lakeside. The general impression is that plant development is about 2 weeks ahead of its normal schedule.

Richard indicated there is a possibility that the Natural Area may be expanded to the north. We wish the DeSmets and the RES success in this endeavour and would like to express our gratitude for their efforts to look after this treasure of a natural area.

Hubert Taube

Heritage Marsh, June 7, 2016

At 7 p.m. a mixed group of ENC members and civilians made their way across the Heritage Marsh Bridge in search of the fabled American Bittern of Hawkstone Landing Lookout. Its strange and alien call has been heard for weeks by local residents. Would it make an appearance that evening? I really hoped it would because a lot of people endured the Henday construction gauntlet to get there!

We started out on the bridge and scanned the marsh, viewing most of the ducks from this vantage point. The Heritage Marsh has almost every common species of duck present at any given time. This location is a great place to get photos because it offers close proximity to waterfowl crossing under it or flying low from pond to pond. From here we moved on towards the west pond and travelled past a nice treed path where an American Goldfinch and Yellow Warblers were seen. This is also where people started to hear the bittern calling... It was somewhere in a sea of cattails on the far shore of the marsh. A very "Sharp"- eyed individual somehow managed to spot the bittern buried deep in the reeds, at least 100 metres away. A very impressive feat to be sure! The group watched it calling for a few good minutes before it flew off to another section of the marsh. Mission accomplished.

The group then made its way back to the bridge to check out the other two ponds. Unfortunately, the House Wrens were down for the night and the Downy Woodpeckers I knew of had fledged. But there were plenty more birds to see! We got a look at two fully utilized Purple Martin boxes. The martins shared the sky with Tree Swallows and the odd Black Tern. A little further down the path is where the American Bittern landed. It was calling close by but was still very hard to locate. Marnie Evans eventually spotted the bittern, and this time we managed to get the scope on it so everybody could get a nice look. It is amazing how well a bittern blends in when it is not moving!



American Bittern in Canada
Photo by Gerald Romanchuk

In the evening a lot of different birds come to this location to roost. Black-crowned Night-Herons and Snipe are sometimes there, but not this evening. However, a Northern Flicker, a Gray Catbird, and Cedar Waxwings were present. Green-winged Teal flew in and made a brief appearance before swimming behind the reeds. Making our way back, we stopped at the last pond and picked up a few sparrows and saw a Merlin make a hurried fly-by over the group. We made our way back through the trees in case it rained, but the weather held out.

Thanks to Brian Stephens for recording the birds (45 species) and Gerald Romanchuk for the photos.

Sean Evans

Spotted Coralroot (right)
Photo by Jiri Novak



Most of the birders walked right past this little gem. Thanks to Jiri Novak for pointing out this lovely orchid beside the trail!
 Ann Carter



The Heritage Marsh setting, Photo by Ann Carter

From that lookout we carried on towards the far pond, where a non-breeding group of American White Pelicans hangs out in the evening. This pond is a good place to see nesting Red-necked Grebes, and Double-crested Cormorants. As we were observing the pelicans a pair of beavers made a surprise visit, swimming around in the shallow end of the pool, allowing a great viewing opportunity.

American Pelicans in Canada
Photo by Gerald Romanchuk



American Pelicans in Canada
Photo by Gerald Romanchuk

Battery Creek, June 5, 2016

On this sunny, mid-20-degrees Sunday, 14 people attended the field trip from about 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. Five of these were members of the newly founded Devon Nature Club. Essentially, it was a repeat of last year’s trip, date- and location-wise. Starting at Michigan Avenue, we skirted Battery Creek on upland trails, reaching the river bottom at the Lions Campground and returning on the wide valley bottom trail that has been re-aligned since last year and is currently under reconstruction.

Plant-wise, the poison ivy patch still caught the greatest attention, while birding highlights were three “talking trees” (nesting trees with incessantly begging young woodpeckers.



Poison Ivy

Brian Stephens and Shirley Coulson recorded a total of 29 bird species. The following highlights of the botany observations are by Patsy Cotterill.

Botany Notes

The trail flora was very similar both in composition and stage of development to that recorded on last year’s field trip, conducted on almost exactly the same date. A few plants observed last year were not seen, but this is likely due in part to chance and to the fact that we took a slightly different route; we returned from the campground partway by a new trail carved out on the east side of the creek. The creek, by the way, featured some impressive beaver dams and ponds after the recent rains.

Generally, with our early warm and dry spring, the flowering (phenology) stage was more advanced than last year. For example, wild sarsaparilla was nearing the end of its flowering period, and prickly wild rose (not noted last year) was in bloom. Likewise, red-osier dogwood and high-bush cranberry were all past their flowering peak.

Additional species recorded included red-and-white baneberry, at the tail end of flowering; tall anemone, just budding out; kidney-leaved buttercup, a slender buttercup with very small flowers frequenting moist, shady woodland edges; and hairy wild rye, an occasional grass of coniferous slopes in our ravines but extremely common in the mountains.

Our biggest surprise was to find spikes of tiny yellow flowers on the poison ivy. (It should not have been such a surprise, as we found the fruits in early July last year.) The colony appears extremely healthy, its large, shiny leaves forming dense ground cover on either side of the trail in one area.



Poison Ivy Flowers

Poison Ivy, Photos by Hubert Taube

Patches of cicer milkvetch were just coming into flower on some of the pipeline cutlines, where they had no doubt been planted to stabilize the slopes. They should probably now be gradually reduced to make room for native vegetation.

Thanks to the Macaulays, Patsy, Shirley, and Brian for being expert guides.

We wish the Devon Nature Club every success in its efforts to maintain Battery Creek in a natural state.

Hubert Taube



Heritage Marsh

Field Trip Reports

Long Lake, June 1, 2016

Thirteen of us braved pretty miserable weather and made the trip to Long Lake for some Spring(?) song birding on Saturday. It rained most of the time and we only persisted until lunch-time, but some of us tried our luck at Elk Island on the way back, by which time the rains had more or less stopped.

We had good luck at our first stop just outside the park gates, where we had both Connecticut Warbler and Ovenbird singing. From there we headed into the park and walked the trail that heads up valley away from campsite loop 5. This yielded a number of “ear birds” (Ruby-crowned Kinglet, Swainson’s and Hermit Thrushes, Black and White Warbler, Tennessee Warbler, Yellow Warbler, Yellow-Rumped Warbler, and Canada Warbler). Some excellent views of Blue-headed Vireos cavorting with a group of Gray Jays were probably the highlight of the day. We headed back the same way and checked out the lake before leaving the park, picking up both Common and Forster’s Terns along with Red-necked Grebe and the big surprise of the day – a Eurasian Collared-Dove.

We saw or heard total of 66 species on this trip, which seemed a pretty good return given the weather!

Martin Sharp



Darwell, May 28, 2016

Our group of 13 met at the restaurant in the town of Darwell north of Wabamun Lake before heading into the private land owned by Lu Carbyn. The weather had cleared and we had a pleasant day hiking through this area.

We were greeted by Yellow-bellied Sapsucker and Red-eyed Vireo before we left the cars. With recently rains, some of the trails were muddy and wet, but we all made it through. Still, we spent quite a bit of time at different spots tracking down birds. We all got good looks at Spotted Sandpipers, Grey Catbirds, Rose-breasted Grosbeaks, Eastern Kingbirds, and Baltimore Orioles. Numerous other species were more elusive, so not seen by everyone. A few species such as Alder Flycatcher were heard only.

Our list on Lu’s property was 61 species, a few of which were new for the property. Thanks to Lu for inviting us out. It was a very satisfying day.

In addition, at the town of Darwell, a few of us saw Cedar Waxwings after our post-trip stop at the restaurant, and were invited over to look at a Ruby-throated Hummingbird at a nearby house.

Brian Stephens



Pond at Lu Carbyn’s Darwell property (below), Tennessee Warbler (top), Photos by Dawne Colwell



Larch Sanctuary, May 18, 2016

Our group of 14 nature enthusiasts enjoyed an evening walk along the lovely trails at Larch Sanctuary. The night was off to a great start when John Acorn identified the mysterious call of a Western Tanager – “mysterious” to me because it was also heard but not properly seen on my scouting trip to the area a few days earlier. We were soon treated to very good views of the species.

A personal highlight was the sight of a Common Merganser pair quietly swimming along Whitemud Creek, then the couple’s sudden synchronized departure flight back around the bend when we overstepped an invisible boundary. A brood of tiny Common Goldeneye ducklings diving in the Oxbow was also a delightful find.

We enjoyed a pleasant evening thanks to the group of wonderful people who came out to help identify birds, plants, and other animals while hiking well-trodden, sloping paths bordered by beautiful aromatic trees, shrubs, and flowers. Much thanks also to Brian Stephens for keeping our bird list, which grew to 24 species by the time we reached the parking lot at the end of the night.

Colleen Raymond

Whitemud South, May 17, 2016

On another pleasant evening 24 of us walked the section of Whitemud Creek from the Snow Valley area as far as the Westbrook junction. Like the previous night it started out very quietly, but we gradually started to pick up bird activity. Spotted Sandpipers were busy along the creek and Eastern Phoebes were at one of the bridges. Perhaps the latter are late arriving, but in the past, every bridge would have had a pair of Eastern Phoebes.

Just before the Westbrook junction we could hear Hermit Thrush, and then a Rose-breasted Grosbeak. Initially we were unable to spot it high up in the poplars, but several people did eventually get a look. We ventured off trail to get closer to the Bank Swallow colony in the cliffs. The swallows were quite active and from time to time work on burrows was evidenced by bursts of sand coming out of the holes. We also had a Western Tanager across the creek, and a pair of Boreal Chickadees.

When we decided to start back, a few people saw a Belted Kingfisher along the creek.



DC

Our timing turned out to be perfect – a Barred Owl was perched above the trail at the Aspen Gardens junction, giving everyone excellent views. It was quite alert and looking around. It suddenly flew, but rather than moving to a new perch, it went after a nearby squirrel – it missed

but took up another perch and was eying another squirrel.

We finished off gradually, as we did get spread out along the last part of the trail. At the very end near the parking area we spotted a pair of Clay-colored Sparrows in a small bush, giving us a total of 29 species.

Brian Stephens

Whitemud North of Smith Crossing, May 19, 2016

With heavy smoke and impending rain, just five of us headed north from the Smith Crossing bridge on 23 Avenue. Three Spotted Sandpipers were working the muddy shore of the creek, which has been very low. As with the previous 3 nights things were pretty quiet, with some sparrows and warblers, until we spotted a raptor on a dead tree silhouetted against the grey sky. With views from various angles, we could see the whitish supercilium of a first-year Northern Goshawk.

We avoided heavy rain and the trails did not get particularly slippery. We saw 13 species here.

Over the four evenings when we explored Whitemud Creek, we had a total of 40 species. Each section offered us something different.

Brian Stephens

Whitemud North, May 16, 2016

Twenty-two of us walked the trail from Fox Drive to Snow Valley, starting at 7 p.m. Birding was very quiet, with absent species more noteworthy than those present. Whitemud Creek itself is running very slow but has lots of water stored behind numerous beaver dams. Also, the leaves are further out than usual for this time of year.

Other than a few Yellow and Yellow-rumped Warblers, we neither heard nor saw any other warblers, nor any flycatchers or vireos. Even Black-capped Chickadees were in short supply. Perhaps some overnight showers will up the number of species stopping in the ravine.

We did get a good look at young ravens being fed at a nest on the orange pipeline girders. Early on a Spotted Sandpiper was browsing the muddy areas of the creek. Those of us lagging behind on the return trip heard and then saw a Western Tanager (female), for a total of 25 species seen or heard.

Brian Stephens



Western Tanager

DC

Global Big Day in Water Valley, May 14, 2016

The village of Water Valley lies west of Highway 2 and north of Cochrane in an area where the Boreal Forest meets the Aspen Parkland and the Foothills forests. It boasts a diverse array of habitats, including coniferous forests, mixed forests, aspen woodland, pastures and hay fields, swamps, and meadows.

We saw a total of 47 species. According to the 17 participants, the highlights were Common Loon and Evening Grosbeak.

Martin Sharp



Evening Grosbeak, Photo by Sean Evans

Field Trip Reports

Hermitage Park, May 10, 2016

Around 20 of us showed up for a decent evening in the park yesterday. The first highlight was when we walked over to the Beverly Bridge. After scoping the railroad bridge and not seeing much, John Jaworski said, "It's right there!" Sure enough, he found us a female Peregrine perched on the closest concrete piling. It made for scope-filling views in great light. Reasonable job, John!

Shortly afterwards, Jana Sneep almost got kicked off the trip after she showed us a picture on her camera screen. It was a Say's Phoebe. Luckily for Jana, we re-found the bird and she was forgiven!

Other than that, things were pretty quiet. A Bald Eagle flew over. Only a few sparrows were singing, and no warblers at all, but we enjoyed a good walk with reasonable company. ;)

Thanks to Ann Carter for eBirding our 27 species.

Gerald Romanchuk



Peregrine Falcon, Photo by Jana Sneep



Bald Eagle, Photo by Adriana Faciu

Shorebird Trip, May 5, 2016

Ron Ramsey told me it reminded him of a scene from Point Pelee, 40 or so birders all lined up with their scopes. We ran a very short-notice trip out to Cooking Lake, and birders just kept coming and coming!

A few of us who got there early were just setting up on a big flock of shorebirds when they all took off. The reason was quickly apparent when a Peregrine came cruising over. After that the birds never really settled anywhere close, but we did get a nice comparison of Baird's, Semipalmated, Least, and Pectoral Sandpipers all in close proximity. It's actually easier to talk about them when there aren't many others to distract us.

We saw 10 species of shorebirds and enjoyed a nice night out. Thanks to Connor Charchuk for eBirding our total of 31 species.

Gerald Romanchuk



Evening at Cooking Lake, Photo by Ann Carter



Participation! Photo by Ted McKen

Strathcona Riverside Trail, May 7, 2016

During a very pleasant mid-morning on the Strathcona Riverside Trail, 19 of us walked the 2 kilometres to the Bald Eagle nest site and added another kilometre by walking east past the nest tree and looping back to the trail at the nest site.

Along the way we were treated to the sounds of Song Sparrows, Savannah Sparrows, and Red-winged Blackbirds. At one point a Lincoln's Sparrow joined the chorus. A highlight was a Yellow-bellied Sapsucker working a tree close to the trail, giving us a very good view. The female eagle was on the nest and the male gave us a nice fly-by as we walked east past the nest. We did not see any nestlings, but the female was standing and very attentive to something below her feet. Perhaps the first of the eggs have hatched.

We encountered 35 species. As always, thanks to Brian Stevens for compiling the list.

Don Delaney

Photos by Don Delaney



Yellow-bellied Sapsucker



Bald Eagle

Unplanned Century Day in Central Alberta, May 1, 2016

We left Edmonton at 7.30 a.m. for what turned out to be a very full and satisfying day of birding in Central Alberta. Our route took us to the north end of Coal Lake, the north and east sides of Bittern Lake, Camrose, Rosalind, Big Knife Provincial Park, Galahad, Alliance, Coronation, and Castor, returning to Edmonton by various routes. The list below is a compilation of my list and separate lists supplied by Connor Charchuk, Ann Carter, and Gerry Fox. I hope it catches all that we saw as a group.

In short, shorebirding was great around Bittern Lake. At Galahad, geese and cranes were spectacular (in their thousands); east of Galahad and south of Castor, ducks and raptors were everywhere. Owls livened up the dusk period, and songbirds offered a taste of things to come. Though not everybody saw everything, between us we racked up a total of 105 species for the day – not bad for the first of May, though it felt more like mid-July! Thanks to all who participated for a wonderful day out.

Martin Sharp

Snow Goose Chase, April 23-24, 2016

Bob Parsons did his usual awesome job of organizing an army of volunteers for the Edmonton Nature Club's annual Snow Goose Chase. Despite the cold, windy, rainy, and snowy weather, everyone had a great time.

On Saturday we had eight buses of school children, parents, volunteers, and guides. The kids came from a variety of inner-city schools and agencies. Volunteers included young naturalists from Nature Alberta, as well as helpers from other groups.

A great variety of nature-oriented activities was scheduled through the day: talks about beavers and the importance of wetlands, bird-banding demonstrations, and several displays and activities in the Tofield Community Hall.

All the scouts we sent out found several large flocks of Snow Geese. In the afternoon, the buses ran out east of town to chase them down. Participants enjoyed great looks at the mixed flocks of geese feeding in the stubble.

Over Saturday and Sunday, we ran another three buses filled mainly with adults more focused on birding. Despite the weather, or maybe because of it, we had some great sightings. Over the weekend we saw a total of 86 species, several of which were rarely seen or firsts for the Chase. These included White-faced Ibis, Common Tern, Snowy Owl, Short-eared Owl, Eastern Phoebe, Eastern Kingbird, Ruby-crowned Kinglet, and Fox Sparrow.

Big Congratulations to Bob for yet another great job of running this show. And a huge Thank You to all the volunteers, scouts, sponsors, and supporters!

Gerald Romanchuk

Sparrow Species of the Big Lake Interpretive Trail

Several sparrow species can be seen on this trail. Song Sparrows, Savannah Sparrows, Lincoln's Sparrows, Clay-colored Sparrows, and Swamp Sparrows are often observed there. Nelson's Sparrows and Le Conte's Sparrows have been noted there as well, but not as consistently as this year.

This article focuses on the seven sparrow species I have most often seen along the trail this season from early spring to the present. The information about each species was taken from *The Atlas of Breeding Birds of Alberta: A Second Look* (2007) and *The Atlas of Breeding Birds of Alberta* (1992).

Clay-colored Sparrow

In the Parkland region this sparrow is found in shrubby uncultivated fields and pastures, tall shrubbery in meadows, brushy openings, edges and burns, and thickets along streams, lakes, muskegs, and swamps. Parkland and the wetter parts of mixed grass prairie are ideal habitats. Their insect-like "buzz buzz" call is a familiar summer sound in these areas. Since 1992, decreases in relative abundance were detected in the Boreal Forest, Foothills, Grassland, and Parkland Natural Regions. The species is considered secure in Alberta.

Savannah Sparrow

The Savannah Sparrow is a bird of open habitats and is the most widely distributed of Alberta sparrows during the breeding season. In Central Alberta their preferred habitat is the edges of prairie sloughs, marshes, moist grasslands, hayfields, overgrown meadows and fields, and any damp, low-lying area with dense vegetation. Decreases in relative abundance have been detected in the Boreal Forest and Parkland regions, likely due to drier conditions of late. The species is considered secure in Alberta.

Le Conte's Sparrow

In central Alberta, the Le Conte's favours sedge meadows, thick grass, shrub tangles at the edges of marshes and bogs, and low, damp parts of cultivated hayfields. These sparrows are often elusive and secretive, spending most of their time in the dense grass and other plant growth where their weak, short-lived, insect-like buzz song is most often delivered. The males do sometimes sing from a dead rush or weed stem. When they sing from a clear perch, they are often quite approachable. The species is considered secure in Alberta.

Nelson's Sharp-tailed Sparrow

This species' typical habitat is sedge marshes with scattered willows. It favours margins of ponds, lakes, and

marshes where there are sedges, cattails in shallow water, or wet grassy meadows. This season they shared this habitat with the Le Conte's Sparrows on the Big Lake Interpretive Trail. On our July 2 ENC walk we observed both species about a metre apart and heard the songs of both all along the trail. The song of the male Nelson's Sparrow is a high wheezy nasal buzz of short duration which is delivered from the top of a grass tuft or hidden in the bushes. Sometimes they are silent during the day and sing at night. The species is considered secure in Alberta.

Song Sparrow

The Song Sparrow breeds in every natural region of Alberta. Its favoured habitat includes low shrubbery growth along the margins of ponds, lakes, and streams; brushy woodland openings; the forest edge; farmland thickets; hedgerows; bushy pasture; scattered aspen groves; and shrubbery around buildings. Of the sparrows mentioned so far this is the species most likely to nest in suburban neighbourhoods. It is very common along the Big lake Interpretive Trail. Their Latin name – *Melospiza melodia* – is very apt. Their sweet song usually starts with three clear notes followed by a series of trills. The male sings as many as 6–8 songs a minute. The species is considered secure in Alberta.

Lincoln's Sparrow

The Lincoln's Sparrow has been observed in good numbers on the Big Lake Interpretive Trail this year as well as at the John E. Poole Wetland. It also likes bogs, wet meadows, and willow and alder thickets bordering marshy areas. The male, whose song is reminiscent of that of the Purple Finch, sings from willows and from the top of bulrushes in marshy areas. They can be quite approachable while singing. The species is considered secure in Alberta.

Swamp Sparrow

In nesting season this sparrow favours the margins of ponds, lakes, and streams with tall emergent vegetation such as cattails or willow; alder thickets; swamps and bogs with shrubs and small conifers; marshes with tangles of vegetation; and sedge meadows. Like the Nelson's Sparrow and Le Conte's Sparrow, the Swamp Sparrow is a wary and secretive bird that keeps low to the ground in bushes and reeds. It is often first noticed when the male's clear and fairly loud slow trill is delivered from a cattail or bush. Look for a chestnut crown and wings. The species is considered secure in Alberta.

All of these sparrow species are migratory and usually stay until mid-September.

Don Delaney

All photos by Don Delaney



Le Conte's Sparrow



Nelson's Sparrow



Song Sparrow



Clay-colored Sparrow



Swamp Sparrow



Lincoln's Sparrow



Savannah Sparrow

Members' Photos



Surf Scoter, Lake Beaumaris, Photo by Jana Sneep



Moose, Photo by Lu Carbyn