

THE PARKLAND NATURALIST



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Coastline, Photo by Betty Fisher



Northern Gannets, Photo by Betty Fisher



Murre Egg, Photo by Judy Johnson



Native Iris, Photo by Marg Reine

Visiting The Rock

An island vacation – I’m in! The words conjure up a tropical island with sandy beaches and palm trees, but it’s not that kind of island – it’s Newfoundland, The Rock! Well, we have always wanted to see that island, explore its history and culture, and yes, of course, see its birds. In June Betty Fisher, Judy Johnson, and I booked a two-week birding trip to Newfoundland with Eagle Eye Tours. We were a party of nine plus two guides, a perfect number for birding and getting to know everyone. Our guides Jared and Jody were exceptional. Jared was from Newfoundland, so he knew all the good birding spots, back roads, and flowers (which were all in bloom).

We began our trip with a couple of days in the St. John’s area. We boarded a boat at Witless Bay Ecological Reserve in search of pelagic species and the nest sites of Common Murres, Thick-billed Murres, Atlantic Puffins, Black-legged Kittiwakes, Razorbills, and Northern Fulmars, as well as numerous gull species. We were not disappointed, as these birds covered nearly every inch of the rocky islands. There were birds flying, birds diving, and birds sitting on nests. The noise was incredible. Then a spectacular sight, as a bald eagle flew over and thousands of birds rose into the air, darkening the sky. As they began to settle down again, opportunistic fulmars and gulls were flying off with eggs and young.

The next two days we explored the “Irish Loop,” the lower part of the Avalon Peninsula south of St. John’s. At La Manche Provincial Park we saw Gray Jays, Gray-cheeked Thrushes, and Black-throated Green Warblers that were very cooperative, coming into full view and staying put. Another highlight was a pair of Black-backed Woodpeckers feeding begging young at the nest hole.

At Cape Broyle and later Biscay Bay we had great views of Common and Arctic Terns close together, as well as our only Lesser Black-backed Gull of the trip. At the Bay we saw all three scoters close to shore and in good light, providing good opportunities for species comparison and photography. We also spotted five Long-tailed Ducks.

Continuing south the next morning, we passed through subarctic tundra on the way to Cape Pine. We saw Caribou in the distance and numerous Short-eared Owls close to the road, and also spotted Northern Harriers, Bald Eagles, Rough-legged Hawks, Horned Larks, and a Willow Ptarmigan. The landscape was amazing and the boggy terrain was also interesting. At Cape Pine we were fortunate to see Short-tailed Swallowtail Butterflies, whose range is restricted to this area.

The next day we were back in St. John’s for a look around Cape Spear and the harbour, as well as Signal Hill. We had sightings of Humpback and Minke whales, some Sooty Shearwaters, and Northern Gannets. Gray-cheeked Thrush and American Black Duck were some of the highlights in the forest and pond edges.

On the afternoon of day five we started toward St. Bride’s. The journey there was fascinating, as we travelled through very boggy areas with amazing flowering plants. Jared had wanted to highlight the Dragon’s Mouth Orchid and was surprised that everyone was right into doing a “bog slog” to look at other plants in bloom. Jared knew all the flowers and found some unique orchids for us when he realized we were not just birders. (On the last day of the trip he told us he was really pleased that this group was so interested in Newfoundland’s flora, history, and culture. He certainly did not disappoint us, with all his knowledge of his island!)

The next morning we headed to Cape Spear to see nesting Northern Gannets in an area that was extremely foggy – we could hardly see each other as we hiked toward the Gannet colony. Once we were close enough we could see Gannets by the thousands, Black-legged Kittiwakes, Thick-billed Murres, and Common Murres nesting on island rocks and the edges of the cliff. The fields leading to the cliffs were full of sparrows and Horned Larks, as well as numerous wildflowers.

Later that day we went to the Castle Hill National Historic Site, a cod fishery museum that was well organized and informative.

We spent the next few days in Terra Nova National Park, where we saw lots of warblers and sparrows and had good views of the Olive-sided Flycatcher and Yellow-bellied Flycatcher, as well as clear songs. On one of our walks in the park we saw and heard an endemic species of Red Crossbills (*Loxia curvirostra peracna*); the guides were very excited, as they had not been spotted there for a while.

Our last stop before Deer Lake was Gros Morne National Park, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, where we had great sightings of sparrows, warblers, flycatchers, a Great Cormorant, and Common Eiders. We took a boat trip through Western Brook Pond, a 16 km long, narrow landlocked fjord carved by glaciers and surrounded by steep rocky cliffs and misty waterfalls. The 3 km walk to the boat dock was through more bog and forest, so we spent a lot of time on the way back looking at and photographing flowers. The next day, our last in the park, we visited the Tablelands, a rare outcrop of the Earth’s mantle that was pushed upward millions of years ago.

All told, we saw 108 different species of birds, a large variety of native orchids, and many mammals and insects. Everyone enjoyed the trip, and the leaders were excellent. We would recommend this island vacation even if doesn’t offer sandy beaches and palm trees. The people are very friendly, and the fish and seafood fresh and tasty. The Rock should be on your bucket list!

Marg Reine

(See two more photos from “The Rock” on page 32.)

On the cover, Sunset, St. Bride’s, Photo by Marg Reine

President's Report, Winter 2017

The ENC functions entirely through the efforts of volunteers. If you would like to give back to the club, please consider joining our awesome board. Watch for emailed notices on positions that will be available.



Our President, Ann Carter

Congratulations to **Dawne Colwell** and **James Fox**, who were recently recognized for their contributions to our club. Congratulations also go out to **Janos Kovaks**, recipient of the Edgar T. Jones Conservation Award. It took several folks to engineer that surprise! (See page 6.)

The Remembering Ray Cromie project kicked off with the installation of bird nesting boxes at a local conservation property. Thanks to **Richard Chamberland** and the **Edmonton and Area Land Trust** for facilitating this. We anticipate installing more songbird boxes later in the year.

We've had positive feedback on our new email system. Thanks to email coordinator **Steve Knight** for his work in creating informative, well timed, attractive announcements. Some Gmail users have noted that our messages are in their "Promotions" folder; this depends on how an individual has set up the inbox.

Members enjoyed another interesting season of indoor programs. Many thanks to program director **Alan Hingston** for seeking out speakers on a wide range of topics and overseeing scheduling and bookings. We appreciate the coffee and goodies set up by **Gerry Fox**. Thanks also go to our study group leaders: **Karen Lindsay** for Bird Studies, **Patsy Cotterill** and **Hubert Taube** for Plant Studies, and **Deanna Steckler** for the Bug and Spider Group. All of these programs will return in the fall.

As many of you know, our Edmonton Christmas Bird Count last December was again a huge success thanks to **Kim Blomme**, the zone captains, and the participation of 456 individuals who counted 40,878 birds. Organizers are now using email to communicate more information and reduce paper mail-outs.

Recent Club Highlights

- During the "double-feature" March Bug & Spider Study, many folks gathered around to view the beautiful butterflies on display thanks to **Bob Parsons**. Then the audience was treated to a high-energy presentation on creepy crawlies and fear. "The Bug Guy" from the Royal Alberta Museum, Peter Heule, kept us laughing as he shared his experiences and knowledge while encouraging close encounters with his "friends." Someone counted the legs on that giant millipede!
- Our annual banquet, arranged by **Toby-Anne Reimer** and **Alan Hingston**, continues to be very well attended. Myrna Pearman shared an entertaining and positive message on the beauty of the natural world. The buffet dinner was, again, fresh and tasty, managing to please both the meat lovers and the vegans! As venue and food costs continue to rise, we anticipate a small increase in the ticket price for next year.

Coming Attractions

- The **Nature Appreciation Weekend** will be at Miquelon Provincial Park, August 18–20. Mark your calendar!
- Our **Annual General Meeting** will be held in September; all members are invited to attend.

Our Partners

- Edmonton and Area Land Trust** is currently considering additional conservation properties. We look forward to hearing more as information is released.

Respectfully submitted by Ann Carter, President, Edmonton Nature Club

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

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 Box 1111, Edmonton, AB T5J 2M1
<http://www.edmontonnatureclub.org>

Executive Elected Officers

President – **Ann Carter**
anncartero@yahoo.ca

Past President – **Ron Ramsey**

Recording Secretary – **Colleen Raymond**
costan@shaw.ca

Membership Secretary – **John Jaworski**
JohnGJaworski@gmail.com

Treasurer – **Stan Nordstrom**
shnordstrom@hotmail.ca

Executive Director – **Gerald Romanchuk**
geraldjr@telusplanet.net

Executive Director – **Hendrik Kruger**
hendrik296@gmail.com

Executive Director – **James Fox**
fox.james.ed@gmail.com

Executive Director – **Sean Evans**
sean.evans74@yahoo.com



Membership

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

Membership Rates for 2016/17:

Household:	\$40.00/year
Students:	\$20.00/year



Appointed Committee Chairs

Director at Large – **Connor Charchuk**
ccharchu@ualberta.ca

Indoor Program Director – **Alan Hingston**
chingston@telusplanet.net

Field Trip Coordinator – **Sean Evans**
sean.evans74@yahoo.com

Bird Studies – **Karen Lindsay**
kdlinds@telus.net

Bug / Spider Studies – **Deanna Steckler**
deannasteckler@gmail.com

Plant Studies – **Patsy Cotterill / Hubert Taube** (liaison)
nutmeg@planet.eon.net / taubeha@shaw.ca

Refreshments – **Gerry Fox**
gfoxedm@telusplanet.net

Parkland Naturalist – **Dawne Colwell**
colwelld@shaw.ca

Conservation Committee – **Hubert Taube**
taubeha@shaw.ca

Communications Committee – **Gerald Romanchuk**
geraldjr@telusplanet.net

Email Distribution – **Steve Knight**
Steve@PerformanceSystems.ca

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

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

Website – **Ann Carter**
anncartero@yahoo.ca

Banquet – **Toby-Anne Reimer**
obitay@gmail.com



Edmonton Christmas Bird Count – **Kim Blomme**
greatblue@shaw.ca

Snow Goose Chase / Grasslands Tour – **Bob Parsons**
vintagebob2@gmail.com

Nature Alberta – **Kerri Charest**
kcharest@live.com

Edmonton Area Land Trust – **Rocky (Raquel) Feroe**
rferoe@gmail.com

Awards

Chickadee Award

Dawne Colwell was recently recognized as one of the ENC's "unsung heroes." She has been putting together our magazine, the *Parkland Naturalist*, since 2011, has produced club brochures, and led field trips. Dawne has also built many maps for use on our club website, the Christmas bird count, and the Snow Goose Chase. Thank you, Dawne!

Photo by Gerald Romanchuk



Robert Turner Appreciation Award

James Fox was presented with this award for the significant volunteer contributions he's made over a number of years.

"I have been attending Friday night monthly presentations for many years now and at each event I noticed James ...greeting attendees, taking donations, setting up refreshments, and cleaning up."

"James's contributions include:

1. **Leading and Organizing Activities:** James has led local field trips and organized a few overnight trips. He has helped with trip registrations. James was the Coordinator for the Ucluelet, BC, Pelagic Trip. (I imagine this was no small undertaking.) James has produced the slide show for the ENC Annual General Meeting for 2 years. James told me he helped with the Snow Goose Chase as a head guide on the adult bus for 3 years.
2. **Sharing Knowledge:** James has shared knowledge through contributing to a few bird studies sessions as well as organizing and leading one session. James helped to organize and run the last three years or more of the Christmas bird counts. James has also helped with knowledge transfer as a former moderator of a Yahoo group. He has shared his bird knowledge with me and, I assume, other members.
3. **Leadership:** James has fulfilled an ENC leadership role as a board member, executive member, banquet coordinator, and club auditor...He has also been email coordinator...James contributed

to rewriting the club bylaws. James has sourced and sold ENC hats and solicited or sourced donations for the banquet."

Raquel Feroe

"James has volunteered in several positions simultaneously for the past few years, including on the board of directors. He organized an amazing Pelagic Birding trip last September which was a wonderful learning experience for participating ENC members."

Colleen Raymond

Edgar T. Jones Conservation Award

Janos Kovaks is the recipient of this conservation 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.

"Janos Kovacs is a licensed Master Bird Bander who has banded thousands of birds in Canada and Europe. Besides volunteering at numerous stations across the country, Janos co-founded and maintains a banding station at the Strathcona Science Park. Janos also contributes his time at the Beaverhill Bird Observatory, leading several events and assisting with banding duties.

"Working as a bander for over 60 years, Janos has collected data that helps monitor bird populations and movements. Besides the valuable data collected, Janos is an excellent educator and an ambassador for birds and nature.

"Janos is extremely skilled and careful while handling the birds he bands. Welfare of the birds is paramount. He uses a combination of dexterity and patience to remove birds safely from the nets.

"Janos has mentored many university students and adults as banders and assistants. It takes a lot of knowledge, patience, and enthusiasm to train others. Janos enjoys the process and loves to encourage anyone with an interest in birds.

"Janos is a long-time member of the Edmonton Nature Club. He participates and helps out with numerous club events. He has hosted the club at the banding station and demonstrated his banding techniques. People are always thrilled to get the close look at the birds that banding allows. He has volunteered for countless Christmas Bird Counts and similar citizen science projects.

“Janos is keen to expose people to the world of birds and nature. He is always willing to host groups or interested individuals at the banding station. School children, various community groups, or even someone just walking their dog are all warmly welcomed with his tremendously friendly and good-natured personality.”

Gerald Romanchuk

“Upon my retirement from government about 4 years ago, I was looking for ways to reconnect with much of my natural history background after too many years as a desk jockey. When I learned of Janos’s bird-banding station at Strathcona Science Park, I thought that would be a good way to contribute and relearn about Alberta’s birds. For developing my personal knowledge about birds and getting some new insights into bird identification, I got much more than I bargained for. Janos selflessly shared his knowledge of birds and banding practices and provided me with many opportunities to contribute to running of the banding station. He also hosted at the banding station a couple of the classes I was teaching from the U. of A. extension department.

“However, it has been Janos’s willingness to invite others to visit the station, his leadership roles at the Beaverhill Bird Banding Observatory events and on ENC field trips, and countless other interactions with fellow naturalists that have impressed me the most. There are few with the depth of knowledge and experience about many natural species and events that Janos has...and who will share that knowledge patiently and clearly with others.”

Dave Ealey

“Janos’s enthusiastic commitment to songbird banding throughout his life acts as an example for us all. On February 24, 2017, he will be 78 years old, so he has been banding birds for over 60 years (he started as a young boy). Of note, he is the one individual who is present every banding day and seems to have energy to spare. It’s no small task to set up and take down for every banding session and to maintain and transport the equipment ready for use each day that banding occurs. Of all the individuals who assist in actual banding, he is the quickest to process the birds and release each one suffering the least amount of stress. Whenever a bird seems hopelessly tangled in the nets, he is the one whose practiced, professional hands are always called on to assist removal...and then he makes it look so simple, you feel like an idiot!! His willingness to pass on his knowledge is exemplary and he also readily accepts new knowledge and implements improvements to technique. He’s a pleasure to volunteer for and never fails to show his appreciation for your efforts (the goodies from Bon Ton Bakery are kind of nice, too!).”

Art Hughes

“I first met Janos while volunteering for the Snow Goose Chase, and the moment he found out my 15-year-old daughter was interested in birds he made sure I would bring her to the banding station to show her all about it... he has mentored Jordan for 7 years now and she has become a licensed bander. His patience, enthusiasm, and humour are his best teaching tools and he uses them to impart his knowledge every day. We have had a number of young banders come through the station and he is always inviting more.

“I have watched Janos share his passion of birds and nature for many years now and it never ceases to amaze me how welcoming he is to anyone who shows even a spark of interest. I think he loves the children the best, but everyone is welcome to visit.”

Toby-Anne Reimer



Janos and Joanie Kovaks
Photo by Jim Brohman

Edmonton Nature Club Banquet

The annual ENC banquet was held on April 1st at the Sawmill Banquet Centre. Our 101 guests included many regular banquet attendees, but we also had a number of first-time club members along with some new biologists and a couple of up-and-coming young biologists. I would say there was at least a seventy-year age span in the people who came to hear Myrna Pearman speak.

This year we gave awards to two very deserving recipients. The Robert Turner Appreciation Award was given to James Fox. Thank you, James, for all the hard work you do for the club. I know my body didn't like the pelagic trip that you organized, but my mind loved it! The Edgar T. Jones Conservation Award was given to Janos Kovacs. Thanks to Janos for all that he does to spread his knowledge of and enthusiasm for birds and nature. I have watched a number of wide-eyed expressions of amazement as people wander by the banding station and he shows them what we do.

Now, let's talk about Myrna Pearman. She is such an engaging speaker, who talks to you from the heart – and with no notes, I might add. Everyone I spoke with had such wonderful things to say about her presentation and I enjoyed it all, but the antics of that mother squirrel had me rolling in the aisles! I can't wait for a trip down to Ellis Bird Farm to enjoy a cup of tea and soak in the surroundings.

We had some great door prizes again this year, donated by The Wildbird General Store, Myrna Pearman, Jordan Lange, and Gerald Romanchuk. Thanks to Colleen Raymond for introducing James; and I can thank Gerald twice, as he introduced both Janos and Myrna. This year I would like to express my special appreciation to Alan Hingston, who makes all the arrangements for our banquet speakers.

See you all next year!

Toby-Anne Reimer



Myrna Pearman
Photo by Jim Brohman



Toby-Anne Reimer
Photo by Janice Hurlburt

Botany Note

As I write, the flower buds on the aspens are swelling and river alder is already in flower, with dangling, pollen-releasing catkins and tiny red female “cones.” Aspens usually flower about mid-April, to be followed by balsam poplars, beaked hazelnuts, American elms, Manitoba maples, and early willows. All these are wind-pollinated (although some of the later willow species flower late enough to attract a number of early-flying insects). Seeing them come into flower is a spring routine that we take for granted even though we anticipate it with pleasure.

Yet we should marvel at the amazing combination of day length, temperature, plant chemistry, plant physiology, and long-time adaptation to a cold climate that enables these woody plants to open their flower buds in timely fashion after long dormancy. At the same time they suppress the opening of their leaves (leaves that would get in the way of pollination and might subject the plant to too much water loss). These strategies ensure their survival and reproduction. How *do* they do it?

Patsy Cotterill



Beaked hazelnut, *Corylus cornuta*, in Snow Valley in early May, with female (red stigmas) flowers at the top and male catkins below.



Mature plant of beaked hazelnut, *Corylus cornuta*, with nuts, in Whitemud Creek.

Chasing Ptarmigan

How do you spot a white bird in a snowy landscape? The question was asked while on the winter road between Fort McMurray and Fort Chipewyan. Over the last few years I've been up there three times. Each time the answer was a bit different.



The white bird in question is Willow Ptarmigan, a pretty tough bird to find in Alberta. Though there are reports of them breeding in remote parts of Jasper NP, as a rule the best way to find them is to go up to some of the northern communities in the winter. The birds can be very irruptive and show up in large numbers some years. On an owling trip to High Level one winter we saw dozens of them and their tracks were everywhere. In other years they can be very scarce. One place that seems to be reliable is the willow flats near Fort Chipewyan.

Fort Chipewyan is about 280 km north of Fort McMurray. The first 100 km is a crazy/busy highway heading past Syncrude and the other large oil sand sites. It can be a white-knuckle drive in the dark. Things calm down when you get to the winter road gate. I've been lucky and been there during warm snaps when they close the road to large truck traffic. Otherwise you might see some traffic, but it usually isn't too bad.

Once you're past the gate, for the next 120 km or so you're driving through a pine forest and rolling sand hills. It can be pretty quiet here, but if you're lucky, and especially if you're the first one on the road in the morning, it can be good for Spruce Grouse. On one trip we counted 47, on another only a couple, and on yet another trip we got shut out completely. It looked like some road maintenance crews had gone through just before us. They would've flushed all the grouse off the road.

When you hear "winter road," you might think of crossing the large icy lakes you see on shows such as Ice Road Truckers. This road isn't like that. It's mostly through the sand hills I mentioned, with a few small river crossings.

When you get closer to Fort Chipewyan you do get onto some ice, but it's the marshy edge of a lake and obviously not very deep water. This marshy willow flat area is the place to start looking for your target bird.

So, how do you spot the white chickens? On days with fresh or recent snow, looking for tracks can be helpful. Stopping and scanning near some fresh tracks produced a couple on my first run up there. The situation was similar on my second attempt, though on that trip, one did surprise us by showing up in the pines.

On the most recent trip, earlier this winter, things didn't look great. It had been warm. A lot of snow had melted, and what was left was crusty and didn't show any tracks. I was asked how we were going to find one of those highly sought-after white grouse. I was in the middle of a long, babbling, bit of nonsense, when a passenger called out, "There's some!!!" They were right beside the road at the base of some willows. So that's the trick. Just see the birds! Pretty funny that on the day when I thought conditions were bad, we saw as many Ptarmigan as I'd seen since the big irruption year at High Level. There were several small groups near the road. Just goes to show that our previous trips didn't give nearly a large enough sample to indicate what the odds were.

In addition to Willow Ptarmigan, there's always the chance to see cool mammals such as wolf or lynx. You can visit Alberta's oldest community, Fort Chipewyan. And you can see a bit of one of our province's unique eco-regions, the Canadian Shield. And remember, if you want to spot a Ptarmigan, just see it!

Gerald Romanchuk



Photos by Gerald Romanchuk

Why Bugs? Interview with Peter Heule: The Bug Guy

Did you know that 97 per cent of all animal species on Earth are invertebrates? I'd certainly never thought about it until my first day at the Royal Alberta Museum. One of the stops on my guided, behind-the-scenes tour was the bug lab. With shelves filled with tanks inhabited by creepy crawlies, spider webs in every corner, old movie posters for films such as "Arachnophobia," and a sign that read "Warning: Tarantula Crossing," the bug lab certainly had a lot of character. Little did I know it would soon become one of my favourite places to visit in the museum.

I had the chance to interview Pete Heule, BSc, the Bug Room/Live Culture Supervisor and Natural History Outreach Technician here at the RAM. Pete spoke with great passion as he described his love for all animals, and how he worked his way from being a volunteer in the bug room to the supervisory position he now holds. He was quick to answer questions about every critter in the room, from the new baby scorpion they picked up on a field outing last week, to the octopus they are currently observing as a potential critter for display in the new museum. He has a great respect for every living thing, and proudly explained that "the only even remotely venomous bite or sting I received in my 16 years of experience was from a velvet ant that I was handling after having mistaken it for dead."

Right now, Pete and his staff are busy developing a lot of displays and exhibits for the new museum being built in downtown Edmonton. This includes work to determine what creatures to purchase and when best to do that, throughout the museum's closure. They are also working hard to learn about the care of some new species, as the museum works to be as sustainable and locally-sourced as possible. While many of their specimens are bred in captivity, some items such as coral are traded with locals or other museums in order to diversify their collections. Once this is accomplished, the team must learn to care for, breed, and maintain the species here, so that there are always plenty of specimens ready to go on display for the enjoyment of museum visitors.

Pete's goal is to share his love for animals and teach others more about them. He chose bugs because he believes they are more in need of an ambassador than mammals or birds. He spoke of what he refers to as "Nature Deficit Disorder," meaning that most children in Alberta can only name animals from the savannah, and don't realize what species inhabit their own backyards. I for one was com-



pletely unaware that Alberta is home to the only Canadian species of scorpion, the Northern Scorpion. Pete explained that he wants to create a personal connection between Albertans and these native species, so people will be more likely to pay attention to lists of endangered animals and conservation efforts.

To Pete, the most rewarding part of his job is when he can see that he has changed someone's perception about a bug or reptile. He likes to think that person will leave the museum with a little more respect for nature, and an understanding that every creature (even the most feared ones) serves a purpose in our ecosystem.

Hanako Nagao

Reprinted with permission from the Royal Alberta Museum.

This article was originally published on the Royal Alberta Museum's official blog. For more stories like this one, visit <http://www.royalalbertamuseum.ca/blog/>.



**Tarantula (above),
Photo by Deanna
Steckler**

**Giant African
Millipede,
(left)
Photo by Ann Carter**

Indoor Meetings, Winter 2017

Birding in Southern Africa

January 20, 2017

Stan Nordstrom and Doug Hube reported on their very successful and exciting visit to southern Africa, made in company with Joan Hube, between late October and early December, 2015. The trip was instigated by Lu Carbyn, who worked with Travel Smart in Swakopmund to organize a guided birding trip through Namibia. Joan and Doug had lived in Pretoria in 1966/1967, and they recognized an opportunity to visit both old haunts and new places missed during that long-ago residence. Stan, too, saw an opportunity to visit more of that fascinating part of the world. So, a two-week trip to Namibia quickly grew into a five-week trip to Namibia, South Africa, Zimbabwe, and Botswana.

A multi-stage flight from Edmonton through Atlanta brought us to Johannesburg. After a night in Jo'burg, we flew to Windhoek. The following two weeks were spent in company with a very knowledgeable and companionable guide, Charles Rhyn. The value of traveling with an experienced guide in an unfamiliar place, looking for unfamiliar birds in often challenging terrain, cannot be underestimated. Charles was able to recognize and name every living creature on land and in the air, knew where to look for birds of special interest and how to attract them, and enlightened us on the history and cultures of his country.

Traveling in a very comfortable 4-wheel drive vehicle, we spent 1 or 2 nights in each of 9 very good to luxurious game lodges, plus 3 nights in Swakopmund on the coast. Our travel was limited to the northern half of the country. At each lodge we enjoyed game drives, hikes, good conversation, and interesting food — roast Kudu, anyone? The trip included visits to the Namib Desert, the Etosha Pan National Park, the world's highest sand dunes at Sossusvlei, the largest known meteorite at Hoba, an indigenous village, a view over the northern border into Angola, a cruise across Walvis Bay, and much more.

We observed approximately 250 species of birds in Namibia, plus more within the other three countries. In addition, we were in close proximity to most of the “big game” animals, plus many of the smaller animals that draw visitors to southern Africa. While many people are attracted to South Africa by the very popular Kruger National Park, visited by Joan and Doug in 1967, Namibia was at least as productive of animal sightings, and superior for birding.

Charles's enthusiasm for sharing Namibia's wildlife with

visitors was demonstrated when, before taking us into the Windhoek airport terminal for our departure, he diverted to an undeveloped site on the airport property where we spotted two new species!

From Windhoek we flew to Cape Town, where Joan and Doug visited old friends, visited the Royal Observatory, went to the summit of Table Mountain, and visited Cape Point. Stan arranged for a guide to introduce him to South Africa's wildlife along the southeastern coast and in the Cape Point National Park. We then traveled for several days in a rented car through the “Garden Route,” which exposed us to the famous “Fynbos” of rare and exotic plants, caves, and the forests and veld near the southern coast.

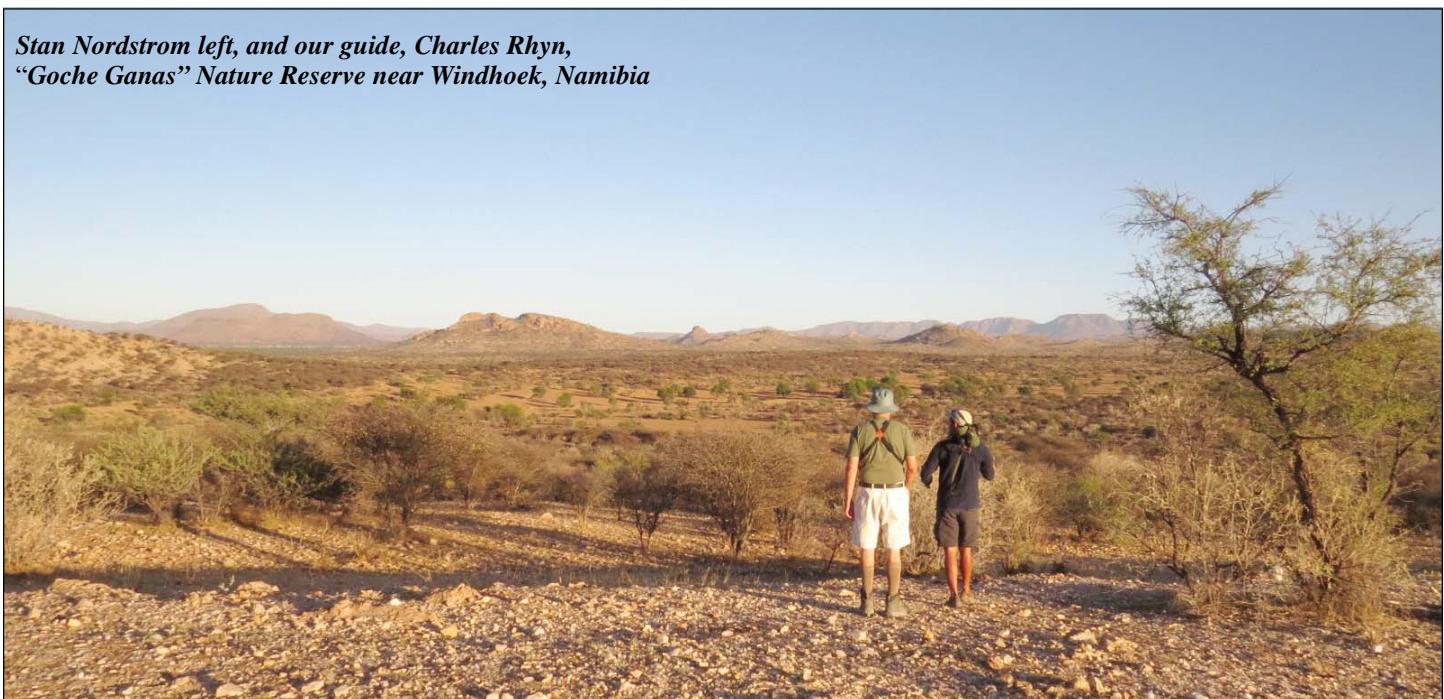
We spent one day in each of Pretoria and Jo'burg with a guide before flying north to spend three nights at the magnificent Victoria Falls Hotel, a repeat experience for Joan and Doug, who had been there almost 50 years earlier and were pleased to see that little had changed. Although it was the dry season, there was sufficient flow in the Zambezi River to generate the wonderful views and spray for which Victoria Falls is renowned. Plants, animals, and birds above the falls were added attractions as we sailed close to the river banks of both Zambia and Zimbabwe.

Discovering that a one-day excursion into Botswana was possible, Stan and Doug signed up! Leaving early in the morning on our final full day, they traveled by coach westward toward the border, passing elephants at the side of the road, and vultures and raptors in the air and nesting in roadside trees. A morning excursion along the river and an afternoon excursion into Chobe National Park revealed an impressive concentration of often exotic birdlife and land animals, including the last of the “Big Five,” the Water Buffalo attended by egrets and oxpeckers.

The good news for attendees at our presentation and for readers of this article is that a similar birding trip to Namibia is planned for June 2017. We would love to go back, and we strongly encourage lovers of nature to take advantage of the opportunity. There will probably be more wildflowers and insects in June than there were during our visit in November. The abundance and variety of birds and land animals will be comparable. For personal insights, have a chat with Lu Carbyn. For details about the trip, contact Alexandra Schimanski: travelsmart@iway.na.

Doug Hube

All Photos by Doug Hube



India's Wild West

March 17, 2017

Justin Peter is Director of Programs and Senior Naturalist at Quest Nature Tours. The son of an East Indian mother and Czech father, he was born and raised in Canada and schooled in French immersion. Justin was a student of languages and cultures from an early age. With a keen interest in nature, travel came "naturally" to him when he was whisked off to visit relatives in far-away places. Driven by a desire to share his observations with others, and following a stint as a naturalist at Algonquin Park, Justin moved to Quest Nature Tours in early 2013. He has personally led tours to such places as Peru, Namibia, the Galapagos Islands and India.

Lions and Tigers Justin's presentation focused on the northwestern states of Rajasthan and Gujarat. This is the driest region in India and has among other natural habitats an African savannah-like landscape of tall grass prairie and scattered drought-resistant trees. The land is surprisingly very productive, particularly following the monsoon, and Justin described an assemblage of animals including abundant deer, blackbuck (an Indian antelope), and predators, including wolves, wild dogs, and hyenas. The Gir Forest contains a population of over 500 lions, with both males and females being distinguished from African lions by the presence of a dewlap (a fold of loose skin hanging from the neck).

There are several tiger reserves in the area. An estimated 40,000 tigers once existed in the last century, but surveys



indicate only about 2,200 remain (however, numbers are on the increase). An increasing human population and associated clearing of forest for agriculture forced the tigers into smaller and more scattered patches of remaining habitat. There have been conflicts with humans when tigers attack domesticated animals. Notwithstanding these pressures, tigers demonstrate a surprising ability to disperse through settled landscapes to find suitable habitat elsewhere.

Country of Contrasts Justin noted several of the apparent contradictions in India. At one of the villages, local people have set up a walled compound where they feed Demoiselle Cranes in their thousands. Cranes are not hunted in India as they are in neighbouring countries, and India is important for these among many other overwintering birds from northern Eurasia. Justin showed photos of a Blue Peafowl (male birds are peacocks) in flight – an impressive sight. Even birds found in villages or gardens can be spectacular, such as the Plum-headed Parakeet and Yellow-footed Green Pigeon. Justin showed photos of these and other birds encountered on his travels. His talk was not restricted to wildlife, as he also commented on several everyday scenes: cow-patties being dried to be used for fuel; the chaos of traffic, with cattle wandering among vehicles along busy streets; the rainbow colours of villagers' saris; the poverty of many of the people; and the world's greatest monument to love – the Taj Mahal.

More information about Quest Nature Tours is available at <http://www.questnaturetours.com>.

Alan Hingston



Photos by Justin Peter



Caracal



*Plum-headed
Parakeet*



Purple Swamphen



Chital Deer



A female Bengal Tiger nurses one of her three cubs.

Conservation Corner

So what is Edmonton doing to preserve its urban biodiversity? In her ENC Indoor Meeting presentation on February 17, 2017, “Conservation Planning in Alberta’s Capital City,” Catherine Shier, an ecological planner with the City of Edmonton since 2012, gave us some insights into the history and current practices of the City’s efforts to maintain nature in Edmonton.

When I introduced Catherine as speaker I noted how ENC (and formerly ENHC) members have been involved in city conservation activities since the 1980s. Dave Ealey, in fact, produced the City’s first inventory of natural areas, “Urban Natural History Interpretive Sites in and around Edmonton,” in May 1986. (It can be accessed online.) These sites were all in the tablelands, i.e., the flat plateaus above the river valley and ravines, and were mostly peripheral, included within the city’s boundaries that had been newly expanded by the massive land annexation that took place in 1982. These sites were later reduced in number and profiled in two reports by Geowest Environmental Consultants (1993, 1999). Since then ENC members have been involved in conducting inventories of birds, plants, and lichens in city natural areas; serving on committees; and acting as advocates for the protection and wise use of river valley parks.

In 1995 the City’s first conservation policy, C-467, *Conservation of Natural Sites in Edmonton’s Tablelands*, was adopted. The policy’s chief outcome, in my opinion and indeed that of developers, who had become the majority owners of peripheral tableland properties in anticipation of development, was to raise awareness of the existence of natural areas without at all being able to secure them. Its chief planning tools (municipal reserve and environmental reserve) were inadequate, and lack of accompanying funding made purchase impossible, even if high prices for urban land had not been the case. Wetlands would seem to have been a better bet as some, such as Poplar Lake, were owned by the Province, and hence did not need landowner compensation. However, even here there were problems. Loss of the watershed to urban development meant that many would have to receive stormwater runoff to maintain water levels, with likely compromise of their naturalness.

The policy failed the test of saving Little Mountain Natural Area, a 17-hectare piece of aspen parkland in the city’s northeast. Its loss in 1999 despite much input on the part of planners, City councillor Brian Mason, and the volunteers who campaigned for it, amid much media publicity did, however, spur the City to greater efforts. Soon afterwards a Natural Areas Reserve Fund was set up (1999; though it was pitifully insufficient to start with). A conservation coordinator (still incumbent) was appointed in 2002, and he quickly acquired his own Office. A Natural Areas Advisory Committee was established in 2003 (although since disbanded), and in 2004–2006 the Edmonton and Area Land Trust was created, with an ENC representative on the board.

In her presentation Catherine documented that sometime around 2005 a paradigm shift in the City’s ecological thinking took place: it changed from a site-specific to a network approach to conservation. Rather than concentrating on preserving isolated tableland sites that might not be self-sustaining, the emphasis was on creating a connected natural areas system in which the river valley and ravines were an integral part. Connectivity was visualized as achievable by landscape corridors of natural vegetation connecting core preserved areas, corridors formed by streams, and “stepping stones” (such as a ribbon of trees allowing bird movement), as well as greater use of buffer zones. This approach was enshrined in a new conservation policy, C-531, replacing C-467, adopted in June 2007.

The idea too was for ecological information to be used to influence the planning process in its early stages, in contrast to earlier practices, in which conservation was applied almost as an afterthought, in the subdivision stage of development, usually far too late to be economically and practically feasible. (Indeed, given that the viability of natural sites is influenced to a very large extent by surrounding land use, including particularly hydrology, planning for conservation should logically be the very first stage in the land development process.) In addition, local connectivity was viewed as being part of a bigger picture, a link to conservation on regional and provincial scales.

To promote connectivity, City ecological planners have embarked on a number of initiatives. Since 2007 the City has constructed several wildlife passages, for which it won an Alberta Emerald Award in 2015. These have been mainly culverts under roads crossing streambeds, which serve small mammals, but have included a large mammal underpass, allowing movement along Whitemud Creek under the Anthony Henday freeway. They function not only as habitat connectors but also to reduce animal–vehicle collisions.

In 2010 the City published Wildlife Passage Engineering Design Guidelines. Since 2010 the number of wildlife passages has swelled to 17, mostly at stream–road crossings, and more are planned for the future. As well, a five-year wildlife monitoring project has been set up to determine the impacts of LRT line construction on wildlife passage pre- and post-

construction. Also with respect to wildlife vagility (the ability of an organism to move about freely and migrate), the City used circuit analysis software and data on vegetation and developed areas and a knowledge of their local

behaviour to map connectivity (or permeability of the landscape) for coyotes and black-capped chickadees. An example of an application of this information is in pinpointing areas that could be restored to fill gaps in connectivity. The City hopes that private property owners will take part in protecting and enhancing this connected network by appropriate stewardship.

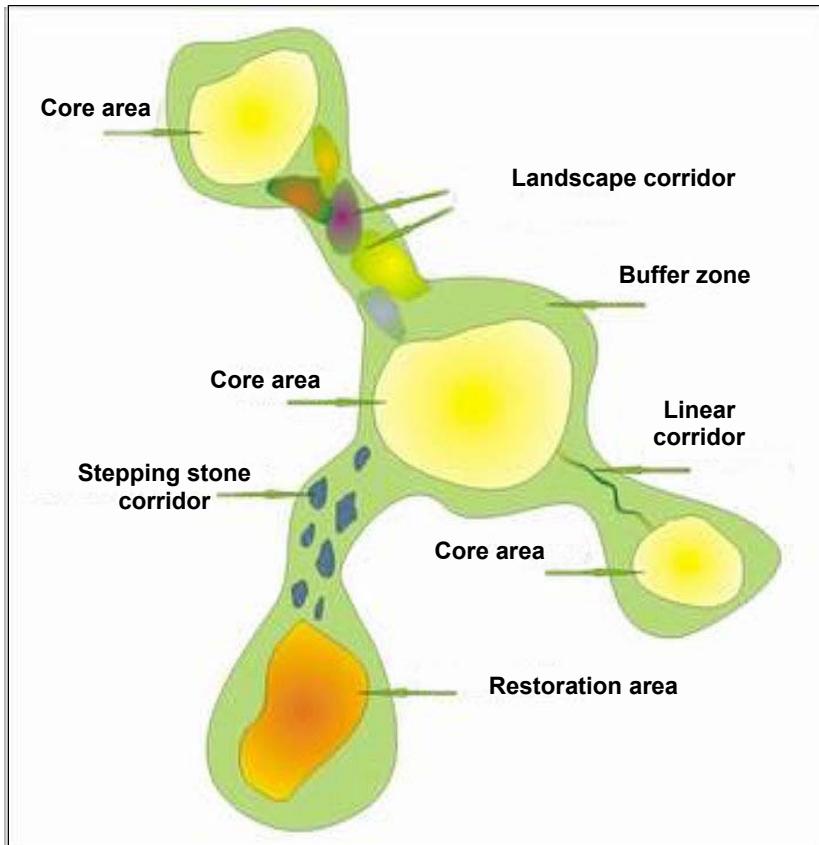
On the vegetation front, in 2014 the City employed consultants to draw up a detailed inventory of plant communities to permit their easier identification and classification by professionals and public, and produced a guide. In 2016 it engaged in a project to map ecologically sensitive sites using a simple formula to assign environmental sensitivity scores to areas and linear features within the city: assets minus threats plus development constraints (a positive since the more difficult a site is to develop the safer it is conserva-

Connectivity concept, graphic supplied by the City of Edmonton

The City's latest Natural Systems Policy, C-531, contains the following statement:

“Natural area systems provide essential habitat for plants and animals, support biodiversity, and maintain a high quality of life for current and future citizens by supplying critical ecological services, as well as opportunities for education, research, appreciative forms of recreation, and aesthetic and spiritual inspiration.”

tionally) equals environmental sensitivity. The higher the score, the greater the effort would be to preserve or manage the site during the planning process. (The problem with this is that it does not seem to involve reducing



threats to high-asset sites, to take into account restoration potential, or to plan on acquiring undeveloped sites that would make highly desirable links but have no actual protection.)



Roper Pond, Photo by Dawne Colwell

Other initiatives on the go include a management plan for NW384, a natural area purchased in 2001, in the southwest, planning for connectivity in the new Riverview Area Structure Plan, also in the southwest, and natural plantings around stormwater management wetlands in this same Plan. Catherine's presentation was well-received and I hope has inspired ENC members to remain involved in providing their expertise to the City with respect to natural history information and interpretation. As well, we gained some excellent ideas for field trips.

The City is currently seeking public input on at least two green space initiatives:

- **Ribbon of Green.** Several members of the ENC were

present at a stakeholders' meeting on March 21st to provide input on the City's project to extend the Ribbon of Green development in the southwest river valley and ravines (to the City boundary) and in the northeast. All ENCers, and many other participants, expressed the desire that ecological values and preservation should be the first priority of any "development" plan.

- **Daylighting of the lower reach of Mill Creek.** City planners have developed three conceptual designs on how the valley area in which the creek will run to its outlet in the river could be re-landscaped. A feasibility study of the daylighting process has been done, although more work is needed, and City Council has yet to approve it. For more information, and to take part in an online survey, Google City of Edmonton Mill Creek daylighting study.

Recently the Edmonton section of the Sierra Club of Canada was successful in persuading the City to relocate the boat dock proposed for the mouth of Whitemud Creek farther upstream on the grounds that it would harm fish health in the Creek. An environmental impact assessment was carried out, but it only considered the effects of the construction phase, not the long-term operation of the dock. Thank goodness for our local activists! Apparently Whitemud Creek is the best fish-producing creek in the city.

Patsy Cotterill

Editor's Notes

Congratulations to the club members who received awards at our annual banquet in April: James Fox received the Robert Turner Appreciation Award and Janos Kovaks received the Edgar T. Jones Conservation Award. (Read more about them on page six.) In December 2016, I was presented with the ENC's Chickadee Award. I am very honoured, and I thank you.

Thanks to Toby-Anne Reimer and Alan Hingston, our annual banquet was very enjoyable, from the appetizing and varied buffet menu to the informative and entertaining presentation by Myrna Pearman, the biologist and site services manager at Ellis Bird Farm in Lacombe.

Once again, I wish to thank all the writers and photographers for their contributions to *The Parkland Naturalist*. I know you will find the diverse articles very interesting. Everyone is welcome to send in articles and photos to share with our members. Please send submissions to colwelld@shaw.ca. The deadline for submissions to the next issue is July 31, 2017.

Dawne Colwell

Field Trip Reports

Beaverhills, April 2, 2017

It was a windy, blustery day, the kind of day when you need staples to keep your hat on. But the sun was shining, the temperature was reasonable, and the birds were flying! We had about 30 people out on Saturday for a tour around the Beaverhills area and over to Holden and Ryley.

Starting at Kallal Meadow, we checked all the ducks on the flooded field to the north but couldn't find the Eurasian Wigeon that was there yesterday. Jiri Novak did spot a Franklin's Gull nearby – first of the season for most of us.

The Amisk Creek Bridge wetland was loaded with a nice variety of ducks and geese. Pintails had to be the most numerous duck – they were everywhere all day. Plus some fly-by Lapland Longspurs and Snow Buntings and a Great Horned Owl on a nest.

We made our way towards Holden for a lunch break at the little park in town. It was a great example of going to the right place at the right time. While we were eating, we noticed a flock of Snow Geese flying in from the south. As people scanned the sky, more and more waves of thousands of geese were seen.



Photo by Janice Hurlburt

After lunch we went towards the Ryley landfill – sounds good, right? While checking out the hundreds of gulls there, more waves of Snow Geese started coming over. We decided to try to follow the geese, hoping to get a closer look. We headed up towards the southeast corner of Beaverhills and saw a few waves of geese, but somehow we lost track of 50,000 or so large white birds! My guess is that the birds went out onto the lake.



Photo by Janice Hurlburt

We checked the east side of Lister Lake and the east side of Beaverhills at Mundane Beach, but there was no sign of the geese. There were decent numbers of raptors throughout the day: Bald Eagles, Harriers, Red-tails, Rough-legs, and a very cooperative Merlin.

Sean Evans did a nice job of spotting some early shorebirds on the route. He saw a Killdeer at one spot and 3 Greater Yellowlegs east of Amisk Creek Bridge.

At Francis Point dozens of Tree Sparrows and Juncos were enjoying Dave Collyer's feeders. A pair of Bluebirds put on a good show, and the trip's fearless leader put on his own show. While sitting at the picnic tables watching all the Tree Sparrows, he said, "You'd think we might get an early Song Sparrow here." Only took about 4 seconds for a Song Sparrow to drop in!

Despite the blustery wind that had a lot of people scrambling to dig their parkas out of the trunk, we had a pretty good day of birding. Thanks to all the participants, and to Emily for taking on the task of counting Pintails, to Sean for organizing, and to James for ebirding.

Gerald Romanchuk

Whitemud Creek, March 25, 2017

After a week of freeze and thaw it was a frosty and foggy morning as a group of 30 set out on our morning hike. The pathways were thick with ice, particularly on the narrower and steeper sections. Fortunately, Wayne Oakes had been out earlier with about 40 pounds of gravel and managed to spread a good coating over most of the worst sections.



Black-capped Chickadee



Pine Siskin

First, we walked down to the river and saw about 30 Canada Geese on the open water on the far side. With them were several pairs of Mallards and a few Common Goldeneyes. Unfortunately, there was no sight of the Mergansers reported earlier in the week. Heading up the pathway along the creek and into the trees we encountered small flocks of Black-capped Chickadees and Pine Siskins and occasional Dark-eyed Juncos that rapidly moved on as soon as they heard us. As we progressed, there were more chickadees, Red-breasted Nuthatches, and White-breasted Nuthatches around the old stumps sprinkled with black sunflower seeds.

Further up the trail there were a pair of Downey Woodpeckers, and a pair of young eyes spotted a Brown Creeper. Although it

Great Horned Owl



moved quickly up the tree and flew on, most managed to see it. Pileated Woodpeckers were calling at several places along the trail and several were spotted flying further back on the hillside. We all trod quietly so as to not disturb the Great Horned Owl sitting on her nest. This was the same loca-

tion as the nest last year, so we knew to take care. The male was perched high in a spruce tree close by with one eye open looking down on us. Most were intrigued by the number of owl pellets scattered on the ground under the tree.

The big surprise was just around the corner when a Black-backed Woodpecker flew down and presented herself just above our heads so we could all take a good look at her. This was one of several lifers seen today for a couple of the newer birders in the group. Shortly after we started to hear the toots of a Townsend Solitaire but were never quite sure that the movement we saw deep in the trees was the one in question. Moving on the path to the pipeline we were able to watch a pair of Ravens carefully placing sticks into the nest they were building high up in one of the towers.

By the time we reached the bridge just before Snow Valley the sun came out and we spent a few minutes enjoying the warmth and watching a huge flock of Bohemian Waxwings hawking for insects from nearby cottonwoods. Another surprise was seeing the unusual Black-capped Chickadee. This bird had been already reported as an white morph, as a large patch of white on its head replaced much of the black cap.

More birds of interest awaited us as we walked back along the path: several gulls, both Ring-billed and California, a Hairy



Woodpecker, and one more Brown Creeper in a location different from where we saw one on the way in. We saw Black-billed Magpies, Ravens, Crows, and Blue Jays at several locations. Finally, as we approached the parking lot a Sharp-shinned Hawk flew by and landed at the top of a tree on the other side of the creek.

John Chapman

All Photos by John Chapman

Epic All-Day Owling Marathon, March 18, 2017

A question was posed... How many owl species could we find in one day? There are 10 possibilities in our area and lot of considerations in trying to work out an itinerary that gives us a chance to get as many owls as possible: time, distance, time of year, scouting reports, etc. But we put together a crew of keen and enthusiastic (those words are code for “having questionable judgement”) owlers and met up at Sherwood Park at 6:00 a.m. on Saturday morning.

First stop was a couple of neighbourhoods overlooking White-mud Creek. This part had to be extremely unsatisfying for most of the group. Imagine standing there in the dark listening as 2 or 3 people say they hear a distant Barred Owl. Then they say they hear a Saw-whet. And all you hear is traffic noise! Not the greatest encounter, but we ticked off 2 owls and headed out of the city.

Heading west, we went up towards Calahoo, over to Imrie Park, near Alberta Beach, and back to Yellowhead near Wabamun. A month or so ago, the route would've produced a few Great Grays. But none for us that day.

So, we headed further west towards Evansburg and went south of the highway on the other side of the Pembina. Stopped at a spot where there were 2 GGOWs (Great Grey Owls) a week ago, but still no luck for us. Further south at the famous Pygmy spot, our luck continued no owls. A little further down the road, Ann spotted a bird. By the time we backed up and checked the bird had flown, but a few of us heard some distant tooting. It was a Pygmy Owl but again not very satisfying for most of the group.

Steve Knight distracted us from the disappointment by asking about some tracks in the snow. It appeared that a small pack of wolves had been roaming around. The crusty snow had held them up in some places, but they'd broken through in others:



By now it was 11:00 a.m., we'd been out for 5 hours, and most of us hadn't seen or heard ANY owls. But 5 minutes later, John Jaworski saved the day. He beat me to the punch and spotted another Pygmy right beside the road. This one was way more cooperative and got photographed like crazy.

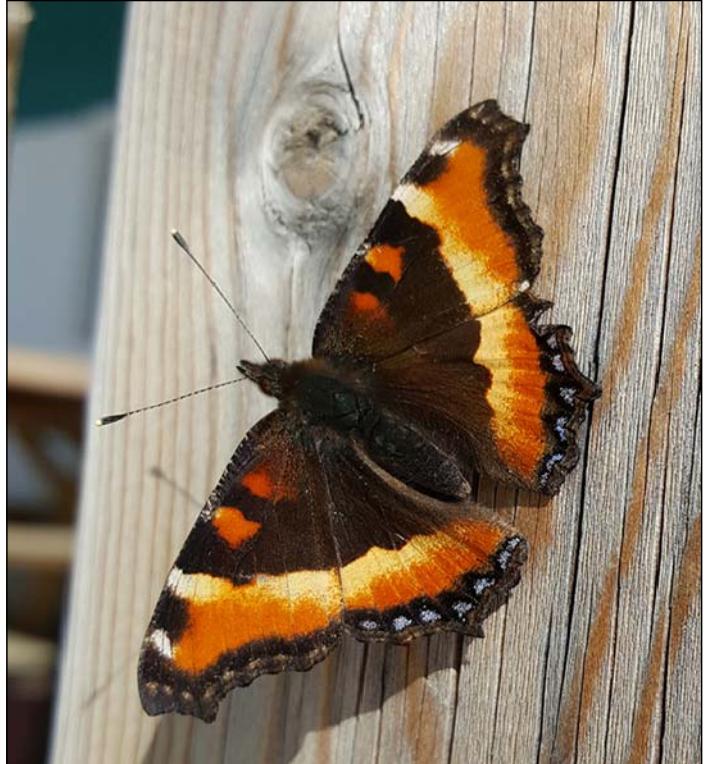
We left that bird alone and continued on to Cynthia. During a pit stop we all basked in

the 10 °C sunshine. Spring felt like it was springing. Manna Parseyan even found a Milbert's Tortoiseshell flitting around.

We tried a few spots near Cynthia where Hawk Owls had been seen this winter, but they completely eluded us. It was one of



Pygmy Owl (above), All Photos by Gerald Romanchuk unless otherwise indicated



Milbert's Tortoiseshell, Photo by Manna Parseyan

the risks of running this trip in mid-March. Most wintering Hawk Owls seem to disperse by that time of year – except, of course, the one Connor Charchuk found the day after the trip!

So we continued on through Lodgepole and Drayton Valley, then south towards Pigeon Lake. Touring through the country we saw lots of the first waves of spring migrants: Canada Geese, crows, and starlings. At one spot we saw a large flock of crows wheeling around. A raven had singled out one rough-looking crow and was intently chasing it, followed by the rest of the crows.

We cruised to the east and got out to the west side of Bittern Lake around 7:00 p.m. It didn't take long before someone spotted a Short-eared Owl way out over the lake. Not a great look, but Steve Knight set up his big scope (affectionately called "Sweet Pea" – I'm not sure why he wouldn't call it something like "Big Green") and we saw our 4th owl species of the day. Of course, after struggling with looking at that distant owl, a kilometre up the road we saw 5 more, much closer.

Over on the east side of the lake we picked up a nice lightly marked Snowy Owl on a power pole, just a bit north of where we had a distant look at a Great Horned on the nest. So after 14 hours and hundreds of kilometres, we had 6 species.

Then it was on towards Tofield. We picked up a couple more Snowies on the way and were starting to get worried about the weather. Wind warnings were coming in and there was an ominous line of clouds to the west. After a quick pit stop in town we hustled out towards the Beaverhills Bird Observatory.

Though the wind had picked up, it wasn't too bad yet.

It's always a challenge to listen for owls in a group. No one seems to realize how distracting the slightest shift of weight or rustling of clothes can be. Despite all the noisy clothes, when everyone settled down we almost immediately heard at least 2 Long-eared Owls and some Saw-whet Owls.

Just as we were leaving, the wind really picked up, along with some sleet and snow. We thought of stopping at Elk Island for a chance at the Great Gray we'd heard a couple of weeks earlier, but with the strong winds it seemed pointless.

We made it back to Sherwood Park by 10:30 p.m. After putting on 700 km over 16.5 hours we ended up with 7 owl species and 20 individual owls. It's very ironic that two of the species we missed – Hawk Owl and Great Gray – are usually two of the easiest to see all winter. So getting 8 or 9 is very possible, with a 10th more likely with some better scouting efforts.

Big thanks to all the keen participants, and especially to Sean Evans for registering everybody!

Gerald Romanchuk



Photos by Gerald Romanchuk
(These photos were not taken on the field trip.)

Listening for Owls, Elk Island Area, March 5, 2017

It was inauspicious (wind and snow) at 6:00 p.m., but by the time our 26 participants got to the first spot on the east side of Elk Island the wind was dying down, so even though the temperature was close to -15 °C we were able to do our listening. We found Northern Saw-whets calling right away, but although one was very close we couldn't spot it (excuse: they're really small!).

Just a short distance from there with the lack of wind and lots of patience we heard a Great Gray.

We continued up the east side and across to sites on the west of the park. Many of these spots were quiet. The roads were snowy but not icy. We stopped at the west entrance to Elk Island and had a Great Horned fly in for a look, so we actually got a view of an owl. We finished up around 11:00 p.m.

Thanks to Sean Evans for managing ride sharing, and to Gerald Romanchuk, Heather Ronnes, John Moore, and James and Gerry Fox for scouting earlier in the week.

Brian Stephens

Bittern Lake Area, February 25, 2017

On Saturday, 17 of us took a ride to the southeast. We went through Bittern Lake, further east close to Daysland, then up towards Holden and the Beaverhills Lake area.

One of the targets on a late winter trip down that way is Horned Lark. The lead car and the people in the front seat of the next car saw 3 of them. Sadly, the rest of the group missed the larks. On the west side of Bittern, we saw a 3 Rough-legged Hawks playing around on a line of pine trees.



Snowy Owl, Photo by Grace Kwong

We picked up our first Snowy Owl on the east side of Bittern.

Going east we saw 3 more Snowies and picked up a pair of Great Horned Owls at a nest site south of Holden. We also saw Gray Partridge, Merlin, Shrike, and Snow Buntings at various stops on the tour.

Redpolls, Chickadees, etc., were at the Francis Point feeders. A walk down to the blind gave us a chance to stretch our legs, but didn't produce many birds. By the time we got back to the cars it was around 4:30 p.m. Most days, most of the birders would be ready to quit and go home, but this bunch was pretty keen, so we headed back towards New Sarepta and checked a spot for Short-eared Owls. It was worth the drive. We saw 6 owls and one posed for photos beside the road.



Short-eared Owl, Photo by Grace Kwong

Thanks to the keen participants, to Grace Kwong for the photos, and to Sean Evans for organizing and ebirding!

Gerald Romanchuk

Strathcona Riverside Trail, February 11, 2017

Thirteen of us (if you remember to count yourself) woke up early Saturday morning to bird the Strathcona Riverside Trail. The weather was great, sunny skies and about -5 °C, with the forecasted wind holding off for most of the morning. The birding was quiet along the trail, with few chickadees along the way, a few White-breasted Nuthatches, and a couple of Downy Woodpeckers. Bald Eagles ended up being the highlight of the trip. There were at least 2 juveniles and likely 2 adult birds, including this one Sean Evans photographed (with a little assistance from the trip leader).



Bald Eagle, Photo by Sean Evans

We scoped the river, which is kept open from the water treatment outflow. Mostly Mallards (around 400), Common Goldeneyes, a lone male Bufflehead, and a lone female Gadwall (Gadhead to come? Or Bufflewall?)

Along the trail we started seeing signs of a scuffle, and came across a freshly cleaned carcass, probably of a White-tailed Deer.

Thanks to all who came out.

Connor Charchuk

Rundle and Goldbar Parks, February 5, 2017

It was a brisk Sunday morning to hold the “Ones That Got Away” scavenger hunt. Eight or so crazy people were on hand to partake, and it would be Emily’s “Hens” versus Gerald’s “Drakes,” with an even number of people per team. (We forgot to name the teams, so that is what I am naming them post-mortem.) I was following the Drakes around because they looked like they could use a hand.



Photo by Karen Lindsay

The game was to start when we got to the Goldbar side of the bridge, but that did not stop the Drakes from quietly checking off a Pileated Woodpecker as it flew across the river before the game began. The Drakes were playing to win!

The idea was to have a normal day of birding, and to incorporate a few other items into the mix such as spotting mammals and completing achievements such as hand-feeding a chickadee. As well, there were a few items hidden within the park; birds that had shown up in AB in the past year or so, but were difficult to find, such as this Great Egret from Rochon Sands!



Photo by Keith Huang

One thing I underestimated is the difficulty involved in locating something that is motionless and silent. Even when they are 4 feet tall or are bright red...or when I set them up just hours earlier. The fake birds (and porcupine) I placed in the park were tricky to locate even though they were just a few

feet from the edge of the path in most cases and at eye-level. I had to rely on my skills as an expressionless non-verbal communicator at times to help the poor Drakes out.

Despite the cool temperature, the parks were quite birdy. There were several large groups of Pine Siskins throughout Goldbar, and we got a few first of season Dark-eyed Juncos after Gerald pointed out their distinct “chip” call. We also found an expired Merlin which was perhaps taken down by an Owl or Goshawk. Bald Eagles were cruising up and down the river, and there were a number of animal tracks to decipher, such as Snowshoe Hare and Coyote, but we were unable to pick up any form of weasel.

As the Drakes made their way through the park, 14 birds, 4 mammals, and 4 of the 6 placed items were found and 4 of the 8 achievements were completed. After 3 hours we made our way back to the starting point. We wondered how the Hens were doing. Good question, as we had to track them down with a search party. It turns out they were busy crushing the course and were not quitting until their list was full. They managed to find 15 bird species and 6 mammal species (Sasquatch was not counted, sorry). They found only 3 placed items, but completed 6 of the 8 achievements, including multiple hits of “Who’s a Good Dog” (patting a stranger’s dog). Not only that, but one of the birds was an actual owl – a Great Horned Owl, in fact!

After regrouping at the parking lot, we grabbed a quick bite to warm up and go over the results. The Hens had an amazing 48 points and a rank of “Solid Birder,” whereas the Drakes came in at 42 points. Here is the Hens’ winning score sheet:

ENC Winter Bird and Mammal Round Up	
Live Birds - 1 point	More Live Birds - 1 point
1. <u>Downy</u>	1. <u></u>
2. <u>canad</u>	2. <u></u>
3. <u>mall</u>	3. <u></u>
4. <u>teach</u>	4. <u></u>
5. <u>bowa</u>	5. <u></u>
6. <u>lave</u>	6. <u></u>
7. <u>rbanu</u>	7. <u></u>
8. <u>wornu</u>	8. <u></u>
9. <u>taig</u>	9. <u></u>
10. <u>bluejay</u>	10. <u></u>
11. <u>piso</u>	
12. <u>Hawc</u>	
13. <u>gnow</u>	
14. <u>cere</u>	
15. <u>pigeon</u>	
<u>/10</u>	
Live Mammals, tracks, or poop - 2 points	
1. <u>spiny tracks</u>	1. <u></u>
2. <u>beaver</u>	2. <u></u>
3. <u>Porcupine</u>	3. <u></u>
4. <u>Beaver</u>	4. <u></u>
5. <u>Red squirrel</u>	5. <u></u>
6. <u>Porcupine</u>	6. <u></u>
7. <u>Sasquatch</u>	7. <u></u>
<u>/10</u>	
<u>15 /20</u>	
<u>17 /16</u>	
<u>Achievements - 2 points</u>	
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> <u>Give a Hoot!</u> Find some garbage and dispose of it properly. No, not from your pocket.	
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> <u>Empty Nester</u> Find an empty bird nest.	
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> <u>Who's a Good Dog?</u> Pet a stranger's dog.	
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> <u>Patriot Games</u> Find a Canadian Flag or Symbol.	
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> <u>Or Drey</u> Find a squirrel nest.	
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> <u>Be a Good Neighbor</u> Avoid stepping on a Cross Country Ski Track all day.	
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> <u>Convert a Civilian</u> Get a Civilian on a bird... through your binoculars or scope.	
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> <u>BCH - Best Bird Ever</u> Convince a Chickadee to take a seed from your hand.	
<u>17 /18</u>	
<u>Achievements - 3 points</u> (you don't need to go bush-whacking to find these, all are in Goldbar Park)	
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> <u>Wish with Death</u> Locate a Porcupine, and live to tell the tale!!!	
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> <u>"NOTE: all sightings are UNCONFIRMED unless indicated"</u> Locate a Yellow-bellied Flycatcher.	
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> <u>I have a Secret Secret</u> Locate a Northern Cardinal.	
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> <u>Get Greater</u> Locate a Great Egret. When you do, eat some snow. You earned it!	
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> <u>A Reliable but Reclusive Source...</u> Locate a Green Heron.	
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> <u>Good Provider</u> Prove you are a suitable mate - demonstrate your ability to locate an Owl.	
*** not one of those plastic GHOW's...and bonus points for finding an actual Owl!!	
<u>9 /18</u>	
Rules:	
Look but don't touch or take anything...except garbage.	
Take a picture of the <u>underlined</u> items.	
Stay within Goldbar and Rundle Park.	
Don't follow around the other team.	
Grand Total: <u>48</u>	
Score:	Ranking:
0 - 30	I'm from Calgary
31 - 40	Do you even bird?
41 - 50	Solid Birder
50 - 60	Ultimate Lister
60 - 70	Found an Owl!!

Hold on...upon further review of Gerald's picture, this Yellow-bellied Flycatcher, looks off.



Least Flycatcher
Photo by Gerald Romanchuk

The wing bars are not quite "yellow enough" and the throat...looks just a bit too grey or something. It's a common trap a lot of birders fall into. It's pretty hard to tell one flycatcher species from another without vocalizations. This bird looks more like a Least Flycatcher. As a result, we had to remove that record, unfortunately giving the Drakes a final score of 39, and rank of "Do you even bird?" What a twist!

With the competition over, and core body tem-

peratures returning to a normal state, we decided to check out the action around Bittern Lake. We cruised the dirt roads for a bit looking for a Horned Lark, but came up empty handed. We did manage to find a few Short-eared and Snowy Owls to round out the day, in addition to a Red Fox hanging out in some lucky person's front yard. It was a pretty good way to spend a winter's day, if you ask me.

Sean Evans

Beaverhills and Southeast, January 28, 2017

ENC field trips have been heading north and west the last few weeks. On Saturday 14 of us spun the compass to the southeast. We went on a tour through Beaverhills, Holden, Daysland, Heisler, Big Knife PP, Forestburg, and Bittern Lake.

Starting out east of the Amisk Creek Bridge, our first highlight was a mammal as we watched a Red Fox cruising across a field. Other than 3 Rough-legged Hawks and a few flocks of White-winged Crossbills in heavily treed farmyards, things were fairly quiet.

A little ways south of Holden we finally picked up our first Snowy Owl of the day. Sky and light conditions made spotting white birds pretty tough. This one was in flight. When it went and perched in a tree, we all agreed we would never have seen it – it really blended in with the sky.



We stopped in Holden for a pit stop. The disturbing trend of ENC guys who can't read a sign continued.

A second Snowy on a power pole was easier to pick out. We also saw Gray Partridge and large flocks of Snow Buntings in the area.

Down in Heisler the main attraction was a few Eurasian Collared-Doves, a year-list bird for many of the group.

We reached Big Knife PP on the Battle River in time for a late lunch. The park was pretty quiet bird-wise. A few chickadees and a drumming Northern Flicker were all we could find. We had to send the A-team out to inspect a dead porcupine under a tree.

There was porcupine sign all over the park and a few of us did see a live one on the way out.

Over at the Forestburg power plant, we checked the open water for ducks and saw Canada Geese, Mallards, Common Goldeneye, and some swans that were too far away to ID.

Driving north of Forestburg, we saw a few more Snowies and another porcupine conspicuously crossing an open field.

As we headed towards Daysland, the Snowies started popping up fast and furiously. We made it to 10, and they just kept coming. By the time we got to Bittern Lake and Connor Charchuk spotted an owl from the back seat, we had a total of 18 Snowy Owls, a day record for most of us on the trip. We tried a few spots for Short-eared Owls but only saw a shape on a fence





*All photos by
Gerald Romanchuk*

post that was too far away to identify, We picked up a Great Horned Owl to end the day.

Gerald Romanchuk

Keephills, Seba Beach, and Beyond, January 22, 2017

A crew of 22 headed out in foggy conditions to check out the open water around Keephills and Sundance and then, time permitting, head further west to look for owls. One of our first birds of the day was a Great Gray Owl near the town of Wabamun. We also picked up a Northern Shrike and a few other common birds in the area.

Going further west to the Evansburg area we heard that a couple of cars were low on gas so we went as far into some bush roads as we could and still get back to a gas station. Got 2 more Great Grays on the way in.



Things got slow, but on our way out a few of us saw a Goshawk. One interesting small, roundish bird was spotted, but took off before the group got a good look.



Then a closer little round guy popped up (easy to spot, right?).

This one stayed long enough for everyone to get out and set up scopes and cameras. It was a Northern Pygmy Owl, a lifer for several in the group.

After that bird flew off, we pulled up the road a ways and stopped for lunch. Three obliging Snow Buntings dropped down onto the road in front of us. Then Alf Scott looked above us and asked, "What's that?" and Sean got a shot of a second Pygmy that came to check us out.



Northern Pygmy Owl, Photo by Sean Evans

We went for gas and headed back towards Seba Beach, where we stopped to visit Mike Greeney. His yard was busy with what seemed like a million chickadees and woodpeckers.

Going towards Sundance, we saw a couple of Bald Eagles. Unfortunately, once we got to Keephills, the cooling ponds were pretty much fogged in. There were thousands of ducks



Northern Pigmy Owl, Photo by Gerry Fox

Hubert Lake Wildland Provincial Park, January 14, 2017

Last Saturday, 31 keen birders met bright and early to join a 12-car convoy out to the Westlock area. The morning started pretty *great*, despite the cloud cover making things rather *gray*, but we successfully found *owls*.

Three Great Grays were hunting in a treed meadow and gave us decent looks.

We moved on from there to the next road over and found a Northern Hawk Owl. It stayed perched high on a telephone wire and didn't provide much in the way of good photo ops.

We spent much of the late morning and early afternoon driving around with relatively quiet birding. Logan Bradley spotted a bird on the side of the road that some folks needed for their life list, which was surprising, because usually they're not too *ruff* to find. (It was a Ruffed Grouse). Logan's sharp eyes also spotted a porcupine and a second Northern Hawk-owl on this drive.



**Great Grey Owl (above) and Porcupine (below)
Photos by Dissan Jayasumana**



and another eagle, but not enough visibility to really work the ducks. The best duck spotted was a Canvasback that several people saw. We got part of the group to pose in the ice and fog. They're saying, "This trip is SO much better than last week's!"

Big thanks to all the participants, to James for ebirding, and to Sean for his organizing!

Gerald Romanchuk



**Photos above by Gerald Romanchuk
unless otherwise indicated**

After a lunchtime pit stop and gas-up, we took to the highway to head a bit further north, but were quickly turned around by a birder (who shall not be named) calling out, "Owl! Owl in the parking lot!" So we all dangerously turned around on the highway to rip back to the gas station. I think some folks were wondering if they couldn't see the owl because there was a raven blocking their view, but it quickly became clear that the raven *was* the owl.

We finally made our way into the Wildland at around 2:00 p.m. A few stops along the way yielded very little activity, but a few of us did hear an American Three-toed Woodpecker calling and drumming in the Wildland, probably the best bird in there.

Then it was time to go, so we drove back down the road where the Great Grays were found in the morning, and ended up seeing 4. One gave us really good looks as it hunted the roadside.

Thank you to everyone for coming out.

Connor Charchuk

Whitemud Park, January 7, 2017

We had a crew of over 30 birders out on a frosty Saturday morning in Whitemud Park. The birding was pretty average, with a few nice treats. The first bird that got everyone all lined up was a Black-backed Woodpecker.



Good birds for the winter list were a couple of White-throated Sparrows near the boardwalk.



Photo above by Sean Evans

Otherwise, folks enjoyed the tame chickadees... and especially one oddball little guy – a leucistic chickadee with white around the eyes.



**Black-backed Woodpecker (above left)
Leucistic Chickadee (above)
Photos by Henry Sanders**

Thanks to Sean Evans for his organizational skills and to Connor Charchuk for ebirding.

Gerald Romanchuk

Christmas Bird Count “Warm-up” at Hawrelak Park, December 11, 2016

Despite the title of today’s walk, there was absolutely NO warming going on today! It was -24°C as I drove to the park this morning, and with reports of a strong wind kicking up, I didn’t think anyone would actually show up. But by 9 a.m., I found out there were five extremely hardy birders in our club!

Actually, there were two more. We have two little lambs that often get lost. I can’t even count how many times I’ve gotten messages from these two little lambs on field trip mornings. One is a little directionally-challenged and likes to go to the wrong meeting spot. The other is alarm-clock-challenged and doesn’t always make it on time.

Full credit to the first lamb; she caught up and made it for the walk. Our alarm-clock lamb, though, had her phone freeze up and turned the wrong way from the meeting spot. When we finally got in touch, we found she had run into a pack of coyotes on the trail and turned back. Sean Evans said, “Good thing she got out of there, they could totally take her down!”

I’d been thinking of back-up plans and shortening the walk, but once we got going out of the wind, things really weren’t that bad. The only problem was a lack of birds.

There were of course Chickadees and a few other common birds. Every woodpecker we heard turned out to be a Downy. We learned that it’s rude to call a fluffed-up Downy “chubby looking,” and that females are way more likely to take offence!

We walked for 2 hours and got 9 species. One birder got a free hair treatment – would’ve cost a bunch at the hairdresser for those frosted tips:

A little harder to notice is the frost on this guy’s beard. He’s got a lot of natural frosting!



Emily Gorda



Brian Stephens

Photos by Gerald Romanchuk

After the walk some of us went to Arby’s for lunch. We even caught up with our alarm-clock lamb and then drove over to the grain terminal. Timing was perfect, a Prairie Falcon just flew off! The wind had picked up and the ex-

posed parking lot was not a pleasant place to stand around. We piled into vehicles and waited for an hour and a half, but all we saw was a quick fly-by of a falcon.

Big kudos to the birders and the lost little lambs who showed up today!

Gerald Romanchuk

The 'Owl'berta Nocturnal Owl Survey

The Alberta Nocturnal Owl Survey celebrated its 15th year of full-time monitoring in 2016, in memory of Ray Cromie, a long-time owl surveyor and bander. The survey was initiated in 1998 with a few keen volunteers. The survey gained momentum in 2002 when Bird Studies Canada initiated the national nocturnal owl survey. The Alberta survey is now coordinated by STRIX Ecological Consulting and Beaverhill Bird Observatory. Surveys are conducted between March 20 and May 5 along accessible roads. Volunteers stop at each station and listen for owls, then play calls of owls to increase the responses.

We had 192 volunteers survey 99 owl survey routes across Alberta in 2016. The drier and milder weather during the winter of 2015/16 resulted in an early breeding season for owls, and volunteers found 578 owls (7 species) during surveys (Table 1). Northern Saw-whet Owls were the most common species detected, with some routes having more than

5 individuals. This was the highest number of Saw-whets in the survey's history. There was high occupancy in the nestboxes monitored in central Alberta, and high numbers of young fledged. Fall Saw-whet Owl banding stations in central Alberta (Beaverhill Bird Observatory, STRIX Ecological Consulting, and Pletz Park) also had record capture rates. Average numbers of all other species of owls were detected on the owl survey. Low numbers of Northern Pygmy Owl and Short-eared Owl are found because they are diurnal owls.

Long-term monitoring is important for longer-lived species such as owls, particularly for species that may not breed every year. For example, if surveys were only conducted from 2011 to 2013, the data would indicate that populations of Great Horned Owls are declining (2.15 to 1.64 owls/route). However, if you look at the numbers from 2003 to 2016, Great Horned Owls show cyclic populations (Figure 1).

Table 1. Number of owls observed per route (10 stations), Alberta Nocturnal Owl Survey 2011-2016

Species	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016
Boreal Owl	0.35	0.51	0.30	0.41	0.41	0.45
Barred Owl	0.21	0.25	0.16	0.18	0.21	0.21
Great Gray Owl	0.08	0.14	0.07	0.10	0.11	0.12
Great Horned Owl	2.15	1.99	1.64	1.85	2.12	2.06
Long-eared Owl	0.15	0.16	0.30	0.32	0.29	0.26
Northern Pygmy Owl	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.01
Northern Saw-whet Owl	1.78	2.83	1.35	1.75	2.02	3.01
Short-eared Owl	0.01	0.02	0.00	0.00	0.01	0.00
Number of Routes	100	99	100	98	98	99
Number of Volunteers	190	185	192	186	190	192

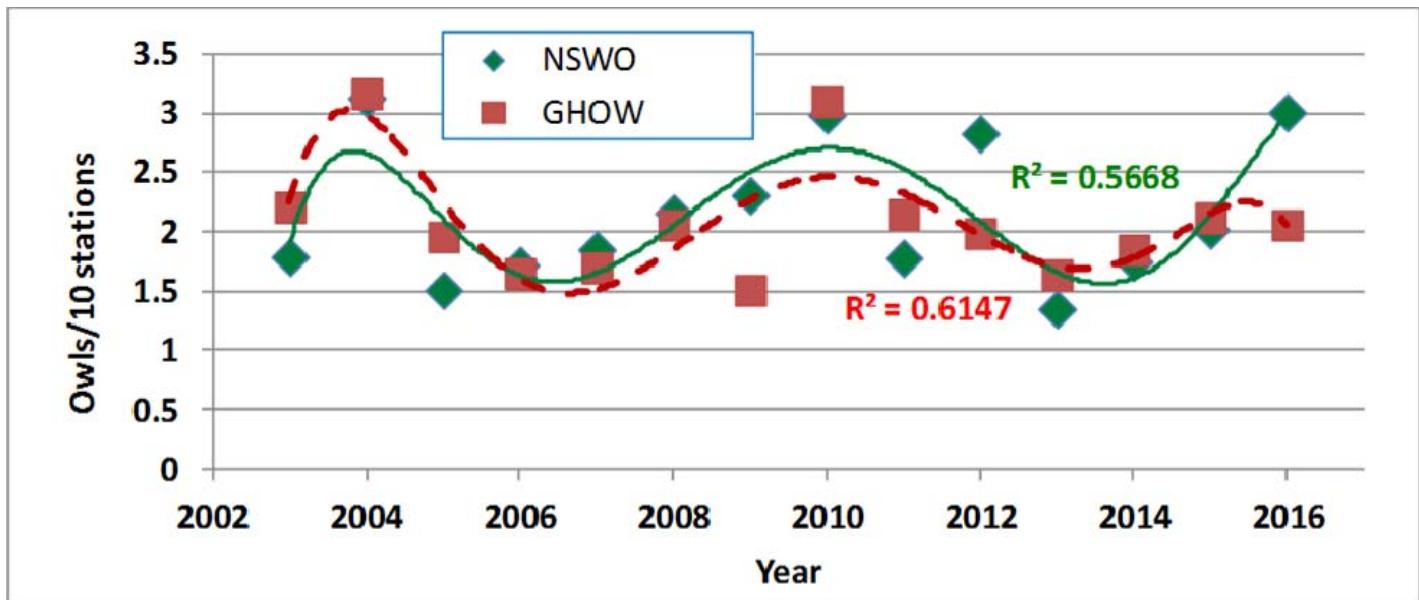


Figure 1. Abundance of Great Horned (GHOW) and Northern Saw-whet Owl (NSWO) detected on the Alberta Nocturnal Owl Survey 2003 to 2016.

Long-term funding and in-kind support from Alberta Conservation Association, Beaverhill Bird Observatory, and STRIX Ecological Consulting allow us to keep this valuable program going. Bird Studies Canada coordinates the national database and promotes the programs through its magazine and website. The 2017 season is

already going, but please contact Lisa Priestley if you would like to participate in the 2018 survey (lisa@STRIXeco.ca). Please let us know where in the province you would like your survey route and provide a mailing address.

Lisa Takats Priestley
STRIX Ecological Consulting



Full moon, Photo by Lisa Priestley



Saw-whet Owl (top) and Boreal Owl (bottom), Photos by Chuck Priestley

Members' Photos



Tundra (left) and Trumpeter Swans, Photo by Ann Carter



Flowers from "The Rock"

Pink Lady Slipper (left), Photo by Marg Reine; Dragon's Mouth Orchid (right), Photo by Judy Johnson