

# THE PARKLAND NATURALIST



MAY-AUGUST 2017

A PUBLICATION OF THE  
EDMONTON NATURE CLUB

<http://www.edmontonnatureclub.ca>



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*Red-throated Loon (top), Arctic Tern (bottom), Photos by Alan Hingston*

## Birding in the Land of the Midnight Sun

### Cambridge Bay, June 20–25, 2017

A year ago in early July, Alan Hingston and I met an Eagle-Eye Tour group at Geoff Holroyd's property near Islet Lake. We were after the Great Crested Flycatcher and they were just starting their trip to Yellowknife and then Cambridge Bay, Nunavut. After talking with the tour leader, Richard Knapton, I got excited about the possibilities of a trip to the north and with Air Miles, it was even financially possible.

With the idea in my head it was easy to convince Alan to join me, as long as we could use our Air Miles. In early September of 2016 my persistence finally paid off and with Alan's credit card number in hand, I booked our flights and made reservations at Umingmak B&B from

June 20–24, 2017. Only ten months to plan, research, make target lists, and get pumped!

Fast forward to June 20, 2017, and it's actually happening. The first leg of our Canadian North flight took us to Yellowknife, where we had a 40 minute layover, enough time to walk out of the terminal across the road to Fred Henne Park in search of a Mew Gull. Crazy Birders! I love it! The 737 from Yellowknife to Cambridge Bay was a combi plane carrying more cargo than passengers. As the plane neared Cambridge Bay we came in over the ocean, which was still ice-covered, raising some angst as to whether the birds would even be here; but everywhere else below us, the tundra was pockmarked with small open ponds and very little snow. Sandy, from Umingmak B&B, was at the airstrip to meet us and after sorting out a rear flat tire, had us checking into our spacious accommodation with plenty of time to bird before...I was going to say "dark," but we're north of the Arctic Circle and the

sun won't set for the entire time we're here!

Once we had finished our welcome cookies and tea, we headed north of Cambridge Bay by walking along the Water Treatment Plant Road before angling across the tundra towards the back of the town dump. It's 8 °C with a mix of sun and cloud! On that first day we picked up 24 species including three lifers: the spectacularly-coloured

King Eider, the striking Sabine's Gull, and the Arctic Tern. Alan hauled around Steve Knight's \$5,000 Nikon camera, taking as many pictures as he could. All the birds here are in breeding plumage: Thayer's and Glaucous Gulls, Common Eider, and Long-tailed Jaeger. Spectacular! A junkyard Killdeer was a surprise bird for this far north! To cut costs, we



*Percy Zalasky at the foot of Mount Pelly, Photo by Alan Hingston*

brought our own suppers and cooked our own meals on the upper floor of the lodge. After supper, day one ended with Alan deleting pictures while I eBirded our day's effort and turned in early to maintain my circadian rhythm.

For the next three days we rented the owner's Ford F-150 to bird further afield. In Cambridge Bay there are only three ways to go: east 20 km to the base of Mount Pelly, west 12 km past the airport to Fox Hill along Dease Road, and north 12 km along the old Dew Line Road. We went east on day 2 and saw our only shared lifer: a gorgeous Yellow-billed Loon at the mouth of the Greiner Lake River. As I slowly drove out of town with the "oil change required" message always displayed, I felt right at home, as our Ford Escape similarly displays messages that we ignore! Whenever the mood urged us, we would stop and walk out onto the tundra in high-top boots, skirting the ponds that are everywhere. At every stop we

*On the cover, Male King Eider, Photo by Alan Hingston*

would see birds: Pacific Loons, Semipalmated Sandpipers, Stilt Sandpipers, Pectoral Sandpipers, Black-bellied Plovers, and Red-necked Phalaropes. Above us patrolled Long-tailed and Parasitic Jaegers (another lifer for me)! A stark and stunning landscape greeted us at every stop! Along the road fishing huts are everywhere, with people fishing for Arctic Char. At the second river crossing with two huge culverts we had close looks at King Eiders, Sabine's Gulls, Arctic Terns, and a Red-throated Loon (all lifers) feeding on the char fingerling wriggling in the shallow cold rushing water. Fantastic close-up views afforded excellent photographs for Alan.



At the end of the road we parked and walked up Mount Pelly, picking up a Peregrine, two Arctic Hares, and three Rough-legged Hawks. From the top we had a 360 degree panoramic view of this vast land, with Cambridge Bay off in the distance to the west. Returning from Pelly I picked up two more lifers: a stunning male Willow Ptarmigan in breeding plumage and a Red Phalarope. Each sighting elicited awe and wonder as we shared our passion and excitement. A spectacular day of birding ended back at Umingmak at 7 p.m., where we fell into our nightly ritual: supper, eBirding, picture deleting, and sleep. Two days under our belts and still no bugs. Yes!

On day 3 I once again got up at 5 a.m. to bird the town before breakfast. I was rewarded by a nest-building pair of Hoary Redpolls. Everywhere are Lapland Longspurs, the most common bird we see, and to a lesser extent Snow Buntings. Cambridge Bay is a rough-looking frontier town with all of the houses constructed on stilts because of the permafrost. Every house has either a snowmobile or ATV parked outside and, sadly, garbage is scattered everywhere! It's very much a government-built town servicing the north. Today, after breakfast, Alan and I drove to Fox Hill along the Dease Road. It's drier terrain in this direction and with different habitat come different birds. Highlights were our first American Golden Plovers, a very cooperative Parasitic Jaeger, and four Long-tailed Jaegers. At Fox Hill we found a Rough-legged Hawk's nest with six eggs next to a huge grassy meadow riddled with lemming tunnels.

After lunch we decided to drive the Dew Line Road and save our last day to drive the best birding road. The Dew Line Road is an old narrow road leading to the original radar site. Apart from the usual suspects, we were not seeing as many birds or any new species. Two Pacific

Loons were the best birds we saw. After encountering several snow-covered hills we decided to turn around 0.5 km past an excellent turn-around spot. Bit by bit by bit we wriggled our 15-foot truck around on the 16-foot-wide road, avoiding catastrophe by placing rocks on the soft edges to give us traction. Fifteen minutes later we were on our way back only to have the engine overheat one kilometre down the road. No worries...with our 500 ml water bottle we were able to add 2 litres to the radiator after it had cooled down. The problem remained with us for the rest of our trip but every time it started to overheat we would stop and walk out on the tundra to bird! When life gives you lemons, make lemonade!!

On our last day with the truck we decided to drive the Mount Pelly Road, which was the perfect way to end our stay in the "Land of the Midnight Sun." So far the only bird we haven't seen is the Baird's Sandpiper, which should be here but so far has eluded us. Under clear blue skies, our best weather of the trip, we got great looks at the Yellow-billed Loon to begin a fabulous day of birding. Towards the end of the Pelly Road, on one of our forays on to the tundra, I found our first Baird's on habitat that Alan remembered as being suitable for the bird's nesting requirements. With birds, it's all about the habitat and as Peter Demulder used to say, "If you walk in Baird's habitat, you'll see Baird's!"

At the end of the Pelly Road we ate lunch. I spotted a Semipalmated Plover nest, witnessed the adults exchanging shifts on the nest and saw another Baird's, which Alan got great pictures of. We took three hours driving slowly back, picking up 34 of the 42 species we would see on the trip. Alan photographed every nest we found: Stilt, Pectoral, and Semi-palmated Sandpipers; Red Phalaropes; and Black-bellied Plovers. But after I got whacked on the head twice by an aggressive Parasitic Jaeger, he passed up photographing that nest. With our stay rapidly coming to an end, we retreated back to Umingmak B&B. We decided that Umingmak meant "musko" in the Inuit language, what with the huge musko painted on the lodge's van and the musko horns decorating the lodge's entrance. Nothing gets by us!

On our last morning I walked straight north from Umingmak and found a Baird's nest that I marked with an inukshuk so Alan could photograph one last nest. Fittingly, an Arctic Fox ambled along the ridge, following me as I retreated for breakfast.

Our trip has been fantastic: a remarkable five days of great weather, no bugs, and wonderful bird watching. It certainly exceeded all of my expectations. I will always treasure the brief glimpse of life in the north: a harsh, fragile, and beautiful land.

**Percy Zalasky**



*Baird's Sandpiper nest and eggs (left), female Lapland Longspur (right), Willow Ptarmigan (below), and Yellow-billed Loon (bottom), All photos by Alan Hingston*



*Percy's eight "lifers"*

*Thayer's Gull*

*Yellow-billed Loon\**

*Willow Ptarmigan*

*King Eider*

*Red-throated Loon*

*Sabine's Gull*

*Red Phalarope*

*Arctic Tern*

*\*Life bird for Alan Hingston*

More photos on the outside back cover.



## President's Report, Spring/Summer 2017

The past few months have been focused on our outdoor activities. Field trips continue to be very well attended. Volunteer **Sean Evans** has organized dozens of walks, trips, and adventures with generous field trip leaders. It's nice to see a few different folks leading an occasional walk or trip, taking some pressure off the regulars!



*Our President, Ann Carter*

One of our excursions was to the Beaverhill Bird Observatory, near Tofield, to see the work being done there. We are very pleased that ENC was able to provide funding to cover the costs for a participant in the **Beaverhill Bird Observatory's Geoff Holroyd Young Ornithologists' Workshop**. At least three young ENC members have attended this program, which was initiated in 2016. See the article on page 8 for more information about the BBO and the workshop.

Another successful **Snow Goose Chase** was engineered by **Bob Parsons** and his team. Once again, all costs for the seven buses carrying inner-city children and families, including their bagged lunches and snacks, were covered by grants and donations. Thanks to Nature Alberta, which partners with us for this event! Ticket sales for the three "public" buses cover costs for that group.

The **Remembering Ray Cromie** project continued with the installation of songbird boxes at several locations. We expect another round of that before winter. Thanks to everyone who has built bird and bat boxes and assisted in the field.

Many thanks to the elected officials of the club who attend meetings to discuss and decide your club activities and finances: Recording Secretary **Colleen Raymond**, Membership Secretary **John Jaworski**, Treasurer **Stan**

**Nordstrom**, and the four Executive Directors: **Gerald Romanchuk**, **Hendrik Kruger**, **Sean Evans**, 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. A special shout-out to **Connor Charchuk**, Director at Large, who provided a youthful perspective and made great contributions to our bird studies and field trips.

### Recent Club Highlights

In July, those attending the morning visit to Nisku Prairie Reserve were rewarded with beautiful wildflower blooms and some nice birds, including Nelson's Sparrow. A total of 140 plant species have been recorded for the site, of which approximately 23 acres are covered more or less completely with native vegetation of aspen groves and grasslands.

The online discussion group has been humming with notes on various Canada 150 projects and lovely images of native flowers, insects, and birds. Thanks to Steve Knight and Gerry Fox, who facilitate these communications.

### Coming Attractions

Our indoor program speaker series and study groups resume in the fall. Details will be posted in the website calendar as they become available. We welcome your topic suggestions and encourage members to participate as presenters to the various study groups.

Mark your calendars: the Edmonton Christmas Bird Count (ECBC) is scheduled for December 17. We'll be looking for feeder watchers and bush beaters to count urban birds and help us hold our world record of the "count with the most participants"! Detailed information is available at [edmontonchristmasbirdcount.ca](http://edmontonchristmasbirdcount.ca).

Respectfully submitted by Ann Carter, President, Edmonton Nature Club

*Contact the executive through General Inquiries on the ENC website home page, bottom right at [edmonton-natureclub.org](http://edmonton-natureclub.org).*

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 is published by the Edmonton Nature Club.  
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Download applications from the  
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**Membership Rates for 2016/17:**

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



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## The Beaverhill Bird Observatory in 2017



*Photo credit: Mike Haskin Panoramic, edits Sara Pearce Meijerink*

The Beaverhill Bird Observatory is situated within the Beaverhill Natural Area on the southern edge of Beaverhill Lake. It acts as a steward for this internationally recognized Important Bird Area, Ramsar site, and valuable multi-purpose provincial natural area used for research, education, conservation, and recreational enjoyment of the outdoors.

Beaverhill Lake was designated a Ramsar site (wetland of international significance) in 1987. Over the past years, the water level at the lake has diminished, and it completely dried up 10 years ago, with grass filling the entire lakebed. This year, with above-average precipitation in April, ENC club members reported a significant amount of water in the area. On Wednesday, May 10, BBO staff surveyed water levels in the lakebed by airplane and, using GPS technology, were excited to discover water filling approximately 70% of the space it historically occupied.

Members of the ENC enjoyed spectacular weather on our morning visit to the observatory, perfect for immersing ourselves in nature. A few were more immersed than others and returned to the station to wring out their socks after finding themselves on deeply flooded trails. They had their own proof of high water levels.



While Least Flycatchers, the most common bird in the natural area, filled the forest with their “Chebek” calls, Clay-colored Sparrows filled the nets. A female oriole tried the nectar feeder, and the largest Hairy Woodpecker I’ve ever seen dined at the suet cage.

*Natalya Hontar releases a Hairy Woodpecker,  
Photo by Helen Trefry*



*Clay-colored Sparrow, Photos by Ann Carter*

The BBO is the oldest migration monitoring station in Alberta and second oldest in Canada, providing extensive long-term datasets tracking birds. Our early birders (some arriving at 5:30 a.m.) were treated to seeing a Gray-cheeked Thrush being processed. Birds are caught in a very specific protocol using mist nets. They’re carefully removed by trained bird handlers, then banded with a numbered metal bracelet, weighed, measured, aged, and sexed. Everything is recorded. The morning of our visit, a total of 71 birds were banded. Along with the thrush, highlight species included a Common Yellowthroat and Rose-breasted Grosbeak. Common species of the day were House Wrens, Yellow Warblers, and Blackpoll Warblers.

The club’s eBird list included Marsh Wren, Sedge Wren, lots of ducks, and a (very sneaky) Ruby-throated Hummingbird. Our list helped move BBO forward in its goal to record 150 bird species this year. Brian Stephens birded over the longest time and also tracked club sightings. Thanks to Assistant Biologist Sara Pearce Meijerink for hosting us!

In 2016 BBO initiated the **Geoff Holroyd Young Ornithologists’ Workshop**. This week-long workshop for teenagers provides a hands-on experience in the world of migrating birds with mentors who are passionate about monitoring, studying, and conserving birds and their habitat. We’re delighted that some young ENC members have benefitted from this program!

As Helen Trefry (BBO board member and workshop organizer) says, this workshop is not just for students planning careers as biologists. For example, with a heightened awareness of nature, a participant might go on to become an engineer designing structures less dangerous to birds.

The 2017 workshop engaged 7 participants (ages 16–18 years) from Alberta, British Columbia, and Ontario. The youths camped on-site, participated at the banding lab, learned about MAPS (Monitoring Avian Productivity and Survivorship) sites, and helped with daily bird census routes. They built 10 Northern Saw-whet Owl boxes, listened to talks by biologists, and took field trips. David Laurie gave a lepidopteran talk, Brenda Dale talked about citizen science, Phil and Helen Trefry led a raptor-related trip, Kim Blomme talked about Wild North and let the students release orphan ducklings, and Geoff Holroyd gave several talks. On a “Big Birding Day,”

Gerald Roman-chuk led the students through Elk Island National Park, where they worked hard to get 118 species, not easy at this



**Cole Gaerber bands his first bird**  
Photo by Helen Trefry

time of year. Cole Gaerber, one of the attendees, discovered a breeding population of Grasshopper Sparrows at Beaverhill as well as other rare sightings, which he entered on eBird. The staff at BBO worked hard to make sure each student was coached in handling and banding birds and enjoyed meeting these keen young birders.



**Kim Blomme and the students, Photo by Helen Trefry**

The BBO covers all direct costs of the workshop, including food and travel for field trips. BBO is grateful for the donations made by individuals and the ENC in sponsoring the event. If you know a youth with an interest in nature, watch for the spring notice that applications are being accepted by the BBO.

Lifetime memberships for the BBO are available online for a single payment of only \$10. Having a larger membership base helps the BBO secure funding through programs for registered charities. For more information on the BBO or the workshop, or to become a BBO member, visit [beaverhillbirds.com](http://beaverhillbirds.com).

**Ann Carter**

## Snow Goose Chase, 2017

This year's annual Chase was held a week earlier than usual (April 22–23) because the community hall had a previous booking for the last weekend in April. The hall is the morning centre of activities, with various displays and hands-on action! There were three buses for the paying public as well as the seven sponsored buses for inner-city youth and their families, low-income families, and recent immigrants and refugees new to our community.

Scouting reports in the two-week period leading up to the weekend suggested an early movement of migrating Snow Geese, but I was sure that the late April wave would materialize as usual. There was some concern about wet and muddy road conditions and I hoped for drying windy conditions, which in fact did occur. The southerly winds helped to improve some of the roads but a heavy snowfall on Saturday evening did not bode well for the Sunday bus. My scouting seemed to aid the guides on the bus, and trouble was averted as drivers tried to use the better roads.

The scouting prior to the weekend was a great success, with close to 70 bird species seen on Thursday and Friday. I was out on Thursday and must have seen close to 100 Short-eared Owls while route-planning. Many farmers had been unable to get into the fields, and the numerous windrows meant plenty of food for mice and voles – and thus for owls and other raptors as well! I have not seen so much moisture in the fields since first visiting the Beaverhill Lake area over 25 years ago, and it was obvious that many farmers were in dire straits, unable to move the necessary equipment.

Birds seen during the scouting period included Townsend Solitaire, Barrow's Goldeneye, Western Meadowlark, Hooded Merganser, and Ross's Goose, not to mention early Swainson's Hawks. The three Percy Page buses on the weekend saw an average of 50–55 species and many thousands of Snow Geese and migrating Sandhill Cranes. Most duck species were observed in very large numbers, and a few early shorebirds such as avocets and yellow-legs were spotted on mudflats and in shallow water.

Over 70 volunteers again assisted in this our 19<sup>th</sup> year, many returning from participating in previous years. Scheduling can be a quite a problem with so many buses, but the guides did a great job trying to keep the varied timing schedules up to date. I had a terrific planning group. We studied feedback from last year, and various improvements enabled us to make the event more efficient. Golden Arrow provided an excellent bus service, and they will be back next year! Jana Sneep did a great job working on a new PowerPoint presentation, with help

and encouragement from Don Delaney. Overall, it was a successful Snow Goose Chase again this year.

### The Inner-City Buses

Children and adults from close to thirteen different Edmonton area schools, groups, and inner-city organizations packed the seven buses that we ran this year. We placed more emphasis on offering seats to recent immigrants and refugees this year, and it sure paid off – so thanks to the Mennonite Centre for Newcomers as well as Edmonton Immigration Services Association. It was heart-warming to see so many families participating in this event.

Needless to say, the displays, exhibits, and hands-on interpretive tables in the community hall drew a lot of attention, and it was fun to have John Acorn, the Nature Nut, present to talk to the kids and their parents and guardians. Outdoor locations were very busy despite the chilly and windy conditions. The wetlands behind the Nature Centre, bird and owl banding at Petras Park, and Dr Glynnis Hood at the Ministik Bird Sanctuary with her popular beaver talk and display all drew many positive comments. My good friend Randal Hoscheit was again at the (muddy) soccer field parking lot, scoping the wetlands just east of the downtown area.

It is always interesting to read the feedback from tour guides and scouts, plus of course the letters from children taking part. One note from a homeschooler hit the spot for me:

Some of the kids in our group are SERIOUSLY into birding and are top notch unofficial ornithologists. My 10-year-old daughter has memorized our birding guide: "Birds of Western Canada" and can quickly identify over 150 species off the top of her head. Another boy in our group goes birding with his family every week, and he has spotted and identified 137 species on his list – including 200 Snow Buntings during this past winter's bird count. Nature and wildlife are definitely passions of our group of kids.

On Saturday, I realized that the Snow Goose Chase provides the children with the highest level of learning possible by incorporating a variety of hands-on activities to stimulate high-level learning and to naturally encourage the children to ask questions. The event was seamlessly coordinated to provide the children with different types of activities. I loved how the children were free to wander around the tables to learn more of what they were interested in after they finished their lunches.

Birding on the bus with 2 specialists was a special treat! We wouldn't have been able to find half the birds that they did if we didn't have their guidance.

I would like to finish off with a special thanks to all our sponsors and supporters: Nature Alberta, TD Bank Friends of the Environment, Alberta Conservation Association, Imperial Oil, Synergy Projects, Cummings Andrews Mackay (lawyers), Progress Club SILKS of St. Albert, the Nordstrom family, and Mr. Ron Cummings. Various members of the planning committee also helped on count days, so thanks to them too!

**Bob Parsons**



*Bob Parsons and Rong Feng*



*Donna Bamber*



*Snow Goose Chase, Photos by Gerald Romanchuk*



Scout (Brian Hornby) pointing out a flock of Snow Geese



Children using scopes

*Snow Goose Chase, Photos by Angela Cheung*

## Chasing Birds: A Fish Out of Water?

What do you call a birder out of his element? Not sure, but can you imagine a birder, who usually chases after birds with binoculars and a camera, chasing after butterflies with a net? It happened to me this past July 15. I got talked into going to an Alberta Lepidopterists Guild weekend event.

The gathering was based in Rowley, a small hamlet east of Three Hills and north of Drumheller. Rowley is a historic/heritage site offering tours of restored buildings from the pioneer era. The ALGers camped out in the hamlet, but spread out from there in search of butterflies and moths.

Colleen Raymond had invited me down there, and we met the group in the Rumsey Natural Area on Saturday morning.

The Rumsey NA, as part of the larger “Rumsey Block,” is on the largest tract of aspen parkland left on the continent. The rolling hills are an interesting mosaic of grasslands, forested groves, and wetlands. The Rumsey Block



*Rumsey Natural Area*

itself is a combination of private and public lands, including the natural area and an ecological reserve.

So I left the big birding lens behind, picked up a butterfly net, and started chasing after fritillaries, crescents, and sulphurs. Even caught a few. And tried to retain at least a

bit of the Latin that was being tossed around. *Speyeria* refers to a genus of fritillaries (a group of big orange butterflies); *Colias*, the genus of some common sulphurs. Butterflies often talk about genera of butterflies, then work out the species after catching the critter and getting a closer look. There were several

other Latin names mentioned, but there’s only so much butterfly jargon a birder can pick up in one weekend!

Learned a bit of botany too. When you go chasing around after butterflies in the grassland wearing socks and sandals (sounds cool, right?) you learn a lot about needle-and-thread grass – especially its sharply barbed seed heads! A painful lesson.

But you can never totally distract a birder from the birds. While picking sharp barbs out of my socks I heard a sparrow singing. It was a song I would’ve expected from further south in the prairies – the musical trill of a Baird’s Sparrow. Doing some research, I learned that Baird’s is expected in the Block. I just didn’t know the normal range of that species.

While chasing down more *Speyeria* (it doesn’t take long to start getting insufferable with the use of jargon!) Colleen spotted another cool bird – a male Bobolink. We saw a female as well; they appeared to be nesting. We heard another grassland bird, Grasshopper Sparrow, singing but couldn’t get a good look. Also picked up a couple of Turkey Vultures investigating a certain tuckered-out birder turned butterfly.



*Fritillary butterfly*

Speaking of tuckered out, there's a certain degree of physicality to butterflying that's missing in birding. Sure, you can use quick reflexes when trying to focus binoculars or a camera on a fast-moving bird. But you never have to try and catch it! On a breezy day those *Speyeria* can really move. Sprinting (yes, you heard that right, sprinting!) after them with your socks full of needle-and-thread grass is not easy. And even if you can run fast enough to keep up with a *Colias*, actually getting a net on it is a whole different thing.



needle-and-thread grass

Hanging out with the ALGers was a lot of fun. And chasing butterflies is a definite challenge. But I don't think I'll sell my birding lens yet!

**Gerald Romanchuk**



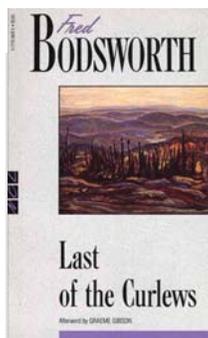
Bobolink

Photos by Gerald Romanchuk

## The Armchair Naturalist

This issue includes a new column suggested by **Karen Lindsay**, chair of the ENC Bird Studies Committee. In “The Armchair Naturalist,” club members review books about natural history they found particularly rewarding. Some of the recommended books may be borrowed from the Edmonton Public Library. To check their availability, go to [epl.ca](http://epl.ca) and click on “Search.”

To suggest additional books of interest to our members, submit a brief review to Karen Lindsay via the ENC website, [edmontonnatureclub.org](http://edmontonnatureclub.org). Click on “Birding,” “Bird Studies,” and “Contact” to send Karen your review.

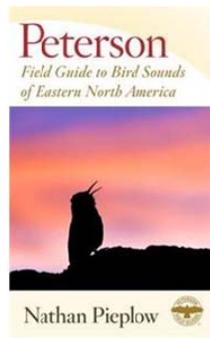


*Last of the Curlews* is a fictionalized account of the life of the last Eskimo Curlew. It follows the bird throughout a year during its migration to South America and return to the Canadian Arctic in search of a mate. The book paints a realistic and detailed picture of this bird's life and behaviour and was made

into an animated film in 1972 (adapted from Wikipedia review).

First published in 1955, it was written by Fred Bods-worth, a Canadian newspaper reporter and naturalist.

*Recommended by Steve Knight (“a must read!”)*



Birders may be interested in Nathan Pieplow's *Peterson Field Guide to the Bird Sounds of Eastern North America*, which covers around 520 eastern species, many of which are western birds as well. It contains an article on how birds make sound, a comprehensive tutorial on how to read spectrograms, (usually) multiple spectrograms for each species, and access to an online resource that provides over 5,500 streaming audio tracks to accompany the spectrograms. There is nothing else like it to help you learn/understand bird songs/calls. The price is \$28US (April 2017).

*Recommended by Martin Sharp*

## Conservation Corner

### The Invasion–Restoration Debate

A while back I wrote some articles for the *PN* on weeds, and I think that my ambiguous attitude towards them confused some people. Indeed, my attitude is ambiguous, but what I was hoping to convey was a nuanced approach, that attitude to a non-native plant should depend on a good understanding of the biology of the plant and the circumstances, including its relation to human activity. Its ecological role, and its value for study of plant strategies and ecology, should also be appreciated. Of course the regulations of the provincial Weed Act dictate the treatment of certain weeds, but should not preclude an unbiased ecological assessment of the plant, and awareness that sometimes the law can be an ass.

In the two local prairie remnants with degraded areas due to human incursion or the influence of nearby agriculture that I and others manage, I have zero tolerance for non-native weeds. (Ironically, a major component of these prairies is non-native Kentucky bluegrass (*Poa pratensis*), which I can do nothing about; it is too extensive to remove, and I do not have the wherewithal to replace it with native grasses.) To preserve the integrity of the native grassland portions, we spend a good proportion of our waking time in the summer removing these weeds. Perhaps because of this investment of time and energy, in anticipation of a long-term successful outcome that cannot be guaranteed, I tend to resent laissez-faire views that hold that non-natives should not be controlled, that such messed-up environments are the norm in a human-dominated world, and that what restoration involves is more environmentally damaging than the status quo.

Consequently I get riled up when I read the blogs of a person or group called “Death of a Million Trees.” Based out of the San Francisco Bay area of California, it started about a dozen years ago to fight the razing of a stand of Eucalyptus trees which the City of Oakland, UC Berkeley, and the East Bay Regional Park District, backed by the Sierra Club, prescribed and want to replace with a pre-European oak-savanna community. Million Trees soon expanded its mandate to protest all tree-cutting on public lands, and generally promotes tree planting, including of exotics, at least in urban or peri-urban areas. (Trees are universally seen as panaceas, good for carbon storage, shade, ecosystem services, and aesthetics, irrespective of climate or habitat, an attitude that speaks to human hubris and fails to understand the value of treeless native plant ecosystems adapted to local conditions such as drought. As the late Canadian forest ecologist Stan Rowe says in his book *Home Place*, if you want trees, go live in a climate where trees grow.)

Million Trees derisively refers to native plant advocates and restorationists as “nativists” (indeed this seems to be becoming the standard terminology) and has likened them to Nazis in wanting a pure race of natives as opposed to a mixed-race bag of native and exotic vegetation (how politically correct is that?). It blasts the discipline of invasion biology, ignoring or refusing to believe that foreign invaders cause much harm. On the subject of zebra mussels, for example, it simply says that numbers are decreasing now that migrating ducks have found

them good to eat! It slams restoration as a practice, believing it to be the preoccupation of sentimental older people who want to recreate mythically pristine historical landscapes. It argues that landscapes have been influenced by aboriginal peoples for thousands of years. (This is true, but that influence was surely minuscule compared to that of modern, European, technologically advanced peoples. It maintains that ecosystems are dynamic, changing with time, and that human influence is natural. True, again, but this is a convenient mindset, absolving humans from responsibility in damaging the environment.

It is absolutely anti-herbicide (which they always refer to as pesticides, presumably because its supporters respond more emotively to the killing of animals than of plants). It doesn't, however, address the much more significant use of herbicides in agriculture than in restoration projects. It concedes patronizingly that it doesn't blame the idealistic volunteers in restoration projects, because they don't use herbicides (I suspect because it sees volunteers as well-intentioned but ineffective), it blames the big environmental organizations behind them. It has accused (without supplying evidence) The Nature Conservancy of being in collusion with herbicide manufacturers such as Monsanto for profit.

Million Trees is much in favour of “novel ecosystems,” those with a mixture of native and non-native biota, regarding them as a naturally increasing feature of the Anthropocene, the era in which the whole planet is influenced, if not completely driven, by the presence and activity of Man. Well, novel ecosystems are hardly novel; most countries have a naturalized flora and fauna, exotic organisms that have moved in from other geographic areas and established stable populations in the new place. Indeed, novel ecosystems may already occupy the greater proportion of the terrestrial Earth. But for me, that only increases the value of natural or near-natural communities, which are therefore to be especially safeguarded (conservation) and restored where feasible.

In a particularly condescending blog, reporting on a conference in which restorationists spoke frankly of their challenges and failures, Million Trees suggested that the restoration community was moving more towards its own ideas. I doubt that restoration ecologists, using scientific methodology and monitoring, were ever less than frank about their results; it is surely that their paradigm and motivations are quite different.

What kind of influence on mainstream conservation biology does a protest group like Million Trees have? With blog titles such as “Xenophobia is killing our planet” and “Restoration is just horticulture dressed up to look like ecology,” it obviously appeals to people already pre-disposed to its mindset. Many of its blog commentators lack an ecological perspective, including a historical ecological one, and have a decidedly anthropocentric view of the world. Plants don't exist in their own right; their purpose is to benefit people. Katrina Blair, author of “The Wild Wisdom of Weeds: 13 Essential Plants for Human Survival” says that weeds are “symbols of resilience and adaptation in a rapidly changing world.” Sounds romantic, doesn't it? What they are, of course, are primary colonizers in an environ-

ment that is being heavily and constantly disturbed by humans, a relatively uniform environment, and they are no more resilient than the native species that are adapted to the huge variety of natural environments that occur on earth.

Reading Million Trees' references (yes, it takes care to appear scientific, even if it cherry-picks facts to suit its ideology and doesn't tell the full story), a picture emerges, however, of a more scientifically based push-back against conventional approaches to conservation and restoration. In "Beyond the War on Invasive Species" Tao Orion states, "when restoration focuses on removing invasive species without looking at why they are there in the first place, it is never going to achieve meaningful results, especially over time." And, "...eradication doesn't work...because unless the niches are changed in ways that encourage native or other desired species to flourish, eradicating invasive species achieves no measurable ecological benefit." He provides some concrete examples of how he manages his own land to reduce the invasives, including notorious invaders such as kudzu, to create more productive ecosystems. Permaculture and organic farming are seen as helpful in changing the conditions that promote weeds. Other land managers subscribe to the theory that in ecologically impoverished landscapes exotic species provide a welcome boost to ecological functionality. The need for changing conditions puts me in mind of the City of Edmonton's war on field scabious (*Knautia arvensis*), a tall herb that forms field-size patches in Terwilliger Park. I support the use of herbicide to get rid of it, but unless the City quickly develops some other form of ground cover the problem will continue or one type of weed will supplant another. I have learnt by experience that if you herbicide a patch of smooth brome, an introduced forage grass that is supremely well adapted to our climate and soil conditions, you need to be prepared to transplant with something equally robust. This is not easy to do, because most natives are adapted to stable, established communities, not denuded, pioneering ones. Other problems include poor or unreliable germination from

seeds or difficulty in obtaining them in sufficient quantities.

On a wider, more philosophical scale, it appears that conservation biology is being redefined, away from the idea of preserving or recreating "pristine" original ecosystems and towards a system, fitting for the Anthropocene, in which conserved areas are small pieces in the jigsaw puzzle of human-dominated and -oriented landscapes; where working landscapes, ecosystem services and the human economy prevail, and ordinary people rather than academics have greater say. This trend is not to be dismissed and contains some valid ideas. For example, the Beaverhills Initiative is an example of a working, but conserved, landscape. Peter Kareiva, a controversial American ecologist, is a leading proponent of this movement.

Still, call me an old fogey, but I for one am not ready to accept this paradigm in its entirety. I am not ready to give humans free rein to redesign the planet entirely in their own interests. I think that if humans have caused environmental damage, they have an obligation to fix it, or at least try. And that it is important to understand historical landscapes to develop an appropriate environmental perspective. As the saying goes, "You don't know where you are going until you know where you are from." I believe that what we need as a species is more humility, not hubris. There should be places from which we have absented ourselves, at least to a significant extent. There should be large spaces on Earth where other organisms can live, move, and evolve without the constraints of human influence. Some environmentalists are saying that "nature needs 50%" to survive, and we are currently officially shooting for 17% of land under conservation. To achieve even the latter we will need restoration and management of the conserved spaces. Restoration is difficult to do, more difficult than conservation, and expensive, and there are few blueprints. Most governments and municipalities have little idea even how to start. But I'm with those who keep trying!

**Patsy Cotterill**

*In late July Derek Johnson photographed this strange creature, thought to be the larva of a tortoise beetle, happily munching its way through Canada thistle leaves in Wagner Natural Area. With the aim of avoiding herbicides, experiments in bio-control of noxious weeds are carried out every summer, and the Wagner Society recently purchased and released thistle gall flies in an effort to reduce its thistle populations. But this insect has appeared spontaneously, and seems to be doing a good job! If anyone else has spotted any larvae – or adults – on thistles or other plants, please let Derek know! (jderekjohnson@shaw.ca)*



## Cooking Lake Birding

### Did the avocets produce any chicks in 2017?

Since 2009, after the drying-up of Beaverhills Lake, my nature walks have been centred on Cooking Lake, on its birdlife and fluctuating water levels. Last summer, the mud flats widened and attracted huge flocks of sandpipers on their return migration from Arctic breeding grounds. Later that fall, the water went practically out of sight, which was all the more surprising because 2016 was not a drought year at all. With a total of 497 mm of precipitation recorded at the Edmonton International Airport, last year's amount was substantially higher than the 349 mm of 2015 and exceeded the all-time annual mean of 454 mm. In the fall of 2016, showers and early wet snow

saturated the soil, which froze solid in winter so that the spring melt of 2017 did not drain away into the ground. This explains why the 2017 run-off was relatively heavy, filling sloughs and depressions, and bringing Cooking Lake back up to the level of the previous year's spring. The snow run-off was less significant at Beaverhills Lake, though, impeded as it is these days

by man-made weirs in the lake's vast watershed.

From late March onward, I made twice-weekly visits to Cooking Lake's south shore and walked the rutted ATV trail. Early in the season the trail was flooded and muddy, and it later became overgrown with vegetation, which reduced my action radius compared to earlier years. In May and June, the wet ground around the lake sprouted shoulder-high grasses, and a yellow rim of marsh ragwort obscured the view on the waterline.

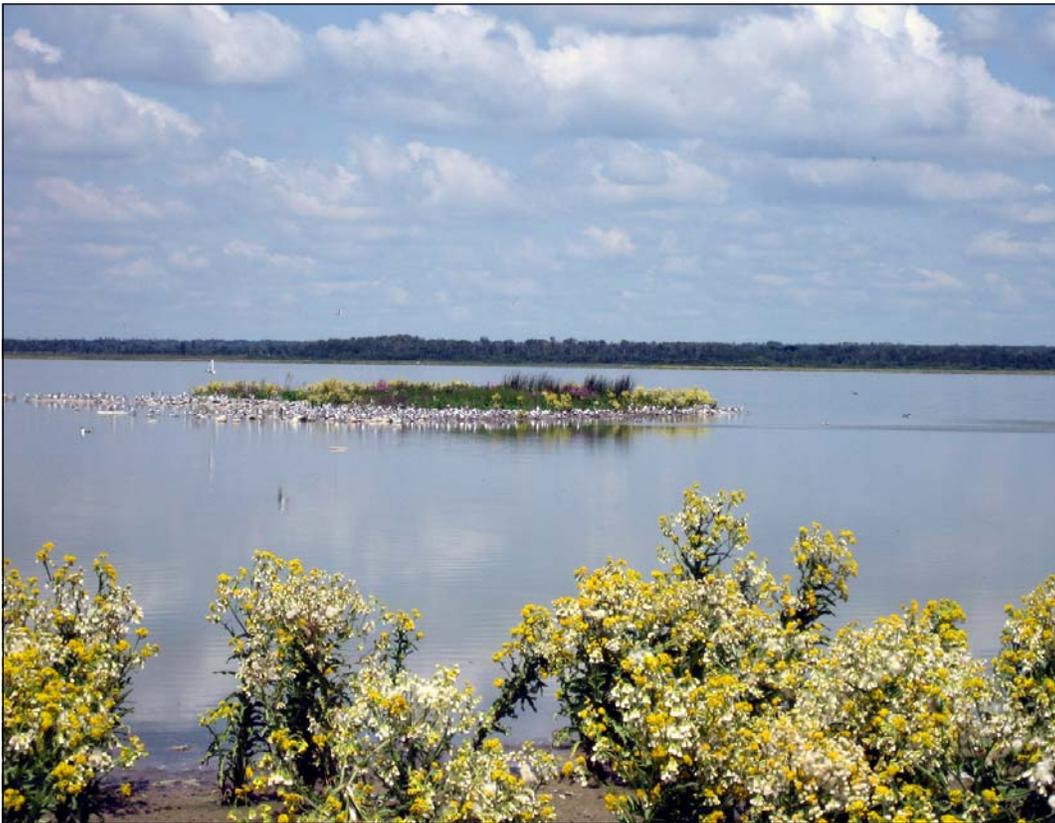
As in previous summers, I kept an eye on a small islet about a hundred metres out from the south shore. Roughly 60 m long, and perhaps half as wide, the islet extended into an outlier of

stones and boulders, their prominence dependent upon the water level. The islet was one of very few locations around the lake where I knew that American Avocets had nested in previous years. There is another islet, a kilometre or so farther west along the south shore, but it is the domain of Ring-billed Gulls. Segregation seems to be nature's way of preventing friction between these two species.

In 2016, I had recorded the first avocets of the season on April 10, and on the 25<sup>th</sup> they were all over the south shore. By contrast, their 2017 arrival was more than three weeks later. The first three avocets graced the islet with their presence on May 8, 2017, and by early June there were about fifty, perhaps more. Their exact number was difficult to count because

the islet had become overgrown with a colourful bouquet of marsh ragwort, fire weed, and bulrush.

Not wanting to disturb the avocets, I did not search for nests. Besides, the soft mud was prohibitive. To learn whether there would be any reproduction this year, I observed the islet twice weekly from a shady spot a little ways inland. In the early summer of 2016, when the number of



*Cooking Lake islet, Photo by Dick Dekker*

avocets around the islet was a multiple of what it was in 2017, I had spotted several adults accompanied by tiny chicks, foraging in the shallows near the islet. The precocious midgets were evidently quite capable of finding their own food. Avocets are known to lead their young away from the nesting colony, and I suspected that some adults seen with chicks farther east along the shore had actually dispersed from the islet.

The 2016 chick sightings occurred in the last days of June and the first week of July. By comparison, this year, as of mid-July I had yet to see a single chick. Furthermore, well before that time, all the defensive behaviour of nesting avocets had stopped. Earlier in the season, approaching ravens or large

gulls had been met with loud alarms. Because of the absence of such protest, I was forced to conclude that this year's breeding season had been a dud.

The exact cause of the apparent nesting failure is not clear, but lack of food could not have been a problem. In June the shoreline was smoking with mating swarms of chironomid midges. Thousands of non-nesting Franklin's Gulls were picking up hatching flies from the lake surface or foraging in the sky above. Moreover, the gulls and non-breeding avocets had lots of time to idle away the hours. In fact, every day the stony edge of the islet was packed with roosting gulls. Could their presence in such numbers have discouraged the avocets? I don't think so, for I never noticed any trouble between them. Quite a different critical factor that might have led to nest abandonment by some or all of the avocets was the growth of vegetation that had completely covered this once open islet.



*Avocets, Photo by Chris Rees*

Over the summer, the yellow of marsh ragwort had been replaced by tall sow thistles, and by mid-July only the odd avocet could be seen there. On July 29, when a helicopter flew west along the south shore, flock after flock of avocets rose in alarm, well in excess of one thousand birds. Large after-breeding aggregations had also collected on the widening mudflats along the east side of the lake. It remains to be seen how long they will stay this year. In 2015 and again in 2016, an estimated two thousand avocets hung around until well into October, and a hundred or more were still there at the end of that month.

#### **Dick Dekker**

*For more information on Cooking Lake's American Avocets and Franklin's Gulls, see the following publications. To obtain a pdf of these illustrated articles, please email [ddekker1@telus.net](mailto:ddekker1@telus.net).*

Dekker, D. 2016. Bugs and birds at Cooking Lake. *Nature Alberta* 40(4):22–27.

Dekker, D. The fall 2016 birding season at Cooking Lake. *Parkland Naturalist* 2016 (4):10–11.

## Parkland Plant Notes

### Pea Family Flowers in Whitehorse Wildland Park in July

A recent trip by botanists to Whitehorse Wildland Park south of Cadomin on July 7–9 revealed members of the pea family (Fabaceae) in full-flowering glory: locoweeds, purple, magenta, blue, white, and yellow according to the species; sweet-vetches, purple and white; and milk-vetches, blue, purple, and yellow; not to mention the non-natives, clovers and sweet-clovers. All are nitrogen-fixers, well suited to growing in the thin soils of the tundra, the rocky slopes and ridges, and stony trail sides. This year was notable as the first time I can remember seeing a white version of Mackenzie's Hedysarum (*H. boreale* subsp. *Mackenziei*), represented by several plants growing with the normal magenta form on the West Cardinal Divide.

Mountain Avens, *Dryas* species, were also still flowering. These too are nitrogen-fixers, although they belong to the rose family, and favour rocky habitats similar to those preferred by the pea genera.

Patsy Cotterill

Photos by Patsy Cotterill



White form of Mackenzie's Hedysarum on the West Cardinal Divide



Even native communities can thrive on some degree of disturbance. Acheson Field Pond (July 16, 2017), in the middle of a canola field, contained over 45 species, most of them wetland species and a few weeds.



Normal magenta form of Mackenzie's Hedysarum



Entire-leaved Mountain Avens, *Dryas integrifolia*

## Editor's Notes

Bird watchers will find lots to read in this issue. The front-cover story by Percy Zalasky describes a wonderful trip to Cambridge Bay, illustrated by Alan Hingston's beautiful photos of birds they encountered. In the back-cover article, Marg Reine describes the activities of a robin family in her back yard this spring, from nest-building to the flight of four fledglings.

Do you like to read nature books? Now you can let everyone know about the books you have enjoyed. See page 13 for Karen Lindsay's new column "The Armchair Naturalist".

Patsy Cotterill has two articles in this issue: Conservation Corner (page 14) and Parkland Plant Notes (page 18).

We have had to edit the many spring and summer field trip reports and photos due to space limitations. The original reports and photos are on our website at [edmontonnatureclub.ca](http://edmontonnatureclub.ca).

Once again, thanks to all who submit articles and photos to *The Parkland Naturalist*. The deadline for submissions to the September–December issue is November 30, 2017. Please send articles and pictures to [colwelld@shaw.ca](mailto:colwelld@shaw.ca).

**Dawne Colwell**

## Field Trip Reports

### St. Albert Grey Nuns White Spruce Woodlot and Lacombe Park Lake Trails, August 13, 2017

Sixteen ENC members joined Percy Zalasky for an advertised warbler watching trip to the Grey Nuns White Spruce Woodlot and Lacombe Park Lake trails.

Viewing conditions were good. Skies were clear, although a little hazy with smoke, and the breeze was quite strong at times.

We saw 25 species in the spruce lot, mostly the birds to be expected at this time of year but we had good views of a Western Wood Pewee.



*Olive-sided Flycatcher, Photo by Janice Hurlburt*

Lacombe Park Lake was similar, with 19 species observed. Highlights were Olive-sided Flycatcher and Western Tanager, which were seen well by those at the front of the line.

Warblers were restricted to Yellow, Yellow-rumped, and Tennessee. It was probably still early for the warbler migration and the leaves still on the trees and strong breeze did not make for easy treetop viewing.

The full list for the trip can be viewed on eBird; thanks to Emily Gorda for keeping the list.

**Alan Hingston**



*Least Flycatcher, Photo by Sean Evans*

### Shorebird Trip, July 30, 2017

Twenty-one of us headed out in search of shorebirds. We had good weather and great conditions. We started out at the Sailing Club access to Cooking Lake. As usual, tons of gulls and ducks but not many shorebirds. The highlight was a group of Hudsonian Godwits. The Range Road 214 access was way more productive – large flocks of avocets, hundreds of peeps and other shorebirds. We had close looks at small peeps such as Least, Semipalmated, and Baird's.

#### Peeps, Photo by Sean Evans



Things started to warm up. We headed back to the cars, but a few of us took notice of all the Tiger Beetles on the sandy trail.

After lunch we headed towards Beaverhill Lake. Things were fairly quiet around

Kallal Meadow and the Amisk Creek Bridge, so we drove towards Mundare Beach and a wetland Brian Stephens had visited a few days earlier. A nice little collection of shorebirds was close enough for a good look and some good discussion on ID characteristics. There are at least 5 species in this photo:



**Tiger Beetle, Photo by Sean Evans**



**Shorebirds, Photo by Grace Kwong**

Further down the road we had to take a break from birding when we found hundreds of Painted Lady butterflies flitting around between a pasture full of thistle and a canola field. All the birders got out of their cars to enjoy the colour.

#### Painted Lady Photos

**Photo by Manna Parseyan**



**Photo by Emily Gorda**



Eventually we tore ourselves away and got back to the birds. Poking around on the east side of Beaverhills we found a Cooper's Hawk, Peregrine, and Bald Eagle harassing ducks. We rounded out our shorebird list with Snipe and Marbled Godwit and picked up a little bonus with a group of 4 Bobolinks.



**Bobolink, Photo by Michael May**

We called it a day around 5 p.m. after finding 19 species of shorebird, with a total of 78 bird species. Thanks to all the great participants and to Sean for eBirding!

**Gerald Romanchuk**

**Central Alberta Birding, July 22, 2017**

We packed 22 birders into 7 cars and cruised south towards Buffalo Lake looking for the Great Egrets that have been seen at Rochon Sands the last few years. Most local birders have seen at least one of them, but a few haven't had any luck down there.

On the way down we birded the west side of Bittern Lake and saw lots of brown ducks, gulls, terns, etc. Jiri Novack pointed out Bladderwort, a carnivorous aquatic plant. We saw a young Merlin perched on the road and picked up Black-necked Stilt and White-faced Ibis at the Ritter Wetland. After a brief stop at Coal Lake, we continued on towards Buffalo Lake. At the Narrows, we saw Yellowlegs, Phalaropes, Least and Semipalmated Sandpipers, and had a nice comparison of Long- and Short-billed Dowitchers on a couple of little ponds.

We ate lunch near the playground at Rochon Sands, watching bitterns, terns, and other birds fly past. While people were putting lunch away, most of the group saw an egret. Luckily, it flew by again when we were on the shoreline trail and everyone got a good look.



**Great Egret, Photo by Janice Hurlburt**

After seeing the egret and soaking the feet of everyone who didn't bring rubber boots, a few of us began getting distracted by butterflies and plants and things.

On the way out of Rochon Sands we stopped at the Ice Cream Stand and rewarded ourselves for finding the egret. Last year we were soundly criticized for rewarding failure when we dipped on the egret, so the ice cream was especially sweet this year!

The group was keen for more birding so we went further south towards Dry Island Buffalo Jump. A pit stop at a campground gave us a chance for a more natural treat, some very tasty Saskatoons.

At Dry Island we enjoyed the scenic overlook.



**Satyr Angling, Photo by Jiri Novack**



**Photo by Colleen Raymond**

We got a look at a Say's Phoebe up top, then drove down into the valley and took a short hike into the badlands.

We hoped for Rock Wren but dipped. A Spotted Towhee made a nice consolation prize.



**Spotted Towhee  
Photo by Jiri Novack**



**Great Horned Owl  
Photo by  
Janice Hurlburt**

On the way back, Ted McKen spotted a Great Horned Owl trying to take a nap.

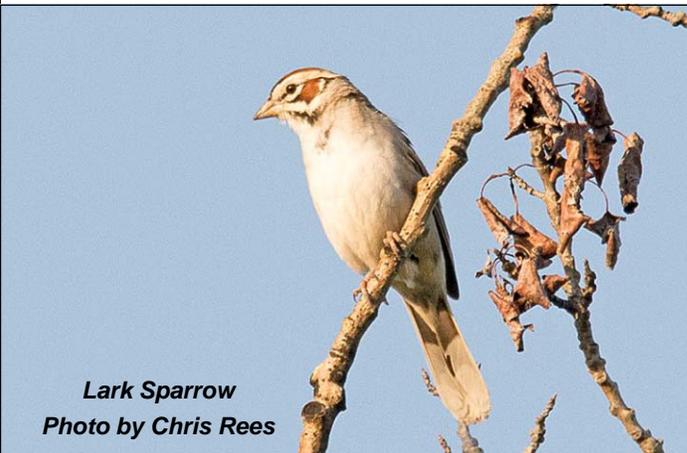
A few of us saw a Turkey Vulture on Highway 21 on the way home. It was a long day, but we had a great crew, saw lots of nice birds, and had fun. Big Thanks to everyone who came out, to the photographers for supplying pictures, and to Colleen Raymond for doing all the eBirding!

**Gerald Romanchuk**

**Nighthawks! July 6, 2017**

Eleven of us took a trip northeast of the city. We checked out a few spots south of Opal and Redwater, then as dusk approached we went over the Vinca Bridge and looked for Nighthawks.

It was pretty birdy up there, 61 species in a little over an hour. Various wetlands produced a nice assortment. We did particularly well on sparrows, including the plain-breasted sparrow sitting up on a dead branch that the lead car sped right past – until Brian Stephens called to identify it as a Lark Sparrow! We turned around, and Sean Evans and John Jaworski got some nice recordings of it singing.



**Lark Sparrow  
Photo by Chris Rees**

After we tore the group away from the sparrow, we headed to areas just south of the Vinca Bridge where the crew doing Nightjar surveys had seen several Common Nighthawks. Shortly after getting out we heard peenting, and then shortly after saw a distant Nighthawk. A little further south, we heard a few more and got better looks.

Thanks to Sean for eBirding.

**Gerald Romanchuk**

### Nisku Prairie, June 24, 2017

Nine people toured the Nisku Prairie Reserve for three hours on a midsummer morning. It was sunny throughout, with temperatures in the low 20s, moderate winds and, on this occasion, no mosquitos!

#### Plant Report

The prairie, a municipal reserve in Leduc County southeast of the Nisku industrial area, was a sea of tall grass, dotted with the white of northern bedstraw, the gold of heart-leaved alexanders, and the blue of slender blue beard-tongue. Highlights of botanical interest were the amount of flowering plains rough fescue (*Festuca hallii*), the iconic grass of unplowed prairies, and the graceful and uncommon Canada ricegrass (*Piptatheropsis canadensis*).



**Heart-leaved Alexander, Photo by Patsy Cotterill (left)  
Slender Beardtongue, Photo by Hubert Taube (right)**

A return journey along the southern boundary in the valley of the Blackmud Creek involved wading through dense stands of introduced reed canarygrass, and creeping meadow foxtail, but the fence line provided the best opportunity to view birds.

A highlight during a short walk through the aspen woods (Nisku is actually an aspen parkland remnant) was a clump of the orchid spotted coralroot (*Corallorhiza maculata*) in flower. The tour also included a look at some of the reclamation plots in a previously disturbed area close to the main gate.



**Spotted Coralroot,  
Photo by Hubert Taube**

#### Birding Report

As soon as we were on site, we could hear birds and see some of them. The Tree Swallows in the nest boxes close to the entrance seemed a bit nervous due to our presence. House Wrens were treating us to their beautiful tunes while we learned from Patsy Cotterill about the colour-

ful and extraordinary native plants that surrounded us.

Someone caught a glimpse of a flying yellow bird and we weren't sure if it was an American Goldfinch or a Yellow Warbler; later we heard both of them and the goldfinch posed for us at the top of a tree.

While we were looking at insects, Colleen Raymond called our attention to some beautiful Le Conte's Sparrows nearby. Some were carrying food, probably for their young.



Although we were busy learning about beautiful native plants and looking for flying and crawling insects, including Painted Lady and White Admiral butterflies, we still heard 27 bird species.

**Le Conte's Sparrow  
Photo by Manna Parseyan**

Compiled by **Hubert Taube**, with contributions from **Manna Parseyan**, **Colleen Raymond**, and **Patsy Cotterill**

### EALT Glory Hills Property Walk, June 18, 2017

Our group of 11 hiked the Edmonton and Area Land Trust's lovely Glory Hills property. We found lots of birds.



**Turkey Vulture  
Photo by Michael May**

We also found butterflies, moths, bees, and bugs.



**Wee Harlequin Bug (left) (*Cosmopepla bimaculata*)  
Photo by Gerald Romanchuk**



**Northern Crescent (right) (*Phyciodes cocyta*)  
Photo by Gerald Romanchuk**

We also found what one of us referred to as tattered ol' ladies. Tattered maybe, but they managed to produce lots of these young ones that we also found along the way.

We found plants to observe and ponder, fences to cross, and nurseries to admire.



**Painted Lady caterpillar (right) (*Vanessa cardui*), Photo by Gerald Romanchuk**



**Heron Nursery, Photo by Gerald Romanchuk**

Thanks so much to everyone who came out, to EALT for conserving the land, and to amazing steward Patty Klak for leading us safely along a beautiful journey.

**Colleen Raymond**

**Rampart Wetland Evening Walk, June 14, 2017**

Storm clouds were threatening, but the birding was fairly good; we got 45 species over the relatively short walk. Nothing crazy, but a nice variety. We did have issues with pointing out where a bird was seen. "It's in that tree." "Which tree?" "THAT tree." "The one with the leaves, it looks like a leaf, a singing leaf!"



Things got even better at the end of the walk when we went over the list. It was quite helpful when I asked how many Ruddy Ducks we saw, and got answers such as 2, 4, 8, and 10 – for the same species!

**Gerald Romanchuk**

**Sean Evans and Brian Stephens Photo by Gerald Romanchuk**

**Century Day at Elk Island National Park, June 10, 2017**

The forecast didn't look good for Saturday – rain, showers, and gusty winds – but 18 keeners showed up bright and early at Elk Island to try to find 100 species.

We started the morning with the usual routine, birded the marsh on the south side of the Yellowhead, crossed over to the Visitor Centre and checked out the barns and sheds nearby, went around the Bison Loop Road, checked a few of the trailheads, took a hike on the Sandhills Trail, and had time for a quick check of the Beaver Pond Trail before lunch.

We found most of the expected species. Small surprises included a pair of Kestrels near the Bison Loop and a Cinnamon Teal beside the parkway.



**Cinnamon Teal Photo by Jo-Anne Castillon**

More surprising might be the misses, such as not finding a Downy Woodpecker or Mourning Warbler. By far the most common fliers were mosquitos. They were thick!

Despite the less than ideal conditions, we saw 80 species before lunch. After

tearing everyone away from the clubhouse we walked around the Astotin Beach area, then drove over to the west side of the lake. Picked up various water birds, terns, gulls, etc., for a total of 94 birds.

Driving out of the west gate and along the west boundary of the park, we saw highly desirable species such as House Sparrow and Rock Pigeon, and also a Vesper Sparrow, Purple Martins, and Mountain Bluebird, for a total of 99. But we got back to Yellowhead stuck at Gretzky. Sean said, "Who quits at 99?" So those of us with some energy left cruised to the east of the park, on the other side of the Chipman Road. We stopped at a little fen and a couple of us heard number 100 – a Nelson's Sharp-tailed Sparrow – sing its hissing song. Also heard, but not seen, were a couple of Sedge Wrens.

We poked around the area a bit more and picked up species that gave a flavour of the southeastern part of the province. Western Meadowlarks were singing and a pair of Loggerhead Shrikes were exchanging food. A pair of Bobolinks were another surprise, and we even saw a Painted Lady butterfly.

We headed back to the park with 108 species in our pockets, and some of us went back into the park to celebrate with a wiener roast (or sausage sizzle if you prefer). A Broad-winged Hawk cruised over as we turned up the parkway, and a Ruffed Grouse was drumming while we got a campfire going.

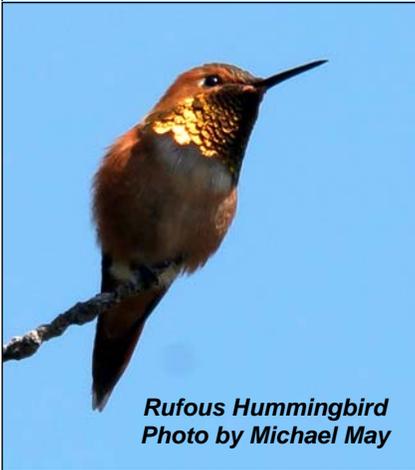
Our total of 110 species may be a Century Day record! Thanks to all the participants for coming out, and to Brian Stephens for eBirding.

**Gerald Romanchuk**

**Hinton, June 3, 2017**

A group of us left Edmonton bright and early and high-tailed it to Hinton to meet up with other ENC members who were staying in the area. We also met Hinton's finest, the Whiskey Jacks (Gray Jays)! Beth MacCallum led us through the Beaver Boardwalk, accompanied by Bob and Linda Morgan, who later in the day would show us around Brule. There were 23 people in total.

This was my first experience at the Beaver Boardwalk, and WOW what a place it is. It comprises 3 kilometres of trails that snake around and over the ponds, as well as through the forest. This excellent habitat supports a dense population of birds. No beavers were present while we were there; their dam recently broke and they went else-



**Rufous Hummingbird**  
Photo by Michael May

where for the time being. We saw a lot of everything else, however. Right from the start of the trail we were surrounded by sparrows and warblers. A Northern Waterthrush could be heard singing very close to us, but it was difficult to locate. Other birds of note were Purple Finch, Rufous Hummingbird, and a family of Gray Jays. It was interesting to note that young Whiskey Jacks are dark gray throughout.

Some local Beaver Trails photographers tipped us off to the presence of a mink that was frequenting the beaver lodge. We saw it swimming through the water and running along the bank.



**American Mink**  
Photo by Michael May

After a few hours along the boardwalk it was time to depart for the next location. But first a group photo!



Photo by Gerald Romanchuk



On to Solomon Ponds, a short distance away. It was still pretty windy, but the birds were out. We saw Cedar Waxwings and various Empids (the easy kinds to identify). There were also a lot of dragonflies and butterflies.

Further down road we turned into the Black Cat Guest Ranch (with permission), where many trails are maintained by the owners. The forest was filled with warblers and flycatchers, but they were silent for the most part, and it took us a long time to figure out that we had a Hammond's Flycatcher instead of a Least Flycatcher. **Photo left by Gerald Romanchuk**

We allowed a few minutes for a stop at Obed. A few Scoters were on the lake, including a White-winged, but no Pacific Loon. (One was seen by people who stayed over the next evening.) Osprey diving for fish put on a pretty good show. It was a nice way to finish up the day before the long drive home.

Thank you once again to Beth MacCallum, and Linda and Bob Morgan for their hospitality! Thanks as well to Brian Stephens for eBirding throughout the day.

**Sean Evans**

**Heritage Hills Wetlands, May 31, 2017**

This was my second trip to the Heritage Hills Wetlands, a trip I would like to do annually. The weather looked a bit ominous earlier in the evening, but it cleared up nicely for our 15 participants. There seemed to be fewer birds this year, and certainly there were fewer beavers, but nonetheless it is always an interesting place to go for a walk.



The wetlands is made up of a natural marsh with constructed bodies of water on each end. The constructed ponds have grebes, loons, and mergansers during migration, and the natural ponds have a variety of ducks. The marsh is also THE place to be if you are a Red-winged Blackbird. A lot of them are there, along with Common Grackles. American White Pelicans are probably what people notice most while walking the trails. Over 30 of them at a time can be seen feeding in a ring.

So what did we see that evening? A lot of nesting ducks hidden all around the cattails, some with ducklings; many Purple Martins in boxes along the



marsh; and at least five nesting pairs of Red-necked Grebes – the pair in the picture gets the best nest award.

We had some unusual birds as well. I had heard a Virginia Rail at the marsh a few weeks earlier, and it was still around. Ted got the best photo of it. Don't feel bad if you don't spot it. Most of the group were unable to catch a glimpse of the master of stealth.

The rail was a hard target. It would call briefly, go silent for 2 or 3 minutes, then peep or grunt just enough to give people a glimmer of hope that it might emerge into the open. It did eventually poke its head out, but not for long. Amazing how it could walk through the cattails without making any noise and sneak right past us!



It was time to move on, unfortunately, and the purists were left with a dilemma. Does one check off a lifer Virginia Rail that was heard clearly for 30 minutes, or do you really need to see one to count it?

We ended up with 40 species. No American Bittern this year, but the Virginia Rail more than makes up for that.

Sean Evans

*All photos by Ted Hogg*

**Islet Lake, May 28, 2017**

It was a perfect day for 7 lucky birders (myself included) as we headed out to Islet Lake. I was hoping we would see (or hear) some warblers, thrushes, and flycatchers and we did pretty well in all categories. For those who are not familiar with the area, a large network of cross-country ski trails extends from the southern border of Elk Island National Park through a nicely treed area with lots of ponds. There are parking lots at the southern, western, and northern borders of the recreation area; the northern part is called the Blackfoot Staging Area.

When we arrived at the parking area, it did not take long to find the first target bird – this handsome Great Crested Flycatcher!

We chose to skip Islet Lake entirely and focus on the treed paths where we were more likely to find warblers and thrushes. We started up “Middle Trail” and headed east to loop around Elk Push Lake. This was a 6.8 km walk, but the area covered was insignificant compared to the overall footprint of the trail system. We could hear robins, Hermit and Swanson's Thrushes, and even got a look at a Veery.



*Great Crested Flycatcher  
Photo by Michael May*

The trails also have a lot of butterflies and dragonflies, including this Anise Swallowtail:

We saw an Ovenbird and a few Back-and-white Warblers (and heard many of each species).

We also tracked down a Philadelphia Vireo. They sound very similar to a Red-eyed Vireo, to me at least, but they sing a bit slower, and pause longer between each of the 4-phrase “question and answer” sequence. The Philadelphia Vireo has a shorter, thicker bill, a yellow-washed chest, and a thicker dark area on the crown compared to a Red-eyed Vireo.



*Anise Swallowtail  
Photo by Colleen Raymond*



*Philadelphia Vireo, Photo by Sean Evans*



*Cape May Warbler, Photo by Sean Evans*

In addition, we picked up an Eastern Kingbird and Western Wood Pewee and songbirds, including Baltimore Oriole, Purple Finch, and Rose-breasted Grosbeak. Colleen and Gerald heard a promising song from the few spruce trees in the parking lot and found a Cape May Warbler! We got nice looks at the bird, and some of us picked up an unexpected lifer!

In all, we saw 5 butterfly and moth species and 48 bird species – a reasonable outing!

Sean Evans

**Darwell, May 27, 2017**

Twelve of us gathered for another trip to Lu Carbyn's property near Darwell. We saw a lot of birds in the restaurant parking lot, including Eastern Phoebe, but no Ruby-throated Hummingbirds at the neighboring property this time.

We proceeded along the road towards Lu's land, (Kumakams) but stopped first at the Sturgeon River Crossing to survey the wetlands. We saw a large variety of ducks and 3 species of swallows but missed the Kingfisher seen the previous weekend. On the walk into the neighbouring property we got a great look at a Pileated Woodpecker and an American Redstart, as well as many Baltimore Orioles and Rose-breasted Grosbeaks.



Along the walk we were scolded by White-throated Sparrows, probably trying to push us along the path away from their nest. We saw a very well camouflaged Least Flycatcher nest in the trees, as well as a pair of Sapsuckers with their freshly excavated cavity.

Later on in the walk we heard an Alder Flycatcher calling from beyond a pond, as well as a Gray Catbird. Both were new for the year in the area. It was not all about the birds, of course; we saw a variety of dragonflies and flowers and heard a Boreal Toad near the end of the day!

Thank you to Lu Carbyn for leading the trip and to Brian Stephens for the eBird tracking.

Sean Evans



*Least Flycatcher nest and Marsh Marigold,  
Photos by Jana Sneep*



*"Kumakams" Lu Carbyn's property near Darwell  
Photo by Toby-Anne Reimer*

**Darwell, May 21, 2017**

Ten birders turned out for the third ENC trip to Lu Carbyn's property northwest of Darwell near the provincial natural reserve known as the Lily Lake Natural Area. Weather cooperated, and so did the birds. We stopped first at the Sturgeon River Crossing, where we encountered, among more common birds, pelicans, cormorants, and a kingfisher.

Our next stop was at a farm owned by John Reynolds, who kindly gave us permission to walk through his back yard (in close proximity to chickens, goats, and horses). The area was also rich in birdlife, and we encountered 22 species before moving on to the property Lu calls Kumakams, meaning a "place with lots of water" in the Nama language from Namibia.

We were fortunate to have Jordan Lange along, as she studied amphibians last summer for the University of Alberta's EMEND project. It was fascinating to identify the various stages in the life histories of Wood and Chorus Frogs along our hiking trails. Ever try to identify day-old tadpoles? We did it!

Most of the trails on the property suffered from high spring run-off. A breach in a 5-foot-high beaver dam had caused massive flooding of the road leading to the centre of the quarter section. Other sections of secondary trails, normally dry, also were flooded, and rubber boots were required to navigate the wet spots.

In a three-hour leisurely hike we encountered 47 species, fewer than on previous trips. We missed seeing Swamp Sparrows, Mourning Warblers, Alder Flycatcher, Northern Water Thrush, Gray Catbird, two species of vireos, two species of thrushes, and some of the birds of prey we usually can count on. Nevertheless, we were happy with the results.

Lu Carbyn and Toby-Anne Reimer

**Beaumaris Lake, May 17, 2017**

On a chilly Wednesday morning, sixteen eager birders showed up for the walk around Beaumaris Lake. We could hear Red-necked Grebes and Red-winged Blackbirds before we even started, and it didn't take long for the Red-breasted Nuthatches and warblers to wake up. A Black-Crowned Night Heron flew in along the shoreline, right in front of the group, and landed in nearby reeds.



*Red-winged Blackbird*

Just around the corner, a Rose-breasted Grosbeak was feeding high up in the canopy. Soon after that we saw a second Grosbeak, and a nesting Merlin watched the group pass by.

Swanson's Thrushes seem to have dropped in recently, and we had nice looks at them. Brian Stephens heard a Blackpoll Warbler, and it stayed put long enough for all of us to see it. Deb Paterson pointed out a good-looking bird on the trail that turned out to be a Palm Warbler, a lifer for her.

It was a fun morning that even included a MacDonald's coffee stop halfway around the lake. Thanks to Brian Stephens for keeping count of the 33 species seen during the trip. (More photos on next page.)

Ted and Donna McKen



*Black-crowned Night Heron*



*Merlin*

*All photos by Ann Carter*



*Whimbrel*

**Migratory Bird Day, May 13, 2017**

On International Migratory Bird Day, twelve of us donned our most colourful rain gear to explore a few areas around Onoway. The first stop was Sunrise Gardens, a little veggie growing operation that backs on to some old forest. We went for a 3 km walk through the woods. The trail was flooded in some areas, but I received no complaints. Tough birders only on my trips.

The woods abounded with Ruby-crowned Kinglets, Yellow-rumped Warblers, and Purple Finches. When we came to the Sturgeon River, a few of the group got a look at a peregrine flying by. At one point, the forest was alive with alarm calls. While half the group went to investigate, Sean Evans spotted a Western Tanager directly above us. Everyone got a look at that bird, but the source of the alarm was never found. We also startled a moose that was lounging near the path.

Leaving the farm, the group had stopped to view some Ring-necked Ducks and an Eastern Phoebe when Sean spotted a few nearly invisible tiny shorebirds at a puddle in the field – Least Sandpipers, a nice surprise! Further on down the road, Gerald used his amazing sense of smell to find a Le Conte’s Sparrow buzzing in the grass.

At Imrie Park it was raining a little harder, and the one usually dry path was partly flooded. We stopped at the blind and scoped out grebes and loons. A flutter of swallows was flying over the water; 95% were Tree Swallows, with the occasional Barn, Cliff, and Bank Swallow in the distant group.



*Blind birding, Photo by Ann Carter*

At Hasse Lake we had close views of more loons and grebes, as well as terns. We scoped Gull Island for rarities, with no luck.

In addition to birds, we found blooming Colt’s Foot, Woodland Violets, and Marsh Marigolds.

**Emily Gorda**

**Shorebird Sunday, May 14, 2017**

It was a beautiful day to get out in the country if you like cold, wind, rain, and mud. Especially mud! But the shorebirds were great. We toured around east of Mundare Beach, out to Vegreville, then down to Kingman, saw 22 species, and missed a few easy ones.

Highlights were largish flocks of American Golden Plovers east of Mundare Beach and at least 70 sharp-looking plovers on one field. After I sent a few friends to look for the plovers, they returned the favour and found a Whimbrel for me. We saw a couple of White-rumped Sandpipers – some years I’m lucky to see one – and a large flock of Long-billed Dowitchers down by Kingman with a few Short-bills mixed in.

**Gerald Romanchuk**

*Photos by Gerald Romanchuk*



*American Golden Plover*

**Lois Hole Centennial Provincial Park, John E. Poole Wetland,  
and Grey Nuns White Spruce Park, May 7, 2017**

Fourteen club members and a couple from New Brunswick (Dave and Bonnie) joined us for some real cool birding around Big Lake! That is, it was about 7 °C (down from 25 °C yesterday) with a cold wind!

We heard sparrows calling before we left the parking lot. After catching glimpses of them, we headed off to the John E. Poole Wetland boardwalk. We saw an adult Osprey with a young one in the nest on the big tower. Red-winged Blackbirds were singing their territorial song and Mallards, Canada Geese, and Snipe (doing its diving display) showed up. We even had a fly-by of Avocets! As we approached the viewing platform past the end of the boardwalk we saw 6 Surf Scoters on the lake. From the viewing platform we saw Tree, Bank, and Barn Swallows and Yellow-headed Blackbirds. Ducks on the water included Blue-winged Teal, Shoveller, Canvasback, Red-head, and Scaup. We also saw Cormorants, a flying Great Blue Heron, and Franklin's and Bonaparte's Gulls.

At Grey Nuns White Spruce Park the tree cover was a welcome relief from the wind, but water was a problem. Brian Stephens and Steve Knight (with assistance from makeshift bridges) led us on trails that kept us out of the water (see below). At the northeast corner edge of the woodlot we spotted a Forster's Tern – the New Brunswick folks helped confirm that ID. We looped around and came out on the road-way. Gerald Romanchuk got us on a Black-and-white Warbler, then Dawne Colwell saw an Orange-crowned Warbler and Brian Stephens found the Kinglets. Despite the cool weather, we got some great birds and had a good time.

Thanks to Sean Evans for organizing the event, Brian Stephens for eBirding, Tony Sneep for help packing the ENC scope, Brian and Steve for guiding us through the spruce lot trail system, and everyone else who showed up and provided birding expertise for my first ENC trip leader event!

**Karen Lindsay**



**Tree Swallow  
Photo by  
Karen Lindsay**



**Tony Sneep and Steve Knight bushwacking  
Photo by Manna Parseyan**

**Central Alberta, April 29, 2017**

After a stretch of cold, snowy weather, at least 18 people were eager to get out of town and head southeast toward the migration flyway. Participants were advised that as the leaders would be watching the road, the map, and the clock, everyone else was to watch for birds. We started with waterfowl and raptors at the mostly frozen Coal Lake. The thawed edges, plus the various meltwater ponds around Bittern Lake and on to Camrose, yielded all the usual ducks in beautiful breeding plumage. Loons and Red-necked Grebes provided the soundtrack at the lakes we visited, and Red-breasted Mergansers were unusually prominent. Someone in Ted McKen's car found us a Cinnamon Teal, and his group also saw a Pied-billed Grebe.



**Bittern Lake, Photo by Janice Hurlburt**



**Cinnamon Teal, Photo by Ian Rodgers**

Kestrels were numerous throughout the day, frustrating the photographers. Rough-legged, Swainson's, and Red-tailed Hawks adorned dozens of roadside perches while Harriers brushed the landscape. An insomniac Great-horned Owl perched in plain view.

Sunshine was warming the stubble fields and the possibility that it would generate thermals for cranes impelled us to dash to the east before they disappeared into the prairie sky. Luckily, the cranes found us, and there was a convenient field access for viewing them.

Cranes were visible across the sky, each flock comprising perhaps a thousand birds. Right above us the low-altitude flocks swirled together and their rolling cries filled our ears as they gained altitude and continued on as tiny specks moving north. The folks from Ontario (Ian and Barb) were suitably impressed.



**Sandhill Cranes, Photo by Ian Rodgers**

After “craning” their necks, folks were starting to think about lunch, so we motored toward Big Knife Provincial Park, seeing raptors throughout the Battle River scablands. We added sparrows, swallows, blue-birds, and meadowlarks to the list. The park is a nice spot for lunch but quite birdless on that day except for Eastern Phoebe, possibly attributable to the recent snowy weather and the Cooper’s Hawk that Chris Rees saw. Mammals sheltered in the thickets.



**Porcupine, Photo by Chris Rees**

Our short walk in the park ended in a dash back to the vehicles as the weather turned. This was in our favour, as the cranes remained on the ground, choosing not to fly in howling wind, lightening, and snow-hail! They did, however, slowly walk away over the closest hills.

As we had now “seen all the birds” and the leaders had never been to the Paintearth Coulee Natural Area, we easily convinced the group to humour us by going to look at plants and erosional landscape that wouldn’t be flying or walking away.



**Prairie Crocus, Photo by Manna Parseyan**

Some folks really got into it! For those asking, two kinds of cactus are native to Alberta, both Prickly Pear. This is likely *opuntia fragilis*. Fragile Prickly Pear is typically found farther north and with smaller paddles than *opuntia polyacantha*. Thanks to the Native Plant Group for this information.



**Prickly Pear Cactus, Photo by Ann Carter**

The birders’ reward was Say’s Phoebe. We also spent some time on a mystery bird. After a plethora of suggestions we ruled out pelican (which was clearly a good call when we later saw a pelican) and settled on flicker. Not everyone was convinced.

**Say’s Phoebe, Photo by Janice Hurlburt**



Rochon Sands Provincial Park was our final stop.. The sky cleared and we marvelled at the size of a pelican, the “hairdo” of a Red-breasted Merganser, and the exotic daintiness of a pair of Black-necked Stilts. A Willet flew in to bring our species total to 83.

**Pelicans are big! Photo by Manna Parseyan**



**Merganser finery, Photo by Ann Carter**



**Black-necked Stilts, Photo by Ian Rodgers**



Thanks to Martin Sharp for suggesting the tour and some locations. Thanks to all for finding and identifying birds for us and working together as a group. What a cheerful bunch! A special thank-you to Emily for keeping the eBird lists and counting all those cranes! The number was easily in the range of 12 to 15 thousand.

**Ann Carter and John Jaworski**

## Nature Appreciation Weekend, 2017

The weather was mostly perfect for our annual nature appreciation weekend, August 18–20, and it was fun to have some families with children come out to enjoy it! Group Site 7 gave us an impressive amount of room and great facilities for the forty individuals who joined us in camping or travelled out for the day.

As usual, Miquelon Provincial Park provided interesting specimens in many forms. We noted wildflower blossoms, dangling spiders, and fast-moving butterflies. The youngsters spent quite a bit of time with tiny wood frogs. Some of our members attended a public program, provided by the park, on identifying and tasting fruiting shrubs.

Of particular interest to the adults on our nature walk was this odd-looking fungi – an “earthstar,” believed to be *Geastrum quadrifidum*. The outside layer of this mushroom splits to form star-like rays and expose a circular spore case. The rays arch downward as they mature, lifting the inner spore sac upward. The spore case becomes brown and powdery as it ages and has a narrow opening at the top from which mature spores escape to be spread by air currents.

The birders were quite happy with the species list. The Saturday morning bird walk produced great views of Marbled Godwit and Baird’s Sandpiper. Everyone was pretty excited when Gerald Romanchuk picked out a Piping Plover that blended almost completely into the shoreline landscape. The club scope was put to good use once always-helpful Steve Knight assisted leader Janos Kovacs with the set-up. At our campsite, a Sharp-shinned Hawk hunted Cedar Waxwings, a juvenile Bald Eagle soared low, and small groups of pelicans passed overhead. Sunday birding highlights included a Northern Waterthrush. At the end of the walk, after most folks had moved on, Emily Gorda, assisted by a mob of chickadees, found a sleepy Northern Saw-whet Owl sheltering in an aspen near the park’s visitor centre.

The sausage sizzle showcased different techniques of campfire cooking; there was the “slow-cook in tinfoil” at the far edge of the grill, the ever-popular “wurst on a stick” carefully rotated over the flames, and the less successful “just throw it on the fire.” Thanks to the ladies who provided yummy cookies and squares, eliminating the need to cook desert!

The presentation on bumblebees shared information about the

life of these bees and identification of local species. Folks were encouraged to head out into the field to capture some specimens. After Gerald Romanchuk’s method of swiping crazily with a butterfly net yielded one very annoyed bee, it was demonstrated that you can easily put a small, hand-held, clear container over a bumble bee that’s working a blossom. (This method is not recommended for other bees!) We were able to capture and identify Tri-colored and Half-black Bumble Bees before quickly releasing them back to their blossom of choice. It was cool to also find a few Yellow-banded Bumble Bees, which are now quite rare in the Edmonton area. Watch for more about bumble bees in a future issue of *The Parkland Naturalist*. Both kids and adults were quite



*Earthstar fungi, Photo by Emily Gorda*



*Checking Bumble Bee chart, Photo by Gerald Romanchuk*

enthusiastic about the bug walk, checking out dragonflies, butterflies, and damselflies along with the bees.

Thanks to Gerald Romanchuk for facilitating the event, and to everyone who came out to participate. It's your enthusiasm that makes the weekend great fun!

**Ann Carter**



*Yellow-banded Bumble Bee,*  
*Photo by Steve Knight*



*Janos Kovacs (l) and Steve Knight (r),*  
*Photo by Gerald Romanchuk*



*Northern Saw-whet Owl,*  
*Photo by Karen Lindsay*



*Marbled Godwit, Photo by Sean Evans*

## The Life of a Robin

The week before Easter, around April 10, the robins were back in our yard. The male was singing, I assumed to set up a territory. Over the next two weeks the robins checked out spots in the yard for possible nesting sites. For two years in a row they have nested in the yard, both times in an evergreen. The first year the nest was unsuccessful; I think the female was immature. The second year the nest was in the same tree and the young were hatched, but a crow pulled down the nest and destroyed them. This spring the female was more particular about her site. She chose the top of a speaker on our deck, under the overhang of the roof, a space with barely enough room for a nest.

During the better part of a week the robins tripped back and forth with twigs, string, and a chunk of plastic bag to set up the foundation. They collected mud from the garden and the female plucked grass to line the nest. With mud on their feet and in their bills they made quite a mess on the deck rail, not to mention the debris on the deck under the speaker. Even the bird bath was muddy! The finished nest was a cup-shaped structure about 14–16 cm in diameter and narrower on the top. Robins' nests typically weigh about 200 grams.

Once the nest was constructed the female disappeared for a few days, then she reappeared and laid her eggs. We could not see inside the nest, as there was no room to look in between the nest and the roof. This was around the last week of April.



Robin's eggs are the typical robin's egg blue, a colour that is a named shade. This colour occurs because ruptured blood cells release hemoglobin that is transformed into bile pigments that are carried via the blood to the eggshell as it is being formed. Robins usually lay three or four eggs, but sometimes five.

By May 17 the robins were feeding the young. You could not see their heads or hear them, but mom and dad came frequently with food. Newly hatched robins weigh about 5 grams. The hatchlings instinctively know when to stay still in the nest, when to pop up and beg to be fed, and to poop as soon as they swallow food.

By the May 23 you could see four chicks sticking up their heads when food was brought in. The first time we saw them, they had a bit of down on their heads and backs but were mostly naked, with transparent skin – typical altricial young that are born immobile and unable to feed themselves. Within a few days they were starting to get downy feathers on their backs and heads.

The female brought most of the food. She was distinguished by her lighter breast colouration and the brood patch on her belly (an area where the feathers are thinner). The brood patches help females keep the eggs warm enough to develop. Feathers usually insulate birds, but during brooding they need to transfer heat to the eggs.



The loss of some feathers to expose skin enables the female to warm the eggs while still keeping her temperature regulated. She became accustomed to us coming and going and would fly in without concern. Her trips were frequent, so I don't think she travelled too far, but she returned with many caterpillars, worms, and bugs in her beak each and every time.

The male, however, was not the best of providers. He was too "chicken" to come in when we were in the yard but instead sat on the fence or trellis. If mom came in to the nest he would also, but he left immediately because there wasn't room for both parents. Sometimes he didn't come in at all and ate the worm himself, and he usually brought only one or two worms! Robins usually regurgitate food for their young during the first four or five days, then the

young start eating parts of worms or caterpillars broken off by the parents.

For the next two days a crow kept trying to get at the nest, but with us scaring it off and the limited amount of space available for it to maneuver in, it was not successful in its attempts to remove the nestlings.

When the chicks first hatched, the female ate their fecal sacs. After a few days she ate one or two and then removed the others. A fecal sac is the membrane that holds young birds' waste. Initially, the food consumed by nestlings is not completely digested, so eating the sacs provides additional nutrition for the female. As the young grow, the fecal material becomes more toxic and the parents remove the sacs whenever they bring food and take them away from the nest, keeping it clean and lessening insect infestation. After a parent fed them and reached into the nest to retrieve the fecal sacs, the chicks obviously had a good gastro-colic reflex. As they grew and began flapping their wings, they could lift their little bodies over the edge of the nest. When a parent came to feed it, after a few moments a chick would raise its tail, wiggle its butt, and the parent would pluck off the fecal sac and fly away. Initially the female was stimulating the young birds to release fecal sacs, but as they grew this reflex became automatic. At this point the parents sometimes missed catching the sacs, and they fell onto the deck!



By May 25 the young were flapping their wings, which were now slightly feathered with some pin feathers starting to show. On May 26 the feathering was becoming more distinct: their heads were smoother black with a few tufts of down, throats were showing black and white streaking, upper breasts were spotted black on red, and lower breasts were light red. They were exercising their wings most of the day. Three chicks were obviously more mature and larger than the fourth. After the crow came calling, the parents began to fly at us when we were on the deck. They flew mostly at Hil, probably because his height brought him closer to the nest. Mom settled down

after a day or so, realizing we were not going to harm her young.



By May 28 the chicks were preening their wings and breast feathers. Practice makes perfect, and they took turns climbing on top of their siblings to flap and exercise their wings. With space at a premium, they kept banging against the eave soffit. Mom and dad had very little room to bring in food.

By May 29 the chicks were quite vocal and began peeping when parents approached the nest. They were moving outside of the nest edge during exercise class.

On Tuesday, May 30 – free at last! The first chick got one leg outside the nest and could not figure out how to get back in, so decided to go for it. At about 11:30 the maiden voyage took place, ending on the grass about 4 metres from the nest. Number 2 left an hour later, but managed only to fall/fly to the deck about 1.5 metres from the nest. It proceeded to walk, albeit wobbly, to the edge and flutter to the grass. Number 3 left very quickly after number 2 and flew all the way to the back garden tree.



Bird 4, the runt, did not get up the courage to leave for about another hour. I was in the kitchen and heard a thump and thud, and when I opened the door it was on

the jamb between the two doors. It was considerably smaller and its feathers were not quite so developed. I moved it to the back garden with its siblings, where it stood on the retaining wall peeping for half an hour until the mom came to feed it.

A few days earlier we had commented that it would be nice to see them take flight while we were around. As luck would have it, we were having coffee and lunch on the deck on that Tuesday afternoon!

On June 1 and 2 the fourth chick stayed close by and was still being fed by mom. Two siblings were nearby in the yard being fed by dad. The third bird ran to the neighbours' yard and we have not seen it again. The young were flying into low branches and hopping up to higher branches but not travelling very far. Apparently it takes 10 to 15 days for robin fledglings to become capable fliers.

On June 3 the parents were still feeding two birds in the yard. By June 10 two young birds remained nearby under a drooping cherry tree. The parents were feeding the smaller bird, but the larger young had started to collect things for itself and was being feed occasionally. The birds were much bigger, with less spotting on their breasts; their tails were longer and wings almost fully developed. We have not seen the young in the bird bath yet, but the parents frequent it daily for drinking and bathing.

From June 12 to 18 two of the young robins were still coming to the yard to look for food and bathe and drink in the bird bath. Both parents were still around as well, but not tending the young. The male robin was singing and courting the female, so I thought they might build another nest.

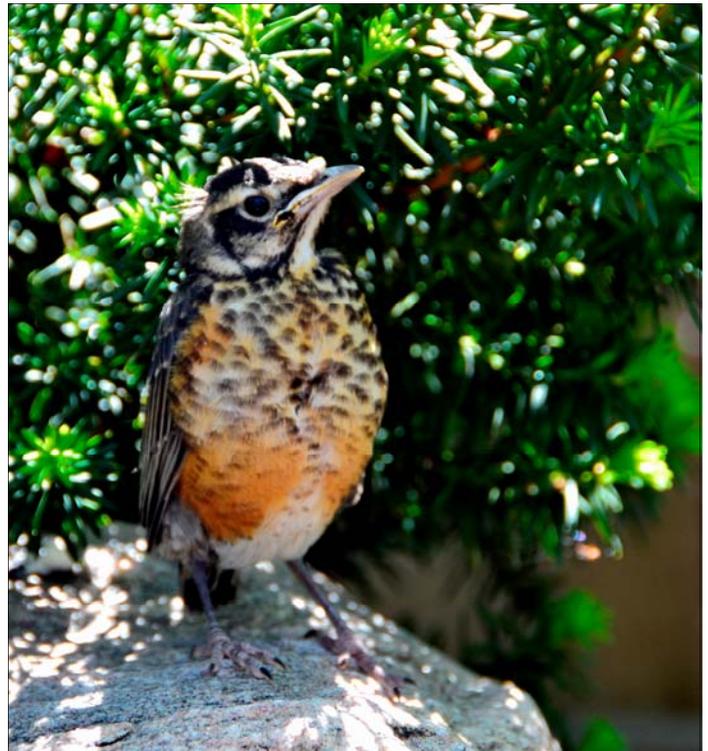
About 25% of young robins die in the first year of life, but if they survive they often live 5 to 6 years. Their major predators are jays, crows, and squirrels, who eat eggs and early nestlings. Robins do not mate for life but stay together for the breeding season and often have two or sometimes three broods. The later broods are usually smaller, often with only two young. At the end of the summer most robins migrate to the southern United States. They often gather in groups and can fly 30 to 35 miles per hour and up to 100 miles or more a day. Like most migratory birds, they migrate because their food source becomes limited. We do, however, find robins in Edmonton in the winter, as documented in the Christmas Bird Count (CBC). These robins usually switch to a diet of berries and any other food they can find. In early spring the migrating males usually arrive first. Year-old robins can mate; they begin to set up territories and will lay eggs as soon as food supplies are sufficient.

This was an interesting and close observation of one of our common birds, especially since they were so visible. From hatching to flight out of the nest took just over two weeks. The young are like most babies – they eat, poop, and sleep, and they grow quickly. The amount of food they eat in a day is phenomenal. One study estimated that a baby robin will consume 14 feet of worms in its two-week nest life, and worms are not the only thing they eat! The American Robin (*Turdus migratorius*) is one of the most adaptable of North American birds.

Marg Reine



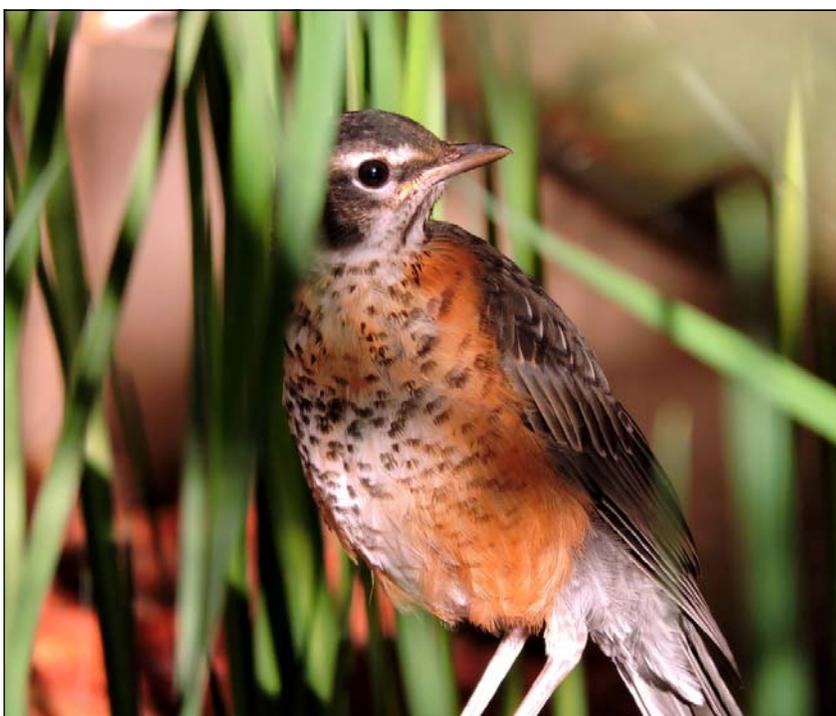
*Three days after fledging*



*The second robin to fledge*



*“The Runt,” last of the chicks to leave the nest.*



*After two weeks, one young robin (left) was still in the back yard.*

*Robin nest*



## Cambridge Bay Photos



*Long-tailed Jaeger (top), Parasitic Jaeger (bottom), Photos by Alan Hingston*