

# THE PARKLAND NATURALIST

JANUARY-APRIL 2020



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*Tolman Bridge East Campground, Red Deer River Valley, photo by Patsy Cotterill (above)  
Field trip to Riverlot 56 Natural Area, photo by Hubert Taube (below)*



## “Optimizing Parks”? Euphemism of the Year?

*“Parks are essential to the quality of life that Albertans enjoy. They conserve our natural landscapes, protect wildlife habitat and offer a broad range of outdoor recreational and nature-based tourism opportunities.”* Alberta Government: South Saskatchewan Regional Plan

*“Divestment....reduction of some kind of asset for financial, ethical or political objectives...or sale of an existing business by a firm...the opposite of an investment.”*  
<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Divestment>

“Optimizing Alberta Parks,” they call it. One has to wonder what good the general public, municipalities, the camping and recreation industry, the tourism industry, the off-highway motor vehicle fraternity, stewardship organizations, and of course the hiking and naturalist communities are finding in the provincial government’s recent move to cut back on the Parks system. It is closing 20 parks in whole or in part and proposing to remove from the parks system 164 recreational sites, affecting a total area of 16,037 hectares. Alberta Parks’ own website describes the benefits to human health of access to the outdoors and nature. With the population of Alberta steadily growing, does it make sense to reduce access to green space to realize the insignificant savings of an estimated \$5 million? Not to mention considering the role parks play in protecting biodiversity and mitigating climate change.

### Change without Consultation

Some of the public anger at this announcement derives from the speed with which this mandate has come down, without prior consultation or clear rationale for the selection of cuts and closures. Despite the existence of a provincial stewardship program, supposedly to support conservation and assist stewards, none of the stewards of the natural areas affected were given the courtesy of being informed of impending changes. This includes stewards of well-known and much-loved Natural Areas such as J. J. Collett near Lacombe, Riverlot 56 in St. Albert, and Sherwood Park. Perhaps the government assumes, possibly correctly, that the stewards will accept a greater burden of responsibility for management; yet failure to consult them hardly sends a message that their stewardship is appreciated. Presumably Parks’ administration made recommendations for the changes, but one wonders whether the Minister has any clear idea of what the impacts of the cuts will be. With a paranoid focus on reducing the defi-

cit at any cost, is the government in danger of knowing the price of everything and the value of nothing?

### A Popularity Contest

The government’s rationale is that many of these sites are underused. This may be true of some but it is not true of all. Looking down the list, available on the Alberta Parks website, names like Highwood, Sibbald Lake, Gooseberry Lake, Twin Lakes (near Crimson Lake Provincial Park) and Park Lake jump out as places that are popular, not to mention Rochon Sands Provincial Park, and Buffalo Lake and Tillebrook Provincial Recreation Areas (PRAs). Waiparous Creek is notorious for its popularity! Some sites indeed are important as strategic stops *en route* to somewhere else. Take the Tolman Bridge campgrounds, for instance, which provide convenient access to Dry Island Buffalo Jump Provincial Park (day use only) and have their own beautiful badlands setting. I can’t count how many times I have stopped at the tiny roadside Maycroft PRA on the long trip down to Waterton and the southwest, a break that many other motorists also take, sometimes staying to do a little fishing. Likewise with Oldman River PRA near Fort McLeod, and Nojack PRA on Highway 16 on the way to Jasper National Park. (This has been an invariable stop for me on the journey to Whitehorse Wildland Park; a place to eat lunch and wander restfully in a lush lodgepole pine forest harbouring spotted coralroot orchids, clubmosses, and a rare member of the buttercup family, goldthread. (One comforting thought is that the flora will flourish without me!) Indeed, the clusters of delisted campgrounds along major highways through the foothills is particularly troubling. Will this place more of a recreational burden on the national parks already at capacity with out-of-province visitors? I shall particularly feel the impact of loss or changes to sites along Highways 11 from Rocky Mountain House, and 47, southwest of Edson, already impacted by previous closures.

### Under New Management?

According to the government website “Optimizing Parks,” some 20 sites, including provincial parks, visitor centres, and PRAs, covering some 4,432 hectares, are to be closed or partly closed (i.e., open to the public but unserved). (Okay, are you imagining what an open, but unserved park could soon look like!?). A further 164 sites, mainly PRAs, occupying 11,605 hectares and repre-

### On the Cover:

**Dry Island Buffalo Jump Provincial Park, photo by Patsy Cotterill**

senting 0.3% of the current parks system, are to be removed from the parks system (or divested), and will be available for “partnerships or alternative management approaches.” I interpret this to mean that the 20 sites in the closure/partial closure category will remain in the parks system and, although the government gives no indication of this, as such their re-opening and/or return to full servicing could conceivably await happier times. A different future is envisaged for the 164 divested sites.

With respect to them, one assumes much will depend on whether there are municipalities, companies, organizations, or even individuals willing to take on (or in some cases continue) responsibility for managing and operating them, and whether they will do a good job. The website provides a clue as to what the government has in mind for them:

“Where a site is removed from the Alberta Parks system, a community can benefit from divested sites by maintaining it for recreation and tourism opportunities. Sites removed from the parks system allow a greater range of uses that were previously not possible under government regulation. Successful transfer to a third party will enable these sites to continue to be part of the community while generating new economic opportunities.”

With respect to the “alternative management approaches” that do not involve community takeover, it states: “Sites removed from the parks system would have their legal park designations removed, and could be open for alternate management approaches....Some of the sites could also stay open under a public lands management model or revert back to vacant public land.”

The government is currently advertising for partnerships on its website. If it hands over all responsibility to a municipality or organization, can that be considered a partnership? Will it be willing to be a real partner for some of the sites, that is, provide some funding for management and perhaps retain original government infrastructure, regulations and oversight? Uncertainty is the order of the day. Is it not irresponsible of the government to announce these closures as a *fait accompli* without first negotiating adequate management alternatives, especially when its own Parks administration recognizes the recreational pressures that already exist on Crown land and can be expected to increase?

Some municipalities may be willing to take on this responsibility, but for others, including organizations and groups, finding funding would be an obvious problem. The chances seem high that commercialization of these natural spaces will take place in order to assure their continued existence. This in turn may be followed by degradation and devaluation of the sites with a loss to both

conservation and the outdoors experience for visitors.

### Alternatives to the Parks System (Public Land)

What alternative recreational opportunities exist for Albertans that might fill the gap? I checked out the system of recreational areas maintained by the Alberta Conservation Association (ACA). In conjunction with Ducks Unlimited, the ACA owns and/or operates over 750 conservation sites covering 123,667 hectares in the province. These cater to hunting, fishing and hiking interests, and operating funds are generated from hunting and fishing licenses. Various partners (including Alberta Parks) make financial investments. However, almost all sites are day-use only, to reduce costs, and on-the-ground maintenance is done by ACA staff.

*“One of the core goals of Alberta’s Parks system is to preserve, in perpetuity, a network of areas that represents the natural diversity of the province.”*

### Conservation Values

As naturalists, our concerns focus on conservation, personal access, and achieving a healthy, nature-literate populace who will champion conservation and biodiversity. The government website opines that conservation values will not be affected by the changes. But again, likely much depends on how sites will be managed in the future. If parks and PRAs are left without human access, and not sold off for development, agriculture, industry, acreages, etc., nor impacted by vandalism, then the natural communities they contain may benefit. Yet access for nature-based recreation will undoubtedly suffer. Living in the White (settled) Area, I have relied on protected areas throughout the province to become familiar with Alberta’s flora. The same is true for birders. Admittedly, and fortunately, land trust properties, which have steadily grown in recent years, make an important contribution both to conservation and to access. The Nature Conservancy of Canada maintains 451,630 hectares of protected land in Alberta, of which a significant proportion is open to the public. Close to home, the Edmonton and Area Land Trust maintains about 908 hectares in nearly a dozen sites, most accessible by trails. Again, the facilities are day-use only.

### Where to Go for Camping and Off-roading?

Presumably the cuts will be felt most deeply by campers, and by all-terrain vehicle users, whose sense of entitlement to recreate on Crown land is strongly entrenched. Random camping is likely to become more common, although it is not likely to be as harmful as the wrath

vented by displaced ATV users. I dread to think where all those who frequent North Bruderheim PRA, an ecologically sacrificed area, will go to practice their sport if it is no longer available. Nearby Redwater Natural Area, previously sacrificed to motorized vehicles, has reached the point of saturation. Northwest of Bruderheim Natural Area, another sandhill reserve of which the ENC's Hubert Taube is a long-time steward, is also to be "closed." It already has some ATV abuse. Will that worsen to the point of total area destruction under a bigger onslaught of ATVs?

### **Entrepreneurial Opportunities?**

I do, however, believe that privatization of recreational opportunities can help alleviate the situation to some extent for campers and off-roaders. Privatization not of Crown land but, rather, repurposing of private properties through entrepreneurial schemes. Land owners would need to provide some facilities in the way of natural features, landscaping, afforestation, facilities, etc., but such investment should not necessarily be greater than in agriculture generally. Indeed, this could be a long-term strategy for the government in the light of growing populations: provide incentives for the restoration of private land that is to be used for recreation. I might also add that I am not against the government's move to raise camping fees. If people can afford RVs, or even the vehicle in which to carry their tenting gear, then surely they can afford a moderate increase in user fees.

Just to determine how the government's "optimization" program might align with the province's Regional Plans, I took a look at the three regional land-use plans for which information is available online. I also wanted to see whether newly established parks and recreation areas implemented or proposed in these plans might mitigate currently proposed losses. The Lower Athabasca Regional Plan, effective September 2012, records five newly created parks, one conservation area, nine PRAs, and five public land use areas (a new category designed for recreation and tourism), representing 16% of the land base as protected Crown land. These areas will be beneficial for biodiversity targets; however, in this sparsely populated region, they will not particularly serve recreationists from central and southern Alberta. The South Saskatchewan Regional Plan, completed September 2014, reports a number of new or expanded conservation sites in various categories (i.e., Wildland Provincial Park, Heritage Rangeland, Provincial Park and PRA). Whether these new areas/expansions will go ahead remains to be seen. Information on the North Saskatchewan Regional Plan, not yet completed, is available online as a substantial profile, and promises 1,735 square kilometres of protected area of various types, representing 2% of the re-

gion's land base. Given the government's current move, this raises the question of whether these plans, and the four others promised under the Land-Use Framework planning system initiated in 2008, will ever come to fruition. If not, the huge amount of time and money invested in developing them will be wasted and far outweigh any monies saved in cuts. The North Saskatchewan Regional Plan profile states:

*"The region's growing population and the increasing demand for recreational opportunities in parks such as motorized recreation and camping, is placing increasing pressure on the region's provincial park facilities, many of which were built in the 1970s. Most of the 3,172 campsites within the region's provincial parks are fully used during the summer and there is limited capacity to expand their number because of a lack of suitable locations for development within the existing parks."*

The Lower Athabasca Regional Plan contains the statement: *"Random recreational activities can lead to environmental impacts, land-use conflicts and public safety issues."* This surely presages exactly what the consequences of the optimization plan might be.

### **Protesting "Optimization"**

Whether the government will reverse some of its decisions in the light of public opinion, and what other solutions may be forthcoming, remains to be seen. Naturalists may want to write their MLA or the Environment Minister Jason Nixon to protest both the general direction they see this heading, and any sites they specifically wish to defend.

Let me finish with a quote from Steve Donelon, a former assistant deputy minister of Alberta Parks and now board chair for CPAWS, Northern Chapter. In an op-ed in the *Edmonton Journal* on March 13, 2020, subtitled "Don't make short-sighted decisions we'll regret," he wrote: *"This government also needs to clearly articulate its commitment to the integrity of the remaining sites in the parks system, how it plans to meet the increasing demands of visitors and how it intends to move forward on future conservation goals."*

Well said! We are holding our breath!

**Patsy Cotterill**

## President's Message, April 2020



*Our President, Brian Stephens*

*Sandhill Cranes and Canada Geese, south of Forestburg  
Photo by Brian Stephens*



I hope everyone is staying safe. We started the year with our regular schedule and some nice walks and field trips, good speakers, and plant, bug, and bird study groups.

However, our plans rapidly ran aground at the beginning of March with COVID-19. The executive looked at the risks and decided to cancel all indoor gatherings, including the banquet, and also car-pooling events. We quickly realized that the city walks would have to be stopped as well due to the risk of transmission when signing waivers. Thanks to all those who researched the risks.

Ann Carter ramped up our communications with interesting online challenges. Our ENCNatureTalk site, hosted by Groups.io, is allowing those of us who can get out birding to share sightings and photos. Many of us are keeping in touch using text messages.

It is unlikely that we will be able to schedule any events (indoor or outdoor) until the provincial health authority deems it is safe, which may be another couple of months.

I look forward to being able to resume our ENC activities.

**Brian Stephens**

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**Household: \$40.00/year**  
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## Enjoy the Spring Migration with 2020 Vision

For many of us birding is an enjoyable year-round experience, while for others springtime ignites the desire to get outside and see the diversity of migratory birds passing through our home areas and all the new arrivals that will call “here” home for the purpose of mating and raising the next generation of their respective species.

Regardless of your own personal interests, the spring migration is well on its way and will grow intensely in the coming weeks and months. For several weeks already many of our year-round species have been engaging in various courtship activities: ravens allopreening, chickadees announcing “tea’s ready,” Blue Jays parading with their combs raised, Pine Siskins sharing seeds and gathering nesting materials.

There are several reasons why the spring migration season is so desirable. For the most part our winters can be somewhat bland. Birds returning in spring sport the vibrant and attractive mating plumage designed to give them the best possible likelihood of a successful breeding season. The majority of birding field guides provide illustrations or actual photographs of birds in their springtime finest. This greatly aids us in proper identification, especially for Alberta’s 22 different warbler species.

One downside to the spring migration is that it is over much more quickly than the fall event. There’s a lot to the old adage, “the early bird gets the worm.” Early birds also get the prime nesting locations. Accordingly there is a huge, burning drive to arrive at their final destination before all others, while in the fall, “What’s the rush?” Southward journeys are typically far more relaxed, with many travellers stopping at various locations for extended rest periods, refueling, or forming into larger travel groups.

It is a good idea to keep an open mind regarding traditional birding habits. During recent years we are seeing more and more birds opting to stay here for the winter: American Robins, White-throated

Sparrows, and even the occasional Great Blue Heron are but a few examples. Well, one should also keep a mind open to the possibility that various species will decide to stay local upon spring arrival rather than flying onward to more traditional breeding grounds. You just might find a few exceptions, as I have.

The spring of 2016 was the first time I really observed the spring migration. I received many appreciated pieces of advice. One in particular was that I needed to be out during the first two weeks of May. “That’s when Western Tanagers pass through. They don’t stay, they’re here for a very brief stop and then move along.” Shortly after getting that guidance I saw my very first male Western Tanager, for me our prettiest spring arrival. Of course I was also eager to photograph a female or two. The very first female I saw along Whitemud North was on the ground, her beak loaded with long grass stems. She was gathering nesting materials, so clearly these were a mated pair, not two birds just passing through.

Observing a bird engaging in the nest-building process is one of the best ways to tell that it is here for the breeding season. If you miss out on that experience, not to worry. Another sure-fire indication is seeing a bird with its beak jam-packed with food. As a rule, a hungry bird will eat as quickly as it can. If you see one of our little feathered



*Female Yellow Warbler sitting in her nest*



*Female Western Tanager gathering nesting material*

friends with a beak full of food, it is likely gathering groceries to take home to its ever-hungry young.

So just how should one approach the spring migration? I would recommend that you follow your heart, go where you want to go, do what you want to do. Don't be afraid to visit new locations or go back to your favourite haunts. Everyone should try to do their best to experience what they set out to accomplish, within reason!

I still have a somewhat long-term goal to photograph all that Mother Nature has to offer along Whitemud North. Each year I've catalogued a few new species. It has been an utter thrill: watching Common Mergansers zooming around looking for open water when Whitemud Creek was still frozen solid; having an American Dipper land right in front of me at Bridge 282; seeing and hearing my very first Grey Catbird; and experiencing the absolute wonderment of all the different warblers. Each year has had its own share of new treasures. Accordingly, I'll likely be there at least one more spring.

Some will just want to be outdoors ambling along at their own pace, others will have a yearly species target list to work on, some will be armed with binoculars or spotting



*Red-tailed Hawk gathering nesting material*

scopes, and some will be sporting a wide variety of camera equipment. If you are one who likes to photograph what you see, I would suggest, if you haven't already started to do so, that you explore and use your camera's audio/video features. The majority of today's cameras take extraordinary 4K videos. Even if you don't see what's singing that beautiful song, you can still shoot a recording to enjoy again later, or use the track to help in the identification process. Be sure to consult your cam-



*Female and Male Hooded Merganser*

era's menu features to set your recording levels and turn on your video stabilization features, or any other adjustment features your model of camera has to offer.

We have the opportunity to enjoy quite a variety of bird groups or families, all with incredibly diverse species covering all manner of our great outdoors: gulls, raptors, shorebirds, songbirds, waterfowl, and others. Both the sights and the sounds, along with being in the wilds, can truly lift your spirits, refresh your inner seven-year-old, and just make you feel good.

**Wayne Oakes**

*All photos by Wayne Oakes*



*Male Common Merganser. Common Mergansers are the fastest flying of all of our waterfowl species.*

## 2020 BOTY

Club members recently flocked to the club's website to cast their votes for the Bird Of The Year. We've never really defined what it takes to be BOTY. It means different things to different people. Sometimes it's a common bird you have a cool encounter with. Sometimes it's a bird unexpected for the area. Sometimes it's a super, crazy, first-ever-for-the-province rarity.

This year's BOTY is definitely the latter. The Ash-throated Flycatcher found near Big Lake last October was voted this year's ENC Bird Of The Year. It wasn't a complete landslide. The other nominees – Mountain Chickadee, Dunlin, and Yellow-bellied Sapsucker – all received several well deserved votes.

Ash-throated Flycatcher is a bird of the American West. Maybe even Southwest, though they do nest as far north as Washington State. They are known to wander. Individuals show up in the eastern US (usually on the coast) most winters. But none had ever been found in Alberta before.

Logan Bradley was the first one to eBird it. He saw an unusual flycatcher near the entrance to the John E. Poole Wetland. There was some question about confirming the

identity. In Alberta, if we see one of the large flycatchers in the *Myiarchus* genus, we'd probably expect Great Crested Flycatcher. But all the experts agreed on Ash-throated Flycatcher. An absolutely awesome find for our province!

One of the most amazing things about this bird was the length of its stay. After its initial discovery on October 9, it was seen for at least 2 weeks, and always in the same general place. As anyone who has ever chased a reported rarity knows, going even a day or so afterwards can be too late. This bird was seen by folks from all over the province and even a few from further afield. There are at least 69 eBird reports.

One of the few rules for BOTY eligibility is that the bird has to be seen on an ENC trip. Luckily, Chris Reese was able to talk his Thursday morning crew into cancelling a walk at Whitemud Creek and head over to look for this bird. It only took about 10 minutes to find the flycatcher and get everyone a lifer or a new provincial bird.

Congratulations to the Ash-throated Flycatcher! The 2020 ENC Bird Of The Year!

**Gerald Romanchuk**



## Beaverhills Lake – Past and Present

*This once huge sheet of open water dried up completely in 2006. Today, after a series of years with above-average precipitation, the lake has partly regained its former size. But obscured by emergent vegetation, it now looks more like a big slough.*



*When you stood on the south shore and looked north up the lake's longest axis, the water reached the horizon, the closest thing to an ocean view in land-locked Alberta.*

Two centuries ago, central Alberta's annual precipitation fluctuated as much as it has done in recent decades, and the size of Beaverhills Lake varied accordingly. After a cyclic drought in the late 1800s, the waters reached a peak at the turn of the century, when European settlers of the region experienced great difficulty getting their horse-drawn wagons across swollen Beaver Creek, the lake's outlet to the North Saskatchewan River. Fed by snowmelt and rain from its huge watershed, the lake was still brimming with water in the 1920s when William Rowan, who eventually became the Chair of the Zoology Department at the University of Alberta, began his ornithological research. He was assisted by Robert Lister, who later wrote a book about their work.

During that period, the lake's gradual retreat had created ideal staging habitat for masses of migratory waterbirds on their way to and from Arctic breeding grounds. Professor Rowan was a hunter as well as a scientist. He and his associates collected large series of waders – the British term for shorebirds – to send to museums across North America and England. Rowan came to love a strip

of sandy shore called Francis Point, just south of the town of Tofield. The point ran west to east and ended at the inlet bay of Amisk Creek, later known as Lister Lake. The county road to Lister Lake is now called Rowan's Route, but the formerly open Francis Point has become overgrown with poplar woods.

Sixty years ago, while living in Calgary, I had heard of Beaverhills Lake, the famous Mecca of Edmonton bird-watchers. After moving there in August of 1964, Irma and I paid our first visit to the west shore of the lake, about halfway between highways 14 and 16. Parking the car at the corner of a gravelled county road and an unpaved road allowance, we could see the lake a kilometre or so farther east in its vast setting of agricultural fields. Walking along the rutted trail, we were approached by a farmer who had been working his land some distance away. After uncoupling a cultivator, he drove towards us in his tractor. His face blackened with dust, he asked, "What you guys looking for?" Apparently, he had never heard of a phenomenon called birdwatching. After a brief chat, he allowed us to go on our way.

Crossing the last fence, we entered the lake-side pasture and walked along the shore, keeping our distance from a herd of cattle. Finding a suitable boulder to sit on, we enjoyed the wide vista of water as far as the eye could see. Bird-wise it was an interesting season; migrating sandpipers were gathering in the shallows. Scanning the distant shore line, I was hoping to see them take to the sky, as they tend to do if approached by Peregrines. After some time, when their flocks rose in alarm, I was thrilled to spot a fast-flying raptor. Following the lake shore, it came close enough to see that it was not a Peregrine, but a Parasitic Jaeger. Later, when I reported our sighting to the Edmonton Bird Club, we were told that jaegers had very seldom been seen at the lake.

When we got back to the car, we were shocked to find that two of our tires had been flattened. After installing our only spare, we limped to the nearest farm house. The man who answered the door was the same guy who earlier that day had unhooked his tractor to talk to us. When we explained our problem, he called his son, who admitted having let the air out of our tires. “You were lucky,” he said. “If the tractor had been back, I would have pushed your car into the ditch.”

Apparently, strangers were not welcome in these parts. However, after the farmer had pumped up the flattened tire, he kindly offered that we could park our Volvo wagon in his yard the next time we wanted to look at birds on his land. In those early years, the west shore of the lake was my favourite stamping ground because the waterline was free of emergent vegetation. This had everything to do with changing lake levels. The previous decade had fluctuated from drought conditions to very wet. “One summer the lake rose five feet,” a local farmer said. “That year, from April to October, it would rain for three days, stop for one day, and rain again for three days, all summer long.”

In the spring of 1974, I witnessed a similar surge in water levels, not after a rainy summer, but due to an exceptionally heavy runoff of winter snow. By late March, the drifts had accumulated to fence-top height, and when the melt was finally underway, the lake gained about one metre. County roads were cut off and inland fields became flooded well away from the former shore. High water levels inundate and kill emergent vegetation, which explains why the lake shore was free of cattails and bulrushes in those years. The wave-washed beaches along the south and east side of the lake were ideal for walking. However, after the lake’s level had remained quite stable over a decade or more, the formerly open littoral zone gradually became overgrown with rushes, cattails, and reed grass.

The 20<sup>th</sup> century ended with a serious drought. As the

waterline retreated, the lake dropped out of sight from the usual access points. When the mudflats widened, I increased my visits to the east shore, where the shallows attracted huge numbers of migratory shorebirds estimated to exceed one hundred thousand on some days. The last pool of water evaporated in September 2006. No doubt, the main reasons for the lake’s loss were low precipitation and high evaporation, but other factors were superimposed on the drought.

For a historical perspective on the lake’s dynamics, I checked the official records for annual precipitation available from Environment Canada. Their data for rain and snow for the Edmonton region go back to 1883. My brother Marius, who is a mathematician, placed these 123 data points in a bar graph. Over the entire span of time the vertical bars go up and down like a yoyo, but when Marius analyzed their statistical variation he reported that the regression line was flat. Over the long term, there had been no real change in precipitation levels. The data confirm the low precipitation of the late 1800s, and an exceptionally high peak early in the next century. Other highs were recorded in 1974, the mid 1950s and 1990s. Apart from the extreme low of 2002, there was an even deeper low a century earlier. Naturally, the graph did not directly pertain to the lake’s level, which is governed by two opposing factors. Firstly the **inflow** of H<sub>2</sub>O, nature’s precious life-giving resource. And secondly, the **outflow**.

Beaverhills Lake is the last in the interconnected chain of lakes draining the Cooking Lake highlands. The parkland soils are fertile, but the climate is semi-arid, and the first European settlers of the region wanted more water. As reported by Robert Lister, the town of Camrose dug a canal to Miquelon Lake, the closest in the wetland chain. Near Tofield, individual land owners built dams in Amisk Creek, the lake’s main feeder stream from the south. And during the dry 1930s, livestock farmers along the north shore built a windmill to pump up ground water for thirsty cattle.

A major development started in 1973 featured Ducks Unlimited (DU), a well-funded group of American waterfowl hunters, whose mission was to stop the alarming destruction of duck breeding habitat in the pothole wetlands of central Canada. However, their large-scale effort to reactivate former wetlands by diverting inflowing streams from the Beaverhills drainage came at a cost to the main lake. In addition, as can be expected, during the deep drought of the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, worried livestock owners increased their demands for water. A regional rancher phoned me to say that he knew of about fifty farmers filling their dugouts by pumping water from Amisk Creek. And at a stony point along the east shore, the Department of Agriculture had parked a tractor to



*As seen from the former east shore, by September 2006 the last pool of water had evaporated.*

pump lake water through a 12-inch pipeline to farms farther inland. A largely unknown deficit concerned the withdrawal of water from underground aquifers by industries and private residents. Is it any wonder that the lake dried up?

The year after the lake had completely dried up, “Mother Nature” came up with a surprise. In 2007, snow run-off and rain were higher than the long-term annual mean. The former lake bottom became waterlogged and the lake regained about half of its former size. Unfortunately, this promising period was followed by another dry spell and the flats turned into a wasteland of shoulder-high thistles.

In the meantime, another decade has come and gone. Annual precipitation has varied a lot from just under 300 mm in 2009 to over 500 mm in 2012 and 2013. The figures for 2016, 2017, and 2018 are also above the long-term mean of 454 mm. Local birdwatchers shouted for joy. The lake was back! But only partially. Along the east shore, at a place once known as Mundare Beach, a fence line runs due west into the lake, which shows how far the water has actually come up. Familiar with this location over more than a half century, I briefly checked the situation in 2017–2019, and noted that the lake was still well below the point from which I launched my canoe in the old days. The grassland surrounding the lake also looked very different from in the past. The pasture used to be short and heavily grazed by cattle. Today, the rough weedy vegetation is hip-high. Walking along the marshy water line is no pleasure at all, and the lake looks like an over-grown slough, as far as the eye can see.

What will the lake look like in the near future? A critical certainty is that this huge sheet of shallows is cyclic and at the vagaries of climatic conditions. Lake levels are bound to go up and down from one extreme to the other. But that is exactly what this ecosystem is all about. The lake has to fluctuate so as to maintain and perpetuate the inherently rich biodiversity of this productive wetland. Periodic floods function to drown out emergent and encroaching vegetation. Decaying organic matter becomes a trophic bonanza for trillions of microscopic bacteria, and billions of midges and their larvae. They are the food supply for tens of thousands of birds, nesting locally or migrating to and from the Arctic.

Dropping water levels and widening shallows attract shorebirds and staging geese, which like to keep their distance from vegetation that could be used by predators to ambush or surprise their prey. By contrast, ducks do not like wide open mudflats and tend to stay close to water deep enough to dive if attacked by Peregrines. The lake’s wealth in pre-drought days included thousands of grebes, pelicans, cormorants, herons, gulls, and terns, which thrive on the schools of minnows and sticklebacks. Unfortunately, during the lake’s decline, small fishes were frozen out and their seasonal movements blocked in the lake’s feeder streams.

**Text and photos by Theodore (Dick) Dekker, PhD**

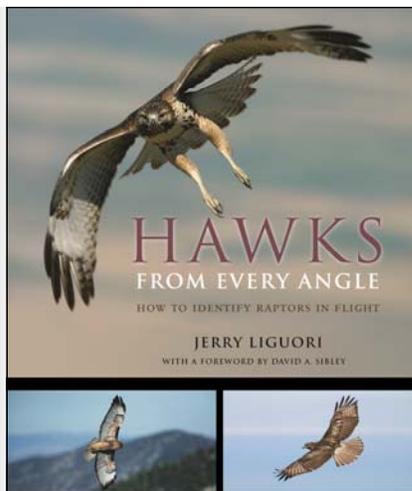
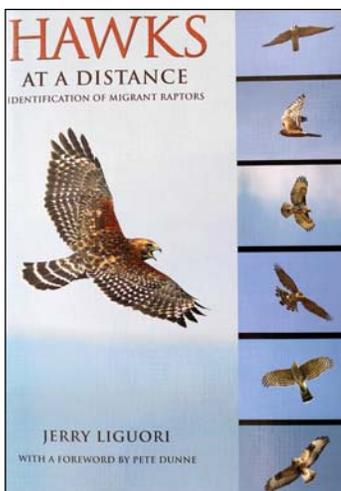
Note: A more detailed pdf on the ups and downs of Beaverhills Lake is available on request by e-mailing [ddekker1@telus.net](mailto:ddekker1@telus.net).

## The Armchair Naturalist

The place where club members review books about natural history they found particularly rewarding. Some of the recommended books may be borrowed from the Edmonton Public Library (EPL) when it reopens. To check the availability of eBooks, 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.

With spring hawk migration in full swing and all the talk about hawk identification on the ENCNatureTalk site, I decided to feature the following books on hawk identification:

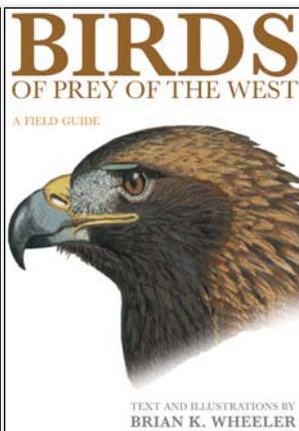
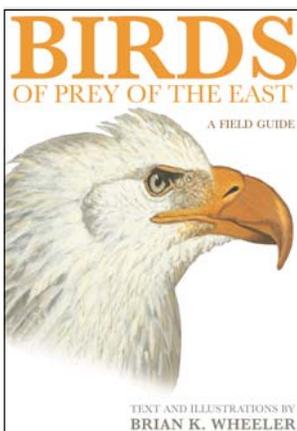


*Hawks at a Distance: Identification of Migrant Raptors*, by Jerry Liguori

*Hawks from Every Angle: How to Identify Raptors in Flight*, by Jerry Liguori

These two books are similar, discussing the different hawk species first by group and then by species, with colour photos and with flight identification the key. Photos of each species are taken mainly from below, but also include one from above. The shapes of each hawk are explored from all angles. Information on different plumages and some flight silhouettes are also provided.

*Recommended by Steve Knight on the ENCNatureTalk site and Karen Lindsay*



*Birds of Prey of the East: A Field Guide*, by Brian K. Wheeler  
*Birds of Prey of the West: A Field Guide*, by Brian K. Wheeler

These field guides feature detailed lifelike paintings by a leading field-guide illustrator and photographer. They show variations of age, sex, and colour, as well as a significant amount of plumage data. Plumage and species comparisons are presented in a classic field-guide layout. Each species is shown in the same posture and from the same viewpoint, to assist comparisons. Facing-page text includes quick-reference identification points and brief natural histories. The range maps are much larger than those in other guides and include the location of cities for more accurate reference. Coloured habitat photographs are next to the maps. (Review adapted from Amazon)

*Recommended by Brian Nicolai on the ENCNatureTalk site*

*HawkWatch International's Identification Guide to Raptors*, by HawkWatch International and Cornell Lab of Ornithology

Available as a **free app**, this guide to North America's 34 species of diurnal raptors includes nearly 1000 annotated photos and identification videos for each species, geared toward helping you identify raptors in flight. If you're just getting started with birding, this app covers the basics; if you're already an expert hawk watcher, this app covers all the variations that can lead to identification confusion, even among the most seasoned birders. (Review adapted from the App Store)

*Recommended by Sean Evans and Brian Nicolai on the ENCNatureTalk site*

# ENC City Walk Highlight

Goldbar Park, March 12, 2020



Photo by Manna Parseyan

It was a cool overcast morning but a fly-over by a flock of Canada Geese greeted us in the parking lot. We headed east and turned to walk the spruce thicket just before the bridge. We noticed birds moving in the low bushes along the pond and were pleased to find not only chickadees and a Downy Woodpecker but also a Townsend's Solitaire. From the bridge and along the river back to outfall there were a few ducks, as the river is open all the way to the Capital Region treatment plant. We checked the spring and were disappointed that no robins were around.



Common Goldeneye , photo by Chris Rees

Plants of the Week: (see photo below)

1: Leaf buds of balsam poplar (*Populus balsamifera*)  
2, 3, 4: Red osier dogwood (*Cornus sericea*), a deciduous shrub native to Alberta. Its berries are high in fat, providing important food for migrating songbirds in fall. It attracts many birds, including American Robin, bluebirds, Grey Catbird, vireos, kingbirds, thrushes, juncos, warblers, grouse, and Wild Turkey. American Robins and sparrows build nests on horizontal branches of this shrub, and many others seek shelter in its leaves. Several species of butterflies favour Red Osier Dogwood as host plants, and its spring flowers provide nectar for bees and other pollinating insects.

Manna Parseyan and Chris Rees

Photo by Manna Parseyan



## Field Trip Reports

### MacKenzie Ravine, March 15, 2020

It might have been the last ENC hike for a while when five of us braved the very cold morning ( $-21^{\circ}\text{C}$ ) and the concern about COVID-19 last Sunday. At the time of the walk, a small gathering outside still seemed safe. The bright sunshine made up for the temperature, and we enjoyed a great 7 km walk across the pedestrian bridge, north on the west side of the river, and into MacKenzie Ravine.

Things got dicey when we got on the boardwalk and every time one of the guys leaned on the railing we heard a loud crack! There was talk about some guys needing to go on a diet. But we all made it across both ways without incident. We also made it down all 131 steps of a staircase on the way back.



The birding was pretty routine; most notable were the woodpeckers: large numbers of Downy, a few Hairy, and nice encounters with a couple of Pileated. Pine Siskins have moved into the area in good numbers and were a constant presence.



It was great to explore new trails while getting some exercise, fresh air, and sunshine with good friends. Stay healthy, and good birding, everyone!

**Colleen Raymond and Gerald Romanchuk**

*Photos by Gerald Romanchuk*

## Genesee, Keephills, and Sundance, February 2, 2020

Six of us went out west on a decent winter morning. Starting at Genesee, we saw the more or less usual assortment of geese, swans, and ducks. Most notable was the Greater Scaup we picked out of a large raft of diving ducks. Many will know that the trip leader is a champion pisher. Who else pishes in pelicans? On this trip he pished in a Ruffed Grouse, just before Manna Parseyan heard a Black-backed Woodpecker.

Heading over towards Keephills, we stopped at several spots but didn't find much other than chickadees and nuthatches. At Keephills, Andy Ross spotted a Red-breasted Merganser. We saw thousands of Mallards, but couldn't find a lot of variety.

We spent a while at the feeders at Sundance Meadows and saw lots of birds, but had no luck with any special chickadees.

It was a reasonable day, when we didn't have to get completely frozen to look at winter ducks. Thanks to the participants and to Andy Ross for eBirding.

**Gerald Romanchuk**



*Scanning Keephills pond, photo by Manna Parseyan*

## Editorial Notes

### “The Times They Are A-Changin’”

*Bob Dylan*

This song title is so true, and let's hope the times will change again soon to something much better. Our club has been affected by the pandemic, with no indoor meetings, bird and plant studies, banquet, or field trips. However, our members are out there birding (separately) and letting everyone know how migration is progressing.

Spring has finally arrived: migratory birds will be passing through central Alberta, plants will start growing, and insects will follow soon after. Try to get out in nature in a safe manner for relief from COVID-19 news. You'll feel much better.

I am sure you will enjoy the articles and photos in this issue of the PN, and I wish to thank everyone for their creative and informative submissions.

- Read our cover story by Patsy Cotterill and send your opinions to Alberta's Minister of Environment and Parks. Nature matters!
- Have you read any good nature books lately? Send

your recommendations to Karen Lindsay for inclusion in the Armchair Naturalist column (page 16).

- There were only two field trips to report, and I added one ENC City Walk Highlight.
- Gerald Romanchuk has the results of the 2020 BOTY (Bird Of The Year) contest (page 11).
- Wayne Oakes is a new contributor to the *PN*, and I hope he will submit more articles in the future (page 8).
- Dick Dekker keeps us informed with his article on the history of birding at Beaverhills Lake (page 12).
- In “Reminiscing,” Marg Reine recalls her experiences with Edmonton nature organizations over the last 50 years (page 19).

The deadline for the May–August issue of *The Parkland Naturalist* is July 31. Please send submissions to [colwell@shaw.ca](mailto:colwell@shaw.ca).

**Dawne Colwell, Editor**

## Reminiscing

### *Marg Reine's 50 years with Edmonton nature clubs*

September: the traditional time for starting new classes, joining new organizations, renewing existing memberships. In September 2019, while I was renewing my Edmonton Nature Club membership, I remembered the first time I came to join the club – it was 1969. I cannot believe it was 50 years ago!

I went to the September meeting of the Edmonton Natural History Club (now Edmonton Nature Club) and signed up as a new member excited to join a group of people who had common interests in geology, geography, flora and fauna. As a third-year university student I was interested in learning more about these topics in a field setting. I was not disappointed, as the monthly meetings and field trips were enjoyable and informative. I met wonderful people, many of whom became good friends and mentors. Pat and Dick Clayton, Eddy and Jeannie Jones, Jack and Eleanor Park, Peter and Deirdre Demulder, Cam and Joy Findlay, John and Margaret Powell, Loren Goulden, Lorne Proudfoot, Graham and Pat Greenlee, Julie Hrapko, Dave Spalding, Hugh Campbell, Bob Lister, Bill McKay, Ross Hodgetts, Lou Carbyn, and Jack Clements, to mention only a few. I became active in the club executive, holding over the years most positions except treasurer and some positions twice. Through working with all these wonderful people I learned not only better field techniques, but also club structure and organization. Conducting meetings, giving talks, and guiding field trips were all great experiences.

Over the 50-year span I have participated in and seen many changes in the club. During field trips to Beaverhills Lake (there was a lake!) in the '70s and '80s, the number of migrating birds was phenomenal, with shorebirds everywhere. You could always have a very productive day birding if you could drive the road or get into Lister Lake or the south shore. Boots were always a must in the spring. I can only imagine what it was like in the very early years that Bob Lister wrote about in *The Birds and Birders of Beaverhills Lake* (Edmonton Bird Club, 1979), when there were thousands of shore birds and people took the train there and camped near the shore. They even tell of shooting 75 to 100 birds of one species and collecting the eggs. This was the norm for birders in the early 1900s. Beaverhills Lake was in the early years and still is today an area where a lot of scientific studies are ongoing and many sightings from citizen scientists are being recorded.

Many of the club's field trip destinations have remained popular, but have all seen changes over the last 50 years.

Ministik Lake, one area the club frequented, was accessible from the Fenna property; after Lois and Don sold the property, access was not as easy. Miquelon Lake, Bittern Lake, and all the areas around Camrose are still popular. We also visited Whitford Lake and areas such as Cucumber Lake, Chip Lake, Alberta Beach, and Wabamum Lake. Most of these are still go-to areas, and many others have been added.

Elk Island National Park was always a good spot for birding, and it has really changed over the past years, especially with the improvement of the road! I was fortunate to work there first as a summer student, then as assistant and acting naturalist over a seven-year period, so it has always been my favourite birding area. I worked with and had as mentors Deirdre and Graham Griffiths during my years at EINP. We did bird surveys in the spring and plant herbarium work in the winter, preparing programs for schools and Guides and Scouts which we ran in classrooms in the winter and in the park during the spring and fall. Many trails have changed, some new ones have been added, and, most notably, Tawayik Lake has all but disappeared. When the viewing platform (which has now been removed) was at the south end, the water's edge was at the platform base, much like it was at the viewing hut on Francis Point at Beaverhills.

In the first years I was a member of the club, many members were instrumental in setting up the Federation of Alberta Naturalists (FAN), now Nature Alberta. I sat on the initial committee until school took precedent and I bowed out. FAN became a reality 50 years ago, and Nature Alberta will be celebrating with events this year. Like the ENC, FAN has experienced many changes over the years. I sat on the FAN board in the early '80s and worked on environmental issues with schools through its Operation Lifeline program. Later, I was the ENC representative on the board of FAN which, like the boards of the Wagner Natural Area and Clifford E. Lee Nature Sanctuary, included members of naturalist clubs throughout the province.

In 1976, the first time I was president, our club was approached by the Canadian Nature Federation (CNF), now Nature Canada. A local philanthropist wanted local clubs to help set up a Nature Sanctuary within 30 miles of the city, the goal being to protect significant habitat and provide learning experiences for school children. The ENHC worked with other groups to find a suitable property and then wrote a brief identifying suitable lands. The property selected became the Clifford E. Lee Nature Sanctuary, named after the philanthropist. The club always had a representative on its board, as well as a member on the

Wagner Natural Area board. Dick Clayton was our first representative on the Clifford E. Lee Sanctuary board. Over the years other club members on the board have included Peter Demulder, Bill McKay, Lou Carbyn, Ross Hodgetts, Jim Flatman, and Mark Tempest. Dick, Lou, Ross, and I were on the board at its inception, and Ross and I are still on the board. The Wagner Natural Area was the same: club members Patsy Cotterill, Dave Ealey, Derek Johnson, and Pat Clayton were involved at the beginning, and some of them still are.

Between 1976 and 1981 we worked together with the bird club to sponsor the Audubon Wildlife Films at the Provincial Museum (Royal Museum). During the mid-eighties to the mid-nineties I took a hiatus from active work with the club (but continued as a member) to raise my kids and participate in their organized activities, which always seemed to fall on the Tuesday night when the club meetings were held. I still participated in some field trips and came when possible to meetings, but work and family were definitely priorities at that time. The club, however, was thriving. During the '80s the plant study group and the bird study group became more active, along with the Snow Goose Festival and Christmas Bird Count, and monthly meetings continued as always. In 1989 the club initiated the Spring Banquet as a yearly social event. All of these activities have been maintained with minor changes and great successes.

The Snow Goose Festival, as it was originally known (1993) and coordinated by a large number of government and non-government organizations (see page 42 of *Preserving our Natural Environment: Celebrating the Centennial of the Edmonton Nature Club*) was always a popular event. In 2003, when the lake had receded, there were fewer geese, and many other organizations pulled out, Bob Parsons took over the newly formed Snow Goose Festival under the ENC. Bob worked diligently to improve the festival, calling it the Snow Goose Chase, and brought in inner-city school kids to give them an experience with nature. The public buses still ran, many members participated as volunteers, and it became very successful. Now that Bob has retired, a Snow Goose Festival will be run by Tofield and the Beaverhills Bird Observatory.

Many club members participate in the annual Christmas Bird Count. Edmonton's first Christmas count was in 1906, but only six counts occurred between then and 1955. From 1955 to 1986 the count rapidly expanded as organizers, including the Edmonton Nature Club, encouraged people to participate. Announcements, registration, and the filing of results are now computerized, making it easier to handle. This count itself has not changed since I

joined, but with more participants a greater diversity of information is being recorded.

During the '80s and '90s, the Edmonton Natural History Club and individual members collaborated with Watchable Wildlife to produce two books, *Alberta Wildlife Viewing Guide* (1990) and *Nature Walks and Sunday Drives 'Round Edmonton* (1995). A *Winter Birding Guide for the Edmonton Region*, by Harry Stelfox and Chris Fisher, was published in 1998, and in 2009 many club members contributed to *Preserving Our Natural Environment: Celebrating the Centennial of the Edmonton Nature Club*. I remember coordinating this committee and the time it took to collect the articles and set a plan for the book. It was a much larger endeavor than anticipated and took a lot longer than expected. Working on these projects makes one appreciate the work done by others in writing books.

The Edmonton Naturalization Group, part of the Plant Study Group, produced *Go Wild! with Easy to Grow Prairie Wildflowers and Grasses* (2004). The ENHC also worked with the city to develop signage for the newly formed Whitemud Natural Area, and obtained STEP (Summer Temporary Employment Program) funding to support students involved in producing six Naturalist Guides for the Edmonton area. Our club is fortunate to have had so many individuals who dedicated their time to such projects over our hundred-year history.

During my time in the ENHC I also coordinated a committee to produce a checklist of common birds in Edmonton, as well as a booklet, *Checklist for Birds of the Edmonton Area*, based on birds found in the Christmas count. In 1998 I worked with other club members to help produce *A Handbook for Conserving Nature in the Edmonton Region* for a conference that the club helped to organize with the Bird Club and the Sierra Club. Participants in this conference contributed to a book edited by Ross Weins, *Coyotes Still Sing in My Valley: Conserving Biodiversity in a Northern City* (2006).

When Jaye Lee and I were looking for information for the history book, we realized documents held by the ENHC were incomplete, and the club materials at City of Edmonton Archives were wholly inadequate because they had literally been dumped at Archives, which did not have the staff to organize them. We found that a significant amount of material was missing, so we asked club members to check their basements for information that might be lying around in boxes. We received many more boxes from club members than we anticipated! Jaye and I spent many days and weeks organizing the materials. The city archivist was very pleased that we had sorted out the boxes; we now have a good background of

material in the Edmonton Archives, and I hope executives have continued to contribute to it.

In early 2001 the Edmonton Bird Club and Edmonton Natural History Club entered into discussions about amalgamating the two organizations. By 2002 committees were struck to develop new bylaws, financial structures, naming, dues, and programs for the proposed amalgamation. In March 2004, at a joint meeting to discuss the committees' recommendations, representatives of both clubs decided to move the merger forward and apply for society status. By July 2004 the Edmonton Nature Club was official, and in October a new slate of officers was elected at the AGM, and I became the president.

During my tenure the club was invited to become involved in setting up the Edmonton and Area Land Trust. I sat on the founding committee for the EALT and was on the board for five years, two of those as chair. Coral Grove, Rocky Feroe, and Henrik Kruger have represented the ENC on the EALT board, and many other club members contribute to the Land Trust as advisors, photographers, volunteers, and donors. The ENC has set up an endowment for the EALT which will help to maintain it into the future. This coincides with the club's objectives, which are available on our website ([edmontonnatureclub.org](http://edmontonnatureclub.org)). The ENC has been one of the greatest supporters of EALT from the non-profit sector, and four club members have set up personal endowments to support EALT. We should all be proud of these great legacies from the club and its members.

In the past the club was always involved with the City of Edmonton, providing input into various stakeholder meetings and writing briefs to support or oppose issues. The voices of some 400 members were always considered in civic issues, whether or not decisions were made in our favour. The ENC is not as involved in these areas now, and I think it is important that we should be, as more natural areas in and around the city are being compromised. These are areas club members visit for birding and plant studies.

The newsletter and the monthly publication have evolved into more polished editions, with more photos. There is not as much personal writing as in the past, as field trip notes seem to dominate the publications. The website is greatly improved, offering new ways to engage club members and giving the club an impressive image. Field trips remain interesting and varied in their locations and the great leaders who step forward to guide them. The sub-study groups, as they used to be called, that focus on birds, bugs, and plants, continue to keep members engaged. For many years these groups were not as active as they initially were, but after persistent work by dedicated volunteers, they are running with great attendance.

During the course of my involvement the club presented awards for volunteerism and conservation. I was a privileged recipient of the Loren Goulden award (1987) which was created by the ENHC to honour Loren, with whom I had the pleasure of working before he was tragically killed in a plane crash. Later the award was taken over by Nature Alberta. In 2008 I received the Appreciation Award (renamed the Robert Turner Appreciation Award in 2012) for "significant contributions to the club in multiple ways, providing...expertise, leadership, and guidance by creating/organizing/leading for at least 5 years." The Edgar T. Jones Conservation Award in 2015 for making "a significant contribution to the knowledge, appreciation or conservation of the natural history of the Edmonton region" was of personal significance, as I had known Eddy as a friend and mentor since joining the club. Many club members have received awards and are to be commended for the work they have done. Now we have two new awards: the Chickadee Award is presented to any club member the current executive wishes to acknowledge for their ongoing contributions, and the Great Gray Owl Award recognizes an ENC member who has demonstrated many years of outstanding dedication and service to the club.



**James Fox presents the Edgar T. Jones Conservation Award to Marg Reine.**

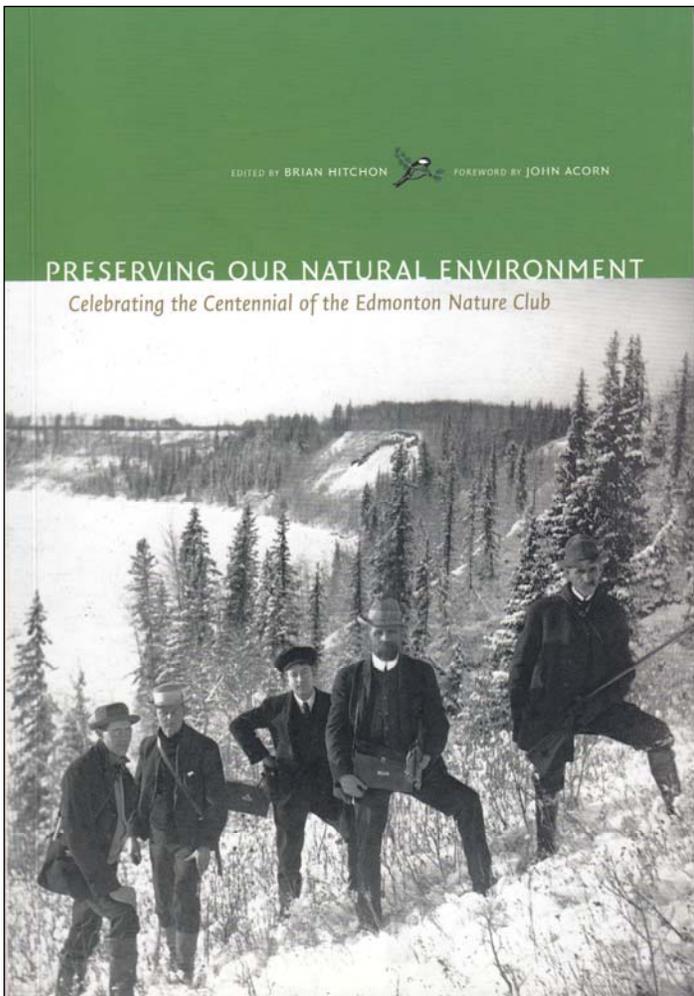
The Edmonton community has been a great source of resources and people willing to share that information with our club at monthly meetings. Clubs such as the Edmonton Nature Club have always relied on volunteers, and hopefully will continue in this spirit into the future. I will be a club member as long as I can, but it has been nice in recent years to enjoy all the club has to offer and not be involved in its organizational component. I can appreciate the work that goes into running the club be-

cause I have been there and done it for many years. I hope new members will become involved in running the club so they can appreciate all aspects of what makes the club run and the wonderful people they will meet.

When I started with the club I was the usual idealistic 20-year-old. I had many learning opportunities and met many new and experienced people. Then I begin to see how things worked or didn't, and the idealism slowly changed to a more realistic (and at times even cynical) view. Over the years I have met many great people involved with our club and with other organizations. Experiences with everyone and everything also gave me an opportunity to learn and improve my field skills, public speaking skills, teaching skills, and organizational skills, and gave me further opportunities through people I met to become involved in other areas and meet even more wonderful people. I hope ENC keeps up the good work for another 100 years.

I think the paragraph I wrote for the history book as an introduction to the interviews sums up my years and my experience with the club. We all enjoy different aspects of Nature. The benefits we derive from working with a group are as personal and as varied as the people involved. Members contribute to the club in a variety of different ways and it is their dedication that creates the club's legacy. The people you meet, the lectures you attend, the field trips you participate in, and the work you do for the club all contribute to the memories and experiences that you cherish.

**Marg Reine**



**Cover of the history book  
published in 2009 by the Edmonton Nature Club**



**Marg receives the Sage Award – Environment in 2016.**

*(Editor's note: Sage Awards recognize Edmonton-area seniors who make an "invaluable contribution...to our communities and lives.")*



*A young Saw-whet Owl discussing the pro and cons of the addition of one of Ray Cromie's owl bands (above)  
photo by Betty Fisher*



*On behalf of Edmonton and Area Land Trust, Marg accepts the Emerald Award for Conservation in 2013.*



*Marg presents a cheque to Kathy Hawksworth to establish her family's endowment fund in support of the Edmonton and Area Land Trust.*

## Reminiscing



*Marg Reine holding one of three Great Horned Owlets banded in Strathcona County  
May 2008, photo by Betty Fisher*