

THE PARKLAND NATURALIST



MAY-AUGUST 2020

A PUBLICATION OF THE
EDMONTON NATURE CLUB

<http://www.edmontonnatureclub.ca>



Inside this issue

Another Fine Kettle of Fish	2	On the Trail of Alberta's Red Foxes	10
President's Message	6	The Armchair Naturalist	12
The Hastings Lake Dead-End Effect	8	Dry Island Buffalo Jump	13
Cooking Lake, Spring 2020 – It's a jungle out there.	9	Conservation Corner – Issues Near and Far	15
		Enjoying Nature during the COVID-19 Pandemic	18



Bank Swallows gathering nesting materials



White-breasted Nuthatch juvenile displaying very prominent leucistic features, much whiter than typical even for a juvenile

Another Fine Kettle of Fish

It seems that every year we experience quite a variation in weather patterns, about which my grandmother used to say, “Well, that’s a fine kettle of fish now, isn’t it?” Last year we started off with a rather dry May stretching just past the middle of June, and then it didn’t feel as if the rain would ever stop. As I recall, the balance of the summer was more normal. Our changing weather conditions and many other factors affect how migrations transition and how many species respond to their summer habitats.

In some cases, migrating species arrived two or more weeks later than in previous years. Our hibernating butterflies such as the Mourning Cloak were also affected, and even the Least Chipmunks were a good two weeks late.



Mourning Cloak

Last year started off with more Spotted Sandpipers along Whitemud North than I have seen in any previous year. When the heavy long-term rains hit, they were gone. Their nesting and foraging areas were flooded. This year has seen more typical numbers, and with the rainy periods being more spread out, the impact on water levels hasn’t been as drastic or as long-term. Mating activities continued into the third week of July; accordingly, it looks like they may have a more successful local breeding season.

This year has the largest production of White Spruce cones I’ve seen since our last mast-seeding in 2015. Mast-seeding conifers such as White Spruce can produce massive cone crops over extended areas. Climate factors or other stressors may trigger high seed production. We have had some years with nearly no cone production, but it appears that 2020 will be a more typical year. I’m certain that our resident Red Squirrels will very much appreciate the ready food supply.

The ample rains of the last two spring and early summer seasons may also be affecting some of our fruit and berry producers. Many of these are bi-annual producers, meaning that they alternate between a large-yield year and a low- or no-yield year. Along Whitemud North, 2020 should have been a high-yield year, but not so. Crab Apple Trees, Mountain Ash, Chokecherries, and even Red Osier Dogwoods all are showing a very low level of pro-

duction. This will in turn have a negative impact on the many animals, birds, and insects that rely on these as primary or supplementary food sources. Those early butterflies that I mentioned start emerging from hibernation long before there are any flowers to feed on. They rely on a good supply of Highbush Cranberries, Mountain Ash berries, and other berries for their survival. Sadly, many berries are taken for human use, leaving very little for wildlife. Unlike ours, their food sources are extremely limited.

The moisture appears to have been very much appreciated by many plant species (and, unfortunately, also by the mosquitoes). Some plants I had not seen before or have not seen very often, such as Bishop’s Cap or Mitrewort (*Mitella nuda*), I found in great abundance this year. Others included Purple Clematis (*Clematis occidentalis*); Palmate-leaved Coltsfoot (*Petasites frigidus var. palmatus*), one of which was over 70 cm tall; Saline Shootingstar (*Dodecatheon pulchellum*); Bog Violet (*Viola nephrophylla*); Blue Columbine (*Aquilegia brevistyla*); and of course a host of both common and native species along with many introduced varieties.



Great Horned Owl nest

Our resident pair of Great Horned Owls successfully fledged two owlets this year, making it the first time in five years that mama owl has had back-to-back successful nesting seasons. On March 5, I observed Pine Siskins starting to gather nesting material. They typically nest here from early March to the end of July. While these are among our early nesters, others were also noted: Western Tanager, Common Raven, Ruby-crowned Kinglet, Chipping Sparrow, Blue-headed Vireo, Eastern Phoebe, Red- and White-breasted Nuthatches, American Robin, Yellow

On the Cover:

Bishop’s Cap is certainly one of our oddest-looking spring flowers. Photo by Wayne Oakes.



Mating display of a male Ruby-crowned Kinglet

Warbler, Yellow-rumped Warbler, Dark-eyed Junco, Red-eyed Vireo, Mallard, American Wigeon, and both Common Goldeneye and Common Merganser nesting in tree holes, to name just a few species. And this year for the very first time I saw both Bank Swallows and Barn Swallows gathering nesting material and mating near the very north end of the creek.

Many of our woodland animals also take advantage of spring conditions to mate and to rear their young. On July 7, I saw an adult female Short-tailed Weasel come onto the west side of Bridge 282, followed closely by a juvenile male. Both looked at me, wondering “What is that?” Mom wanted to cross but junior wasn’t too sure, so she grabbed him, with her mouth, by the scruff of his neck and proceeded to pull the youngster towards me. This soon digressed into a playful tussle and then they ran

right past me and off into the brush. That was by far my best weasel experience.



Short-tailed Weasels: juvenile male on the left, adult female on the right

I managed to see and photograph one additional interesting animal experience in the creek. North of Bridge 301, where it empties into the North Saskatchewan River, I saw something swimming across the creek. It was a Red Squirrel.

By the time this article comes to print we will be well

into the fall migration. Keep in mind that the juveniles will not look like their spring-time parents, nor will those parents look like they did during their spring migration. However, nearly all should have crisp, clean, unworn, and unweathered plumage and provide many hours of fun and excitement (and maybe just a little frustration) as you try to figure out exactly what you saw.

Oh, and just in case you think that I totally overlooked the “fine kettle of fish,” the early rains kept the water levels in the Whitemud too high to observe the various species as they were spawning, and the very dirty water made it virtually impossible to see much of anything other than a few sightings of the Northern Redhorse Sucker which typically run in the creek for the last three weeks of May. All-in-all, our ever-changing conditions can be “a fine kettle of fish” or in simpler terms, “an awkward state of affairs.”

Wayne Oakes



White-tailed Deer buck growing his velvet-covered antlers, which presently have six points on the right and an amazing nine points on the left



White Admiral



This Bald-faced Hornets' nest is about the size of a clenched fist, making it in the early stages of development.



Dragonflies feed heavily on mosquitoes and are fed on by several of our smaller raptors such as Merlin and American Kestrel (left).

Dark-eyed Junco gathers materials to build a dainty basket nest at ground level (right).

All photos by Wayne Oakes

President's Message, August 2020



Our President, Brian Stephens

Our outdoor program is still on hold due to the increasing incidence of COVID-19, and indoor programs are not possible while venues are closed. Keep in touch with the ENC website, however, as we may be able to re-start some walks.

We are working on using Zoom Meetings for our AGM, and possibly for some presentations from our speakers' program.

In spite of the restrictions, ENC NatureTalk posts show that individual members are active outdoors, photographing birds, butterflies, moths, and plants, and even pursuing an Alberta big year.

I hope everyone is staying well.

Remembering Fred Wiley

A long-time Alberta birder and club member, Fred Wiley, died recently. I first met him on club trips in the early 2000s, when he helped us beginners find and identify birds. One time I met him at Islet Lake and we went for a

walk along some of the trails. At one point, I said a bird was calling up ahead. He told me to hold up a hand the next time it called. When I did, he promptly said it was one of three birds. I was surprised because he seemed to know all of the bird songs. Fred pointed to his ears and said, "Those are the three birds my hearing aids don't pick up." We soon spotted a Warbling Vireo, which was one of those birds.

On another walk Fred talked about setting out with a friend to do a big year in the early '90s. Remember, this was before the Internet, eBird alerts, and smartphones. Birders relied on getting tips from friends, searching for the right habitats, and having a plan. Fred said a big year was just plain hard work from 12:01 a.m. on January 1 to midnight on December 31.

My birding experiences were enriched by birding with Fred.

Brian Stephens



Black Necked Stilt (left), Franklin's and Bonaparte's Gulls (right), photos by Brian Stephens

The views, comments and opinions expressed in this publication are those of the respective contributors concerned only. They do not necessarily reflect the views or positions of the editor, the Edmonton Nature Club (ENC), its executive or any other representatives or agents.

The ENC is not responsible for, and disclaims any liability for, the content expressed in *The Parkland Naturalist* by contributors. The information set forth in this publication has been obtained or derived from sources believed by the ENC to be reliable. However, the ENC does not make any representation or warranty, express or implied, as to the accuracy or completeness of the information.

The Parkland Naturalist

is published by the Edmonton Nature Club.
 Box 1111, Edmonton, AB T5J 2M1
<http://www.edmontonnatureclub.org>

Executive Elected Officers

President – **Brian Stephens**
stephensbrian319@gmail.com

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

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

Treasurer – **Katherine Madro**
kathrinemadro@gmail.com

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

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

Executive Director – **Chris Rees**
csrees@shaw.ca

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

Membership

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

Membership Rates for 2019/20

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

Appointed Board Members

Program

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

Outdoor Program Director – **Sean Evans**
sean.evans74@yahoo.com

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

Bug and Spider Studies – **Pat Dunn**
patdunn001@gmail.com

Plant Studies – **Patsy Cotterill and Hubert Taube**
nutmeg@telus.net / taubeha@shaw.ca

Annual Events

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

Edmonton Christmas Bird Count – **Lynn and Arnold Maki**
maki2@telus.net

Nature Appreciation Weekend – **Gerald Romanchuk**
geraldjr@telusplanet.net

Communications

Communications Director – **Ann Carter**
anncarter005@gmail.com

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

Group Representatives

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

Edmonton and Area Land Trust – **Hendrik Kruger**
hendrik296@gmail.com

Nature Alberta – **Len Shrimpton**
lenlau@telus.net

The Hastings Lake Dead-End Effect

Have you ever heard of the Patagonia Picnic Table Effect? I'm not sure who coined the phrase or exactly what birds were involved, but it's a legendary birding phenomenon. It started when a rare bird was reported at a highway rest stop near Patagonia, Arizona. The report drew numerous birders to the same spot and the extra eyes ended up finding more cool birds. The more rarities that were found, the more coverage the spot got, creating a kind of feedback loop. The name Patagonia Picnic Table Effect was coined and became part of birding lingo.

We had a mild version of the PPTE at Hastings Lake this spring. It started with reports of White-winged Scoter from Sean Evans and Andy Ross. When Connor Charchuk went out for the Scoters, he spotted some Sabine's Gulls on the far side of the lake. His report brought several of us out to the dead end on Range Road 205. Connor's gulls were way out on the other side of the lake. You definitely needed a scope, and I seemed to be the only one that couldn't spot one. While scoping, Andy Ross and I saw a very different bird speeding across the lake. It was a dark, gull-like bird with a pale belly. Andy yelled "Jaeger" the same time I yelled, "What the...?" Unfortunately, the bird cruised on past and we didn't see enough to be able to tell which species of Jaeger it was. Possibly a Parasitic, but we couldn't be sure.

This brought out even more birders. A bunch of us sat out there for hours, but the Jaeger never showed again. Andy spotted some Surf Scoters and it all made for a pretty decent day: two Scoter species, Sabine's Gull, and a Jaeger. Very good for our area.

By 7:30 the crowd had thinned out. Vince Cotterill and I were the only ones left. It was a warm afternoon and with no new cool birds we couldn't even talk anyone into coming over with a few nice cold beverages!

I decided I'd had enough, but thought I'd go over and check the dead end at Range Road 204. I saw a bunch of terns and non-adult Bonaparte's Gulls on the exposed rocks. These young birds were messy looking and none looked exactly the same. I was sooooooo close to leaving. But one of the gulls didn't seem right and I took a closer look. Compared to the Bonaparte's, it had a very dark cap and ear spot and a large black patch on the side of the folded wing. I took a few terrible record shots, looked at the Sibley App, and was pretty sure it was a first-winter Little Gull! Got on the phone. Vince was still out, and he and a few others got over before the sun went down and saw the bird.

So now with a Little Gull, a great day turned into an awe-

some day. There are scattered records of Little Gull for Alberta, maybe one every 4 or 5 years, even fewer for the Edmonton area. It helped to make one of the best one-day lists of uncommon birds in the Edmonton area that I can recall, though likely Beaverhills Lake produced some very good lists back in the day.

The next evening I went back to the RR 204 spot. Wasn't surprised to see a few birders there. I was hoping for closer photos of the Little Gull. I sat down on the shoreline and was looking through the gulls and terns. One tern got my attention, but I was struggling to clearly see the necessary details. The rocks the birds like are just out of easy viewing and shooting (with a camera!) range. I asked Bob Bowhay if he could see any black on the bill. He couldn't. He asked if I wanted to look through his scope. He has a nice Swarovski and as soon as I looked through it, I could see what I needed. A blood-red bill with no black tip and tail tips that extended past the wing tips. It was an Arctic Tern! Not as rare as the Little Gull, but still a very good bird for our area.

The tern and the gulls made sporadic appearances over the next week and lots of people got to see them. Hastings Lake Dead-End Effect might not have the same ring as Patagonia Picnic Table Effect, but it was in full force for a few days in May. Each good sighting seemed to lead to another. Several local birders got to add a lifer or at least a very good bird to their lists. Where will the HLDEE strike next?

Gerald Romanchuk



Little Gull, photo by Gerald Romanchuk

Cooking Lake, Spring 2020 – It's a jungle out there.

After our long winter, it's a great day when Cooking Lake finally opens up. The date has varied from April 3 to 23. This past year, as viewed from the south shore, the entire lake was still snow-covered on April 16, and my usual birdwatching spot in the lee of some bushes was buried under a two-metre deep drift. Four days later there was some open water along shore, and on April 24 the lake was free of ice as far as the eye could see.

California Gulls were cruising over last year's nesting island, but Ring-Billed were absent. And although the first Franklin's flew by on April 27, they never reached the multitudes typical of other years. Also, avocets were scarce. From a vanguard of three dozen or so on April 27, they dwindled to none at all on May 2. This spring and early summer, apart from a few ducks, water birds were unusually low in number.

While the previous year's snow run-off had been high enough to bring the lake up into the shore vegetation, the late thaw of 2020 added enough to drown out the rim of marsh ragwort. To monitor how far the water would eventually rise, I frequently checked the former avocet islet along the middle of the south shore. By mid-May, its outlier of boulders was completely submerged and its stony margin gradually shrank back. A parallel process affected the larger gull island farther west. The loss of nesting room may have forced some of the California pairs to move out, which might explain why there were now some two dozen large gulls on the avocet islet. Dur-

ing May and June the waters rose even more, and as of June 30, the annual precipitation record for the Edmonton International Airport had climbed to 256 mm, as compared to 160 mm for the same period in 2019.

The former shoreline trail was overgrown with a jungle of hip-high vegetation. Stumbling along over the wet and uneven ground, while looking around for interesting plants, I fell twice in the mud. My botanic knowledge is limited to a few prominent species, one of them the water hemlock, which is said to be the most toxic plant native to Europe and North America. This waterlogged summer, hemlock proved to be widespread and many specimens grew well over one metre tall.

Just to check whether some gulls managed to bring off a brood, I continued my visits to the islet during July. On the 19th, it was nearly completely inundated; only the odd boulder and some vegetation emerged from the water. During an hour of keeping watch, I saw two adult California gulls arrive, to be followed by a single immature.

A characteristic of this past season that might have had a bearing on the low number of avian species was the general lack of lake flies, which in normal summers constitute a common and abundant food for shorebirds, gulls, and ducks.

Dick Dekker



California Gull, photo by Chris Rees

On the Trail of Alberta's Red Foxes

The red fox has a very wide distribution across North America and Eurasia, but it was absent from the coastal dunes of Holland where I spent my birdwatching youth. The reason was simple. To protect his precious pheasants, the local gamekeeper said that he would not rest until he had caught the first fox to ever show up.

Does absence make the heart grow fonder? In 1959, after immigrating to Alberta, keen on seeing its wildlife, I was disappointed to find that the red fox was missing, and again the explanation turned out to be simple. During the 1950s, the provincial government had conducted an intensive campaign to exterminate all canids in a wide belt around settled regions. The intent had been to stop the spread of rabies, which had been diagnosed in some northern foxes. After four or more years of poisoning, the official toll climbed to 55,000 dead foxes and 161,000 coyotes!

During the 1960s, with foxes on my mind, I made exploratory trips to Saskatchewan's Prince Albert National Park, where they proved to be common, especially around the town site. But it took until the early 1970s before the species made its return to central Alberta. In September 1972, a Fish and Wildlife officer told me that he had impounded two illegally acquired fox pups from a farm boy who had taken them for pets. The location was not far from Tofield and upon contacting the family, I was shown two fox dens, one in a grain field, the other under a barn on the edge of their yard. The farmer had been alerted to the presence of foxes by the daily disappearance of one of his chickens.

Their information started me off on many years of field studies. During winter I looked for fox tracks, following them on snowshoes, and by early June I searched for occupied den sites around Tofield, near Devon, and even within the city. The first thing I learned about these farmland foxes was that they made use of human habitation as a refuge to get away from their bigger rival, the coyote. In ecological terms, foxes and coyotes were spatially segregated.

From a parked car, looking through a scope or binoculars, I spent countless hours watching fox families. There is no happier sight in the world of nature than young foxes gambolling together or playing tag with their parents. One of these delightful scenes was rudely interrupted when a coyote rushed up. Fortunately, the vixen had spotted the danger in time and sounded a warning from the nearby bushes. The alarm bark of a fox is quite different from the bark of a dog and sounds more like the hoarse scream of a peacock. A few days later, this den was de-

serted and I picked up the severed tail of one of the pups lying on the ground. As described in my book *Wild Hunters*, I often watched coyotes chasing foxes, or foxes attempting to lead their aggressive nemesis away from the denning area. Sometimes farm dogs played a critical role in these canid hostilities.

At the time little was known about fox behaviour in Canada, but the Edmonton public library included books from England. There, as a popular subject of myth and folklore, the wily fox was renowned for its tricks in staying ahead of a pack of baying hounds and a horse-mounted party of ladies and gentlemen in a cultural event called the hunt. What English naturalists knew about foxes turned out to be misleading. For instance, some stated that the adult male, which they called the dog fox, did not take part in bringing food to his mate or the pups. Others erroneously argued that all North American foxes were descended from a batch of British foxes that the immigrants had imported and released into Pennsylvania. American foxes were not considered a sporting target, because instead of running when chased by the local hunt club, the native foxes would make their escape by climbing a tree. Tree climbing is indeed a habit of the gray fox of eastern North America.

In clear contrast to British opinion, the adult male foxes that I watched took an active part in provisioning the vixen and her family. Furthermore, at several dens I saw three different foxes bringing food to the pups. Around the same time as I published these observations of helpers at Alberta den sites, one British researcher made a similar discovery during his studies of captive foxes in a fenced enclosure.

In his 1920s book *Wild Animals I Have Known*, the great Manitoba naturalist Ernest T. Seton wrote that the lives of wild animals always end in tragedy. Some of my foxes succumbed to chicken baits treated with gopher poison. One was caught in a steel snare set in the entrance of its den. Others were shot, and an unknown number of foxes and coyotes were killed by greyhounds released from trucks by persons driving the back roads. This sport was eventually made illegal in the province.

Today, members of the Edmonton nature club occasionally report fox sightings in central Alberta, particularly from the St. Albert region. Some decades ago, I commonly found fox tracks within city limits, for instance, on the Whitemud Trail. These urban habitats have now been taken over by coyotes.

Dick Dekker

Fox tracks can be distinguished with certainty from those of the competition by the transverse ridge on the fox's heel pad (see my publications below).

"Denning and Foraging Habits of Red Foxes and Their Interaction with Coyotes in Central Alberta, 1972–1981." *Canadian Field-Naturalist* 97:304–306, 1983.

"Farmland Fox." *Wild Hunters*, pp. 72–104. CWD Publications, Edmonton, 1985.

"Living by its Wits." *Naturalist Painter*, pp. 88–95. Western Producer Prairie Books, Saskatoon, 1980.

"Mortality Rates of Red Fox Pups and Causes of Death of Adult Foxes in Central Alberta." *Alberta Naturalist* 8:65–76, 1976.

"Population Fluctuations and Spatial Relationships among Wolves, Coyotes, and Red Foxes in Jasper National Park, Alberta." *Canadian Field-Naturalist* 103:261–264, 1998.

"Red Foxes in Central Alberta." *Edmonton Naturalist* 3 (5):7–8, 1975.

"Red Foxes Make a Come-back after 30 Years." *Blue Jay* 31:43–44, 1973.

"The Foxy Underdog." *Wildlife Adventures in the Canadian West*, pp. 182–187. Rocky Mountain Books, Calgary, 2002.

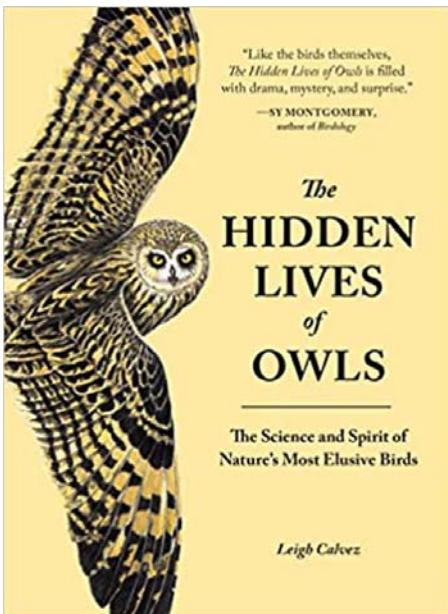


Red Fox pups playing, photo by Brian Genereux

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). To check the availability of eBooks, go to epl.ca and click on “Search.”

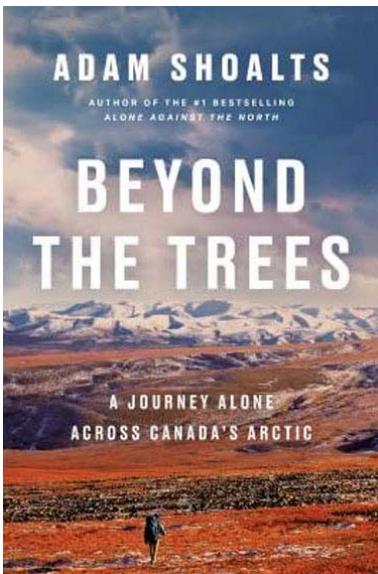
I am looking for more reviews of good nature books to share! This is a great time to curl up with a book and escape the complexities of the day. To suggest additional books of interest to our members, submit a brief review to Karen Lindsay via the ENC website, edmontonnatureclub.org. Click on “Birding,” “Bird Studies,” and “Contact” to send Karen your review.



The Hidden Lives of Owls, by Leigh Calvez

Join Leigh Calvez on her adventures into the world of owl-watching, avian science, and the deep forest in the dead of night when few venture into the woods. This book is packed with information about 11 species of owls. Learn what tool you likely have that you can use for your own field microscope. *The Hidden Lives of Owls* is available from online vendors as a paperback and eBook.

Recommended by Karen Lindsay



Beyond the Trees: A Journey Alone Across Canada's Arctic, by Adam Shoalts

This is the story of Adam Shoalts’ harrowing canoe journey across the Canadian Arctic in 2017... alone. During a journey spanning nearly 4 months, from his starting point in Eagle Plains, Yukon Territory, to Baker Lake, Nunavut, he faced a maze of obstacles: shifting ice floes, swollen rivers, fog-bound lakes, gale-force storms, expanses of jagged twisted rocks, snarling bears, galloping musk-oxen, and more. Adam timed his departure by the breakup of the spring ice, then sprinted across nearly 4,000 kilometers of rugged, wild terrain to arrive before winter closed in.

The book contains beautiful descriptions of Canada’s wildest lands. Use Google Earth while reading to get a real view of the described locations and to follow his progress.

Adam Shoalts has been called one of Canada’s greatest living explorers and in 2018 was named an Explorer-in-Residence of the Royal Canadian Geographical Society. He is also a historian, archaeologist, and geographer, and his book *Alone Against the North* was a #1 national bestseller.

The idea for his journey was in part to celebrate 150 years of Canada’s Confederation, but really arose from a suggestion made to him at a naturalists’ club meeting near Lake Ontario, where he was a guest speaker!

Review compiled from Mike Nash, Amazon, and Karen Lindsay

Dry Island Buffalo Jump

Retired wildlife biologist and amateur paleontologist and geologist Tim Schowalter of Drumheller led a field trip into Dry Island Buffalo Jump Provincial Park on July 29. It was a privilege for five of us to be guided through this spectacular badlands landscape in the Red Deer River valley by someone who knows it well, as there are no formal trails. The value-added was having Tim interpret bones, fossils, rocks, and geological formations for us. Birds we saw included Turkey Vultures, swallows, Rock Pigeons, Mourning Doves, Great Horned Owls, Mountain Bluebirds, and Spotted Towhees, as well as more ubiquitous birds. (The previous night at Tolman Bridge camp-ground we had been entertained by Common Night-

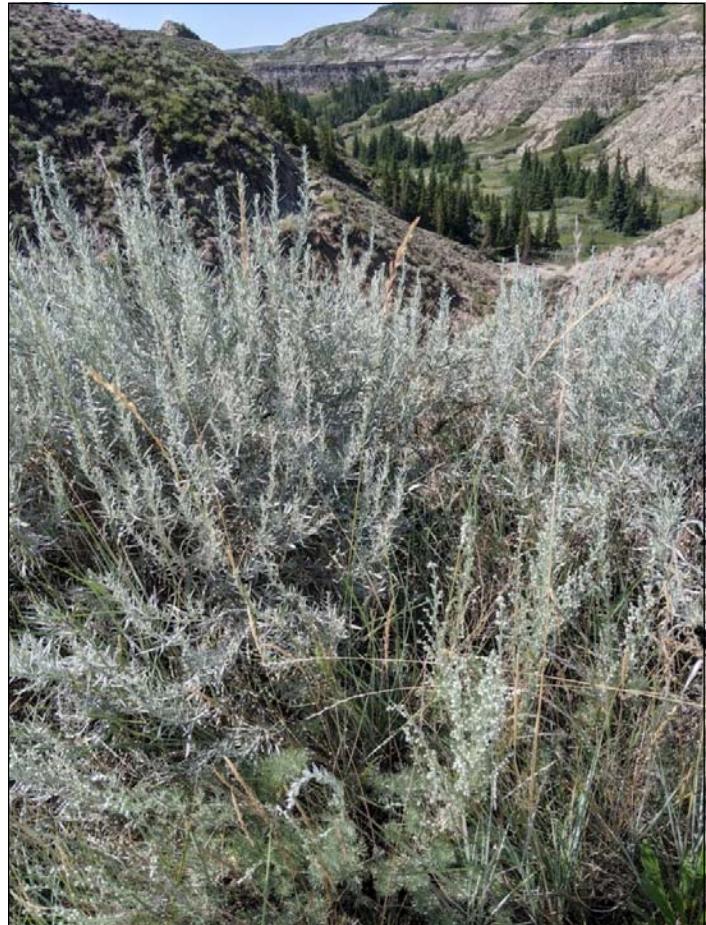
hawks, Brown Thrashers, Spotted Towhees, Grey Catbirds, and American Robins, among other birds, along with Least Chipmunks and Nuttall's Cottontails.) In the park we identified five species of sage; *Artemisia*, just coming into flower; seven species of milk-vetch; the typical subspecies of northern hedsarum; a number of plains grasses; and more. Butterflies of various species got around more easily in the badlands than we did as we scaled gullies or slipped on loose ironstone, and the iconic sound on this hot day was the crepitation of grasshoppers.

Patsy Cotterill



Long-leaved wormwood (*Artemisia longifolia*), a species of hoodoo slopes, also grows in the North Saskatchewan River Valley in Edmonton.

Photos by Patsy Cotterill unless otherwise indicated.



**Silver sagebrush (*Artemisia cana*),
photo by Manna Parseyan**



White prairie-clover (*Dalea candida*) in flower. Purple prairie-clover (*D. purpurea*), which grows in our local grasslands, was also present.



Peculiar fluting (looking like old plant roots) due to erosion on a hoodoo



Hiking the eponymous “dry island,” an outcrop surrounded by dry ravines

Conservation Corner – Issues Near and Far

Local – Trails in the River Valley

Members of the Edmonton Nature Club responded swiftly with emails and letters of protest to a rumour that cycling may be made legal in Edmonton's Whitemud Parks North and South. Hubert Taube, in communication with his ward councillor, Sarah Hamilton, obtained this reply from her office, on July 2:

Administration is aware that City Council has received several inquiries from Edmontonians who are concerned about cyclists in the Whitemud Nature Reserve in terms of both their impacts on the natural environment and user conflicts. Concerns have been expressed that the City will be more permissive about cycling in this area through projects like the Ribbon of Green renewal. This information is not correct.

The Whitemud Nature Reserve is a highly valued natural asset within the North Saskatchewan River Valley and Ravine System. Through both the 2004 South Whitemud Planning Study and 2018 draft Ribbon of Green SW+NE, the Whitemud Nature Reserve has been classified as "Preservation," the highest level of ecological protection. This Classification limits access to foot-based travel and prohibits cycling in ecologically sensitive areas. Administration has no predetermined intentions of reversing that strategic direction.

Even so, I would recommend that naturalists maintain a strong presence and express their opinions when the next Ribbon of Green public consultations come up in which the Whitemud Parks will be included. In general, the City looks favourably upon bicycle commuting and its focus, despite lip service, is far more on the usefulness of the river valley for recreation than on its value as habitat and connectivity for wildlife. Note that the above statement does not define exactly what or where the Whitemud Nature Reserve is.

Despite being against the regulations, cycling in Whitemud Ravine is a common phenomenon. Hubert in his solitary ramblings along west-end and Whitemud trails this spring and summer has done his best to inform and educate the illegal cyclists he encounters. Some responses are polite and apologetic (or blame lack of adequate signage) but other encounters are decidedly unpleasant. One cyclist, careening down the Tufa Springs trail which is signposted no cycling, professed not to know that the City had park rangers, suggested that he had more right to be on the trails than Hubert because the Edmonton Mountain Biking Association (EMBA) built

and maintained these trails, and asserted his right as a tax-paying citizen to be on any City land! Talk about ignorance coupled with a deep sense of entitlement!

From one of these cyclists Hubert learned about the existence of a crowd-sourced website, Trailforks, which provides maps to the city's trail system, many of which are presumably illegal as they far exceed the number shown on the official trail maps. While it may be true that the City looks to EMBA for cooperation in creating and maintaining bike trails, it is clear that EMBA does not, and indeed cannot be expected to, police the trails and their many users. Indeed, I consider EMBA's involvement to be more a case of the fox guarding the henhouse. Hubert was successful at least in getting the Tufa Springs Trail taken off the Trailforks website!

In June I wrote a letter to Council on a separate but related matter: the proliferation of short-distance, user-generated or side trails, which have sprung up everywhere in the river valley and ravines in recent years. Many of these are on slopes and are created by mountain bikers for the thrill of riding up and down steep, often muddy, tracks knotted with tree roots and other hazards (simulated mountains). Others are made by tobogganers and trail runners; some along river or creek edges are pedestrian trails providing a view or access to the water. My letter was passed on to the administration (Parks department) who replied promising better signage and more rangers in the future and boasting the apprehension of one person caught cutting trees for a trail in Mackenzie Ravine. In my letter I proposed a number of other solutions, including physical blocking off of these trails, redefinition of bylaw 2202, and much better systemic education of citizens, that is, not just by means of better signage. I heartily echo Hubert's conclusion in his complaint to his councillor, saying his experiences "clearly illustrate that trail access in our city is misunderstood, often violated, and poorly, if at all, enforced." I encourage all our naturalists to complain to their council member, and if they see anyone cutting vegetation for trails to immediately phone 311 and/or fill in a complaint form with their ward number (e.g., <https://coewebapps.edmonton.ca/contactcouncil/default.aspx?cid=ward5>).

With respect to Ribbon of Green designations of areas in the river valley, it is my personal opinion that their plans will foster the development of side trails. All three designated land use categories in the RoG plan – Preservation, Conservation, and Active Working Landscapes – envisage a network of trails and at least in the latter two zones "a variety of trail experiences." The maps even show trails on both sides of very narrow ravines in the south-

west, indicating that a major objective, expressed also in their open-space policy, Breathe, is easy access to the river valley for recreation. The more access there is via legal trails, the greater the opportunity for creating illegal side trails!

Hubert also regularly patrols Oleskiw, the flat floodplain area between the Fort Edmonton and Terwillegar footbridges. Here several of us in 2016 successfully campaigned to have the asphalt connecting trail located at the base of the escarpment, not along the narrow, natural surface trail along the river. However, with the increased connectivity resulting from the footbridges, cyclists have taken over the riverside trail as well as a convoluted trail on the escarpment close to the Fort Edmonton footbridge, with resultant trail widening and erosion, vegetation loss, and currently, according to Hubert's report, impassable (to pedestrians) mud. Yet the Ribbon of Green staff were aware of these trails, sanctioned them by designating the area as Conservation, and did nothing to foresee or prevent the impact. In my letter to Council I pointed out that the explosive increase in usage the river valley has seen this summer due to COVID-19 presages the situation that will obtain when the City's population has risen to a predicted 2 million. Hence to remove any land from the river valley and ravine system, as with a solar panel development, is madness!

A link was posted in a southeast community newsletter to an article I wrote for the Edmonton Native Plant Society's monthly newsletter, *Wildflower News*, and it elicited a response that is probably typical of the way many people feel. I was called out for being selfish in not wanting to share the trails. This is to frame the issue as one of competition between different recreational users. But my issue is one of competition between humans and nature. The completely anthropocentric viewpoint that prevails is hard to counter, however. Moreover, the idea that there could and should be a real nature reserve in the river valley, with no access by humans, would simply never occur to a large segment of Edmontonians, including politicians.

Provincial – Parks and Protected Areas

Several of us have recently joined conference calls organized by the NDP and the Council of Canadians (with CPAWS Northern Chapter staff as guest speakers) to learn more about provincial parks' closures and divestments and possible alternatives. (The conclusion reached was that the best solution is a change of government!)

An article in the *Edmonton Journal* on July 24 was illuminating. Using a FOIP request to obtain internal government documents and emails CPAWS has uncovered that the UCP did not particularly expect to save money from

the initiative; they were warned that divestment could require payment of operating subsidies or grants to partners. Further, the Minister ignored senior civil service advice to consult with the public, including Indigenous peoples, both on the general program and on specific sites. The rationale the UCP gave for closures was that they had little visitor use, yet data on visitation is lacking.

Please keep up the pressure on the Minister of Environment and your MLA to let them know that you do not support their plan: <https://action.cpaws.org/page/57187/action/2>.

A second article in the *Journal* on July 29, titled "Influx of 'random campers' threatens Bighorn area," reports overuse, destructive behaviour including creation of new trails and braiding of old ones, and trespass on Indigenous lands. Bringing order to recreational uses, and responsible conservation, with the exclusion of industry, to Bighorn Country was, you'll remember, a major plank in the late NDP's environmental strategy. Now, chaos reigns!

So far as I know, however, the parks closures and divestments have not yet taken place. I camped recently in two campgrounds slated for closure, Watson Creek PRA near Cadomin, and Tolman Bridge in the Red Deer River valley, ironically, both busier than I've ever known them. With a huge public outcry, can we get this government to reverse its stand and accept its proper responsibility as guardian and protector of our precious parks and protected areas?

National/International – Declines, Extinctions

This is where things get really grim. Polar bears are expected to go extinct except in the High Arctic by the 2080s, sharks around coral reefs are disappearing, koalas are in trouble in Australia and may go extinct in New South Wales, indeed, wildlife in Australia in general has been clobbered by last year's fires. And on and on... I'm still angry when I recall Chris Thomas' remark in his book *The Inheritors of the Earth* that his daughter won't miss the nature she has never known. There's a term for this: shifting baseline syndrome. I quote:

Shifting baseline syndrome (SBS) is a psychological and sociological phenomenon whereby each new human generation accepts as natural or normal the situation in which it was raised. With ongoing local, regional and global deterioration in the natural environment, this results in a continued lowering of people's accepted norms for these environmental conditions. SBS is thus increasingly recognized as one of the fundamental obstacles to addressing a wide range of global environmental issues faced today....

(Masashi Soga & Kevin J. Gaston, <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/155789559.pdf>).

I wonder, however, if Thomas' granddaughter or great granddaughter, perhaps a contemporary Greta Thunberg, will look at a picture of a polar bear and curse the generations on whose watch it went extinct? We need a knowledge of history, including natural history, to inform present actions so that we can retain valuable heritage into the future.

Further Notes

This is the first time I've tuned in to ENC NatureTalk and I've been amazed at members' passion and knowledge of the natural world and their sharing of it. The care they take in making correct species identifications and commenting on behaviour is laudable. I was particularly impressed by Kim Blomme's advice to the acreage owner who wanted to get rid of house sparrows. Killing one species to save another, especially when the situation is human-caused, is morally distasteful, and it is now being realized that it is the system that has to be mitigated, not the species. The same is true of weeds. It is often not enough to apply a herbicide, one has to change the conditions to make them unfavourable to the growth of weeds. (I only wish it were simple to do so.) I trust that the specialized knowledge (and fantastic photographs) that reside within the ENC will be passed on to a wider audience and will contribute to the cause of conservation.

Patsy Cotterill



User-generated trail on escarpment, Patricia Ravine, May 2019, photo by Patsy Cotterill (above)
Riverside Trail, Oleskiw Park, July 14, 2020, photo by Hubert Taube (below)



Enjoying Nature during the COVID-19 Pandemic

On March 15, 2020, the World Health Organization declared a global COVID-19 pandemic. The ENC executive immediately postponed all club social activities to protect the health and safety of club members. This meant there would be no road trips or city walks for the foreseeable future. As a result, we all had to adapt from getting together to enjoy nature to enjoying nature on our own and getting together through social media.

Club members are using three primary social media tools:

- eBird, a global database of bird sightings, is a project of the Cornell Lab of Ornithology. Learn more at <https://ebird.org/about>.
- ENC NatureTalk is a discussion group sponsored by the Edmonton Nature Club. Learn more at <https://groups.io/g/ENCnaturetalk>. Over the summer more and more members seem to be getting comfortable with this networking tool. Even I, the old Luddite, recognize that as a good thing.
- What's App is a messaging app for cell phones, and participation is by invitation. Learn more at <https://www.whatsapp.com/>.

If we had been able to do field trips and city walks, what might we have been able to share? From a birding point of view, it has been quite an interesting year. My primary tool is eBird, which I use to check hot spots and search for selected species. I actually turned off the eBird alerts, as I found them irritating (Luddite!).

Let's start with Whitemud Creek south, which is one of our frequent city walks. The Barred Owl was actively calling from March until July. Unfortunately, this probably means the bird did not find a mate. I have not seen any mention of young Barred Owls in Whitemud. On May 30, Peter Thompson identified a Connecticut Warbler singing in the ravine. Over the next six weeks I was able to find the bird each time I walked the trail. Based on my last two observations, I am pretty sure the bird nested in the area. Rough-winged Swallows were also present in the area during late June and early July. Another unexpected Connecticut Warbler sighting was at Coyote Lake.

An ENC NatureTalk posting by Ted Hogg on April 12, along with input by several others, had many of us exploring the Quesnell Bridge area when Ted identified Barrow's Goldeneye, Wood Ducks, and Hooded Mergansers on the open water of the North Saskatchewan River.



Barred Owl at Whitemud Creek



Barrow's Goldeneye at Hawrelak Park

Later in April a Barrow's Goldeneye was reported in Hawrelak Park. No other Wood Ducks have been reported to eBird from this area.

An ENC NatureTalk posting by Pauline and Jack Dehaas sent many of us to the Jennifer Heil pond off Highway 16 on April 29 to see the excellent Spring pair of Long-tailed Ducks.

Martin Sharp's ENC NatureTalk posting on April 17 started a string of observers reporting huge flocks of Snow Geese, Ross's Geese (including dark morphs), White-fronted Geese, and Sandhill Cranes.



Golden Plover and Cliff Swallow at Fort Saskatchewan Gravel Pits

The Fort Saskatchewan Gravel Pits have become one of my go-to birding spots ever since Sean Evans introduced me to the area. This spring it was especially productive. I think just about every expected species of duck and water bird was reported, including Western Grebe, Cinnamon Teal, Eurasian Wigeon, and a flock of 16 Surf Scoters. The pond on the west side of the road provided one of the few mud-flat habitats in the Edmonton area. Many other normal shorebird hot spots were flooded due to high precipitation over the winter and spring. Although there were never huge numbers of shorebirds, the range of species was extensive. The list included Black-necked Stilt, American Avocet, Black-bellied Plover, American Golden-Plover, Semipalmated Plover, Killdeer, Whimbrel, Hudsonian Godwit, Marbled Godwit, Red Knot, Stilt Sandpiper, Sanderling, Least Sandpiper, Pectoral Sandpiper, Semipalmated Sandpiper, Short-billed Dowitcher, Long-billed Dowitcher, Wilson's Snipe, Wilson's Phalarope, Red-necked Phalarope, Spotted Sandpiper, Solitary Sandpiper, Greater Yellowlegs, Willet, Lesser Yellowlegs, American Bittern, and White-faced Ibis.

Murray Marsh, northwest of St. Albert, was similarly challenged by high water, but a Dunlin and White-rumped Sandpipers were reported there. At the Gravel Pits a Mew Gull was reported on May 1. During rainy days on May 21 and 22 a huge flock of mixed swallows were feeding over the ponds and sitting on the fences. All five swallow species were reported.



The Strathcona Wilderness Centre (SWC) was closed until around the first week of May. It is another one of my go-to places on the east side of Edmonton for woodland birds. In an ENC NatureTalk posting on May 15, Connor Charchuk reported he went for a stroll at the SWC and found good trails and some nice habitat. Connor has an amazing knowledge of bird calls and posted several Dawn Chorus quizzes that got me listening more selectively for warblers. The following species were reported at the SWC: Ovenbird, Northern Waterthrush, Black-and-white Warbler, Tennessee Warbler, Orange-crowned Warbler, Mourning Warbler, Common Yellowthroat, American Redstart, Cape May Warbler, Magnolia Warbler, Yellow Warbler, Blackpoll Warbler, Yellow-rumped Warbler, Wilson's Warbler, Baltimore Oriole, Rose-breasted Grosbeak, Veery, Hermit Thrush, Swainson's Thrush, and Saw-whet Owl. On June 21 a Cinnamon Teal was reported at SWC. The downside of having good warbler bush on the east side of Edmonton was that I did not make it to the Grey Nuns White Spruce Park in St. Albert.

In early May, there was a build-up of Bonaparte's Gulls on Hasting Lake. Quite a number of birders started reporting eBird lists for the area. On May 18 Gerald Romanchuk and Vincent Cottrell reported a Little Gull and on May 19 they reported an Arctic Tern. Unfortunately, the birds were just beyond the reach of good photos with 500 mm and 600 mm lenses. Over the May long weekend, large groups of birders, socially distanced, were scoping the lake for birds. Notable species included Little Gull, Arctic Tern, Common Tern, Forester's Tern, Sabine's Gull, Surf Scoter, White-winged Scoter, and a possible Jaeger. A Sabine's Gull also spent a few days recuperating from an injury on a pond in Sherwood Park. On July 11, Kimberley Fulton submitted an eBird report of a Great Egret with the Black-crowned Night-Herons and Great Blue Herons nesting on Hastings Lake. The bird seems to have stayed in the area for only a few days, as only two other eBird observations were submitted.



Sabine's Gull in Sherwood Park

Brian Stephens and I have made a trip to Long Lake for the spring warblers for the last two years. On June 1 this year we agreed to maintain the tradition, but to socially distance by travelling separately in our own vehicles. Long Lake was a bit of a disappointment, as we did not find the Connecticut Warbler or Black-throated Green Warbler. We had better luck at Sir Winston Churchill Provincial Park on Lac la Biche. Brian and I went back to Long Lake and North Buck Lake after Percy Zalasky reported on eBird that the Connecticut Warbler had moved to an area near the gate on the ski hill road and a Caspian Tern was on North Buck. The eBird hotspots indicate that it was a good year for warblers; many people went on one-day trips or took advantage of the campgrounds at Long Lake, Sir Winston Churchill, and Cold Lake after they opened on the first of June.

***Bay-breasted Warbler at
Sir Winston Churchill Provincial Park***

Gerald Romanchuk and Colleen Raymond submitted an eBird report on June 20 that included Yellow Rails, White-faced Ibis, and Nelson's Sparrows in the Hay Lakes area, which quickly developed into an eBird hotspot. The species reported included Yellow Rail, Virginia Rail, Willet, Black-necked Stilt, American Avocet, Wilson's Phalarope, White-faced Ibis, Bobolink, Meadowlark, Sedge Wren, Nelson's Sparrow, Short-eared Owl, and Peregrine Falcon. On July 29 Gerry Fox reported through the ENC NatureTalk that he and James had observed a flock of 237 White-faced Ibis feeding in a field in the area.

The second road trip Brian Stephens and I have made in other years has been to Dry Island Buffalo Jump. This year we went on July 7, but decided to go a bit further afield to the Hanna area and then check the Tolman Bridge area and Dry Island Buffalo Jump on our way back. Again we socially distanced in two vehicles. When we went to Long Lake we thought we could get by without radios, but that did not work out. This trip we tried





Willet and Nelson's Sparrow in Hay Lakes area



using the voice-activated car/cell phones, but they gave too slow a response time for birders. Brian had learned from Connor Charchuk on What's App the location of a Baird's Sparrow sighting. As we headed south from Holden, I spotted a Loggerheaded Shrike on the wire. We quickly discovered how brutal it was to use the car/cell phones to communicate. We proceeded to the Baird's Sparrow location and quickly recognized the bird. A bonus at this stop was several Sprague's Pipits singing high overhead. Other highlights for this trip included Ferruginous Hawks, Brown Thrashers, Grasshopper Sparrow, Rock Wren, Spotted Towhee, and Violet-green Swallow. Martin Sharp reported on ENC NatureTalk on July 17 that he had driven the Coronation/Spondin/Hanna area. He posted an impressive list of 37 species which included Western Kingbirds.

There are many other interesting locations and sightings, and other contributors to the local eBird community and ENC NatureTalk that I have failed to recognize. I apologize for that, and hope our paths will cross. So far, 2020, the year of COVID-19, appears to be a very good birding year even if ENC members have not been able to share experiences through field trips and city walks. Please trust the networking tools and continue to share your experiences with each other.

Chris Rees

Ferruginous Hawk at Coleman Lake

All Photos by Chris Rees



Brown Thrasher at Prairie Oasis Campground
Photo by Chris Rees