

# THE PARKLAND NATURALIST

SEPTEMBER-DECEMBER 2020



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EDMONTON NATURE CLUB

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*Juvenile Harris Sparrow, Centennial Park*



*Juvenile Cooper's Hawk, Lacombe Lake Park and ravine*

## Enjoying Nature During a Pandemic

Covid-19 did not go away with the summer. All ENC activities remain on hold, including group City Walks and Road Trips. Many of us continue to use the required (anti-) social distancing as an excuse to go birding, and we continue to use eBird, ENC NatureTalk, WhatsApp, and personal contacts to stay in tune with the many exciting birds that are being found. One good development for the club is that ENC NatureTalk is being increasingly used for non-birding communications. There have been many good discussions about plants, bugs, frogs, and flowers. The second half of the year for birders has been very interesting. My primary focus remains the Edmonton region, but provincially there have been some amazing sightings: Ruff, Purple Sandpiper, Red Phalarope, and Yellow-billed Loon.

Let's look at some of the highlights from the last half of the year.

The fall warbler migration is a major birding event in the Edmonton area. Many eBird "hotspots" in the city provide for excellent warbler, flycatcher, and vireo sightings. Some of the popular areas for City Walks in the past included Whitemud North, Whitemud South, Hawrelak Park, Emily Murphy Park, Grey Nuns White Spruce Park in St. Albert, Lacombe Lake Park and ravine, Ravencrest Golf Course, Goldbar Park, and Heritage Wetland Park.

Lacombe Lake Park and ravine was one of the more popular locations this fall. The first warbler reports started around August 11. The long list of birds observed includes Olive-sided Flycatcher, Western Wood Peewee, Blue-headed Vireo, Philadelphia Vireo, Warbling Vireo, Red-eyed Vireo, Ovenbird, Northern Water Thrush, Black and White Warbler, Tennessee Warbler, Orange-crowned Warbler, Nashville Warbler, Mourning Warbler, Common Yellowthroat, American Redstart, Cape May Warbler, Magnolia Warbler, Bay-breasted Warbler, Blackburnian Warbler, Yellow Warbler, Chestnut-sided Warbler, Blackpoll Warbler, Palm Warbler, Yellow-rumped Warbler, Black-Black-throated Green Warbler, Canada Warbler, and Wilson's Warbler. A family of Cooper's Hawks in the ravine also made for interesting sightings.



*Warbling Vireo, Lacombe Lake Park and ravine*



*Juvenile Mourning Warbler, Lacombe Lake Park and ravine*



*Magnolia Warbler, Heritage Wetland*

**On the Cover:**

**Ovenbird, Goldbar Park, photo by Chris Rees**

On August 14 Vivek Dabral and his daughter reported an adult Whooping Crane in the Bittern Lake area on eBird. The Bittern Lake area has been one of the club's Road Trip destinations many times in the past. Over the next few days birders from all over the province were lining up along RR 222 to view this "lifer" bird. Andy Ross consulted the Canadian Wildlife Service about the bird, and the response he posted on ENC NatureTalk was as follows. "It was banded as a juvenile in Wood Buffalo in 2019, so it is a year-old non-breeding bird. The tracker is still functional and it appears it's been hanging around Bittern Lake for several weeks. Non-breeding birds summering on the prairies are usually more common in Saskatchewan but there are at least 3-4 birds hanging around Alberta this summer."



*Whooping Crane near Bittern Lake, photo by Andy Ross*

On September 3, Gerry and James Fox reported a Cattle Egret at Whitford Lake on eBird. They noted that the bird was first reported by Brian Genereux. Whitford Lake has



*Cattle Egret on Maui*

been another of the club's Road Trip destinations. Over the weekend many of us headed out to see the bird. I have always said birding is based on random intersections in the time-space continuum. Without talking to each other, Brian Stephens and I arrive at the intersection just west of Whitford Lake at exactly the same time! Brian came from the south and I came from the west. Seeing the Cattle Egret brought back fond memories of Maui.

Warbler migration is usually over around the end of September. However, on September 26, Wayne Oakes posted to eBird a Black-throated Blue Warbler at the mouth of Whitemud Creek. On October 21, Vincent Cottrell posted to eBird a Northern Parula in Kinnaird Ravine. Both these birds are way northwest of their normal ranges and provided a great opportunity for birders to meet each other. The Black-throated Blue Warbler left within a few days. The Northern Parula hung around longer and was last reported on October 31. Many of us hope it took advantage of the good weather over that weekend to head for a warmer location.



*Black-throated Blue Warbler, Whitemud Park*



*Northern Parula Warbler, Kinnaird Ravine*

Brian Stephens and I did manage to get together for two shorter road trips this fall to Genesee Lake, Keephills Pond, and Wabamum. We have purchased walkie-talkies so communication while driving was much easier. The lakes are usually good places to see scoters and loons. On the first trip we found Surf Scoters and a possible Black Scoter, plus a Common Loon. There were large numbers of Western Grebes on all the lakes. Andy Ross posted to ENC NatureTalk on October 10 that he had found all three scoters – Black, Surf, and White-winged – on Genesee Lake. Other birders had reported Pacific Loons on the lake. I did a third trip by myself two weeks later and was able to find two Pacific Loons on Genesee Lake.

Sparrows are also part of the fall migration. We often take them for granted, as many also breed in the area. Two sought-after fall sparrow migrants are the Fox Sparrow and the Harris Sparrow. Fox Sparrows were reported this fall in Whitemud North, Whitemud South, Goldbar Park, Grey Nuns White Spruce Park, Lacombe Lake Park, and at Islet Lake. On October 9, I made my contribution to the fall birding by posting a Harris Sparrow on eBird and the ENC NatureTalk. The bird was feeding on a picnic table at Centennial Park in Sherwood Park. My previous sightings of Harris Sparrow had been quite brief, but this bird stayed around for several days. At first it was quite shy, but it soon became very bold. Percy Zalasky observed that it became the table boss. Many birders were able to share an experience watching the bird over the Thanksgiving weekend.

***American Pipit, RIS wetland***



On October 10, Edward McKen posted a Varied Thrush in Goldbar Park to eBird. The bird stayed only briefly, but other birders found a large group of robins, several Hermit Thrushes, and a Fox Sparrow, and I found a very late Ovenbird. Gold Bar Park is one of the City Walks the club enjoys in late fall and early winter. On November 9, Vincent Cottrell identified eleven species of ducks, including a Wood Duck, on the river. Gerald Romanchuk, Steve Knight, and I each added one more, bringing the total number of duck species to fourteen for November. Not bad!



***Hermit Thrush, Goldbar Park***

It was not a great fall for shorebirds. At best it could be described as intermittent, as most of the good local mud flats remained flooded. There were reports from the flooded fields north of Morinville, the Fort Saskatchewan Gravel Pits, and along RR 222 south of Wye Road. On September 11 Percy Zalasky posted shorebirds at a wetland by the RIS building on 50th Street. This became a birder and photographer hotspot for the next couple of weeks. In addition to shorebirds there were American Pipits, Yellow-rumped and Palm Warblers, Lapland Longspurs, and a Rusty Blackbird. Several species of raptor also were observed: Peregrine Falcon, Northern Harrier, Sharpshinned Hawk, Cooper's Hawk, and Merlin. Some shorebirds and pipits and a large flock of Rusty Blackbirds were also reported along the Big Lake Interpretive Trail.



**Rusty Blackbird, Big Lake Interpretive Trail**

There were two rare gull sightings this fall. On October 9, Vincent Cottrell posted a Mew Gull at Rundle Park to eBird. Several birders found the bird over the next few days. On October 25, Alfred Scott posted a Glaucous Gull at Pylypow Wetlands to eBird. The next morning many local birders were able to observe and photograph the impressive gull. I missed this one because I had headed west to look for Spruce Grouse and possibly owls. It had me seriously rethinking my Luddite ways by turning on the eBird daily alerts for Edmonton. I did have a successful day for the Spruce Grouse. I found two picking up gravel in the dry gravel under a pump jack platform. The surrounding area had heavy snow cover. One of the birds flew off as I drove up, but the second bird provided a good photo op. I hoped the birds would return for gravel, but did not locate the grouse again on subsequent visits.



**Mew Gull, Rundle Park**



**Spruce Grouse, Cynthia area**

The almost unbelievable happened on November 12. Around 3:30p.m., Vincent Cottrell phoned me to say a Northern Hawk Owl and a Great Gray Owl had been sighted in a known Edmonton area hotspot. I drove over and saw the Northern Hawk Owl immediately as I entered the parking lot. Several birder/photographers were observing the bird.

I said hello to the group, took some photos, and headed in to find the Great Gray Owl. After waiting a few minutes for a cow moose to clear the trail, I found the Great Gray and along with two other birder/photographers took some photos. As we left, with the light failing, the owl plunged into the grass and caught a meadow vole. Wow!

Once again, there are many other interesting locations, sightings, and contributors to the local eBird community and ENC NatureTalk that I have failed to recognize. I apologize for that. The year 2020, the year of Covid-19, continues to be a very good birding year, even if ENC members have not been able to get together formally to share any outdoor experiences.

Please continue to use the networking tools and share your findings with each other until we can once again head out on City Walks and Road Trips.

**Chris Rees, ENC Outdoor Program Director**

*All photos by Chris Rees unless otherwise indicated.*



*Northern Hawk Owl, Edmonton area*



*Great Gray Owl, Edmonton area*

## President's Message, December 2020



**Our President, Brian Stephens**

This has been a difficult year, but many people are finding ways to safely enjoy the outdoors. While our indoor and outdoor programs remain suspended, we have begun using Zoom presentations for programs about nature. The initial experience has been positive, with good participation numbers.

Based on our AGM financial review, the club is still on a secure footing. As restrictions and the scale of the Covid-19 pandemic change, we may begin some outdoor program activities.

### AGM 2020

We were able to hold our AGM through Zoom on October 21. Thirty individuals attended. We reviewed our activities, our membership status, our financial position, and the Edmonton and Area Land Trust activities.

We elected the executive for the upcoming year and reviewed our appointed members. Sean Evans has moved from Executive Director to Treasurer, Karen Lindsay has become an Executive Director, and Chris Rees has taken on responsibility for the Outdoor Program. We welcome Alana Tollenaar as Indoor Program Director. We also elected Alan Hingston and Heather Ronnes as auditors for next year. Emily Gorda continues to look after Instagram and Marnie Evans our Facebook page. For a complete list of the executive for 2020/2021 see page 9.

*Thanks: to Toby-Anne Reimer, who acted as co-host for the Zoom, Alan Hingston for his many years of work on the indoor program, and Katherine Madro for her service as Treasurer, especially over the past year.*

### Upcoming Year

Our indoor program remains suspended, although we are now doing some virtual presentations. Outdoor walks may be restarted soon, but car-pooling trips are still suspended.

### Brian Stephens

**Whitemud Ravine South, Photo by Brian Stephens**



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# The Parkland Naturalist

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## Membership

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

### Membership Rates for 2020/2021

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

## Appointed Board Members

### Program

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## Cooking Lake, 2020: Fourteen Years of Bird Surveys

This past year, between ice break-up and freeze-up, I visited Cooking Lake once or twice a week, concentrating on the same stretch of shore west of County Road 214. The previous year's snow run-off had been high enough to bring the water up into the shore vegetation, and the spring of 2020 turned out to be quite wet. To monitor how far the lake would rise, I frequently checked the former avocet islet along the mid south shore (see previous issues of *The Parkland Naturalist*).

Avocets were absent or very scarce this year, and few California Gulls fledged any young. As it was last year, the islet was inhabited by a pair of Canada Geese, although they were eventually forced to abandon the spot. Other pairs, which probably nested higher up on the shore, were more successful. On July 3, six families, each with two or more goslings, were swimming by.

The weather was generally very windy. After days with strong northwesterlies, the south shore became lined with a strip of foam, here and there half a metre thick. I had noted this phenomenon in other years, and wondered about pollution from agricultural chemicals. But my worries were allayed by club member Chris Rees, a chemist by profession. He said that the foam was caused by wave action when the alkaline water containing plant-based surfactants was washed against the shore. He provided me with a reference, "Foam on Surface Waters," published by Alberta Environment. On May 9 and again on September 26 the drifts were particularly prominent and resembled snow drifts.

Apart from a scattering of ducks and small grebes, there were very few birds around. A lone Red-winged Blackbird was seen to chase the odd female, and just once or twice a day I was passed by a Northern Harrier. Like the spring migration, the return movement of Arctic shorebirds was a complete dud.

This past year the birding season turned out to be very different from that of previous years. For instance, in the spring of 2009 when I began my surveys, the muddy shores were swarming with sandpipers and a variety of species. Farther out on the lake, great flocks of Red-necked Phalaropes were attended by Peregrines and Merlins. On the wide mud flats by the narrows I came across a family of Piping Plovers. Elsewhere, a rare Snowy Plover was photographed by Gerald Romanchuk.

Drastic but temporary differences in habitat add to the challenge of writing realistic nature guides about popular birding sites. Some years ago, I recall meeting a party of ecotourists from Switzerland who had included famous

Beaverhills Lake on their western Canadian itinerary. I found them standing forlornly at Francis Point, with no water in sight.

In 2020, Cooking Lake was frozen over by the third week of October, much earlier than usual. On my last visit before the first snow fell, my car failed to start and had to be towed back to Edmonton. Covid regulations prohibited passengers from riding along, so I had to phone son Richard to come and get me. The delay gave me several hours to hang around on the parking lot, during which my memories went back to the time of my first visits to the lake.

Prior to 1964 when Irma and I immigrated to Edmonton, I had lived in Calgary for a couple of years. There, I discovered the seasonal migrations of Golden Eagles in the foothills west of the city. After our move to central Alberta, I focused on Bald Eagles. Cooking Lake was particularly suitable for watching eagles during the fall and early winter, because the water level was much higher then, and while sitting in the parked car at the end of RR 214, I could oversee the frozen lake through binoculars or telescope. There were no trees to block the view. Apart from counting the eagles, my main objective was to see them hunt and catch ducks that for some reason had not yet flown south.

The following article is a review of my twenty years of observation, 1964–1983.

### Dick Dekker



*Bald Eagle, photo by Dawne Colwell*

## Bald Eagle Migrations and Hunting Habits in Central Alberta



Half a century ago, when Irma and I settled in Edmonton, pesticide poisoning of raptors was a worldwide concern. The American Bald Eagle had already become scarce over its continental breeding range. A few years earlier, while living in Calgary, I had seen many eagles – golden as well as bald – migrating along the Rocky Mountain foothills, and wintering Bald Eagles were still common along open stretches of the Bow River east of the city. But how the species was doing in Canada's vast boreal hinterland was not exactly known. A topical question raised by the scientific community was whether these eagles were still fledging young, or whether their progeny had been compromised by the toxic residues of chemicals used in agriculture and other industries.

The move to central Alberta opened up a new opportunity

for Bald Eagle watching. From 1964 onward and continuing for the next 20 years, I kept notes of all eagles sighted in the lake-studded parklands east of the city. Fall migration began in the second week of September and lasted until the end of December. Return flights took place from mid-March to mid-May. Most of my observations were made around Beaverhills Lake, but during late fall and early winter, I spent many days at Cooking and Hastings Lakes. Their water level was about two or more metres higher than today, and some county roads gave open access onto the shore. Sitting in the parked car, I scanned the partly frozen lake through binoculars or a telescope in the hope of observing eagle interaction with the last of the ducks.

The following information is gleaned from my 1984 pa-

per in *Blue Jay* (42:199–205), published by the Saskatchewan Natural History Society. During the fall migration period, I spent a total of 463 days afield, compared to 435 days in spring. The respective numbers of eagles sighted were 626 and 187, which amounts to 1.35 sightings per day in fall and 0.43 per day in spring.

The fact that I saw a lot more eagles on their way south than coming back in spring needs an explanation. Part of the reason might be that the migrants were subject to a high mortality rate on their wintering grounds. But the main reason is that the fall movement is quite leisurely, with the eagles stopping off on Alberta's prairie lakes to hunt waterfowl. By contrast, in spring, the adults hurry to reach their northern breeding grounds in competition with other pairs.

The good news coming out of my twenty-year project was that the south-bound flights included a remarkably high percentage of immature eagles. The fall data were as follows: 231 immatures, 215 adults, and 180 unclassified birds. The percentage of immatures was even higher during the return migration: 116 immatures, 47 adults, and 24 unclassified Bald Eagles.

Bald Eagles spend most of their day in idleness, just sitting on a tree for hours on end or soaring in the blue. Their lifestyle is geared toward energy conservation. With a staple diet of fish, their winter menu includes any kind of carrion, and where Bald Eagles are attracted to concentrations of waterfowl, they are known to pick off ducks and geese crippled by hunters. Apart from robbing gulls and parasitising peregrines, they aggressively compete with each other and fight over the smallest bits of food. Yet, once they shake off their lethargy, Bald Eagles are very capable hunters of waterfowl.

If approached directly, ducks and geese take to the air, but when the lakes begin to freeze up, and the remaining waterfowl are concentrated in patches of open water, they seem reluctant to flush. Some or most of these laggards might be sick or crippled. I have seen flightless ducks leave waterholes on their own, walking or sliding along the ice on their way to the shore. A few managed to reach and hide in the reeds, others were intercepted by eagles. One was killed by a coyote.

By mid-November there might be more than a dozen migrating eagles resting on the ice of Cooking Lake. My highest day count was November 11, 1977, when there were 15 eagles on Cooking, 7 on Hastings, and 5 on Beaverhills. From time to time, one of them flew toward swimming ducks. Whether or not these flights represented a serious attempt at capture was not always clear. If the eagle passed over massed ducks at a height of one metre or less, I counted that as a hunt. Of 118 such

flights, 60 involved swoops at diving or splashing targets, 9 included a brief hover, and 3 resulted in a short pursuit of fleeing birds. Fourteen of these attacks ended in a catch, representing a success rate of 12 per cent. On 15 additional occasions I saw eagles carrying or eating ducks which might have just been caught. Prey theft and aerial chases were common. Most food items "changed hands" repeatedly. If a prey-carrying eagle was forced to drop its duck, the item was often retrieved by another eagle in the air before it hit the ground. Intraspecific piracy and commensal feeding were also routine at Boundary Bay on the Pacific coast near Vancouver, where wintering Bald Eagles have become super abundant.

During November 1976, the waterholes in Cooking and Hastings Lakes were about 300–400 metres distant from my point of observation and remained open later than in other years, which created exceptional opportunities for detailed observation. Following are some examples of successful hunts showing a variety of methods.

November 6, 1976. 11:00. Hastings Lake. Flying at a height of about 10 metres against a strong wind, an adult eagle approached an open waterhole in which some 100 ducks, mostly Lesser Scaup, were massed together and splashing about. A lone female Mallard flushed well ahead of the eagle and dropped back into the water just after the eagle had passed by. In a very swift manoeuvre the eagle doubled back and seized the Mallard.

November 14, 1976. 12:30. Cooking Lake. An adult Bald Eagle, which had been standing on the ice for some time, flew at a height of 2–3 metres to a waterhole. About 80 ducks standing on the edge of the ice, mostly Lesser Scaup, hurriedly entered the water. The last bird, a drake scaup, was seized by the eagle in one foot.

November 20, 1976. 13:00. Cooking Lake. Two immature Bald Eagles hovered against a strong wind 2–3 metres over a waterhole. They were approached by an adult eagle that landed on the ice nearby. The immatures each swooped several times at the same duck, probably a female Mallard, which dived each time. After a brief rest on the ice, the two immatures resumed the attack until one of them plunged into the water and lay on the surface, wings extended. After half a minute, it rose, holding a duck in its feet. Landing on the ice, it was rushed by the adult eagle. The duck was released and escaped into the water. Presently, the two immatures again hovered over the waterhole, swooping alternatively until one of them plunged down. Rising with apparent difficulty and swooped at by the other immature, it dropped the duck. After a rest, the two eagles resumed hovering with the same result as before. One of them plunged into the water to lie on the surface for half a minute. When it rose, holding the duck, the eagle had trouble getting out of the wa-

ter and twice fell back. On the ice, the wing-flapping duck was surrendered to the adult, which killed and consumed it, flanked by the two immatures. A third immature cleaned up the leftovers.

In several interactions, Bald Eagles attempted to overtake ducks that flushed at close range, pursuing them until the target abruptly changed course. On November 13, 1978, an immature eagle flushed a flock of ducks from a waterhole at Hastings Lake. All ducks returned to the water except one that flew out over the frozen lake, climbing at first, then dropping low over the ice, to be chased by an immature and an adult eagle. In a close pursuit of some 800 metres, the adult and the immature alternately seized the duck, holding on for a minute. When the other eagle swooped at the one holding the prey, the duck was released and flew on. It eventually reached the cover of shore vegetation.

Apart from their focus on waterbirds, the Bald Eagles opportunistically added small mammals to their diet. On April 10, 1966, I watched four immatures standing on the ice of Beaverhills Lake, facing a muskrat. Over some 20 minutes, the rat defensively dodged five or six pounces until the eagles gave up the siege. On April 8, 1972, four immatures, plus one adult Bald Eagle and one Golden Eagle, were picking up meadow voles that had been flooded out of their burrows by snow melt. Numerous gulls, crows, and harriers were taking part in the feast. In Jasper Park, I once saw an adult Bald Eagle feeding on a rabbit, still in its white winter fur, which must have been an eye-catching target on a snow-free slope.

In the intervening years, the return of the Bald Eagle to its former breeding range across North America ranks among the greatest conservation stories of our time.

**Dick Dekker**

*Oil painting (page 11) by Dick Dekker, photo of painting taken by Richard Dekker*



*As hunters of waterfowl, immature Bald Eagles are less capable than adults, and they fight over every piece of food. In this action photo, harassed by two contenders, the top eagle has just released a small prey, while one of its pursuers is turning to catch the falling item before it hits the ground.*

**Photo by Miechel Tabak**

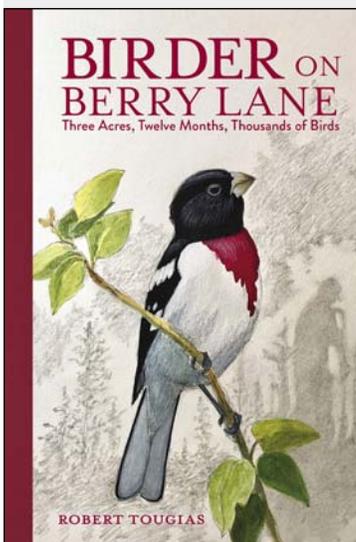
## The Armchair Naturalist

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](http://epl.ca) and click on “Search.”

**I am out of book recommendations!** 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](http://edmontonnatureclub.org). Click on “Birding,” “Bird Studies,” and “Contact” to send Karen your review.

A number of people expressed interest in nature journaling so this PN's first book selection is a great example of what you can do even in your own backyard. Space is included at the back of the book where you can begin your own backyard nature journal filled with your observations. Just pick a place and get started!



### *Birder on Berry Lane: Three Acres, Twelve Months, Thousands of Birds*

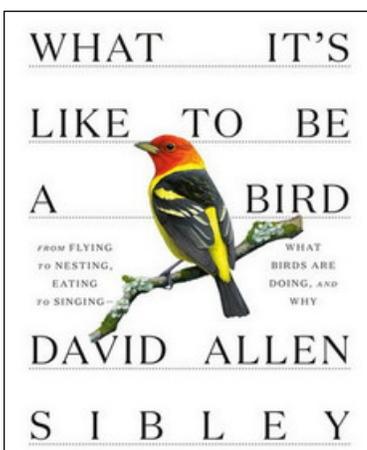
By Robert Tougias, illustrated by Mark Szantyr

This month-by-month guide to the birds that flock to a peaceful New England backyard was written by a noted writer, birder, and naturalist, the author of *Better Birding: Tips, Tools, and Concepts for the Field*.

Robert Tougias reveals the miracles of the ordinary in the subtle changes, season to season, of the ecosystem of the woods, streams, and meadow that make up the sprawling backyard on Berry Lane, including the interactions between the birds and their habitat as well as each other and the other inhabitants. The quietly powerful writing tunes our senses to the change of the seasons, the return of warblers in spring, geese flying south in the fall – all happening on time as they have for eons. (Compiled from Google reviews)

“Robert Tougias proves that if we look, we can see so much more than we think, even in our own backyards.” (Brian Sullivan, eBird project leader, Cornell University)

*Recommended by Karen Lindsay*



### *What It's Like to Be a Bird*

Written and illustrated by David Allen Sibley

“Can birds smell?” “Is this the same cardinal that was at my feeder last year?” “Do robins ‘hear’ worms?” In *What It's Like to Be a Bird*, David Sibley answers frequently-asked questions about the birds we see most often. This special, large-format volume is geared as much to nonbirders as it is to the out-and-out obsessed, covering more than two hundred species and including more than 330 new illustrations by the author. While its focus is on familiar backyard birds – blue jay, nuthatches, chickadees – it also examines certain species that can be fairly easily observed, such as the seashore-dwelling Atlantic Puffin.

“David Sibley’s exacting artwork and wide-ranging expertise bring observed behaviors vividly to life. (For most species, the primary illustration is reproduced life-sized.) And

while the text is aimed at adults – including fascinating new scientific research on the myriad ways birds have adapted to environmental changes – it is nontechnical, making it the perfect occasion for parents and grandparents to share their love of birds with young children, who will delight in the big, full-color illustrations of birds in action. Unlike any other book he has written, *What It's Like to Be a Bird* is poised to bring a whole new audience to David Sibley's world of birds.” (Review by Penguin Random House)

*Recommended by Karen Lindsay*

## Getting Twitchy

This past summer Colleen Raymond and I got pretty twitchy. No, it's not about a new dance move. And no, it's not about an overdose on caffeine. It's about spending parts of the summer going off looking for a bunch of rare birds and lifers.

*Twitching* is a British birding term that basically means to chase down a reported rare bird. Apparently, the term was coined when one particular Brit birder got so excited at the prospect of a new bird that he started to twitch and shake. I'm guessing many of us would get more enjoyment out of finding our own birds, but it's pretty hard to resist twitching when you see several reports of a bird you've been waiting years to see.

For Colleen and me it actually started in early August with a butterfly. We'd heard of the possibility of a Monarch in Olds. At the same time there was a report of a Ruddy Turnstone at Weed Lake east of Calgary. Both would be lifers for Colleen. We decided to try for the turnstone first. No luck. We dipped. *Dipped* is another British birding term. It means missing or not finding your target bird.

While we were eating lunch near Weed Lake, an eBird alert came through. There was a Buff-breasted Sandpiper at Frank Lake. Did we want to drive another hour further south? It would be a lifer for Colleen, and it was being seen right at that moment. So we went for it. Better luck this time! Several birders were there and helped us get on the bird. By this time it was too late to stop at Olds, so we headed home Monarch-less.

The very next weekend we decided to head south again and went straight to Olds. We lucked out and quickly found a Monarch that we believe may have just emerged that morning. We watched it slowly move around for an hour or so. Eventually and suddenly the butterfly lifted off. It was a huge thrill to see a Monarch's first flight!

That morning, an eBird alert showed another Ruddy Turnstone had arrived at Weed Lake. This one was a juvenile. Personally, I was hoping that Colleen's lifer Ruddy Turnstone would be a more colourful adult, but I guess you take what you can get. We left the Monarch and got to Weed Lake. Looking through a large flock of shorebirds, we saw three Ruddy Turnstones, including one striking adult! Two very good shorebirds and a Monarch Butterfly for Colleen in just seven days!

The next twitch didn't go so well. A Cattle Egret was found at Whitford Lake near Andrew. We drove out after work on Thursday, September 3. Other birders were there

and we heard the classic but dreaded, "It just flew." We hung around until dark, but the egret didn't show. Dipped again.

That Saturday we decided to head south once more. A Ruff had been seen repeatedly at a wetland in Calgary. Ruff was a long-time nemesis bird of mine. It seemed like they were seen somewhere in the province almost every year. By everyone but me. Somehow, despite some shaky navigation by yours truly, we got to the parking area. On the kilometre or so walk down to the Ruff spot we ran into a few Calgary birders walking out. One couple seemed friendly enough, but it felt like they were trying to fake us out. They told us about seeing the bird earlier in the morning, but not in the past few hours. We were kinda discouraged. But as we got closer, another lady told us she had just seen it and described the location. All right, that sounded better! Sure enough, we got to her spot and we a bird that looked like a Yellowlegs – but different. A Ruff! Finally!!

Two weeks later another really good shorebird was found at the same wetland in Calgary, a Red Phalarope. I talked to Steve Knight, and he wanted to twitch on that bird too, so the three of us made plans for a Saturday trip. Incredibly, that Friday a report of a Purple Sandpiper north of Calgary came in. This would be the second record ever for the province. It was a no-brainer. We headed south Saturday morning.

As with the Cattle Egret, timing can be everything on a twitch. So imagine our frustration when we were 3 km away from the Purple Sandpiper and we ran into a cattle drive blocking the entire road. Couldn't believe it! The farmers finally turned the cows left and we went straight to the sandpiper spot. Several birders were there, and they helped us find the bird. An extremely awesome bird for Alberta. Sadly, other birders who showed up within an hour after we left dipped. As I said, timing can be everything.

We continued on to Calgary, walked down to the wetland, and found the Red Phalarope almost instantly. It almost seemed too easy. I'd been looking for Red Phalarope for years, and did feel strangely let-down that this one was so easy to see. The Phalarope was in its relatively drab winter plumage, though, so I still have a bird in breeding plumage to look forward to.

The next twitch, on September 28, was way closer to home. Wayne Oakes found a beautiful male Black-throated Blue Warbler at Whitemud Creek. Everything fell together awesomely on the evening we went looking

for it. Colleen had the day off and her car was in the shop. I finished my last job at 3:30 and suggested we could go look for the warbler and still pick up her car before the shop closed. We got to Whitemud and ran into several other birders. No one had seen the bird. We were starting to run out of time when Keith Huang waved us over. He had the warbler! We got on it, managed a few snaps, and even got to the shop in time to get Colleen's car. Whew!

Vince Cottrell found the next twitchable bird, another great discovery right in Edmonton. He was down in Kin-naird Ravine on October 21 and saw a Northern Parula. The species has been seen in Alberta several times, but only recorded once as far north as Edmonton. Luckily, I had time the day Vince found it and got down there for a look. I checked every flock of chickadees, assuming the bird would be in with a mixed group. On the fifth or so flock I almost gave up, but saw a bit of colour. It was the Parula!

Now the next trick was getting the bird for Colleen. We tried one evening after work, but the days were getting so short that by the time we got down there all the birds

seemed to be settling down for the night. We had about an hour to spend there on a Saturday morning, but that wasn't enough time either. On Sunday we had all day. It was a beautiful day. As we walked down the trail, we ran into a group of photographers eagerly shooting something. I told Colleen that had to be it, but it was a Pine Grosbeak. Nice bird, but not what we wanted. We checked further down the trail, going past all the paparazzi. Still no luck. Heading back to all the shooters, we found them working on a Ruby-crowned Kinglet. This had potential – the Parula had often been seen hanging with Kinglets. Soon enough, we caught some quick movement and flashes of yellow and blue. Northern Parula! Colleen and all the others got it.

It turned out Colleen and I did learn a new dance – the lifer dance. And we did need a lot of coffee and caffeine for all the driving. But an incredible summer of lifer birds, a butterfly, and some really good luck made our twitching all worthwhile.

**Gerald Romanchuk**

(With a lot of help from Colleen Raymond)



*"Twitchers" Colleen Raymond and Steve Knight with a "civilian" (non-birder) in the background  
Photo by Gerald Romanchuk*

## Remembering Ray Cromie

A very beloved member of the Edmonton Nature Club passed away five years ago. Ray Cromie was a recipient of the club's Edgar T. Jones Conservation Award and Nature Alberta's Loren Gould Award.

Probably best known as an owl and raptor bander, Ray banded thousands of owls over the years. Many Edmonton-area birders were lucky to experience Ray's generosity, and hundreds of us saw lifers of several hard-to-find owl species directly because of Ray's guidance.

In addition to being an expert on owls, Ray was a very knowledgeable all-round naturalist. He could talk to you about warblers, butterflies, or plants just as easily as about the nesting habitat of Saw-whet Owls.

Ray was a tireless volunteer, always giving presentations to all sorts of groups. He led countless owling field trips for the ENC. These trips were always very popular, as

folks got up-close looks at the whole procedure of finding, catching, processing, and banding birds such as Great Gray and Hawk Owls. Ray's owl display at the club's annual Snow Goose Chase was always a big hit with the children.

But more important than any owls was the way Ray showed us, by shining example, how to be a great leader, mentor, and teacher. How to be a good, generous person. And he did it all with an awesome and charming sense of humour.

Here is a photo of Ray doing what he loved to do, sharing owls with others.

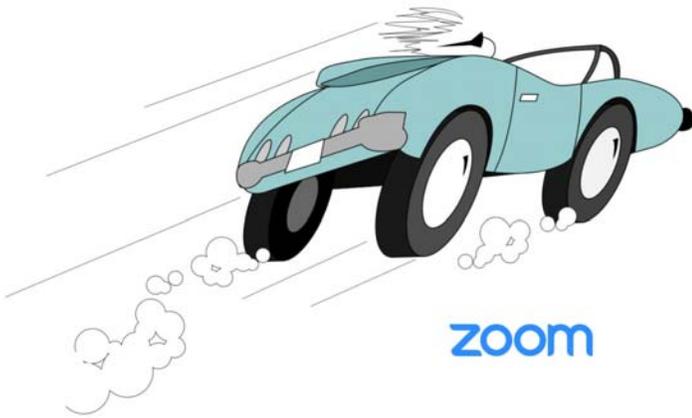
### Gerald Romanchuk

*Note: See article about Ray in the September–December 2015 Parkland Naturalist.*



**Ray Cromie and Brian Stephens holding Long-eared Owlets**  
Photo by Gerald Romanchuk

## 2020: The Year of Zoom



Zoom is not a word I've likely used much in my life, at least not since childhood. Perhaps back in the 1950s while playing with my toy cars and balsa-wood planes, I may have been inclined to urge them to go faster by saying "zoom." I had certainly never heard of Zoom – the software platform for video and audio conferencing, chat, distance education, and social relations. I do recall where I first heard of Zoom and pride myself on my multitasking abilities. I was at the Orokonui Ecosanctuary near Dunedin, NZ, in fall 2017 watching native birds such as the Tui, Bellbird, and Kaka take liquid refreshments from tube feeders. At the same time I was talking to a retired IT specialist at Dunedin University who was telling me about his career and how he had set up the faculty at the University for remote learning using Zoom. "Zoom?" I said absent-mindedly. "Yes," he said, "it's a software platform." Well, you know the rest. He added, "It's very good. You should look into it." Prescient words.

Fast forward to mid-March 2020, and there are two speakers remaining in the Indoor Program series. I'm particularly looking forward to these two presentations: Zoltan Domahidi will be talking about his research on owls in the boreal forest and will be followed in April by Edson Endrigo, a Brazilian bird guide. This meeting had been set up by Nature Calgary and its indoor program coordinator, Phil Cram, who has been guided by Edson on birding tours in Brazil. The plan was that Edson would speak to the Calgary naturalists on Wednesday, and then Phil would bring him to Edmonton on Friday. However, as you are aware, the Covid-19 virus erupted and led to the cancellation of these two presentations. The ENC quickly posted that all its activities and events were suspended on account of the Covid-19 pandemic. This included city walks, field trips, and indoor meetings. I reluctantly notified my King's University contact and cancelled the room bookings for the two remaining meetings. I left the arrangement optimistically open: "We'll be in touch in August to schedule next winter's indoor program."

I had decided after eight years of organizing the indoor program that I would like to step down, if the ENC Executive was able to identify a replacement. As the summer continued, my feeling that life would not return as it had been pre-pandemic intensified. When the pre-AGM executive meeting was scheduled in August, I was pleased to hear that the executive had a candidate replacement for me. Alana Tollenaar had shown interest in the position, and Brian informed me she was young and tech-savvy. At the executive meeting, which was held on Zoom, I was further told that she was experienced in hosting Zoom meetings. The executive discussed the difficulty of putting on events for members, given the Covid restrictions, and how, if Zoom meetings were possible, members would at least be able to hear presentations from speakers in the form of webinars.

I was interested in November to receive notice of the first of the Zoom meetings. Dana Eye, a master's degree student at Thompson Rivers University in Kamloops, would talk on the reproductive ecology of female western rattlesnakes in southern BC. I was provided with a link to the Zoom meeting and useful guidance on how to join and etiquette during the meeting. Upon clicking on the link I was greeted by Alana and could see a number of familiar faces, if they had their video turned on, or their names, if not.

The talk was most interesting. Dana's study area is in the area of the Nk'Mip Desert Cultural Centre in Osoyoos. From photos and satellite images, the area appeared barren, being antelope brush – an endangered habitat of which 68% has been destroyed and only 13% is protected. The purpose of Dana's study was to identify western rattlesnake birthing sites (also known as snake rookeries) and hibernacula (over-wintering den sites) and track their movements and feeding ranges. Western rattlesnakes bear live young (usually 2–5) following a long gestation period. They are found south to Arizona, with BC being at the northern edge of their range. In consequence they have a shorter active season, slower growth rates, and infrequent reproduction. Rattlesnakes are "capital" breeders, a term that was new to me. It means they must reach a threshold of condition to breed, so have to build up their energy stores before breeding. Presumably the analogy is with having "money in the bank."

Dana described the characteristics of birthing and den sites from having tracked the rattlesnakes. Snakes are ectotherms; they need warmth to regulate their temperatures. In consequence, birthing sites generally have slabs of rock for the snakes to sun themselves on, and hibernacula are on south-facing slopes. Recent research was focusing on rattlesnakes in two other areas of the Okanagan

valley farther north at Vernon and White Lake. There are numerous threats to the rattlesnakes, notably road mortality, land use changes leading to tourism development and the planting of vineyards on the hill slopes; and, unfortunately, snakes are still being killed by fearful people. Previous studies had indicated that after giving birth, which can be late in the year (at Osoyoos, August 9–30), female snakes did not feed but went to denning sites. However, Dana found the tracked females did go looking for food and water and that supplementary feeding on mice improved their condition.

The “chat” following the meeting was interesting and entertaining, as it would have been at one of our indoor meetings. Ann Carter identified a new collective noun: a “hissy fit” of snakes in a basket, which was one of the photos shown. Gerald and Colleen managed to bring John Wayne into the discussion, along the lines of what John Wayne would have done, faced with a snake bite. Regardless of how the cowboy hero would have responded, Dana said the correct procedure is to draw a circle around the extent of swelling, write the time down, and then drive to a hospital where medical staff can determine the extent of spread upon arrival. Although approximately 100 people are bitten by snakes each year in Canada, none have died, according to one journal article.



*Snakes in a basket described by Ann Carter as a “hissy fit” of rattlesnakes, photo by Dana Eye*



Our second Zoom talk followed in quick succession a

week later. Tara Russell, Program Director at the Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society (CPAWS) Northern Alberta Chapter, based in Edmonton, gave a presentation titled “Save our Parks.” Earlier this year, the Alberta government announced the planned closure of 20 parks and the delisting of 164 natural areas. These are areas identi-

fied for their recreation and conservation value and protected under provincial parks or natural area legislation. Under the Public Lands Act under which they would now fall, development and different uses would be permitted.

Again, a lively discussion ensued. Zoom participants can type messages into a “chat” feature as they arise, without interrupting a presentation. As moderators, Alana and Brian brought these questions and comments to Tara’s attention at the end of her talk. In response to one query, Tara noted that the Alberta government had initially described the delisted sites as “underutilized,” but it had never provided any evidence of that. A continuing concern was the lack of public consultation and the delays with promises of further details being provided by the government. CPAWS urges ENC members to write letters to their MLAs, request lawn signs (I have seen a number in St. Albert), or make donations.

In between these two presentations I “attended” a Bird Study Group meeting of Nature Calgary. Miles Tindal described a “bucket list” of bird travel to Arctic and Antarctic regions and showed some wonderful photos and shared a number of anecdotes. The Friday before the Edmonton Christmas Bird Count has always been our Birds of Christmas presentation. I just received notice that the speaker will be Dick Cannings, long-time Christmas Bird Count Coordinator for Bird Studies Canada, so I’m looking forward to that presentation.

I have to say that in Alana’s capable hands, the Zoom indoor meetings are working very well. I know that the Bird Study Group will be adopting this format when Geoff Holroyd provides the results of the Edmonton Christmas Bird Count in early January. Zoom meetings hosted by Nature Calgary and the ENC generally attract approximately 50 attendees. A number of regular indoor meeting attendees are missing from our Edmonton Zoom meetings, which I suspect is due to unfamiliarity with the technology. A big benefit of Zoom meetings is that speakers are not restricted to those present in the host city: Dana spoke to us from Kamloops, and I think Miles Tindal was talking from Canmore at the Nature Calgary presentation. A virtual meeting saves the cost of the room rental at King’s University and also avoids the need to drive across town in mid-winter when roads may be hazardous. I know from experience that attendance at meetings in January and February can suffer due to adverse traffic conditions.

If you haven’t attended one of the ENC Zoom meetings, I would encourage you to do so. There are on-line tutorials on using Zoom. As my acquaintance in NZ said, “It’s very good, you should look into it.”

**Alan Hingston**

## Edmonton Christmas Bird Count, 2020

The year 2020 marked the 121<sup>st</sup> Audubon Christmas Bird Count, which took place across the Western Hemisphere between December 14 and January 5. The ABED (Edmonton circle) count took place December 20.

The Audubon Christmas Bird Count is the longest-running citizen science project in North America. In 2019 our 24 km diameter circle was one of 469 participating in Canada. It will be interesting to see how many Canadian circles participate this year.

The weather in Edmonton on December 20 was favourable for a good count, with temperatures ranging from a low of  $-1^{\circ}\text{C}$  at 6:00 a.m. to a high of  $+5^{\circ}\text{C}$  reached at noon and sustained past 2:00 p.m. Winds were light at SW7km/h at 6:00 a.m., increasing during the day to NW31km/h and gusting to 52km/h by noon. Skies were partly cloudy in the morning, clearing by noon. Sunrise was at 8:48 a.m. and sunset at 4:16 p.m. Snow cover was

approximately 18 cm, with bare patches. No precipitation was recorded during the day. The river was frozen, with small open patches.

There were 462 participants this year: 251 feeder watchers and 211 bushbeaters. A silver lining in the Covid-19 pandemic may have been the necessity to assign routes in advance and to limit participation in each group to those within the same family or social “bubble,” which meant there were a greater number of bushbeater parties and a more thorough coverage of the area.

A total of 28,907 individual birds were either seen or heard, with a total of 49 species. Nearly 10,000 more birds were counted than in 2019.

A highlight of the count was sighting a Yellow-rumped Warbler at a local feeder. Congratulations to Linda Capjack. This is the first time a warbler has been observed at the Edmonton Count.

## RESULTS

### A-LIST Expected Birds

Mallard	605	Black-capped Chickadee	3691
Common Goldeneye	267	Boreal Chickadee	35
Grey Partridge	61	Red-breasted Nuthatch	605
Rock Pigeon	805	White-breasted Nuthatch	330
Sharp-shinned Hawk	2	Brown Creeper	16
Cooper's Hawk	3	Golden-crowned Kinglet	5
Northern Goshawk	4	Townsend's Solitaire	3
Bald Eagle	12	American Robin	26
Great Horned Owl	3	European Starling	34
Three-toed Woodpecker	1	Bohemian Waxwing	4591
Downy Woodpecker	430	Cedar Waxwing	20
Hairy Woodpecker	68	Pine Grosbeak	171
Pileated Woodpecker	86	House Finch	1240
Northern Flicker	39	Purple Finch	1
Merlin	17	Common Redpoll	196
Northern Shrike	5	White-winged Crossbill	5
Blue Jay	580	Pine Siskin	154
Black-billed Magpie	3447	Dark-eyed Junco	121
American Crow	79	White-throated Sparrow	19
Common Raven	617	House Sparrow	6368

**B-LIST Difficult Birds**

Canada Goose	132
Common Merganser	2
Barred Owl	1
Black-backed Woodpecker	3
Prairie Falcon	1
White-crowned Sparrow	3

**C-LIST Rare Birds**

Barrow's Goldeneye	1
Eurasian Collared Dove (1)*	
Varied Thrush	1
Yellow-rumped Warbler	1

**Lynn and Arnold Maki**  
 ECBC Coordinator/compilers

*\*The Eurasian Collared Dove was seen during the week of the count and is not included in the count day total.*



*Pine Grosbeak, photo by Wayne Oakes*



*Yellow-rumped Warbler, photo by Linda Capjack*



*Blue Jay, photo by Wayne Oakes*

## Conservation Corner: Social Justice and the Conservation of Names

Warning! This column is going to be politically incorrect. But I figure that at my age, with no reputation and no job to lose, I can afford to be politically incorrect. Popular movements, such as the recent calls for Indigenous reconciliation or for social justice, have a way of effecting change rapidly, but they can also indicate a herd mentality, and the conformity demanded by political correctness has a way of obscuring the complex and nuanced truth.

### De-colonization (the Land Back Movement) and Environmental Justice

I was astonished to unwrap my latest newsletter from the BC-based environmental organization Wilderness Committee and see a massive headline “No Conservation without Justice.” Other headlines included “The Problematic History of Parks,” “Climate Change and Colonialism,” “It’s Time to Honour the Treaties and End Environmental Racism,” and “Indigenous Rights Equals Healthy Ecosystems.” A call-out states: “The future of environmentalism needs to be centred on giving land back and restoring sovereignty to Indigenous people.” Another statement runs: “We have to decolonize existing parks and ensure that Indigenous rights are the foundation of new protected areas.”

It is true that Indigenous peoples suffer more from the effects of White-run industrialization, pollution, logging, and fishing than urban White communities. However, it needs to be recognized that Indigenous people’s interest in land is also primarily economic even if it is for hunting and harvesting, which of course can be sustained by appropriate conservation and stewardship. Allowing for the fact that rural BC may be the hotspot of Indigenous environmental activism, I suggest that many Indigenous peoples elsewhere are now members of a mixed Indigenous-White culture and welcome the same opportunities for industrialization, jobs, and amenities as White people in the modern Western world. I wonder if the Wilderness Committee should consider changing its name. The US Wilderness Act of 1964 defines wilderness as “an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammeled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain.”

Can we be sure that under Aboriginal leadership true conservation, in the sense that the right to survival of non-human species is given priority, will occur? In a September 2017 presentation organized by the Edmonton River Valley Conservation Coalition, I said the following: “Now, no-one denies that the Natives were shabbily treated as a result of colonialism, but the problem is, plant communities and wildlife do not distinguish be-

tween Aboriginals and the White Man: there’s just one species that is the enemy, *Homo sapiens*. Last Sunday I opened my latest issue of *The Walrus* to the first article, ‘Take Back the Parks,’ by Indigenous writer Robert Jago, who calls the appropriation of Indigenous land for parks ‘green colonialism.’ He freely admits that reclaimed land would be used for economic purposes by First Nations, and plays the card of Canadians’ collective guilt over reconciliation. His final sentence is, ‘Wilderness may be a sacred concept to Canadians, but it’s one that must be sacrificed if reconciliation is to have meaning.’” How would this help Canada achieve the conservation goals it is internationally committed to?

My surprise morphed into annoyance when I received my Fall/Winter 2020 issue of *Greenpeace Magazine* and saw the cover: a black fist with the title “No Peace without Justice,” a reference, of course, to the organization’s name. Inside, a third of its pages are devoted to the topic of anti-racism and social justice with reference to Black Lives Matter. Has the social justice movement co-opted the environmental one, or vice versa? This conflation of two separate issues can only lead to confusion. I already give to organizations whose mandate includes social justice; when I donate to environmental organizations I expect the money to be spent on environmental issues.

### Re-writing History and Changing Birds’ Names

Next, I happened across “The Good News Page” (page 10) no less, in the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives (CCPA) November–December 2020 issue. This stated: “In antiracist spirit, the American Ornithological Society has renamed the McCown’s Longspur (after Confederate Captain and slave John P. McCown) the Thick-billed Longspur. Townsend’s Solitaire, Townsend’s Warbler, Bachman’s Sparrow, Audubon’s Oriole, ...Nuttall’s Woodpecker and Cooper’s Hawk are among 149 other 19<sup>th</sup> century bird names to be changed.” I shake my head in wonderment at how identifying a bird as a McCown’s Longspur can promote or celebrate racism in the average birder!

I know almost nothing about Mr. McCown, John Kirk Townsend (though his two sisters produced an anti-slavery pamphlet, apparently), and Rev. John Bachman, and only a smidgin about John James Audubon (admittedly, a quick Wikipedia check on these men did reveal some connections with slavery). But I do know a little bit about Thomas Nuttall (1786–1859). When I left the boreal forest of Manitoba for the southern prairies in the late ’70s, I was struck by how often Nuttall’s name cropped up in so many plant species, either as the specific

epithet, such as *nuttallii* and *nuttalliana*, or as the author of the plant's name with the abbreviation Nutt. after it (e.g., *Amelanchier alnifolia* Nutt., saskatoon).

Who was this guy? As soon as I could, I got hold of Jeannette Graustein's biography of him. An Englishman who found the wilds of the U.S. far more appealing than the tamer landscapes of northern Britain, he was one of several pioneering naturalists, many of whom knew each other and sometimes worked together, who documented the natural history of America in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Nuttall was the quintessential taxonomist; given a few lifetimes he could have classified and described every natural object in the world. He was critical of the voyageurs who spent their spare time carousing when they could have been studying natural history, and of the American government, for not supporting science, but he was saddened by the apparent decline of Indigenous tribes and wished to retain their languages. His life was saved at least once by a Native person. Finding him exhausted, starving, and prepared to die after a long overland exploration, this person paddled Nuttall back by canoe to his base camp and colleagues.

### NACC and the Common Names of Birds

The American Ornithological Society's North American Classification Committee (NACC) is in charge of common names of birds, and mostly their guidelines make sense. On the new push for politically correct names, it has this to say at first: "Proposals to the NACC advocating a change to a long-established English name must present a strongly compelling, well-researched, and balanced rationale." On eponyms (i.e., names referring to historical persons), it goes on: "By itself, affiliation with a now-discredited historical movement or group is likely not sufficient for the NACC to change a long-established eponym. In contrast, the active engagement of the eponymic namesake in reprehensible events could serve as grounds for changing even long-established eponyms, especially if these actions were associated with the individual's ornithological career."

NACC further "declines to consider political correctness alone in changing long-standing English names of birds." But since then has come the reversal, the concession to political correctness: "The present policy document revises this approach to acknowledge that there may be English names that cause sufficient offense to warrant change on that basis alone. *The committee will consider the degree and scope of offensiveness under present-day social standards as part of its deliberations* (italics added). The NACC acknowledges that some words or terms may become secondarily offensive, even when they were not originally intended as derogatory, and sometimes even when there is no direct etymological link be-

tween the original name and its now-offensive connotation." Hmm! I'd like to suggest an alternative viewpoint. That not to honour these pioneering naturalists by identifying their discoveries is disrespectful to them, their dedication to their disciplines, and in many cases to the hardships they suffered to advance knowledge of natural history. One might go so far as to say it is disrespectful to science.

### Scientific Names Are More Conservative

Fortunately, it is not so easy to change scientific names. The NAAC admits that it has no jurisdiction over the Latin names, which are governed by the strict rules of the International Code of Zoological Nomenclature (ICZN 1999), and which (at least, so far) take no account of human sensitivities. (The same is true for plant scientific names, governed by the International Code of Botanical Nomenclature.) Priority is a first rule, that is, the first name for a taxon that was validly published is the one that stands. (In a pre-Internet age you can imagine that there would be considerable replication of names by different naturalists working in different areas but encountering the same organism, and it often proves a little tricky to establish the first valid naming.)

As we all know, scientific names have changed a lot in recent years, but for scientific reasons, the result of taxonomic research and the fine-tuning of genetic relationships. Names may have to be created, changed, or dispensed with according to whether species are split, or lumped, or accorded a different status in the taxonomic hierarchy. So, given the conservatism of the Codes, it is some comfort to think that even if we lose Nuttall's Woodpecker, and the rest of the 149 birds slated for common name change, we will still have *Dryobates nuttallii*, *Rhynchophanes mccownii*, *Myadestes townsendii*, *Accipiter cooperi*, and the rest.

### History without Revision

A knowledge of history is essential to understanding how we got to be where we are, and to inform action for social change both in the present and the future. For example, I believe Alfred W. Crosby's (1986) book, *Ecological Imperialism: The Biological Expansion of Europe, 900-1900*, should be mandatory reading for all high-school students. I just do not believe in revisionist history. Heaven knows, we hardly lead morally defensible lives ourselves in this Age of Extinction! Retaining rather than obliterating the names of devoted and courageous pioneering White guys will stimulate a study of history, just as happened with Nuttall and me. And if the 19<sup>th</sup> century American naturalists represent an aspect of White supremacy, then I think we amateur naturalists should embrace it.

*Note:* By the way, the NACC clearly states that all birds' species names (e.g., Blue Jay) should start with capitals – as I believe we agreed upon during a little discussion on NatureTalk a while ago. Canadensys Vascan database uses the lower case for plant names, and I follow this convention.

### Caribou with Honour?

Speaking earlier of peace, this reminds me of a book written in 1934 by pacifist A.A. Milne called *Peace with Honour*. A central thesis of the book, if I recall correctly, is that peace can only be achieved by pursuing it single-mindedly, unconditionally, with no other agendas. So, Milne maintained, if you want peace but only on condition that it comes with honour, you will not get peace.

The provincial government has just announced a caribou recovery plan. If it really wants to save caribou, it will take all necessary steps to make recovery likely, and no others, but if it wants caribou recovery with logging and mining and oil and gas development, access roads, and human recreation, it will not have caribou.

The same applies to conservation in general. If you conflate issues of social justice, Indigenous reconciliation, and rewriting of history with conservation of natural communities you risk detracting and distracting from the latter, and diluting the urgent message that, if we want to save biodiversity and functioning world ecosystems, the human species as a whole has to unite to rework its relationship with nature.

### Patsy Cotterill



*Saskatoon, Amelanchier alnifolia Nutt, at Laurier Park*



*Prairie crocus, Pulsatilla nuttalliana (formerly Anemone patens), at Gibbons Badlands Prairie (evidence of a name change for taxonomic reasons, following the International Code of Botanical Nomenclature)*

*All photos by Patsy Cotterill*



*Nuttall's evening-primrose, Oenothera nuttallii, at Fort Saskatchewan Prairie*

## Turn Your Cart Before You Load It

Another very interesting fall has come and then drifted into winter-like conditions. This helped me to reflect on a youthful lesson learned from my grandfather: “Always turn your cart before you load it.”

I was delighted with the abundance of late-blooming flowers that demonstrated many plants’ abilities to survive in the face of a soon-ending growing season. Some Red-osier Dogwoods were able to squeeze out a fourth flush of blossoms. Western Canada Violets, early spring bloomers, were flowering in late September. As expected, Showy Asters bloomed well into October. Some of the late bloomers were likely viewed with varying degrees of disdain due to the fact that they aren’t natural species and some are outright invasive. Being out as much as I was afforded me the opportunity to see many insects taking full advantage of every available flower regardless of its status; food and survival regardless of the source. And everything loves dogwood berries.



*Red-osier Dogwood (Cornus sericea ssp. sericea), fourth flush of blossoms*



*Western Canada Violet (Viola canadensis)*

The fall bird migration had many different elements and seemed to go on forever. This year I didn’t see quite the numbers of Sandhill Cranes, Snow Geese, or swans flying over Edmonton. On the other hand, many folks experienced lots of unusual sightings such as the Black-throated Blue Warbler, both Red and Slate-colored Fox Sparrows, the Northern Parula, and an Orange-crowned Warbler observed at mid-November. Wow! The annual fall parade of warblers provided tons of excitement and enjoyment for all levels of nature lovers. We also started to see small groups of Bohemian Waxwings arriving months earlier than in recent years.



*Slate-colored Fox Sparrow (top),  
Red (Taiga) Fox Sparrow (bottom)*

Localized fall migration activities were very prominent and seemed to go on and on. American Robins gathered in record numbers along Whitemud Creek. White-throated Sparrows actively foraged under the shrubbery and sought out every available dogwood berry. And some of my favourites, the Dark-eyed Juncos, displayed a collection of colour variations pretty much second to none.

I know juncos are now all considered to be a single species, but I love to look closely for the differing colour patterns of what are now considered to be “groups,” i.e., Slate-colored and Pink-sided. While I was beginning to wonder when or if they all would continue southward, by about the end of October, poof, pretty much overnight all had moved on.



***Dark-eyed Junco***

On several occasions this fall along Whitemud North I noted a behaviour that I had not observed before. Least Chipmunks were absolutely stuffing their cheeks with Canada Thistle Seeds. While it is somewhat possible that they were collecting these very tiny seeds as a food source, I have a hunch that the goal was to use the fluffy material as insulation for their winter dens. I also noted many Black-capped Chickadees and Red-breasted Nuthatches caching seeds at ground level. Might all of this suggest a cold winter with minimal snowfall? I guess we'll have to wait until spring to reflect back on it.



***Least Chipmunk stuffing its cheek with Canada Thistle Seeds***

In addition to the changing of the leaf guard and annual migrations, the fall brings about many other changes. The Bruce Spanworm Moth, one of the last moth species to be observed, could be seen flitting about as the males actively sought wingless females to mate with before the winter freeze hit. White-tailed Jack Rabbits (hares) and Snowshoe Hares, along with Long-tailed, Short-tailed, and Least Weasels all progress through their twice-yearly colour change. It is somewhat interesting that some animals change colour to better their hiding chances, while others change to better their hunting abilities. All that turn white are doing so for the same reason: survival. I believe everyone knows who's the hunter and who's the hunted. Hint, weasels are the hunters who will also eat seeds.

With the arrival of our first long-lasting blast of snow, the creatures that had changed to white definitely gained a significant advantage. While they became almost impossible for us to see, others began to stick out like the old sore thumb. All those creatures that don't change colour are now much easier to spot, observe, and photograph, especially those that don't hibernate. Deer Mice, Meadow and Red-backed Voles, Masked and Prairie Shrews, and of course Red Squirrels, are just a few waiting to catch our attention.

One thing that does have me concerned this fall is the relatively reduced numbers of many of our smaller creatures. Even the number of Red Squirrels appears to be way down. During the winter of 2017 there were virtually none of these food sources for many of our predators; coyotes, weasels, hawks, shrikes, and owls. Many of those species, especially owls, suffered greatly due to the lack of food. Throughout the summer and into early fall this year's activity seemed to be on par for a typical winter season ahead. I cannot identify any reason for the sudden and considerable drop in observable activities. Hopefully this is a short-term and very localized occurrence and other areas are not experiencing similar reductions.

So, about loading that cart. When I was about twelve years old, my grandparents bought a mobile home that was then situated on our home lot. Our end of town did not have serviced water. Our family had a dug well, and up on the hill an artesian well would provide water for our grandparents. My brothers and I had to bust up the hard slate or bedrock with picks and sledge hammers to make a trench for the water line. I wheeled in the wheelbarrow and filled it with the first, very heavy, load of busted-up slate. As I pained and strained to turn it around, my grandfather, who sat there patiently watching, exclaimed, “Always turn your cart before you load it.” This was sound advice that I have heeded nearly every

day since. Think ahead, be prepared, and be ready for what is or might be ahead of you, especially when venturing out in nature.

Our ability to gather, to learn, to observe, to share, and to help one another is a priceless gift just waiting to be utilized to its fullest extent.

And remember, every day forward is a day closer to spring....

**Wayne Oakes**



*Masked shrew (top) and Red-backed Vole (bottom) both foraging for food*

*All photos by Wayne Oakes*



*Long-tailed Weasel, totally white, eating raw sunflower seeds (top) and  
Long-tailed Weasel, still partly brown, hunting voles*

*Photos by Wayne Oakes*