

THE PARKLAND NATURALIST

JANUARY-APRIL 2021



A PUBLICATION OF THE
EDMONTON NATURE CLUB

<http://www.edmontonnatureclub.ca>



Inside this issue

A Great (Gray) Winter	2	Conservation Corner	12
President's Message	6	The Most Exciting Sighting	15
Remembering Jim Beck, a.k.a. The Owl Nut (1941-2021)	8	Enjoying Nature During a Pandemic	18
The Armchair Naturalist	10	Sixty Years of Watching Wildlife	21
Beaverhill Bird Observaory: Looking Up!	11	2021 Bird of the Year	22



Great Gray Owl on a birch stump



Listening on a fence post

A Great (Gray) Winter

All About Birds gives the following basic information about the Great Gray Owl:

- The Great Gray Owl is a dapper owl dressed in a gray suit with a bow tie across its neck and a surprised look on its face. In the stillness of a cold mountain meadow the elusive giant quietly floats on broad wings across meadows and openings in evergreen forests. They are mostly owls of the boreal forest with small populations in western mountains, but in some years they move farther south in search of food, giving some a unique opportunity to see this majestic owl.
- Although the Great Gray Owl is one of the tallest owls in the U.S., it's just a ball of feathers. Both the Great Horned Owl and Snowy Owl weigh more than a Great Gray Owl and they have larger feet and talons.
- Great Gray Owls are big owls, which means that they need to eat regularly. In the winter, they eat up to 7 vole-sized small mammals every day.

The winter of 2020/21 was an exceptional year for an irruption of Great Gray Owls in the Edmonton area.

An irruption is described as a dramatic, irregular migration of large numbers of birds to areas where they aren't typically found. Irruptions may occur in cycles from 2 to 10 years, or they may be much more unpredictable. It is difficult to predict where or when irrupting species may appear.

The last irruptive year for Great Grey Owls in the Edmonton area, that I could find, was documented by Gerald Romanchuk in the January–March 2012 *Parkland Naturalist*. The 2020/21 winter's irruption happened more within the 100 km circle of Edmonton. Following is the list of people who notified me that Great Gray Owls were observed in an area. The birds may have been found by others, but those named shared them with me via ENC NatureTalk, What's App, e-mail, phone calls, or conversations in the field:

Bruderheim Natural area, reported by Hubert Taube

Grey Nuns White Spruce Park, reported by Vincent Cottrell

Boisvert-Greenfield, reported by Andy Ross

Seba Beach, reported by Steve Knight

Elk Island National Park, reported by Vivek Dabral

Ascott Beach, Wabamun, reported by Andy Ross

Strathcona Wilderness Centre, reported by Chris Rees

Sherwood Park area, reported by John Moore and Gerald Romanchuk

Opal (north), reported by Don Delaney

Opal, reported by Vivek Dabral

Sherwood Park Natural Area, reported by Alfred and Margo Scott

Dapp area, reported by Bob Bowhay

My personal encounters were at the Grey Nuns White Spruce Park, Elk Island National Park (EINP), Strathcona Wilderness Centre, Seba Beach, and in the Opal north area.

My first encounter was in the Grey Nuns White Spruce Park. The bird was there one day, then moved off. My next encounter was out at EINP. Two birds were in the area, and they stayed for several weeks at least. I found one of them on a hoar-frosty snowy morning. The owl was first on a fence post, then moved to a tree before finally moving back deeper into the bush. My photos from the fence post show the bird has hoar frost on its face.



On the Cover:

Great Gray Owl plunging into the snow, photo by Chris Rees



A flight shot

The next week I was heading back to EINP when to my surprise I found a bird in the muskeg area on the north side of the road from the Strathcona Wilderness Centre.

The bird was on a birch stump (photo, page 2) and appeared to be actively hunting. It flew to another birch stump and looked around for several minutes, then flew down to a fence post. It looked around for a few minutes, and then flew to another fence post. Again it looked around and moved to a third fence post, where it looked around again. This time it moved to a small tree for a few minutes, then disappeared deeper into the bush. This bird gave me my first action photo of a Great Gray in flight.

Early in January I headed out to the Wabamun area and took a few minutes to look for the Great Gray reported in the Seba Beach area. I drove past a spot twice before the bird finally appeared, but as soon as I stopped it flew off into the bush. I drove about a kilometre, turned around, and when I returned the owl was back in the same tree. Again it flew as soon as I approached. This time it crossed the road and disappeared. I decided to leave the bird in peace.

Several people had told me about Great Gray and Northern Hawk Owls around Opal, so once I thought the congregation of photographers might have quieted down in early February, I headed to the area. My original target was a Northern Hawk Owl. I made a total of three trips to the area, with one aborted trip when my car thermometer read -30°C and it was snowing lightly. I gave my head a shake and decided these were no conditions for an old guy to be driving back roads.

On the first trip I turned east onto the township road and spotted a Great Gray on a telephone pole about half a kilometre off the main road. The bird flew as I drove up and disappeared into the bush. I saw the Northern Hawk Owl but it was far off, so I drove to the next range road and turned around. There were now three other vehicles



Great Gray Owl with defective left eye

on the road so I headed west. About three kilometres west I found another Great Gray. It was on a fence post but flew up to a tree as I approached. I got out of the car and the bird let me approach quite close on foot. It was hunting and over the next fifteen minutes or so, it flew from one tree perch to the next. At each perch it looked and listened before moving to the next perch. It too finally disappeared into the bush. The photos of this bird show it has an eye defect but this did not appear to cause it any problems with flying or landing.

My next trip into the area was two days later. On this trip I finally got to see an owl capture a mouse. The bird was on a fence post (photo, page 2), actively hunting. I approached on foot. It flew off the post and plunged. It passed the mouse from its feet to its beak and flew back to a post, where it swallowed the mouse. I watched it for a while, then drove off to check for other birds. I found another owl hunting just west of the main road. It used the same strategy of moving from perch to perch and listening for a few minutes before moving on. My third trip



1. Launch from the fence post.



2. Hover and listen.



3. Carry the mouse back to the fence post.



4. Move to a new perch.

into the area was the most successful, from the point of view of seeing owls capture mice. I watched two owls each catch four mice before they moved deeper into the bush.

The owls used either a direct drop and plunge from the perch or a fly out, hover, and plunge approach. I only saw the one mouse captured and carried to a fence post to be eaten. After several other plunges, I thought the owl ate the mouse on the ground.

The winter of 2020/21 will be my Great Gray winter. I so appreciate the birds tolerating my presence and letting me share these few mornings with them.

Chris Rees

Reference: Great Gray Owl, *All About Birds*, https://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/Great_Gray_Owl, February 2021.

All photos by Chris Rees

President's Message, April 2021



Our President, Brian Stephens

Although our indoor and outdoor programs remain suspended, our members have been quite active with the Winter Bird Count (December to February) and the Dead of Spring count for March. With early migrants arriving and the major migration soon to begin, I hope everyone can get out.

Chris Rees prepared an Inventory of Walks and Drives in the Edmonton Area, which can be accessed through the members' page under Maps. You will find maps to other nearby areas as well.

Our Zoom presentations about birds, bugs and spiders, and plants, along with specialty topics such as bats, have proven to be very successful, with high attendance and excellent speakers. There's more to come, with spring bugs and birding topics.

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

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

Executive Director – **Karen Lindsay**
kdlinds@telus.net

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 2020/2021

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

Appointed Board Members

Program

Indoor Program Director – **Alana Tollenaar**
alana.tollenaar@gmail.com

Outdoor Program Director – **Chris Rees**
crees@shaw.ca

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

Remembering Jim Beck, a.k.a. The Owl Nut (1941–2021)



Jim and Barb Beck with a Saw-whet Owl

Dr. James (Jim) Beck grew up living in and around many California state parks, which influenced his passion for the natural world and led him to complete a degree in Forestry at the University of California, Berkeley. He was one of the first two professors hired to start the forestry program at the University of Alberta in Edmonton in 1971. Although Jim would refer to himself as a “timber beast,” he was a strong supporter of sustainable forest management and wildlife ecology and taught generations of Forestry and Environmental Conservation Science students. He had a love for the outdoors and spent a great deal of time pursuing that passion with his wife Barb and family in tow.

When Jim and Barb first joined the Edmonton Christmas Bird Count (CBC) they headed out calling for owls,



Christmas Bird Count wrap-up, 2005

which had not been done before. When they reported hearing a number of owls, everyone was amazed, and owling has now become the norm for many counts in Alberta. Jim never did anything small. His Zone 1 bird count often was the record holder for volunteers, bird species, and numbers, and this was celebrated with the ringing of cow bells at the count wrap-ups. Jim and Barb also coordinated the Wabamun and Devon CBCs.

Jim developed the first Edmonton Owl Count, and it gave some great baseline information on owls that breed in the area. With Barb, he conducted many Breeding Bird Surveys all across Alberta and north on the Dempster Highway. When they couldn't find suitable local recordings of birds for study, they recorded and produced CDs of some 250 bird species for classrooms of students that took their Advanced Bird ID course. Butterfly Counts became an obsession, and they conducted a record number of surveys with the help of students and local naturalists.

Jim joined the Beaverhill Bird Observatory and served as a director for many years. He held a banding permit and volunteered many days and nights banding songbirds and owls. Many hours were spent on various construction projects, from digging postholes for a parking lot to kiosk, lab, and bunkhouse construction.



Jim (left) and Al DeGroot (right) dig a post hole in the Beaverhill Natural Area parking lot.

Jim and Barb were huge supporters of the University of Alberta Bears and Pandas athletics teams, long-time supporters of the Edmonton Symphony Orchestra and Citadel Theatres, and probably hold the record for attending the most Fringe Festival plays. Jim will be lovingly remembered by Barb, his wife of 59 years; his children Bob (Chenelle) and Jim (Holly); and his grandchildren Cathryn, Calvin, and Paige. His memory and influence on forestry, wildlife, and the arts will live on. The family requests that, in lieu of flowers, donations be made to the

James Beck Prize in Forest Management at the University of Alberta (<http://uabgive.ca/Beck>.)

Jim's family learned from him that family, good people, and the natural world are worth time, patience, and sacrifice. The best tribute to this larger-than-life man is to share some of his students' memories of him. Thanks to all who contributed these kind words.

Jim Beck exuded strength and was a force in everything that he set his considerable mind to. He was a central, guiding force in steering a four-decade evolution of the university department he so personified, an irrepressible force in understanding, promoting, and sharing our Alberta wildlife and our wildscapes. But what I saw in Jim that was most impactful was that he was an unrelenting force of support to generations of students, athletes, and artists and whose genuine kindness and humanity was most touchingly expressed while sharing discoveries with his grandchildren on camping trips. – **Chris Fisher**

Jim Beck was ridiculously busy yet always had time to give. He was one of my biggest cheerleaders – both in grad school and again when I made the switch to the arts – and that encouragement gave me courage to do the things I am passionate about. – **Christine Hornung**

The best way I can describe “Team Beck” is that they were larger-than-life characters who'd arrive with a whirlwind flourish, were boisterous and gregarious, with an almost constant “Marco-Polo” type banter between them that could be heard near and far. My most vivid memories of “Team Beck” were from a “Voyage to the VORTEK” gathering at the Steeveville campground. I recall watching them chasing down (yes, I saw them running), hooting and hollering back and forth as they caught butterflies. Once a butterfly was caught, they'd delicately extract it from the net and passionately describe, to those gathered around them, the nuances of the particular butterfly they had in hand, their exuberance for teaching shining through. – **Steve Glendinning**

Dr. Jim Beck provided some sound and humble advice that got me started (on my thesis). – **Tyler Flockhart**

One of my fondest memories of Jim (and Barb) was doing a butterfly count in the area around Dinosaur Provincial Park in 2002. I have a vivid memory of Barb standing on a gravel road, directing Jim and me to chase butterflies around the ditch. Turns out we ended up catching a Delaware Skipper in the frenzy of nets and butterflies. At the time, it was the second recorded occurrence of the butterfly in the province (published in the *Blue Jay*).

– **Jeff Manchak**

Jim was my graduate supervisor for my MSc research. One fond memory that I have of Jim was during my thesis defence; he knew I loved chocolate and also knew I would be anxious and nervous. So when I got to the examination room, I found a big pile of chocolate cookies stacked in front of my chair at the end of the table! It was very kind of him to try to put my mind at ease...and I think it helped. – **Cindy Kemper**

I spent many nights with Jim in search of owls, travelling in his large rumbling Suburban with the Owl Nut licence plate. We would meet out at his cabin at Wabamun, or on some dark road in late December, and work the wood lots and ravines in search of calling owls. It was magical to have the complete silence break with the sound of hooting Barred Owls! I went on to complete my thesis on these owls under his supervision. He told me, I'm only a forester, you need a co-supervisor who is a biologist.

Lisa Takats Priestley (a.k.a. Owl Geek, thanks to Jim)



Photos above by Lisa Takats Priestley

Barred Owl, photo by Chuck Priestley

On February 18, 2021, ENC received the following information via ENCNatureTalk: “I'm sorry to bring you sad news. Jim Beck passed away yesterday, (February 17, 2021) and his family has asked me to let the bird and butterfly people know. Jim, along with his wife Barb, was very active in the breeding bird survey, in owl research, and in butterfly counts. He will be missed.” John Acorn

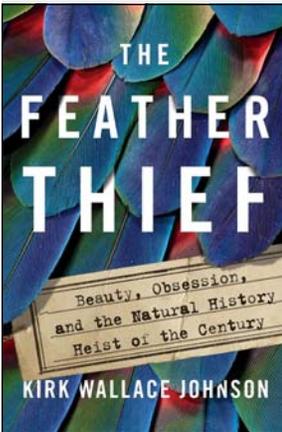
The Armchair Naturalist

In response to the appeal for recommendations by our section editor, Karen Lindsay, I couldn't resist the opportunity to review two recent books which, coincidentally, are both about thieves, albeit thieves of eggs, feathers, and birds.

People with obsessions are not strangers to club members, since many of us qualify for that distinction. We obsess about birds, plants, insects, mosses, spiders, and the list goes on. What is unusual is when an obsession becomes a criminal livelihood. Many of us enjoy travel and adventures, but these two thieves combined adventures and obsessions to make a living, until they got caught...several times. When one gets caught, is punished, and returns to theft, obsession is the only description.

Enjoy these two books. You will learn not only about their heists, but also about the history of egg collectors, falconry, bird ecology, and fly-tying. Both books are available from the Edmonton Public Library.

Geoff Holroyd

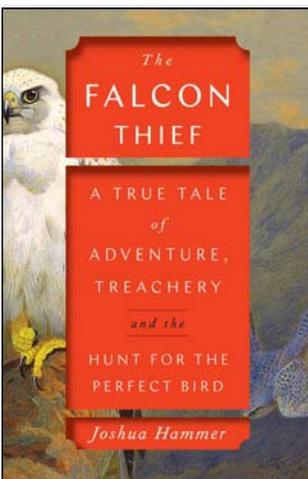


The Feather Thief: Beauty, Obsession, and the Natural History Heist of the Century
By Kirk Wallace Johnson, published by Viking Press of Penguin, Random House, 2019

Musician Edwin Rist, who was also a keen fly fisher(man), saw fly-tying as an opportunity to earn money to acquire a better flute. Once started, he could not stop. Fly-tying was an art in Victorian times; books were published stipulating how feathers from specific feather tracts of specific species of tropical birds should be placed in specific places within the fly. With such detailed requirements for feathers, Edwin had to determine where to get them. He decided to raid the British Museum of Natural History.

I suspect Edwin may have never heard of Darwin and Wallace, but once he opened the specimen drawers in the British Museum, he didn't care about who collected the birds, or their irreplaceable value. Edwin just wanted the feathers.

This book follows Rist as he sells fishing flies, then feathers, then whole skins on the black market. The author of *Feather Thief*, a fly fisherman himself, became almost as obsessed as Rist in his determination to track down the source of those exotic fishing flies. This gripping story follows his efforts to find the feather thief and bring him to justice. When Edwin is brought before a judge, he is not punished. I recommend that you read the book to follow the intrigue of international feather trading – and the court's opinion of the severity of bird theft!



The Falcon Thief: A True Tale of Adventure, Treachery, and the Hunt for the Perfect Bird
By Joshua Hammer, published by Simon and Schuster, 2020

A youngster's obsession with finding bird nests in Rhodesia's forests and cliffs turns into a lifelong career stealing falcon eggs for Middle Eastern millionaires. The author retraces the exploits of Jeffrey Lendrum as he abuses the faith of fellow birdwatchers in the Rhodesian Ornithological Society who were surveying raptors in national parks. He steals the eggs of Black Eagle, Crowned Eagle, and other endangered raptors, at first as an egg collector, until he realizes that he can make a living stealing eggs for sale.

Eventually he meets falcon breeders in the Middle East and his search for eggs takes him to northern Quebec, Patagonia, Africa, and the United Kingdom. Despite being caught and sent to jail, he continues his globe-trotting smuggling.

The book also traces the life of Detective Andy McWilliam, who devotes his later career to exposing the illegal wildlife trade. The educational and gripping tale also tracks the changes in falconry underlying the demand for faster, fitter, falcons and global enforcement efforts to stop the illegal trade in falcons and their eggs.

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.

Beaverhill Bird Observatory: Looking Up!

New Beaverhill Bird Observatory Educational Research Centre and Motus Tower

This 24-metre (80-foot) tower is part of the new set-up for a Motus Wildlife Tracking System erected at the Beaverhill Bird Observatory (BBO) in November this year. The ENC was the primary donor for setting up this station. Motus is an international cooperative project and network of researchers using a system of towers to detect radio tags placed on birds, bats, and even insects to study the movements of these small flying creatures on local, regional, and hemispheric scales to enhance the understanding of wildlife movement.

The Motus system was discussed at the Western Canada Bird Banding Conference organized by the Beaverhill Bird Observatory in March 2019 in Edmonton, which a number of ENC members attended. At this meeting, it became apparent that because there were no Motus towers in the province of Alberta, we were missing out on an opportunity to collect data on migratory birds using this important flyway.

The installation of the tower and solar array enables the BBO to join the Motus Wildlife Tracking System, which currently includes Alberta locations at the Ellis Bird Farm and in Calgary. The University of Alberta is proposing an Augustana Station in Miquelon Provincial Park, and a group in Calgary is considering additional stations in southern Alberta.

The Beaverhill Bird Observatory is the second oldest bird observatory in Canada, established in 1984. It is located by Beaverhill Lake, which was designated as an Important Bird Area (IBA) in 1997, making it a strategic location for a Motus tower.

The Motus station includes a tower anchored into the ground with 4.6-metre (15-foot) screw piles, with several antennae at the top that are connected to a signal processor, then via Wi-Fi to the central control station. The Motus system will allow the BBO to monitor any birds within a 15 km radius, not only birds tagged at the BBO, but also birds tagged elsewhere that travel through this corridor. The system will communicate the results to other researchers and interested citizens to enhance education and understanding and promote the conservation of migratory birds and other species.

The BBO has been banding and monitoring birds since 1984. The BBO's core programs focus on songbird migration monitoring, monitoring avian productivity and survivorship, Saw-whet Owl migration monitoring and

tracking, and Tree Swallow productivity. In addition, university interns monitor bats, House Wrens, breeding birds, and butterflies. BBO is also heavily involved in providing education about the natural world through school presentations, the spring Big Birding Breakfast, autumn Steaks and Saw-whets suppers and owl-banding demonstrations, and the week-long Young Ornithologist Workshop for teenagers interested in bird banding and bird research. The BBO has received support from the ENC for projects in the past and is keen to cooperate with other Edmonton-based birding and natural history enthusiasts.

The Motus station at the BBO now has the potential to detect migrating birds from the tropics of Central and South America who were fitted with nanotags by researchers in their wintering grounds. Once a network of stations is established in Alberta, new research can begin on the movements and survival of local birds in our province. It is an exciting new development for bird research.

Karen Lindsay

Photos by Geoff Holroyd



BBO staff Sara Pearce Meijerink and Shane Abernethy in front of the Educational Research Centre and Motus Tower

Conservation Corner

Edmonton table land natural areas and the river valley system: are they being protected and managed adequately?

The arrival of spring is always a mixed blessing for the conservation-minded urban naturalist. On the one hand is the return of life, but on the other is the surge of development projects in the city that sees more aspens felled and more open land laid waste, or the threat thereof.

Oleskiw Park Rezoning in the West End

Towards the end of February, 2021, residents of the Westridge–Wolf Willow–Oleskiw communities became aware of a City of Edmonton rezoning proposal for a portion of Oleskiw Park. (This is the park in the community, a table land park in the natural areas system, not the Oleskiw River Valley Park in the river bottomlands, formerly known as Centennial Valley.) Formerly reserved for school construction, a 1.4 ha part of this city-owned park was declared surplus to school requirements in 2015 and to civic needs in 2017. City administration is proposing to change the zone from Public Parks (AP) to allow for residential development. If housing were to go ahead, it would take out a remnant fringe of aspen forest, a soccer field, and the southeast portion of a 3.1 ha stand of poplar forest recognized since the early 2000s as Natural Area NW 638. These areas, together with more park space including a large playground, make up the 8.50 ha of Oleskiw Park.

It is safe to say that the local communities are not keen on losing any of their park space. Many residents also have common cause with Edmonton's naturalist/conservationist community which sees the rezoning issue as an opportunity to seek retention of the total forested area and greater protection for the Natural Area by rezoning it as a Natural Area Protection Zone (NA). (An NA allows for the conservation, preservation, and restoration of identified natural areas, features, and ecological processes.) Anticipating that the City might refuse such a request on the grounds that it could not afford to hire consultants to do the required management plan, a group of citizen scientists has volunteered to conduct the necessary surveys and fulfill the data requirements to produce a site-specific natural area management plan for NW 638. Nature lovers from all over the city have signed on to the letter to Council to request the NA zoning, on the principle that table land tree stands like Oleskiw's are rare and precious assets of a growing city, which can ill afford to lose green space even, or especially, for infill development. (See <https://www.wcccl.com/featured/new->



The aspen woods of NW 638 in Oleskiw (table land) Park show considerable regeneration with young suckers following an accidental fire three years ago.

[proposal-for-the-oleskiw-surplus-school-site-by-local-residents-and-other-neighbours/](#).)

City-wide Natural Area Management Plan

In connection with the NA rezoning campaign I read the City's document "City-wide Natural Area Management Plan" (https://www.edmonton.ca/city_government/documents/PDF/City-Wide_Natural_Area_Management_Plan.pdf). Dated 2014, it is a comprehensive document that provides some useful summaries of the natural history and physiography of the Edmonton area. It shows accurate understanding of the problems associated with managing urban natural areas, and most of its visions and prescriptions are apple pie good. However, like many another City plan, it has become obsolete before it has been largely implemented. For example, responsibilities are assigned to the Office of Biodiversity, which no longer exists, and many roles are suggested for graduates from the Master Naturalists program, likewise deceased. Master Naturalists were intended to act as stewards for some of the City's new natural areas and natural area parks, including wetlands, but due to lack of field support from the City and tightening safety regulations, it is doubtful if any of their roles were properly fulfilled. A Partners-in-Parks program continues, but largely concerns itself with "beautification," targeting horticultural enrichment in city public spaces. Some of the community stewardship groups mentioned in the document have folded. The Friends of Hodgson Wetland is an example I'm aware of. The bureaucracy here was formidable, with volunteers having to liaise with dif-

ferent City departments, the community league, and the local home-owners association. Local “Friends” eventually lost interest, as did the naturalist volunteers who moved on to more rewarding, better-organized volunteer events. Some community stewardship groups do remain, but the need for more is great. Although citizen expertise and input have been sought in some sophisticated City mapping initiatives, all in all the plan’s vision for community stewardship remains unrealized.

City Management of Natural Spaces

If professional management of natural areas has been taking place, then certainly it has not been transparent to the general public. Monitoring is also envisaged in the City-wide Plan as an important part of natural area management, which among other things would trigger the need for control of weeds. Yet, when I contacted a City employee recently about removing two small infestations of ecologically invasive plants in Natural Area Park NW 302 before they became unmanageable, I was told that the City only has a budget for removing regulated weeds as prescribed by provincial law.

And don’t get me started about the City’s lack of management of the river valley and ravine system! The City continually promotes the river valley as a venue for recreation without attempting regular assessment of ecological carrying capacity and resiliency affected by such a policy. Particularly obvious in recent years of burgeoning use is the proliferation of side trails by mountain bikers and trail runners, and an increase in random tobogganing on forested slopes. Walking in west-end valley areas is no longer a pleasure for me, so upsetting it is to see the habitat fragmentation that is taking place. I also worry about the sustainability and the trajectory of forests that lack the renewal opportunities provided by natural disturbances such as fire.

Citizen Stewardship and a Prescription for Change

Increasing budgets for maintenance and management, including restoration, of the city’s natural green space would seem to be an obvious answer. But the City pleads chronic poverty. A solution might be to turn once again to community volunteers, acting as stewards. To do this the City could revamp a stewardship program that not only offers ecological literacy but also on-the-ground management and restorative know-how. Education should be relatively cheap given the explosion of online technology. Participation would need to be streamlined, and allow sufficient latitude in activities to make the volunteer experience both easy and rewarding. It could encourage the formation of stewardship or “friends” groups for all of its named natural areas and natural area parks.

Activities should be attractive to youth, not just to older, retired people who are so often the volunteers. If logging on to the ENC’s NatureTalk has revealed to me anything more than just how much bird and bug diversity exists out there, it is the huge joy people get out of observing it. Imagine if our youth, instead of wasting hours playing games on computers and phones, could experience a similar enthusiasm for nature and stewardship! There is so much opportunity!

The City should also consider re-constituting the Office of Biodiversity, or its equivalent, not least to present a transparent administration to the public who would thus have a clear route for engagement with the City on ecological issues. Once the City has some of these ducks in a row, it could then look at bringing its City-wide Natural Area Management Plan up to date. An important goal of the new plan would be to get people into natural areas, and have them experience nature responsibly, while still maintaining the ecological integrity of these sites.

The City’s Natural Systems Policy (C-531) states:

“... the City will lead by example – engaging the public in natural area issues, and encouraging businesses, residents, and the community to secure new natural area systems and steward what we have effectively.”

Big Island Provincial Park Proposal

On March 26 the provincial government officially announced that it has started planning for the creation of a provincial park at Big Island, a river valley floodplain in Edmonton’s southwest. Naturalists should hesitate to applaud this announcement. While as “vacant public land” this area has been unprotected and has seen considerable unregulated human impact, a provincial park is likely not the best designation for this 68-hectare site that cannot readily be accessed by land. A provincial park implies considerable recreational use which is probably not sustainable in this small area of decadent balsam poplar forest dissected by many trails, an oxbow channel with associated marsh, and more or less natural wetlands. When the promise of this park was made during the election campaign there was mention of a campground. An especially bad idea! Wildlife would suffer from the 24-hour presence of humans in this confined area.

The government’s record on environmental protection is not good, and the fact that a boat tour operator has already been given a temporary license to hold night stop-overs on Big Island suggests that the government is not overly concerned about the ecological integrity of the area. A \$300,000 budget will go to the City of Edmonton and the Enoch Cree Nation to conduct an ecological assessment and a traditional land use study, respectively. Public consultation will be available in 2022 and it is proposed (completely unfeasibly) that the park will be in operation by 2023. In my opinion, human use of the river valley is reaching saturation point, and the only further access and uses that should be allowed are for nature appreciation and education, with possibly (in the case of Big Island) carefully regulated growing and harvesting of traditionally used plants by Indigenous peoples.

Patsy Cotterill



Oxbow channel at Big Island, August 2015



Disturbance due to vehicles and off-road vehicles in Big Island, April 2016

Photos by Patsy Cotterill

The Most Exciting Sighting

As I walk along the maintained trails of Whitemud North I am eager to stop and chat with the folks that I meet and am always open to answering their questions. The one most frequently asked is, “What’s the most interesting thing that you see here?” This takes me back to being a very curious five-year-old sitting between my mom and dad in the front seat of the family’s 1963 Rambler Classic Station Wagon. I recall on one drive looking up at Dad and asking, “What’s the most dangerous mile that you’ve driven?”

Like every season, winters have many wonders just waiting to be seen and appreciated. We started off with a very prolonged mild stretch that seemed as if might run right through to spring. Then just when we were really getting used to the mild conditions, the bottom fell off the thermometer and we were well below seasonal averages for a period that felt longer than the preceding warm spell. Even with temperatures hitting -35°C , I was out photographing birds such as our Black-capped Chickadees and Great Horned Owls. Being able to wear extra layers to keep warm, one wonders how creatures in the wilds are able to survive. And we didn’t get much snowfall. The city did not enact a single seasonal parking ban this year.



Black-capped Chickadee above, Great Horned Owl below



Now this isn’t scientific or the results of decades of observations, but you may recall that last fall I noted many Least Chipmunks gathered extra bunches of fluffy Canada Thistle seeds, possibly for insulating their nests. Black-capped Chickadees and Red-breasted Nuthatches were seen caching seeds very close to the ground instead of higher up. Those actions may well have spoken of their abilities to know what the upcoming season might bring. I’ll bet that if the chipmunks did use the thistle seeds to better insulate their winter dens, they greatly appreciated the extra effort. And the cached seeds were accessible to the birds all winter.

Whether a direct result of our winter conditions or perhaps some unknown factors, this year I saw fewer smaller creatures than in any of the past six winters. These included Snowshoe Hares, Red Squirrels, Meadow Voles, Red-backed Voles, and Deer Mice. Several of these species appeared to be almost nonexistent. I did not see a single sample of Coyote scat containing fur or animal hair, suggesting that hunting their usual food sources was difficult. Having said that, I have to admit that every Coyote I saw this winter appeared to be in very good health. The lack of hair in the scat will have negative consequence for some springtime nesting birds. Every year I see Black-capped Chickadees and other small birds pulling the hairs from scat to line their nests. I heard from several folks that in other areas these same small creatures were rather plentiful.



Coyotes

I also noted that the numbers of all woodpecker species were way down. The Black-backed which are commonly seen from October to April were extremely hard to find. This was first winter in many years that I didn’t see any Pine Siskins until early March. On the other hand, it was a bumper winter for Pine Grosbeaks and, unlike in other



Black-backed Woodpecker



Pine Grosbeaks, male above, female below

years, there were lots of males. One of my photographs captured 14 males in the frame, and there were more in the group. Both females and males spent a lot of time eating Mountain Ash berries, as well as feeding on sunflower seeds on the ground.



Common Raven and Great Horned Owl

March heralded the annual rise in conflicts between Common Ravens and our Great Horned Owls as both began their breeding seasons. These two species definitely do not like each other. I noticed at least one pair of ravens learned a new tactic for harassing the owls. On three occasions I watched them go into a White Spruce just above where a Great Horned Owl was sitting and snapping off both living and dead twigs, then dropping or throwing them down in what appeared to be an attempt to drive the owl away. They also resorted to diving down and occasionally striking the owl. This typically only served to rile the owls, who then put on one heck of a chase sequence of their own. Sadly, it does not appear that our resident owls nested in their usual spot this year.



Saw-whet Owl

We had a sighting of a Northern Saw-whet Owl one Saturday morning. I was fortunate to have been in the general area of the folks who first spotted this tiny wonder. Unfortunately, the news spread like wildfire, and over the next day and a half throngs of people were pounding through the woods in an all-out hunt. While I understand



Northern Flying Squirrel

and appreciate the desire to see this hard-to-find bird, I fear the negative impact on the owl caused by such a chase. Respecting the guidance given by the more credible reference guides, I did not share this sighting with a single person. Now, well after the fact, I feel it is important to share this reflection on the ethical, moral, and legal aspects of responsible birding, which were not well respected here.

I had an incredible one-of-a-kind daytime sighting. While on the trail photographing a beautiful male Pine Grosbeak, something flashed across my lens. Wondering what just photo-bombed the grosbeak, I peered around the camera and was blown away by my first sighting of a living Northern Flying Squirrel in Whitemud North. I had seen a dead one being eaten by a Barred Owl on November 12, 2016.

Slowly but surely, signs of spring began to awaken. The drumming and courting activities of our Downy, Hairy, and Pileated Woodpeckers and all three variations of Northern Flickers. The return of Canada Geese, American Robins, Pine Siskins, and Dark-eyed Juncos, all arriving ahead of the majority of our colourful migrating song birds. Did you notice the leaf buds on various shrubs and trees getting ready to burst open? The repro-

ductive catkins of the Beaked Hazelnuts, River Alder, and White Birch, which were set last fall, all became much more noticeable as the warming temperatures and lengthening daylight hours began signalling them into action.

For me, one sure sign of spring is walking along a trail and seeing all the really fine spider webs glistening at eye level, in the sunshine. I recently read that baby birds fed a good diet of spiders will do much better than those fed anything else. There is a chemical in spiders that is essential for their healthy growth and development. The article didn't say if one kind of spider was more or less beneficial.

Various mammals began to emerge around the middle of March, much earlier than last year – the first batches of baby Red Squirrels frolicking and playing, Least Chipmunks seeking out nuts and seeds, and Muskrats eagerly feeding in the creek.

You may have heard that on February 22, City Council passed Bylaw 19553, Feeding of Wildlife. The primary focus seems to be on feeding coyotes or other wildlife in a manner that leads to a health risk or nuisance conditions. It is very important to note the definition of wildlife as “*non-domesticated animals, or an animal that is wild by nature and living in its natural habitat, but does not include feral cats or birds.*” If inclined to do so, we can continue feeding the birds. Anyone having questions or seeking clarification should call 311.

So, you're likely wondering how someone asking me about the most interesting things I see along the creek would cause me to reflect back on asking my dad about the most dangerous mile that he had driven. Well, when I asked that question, Dad didn't answer right away. He paused and thought for a few moments, a long time for an anxious five-year-old. Then he looked down and calmly stated, “The next one.” That was such a wise response, and it applies to most everything we do, from driving down a long winding road to walking through the wilderness. I for one am always excited about the possibilities ahead along the trail.

Wayne Oakes

All photos by Wayne Oakes

See back cover for two additional photos.

Enjoying Nature during a Pandemic

Covid 19 still has not gone away, but the vaccine roll-out offers new hope. ENC has successfully adapted its indoor programs to a Zoom-based format. All ENC outdoor activities remain on hold, including group City Walks and Road Trips. Many members continue to use eBird, ENC NatureTalk, What's App, and personal contacts to keep track of the exciting birds that are being found. One good development for the club is that ENC NatureTalk is increasingly used for non-birding communications. There have been many good discussions on plants, bugs, frogs, and flowers.

The last part of the year has again been very interesting for birders. My primary focus remains the Edmonton region. Let's look at some of the highlights from the last part of 2020 and the first months of 2021.

The winter started cold, warmed up, went really cold, and ended warm one day and cold the next. On November 20 I posted a photo to ENC NatureTalk of a coyote stalking a goose and ducks on the almost frozen Sturgeon River. Three days later the river had opened up again and a family of swans and several species of ducks were present on the open water. The river finally froze over on December 11, when Alan Hingston and Kim Blomme tried to rescue the last remaining Tundra Swan. Fortunately, the swan was able to fly away as Alan and Kim approached.



Cassin's Finch – a first for Edmonton – at Whitemud Road, photo by Connor Bowhay

On November 30, Bob and Connor Bowhay posted a photo of a Purple Finch on eBird; however, others soon recognized the bird as a Cassin's Finch, a first for the Edmonton area. For the next few weeks Whitemud Road had many visiting birders closely inspecting all of the local House Finches. A Purple Finch spent much of the winter at the Hermitage bird feeders. In January, for several weeks, a Golden-crowned Kinglet also came to these feeders and drew a crowd of birders. White-throated

Sparrows were reported at Whitemud Road, the Hermitage bird feeders, and several other locations over the winter. Townsend's Solitaires were reported in several locations. Percy Zalasky reported a Yellow-rumped Warbler in St. Albert on December 31 that was first recorded on the St. Alberta Christmas Bird Count. On February 15, Vince Cottrell reported a Harris's Sparrow on eBird that was first recorded on the Edmonton Christmas Bird Count.



Townsend's Solitaire at Rundle Park



Golden-crowned Kinglet at Hermitage feeders

The January 2, 2021, Wabamun Christmas Bird Count produced some notable birds: Varied Thrush, Harris's Sparrow, Northern Hawk Owl, Great Gray Owl, and Glaucous Gull. The gull stayed for about a week, picking up minnows frozen on the ice and checking around the ice fishing huts. The Varied Thrush was shy but hung around most of the winter. The Harris's Sparrow was very loud but for me remained well hidden in a hedge. It stayed around for about two weeks. These notables attracted many of the competitive birders to the area, and most visited the Genesee and Keephills cooling ponds to get their yearly waterfowl, instead of waiting until April to get all their ducks in a row. On January 15 Bill Reynolds reported a Long-tailed Duck on Genesee, again

increasing the draw of birders to the pond. Two Golden Eagles were present in the area in late January.



Glaucous Gull at Lake Wabamun



Harris's Sparrow at Seba Beach

This winter has to go down as the Winter of the Owls for the Edmonton Area. It started on November 15 with a Northern Hawk Owl and a Great Gray in St. Albert. Next, Elk Island National Park became the hot spot. Through late November, December, February, and early March there were many Great Gray Owl sightings within the 100 km circle of Edmonton. Northern Hawk Owls were less numerous. In January and February many sightings of Northern Saw-whet Owls were reported in St. Albert. In late February, a Great Horned Owl pleased (too) many birders in St. Albert by hunting during the day. On March 6, Bob Bowhay posted to eBird a collection of photos showing a Barred Owl hunting during the day. The Whitemud South Barred Owl showed up for two days in March but, sadly, the bird was found dead with what appeared to be head wounds. Millwoods became an owl hot spot in March, with a Long-eared Owl and several Northern Saw-whets being reported. Snowy Owls were pretty scarce most of the winter.



Great Gray Owl in the Edmonton area



Northern Hawk Owl in the Edmonton area



Great Horned Owl in St. Albert



Barred Owl in the Opal area, photo by Bob Bowhay



Long-eared Owl in Millwoods, photo by Heather Ronnes



Northern Saw-whet Owl in Millwoods

The falcon show at the Alberta Grain Terminal was limited this winter. No Gyrfalcons were reported there, although a few were seen in the Edmonton area. Bald Eagle sightings were rare. In early March the Prairie Falcon known as Digit, due to an injured toe, hunted the terminal for a few weeks. A male Prairie Falcon was also present for a few days, and a Peregrine went by one day. Accipiters were also uncommon, just a few Goshawks and a couple of Sharp-shins, and Wayne Oakes had to work really hard to produce a Cooper's Hawk for the Winter Bird List. Rough-legged Hawks were scarce all winter. Bob and Connor Bowhay reported an early Red-tailed Hawk along Whitemud Drive on February 20.

Gerry Fox facilitated the 9th Winter Bird List. A big thank-you to Gerry for keeping us all challenged to have the best winter ever. We did, at 95 species. This activity keeps us out birding and makes the winter go by faster. New species to the list this winter were Pacific Loon, Harris's Sparrow, and Cassin's Finch. Gerry insisted that participants use the ENC NatureTalk to submit sightings, increasing the focus on this ENC sharing platform.



Prairie Falcon at Alberta Grain Terminal



Northern Goshawk in Whitemud Park

Thank you to Connor Charchuk for facilitating the Dead of Spring list again this year. This activity keeps our hopes up through March, which is a notoriously slow birding month. Again this year we set a new record, with 93 species.

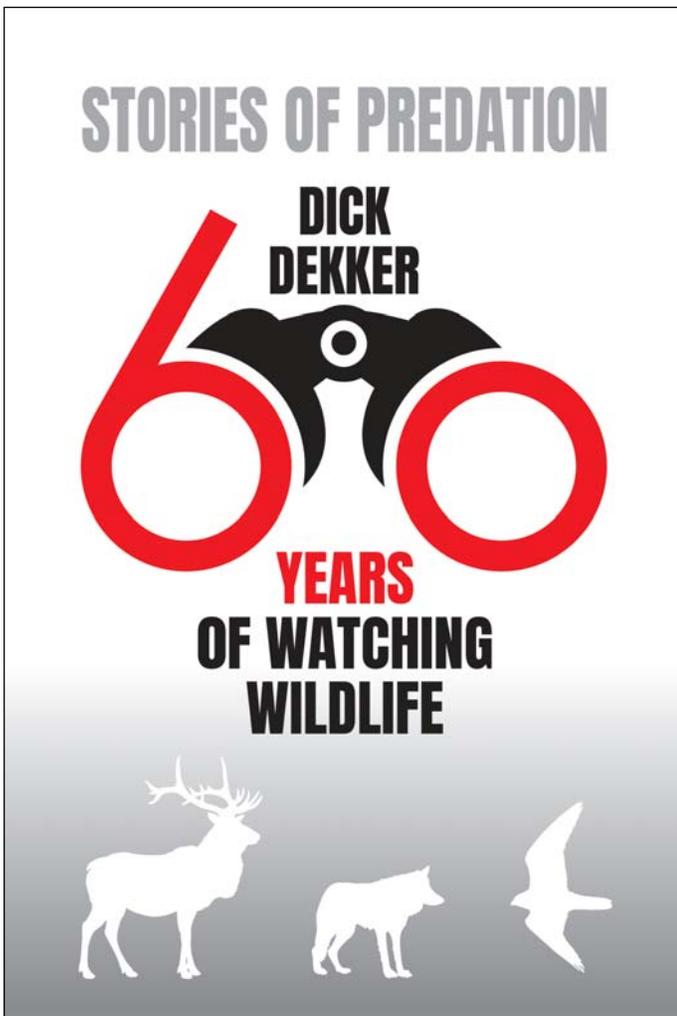
There are many other interesting locations, sightings, and contributors to the local eBird community and ENC NatureTalk that I have failed to recognize. I apologize for that. As we enter the second year of the Covid 19 lockdowns, birding continues to be very good, even if ENC members have not been able to get together to formally share any outdoor experiences. Hopefully, by the fall, the "all clear" will have been sounded.

Please continue to use the networking tools to 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

Photos by Chris Rees unless otherwise indicated

Sixty Years of Watching Wildlife



Published by Hancock House in Vancouver, Dick Dekker's recent memoir, *Stories of Predation: 60 Years of Watching Wildlife*, is illustrated with 40 photographs, either full colour or black and white, depending on the book's format. For ordering details, please contact sales@hancockhouse.com. The book was positively reviewed by four scientists. John Acorn's endorsement is reprinted below with his kind permission.

"Dick Dekker is a remarkable individual, and *Stories of Predation* is a remarkable book. The tagline *60 Years of Watching Wildlife* gives away the fact that this is actually an autobiography, summarizing Dekker's accomplishments over the years. On page 209, he can't resist letting us know that this was his original choice for the title. Still, the book is indeed about predators, mostly, and there are plenty of well-told stories here about wolves, falcons, and eagles. But the book also contains tales of shorebirds, ungulates, forests, and water levels, and on another level, it chronicles Dekker's opinions on various aspects of park management (and mismanagement), con-

servation, life in the backcountry, and life as a Dutch immigrant to Canada.

"It is important to realize that in many ways, Dick Dekker's perspective is singular. He is not a university academic, although he now holds a PhD, and his publication record looks a lot like one of theirs. Likewise, he is not a government biologist, or a typical environmental journalist. Instead, Dekker describes himself as an independent naturalist. In a world where most biological studies take place over one or two "field seasons," Dick Dekker's datasets were amassed over decades. Whereas most biologists frame their studies in terms of "hypothesis testing," Dekker is relentlessly inductive, mulling over thousands of observations before suggesting a general explanation for what he has seen.

"Even among birders and weekend naturalists, Dekker's observational record stands out prominently. For this reason, *Stories of Predation* should be right there on the bookshelf of anyone interested in the natural history of Western Canada, be they professional or amateur. Recognizing the importance of diverse perspectives on all environmental issues, a voice as unique and powerful as Dick Dekker's deserves to be heard, and this book will ensure his legacy as a truly insightful naturalist."

Dick Dekker's long-term observations include huge fluctuations of elk and wolves in Jasper National Park, migrating sandpipers at Beaverhill Lake, and summering avocets at Cooking Lake, where annual estimates have varied from zero to 3,000 in some years.



*American Avocets in both plumages,
Photo by Dawne Colwell*

Dick Dekker

2021 Bird of the Year

This year's nominees for the ENC's BOTY included four extremely rare birds for the area and an uncommon but very cool colour variation of a common species. In past years, our rule for BOTY was that nominees had to be species seen on ENC field trips. But with Covid cancelling most of our events, we changed the rule to birds in the general Edmonton birding region.

One nominee was seen on a club trip before the virus hit. "Ghost" Magpies are found in the city from time to time. These pale versions of one of our most common birds are notable and striking.

Many birders saw a Little Gull at Hastings Lake last May. This sub-adult bird was very similar to the Bonaparte's Gulls it was hanging out with and could be tough to find until you worked out the field marks.

In August, out at Bittern Lake, a Whooping Crane was much easier to identify! The biggest challenge was timing – you needed to get there when the bird was visible from the road. But dozens of local and not-so-local birders were lucky enough to see this highly endangered species.

Later in the fall, two rare-for-the-area warblers were found right in the city. In late September, a very sharp looking Black-throated Blue Warbler was found. Then in October, down in Kinnard Ravine, a Northern Parula played hide and seek with birders for over a week.

Club members were given this slate of five amazing birds and asked to vote for a winner. It was likely the toughest choice since we started the whole BOTY thing. Personally, I couldn't decide and voted for two birds!

The votes poured in and the winner, by a landslide, is.....Whooping Crane!!

This particular Whooper was spotted by a farmer on his land near Bittern Lake. The farmer told a bird photographer friend, who told club member Vivek Dabral. The farmer took Vivek out towards the lake and he had a distant view of the bird. The next morning Andy Ross, following up on Vivek's eBird report, got a nice look and photos from Range Road 222 west of Bittern Lake.

Andy's photo showed the bird wearing coloured leg bands and a satellite transmitter. He contacted the Canadian Wildlife Service and was informed that the bird was banded as a juvenile in 2019 in Wood Buffalo. The transmitter was still active, showing that the crane had been in the Bittern Lake area for several weeks.

For the next week or so, the bird would spend parts of its days at a favourite spot off of 222. Other times it was likely out on the lake, well out of range of even the best scope, but it was a thrill for those who timed things right. A lifer or Alberta bird for dozens, this large, unmistakable, captivating bird makes for an awesome 2021 Bird of the Year!

Gerald Romanchuk



Black-throated Blue Warbler,
Photo by Gerald Romanchuk



Northern Parula,
Photo by Gerald Romanchuk

Bird of the Year, 2021



Whooping Crane near Bittern Lake, photo by Andy Ross



Red Squirrel and Southern Red-backed Vole, photos by Wayne Oakes