

# THE PARKLAND NATURALIST

SEPTEMBER-DECEMBER 2021



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*Purple Finchs (male above and female below), Centennial Park  
Photos by Chris Rees*



## Enjoying Nature during a Pandemic

In the May–August article I was very optimistic about the end of the pandemic. Unfortunately, it turned out that the end was not here! Even the perceived light at the end of the tunnel turned into a train in the form of the Fourth Wave. ENC planned for fall outdoor activities and even proceeded with two warbler walks. However, all was shut down again as the severity of the Fourth Wave became apparent. Although Janice Hurlburt is now the Outdoor Program Coordinator, I continue to monitor eBird, ENC NatureTalk, WhatsApp, and personal communications to stay up-to-date with bird activity in the Edmonton area and to think about what could have been for an Outdoor Program. Unlike this Luddite, several members are monitoring Facebook and Albertabird. For most active birders, it was a very good late summer and fall.

Several Rufous Hummingbirds and Yellow-bellied Flycatchers were reported in mid-summer. The hummingbirds showed up at feeders in the Woodbend and Woodcroft areas. The Yellow-bellied Flycatchers were reported in Grey Nuns White Spruce Park, Lacombe Park Ravine, and Centennial Park in Sherwood Park.

Starting in early August, until Thanksgiving, I spent much of my time hanging out at the picnic table in Centennial Park. Okay, I was hoping the Harris's Sparrow from last year would come back. Highlights for me were a Yellow-bellied Flycatcher, a Blue-headed Vireo, several Purple Finches, and a family of Cooper's Hawks.



*Blue-headed Vireo, Centennial Park*



*Yellow-bellied Flycatcher, Centennial Park*

Late July and early August were, as always, good for warblers, with Nashville Warblers, Blackburnian Warbler, and Townsend's Warbler probably being the best sightings reported on eBird.

On October 10, Vincent Cottrell reported a Harris's Sparrow in Rundle Park on eBird. A second bird showed up in a couple of days. A Harris's also showed up at the Hermitage bird feeders. These birds drew attention for about a week.

*Harris's Sparrow (right), Rundle Park*



**On the Cover:**

***Pine Warbler, Strathcona County, photo by Chris Rees***

On October 17, Gerald Romanchuk and Colleen Raymond posted a Harlequin Duck at the mouth of Whitemud Creek to ENC NatureTalk. Many birders and photographers took advantage of the opportunity to see this rare duck in Edmonton.

On October 20, I went on my annual grouse hunting trip, to the Cynthia area. This year not only did I get a Spruce Grouse but I also recorded a Steller's Jay and a Northern Pygmy Owl. Four Canada Jays alerted me to the Northern Pygmy Owl, but my first thought was, "Why are the Canada Jays harassing a sparrow?"



*Harlequin Duck, Quesnell Bridge (above) and Northern Pygmy Owl, Cynthia area (below)*



On October 23, Vincent Cottrell finally sighted the first Short-billed (Mew) Gull on the island at Rundle Park. Again, many birders took the opportunity to view this gull. Gerald Romanchuk found another Short-billed a few kilometres away in the Cloverbar Gravel Pits and posted an excellent series of photos to the ENC NatureTalk. I lucked out on October 31 and found an Iceland (Thayer's) Gull on the Rundle Park island.



*Short-billed Gull, Rundle Park*



*Iceland Gull, Rundle Park*

On October 28, Gerald Romanchuk posted an excellent series of photos of the good show that the swans had been putting on at Big Lake during the previous week. On November 1, I shared on ENC NatureTalk that there were many Trumpeter Swans on Lake Wabamum. Many birders and photographers took advantage of the concentrations of these magnificent birds. On November 2, there were even six Tundra Swans on the big pond in Centennial Park!

It was a very pleasant surprise when Maddie Trotter posted that two Barred Owls were calling below Saskatchewan Drive on October 21. These very popular birds have been missed since the one in Whitemud Creek was found dead in the spring. Subsequently, Barred Owls have been reported in Bunchberry Meadows, at Lois Hole Park, and in Fort Saskatchewan. Hopefully we will be able to enjoy their presence come the spring.

The first winter birds started being reported in mid-October. There are now huge flocks of Bohemian Waxwings plus Pine and Evening Grosbeaks in the Wabamum area. A flock of seven Evening Grosbeaks was recorded in Whitemud North by Wayne Oakes on November 5. Lots of Brown Creepers are being reported. Large flocks of Common Redpolls with a few Hoary Redpolls are actively stripping birch trees around the city. Sean Evans reported American Goldfinch coming to his feeder throughout the fall. Others have also reported goldfinches in the area. Black-backed and American Three-toed Woodpeckers have been reported in the Whitemud Ravine. Townsend's Solitaires seem to be very common this fall.



*Evening Grosbeak, Keepphills Hamlet*



*Brown Creeper, Goldbar Park*



*American Three-toed Woodpecker, Whitemud South*



*Cape May Warbler, Devon*

November is turning out to be a WOW month again this year. A Pine Warbler and an Eastern Towhee were posted on Albertabird. A Cape May Warbler was posted on eBird. The owners of the properties where these birds are located have been very open to visitors, and there have been many. The generosity of owners of the properties is very much appreciated.

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. Right now there really is no clear picture of what lies ahead with Covid 19. We can only hope that the vaccines remain effective.

**Chris Rees, ENC Director**

*All photos by Chris Rees*



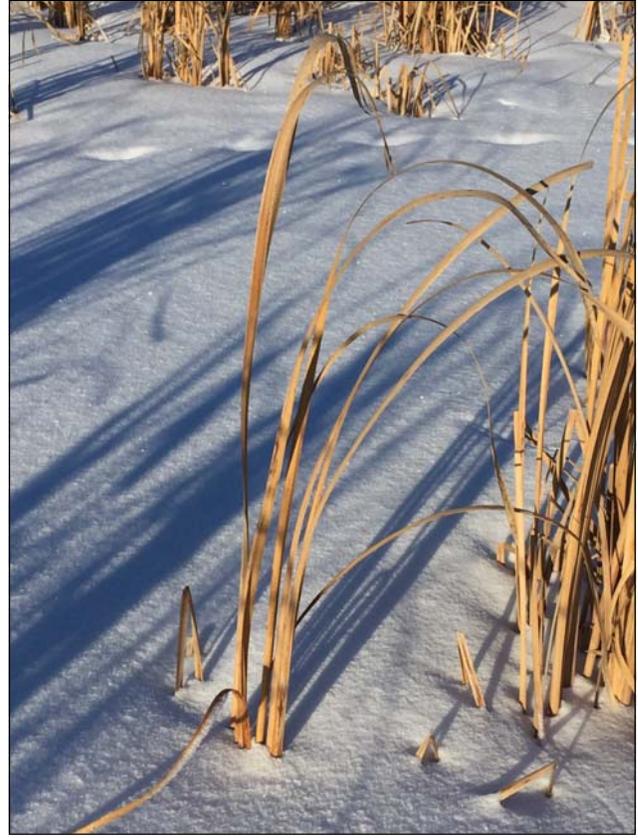
*Eastern Towhee (above), Strathcona County, and Townsend's Solitaire (below), Hermitage Park*



## President's Message



*Our President, Brian Stephens*



*Winter shadows, Astotin Lake Elk Island National Park  
Photo by Brian Stephens*

So it has been a difficult year. We have been unable to run indoor and outdoor programs and probably will not restart very soon. Still, through Zoom and Nature Alberta we have had many excellent speakers, including those from our ENC Bug and Spider, Plant, and Bird Studies groups and others from clubs throughout Alberta. We tried two walks in the city in August before the restrictions stopped these.

In spite of the restriction in activities and a drop in memberships, our financial position remains secure, as the decrease in room rental fees offsets the drop in revenue.

Along with several other organizations from the Edmonton area, we are working on Nature Canada's Bird Friendly Cities Initiative, whereby we hope to have Edmonton obtain a Bird Friendly City Certification. This will come from meeting standards in three areas: Threat Reduction; Habitat Protection, Restoration, and Climate Resiliency; and Community Outreach/ Education. By publication time, we expect the application will have been submitted to Nature Canada. Certification comes in three levels depending on how much has been accomplished.

Hope everyone is getting out birding.

**Brian Stephens**

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## Conservation Corner

### Informal Trails in the River Valley – Death by a Thousand Cuts?

Over the last decade or so mountain biking has taken off as a sport, internationally. And since it usually takes place in wilder areas well-endowed with contours, so has the amount of environmental degradation it causes. This is also a matter of observation in our Edmonton river valley and ravine system, where the number of dirt, aka single-track, aka user-generated, trails has proliferated to the extent that there is hardly anywhere in the urban or semi-urban river valley that is free of them. The root-knotted, heavily treed and undulating escarpments of the North Saskatchewan River make good substitute mountains accessible on the doorstep. If the City of Edmonton upgrades an informal trail, then you can bet that the mountain bikers, eschewers of multiple use, will almost immediately construct their own informal one nearby. The presence of formal trails, which the City wishes to expand, in many cases provides them with the access to the higher, densely vegetated slopes they crave.

Mountain bike enthusiasts argue that their sport isn't any more damaging than hiking or trail running or horse riding, but the fact is that hikers, runners, and horse-riders don't create as many trails as mountain-bikers, and the hikers at least (the majority of other trail users) don't go nearly so far. Meanwhile, the destruction is plain for all to see: loss of vegetation which doesn't grow back, soil compaction, fragmentation and loss of habitat, human disturbance of wildlife, erosion, possible increased weediness and exposure to pests, and other polluting influences.

A powerful lobby group, Edmonton Mountain Biking Alliance (EMBA), exists to promote the interests of local mountain bikers. It has obtained permits or other authorization to build some of these trails – at this point it is not clear how many. It also participates in a “user-created” website that advertises these trails, not only to local users, but to a tourist biking community as well.

Despite the City's bold new vision with its Natural Connections Plan (2007), which envisaged the city's tableland natural areas and the river valley and ravine system forming one continuous network of ecological connectivity, most urban planners have continued to assume that the primary purpose of the river valley is for human recreation. The belief seems to prevail that land management is unnecessary or at least of low priority, presumably because nature can look after itself.



**A trail with bridging pallet cut into the side of an escarpment near Wolf Willow Ravine. Photo by Hubert Taube 2020.10.14**

The Edmonton River Valley Conservation Coalition (ERVCC), whose mandate is promoting the ecological health of the river valley, has been trying for at least a couple of years to get the City's attention on informal trails, to admit there is a problem and to do something about it. I should, however, note at this point that it isn't just mountain bikers who are making serious inroads into the integrity of the river valley and ravines: tobogganers are doing it too, particularly in steep, treed areas of some of the ravines, and it is quite likely that all the valley's open, green hills will be devoid of vegetation before long. Trail runners and hikers do of course contribute to the trampling. I contend that the river valley has been suffering from *overuse* and *abuse* for some time, and this has been exacerbated by Covid-19.

A Parkland bylaw, 2202, has outlawed cutting down vegetation but this has not proved particularly helpful in curbing trails. Once a dirt trail exists (regardless of how it was created) it is legal to use it.

Here is an email from the Supervisor, River Valley Parks and Facilities, Citizen Services, Community and Recreation Services, sent in December 2020, in answer to questions that were asked by the ERVCC group.



**Forest trail on steep slope in Patricia Ravine.  
Photo by Patsy Cotterill 2021.07.21**



**Extensive denudation of vegetation and infrastructure on a Terwillegar Park trail. Photo by Hubert Taube 2021.10.27**

**How does the City keep track of dirt trails? If so, who does this?**

The City does not keep track of unimproved (dirt) trails, only the improved trails that the City maintains. Capacity and resources do not exist for this type of monitoring.

**What is the City's recourse when there is a cutting of new dirt trails, the nailing of signs into trees, etc.?**

The City does not have dedicated resources assigned to manage unimproved trails. Issues are therefore addressed on a case-by-case basis and when/if resources can be made available from other duties. When the City is alerted to issues, efforts are made to inspect the site. Actions like removing structures are flagged for follow up when resources can be redirected. Issues should be reported through 311.

**Does the City remove illicit trails from the Trail Forks app? If so, who does this?**

*Trail Forks* is a private, user-generated system which the City does not have control or influence over. We have been able to work through EMBA in the past to have some select trails removed, however, given the user influenced nature of the site, that is often a temporary measure. Should ERVCC have concerns you can certainly reach out to Trail Forks directly.

**Is EMBA the only group that has an agreement with the City to maintain trails? What are the terms of this agreement?**

The City has many agreements with various sport partners. In general, sport partners are contributing financial and volunteer resources to enhance and maintain public amenities beyond the City's planned service levels. Agreements outline the roles and responsibilities and define the parameters for both the City and the community sport partner. As EMBA's agreement is a legal agreement with the City, it is not something we can release publicly.

**Besides the recreational groups you mentioned meeting with, do you meet regularly with any ecology/conservation groups?**

The relationships with these groups are managed by our Sport Partner section. That section holds the primary relationships with these various organizations. We participate as requested by that section to provide operational representation in relation to agreements. There isn't a comparable structure in place to support conservation groups. The City engages other stakeholders and general public through information and engagement sessions. The Open Space Strategy team (City Planning) will be including

such engagement through the 2021–22 Ribbon of Green project. Feel free to contact ...

This statement was co-signed by a supervisor of Open Space Operations and three planners.

While this was an honest statement of fact, for which I am grateful, it is also the most defeatist abandonment of civic responsibility I have read. There are no resources for informal trail monitoring? Resources are provided on a case-by-case basis when they are available (obviously always a secondary consideration)? The City can't do much about Trail Forks (even when it's advertising trails on City land)? What kind of a landowner is it?

There are a couple of telling statements in this email. One is that "*sport partners are contributing financial and volunteer resources to enhance and maintain public amenities beyond the City's planned service levels.*" Ay, there's the rub. Binocular-touting nature-lovers don't, I presume, contribute to the City's service levels, even if, on the other hand, they don't cause damage and expense. But I shouldn't be surprised: things tend to get done in this city when somebody else pays for them. (I mean, notice how the footbridge over the river at Terwillegar suddenly became "essential" when the federal government was providing a generous grant!)

Another statement to note is: "*There isn't a comparable structure in place to support conservation groups.*" Lack of an equivalent conservation group or advisory committee is a definite omission from City organizational structure and means that, without balancing demands, recreational ones will continue to outweigh ecological ones. It needs someone to stand up to EMBA, which has had its own self-serving way for far too long. It would be easy enough for the City to set up an official Conservation or Ecological Committee; there would be no shortage of willing applicants; members of the existing ERVCC and North Saskatchewan River Valley Conservation Society could be drawn on to found the first one.

How do things stand in December 2021? Administratively, although not on the ground, there has been a little progress. We have heard from Open Space Operations that tracking and monitoring of trails is occurring and some effort is being made to reduce access (we don't know the details); further, a "trails strategy" is being con-

sidered for the budget cycle 2023–2026. This at least indicates awareness on the part of the "ecological team," but it is not nearly soon enough for action supported by adequate funding: the degraded state of the river valley is a matter of urgency. Trees, ground cover, and habitat are not sustainable resources at the rate they are being abused, and the future can only be worse: the city's population continues to grow. The ecologists are collecting examples of the steadily increasing scientific literature on the effect of extreme sports on natural environments, the better to make their case for counteraction.

This is where you ask: what can we naturalists do? Well, something. I am convinced that we need a big public outcry over the state of the river valley and its destructive labyrinth of trails to bring this issue front of mind with the City. As frequent users of the river valley and ravines, even if we are not all Edmonton residents, we are well-placed to email or write our city councillor or Council as a whole. (Call 311 if you witness outright harmful behaviour.) I'm guessing this may be more productive than confrontation on the trails, although I can guarantee that the latter will be illuminating for both parties! As the ERVCC points out, though, it is not up to citizens to educate the public in responsible use of the river valley: that is the City's responsibility.

When you write or call it might be worth mentioning that as a taxpayer you want to see the City invest in the sustainability of the river valley and ravines, not use them as a cheap outdoor rec centre and money-saver. Lack of funding should not be used as an excuse for not maintaining what is often touted as the city's greatest asset. If you are good at analyzing scientific papers on environmental topics, please consider reading some and spitting them out in more popular form, to help others understand. Perhaps the ENC could develop a brochure for use in schools?

Naturalists, in this day and age, must always be conservationists. In my previous conservation column I mentioned other City plans and developments that will have an impact on our river valley and demand vigilance and citizen participation from our naturalists. If the new Ribbon of Green consultations are called in the next little while, please make sure to attend them, and deploy a critical eye and voice!

"...increasingly, recreation in natural areas is including 'adventure' sports. One such recreation/sport that now incorporates a range of forms, including adventure derivatives, is mountain biking. In the more extreme forms, riders use extensive trails, often with steep segments and natural or human-made obstacles to demonstrate technical skills (e.g., balance, calculated risk-taking, excitement, speed). Appreciation of the natural environment is seldom, if ever, a reason

for participation.... While there is a dearth of information on the impact of mountain biking, we conclude that park management needs to be strategic in their consideration of the issues associated with mountain biking or the outcome will be further degradation of natural areas and, at the least, loss of many animals if not major threats to populations. [The same is of course true of plant populations.]”

*From: “Is the evolving sport of mountain biking compatible with the conservation of fauna in national parks?” a paper by Nigel Hardiman and Shelley Burgin of Kent University, U.K., and Bond University, Gold Coast, Queensland, Australia, respectively.*

### Community Science vs. Citizen Science?

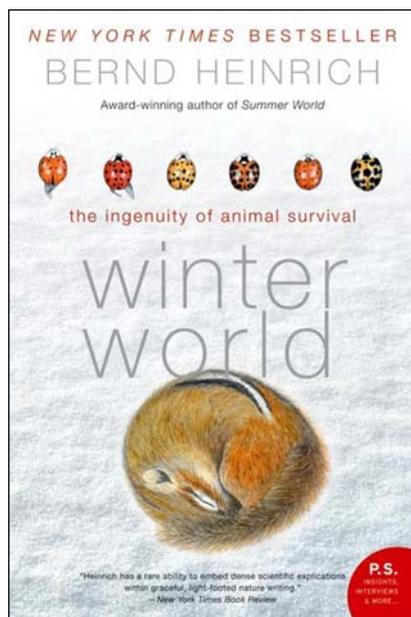
Why “community science,” not “citizen science?” is the question asked in the Fall/Winter 2021 issue of the Yellowstone to Yukon Conservation Initiative’s Connections Newsletter. Yes, I have wondered myself about the change. According to Y to Y, the term is being increasingly used in order to be inclusive: it recognizes that an individual doesn’t have to have citizenship within a country, province, or state to participate in these collaborative projects. Hm. It’s true we’re not all citizens. But I find “community science” a little bit confusing. What community, and what does it mean exactly? What about “layman” science? No, that has religious connotations, and in any case some participants do have specialized knowledge or have had careers as professional scientists. What about “volunteer science” then, or better still, “amateur science.” An amateur is a true lover, willing to do something for its own sake, or for the good it will bring, without thought of monetary reward! I think of our birders as true amateurs, despite their knowledge and the professional quality of the photographs they turn out, especially as they near-freeze to death, waiting for that sighting or better-quality photo!

Patsy Cotterill

## 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 on the availability of books in printed and electronic formats, go to [epl.ca](http://epl.ca) and click on “Search.”

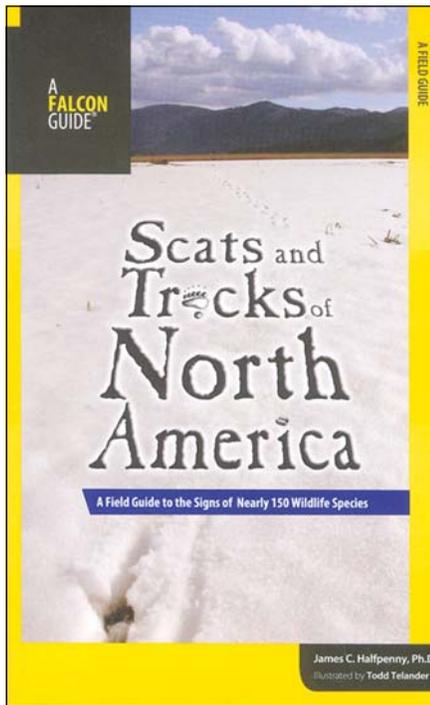
Curl up with one of the recommended books and escape into the wonderful world of nature!



***Winter World: The Ingenuity of Animal Survival***  
By Bernd Heinrich, published by Harperren, 2003

A *New York Times* bestseller by the award-winning author of *Summer World: A Season of Bounty*, this book is a good introduction to the myriad ways animals have adapted to cold temperatures.

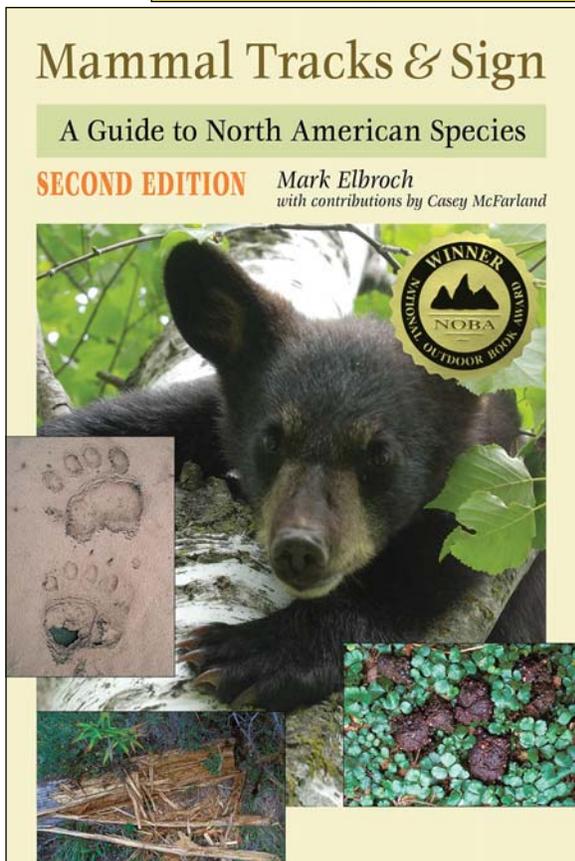
**Recommended by Connor Charchuk**



**Scats and Tracks of North America**  
 By James C. Halfpenny, published by Falcon Guides, 2019

This field-sized book (approximately 10 x 18 cm) describes and illustrates the scats, tracks, and track patterns of various North American birds, amphibians, and mammals. A ruler is provided on the back cover for use in the field. The author is regarded as one of the world’s leading experts on animal tracking.

**Recommended by Karen Lindsay**



**Mammal Tracks & Sign**  
 By Mark Elbroch and Casey McFarland, published by Stackpole Books, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, 2019  
 Winner of the 2019 National Outdoor Book Award for Outdoor Classic Books

I have the first edition and really liked the illustrations of how each animal is moving and making the track patterns (hops, bounds, lopes, gallops, and 2 x 2 lopes). Illustrations include stride length and identify hind and front feet in the track patterns. This book has both photographs and illustrations. Animal scats and other animal sign seen in the woods are also discussed with photos and illustrations.

**Recommended by Karen Lindsay**

I am out of book recommendations and am looking for more reviews of good nature books to share! To suggest a book review, go to the ENC website, click on “Member Entrance,” and log in using the password you received with your membership. Use "Contact us!" to provide your information, e.g., in the “Comment” section, write “Parkland Naturalist book review,” describe the book you’d like to recommend, and I’ll get in touch with you.

**Karen Lindsay**

## Jaeger Sightings at Cooking Lake and Beaverhills Lake



**Between September 8 and 12, 1977, a Long-tailed Jaeger captured and killed three Lesser Yellowlegs.**

This past year, very few Edmonton area birdwatchers visited Cooking Lake, possibly due to the scarcity of migrating shorebirds, but on 27 September I had the pleasure of meeting Vince Cottrell there. After an exchange of the day's sightings, Vince asked me about jaegers. He was hoping to see one. As it so happened, I was to spot two of them later that afternoon, about half an hour after Vince had left the lake.

The previous year, also during September, I had seen a distant jaeger harassing a large gull at Cooking Lake. The timing of that sighting was one day after a Parasitic Jaeger had been reported at Hastings Lake. My only close view of a parasitic at Cooking Lake dates back to September 10, 2009. A few years later, a Long-tailed Jaeger was photographed there by Gerald Romanchuk.

As far as I know, the above four records encompass the entire list of jaeger sightings at Cooking Lake. This total seems all the more meagre in view of the great amount of time I have spent birding at the lake. Over 12 consecutive years, from 2009 to 2021, I surveyed the same stretch of lake shore roughly once a week – sometimes even more often – from ice break-up to freeze-up.

In contrast, my sighting rate of jaegers used to be very much higher around Beaverhills Lake. In fact, the very first time Irma and I visited that lake, on an August day in 1964, we were surprised and delighted to see a Parasitic Jaeger fly by along the wide-open west shore. Since then,

from 1964 onward I have spent about 50 days per year birding at Beaverhills Lake, particularly during the migration seasons, until I switched over to Cooking Lake, which is less than half the road distance from Edmonton. My past observations of these fascinating Arctic pirates were detailed in three of my books, two articles in the nature periodical *The Blue Jay*, and one story in *Alberta Naturalist*. (See the list of publications below.)



**Long-tailed Jaeger in flight at Beaverhills Lake**

The following is abstracted from *Wild Hunters* and *Prairie Water*. Between 1964 and 1983, I recorded 141 jaegers at Beaverhills Lake on 61 dates. Although they could show up in any month from May to October, 99 out

of the 141 did so in September. Some of them stayed far off-shore, others were observed at close range and could be positively identified by their elongated central tail feathers as Parasitic Jaegers. Light-phase adults were most common, three were dark-phase, and several appeared to be mottled immatures. To see two or three jaegers following each other in flight was common, and on rare occasions there were four or five simultaneously in the air. Incidentally, on May 27 and 29, 2002, Brian Genereux and I watched a group of seven jaegers actively hunting sandpipers at Beaverhills Lake. (See my book *Sixty Years of Watching Wildlife*, page 169.)

To increase one's chances of spotting jaegers it pays to keep an eye on aggregations of shorebirds and gulls. The jaeger's arrival causes wide-spread unrest. Gulls that are singled out for close pursuit scream in terror and dodge the pirate's attack by veering and twisting. Such aerial pursuits may last several minutes, and if the jaeger has its way the gull will end up regurgitating the contents of its gullet. Diving after the falling morsels, the jaeger tries to catch them in mid-air.

#### *Jaeger photos by Dick Dekker*

For more details on my observations, see the following publications:

*Wild Hunters*. 1985. CWD Publishers, Edmonton. (pages 169–174)

*Prairie Water: Wildlife at Beaverhills Lake, Alberta*. 1991, 1998. University of Alberta Press. (page 108)

*Sixty Years of Watching Wildlife: Stories of Predation*. 2021. Hancock House Publishers, Surrey, BC. (pages 152, 169)

Autumn Records of Parasitic Jaegers in Central Alberta. 1968. *The Blue Jay*, 26(1):16–17).

Long-tailed Jaeger Preys on Lesser Yellowlegs. 1979. *The Blue Jay*, 37(4):221–222.

Jaegers at Beaverhills Lake, Alberta. 1985. *Alberta Naturalist*, 15: 1–4.

Less commonly witnessed is the jaegers' persistence in hunting small passerines or shorebirds. Two or three may make alternate passes at a fleeing phalarope or sandpiper until one of the pursuers seizes the prey in its bill and carries it down to the water. Few of these hunts fail unless the victim escapes into the cover of reeds or bushes. The only Long-tailed Jaeger I ever watched at the lake, over several days, seized three Lesser Yellowlegs and pecked them to death while standing on them in shallow water.

Over the years, for some unknown reason, jaegers have become less routine at the lake. From a high of 0.41 sightings per fall day during the five-year period of 1964–1968, mean sightings dropped to 0.16 and 0.08 respectively in 1974–1978 and 1979–1983. Northern pelagic birds such as jaegers are known to migrate along the Atlantic and Pacific seaboard, but my observations prove that they also use an overland travel route through the heart of the continent, as was suggested sixty years ago by an American ornithologist who reported winter sightings of jaegers in the Gulf of Mexico.

#### **Dick Dekker**

## **Cooking Lake, 2021: What happened to the birds and insects?**

Since 2009, I have visited Cooking Lake once or twice every week between ice break-up and freeze-up. When long hikes up the southeast shore became too tiring, I limited my bird surveys to a stretch of about 2 km along the south side of the lake. Every year included some interesting highlights, but the changes seen this past summer were puzzling and alarming.

My first visit of 2021 was on March 16, when the entire lake was still frozen. By mid-April there was a strip of open water along the shore, about one week earlier than last year. On April 22, all ice was gone, but waterbirds were few and far between. By contrast, on April 22 of the previous year, Chris Rees saw hundreds of avocets at Cooking Lake. In 2021 the first two showed up on May 5. By May 14, the weather warmed and the littoral zone was graced with several Black-necked Stilts and Lesser

Yellowlegs, as well as a few flighty sandpipers. Around that time, the migration of Arctic shorebirds should have been in full swing, but it turned out to be a dud. A persistent dome of high pressure over Alberta might have pushed the main migration of sandpipers well east of our region.

Every year, I monitored the lake level by way of a small stony islet along the south shore. Between 2016 and 2020, the islet was partly inundated due to adequate precipitation. Annual totals recorded at the Edmonton International Airport for these years averaged 475 mm, well above the 123-year mean of 454 mm (see my book *Sixty Years of Watching Wildlife*, page 161). In recent years, the snow melt has flooded into the shoreline vegetation, submerging mudflat habitat.

The spring of 2021 was actually quite dry. As per May 26, the annual precipitation was 132 mm, compared to 160 mm the previous year. By November 3, the difference was even more pronounced: 312 mm in 2021 and 471 in 2020. Nevertheless, the lake came up a little, most likely due to rising ground-water levels in response to the higher than average precipitation of 2016–2020.

The remainder of this birding season was again a dud, and the key factor was insects. There were no mosquitoes at all at the lake (or in the city), and mud flies, that practically covered the water line in previous summers, were absent. Except for a few days in spring, I noted very few hatching flights of tiny midges, and I rarely saw evidence of the larger chironomids. There must have been some insect life in the water, though, because an estimated one thousand non-breeding avocets were present all summer. A few stayed around until well into October. Whatever they were feeding on, they often swam far off-shore and foraged in the way ducks do, by

up-ending. To investigate the avocet food question, in October of 2018 Zac MacDonald, a student of University of Alberta Professor John Acorn, walked into the muddy airport bay and collected one or more chironomid larvae, called bloodworms.

Oddly absent this season were Franklin's Gulls, which were super abundant in other years. By late summer, some loose flocks might fly over during mid-day, possibly on their westward migration, but instead of hawking insects high in the sky, they swooped down and picked up small items from the water surface. One exciting and unexpected highlight of September was a pair of jaegers that were shadowing migrating Bonaparte's Gulls far out over the lake.

The cause of last summer's scarcity of birds and insects is unknown. Hopefully, it's not some environmental problem that may be with us for years to come.

**Dick Dekker**



*Avocet Islet, Cooking Lake (above), photo by Dick Dekker  
Bonaparte's Gull (below), photo by Chris Rees*



## Changing How We Spread The News

Can you imagine using a landline telephone to call a recorded message to find out about recent bird sightings? And by recent, I mean within the last few weeks or even months. Quite the contrast to the almost instantaneous communication we enjoy now. Over twenty years ago, when I started birding, calling into the Northern Alberta Bird Hotline was a main source of intel. Or you could go into the Wildbird General Store and check out the big white board in the back. Or you could join the Edmonton Bird Club and make friends who might call you when a cool bird was seen.

For the most part, all of the above are slow. I recall going into the store and seeing a report of an Indigo Bunting visiting a feeder in the Ottewell neighbourhood. By the time I saw the report and got out there, the bird hadn't been seen for a couple of weeks. One bird hotline incident still burns me. One fall day at Elk Island, I saw a large flock of Bonaparte's Gulls, but I wasn't good enough or smart enough to look carefully at all of them. A couple of days later I called the hotline and couldn't believe it. Some birders found a Black-legged Kittiwake there on the same day!

Sometimes the old-fashioned ways did work. In the early 2000s I got a call from Jack Park at the Bird Store. He'd heard from a lady in Clareview who thought she had a Northern Mockingbird in her yard. I went over and saw the bird, got some pics, and proved her bird was indeed a Mocker.



*Northern Mockingbird*

By this time the Internet listservs were becoming popular with birders. A Yahoo group, Albertabird, was started. It's still running on the GroupsIO platform today. Things

were still a bit slow by today's standards. You had to go home, fire up the old desktop, connect via dial-up to the Internet, and hope no one else picked up a phone. The Clareview Mockingbird stayed around all winter, and the lady was feeding it mealworms and special cookies. We posted it on Albertabird and folks from across the province came to see it.

The next big step in bird communication was smart phones. My first was a BlackBerry. Remember the ones with the tiny little keyboard buttons? Back in 2009, it worked to get a few people a good bird at Brooks during the May count. Steve Knight and I were camping at Tillebrook Park. While taking down camp early on our last morning, we heard an unusual bird song neither of us recognized. It sounded like a thrush. We played several songs on a CD player. None of our common thrushes sounded like this bird. Then we played Wood Thrush. We looked at each other and had an OMG moment. That was it! We tracked down the bird and got a look and some very mediocre photos.



*Wood thrush*

We wanted to tell others about the Wood Thrush, but no one else was around except a group of birders who thought we actually meant one of the more common thrushes. Too bad for them. On the way out of the park, I wrote up a quick report on my BlackBerry and sent it to Albertabird. A birder in Calgary saw the message, and called friends who were in Brooks. They and a few others were able to get back to Tillebrook and find the thrush.

Karma is a thing. A few years later, in 2013, Steve and I spent the May long weekend birding in the Crowsnest

Pass area. On our way home up Highway 2, I read some Albertabird postings on my iPhone. A Sage Thrasher had been spotted on the outskirts of Calgary. By coincidence one of the guys who found it was a birder who benefited from our Wood Thrush report. Back to the Thrasher. It it would be a lifer for both of us, and we would be driving by within a few miles of where it was seen the day before.

We went to the spot. Steve went one way and I went the other. Soon I heard an unfamiliar call, then a bird popped up on a fencepost. Sage Thrasher! I didn't have my camera and had to sprint back to the vehicle. We both got great looks and photos of a long-sought-after species.

By 2015 smart phones were becoming ubiquitous. Birding communication via listservs, text messages, and social media such as Facebook was common. You hardly had to go look for a bird. Just wait for the reports, some posted while the sender was still looking at the bird.

Sometimes bird reports come in a very round-about way. In May 2015 I got an email from a friend in Newfoundland. A friend of his had just returned from visiting his brother in southwestern Alberta near Waterton, where he saw and photographed a Great-tailed Grackle, a species that hadn't been reported in the province before. I put the word out on Albertabird and several birders went down

and saw the grackle. It was a few weeks before Steve and I could get there, but eventually we saw it too. All because of a timely, thoughtful email from across the country!

I probably started using eBird regularly around 2011 or 2012, after Ann Carter gave the club a presentation that inspired many of us to sign up. Eventually eBird introduced the alerts feature that you can set up to receive daily or even hourly emails whenever a rare bird is seen in a preset region, or birds you need for a life or year list.

It worked well for Colleen and me in the summer of 2020. We were at Weed Lake near Calgary looking for a Ruddy Turnstone. We dipped. While we were having a lunch break, the eBird alert came in. Someone had found a Buff-breasted Sandpiper near Frank Lake. It would be a lifer for Colleen, and it was only 45 minutes away. We buzzed down. It wasn't hard to find the spot – folks with scopes and cameras were lined up on the side of the road. It didn't take long for Colleen to see the bird.

There's no doubt computers, smart phones, listservs, eBird, digital cameras, social media, and the like have drastically changed birding. Who knows what's next? Binoculars that ID a bird for you aren't far away. There's probably a lot more to come....

**Gerald Romanchuk**

*more photos on next page*



**Sage Thrasher**



*Great-tailed Grackle*



*Buff-breasted Sandpiper*

*All photos by Gerald Romanchuk*

## Road Trip: Fall Migration in Saskatchewan



*Sandhill Cranes, photo by Betty Fisher*

Fall migration, a wonderful time of year – crisp blue skies, gorgeous colours, and a plethora of bird sightings and sounds. With this in our minds, Betty Fisher, Judy Johnson, and I set off in early October to join an Eagle-Eye tour in search of cranes and other migrants in Saskatchewan. We left Edmonton two days early and planned to stay two days after the trip in order to do birding on the way to and from Saskatoon and around the area. It was a very productive trip, with huge flocks of geese and sandhill cranes moving and feeding in large numbers and, of course, the Whooping Cranes.

Our trip started on the backroads to Saskatoon, a five-hour trip, but for us birders it took about ten and half hours. We started out toward Wainwright, then went south to Provost, and then straight east on Highway 14 in Saskatchewan. There are numerous ponds and lakes on this route. Each species of duck occupied its own pond or section of pond, shorebirds were still present, and Greater White-fronted Geese and Snow Geese in abundance. As the sun was setting on the last lakes and fields before we arrived in Saskatoon, huge flocks of Snow Geese were flying over and landing. We pulled into a farm road

where we spotted geese on the ground. Over the course of an hour the whole field filled up with Snow Geese – it looked like a storm had dumped a pile of snow on the field. We estimated 100,000 geese in the fields. Saskatchewan has far more blue morphs than we usually see in Alberta, which was interesting. Ross's Geese were also present. Another large flock was in a dip on the other side of the road, but these were the White-fronted Geese. They like to have their own area of habitat and, in addition, the Snow Geese were having problems finding space to land in their field.

In Saskatoon the next day we explored areas listed on previous Eagle-Eye trips and found more geese and about 70 Sandhill Cranes on the ground feeding by a lake. The Sandhill Cranes were well camouflaged in the canola fields, especially the young of year. Stopping by a marsh near the road we saw about 70 Rusty Blackbirds feeding and bathing and more flying around in the field. We also spotted a couple of Turkey Vultures and Red-tailed Hawks.

At lunch we stopped by a lake in Prud'Homme. The sky was full of Snow Geese who kept flying over and circling, as a couple of eagles and a Merlin were surveying the area. We stayed there for a couple of hours and scoped the lake, finding a variety of ducks, including a Barrow's Goldeneye, shorebirds, about 60 Tundra Swans, Cackling Geese, Ross's Geese, and Bonaparte's, Ring-billed, and Franklin's Gulls. A very enjoyable lunch spot and the weather was perfect. It is always amazing when you stay for a while in one spot. The variety of bird life you see and the changing dynamics of the birds on the lake are fascinating. We would have stayed longer, but we needed to meet the group for the actual trip, so headed back to Saskatoon.

On the first day of our trip, ten participants with two guides started out to see the Whooping Cranes. An hour and half hour north of Saskatoon we had our first sighting, two adults and a young standing near the road. Other groups were also on the look-out for the cranes, and soon our guides received news of more. We drove the area and saw a flock feeding by a hill far off the road. As they moved out of the dip up onto the hill, we saw there were about 40 Whooping Cranes. They are skittish, so we never got too close, but with scopes we had exceptionally good views. Shortly after this sighting, the flock flew over the road and landed by a lake where more cranes were already present, so the total for the day was seventy. As we watched, they moved out of the bushes and cattails and onto the edge of the lake, becoming increasingly visible.

We spent two days scouting around Saskatoon and found about 70 Brewer's Blackbirds, Rusty Blackbirds, Avocets, Black-bellied and Golden Plovers, and Palm and Yellow-rumped Warblers. At one stop we saw about 250 Common Grackles on the fence line and eating gravel, and many more gleaning grains from the field. Most days we saw 10 to 12 Harriers. These were just a few of the key species we saw.

We headed up to Prince Albert National Park on the last day of our tour. Along the way we stopped at Emma Lake and walked around the area. We saw about 25 Evening Grosbeaks feeding in the conifers as well as Swamp, Lincoln, and White-throated Sparrows. There were large rafts of Common Mergansers, Pied-billed Grebes, Gadwalls, Widgeons, and other ducks, as well as Coots. We had excellent views, as a local cottage owner invited us down to his back deck overlooking the lake.

At Waskesiu Lake, in the park, we saw loons, gulls, Canada Jays, Lapland Longspur (by the water), and Boreal and Black-capped Chickadees, as well as Townsend Solitaires and Harris's Sparrows. Driving around and through the park we saw 5 Ruffed Grouse displaying close by in

the ditch, a lone male Wood Duck, and more than 50 ravens. The ravens cruise ditches looking for roadkill, so they were always present.

That evening on the way back, we went by Marcelin to see if the Whooping Cranes were still around and found 73 in the lake and flying. About 7,000 Snow Geese flew into the fields to feed. Also, 5 Bald Eagles, a Merlin, and a Northern Shrike. Harriers were also present and had been in numbers every day of the trip. Closer to Saskatoon, now well after sunset, we saw 4 Great Horned Owls. It was a long but very productive and enjoyable last day.

Next morning the three of us headed out to a spot on the South Saskatchewan River where a Kentucky Warbler had been spotted. We cased out the spot and watched for some time, but after returning numerous times we dipped on the warbler. Not all was lost, as we did find thousands of Sandhill Cranes on the river sandbanks and feeding in nearby fields. Large flocks were flying over us all day, sometimes barely above the treetops, so we had wonderful views of cranes continuously calling in sunny blue skies.

We ended our trip a day early, as the forecast was for fog and rain. We took the same route home and found greater numbers of geese, especially Snow Geese, and more Tundra Swans. Ponds held large numbers of Pintails and Green-winged Teal as well as a variety of lingering shorebirds and small numbers of ducks. We saw flocks of Lapland Longspurs and Snow Buntings flying over the fields and stopping along pond edges to drink and bathe.

We were glad we took the trip and added the extra days, and the chosen route was fantastic. We thought it might be interesting to repeat it in the spring with a further detour to Chaplin Lake outside Moose Jaw, which has incredible spring migration. Birding road trips are always enjoyable, especially when travelling with like-minded friends. Amazing birding is possible in Alberta and our neighbouring provinces.

### Marg Reine

*Betty Fisher, Marg Reine,  
and Judy Johnson (l to r)*





*Snow Geese, photo by Marg Reine*



*Great Horned Owl, photo by Betty Fisher*



*Whooping Cranes, photo by Betty Fisher*



*Harris's Sparrow, photo by Betty Fisher*



*Greater White-fronted Geese with Snow Geese, photo by Betty Fisher*



*Two muskrats curled up on a grebe nest (top), photo by Marg Reine  
Canada Jay (bottom), photo by Betty Fisher*