

# THE PARKLAND NATURALIST

SEPTEMBER-DECEMBER 2022



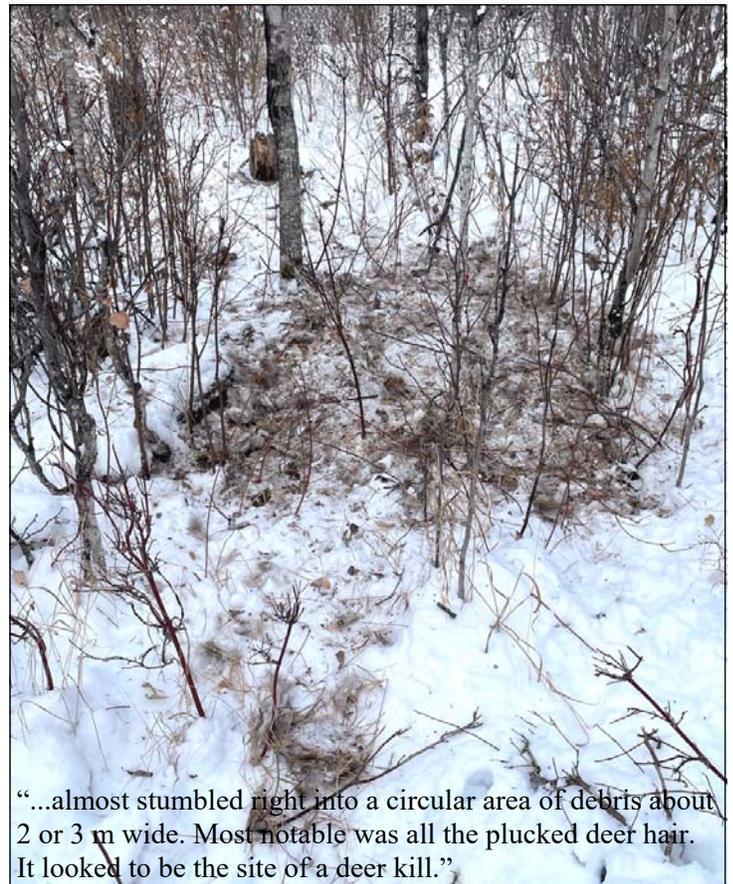
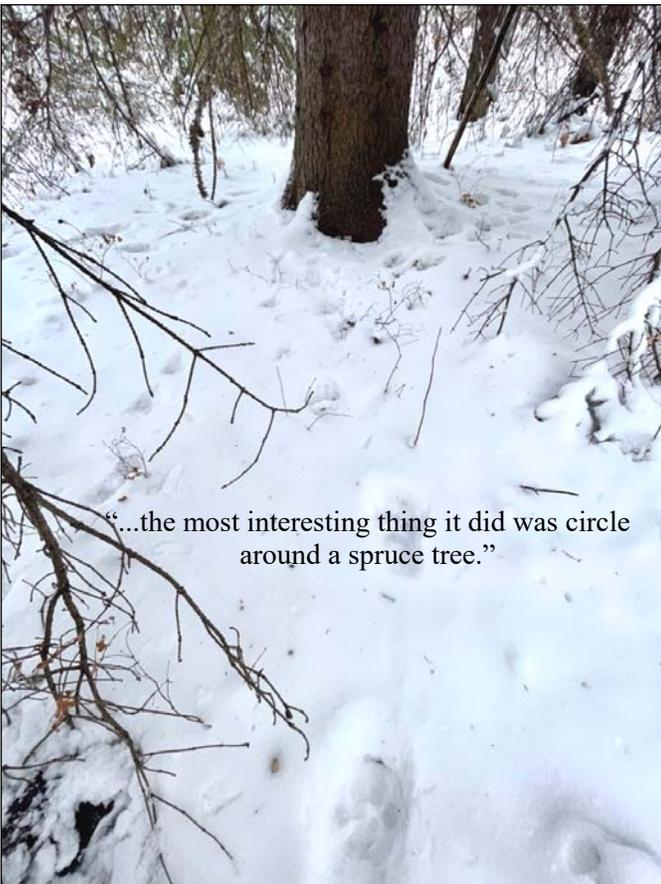
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***Cougar (top), Cougar tracks and deer kill site (below)***

***Photos by Gerald Romanchuk***

## Tracking Cats

It's kind of unnerving coming across a set of tracks in the snow that you're sure are from a large predatory animal. Especially when you're alone and the tracks look fresh. The snow was several inches deep and fairly loose. At first there weren't any distinct prints, just big circular tracks in a walking pattern. Then I came across a few tracks that showed a nice imprint of the foot. I could see the foot pad and toes, and that the negative space between them made a "C." It's an important feature that helps distinguish a cat track from the "X" that would show on a dog (coyote, wolf, domestic) track.



I was sure these were from a cougar. Gotta admit it was a relief to find the good imprints and see that the cat was

going in the opposite direction. I back-tracked it for about 400 meters. It was following a deer trail through the bush. The cat seemed to be in travel mode. Other than stepping up on various downed logs, the most interesting thing it did was circle around a spruce tree. Eventually I gave up and headed to my vehicle for lunch.



Some readers might be familiar with the cougars I've recorded on trail cameras over the past year and a half. I've put up several trail cams at a local natural area. There have been twelve recordings of cougars at three different camera locations. They span most months of the year, showing a fairly consistent cougar presence.

After lunch I went to another part of the natural area where I had more cameras. Walked up to the one called BeaverCam and saw another set of big circular tracks right under the camera. Sure enough, when I checked the memory card I saw a cougar had gone past. A lesson I got was that even though the tracks looked pretty fresh, they were actually two days old.

I went back the next day and followed the tracks as far as I could. After reading about other signs cougars leave, I was hoping to see something like a scrape that a male cougar leaves with his rear feet. Or a place where the cat bedded down, scratched a log, or even peed. I followed the trail for about a kilometre until I lost it at a confusing deer trail intersection. As on the other trail I back-tracked, the cougar seemed to be in travel mode and I didn't see any sign other than walking. I'm fairly sure that if I'd been able to follow it further it would've even-

### *On the Cover:*

***Cougar, Genesee Natural Area, photo by Gerald Romanchuk***

tually connected with the trail I saw earlier and was likely made by the same cat on the same day.

One thing of interest that I saw was that when the cat came to a fallen tree that was laying horizontally about 40–50 cm above the ground, it must've done the limbo and gone under the log instead of jumping over. On my way back it occurred to me to look at the bottom of the log. Sure enough, I saw some strands of yellowish hair that I think was probably from the cougar.



It's awesome to be able to follow a cougar trail so close to the city. It's highly unlikely to actually see one of the cats in person, but it's been very cool to see them on the trail cams. I'm getting a bit braver around cougar sign. And now my mission is to follow more trails and find evidence of some interesting behaviour.

Two weeks after the events described above, I was out for another camera check. The first one I checked, BeaverCam, had a cougar video on it. That was awesome. I walked to the north about 300 m towards MartenCam. On the way there I came across some cougar tracks heading southeast. Continuing on to the camera I was excited to see the tracks had come from that direction and sure enough, there were two cougar videos on MartenCam.

After the cam check, I followed the cat tracks to the southeast. It made its way to the east boundary of the natural area, then continued south across a township road and onto private land. On the way to check my other cameras on the west side of the natural area, I struck another cougar trail heading north, but couldn't follow it.

I returned to MartenCam the next day and started back-tracking the cougar trail in the other direction. It seemed to follow game trails for stretches, then head off and join with another trail keeping almost due north. As on the other trails I followed recently, the cat was travelling and didn't do anything else.



At times the trail was hard to follow, especially through open areas with deeper, looser snow and other animal tracks. I was keeping my nose down, trying to stay on the trail, and almost stumbled right into a circular area of debris about 2 or 3 m wide. Most notable was all the plucked deer hair. It looked to be the site of a deer kill. (see photo on inside front cover). The cougar had buried all the remains; the only thing I could see other than hair and leaf litter was what I think was the deer's stomach.

The deer kill clears up some confusion over what the trail cam videos showed. On November 29 the cougar went north past MartenCam, on November 30 it went south past BeaverCam, and on December 1, after fresh snow, it went south past MartenCam. It seemed like a lot of coming and going in the same general area, but a nearby deer carcass makes a lot of sense.

The combination of trail cam videos and old-fashioned tracking gave a partial window into the life of this amazing animal. It's a huge treat to be able to walk in the footsteps of the big cat.

**Gerald Romanchuk**

*All photos by Gerald Romanchuk*

## Snapshots from Australia

### A Plant Traveller in a Foreign Land

In October and November I made another of my short vacation trips to the state of Victoria in southeastern Australia. Apart from visiting family, my main interest is the native flora, which remains challenging, given its great diversity and the fact my parachutings-in allow a mere snapshot of plant phenology. A fair number of families and genera are familiar to me now, as is the odd discrete plant community such as coastal scrub. However, where the genus is a large one with many species, identification to species level can be nigh impossible. The genus *Eucalyptus* is a case in point, with some 280 species in Victoria alone, and about 700 in Australia. *Acacia*, or wattle, is another example, with over 210 species in Victoria and nearly 1,000 in the country as a whole. Golden wattle, *Acacia pycnantha*, is Australia's plant emblem. (Compare Alberta's two most populous genera: willow [*Salix*] with 43 species, and sedge [*Carex*] with 131.)

Australia's old geology and infertile soils have promoted speciation and the proliferation of endemics (species that are found nowhere else but in the specified place). Nevertheless, the pattern is the same as here in much less diverse Canada; some species are common, while the rest are restricted to certain geographic areas and are unlikely to be encountered by the casual botanist. Since the guidebooks aim to cover the commoner species, some of those with a wide distribution are identifiable with reasonable certainty. An impressive online *Flora of Victoria* now exists, developed by a team of plant taxonomists operating out of the herbarium in the Royal Botanic Gardens in Melbourne.

It is not very practical to use the *Flora* keys when one is travelling and specimens are available, but the *Flora* does provide distributional maps that can be consulted in advance and species lists that can be generated for conservation areas, which also prove useful after the fact. For example, I visit a state park in a suburb of Melbourne on my trips and I can print off a (albeit long) species list for the park. Would that we had a similar electronic flora guide for Alberta! I have nothing but admiration for Australia's taxonomists and the diversity they deal with. Of course, the best way for a visitor to know what they are looking at is to have interpretive signage in situ, and Australia is as sadly deficient in this respect as Canada. Plant-spotting remains a hobby of the few, as here, and a serious professional pursuit for even fewer.

I also like to make comparisons while travelling, teasing out generally applicable ecological principles from alien ecosystems, and looking for fresh ideas on nature inter-

pretation, conservation, and restoration that are transferable back home.

### Local Restoration

The use of native plants in small-scale restorations seems to be a common practice of municipalities, in contrast to the situation in Alberta. Small plantations of green triangles (three sticks supporting a green plastic cover or mesh around small native shrubs and tough, tussocky herbs) can often be observed on degraded tracts of public land or street beds. In Melbourne, large areas of natural vegetation have been retained as parks and reserves upstream of the Yarra River, while downstream stretches of trail have been planted with native trees and shrubs providing both habitat and a salubrious environment for human recreation. Some parts of the trail are shared by pedestrians and cyclists, but in places the track parallels a lower single-track dirt trail for pedestrians only. Edmonton would be well advised to emulate this, rather than plaster the North Saskatchewan riverside with the concrete platforms and other hard-surface developments the Touch-the-Water plan proposes. The Yarra Trail is not perfect, there is scope for weeding and further inplanting, but the urban Yarra is luckily not blessed with Edmonton's steep river escarpments, and there is no evidence of mountain bike damage or spur trails that fragment habitat and create eyesores here.



An interpretive sign along the Yarra River Trail, Melbourne, incorporating Indigenous and climate messages (November 2, 2022).

### **“Hybrid” Forest Ecosystems**

One observation that mirrors Canadian experience is that introduced plants (in Victoria many are familiar to me because of my origin in temperate northern Europe) are invariably associated with the human footprint. Non-natives are noticeable in national parks and in coastal areas along trails and other disturbed areas. However, I was surprised to see examples of steep, forested hillsides where an overstory of native *Eucalyptus* trees was underlain by an extensive ground cover of non-native grasses. It turns out these hillsides had been cleared for gold-mining in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, usually with further disturbances in the form of logging, building, and bushfires in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. These mixed (“hybrid” or “novel”) ecosystems of introduced and native elements appear to be the norm wherever natural communities have been disturbed, with the result that wildness now likely only exists where humans have not been. Perhaps, however, the “novel” phenomenon is more prevalent in countries agriculturally colonized by Europeans, such as Australia and Canada. Is this true of, say, disturbed ground in wild South America?



**Native vegetation, grass trees, and silvertop wallaby-grass among eucalypts, near the top of a rocky hill once mined for gold, Ovens Valley, Victorian Alps (November 7, 2022).**

### **Australian Birds**

Birding in Australia is definitely worthwhile, but be sure to take along a bird call app to identify those shy forest birds with the beautiful calls! I had time only to notice the in-your-face, human-adapted ones: Australian Magpies, Magpie-larks, Australian Ravens, and wattlebirds. Australian Wood Ducks, some shepherding large broods, Silver Gulls, Galahs, Crimson Rosellas, and Sulphur-crested Cockatoos are easy to see because they make use of municipal lawns for foraging. The occasional perched Laughing Kookaburra makes its presence known with a call. Common Mynas, a noisy import from India, are the urban bird par excellence and the classic successful colonist, scarfing down human food, quaffing the nectar of birds-of-paradise and the wild flora, and using cavities in old eucalypts to nest. Purple Swamphens are common around the artificial lakes in Melbourne’s botanic garden, teaching their young to forage in aquatic vegetation, but one had me intrigued by its determined attempts to snatch my croissant as I sat eating lakeside. When I finally threw it a piece, it flew off with it to what appeared to be a nest on the other side of the lake, and did not return for more. Was this human adaptation in action or a case of bad parenting (giving your kid fast food)?



**A Purple Swamphen harassing me for a croissant, Royal Botanic Gardens, Melbourne (October 26, 2022).**

## Conservation

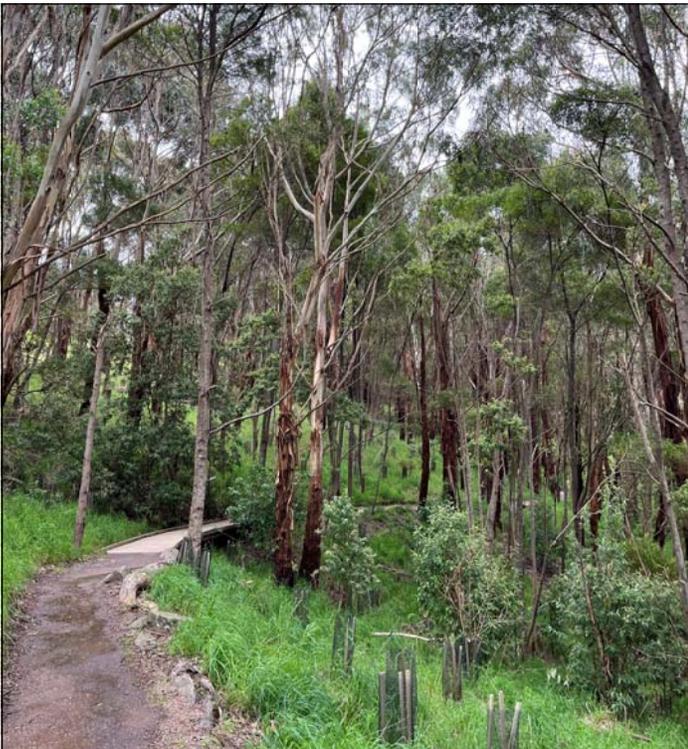
In the bigger picture, Australia has a poor record for conservation, the cause being the same as in Canada, and indeed globally, human population increase. The iconic Koala has recently been declared an endangered species. There are conservation initiatives, of course, and we got a glimpse of one in the Otway Ranges, the Conservation Ecology Centre's reserve near Apollo Bay. Here pastoral land above a photogenic stretch of surfing beach, security-fenced against foxes and cats, has reforested with eucalypts and a sparse cover of native shrubs and herbs, amidst the typical non-native grass ground cover of the former cleared pastures. Red-necked Wallabies, Long-nosed Potoroos, Eastern Grey Kangaroos, Koalas, and other marsupials thrive here despite the alien vegetation component. I was pleased to see that the guide was as excited about the flowering of a rare *Astelia* as he was about the fauna! Guided tours, a gift store and mini museum with a cute, aquarium-bound Eastern Long-necked Turtle, and an expensive café provide funds to support the conservation work and make for a good visitor experience.

Patsy Cotterill

All photos by Patsy Cotterill



*The openness and the infertile sandy soils of coastal heaths support high biodiversity, such as this one at Anglesea, Victoria (October 27, 2022). Equivalents here might be the wet heaths (fens) of Wagner, Clyde Fen, and Garner Lake Orchid Fen Natural Areas.*



*Restoration plantings (in enclosures) in a wildlife reserve near Apollo Bay, Victoria. Eucalypt trees display a variety of bark types, from smooth (gums) to peeling in strips, to stringy and deeply furrowed, showing differing adaptations to fire. Note the ground cover of non-native grasses (October 29, 2022).*



*Eastern Grey Kangaroos grazing in the Apollo Bay reserve. The tree behind the front kangaroo is an English elm, which illustrates another point. Settlers tended to plant European trees, possibly partly out of nostalgia, but mostly because they were deemed less prone to fire, another practice that increased the number of introduced species.*

## President's Message



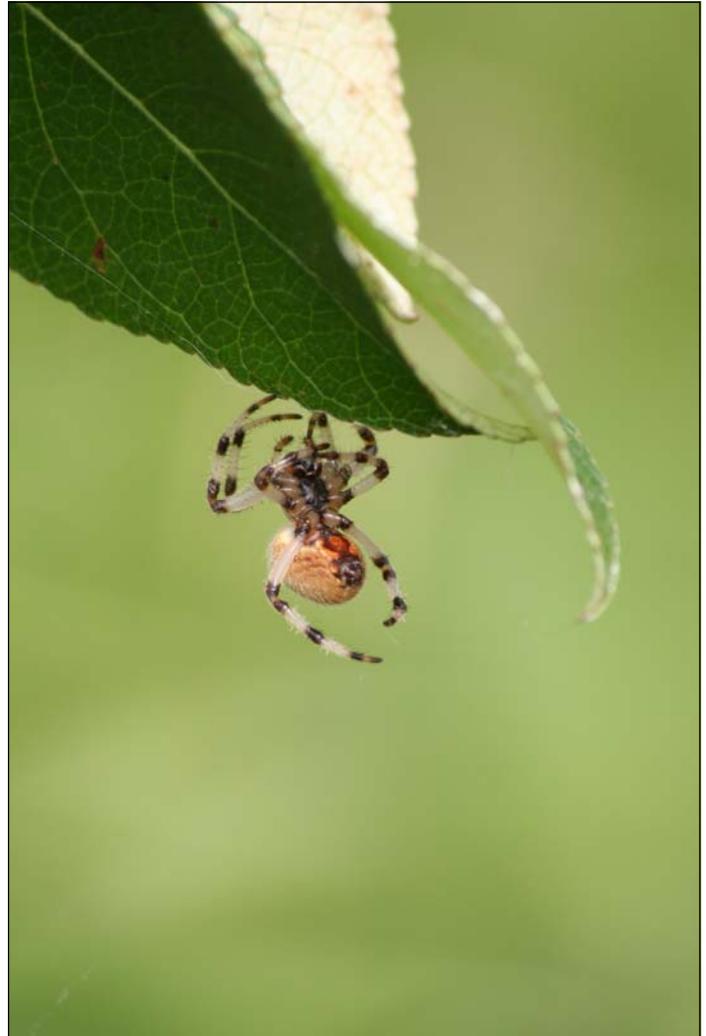
*Our President, Brian Stephens*

Our AGM in October 2022 reviewed all the activities over the past year. The financial review shows that the club is in a sound financial position. Activities last year included many city walks and excellent zoom presentations. We look forward to more activities in 2023. These will include our ongoing participation in several biodiversity events collecting information on plants, insects, and birds in the Edmonton area. I encourage members to keep a lookout for announcements of the 2023 events, and to participate in them.

The Bird-Friendly City (BFC) Team continues to work on new initiatives, including the selection of an official City Bird. Several upcoming decisions by the City will affect our river valley and natural areas. As mentioned before, defending the accomplishments of the City to make Edmonton bird-friendly is critical. The team has submitted our first annual report to Nature Canada. In December 2022, during the 15<sup>th</sup> Conference of the Parties (COP-15) of the Convention on Biological Diversity in Montreal, the Minister of Environment and Climate Change, Steven Guilbeault, personally signed our BFC certificate.

As noted at the AGM, we have many new members. We are often in need of volunteers for various activities and positions, and new members are encouraged to consider how they could contribute.

### Brian Stephens



*Jewel Spider,  
photo by Brian Stephens*

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# The Parkland Naturalist

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## Membership

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

### Membership Rates for 2022/2023

Household: \$40.00/year  
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## Armchair Naturalist

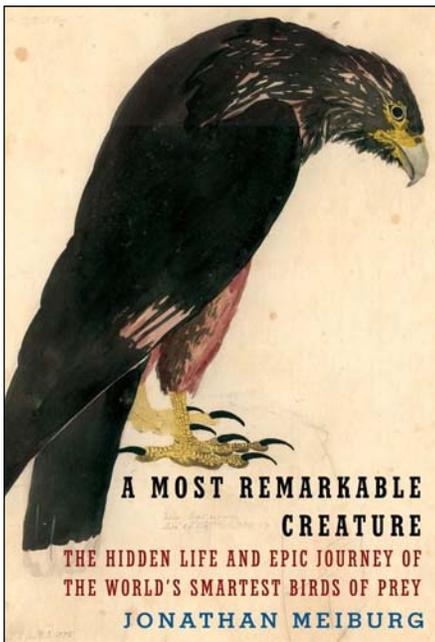
The place where club members review books about natural history they found particularly rewarding. Some of the recommended books may be borrowed from the Edmonton Public Library (EPL). To check on the availability of books in printed and electronic formats, go to [epl.ca](http://epl.ca) and click on "Search."

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

Two members recommended the book featured in this issue of *The Parkland Naturalist*.

*A Most Remarkable Creature: The Hidden Life and Epic Journey of the World's Smartest Birds of Prey*

By Jonathan Meiburg, published by Vintage Press, Penguin Random House, New York, 2022



You may remember the sighting of a Crested Caracara a few years ago in Jasper. Turns out this could be an example of this species' range expansion after Antarctica froze and the land bridge to South America disappeared! This book is more than just a life history of a species, but rather a history of caracaras from their evolutionary split from falcons to their con-

servation today. The initial focus is the Striated Caracara, a very curious and isolated species on the Falkland Island that depends on seals and other marine life for its existence. In captivity this species has shown itself to be resourceful and adapted to human activities. In the wild it was threatened by humans until recent conservation efforts to protect it.

The book explores all the species of caracaras that live in diverse environments ranging from mountaintops to deserts to ocean shorelines in South America. I could have skipped Part 3, a rather long series of chapters about the author's trip up the Rewa River in French Guyana to see the Red-throated Caracara, which we don't learn much about. Otherwise his travels provide context for the caracara environments that he explores.

The book is an interesting mix of bird biology, evolution, geologic history including continental drift, and a travelogue of the author's trips around South America to visit all the species of caracaras in their native habitats. He doesn't shy away from human impacts on the species' survival. The Guadalupe Caracara was down to the last flock when a collector shot 9 of the 11 birds, the last time the species was seen!

I recommend this book to anyone who wants to know more about this social group of raptors that evolved from unsocial falcons into raven-like birds of prey that occupy South America and Mexico and are still moving north. In addition, the author's review of evolution on our planet, from tectonic forces to climate change, will be of interest to all naturalists.

### Recommendation by Geoff Holroyd

The Caracara looks like a bird of prey, with its tearing beak and grasping talons, but otherwise, it looks more like a shaggy raven. Also like the raven, it is intelligent. It is good at solving puzzles and enjoys doing them, which makes the bird so appealing to those who work with and study it.

The Caracara's range is from the Falkland Islands through Mexico and Central and South America. A Crested Caracara, whose range extends across the southern United States, was seen east of Seattle in 2014, an unusual location for this bird and once thought to be the furthest northern sighting.

Jonathan describes his adventurous trips through South America to see species of Caracara. He also describes the people who inhabit the many extraordinary landscapes in which it is found. This book is great for a winter read when you want to savour every word and spend time reading the excellent notes.

### Recommendation by Elaine Mellor

*The Edmonton Public Library has a copy of this book. To check on its availability, go to [epl.ca](http://epl.ca) and click on "Search."*

## Caracaras Seen in Canada, including Alberta!

Caracaras are known to wander outside their normal range; the Crested Caracara has been seen in British Columbia, Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, Ontario, and Alberta. The first provincial record bird was found at Drury Inlet near Port Hardy, BC, between May 4 and June 3, 1998, and was documented with photographs.

For a report on the first Alberta sighting, see <https://www.audubon.org/news/crested-caracara-spotted-alberta-first-time>.

Also, visit <https://ebird.org/species/crecar1/CA-AB> for great photos, including the one on the right, of the Crested Caracara seen in Alberta in 2015. According to eBird, the most recent documented sighting of a Crested Caracara in Alberta was on July 29, 2017.

Whether the birds seen in Canada come from Texas or Mexico is not known. Their populations are increasing in both areas. As more birders contribute to online databases

such as eBird, observations of wandering birds far from their typical home ranges are more likely to be reported.

**Karen Lindsay**  
ENC Bird Studies Group Leader



*Crested Caracara, Jasper National Park,  
photo by Gerald Romanchuk, July 18, 2015*

I 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 submission, e.g., in the “Comment” section write “Parkland Naturalist book review,” describe the book you’d like to recommend, click “Submit,” and I will get in touch with you.

Thank you. **Karen Lindsay**

## A “Hole” Lot of Confusion!

Years ago I bought a roosting box at a bird store and mounted it in a spruce tree. I could see it from my living room window and hoped that on one of our cold nights some adorable chilly bird would take an interest. It was specifically labelled as a roosting box, but the hole was drilled at the bottom of the door rather than the spot where a nesting box hole would normally be. Nonetheless, confident I was buying the right thing, I put it on the spruce trunk with high hopes.

Three years passed. I was pretty sure no one had gone in it and decided to take it down. When I opened the box there was not a single feather, not even one little tiny piece of bird poop, not even cobwebs! When I took it down I had just learned that Downy Woodpeckers take readily to roost boxes, even though they won’t use one

for nesting, so back to the bird store I went! This time I bought a bigger box that could fit a Downy Woodpecker, and although the hole was still at the bottom, you were able to flip it around so the box could also be used as a nesting box. Up the box went, this time with a camera attached. After a week, not one bird had popped its head in. I took the box back down, flipped the door so it looked like a regular nesting box and within days I had a Downy Woodpecker roosting!

To be fair, scientifically it makes sense that a hole in the bottom would trap the warmer air up high. I think this may be another case of humans thinking we’re more clever and capable than the birds! During the 152 nights Roberta Downy Jr. (my first Downy Woodpecker) roosted, almost every single one was spent sleeping in a

ball on the floor of the box. This year I have two Downy Woodpeckers roosting every night, Tapitha and Bojangles, and they also sleep on the floor. The routine seems to be that they spend the first few days perched in the hole to watch for danger. After they are confident the cavity is safe, they move to the floor to curl up in a ball. I also had a Northern Flicker, Flicka Flav, roost for 68 nights this year before he decided to head south. (My guess as it was the night before the cold weather set in). He also mostly slept on the floor, but seemed a bit more skittish and would spend some nights alternating between the hole and the floor.

This November, I was able to observe a White-breasted Nuthatch roost in one of my boxes for the first time, and it also slept on the floor. I'm hoping someday to catch a Red-breasted Nuthatch or a Black-capped Chickadee roosting, but I hear it has to be about -30° for them to

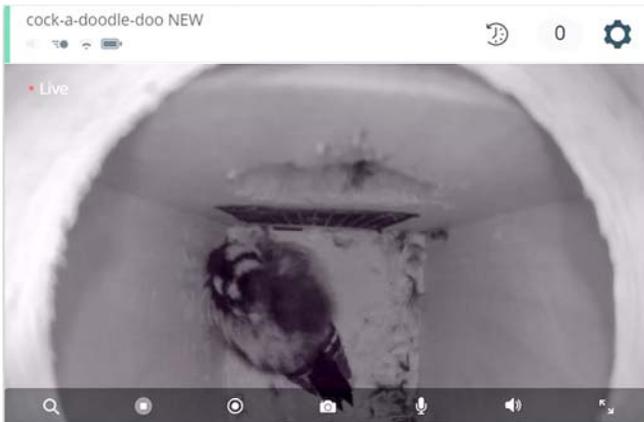
roost in a box, and by then my camera batteries are frozen!

From my observations it seems that the hole, when they can perch at it, serves as a lookout. Every rooster would immediately perch at the hole if there was any kind of disturbance in the yard. But their heads rarely stuck out and they kept to the shadows (I'm assuming to hide their roosting spot). How would they be able to keep a lookout, to protect themselves, with a hole on the bottom? If you're planning on putting up a roosting box this year, it seems your success will be greatly increased by buying or making a regular nest box or a convertible roost box set for nesting.

Here are photos taken from my security cameras, in which all the woodpeckers and a White-breasted Nuthatch show you how they like to sleep.

**Melissa Penney**

**Female Downy Woodpecker**



**Male Downy Woodpecker**



**Male Downy Woodpecker**



**Male White-breasted Nuthatch**



## Conservation Corner

### **Trails Strategy**

In recent years some of us have been documenting user-generated illegal trails in Edmonton's river valley and ravines and lobbying City Council and Administration to do something about them. The situation came to a head this spring during public consultations on the Ribbon of Green and the City's River Valley Planning Modernization Project. Mountain bikers, who are responsible for much, although not all, of this network of trails, protested loudly in support of their trail system. On May 31, a Council motion sanctioned bikers' continued use of the trails but proposed that a trails strategy should be funded in the 2023–2026 budget. The River Valley Trail Strategy would "identify an approved trail network (including paved, granular, and natural tread/single-track trails) and develop trail management recommendations in the River Valley and Ravine System."

As I write in early December, budget deliberations are in progress and the strategy, according to page 89 of the City Budget, remains unfunded. This does not mean it won't be funded, but that no decision has yet been made. I do, however, think it shows how little priority the City gives to preservation and management of river valley ecology even in the face of community interest. And if the strategy is funded, what then? Will the City step up to its responsibilities as protector of its riverine ecosystem or will it allow it to be a free-for-all between mountain bikers and community conservationists?

### **Natural Area "Protection"**

On June 1 Council passed a further motion – vague, but apparently well-intentioned – asking Administration to recommend options to "strengthen natural and agricultural land protection programs and policies." It also in-

involved the idea of an increase in natural areas and green spaces as the City's population grows. A further motion asked Administration to "prepare an unfunded operating service package for the protection of natural areas for consideration in the...budget." Administration duly reported that the Natural Areas Reserve Fund, used for acquisition of privately owned Natural Area properties, was fully subscribed (with the existing debt still being paid off annually). Nor could the Edmonton and Area Land Trust be expected to help because it relies on donations.

The National Urban Park initiative, although still in a "pre-feasibility stage," was perhaps a potential option for increasing protection. The Natural Areas Reserve Fund could be augmented to purchase more but, said Administration, most funds would be dedicated to city renewal projects and "it is likely the only new growth projects to proceed will be those that are mandated by legislation, those that have high safety impacts, or are high priority and eligible to receive funding from partners and other orders of government." The likelihood of this "protection" package getting funded then? Nil. (For more information on the request, see the North Saskatchewan River Valley Conservation Society's excellent presentation to Council at <https://www.edmontonrivervalley.org/projects>). I relate this in some detail because it demonstrates how difficult it is to achieve conservational goals in Edmonton. Despite all the recognized benefits of green spaces, the City simply will not afford them!

Phase 3 of the River Valley Planning Modernization will take place in the spring with more public consultations. Be prepared to take part: naturalists must also be politicians!

**Patsy Cotterill**

## Editorial Notes

I hope you enjoy this issue of *The Parkland Naturalist*, which covers a wide range of topics, including Gerald Romanchuk's latest stories and photos compiled from his trail cams in a natural area, and Chris Rees' comparison of two winter woodpecker species.

Patsy Cotterill takes us from a trip to Australia to Edmonton's River Valley and notes some similar issues relative to species restoration in municipalities, while Martin Sharp describes an eBird tool used to animate migration data. If you're looking for a good book to read, see *The Armchair Naturalist*. Another great read, with lots of photos, is the summary of ENC field trips submitted by Janice Hurlburt and Chris Rees.

And we're happy to welcome a new author, Melissa Penney, whose presentation for backyard birders was described in the previous *Parkland Naturalist*. This issue includes Melissa's observations of winter birds roosting in her nest boxes.

The deadline for submissions to the January–April 2023 issue is March 30, 2023. Email articles to Dawne Colwell at [colwell@dshaw.ca](mailto:colwell@dshaw.ca).

## Outdoor Program, Fall 2022

After restarting the Outdoor Program with warbler walks in August, we were able to continue with the member-only and pre-registration approach into the fall season. Sixty-nine people participated in 13 walks and 5 owl banding evenings over the fall, for a total of 128 registrations. In this *Parkland Naturalist* report we try to capture the highlights from the walks. Full detailed trip reports are available on the ENC Nature Talk, filed under #tripreports.

### City Walks

Wayne Oakes led the first fall walk in Whitemud North on September 6. For convenience, many birders divide Whitemud Creek into north and south, i.e., north of the ski hill and south of the ski hill. Over the fall, Wayne Oakes led five other walks in Whitemud North, on September 17, October 4, October 15, November 8, and November 19. Many participants in the walks expressed their appreciation for Wayne's enthusiasm and knowledge about nature in the ravine. The highlight of the fall was the Wayne's sighting of a Turkey Vulture over the ravine – his second ever.



*Photo by Wayne Oakes*



*Turkey Vulture, photo by Wayne Oakes*



*Flooded and frozen creek, photo by Ted Hogg*



*Pileated Woodpecker, photo by Wayne Oakes*

Ted Hogg led walks in Whitemud South on September 14 and October 22. These were the first two trips for Ted to lead and he carried out his new role perfectly. Highlights of the trips were seeing both a Cooper's hawk and a Sharp-shinned Hawk on the September walk. Most disconcerting was seeing three coyotes together on the October walk.



*Photo by Ted Hogg*



*Three coyotes, photo by Ted Hogg*

Toby-Anne Reimer led walks in Mill Creek South on September 21 and October 19. A highlight of the trips was crows chasing a Sharp-shinned Hawk.



*Photo by Douglas Faulder*



*Photo by Jiri Novak*

Percy Zalasky led a walk at Lois Hole Provincial Park in St. Albert on September 28. The highlight of this walk was some excellent views of Rusty Blackbirds foraging on the mud. The prize for most dedicated participant, hats off, goes to Thelma! Originally from Tasmania, she bussed into St. Albert from the University area, and then walked to Lois Hole! Now that's dedication! And for the record, she did not have to walk back to the bus depot but was able to hitch a ride home...birders have each other's backs. (See photos, next page)



*Photo by Janice Hurlburt*



*Rusty Blackbird, photo by Janice Hurlburt*

Don Delaney led a walk at Beaumaris Lake on October 13. It was a very pleasant walk with the beautiful fall colours, warm temperature, and good company. And as hoped, the Hooded Mergansers were present on the lake.



*Hooded Merganser, photo by Don Delaney*

### **Northern Saw-whet Owl Banding**

This fall Edmonton Nature Club members joined with the Boreal Avian Research & Conservation Association (BARCA) banders on five evenings to witness the capture and banding of Northern Saw-whet Owls at Lady Flower Garden, a private property close to the city. These activities were held on September 23, October 6, October 14, October 21,

and October 27. A total of 20 ENC members participated and over the five evenings during which ENC participated, a total of 16 owls were captured. Participating members thoroughly enjoyed the experience. BARCA invited ENC to join them again next fall.



*Checking the nets, photo by Chris Rees*



*Northern Saw-whet Owl,  
photo by Toby-Anne Reimer*



*A bird in the hand, photo by Jan Karasek*



*Processing a captured owl,  
photo by Don Goulding*

## Road Trips

We completed one road trip on September 11, led by Chris Rees. Seven people in two cars looked for shorebirds north-east of Beaverhill Lake and up to Rush and Whitford Lakes. Overall we saw 68 species that included “lifers” for at least two members of the group. (See photos, next page.) We all agreed it was really pleasant to spend time in the field again with a group of fellow birding enthusiasts. Unfortunately, matching drivers and passengers proved a bit more difficult than anticipated, with the member-only and pre-registration requirements.



*Photo by Chris Rees*



*Merlin, photo by Gay Erikson*



*Red-tailed Hawk,  
photo by Sean Evans*



*Dowitchers, photo by Chris Rees*

**Janice Hurlburt and Chris Rees, Outdoor Program Directors**

## Animating eBird

For many of us who are fascinated by the lives and movements of birds, field guides such as those produced for North America by Roger Tory Peterson and David Sibley have become part of our birding tool kit. One key element of this tool kit is the distribution map that accompanies the description of each species, and which purports to describe how the distribution of the species within North America changes over the course of a year.

Peterson, for instance, does this by applying up to four colour codes to the distribution map for each species. In this case, red represents the summer range of the species, blue the winter range, purple the year-round range, and blue stripes the pelagic (or over-ocean range). Red, blue, or purple dashed lines delineate “irregular” summer, winter, and year-round ranges, while striped areas over parts of the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans represent the pelagic (offshore) ranges of the ocean-going species that spend time there.

Sibley does something similar, using blue to define winter ranges, orange for summer ranges, purple for the year-round range, yellow for areas occupied during migration, and green to identify areas where a species is rarely found.

What has always bothered me about this approach is that it does a rather poor job of describing how birds of different species move around the North American continent in the period between winter and summer, in particular because it essentially fails to define when and where these movements take place, thus making migration seem like a homogeneous process (in both time and space) for individual species when the reality is probably very different (i.e., birds of different species likely move at different times and at different rates, and in ways that are strongly affected by changes in the prevailing weather, and the availability of suitable food sources).

In addition, migration pathways are likely strongly influenced by the topography of the underlying land surface, which generates both obstacles to movement and pathways that favour it (like the flyway along the Alberta foothills, for instance). Unfortunately, the nature of field guide maps makes it difficult to identify where such flyways are located, what topographic or ecological features define them, and when, during the year, they are attractive to migrating birds of different species.

This can all be done quite simply by animating the eBird data using new tools that are now part of the online eBird toolkit (referred to on the eBird website as

*eBird abundance animations*). Here are the steps to follow:

First go to ebird.org. Select “Explore.” Then select “Science.” Scroll down the page and select “Use eBird data and tools.” In the first paragraph, click on the sentence “next generation visualizations of migration and abundance.” This takes you to a list of all the species. Select the species you are interested in, e.g., Ross’s Goose, and it will display an abundance map. Select “Downloads” (located in upper right corner) and click on “Weekly abundance animation MP4.” This will generate a MP4 file which you can download and run by clicking on the play arrow to see how a chosen species migrates during the year.

As far as I can tell, these are created from raw eBird input data by producing repeat distribution/density maps for individual species across their ranges at different times of year and then animating these maps as MP4 files that simulate how the distribution of each species changes through the year – including during periods when the birds are actually migrating (either north or south).

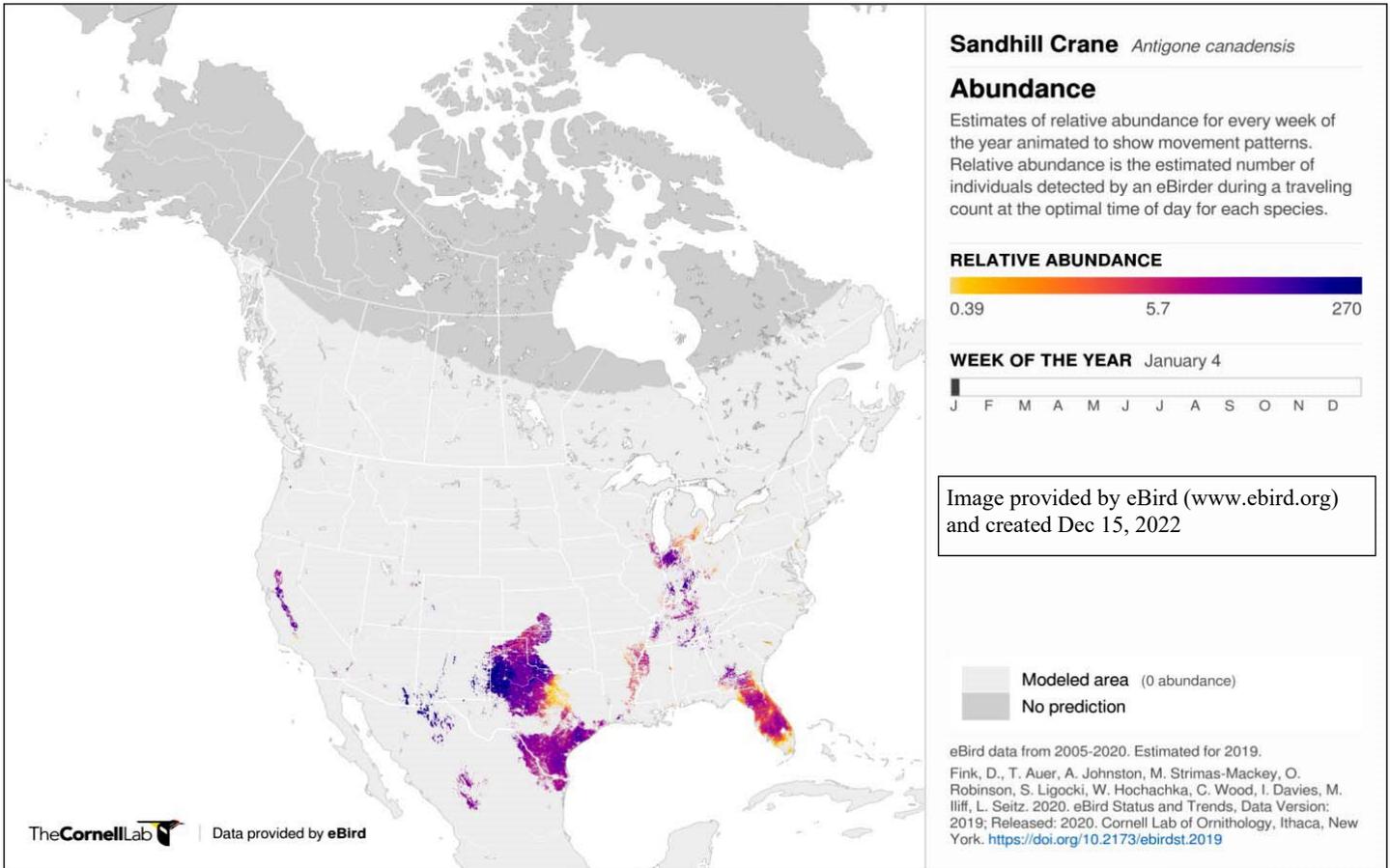
What really strikes me about the animations is the continuity of the migratory movements that they pick out, and the ability they provide to identify periods when birds are moving fast, and when their progress slows down (which may open up opportunities to start thinking about how eBird data can be used to explore how weather and its interaction with the topography of landscape affect migratory processes).

A good exercise is to view the animation while looking at a distribution map for the same species in either the Peterson or Sibley field guide – and then ask yourself whether the animation or distribution map in the field guide taught you the most!

**Martin Sharp**

*(continued next page)*





The map above is an example of a migration map that can be animated in eBird.



Migrating Sandhill Crane family, photo by Dawne Colwell, Murray Marsh, September 22, 2013

## Update to the River Valley Trails Strategy Funding (January 2, 2023)

The trails strategy has not been funded. For further information, see the North Saskatchewan Conservation Society's (NSRVCS) December newsletter at <https://www.edmontonrivervalley.org/newsletter/nsrvcs-news-december-22-2022>.

This is astoundingly bad news and a big disappointment given the fact that it was the subject of a councillor's motion, not just a request from a member of the public, and presumably its consideration as a budget item was approved by Council. However, this may not be the end of the story. It appears there is some wiggle room in the budget process, and the request could be resurrected in April during a budget amendment process. This would likely be a good time to advocate further for the funding, especially if it coincides with the aforementioned River Valley Planning Modernization Phase 3 public engagement sessions. (The message would be that Preservation Areas designated in the Ribbon of Green land classification system should be respected as no-wheeled-vehicle access zones.)

In emails last June, Hubert Taube advised the Edmonton Nature Club board of the problem posed by this excessive network of unauthorized trails. Several members responded that they thought the ENC should have a formal position on the issue. The Edmonton Mountain Bike Alliance is a powerful advocacy group for "their" trails system; the conservationists need to show similar solidarity in their arguments for why many trails should be closed off and allowed to revegetate.

The Natural Areas Reserve Fund did receive a \$3.5 million addition to its capital budget, short of the NSRVCS's recommended request of \$10 million over the next four years. However, there appears to be optimism on the part of some councillors that the higher target can still be achieved.

I note the statement made by the NSRVCS in its budget presentation to Council, quoting Calgary Councillor Courtney Walcott: "...budgets are not just documents about money.... A budget is a moral document. It signifies what you value, because in our system, what you invest in and what you spend money on signifies your values." I believe the ENC has a role to play in getting Council to show some moral backbone and invest in the protection of the river valley.

**Patsy Cotterill**



*Portion of a trail running from Wolf Willow Ravine to near the Fort Edmonton footbridge. It is typical of many such trails. It runs transverse to the slope of an escarpment parallel to and above an asphalt trail used by walkers and regular bikers. Mountain bikers shun asphalt trails and do not wish to share them with other users. However, their incursions into the heavily vegetated but highly erodible escarpments must be limited.*



*Burnet-saxifrage (Pimpinella saxifraga), a very rare non-native weed, originating from a field in the Oleskiw floodplain, spreading along this Wolf Willow trail. To the left are the leaves of western poison ivy (Toxicodendron radicans var. rydbergii), which is native but also rare in the river valley. This shows how human traffic is responsible for the spread of plants, not always desirable, that are adapted to colonize disturbed ground.*

*Photos by Patsy Cotterill*

## Winter Woodpeckers

Whitemud Ravine south of the Snow Valley Ski Hill is one of my favourite walks in Edmonton. On November 12, 2021, I was enjoying a walk with my daughter and two grandsons. Midway through the walk we spotted a male Black-backed Woodpecker on a dead spruce. Almost immediately my grandsons yelled, “Grandpa, there is another woodpecker over here.” It was a female American Three-toed Woodpecker. I could not believe our luck in finding both of these winter visitors within a few metres of each other.

David M. Bird (p. 253) notes that although the Black-backed Woodpecker’s range overlaps geographically

with the American Three-toed Woodpecker’s range, the two species are rarely found together in the same locality.

Historically called the Arctic Three-toed Woodpecker or Black-backed Three-toed Woodpecker, the Black-backed Woodpecker is an inhabitant of the western and northern evergreen forests. The American Three-toed Woodpecker was historically called the Northern Three-toed Woodpecker or just the Three-toed Woodpecker, with no separation of it from the Eurasian Three-Toed Woodpecker. This species too is an inhabitant of the western and northern spruce and pine woods. Unlike other woodpeckers, both the Black-backed and American Three-toed have only three toes on each foot.

**Range of the Black-backed Woodpecker**



**Range of the American Three-toed Woodpecker**



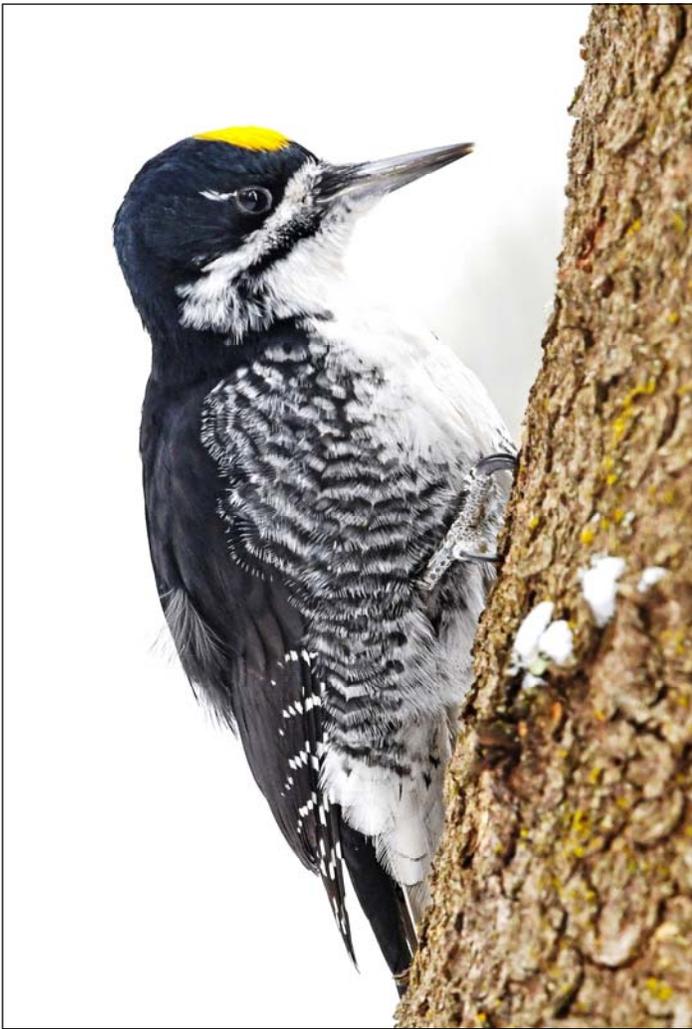
**Source:** [https://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/Black-backed\\_Woodpecker](https://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/Black-backed_Woodpecker)  
[https://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/American\\_Three-toed\\_Woodpecker](https://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/American_Three-toed_Woodpecker)

In the Edmonton area these two woodpeckers are primarily winter visitors, although sightings have been reported for every month of the year. The Edmonton Christmas Bird Count results show spikes indicative of both species being eruptive. Any of the old-growth spruce woods provide suitable micro-habitats. Whitemud Ravine and Grey Nuns White Spruce Park in St. Albert are prime locations to look for these two woodpeckers in the late fall and

winter. The presence of the birds can often be detected by debarked dead spruce trees with a shower of bark chips at the base. The flick, flick, flick of these woodpeckers as they flake off the outer bark, rather than excavating wood, is also unique, so after a few sightings you learn to differentiate them from the softer tap of the Downy or harder knock of the Pileated.

**Chris Rees**

**Reference:** David M. Bird, *Birds of Western Canada*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Dorling Kindersley Limited, Toronto, ON, 2019.

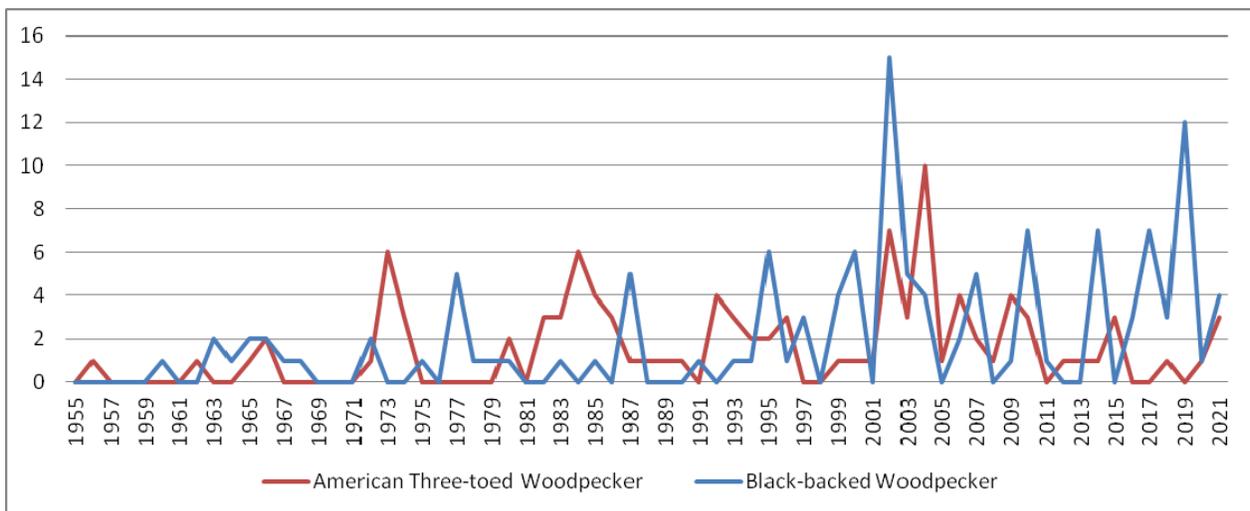


*Black-backed Woodpecker – male*



*Black-backed Woodpecker – female*

**Edmonton Christmas Bird Counts, mid-December**



**Data Source:** <https://netapp.audubon.org/CBCObservation/Historical/ResultsByCount.aspx>



*American Three-toed Woodpecker – male*



*American Three-toed Woodpecker – female*



*Flipping bark*