

THE PARKLAND NATURALIST



SEPTEMBER–DECEMBER 2023

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All photos by Manna Parseyan



Orange-crowned Warbler on native plants in my garden



*Meadow arnica (*Arnica chamissonis*) and Orange-crowned Warbler*



*Milbert's Tortoiseshell (*Aglais milberti*) caterpillars feeding on stinging nettle (*Urtica dioica*) and butterfly on Lindley's aster (*Symphyotrichum ciliolatum*)*

Growing Native Wildflowers in Your Urban Garden: A Sustainable Choice

Embracing the beauty of native wildflowers in your garden not only adds aesthetic charm, but also plays a crucial role in supporting local ecosystems. Let's explore the significance of native plants and the numerous benefits they bring to your urban oasis.

What are Native Plants?

Native plants are species that occurred naturally and without any human intervention in a particular region, ecosystem, or habitat. They have evolved over time through interactions with local soils, climate, fauna, and other plants.

Benefits of Growing Native Plants

Native plants are well-adapted to the local climate and soil conditions, demanding less watering and maintenance than their non-native counterparts. They do not require fertilizers and pesticides to grow well and are resistant to drought, frost damage, and common diseases. The majority of native wildflowers in the Edmonton area are perennial and don't need to be replaced every year. All of these qualities make local native species a more sustainable choice for gardens and landscaping.

Another benefit of native plants is that they come in a variety of colours, heights, textures, and bloom time, which can add beauty and interest to your garden or landscape.

Furthermore, native plants provide important habitat and food for local wildlife, such as birds, bees, butterflies, and other insects. This can help support biodiversity and ensure that local ecosystems remain healthy. Additionally, because native plants are a natural part of the local ecosystem, they can help to prevent soil erosion and protect against the effects of natural disasters such as floods and wildfires.

Renowned entomologist Douglas Tallamy, who coined the term Homegrown National Park in the US, says, "*In the past, we have asked one thing of our gardens: that they be pretty. Now they have to support life, sequester carbon, feed pollinators and manage water.*"

Amid rampant habitat destruction, our private properties offer a unique space for positive change. Let's be stewards of our land by cultivating native species, contributing to a collective effort for a thriving living landscape.



Doug Tallamy has authored 106 research publications and has taught insect-related courses for 41 years. (Photo from the internet)

<https://homegrownnationalpark.org>



Cover photo

***Gaillardia* (*Gaillardia aristata*),
meadow blazingstar
(*Liatris ligulistylis*),
yarrow (*Achillea borealis*) and
smooth fleabane
(*Erigeron glabellus*) in my native
plant garden**

On the Cover

Native Wildflowers, photo by Manna Parseyan

Edmonton Native Wildflower Species

A wide variety of native plant species in the Edmonton area are suitable for different light, soil, and moisture conditions. Some common wildflowers that also support our native insect and bird population are:

gaillardia (<i>Gaillardia aristata</i>)	wild bergamot/bee balm (<i>Monarda fistulosa</i>)
western Canada goldenrod (<i>Solidago lepida</i>)	giant hyssop (<i>Agastache foeniculum</i>)
low goldenrod (<i>Solidago missouriensis</i>)	wild blue flax (<i>Linum lewisii</i>)
smooth aster (<i>Symphyotrichum laeve</i>)	meadow blazingstar (<i>Liatris ligulistylis</i>)
Linsley's aster (<i>Symphyotrichum ciliolatum</i>)	harebell (<i>Campanula alaskana</i>)
meadow/leafy arnica (<i>Arnica chamissonis</i>)	three-flowered avens/prairie smoke (<i>Geum triflorum</i>)
common tall sunflower (<i>Helianthus nuttallii</i>)	early blue violet (<i>Viola adunca</i>)

Like native wildflowers, many grasses and sedges are also used by wildlife. Some of our common native grasses are:

prairie Junegrass (<i>Koeleria macrantha</i>)	Canada wild rye (<i>Elymus canadensis</i>)
Rocky Mountain fescue (<i>Festuca saximontana</i>)	bearded wheatgrass (<i>Elymus trachycaulus</i>)

Guidelines for Planting Native Wildflowers

1. Rather than mixing your native plants with non-native flowers and lawn grass, allocate a specific area of your yard for your native wildflowers. Native species don't need watering when established (after the second year, if they are sited properly) and don't need any fertilizers, pesticides, or other chemicals, unlike non-native plants and lawn grass.

2. Plant groups of three, five, or more of the same species for several crucial reasons. First, to ensure an ample supply of flowers and foliage for insects, making it easier for them to move between blooms. This is especially beneficial for insects with specific host plant preferences, such as the monarch butterfly caterpillar on milkweed, primrose moth on yellow evening primrose (*Oenothera biennis*), and Milbert's tortoiseshell butterfly caterpillar on stinging nettle (*Urtica dioica*). When a concentration of the same species exists, insects can sustain themselves on the plant, lay eggs, and establish a permanent home. Second, a unified colour scheme in a flower patch enhances design aesthetics and pleases the eye. Additionally, planting a greater number of the same species together promotes healthier growth, as plants alter soil chemistry to their liking.

3. Some native plants, such as goldenrods, asters, and fireweed, spread through rhizomes, while others, such as gaillardia, wild bergamot, and harebell, have tap roots and don't spread. Be cautious not to mix both types, as rhizomatous species can limit the space for those with taproots. Planting rhizomatous species together can yield better results, as they restrict each other's spread. Notably, goldenrods, asters, and sunflowers, all rhizomatous, top the list of keystone herbaceous species, supporting the most insect species. For example, western Canada goldenrod in my



**Western Canada Goldenrod (*Solidago lepida*)
and Tennessee Warbler**



**Police Car Moth feeding on western Canada
goldenrod (*Solidago lepida*)**

native plant garden attracts various native bees, butterflies, moths, spiders, beetles, and ladybugs. Many warblers feed on insects or seeds from the goldenrod in my garden during spring or fall.

4. To avoid leaving space for weed seeds, plant as densely as possible and use native ground cover species or untreated mulch (at least 15 cm thick to be effective).

5. Plant local native species obtained from sources in the region, as these species possess the appropriate genetic traits to withstand our harsh climate. Additionally, by doing so, you contribute to the preservation of our local genetic diversity.

As urban gardeners, the power to create change lies in our hands. By cultivating native wildflowers, we not only beautify our surroundings, but also actively contribute to environmental sustainability. Let your garden be a testament to the harmonious coexistence of nature and urban life.

The photos of native plant, birds, and insects were taken in my native plant garden in Edmonton.

Manna Parseyan



Meadow blazingstar (Liatris ligulistylis) in front, Western Canada goldenrod (Solidago lepida) at the back



Lindley's aster (Symphyotrichum ciliolatum) in front of my garage

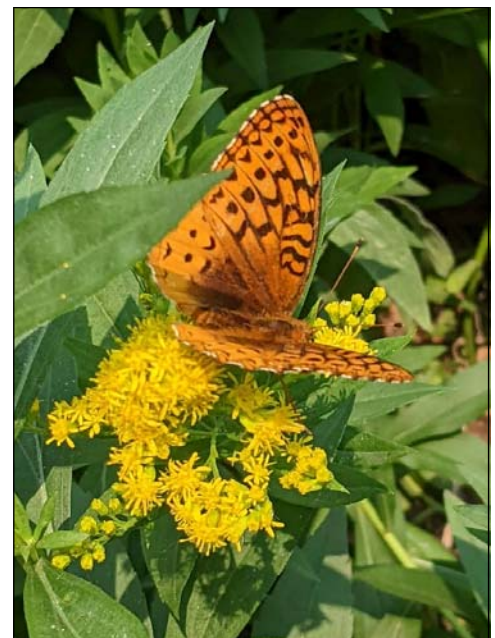
Plant photos by Manna Parseyan



Gaillardia (Gaillardia aristata) in my front garden



Wild bergamot/bee balm (Monarda fistulosa)



Western Canada goldenrod (Solidago lepida) and Fritillary butterfly

President's Message



Our President, Brian Stephens

Photos below by Brian Stephens from a trip to SE Arizona in 2014.



Pyrrhuloxia

As we move into 2024, I want to shout out to Karen Lindsay, our Bird Studies program coordinator, for her excellent work in providing interesting and diverse presentations, especially over the last three years. In the absence of indoor meetings, they have formed the basis for our regular program. A lot of work goes into planning, managing, and presenting these online events.

I am looking forward to a number of additional activities in the coming year, as well as the following events.

The Edmonton Area Winter Bird Count managed by Gerry Fox is ongoing to the end of February.

The Snow Goose Festival in Tofield will run again on the last weekend of April. Lots of volunteers will be needed and appreciated.

World Migratory Bird Days will occur in May and October. This past year a group of organizations collaborated with the Edmonton Valley Zoo to develop displays and other information related to the protection of migrating birds.

We will again host the Edmonton and Area Bird Species Count at the end of May.

Biodiversity events will offer opportunities for us to search for plants, bugs, and birds and contribute increasing the knowledge of the scope of life in our area. I hope everyone will be getting out in nature.

I was inspired to include photos of my trip to SE Arizona by Doug Faulder's Bird Studies presentation.

Brian Stephens



Whiskered Screech Owl

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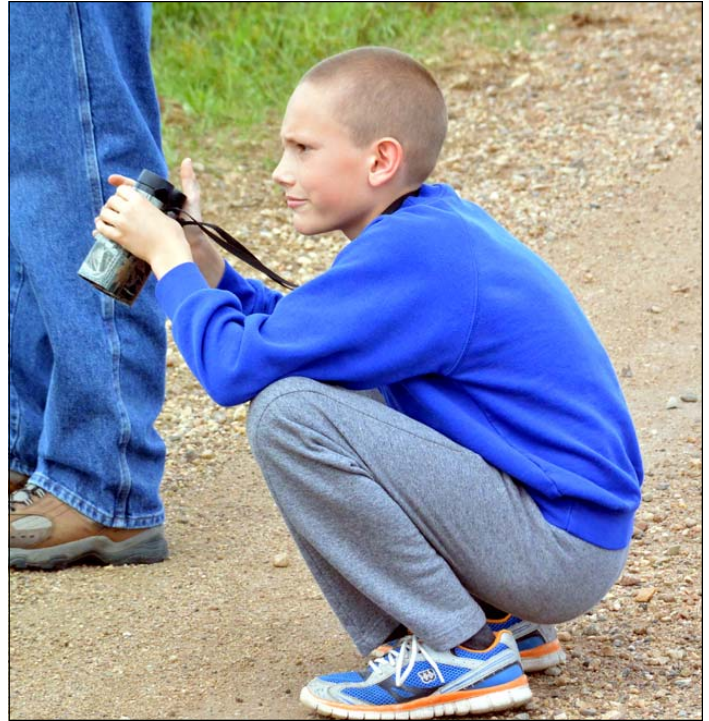
My Birding Journey

My passion for birding began when I was 9 years old. A pair of Merlins, a small yet extremely noisy species of falcon, nested in my neighbourhood not far from my home. They made their presence known for sure. I often saw them when I went outside, and I spent many hours watching them fly around the park in front of my house. My parents weren't the biggest fans, however, but to be fair, I wouldn't like being woken up at 4 a.m. every day by loud shrieking either. The Merlins also loved to perch in an elm tree right above where we park our cars out front... we had to wash them pretty often. Despite the drawbacks to having them around, they sparked my interest in birds, which has grown every year since.

A fun memory I have from when I was young took place one morning at Hawrelak Park. The only bird book I had was a super old one, Robin Bovey's *Birds of Edmonton*. I know better now, but at the time, I didn't realize there were more species of ducks around the city than Mallards, scaup, and goldeneye. Well, while spending some time around the pond at Hawrelak, I saw some American Wigeons. But they did not appear in my trusty bird book. I thought I had found some sort of new, rare bird that wasn't supposed to be in Edmonton, and I got all excited.

Over the course of that summer, I really started to develop an interest in birds. I began my first list on paper, knowing only the 35 or so species included in my *Birds of Edmonton* book. Luckily, none of the common backyard birds were missing. When my parents noticed my interest in birds, they got me a way better field guide. It was *The Sibley Guide to Birds*, featuring all the species in North America – including American Wigeon. I remember spending so much time flipping through that book; it's still in my bookshelf today. The following spring, my mom asked if I might want to join a local nature club or group. I must've shown at least some interest because she began looking, and, well, you can probably guess what she found.

My first memory of a proper birding trip was in June of that year. It was my first Edmonton Nature Club (ENC) field trip; my dad took me with the group to Halkirk Farm. I can't remember much, only snippets of the trip, but the whole experience blew my mind. On the drive down, I saw my very first American Kestrel. At the farm, I recall seeing goldfinches, such beautiful, shockingly bright yellow and black songbirds, as well as a Willet walking around in a marsh, making peculiar sounds. I was thrilled to see my first cormorant, pelicans, and hummingbird. American Avocets always stuck out to me as being the coolest bird in the book, and it blew my mind to see them in real life. All the birders were incredibly nice,



David on ENC field trip to Halkirk Farm, June 20, 2015

and even my Dad, who had no interest in birds prior to this, enjoyed the trip.



Birding at Sidney Split

The following month, the ENC led a field trip down to Water Valley. To this day, I'm still amazed my mom took me, a 14-hour field trip when she had little to no interest in birds. It was such an incredible day. We car-pooled with Brian, and it was a lovely road trip both ways. I saw my first-ever Western Kingbird, Say's Phoebe, and Pacific-slope Flycatcher, and I must've been amazed by all the sparrows sitting on fence posts along the road, because when I asked what they were, and Brian answered, "Oh, they're probably Savannah Sparrows," I recall getting pretty excited.

After this, I wanted to go on every other field trip the ENC offered, and my parents were awesome about taking me on as many as they possibly could. I remember, though, a time where I had my heart set on a particular all-day field trip, but my parents simply couldn't take me. It was probably unreasonable for me to ask to go in the first place, but when the reality hit home that I couldn't go, I remember spending the whole morning in tears. I look back on it now and laugh.

When I was 10, I won the Nature Alberta Youth Award. I'm incredibly thankful for that, because it motivated me to stick with my passion for birds and continue learning. Over the course of the next few years, my parents took me on countless other ENC field trips. I have good memories of Gerald's Elk Island Century Days and late autumn Owl Prowls, Don's fall warbler walks, Connor's Western Lakes expedition.... Everything I've learned has been thanks to the many experts and people who have led field trips over the past 8 years.

A few years ago, my uncle from Calgary, who is interested in birds but by no means a birder, took me on a multi-day trip to Point Pelee National Park, arguably the #1 birding hotspot in all of Canada. I won't go into any detail about the trip because I could go on forever about it, but it was one of the greatest experiences of my life. And we went again two years later, but that time we brought my dad and grandpa. I can't put into words how spectacular a trip it was, and how thankful I am to my uncle for taking me.

One more thing before I wrap up – last summer, I attended the Young Ornithologists Workshop at the Beaverhill Bird Observatory (BBO), and that was an incredible experience too. I met other young birders like myself, and got to experience the "field work lifestyle." It opened up my mind to a whole set of possibilities as to how I could take birding and turn it into something bigger and more meaningful.

This summer marked the end of my eighth year of birding. Despite starting my first year of university, I'm still trying to get out and about as much as possible. Birding

has become one of my greatest passions, and I have no doubt it will stay that way for the rest of my life. This summer, I volunteered at the BBO and Lady Flower Gardens, helping with bird-banding and improving my skills. In August, I led a couple of ENC walks, and I hope to improve as a trip leader and lead more in the coming years. Everyone who has attended and led field trips in the past has been immensely important to helping me develop my interest in birds and become a better and better birder. There are too many names to list, but thank you to all the experienced birders who have been so gracious in teaching and mentoring me along the way. The biggest thank you of all should go to my parents, who made everything possible, buying me my first field guides, binoculars, and spotting scope, and taking me on countless club field trips even when they didn't want to.

Every year since I was 9 years old, Merlins have nested in our neighbourhood. They still wake my parents up at 4 a.m. on spring and summer mornings, and we still have to wash our vehicles more often when they're around, but I'm no less amazed by them nearly 9 years later.

David Grinevitch



Photos provided by David Grinevitch

A Moment of Reflection

When we look at the problems facing birds, they seem overwhelming and can leave us feeling powerless. Even though small actions add up and do help, we don't necessarily see our impact on a daily basis. One thing we can do and see immediate benefits from is making our personal spaces safer for birds. In Canada, window strikes kill 16 to 42 million birds every year. It's easy to associate window strikes with downtown skyscrapers, but the windows on our own homes are also a big problem, especially now that so many of us are welcoming birds into our yards with habitat, feeders, and birdbaths. I hope that sharing this story about my windows will take away some of the trepidation you might feel about protecting birds from windows in your own home.

When I heard about bird window tape I wasn't immediately hooked on the idea. I didn't know how common window strikes are in Canada. I didn't know that birds do not understand what reflection is. I didn't know that even a glancing blow probably means death. (This is a time when cat attacks are also easier because birds are stunned or disoriented on the ground). I didn't know that properly installed window tape would completely stop strikes from happening on my property.

Before I installed window tape we had a few strikes (that we were aware of) resulting in death and a few where the bird seemingly shook it off and flew away. Then one day I started to think about it differently. If I'm having even just a few strikes, how many are happening elsewhere? I know my in-laws had some, especially at one window where I found a dead Ovenbird one day. I had heard people talk about birds hitting their windows, but no one (including me!) was aware there was an easy solution. I realized that failing to safeguard my windows was akin to throwing a recyclable container in the garbage instead of a recycle bin. Sure, it's just one water bottle. But the chances are that millions of people had that same thought on the same day, and millions of recyclables were thrown in the trash.

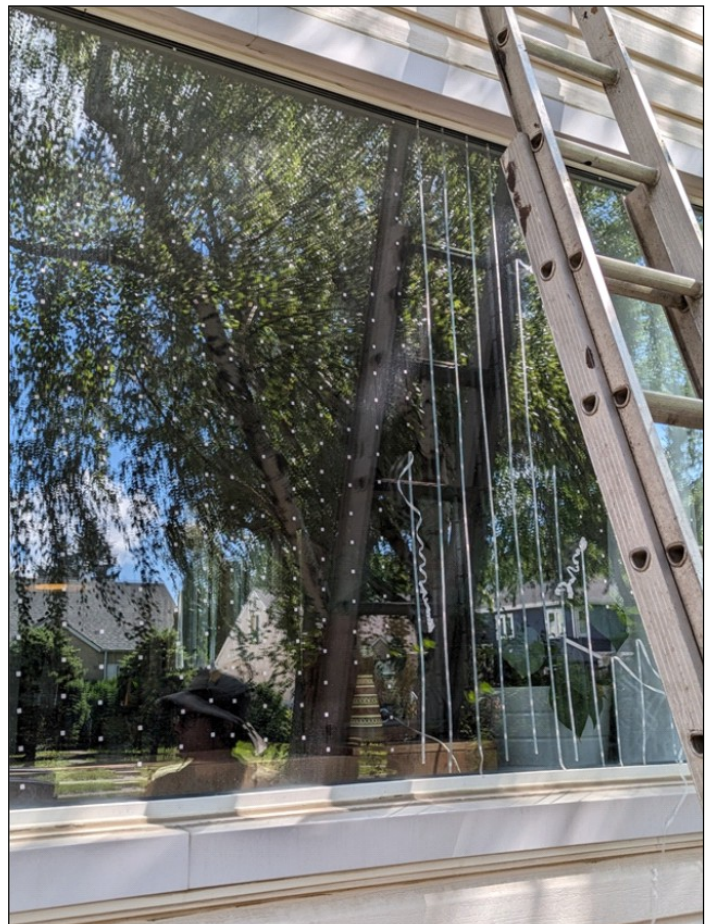
After some research I decided to try a product called Feather Friendly. I learned that the old recommendation was 4-inch spacing between decals, but it had changed to 2 inches. This product was tastefully designed and promised to be easy to install. Now I was very excited to get it up but sometimes my excitement gets the best of me. I didn't read the directions! This is terribly embarrassing because it is rare for me not to read directions. The result was two years of window stripes instead of dots because I didn't remove the backing. It wasn't until I decided to do more windows this year that a friendly staff member at Wildbirds Unlimited caught my mistake. Thankfully,

almost all the original strips peeled off easily (leaving the dots in place) and I only had to replace a few.

This picture might give you a better idea of what I'm talking about. On the right the strips are still on, on the left it looks like it is supposed to with the backing peeled off. Another embarrassing thing is that in my excitement I didn't use the rulers that came with the strips. The only part I did a really good job with, which is integral for success, is washing the windows very well and letting them dry completely before applying the tape.

I purposely took the photo from this angle so you can see the dots, the backing, and how it peels off, but also so you can see how reflective glass is. Without the dots, birds think they are flying into another awesome tree canopy, not a solid barrier.

You might be wondering what it looks like from the inside. You can see the dots in the picture, but when I'm inside looking out to my yard I do not notice the dots at all. Your eyes easily look right past them.



Tape and decals MUST be applied to the outside of the window.



The process to get the window tape up is very simple. You wash the window with soap, spray it well with water to rinse it, then let it dry completely. After it dries, you line up the rulers on either side of the window (and tape them there) as a guide for the tape to line up evenly. The kit comes with a small, hard, plastic piece that you rub over the backing to help the dots stick, then you use the tool again as you're peeling away the backing to make sure you don't peel any dots off at the same time. Most of the dots stay on the window easily – there were only a handful that I had to shimmy back into place using the little plastic tool.

This task seemed daunting, but once I started, I saw how easy it was. And also how easy it was to fix if there was an error! I'm hoping in the spring, before migration, you can spend a couple of hours of your time to protect the birds in your yard, too. Since I taped my windows I have not had a single window strike, and I feel very good about that!

Melissa Penney

View of my yard from a window with decals on the outside

Photos by Melissa Penney



Editorial Notes

We welcome two new authors who submitted articles to this issue of *The Parkland Naturalist*: Manna Parseyan and David Grinevitch.

You might be wondering why we have a summer photo on the cover of the September–December magazine. Apart from the fact that it's a beautiful picture, this is a very good time to begin planning for spring. Manna Parseyan recommends native wildflower species and strategies for growing them in your home gardens.

When he was in elementary school, David Grinevitch took his first birding trip with the Edmonton Nature Club, one of the events he recalls in "My Birding Journey." David is now a student at the University of Alberta, and he led ENC field trips to Cooking Lake and Hawrelak Park this fall (see the Outdoor Program report on page 17).

Kimberly Fulton sent a fine Outdoor Program article summarizing the field trips from August 19 to November 18. Thank you to all the volunteers who lead field trips.

Our regular authors Brian Stephens, Gerald Romanchuk, Patsy Cotterill, Chris Rees, Karen Lindsay, and Melissa Penney have again sent in informative and interesting articles.

The deadline for submissions to the January–April issue is March 30, 2024. Please email articles and photos to Dawne Colwell at colwelld@shaw.ca.

Dawne Colwell, Editor

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 at EPL in printed and electronic formats, go to epl.ca and click on "Search." Curl up with one of the recommended books and escape into the wonderful world of nature!

Streams *of* Consequence

DISPATCHES FROM THE CONSERVATION WORLD

LORNE FITCH



I have just finished reading Lorne Fitch's newly published book titled *Streams of Consequence: Dispatches from the Conservation World*. This is a must read for all Albertans who love and care about our province as a great place to live, work, and play.

Lorne is a respected professional biologist, conservationist/naturalist and writer. He worked for Alberta Fish and Wildlife Division for some 35 years before retiring from his government work in 2006. Since then, he has continued to advocate for better care and understanding of Alberta's natural heritage – a heritage which he documents as seriously diminished in the face of unrelenting rapid natural resource development and industrialization.

Lorne reveals his deep and sensitive love for the natural world, starting as a boy growing up on a farm in central Alberta west of Sylvan Lake.

He outlines in detail the degradation that has occurred to Alberta's landscapes – its soils, waters, forests, and biodiversity – since settlement in the late 19th century. He is careful to not lay blame at a few easy targets, showing us how we all have "skin in this game." He also reveals that this is not a simple "economy versus environment" conundrum. In fact, we are brought to an awareness that our economy and the environment are essential to each other. We have to figure out better ways to shift our perspective and world view, so that we can more effectively integrate these two sides of the coin. However, time is of the essence.

As I finished the book, I realized just how effective Lorne's voice is in delivering very powerful conservation messages through his unique and compelling ability to tell stories.

Recommendation and review by Harry Stelfox

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

Plant Pathology: Galls and Other Arboreal Deformities

You know it's winter when naturalists are reduced to noticing galls on leafless willows and wondering what caused them! The question from an ENCNatureTalk member was easily answered: the photo showed a pine cone gall on a willow, the unlikely result of the invasion of a tiny fly, the gall midge, *Rabdophaga strobiloides*. However, it had me flipping through my two books on forest diseases (see references below) and turning to the trusty Internet. Judging by this last source of information these "cones" on a deciduous shrub have attracted quite a lot of attention!

At least four pages of *A Field Guide to Forest Insects and Diseases of the Prairie Provinces* begin with the statement: "Many insects and mites cause galls on hardwood foliage and buds." Indeed, the panoply of diseases, lesions, and malaises that our woody plants can suffer due to insects, fungi, bacteria, birds, mammals, wind, weather, and, of course, people, is something of a horror show. We shouldn't be surprised. It's a law of nature that if there is a living to be made somewhere, some organism will exploit it. Unfortunately, this means parasitism and predation, and for the hosts/victims, the results are usually not pretty. Much of the time we ignore native plant infirmities unless they are extensive enough to be eye-catching, and in photographing a specimen we instinctively look for one that is beautiful, that is, healthy. However, I suggest that identifying some manifestations of our local plant pathology can add an interesting dimension to field trips and the outdoors, especially in the winter.

Pine Cone Galls on Willows

The galls and their causal agent are aptly named (*strobiloides* comes from *strobilus*, meaning a cone), for the former are about the size of pine or large spruce cones and form a similar tapering pyramid of overlapping "scales," which start out green like the modified leaves they are, but eventually turn brown and woody. They only occur at the tips of branches and persist on the shrub until they disintegrate, long after they have been abandoned by their inhabitant. The adult midge lays a single egg on a newly flushed willow leaf. The light orange larva crawls to the terminal bud of a twig and bores through the tissue to the central cavity. Its feeding as a second-instar larva stimulates the abnormal growth that forms the gall, in which the third-instar larva overwinters before emerging as an adult the next spring.

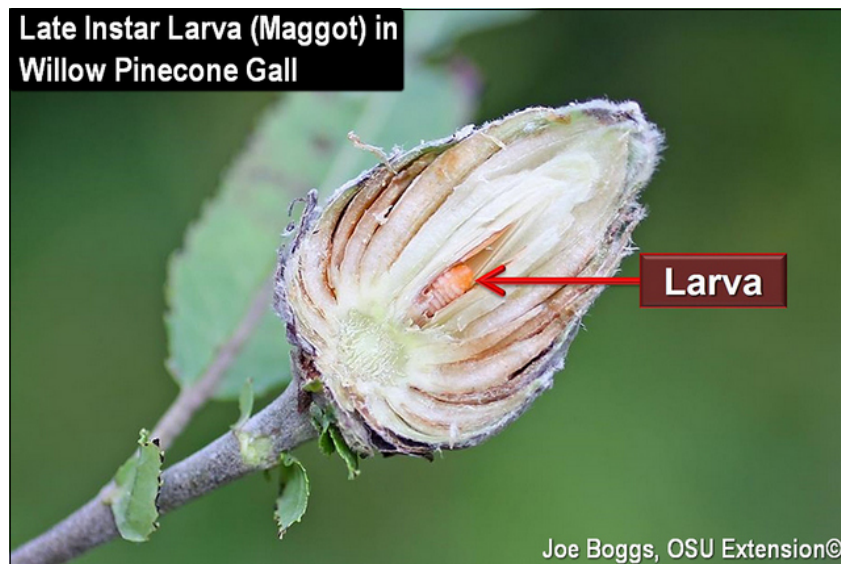
Willows, it appears, are very susceptible to galls, with the manipulation of normal growth processes that this implies, possibly by means of a chemical injected during

oviposition. The shrub does not seem to be unduly harmed, although heavily infected branches may die. Still, the pine cone gall midge appropriates resources that otherwise would be used by the host, so it's probably just as well that the gall, which provides both food and shelter – the "scales" are often hairy, providing further insulation – is not inviolate. Researchers Brian Van Hezewijk and Jens Roland at the University of Alberta examined willow pine cone galls in Central Alberta over four years and found that mortality of the gall midge was mostly caused by two parasitoid wasps, and by birds. They found that the birds attacked the smallest galls, one of the wasps attacked the mid-sized galls (thereby avoiding themselves being predated by the birds) and the other wasp species attacked the largest galls, thus avoiding both predators. (This way they all got away with murder!) My own recent short survey of willows in a few local areas didn't turn up many willow galls, so perhaps the gall midge isn't doing too well round here – or its predators got too clever!

There are a host of gall-forming organisms, including those that affect leaves, as well as the legion of other afflictions I've already referred to and, as I've suggested, one can have a literal field day seeking them out and identifying them, possibly with the help of iNaturalist and our local professional entomologists.



Old pine cone galls on hungry willow (*Salix famelica*) along the North Saskatchewan River at Patricia Ravine, May 20, 2023. Photo by Patsy Cotterill.



Dissected gall. Internet picture.



Pine cone galls in winter, January 19, 2021. Photo by Manna Parseyan.



Young gall in the process of formation on beaked willow, September 1, 2020. It is possible that it is another type of gall, as various insects form galls on willows. Photo by Manna Parseyan.



Another type of gall on willow in Wedgewood Creek Ravine, November 19, 2020. Photo by Patsy Cotterill.



The host willow in Wedgewood, November 19, 2023. Dissecting fresh galls might provide some clues to the causative agent. Photo by Patsy Cotterill.



*Northwest poplar (*Populus x jackii*) infested with poplar bud gall mite (*Aceria parapopuli*), November 28, 2023. Photo by Patsy Cotterill.*



Close-up of old poplar bud galls, November 28, 2023. Active galls can contain thousands of these tiny arachnids. Photo by Patsy Cotterill.

Other Insect Infestations and Their Implications for Landscaping/Restoration

Pondering the ills that forest trees and shrubs are heir to led me onto another familiar topic: how they fare in an urban environment. As part of its greening plan, the City of Edmonton proposes to plant two million trees and reach 20%

urban forest canopy by 2071. What will it plant and how will it look after its plantings?

It seems that some trees have gone out of fashion – those lovely laurel-leaved willows (*Salix pentandra*) on the University campus, for example, have not been replaced by younger versions of themselves – while others, such as bur oak (*Quercus macrocarpa*), with little grace to recommend it, have become more popular. Yet according to my pest books, bur oak is prone to a number of infestations. Possibly more important, it has shown itself capable of loosing its residential moorings and drifting into the river valley.

We, the public, have little influence with the City Parks Department, but I would hope that our native poplars, aspen and balsam poplar, will feature prominently in city plantings, especially in the larger open spaces. However, poplars are susceptible to at least two insects that certainly spoil their appearance and likely militate against their reaching old age. These are the poplar borer (*Saperda calcarata*), a beetle, and the willow and poplar borer (*Cryptorhynchus lapathi*), a weevil.

Their white, grub-like larvae, 1 to 4 cm long, have a surprising ability to chew woody material and scar and wound the trunks, the wounds exuding frass and attracting woodpeckers that do further damage, as well as fungi causing disease and rot. The tree bleeds resin in its attempt at defence. There is evidence that open-grown trees (such as city plantings) and trees at the edge of stands are particularly vulnerable, and my own observations bear this out. Several aspens we planted at Hodgson wetland show *S. calcarata* infestation, and one mature tree at the constructed wetland was so defaced that it had to be cut down. It will hardly be a smart move if the City has to remove a significant proportion of its trees prematurely. Perhaps a better way would be to encourage the regeneration of dense, natural stands by burning – but, of course, the City won't do that!

As the name suggests, the willow and poplar borer (*C. lapathi*) also infects willows. I have planted willows in restoration projects in Whitemud Park North and Wagner Natural Area and then later observed with dismay the tell-tale signs of borer infestation: prostrate stems amidst the upright ones. I'll find the wood at the base of the fallen stem is yellowish, spongy, and as full of holes from larval tunnelling as a colander, causing it to break off. Often the whole shrub becomes infected and dies. Yet planting willows would seem to be a good remedy for a lack of native flowers in the spring: the abundant flowers of willow, full of pollen and nectar, provide a feast for pollinators. Fortunately, weevil larvae have their predators too, but perhaps as a supplement to planting willow cuttings or providing seed beds for willows, since saplings are most vulnerable, other methods could be tried. Older specimens could be pollarded, encouraging the production of new shoots. Alas,

the City seems unwilling to devote dollars to managing its natural woody canopy, believing falsely that, even in an urban environment, nature can take care of its own!

Patsy Cotterill



(left) Aspen poplar planted at Hodgson Wetland, showing scarring by holes and death of upper stem, likely due to poplar borer (*Saperda calcarata*), November 24, 2023.

(right) These are likely the culprits responsible for my dying willows in Whitemud North: poplar and willow borer weevils (*Cryptorhynchus lapathi*), May 15, 2015. *Cryptorhynchus* means "hidden snout" and I presume refers to the weevil's capacity to retract its curved snout into a groove when it is not feeding. Photo by Patsy Cotterill

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Outdoor Program, August–November, 2023

City walks enable members to explore local parks and learn about the wildlife that may be present in these urban habitats. Field trips offer members opportunities to explore areas outside the city.

Full reports of the following walks and field trips are available on the ENC Nature Talk (ENCnaturetalk@groups.io | Home) and can be filtered by a hashtag (#tripreport).

Emily Murphy Park – Don Delaney

On August 19, twenty members met at Emily Murphy Park. After a night of rain, there was a lot of bird activity from Emily Murphy Park and Hawrelak Park to the Buena Vista Bridge. Since so many members turned out, we split into two groups, with one taking the lower trail and the other taking the trail along the golf course. Thanks to Heather Ronnes for leading a group. In all, 34 bird species were recorded, including 12 warbler species.

Cooking Lake – David Grinevitch

Eleven members met early in the evening of August 20 at Cooking Lake. This was David's first outing as a field trip leader!

Near the sailing club, both Marbled and Hudsonian Godwits were found, as well as Short-billed and Long-billed Dowitchers. At the RR 214 access, the group got a good look at Stilt Sandpipers and Semipalmated Plovers. Amid a large flock of Semipalmated Sandpipers, Gerald spotted something pretty exciting – a Western Sandpiper! A rare migrant through Alberta and a lifer for most of the group. A Merlin came and swooped through a flock of shorebirds, looking for a meal.

The final stop was the airport access on the north side of the lake. Both Wilson's and Red-necked Phalaropes were seen, as well as another Stilt Sandpiper. A Northern Harrier hunted over the field. The group found 16 different species of shorebirds, with 49 species in all.

Emily Murphy Park – David Grinevitch

On the morning of August 22, thirteen members set out from the west end of Emily Murphy Park and began walking the riverside trail towards Hawrelak. They came across some early activity with robins, a Least Flycatcher, and a handful of Tennessee and Yellow Warblers flying around high in the treetops.

They continued along the riverside trail and saw an Ovenbird, Swainson's Thrush, Philadelphia Vireo, Rose-breasted Grosbeak, Black-and-white Warbler, Pileated Woodpecker, and a Western Wood-Pewee, as well as a gorgeous male American Redstart.

All in all, it was a good trip with a total of 33 species, including 7 warblers.

Forest Heights – Vince Cottrell

On August 25, fourteen birders showed up on a foggy morning to look for warblers and other migrants in Forest Heights. The low light levels made photography a challenge. Only 3 species of warblers were found and no vireos. Trails were muddy, and this caused some restrictions on where the group could go, with access to the shoreline trail a no-go due to wet conditions. But thanks to the keen hearing of David Grinevitch and several other birders, we were able to pick up 22 species despite the rather slow and quiet morning.



Photo by Gerald Romanchuk

Whitemud South – Ted Hogg

Nineteen members met on August 29 for a walk through Whitemud Ravine south of Snow Valley. There were abundant signs of recent storm damage; in some areas, the creek was littered with fallen trees and woody debris.

The walk started with a flyover of Canada Geese as a reminder that fall migration is well underway. One of the highlights was seeing three hawk species (Cooper's, Sharp-shinned, and Red-tailed) from one of the viewpoints along the creek. They might have been missed if it weren't for the raucous cacophony from a nearby flock of Black-billed Magpies! There seemed to be fewer small migrant birds than usual for this time of year – perhaps they were keeping a low profile to avoid the hawks?

In total, 28 bird species were recorded, thanks to the collective efforts of the group that included several experienced birders.



Birders, photos by Ted Hogg



Sharp-shinned Hawk, photo by Ted Hogg



Bird tracks, photo by Ted Hogg



Solitary Sandpiper, photo by Brenda Pullen



Solitary Sandpiper, photo by Ted Hogg

Gold Bar Park – Vince Cottrell

Seven members showed up at Gold Bar Park for the September 8 bird walk. From the parking lot, they took the wide off-leash trail pathway that follows the river east. The first warbler observed was an Orange-crowned, followed by a Ruby-crowned Kinglet!

The trail was relatively quiet, with an occasional White-throated Sparrow. After a brief stroll on the footbridge that leads to Rundle Park, the group turned and headed south, following the creek. A Kingfisher made an appearance and a mixed flock of warblers was found. A good variety of birds were seen, but there were few of each species and it was difficult for everyone to locate all of them. At a small duck pond, we found two Solitary Sandpipers. A total of 26 species were recorded.



Ruby-crowned Kinglet, photo by Faye Smith



Merlin, photo by Lucia MacQuarrie

Fall Shorebird Road Trip — Chris Rees

Six members headed out on September 10 in two cars going east on Highway 16. The group turned south on Range Road 172 and soon began to encounter many sparrows and American Pipits along the roadside. At the first wetland, the first of many Long-billed Dowitchers were seen. We explored wetlands around the northeast quadrant of Beaverhill Lake and finished the trip at Cindy Conservation Area. Most of the wetlands had a least a few dowitchers and yellowlegs. By the end of the trip, 14 shorebird species had been recorded, and a total of 59 bird species. Highlights include the large number of dowitchers, the first of the fall resting Snow Geese, a Sanderling, 13 Black-bellied Plovers, and the vast array of sparrows and passerines that were continuously flushing as the group drove along.

Thanks to David Grinevitch for handling the eBird checklists.



American Pipit, photo by Faye Smith



Red-necked Phalarope, photo by Chris Rees

Owl Banding at BARCA (Boreal Avian Research and Conservation Association)

September 21 – Brenda Pullen

Members joined some BARCA folks to witness and record the fall migration of Northern Saw-whet Owls. BARCA is a non-profit organization aimed at protecting the environment, with a special emphasis on avian research and conservation within western Canada's Boreal forest.

Four Northern Saw-whet Owls were captured and banded. A highlight for me was being able to hold and release one of these gorgeous owls. Three of the birds were first-year hatches, and one was a second-year bird. It was very interesting to see how the growth of new and old feathers indicated the age of the birds.

October 5 – Faye Smith

It was an amazing experience, sitting in the middle of a dark forest with coyotes howling and geese calling overhead. Several net checks over the evening yielded 9 Northern Saw-whet owls. The observers witnessed the expert processing of these little creatures – weight, wing and tail measurements, age assessment, and leg banding.

What magic to see these beauties silently winging away after being released, and what better way to spend an evening!



***Northern Saw-whet Owl,
photo by Faye Smith***

Whitemud North – 360 Degree Nature Walks with Wayne Oakes

The 360 Degree Nature Walks were designed by ENC Member Wayne Oakes to cover all aspects of nature and are a look into the natural world thriving in Whitemud North. Three walks were held in the fall.

September 16

Six members met and headed north towards the North Saskatchewan River. Various vegetation was discussed, including balsam poplar, trembling aspen, interior sandbar willow, and chokecherry. A short distance later they stopped to look at the remnants of an old slime mold – *Lycogala flavofuscum*, which looked like mashed potatoes!

Walking towards Steel Ball Pond, the group discussed the various grasses growing in this heavily worked area: foxtail barley, smooth broome, and timothy grass. They also discussed western dock, wild vetch, white cockle, and several other invasive weed species. One plant that everyone was surprised to see was wild asparagus!

Sixteen bird species were also observed.



American Crow, unusual brown colors



Downy Woodpecker, female



Mallard, male

All photos by Wayne Oakes



Least Chipmunk, photo by Wayne Oakes

October 21

Ten members met and started off by heading north towards the North Saskatchewan River, as the trail along this section still has a good amount of red-osier dogwood berries. A female Downy Woodpecker was observed eating the berries.

With the majority of leaves now fallen, the group had a really good look at many different aspects of fall plant features: the male pollen catkins of beaked hazelnuts, the still green leaves of common wintergreen, the still fleshy green leaves of spinulose wood fern, and others.

Twelve bird species were observed.



Strawberry Blite (Blitum capitatum)



Downy Woodpecker, female eating Red-osier Dogwood berries



Chickpea Milkvetch (Astragalus cicer)

All photos by Wayne Oakes

November 18

Eight members met in front of the Alfred Savage Centre and observed a cooperative Common Raven giving a low fly-over, with a second one following. Several Blue Jays began to sound the typical Blue Jay alarm, possibly in response to the ravens.

As the group proceeded along the trail they discussed some of the various plant species present: red-osier dogwood, common and western snowberries, chokecherries, and saskatoons, to name a few. They were pleasantly surprised to find the small patch of strawberry blite was still in a fairly good state! This appears to be a very hearty species. The group spotted a Long-tailed Weasel in its full winter whites; the only remaining colour was the black tip of the tail, which seldom ever changes.

This was a very pleasant experience, with 16 bird species identified.

All photos by Wayne Oakes



Common Raven



Pileated Woodpecker, male



*Dog Sick Slime Mold
(Didymium spongiosum)*



*Pine Grosbeak, female
eating Highbush Cranberries*

Kimberly Fulton, Outdoor Program Director

Some Rarer Gulls on Clover's Bar



Thomas Clover, for whom the Clover Bar district was named. STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF NORTH DAKOTA



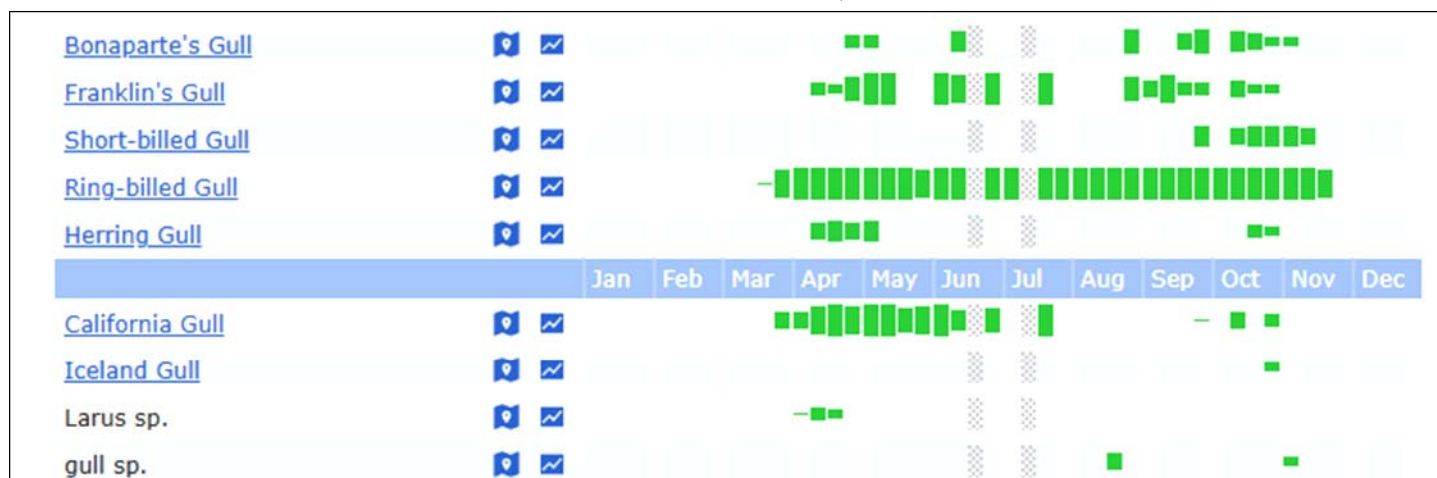
A bar in a river is an elevated region of sediment (such as sand or gravel) that has been deposited by the flow of water. There is a bar in the North Saskatchewan River, just upstream from the Beverly Bridge, that was originally named Clover's Bar after a miner, Thomas H. Clover, who was seeking gold along the river in 1860–1864. Over time this name became shortened to Clover Bar, which is now the name given to the district. Over the years, the lands adjacent to the river have been Indigenous campsites, gravel pits, coal mines, a private garbage dump, a city landfill (1975–2009), and a Provincial Science Park. The land was reclaimed as part of Premier Lougheed's Capital City Recreation Plan in the 1970s. The land is currently a golf course, a ski hill, and two parks: Rundle Park and Strathcona Science Park. The two parks are connected by a pedestrian bridge across the river.

I am no expert on gulls, so Gerald Romanchuk's help has been invaluable. I obtained copies of *Gulls Simplified*,

Gulls of North America, and *Gulls of the World* to try learn more about gulls. Gull Research.org is an excellent reference site, with lots of photos of gulls at various stages of life.

In the spring Clover Bar is mostly flooded but it is still used by gulls. eBird reports show Ring-billed, California, and Franklin's gulls are the most common spring species. With lower water levels in the autumn, a small rapid is created at the head of the bar that provides a good feeding spot for the gulls. The bar also provides a resting and preening place. Ring-billed Gulls and Bonaparte's Gulls are the most common autumn species. Over the past 5 years, there have been fall sightings of some rarer gulls: Short-billed Gulls and Iceland (Thayer's) Gulls. Green bars on the eBird bar chart below show the time periods during which gull species were reported. Gray bars mean no reports were filed for the time period.

**eBird Bar Chart Extraction for Gull Observations at Rundle Park
extracted November 18, 2023**



In 2019, Vince Cottrell was the first birder to file an eBird report for a Short-billed Gull on the bar. The first few birds reported were adults, so identification was relatively straightforward. In 2021, smudgy brown immature birds were observed. In 2022, an adult was sighted and a sub-adult bird was also present.

Short-billed Gull eBird Reports

Date	# of birds	# of eBird reports	Age
2023-10-29	1	3	Adult
2023-10-28	1	4	Adult
2023-10-27	1	2	Adult
2023-10-26	1	3	Adult
2022-10-23	1	1	Sub-adult
2022-10-18	1	2	Sub-adult
2022-10-17	1	2	Adult
2021-11-12	1	1	Immature
2021-11-06	1	3	Immature
2021-11-05	1	4	Immature
2021-11-01	1	2	Immature
2021-10-27	1	1	Immature
2021-10-26	1	1	Immature
2021-10-23	2	1	Immature, Adult
2021-10-16	1	1	Immature
2020-10-18	1	1	Adult
2020-10-13	1	1	Adult
2020-10-12	1	1	Adult
2020-09-24	1	2	Adult
2020-09-23	1	4	Adult
2020-09-22	1	1	Adult
2020-09-19	1	1	Adult
2019-10-09	1	1	Adult

Once you have seen them, adult and juvenile Short-billed Gulls are relatively easy to distinguish from the Ring-billed Gulls that are the primary species found on the bar. In most cases, if you have a Short-billed Gull adjacent to a Ring-billed Gulls, the apparent size of the Short-billed Gull is smaller. Adult Short-billed Gulls have smaller all-yellow bills. Juvenile Short-billed Gulls have smaller, mostly black bills and are smudgy brown in colour. Sub-adult Short-billed Gulls are very difficult to differentiate from some Ring-billed Gulls. Most of the time the bill on a sub-adult Ring-billed Gull looks fairly substantial and is bright pink with a black tip when viewed through binoculars or a spotting scope. Dunne and Carlson (p. 114) note that the Short-billed Gull has a rounder head, more petite bill, and less contrasting plumage. The Short-billed Gull also has a shorter neck and more compact body and wing profile.

As I was doing research about these gulls, it was interesting to think about the transition the birds go through in the first three years; from smudgy brown immature with brown wing tips, to a smudgy brown and-gray-backed sub-adult, to a pure white adult with a grey back and black wing tips. The bill colour changes from mostly black, to pink and black, to yellow and black, to yellow.

But sometimes there seem to be Ring-billed Gulls with lighter weight and longer bills. Dunne and Karlson (p. 104) identify these as males that also show a decurved tip on the upper bill. To make things more confusing, Dunne and Karlson show a Short-billed Gull with an unusually long bill (p. 117). Add to this the “wearing” of plumage and, as Dunne and Karlson note, the fact that individuals may be advanced or retarded in their plumage transition, and the identification challenge grows.



Short-billed Gull, immature, October, 2021



Short-billed Gull, sub-adult, October 2022



*Short-billed Gull, adult non-breeding plumage,
October 2020*



Short-billed Gull in breeding plumage, Parksville, BC, 2016



Adult Ring-billed and adult short-billed Gulls, October 2023



Sub-adult Short-billed Gull (front left), smaller in comparison to the Ring-billed Gull adults and sub-adult behind it



Adult Ring-billed and sub-adult Short-billed Gulls, October 2022

The other rarer gull that has stopped on the bar is the Iceland (Thayer’s) Gull. Again, Vince Cottrell was the first to identify the species, in 2019. In 2021, Vince and I shared the observation of a smudgy brown immature bird. The reader may wish to fully explore the Iceland (Thayer’s) Gull on [Gull-research.org](http://www.gull-research.org); <http://www.gull-research.org>.

Iceland Gull (Thayer’s) eBird Reports

Date	# of birds	# of reports	Age
2021-10-31	1	2	Immature
2019-10-24	1	1	Adult



Immature Iceland (Thayer’s) Gulls, October 2021, all photos by Chris Rees

Chris Rees, Sherwood Park

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Strathcona County. Listen for the echoes of Clover Bar, <https://www.strathcona.ca/council-county/history-and-heritage/narratives-and-accounts/listen-echoes-clover-bar/>

2023: A Rare Year

This has been a very good year for finding and seeing rare and uncommon birds in the Edmonton area. I need to start by defining the Edmonton area, using what eBird calls “Edmonton County.” It’s not a true county, by any means; it’s based on a federal census district covering several counties. And it’s very different from the circle the ENC uses to designate the Capital Region for events such as May species count and the winter bird list. The eBird county does not include Elk Island NP or Beaverhills Lake, but does go as far west as the Brazeau Reservoir. While it doesn’t include several traditional Edmonton area birding sites, using eBird’s data is a huge advantage.

Over the last 15 years we’ve been averaging 2 or 3 new birds a year. But in 2023 an incredible 7 very cool birds were new to the county.

On May 26, Zach Greene, Bill Wilson, and Percy Zalasky heard and saw an Eastern Wood-Pewee at the Spruce Lot in St. Albert. Now, a lot of people these days call it the Grey Nuns White Spruce Park, but I’m a traditionalist. When I started birding it was simply the Spruce Lot and to me it’ll always be the Spruce Lot. The Pewee was a really great find – the species has only been seen in Alberta twice before. I’m sure the guys were happy the bird was singing; visually, it’s extremely hard to tell it apart from the more common Western Wood-Pewee.

Percy struck again on June 6, when he, Alan Hingston, and Dan Stoker were out by Calahoo doing their Breeding Bird Survey. They heard an unusual bird song, recorded it, and continued on with their survey route. They went back later and eventually got a look at the bird. It turned out to be a Yellow-breasted Chat. Although Chats nest in southern Alberta, they’ve never been reported north of Trochu before.

It took a while for the next cool bird, but on September 17, Del Huget reported an unusual woodpecker from the Edmonton Research Park. When the bird was found again the next day and photographed, it turned out to be a juvenile Red-headed Woodpecker, which looks very different from our regular woodpeckers. It’s been seen in Alberta several times over the years, but not in our neck of the woods, and is usually very hard to twitch on. Most of the birds I heard of never stayed in one place for long and were never relocated – you had to be on scene within an hour to have a chance. Luckily, this particular one stayed for several days and was seen by many people.

On the morning of September 18, while some folks were looking to find Del’s woodpecker, Denis Lavallee and

Lucia MacQuarrie were birding the Spruce Lot. They saw an unusual warbler and Lucia got a photo of it. Later in the day she got the photo off her camera and sent it to Denis. Denis was riding with Steve Knight to go for the woodpecker, and Steve recognized the bird as a Black-throated Gray Warbler. A bird from southwestern BC, it’s only been seen in Alberta a handful of times and never anywhere near Edmonton. A few people saw it on September 19, but many dipped on it. The warbler and the woodpecker posed a question never asked by Edmonton birders before: do I go for the Red-headed Woodpecker or the Black-throated Gray? What a choice!

The warbler drove a lot of birder traffic to the Spruce Lot – and put the Hastings-Lake-Dead-End-Effect (see the previous issue of *PN*) into play. While looking for the warbler on September 22, Sydney Rhode found another good bird – a juvenile Golden-crowned Sparrow – a subtle one that could be easily overlooked. Although this species does nest in Alberta, it is restricted to treeline in the mountains and very rarely seen elsewhere in the province. They all like to head to the west coast for the winter.

On October 23 a very unusual backyard bird was found in Millwoods. Can you imagine seeing a Western Cattle Egret hunkered down in your yard? The egret was in poor condition and was rescued and taken to a vet. Cattle Egrets are seen in the province from time to time. They’re known to wander, but for whatever reason we hadn’t recorded one in the Edmonton area before.

“Warren the Warbler” was first noticed as something different by Susan Stout in her yard near Breton on October 22. Eventually she took a closer look and identified it as the third Yellow-throated Warbler ever reported in Alberta. Susan is no stranger to rare birds; she had a Barn Owl at her place 10 years earlier. Both Susan and Warren were very accommodating – dozens of birders from across the province visited and saw the bird. It would flit around the eaves of the house, drop down to the deck for dead flies, and check out the numerous feeders. This very striking bird is usually found in the southeastern United States.

Honourable mention goes to some other birds seen this year that are usually pretty tough to find in Edmonton County: Piping Plover, Indigo Bunting, Eastern Bluebird, Summer Tanager, Western Kingbird, Upland Sandpiper, Cassin’s Finch, and American Dipper. Many of those species had only been seen here once or twice before.

It was a really great year for birders working on their Edmonton County lists. Lots of rare and uncommon birds, some eastern birds, some from the south, and a couple of westerners. Several rarities were found by birders working their patch or regular birding spots, some by birders twitching or looking for previously reported birds, and a few birds that went to the birders instead of the other way around. Not sure if more rare birds are around nowadays or more people are looking. Probably an unanswerable question?

Gerald Romanchuk



Black-throated Gray Warbler, photo by Lucia MacQuarrie



Yellow-throated Warbler, photo by Gerald Romanchuk



Red-headed Woodpecker, photo by Gerald Romanchuk