

# Nature Alberta

ALBERTA'S NATURAL HISTORY REVIEW



RICK PRICE

*feature article*

## Considering Coyotes



SEE "WILDLIFE STARRING...PORCUPINES" STORY, PG 16. PAUL HORSLEY

SEE GOLDEN BEAN STORY,  
PG 41. BARBARA ZIMMER



WILDLIFE FESTIVALS! SEE THE STORY ON PAGE 18. GLEN HVENEGAARD



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Nature Alberta is composed of natural history clubs from across the province. The aims of the Federation are:

- (a) To encourage among all Albertans, by all means possible, an increase in their knowledge of natural history and understanding of ecological processes;
- (b) To promote an increase in the exchange of information and views among natural history clubs and societies in Alberta;
- (c) To foster and assist in the formation of additional natural history clubs and societies in Alberta;
- (d) To promote the establishment of natural areas and nature reserves, to conserve and protect species, communities or other features of interest;
- (e) To organize, or coordinate symposia, conferences, field meetings, nature camps, research and other activities whether of a similar or dissimilar nature;
- (f) To provide the naturalists of Alberta with a forum in which questions relating to the conservation of the natural environment may be discussed, so that united positions can be developed on them, and to provide the means of translating these positions into appropriate actions.

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# Editor's Page

BY DENNIS BARESCO

## FEATURING COYOTES!

Coyotes have been getting a lot of media attention lately. Well, attention may be an understatement; try “media circus” or “sensationalism.” When wild animals, in particular predators, do something that harms or even interferes with people directly or indirectly, it makes headlines. The media and assorted other spokespersons shriek about the need to “DO SOMETHING!!!” Warnings go out: keep children indoors; travel in groups while banging pots and pans; carry pepper spray; never venture out after dusk; be afraid – *be very afraid!* – of all wild animals!

All this happens even if it was just a pet that was nabbed. The recent sensationalism surrounding a particular Coyote taking a pet in Toronto, and a similar situation

in Sarnia, was bizarre. “Your children are next!” was one of the rallying cries.

My point is not to belittle attacks by Coyotes or other predators on people or pets. But let's get some perspective here. For example, every year tens of thousands of people are bit – many are mauled, some are killed – by select breeds of dogs and their hybrids from the four or five inherently-dangerous groups of breeds; heaven knows how many pets are killed annually! Yet banning or controlling these breeds moves slowly and inevitably stirs up objections. Hmmm... tens of thousands of conflicts are acceptable to society on one hand, while a few dozen conflicts are unacceptable on the other hand. And dogs are but

one threat to people and pets that makes the threat from wild animals minuscule in comparison. I don't expect we'll ever see a headline like: *“Budgie bites baby, draws blood; government promises controls on budgies!!”*

Such sensationalism and mindless fear

mongering concerning wildlife does no one any good; it is, in fact, grossly irresponsible. Awareness, respect for and understanding of wild animals will provide people with many more tools to deal successfully with potential conflicts. Many wildlife officers show an admirable levelheadedness in addressing people-animal conflicts, as do nature interpreters. Naturalists and environmentalists can help by taking their message to the public and responding to the media when sensationalism raises its ugly head.

For more on Coyotes – the “Trickster” – see the Feature Story, starting on page 22.

## THANKS!

Your Editor is always saying that input and constructive criticism concerning *Nature Alberta* is welcome. I'm not just saying that; I really do want input. A number of readers have sent me input – and I thank them sincerely. Two readers in particular have sent me long, detailed comments, and so I say: “Thank you, Dick and Gus!” All the comments received make for a continuously improving magazine. Time and financial constraints mean some of the positive changes will take longer than others, but we are getting there.

So, as Dean Martin used to say: “Keep those cards and letters coming.” Your input is appreciated.



JACKIE SILLS

## ALBERTA ISSUES IN BRIEF

## Statuses Assessed

The Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada (COSEWIC) met in Ottawa from November 23-27 to assess the risk of extinction for Canadian wildlife species. The Birds Specialist Subcommittee, co-chaired by Dr. Marty Leonard (Dalhousie University) and Jon McCracken (Bird Studies Canada's Director of National Programs), presented status reports for seven bird species at the November meetings.

Of these, the previously-assessed status was reconfirmed for five: Greater Prairie-Chicken (Extirpated), Eskimo Curlew and Mountain Plover (Endangered), and Yellow Rail and the princeps ("*Ipswich*") subspecies of Savannah Sparrow (Special Concern). Given that there have been no verified sightings of

the Eskimo Curlew anywhere since 1963, this species is on the brink of becoming the first Canadian bird to be declared Extinct since the Passenger Pigeon nearly 100 years ago.

One Alberta bird species was upgraded to a higher category of risk. The newly-assessed Chestnut-collared Longspur was designated **Threatened**, based on results from volunteer-based monitoring programs like the Breeding Bird Survey, showing that severe population declines this species has suffered since the 1960s are continuing (albeit at a slower rate). This native prairie grassland specialist is threatened by habitat loss and fragmentation from road development associated with the energy sector.

## New Study: Does the Alberta Tar Sands Industry Pollute? The Scientific Evidence

A study released in October called for urgent attention from the world's scientific community on the impact of oil sands activities on contamination. The study, *Does the Alberta Tar Sands Industry Pollute? The Scientific Evidence* by Kevin Timoney and Peter Lee confirmed that current levels of pollution found in water, river and lake sediment, and in fish in the area affected by oil sands production present human health concerns. The study also reported that certain types of contamination are increasing over time. The

authors suggest "there is an urgent need for information about the impacts of tar sands activities" as these operations are expected to triple over the next decade.



DAVID DODGE, PEMBINA INSTITUTE

From *The Water Log*, Nov 5, 2009.  
To learn more: [www.water-matters.org](http://www.water-matters.org).

## Banff, Bison and Caribou

In November 2009, Nature Alberta made a submission commenting on the new draft Banff Management Plan. We were very supportive of the Plan generally and made many positive and (we hope) helpful comments. We did, however, make one critical point:

**"The results and Nature Alberta's support assumes that all the objectives and actions in the Plan adhere strictly to the mandate and the 'first priority to the maintenance or restoration of ecological integrity' (pg 5 of the draft)."**

Without a doubt, this is the most important point to be made, because it is not unusual for visions and mandates to be fudged, glossed over or relegated to a lower priority in the carrying out of actions. For our full submission on the draft Banff Management Plan, see our website [www.naturealberta.ca](http://www.naturealberta.ca).

One initiative mentioned in the draft plan is the reintroduction of both Caribou and Plains Bison to Banff National Park (BNP). At first glance, this seems to be a good idea, and Nature Alberta supports, in principle, the idea of reintroducing Caribou to BNP. Plains Bison is a different story. In a perfect world, having Bison once again roaming BNP would be wonderful. But the world is not perfect.

Our rationale is as follows, from our submission: BNP managers "are certainly aware of the many problems that would arise with a reintroduction of Plains Bison:

## On the Covers:



### FRONT COVER

A photographer's criteria: being in the right place (photogenic surroundings); at the right time (good light); with good instincts (subject is actually there); a photogenic subject (which Coyotes certainly are); and an artistic sense. Rick Price, who has contributed many

photos to *Nature Alberta*, has all the qualities necessary for taking excellent photos. The full, Feature Story, "Considering Coyotes," starts on page 22.



### INSIDE FRONT COVER

Porcupines often cause people to be fearful – unnecessarily so as long as one does not try to touch them! A close-up look at their faces – such as seen

with Paul Horsley's photo – and in particular their gentle, expressive eyes, is a soothing thrill every naturalist should strive to achieve. For more on this unique animal, see the story, "Wildlife Starring...the Porcupine" on page 16.



Nature enthusiasts visit wildlife festivals for many reasons, including nature knowledge, time with family, conservation support, competitive birding, and recreational activities. Glen Hvenegaard's photo introduces the story on festivals, starting on page 18.



### INSIDE BACK COVER

Paul Horsley, a regular contributor to *Nature Alberta*, has captured the essence of winter with his photo of a Bighorn Sheep on a hillside and a close-up of "coldness"!



### BACK COVER

Whitebark Pine (*Pinus albicaulis*) is declining over much of its range, including Alberta. Its survival is threatened by the combined effects of blister rust, fire suppression and pine beetle epidemics. Parks Canada is involved in a

number of initiatives to restore a healthy Whitebark Pine population and sub-alpine community. For more information on Parks Canada's efforts: [www.pc.gc.ca/eng/pn-np/ab/banff/natcul/natcul22b.aspx](http://www.pc.gc.ca/eng/pn-np/ab/banff/natcul/natcul22b.aspx)

management and containment difficulties; disease possibilities; year-round food availability; population control; political opposition; to name just a few. We're not really sure what the point would be, considering the problems, headaches and potential expense. Would it not be far better to focus on grizzlies, large carnivores and other more immediate concerns? To quote one of our Directors: 'Manage what you have, as best you can, and do not further complicate matters.'

"Thus, Nature Alberta does NOT support a Bison reintroduction at this time. Perhaps bring the idea back in 10 years, when all your other priorities have been successfully initiated."



NATURE  
ALBERTA

## Ponderables

"The Sun, with all those planets revolving around it and dependent upon it, can still ripen a bunch of grapes as if it had nothing else in the universe to do."

— GALILEO GALILEI

# Nature Alberta NEWS



## NEW NAME!

Nature Alberta is the new brand name of the Federation of Alberta Naturalists! While “FAN” will remain our official, legal name, Nature Alberta (NA) is the title you will see more and more and will be used in all our communications, publications, fundraising and day-to-day referencing.

The change was approved by the FAN – er, that is, the NA Board of Directors at the September 2009 meeting. Official launch of this new name will be at the April Annual General Meeting. There will be a transition period, where we use both names together, until Nature Alberta becomes familiar.

So whenever and wherever you see “Nature Alberta,” remember – it’s still FAN!

## FORTY YEARS!

2010 marks the 40th anniversary of FAN – forty years of natural history education, stewardship and conservation of nature. While there are a great many challenges facing naturalists and naturalist groups, there is also a lot of excitement within Nature Alberta about the opportunities and possibilities as we enter our fifth decade.

It’s more than just a new name. Led by our new Executive Director Philip Penner, our new Office Manager Christine Brown, a

dedicated Executive, and a strong group of Directors, Nature Alberta is planning and introducing a wide variety of initiatives to strengthen the organization, live up to our mission and fulfill our objectives.

If you would like to be involved in the positive future of Nature Alberta, let us know. Just contact the office – even if it is just to wish us Happy Birthday!

## OUR PUBLIC FACE

A recent survey by the Alberta Conservation Association revealed that half the respondents could not name a single conservation group active in the province. Even when aided (respondents were read a list of provincially-active groups), only seventeen percent indicated knowledge of FAN. The message was clear: we need to do more! After all, widespread public interest and involvement is the key to conservation success.

Awareness of Nature Alberta will not happen overnight, but we are determined to make it happen. Three things are on the immediate horizon (but watch for much more):

- One of the easiest ways to add a promotional factor is to start a **FACEBOOK** page, which we have just done. We welcome everyone to sign up!



- By the time you read this, Nature Alberta will have introduced an **E-NEWSLETTER**, a communication tool of brief bits to keep the reader informed and entertained.
- The **24th International Congress for Conservation Biology** is taking place in Edmonton, July 3 – 7, 2010. Nature Alberta will be there to promote our organization and activities to the registrants; well over 1,000 are expected from around the world. Theme of the Congress is “Conservation for a Changing Planet” – which fits well with our objectives for the future.

## NATURE ALBERTA LIBRARY

Did you know? Nature Alberta has a fine library on a wide variety of animal, plant and ecology topics: nature books, field guides, research papers, videos, back issues of many magazines. You are welcome to come to the office (3rd Floor, Percy Page Building, 11759 Groat Road, Edmonton AB) and have a look for yourself. Most items can be checked out.

So drop in, say hello to the staff, and peruse the Nature Alberta Library!

## LOWER ATHABASCA

As part of Alberta’s Lower Athabasca region planning process, three groups – Nature Alberta, Alberta Wilderness Association and Canadian

Parks and Wilderness Society (Northern Alberta) – submitted a report to the Lower Athabasca Regional Advisory Council and the Government of Alberta. The report, “Recommended Conservation Approach for the Lower Athabasca Regional Plan,” is based on a review of the Terms of Reference for the regional plan. It also suggests land conservation outcomes we believe are necessary to achieve a balance of environmental, economic and social objectives in the region. To read the report, see [www.naturealberta.ca](http://www.naturealberta.ca).

#### **IBA DRAWS SUPPORT**

In January, Nature Alberta was successful in gaining grants from the TD Friends of the Environment Foundation, both the Central Alberta Chapter and the Calgary Chapter, for the Stewards Network for Alberta’s Important Bird Areas (IBA) program. The Stewards Network

is a volunteer effort to increase the public’s recognition of, and engagement with, Alberta’s globally significant bird areas.

Other supporters of the IBA initiatives for 2010 are Nature Canada, Alberta Sport Recreation Parks and Wildlife Foundation, and Alberta Conservation Association. Nature Alberta is extremely grateful to have all these agencies invest in a program as important and positive as IBA.

#### **NATURE ALBERTA, THE MAGAZINE**

A number of older copies of *Nature Alberta* have been in office storage. Now, Lu Carbyn has offered to sell them through his Wildbird General Store at a substantially reduced rate. The Wildbird General Store is at 4712 – 99th St, Edmonton. The store is worth a visit, just to see the amazing selection of books, bird supplies, art and “knick-knacks” of all kinds.

*Nature Alberta* has been receiving a mailing subsidy through the Publications Assistance Program (PAP) of the Heritage Canada department. The program has been a blessing to many Canadian magazines, in particular smaller publications. However, the federal government has ended the program. The new Canada Periodical Fund limits grants to those publishing over 5,000 copies per year – considerably more than *Nature Alberta* prints.

The loss will result in an increase of mailing costs of about \$600 to \$800 per year. However, since we are no longer limited by the PAP criteria (starting with the next issue), we will now have more flexibility in how we handle memberships and subscriptions.

## Got any Milestones?

Your Editor would like to introduce a “Milestones”-type column as a regular feature (eg your 250th bird, special birthday, special occasion, a nature-related accomplishment) for celebrating and recognizing our naturalists – or naturalists-to-be.

Send your milestone (or someone’s you know) to:  
[na@naturealberta.ca](mailto:na@naturealberta.ca).



DEBBIE GODKIN

## Nature Diary: “Squirrel versus Hawk”

BY DEBBIE AND ALAN GODKIN

The Sharp-shinned Hawk had made several attempts to catch the Red Squirrel but had been unsuccessful. After one such attempt, the hawk perched in the

same poplar tree that the squirrel thought it owned. The squirrel didn't hesitate to confront the hawk to let it know that it was

intruding on its space. Finally, the hawk moved on, perhaps stalking an easier and less vocal prey!

*Like many naturalists, Debbie and Alan Godkin, from Westlock AB, have numerous stories of their experiences with nature – stories they love to share with other naturalists in this “NATURE DIARY” series!*

# Up Close Naturally: The Mighty Shrew!

BY MARGOT HERVIEUX



*Beneath the snow, small but mighty predators are following mice tunnels in search of prey.*

Shrews, some of the world's tiniest mammals, are fascinating creatures that most of us never see.

Shrews are barely mouse-sized, with pointed snouts and sharp teeth. They belong to a group of mammals known as the insectivores, and they eat everything from insects, spiders and worms to slugs and baby mice.

Five of Alberta's seven species of shrew can be found in the wooded parts of Alberta, but they tend to be found in different habitats. The smallest is the Pigmy Shrew (*Sorex boylii*) with a total length of 6 cm (just over 2 in). Pigmy Shrews can be found in dry and moist forests as well as shrubby areas.

Our most common shrews are the Masked (*Sorex cinereus*) and Arctic (*Sorex arcticus*) Shrews. They live in a variety of forest habitats where they scurry through the leaf litter in search of food. Arctic Shrews prefer wetter places than Masked Shrews.

Mountain valleys are home to the Dusky Shrew (*Sorex monticolus*).

They hunt in wet meadows and bogs or along creeks. The very similar Vagrant (or Wandering) Shrew (*Sorex vagrans*) is only found in the extreme southwest corner of the province.

The only shrew that prefers grasslands is the Prairie or Hayden's Shrew (*Sorex haydeni*). Though similar in appearance to our other shrews, this shrew is found in the open meadows and short-grass prairie of the south.

Perhaps the most interesting shrew is the Water Shrew (*Sorex palustris*). Our largest shrew, it reaches a total length of 17 cm (6.75 in). This animal dives beneath the water along the edges of streams or the mossy shores of forest lakes to hunt for aquatic insects and small fish. Their hairy hind feet serve as paddles when swimming and are used to comb water from their fur when on land.

All shrews have very high energy needs and must eat up to three times their body weight everyday. They don't hibernate in winter but alternate between bursts of

active hunting and short periods of energy-saving rest.

Shrew nests look like balls of grass. Depending on the shrew, they are located in hollow logs, under rocks or in shallow burrows. The shrews don't hollow out the centre of their nests; they simply wiggle into the mass of grass.

Like many small mammals, shrews produce large numbers of young. Eighteen days after mating, the mother gives birth to four to ten blind, naked babies that will be weaned and on their own in only three weeks. Shrews produce one to three litters per year depending on the season.

Life is risky for any small animal and shrews are no different. They are prey for all sorts of creatures including weasels, foxes, coyotes, owls, hawks and house cats. During the winter they are slightly safer, as they spend most of their time beneath the snow.

The next time you are out for a winter walk, consider the shrew. Somewhere under that snow blanket they are actively pursuing a meal!



Margot also writes a column for the Peace Country Sun, archived copies of which are available at [www.peacecountrysun.com](http://www.peacecountrysun.com).

## BOOK REVIEW

# Caught in the Spin:

## The Wild Horses of CFB Suffield

REVIEW BY: LU CARBYN

*I kept putting it off! Reviewing this book was one of the toughest assignments that I had faced for some time.*

It was not the quality of the book that made me hesitate, but the subject. Up front – let me say that *Caught in the Spin: The Wild Horses of CFB Suffield* is one of the best books that I have read for a while.

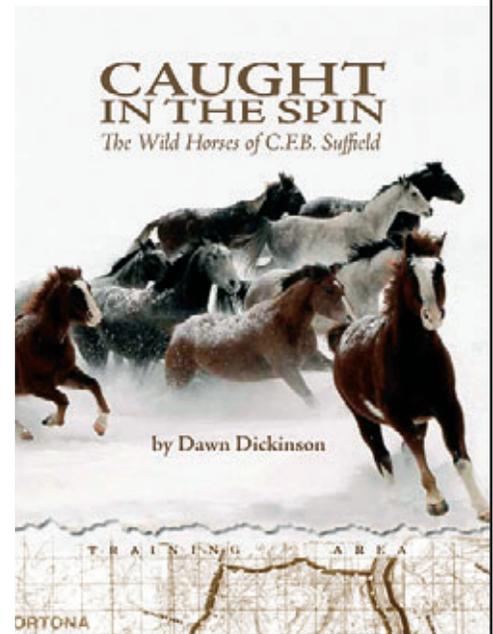
The challenge was to think through the multi-faceted complexities inherent in the core subjects of prairie ecosystem management, agency responsibilities, perceptions on ethics and personal agendas. No easy “waters” to navigate at the best of times, but very tricky when caught up in political agendas where science is used as a scapegoat to push through programs with preconceived outcomes.

Formation of the Citizens Advisory Committee in this case – pardon the pun – placed the “cart before the horse”. It politicised the issue before all the facts were thoroughly evaluated. What was needed was to place the technical information on the table and to address the different management scenarios with factual details that could then have been consulted for an objective assessment of possible outcomes, given the different possible actions to be

taken. In retrospect, this book is a vindication of a different view from the one that prevailed at the end, but it is not necessarily the only best case scenario possible.

The contents are exceptionally well researched. The author, Dawn Dickinson, is a biologist, a naturalist and a scholar. The book is well written – it is an honest, painful, exposé of a struggle that touches raw nerves. The author was wronged and she meticulously presents her point of view. Her activities, her ideas and her actions were trivialized by individuals and institutions who should have known better. But then, we are dealing with an explosive topic in which common sense and civility may not always prevail.

Horses, particularly wild horses, like seals on the Atlantic coast, are known to create controversies. Though on the surface there may appear to be similarities, in reality, for the Suffield Horse it was not the same. The seal issue rests entirely on raw emotions and human perceptions on value systems. It is okay to kill cattle (adults and babies in slaughter houses) but it is not okay to kill cute and cuddly seals with



**Dawn Dickinson.** Rain Cloud Publishing, 2009. 180 pgs. ISBN 978-0-9811970-0-5

endearing, pleading dark eyes on white snow and ice – particularly when it is associated with blood and gore.

The Suffield horses and their grazing incorporated ecological dimensions that were dismissed as unrealistic and trivial. Dawn Dickinson tried to raise scientific arguments without success. Therein was the problem. Bureaucrats, allied non-governmental organizations and even professional societies were short-sighted and not willing to give all positions a fair evaluation. Without reading this book, I would have been one of them.

Conventional wisdom was, and is, that exotic grazers with sharp hooves are destructive to sensitive natural areas. End of argument. It is a universal notion. We have plenty of examples – horses (Nevada), donkeys (Grand Canyon) and goats (Oceanic

Islands). Whenever these exotics are allowed to multiply, there will be devastating impacts on soils and native vegetation. So why the difference in this instance? Before reading the book my sentiments were entirely with those who condemned the horses. Having read the book, I experienced several Eureka Moments, and can clearly identify with the author. Dickinson raised the question of a management scenario with a reduced number of horses – as opposed to complete elimination. She has made a very strong case for that position.

This book is a must read for any one who is concerned about the environment and how decisions are often made in the absence of a fair process. That does not mean that there is not a strong case to be made by the “other side”. Someone with equal dedication and conviction should take the time to write a book and present the flip side of the coin to what had happened.

*Caught in the Spin* is available from the Nature Alberta Bookstore ([www.naturealberta.ca](http://www.naturealberta.ca)), the Wildbird General Store in Edmonton, and other outlets.

Let's be realistic, no agency wants to continually face a “lose-lose” situation over time. Wild horses, like seals, bring out the media and pit the “good” against “bad”. Horse management, with partial reduction of the herds, would have been challenged by those opposed to any kind of manipulation. That issue simply does not go away. Better for the military to lose one battle, get bad publicity for removing the horses now – have “egg on your face” for getting rid of the horses, and be rid of the headlines in the future. Was this possibly one of the ultimate reasons for the decisions taken? If so it would have been nice to know. Scientists involved too, should have seen the politics that were being played to push agendas. Agencies and scientists alike, cannot make a strong case with incomplete science, and sell it as the truth. That simply is unacceptable and is also very dishonest.

It is amazing how short-sightedness perpetuates itself. I own a bookstore, and on several occasions I pointed out the merits of this book to biologists of an “older vintage” – those familiar with the controversy. They pick the book up, look at it, put it back on the shelf and respond by sighing: “Ah, I know all about it – just sentimental trivia”. Students that I teach in University courses respond quite differently. Maybe there is some hope after all.

This book should be considered for 4th year ecology and resource conservation courses in Universities. It has much to offer. I already mentioned that there are other dimensions not covered in this book. Every debate has at least two sides to it. We need to hear from the other side; only then can we move ahead and not repeat similar mistakes. We owe it to future generations that we come full circle on the debate.

## Advertising in *Nature Alberta*

*Nature Alberta* is now accepting a limited number of advertisements for future issues. Ad rates vary from \$35 (business card size) to \$249 (full page), X2 for colour.

Full details, including rates and sizes, are available at:  
 online: [www.naturealberta.ca](http://www.naturealberta.ca)  
 email: [na@naturealberta.ca](mailto:na@naturealberta.ca)  
 phone: (780) 427 – 8124

NOTE: Full count-by-count results are available on the Nature Alberta website: [naturealberta.ca](http://naturealberta.ca).

**FRANKLIN'S GULL WAS THE MOST  
NUMEROUS SPECIES IN THE SPRING  
2009 BIRD COUNT.** AVICEDA (WIKIMEDIA  
COMMONS)

WINTER 2010

11



# Wings of Spring:

## The Spring Bird Count 2009 Summary

COMPILED BY JUDY BOYD

*The number of species was up in 2009: from 271 in '08 to 280; the number of individual birds also went up: from 211,229 to 269,851.*

In 2008, the most numerous species was Tree Swallow (13,085), second was Red-winged Blackbird (12,625) and third was Franklin's Gull (11,740). In 2009, Franklin's Gull moved to first spot, with 37,211. Second was Canada Goose with 13,347 and Red-winged Blackbird dropped to third, with 13,266.

Last year 17 species were seen in only one location and 12 species were found in only two locations. This year, 27 species were seen in only one location and 12 species were found in only two locations around the province. Of the single sightings: Greater White-fronted Goose, Snow Bunting, Common Redpoll were each seen at Lac La Biche; Cackling Goose at Cold Lake (with a count week bird seen at Taber-Vauxhall); Wild Turkey at Cypress Hills; Great Egret at Brooks; Gyrfalcon at Cardston; Peregrine Falcon at Brooks; Ruddy Turnstone at Lac La Biche; Dunlin and Long-billed Dowitcher at Brooks (for both, a count week bird seen at Calgary); Sabine's Gull at Cold Lake; Northern Pygmy-Owl and Northern Saw-whet Owl at Claresholm; Common Poorwill at Cypress Hills; Lewis's

Woodpecker, Red Crossbill at Calgary; Northern Shrike at Medicine Hat; Western Bluebird at Crowsnest Pass; Wood Thrush at Brooks; Bohemian Waxwing at Cardston; Sedge Wren, Nashville Warbler, Chestnut-sided Warbler, Blackburnian Warbler, Bay-breasted Warbler at Cold Lake; and Golden-crowned Sparrow at BowKanBirders.

Of the species found in two locations: Tundra Swans at Calgary and Central Alberta; Eurasian Wigeon at Medicine Hat and Cardston; Yellow Rail at Calgary and Cold Lake; Hammond's Flycatcher at Banff and BowKanBirders (with count week birds seen at Crowsnest Pass); Pacific-slope Flycatcher at BowKanBirders and Calgary (with count week birds seen at Crowsnest Pass); Steller's Jay at Waterton and BowKanBirders; Mourning Warbler at Lac La Biche and Cold Lake; Canada Warbler at Cold Lake and Fort McMurray; Nelson's Sharp-tailed Sparrow at Calgary and Cold Lake; Lapland Longspur at Fort McMurray and Lac La Biche; Rusty Blackbird at Fort McMurray and Lac La Biche (with count week birds seen at

Milk River); and Pine Grosbeak at BowKanBirders and Claresholm.

Last year we had seven species seen in all areas – in '09, only five species: Canada Goose, Mallard, Northern Flicker, American Robin, and Yellow Warbler. Last year four species were found in all but one area and eleven species were observed in all count areas except two. This year three species (Blue-winged Teal, Tree Swallow and Red-winged Blackbird) were found in all areas except one and eleven species (Bufflehead, Killdeer, Spotted Sandpiper, American Crow, Swainson's Thrush, Chipping Sparrow, Clay-coloured Sparrow, Savannah Sparrow, and Brown-headed Cowbird) were found in all areas except two.

### SPRING COUNTS FUN!

Interested in Birds or Flowers? You can join in the 2010 Spring Bird and Flower Counts which are held the last week of May. Taking part in the counts is fun, plus a great way to learn to identify the different species. And remember: all levels – from beginners to pros – are very welcome and encouraged to sign up. Check with your local naturalist club or nature centre.

WATCH FOR THE MAY "PLANTS IN FLOWER" SPECIES COUNT 2009 SUMMARY IN AN UPCOMING NATURE ALBERTA!

## Close to Home: Nature Photography in Alberta

# Highwood Grizzlies

BY JOHN WARDEN



JOHN WARDEN

*The threatening clouds were sinking down from the sky and merging with the highway into a grey misting soup. It was rainy and misty and altogether not a morning for photography, when a Grizzly Bear reared up on his hind legs and peered at me out of the fog. Now there is an image I'll never forget!*

As I pulled over to the side of the road, the Grizzly dropped down onto all fours and ambled a short distance away, then stood up again to have another look at me. A standing Grizzly in the mist. I scrambled to get my camera out, knowing full well that there wasn't enough light yet.

While it was technically sunrise and I had planned to be at this place, the Highwood Pass, at this time, it was still way too dark for photographs. I spent about fifteen minutes watching the young Grizzly Bear, maybe a two year old, feed on the lush grass and dandelions along the roadside.

What an experience. I took a few shots, just because I had to, but sure enough, they were just dark and blurry. The mountains were turning dark blue against the grey of the sky when the bear ambled across the highway and continued on up the mountain and out of sight.

No photographs, but in terms of an adventure, how does a day get any better than that? But as it turns out, it did!

I was half thinking of heading for home, perhaps stopping at Kananaskis Village for breakfast, but it was only about 6:00am, so I

decided to drive along the pass a few more times while the sun filtered its way through the mountains.

The Highwood Pass on Highway 40 in Kananaskis Country, at 2206 meters elevation is the highest drivable pass in Canada. It is higher than the Sea to Sky Highway near Squamish in B.C. (1968 meters) and higher than the Logan Pass on the Going To the Sun Road in Montana (2025 meters). Best of all, hardly anyone uses the Highwood Pass. At 6:00am on the 3rd of July, there was no traffic, and no tourists. For a while, there was just me at the top of the world and Grizzly Bears.

I did meet Claude, a local who was standing by his truck by the side of the road, looking down the mountain. I pulled in behind him and we chatted a bit. Claude told me that he comes up to the pass every chance he gets and that he had been watching the Grizzly Bears for five years. He said that there are six bears that he knows of that frequent the pass and that he has names for them. He pointed out a large Grizzly with



JOHN WARDEN



JOHN WARDEN

a white face that was moving through the brush below us. We watched for it for a while trying to anticipate where it would come out from the trees, but we didn't see it again. That was Grizzly number two.

Claude said he was done for the day and headed for home, but advised me to be patient, that the bears should be hanging around the ridge for another couple of hours.

I picked up Grizzly number three about twenty minutes later and I stayed with him for nearly two hours. The sun was up and there was finally enough light for photographs, but the sky was heavy, overcast and grey. I took hundreds of images as the bear fed peacefully along the

roadside, shooting from inside my car, out the driver's window. Two weeks earlier, near Lake Louise, a big Grizzly bluff-charged me – another experience that will stay with me forever! Fortunately he was on the other side of the fence that runs along the Banff highway. There was no fence up here on the Highwood Pass, so I took my shots from the safety of my car. I watched as he rubbed his back against a tree, looked inside a hollowed out log and I got a great shot of him silhouetted against the sun. Bear three finally dropped down below a ridge where I couldn't see him anymore. I decided my day was complete and headed back for breakfast.

It wasn't five minutes later that I saw Grizzly number four. He

was a young one, maybe just a yearling, and he was on the run. Where the other three bears had ambled along eating dandelions and vegetation, this young guy was a running and eating machine. I spoke briefly with another photographer who had been following this bear and shooting from the safety of his car. He told me that the local Park Rangers shoot the Grizzly Bears with rubber bullets to try and keep them away from the highway. As a result, the bears are conditioned to run if a person gets out of their vehicle. I had no intention in finding out whether or not this was a true story.

I followed bear number four for a few minutes until he disappeared down behind the same ridge as bear three. That was it for the



JOHN WARDEN

day; I was definitely heading for home. I had just put away my camera and looked back; there was bear four coming back over the ridge, still on the run, but this time being pursued by bear three. The chase was on. Growling and spitting, they crossed the highway right in front of my car, went down the shoulder and up the mountainside. Bear four stopped and turned around for a moment and I thought perhaps I would get to see a confrontation; but no, the chase continued, up and over the hill and out of sight. What a fantastic climax to an extraordinary morning.

## correction

A number of readers commented on the identification of the Goshawk in the Fall Nature Alberta "Close to Home" article. In fact, the photo was of a juvenile Red-tailed Hawk. Though there are several similarities between the two, "the white chest is the most obvious indicator," said one reader, "and the tail bars are very narrow which would be a young red-tail (they don't get red tails until they are adults). The young Goshawk would have tear drop shaped markings all across the chest. Also, two young Goshawks would not be sitting on fence posts; they are much more secretive. There are Goshawk nests and Red-tailed Hawk nests in Elk Island National Park, though."

Author John Warden's response: "I appreciate the input from a number of readers in correctly identifying the photos of the juvenile Red-tailed Hawk in my last article. The fault is all mine. Sorry for the bad information. The upside is, I now have some great contacts for bird photo verification. Thanks so much."

## 2009 Baillie Birdathon Fundraisers

The Baillie Birdathon, a fundraising birding event, is held annually across Canada to raise money for bird-associated projects. In 2009, over 6,000 people from all over the world donated a record \$240,238.00!

Three Alberta birders were among the top ten fundraisers: Ed and Bev Kissinger (Calgary Bird Banding Society) and Michelle Manly (Beaverhill Bird Observatory). Congratulations to them from Nature Alberta!

For information on the Baillie Birdathon, visit [www.birdscanada.org/support/birdathon](http://www.birdscanada.org/support/birdathon), or call 1-888-448-BIRD (2473).



# Calling All Naturalists

## Come join the Prairie and Parkland Marsh Monitoring Program



Marshes are wetlands that are characterized by the presence of emergent vegetation; they are extensively distributed throughout the Prairie Provinces of Canada. The seemingly countless marshes that characterize this region are the primary reason for it being identified as the most important waterfowl production area within North America. Naturally, the region is also valuable to a host of other wetland-associated species. With over 30 species of marsh birds and waterbirds breeding within the region, it is considered among the most important ecosystems in North America for wetland-associated birds. In the past century, there have been extensive landscape-level changes which have resulted in the widespread loss and degradation of wetland habitats. In response to habitat conservation needs, the Prairie Habitat Joint Venture (PHJV) was established the late 1980s to provide leadership to achieve healthy and diverse bird populations through conservation partnerships.

To improve conservation efforts for wetland-associated birds, better information is needed regarding population status, distribution and species habitat preferences. In partnership with the PHJV, Bird Studies Canada (BSC) began the Prairie & Parkland Marsh Monitoring Program (PPMMP) in 2008. Support for this program has been generously provided by Alberta Conservation Association, Alberta North American Waterfowl Management Plan Science Fund, Ducks Unlimited Canada, Environment Canada, Manitoba Sustainable Development Innovations Fund, and Wildlife Habitat Canada. In Alberta there are study locations near the following communities: Aetna, Big Valley, Bow Island, Brownfield, Cereal, Consort, Coronation, Delburne, Donalda, Dunmore, Etzikom, Ferintosh, Hanna, Hay Lakes, Hill Spring, Hobbema, Holden, Hughenden, Mundare, Magrath, Medicine Hat, Milk River, Murray Lakes, Rochon Sands, Rumsey, Smoky Lake, Stettler, St. Paul, St. Mary's Reservoir, Tofield, Vegreville, Veteran, Viking, and Warner.



*The Common Yellowthroat (above) and Sora (top right corner) are common species encountered during marsh bird surveys.*

Opportunities exist to participate in the program as a marsh bird monitor, and BSC is seeking enthusiastic individuals to conduct marsh bird surveys at these locations. Marsh monitoring is a fun activity that gives people an opportunity to experience a group of birds that are often overlooked!

Participation in this program requires as little as 12-hours per year, although individuals are encouraged to do as many surveys as they wish. Marsh bird surveys involve recording birds encountered during a 15-minute survey at a specified location. The survey targets 10 focal species (including rails, bitterns, grebes and the Nelson's Sharp-tailed Sparrow), but approximately 30 other marsh-associated species are documented. While some prior experience with bird identification is beneficial, we encourage involvement by anyone who is interested, as training packages will be provided!

**To participate, or simply learn more about the program, please contact**

**Katherine Brewster at:**

prairieprograms@birdscanada.org

(306) 249-2894

115 Perimeter Rd.

Saskatoon, SK

S7N 0X4

***Thank you for helping us to better understand marsh birds!***

# Wildlife! Starring... the Porcupine

BY DENNIS BARESCO

*Porcupine – an odd name, but one well suited for a delightfully odd creature.*

When thinking of rodents, one thinks of mice, rats and the like; but Porcupines (*Erethizon dorsatum*), like their similar-sized or slightly larger Beaver cousins, are indeed rodents. Unlike Beavers, Porcupines have a considerably laid back and unhurried lifestyle.

People are often surprised to learn that Porcupines climb trees. Perhaps that's because, with such a heavy (up to 12 kg), giant football-shaped body, it appears they could barely stand upright, much less climb. But each toe (four front, five rear) has a strong, curved claw for gripping a tree trunk, and they are amazingly adept climbers. They are also able to wander far out onto branches that seem too small by far to support them. (Having said that, falling out of trees is one of the main natural causes of death!)

The reason they are in trees in the first place is . . . food. They

munch away on the leaves, buds and (in winter) the cambium layer and inner bark of many different trees. Woody shrubs (like Chokecherry and Saskatoon), forbs, berries, seeds, antlers, bones and roots are also on their diet. They especially like items rich in sodium – hence their fondness for things like wooden axe and shovel handles, to the chagrin of campers and cabin dwellers.

People may also be surprised to learn that Porcupines are excellent swimmers: the hollow quills help them to keep buoyant. Yet another surprise is their voice. For what appears to be a quiet animal, they can emit a startling collection of squeaks, shrieks, snorts, whines, grunts, groans, moans and hums!

Porcupines love to sit quietly – for hours – in a tree, especially in winter as they sunbathe. In fact, since they do not hibernate, they

are often best observed in winter. They don't especially hurry on the ground either; after all, with 30,000 barbed quills as protection, a shuffling, waddling, almost comical gait on short legs is all that is required.

Porcupines are one of only a dozen mammals that are potentially found throughout all of Alberta. As long as there are trees or shrubs to eat, Porcupines will be there – even in the arid grasslands. Solitary, nomadic creatures, they seldom tolerate others of their species.

Porcupines breed in October–November, with just one, fairly heavy (at 500gm) baby – called a “porcupette” – born in the spring (twins are very rare). Porcupines are the only North American rodent to give birth to precocial and advanced young: that is, porcupettes are born with eyes open, covered with long black hair, short, soft quills and are able to climb in less than a week. The quills harden within 30 minutes and are essentially “ready for action.”

Quills – an exceptional defense mechanism – are actually modified hairs, each tipped with microscopic barbs, or hooks. It is the barbs which cause all the pain not only



**OUT FOR A WALK ON A NOVEMBER MORNING!**

HOLLE HAHN



AHHH...THOSE BEAUTIFUL EYES! RICK PRICE

in pulling them out, but because once embedded, they continue to work their way into the flesh and muscle, and can pass through the entire body. No, Porcupines do NOT throw their quills. Contact must be made – though for such a slow, dim-witted animal, they are almost lightning-quick in turning to face away from an enemy, raising their spines, and thrashing their quill-laden tail. New quills grow to replace those lost. For most of the lesser-skilled predators, seeing the defensive posture is enough to scare them away. Most dogs, unfortunately, seem unable to get the hint!

A Porcupine's body is not all quills, which are just on the head, neck, rump and tail; it has a fine pelage as well, of dense, wooly undercoat and long guard hairs.

It has been suggested that Porcupine quills may be too good

a protective device. Over the three million years Porcupines have occupied North America, such effective protection has essentially reduced the need to evolve devices such as speed, good eyesight, vigilance and intelligence. In fact, they are generally seen as animal-world dullards! As Dr J. Dewey Soper says of Porcupines in *Mammals of Alberta* (1964): "Use is the mother of progressive development, and disuse leads to degeneration. This law is well illustrated also in the turtle, armadillo and echidna."

Thus, even with a good sense of smell and hearing, they are highly susceptible to some "smarter" predators, especially the Fisher which, though much smaller, can dispatch a Porcupine with casual ease by flipping it over and attacking the unprotected stomach. Wolverines and Bobcats

are two other skilled Porcupine predators. Still, for most other predators (such as Great Horned Owls and Canids), that tasty, substantial meal may well come at a high cost: a prolonged death by embedded quills.

Two predators kill more Porcupines than all the rest put together: cars and trucks. Slowness and poor eyesight result in lethargic road crossings and . . . whomp!

As for the name? It comes from the French, *porc d'épine*: 'spined pig'.

### The Porcupine BY OGDEN NASH

Any hound a porcupine nudges  
Can't be blamed for harboring  
grudges.

I know one hound that laughed all  
winter

At a porcupine that sat on a splinter.

# Explore Alberta's Wildlife Festivals

BY GLEN HVENEGAARD AND JODY RINTOUL

*Wildlife festivals are booming in Canada and Alberta. In the past two decades, they have grown in number, diversity, and popularity.*

Wildlife festivals are annual public celebrations of natural wildlife features in a local area. These festivals attract mostly local and regional visitors, are facilitated by volunteers, and are usually sponsored by many local conservation, government, and community organizations. Wildlife festivals offer a variety of social, recreational, and educational activities, often including guided nature tours, art shows, guest speakers, displays, or bird watching competitions. Thus, they are a great way to learn about wildlife, support a local community, and potentially contribute to conservation.

Festivals are usually held to enhance a community image, generate local economic impacts, provide recreational opportunities, develop a local sense of community, and raise concern for local features. Therefore, wildlife festivals are a great way for a community to show off its local

natural treasures, help visitors learn more about natural history, promote local spending, and generate community pride. Just as important, wildlife festivals provide an opportunity to enhance the conservation of local wildlife populations and habitats.

More than 80 wildlife festivals are held each year in Canada. In Alberta, 13 festivals will be offered in 2010. Some festivals attract only a few dozen participants, whereas others attract several thousand. Either way, these festivals celebrate local wildlife spectacles and require sustainable wildlife populations and their habitats.

How can wildlife festivals contribute to effective wildlife conservation? Wildlife festivals can offer incentives to establish protected areas and generate revenue for wildlife and park management. The economic impact produced by wildlife festivals can encourage local residents

and landowners to conserve wildlife. Finally, education of visitors and residents can raise awareness of, and support for, wildlife conservation. However, some of these festivals do not clearly identify conservation as a specific goal, and therefore, do not intentionally develop mechanisms to achieve that goal. Further, many festivals do not monitor any positive or negative effects on wildlife populations and habitats.

Most past research has examined the positive economic impacts and negative ecological effects associated with festival activities. Few studies have examined the broader conservation benefits. Thus, our research team has begun a 3-year study to inventory current wildlife festivals in Canada, explore their potential conservation benefits, and create a set of best practices for festival management. As part of this study, we will interview wildlife festival organizers from across Canada and conduct case studies on a wide range of these festivals to determine how well their conservation objectives, mechanisms, and outcomes are aligned.

Take a look at the following list of wildlife festivals in Alberta. Incorporate them into your holiday plans and

*Glen Hvenegaard (glen.hvenegaard@ualberta.ca) teaches at the University of Alberta's Augustana Campus in Camrose and conducts research on the conservation impacts of ecotourism activities such as wildlife festivals. He is a member of the Camrose Wildlife and Greenspace Stewardship project which is starting a Purple Martin Festival in 2010.*

*Jody Rintoul is completing her BSc in Biology at Augustana this year, with plans for graduate school in the near future.*



**MOST WILDLIFE FESTIVALS HAVE SOMETHING OF INTEREST FOR PEOPLE WITH DIVERSE ABILITIES AND INTERESTS. HERE, PEOPLE ON A GUIDED HIKE LEARN ABOUT BIRD CONSERVATION ISSUES IN THE BOREAL FOREST.** GLEN HVENEGAARD

encourage festival organizers to incorporate conservation into their plans and goals. As the time approaches, check the current information for any changes in dates and activities – most organizers are still making plans for their 2010 festivals.

#### APRIL 24-25, 2010

##### **Beaverhill Lake Snow Goose Chase** TOFIELD

**DESCRIPTION:** An event for all ages with opportunities to be immersed in nature. This is not only a birding festival, but has a focus on many groups of animals including birds, snakes, and insects.

**ACTIVITIES:** See wild birds, regional tour, conservation displays, hikes

**WEBSITE:** [www.enc.fanweb.ca](http://www.enc.fanweb.ca)

**CONTACT:** Bob Parsons, Marg Reine, Dale Dawson

**EMAIL:** [vintagebob@shaw.ca](mailto:vintagebob@shaw.ca), [mreine@telusplanet.net](mailto:mreine@telusplanet.net)

**PHONE:** 780-488-1344, 780-430-7134, 780-464-5814

#### APRIL 24-25, 2010

##### **Swan Festival** GRANDE PRAIRIE

**DESCRIPTION:** Learn about Trumpeter Swans and the current problems that they face.

**ACTIVITIES:** guided bus tours, wetland wonders, crafts, face painting, lunch

**WEBSITE:** [www.swanfestival.fanweb.ca](http://www.swanfestival.fanweb.ca)

**CONTACT:** Margot Hervieux

**EMAIL:** [Margot.Hervieux@gov.ab.ca](mailto:Margot.Hervieux@gov.ab.ca)

**PHONE:** 780-538-5603

#### MAY 26-JUNE 2, 2010

##### **Crowsnest Wing Fest** BLAIRMORE, CROWNEST PASS

**DESCRIPTION:** Come enjoy the beauty of the Crowsnest Pass during its annual bird festival. Be a part of the spring bird, mammal, and butterfly counts!

**ACTIVITIES:** Guided birding tours, luncheon speaker.

**WEBSITE:** [www.crowsnestconservation.ca](http://www.crowsnestconservation.ca)

**CONTACT:** Marilyn Liddell

**EMAIL:** [birds@crowsnestconservation.ca](mailto:birds@crowsnestconservation.ca)

**PHONE:** 403-563-7545, 403-562-8923

#### JUNE 5-6, 2010

##### **Songbird Festival** LESSER SLAVE LAKE

**DESCRIPTION:** A birding festival for all ages and groups. This beautiful and unique setting allows for great bird watching! Take a tour of the new Boreal Center for Bird Conservation.

**ACTIVITIES:** Guided bird hikes, banding lab tours, build birdhouses, workshops, family and children's activities.

**WEBSITE:** [www.lslbo.org/songbirdfestival.asp](http://www.lslbo.org/songbirdfestival.asp)

**CONTACT:** Patti Campsall

**EMAIL:** [executive.director@borealbirdcentre.ca](mailto:executive.director@borealbirdcentre.ca), [info@borealbirdcentre.ca](mailto:info@borealbirdcentre.ca)

**PHONE:** 780-849-8240, 780-849-8235

#### JUNE 6, 2010

##### **Purple Martin Festival** CAMROSE

**DESCRIPTION:** A birding festival with a focus on Purple Martins. Stay after the Jaywalkers' Jamboree for great bird watching, management tips, nature studies, and more. Take a tour of our Four Seasons Environmental Park.

**ACTIVITIES:** Guided birding hikes, speakers, Purple Martin nest box observation and management, build birdhouses, workshops, family and children's activities.

**SOME WILDLIFE FESTIVALS DIRECTLY SUPPORT WILDLIFE CONSERVATION. HERE, STAFF AT THE LESSER SLAVE LAKE BIRD OBSERVATORY DEMONSTRATE BIRD BANDING TO PARTICIPANTS IN THE SONGBIRD FESTIVAL IN LESSER SLAVE LAKE PROVINCIAL PARK.**

GLEN HVENEGAARD



WEBSITES: [www.camrose.ca/index.aspx?nid=168](http://www.camrose.ca/index.aspx?nid=168),  
[www.tourismcamrose.com](http://www.tourismcamrose.com)  
CONTACT: Camrose Wildlife and Greenspace Stewardship Coordinator  
EMAIL: [glen.hvenegaard@ualberta.ca](mailto:glen.hvenegaard@ualberta.ca)  
PHONE: 780-672-0544, 780-672-9195

### JUNE 9, 2010

#### International Migratory Bird Day Festival CALGARY

DESCRIPTION: Celebrate the return of migratory birds on International Migratory Bird Day. In Calgary, this event is held at the Inglewood Bird Sanctuary & Nature Centre, with stations to spot birds, displays on local conservation organizations, and door prizes to be won.

ACTIVITIES: Hands on activities, crafts, games, and storytelling.

WEBSITE: [www.birdday.org](http://www.birdday.org)  
CONTACT: Bojan Tasic or Inglewood Bird Sanctuary & Nature Centre  
EMAIL: [bojan.tasic@calgary.ca](mailto:bojan.tasic@calgary.ca)  
PHONE: 403-268-2489, 403-221-4523

### JUNE 19-26, 2010

#### Waterton Wildflower Festival WATERTON

DESCRIPTION: Venture to Waterton Lakes National Park and witness the vast array of wildflowers. Bring the whole family for a day of entertainment!

ACTIVITIES: Science presentations, guided field walks, bird watching, photography, art, music, see real specimens, live theatre.

WEBSITE: [www.watertonwildflowers.com/](http://www.watertonwildflowers.com/)  
CONTACT: Beth Towe, Trail of the Great Bear  
EMAIL: [info@watertownwildflowers.com](mailto:info@watertownwildflowers.com),  
[tgbear@telusplanet.net](mailto:tgbear@telusplanet.net)  
PHONE: 403-859-2378, 403-859-2663, 1-800-215-2395

### JULY 10, 2010

#### Bluebird Festival LACOMBE

DESCRIPTION: Come to Ellis Bird Farm for a pancake breakfast and a day of family activities. Tours of the bluebird trail are a hit!

ACTIVITIES: Live entertainment, trail tours, banding demonstrations, bird house building, face painting, pond dipping.

WEBSITE: [www.ellisbirdfarm.ab.ca/events.html](http://www.ellisbirdfarm.ab.ca/events.html)

CONTACT: Myrna Pearman  
EMAIL: [mpearman@telus.net](mailto:mpearman@telus.net)  
PHONE: 403-346-2211, 403-885-4477

### AUGUST 7, 2010

#### Bug Jamboree LACOMBE

DESCRIPTION: A fun afternoon devoted to all things buggy.

ACTIVITIES: Alberta bug experts come to Ellis Bird Farm to share their knowledge about, and enthusiasm for, insects and spiders. Interactive bug-related stations are set up around the site that visitors can check out.

WEBSITE: [www.ellisbirdfarm.ab.ca/events.html](http://www.ellisbirdfarm.ab.ca/events.html)

CONTACT: Myrna Pearman  
EMAIL: [mpearman@telus.net](mailto:mpearman@telus.net)  
PHONE: 403-346-2211, 403-885-4477

### AUGUST 28-29, 2010

#### Jasper Annual Wildlife Festival JASPER

DESCRIPTION: Come to Jasper National Park to connect in new and exciting ways to the natural ecosystems and the wildlife that depend upon them. Parks Canada peels back the layers of the park programs to uncover the people, research, and conservation initiatives that are at the heart of the National Park.

ACTIVITIES: Field demonstrations, wildlife management demonstrations, interpretive wildlife displays, learn how to share the valley and live safely with wildlife, storytelling, and much more!

WEBSITE: [www.jaspercanadianrockies.com/u/calendar/index.phtml?calTime=1280642400](http://www.jaspercanadianrockies.com/u/calendar/index.phtml?calTime=1280642400)  
CONTACT: Darlene Skehill  
EMAIL: [Darlene.Skehill@pc.gc.ca](mailto:Darlene.Skehill@pc.gc.ca)  
PHONE: 780-852-1886

### SEPTEMBER 24-26, 2010

#### Waterton Wildlife Weekend WATERTON

DESCRIPTION: Join others in Waterton to experience the wonder of its native wildlife!

ACTIVITIES: Guided walks, boat tour, horseback riding, workshops, hear from prominent authors, and learn about how our behavior affects animals. Activities for all ages.

WEBSITE: [www.trailofthegreatbear.com/registration.html](http://www.trailofthegreatbear.com/registration.html)  
CONTACT: Beth Towe, Trail of the Great Bear  
EMAIL: [tgbear@telusplanet.net](mailto:tgbear@telusplanet.net)  
PHONE: 403-859-2378, 403-859-2663, 1-800-215-2395

### EARLY TO MID-OCTOBER, 2010

#### Crowsnest Pass Eagle Watch BLAIRMORE

DESCRIPTION: Learn about raptor identification and help with an annual eagle monitoring program.

ACTIVITIES: Guided tours, bird monitoring.  
WEBSITE: [www.crowsnestconservation.ca/events.php](http://www.crowsnestconservation.ca/events.php)

CONTACT: Marilyn Liddell  
EMAIL: [birds@crownsnestconservation.ca](mailto:birds@crownsnestconservation.ca)  
PHONE: 403-563-7545, 403-562-8923

### OCTOBER 15-16, 2010

#### Festival of the Eagles CANMORE

DESCRIPTION: A weekend to celebrate the migration of the Golden Eagle. View the eagles from look-out decks as they fly overhead – a spectacular sight!

ACTIVITIES: Guided hikes, viewing deck for watching eagles, eco-fair, raptor displays, school presentations, workshops, evening speaker

WEBSITE: [www.canmore.ca/About-Canmore/Community-Celebrations/October-Festival-of-Eagles.html](http://www.canmore.ca/About-Canmore/Community-Celebrations/October-Festival-of-Eagles.html)  
CONTACT: Heather Dougan  
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## BOOK REVIEW

Dawn Dickinson. Rain Cloud Publishing,  
2009. 180 pgs. ISBN 978-0-9811970-0-5

# Country Roads of Alberta:

## Exploring the Routes Less Travelled

REVIEW BY: JOHN WARDEN

*I wouldn't have seen the grizzly bears of the Highwood Pass if I hadn't picked up a copy of Liz Bryan's Country Roads of Alberta.*

The book was on display on the feature wall at Chapters Books in Sherwood Park, and the beautiful front cover prompted me to pick it up and thumb through it. A quick glance at the quality of the wonderful photographs and the clear and concise maps got me interested, but the chapter titled "Kananaskis Bypass" motivated me to buy the book.

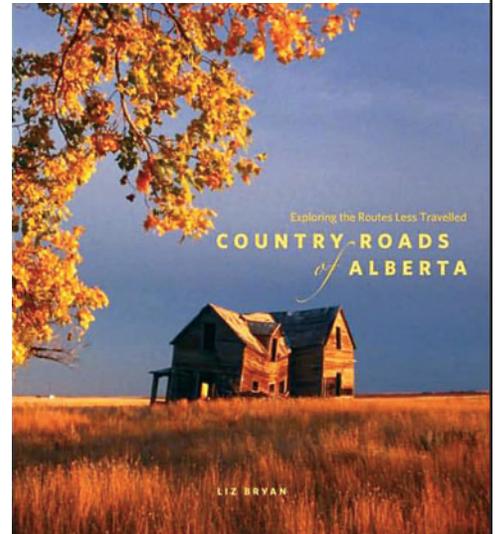
I've been up on the Bow Summit and the Cardinal Divide, but had never driven the Highwood Pass. I bought the book thinking that it would be a good source of information for potential adventures 'Close To Home', and it was.

This book is a gem. It's very well written with interesting stories; I learned a lot about the explorations of Peter Fidler and his journeys across the province,

as well. But for me, the best part is that the book is a motivator. The photographs of the Highwood Pass and Wedge Pond inspired me to go experience these places. As a result, I had my own adventures and now have my own stories and photographs.

Having already been to the Badlands around Drumheller a number of times, the Dry Island Buffalo Jump had never been high on my list of places to see. What a mistake! Bryan's description of the 'Jump' in the chapter "Fidler's Quest" prompted me to drive down from Edmonton one day. It's an amazing place, spectacular in its scenery and mystical in its spirit. And I might have missed it if I hadn't picked up this book.

I enjoyed *Country Roads of Alberta* so much that I went to



**Liz Bryan.** Heritage House;  
ISBN 978-1894974295

the library and borrowed all of the other books Liz Bryan has authored. They are all interesting, though for me, this one is the most enjoyable read.

This is a great book that has already added to my life experiences and will continue to do so. I am making plans to take her suggestion and "meander along the Milk River" next summer.

This book offers the reader a lifetime of experiences for a \$25.00 investment. Hard to beat!

FEATURE ARTICLE



JACKIE SILLS

# Considering Coyotes

RICK PRICE



JACKIE SILLS

# Alias Coyote

BY DAWN DICKINSON

*Names of species seem to have their own evolutionary history, migrating across continents and oceans, struggling against the competition of older or newer names, and either surviving or becoming extinct, while the species itself continues to flourish independently of its name.*

WATCHING FOR MOTHER IN WATERTON LAKES NATIONAL PARK. RICK PRICE

Authors of some recent accounts have stated that the species we know as the coyote (*Canis latrans*) became much more numerous in the Canadian prairies after European settlement, largely as a result of the extirpation of wolves. It is a theory that rests on two kinds of indirect evidence: observations in historic journals, and the phenomenon of intra-guild aggression among carnivores<sup>1,2</sup>.

In Canada, 18th and early 19th century fur traders frequently wrote in their journals of seeing wolves and foxes, but not coyotes<sup>3</sup>. Therefore, it is inferred that *Canis latrans* must still have been south of the 49th parallel during that period, whereas it was just the name “coyote” that was still south of the 49th parallel. The animal itself had been happily pursuing its interests north of that parallel under the name of “prairie wolf” for much of the 18th and

19th centuries, and under its older Blackfoot and Plains Cree names for considerably longer.

The name “coyote”, which is a Spanish derivation of the Aztec word “coyotl”, was apparently first used in print by Francisco Hernandez in 1651, along with a fairly accurate physical description of this New World animal<sup>4</sup>. However, English-speaking immigrants to western North America called *Canis latrans* “prairie wolf”, or in some regions, “brush wolf”, while *Canis lupus* was the “big prairie wolf” or “buffalo wolf”. Unless it was necessary to make the distinction, the adjectives were often omitted, the generic word “wolf” being used for both species.

The name “coyote” (variously spelt and pronounced) gradually moved north from Mexico over the next couple of hundred years, and by about 1830 was in fairly

general use within the United States<sup>5</sup>. It [the name] apparently did not expand its range into Canada until the latter half of the 19th Century where, over the next few decades, it caused the demise of its small prairie wolf competitor - with one exception. The name prairie wolf is still used, more than a century later, in Statistics Canada’s fur export reports - albeit only in parenthesis after the name coyote.

Fur traders expanded their own range westwards in the 18th Century, and while relatively common in the parkland region along the North Saskatchewan River, they might almost be classed as “accidental” in the mixed-grass prairie region of what later became Alberta and Saskatchewan. These traders were not scientists or naturalists and, with some notable exceptions like Samuel Hearne and David Thompson, few of their written



LIKE ALL LARGE PREDATORS, COYOTES PROVIDE FOOD FOR A HOST OF OTHER ANIMALS. HERE, A BLACK-BILLED MAGPIE PATIENTLY WAITS ITS TURN.

MIKE STURK

records contain much in the way of accurate descriptions of animals.

Daniel Harmon served the Northwest Company at the prairie posts of Swan River and the South Branch, before being transferred farther west. He wrote in his journal of 1800-1816, "There are two kinds of wolves, one of which is rather larger than a stout dog, and the other is not more than half as large"<sup>6</sup>.

But for the purpose of the fur trade, neither the Hudson's Bay Company, nor the Northwest Company made any distinction between wolves and coyotes. There was no reason to do so, since their pelts traded for the same price. Also, they were not very valuable furs; beaver, fox, and mink were more greatly prized. In his Chesterfield House Journals, Peter Fidler noted in 1801 that wolf pelts were worth only half a Made Beaver<sup>7</sup>. (A Made Beaver (MB) was a Hudson's Bay Company unit of currency that could be traded at their posts for trade goods. It represented the value of a prime beaver pelt on the London market. It served as a standard accounting unit related to the quality of any and all animal pelts traded. For

example, two otter pelts might equal one MB; a very fine quality beaver pelt could be worth five MBs.) And by 1809, Alexander Henry had received instructions to "trade no more wolves or small fur."<sup>8</sup> In their published journals, neither Fidler, Henry, Hendry, nor David Thompson in his Narrative of 1784-1812, provided any description of wolves in the Canadian prairies to suggest that there were two kinds. In fact they seem to have provided no physical description of wolves at all, although they commented on their behaviour and relative abundance.

The clearest description comes from Isaac Cowie of the Hudson's Bay Company, who, after his retirement, wrote a narrative of his experiences in the prairies. Recalling a journey in 1869 between Qu'appelle and Wood Mountain, he wrote under the heading: "Prairie Wolves. There are two kinds of wolves, the smaller being those known today by the familiar name of Coyote, and then called Togony. The others were the real big prairie wolf. ...These big brutes took the lion's share of the prey [bison], while the coyotes acted the part of the jackals."<sup>9</sup> Later,

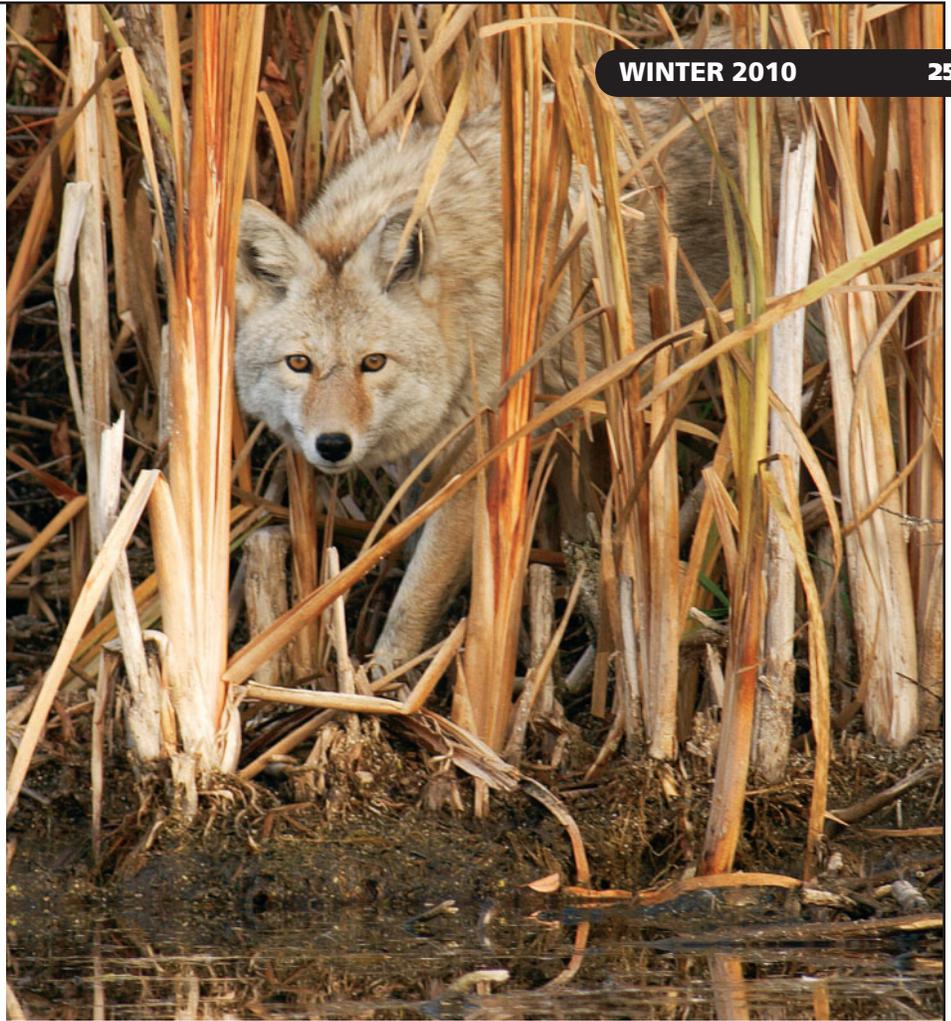
when he was at Fort Pelly, he wrote, "Besides being of use to the Company as a furbearer, the small species of wolf then known as the "Togony" and now as the "Coyote", preyed upon the Company's calves and colts." Cowie then goes on to describe how the man, whose job it was to guard the horse herd, specialised in "running down on foot and clubbing the wolf to death."<sup>10</sup> So what started out as a coyote preying on a colt ended, after a chase, as a wolf being clubbed to death - and with Cowie reverting to the common speech of the period of which he writes.

There are records also by government expeditions. Surgeon-naturalist, John Richardson, wrote in 1829 that coyotes were not uncommon in the plains of the Missouri and Saskatchewan.<sup>11</sup> On July 27 1858, an assistant to Henry Youle Hind, describing a surveying trip along the Qu'appelle River wrote, "The only other animal we saw was a little prairie wolf, Togony, as he is called by the Indians."<sup>12</sup> A year later, in 1859, Dr. James Hector of the Palliser Expedition wrote of wolves killing a horse at Jasper, and the carcass being laced with strychnine. The following morning they found the bodies of, "Four enormous wolves, besides five or six of a smaller species."<sup>13</sup>

This record also shows that both species inhabited the same local area at the same time. Palliser himself noted the presence of both wolves and coyotes near Fort Carlton. Unlike Hector, Palliser had earlier spent some time in the United States on a sporting holiday, and so would have been familiar with the name “coyote”. Hector clearly was not.

Palliser also noted in his account that the Plains Cree called the coyote “Togonay” or “Mischechogonis”. The Cree had moved from the forests of northwestern Ontario southwest into the plains of Manitoba and Saskatchewan, probably reaching central Alberta in the early 18th Century. They called the grey wolf (*Canis lupus*) “mahigan” and the coyote “mistachaganis” or “mescacaganis”.<sup>14</sup> Why would the Cree, already familiar with the wolf in Ontario, have a name for the coyote if they had not encountered the animal as they moved into the plains?

The Blackfoot-speaking peoples had come into the prairies from the northern forests much earlier than the Cree. They called the coyote “aapi’si”, and the grey wolf “ohmakapi’si” – literally, “big coyotes”.<sup>15</sup> Here again, the two kinds of wolves - small and large. The fact that there are names for both species, and that both played an important part in Blackfoot mythology, argues a long familiarity with coyotes as well as with wolves. That the wolf, but not apparently the coyote, also has an archaic name, “makoyi” is compatible with the previous homeland of the Blackfoot in the northern forest, where wolves,



but presumably not coyotes, were present.

South of the Border, Lewis and Clark encountered both wolves and coyotes along the Missouri River in 1805, noting that, “The wolves are very abundant and are of two species.”<sup>16</sup> The type locality for both *Canis lupus nubilus* and *Canis latrans* is Council Bluff in Iowa, where both species were described by Thomas Say in 1823. It is also of interest that in the returns of the American Fur Company between 1835 and 1839, which included the Missouri region, no distinction was made between the two species.<sup>17</sup>

Banfield states that coyotes were originally found in western North America from central Mexico north to the central Prairie Provinces, and that sometime after 1829 they expanded their range northward

from about the 55th parallel, reaching southern Alaska, Yukon, and the Mackenzie District before 1907.<sup>18</sup> There seems little reason to doubt that prior to European settlement in the Canadian prairies the range of grey wolves and coyotes overlapped throughout most of the mixed-grass prairie region of North America. What their relative numbers were is unknown.

Unfortunately, we also know next to nothing about the behaviour of the grey wolf in the prairies when its principal prey (bison) was still numerous. The theory that prior to European settlement, the grey wolf (*Canis lupus*) controlled coyote populations through intra-guild aggression, hinges on the question of behaviour – specifically territoriality. Were these wolves territorial in the sense that grey



RICK PRICE

wolves in some forested areas preying principally on non-migratory prey (moose and deer) are territorial?<sup>19</sup> Or did their behaviour resemble more closely that of the grey wolves of the arctic tundra, with their temporary denning sites and nearly year-long association with migratory, barren-ground caribou?<sup>20,21</sup>

Considering the extensive migratory or nomadic movements of the bison, the latter seems more likely. If so, it is difficult to see how the grey wolves of the prairies could have controlled coyote populations. Intra-guild aggression among carnivores is common and includes the killing of individuals. But killing individuals is not the same as controlling populations. So what

circumstances are necessary for such control to occur? Might the level of aggression depend on the relative abundance of food, as well as on the relative densities of populations? Certainly, wolves must have influenced the behaviour of coyotes, both positively by providing carrion when prey were plentiful, and negatively by aggressive actions. But if wolves followed a highly mobile prey throughout much of the year, their densities in the prairies would have varied dramatically both temporally and spatially.

That coyotes disappeared from Isle Royale after wolves occupied the island is well-documented. Reduction, but so far not exclusion, of the coyote

population in Yellowstone National Park since the reintroduction of wolves in 1995 is also documented. In Riding Mountain and some other areas where wolves and coyotes co-exist, and where wolves exhibit strong territoriality, populations of the two species seem to fluctuate inversely in abundance.<sup>22</sup> But these are all forested situations where the principal prey species of wolves are relatively sedentary, unlike the prairies where not only bison, but other ungulates - elk and antelope - were highly mobile. There seems little justification for extrapolating the findings of forested or insular ecosystems to a region as vast, and an ecological system as different as the mixed-grass prairie, prior to European settlement.

The mixed-grass prairie region in Alberta and Saskatchewan was

opened to European settlement only after the Treaties of the 1870's, and after the government surveys of the 1870's and 1880's. By 1880 there were scarcely any bison left in the Canadian prairies, and by the end of that decade they were gone. Elk followed soon after and antelope populations plummeted. But the grey wolf was not extirpated from the Canadian prairies until the 1920's. This followed a massive, decades-long, extermination program which included poisoning, trapping, hunting with dogs, and destruction of dens. Both wolves and coyotes were the targets. The wolf succumbed, while the coyote survived, but presumably with populations greatly reduced.

There are almost certainly more coyotes in the prairies now than in the 1920's, but are there more now than in the 1820's? Or the 1860's? What baseline is being used for comparison? The far-reaching effects of agriculture on prairie wildlife and habitats makes the question a very complex one. But we belong to a species which seems to dislike complexity, is uncomfortable with uncertainty, wants always the definitive answer. The argument that coyotes were absent or scarce in the Canadian prairies, that wolves controlled coyote numbers, and in the absence of wolves we must do the same, is a linear argument based on misunderstanding of common names and some debatable scientific assumptions.

The Aztec gods Coyotlinauatl and Huehucoyotl must smile sardonically at the confusion of words and concepts surrounding their familiar - the little prairie wolf

(alias coyote). If the gods' powers are as reputed, they probably masterminded the confusion. (What fools these mortals be!).

"Alias Coyote" is from *Landscape with Elk*, by Dawn Dickinson, which will be published in late 2010.

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ROB MCKAY

## O P I N I O N

# How to cope with the fearless Coyote?

BY DICK DEKKER, PHD.



*In late October 2009, the national and international press reported a shocking incident under the headline: “Coyotes kill young singer hiking on Nova Scotia trail.”*

It was quickly followed by an almost equally shocking news story, but then in a very different sense: “Victim wouldn’t want coyotes shot: mother.”

The bereaved mother was quoted to say: “We take a calculated risk when spending time in nature’s fold.... in the Coyote’s space.” By this she probably meant that the Coyote was here first and its rights should take precedence over those of humans.

Unfortunately, her soft-hearted reaction appears to be based on the fallacious belief that Nova Scotia is the Coyote’s original habitat.

This is not the case at all, quite the opposite. The Coyote arrived in the east after humans exterminated its natural control, the Wolf.

Prior to European settlement in North America, the original range of the Coyote was largely restricted to the southwestern States and Canada, whereas all lands to the east and north were the domain of its bigger cousin, the Wolf. However, after Wolves were shot and poisoned from most of the continent, the Coyote took advantage of the opportunity by expanding its range. This adaptable Canid is now common from coast to coast and in all suitable habitats as far north as Alaska.

According to various experts interviewed by the news media and asked to comment on the Nova Scotia tragedy, Coyotes rarely attack people, and the pair of animals involved in killing the 19-year old woman may not have been pure Coyotes, but hybrids of Coyotes and dogs.

Be that as it may, Eastern Coyotes are indeed somewhat larger than the western kind, and the differences may involve more than just size. In the Maritime provinces, Coyotes have in fact become wolf-like and now prey on deer as well as mice and rabbits.

A professor with the University of Alberta was quoted to say: “Eastern Coyotes may be more aggressive.” This opinion, however, is contradicted by the facts.

Based on the known record, attacks on humans by Western Coyotes are by no means rare. More than a dozen serious and potentially lethal cases have been reported from the National Parks – including Jasper, Banff, and Yellowstone – as well as from provincial recreation sites in British Columbia. Coyote aggression towards people is not uncommon in large cities, including Vancouver, Los Angeles, and Toronto.

In all of these areas, there is no hunting, and Coyotes quickly lose their fear of people. They readily scavenge on food scraps and are sometimes being fed by humans. This has given Coyotes the wrong idea. Some began seeing people as potential prey. Most of the woundings have involved children, which were grabbed and dragged into bushes. Luckily,



in nearly all of these horrifying incidents, the timely intervention of parents saved the screaming victims from certain death.

Some well-meaning defenders of wild predators argue that attacks on humans by Coyotes are very few compared to those by dogs. This is indeed a very sad fact. Serious bites and even lethal maulings by “man’s best friend” average five million reported cases per year in North America.

The difference is that some Coyotes consider humans as potential food, on a par with deer or Bighorn Sheep. The Coyote’s ferociousness in attacking animals larger than itself is not a pretty sight.

In cities, the fearless Coyote is a growing problem, and what to do about it is locally under review.

*Dick Dekker, PhD., is a wildlife ecologist living in Edmonton.*

In Edmonton, park rangers think that only proven culprits should be killed, because for every Coyote removed, another one will take its place.

This realistic management option shows a surprising level of tolerance for a potentially dangerous predator in a city where people think little of destroying other wildlife, such as Magpies and squirrels, just because they are noisy or a nuisance.

In wilderness habitats, the opportunistic Coyote is kept in its place by the Wolf. I can speak from personal experience. During my thirty years of annual mammal surveys in Jasper Park’s lower Athabasca valley, where Wolves are the apex predator, Coyote sightings per day have gradually declined by a factor of ten to one.

In my opinion, in large cities, in the absence of Wolves, humans are now the dominant predator and should take the responsibility for keeping aggressive Coyotes at bay. There is a realistic precedent for this. Having suffered their share of trouble with human-habituated bears, Wolves, and Coyotes, park wardens in Jasper and Yellowstone now discourage large carnivores from coming too close.

Along roads and in townsites, predators are warned to stay away from people by a range of deterrents, including cracker shells that explode with a loud bang but do not result in bodily harm. Also commonly used are shotgunned bean bags or rubber bullets. The intent of these measures is to restore the fear of the Lord (sorry, humans) into the beasts, for their benefit as well as our own.

## You say “Ky-OAT-ee” — I say “KY-oot”

BY DENNIS BARESCO

So which is it? “ky-OAT-ee” or “KY-oot” or “KY-oot” or “KY-yute”? Which is Canadian versus American? Well, it’s complicated!

The word “Coyote” came from the Aztecs; in their Nahuatl tongue, it was called “coyotl” – a two-syllable word. When “TL” is at the end of a Nahuatl word, the L is only semi-silent in speech; it is hinted at (about one-third of the L is spoken, says one linguist). Apparently, Spanish-speaking Mexicans could not pronounce the “TL” so they added the third syllable, “EE”, a pronunciation which was picked up by English speakers in the US Southwest in the 1800’s. Which

means, unless a group of Aztecs somehow leapt into Western Canada in the 1800’s and taught settlers to say “KY-oot” or “KY-oot”, that both the two-syllable and three-syllable (ky-OAT-ee) pronunciations came to us from our southern neighbours. And both are correct.

What about “KY-yute” – i.e., adding a Y sound to start off the “OOT”? It has been suggested that this is a uniquely Alberta-born pronunciation.

For a completely Canadian name, we should adopt the Plains Cree words that the Western Canadian explorers used: “Togonay” or “Mischechogonis” – except then we’d have to learn how to pronounce them, too!



**SINCE I'M FROM JENNER AB,  
AM I A KY-YUTE?** RICK PRICE

## O P I N I O N

# Citizen Coyote

BY DENNIS BARESCO

*It is a simple fact: Coyotes are controversial.*

Notwithstanding the fact that feeding themselves for the sake of survival brings them into conflict with people, Coyotes tend to get blamed for everything with which anyone could possibly connect them, regardless of how illogical. The fact is that most measures to prevent potential conflicts between Coyotes and people are just common sense.

Many clashes involve pets. Coyotes will prey upon easy

meals like free-roaming dogs (mostly small ones). On the plus side, they, like foxes, may be highly beneficial in keeping the free-roaming cat population (feral or otherwise) under control, especially in urban settings. A recent, four-month Arizona study discovered that cats made up 42% of the study Coyotes' diet.

Coyotes are certainly the most abundant livestock predator in western North America.

In Alberta, they along with Red Foxes are the only large predators occurring throughout the entire province; as such, they have far more opportunities to predate, which is reflected in the Alberta Agriculture estimate that 75% of livestock predation losses are due to Coyotes.

A complicating factor, however, is feral and domestic (or farm) dogs; their livestock predation may often be blamed on wild Canids. A study in Iowa showed that dogs were

**A COYOTE'S STARE IS A MIX OF INTELLIGENCE AND CURIOSITY, WITH A TOUCH OF "TRICKSTER".** PETER BOYTANG (WWW.PETERBOYTANG.COM)



responsible for 49% of sheep losses, 45% of cattle losses and 82% of poultry losses. The feral and domestic dog problem is serious enough that Alberta and other provinces have publications to assist in determining whether dogs or coyotes were the predator.

However, since most agencies in North America will not compensate livestock growers for losses by dogs, the tendency would be to blame coyotes (or wolves or anything but the actual culprits). As well, the wide variety

of wildlife (deer, small game, birds) taken by dogs is considered in many areas to be a serious problem – again, one for which Coyotes may often be labeled the culprit.

All of the above is not to suggest that Coyotes do not conflict with people; however, it helps to understand all possible factors in a situation. And it is a fact that Coyotes are an important control on rodent populations. Biologists also agree that coyote populations have no lasting effects on other wildlife populations.



**FIRST THE HUNT, THEN THE RODENT PONCE!** DOUG MCQUEEN



RICK PRICE

## The Presence of Coyotes

BY GUS YAKI

When some folks learn of the presence of Coyotes in the city, they may become anxious for their children. It is possible that a rabid animal might physically attack a child but there is little need to fear a healthy animal. Of far more danger are domestic dogs – or the motor vehicle.

As a child, the author walked three miles to school. At age six and a half, one morning, treading through a snowy rut over 30 cm deep, he met a group of 14 coyotes coming toward him in the other rut. They passed without showing any intent to harm. Ever since, he has realized what a beautiful and beneficial creature the Coyote is. Long may we hear their howl!

The above is from "Talk about Wildlife", [www.weaselhead.org](http://www.weaselhead.org). Check out the Weaselhead Society's superb website for fascinating information and photographs on Alberta wildlife and related subjects.

# Song of the West

*The howl of Wolves, long, deep and mournful, has a “shivers-down-the-spine” quality.*

The sound of Coyotes, in comparison, is playful and uplifting. There are few sounds from dusk to dawn (though Coyotes will “sing” during the day, too) more enjoyable than the high-pitched, quavering but melodious howl and accompanying *yip-yip-yip* of Coyotes – the song of the West!

Coyotes have four different “songs”:

- 1) **The howl:** communicating with other Coyotes for territorial announcements, discovering location, mate attraction, etc.
- 2) **The yelp, or yipping:** small talk, youthful playfulness, complaining or celebrating.
- 3) **The bark:** a threat display, and that from which Coyotes got their scientific name of *Canis latrans* (“barking dog”).
- 4) **The buff:** generally what adults use to call pups while keeping their voice down.



## Coyote “Tidbits”

➔ Coyotes can run at close to 70 km/hr, easily jump a 2-3 meter fence, and could reach up to 10 years old in the wild.

➔ Average Coyote litter is six, with up to 70% of pups not reaching adulthood. Increased persecution leads to larger litters – as high as nineteen pups!

➔ Coyotes are persistent: a successful attack on a larger ungulate may last as long as 20 hours.

➔ Where Coyotes and Wolves are sympatric (sharing the same geographical area), Coyotes prefer steeper terrain; on flat ground, they can be caught and killed by Wolves. Often, a Coyote will lead a pursuing Wolf downhill. Suddenly, the Coyote will turn and run up the hill.

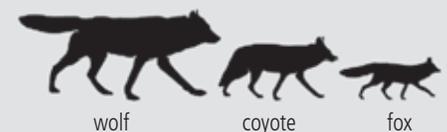
The bigger, heavier Wolf cannot stop as quickly, and the Coyote will increase its lead.

➔ Coyotes occasionally hunt with Badgers, each using their own specialty to snag a meal. Coyotes can chase a prey animal (like a ground squirrel) but is not effective at digging it out of a burrow. Badgers are the ultimate diggers but cannot catch much on the run. By working together, there is little chance for the prey to escape.



➔ Only two deaths from Coyote attacks have been recorded in North America: one in 1981 in California and the recent 2009 death in Nova Scotia. On the other hand, pet dogs in North America kill, on average, twenty people every year! (It is now thought that the Nova Scotia “coyotes” that killed the young woman may in fact have been coy-dog or coy-wolf hybrids.)

➔ Size and body shape comparison of wolf, coyote and fox (note that the coyote usually carries its bushy tail low and close to the back legs).



# A Back Yard Bird Bander's Banter

BY ERNIE KUYT



*For many years I welcomed the sight of colour-banded Whooping Cranes returning to their respective breeding sites in and near Wood Buffalo National Park. It felt like welcoming back old friends.*

Now that my banding efforts are restricted to “hobby-banding” in my back yard, using a 12.5 by 2.5 meter mistnet with 3 cm mesh size, sightings or retraps of birds I banded are much reduced. Still, the presence of banded birds in my yard and the occasional retrap are enjoyable events.

On July 30th, 2009, I retrapped a Black-capped Chickadee wearing an old band. The band 2220-32131 was badly worn and the numbers barely legible. I removed the band and placed band 2490-24615 on its other (left) leg. Checking my records, I found that I had banded the chickadee in the same yard on 24 September 2001. For at least 7 years and 10 months this little fellow of unknown age when first banded, had successfully eluded Edmonton's much-maligned crows, magpies and house cats, and safely survived our cold winters.

Of perhaps greater interest was my retrapping of Chipping Sparrow 1840-76068 on July 3rd, 2009. I had banded the bird as an adult in my back yard on July

25th, 2005. The recently published Canadian Atlas of Bird Banding (Brewer, et al; 2000) provides information on bird banding results from 1921-1995, including those of Passerines. “Chippies” winter in the southern USA, some even as far south as San Salvador in Central America.

If our sparrow wintered around – let us assume – the southern tip of Texas, a one-way trip would cover about 3500 km. During its four year life, our chippie may well have flown at least 35,000 km on its migrations between Texas and my yard in Edmonton. Of course, it is entirely possible that the bird may have summered elsewhere on occasion, and not in Edmonton. However, philopatry in birds is well documented. (Philopatry is the tendency of an individual to return or stay in its home range. Male birds tend to be more philopatric than females.)

Chipping Sparrows must have had a good breeding season in our area. Of 32 of these sparrows I banded this year, 17 were young birds. One of the adults lived a charmed life as it just made it over the mistnet, but not so a pursuing adult male Merlin, which was (carefully!) removed from the net and banded, in a scene reminiscent of that in 2000 (Kuyt 2004), but this time I was lucky to witness the event and able to identify the Merlin's intended prey.

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#### EDITOR'S NOTE:

Readers are encouraged to dig out their 2004 copy of *Nature Alberta*, or go to the FAN website and download the issue, and read the very interesting article by Mr Kuyt.

# First Hand: A Birding Lesson

BY PAT BUMSTEAD

*We took a prairie birding drive yesterday, looking for Snowy Owls. Naturally enough, this post is therefore about Black-billed Magpies.*

Some trips, Snowy Owls are easy to find: perched on power poles, fence posts, granaries and hay bales. Some trips they just don't want to be seen.

When we left the city, I commented to my husband that we should write down the species we see on this trip. The words had no sooner left my mouth than he said "Black-billed Magpie." And he kept saying it all day.

Everywhere we went, we saw Black-billed Magpies perched on power poles, fence posts, buildings etc, etc. On this trip we were glad of their company, as we saw little else.

With all this time to actually think about Black-billed Magpies, I chastised myself once again for taking these beautiful birds for granted. Having grown up in the west, these birds have been in my life for as long as I can remember. I plead guilty to looking past them to find 'real birds.'

Their bold black-and-white pattern and long tail make them easy to identify, and in true Corvid

fashion, they are rarely, if ever, silent. These clever Corvids are not actually black, but a beautiful iridescent green/blue colour. They are magnificent in the sunshine. [Corvids are members of the family Corvidae which, in Alberta, are jays, crows, ravens, magpies and nutcrackers.]

One day when I was doing a shift at the local bird sanctuary, I was approached by two very excited visitors. They said they had just seen the most beautiful bird, and wanted to know what it was. I immediately started thinking Western Tanager or Varied Thrush or something similar. They said it was black and white with a very long tail. Oh.

It turned out they were from eastern Canada, and had never seen a Black-billed Magpie before. Yep, we surely do take them for granted.

If you have a first-hand experience with nature, send it in and share it with other naturalists. After all – there are 8 million stories in the Nature City. Yours... could be one of them.



I regularly feed the magpies in my yard, without giving it a thought. They love chicken or turkey carcasses, and even have their own feeding tray. When I put one of these out, I immediately have about 10 magpies descend on it, providing hours of squabbling, squawking entertainment.

They often pick up a piece of meat, drape it over the edge of the tray and put one foot on it. When it is thus securely held, they can tear strips off, and prevent other birds from getting near it.



A few years ago when we had a heavy overnight snowfall, I threw a few cups of dry dog food out on the deck for the magpies, and it disappeared quickly. Ever since then, whenever we get a heavy snowfall, there is a flock of silent magpies sitting on the deck railing, looking in the window and waiting patiently for their meal. The older birds have taught the younger ones the routine.

As a true Corvid fan – my favorite bird is the Raven – I should be ashamed of myself for taking the clever, magnificent Black-billed Magpie for granted.

Yes, it is always a treat to see Snowy Owls when they make their way down from the Arctic, but their appearance is decidedly a hit or miss affair. Our magpies, on the other hand, are always around when we want to see birds. I'd do well to remember that in future.

To read more about Black-billed Magpies, visit the Boreal Songbird Initiative webpage ([www.borealbirds.org](http://www.borealbirds.org)). This page also lets you listen to the sound these birds make. Turn your volume up all the way, and imagine that outside your bedroom window at 5:00 am . . . .

## PAT'S BIRD BLOG

If you like birds, or photos of birds, or just interesting stories, you will love Pat Bumstead's Canadian bird blog, at [www.birdcanada.com](http://www.birdcanada.com). It's a delight!

"The idea of the blog," says Pat, who is from Calgary, "is to increase public awareness of our birds." The blog has been up for seven months with well over 3,000 visitors so far – half of whom are from outside Canada. Check it out. You will be very glad you did.

# First Bald Eagle nest in River City downed by summer storm

BY DICK DEKKER, PHD.

*The near-tornado that hit Edmonton on 18 July, 2009, caused a lot of material damage. No human deaths were reported, but a rare casualty -- or so I thought -- was a pair of juvenile Bald Eagles, the first of their tribe to hatch in "River City."*

Since 2000, I had kept an eye on a huge stick nest in a tall poplar on the banks of the North Saskatchewan River in the outskirts of Edmonton. During winter, an adult female Bald

**BALD EAGLES BREED LOCALLY THROUGHOUT ALBERTA. THEY BEGAN NESTING WITHIN THE CITY LIMITS OF CALGARY IN 2004, AND THERE IS NOW AN OCCUPIED SITE ON ST. ALBERT'S BIG LAKE. TO FINALLY HAVE THESE MAJESTIC BIRDS MOVE INTO THE PROVINCIAL CAPITAL MARKS A NEW HIGH IN THEIR RECOVERY AND CAN BE CREDITED TO MANKIND'S GROWING TOLERANCE OF THESE FORMERLY PERSECUTED PREDATORS.** MIECHEL TABAK



Eagle was often perched nearby, and in early April 2004, I obtained a glimpse of a second, slightly smaller eagle. Soaring over the nest tree and spotting me, he *chittered* defensively. Several days later, the white head of an adult, sitting low on the nest, was just visible through binoculars. I retreated at once, certain that I had found the first occupied Bald Eagle nest in River City (Whiley and Dekker, 2005).

I did not visit the area again until May 25. Approaching behind a belt of trees, I took care to stay out of sight until I could just make out the nest screened by leaves. The glasses revealed that there was indeed a bird on the nest, lying low as if brooding eggs. But the thrill of discovery quickly changed into disappointment when the occupant turned out to be a Canada Goose. Apparently, the eagles had abandoned the nest.

In March 2009, there was again a pair of eagles present at the same site. I stayed away until early June. When I glassed the nest, it seemed unoccupied, although there was an adult eagle perched in a nearby tree. Disappointed, I continued my walk for several kilometres along the river bank. To my surprise, on the way back I was passed by an adult eagle carrying a large fish, holding it by the head. It looked like a pike of more than half a metre long. The eagle headed straight for the nest, where it was joined by the other bird. Their head movements indicated that they were eating. Perhaps feeding small young, I wondered...

As the summer foliage of the trees became denser, it was difficult to ascertain whether or not there

were actually chicks on the nest. Finally, by July, peering through the telescope from a spot across the river, I saw two almost fully feathered youngsters standing on the nest rim. Flapping their great wings, they seemed ready to fledge.

Unfortunately, on July 18, 2009, the Edmonton region was hit by a near-tornado. Two days later, upon checking the area, the devastation was hard to believe. Many trees had been uprooted or broken, including the eagles' huge poplar. On the ground below, a great packet of branches lay buried under broken poplar trunks and debris. The parent eagles were still in the area, but there was no sign of the young. About 300 metres downwind, I found a brown eagle feather, a secondary wing feather, the shaft still in the blood-gorged growing stage. I feared for the worst.

However, on July 26, to my great relief, I saw that at least one of the two eaglets had survived the devastation. Flying off and on, it looked in excellent shape and feather-perfect. But where was its sibling? On August 9, there was still only one youngster around

and I had given up all hope of ever finding out what had happened to the other one. Then, on August 16 and again on August 30, there were two young eagles in the air. One of them looked somewhat damaged. When it soared overhead, I saw that one of its wings was missing a secondary feather.

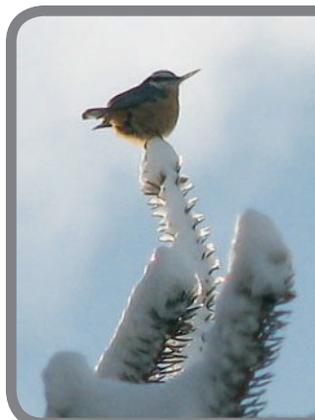
By early September, during mid day, only the adult eagles were around. Evidently, the juveniles had dispersed, perhaps to places like Cooking Lake, where large numbers of ducks were massing before migration. As the fall progressed, I occasionally walked the same stretch of river and wondered whether the eagles would build a new nest next year. In past winters, I had seen Bald Eagles carrying branches of up to one metre long. This year, already by the end of November 2009 there was a new eagle nest under construction in a tall tree very close to the big poplar broken by the tornado.

It will be interesting to find out what will happen in 2010.

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*Dick Dekker, PhD., is a wildlife ecologist living in Edmonton.*



## A "Hummerhatch"?

Medicine Hatter Milt Spitzer was out bird watching this winter when he was surprised to see a Red-breasted Nuthatch with an obviously longer beak than normal. He quickly took a few photos as proof. The bird is now being referred to locally as the "hummerhatch"! If anyone else has seen something similar, let *Nature Alberta* know.

# An Uncommon Prey Item for Great Horned Owls

BY TERESA DOLMAN

*Nicholas Sheran Lake is a 30-year-old, man-made lake in West Lethbridge surrounded by a grassy park which has been planted with a variety of trees and shrubs. It is close to our home and we regularly walk around the lake.*

This past spring (2009) for the first time that I am aware of, a pair of Great Horned Owls (*Bubo virginianus*) nested in the park and raised two young. Once fledged, the young birds stayed in the area for more than a month and were most often seen perched in a large cottonwood near the lake shore. A shale path is located very close to this tree and people walking the path could often see the owls.

It was towards the end of July when I decided to look for owl pellets beneath the tree; I was curious as to what these urban owls were being fed. I found twelve pellets, most crushed either by people walking around to see the owls, or more likely by a grass mower. However, the contents were mainly intact. I expected mammal bones and bird remains and indeed found these. But what

I didn't expect to see were crayfish remains! In fact only two of the twelve pellets did not contain crayfish remains and several had nothing but crayfish parts. Figure 1 shows a sampling of prey items extracted from pellets and picked up from around the base of the tree. Figure 2 shows an *in situ* pellet consisting entirely of crayfish body parts.

Prior to 1991, when *Aquatic Invertebrates of Alberta* was published, the Virile or Northern Crayfish (*Orconectes virilis*) occurred in Alberta

**FIGURE 1.** Remains of prey fed to great horned owl chicks: upper left – mammal bones; lower left – bird remains, probably all from an American Coot; on the right – crayfish parts.



DOUGLAS DOLMAN

**FIGURE 2.** Pellet containing Crayfish body parts.



DOUGLAS DOLMAN

only in the Beaver River basin southeast of Lac la Biche. Since then, however, this crustacean has staged an aggressive expansion from the east, abetted perhaps by releases of live animals by bait fishermen. It is now well up the North Saskatchewan, South Saskatchewan, Bow and Oldman River drainages and in a large number of lakes and reservoirs, including Henderson and Nicholas Sheran Lakes here in Lethbridge.

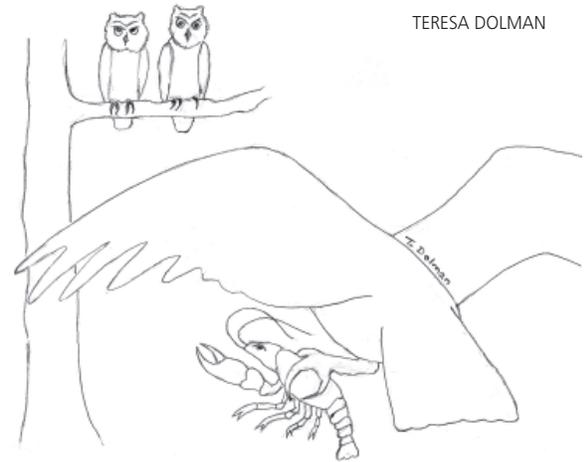
One would predict that the usual predators of crayfish in Alberta would be carnivorous fish such as Northern Pike, mammals such as Raccoon and American Mink, and birds such as herons, cranes and some waterfowl (we once watched a Red-breasted Merganser at Henderson Lake juggle a crayfish in its bill for several seconds before swallowing it). Great Horned Owls will take crayfish (Bent, 1961) but they are certainly not a staple in the diet of this owl. According to Johnsgard (2002), about 90% of the owl's prey are mammals, 9% are birds and about 1% are other prey types

including fish, amphibians, reptiles and invertebrates.

But given the opportunistic nature of Great Horned Owls, these proportions may change considerably with variations in prey availability. Bent (1961) writes that “almost any living creature that walks, crawls, flies or swims, except the larger mammals, is its legitimate prey; it is not at all particular as to what it kills for food and will take what is most available and most easily caught”. The fact that our local owls are catching and eating crayfish is another example of the adaptability of this species in taking advantage of a new prey base. What did the young owls think of this food item? We can only imagine (Figure 3).

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TERESA DOLMAN

**FIGURE 3.** “Ye gads... not another crayfish!”

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## Ponderables

“Learn from yesterday, live for today, hope for tomorrow. The important thing is not to stop questioning.”

— ALBERT EINSTEIN

## CELESTIAL HAPPENINGS

# Starry Nights

## Winter/Spring: February to April

BY JOHN MCFAUL

### FEATURED CONSTELLATIONS – CANIS MAJOR, CANIS MINOR AND CANCER

Perhaps the most majestic of the constellations that can be viewed from spaceship Earth is the constellation Orion. Orion was the mighty hunter of Greek mythology. He struts across the celestial stage through much of the winter and early spring months. However, he is not alone as he seeks his quarry, as he is accompanied by his faithful hunting dogs. They are known as Canis Major and Canis Minor.

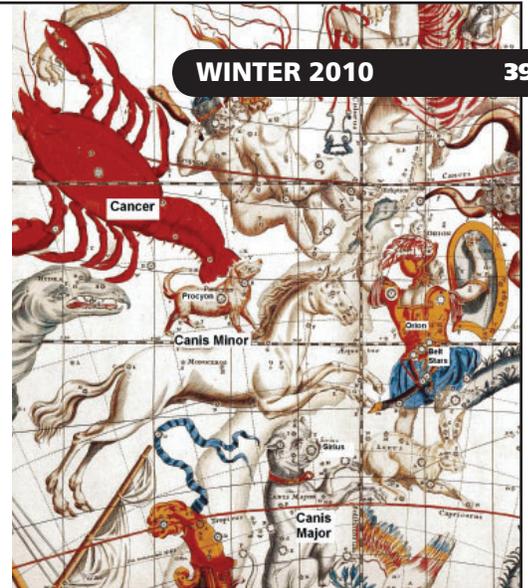
Canis Major follows Orion at his heel, ready to pounce on any prey that they encounter. This constellation is composed of a number of relatively faint stars except for the sparkling jewel of Sirius, which is the brightest star in the night sky. It can be easily found by following the line marked by the belt stars of Orion; they point down to Sirius.

Sirius owes its apparent brightness not only due to its size and hot surface temperature, but also, at 8.6 light years distance, it is the fifth closest star system to our solar system. The early Egyptians worshiped the star as its appearance in the morning sky just before sunrise marked the beginning of the flooding of the Nile. The ancient Greeks and Romans noted that its appearance coincided with the hottest days of the year. These became known as the “Dog Days”. It was thought that Sirius added its heat to that of the Sun. Thus Sirius is also known as the Dog Star. It does have a companion star

known as “The Pup”. This companion is about the size of the Earth, but has the mass of the Sun. It is known as a White Dwarf.

Above Canis Major lies Canis Minor. It is marked by the relatively bright star Procyon. Procyon means “before the dog”. Seeing this star would alert the ancient Egyptians that the Dog Star, Sirius, would soon be rising too.

Above and to the left of Canis Minor is the faint constellation Cancer: “The Crab”. It is a member of the



zodiac and is thought to represent the crab that was sent by Hera, wife of Zeus, to distract Hercules from his battle with Hydra. Currently, Cancer has a bright visitor which is the planet Mars. On April 16th, Mars will be just above the pretty Beehive Cluster located in the central part of Cancer. It will be a captivating sight with the use of binoculars. The Beehive Cluster is a grouping of 40 stars which were first discerned by Galileo in 1609. They are thought to be about 600 million years old. This makes them about three times the age of Sirius.

### CELESTIAL HAPPENINGS

**Sun:** Rise - Feb 1 (8:19 MST), March 1 (7:21 MST), April 1 (7:07 MDT)  
Set - Feb 1 (17:16 MST), March 1 (18:12 MST), April 1 (20:09 MDT)  
*Note: Day Light Savings Time will start on March 14th.*  
*Spring Equinox occurs at 11:32 MST on March 20th.*

**Moon:** Full – Feb 28, March 29, April 20  
New - Feb 13, March 15, April 28

**Planets:** **Mercury** will emerge from the solar glare in late March and early April when it will be close to Venus in the western sky just after sunset.

**Venus** will be best seen in the western sky from late March through April. Venus and Mercury will form a close pairing in the western twilight during the first week of April. This pair will be joined by a thin crescent Moon on April 16th.

**Mars** remains high in the south-west in the evening with the Moon coming very close on the nights of February 25th and April 21st.

**Jupiter** will be too close to the sun to be seen until late April when it will appear in the eastern sky just before sunrise.

**Saturn** in February can be seen in the south-west just before sunrise. By mid April it will rise at sunset and can be seen traversing the southern sky all night.

**Meteor Shower:** Lyrids , April 21, 15/hour in a dark sky.

*Meteors are best observed in dark skies well away from city lights and with no Moon.*



# IT'S WINTER!

BY DENNIS BARESCO

Winter 2009 began with the December 21 Solstice and ends on March 20, 2010, when the Spring Equinox occurs.

## Winter sayings:

*“Antisthenes says that in a certain faraway land the cold is so intense that words freeze as soon as they are uttered, and after some time then thaw and become audible, so that words spoken in winter go unheard until the next summer.”*

PLUTARCH, MORALIA

*“Winter came down to our home one night*

*Quietly pirouetting in on silvery-toed slippers of snow,*

*And we, we were children once again.”*

BILL MORGAN, JR.

*“I prefer winter and fall, when you feel the bone structure of the landscape - the loneliness of it, the dead feeling of winter. Something waits beneath it, the whole story doesn't show.”*

ANDREW WYETH

**SNOWY OWLS, IN ALL THEIR STUNNING SPLENDOR, WINTER IN VARYING NUMBERS IN MANY PARTS OF ALBERTA. ROB MCKAY**



Rob McKay 2010

# Golden Bean

(*Thermopsis rhombifolia*)  
found in Jasper National Park

BY BARB ZIMMER



*For the past nine years, I have been involved in the compilation and identification of plants for Flower Count weekend in Jasper National Park.*

Flower Count, which is always on the last full weekend in May, is an exciting time every year as volunteers search all over the park to locate any plants that are in bloom. This year, to my great surprise, one of our most faithful volunteers, Jill Seaton, arrived at our weekend wrap-up evening with digital photographs of a plant no one had ever seen in Jasper Park before. It was Golden Bean (*Thermopsis rhombifolia*) in full flower.

In Packer's revision of *Flora of Alberta* (Moss 1983), the distribution map for Golden Bean shows its range to be much farther south in Alberta. In *Illustrated Flora of British Columbia* (Douglas 1999), the range given is from southeastern British Columbia through the southern part of Alberta to southern Manitoba, and south all the way to Colorado, Nebraska, and California. There is no record that this plant has ever been seen in Jasper National Park, and it is missing from the plant inventory list for Jasper, although it is listed as present in Banff, Kootenay, and Yoho National Parks (Achuff 2006).

A few days after Flower Count weekend, Jill Seaton took me out

to the site where she had found the plants, and I was able to take photographs of the several dozen Golden Bean in full bloom. They were growing in dry grassland amongst some fallen trees from an old burn, not far from the Snaring Ponds and about 14 km east of the Jasper town site (53 00' 05" N, 118 04' 17" W) at an elevation of approximately 1040 m. There was no question about the identity of the plants, as Golden Bean is quite unmistakable with its bright, golden-yellow flowers and its digitate, 3-foliolate leaves. Dr. Derek Johnson (Taxonomist and author, Canadian Forest Service, Edmonton AB) and Dr. George Scotter (author, *Wildflowers of the Rocky Mountains*) have since looked at the photographs and confirmed this identification.

The genus name, *Thermopsis*, is taken from the Greek words *thermos*, which means lupine, and *opsis*, which means resemblance, because the plant looks so much like a lupine, but with bright yellow flowers. Its other common name, Buffalo Bean, comes from the Blackfoot Indian belief that when this plant was in bloom, the buffalo bulls were in their prime and ready

to be hunted. The buffalo, however, did not eat this plant, because of the poisonous alkaloids that it contains.

Finding Golden Bean in Jasper Park for the first time was certainly the highlight of our Flower Count weekend for 2009. We have to ask if it has been there all along, just undiscovered in its somewhat unfrequented location, or if it is a new introduction to the park, perhaps having traveled along the highway or railway corridors that are about a half a kilometer away. In either case, this discovery shows us that we are still learning about what is growing out there in our province.

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#### Acknowledgments

Thanks to Jill Seaton for her many years of flower counting and her endless enthusiasm for finding new plants. Also, thanks to Derek Johnson and George Scotter for confirming the identification of our plants.

# Medicine Wheel

## a Ducks Unlimited Project

BY BOB PARSONS

*The Medicine Wheel Project is one of the many wetland complexes managed by Ducks Unlimited (DU) in Southern Alberta.*

DU has developed 36 wetland basins connected by irrigation canals; hence the quality of nesting habitat has vastly improved throughout this native mixed-grass prairie. The actual location is crown land southwest of Brooks and directly west of Bow City. There is some limited cattle-grazing toward the end of July, and, in my opinion, very little oil and gas development. One dirt road runs north and south and can be impassable after heavy rain! A recent local publication sums up my feeling and attachment to

this area: "Standing high on top of the Medicine Wheel bluff with unbroken prairie stretching almost to every horizon...."

Ducks Unlimited Canada uses the irrigation canals to maintain each basin at optimum levels for waterfowl production. The main irrigation channel is to the west of the project, runs north south, and has a rough road running alongside. I have heard that there are plans in the late summer of 2009 to run a fair amount of water into the basins, some of which could use replenishment.

The whole area has a fascinating history, from the discovery by European settlers of the Majorville medicine wheel in the early 1900's, to the management by the Eastern Irrigation District, and their long-standing agreement with Ducks Unlimited to secure wetlands and uplands for waterfowl and other wildlife. The construction and improvements to the canals, wetland basins and water control structures was completed in 1995 (<http://www.ducks.ca/province/ab/projects/medicine/index.html> and <http://www.shrinesandsacredsites>).



ARTHUR WIECKOWSKI



com/mmw.htm). I didn't know the history of this sacred ground until I talked to Jay Bartsch (of DU fame) in 2001. I consequently visited the area with some Edmonton Nature Club members in 2002 and plans were made to do a bird count there the following year.

The Medicine Wheel DU area has developed into a special place for the regulars who participate in the annual Brooks/Lake Newell May Species Count. This count has just celebrated its 11th year (2009) and the Medicine Wheel Project has been part of this count for the past six years, on the May long weekend. It is usual for two teams to count here, usually on the Sunday of the count weekend. Michelle and Curtis Manley make a terrific team and traditionally count the northern section, whilst I look after the southern section with a team of three or four. If conditions are dry, one can cover most basins by car or truck. I have walked in some years, but time constraints do not allow one to cover the whole area (56,000 acres) effectively.

Why is this place so special? It's the vastness and desolation of the place that appeals to me and my colleagues. A bush here, a tree there, remnants of an old farmhouse...that's it! I have only visited the area during the spring so I cannot describe the natural elements for the rest of the year.

I show pictures and photos to family and friends and they always query my mental state – “Why would you go there for birding? What on earth would you find there?” Good questions, as it can change from year to year: Brewer's Sparrow appeared in 2004, Tundra Swan in 2005, and 6 White-faced Ibis in 2008. The unexpected species seems to be the norm; this year (2009) Curtis found Eurasian Wigeon! Looking at past results of the Wheel, one can expect to find up to 80 species over the eight hour period of counting, not bad when one considers the unique birding habitat. Ferruginous Hawks make use of the huge power transmission towers to build their big nests and Peregrine Falcon have been reintroduced along the Bow River nearby. Banging on the old wooden exterior walls of the deserted farmhouses can flush out a Great Horned Owl, and singing Marsh Wrens inhabit most of the reed beds. American Bittern are not too hard to hear, while Northern Harrier glide effortlessly over the never-ending grasslands. A few Red-tailed Hawks visit from the vast Ketchmark property to the east of the boundary. One can find Common Tern mixed in with Forster's and Black Tern. It is always exciting to spot the occasional Short-eared Owl, while many Sprague's Pipit dive right over your head.

One of the main reasons for counting at the Medicine Wheel Project is the migrating shorebirds and other water birds. My favourite saying is repeated every year: “I did not come all this way to count ducks”. But – yes, I count ducks, and they always add to the

excitement of the count. The last four years or so have seen some of the water levels drop. As a result there have been more mud-flats, sand bars and alkaline shorelines, all necessary for the feeding migratory shorebirds heading north. I have noticed increased numbers of American Avocet, Willet, Marbled Godwit and Black-necked Stilts nesting in these basins. Naturally we have come across good numbers of “Peeps” – always an ID challenge. “Peeps” is birder slang for the five smallest North American sandpipers, which are very similar in appearance. The word “peep” is from the sound of the typical call these birds make. Semipalmated Sandpipers, mixed in with a few Least, Baird's and Pectoral, are bountiful, and Upland Sandpiper can usually be spotted in the grassland areas, alongside Chestnut-collared Longspur and, infrequently, Grasshopper and Baird's Sparrow.

Impressions may vary from birder to birder, season to season, but I have tried to write a fair account of this wonderful place. Although remote, it is easily accessible, making it the perfect haunt for naturalists. Both Candace Savage and Trevor Herriot in recent publications have written about the spirit of the grassland world and the uniqueness of its birds. Rob Warnock in a recent *Nature Saskatchewan* Blue Jay article wrote: “Herriot is correct in saying that loss of habitat diminishes the value of prairie and makes us poorer.” Let's hope that areas such as the Majorville Medicine Wheel Project will continue to flourish, enabling us all to further our knowledge of these special places.



# Our Wish List

Your help will go a long way toward providing the means to fulfill Nature Alberta's conservation mandate. To contribute to any of the Wish List items, contact the Nature Alberta office: (780) 427-8124; or philipp@naturealberta.ca, or christineb@naturealberta.ca.

(You can receive tax receipts for contributions, if you wish.)

## "BOOKS IN SCHOOLS" PROGRAM

Nature Alberta has a number of book titles that would be very valuable as student educational resources. Just pick your books, then pick your schools. The choice is yours! The titles we carry are on our website ([naturealberta.ca](http://naturealberta.ca)), or we can email a list to you.

## SIGNAGE AT IBA SITES

Important Bird Areas sites are more than just a conservation tool; they are a marvelous educational feature, as well! As part of the IBA program's education mandate, interpretive signs will provide visitors with a message outlining the site's great importance. Cost of signage is approximately \$1,000 per site.

## NATURE 'N NEWS STORIES

Nature Alberta is reaching out to a new audience through a number of new communications initiatives. In particular, we wish to take advantage of the tremendous potential of social networking and mini-videos. Executive Director Philip Penner has more details, but we are "wishing" for \$1,000 to \$2,000 for cameras and software, depending on the particular initiative.

## Nature Alberta

*Celebrating our natural heritage!*

*Nature Alberta* welcomes submissions of articles, photos, humour and other suitable material on Alberta's natural history. Submission guidelines for articles and photos are available on the NA website at [www.naturealberta.ca](http://www.naturealberta.ca).

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# Nature *gallery*



**WHITEBARK PINE (PINUS ALBICAULIS). SEE "ON THE COVERS", PG 4; FOR MORE INFORMATION ON PARKS CANADA'S EFFORTS TO RESTORE WHITEBARK PINE POPULATIONS: [WWW.PC.GC.CA/ENG/PN-NP/AB/BANFF/NATCUL/NATCUL22B.ASPX](http://WWW.PC.GC.CA/ENG/PN-NP/AB/BANFF/NATCUL/NATCUL22B.ASPX) PARKS CANADA (CYNDI SMITH)**



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