

Nature Alberta

ALBERTA'S NATURAL HISTORY REVIEW



NEWBORN FISHERS. WAYNE LYNCH

feature article

Fisher (*Martes pennanti*) on the
Cooking Lake Moraine, Alberta



**AMERICAN KESTREL;
SEE STORY, PG 35.**
RICK PRICE

SEE FEATURE STORY, PG 22. WAYNE LYNCH



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NATURE ALBERTA DEADLINES ARE:

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

- To encourage among all Albertans, by all means possible, an increase in their knowledge of natural history and understanding of ecological processes;
- To promote an increase in the exchange of information and views among natural history clubs and societies in Alberta;
- To foster and assist in the formation of additional natural history clubs and societies in Alberta;
- To promote the establishment of natural areas and nature reserves, to conserve and protect species, communities or other features of interest;
- To organize, or coordinate symposia, conferences, field meetings, nature camps, research and other activities whether of a similar or dissimilar nature;
- 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

AMAZING!

Every once in a while, I read of a new species being discovered. One might expect the routine finding of unknown insects and other invertebrates, but it is a different kettle of fish (to sort of mix my metaphors) to find "big" new animals like mammals and birds. The latest is the Fiji Petrel.

The Fiji Petrel was known only from a single specimen collected in 1855 on Gau Island, Fiji. But, after scattered reports over the last 20 years from Gau villages, an expedition was launched and eight individuals of this seabird were found in an area about 25 nautical miles south of Gau. The flight, behavior and identification details of the Fiji Petrel have been described for the first time. Amazing! If you wish to learn more, go to the BirdLife International website.

MILESTONES

For 2010, FAN's 40th Anniversary, your Editor would like to introduce a "Milestones" column as a regular feature (eg your 250th bird, special birthday, special occasion, a nature-related accomplishment, etc) for celebrating and recognizing naturalists and naturalists-to-be, regardless of age. Send your milestones (or that of someone you know) to na@fanweb.ca. Photos are welcome, too.

THE LAND ETHIC

In this era of tar sands, industrial wind facilities, coalbed methane, power lines, avarice-madness, short term self-gratification and mindless pursuit of leisure, all justified with the most perverse logic, it is timely to recall Aldo Leopold's basic principle of his land ethic: "A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise."

Leopold describes it in this way: "The land ethic simply enlarges the boundaries of the community to include soils, waters, plants, and animals, or collectively: the land... [A] land ethic changes the role of *Homo sapiens* from conqueror of the land-community to plain member and citizen of it. It implies respect for his fellow-members, and also respect for the community as such."

INSIDE NATURE ALBERTA

While the finding of Fishers near Cooking Lake Moraine was not the discovery of a new species, it was nonetheless very exciting. Imagine the feeling of observing a species which everyone thought had disappeared! Those observations, by Margo Pybus, Glen Lawrence, and Pat Harris, make up this issue's Feature Story (pg 22).

This issue has some excellent and novel articles on birds and birdwatchers. The Important Bird Areas project is one of great importance across Canada and internationally, and particularly for FAN. But what exactly is "IBA"? Chuck Priestley and Vid Bijelic explain the idea (pg 31). Still on the bird theme, you will find stories running the gamut from bird watching (the great Snow Goose Chase, pg 14; a Junco raising a Cowbird, pg 30), to science (Kestrel nesting, pg 35), to drama (hunting Peregrine Falcons, pg 11; and Herring Gulls, pg 43), to potentially good news (Sage Grouse, pg 41).

So, enjoy this issue – and let your Editor know if you have any comments. One more thing:

Have a very lovely Christmas and a great New Year!



ALBERTA ISSUES IN BRIEF

Kimberly-Clark Strengthens Forest Policy

Kimberly-Clark, maker of Kleenex, Scott and Cottonelle brands, is working towards obtaining all of its wood fiber for tissue production from environmentally responsible sources, including Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) certified and recycled fiber. The company will also, by the end of 2011, stop purchasing non-FSC-certified fiber from the Canadian Boreal Forest.

Information from RCEN e-Bulletin, Aug 6/09.

Greenpeace worked with Kimberly-Clark on its revised standards and has announced that it will end its “Kleercut” campaign, which focused on the company and its brands. Kimberly-Clark’s new fiber sourcing policy can be found at www.kcc.com. For more information on the FSC, go to www.fsc.org, and on the Greenpeace “Kleercut” campaign, www.greenpeace.org/kleercut.

Oil Sands Myths

The Pembina Institute recently released *Oil Sands Myths: Clearing the Air*, a set of resources to help you sort the spin from the facts in the ongoing efforts of the oil sands industry and governments to clean up their image with words instead of actions.

“Government and industry brochures and presentations that defend status quo oil sands development are littered with misleading statements,” said Jennifer Grant, Policy Analyst & report author. The guide provides concise, referenced information on oil sands environmental impacts and management. An overview slide show is also available.

From Pembina Institute eNews, Summer 2009

The guide exposes why the oil sands are being scrutinized internationally for their high greenhouse gas emissions intensity, the overall growth in greenhouse gas pollution, the production of toxic tailings waste and the lack of rules to limit cumulative environmental impacts to air, water and wildlife. The guide and slide show can be downloaded at www.OilSandsWatch.org.

Meanwhile, two studies by the government-funded Alberta Energy Research Institute (AERI) reaffirm that producing and burning oil from the oil sands is one of the world’s most polluting processes in terms of greenhouse gas emissions.

No New Legislation?

Members of Alberta’s Endangered Species Conservation Committee (Scott Jubinville is the FAN representative) have been informed that the Alberta government will no longer be proceeding with new species at risk legislation. No reasons were given. This is not good news for the protection of Alberta’s endangered and threatened wildlife, which – a skeptic might conclude – is precisely the reason there will be no new legislation.

Staples Greens Its Paper Supply

Staples has announced that it has joined The Rainforest Alliance’s SmartSource program as it moves to make most of its paper products FSC certified. The partnership is part of Staples’ ongoing efforts to improve its environmental impact. The company earned considerable praise for severing ties with Asia Pulp & Paper, a company long singled out for its poor environmental performance. More details on the Rainforest Alliance’s SmartSource program are available on rainforest-alliance.org.



that was easy.sm

On the Covers:



FRONT COVER

Wayne Lynch's shot of a pair of newborn Fishers peering out from a layer of leaf litter is the perfect introduction to this issue's Feature Story relating several very rare observations of "Fisher on the Cooking Lake Moraine, Alberta" (see pg 22).



INSIDE FRONT COVER

American Kestrel, our smallest falcon, is normally a cavity nester. It is also one of the easier birds of prey to observe close up. Rick Price's photo of a male shows that Kestrels are also great photographic subjects. See the story, pg 35.



As cute as baby Fishers are, adults can give the appearance of ferocity, as Wayne Lynch's photo illustrates. Fishers, like all mustelids, are carnivores and will take prey considerably larger than themselves; that requires sharp teeth and an aggressive, sharply-focused disposition!



INSIDE BACK COVER

There's always something interesting to discover on field trips!

Whether the field trip consists of a busload or just one individual, the natural world is there to thrill you, as John Warden's sighting of a bull Elk blending in with the aspens illustrates dramatically. Turn to page 12 for John's regular column; this issue, it's the story of "Patterns in the Aspen Forest."



A spider draws considerable attention from youthful naturalists, even though the main event was a Snow

Goose chase. Photo by Gerald Romanchuk; the Snow Goose Chase story is on page 14.

Autumn field trips are the ideal time for viewing migrating birds or just getting out in the crisp, cool air, as this group of naturalists is doing at Ministik Lake. Photo by Chuck Priestley; see story, pg 31.



BACK COVER

Few North American animals are as spectacular in both appearance and action as male Greater Sage-grouse during breeding season. It is hoped that we can turn around the continuing decline of this critically-endangered species in Alberta. Photo by Gordon Court; see the story, pg 41.

Fines for Allen Bill Pond Fiasco

In August, Alberta Tourism, Parks and Recreation, along with private contractor Wilco Landscape Contractors Ltd., were fined \$65,000 and \$30,000 respectively after pleading guilty to destroying fish habitat near the Allen Bill Pond along the Elbow River. The problem started when a bank stabilization project ended up with trees cut down, landscape removed, infilling of fish habitat and heavy rip-rap (large boulders) dumped on the shoreline – all without permission from Fisheries and Oceans Canada.

The destroyed section is said to have been some of the best fish habitat on the river. The contractor was carrying out instructions from Tourism, Parks and Recreation. While the court has ordered restoration, it will be decades before there is anything even resembling the original.

About 75% of the fine money will go to Trout Unlimited Canada, with the rest to the Elbow River Watershed Partnership. The government is also required to initiate a program focusing on training and awareness for employees whose work entails fish and waterways.

BEFORE: APRIL 2006



AFTER: SEPT. 2006

Reducing Bat Deaths from Wind Turbines

University of Calgary scientists have found that substantially slowing turbine blades during low-wind periods may reduce, by up to 60%, bat deaths from wind turbines without a significant reduction in the energy generated. The reason, according to U of C biology professor Robert Barclay, is that “bats are more likely to fly when wind speeds are relatively low. When it’s really windy, which is when the turbines are reaping the most energy, bats don’t like to fly.”

Previous studies by Barclay and PhD student Erin Baerwald found that many bats were killed at turbines by “barotraumas”: a sudden drop in air pressure near the turning blades that damages the lungs of bats. Fatalities of bats from industrial wind facilities are now thought to outnumber bird deaths and could have severe impact on the populations of certain species.

The next step is to see if the strategy works elsewhere and if the costs are acceptable. TransAlta, which has supported the studies, has applied the low wind/slow blade speed strategy to its 38 turbines in the study area.

The research, by Barclay and Baerwald, was published in the *Journal of Wildlife Management*; the article, *A Large-Scale Mitigation Experiment to Reduce Bat Fatalities at Wind Energy Facilities*, can be found online at: www.wildlifejournals.org/ (in Archives, Vol 73, #7, Sept 09).

Sustainable Path?

The report of the federal Commissioner of the Environment and Sustainable Development, Office of the Auditor-General of Canada, was recently released. The report confirms what most of the world already knows: in many areas, Canada is an eco-outlaw. As the March 23/09 Gallon Environment Newsletter (Vol. 14, No. 3) stated:

“Some of the items in the Commissioner’s report...should make Canadians absolutely furious at their government: at departments with an agreement with industry to retroactively reduce emissions of air toxics (physically impossible!); mandatory implementation of Environmental Farm Plans (EFPs) for farmers accessing certain funding programs but no verification as to whether

the EFPs are actually achieving anything; blatantly not adequately enforcing a regulation to reduce emissions of one carcinogenic substance and another designated toxic substance, and much more. It makes one wish that citizens had the power to prosecute their government officials and the elected cabinet of ministers for negligent dereliction of duty.”

In what is certainly an understatement, Commissioner Scott Vaughan politely stated: “Science indicates that we are not on an environmentally sustainable path.”

The Gallon Environment Newsletter is an excellent publication of the Canadian Institute for Business and the Environment. To subscribe: subscriptions@gallonletter.ca

C O R R E C T I O N S

In the Summer 2009 *Nature Alberta* (page 30), the wrong photo of a Sandhill Crane flock was accidentally inserted; it should have been this photo, by Judith Johnson. The photo on page 30 was incorrectly credited and was taken by contributor Sandra Hawkins.



Also in Summer 2009, in the “FAN News” section, the photos were all taken by Vid Bijelic. Inexplicably, the “d” was deleted from Vid’s first name. Vid is FAN’s resident computer genius – and also an excellent photographer.

Up Close Naturally: Cones

BY MARGOT HERVIEUX

The spruce trees in my area were so laden with cones last year that the tops appeared brown from a distance. This may be business as usual for the trees, but it means a bounty for a variety of creatures.

Spruce trees, and other conifers like pine and fir, have cones most years, but they produce major crops in three- or four-year cycles. Big crops occur in different years in different regions, so while we had lots of cones around Grande Prairie last year, they will be most abundant in another part of the region next year.

The whole point behind cones is seed production. Since seeds are a popular source of food for all kinds of creatures, plants try to beat the odds by producing hundreds or even thousands of future offspring. When all the trees in one area produce cones at the same time, the chances of survival are even better because predators simply can't keep up with supply.

If you take apart a spruce cone, you will find small, winged seeds under each scale. When

the cones open and the seeds drop, the wings catch the wind and spin the seeds away from the parent plant,

where they are more likely to find an open spot to germinate.

One of the most voracious eaters of spruce seeds is the Red Squirrel. I never tire of watching these creatures race around cutting branches, collecting cones and stashing their prize for later use. Red Squirrels can gather over 15,000 cones in a season. Their storage middens are used year after year and some can cover more than 20 sq. metres.

Many birds also dine on spruce and other tree seeds, especially during the winter. Feeder watchers will have noticed that some of our winter birds, including Pine Grosbeaks, Redpolls and Siskins, are abundant some years but not others. These birds move around

with the seed crop and we only see them locally in high seed winters.

Few birds are as well adapted to eating spruce and pine seeds as crossbills. A close look at these birds will reveal that the narrow tips of their thick bills actually cross. This feature allows the birds to easily pry open cones to reach the seeds inside. Crossbills are so closely tied to abundant cone crops that they will nest at almost any time of year in order to feed their young the bounty of seeds.

Cones are the defining feature of coniferous trees like spruce, pine and fir, and they have been protecting the tree's naked seeds since the time of the dinosaurs. They are one of many adaptations that allow trees to survive in our northern forests.



ARJUN/WIKIPEDIA



MPF/WIKIPEDIA

Margot also writes a column for the Peace Country Sun, archived copies of which are available at www.peacecountrysun.com.



A RED FOX AND OZ (OUR HORSE). DEBBIE & ALAN GODKIN

Nature Diary: Red Fox Plays “Magpie ‘n Mouse”

BY DEBBIE AND ALAN GODKIN

On a cool fall day near dusk, I was watching a Red Fox in the horse pasture. It tossed a mouse up in the air repeatedly, then dropped it and walked about twelve feet away, and lay down in the grass.

Two magpies thought they had spotted a free meal just lying there, and flew to within twenty feet of the mouse, then cautiously walked toward it. The fox lay still as a statue, until the magpies were within five feet of the mouse. The fox then sprang to its feet and chased the magpies into the trees at the end of the pasture.

The fox returned, picked up the mouse, and tossed it in the air

several times, and then lay back down again and waited. Within a minute the magpies flew back into the pasture and proceeded to walk toward the mouse until they were so close they could taste it. Again the fox sprang to its feet and chased them off into the trees.

The whole show was repeated for a third time before the magpies finally gave up and flew off.

Game over, the fox picked up the mouse, tossed it in the air twice with a lot less enthusiasm, then gulped it down and trotted off into the sunset.

I know foxes are known for their playful antics, but I couldn't help but wonder if it was using the mouse as bait to try and catch something more substantial for its dinner.

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!

WILDLIFE MUSEUM

HOTEL LOWER LEVEL



STREET LEVEL SIGN ADVERTISING THE MUSEUM. ANTJE ESPINACO-VIRSEDA AND JOHN BUHLER

Museum Review:

The Den: Jasper's Wildlife Museum

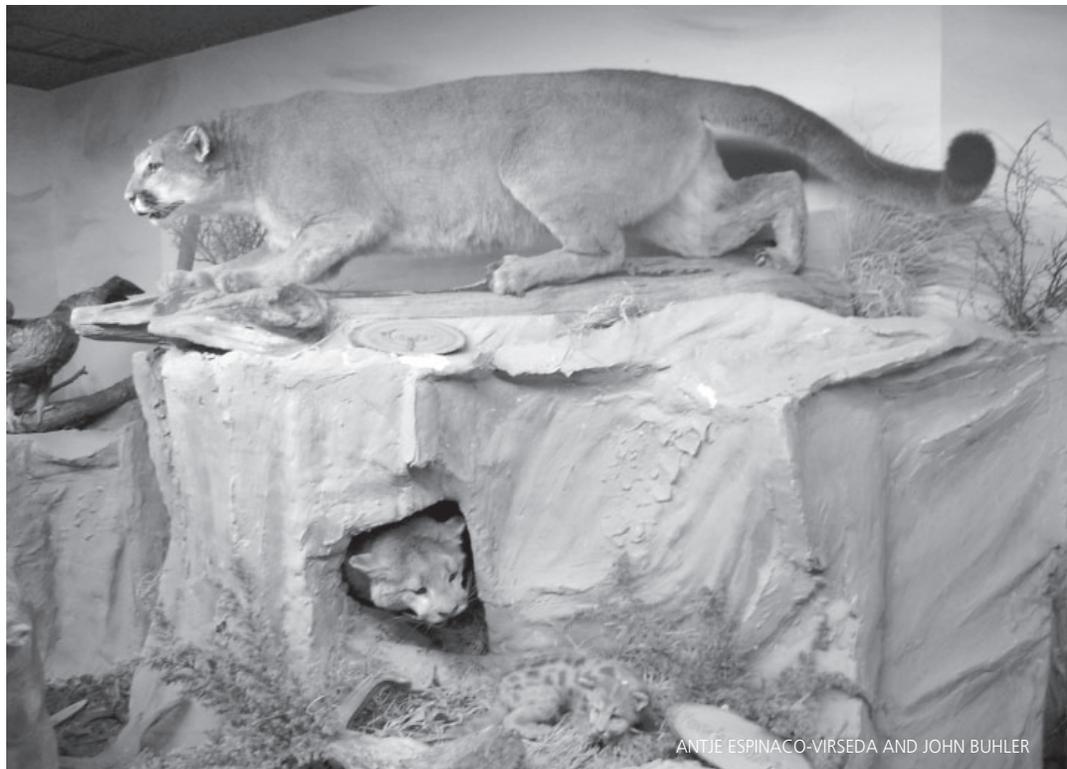
BY ANTJE ESPINACO-VIRSEDA AND JOHN BUHLER

The Den Museum in the basement of Jasper's Whistler's Inn offered us some respite from the cold and torrential rain outside.

The museum's brochure promised Alberta wildlife specimens displayed in "life-like habitats found in the provinces [sic] four natural regions: prairie; aspen parkland; mountain; northern forest." It seemed like a worthwhile diversion.

The Den, in fact, offers a rather fanciful display. One of the first scenes we encountered upon entering the museum was a family

Antje Espinaco-Virseda is an Edmonton-based amateur naturalist and trained taxidermist. John Buhler is a free-lance author.



ANTJE ESPINACO-VIRSEDA AND JOHN BUHLER

of cougars positioned on, in and around a rather contrived-looking chunk of faux stone. Three adult cougars and a cub are portrayed together as a single group, giving the false impression that these animals form packs. One cougar is preparing to pounce from the rock, with its claws unnaturally extended on each of its four paws. Lower down, a mother cougar is poking her head from a cave, inexplicably growling at her cub. Perhaps the taxidermist had either very little knowledge of – or perhaps little interest in – the animals' normal behaviour. Overall, this domestic scene was certainly not the work of any naturalist, but instead must have been created by some amateur curator who believed that large predators should only be shown in aggressive poses, regardless of the context.

Not far away, an eagle is about to crash into the ground, diving at its prey in a pose that likely does not reflect observations made in the wild, but rather perhaps Second World War films of dive bombers in action.

These depictions are especially problematic when one considers that a museum display is a source of information for the viewer, and in this case supports and spreads false notions about the behaviours of animals in the wild.

It soon becomes clear the displays not only include poor representations of animal behaviour; they also demonstrate poor or at least outdated taxidermy, as well as a simple lack of maintenance. The overstuffed wolves, rather than appearing like lean hunters of the wilds,



ANTJE ESPINACO-VIRSEDA AND JOHN BUHLER

resemble overfed family dogs. A number of specimens seem to be coated in a layer of dust, and it appears that the ears on some of the animals are coming apart.

The museum's brochure had promised "natural settings" but this claim is a little far-fetched. Artificial Christmas trees, of the toilet brush variety, provide most of the flora, and are set against a painfully two-dimensional painted backdrop. Unimaginative plaster rock stands in for the Rocky Mountains, providing a medium through which a group of mountain sheep, like cartoon characters, ridiculously poke their heads. The cougar display mentioned earlier is built around a heap of plaster that looks a lot like a fireplace mantle rather than a natural rock formation.

Moving from one scene to another, museum visitors walk along walls resembling the simple rough exterior of a log cabin and peer into wildlife displays that are behind glass. Are viewers therefore looking *into* a log

cabin and seeing wild animals inside? What is this arrangement supposed to mean, and what does it say about our relationship with nature and our understanding of it?

Fortunately, no one is claiming that that this pastiche is meant to be educational. Apart from small wooden plaques bearing the (common) names of the deceased, there is no other information provided regarding the animal specimens.

The Den amounts to a naturalist's nightmare. The museum is archaic, not just in the methods employed in making its displays, but also in mindset that is preserved there. More recent taxidermy techniques allow specimens to look more life-like and newer materials have a longer lifespan, but the preservation of the specimens is less important than the message that the exhibit presents. Rather than enhance the public's understanding of wildlife, *The Den* and similar collections

of animals remind one of the 19th and early 20th century view of nature. At that time, wildlife displays depended upon the hunting and presentation of prize breeding stock, their portrayals of predators emphasized aggressive poses, and exhibitions provided little or no information about animal behaviour and conservation issues; these are all part of an outdated and unsustainable approach to our relationship with the natural world.

And what exactly does it mean when one encounters a wildlife exhibit of mounted animals presented in a hotel basement within a national park? Were the animals collected and displayed for hotel patrons so that they would not need to be bothered trying to see fauna in its natural habitat? If that is the case, does it, in effect, create a greater psychological distance between humans and park animals, and turn visitors' attention away from the problems associated with wildlife conservation and the preservation of natural habitats?

Yet, this display could be put to good use. The exhibit would acquire some value if it were consciously used to encourage museum visitors to contemplate the implications of this style of wildlife presentation and how it

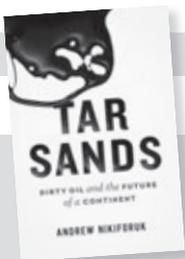


THE "NATURAL SETTING" CLAIM STRETCHES CREDIBILITY IN THIS DISPLAY!

ANTJE ESPINACO-VIRSEDA AND JOHN BUHLER

contrasts with our current ideas about museum curation and wildlife conservation; and how the procuring of prize specimens depends upon the killing of the healthiest and largest animals, robbing a species of healthy genetic stock. These would be interesting points for park visitors to ponder. *The Den* could also educate the public about the progress that museums have made in displaying animals in poses that reflect their behaviour in nature, and the increased skill and attention that more recent museum artists employ in recreating naturalistic settings.

The Den museum in its present state has little to offer to Jasper's mountain park tourists. Viewers are presented with examples of poor taxidermy, misrepresentations of animal behaviour, and outdated ideas about our relationship to nature. By taking on a more conscious educational role and setting its displays in a particular context, however, it could help park visitors to re-evaluate our connections with the natural world and the manner in which we have abused it.



TAR SANDS WINS!

Andrew Nikiforuk's latest book, *Tar Sands: Dirty Oil and the Future of the Continent*, has won the Rachel Carson Environment Book Award, which comes with a \$10,000 US prize. The award is given out by the Society of Environmental Journalists, and Mr Nikiforuk is the first Canadian journalist to win. *Tar Sands* is an excellent, information-packed book that tells it like it is.



Peregrine Catches Hudsonian Godwit

BY DICK DEKKER

On the windy afternoon of Friday May 1/09, I made my first visit of the year to the east side of Beaverhill Lake.

Far out on the dried mudflats shimmered a sheet of meltwater, a pathetic remnant of this once 10 km x 18 km Ramsar wetland. The only birds in view were a scattering of Ring-billed Gulls and a few distant ducks.

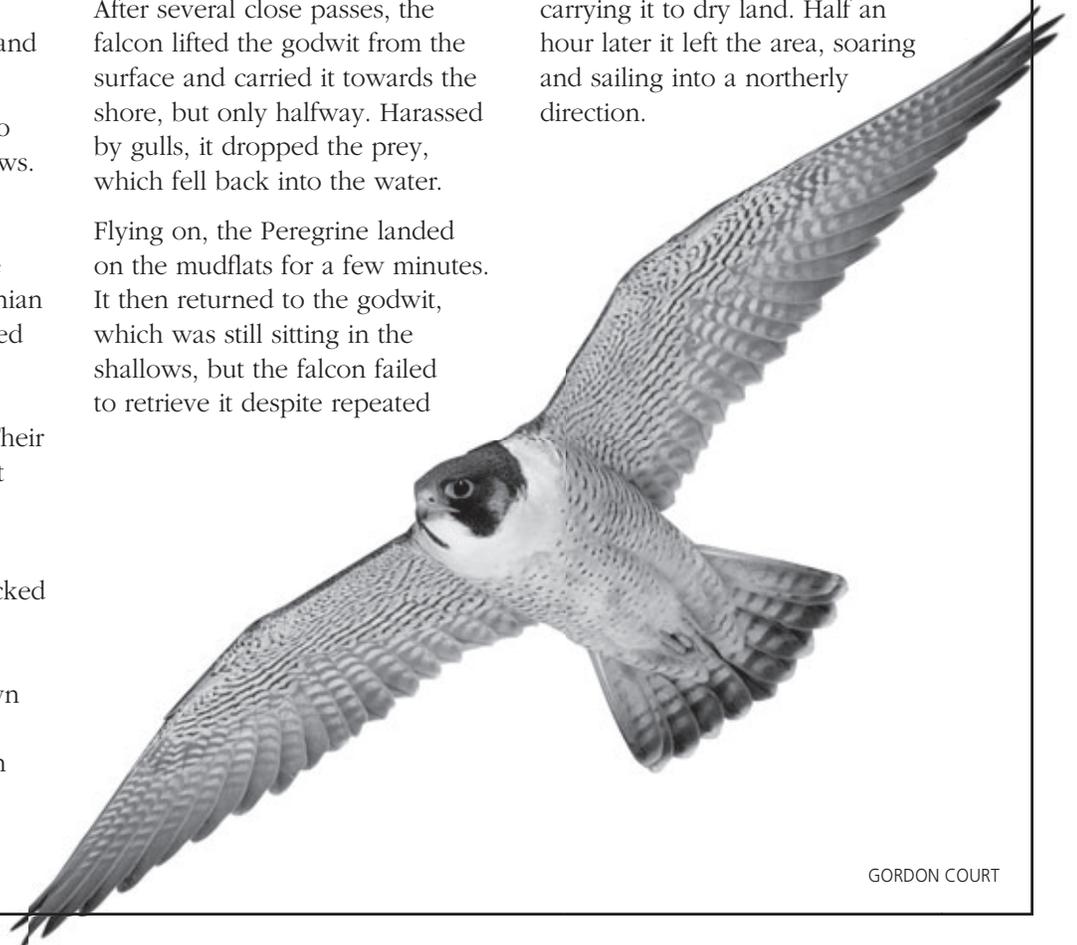
It took nearly an hour's walk to reach the far side of the shallows. On the way back, I sat down on a stone, looking at three Avocets, the first waders of the day. Presently, a single Hudsonian Godwit passed by. As I followed it in the binoculars, I focused on half a dozen small gulls (Bonaparte's and Franklin's). Their hurried flight made me suspect the presence of a Peregrine Falcon.

Scanning the lake, I indeed picked up a low falcon. Apparently, it had just forced a Hudsonian Godwit (or the same one) down into the water. Attempting to make it fly up again, the falcon

repeatedly swooped at the splashing wader. When the godwit finally did flush, it plunged down again just before being overtaken. After several close passes, the falcon lifted the godwit from the surface and carried it towards the shore, but only halfway. Harassed by gulls, it dropped the prey, which fell back into the water.

Flying on, the Peregrine landed on the mudflats for a few minutes. It then returned to the godwit, which was still sitting in the shallows, but the falcon failed to retrieve it despite repeated

attempts. Finally, after its third rest, the falcon approached the godwit in low direct flight against the wind and picked it up at once, carrying it to dry land. Half an hour later it left the area, soaring and sailing into a northerly direction.



Close to Home: Nature Photography in Alberta



JOHN WARDEN

Patterns in the Aspen Forest

BY JOHN WARDEN

I think that it was the art of Bev Doolittle that taught me to look for patterns in nature.

Her famous camouflage art, 'Two Indian Horses' and 'Sacred Ground', feature the repeated patterns of birch and aspen trees with the subject of her compositions, hidden in the patterns of the trees. I've yet to find a pinto pony gazing out at me from an aspen forest, but because of the art of Bev Doolittle, I've been looking - and as a result, I've seen some cool stuff.

One evening I was driving the outside perimeter of Elk Island National Park, coming down from the north gate, along the west fence line. As I made a turn in the road, there were two Northern Goshawks. They were sitting on fence posts, preening themselves in the soft golden light of evening. I shot right out of the window of my car, letting my foot off the brake to creep forward, closer and closer. I got a couple of okay, posed shots and then the hawks flew off.

One 'Gos' landed in an aspen tree just inside the park, but at the very edge of the range of my zoom lens. Getting out on foot, I got as close as the fence would allow me and captured another image before the Goshawk flew off again, but what an image. The Goshawk blends into the patterns of the aspen that it is perched in, yet the image is still clear and crisp enough to bring out the fierce predator look in



JOHN WARDEN



JOHN WARDEN



JOHN WARDEN

the hawk's eye. As it flew away, I grabbed another shot, also a good one, but the better image I think is how the patterns of the Goshawk's feathers blend with those of the tree, a natural camouflage.

Several months later, I was again patrolling the west fence line of the Park when I came across a bull Elk with a nice rack. The Elk in Elk Island National Park are very skittish, so as I expected, he took off into the scrub aspen. But then he paused and looked back at me and I got the picture. Not a pinto pony in birch trees, but I like how only a few feet into the saplings, the Elk begins to blend into the patterns of its environment (see the inside back cover).

Not all of my aspen forest photographs have a subject though. Sometimes, the subject is the patterns itself, or an

interruption in the repeating patterns: 'Wabi', a flaw in perfection.

The aspen and birch forests of Alberta are close to home for all of us. They offer nature

photographers an opportunity to work on composition, depth of field perspectives and perhaps, to discover camouflaged creatures peering back at us from the patterns of nature.



JOHN WARDEN

Another Successful Snow Goose Chase

BY BOB PARSONS

The annual Snow Goose Chase on the weekend of April 25/26 was eagerly awaited by the many participants who were booked on the seven buses run by the Edmonton Nature Club.

Four busloads of inner-city school children and local organizations, as well as three busloads with the paying public, were all expecting to experience local nature along with the huge spring migration of ducks, swans, geese, hawks and other bird species. Jim Lange and Bob Gehlert had spent a lot of time scouting out the area to

the east and north of Tofield and were certain that many “snowies” would be spotted. I felt sure that a second wave was due as reports from locations such as Medicine Hat informed me that many thousands of Snow Geese were ready to move north.

This year’s Chase surely has to rank as the coldest event in its ten

year history, and I was surprised at the high turnout. I thought there would be some no-shows due to the wintry weather, but overall we had an excellent showing by all the participants. Red-tailed Hawks on nest had been recorded by Jim and there was a Great Horned Owl on a nest just north of Tofield which

HAL KORBER/PGC PHOTO



**SOME YOUNG BIRDERS LINE UP AT
THE SCOPE, SET UP IN A BLIND, FOR
A CLOSE-UP LOOK.**

GERALD ROMANCHUK



could be easily seen looking through the many spotting scopes available. Parsons Quarry just north of the town was visited by all the buses and good numbers of Tundra Swans and American Pelicans were seen along with an assortment of ducks and a few shorebirds.

The usual brief visit was made to the Tofield Nature Centre and then the buses moved on to the community hall where the children viewed a number of displays and exhibits. Coffee and muffins went down really well and participants were able to study the perched hawks and owls from the Valley Zoo. Nadi, the local tame Burrowing Owl, was very popular as was the bird slide show put on by Don Delaney who is a terrific member of our nature community.

After a wonderful buffet lunch put on at the Legion and an

entertaining talk by Hugh Campbell on local history, everyone got back on the buses and headed east to find the Snow Geese. The run was expected to take about 20 minutes to the scouted-out area and along the way many saw hawks, bluebirds, Western Meadowlark, a heron or two plus some lingering Snow Buntings and longspurs in the dried-out fields. Many wetland areas were completely dry this year and it was obvious that Ducks Unlimited was finding no water from the streams to fill their wetland projects. Usually one would expect to find a few migrating shorebirds in these wet spots, but apart from some yellowlegs, nothing of note was spotted.

After some radio transmissions with the scouts, we were finally able to come across many thousands of Snow Geese in the

area just to the east of the lake. There were also over 200 Sandhill Cranes, so everyone was able to get a good look. The geese were flying around quite nervously, so it was possible that a wandering hawk or eagle was stirring them up. Many who had been on previous trips thought this was the highest concentration of Snow Geese they had ever seen.

Many more geese and cranes were seen on the way back to Tofield, along with some migrating Tundra Swans.

Two of my spotters had spent the whole morning out on the east side and they figured they had seen a total of over 80 hawks in a four hour period. These were very impressive numbers for a cold and generally unpleasant day weather-wise!

I guess we do it all again next year.

For 2010 dates and details, contact the Edmonton Nature Club (www.enc.fanweb.ca)

Snow Goose Chase A Personal Perspective of the Chase

BY STEVE KNIGHT

One of the unavoidable rites of spring in these parts is the Snow Goose Chase, organized by our own venerable Bob Parsons.

Bobbie-boy, as I like to call him, is a tireless organizer and volunteer for this event and he makes sure we Edmonton Nature Club members do our share to promote nature. We help young and old experience the treasure nature has in store for us, if we only just go out and look for it! In addition to Bob, we have a cast of many dozens of faithful volunteers and sponsors that make this annual event possible. Most of them have been participating continuously for ten years, and my thanks go out to them for making this event a yearly success!

My personal perspective on this event relates to serving as an on-bus guide for the adult and seniors buses that are part of the event. Over the years, I have come to think of these bus-tours as Lifer-delivery vehicles par excellence! Through the mentoring of long-time leaders Jim Lange and Peter DeMulder,

we use the following routine to prepare the attendees for a day of Life-Bird spotting:

First we deliver the attendees their handouts, checklists and bottled water. Next come field-guides, making sure every seat has at least one. Then come the binoculars, for which we have a generous supply provided by the club, and making sure that each seat has at least one pair – preferably one set per person.

Then comes binocular usage. This is an important step since there are some non-intuitive pieces to this puzzle for everyday civilians (definition: non-members of the ENC!). Most importantly bending the binocular into the right shape for your eyes, twisting the eye-cups out (or in for eye-glass-wearers), use of the focussing wheel, and determining what that darned diopter-thingy does and at least setting it to the zero position for starters.



FROM LEFT TO RIGHT: JOHN CHAPMAN, PETER DEMULDER AND JIM LANGE CAREFULLY PLAN THE EXCURSION ON THE FIRST MORNING OF THE SNOW GOOSE CHASE. STEVE KNIGHT

Then the all-important discussion about looking down-light for maximum advantage as opposed to staring at backlit silhouettes! At this point I like to describe my early birding experience, heading solo to Atim Creek near Spruce Grove and after a frustrating couple of hours, peering up-light at unidentified blackened silhouettes out on the water, concluding that I suck as a birdwatcher! (No comments please about whether this still applies!)

BIRDING, BIRDWATCHING, AND TWITCHING

Did you know that the term birdwatching was first used in 1901, while “to bird” was first recorded as a verb in 1918. The term birding was also used for the practice of fowling or hunting with firearms, as in Shakespeare’s *The Merry Wives of Windsor* (1602): “She laments sir... her husband goes this morning a-birding”. The terms birding

**BAD WEATHER? PSHAW!
THERE'S NO SUCH THING
WHEN BIRDERS SPOT FLOCKS
OF INTERESTING BIRDS.**

STEVE KNIGHT



and birdwatching are today used interchangeably, although birding is preferred by many since this includes the auditory component involved in locating and identifying birds. Also, the term twitcher, sometimes misapplied as a synonym for birder, is reserved for those who travel long distances to see a rare bird that would then be “ticked” off on a “list”. The term appeared in the 1950s, said to have originated from a phrase used to describe the nervous behaviour of Howard Medhurst, a British birdwatcher.

Now we are ready to discuss the definition of a lifer, NOT ‘A prisoner serving a life sentence!’. More like ‘Not bad - 55 species of birds, including 14 lifers for the day!’.

Also, let’s not forget our mammalian and insect friends. Most chases I have been involved in serve up several species, hopefully including deer, ground squirrel and coyote,

but sometimes even moose and badger.

Two key concepts I like to use in guiding are more or less diametrically opposed but both important to the day. The first is the all-important technique of remembering that a great view of a Blue Jay or a Red-winged Blackbird can be equally as rewarding to our audience as that distant 400 yards-view of a Merlin on a fence-post. So I like to mix up the sightings we highlight to our guests to include a little of both!

And if Dolores is at all involved, we usually have a ready-supply of snacks for any mid-morning and mid-afternoon lulls!

Because I was curious about how we were doing on the lifer-front, for 2008 and 2009 we did a brief survey of our bus participants’ Lifer count. In 2008, we had 43 species and individual patron results were as follows: 10-lifers, 3-lifers, 0, 11, 4, 10, 2, 10, 10, 4,

7, 5, 10, everything!, 22, 2, 3, 2, 2, 1, 25, 2, 2, 7, 4, and 8. Note that almost all guests had at least one life bird sighting! In 2009, results were very similar, with I believe the median number of lifers as high as 10-12 species. Not bad for our volunteer efforts!

You might ask why this is important, and I can only relate this to my own journey into nature watching which started at the predecessor Snow Goose Festival to which I am eternally grateful. I clearly recall to this day my sense of amazement, at the sheer variety and diversity of life, of which we are but a small part, even here in our own immediate neighbourhood so to speak.

Before closing, there is one other aspect of the Snow Goose Chase that can be unparalleled and that we sometimes are privileged to witness. At the 2009 event we had stopped to scope a large flock of geese on a pond immediately south of a farm property on the

Ryley Road. Due to good planning on Gerald Romanchuk's part, the bus had stopped such that we were partially pulled into the farm entrance without fully blocking it. With our patrons already outside and spotting scopes duly set up, we were fortunate that the farmer's daughter determined to make an exit from her house and

head out in her vehicle. In doing so, and particularly with running back into the house because she must have forgotten something, she caused the flock to take flight and reveal what we first thought were several hundred Snow, White-fronted, and Canada Geese. With the geese in the air, it was now quite clear that we

had perhaps 5,000 geese in the air overhead, circling at times right over our group! Nothing can compare to this visual and auditory experience and we guides immediately became experts in the eyes of our guests!

FAN News

WINNER!

Greg Cole, of Drumheller, is the winner of a FAN-published book for correctly guessing the line in the movie *Network* spoken by the character Howard Beale (played by Peter Finch). Shouted Beale: "I'm mad as hell, and I'm not going to take this anymore!"

Meanwhile, no one won the \$50 gift certificate by identifying the photo on the back cover of the Summer '09 Nature Alberta. Your Editor was very surprised to NOT receive any responses, as I didn't think it to be that difficult. Just so you know, the photo was in Highwood Pass.

DIRECTOR RESIGNS

It was with regret that Appointed Director Branimir Gjetvaj informed us of his resignation. Branimir has moved back to Saskatoon. Despite his short stint as Director, Branimir said: "I am glad that I did attend one meeting last April and meet with the FAN Directors and staff. Hope we will be able to work together on conservation and

nature education issues of interest to both provinces." Branimir will likely rejoin Nature Saskatchewan's core of active naturalists.

THE FUTURE

FAN is preparing to celebrate its 40th birthday in 2010 and is looking forward to a future of great success. There is an opportunity for you to be part of this team of active naturalists by volunteering for FAN. Many different activities are available: from helping out in the office, to research, to project assistance. For more information, check the FAN website, www.fanweb.ca, under "How to help: Volunteer at FAN" – or call us at (780) 427-8124. But what if you do not have the time? Well, you can still help immensely by donating to FAN (secure on-line or by mail) and getting a charitable tax receipt. Another increasingly popular method of support is planned giving (see the article, pg 21). Helping FAN help nature is a rewarding activity, whether through volunteering or financial support.

A HEAD'S UP!

You will soon be seeing the name "Nature Alberta" everywhere you once saw the Federation of Alberta Naturalists. That's because, over the next while, FAN will be changing its name to Nature Alberta. The legal name will remain Federation of Alberta Naturalists; however, Nature Alberta is a more modern, easier-to-say, easier-to-promote moniker. Many organizations have gone with this type of change: Nature Canada, Nature Saskatchewan, Nature BC, etc.

The name change is just one of many very exciting developments that FAN is pursuing entering our fortieth year as the umbrella group for naturalist organizations and interested individual naturalists. Stay tuned – you will be hearing more!



NATURE
ALBERTA

A Sound Like Water Dripping In Search of the Boreal Owl

REVIEW BY: LISA PRIESTLEY

".... I could make out the dark row of trees on either side of the road so I did not use my flashlight. The soft soil dampened my steps and I made no noise as I walked along. The air was still and in my exhausted state, all I could think of was my bed back at the cabin. I suddenly hit something – a large, warm, furry wall." (Soren Bondrup-Nielsen)

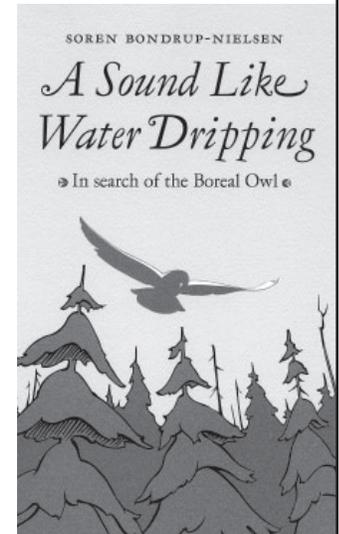
Yes, this book is about Soren Bondrup-Nielsen's study on the Boreal Owl (which has feathers, not fur), but there is so much more packed into this wonderful book. As a mother of two very active young children, I have not had much time for reading. I tend to crawl into bed at the end of the day and attempt to read a book I am trying to get through, but fall asleep after a page or two. I read this 236 page book in about two weeks!!

Soren is a professor at Acadia University where he teaches conservation biology and ecology. He completed his graduate work in the 1970's studying the ecology of the Boreal Owl in Ontario and Alberta. This book relates the story of how he began his study and the challenges and trials along the way as he worked to complete his thesis on a species that was relatively unknown at the time. He recorded and photographed the Boreal Owl and studied their diet, habitat, courtship and nesting behaviors.

Being an owl biologist myself, I of course am partial to stories that have owls in them. But this book is as much about owls as it is about the history of forestry in northern Ontario, oil and gas in Alberta, challenges that any researcher has when setting up a study, and the many experiences you have being

out at night during the various seasons. He is able to bring the reader outside with him deep into the boreal forest and allow us to experience the darkness and stillness of late winter nights in the comfort of our home. I have to say I did feel the winter cold creeping into my bones at times while reading, and had to wrap a blanket around me (even though it was a comfortable +18C in my bedroom). The reader also feels the rollercoaster of emotions a researcher feels when things are going well or are close to disaster. But have no fear, the story has a happy ending.

There is so much information packed into this book, yet you never feel overwhelmed while reading it. Specific facts and details are spread throughout the book so you don't feel as if you are studying for an exam. I was particularly amazed at how much detail Soren could recall from his research, an indication that he was very good at keeping field notes each day of his research. This is a testament to the importance of documenting your life in a diary or field book; you never know when someone may want to read about your life's experiences. The black and white pictures Soren includes also help you feel a part of his research.



Soren Bondrup-Nielsen.
Gaspereau Press, Kentville, NS;
\$26.95; Sewn paperback

Each chapter brings you a step closer to how he went about documenting the first Boreal Owl nest ever discovered in Ontario. You feel you are a part of the excitement of that moment. I was also pleased to read about all the people that helped Soren along the way, a few that I know quite well, and it made me feel closer to the story as a result. And finally, for you romance story buffs, there is a hint of it throughout the book that adds realism to his adventures. A thesis is much more than the field work; it is all about the experiences you have with the people that support you along the way, providing a cup of tea, a five-course breakfast, or just an ear to listen. You do not have to be a biologist to know how important people outside your field of work are.

So, I highly recommend this book if you like owls, and want to read an interesting, informative, adventurous and humorous story. If his lectures at the university are as interesting as this book, his students are very fortunate. And if you want to find out what Soren actually bumped into, you will just have to read the book.

[Lisa Priestley's cover story about nesting Saw-whet and Boreal Owls can be found in the Fall 2008 Nature Alberta (Vol 38, No 3). -- Ed]

Wildlife! Starring... Fall's Fallen Leaves

BY DENNIS BARESCO

Fallen leaves may be an annoyance to urbanites, but they are – or at least what happens to them is – as important to healthy forest ecosystems as sunlight, water and soil.

In fact, the astounding amount of life, activity and “recycling” processes going on in leaf litter is almost beyond our comprehension.

It is no exaggeration to say that, if the billions of fallen leaves did not decompose, forests would soon starve – if they didn't choke to death first. A healthy, mature tree (depending on the species) could drop 100,000 to 200,000 leaves every year; something has to happen to them!

And happen it does, as tens of billions of organisms decompose

the leaves into their chemical elements and return nutrients to the soil; those same nutrients are used again by trees when spring rolls around. Leaf decomposition is not a single, simple process; it is a myriad of complex food webs involving herbivores, carnivores and parasites.

Armies of microbial life – fungi and bacteria – could be called the front line of decay. One group of these microorganisms, the sugar feeders, “attacks” the detritus. Once they have taken what they want, another group moves in: the cellulose feeders. After a succession of groups, all that's left is elemental nutrients. When the fungi and bacteria die, or are eaten, the nutrients they hold are released to be used again.

A whole group of animals, the microbial consumers, feed on the fungi and bacteria: animals such as nematodes (a Class of worms), collembolans (springtails), beetle larvae, fly larvae and mites.

There are many invertebrates – earthworms, insect larvae, millipedes, isopods (an Order of Crustaceans) – that feed on the

leaf detritus. Besides fragmenting it, they also “use” less than 10% (the easily-digested proteins and carbohydrates) with the rest being deposited as fecal matter. The result is more food for the microbes, thus more food for the microbial consumers. Plus, most of these consumers and invertebrates eventually end up as food for other animals: spiders and birds, of course, but also a great many insects such as beetles and dragonflies.

The forest floor may seem to be a quiet, somewhat lifeless place, but it is most assuredly one of the busiest and more fascinating places in the natural world – all because of the star of the show: fallen leaves!

Information taken from: Robert Leo Smith. Ecology and Field Biology, 3rd Ed. 1980.

A MICROSCOPIC MITE.

ERBE, POOLEY: USDA, ARS, EMU



DENNIS BARESCO

Planned Giving Using Life Insurance

Planned giving using life insurance as an estate planning strategy is an increasingly attractive concept for people who are charitably minded.

Planned giving is a strategy that can work for individuals who have achieved a degree of financial success, have a desire to support a charitable organization like FAN, and have an interest in offsetting current or future tax obligations.

This is great news for FAN, and other charitable and nonprofit organizations, that:

- Rely on financial contributions from many sources, particularly as direct financial support from the government is shrinking
- Continue to seek alternatives to traditional fundraising to provide more stable funding for the long term

HOW USING PLANNED GIVING THROUGH LIFE INSURANCE WORKS

People have the option to distribute their assets to two of the following three groups – a favourite charity, to heirs, or to fund taxes owing to Canada Revenue Agency (CRA). Planned giving using life insurance allows them to decide how their estate will be distributed.

A carefully arranged planned gift can be tax effective, and at the same time balance a client's final needs with the needs of their families. It can allow individuals to leave lasting personal legacies and provide their favourite charities with stable funding over the long term, without reducing the estate available to their heirs or jeopardizing their future financial independence.

Permanent life insurance allows people to accumulate cash value growth inside the life insurance policy, within certain legislative limits, without paying income tax on the growth. Cash withdrawals are subject to taxation based on the rates and rules in effect at the time funds are withdrawn. The death benefit is paid to the identified beneficiaries of choice, if other than the estate, tax-free upon death.

Methods to fund a charitable bequest or donation using life insurance include:

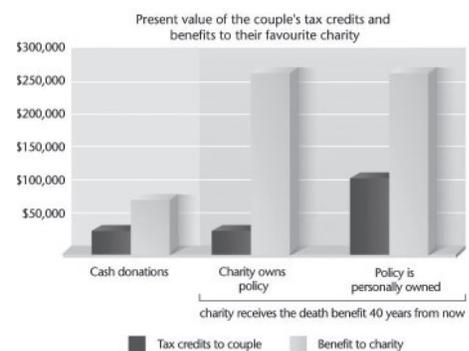
- Funding a bequest through a will
- Charity-owned insurance policy

You can distribute your assets to the following three groups.



- Donor-owned insurance policy and names charity as beneficiary – since 2000, a donor may name the charity as beneficiary and get full donation tax credit and sidestep probate and creditors

Consulting with a financial security advisor for a personalized example of how this concept applies is recommended. For further information about leaving a charitable donation to the Federation of Alberta Naturalists please contact the Federation of Alberta Naturalists office. For more information about planned giving using life insurance, please contact Ron McGuffin, a financial security advisor with Freedom 55 Financial, a division of London Life Insurance Company. He can be contacted at 780-428-8585, extension 258 or by email to ron.mcguffin@f55f.com.



The above information, provided to FAN courtesy of Freedom 55 Financial, is based on current laws, regulations and other rules applicable to Canadian residents. It is accurate to the best of the writer's knowledge as of October 8, 2009. Rules and their interpretation may change, affecting the accuracy of the information. The information provided is general in nature, and should not be relied upon as a substitute for advice in any specific situation. For specific situations, advice should be obtained from the appropriate legal, accounting, tax or other professional advisors.

FEATURE ARTICLE

Fisher

(Martes pennanti)

on the Cooking Lake Moraine, Alberta:

Landowner Observations

BY M.J. PYBUS, GLEN LAWRENCE, AND PAT HARRIS

The Fisher (Martes pennanti), a mid-sized member of the weasel family Mustelidae, generally is dark in colour, about the size of a Red Fox (Vulpes vulpes).

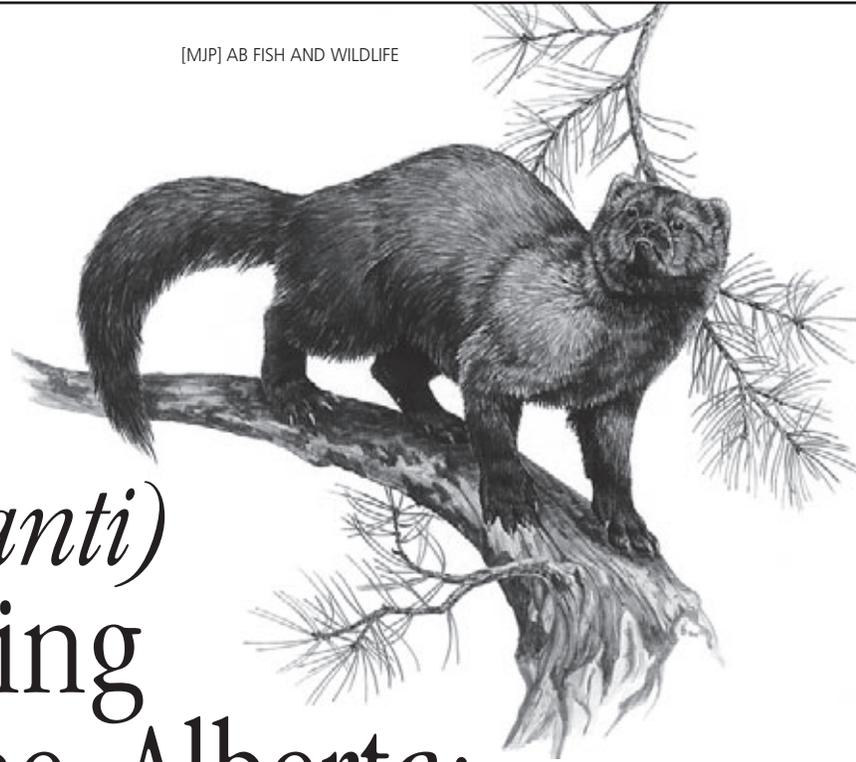
Fisher have the distinctive mustelid long tubular body and relatively short legs, small head with short ears and bright dark eyes, and a relatively long tail. Their lush pelt with long guard hairs has long been sought by trappers and fur buyers. These agile, semi-arboreal carnivores of North America originally ranged through the forested habitats of Canada, extending southwards in the forests of the Appalachian and Pacific Coast mountains of eastern and western regions, respectively (Graham and Graham, 1994).

However, Fisher populations declined significantly in southern portions of their range, including the forest fringe of north central

Alberta, following European settlement and the combined effects of extensive habitat changes (logging, settlement, and agriculture) and trapping activities.

The Cooking Lake Moraine is a glacial remnant of the Laurentian Ice Sheet some 22,000 years ago (Edmonton Geological Society,

1993). The moraine lies roughly 30-40 km east of Edmonton, Alberta, from 53°10' to 53°45'N and 112°40' to 113°15' W, covering an area with maximum dimensions roughly 60 km north-south and 20-30 km east-west – some 400 km² in total extent. It is an upland area of steeply rolling knob and kettle terrain formed in association with the stagnant ice sheet. Apparently, the kettle



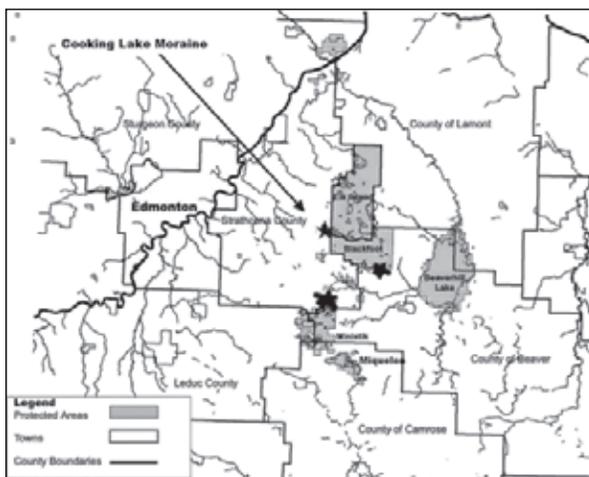
EXAMPLES OF FISHER HABITAT. [MJP] AB RESEARCH COUNCIL



depressions formed under the last isolated blocks of ice that became trapped in the rubble and settled into the accumulated glacial till.

The vegetation type is primarily Aspen Parkland with interspersed stands of White Spruce (*Picea glauca*). The combined elements of glacial rock and stone rubble, shallow clay soils with low organic content, undulating terrain, and relatively harsh climate were major deterrents to successful agriculture or settlement. As a result, the moraine remains primarily covered with large tracts of a contiguous, relatively undisturbed mixed assemblage of Trembling Aspen (*Populus tremuloides*) and Balsam Poplar (*Populus balsamifera*) forests, with small patch conifer blocks, open sedge meadows, and small permanent lakes, sloughs, and ponds.

FIG. 1. COOKING LAKE MORAINE, WITH FISHER SIGHTINGS (MARKED AS STARS). [MJP] BEAVER HILLS INITIATIVE



Human disturbance is further minimized due to habitat protection associated with Elk Island National Park (194km²,

established 1906), Ministik Game Bird Sanctuary (65km², established 1911), the Cooking Lake Forest Reserve (6 contiguous townships, established 1892) and later recast as the Cooking Lake Blackfoot Recreational Area and Grazing Reserve (97 km², established 1988), and seven local designated provincial or county Natural Areas (Fig 1). Local Fisher populations on the Cooking Lake Moraine likely were extirpated in the early decades of the 1900s.

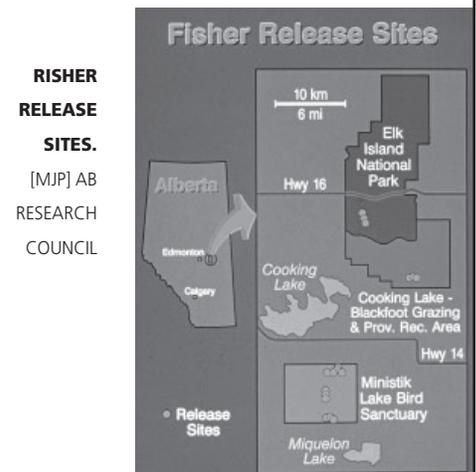
In an attempt to re-establish this keystone carnivore in the local ecosystem, 20 radio-collared Fisher were reintroduced to the moraine (Badry et al., 1993; Proulx et al., 1994). Ten adult Fisher were released as pairs or in small groups in March and June 1990, and ten more in August 1992. Release sites were used in each of the three major protected

areas on the moraine: Elk Island, Cooking Lake/Blackfoot, and Ministik. Animals released in March did not persist; however, those released in June and August stayed within the vicinity of the release site during the initial monitoring period (Badry et al. 1997).

Despite some early evidence of successful reproduction, further reports and sightings have not been documented and in the interim the reintroduction generally was

deemed to have failed in the long run (Pybus 2005).

PREPARING TO RELEASE A FISHER. [MJP] AB RESEARCH COUNCIL



MONITORING FOR SIGNALS. [MJP] AB RESEARCH COUNCIL

The following account documents the recent incidental observations of three local landowners on the Cooking Lake Moraine. Each observer has extensive life-long experience with wildlife and recognized expertise in making natural history observations. These observations have been entered into the Alberta provincial database [Fisheries and Wildlife Management Information System] maintained by the Fish and Wildlife Division in Edmonton.

OBSERVATION #1

OBSERVER: Glen Lawrence. Founder of Ministik Lake Bird Sanctuary Society; Chair of the Cooking Lake Conservation Association; Strathcona County Council representative and Chair of the Beaver Hills Initiative; born, raised, and still living on the moraine.

CONDITIONS: late March 2007, 9:00 a.m., clear bright sunny day, more than 2 feet (two-thirds of a metre) of snowpack over the ground with 100% coverage. Clear and unobstructed view within 20 m of the Fisher.

LOCATION: Section 6, Township 51, Range 20, W4; UTM: 12U 0370718 / 5914965.

OBSERVATION: A relatively large dark animal was seen among the trees in a secluded area near my house and adjacent to the north boundary of the Ministik Game Bird Sanctuary. The Fisher was travelling slowly with its nose to the ground investigating from tree to tree. I stopped and watched it for 2 or 3 minutes until it slowly wandered off among the trees. I knew immediately it was a Fisher. There is no other animal out here that looks like that. It was far too big for a cat and was big even for a Fisher. I believe it likely was an adult male.

OBSERVATION #2

OBSERVER: Glen Lawrence

CONDITIONS: early April 2007 (2 weeks after the first observation), mid-afternoon, clear bright warm sunny day, air temperatures around 5°C. The week had been quite warm and the snowpack was reduced to 50% coverage, with isolated snow banks on north-facing slopes and areas protected from direct sun.

LOCATION: Section 6, Township 51, Range 20, W4; UTM: 12U 0370718 / 5914965.

OBSERVATION: I had just returned from a walk through the bush and was looking out the front window of the house when I noticed a large Fisher among the trees. I watched the Fisher for a full five minutes. The animal traced a path down a treed north-facing ridge and out onto a sedge lowland adjacent to a large frozen beaver pond. On its way to the pond, it travelled the full length of a fallen tree lying approximately 20 m from a large south-facing window. The tree was parallel to the window and thus I was able to observe the Fisher clearly and without obstruction as it walked the length of the log. At the pond, there was no snow left among the sedges and the Fisher appeared to be actively hunting the area. It wove back and forth, all the time focused on the ground and poking under the vegetation. It eventually wandered up and over a ridge north of the beaver pond.





OBSERVATION #3

OBSERVER: Pat Harris. Science & Environmental teacher at Ardrossan Junior High School 1998 to 2007; Certified Alberta Hunter Education Instructor since 1988; Provincial Hunter Education Teacher of the Year 2001; previous employment with Canadian Wildlife Service and Alberta Fish and Wildlife; member of the Minstik Lake Public Advisory Committee since its inception; long-time volunteer with Ducks Unlimited Canada; resident of the moraine since 1981.

CONDITIONS: early March 2008, 9:30-9:35, overcast but full daylight, near-zero air temperature. Full snow cover on the ground averaging twelve inches (25 cm) deep. Well after leaf drop, with no deciduous

Observation: A Fisher was observed in a large Balsam Poplar on the edge of a clearing near the house. My initial impression of the animal was a very large black cat but in a split second I realized that it was far too big and that it was a Fisher. It was investigating White-tail Deer (*Odocoileus virginianus*) skeletal remains hung in a tree near the house as a supplemental winter source of protein and fat for foraging birds and small mammals. My wife and I watched it feed on the deer carcass for about 5 minutes as it repeatedly tore off chunks of meat and returned to the ground to eat them (Fig 2; Fig 3). Eventually it came down the tree and wandered off into the surrounding forest.

leaves on the trees or under-storey. Sightability: Clear and unobstructed view within 15m of the Fisher. Photos taken.

LOCATION: Section 32, Township 51, Range 19 W4; UTM: 12U 0383450 / 5922625.

OBSERVATION #4

OBSERVER: Margo Pybus. Editor Edmonton Naturalist 1989-1994, President Strathcona Naturalists 1994-1999, President Alberta Chapter of The Wildlife Society 1995-1996, Adjunct Professor in Biological Sciences at the University of Alberta since 1993, wildlife biologist with Alberta Fish and Wildlife Division since 1983 and Provincial Wildlife Disease Specialist since 1989. Resident of the moraine since 1991.

CONDITIONS: October 15, 2008, 7:45 am. The leaves were off the trees, the view was completely unobstructed. The incident took place within 2 m of the house and in direct view from a window. Dawn was well advanced to the point that natural light levels were good throughout the observation.

LOCATION: Section 25, Township 52 Range 21 W4; UTM: 12U 0369362 / 5931951.

OBSERVATION: Looking out a window, I saw a relatively dark brown animal crouched on the ground at the base of a small aspen tree about 10' from the corner of the house. At first I thought it was one relatively large animal with grizzled long brown hair on its back and having a long dark bushy tail. However, as I watched I soon realized that it was two animals tussling with each other: it was a Fisher straddled lengthwise on top of a black feral cat, with the Fisher pinning the cat to the ground. The Fisher stayed on top of the cat, repeatedly biting at its head until the cat

FIG. 2. [MJP] P. HARRIS



FIG. 3. [MJP] P. HARRIS





died. The Fisher took a little breather but then dragged the dead cat off through the trees behind the house. The sharp face and small rounded ears of the Fisher were easy to see. The Fisher was similar in size to the cat, perhaps slightly smaller. Given the sexual dimorphism in Fisher and my previous experiences with Fisher, I believe it was a female or juvenile; at least, it was not an adult male. Total time spent observing was ~10 minutes.

I had seen this black cat a couple of times in the vicinity of the bird feeder in the previous two weeks. According to the neighbours, it was a feral cat that had been 'wild' for some time. But apparently not wild enough to avoid a successful attack by the Fisher. Given the devastating toll that feral cats take on small songbirds, it's just as well the Fisher was successful.

DISCUSSION

The distance and topography among the three sites where Fisher were observed (see Fig 1) suggest it is unlikely that the four observations involved only one animal. Straight-line distances among the observation sites generally reflect the points of an equilateral triangle, each site being approximately 20 km from each of the other two. This distance greatly exceeds the documented maximum linear dimension within a single Fisher home range in this habitat type (<10 km) (Badry et al., 1997) and reinforces that some of the observations likely were of different individuals (although the Fisher seen in the two Lawrence observations may well have been the same one). Similarly, although human

disturbance in this area is limited relative to many other areas in central Alberta, the intervening forest cover between the three locations is not continuous and is interspersed with wetlands and open meadows. Fisher generally prefer habitats with continuous forest cover and high stem density in the understory (Badry et al. 1997). Further, there was apparent size discrepancy among the animals observed. While it is not possible to know the exact age or gender of the individuals, there is sexual dimorphism in the species and adult male Fisher are significantly larger than females and juveniles (Powell and Zielinski, 1994). The Fisher seen feeding on the deer carcass and the one at the beaver pond were relatively large, while the individual that killed the cat was relatively small.

There are two primary potential sources of the Fisher seen on the Cooking Lake Moraine: re-colonization from existing populations outside the moraine; or descendants of the animals released on the moraine in the early 1990s.

The closest contiguous population of Fisher occurs well over 100km northeast of the moraine in the



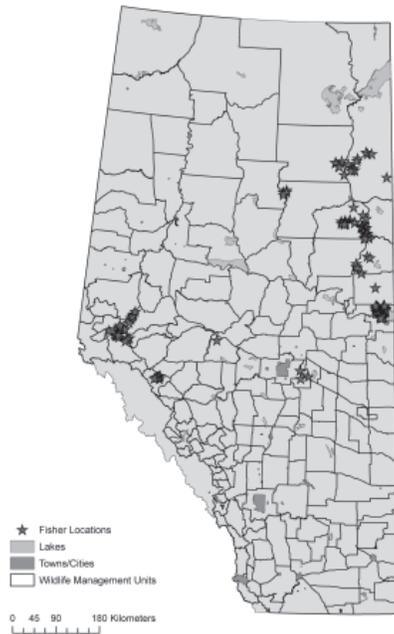


FIG. 4. PROVINCIAL FISHER SIGHTINGS

[MJP] AB FISH AND WILDLIFE

vicinity of St Paul and Elk Point, Alberta (Alberta Fish and Wildlife Division, Fig 4). Much of the intervening distance contains cleared agricultural lands unsuitable for Fisher. However, the North Saskatchewan River flows through this area and potentially could have provided a travel lane of suitable habitat for Fisher to reach the north end of the moraine. However, the current sightings are all on the south end of the moraine and any Fisher arriving by way of the river valley would have to traverse a further 50 km distance along the moraine in order to reach the observation sites.

It seems far more parsimonious that the Fisher observed in our sightings are descendants of the released animals. The release sites used (Proulx et al, 1994; Badry et al., 1997) generally

were within 10km of the current sightings and there was some initial evidence of persistence for a few years, including limited successful reproduction. Fisher are relatively obscure, secretive mammals rarely seen in daylight hours. Thus it seems reasonable that a small local population could have existed on the moraine unnoticed by residents and recreational visitors to the area in the intervening 15 years. Starting from only a few founding individuals, it would take quite some time for the population to build. Fisher are not reproductively prolific (many adult females do not den and in some cases < 50% produce litters, average litter size is 2 or 3, and survival of kits to fall is less than 1 kit per adult female; Powell and Zielinski, 1994). However, original individuals that did survive would have access to extensive stands of suitable forested habitat and abundant food availability in the high local populations of suitable prey, including Red Squirrels (*Tamias sciurus*), Porcupines (*Erethizon dorsatum*), and feral cats.

There is no longer any doubt that Fisher are present once again on the Cooking Lake Moraine. They roam the forests, clearings, and sloughs in sufficient numbers that finally triggered a threshold for discovery. In checking further we found that occasional reports of road-killed Fisher, and probable Fisher tracks in mud and snow in the surrounding areas suggest there is an established, yet likely small, population. In February 2009, a visitor to Elk Island National Park (EINP) was able to capture a photograph of a beautiful big Fisher (EINP, unpublished record) and provided additional verified evidence that a local population is present and indeed may be increasing in number and distribution along the Cooking Lake Moraine. These animals not only help re-establish an important component of the native ecosystems in the aspen parklands of central Alberta, but also provide exciting natural history opportunities for visitors and local residents lucky enough to see them.



[MJP] DP HOBSON

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Tuttle Steps Down

Merlin Tuttle, founder of Bat Conservation International (BCI) in 1982 and the man whose name is forever synonymous with bats, has resigned as President and Executive Director of BCI. It's almost impossible to describe how important he has been to the well-being of bats: through changing public perceptions, research, advocacy, the influence of his name alone, and the world-wide activities of BCI.

Merlin Tuttle "has done more for bat conservation than anyone in history," says Long Island University's Bill Schutt, in an article in *Bat Conservation Times* (Vol 7, # 5, May 2009). Tuttle will still work with BCI on such projects as dealing with the devastating White-nose Syndrome.

For more information on Tuttle and BCI, go to their website: www.batcon.org.



NEW EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

Nature Canada Board of Directors Chair Richard Yank is pleased to welcome Ian Davidson as the organization's new Executive Director. Ian began his new responsibilities on July 8, 2009.



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First Hand: Junco Caring for an Adopted Chick

BY DIANE SOCH

I took these pictures at Turtle Lake SK on June 24, 2009. I believe the adult bird is a junco. Is the chick a cowbird?

I understand a recent issue of *Nature Alberta* ran an article on the habit of cowbirds laying their eggs in the nests of other species*. This particular chick was quite demanding and insistent in its need to be fed, even though it could already fly. We watched the pair over the course of 2 or 3 days. They were coming to an area which had a bird feeder.

We had cowbirds in northern Alberta where I grew up, but I haven't seen any for years.

[* See the article "A White-throated Sparrow Raising A Cowbird", by Debbie Godkin, in *Nature Alberta*, Fall 2005, Vol 35, No3.]



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Important Bird Areas Program

BY CHUCK PRIESTLEY AND VID BIJELIC

[PART 1] Across Alberta and Beyond...

BirdLife International initiated the Important Bird Area (IBA) program in the mid-1980s. The main goals of the program were to identify, conserve and monitor the world's most critical places for bird populations.

IBAs are priority areas where threatened, restricted-range, biome-restricted and congregatory birds occur. Before obtaining IBA designation, sites go through rigorous nomination and review processes to ensure their suitability.

Birds are the best documented, and are often thought to be the most efficiently monitored, of all animal and plant groups. For these reasons, birds are often chosen for environmental monitoring efforts.

Places rich in bird species are generally rich in other forms of biodiversity. When IBA's are

maintained, there is value for birds and non-birds alike. As such, maintaining IBAs contributes to conservation objectives beyond birds.

IBAs are critical for people and their communities. For example, human health and wellness are increased when people are reconnected with natural places such as IBAs. Visiting IBAs can be a way for people to de-stress, relax or engage in physical and social activities. IBAs are accessible to a wide demographic. Enjoying an IBA does not require expensive or specialized equipment; therefore, many people could do so without

concern for potential financial barriers. IBAs provide human services that are important for our survival. Many IBAs are wetlands. These sites provide environmental services, such as maintaining freshwater and reducing the impact of extreme weather events including floods and droughts.

In Canada, BirdLife International's national partners are Nature Canada and Bird Studies Canada. The Federation of Alberta Naturalists (FAN) has taken on coordination of the IBA program at the provincial level in Alberta where forty-eight sites have been declared IBAs. Other provincial-level partners have taken on coordination and delivery of the



TUNDRA SWANS. CHUCK PRIESTLEY

Eyes on IBAs! This is the first instalment of an on-going series that will showcase Alberta's Important Bird Areas and/or the conservation initiatives that are occurring at them. On occasion, IBAs in other parts of Canada and the world will be the focus of this series.

IBA program in British Columbia, Saskatchewan, Quebec, and Nova Scotia. Provincial-level partners work directly with local people and organizations to help carry out the work on the ground at IBA sites. It is hoped that all provinces and territories across the nation will be represented in the collaborative effort to identify, conserve and monitor Canada's premier bird places.

International, national, provincial and local partners work together to carry out the IBA program. Each partner brings their own unique perspectives and strengths to the program. For example, local organizations are often better suited to take the lead on site improvement initiatives at individual IBAs. Provincial and national-level partners can

assist the efforts by applying for financial and in-kind support that is required to carry out the work. Support obtained via provincial- and national-level proposals could benefit multiple IBAs that require similar work.

FAN aims to increase knowledge and understanding of natural history and ecological processes, organize forums for people to engage with nature in the field and promote collaboration among nature clubs and nature-minded people. The IBA program is a good fit for FAN because all of these objectives will be achieved during the program.

Currently, FAN is working to establish, coordinate and

assist the efforts of a network of volunteer caretakers across Alberta. Caretakers could choose to be involved in a variety of work such as working on the ground to increase the profile of IBAs, engage with local people that live near IBAs, count birds and assess habitat conditions at IBAs. An individual, a group of individuals or an organization (such as a nature club) could be caretakers. FAN will also work to help increase the profile of Alberta's IBAs by creating an interactive website that will take people to Alberta's IBAs' virtually. Our technological age is often cited as one of the main reasons that people have lost their connection with nature. In a

Did you know?? From the Peace-Athabasca Delta in the north to the Milk River Canyon in the south, forty-eight IBAs occur across Alberta.

A LIGHT MIST ON MINISTIK LAKE. CHUCK PRIESTLEY



“fight fire with fire” approach, we will use technology to reconnect people. Awareness of IBA sites and the program will be increased by doing presentations at public events, publishing articles and bringing the public and media out for ‘Big Birding Days’.

Delivery of the IBA program is about collaboration and partnership. The program is a coming together of people who feel that birds and the habitats that support their populations are critical. The goal of these

combined efforts is to ensure that people will recognize the importance of the world’s most important places for birds – IBAs – and support efforts to monitor and conserve these sites.

If you would like to learn more about, or participate in, the IBA program please contact Chuck at chuckp@fanweb.ca or 780-427-8124. We would really appreciate hearing from you.

[PART 2] Ministik, Joseph and Oliver Lakes

Located approximately 20km southeast of Edmonton, Ministik, Joseph and Oliver Lakes IBA (see Fig 1) is a great place for birds, wildlife and nature enthusiasts.

One of the best descriptions that we have heard of this place was spoken by Peter Lee a number of years ago when he called the site a ‘real hidden treasure’. It is amazing that such a great place could be so close to large urban centres and remain largely undiscovered.

The site is composed of a number of large lakes and ponds of varying sizes interspersed with forest typical of the Dry Mixedwood Natural Subregion. The area is aspen-dominated and contains a mixed understory (such as rose, cranberry and alder). The rolling topography provides some variety that adds to the enjoyment of visiting the area.

The site was given IBA designation with global significance due to congregations

of large numbers of waterfowl during fall migration (more than 51,000 reported). Other species of note include nesting colonies of American White Pelicans,

Double-crested Cormorants and California Gulls. Soras, Common Goldeneyes, Buffleheads, Red-eyed Vireos, White-breasted Nuthatches, Song Sparrows and Northern Saw-whet Owls also

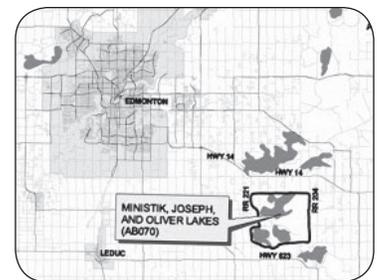


FIG. 1. MARIJANA BIJELIC

AMERICAN COOT. CHUCK PRIESTLEY



frequent the area (to name just a few).

The best access for nature enthusiasts is along the Waskahegan trail. A portion of the 309km-long Waskahegan trail goes through the Ministik Lakes Game Bird Sanctuary. The trail was established, and continues to be maintained, by the Waskahegan Trail Association (see www.waskahegantrail.ca). To get there, travel southeast along highway 14 from Edmonton. Turn south (right) at Range Road 212 and drive for 3.2km until a T-intersection is reached at Township Road 510. Turn east (left) and travel along 510 for approximately 2km until the trailhead is reached on the south (right) side of the road. The trail initially follows the road used by the University of Alberta to access their research facility. This road is pleasant to walk along because it is infrequently driven (it is closed to the public). After about one kilometre the trail leaves the road and continues along a walking path. The Waskahegan trail is marked with yellow plastic

Some of Alberta's IBAs are used by birds during winter. The next edition of 'Eyes on IBAs' will showcase an IBA southeast of Calgary where thousands of waterfowl sometimes spent a good portion of the winter.



MINISTIK LAKE. CHUCK PRIESTLEY

triangles. Watch for these on trees and posts as you travel along the path to ensure that you stay on course.

If you have a chance to visit this IBA or others across the province we would be interested in hearing from you. To do so, please call the FAN office at 780-427-8124 or send an email to Chuck at chuckp@fanweb.ca.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Alberta's Important Bird Areas project would not be possible without generous support from our partners. We thank Alberta Conservation Association, Alberta Sport Recreation Parks and Wildlife Foundation and Nature Canada for their contributions to this program (listed alphabetically).

Ponderables

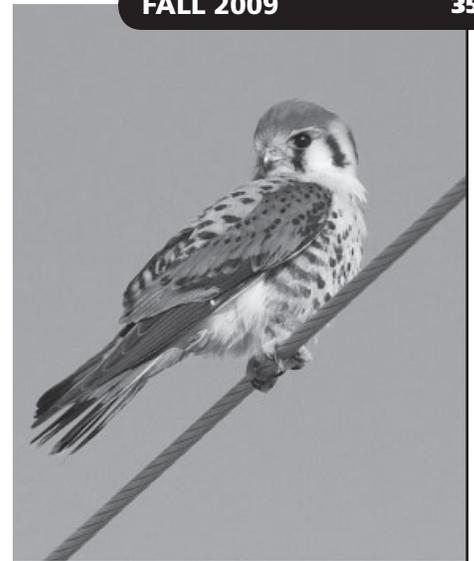
“Use what talent you possess - the woods would be very silent if no birds sang except those that sang best.”

— HENRY VAN DYKE

American Kestrel (*Falco sparverius*):

Nesting Phenology and Fledging Success in Central Alberta

BY LISA TAKATS PRIESTLEY AND EELCO DEGROOT, BEAVERHILL BIRD OBSERVATORY



GERALD ROMANCHUK

The American Kestrel (Falco sparverius) is the smallest and most numerous falcon in North America (Smallwood and Bird 2002).

Kestrels are found in every Natural Region in Alberta (Federation of Alberta Naturalists 2007). This small falcon will nest in tree cavities, woodpecker holes, crevices of buildings, holes in banks, nest boxes, or rarely in old nests of other birds. Three to seven eggs are laid (usually 4 or 5) over a period of 2 or 3 days. Habitats used by American Kestrels include open fields containing widely scattered trees, pastures adjacent to woodland borders, and rural, urban, and suburban areas with structures for perching and artificial nesting sites.

Although American Kestrel populations are considered Secure in Alberta (Alberta SRD 2006), declines in relative abundance were detected in all Natural Regions between 1992 and 2007 (Federation of Alberta Naturalists, 2007). Breeding Bird Survey data indicate that abundance declined in Alberta and Canada between

1995 and 2005 (Sauer *et al.* 2005). There have also been concerns expressed about declines in monitored migrant populations (HMANA 2007). New Jersey's Cape May Bird Observatory numbers of kestrels were 40% below average, and many other stations detected similar declines in 2006. In Florida, the American Kestrel is now listed as threatened (Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission 2008).

In 1988, a volunteer raptor nest card program was initiated by Alberta Sustainable Resource Development (Alberta SRD) to enable raptor banders and researchers to collect information on nest locations of birds of prey. This program developed into the Prairie Nest Record Scheme and Alberta Raptor Nest Card Programs. The Alberta Raptor Nest Card data are stored with Beaverhill Bird Observatory and data is submitted to Alberta SRD and the national Nestwatch

Program run by Bird Studies Canada. The Beaverhill Bird Observatory has been analyzing the phenology of a variety of raptor species from data collected in the nest card program (Priestley 2005a, Priestley 2005b, Priestley 2008, Priestley, unpubl.). This paper addresses the timing of nesting and fledging success of American Kestrels nesting in central Alberta, based on nest banding data collected between 1992 and 2008.

METHODS

The study area was located in central Alberta (latitudes 52.50 to 54.60, longitudes 110.50 to 114.2), surrounding the city of Edmonton. Nests were located in the aspen parkland and boreal ecoregions. Nests were located by one or more of: 1) visiting known nestboxes; 2) looking for pairs of birds on territory in the spring; or 3) through contact with landowners who found pairs or

nests on their land. For each nest, banders collected information on nest type (natural cavity or man-made), nest height, tree height, nest habitat, and banding data including an estimate of the age (in days) of the young at banding (Bent 1938, Boal 1994, Pyle 1997). All data from nest cards were entered into Microsoft Excel for analysis.

The estimated date of hatching was calculated by subtracting the age (in days) of the oldest-aged young from the date of banding. Laying date was estimated by subtracting the number of days required for incubation from the estimated hatch date. Fledging date was estimated by adding the number of days required for fledging to the estimated hatch date. The time required for incubation and fledging was determined as the largest number of days reported in the literature, since there is little information from Alberta. The estimated number of days needed for

FIG. 1. Estimated egg laying dates of the American Kestrel in central Alberta 1992 to 2008.

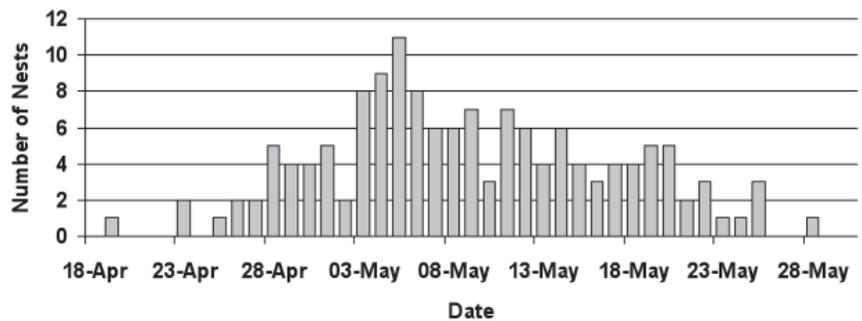
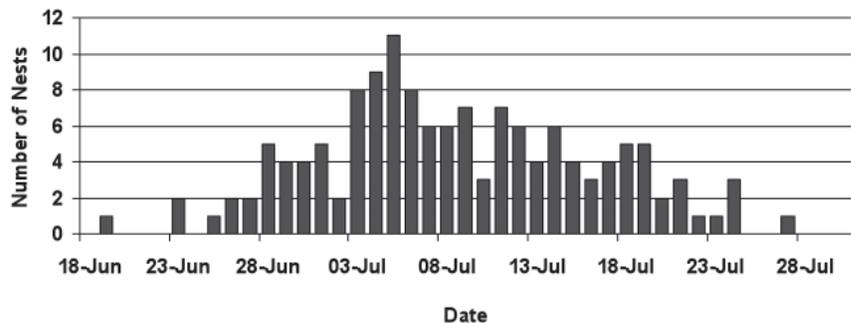


FIG. 2. Estimated fledge dates of American Kestrel nestlings in central Alberta 1992-2008.



incubation and fledging used for this paper were 31 and 31 days respectively (Smallwood and Bird 2002).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

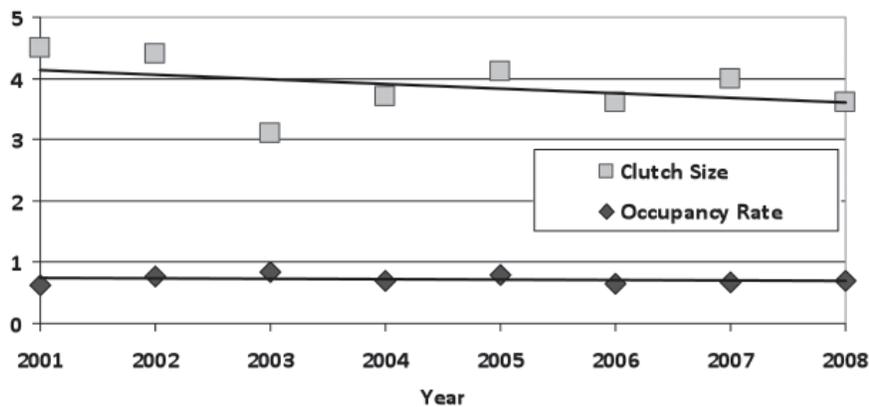
Of 156 American Kestrel nest records, 145 included estimated nestling age. Only 10 nests were from before the year 2000. In 2001 a more intensive nestbox project was initiated with more than 20 boxes being erected (DeGroot, pers. comm.). Five nests were in natural cavities and the remaining 140 were in nestboxes. The earliest estimated date for egg laying was April 19 and the latest was May 28 with an average egg laying date of May 8 (Fig 1). The average estimated hatching date was June 8 and the estimated fledging date was July 8 (Fig 2). Bird and Palmer (1988) reported American Kestrels

visited nest cavities in Montreal as early as the end of February. The range of dates for clutch initiation in Saskatchewan is reported to be April 30 to June 18 with the peak around May 20 (Bortolotti, unpubl. data). American Kestrels in Alberta nest earlier than those in Saskatchewan.

Of the 145 nests, 19 failed (no young fledged) and 126 were considered successful (one or more young ready to fledge at banding time). Four nest failures were caused by the tree falling or the nestbox being sheared off the tree. Most nest failures (89%) occurred during the egg stage of nesting. Clutch size averaged 3.9 (range 0 to 6), however, successful nests had an average of 4.4 young that were banded (considered ready to fledge). Many nests that had 4 or fewer young had addled eggs in them.



FIG. 3. Average clutch size of young at time of banding, years 2001 to 2008.



Nestboxes from 2001 through 2008 have been consistently checked and monitored (DeGroot, unpublished data). Average clutch size declined slightly between 2001 and 2008; however occupancy rates remained fairly stable.

Data on primary demographic parameters (productivity and survivorship) are needed to determine the factors responsible for population declines in these birds and to identify conservation and management actions to reverse the declines (Alberta SRD 2001, Desante 1995). Raptors such as the

American Kestrel can be affected by anthropogenic disturbances, particularly during the nesting season. Overall data from migration counts, Christmas Bird Counts, and Breeding Bird Surveys suggest substantial declines in populations of American Kestrels across North America, so there is some conservation concern (HMANA 2007). Nests of American Kestrels need to be protected from excessive disturbance from the end of April through to the end of July. Further, young American Kestrels are observed re-entering nest cavity for roosting for up to

12 d after fledging (Balgooyen 1976), therefore protection could extend to mid-August.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Funding from Alberta Ecotrust, Alberta Conservation Association, Alberta Sustainable Resource Development, Alberta Sport, Recreation, Parks and Wildlife Foundation, and Beaverhill Bird Observatory is greatly appreciated. The new raptor nest card template was produced in cooperation with Alberta Sustainable Resource Development, Canadian Wildlife Service, Federation of Alberta



A KESTREL FLIES OFF WITH A MOUSE IN ITS TALONS. ROB MCKAY



"Frog Legs Anyone?"

BY STEVEN STRYDE

On July 16, 2008 I was fortunate enough to have captured an American Kestrel landing on a utility line at the west end of the Fort McMurray Airport. The Kestrel flew up from the ground holding a frog and, once perched on the wire, proceeded to bite the head. After I snapped six pictures, the bird flew off still grasping the frog. The title I chose for the photos was "Frog Legs Anyone?" Upon forwarding the photos to the bird club, I was encouraged to forward them FAN for *Nature Alberta*.

I used a Canon 20D with a Canon 100-400 mm lens.

I have been part of the Wood Buffalo Wild Bird Club in Fort McMurray for the last 7 years. I am an avid photographer of flora, fauna, and landscapes.



Naturalists, and Bird Studies Canada and is available on Beaverhill Bird Observatory's website at www.beaverhillbirds.com/bboraptorsnests.htm. We thank Ray Cromie, Al DeGroot, Rick Morse, Hardy Pletz, and Violet Pletz for their data contributions. We also thank Geoff Holroyd for his comments on an earlier draft of the paper. The continuing cooperation of landowners is of great value to this program.

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Ponderables

“There are only two ways to live your life. One is as though nothing is a miracle. The other is as though everything is a miracle.”

— ALBERT EINSTEIN

CELESTIAL HAPPENINGS

Starry Nights

Fall/Winter: November to January

BY JOHN MCFAUL



FEATURED CONSTELLATIONS – PISCES AND ARIES

Pisces and Aries are two more members of the Zodiac. This is the group of 12 constellations of antiquity that the path of the Sun goes through on its yearly journey of our sky. Pisces is the constellation in which the Sun is located at the vernal equinox when spring returns to the northern hemisphere. Some 2000 years ago, when the zodiac was defined, the Sun was in the constellation Aries at the time of the vernal equinox. Astrologers still refer to the vernal equinox as “The First Point of Aries”.

Pisces – The Fishes are depicted as two fish with their tails connected together by a cord. One story tells of Venus and her son Cupid diving into the sea or the waters of the Euphrates River to escape the terrible Typhon. This monster could live in fire, but not water. Venus and Cupid tied themselves together with the cord to prevent being separated in the dark waters.

It is thought by some that Jupiter and Saturn were very close together in Pisces at the time of the birth of Christ. Thus they may have been the Star of Bethlehem.

Aries – The Ram lies just to the east of Pisces. There are a variety of Greek/Roman myths associated with this constellation. The most common one cited is that of the rescue of Phrixos and Helle who were the children of King Athamas and the goddess Nephele. Their

stepmother devised a scheme to have them killed. At the last moment Nephele sent a ram with the Golden Fleece to rescue them. Later the Golden Fleece became the object sought after by Jason and the Argonauts.

CELESTIAL HAPPENINGS

Sun: Rise - Nov. 1 (07:34 MST), Dec. 1 (08:28 MST), Jan. 1 (08:50 MST)
Set - Nov. 1 (17:00 MST), Dec. 1 (16:18 MST), Jan. 1 (16:25 MST)
Times are for Edmonton. Autumnal Equinox Sept. 22nd

Moon: Full – Nov. 2nd, Dec. 2nd, Dec. 31 (Blue Moon), Jan. 29th
New - Nov. 16th, Dec. 16th, Jan. 15th

Planets: **Mercury** can be seen low in the SE sky just before sunrise in January.

Venus may be visible in the eastern sky just before sunrise in early November.

Mars will be high in the southern sky before sunrise. The moon will be near Mars on Nov. 8th, Dec. 6th and Jan 3rd.

Jupiter lies low above the south-western horizon in the evening sky. The planet Neptune is near Jupiter for most of this time, especially on Dec. 19th. The crescent Moon passes close to Jupiter on Nov. 23rd, Dec. 20 and Jan. 17th.

Saturn continues as a morning object high in the Southern sky in the Constellation Leo from November to January. The Moon is near Saturn on the mornings of Nov. 12th, Dec. 9th and Jan 6th.

Meteor Shower: Watch for the Leonids on November 17th, the Geminids on December 13th and the Quadrantids on Jan 3rd.

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

It's Autumn!

BY DENNIS BARESCO

Autumn '09 began with the September 22 Fall Equinox and ends on December 21 when the Winter Solstice begins.

From a natural perspective, “autumn” is deceiving. Generally, we picture autumn in our minds as leaves turning colour and then falling, birds migrating, crisper winds, shortened daylight.

Yet, by Sept 22, almost all the shorebirds are already long gone and many songbirds have taken flight south or are on their way – to be gone before

autumn is even a month old. Except for the odd first-year male, Richardson’s Ground Squirrels are fast asleep. The days have been getting shorter for three months – though admittedly, they will keep shortening for yet another three months! And many places in Alberta, particularly in the mountains, will have had one or more blasts of winter.

Even before autumn ends on Dec 21, no one will remember those pictures in our minds because the only birds will be “winter” birds. The trees will be bare and the winds bitter. The weather may well be freezing, blizzardy, snowy. Winter will have eagerly intruded on autumn’s territory.

Autumn is lovely, without a doubt – it’s just that it’s over long before it ends!

Autumn sayings:

“Autumn is the eternal corrective. It is ripeness and color and a time of maturity; but it is also breadth, and depth, and distance. What man can stand with autumn on a hilltop and fail to see the span of his world and the meaning of the rolling hills that reach to the far horizon?”

HAL BORLAND

“I love autumn. I love watching the leaves fall. It reminds me of the Toronto Maple Leafs.”

UNKNOWN

“Bittersweet October. The mellow, messy, leaf-kicking, perfect pause between the opposing miseries of summer and winter.”

CAROL BISHOP HIPPS

“No spring nor summer beauty hath such grace As I have seen in one autumnal face.”

JOHN DONNE



Sage Grouse Then and Now

BY DAWN DICKINSON

It was early May and I had forgotten how beautiful the prairies are in Spring. After a winter at university in Vancouver, I had a summer job in 1968 as field assistant to a wildlife biologist in Lethbridge.

My first task was to count male Sage Grouse (*Centrocercus urophasianus*) displaying on some traditional leks (mating grounds) in southeastern Alberta.

I had driven on gravel roads through miles of almost uninterrupted grasslands – a ranch gate here and there, an occasional glimpse of distant ranch buildings or hayfields. It was a lonely land, but there were shorebirds and waterfowl on every sparkling slough; there was the sound of

snow-melt water running in small creeks and of the wind, bringing with it a sense of immense distances.

I had met with a rancher in the early evening, whose land contained one of the larger known leks. He was wearing a gun on his hip, which was not exactly a common practice in the 1960's even in the wilds of southeastern Alberta. I followed his truck along a rough trail to a grassy ridge from which he showed me the

lek, out on some sage flats. He also directed me where best to park my government vehicle so that the sun would be behind me when it rose and I would have a clear view of the grouse. Then he left and in a little while, the only sounds were prairie sounds and the only lights were stars.

In the growing darkness I could see nothing clearly, but I heard occasionally some weird poppings and rustlings and gurglings from out there on the flats. It was





GREATER SAGE-GROUSE HEN. GERALD ROMANCHUK

mysterious and somehow eerie, as if these lands were haunted by small, disembodied voices. Several hours later, as the sky started to pale, the frequency of these sounds increased and some shadowy shapes took form. And when it was light enough to see the entire lek clearly, I counted and recounted 78 mature males. And then the sun rose and its slanting light shone on the brilliant white feathers and dark plumage around the birds' yellow air sacs as these were inflated and deflated. The sight of so many strange-looking birds making such weird sounds in those remote grasslands was awe-inspiring.

Seventy eight males on a single lek in Alberta in 1968 was more

than the total number of males (70) counted on leks throughout Alberta in 1994 and more than the total of 66 males counted in Alberta in 2009. By 1998, the population had plummeted and the Greater Sage-grouse* had been classed in Canada as endangered. A Canadian Sage Grouse Recovery team was formed in 1997 to draft a recovery strategy for the species. The team released its report in 2001. Two years later, in 2003, the Species at Risk Act (SARA) was passed which stipulated that recovery strategies had to be developed for endangered species within a given time limit. These strategies were required to identify habitat critical to maintaining populations of species that were at immediate risk of extinction.

The *Canadian Sage Grouse Recovery Strategy* report of 2001 was then updated in 2006, but the authors of the revised report decided to not identify any critical habitat in spite of the Act's requirement that this be done to the extent possible by June 2006. Since Environment Canada had failed to meet deadlines for identifying critical habitat for other endangered species, EcoJustice (formerly Sierra Legal Defence Fund) took the minister of environment to court at the request of Alberta Wilderness Association, Federation of Alberta Naturalists, Grasslands Naturalists, Nature Saskatchewan, and the Wilderness Committee. The case was heard before Justice Zinn in Vancouver in July 2009 and the judge ruled that the applicants be granted a judicial review.

This ruling set a legal precedent requiring the Minister to follow the SARA requirements for mapping critical habitat in recovery strategies. These strategies have to be completed for all endangered species in Canada, within a specified time-frame.

***EDITOR'S NOTE:**

The English name Sage Grouse was changed several years ago when the species was split into two: the Gunnison Sage-grouse (those occurring within the Gunnison Valley in Utah and Colorado) and the Greater Sage-grouse (also spelled Greater Sage-Grouse). The Latin name stayed the same for the Greater Sage-grouse.

Herring Gull Actively Hunting Ducks

BY DICK DEKKER



At Beaverhill Lake on Wednesday May 13/09, I saw a Herring Gull make a long series of attacks on swimming ducks, flushing them from the water and pursuing them vigorously.

The first instance happened while I was watching the mating behaviour of half a dozen Shovelers: five drakes and one hen. This was not the usual “raping party”, but the female appeared to be actively seeking out one of the drakes, staying close at his side and continually bobbing her head, until they were rudely disturbed.

A Herring Gull flying at an altitude of perhaps 30 metres described a half circle around the ducks and suddenly swooped steeply down at them, aiming for the hen. She flushed and managed to just stay ahead by one body length until she gained enough speed to out-fly the attacker.

I followed this gull in the binoculars for about 25 minutes as it flew back and forth over the expanse of shallow water in the east bay of the lake. It made some 15 attacks on ducks until it eventually descended in the

distance. Some time later, I again saw a large gull flush ducks in the above aggressive manner. Also, groups of Avocets were quick to rise and get out of the way.

It is well-known that swimming ducks commonly flee at the approach of large gulls and that gulls scavenge on dead waterfowl. In addition, I have seen them follow hunting Peregrines and retrieve downed sandpipers before the falcon has a chance to turn around. On the west coast, I once saw a sneaky Glaucous-winged Gull swim close to feeding Dunlins and seize one in its bill, to swallow it whole, still alive and flapping its wings. But to see a large gull actively and repeatedly hunt ducks was new to me. Perhaps others are aware of similar predatory behaviour?

On May 25, at Cooking Lake, I observed another incident involving

a large gull. Swimming some distance from shore, it was hacking away at the floating remains of a duck-sized bird. Looking through the 60x telescope, I could see the top of the bloody carcass, as well as the diagnostic features of the gull. Its huge yellow bill with the red tip on the lower mandible and its light (accipiter-like) eye distinguished it from the California Gull, which has dark eyes.

It is possible that the above observation was a case of scavenging. However, in view of what I had seen two weeks earlier, it seems quite possible that the gull had actually seized and killed its prey.



Got Guides?

You see a bird – or butterfly – that you don't recognize and what's the first thing you do? Pull out your trusty field guide, naturally. That's what helps you develop your identification and knowledge skills. It works with anyone who has a field guide. Lack of field guides is a problem for local people in Latin America who, though they may have a real interest in wildlife and data gathering, simply can't afford guides. If you have any field guides – language doesn't matter – that are collecting dust, send them to the Audubon Society at the address below. They and their Latin American partners will be excited to receive your donations and will definitely put them to good use. For more information about Audubon's program, go to www.audubon.org/bird/IAP.

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FIELD TRIPS!

SEE SNOW GOOSE CHASE
STORY ON PAGE 14.
GERALD ROMANCHUK



SEE IMPORTANT BIRD AREAS STORY ON PAGE 31. CHUCK PRIESTLEY



Nature *gallery*



TWO MALE GREATER SAGE-GROUSE; SEE STORY ON PAGE 41. GORDON COURT



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