

Nature Alberta

C E L E B R A T I N G O U R N A T U R A L H E R I T A G E



A BLACK-CAPPED CHICKADEE ENJOYING THE SEASON! SEE THE FEATURE STORY (PAGE 22). LEN PETTITT

feature article

Winter Wild!



CAPE MAY WARBLER; SEE THE STORY, "LATE WARBLERS" PG 26.
RON DONNELLY



YELLOW-RUMPED WARBLER; SEE THE STORY, "NATURE DIARY" PG 10.
DEBBIE GODKIN

WESTERN Tanager; SEE THE STORY, "NATURE DIARY" PG 10.
DEBBIE GODKIN



*Nature Alberta:
Celebrating our natural heritage*

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11759 GROAT ROAD, EDMONTON, AB T5M 3K6
PHONE. 780.427.8124 FAX. 780.422.2663
EMAIL. na@naturealberta.ca

EDITOR. **DENNIS BARESCO**
EMAIL. **na@naturealberta.ca**
CIRCULATION. **TED HINDMARCH**
LAYOUT. **BROKEN ARROW SOLUTIONS INC.**

THANKS TO THE PROOFREADERS WHO ASSISTED IN PRODUCING THIS ISSUE:
IAN FOSS, SANDRA FOSS, ELAINE GERMYN, SUZANNE LORINCZI,
VAL SCHOLEFIELD, JUNE VERMEULEN.

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Nature Alberta 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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T6G 2T5

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Editor's Page

BY DENNIS BARESCO

FOLLOWING GORDON GEKKO

"The question is: In the wake of progress, can its natural beauty hold out?"

This was a comment in the *Globe & Mail* "Travel" section on Saturday November 24th, in an article by Cliff Lee called "Making Malaysia."

The comment indicates a rather perverted confusion about "progress" that saturates the mainstream media, government and business – the hard and fast decree that progress everywhere is good and inevitable, while natural beauty everywhere is a luxury and of no meaningful value. Granted, the question wouldn't have the same convincing effect if it was: "In the wake of avarice and exploitation, can natural beauty hold out?"

Referring to nature as "natural beauty" illustrates how propagandists can subtly twist a person's thinking. Beauty, it is insinuated, is merely aesthetics; it should never stand in the way of jobs, economic advancement, growth and prosperity. The fact is that when the word progress is used, it's almost exclusively referring to money-making; the progress of society, humanity and intellect is given short shrift. That "nature" provides hundreds of billions of dollars of economic benefits annually and that our existence depends on it is also

given short shrift by those who consider only their own personal and immediate gratification.

And so we get "Jobs, Growth and Prosperity," the spin-doctored name of the federal 2012 omnibus bill (ludicrously referred to as a budget bill) and the catch-phrase of the mega-millions of dollars advertising campaign by the Harperite Government. Granted, it would not have had the same convincing effect if it was more accurately called the "Extermination of Science, Society and the Environment" bill.

And so we get an almost maniacal obsession with exploiting every last natural resource and every drop of gas and oil, and damn the consequences. We can cheerfully allow the potential polluting and destroying of almost every single water body in Canada (see "Alberta Issues: What Water Bodies are Federally Protected in Alberta?" page 8).

But all that is okay. After all, as Gordon Gekko said in the movie *Wall Street*: "Greed, for lack of a better word, is good. Greed is right."

NSWA ATLAS AVAILABLE

The North Saskatchewan Watershed Alliance (NSWA) has a new publication: *Atlas of the North Saskatchewan River Watershed*.

The Atlas is intended to provide a broad overview of the watershed, its natural attributes and the nature

of human activities affecting it. It is intended as an educational product for watershed residents as well as a fundraiser for the NSWA. Copies are available for \$35 each at the North Saskatchewan Watershed Alliance, 9504-49 Street, Edmonton, T6B 2M9, www.nswa.ab.ca.

EALT TO PRESERVE NEW LANDS

The Edmonton and Area Land Trust (EALT) has secured another conservation property thanks to the generosity of an anonymous donor. It's a terrific wooded area, adjacent to Pipestone Creek, which was slated for a country residential subdivision. The EALT, a Registered Charity, uses donations to support the securement of land, monitoring, interpretation and education about the land. Visit their website at www.ealt.ca for further information.

BLOGS

One could spend all their waking hours reading blogs, even if limiting it to those about nature. Two of my favourites are John Marriott's Wildlife Photography Blog (<http://blog.wildernessprints.com>), to which I'm subscribed, and Ryan Heavy Head's journal (<http://akayokaki.blogspot.com>), an excerpt of which is a regular feature of *Nature Alberta*.

I mention this because Nature Alberta recently got a request to post a blog article (or link to it)

on our website. For a variety of good reasons, that's something we avoid doing. Still, since I enjoyed the writing style, the informality, the personality and feel of the writing (which is an engaging mixture of nature, recreation and social comment), I thought I'd mention it in case you'd like to check it out. The author is Aspen Gainer (who lists herself as "Professional Writer"); the blog is at <http://inthewildspaces.wordpress.com/>.

CORRECTION:

In the Fall 2012 Feature Story, the credits for the three photos in the "Hazards of Monitoring!" section (page 29) were deleted. Susanne Maidment took the photo of the cows around the car; Wim and Marijke Jalink took the other two photos: of the squirrel in the nestbox; and the deep snow almost burying a nestbox. Our apologies for the omission.

MEA CULPA (AGAIN!)

If this winter edition of *Nature Alberta* seems late, it's because it is. Your Editor's computer gave up the ghost in early January, and it wasn't until mid-February that the new computer was up and running, files (photos, articles, emails) extracted and available for use – and then the hassle of using a new Word program.



On the Covers:



FRONT COVER

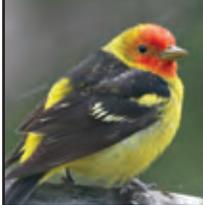
Black-capped Chickadees are certainly one of the best-known, friendliest and easiest to attract birds at our Alberta feeders. W. Earl Godfrey, in *Birds of Canada*, got it right when he wrote: "Whoever saw a dejected chickadee? ... the chickadee is the personification of cheerfulness and good nature." Looking at Len Pettitt's photo, you can almost hear it chuckling, *chicka-dee-dee-dee!*



INSIDE FRONT COVER

It always pays to have a camera on hand, even during the winter. Assuming you can contain your excitement and remain steady-handed at the sight of an unexpected visitor, you could catch the proof to show that, yes... that is a Cape May Warbler and a Wilson's Warbler – or

in Debbie Godkin's case, a Yellow-rumped Warbler and a Western Tanager. See "Late Warblers" (page 26) and Godkins' "Nature Diary" (page 10).



INSIDE BACK COVER

In addition to the lovely photos making up the "Cover Story," Ryan Heavy Head's Cottontail and Paul Horsley's Porcupine illustrate just how unique and dramatic winter wildlife watching can be. Meanwhile, John Warden's autumn photo, as part of his column in this issue (see

"Inspiration" page 18), concentrates on the sky to highlight this inspiring landscape.



BACK COVER

Edmontonian Ewen Clark has a strong interest in amateur wildlife and landscape photography. His shot of two Mountain Goats and their surroundings – the rocks and snow, sprigs of vegetation – is beautiful and deserves to be highlighted in the "Nature gallery"! The photo was taken with a Canon Digital Rebel XTi w/ Sigma 70-300mm at F7.1, 1/400 Sec. Iso 200.

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Journal now Online

Volume 2 Issue 1 of the open-access *Canadian Wildlife Biology & Management* is now available online at <http://cwbm.ca>. All papers have been refereed, revised and published within 6 months of their original submission. Under *Archives*, you can also view Volume 1 Issue 1 (2012).

This new Journal reflects our aim to help wildlife professionals and naturalists report their findings, encourage more field work on wildlife populations, habitats and behavior, and provide managers with recommendations for state-of-the-art conservation programs.

Do not hesitate to contact me if you have questions or comments, or if you wish to submit a paper for publication.

GILBERT PROULX, PHD, EDITOR-IN-CHIEF
Tel: 780-464-5228
Email: gproulx@alphawildlife.ca

Sandhill Crane Hunt

It has come to my attention that a Sandhill Crane season in Alberta is proposed in the amendments to the Migratory Birds Seasons in 2013. Such a season in Alberta was proposed in 2009 and rejected. I was opposed at the time and can see no reason for reconsideration.

I am opposed to any Alberta Sandhill Crane hunt, now or at any time in the future. Any such hunt would be ill-considered, not only for the cranes which have an extremely low reproductive rate and subsequent recruitment to their population, but also for the public viewpoint that it would cast on hunting and hunters in Alberta. The nearest example that I know of a hunted species with such a low reproductive potential (yet still higher than that of the crane) is the sage grouse. The hunt which existed

for them resulted in a continuous decline in populations with the species ultimately being listed as an endangered species. The sage grouse now teeters on the brink of extirpation in Canada.

We talk of hunting opportunities, yet why would we need to add the crane to the list when we enjoy huge surpluses of the goose species and nearly unlimited hunting opportunities already? I have been a hunter all of my adult life, the most of which I have spent employed as a waterfowl biologist, and quite frankly, the concept of crane hunting in Alberta appalls me. Proponents of the hunt have stated that government documents note that only two of the endangered Whooping Crane have been shot by hunters in Saskatchewan in four decades of hunting, yet 34 of the endangered Whoopers

disappeared in the fall of 2008 alone during the southward migration. How many of those were shot but never reported?

While it is true that the hunts elsewhere to date do not appear to have endangered the crane populations, any additional mortality would be cumulative. In the *Status and Harvests of Sandhill Cranes 2012* it is stated that "Compared to increases recorded in the 1970's, annual indices to abundance of the Mid-Continent Population (MCP) of Sandhill Cranes have been relatively stable since the early 1980's." This report goes on to state that "The long-term (1982-2008) trends for the MCP indicate that harvest has been increasing at a higher rate than population growth." This would appear to indicate that a negative population growth trend has already been established

without the existence of any Alberta hunt.

It has been stated that a hunt in eastern Alberta would not affect the sensitive population that nests in the northern boreal forest. These birds, the Canada Sandhill or *Grus canadensis rowani*, have never been the subject of scientific study and in reality the migratory pathways are ill-defined at best. However, as nearly all northern sandhills follow a northwest to southeast fall migration route, it is most probable that these birds do stage in the major concentration sites in eastern Alberta alongside the Lesser Sandhills, the area where the hunt is proposed. No scientific study of Alberta Sandhill Crane populations has been carried out, and virtually nothing is known about the biology of this species in Alberta.

The *Northern Prairie and Parkland Waterbird Conservation Plan* (2004) identifies several research needs with respect to the Sandhill Crane, mostly centering on determining factors influencing recruitment to the population. How can we categorize a species as safe when we do not even understand these factors? It is far easier to continue to protect what should be a protected species, than it would be to discontinue any hunt once a season has become established. Again the Alberta [Greater] Sage Grouse comes to mind. Please do not allow this potentially dangerous crane hunt.

THOMAS (TOM) S. SADLER
STRATHMORE, ALBERTA



A Big Thank You!

I would like to extend a big Thank You to all our volunteers at the February Hypothermic Half Marathon. It is because of you that the event was a success. It was a beautiful day for the race and we had a wonderful turn-out.

This race is an important fundraising event for Nature Alberta and, in addition to showcasing excellent athleticism,

the race demonstrates that we can all get outside, enjoy the outdoors and be active, even in the middle of winter.

Don't forget to check out Nature Alberta on our website at www.naturealberta.ca.

Again, thank you everyone,
CHRISTINE BROWN, NATURE ALBERTA,
HYPOTHERMIC HALF VOLUNTEER
COORDINATOR

ALBERTA ISSUES IN BRIEF

Sandhill Crane Hunt

At the behest of Alberta Fish and Game Association, the Alberta Government is yet again trying to initiate a Lesser Sandhill Crane (*Grus canadensis canadensis*) hunt, with a daily allowable shoot of five birds. The hunt dates (Sept through Dec) would be consistent with waterfowl seasons and in an area roughly from central Alberta south to the US border and the eastern two-thirds of the province. The hunt would be in Wildlife Management Units which the government hopes would avoid contact with Greater (or Canada) Sandhill Cranes (*Grus canadensis*

rowanii) as well as Whooping Cranes.

A Lesser Sandhill Crane hunt has been suggested for roughly a half-century; it was last ruled out in 2009. Nature Alberta, along with many other groups, was opposed at that time, and still is. The reasons for our opposition are many, perhaps one of the more significant being misidentification by hunters with other cranes. While a very small amount of the meat is edible, the main reason for the proposed hunt seems to be simply to add another species to



PAUL HORSLEY

the game list. It should be noted that, at this point, the population numbers are high enough to support a well-managed hunt. For more detail, see Tom Sadler's "Letter to the Editor" page 4.

The story of Caribou policy in action, or is that inaction

[Taken from an Environmental Law Centre (Alberta) Post of January 29, 2013, by Jason Unger]

A recent story of a road being built in the Little Smokey Caribou range reflects the provincial government's narrative of the demise of a species. It reflects a disconnect between policy and action, both federally and provincially, and indicates an inability on the part of the government to come to terms with habitat needs of a species.

The recommendations of the Woodland Caribou Recovery Team – for a moratorium on further mineral and timber allocations in caribou ranges – were rejected by governments,

which then disbanded the Team. The story becomes clear: a proclamation of balancing environmental protection with economic development is revealed as a falsehood; attempts to meaningfully protect habitat are isolated to small portions of the province. Governments are unwilling or unable to proclaim that, practically speaking, the outcome of their Caribou policies, as implemented, will result in the extirpation of some herds. Short of a display of miraculous adaptability on the Caribou's part, herds will be gone.

According to the proposed federal recovery strategy, the range of the Little Smokey herd has

95% habitat disturbance (with buffers included). The recently published federal recovery strategy aims at having habitat disturbance at 35%, and this only results in a 60% chance that the caribou herd will become self-sustaining. There are no legal provisions protecting Caribou habitat (or critical habitat) that currently apply to provincial lands (although the federal government could theoretically step in). The federal recovery strategy relies on provincial policies to reach the 35% disturbance goal.

There is 95% habitat disturbance; what's one more road? The end of the story appears clear.

CEMA Funding Pulled, then Restored

Last year, the OSDG (the Oil Sands Developers Group, made up of companies involved in tarsands mining) announced that they would halve funding for the Cumulative Environmental Management Association (CEMA), with a view to immediately review the agency, then shut it down. CEMA was started in 2001 to develop policies to reduce air and water pollution and protect wildlife, and produces technical reports on safe storage of the toxic tailings ponds.

The announcement came as a surprise to (and angered) many; the \$5-million annual budget was but a drop in the proverbial bucket to the industry. Fortunately, Environment Minister Diana McQueen intervened, resulting in the restoration of the funding.

In an *Edmonton Journal* article (by Sheila Pratt, Dec 19th, 2012), Minister McQueen said that the restoring of the funds “is an important signal for me and Albertans and industry as well’ of the continued importance of CEMA’s work in helping to devise strong environmental policy.” Ms. McQueen announced that her department would initiate a review of what policy issues CEMA needs to address.

The same *Edmonton Journal* article stated: “CEMA executive director Glen Semenchuk said he’s ‘surprised and pleased’ with McQueen’s handling of the situation and the speedy reversal by the oilsands group. ‘The review will force everyone to sit down at the table and see what needs to



be done and who will do it,’ Semenchuk said.”

Whether CEMA’s funding will continue in 2014 depends on the review.

However, it is hoped that its work will continue and the “strong environmental policy” mentioned by Ms. McQueen will not be abandoned for any reason.

2012 Fall Report of the Commissioner of the Environment and Sustainable Development

The Fall Report from the federal Commissioner of the Environment and Sustainable Development was released in February. The Question reported on: Is environmental protection keeping pace with economic development? The Commissioner stated, in his introduction:

“It is vital from an economic perspective that Canada’s environmental protections keep pace with economic development. In this report, we found a number of encouraging practices, but also numerous shortcomings. When combined with our previous reports and viewed in the context of the risks and challenges posed by increasing development, these shortcomings leave me concerned that environmental protection is failing to keep pace with economic development.”

The Commissioner, Scott Vaughan, was being overly diplomatic in that assessment. The report examines the federal environmental programs and activities which are supposed to “help ensure that natural resource development is both responsible and sustainable.” In a nutshell, one could say that the Commissioner has found the opposite. You can read the Commissioner’s findings and get links to the full report at: www.oag-bvg.gc.ca/internet/English/parl_cesd_201212_00_e_37709.html. Mr. Vaughan has resigned from his post two years before the end of his term. He will become the President and CEO of the International Institute for Sustainable Development based in Manitoba.

What Water Bodies are Federally Protected in Alberta?

Not many any more, is the short answer – five, to be exact. As part of the systematic destruction of environmental protection across Canada, the federal government has essentially eliminated protection for almost all – literally thousands of – water bodies by removing them from the now eliminated Navigable Waters Protection Act. The new Act – called the Navigation Protection Act – now lists, only 97 lakes, the three oceans and 62 creeks, rivers and canals as protected – or, considering pipelines were previously removed from the Act's scope, sort of protected.

The Alberta lake and rivers identified in the Navigation Protection Act are:

- Lake Athabasca (includes the mouths of connecting waterways)



NORTH SASKATCHEWAN RIVER. THINKSTOCK.COM

- Athabasca River (from the confluence with the Whirlpool River to Lake Athabasca)
- Peace River (from Williston Lake to the Slave River)
- South Saskatchewan River (from its confluence of the Bow and Oldman Rivers to the confluence with the North Saskatchewan River)
- North Saskatchewan River (from the confluence with the Ram River to the confluence with the South Saskatchewan River)

And that is it! Note that the waters that feed these water bodies are not listed.

The federal government claims that water bodies will still be

protected through four other acts: the Canadian Environmental Assessment Act 2012, the Canadian Environmental Protection Act, the Species at Risk Act, and the Fisheries Act. However, since those Acts have been (or are being) gutted as well, saying that they will provide protection is nothing more than spin. It is now up to the provinces and municipalities to protect their future.

Why the changes? The answer was given in a *Postmedia News* article: "Transport Minister Denis Lebel suggested that the changes could ease the burden on companies seeking approval on new industrial projects such as oilsands development or mining extraction."

New Study Implicates Pesticide Use for Grassland Birds Decline

A new study led by a preeminent Canadian toxicologist identifies acutely toxic pesticides as the most likely leading cause of the widespread decline in grassland bird numbers in the United States. The study was conducted by Dr. Pierre Mineau, recently retired from Environment Canada, and Mélanie Whiteside of Health Canada.

"What this study suggests is that we need to start paying a lot more attention to the use of pesticides

if we want to reverse, halt or simply slow the very significant downward trend in grassland bird populations," said Dr. Mineau. "Our study put the spotlight on acutely toxic insecticides used in our cropland starting after the Second World War and persisting to this day – albeit at a lower level. The data suggest that loss of birds in agricultural fields is more than an unfortunate consequence of pest control; it may drive bird populations to local extinction."

You can read the article (from which the above was taken) on the Focusing on Wildlife website: <http://focusingonwildlife.com/news/new-study-finds-pesticides-leading-cause-of-grassland-bird-declines/>



HORNED LARK AND CHICKS. MIDDLETON EVANS



Water Matters

Abundant, clean water for people, and for the healthy ecosystems on which we all depend, is a basic need and priority of Albertans.

Across the province's watersheds, from the tapped out river basins in the southwest to the industrial pressures of the northeast, Albertans are increasingly concerned about the future of their water. Take a moment to think of the ways that you relate to water in your life. How confident are you that your water needs will be acknowledged and addressed as Alberta continues to grow and develop over the next decade?

Water Matters is a voice for watershed protection in Alberta. As a registered charitable organization, we:

- conduct and promote timely and leading edge research and investigation;
- provide and support outreach and education programs;
- advance initiatives for watershed health; and
- work with others concerned about the protection of watersheds.

Two highly successful projects were undertaken in 2012. In "*Community Conversations on Headwaters Health in the Oldman River Basin*," Water Matters built a unique model of community

involvement and led workshops across the Oldman Basin engaging local residents, landowners, municipal officials and business people in dialogue about local water uses, health and activities that impact headwaters integrity. Delivered in partnership with the Oldman Watershed Council (OWC), the information will add critical local knowledge to OWC's Headwaters Action Plan for furthering on-the-ground stewardship of this important source water area in Alberta. A second phase of community workshops will occur in Feb/Mar of 2013, identifying headwaters stewardship successes and priorities.

The "*Water Policy Dialogues: Instream Flow Needs and Water Allocation*" project developed progressive policy options for incorporating instream flow needs protection into water management in Alberta to ensure long-term ecosystem health. The recommendations and tools were informed by interviews with key stakeholders, experts and decision-makers across Alberta.

Consider a donation to Water Matters as your way of advancing progressive action on water issues in Alberta. Call the office at (403) 538-7785; email Carlos R. Garcia (carlos@water-matters.org); or donate online through our website. To learn more Water Matters, please visit www.water-matters.org.

Our research also focused on other issues such as water rights and drought management. Four publications outlining the research and recommendations - *Maintaining Healthy Aquatic Ecosystems*, *Moving Waters*, *Allocating Our Water*, and *Sharing Our Rivers*, are available at www.water-matters.org/pubs.

The Government of Alberta has announced its intention to hold province-wide consultations in 2013 about key water issues. Our proven expertise and recent Water Policy Dialogues research positions us exceptionally well to contribute thoughtful and critical input to the provincial water consultations.

We hope you will engage with us to ensure Alberta's water resources are protected and sustained for the long-term.



DEBBIE GODKIN

Nature Diary: Western Tanager and Yellow-rumped Warbler

BY DEBBIE AND ALAN GODKIN

If there is a storm during the spring or fall migration, I always go to the window with my camera, because quite often I've seen a bird that would have passed through unnoticed had it not been storming.

Such was the case on May 12th, 2009 when a male Western Tanager appeared at the feeder. Upon sighting it, I put out half an orange and some grape jelly, to which it was immediately attracted. An hour after the male arrived, a female Western Tanager showed up looking very tired and cold. Several times a day, she perched

on the window ledge to catch some heat and escape the snow for a few minutes. They both fed on the grape jelly at approximately 20 minute intervals from 2:00 pm until dark.

The next morning I expected them to be gone, but they were both at the feeder and looked perkier than when they had arrived. On

the fourth day the female left, but the male was in no hurry to leave even though the weather had improved. He hung around the yard for three more days, and didn't hesitate to come to the bird bath to drink and bath with me only ten feet away. To say, "what a beautiful bird" is the Western Tanager, is inadequate so I'll let the photographs do the talking.

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!



DEBBIE GODKIN

A male Yellow-rumped Warbler also showed up during a stretch of stormy weather on April 27th 2009. The warbler ate suet at half-hour intervals for three days straight, which is something I hadn't seen before. But due to the abnormally cold and dry

conditions the catkins on the willows and poplar weren't out yet, which would have attracted insects for the warblers to feed on. By day four, it had warmed up and the warbler stopped coming to the suet, but could be seen fly catching down in a low spot in the pasture.



DEBBIE GODKIN

I've seen several Yellow-rumped Warblers as they pass through in the fall, but have rarely seen an adult male in its breeding plumage in the spring. It was the highlight of the '09 spring migration to get to observe both the Western Tanager and the Yellow-rumped Warbler up close over several days.



BOOK REVIEW

Little Black Lies: Corporate & Political Spin in the Global War for Oil

REVIEW BY: TED HINDMARCH

Calgary writer, columnist, lecturer and champion of sustainable ecosystems and development, Jeff Gailus, has a new book on the shelves of bookstores. In *Little Black Lies*, a small manifesto style publication, Jeff explores and sheds light on the public relations war being waged around oil production from bitumen mining operations in Northern Alberta. This compilation of the various public relations campaigns with background, facts and insight from various sources provides an interesting, informative and thought-provoking read and is not without controversy.

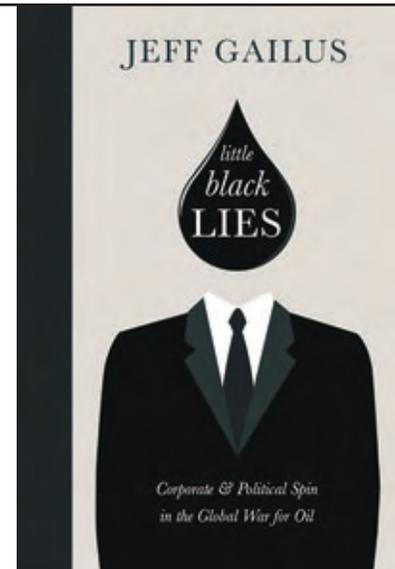
The battle, he explains, is being fought on one side through a collaborative approach by both federal and provincial governments and industry (which Jeff describes as the Triple Alliance). The other side of the public relations war, arrayed against this superior firepower, is a loose coalition of individuals and organizations – activists, environmentalists, First Nations and a few vocal scientists (opposition, he points out, that the government has attempted to label as adversaries, radicals and extremists).

The book demonstrates that the pro-development propaganda has focused on the socio-economic benefits but has either misrepresented or dismissed facts related to both short and long-term impacts to the health and well-being of humans, wildlife and the ecosystem. The book explores the escalation of rhetoric on both sides, as messages to the public have often moved to the argument extremes for

or against and, as a result, have left truth and fact somewhere unstated in the middle. Jeff references Alberta oil historian David Finch's explanation that the term tar sands was in use until the 1960's, when both terms started to be used. Only in the last ten years have the politicized term "oil sands" dominated pro-development public relations campaigns.

The book examines example after example of various advertising campaigns and fills in some of the information missing or misrepresented to the public. This includes an examination of the propaganda around industry and government environmental monitoring claims, what is and isn't being said about efforts to reduce GHGs (Green House Gas emissions), and claims about other major environmental concerns such as reclamation. It looks at the anti-development "Rethink Alberta" campaign, some of its questionable claims and the resultant backlash, comparing this with the more successful fact-based literature and approach of the Pembina Institute in pushing for change.

This book challenges statements that the oil sands can, are or ever could be sustainably developed. Canadians should be able to count on our government and its agencies not to be part of the industry "greenwash" regarding the development of the oil sands. Our elected officials should "man-up" to the impacts as well as the economic benefits, so



By Jeff Gailus. (<http://jeffgailus.com/>)
Published by Rocky Mountain Books
2012. 192 pages; hard cover: \$16.95;
ISBN 9781926855684

that Canadians know the full impact of moving ahead with development, rather than become complacent with the claim that everything is growing up green in the world of the Athabasca tar sands. In the quoted words of Bob Gibson, professor of environmental studies at the University of Waterloo: "Their battles for influence based on swayed opinion threaten to bury the struggle for truthful communication, perhaps even truthful understanding." In his closing statement, Jeff sums up his hopes for facts and truth to prevail, "because a future built on little black lies will be a dark one indeed." The reader can be the one to decide if *Little Black Lies* achieves the result of balancing truth against fiction. Read it and draw your own conclusions.

In his previously published book, *The Grizzly Manifesto* (2010), Jeff Gailus dealt critically with political and man-made challenges that face this great bear's struggle for survival and the factors determining its fate along the Yukon to Yellowstone corridor. He had a previous 2007 published magazine article on the Great Plains Grizzly titled *Ghost Bear* and available on-line at <http://jeffgailus.files.wordpress.com/2010/08/swerve-may4-bearcoverstory.pdf>. Jeff is currently teaching at the University of the Rockies in Missoula, MT.

Nature Alberta NEWS



New Affiliate Member

A new club has applied for Affiliate Membership in Nature Alberta: the Little Creeks and Rough Fescue Appreciation Society (LCARF).

What does LCARF want to do? Based out of Cochrane, AB, members “promote the importance of riparian health on feeder creeks, and the natural capital value of native grasses, particularly Rough Fescue, in the watersheds of the Bow and Little Red Deer Rivers in the counties of Bighorn, Mountain View and Rockyview.”

Extended Membership

Nature Alberta recently introduced a new category, the Extended Membership. This is available to any individual or family who is a current member of a society or club that is a Corporate or Affiliate member of Nature Alberta. The applicant must provide the name of their Corporate or Affiliate Club. This membership fee includes the e-version (but not the hard copy) of Nature Alberta Magazine.

It is hoped that this will make it easier – and more

The membership as a Nature Alberta Affiliate was approved in principle at the February Directors meeting, subject to some further documentation to comply with our bylaws. An electronic vote will likely have been taken by the time you read this.

Membership in LCARF costs \$5.00 per annum. To join, please send your contact information and \$5, or other donations, to: PO Box 793, Cochrane, Alberta T4C 1A9.

economical – for members of NA clubs to get the opportunity to read our magazine. Note: for present members who may be eligible for the Extended Membership, you can request same upon your renewal date; however, if you wish to continue with the hard copy, then simply maintain your present membership category.

Cost of a one-year Individual Extended Membership is \$15.00; a one-year Family Extended Membership is \$25.00.

Hypo-Half Marathon

Nature Alberta sponsored two Hypothermic Half marathons – on Feb 10th and Feb 24th. These Running Room events are always a great success, even in the dead of winter. Nature Alberta volunteers are stationed along the route to guide runners. Teams of 2-4 volunteers work together to cheer on participants and provide support. Hot chocolate is provided!

A huge thank you to the Running Room and to all the volunteers; a special mention for Christine Brown (NA’s Treasurer), who coordinated our involvement in 2013. Hooray! There are some good photos taken by Sean Gordon on the NA Facebook page: www.facebook.com/NatureAB#!/media/set/?set=a.10151531513439954.555921.576384953&type=1

VOLUNTEER ELAINE GORDON AT HER POST!
SEAN GORDON



RUNNERS HEAD FOR A CHECKPOINT.
SEAN GORDON

Nature Alberta 2013 AGM

Nature Alberta's Spring Board Meeting, Annual General Meeting (AGM), and Awards Banquet is being planned for the weekend of 26-28 April 2013 in Edmonton.

The weekend activities are planned to include a bus outing on the Edmonton Nature Club's Snow Goose Chase to the Tofield and Beaverhill area.

Affiliate clubs and all members of Nature Alberta in good standing are invited to attend and hold a vote at the AGM, and to purchase tickets for the annual Awards Banquet and for the Snow Goose Chase.

The details and final timings are still being worked out. If you are thinking of attending, watch for details on our website at www.naturealberta.ca, contact info@naturealberta.ca or call the office at 780-427-8124.

Kelsie Adds to Duties

Congratulations to our Young Naturalist Club Coordinator, Kelsie Sharun, who recently won a competition for the part-time position of Youth Coordinator at Morinville, AB. Kelsie will continue to be at Nature Alberta part time to manage the Young Naturalist Club activities as we provide and seek out additional coordinators and support for this programme in areas around the province.

Bookkeeper Hired

Nature Alberta welcomes the services of Janet Melnychuk as bookkeeper for Nature Alberta. Janet started a one-day per week contract in early Dec 2012 to assist in our bookkeeping efforts. Janet was a member of the Canadian Forces for 32 years in Resource Management Support with experience in various areas of finance and administration. A few of her primary financial functions have been accounts payable, audit, travel reimbursement, financial management, business planning, reporting and cashier related duties. She has extensive experience in Excel, Word, power point and Microsoft Office. For the past 4 years she has also provided full cycle bookkeeping services (including CRA submission) for a local painting company utilizing Quickbooks.

COMPUTERS and STUFF

Due to some recent computer failures in the office, Nature Alberta is seeking donations of used computer equipment/peripherals in good working condition and of recent vintage. Have you and any one you know upgraded computer systems recently, for example over the Christmas season, and have equipment around that is no longer required and might be seeking a good home? In particular, we need three flat screen monitors, and as many as six desktop computers. Any assistance will help alleviate our expense of purchases.

If you can assist, contact the Nature Alberta Office at info@naturealberta.ca or 780-427-8124 with your contact info. We can arrange pickup in the Edmonton area, but will need to coordinate on sources outside of Edmonton. And thank you very much for any help you can provide!

f FACEBOOK AND SUPPORT

Follow Nature Alberta on Facebook at www.facebook.com/NatureAB.

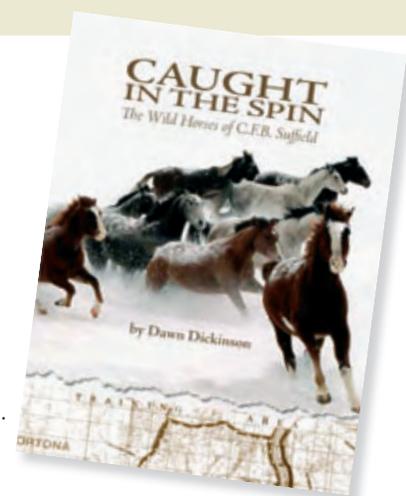
There are many different photos, links, comments – and an opportunity for you to add something yourself!

While volunteers provide a huge service to Nature Alberta, our organization also needs financial resources to operate and provide the services and benefits that we do for Albertans. Please consider supporting us with whatever you can afford. Your support means a great deal to the conservation of nature in Alberta.

BOOKS on SPECIAL

Nature Alberta carries a number of nature-associated books in its bookstore (online: www.naturealberta.ca). Several titles are on special or have had prices reduced. One of those titles is *Caught in the Spin: The Wild Horses of CFB Suffield*, by Dawn Dickinson and published by Grasslands Naturalists. The book is now reduced by 50%, to \$10.00. *Caught in the Spin* is a carefully documented account of the events which led to the horses' removal and answers many of the questions still surrounding the issue.

For other book specials, check out the Nature Alberta website.





Eyes on IBAs

Seventh in a Series

Lesser Slave Lake Provincial Park IBA

BY ERIN CAMPBELL

It's January and freezing out. As I dial the number for the Lesser Slave Lake Bird Observatory (LSLBO), I can't help but think of the coming spring and the promise of warmer days heralded by migrating birds returning to Alberta.

It is for this reason I am reaching out to Patti Campsall, executive director of the LSLBO, which is one of only three bird observatories in Alberta.

Lesser Slave Lake Provincial Park, located right in the middle of the province, is home to a remarkable amount of biodiversity, even by northern Alberta standards. Frank Fraser, one of the founders of the LSLBO, spent years championing for the area, and was instrumental in gaining IBA status based on the Tundra Swan and Western Grebe populations, both of which are globally significant for migration and nesting in the area. Although the history of the LSLBO has been primarily volunteer-driven, partnerships with

organizations like the IBA program and the Boreal Centre for Bird Conservation (BCBC) have led to a multitude of public education programs, tourism, and scientific research, enabling the LSLBO to grow in both scope and size.

Working out of the BCBC facility, Patti describes the work of the LSLBO as building a stewardship for the public and keeping them connected to the boreal forest, which is something that we tend to take for granted in Alberta. Says Patti: "The example I always use when talking about what we do is this: Anyone can look at a picture of a Yellow-rumped Warbler and

appreciate it, but if you can hold a Yellow-rumped Warbler in your hands, and recognize that this small bird traveled 4000 miles to breed in this area, that generates a connection between yourself and nature that is hard to deny."

This is precisely what the LSLBO strives to do: bridge the connection between the public by getting them directly involved with Alberta's boreal forest biodiversity. The LSLBO delivers educational programs to people of all ages by connecting them with real research being conducted in the area. Anyone can visit the site and participate in bird banding, view past research from the area, and even see scientists working out of the BCBC

THE LOOK ON THESE CHILDREN'S FACES IS UNDENIABLE PROOF OF THE VALUE OF EXPERIENCING NATURE FIRST HAND!

LESSER SLAVE LAKE BIRD OBSERVATORY

IBA COORDINATOR ERIN CAMPBELL.





ASSISTANT BANDER NICOLE LINFOOT EXTRACTS A MALE YELLOW-RUMPED WARBLER (THE MYRTLE WARBLER VARIETY) FROM THE MIST NET. BACK AT THE LAB, BANDER-IN-CHARGE RICHARD KRIKUN GATHERS DATA. YELLOW-RUMPED WARBLERS ARE THE NUMBER ONE Banded BIRD AT THE LSLBO. LESSER SLAVE LAKE BIRD OBSERVATORY

field station, which hosts graduate research in addition to public education. Patti estimates that the facility hosts between 5000 and 6000 visitors each year, comprising students as young as four or five, all the way up to seniors. "Birding is one of those things that attract all types of people," Patti says with a laugh. "We get tourists from all over the world who are just fascinated with the amount of diversity in the area. That's what I like about what I do; I get to spend time with people who traveled thousands of miles to visit an area that is so familiar to us."

Which, I say, leads me to my next question: about the 2011 fires in

the Lesser Slave Lake area. "We get asked that question a lot, whether or not the fires affected the bird populations," Patti tells me. "But there was very little impact. The fire was May 15th, which is right in the middle of peak migration for many species, including the Tundra Swans and the Western Grebes. Because of that, the birds just avoided the area when flying, and because they hadn't yet settled down to nest, and many of the established nesting areas were outside the range of the fire, the populations weren't at risk."

Known for the area's unique "Point Pelee Effect", the location of Marten Mountain right in the middle of a huge migratory path helps direct thousands of transient birds to the shorelines of Lesser Slave Lake, accounting for the remarkable numbers of birds who temporarily inhabit the lake and surrounding forest. Most of the research conducted at the facility,

including the bird banding initiatives that the public can get involved in, is focused on tracking migration patterns and numbers. This research is the backbone of the LSLBO.

For years they have prided themselves on creating democratized citizen science programs where everyone has the opportunity to visit and really get involved. According to Patti, public involvement and awareness is truly the cornerstone to the continued preservation of areas like the Lesser Slave Lake Provincial Park: "If people don't understand what you're doing, in terms of research, you can't build that stewardship." The Boreal Centre for Bird Conservation is open year-round, and welcomes students and visitors alike to get involved in any way they can. The Tundra Swans will start returning to the area in April, one of the earlier migrations to the area, and are surely harbingers of spring. So until then, try and stay warm!



ATTACHING A BAND.
LESSER SLAVE LAKE BIRD OBSERVATORY

Important Bird Areas (IBAs) is a program of BirdLife International (BLI); the Canadian BLI partners are Nature Canada and Bird Studies Canada. Nature Alberta, as Nature Canada's provincial affiliate, is the IBA lead in Alberta. The three pillars of the IBA program are identification, conservation and monitoring.

BOOK REVIEW

A Short History of Progress, Massey Lecture Series, 2004

REVIEW BY: TED HINDMARCH

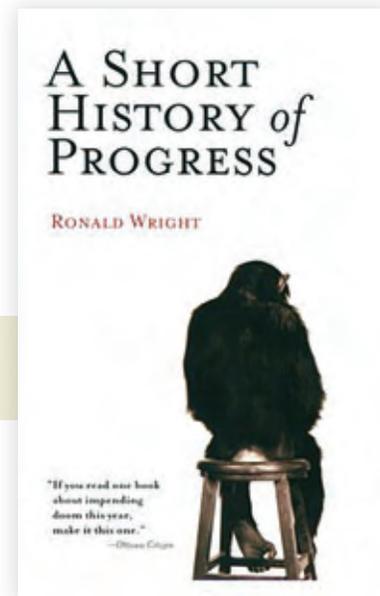
*Companion Reading Material to Little Black Lies...
(see page 12).*

When one stops to think about our society's increasing emphasis on short-term economic growth – to the continued detriment of the environment, bio-diversity, and our own health – it may be time to pull the 2004 national bestseller *A Short History of Progress* off the shelf, dust off the cover and re-discover some of our world's previous civilizations that have fallen for much the same reasons. Wright moves through history to answer the questions, "Where do we come from?" "What are we?" and to ultimately consider "Where are we going?" Who felled the last tree on Easter Island, once heavily forested, which caused a resource war that ended that civilization? What caused the fall of the Sumerian civilization in what is now southern Iraq? What about the collapse of the Romans and of the Maya?

Wright provides a very readable look at the collapse of several successful human civilizations and relates them to an over-exploitation of natural

resources. In assessing modern civilization on a global level, he advises that we should be reading the "flight recorders" in the wreckage of crashed civilizations – and points out that our present behaviour is typical of failed societies at the zenith of their greed and arrogance. He refers to the triggers to each collapse as 'progress traps'. He makes the statement that if civilization is to survive, it must live on the interest, not the capital, of nature.

He provides the example of ecological markers which suggest that in the early 1960's, humans were using about 70 per cent of nature's yearly output. By the early 1980's, we'd reached 100 per cent, and in 1999 we were at 125 per cent. He admits such numbers may be imprecise, but their trend is clear – they mark the road to bankruptcy. His notes and bibliography in this relatively quick read provide additional background



By Ronald Wright. Published by House of Anansi; five one-hour lectures (5 CD set); available from the CBC Shop.

to his narrative. Is Wright correct in stating: "If we don't make corrections now, while we prosper, we will never be able to do them when times get hard"? Regrettably for mankind, I feel he is correct, and yet – we continue to throw our environmental health to the winds to maintain short-term economic progress; we are definitely caught in another progress trap.



JOHN WARDEN

Close to Home: Nature Photography in Alberta Inspiration...

BY JOHN WARDEN

To breathe in the spirit of the muse.

I've been doing a lot of reading lately, studying about the early explorers, painters and photographers of the West. What did they see and feel when they observed the landscape of early Alberta. Can I improve my 'long slow look' approach to nature photography by trying to see through their eyes?

The comments from two people seem to really stand out for me:

Thomas Blakiston the explorer and 'Kootenai' Brown the frontiersman.

In 1858, the Palliser Expedition was searching for a route through the Rocky Mountains for the Canadian Pacific Railway. As a result of some differences, Blakiston and a small party split away from the expedition and continued on their own. Their journey took them over the South

Kootenay Pass and along Pass Creek (renamed Blakiston Creek) down to the Kootenay Lakes, which he renamed Waterton after Sir Charles Waterton, a prominent English naturalist. From Blakiston's writings:

After two hours travelling on level ground along Red-stone Creek (Red Rock) we emerged on the Saskatchewan plains, just six geographical miles north of

JOHN WARDEN





JOHN WARDEN

the 49th parallel and camped at the lakes... The scenery here is grand and picturesque...¹

While Blakiston may have been one of the first Europeans to travel the South Kootenay Pass, the Waterton Park website advises that *evidence of bison hunts and travel along this route date to more than 10,000 years ago².*

Seven years after Blakiston, the legendary Kootenai Brown came through the pass.

Emerging from the South Kootenay Pass we hit the foothills near the mouth of Pass Creek and climbed to the top of one of the lower mountains. The prairie as far as we could see east, north and west was one living mass of buffalo³.

Brown is described⁴ as a gold miner, pony express rider and buffalo hunter. He was wounded by the Blackfoot, captured by the Sioux, spent time as a wolf hunter, was a whiskey trader and chief scout for the Rocky Mountain Rangers during the second Riel Rebellion. Interestingly, considering his past, Kootenai Brown became a champion for conservation. He loved the beauty of Waterton Lakes and was one of the key drivers behind the Waterton Lakes area becoming a forest reserve in 1895 and then a national park in 1911. Brown was appointed the first fisheries officer in the reserve, then a

game guardian and eventually, park ranger.

The beautiful descriptions of Waterton by both Blakiston and Brown inspired me. I needed to go and see what they had seen and perhaps get some sense of the feelings and emotions behind their words. By standing in their footprints, could I breathe in their spirit?

I left Sherwood Park early, 4:30 AM, taking highway 21 south, and three hours later stopped to experience the solitude of sunrise on the edge of the Dry Island

JOHN WARDEN



¹ Retrieved from: www.mywaterton.ca/about-history.cfm

² Retrieved from: www.watertonpark.com/activities/drives.htm

³ Retrieved from: www.ourheritage.net/index_page_stuff/following_trails/Blakiston/Blakiston_Rockies/Blakiston_Rockies_html/Kootenai_Brown_shack.html

⁴ www.mhs.mb.ca/docs/mb_history/30/kootenaibrown.shtml



JOHN WARDEN

Buffalo Jump. In the valley below the cliffs, mist was floating above the Red Deer River. Clouds swirled around the rising sun and spirits of the past danced in the sparkling sunlight. Easy to see why some say Dry Island is a sacred place.

It was hard to leave, it's so beautiful and mystical there, but Waterton, my muse, was tugging at me. I continued on Highway 21 to Strathmore, but then cut across to Gleichen to get a sense of the prairies. The sky was huge and imposing as I zigzagged along highway 547 through the lands of the Siksika Nation. Picking up Highway 23, I stopped for gas and lunch at Vulcan.

I was born at Vulcan, so made the time for a small detour and headed east on the Lomond Road towards our old farm. Imagine my surprise when at the turn-off for the farm, there at the corner, alone on the prairie was a big bull bison (see the photo). Certainly it was a domestic bison and of course the land was fenced, but somehow, the symbolism was just so appropriate. The buffalo landscapes as seen by Blakiston and Brown remain, close to home. It was a moment steeped in connections with the past and an opportunity for artistic expression that for me bridged the gap of time.

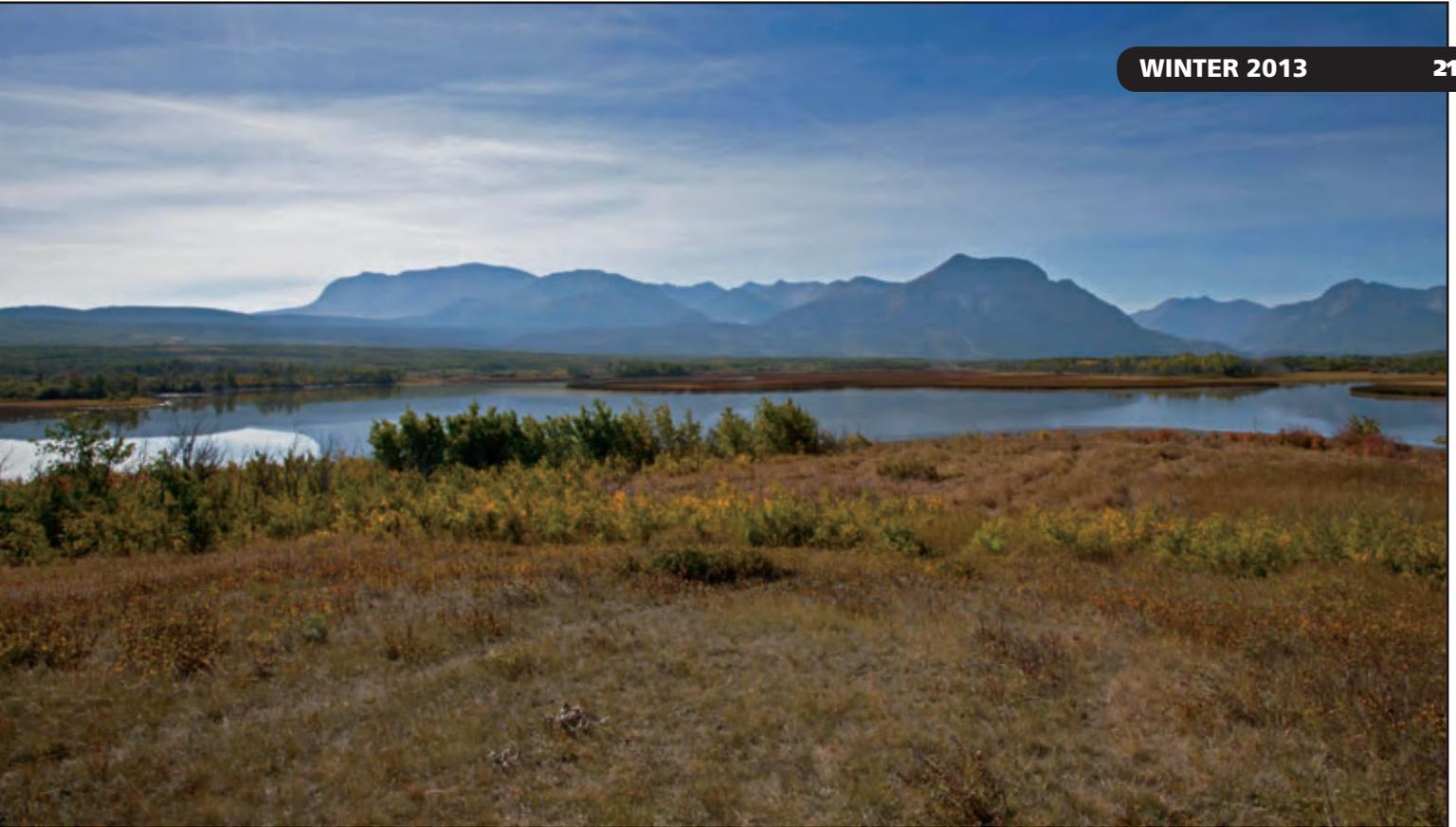
I paid my respects to the land around the old Warden place and the Clifford place and then returned to Highway 23. I followed the highway past Carmangay where my grandfather came to Alberta in 1906 and carried on south to Fort MacLeod and west to Pincher Creek. Turning south on Highway 6, I recognized the silhouette of Chief Mountain from the paintings of local artist Brent Laycock, and I was at Pass Creek by 4:00 PM.

Driving up onto the Red Rock Parkway was to step back in time. As I drove along the Parkway and into Blakiston Valley, the fall colors and sweeping lines of the landscape spread out before me.

Parks Canada describes the Red Rock Parkway *as the best place to experience Waterton's classic prairie meeting mountain landscape*. The parkway follows the creek for 14 km into the mountains and Red Rock Canyon. I stopped for photographs of bears eating berries, the rocks and wave ripples at Lost Horse Creek and then spent an hour or so exploring Red Rock Canyon as the light faded into the mountains.



JOHN WARDEN



JOHN WARDEN

I was up before the sun the next morning. The parkway climbs up about twenty meters or so above the highway and the view is amazing. I parked my car and walked amongst the rolling hills and eskers. Looking to the east and the first rays of the morning sun, bull elk were bugling all around me. I caught glimpses of them running through the trees, their hooves pounding in the solitude of the morning. Blakiston and Alden had come through this same valley in September 154 years ago. Then too, the elk would have been rutting. We shared a connection across the

years. It was gloriously beautiful, standing there as the sun rose over the prairies to meet the mountains and easy to appreciate that I was standing in the footprints of mountain men.

It was still early, a good time to see wildlife, so I took another slow cruise along the parkway. It follows an old buffalo trail and Parks Canada roadside displays do a wonderful job of explaining the long history of buffalo hunting in the area.

As I drove the parkway, inspired by the past and motivated by the sublime beauty of the present,

the spirit of the old buffalo trail was revealed to me. Cracks and shadows in the red argillite rock became a bison with one horn. The rippling waters of Red Rock Canyon swirled together to form the face of a black bear and somehow, camouflaged amongst the trees, was it a trick of the light or did I see an old park ranger's Stetson, set low, over a big white moustache?

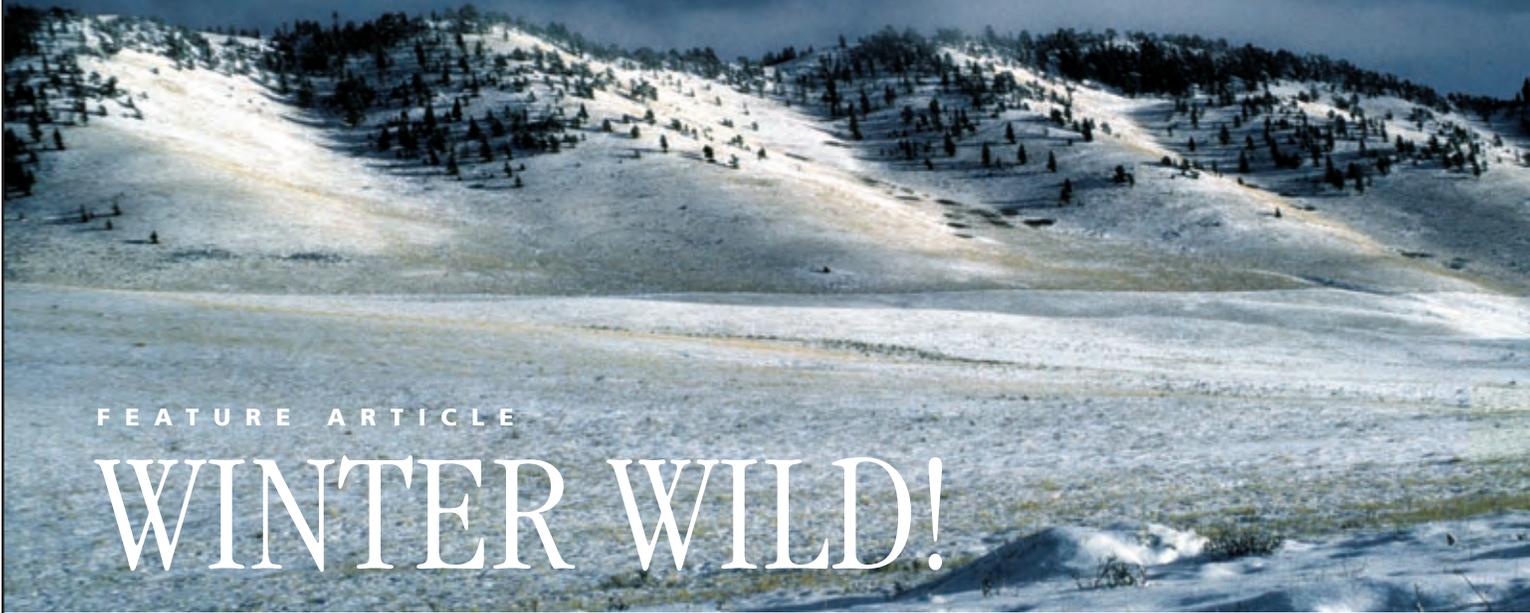
Inspiration allowed me to see the landscape with new eyes. Being open to the spirit of the land though, allowed me to feel it's magic.



www.jwardenphotography.com

John Warden's website (www.jwardenphotography.com) is definitely worth a visit for excellent photos of wildlife and landscapes in Alberta and beyond. John also posts articles on his blog (<http://jwardenphotography.blogspot.com/>) from previous *Nature Alberta* magazines.

Drop in and say hello!



FEATURE ARTICLE

WINTER WILD!

“Celebrating our natural history” is the theme of Nature Alberta magazine. The season does not matter. Celebrating nature, watching wildlife, viewing landscapes and discovering new things are all thrilling at any time of year.

Spring flowers, summer greenery, fall colours...what does winter offer? A totally different view of nature – which includes colours beyond white and dramatic photo opportunities. Winter even offers insects; look for the “Wildlife Starring” article (page 40).

Though winter technically runs from Dec 21st to March 20th (this year), those official dates bear little resemblance to the reality of winter in Alberta. Depending on where you live, winter could easily be seen as starting Oct 1st

and ending sometime in April. Thus, in particular for birders, winter time could mean some unusual, out-of-season sightings – or changes in the seasonal habits of birds.

DOWNY WOODPECKERS ARE NOT QUITE AS TRUSTING AS CHICKADEES, BUT NONETHELESS CAN BE PERSUADED BY A HELPING HAND. LEN PETTITT



THE WHALEBACK RIDGE, BOB CREEK WILDLAND PARK, LOOKS VERY COLD AND DESOLATE IN WINTER, IN PARTICULAR WITH A DARK AND LOOMING SKY...YET ITS STARKNESS IS BEAUTIFUL.

IAN GARDINER

A VERY FROSTY JANUARY DAY IN RED DEER. BONNIE MULLIN



A COW MOOSE, WITH A DUSTING OF SNOW, PEEKS AROUND AN ASPEN IN THE CYPRESS HILLS.

RICK PRICE



DARK-EYED JUNCOS ARE USED TO SNOW – ESPECIALLY THOSE THAT OVERWINTER IN SOUTHERN ALBERTA, BUT ALSO THE RETURNING MIGRANTS. THEY RETURN IN LATE MARCH AND APRIL (THE PHOTO WAS TAKEN APRIL 14TH) – WHICH VIRTUALLY GUARANTEES A TASTE OF WINTER WEATHER. HOLLE HAHN



A BRIGHTLY SUNNY DAY WITH BRIGHT BLUE SKIES ON THE BENCH AT CYPRESS HILLS: ON SUCH A DAY, ONE HARDLY NOTICES THE COLD!

RICK PRICE



MOST AMERICAN PIPITS ARE LONG GONE SOUTH BY THE TIME THIS PHOTO WAS TAKEN ON OCTOBER 13TH, BUT OCCASIONALLY STRAGGLERS CAN BE FOUND AS LATE AS MID-NOVEMBER. AMERICAN PIPITS, WHICH USED TO BE KNOWN AS WATER PIPITS, NEST IN ALPINE REGIONS ABOVE THE TIMBERLINE. GEORGE HALMANZA

VARIED THRUSHES ARE HARDY BIRDS AND CAN BE FOUND (ALBEIT IN SMALL NUMBERS) THROUGHOUT THE WINTER IN THE SOUTHERN HALF OF THE PROVINCE. SPOTTING ONE ON A SNOWY CREEKSIDE IS ONE OF THOSE SPECIAL MOMENTS FOR NATURALISTS. GEORGE HALMANZA



IT LOOKS AND FEELS LIKE AND MIGHT AS WELL BE WINTER TO THIS LAZULI BUNTING; BUT IT'S A RATHER COMMON SCENARIO IN WATERTON LAKES NATIONAL PARK DURING THE FIRST WEEK OF MAY. RICK PRICE



**FOG...
SNOW...
BULL MOOSE...
WINTER WILD!
DEBBIE GODKIN**

Flicker

BY LEN PETTITT

This January, I have seen at least three Northern Flickers in the area above the Kennedale Ravine. We have feeders out – some seed and some suet feeders. Quite a few birds visit: Chickadees, Redpolls, House Finches, Woodpeckers (three types including Pileated) and Flickers. I have seen both Yellow-shafted (male and female) and also one Red-shafted male. Although the Flickers are considered strongly migratory, I wonder if there are more that winter now in the area due to the availability of food, as more people put out and keep feeders filled during the winter months?



LEN PETTITT



LEN PETTITT

Bald Eagle

BY LEN PETTITT

Even with the big swings in temperature and early heavy snow, it seems that these raptors will hang out close to the river, probably waiting for a wounded waterfowl as an easier mark for lunch. This photo was taken in the Hermitage Park area and near the North Saskatchewan River.



WILSON'S WARBLER. RON DONNELLY



CAPE MAY WARBLER. RON DONNELLY



CAPE MAY WARBLER. RON DONNELLY

Late Warblers

BY TED HINDMARCH

This late migrating Wilson's Warbler was photographed in the yard of Ron and Nancy Donnelly in Cold Lake south on 17 Oct.

A late migrant Cape May Warbler showed up in the yard of Ron and Nancy Donnelly in Cold Lake on 2 Nov 2012. Doing some further research on late sightings of Cape May Warblers in Cold Lake, I found that we had a November 2002 Cape May Warbler at a yard in Cold Lake North from first

week of Nov through 11 Nov [<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/Albertabird/message/3021>], and another Nov 2005 record in that same yard [<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/Albertabird/message/7831>].

That same fall there was a 30 Oct, 2005 record at Ron and Nancy's yard in Cold Lake south – the same yard as this latest late migrant has now shown up. A snip from 10 Dec 2005 states:

[<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/Albertabird/message/7952>] "Late Report: Photos have confirmed that another late migrant Cape May Warbler (fall adult male) was observed 30 Oct 05 in a mountain ash at one of our society members' yards in Cold Lake south. Same location frequented by the House Finches".

House Finch Expansion

BY TED HINDMARCH

On 17 Oct 2012 at least 6 House Finches visited Ron and Nancy Donnelly's yard (two of them captured in the photo). House Finches have been steadily increasing their range north in Alberta. A "Birds Calgary" report advises that the first Alberta House Finches were reported from the mountains in the 1960s. Sightings expanded to Calgary in the early

1970s, but significant populations did not develop until the late 1990s. The first report in the Bonnyville-Cold Lake checklist area was of a tentative sighting 30 May 2005 at the then home of Del Huget, in Whispering Spruce estates on the west shore of Cold Lake. That same May, House Finches were recorded in Vilna, midway between Edmonton



A FEMALE AND MALE HOUSE FINCH. RON DONNELLY

Ted is President of the Beaver River Naturalist Society as well as Nature Alberta

and Cold Lake. On 5 Jun 2005, a pair was confirmed within the town of Bonnyville and on 9 Jun 2005 a confirmed sighting was made of a male at a Beaver River Naturalist Society member home in Horseshoe Bay estates. House Finches have now been irregularly observed in Cold Lake over the past 7 years, several of these sightings in Ron and Nancy's yard.

Following the initial 2005 sighting in Cold Lake, sporadic sightings were made during the summer, early fall, with a flock of 5, presumed to be a family group, observed at Ron and Nancy's feeder in Nov 2005 which indicated probable breeding in the area that year. Since 2005 irregular sightings have continued. The initial report of a wintering bird was reported on the Christmas Bird Count (CBC) that same 2005 (6), with other reports in 2006 (1), 2009 (5), 2010 (5), but there were no reports in 2011. They have been seldom encountered during the May species count

period, although 2 were reported in Bonnyville this past year. In 2000 only 2 Alberta CBC circles reported House Finch (197 birds). By 2011, the number of reporting count circles had increased to 17 (3392 birds).

For the Edmonton area the Edmonton CBC's started reporting House Finches in 1995 (4), followed by 1998 (1) and annually from 2001 (1) through 2011 (941 – high count to date); St Albert has reported annually since 2006 (12) with a high count in 2010 (95); Strathcona annually since 2007 (9) with a high count in 2010 (35); Fort Saskatchewan 2007 (1) through 2010 (2) with a high in 2008 (50); and Devon-Calmar 2005 (6), 2007 (38), 2011 (7), with high 2008 (43).

A check of the records on more northerly Alberta Count Circles reflect the following reports for House Finches: Grande Prairie 2011 (2); Lac la Biche 2010 (8); Opal 2011 (1); Vermillion 2006

(3), 2009 (1), 2010 (12); and the Cold Lake results provided earlier in this report. They have yet to be reported by Fort McMurray.

In Saskatchewan, Prince Albert recorded House Finches in 2009 (7), 2010 (5). It will be interesting to watch the expansion of the House Finch over the next few years as development and populations continue to increase north in the province. The current small numbers in locations north of Hwy 16 may indicate winter conditions remain too harsh for an increase in the House Finch population. To date, numbers do not appear to indicate any substantial increase in numbers of resident wintering birds at each of the listed population sites outside of the Edmonton area.

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EDITOR'S NOTE: This article is a condensing of Ryan's December, 2012 blog; to read more, plus his past walks through ecology, see <http://akayokaki.blogspot.com>.



AKAYO'KAKI A'PAWAAWAHKAA

BY RYAN HEAVY HEAD; SIKOOHKOTOKI, KAINAISSKSAAHKOYI

My Walk through Ecology, Dreams, Natural Education and Experience in Blackfoot Territory.

CHRISTMAS BIRD COUNT IN SIKOOHKOTOKI (26 DEC 2012)

10:11. Sspopiikimi – Mahoney and I have volunteered to cover the western river bottom, from the pond all the way to Whoop Up Bridge. The temperature's about twenty below and, starting off, everything seems pretty quiet, but we'll see.

10:18. Hiking in, there are plenty of signs of life...aapi'si [Coyote] tracks galore, and therefore presumably a good number of subnivian rodents, though the snow pack is really shallow, and we haven't spotted any little critter trails yet.

Our first live encounters occur before even reaching the ksisskstakioyis at mid-pond. First we hear, and then spot, three niipomakiiksi [Black-capped Chickadee] scouring the deep bark fissures of the mature a'siitsiksiistsi on the golf course. Then a single mamia'tsikimi [Black-billed Magpie] wings toward the north wood. And just when we think that's it for the moment, a female omahkiitokii

[Ring-necked Pheasant] is flushed from the cutbank, gliding



RYAN HEAVY HEAD

off toward the dense chokecherries below the coyote playground.

10:24. As we approach south-pond, a second mamia'tsikimi flies high overhead, this one heading toward the neighborhoods above the coulee rim. At our feet, there have been more tracks. Some of them belong to deer, probably the awatoyiiksi ('wag-tails' or white-tails) who reside down here in the wet meadows and forest main. The others belong, I'm fairly certain, to the western jumping mouse, and comprise a series of hops, with feet parallel, and tail dragging all the way, leading between favored seed plants like gumweed and wild licorice.

10:46. Reaching the wide south pool, we're surprised to find absolutely no birds in the currant and bulberry patch above the peninsula, nor in the brush leading up the coulee draw there. It's unusual that these areas, which usually offer some of the best birding for small passerines, should be absent of such life. The only ones here at the moment are sikaatsistaiksi [Mountain Cottontail], and we stop briefly to greet one of them.

11:02. So much of the river is open that I'm concerned we might

not find any waterfowl at all; they're usually easy to pin down at the small, flowing crags of your average winter. But a little ways down the trail, we see that a little ways ahead, at the bend before Whoop Up, the opposite shoreline is thick with aapsspinii [Canada Goose], and that there are quite a few kihtsipimiisa'aiksi [Common Goldeneye] diving in the river itself. Counting through the thick steam coming off the water, I confirm at least a hundred and eighty-four geese, while Mahoney gets a minimum of twenty-five goldeneyes.

11:30. A little further up the trail, along the steep coulee slopes, we become surrounded by a small foraging flock of Common Redpolls. I figure at least seventeen of them, but they are so small and swift it's difficult to know. They're stopping off at several seed plants, including Prairie Sunflower and Wavy-leaved Thistle. Most of the efforts, however, are focused on Canada Goldenrod. Their bills are caked with the fluff from goldenrod seeds.



RYAN HEAVY HEAD



From our position on the coulee slope, we can see even more aapsspini upriver. I count another eighty-four. Mahoney and I are splitting up at this point. She's going to head back to Sspopiikimi and the forest main, to ensure her legs don't give out while she's too distant from our vehicle. I'm continuing upstream.

12:15. Hidden in the dense Chokecherry shrubbery of this flat I'm surveying is a very small and secluded oxbow wetland, complete with cattails and bulrush hummocks. I walk across the ice, looking for mi'sohpsski [Muskrat] push-ups, hoping to find evidence that a few of them are still getting around on the surface in this season. No luck. But I do find another, rather distinct and fresh trail. It leads me to a hollow under a shoreline pile of logs, a den no doubt originally carved out by a ksisskstaki [Beaver], but presently inhabited by the terrestrial equivalent, kai'skaahp [Porcupine]. Laying down on the snow to peer into the den, sure enough a thickly-haired, sloth-like face looks back out at me. We inspect one another quietly for a few moments, then the porcupine turns and moves deeper into the logs, beyond my vision.

12:38. Eventually, I make my way to the Oldman River and begin slowly walking the ice downstream, back toward the pond. Along the way, I attempt to photograph the kihtsipimiisa'aiksi. They're behaving surprisingly calm today, perhaps

owing to either their numbers, the presence of so many geese, or the amount of open water. In any case, I'm allowed to approach as close as feels safe on the ice.

The goldeneyes are using some of the same fishing strategies employed by the pelicans in summer. A few of them will fly a short distance upstream, then allow the current to drift them over what I assume are the best fishing holes, where they dive vigorously in pursuit of their prey. When they reach a certain point, they repeat the process. Though they aren't working as closely together as the pelicans do, it seems at least that same-gendered birds are somewhat cooperative. At one point, I witness a female come too close to a male, which prompts a violent chasing. When the female ultimately escapes, the male cranes his head back onto his wings in display

13:00. As I put my camera away and start seriously hiking back, a cluster of aapsspini breaks off from one of the upstream groups and drifts along beside me, eventually joining the northernmost flock. Along with them come several goldeneyes, who obviously want to keep near the geese. I figure the latter offer safety in several respects. First of all, the geese are

more conspicuous, and it's likely their main predators at the moment - eagles and coyotes - would focus on the larger, more obvious birds. Secondly though, so long as the aapsspini are near, the goldeneyes have many sentries to look-out for predators

while they themselves are busy diving underwater.

I ponder these relationships as I continue moving, soon passing back under the high-level bridge. Another Magpie passes by. And somewhere ahead, in the forest main, Mahoney has come across the kai'skaahp we call Peekaboo.

13:35. Mahoney's sighting of our old porcupine friend is the last I hear from her. Even though warmed in my pocket, my phone has finally succumbed to the freeze and died.

With communications cut-off, I hustle back toward our jeep. Soon, I too pass Peekaboo. He's asleep in the canopy of one of the large poplars of the forest main. As I came to the clearing at the north end of the forest, where the cutbank overlooks the big island on the Oldman, another male pheasant is flushed from the grass. I stop briefly at the cutbank to count goldeneyes on this downstream section of the river. There are nine who I can see, and no geese to accompany or protect them.

From there, I round north-pond and quickly arrive at the parking lot, where I find Mahoney observing a group of ten niipomakiiksi, who are scouring the bark of a small cottonwood. These chickadees are the last we add to our contribution toward today's bird count.

Ryan Heavy Head and his wife Adrienne are caretakers of a Beaver Bundle for the Blood Tribe of southern Alberta. He works as the coordinator of Kainai Studies at Red Crow College, on the Blood Reserve, where he teaches field courses in phenology and traditional foods.

The Saga of “Ed” the Duck, and Others

BY LORNE FITCH, P. BIOL.

In the movie “On Golden Pond” Henry Fonda’s character pursues a big trout named “Walter”. Walter the fish apparently had a personality and gave Fonda’s character meaning, if a fish can perform such a miracle. The attachment and dynamic tension between the two was poignant.

Walter reappeared, or was reincarnated, as a large Rainbow Trout named “Gus”. Gus had been marooned in a water-filled construction hole on the grounds of the Sam Livingstone Fish Hatchery in Calgary. Work progressed around Gus on an outdoor interpretive display for the Bow Habitat Station along the banks of the Bow River. Workmen routinely checked to ensure the trout was still occupying the deep puddle. Care was taken not to muddy the water or to disturb Gus during construction. As an unintentional interpretive display and awareness program, Gus succeeded beyond the best of planned initiatives.

Then there was the Mallard drake in the Inglewood Bird Sanctuary in Calgary with a plastic six-pack holder firmly gripping his green head. He became “Ed” the duck, likely linked to a British puppet

mallard with a ham allergy. Whether or not Calgary “Ed” was allergic to ham was never determined but he remained much averse to capture. His fate captivated the print and screen media of Calgary (and much of southern Alberta) for almost two weeks. The nightly TV news had updates on attempts to capture Ed and liberate him from his human-induced dilemma. Even the national news had clips on this wildlife drama.

Ed eluded capture, ratcheting up the emotional outpouring from well-meaning people. Finally one individual, in a Rambo-like enterprise, dove off a footbridge – snaring Ed, but breaking the rescuer’s leg in the process. It’s hard to get that much exposure to wildlife in the media but Ed, with his plastic collar of a six-pack holder, managed it in spades.

As a biologist I’m not immune to the anthropomorphizing of wildlife, though I have resisted naming individuals. On an Earth

Day drive a few years ago, to watch the timeless return of waterfowl to prairie wetlands, we found a Short-eared Owl impaled on a barbed wire fence. Short-eared Owls are not rare and saving this one would not have made a difference one way or the other to the grassland population of the species. That never entered our minds. We carefully extracted it from the barb and rushed it to a wildlife rehabilitation center some distance away. There we expressed concern for its condition and offered a hefty donation to ensure it received veterinary and extended care. When we found a post card in the mail many months later with news of its successful convalescence and release, we were thrilled.

The issue with that Short-eared Owl and its kin relates more to the loss of native grasslands and the fragmentation of the landscape with fences which, in this case, snared the unsuspecting owl as it went about its business.



Lorne Fitch is a Professional Biologist, Adjunct Professor with the University of Calgary and a retired Alberta Fish and Wildlife Biologist. He is a well-known speaker, writer and photographer, living in Lethbridge AB. “The Saga of “Ed” the Duck, and Others” is the seventh in a series of articles by Lorne.

When Aldo Leopold suggested “thinking like a mountain”, it means considering the needs of the whole wildlife community (and landscape integrity) rather than those of one member, or one individual, alone. In all of the coverage of Ed the duck, not once was the loss of waterfowl habitat, especially the pervasive loss of prairie wetlands ever discussed. Gus the Rainbow Trout never got his message across that there are many rivers, or river reaches, in southern Alberta that are no longer trout habitat, let alone habitat for any fish, because of diversions for irrigation agriculture.

It is one thing to see an individual bird (or any species of wildlife or fish), to watch it, to identify its characteristics and to name the species. It is a far bigger step to realize what that individual embodies: energetics, migration, interactions, habits and habitats, population dynamics and threats. Until we can see through the bird, to all the factors that make and maintain a bird, a bird is all we see.

The challenge is to distinguish between caring for the good of a species and obsessing about an individual creature. Picture an animal: a bright eye, the sleekness of hair or fur, the fierce independence, wildness. Everything else disappears, sometimes even the bars on the cage. Whether a photograph or a flesh and blood sighting, what jumps into focus is the animal. The background, the population, the connections and the habitat are out of focus, out of mind and largely unseen, unobserved.

*A fixation on the individual
does little to connect the
essential dots.*

The basic unit of biodiversity is not the individual but the population of which that animal or plant is a part. A population should be thought of as the reproductive community, a factory that keeps turning out workable individuals. Evolution’s raw material is not the individual but the population whose pool of genes provides robustness and is the intermediary between today’s individual and the future survival of the population. Individuals are, in the greater scheme of things, expendable. It is the population, the collection of individuals that must meet the rigors of natural selection over space and time. Focusing on the individual – cute or fierce or iconic as the animal might be – is the wrong channel to be tuned to; context is the only channel that counts.

A fixation on the individual does little to connect the essential dots. It might be dangerous to over-invest individual animals with symbolism. Who can resist the yawn of a lion, a Timber Wolf howling on a snowy ridge or a dappled White-tailed Deer fawn nestled in tall grass? But unless we connect that lion, wolf or deer to place, the place may not remain to sustain the individual. Wildlife should be seen as the embodiment of the landscape in which they survive. A focus on the landscape, including the human footprint, provides a lesson on

adaptability, connectivity and resilience. It’s the habitat, not the individual that defines the persistence of wildlife and our ability to interact, enjoy and learn from them.

Wildlife is not named Woody, or Smokey, or Pooh, nor does it live a happy-go-lucky, magical life at Disneyland playing a ukulele for the tourists. It doesn’t exist solely in a National Geographic special or as the emblem of an insurance company, a trucking firm or a country. It often shares a common landscape with us; it can be a metric showing how well we can manage that place and its disappearance should alarm us. When only a remnant occurs behind bars, or glass, in controlled circumstances it could be a measure of failure. Alternately, when populations of some species explode into unsustainable numbers we have to ask what our role has been to accommodate that eruption.

In conservation the most powerful, evocative message is about consequences and what is at stake for wildlife to persist. A deeper appreciation is, inevitably, what connects us and helps us realize we are of the same world and circumstance. To develop empathy for fellow creatures, to care, to envision a future for them, as well as ourselves, requires the acquisition of a sense of context. It is balancing the emotion related to the individual with pragmatism about the population and its habitat. The rest is just unconnected distraction, tinged with entertainment.

Beetle Hitchhikers!

Del McKinnon, of the Purple Martin Conservancy (a Nature Alberta Affiliate Club) recently sent a photo of a burying beetle which had hit a window. A close look at this rather attractive creature revealed about twelve arachnids bumming a ride. Were they parasites?

Not parasites, says John Acorn, but rather phoretic mites hitching a ride. John thought the burying beetle was *Nicrophorus defodiens*. The mites, as identified by Heather Proctor, are *Poecilochirus spp*; there are, says Heather, lots of photos and information on them at: <http://bugguide.net/node/view/87680>

Phoresys is a method which some animals use for transportation – sort of public transit for arthropods. In this case, the mites clung to the burying beetle in order to move some distance away; at some point, they would release their grip and fall to the ground.



PHORETIC MITES ON SEXTON BEETLE (*POECILOCHIRUS SPP.*)
LYNETTE SCHIMMING/CREATIVE COMMONS

The “beetle bus” can often get quite overloaded, which results in preventing said beetle from normal movement. Thus, hitching a ride may sometimes defeat the purpose of phoresys if the bus is as full as demonstrated by the Sexton Beetle photo.

DEL'S BEETLE. DEL MCKINNON



22/08/2012 2:48:05 PM MDT
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IT WASN'T JUST NATURALISTS THAT WERE WATCHING BIRDS! JACK BORNO

Wings of Spring:

The 2012 May Species Count for Birds

BY JUDY BOYD [NATURE ALBERTA SUMMARY]

The number of species went down in 2012: from 279 last year to 272 this year; the number of individual birds also went down: 257,605 from 310,396.

In 2011, the most numerous species was Franklin's Gull with a whopping 138,350. Second was Red-winged Blackbird with 8,956 and third was Cliff Swallow with 7,725. This year, the most numerous species was again Franklin's Gull with 38,894 (but 100,000 less than 2011). Second was Cliff Swallow with 15,953 and third was Canada Goose with 10,752.

Last year, 26 species were seen in only one location and 19 species were found in only two locations around the province. See Table 1 for 2012 single locations and Table 2 for two locations:

TABLE 1. 2012 May Species Count Sightings at Single Location

Location	Species
BowKanBirders	American Tree Sparrow, Gray-crowned Rosy-Finch
Brooks	Semipalmated Plover, Ruddy Turnstone, Western Sandpiper, Dunlin
Calgary	Surf Scoter, Clark's Grebe, Northern Hawk Owl, Northern Pygmy Owl
Cardston	Eurasian Wigeon
Central Alberta	Short-billed Dowitcher
Claresholm	Northern Mockingbird
Cold Lake	Yellow Rail, Sedge Wren, Black-throated Green Warbler, Bay-breasted Warbler
Crowsnest Pass	Pacific-slope Flycatcher, Common Redpoll
Fort McMurray	Yellow-bellied Flycatcher
Lac La Biche	Virginia Rail
Lethbridge	Great Egret
Medicine Hat.	Yellow-breasted Chat
Taber-Vauxhall	Brewer's Sparrow
Waterton	Pine Grosbeak



TABLE 2. 2012 May Species Count Sightings at Two Locations

Location	Species
Central AB, Calgary	Northern Goshawk
Brooks, Medicine Hat	Rough-legged Hawk
Calgary, BowKanBirders	Peregrine Falcon, Golden-crowned Kinglet
Calgary, Cold Lake	American Golden Plover, Chestnut-sided Warbler
Brooks, Calgary	Hudsonian Godwit
Brooks, Cold Lake	White-rumped Sandpiper
Cold Lake, Lac La Biche	Connecticut Warbler
Calgary, Claresholm	Bullock's Oriole
Brooks, Milk River	Burrowing Owl
Calgary, Fort McMurray	Black-backed Woodpecker
Fort McMurray, Lac La Biche	Philadelphia Vireo
Crowsnest Pass, Waterton	Stellar's Jay, Cassin's Finch
Brooks, Taber	Gray-cheeked Thrush, Grasshopper Sparrow
Cold Lake, Yamnuska	Palm Warbler
Cold Lake, Fort McMurray	Canada Warbler

Last year we had three species in all areas: Canada Goose, Tree Swallow and American Robin. This year only the American Robin was seen in all areas. Last year four species were found in all but one area, and thirteen species were found in all but two areas. This year eight species were found in all but one area: Canada Goose, Mallard, Bufflehead, Wilson's Snipe, Tree Swallow, Barn Swallow, Red-winged Blackbird and Brown-headed Cowbird. This year six species were found in all but two areas: Sora, Northern Flicker, American Crow, Common Raven, Yellow Warbler, and Chipping Sparrow.

Ruth Catana Moving On

Ruth Catana, Chief Operating Officer at Nature Canada, has resigned effective November 30th, 2012. Ruth is well known by many Nature Alberta folks, as she worked with NA very often over the years.

Ian Davidson, Nature Canada's Executive Director, said: "We are very proud of Ruth's accomplishments over the last 17 years. She played an instrumental role and contributed significantly to the development of Nature Canada. During her tenure she oversaw the growth of Nature Canada's membership services and played a vital role in the

development of Nature Canada's major program initiatives."

Ruth has accepted a position (Executive Director) with St. Patrick's Home of Ottawa Foundation. Exclaimed Ruth: "Being involved at Nature Canada has been a great opportunity for me both professionally and personally which has allowed me to meet and work with some wonderful people. I am proud to have played a role in an organization that has accomplished

so much on behalf of nature conservation both in Canada and throughout the Americas."

Nature Alberta joins Nature Canada in thanking Ruth for her professionalism, dedication and commitment to the organization's mandate.



John Acorn Wins RSC Award for Promoting Science

John Acorn has won the 2012 Royal Society of Canada's McNeil Medal, awarded for outstanding ability to promote and communicate science to students and the public within Canada.

It's the latest acknowledgement of Acorn's work to promote science and share his passion for nature, and insects in particular, to a general audience. In 2008, he won NSERC's Michael Smith Award for Science Promotion, and in 1998 he was the recipient of the ASTech Award for Excellence in Science and Technology Journalism.

Acorn is best known as the host and creative force of *Acorn, the Nature Nut*, an award-winning, fun and creative television series that was produced in Edmonton and ran for seven seasons on a variety of networks including CTV, PBS, Discovery Canada and Animal Planet, among others.

What pleased Acorn most about this award was that the nomination, which he only saw after being told he won, focused more on his work as an author, especially those books published

by the University of Alberta Press. Acorn has written 16 books so far, including a wide variety of field guides such as *Tiger Beetles of Alberta, Compact Guide to Alberta Birds, Bugs of Northern California*, and a children's book about dinosaurs. He is currently working on another field guide, expected to come out in 2013, about eastern Canada butterflies.

"When someone says, 'I got your book and I just want to get out there and chase ladybugs or tiger beetles or whatever,' that's the thing that really makes me happy," Acorn said.

He added that the key to his success, whether in television or in books or even radio (he



produced a radio series about dinosaurs at one point), is his ability to communicate his enthusiasm for insects and nature.

"Enthusiasm is contagious," said John. "It's at least as important as the subject matter."

John is President of the Alberta Lepidopterist Guild and a member of the Edmonton Nature Club, both Nature Alberta club members. Nature Alberta heartily congratulates John on receiving the McNeil Medal!

First Hand: More Great Wildlife Encounters

A Hallowe'en Treat

BY EILEEN FORD

The trick or treaters have come and gone and so has my appropriately-attired Hallowe'en visitor. He appeared just after noon on October 31 and helped himself to goodies from beneath the spruce boughs and the mountain ash. What a sight with his orange and black costume against a background of frosty branches.

An adult male Varied Thrush (*Ixoreus naevius*) retains his vivid colours through the winter. Chris Fisher and John Acorn, in *Birds of Alberta*, tell us that "the Varied Thrush is typically a bird of damp coastal coniferous forests, but it extends its range into Alberta in appropriate habitat. Varied Thrushes arrive early to Alberta; they can be seen hopping under feeders and along open shorelines in mountain townsites by the end of March...In fall, most Varied Thrushes have left the mountains by the end of September. Every year a few birds seem to become disoriented and head east instead of west..." How fortunate for us!

By early evening he had his fill and now has moved on. For most

of the afternoon an American Robin and a Starling foraged in the same area, albeit the Starling was interested mainly in the berries of the mountain ash. A few metres away, at the feeders and bird bath, the gluttonous Black-capped Chickadees, House Finches, English Sparrows, Pine Siskins, Juncos, Red-breasted and White-breasted Nuthatches, a Downy Woodpecker, a Northern Flicker, a Blue Jay, and three Eurasian Collared-Doves, all

demanded their treats. A Raven "kr-a-a-ked" over and three Magpies would periodically upset the scene. Some 200 metres further west on the partially frozen wetland, a majestic adult Bald Eagle threatened the lone Tundra Swan, the Coots, and the ducks. All the while, a female Northern Harrier performed her aerials in hopes of securing some Hallowe'en treats of her own.

A memorable Hallowe'en!

A VARIED THRUSH, WITH A DIFFERENT THRUSH SPECIES – A ROBIN – SITTING TO ITS LEFT.

EILEEN FORD





LEN PETTITT

First Hand from Len Pettitt

Len Pettitt is often out in nature with camera in hand, so he gets many chances to encounter some great wildlife sightings. Here are just two of them.

CARSON LAKE LOONS

On September 6th, in the company of a friend, we traveled to Carson Lake to try fishing for Rainbow Trout. We were successful in catching three keepers and had them in a live well close to our spot on the walkway at shore. There were two Common Loons in the area and one was attracted to the fish in the live well. Thus with my camera at hand, I was able to get a few shots at fairly close range!

EDMONTON WILDLIFE

After moving from Camrose we are settled in Edmonton for about ten days now [August 28th]. Since my main hobby is taking photos of wildlife, I had a concern as to how far I might have to travel. Well, my concern has been allayed. We live not far from Hermitage Park and after a few short hikes found that

wildlife is fairly abundant in this area. The man-made ponds and constructed Kennedale wetland have many waterfowl and a few shorebirds. I have seen Canada Goose, Mallard, American Wigeon, Red-necked Grebe, Pied-billed Grebe and Common Merganser. The latter was a bit of a surprise; there was a group of three Common Mergansers and

I'm not sure if they were raised here or in migration mode. One evening I saw a Great Blue Heron feeding near the edge of a pond. Walking a bush trail turned up Cedar Waxwing, House Finch and one Black-and-white Warbler. Mammals so far have been Red Squirrel, Coyote and White-tailed Jackrabbit. I am pleased with the results.



A FEMALE COMMON MERGANSER.

LEN PETTITT



PETRA ROWELL

First Hand from Petra Rowell

Petra is Nature Alberta's Executive Director and came upon a rather unusual sight!

I was travelling home after a great day of birding at a number of Important Bird Areas in central Alberta. Just as I passed the stormwater pond that is Lacombe Lake in St. Albert (immediately north of Edmonton), I saw this sight (see photo). It made me

think that, while we often focus on habitat we are losing, we don't often think about the habitat we are creating! Over the years, Lacombe Lake has been stocked with trout and also has become the recipient of a large number of unwanted domestic Koi - which

appears to be what attracted this Osprey to the area. The light standard beside the lake made a perfect perch for this piciverous predator to feast upon his bloody but colorful prey!

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

YEAR OF THE BAT

Bats in the News: Learning from Friends

The biological sonar system called echolocation is a powerful tool for insect-hunting bats. Now an innovative experiment with Big Brown Bats suggests that young bats learn to use echolocation by eavesdropping on the calls of their more-experienced hunting companions, the BBC reports.

Reporter Victoria Gill said this is the first study to show that bats (at least Big Browns [*Eptesicus fuscus*]) actively listen for the echolocation calls of other bats in order to learn from them. Such social learning has been confirmed in many mammals, but until now it had not been clearly demonstrated in bats.

A University of Maryland team, led by graduate student Genevieve Spanjer Wright, conducted the experiment in a flight cage, tracking bats as they “hunted” a mealworm suspended on a string, Gill reported. The results are published in the journal *Animal Behaviour*.

Spanjer Wright and her colleagues trained 12 “demonstrator bats” to catch the mealworm. By repeatedly changing the worm’s location, the bats had to use echolocation pulses to hunt for it, the BBC said.

Then 22 young “naive” bats were added to the experiment. Half of them were released into the cage while the trained demonstrator bats hunted for the mealworm, Gill said. The other half flew with untrained bats.

“When the naive bats then flew on their own, most of the animals that had previously flown with an experienced demonstrator knew how to capture the mealworm,” Spanjer Wright told the BBC. “None of the ones that flew with an untrained bat captured the worm.”

An analysis of video from the experiment revealed that whenever an experienced bat found the worm and emitted

a “feeding buzz” (a very high frequency call that bats use to home in on prey), the naive bat stayed very close to the demonstrator, the BBC reported.

Spanjer Wright told the reporter that there previously had been no conclusive evidence that young, insect-eating bats used social learning to acquire hunting skills. “This is good evidence that they do,” she said, “and it [shows] the mechanism by which the bats may learn: by increasing their interaction with a knowledgeable demonstrator bat.”

Biologist Marc Holderied of Bristol University in the United Kingdom told the BBC that bats of many species tend to fly in small groups, which had been interpreted as social learning. “But this experiment provides very convincing evidence that this species specifically looks at experienced foragers to learn how to forage.”



THE WINTER CRANE FLY SEEN BY JOHN AND SANDRA. JOHN MCFAUL

Wildlife! Starring...

Winter Crane Flies

BY DENNIS BARESCO

On Jan 24th, John McFaul and Sandra Foss were out cross-country skiing near Cochrane during a very snowy and hard-blowing windy day. Crawling on the snow and fighting through the snow crystals were some long-legged and odd-looking creatures.

John and Sandra always see them, but never knew what they were and why they were out there in weather hardly fit for a human much less an insect.

Well, we learn stuff every day! Who knew there was a genus of crane flies that could be seen during the winter? Okay, maybe many of you knew, but this naturalist did not.

Winter (or Snow) Crane Flies (in the genus *Chionea*) were named for the obvious: they occur during winter, usually in forested areas, and can be seen walking on snow, just like John and Sandra saw. As with a surprisingly large number of animals, the natural history knowledge of Winter Crane Flies is not complete; however, some information is known or at least surmised.

Adults do not feed (neither do summer crane flies) but may drink water by actively seeking out the coldest place they can find and pressing their proboscis against the snow.

Why don't they freeze? They produce glycerol in their hemolymph (a fluid in the insect's circulatory system) which prevents them from freezing. *Chionea* are

wingless, probably because at sub-freezing temperatures, it is very hard to generate enough energy for maintaining flight muscles.

However, unlike the flying summer crane flies, being wingless is very limiting as far as getting around. Limited range creates a problem – a big problem! When walking speed may be only about 1.3 metres per minute (though apparently males can leap if they wish), finding a mate takes on an urgency. For that reason, it is thought, mating is indiscriminate. It takes 30 to 70 minutes. Unlike winged crane flies which mate facing in opposite directions, Winter Crane Flies position themselves like many beetles do. Females store their eggs in the space normally taken by the flight muscles, with as many as 200 eggs laid singly.

Considering the difficulties associated with being an insect in icy conditions, one has to wonder why this trait evolved. One reason given is the absence of predators; other than perhaps mice and a few species of birds, there are not a lot of insect-eaters out in the dead of winter. That may be the reason why some other insects (albeit, very few) are out and about during winter: the very numerous springtails (“snow fleas”) and winged insects like some winter stoneflies and some midges.



Chionea valga (likely the species photographed by John) is the most widely distributed species of Winter Crane Flies, ranging from central Alberta eastward to coastal Labrador. Life span is about two months, which is considerably longer than winged crane flies, which only have a week to ten days.

For more information on Winter Crane Flies, see: www.emporia.edu/ksn/v38n2-may1992/index.html

Ponderables

It is horrifying that we have to fight our own government to save the environment.

ANSEL ADAMS (1902 – 1984)

Up Close Naturally: Early Nesters

BY MARGOT HERVIEUX

No matter what the winter weather, early March is nesting time for a hand-full of local birds.



It is hard to imagine ever sitting on eggs for weeks, let alone doing it at sub-zero temperatures. For some northern residents, however, getting a jump on the season is worth enduring the cold.

The prize for first egg in the nest goes to the Gray Jay which is often called a “whiskey jack.” These outgoing birds stay year-round on their territory with their life-long mates. Lengthening days in late February trigger a flurry of nest building activity. Over the course of two weeks, a tangled cup of twigs and grass is carefully lined with moss, lichen, feathers, hair and even fur. Hidden in the crotch of a spruce tree, the nest is partly exposed to the sun for extra warmth.

By the middle of March, two to six hungry youngsters inhabit the nest. Mother jay will continue to provide warmth for her brood whenever necessary, leaving Dad doing most of the food gathering. Gray Jays actively store food for

later use, thus providing valuable provisions during late springs.

Even more unusual are the Red and White-winged Crossbills, which use their very distinctive crossed beaks to pry seeds out of pine and spruce cones. The flocks are nomadic, moving from feeding area to feeding area. When they find a site with a good cone crop they will nest, whether it is February or August. They do make one allowance for the weather, however, and build a more substantial nest during the winter months.

Another late-winter nester is Alberta’s provincial bird, the Great Horned Owl. February and March is the time to start listening for their deep *whoo whoo--whoo-whoohoo* in wooded areas after dark. Old hawk or crow nests are the preferred choice for nesting and two or three owlets fledge in mid-May – just in time to practice their hunting skills on a wide variety of young mammals and birds.

At this time of year you may also notice signs of courtship among some year-round residents. The two-note whistle of the Black-capped Chickadee is their territorial spring song. Raven pairs can be spotted sitting together grooming or doing aerial acrobatics. Other owls, including the tiny Saw-whet Owl with its repetitive whistle and the larger Barred Owl that says “who cooks for you”, are also beginning to call.

Birds big and small can survive a northern winter but only if they can find food. Nesting early gives local residents a head start over the competition arriving from the south but that only works if your young don’t need juicy insects to live on. It is definitely more challenging to raise a family during the coldest season but, for a few hardy birds, the benefits out-weigh the risks.



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

CELESTIAL HAPPENINGS

Starry Nights

Spring (March to May)

BY JOHN MCFAUL

FEATURED CONSTELLATION: CENTAURUS AND CRUX

In the second century AD Claudius Ptolemy catalogued 48 constellations. Most of these constellations are visible to Albertans. However, some of these can only be seen very low on the southern horizon during the spring months. This is because Ptolemy did his work in the ancient Egyptian city of Alexandria whose latitude is some 28 degrees south of Alberta's. One such constellation is Centaurus –the Centaur whose northern stars barely peak above Alberta's southern horizon during the spring months.

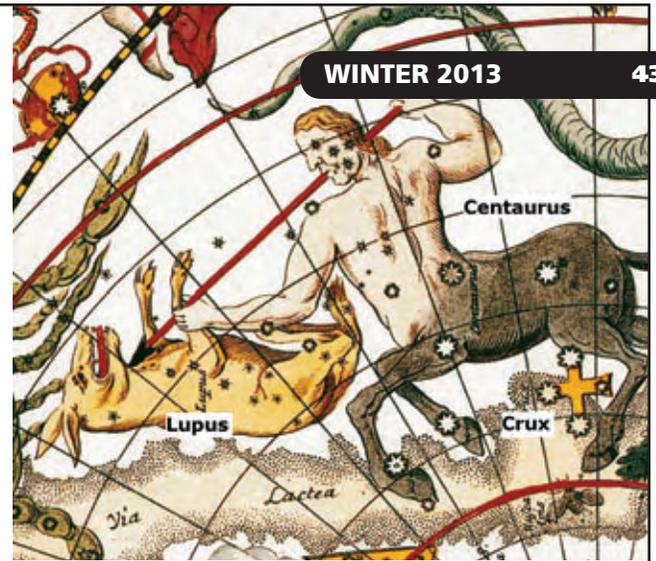
Centaurus was Chiron, the offspring of the titan Cronus and the oceanid Philyra. In order to seek the favour of Philyra, Cronus turned himself into a horse. As a result Chiron had the body of a horse and the torso and head of a human. Unlike most of the centaurs that were mostly a lustful, rowdy bunch, Chiron was very civilized and intellectual. He was a teacher of many of the gods. One day he was accidentally injured by a poison arrow dropped or shot by Hercules. Being immortal he could not escape his suffering until he traded places with the mortal Prometheus. This heroic act was rewarded by Zeus who placed Chiron amongst the stars.

The brightest star in Centaurus is Rigel Kent also known as alpha centuari. It is actually a double star with a third star orbiting the pair known as Proxima Centauri. This is the closest star to the earth being about 4.24 light years away. Despite

its relative closeness it would take Voyager 1, the fastest space craft sent from Earth traveling at 17 km/sec, over 73,000 years to reach it.

Below Centaurus is the small constellation Crux also known as the Southern Cross. This constellation was considered as being part of Centaurus by Ptolemy, but was since separated as its own constellation

in the 1600's. Of all the southern constellations Crux is the most sought by travelers to the southern hemisphere. In fact it did provide guidance to the early sailors of the southern seas, as the vertical axis of the cross points toward the South Pole. There are 5 nations which have the Southern Cross as part of their national flags. Unfortunately Crux is not visible from Alberta.

**CELESTIAL HAPPENINGS**

- Sun:** Rise – March 1 (7:21 MST), April 1 (7:06 MDT), May 1 (5:58 MDT)
Set – March 1 (18:12 MST), April 1 (20:10 MDT), May 1 (21:05 MDT)
Note: Day Light Savings Time started on March 10th. Spring Equinox occurs at 5:02 MST on March 20th.
- Moon:** Full – March 27, April 25, May 24
New – March 11, April 10, May 9
- Planets:** **Mercury** may be seen with difficulty very low in the eastern sky just before sunrise in late March. In late May it can be seen low in the western sky just after sunset. At this time it forms a nice grouping (conjunction) with Venus and Jupiter.
Venus is hidden from view by the Sun's glare until late May when it will be seen very low in the western sky just after sunset. At this time it will be very close to Jupiter and Mercury in the evening twilight.
Mars is too close to the sun to be seen this season.
Jupiter continues to ride the back of Taurus the Bull in the evening sky. In March it is 40 degrees above the western horizon after sunset. By late May it will set soon after sunset. The Moon will be nearby on March 17th, April 14th and May 12th.
Saturn is opposite the Sun during the spring season. In March it rises in the east in the late evening hours. By the end of April and into May it will rise around sunset time and sets a little before sunrise. The moon will be close to Saturn on March 27th, April 26th and May 23rd.

Meteor Shower: Lyrids (April 21, 15/hour in a dark sky), Eta Aquirids (May 4th, 20/hour)
The rate of meteors observed is for dark skies well away from city lights and with no Moon.

Comet PanSTARRS: This moderately bright comet will be visible from the middle of March through early April low in the western sky shortly after sunset. Binoculars may be required to see it well.

EARTH MATTERS CONFERENCE



The Alberta Council for Environmental Education is hosting a conference in Canmore AB, April 25-27, 2013

The full program with workshop descriptions, as well as registration, is now available at <http://abcee.org/conference/>

Keynote speaker is Richard Louv, author of *Last Child in the Woods* and *The Nature Principle*, a speaker who will inspire you and remind you of the importance of getting people outdoors – and how you can do that.

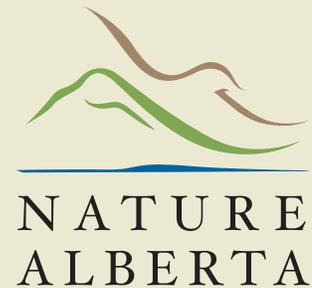
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For Nature Alberta, Kelsie Sharun, for Young Naturalists, and Brianne Lovstrom, for Living by Water, are both planning to attend.

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PORCUPINES ARE DRESSED FOR WINTER: A DENSE, WOOLLY UNDERCOAT; LONG GUARD HAIRS; THOSE STIFF QUILLS; AND OF COURSE, LOTS OF BODY FAT! PAUL HORSLEY



COTTONTAILS SPEND THEIR TIME IN SHRUBBY AND WOODY HABITAT, WHERE BROWNISH COLOURS ARE BETTER CAMOUFLAGE. THUS, THEY DON'T TURN WHITE IN WINTER LIKE HARES. RYAN HEAVY HEAD

SEE "CLOSE TO HOME: INSPIRATION" PG 18. JOHN WARDEN



Nature *gallery*



MOUNTAIN GOATS AT PLAIN OF THE SIX GLACIERS, BANFF NATIONAL PARK. EWEN CLARK



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