

# MUSKRAT EXPRESS

WILLIAMS LAKE FIELD NATURALISTS  
MAY+JUNE 2008 NEWSLETTER





The newsletter for the:  
Williams Lake Field Naturalists  
1305A Borland Road, Williams Lake BC, V2G 5K5

**Membership fees:** Family (\$27) or single (\$22) memberships can be mailed to the above address. Please include your address and phone number with your membership fee. For more information about the club please contact Fred McMechan at 392-7680 or e-mail [Fred\\_McMechan@telus.net](mailto:Fred_McMechan@telus.net)

**Executive of The Williams Lake Field Naturalists:** president Fred McMechan, vice-president Jim Sims, secretary Kris Andrews, treasurer Katharine VanSpall and directors Nola Daintith, Ordell Steen, Anna Roberts, Rob Higgins, Rick Dawson and Cathy Koot

**Editors:** If you have comments, suggestions or articles for the Muskrat please contact Margaret Waring (398-7724), Jim Sims (296-3636) or e-mail [simsj@telus.net](mailto:simsj@telus.net)

## **Field Trip Report - Chilanko Marsh**

On May 17<sup>th</sup> an eager group of 16 meet at the marsh and enjoyed the wonderful rare warm weather. This year we had a counted 79 species which is well above the average of 72. Highlights included another Great-horned Owl with a young sitting on a nest opposite the tanker base. An American Bittern put on an excellent display and photo opportunity early Saturday morning for the eager Friday night campers. This was also the first time



**American Bittern**



**Enjoying Chilanko Marsh**

we had seen a bittern in the marsh. Another highlight was the recording of four species of Flycatchers that included Olive-sided, Western Wood Pewee, Hammond's and Dusky. We also had a rare sighting of a Black-backed Woodpecker. Many of the group went on to Eagle Lake and enjoyed a delicious pot-luck supper and Sunday morning pancake breakfast. Kris found a rare sighting of Semi-palmated Plovers. There were three in the group and they were displaying courtship behaviour. Check out the bird report below for more details.

## **Field Trip Report - A Trip up the San Jose**

It was a stormy looking Friday night when participants met at Scout Island and drove to launch boats at the other end of the lake. Three canoes and five kayaks were soon on the water and headed to the very end of the lake spotting pelicans and loons on the way. Two osprey

performed dives for our entertainment and probably for their dinners too. The water level was high with no beaches around. The wind no longer affected us when we entered the river and began the upstream journey. The blossoms, grasses, river edges and curves were beautiful. We talked about high bush cranberries, when they are ready to pick, what they taste like and who likes them. We found a landing spot and picnic suppers appeared. A little more upstream travel after supper until the current suggested we turn downstream. Very soon we were back in the lake where black terns and nighthawks greeted us. We arrived at our cars around 9pm, about five minutes before the rain started. A great way to spend a Friday evening.

### **Field Trip Report - Churn Creek**

Ten naturalists enjoyed one of the few warm, sunny days of late May – early June hiking in Churn Creek Protected Area. After stopping for a quick introduction just above the Churn Creek bridge, we parked the cars on the Iron Gate Road near Onion Lake and hiked through fragrant sagebrush into Coal Pit pasture. Binoculars and a spotting scope focused on vesper sparrows, meadowlarks, kestrels, and golden eagles. We examined grasses and discussed the adaptations of plants to this hot, dry environment. At the rim of the Churn Creek canyon, we watched California bighorn sheep, including a young ram, on south-facing slopes across the canyon. The canyon fell away from our feet for more than 200 m and presented a spectacular view, accentuated by the many colours and spires of rock. A small waterfall descended the slope across from us into a small wetland, probably the result of Gang Ranch irrigation. From the rim of the canyon, we continued our circuit, climbing to Dry Lake, into elevations above sagebrush of the Lower Grassland and into a greater number of wildflowers of the Middle Grassland. Finally we reached the Iron Gate Road again and followed it back down the hill to our vehicles. A great day in one of the warmest areas of the Cariboo-Chilcotin.



**The View from the Rim Rock**

### **The Elton Anderson Award**

Fred McMechan received the Elton Anderson Award at the 2008 BC Nature (Federation of BC Naturalists or FBCN ) AGM in Penticton. The award was presented at the banquet on June 7 by Pat Westhueser, Awards Chair, and Bev Ramey, President of BC Nature.

This prestigious award recognizes a member of BC Nature who has served the organization well over a period of time in order to further its aims. This award is named after Elton Anderson, a former president of the FBCN, and a key person in the promotion and establishment of the FBCN. In 1971 Elton came to Williams Lake to encourage the formation of a local naturalists club; as a result the Williams Lake Field Naturalists was started.

## **Scout Island Nature Centre Report**

The summer staff has been working flat out for the past 4 weeks. Our full time staff members this year are Jean Oosthuizen and Wyatt Klopp. Both have finished their first year of university. Sari Small is part time until the end of June. She has her biology degree and will be working on a teaching degree so SINC is the perfect experience. It is a great joy to be working with these three, who are full of energy. Ian Higgins will join us at the end of June.

The school programs have kept us very busy. We have really emphasized having the students outside. All "at school" programs are held outdoors at the school. We have had 3 full day programs at schools that used nearby marshes and wooded areas. The programs at SINC have been extended in time so that students have more time to enjoy nature. We also teamed up with Cariboo Chilcotin Conservation Society (CCCS) to do programs in the river valley. Jenny Howell leads the students in doing water testing in the river (pH, phosphates, temperature, etc). Sue or the summer staff takes half the class and explores the nearby marsh catching invertebrates and vertebrates. This is a follow up to the Water Wise Programs that Jenny has been doing with classes.

You may have noticed some disturbed ground along the Butter Fly Trail. The City came in and scarified areas in preparation for planting trees. The vision is to have open forest along this area for the next generation of Nature Centre visitors (all species). An energetic gang from the Columneetza Horticulture Class planted the first 20 trees. The Nature Trust of BC's Youth Crew will be helping with the rest of the planting. Ron Young from Solar Eagle will be setting up a solar run pump for the Nature Centre to water this new area so that we will not be using City water for irrigation. The pump will take water directly from the lake.

### **Nature Fun**

The summer **Nature Fun** program will run July 2<sup>nd</sup> -August 22<sup>nd</sup> this year.

Monday to Friday ages 3-8

morning and afternoon sessions (\$9)

Each day there are outdoor activities that provide opportunities to explore and learn about nature, as well as games and crafts to add to the enjoyment. Activities are based on weekly themes.

Plus exploration, investigation and adventure for curious and adventuresome children ages 8-13

Wednesdays 1-3pm Cost \$9

Mondays All Day 9-3pm \*bring your lunch! Cost \$15

For information and to register for any of the programs call us at 398-8532 or come down to the Nature House.

### **Free Family Evening Programs**

Every Wednesday (we think that will be the day) evening (7pm) during the summer, there will be nature programs covering a wide range of topics. Call the Nature Centre for the schedule or check out the newspaper.

## Book Sale

We're adding a new perk of membership! All the books in our For Sale cabinet are now 10% off for members. The kids' books are at 50% discount for everyone. It is time to rotate the stock.

## Weed Warriors Needed Payment –Exercise in a Great Setting

All the great rain this spring has brought the weeds on fast. We once again need weed warriors to adopt a section for weed control. If you would like to help out give Sue a call 398 8532

## Weekend Hosts Needed for Nature House

We would really like the Nature House to be open both weekend days in the summer. To do this we need volunteers for each Sunday (staff covers Saturdays). You would need to be there from 1-4 on Sundays. It is a lot of fun. There are live animals to feed, live people to talk to about the displays, and wonderful birds to watch. If you can give one Sunday from July-September let Sue know 398-8532. We would be happy to show you the ropes ahead of time.

## Sandman Inns Donation

In response to our spring fundraising appeal to local businesses, we received a gift certificate from Sandman Inns for accommodations for two persons, one night in Williams Lake, Quesnel or Prince George. We'd like to turn this into cash we could use for our programs. If you have any use for such accommodations, please consider swapping with us for this certificate (\$150 value). Give us a call at 398-8532.

## Bird Sightings from the Williams Lake Area      June 16, 2008

The damp cool spring and high water may be delaying the nesting by **Common Loons**. There has been no nesting Loons reported from Williams Lake. Here at Rose Lake I have paddled around most of the shore line. My travels through usual nesting territories did not result in any Loons displaying nest defense calls. If any of you have similar observations or have found Loon nests please let us know.

Three or four **American White Pelicans** can still be found at the East end of Williams Lake. They have not been as plentiful this year and there have been very few sightings around Scout Island. They must be finding a better source of fish closer to Stum Lake. However today there was a large flock of about 30 pelicans at the east end so perhaps they are starting to feed on Williams Lake again. Does this correspond to the hatching of the new young at Stum lake and a greater need for a good food source?

A visitor from Victoria reported a **Green Heron** by the causeway at Scout Island also on June 5th. This would be only the 4th Cariboo record and the first in spring. On June 12<sup>th</sup> there were

four **Great-blue Herons** near the dam on Rose Lake. I need to get busy and look for a nearby rookery.

Tom found 16 **Turkey Vultures** perched in the morning sunshine at Forest Grove on June 15th. This is possibly the largest congregation recorded in the Cariboo. A cow carcass in the woods nearby was believed to be the attraction.

In the Chilanko Marsh trip description it was noted that Kris had observed three **Semipalmated Plovers** at Eagle Lake. On June 7th I returned to the cabin and checked out the Plovers. I found two in the same area and noted that they paid more attention to my presence this time. They stopped feeding along the shore and moved away from the beach. During our May visit they allowed very close approach and stayed along the shore and continued feeding. I came back again on Sunday and this time I observed a broken wing display to draw me away from a possible nest. Later in the afternoon I decided to return and sit close to where they had been active to see if they would return to the nest. The male was more active and seemed to be slightly darker than the female. The male moved from one



Semipalmated Plover sitting on nest



Plover Nest

side of me to the other staying about 20 feet away. The female remained a bit further away but stayed in a smaller area between where I sat and the shore. After about a half to three-quarters of an hour the male became more comfortable with my presence and returned to the shore to feed. It returned to check me out a second time and then went back to the shore. Shortly after this the female approached a few feet closer and I observed her fluff up her chest feathers and she sat down on the nest. I was fortunate to catch this on a brief video. I then photographed the eggs and left the area. This is a

significant observation as there are very few nesting records for the Semipalmated Plover below the Yukon border. The only other Chilcotin record was in 1961 and was close to Eagle Lake. Three sets of **Killdeer** young were found along the shores of a small pond south of highway 20 near the Loran-C tower. They provided great entertainment and photo opportunities. **American Avocet** numbers are quit high this year, with up to 18 reported and at least 4 nesting pairs.



Juvenile Killdeer

On June 11th I was joined by Kris Andrews and Sharon Henry when I checked my Bluebird route. Sharon has this area as her breeding bird atlas plot so we spent a lot of our time checking for evidence of nesting species. When we found a pair of agitated **Curlews** close to the route we delayed and spent some time checking for nest or young. Eventually Kris found the young and we quickly grabbed cameras to record the observation. Shortly after we found the young we were all looking



away when the young curlew disappeared. We searched high and low and could not find it. We speculated that it must have quickly darted away in the not very long grass. Eventually we gave up and started to leave. I happened to walk over the area where we had seen the young and there it was extremely well camouflaged lying in the grass so we were able to complete our photo collection.

Very large flocks of **Bonaparte's Gulls** were reported about May 12th. 54 were counted on a pond just past Big Lake. Large flocks were also found on Rose Lake and Goldpan Lake on the Horsefly Road. A **Caspian Tern** was reported on Williams Lake on May 28th. This Caspian Tern was photographed by Kris at Scout Island. On June 12th a **Common Tern** was flying over Rose Lake.



Caspian Tern



Catbird Eggs

On June 1st **Pacific Slope Flycatchers** were well established in Williams Lake and Quesnel. Redstarts were reported in Quesnel on May 27th and were in the Williams Lake river valley on June 1st. **Willow Flycatchers** have returned to occupy all suitable habitat as have **Veery, Orioles** and **Catbirds**. The photo of the bright blue Catbird eggs was taken by Kris during Phil's field trip.

A **Winter Wren** was found singing in the lower Williams Lake river valley during Phil's field trip on Father's Day. When Phil played his winter Wren recording it immediately flew into the nearby trees and provided great observations

A **Rose-breasted Grosbeak** was found above Chimney Valley on June 1st. Tom was sent a photo of another one visiting a feeder at Bridge Lake and he still has a female **Black-headed Grosbeak** visiting his feeder. On June 6th a **Bobolink** was found in its usual location near Horsefly. Another one was found near Jones Creek on Mission Road. We received from Big Lake this report of a brief visit of a Baltimore Oriole at a feeder; "Definitely was a Baltimore, not a Bullocks. Nor was it an intergrade of the 2 species, as shown in the Nat. Geo. field guide."

The Rose lake area has been infested with very large numbers of **Purple Finches**. Most feeders must be filled daily to keep ahead of the mobs. They can be seen and heard singing near any of the filled feeders. Up to thirty can be seen at the feeders at one time. Similar numbers of **Pine Siskins** are also visiting the feeders. On May 9th what appeared to be a mated pair of **White-winged Crossbills** were sitting in a spruce tree near the feeder. In early June group of seven or eight were feeding on spruce cones that had been dropped from the trees by the squirrel. Was this the family group from the pair seen earlier? On June 1st a pair of Red Crossbills was getting sunflower seeds from a Rose Lake feeder.

The **tree swallows** that are nesting below the bird spy camera at Scout Island can be viewed in the Nature Centre. If you have not been down to see the nest box activity you should try to get down some time this week. They still have a good week to go before they fledge.

Kris sent me this interesting photo of a turtle back on May 5<sup>th</sup>. You can clearly see what looks like thin layers of shell peeling off the turtles back. Does anyone know anything about this? Does a turtle shed its shell?



Jim Sims

## **Remaining Field Trips for 2008**

**Early Morning Birding at Scout Island Nature Centre** June 22<sup>nd</sup> Cathy Koot (392-4250)  
Meet at the Nature Centre at 8:00 am and join Cathy for a morning walk around the Nature Centre and an opportunity to identify the many different species that will be nesting there.

**Eureka Peak** July 26<sup>th</sup> Sue Hemphill and Jurgen Homburg (398-8532)  
Meet at the Horsefly Bridge at 8:00am. Join Sue and Jurgen for a hike into the alpine on the north end of Eureka Peak located in the Cariboo Mountains near the headwaters of the Horsefly River. There will be an elevation gain of close to 1500 feet so be prepared for a healthy hike. This trip is planned to coincide with the peak of the alpine flower season so bring your plant book to help with identification. The steeper East side of the Eureka ridge is home to a large mountain goat herd and they can often be seen from the top of the ridge. Be sure to pack a hearty lunch and trail mix as well as good rain gear as you are in the rain belt of the Cariboo Mountains. Streams on the hike up as well as the plateau are dependent on snow melt and rain fall so you should bring a water bottle. Good foot wear is imperative and gaiters could be an asset as the vegetation will be very deep and most likely wet. The last part of the drive is over rough logging access roads so high clearance vehicles should be used. Car pooling will be arranged at Horsefly. If you wish you are welcome to camp over Saturday night but your guides will most likely be returning home Saturday evening.

**Ducks Unlimited Nest-Boxing** Aug. 10<sup>th</sup> Katharine VanSpall (398-7028 daytime) or (392-4447 evening)

Join DU staff member Katharine to check duck nest boxes at a local wetland (TBA). Take a peek inside several boxes to learn what kind of critter has been using them and the fate of duck nests of various species. The day may include: checking & maintaining the boxes, identifying bird eggs & nests, bird-watching, recording the species of animals and plants observed at the wetland, and possibly canoeing or kayaking depending on the interest of the group.

Duck nest-boxes are often found to contain not just duck nests but also nests of swallows, robins, starlings, and kestrels; as well as squirrel "nests" or sign of predators such as mink, marten or bears.

Learn more about the why's and how-to's of duck nest-boxing!

**Paddle with the Salmon** Sept. 14<sup>th</sup> Margaret Waring (398-7724) or Rick Dawson (392-3370)

Meet at Scout Island with your canoe/kayak, lunch, PFD and extra clothes at 9:00 am for this “paddle with the salmon” ending at Horsefly bay on Quesnel Lake. It is very neat to be in the river with the salmon and see all of the other life in and around the river at this time. This is mostly a relatively easy drift, but includes a few slightly more exciting stretches that could tip your canoe if not approached correctly. River paddling experience is required for at least one person in each boat.

**Hike the South Side of the Chilcotin Rive to Big Creek** September 27<sup>th</sup> Ordell Steen and Jim Sims (296-3638)

Meet at Scout Island at 7:00am. Join Ordell and Jim for a Fall hike in the grasslands. We will start at Farwell Canyon and hike up river to Big Creek. The trip starts with a steep climb up from the valley floor. Bring your lunch and water bottle and enjoy the amazing views along the way.

**Junction Sheep Range Provincial Park** October 19<sup>th</sup> Fred McMechan (392-7680)

Meet at Scout Island at 8:00am. Bring a lunch, water bottle and you binoculars for this annual day long drive and hike into the park. This will be at the peak of the Big-horned Sheep rut so look forward to seeing the sheep and perhaps you will be lucky and see or hear some head-bu

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**WILLIAMS LAKE FIELD NATURALISTS MEMBERSHIP**

Name(s): \_\_\_\_\_

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

Phone: \_\_\_\_\_ email \_\_\_\_\_

Cost: Family membership \$27 \_\_\_\_\_ Single membership \$22 \_\_\_\_\_  
(Membership cheque made out to Williams Lake Field Naturalists. A charitable receipt will be given)

I have included a donation of \_\_\_\_\_ to the Scout Island Nature Centre Fund Raising Campaign  
(Please provide a separate cheque made out to Scout Island Nature Centre)

Please mail completed form and cheque to:  
Williams Lake Field Naturalists - 1305A Borland Road - Williams Lake, BC - V2G 5K5