

MUSKRAT EXPRESS

WILLIAMS LAKE FIELD NATURALISTS
NOVEMBER • DECEMBER 2013 NEWSLETTER



JANUARY 27-MONDAY 7:30PM MUSKWA KECHIKA
BC'S WORKING WILDERNESS



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

Membership fees: Family (\$30), single (\$25) or student (\$10) memberships can be mailed to the above address. Please complete the membership and waiver forms available at the Nature Centre (250) 398-8532, muskratexpress@midbc.com or the web site below. For more information about the club please contact Fred McMechan at 392-7680 or e-mail Fred_McMechan@telus.net

Williams Lake Field Naturalists Website <http://www.williamslakefieldnaturalists.ca>
Scout Island Nature Centre Website <http://www.scoutislandnaturecentre.ca>

Executive of The Williams Lake Field Naturalists: president Fred McMechan, vice-president Jim Sims, secretary Ordell Steen, treasurer Katharine VanSpall and directors Nola Daintith, Rob Higgins, Cathy Koot, Peter Opie and Ray Hornby



Editors: Thanks to all of you who have contributed to this edition of the newsletter. Please expect your next edition of the newsletter in mid to late January. If you have comments, suggestions or articles for the next Muskrat Express please contact Margaret Waring (398-7724), Jim Sims (296-3638) or e-mail us at muskratexpress@midbc.com.



Membership Reminder:

Your membership fees for 2014 will be due as of January 1st, 2014 so before you forget why not visit the club website and download the forms and get the dues dealt with early. For those who do not have email access the forms will be included with the snail-mailed copy of the newsletter. 2014 forms can also be picked up at Scout Island. Remember to complete and sign the membership and waiver forms. This must be done each year.

46th Williams Lake Christmas Bird Count – Is time running out?

As a matter of course at this time of year I mention that some of the original counters from the first Williams Lake Christmas Bird Count in 1969 will be out again for this the 46th annual count on Sunday Dec 15th. Looking back through the list of participants, the same names appear year after year and I assume each of us will be a year older than the year previous. The majority of participants are now in their 50's or 60's with most of the remainder upping the average age.

It's not hard to imagine that unless there's an infusion of new blood within the next 20-30 years, the count will wither away through attrition. I'm not sure if this holds true or not. If it does, then I suppose whether to reform or abolish the Senate wouldn't be an issue. Perhaps the entry age for bird counters may well be the years after careers are well established and families have been raised – although I'm not sure if they need to be appointed by the Prime Minister. 'Birding is the fastest growing past time/recreational activity in N. America' is quoted endlessly from what source I'm not sure. Either Williams Lake is bucking the trend, the trend has been reversed or it never had a factual basis. I rather suspect the latter, but if there is an interest in birds in the community among the younger folk then it doesn't seem to translate into participation in the Christmas Bird Count. I'm banking heavily on Margret Onnekin's graduates at Discovery Preschool turning 40 and picking up the torch.

Not that geriatric bird counters are necessarily an issue. I seem to recall that last year a spry 92 year old by the name of Marion Corless insisting she had an unusual bird at her Terra Ridge feeder and identifying a Scarlet Tanager making its first appearance on any bird count in Canada. That



Scarlet Tanager (photo by Rod Sargent)

certainly sparked some interest in the birding world and keeps up the impetus to get out in the cold and snow every year to see what else might be out there.

If you're a seasoned veteran and will be participating again, please email me to confirm, otherwise I will be contacting you in the next week. If you haven't participated before and would like to, please contact me at 250 398-7110 or ranson1@telus.net for more details. Fred McMechan has once again kindly offered to host a post-count potluck at 1225 Moon Ave at 6:00 PM.

The Muskwa-Kechika: B.C.'s Working Wilderness

Monday, January 27, 7:30 pm, Scout Island Nature House

The magnificent Muskwa-Kechika Management Area in the northern British Columbia includes Parks and Protected Areas where resource extraction is prohibited, and management zones where resource extraction may occur, according to higher standards than elsewhere in the province. We will present a half-hour DVD describing this unique approach to natural resource management in B.C. and some of the people involved in it. Afterwards, Cathy Koot will share a few slides from a trip she took with fellow naturalists a few years back to some of the very sites shown in the film.



Hiking in the Muskwa-Kechika
Photo by Cathy Koot



Notes from the Executive **Fred McMechan, president**

License of Occupation with BC Lands: This License has a term of 10 years and expires in April, 2014. It gives us land tenure to have the following structures on Crown property: the two dipping docks along the river outlet and the marsh, the bridge at Otter Point, the elevated board walkway at Otter Point and the viewing platform on the Bulrush Trail. This fall we sent an application to the Lands office to have the License renewed. It requests recognition of the present structures and as well, land tenure amendments to include other structures such as the foot bridge on the Island Trail, the pole with the osprey nest, sections of the elevated walkways on the Willow and Island Trails, and the bird blind. We have also applied for tenure amendments to allow us to develop educational and recreational structures in the future on crown properties, such as along the marsh and the lake adjacent to the causeway road, and the Channel Diversion property adjacent to the river outlet. The Lands office will process this application and we expect to get its reply early next year.

Conservation and Recreation Reserve: In 1984 an Order-in- Council Land Reserve at the west end of Williams Lake was established for recreation, conservation and habitat protection. This reserve has a 30 year term and hence it will need to be renewed in 2014. At this time our club and the City of Williams Lake have co-applied to the Lands office for renewal of this land reserve. This reserve covers a part of the west end of the lake and the marsh. After the application is processed the City and our club will be contacted by Lands with their decision.

BC Hydro Project: The BC Hydro project to provide underground wiring to the Nature House has been completed. During the project ditching along the causeway road and then to the Nature House, placing of the ducts to carry the electrical cable and the feeding of the cable through the ducts was carried out. After the electrical connections were completed Horizon Climate Controls installed the heating system. This included the installation of the air exchange heat pump and the electrical furnace, and the improvements for air exchange in the building. As well Shaw Cable and TELUS have installed their systems in other separate ducts which were placed in the ditch. Another set of ditches were dug to the City pump houses. This part of the project was also completed and now the pump houses are connected to the underground system. The overhead poles and lines will be taken down in the winter or in the spring.



Scout Island Nature Centre Report

By Sue Hemphill

Nature Writing –Fun for All

Did you say I have to write during my week off of school? No Way! That is how some children might respond if you suggested such a thing to them. But not the children that Joined Paula Laita and Anne White during the fall break. The days were full of games and challenges indoors and out. At the end, they suggested that the time for writing needed to be longer. Here are a couple of samples:

Bear Dream

When a bear dreams
 he dreams of honey and creams,
 syrup, berries, and clouds,
 big fluffy clouds
 he dreams he's floating
 in the air, when the sun is shining,
 but when he has a nightmare he
 can really scare
 himself, because he dreams of
 being shot
 falling into a witches pot
 falling off a cliff
 having a terrible sniff...
 thank goodness its just a dream.
 Ivy McKay

Black is a hole in your life
 Or a quiet place on earth
 Black tastes like liquorice or a peppercorn
 It is a shadow looming around in an alley
 It feels soft or scratchy
 When I think of black, I think of storming
 thunderclouds
 Madi Riplinger



Rebecca Elefson –can you see her?



Anne and the group sharing ideas

More

Adventure and More Writing.

Kim Zalay, a Grade 7 teacher, and 22 of her students decided they needed

to Scout Island by moon light. Some slept in tents and some in the Nature House—all got up close and personal with the resident beavers. More students joined us the next day. They morphed into a variety of animals and learned and imagined how each adapted to fall and winter (and how they knew it was time to adapt).

By Lynne Julius aka black capped chickadee gives a full account.

Chirp, chirp! The Scout Island newspaper is here, written by a black capped chickadee - black capped chickadee!

We start in the lot, cars driving in, arriving with big bags and pillows also some cookies and muffins. So here we are in the Nature House with many of my friends which I realize are dead and stuffed ... oh!

Now for a snack of cookies and cocoa! We are done and I didn't get any cookies because I am a bird. Oh, we're going to see the beavers now. I know them and they are fed up with people mistaking muskrats for them and they say, "You can tell us apart by our tails. Theirs move like a snake and ours are under water and we slap them when we think there is danger." So about their eating, they only eat the growing layer of trees ... even I knew that! Now we are in the trails being quiet (kind of) and as we go ... DARN! A dead end but one good thing, a sign of deer, its scat. That's gross, bleeech!

On our way back we see more beavers, but then it's time to go to sleep (yawn). I'm so glad I'm outside because it is so loud in there!

Good morning! Time to get up, put things away, and get a breakfast of yogurt, cookies, muffins, and fruit. After that some prep, and after that, back outside. We took another walk while some stayed inside and looked at invertebrate.

Well, one thing I learned is how creatures are pale for winter. Some stay and hibernate, some migrate, while others stay and are completely active! Another thing is some owls even come here to Williams Lake! Did you know an owl can see and hear as well as you! You just don't use it! It's kind of weird, why would owls stop here, it's cold!

Now with our walk, did you know some ducks make a hole in a tree too, and the baby, when it hatches, bursts out into the lake! You would think they might wait until they have feathers!

There are also the invertebrates in fresh water and salt water. It must be hard being in danger all the time. It's a good thing they have a shell!

That's that, it was fun, but now I'm done.

Two Presents for the Price of One

This beautiful children's table and chairs set was hand crafted from local aspen by WLFN member Jurgen Hornburg. He has donated two sets to the Nature Centre. The set (table and chairs) cost \$400. It would be a gift to a special child as well as a gift to the Nature Centre. Contact Sue (250 398 8532) if you would like to see the table and chairs up close.



Also for Sale in exchange for a gift to Scout Island we have a used organ that was donated to SINC. Roco Catalano has checked it out and reported to plays well. Make us an offer, it will not likely be refused and gather your family around the organ this Christmas Season and sing your favourite carols. (again you can Contact Sue)

For the Birds we have Organic Pork Suet for Sale at \$1/pound, proceeds to the Nature Centre.

Red Crossbill (*Loxia curvirostra*)

Researched by Jim Sims (Checklist of Cariboo Chilcotin Birds, <http://www.allaboutbirds.org>)

Last week Phil Ranson circulated the photo to the right of a pair of Red-Crossbills. The pair was part of a group of 7 that he found in the Firs on the switchbacks going down into Farwell Canyon. A couple of days later Smedley and I watched another half dozen getting grit from the middle of Allpress Road (Rose Lake area) while we were out for our morning walk. These sighting have prompted me to do a bit of research for you.



The name Crossbill has been applied to this finch due to the weird "cross" shape to the bill. This bill has been adapted to this seed eating species to help it extract large seeds from the cones of coniferous trees. The odd bill shape helps it get into tightly closed cones. A bird's biting muscles are stronger than the muscles used to open the bill, so the Red Crossbill places the tips of its slightly open bill under a cone scale and bites down. The tip of the top half of the bill pushed down against the cone while the tip of the lower part of the bill hooks the bottom of the seed and lifts it up out of the cone. The Crossbill is almost completely dependent on seeds for its food source. It will even feed seeds to the young. For this reason they may nest at any time during the year. I recall seeing a family in my yard in late May

when the rest of the birds are busy trying to find a mate and looking for a good nest location.

The Red Crossbill shows a great deal of variation in bill shape and voice, and it may in fact be composed of several

different species. Eight different flight call types have been described north of Mexico, and birds giving each type have slightly differently shaped bills and prefer to feed on different tree species with differently sized cones. Do they inter breed, a question for more research?

The “Checklist of Cariboo Chilcotin Birds” frequency graph

J	F	M	A	M	J	J	A	S	O	N	D
					*						

 classifies the Red Crossbill as a nesting fairly common (7 to 20 individuals per locality per day) year round resident. The (*) asterisk in the middle of the graph indicates it is an eruptive species. This means during some years or seasons it will be very abundant and at other times will be absent from the region. They will wander across North America in search of the best cone crop area. This is similar to some other seed eating species such as Siskins and Redpolls.



Similar White-winged Crossbill

The Red Crossbill can be mistaken for its relative, the White-winged Crossbills. Both species have the characteristic crossed bill and similar colouring (males are reddish). The White-winged has a significant white bar on the blackish wings of both male and female. This white bar is missing from both male and female in the Red Crossbill. Let’s hope that this year is one of those “Big Cone Crop” years and we see lots of seed eaters this winter.

Pacific Wren (*Troglodytes pacificus*)

Researched by Jim Sims

This past Sunday I was climbing down the bank towards the lake in front of my home. A weakened spruce tree had tipped over due to the recent heavy snow fall and I wanted to remove it before today’s cold was established. Out of the corner of my eye I saw the quick flash of a bird flit off into some brush along the shore. My first thought was a Junco but then I thought maybe a Winter Wren. I noticed a small twig sticking out from behind a tree trunk moving slightly so I slowly moved a bit further so I could see around the tree. Sure enough perched on an upturned root deep in the tangle of shrubs by the lake was a clear view of the small brown bird with a short tail sticking up in the air and a long thin bill; a wren for sure.



Pacific Wren
Photo from Checklist Gallery

Of course this was not a Winter Wren, a few years ago it would have been. As a result of recent studies of the genetics as well as the vocalizations of the Winter Wren the species has been split into 3, the Winter Wren of the Eastern part of the Continent, the Eurasian Wren of Europe and our Pacific Wren. The 3 Wrens are very difficult to tell apart and even good photos can prove to be difficult. It is mainly the differences in the calls and songs that distinguish the 3 species as well as their geographic location. The only Wren from these 3 species in our location is the Pacific Wren. Often we will hear the Wren before we actually see it. The song of the Pacific Wren is a loud, rich, liquid and full song with rising and falling high-pitched notes in a fine silver thread of music lasting about seven seconds and containing 108-113 separate notes. It sings from a low perch or on the ground where it remains well hidden. The Pacific Wren delivers its song with 10 times more power than a crowing rooster when compared to their unit weight.

At this time of the year the Checklist of Cariboo Chilcotin Birds frequency graph

J	F	M	A	M	J	J	A	S	O	N	D
					█	█	█	█	█		

 designates the Pacific Wren to be a rare species (1 to 6 sightings per season). It does nest in the region and is fairly common in the right habitat during the breeding season.

One of my favourite sightings of this species occurred during my kayak trip to South Moresby Gwaii Haanas back in 1987. It was a few days before the islands became protected with National Park status. We were wind bound for a few days on Alder Island where we survived on the 5 salmon we had caught the day before. Behind my tent I found these three young wrens being fed by an adult that disappeared into the brush and came back shortly with a bug to feed the newly fledged young.



Gwaii Haanas Pacific Wrens

Our View of the Night Sky – December 2013.

Planet Review

Jupiter is visible in the evening sky in the constellation Gemini. Venus is visible low in the west at sunset – very bright. Mercury & Saturn are visible in the pre-dawn low in the south-east near Spica. Mars is visible at dawn low in the south.

Meteor showers

December 13, 14 - Geminids Meteor Shower. The Geminids is the king of the meteor showers. It is considered by many to be the best shower in the heavens, producing up to 120 multicolored meteors per hour at its peak. It is produced by debris left behind by an asteroid known as 3200 Phaethon, which was discovered in 1982. The shower runs annually from December 7-17. It peaks this year on the night of the 13th and morning of the 14th. The waxing gibbous moon will block out some of the meteors this year, but the Geminids are so bright and numerous that it should still be a good show. Best viewing will be from a dark location after midnight. Meteors will radiate from the constellation Gemini, but can appear anywhere in the sky.

December 21, 22 - Ursids Meteor Shower. The Ursids is a minor meteor shower producing only about 5-10 meteors per hour. It is produced by dust grains left behind by comet Tuttle, which was first discovered in 1790. The shower runs annually from December 17-25. It peaks this year on the night of the 21st. This year the second quarter moon will be bright enough to hide all but the brightest meteors.

January 2, 3 - Quadrantids Meteor Shower. The Quadrantids is an above average shower, with up to 40 meteors per hour at its peak. It is thought to be produced by dust grains left behind by an extinct comet known as 2003 EH1, which was discovered in 2003. The shower runs annually from January 1-5. It peaks this year on the night of the 2nd and morning of the 3rd. The thin crescent moon will set early in the evening leaving dark skies for what could be an excellent show. Best viewing will be from a dark location after midnight. Meteors will radiate from the constellation Bootes, but can appear anywhere in the sky.

December Solstice - December 21.

Comet ISON

ISON's orbit is closest to the Sun on November 28th at 1.1 million kms. If it survives this part of its orbit, it may emerge in early December in the dawn sky and be visible in binocs or small telescopes. If it does survive its close encounter with the Sun it may be visible to the naked eye.

Try this url for a great image of ISON. <http://www.skynews.ca/comet-ison-update/#more-3650>

Try this url for a short video showing ISON's path through our solar system: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=40wICUY5VmU#t=47>

Dec. 1st is the start of a two week period where ISON may be visible in the pre-dawn sky. By Dec. 19th ISON should be visible in the evening sky to the west, but it is moving fast and will quickly drop in visibility over a two week period.

Evening Sky Map – Skymaps.com - <http://www.skymaps.com/skymaps/tesmn1311.pdf>.

