

MUSKRAT EXPRESS

WILLIAMS LAKE FIELD NATURALISTS

FEBRUARY 2015 NEWSLETTER

I am looking forward to BRIONY PENN'S STORIES OF THE CHILCOTIN

I am looking forward to Joanna's Desserts

I hope there is a piece of lemon cake for me

I am here from the Chilcotin Alpine. The berries and leaves look delicious!

I want to meet the Chilcotin Cow Girl!

BANQUET
STORIES OF STAYING
IN THE SADDLE
FRIDAY APRIL 24TH

+ POTLUCK + AGM + SHOW MARCH 27TH





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@shaw.ca 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, secretary Ordell Steen, treasurer Katharine VanSpall and directors Nola Daintith, Cathy Koot, Peter Opie, Ray Hornby, Brian Chapman, Don Lawrence and Christie Mayall



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-April. 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@shaw.ca . **MEMBER'S MOMENTS (An opportunity for**



you to share your photos and stories). We are going to add this new feature to our newsletter, a place to share your special pictures of the Cariboo Chilcotin. If you have a picture of a flower, some scenery or a bird or plant from when you were in the mountains, working in your garden, on a hike, visiting Scout Island, walking around town or in the Creek Valley why not share it with all of us. Email your full resolution "Member's Moment" to muskratexpress@shaw.ca. Provide a title for your picture, tell us who you are and where the picture was taken, and identify what is in it and anything else you want to share about your photo. We promise to look at all your photos and read all of your descriptions and we will use our favorites in a future edition of the Muskrat.

Williams Lake Field Naturalists AGM

Potluck Supper, AGM and Birds and animals from Coast Rica Friday March 27th

Our club's Annual General Meeting will be held on Friday, March 27, at the Nature House.

The itinerary will be as follows: 1) potluck supper, starting at 6 pm 2) very short AGM meeting, from 7:30 to 8 pm. 3) Ending with a half hour presentation by Susan Aspinall. Take your mind off your late winter doldrums and enjoy Susan's photos of birds and animals from her recent trip to Costa Rica. If possible please attend so that we will have a decent quorum for the AGM. (Our potluck suppers always feature awesome dishes come out and enjoy!)

Impacts of the Polley Mine Rupture

And evening presentation by Sam Albers from the Quesnel River Research Centre

Tues. Mar. 17th 7:00pm at Scout Island Nature Centre

On August 4, 2014, the Mount Polley Mine tailings impoundment ruptured and discharged ~25 million m³ of tailings and wastewaters to downstream surface waters. The Quesnel Lake system represents some of British Columbia's most important sockeye salmon habitat. Since August 4th, the University of Northern British Columbia's Quesnel River Research Centre (QRRC) has been engaged in research looking at potential impacts of the tailing pond breach. This presentation will summarize the research findings from the QRRC with a focus on Quesnel Lake.



Field Trip Meeting

Tuesday March 31st

The meeting to plan the field trips for this year will take place on Tuesday, March 31, at the Nature House, starting at 5 pm. If you cannot attend and wish to lead a field trip please contact Jim Sims. Also you are welcome to provide recommendations for field trips.

Friends of the Churn Creek Protected Area Society (FCCPAS) – AGM

The 2015 FCCPAS AGM will be held on Saturday, April 25, beginning at 10:00 am at the Dog Creek Community Gymnasium. A brief business session will be followed by a light lunch and an afternoon hike into the Churn Creek Protected Area, presuming the weather cooperates! If you are a member or just interested please come. Contact Ordell Steen (oasteen@shaw.ca) if you have questions or would like to become a director. For those wishing to carpool please meet at the “Y” in the west parking lot across from the A&W at 8:30 am.

Annual Scout Island Nature Centre Fund Raising Banquet

Friday April 24th

The Scout Island Nature Centre Banquet will be held on Friday, April 24, at St. Andrew’s United Church Hall. The pre-dinner social will start at 6 pm and the meal will be served at about 6:30 pm. The Church will cater and Joanne Wright will serve her fabulous desserts. The tickets will be: adults - \$35; children 16 and under - \$15. Tickets will be available starting in March from members of our executive and at the Open Book. The guest speaker will be Briony Penn (Mother Nature has promised that Briony will be able to fly into Williams Lake this time!!)

Stories of Staying in the Saddle (from assorted journals on the Chilcotin)

Stories drawn from the nature journals of Briony Penn, her family (the Drummonds of Riske Creek), and zoologist/naturalist, Ian McTaggart Cowan (the subject of her latest book).

Briony Penn's family, the Drummonds, were homesteading ranchers in the 19th century at Riske Creek and her family journals provide stories and images of the natural and cultural history of Riske Creek at the turn of the century — including photographs of Chief Toosie, his wife and family. A century later in 1982, Penn returns to her "ancestral lands" to work as a cowgirl and ends up at Gustafson Lake rescued by Chilcotin cowboy, John Salinas, a decade before the Sundance showdown. As a journalist/broadcaster mother with two young boys, she returns again in 2003 to cover the story of the historic court case of Chief Roger William and the Mountain Horse Race, just before the wildfires devoured the Brittany triangle. Her latest book—*The Real Thing: The Natural History of Ian McTaggart Cowan*, due to be released in May, covers Cowan's journals from 1930 -1955 and his landmark biological surveys of Chezacut in 1931, Ootsa in 1936 and Weswick Lake (and others) in 1955. The previously unseen journals, digitized CBC early TV shows elaborate on the research and advocacy of this period.



The journals give tiny glimpses of the wildlife of the Chilcotin over the last century and track the relationships formed when people of two different cultures — who both

love nature — meet. "One of the best things I learned in the Chilcotin, was stay in the saddle."

Briony Penn is a writer, naturalist, artist and educator who has been keeping journals and writing stories for local magazines about BC since her first published article in 1976. She lives on Saltspring Island.

Spring is coming and it is time to start preparing for the Yard Sale on May 9th

Margaret Waring will be coordinating the sale again this year and needs your help.

The purpose of our sale is to support student education. We donate a bursary to a graduating grade 12 student with the funds we earn. If there is extra money earned it is contributed to Scout Island education programs. Last year we just made enough to support the bursary. We need your donations to create this bursary.

This is an early reminder that it is time to start preparing for our annual sale. We are hoping you will start some extra garden seeds to donate seedling plants to sell. Transplant a few of your favourite house plants so they are ready to go. When you do get into your garden please gather and pot some of your outdoor plants.

We are known by the garage sale shoppers as having tomato seedlings (they line up before the doors open on the sale day to get the tomato plants!) and other plants but we also sell many other things such as camping, sport and outdoor equipment, things for gardens and yards, books, toys, pieces of art, kitchen items, tools, Christmas decorations, arts and craft items and whatever you bring!!!! When you are doing your spring cleaning please have a box to gather items you do not want but we can sell to others who do! We will ask you to bring your items to Scout Island Nature House on Friday May the 8th in the afternoon (or call for other options). Feel free to ask your friends to donate too! Watch for more information in your next (March-April) newsletter. Please keep adding treasures to that big box and think about what plants you can donate.

If you have any questions please call Margaret at 250-398-7724 or email muskratexpress@shaw.ca or mewaring@hotmail.com

City Application to Bike BC Successful!

From Jane Wellburn

In September 2014 the Williams Lake Air Quality Roundtable wrote a letter of support for the City of Williams Lake's funding application to Bike BC. In February we were excited to find out that the application was successful!

The City will receive \$142,498 from the BC government towards the construction slated for Highway 97/Toop Road and Carson Drive, providing a separated bike path and shared roadway to make it safer for cyclists. Creating a bike route on the east side of Highway 97 north of Toop Road that will provide a key connection between the north end of Broadway Avenue through to Fox Mountain Road. A multi-use pathway will connect two major highway intersections.

Congratulations to the City! Here's to safer streets for cyclists and cleaner air for all of us!



Scout Island Nature Centre News

From Sue Hemphill

It has been a busy month. Sadie Parr from Wolf Awareness spent 4 days in Williams Lake sharing her passion and knowledge about wolves not only at an evening presentation, but with 8 high school classes at their school and 4 intermediate classes at Scout Island. The students learned about her research in the Nemiah-Brittany Triangle area, in cooperation with the Xenigwet'in community of the Tsilqhot'in Nation, and in partnership with the Valhalla Wilderness Society and Friends of the Nemaiah Valley. The project is focused on acquiring baseline data about the annual diet and feeding ecology of the grey wolf in the project area. This sounds dry, but I can assure you the students were totally involved and eager. They left knowing that wolves are interesting engaging animals worth caring about—not the scary wolf of Little Red Riding Hood.

Grade 7 classes have been at the nature house for all day programs, becoming natural history experts. This was to

prepare them for the Earth Challenge coming up in April. Paula was busy outside in the snow with classes (when there was snow). The Mid Evil Market gave us a grant that helped pay for classes to bus to the nature centre. This is so important so that teachers do not have to do fundraising to take their students outside. The grade 7 outdoor education class has been getting up close to animals of their choice—researching and writing about them. Below are a couple of the diamantes they wrote.

Elk antlers
Big, fast, strong
Jumping, defending, eating, sleeping, running, fighting
Fighting like a tank
Keep my forest

Hummingbird
Insanely fast
Humming,sneaky,hiding, speeding,flying,singing,sucking
As fast as a shooting star
Please don't destroy my habitat. I don't harm you

Be Wild this Spring Break at

Scout Island Nature Centre

Nature Exploring and Art in Nature for Ages 6-13

March 17-19

With support from
Pinnacle Renewable Energy

End of a Long Spring Break, Don't sit at home bored ---Join us for the **Spring Break Program that will have you outside exploring, playing games and having adventures every day.** Join us between 9:30-3:00 each day

We will be outdoors as much as possible actively exploring and playing. Each day will be different, so you will want to be part of the fun all three days.

- Spring birds
- Animal tracks
- Signs of spring
- Carnivores, herbivores, and omnivores using skulls –special attention to wolves
- You feed the Nature House animals
- Finding Art in nature

The cost is \$25 a day Call 398 8532 or shemphill@netbistro.com to register. Only 8 spots



Williams Lake Field Naturalists News from the Executive
By Fred McMechan

Williams Lake Field Naturalists:

- 1) The Ministry of Education Committee which was formed to revise the BC Curriculum to include environmental education started this month. Lenny Ross is representing the BC Teachers Federation on this Committee. Christie Mayall who wrote our letter to request this revision has joined the Education Committee of BC Nature which will oversee this revision process.

- 2) The preparation of the BC Nature Tatlayoko Lake Field Camp is ongoing. If you are interested in attending, the registration for the Camp will begin to take place by phone on March 15. Full details about the camp are on the websites of BC Nature, www.bcnature.ca or of our club, www.williamslakefieldnaturalists.ca
- 3) Our club has applied to the BC Naturalists Foundation, BC Nature, for a grant to support Jon Gaztelumendi, a club member, to continue with his research project on the Golden Eagle in the Cariboo Chilcotin region.
- 4) Our club has donated \$2000 to the UNBC Quesnel River Research Centre to provide financial assistance on their scientific sampling and monitoring of the Mount Polley Mine tailings pond break. Note that our club will sponsor a public talk on their research on March 17 at the Nature House. Sam Albers from the Research Centre will be the guest speaker.
- 5) We have decided to support the reestablishment of the City of Williams Lake Sustainability Committee. Jenny Noble has kindly offered to be our rep on this Committee.
- 6) We accepted an invitation by Larry Davis, biologist, to give a public talk on his research on the Fisher and the Lease Weasel. This talk will take place at the Nature House on February 25.
- 7) Planning for our club's AGM on March 27 has taken place. Details about this event can be found in a separate article in this newsletter.
- 8) Field trip planning for this year was finalized. Details are given in an article in this newsletter
- 9) Fred McMechan will be the club's representative at the BC Nature AGM/Conference.
- 10) The date for the Plant and Yard Sale will be on May 9. Margaret Waring has kindly offered to be the coordinator for this event.

Scout Island Nature Centre:

- 1) Planning for the Nature Centre fund raising banquet has taken place. Details are shown in a separate article in this newspaper.
- 2) We have established an on-line donation link, via Paypal, on the Scout Island Nature Centre website, www.scoutislandnaturecentre.ca . Hopefully we will receive a multitude of donations for the operation of our Nature Centre!!
- 3) We are pursuing the removal of the present wheel-in dock at the river outlet and replacing it by a floating dock. The new dock will move up and down with the changing water levels and will remain in place for the entire year.
- 4) Renovations to the west and south walls of the Caretaker's House this year are in the planning stages. To increase the insulation value we wish to install foam board and siding on these walls. Also we wish to replace the kitchen, bedroom and bathroom windows with new energy efficient ones. The renovations to the north and east walls will hopefully be completed next year.
- 5) We had to get involved with an issue regarding the opening of the Nature Centre gate for 24 hours. On January 23 we became aware of a motion by Councilor Ivan Bonnell which was to be presented to City Council on January 27. This motion was in support of removing the gate immediately so that the Nature Centre would be open to vehicular traffic for 24 hours. On January 24 I contacted Bonnell to organize a meeting between him and our executive, and this meeting was held at the Nature House on January 25. We clearly gave reasons why this motion was not acceptable and we persuaded him to change the motion. He deleted" removing the gate" and replacing it by "the gate will be locked to vehicular traffic during nighttime hours".
We attended the City Council meeting on January 27 where the revised motion was passed.
Thank you to our members and others who wrote messages of opposition to the original motion on Facebook.
- 6) Discussions on other aspects of operating the Nature Centre were discussed. These are covered in other parts of the newsletter.

Spring Bird Species Return Dates

By: Phil Ranson

This is a useful guide to determine the approximate dates on which birds should either be returning to local breeding grounds or passing through on their journey to the far north. The dates have been derived beginning with the 1992 checklist and supplemented with reported dates from (mostly) email correspondence with birders throughout the region. The list is in order of average return dates and covers February and March. Also shown in the list is a column showing the earliest reported return date and the last column shows the number of years in which observations were recorded.

These dates should be tempered with the knowledge that most of the birds on the list are not considered long distance

migrants and there are wintering records for many. Some birds will stay as far north as climatic conditions will allow and any open bodies of water will harbour certain species of waterfowl. For example, swans, ducks and some grebes and even loons have been recorded on Quesnel Lake throughout the winter when conditions allow. Therefore in some instances the return dates are based on observations, primarily from the urban centres, when the first 'true' migrants are believed to have returned. Birds showing the least amount of data in the last column are either rare birds or more likely birds which winter regularly in confined locations and the dates given are for spring dispersal.

<i>Common Name</i>	<i>Ave.Spr return date</i>	<i>Earliest date</i>	<i># years data</i>	<i>Common Name</i>	<i>Ave.Spr return date</i>	<i>Earliest date</i>	<i># years data</i>
Red-winged Blackbird	12-Feb	01-Feb	4	Sharp-shinned Hawk	19-Mar	14-Mar	2
Canada Goose	23-Feb	03-Feb	12	Short-eared Owl	19-Mar	19-Mar	1
Common Goldeneye	24-Feb	03-Feb	2	Say's Phoebe	19-Mar	02-Mar	13
American Robin	27-Feb	09-Feb	12	Barrow's Goldeneye	20-Mar	05-Mar	12
European Starling	03-Mar	23-Feb	2	Pied-billed Grebe	21-Mar	26-Feb	15
American Coot	04-Mar	10-Feb	14	Gadwall	22-Mar	10-Mar	15
Horned Lark	04-Mar	07-Feb	16	Herring Gull	22-Mar	15-Mar	15
Varied Thrush	05-Mar	23-Feb	8	American Tree Sparrow	23-Mar	27-Feb	7
Killdeer	06-Mar	24-Feb	17	Brewer's Blackbird	23-Mar	16-Feb	8
Trumpeter Swan	07-Mar	25-Feb	12	Spotted Towhee	23-Mar	07-Mar	12
Gyr Falcon	08-Mar	20-Feb	4	Tree Swallow	24-Mar	15-Mar	15
Northern Pintail	09-Mar	23-Feb	14	Ross's Goose	25-Mar	25-Mar	1
Green-winged Teal	09-Mar	27-Feb	9	American Kestrel	25-Mar	11-Mar	16
American Wigeon	10-Mar	20-Feb	14	Great Blue Heron	25-Mar	18-Mar	14
Ring-necked Duck	10-Mar	21-Feb	16	California Gull	26-Mar	10-Mar	14
Lesser Scaup	11-Mar	21-Feb	14	Wood Duck	26-Mar	13-Mar	14
Mountain Bluebird	11-Mar	02-Mar	17	Cackling Goose	26-Mar	11-Mar	3
Western Meadowlark	12-Mar	01-Mar	16	Gray-crowned Rosy-Finch	26-Mar	06-Mar	6
Common Merganser	12-Mar	28-Feb	14	Northern Shoveler	27-Mar	13-Mar	15
Lapland Longspur	13-Mar	03-Mar	14	Violet-green Swallow	28-Mar	15-Mar	16
Bufflehead	14-Mar	28-Feb	12	Red-breasted Sapsucker	29-Mar	21-Mar	9
Hooded Merganser	15-Mar	27-Feb	11	Greater Scaup	29-Mar	16-Mar	15
Eurasian Wigeon	16-Mar	09-Mar	14	Belted Kingfisher	29-Mar	26-Feb	11
Eurasian Green-winged Teal	16-Mar	03-Mar	6	Snow Goose	30-Mar	11-Mar	9
Peregrine Falcon	16-Mar	28-Feb	11	Long-eared Owl	31-Mar	14-Mar	3
Canvasback	17-Mar	05-Mar	16	Pacific Wren	31-Mar	19-Mar	6
Redhead	17-Mar	28-Feb	15	Ruddy Duck	31-Mar	14-Mar	15
Northern Harrier	18-Mar	08-Mar	10	Prairie Falcon	31-Mar	07-Mar	12
Ring-billed Gull	18-Mar	10-Mar	15				
Tundra Swan	19-Mar	07-Mar	14				

White-tailed Ptarmigan (*Lagopus leucura*)

On January 22nd I took this photo of a White-tailed Ptarmigan that was feeding on willow buds and Rose hysops along the road side near my Eagle Lake cabin. It spent a good part of January moving up and down the roadside and was part of a loose flock that numbered up to a half dozen. It is amazing how this species adapts its colouration to blend in with its habitat. If it had not flown away from Smedley (my dog) I doubt I ever would have noticed it.



This reminds of one of the first times I saw a Ptarmigan. It was way back in June 1980 on the weekend of the summer solstice. We were doing an overnight backpack into the Pantheon Range above Bluff Lake and were hiking well above the tree line at about 7000 feet when my 2 Springer Spaniels startled a White-tailed off its nest. It was close enough to us that we were easily able to locate the nest. Since we were to return the next day we decided to

make a small cairn near the nest so we could locate the nest and get a photo of the bird sitting on the nest. The following day as we spotted the cairn I had the dogs sit and stay. With cameras ready we began to sneak up on the nest getting closer and closer but we could not see the nest. We were very puzzled by this and wondered how she had moved the eggs and what about the feathers? We were about to give up when I looked down at my boots and there less than 2 feet away



and surrounded by the group was a perfectly camouflaged ptarmigan lying on the nest. We backed up so we could focus, got our photos and carried on without disturbing the bird off the nest.



The Checklist of Cariboo Chilcotin Birds designates the White-tailed Ptarmigan as an uncommon (1 to 6 individuals per locality in the appropriate habitat) year young nesting species. The White-tailed has perhaps the widest distribution of the Ptarmigan within the Cariboo Chilcotin and occurs from the Marble Range through to the alpine areas in the South Chilcotin Range into the North Cariboo mountains as well as the Itchas Ilgatchuz and Coast Range foothills. Birds are often reported from the Timothy Mountain ski hill and have been recorded at lower elevations in winter including Gaspard Lake, Anahim Lake and of course Eagle Lake. From *The Birds of British Columbia Vol.2* White-tailed Ptarmigan are typically non-migratory however data collected indicates they will make extensive movements to wintering areas up to 1200 m lower in elevation and 50 km from the nearest suitable breeding area.

The White-tailed Ptarmigan is the smallest of the Ptarmigan and is in fact the smallest member of the grouse family. Ptarmigan is one of the few birds that undergo three molts per year and the molts extend over a relative long time. As you can see from my photos these molts are critical to the species survival. In summer they have a grey-brown barred back with white underneath, all white tail and white wings. In the fall it molts to a reddish brown and the white feathers begin to show through. By winter the bird will be completely white. The feet are covered in feathers that act as snow shoes and also provide insulation. In winter they may roost under the snow to conserve heat lose. The other 2 Ptarmigan have black bands on each side of the tail in all



plumages. In the breeding season you are more likely to find the Willow Ptarmigan closer to the tree line in its preferred habitat while the White-tailed is usually found on the higher treeless slopes. The Rock Ptarmigan is very elusive in our region and there are few records (The Birds of BC only lists 4 sightings in our region). If you do identify a Rock Ptarmigan be certain to have your camera and send us a photo. The young chicks will be ready to leave the nest within 12 hours of hatching and will be fledged (able to fly) in 7 to 10 days. During the early quick growing days they will feed mainly on insects but as their dietary tracts develop they will switch to flowers and leaves.

Member's Moments (from Kris Andrews)



The Rainbow

Last August I was lucky to join a group of horse assisted hikers in the Rainbow Mountains for a week. The trip was outfitted by Rainbow Mountain Outfitters of Anahim Lake. They provided our meals and packed all our camping equipment and personal gear. Chris Harris advertised the trip for photographers and led us on an 8 day hike starting in the Tsulko River Valley and eventually ending up in MacKenzie Valley. The scenery is spectacular everywhere you look. This photo was taken looking over part of MacKenzie Mountain, and east towards Boyd Pass and Crystal Lake. We were fortunate to see a Wandering Tattler, White Tailed and Willow Ptarmigan, a northern Hawk Owl, Brown Lemmings and many interesting alpine plants. I guesstimate that we averaged at least 10 km per day, and stayed two nights in each camp making the trip very enjoyable. I highly recommend it to those who enjoy hiking and nature.

Thanks to Kris for being the first to provide her favourite "Member's Moment" for all of us to enjoy. We all look forward to seeing yours!