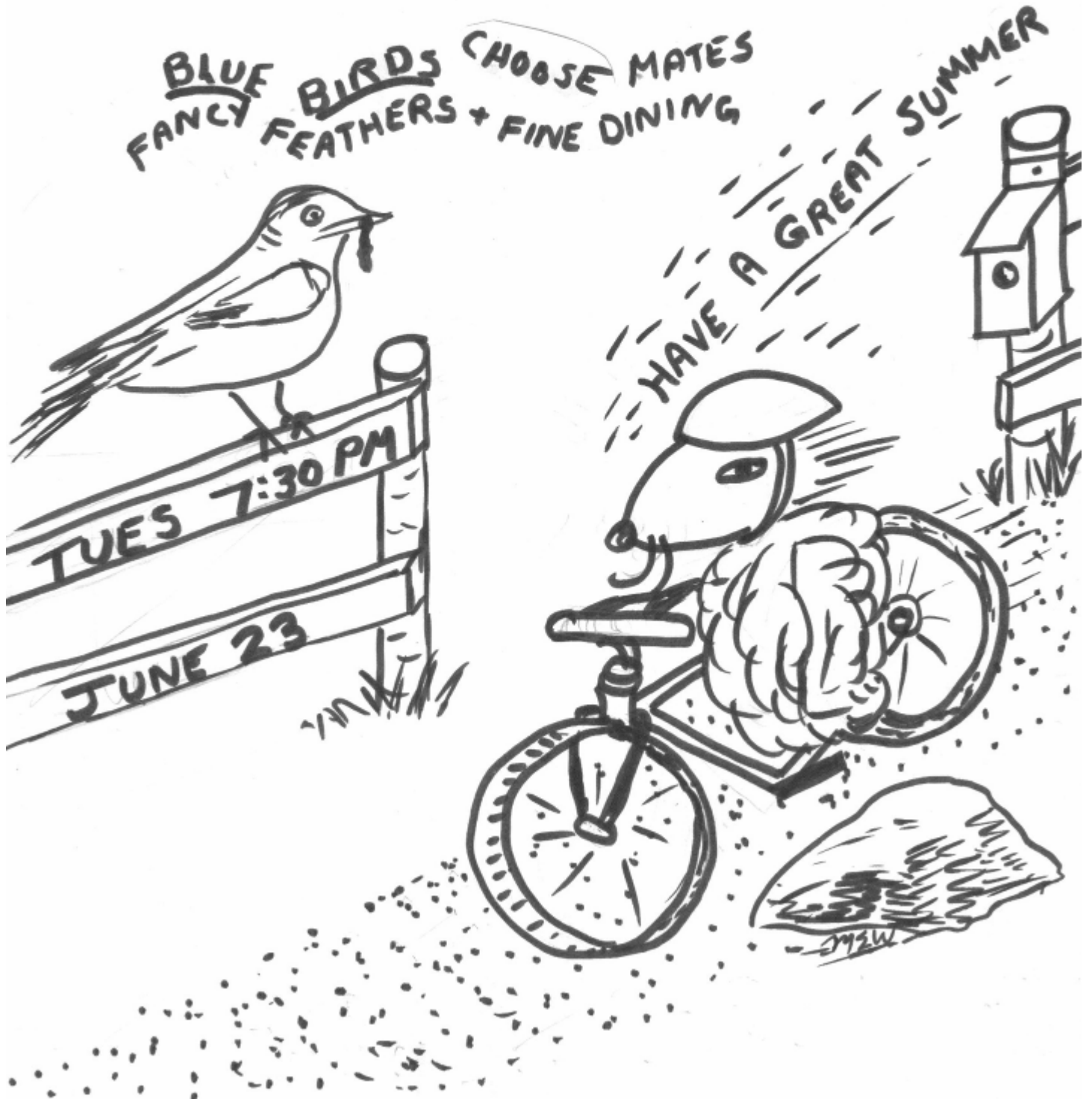


# MUSKRAT EXPRESS

WILLIAMS LAKE FIELD NATURALISTS

MAY + JUNE 2009 NEWSLETTER

BLUE BIRDS CHOOSE MATES  
FANCY FEATHERS + FINE DINING





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)

**Visit the Williams Lake Field Naturalists Web Site** <http://www.williamslakefieldnaturalists.ca>

**Executive of The Williams Lake Field Naturalists:** president Fred McMechan, vice-president Jim Sims, secretary Bev Fittenburg, treasurer Katharine VanSpall and directors Nola Daintith, Ordell Steen, Beverly Anderson, 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 us at [muskrat@midbc.com](mailto:muskrat@midbc.com)

### **Food, sex and the colour blue: The influence of plumage colour and food Availability On Mate Choice In Mountain Bluebirds**

June 23rd at Scout Island Nature House at 7:30 pm

Erin O'Brien, a doctoral candidate in the Natural Resources and Environmental Studies program at the University of Northern B.C., will be discussing some of the results of her research with Dr. Russell Dawson on mountain bluebirds in the Cariboo, south of Williams Lake. Patterns of parentage within nests were determined using genetic analysis of broods over three years, and these results will be examined in relation to male plumage colour, as well as a food supplementation experiment conducted in 2007-08.

The questions that will be addressed in this presentation include: Do "bluer" males produce more young (either in their own or neighbouring nests), and how does food availability, one measure of territory quality, influence whether female bluebirds seek matings with males other than their social mate? These results suggest ways in which factors such as annual variation in weather p behaviour, and ultimately genetic variation, in populations of these larger issues will also be discussed.



### **Spring Yard and Garden Sale**



**Gloria Selling Tomatoes**

by: Margaret Waring

We had our annual sale on Saturday May 9th and again it was a great success. We earned over \$900. \$600 is for a bursary awarded to a graduating secondary school student and the rest goes toward programs at the Nature Centre. I thank everyone who helped; the tomato growers and contributors of other sale items, the setup crew, the sellers and the clean up crew. Is it a good time to start gathering and planting and collecting for next year?

### **Brunson Lake Field Trip**

by: Margaret Waring



It was a lovely Friday evening and canoes and kayaks and paddlers gathered on the lake shore. A picnic supper was followed by a tour of the lake and marsh. It was sunny, calm and beautiful evening to be on the water. A wonderful opportunity to appreciate the life on the lake and the start of the summer season.

**Picnic Supper on the Shore of Brunson Lake**

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

On the Victoria Day weekend we had another successful field trip to the marsh. We observed a total of 82 species of birds. Two new species were added to the list, a pair of Red Crossbills was found feeding on pine cones and the Red-necked Phalarope was confirmed by the photo that was taken by Ray. Two other special sightings included a small flock of Pelicans for only the 4<sup>th</sup> time and a couple of Greater White-fronted Geese for only the second time. Perhaps we will see more of them on future counts as observations of these geese have become more frequent recently.



**Mottled Mallard Found in the Marsh**

### **Scout Island Nature Centre News June 2009**

The four summer staff have been racing to keep up with all of the schools who want programs. With the warm weather, there are a lot of two legged creatures in the water trying to catch 6 and 8 legged creatures. We also just helped 250 students release their Chinook fry for their long journey to the ocean. Then the students watched as we dissected adult salmon and one overheard comment was, "I didn't think girls could do that!" The Nature Centre is completely booked for the rest of June.

The summer program, Nature Fun, will run weekdays July 2-August 21. There will be programs for 3-8 year olds morning and afternoon every week day. Programs for older children (8-13) will be on Mondays and Wednesdays. Call the Nature House for more information and the Themes

for each week.

The summer staff will be working extra for the next few weeks and we would like to give them the weekend of June 26-28 off and that means we need volunteers to be **Hosts at the Nature House from 1-4 each day**. If you have an afternoon to give, please call Sue at 398 8532 or email [shemphill@wlake.com](mailto:shemphill@wlake.com)

We are very excited about the **Coyote Mentoring Workshop** that Patricia Spencer is offering on June 29 from 9-4 at the Nature House.

**This is a workshop for parents, grand parents, teachers, youth leaders and anyone else who wants to lead children into nature.** Coyote Mentoring is an experiential approach to teaching, where the child is gently guided into the world of nature through inspiration, games, stories, questioning techniques and humour.

**To register or for more information call 398-8532  
or contact Patricia at [earthwise@shaw.ca](mailto:earthwise@shaw.ca) 250-791-1901**

I hope many of you planning to come to:

*A Balanced Life: Creating a Sustainable Future Together*  
**Williams Lake Sustainability Fair**  
*Saturday June 13, 2009 from 11:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m.*  
**Gibraltar Room & Boitano Park & Scout Island Nature Centre**

Part of the Fair is **Tree Planting at the Nature Centre**. We will be planting out conifers along the Butterfly Trail and cutting down the weeds and grasses that are growing up around the trees planted previously. **We need all willing tree planters from 11-1!** Then you can go into the Nature House and visit Diane Dunnaway our beekeeper and learn about bees. There is free transit up to the Gibraltar Room for more activities, music, and information.

The **weeds** are growing fast and it is time for Weed Warriors to come back to work. If you would like to claim a special area to keep the weeds controlled (we use shovels and muscles), please call Sue.

## **Conservation Update**

The WLFN executive submitted an eight page letter on May 25 to the BC Environmental Assessment Office and the Canadian Environment Assessment Agency who are charged with reviewing the environmental impacts of the Prosperity Mine for the Provincial and Federal Governments. The letter details our concerns about long-term water quality, plant and animal habitats, cumulative effects of the mine development, and bonding issues related to long-term monitoring, treatment and reclamation. We pointed out the many current values of the area and contrasted this with the potential environmental and social problems associated with the mine development. The letter suggested that the Environmental Impact Study presented by Taseko mines "must be greatly improved in terms of detailed commitments for monitoring, mitigation and compensation before it would provide an adequate basis for public and government review of the project".

If you request a copy of the full letter through [Muskkrat@midbc.com](mailto:Muskkrat@midbc.com) one will be emailed to you. It is also available through this web site:

[http://www.ceaa.gc.ca/050/05/documents-eng.cfm?CEAR\\_ID=44811&categoryID=7](http://www.ceaa.gc.ca/050/05/documents-eng.cfm?CEAR_ID=44811&categoryID=7)

## **Spawning Stories, Hatching Change**

BY: Jenny Noble

Sue and I recently attended a social marketing workshop, and we were impressed by the research on what really motivates people to change. Factual information is important, of course, but without emotional connection, change gets stalled at the “should” stage and does not move to “will”. Building on that, we designed a project to take people into the watersheds, and then facilitate them in creating stories from their experiences. We received funding from Fraser Salmon & Watersheds Project to hire mentors.

For the first field trip, Williams Lake Secondary drama teacher Sidonie Boll enlisted several Grade 8 & 10 students for a day in the lower river valley with Sue and Jenny. They are developing a performance piece, and we can’t wait to see what they’ll come up with.

Participants can choose among these additional field trips:

- June 20 – Field Naturalists’ trip to Becher’s Prairie (yes, we’re emphasizing they must become members to attend)
- July 4 – Viewland Mountain
- July 13 (tentative) – Lower River Valley with Roy Argue
- July 14-15 – Elders’ Gathering at Fish Lake – this will be a camp-out. The elders are teaching traditional skills like net-making, gaff-making, fish preservation, medicinal and food plant use. The public is welcome. Councillor Lois Williams is our First Nations mentor

Following the field trips, participants can work with mentors Barbara Bearman (written word) or Pharis Patenaude Romero (songwriting) to shape their impressions into a story form. The mentors will get them started in short workshops, and then be available for follow-up contact. The finished products will be made available to the public in a variety of ways: presentation at the Horsefly Salmon Festival (Labour Day weekend), the Scout Island website, and through a multi-media package that will be distributed to other rural communities.

We will be delighted if any WLFN members want to take part. Please contact us (398-8532 or [neptune@goldcity.net](mailto:neptune@goldcity.net)) for more information or to register

## **Bird Sightings from the Williams Lake Area**

May, June

By Phil Ranson

The arrival of spring birds is always an interesting time with many of our breeding birds and some that move further north showing a remarkable fidelity to their return dates. Sometimes a late winter may cause some minor adjustments but on the whole the arrival of a species can be anticipated within a matter of a few days. Over 10 years worth of data was put together to compile a chronological list of returning bird dates from observations all over the Cariboo. From this data, the first return, last return and average return dates was put together and can be viewed at:

<http://www3.telus.net/CaribooBirds/Cariboo%20Chicotin%20Average%20Return%20Date.pdf>

A revised list incorporating this year’s data will be available shortly.

Most of our breeding waterfowl have already returned by the end of April with only the 'sea' ducks, most of which winter on our coastline and breed in the Arctic, making their way through in May. Rafts of Surf and White-winged Scoters can be seen resting on Williams Lake often intermingled with Long-tailed Ducks. The 'third' scoter species, the Black Scoter, is an elusive bird in the interior with very few records, so the appearance of a lone male bird at the east end of Williams Lake on May 17 was quite exciting.

Other species that caused some excitement in May were Kath's sighting of a Eurasian Tufted Duck at a DU project near 111 Mile on May 2<sup>nd</sup>. Another had been reported earlier from Bouchie Lake. Kath's monitoring of the DU project at Chilco Ranch also produced a Black-necked Stilt on May 14<sup>th</sup>, far north of its breeding range. These were not the only sightings to cause great interest; the remarkable find of a Brown Pelican associating with White Pelicans on Bouchie Lake on May 11<sup>th</sup> ended unhappily when the bird was rescued after being reported in distress but died soon after. This is the second sighting in the Cariboo with the first report from Lac la Hache last year.

Ray photographed a Great Egret at the east end of Williams Lake on May 3 for the earliest of only a handful of records for the area and the very rare spring sighting of a breeding plumaged Red-throated Loon occurred on May 7 also at the east end of the Lake. Jim's much anticipated Arctic Terns returned to Eagle Lake on May 17<sup>th</sup> where Semipalmated Plovers may again be nesting. To round out some very unusual occurrences, Kris found a diminutive Green Heron off Otter Point at Scout Island on June 14<sup>th</sup>. All of the few previous sightings have been of fall birds.



**Green Heron Photo by Don Piller**

## **Western Tanager**

By: Jim Sims

Each spring we received reports of a very striking bright yellow songbird with a red head being seen all around town. This past year was no exception as the flocks of Western tanagers moved through Williams Lake in large numbers. This one was photographed in a riparian zone along my Bluebird route on Becher's Prairie a couple of weeks ago. I expect that it was not migrating but was planning on staying around to raise a family as there was a not so bright female Tanager flying through the willows close by.



**Male Western Tanager**

Many Tanagers remain behind in the Cariboo Chilcotin to breed and raise their young. Once the migration is through they are not as easy to spot as their yellow body blends in well with the high canopy of coniferous and deciduous forests where they inconspicuously gather insects for their young. When readily available they will also feed on fruits and berries. Often we mistaken their song for that of an American Robin so we tend not to try to find and identify the singer. Here at Rose Lake, if I stop and listen carefully I often hear the Tanager's song that John Neville describes

as “a tone deaf Robin” on his CD “Beginners Guide to Birdsongs of BC”.

The Western Tanager breeds in the western third of North America. The breeding territory extends farther north than any other member of its mostly tropical family, breeding to nearly 60°N in the Northwest Territories.

The red pigment in the face of the Western Tanager is rhodoxanthin, a pigment rare in birds. It is not manufactured by the bird, as are the pigments used by the other red tanagers. Instead, it must be acquired from the diet, presumably from insects that themselves acquire the pigment from plants.

### **Rare Nesting Artic Terns Return to Eagle Lake**

by: Jim Sims

Following the Victoria Day field trip to Chilanko Marsh the pair of Terns was once again found at Eagle Lake and they were reclaiming their nesting site on a small rocky island. On June 2<sup>nd</sup> I canoed out to the island and they acted as though they were defending a nest territory but no eggs could be found. At the same time this loon nest with a single egg was discovered on the same island. Due to the receding water levels on the lake there is no longer any vegetation near the shore of the lake and the Loons are forced to make



**Arctic Tern sitting on the high spot on Tern Island**



**Loons Nest**

due as best they can this nest is simply scraped out of the sandy shore line. I expect the very defensive Terns will help protect the Loon and its egg from predation by the gulls on the lake. The Loons successfully raised two young from this site last year.

On the Victoria Day weekend I had spent some time looking for the Semipalmated Plover and was successful in locating at least three

different birds. During my June visit I found them in a variety of locations within a half kilometre of the nesting site they had used last year. Usually I saw one pair and a separate single bird. The last time I saw them all three were together on Tern Island. They had not nested yet but it appeared that there were two males that were trying to woo the female. I hope they choose this location to nest as the tern is far more protective of a nest site than the Plover. Some research I have done might help explain why the Plover has chosen Eagle Lake. The Plover feeds on insects by sight. This is why the eye is so large in proportion to the rest of the head. They frequently "foot-stir". By holding one foot forward and vibrating the substrate they cause invertebrates to move and be detected. The soft sandy alkali shore line lends itself to this feeding technique. I hope to return soon to confirm again the nesting of the Terns and the Plovers.



**Semipalmated Plover**

### **Remaining Field Trips for 2009**

**Becher's Prairie day walk/drive June 20<sup>th</sup> Ordell Steen (398-5017)**

Follow the trails east from the old CIFAC camp to the Rock Lake area. Tour the many waterfowl ponds, aspen stands and grasslands. Bring your lunch, and binoculars. High clearance vehicles may be needed. Meet at Scout Island at 8:00am Saturday morning.

**Perkins Peak day hike** July 18<sup>th</sup> lead by Jim Sims (296-3638)

***Please note the change in date for the Perkins Peak trip to July 18<sup>th</sup>.***

Drive to the alpine via the Miner Lake Road and enjoy a great day of wandering through the alpine or take the challenge of a climb to the summit of Perkins Peak. Please meet at the turn off to Miner Lake at 9:00 am sharp on Saturday morning. Vehicles should have high clearance and good tires. If you plan to climb the summit the last part that can be driven is very rough rocky road. Bring a hearty lunch with extra snacks, good hiking boots, binoculars camera sunglasses and screen as well as rain gear. Walking sticks are a great asset on the rocky slopes and you will be sorry if you don't have them. You may want to turn it into a camping weekend. There are lots of recreation campsites in the area that could be used. In fact you could even car camp in the alpine on Saturday night. **Please register by phoning Jim or email the Muskrat so we know to contact you if there is a change in plans.**

**Thursday Evening Bats** at Scout Island Aug. 6<sup>th</sup> with Anna Roberts (392-5000)

Join Anna for an evening of bat facts and identification. Meet at 8:30 pm at Scout Island Nature House to learn about our local bat species, then at dusk watch and listen to bats as they feed.

**Eureka Peak** Aug 9<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. **Please phone Sue or email the Muskrat to register so you can be informed if a change must be made.**

**Hike the South Side of the Chilcotin River East towards the Fraser** September 19<sup>th</sup> Ordell Steen (398-5017) and Jim Sims (296-3638)

Explore low grassland benches and ridges along south side of Chilcotin River below Farwell Canyon (8 - 10 km hike). Meet at Scout Island at 7:30am. Join Ordell and Jim for a Fall hike in the grasslands. We will start at Farwell Canyon and hike down river towards the Fraser River. Be prepared for some short but steep up and down slopes. Bring your lunch and water bottle and enjoy the amazing views along the way.

**Junction Sheep Range Provincial Park** October 25<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 California Big-horned Sheep rut so look forward to seeing the sheep and perhaps you will be lucky and see or hear some head-butting.