

MUSKRAT EXPRESS

WILLIAMS LAKE FIELD NATURALISTS

NOVEMBER + DECEMBER 2022 NEWSLETTER





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

Membership fees: Family (\$35), single (\$30) 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 **2022 Memberships will expire on January 1st, 2023. Please renew your membership promptly.**

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: presidential Team Margaret Waring (Chairperson), Don Lawrence (Scout Island affairs) and Ordell Steen (Communications/liaison), secretary Nola Daintith, treasurer Katharine VanSpall and directors Peter Opie, Ray Hornby, Jean Oke, Cathie Hamm, Sean Donahue, Lara Roorda and Fred McMechan



Editors: Thanks to all of you who have contributed to this edition of the newsletter. Please expect your next edition of the newsletter before the end of January. If you have comments, suggestions or articles for the next Muskrat Express please contact Margaret Waring (398-7724), Jim Sims (778 764-2752) or e-mail us at muskratexpress@shaw.ca



From Jim at Tern Inn

Sitting here finishing the newsletter I am looking out at an all-white lake for the first time this fall. The cold -31 last night was too much. This is the earliest day for "Ice On" that I have in my records from my neighbours here at Eagle Lake. It is time to finish this job and then get another log on the fire.

From Margaret:

Raccoon Sighting

A raccoon was spotted on Judy Alsager's lawn in late September. Judy lives on West Fraser Road just south of the old Marguerite ferry site. She and her son spotted it and it then ran across the lawn and down the bank towards the river. Judy has also seen evidence of them at a ranch farther north as well. Thanks to Gerry Gebert for sending this to us. If you have seen a raccoon or have more information on this topic (or another topic) please let me know by sending a note to mewaring@hotmail.com or muskratexpress@shaw.ca or calling 250 398 7724.

Notes from the Director's Meetings.



By Margaret Waring

I cannot believe it is already time for another newsletter and tomorrow will be December. Then I remember my recent drive home in beautiful falling snow and enjoying the outdoors as I shovelled my driveway. I bet I might need to do more shoveling tomorrow!

Tonight, I went to City Council and listened to the excellent presentation done by Ordell and Sue. We are asking for an increase in the grant we have been receiving from the city. We need to have an executive director for Scout Island and this position requires ongoing secure funding. Sue is a wonderful Executive Director and a dedicated volunteer. Many thanks to Sue. She does a great job but is considering retirement.

Tomorrow night we are having a presentation at the Nature House by Jenny Howell regarding water use in Williams Lake. This will be followed by tea and snacks and a get together for club

members. Michael Moses, new to the city council is looking forward to attending.

I hope you have been able to take a stroll on the new board walk. It is beautiful and be sure to say thank you to the worker who recently created it!

I hope you are able to take part in the December 18th Christmas Bird Count.

Happy Holiday Season to all.

55th Annual Williams Lake Christmas Bird Count

From Phil Ranson

The 55th consecutive Williams Lake Christmas bird count is scheduled for Sunday, December 18th. We won't be counting chickens before they're hatched, but Fred McMechan has once again kindly agreed to host the post-count potluck at his home on Moon Road following 2 years of cancelled meetings. We'll have to leave this as tentative for the time being as nothing seems certain anymore. More details and any notification of changes will be emailed to the count distribution list.

On the topic of 'change', a transition is underway in the count organisation and Sean Donahue has kindly agreed to organise the field teams and Lubna Khan will be preparing the party maps. I took over from Anna Roberts as compiler in 2000 and it is now time for a fresh approach. I will continue with compiling the numbers for the time being. If you haven't already been notified by Sean and would like to participate, please drop him a line at donahue9@telus.net

On last year's count we had over 9000 birds of 54 species of which the undoubted highlight was a Lark Sparrow at Leslie Harris's feeder on Opal Street. This was a new species to the count and although there are several summer records, with confirmed breeding at Churn Creek, this species is at the northern extreme of its summer range and is completely unexpected in winter. It had been at Leslie's feeder for several weeks and was last seen on count day. As much as it was exciting to see this bird on the count, there is rarely a positive outcome for species so far removed from their winter range.

If you have a bird feeder within the count circle (a 12 km radius from downtown) and would like to contribute to the count, please phone or email me with a list of what you see: ranson1@telus.net or 250 392-0946 (after 5:00 p.m. on count day). Please also notify any friends or neighbours with feeders of the count date.



Rick and Scout enjoy the new boardwalk



**Lark Sparrow
Photo by Leslie Harris**



Scout Island Nature Centre

By Sue Hemphill

Salmon Trip 2022

The planning for this trip began in earnest in early July 2022. After a two-year hiatus because of the pandemic, we were determined to go ahead in 2021 with a three-day overnight trip for students. This annual trip has been happening since 2006 with huge support from Fisheries and Oceans Canada, Gavin Lake, Quesnel River Research Centre (QRRC), and SD 27 teachers. We planned a full three days of outdoor activities for the students using Gavin Lake as home base. We had 21 grade 9-12 students signed up to go. Three days before the trip was to begin, the Monday of the trip was declared a non-work day in respect for the Queen’s funeral. After a lot of scrambling and loads more paper work, we shrunk the trip to two days. The focus of trips in the past was the catching of adult chinook salmon



and harvesting gametes. This wasn’t

possible this year because of how few chinook made it up the Fraser River. We were able to put a wide variety of activities together over the two days including:

Working with researchers at the QRRC to learn about the research being done there related to changes in Quesnel Lake as a result of mine waste in the sediments since the tailings spill from Mount Polley.

Some very hands-on activities on the Horsefly River learning how fish stocks are identified and assessed.



You may be interested in having a look at this article from the Evergreen Alliance if you are concerned about logging practices in our province.

<https://www.evergreenalliance.ca/direct-engagement-with-the-ministry-of-forests-and-logging-companies/10/>

Greenhouse gases saved during GoByBike Weeks

By Erin Hitchcock

Air Aware Educator, Scout Island Nature Centre

This fall’s GoByBike Weeks event was incredibly successful, with the biannual event appearing to grow in momentum. Taking place for two weeks from Oct. 3 to 16, more than 1,000 kilograms of greenhouse gases were saved from our airshed by the 122 people who registered and collectively logged 4,729 kilometres by cycling or using other forms of active transportation.

During that time, several fun and educational events took place, including a “Bike Bus” at Cataline Elementary School (volunteers helped 18 children get to school in the morning and home in the afternoon by bike on two different days), a Seniors on Wheels and



GBB volunteer Denise Duchene leads Cataline Students safely to school on the Bike Bus

Electric Bike Demo at the Seniors Activity Centre, a Politician on a Pedal Challenge and Guided Tour, bike recycling at local schools, a bike swap at the Potato House, and a Critical Mass Bike Ride and Parade.

We would like to send a big thanks to all of the volunteers who helped, as well as the many businesses and organizations that sponsored prizes, offered discounts, or provided other forms of support during the event. Plans are in the works for the spring GoByBike event, which runs May 29 to June 5. Stay tuned!

Erin Hitchcock is the community coordinator for GoByBike Weeks and Air Aware Educator with Scout Island Nature Centre. Visit our website at breatheasywilliamslake.org and follow us on Facebook at Air Aware Williams Lake. We gratefully acknowledge the financial support of the Province of BC through the Ministry of Environment and Climate Change Strategy.

Scout Island Featured 2023 Calendar

Anne Brown has kindly produced several copies of this calendar of stunning Scout Island photos. Look for them at the Nature House, The Open Book and Margetts Meats. They are almost sold out so do not wait any longer. This is a fund raiser for Scout Island.



Some Photos of the new Willow Trail boardwalk



Scout Island Nature Centre 2022-2023 Fundraising Campaign

It has been a busy year.



Martin led winter programs at Scout Island and on Bull Mountain (students on skis).



Sue led an early spring program about birds for visitors from Cariboo Partners for Literacy.



Making mud to make “bird” nests as part of Nature fun Bird week.

Three great summer staff started in May and spent their first 3 weeks assisting Martin with Ecosystem Training for Grade 7 students getting ready for the Earth Challenge. That was followed by classes coming to release their chinook fry to swim off to the ocean. Staff then provided 76 classes with a variety of nature program through May and June. Staff shifted into summer Nature Fun and guided 360 children into nature and art (ages 4-12).



Little Chiefs Preschool –the first class on the boardwalk

The fall has also been busy. Two kindergarten classes from Marie Sharpe are each using the Nature K space 2-3 days a week. Tuesdays another class from Marie Sharpe comes down with the Nature K bus and spends the whole day exploring. Martin Kruus, our Education Coordinator, has been leading nature programs at the Nature Centre and outdoors at schools. He is also busy with the Stream to Sea program. Twelve classes are nurturing

chinook alevin in their classrooms.

There has been much volunteer work all year as usual. Fred McMechan led volunteers all summer fighting weeds. Most exciting, is the Willow Trail Boardwalk is now repaired.

That brings me to our **Fund-Raising Drive for 2022-2023**. As you know, donations from the community fund a significant proportion of all of our programs. Your donations make it possible for us to have nature mentors to engage all ages with nature have a nature house full of life of all kinds.

You can donate by check or by e transfer. (Log into your personal online banking and send an Interac e transfer to SINCdonations@shaw.ca) Send an email with your mailing address if you want a charitable receipt. Mail checks to Scout Island Nature Centre, 1305 A Borland Rd. Williams Lake BC V2G 5K5

Annual Fieldtrip to the Junction Sheep Range, October 22, 2022

By Loyd Csizmadia

Bundled warmly against a foggy, ice-cold morning, six hardy Naturalists joined Michaela and I for the annual fieldtrip to the Sheep Range. This was our first time leading the trip, so I visited the site the day before to check the roads and scout for California Bighorn Sheep. Happily, I discovered that the roads were dry and easily passable to vehicles with moderate clearance. I also spotted a small, mixed herd of male and female sheep grazing in the area. They posed for a few shots, one of which is included in this write-up. I returned to Williams Lake, satisfied that our first fieldtrip as co-leaders promised to be successful.



Michaela, Jean, Susan, Fernando, Maria, Yves, and Kris pose on the monument side of a Cariboo-style zig-zag fence (Photo by L. Csizmadia)



Five of eleven California Bighorn Sheep in a mixed herd (Photo by L. Csizmadia)

Saturday, October 22nd was a lot colder than anyone could have predicted. At one point on the drive out to Farwell Canyon, my truck's thermometer registered minus 8 degrees Celsius. Thankfully, our group eventually climbed out of the fog and into the sunshine. This buoyed our spirits. Inside warm vehicles and with digital cameras switched on, we slowly wound our way over the rocky, rutted, pot-holed track leading to the trailhead. No sheep posed for us on the way in, although one member of the group fleetingly observed a sheep-like shape near where I had spied the herd on Friday.

Arriving at the stone monument that overlooks the Fraser and Chilcotin

Rivers, we paused to read a dedication to Harold Mitchell and Wes Prediger, two key figures in the establishment of this preserve for California Bighorn Sheep. Mitchell in particular, a Biologist working for the Fish and Wildlife Department, inspired the land exchange in 1973 between Riske Creek Ranching Limited and the BC Government, which resulted in a 4,573-hectare Wildlife Reserve. By 1995, this reserve became a 4,778-hectare Class A Provincial Park, the only park in BC focussed on the needs of California Bighorn Sheep. Sadly, neither Harold



Plaque dedicated to Harold Mitchell and Wes Prediger (Photo by L. Csizmadia)

Mitchell nor Wes Prediger survived to see the fruits of their labour. On March 2, 1981, their helicopter crashed while on a sheep tagging expedition. Both men perished, as did Nels West of Vancouver and pilot Bert Warttig of Williams Lake. Like Mitchell and Prediger, Bert Warttig was dedicated to wildlife conservation, assisting the Ministry with their efforts to reintroduce Bighorn Sheep into depleted areas, including areas in the USA. In 1992, Warttig Lake near Horsefly was named in his honour.

In an effort to remind visitors that the lower-elevation terraces of the park are off-limits to all but pedestrian traffic, a zig-zag fence separates the monument from the designated footpath. After posing for a group photo along a zig in the fence, we readied ourselves for the steep descent to the benchlands that undulate scenically towards the confluence of the Fraser and Chilcotin Rivers. For the first half of the hike, sunshine sparkled off waving seedheads and highlighted the yellows, reds, greens and greys created by a mix of bunchgrasses, sages, rabbitbrush, lichens, mosses, and a variety of other low-growing herbaceous plants that define a grassland. Of course, everyone was watching for sheep! October is the beginning of mating season, and we were about to enter an area commonly occupied at this time by male, maternal, and mixed herds of varying sizes.

The first stage of the hike lasted about an hour. No sheep, and only one bird (a Golden Eagle), so we spent most of our time chatting and admiring the richness of the natural world. At a rocky outcrop overlooking the mouth of the Chilcotin River, we pulled up a stone, fished out our lunches, and wondered about the level landscape at the confluence below. Before writing this article, I read a few items about the cultural history preserved by the park. Archaeologists suggest that the Fraser Plateau could have been occupied seven to twelve thousand years ago. However, the most concrete evidence of extensive habitation is more recent, dating between 3,500 and 4000 years ago. The first record of Euro-American contact with First Nations villages near the Chilcotin River wasn't until 1808, when Simon Fraser paddled through. Fur traders, missionaries and priests arrived within ten years, and by the 1850's, numerous miners were sifting the gravel bars for gold. Tragically, in 1862, small pox carried by the newcomers nearly wiped out the original inhabitants, forcing the survivors to abandon their villages. By 1873, ranchers moved into the area, establishing the Cotton and Deer Park Ranches which eventually amalgamated into Riske Creek Ranching Limited. Today, from the rocks overlooking the confluence of the Chilcotin and Fraser Rivers, one would be hard-pressed to see much evidence of human occupation. Only the evenly spaced rows of tailings left by the Chinese placer miners are visible to the trained eye. And one day, even these will be erased by the forces of Nature.

As we finished our lunches, the clouds--which had been approaching throughout the latter half of the morning-- thickened, and any thoughts of exploring the confluence were abandoned. Instead, the group followed the bench that parallels the Chilcotin River and then climbed to a very steep outcrop overlooking the Railroad Rapids. Our cameras were so busy looking down that we failed to notice that snow could begin falling at any moment.

Rather than retrace our steps to the main trail, we hiked cross-country past a dry wetland surrounded by the most gorgeous grass and toward an enclosure used decades ago by the Fish and Wildlife Department. We wondered why the enclosure was here and not at the old research station. The answer revealed itself.



**Busy photographers above the Railroad Rapids, the straight stretch of the Chilcotin River on the left
(Photo by M. Waterhouse)**

Although I didn't know it at the time, our cross-country trek was taking us towards ideal winter habitat for the California Bighorn Sheep: a south-facing, open grassland near a 60 to 70% uphill slope which biologists call escape terrain. Yves, a young fellow with very good eyes, was the first to spot movement on the winter range. Within moments, all of us were happily observing a large, mixed herd of 44 sheep including eight rams. This was what we had been hoping for.



**Bands of fall colours in the Lower Grasslands
(Photo by L. Csizmadia)**

Back at the monument, everyone declared the field trip a resounding success. What else is there to say? Okay. There is a bit more. It didn't snow. Kris picked up



some prickly pear on her shoe, which demonstrates why it is a bad idea to bring dogs into the park. And on the way out, I spotted two Columbia Sharp-tailed Grouse. More importantly, however, when Michaela and I reviewed my photos from October 21 and 22, we wondered why there were no lambs. Perhaps one of our members can suggest an answer?

**A mixed herd of 44 California Bighorn Sheep utilizing the nearby escape terrain
(Photo by L. Csizmadia)**

**Columbia Sharp-tailed Grouse
(Photo by L. Csizmadia)**



Member's Moment from Connie Haeussler & Leo Rankin



Did you Know that Garter Snakes Eat Small Fish?

This summer we paddled over to the swinging rope on Till Lake to go for a swim. When we arrived, we spotted a garter snake swimming in the lake. To our surprise it had a small fish in its mouth. We watched as it climbed ashore and swallowed the fish in front of us!

“Member’s Moment” is an opportunity for you to share a special scene, plant, animal, bird or outdoor activity that you have enjoyed and photographed here in the Cariboo Chilcotin. A chance for you to encourage other members to get outdoors and find their own special moments close to home and perhaps share them with all of us. For each newsletter the editors will select one or two photos for inclusion in the newsletter based on the quality of the photo as well as the interesting paragraph you must provide. We will save all submitted unused moments in hopes they may find a place in a future edition. Please email your full resolution photo and paragraph to the muskratexpress@shaw.ca. A special thanks to Connie and Leo for the winning entry.