

# MUSKRAT EXPRESS

WILLIAMS LAKE FIELD NATURALISTS  
FEBRUARY - MARCH 2023 NEWSLETTER

**FRIDAY MARCH 31<sup>ST</sup> 6PM** I am going to the  
NATURE HOUSE for the POT LUCK and AGM  
Maybe I will be featured in one of the pictures

Come + meet at  
the NATURE  
HOUSE to plan  
our FIELDTRIPS  
**TUESDAY MARCH 28  
5PM**



We can all go the United Church  
**FRIDAY APRIL 21<sup>ST</sup> 6PM BANQUET**  
We can have dinner + Joanne's  
desserts with our special speaker  
**FRANK RITCEY**

See  
you  
there



new



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](mailto: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](mailto: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:** 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 late in April 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](mailto:muskratexpress@shaw.ca)



**From Jim at Tern Inn**

I have been watching for a couple of interesting bird species out here in the west Chilcotin this winter. At a local ranch a Northern Hawk Owl has been a resident since before Christmas. The other is Sharptailed Grouse. I have been finding this species in small coveys at several sites this winter, one of the most common is along our community ski trails over at Martin Lake.

Following each sighting I enter the checklist of birds observed at the site into eBird. The first time I did this I was informed that both of these species are listed as "Sensitive" which I found interesting. The question arose what does this mean so I asked eBird for an explanation:



**A Sensitive Sharp-tailed Grouse**

**What is a "Sensitive Species"?**

*Some bird species face risks from humans of capture, targeted killing, or significant targeted disturbance. Open-access data can be a risk for these birds that are targeted for exploitation. eBird data output is restricted to protect these "Sensitive Species" while still allowing important data about them to be entered into eBird.*



**Northern Hawk Owl**

If you examine any of my eBird checklists that have these species recorded you will not see the Hawk Owl or the Sharp-tailed Grouse. On the other-hand

if you look at the Cariboo species list they will show up in this list but the location of the observation will not be shown.

The Sharp-tailed Grouse is listed because it is declining in numbers due to loss of grassland habitat and its lek (breeding) sites. Lek sites are traditional dance sites that are used year after year by several male grouse. The Lek is susceptible to human disturbance and the Lek may be permanently abandoned. This can result in reduced breeding due to loss of the traditional site.

I expect the Northern Hawk Owl is listed because it is a highly sought after species for sightings and photos. It is a northern breeding species that will migrate far to the south during winters of high breeding success and low food supply. If they settle on a southern location close to large populations knowledge of the owl's location can result in extensive disturbance by birders. This owl feeds during the day, spending the day perched on the top of a tree where it can see prey up to a half kilometre away. It has moved to these locations because it is having difficulty finding food and disturbance that becomes too frequent can result in the owl's inability to feed and eventual starvation.

I have not been too concerned about sharing the location of these 2 species, the Sharpe-tailed grouse does not stay near the breeding site once the deed is finished. All of the grouse I have been seeing are in open pine forests along roadways or trails and they do not appear to stay close to the same site. The Hawk Owl is too far away form large populations to suffer frequent disturbance. I will never tell anyone about a Lek if I stumble on one.

Please be aware of these sensitive species and any others you find and minimize your disturbance.

### **Notes from the Director's Meetings.**

By Margaret Waring



Hello Field Naturalists,

Do you think spring is just around the corner? The official start is only two weeks away! I thought about spring as I shovelled snow, lots of snow today. I enjoyed watching the Bohemian waxwings flying overhead and landing and moving around on trees. I have no Mountain ash berries or crab apples left on the trees in the front yard. When outside now I am beginning to hear more bird sounds. I think winter has been quiet regarding bird sounds.

Since reporting to you in our last (January) newsletter we had a single topic director's meeting on February 13th to discuss the continued use of the downstairs classroom by the Marie Sharpe Kindergarten and a regular meeting on February 22nd.

Check out the following upcoming events.

### **Field Trip Planning Meeting**

**This will be Tuesday March 28th at 5 PM** at the Nature House. Please come and join in. Bring ideas and make suggestions and plans for outings this year. If you cannot attend please contact Jim before the meeting with your proposed field trip. (778)764-2752 or reply to the newsletter email address.

### **Annual General Meeting (AGM)**

**Friday evening, March 31st starting at 6PM** at Scout Island Nature House.

The evening will begin with a Potluck supper at 6PM

AGM at 7PM

Program at 8PM. The program will feature life on Scout Island with pictures and videos of animals and related life.

Your attendance and support of our activities is very important so we hope to see you there.

## Scout Island Nature Centre Banquet is Back Again!

After a four-year hiatus during the pandemic, Scout Island Nature Centre will again hold a spring banquet on **April 21, 2023**. The banquet has long been an important fundraiser to help support nature education and outdoor programs at the Nature Centre and to celebrate the presence of such a special place in our community. The Nature Centre offers outdoor education for more than 250 school classes each year. In a world of too much screen time, this is a way for children to get outside safely and experience the simple joys of being among and learning about plants and animals and the land. The banquet is also an opportunity for us to renew friendships and learn about nature from an expert and entertaining featured speaker.

The banquet will be at St. Andrews United Church starting at 6:15 p.m. with dinner at 6:45. Tickets are \$50 for adults and \$20 for those 16 or younger. They are available at the Open Book, at Scout Island Nature Centre, or from a Williams Lake Field Naturalist director. Please get your ticket at least five days before the banquet so that caterers will know numbers. The great dinner will be catered by St Andrews United Church and Joanne Wright has promised to bring her fabulous desserts again.

The featured speaker this year will be Frank Ritcey, the “Outdoor Guy” on CBC’s North by Northwest. He will tell lots of stories and show some of the many videos of wildlife he has made over his many years of stepping into the world of nature. His fascination with wildlife was evident even in his childhood, living near Clearwater, BC. Now, in semi-retirement in the heart of the Nicola Valley grasslands, he spends many of his days and evenings watching and recording the birds, mammals, reptiles, insects, arachnids, plants, clouds and landscapes of BC. In between childhood and retirement, he has followed a variety of careers (from horse-logger to publisher to most recently, managing the WildSafeBC program) but throughout his careers he always made time to get into natural places.



Frank’s passion for wildlife and for the out-of-doors has led him throughout the province as he built his library of images and video clips of all animals, “great and small.” In his many encounters with wildlife, he has developed his own set of guidelines for keeping himself and his subjects safe. Although his formal training was that of a Resource Economist, Frank’s wilderness schooling came from his father, a professional biologist, and his mother, a settler daughter raised in the wilds of what is now Wells Gray Provincial Park. Through their guidance and his years in the mountains he has developed a unique and personal understanding of his relationship with nature.

As a presenter of wildlife videos, Frank’s talks are less of a lecture and more of a chance for people to sit around, listen to stories, see some unique videos, ask questions and to celebrate the richness of our natural world. Join Frank Ritcey, CBC’s Outdoor Guy, and professional wildlife videographer, for an evening of stories, video clips, and a discussion around being a “Compleat Naturalist”.

## Spring Plant and Yard Sale

By Margaret Waring

We have agreed to sponsor our usual student bursary for the graduating class of Lake City Secondary. That means fund raising so **May 13<sup>th</sup>** is the date to mark on your calendar for our annual Spring Plant and Yard Sale. Your contributions are what make this a successful event. I hope gardeners starting seeds will put in a few extras for us. If you have house plants and need to divide them, please consider a few plants for our sale. When we get out into our gardens check out what plants you can pot for the sale. Plants are our best sellers. And I hope you have not forgotten the box. The box that you fill as you clean up and downsize. Buyers come looking for antiques, outdoor

equipment, household and craft items, bargains and garage sale items. Our book section is popular. I hope you are able to participate by contributing, shopping and helping at the sale. We have fun! If you have any questions or ideas, please let me know at [mewaring@hotmail.com](mailto:mewaring@hotmail.com) or 250 398 7724.



## Plants of Scout Island Nature Centre

By Ordell Steen

This is the first of what I hope will be a series of articles on the plants of Scout Island Nature Centre. Renewing an acquaintance with a plant, like an old friend, and noting it growing, flowering, and fruiting through the season always makes a walk on Scout Island all the more enjoyable for me and many others. About 20 years ago, Anna and Gina Roberts prepared a simple list of vascular plants of the Williams Lake valley, many of which occur on Scout Island. Before that, Jean Waite prepared a small booklet with hand drawings of a few common plants on the Nature Centre. Recently, I started to photograph and describe all of the vascular plant species I've seen on the Nature Centre and one day will hopefully organize them into a guide. In the meantime, I'll start here.

### Saskatoon / *Speqpeqéllp*

#### *Amelanchier alnifolia*

I selected saskatoon for this first article it because when it flowers, it confirms for me the arrival again of warm spring days and the promise of summer, when the berries are good eating. Saskatoon is also one of the most important and popular food and material use plants for the Secwepemc who have long gathered, and continue to gather, its berries and branches. Through long experience, they have learned this plant well. Saskatoon is common on Scout Island, especially on the causeway and other sunny locations all over the islands not far from the water's edge and in moist dips.



Saskatoon is also called service berry by some people. The name "saskatoon" is said to come from the Blackfoot name for this shrub. It occurs from the low elevation grasslands just above the Fraser River, where it occurs primarily in ravines and on flood plains, to the upper elevations of forests in BC. It is frequently browsed by mule deer and is especially important as winter browse. Its berries are important food for birds.

Saskatoon shrubs are generally from a half to more than five metres tall and often occur in colonies because they spread by underground or creeping stems. The leaves, which are about 3 – 5 cm long, are very distinct, easily recognized by their round to slightly oval shape with teeth on the upper half of the leaf edges. The lower third of the leaf is not toothed. The mid-vein of the leaf has lateral branches which extend nearly parallel with each other, appearing unbranched from the mid-vein to the leaf edge.

Saskatoon flowers appear mostly in early to mid May but sometimes into early June on Scout Island. They occur in many clusters of 3 to 30 all-white flowers on the tips of branches. When flowers are new and abundant, they are a splash of white visible from a distance on the landscape. The petals are relatively long and narrow for their length, or strap-like, narrowing even further at their base. Botanists recognize four varieties based on petal length and other flower characteristics.

Mature berries generally first appear on Scout Island in mid June, although some appear as early as late May or as late as July. The berries are purple to nearly black and relatively sweet, although juiciness and seediness are variable. Many people collect them to make pies and other food.



Interior Salish people recognize 3 to 8 varieties of berries. According to Cecilia DeRose, the Secwepemc currently recognize three types of saskatoon by name and use, distinguished by seediness, taste, and habitat. *Speqpeq7úwi* is the most common “ordinary” berry bush, has small seeds, and grows on floodplains and riparian habitats. *Stsiqwem* has many large seeds, is sweet and grows in gullies in dry landscapes. *Senweweséllp* has medium sized seeds and is sweet. In this region, it grows along roadsides from Xget’tem (Dog Creek) to Stswecem’c (Canoe Creek).

Cecilia DeRose, Jean William, and Agness Jack say that saskatoon berries were and continue to be one of the most important berries for the Secwepemc. Not only were they prized food but also traded with people on the coast. They were/are the first fruits picked in the summer and were/are eaten fresh, made into a pudding, mixed with other berries, used for pies, or dried and made into cakes and added to other foods such as in a stew.

Saskatoon wood and branches were very important in traditional Secwepemc culture. The wood is very strong but flexible and the stems and branches were highly sought after traditionally to make a large variety of materials including many tools, building frames, cradles, and arrows. The importance of saskatoon is indicated by its inclusion in ancient Secwepemc stories and legends.

### Mountain Bluebird Update, March 2023

By Loyd Csizmadia



The Mountain Bluebirds will soon be back in Williams Lake. The earliest record for a Mountain Bluebird is February 18<sup>th</sup> 2015, when a single male was spotted on the Dog Creek Prairie. Eight days later, on February 26, a small flock arrived in Canoe Creek, eight to be exact. Normally, according to data posted on the Editing Checklist, serious numbers of Bluebirds do not return until the middle of March, so if you have a Bluebird Route, there is still time before the required cleaning and maintenance of nest boxes. I’ll be in touch to remind you. If you are on the waiting list for a route, I haven’t forgotten. At this time, no routes are available, but if anyone plans to give up a route, please let me know as soon as possible. If any club members would like a route, I can add your name to the waiting list. My email is [lmccsiz@gmail.com](mailto:lmccsiz@gmail.com).



**Sean Donahue Cleans a Box with his Homemade Nest Remover (Lubna Khan 2022)**



**Female Mountain Bluebird, Becher’s Prairie (Loyd Csizmadia 2018)**

#### Bluebird Nest Boxes

If any boxes on your routes need replacing, there is a fresh supply at the Nature House thanks to Jim Sims and Fred McMechan. Replacement boxes for the WLFN nest box routes are available at the SINC block house. They are stored in unlocked metal storage sheds one on each side of the block house. If you take any houses for your route, I would like to know. Jim Sims encourages monitors to take a cordless drill with them and perhaps a few 1¼ in screws along with a few longer ones in order to repair damaged boxes in the field. Wood has become quite expensive.

If you or someone you know wants a nest box for personal use, the Nature House is willing to sell some in order to supplement the cost of materials. These are best purchased for \$20 per box through Sue or perhaps Martin at the Nature House. Once summer students are hired, they can also sell boxes.



**Male Mountain Bluebird, Becher's Prairie  
(Loyd Csizmadia 2018)**

*You will find greater peace of mind  
Knowing there's a bluebird of happiness.  
And when he sings to you,  
Though you're deep in blue,  
You will see a ray of light creep through,  
And so remember this, life is no abyss,  
Somewhere there's a bluebird of happiness.  
The Bluebird of Happiness*

*by Edward Heyman 1934 (Lines 8-14)*

Cheers,  
Loyd Csizmadia  
Bluebird Program Coordinator

## **Disease threatens the Little Brown Bat - researchers ask public for help**

B.C.'s bats, including the well-known Little Brown Myotis, are threatened by a fungal disease headed towards the province from Alberta and Washington State. The Cariboo Region Community Bat Program, in collaboration with the Province of BC, are asking the public for help in the effort to detect and prevent the spread of White-Nose Syndrome (WNS). Residents are urged to report any bat activity observed in winter, and any sick or dead bats found before May 31st.

*White-Nose Syndrome* is a fungal disease that is harmless to humans, but has devastated North American bat populations. The fungus attacks bats while they are hibernating, appearing on their wings and faces, giving the appearance of a white nose. Bats often wake to clean the fungus from their skin. This uses valuable energy, and eventually the bats die from hypothermia and starvation as their body energy reserves are depleted. Across North America, millions of bats have been killed, and two BC species are now listed as *Endangered*. As a key predator for many night-flying insects, bats are essential parts of BC's ecosystems and provide billions of dollars of economic benefit by helping control agricultural, forest, and urban pests.

First detected in New York State in 2006, the disease continues to spread, with detections on the west coast close to Seattle and in south-central Alberta. Biologists say the arrival of WNS in BC is imminent. Increasing the number of reports from the public is the best chance to understand how WNS might spread and affect local bat populations. Though there is not yet a proven cure for WNS, several promising treatment options are being developed, and it may be possible to mitigate the effects of this wildlife health crisis.

If you find a dead bat or have sightings of winter bat activity, please report it to the B.C. Community Bat Program online at [www.bcbats.ca](http://www.bcbats.ca), via email at [info@bcbats.ca](mailto:info@bcbats.ca), or by calling 1-855-922-2287 (1-855-GOT-BATS). All live bats should be left alone — keep your distance, take a photo, and report it to the B.C. Community Bat Program. If you must move a bat, visit [www.bcbats.ca](http://www.bcbats.ca) for advice and never touch a bat with your bare hands. Please note that if you or your pet has been in direct contact with the bat you will need further information regarding the risk of rabies to you and your pet.

In partnership with the BC Ministry of Environment, and funded by the Habitat Conservation Trust Foundation, Forest Enhancement Society of BC, and the Habitat Stewardship Program, the BC Community Bat Program provides information and promotes local stewardship and citizen science. You can find out more about the BC Community Bat Program and options for helping local bat populations at [www.bcbats.ca](http://www.bcbats.ca), [info@bcbats.ca](mailto:info@bcbats.ca), 1-855-922-2287 or 250-398-8532

