

BRITISH COLUMBIA FIELD ORNITHOLOGIST

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Send material for publication in any format (mail, phone, FAX, print, IBM WordPerfect or Word for Windows files on 3.5" or 5.25" floppies) to the BCFO Newsletter Editors (name, address and phone no. page 2). We especially welcome bird-finding information for the "Site Guide" series and any articles about birdwatching experiences, preferably (but not necessarily) in British Columbia.

Membership in British Columbia Field Ornithologists is open to anyone interested in the study & enjoyment of wild birds in British Columbia. Our objectives include: fostering cooperation between amateur and professional ornithologists; promoting cooperative bird surveys and research projects; and, supporting conservation organizations in their efforts to preserve birds and their habitats.

Membership dues: Individual memberships or library subscriptions, \$25.00; junior memberships (age under 18), \$10.00; U.S. and foreign memberships, \$25.00 (U.S.). Memberships are for the calendar year. For further information, or to join, write:

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EDITORS' NOTES AND NOTIONS

Welcome, BCFO members, to the **Fifth BCFO Annual General Meeting**. When you arrive, if the names below mean nothing to you, we hope that before you leave these and other sites will provide you with some memorable birding and a desire to return.

Aylard's Farm	Hastings Flats	Quick's Bottom
Beechy Head/Hawk Ridge	Island View Beach	Rithet's Bog
Beacon Hill Park	Jocelyn Hill	Songhees Waterfront
Beaver/Elk Lake	Lochside Trail	Swan Lake Nature Centre
Blenkinsop Lake	Martindale Flats	Sydney Island and Spit
Cattle Point	Mill Hill	Ten Mile Point
Clover Point	Mt. Douglas	Thetis Lake
Dallas Road	Mt. Tolmie	Viaduct Flats
Esquimalt Lagoon	Observatory Hill	Victoria Airport
Goldstream Park	Ogden Point Breakwater	Witty's Lagoon

When you are not birding we offer, for your reading enjoyment, another full slate of articles in this newsletter. Dick lets us share in his Big Day record, Jo Ann reminds us to be ever diligent in our "blackbird" observations, Sandy explains how owls and fishing can go together, Harold provides bluebird data and Hantavirus precautions, Jamie gives us a different view of an often scorned bird, Al sends observations on woodpecker behavior, Alan writes about a seldom birded portion of the province, Bruce extols the pleasures of birding in the Yukon, and Chris nicely summarizes the findings of the Okanagan Mountain Provincial Park Bird Blitz.

We still need input for our News & Announcements. Thanks, Martin for this month's Upcoming Meetings and Events section. A few Letters to the Editors would be nice also just to let us know that this newsletter is actually being read out there. Please note that the December issue "In-Basket" is empty so, if you want some winter reading ... Each December we provide a list of CBC dates and contacts. This is fairly costly for us in telephone charges so if you could let us know about yours by or before the first week of December we would be grateful. Thanks in advance.

We questioned a number of people about one member's "Question for the Quarterly" in the last issue. For this issue we, the Editors, ask a "Question for the Quarterly" and the Question is... "What should we name the newsletter?" The present name is quite a mouthful. We would like something more catchy and memorable. Think about the request, send us your suggestions and we will run them all past the executive.

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SOCIETY NEWS

**British Columbia Field Ornithologists
Fifth Annual General Meeting
September 15-17, 1995
Dunsmuir Lodge, Sidney, BC**

Paper Session Speakers

- David Allinson**, Victoria, BC
Hawk Ridge, BC: Raptor migration on southern Vancouver Island.
- Dr. Fred Cooke**, Simon Fraser University, Burnaby, BC
Overview of bird population studies being conducted through the Wildlife Ecology Chair at SFU.
- Dr. Kathy Martin**, CWS/University of BC, Vancouver, BC
Life at High Altitudes: How Ptarmigans make a living.
- Michael Shepard**, Victoria, BC
Passerine migration studies at Rocky Point, Department of National Defence, southern Vancouver Island.
- Tom Ethier**, Wildlife Branch, Victoria, BC (tentative)
Ecology of Northern Goshawks.

Banquet Speaker

- Terry Wahl**, Bellingham, WA
Pelagic Birding off Westport, Washington.

UPCOMING MEETINGS AND EVENTS

- Sept 12-17, 1995 **THE WILDLIFE SOCIETY ANNUAL MEETING**, Portland, Oregon. Contact The Wildlife Society, 5410 Grosvenor Lane, Bethesda, MD 20814-2197. Phone (301) 897-9770.
- Sept 22-24, 1995 **WESTERN BIRD-BANDING ASSOCIATION ANNUAL MEETING**, Rio Grande Nature Center, Albuquerque, NM. Contact Catherine I. Sandell, 8101 N. Main St., Las Cruces, NM, 88012.
- Sept 28 to
Oct 1, 1995 **FBCN FALL GENERAL MEETING**, Quesnel, BC. Contact the Quesnel Naturalist Club, Box 4296, Quesnel, BC V2J 3J3. Phone June Wood (604) 249-5532 or Adam Moss (604) 747-3455.
- Oct 26-28, 1995 **INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE & TRAINING WORKSHOP ON CONSERVATION AND ECOLOGY OF GRASSLAND BIRDS & 1995 ANNUAL MEETING, ASSOCIATION OF FIELD ORNITHOLOGISTS**, Tulsa, OK. Contact Kevin Colbert, Sutton Avian Research Center, Box 2007, Bartlesville, OK 74005.
- Nov 1-4, 1995 **RAPTOR RESEARCH FOUNDATION 1995 ANNUAL MEETING**, Duluth, MN. Contact Gerald Niemi, Continuing Education and Extension, University College, Univ. of Minnesota (Duluth), 10 University Drive, 316 DadB, Duluth, MN 55812-2496. Phone (218) 720-4279.
- Nov 8-12, 1995 **JOINT MEETING BETWEEN THE COLONIAL WATERBIRD SOCIETY AND PACIFIC SEABIRD GROUP** will be held at the Victoria Conference Centre, Victoria, BC. Theme of the meeting is "Behavioral Mechanisms of Population Regeneration". For further information please contact Rob Butler in Vancouver, BC at (604) 946-8546 or by e-mail at: butlerr@cwsvan.dots.doe.ca.¶

COWBIRD PARASITISM: IS IT A THREAT TO BC'S SONGBIRDS?

by Jamie Smith
4407 West 15th Ave
Vancouver, BC V6R 3B1

Every summer, northern songbirds work almost tirelessly to raise their young. There is, however, one exception: the brood parasitic Brown-headed Cowbird, which reproduces only by stealing parental care from other songbirds. Cowbirds have recently become a conservation concern, because they have contributed to the endangerment of several rare birds in the USA, notably the Kirtland's Warbler. Programs which involve killing cowbirds are being advocated as a "solution" to the widespread perception that songbird populations are declining. There is, however, a danger that the cowbird is merely a convenient scapegoat, when the main causes of songbird declines (eg. habitat loss and degradation) lie elsewhere. Are cowbirds a threat to British Columbia's songbirds, and should we cull cowbirds here? To answer this question, it helps to first consider the natural history of the cowbird, and its known impacts on hosts.

Cowbird Natural History

There are three cowbirds in North America: the Bronzed Cowbird of the Lower Mississippi Valley and Gulf Coast; the Shiny Cowbird, a recent immigrant to Florida from the West Indies; and the more familiar Brown-headed Cowbird, which occurs from coast to coast, and north to the Yukon. The original breeding range of Brown-headed Cowbirds was the Northern Prairies, where they associated closely with Bison. As European settlers cleared forests and introduced cattle to the entire continent, cowbirds expanded east, south and west, reaching the east coast in the early 1800's, Los Angeles about 1900, and coastal BC by 1955. Cowbird numbers undoubtedly increased greatly as their range expanded, but results from the Breeding Bird Survey have revealed that cowbird numbers are no longer increasing in most parts of the continent, and are actually declining slowly in many areas, including coastal BC.

Brown-headed Cowbirds are easily recognized by the piercing whistle and shiny two-tone plumage of the male, and the female's ash-gray plumage. The two sexes are rarely seen apart. Their sparrow-like beak and smaller size separates them readily from other blackbirds and starlings, which they often join in mixed-species flocks.

Unlike European Cuckoo parasitism, where each individual parasite specializes on a particular host species, Brown-headed Cowbirds are host generalists, using over 200 different host species. While different cuckoos lay an egg that matches that of their chosen host, cowbirds lay a standard egg in all host nests. Up to 50 host species may be used in a local area, but usually only a few species are frequent hosts locally.

Avian brood parasites usually lay their eggs in host nests while the host is laying its own eggs. The female cowbird often removes a host egg from the nest before or after she lays her own egg(s). The cowbird egg hatches after ten days of incubation, and a day or so before the eggs of most hosts. Cowbird nestlings, unlike cuckoo nestlings, do not evict host young or eggs from the nest, or kill host young directly. However, because of cowbird earlier hatching and generally large size, host nestlings often starve, leaving only the cowbird to be reared by the luckless foster parents.

Although cowbirds use many other songbirds as hosts, not all species rear young cowbirds. Cowbirds avoid cavity-nesters, and some species have defences against parasitism. The American Robin, Cedar Waxwing, Gray Catbird, and Northern Oriole recognize and routinely eject cowbird eggs from their nests. Birds that feed their young seeds, like House Finches and American Goldfinches, cannot rear cowbird young, because the cowbird nestling requires insects and spiders.

Cowbirds, as their name implies, frequently feed by using grazing cattle as "beaters" to flush grasshoppers and other insects. They also eat weed seeds and feeding and breeding habitats are separate. They can commute up to 7 km between breeding and feeding sites, because the freedom from parental responsibility allows them to pick the best feeding sites available, even if these do not provide breeding opportunities. This same freedom from parental responsibility allows cowbirds to produce many more eggs than other songbirds. A cowbird female can lay up to 72 eggs

COWBIRD PARASITISM... (continued)

per year, while most songbirds lay only 4 to 16 eggs a year. Cowbirds occur throughout BC wherever there are open meadows and stock-raising operations, but they are most abundant in the dry valleys of the Southern Interior and in the lowlands of the Georgia Depression.

Cowbirds as a Conservation Threat

Cowbirds pose a threat to host populations for three reasons. First, because they use some host species and habitats more than others, their impacts are not spread evenly over a host community. Second, if a host species is rare but preferred, cowbirds can drive it to extinction, while maintaining their numbers on less-preferred, but common hosts. Third, while laying in host nests, cowbirds may puncture eggs, and cause the host breeding attempt to fail inadvertently, or even deliberately (see below). Cowbirds probably have their greatest impact on hosts in regions where most of the land is intensively farmed, but where there are small remnants of native habitats. In isolated woodlands in agricultural land in Illinois, Cheryl Trine and Scott Robinson have found that the Wood Thrush (a frequent cowbird host) receives over three cowbird eggs in the average nest, and rarely rears any of its own young.

At UBC, we have studied cowbird threats to local songbird populations in two areas. Our most extensive studies have been in the Georgia Depression, particularly in the southern Gulf Islands and at the Reifel Waterfowl Refuge in the Fraser Delta. We studied the Song Sparrow as a cowbird host in particular detail. Song Sparrows serve as a useful indicator species of the effects of parasitism, as they are frequently parasitized by cowbirds wherever the two species occur together, and often rear cowbird nestlings together with their young.

Peter Arcese and I found that about 25% of sparrow nests were parasitized on the Gulf Islands, but that the sparrows there could cope comfortably with this level of parasitism, mainly because cowbirds began to breed after sparrows, and all early sparrow nests went unparasitized. Things were very different at the Reifel Refuge, where Mary Taitt, Chris Rogers, Gwen Jongejan and I found that: (1) there was more overlap between host and parasite nesting periods; (2) 66% of sparrow nests were parasitized; and (3) there were often two or more cowbird eggs in each parasitized nest. As a result, Song Sparrows at Reifel bred so poorly that their numbers were only maintained by immigration from elsewhere, and this "Refuge" may thus not be very effective at protecting songbirds.

The Song Sparrow, however, may not be representative of other songbirds in the Georgia Depression for two reasons. First, it is parasitized more often than most other cowbird hosts and may thus suffer more from parasitism. Second, and in contrast, it has a longer breeding season than other cowbird hosts and may thus suffer less than hosts whose breeding period overlaps completely with the cowbird. Better data on other host species are needed to assess how much they are affected by cowbird parasitism, but no host species is currently known to be threatened by cowbird parasitism in the Georgia Depression. Cowbirds are particularly abundant at Reifel, and Mary Taitt and I have recently begun a banding program there to study their movements and survival in more detail. In future, we plan to remove breeding cowbirds from the area to look at their impacts on the songbird community.

One idea from our studies in the Gulf Islands that may have practical implications is that the female cowbird may "farm the hosts" on her breeding site. We speculate that, by killing host nestlings or removing host eggs from nests that are found too late in the host's breeding cycle to be successfully parasitized, she can increase her supply of nests for laying in. Female cowbirds are known to kill host young, but it is not known if they do this commonly. By behaving this way, a cowbird could ensure herself a steady stream of nests for laying in, because host females will re-lay four or five days after their last nest fails. This idea predicts that nest failure rates, which are very high at Reifel, should drop sharply if cowbird numbers there are reduced. If the prediction is confirmed, the impacts of cowbirds on their hosts may have been underestimated in the past, and the cowbird may be more of a conservation threat than is currently recognized.

The South Okanagan Valley near Vaseux Lake is home to many of BC's rarest birds, including species that are vulnerable to cowbird parasitism like the Gray Flycatcher and Yellow-breasted Chat. David Ward and I have studied parasitism in this host community, building on historical records of parasitism summarized by the

COWBIRD PARASITISM... (continued)

Cannings Brothers, Rob, Dick and Syd. The picture emerging from this work is that, like elsewhere, cowbirds seem to have a few frequent hosts (including the Yellow Warbler, Chipping Sparrow, Song Sparrow, and Warbling Vireo). As in the Lower Mainland, the frequent hosts are among the commonest birds, and these species seem at little risk from the detrimental effects of parasitism. The picture for rare host species like the Yellow-breasted Chat is unclear, as there are almost no data on the frequency of parasitism. It is, however, of concern that cowbirds are most abundant in the fragments of riparian woodland and scrub, which provide habitat for the few remaining chats. In the Okanagan, as elsewhere, cowbird parasitism probably goes hand-in-hand with habitat loss as a threat to the survival of songbird populations. Further monitoring work, and intensive study of the nesting success of rare host species like the chat is needed so that we can assess of cowbird parasitism is a threat to these species.

Cowbird Management in BC

Should we be attempting to trap and kill cowbirds in BC? Cowbirds are pathologically sociable, and can be readily trapped in large numbers using traps baited with live cowbirds as decoys. Several such trapping programs are underway in the USA to protect endangered host populations threatened by parasitism and other causes of decline. Such programs are attractive to management agencies, because the number of cowbirds killed is proof that they are doing something to "solve the problem of songbird declines", and trapping programs are cheap compared to the purchase and protection of habitat for nature reserves. There are calls for regional, or even continent-wide, control programs, and some people feel that the case against the cowbird is already proven, but I disagree.

There are at least three reasons to be cautious in beginning cowbird control programs, unless endangered and declining songbird hosts are suffering greatly from parasitism. First, cowbirds may have been wrongly blamed for songbird declines in the past, when they were not the principal or sole cause. This was true for the Kirtland's Warbler, where creation of new habitat by fire was a key to the species' recovery. In BC, cowbirds are so rare over heavily forested areas (90% of the Province), that it is hard to believe they can have much impact on songbird numbers there. Second, extermination of any native species should be questioned on ethical grounds. Cowbirds are often shot on sight (the species is not legally protected) and their eggs and young are routinely removed from host nests by nest recorders. Such "cowbird-hatred" is reminiscent of past slaughter of raptors, which was encouraged by government regulations and by the offering of bounties. Cowbirds have a fascinating life-style and, arguably, have as much right to exist undisturbed as "noble predators" like Peregrine Falcons or wolves. Third, our knowledge of bird communities is far from good enough to predict what the effects of cowbird removal would be. It is even possible that cowbird removals could harm rare host species, because the release of "cowbird pressure" might allow common hosts to out-compete rare ones for breeding sites and food.

While there may be no immediate need to begin cowbird control programs in BC, there is certainly a need for better monitoring of the effects of cowbird parasitism on populations of rarer hosts. Of particular interest are species that are likely to suffer frequent parasitism because they occupy habitat where cowbirds are common. Such monitoring is straightforward in principle, but labour intensive, particularly the assessment of levels of nest parasitism and host breeding success. With more and better information, we may be able to estimate the effects of cowbird parasitism on rare bird species, and to choose effective local and regional management actions accordingly. ◻

AUTHORS IN THIS ISSUE

Bruce Bennett

Since April 1993 Bruce has been employed as a Forest Bird & Plant Community Technician for the Canadian Wildlife Service, initially in Delta but with a relocation to Whitehorse in April 1995. His interests are wide ranging and include botany, birding, natural and human history.

Richard (Dick) J. Cannings

An avid birder, Dick is actively involved in the Vancouver Natural History Society. With his brothers, Dick co-authored Birds of the Okanagan Valley.

AUTHORS IN THIS ISSUE (continued)

Chris Charlesworth

Chris, a member of the Central Okanagan Naturalists Club, has been birding in the Okanagan for about 6 years. He has lead many groups birding in the area and welcomes calls from interested visiting birders. (604) 765-6048.

Al Grass

Al, a Park Naturalist for some 25 years, is stationed at the Vancouver District, North Vancouver. His ornithological interests include raptors, uses of native trees and shrubs by birds, and woodpecker feeding habits.

Jo Ann MacKenzie

Jo Ann enjoys birding anywhere, anytime! She and husband Hue are active members of the White Rock and Surrey Naturalists and the Vancouver Natural History Society.

Alan MacLeod

Alan, a labour negotiator who likes to tramp the highlands of greater Victoria looking for birds and wildflowers, looks forward to the annual hawk migration on the south end of Vancouver Island. He encourages others who have birded the Telegraph Creek area and would like to compare notes on the Stikine region to write to him at #4-251 Ontario St., Victoria, BC V8V 1N1.

Sandy McRuer

Currently a forester with the BC government, Sandy has lived in Port Alberni for over 8 years. He has taught a course on birding and is involved with the Alberni Valley Naturalist Society.

Harold S. Pollock

After Harold finished teaching at Queen's University he retired to Victoria where he developed an interest in birding, especially in bluebirds. He is an active member of the Victoria NHS and birds regularly with the Tuesday Group.

Jamie Smith

Jamie is a native of the Isle of Bute, Scotland, where he began birding at the age of eight. His favourite bird is the Song Sparrow, and his favourite birding place is the southern Gulf Islands. He likes all common birds and is fascinated by the "secrets of their success".

GONE FISHIN'

Sandy McRuer
4728 Southgate Road
Port Alberni, BC V9Y 5K6

It was a cool clear crisp March day when we all met to look at the condition of Kitsuksis Creek. A local forest company had plowed a field in preparation for a hybrid poplar plantation and we were concerned that habitat had been damaged. To assist us in assessing the work we had invited Dave Cluff, a fisheries biologist on retainer to the Department of Fisheries. The other seven were members of the local naturalist society and a stream enhancement group.

As we walked to the area we wanted to inspect, we heard the call of a Northern Pygmy Owl. This wasn't the double-noted call in all the tapes, but a single note repeated every minute or so. It seemed quite close, but when I looked around I didn't see it. I shrugged and hurried to catch up to the rest of the gang.

On our way out we were going through a wooded area and we heard the call again, only there were two of them. Curious, three of us tramped through the moss and salal to see if we could locate the birds. They gave us a merry chase and eventually we gave up and went on.

Later that day, we went to another part of the Kitsuksis drainage, Mulcaster Swamp. The swamp was named after the Mulcaster family who originally farmed there. Now all that remains of the farm is a small cleared area next to the swamp, and a

GONE FISHIN' (continued)

few naturalized garden flowers. When we emerged from the forest into the clearing we were concentrating on what ducks might be on the water. However, Nel noticed that there was a small bird on top of a young Douglas fir across the clearing. She asked me what it was, and I told her, with a good deal of satisfaction, that it was a Northern Pygmy Owl!

It sat there calmly looking about. We walked around it a little so that the sun was behind us and were rewarded with excellent views of the "fake" eyes on the back of its head. The tree it was in was not very tall and everyone could see at least that it was a little owl. Dave wanted to go to the other end of the swamp along a little trail to see the beaver dam and so some of us went along. When we returned, one of our group was silently pointing at the owl. It had moved to the top of a small Hemlock only about fifteen feet tall. It seemed quite unconcerned that there were eight large humans staring at it from fairly close range.

That's when I commented to Dave that I had heard that some people had fished for owls. You can put a small brown furry object on the end of a fishing line, cast it in the direction of a known owl and retrieve it. The owl will think the object is a mouse and will pounce. Well, Dave took off his Cowichan hat, undid the pompom and tossed it in the direction of the owl.

The Pygmy Owl's head swivelled immediately! It stared fixedly at the pompom but did not move. Dave suggested everyone take a couple of steps away from the pompom. Then the owl pounced! It sat there on the pompom, on the ground, twenty feet away from a group in front and behind it, in broad daylight without any apparent fear. It pecked once or twice at the fluff, looked about, and then to Dave's consternation it flew off with its "prey".

We all slowly walked back along the trail buzzing about the owl. It was clearly one of those rare encounters in the wild and one to savour. I have seen Dave a couple of times since then and each time he has asked if I know where his pompom is! ☺

**NOTES ON BIRDING THE GRAND CANYON OF THE STIKINE
AND TELEGRAPH CREEK, BRITISH COLUMBIA**

by Alan MacLeod
4 - 251 Ontario Street
Victoria, BC V8V 1N1

Birders yearning for some relatively untravelled territory and who appreciate spectacular terrain in a rich historical setting might want to consider Telegraph Creek, in northwest British Columbia.

You have to want to get to Telegraph Creek. This community of about 300 people sits a little below the 58th parallel, a good 3-4 day drive from the SW corner of the province. Access is by way of Highway 37, the "Stewart-Cassiar", via Dease Lake, which drains north into the Arctic Ocean rather than west into the Pacific.

My companion and I spent a week in Telegraph Creek in late May of 1995 and enjoyed one of those rare, serendipitous things: an experience that was even better than the great expectations that preceded it. Telegraph Creek is a storied B.C. community situated on the mighty Stikine River, just below the remarkable Grand Canyon of the Stikine. It is a largely unspoiled area of great physical beauty, a surprising climate and abundant wildlife. And the birding is pretty good too.

During my short time in Telegraph Creek and the Grand Canyon of the Stikine area, I found 98 species of birds, nine of which the reference books indicate are rare or absent altogether from this region of the province. An experience of just one week is entirely insufficient to qualify one to say anything definitive about the birds of Telegraph Creek, but it is long enough to have enabled me to discover a few potentially interesting birding sites and certainly enough to inspire great praise for this untrampled area of our province. If you want some new vistas, prefer uncrowded places, and enjoy outstanding scenery, go to Telegraph Creek.

BIRDING THE GRAND CANYON... (continued)

Before proceeding to Dease Lake, a short detour from Highway 37 provides an excellent opportunity to explore some alpine habitat. Just 1.4 km north of the gas station at 40 Mile Flats [about 70 km south of Dease Lake], turn right on a road heading east. In less than 20 minutes [12 km], you will climb nearly 600 m and find yourself above the tree line. During our short visit we climbed a rocky promontory at 1,600 m, enjoyed panoramic views of Mt. Edziza Park and the Spatsizi Plateau, and saw some nice birds too. While Horned Larks and Water Pipits sang, a Northern Harrier and Short-eared Owl patrolled the barrens. An unseen ptarmigan called from the willow scrub as a variety of ducks dabbled on ponds still fringed with snow.

In Dease Lake, at a junction dominated by a large grocery store and Petro-Canada station, a small sign marks the start of the road to Telegraph Creek. For about half of the 113-kilometre distance ahead of you this gravel road parallels the Tanzilla River, the first of three tributaries that join the Stikine before it reaches Telegraph Creek. Aspen dominates the roadside forest and though mountains decorate the horizon, nothing indicates the unique terrain awaiting travellers further along the road.

Which is not to say there won't be surprises on your way to the Stikine canyon. Moose and black bear are plentiful in the Stikine watershed and are frequently seen by the roadside, as are Osborn caribou, coyote and porcupine. In the week following our visit a motorist driving to Telegraph Creek was forced to stop about 30 km out of Dease Lake by a dramatic obstruction: three grizzly bear cubs in the middle of the road. Whereupon mama grizzly appeared on the scene and expressed her objection to the interloper by mugging the truck. A grizzly-clawed vehicle fits my idea of a bona fide Stikine souvenir, but we had no such luck: only one moose and a couple of chipmunks crossed our path. As for the birds, the best were the Pine Grosbeaks our truck occasionally flushed from the gravelly roadside.

At 65.3 km out of Dease Lake we took a quick look at a large open area just left of the road and, beyond it, a big puddle locally known as Rousseau's Pond. A Sora, which The Birds of British Columbia [Campbell, et al] indicates is absent from this part of the province, called from the pond. Ducks dabbled among the lily pads while Red-winged Blackbird and Common Yellowthroat vocalized from the cattails. White-crowned and Chipping Sparrows sang in the open area and the margins looked like a promising place to check for edge-preferring songbirds.

Just inside the eastern boundary of the Stikine River Recreation Area look for an outhouse and a sign indicating a viewpoint. From this spot a short trail leads to another open area commanding an excellent view of the Tuya Valley and a mountain backdrop. Here a White-crowned Sparrow and Yellow-rumped Warbler sang as Violet-green Swallows practised aerial manoeuvres in our sightlines.

At 75.2 km the road becomes more unruly. A highway sign warns of a 20 per cent grade as the road turns steeply down toward the Tuya River, which is crossed at 78.2 km. Soon you find yourself in magnificent country. Here the Stikine, which means "great river" in the language of the coastal Tlingit people, runs through what is billed as the "Grand Canyon of the Stikine". It is no misnomer. The river cuts narrowly through sheer cliffs up to 300 metres high as the gorge closes to as little as two metres. The exposed sedimentary-volcanic geology is fascinating. Photo opportunities abound.

After passing a Bank Swallow colony [85.3 km], stop at the Ministry of Highways Rest Area at 90.2 km. This is an excellent place to have lunch, savour the vistas, contemplate your place in the scheme of things, and enjoy a few birds too. During our stop a Western Tanager sang from a dry slope near our picnic table, swallows sheered canyon airspace, and a Townsend's Solitaire dropped in for a look.

At 92.8 km the road follows a narrow saddle between the Stikine and the Tahltan River, the third of its tributaries on the way to Telegraph Creek. Step to the left road shoulder for marvellous views at the edge of the Stikine gorge, then to the right for the impressive Tahltan. But be careful. The road, though much improved in recent years, is often narrow, winding and steep. Drive inattentively and you could find yourself in a sharp descent to a very rough landing.

This section of the road lies inside the boundaries of the Stikine River Recreation Area but at the point the Tahltan joins the Stikine you are in the old

BIRDING THE GRAND CANYON... (continued)

Tahltan village site and signs ask that you not trespass on Tahltan land. The recreation area is exited at 102.7 km and shortly thereafter the road straightens again and leads away from the canyon.

At 113.5 km the BC Hydro diesel generating station marks your entry into Telegraph Creek. The Tahltan people were the first human inhabitants of this area of the Stikine. The Tahltans fished, hunted and trapped the region, and traded with the interior Kaskas and coastal Tlingits. Today Tahltans are still the majority among Telegraph Creek's residents. European settlement began in the mid-nineteenth century when the desire to establish a communication link to Europe via Russia led to the development of the Collins Overland Telegraph Trail. The telegraph line crossed the Stikine here, giving the town its name. Although the Collins project was initially abandoned when it was superseded by the laying of the trans-Atlantic cable, the telegraph line was later extended into the Yukon as a consequence of the rush for gold and it continued to be used into this century. Telegraph Creek and nearby Glenora were overrun by the fortune-seekers during the Cassiar and Klondike gold rushes of 1873-74 and 1897-98, when thousands of prospectors came by steamboat up the Stikine. Gold fever quickly faded, but old buildings from this era still stand at Telegraph Creek. The town remained an important supply centre for northern communities, and regular river boat service continued to Telegraph Creek until 1972, when the Stikine supply route was eclipsed by the new Stewart-Cassiar highway.

In Telegraph Creek, supplies, food and lodging are available at the Stikine Riversong general store/restaurant/lodge. As you munch on your burger you can enjoy the fast-flowing river just across the road and watch five or six swallow species careening at the water's edge. During our stay here Spotted Sandpipers were numerous along the river. Western Tanagers sang in trees along the road. Further 'uptown' at the junction of the Glenora road, look for Say's Phoebe. We found a phoebe here, apparently nesting in a building close by this junction. It sang and hawked flies, pleasing a coastal birder who still regards this bird as special. As the phoebe showed its stuff a "Harlan's" Red-tailed Hawk flushed and screamed.

The road from Telegraph Creek to Glenora provides some good birding possibilities. A kilometre or so down this road you will find a ranch-style gate and a big open area locally known as McPhee's Woodlot. This looks like promising habitat. Warbling Vireo, MacGillivray's Warbler, Chipping and Savannah Sparrows were present during our visit. Local birders say the area is reliable for Mountain Bluebird and a good spot to look for raptors.

Another kilometre down the Glenora Road takes you to Sawmill Lake, accessed by a small roadside picnic area, or just beyond that, by a short road to a small grass air strip and float plane base. A Sora called here too, and Red-necked Grebes were present and vocal. Among several duck species on hand were Barrow's Goldeneye and two species The Birds of British Columbia indicates are rare in the region, Blue-winged Teal and Ring-necked Duck. An Osprey, yet another local rarity, fished successfully for rainbow trout. A Belted Kingfisher tried its luck too. Five swallow species jostled for flies over the lake. Ruffed Grouse drummed from woods beside the airstrip. A male Spruce Grouse strutted handsomely. The Birds of British Columbia indicates that breeding records are scarce for Killdeer in this area of B.C; nevertheless, one performed the broken-wing charade by the airstrip edge. A Common Snipe whinnied and Spotted Sandpipers called from the lake perimeter. A young black bear disappeared in a hurry as we scoured the airstrip edges for passerines.

In the aspen woods and brushy lake margins singing passerines included Least and Dusky Flycatchers, Swainson's and Varied Thrushes, several warblers; Orange-crowned, Yellow, Yellow-rumped, Wilson's, Northern Waterthrush, Common Yellowthroat, and sparrows too, including Savannah, Fox and Lincoln's.

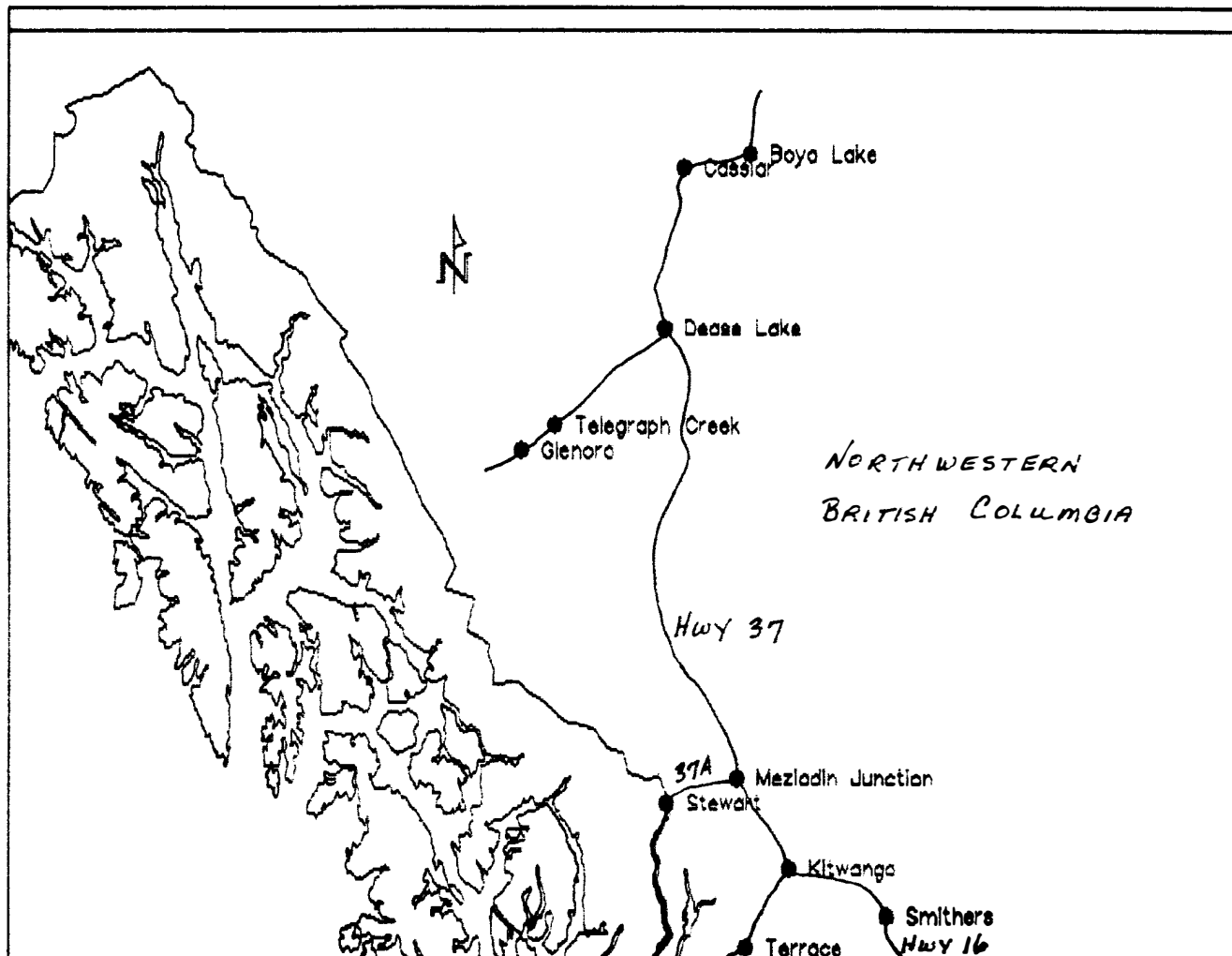
Some 4.6 km down the Glenora road from Telegraph Creek look for a side road to the right directing one to "Valley Welding" and "Pronto Excavating". Just 0.2 km and 0.4 km past this road, two access routes lead to a small but worthwhile woodland lake local people call the Austrians' Pond. The first access is by way of a short road to the water's edge, the second by a short, easy-to-miss footpath. At either spot the margins are flooded and you may need to do just a bit of scrambling for a view of the water, but the effort is worth it: the area is productive for waterbirds and passerines.

BIRDING THE GRAND CANYON... (continued)

During our visits to the pond Red-necked Grebes were conspicuous by their vocal and behavioral displays. Green-winged Teal, Mallard, Blue-winged Teal, American Wigeon, Ring-necked Duck, Lesser Scaup, Barrow's Goldeneye all paraded before our binoculars. So did Bufflehead and Hooded Merganser, two more species that are unusual for this region, according to The Birds of British Columbia. Given the situation and time, it seems clear that at least some of these species were breeding at the site. Singing passerines here included Western Wood-Pewee, Dusky Flycatcher, Ruby-crowned Kinglet, Warbling Vireo, Yellow and Yellow-rumped Warblers, Northern Waterthrush and others.

Beyond the Austrians' Pond the road winds several kilometres to the site of the goldrush boom town, Glenora. The revered naturalist John Muir climbed nearby Glenora Mountain in 1879 and rhapsodized memorably about his experience in the book Picturesque California. During the 1897-98 Klondike frenzy Glenora is said to have accommodated as many as 10,000 gold-seekers in tents and rough wooden buildings. Today there is little trace of Glenora's former glory: aspens grow tall where buildings once stood and prospectors' shouts are replaced by the songs of ardent warblers.

Stop at the roadside along the way to Glenora in late May and you are likely to find a nice variety of birds just about anywhere. Ruffed Grouse are common, easily detected by their drumming. Red-breasted Sapsuckers and Northern ["Yellow-shafted"] Flicker are the conspicuous woodpeckers. Western Wood-Pewee; Dusky Flycatcher; Ruby-crowned Kinglet; Warbling Vireo; Yellow, Yellow-rumped and Wilson's Warblers; Northern Waterthrush; Western Tanager; Fox Sparrow; and Pine Siskin are all common songbirds. Less frequently encountered birds included Sharp-shinned Hawk, Northern Goshawk, American Kestrel, Hairy Woodpecker and Townsend's Solitaire. At Telegraph I saw Black and Vaux's Swift, two more alleged rarities for this area.



BIRDING THE GRAND CANYON... (continued)

At Glenora the road ends, and if you want to see more of the Stikine, you will need to get into a boat. We were fortunate enough to be able to do just that, and spent two days on the river. The geology of the Stikine is less spectacular downstream from Telegraph Creek, but there are many attractions here too: the river itself, its mountain vistas, the isolation, the plentiful wildlife. We saw mountain goats on the impressive cliffs at Mess Creek, just beyond Telegraph Creek, and moose, black bear and wolf further downstream. Though not as numerous as black bear, grizzly are also present, as indicated by the several sets of tracks we found at stops along the Stikine.

Birds are here too. Spotted Sandpipers were common all along the river and from time to time a sentinel Bald Eagle came into view, inspecting the scene below from a riverside snag. Our party camped at "Jacksons", about 55 km downstream from Telegraph Creek. Here, about 175 km from the Pacific, I was surprised to find a denizen of south coastal B.C., a Glaucous-winged Gull, perched on our boat, presumably waiting for humans to produce an easy meal. This is another bird that ought not to be in Stikine country according to The Birds of British Columbia. Herring Gull also appeared at Jacksons. Passerines encountered on the banks of the Stikine include many of those already listed, but a treat for this coastal birder was hearing songs, such as Lincoln's Sparrow, that we never hear on the south coast, and others that are quite different from their more familiar southern counterparts. One morning we scrambled up the first 335 m of Missusjay Mountain, added Hammond's Flycatcher and Townsend's Warbler to our day list, and admired the 200-degree views of the Sawbacks and the Stingies.

Although the Telegraph Creek area is nominally part of the boreal white and black spruce biogeoclimatic zone, it is situated in a rain shadow produced by the Coast Mountains and enjoys a unique dry belt climate more like that of B.C.'s southern interior. Annual precipitation at Telegraph Creek averages less than 15 inches [380 mm], only marginally more than Kelowna receives. The dry climate has produced open forest and grassland habitat I had not expected to find so far north. Botanizing on rocky, south-facing slopes above the Stikine was an adventure. I explored the ridges above and below our hosts' home and had several nice finds among the plants growing in their "boreal" back yard: Rocky Mountain and common juniper, prickly rose, soopolallie, three-toothed saxifrage, cut-leaf anemone, showy Jacob's-ladder, and two *Artemisia* species, pasture sage and northern wormwood.

People are relatively scarce in the Stikine country, so there are few amenities. Accommodation is available at the Stikine Riversong and there are two Ministry of Forests campsites at Glenora. Although there are no organized campgrounds in the Stikine River Recreation Area, camping is permitted, provided you remember to leave your campsite as you found it. Helpful brochures for both the recreation area and adjacent Mount Edziza wilderness park are available from BC Parks. Two Ministry of Forests' recreation maps, **Cassiar Forest District** and **Lower Stikine River**, are also useful. Before going to Telegraph Creek, check The Birds of British Columbia to determine what to expect, and not to expect, in the Stikine area. Take along a copy of Plants of Northern British Columbia [MacKinnon, et al] to aid in your identification of unfamiliar plants. And if you have a hankering to make a trip on the Stikine, enquire about the possibilities at the Riversong.

I managed to find close to a hundred species of birds in my week in the Stikine region. That nine of these are listed by the authorities as rare or absent is doubtless an indication of how lightly birded the area is. Telegraph Creek has great potential for birders who want to do their bit to expand our knowledge of the distribution of B.C.'s birds. Given what I found in late May, and the advice of local observers that another twenty or thirty species are possible earlier in the month, while spring migration is still under way, I reckon that a sharp birder could reap well over a hundred species in the course of a week-long trip in May to the Telegraph Creek area - not to mention the abundant geological, physical, historical, and botanical prizes this area has to offer.

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- Campbell, R. Wayne; et al. 1990. The Birds of British Columbia. Victoria, BC: Royal British Columbia Museum.
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- MacKinnon, Andrew; et al. 1992. Plants of Northern British Columbia. Edmonton, AB: Lone Pine Publishing. ☐

THE NORTHERN NEWS

by Bruce Bennett
#31 -- 203 Range Road
Whitehorse, YT Y1A 3A5

It was a wonderful surprise upon moving to Whitehorse in the Yukon Territory to discover the existence of an enthusiastic group of birders known collectively as the Yukon Bird Club. It was only my first evening in town when I was taken out for an evening of looking for raptors. Even though it was only April 12 and most of the area was still under snow we found, Golden and Bald Eagles, Rough-legged, Red-tailed and Harlan's Hawks but the highlights were a Boreal Owl calling and over ten Northern Shrikes dotting the highway. Two days later I discovered a bird that caused quite a stir in the area. While searching the Yukon River for interesting gulls amongst the ice-covered islands, I saw the familiar shape of a crow feeding along the water's edge. Making a quick mental note of the bird, I did not realize that this was a casual species for the Yukon. I returned and photographed it, but without calls it was impossible to tell whether it was a Northwestern or American Crow. (I still feel it looked more like an American Crow even though the coast is so close, just over the White Pass). The only individual collected in this area was a hybrid between the two species. It remained long enough for others to see it so my reputation was secure.

The Yukon Bird Club has afternoon and evening walks throughout the Spring & Autumn. The Spring is the migration time, where open water is found so are the waterfowl. An important event occurs on the weekend of April 22-23 at McClintock Bay on Marsh Lake 20 minutes east of Whitehorse. This is a staging area for Trumpeter and Tundra Swans but intermixed are numerous species of ducks and geese. This is the weekend of the Swan Festival at Swan Haven Nature Sanctuary. Interested groups and individuals also converge on this area where naturalists and volunteers assist in answering questions about the 1900+ swans found in this icefree harbour.

This past weekend May 24-25 was the annual 24 hour bird-a-thon. It is a lot easier to bird with only four hours sleep when it is light all night. There are prizes for the greatest number of birds, environmental awards for the most birds seen without using a vehicle etc. The element that struck me with the greatest impact, however, was the camaraderie shown by the participants. The friendliness of the north spills over throughout this "competition". You inevitably run into other birders throughout the day who share the locations of their "best birds". This goes so far as to assist other teams with field marks to look for and identification of calls. My grand total was 104 species which was close to the highest total of 110. In all 138 species were identified by about 30 participants. My best birds were Black-Bellied Plover, Baird's Sandpiper, Willow Ptarmigan, Dusky Flycatcher, Brant, Double-crested Cormorant, and the Gray-cheeked Thrush.

There is little information on the birds of the Yukon and very little information on all species other than migratory waterfowl. For instance, there were 400 Rock Doves seen on the Christmas Bird Count yet there are no nesting records. If anyone has any bird observations (with as much detail as possible), and especially nesting records, for the Yukon Territory please send them to:

Environment Canada
Canadian Wildlife Service
Attn. Wendy Nixon
P.O. Box 6010
Whitehorse, YT Y1A 5L7 Telephone: (403) 667-3929 Fax: (403) 667-7962

This information will be included in an upcoming book that will be titled Birds of the Yukon that is being produced partially by the Canadian Wildlife Service.

EDITORS' NOTE: the following was from a letter which we received from Bruce:

I have been in the extreme southeast corner of the Yukon, right at the BC/NWT border working on forest birds and the associated vegetation. Our team discovered several new species for the Yukon; Bay-breasted Warbler, Canada Warbler, Black and White Warbler, Ovenbird, Rose-breasted Grosbeak, Red-eyed Vireo, Philadelphia Vireo and several species that have been only reported as accidental; Yellow-bellied Flycatcher, Eastern Phoebe, Winter Wren, Solitary Vireo, Western Tanager, and Evening Grosbeak. I will send a full report once I have some time to get settled. On the following page is a list of the species found during the bird-a-thon.

YUKON BIRD-A-THON BIRD LIST

Red-throated Loon	American Coot	Barn Swallow
Pacific Loon	Sora	Gray Jay
Common Loon	Black-bellied Plover	Black-billed Magpie
Horned Grebe	Semipalmated Plover	Common Raven
Red-necked Grebe	Killdeer	Black-capped Chickadee
Double-crested Cormorant	Greater Yellowlegs	Boreal Chickadee
Tundra Swan	Lesser Yellowlegs	Red-breasted Nuthatch
Trumpeter Swan	Solitary Sandpiper	American Dipper
Gr. White-fronted Goose	Spotted Sandpiper	Mountain Bluebird
Brant	Whimbrel	Townsend's Solitaire
Canada Goose	Semipalmated Sandpiper	Gray-cheeked Thrush
Green-winged Teal	Least Sandpiper	Swainson's Thrush
Mallard	Baird's Sandpiper	Hermit Thrush
Northern Pintail	Pectoral Sandpiper	American Robin
Blue-winged Teal	Short-billed Dowitcher	Varied Thrush
Cinnamon Teal	Long-billed Dowitcher	Golden-crowned Kinglet
Northern Shoveler	Common Snipe	Ruby-crowned Kinglet
Gadwall	Wilson's Phalarope	Water Pipit
Eurasian Wigeon	Red-necked Phalarope	Bohemian Waxwing
American Wigeon	Bonaparte's Gull	European Starling
Canvasback	Mew Gull	Warbling Vireo
Redhead	Herring Gull	Orange-crowned Warbler
Ring-necked Duck	Arctic Tern	Yellow Warbler
Greater Scaup	Rock Dove	Yellow-rumped Warbler
Lesser Scaup	Great Horned Owl	Blackpoll Warbler
Harlequin Duck	Boreal Owl	Northern Waterthrush
Surf Scoter	Belted Kingfisher	Common Yellowthroat
White-winged Scoter	Yellow-bellied Sapsucker	Wilson's Warbler
Common Goldeneye	Downy Woodpecker	Red-winged Blackbird
Barrow's Goldeneye	Hairy Woodpecker	Rusty Blackbird
Bufflehead	Three-toed Woodpecker	Brown-headed Cowbird
Common Merganser	Northern Flicker	Pine Grosbeak
Red-breasted Merganser	Olive-sided Flycatcher	Purple Finch
Ruddy Duck	Western Wood-Pewee	Red Crossbill
Osprey	Alder Flycatcher	White-winged Crossbill
Bald Eagle	Least Flycatcher	Pine Siskin
Golden Eagle	Hammond's Flycatcher	American Tree Sparrow
Northern Harrier	Dusky Flycatcher	Chipping Sparrow
Northern Goshawk	Say's Phoebe	Savannah Sparrow
Red-tailed Hawk	Horned Lark	Fox Sparrow
Swainson's Hawk	Tree Swallow	Song Sparrow
American Kestrel	Violet-green Swallow	Lincoln's Sparrow
Merlin	N. Rough-winged Swallow	Swamp Sparrow
Spruce Grouse	Bank Swallow	Golden-crowned Sparrow
Willow Ptarmigan	Cliff Swallow	White-crowned Sparrow
Ruffed Grouse		Lapland Longspur

THIRD ANNUAL OKANAGAN MOUNTAIN PROVINCIAL PARK BIRD BLITZ

Chris Charlesworth
 725 Richard's Road
 Kelowna, BC V1X 2X5

Okanagan Mountain Provincial Park is a large (4266 ha) wilderness area located between Kelowna and Penticton on the east side of Okanagan Lake. The habitat in the park ranges from semi-arid Ponderosa pine woodlands to the dense sub-alpine forest.

In 1993 the first Okanagan Mountain Provincial Park Bird Blitz was held in hopes of adding knowledge to the avifauna of this vast expanse of wilderness. Hosted by the Central Okanagan Naturalists Club in conjunction with South Okanagan Naturalists Club and BC Parks, the first blitz was a great success. The 40 to 50 birders counted 109 species with 2 Parasitic Jaegers being the most amazing find. In 1994 about 45 birders found 94 species, including a Great Gray Owl, a Pacific Loon and a Double-crested Cormorant.

THIRD ANNUAL OKANAGAN MOUNTAIN PROVINCIAL PARK BIRD BLITZ (continued)

This year's count was held on May 27, 1995, which turned out to be a spectacular day, weather-wise. Roughly 50 people participated in this year's count. Everybody, even Eva Durance, managed to complete the day without getting lost. Although no rare species were tallied this year, a few high counts can be noted. Denise Brownlie and her group tabulated an amazing 50 Calliope Hummingbirds along a three and one-half kilometre section of road at the park's northern boundary. Last year's Nashville Warbler total was 37, and it seems that they are having a great year with 69 recorded. The only species which was added to the park list this year was a Chukar. This colourful partridge was introduced into the interior of BC in the 1950's. Today it is an uncommon resident in the South Okanagan and Kamloops regions (especially around Vaseux Lake and in the Similkameen Valley). Chukars are very rare north of Penticton and this bird, which was seen perched on a rock by Hugh Westheuser of Kelowna, is the first record for the Central Okanagan to my knowledge. In Wildhorse Canyon a team counted 2 Rock Wrens and 8 Canyon Wrens. Wildhorse Canyon is the northern-most breeding location for the Canyon Wren.

In the evening everybody gathered at Okanagan Lake Provincial Park for an excellent barbecue. The stories of triumph and woe were told by the team leaders. The end count was 97 species, about average so far for this particular count. After arguing about who got to count the nesting pair of Ospreys which four teams saw (I counted them for our team) the individual birds numbered 1,505, down 357 birds from last year. Other interesting finds included a "Cinnamon" Black Bear (which was also seen last year), a Rattlesnake and 2 Western Skinks.

There were many people involved in making this year's Okanagan Mountain Park Bird Blitz possible. Eileen Dillabough and Eva Durance deserve special mention since they put in a lot of time in preparation for the count. Don Gough (District Manager for BC Parks) and his staff are also to be applauded for making the blitz a success and of course thanks to all of the naturalists who participated. We hope to see you all again next year. ♣

THIMBLEBERRY GALLS AS WINTER FOOD SOURCE OF THE DOWNY WOODPECKER

by Al Grass
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The use of galls as a food source for birds, especially woodpeckers, is said to be well-known. It is interesting to note however that Bent (1964 ed.) in the Life Histories of North American Woodpeckers, with particular reference to *Dryobates pubescens gairdneri*, "... one of the well-marked dark coloured races that occur in the humid Northwest coast region from Southern British Columbia to Mendocino County, California...", does not mention the use of galls as a bird food source.

Yet if one examines Thimbleberry (*Rubus parviflorus*) bushes with galls, it becomes plain, at least here in South Coastal British Columbia, that they are commonly pecked open. On at least three occasions, I have observed Downy Woodpeckers (*Dryobates pubescens*) pecking open Thimbleberry stem galls to extract the larvae. I have also observed Black-capped Chickadees (*Parus atricapillus*) probing at opened galls.

Thimbleberry stem galls are induced by a Gall Wasp (Cynipid) *Diastrophus kincaidii* Gill. Loren and Capizzi (1983) comment:

"These galls (Thimbleberry stem) are easiest to find in late fall or winter, when the stems are leafless. In October, the galls are green or brown, anywhere from 2.5 to 40 cm long, 2 to 2.5 cm wide and contain many white larvae each in a larval chamber."

Larvae over-winter in the galls, making them available as a winter food source for the Downy Woodpecker, and perhaps other birds.

THIMBLEBERRY GALLS AS WINTER FOOD... (continued)

These observations, while anecdotal and opportunistic, hint at the possibility that this may be, at least in some areas, an important winter food source of the Downy Woodpecker. It should at least alert us to further study. A literature search was undertaken, but no references could be found to the use of Thimbleberry stem galls as a food source by the Downy Woodpecker.

References:

Bent, A.C. 1964 ed. Life Histories of North American Woodpeckers. New York, NY: Dover.

Loren, Hiram and Joseph Capizzi. 1983. Common Insect and Mite Galls of the Pacific Northwest. Corvallis, OR: Oregon State University Press.

Further Reading:

Essig, E.O. 1958. Insects and Mites of Western North America. New York, NY: The Macmillan Company.

Martin, A.C., H.S. Zim, and A.L. Nelson. 1951. American Wildlife and Plants: A guide to wildlife food habits: the use of trees, shrubs, weeds and herbs by birds and mammals of the United States. New York, NY: McGraw-Hill. ☐

A WINTER SURPRISE IN THE WEST KOOTENAY

by Jo Ann MacKenzie
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December 14, 1994 was the last day of my week's visit with my daughter Linda Murray and her husband in the tiny community of Slocan Park, on Highway #6 in the Slocan Valley, northwest of Nelson. This was my first December experience in the West Kootenay, and I had spent many pleasant hours walking and birding the back roads of the narrow valley. Earlier in the week, I had found three American Dippers along the edge of the Slocan River, a flock of about 100 Common Redpolls feeding on birch seeds, and assorted other species including ubiquitous starlings and blackbirds. On this morning, I walked the Slocan Park Road, watching for the Northern Goshawk and Northern Pygmy Owl which Linda had seen recently (but which had so far eluded me), as I photographed the scenery. In three hours I would depart for the Lower Mainland.

There were a few starlings in a roadside tree. I glanced at them, then looked more closely, because one was different. It was shaped like a Brewer's Blackbird, but was the wrong colour -- ochre face, with a narrow, dark eyeline. The supercilium was bright ochre, brighter than the auricular area. The crown was dusky brown. The throat was pale ochre. The upper breast was ochre which faded smoothly to dusky ochre at the mid-breast and to slaty at the vent. A female **Rusty Blackbird!** Although I didn't have a checklist for the area, I suspected that this species was rare in December. I approached as closely as I dared, then zoomed my lens to its 200 mm maximum and used the last exposure on the roll of film for a photograph. The bird uttered a harsh, deep "tsuck" just before the small flock flew away.

After returning home, I sent the resulting photo (not a great picture, but adequate for confirmation) along with the details to Gary Davidson in Nakusp, who had compiled the checklist for the West Kootenay. Sure enough, Rusty Blackbird is rare in the area in winter. In fact my sighting turned out to be the first confirmed winter record for the West Kootenay.

The moral to this story is: *Scorn not ye starlings and blackbirds ... especially in winter!* ☐

EDITORS' NOTE: In an accompanying letter Jo Ann mentioned also sighting a **Pomarine Jaeger** over Duck Lake near Creston, BC on June 20, 1995. Another surprise in the West Kootenay.

1994 BC BLUEBIRD SURVEY OBSERVATIONS

by Harold S. Pollock
 104 -- Belleville St
 Victoria, BC V8V 4T9

After the relatively poor 1993 bluebird year, I am happy to be able to report that the number of pairs of both species of bluebirds in 1994 was higher in every district and the total for BC was significantly higher than in the previous year. This is, no doubt, due to the more favourable weather generally as well as to the greater availability of nest boxes.

It is indeed encouraging to learn of the efforts being made by many groups to construct more nest boxes during the off season. Vern Johnson's group is outstanding in this respect. Their total increased from 2202 to 2777 or by 26% and constitute slightly over 50% of all those in the Province. The total is 5487 nest boxes, up by 19%, from 4603, in 1993.

Your nest boxes also provided occupancy for other desirable passerines. The number of pairs using "bluebird" boxes is as follows:

<u>Species</u>	<u>1990</u>	<u>1993</u>	<u>1994</u>
Tree Swallows	230	725	595
Violet-green Swallows	9	67	97
House Wrens	42	190	117
Black-capped Chickadees	30	16	41
Chestnut-backed Chickadees	none	none	5
Mountain Chickadees	10	33	11
White-breasted Nuthatches	15	17	18
Red-breasted Nuthatches	n/a	1	2
Nuthatches	n/a	n/a	7

Not too much can be read into these figures in the nature of trends, since some groups that reported on non-bluebird species last year failed to do so this year. As well, in one case data on only slightly more than half the total number of boxes was submitted.

The Kamloops Naturalists Club are to be congratulated on achieving a 23% increase in Mountain Bluebird breeding pairs and a 37% increase in fledglings, due to an increase in nest box supply and other factors.

Vern Johnson's Southern Interior Bluebird Trail group reported an increase of 86% in Mountain Bluebird and 42% in Western Bluebird fledglings. I look forward to next year when all boxes will be included.

The Rocky Mountain Naturalists under the leadership of Art Gruenig almost doubled the number of available boxes which, along with other factors, resulted in a 52% increase in Mountain Bluebird pairs and 56% increase in fledglings. Their Western Bluebirds also responded very positively with the pairs being boosted by 89% and fledglings by 81%.

The Boundary Naturalists Association, led by Ron Walker had an increase of 100% in Mountain Bluebird pairs and 229% in fledglings. For Western Bluebirds the figures were 29% and 65% respectively. Wonderful!

British Columbia's foremost bird authority, Wayne Campbell wishes to use our bluebird reports as source material in the third volume of The Birds of British Columbia. He would also like to include a map showing all the bluebird trails in the Province. If you submitted a map to me in 1992 and if there are no significant changes or additions to your trails since that time you may ignore this request. Otherwise please let me have an up-to-date map showing just where your bluebird trails are located. For uniformity, please use a blue felt pen to indicate Mountain Bluebird trails and a red felt pen to indicate Western Bluebird locations. As the volume is nearing completion please let me have your map as soon as possible.

HANTAVIRUS HAZARD

Three people in BC contracted this virus in 1994. The virus is spread by the deer mouse and possibly other rodents such as the chipmunk and squirrel. The disease causes a severe and often fatal lung disease in humans. It is found in mouse droppings and dust in a mouse nest. This information has immediate relevance for bluebird nestbox monitors as transmission might occur when dried material contaminated by rodent excreta is disturbed (ie. cleaning a nestbox used by mice).

Symptoms are similar to flu with temperatures of at least 38.4°C (101°F), headache, muscle aches, sometimes abdominal pain and nausea. Within a few days respiratory tract symptoms develop (cough and shortness of breath). Fluid build-up in the lungs is rapid. Mortality is 60%!

Although the overall risk of Hantavirus infections is low, precautions should be taken. So, if you are cleaning out nestboxes that have, or have had, mice, chipmunks or squirrels, it is suggested that you:

1. wet down contents of box with a solution of bleach and water.
[EDS' NOTE: Ministry of Health from the Health files suggest 10% bleach for 30 minutes to ensure adequate sterilization.]
2. avoid inhaling any dust when removing contents (wear a mask).
3. use a tool to remove contents and bury contents if possible.
4. do not handle any mice -- remove them with tools.
5. clean tools with bleach solution.

In closing let me thank you all for your continued cooperation and your dedication to the bluebird cause. The totality of your efforts is most significant in ensuring the future health of the bluebird as a race in this Province. Keep up the good work.☺

EDITORS' NOTE: The information on the potentially lethal Hantavirus was originally published in The Nestbox and accompanied Harold's submission. We reprint it here with the permission of Vern Johnson, president of Southern Interior Bluebird Trail Society [RR #3, Site 50, Comp. 75, Oliver, BC V0H 1T0]. Each local Public Health Unit has from the Health files fact sheets on Hantavirus and rodents. Hantavirus precautions are important to all who may have contact with rodents or rodent feces.

RED-BREASTED SAPSUCKER FEEDING ON SALMONBERRY FRUIT

by Al Grass
1610 Mt. Seymour Rd
North Vancouver, BC V7G 1L3

On May 29, 1995, at Mount Seymour Provincial Park, North Vancouver, a male Red-breasted Sapsucker (*Sphyrapicus ruber*) was observed feeding on salmonberry (*Rubus spectabilis*) fruit. The fructivorous habits of this species do not seem to be well known and a literature search could find no specific references to salmonberry. Bent (1939) notes that, "... fruit averaged less than 4% of the food of this species, and included elderberries (*Sambucus spp.*), wild cherries (*Prunus spp.*), hawthorn (*Crataegus spp.*) and dogwood (*Cornus spp.*)." Grass (1990) has observed the Red-breasted Sapsucker feeding on fruits of salal (*Gaultheria shallon*). Salmonberry may now be added to the list of fruits consumed by the Red-breasted Sapsucker.

References:

- Bent, A.C. 1939. Life Histories of North American Woodpeckers. U.S. National Museum Bulletin 174.
- Grass, A. 1990. "The Red-breasted Sapsucker in Golden Ears Provincial Park." Discovery, 19(3): 87-88.☺

EDITORS' NOTE: see also March 1995. "An Observation of Possible Bark Scaling by the Red-breasted Sapsucker (*Sphyrapicus ruber*). BC FIELD ORNITHOLOGIST. 5(1): 11.☺

THE BIGGEST DAY

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I remember the moment clearly. It was Monday, May 22, 1995. I was basking in the Okanagan sun, dead tired but enjoying the braggart's rights of having just won the Okanagan Big Day Challenge the day before, when the chilling thought hit me -- I had promised Blake we would do this again tomorrow! Only this time we were supposed to drive to Vancouver as well in an attempt to better the BC Big Day record of 177 species in a day. Was I insane? How would we stay awake? We had not slept at all on Saturday night, and we would get precious little sleep tonight. Well, such are the schemes Big Days are made of!

We changed our Okanagan team only slightly -- George Sirk politely begged off to get back to Cortes Island, so Tom Plath joined Alvaro Jaramillo, Blake Maybank and myself. The plan was straightforward -- we would use our Okanagan Challenge route until reaching Osoyoos, then high-tail it over Richter Pass and head for the coast. We decided to change only the starting point, eliminating an unproductive hour around White Lake, beginning instead at the north end of Osoyoos Lake.

It was calm and moonless at the river mouth at midnight. Marsh Wrens chattered from the reeds and Canada Geese honked in the distance. The Osprey glared back at our light from its nest on a road-side pole and a Yellow-breasted Chat whistled loudly. We walked across a meadow, hooting into the night, and cheered as a Long-eared Owl called overhead. No Saw-whet answered our whistles, but the clear notes of a Canyon Wren echoed off the cliffs to the east. Species number ten, and one that could save us time later. We quickly ticked the Barn Owl in its barn and it was off to Vaseux Lake. It was 1:00 am.

Irrigation Creek came through with its usual owls -- Great Horned, Western Screech, Northern Saw-whet and Flammulated, and then at last a Common Poorwill. We bounced up over the bumps of Shuttleworth Creek and on up into the larches, where a Barred Owl answered our hoots immediately. Ten minutes to three and only Boreal Owl left to get before dawn. We continued on to Venner Meadows, but they were silent save for a Lincoln's Sparrow warbling in the dark. A quick retreat brought us to Rabbit Lake by 3:15, but the resident Boreal Owl refused to answer. We gave up owling at 4:00 am, just as the passerines began to sing.

One of my cardinal rules of Okanagan Big Days is to be high at dawn, and we were about as high as we could get on a decent road. We chose this point because it had a four-kilometre stretch of intact Engelmann spruce-subalpine fir forest, a rare commodity these days in the south Okanagan. At 4:10 the Fox Sparrow began to sing, and by 4:40 Winter Wren was species number 28. Boreal Chickadee, Brown Creeper and then a double clap of a Spruce Grouse! Things were indeed going well!

We were back at the larches by 5:30, ten minutes ahead of our Okanagan Challenge pace and right on the species target. This was woodpecker country, and we hoped the judicious use of a tape recorder would help us clean up here. Fifteen minutes later we had Downy, Hairy and Three-toed Woodpeckers in the bag as well as a Williamson's Sapsucker and we were heading downhill a full hour ahead of schedule.

We turned back onto the Irrigation Creek road to pick up Gray Flycatcher and the other Ponderosa pine specialties, but it took us a full half-hour to find our staked out Northern Pygmy Owl and White-breasted Nuthatch. It was 7:00 am when we got down to Vaseux Lake again, with almost all the forest birds checked off and time in hand. A Bonaparte's Gull was a nice bonus on the water, then a Veery called and a Catbird sang -- the first one I had heard this year. We had a coffee and the Tim Horton's box was opened to celebrate. My measure of a good big day is whether we have 100 species by 8:00 am -- at 8:02 a Killdeer made it 116.

Feeling rather confident, we raced off to River Road -- Eastern Kingbird but no Black-chinned Hummingbird. No problem, we just wound up the hill to Victoria Creek, and there was our back-up Black-chinned on his birch tree. As we sped south to Oliver, Blake was reciting the list of species missed so far -- "Ruddy Duck, Turkey Vulture, harrier, CHUKAR!" I wondered for a second why he was so upset to miss such a difficult species until it sank in -- he had actually seen two Chukar

THE BIGGEST DAY (continued)

on the road. We roared back to the site and ran up the hill until the pair of big partridges rocketed away. More celebratory doughnuts appeared.

We looked over Osoyoos Lake for the bird my brother Syd had kept a secret for the Okanagan Challenge, and there it was -- a Yellow-billed Loon feeding along the northeast shore. A Northern Harrier flew over the marsh, Bobolinks jangled over the meadows, but no curlews anywhere. Discouraged at that miss, we climbed up over Richter Pass. For the umpteenth time that day, Alvaro yelled "Stop!" It's amazing how many birds you can see if you just stick your head out the window and look up. This time it was a Cooper's Hawk, the only one of the day. Blake insisted we look over the sad remnants of Richter Lake, which surprised us with a female Hooded Merganser. The road to Chopaka customs had no Sage Thrashers or Grasshopper Sparrows, but a pair of Long-billed Curlews 10 metres north of the border boosted our spirits as we turned north, then west for the coast. Exactly eleven o'clock -- right on time; 147 species, two ahead of our target. We might do OK.

A quick stop at the Princeton Sewage Channels failed to produce the hoped-for Solitary Sandpiper and Franklin's Gull; Separation Lake had a surprise pair of Northern Pintail but no Eared Grebes. We decided to backtrack to August Lake for the latter species, where we found the road blocked by a major bull drive. Edging our way past the last huge bovine, we skidded to a halt at the lake and had the surprise of the day -- a Tundra Swan calling overhead, flying north.

A few stops in Manning Park nailed Vaux's Swift and Red-breasted Sapsucker. A Bald Eagle perched along the Fraser River at Floods -- the only one we saw that day. We got to Campbell Valley Park at 17:20 and quickly got Hutton's Vireo and Bewick's Wren. Off to the Spitmann's house in South Surrey where a 10 minute wait paid off with both Anna's Hummingbird and the Purple Finches we had missed at Campbell Valley.

Then to Blackie Spit to scan through the shimmering heat haze across the vast mud flats. Whimbrel were there, way out there, and then Blake spotted the Hudsonian Godwit we had seen last week. It dropped into a channel and refused to come out, so we reluctantly pushed on. The Caspian and Common Terns off Crescent Beach were species number 176 and 177. We had tied the record! The tape recorder came out at Crescent Park again and quickly produced Pacific-slope Flycatcher and Black-throated Gray Warbler. It was only 18:50 and the goldmines of Tsawwassen, Roberts Bank and Iona lay ahead. Was 200 possible?

Twenty minutes at Roberts Bank bolstered our confidence with nine more species, including a lovely Marbled Godwit. A dash out the Tsawwassen ferry jetty gave us Pacific Loon, Greater Scaup (whew!), White-winged Scoter and a bonus Black Oystercatcher. The sun was nearing the horizon, but we had 192 species and could get to Sea and Iona Islands before dark. Our shorebird list was pretty scanty and Sea Island had been hopping last week.

The Crested Mynas at Granville and Moffat in Richmond put us up to 193, then the bubble burst. The Sea Island ponds had Canvasback and Pectoral Sandpipers, but no yellowlegs or dowitchers. We got to the Iona gate just as the sun set, ran to the sewage ponds and looked at their empty mudflats in dismay. The flocks had gone. North? Out to the foreshore? A few Short-billed Dowitchers put the final total up to 196. Had it been 198 we might have continued on; Pitt Meadows could have produced American Bittern and maybe even Sandhill Crane. But we were very, very tired, and 196 was good enough for us this year. ☐

EDITORS' NOTE: Congratulations on the newest BC Big Day record and thanks Dick for sharing the planning and excitement with us! With a bit more rest and a few more doughnuts it would seem that breaking the 200 barrier will soon become the next objective for our enthusiastic BC (plus the "Accidental" Nova Scotian) birders.

Question for the Quarterly

The Question for the Quarterly is not resolved (ie no answer yet). Our Cornell Home Study Course does state: "An eye color that contrasts vividly with the surrounding plumage may be significant in the bird's behavior patterns... where the eyes of the adults are brightly colored, those of the young are duller... This difference may help the birds in recognizing the juveniles as such..." Why red? -- I guess that mutation worked best for towhee behavior, or -- perhaps they eat "fermented fruit".