# BC BIRDING

**Newsmagazine of the British Columbia Field Ornithologists**

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*Curlewmania: Note the leg tag and antenna. See pages 3 and 22.*

**Publisher**
*BC Birding* is published four times a year by the British Columbia Field Ornithologists, P.O. Box 61670, RPO Brookswood, Langley, BC V3A 1K0.

A subscription to this quarterly is a benefit of membership in the society. Members will also receive a copy of the annual journal, *British Columbia Birds*.

**About the BCFO**
Membership in BCFO is open to anyone interested in the study and enjoyment of wild birds in British Columbia.

BCFO 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**
See the website (http://bcfo.ca) for details, or write to the BCFO address given above under "Publisher."

**Annual Membership Dues**
General Membership (Canada): $30
Junior Membership (Canada): $20
U.S. and International Membership: $35

**Newsmagazine Submissions**
To submit material to this publication, contact the Editor by email (clive_keen@hotmail.com). Books for review should be sent to 10790 Grassland Road, Prince George, BC V2K 5E8.

Topics may include birding experiences, casual observations about bird behaviour, bird project reports, site guides, birding equipment, bird photography, trip reports (including overseas trips), and other subjects of broad interest to BC birders. Brief items are always welcome, but average submissions tend to be in the 400–600 word range. For longer submissions the normal maximum length is 1,500 words. Note that this is a newsmagazine rather than an academic journal; formal reference lists etc tend to be inappropriate.

Photographs should be in mid-resolution jpg (preferably 1–4 MB), and articles should be in plain text, either as the content of an email, or as an attachment (preferably Word).

Deadlines (i.e. final dates for submission of material) are as follows. Material received after the deadline will be held over to the subsequent edition.

- March edition: February 15
- June edition: May 15
- September edition: August 15
- December edition: November 15

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Quarter page: $40 per issue or $36 each for four or more issues.
BCFO members are welcome to include classified ads, of up to 25 words, at no cost.

# BCFO Officers & Directors

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*British Columbia Birds (Journal) Editor*: Art Martell
*Production Editor*: Neil Dawe
*Canadian International Joint Venture:* Wayne Weber
*Christmas Bird Count Coordinator*: Monica Nugent
*Featured Photographer:* Carlo Giovanella
*Membership Secretary:* Larry Cowan
*Two-day Trips: Vacancy*
*Website*: George Clulow, Neil Dawe

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*Cannings Award Committee*: Wayne Weber (Chair), Art Martell, Dick Cannings.

*Conservation and Education Committee*: Gary Davidson (Chair), Art Martell, Gerald McKeating, Stephen Partington, Marian Porter.

*Young Birder Awards Committee:* Carlo Giovanella (Chair), George Clulow, Melissa Hafting.

# Contents



## Online AGM
## 7:00 PM, June 25, 2020

Since the Smithers conference has had to be postponed to 2021, this year's formal AGM business will be conducted through Zoom Communications.

Annual reports will be available on the website (bcfo.ca) and all members will receive an invitation to join the online meeting through email.

## Front Cover Photo

Ivan (tag KY) in the Walrath Road field, Shelley, near Prince George, 30 April, 2020.

Searching for curlews carrying tags and transmitters adds a great deal of spice to the chase. Ivan was one of ten birds given a leg tag in summer 2019, seven of which were also fitted with a transmitter. Prince George birders had been eagerly awaiting their return from wintering in the Southern US. All seven with transmitters, and two of the others, had been spotted in the Prince George area by publication time. Jean might have fallen by the wayside – we don't know – but 90% at least got through the winter safely. Photo by Clive Keen.

## Back Cover Photo

John Gordon writes: "I had been birding all morning in hope of adding a Western Tanager to my year list but had had little luck. Later that day, while enjoying an afternoon in the garden, this beautiful male landed in my Acacia tree. I rushed to get my camera from my basement and managed to capture a few frames of the bird before it suddenly left. It was a new yard bird for me and Metro Vancouver 2020 bird #200. Nikon D500 and Nikon 200–500mm handheld."

# President's Message

*Marian Porter, Salt Spring Island*

2020 promised to be a particularly exciting year for BCFO members with a conference and field trips planned for the northwest corner of British Columbia to locations never visited before as an organization. Local birders in the Skeena Region were looking forward to meeting us and had put much effort into creating a varied and unique experience for the conference and extension field trips. The three-day spring migration trip to Bella Coola Valley and Anaheim Lake co-lead by Adrian Leather was filled and promised great birding and spectacular scenery. Suddenly the pandemic which seemed so far away changed our lives dramatically, and all events had to be cancelled or deferred until next year. It became necessary to postpone the Smithers Conference and AGM to June 25–27, 2021 with the pre conference extension trip June 22 to 25, 2021.

There will be a short 2020 BCFO AGM via Zoom Communications on Thursday, June 25 at 7:00 PM Pacific Time. The President's Report will be presented with a reduced agenda to keep the meeting as brief as possible. Approval of the minutes of the 2019 AGM and the Financial Report will precede the election of directors for the next year. There is a full slate of directors which will enable us to complete the election by acclamation. All other reports will be made available on the BCFO website in the member's section before the meeting, and an email Zoom invitation with a link will be sent to all BCFO members with the ability to join us online.

An online AGM is no substitute for travelling to new locations to join old friends and meet local birders, and I hope many of you are planning to join us in Smithers in 2021. I am a great believer in ornithological conferences and birding festivals as a means to connect to people and birds in unfamiliar environments and gaining awareness of the environmental challenges facing them now and in the future. Every conference and festival I have ever attended has been worthwhile, and they vary greatly in terms of efficiency in organization, number of participants and field trips offered as well as guest speakers and workshops.

The Point Reyes Birding and Nature Festival was my "local" when I lived in the San Francisco Bay area, initiated by the West Marin Environmental Action Committee in 2010 to create an awareness and stewardship of the region and act as a fundraiser to protect the unique environment and biodiversity of West Marin. Many of the speakers and field trip leaders were from Marin County, and one of my early experiences with the festival was in a crowded classroom in the Point Reyes Station Dance Palace for a talk by Peter Pyle. His laid-back California style, gained from many years banding birds in the Farallon Islands and living in the sun-drenched beach town of Bolinas, did not prepare me for the next hour. He began with, "I have been thinking about molt for the last ten years and I would like to share what I have learned with you." That talk changed the way I thought about birds

forever, an intense and thorough immersion into the complex world of molt and plumage sequence by the author of the *Identification Guide to North American Birds (Part I & II),* used by all bird banders in North America.

Another festival I frequented was the San Diego Bird Festival, hosted by the San Diego Audubon Society. Speakers and field trip leaders were often high-profile birders, authors and researchers from across the United States. I had memorable birding experiences with David Sibley who talked about his decade chasing birds throughout North America to ensure every species was sketched from life for his *Sibley Guide to Birds*. His two-day workshop on drawing birds convinced me he really did that. Birding with *Kingbird Highway* author Kenn Kaufman impressed me not only with his knowledge of birds, but his appreciation and strong connection with them as well. We should embrace his perspective during this time of isolation and distancing when we cannot travel to exotic birding locations and exciting bird conferences and festivals. "We can go out into our backyard and see new things we haven't seen before with common birds. In a thousand lifetimes, we wouldn't run out of things to see with the common regular birds." Kenn's philosophy should be considered when deciding whether to travel to areas of British Columbia with familiar bird species…the remarkable and unexpected can surprise you at any location, especially ones you think you know very well.

It is both humbling and exhilarating to have your horizon expanded by people who are truly experts in their field, and hopefully I will be able to meet you doing just that next year at the BCFO Conference and AGM in Smithers.

The future of the two- and three-day field trip program is uncertain at this time with the resignation of our co-ordinator Adrian Leather. His versatile skills as communicator, birder, and boundless enthusiasm for the exploration of new locations in BC with our members and local field trip leaders will be greatly missed. A good guide is experienced in dealing with group dynamics and logistics in a wide variety of locations, and possesses field skills to deliver a memorable bird list at the end of the trip. Adrian had all of these qualities and on behalf of BCFO I would like to thank him for his exceptional service as co-ordinator for the two- and three-day field trip program. Please contact me if you are interested in filling this position.

# BCFO Provincial Bird Records Committee Update

With the appointment of three new members to its ranks, it's a great pleasure to report that the Bird Records Committee continues to flourish as the committee of record for wild, rare birds, including new bird species, occurring in British Columbia.

The BCFO board of directors is pleased to welcome to the committee: Dianne Cooper (Kimberley), Ian Cruickshank (Victoria), and Mark Phinney (Dawson Creek).

The committee has also confirmed its new chair with Catherine Craig assuming that role from Nathan Hentze. The full committee composition now reads:

- Catherine Craig (Revelstoke), Chair

Members at large:

- Cathy Antoniazzi (Prince George)
- David Bradley (Surrey)
- Dianne Cooper (Kimberley)
- Ian Cruickshank (Victoria)
- Guy Monty (Parksville)
- Mark Phinney (Dawson Creek).

A special note of thanks could not be more deserved than by Nathan Hentze, who chaired the committee since its re-establishment in 2013. Nathan has been tireless in establishing the consensus model of operation adopted by the committee, and has spent countless hours pursuing records, photographs, and sound recordings for the committee to work with to come to their decisions. His legacy is a strong, efficiently running committee that is contributing to our ornithological understanding of British Columbia and North America. Congratulations Nathan on a stellar success story and for setting a standard for the future operation of the BRC.

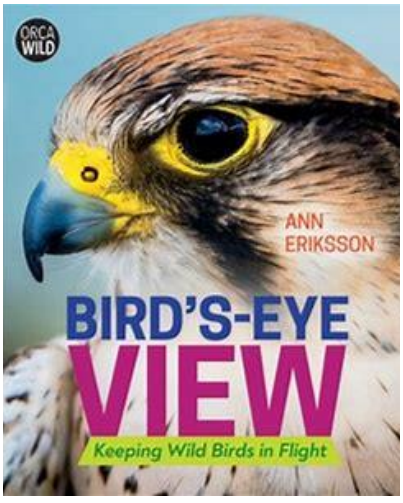
*George Clulow and Art Martell – Board/Committee liaison*

# Young Birders Featured

Two BCFO Young Birders – Katya Kondratyuk and Adam Dhalla – are featured in a new book by Ann Eriksson. *Bird's Eye-View: Keeping Wild Birds in Flight* is aimed at young readers, looking at "why wild birds are important, why they need help and what young people all over the world are doing and can do to give wild birds a boost." The hard copy of the book retails at $24.95, and is also available as an ePublication at $9.99.

Details can be found at:

www.orcabook.com/Orca-Wild-C2092.aspx



# BCFO Annual Reports

This year's annual reports will all be available on the BCFO website (BCFO.ca) prior to the online AGM on June 25. Some are in addition available here, and others will appear in the September edition of this newsmagazine.

## Education & Conservation Committee Report

During the last twelve months, the Education and Conservation Committee has reviewed five requests for funding.

In May 2019 we approved a grant to the Tatlayoko Lake Bird Observatory. This was an exceptional grant since our policies specify that we do not fund "on -going projects." However, in this case the observatory had just received word that their traditional major sponsor had withdrawn funding. Without some assistance, the observatory would have been forced to cancel its entire 2019 season. We approved a one-time bail-out grant to allow them to continue their good work.

In September 2019 we received a request for funding that was clearly outside our guidelines; the proposed research was being conducted outside BC. In November 2019 we received a request from Vance Mattson for funding for a second year of research on Golden Eagle nesting in the BC Rocky Mountains. Since this was the second year of the project, we once again found ourselves looking at an on-going project. However, the Committee and the Board felt that the research was important enough to make an exception and grant the request. Mr. Mattson has been advised that no further funding will be forthcoming from the BCFO.

In December 2019 we approved a grant to the Important Bird & Biodiversity Areas (IBA) Caretaker Network for a study of the Vaseux Lake IBA.

In April 2020 we approved a grant to a young university researcher from the Lower Mainland. Inspired by the Golden Eagle research being conducted by Vance Mattson in the Rockies, Joseph Walters wanted to explore the mountainous regions of southwestern BC in search of potential Golden Eagle nesting territories.

*Gary Davidson, Chair, Education and Conservation Committee*

## Report of the Editor of *British Columbia Birds*

Volume 30 (2020) of *British Columbia Birds* was produced in April 2020. This issue includes papers on Fox Sparrows on southern Vancouver Island, Northwestern Crows in Burnaby, morphology of Cooper's Hawks, historical bird observations in the West Kootenays, marine birds in southern Howe Sound and the Fraser River estuary, and seabirds in Barkley Sound, as well as the Annual Report of the Bird Records Committee. I thank all of the authors for their submissions and the members of the Bird Records Committee for their important work.

I currently have one submission for Volume 31, so more are needed. We need a steady flow to continue to have *British Columbia Birds* published regularly. All members are encouraged to submit manuscripts and to encourage friends and colleagues to do likewise. This is your journal, and it has room for a diversity of papers on wild birds in British Columbia.

The quality of all of the papers is enhanced by our Editorial Board: Andy Buhler, Rob Butler, Mark Phinney and Mary Taitt. Thanks go to them as well as to the external reviewers of the papers, all of whom have given willingly of their time and thought. Neil Dawe again has done a splendid job of producing the journal and of placing the papers on the website.

*Art Martell, Editor,* British Columbia Birds

## Newsmagazine Report (*BC Birding*)

In the year preceding this AGM the newsmagazine was again produced according to plan, with the four quarterly editions prepared and distributed as scheduled. The table summarizes the content, with the previous year's figures in parentheses.

**Content**

Thanks are again due to all contributors, and particularly regular contributors John Gordon, Michael Church, Chris Siddle, Larry Cowan, Adrian Dorst, Charles Helm and Wayne Weber. Additional regular contributors continue to be sought: they might cover areas such as regional summaries, book reviews, and equipment reports. Members are also reminded of the new features: Feederwatch and Bird Photographer's Corner, for which any contributions, long or short, are welcome. Avian Encounter notes, however brief, are always welcome as are trip reports and high-quality photographs.

**Staffing**

Clive Keen continues to edit and desktop-publish the magazine, Virginia Rasch is copyediting chief, and June Ryder arranges print and distribution of the printed edition.

*Clive Keen, Editor,* BC Birding

| Edition | Pages | Items | Photographs & Graphics |
|---|---|---|---|
| September 2019 | 36 | 32 | 34 |
| December 2019 | 30 | 22 | 29 |
| March 2020 | 48 | 27 | 25 |
| June 2020 | 32 | 28 | 34 |
| *Total 2020 (2019)* | *146 (138)* | *109 (95)* | *122 (135)* |

# Membership Report

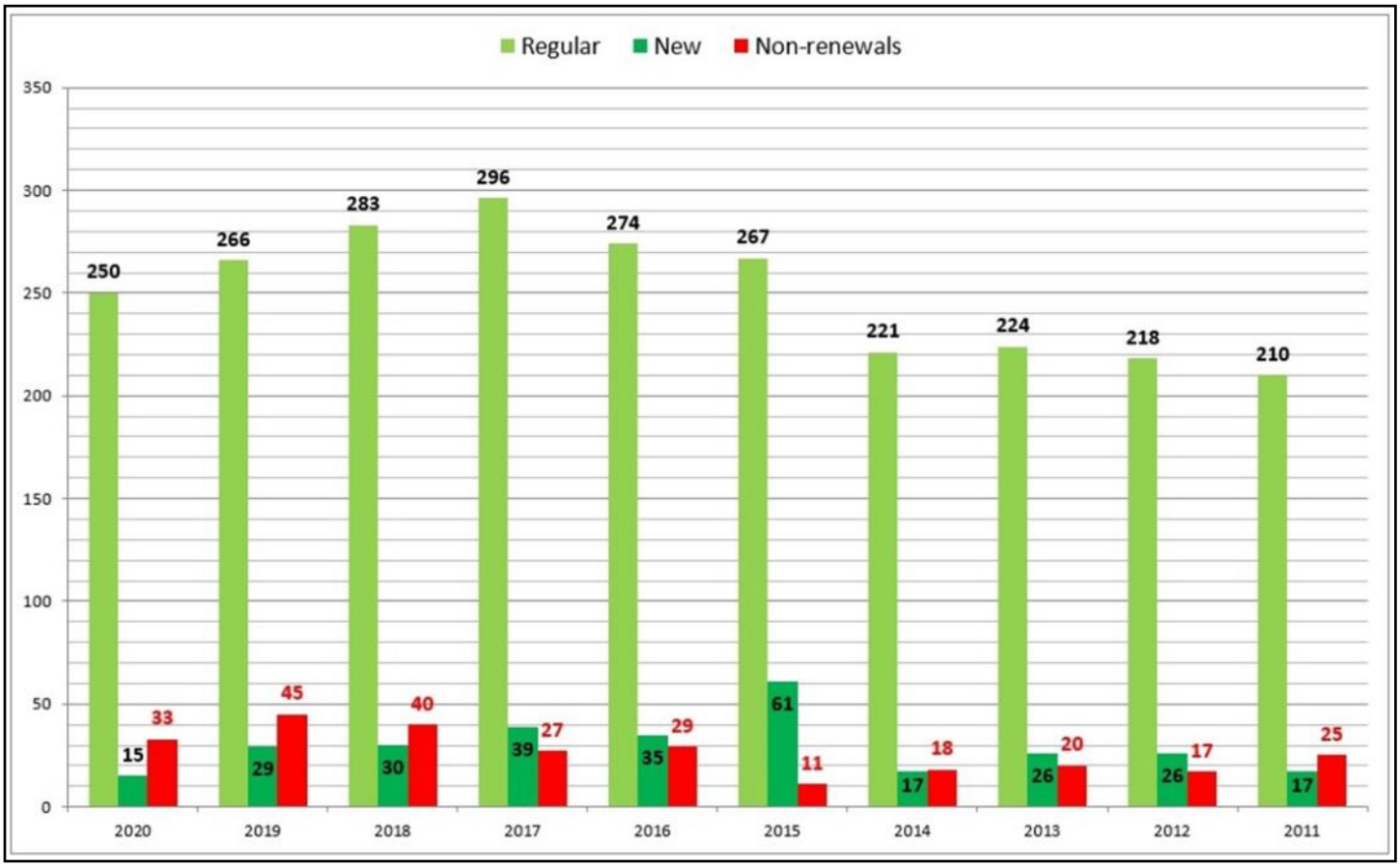
## As of May 6, 2020 – *Larry Cowan*

### Membership Numbers

| 2020 | | 2019 |
|---|---|---|
| 278 | Total | 295 |
| 250 | Regular | 266 |
| 3 | Honorary | 3 |
| 16 | Jr. award winners | 16 |
| 6 | Institutional | 6 |
| 3 | Complimentary | 4 |
| 15 | New | 29 |
| 33 | Non-renewals | 45 |
| 74 | Paid *BC Birding* | 82 |
| 3 | No email | 3 |
| 77 | *BC Birds* email | 88 |
| 59% | Male | 60% |
| 27% | Female | 29% |
| 14% | Couples | 11% |

### Membership by Region

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 37% | 93 | Vancouver Coast & Mountains |
| 24% | 60 | Vancouver Island |
| 14% | 36 | Thompson/Okanagan |
| 10% | 25 | Kootenay Rockies |
| 8% | 19 | Northern BC |
| 3% | 7 | Cariboo/Chilcotin/Coast |
| 1.2% | 3 | Alberta |
| 0.8% | 2 | Nova Scotia |
| 0.4% | 1 | Ontario |
| 0.4% | 1 | Quebec |
| 0.4% | 1 | US |
| 0.4% | 1 | Finland |
| 0.4% | 1 | Uganda |



**BCFO 31st CONFERENCE & AGM, June 25 – 27, 2021, Smithers, BC**

# Schedule of Events

**Location:** Prestige Hudson Bay Lodge & Conference Centre, 3251 East Highway 16, Smithers, B.C.V0J 2N0.

## Friday, June 25, 2021

5:00 PM to 8:30 PM – Registration and Social at the Prestige Hudson Bay Lodge, Cascade Room. Pick up your conference package, socialize with fellow birders and confirm your trip selections. There will be appetizers and a cash bar.

## Saturday and Sunday, June 26 & 27, 2021

**Location**: Prestige Hudson Bay Lodge, Cascade Room.

**Breakfast:** 5:30 to 6:00 AM, prior to field trips (both days).

**Conference Field Trips**: 6:15 AM departures both days from the Prestige Hudson Bay Lodge
Trip 1 - Hudson Bay Mountain
Trip 2 - The Bluff Trails
Trip 3 - Telkwa High Road to Tyhee Provincial Park
Trip 4 - Pacific Wetland Trail
Trip 5 - Malkow Lookout Trail
(see below for details and for additional events)

**Lunch:** 12:00 to 1:00 PM (both days).

## Saturday June 26, 2021

**Afternoon Speakers:** 1:00 to 2:30 PM, Frank Doyle: *Harvesting for Goshawks*; Curt Gesch: *Habitat restoration for birds on farmland*.

**Annual General Meeting:** 2:30 to 3:30 PM.

**Social Hour Cash Bar**: 5:30 to 6:30 PM.

**Banquet:** 6:30 to 7:30 PM.

**Banquet Keynote:** 7:30 to 9:00 PM . Michael Kawerninski: *Birds of the Bulkley Valley.*

# Field Trip Details

## Field Trip Selection and Waiver Forms

Field Trip selections for the morning of June 26 will be made during registration on Friday, June 25 at 5:00 PM. At the same time, you will be asked to complete your conference waiver form and review the BCFO Code of Ethics. Sign-up sheets for the Sunday morning field trips will be available just after the AGM.

## Hudson Bay Mountain

Alpine meadows are accessible on an easy hike from the T-bar at the base of the ski hill to Crater Lake where species such as Willow, Rock and White-tailed Ptarmigan as well as Gray-crowned Rosy Finch, Horned Lark, Lapland Longspur and American Pipit may be found. Below timberline will yield Clark's Nutcracker, Spruce Grouse, Boreal and Mountain Chickadee, Pine Grosbeak, Red and White-winged Crossbill and Hermit Thrush. The boreal forest may also yield American Three-toed and Black-backed Woodpeckers, and Northern Goshawk and Golden Eagle are a possibility. Probable sightings of mammals include mountain goats and marmots. A wetland en route to the mountain will be checked for Blackpoll Warblers.

## The Bluff Trails

The field trip begins with a 500-metre boardwalk traversing a willow-thicket wetland rich in warblers such as MacGillivray's and Yellow as well as American Redstart and Common Yellowthroat. The trail ascends to an aspen forest with birds such as White-throated Sparrow, Least Flycatcher and Western Tanager. The trail ends up in mixed deciduous and conifer forest with birds such as Magnolia Warbler, Cassin's Vireo, Golden-crowned Kinglet and

Pacific Wren. The morning will finish with a trip to a wetland which will add Sora, swallows, more warblers and Red-winged Blackbird.

### Telkwa High Road to Tyhee Lake Provincial Park

Discover Calliope Hummingbird and Lazuli Bunting en route to the park with a varied list of ducks, grebes and loons as well as Bonaparte's Gull. The aspen forests and alder thickets may reveal Yellow Warbler and American Redstart, Red and Yellow-bellied Sapsucker, Alder, Least and Dusky Flycatcher, White-throated and Lincoln's Sparrow.

### Pacific Wetland Trail

This trail has an extensive list of warblers including Blackpoll and Tennessee Warblers and Northern Waterthrush. Sparrows include White-throated and Lincoln's with a wide variety of flycatchers including Willow, Dusky, Least, Alder and Olive-sided. The Riverfront Park on the Bulkley River is another destination that has recorded Northern Shrike, American Bittern, Sora, Red-eyed Vireo and Magnolia Warbler.

### Malkow Lookout Trail

This is a three-km hike through pastureland and mature aspen forest, ending in mountain and valley views of the region. Lazuli Buntings may be seen in the fields, and Dusky Grouse can be found at the summit.

### Extras

- A special tour of the Hazelton Valley and Ross Lake Provincial Park will be led by Ray Sturney on Sunday.
- A wetlands canoe trip could be arranged for Sunday morning.
- A bird-banding demonstration will be offered at the fish hatchery and nature centre in Houston by Dennis and Cindy Verbeek.

## Pre-Conference Extension Trip to Terrace and Kitimat

**Date: June 22 – 25, 2021**

Walter Thorne and Diane Weismiller will be our guides for the pre-conference extension trip. Walter conducts a breeding bird survey in the Kitimat region and the BC Coastal Waterbird Survey at MK Bay. He is the Northern Clubs co-ordinator and is on the Education Committee of BC Nature, as well as a director of the Kitimat Valley Naturalist Club. Diane started birding in 1970 and has been the compiler of the Terrace Christmas Bird Count since 1973. She has conducted the local Kwinitsa Breeding Bird Survey since 1974.

Pre-conference participants will be based in Terrace. Field trips will begin early on the morning of June 22, with the option of a dinner meeting June 23.

Ferry Island is located in the Skeena River with park trails where we may find Black-backed Woodpecker, Merlin, Veery, Alder Flycatcher and a good variety of warblers including Magnolia Warbler. New Remo is a local birding hotspot on the Skeena River with waterfowl, shorebirds, a good variety of warblers and flycatchers including Alder and Least. Rusty Blackbird has been recorded, as well as Northern Goshawk. Exchamsiks River Provincial Park is 50 km west of Terrace with a short nature trail through old-growth Sitka Spruce forest and Kasiks Wilderness Resort is 5 km further with a lunch stop in old-growth forest. Lakelse Lake Provincial Park is another site with waterfowl which may include Red-necked Phalarope.

The estuaries near Kitimat are rich in birdlife with the possibility of grizzly and whale sightings from the beach flats at Elmsley Cove. MK Bay, Kitimaat Village, Minette Bay and Magee point are birding locations with many species of ducks, shorebirds, grebes and alcids including Long-tailed Duck and Marbled Murrelet.

Ross Lake Provincial Park near Hazelton will be a stop en route to Smithers. The lake has a wide variety of ducks, grebes, loons, gulls and shorebirds with the possibility of uncommon species such as Rusty Blackbird, Say's Phoebe, Townsend's Solitaire and Golden Eagle.

## Accommodation

### Smithers

**Prestige Hudson Bay Lodge**
3251 East Highway 16, Smithers (250) 847-4581 Toll Free: 1 877 737-8443

**Stork Nest Inn**
1485 Main Street, Smithers (250) 847-3831.

**Capri Motor Inn**
3984 Highway 16 West, Smithers (250) 847-4226.

**Sandman Inn**
3932 Highway 16 West, Smithers (250) 847-2637.

**Smithers Guesthouse Hostel**
1766 Main Street, Smithers (866) 430-4982.

### Terrace

**Holiday Inn Express and Suites**
3059 Highway 16 East, Thornhill, Terrace (778) 634-3977

**The Lodge at Skeena Landing**
4035 Motz Road, Thornhill, Terrace (250) 638-0444

These two locations are convenient to the extension-trip guide residence.

# BCFO Short Trips

*Short trips are, as would be expected, on hiatus at present, but information on some trips to be rescheduled when possible is given below. Meanwhile, if you have ideas for other short trips, let any member of executive know: addresses are on page 2.*

## How the Short Trips Work

BCFO two-day and three-day field trips are member-led, but participants make their own arrangements for accommodation, food, and travel.

The first day is all-day birding followed by an evening get-together at a restaurant to recap the day and tally species. On three-day trips, the second day is similar.

The final day is morning birding, with optional birding in the afternoon.

Carpooling is encouraged and will be arranged on the morning of Day 1.

Register at least two weeks in advance. The leader will give specific details of when and where to meet.

*Cost:* No cost to members; fee to non-members: $30, which covers BCFO membership.

## Three Days: Bella Coola Valley & Anahim Lake *Postponed*

**Leader**
Local expertise.

**Registration**
TBA.

**Itinerary**
*Saturday*: (Lower Valley) Estuary, Clayton Falls, sloughs, airport, Snooka Trail, Nusatsum, Noosgulch.

*Sunday*: (Upper Valley) Burnt Bridge, Fisheries Pool, Stuie, Tote Rd, Atnarko and/or Talchako, to the plateau.

*Monday*: Anahim Lake area.

**Accommodation**

- Bella Coola Mountain Lodge & Brockton Bistro, Hagensborg (nights of May 15 & 16). 1-866-982-2298, Pete & Jayme.
- Eagle's Nest Resort, Anahim Lake (nights of May 17 & 18). 1-800-742-9055, Tim & Tena.

Participants are encouraged to book early as there is a range of suites, rooms, and cabins to select from, space might be limited at one location, and we want to keep the group together at single sites.

**Description**
Bella Coola claims to be "the real BC" and offers spectacular scenery. A local birder will lead us around a good variety of habitat, and altitude, starting at the oceanfront and working along the valley up The Hill to the tundra-like plateau, and exploring the Anahim Lake area.

The valley has Black-throated Gray Warbler and Sooty Grouse, among many others. Anahim Lake often has American White Pelican, and has hosted breeding American Bittern, Least Sandpiper, Lesser Yellowlegs, and Yellow Rail. The folks at Eagle's Nest Resort maintain bird feeders, and the resort is situated on a small peninsula which attracts numerous species. Great Gray Owl and Great Horned Owl have been recorded. Birders might choose to continue birding across the Chilcotin Plateau, where vast lakes attract coastal species, and Eagle Lake holds breeding Arctic Tern and Semipalmated Plover. Of course, some species will have returned, others not. Who knows what we will find on this exciting mid-migration foray?

**Transport**

- Bella Coola and Anahim Lake have airports.
- BC Ferries offers service from Port Hardy to Bella Coola (check for availability).
- Hwy. 20 from Williams Lake is a beautiful drive.

**Party Size**
The trip is limited to a maximum of 15 birders.

## Two Days: Nakusp *Postponed*

**Leader**
Gary Davidson.

**Registration**
TBA.

**Accommodation**
The Lodge at Arrow Lakes, 1-800-663-0100.

**Further Details**
Updated information will be provided on the BCFO website.

# Ornithology Rules

## No. 4: Allen's Rule

*Animals adapted to cold climates have shorter limbs and body appendages than animals adapted to warm climates.*

This rule makes intuitive sense for mammals. In cold climates, they will need to conserve as much heat as possible, and reduced surface-to-volume ratios will minimize the heat-dissipating surface area. To put it another way, people with Dumbo-sized ears are more likely to get them frostbitten.

It is less obvious why the rule should be true for birds, but R.L. Nudds and S.A. Oswald studied seabirds' legs and found that the exposed leg lengths did indeed follow Allen's Rule. This was followed by a study of bill sizes – significant sites of heat exchange – by Matthew Symonds and Glenn Tattersall. After comparing bill length in 214 bird species, they concluded that there is a clear relationship between bill length and environmental temperature, with species in colder climates having significantly shorter bills.

The rule was formulated by Joel Asaph Allen in 1877. Allen (1838 – 1921) was an American zoologist and ornithologist, and became the first president of the American Ornithologists' Union.

Still to come: Lack's Principle, Rensch's Rule, and Schmalhausen's Law.

# Upcoming Meetings & Events

*Compiled by Wayne C. Weber*

The following meetings and other events are those that take place in BC and immediately adjacent areas or that potentially include information on birds that occur in BC.

*Note*: Because of the Covid-19 epidemic, most scheduled meetings and events for the next few months have been either cancelled or postponed until 2021. This includes our own planned AGM in Smithers. Events which have not yet been cancelled could still be cancelled at a later date. Please be sure to check event websites before you plan to attend or register for any events.

For most meetings, festivals and other events, the website is the main source of information, and registration can usually be accomplished online as well. Wherever information can be obtained through a phone number or e-mail address, we have included these as well; if no contact information is listed, it can be assumed that none was provided by the organization, at least not on the date when this listing was compiled. It is usually not necessary to contact a particular individual, except for scientific meetings when one is interested in making a presentation. Names and contact information for individuals are listed whenever they are available.

For a detailed listing of birding festivals all over North America, please check the Cornell "All About Birds" website at this URL: www.allaboutbirds.org/birding-festivals.

## 2020

June 1–July 7: NORTH AMERICAN BREEDING BIRD SURVEY. This long-established program, supervised by the Canadian Wildlife Service and US Fish & Wildlife Service, is for experienced birders who are skilled at identifying birds by songs and calls as well as by sight. It involves running a roadside survey route once every year during June or very early July. There are several "vacant" (i.e., unassigned) routes in various parts of BC. If you are interested, check the Canadian Wildlife Service website at www.canada.ca/en/environment-climate-change/services/bird-surveys/landbird/north-american-breeding/overview.html, which includes further details and has contact information for the CWS staff in charge of the program.

NOTE: SURVEY CANCELLED FOR 2020.

June 5–7: MANNING PARK BIRD BLITZ, Manning Provincial Park, BC (based at Loneduck Campground on Lightning Lake). For information and to register, check the website at hopemountain.org/programs/manning-park-bird-blitzjune5-7-2020, Inquiries may be made by email to Ashley Tyler at atyler@hopemountain.org or by phone at 604-869-1274.

June 26–28: BC FIELD ORNITHOLOGISTS ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING in Smithers, BC. For details, see this magazine or visit our website at bcfo.ca/2020-annual-conference-smithers-june-26-28. *NOTE: MEETING POSTPONED UNTIL 2021.*

Aug. 10–15: Seventh NORTH AMERICAN ORNITHOLOGICAL CONFERENCE, San Juan, Puerto Rico. This joint meeting of the American Ornithological Society, Wilson Ornithological Society, and Association of Field Ornithologists takes place once every four years. For details, please check the AOS website at americanornithology.org/meetings/annual-meeting. *NOTE: THIS MEETING WILL BE HELD AS AN ONLINE RATHER THAN IN-PERSON EVEN*T. Please check the AOS website for details as they become available.

Sept. 9–13: WESTERN FIELD ORNITHOLOGISTS CONFERENCE (45th annual) at Reno, Nevada. For further details, check the WFO website at www.westernfieldornithologists.org/conference.php. Registration should open in June 2020. *NOTE: MEETING POSTPONED UNTIL 2021.*

Sept. 11–14: First joint meeting of WASHINGTON ORNITHOLOGICAL SOCIETY and OREGON BIRDING ASSOCIATION, Astoria, OR. For information and to register, check either the WOS website at wos.org/annual-conference or the OBA website at https://oregonbirding.org next spring. *NOTE: MEETING CANCELLED, MAY BE RESCHEDULED FOR 2021.*

Sept. 11–13: PUGET SOUND BIRD FESTIVAL, Edmonds, WA. For information and to register (starting Aug. 1), check the festival website at http://www.pugetsoundbirdfest.com or contact Jennifer Leach at the City of Edmonds Parks Dept. (phone 425-771-0227), or email her at jennifer.leach@edmondswa.gov.

Sept. 27–Oct. 1: 26TH ANNUAL CONFERENCE OF THE WILDLIFE SOCIETY, Louisville, Kentucky. For information, check the TWS conference page at https://wildlife.org/2020-conference.

Oct. 4–8: RAPTOR RESEARCH FOUNDATION annual meeting, Boise, Idaho, USA. For further details, visit the society website at https://raptorresearchfoundation.org/conferences/upcoming-conferences.
*NOTE: MEETING POSTPONED UNTIL 2021.*

Nov. 10–14: THE WATERBIRD SOCIETY annual meeting at Clear Lake, Texas (near Dallas). For information and to register, please visit the society website at https://waterbirds.org/annual-meeting .

Dec. 14 to Jan. 5 (2021): CHRISTMAS BIRD COUNTS. For information on dates of counts and contact information for count organizers, check the BCFO website in November and December, or check the December issue of *BC Birding*.

## 2021

Feb. 12–15: GREAT BACKYARD BIRD COUNT. For information on how to participate, please visit the GBBC website at https://gbbc.birdcount.org.

Feb. 24–27: PACIFIC SEABIRD GROUP annual meeting, San Diego, California. For details and to register, please visit the society website at https://pacificseabirdgroup.org/annual-meeting.

# Birding Portugal's Algarve

*Joshua Brown, North Vancouver*

Last summer and fall I started my gap year by living in Europe, spending time volunteering, visiting family, and birding. Whilst there I had an amazing opportunity to see the south coast of Portugal in October, and I managed to time my visit with the country's largest birdwatching festival. I spent four days at the festival in Sagres, located in the extreme southwestern corner of the European continent, and the following four days around Faro and Olhão just over 100 kilometres east on the other side of the Algarve. It was a fantastic introduction to the birds of the Iberian Peninsula, as well as peak fall European migration.

I arrived in the country late in the evening the night before the Sagres Festival began. The next morning I awoke early to join up with a guided tour and register for events. The hub of the festival was housed in a sixteenth-century fort on a cliff edge towering over a sweeping bay, but before I was even in line to enter I had seen two lifers: Sardinian Warbler and Red-billed Chough. The warblers turned out to be one of the most common birds along the coast, though the choughs were quite localized and it was a fortunate sight to see them as they drifted effortlessly over the cliffs. The group assembled and began the morning's birding in earnest, heading to a dramatic lighthouse at the place known as "the end of the world" to watch seabirds like Balearic and Cory's Shearwaters and Yellow-legged Gulls fly past.

A nearby farm track through the characteristic dry, scrubby, stunted vegetation of the peninsula produced migrating Booted Eagles, Thekla's Lark, Spotless Starling, Little Owl, and an Iberian Grey Shrike. The whole area around Sagres seemed to be filled with great birds; a promontory by the harbour held Eurasian Crag-Martin, Black Redstart, Dartford Warbler, and a constant stream of Northern Gannets and Great Skuas offshore in the warm glow of the Mediterranean sun.

That evening, amongst a large roost of House Sparrows I picked out a couple of Spanish Sparrows, which are very similar to the former but with a chestnut crown, white cheeks, and much more black streaking on the breast, only found in southern coastal areas of the continent.

The next morning I went on a pelagic trip that headed out of the spectacular orange cliffs and straight into the open Atlantic. Our small boat was treated to brilliant diversity including both Wilson's and European Storm-Petrels (the poster bird of the festival), Great and Balearic Shearwaters, and many more Great Skuas. Heading back into town for lunch after the pelagic I saw a flock of endemic Iberian Magpies flying over the road, and back by the fort a Yellow-browed Warbler popped out of a low bush, Portugal's first of the season. That evening a local guide I had met while birding showed me a shaded ravine east of the town with even more amazing birds, like Black-winged Kite, Blue Rock-Thrush, feeding Eurasian Nightjars, and a magnificent pair of Eurasian Eagle-Owls (one of the largest owls in the world).

I started the third day of the festival at a small hill called Cabranosa. As it was about twenty metres higher than the surrounding land it was used as a raptor watchpoint, and the slight elevation difference was enough to improve the viewing of hundreds of Booted Eagles, a Goshawk, Egyptian Vultures, Short-toed Snake-Eagle, Bonelli's Eagle, Peregrine Falcons, and a handful of Black Kites using the late-morning thermals. Aside from raptors there was also a migrating Ring Ouzel, Whinchats, and a flock of Rock Pigeons, pretty much as close to truly wild as possible.

*The plains of the Alentejo region. Photo by Joshua Brown.*

By midday the sun was quite strong and I left the exposed hill to find some shade, and ended up driving north of Sagres into the foothills and mountains of the Serra de Monchique range. Atop Fòia, the highest peak in the Algarve at just over 900 metres, I found many more Dartford and Sardinian Warblers as well as a group of six Rock Buntings, all taking in the incredible view down to the coast. The mountain road winding its way back down to Sagres was lined by White Stork nests; these great masses of sticks bundled together, similar to Ospreys, were atop

nearly every telephone pole along the way.

Just in case the first pelagic had been cancelled for bad weather I had booked a second on the final day of the birding festival, but since the weather was brilliant all the time I was out on the ocean again! This one brought more amazing shearwaters and storm-petrels and some Mediterranean and Audouin's Gulls close to the boat, which was a fitting end to such a fantastic festival.

The final half of my trip on the east side of the Algarve was in the Ria Formosa National Park, a network of lagoons, saltpans, and beaches linked along the southeast coast. This habitat was quite different to the dry scrub I had left behind in Sagres, giving way to lush wetlands. One of the lagoons, called Lagoa dos Salgados, was filled with Black-winged Stilts, Pied Avocets, Eurasian Spoonbills, Cattle Egrets, one hundred Greater Flamingos, and over four hundred Glossy Ibises! A Wryneck, which is an unusually cryptic small woodpecker, flew past the boardwalk, and in the reeds Zitting Cisticolas, Cetti's Warblers, and Crested and Thekla's Larks sang prominently. I also saw one of my favourite birds ever: a Hoopoe. Despite the bold combination of orange, white, and black, once Hoopoes land on the ground to feed they can actually blend in adequately with their surroundings. Another adjacent lagoon on a golf course had the strange-looking Western Swamphen (also known as Purple Gallinule) and a few introduced Common Waxbills and Black-headed Weavers.

I decided to have lunch at the golf club house, and just as I was sitting down to eat I heard a sharp rail-like call coming from the reeds below the green, and suddenly a Little Bittern emerged. As if on cue, another followed the first, before yet another flew out from the opposite bank. I continued watching and it became clear I was actually seeing a family group of four juveniles and an adult! The young birds chased each other around the reeds and practised calling every so often, and I was captivated seeing them for the first time.

At the birding festival a few days prior I had met an amazing French birder who lived nearby, and he offered to take me into an area to the north called the Alentejo. On the very last day of my trip we were able to go, and before dawn we made our way from the coast through the mountains and into the vast, flat plains of Castro Verde. Once again the landscape shifted dramatically. Almost completely flat, the land is studded with cork oak and olive trees here and there, with a few picturesque walled farming towns sprinkled throughout. The change in scenery also meant for different birdlife, and as we birded the dirt tracks and villages of the area we found some spectacular species. As the sun broke over the plains the bird I most wanted to see, the world's heaviest flying bird, flew gracefully along a ridge a kilometre away. Incredibly, I managed to see fourteen of these Great Bustards throughout the day, mostly picking their way unbothered through farm fields and stands of cork trees.

There were more successes to follow the bustards. After cresting a small rise we saw a committee of Griffon Vultures on the hillside below us, and they took off and joined another group in the air. A Spanish Eagle zoomed past the same spot, similar to the smaller Golden Eagle but endemic to the Iberian Peninsula. Where on the coast they had been scarce, here Black-winged Kites, Iberian Grey Shrikes, Spanish Sparrows, and large flocks of Corn Buntings were common. Two more lifers were a great way to end my time in the country: a flyover flock of seven Black-bellied Sandgrouse and a calling Calandra Lark.

I could not have had a more enjoyable introduction to Portugal and its varied landscapes and birdlife. Particularly because of migration there were new birds appearing every day, and every third species I saw was a lifer. The cliffs, mountains, plains, and wetlands were spectacular and some of the best places I have ever been birding.

*A Hoopoe, perhaps the iconic bird of the Iberian Peninsula. Photo by Joshua Brown.*

# Costa Rica in a Time of Coronavirus

## March 7–15, 2020, Costa Rica

*Clive Keen, Prince George*

*Female Great Curassow spotted at Arenal Oasis Eco Lodge, La Fortuna. All photos by author.*

Fourteen lifers before breakfast. Twenty-five by lunchtime. It would have been beyond marvellous if it wasn't for the news coming over the internet. But I'll focus on the birding, and leave you to imagine the downsides of being in a foreign country when panic is rife, borders are being closed and our Prime Minister is imploring travellers to come home while they still can.

First, everything you ever heard about the marvels of birding in Costa Rica is true. My son Ben and I were there for just eight days, having had to cut the planned trip in half, but we still saw 220 species of birds, mostly unguided. And among the huge numbers of lifers – 104 for me, and 51 for my son, who'd been in Costa before – were dream birds. The tropics specialize in avian flamboyance, so it's a dream not just for birders but for bird photographers. Just a tiny proportion of the hundreds of publishable photographs are shown here.

**Carara Area**

Our birding started at Macaw Lodge in the central-pacific region, two hours from the airport at San José. Within minutes we were spotting Charming Hummingbirds, Gray-cowled Wood-Rails, Scarlet Macaws, Montezuma Oropendolas, a Yellow-throated Toucan, and those glorious Red-legged Honeycreepers. A full list of the great birds seen would fill too many paragraphs, so I have to gloss over birds even of the quality of motmots, parrots and mountain-gems. Macaw Lodge and its 264 acres of wildlife reserve would have met most birders' dreams for a full stay, but not too far away (the awful roads made it seem longer) were the Tarcoles River and Carara National Park, which offered even more jaw-dropping species.

We took a private birding trip on the Tarcoles River with Jungle Crocodile Safari – a much cheaper public tour would have been available, but the private tour allowed us to focus on our target species. When I expressed a desire to see a Double-striped Thick-knee, for instance, our captain immediately stopped the boat, we went ashore on a sandbank, and promptly had good views of this weird stone curlew. Since this was a private tour, we could also avoid the inevitable lingering over fifteen-foot crocodiles that would have been the choice of non-birders. As a result, the trip yielded such gems as a great view of a Plumbeous Kite, close-ups of Amazon and American Pygmy Kingfishers, and of just about every type of wader in Central America.

Carara National Park came next, and after exploring on our own and finding such delights as a White-whiskered Puffbird, Rufous-tailed Jacamar and a Sunbittern (my son's 1,500th life bird) we hired a local guide, who had the invaluable benefit of local knowledge. This allowed us to find lekking Orange-collared and Long-tailed Manakins, a Royal Flycatcher, my thousandth life-bird – a Golden-winged Warbler – and something quite unexpected: a sleeping White Bat.

We learned another lesson about hiring local help. I'd read that it was a good idea to tip people at hotspot parking lots, as they'd look after the car. My son did so, with a rather large tip, and it paid off a hundred-fold when we left with his wallet still sitting on the car roof. Our volunteer car-park attendant saw what had happened, collected the wallet, and waited for our return.

**Monteverde**

Next on the agenda was our second hotel, El Bosque in Monteverde. Less palatial (and a lot cheaper) than Macaw Lodge, it was still a splendid spot for birders, with its own extensive walking trail. A Lesson's Motmot and a Masked Tityra posed for our cameras outside our cabin, Yellow-faced Grassquits rooted along the sidewalks, and we found our first Golden-olive Woodpecker.

The Monteverde go-to spot for most birders is the Cloud Forest Reserve, so we made an early way there, stopping for a good while at the Hummingbird Gallery and picking up nine species of hummer. Birding in the cloud forest is hard work, though, and people who don't see too well in the gloom, like me, end up with a fairly low bird count. A Black Guan, Slaty-black Nightingale-Thrush and Tufted Flycatcher made the trip well worthwhile, but I much preferred our next destination, the Curi-Cancha Reserve. This was less busy, far more open, and had a hummingbird gallery that was even better than the one by the Cloud Forest Reserve. We picked up Chestnut-billed Oropendolas,

*Above: Red-legged Honeycreeper at Stella's, La Fortuna.*
*Below: Lesson's Motmot at El Bosque.*

the obligatory Resplendent Quetzal, some Mountain Thrush, a gorgeous Golden-browed Chlorophonia, and an assortment of wrens, sparrows, and warblers – 23 new species for our trip.

**Arenal**

We'd planned to spend six nights in the Arenal area, but by now my wife had arranged an early flight home, leaving room for just a day and a half at La Fortuna. It was short but very sweet. Almost as soon as we reached the Arenal Oasis Eco Lodge we spotted a Great Curassow – one of our target birds, and perhaps the most spectacular. Even better, both the male and female were haunting an area of forest by the restaurant, so we could get great photographs of the birds and drink beer at the same time. Perhaps life could get better, but it's hard to think how. And after luxuriating in the Curassows, we found a Gartered Trogon, a Long-tailed Tyrant, and then – joy of joys, my number-one target bird – a Collared Aracari.

Though we had just a limited time remaining, we managed to fit in two of my long-desired trips: first to Sendero Bogarin, where we found White-throated Crake, Smoky-brown Woodpeckers and more, and then Mistico Hanging Bridges. Mistico is a quite extraordinary development, which must have cost tens of millions of dollars. It is essentially a two-mile interpretive trail connected by suspension bridges, giving great canopy views. We almost immediately spotted a Rufous Motmot, and other sightings included the delightful Tawny-capped Euphonia and an impressive White-throated Shrike-Tanager.

Time to go home, I fear, to stand in static airport line-ups of mask-covered travellers. But as we drove through the excuses-for-main-roads back to the airport, we watched a White-tailed Kite hover over a particularly lovely part of this beautiful country: a great final sighting. Here's hoping I could be back one day, when the world is open for business again.

**Addendum 1: Other Creatures**

One of the great things about birding trips is that mammals and reptiles are thrown in for free. We saw plenty of White-nosed Coatis and Agouti, both of which were surprisingly tame, and we had good views of all three Costa Rican monkey species: White-faced Capuchin, Spider, and Howler. Variegated Squirrels were plentiful, as were lizards, including metre-long Basilisks. On the scary side were spiders I refused to look at, and a very large snake that passed beside us at high speed. Surprisingly, we never did spot a sloth, though I suspect it would have been easy enough if we'd been trying. I'm glad to add that the biting bugs were less troublesome than I feared, though I recommend liberal applications of deet for future trips, while my son advises against open-toe shoes and venturing off-path, as ticks and other nefarious creatures can ignore all rules about social distancing.

**Addendum 2: Advice for a Trip**

1. Bird species vary tremendously within quite short distances in Costa Rica, so it's a good idea to move around. Each of our hotel moves offered us dramatically different species. I'd recommend no more than four days in any location.

2. Be ready to hire local guides. Your hotel will have guides standing by, and at birding hotspots guides will often be waiting and offering their services. Even if you're a great observer, the

local guide will (continued next page) know where birds hang out, and will be able to confirm or correct your identifications.

3. Many of the roads are dirt or gravel, narrow, and winding. Road signs are almost non-existent and it is hard to believe that some major roads are not in fact farm tracks. Be sure to get a GPS device – we'd have been utterly lost without the Waze provided by our car-rental company.

4. Costa Rica is a beautiful country, the people seem well-disposed towards tourists, the accommodation and restaurant standards are high (ask for the IPA), and there is more to the place than birds, so you need have no qualms about taking a non-birding partner.

*Top left: Golden-olive Woodpecker at El Bosque, Monteverde.*

*Top right: Rufous Motmot at Mistico Hanging Bridges, Arenal.*

*Centre: Hoffman's Woodpecker at Stella's, Monteverde.*

*Right: Gray-headed Chachalaca at Sendero Bogarin, La Fortuna.*

# Helping the Threatened Ptarmigan

**The Tumbler Ridge Example:**

**How Your Contribution Can Help Threatened Ptarmigan in BC**

*Charles Helm, Tumbler Ridge*

This feel-good story starts with an out-of-the-blue April phone call from Kathy Martin, Professor in the Faculty of Forestry at UBC. Somehow she had become aware of a nest-record card that my son Daniel and I had submitted to Wayne Campbell back in 2003. It described a brood of ptarmigan high above tree-line south of Tumbler Ridge, that we thought at the time provided our first regional record of Rock Ptarmigan. Kathy asked if I could recall more details to substantiate the record, as this would be the southernmost record in the Rockies (Pink Mountain being the nearest contender, hundreds of kilometres to the north), and hence would represent a significant expansion of the species' known summer breeding range.

While I stammered defensively that it was all a very long time ago, it became clear that Kathy and her colleague Davide Scridel (research scientist at UBC's Conservation Biology Lab) were super-serious about ptarmigan records in BC, and were engaged in a large study to try to determine the summer ranges of all three species, and the potential effects of climate change on these ranges. They were looking for any records from 1970 onwards (not reported on eBird or iNaturalist). And rather surprisingly, ptarmigan records for BC were rather sparse: whereas the surface area of our province is just under a million square kilometres, sure evidence of Willow Ptarmigan covered just 109 km$^2$, and the number for Rock Ptarmigan was even less, a mere 80 km$^2$!

I promised to go through all my records and extract my ptarmigan data, and to send this to Kathy and Davide. I realized that we happened to have an expert birder in town, Dr Nigel Mathews, who was with us again as a locum tenens physician. I asked him if he kept ptarmigan records, and without batting an eye he stated that over the years he most certainly had at least one record for all three species in the Tumbler Ridge mountains!

It then dawned upon me that a number of my hiking friends, mostly non-birders, were keen photographers, and may have taken photos of ptarmigan. I contacted them, and asked them to send me their photos, along with approximate locality and elevation data. Within days, each of them had rallied wonderfully to the cause, and soon I had a wealth of information and photos. Clearly ptarmigan were a) of interest to many in the alpine, not just birders, and b) easy to photograph. I decided to send all the photos to Kathy and Davide.

*Rock Ptarmigan near Windfall Lake, 2015. Photo by Antonio Suncion.*

Kathy and Davide are exemplary and accessible scientists and communicators – send them an email or a WeTransfer, and the same day or the next you will receive your grateful and informative reply (I learned later that Kathy has decades of experience in ptarmigan research[1,2], and is the President of the American Ornithological Society, no less). Yet I was not ready for what their summary response contained. After consulting with each other and a number of expert colleagues, they had concluded that among those photos I had submitted were four Rock Ptarmigan records (each from a different locality), and a number of very useful Willow Ptarmigan sightings, in addition to the expected White-tailed Ptarmigan.

A bit stunned, I then contacted the northeastern BC birding group, followed by representatives of the north-central BC birding group. Some of their experts were already aware of this research, and had provided their records, but others had not. Once again, I was amazed at how quickly and readily these folks responded with valuable information, which I forwarded on. This included musings on declining numbers over a period of three to four decades, and one of the southernmost Willow Ptarmigan records in the Rockies.

Why is this important? Well, ptarmigan are iconic denizens of our BC tundra habitat. But that habitat is under pressure, and is shrinking as a result of anthropogenic climate change. In order for future predicted distribution ranges to be valid, accurate current data is essential. And surprisingly little is known of their distribution ranges: perhaps birders in general tend to hug the more accessible lower elevations?

Kathy and Davide sent me a great PowerPoint so that I could hone my ptarmigan-ID skills. I soon realized how amateurish my earlier attempts had been. I had relied on excluding a white tail, then using size and elevation/habitat to distinguish between Willow and Rock, or had hoped to find a male bird in perfect breeding plumage. Now I learned that bill shape was of paramount importance. Yes, this is mentioned in Sibley,[3] but I hadn't really understood the significance. Body shape is also a bit more slender for Rock Ptarmigan. (continued overleaf)

*Willow Ptarmigan near Holzworth Meadows, 2018. Photo by Antonio Suncion.*

(If in doubt, take photos and analyze them at leisure, or consult with others.) And I learned that male Rock Ptarmigan seldom stay with the female to help rear and defend the chicks, while this is the norm for Willow Ptarmigan. In addition, the calls of the three species are very different and are easy to distinguish – these are more likely to be heard on foggy days when the birds may be less inhibited, given that they are better protected from aerial predators.

Kathy also sent a summary article that she had contributed to, entitled "Birds in High Places."[4] This addressed BC's high mountain habitat from the perspective of birds. It contained everything I hadn't known I needed to know on the topic, and was a wealth of information, sometimes confirming my instincts, sometimes opening unexpected new avenues of thought. I learned that almost a quarter of BC is above the tree-line, but that these alpine environments are extremely understudied, fragile, and threatened. I learned that their richness in avian species peaks in late summer and fall, around mid-September, as altitudinal migrants move up to enjoy a bounty of insects, flowers and fruits (just the time when I most enjoy hiking in the mountains and searching for birds and fossils).

Furthermore, it confirmed that the general north-south orientation of BC's mountains provides suitable conduits for travel, and confirmed my own observations of the relatively high and varied number of raptor species that take advantage of the open terrain and good visibility. I also learned that habitat destruction at lower elevations tends to push birds up into the alpine, and therefore increases the value of alpine and sub-alpine habitats (making them even more important for migration), at the same time that a rising tree-line is reducing their extent.

And as a family physician and healthy lifestyle advocate, I just loved this unexpected quote about the Dark-eyed Junco, "*Juncos have also adapted elevation-specific life history strategies; high elevation juncos produce half the number of offspring per season, but live longer, healthier lives with fewer parasites than juncos at lower elevations."* The message I took from this: the hills are good places, for both humans and birds!

Over the years I have realized the special nature of our alpine regions. There is nothing quite like encountering a couple of Baird's Sandpiper on the most barren alpine plateau, or lying on one's back on a fall day in the tundra and watching one Golden Eagle after another after another winging its way south. Or logging a number of unexpected sightings of Prairie Falcon, or a large flock of Black Scoter in fall migration on sub-alpine Windfall Lake. Even nests are easier to find, in the absence of concealing vegetation. Now I wonder: might I even find a Wandering Tattler or American Golden Plover that chooses to stick to the mountain-tops in migration? Probably not, but one never knows….

For a long time I have been trying to promote Tumbler Ridge birding as one of the places where "east meets west," where, for example, we can find Pacific Wren and Winter Wren, or MacGillivray's Warbler and Mourning Warbler, singing in the same patch of forest. Now I maybe need to add that the Tumbler Ridge portion of the Rockies is where "north meets south," where in theory you may be lucky enough to encounter a Rock Ptarmigan and a Clark's Nutcracker on the same day.

This all illustrates the value of citizen science. It is an echo of the Vancouver Island Ptarmigan project, where

records from interested citizens provided records for over 100 mountains, complementing the more formal field research in an extremely useful manner.[5] One outcome of this combination of data, and the resulting insights, is that what is currently listed as a White-tailed Ptarmigan sub-species may in time be designated a separate species.[6]

In summary, our six Rock Ptarmigan records unequivocally and fairly substantially extend the known summer and breeding range of this species, and entrench Tumbler Ridge as one of the special places in North America where with a bit of luck all three species can be found. But this welcome news also contains a warning: we have largely been missing this species, and we need to work on our ptarmigan identification, and zoom in on that bill shape. Plus, there is a swath of Rockies summits south of our southernmost sighting, with an absence of any records. Absence of evidence is not evidence of absence: where exactly is the southern limit of Rock Ptarmigan?

This is one of the reasons I love living where I do, in the heart of the Tumbler Ridge UNESCO Global Geopark, with a relatively low tree-line and hence easy access to the alpine, and the chance to make some significant observations in areas few other birders get to. A couple of years ago my wife and I drove all the way up to the shores of the Arctic Ocean. It was a wonderful trip, but was rather long. In 2020, in a pandemic year with travel being restricted, I will take the short cut to the Arctic by heading up into the hills beyond the tree-line. And I might just choose some areas further south than my usual alpine haunts, to see if I can extend that summer of Rock Ptarmigan a little bit more.

I hope I have managed to convey the importance of Kathy and Davide's work. While their research on this issue is close to wrapping up, it is not too late to contribute further results. I know that they will generously welcome your contributions. They are readily contactable at:

kathy.martin@ubc.ca
davidescridel@hotmail.co.uk

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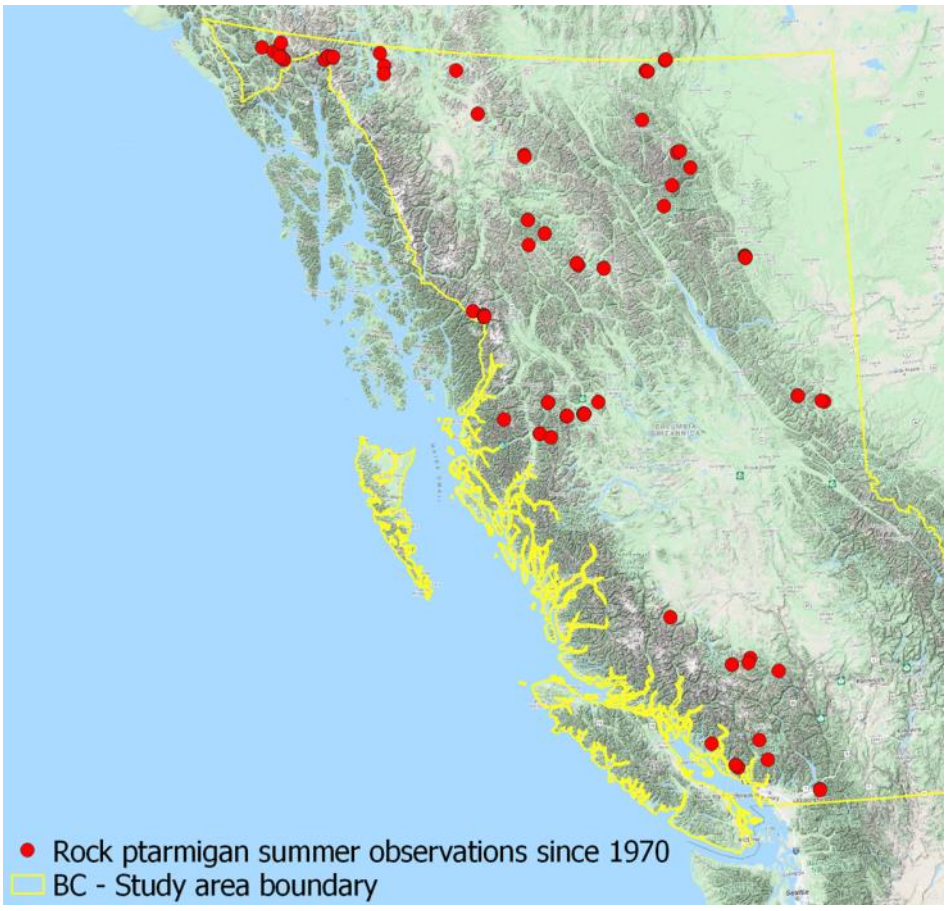
*Map of BC showing Rock Ptarmigan summer records, reproduced with permission from Davide Scridel.*



# Launching the Columbia Valley Swallow Project

*Rachel Darvill, Golden*

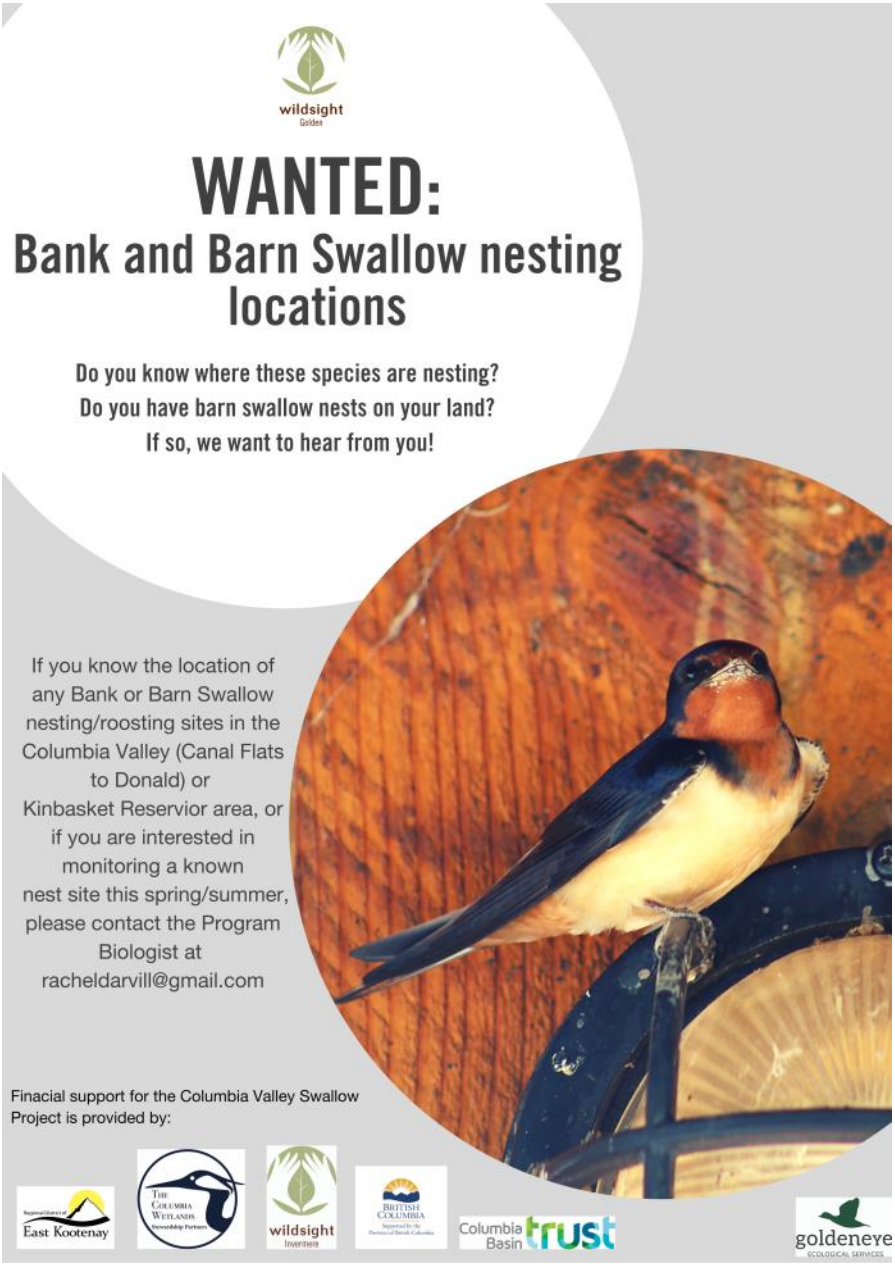
## New Project to Help At-risk Species

We all love birds, and most of us know that many bird populations are declining at an alarming rate due to a number of threats including habitat destruction, recreational disturbance and climate change. A recent study published in the journal *Science* estimates that 2.9 billion birds of various species have disappeared in Canada and the United States since 1970 – a population decrease of 29 per cent. Even the more common bird species such as swallows are facing population declines. Swallows are beneficial insectivores and iconic species that many of us appreciate. Swallows have intrinsic value and play an important role in pest management – one individual eats up to 850 insects (e.g. mosquitoes) each day!

Recently, both the Barn Swallow and Bank Swallow were listed as threatened species under the Canada's Species at Risk Act. In the Columbia Valley (think Canal Flats, Fairmont, Invermere, Golden) swallows seem to be abundant. It is well known that both Bank and Barn Swallows do breed and feed in the Columbia Valley, but there is a lack of information on the status of swallow species in the Columbia Valley, including where important habitats (e.g. nesting and roosting locations) are located. There is a need to undertake inventory work to determine nesting locations so that conservation actions, such as habitat enhancement (i.e., erecting artificial nesting structures) or private landowner outreach, can be best directed in future years to help conserve swallows and their breeding habitat.

A new project called the Columbia Valley Swallow Project (CVSP) is starting up this year. The main purpose of year one will be to determine the location of Bank and Barn Swallow nest sites, with an opportunity for volunteers to assist with monitoring. Nest locations and nest success will be used to inform the management of nesting sites in the Columbia Valley (Canal Flats to Donald). Data will also contribute to provincial and federal recovery planning and implementation processes. In year two of this project, the emphasis will be on-the-ground stewardship and conservation activities such as erecting artificial nesting structures. This swallow project will also be beneficial in terms of providing information to the public regarding the Migratory Birds Convention Act, including obligations under this Act. This will assist private landowners with empowering education regarding their duties to protect nests.

The CVSP is a project of Wildsight Golden, developed and managed by principal consultant Rachel Darvill of Goldeneye Ecological Services, with financial support from Columbia Basin Trust, Columbia Wetlands Stewardship Partners, RDEK's Columbia Valley Local Conservation Program, Wildsight Invermere and Wildsight Regional. If you're in the valley and would like to participate in monitoring activities, know of any Bank or Barn Swallow nest sites (including on your own private property), or want more information, check out the Columbia Valley Swallow Project (wildsight.ca/branches/golden/columbia-valley-swallow-project) or contact racheldarvill@gmail.com.



# Vaux's Roost at Courtenay Museum

*Krista Kaptein, Courtenay*

How many swifts can fit into a chimney? In the case of Vaux's Swifts, at the Courtenay & District Museum chimney in the Comox Valley, the number is in the thousands.

Since 2017, Vaux's Swifts have been coming to roost nightly in the museum chimney during their northward migration, from the last week of April until mid-May. This roost site was first discovered by Dave and Adele Routledge who previously monitored a chimney in nearby Cumberland, where swifts had come to roost for many years. However for several years prior to 2017, there were no birds coming to Cumberland and it was a mystery where they had gone. That year by chance Dave and Adele were near the Courtenay Museum one evening and saw thousands of birds entering the chimney around dusk. The next evening when more observers attended, the official count was 3,650 birds!

Although subsequent evenings and years did not quite reach this high number, it is a spectacular sight when even a few hundred birds enter the chimney, comparable to a whirling tornado, or a flow of water spiraling down a drain. Some evenings the event attracts dozens of observers, photographers, naturalists and the general public, who can safely watch while spread out in nearby parking lots.

This year, observers started watching the chimney on April 24, and the first dozen birds came to roost in the chimney on the evening of April 28. Over the next days the numbers increased to hundreds and then thousands, with the peak count this year of 2,210 recorded on May 4. However after a series of very warm evenings, by May 13 only one bird was recorded. The phenomenon is somewhat unpredictable – more birds seem to roost on cool evenings with impending rain, while on warm evenings birds may gather over the nearby Courtenay River but don't enter the chimney. Some evenings the resident Merlin pair attempt a catch, usually unsuccessfully. The most spectacular evening this year featured looming clouds, rain, then clearing skies and a double rainbow – with rumour of a competing phenomenon of a pod of Orca in nearby Comox Bay!

*Below: A single Vaux's Swift by Mike Yip.*
*Above right: Group entering chimney by Bruce Moffat.*

Smaller numbers of birds are counted by direct count or from photographs – for high numbers, the total number of seconds that birds are entering the chimney are counted, then multiplied by 10 birds per second. The multiplier is based on experience and the size of the chimney opening, in consultation with Larry Schwitters at www. vaux-happening.org who compiles all the data.

The Courtenay Museum is the only known regular communal chimney roost site for Vaux's Swift in BC. Several chimneys in Washington State are famous for the evening roost, where the bird numbers reach tens of thousands, usually during the southward migration in September. Although the phenomenon in Courtenay is finished for the year, as the birds have never been observed coming to roost here in the fall, many videos are available to view online: e.g. the last flock of May 4 is here:

www.facebook.com/BCImportantBirdBiodiversityAreas/videos/1222465384812404/

A professional video from 2017 is available at:

www.youtube.com/watch?v=brcZDhw646o

# Curlewmania!

*Clive Keen, Prince George*

*One of the untagged arrivals (April 14) showing that food could be found at the Shelley field along the pipeline route. All photos by author.*

Curlewmania was building in Prince George as the snows started to melt in late March, but then there was a week of anxiety. More snow fell, the temperature dropped to minus ten, and it seemed that "our" curlews, fitted with transmitters over the summer, would never come. The local birders hoping to see Jean, Peter, Schalin, Jack, Martha, Konrad and Ivan knew that they remained in the US: we could follow their progress by their satellite pings. Jean, Martha and Schalin had started their spring migration in March, but they hadn't got far, and the others showed no inclination to move at all.

Disappointing, but very sensible, we thought, as there'd surely be no food available when they reached the famous Walrath Road field in Shelley, used by curlews for decades as an international port of entry.

But on April 6, far sooner than we'd expected given the snow depth, six Curlews were spotted in the field. There was much excitement and delight, mixed with consternation. The 200-acre field, normally an abundant source of earthworms in early April, was completely covered in thick snow. Had these curlews been too quick off the mark? Would they starve, or turn round and go back south?

On April 9, twenty curlews were seen in the field, and a leg-flagged curlew appeared in the Wright Creek area, nineteen kilometres away. On April 10 the number of curlews at the Shelley field had increased to 37. And then on April 11 there were several sightings of a bird with a transmitter, which turned out a day later to be Martha, photographed at Walrath Road. She doubted the wisdom of her early move, though, as satellite pings indicated that she doubled back a hundred kilometres south, taking a few days to decide that perhaps Prince George would be OK after all.

*An early arrival looking skyward. Was he looking out for raptors, searching for more incoming curlews, or just checking the weather?*

Birders started paying attention to the pipeline route through the Walrath field. A thin snow-free band appeared above the twin pipes, presumably because there is less material above the pipelines to hold the cold, or perhaps because moving gas under pressure warms the surrounding soil. (This is the line that ruptured two years ago in a huge explosion and fireball, leaving the province short of gas for months.)

The pipeline area was the only foraging spot on the field for the early curlews, and though it was initially very thin, it began to widen each day. By April 14, temperatures rose, and the open area seemed wide enough to sustain all the birds probing it. They had no great trouble finding worms – I watched one curlew snag five worms in as many minutes, followed by a cranefly larva for dessert – and as a result the birds spent more of their day loafing and quarreling. So, they knew what they were doing all along. As Pete Dunne reminds us, birds are professionals.

April 15 brought satellite pings from Ivan near the airport. On April 16, in the same area, a flock of 91 birds flying in a V formation turned out not to be Canada Geese as the observers were expecting, but more curlews. The rush was on. Lane – one of the three curlews fitted with leg tags but not a transmitter (the others were Raven and Jill) was

spotted at his old breeding ground in the Wright Creek area, where most of the curlews had been tagged in 2019. Pings were showing that Schalin was now in northeastern Oregon heading northwest, Jack had reached Pavillion Lake, and Peter was north of Kamloops, but Jean and Konrad were still stuck in Nevada and Utah. On April 17, Ivan was spotted in the Shelley field.

On April 18 Jack was found at Wright Creek and Konrad was winging his way through Montana, but Jean still seemed to be stuck in Nevada. Excitement was now running high among northern BC birders, with daily reports eagerly followed across the entire territory. On April 19 we heard that Peter had been seen at Stoner – the second area near Prince George where the birds had been tagged – and Schalin was seen in a field not far from Shelley. The only birds now south of the 49th were Konrad, now located around Great Falls Montana, and Jean, who was starting to give concern – transmitter problems?

Perhaps things were getting too breathless because on April 21 – World Curlew Day! – Mother Nature decided to cool things by washing away the road leading to the Shelley Curlew field. Since repairs would take at least a week, that left me – I live near Shelley – as one of the few people able to observe the goings on there. Fortunately we could still get reports from the breeding grounds at Wright Creek, where Raven had just been spotted, and the secondary breeding ground at Stoner. The satellite, too, continued to provide news, including the fact that Konrad was now heading to Prince George via Hinton, Alberta. (He finally made it back to PG on April 23.) Satellite data was also showing us how the birds were moving between feeding grounds and their breeding spots, to which they seemed faithful.


*Jack (right-leg tag AJ) spotted on 27 April.*

At this point we began wondering about pair fidelity. Jack and Jill, and Peter and Jean, were tagged pairs – would they get back together? Jill was nowhere to be found until 27 April, when she was finally located at her previous nesting spot in Wright Creek, where Jack was waiting. Unfortunately Jean had gone missing, and by 27 April Peter had apparently given up waiting, as he was found with another female. As the photo at bottom left shows, it was time to get on with things.

Information from this project will answer many questions, but this will be tackled in the next article, to appear in September.

*Below: Martha (left leg tag AM), and friend, 27 April. Curlew courtship gives a whole new meaning to the expression "hitting on." For perhaps fifteen minutes the suiter followed Martha, pounding her back in staccato fashion with his bill. At first, Martha resisted his charms, but finally succumbed.*


**Thanks**

Special thanks to Jack Bowling, whose reports on satellite pings form the basis of this article, and to Martha (the human one) from Wright Creek and Karen from Stoner, who provided reports on activity at the breeding grounds. The whole project is led by Graham Sorensen and David Bradley, and you can see their excellent seminar held for Prince George birders at:

www.youtube.com/watch?v=4dVp4DGhOFQ

There is also a project web page at:

www.birdscanada.org/research-updates-on-leggy-birds-for-world-curlew-day/

And the curlew tracking page is at:

www.birdscanada.org/apps/lbcu_map/index.jsp

# Birding New Zealand's Subantarctic Islands

*Val George*

*Above: Southern Royal Albatross. Below: Snapes Penguins. All photos by author.*

If you get a chance to go on a birding trip to New Zealand's Subantarctic Islands, go! It'll be a unique experience, even if you've birded many other parts of the world – as I had. Several years ago, I joined a small group of BC birders, organized and led by well-known BC birder Bill Merilees, to go there with Heritage Expeditions, a New Zealand based eco-tour company. Their boat was a Russian vessel that had been built for polar and oceanographic research, so it was fairly basic but still comfortable. It carried about four dozen people.

New Zealand has several groups of islands that lie in the Southern Ocean to the south of the main islands. We went to three of them: Campbell Islands, Auckland Islands and Snares Islands. The most southerly is the Campbell group, about 700 km from our sailing departure point, Invercargill on New Zealand's South Island.

These islands are some of the most remote in the world. They're highly protected areas with very limited access. After travelling a couple of hours from our starting point, we never saw another boat or person – other than a couple of researchers on one of the islands – until we returned.

A few words about the habitats: apart from the ocean and shorelines, two of the island groups, Campbell and Auckland, are dominated by large open areas of tussock grasses and areas of small shrubs, including large stands of the spectacular red-flowering Southern Rata; Snares is mostly treed by a small, white-flowering Tree Daisy.

The Southern Ocean is notoriously rough, so the two days steady sailing in four-to-five-metre seas to get to Campbell Island were not particularly comfortable. Once we reached there, however, conditions changed dramatically because we spent most of the rest of the trip in the shelter of the various islands.

But enough of this chit-chat, because this article is supposed to be about the birds. For me – as I imagine it would be for most birders from the Northern Hemisphere – the most interesting species were the albatrosses and the penguins.

The world has about 20 species of albatrosses, the exact number depending on which authority you want to listen to; we saw half of them on the trip. The Southern Royal Albatross was the first breeding species we visited. This species, together with the Wandering Albatross, which we also saw on its breeding grounds, has the largest wingspan of any bird in the world. Before we disembarked to visit our first breeding site one of our guides gave us a little lecture on the birding etiquette on the islands and said, "Don't get too close to the birds because we don't want to disturb them." Right – no problem. The first bird I come across is on its nest and a great photo op, so I slowly walk up to maybe 60 metres from it and, because it's rather windy, sit down on a large grass mound to steady the camera. The bird immediately gets off its nest and waddles over to within a

few metres from me to check out this peculiar new species of albatross. I have to back off to about a hundred metres to get the shot accompanying this article. Our guide should have given his speech to the birds.

During the trip we visited the breeding sites of several other albatross species, including the sooty-brown coloured Light-mantled Albatross, one of the smallest members of the albatross family at less than half the weight of the Southern Royal Albatross.

*Left: Tui. Above right: Auckland Shag.*

We saw many other species of pelagic birds on the trip, especially when we were travelling between the islands: shearwaters, storm petrels, diving petrels, prions, etc. The abundance of these birds is exemplified by the more than a million pairs of Sooty Shearwaters breeding on Snares Island.

Sightings of penguins were not common, though we saw several thousand Snares Penguins on Snares Island, where they're endemic. This species is one of the medium-sized crested penguins. We observed them from the water, watching them comically trying to launch themselves onto the rocky foreshore from the heavy ocean swells, then as they scrambled up the steep slopes to their nesting colonies.

Other species of penguins seen on the trip were: Yellow-eyed Penguin, an endangered New Zealand endemic; Southern Rockhopper Penguin; and, closer to the New Zealand mainland, Little Penguin.

The two main groups of islands each has an endemic flightless duck: the Campbell Teal, and the Auckland Teal. These are two of the world's rarest ducks. Both are similarly coloured brown birds somewhat resembling the females of our Green-winged Teal. Our guides couldn't find the Campbell species, not too surprisingly because they're nocturnal and number only about 100 birds after nearly going extinct. The Auckland Teal has a somewhat larger population so we did see several of these.

Campbell and Auckland Islands also each has an endemic cormorant: the Campbell Shag and the Auckland Shag. These black-and-white birds were fairly easy to see because even outside their breeding season they don't wander far from their islands.

Some of the mainland's endemic birds are also present on the islands. For example, the country's only two members of the large Honeyeater family (*Meliphagidae*) are found here: the Tui, a black thrush-sized bird with a metallic blue sheen on its wings and two peculiar white feathers projecting from its neck; and the New Zealand Bellbird, a small olive-green bird noted for its melodious, bell-like song.

Mainland New Zealand has more introduced species than almost any other country. Any UK birder who has visited will know that some of the parks in the cities in the early mornings sound like an English country garden. Somehow or other a few of these have found their way to the Subantarctic Islands: Common Blackbird, Song Thrush, Common Chaffinch, European Greenfinch, and a few others.

I'll conclude by mentioning our most surprising addition to our checklist: the secretive endemic Subantarctic Snipe. This bird is extremely difficult to see because it very rarely flies, choosing instead to just hunker down when threatened by predators. We got to see one when, wandering about in some typical swampy snipe habitat, one of our group literally almost stepped on one. It never moved from its crouching position under a grass mound.

So that's a rather brief overview of a unique birding experience. If you get a chance to go there, pack your rain gear – it rains, if only briefly, most days

# Briefings 1 & 2

*Summary by M. Church, Vancouver*

## (Very) Ancient Birds

Today, it is well known that birds are directly descended from the dinosaurs. But the fossils of early birds are scarce, so much remains to be learned about their evolution (your modern Robin is a long stretch from T. rex). Fossil scarcity is the consequence of easy destruction of the delicate bone structures, soft parts and feathers of birds as enclosing sediments harden into rock. Two recent discoveries have therefore kindled high interest in the character of the earliest birds.

Especially astonishing is the near-perfect preservation of a diminutive skull in a 99-million year-old piece of amber found in the Kachin province of northern Myanmar. The skull is 16 mm in length (!) and consists of an elongated bill (about 6 mm), relatively enormous bony eye sockets (5 mm across), and a rear cranial cap. The upper mandible of the bill contains 23 teeth, affixed, in the manner of lizards, on their side rather than at the base. The openings at the centre of the eye sockets are small, suggesting that the bird was a diurnal predator (like its dinosaurian forebears) and probably dependent on insect prey.

The bird appears to have been even smaller than the smallest extant bird, the Bee (continued next page)

Hummingbird, found in Cuba. The slightly larger females of that species are 61 mm in total length and weigh 2.6 grams; males weigh about 2.0 g. The new fossil is about 100x smaller than the smallest true dinosaur – which itself weighed less than a kilogram. Evidently it was very small indeed. Why? One reason may be that such small size would make it easily overlooked by larger predators, and if the mobility of modern hummingbirds is any indicator, it may have been very difficult to catch. But this tiny predator was no hummingbird, which are all nectar feeders; the character of the preserved tongue of the new find eliminates that possibility.

Another remarkable find comes from 66.7 million year-old rocks in Belgium. Again, the skull is almost completely preserved. In an artist's complete reconstruction, the bird most nearly resembles a modern Coot or Moorhen. The host rocks are sediments that were deposited in a shallow sea, so the bird was likely a wader or an inshore seabird. At an estimated 400 grams, it was similar in size to an American Coot. The significance of this find lies in its affinities with both Galliformes (chickens, turkeys, quail, pheasants, grouse, ptarmigan) and Anseriformes (ducks, geese, swans).

This bird is the earliest known representative of the superorder Galloanserae (informally "fowl"), which includes all of both the land and aquatic birds in the two orders mentioned above. Furthermore, it is the earliest "crown group" bird so far found. (Palaeontologists divide organisms, including birds, into two groups. Crown group birds are all those species that either are living or, if extinct, can be related to living species. In contrast, "stem group" birds are unequivocally birds that are extinct and have no living relatives.) This new find shows that fowl have very deep origins indeed, as may other living birds.

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## Where Have All the Penguins Gone?

In these briefings, we have recently (September, 2019) considered massive losses of Antarctic penguins, notably Adélies and Emperors. It now appears that sub-Antarctic species are also at risk. Île aux Cochons is a tiny volcanic island in the southwestern Indian Ocean, about 1400 km east-southeast of the southern tip of Africa. (It is so small that it does not even appear in my *Times Atlas*.) It is an uninhabited nature reserve, administered by France. Just a few decades ago it was home to half a million pairs of King Penguins, subantarctic relatives of the ice-loving Emperors. Yet a 2019 expedition to the island found only about 100,000 birds – 50,000 pairs. Ninety percent of the colony has disappeared without trace.

Expedition members could spend only a few days on the island (landed from a French icebreaker on its way to Antarctica), but they managed to rule out predators (cats were left on the island by 19th century whalers) and disease as causes of the decline. Nor has a large number of the penguins turned up at any other subantarctic colony, or new site. The penguins still present are healthy.

This leaves the scientists to speculate that changing sea conditions, hence food supply, is the likely reason for contraction of the colony. The birds forage up to hundreds of kilometres to the south, as far as the "polar front" – the zone of convergence between warm Indian Ocean waters and the cold waters of the Southern (Antarctic) Ocean. At the front they exploit a rich source of krill, squid and lanternfish, the penguins' principal food sources. Increasingly in recent years, the incursion of vigorous north winds carrying warm, subtropical air has pushed this Antarctic convergence farther south: it may then become a journey too far for the adult penguins, who may fall prey to exhaustion or predation. Much more likely, though, is simply that insufficient food gets carried back to the colony to feed chicks, so breeding has failed to maintain the population numbers. Continuing studies at Possession Island, 160 km to the west of Île aux Cochons, confirms that, in years with a notable southerly excursion of the front, breeding success declines by one third. Further, the Île aux Cochons researchers found that some of the ten birds that they tagged with GPS devices swam north, not south, toward the "subantarctic convergence," an alternative but less rich zone of prey concentration. The birds evidently are aware of their predicament.

The species is not in danger, though the Île aux Cochons colony may be. King Penguins are present on most subantarctic islands farther south and on the northern tip of the West Antarctic peninsula. But the predicament of the Île aux Cochons birds is consistent with that of the Adélies in that the northerly windflow is increasingly frequent, signaling a changing climate. That has created food supply crises for both the Antarctic and subantarctic birds.

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*Below: Also troubled by changing sea conditions – the Galapagos Penguin. CNK photo.*

# Featured Species No. 10

*Adrian Dorst, Tofino*

## Semipalmated Plover (*Charadrius semipalmatus*)

*Status:* Common spring and fall migrant.

This small plover with sand-coloured upper parts and a conspicuous black breast band is a familiar sight on west coast beaches. The word "palmated" refers to webbing between the toes; thus "semipalmated" means that the bird is semi-webbed. This species has a very extensive breeding range from Nova Scotia and Newfoundland to Arctic and subarctic regions of Canada. West of Hudson Bay it breeds in most regions above 60 latitude, including Alaska, with the exception of the northernmost Canadian islands. It winters on the Atlantic coast from Virginia south to southern Argentina, and on the Pacific coast from Oregon to Chile. In British Columbia, the species is a common breeding bird on the beaches of northern and eastern Haida Gwaii and, to a lesser extent, in the subalpine regions of the Chilkat Pass region in the extreme northwestern portion of the province. There is a single breeding record from Iona Island on the Lower Mainland. Recently the species has been expanding its breeding range into the Chilcotin region of the province.

On Vancouver Island's west coast, these small plovers are seen solely as migrants, but conspicuous ones, as they feed on our beaches in considerable numbers in both spring and summer. Even at a distance, they are easy to distinguish from sandpipers through their habit of standing still, then running and tipping forward. Watch closely and you may see a bird standing still with one foot caressing the surface of the wet sand. It will then make a sudden dash to pluck a red worm from the sand. This foot action apparently aids the bird in detecting its prey. In late summer and fall, amphipods become an important food source.

Infrequently, the species is seen on small sandy beaches on islands and peninsulas during migration, such as 12 birds on Brooks Peninsula on 4 August 1981.

First arrival dates in spring usually occur in the second half of April, with numbers rising rather rapidly in the last week of April and peaking by the last few days of April or the first week of May. On 4 May 1985, 150 birds were counted at Incinerator Rock, Long Beach, and on 1 May 1988 and 25 April 1992, 115 birds were counted there. Flocks of 50 or more birds are quite common. The maximum number recorded from any single location in recent years was 120 birds at the Long Beach Golf Course on 6 May 2009, during a storm. This number still falls well below the maximum number listed in *Birds of Pacific Rim National Park*, which was 400 birds at Long Beach on 8 May 1974. That number presumably resulted from a count over a broad expanse of beach rather than at any single location. Numbers quickly decline after the first week of May, though a few may linger to the end of the month.

The earliest spring date involves a lone bird on Stubbs Island on 12 April in 2010. In 2012, the first two birds arrived on 18 April. June birds are rare and likely involve nonbreeding individuals. Two and three birds were still present at Chesterman Beach on 8 June in 2012 and 2014, and four birds were present on Stubbs Island on 12 June 1987.

The first fall migrants usually appear by about mid-July. However, there are two records as early as late June. In 2008, a bird was seen at Stubbs Island on 30 June, and in 2016 a single individual was seen in the company of newly arrived Western Sandpipers at Long Beach on 23 June. From late July through August, and in some years up to the middle of September, substantial numbers ply our beaches, the adults passing through first, followed by the juveniles. In 2009, the highest number, 57 birds, was recorded on 8 September at Chesterman Beach. In 2011, numbers peaked from 17 August to 22 August, with more than 60 birds counted. October sightings are fairly rare, with only 6 records. A single bird, seen at the airport on 9 November 1996, is our latest fall record.

Outside our region, highest numbers in spring and fall migration are from Rose Spit, Haida Gwaii, where 2,100 and 1,761 birds, respectively, were reported.

This is an extract from Adrian Dorst's *The Birds of Vancouver Island's West Coast*, UBC Press, which covers 360 species in its 550 pages. The book can be ordered at ubcpress.ca.

*Juvenile Semipalmated Plover. Photo by Adrian Dorst.*

# Bird Photographers' Corner

*This is a new section of the magazine, devoted to bird photography techniques. If you have any advice, information, comments or questions about equipment, techniques or style, this is your pulpit. You are invited to send in notes or articles, short or long, for future editions.*

*To get things going I'll explain how I (editor) salvaged the shot below.*

**Light is Optional?**

On entering a darkish forest in Costa Rica I increased the ISO setting on my DSLR camera to 1600, which I thought might suffice if something interesting appeared. It would have been much wiser to have set the camera on automatic ISO, as in the very darkest part of the forest, a rarity – a Great Tinamou – briefly appeared. Photographing with a handheld 600 mm lens in the virtual absence of light seemed hopeless, as I could not even see the bird through the viewfinder, but I pointed the camera in the general direction, pressed the shutter, and hoped the autofocus would work. The shutter sound showed that it had, but that a very slow exposure had been taken; it turned out to be one-thirteenth of a second. Obviously hopeless, one would think; a shot to be junked.

But Messrs Nikon, Tamron, and Photoshop had other ideas. The raw photograph turned out to be not quite as useless as expected – the inevitable camera shake had been reduced by the vibration reduction system of the lens, so I had at least a bad record shot of the bird. The exposure was, of course, exactly right – it can be taken for granted these days except where there is heavy backlighting – but the image was extremely flat, with the bird barely distinguishable from the litter, and still too badly blurred to be worth keeping. So I thought.

Enter Photoshop Elements. Adobe Lightroom is touted as the preferred program for serious photographers, but Elements remains extremely powerful, and you can buy it, rather than rent it.

Elements has numerous tricks allowing photographers to deal with very flat photographs. It automatically identifies the subject, making it easy to separate the subject from the background through processes such as background blurring and lightening or darkening. Then levels, contrast, vibrance, brightness, etc were adjusted to give the photograph some life. I then used the program's Camera Shake function, and it was clear by the large amount of time taken while the computer thought about it, that I was asking a lot. But, rather to my surprise, I ended up with a degree of sharpness I could just about get away with in a small print.

*Great Tinamou miracle shot, courtesy of automatic focus, vibration reduction, and the whole box of tricks provided by Photoshop Elements.*

The next phase involved removing distractions. Photo-editing programs have had simple distraction-removal systems for years, but now they are remarkably advanced, and annoying clutter can be removed in seconds. The final step was adding a small amount of vignetting to draw the eye straight to the bird; vignetting frames the subject and gives a useful spotlight effect. Lightroom has a nice slider allowing this to be done in RAW, but Elements now has perfectly usable versions in its guided mode and in the filter named Camera Distortion.

The final image won't win prizes, nor should it be enlarged much beyond 4×6, but it is fully satisfying as a record of a rare experience. The Great Tinamou is a weirdly impressive creature, and must have the largest body-to-head ratio of any bird I've come across. I'm glad to have seen it in the gloom, and to have trusted today's awesome photographic equipment to give me the proof.

**Equipment Notes**

*Camera*: Nikon D7100, set to aperture priority and RAW. This camera is now getting a bit long in the tooth; the D500 clearly does a better job in low light, as was evident when the shutter of my son's D500 fired away happily in extremely low lighting conditions where my 7100 struggled. I'll get the D510 when it comes out.

*Lens*: Tamron 150–600 5.6–6.3 G2, set to wide open. The first generation of this lens was too soft to be recommended, but the G2 is a marvel, and unlike the long lenses made for professional sports photographers, is within the financial reach of hobbyists.

*Program*: Photoshop Elements 2020. New editions of the program appear annually, and I was surprised how much it has advanced since my 2015 version; this persuaded me not to switch to Lightroom and its monthly payments for eternity. But since processing this shot, I've been experimenting with Sharpen AI from Topaz Labs to see if it does a better job with camera shake and soft focus. Since sharpness is crucial in bird photography, even a slight improvement would be worth the program's $79 cost. This will be covered in the next edition.

# Briefing 3

*Summary by M. Church, Vancouver*

## Need a Statistician? Hire a Parrot!

Well, not just any parrot: New Zealand Kea (or Keas: the plural form is a bit uncertain) turn out to be very good, if somewhat self-focused, statistical thinkers. At least, they appear to be masters of probabilistic thinking – the basis for statistical expertise. This circumstance was discovered in experiments with a captive group of the birds to test whether or not they possess "domain-general" intelligence (meaning that the birds are able to apply past experience to solve novel problems). This is contrasted with "domain-specific" intelligence, in which responses to problems are essentially fixed. A simpler way to think of the issue is to consider that it contrasts adaptive behaviour with instinctive behaviour. Heretofore, domain-general behaviour has been thought to be restricted to humans and the great apes.

So six Keas (named Blofeld, Bruce, Loki, Neo, Plankton and Taz – Keas definitely have personality) were subjected to a battery of tests that involved guessing, in a binary decision, which choice contained a food reward, given certain prior experience. Before each test, the birds were trained for the test. The key outcome was how many trials would be required for the birds to realize how assuredly to acquire a food reward. In essence, they were being trained to reveal whether they could efficiently judge probabilities. It typically required a dozen or so tests for the birds to solve the problem, which is relatively efficient. The tests subjected the birds to critical variations that required them to make further probabilistic inferences.

In the first test they were shown two jars, one containing a large majority of reward tokens and the other similar majority of non-reward tokens. After training, the birds were presented with one token from each jar, held in a closed fist after extraction from the jars in a manner that revealed the jar but hid the nature of the token. The birds had to indicate their preferred choice. They overwhelmingly chose the sample drawn from the "reward rich" jar. They successfully transferred their observed knowledge of the jars' contents to the best probable choice of a sample from the jars.

A second condition tested whether the birds were keying on absolute numbers of tokens or on relative abundance of reward tokens. Both jars now had the same number of reward tokens, but one had many unrewarding ones and the other few. The birds focused their attention on the jar with the fewer unrewarding tokens, hence greatest probability of a reward. A third test varied the number of unrewarding tokens rather than the reward tokens. The birds then focused their choices on the jar with few unrewarding tokens.

Another test examined whether the birds could understand the implications of a special condition. A physical barrier (a piece of cardboard) was placed in the jars such that half the tokens were above the barrier and half below. One jar had equal numbers of tokens of each type above and below the barrier; the other had a preponderance of reward tokens above the barrier. In a second trial, the condition of the "unbalanced" jar was reversed so that most of the tokens above the barrier were unrewarding. The birds in the first instance focused on the reward-rich upper half jar and, in the second, on the jar with equal halves (and more accessible reward tokens). This is a fairly stiff test of flexible cognitive ability.

In a final test, the Keas were trained to recognize that one of the persons drawing the samples might be biased. In training, the biased sampler went through the motions of drawing a token but held only an empty fist. In the test, the biased sampler then always drew a reward token from a jar containing few (10 in 110) reward tokens; the honest sampler drew tokens from a jar with equal numbers of each type. Three of the birds quickly tumbled to this situation and went consistently with the biased sampler, guaranteeing a reward, despite the reversal from training in the biased sampler's behaviour.

Taken altogether, these results establish Keas as domain-general thinkers, able to transfer experience to solve novel problems. The first three trials showed that Keas use statistically based reasoning on relative proportions, rather than number counts, to assess relative advantage. The next trial showed that they can integrate information about special conditions (here, a physical barrier) into their reasoning, while the last showed that they similarly respond to social behaviour. These results form part of a rapidly expanding knowledge of animal capabilities that show them to be considerably more adaptive and intelligent than we have previously assumed. The new question is "what about other parrots?" One might also think further on corvid behaviour – that other group of birds well-known to be capable of a variety of flexible responses.

**Reference:**

Bastos, A.P.M. and Taylor, A.H. 2020. "Kea show three signatures of domain-general statistical inference," *Nature Communications* 11:828. https://doi.org/10.10.1038/s41467-020-14695-1.

*New Zealand Kea. Creative Commons photograph by Mark Whatmough.*

# Gone Fishing

*Chris Siddle, Vernon*

## My First Boreal Owl

When you live in a small town and the locals learn that you're interested in birds, you become the go-to guy for all things avian. You're the bird guy.

They share their bird stories with you. They ask you to identify a strange (to them) bird they have seen. Or, more exciting, they bring you the dead birds they have found.

My first experiences with the Boreal Owl, a species I had lusted after forever, were frustrating dead-ends. In the winter of 1980–1981 a local fur trapper allowed me to photograph an adult Boreal Owl that had been accidentally killed in a trap along his trapline north-east of Hudson Hope where aspen parklands mix with boreal forest. Ok, that treasured photo became proof of the obvious: there were Boreal Owls in the area, hardly a surprise since I was living in Fort St. John, in BC's north-east.

Reasoning that the boreal forest was possibly too fragmented around Fort St. John where extensive areas had been cleared for agriculture, I stayed for a weekend in February 1983 in the heart of the boreal forest at a remote ranch near the Chowade River off the Alaska Highway. The weekend was a delight, complete with Spruce Grouse, a Northern Goshawk and Boreal Chickadees, my "life" Canada Lynx, the one-and-only bunkhouse I have ever slept in, and delicious homemade cinnamon buns. On Saturday morning my host tossed deer mice to a Northern Hawk Owl that had become habituated to being fed when the rancher was forking hay for his livestock. During a night walk under the northern lights, I heard a very distant Boreal singing, its hollow notes hovering at the edge of audibility. A wonderful weekend but in terms of tick-worthy encounters with a life species, hardly what one would label as a satisfactory experience with a Boreal Owl.

A month later, with the help of his dog, the younger brother of one of my students found a freshly dead Boreal Owl in the snow at Kin Park, Fort St. John, no more than three blocks from my house. If I could have breathed life back into the owl, I would have.

Two years later, also not far from my house, a Boreal Owl blundered its way into a treeless cul de sac to collide with a balcony door. Barb Tootel and her husband, startled from their late evening television viewing by the loud thump, investigated the noise and managed to take a Kodacolor snapshot of a real, live Boreal Owl glaring at them through the glass, just before the bird flew into the night. I saw the photo a few weeks later.

For two and a half more years I had to be the town's bird guy, the man who claimed to be a northerner but also the birder who had never seen a live Boreal Owl. My pain was chronic and severe, my owl-based self-esteem shaky.

*Boreal Owl*
*(Creative Commons photograph – New Hampshire Fish and Game)*

Then came the day when Dennis, my school's automotive teacher, local farmer, and general good guy, reported that he had been hearing an odd vocalization in the extensive woodlands between his house and a local provincial park at Charlie Lake, a few kilometres north of Fort St. John. Dennis knew his local birds. If this call was unusual in Dennis's experience, it was worth investigating, especially since it was March, prime time for a Boreal Owl to be "singing."

Jerry Paille, the senior chemistry teacher, came with me on our first serious nocturnal exploration. Jerry is a keen outdoorsman, tenacious, and is blessed with good night vision. After dark we enter the woods from the edge of Dennis's property. Thirty or forty years previous this undulating land had been burned over, whether purposefully or accidentally I don't know. In a region where land clearing can be as brutally simple as dragging a huge chain between two giant caterpillar tractors, using fire to burn off old growth White Spruce would have been deemed an acceptable practice. Now, in 1988, a young forest of slow-growing aspens covered the hills, with clumps of tall willows and occasional patches of skeletal spruce snags predominating in the deeper swales. Here and there old broken trunks of poplar and spruce that had escaped toppling still stood, especially in one section where the old timber lay in a jumbled confusion of snags and logs.

We pushed our way through the aspens until we could no longer see the road. I played the tape of a Boreal Owl singing its hollow, rising spring whistle. Suddenly close by from out of the darkness about head level something substantially large flashed by and called "skiew." Suffering J, it had to be a Boreal Owl, because that's the call that Boreal Owls utter when irritated, according to the scant literature I had read and reread. I whispered the news to Jerry and, tense now, played the tape again. "Skiew" – the bulky little bird zipped by again. This time Jerry spotted where it landed. For a fleeting half second our flashlight showed the owl in the aspens. The relief for me is enormous, but there was better to come.

But first we had to extract ourselves from the trees. A branch poked me in the face sending my glasses flying into the bush. Fortunately they showed up against the snow crust and Jerry retrieved them for me. I remember feeling lucky that Jerry was along.

The aspens gave way to willows and a jumble of old dead spruce. Now that we were out from the cover of branches we could see the sky and the stars bright overhead. A Boreal Owl's typical spring hooting started up, hollow, spooky, and most importantly loud. We triangulated our way under and over blacked logs stark against the snow to find the snag he was calling from. He was perched in an old cavity, possibly originally dug by a flicker. We dared not move much. The view was perfect, Framed by the pale worn edges of the nest cavity, he remained, calling once more his series of hollow notes, the

song of the still-frozen north, the earliest spring song that echoes across vast Canada's boreal forest.

Fumbling with my camera and flash I managed to take a couple of badly under-exposed pictures. Years later, holding these slides up to a bright light I could barely make out the owl in the cavity surrounded by the silvery wood of the spruce snag, under a starry sky in the otherwise silent March night.

The owl remained in the immediate area of the snag for another nine nights. I was able to show it one night to a friend, Ken Best, who had been on the Chowade River expedition with me plus other abortive searches for the species. However, on 22 March, we discovered that the owl had re-located far to the north of Dennis's property in an inaccessible piece of wooded private land. Our hopes of a female Boreal Owl joining the male to make the cavity a nest were dashed.

Since that first night with Gerry, 32 years ago, I have seen a few more Boreal Owls including two roosting winter transients around Vernon, a vocalizing male on the early-spring plateau above Winfield and a female in a bird box erected by Dick Cannings near Rabbit Lake, east of Oliver. While these sightings have always been exciting, none have come close to the excitement and joy of finding my first Boreal Owl myself.

# Briefing 4

*Summary by M. Church, Vancouver*

## Simpler Landscape, Different Birds

Landscapes farmed intensively are simpler than natural landscapes; they consist of large areas of crop monocultures, sometimes separated by linear hedgerows. Such landscapes may be extensive. They offer almost no variety of food or habitat resources for birds (or, indeed, for any other wildlife). In contrast, almost any natural landscape, with the exception, perhaps, of the driest deserts, offers a rich variety of resources and habitat niches. Landscapes of diversified agriculture, including subsistence farming, may offer a "halfway house" between these two extremes with a variety of land-cover types including trees, shrubs, hedgerows, vegetable and grass crops, and remnant forest not far away.

In 2000 a team of ecologists set out to determine differences in bird-species composition and rate of change in these three land-use types in Costa Rica, a country with notably diverse birdlife and reasonably assured long-term survey possibilities. They classified their landscapes into three categories: "intensive agriculture," "diversified agriculture" and "natural forest" – the latter being a sort of control for the other results. These land-use types were mainly established in the mid-20th century and were more or less stable by 2000.

The scientists defined four life zones: lowland wet-and-dry forest, mid-elevation wet forest and premontane wet forest, yielding 3×4 = 12 landscape units. They established at least three transects in each unit and maintained 48 transects in total. Each transect was visited three times in each wet season and three times in each dry season for 18 years, beginning in 2000. They totaled 281,415 observations of 400 resident and 110 migratory species (510 species in all). Precipitation, temperature and vegetation (satellite derived leaf-area index) were recorded daily for the duration of the surveys.

Two questions were investigated: (1) the magnitude and persistence of long-term changes in bird communities in the three land-use categories, and (2) how changes in climate and vegetation interacted with land-use types to drive changes in bird communities.

Using an index of the similarity of species composition in each year in comparison with that observed in the year 2000, averaged over all sites within each land-use type, it was found that there was no significant trend in bird community composition in the forested sites, though there was a small measure of change in the first six years of the survey. Both the diversified and intensive agriculture sites showed significant declines in similarity, with intensive agriculture being by far most severe. What is perhaps more significant, change continued at an essentially constant rate through the 18 years of the survey, and more than half a century after establishment of the land-use types. Some of the results might arise from random variations in the observations from year to year, particularly for the rarer species, but that cannot explain the persistence of the trend toward greater dissimilarity.

It was observed that, over the 18 years of survey, nectar-feeding birds declined significantly while seed-feeders increased in the agricultural areas, while the composition of insectivores also changed. That these changes are continuing half a century after establishment of the land use strongly suggests that there is a continuing source of pressure for change.

Turning, then, to correlation of these observed trends with climate, no significant effect was detected for forest or diversified agricultural terrains, but there were strong effects in intensive agriculture. Warmer temperatures and drier conditions, exemplified by increasing frequency of seasonal drought, were found to reinforce change in bird communities. Similarly, a relatively low leaf-area index, indicating slower vegetation growth, was associated with increased community change.

While it is well-known that radical changes in land use and land surface condition – particularly ones affecting vegetation cover – have an immediate dramatic effect on bird species composition, the notion that such change can trigger longer-term changes in bird populations that may be associated with additional changing environmental factors is less well appreciated. In the present case, long-term changes were minimal in forest landscapes, implying a degree of resilience in forest habitats against the externally imposed changing climate. But this resilience is apparently lost in radically simplified human landscapes. In the present case, the relatively modest rate of change in landscapes of diversified agriculture is a significant finding for bird conservation possibilities. But the increasingly universal nature of landscape redesign and simplification by humans is a cause for concern. For us in British Columbia, the impact of forest harvesting, a widespread but episodic change in our landscapes is a subject suitable for similar long-term study.

### Reference

Hendershot, J.N. and 7 others. 2020. "Intensive farming drives long-term shifts in avian community composition," *Nature* 579: 393-396.