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A LeConte's Sparrow spotted during the Tumbler Ridge AGM post-trip – see page 3 for details. Photo by John Gordon.

Publisher

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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) or by mail at 10790 Grassland Road, Prince George, BC V2K 5E8.

Submissions may include articles about birding experiences, casual observations about bird behaviour, site guides, photographs, and other topics of broad interest to birders, preferably, but not necessarily, in British Columbia. Overseas trip reports are welcome but should be kept to a maximum of 2,000 words. Deadlines are:

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BCFO members are welcome to include classified ads, of up to 25 words, at no cost.

Photo right

We're currently in the midst of "is it long-billed or short-billed" season. Take a look at the one on the right, photographed on August 20, 2017 at the Shelley lagoons, and see if you can come to a decision.

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Cover Photos

John Gordon writes: The Peace River region is somewhere I had always wanted to visit. Situated in the northern part of British Columbia, the Peace is a three-thousand kilometre round trip journey from Vancouver.

Three days of hard-core birding were slated for June 11–13 following the BCFO convention in Tumbler Ridge.

Twenty birders were split into two groups. Mark Phinney and Brian Paterson were group leaders.

Based in Dawson Creek and led by Brian, our group visited numerous birding hotspots including Swan Lake, Road 201 and McQueen Slough. Day 2 saw us visit Fort St. John where we birded Beaton Park and Boundary Lake, Watson Slough as well as spots in-between.

The LeConte's Sparrow was a target bird for many in the group and thanks to our group leaders everyone had great views. These birds prefer undisturbed wet fields. On reflection I would have preferred to have photographed the bird from more of a side angle but I didn't want to risk flushing it before everyone had had a good view. Thanks to Brian Paterson for getting us on the bird.

The Lazuli Bunting photo (back cover) was taken on my way home on the West Fraser Road just south of Quesnel.

*Photo right: a very young Spotted Sandpiper at the famous Shelley Lagoons, early August 2017.
CNK photo*

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President's Message

Mike McGrenere, President

June was an excellent month for BCFO activities with a two-day field trip in the Quesnel area preceding the AGM, an eventful AGM in Tumbler Ridge where we enjoyed not only the birds but also the dinosaur history of the area and two extension trips which searched for birds in the Fort St. John and Dawson Creek area.

We have two new Board members for the coming year. Gary Davidson was elected at the AGM and it's great

to have a board member from the Kootenay area. Josh Inman expressed an interest in taking over the Treasurer's position at the end of the Tumbler Ridge weekend and has now been appointed as a Board member and as Treasurer.

Members were notified in July that our mailing address has been changed and the mailbox is now located in Langley. Josh lives in Langley and the society mailbox must be close to the Treasurer's residence for ease of checking for bills and cheques that are sent by conventional mail.

It is now time for the Board members to gather together for our annual fall planning meeting. Most of the Board members will be gathering at "the Grass shack" (Jude Grass's residence) in September and some mem-

bers will be connected by Skype. High on the agenda will be planning for the 2018 AGM and conference. It was announced at this year's meeting that we are intending to hold the 2018 AGM in Hope. The dates for the 2018 meeting should be available in the December issue of *BC Birding* and on the BCFO web site.

One other major item for discussion will be the revamping of our constitution and bylaws to conform to the requirements of the Province's new Societies Act. All societies in British Columbia must conform to the requirements of the new act by November 2018. Art Martel is currently preparing draft changes for the Board's consideration. When draft changes have been approved by the Board, they will be sent out to members for review and comments. A new constitution and bylaws will be presented to members at 2018 AGM for approval.

The planning meeting will also be looking at the society finances and examining ways that the revenue might be used; discussing the field trips for the 2018 IOCongress which will be led by BCFO members; considering potential locations for two-day field trips in 2018; and considering the merits of a BCFO birding code of ethics.

Fall migration will be in full swing in September and I hope that everyone will have the opportunity to do some birding in BC or further afield. Maybe you will be lucky enough to find a rare bird for review by the BC Bird Records Committee.



Steve Cannings Award

The Steve Cannings Award for 2017 was presented at our AGM to Dr Art Martell of Courtenay, current BCFO member, who served for many years as a biologist and administrator with the Canadian Wildlife Service and Environment Canada. We will have an article outlining Art's many accomplishments and his contributions to bird study and bird conservation in the next issue of BC Birding.

Photo (Art Martell left, Mike McGrenere right) by John Gordon.

Short Notes

Reminder

The new BCFO mailing address is:

P.O. Box 61670
RPO Brookwood
Langley, BC
V3A 1K0

Expedition in Mind?

If you have been contemplating an expedition needing more participants (Haida Gwaii? Atlin? Triangle Island?), feel free to contact a board member (page 2) with the idea, to see if it might become a BCFO-sponsored and promoted activity.

Farewell Thayer's Gull

Lumpers scored a rare victory in the latest AOS (formerly the AOU) checklist supplement: Thayer's has been lumped with Iceland Gull. Hoary and Common Redpolls, though, survived the voting, and splitters got one back with the split of Cassia Crossbill from Red Crossbill.

At last we no longer have to wonder why Chats are classified as warblers, as they've been given their own family. We also have to take care now over the spelling of "LeContes" which is changed to a single word. For more details see blog.aba.org/2017/07/2017-aos-supplement.html.

Rare Bird Alerts

Among the usual flow of rare birds reported at bcbirdalert.blogspot.ca the most surprising of late must be the Curve-billed Thrasher found and photographed on July 7, 2017 at Francois Lake. This is the first sighting of the bird in BC, but is not the first rarity found by Keith Walker at Francois Lake. This spot, in the centre of the province near Burns Lake, regularly comes up with surprising finds, but not normally as surprising as this.

Young Ornithologist Workshops

Bird Studies News, August 2017 edition, leads with a story on the Young Ornithologists' Workshop at Long

Point Bird Observatory. Logan Lalonde of Kelowna was one of the six participants.

This training program began in the 1970s. Each year, the Doug Tarry Student Awards are granted to six applicants aged 13–17 from across Canada, covering the costs of the workshop. ->

George and the Accentor

At the Cranbrook AGM, Past President George Clulow was presented with this memento of the discovery of a Siberian Accentor in Surrey with Mandy Lu (see *BC Birding*, Vol 26,1). The occasion was the completion of George's term as President of BCFO with "many thanks for his outstanding leadership, guidance, and innovative contributions." Both photographs, of the framed shot and George holding it after the presentation, are by John Gordon.



To date, more than 150 teenagers have taken part. Program alumni are pursuing careers in research, conservation, environmental consulting, and some are leading birding tours. Several work for, or have worked at, Bird Studies Canada.

Logan, along with Liron Gertsman (Vancouver) and Joshua Glant (see page 20) also took part in The Cornell Lab of Ornithology Young Birders Event, July 6 – 9, 2017 in Ithaca, New York.

In addition, BCFO Young Birder Cole Gaerber (Vancouver) took part in the week-long Beaverhill's Bird Observatory's Youth Ornithologist Workshop in Alberta. This workshop, running from July 30 to August 5, 2017, is for young birders 15–18, and BBO covers all direct costs of the workshop including food, travel for field trips, and professional instruction. More information can be found at

<http://beaverhillbirds.com/programs/young-ornithologist-workshop/>.

Bird Banding Updates

Mugaha Marsh

Between opening on July 19th and August 10th, 990 birds had been banded at Mugaha Marsh near McKenzie. By far the most common were American Redstarts (176), the next most common being Swainson's Thrushes (62), Least Flycatchers and Tennessee Warblers

(58 each), and Magnolia Warblers (57). 48 species had to date been banded. To receive reports, head to

www.mackenzienatureobservatory.ca/documents/reports.htm.

Vaseaux Lake Observatory

The banding station opened on August 1st, with high water from spring flooding restricting the number of nets to eight rather than the usual fourteen. During the first week, 245 birds of 29 species were banded, including a Sharp-shinned Hawk and a Sora.

In the second week, two more nets were opened, in good time for a Cedar Waxwing invasion – 62 were banded. Over the week, a total of 219 birds were banded, of 24 species, including a Black-chinned Hummingbird.

More information can be found at <https://vlbo.wordpress.com>.

Colony Farm

A detailed account of the summer's activities of the Vancouver Avian Research Centre can be found at:

http://www.birdvancouver.com/blog_summer_2017.html

Included in this update is an account of their Bird of the Month: a Rufous/Anna's Hummingbird hybrid, one of two netted at the bird banding station this summer. The excellent photographs and discussion make for fascinating reading.



Hybridizing Sapsuckers

And on the topic of hybrids: in a note to ncnbird, the listserv for central BC birders, Jack Bowling wrote:

"Many know that the central interior of BC is a melting pot for three of the Sphyrapicus species of sapsuckers: Red-breasted, Yellow-bellied, and Red-naped. Mutts of the three possible combinations and numerous back-crosses are becoming more frequently seen around Prince George. The pair in my yard is comprised of one that looks like a typical Red-breasted (but may not be genetically) and one that looks nothing like any of the others (photo, above, taken on the yard birch tree). Obviously some Red-breasted ancestry there, but I'm not sure of its other genetic path. As with Flickers here, it is likely that pure individuals will dwindle in numbers over time."

In immediate support of Jack's note, the only sapsucker banded this year at Mugaha Marsh, north of Prince George (see above), was classified as a hybrid.

Newly banded Magnolia Warbler at Mugaha Marsh. Photo by Sharlene James.



BCFO Two-day Trips

Mini-Pelagic October 28–29, 2017

The first day of this trip will be a return journey from Victoria to Port Angeles on the MV Coho, spotting pelagic species along the Juan de Fuca Strait. The second day will explore birding spots in and around the Victoria area.

Leader

Mike McGrenere, mi8624@telus.net,
250-658-8624

Registration

Adrian Leather, q-birds@xplornet.com,
250-249-5561

Itinerary

Saturday morning: Meet at Coho Terminal, Superior Street, by the legislative buildings at 09:45, for ticket purchase and signing BCFO waivers. Depart from Victoria at 10:30, arriving at Port Angeles at midday.

Lunch will be enjoyed in a park in Port Angeles. (Please bring a bag lunch.)

Saturday afternoon: Depart Port Angeles at 2:00 p.m. arriving back in Victoria at 3:30 p.m.

How the Trips Work

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

- Day 1: all-day birding and then evening get together at a restaurant to recap the day and tally species.
- Day 2: morning birding, afternoon optional birding.

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: Members \$10 per person; non-members \$40, which includes BCFO membership.



Heermann's Gull spotted on an earlier BCFO two-day mini pelagic trip. CNK photo.

Saturday Evening: Tally-up in Victoria. Venue to be arranged on the trip, according to where folks are staying, and how many attend.

Sunday morning: Meet at 8:30 a.m. at Ogden Point Breakwater. We will first be birding along the Victoria waterfront for rockpipers, gulls, and other waterbirds. We then head for the Martindale area farmland, and/or chase any rarities present.

Lunch: again, please bring bag lunch.

Sunday afternoon: We'll be birding the Victoria waterfront to Saanich Peninsula, ending close to the ferry terminal so mainland folks can depart from there.

Notes

- Please bring your passport. Identification is required to enter the US, and return to Canada. (Immigration and customs on both trips.)
- Walk-on passenger fare is \$37 (US) for the return trip.
- Be prepared to bird at the bow of the ship and dress appropriately.

Below: Adrian Leather's pre-conference group found a Spruce Grouse high up in a tree – well worth getting warbler neck. Photo by John Gordon.





A Northern Mockingbird photographed by John Gordon at Dunlevy Ranch during the pre-conference trip.

AGM Pre-conference Trip Report

Brian Self

Quesnel Area, June 7–8, 2017

These two-day trips leading up to our AGM and conference have proved popular, are often over-subscribed and always looked forward to by the lucky few who make the cut. This one was all of the above.

Thirty birders met in Quesnel on Wednesday morning, were quickly sorted into two groups and on the road just after 6:00 a.m. on what promised to be a hot day. We were very ably led by Adrian Leather and Brian Murland, who arranged for us to bird an identical route in opposite directions; we would meet and pass somewhere in the middle of the day to compare notes and bragging rights.

Mike, Josh and I were in Brian's group in five vehicles and headed out of town to cross the Fraser River and turn south onto West Fraser Road which parallels the river to Rudy Johnson Bridge at Soda Creek, north of Williams

Lake. We stopped at many spots along this wide paved road of aspen and fir habitat, cleared in places for horse and cattle grazing. Offering nice and birdy habitat, Narcosli Creek produced the first of the many Least Flycatchers and Northern Waterthrushes; a second stop, Mountain Chickadees and Red Crossbills. Along Redekop Road we found both Sora and Virginia Rail in a pond on private land that our leaders had gained access to. Jean and Dave Hall's farm added Evening Grosbeak; Lands Road, which leads down to the Fraser, added our first Black-chinned Hummer of the day, two vireo, five swallow species and a Western Kingbird, which sat on a nest atop a power pole. An hour later we were watching two more Western Kingbirds bringing food into another nest on Marguerite Ferry Road.

The forecast heat was developing nicely and at lunchtime birders were seeking shade as the thermometer approached the 30 C mark. We re-crossed the Fraser and headed down into the old Soda Creek Townsite, and I wondered why anyone would abandon such a nice piece of habitat as this. Economics probably forced the move for some, but

on a hot sunny day like this it was hard to comprehend. A beautiful spot.

Somewhere along the Soda Creek–Macalister Road, someone spotted something long-tailed flying across the road so we all turned back and eventually found a Mockingbird perched in Aspen/Birch. There is a lot to be said for many eyes when birding. Shortly after we turned into Dunaway Ranch where hummingbird banders from Quesnel Birding Club had been in action during the cooler part of the morning, far too hot now at 3:30 to 4:00 p.m. Diane Dunaway very generously fed us cold watermelon and provided chairs for us to watch the feeders out back. Calliope and Rufous duly turned up. This had been a well-organised day.

We were back into Quesnel just before 7:00 p.m. after stops at a pond on Edmunds Road and Dragon Lake on the edge of town. Beer and supper in the pub followed a very good day's birding.

Thursday was spent travelling Hwy 26 east to Wells, Barkerville and Bowron Lakes. The leaders exchanged groups, and as this was out and back along the same route, we headed out an hour apart. We drew the long straw and

left at 7:00 a.m.

Our first stop was Sorum Road by the Cottonwood River, a good stop with a dozen species singing simultaneously. There were Lincoln's and White-throated Sparrows, Waterthrushes, Redstarts and Ruby-crowned Kinglets all at full throttle. Well, O.K. maybe the Redstarts weren't at full throttle.

A stop at the T-junction with 2400 Road delivered very good looks at Tennessee Warblers, a life bird for some, and Varied Thrush singing nearby. Stanley Pond alongside the highway produced great looks at a singing Blackpoll Warbler which perched atop a fir for as long as we wanted to admire it. Scoped looks were even better and another lifer for many.

By now the clouds had built up and we were into rain showers with temperatures 10 C cooler than the previous day. We caught up with the 6:00 a.m. starters for lunch in the Jack of Clubs Lake parking lot on the edge of Wells, compared notes and moved on. A pleasant walk through The Meadows in Wells showed us Cliff and Barn Swallows collecting mud for nests, plus Evening Grosbeaks and a lone Red

Crossbill. On the drive out of town there was a Sandhill Crane in a marshy area just off the side of the road: this bird was stained almost orange and looked a bit bizarre that colour. Breeding Sandhills stain their back and wings with mud, and the clay around Wells is just the colour of this bird.

We headed down the gravel road to Bowron Lake Provincial Park stopping at times to look and listen. Adrian saw a large bird clatter into the top of a Spruce and we eventually found said bird, a female Spruce Grouse appropriately enough, 70 feet up in the tree. The park H.Q. area produced Common Mergansers, Spotted Sandpipers, a flock of Pine Siskins, four species of swallows and a Red-eyed Vireo.

On the drive back to Wells, we stopped a few times to play song for Boreal Chickadee without success, ran afoul of the road crews resurfacing and grading the road, so left them to it. The rain set in properly about now, becoming torrential at times and windy. We were back into town before 6:00 p.m.

This was a very successful two-day

trip. We managed to identify 130 species mainly due to the hard work put in by Adrian and Brian who had thoroughly scouted the routes, contacted private homeowners and ranchers to gain access to land and water, and worked hard on the day to identify unfamiliar bird song for all of us out-of-towners. Our sincere thanks to you both.

No Justa Birds Here!

A priceless lesson learned while on a guided trip down south:

"There are no Justa Birds on my trips."

Laura Paulson, bird guide extraordinaire for the Santa Ana NWR, South Texas, offered this gem of wisdom to her troupe with a congenial smile.

It was a reminder, worth sharing, that we should take common birds seriously. We learned never to say "it's Justa Robin," "It's Justa Cowbird," or even, for those of us from the north, "Justa Nuther Raven."

Photo by John Gordon.



AGM Trip Report

Tumbler Ridge – Brassey Creek, June 10

John Gordon

Birding with birders can be a most interesting experience. Normally I photograph on my own or car-pool with another photographer. We might spend a morning or sometimes all day stalking one species. Sometimes we come up blank, other days we capture something that makes the outing really worthwhile.

The advantages of joining a birding group are many. The first is you'll see a lot more species – sometimes over a hundred species in a single day. A group led by an experienced leader with local knowledge is the key to finding difficult species. Our group leader in Tumbler Ridge was renowned birder Mark Phinney. His specialized knowledge led us to a number of eastern species not normally found in BC. A second group was led by Brian Paterson, another excellent birder.

We had two mornings of birding before the business part of the BCFO annual conference. There were a number of trips arranged and I chose the Brassey Creek option. Brassey



Tennessee Warbler spotted at Brassey Creek. Photo by John Gordon.

Creek is a forty-minute drive north of Tumbler Ridge. When we arrived it looked just like any other areas we had just driven by. Obviously Mark had scouted out the location and was able to pinpoint a number of species before many of us could even see them. Our first stop was a gravel pit where we soon found several Wilson's Snipe, Lincoln's Sparrows and a Townsend's Solitaire.

It was at Brassey Creek Road that many of us got our first lifer of the trip. Mark took us into the forest of aspen

and fir; the understory, he explained, would be ideal for vireos and warblers.

Soon enough Mark has us on a Philadelphia Vireo, a lifer for me and many in the party.

The blue skies and warmth of Saturday were replaced by torrential rain on Sunday. Despite that we still went out but the inclement weather meant the birding wasn't as good, but that's how it goes sometimes.

Overall the convention was a great success: great company; new contacts made; two lifers in the bag – and the added excitement of leaving for Dawson Creek for four more days of hardcore birding.

A birder's dream!



Left: a Philadelphia Vireo photographed by John Gordon at Brassey Creek. Eastern vireos and warblers were targets for a number of AGM attendees. The northeast of the province offers a wide range of species rarely or never seen in the rest of the province, amply repaying the long drive.

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. Information on additional meetings is listed in the bimonthly *Ornithological Newsletter* at www.birdmeetings.org and on the BIRD-NET website at <http://www.nmnh.si.edu/BIRDNET/ornith/birdmeet.html>.

For most meetings, festivals, and other events, the website is the main source of information, and registration can often 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.

2107 Events

Sept. 1-3-- 31st ANNUAL OREGON SHOREBIRD FESTIVAL, Charleston, Oregon (near Coos Bay). Field trips will include a pelagic trip, and featured evening speakers are Noah Strycker and Paul Bannick. For information and to register, visit the festival website at: <https://www.oregonshorebirdfestival.org/>.

Sept. 2-- First WESTPORT SEABIRDS pelagic birding trip of the fall season from Westport, WA. This is the first of 8 trips scheduled in September and October 2017. For information and to sign up for a trip, please visit the Westport Seabirds webpage at <http://www.westportseabirds.com>.

Sept. 2-- First OREGON PELAGIC TOURS pelagic birding trip of the fall. Four trips are scheduled from September 2 through October 28, plus one in December. Trips depart from

Charleston or Newport, OR. For info and to make reservations, visit the webpage at <http://www.oregonpelagictours.com/p/schedule.html>.

Sept. 15-17-- OREGON BIRDING ASSOCIATION ANNUAL MEETING, at the Malheur Field Station, near Burns, OR. For information and to register, check the OBA website at <http://www.orbirds.org/2017annualmeeting.html>.

Sept. 15-17-- PUGET SOUND BIRD FESTIVAL, Edmonds, WA. For information and to register, check the festival website at <http://www.pugetsoundbirdfest.org>, or contact Jennifer Leach at the City of Edmonds Parks Dept. (phone 425-771-0227), or email her at jennifer.leach@edmondswa.gov.

Sept. 21-23-- FALL GENERAL MEETING, BC NATURE, Vernon, BC, hosted by the North Okanagan Naturalists. For information and to register, visit the BC Nature conference website at <http://www.bcnature.ca/fgm-2017-vernon/>, or contact the office at manager@bcnature.ca.

Sept. 21-25-- WASHINGTON ORNITHOLOGICAL SOCIETY ANNUAL CONFERENCE, Semiahmoo Resort, Blaine, WA. For information and to register, check the WOS website (<http://wos.org/annual-conference/current-year>).

Sept. 23-27-- 24th ANNUAL CONFERENCE OF THE WILDLIFE SOCIETY, Albuquerque, NM. For information, check the TWS conference page at wildlife.org/learn/conferences-2.

Sept. 28- Oct. 1-- WESTERN BIRD BANDING ASSOCIATION annual meeting, Cave Junction, OR. The meeting will be based at the Siskiyou Field Institute near Cave Junction. For information and to register, visit the website at http://www.westernbirdbanding.org/meeting_2017.html.

Oct. 6-8-- 18th annual RIDGEFIELD BIRDS AND BLUEGRASS FESTIVAL, Ridgefield, WA (near Vancouver, WA). For information, check the festival webpage at <https://ridgefieldfriends.org/events/birdfest-bluegrass>, or contact the Friends of Ridgefield NWR by phone at 360-609-0658, by

Late Brood

Gordon Brown had an unusual event take place in the lilac six feet from his deck: a Red-eyed Vireo decided to have either a second or very late first brood. Fledge was August 15, apparently among the latest on record. One of his photographs is to the right.



© Gordon F. Brown

email at ridgefieldfriends@gmail.com , or by snail mail at PO Box 1022, Ridgefield, WA 98642.

Nov. 8-12-- RAPTOR RESEARCH FOUNDATION annual meeting, Salt Lake City, Utah, hosted by HawkWatch International. For information, check the RRF website at <http://www.raptorresearchfoundation.org/conferences/upcoming-conferences>, or contact the chairperson, Dave Oleyar, by email at dolyar@hawkwatch.org , or by phone at (206) 972-0163.

Nov. 18-19-- FRASER VALLEY BALD EAGLE FESTIVAL, Harrison Mills, BC. For information, check the festival website at <http://fraservalleybaldeaglefestival.ca> , send an email to info@fraservalleybaldeaglefestival.ca , phone 604-826-7361, or write the Mission Chamber of Commerce, 34033 Louheed Highway, Mission, BC V2V 5X8.

Dec. 14 to Jan. 5 (2018)-- 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*.

further information, visit the festival website at <https://www.wingsovertherockies.org/> .

June 7-9-- WILSON ORNITHOLOGICAL SOCIETY annual meeting at the Chattanooga Convention Centre, Chattanooga, Tennessee (advance notice). For further information, check the WOS website at <http://www.wilsonsoc.org/wilsonsocmeetings> .

Below: Katya Kondratyuk with her 2017 BCFO Young Birder Award plaque.

You can see some of Katya's bird and wildlife photographs at <https://www.flickr.com/photos/141005852@N07/>

2018 Events

Feb. 21-24-- 45th ANNUAL MEETING, PACIFIC SEABIRD GROUP, La Paz, Baja California Sur, Mexico. For information and to register, visit the conference website at <https://pacificseabirdgroup.org/annual-meeting> .

Mar. 23-25-- 21st ANNUAL OTHELLO SANDHILL CRANE FESTIVAL, Othello, WA. For information, check the festival website at www.othellosandhillcranefestival.org, or contact the Grant County Conservation District at 1107 South Juniper Way, Moses Lake, WA 98837 (phone 509-765-9618).

Apr. 5-8-- HARNEY COUNTY MIGRATORY BIRD FESTIVAL, Burns, Oregon (near Malheur National Wildlife Refuge). For further information, check the festival website at <http://www.migratorybirdfestival.com/> .

Apr. 9-14-- 136th STATED MEETING, AMERICAN ORNITHOLOGICAL SOCIETY, Tucson, Arizona (advance notice). For further information, check the AOS website at <http://www.americanornithology.org/content/aos-2018-meeting> .

Apr. 27-29-- GRAYS HARBOUR SHOREBIRD FESTIVAL, Hoquiam, WA. For further information, check the festival website at <http://www.shorebirdfestival.com/> .

May 7-13-- WINGS OVER THE ROCKIES BIRDING FESTIVAL, Invermere, BC. For



Avian Encounters

Grateful Hummer

Gordon F. Brown

In June of a typical year, if you were cold and wet you'd probably be in the West Kootenays. On one of those typically rainy afternoons we happened to look out the patio door, only to find what we thought was a dead Rufous male on the landing. There wasn't a feeder on that side of the house, and while hummingbirds hadn't been among those who tended to hit the glass, we had to assume that's what had happened.

The poor little guy was on his side,



Photo by Jeannie Brown.

drenched and with his lower wing stuck to the surface, so I went out to collect the tiny body preparatory to a decent burial. To my amazement, however, when down on hands and knees I discovered in the little breast faint movement that would surely soon be stilled by hypothermia. Realizing my only option was an attempt to warm him, I carried him to the deck and sat at the picnic table with him loosely cupped between my hands.

Initially, he lay motionless on his side, but after thirty minutes had struggled to a sitting position. The extent of his injuries was unknowable, but at least he seemed to be reviving; although his wings drooped away from his body, tips resting on my palm, neither appeared to be damaged.



After another half hour he was dry, sitting alertly with head raised and wings folded back into position. I let him stay that way for quite a while longer hoping he would take off, but he chose not to. Having no idea what else to do, I finally walked over to the edge of the deck and gently tossed him into the air, thinking that if he could fly, he would. He did.

The next day at about the same time, a scotch and I happened again to be sitting at the picnic table, when all of a sudden a Rufous male exploded into close view. He hovered 18 inches from my face for a few seconds, and then left as quickly as he'd come. I wasn't wear-

ing red, and so felt justified in accepting the gesture as a "thank you."

Mystery Bird

The character above gave the Editor a surprise on June 29, 2017, when it visited his feeder station. Funny looking Goldfinch? No, it's a leucistic Pine Siskin.

When not rescuing hummingbirds, Gordon Brown might be seen monitoring a Bald Eagle nest, and using his Nikon 500 for great shots such as this.



Briefing 1

The Most Perfect Thing*

Birds' eggs! Perfectly round in two dimensions, but more or less elongate in the third dimension, and more or less squashed at one end, much like a water droplet about to fall from the tap. So fascinating in their variations of shape and markings that they formerly were the quarry of fanatical egg collectors (a pursuit that is now illegal almost everywhere). Most of the more extensive egg collections of the 19th and early 20th centuries reside today in museums: the zoological museum at Berkeley, California, possesses more than 49,000 eggs. Now a group of six ornithologists has examined the eggs of 1,400 species from that collection in an attempt to determine why egg shape varies.

Egg shape can be defined by two characteristics. First, how relatively elongated is the egg along its longest axis – how “elliptical is it?” Second, how asymmetric is it in long section – how squashed, or pointy – is it at one end? There is a huge range of combinations of “ellipticity” and “asymmetry,” but certain combinations cannot occur: an egg with low ellipticity (i.e., it's nearly spherical) cannot be strongly asymmetric. Consider your ordinary breakfast egg (for most of us, the product of *Gallus gallus domesticus*). It is somewhat elliptical, but exhibits only very subtle asymmetry – it's a good imitation of an ellipsoid (hence the deliberately absurd satire of the “big-endians” and the “little-endians” in *Gulliver's Travels*). The most nearly spherical eggs appear to be those of the Brown Hawk Owl (*Ninox scutulata*) of South Asia; the large ratites (ostriches and allies) also produce near-spherical eggs. The most asymmetric are those of the Least Sandpiper (*Calidris minutilla*). The most jointly extreme eggs (highly elliptical and highly asymmetric) are the famously pointy-ended eggs of the Common Murre (*Uria aalge*).

Why do eggs vary in this way? There are lots of functional speculations. For example, “seabirds' eggs are strongly pointy so they roll in circles and so do not easily fall off the cliffs where the birds nest....” “More or less asymmetry allows eggs in various clutch sizes to fit neatly into a

nest” (and allows the brooding parent to sit comfortably over them).... But they are all nonsense. It turns out that egg shape doesn't even depend upon the shell. The combination of two factors controls egg shape. First the ratio of the pressure exerted on the egg (and carried by the membrane that encloses the fluid content and the chick embryo) along the long axis of the egg versus the radial confining pressure as the egg travels along the bird's oviduct. Second, the pressure difference across the membrane as the egg grows and squeezes against the oviduct walls. The membrane stretches and adapts its overall shape to contain these forces so that the egg is safely delivered. The calcareous shell simply encloses the finished shape as the egg is laid.

So what determines those pressures and why do they vary from bird to bird? The researchers propose that the degree of adaptation for flight, perhaps the most basic determinant of a bird's overall body plan, is the underlying control. Birds that are highly streamlined for extended flight have narrower pelvises, so the female oviduct is more confined. Aerial insectivores and long-distance migrants accordingly produce the more highly elliptical eggs. And in the more extreme cases, the only way to fit a developing chick inside a narrow egg is to make the egg asymmetric. In contrast, sedentary and flightless birds produce more spherical eggs. So swifts produce highly elliptical eggs, while those inter-hemispheric travelers, the sandpipers, produce elliptical-asymmetric eggs. In contrast, sedentary tropical birds (think trogons, parrots), ratites, our domestic chickens, and most owls produce relatively spherical eggs. Penguins and sea birds such as the murre appear to be an exception, but their need to fly underwater dictates

their streamlined body plan and their production of elliptical eggs.

The shape of a bird's eggs is finely adapted, then, to the lifestyle demands on the bird's body, a striking example of the efficiency of Nature's designs.

*As described by T.W. Higginson in the *Atlantic Monthly* for 1862 and adopted for the title of a popular book about birds' eggs by T.R. Birkhead, *The most perfect thing: inside (and outside) a bird's egg* (Bloomsbury, 2016).

References

Stoddard, M.C. + five others. 2017. Avian egg shape: form, function, and evolution. *Science* 356: 1249-1254.

Spottiswoode, C.N. 2017. The most perfect thing, explained. *Ibid.* (A commentary on the principal article: much the more readable of the two pieces.)

Summary by M. Church

Below: the new bird blind at Vaseaux Lake, officially opened on May 12, 2017.



Scoters, and Alpine Birding Lessons Learned

Charles Helm

I have learned the hard way to make no assumptions with regard to alpine birding near Tumbler Ridge. In the early 1990s, soon after I arrived here, I went skiing up to one of the summits of Mt. Spieker at the end of winter, and found ten Golden Eagles flying by. I thought that was really cool, and then thought no more about it. Soon afterwards my friend Peter Sherrington encountered something similar further south, asked the right questions, went back for more sightings, and thus identified the wonderful Golden Eagle migration along the Rockies. I had been in the right place at the right time; if only I had asked the right questions....

Likewise, I wonder how many alpine falcons I assumed were Peregrine, before I realized that Prairie Falcon is way commoner here in the mountains. I had made an assumption about what should be the most likely, without properly using my birding skills.

This bad habit extended to looking at the Cigar Galaxy through a friend's backyard telescope one night in January 2014, and remarking to him about what seemed to be a star within it. I assumed that it was a nearby star in a direct line between me and that galaxy. In fact, I was probably the first person to see what is now known as the Cigar Galaxy Supernova, as it was only announced in the media a few days later. Again, if only....

I have also learned that birders are few and far between in these high elevation haunts, so that observations up in the mountains are potentially of more value than those in areas highly frequented by birders, where there may be less left to discover. And there may therefore be lots of phenomena that perhaps have never been recorded before, just waiting to be identified. So there was no excuse for forgetting my binoculars when I recently climbed the local mountain known as The Terminator. I didn't need them when I got up close to a herd of mountain goats, but what was that flock of a dozen big white birds flying far off in the distance at great height? Pelicans, swans...? Unfortunately, I just don't know, but it

would have been something special to document.

On a better note, I do document every alpine shorebird I encounter, something which usually happens in August. This task is actually easy, because they are all Baird's Sandpipers. These birds are undoubtedly my favourite peeps – I think of them as loving their tundra breeding habitat so much that some of them choose to follow it right along the spine of the Americas to their wintering grounds. Why just Baird's and not the other peeps? I don't know the answer, but I do know that this phenomenon is poorly described and acknowledged. At least I am thinking critically on this one.

This brings me to the topic of scoters. It starts off badly yet again. On July 30th 2016 I was the trip leader for a hike to Windfall Lake, around treeline in the mountains above Tumbler Ridge. The weather was bad, and I had to deal with a bunch of near-hypothermic hikers. So when I noticed a flock of scoters in the middle distance on the lake, I had other seemingly more important issues on my mind, like peeling off layers of my own clothing to keep others warm. Yet I do recall thinking that this was unusual and unexpected.

But then on August 7th 2017 Sandy Corsi, a hiking friend, sends me some duck photos that she has taken earlier that day at Windfall Lake. I take one look, consult a few books, and come up with my ID. But it is so unlikely that I begin second-guessing myself. I therefore send the photos on to PR_NAT (the northeastern BC birding group) for help, without mentioning my thoughts. My accomplished birding friends Jack Bowling and Mark Phinney come up with the same conclusion as I have: Black Scoter, possibly in eclipse plumage. Extremely rare inland, just a handful of known sightings. A new bird for the Tumbler Ridge checklist.

Jack says that they are most likely male, and that scoter molting lakes are little known. And he mentions a theory that the males leave the sub-Arctic and head for the high mountain lakes to molt where they will be safer from predators while flightless.

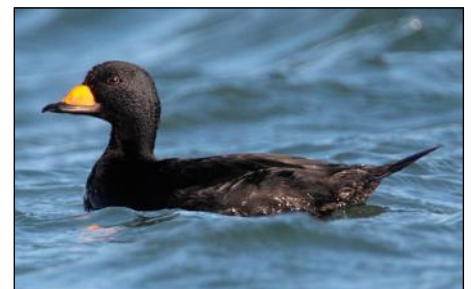
Sandy then tells me there were about twenty ducks in the flock, and

sends more pictures. There are definitely some Surf Scoters too, so it seems to be a mixed flock of males. Sandy then drops a clincher: they were whistling incessantly, to the point of irritating her. Our literature sources state that only males whistle, and that Black Scoter is far more vocal than Surf Scoter.

I now need to apply the alpine lessons I have learned from the past to this present situation. I should not assume that this is a freak sighting. I should question whether this could be something widespread that has eluded observation in the past because of a relative lack of high-elevation birders. Perhaps because my friends and I have built a trail to Windfall Lake and built campsites there, observations like this are now being made. If Baird's Sandpipers are unique among shorebirds as some of them choose to migrate above tree-line, could scoters be the Baird's equivalent among ducks? Could populations of the enigmatic Black Scoter, which breeds on tundra lakes, choose to follow chains of alpine lakes before heading for their West Coast wintering grounds?

I don't know the answers to these questions, at least not yet. But it is evident that little is known about possible interior migration routes for the western population of the Black Scoter, and I think that two consecutive years of late July–early August scoter sightings on Windfall Lake are suggestive of something significant. And I know that if I study this further over time and place, I will constructively use the hard birding lessons I have learned along the way.

Below: Black Scoter, courtesy of Creative Commons.



Better eBirding

Chris Siddle sent out two important emails on the BCintbird listserv when in July he took over another region as eBird moderator. They are well worth repeating here, as most birders won't have appreciated the complexities of eBird moderation.

Email 1

After doing a terrific job for three years, Rick Howie has retired as the eBird sightings reviewer for the Thompson/Nicola and I have taken his place. There is a large backlog of unverified sightings that I am currently working through.

Undocumented sightings, which would be sightings of rare or unusual species that are not supported by photos or carefully written field descriptions of the bird, are numerous, so numerous that I feel a note about eBird documentation is in order.

Since eBird as a program is essentially "an open campus" and anyone, regardless of the birding experience and bird knowledge the person may or may not have, can go online and can claim to have seen anything, the program is only as good as the details that support each sighting. My job is to evaluate the details and decide whether the sighting is valid or invalid. I can't do my job if the sighting comes with no details (physical description of the bird) or photo attached.

Many birders in B.C. neglect to append any details at all to their sightings. This means that not only are many potentially valuable sightings lost but the reviewer's workload becomes very heavy as he or she may feel compelled to write to the observer to ask for details. This involves drafting an email, waiting for a response, and in some cases entering into an extended correspondence.

As an eBird reviewer currently responsible for the Peace River, the Columbia-Shuswap, Nicola-Thompson, and the North Okanagan, I simply do not have the time to ask for details, when they should have been provided in the first place. I tend to simply inval-

idate unsupported sightings.

In a future email that I will soon post I will describe what constitutes acceptable details and how and where to post them within the eBird program.

If you are an eBirder, please make sure that you read the very valuable "how-to" notes that you can find in the Help section of the eBird site. Thank you.

Email 2

If you have used the bird sightings program *eBird*, you have noticed that next to each bird species is a button labelled Add Details. Press that button and you will find an expandable space beneath the species' name where you can enter a physical description of the bird that you saw. The objective is to enter a brief but detailed description based upon your impressions at the time of the sighting. This brief description needs to be written so that it will convince the eBird reviewer that you know your stuff.

Hopefully you're not insulted by a reviewer questioning your sighting. Remember, as a program eBird is open to anyone and everyone, from the rawest beginner who has never opened a bird book to the most advanced expert, from people who are guessing at a bird's identity to people who know most North American species and have seen examples of their local species literally thousands of times. As the instrument of citizen science, eBird must contain verifiable sightings, not best guesses, and there are only two ways that a sighting can be verified:

1. the reviewer is convinced by your details that you really did see such-and-such a species
2. you attach to the checklist a recognizable photograph you took of the bird at the time of the sighting.

Please note – you may not "borrow" a photo of a bird that "looks just like your bird" from the internet or even from your own collection of bird photos. You must use a photo you took of the bird at the same time and place that your sighting refers to.

For reasons I don't fully understand, many people think Details should be filled in with information like who you were with at the time, the optics you

were using, the so-called birding reputations of the people you were with, whether you had a dog with you on your walk, I have read it all, and almost none of it is what I as a reviewer want to read. So I'm going to provide some examples, good and bad, strong and weak, of field descriptions as models what to and what not to write.

For which species do you write details:

- Species not on the local lists, which means that they are very rare or never before recorded in your area.
- Normally occurring species that you have seen earlier or later, outside their normal pattern of occurrence.
- Confusing species like female gold-eyes, swifts, female and immature hummingbirds, juvenile sparrows, most shorebirds, Plegadis ibises, female-type ducks especially Cinnamon teals vs Blue-winged teals, Greater and Lesser scaups, Golden vs immature Bald Eagles, Cooper's vs Sharp-shinned hawks, Northern Goshawk, and so it goes. This list I will expand upon in a future email.

When I submit a list I will err on the side of caution and if I think my list will be strengthened by a description I will write one based upon the notes I made in my notebook at the time of the sighting. This morning, for example, I saw my first Baird's Sandpiper of the season. This is what I scribbled in my notebook:

"BASA [Baird's Sandpiper] – golden brown upper parts with dark feather centres and buffy edges – scalloped look. Long primaries extend past tail. Brown band across breast. Paler throat. Short black slightly decurved bill. A horizontal stance or posture."

I'm not happy with the "band across breast" because I really meant a brown wash rather than a band. Band makes it sound like the bird had a dark definite breast band like a Killdeer has. However, the rest of the description is OK and would go a long way towards convincing a reviewer that I know what I'm talking about. However, there is one omission I made that many birders make, and that's failing to write a con-

cise introductory sentence like “A sandpiper larger than Least and Semipalmated sandpipers nearby and smaller than a dowitcher.” Such a sentence would make a good introduction, and would be strengthened by my details which would follow it.

Let’s try another species. What if you saw a Black-bellied Plover on the Salmon Arms mud flats in October? The bird will be in juvenile or non-breeding plumage. You know from your reading at home that the species most likely to be confused with a Black-bellied Plover are American Golden and Pacific Golden plovers so you’re going to craft your details to eliminate these possibilities.

GOOD – A plover quite a bit larger than a Killdeer, generally grey above and off-whitish below, with a big dark eye and short, stout dark bill. Through the scope I can see a prominent pale supercilium (eyebrow), a dark wash of gray across the breast and white spots as well as dark feather centres on the back. Bird raised its wing and I saw the blackish “wing pits” (axillary) and white wing stripe on the upper surface of the wing.

This is probably more wordy than most people would make it, but it describes a juvenile Black-bellied Plover to a tee.

It will take some practice to get good at written details but the benefits are worth it. You will be looking at birds through new eyes as it were, challenging yourself to capture in words colours, patterns, behaviour, and even those pesky “parts of a bird” diagrammed at the beginning of every field guide ever published.

In a future email I will challenge readers to write a few more descriptions. In the meantime, have fun adding details to your eBird lists.

Book Review

Birds: A Complete Guide to their Biology and Behaviour, by Jonathan Elphick. Firefly Books, 2016, 272 pages, \$29.95.

This is a highly recommendable book for anyone whose interest in birds goes beyond the challenges of correct identification.

The title of the book undersells it.

This is indeed a complete guide, but one that covers more than just the biology and behaviour of birds. At 272 pages, it might seem of just standard length, but it is in fact a large, three-column volume, allowing a comprehensive review of the current state of ornithological knowledge.

There are nine main sections. The first, our Tumbler Ridge hosts would be pleased to hear, covers paleornithology: the development of today’s birds from the era of dinosaurs. Then comes a full discussion of anatomy and physiology; an account of the mechanics of flight; a review of food and feeding behaviours; a shorter exegesis of bird society and populations; and an overview of the many breeding strategies and behaviours. It then concludes with sections on migration, on where birds live, and on the human–bird relationship.

“Thorough” kept coming to mind when I took notes on the book, and, depending on the level of the reader’s interest, this is either a great strength or a minor weakness. Elphick does not cherry pick, giving just the most quotable and pleasing discoveries of ornithologists, but rather covers the range of current knowledge in a systematic fashion. When discussing feeding behaviour, for instance, he doesn’t restrict himself to sections on what is eaten, but concludes with a rich section entitled Cooperation, Mutualism, Commensalism, Piracy and Parasitism. A lesser author would have done these themes much less justice, treating them as aberrations rather than, what they are shown to be, serious feeding strategies.

The drawback of such thoroughness is that it can at times seem that the intended readership might be Ornithology 101 students. I suspect that was in fact never the intention, though students would have been lucky to be provided with a text far more readable than most. The author also, most of the time at least, steers well clear of academic jargon, though without ever insulting the intelligence of the reader.

The main impression of this reviewer is that the

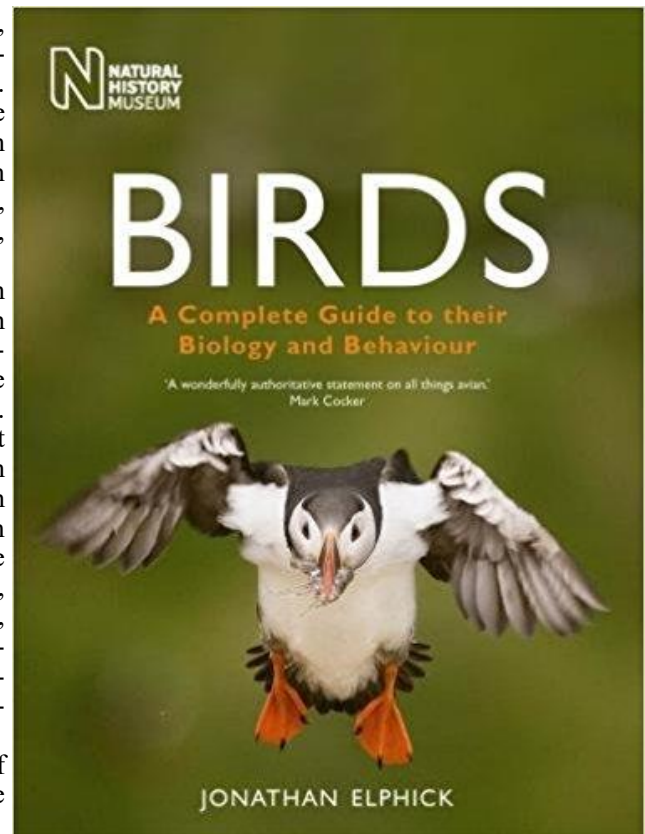
book is astonishingly good value. How on earth Firefly continues to produce substantial full-colour, well-illustrated, almost coffee-table type books at such a modest price must be a mystery to the rest of the publishing world. It really is too much of a bargain to miss. If you are not inclined to read it from beginning to end, worry not. The book is worth more than its cover price even if it is just occasionally dipped into for points of particular interest. – CNK

Briefing 2

Ravens are Even More Like Us

(cf. Ravens are just like us; *BC Birding*, March, 2015, p.21)

We humans use our experience to guide decisions about future activities: we store memories that help us plan ahead. It has long been supposed that animals do not have such a facility, that they act entirely spontaneously and do not anticipate future situations. Studies of primates and some birds have partially modified this view; in particular, food



caching behaviour implies an ability to anticipate future needs. Two researchers have now demonstrated (or, rather, allowed the ravens to demonstrate) that Ravens (*Corvus corax*) can not only plan for the future, but they do so flexibly, using past experience as a guide – just like us. The researchers used two types of experiment, one entailing a technical ability (selection of a tool with which later to recover food) and one requiring some “social” capacity (trading of a selected token for a food reward).



Ravens are not habitual tool users, but can use tools when trained. The researchers employed five hand-reared Ravens in the study (so the basic constraint of mistrust of humans was no problem). Four of the birds took part in each experiment. In the first experiment, the birds were first trained (i.e., gained prior experience) to recover food from a specially designed apparatus using a particular tool (a straight stick). Later, they were then presented with a tray containing a stick and three other “tools,” none of which (they had been shown) could do the job of food recovery. The food-containing apparatus was nowhere to be seen. The birds selected a tool from the tray: if they were trading on experience they would choose the stick. Fifteen minutes later, the food-containing apparatus was presented to the birds at a different location. The exercise was repeated several times. The birds indeed selected the stick – evidently in anticipation of a future food recovery opportunity – on 79% of the trials. But one bird foiled the researchers: she figured out a way to recover the food without using the stick. Absent her performance (apparently, she was demoted from the experiment for being too clever), the recovery success was 86%. A repeat of the ex-

periment with 17 hours delay saw the birds gain their reward in 89% of the trials.

Next (and after appropriate training) the birds were invited to select from amongst several objects a token that they had been taught could later be exchanged for food. The birds selected the correct token in 143 of 144 tries and, after a short delay, successfully negotiated an exchange for food, with an experimenter they had not previously met 78% of the time. After a longer delay, the birds claimed their reward in 96% of the trials. Interestingly, in both types of experiment all the birds made the correct choice of the tool/token in their first trial and all but one bird successfully converted the tool/token to a food reward in that first trial. (The “first trial” success rate is important; the repetitions of the experiment could be interpreted as conditioning by repetition.)

To see whether the birds are capable of planning for the future in the presence of an immediate reward, both experiments were repeated, only this time, the tray with tools or token also featured an immediate small reward (and

the birds were conditioned to grab this reward when there was no tool on the tray). In this, more complex, choice, the birds chose the tool in 74% of the trials and chose the token in 100% of them. That is, they passed up an immediate reward in anticipation of a larger future one on a significant proportion of occasions. The researchers concluded that Ravens make decisions for possible future conditions that are outside their current awareness; they can use past experience, just as humans do, to anticipate future developments, and govern their actions accordingly. In this they outperform tool-using hominids (including orangutans, bonobos and chimpanzees) and even humans of age 4. It seems that Ravens are ready to enroll in kindergarten.

Reference:

Kabadayi, C. and Osvath, M. 2017. Ravens parallel great apes in flexible planning for tool-use and bartering. *Science* 357: 202-204.

Boeckle, M. and Clayton, N.S. 2017. Commentary: A raven's memories are for the future. *Ibid*: 126-127.

Summary by M. Church

Banding in Style

Birders used to the primitive conditions of most bird banding stations will get a pleasant surprise if they visit the Mugaha Marsh station near Mackenzie. Below is the latest improvement: a small building built by some dedicated volunteers to serve as a kitchen for the banders and volunteers. Another enhancement this year is a memorial bench on the viewing stand to honour past volunteers who are no longer with us.



Young Birders Program

Mount Cheam Trip

Melissa Hafting

On July 15, 2017 seven of us hiked up Mount Cheam in Chilliwack in search of White-tailed Ptarmigan. We were inspired by my friend Dave Beeke who recently went up there and got Ptarmigan. He actually goes every year and usually gets the bird. In 2006 Roger and Andrew Foxall and Ilya Povalyaev found Rock Ptarmigan on the mountain.

I rented a four-wheel drive SUV because the road is not passable for a 2WD. This is not an exaggeration; it was the worst road I have ever driven. Even with a 4WD you need to be very cautious, as some 4WD drivers got stuck. It is a narrow winding high mountain gravel road with large rolling hills and ditches where you can bottom out with huge potholes and large rocks. It was an adventure, that is for sure, and this year the road is particularly bad.

We made it safely to the top with our eight-seater, 4WD Ford Expedition SUV that the kids call "The Tank." The parking lot was full at the top but we found a spot further down the hill. The views were stunning from the parking lot.

We sprayed our bug spray and sunscreen and began our ascent. It was a piece of cake in comparison to our much harder Needle Peak/Flatiron hike last year.

As we started hiking up through the pretty stream- and flower-filled meadow, we had many Sooty Grouse hooting, Rufous Hummingbirds, Hermit Thrushes, Barn Swallows, Yellow-rumped Warblers, Chipping Sparrows, Dark-eyed Juncos, American Pipits, and Vaux's Swifts flying low over our heads. Seeing the swifts like that was a really cool sight to see, as Vaux's Swifts are usually high-up distant specs.

We traveled by the first little lake where the kids found some Western Long-toed Salamanders. The cool looking Salamanders with yellow stripes down their backs were a first for many of the kids. As we climbed further up the Mountain we had Slate-colored Fox Sparrows singing their beautiful songs. The wildflowers were just gorgeous and

we had great views of the winding road beneath us. As we continued our ascent we stopped at a small upper lake where we had our lunch. We looked at native ladybugs and saw some tiger beetles. After lunch we headed up the hill towards the summit. The landscape was just stunning.

Lots of people were on the trail this Saturday. We met Mike Klotz and Uday Sant coming back down the hill and they told us they did not see any White-tailed Ptarmigan today due to the large number of people. We were not discouraged and continued on. Bridget spotted a Gray-crowned Rosy-Finch that ended up landing right in front of her! We all got pics of it as it hopped along feeding on the snow. We also spotted several Townsend's Solitaires singing and perched on trees.

We saw a pika at its burrow that Viktor spotted and many Golden-mantled Ground Squirrels, Yellow-pine Chipmunks and Hoary Marmots. The Marmots were whistling all day.

We got up to the summit where I watched the kids closely since there were sheer drop offs on both sides and slippery rocks. Some people have lost their lives here, so it is imperative you watch where you walk. Here we had Gray-crowned Rosy-Finches, we saw a





total of at least six. The views were amazing of the Fraser Valley below and



the mountain ranges around us. We could even see Mount Baker. We watched people at the top of Lady Peak with awe. It was nice and sunny at the top and the kids posed for a photo for me.

Other couples asked me to take their photo after reaching the summit; some stood a little too close to the edge for my liking. We watched Common Ravens fly above us and also saw a Bald Eagle. We searched all over the summit and below it for the White-tailed Ptarmigan but there were none that we could see. Just as Mike and Uday said the mountain was extremely busy this Saturday with lots of people and dogs. We were having a great day and not too disappointed, even though it was the third hike we had done as a group now where we couldn't find Ptarmigan. We had great birds, great people and spectacular views so we couldn't complain.

We couldn't have asked for a more beautiful day and now had many good

memories. I know from seeing White-tailed Ptarmigan in the field myself that it is never a guarantee to see one. I also know that one day all of the kids and I will see one together. Liron and I saw one in full white plumage together on Mount Seymour in North Van, back in 2015 and it was a lifer for him then. I can't wait until I get to share that experience with all the kids together.

After coming down the awfully rough 4WD-only road, we finished off the day with a nice meal at Tim Horton's because we were all starving after our big 9.5 km hike.

Another great day that we won't soon forget.

Making the Difference

The following article is by Young Birder Joshua Glant, aged 16.

Robert Frost wrote, in the last stanza of his immensely popular poem *The Road Not Taken*, that he had taken "the [path] less travelled by," and that this choice had "made all the difference." One could say that this concept – of one seemingly unimportant choice at a point of divergence having permanent and significant consequences – has been true in my own life as well. I can remember the day I became a birder, and can even remember the literal divergence in my path that led to this amazing obsession that I like to call a hobby, and hope to soon call a career. On De-

cember 24th of 2011, in the Sawtooth Range of central Idaho, I made the choice to ride the ski lift to the summit rather than ski down the mountain. This choice seems pretty mundane, doesn't it? Not so – near the end of the ride, as we approached a gleaming white ridge where we were to disembark, a Common Raven soared out over the mountain, and I was absolutely enthralled.

When I was in kindergarten, my school took a field trip to a local children's theatre in downtown Seattle, where we watched a puppet show: *Raven and the Box of Light*. Ravens are a prominent character in the native art and mythology of the Pacific Northwest where I live, and seeing this show ensured that Ravens would continue to hold a special place in my heart from that day forward. However, until December 24th, 2011, I had never seen one in life. I didn't know it in that moment, but the Raven that I watched sailing out over the ridge would be my "spark bird." Almost six years later, through many more choices, new friends, rarities and misses, events and opportunities, and a lot of early mornings, here I sit in my kitchen, writing an article for an ornithological newsletter, volunteering as a curator for the University of Washington's Burke Museum, and burying myself in the college application process as I seek my path into academic and, hopefully someday, professional prominence in the world of birds.

As a young birder, it has been a huge boost for me to become involved with young birder organizations and programs. For example, I attend meetings for my local Seattle Audubon Young Birder's Club, participating in field trips and events periodically. Melissa Hafting, a great mentor for me and many others, has also been in correspondence with me for a long time about the BC Young Birders Program! One important step for me, as a teen-aged bird enthusiast, has been to attend summer events and camps designed for young birders. These events are run by groups such as the American Birding Association, Victor Emmanuel Nature Tours, National Audubon Society and the Cornell Lab of Ornithology. These camps accept teenagers from age 13 to 18, and it is possible to pursue financial aid from a local ornithological society or organization to attend any one of them. I have previously attended Camp

Colorado in the north-central area of its namesake state, and in 2018 I will attend Camp Chiricahua in southeastern Arizona. This year, along with BC young birders Liron Gertsman and Logan Lalonde, I attended the Young Birder's Event (YBE) in Ithaca, New York. Based out of the Cornell Lab of Ornithology, this event is without a doubt the most helpful of the events that one could attend as someone interested in an ornithological career.

The 2017 YBE lasted from Thursday, July 6th to Sunday, July 9th. The attendees stayed in Cornell's Ecology House on the northeast side of campus. Early each morning, several staff members of the Lab – among them, Chris Wood, Jessie Barry and Ian Davies – led birding field trips in and around the Finger Lakes region. The beautiful rolling, green hills of Ithaca were not what I was used to from back at home, and the birds definitely were not either. I finished the trip with over 30 lifers, my favorite of which were probably the warblers we saw, especially the Ceruleans. We were given several tours of the research halls and collections of the Lab, which were a major highlight for many at the event.

The Cornell Lab of Ornithology has its reputation for a reason, and seeing the different parts of the building made it clear as to why the Lab is a major hub worldwide for bird studies and public outreach. Undoubtedly the most impactful part of the event was hearing the talks given in the Lab's presentation room each afternoon. We listened to Cornell students and faculty members speak about what they are doing at the Lab and, crucially, how they got there. Throughout the talks, one persistent theme became clear: there is no such thing as a straight path in an ornithological career. Success depends on networking and seizing every opportunity that comes your way. For example, at Cornell there is one event at the beginning of the fall semester that is a fantastic opportunity to meet professors and faculty members and learn about potential research trips and opportunities: an ornithological pizza party! Like Frost's diverging path, you may find yourself making a choice – the choice of college certainly comes to mind, but also which major, which research opportunities you pursue, and many more – each of which could make a major difference. Alternatively, a moment that happens

by chance could change your path entirely by shifting, or clarifying, your interests. One example of such a shift is Andy Johnson, who talked about reorienting his course from studying birds to filming them as part of the Lab's Multimedia department.

This brings us to another point that was reinforced at this event: there are several different paths you can take in the professional world of birds. There is, of course, the path of becoming a professor through a graduate and then doctorate program. Even within this path, it is necessary to specify what you want to focus on, like evolutionary biology or neurobiology, among a myriad of other options. But there is also multimedia – documenting birds through videography, sound recording and photography to spread awareness and aid in conservation. There is a strong technological component with citizen-science programs like eBird – indeed, eBird Project coordinator Ian Davies encouraged us all to learn the R programming language to contribute significantly to our skills and credentials. A common topic of discussion among my young birder friends, and certainly myself as well, is anxiety over our ability to make a living out of a career in birds. I have a feeling that a good portion of my readers probably sympathize with these feelings. I want to spend my life with birds, but how am I going to do it while still making enough money to live comfortably? After this event, I now feel more hopeful.

One final, essential message throughout the talks was that the college you attend is not necessarily as important as what you make of the opportunities you seek out. Jessie Barry, program manager of the Macaulay Library and project leader for the Merlin Bird ID phone application, assured us that if you take the time to get to know every possible opportunity, many universities with a biology program could have similar opportunities as those you would find studying at Cornell. Indeed, it seemed to me that almost all of the prominent members of the Cornell Lab had started their academic journey elsewhere before coming to Cornell as a graduate student or even after completing their college education entirely. And I will make it clear that, while I have been singing the praises of Cornell throughout this entire article, it's not the end-all-be-all for someone who

wants to be successful in the field of ornithology: Louisiana State University, the University of Kansas and the University of Washington, among many others, are known to have strong ornithology and evolutionary biology departments. The critical part is making the most of the school you are in, and seizing opportunities to make yourself known by publishing papers and completing research.

On that note, it's probably a good time to mention that Robert Frost's poem, the one I have been using as a central theme, is in fact badly misinterpreted by almost everyone who reads it, including by me, on purpose. In the third stanza of the poem, Frost indicates that both paths actually "equally lay / In leaves no step had trodden black"; in other words, both paths were actually equally untraveled. In the fourth stanza, Frost states that he will be "telling [the tale of the diverging path] with a sigh / Somewhere ages and ages hence", revealing that the final three lines of the poem are not a description of what actually happened, but only how he wanted to remember it happening. The other path might very well have led to an equal, though different, outcome. Robert Frost's real message is thus: although we may look back on the story of our lives and say that one choice we made was a defining moment that changed our lives for the better, the reality is that maybe the two paths aren't so dissimilar after all. Perhaps, after all, the important part is what you make of your choice. If I had chosen to ski downhill and hadn't seen the raven at the mountain summit, would I be a birder right now? It's possible, but I can't ever know that for sure; all I do know is that I am willing to apply myself completely, to use this path that I'm on to the fullest. Although I don't know yet what I want to do, besides wanting to eventually end up working with an organization like the Cornell Lab of Ornithology, I feel confident in knowing that I have options ahead of me: more paths to take, more choices to make. If you go to Cornell, or LSU, or your state college, or wherever else you choose, you can get to where you want to be if you stay focused, network, seize every opportunity – and stay open to taking unfamiliar paths. It may, indeed, make all the difference.

Young Birders at Manning Park

Melissa Hafting

Eight of us left Vancouver at 7:00 a.m. on June 21, 2017 to head to Manning Park. It was our first trip with 12-year-old young birder Adam Dhalla and he fit right in with our group. We were in a Suburban SUV and it was so fancy there was WIFI in the car, leather seats, sun roof and TV screens with blu-ray players for the passengers. We didn't use any of this since we were birding but it was super cool. We stopped in at Hope Airport briefly to see if we could find the reported Northern Mockingbird or a Western Kingbird but no dice.

About 2 km before we got to the lodge, we saw two black bears. Ian spotted the first one in the gravel pit and we all got out and took pictures as he was a safe distance away. We were happy to see he was the same bear we had seen two years ago. We could tell this due to the large scar on his snout, most likely from a fight with another bear. I spotted the second one, a Cinna-

mon Black Bear, right by the side of the road. The Cinnamon Black Bear came very close to our car as he grazed, so we stayed in the car and watched him from there. The kids got full frame shots of his face. He was stunning to look at.

We started off going up the road to the Cascade Lookout to look for grouse before all the cars arrived. We didn't see any grouse at all. We also did not see any Pika or Yellow-bellied Marmots as on previous trips. We had gorgeous views of the Cascade Mountains both in the U.S. and Canada when we got to the top at the lookout.

We parked and immediately began feeding the Clark's Nutcrackers, Golden-mantled Ground Squirrels and Yellow-pine Chipmunks. We also saw Common Ravens. We heard Cassin's Finches here and a flock of Pine Grosbeaks flew over that only some in the group saw as they were immersed with feeding the rodents.

After a good chunk of time photographing and feeding the menagerie we started to go up to Alpine Meadows since the road was open. Four weeks ago the flowers were not in bloom and

the road was closed a few hundred metres past the Cascade Lookout. We looked to no avail for Grouse on the way up. When we got up we heard Cassin's Finches, one lone Gray Jay and saw Pine Siskins. We looked at the beautiful alpine flowers, being careful to stay on the trails not to step on any. We then heard a loud Pine Grosbeak calling. He must have been close! So we went down the Heather Trail and found a Russet Male singing his heart away. I do love their pretty songs. It was a lifer for a few in the group.

The bugs were bad here and I was glad I brought bug spray and sprayed it on the kids who needed it. Next we headed back down the mountain keeping our eyes open for grouse but by now all parking lots and roads were inundated with traffic and it was hard to see any birds in the dust clouds. We did end up seeing a Mountain Bluebird, many Chipping Sparrows and Hermit Thrushes though. Ian also spotted a Snowshoe Hare.

When we got to the base we headed straight for Lightning Lake where we

Below: Clark's Nutcracker by Melissa Hafting



had a lovely walk around the emerald lake. It was boiling hot as we were in a heat wave: the temperature gauge in the car read 36 degrees Celsius.

We had a pleasant walk and found many Chestnut-backed Chickadees, Pacific Wren; heard a Northern Waterthrush; and saw a few Western Tanager, Western Wood-Pewee, Hammond's Flycatcher, and Willow Flycatcher. We had great views of Yellow, Wilson's, Yellow-rumped and Townsend's Warblers and a Red-breasted Nuthatch. Just when we were about the leave we caught sight of a Red-naped Sapsucker that landed on the grass. As quick as he landed he was gone. Luckily he was the first of three we would see that day.

By this time it was after 1:00 p.m. and time for lunch. We went to Lightning Lake and lunched with the lake as our backdrop. We were surrounded by Columbian Ground Squirrels. We saw a Common Raven and its fledglings, a Steller's Jay and a few Clark's Nutcrackers. We also saw Canada Geese with three Goslings and Tree Swallows. An Osprey flew above us several times.

Next we went to Twenty Minute Lake where we had Warbling Vireos, a calling Mountain Chickadee, a Belted Kingfisher and Spotted Sandpiper. The best thing of all we saw was a Common Goldeneye with her seven ducklings. This was reminiscent of our last trip where we saw a Common Goldeneye with eleven ducklings.

We proceeded on towards Strawberry Flats where we hoped to feed the Gray Jays and get an American Three-toed Woodpecker. We had success there last year and it's my favorite place to find them. Well, on this day we dipped on both. I still can't believe we didn't see a single Gray Jay – they seem to be always there stealing food from the hand. We did see some nice birds along this trail and it was a pleasant walk despite the heat. The birds we saw on this trail were a Red-naped Sapsucker, Olive-sided Flycatcher, Chipping Sparrows, Dark-eyed Juncos, Yellow-rumped Warblers, Golden-crowned and Ruby-crowned Kinglets, Varied Thrush, Hermit and Swainson's Thrushes.

We walked back slightly disappointed but still in good spirits because we were off now to the Eastgate to try for Waterthrush where Ilya and I had one last year. Well we got to the spot and before I could even open the car door

there was a Red-naped Sapsucker on the road right by the car! We hoped to see a Ruffed Grouse here which is a nemesis bird for young birder Joshua Brown. Unfortunately we didn't hear or see one and the heat was now sweltering. We ended up seeing the Northern Waterthrush as it sang loudly. This bird was a lifer for three of the kids and since most of us in Vancouver don't see a Waterthrush often it was a treat for us all. A Hairy Woodpecker was calling in the distance along with an American Crow. We also heard and saw many Yellow Warblers, a MacGillivray's Warbler and a Spotted Sandpiper.

By now we were really hot from the baking sun and decided to head to the lodge for a freezing cold Popsicle/ice cream and cold drinks. We got there and got those and I was pleasantly surprised to see the hummingbird feeders were rehung on the newly constructed lodge. They weren't there on my last visit in May.

Here the kids had great fun feeding the Ground Squirrels, Steller's Jays, Clark's Nutcrackers and Brown-headed Cowbirds. At one point Bridget had two of the fearless Ground Squirrels and a

Clark's Nutcracker on her tummy. I had to take a picture.

We may have missed some of our targets (Grouse of any species but especially Ruffed and Spruce and American Three-toed Woodpeckers and Gray Jays to feed) but we had a wonderful day in terrific company.

More Media Attention

Maclean's Magazine interviewed Melissa Hafting on millennial birders and also asked to chat with a graduate of the Young Birders program, so she passed on the name of Alice Sun, who is now at McGill and has won a number of birding and photography scholarships.

Below: Willa Crowley of Fort St. James with her BCFO Young Birder Award plaque.



Briefing 3

Ice Age Survivors

Haida Gwaii lies off the coast of northern British Columbia, immediately south of the end of the Alaska panhandle. The mainland shore is a region of high mountains (the northern Coast Mountains) that still carry glaciers today. During the ice ages – the last of which ended 12,000 to 13,000 years ago – these mountains were buried in ice. Geologists have long argued over whether the ice extended across Hecate Strait and covered the islands of Haida Gwaii. Certainly there was ice there: glacial sediments are witness to that. But were the islands completely inundated, or did some parts remain ice-free and sufficiently temperate to maintain plants and animals in what biologists call a “refugium?”

Ornithologists have now examined genetic evidence from eleven bird species on the islands, all of them dwellers in the Sitka spruce forests that dominate the landscape. Together they represent a high proportion of all the forest-dwelling birds there. Birds examined were Sooty Grouse (*Dendragapus fuliginosus*), Northern Saw-whet Owl (*Aegolius acadicus*), Red-breasted Sapsucker (*Sphyrapicus ruber*), Hairy Woodpecker (*Picoides villosus*), Pacific Wren (*Troglodytes pacificus*), Steller’s Jay (*Cyanocitta stelleri*), Swainson’s Thrush (*Stellarus ustulatus*), Hermit Thrush (*C. guttatus*), Chestnut-backed Chickadee (*Poecile rufescens*), Song Sparrow (*Melospiza melodia*) and Pine Grosbeak (*Pinicola enucleator*).

The researchers analyzed a particular gene that yields information on population divergence events (up to the level of emergence of a distinct subspecies), and allows a rough estimate of time since divergence. They compared Haida Gwaii birds (4 to 15 individuals of each species) with individuals of the same species from Washington and Oregon (south of Pleistocene ice margins), southern Rocky Mountains, and Alaska (where the dry Arctic steppe escaped glaciation).

They found that, amongst the

sedentary (i.e., non-migrating) birds, Northern Saw-whet Owl, Hairy Woodpecker, Steller’s Jay and Pine Grosbeak showed definite indications of isolation in a refugium. All four have endemic subspecies on the islands. In addition, the Pacific Wren and Song Sparrow (partial migrants) show indications of endemism. These six species have apparent divergence dates in the range 20 – 30,000 years before present (ybp), with Hairy Woodpecker possibly as great as 70,000 ybp and Pine Grosbeak 120,000 ybp. These dates predate the last glacial advance and for the woodpecker, an early lateglacial interstade. The grosbeak may have arrived on the islands as early as the interglacial epoch preceding the last glacial period, allowing much time and the environmental pressure of successive glacial episodes for subspeciation. The remaining two sedentary species (Sooty Grouse; Red-breasted Sapsucker) are apparently early post-glacial immigrants. Neither species (especially the grouse) is apt to have made a long over-water flight, so one may speculate that they may have arrived very shortly after local deglaciation when the floor of Hecate Strait was still exposed as dry land (due to the much reduced sea level: there are post-glacial archaeological sites on the floor of the strait).

The remaining sedentary species (Chestnut-backed Chickadee) appears to be a recent immigrant. The two obligate migrant thrushes have high genetic diversity, as might be expected in birds

able to mix with other populations. They appear to be recent immigrants from the south. Nevertheless, Swainson’s Thrush, along with Sooty Grouse, has developed an island subspecies so that behaviour patterns must be creating a new recognizable population.

There are other animals as well as plants on the islands that also strongly suggest the persistence of a non-glaciated refugium, including Ermine (*Mustelia ermine*) and Black Bear (*Ursus Americana*), Garter Snake (*Thamnophis sirtalis*), Sword Fern (*Polystichum munitum*) and Lodgepole Pine (*Pinus contorta*). Combined with the birds, some freshwater fishes and invertebrates (snails), these species make a strong case for the existence of forests here, at least at lower elevations, throughout the last ice age. Hence, there was a forested ice age refugium on the marine-dominated islands of Haida Gwaii.

Reference

Pruitt, C.L., Topp, C.M., Maley, J.M., McCracken, K.G., Rowher, S., Birks, S., Sealy, S.G., and Winkler, K. 2013. Evidence from genetics of landbirds for a forested Pleistocene glacial refugium in the Haida Gwaii area. *The Condor* 115: 725-737.

Summary by M. Church

Below: a Red-breasted Nuthatch spotted in the Quesnel area by Nora McMuldach.



More from Tumbler

Members attending the Tumbler Ridge AGM, and hearing presentations on paleo-ornithology, will be pleased to read the following media release issued by the Tumbler Ridge Museum Foundation in early August.

MORE FOSSIL BIRD TRACKWAYS DISCOVERED NEAR TUMBLER RIDGE

Bird fossils are not common. One of the key sources of information on birds that lived in the Age of Dinosaurs comes from fossilized bird tracks and trackways. Four such track sites, including some of the oldest known bird tracks in the world, have previously been identified within the Tumbler Ridge UNESCO Global Geopark (TRUGG) by Dr Lisa Buckley and Dr Richard McCrea, the palaeontologists at the Tumbler Ridge Museum Foundation's Peace Region Palaeontology Research Centre (PRPRC).

A recent field trip yielded two more such track sites, bringing the total number of fossil bird tracks sites within the TRUGG to six, and further cementing



Tumbler Ridge's reputation as a global fossil bird-track hotspot.

On August 1st Dr Charles Helm escorted Dr Buckley and Dr McCrea to a dinosaur track site he had discovered earlier this summer, as well as to one brought to his attention by local resident Rob McIntyre. In each case Dr Buckley spent time examining the surrounding exposed rock surfaces, and each time her perseverance paid off with the discovery of a handsome avian trackway. Both specimens are in rocks of the Gates Formation, from the Creta-

ceous Period about 100 million years ago.

On August 5th one of these specimens was retrieved and transported to the PRPRC, where it will receive further study. The previous discoveries were incorporated into a unique and special exhibit for the public in the Dinosaur Discovery Gallery, and it is likely that these new specimens will be interpreted and exhibited once the research is complete and the resulting publication in a scientific journal has occurred.

This topic of "paleo-ornithology" is one reason that the BC Field Ornithologists chose Tumbler Ridge and the Dinosaur Discovery Gallery for their AGM earlier this year. In 2018, the 27th International Ornithology Congress in Vancouver, BC (to be attended by thousands of delegates from around the world), already has a post-conference field trip advertised to Tumbler Ridge to visit the Dinosaur Discovery Gallery with its fossil bird tracks, the PRPRC and the TRUGG.

The scientific work done by Dr Buckley and Dr McCrea was one of the main factors in the designation of the TRUGG in 2014, and such ongoing research and discoveries, and the resulting interpretation and exhibits, will help boost the chances of successful re-evaluation of the Geopark by UNESCO in 2018.

Photo top: Dr Buckley with fossil bird trackway.

Below: recovering the fossil bird trackway.



The Reflective Birder

Clive Keen

Reflections on Avian Beauty

Since learning to really look at birds rather than just ID them, I've been growing steadily more aware of, and confounded by, the fact of avian beauty. "Sure, birds are pretty, big deal" is the understandable viewpoint of casual glancers, but when you're acquainted with a thousand or more species, and have looked very carefully, you get to realize that labelling birds as "pretty" doesn't even begin to cut it. It is like describing the Alhambra as a competent structure, or the Taj Mahal as an OK place to put a dead body.

There's a depth and width of beauty in birds that goes far beyond the point at which nonchalance on the subject is defensible. First, the beauty of birds is far more widespread than most realize. When I first wrote that sentence, I looked out of the window and saw three birds: a Starling, a male Brown-headed Cowbird, and a Red-breasted Nuthatch. Ordinary, everyday, ho-hum birds most people wouldn't look at once, let alone twice. But if a world-class photographer were to spend a week photographing them, and put the best prints on show, visitors would be amazed by the beauty displayed. "I just never knew that these birds are so gorgeous!" would be the response of most. Because they are.

It's not just that birds exhibit beauty, but they do so in an incredible variety of ways. Many choose simplicity. There's the purest simplicity of the Fairy Tern, a bird that could almost define the concept of loveliness. You could imagine Michaelangelo weeping at his first sight of a Fairy Tern – it is perfect. And there's a very different sort of simplicity in the beauty of the Red-headed Woodpecker. When I first saw one, I admit that I laughed: it was a child's rendition of a beautiful bird. Three bright colours, straight out of the paint box, applied with a thick brush. Head – bright red; body – pure white; wings – dark blue; done! But having seen the birds often enough since, I now see in them the simple beauty of American Primitive art, or a Ted Harrison silkscreen.

Most birds that we readily proclaim as beautiful tend to be more ornate. The ornamentation is often through colour, such as the incredible multi-colouring of the Painted Bunting, though colour is usually added with more artful strokes and less flamboyance. Sometimes just a little colour, such as the blue around the eye of a White-winged Dove, can succeed better than a rainbow. We tend to be wowed most by the extraordinary birds of the tropics, but many birds which are less in-your-face stunning can be even more pleasing when we look closely. Ostentation is an option in avian beauty, not a requirement.

Ornamentation in birds is certainly not limited to colour. It might be the result of adding a rococo touch to feathers, and producing, say, the gorgeous profile of a Snowy Egret or the fluted long tail of the Resplendent Quetzal. Sometimes ornamentation comes from

adding something new that has no function at all, but simply looks good, like the "ears" of many owls, or the "horn" of the Horned Guan. Humans have long since added touches to their buildings for no reason at all other than that they look good. Birds quite clearly can do the same thing.

Beyond Aesthetics

The beauty of birds starts to become more than a matter of aesthetic contemplation when we realize that it is entirely due to decisions made by the birds themselves, over countless generations.

Darwin famously, and correctly, explained the beauty of birds in terms of preference for good-looking partners. Better-looking males, in particular, get chosen in mating season, so unlike their less comely rivals, they pass on their genes, and there is a snowballing effect. Modern science, infamously and wrongly, scoffed at this explanation for a century. The explanation committed two crimes against the prevailing mores and paradigms of science. First, it explained in terms of consciousness – the inner life of the mind – which was verboten. Science was supposed to assume either that such things did not exist, or were at best irrelevant and should be ignored. In recent years, scientists have drawn back a little from this. An open letter by a group of eminent scientists announced that they believed, gasp, that animals do in fact have consciousness. How on earth anyone with a dog could ever have doubted this is utterly beyond me; it is extraordinary how theory, methodology and peer pressure can overcome all common sense. But progress has been made, and Darwin's explanation in terms of sexual selectivity is no longer entirely rubbish. Practicing scientists worried about their reputations, though, continue to steer away from Darwin's second crime: explaining the beauty of birds in terms of their aesthetic judgements.

To get around the heresy, we are now told that a female bird will choose a male with, say, a particularly bright blue patch on his throat, because the patch "displays the bird's fitness." The idea is that the production of something ornate has a physiological cost, and only birds in fine fettle can afford the

"Sometimes just a little colour, such as the blue around the eye of a White-winged Dove, can succeed better than a rainbow." CNK photo.



cost, so the female, recognizing that the male is in good shape, accepts his advances.¹

This explanation puts me in mind of another favourite explanation of animal behaviour by those fearing the charge of anthropomorphism. We'll be shown footage of two young animals romping, and an earnest voice will tell us that the youngsters are "practicing the skills they need in adult life." It will be utterly obvious to everyone without blinkers around their brain that the animals are simply having fun. Muscles and reflexes might well be developed in play, but the animals are playing because they enjoy it. Saying that they play to develop the muscles and reflexes puts the cart in front of the horse.²

For now, the mores and paradigms of science still cleave to explanations solely in terms of functionality, but it will change. As we move further away from mechanistic materialism, scientists will relax about the obvious fact that animals can do things for fun. Similarly, the "displaying fitness" gambit will eventually be recognized for what it is – face-saving camouflage. And fortunately, the behaviour of bower birds, which are being extensively studied with an open mind, will overcome remaining resistance to the notion that birds have an aesthetic impulse.

Beyond Relativism

Some years ago I was contemplating the notion of *Homo aestheticus* after musing on the fact that I'd put a huge amount of time and energy into renovating a house, not one element of which had a functional purpose. Everything I did was simply to make the place look better. Consider crown mouldings: utterly functionless, but they sure look good. A functionalist might at this point roll his eyes, and say I can waste my time like that if I wish, but I then sold the house, in a flat market, for 50% more than I paid for it. Most human beings are in agreement that a house that looks good is much to be preferred to one that is functionally identical but seriously lacks aesthetic appeal. The aesthetic impulse is a deep and pervasive human trait, not an individual idiosyncrasy.

The point of bringing up the *Homo aestheticus* issue is that when I was musing on the topic, I assumed that an aesthetic sense was something special about human beings, something that distinguished them from other animals. After we discovered that other animals used tools, we had to give up the idea of *Homo faber*.³ Could *Homo aestheticus* take its place? The above discussion of beauty in birds shows not. It is birds' aesthetic impulse that is responsible for their appearance today. And – this is truly unexpected in an age when relativism and subjectivism rule – the tastes of birds and human beings can be seen to be remarkably similar.

When people see a male Wood Duck for the first time, they assume that the bird must have been carefully bred to look that way; it seems impossible that a bird fitting so closely with our sense of design could have simply sprung out of nature. And any talented artist, given free reign to invent a beautiful bird, will never do better than to observe real birds, mixing and matching the features seen. Certainly no artist has ever invented from scratch a bird that is more beautiful than some created by nature. The congruence of birds' aesthetic sense and humans' is also indicated by the fact that extremely few of the 11,000 or so bird species in existence are considered by people to be ugly. We don't think much of Turkey Vultures, and the dangling neck decorations of a few species don't receive many plaudits from humans, but these are extremely rare exceptions. While beauty is manifested in many different ways in both the bird and human world,

the general idea of what is beautiful is remarkably concordant in both.

Rather than a purely subjective thing, to be ignored in our explanations of nature, the aesthetic impulse goes beyond individuals, or even species, and needs to be recognized as a genuine force of nature. Sure, it's not as strong a force as the quest for food, or for reproduction, but in the avian world as well as ours it can be recognized as very real, with highly persistent and persisting influence. Gravity, physicists tell us, is the weakest of the four physical forces, but weak forces can shape the universe profoundly. I for one find the idea of beauty as a force of nature, quietly but steadily shaping the world, to be a very happy one.

Notes

1. There would surely be far better ways of displaying fitness than developing something wholly functionless, which the ornate feature would be if the potential partner lacked all aesthetic sense. If displaying fitness was all that was required, a mere billboard with no aesthetic merit would be quite enough. It can be no accident that something visually pleasing is developed instead.

2. Adult animals continue to play long after they've developed the skills needed in adult life, and I suspect that even earnest commentators would find it a bit thin to explain adult play as just "re-polishing the skills they require in their everyday life."

3. 270 species of birds are now known to use tools.

"When people see a male Wood Duck for the first time, they assume that the bird must have been carefully bred to look that way." CNK photo.



