

B_C BIRDING



Newsmagazine of the British Columbia Field Ornithologists

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A reminder that spring will be here again – a female Mountain Bluebird by William Murdock. See pages 14 and 32..

Publisher

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About the BCFO

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

BCFO objectives include: fostering cooperation between amateur and professional ornithologists, promoting cooperative bird surveys and research projects, and supporting conservation organizations in their efforts to preserve birds and their habitats.

Membership

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

Annual Membership Dues

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

Newsmagazine Submissions

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

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

Articles should be in plain text, either as the content of an email, or as an attachment (preferably Word). Photographs should be sent as separate attachments, not embedded in text. Be sure to name the photographer.

Deadlines (i.e. final dates for submission) are as follows:

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

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Full page: \$125 per issue. Contact editor for other options.

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Young Birder Awards Committee Chair: Nathan Hentze.



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IMPORTANT DATES

CONFERENCE AND AGM, CRESTON

June 7–9, 2024

ZOOM PRESENTATIONS

January 17, 2024

African Birding – Timothy Jackson.

February 21, 2024

Veracruz River of Raptors – Zinthia Vasquez & Pilar Gonzalez.

March 20, 2024

Overwintering Ecology in Migrant Warblers in Jamaica.

April 17, 2024

Birding in Ethiopia – Tom Plath.

Photo right: Zinthia López with Team Veracruz, River of Raptors. Zinthia will be giving a Zoom presentation on February 21.

See also page 19.



President's Message

Nathan Hentze, Victoria

As birders, we are used to handling change. Sometimes we thrive upon it. We cheer the arrival of warblers, tanagers, and hummingbirds in spring, the arrival of longer days and warmer nights. Other times we despair it. The departure of the final fall shorebird flocks winging south, the quieting of the forests, signifying the colder days and longer nights ahead. Such turnover in the seasons and their respective avifaunas is change, albeit predictable. Unpredictable change, on the other hand, can be especially disruptive. A vagrant bird can be a great disruptor, causing rapid alterations to work schedules, family plans, or even bank accounts to those most passionate. Emotions often run highest in response to those unexpected changes. From the adrenaline highs of finding a mega vagrant to the gloomy lows of dipping on a most-wanted species.

The BCFO, as with any organization, undergoes change too. Like birds, some of our changes are predictable, such as new Zoom presentations every month with different presenters speaking about exciting birding destinations or tales of field studies and ornithology (check out the website and watch your inbox for Zoom presentation registration information). Or the yearly change in host community for the BCFO conference – we excitedly look forward to welcoming all of you to Creston, June 7–9, 2024! Save the date, and watch for more information as it becomes available. Some of our changes are more sudden, for example, the announcement of seeking membership in the Young Birders Program Committee (right).

But perhaps one of the biggest changes to come to North American birding in a long while was the announcement on November 1 by the American Ornithological Society that all

birds named after people would be given new English names. This announcement has seen an incredible outpouring of emotion, both in support and against the initiative. I know that there are BCFO members who firmly believe that these names should change, and others who feel strongly that they shouldn't, but despite what the internet might tell us, it's OK to have differing opinions! Regardless of your personal opinion on the matter, I believe there are two important takeaways. The first is that, possibly for the first time ever, there will be public consultations on choosing the new names. To me this represents an exciting opportunity to put our heads together to think of new names that better repre-

sent the birds themselves. The second is that not everyone experiences birding in the same way. Not everyone has the same opportunities, same background, same privilege, and same access to resources. A name that is seemingly benign to many birders, might present a barrier to participation in birding to others. At a minimum I think we can take this moment in history as an opportunity for reflection. Reflect on what bird names mean, and how we can improve them, and reflect on ways that we can deconstruct barriers to make our hobby/sport/profession/passion/organization as welcoming and inclusive to all as we possibly can.

And whatever your name, we're glad you're here.

Invitation to Apply to the Young Birders Program Committee

Do you have a passion for shaping the next generation of birding enthusiasts? The BCFO invites dedicated individuals to contribute to the newly established Young Birders Program Committee!

Background. Established in 2014, the Young Birder Award recognizes outstanding birders aged 11 to 18 for their birding contributions within the province. Previously, a BCFO Young Birders Field Program offered educational field outings for youth to improve their birding skills. In our commitment to enhancing the Young Birders Program, we are undertaking a review of these initiatives to ensure the program aligns with the interests and reflects the values of young birders across the province.

Opportunity: We are actively seeking individuals to contribute their ideas and insights to guide the evolution of this program. While we especially encourage past and present Young Birder Award/Program members to join, this invitation is extended to any and all who wish to make positive advancements in supporting young birders in the province.

Benefits: Joining the committee provides an opportunity to gain valuable experience and skills while contributing to the growth of both the Young Birders Program and BCFO. Early-career members in particular will gain valuable skills that can be useful towards future job opportunities, while all members can build meaningful connections and make positive impacts.

Criteria: BCFO operates in a safe space, expecting members to be courteous, respectful and open-minded individuals who can embrace diverse ideas and opinions. As committee communications will be digital (Zoom calls and emails), the ability to access the internet and work with basic MS Word and Excel files is required.

How to Apply: Expressions of Interest can be sent electronically to:
president@bcfo.ca.

Motley Notes

BCFO Board Deliberations

2024 Conference Venue

The dates were confirmed as June 7 –9 at the Ramada by Wynham, Creston. with catering by Ricky's.

Keynote Speaker

A keynote speaker had not as yet been selected, and suggestions were sought. Perhaps a high-profile speaker (e.g. Chris Cooper or Pete Dunne) should be contacted? Providing opportunities for presentations by students would also be potentially valuable, time-slots permitting.

Bursaries for attendance?

The possibility of providing bursaries for those unable to cover the cost of attendance was discussed, with details to be worked on at future meetings.

Social Media Strategy

A Facebook account has been made active, and a YouTube account has been set up, which can host Zoom presentations. Ideally BCFO would now have a social media coordinator and committee: it was agreed to issue a call for volunteers.

Langley National Historic Site Family Day

The BCFO has been asked to provide a table for this event, to take place in February 2024. It was agreed that this would be excellent publicity and such opportunities should be taken whenever feasible. Kaitlyn York agreed to organize a table including the BCFO display and a new promotional leaflet, and organize bird walks.

Note: The leaflet can be seen through the Members Only BCFO webpage, or directly at:

bcfo.ca/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/bcfo-brochure.pdf

Eponymous Names to be Replaced!

The American Ornithological Society has made the huge decision to change the English names of ALL birds in North America currently named after persons. Since it will be a gradual process, with new names decided only after wide consultation, BCFO members will be able to offer suggestions. Prosaic descriptive names are likely to predominate as they are useful and quite easy to formulate – for example *Long-winged Sandpiper* for Bairds' Sandpiper – but let's hope that at least some new names will have a bit of imagination and zest.

Readers are encouraged to come up with proposals for names: send them to the Editor for inclusion in future editions of this magazine and forwarding to the AOS. We probably shouldn't try to invent amusing names (for example *Whirlybird* for the Wilson's Phalarope, or *Damned Empid* for Hammond's Flycatcher) as this is a serious issue, brought to light by social concerns. Here are two suggestions to get things rolling:

- Barrow's Goldeye: *Crescent-cheeked Goldeneye*.
- Blackburnian Warbler: *Firethroat*.

Below: A bird soon to be known as "Firethroat"?



Bird of the Century

If you missed the vote for New Zealand's Bird of the Century, you missed a lot of fun and a wonderful way to increase interest in birds and raise awareness for bird conservation.

For a taste of the fun, go to:

www.youtube.com/watch?v=6GF6Gd7wrlk&t=

And for a taste of why this is marvelous for bird conservation, go to:

www.youtube.com/watch?v=oGdi01rxqaM

Zoom Presentations

Starting in January 2021 as a response to Covid lockdowns, these online presentations have proved to be very popular, typically attracting around seventy participants. Twenty presentations have now been delivered, with the majority covering birding overseas or the results of research projects. They are held at 7:00 PM on the third Wednesday of the month, and the

2024 series starts off with the following:

January 17, 2024

African Birding – Timothy Jackson

February 21, 2024

Veracruz River of Raptors – Zinthia Vasquez & Pilar Gonzalez.

March 20, 2024

Overwintering Ecology in Migrant Warblers in Jamaica.

April 17, 2024

Birding in Ethiopia – Tom Plath.

Rare Bird Alerts

Since the deadline for the September edition of this magazine, the following alerts were issued:

- GREEN-TAILED TOWHEE, Denman Island, Nov 15
- SUMMER TANAGER, North Saanich, Nov 11–12
- BROWN BOOBY, Victoria, Nov 8
- ORCHARD ORIOLE, Victoria, Nov 5–13
- BROWN BOOBY, Haida Gwaii, Oct 26
- MASKED BOOBY, between Frederick and Langara Islands, reported Oct 26 from a sighting on Sept 21, 2021.
- LARK BUNTING, Vancouver, Oct 13–19

- BLUE-GRAY GNATCATCHER, Victoria, Oct 9–31
- PALLAS'S BUNTING, Victoria, Oct 4
- RED-THROATED PIPIT, Tofino, Oct 3
- RED-THROATED PIPIT, Victoria, Oct 1
- NORTHERN PARULA, Jordan River, Oct 1
- BLUE-GRAY GNATCATCHER, Metchosin, Sept 29
- ASH-THROATED FLYCATCHER, Terrace, Sept 26–Oct 11
- BLUE-GRAY GNATCATCHER, Jordan River, Sept 24
- REED/PALLAS'S BUNTING, Squamish, Sept 23
- CHESTNUT-SIDED WARBLER, Metchosin, Sept 22
- ASH-THROATED FLYCATCHER, Cedar, Sept 18
- BLACK PHOEBE, Delta, Sept 15–24
- CHESTNUT-SIDED WARBLER, Kelowna, Sept 13
- NORTHERN PARULA, Kelowna, Sept 11
- SNOWY PLOVER, Tofino, Sept 11
- SHORT-TAILED ALBATROSS, Tofino, Sept 9
- CHESTNUT-SIDED WARBLER, Ucluelet, Sept 7
- BLACK PHOEBE, Agassiz, Aug 31–Sept 29

How BCFO Short Trips Work

(See page 8 for an example.)

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

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

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

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

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

If you have ideas for a short trip, Paul Foth would be pleased to hear from you at paulrfoth@gmail.com.

- SCISSOR-TAILED FLYCATCHER, Whistler, Aug 21–23
- SNOWY PLOVER, Tofino, Aug 20
- ASH-THROATED FLYCATCHER, Nakusp, Aug 20

BCFO Research Grants

BCFO encourages submission of proposals from groups or organizations for financial assistance for bird surveys and other ornithological research. It also wishes to foster greater connections between applicants and the society. Potential applicants are reminded that:

1. Requests for funding must be for planned, rather than completed, projects.
2. Projects must be conducted within British Columbia.
3. Under normal circumstances applicants must be members of the BCFO.
4. Projects and their results are to be reported in BCFO's journal, *British Columbia Birds*, or in the newsmagazine, *BC Birding*.
5. In order for BCFO directors to give a timely response to project proposals, deadlines for submission are January 1, April 1, July 1 and October 1.
6. All reasonable requests up to \$3,000 will be favourably considered; larger requests may require approval at an AGM.

Full guidelines are available online at bcfo.files.wordpress.com/2018/11/bcfo-grant-application-update16nov2018.pdf

BC's Western Grebes

Chris Siddle, Vernon

Almost Complete Breeding Failure in 2023?

Available evidence suggests that in the spring-summer of 2023 Western Grebes in British Columbia's three breeding colonies experienced almost complete nesting failure. The main colony at Salmon Arm Bay produced only four chicks, possibly due to unusually early highwater conditions in early June (Ted Hilary, John Woods, personal communication), while no chicks were located in a kayak survey of the little colonies along the southeast shore of the North Arm of Okanagan Lake in August conducted by Margaret Mackenzie of the North Okanagan Naturalists Society. The third colony at Creston has been declining for several years possibly because of food competition with a burgeoning Double-crested Cormorant population in the area, suggests Marc-Andre Beaucher,

head of conservation of the Creston Valley Wildlife Management Area (John Woods personal communication).

Western Grebes nest colonially, forming pairs each spring with spectacular "dance" displays. Both male and female grebes pile aquatic vegetation into floating heaps anchored to emergent vegetation. The species has been in decline in Canada since the 1980s and has been provincially red-listed as an endan-

gered species in British Columbia.

Below: Claude Rioux sent this photo of a Western Grebe with chicks, taken in the Okanagan in earlier years, adding "So sad that there were no young ones this year riding on the parents' backs and demanding to be fed."



Welcome New Members



Joyce Heard, Vernon

Elizabeth Bredberg, Parksville

Vidya Padmakumar, New Hazelton

Andrew Iwaniuk, Lethbridge

John Elliott, Delta

BCFO Two-Day Trip: Salmon Arm

Clive Keen, Prince George

On September 9–10 Don Cecile (Vernon) led a small group of BCFO birders around the lakefront of Salmon Arm, with shorebirds being the main target. Water levels were at a historic low, but the birdlife remained plentiful. Some species were indeed abundant: counts included 30 Killdeer, 60 American Pipits, 30 Baird's Sandpipers, and 97 thrice-counted American White Pelicans.

Fifteen species of shorebird were seen, including the Pectoral Sandpiper below and the Semipalmated Plover at bottom right. But, just to prove that there is more to Salmon Arm than water birds, a Ring-necked Pheasant



Above: These Salmon Arm Ospreys found themselves picked on by a Peregrine Falcon and made their feelings plain.

Middle right: This Stilt Sandpiper was not engaging in thermal regulation – it really does have one leg, which made it a familiar hopalong sight for local birders. Photos by Author.



BCFO Young Birders

Featuring Sasha Fairbairn

Krista Kaptein

The BCFO Young Birders Award is in its tenth year of recognizing and supporting outstanding young birders. In 2019, Sasha Fairbairn was the recipient of the Award. Sasha was nominated by Melissa Hafting who designed and led the Young Birder Program for youth field outings, which was adopted as an official program of BCFO in 2016.

"In common with many of the award winners, Sasha is a committed volunteer," Melissa noted in the nomination. Sasha helped the Sunnyside Acres Heritage Society, near Surrey, with their social media web pages, and was also a birding guide for the society, welcoming visitors to Sunnyside Acres Urban Forest Park. "Sasha attended the Beaverhill Bird Observatory Young Ornithologists Workshop in Alberta where she learned to band birds, and was able to greatly increase her knowledge of matters ornithological." In 2019 she

also won a place at the Young Ornithologists Workshop at the Long Point Bird Observatory (LPBO) in Ontario. While in BC, Sasha participated in the Manning Park Bird Blitz, Project FeederWatch, and the Great Backyard Bird Count. She entered her sightings into eBird, and wrote her own blog about birds and birding. Previously Sasha lived in New Zealand where her love of birding developed.

"I really enjoyed all of the field trips I went on in the Young Birders program," Sasha says. "They gave me a chance to explore new parts of British Columbia and be surrounded by other young bird lovers – a group that was easy to forget existed while I was in high school. Some memorable moments include successfully finding White-tailed Ptarmigan up Illal Peak and visiting Manning Park where there were many grouse and where the Can-



Above: Sasha in 2019 at the time of her Young Birder Award. Below: Sasha birding in New Zealand in April of this year.



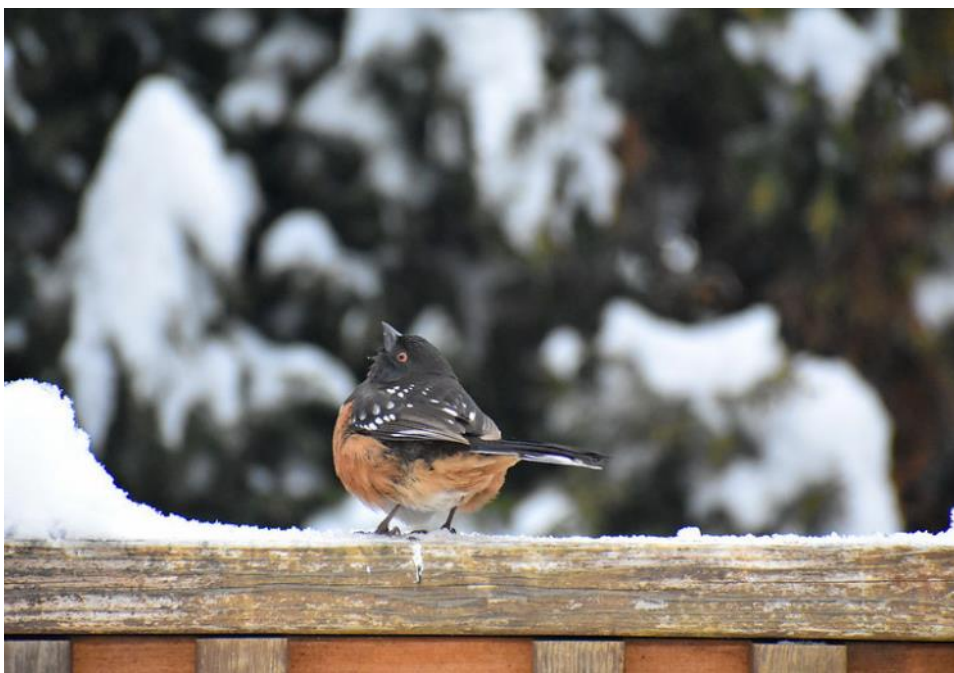
ada Jays landed on our heads."

After leaving the Young Birder Program Sasha has been spending the majority of each year at university in Edmonton, so has not been able to continue her membership with BCFO, though she adds: "Until a time comes where I will be in BC long-term and be in a situation where I am able to chase rare birds!"

On her blog Sasha provided some notes for beginning birding. "When I was teaching myself the birds in my area, I found the field guides, *Birds of Southwest British Columbia* and *Compact Guide to British Columbia Birds* very handy. *Peterson Field Guide to Birds* is also great but it is bigger and more advanced, so therefore better as the book you would use at home after your walk instead of the one to pack with your binoculars for the walk. You should also get some binoculars or a camera with really good zoom. They can be extremely helpful for identifying far-away birds and spotting the tiny



feature that tells one bird apart from another. Of course it feels like whenever I bring binoculars, there are no birds to be seen and when I do not, I spot a



THE BCFO YOUNG BIRDER AWARD

This award, inaugurated in 2014, is given to outstanding youth birders, aged 11 to 18, in recognition of their accomplishments, contributions, and engagement with birds and birding in the province. The award welcomes these talented young birders into the birding community. Nominations are sought annually for qualified young birders.

Each recipient of a Young Birder Award receives a plaque, a BCFO ballcap, free BCFO membership (electronic) until age 19, plus other contributed awards.

To be selected for a Young Birder Award, recipients must meet all of the following criteria:

- Be at least 11 years of age, and no more than 18 years of age as of January 1 of the year of the Award.
- Have demonstrated exceptional observational and birding skills well beyond the “novice” level.
- Have made significant contribution to activities in the birding community such as: posting to listservs, entering data to eBird, or participating in local surveys, bird counts, bird banding, and field trips.
- Be nominated by a BCFO member who has knowledge of the candidate, their birding skills, and their contributions to the birding community.

If you know of a potential candidate for this award, contact any of the BCFO Directors – see page 2 for addresses.

rare bird but even so, it is better to be safe than sorry! After all of that, you are prepared to go out and explore!”

For young birders in particular Sasha offers some specific encouragement. “My main advice to young birders would be to embrace your passion and

to remember that you are part of a community of other young birders even if you cannot find them locally. Taking opportunities as they showed up also gave me access to further opportunities down the road which I am grateful for. Transportation was definitely my main challenge in pursuing this hobby, but it also helped me to embrace local and backyard birding and to enjoy my passion without needing to find the rarities.”

Sasha was among other young birders featured in Wingspan magazine in 2020, where she noted her lifelong love of birds and fascination with their intelligence and evolution.

She is currently in her fourth and final year of Conservation Biology at the University of Alberta.

Photos by Sasha: Hairy Woodpecker in Sunnyside Acres Urban Forest, and Spotted Towhee in her backyard.

Bird Guides Needed

The growth of the Creston Valley Bird Festival has created a need for additional bird guides for the next event, taking place on May 10–12, 2024. This festival, which has been running since 2011, offers a variety of birdwatching activities guided by field experts, as well as photography and art displays and bird-oriented workshops.

Bird guides receive payment, travel expenses, and a dinner at the opening banquet. If you are interested, for more information contact:



info@crestonvalleybirds.ca

Briefing I

Summary by M. Church, Vancouver

Harpy Eagles Grow Rain Forests

Harpy Eagles live in tropical forests from southernmost Mexico to the Pantanal marshes of northernmost Argentina. They are among the largest of eagles and are apex predators in their range. They nest in the forest canopy or in emergent highest trees and hunt tree-dwelling mammals at the same levels. Dominant prey includes sloths and monkeys (including capuchins, howler monkeys and squirrel monkeys, among others). They may sit and wait for prey to appear in a manner similar to our buteos, or they may chase birds through the canopy, accipiter style.

A life-bonded pair builds a large stick nest and raises one chick every other year. There usually are two eggs but, once the first hatches, the second egg is often ejected from the nest. The chick is fed at the nest for the duration of its residence, which may be up to the full two-year rearing cycle. Feeding the chick and themselves involves each of the adults bringing about 100 kg of food to the nest each year. Nest-keeping entails scraps being ejected

from the nest and defecation outside the nest. This mess falls to the ground around the base of the nest tree.

Rain forest soils are famously barren of nutrients. Growth of the vegetation is so vigorous that any nutrients are taken up immediately. The stock of rain-forest nutrients resides in the trees and understorey vegetation. So the material ejected from a Harpy nest represents a valuable concentration of additional nutrients in the area immediately around the base of the nest tree. Researchers have collected leaves from nest trees and immediately surrounding understorey plants, whole ground cover plants, and similar samples from the base of trees comparable with the nest tree but far from any nest. Elemental analysis of the sampled material showed that nitrogen was 87 percent more abundant in the leaves of the nest tree and immediately surrounding plants than in the far sample, and that phosphorus was 142 percent more abundant at the nest site. No comparable enrichment was detected in soil samples taken at the test sites, so nutrient uptake either is incredibly rapid or there is a particular time of year when soil nutrient reserves are fully drawn down by the growing vegetation. Given the known general poverty of rain-forest soils, the former seems the most likely situation.

It appears, then, that many Harpy nests scattered throughout a rain forest, and possibly the nests of other raptors, play an important role in nutrient cycling in tropical rain forests. The most famous example of an animal augmenting soil nutrients and, ultimately, plant growth and forest maintenance is the propensity of bears in the Pacific Northwest to drag salmon carcasses away from streams and to abandon them in the forest. It is a reasonable conjecture that animal habits in a wide variety of landscapes play an important central or auxiliary role in fertilizing the soils in their environment, hence the growth of vegetation, thereby influencing the character of the place. Nor is it entirely far-fetched to explain the sometimes rich vegetation around ancient settlement sites in the Amazon rain forest as the legacy of human activities centuries ago. If so, it might imply that natural (i.e., unharvested) vegetation retains the local endowment of nutrient through many generations – an interesting speculation.

Reference

Chakravorty, A. 2003. Harpy eagles concentrate precious nutrients in the Amazon, *Eos* 104, <https://doi.org/10.1029/2023EO230183>.

Listers' Corner

Kathryn Clouston, Courtenay

Listers' Corner has been a popular feature for BCFO members for many years and I took it up from Larry Cowan last year with some hiccups. My apologies to those whose numbers I mixed up; I will try to do better this year.

To participate, please submit your life and year totals, as of December 31, 2023, for the areas listed in the accompanying table. Most listed areas are those with historical published checklists. Other areas may be suggested by submitting a total. The number following each area in the table is the threshold level for submissions, in most cases 50% of species recorded. You may report levels below the threshold, and we will try to include them.

Specialized lists may also be submitted – for example birds seen above 1,500 metres in BC.

The **ABA list** comprises two listings, one as ABA Continental and a second ABA Continental plus Hawaii. Totals will only be listed for the area given i.e. if only an ABA Continental is submitted then it will only appear in the ABA Continental listing and vice versa.

North Pacific Pelagic Waters include all species seen more than 3.2 km (2 miles) offshore from Alaska, BC, Washington, Oregon and California.

Non-motorized Transportation (NMT) consists of species seen/heard using self-powered locomotion (walk, run, bicycle, canoe etc.) from your home location.

ATPT is the totalling of all your Canadian Province & Territory lists to create a "total ticks" list.

ARDAT (All Regional Districts Added Together) is the sum of all eBird Regional Districts.

Areas listed individually are those having three or more members providing totals.

If more than one family member is submitting a list, individual lists need to be submitted.

Special Notes

A reminder to those summarizing their numbers from eBird. More than a few "reporting areas" differ from eBird to the historical listing boundaries:

Vancouver Checklist – eBird does not include Point Roberts or all of Golden Ears Provincial Park but the historical Vancouver Checklist does!

Okanagan Valley – eBird includes most of Manning Park while the historical Okanagan List does not.

Submissions

Email morrisoncreek@yahoo.ca or mail Kathryn Clouston, 1540 Embleton Cres., Courtenay, BC V9N 6N8.

Deadline for submissions is February 01, 2024. All submissions will be acknowledged if the member's email address is known. If you don't get an acknowledgement, your listings weren't received.

BCFO LISTING REPORT FORM DECEMBER 2023

Name.	Date
..... British Columbia (250)	..... BC Winter Seasonal list (125)
..... Canada (340)	..... Non-motorized (NMT) (100)
..... ABA Continental (400)	..... N. Pacific Pelagic Waters (45)
..... ABA incl Hawaii (450)	..... Manning PP (100)
..... World (900)	..... Prince George (130)
..... World Families (120)	..... Sunshine Coast (135)
..... North America (500)	..... West Kootenay (150)
..... Vancouver (190)	..... Creston Valley (140)
..... Okanagan Valley (160)	..... Fraser Valley (150)
..... Yukon (45)	..... Blackie Spit (100)
..... Northwest Territories (40)	..... Semiamhoo Peninsula (120)
..... Alberta (190)	..... Kamloops (140)
..... All Ticks Prov & Territories (ATPT)	..... Mount Robson PP (90)
..... Washington (190)	..... Princeton (90)
..... Victoria (120)	..... Salt Spring Island (110)
..... Vancouver Island (190)	..... Haida Gwaii (75)
..... Peace River Area (130)	..... Pitt Meadows (110)
..... Sea & Iona Islands (160)	..... Comox Valley (125)
..... Westham & Reifel Islds (140)	(Other)

Photo Essay I

Cooperative Buntings

Adrian Dorst, Tofino

Snow Buntings breed on the Arctic Tundra and in fall migrate to southern Canada and northern United States. On our west coast they are considered casual migrants, meaning we rarely see them. I lucked out on October 26 when I found two feeding on the beach at Stubbs Island. After spotting them I sat down and allowed them to come to me. It was quite thrilling to see these birds up close and paying me no mind.



Photo Essay 2

Nesting Bluebirds

William Murdock (Burnaby) took these Mountain Bluebird shots – and the ones shown on the front and back covers – at South Okanagan nestbox sites.



Dedication for Jude and Al Grass

Phil Henderson, Fort Langley

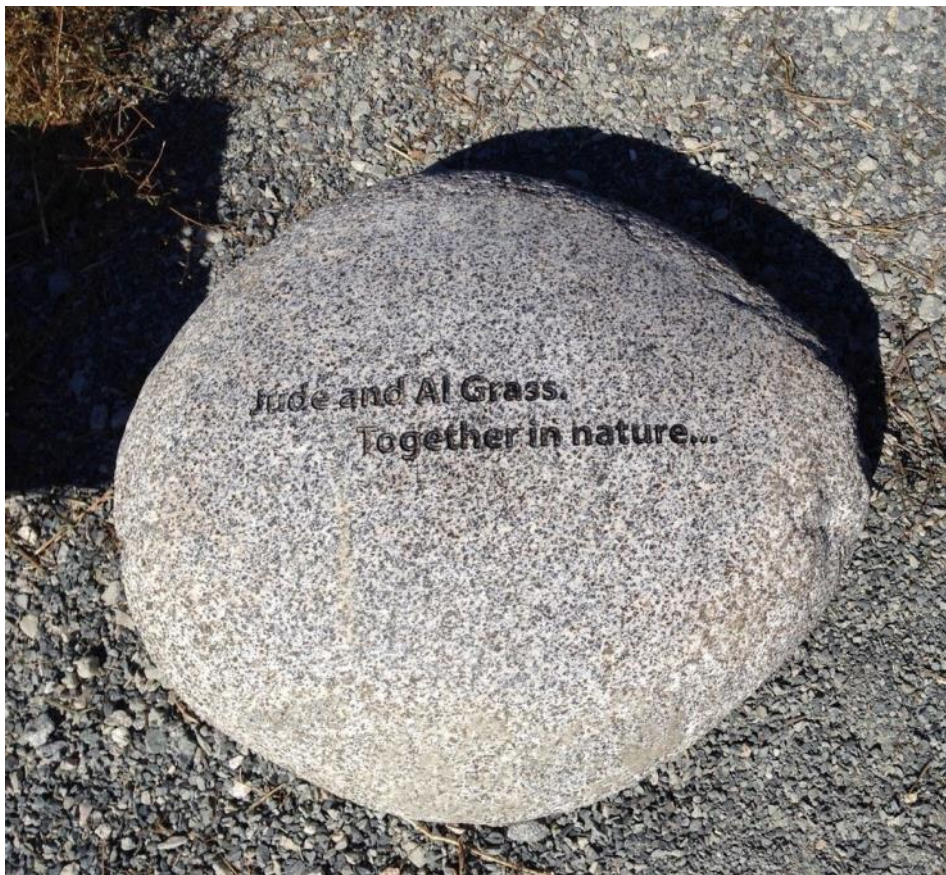
On September 15, 2023, over 40 friends and nature enthusiasts gathered at Fergus Watershed Biodiversity Preserve in Surrey to visit with Jude and Al Grass and to see the inscribed boulder placed along the path to honour their selfless dedication to nature. This marked the first time Jude and Al and many of the attendees had seen it. The boulder, and lovely inscription penned by Al, ensures that their legacy as tireless advocates for nature lives on.

Many organizations and individuals, including BCFO, generously contributed letters of support to the City of Surrey. Neal Aven, Director, Parks and his team at the City of Surrey embraced the idea of a dedication and made it happen. I have little experience with civic politics

but I can imagine there were a few hurdles and obstacles to negotiate. But Neal had the right people pushing for

the Grasses and the right people – Jude and Al – as the mission's focus. Who could deny this? The boulder is a permanent beacon of inspiration for nature in an official space dedicated to conservation.

Above: the boulder, photographed by Glenda Bartosh. Below: Ken Crosby, City of Surrey, with Al and Jude Grass. Photo by George Clulow.



President Jude

Jude was involved directly with the BCFO for many years as President and Vice-President and Al has promoted nature, educated and inspired countless individuals on walks for birds and other organisms for many different groups. Jude and Al have been an inseparable force for nature over many years.

For those who couldn't attend and wish to visit the site, Fergus Watershed Biodiversity Preserve is located at 14th Avenue and 168th Street in Surrey. The parking lot is on the west side of 168th. From the parking lot head west along the trail about 250 metres. The Grass' stone is located between two benches at the rest stop.

Albatross!

Kenneth Whyte, Vernon

In January of this year we completed a 23-day expedition with Hurtigruten on the expedition ship Fram. We started in Santiago de Chile and had stops in the Falkland Islands, South Georgia and Antarctica before returning to our starting point. There were many stops and highlights during the 9,500 kilometer sea voyage.

One of the key highlights were up-close observations of the Black-browed Albatross at stops at Carcass Island, Westpoint Island and Sanders Island in the far northwest part of the Falkland Islands. The Falklands are the most important site globally for this beautiful seabird, holding 70% (500,000 pairs) of the world population.

They have a pure white head with a black line over and through the eye, producing the black-browed effect. The heavy hooked bill is yellow and pink. The huge wingspan is 210–250cm (7–8ft) with black upper wings and a broad black leading edge to the underwings. The legs and large webbed feet are a flesh-grey colour.

Black-browed Albatross are migratory, arriving in the Islands to breed in September and lay a single egg in October and leaving by the end of April. They return to breeding sites reusing



the same nest year after year.

Seen offshore throughout the year in Falkland waters, the species ranges widely across the South Atlantic Ocean. Young Falkland birds disperse rapidly northwards to southern Brazil, not returning to their colony to breed for seven to ten years. Black-browed Albatrosses are known to have survived for more than 50 years.

The nest is a solid pillar up to 50cm high of mud and guano with other materials sometimes incorporated. They fre-

quently nest in association with Rock-hopper Penguins. Young fledglings are covered in a soft grey down but by April they have grown their adult plumage and are abandoned by their parents. After losing weight for a few days, they leave the nest to fly out to sea on their own.

Black-browed Albatross feed largely in the Falkland Current on fish, lobster-krill and squid. They may travel long distances to find the best feeding – sometimes more than 200 miles in a single trip away from the nest. They are successful scavengers of waste and offal discarded from fishing trawlers.

*Black-browed Albatross photos
by author.*

Cordilleran Flycatcher:

Now You Have It, Now You Don't

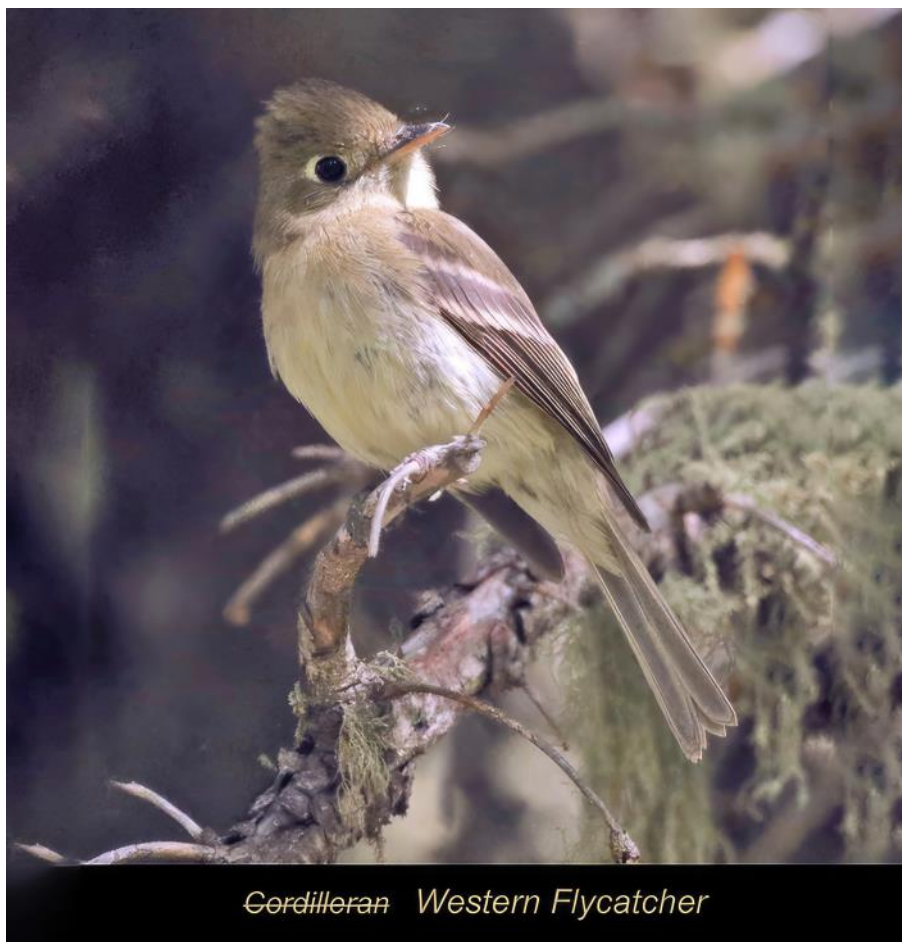
Carlo Giovanella, Cloverdale

Species come and go, mostly through biological evolution. A few result from human whims. This is a story of one such species.

Members of the *Empidonax* genus are small songbirds, not particularly remarkable as to colour, song, or other intriguing characteristics. For many birders, the main issue is in trying to tell them apart. They all look much alike, and are best distinguished by vocalizations, although that too can be challenging for some. It didn't help matters in this regard when in 1989 the AOU (American Ornithological Union, now Society, so AOS), decided that one species of said empids, the Western Flycatcher, was actually two species; Pacific-slope Flycatcher on the coast side, and Cordilleran Flycatcher farther inland. Although there was general agreement that the two birds were identical in appearance, there were noticeable differences in vocalizations and breeding range.

The newly minted Cordilleran Flycatcher was of little relevance to our local birding scene, as it was never confirmed as occurring in BC. The seminal 4-volume *Birds of British Columbia* in 1997 stated that the distribution of Cordilleran Flycatcher "... needs clarification". The *BC Breeding Bird Atlas* (2012) does not mention the species. It is not listed on the official checklist of BC, or of Alberta. The putative range for the species was to the south, across the USA border.

No surprise that not everyone was on board with this split! Among the sceptics was Richard J Cannings, a founding and long-time member of BCFO, and currently the Honourable MP for South Okanagan-West Kooten-



Cordilleran Western Flycatcher

ay Riding. At the time of the split, Dick was Curator of the Cowan Vertebrate Museum, Dept of Zoology, UBC. There he had access to a device for converting analog birdsong recordings into sonograms. On examining the songs and calls of Western Flycatchers across southern BC, he concluded that the split was not warranted, and subsequently submitted a scientific paper documenting his objection. The paper was rejected for publication. The fact that the reviewer who rejected the paper just happened to be the person who orchestrated the split may or may not have influenced the decision.

On July 6, 2023, the AOS reversed its earlier split, lumping the two birds and reinstating them as Western Flycatcher. After 35 years of existence, the Cordillera Flycatcher was officially no more, and Cannings was finally and fully vindicated.

There is a personal side-note to this story. The "Cordilleran Flycatcher" had

never been confirmed as occurring in Canada. So when a Western-type empid was found nesting in the Cypress Hills in Saskatchewan in 2021, it was beyond the normal range of Pacific-slope, and thus presumed to be a genuine "Cordilleran." A number of listers, myself included, made a special effort to twitch that bird, just to add to their Canada lifelist.

On June 21 of this year, Roger Foxall and I flew to Calgary, then motored to the Cypress locality, where we successfully located the bird. It was proudly included on our Canada lifelists for exactly 15 days. In hindsight, the release of the lumping announcement proved to be quite untimely for us. That bird had been showing for three successive years, but "they" had made no official mention of lumping until just two weeks after our sighting appeared on eBird!

Barred Owl Attack

Brent Matsuda, Burnaby

On October 15, 2023 at 5:40 pm, my two-year-old son, Bryce, was attacked by a Barred Owl while we were walking on a popular trail at Squint Lake Park in Burnaby. He was 2–3 metres in front of me when the bird swooped in from above and clipped him on the side of the head. He started crying immediately and upon examination there were lacerations on his left eyelid and scalp above his forehead and his left ear. As can be seen in the photo, the talon scratch came within millimetres of his eye.

While Barred Owl attacks are not uncommon, they are infrequent outside of the nesting season (although there was another Barred Owl attack reported in Sidney shortly thereafter). There have been other attacks on people at Squint Lake, resulting in warning signs posted by locals and eventually by the City of Burnaby. However, previous attacks have occurred during the spring/summer season, and there were no signs posted on the trail where the attack occurred and not at this time of year. Given that this bird has demonstrated that it will attack at any time of year, signage will need to remain in place year-round. Eventually it's effectiveness will wane if heeded at all. People were completely ignoring the signage posted after the attack, as its messaging appears to be lost to those that do not realize how much injury an owl is capable of inflicting.

The BC Conservation Officer Service (COS) could not be reached through the RAPP (Report All Poachers and Polluters) hotline when the attack happened and I had to contact the City of Burnaby emergency line who were able to reach them. I was finally able to get through to COS dispatch days later and request a call back, to which they have not responded. During the attacks reported in the media in July in which the owl apparently knocked down people and

drew blood when attacking from behind, the COS stated that, "They do not attend owl interactions."

Presumably this is because the attacks do not result in serious injury (yet). However, the safety concern remains given the network of trails and proximity of the attacks to baseball diamonds and a children's playground from which I have heard the owl calling during the daytime in September. The next person, be it adult or child, may not be so lucky as Bryce. Being blinded during an owl attack is not unprecedented and given the size of my son's head relative to the spread of an owl's talons, a great deal more damage could have occurred.

In this case, the bird hit Bryce from the side, and the attack appeared to be focused on him, perhaps because he was the smallest in our group and somewhat isolated being 2–3 metres ahead of me. His six-year-old sister and seven-year-old brother were about 3 metres in front of him but were holding hands with my wife. No one else was attacked and the owl only made one swoop and then disappeared.

Since the Barred Owl attacks in Squint Lake have occurred for more than one season, it is unlikely to be a juvenile learning to hunt. A pair of Barred Owls was reported to have nested in the park in the spring, which is when the attacks were reported in July. If it is an adult bird doing it, then the attacks will continue year-round.

As a professional Wildlife Biologist, I have worked with and interacted with owls from California to northern BC for the past 20 years of my 37-year career, including having agitated Barred Owls flying in and loudly vocalizing territorial infringement, and have stood under the trees of Barred Owlets branching. But I have never been attacked. This incident strikes me as an aggressive outlier, no different from outliers in other species (birds, mammals, or any vertebrates) in which individual personalities manifest themselves in

unique behaviours which may be beneficial or harmful in their interspecific or intraspecific interactions with others. If this bird is an aggressive outlier and continues to attack people year-round, then a decision must be made to resolve the safety concern. Translocation of an owl is challenging with its territorial establishment and COS will be unlikely to do so given that the Province of BC has been culling Barred Owls for decades. Euthanasia will not be popular in the public eye, even if it is just one owl attacking people. The messaging of posted year-round signage will be lost on kids and new immigrant families that frequent the park that do not understand how much injury an owl can cause. And it is unrealistic to expect them to leave the park and return with hats or umbrellas if they see the signs posted for the first time. If nothing happens to them, then they will continue to repeat their behavioural usage of the park, unless they are attacked.

I am curious if anyone else has any thoughts on this incident, or perhaps suggestions on how to deal with this aggressive owl before it injures someone else more seriously. Feel free to contact me directly at

brent.matsuda@mail.com.



Galaxy S20 FE 5G

Veracruz, Mexico: Sky in Motion

Zinthia López, Vázquez, Mexico

Raptors in Migration

Looking up at the sky on a warm autumn afternoon on the central coast of Veracruz can be one of the greatest and most exciting experiences any birder will ever have. Just imagine for a second, hundreds of thousands of birds gliding gently overhead, heading south, always south, pushed by rising warm air currents and southerly winds that facilitate their titanic task. This wondrous spectacle can be life-changing for those who dare to watch and marvel at the world's most abundant raptor migration.

Migration is such an intriguing and amazing natural phenomenon, both for scientists and naturalists around the world. Mexico is fortunate to be not only the winter resting place of hundreds of migratory species, but also a migratory corridor through which millions of individuals pass to Central and South America.

The particular orography of the American continent, and specifically Mexico, creates a natural migratory



Photo: Perla Torres. Migration of Swainson's Hawks, 2017.

corridor at the point where the two great mountain ranges called Sierra Madre Oriental and Sierra Madre Occidental converge with the Neo-Volcanic Transverse Axis, forming a bottleneck that concentrates the migratory passage for more than 95% of the global population of Broad-winged Hawk, Swainson's Hawk and Mississippi Kite. In addition, there are more than twenty other species of raptors, not to men-

tion waterfowl and passerines: the spectacle is simply breathtaking! On a good day, when groups of raptors accumulate from a previous storm, you can see several hundred thousand migrating birds in the space of a few hours.

This marvellous phenomenon has only been studied for about three decades, driven by a group of young Mexican biologists who, in the spring of 1991, installed for the first time a monitoring station on the central coast of Veracruz. After finding the ideal spots and time of year to document the world's most important migration, they established a standardized monitoring system under the umbrella of a non-profit organization that has been responsible for funding and strengthening the project over the years: Pronatura Veracruz. After more than three decades of monitoring, it is estimated that the average number of migratory birds of prey per season in autumn (August-November) is more than 5,200,000 individuals, without counting the tens of thousands of waterbirds and millions of passerines.

The work has not stopped there, Pronatura Veracruz, with some international help, has generated an articula-



Photo: Dayan Espinoza. Birdwatching with kids of Chichicaxtle, Ver. 2017



Photo: Dayan Espinoza. Visit to the banding station for kids of Chichicaxtle, Ver. 2017.

ted effort to understand this amazing phenomenon in more depth. Thus, since 1988, a banding station was established at La Mancha (later moved to Cansaburro), which has provided valuable data thanks to the recapture and reporting of previously banded birds; for example, it is known that many of the accipiters that cross Veracruz originate from the Midwestern and Northeast regions of the United States (Michigan, Iowa) and south-central Canada (Saskatchewan and Alberta), more than 3,100 kilometres from Veracruz!

In addition, almost from the beginning, an environmental education programme was developed and strengthened over the years by different institutions such as Hawk Mountain Sanctuary and the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation. A formal education programme with fourth-grade children from the public elementary school in the town of Chichicaxtle and after-school activities in the environmental education room of the Dr Mario A. Ramos Observatory, open to children of all ages, has been established. These hotbeds of environmental know-

wledge have impacted several generations of enthusiastic students on the topics of migration, birds and other aspects of ecosystem conservation. They have made such a strong impact that some of the curious children trained by the environmental educators are now accountants, banders or environmental educators in the same project they were trained in and have managed to participate regularly in other

national and international research projects.

To talk about Veracruz and the raptor migration without mentioning the vibrant community that has supported this beautiful project over the years would be like not giving heart and soul to this initiative. The people of Veracruz are warm, cheerful, optimistic, proud of their land, their food, their roots, their dancers – in love with life, passionate. They arrive at their work place happy and leave twice as happy, they chat, laugh, enjoy themselves and their joy is contagious. Veracruz Río de Rapaces is more than a scientific project, more than an educational programme, it is a philosophy that proclaims love for nature, it is a source of inspiration, it is energy to change the world, it is passion, joy and love. It is the experience that any birdwatcher should live and it is the prize for those who dare to live looking at the sky!

If you dream of witnessing firsthand the most abundant raptor migration in the world, don't miss the information we will be presenting at a BCFO Zoom event on February 21, 2024, where we will also be discussing the upcoming tour to Veracruz that we are organizing in collaboration with Timothy Jackson for October, 2024.



Photo: Zinthia López. Group of visitors at Dr. Mario A. Ramos Observatory, Chichicaxtle, Ver. 2018.

The Palaeo-Ornithologist

Long Fossil Avian Trackways: A Global Perspective

Charles Helm, Tumbler Ridge

If a “long” avian trackway is arbitrarily defined as containing ten or more tracks, such a phenomenon is rare in the global fossil record. And British Columbia, despite the wealth of fossil avian tracksites detailed in the July 2023 issue of *BC Birding*, doesn’t have a single qualifier. What we do have in BC is old avian tracks, and areas of trampling, but long trackways: nada.

The global gold standard with regard to long avian trackways is a Pleistocene site from Carson City, Nevada, USA. This diverse assemblage of tracks was recorded in an 1889 sketch map, which depicts eight heron-like trackways, each containing more than 20 tracks. However, there is a catch: the surface was covered over in the 1930s during the construction of a prison, and has been inaccessible ever since. Other tracksites, happily still accessible to the dedicated palaeo-ornithologist, include a trackway of 15 tracks made by a tur-

key-like trackmaker from a Miocene site in Mexico, and a long tridactyl trackway, probably made by a shorebird, from the Oligocene La Playa Fósil site in Spain.

It has been my good fortune to enjoy an annual palaeontology field season on the Cape south coast of South Africa. Our team has documented more than 350 vertebrate Pleistocene tracksites along a coastline of 350 km. Most of these were registered by mam-

mals, but 12%, totalling 41 sites, are of avian origin. This contrasts with the relatively sparse Pleistocene body fossil record in the region: the body-fossil record and the trace fossil record are thus nicely complementary.

Among those 41 sites, 22 are clustered along a 9 km stretch of coastal cliffs. These include four long trackways. First described in 2017 was a site with two approximately parallel trackways, comprising 20 and 14 tracks that were about 10 cm in length (Figure 1). The trackmaker was probably a spurfowl (family *Phasianidae*). And now, in a recently published study in the jour-



Above: Figure 1: parallel long trackways registered by spurfowl.

Below: Figure 2: a long trackway registered by a gull.



nal *The Ostrich*, we recorded a large palaeosurface on a massive fallen block, containing two further long avian trackways. One, containing 19 tracks (Figure 2), appears to have registered by a gull (family *Laridae*). The second, comprising 22 tracks (Figure 3), was probably made by a flamingo (family *Phoenicopteridae*). On the same surface is a long invertebrate trackway (probably made by a cricket) and a small rodent trackway comprising 108 tracks in a meandering pattern typical of rodents.

Remarkably, the two sites containing these long avian trackways are situated a mere 350 metres apart. This short stretch of coastline on the Cape south coast thus contains four of the longest fossil avian trackways ever

identified. Although the sites have not been directly dated, comparison with other dated sites nearby suggests an age of 90,000 to 140,000 years. In all four cases the tracks would have been made on dune surfaces, which are now cemented and thus amenable to our interpretation.

Accessing these remote sites, situated in unstable surroundings that frequently see landslides and cliff-collapse events following storm surges, is not for the faint of heart. Moreover, we don't know how long these long trackways will survive – they could be gone after the next spring high tide. But in the meantime they provide an engaging glimpse into ornithological deep time.

Given the numerous examples in the fossil record of long dinosaur trackways, why is it that long avian trackways are so rare? The answer is most



likely that we have not been looking hard enough. Dinosaurs, many of them

being so massive, left deep, large tracks and obvious trackways that are sometimes identifiable from a distance. Bird trackways, typically made by much lighter individuals, are smaller and shallower. Finding them may require angled lighting, either from sunlight shining at an optimal angle or else from a bright LED light used at twilight or in the dark.

And therein lies a challenge. BC, with its impressive history of fossil avian tracks, is well placed to play a role. But successful identification of long avian trackways in our province is not going to come without substantial effort and commitment.

Left: Figure 3: angled view of a very straight, long avian trackway registered by a flamingo.

Picidae Summer

Doug Cooper, Vancouver

It began with me resolving that this year was going to be the year that I photographed a Black-backed Woodpecker. My only previous encounter with the species had been in late April of 1994 near the Nelway border crossing south of Nelson. My field notes from that sighting stated: "Pair, nesting in power pole along north edge of field. Male with bright yellow crown, both very pretty." No photographic record of the encounter exists. Getting a good photo of the species has been a goal ever since getting hooked in the 2000s on the pleasures of birding with digital camera equipment.

My hunting ground of choice for the last several years has been Kettle River Provincial Park, aka Kettle River Recreation Area, north of Rock Creek. A 2015 forest fire affected a considerable portion of the area, and Black-backed

Woodpeckers have been reported tantalizingly frequently since. Since 2019 I've made a number visits without success. The trend continued in mid-June when I camped overnight and spent another fruitless day wandering about, having my hopes raised and then dashed repeatedly when the calling or tapping turned out to be from woodpeckers without black backs.

Not that the camping trip in June was without some pluses. I spent a night in an unnamed grove off Highway 3 not too far from Johnstone Creek Provincial Park campground, west of Rock Creek. In the morning I was awoken by the irregular tapping of a sapsucker. Further exploration culminated in terrific views of a pair of Williamson's Sapsuckers separately visiting the same spot on the same Western Larch. I had seen



*Above: A female Williamson's Sapsucker.
All photos by author.*

WISAs a few times before but had been able to take only record-quality photos.
(continued)

In addition, later on the trip I visited the same friends who had hosted the BBWOs in 1994. This time they were reluctantly putting up with a pair of Red-naped Sapsuckers who had taken to boring sap wells in a decorative mountain ash. They were less thrilled than I was at this occurrence and, shortly after I took the accompanying photo, they wrapped the trunk of the tree in burlap in hopes of discouraging the practice.

Determined not to give up on my BBWO quest, I took a second trip in early September to Kettle River Park. I spent two days methodically working my way through the forest of blackened spars and fallen logs without a sighting. Late in the morning of when I was booked to check out of the campground, I reluctantly admitted to myself that my effort was again going to be for naught. I was nearly out of the forest and within sight of my camper, when I heard the tap of a woodpecker at work. To my joy, and I don't use the word lightly, it turned out to be coming from a woodpecker with a solid

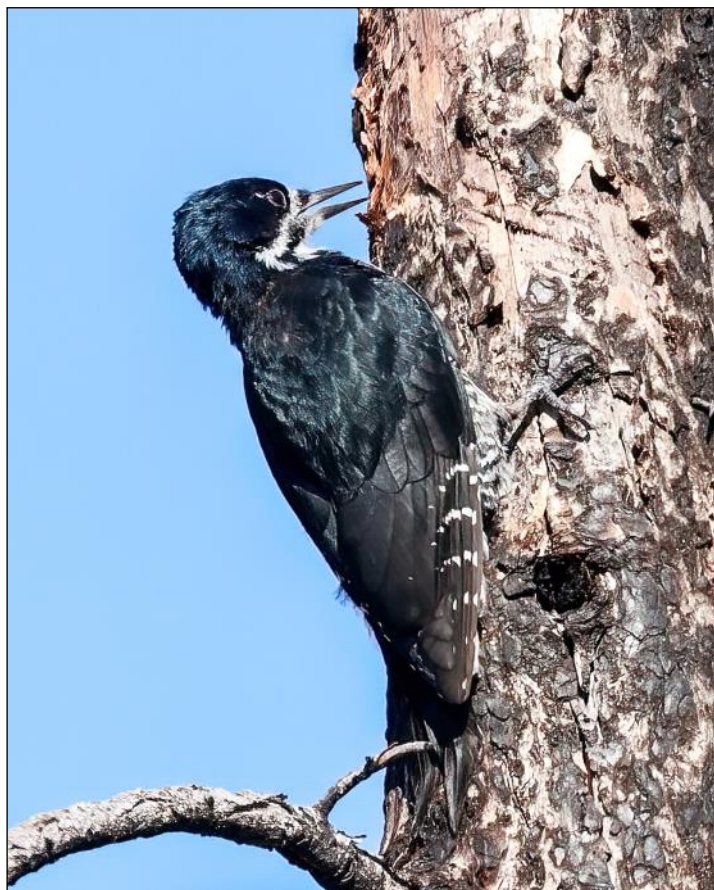
black back. The bird, a female, was concentrating so assiduously at its task of flaking off bits of outer bark that she allowed me to get some great photo opportunities.

During my two days of trekking through the area, I came also upon an adult and a juvenile Pileated Woodpecker. The adult was working steadily at excavating some sort of foodstuff from a spar and would intermittently regurgitate into the begging juvenile's beak.

I still had a few days left on my trip so I headed to Jewel Lake Provincial Park, my back-up site if Kettle River had not yielded any BBWOs. Having



Above: A male Williamson's Sapsucker.



bagged my main target, I began to think maybe of stopping in Manning Park on my way home to see if I could rouse up an American Three-toed Woodpecker, a species I had also seen only a few times and with no good photograph evidence of same. The first bird I saw on my morning at Jewel Lake was a male ATTW, obligingly posing with one of its feet stretched out in full view.

Shortly after returning home after the triumph of seeing the Black-backed, I began to wonder

if there was a bit more luck to be had in my quest for woodpeckers I have been wanting to see and photograph. I had struck out in my one attempt, with my late father-in-law, to see the famous White-headed Woodpecker that in 2001 frequented a mullein patch up around Km 11.5 of McKinney Rd east of Oliver. eBird told me that Leavenworth in central Washington was a hotbed for White-headed Woodpeckers. With the help of a fortuitous encounter with a fellow birder (who may or may not have been an emissary from the birding goddesses) I managed to get an obscured but none-the-less treasured photo of my lifer male WHWO, again very near the end of my allotted time for searching.

All in all, it was a very satisfying summer for woodpeckers.

Left: A female Black-backed Woodpecker, giving a good view of its three toes.

Photographers' Corner

Shooting in the Fog

Dennis Forsyth, Denman Island

Long, long ago I remember learning to hunt from men much older than myself. I was cocky enough in those days to sometimes find their beliefs and techniques just silly. One lesson it took me a long time to learn concerned the best weather to hunt elk, moose and deer in. Most of these old-timers sniffed at what they called "bluebird days." If the day dawned with a bright, clear sun beaming down and promised to be unseasonably warm and pleasant they found something else to do and waited for a blustery, wet, or decidedly chilly day.

I haven't hunted with a gun for many years now but I do still use many of the hunting skills I picked up back then in my animal and bird photography. And not long ago I was reminded of the old "bluebird day" dictum. Most photographers learn that a day with a very strong sun beating down can be problematic. Everything gets lit much too starkly. Too much glare, too many reflections, colours too garish, shadows too sharp.



Occasionally I am asked by local artisans to photograph their work. If the objects are things like jewellery or pottery or small sculptures, I get out my lightbox to set the work in. This contraption allows me to light my subject with great control. I can get a non-directional, very even light with minimal shadows and make the object being photographed appear to almost float in space. Most photographers know how this works. What nature photographers sometimes forget is that occasionally nature itself will turn the whole world into a giant lightbox

that makes a lot of things much simpler.

A nice, even, high overcast sky can do this, as can a nice medium-density ground fog. Something that effectively cuts the direct sun out but still provides plenty of light to allow high shutter speeds and high f-stops. That light, however, will tend to be non-directional and fairly shadowless. A few weeks ago we had just such a day here where I live. Damp, yes. Cool, yes. But what a great light. So, I hit the beach and found a small flock of Killdeer willing to play with me in the fog. These images are from that shoot. The birds landing among the rocks show pretty well how thick the fog was. When looking at the ground the fog was quite obvious. The in-flight shots on the other hand don't show a lot of fog, but it was there just the same.

What is evident here is just how nicely, with very minimal editing and adjusting, the colours pop. It is also clear I think that the light is actually omni-directional rather than direct. And that is what makes the detail in feathers and wings show well.

So, next time you look out at a foggy, damp non-bluebird day, grab a camera and get out to enjoy shooting in the biggest lightbox in the world.



Photographers' Corner Continued

Clive Keen, Prince George

Anticropping and Intracropping

Since birds are mostly small and farther away than we'd like, we end up with images that almost always need cropping. Cropping thus becomes the most basic tool of post-production. But almost as important for upwardly mobile bird photographers are anticropping – adding rather than removing background – and intracropping – removing background elements *within* the photograph.

Anti- and intra- cropping are essential tools of magazine editors because photographs need to be made to fit the space available. One example is on the bottom of the previous page. To make the photograph fit, the background between the lower two Killdeer and the one above was intracropped. Voila – the photograph fits nicely, without undermining its integrity. Many front- and back-cover photographs of this magazine, on the other hand, have been anticropped: extra background has been added so that the photographs fill the



very awkward dimensions of the page, allowing us to appreciate the bird without any distortion.

But such background amendment is invaluable not just in magazine editing. If a bird is large, or close, there is often not enough background to create a desirable composition. And when there are multiple birds, they can be too far apart to satisfy our compositional urges. We rarely get to compose our bird photographs in the viewfinder. Mostly, we get to blast away breathlessly for a few precious seconds and remain

grateful for whatever we are left with. With today's post-production tools, we needn't remain half-satisfied. Following are examples of photographs that might have failed everyone's composition judgement if today's wonderful post-production tools hadn't come to their aid.

Exhibit 1: Anticropping with Fill

The original of the Burrowing Owl photograph above was less than satisfactory because there was no foreground beyond the bird's claws. On this occasion, the *extend background* feature in Photoshop Elements came to the rescue. It's a guided program: you tell it where you want more edge background, and it uses an "intelligent fill" process to fill the desired space. It did a pretty good job on the first pass, though close inspection showed duplication of claws and other features. Such flaws were very easily overcome using the clone and blur tools.

Exhibit 2: Anticropping by Stretch

The original version of the Great Curassow photograph on the left could have gathered dust because the bird was originally plumb in the centre of the frame, and since the bird was looking to the right, the composition really did



not work. What was needed was more background on the right of the image – which could be added in seconds. This time, the *recompose* tool in Photoshop Elements was employed. The left side of the image was masked for protection, and the image was then stretched to the right. Bingo.

Exhibit 3: Intracropping by Squeeze

The left-most vulture in the photo to the right was farther apart from the others, completely messing up the composition. The *recompose* tool easily fixed that, by squeezing the background between the birds. The birds were marked for protection, the space between them left unprotected, and the sides of the image drawn together. Exactly the same method was used for the Ospreys shot on page 8 and the Killdeers shot on page 24. Though those were intracropped primarily to make the photographs fit the page, it improved the composition into the bargain.



Anticropped and intracropped shots are not eligible for many photo competitions, but that might not concern us. What should concern us is the issue of whether the amended photograph misleads in any way about the bird or its

behaviour. If it does not, surely honour, as well as photographic pride, is satisfied.

Photos by author.

Briefing 2

Summary by M. Church, Vancouver

News of More Disasters

(For earlier disasters see “More Thoughts on Epidemic Birds”, *BC Birding* 33:1, March 2023, pp. 35-6, and “Epidemic Birds – Again”, *BC Birding* 32:3, September 2022, p.25)

Last spring we reported the spread of the current world outbreak of HPAI (highly pathogenic avian influenza or “bird flu”) to South America and Australia. Only Antarctica remained free of the disease. Well, the disease has now been detected in Antarctica. It probably was carried there by long-distance flying seabirds such as the Wandering Albatross.

The great fear is that it will probably decimate penguin colonies, where the birds’ characteristic crowding behavior makes rapid spread of the disease almost certain. Furthermore, the current

form of the disease is a new variant, labelled H5N1.2.3.4.4b, that is more highly virulent than earlier strains. First detected in East Asia ca. 2014, it rapidly spread to Europe via migratory waterfowl that mix on Arctic summering grounds with Asiatic birds. It arrived in North America late in 2021, carried to Newfoundland by infected gulls, thence across the continent and on to South America. On the west coast it likely was carried directly from East Siberia via the east Pacific flyway.

It has now been detected, as well, in the Galapagos, where frigatebirds and Red-footed Boobies have been found dead with the flu. The disease will spread rapidly through dense nesting colonies of birds and susceptible animals on the islands. There is great concern that the disease will prove fatal to Galapagos specialties such as the Lava Gull – the world’s rarest gull (300 nesting pairs) – and the Galapagos Penguin, a subspecies of the Humboldt Penguin. An additional cause for concern is that we are apparently

entering an El Nino phase of the Pacific climate, during which seafood resources became less abundant for marine feeding birds and animals. Hence the disease may also affect Galapagos populations of fur seals and sea lions as well as the birds. It is currently proposed to attempt to minimize other sources of stress on the bird and animal populations of the Galapagos by restricting access to the national park and by suspending fishing near the islands.

Europe has long been familiar with the disastrous effects of bird flu on the husbandry of domestic chickens and ducks, particularly in the Netherlands, Belgium and France. Attempts to counter the effects of the increased virulence of the recent variant by attempting to isolate flocks from wild birds and by preventing exchange of the pathogen between domestic flocks (by carrying inoculated soil or animal droppings on vehicle tires or farmers’ boots, for example) have proven insufficient. (Continued on page 31.)

Gone Fishing

Chris Siddle, Vernon

Birding Notebooks

To a small, probably very small, number of birders, keeping a notebook of bird sightings is as automatic and as necessary as breathing. I carry a notebook with me every time I go birding and I note down almost every bird I see or hear at certain locations. The only time I don't note down a bird is when it's a reasonably common species and I am driving and there's little possibility of pulling over safely. These days I enter most of my lists into eBird, the online citizen science database.

This is not a notebook versus eBird article. eBird serves well as an index to my lists and through the lists to my notebooks. If you took eBird away from me I would miss it. But eBird for me is just a tool with many limits to its usefulness, while writing or drawing in a notebook is an exercise in setting your own limits. Reliving days afield by paging through old notebooks is a joy, each notebook a chapter and a detailed record of my birding life.

I started filling notebooks when I was in my early teens. I'm in my early seventies now. The notebooks have been of various sizes, different binding, and paper quality ranging from near-pulp to archival. Their covers are different colours. A few have shed their covers long ago. The notebooks are mounting up. The last time I counted I was entering sightings into Notebook #143. I have kept all of them except for a few from my teens which in a temporary fit of lunacy I donated to a museum. That turned out to be a bad decision. Those notebooks from 1965–1968 disappeared into the museum's collections long ago. No matter how hard or often I pleaded for their return, no one could find them. With those notebooks went details of four of my teenage, very active birding years. What a loss! However, all my other notebooks sur-

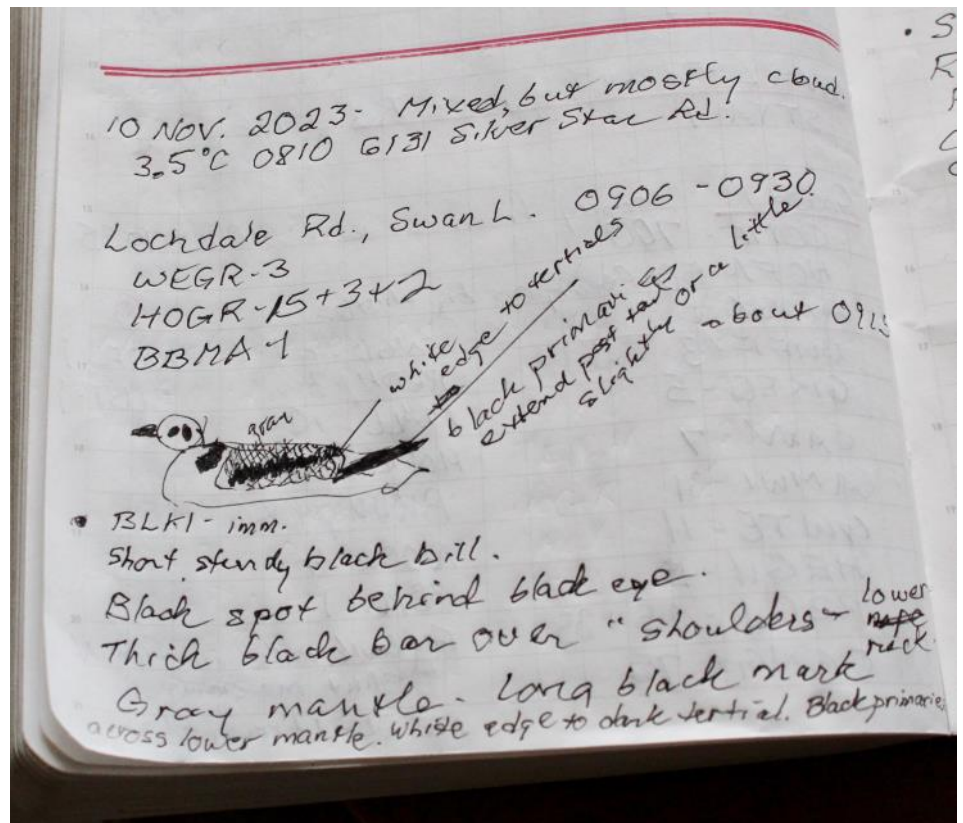
vive and if I lined them up on a very long shelf they would measure several feet in length.

In mid-August of this year a wildfire roared down a ridge in West Kelowna, jumped Okanagan Lake and burned its way northwards through parts of Winfield toward Vernon where my wife and I live. Given the extremely dry conditions of the past few months and the chance of a strong wind rising, Sonja and I anticipated the worst, imagining the fire spreading to the North Okanagan. We had our go bags packed: necessities for a life on the road, and personal treasures. Then I regarded the several shelf-feet of my nature notebooks. If I packed them all, they would fill several boxes for which there was no room in the car. I decided to take the five notebooks I had filled in our three trips to Australia, simply because we might never make it back to the island continent.

It turned out that the fire stayed in Winfield. The Aussie notebooks resided in the unused go bag well into the autumn and then I returned them to their proper chronological order on one of the notebook shelves. But the incident,

like the loss to the museum, made me realize how much I love my notebooks, all of them, a lifetime's collection.

I open one at random and I am transported to a very specific time and place. It's not just the lists that are important. It's all the other things that pages have allowed to intentionally and accidentally collect. The value resides in the seemingly casual note that on July 7, 2003 I heard wolves howling in chorus in the wilderness somewhere between Chetwynd and Tumbler Ridge, the only time in my life I have heard this awe-inspiring sound. The value is the mosquitoes that were so thick in the spruce woods near Fort St. John that when I closed a notebook after describing the singing habits of a Cape May Warbler I crushed a few that are preserved to this day in the margins. Drawings of animal tracks, orchids, the arrangement of Great Blue Heron nests in a snag make for my personal history as a naturalist. Hastily drawn maps and scribbled tips for locations of "hot" birds, phone numbers of birders met in the field, grocery lists for supplies needed for camping meals, flower and butterfly lists and mammal sightings,



photos glued onto the pages and where photos were not valuable postcards bought from little country stores or from museums. Each notebook is a source of memory.

I hope this column has inspired birders to try notebooks for themselves, or if they have notebooks of their own, to treasure them as never before. Here, selected more or less at random, are some entries I encountered and enjoyed as I wrote this piece.

July 24, 1977

My first trip to eastern North America. Hall's Lake, Ontario. 5:45 a.m. Female Scarlet Tanager; 3 juvenal Evening Grosbeaks fed by an adult; my lifer Field Sparrow; my lifer Blackburnian Warbler, an adult male.

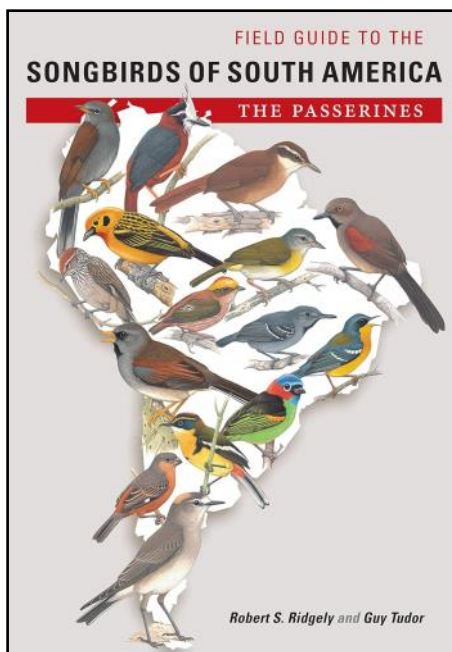
July 1, 1983

My first birding trip to Vernon, B.C. Being shown special birds by Jim Grant. 12:40. Black-chinned Hummingbird male bathed in cold, steady rain off Kidston Rd. Perched on a shrub's dead twig on about 14 feet from the ground. Tilted tail slightly above the horizontal; spread tail to the maximum, opened wings slightly and fluttered them rather slowly. Bill tilted upwards. Head turned from side to side.

July 16, 1989

South-east Arizona. Cloudy. We (Gary Davidson and I) take Guy Tudor and Michelle to the Patagonia Rest Stop and show them the male Rose-throated Becard and a Thick-billed Kingbird, a Rufous-crowned Sparrow and hear a Yellow-billed Cuckoo.

[Guy Tudor is a highly respected artist who painted the dozens of colour plates for the groundbreaking *The Birds of South America* by Robert Ridgely (two volumes, 1989 and 1994). Audubon magazine called him "one of the most skillful hands in the bird-painting business." He and his companion, Michelle, were touring south-east Arizona at the same time Gary and I were. We kept encountering each other at various hot spots. Cursed by a rental car with tissue-thin tires, Guy and



Michelle had flat after flat, so we ended up giving them rides.]

January 27, 1991

Vernon. Cloudy. Birded in p.m. along e. shore of Okanagan Lake from Landing to Ellison Prov. Park with Phil Ranson. [Excerpts from list of 20 species] PBGR-45; HOG-105; WEGR-10; GBHE -2 immobile and unhappy; COME-20m, 5f; RBME-f, my first for the Okanagan Valley; GRPA: 6-8, Paddlewheel Park; TO-SO-1, whisper-singing in low bush.

September 11, 2005

Vernon. Overcast. MacKay Reservoir, Vernon Commonage. 1136-1215. The police firing range nearby is very busy, Sounds like the cops are marking the anniversary of 9-11 by firing off every bullet they possess! Birds are few: PIWO-1; RCKI-1; LBDO-20; PESA-3; RNDU-3m.

.....

Today I carry a small, well-bound notebook. It fits easily into most of my coat pockets or even the back pocket of my jeans. Its small size is a blessing and a curse. Though it's very portable it's also restrictive how much I can write or draw on one page. I try to add more information than there is space by adding tiny writing in its margins. The result is usually a bit of a mess. However, neatness is not the point. I had that

notebook with me on Nov. 11 of this year when I was scoping a section of the east side of Swan Lake, Vernon. I was counting grebes when a small gull riding the choppy water caught my attention. Holy moly! I knew what this gull was the instant I saw it but doubt set in. Out came the notebook and I drew a small circle and a larger oblong shape to represent the gull. Then I sketched in the bird's field marks, black spot behind its dark eye, big, wide black band across its nape and down its "shoulders" and a longer, narrower black line across its lower back. I noted the colour of its mantle, and the white edge of its tertials and when I looked up, the bird had disappeared. The drawing is rudimentary, the notes scrawled outside the lines messily, but the sketch is proof that I really did see a Black-legged Kittiwake in the Okanagan Valley.

The awful little sketch (see previous page) will become more than an example of how challenged I am artistically. It marks the day for me as special, the cloudy, windy day when I saw a very rare bird for the area on the tossing water.

Below: Kittiwake from Adobe Stock.



Briefing 3

Summary by M. Church, Vancouver

Very Long Distance Navigation

Procellariiform seabirds (albatrosses and several classes of petrels) travel vast distances over trackless ocean, yet return to their natal colony, initially, perhaps, when ready to breed after years at sea. The colony is typically located on a wild coast or a tiny ocean island – a negligible spot in the world ocean. How do they do it?

There is a good deal of evidence for birds' ability to sense and use elements of Earth's magnetic field (for example, see "Magnetic Attraction", *BC Birding* 32(2), 2022: 16). Early research with the Manx Shearwaters of Skokholm Island (south Pembrokeshire coast, Wales) seemed to confirm the role of the magnetic field and subsequent work has shown, by inference from the birds' behaviour in a variety of contrived magnetic fields, and in nature that they do sense and use Earth's magnetism. But magnetic signals are not reliable in some parts of the world, notably the tropics. Nor, at sea, are celestial signs apt to be continuously, or even frequently observable. A recent study suggests that birds at sea may use infrasound as a navigation tool.

Infrasound is very low frequency sound (0.1 to 0.6 Hz). Ocean infrasound appears to peak at 0.2 Hz, for a wave period of five seconds, comparable with observed ocean wave period. Several animals, varying from elephants to domestic chickens are known to be able to detect infrasound, but the use of it in flight navigation has, so far, been considered only in domestic pigeons. A useful feature of infrasound is that its attenuation rate is exceedingly low: the sound waves can be detected by an appropriately equipped listener over distances of up to 5,000 km or more. This far exceeds olfactory signals, good for 30 to perhaps 100 km in animals with the most sensitive sniffers

(seabirds use smell to detect and approach fishing vessels where there is often food to be had: see "Albatrosses Do Career Development", *BC Birding* 32 (4), 2022:28-29).

Infrasound is generated by wind blowing over high topography, by wave beat on a shoreline, and by clashing waves travelling in opposite directions. The latter is a common situation at sea where swells generated by storms in different parts of the ocean meet and interfere with each other. Where this occurs, organisms that are desirable food items for albatrosses are often brought to the ocean surface. Further, the waves induce upwardly directed air currents that the albatrosses can use to support soaring. Albatrosses are heavy birds (6–10 kg) with high wing loading, hence flapping flight is energy intensive. Their mastery of soaring is essential for the long journeys – up to 10,000 km – that they make at sea. The ability to detect infrasound generated around the margins of storms at sea might, then, be critical to the success of albatrosses' long-distance travels.

Researchers studied the sensitivity of albatrosses to infrasound by observing the travels of Wandering Albatrosses that nest on Crozet Island (46°24'S; 51°46'E) in the Southern Ocean. They affixed miniature GPS units to 89 birds (50 females and 39 males). The birds of a nesting colony were used because they are initially found in one spot and are sure to return after a year's "wandering". Possible responses to ultrasound were investigated by selecting episodes of linear flight of at least 20 km length after a period of inconsistent flight direction ("searching flight") or rest on the water. The strength of the ultrasound field varies with direction away from an observer since upwind sea conditions vary around the compass circle.

The ultrasound field was constructed from maps of sea state and atmospheric weather by the European Centre for Medium Range Weather Forecasts. A convenient check for accuracy of the

maps was available from an infrasound measuring station on Kerguelen Island, part of the global network of stations tasked with identifying clandestine atomic weapons tests.

For the test of bird behaviour, the compass was divided into six classes of 60° spread, centred on the bird (at 0°). Infrasound derived from the first 2,000 km away from the bird in each compass slice was computed. The strength in the slice defined by the bird's new heading after the turn was always the strongest signal.

The result circumstantially establishes that the albatrosses navigate according to infrasound, which provides information of likely areas of rougher sea to provide additional wave-related lift for soaring flight and bring more abundant food resources to the surface. At the same time, signal strength may allow the birds to avoid severe storms. But this test does not reveal how they may use the infrasound field to navigate successfully back to their birth and nesting place. Perhaps marine infrasound has a steady mean condition that the birds learn to read – an ultrasound map of the oceans.

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Photo by Kenneth White. See page 16.



(bottom left) put on a nice show.

The Reflective Birder

Clive Keen, Prince George

Merlin the Magician

We have a diffident culture. Whenever some powerful innovation appears, the initial response always seems to be unease. So it has been with the Merlin Sound ID app. Cyberspace commentary on Merlin has from the start been permeated with misgivings. This really won't do. The Merlin Sound app is in truth one of the greatest enhancements to birding ever, joining eBird as one of the fundamental game-changers of our time.

As Important as Binoculars?

It might seem too much to compare the creation of the Merlin app to the inception of birding binoculars, but even this is in play. I've just returned from my home patch with 42 species tallied, and find that 16 were first identified by binocular-assisted sight, while 26 were first identified by Merlin-assisted sound. Like the aurally gifted (which I'm emphatically not) I am now primarily an ear birder, at least when I'm not far from home. When the birds are singing I'd far prefer to forget my binoculars than my cell phone.

Merlin has transformed my birding in five ways:

1. Validation

Earbirding in the past has for me been a source of serious frustration. While some bird vocalizations are easily identified, many are far less so. After struggling for years to identify birds by sound I would still spend much of my time uncertain about what I was hearing. As often as not, I would despairingly throw in the towel. It is very different with Merlin sharing the soundscape. Today, for example, I'd be thinking thoughts such as "That seems to be a MacGillivray's Warbler," and seconds later the bird's name would appear on my cell phone. Rather than shaking my

head in uncertainty, I could luxuriate in the sound and, after further checks, confidently report the species to eBird.

2. Reinforcement

One of the finest things about Merlin is that the name of the bird lights up on your cell phone each time the bird sings, reinforcing knowledge of the sound and the bird's identity. So often I've "learned" a bird song and then, weeks later, found I've forgotten it. With Merlin constantly validating your identification, the knowledge sinks in deep, not superficially; it doesn't have to be learned all over again next month or next spring.

3. Recognizing Variations and Ignoring Disruptions

Birds don't always offer their classic vocalization. Sometimes it's half-hearted. Sometimes only part of a song is given. Sometimes they ad lib. Sometimes other species sing at the same time. Merlin helps you to recognize, not just the classic undisturbed songs of the recordings, but the real-life sounds you have to cope with in the field. In my neck of the woods, when-

ever Yellow Warblers sing, American Redstarts seem obliged to chime in. It used to drive me crazy with indecision. With Merlin in hand, I can check that both are there, laugh, and enjoy both.

4. Teaching

As a learning-from-scratch tool, Merlin is matchless. A bird sings. The name lights up on the phone. It sings again. The name lights up again. Even incompetents like me who need to hear the sound confirmed dozens of times are patiently given those dozens. Fantastic for beginners. But it has also meant that birds with more difficult songs have moved within our grasp. I tried the recordings, the learn-the-songs apps, the lists of mnemonics – in fact I tried just about everything – and at best made horribly slow progress. These days I can learn one new song each trip rather than one new song each year.

5. Signaling the Unexpected

Surprisingly often, Merlin tells me that a bird I don't expect is in my vicinity. Sometimes it puts a red dot beside the bird's name, indicating that the bird is rare at the location and time of year. Sometimes it adds an orange semi-circle to indicate that the bird is uncommon. Since Merlin isn't, of course,

"Merlin says that it's not a Black-capped but a Mountain Chickadee It does sound a bit different Let's see if we can find it." Photos by author.



perfect, I treat this information cautiously – the red dot in particular is a “beware” marker – but I am still alerted to the possibility that there’s something good around, and so keep my eyes peeled. And, lo and behold, sometimes there is, and I feel like high-fiving this lovely bit of technology.

Not Perfect?

Whoever thought it would be? Merlin makes errors, keeps silent while some birds call clearly nearby, and misses birds you can recognize easily by yourself. GET OVER IT. But it is probably already better than 95% of birders, and will continue to get better each time the boffins issue updates. Because it’s not perfect, though, we have new protocols to follow when it comes to reporting birds.

New Protocols

The basic rule I follow, which I suspect is fairly standard, is that I must be able to recognize the bird myself, with Merlin just playing an assisting role, before I can tick it. This means, of course, that I can’t tick a number of birds that Merlin is confident about, but I’m not. Birds fly over which Merlin reports, but they elude me. Well, can’t win ‘em all. Handing over judgement in such cases to your cell phone would be a dreadful habit leading not just to chronic laziness but to stringy reporting. And every-one hates a stringer.

More frustrating and problematic, though, are the cases where Merlin is super-confident about birds in an area

where you have no doubt they are present – they are often there – but you have neither seen nor heard them on this occasion. I have trouble hearing, for instance, Golden-crowned Kinglets, so it would seem that I can’t count them unless I see them, however many times Merlin insists they are there.

Now If birding was just a sport, we would say that in such cases we must hold firm and deny the tick. But birding is also citizen science. Denying the tick would also mean refusing to convey valuable information. What to do? George Clulow suggests a way forward. Keep the recording. When you get home, study the sonogram. If it convinces you, confirm the ID. If not, don’t. The final judgement must always be yours, not the machine’s.

Above All

Something that deserves double emphasis is just how much Merlin can add to the joy of birding. Used sensibly, it can make you a far better birder: more knowledgeable, more informative, and more reliable. And happier. So often in birding, at least for those lacking razor-sharp eyes, there can seem to be nothing much to look at. Birds might be there, but they lurk, dammit. But with the acoustic as well as the visual field fully open, there’s nearly always something to notice, and something to enjoy. Enjoy not simply because the trip list is expanded, but because the beauty of the sound is added to the beauty of the feather and form. A whole dimension of birding can be added for

those who thought earbirding was beyond them. And it means being more capable of entering the world of the birds, not simply looking on from ours – perhaps the *summum bonum* of birding.

Conclusion

Merlin ID Sound deserves wholehearted celebration, not moaning, guilt, or grudging respect. For tens of thousands, Merlin will mean falling in love with birding. For tens of thousands more, it will mean falling in love with birding all over again.

*“Oh heck, an empid ... switch on Merlin
... yes, it’s indeed a Willow!”*



Briefing 2, continued from page 26

Authorities in France have now concluded that vaccination of domestic stock is the only viable solution and are currently supervising test vaccinations of flocks of ducks. This countermeasure, long available, has previously been avoided for fear that the animal products would then prove unmarketable, even though the vaccine is known to be perfectly safe for humans.

The experience with bird flu is now prompting researchers to examine the broader issue of disease vectors that may be carried by migrating birds. Both West Nile virus and dengue fever have been imported into Europe in this way. Still exceptional, monitoring for such events is made difficult by the initial rarity and local occurrence of them, and more so in the situation of climate change, which may alter migration timing and destination of the birds, and

the survival and virulence of any disease pathogens they may be carrying.

We have no doubt not heard the end of bird flu, or of similar issues with an expanding set of pathogens spread by birds.

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