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The Osprey

NEWSLETTER OF THE WEST KOOTENAY NATURALISTS'
ASSOCIATION



Citizen Science - The West Kootenay Bird Study 1968-1975

BONUS ISSUE



CITIZEN SCIENCE - THE WEST KOOTENAY BIRD STUDY 1968 - 1975

BY BILL MERILEES

Wedged between the Monashee Mountains on the west and the Selkirk Mountains to the east, the West Kootenay has never been considered a 'birding hot spot'. In fact it was once regarded as 'terra incognita' - the space you pass through, between the superb birding offered by the Okanagan Valley and the Creston Marshes! It was into this territory that the author arrived in Castlegar in 1968, hired as an instructor at British Columbia's first Regional College, Selkirk.

Influenced by our Provincial Museum's Occasional Papers series (for example, Stanwell-Fletcher's "Flora and Fauna of the Driftwood Valley", Jim Munro's "Birds and Mammals of the Creston Region" and Walter Johnstone's "Birds of the East Kootenay"), a community based 'citizen science' bird study, sponsored by the College was proposed. Although the term 'citizen science' was not as popular as today, this suggestion was eagerly supported by the College Council.

Terra incognita seemed appropriate at this time, as the only substantial publication about birds for the West Kootenay area was that by Dr.

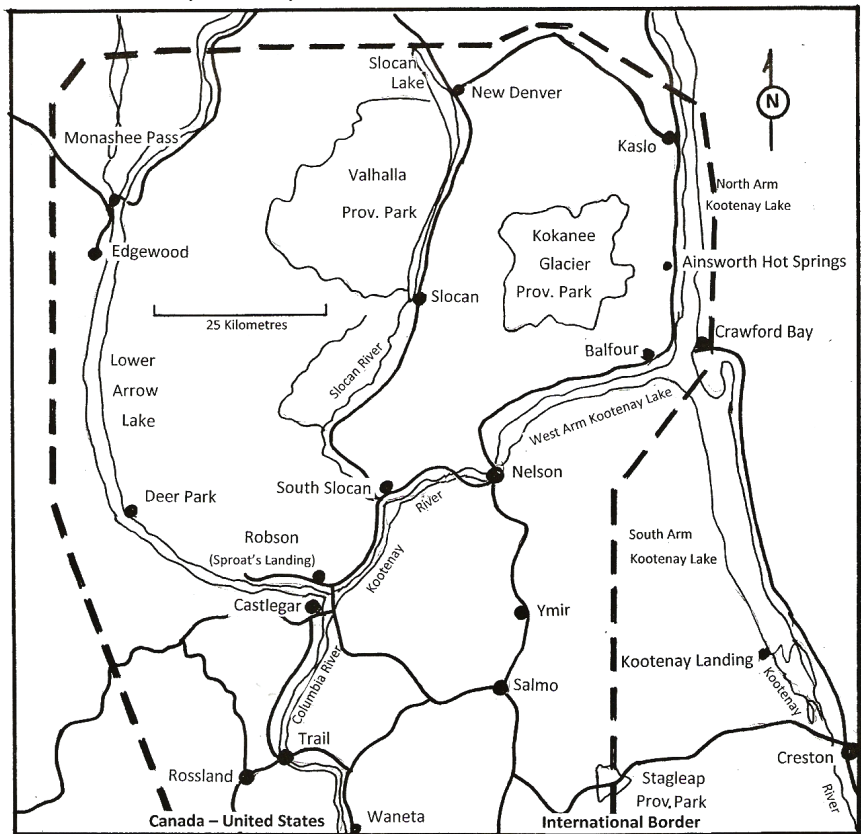
Kelso, for Edgewood on Lower Arrow Lake. Kelso was a member of the prestigious British Ornithological Union so it is not surprising he chose to publish his observations in their (United Kingdom) journal, *Ibis*, in 1926.

At the time the West Kootenay Bird Study commenced the standard bird reference for the province was by Jim Munro and Dr. Ian McTaggart Cowan, "A review of the

Bird Fauna of British Columbia", published in 1948. These authors acknowledged that they had yet to visit the West Kootenay!

The West Kootenay Bird Study (WKBS) began with an information release by the College to the community newspapers of Trail, Nelson and Castlegar in October, 1968. The initial number of responses was small, but participation grew

The West Kootenay Bird Study Area



steadily. In 1969 our first Christmas Bird Count was held and participation in the B.C. Nest Record Scheme, then managed by the Zoology Department at the University of British Columbia, began in 1970. The West Kootenay Naturalists Association became formally established in 1972, with many of its original members being participants in the bird survey.

The WKBS had two components. The first, the Citizen Science portion, involved the public, where participants were asked via questionnaires, to record their observations of bird species migration (arrival and departure dates), winter residents and feeder frequenting species. The second component was the author's research to uncover historical information back to the 1800's. This research uncovered a considerable trove of ornithological material, some published but for the most part unpublished, in field notebooks, photographs and newspaper articles.

A BRIEF SUMMARY OF WEST KOOTENAY ORNITHOLOGY UP TO 1968:

From time immemorial, the Sinixt (Arrow Lake) Interior Salish people possessed a practical knowledge of West Kootenay bird life important to their way of life. Their Colville-Okanagan vocabulary, as compiled by Anthony Mattina, has about thirty bird entries, most at a generic level such as grouse, hawk, or hummingbird

but many, such as heron (Great Blue Heron) and Kingfisher (Belted Kingfisher) are mono-specific.

During the early 1800's, map maker David Thompson, botanist David Douglas, and painter Paul Kane, passed through the West Kootenay, but their journals record nothing about the bird species they encountered other than duck or grouse which they hunted for food.

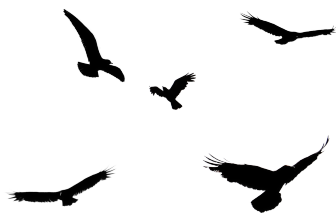
With the completion of the Canadian Pacific Railway in 1887 the opportunity for the first museum expedition to visit the West Kootenay area took place. In 1890, John Macoun, Curator for the National Museum of Natural Science in Ottawa, with his son James, and William Spreadborough descended the Columbia River on the paddle steamer Kootenai, from Revelstoke to Castlegar. They camped at Deer Park and Pass Creek, May through June and later visited Nelson and Ainsworth before retracing their route back to

Revelstoke. Field notes of their collections and observations are housed in the National Museum of Canada. Their most notable observations were the arrival of an American Barn Owl at their Deer Park camp and the presence of a Red-headed Woodpecker near Pass Creek.

With railway access to Nelson, via the Fort Sheppard Rail Line north along the Salmo Valley from the United States, two American ornithologist/collectors, Samuel Rhodes, of the Philadelphia Academy of Sciences, in 1892, and J. Alden Loring, of the Smithsonian Museum of Natural History, in 1894, collected birds in the vicinity of Nelson and Toad Mountain.

In the spring of 1902 William Spreadborough, directed by John Macoun, again descended the Columbia River directly to Trail. From May 18 to June 25 he collected in the Rossland/Trail area before departing for Cascade via the Dewdney Trail. His field notes are housed in the Canadian Museum of Nature, Ottawa.

Dr. John Edward Harry Kelso accepted the position as Medical Health Officer at Edgewood where he resided from 1913 until 1932. In addition to producing the first published record of his West Kootenay bird observations (Ibis, 1926), he was close to completing a considerable manuscript (290 pages) at the time of his passing. The original of this unpublished manuscript was located in Vancouver in the possession of his granddaughter in 1976.



Walter Johnstone also resided in Edgewood between 1915 and 1919. Influenced by Kelso, he began recording bird observations. A partial record of his West Kootenay data survives in the form of notations published in Munro and Cowan's "A Review of the Bird Fauna of British Columbia". These notations were extracted from an unpublished draft, now believed 'lost', of his Provincial Museum Occasional Paper. In 1919, with the noted wildlife artist Allan Brooks, Johnstone made a trip into the high country of Gold Range to the west of Lower Arrow Lake. Their observation of Chestnut-backed Chickadee was the first of this species for the West Kootenay.

In 1929 Hamilton 'Mack' Laing was part of the Federal Government's International Boundary Survey between Osoyoos and Yahk. During July and August, with assistant Elgin Hall, they collected and recorded birds in the vicinity of Rossland and Old Glory Mountain.

In 1937, Dr. Ian McTaggart Cowan, then Curator at the B.C. Provincial Museum, along with Kenneth Racey, visited Monashee Pass in June. Their primary collecting focus was small mammals, notably pikas, but detailed notes of the bird fauna were also kept.

Maurice Ellison, resident of Trail, recorded bird observations from 1939 until 1997, (58 years!). His impressive number of observations not only well documented the bird

fauna of Trail, but also provided an indication of the effect smelter emissions had on this area's bird fauna.

Between 1945 and 1950, Herbert H. Currie, Editor of the Nelson Daily News, recorded bird observations and wrote a series of natural history articles (published in the Nelson Daily News). His observations of waterfowl wintering on the West Arm of Kootenay Lake were sent to Jim Munro, Migratory Bird Officer. His other bird observations, kept on scraps of newsprint (no surprise!), were kept by his wife. These were loaned to the WKBS and collated by students at Selkirk College.

W. Earl Godfrey, Curator of Birds at the Dominion Natural History Museum passed through the West Kootenay in 1956. At Balfour, on Kootenay Lake, he made one of the earliest observations of the (European) Starling for British Columbia (Myres, 1958).

The above body of information became the foundation for the West Kootenay Bird Study.

Table 1. Contribution of species to the West Kootenay bird fauna up to 1968

John Macoun and party / 76
 Maurice Ellison* / 19
 William Spreadborough / 21
 Herbert H. Currie / 11
 Dr. John Kelso / 89
 Earl Godfrey / 1
 Walter Johnstone & Allan Brooks / 1

Total species / 218

* Maurice Ellison continued to contribute up until his passing in 1997.



**THE WEST
KOOTENAY BIRD
STUDY**

This study began in September 1968 and continued until the end of 1975. A great amount of information was gathered, but for the purpose of this report, only species new to the WKBS are reported here. This information was published by the BC Field Ornithologists in their publication, BC Birding, September, 2020 edition.

NEW SPECIES ADDED

Cinnamon Teal: Many transient records April 21 thru May. Breeding not recorded though observations of lone males up to June 18 indicate this possibility.

Eurasian Wigeon: Two records, October 26 & 27, 1971, at Nelson.

White-tailed Ptarmigan: Five high country records - Kokanee Glacier Park & Mulvey Meadows, within Valhalla Provincial Park, where two females with young, ¼ and ¾ grown, were encountered August 9, 1972.

Wild Turkey: The first 'wild' Wild Turkeys observed in the West Kootenay occurred in 1967, reported by Peter Berukoff. These observations originated from releases made by the Washington State Department of Game, ten miles south of Kettle Falls, in 1962. Since this time Wild Turkeys have become established in the West Kootenay and have continued their spread northward, at least to Nakusp. In 2019 Castlegar had a designated Turkey Crossing on its main north south thoroughfare and one of the

turkey's favoured roosting areas was on the author's former residential property on Chickadee Lane!

Band-tailed Pigeon: One record - July 10, 1972. Nelson.

White-throated Swift: First seen April 18, 1969 over Castlegar and on May 4, birds were seen inspecting the Rock cliffs above Robson. Seen annually, but sporadically in small numbers thereafter. Breeding suspected.

Anna's Hummingbird: The first and only record for this species was a photograph published in the Nelson Daily News, January, 11th, 1975. This bird was at a feeder operated by Marjorie Benson and photographed by H.M. Buchna.

Semipalmated Plover: First observed by David Stirling at Kokanee Creek Provincial Park, September, 13, 1968. Two additional records at this location August 16 & 19, 1973.

Upland Sandpiper: One record - Castlegar, Sept. 15, 1971.

Long-billed Curlew: Two records - April 21, 1972 and April. 21, 1975.

Ruddy Turnstone: One record - September 3, 1973, Kokanee Creek Park.

Western Sandpiper: Six records, all at Kokanee Creek Provincial Park, between July 7 and August 29.

Glaucous-winged Gull: One record - February 9, 1972, Nelson waterfront.

Black Tern: One Record - Champion Creek Marsh, by Mel Deanna, June 9, 1975.

Double-crested Cormorant: One record, by Conservation Officer Ted Rutherglen at Long Beach, near Balfour, mid-1960's.

American White Pelican: One record - September 14, 1975, by Mel DeAnna on Lower Arrow Lake.

Rough-legged Hawk: Four records - April 12, 1969, April 26, 1970, July 31, 1971 and October 13, 1968.

Western Screech Owl: One record - summer 1971, 2 birds seen at Six Mile, east of Nelson by Margaret Barwis. Note: there is a specimen in the Royal B.C. Museum, taken at Nelson, November 3, 1911.



Anna's Hummingbird photograph published in the Nelson Daily News - 1975

Barred Owl: One found dead on the Salmo Road, July 25, 1971.

Great Gray Owl: Between January and March 30, 1974, a single Great Gray Owl was seen along the West Arm of Kootenay Lake by Conservation Officer Ted Rutherglen, and Margaret and Terry Rourke.

Boreal Owl: One found dead on road, at Kootenay Bay, March 23, 1973.

Peregrine Falcon: One record - an immature bird at Castlegar, September 5, 1969.

Eastern Blue Jay: Many records. This species primarily passes north through the West Kootenay in March and early April, and south from late September through October. It wintered in three of the seven years of this study, always in association with bird feeders.

Pygmy Nuthatch: One record - Salmo, November 24, 1969, by George Hartland.

Canyon Wren: Twelve records - the first by Dosie Crawford, an immature individual, September 18-26, 1968, Kinnaird Canyon. It was recorded thereafter along the north side of the Columbia & Kootenay River Valleys from Deer Park to Pulpit Rock, near Nelson. It may over-winter in the vicinity of Deer Park, the latest observation being October 19, 1969, by John Walton and the earliest February 19, 1971, by Walter Jacobson.

Northern Mockingbird: Seven records by a number of individuals - four in summer, June 3 - 12, (one singing at night, June 12, 1969); three winter records, November 24 to December 31.

Brewer's Sparrow: One record - May 21, 1973, at Kaslo by Nancy and John Anderson.

White-throated Sparrow: South Slovan, winter of 1974-75, at the bird feeder of Jim and Hazel Street.

Harris's Sparrow: Thirteen records - nine between January 21 and February 12, and four records between May 2 and 16.

Golden-crowned Sparrow: One record - September 2, 1968, Kokanee Glacier Park.

House Finch: The first record of this species for the West Kootenay appears to be that of Doug Turnbull of Trail "in the summer of 1961". Also, for an unknown period of time previous to 1968, a small resident 'flock' of House Finches had been attending the feeder of Dosie Crawford in Kinnaird. This information predates observation by Maurice Ellison.

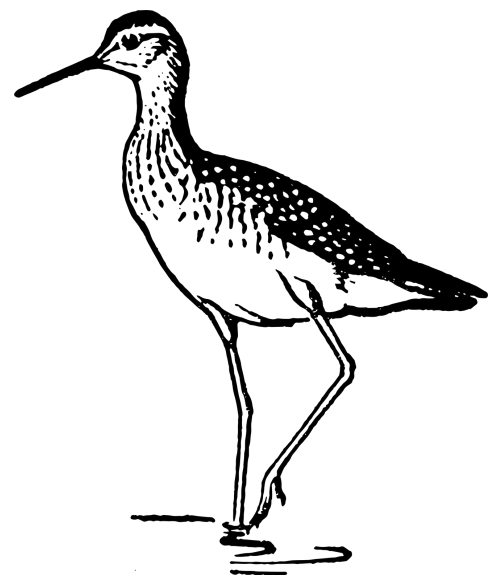
Magnolia Warbler: One record - April 29, 1971, at Robson, by Ian and Roberta Hamilton.

Indigo Bunting: A hypothetical record existed at Trail, by Sam Hopkins, in 1966 (Godfrey W.E., Bird of Canada, (1966 Edition)). A second record for this species, that of a singing male, at South Slovan between June 30 to July 26, 1972, was documented by Laurie Street (Street & Merilees, 1974: Canadian Field Naturalist, Vol. 88, No. 1)

-
33 species

On the basis of these records, 251 bird species have been documented, as occurring in the West Kootenay Bird Study area up to the end of 1975. Undoubtedly additional species have been recorded since this time.

Bringing this species list up-to-date and continuing it into the future should now become the challenge of a new team of bird watchers.



IN CONCLUSION

In 1968 the West Kootenay might well have been an area largely unknown, a 'terra incognita', from a bird watching perspective. However once this study got underway it soon became apparent that though this area did not have spectacular bird concentrations, it did possess a considerable variety of bird species. As this report details, visitors and residents to 'our area' have over the past 130 years compiled a surprising ornithological record.

The presence of 'Okanagan' species such as the Canyon Wren, White-throated Swift and Poorwill are a considerable surprise - but - no one has yet (?) recorded the presence of the Williamson's Sapsucker!

Due to the north south orientation of West Kootenay topography our river valleys become migration corridors. Well I remember listening to the migrant Yellow Warblers as they passed northward, singing from tree to tree along a hedgerow of White Birch come early May. A good place to view migrant waterfowl was the flooded oxbow of the Kootenay River below Selkirk College in April. An excited phone call from Maurice Ellison alerted me to a flock of American Avocets that had settled to rest on a partially submerged gravel bar of the Columbia River at Trail.

On quiet nights during their Autumn migration, song birds can be heard as they pass



American Avocets along the Columbia River at Trail, April 26, 1976.

overhead. Those with a very keen ear for bird song can pick out the species though they never get to see the bird! Owling, for a variety of species, is another night time quest.

If one knows when and where to look, Kokanee Creek Park is one such place, a good variety of shorebirds (perhaps even a Ruddy Turnstone?) are possible. Though often challenging to I.D. to species, they are more regular in their appearance than our records indicate. With climate change and global warming, who knows what might also show up? This is a wonderful challenge of bird watching!

If it was not for bird watching and other nature pursuits, along with the establishment of Selkirk College, the West Kootenay Naturalist's Association might never have come together. It is hard to believe the WKNA, formed in 1972, is almost 50 years old!

One additional accomplishment we have achieved is that,

through our collective efforts, the West Kootenay should no longer be considered Terra Incognita as far as its birdlife is concerned. This can also be said of our other natural history interests, such as botany, entomology, and geology which enrich our environmental smorgasbord. Along this path, members of the West Kootenay Naturalists' Association have had a lot of fun and good camaraderie!

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank:

Selkirk College for their logistical support and the great many West Kootenay residents and students who participate in this study. (Appendix 1).

Greg Nesteroff and Muriel Walton for West Kootenay railway history and information about the Sinixt people.

The West Kootenay Naturalists Association for their assistance in publishing this report.

**APPENDIX 1: WEST
KOOTENAY BIRD
STUDY
PARTICIPANTS**

Charles Anderson
John and Nancy Anderson
Doug and Mary Armstrong
Mr. & Mrs. Doug Axworthy
Stan & Nancy Baker
Brenda Balaam
Mrs. R. H. Ballentine
Margaret Barwis
Mr. & Mrs. Harold Bath
Mrs. F.W. Batt
Barbara Bavington
Marjorie Benson
Trova Besecker
Mrs. K. Blaylock
Jean Brandon
Norman & Melitta Brewster
Mr. and Mrs. J.H. Brown
Diana Brooks
Dick Brost
Diana Brooks
Mr. J. Bryden
Helen Butling
Norm Caldicott

Ed Callin
R. Wayne Campbell
Don & Isa Cameron
John Carter
Iris Clarke
Sydney Clark Sr
Sydney Clark, Jr.
Agnes Carmichael
Ralph Crabtree
Dosie & Terri Crawford
Mrs. H. H. Currie
Gary Davidson
Mel Deanna
Bob Denison
Betty Drew
Helen Dunlop
Len and Mary Dunsford
Chess Edwards
Fred Edwards
Carl Ellingsen
Maurice & Ronnie Ellison
Jack and Madeline Eselmont
Pete Ewart, C.O.
Russ Fletcher
Frank & Viva Flood
Ted, Laura & Ian Forbes
William Fraser
Gordon Frew

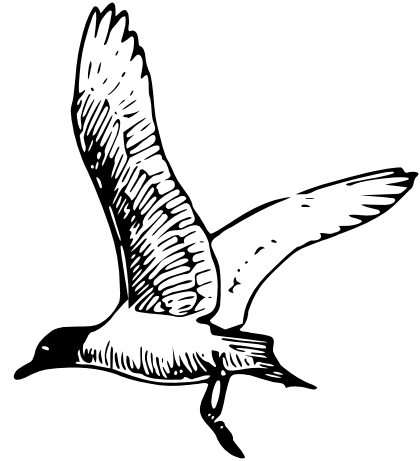
Dr. Trudy Friesen
Rob and Cathy Gardener
John Gellard
Val & Ila George
Violet Gibbard
Milt Goddard
Trevor Goward
Bob Greyell
Lloyd Groutage
Jim Grant
Helen Greene
W.O. Green
Don Guthrie
Ian & Roberta Hamilton
Laurie & Daphne Hamilton
Bob & Elsie Hammond
Mrs. Sadie Hammond
Catherine Handley
Hilary Harper
Dr. Bob Harrington
George Hartland
Ed, Dorothy, David & Lorna Hearn
Anna Henrikson
Brenda Herbison
Mrs. R. Hlady
Edgar Hodge
Dennis & Ann Holden



L to R - Ian Forbes, Bob McFetridge, and Ted Forbes - Nelson (Gyro Park) Winter Waterbird Count November 1968.

Jack and Madge Hollington
 Jim and Bunny Horswill
 Dick & Ann Howe
 Jean Iverson
 Harry Jackson
 Mrs. Kris John
 Walter Jacobson
 Ivor and Winifred Jones
 Mrs. K. F. Kemp
 Nancy & Margaret Knight
 Tommy & Jean Lund
 Ellis and Jean Lypps
 Fred Marsh
 Bud Mawer
 Bob McAllister
 W. D. MacDonald
 Joe McDonald
 Bob McFetridge
 Jerry & Lynne McFetridge
 Peter, Christopher & Ian
 McIver
 Mrs. Kory McKim
 Shawna Meade
 Mrs. Annie Metcalfe
 Jack and Eileen Millican
 Dr. Don & Maureen Mitchell
 Bud & Keith Mufley
 Dick and Helen Mulloy
 Peter & Arleen Ommundsen
 Margaret Ostrowsi
 Peter Nancarrow
 Bill and Hope Parker
 George Parker
 Tom Parkin
 Leon Pavlick
 Frank Paul
 Bert and Sue Port
 Colin & Margaret Pryce
 Betty Richardson
 Lorne & Margaret Roberts
 Mrs. Verna Robinson
 Ruth Rogers
 Margaret & Terry Rourke
 Ted Rutherglen, C.O.

George Shanks
 Carol Shrieves
 Winnifred Simpson
 Michelle Simms
 Rev. John Stainer
 Milton Stanley
 George Staudinger
 Jack Steed
 Jim & Hazel Street
 Laurie Street
 David Stirling
 Doug and Elsie Turnbull
 Bob Wadey
 Art Waldie
 Ron & Ollie Walker
 Elizabeth Wallach
 Mr. and Mrs. Weldon
 Bob Walton
 Dr. John & Muriel Walton
 D. V. Weseloh
 Ralph Westendorp
 Mildred White
 George Whitehead
 Allan Whitmore
 Dr. Peter & Ann Wood
 J. W. Wright
 R. H. York



Lion's Head Rock, Robson, B.C. Suspected nesting site of the White-throated Swift and Canyon Wren habitat.

APPENDIX 2: AN ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY OF THE WEST KOOTENAY AREA



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Note: Kelso also wrote a number of articles published in a journal called “The Migrant”. This was the newsletter of the British Columbia Ornithologists Union, 1923-1927. Some of Kelso’s articles are ‘on file’ at the Royal B.C. Museum.
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Reference:
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Note: Jim Munro never really visited the West Kootenay study area but the above compilation, with Dr. I. McT. Cowan, provides information on West Kootenay bird specimens in the Royal B.C. Museum's Collection.
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Cover Photo: Greater Scaup at Nelson, November 1946, photo by H.H. Currie.

Editor: Suzy Christoffel