

# *The Osprey*

NEWSLETTER OF THE WEST KOOTENAY NATURALISTS'  
ASSOCIATION



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**OPEN POSITIONS:**

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**DELEGATE TO BC NATURE**

**RECORDING SECRETARY**

**FIELD TRIPS**

Contact the field trip director for information on trips and meetings. If you do not have email, contact the field trip director for hard copy updates.

**DEADLINE FOR SUBMISSIONS**

The deadline for the next newsletter is **February 15, 2022**. Material accepted by the Editor any time up to this date. We reserve the right to edit for space, clarity, spelling, and syntax. Major changes will be discussed with the contributor.

# TRIP REPORTS

## \*Just a Reminder\*

1. Common courtesy and common sense dictates that you inform the contact person to confirm your attendance at an event or program, AND THAT YOU CONTACT TO CANCEL if you later find that you cannot attend. Nothing is written in stone and changes may have to be made from time to time, due to weather conditions or personal reasons. Do not wait until the last minute to contact if you are interested in any of our events as leaders may have already left, especially if camping or long distances are involved.

2. The leader of an outing is responsible for:

- Getting the appropriate waiver form signed by every person attending. There are TWO waivers - one for all attendees and one for guests (one-day membership + \$2). Print/photocopy the guest waiver beforehand and keep extra copies just in case. Forward member waiver/sign-out sheets to Diane White, and day membership forms and accompanying dollars to Paula Neilson immediately.
- Making sure that no one is left behind with car trouble at the parking area, especially in winter.
- Arranging to have the trip report forwarded to the newsletter editor. The leader may delegate this, of course. The writer also has the obligation to get the report submitted BY THE DEADLINE.

3. Make it a policy with the entire group to keep the person behind you in sight. If your follower on the trail is lagging, slow your pace to keep that person in sight. If everyone in the group continually checks to make sure they can see the person behind them, it is impossible for anyone to get into serious trouble. If you split into groups, do not allow any one person to "take off" by him/herself.

4. NO PETS allowed on any of our outings.

## Do you have any suggestions for outings, speakers, projects, or improvements to the Club?

### Contact a member of the Executive!

**June 23, 2021**

Birding in the Slocan Valley

A small group of Naturalists joined our last minute birding trip. We birded the places listed in the invitation, and had a really great morning in the sunshine. It was a pleasant temperature until about noon when we returned to my place for lunch.

The birds were very cooperative and we had some great looks at many birds and heard many more, including a deafening voice battle between several Red-eyed Vireos on the Rail Trail. Highlights included a female Common Merganser with maybe 10 chicks half of them riding on her back, wonderful looks at a flying



Photos by Diane White  
Top: Violet-green Swallow  
Bottom: Tree Swallow



Bobolink over a marshy area, very close look at a pair of nesting Say's Phoebes, lots of Lazuli Buntings and even a Virginia Rail, unusual in mid morning. A Northern Harrier was seen from distance, very unusual in this area, and one lucky person saw a Lewis's Woodpecker.

Between us, about 50 species were recorded.

Attending were, Ed and Hazel Beynon, Sue Port, Diane White, Nancy Suuban and organiser and reporter, Peter McIver

- Peter McIver



Top- Cedar Waxwings

Bottom- Red-tailed hawks

July 21, 2021

Castlegar Nordic Ski Trail Hike

Despite smoky conditions ten WKNats showed up for a hike at the Castlegar Nordic Ski Trails. The trails are quite a bit higher than our valley towns and consequently the smoke was not a problem and conditions were quite pleasant. We parked our vehicles on Ben Shaw Trail where the Seal Creek Trail joins it and hiked up the latter trail to Old Growth Trail. From there we followed Old Growth, then Ridge Road and Ben Shaw Trails to Ben Shaw Cabin.

Lunch was eaten on a rock outcropping which overlooks attractive rapids and a pool on Sheep Creek which is behind the cabin. This location provided the highlights of the trip. Not only was it a beautiful spot but we were entertained by trout fingerlings in the pond followed by a juvenile American Dipper landing on a rock right in front of us where it preened and dipped, as dippers do. It appeared to be totally oblivious to our presence, which is

strange knowing how noisy naturalists can be. After lunch we followed Booty's, Mid Loop, and Ben Shaw Trails back to our vehicles. During our walk we were almost constantly in the company of butterflies and the dipper was the only bird that we actually saw. Few birds were singing as the breeding season was already over.

-Hazel and Ed Beynon



All photos by Hazel and Ed Beynon. Bottom right photo: Fritillary butterflies



**October 21, 2021**

**Hike to Lion's Head**

The hike to the Lion's Head was organized on short notice to take advantage of a predicted nice day during a rainy spell. Twelve members said they wanted to do the hike but 3 were not able to come at the last minute.

The weather was fine and we had a pleasant hike in. Some of the high points were beautiful mushrooms and a family of Ruby-crowned Kinglets that allowed us to observe them for a while. We arrived at the Lion's Head at precisely 12 noon for lunch. We had a happy social lunch and were entertained by ravens, bald eagles and red-tailed hawks soaring nearby.

Shortly after starting the return trip, one of our group slipped and twisted her ankle. She attempted to walk out with help but it quickly became evident that the ankle pain was too severe to continue so we stopped and called 911. The SARS rescue team arrived after 5 pm and eventually took our injured member out on a stretcher. The remainder of the



Photos by Diane, Alison, Paula, and Ed

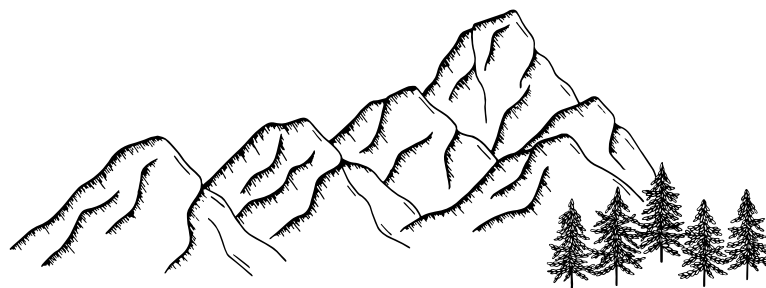


group stayed until we were confident that all was under control and then walked out, mostly in the dark.

Many thanks to everyone on the trip for staying together and being so supportive.

-Hazel and Ed Beynon

PS The next day the ankle was found to be broken and a steel pin was used to repair the break the followings day. Six weeks of recovery are required before our member can hike again.



# NORTHERN POCKET GOPHER

*Thomomys talpoides*

BY ED BEYNON

There are 5 genera and 35 species of this animal spread across North America and Central America. The only one in our area is the Northern Pocket Gopher and it gets its name from its fur lined external cheek pouches (pockets). The pockets extend from the mouth to the shoulder and are used for carrying food and nest material. They can push the pouches out for cleaning and then retract them back into position. This rodent is seldom seen as it spends most of its life underground in its burrows and it literally spends its life burrowing. They are solitary animals except when mating and raising young (young raised by female only) and are otherwise very hostile to other pocket gophers in their area. The young are burrowing on their own by two months of age and ready to mate at three months. The weasel is their main predator, and owls and hawks take them when they can.

In this area pocket gophers are active from valley bottom to almost mountain tops. The following two photos were taken on the Seven Summits Trail near Mt. Plewman at over

16000 feet elevation. We assume that it was run over by speeding mountain bikers celebrating their first bit of downhill ride since starting on the trail at Strawberry Pass, about seven kilometres away.



This is our Northern Pocket Gopher. It looks a lot like a vole but note its large head, very short neck, and almost hairless tail. It has very small ears and eyes and this one is about 6" long including its tail



This highly specialized animal is built for moving dirt. Its tiny nostrils are just above its nose tip. Just above this are its front teeth, which are presently closed, the lips close behind these teeth to prevent entry of dirt into the mouth while it is cutting roots, food or moving small rocks while digging. To either side of the teeth are the cheek pouches or pockets, something is in the pouch on the right. The front claws are its primary excavation tools. The animals excavate tunnels and deeper shelters until there is too much soil underfoot then they turn around and using head and forefeet as a dozer blade push dirt up an inclined tunnel to the surface. Small cones of dirt on the surface in summer and long lines of dirt under the snow are exposed in spring from winter activities.





# LAPLAND LONGSPUR

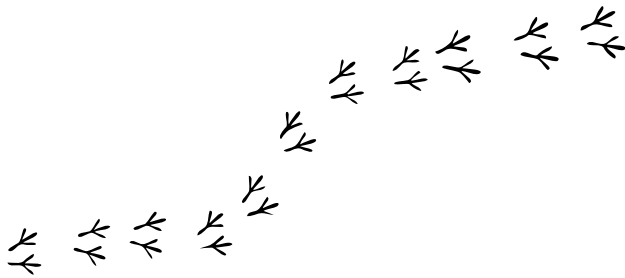
The bird in the photos is in nonbreeding plumage. Females look about the same in breeding plumage and male's head and breast are black outlined with white and have a chestnut coloured collar.

They breed throughout much of the world's arctic tundra and are not considered to be endangered. In our area they are considered to be uncommon transients and can sometimes be seen along roads

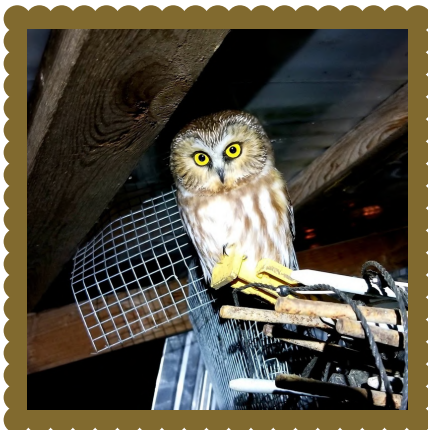
and in trampled or grazed fields during migration. They winter in stubble fields and areas of short grass that are not snow covered. Most migrate through the prairies in Canada.

Longspurs received their name because they have a long claw on the hind toe of each foot which is an adaptation for perching on the ground.

-by Ed Beynon



# NORTHERN SAW - WHET OWL



One night a few months ago, while tucking in our chickens, I got that "being watched" feeling and looked up to see a stock-still Northern Saw-whet Owl staring down at me, unblinking, from the coop rafters. Weighing in at 100 grams - about as much as a robin - this critter posed no threat to our chickens. But, beware all mice who dare to steal our precious chicken feed!



- by Jamie Bastedo

# BLAGODATNOYE BLUEBIRD BOXES, BEARS, BIRDS AND FLYING SQUIRRELS

BY PETER MCIVER

## Introduction

This note covers the use of a series of Bluebird Boxes erected by, or at least maintained and monitored in the past by, Gary Lelliott of the WKNats. In the Spring of 2020 Ed Beynon showed a small group of WKNats members the locations of most of the boxes, which are spread throughout old orchards of the Dukhobor settlement of Blagodatnoye on Champion Creek Flats. In subsequent visits a few more boxes were located, and there were 5 constructed in 2019 by Selkirk College students. Several boxes needed substantial repair or replacement, so 19 boxes were monitored in 2020 and 24 in 2021. Other WKNats boxes are being monitored by Paula Neilson and Peter Wood.

To fulfill the monitoring requirements of The Southern Interior Bluebird Trails Society, boxes need to be checked weekly, or at least every 2 weeks through the nesting period, April until July. I am maintaining the boxes and checking periodically with the help of Dave DeRosa.

\*If someone wishes to do formal monitoring, this would be welcomed.\*



Female Mountain Bluebird at Champion Creek Flats

## Summary

2021

{24 boxes}

- 4 Bluebird nests with eggs or young, one with 2 broods
- 3 of the nests were Mountain Bluebirds, the other nest species not determined
- 2 had breeding resulting in fledged Bluebird young
- 2 Bluebird nests were in boxes that were broken into

## Other Observations

- 1 Black-capped Chickadee nest
- 1 Violet-green Swallow nest
- 4 Northern Flying Squirrel nests
- 6 Bear-attacked boxes, one of which was attacked twice. One contained Flying Squirrels, which I believe occupied a neighbouring box. Two were Bluebird nests and one other appeared to be a Bluebird nest. The other two did not have enough residual



material to make any determination. Four of the six were on metal posts {as opposed to being fastened to trees like the majority of the boxes}

2020  
{19 boxes}

- 5 Bluebird nests with eggs or young seen, plus one with a female entering carrying food, which I did not disturb
- 4 Western Bluebirds nests
- 2 Mountain Bluebird nests
- 5 of the 6 Bluebird nests resulted in fledged young, including the one with female carrying food

Other Observations

- 1 Black-capped Chickadee nest
- 2 Tree Swallow nests
- 1 Flying Squirrel nest
- 1 Bear-attacked box - unsure what it contained

**Discussion**  
Bears

Presumably a bear will only attack a box to get at food inside. One box attacked was on a tree, very old and contained Flying Squirrels. Four of the other five were on posts.

Although others have mentioned that this year's heat dome killed fledglings in nest boxes, I did not find any dead fledglings. This makes me wonder if there were dead birds in the boxes attacked, especially since four of them were on the very exposed metal posts.

Flying Squirrels

Most of the occupied boxes had metal restrictors of the diameter recommended by the Bluebird Trails Society. This seems effective against the Red Squirrel, average weight 180-

330 grams, but not the slighter Northern Flying Squirrel, average weight 160 grams {Mammals of the Canadian Rockies, Cotter and Ulrich 1995}. The same source says the Flying Squirrel is the most carnivorous of the squirrels, eating eggs and young birds, so may not be the best companion for bluebirds.

Flying Squirrels are not endangered, being apparently quite common. But they are as cute as hell, and I have not evicted them. They use cavities for shelter, except in the summer when they build a drey in a tree fork presumably to raise young. There are groups in the nest boxes, and they do not exit when the box is opened, just hide in the nest.



Male Western Bluebird on the access road was using a nestbox



Northern Flying Squirrel at Champion Creek Flats

# A NEW ADVENTURE IN BIRDING: BREEDING BIRD SURVEY UP THE LITTLE SLOCAN RIVER

BY JAMIE BASTEDO

The Breeding Bird Survey, or BBS, is the gold standard for collecting bird data, estimating population trends, and guiding conservation measures for over 600 species across North America. Each spring, thousands of citizen birders from Canada's high Arctic islands to Mexico's Sierra Madre mountains, collect data on BBS routes, allowing us to better understand what's happening to our birds and protect them. Plus, it's a lot of fun!



Photo of Swainson's Thrush from  
Wikimedia Commons

While living up in the Northwest Territories, I had the pleasure of regularly surveying a BBS route near Yellowknife for over 25 years. I used to tell my kids it was my favorite morning of the year: jumping out of bed at 2:15 a.m., driving into the misty dawn, noting all birds seen and heard during a 3-minute sample period, then doing that again and again, 50 times, over a 40 kilometre route.

Having lived in the granite-studded subarctic forest for 35 years, our move to the mountainous Kootenays several years ago opened up an entirely

new ecological adventure. I decided that one of the best ways to get to know this new biome was to snoop around for another BBS route that I might adopt.

That's when I found route #11206 that follows the Little Slocan River, north, then east, from the cozy community of Slocan Park, to just above the jewel-like Little Slocan Lakes. Started in 2001, no one had surveyed this BBS route in almost 15 years. I checked with a local Canadian Wildlife Service guy, Andrew Huang, and he confirmed the route was "up for grabs".

I could already hear the birds calling me! But would I know all of them by the time of my first survey, scheduled for June 2020? I knew from studying the route data that Yellowknife and the Kootenays shared many species: Swainson's Thrush, Dark-eyed Junco, Red-breasted Nuthatch, Warbling Vireo, Orange-crowned Warbler, and many more – all dear old friends. I felt these would be a slam-dunk for me in the field, though I already knew that regional dialects were at play in their songs.

Then along came COVID and, for the first time in something like 50 years, the annual North American Breeding Bird Survey was shut down. As disappointed as I was, this gave me another year to bone up on birds that were less familiar to me.

When I finally stepped out of my car, at 4:12 a.m. one fine June morning in 2021, beside the west bank of the Little Slocan River, I felt my knees suddenly grow weak. How could I collect any credible data amidst the rush of water and cacophony of bird song that flooded my ears? After a



few deep breaths and a big gulp of strong tea, I gradually calmed down and was able to dissect the jangling sound around me into distinct songs – the flute-like refrain of a Veery, the lilting melody of a couple of dueling Song Sparrows, the quick, raspy chirrup of a Western Tanager, and yes, a good old Swainson’s Thrush. After our first sampling session, recording old friends and new, I thought I just might be able to pull this off.

My wife and I eventually got into the BBS groove: sample 3 minutes, drive 800 metres, over and over. After a glorious, though occasionally drowsy morning of birding up the Little Slokan River, and what felt like good data under our belts, I was already looking forward to next year’s BBS adventure.

Back home, a big question remained unanswered: Who exactly started this BBS route? I could find no name on any of the historic data sheets I’d been sent. I was very curious to meet this keen birder, to compare notes on species recorded, and learn how the habitat along the route might have changed over the years.

Wanting to dive deeper into the West Kootenay Naturalists scene, I decided a few weeks after our survey to join a small group of members at Diane White’s home for a meet-and-greet with Harry Crosby, President of BC Nature. As luck would have it, the guy who started the Little Slokan BBS

route was sitting right across from me at this gathering, birder and naturalist extraordinaire, Ed Beynon!

On a follow-up phone call with Ed, I learned that he too had spent several years living up in the Northwest Territories and that we shared a special affection for Yellow-billed loons and Bobolinks. I told him about some of my initial challenges in adopting his survey route but hoped I had honored his pioneering work. We both agreed that one of the biggest challenges to doing these surveys is getting up so darned early.

“That was the toughest part,” he tells me. “By the time the survey was over, I’d be getting pretty sleepy. We usually got up about 3:00 a.m. We had to be on site by a little after 4.”

“So you were the guy who set the official start time at 4:12 a.m?”

“Yep,” Ed says. “That was me.”

“Thanks for that Ed!” I say. “What about doing the BBS sampling work. Did you rely heavily on your ears?”

“For sure,” he says. “There are so many birds you don’t see. My ears are my eyes.”

It turns out Ed and I both started learning bird songs, way back, by cobbling together recordings from Roger Tory Peterson’s cassettes. “Of course now there are so many excellent websites and CDs,” Ed says. “But the best way to learn the songs is out in the field when you can see them and hear them. Then you really know for sure who’s singing out there.”

I silently add another item to my birding bucket list: to get out in the field with Ed Beynon as soon as possible.

“I’m really pleased you’re doing the route,” Ed tells me. “It makes me feel very happy.”

“A great pleasure, Ed. Happy birding to you.”

“And same to you.”



*Formerly from Yellowknife, local author and naturalist Jamie Bastedo now lives in a lively co-housing community in the mountains near Nelson. His latest book, *Protectors of the Planet* dives deep into the lives of a dozen green leaders from across Canada.*

*<https://www.reddeerpress.com/Detail/0889955697>*

