

# Nicola Naturalist Society

**Newsletter No. 1 December 2010**

Welcome to the first Nicola Naturalist Society newsletter. Our society was launched this year and we plan to publish a quarterly bulletin (spring, summer, fall and winter) featuring nature news, society events and items of interest for the Merritt area.

**PLEASE CONTRIBUTE** – the newsletter is open to all members to contribute short articles, photos, artwork, book reviews, etc. Once we get a website up and running (hopefully soon) we will post these newsletters on our website along with many more photos and other contributions from members. See the last page for contact information.

## Our association with BC Nature



BC Nature (Federation of BC Naturalists) is the umbrella organization for over 50 naturalist clubs and societies in the province (over 5,000 members). Part of the dues to NNS go to BC Nature and in return members get the quarterly BC Nature magazine, regular e-news bulletins and can participate in the field camps, meetings and many other BC Nature events (check out [www.bcnature.ca](http://www.bcnature.ca)). In addition, our society gets other benefits like group insurance, charitable status, and access to grants.

## Logo contest

We need a logo! Your logo can be immortalized on our newsletter, future website and anything else the NNS produces. You don't have to be an expert artist – if necessary we will get a local artist to tidy-up the winning logo. It can be stylized like the BC Nature logo, or more realistic. The logo should feature some local species (plant or animal) or some element of our local landscape and environment.

The logo contest winner will receive a one-year membership of NNS and a book prize. See the last page for addresses to submit your entry. Contest ends 31<sup>st</sup> March 2011.

## Swans from Alaska at Beaver Ranch Flats

On 14 November 2010 NNS members Gloria and Mike Brenner stopped to admire the swans feeding at Beaver Ranch Flats on the Guichon Ranch north of Nicola Lake. Among the dozens of Tundra Swans feeding in this rich marsh were several with blue neck bands. Gloria and Mike were able to get some nice photos of these birds.

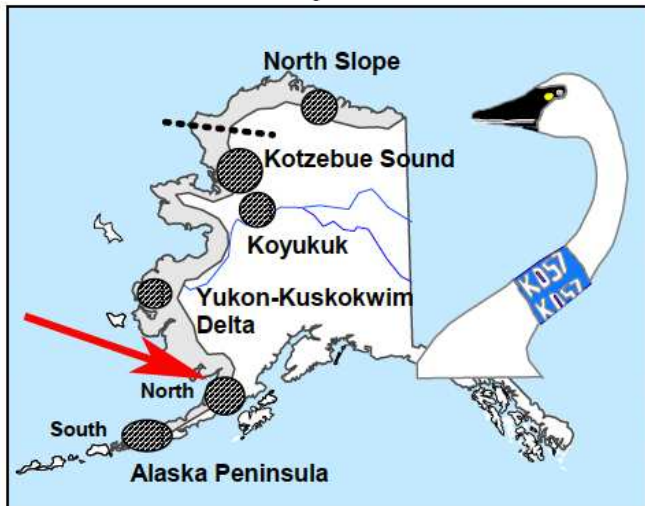


Photos: Gloria & Mike Brenner



Through contacts with Canadian Wildlife Service we were able to pass on these photos to the people who had attached the neck bands. Tundra Swans (Whistling Swans in some of the older bird books) are being tagged by biologists of the US Geological Survey as part of an ongoing study of swan migration, set up in part to investigate possible movements of avian influenza viruses. Craig Ely of the USGS Alaska Science Center in Anchorage is part of the study, and sent the following map and information on the Beaver Ranch Flats birds.

Tundra Swans are being captured and neck-banded at several of their breeding grounds in Alaska, shown in the shaded areas on the map.



Map: Craig Ely, Alaska Science Center, Anchorage, AK

Two of the birds photographed by the Brenners (N021 & N022) were banded as adults (a pair) on 21 July 2010 on the north end of the Alaska Peninsula, near King Salmon (shown with the red arrow). Another adult pair (P951 & P952) were banded on 18 July 2010 in the same area.

The same Alaska researchers have also attached satellite-tracking tags on Tundra Swans which allowed continuous tracking of their migration. This study showed that the Alaska Tundra Swans migrated on both sides of the Rockies en route to their wintering sites in California. Swans from the far north of Alaska and Canadian Arctic tend to migrate to the eastern U.S. for the winter. Read more about this amazing research and see the satellite tracking maps at this web-site: [http://alaska.usgs.gov/science/biology/avian\\_influenza/TUSW/TUSW\\_research.html](http://alaska.usgs.gov/science/biology/avian_influenza/TUSW/TUSW_research.html)

Swans tend to mate for life and families migrate together. The newly-fledged juveniles (more greyish in colour than the pure white adults) accompany their parents on the southward migration before becoming independent.

### Trumpeter or Tundra?

Most of us are used to seeing Trumpeter Swans on Nicola Lake during the winter. There are sometimes over 100 of them on the lake. It might therefore surprise some to hear that these were Tundra Swans passing through on their fall migration. So how can one differentiate the two species? It isn't easy and it helps to have your bird field guide with you as you peer

though your binoculars or, better still, a spotting scope.

**Body size:** Trumpeters (average mass 10.5 kg) are bigger than Tundras (average 6.6 kg).

**Neck length & shape:** Trumpeters have longer necks and more often have it folded back at the base; Tundras tend to keep their necks more vertical but this is not a strong identification feature.

**Bill shape:** Trumpeters have much larger, longer bill, which is more straight (Tundra is curved) where the bill meets the lower cheek.

**Yellow spot on the lores:** this is the clincher (if you can see it!) Only Tundras have a yellow spot in front of the eye – this varies a lot and is often hard to see.

**Voice:** Trumpeters are less vocal and lower pitched with gentle nasal honking (like a European taxi according to Sibley!); Tundras have a melancholy hound-like *klooo* call.

At this time of the year (mid-winter) as long as there is some open water on Nicola Lake we usually have some Trumpeter Swans overwintering. Down at the BC coast you can regularly find hundreds of overwintering Trumpeters. The Tundras are enjoying much balmier conditions overwintering in California.

Although Trumpeters are now the most common swan seen in BC the species had a close brush with extinction. Excessive hunting and the feather trade decimated the populations and by the 1930s there were fewer than 100 left. It took heroic efforts to save the species. The 1957 Canadian classic *Crusoe of Lonesome Lake* by Leland Stowe documented one BC family's critical role in winter feeding and protecting the Trumpeter Swans in Tweedsmuir Park. This is a conservation success story and the Trumpeter Swans are slowly recovering and now number about 10,000 birds. The more numerous Tundra Swans which, as we have just learned, nest in remote areas in Alaska and the Canadian Arctic, were never in danger of extinction.

### Look out for marked waterfowl

There are several studies using neck bands to identify and track geese and swans. The bands are designed to allow the birds to feed normally. If you see any of these birds **write down the colour of the band and the number**. Sightings of these marked birds provides important information on migration routes and critical habitat. Send sightings to: Canadian Wildlife Service, 5421 Robertson Road, R.R. #1, Delta, BC, V4K 3N2. (Tel: 604-940-4724). Or pass them on to one of the NNS directors and we'll get in touch with CWS.

## Upcoming Events

Our monthly evening meetings are held at the Nicola Valley Institute of Technology (NVIT) on Belshaw Rd, Merritt.

### Sunday 2 January – Merritt Christmas Bird Count. –

Come out and work off that holiday excess while you look for birds and contribute to the world’s largest wildlife database run by the Audubon Society and Bird Studies Canada. \$5 contribution to Bird Studies Canada. There will be a post-count tally including supper and dessert pot-luck. Contact Alan Burger at [aburger@uvic.ca](mailto:aburger@uvic.ca) or 250-378-2468.

### Thursday 13 January, 7 PM at NVIT Lecture Theatre: – *Wonders of the High Arctic in a Changing Climate.*

NNS president Alan Burger regularly works as a biologist/naturalist in the High Arctic (Svalbard and East Greenland). His presentation, with many photos, will feature polar bears, walrus, muskox, arctic fox, whales, seals, arctic wildflowers and much more.



Photo: Alan Burger

### Thursday 17 February, 7 PM at NVIT Lecture Theatre: - *Burrowing Owls.*

Dawn Brody of the Burrowing Owl Society will tell us about their ongoing work in the Thompson Nicola region to restore wild breeding populations of this endangered and endearing little owl. *Beaker* the live owl is likely to be there too!



Photo: Jack & Carol Madryga

### Thursday 17 March, 7 PM at NVIT Lecture

#### Theatre: – *Bear Awareness*

Andy McKay, one of the local Conservation Officers, will give a presentation on bears and how to deal with human-bear interactions. Some timely information just before the bears emerge in the spring.

### Thursday 21 April, 7 PM at NVIT Lecture Theatre: – *Photographing Nature*

Well-known local author and photographer Murphy Shewchuk will give some tips on how to take photos of wildlife and landscapes, illustrated with his wide variety of nature photos from the BC interior.



Bohemian Waxwing  
(*Bombycilla garrulus*)  
© 2009 Murphy Shewchuk  
[www.murphyshewchuk.com](http://www.murphyshewchuk.com)

### May 12-15: - BC Nature Spring Conference and AGM. *Enjoying nature in the Cariboo-Chilcotin.* Hosted by the Williams Lake Field Naturalists.

NNS members are encouraged to attend this event which features lectures, field outings, photographic presentations and social events. It’s a lot of fun and a good way to meet other naturalists and get to know BC’s nature. For details visit [www.bcnature.ca](http://www.bcnature.ca) and click on Conferences and Field Camps.

**Spring field outings** – stay tuned. We will notify members by e-mail or phone.

**Amphibian Monitoring** – Under the guidance of Victoria herpetologist, Dr. Kristiina Ovaska, the NNS will be starting a multi-year volunteer program to count and map frogs and salamanders in the Merritt area. Get your frogging gumboots warmed up. More about this in our spring newsletter.

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## Feature Species

Each issue will feature one or more local wildlife or wildflower species. Please contribute photos and text!

### Sharp-shinned Hawk

(*Accipiter striatus*)



At this time of year when many juncos, finches and other birds are visiting feeders, the peaceful backyard scene sometimes erupts into a frantic flurry of wings as this little hawk comes dashing out of the shrubbery. Small birds are its primary prey and it usually catches them by surprise, flying rapidly through the trees and tall bushes, its long tail giving it excellent steering through the vegetation. This is the smallest and locally most common of the three *Accipiter* species found in N. America (all three occur in our area). It is slightly smaller than a crow. The big Northern Goshawk (*A. gentilis*), about the size of a Red-tailed Hawk, is quite rare and mostly hunts larger birds like grouse and also squirrels and hares. The mid-sized Cooper's Hawk (*A. cooperii*) is very similar to the sharpie in coloration and shape, but is slightly larger (about crow size) and has a more rounded tail (unlike the square tip of the sharpie). Notice the long thin legs of the sharpie – the larger accipiters have more robust legs.

When seen in flight, all accipiters have rounded wings and long tails, in contrast to falcons which have more pointed wings and shorter tails. The Merlin (*Falco columbarius*), a small falcon, is about the same size as a sharpie and is also a relatively common year-round resident of our area. It too hunts birds at feeders so watch those wings and tail shapes and keep your field guide handy.

As with most raptors, female Sharp-shinned Hawks are larger than the males (in many other bird groups males are larger). When breeding the female usually

does most of the incubating of the eggs and brooding the small chicks while the smaller male does most of the hunting and brings prey to the female and the chicks.

Here's another photo of a Sharp-shinned Hawk, taken by Carol Madryga after it was pursuing birds in her Merritt backyard and then settled on the bush.



### Nicola Naturalist Society Contacts

President: Alan Burger – [aburger@uvic.ca](mailto:aburger@uvic.ca); ph: 250-378-2468

Vice-President: Jack Madryga

Treasurer: Carol Madryga

Directors: Glen Carlson and Chris Lepsoe

Membership: Liis Jeffries

**Mailing address:** Nicola Naturalist Society, c/o 2708 Grandview Heights Rd. Merritt, BC V1K 1R1.

### Special thanks to:

- NVIT for letting us use their excellent lecture theatre and classrooms.
- Interior Savings Credit Union (Merritt Branch) for providing a *community builders* savings account.
- Newsletter contributors : Gloria & Mike Brenner; Murphy Shewchuk; Jack & Carol Madryga; Alan Burger.

### Send newsletter contributions and logo:

Alan Burger – [aburger@uvic.ca](mailto:aburger@uvic.ca) or to the NNS mailing address above.