

Nicola Naturalist Society

Newsletter No. 5 January 2012

Our quarterly bulletins (spring, summer, fall and winter) feature nature news, society events and items of interest for the Merritt area.

Much more on our website: www.nicolanaturalists.ca

PLEASE CONTRIBUTE – our newsletter and website are open to all members to contribute short articles, photos, artwork, book reviews, etc. See page 3 for contact information.

Merritt Christmas Bird Count results

The annual Merritt Christmas Bird Count was held on 2 January 2012 in excellent crisp weather. Christmas Bird Counts have been held for over 100 years and are done in specified count circles in over 2000 locations across North America. This was the 13th count for Merritt and we had a record number of participants (23 in the field and 3 feeder-watchers), including some expert birders from Delta and Kamloops.



Spotted Towhee (formerly known as Rufous-sided Towhee) photographed on the Christmas Bird Count Photo: Corey Burger

Overall we recorded 60 species and 3704 birds, both slightly higher than average. A single Western Grebe was the first record for the Merritt CBC, although there had been a count week bird in 1995. Other sightings of unusual CBC birds for this count circle included one Varied Thrush (second CBC record), two Ruffed Grouse (3rd record), three Gray Jays (3rd record), and a lone White-crowned Sparrow (4th record).

New high counts were recorded for Great-blue Heron (9 birds), Gadwall (31), Common Raven (131), Northern Shrike (8), Brewer's Blackbirds (152), House Finch (439), and American Goldfinch (60).

The relentless invasion of the Eurasian Collared Dove was clearly evident. This species, introduced some decades ago into the U.S., is now spreading

rapidly into southern B.C. It first appeared in Merritt in 2009 and is now breeding and thriving in the town (14 birds on the CBC in 2009/10, 34 birds in 2010/11 and 112 this year). Perhaps as a consequence of competition with this alien invader, the count of Mourning Doves (34 birds) was well below the average of 120 birds. [See our feature on page 4 comparing these two dove species] Other introduced species are also doing well in Merritt with high counts recorded for European Starling (563) and House Sparrow (186).

Low counts for regular species included Green-winged Teal (3 birds; average is 21) and Bohemian Waxwing (76; average is 462). Species which are regulars in our count circle but not recorded this time were Horned Grebe (one in the count week), Pied-billed Grebe and American Coot. Even though there was plenty of unfrozen water on Nicola Lake and the two local rivers, our count of all waterfowl (125 birds in total) was below the average of 1406 birds.



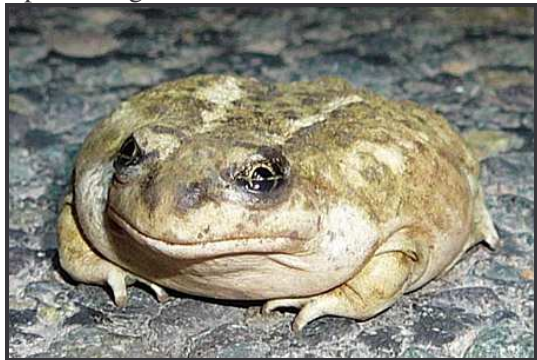
Hairy Woodpecker at a Merritt feeder. Photo: Corey Burger

The full tally and other details from the Merritt CBC can be found on our website: <http://www.nicolanaturalists.ca/>

The Christmas Bird Count data, archived by the Audubon Society, make up the world's largest citizen-science database. These data have been used in numerous scientific analyses of bird population trends and geographic range changes. So, in addition to having a fun day of birding, we are also contributing to a powerful scientific and conservation database.

First report on amphibian monitoring

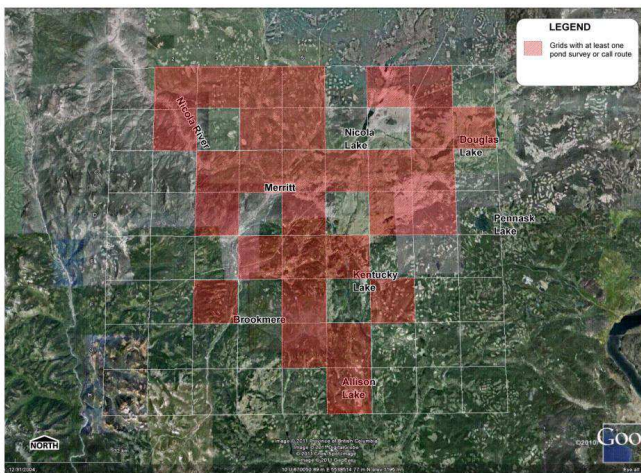
Last spring the Nicola Naturalists, in partnership with Biolinx Environmental Research Ltd. of Victoria, began an ambitious project to map and monitor breeding amphibians (frogs and salamanders) in the Merritt region. Many of you participated in the training workshop and field work. In addition to providing a great learning experience (and a lot of fun!) this project is also producing some solid science.



Great Basin Spadefoot . Photo: Christian Engelstoft.

Biolinx Environmental Research has just released a progress report which is posted on our website (see below). Here are a few highlights from the report.

Field surveys were made from May to July 2011. Using an atlas approach, the 7,200 km² study area was divided into 10 km x 10 km grid cells.



The red squares are the 30 grid cells that were sampled in 2011.

With help from Nicola Naturalist volunteers (253 volunteer hours logged), 54 wetlands were surveyed and 109 frog call listening stations along six routes were sampled. These surveys detected all five amphibian species known from the region. The Great Basin Spadefoot (nationally “Threatened”) was found in 27% of the grids surveyed, Western Toad (nationally “Special Concern”) in 37%, Columbia Spotted Frog in

43%, Pacific Chorus Frog in 67%, and Long-toed Salamander in 17%. Seven major and two minor breeding sites of Western Toads were identified. These sites are exceedingly important to protect as they can attract hundreds or thousands of toads over a wide area (see the last NNS Newsletter).



An example of species distribution: In 2011 Western Toads were found breeding in 11 of the 30 grid cells, shown in red.

The Spadefoot and Pacific Chorus Frog were readily detected during night-time frog call surveys, and this method holds promise for obtaining information on population trends at intensively monitored sites. The data collected contribute to the provincial database through the B.C. FrogWatch.

An important part of the project is liaison with local landowners. We established contacts with and conducted surveys on the properties of five large landowners, including three ranches, and additional residential properties. Biolinx prepared site-specific habitat management guidelines for three large landowners with amphibian habitat on their lands, including breeding sites for the Western Toad and Spadefoot. Initial contacts were established with the Nicola Tribal Association and are expected to lead to collaboration and access to First Nations lands.

To download the full progress report go to our website: <http://www.nicolanaturalists.ca/projects/>

Frogging again this spring!

Our Amphibian Monitoring Project will continue this spring. To register for the project or get more information contact the volunteer coordinator Andrea Lawrence at this e-mail address: nicola.amphibians@gmail.com

Upcoming Events

Our monthly evening meetings are held at the Nicola Valley Institute of Technology (NVIT) on Belshaw Rd, Merritt. Field outings are for members only (family membership includes dependent children). Guests of members can purchase special membership for a day to cover insurance.

Thursday 26 January 2012, 7 PM in the NVIT lecture theatre: *Amphibians in peril: conserving frogs in a changing climate.*

Dr. Kristiina Ovaska of Biolinx Environmental Research Inc. is one of BC’s most active and prolific herpetologists, and is the professional leading our society’s Amphibian Monitoring Project. She has worked on research and conservation projects in many parts of the world and will share some of her experiences with us, while explaining why amphibians are so vulnerable to the many changes the earth is experiencing. [Please note that this is the 4th Thursday in January – not our usual 3rd Thursday]



Diasporus diastema – a frog from Panama. Photo: Kristiina Ovaska

Thursday 16 February 2012, 7 PM in the NVIT lecture theatre: *Restoring nature in the Thompson highlands.*

Renowned Kamloops naturalist and wildlife photographer Rick Howie has had a long career in the BC interior as a government wildlife biologist and independent consultant. In recent years he has been involved with restoring nature at the massive Highland Copper mine near Ashcroft. Rick will share his insights into getting nature back into these worked-over lands, and much more on local wildlife.



A Pika living in a restored mine area. Photo: Rick Howie

Other speakers coming up in our evening nature talks later this winter:

- Bob Davis – “Research on West Nile virus in the Nicola Valley”
- Eva Durance – “BC wild flowers and gardening with wildflowers”

Details on these talks will be e-mailed to members.

BC Nature AGM and Spring Meeting – 11-13 May in Kelowna

All NNS members are eligible and encouraged to attend BC Nature meetings and camps. The BC Nature AGM, hosted by our Kelowna neighbours, the Central Okanagan Naturalists Club, will feature numerous field outings, lectures by highly qualified speakers and the opportunity to meet naturalists from across B.C. For details and registration visit the BC Nature website <http://bcnature.ca> and click on the Conferences and Field Camps link.



A young moose crossing a restored mine area. Photo: Rick Howie

Nicola Naturalist Society Contacts

President: Alan Burger
 Vice-President & Secretary: Jack Madryga
 Treasurer: Carol Madryga
 Directors: Glen Carlson and Chris Lepsoe
 Amphibian monitoring project: Andrea Lawrence
 Website: www.nicolanaturalists.ca
 Our e-mail address: nicolanaturalists@gmail.com
 Mail: 2708 Grandview Heights Rd. Merritt, BC V1K 1R1.

Newsletter contributors : Glen Bartley, Alan Burger; Corey Burger; Christian Engelstoft; Rick Howie, Andrea Lawrence; Dr. Kristiina Ovaska.

Feature Species

Each newsletter features one or more local wildlife or wildflower species. Please contribute photos and text!

This time we are doing a comparison between two doves, one a native resident and the other an introduced species, which are now both common in Merritt and both often visit feeders.

Mourning Dove



Mourning Dove *Zenaida macroura*. Photo: © Glenn Bartley

Identification:

- Long pointed tail, no white bar on under-tail
- No collar
- Spots on wings
- Mournful multi-syllable cooing “ooAAH coo coo coo” (from Sibley)

Mourning Doves are native residents of the semi-arid regions of North America. They are found across much of the U.S. and southern Canada and are abundant in many places, especially where they can feed on agricultural grain and livestock feed. Their food is primarily seeds and over 200 species of plant seeds have been recorded in their diets. Fast fliers, these doves are adapted to cover large areas in search of food and often feed and travel in flocks.

They migrate from more northern parts of their range, but where the climate is mild or where they can find winter food at agricultural sources they remain resident. In the Merritt area Mourning Doves can be found year-round. If there are cattle feedlots operating they can aggregate there in the hundreds. Backyard feeders are also popular feeding sites. The highest count in the Merritt Christmas Bird Count was 441 in 2000.

Breeding: Mourning Doves build a very flimsy twig nest, usually 2-3 metres above ground in a tree or large shrub. They lay 2 whitish eggs. Incubation takes 14-16 days and the chick remains in the nest for 11-15 days. They are capable of raising several broods in a year and can start breeding within a year of hatching.

Eurasian Collared Dove



Eurasian Collared Dove *Streptopelia decaocto*. Photo: Alan Burger

Identification:

- Squarish tail with white bar on underside
- Obvious black collar
- No spots on wings
- Cooing calls, repeated 3-syllable “coo-COOO cup” (from Sibley)

Eurasian Collared Doves are native to southern Asia (mainly the Indian sub-continent and neighbouring areas) and parts of southern Europe. They have spread or been introduced to many other areas (northern Europe, the U.S.). As a popular cage bird there have been many accidental introductions around the world. In North America large feral populations were first seen in Florida and later California, but the species range is expanding rapidly. Collared Doves were first reported in southern British Columbia just a few years ago, but they have rapidly become established as breeders in the Okanagan and many other parts of southern B.C. As documented on page 1, the species was first recorded in Merritt in 2009 and there are now well over 100 birds and many breeding pairs. This alien species shares much of the same food and habitat as the native Mourning Dove and it is not yet known whether competition will cause declines in the Mourning Dove populations.

Breeding: Makes flimsy twig nests similar to those of Mourning Doves. Also lays 2 whitish eggs. Incubation is 14-16 days and chicks remain in the nest for 15-19 days. This dove has the same capability of rapid breeding and high population growth if conditions are favourable.

~~~~~