



Nicola Naturalist Society

Newsletter No. 8 January 2013

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 4 for contact information.

Merritt Christmas Bird Count results

The 14th annual Merritt Christmas Bird Count was held on 16 December 2012 in excellent weather. We set a new record of participants with 26 people in the field and three feeder watchers. Thanks everyone! And special thanks to Katharine and Murphy Shewchuk who hosted our post-count pot-luck supper.

Overall we recorded 64 species and 3475 birds, both slightly higher than average. We added three new species to the Merritt CBC list. Most exciting was the presence of the male Anna’s Hummingbird that had been faithfully visiting a heated feeder on Spanish Creek Place for some weeks. [Sadly this little hummer disappeared at the end of the year and was last seen on 31 December just before some very cold nights.]



Male Anna’s Hummingbird – on the day of the Merritt Christmas Bird Count. Photo: Bob Scafe

Other species new for our Christmas count were 3 Tundra Swans on Nicola Lake, seen among the more common Trumpeter Swans, and a single Double-crested Cormorant, also on Nicola Lake. Having the Christmas count earlier than normal this year and the mild weather preceding the count day meant that Nicola Lake was still mostly unfrozen and had many

waterbirds present. A river otter was an exciting mammal sighting on Nicola Lake on the count day.

Other unusual species on the Christmas count were 9 American Tree Sparrows (near Quilchena Hotel), 3 White-crowned Sparrows (at feeders in Merritt), 3 Killdeer (on the shores of Nicola Lake) and 1 Ruddy Duck (on Nicola Lake).



American Tree Sparrow near Quilchena Hotel . Photo: Corey Burger



White-crowned Sparrow photographed on the Christmas Bird Count
Photo: Aline Lachapelle

New high counts were recorded for Great-blue Heron (13 birds), Pileated Woodpeckers (5 birds) and 11 other species. There were no sightings of American Coot and Northern Shrike, two species we usually get on the count day.

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

The Christmas Bird Count data, archived by the Audubon Society (with the Canadian assistance of Bird Studies Canada), 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.



Pileated Woodpecker – one of five seen on the December 2012 Merritt Christmas Bird Count . Photo: Bob Scafe

Report on Douglas Lake Plateau IBA

A year ago the Nicola Naturalist Society and the Kamloops Naturalists agreed to jointly take over monitoring the Douglas Lake Plateau Important Bird Area (IBA). IBAs are internationally recognized sites which support key areas for birds, such as breeding concentrations or migration staging areas. IBAs have been set up in many countries – the main purpose is to keep an eye on any changes that might impact the birds using these areas. The Douglas Lake Plateau IBA, one of the largest in B.C., was established in 1996, primarily because of its importance for large numbers of migrating Sandhill Cranes, but also for the important breeding areas for waterfowl and grassland specialists.



Sandhill Cranes near Chapperon Lake on the Douglas Lake Plateau during fall migration, September 2012. Photo: Jack & Carol Madryga.

IBAs do not involve land ownership – in this case most of the Douglas Lake Plateau IBA is privately owned ranchland, and IBA monitoring is done strictly from public roads. The Nicola Naturalists are mostly tasked

with keeping an eye on the southern portion of the IBA and the Kamloops Naturalists cover the northern area. NNS members informally reported bird sightings and our society also had several field outings in 2012 to parts of the IBA. With the help of the B.C. IBA Coordinator Krista Englund (who visited this IBA with us in May), we are in the process of setting up a more formal database and reporting system.

Many Sandhill Cranes were observed in the IBA during both the spring and fall migrations. In spring, 95 were flying overhead near Douglas Lake on 17 April 2012. In fall the highest count was on 16 September 2012: 117 near Chapperon Lake and 14 near Douglas Lake. The species was also reported in spring and fall near Kamloops.

American White Pelicans, a “Red-listed” threatened species in B.C., is another important visitor to the Douglas Lake Plateau IBA and nearby lakes. Pelicans regularly visit the larger lakes on migration in spring and fall and sometimes stay for weeks hunting fish in the shallows. Pelicans were regularly seen on Nicola Lake and Douglas Lake: e.g., 17 April 2012 – 17 on Nicola Lake; 16 September – 26 at Nicola Lake, 14 at Douglas Lake.



White Pelicans on Nicola Lake (upper) and Douglas Lake (lower) during fall migration, September 2012. Photos: Alan Burger.

To download the 2012 Douglas Lake Plateau IBA progress report go to our website:

<http://www.nicolanaturalists.ca/projects/>

Upcoming Events

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

Thursday 21 February 2013, 7 PM in the NVIT lecture theatre: *Eradication of High Risk Invasive Species in Lakes of the Thompson Drainage.*

Steve Maricle is a wildlife biologist working for the Ministry of Environment, Fish & Wildlife Branch in Kamloops. He has worked on many lakes in the BC interior and is particularly concerned about the effects of invasive species in these freshwater ecosystems. Steve will explain the treatment of 9 lakes within the Thompson drainage to eradicate 4 species of invasive “spiny ray” fish (yellow perch, large & smallmouth bass and pumpkinseed sunfish). This 7 year project was one of the largest ever in our region.



Yellow Perch – one of the destructive introduced fish in local lakes.
Photo courtesy Steve Maricle

Thursday 18 April 2013, 7 PM in the NVIT lecture theatre: *Movement and habitat use of the Great Basin Spadefoot*

Jocelyn Garner recently completed her MSc at Thompson Rivers University, Kamloops. Her thesis work involved exciting new methods to track spadefoots, giving new insights into the secretive lives of these grassland specialists. Her work examined the effects of cattle ranching on these threatened amphibians, with some unexpected results.



A male Great Basin Spadefoot inflated and calling to attract a mate.
Photo: Lennart Sopuck.

Thursday 21 March 2013, 7 PM in the NVIT lecture theatre: *Williamson’s Sapsuckers and other local woodpeckers.*

Les Gyug is a wildlife ecologist and based in Kelowna. He has worked on many of our local wildlife species but has a special love for Williamson’s Sapsuckers. He has found and monitored dozens of nests of this threatened local specialty and published several papers on this species. Les is very active in education and conservation of wildlife, a good photographer and a lively speaker.



Female and Male Williamson’s Sapsucker. Photos: Alan Burger

BC Nature AGM and Spring Meeting – May 2-5, 2013 in Abbotsford.



NNS members are eligible and encouraged to attend BC Nature meetings and camps. The 2013 BC Nature AGM in Abbotsford will feature numerous field outings, lectures by highly qualified speakers and opportunities to meet naturalists from across B.C. The many field trips offer exciting opportunities to explore diverse areas of the Fraser Valley. For more details and registration visit the BC Nature website <http://bcnature.ca/>.

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## Feature Species

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

### Mountain Chickadee



Mountain Chickadee *Poecile gambeli* Photo: Alan Burger

Four species of chickadees can be found within an hour's drive of Merritt (Black-capped; Mountain; Chestnut-backed; Boreal). All are year-round residents. In our area the Mountain Chickadee is generally most common. Its distinctive white eyebrow separates it from all other N American chickadees. As its name suggests it is usually found in higher elevations, most often in drier pine forests. Life at high elevations is harsh, especially in winter. These tiny birds (at 11 g they weigh the same as a heaped teaspoon of sugar) must be active and opportunistic to survive. Chickadees, along with some other mountain birds like Gray Jays and Clark's Nutcrackers, hide food in caches to eat later when times are tough. Re-locating food caches demands abilities to remember where the cache was hidden, maybe weeks earlier. A new study done in the Sierra Nevada mountains showed that Mountain Chickadees in higher elevations had better memory and larger hippocampus memory areas in their brains than those of the same species living nearby at lower, less demanding elevations. Chickadees 600 m higher but less than 10 km apart from their low-elevation neighbours had almost double the number of hippocampal neurons. They were also better at finding hidden food in lab tests. Another study, done near William's Lake, BC, showed that Mountain Chickadees benefitted from forest insect outbreaks like spruce budworm and mountain pine beetle. Not only did the chickadees find more food during outbreaks, but they also could find more nest sites. Beetle outbreaks also increased the number of cavity-digging birds like woodpeckers and nuthatches and the chickadees could later use these cavities for their own nests. Adaptable and smart little birds!

Sources:

Freas, C.A. et al. 2012. *Animal Behaviour* 84:121-127.

Norris, A.R. et al. 2013. *Ibis* 155:165-176

### Southern Red-backed Vole



Southern Red-backed Vole *Clethrionomys gapperi*. Photo: Alan Burger

Voles are basically mice with stumpy tails, small ears and long dense fur. They are among the most abundant rodents in our northern forests and meadows. Like many other northern rodents their populations fluctuate tremendously in cycles, reaching peaks every 3 to 5 years (2011 was a peak year in areas near Merritt). The Southern Red-backed Vole is generally a species of mature coniferous forest, rustling around in the ground litter in search of seeds, berries, lichens and vegetation. They do not hibernate or store food but live under the snow in winter, creating runways between the snow pack and frozen ground. The snow acts as an insulating blanket for these tiny critters. Voles can be pests in forest plantations – they love to chew off the bark and vascular tissue of young seedlings. And those seedlings raised in nurseries and given lots of fertilizer are unfortunately the tastiest, once they are planted out in clearcuts. Most of the damage is done by other *Microtus* vole species which prefer more open areas, but Red-backed Voles are also culprits if planting is done near older forests. Like most rodents they breed early in life (starting at 2-3 months old) and fast (gestation is just 20 days and 2-8 young are born per litter). Most of this prolific output ends up providing food for their many predators, like weasels, owls, hawks and coyotes.

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