

THE SAGEBRUSH CHRONICLE



Interpretive Program Updates

We have been busy planning all sorts of activities for the winter, working with COVID concerns and restrictions. Most events will require pre-registration for limited spaces, so call us early. Indoor events will likely require masks. We want to keep everyone involved and healthy.

Nov. 19: Beginner's Night Time Photography 7 p.m.

Nov. 29: By the Light of the Moon

Early in December, we will be hosting a Winter Bird Identification session, and on another day we will invite people to decorate our Christmas Tree with handmade crafts.

Dec. 20 will be the annual Christmas Bird Count; lots of birds but no feast for us this year. Talk to Marty about signing up for a territory or to watch your feeder. At least the birds will get fed.

Call us **403-529-6225** for more information or to book a spot for our activities. Of course, we always will try to answer your questions and we like hearing about your nature nuggets. We also look forward to weekly walks, skiing, or snowshoeing that might be happening in Police Point.

See you Soon: **Corlaine**



From This to:



This in a Month

Executive and Board Members

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MH Interpretive Program

(Managed by Grasslands Naturalists)

Based in Police Point Park Nature Centre

To contact the Nature Centre call the:

Nature Line at (403) 529-6225

Also find us on Facebook and Twitter

Policepointpark

The Nature Centre is open from:

Tuesdays to Sunday from 09:00AM to 4:30PM

The family accessible washroom is open:

Every day from 09:00 to 11:30 & 12:00 to
16:30

Need Stocking Stuffers?

Despite COVID, the store at the Nature Centre is still open. Check out:

- Books for both adults and children,
- Bird feeders,
- Stuffedies,
- Comfort birds,
- Coffee

And much, much more.

Remember that programs being presented by the Interpretive Staff require pre-registration. Phone: 403 529-6225 to register and to find out what programs are coming.

The Sagebrush Chronicle is published ten times a year by Grasslands Naturalists. **Submissions of writing and artwork are welcomed but must be edited for publication. Deadline: the 10th of each month.** If you would like to advertise in the Chronicle, more information is available from the editor. Submissions are to be sent to: milton.spitzer@gmail.com (403-528-3120). Do not imbed photos in articles but **do send** them separately.

The Society of Grasslands Naturalists encourages the study, conservation and protection of all components of the natural world. The Society provides educational opportunities, assists in the collection and provision of species data, acts as stewards of the environment, discusses environmental topics and organizes member activities. The Society also manages the Medicine Hat Interpretive Program.

General Meetings: 4th Tuesday (**suspended during COVID**), Sept. - May **Board Meetings:** 1st Tuesday Sept. - June

To join Grasslands Naturalists and/or send a tax-deductible donation, write:

Grasslands Naturalists
Box 2491
Medicine Hat, AB T1A 8G8

Contact info: Nature Centre 529-6225

Annual Membership Dues: Eileen Cowtan

Individuals	\$20
Families	\$25
Organizations	\$25

Donations to Grassland Naturalists and Interpretive Program are another great way to support local nature and nature education. Tax receipts are issued for all donations over \$10. Your generosity is greatly appreciated!

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GN Website:

www.grasslands-naturalists.org

GN Facebook:

<http://www.facebook.com/GrasslandsNaturalists/>

You must be a Facebook member to view most of it.

Medicine Hat Christmas Bird Count

The annual Medicine Hat Christmas Bird Count will be conducted on December 20 this year. This is a great activity in these days of COVID. To register for a count area or to do a feeder count please call **Marty at 403 529 6225.**

Member's Corner

It is great to get a new member in this time of COVID. We welcome **Kathy Kearney** to our society. Unfortunately there are, at present, no monthly meetings but there are some Wednesday outings where we can perhaps meet. In any event welcome Kathy.

There has been a shake-up in the Executive as after many years serving as our Treasurer, Eileen Cowtan, has resigned effective October 6. We thank Eileen profusely for her many, many, years of excellent service to the society. Have no fear however, while giving up her duties as Treasurer, Eileen will continue on the Board as a Director at Large so her many years of experience will not be lost to us. Angela Turner has been appointed as our new Treasurer and no doubt will do an excellent job. Who will do memberships has not been decided as yet but, in the interim, Eileen will continue to pick up and mail out the monthly Chronicles.

President's Report To Members

At the start of 2020, none of us had an inkling of what a different year this would be. We began the year making usual plans.

Annalora and I left Medicine Hat on February 5 for three weeks in Costa Rica to be followed by a month in Arizona to house sit for American friends of ours. Life was normal here as we boarded our Air Canada flights to San Jose. Many months ago we had booked a 2-week tour of Costa Rica offered by the National Geographic Society through G-Adventures that spanned the entire width of the country from coast to coast. We highly recommend the National Geographic version of touring because of its focus on natural history and local culture as well as supporting only local guides and other locals.

This tour had daily natural history jungle walks or jungle riverboat tours which produced incredible sightings, including a tapir, 4 species of monkeys, more lizards than we could count, cayman and crocodiles, and birds everywhere...about 60 lifer species for me. We visited a private home and learned to make tortillas, and attended 3 lectures: first, at a sea turtle conservancy on the Caribbean coast; second, a talk on climate change research at the Monteverde Institute; third, a talk on cloud forest ecology right in the cloud forest. Best of all we spent a morning under the supervision of the Monteverde Institute helping prepare tree seedlings for planting to reclaim cloud forest from agriculture. For our efforts we received a certificate informing us that our trip had become carbon neutral by planting new trees!



Two-toed Sloth



Rain Forest Tree Frog

As many of you know, my wife Annalora is a retired school teacher and principal. So our 3rd week in Costa Rica was spent visiting a mission in San Jose that is involved in producing new curriculum for public schools in Costa Rica, Nicaragua, Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador and Panama. This curriculum has been developed by Canadian friends from Alberta and focuses on teaching Vital Values With Jesus that produce good human character and has proved to be very acceptable in these highly Catholic countries. We spent this week meeting

spent this week meeting with the Assistant Deputy Minister of Education and some of his colleagues learning about the Costa Rica Education system. This was followed by visiting 8 public schools in San Jose and meeting District Superintendents, principals, teachers and students. This curriculum has been so life-changing that Colombia and Equador have now approached our missionary friends to expand their program in those countries. Millions of children from kindergarten to grade 6 are now learning about the importance of values such as kindness, honesty, respect, forgiveness, self-control, dignity, courage, hope and over 20 more. In these lands where many children's ambitions are to join the drug lords or to get their piece of corruption proceeds, this mission project is having a huge impact. The teachers we met talked about how this is dramatically improving student behavior!



By the time we left Costa Rica on February 26 to fly to Arizona, we were beginning to hear some alarming reports of COVID-19 arriving in North America. By our second week there, the pandemic panic had taken hold just like I'm told happened here in Medicine Hat. No toilet paper! In our first week there we attended a wonderful indoor lecture sponsored by the Tucson Audubon Society on the subject of hummingbirds. Over 300 people were in attendance; not knowing at the time that would be our last indoor program of any kind for months.

By our 4th week in Arizona, flights were being cancelled left and right. We didn't know if we were going to get back home and our travel agent phoned us from Medicine Hat to see if we were OK. We had a Westjet flight from Phoenix to Calgary booked on March 22 if it didn't get cancelled like so many others. We had booked that flight last September 2019. As it turned out this would be the last Westjet regularly scheduled flight to arrive in Calgary from a U.S. destination. How fortunate for us! A passenger sitting next to us reported that he had 5 flights cancelled before he got on ours.

When we flew back into Medicine Hat, it was like arriving in a ghost town. Life hasn't been the same since, and I'm sure all of you can say the same. We began 14 days of self-isolation.

As your new President, the board and I are grappling with many questions about how a society like ours should function in a pandemic environment. We have looked, and continue to look, at whether there is a safe way to resume our indoor programs. Those of you who responded to last month's survey on this subject, gave us a very mixed response. For the time being we have decided to continue suspending this fall's programming but will review that decision again in January. We have found a location (Chinook Village's Terrace Room) that can offer social distancing for a group our size and they have a good sound system as well as projection equipment. The rental cost would be \$250 per meeting.

We have resumed some outdoor programming such as neighborhood walks and believe that we can conduct these safely under Alberta Health guidelines. However, if the pandemic really gets out of control in Medicine Hat, that could again change. We have also asked our governance committee to review our waiver system which all members are expected to sign and we plan to tighten up our procedures on the use of these waivers. You will hear more about this going forward.

Linda Fisher, our indoor program chairperson, had a terrific program of lectures planned for this winter and many of those guest speakers have assured us they will still participate at a future date. I can hardly wait to hear some of them and I know you will find them highly interesting.

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We had a board meeting this past November 3rd and covered many topics. We are also working on some longer term plans to take effect after the pandemic is under control. In the meantime we can all still safely enjoy the outdoors that we love so much.

This past fall has been one of the most beautiful in years. The Cypress Hills were incredibly beautiful for several weeks with fall colour! Get outdoors this winter. It is one of the safest places to be as long as we social distance! But stay safe. Our daughter sent us some ice grippers that we can attach to our shoes and boots. We'll give them a try.

Submitted By
Phil Horch, President

Upcoming Events, Field Trips and Announcements

(See the October Chronicle regarding COVID Rules for Outings)

Wednesday, November 18 at 10:00 AM: Cross-country Skiing and/or Snowshoeing in Police Point Park. Meet at the Nature Centre. Bring your equipment or rent from the Nature Centre.

Thursday, November 19 at 7:00 PM: Beginners Night Time Photography. Pre-registration required. Call 403 529 6225.

Tuesday, November 24 at 12:00 PM: Webinar: "Effects of Oil Development and Anthropogenic Noise on Grassland Songbirds in Canada: Register at:
<http://attendee.gotowebinar.com/register/1850120038625600783>

Wednesday, November 25 at 10:00 AM: Cross-country skiing in Harlow Kiwanis River Park. Meet at the parking lot at the West end of Red Deer Drive SW. Bring your equipment or rent from the Nature Centre.

Sunday, November 29: "By the Light of the Moon" Call the Nature Centre (403 529 6225) for pre-registration and time.

Wednesday, December 2 at 10:00 AM: Winter Walk, or Cross-country skiing in Police Point Park. Meet at the Nature Centre. Bring your equipment or rent from the Nature Centre.

Wednesday, December 9 at 10:00 AM: Outing type and destination to be announced.

Sunday, December 20: Annual Christmas Bird Count: To register for an area or to do a count at your feeders call Marty at 403 529 6225.



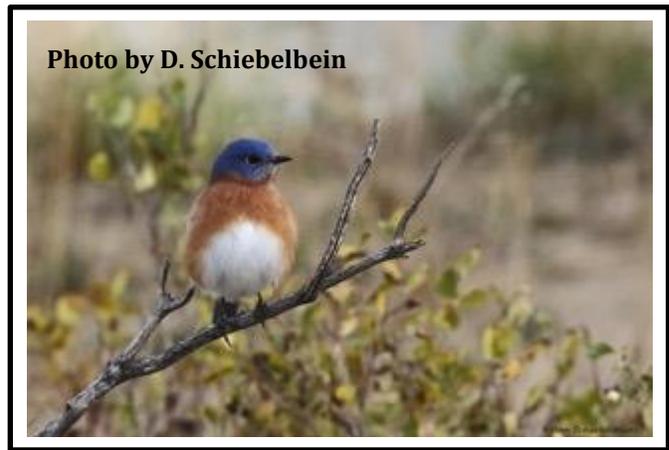
Some Wednesday Walk Participants: On left: John Slater, Bruce McLeod, and Tina Regehr; not shown Martha Munz Gue (took photo): On Right: Chris Beck, Grant McLeod and Martha digging Russian Olive Saplings.

Exciting Sightings by Bob Frew

November is usually a slow month for birding as fall migration comes to an end, and the change to winter brings a reduction in avian diversity. However, it can also be a good time to encounter lingering migrants and possible rarities. Already, there have been some early reports of “winter finch” sightings in Southeastern Alberta (albeit in low numbers) including; Pine Grosbeaks, Snow Buntings, Red Crossbills, and Common Redpolls arriving from their boreal and arctic ranges. Local birders have reported some exciting sightings during the past month:

Surf Scoter- Phil Horch reported sighting a raft of 9 Surf Scoters on the South Saskatchewan River at Strathcona Island Park. One of three scoter species, the Surf Scoter is a tundra breeder which migrates to its coastal wintering grounds each fall. The adult male has a white patch on its forehead and nape, the female also has a white nape and usually two white patches on each side of the face. The species is an uncommon migrant in Alberta.

Eastern Bluebird- Eric Vokes reported a most interesting sighting of two bluebirds at Police Point Park on October 17th, which were identified as a male Eastern Bluebird, in the company of a female Mountain Bluebird. These bluebirds appeared to be travelling together and remained in the area for a couple of days, enabling other GN birders to confirm the sighting. The Eastern Bluebird is a rare breeder in the Cypress Hills (a breeding pair was previously observed at a nest box during a GN field trip to the Cypress Hills in July, 2019).



Lincoln's Sparrow- Marty Drut and fellow interpretive staff reported several juvenile Lincoln's sparrows at Police Point Nature Centre's feeders on October 23rd, sightings continued into the last week of October. This secretive sparrow species is usually found foraging near the ground, and prefers dense brushy habitat.

Rusty Blackbird- While birding at the Connaught Pond on October 23rd, Colton Prinz observed 6 Rusty Blackbirds foraging in the reed beds surrounding the pond. In winter, adult and immature birds have rufous coloured feather tips, and rufous-edged tertials and wing coverts, giving them an overall rusty appearance. Dan Schiebelbein reported another 12 Rusty Blackbirds at Strathcona Island Park pond on October 28th. Numbers have declined sharply in recent decades, and the species is now considered casual/rare in its western range. Seemingly at odds with this, Phil Horch reported a large flock of Blackbirds (~200), the majority of which were Rusty Blackbirds, at the intersection of the Holsom Road and RGE Rd. 64 on October 30th.



Bonaparte's Gull- An unusual sighting of 7 Bonaparte's gulls resting on the Saskatchewan River gravel bars at Police Point Park, was reported by Milt and Elaine Spitzer on November 1st. In fall these small tern-like gulls are in non-breeding/winter plumage, and lack their black hood, but have a dark post ocular spot. This species is a rare inland migrant. The sighting was confirmed by Dan Schiebelbein on November 2nd.

Snow Bunting- This fall's first report of Snow Bunting sightings comes from Dan Schiebelbein, who observed 3 buntings at Sauder Reservoir on November 4th. Snow Buntings usually travel in huge flocks, and have a habit of migrating to southern parts of the province before the first winter snows. This species is an irruptive migrant, and numbers can fluctuate from year to year in Southeastern Alberta.

Golden Crowned Kinglet- This small active bird's boldly striped face and crown (i.e. orange/yellow crown stripe, and white supercilium), along with its distinct call and song distinguish it from the Ruby-crowned Kinglet. Kinglets often join mixed species flocks in fall. Bob Frew reported a Golden-crowned Kinglet at Police Point Park On October 14th. It was first detected audibly, then by sight. Dan Schiebelbein also reported a Golden-crowned Kinglet at Echo Dale Regional Park on October 17th.

Hooded Merganser- There has been several sightings of this colourful merganser reported, which is the smallest of our three merganser species. On October 28th Dan Schiebelbein reported a group of 9 Hooded Mergansers (4 males and 5 female) at Connaught Pond, an impressive sighting indeed!

Townsend's Solitaire- This medium-sized thrush is recognized by its gray overall appearance, white eye ring, and buffy wing patches. The species breeds in our western mountain forests and, can usually be seen in the prairie region during fall migration. It is inconspicuous and can be easily missed. Barry Anderson reported a single solitaire in Ajax Coulee on November 7th.

Please report your exciting sightings to Bob Frew: phone 403-526-4573, or e-mail Robert.frew@shaw.ca

GN Field Trip to Schuler and McLaren Lakes **October 17, 2020**

A total of 5 braved the elements, the overnight light dusting of snow, and the dubious quality of the trip leader to make their way to Schuler and then on to McLaren Lakes and back. The five consisted of Ben Verner, Val and Fay Felesky and Elaine and Milt (faux leader) Spitzer. Highway 41 was clear for the most part but as we neared Schuler there was a skim of ice on the road. Fortunately we soon headed off on gravel roads that were dusted with snow, a boon in that it kept down the dust.

We found that Schuler Lake was ice covered and hence few waterfowl were there except for some 20 or so forlorn Tundra Swans standing on the ice in the middle of the lake. On our way to the lake Ben had seen a flock of Sandhill Cranes which the *leader?* had missed. From Schuler we proceeded east to McLaren Lake where, as we neared the lake, we began to see skein after skein of Greater White-fronted Geese along with a few flocks of Canada Geese. On the lake, which was roiling with waves (the wind was coming from the north at about 30km/hr and the temperature was -5C so it was bitterly cold standing near the shore. While we could stand it we did observe more White-fronts (speckle bellies) arriving and landing, a small flock of Snow Geese (30), about 40 Tundra Swans, and a smattering of a variety of duck species.

We walked around the park, taking advantage of the shelter belts, where we stirred up a Great Horned Owl, saw a very late Gray-cheeked Thrush sitting on a dog house sheltered by a cabin, a few American Robins and several American Tree Sparrows.

Driving the gravel roads north and south and east of McLaren Lakes the stubble fields and roadsides were teeming with flocks of Lapland Longspurs interspersed with Horned Larks. Ben and I both remarked that never had we ever seen such huge flocks of longspurs. They were like locusts and we had to slow down while driving the roads to avoid mowing a number of them down. Also travelling the roads we saw a few Western Meadowlarks, two Golden Eagles, three Rough-legged Hawks, a Red-tailed Hawk and a Northern Harrier.

In spite of the weather it was a great trip.

Russian Olive Removal By Paula Munro and Martha Munz Gue

Sports teams, student councils, and service clubs are encouraged to contact the SEAWA Office (www.seawa.ca 403- 488-8110) to indicate your interest in participating in weed pulls in the spring of 2021

On Saturday October 31, during a beautiful, crisp, Halloween morning, SEAWA welcomed 9 of our volunteers and staff to come out and partake as a group in the uprooting of saplings from the Russian olive tree near the riverfront off Red Deer Drive SW (Harlow District), in Medicine Hat.

As an invasive tree that is not native to our Canadian prairies, it has become problematic in taking over parts of the riparian shorelines in areas around Medicine Hat and Brooks, disrupting the vital, natural ecosystems and choking out the native trees and plants that traditionally grow along the river and wetlands. Over the course of two hours, our volunteers were able to remove 600-700 saplings spanning a distance of roughly half a mile. It was a great effort by all; these new trees are removed by hand and shovel rather than by chemicals, which may affect other life and the quality of the river water.

Further efforts for removal will continue in the spring. Please come join us, and bring your family and friends for some fresh air, great company, and meaningful efforts to protect and preserve our stunning prairie shoreline.

These pictures show some great shots of what leadership means! Our executive director is right there with the rest of us digging out the invasives! Marilou leads by responding to observations appropriately and in a timely fashion, and then participating in the actions she asks others to do. A picture of the area was shared with her on Wednesday, she went to see for herself on Thursday, then called for a "weed pull" for Saturday morning. From observation to action took three days! Whew! **Thanks Marilou!** Of course, the threat of winter chasing our heels spurred an immediate response!

There are hundreds (perhaps thousands) more Russian olives quietly taking over the natural area between the berm and the river. Birds love the seeds; flocks of migrating robins have been seen swarming large Russian olive trees near the college. Then they perch on the huge aging cottonwoods in other areas and deposit the seeds. The aging cottonwoods will eventually die and the young olive seedlings will grow to maturity, shading the area with a network of trees connected underground through their root systems. Cottonwood recruitment only happens in sunny areas near water; they won't succeed in the shade of Russian olives. Furthermore, invasive climbing nightshade prefers the shaded understory of olive trees. And so the riparian areas eventually become overgrown with at least two invasives that choke out the complex native plant communities.

As soon as things dry up in the spring, SEAWA, Grasslands Naturalists and City crews will be tackling the problem of the spread of Russian Olive throughout our riparian areas. Phone SEAWA now (403 488 8110) to get on the contact list to receive announcements of further weed-pulls.



< Another Concern: Invasive Growth of Buckthorn. At right Gerry Ehlert viewing the growth of buckthorn in a river coulee. Police Point Park also has a significant buckthorn invasion.