

THE SAGEBRUSH CHRONICLE



The **Interpretive Program** continues to work within the guidelines for keeping everyone safe and healthy. The **Nature Centre** is closed until phase 3 of the provincial opening plans. That could be late March. The staff are still busy helping people enjoy winter. The Medicine Hat Kiwanis club supports our Family Day activities. This year we are celebrating "**Kiwanis Family Month**" with new activities each week. Call the Nature Centre (403 529-6225) for more information. The month was started off with robin nest box kits. We appreciate the support of the Kiwanis and our wonderful carpenters, Ben and Richard, for supplying these kits at a modest cost. If anyone else would like to help out, please call the Nature Centre. Our staff have also created some activity pages which can help families enjoy the Park or their neighbourhoods. Mini sketchbooks are available courtesy of the Robert Bateman foundation.

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 remains Closed due to
COVID-19 restrictions**

**The family accessible washroom is open:
Each day from 09:00 to 11:30 & 12:00 to 16:30**

Our Winter StoryWalk® is on the trail. The cold weather won't last too long and the sun feels great. Get out and enjoy our StoryWalk® before it disappears at the end of February.

The Nature Centre is staffed each day to put out bird feeders, to open and clean the bathroom, to answer the phone and to keep up with projects.

Give the staff a call or email them mhip@natureline.info regarding any questions you might have or to report any exciting nature sightings.

**To All:
Stay Safe and Healthy!**

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!

EDITORIAL DISCLAIMER

The opinions expressed by the authors in this publication do not necessarily reflect those of the editor and the Grasslands Naturalists. The editor reserves the right to edit, reject or withdraw articles submitted. While due care will be taken of all manuscripts, photos or artwork submitted, GN cannot be held responsible for any loss or damage to such articles.

GN Website:

www.grasslands-naturalists.org

GN Facebook:

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

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

This seems to be the owl issue with photos of four different species located throughout this issue.

**The cover photo is of a Short-eared Owl
photographed by Dan Schiebelbein
(dansnaturephotography.com).**

Member's Corner

2021 Memberships are Due!

Over the past four weeks, a few GN members have enjoyed two walks in local parks and four cross-country skiing outings on the Spring Creek Trail in Elkwater. With the cold weather this week, members are encouraged to enjoy short walks but bundle up with warm clothing and suitable footwear. The middle of next week is forecasted to be warmer so two skiing trips are suggested for the Spring Creek Trail in Elkwater on Wednesday, February 17 and Friday February 19. Meet at the Spring Creek Trail head at 11:00AM. Activities for the following weeks will be weather dependent. Email announcements will be sent out or contact the Nature Centre for additional information.



**Bruce McLeod, and Don and Elaine Zimmer
enjoying one of the cross-country ski outings.**

President's Report To Members

Mention the words "climate change" and that can quickly raise up a flashpoint with many people...especially in Alberta. Probably more than any other province in Canada, Alberta has experienced harmful economic changes because of climate change impacts and adaptations. Understandably, many people harmfully impacted in their livelihoods, will lash out at the perceived reasons for their situations, especially since fossil fuels are mostly blamed for climate change. As producers of coal, natural gas, and oil, our province is most affected by climate change adaptations along with Saskatchewan and Newfoundland-Labrador. Nonetheless we are well past the time when anyone can deny climate change is happening.

I personally became convinced of the reality of climate change over 10 years ago after two trips to Alaska and the Yukon. For hundreds of years the soil of the arctic regions has been characterized with perma-frost, and glaciers were considered permanent features. In the north I visited "drunken forests" where trees were tipping over at crazy angles and homes were tipping off their foundations because of unprecedented melting of centuries old perma-frost. Also glaciers had started melting and receding at unprecedented rates. We can see that with our own Columbia Glacier in Alberta which is receding dramatically.

Today, closer to home as we drive across southern Alberta, we see massive new power transmission lines, new wind turbine and solar farms springing up on our prairies, and our own city is contemplating the sale of our power plants because its natural gas generating capability will render it obsolete a couple decades down the road.

Industry has already started massive and revolutionary changes to adjust to climate change realities. Today I drive a hybrid vehicle but in another 15 or so years even they will become obsolete as vehicles are converted to all-electric. Last week General Motors announced their plan to build only electric vehicles in the not too distant future. Almost every industry sector is making major changes in order to reduce their carbon footprint.

I say all this to point out that all our lives, even in Alberta (maybe especially in Alberta), are going to dramatically change in the next thirty years because of climate change and the efforts to combat it. We may never fully succeed in our efforts to combat climate change but we can likely mitigate it combined with strategies to also adapt to it.

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Along with impacting human lives, climate change is also making a difference in the natural world that we naturalists enjoy so much. I just cite a couple examples in the bird world of which I am most familiar. When I moved to Medicine Hat in 1982 there was not a single Canada Goose over-wintering in our city. You all know how that has changed! Also, in 1982 we did not have House Finches or Eurasian-Collared Doves in our city. They along with many other species throughout North America have been expanding their ranges northward. At the same time we are seeing dramatic drops in populations of songbirds. Since the 1960's most species of songbirds have dropped between 40 and 60% in their numbers. Grasslands species have dropped the most in their numbers. This is attributed in part to climate change, habitat destruction, insect declines and farming practices.

There is no escaping the fact that our modern world is headed for some dramatic changes that we all need to be ready for. Covid aside, we all know that once the pandemic is over, that climate change will again become our front and center issue. And we residents of southeastern Alberta cannot escape its impacts.

Climate change and adaptations to it will impact our water supply (potentially disastrously unless we start acting now), the way we build and operate our homes, the way we plan our cities, (my son is a Leed-educated architect), the way we farm and ranch the land, and the way we live our day to day lives. It will also result in a massive change in jobs and careers.

For this reason, at our most recent GN Board meeting we have decided to plan for a possible major Climate Change Symposium focused on how life, nature and our economy will be impacted in Southeastern Alberta in the next thirty years. This symposium would be targeted to the general population and would be held after the pandemic. Its purpose would be an effort to help our local citizenry see the future more clearly and prepare us all for the changes to come. We would include a major thrust to include local high school and college students in attendance. Our board has authorized the establishment of a GN Climate Change Symposium Steering Committee to lay the groundwork for this event. If working on such a project captures your imagination and you would like to get involved at the ground level, please feel free to contact me at phorch@telus.net or phone me at 403-529-5918. We anticipate that the steering committee will complete its work by the end of this year at which time it will recommend that this project will proceed or not. If we decide to proceed, at that time, an Organizing Committee would be struck.

In closing I would recommend an excellent book titled "DRAWDOWN: The Most Comprehensive Plan Ever Proposed To Reverse Global Warming" edited by Paul Hawken. It will give you a good idea of the coming changes to our world.

Submitted by Phil Horch, President

The following letter was sent to the Premier with GN Board authorization:

Dear Premier Kenney,

Our membership is deeply concerned about the decisions that you and your government are making regarding land use decisions in Alberta. We believe they are made from too narrow a perspective, and decisions are often not representative of Alberta's heritage, lessons learned, and accomplishments. We agree that Albertans want a prosperous economy and jobs. However, not at the cost of an unhealthy environment, creating negative impacts to livelihoods, and the risk of socio-economic imbalances in Alberta's future well-being. The anger and opposition that you are now hearing from a variety of Albertans about government changes to our Provincial Parks, the selling of Crown native grasslands, and allowing for the open pit mining of coal in the Eastern Slopes are examples that cannot be supported by Albertans. As downstream users, we are concerned about the environmental impacts of open pit coal mining to our Bow, Oldman, High, and South Saskatchewan River watersheds. What will coal mining do to the quality of our drinking water? We recommend that the UCP use an integrated, science-based and public consultation approach to land use decision making to achieve a balanced economy, healthy environment, and investment in our social well being.

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Integrated Approach to Land Use Decision Making

Alberta has a long history of using an integrated approach to land use decision making. It involves a discussion with Albertans about land use and future direction. This approach is founded on a grass roots participation. It recognizes that our input and the use of good science can lead to improved solutions. Such land use plans are often built on a watershed basis, for example the Alberta South Saskatchewan River Regional Land Use Plan (2017-2024). Land use plans have renewal dates that recognize that new issues and concerns may come into play and need to be addressed. However, what is critical to the success of a renewed plan, is that any new direction that is proposed is drafted in consultation with Albertans, such as communities, industries, and the watershed public. Holding government meetings (zoom and face to face) and hearing about informed stakeholder concerns and differences are fundamental to developing a successful and supported change. Affected stakeholders such as Ranching, First Nations, Educators, Conservation Organizations, and Rural and Urban Communities should have a democratic opportunity to participate into any proposed land use changes.

A major theme you will hear about from Albertans and find throughout Alberta's history books is the evolution and involvement of a stewardship ethic. Alberta's stewardship is a land use and conservation ethic that reflects our Alberta history and lessons learned. We must genuinely care for the use of our land, air and water, and put these words into action that includes monitoring. Using an integrated approach to land use decision making will sometimes say no to a particular idea. However, that idea may lead to other balanced solutions that are supported, and move us forward, thus illustrating the importance of an integrated approach to land use decision making.

We look forward to your response to our recommendations.

Sincerely,

Phil Horch, President Society of Grasslands Naturalists Medicine Hat

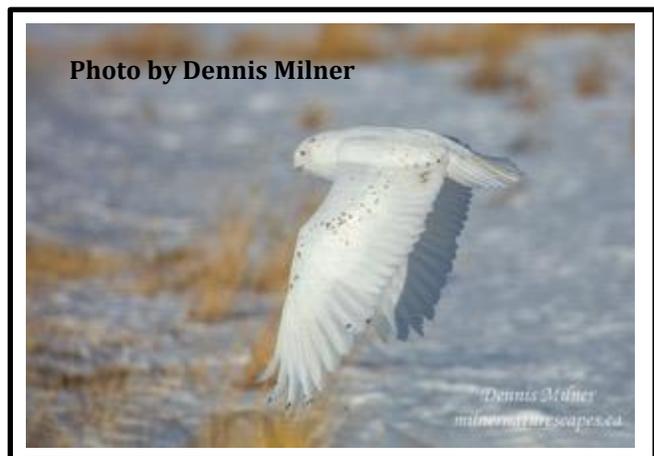
Copy: Drew Barnes, Michaela Glasgo, Jacquie Fenske, Mark Boyce, Rachel Notley, Christyann Olson, Brooke Kapeller, Helen Mcmenamin, Ted Clugston, Kris Samraj, Brad Dubeau, Richard Harrison

Exciting Sightings by Bob Frew

Winter provides the opportunity for new bird sightings; arctic-breeding Snowy Owls, Snow Buntings, Northern Shrikes, and Rough-legged Hawks can all be observed at more southerly latitudes, often far from their northern summer ranges. Irruptive winter finches can also become locally abundant depending on seed crop availability, and one never knows when an unexpected rarity may turn up. January's weather has been more gentle than usual, and more Albertans have been taking to the outdoors to watch and photograph birds. Some recent exciting sightings reported by local birders include the following:

Snowy Owl- Dennis and Kathryn Milner reported seeing four of these iconic arctic owls while driving HWYs 884 and 544, north and west of Suffield on January 21st. In winter, Snowy Owls retreat from their northern-most range in response to periodic population fluctuations of lemmings and other small rodents in the Arctic. The adult male is mostly white; the female and immatures are more heavily marked with dark bars and spots than the male.

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Eastern Screech Owl- A noisy mobbing by magpies, alerted Dan Schiebelbein to the presence of a small owl roosting in a natural tree cavity along a riparian trail by the South Saskatchewan River on January 17th. Identified as an Eastern Screech Owl, this species is considered accidental <10 sightings in Alberta, which is outside of its normal range. In eastern parts of the prairies including Southeastern Alberta, such sightings are likely to be Eastern Screech Owls (rather than the similar Western Screech Owl). There are records of local sightings from a decade ago. Plumage color-phases include grey or rusty morphs.

Short-eared Owl- Dan Schiebelbein reported two Short-eared Owls while birding in the Brooks area on February 4th. The sightings were made near the south end of Kitsim Reservoir which can be accessed from HWY 36. This owl of open grasslands and marshes is active in daylight, especially at dusk. Winter sightings can be irregular. In flight the black patch on the underside of the wing, and the buoyant moth-like wing beats are distinctive. (photo on front page)

Winter Finches- There have been numerous sightings of **White-winged Crossbills** reported at local City parks during the month of January. Their black wings with conspicuous white wing bars distinguish this species from the Red Crossbill. Both Crossbill species are associated with conifers. Milt Spitzer observed a flock of ~25 White-winged Crossbills at Police Point Park on January 19th. Small groups of **Pine Grosbeaks** also continue to be reported during the past month by GN birders. Small flocks of **Cedar Waxwings** >12 <25 have been reported at Police Point Park; these modest numbers surprisingly exceed the number of **Bohemian Waxwings** reported. Only a few **Common Redpolls** have been seen at the Nature Centre feeders. A small flock of **Pine Siskins** was reported on the Connaught Golf Course by George Koopmans on Feb 1st, and on February 8th during the current cold spell, he reported hundreds of **Snow Buntings** and **Horned Larks** on RGE Rd. 84 near the Hamlet of Whitla. These observations underscore the unpredictable and erratic nature of irruptive winter finch wanderings.

Golden-crowned Kinglet- Kinglets are tiny active olive green/grey birds. A yellow crown with a black border and white eyebrow distinguishes the Golden-crowned Kinglet from the Ruby-crowned Kinglet. The vocalizations of each of these species are very different. Kinglets breed in coniferous woodlands. Local sightings are rare and unpredictable. Barry and Judy Anderson observed two Yellow-crowned Kinglets at Hillside Cemetery on January 15th.

Northern Shrike- Although this species is never abundant, good sightings have been reported by GN birders in various locations in the past month; one at Reesor Lake in the Cypress Hills on January 21st by Dan Schiebelbein, one at Police Point Park on February 1st by Milt Spitzer, and another at Ajax Coulee on February 4th by Bob Frew. The Northern Shrike closely resembles the Loggerhead Shrike. In Southeastern Alberta the Northern Shrike is likely to be observed only in winter and the Loggerhead only in summer.

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

“I sit here growing old by inches,
Watching the clocks instead of finches,
But sometimes I visualize in my gin
The Audubon I audubin.”

Ogden Nash

Pollinator Farm: Field of Flowers on Our Prairie

Proposal by Rob Gardner, February 1, 2021

Goal

To create a very large area with a high density of wildflowers to achieve the greatest possible diversity and numbers of pollinating insects. For the Society of Grasslands Naturalists to take on a timely, positive and low-cost project that will involve members while making use of their plant identification expertise.

Background

Transition Medicine Hat has the use of a quarter section of pasture seeded to Crested Wheat Grass. Prior to being tame pasture, this land was cultivated for many years, during which it suffered from substantial wind erosion. In the 30+ years since being seeded, the pasture has been colonized by few wildflowers. Only Hairy Golden Aster and Skeletonweed are present in substantial numbers. I feel this is due to the lack of seed source, since other tame pastures have good populations of other species. Crested Wheat Grass provides good forage during May and June, with a somewhat longer period if the weather brings rain. A more diverse plant community will have healthier soil that can lengthen the grazing period.

Approach

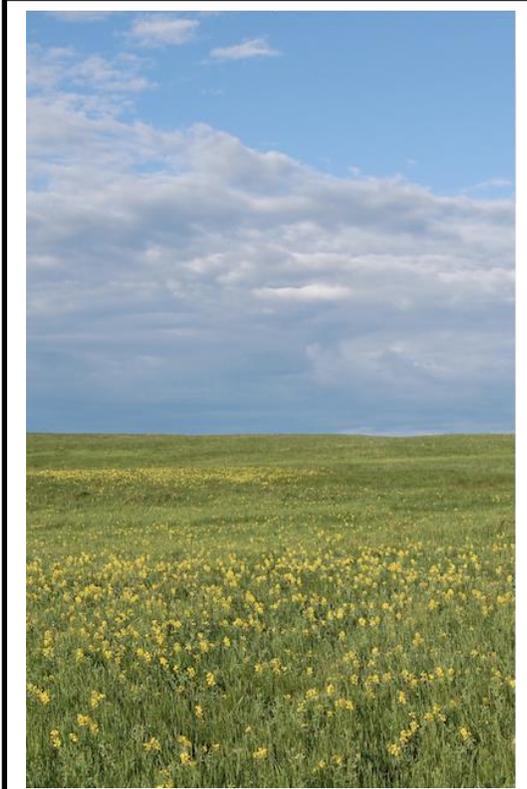
Volunteers will gather wildflower seeds by hand from various dry mixed grass sites around Medicine Hat, and distribute them on the project land. As many species typical of this habitat will be introduced as possible. The emphasis will be on legumes (buffalo bean, narrow-leaved milk-vetch, psoralea), to add nitrogen to the soil. Seeding sites will be spread out across the field to give many locations from which the plants can disperse. Some less common species may be started indoors, with the seedlings planted in suitable habitats. At the same time, grazing will be managed to increase the diversity of habitats available. Salt blocks will be placed to increase the presence of cattle in small areas. These sites will be suitable for disturbance-dependent species. Intense but brief grazing will leave the field without cattle for most of the growing season while continuing to provide the same amount of forage. As taller species such as Silver Sagebrush and Prairie Sunflower establish, they will trap more snow and increase the available precipitation. After several years, the field will become a source of seeds for planting in additional areas.

GN's Role

The GN Board voted to accept the Pollinator Farm as a club project under the umbrella of **Transition Medicine Hat**. A club member will be recruited to lead this project. This person will promote the project in the club, encouraging other members to report sites with high numbers of blooming wildflowers so seeds can be collected. The person will set up small field trips to gather the seeds and then spread them on the site. Simple notes will record what species have been introduced. Other club members may want to document the pollinator population as the project continues, to see if the variety and number of insects increase. Please contact Rob Gardner at 403-527-2052 if you would like to be involved.

Summary

This project offers opportunities for GN to involve its members in an outdoor, nature-based activity that restores our grassland habitat while requiring only modest physical activity and no financial investment. Small groups and the outdoor site make the project COVID-compliant. The resulting Field of Flowers will be easily appreciated by the general public, and can generate good publicity.



Photos From Members

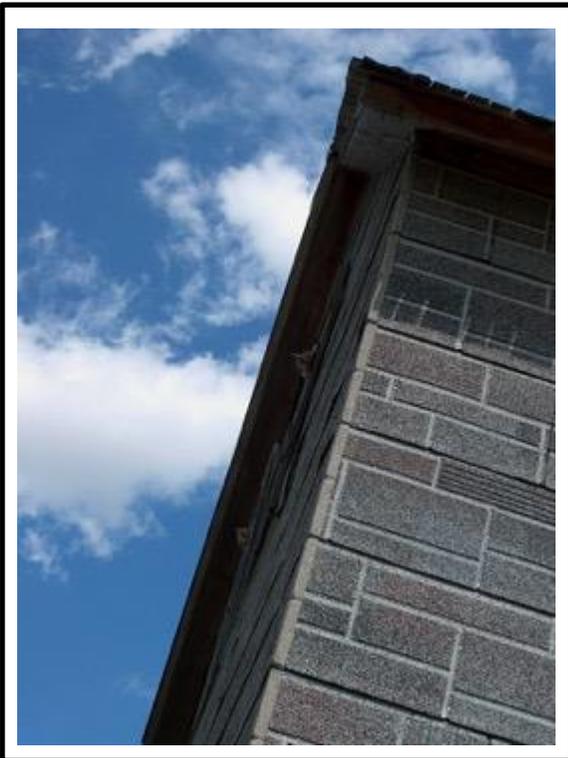


Are we all dreaming of spring and the flowers that it will bring?

Crocus: Photo by Bruce McLeod



Photo of Northern Goshawk taken by Bob Frew: One was hanging around Police Point Park this past Sunday and Monday (February 7 and 8); perhaps looking for a birdcicle?



Two Great Horned Owls peeking out of an abandoned building (told you there would be photos of four species of owls) and nest scraping and eggs of a Killdeer (while very much camouflaged and easily trod on by animals or humans but killdeers seem to be doing well so it must work).

Photos taken this past summer by Donna Steele and Sue Higgins.



Society of Grasslands Naturalists
Box 2491, Medicine Hat, Alberta T1A 8G8



Membership Form for 2021

Name* _____ Name of 2nd Family Member ** _____

Address* _____ Membership: Individual \$20/year _____

City / Province* _____ Family \$25/year _____

Postal Code* _____ Organization \$25/year _____

Telephone+ _____ Donation _____ Tax Receipt Available

Email++ _____ **Total Enclosed** _____

Preference for receiving Chronicle newsletter*:

Post or Email or Neither

Current and recent Chronicles can be viewed and downloaded from the Grasslands Naturalists website www.grasslands-naturalists.org

* Required information. ** Required information for family membership.

+ Optional Information. For phone number(s), please note whether it is a residence, cell phone or business number.

++ Information required if you wish to receive the Chronicle and announcements by email.

Informed Consent for Field Trips

I may wish to participate in field trips and events organized by the Society of Grasslands Naturalists.

I affirm that, as a participant, I and my child(ren)/ward(s) are prepared to stay with the group and follow the directions of the coordinator and activity leader. I affirm that, knowing my personal state of health, I feel that I am mentally and physically capable of participating in the trips and events that I choose to attend.

I acknowledge that I am aware of the inherent risks, hazards, and dangers associated with activities arising from my participation in trips, events, litter cleanups, invasive species removal or any other activity that may result in injury, sickness or death to me or my child(ren)/ward(s). Some of these risks may be specific to the area. These include, but are not limited to, animal attacks as well as poisonous snakes, insects and vegetation. Therefore, in consideration of my participation in these trips and events, for myself, my heirs, my executors, my administrators, and my successors, I voluntarily assume all risks and hereby waive all my rights against Grasslands Naturalists and unconditionally release and discharge the Grasslands Naturalists, its members, directors, officers, its affairs and its coordinators from all manner of activities, causes of action, suits, claims and demands for damages due to personal injury, sickness, death, loss or damage to property, expenses or otherwise which may or shall arise in any way as a result of my participation in the above trips and events.

Signature of Member

Signature of 2nd Family Member

Date: _____

Date: _____



Society of Grasslands Naturalists
 Box 2491, Medicine Hat, Alberta T1A 8G8



Consent Form

Consent to the Use and Distribution of Personal Information

Grasslands Naturalists (GN) collects personal information subject to the '*Personal Information Protection Act*' (PIPA). GN may, subject to your consent, wish to make some personal information public through, for example, its Chronicle, Website, Facebook page or newspaper article. Please indicate your consent to the following release of information and note any specific exclusion of a consent such as for children.

	Yes	No	Exclusion
Name	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	_____
Residence telephone	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	_____
Cell phone	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	_____
Business phone	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	_____
Email address	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	_____
Residence address	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	_____
Pictures	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	_____

Beyond the above consents, GN will not distribute personal information to a third party without your consent unless such information is required, by law, to be released to a federal or provincial government agency in order, for example, to maintain GN's non-profit organization status.

Consent to Receive Emails Related to Commercial Activities

GN may wish to send you emails to promote some of its commercial activities including those provided by its *Club* and *Interpretive Program*. Please indicate your consent to receiving such information. Yes No

Modification of Consents

You may modify any of the above consents, at any time, through a written request to the member of the GN Executive responsible for Memberships.

Signature of Member

Signature of 2nd Family Member

Date: _____

Date: _____