

THE SAGEBRUSH CHRONICLE



Wilson's Snipe: Photo by Dan Schiebelbein (dansnaturephotography.com)

Good News!

**The accessible washroom at the Nature Centre is now open from:
8:00 AM to 8:30 PM.
It will be closed for cleaning briefly, twice a day.**

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 08:00 AM to 8:30 PM**

With the circuit breaker restrictions trying to stop the spread of Covid, we are adapting again. Our workshops have been going very well, but have been put on hold. The 4 Bumblebee Box Workshops were booked up. Extra kits for the boxes are also available for purchase. These are a great way to add potential habitat to your yard or even your balcony.

Our other workshops have been postponed. Outdoor gatherings are limited to **5 people from a maximum of 2 cohorts.**

The Spring Flower and Bird Count will be May 30. This project has individuals out enjoying and contributing to the ongoing citizen science without gathering in groups beyond their cohort. Please talk to Marty about territories, maps, and lists.

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.

As always, Nature is not closed. Our informal map box in front of the Nature Centre also has wildflower brochures, and sometimes other interesting items. If you have questions, call us or knock on the door. Stay well, and have a Happy Spring.
Corlaine

Member's Corner

2021 Memberships are Due!

GN welcomes new members **Pat Ward** (has been on several of the Wednesday walks) and **Jessie Bainbridge**. Hopefully as COVID restrictions ease, many of us will get to meet you during our activities.

'New and Revised GN Policies and Procedures and Medicine Hat Interpretive Program Terms of Reference

GN has developed new Policies and Procedures for 'Privacy and Advertising'. It has also revised 8 other Policies and Procedure and the Terms of Reference for the Medicine Hat Interpretive Program Operations Committee. These documents can be found on the 'For Members' page of the GN website at www.grasslands-naturalists.org/for-members. The Board welcomes from GN Members any comments, concerns or suggestions related to the documents. Your feedback can be submitted to the GN President, Phil Horch (phil.horch@grasslands-naturalists.org, 403-529-5918), before May 28th so that it can be reviewed and addressed at the Board's next meeting.'

Nature Alberta is offering FREE Nature Alberta Memberships for all GN Members!

Nature Alberta is offering [Club Name] Members a FREE Lifetime Membership.

Nature Alberta connects and supports clubs like ours across the province. When you join Nature Alberta as a member, you add another voice in support of the active appreciation and conservation of Alberta's natural environment.

NatureAlberta.ca provides a central place for clubs from all over the province to promote their events. They also create educational materials like species checklists and guides to supporting nature in both urban and rural areas, available for free on their website. They run outreach programs like Nature Kids to promote first-hand nature experiences and inspire the next generation of naturalists. They publish *Nature Alberta Magazine* quarterly, filled with informative articles and beautiful photography. You can check it out for free online or subscribe to receive your own print copies at naturealberta.ca/magazine.

Your membership supports all these initiatives and more. Members also get 10% off books in their [online store](#).

Click here to become a Nature Alberta Lifetime Member today. Email Steph at info@naturealberta.ca if you have any questions or for more information.

Earthday

In spite of the weather five members of Grasslands Naturalists came out to do a clean up of Ranchlands Phase 3. Within one hour, they collected 7 bags of litter plus a cardboard box, beach ball and a discarded Christmas spruce tree.



GN President's Report to Members

It was a little over a year ago that Annalora and I were in Costa Rica and visited Monteverde Institute, a scientific research station located in the incredible Costa Rican cloud forest. This station is supported by 25 universities from all over the world and conducts research on rainforests and cloud forests, the latter of which we were told, there are only six in the world.

We spent 3 days in Monteverde hiking the cloud forest (day and night), hearing lectures, and then provided volunteer labor for half a day. The job of our small 16-member tour group was to fill plastic pots with rich black soil and do it just right in order that new tree seedlings will grow and survive to some day become big trees. This is part of the Monteverde Institute's project to reclaim cloud forest from former abandoned farmland.

By the end of that morning our small group had filled hundreds of pots ready to host the seedlings. In appreciation for our efforts, the Institute awarded us with a certificate that claimed our work that morning had made possible enough new trees to offset the carbon footprint we created by travelling to Costa Rica. Hopefully it did.

I've often wondered just how many trees would need to be planted in our world in order to fully offset carbon. It turns out there is a scientific group mentioned in Seth Klein's new book, "A Good War, Mobilizing Canada For The Climate Emergency" that conducted a study to determine that. They called it the Trillion Tree Project. Their work concluded that enough trees to cover an area as large of all United States would be needed. The problem with this approach is that taking that much arable land out of food production would reduce the world's food supply enough that millions would starve.

In fact there is no one solution that will fully address the problem of climate change (some call it a climate emergency). It will take effort on many different fronts and will affect every living person on this planet in some way. All of our lives will be affected in the next 30 years. Here in southeastern Alberta, we will have some unique impacts. For that reason the Grasslands Naturalists are planning a Climate Change Symposium to discuss how southeastern Alberta lives will be impacted (and quickly in many cases) and examine ways we can all adjust to what's coming. We already see much impact in the loss of local jobs in the fossil fuel industry and the proliferation of sustainable energy projects on our prairie grasslands and farmlands. New wind turbine and solar farm projects are springing up almost overnight. Take a look at what's happening around Whitlea right now. We hope to organize this symposium for in-person attendance after covid so probably late in 2022. Our goal is to attract and speak to students and average everyday Medicine Hatters who may be sceptical of climate change or simply want to know more.

Covid is Back in Medicine Hat Worse Than Ever - Our AGM is Postponed to June 22

As I write this, our provincial government has imposed new restrictions because of this latest wave of COVID-19. In the middle of writing this I received a text that one of my nephews and his family have just been diagnosed with COVID-19. This wave is the worst one yet to infect our city and province. As a result, outdoor activities are reduced to only 5 people at a time which has impacted our planned birding field trips for at least the next couple weeks. The Neighborhood Walks will go ahead however because they are easy to break up into groups of 5 while adhering to mask and distancing guidelines. This is not so easy to do safely on birding field trips.

The new restrictions mean we are unable to hold our Grasslands Naturalists AGM on May 25 as announced last month. Instead we will re-schedule for June 22 provided that restrictions at that time permit it. It is our plan to meet as we did last year, outside at Police Point Park Nature Centre following whatever guidelines are in place at that time. Failing that, we will re-schedule again to September like we did last year.

Those of you who are committee chairpersons are reminded to submit your year-end reports to Paul Thibault at paul.thibault@grasslands-naturalists.org no later than June 1st (new deadline) in order that he can post them on GN's website for all members to view.

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As I mentioned in last month's Chronicle we are also looking for nominations for executive and board positions. We are in need of a candidate for Vice-President and Secretary. **You can give your nomination to John Slater, past president, by telephone at 403-526-7003.**

Finally, I draw your attention to the fact that the Governance Committee has made several revisions to GN's policies and procedures. These changes are being posted on our website so all members can review them. After reviewing these proposed changes, if you have any questions or recommendations, please feel free to contact myself at phil.horch@grasslands-naturalists.org or phone me at 403-529-5918.

In closing, let me wish all our GN members good health. Get your vaccination if you haven't done so yet. Annalora and I received our second Pfizer vaccination on April 22 which is a big relief. Stay safe and take care.

Submitted by Phil Horch, President

Exciting Sightings by Bob Frew

Spring migration reaches its peak during the month of May. This annual spectacle is greatly anticipated by birders, and brings an influx of northward bound passerines, waterfowl, and shorebirds returning from their tropical and sub-tropical winter ranges. Migrants include those nesting locally in the prairie grasslands and wetlands of Southeastern Alberta, and others passing through on their way to distant boreal or arctic tundra breeding grounds. Recent exciting sightings reported by local birders include the following:

Snow Geese- Sauder Reservoir, Murray Lake and Pakowki Lake all serve as staging areas for migrating waterfowl. Dan Schiebelbein reported a raft of ~400 migrating Snow Geese at Sauder Reservoir on April 10th.

Townsend's Solitaire- The Solitaire is a thrush species that behaves much like a Flycatcher. It breeds in the Rocky Mountains and foothills region, and also in the Cypress Hills. During migration it can be seen in the grasslands. It is moderately detectable, but can be easily overlooked. Ajax Coulee in particular has been a reliable location to find Solitaires, with numerous sightings reported there and elsewhere in April.

Turkey Vulture- This large bird has a 2 metre wingspan, and it is most often seen circling on warm rising air currents. Eric Vokes reported the first sighting this spring of a vulture, roosting on the downtown Telus Tower on April 14th.

Cooper's Hawk- Parks interpreter Marty Drut reported a male Cooper's Hawk sighting at Police Point Park on April 15th. A pair of Cooper's Hawks has bred successfully at the park for almost a decade. Unfortunately, it appears they have given the Police Point Park nest-site a pass this spring (last seen there on April 20th). On April 30th, Courtney Tripp reported a/the Cooper's Hawk at a nest-site further upstream alongside the Saskatchewan River.

Wood Warblers- The Yellow-rumped (Myrtle) Warbler is an early spring migrant that breeds in mixed coniferous and black Spruce bogs. It is the first warbler species to arrive here each spring, followed closely by the Orange-crowned Warbler. George Koopmans reported Yellow-rumped Warblers at the Connaught Pond on April 26th, and several Orange-crowned Warblers in Connaught on April 28th. Yellow-rumps were also observed by other GN birders at Police Point Park on April 29th, and 30th. The similar Yellow-rumped (Audubon's) Warbler occurs in the Cypress Hills. Other warbler species reported included a Blackpoll Warbler at Elkwater Lake by Phil Horch on May 6th, and another by Barry Anderson in his Ross Glen yard also on May 6th. Barry also observed a Northern Waterthrush at Connaught Pond on May 7th. Bob Frew observed a Yellow Warbler at Police Point Park on May 9th.

Wood Duck- Barry and Judy Anderson reported a male Wood Duck at the Echo Dale Regional Park pond on April 28th. The brightly coloured male is easily recognized. Until recently, the species was breeding in the Medicine Hat area including at Police Point Park.

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White-faced Ibis- Once rare, this wading bird is now well established in many marshes and wetlands throughout Southern Alberta. Milt and Elaine Spitzer reported 3 White-faced Ibis during a birding trip to the Wild Horse area on April 29th. Mark Oxamitny and Bob Frew also observed 3 Ibis at the marsh on the east side of RGE Rd.75, at the south end of Murray Lake on May 1st.

Snow Bunting- While birding in the Tide Lake area (ephemeral lake northwest of Suffield) on May 2nd, Dan and Mark Schiebelbein were surprised to encounter 5 very late Snow Buntings. The species is a winter visitor in Southern Alberta, and travels in large flocks in early spring.

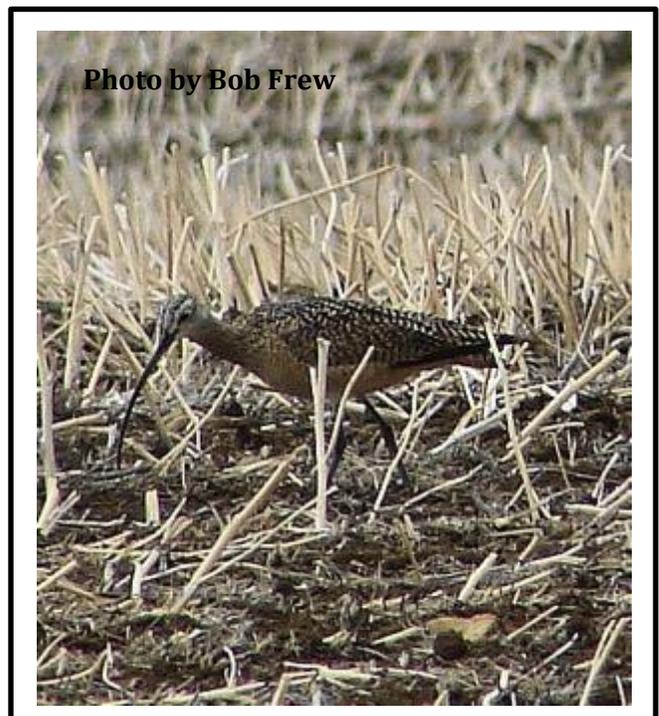
Short-eared Owl- Dan Schiebelbein reported a Short-eared Owl perched on a fencepost along HWY 523 as it turns south just before the Rattlesnake Dam, at sunset on April 23rd. This species is found in open areas, marshes, and grasslands; the loss of habitat has resulted in a serious decline of both Short-eared Owls and Burrowing Owls.

Purple Martin- On May 4th, Milt and Elaine reported a Purple martin at a Martin house (artificial communal nest box) in the Hamlet of Schuler east of HWY 41. The species is darker and larger than other swallows. It is a mosquito eater, and therefore a welcome backyard guest.

Western Tanager- George Koopmans, along with Barry and Judy Anderson observed a female tanager in the dip at the east entrance to Connaught Pond on May 6th. Sightings usually require a trip to the Cypress Hills where the species breeds, and is more commonly seen. The species is often detected by its distinctive “pit-er-ick” call, before being sighted.

Long-billed Curlew- Our largest shorebird returns to the grasslands in late April, with precise timing. This curlew’s size, long down-curved bill, and buffy colour are distinctive. Milt and Elaine Spitzer reported a single curlew in a pasture along HWY 41, 2 kilometers south of the Trans-Canada HWY 1. Phil and Annalora Horch observed 2 curlews along TWP Rd. 112, near Longfellow’s Hall on May 6th. This latter location has been a reliable spot for Long-billed Curlew sightings in spring.

Avocets and Stilts- There were numerous reports of American Avocet sightings in the latter part of April, and into the first week of May. Dan Schiebelbein had 4 avocets at Murray Lake on April 10th, and several larger groups have been reported by GN birders at Sauder Reservoir, and Cavan and Murray Lakes. Bob Frew reported 2 Black-necked Stilts at the south end of Murray Lake on April 24th, and Marty Drut reported 20 stilts on the South Saskatchewan River at River Valley Park in Redcliff on May 2nd.



McCown’s Longspur- This prairie species can be found by driving slowly along our gravel TWP and RGE roads, and observing the tail markings of flushed birds. The McCown’s can be identified by its white tail markings (an inverted T of black on white), or by observing the male’s flight/song display. Preferred habitat includes short-grass prairie, overgrazed pastures, and dry lake beds. Milt and Elaine Spitzer reported ~30 McCown’s Longspurs in the Wild Horse Area on April 29th, and Dan and Mark Schiebelbein encountered large flocks of McCown’s as well as Chestnut-collared Longspurs in the Tide Lake area on May 1st. Breeding bird surveys in recent years suggest that longspurs and other grassland species are in decline.

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Barrow's Goldeneye- This species breeds in the mountains and foothills. It is similar to the Common Goldeneye, and is considered a vagrant in the prairie region. The Barrow's Goldeneye has a crescent shaped white patch between the eye and bill, and a purple sheen to the head, whereas the Common Goldeneye has an oval white patch between the eye and bill, and a green sheen to the head. Mark Oximity reported a single bird at Sauder Reservoir on May 1st.

Semipalmated Sandpiper- A relatively mild winter in Southeastern Alberta has resulted in less than optimal shorebird habitat, as several local sloughs and wetlands have low water levels, or have dried up completely. Mark Oximity and Bob Frew identified a small flock of ~30 Semipalmated Sandpipers, at the marsh area on the east side of RGE Rd. 75, at the south end of Murray Lake on May 2nd (possibly the same "Peeps" reported earlier by George Koopmans). Also on May 1st, Dan and Mark Schiebelbein tallied ~50 Semipalmated Sandpipers at Kininvie Marsh. This sandpiper species is a common migrant in Alberta. Other migrant sandpipers to watch for include, Least Sandpiper, Pectoral Sandpiper, Stilt Sandpiper, and Baird's Sandpiper.

Gray-cheeked Thrush- Milt and Elaine Spitzer reported a Gray-cheeked Thrush just south of the Nature Centre at Police Point Park on May 9th. The Gray-cheeked Thrush can be distinguished from the Hermit Thrush by its lack of a rufous tail, and from the Swainson's Thrush by its subtle grayish cheeks, and a faint incomplete eye ring.

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

Wednesday Walks, May Species Count and SEAWA Environmental Week Event

Note: All walks and programs will be conducted according to existing Alberta COVID protocols. i.e. presently groups must be limited to 5 people or less. If more show up, the group will be split accordingly.

May 19th: SE Hill: meet at east end of 11St SE at 1:30 PM.

May 26th: Kin Coulee and Ajax Coulee: meet at Lorne Holden Ball Diamond at 10:00 AM.

Sunday, May 30: Annual May Species Bird and Flower Count: Contact Marty at the Nature Centre for more details and to volunteer for an area to count.

June 2nd: Echo Dale Regional Park: meet at Upper View Point at 10:00 AM.

June 5th. SEAWA will celebrate Environment Week at **Connaught Pond from 09:00 AM to Noon**. Activities will include: talks about invasive species, Russian olive control and removal, and ecology of beavers. There will also be a trash pickup. Because of COVID-19 restrictions **all participants must preregister at: executive@seawa.ca** or via Facebook Messenger at Seawa Watershed. Presently each group can only consist of 5 participants.

June 9th: Redcliff River Valley Park: meet at Upper Parking Lot at 10:00 AM.

June 16th: Tepee & Saamis Coulee: meet at Tepee Parking Lot at 10:00 AM.

Russian Olive: This Local Weed Must be Controlled: Marilou Montemayor & Ben White

Russian olive trees, admired for their beauty and hardiness, have become ubiquitous around Medicine Hat and surrounding areas. They form thickets on stream banks, around ponds, and along drainage ditches. They are also found in coulees, natural areas, gardens, and wherever else they have an opportunity to grow. Originally from Europe and Western Asia, Russian olive trees were introduced to the prairies for shelterbelt and ornamental planting. They are very prolific in producing fruits with seeds that are easily dispersed by birds. They can tolerate salinity and alkalinity, and grow in dry climate, characteristics of Southern or Southeastern AB and the broader grassland ecosystem. In Southern Alberta, in addition to favourable climate and soil, there are very few pests or diseases that would hinder their growth and spread.

As with any invasive species, the spread of Russian olive comes with adverse ecological impacts. These trees have the potential to or have already become the dominant vegetation in some locations, choking out or completely replacing native plants. Russian olive trees deprive native plants of space, sunlight, nutrients, and water and thereby slowing their growth and fruiting and eventually replacing them. They are particularly problematic in riparian areas (the lands directly adjacent to waterbodies) that provide habitat for many species of birds and other wildlife. The invasive traits of Russian olive are a disadvantage for native trees such as cottonwoods, and the wildlife that rely on them. For example, beavers prefer cottonwoods for food and construction materials and will avoid Russian olive when they can. Deer prefer to browse cottonwoods to the thorny Russian olive. Deer cannot rub on the tangle of thorny thickets of young Russian olive trees, a disruption of its method to attract a mate. Russian olive leaves also contain much more nitrogen than most native species, contributing to nutrient loading of water bodies when many Russian olives grow nearby. Waterbodies in the prairies usually have more than sufficient nutrients. Any additional nutrient can result in poor water quality impacting fish and other aquatic organisms. Russian olive leaves do not decompose easily and this debris settle and accumulate in pond bottoms impacting fish habitat. In urban areas where Russian olive trees have grown along streets or road sides, fruits and leaves accumulate in street gutters. Snow melt and rain carry them through the stormwater grates and into their network, eventually discharging into a stream and seeding its riparian areas.

Russian olive tree invasion is a serious threat to the semi-arid open grassland ecosystem. The grassland community of grasses, various kinds of sagebrush, and patches of native shrubs where landforms allow the accumulation and conservation of limited snow and rain is being disrupted or replaced by thickets of Russian olive trees. The open grassland is home to several plants and animals that have been listed as species-at-risk, endangered, or threatened. These include the burrowing owl, Ord's kangaroo rat, tiny cryptanthus, and several more.

The aggressive spread of Russian olive trees must be controlled to prevent further spread and ecological damage. This should be done by asking people not to plant this tree, actively working to reduce the population through removal of seedlings and young trees, and the gradual removal of mature trees. An effective simple method of control is the physical removal of seedlings and young trees by digging out their roots using a garden shovel. Mature trees removal should be done by professional tree removers. A gradual eradication program accompanied by simultaneous planting of native shrubs and trees is encouraged. It is also recommended that no further planting of Russian olive should take place, and alternative species should be planted.

If you have considered Russian olive for planting in your yard or garden, there are several beautiful native species that could be planted instead. Wolf willow and thorny buffalo are both in the same family as Russian olive and have some similar traits. Wolf willow has similar silvery leaves and fruits, and thorny buffalo is a beautiful large shrub that attracts birds. Other shrubs include golden currant, Saskatoon, chokecherry, and red osier dogwood. Trees such as cottonwoods, green ash, and Manitoba maple are also excellent alternatives. Willow trees are good additions, as well as evergreens such as white spruce and junipers.

If you'd like to learn more about the dangers of Russian olive, and how to prevent its spread, visit seawa.ca/take-action/invasive-plant-management.



Progress on the Transition Farm which was featured in the February Chronicle. Rob is still looking for volunteers to help with this project. If you can help contact Rob Gardner at: 403 527-2052.

Photo by John Slater

GN Birding Trip to Reservoirs West of the City (April 24)

In all there were a total of 8 participants (note: this was when Alberta COVID restrictions allowed up to 10 people to gather outdoors) on this Grasslands Naturalists trip. We started at Echo Dale Regional Park (including the wetlands on the top of the valley), and then proceeded to Rattlesnake/Sauder's Reservoir (both north and south side). We took a lunch break at Premium Sausage in Seven Persons (yummy sausage on a bun). From here we travelled to the northeast and southeast ends of Murray Lake where we met up with George Koopmans who was still searching for the mythical Black-necked Stilt (I guess a photo makes it less mythical). Since then of course many Black-necked Stilts have been sighted.

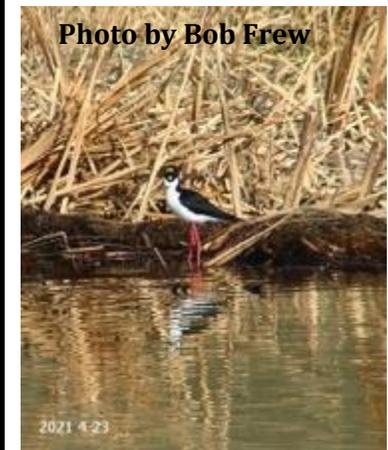


Photo by Bob Frew



Photo by Ian Turner

We had great looks at most of the duck species, including about 20 Red-breasted Mergansers on Sauder's Reservoir. We also saw Red-necked, Horned and Eared Grebes at Sauder's and got a fourth Grebe species on Murray Reservoir with distant views of three Western Grebes. We had distant view of 5 American Avocets at Rattlesnake but were later blown away by very close looks of about 100 American Avocets at the southeast end of Murray Lake. Also tallied were Marbled Godwits, Willets, and Killdeer at both reservoirs. We also saw all three teal species at the southeast end of Murray Lake.

We also had a Red Fox sighting near the hamlet of Whitla.



Note: The following opinion is that of the editor only and does not necessarily reflect the views of the Grasslands Naturalists Society nor of the Interpretive Program.

The photo on the left was taken while doing the bi-weekly Adopt-a-Pond duties at the Northlands Storm Water Retention Pond. This photo shows the north bank of the pond which the City completely cleared of shrubs and some rather large trees to allow the residents bordering the pond unobstructed views of the pond. Unfortunately someone felt that this didn't go far enough as more trees have been hacked down (in foreground of photo).

The shrubbery is/was a great spot for migratory passerines to hide and fuel up on their respective trips to the north or south. Similarly the City cleared most of the shrubbery around the fishing pond at Echo Dale Regional Park; presumably to facilitate efficacy of operations although these shrubs in no way were hindering lawn cutting or other maintenance efforts. In the spring and fall these bushes were alive with a variety of migrating passerines. I noted that Calgary was recently awarded a Bird Friendly citation; in no way can Medicine Hat even think of a similar award.

Sept. 2019



April 2020



May 2020



May 2021



Leucistic Robin(s) seen at Echo Dale Regional Park