

# THE SAGEBRUSH CHRONICLE



## Meet Alicia Lew, new Chief Interpreter at the MH Interpretive Program

You may notice some new faces the next time you visit the Nature Centre at Police Point Park. The Society of Grasslands Naturalists, who has managed the MH Interpretive Program for the past 27 years in partnership with the City of Medicine Hat, announced this week that Alicia Lew will be replacing retiring Corlaine Gardner as Chief Interpreter.

Alicia joined the Interpretive Program in January 2020 as a Park Interpreter. She was born and raised in Calgary and earned her Bachelor of Science and Master of Science degrees at the University of Victoria. Her specialties are biology and earth, ocean and climate science.



For several years she taught ocean, climate and environmental science courses at the University of Victoria and at Thompson Rivers University in Kamloops. She enjoys creating nature illustrations, trekking, camping, cross-country skiing, horseback riding and generally being active outdoors.

Alicia moved to Medicine Hat in November 2019 and has enjoyed discovering the beauty and importance of southeastern Alberta's grasslands and riparian areas. She is especially looking forward to continuing and growing the Interpretive Program's great tradition of sharing our region's beautiful natural heritage with others. The next time you visit the Nature Centre at Police Point Park, welcome Alicia to her new role.

Corlaine Gardner, who has been the talented face of the MH Interpretive Program for the past 15 years, is retiring with the gratitude and appreciation of the Grasslands Naturalists Society and the City of Medicine Hat. The MH Interpretive Program is known and admired across the country for the way in which it has interacted with the public and schoolchildren of Medicine Hat and area. Each year, thousands of people learn about our natural history because of their talented programs and displays. **Note: Corlaine and Marty's retirements and a gathering for recognition of their excellent service are contained in the President's Report.**

### **Exciting News!!!!**

**November 23, 2021 Zoom Meeting of Grasslands Naturalists  
See Page 3 & 4 for details and Poster regarding the Gardners'  
Mauritius Presentation at this event!**

## Executive and Board Members

President Phil Horch 403-529-5918  
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Vice-President Vacant  
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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 family accessible washroom is open:  
Each day from 08:00 AM to 8:30 PM

**The Nature Centre is open but please  
observe the COVID restrictions:  
Face Masks are Required!**

**Note: Nature Centre Events are detailed in  
the Events, Trips and Announcement  
Section of this issue.**

**Visit the store for your nature  
related gifts including books,  
stuffedies, comfort birds, bird feeders,  
and other items. These would make  
great stocking stuffers.**

### Saturday, November 13

First day of Project Feeder Watch! Start keeping track of the number and species of birds you see at your home feeder or come on down to the Nature Centre and help keep track of what you may see at our feeders.

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 10<sup>th</sup> 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](mailto: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:** 4<sup>th</sup> Tuesday (**suspended during COVID**), Sept. - May **Board Meetings:** 1<sup>st</sup> 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: Angela Turner**

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

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GN Website:

[www.grasslands-naturalists.org](http://www.grasslands-naturalists.org)

GN Facebook:

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

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

### **Errata**

Gerry Ehlert's title was incorrectly stated in the October issue noting the Community Spirit Awards. It should have been:  
Gerry Ehlert, former Rangeland Agrologist and Instructor.

## Member's Corner

### Casino News Update

A huge **Thank You** to **Justine Bolen** who has stepped forward and has volunteered to be the New Casino Manager. **Dave Mackenzie**, our former manager to whom we also owe a huge **Thank You**, will help her get up to speed and of course she will need people to volunteer for working in the casino on either February 26 or 27, 2022. There are two shifts per day with the early shift starting at 2:45 PM and the late shift starting at 7:45 PM. Krystal Bates, our Casino Advisor, will be giving a training session prior to these times.

Please talk to Justine to volunteer or say yes when she calls you.

**Note:** We will be following whatever COVID protocols are mandated at the time; hopefully none.

Thank You for your participation:

Hugh Armstrong, Fund Raising Chair

## **DODO's Guide to Conservation**

New parks for  
the endangered  
species of  
Mauritius



Corlaine and Rob Gardner  
describe their experiences on this  
tropical island in the Indian Ocean.

### **November 23, 2021 Monthly Meeting to be held on-line**

The GN Executive has decided to use an on-line Zoom group meeting for our November general meeting. (Current COVID requirements prevent use of the Nature Centre for our monthly meetings on the 4<sup>th</sup> Tuesday of each month). With Zoom you will be able to keep up to date on all GN business and happenings and also enjoy the educational speakers.

Our first Zoom meeting will be held on November 23, 2021.

Below are the instructions for members who have a computer, laptop or cell phone to join the Zoom meeting for the General Meeting.

The General Meeting has been booked beginning at **6:45 p.m.**, so you could sign in then and socialize on-line before the **Business meeting begins at 7 p.m.**

**Rob and Corlaine Gardner will begin their Mauritius presentation at 8 p.m..**

You'll receive an email from Angela Turner with a subject of

**"Grasslands Naturalists Zoom Meeting".**

1. Open the email and go to the link below **"Join Zoom Meeting"** and click on it. This will take you to your browser. Note: if your email doesn't show a 'clickable' link (in blue) then copy and paste the link into your browser.
2. On the next screen there will be a box **"Open Zoom Meetings"** and you need to click on the 'little' box. Then at the bottom of the screen press **"Open Zoom Meetings"**.
3. If #2 above does not appear on your screen then simply press **"Launch Meeting"**.
4. Press **"Join With Video"** on the next screen.
5. When the meeting host is notified that you want to join the meeting standby until the host admits you to the meeting.
6. On the next screen press **"Join with Computer Audio"**.
7. When you want to leave the meeting move the mouse and the bottom menu options will appear. Press the **red "Leave"** box to exit. Lastly, press the **red "Leave Meeting"**.

If Zoom meetings are new to you, below are a few **Zoom Etiquette tips** to help improve your experience and avoid any disruptions or embarrassing situations.

1. Be sure to **mute your microphone**, (lower-left corner of your screen), as soon as you sign on and whenever you are not speaking. This is important and perhaps the most critical tip to avoid background noise, feedback and distractions for others who would otherwise be able to hear things around you. If you speak or there is noise in your background it will interrupt the Speaker, and all of the other meeting participants will also be able to hear you and your surroundings.
2. Consider muting your video (also on the lower left of the screen) if you are eating, talking with someone else in the room, or anything else that might be distracting to others.
3. Close unneeded applications on your computer to keep the video optimally functioning.

### **Revised Policies and Procedures**

The Grasslands Naturalists Board has approved, in principle, revisions to the following Policy and Procedures:

- Contracts and Agreements
- Awards and Donations

These have been posted on the "For Members" tab of the GN website under the heading "Policies and Procedures/Governance and Meetings". The added and revised clauses are indicated in red and are submitted to the Membership for comments before final approval by the Board at its next meeting on December 7, 2021.

## President's Report To GN Members, November, 2021

**November Indoor Program to be Online** – No doubt we are all getting fed-up living under the constant restrictions and inconveniences of the pandemic. It's been well over a year since we have been able to conduct an indoor program in our rather confined meeting room at the Nature Centre.. On November 23 we are going to attempt an indoor program online using Zoom. Rob and Corlaine Gardner have graciously agreed to bring us their visit to the Island of Mauritius in the Indian Ocean via this method. You are invited to join us online via your computer or cell phone and let's give this a try! Hopefully all the technology will cooperate. We appear to be at the tail end of the 4<sup>th</sup> COVID wave and I know we all look forward to the time we can get together in person again. We shall see what January brings. In the meantime we can look forward to the Christmas bird count in December. Look for all the meeting details on pages 3 & 4 of this issue. I hope to see you there.

**Monitoring Many Environmental Issues** – There seems to be a never-ending stream of activities that negatively affect our environment. Recently our members were upset by the new trail our city built by the Ranchlands Environmental Reserve. The trail was far more intrusive on this native grassland than it had to be and that we were led to believe it would be. The board is in the process of developing a letter to the city expressing our concerns.

Many other members are concerned with the impacts of the new mountain bike trails in the river valley between Medicine Hat and Echo Dale Regional Park. Despite assurances from the city that impacts would be minimal, this is proving to not be the case. Some others have been concerned with the way the city is reducing shrub growth in Echo Dale Park which has been important for migrating songbirds. Our city's environmental consciousness seems to have gradually been dwindling over the years. At one time our society had convinced the city to develop an environmental roadmap to govern all its departments and had also hired an individual to monitor and inform city departments about environmental matters. This was done because of pressure from the Grasslands Naturalists Society. But somewhere along the way as city government players change, all this seems to have been lost.

It is time to again bring pressure to bear on the city to mind its manners when it comes to protecting our environment. With a new mayor and many new councillors, now is a good time to begin a dialogue with the city on the need for an over-arching environmental master plan that applies to all city departments. I am feeling like this is déjà vu because I was very involved in convincing the city to do this when I previously was President. It seems like decades ago! However, the fight to protect our environment never stops! Your board is developing plans to meet with our city government to begin this badly needed dialogue.

At the same time our Issues Committee is monitoring major new developments happening in southern Alberta's irrigation systems. The Federal Government has come up with over a billion dollars to expand reservoirs, create new reservoirs and enclose canals to mitigate water evaporation. We are monitoring these plans as they emerge to determine if any of these plans will negatively impact natural grassland. All of these developments are taking place in southern Alberta. We have linked up with the Lethbridge Naturalists and are monitoring these projects together.

While COVID may have made it difficult for us to meet in normal fashion, your GN Board has been extremely busy and active. Plans are also progressing to determine if we can conduct a major symposium on climate change in the spring of 2023. You will be hearing a lot more about that in the future.

### **And Finally – A Big Thank-you to Corlaine and Marty!**

You are probably aware that our highly respected Interpretive Program at the Police Point Nature Centre is about to undergo major changes. Two long-term staff, who have been the face of our program for so many years are retiring. I encourage all GN members to drop into the Nature Centre in the next couple weeks and express your appreciation to these incredibly talented and hard-working individuals. There are plans to properly recognize both Marty Drut and Corlaine Gardner at a retirement reception as soon as COVID regulations permit. Watch for news about that, hopefully soon. At the same time as you say your congratulations to Marty and Corlaine, you can say hello to their replacements, interpreter Ian Langill and new Chief Interpreter Alicia Lew. We welcome them aboard!

In the meantime, I hope to see you online, November 23<sup>rd</sup>.

Submitted by Phil Horch  
President

## **Upcoming Events, Field Trips and Announcements**

**(Note: All walks and field trips will be conducted under existing COVID-19 Rules. Presently masks are required indoors, and social distancing outdoors).**

### **GN Wednesday Walks:**

**Wed Nov 17: 10am:** Ranchlands Stone Circles walk starting at far northeast end Ranchlands Blvd NE.

**Wed Nov 24: 10am:** Walking the trails in Echo Dale Regional Park starting at the Lookout View Point.

**Wed Dec 1: 10am:** Walking SE Hill Trail starting at 11<sup>th</sup> Street SE north towards downtown.

**Wed Dec 8: 10am:** Downtown walk starting at Division Ave S along 1<sup>st</sup> Street SE and River Road Water Front development.

**Wed Dec 15: 10am:** Saratoga Park walk starting at South Railway Street bottom of Scholten Hill.

### **Interpretive Program Events:**

**(Note: Registration is required for the following events. To register, get the time for the event(s), and location call 403 529-6225).**

**Monday, November 8:** Check out "Froggy Gets Dressed" StoryWalk®. Up for your enjoyment until December 8!

**Saturday, November 13:** Make a Pinecone Bird Feeder: We will be using a healthy homemade suet recipe for the birds to coat pine cones in! We will have 3 outdoor stations on the front patio of the Nature Centre set up in 30-minute intervals. Cash donations warmly appreciated.

**Saturday, November 13:** First day of Project Feeder Watch! Start keeping track of the number and species of birds you see at your home feeder or come on down to the Nature Centre and help keep track of what you may see at our feeders here!

**Friday, November 19:** Full Beaver Moon Walk -- Call for details. Location most likely along Jefferies Trail to Medicine Hat lookout. Meet at 4:30 PM

We are also working on a Beaver Display for the Nature Centre's Main Display area later this month. Watch for it!

**Sunday, December 19:** Christmas Bird Count. Specifics will be in the December Chronicle.

### **Nature Conservancy of Canada Volunteer Event:**

Date: **Thursday November 18 Time: 10 am - 2 pm**

Location: Haugan (55 minutes S of Medicine Hat) 49.3996, -110.757

Join us as we venture out to the Haugan property to install sage-grouse reflectors on the perimeter fencing, and clean up any old fence clips that have fallen off. Studies have shown that these vinyl clips can reduce bird collisions with fences by a whopping 70 to 80 per cent! The work site is in a very remote location and will require a fair amount of walking through the grassland. Volunteers will need to find their own transportation and gloves. Snacks and refreshments provided by NCC.

**To attend this event please RSVP to [Kirsten.betteridge@natureconservancy.ca](mailto:Kirsten.betteridge@natureconservancy.ca)**

Specific driving directions and waivers will be sent out closer to the event date.

### **Nature Alberta:**

**Our auction is now live for bidding!** Please go do your Christmas shopping now. People want to be a part of a successful campaign. To make them feel like they are bidding in a successful campaign, we need our inner circle (that's you!) to place those first few bids. There are 80 (at least 1 still in progress) items here - that means there is something for everyone! Almost all the minimum bids are extremely reasonable, undervalue prices, so please go bid to help us launch this auction into success!

Plus, if there are items you are wanting to get for Christmas gifts, you will get a notification email when someone else bids on it so you can keep an eye on that item and win it Nov 28!

Here's the auction link: <https://www.32auctions.com/organizations/90193/auctions/112484>

## Exciting Sightings by Bob Frew

As the month of November brings fall migration to an end, there are reports of **Snow Geese** and **Tundra Swans** staging at Murray Lake. Although November can be a slow month for birding, irruptive fall flocks of “winter finches” may roam south from their northern summer ranges. Already there have been some early reports of **Common Redpolls** in our local coulees, and **Gray-crowned Rosy Finches** in the Cypress Hills. Recent exciting sightings are briefly described below:

**Varied Thrush-** This thrush species breeds in the Rocky Mountains and Foothills regions. It is usually seen in the grasslands during fall migration. The male has a grayish blue nape and back, orange eyebrow; orange underparts, and a black breast band, which distinguishes it from the similar American Robin. In fall it can be seen well to the east of its breeding grounds. Dan Schiebelbein reported a male Varied Thrush in his NE Crescent Heights yard, on October 11<sup>th</sup>.

**Common Redpoll-** Redpolls are an irruptive species, and wander south irregularly in winter. Barry and Judy Anderson reported ~8, and ~20 Redpolls in Ajax, and Kin Coulees respectively, on October 26<sup>th</sup>. Phil Horch reported a further ~50 Redpolls at Golden Sheaf Park on October 27<sup>th</sup>.

**White-faced Ibis-** Dan Schiebelbein reported a rather late sighting of four lingering Ibis at Lake Newell on October 15<sup>th</sup>. The first record of this species in Alberta was a sighting of a single bird photographed at Pakowki Lake in 1974. Since then their range and numbers in Alberta have increased considerably.

**Golden-crowned Kinglet-** This small hyperactive species breeds in mature coniferous woodlands dominated by spruce. Its head pattern is distinctive; with an orange crown stripe in the male, and yellow in the female. Kinglets associate loosely with mixed-species flocks in fall and winter. Dan Schiebelbein reported three Golden-crowned Kinglets at Spruce Coulee on October 15<sup>th</sup>, which he fortuitously encountered again in the same location on October 28<sup>th</sup>.



**Rough-legged Hawk-** The first southward movements of this buteo species are usually observed in Southeastern Alberta in mid-September and peak by mid or late October. Its distinctive white tail with a dark sub-terminal band, and a square dark carpal patch on the underwing is useful in confirming identification. Milt Spitzer reported two Rough-legged Hawks, the first along HWY 41 near Chappice Lake, and a second near Hatton, Saskatchewan on October 19<sup>th</sup>.

**Ross' Goose-** On October 27<sup>th</sup>, as Phil Horch was watching ~2000 Snow Geese and ~200 Tundra Swans at Murray Lake, a Ross' Goose landed very close to him. This compact, short-necked, all white goose with black wingtips is very similar to, but smaller than the Snow Goose with which it usually occurs. There are white and blue morphs, the latter is extremely rare.

**Gray-crowned Rosy Finch-** Colton Prins encountered a dozen Rosy-Finches in the parking lot of the old forestry museum building close to Horseshoe Canyon in the Cypress Hills on October 25<sup>th</sup>. The alpine tundra of our mountain parks is its summer habitat. In winter, it descends from higher elevations, and wanders east of the mountains onto the parkland and grasslands regions, where it is considered a vagrant. This finch species has dark brown plumage, with gray on head; pink on wings and underparts.

**Brown Creeper-** This inconspicuous diminutive songbird is difficult to detect as it creeps up tree trunks searching for insects. Furthermore, its weak call does not carry far, and its complete high pitched song is usually only heard on its breeding territory. Barry and Judy Anderson reported a Brown Creeper in their Ross Glen yard on October 16th.

**Rusty Blackbird-** This species is the northern counterpart of the similar Brewer's Blackbird, which it is often confused with, except in fall when the Rusty Blackbird is easily distinguished by the rusty brown edges on its feathers. These edges/tips wear off by spring. Rusty Blackbirds frequent bogs, muskeg, marshes, and beaver dams in the boreal forest. Overwintering has been reported in Southern Alberta, including Medicine Hat. Dan and Carol Schiebelbein reported 6 Rusty Blackbirds at Bullshead Reservoir on October 15<sup>th</sup>, and Phil Horch sighted two birds at a farm yard along TWP Rd. 122 near Sauder Reservoir on October 27<sup>th</sup>.

**Harris's Sparrow-** This large sparrow is more frequently seen during fall migration, and can show up at feeders. Winter adults have a black crown, buffy cheeks; their throats may be all black or show a partial white band. Immature birds resemble winter adults, but show less black, and have a white throat. Rob and Corlaine Gardner observed an immature Harris's Sparrow at a bird bath in their S.E. Hill yard on October 29<sup>th</sup>.

**Northern Shrike-** This shrike species is an aggressive predator of small birds and rodents, killing both by a blow to the neck with its powerful beak; and often impales its prey on thorns. It is an uncommon to rare winter visitor in southern parts of the province. Its black mask is narrower than the loggerhead Shrike's, does not extend above the eye, and its bill is longer with a more distinct hook. Milt Spitzer reported sightings at Police Point Park on October 23<sup>rd</sup>, and on November 4<sup>th</sup>.

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

### **A MURMURATION! By Jean Van Wert on October 8, 2021**

I have lived above Ross Glen coulee in Medicine Hat for 40 years, and just saw my first murmuration of starlings TODAY! About 2pm, I looked out towards the coulee, as is my constant habit, and noticed something very strange happening. The entire base of the coulees about half a mile long and full width had a dark 'shadow' of fast movement. I had no idea what it was, so I grabbed my binoculars. There seemed to be a massive rushing across the coulees . . . looked like birds, dark, blackish-coloured birds . . . that zoomed so fast past me that suddenly the view was empty. I put down the binoculars and looked for this 'mass'; suddenly, it reappeared . . . from my right and once again filled the coulee, all together, in a massive flight and then made an abrupt turn left heading for the far east side of the coulee - then did a skyward rush and returned as quickly to wildly flood the coulees as before, disappearing suddenly from my sight to the south part of the continuing coulee, then reappearing at lightning speed - soaring straight up into the sky, almost an arrow-like formation and then flattening out back into the coulee and disappearing out of my sight again . . . for a minute or so.

What was this incredible 'movement of nature'? I Googled, "what is a mass of birds in flight?" It was a MURMURATION of European Starlings! I couldn't estimate how many starlings were involved, but they covered the prairie within my eyesight, and I think the 'layer' of the flock was approximately 10-15 ft high. There seemed little space between the birds. And this pattern of soaring vertical and horizontal movements continued for about 45 minutes with easy viewing from my house. I went outside to watch from the deck and the 'mass' suddenly moved up and seemingly was going to pass overhead, but when they reached the coulee edge closest to my house, the entire 'murmuration' streaked straight up about 50 ft from my deck and then swung backwards in an arc to the opposite end of the coulee. I guess it was about half a mile across. This took just seconds.

They then streaked down across the coulee to my left and immediately flew the length of the coulee east in my view. I watched to see how far they were now going and where they were heading - when I suddenly realized . . . it was over! I don't know where they dispersed; they just suddenly weren't there!

**BUT WHAT A SPECTACULAR VIEWING OF MY FIRST MURMURATION!**

**(See next page for photos)**

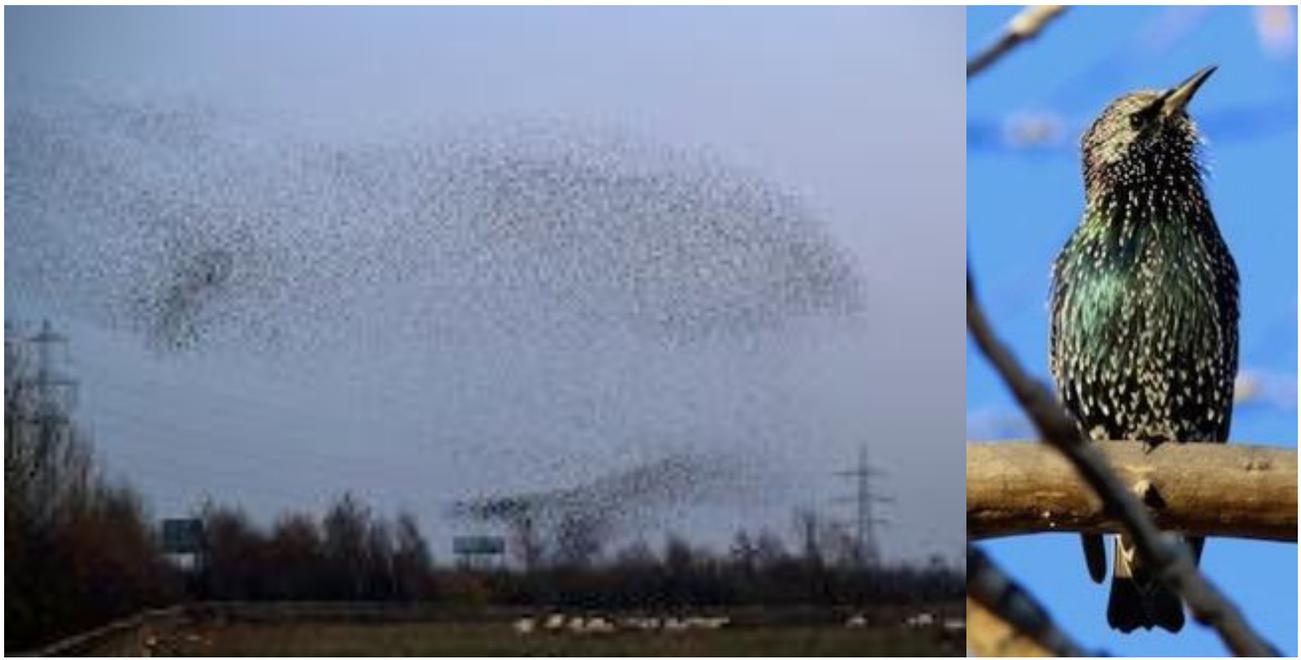


Photo of Murmuration by Walter Baxter (Creative Commons License)

**Assorted Photos by Members and Friends of Members**



Left: Black Widow Speder: A Scary Halloween Treat on the Door Screen of Richard Ehlert (Lethbridge).

Above: A Varied Thrush visitor to Dan Schiebelbein's Yard.

## Member's Photos During Wednesday Walks



Photos from Top going Clockwise:  
City Centre from McCutcheon Drive  
Walk along trail below McCutcheon Drive  
Walk along Ranchlands Riparian Trail  
Eastern Screech-Owl: This bird has since been disturbed and has moved (?) as a result of the Necessary Fire Station boat ramp. [dansnaturephotography.com](http://dansnaturephotography.com)  
Pincushion Cactus with at least 30 Berries seen along McCutcheon Trail.  
All Photos except the Screech-Owl were by John Slater.