

THE SAGEBRUSH CHRONICLE



Monthly GN Meeting: Tuesday, October 24, 2023
at Nature Centre or by Zoom (info will be sent prior to meeting)

6:30 to 7:00 PM: Refreshments and Socializing (lemonade, coffee and cookies)

7:00 to 7:30 PM: Presidents Announcements, MHIP Report

7:30 to 8:30 PM: Shirley Boomer Presentation

8:30 to 9:00 PM: Exciting Sightings, Information/Reports, Timely discussions for members to participate in, etc

A Pathway for Environmental Reconciliation

Shirley Boomer is a Sixties Scoop Survivor, who recently discovered she belongs to the Mistawasis Nehiyawak (Cree) Nation. Shirley's journey to gaining knowledge of her heritage started in her early twenties. She has been learning about and teaching First Nation culture, traditions, art and crafts for over thirty years.

Shirley will share the way First Nations viewed the land and all that is part of it. She will discuss ways that the land was replenished and taken care of, and touch on what some Nations are doing today to build and live in a way that helps heal Mother Earth.



Executive and Board Members

President Phil Horch 403-529-5918
phil.horch@grasslands-naturalists.org

Vice-President Paul Thibault
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Secretary Martha Maudsley

Treasurer Angela Turner
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Past-President Hugh Armstrong
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Large Ian Turner
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Linda Fisher
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MH Interpretive Program

(Managed by Grasslands Naturalists)

Based in Police Point Park

www.natureline.info

Nature Line: (403) 529-6225

Facebook and Instagram: @policepointpark
The Nature Centre is open year round from:
9:00AM to 5:00PM Tuesday through Sunday

October 14 and 21: 1:00 to 2:00 PM: House Plant 101 Parts 2 and 3: Part 2 is about sun, temperature and humidity. Part 3 is about common pests and diseases. \$5 per workshop. Call the Nature Centre to register.

Birdseed Fundraiser: Orders are being taken for this years' annual fundraiser! Chin Ridge seeds at great prices! Call or visit the Nature Centre to place your order. **Orders will be closing at 10:00 AM. Monday, October 23.** Any orders placed after this time will be included in a follow up order.

A Swift Current- a Story of Police Point Park: The new display is now up at the Nature Centre. A brief overview of how Police Point Park came to be: geomorphologically, socially, culturally and politically. Display ends December 31.

November 18: 10:00 AM to 3:30 PM: Holiday Market: Call the Nature Centre for more details.

The Sagebrush Chronicle is published ten times a year by Grasslands Naturalists. **Submissions of writing and artwork are welcomed but may 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, Sept. to May **Board Meetings:** 1st Tuesday Sept. to 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 403-529-6225

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

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.

Come and visit the Nature Centre and browse the Gift Shop for Nature Related Items.

Members' Corner

President's Report To GN

No doubt many of you, just like Annalora and I, have been making the most of our spectacular fall weather. Yesterday, (October 10) we visited Dinosaur Provincial Park and the day could have passed for mid-summer as the temperature reached 29 degrees. I can't remember a temp like that in October though I'm told it has happened before. This glorious fall is something to be thankful for (It has been Thanksgiving Day after all) but at the same time our enjoyment is tinged with the realization that this lovely season may be the result of climate change. That's the grim undertone to almost everything happening in weather these days. We can safely state that climate change is the big over-arching issue facing our world these days but that's not to say it's the only issue impacting our environment these days.

Our society is dealing with several issues and there are some we should probably be dealing with but have been unable to because of lack of volunteer help. Some of the issues that we are tackling include the Environmental Framework for the City of Medicine Hat, Invasive Species which includes the City's Russian Olive Task Force, Impacts of Southern Alberta Renewable Energy Projects, Strong Towns Program for the City of Medicine Hat, Bird Friendly City Initiative, Adopt-A-Pond Project, and the Scenic Views Project which is nearing completion.

Some other issues that have arisen but we haven't been able to take on include the City's management of our storm ponds, the impacts of the new mountain bike trails in our river valley, and probably the biggest miss are all the changes taking place in Alberta's Irrigation Districts. There are others.

Our ability to be involved in all these issues is being taxed to the limit and this has been a matter of board discussion for several months. It has even led us to consider the possibility that GN should abandon tackling issues so we can focus more on our core interests, especially given the unfilled need of more and younger volunteers. Part of the problem is that we have many individual committees pursuing our present issues which means the board is required to coordinate all these disparate committees. If we are to continue tackling environmental issues we need an over-arching Issues Committee which will coordinate the work of these various (what would become) sub-committees. At our January indoor program meeting we hope to initiate a discussion on this matter with you, our members. Think about this. We need your feedback.

New Indoor Program Format Feedback – At our September indoor program we tried a new format which didn't quite work out as planned. We started earlier (6:30 pm) and streamlined the reporting and had our speaker time start at 7:30 pm. We had hope to have a second half hour for members discussion but the speaker session prevented that this time. We will try again in our October indoor program on October 24. Please let us know if you appreciate these changes.

GN is now a Member of the Medicine Hat Chamber of Commerce – At our last board meeting we decided to join the Chamber of Commerce at a cost of \$288 per year. For this we receive many benefits including the use of their downtown boardroom, which we sorely need, access to some limited free legal and accounting advice, and the opportunity to attend meetings where access to many civic and business leaders is possible. Because we are adding two more members to our board of directors, our past practice of meeting in board members' homes has become difficult due to space requirements. We will try this for the current year and monitor its benefits.

Submitted by Phil Horch, President

Members' Corner (Cont.)

Who's Who: by Corlaine Gardiner, Communications Committee

This month I would like to introduce you to the people working on making our indoor programs and meetings lively, and a pleasure to attend.

We all enjoy the variety of interesting talks at our regular meetings. Linda Fisher is the Indoor Program Coordinator who finds our guest speakers. She looks for a balance of local natural history, environmental topics, and travel tales relating to our interests. She really appreciates ideas from fellow naturalists for future programs. And she relies on members who can step up when there are cancellations. Linda tells me that she really enjoys working on this committee, and getting to know the extraordinary people who share their passions with our Grasslands Naturalists. She would welcome you to talk to her about the variety of duties which all help keep our Programs running smoothly.

Of course, over the last couple of years, running the programs has involved a group of tech savvy Naturalists who manage the audio, visual and zoom connections. David Gue, Ian Turner and Paul Thibault are the mainstays of the computer corner.

We also like to socialize over a snack and a beverage. Since we resumed in-person meetings Angela Turner has been organizing this. **But now is the time to resume the pre-COVID teams of helpers who can take turns arriving early and helping set up the refreshments and the room. Which month can you volunteer? If you can help for October, please arrive at 6:15 PM. We will have a sign up sheet for future meetings.**



Upcoming Events, Walks and Announcements

Wednesday, October 18: 10:00 AM to Noon: Saamis Coulee on Seven Persons Creek with Cathy Linowski and the Archaeological Society. Park at the Teepee or near the Ball Diamond in Kin Coulee next to the pedestrian highway underpass. Meet at the bottom of Teepee Trail at 10:15 AM.

Wednesday Walks from October 27, Onward: Meet at the Nature Centre at **10:00 AM**. Depending on the weather and number of participants, the walk or activity will be decided on.

Interpretive Program Events: House Plants Workshops, Bird Seed Fundraiser, Police Point Park Display and Holiday Market. More details regarding these events can be found on page 2 of this Chronicle and for even more detail or for more clarification and information contact the Nature Centre at: **403-529-6225**.

Exciting Sightings

The autumn equinox in late September marked the peak of fall bird migration in Southeastern Alberta. Passerine migration has slowed noticeably with smaller numbers of **Yellow-rumped Warbler**, **Orange-crowned Warbler**, **Wilson's Warblers** still moving through, along with the odd **Palm Warbler** in the mix. **Ruby-crowned Kinglets** have been reported by several local birders. Fall can be a good time for encountering rarities, either lingering and/or off-course migrants, or as early arrivals from northern breeding ranges. Exciting sightings reported in September are listed below:

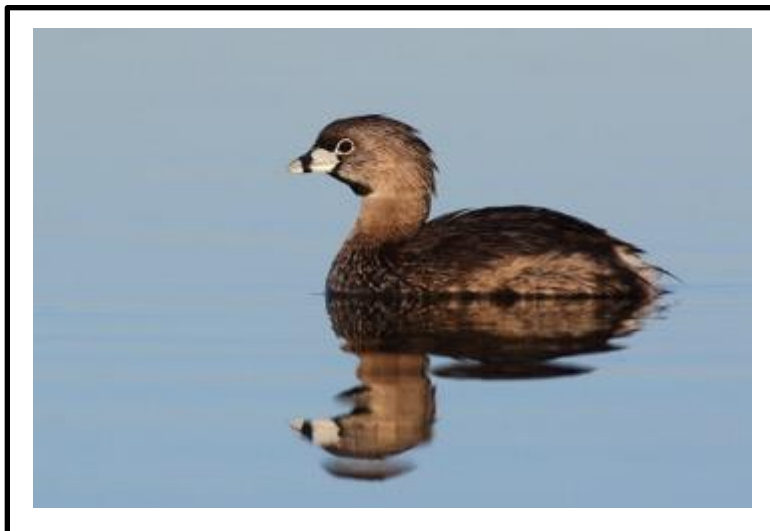
Thrush species- Adam Turnbull reported, observed and photographed a **Varied Thrush** at Police Point Park on September 28th. This species is common in the coniferous forests of our mountain parks and the interior of BC. The male's grayish-blue nape and back, orange eyebrow and underparts with black breast band distinguish it from the American Robin with which it does not associate. Its song, a haunting whistle is unmistakable. Adam also had a **Hermit Thrush** which has a habit of raising its rufous tail when alighting. **Townsend's Solitaire** sightings continued into the first week of October at Police Point Park. This slender thrush of open coniferous woods is gray overall, with a bold white eye ring, and buffy patches on the wings. All three of these thrush species are considered rare in the prairie region in fall, with sightings occurring during migration.



Snowy Owl- Linda Fisher reported an unusually early sighting of this iconic arctic owl on September 13th, at a friend's ranch located in the special areas south of Oyen. Linda encountered and identified the owl, as it made a boisterous exit from a caragana hedge shelterbelt on the ranch. This early sighting could be due to the recent northern wildfires, and/or to something else in a changing arctic landscape. It appears that Snowy Owls can, and often do show up where and when they are least expected.

Evening Grosbeak- This attractive grosbeak species is noisy when in flocks and is considered a vagrant in the Prairie region of Southeastern Alberta. It occasionally shows up at local feeders containing black sunflower seeds, like other grosbeak species it has a distinctive large beak. Adam Turnbull reported a female grosbeak in the berry bushes at Police Point Park on September 30th.

Grebes- Two grebe species were reported on the South Saskatchewan River at Police Point Park on October 3rd by visiting Calgary birder Sandra Davis.



They were identified as a **Western Grebe**, a large grebe with a long body, neck, and bill, and a **Pied-bill Grebe** which is smaller and stocky, brown overall, its pale bill has a distinctive wide dark band which is absent in winter. Both species over winter in coastal saltwater bays.

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

Photos by Dan Schiebelbein:
dansnaturephotography.com

Well Worded

What do you think of when you are asked about nature? Most of us will picture something from our childhood, the things that we thought of as “wild”. J.B. MacKinnon, author of *“The Once and Future World”* was stunned to discover that his childhood “wild prairie” was really a much altered landscape. The sub title of his book is *“Nature as it Was, As it Is, As it Could Be”*. He examines the process of forgetting what really existed, from generation to generation.

This book is not all doom and gloom. MacKinnon encourages us to recognize the changes and learn more about the past so that we can all participate in a more promising future. He enthuses about the opportunities for re-wilding our landscapes. Native flowers in your own yard to support the native pollinators is a great start. A somewhat larger project, the reintroduction of the swift fox is a local example of rebuilding our prairie ecosystem.



Photo by Rob Gardner: Note the beetle and ant in the flower at 7 o'clock.

“The Once and Future World” should be available at the Public Library. Or you could borrow our copy. I found it to be an enjoyable and hopeful book.

Corlaine Gardner October 2023

September Field Trips (Sauder and Yeast) and Wednesday Walks (Connaught Pond and Saratoga Seven Persons Creek), with SEAWA's Marilou Montemayor and Ben White.

Our thanks go to Marilou for leading these events in her last month in Medicine Hat, and for her seven years as Executive Director of SEAWA. At the habitat creation site at Sauder reservoir, we witnessed the challenges of selecting the plants for survival from drought, prolonged extreme temperatures (>-30C to >+30C), wind, tornado, hail, mice, voles, ants storing aphids, soil salinity, and animal browsing. At that site, native Snowberry/Buck Brush (*Symphoricarpos occidentalis*) seems to be the only plant to survive well enough to propagate. Saskatoons have been resilient. The Yeast site project, as well as Saratoga Seven Persons Creek, appear to be more successful with Wolf-willow/Silverberry, Thorny Buffaloberry/Bull Berry, Dogwood, Saskatoon and Chokecherry. Golden Current produced abundant quantities of fruit in late summer.

At Connaught Pond, the abundant invasive crested wheatgrass and Russian olive limit biodiversity. Experimental plots demonstrated the spontaneous return of native Western wheatgrass, scarlet mallow, skeleton weed, and reflex cress, when shallow rooted crested wheatgrass was pulled. Manitoba maples are thriving from seedlings found in the lanes, and a variety of locally sourced shrubs have been planted to provide competition for the rapidly expanding population of Russian olive. Native Cottonwood, propagated from cuttings, are thriving, while those sourced from greenhouses suffered from frost crack. Removing young Russian olive trees (less than 4" diameter) by cutting about 20 to 30cm above the ground level and removing sunlight by wrapping the stump with heavy black plastic, spread out to about 80 to 100cm appears to be effective. When sprouts do appear at the base of such trees, they are removed. “Branches” often sneak underground to find sun some distance from the mother tree; these are also chopped away asap to starve the roots from sunlight.

Thanks are due to SMRID and the City of Medicine Hat for providing space for the many field trials and experiments at these four locations where local knowledge is growing for use by land owners who wish to initiate their own restoration projects, in response to the dual emergencies of climate and biodiversity loss.

Carol Porter Bluebird Trail Results for 2023

The success of the breeding program for the mountain bluebirds along the Carol Porter Mountain Bluebird Trail can only be attributed to the dedication of the team of volunteers who monitor and service this trail. Following are the monitors who faithfully tended to these boxes:

- Dee Cowan (since 1996)
- Randy and Lorraine Stotz (since 1996)
- Ric and Anne Carrier (since 2000)
- Sue Higgins and Donna Steele (since 2004)

Later additions to the team include:

- Jim and JoAnne MacFarlane
- Ian and Angela Turner
- Hugh and Dee Armstrong
- Len and Lindy Moser
- Kelly Blair and friends
- Bruce McLeod and friends

New to the team this year include:

- Jurrie and Maureen Mellama
- Dan and Carol Schiebelbein



Unfortunately long time monitors Mel Bender and Beth and Ted Turner were unable to continue servicing this trail but we owe a great debt to them as well as to all the volunteers for their efforts in ensuring that the mountain bluebird species continues to thrive.

2023 Results

In 2023 a total of 206 mountain bluebirds were successfully fledged from the trail of 93 boxes. While this is a good number of fledglings the result is somewhat disappointing in that no extreme weather events were recorded during the breeding season. This number is not much below the longterm average of 239 (based on records from 1997 onwards). The number of bluebird nests (45) was the lowest on record but fortunately all but one were successful which resulted in just a bit below normal success rate. The number of eggs laid (233) was the lowest on record since 1996 when only 25 nest boxes were in operation. Again because of the dedication of the monitors and the good weather there were very few eggs that were sterile, abandoned or plundered by predators. Nonetheless this trend of fewer successful bluebird fledgling is disconcerting.

Conversely the success of Tree Swallow fledglings was the highest (318) since 2017 and much above the long term average. (from 2010 to date as no numbers were recorded prior to that date). Tree Swallows often compete with bluebirds for box possession but since bluebird males usually arrive on site before the tree swallows they lay claim to prime boxes but often battles ensue and sometimes the tree swallows prevail. Perhaps the tree swallow success has slowed the success rate of bluebird fledglings or perhaps fewer adult mountain bluebirds returned from their wintering grounds. Future year results may further verify or discredit these theories. In any event tree swallows are a desirable species in their own right as they too are vast consumers of insects.

For more details and/or the spread sheets of historical records contact Milt Spitzer at milton.spitzer@gmail.com.

Birding Field Trip to McLaren Lake on September 30, 2023: by Milt Spitzer

Nine brave souls met up and cavalcaded in three vehicles to McLaren Lake on a cool, breezy and drizzly morning. Because of the extreme drought which has afflicted the south-east corner of Alberta these past two years we went directly to McLaren Lake as that is the only standing water in the area. As we neared the lake we came across several flocks of Sandhill Cranes feeding in the harvested croplands. Gisele wanted to know if she could creep up the distant flocks for better photos but I assured her that this was not necessary as we would see flock after flock fly over us at the lake and there would be flocks nearby feeding in the fields (famous last words as we did not see a single crane once we arrived at our destination). We did however have several flocks of Greater White-fronted Geese fly directly overhead as well as a small flock (20) of Cackling Geese flying very low directly over us letting us know why they are called “cackling” geese. **Note:** Rob and Corlaine Gardner travelled south of Leader on October 9 and encountered thousands of Sandhill Cranes and other waterfowl during their journey home.



There were other waterfowl on the lake but surprisingly there wasn't a white bird among them; no Snow Geese, no Swans nor, which would have been a great surprise, Whooping Cranes. We did walk through the park and encountered a number of late shorebird migrants as well as several passerine species. The resident Great Horned Owl (2) did not disappoint.

On the way home we travelled east on Highway 528 and then south along Range Road 22. We encountered several raptor species as well as a lost Great Blue Heron (no water of any kind any where near where it was flying). As is usual in the fall we encountered several large flocks of Lapland Longspurs in constant flight landing briefly to disappear in the stubble. In all we tallied 42 species.



Marilou Montemayor shows the luxuriant growth of the red osier dogwoods (taller than people) at the Saratoga Restoration Site, September 27, 2023. Photo by Ben White.

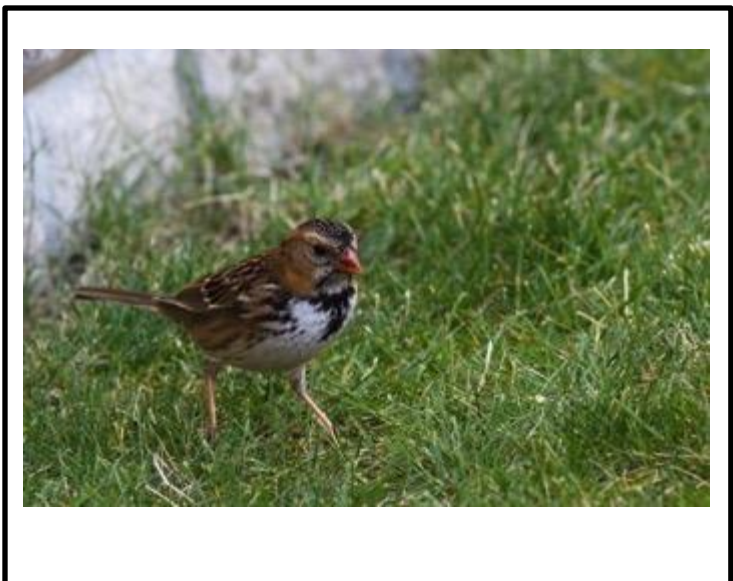
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Fall Photos



Top Two Photos: Fall Colours at Police Point Park: Photos by Hazel Gray.

Center Two Photographs: Writing-on-Stone Provincial Park: Photos by John Slater.

Bottom Photo: Harris's Sparrow in Dan Schiebelbein's yard. Photo by Dan Schieblebein.
dansnaturephotography.com