

Shuswap Naturalist Club Newsletter

January 5, 2021

I am wishing you all a happy and productive coming year. We are grateful that we have nature to enjoy and the ability to share this love with each other.

If this was a normal year we would be meeting at the high school and electing our executive and directors for the coming year. This, however, will have to be done when things are closer to normal. I hope that some of you will consider putting your names forward. I am fairly optimistic that with the arrival of the vaccines, we will be able to go ahead with some of our outdoor activities in the spring.

This newsletter focuses largely on the Christmas Bird Count and shares some of your adventures while counting the birds. It also has some information to help us learn more about birds and bird behaviour.

Many thanks to Ted Hillary for organizing the count. Here is his wonderful report:



Christmas Bird Count 2020 - report by Ted Hillary

The annual Salmon Arm Christmas Bird Count was held on Sunday December 20. It was a perfect day for birding. In the valley bottom there were overcast skies but the lighting was good and there was no snow on the ground. Higher up there was a trace of mixed snow and rain and about 10 centimeters of snow on the ground. The Lake for the most part was open water and the Salmon River was flowing. Temperatures hovered between zero and plus 5 degrees.

There were 35 participants in 16 groups of 1 to 5 people in each. Because of covid-19 we were not able to participate in large groups as usual but rather, for the most part, each group covered a smaller area. I think that this proved to be more successful as more areas were better covered. Participants on foot spent 24 hours covering 29.3 km. There were 475.3 km driven in a combined total of 38.6 hours.

There was a total of 81 species seen, considerably above our average of about 75. In addition, 3 species were seen during count week. The total numbers of birds seen was 10,940, much above our average. In comparison last year we had 67 species and 6,880 birds.

The most common bird seen was the Canada goose with 2312, a count record; the previous record was 2042 birds seen in 2018. Mallards were the next highest count with 1696 birds. This was also a record high with the previous record of 1454 set in 1989. The open water and mild temperatures probably account for these large numbers.

Rounding out the top 5 were 951 rock pigeons, 919 European starling and 804 pine siskins. Although these are not record highs, they are still goodly numbers.

There were 4 more record high counts: 8 cackling geese, previous high of 2 in 2019; 329 trumpeter swans, previous high of 311 set in 2011; 725 American goldfinches, previous high of 669 set in 2007; and 8 spotted towhees, previous high of 5 set in 2019.

Several highlights were mentioned by participants. To note but a few: a cooper's hawk catching a squirrel; a peregrine falcon posing for an admiring audience; a pileated woodpecker in all its majesty; killdeer and dunlin feeding near the mouth of the river; a pygmy owl watching the watchers; lots of little brown birds feeding under a feeder. I'm sure each participant has a favourite moment which we could add to the list.

I would like to thank everyone who participated in this count, whether you were in the field or watching your feeder. With all the restrictions this year imposed by the covid virus we missed all the socialization which is usually part of the count. Hopefully next year it will be more back to normal.

Listed below are the species seen and their numbers:

Cackling goose - 8	Red-tailed hawk - 26	White-breasted nuthatch - 1
Canada goose - 2312	American coot - 55	Brown creeper - 4
Trumpeter swan - 329	Killdeer - 7	Pacific wren - 1
Tundra swan - 3	Dunlin - 2	Golden-crowned kinglet - 11
Swan (SP) - 35	Ring-billed gull - 6	Ruby-crowned kinglet - 1
Gadwall - 18	California gull - 1	American robin - 62
American widgeon - 100	Herring gull - 2	Varied thrush - count week
Mallard - 1696	Rock pigeon - 951	European starling - 919
Northern pintail - 10	Eurasian collared dove - 126	Bohemian waxwing - 225
Green-winged teal - 133	Mourning dove - 17	Cedar waxwing - 8
Redhead - 2	Northern pygmy-owl - 2	Snow bunting - 2
Ring-necked duck - 17	Barred owl - count week	Dark-eyed junco
Greater scaup 38	Great gray owl - count week	(slate-coloured) - 7
Lesser scaup - 7	Short-eared owl - 1	Dark-eyed junco
Scaup (12)	Belted kingfisher - 1	(Oregon) - 159
Bufflehead - 9	Downy woodpecker - 14	White-crowned sparrow - 4
Common goldeneye - 48	Hairy woodpecker - 2	White-throated sparrow - 5
Barrow's goldeneye - 2	Pileated woodpecker - 5	Song sparrow - 81
Goldeneye (2)	Northern flicker - 7	Spotted towhee - 8
Hooded merganser - 4	Red-shafted flicker - 92	Red-winged blackbird - 215
Common merganser - 86	American kestrel - 3	Pine grosbeak - 10
California quail - 68	Merlin - 2	House finch - 250
Ring-necked pheasant - 11	Peregrine falcon - 1	Red crossbill - 59
Common loon - 4	Northern shrike - 3	White-winged crossbill - 4
Horned grebe - 13	Steller's jay - 9	Common redpoll - 48
Red-necked grebe - 10	Black-billed magpie - 69	Pine siskin - 804
Western grebe - 3	American crow - 256	American goldfinch - 725
Great blue heron - 10	Common raven - 116	Evening grosbeak - 13
Sharp-shinned hawk - 1	Black-capped chickadee - 367	House sparrow - 6
Cooper's hawk - 2	Mountain chickadee - 21	
Bald eagle - 43	Red-breasted nuthatch - 84	

Members Share -

Gillian Richardson

From the North West Quadrant - There was nothing much of special note on our route, but we did find more birds and more people in Herald Park than I've ever seen on our count day. One fir tree just past the entry gate was busy with Black-capped and Mountain Chickadees and Red-breasted Nuthatches. Alas, no Solitaire or Dipper at the usual sites in the park.

We encountered about a dozen people on the trails. Reason? A combination of mild weather, easy walking (no snow) and probably a COVID-related impulse to get outdoors for some exercise. Usually, I might be the only person walking through the park that day.

Joyce Henderson

From the South East Quadrant - Grindrod. Last stop of the day - walking the abandoned train track - in 15 minutes - 4 new species - Northern Shrike, Ruby-crowned Kinglet, Golden-crowned Kinglet, Cedar Waxwing. We had agreed to walk south for 15 minutes, covered just a few metres before we counted the above species. What a great way to end the day. Joyce Henderson, Laura Henderson, John Woods, Marie Fortin.



Another note from Joyce - Great entertainment at our house (Cooper's Hawk). One less pigeon to count.



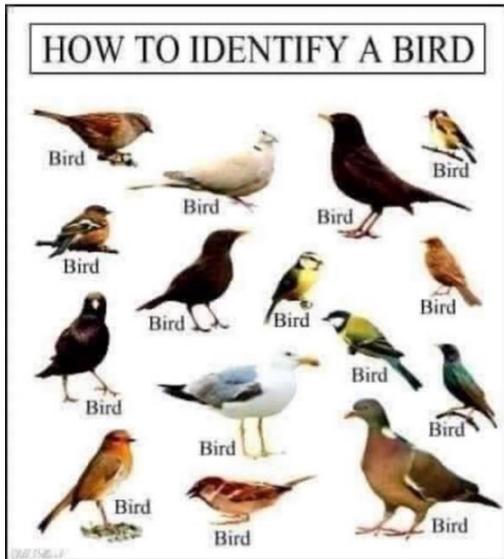
Roger Beardmore

Here's a link to a great article about bird survival in winter. It's easy reading, lavishly illustrated, and very informative:

https://www.allaboutbirds.org/news/how-do-birds-survive-the-winter/?utm_source=Cornell%20Lab%20eNews&utm_campaign=14a5cf94b2-Cornell-Lab-eNews-December-2020&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_47588b5758-14a5cf94b2-305006737

Mike and Pam Saul report -

It's not all about birds. A dung beetle walked into a bar and asked, "Is this stool taken?"



Tom Crowley reported that he found this chart most helpful. He said, "You have to start somewhere."

North Shore Bird Count

On December 29th Bob and Sandra Ewart and Marlene and I participated in the North Shore bird count. The number of species counted was 58, the same as last year, but the number of individuals was down a bit. There was plenty of snow which made some areas difficult to access.

Birds with the highest numbers:

- Pine Siskin – 748
- Black-capped Chickadee - 139
- Mallard Duck - 124
- Ring-necked Duck – 67

Membership dues for 2021

Ted Hillary writes -

Dues are due now. Because of the lack of meetings, I was thinking that no dues or only partial dues would be requested at this time. The only foreseeable expenses at this time will be the BC Nature dues which do take much of what we pay out. However, several members have already paid their dues in full so I guess we should be requesting full dues from all our members. I see that BCN may be having financial problems because the overall membership has dropped considerably. I should think that there will be a drop in our membership also, but for this year I'd recommend payment of our dues at the current rates. Single - \$25 Family - \$30

This payment includes membership in BC Nature and the BC Nature magazine plus our club's liability insurance. We keep about \$5 from a single and \$10 from a family membership.

(membership renewal form on page 8)

The American Dipper (*Cinclus mexicanus*)

by Roger Beardmore

Birds are so fascinating and so much fun, that its hard to choose a favourite. Not that you have to choose, of course, but if you did, it would not surprise me at all to see the “dipper” near the top of your list! They are little bundles of energy that make their living (and their homes!) on fast flowing rivers of western North America, from Alaska all the way down to Panama!

Identification

This stocky little species is about 7.5 inches long. They are not the most brilliantly coloured bird - both males and females are identical in appearance - being slaty-grey overall with a brownish tinge to the head. So, they don't stand out in that department! However, their unique shape (stubby wings and short tail), behaviour, and strict habitat requirements, make the dipper very hard to confuse with any other species.



Behaviour

The Dipper has the endearing habit of “dipping” which is the bobbing or dipping motion they use constantly while foraging along streams. But, why do Dippers dip? Given that there are a few different theories, it would be safe to say that the definitive reason remains to be determined! Nevertheless, ornithologists think that dipping may help the birds locate their prey underwater by visually isolating reference points under the water. Dipping may also help Dippers conceal themselves from predators amidst the rushing waters. It is also thought dipping may be a form of communication between Dippers within the noisy environment of mountain streams. Dippers dip at different rates in different situations, so dipping may be a form of “Morse code” for Dippers to communicate different messages!

Although many songbirds bathe and splash on the edge of streams or other water bodies like ponds, puddles or lakes, Dippers are the only passerine to actually swim or walk



underwater, while hunting for food. Searching for aquatic invertebrates like larvae that hide and crawl on stream bottoms as well as other aquatic organisms such as tadpoles and small fish, including fish eggs, American Dippers are experts at finding and capturing these prey items in the fast moving waters of mountain streams. They even have the ability to "fly" underwater, using their wings to aid in propulsion, maneuvering, and stabilization in swift flowages.



White eye-lids

With close observation, it will soon become apparent that the Dipper flashes white eyelids when it blinks! The early assumption that this may be a **nictitating membrane** to aid visibility during their underwater travel proved to be false. All birds have a nictitating membrane – a translucent eyelid that flicks across the surface of the eye from front to back, to protect it while still permitting some vision. However, the Dipper's white flash is actually the eyelid that travels from top to bottom and is covered in tiny white feathers!

But, why do Dippers have white eyelids, and apparently like to show them off by blinking slowly? Well, the answer is....wait for it.....no one knows!! Again, there is some speculation that it may have to do with facilitating communication in a noisy streamside environment, but this is unsubstantiated hypothesis at this time.



Where to see Dippers near home

Recently (first couple of weeks of December) I have observed and photographed Dippers at Skimikin Lake (west end where small creek enters and keeps water open), and in Reinecker Creek just below Margaret Falls. Nan and I, along with Peter and Sharon Lawless, usually see them in the Salmon River during the Christmas Bird Count, but sadly, we didn't see one this year! However, in winter they can found in rapids or pools kept ice free by rushing water or warmer ground water sources. They are often quite approachable, and with some stealth and perseverance you may see them flash those crazy white eye-lids!

Enjoy the winter and Happy New Year everyone!

Request regarding the protection of Bank Swallows

Bonnie Thomas sent a request to Janet Aitken asking if naturalists would be interested in reporting information on the state of Bank Swallows in the Shuswap area. (Bank Swallows are listed as threatened under the Species at Risk Act.) This program is being conducted by the Canadian Wildlife Strategy for Bank Swallows.

I know they nest in our area. Because they nest in a colony where each of them tunnels a hole into a vertical sandy cliff, their nesting site is often the victim of erosion.

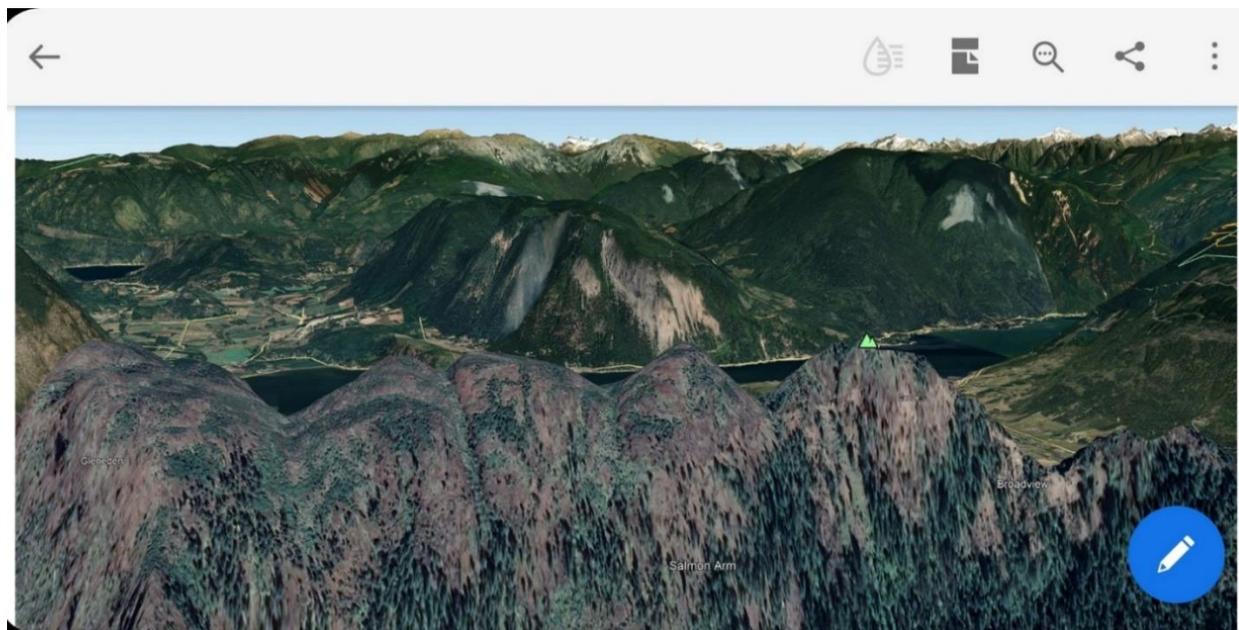
This might be a suitable task for the Save the Songbirds Committee.

If any of you have information on where Bank Swallows nest in our area please pass it on to me and I'll forward the information to Janet. I will be sending out further information on this subject in February.



Mt. Ida

Blain Carson, who is on the committee to have Mt. Ida become a Provincial Park, sent this photograph as seen from Google Earth. It is showing the six humps of Mt. Ida. Shuswap Lake is in the background of the humps. We will be hearing more about the success of their request in the months to come.



Breaking News from Mike and Pam

A Bar-tailed Godwit made a non-stop flight from Alaska to New Zealand. It took 11 days to fly 12,200 km. Wow!!

