Shuswap Naturalist Club Newsletter
September 2022

This newsletter begins with the Western Grebe count. The first record of grebes in the Salmon Arm Bay was in 1950 when 100 grebes were counted. Nesting was first observed in 1962, and the first detailed reporting began in 1990 by Frank and Doris Kime. Ed and Monica Dahl took over from them and continued for eight years until 2016, when Di Wittner took on the task.

The success of the grebe nesting has remained fairly consistent, but it is important that we continue to be in vigilant in caring for the foreshore.

Western Grebe Count –
report by Di Wittner

Date of count: August 15, 2022
Start time: 7:10 am, End time: 10:15 am

Viewing Location	Adults	Young of the year
Raven	7	3
Christmas Island (north end)	84	48
Beaver boardwalk	113	27
Wharf	45	42
Peter Janninck Park	52	24
Sandy Point	16	3
Tappen Bay	14	4
Sunnybrae Park	3	0
Sunnybrae winery	0	0
Totals	334	151

Notes:

- Excellent counting conditions: calm water, good light, no boat activity
- Total count: **485** (Due to wide variation in juvenile ages, a few of the adults that were counted as 'adults' could have been older juveniles.)
- Note adult count at end of May was 315

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Growing success of the Heronry

It is gratifying to see how the heronry near Shoemaker Hill, now in its fifth year, has continued to become more successful each year.

We estimate the number of newly hatched Great Blue Heron in the heronry by counting the number of empty shells to be found under the trees. This year's number was 89, five more than last year.

Glynn Green photo

Speaking of Turtles – by Di Wittner

On June 19th, six club members enjoyed a wonderful afternoon at Niskonlith Lake where we learned a lot about painted turtles. Our hosts were Shirley and Peter Ballin who have a breath-taking property right on the shoreline. Peter has been researching turtles in the area since 2011, collecting data on weight, size, gender and more. He attaches small tracking devices to the outer edge of a turtle's carapace to monitor its movements. Who knew a turtle could 4-wheel-drive up a vertical slope? Or that they would wander three or four kilometers in search of food, habitat, or a mate?

Peter gives us a close up of a turtle he's been tracking – Cathy Meakes photo

Peter shared marvelous stories about watching turtles swim under winter ice. He has observed males fighting with competitors and showed us how to identify a turtle nest. They're invisible to the untrained eye! Two of Peter's research turtles were captured for data collection just prior to our arrival. After our departure, they would be released back into the lake.

We thank the Kamloops club for the invite. It was definitely worth the drive!

Up close view of the pattern on a turtle's plastron - Gillian Richardson photo

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Mystery of the Missing Leg

Glynne Green observed this Long-billed Dowitcher near the mouth of the Salmon River. It had lost one leg but seemed content just hopping around searching for food.

This sighting brought to mind a story of the Ancient Murrelets. In 2004 an Ancient Murrelet was seen in the Salmon Arm Bay area, a very unusual sighting since this bird belongs in the ocean. A friend, who had worked in Haida Gwaii where these birds nest, told me that they were interested in learning more about what took place after the murrelet left the nest. To help the study they attached a red band around one leg. When the birds returned to the island it was noticed that a few of the birds were missing a leg. It was determined that the red band was acting as a lure for salmon. This, of course, was not the case with the dowitcher since it does not swim but wades in water. Could it have been bitten by a turtle? We can only surmise.

Ancient Murrelet

Wasps are an Enigma - Hanne MacKay

Many people wonder why we have wasps. What is their purpose in the whole scheme of things? I was speaking with Di Wittner about this. Wasps will eat the little green worms on cabbage plants and they eat mosquitoes.

At the beginning of July, I noticed some strange activity in and around my most popular swallow birdhouse. It looked like something was draping cloth all around the birdhouse but there were no birds. Then I realized it was paper wasps that were building a huge nest that was enveloping the birdhouse!!! Nature is so amazing!

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Work Bee at Blackburn Park, June 10

Thank you to the group that came out to dig out, replant and mulch the trees and shrubs. Another work bee is planned for the fall. Stay tuned for the details.

Here is Joyce Henderson, on her knees, replanting, as she continues to work on this project.

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Thank you Dorothy -

Dorothy Parks has been maintaining our simple but informative website www.shuswapnaturalists.org for the last 12 years and is now eager to hand this over.

She and Don joined the Shuswap Naturalist Club soon after they moved to Salmon Arm in 1998. Over the last 24 years, Dorothy has been active in many aspects of the Club, and we are grateful for these contributions.

With her love of nature and her wish to explore her new surroundings, she enjoyed participating in club outings. By 2004, she was responsible for organizing the spring and fall outings program, and she continued to do this until 2013.

In 2011, the Club published an updated bird checklist which includes all locally recorded species, indicating their abundance and frequency. Dorothy designed the checklist and did the data entry, based on input from other club members. Using information provided by Ted Hillary, she keeps the list up to date, to better prepare for the day we may wish to publish a new list.

Dorothy has been a director for several years. Some of her other club activities include serving on the organizing committees for the BC Nature 2005 and 2014 conferences which the Club hosted. She was responsible for registration and designing the printed programs. She helped obtain financing to print a series of five posters depicting the birds in a shared Salmon Arm Bay habitat, designing an attractive brochure to accompany them. She helped select Thompson Rivers University Natural Resource Science program as a suitable one to place our academic award and she remains our contact person with them.

If you are interested in taking over the website (software of your own choosing), please let us know.

Blast from the Past -

by Gillian Richardson, club historian

If you've been a little confused lately about the location of our Naturalist Club meetings, it's okay. Blame COVID! Now that we are beginning a new year of Club meetings at Salmon Arm Senior Secondary Library, here's a little history lesson using details in our archives:

The first monthly meetings of SNC, in 1970-71, were held in JL Jackson Secondary School Library. After a couple of meetings at the United Church, and then Okanagan College, by 1979 the regular venue became a classroom in Salmon Arm Senior Secondary. One noted exception shows up in the April 1985 minutes, when the group met once at the United Church and Secretary Wendy Hooke wrote: "*High school closed for Easter Break. This is a much more pleasant meeting place than the school.*" During 1997-2000, we met at Shuswap Junior Secondary in a classroom. Then, the group found a permanent meeting site in the new library at Salmon Arm Senior Secondary (SASS).

For a change of scenery beginning in 1986, June meetings were held at the home of Doris and Frank Kime, and usually included a pot luck dinner. Here's a note from the minutes of June 3, 1986: "*The last meeting of the season was held at the home of Doris and Frank Kime in Sunnybrae. It was a beautiful warm day.... Early in the afternoon about 10 people joined Frank in a leisurely walk about Sunnybrae. Thirty-three people enjoyed a bountiful pot luck supper which was eaten outside on the lawn and porch to the accompaniment of the orioles and swallows. Very pleasant.*" On another occasion, a trail hike near Frank's home produced "*a lazuli bunting sitting in plain view out on a limb*." *(both notes by Wendy Hooke).* This practice continued until about 1997; thereafter June meetings were held variously at Ed and Marlene McDonald's home, the Sunnybrae Centre, and Barb and Ted Hillary's garden.

First potluck in the new shelter in Peter Jannink Park. Pictured here are Tom Brighouse, Jack and Cathy Gillick, Frank and Doris Kime, and Eric Grayston.

In 2004, we began meeting for a pot luck dinner at Peter Jannink Park, dedicated to Peter who passed away in 2003. We've met there ever since, (COVID permitting).

How did the September meetings come to be held in Sunnybrae Provincial Park? In the minutes of August 21, 2001, I found this note: "*Fall Meeting - Pot Luck. It was suggested the venue (SASS) be changed to Sunnybrae Provincial Park and it be a pot luck. If the weather is inclement, we will rent the Sunnybrae hall. A short meeting will begin at 11 AM, with a nature walk and pot luck to follow.*" So a new tradition began with the September 11 lunchtime meeting..."*where members enjoyed a warm, sunny day.*" Once again, we'll begin our schedule of SNC meetings in 2022/23 with this Sunnybrae gathering. Pack a lunch, and see you there!

P.S. Regular meetings are back to the **first Tuesday of the month, 7 pm**, after a brief switch (blame COVID

Report on H5N1 in the Bay –

by Di Wittner

In mid-June birders and beach-goers started talking about seeing odd behaviours in geese around the wharf. Reports went to the Brighouse Nature Centre staff about goslings swimming in circles. Since H5N1, a variant of the avian flu, had already been confirmed in several locations throughout BC, it was natural to be concerned the virus may have reached our shores.

I asked BNC staff to keep an eye out for sick-looking birds in the hopes I could get a fresh sample for testing. Unfortunately, for one such Canada goose, I got that sample July 9th which I submitted for testing immediately.

Due to the backlog of samples created by an unusually high number of cases – both domestic and wild – the result took some time in coming. In the meantime, I suggested that anyone who saw a sick bird contact me ASAP and avoid direct contact. H5N1 is zoonotic (i.e. can be passed to humans) so it is important to avoid handling without full awareness of potential risks and personal protective equipment (PPE).

I received the preliminary results August 17th but was asked to 'sit on it' by government authorities until the results could be reviewed and approved. Since I was going away for ten days, I agreed to do so. As of August 30th, I still haven't received the go-ahead but I consider the delay irresponsible so I'm sharing with club members. As I suspected the goose tested positive for H5N1.

It's important to know there are several strains of avian flu, many of which have been around for a long time and pose little overall threat to avian populations or to people. How this variant will affect birds in the Shuswap or BC is unknown at this time. I have heard some 'talk' from locals who commented on dead birds being picked up by authorities and other birds from Salmon Arm having tested positive, but it's all hearsay at this point. In my discussion with wildlife health authorities, the single goose I submitted is the ONLY one tested here so far though it should be noted, authorities aren't always forthcoming and test results can take a long time to become public. Since the virus is easily transmitted, especially among flocking waterfowl, I think we can safely assume there have been and will continue to be others.

Clinical signs are readily spotted up close which is useful for poultry farmers but not much use for wild birds. The following are symptoms we can observe from a distance:

- Torticollis (neck twisting)
- Ataxia (difficulty with balance and coordination)
- Swimming in tight circles incessantly

Despite one vague account from a man who claims he saw a number of dead grebes near the shore, our grebes seem to have weathered the worst of it so far. During my count in August, grebe numbers seemed stable. (I will attempt to count again in a couple of weeks.) There were also plenty of healthy geese, both swimming and in the air. I have no information at this time about H5N1's effect on local songbirds, raptors, or shorebirds.

If you are thinking about submitting a dead bird for testing, please be careful. H5N1 has a higher mortality rate in humans than Covid-19. Samples can go to the Kamloops Wildlife Park where they are picked up and sent to the lab in Abbotsford. Carcasses should be double-bagged and frozen. Above all, they must be fresh, meaning expired less than a day.

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"Wildlife can only be protected by the love of compassionate hearts."
Mehmet Murat Ildan

Along with giving a presentation at one of our meetings, Mitch has taken us on a number of inspiring and informative outings. He has now joined our naturalist club and is continuing his willingness to share. We thank him for this piece. You will enjoy it.

Is it Safe to Eat? - by Mitch Milgram

People are interested in wild mushrooms for a variety of reasons. Some are attracted by their beauty, others by their novelty and mystery. Some like to photograph them, while others use them as natural dyes for fabrics. For a growing number of people, the medicinal properties of mushrooms are drawing more and more attention. However, it's the appeal of harvesting and eating wild mushrooms that's attracting most people to the woods and fields. When I lead a group into the woods I'm always bombarded with the question, "Is it safe to eat?" There's not an easy answer to this question. However, before addressing this question, here's a bit of context.

Angel Wings Pleurocybella porrigens

Most reports of mushroom poisoning are the results of overindulgence (especially of raw mushrooms), allergic reactions, and food poisoning from the eating of rotten mushrooms. Though there are poisonous mushrooms, there are not that many that are dangerous. The poisonous toxins come in a variety of forms. Most "poisonous" mushrooms will give you nausea and/or gastrointestinal distress, to varying degrees. Some poisonous mushrooms will give you hot flashes and sweats. Most hallucinogenic mushrooms are considered poisonous mushrooms. But anyone collecting and consuming wild mushrooms needs to be aware that there are some truly dangerous mushrooms, with toxins such as Amatoxin and Orellanine. These mushrooms could kill you. The good news is, as stated previously, is that there aren't that many of this type, and with proper guidance and observation a person should have no difficulty avoiding them. The fact is that as far as edibility goes, many wild mushrooms are often unappealing, bland, or simply just don't taste good. However, this doesn't, and shouldn't, deter a person from experiencing the excitement of collecting and eating wild mushrooms, and there are numerous types that are easy to identify and tasty. Here are some things to consider.

Have you made a positive identification? This can be difficult, as there are thousands of different mushrooms, many of which look very similar, especially to the novice. In the excitement of collecting, many people will "shoehorn" their mysterious find into a likely identity, wishfully thinking it matches the picture they've settled on in their guidebook. A close relative of mine fell prey to this. He has some limited experience collecting wild mushrooms. While a guest at a cottage north of Toronto a few summers ago he was keen to impress his hosts with his foraging skills. The weather was hot and dry, mushrooms were scarce. When he chanced upon an attractive group of Bolete mushrooms, he took them back to the cottage, cooked them up and served his wife and hosts. They didn't taste very good, so all except my relative, just had a taste. All except my relative were mildly ill a couple of hours later. My relative, not wanting to show reluctance had a sizable portion and was violently and seriously ill, all night. He recovered the next day but learned his lesson. In questioning him afterwards I was baffled to know what he was

thinking. He knew not to eat anything unless he'd made a positive identification. His best response was, "I just wanted to eat some wild mushrooms".

The answer to whether a mushroom is edible or not can be hazy at times. Is it usually tolerated by most people? For example, consider Morels. Morels are one of the most popular and most collected wild mushrooms. They're sold around the world both fresh and dried. Yet ten percent of people are made ill by them. An acquaintance fed them to her family, everyone enjoyed them, but her son was ill afterwards. Unfazed, she served them again the following evening, and once again her son was ill. Likely he's among the ten percent. A rule of thumb when trying a new wild mushroom is to just have a small portion the first time. Additionally, to be safe with new varieties, eat them separately the first time.

When collecting for the table make sure the mushrooms come from a wholesome environment. Mushrooms can act like sponges, absorbing nutrients from the soil, but that same ability means they are also very good at absorbing toxic heavy metals. They're so good at this that people are experimenting using them for the remediation of polluted landsites, such as mine tailings. Don't collect mushrooms from sites such as beside a busy roadway, where they can be absorbing pollutants, or from a lawn that gets sprayed with insecticides.

Ensure that the mushrooms you intend to eat are unspoiled. You might be thinking, "Why even mention this, it's obvious." However, I'm surprised at how undiscerning people can be on occasion. They're so excited to have found an edible variety of mushroom that they are willing to ignore the rotten spots and larvae damage, things they'd never consider taking home from the supermarket.

A basic rule of thumb is to cook wild mushrooms. Most mycologists feel all mushrooms should be cooked, including the common white button mushrooms from the supermarket. An incident a few years ago illustrates this. A cook preparing for a banquet in Vancouver was given fresh morels. Not being familiar with them he chopped them up and added them raw to the salad. Scores of people from the banquet ended up in the hospital with severe abdominal pain and upsets. Some mushrooms are very mildly toxic, but cooking will neutralize any harmful tendencies.

Are you basically healthy? If your immune system is compromised be cautious, because as mentioned above, some wild mushrooms can have low levels of harmful compounds. To illustrate this, and at the same time to go back to an earlier statement that it's sometimes not easy to answer definitively whether a mushroom is safe to eat, here's a cautionary tale. There's a common mushroom named "angels wings", Pleurocybella porrigens. For many years it was considered (and is still considered by many) to be a good edible mushroom. Many mushroom guidebooks around still list it as such. However, fairly recently it was blamed for multiple deaths among a group of elderly Japanese men, all of whom were on dialysis.

Angel Wings

A final thing to remember is moderation. Many reports of mushroom poisoning are actually instances of overindulgence. Again, sometimes the excitement of a large haul of choice edibles can influence people's better judgement. Most times the worst effect is a transitory case of gastrointestinal upset. However, rarely, the consequences can be far worse. There's another common mushroom whose status has recently been re-evaluated, the "Man on Horseback", Tricholoma equestre. As mentioned previously, it, too, was considered a popular and desirable edible mushroom, and it, too, is listed in some older guides as such. But not that long ago there were huge fruitings of it in France. People ate large quantities day

after day. Shortly afterwards there were reports of deaths, assumed to be the result of the rapid accumulation of low levels of toxins.

Man-On-Horseback
Tricholoma equestre -
previously considered safe,
now deemed unsafe

Having considered all these factors you might be thinking, "Do I want to eat wild mushrooms?" This is good. You should be cautious. As the saying goes, "If in doubt, throw it out". If you want to try eating wild mushrooms, go with someone knowledgeable in the subject and use caution. Then enjoy the experience, because there are many safe and easy to identify mushrooms to be found, and because it can be a truly engaging and exciting pursuit.

The webpage Mushrooms Up provides pictures and information on many of BC's edible and poisonous mushrooms at https://www.zoology.ubc.ca/~biodiv/mushroom/.

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Artistic talent runs in the family -

Clive Bryson shares his 22-year-old granddaughter's art work which is based on his photos. Lexi Bryson is showing her talent using both oil brush and pencil.

Oil painting of a Red-winged Bluebird

Pencil drawing of a Great Blue Heron