

Shuswap Naturalist Club Newsletter

January 2023

"I heard a bird sing in December. We are nearer to Spring than we were in September."
Oliver Herford



Ted Hillary has provided us with a wonderful detailed account of the Christmas Bird Count. This is backed up by the numerous members who shared their Christmas Bird Count experience.

Mitch Milgram gives us another reason to look forward to spring, the Morel Mushroom.

We thank all those members who continue to contribute to this newsletter.

This Long-eared Owl, seen bird count week.

Christmas Bird Count 2022

by Ted Hillary

Our annual Salmon Arm Christmas Bird Count was held on Sunday December 18. It was a bone-chilling cold day with temperatures ranging from minus 12 degrees to minus 16 degrees. And it was windy, with gusts in some places at times almost up to gale force. All participants were very glad of their winter woolies! It was overcast with ice fog over the areas of the lake which were not frozen over.

The 32 participants were in 13 parties mostly in groups of two to four. There were 463 kilometers covered in vehicles for a total of 42.25 hours. In addition, participants on foot covered 15.3 kilometers in 12 hours and 5 minutes.

A total of 62 species were seen, two fewer than last year; an additional three were seen during count week. This is our lowest count ever, considerably below our average of about 75. The total number of birds seen was 5449, also one of our lowest counts ever. The early cold weather, with much of the lake frozen over, would be a contributing factor.

There were some very notable sightings. For the first time on all our counts a snow goose was seen, flying with mallards west of the wharf. This bird was present for a couple of days feeding with mallards in front of the Prestige Inn. A hermit thrush was seen flying in South Canoe. This close relative of a robin has only been counted on three previous counts, the last time in 2003. A long-eared owl was spotted on the Kime Trail on December 17, the first time one has been seen in the count period since 2008.

The most common species was the mallard with 1189 birds scattered over our entire area. Trailing in second place were dark-eyed juncos with 818 birds. The 534 Bohemian waxwings, the 497 rock pigeons, and the 390 European starlings were not nearly as numerous as usual. Only five Canada geese were seen when usually there are many hundreds.

The varied thrush did put on a show for count participants. A total of 253 were seen scattered all over our area. The previous high count was in 2005 when 44 birds were seen. I do not know why it should be such a great year for thrushes. Perhaps the early cold weather brought them here from the north. There are lots of ash berries and other berries for them to eat which may explain why there are staying here.

Also, a record 127 California quail were seen. The previous high was in 2017 when 114 birds were seen. The quail are a dry land bird which have been increasing in numbers here as it is becoming drier and the winters are generally warmer with less snow. The quail have been taking over the habitat of the ring-necked pheasants which have slowly been decreasing in numbers; only 19 were seen in this year's count.

Some of our sparrows showed up in record numbers. The 818 juncos broke the previous record of 387 set in 2016. There were 29 spotted towhees which shattered our previous record of eight set in 2020. The number of song sparrows was 119, a bit higher than our previous record of 97 seen in 2021. Perhaps the numbers of feeders and the availability of food in urban areas can account for these numbers.

I would like to give a big thanks to everyone who participated in this count and braved the frigid weather. Without your help the count could not happen.

Listed below are the species seen and their numbers:

Snow goose 1	Eared grebe 2	American crow 366
Canada goose 5	Great blue heron 1	Black-capped chickadee 160
Trumpeter swan 35	Northern harrier 1	Red-breasted nuthatch 16
Gadwall 8	Cooper's hawk 2	American dipper 2
American widgeon 6	Bald eagle 34	Ruby-crowned kinglet 3
Mallard 1189	Red-tailed hawk 17	Hermit thrush 1
Northern pintail 1	Ring-billed gull 1	American robin 107
Green-winged teal 2	Rock pigeon 497	Varied thrush 253
Ring-necked duck 6	Eurasian collared-dove 90	European starling 390
Greater scaup 34	Great horned owl 1	Bohemian waxwing 534
Lesser scaup 23	Long-eared owl CW	Dark-eyed junco 818
Bufflehead 5	Short-eared owl CW	White-crowned sparrow 1
Common goldeneye 35	Belted kingfisher 1	White-throated sparrow 5
Hooded merganser 6	Downy woodpecker 7	Song sparrow 119
Common merganser 6	Hairy woodpecker 2	Spotted towhee 29
California quail 127	Pileated woodpecker 9	Red-winged blackbird 11
Ring-necked pheasant 19	American kestrel 4	House finch 119
Ruffed grouse 2	Merlin 1	Red crossbill 2
Common loon 1	Northern shrike 3	American goldfinch 19
Pied-billed grebe 1	Steller's jay 3	House sparrow 44
Red-necked grebe CW	Black-billed magpie 57	

* * * * *

A Christmas Carol Bird Count:

*How many birds do we sing about in the Twelve Days of Christmas?
No prize, but maybe surprise!*

Christmas Bird Count - Hanne MacKay reports

Janet Aitken photos

In -17C weather, with blowing snow, four intrepid teams went out in their assigned quadrants on Sunday, December 18.

Pat Danforth, Geoff Styles, Janet Aitken and Hanne MacKay set off at 7:30 am in the SE quadrant on Black Road, travelling up into Larch Hills and along Edgar Road. Then we ventured down into Grindrod, along Grandview Bench Road and then along Riverside Road toward Mara Lake. In the afternoon, it warmed up to -12C.

Highlights were the amazing number of Varied Thrushes - nineteen in all!



We saw two Northern Shrikes in the Mara Lake area.

A Cooper's Hawk, four Red Tailed Hawks, a Merlin and two American Kestrels all looked hungry as they scoured the fields for mice or songbirds. A flock of 62 Bohemian Waxwings were feasting on Rowanberries.

The most notable sightings of the day were found at bird feeders where we saw three White - Throated Sparrows amongst the Oregon Juncos.

Hot chocolate and Emily's amazing Chocolate Ginger Shortbread made the day very memorable! We all agreed that the Christmas Bird Count is like a Giant Scavenger Hunt in Nature. It is a wonderful experience because you get to work in a group and you always learn a lot from each other. You also see birds that you may not have seen before. A huge Thank You to Ted Hillary for organizing the day.

* * * * *

Ken Raynor shares these photos from Bird Count Day.



Bohemian Waxwings



Trumpeter Swans

The North West Quadrant

- Gillian Richardson reports

Seven brave souls, divided into three groups, faced the biting winds to survey the NW segment for our bird count. In spite of the cold, Gillian, Trevor, Sandra and Bob took the plunge and tramped through Herald Park. As usual, it wasn't too productive for birds...a few chickadees mocking us, I think. I did hear a bright chirp—only twice, so Merlin wasn't able to help. It could have been the Townsend's Solitaire we always hope to find in this area, but we didn't see it.



We did see some rather large (3-4 inches) animal tracks, though. Speculation: big dog? Cougar? The latter was more exciting, so we kept our eyes peeled just in case. No sighting, of course.

Along the lakeshore just west of the Herald Park gate, we did spot an American Dipper. We haven't found one here for several years, so that was our prize sighting. And too many Varied Thrush and Junco to be believed!

Ed reports that their favourite sighting was this *Roughed Grouse*, walking just off the Tappen Valley Road.



* * * * *

Paulette Bouvier's photos of the day.

Trumpeter Swan



Downy Woodpecker



Ring-necked Pheasant



Spring Morels - by Mitchell Milgram

I like to collect wild mushrooms and have been doing so for close to 45 years. My focus is on taxonomy, identifying the genus and species, and recording the multitudes that occur throughout interior BC. If on occasion I chance upon a prime fruiting of some choice edibles, such as oyster mushrooms or white chanterelles, I'll bring them home to eat. However, when it comes to morels, I have a different perspective.

There is some confusion as to the number of morel species. In the recent past (30 years or so ago) most field guides would direct you to 'blacks' (*Morchella elata*), 'blonds' (*Morchella esculenta*) or 'greys' (*Morchella tomentosa*). However, now the whole mycological world is somewhat in flux as mushroom species are renamed and reclassified with the new knowledge gained by DNA sequencing. Presently, many field guides list a dozen or more species, many of which are difficult to separate macroscopically. Regardless, all of the 'true' morels are edible. Morels are

often classified as being either naturally occurring, that is, appearing in forests or gardens randomly each spring, or as 'burn' morels.

For years morels held no more importance to me than most other mushrooms. Then one day about 20 years ago, a friend suggested we pick morels following the McClure Lake wildfires northeast of Kamloops. It opened up a whole new world. Here along the back logging roads, we came across scattered



encampments of mushroom pickers, some casual like ourselves while others were serious commercial pickers. There was a 'wild west' atmosphere to some of these encampments, reminiscent of historical mining boom towns complete with makeshift stores, restaurants, bars, and buying stations. Some buying stations could be as simple as a folding trestle table with scales and baskets for the morels. Others were more sophisticated with large tents, diesel powered fans and mobile drying racks. In keeping with the unregulated atmosphere, here everything was strictly cash.

My friend and I picked for an hour or two, then I hesitantly approached one of the buyers with my collection. The buyer looked at my haul. With a snort of disgust, he discarded some dirty or defective morels, flinging them aside. He then weighed the rest and paid me. I don't recall how much it was, perhaps \$40 or \$50, but I was very excited. Imagine, getting paid to do what I love doing.

Since then, I've been picking morels each spring. Morels occur naturally throughout the interior of BC, generally appearing in late April and for a few weeks till mid-June, depending upon the elevation. Morels are generally elusive. You can go looking for them and find none, or, if you know to look for habitats with poplar and aspen trees and sandy well drained soil your chances are better. But the exception to these hard to find 'naturally occurring' morels are the burn morels that my friend and I picked.

For reasons not fully understood, the spring following a forest fire there can be a massive fruiting of morels. Perhaps it's the infusion of carbon into the soil. Or perhaps, like a flowering plant growing under stressful conditions and producing an extra vigorous floral display and seeds, the mycelial mass producing the morels fruits prolifically to enhance spore production. Whatever the reason, as long as

the moisture, soil type and temperature conditions are right, large quantities of morels can be harvested.

My most memorable morel season was about 12 years ago, picking the Notch Hill fire site west of Salmon Arm. With a couple of enthusiastic coworkers, I was directed to a secret 'backdoor' to the fire site, an obscure and not easily accessible way to get to the burn. Hiking in about a kilometer and avoiding the antagonistic chicken farmer along the way, we'd scrambled over the wall of debris bulldozed up to form the fire guard and immediately started finding and picking morels. Equipped with large backpacks containing pails, and a large bucket in each hand, we slowly worked our way up the mountainside. The morels would appear in clumps and 'runs', and not wanting to miss any we'd strategize, mapping out a route that would maximize efficiency. We'd work in a line, one person working high, one low, one in between. The quiet and somber burnt forest would periodically echo with exclamations of excitement as we came across particularly large groups of morels. After a few hours we had 40-50 pounds each, as much as we could carry, and then we'd make our way back to the vehicles, dirty, sweaty, tired, but elated.

We returned to that site every few days for the following 5 or 6 weeks, each time having to hike deeper into the forest and higher up the mountainside to find fresh ground. As the season progressed different morel species appeared. By the end of June, the morels stopped fruiting.

Other than the very first time when I sold my morels freshly picked to a buyer, if I'm able to collect enough morels I'll dry them and sell them in the off season when the prices can be higher. Morels are easy to dry. Being hollow inside they dry quickly. Check them first for bugs and discard any that are infested. You may have to slice some open to make a proper determination. Simply lay them out on old window screens and dry them in the sun, or with a fan. As long as they are bone dry, they'll keep for years. When collecting keep them clean, slicing them off at the base and keeping dirt and debris out of the collection.



If you do plan to try eating morels remember that all wild mushrooms should be cooked beforehand. Is there anything poisonous that you might confuse with morels? Possibly. There are numerous fungi going under the title '**false morel**', some appearing at the same time and location as the true morels. Fungi in the genus **Gyromitra** can confuse novice collectors, so until you have become familiar with the true morels, caution is advised.

Each summer I closely monitor and record local forest fires for the following spring's picking. I'll download fire perimeter maps off the BC Wildfire Site and try to gather information about the topography and access. Some sites are too difficult to access. Some are too high, in sparse alpine wilderness. Some are too dry and exposed, or the soil is too thin. Often, despite maps and GPS assistance the fire sites can be hard to find amongst the ever-changing logging spur roads. More than once I've travelled hours to get to a site, only to find few or no morels because the conditions were too poor. However, when the conditions line up, when the burn is not so hot that it kills the mycelium, when it's a light burn that has left some standing live trees and there's a patchily burned edge to work, then an exciting pick can be had.

There's the old saying that we have to be careful of what we wish for. Most summers as I watch the occurrence of fires I do so with anticipation of morel picking the following spring. However, the devastating fires we've had in the last few years, with all their accompanying smoke and disruption, gives me pause. I'll still hope for some burn morels, just not as extreme as we've recently experienced.

On Fungi - Colin Spence shares

My sister sent me a link to a YouTube video from a photographer who been on a decades long journey learning about fungi. He has produced a wonderful documentary with great photography, compelling natural history notes, and an important message at end for those who care to watch the whole thing. [\(128\) Stephen Axford: How fungi changed my view of the world - YouTube](#)

* * * * *

A note from Gardom Lake

- Liz Winters writes

The Gardom Lake Stewardship Society has really appreciated the support and enthusiasm of the members of the Shuswap Naturalists.

We've just completed an expansion of the wetland on Musgrave Road. We've been able to incorporate Upper Gardom Creek into the wetland providing more filtration for the water in the creek before it reaches Gardom Lake.

A group from your club visited the wetland after our first round of excavation in September 2022. In late October 2022, we did a little more excavating, added turtle basking logs, planted indigenous trees, seeded with a riparian mix, mulched with straw and relocated the BCWF water staff gauge and trail cam.

When the weather became cold, we settled in to compile a Summary Report and start planning for our ongoing phase 2 projects. Please contact us, www.gardomlakestewards.org, if you have questions or concerns or if you would like any further information or clarifications regarding the Summary Report. *(This report is being sent out separately.)*

We look forward to visiting with a Shuswap Naturalist group at the wetland in 2023.

* * * * *

Looking forward to Earth Day

- an invitation from Janet Pattinson

The Shuswap Climate Action group are making plans to celebrate Earth Day on April 22, 2023. We are hoping to promote the planting of deciduous trees and bushes especially in urban areas to fit with the recommendations of the Fire Smart program. We also hope to collaborate with some of the garden centres in the community in this project. If anyone has any suggestions for us or would like to join in this project, please contact either Julia Beatty or Janet Pattinson.

* * * * *

Barn Owl Box

- built by Ken Raynor

What a beautiful owl box! Di Wittner writes that she has been scouting for poles along the foreshore and has found several perfectly good poles, washed up, there for the taking. She will have a custom-built bracket made to attach the box to the top of the pole.

Now we'll see who takes the box – a Wood Duck maybe?



Membership Dues for 2023

Your membership fees, \$25 for single or \$30 for family, include membership in BC Nature, the BC Nature magazine plus our club's liability insurance. The club keeps about \$5 from a single and \$10 from a family membership. **Ted Hillary reminds us that for most of us our dues are now due.** You can pay this either in person at our next meeting or send your money to Ted via mail.

Shuswap Naturalist Club Membership Renewal Form

1740 16th St. NE, Salmon Arm, BC, V1E 3Z7

Name/names: _____

Address: _____

Telephone: _____ Email Address: _____

Membership Type: [] Family (\$30) [] Single (\$25)

Past Club Executive and Directors (2022)

President: vacant

Janet Aitken

Dorothy Parks

Vice-President: vacant

Pat Hutchins

Janet Pattinson

Past President: Ed McDonald

Sharon Lawless

Colin Spence

Treasurer: Ted Hillary

Secretary: Gillian Richardson

Current Club Committees

Programs: Anne Caughlin

Membership: Ted Hillary

Communications: Ken Raynor

BC Nature Director: Di Wittner

Website: Dorothy Parks

BC Nature e-news reporter:

Gillian Richardson

Newsletter: Ed and Marlene McDonald

FaceBook Page: Fern Fennel

Historian: Gillian Richardson

Coffee Conveners: Pam Saul, Pat Turner

Award /Bursary:

Dorothy Parks, Janet Pattinson

SABNES: Janet Aitken (Pres.)

Grebe Count: Di Wittner

Bird House Project: Di Wittner

Christmas Bird Count: Ted Hillary

Songbird Committee:

Janet Aitken, Pat Danforth,

Gillian Richardson, Pat Turner,

Di Wittner, Isobel Anderson (advisor)

Bluebird Trail: Fern Fennel

Weedpull Project:

Janet Aitken, Ed McDonald

District Environment Committee:

Janet Pattinson

Naturalist Trail: Greg Wiebe

Outings Committee: Pat Danforth,

Hanne MacKay, Dawn McDonald

Young Naturalists: Molly Cooperman

Larch Hills Interpretive Trail:

Pat Danforth, Dawn McDonald

Anne Caughlan

Blackburn Park Tree Project:

Joyce Henderson

How many birds do we sing about
in the 12 Days of Christmas? - 23

shared by Trevor Richardson

