

November 2023 Newsletter

Again, thank you to all who are contributing to our club and to nature in general, and thank you to everyone who contributes to these newsletters.

"The achievements of a club are the results of the combined effort of each individual."

Vince Lombardi

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Ultimate Habitat Engineers Return to the Foreshore

- by Di Wittner

Anyone strolling along the foreshore this fall is sure to have noticed the industrious activities taking place at the beaver pond. Back in May, I noticed evidence to suggest a beaver was in the area so, with SABNES permission, I made a few trees 'available' in the hopes the beaver(s) would have reason to stick around. Just three days after removing wire from half a dozen trees, the first poplar came down.

Over three work bees, I freed 25-30 trees but there are still dozens encased in wire. Barb and Ken have been faithfully monitoring and reporting back as 'another one bites the dust'.

It's difficult to tell whether the activities are the work of one beaver or a mated pair but the changes are tangible already. The pond was choked with vegetation prior to the beaver's return; now there are open channels with improved water flow, not to mention a gradual clearing of the pond itself. Habitat created by beavers increases biodiversity so it will be fascinating to watch the changes, as long as we can keep the beavers safe from human interference.

I don't have to tell members of our club about the many ecological benefits engineered by beavers and how pleasing it is to see their return. This past summer, hundreds of trees have been taken down by humans in this city, destroying habitat in the process. Several areas that were forested last spring are now concrete, slag, and raw dirt. At least when a beaver takes down a tree, it is *creating* habitat rather than destroying it.



Over a 2-3 week period, this large poplar was whittled away at until it made a safe landing across the waters of the pond.

Barb Raynor photo

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Frances Backhouse in Once They Were Hats, *In Search of the Mighty Beaver*, says: "With North America facing a multifaceted water crisis – flash floods here, multi-year droughts there, growing uncertainty everywhere, we, and many other species, need beavers as a moderating force more than ever. Never mind being faster than a speeding bullet, more powerful than a locomotive or able to leap tall buildings in a single bound. The Mighty Beaver is a superhero in its own inimitable way.

A Perfect Autumn Morning

- by John Woods

After one of the toughest summers for enjoying the outdoors that anyone remembers, our club outing to Christmas Island on October 5th was a joy. Blue skies, clean air, fair winds, 33 species of birds and good company made it a day to remember!

Outing leaders John and Marcia Woods and six other club members had birds constantly in view, or by ear, as we strolled down the Raven Trail enjoying the autumn colours. Sharing views through a spotting scope gave us some wonderfully close looks at a Lapland Longspur sitting on the shoreline mud at Christmas Island. The scope also allowed us to pick through a large raft of offshore ducks—surprisingly composed mostly of American Wigeon with a smattering of Redhead, Ring-necked Ducks, Lesser Scaup, Gadwall and Bufflehead. A single Western Grebe looked lonely as it swam in the bay.

One of most memorable moments came when a group of 14 American White Pelicans gave us an airshow as they slowly beat their way by us in a formation made perfect with brilliant sunshine on their white and black plumage.

You can see our eBird list from the outing at:
<https://ebird.org/checklist/S151492690>.

Marcia Woods, Colin Spence, Marlene McDonald, Anne Caughlin, Isabell Elden, Gillian Richardson and Marie Fortin. John Woods was holding the camera!



Greater Yellowlegs



Ring-billed Gull

Isabell Elden's photos from the day -



House Finch





Lesser Scaup -
can you tell how it differs from
a Greater Scaup?

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Nest Box Bonanza - Di Wittner

The first nest box clean-out in July suggested we might be looking at a disastrous year for the swallows. The opposite turned out to be true. Basically, swallows scrapped for cavities, taking advantage of any hole they could find, including owl boxes, duck boxes, pileated cavities, and flicker boxes.

Just when I thought we were establishing a rough baseline of 90% occupancy with 60% success, 2023 resulted in 95% occupancy with nearly 79% success! Of 103 boxes (one went missing from the original 104), only 5 remained empty. Two of those 5 have been unused since they were first erected - as long as you don't count spiders - so they've been moved to an area that I hope will be more attractive to birds. There were 11 double nests and one triple nest, the latter comprising three different species!

The highest-ever species count in past years was 7, recorded in 2022. This year we had 8, with Buffleheads using one of the boxes for the first time.

Wood ducks did very well. Not only did they nest along the foreshore, Werner discovered they had nested in both boxes on the Cress Creek trail.

Bluebirds also had a good year. By the time summer ended, there were bluebirds galore in the area of Peterson's Orchard. The hard-working pair in box #7 were raising their second batch in early July. Fern and I were regaled with soft calls and flashes of blue all along the fence line.

Though the barn owls did not occupy the lovely house constructed by Ken, a pair of swallows were quite happy to take advantage of the extra room, constructing a nest in one corner of it. I saw swallows sitting smugly in the entrance hole in May and wondered if they were serious. Apparently, they were!

One of the duck boxes was occupied by a mystery species that left a thick layer of filthy black shavings behind. There were no eggs and nothing resembling a nest. I suspect the occupant was a mammal, likely one that used the box as a hidey-hole or temporary den. A swallow box was also used late in the summer by rats that attempted to raise a litter of four. Note I say 'attempted'.

The total number of fledged avian broods was 77. Of those 56 were either Violet Green or Tree swallows, the latter comprising the majority. Other species included Black Capped chickadee (11), House wren (1), Northern flicker (1), Mountain bluebird (4), Wood duck (3) and Bufflehead (1).



Of course, the conclusion I came to when all was said and done – gulp – was that swallows were competing for any cavity they could find, no matter the size, what direction it faced, or how high off the ground it was. We *do* have more nest boxes in storage ... why not make it an even 105 for 2024?

This beautiful Bufflehead egg is one of two that didn't hatch. Fortunately, the rest did!

Wood Ducks in Cress Creek Ravine

- Werner Groeschel

We live close to Cress Creek Ravine and I walk our dog Miska regularly in the ravine. Access to the ravine starts at 24th Avenue NE and Lakeshore Road.

Cress Creek is a small creek flowing on the bottom of the ravine, entering a culvert under Lakeshore Road and flowing down the bank to Shuswap Lake. The ravine bottom near the creek is swampy and covered by dense vegetation.

On my dog walks I have been observing a pair of Wood Ducks in and near the creek early in the spring when the plants were still dormant and there was no leaf cover. On the few occasions I managed to spot the ducks, they were always cautious and weary and fairly quickly headed down the bank of the creek to seek cover.



I also noticed a duck nest box somebody had installed a while ago on one of the dead Cedar trees approximately half way up the ravine.



Since I had some left-over scrap plywood that I had collected from construction sites to build nest boxes for Di Wittner in 2022, I decided to build another duck box using a plan that Di had sent me. Once the box was finished, I gave it several coats of paint including a top coat of camouflage paint, to make it less visible from the trail that runs along the side of the ravine. Early in the spring of 2023 I installed the new box approximately 100 meters downstream from the other box on a tree close to the creek and filled the bottom third of the box with wood shavings I had collected from my wood carving projects.



A few days ago, I decided to check the two duck boxes. Equipped with a ladder, rubber boots, screw driver, gloves and a bag of wood shavings I made my way to the ravine.

When I opened the door of the box I had installed earlier in the year, I found to my surprise definite signs of occupation of the box, such as down fluff, eggshells and one egg that had not hatched.



After removing the nesting material and replacing it with fresh wood shavings, I proceeded to the other duck box and opened it. It had been used as well. There were lots of pieces of egg shells and down mixed in with the wood shavings.

I don't know if the same pair of ducks used both boxes or if there was more than one pair using the ravine as a nesting location. For the next season I plan on putting a trail camera near one of the nest boxes. It would be great fun to see the ducklings exiting the box and getting down onto the ground to make their way to the creek.

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Western Grebes: Good News and Bad - Di Wittner

In October's meeting, I reported on the sad state of affairs for our grebes this year, observing just eleven young. Rapid changes in water level resulted in consecutive nest failures. While last year's high numbers seem to have remained stable - with approximately 270-300 adults - we won't know until next year how the low reproductive rate will affect numbers in 2024.

While our discouraging nest year doesn't bode well for the local colony, I've since learned there is a similar-sized colony in the Okanagan! For years, we've thought the Shuswap grebes was the last colony left in the province; turns out there's another not so far away. Our compatriots at the Vernon club have been observing Western grebes in the north arm of Okanagan Lake for the past five years. According to their report, this population ranges from 120-270 adults. Like us, they saw very few young in 2023 though other years have been more successful. (See the NONC newsletter sent by email last month.)

Though grebes tend to exhibit high site fidelity (i.e. they return to the same location year after year to breed), these two colonies are close enough to each other that there may be some recruitment back and forth. This, of course, helps stabilize *both* groups. Keep your fingers crossed!

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Lose the Lawn - note from Janet Pattinson

Some of our members joined with more than a hundred others in the webinar called "Lose the Lawn" hosted by Shuswap Climate Action Society with presenter Keli Westgate in October. It was interesting to see how she had converted the standard yard at the home she moved into (including cedars planted next to the wall of the house) into a nature friendly yard with consideration of Fire Smart advice as well. There is a follow up webinar scheduled for February 21st, 2024 for more ideas from Sigrie Kendrick on how to make your yard more water efficient with native plants. Closer to the date you can register on the SCA website.

Check out these online destinations!

- Gillian Richardson

1) The BC Bird Trail - Look Up, Stay Grounded

Have you seen the advertising pillar outside downtown Askews? One side features a downy woodpecker photo by Roger Beardmore, a longtime SNC member/photographer now living on Vancouver Island. It calls your attention to the **BC Bird Trail**, an initiative launched in 2020 with an impressive website in support of birding, and birdwatching-focused travel in British Columbia. It includes 5 regional bird trails—Central Vancouver Island, Columbia Valley, Fraser Valley, Sea to Sky, South Fraser – plus bird trail outposts in communities like Shuswap/Sicamous. You'll enjoy videos, field notes and stories, bird lists and maps locating trails/cafes/shopping. Great viewing for bird-minded locals and visitors!

2) "Migration is a precarious time for birds"

Birds in your yard during spring and fall migration may be on lengthy journeys of interest to scientists who look for ways to protect them. This webinar shares some of that work, and offers ways to protect migrating birds. [Shedding Light on Protecting Birds | Bird Academy • The Cornell Lab \(allaboutbirds.org\)](#).

Watch interviews with Dr. Jacob Job (feather DNA analysis to target breeding locations for conservation efforts), Dr Jenifer Uehling (BirdCast and MOTUS tracking systems to monitor movement/identify stopover sites), and PhD candidate Brendon Samuels. This last interview (best viewing is between 28-41 minutes on the time line) concerns minimizing bird-window collisions, a novel approach to alerting cat owners to the harm their roaming pets do, and details of creating a Bird Friendly City (like Brendon's hometown, London, ON). Could we do this in Salmon Arm?

3) SNC website: [Shuswap Naturalist Club \(shuswapnaturalists.org\)](https://shuswapnaturalists.org)

Our Webperson, Dorothy Parks, posts current meeting and outings information on our website's home page. There's always a photo taken by one of our members. Right now, it's a stunning fall scene of Salmon Arm Bay.

For general information, and the Club history, click the "club info" button. There's a **membership application form** there too—invite your friends to join us! The 'special interests' page highlights our ongoing projects: e.g. monitoring western grebe nesting; songbird, owl and duck nest boxes in the nature sanctuary; our academic award; weed pulls in the foreshore marsh; Mara Meadows Ecological Reserve.

And there's more...

- ➔ outings: watch for new details in spring 2024
- ➔ a 2-page checklist, *Birds of the Salmon Arm Area*, to keep track of your sightings
- ➔ records of Christmas Bird Counts from 2002 to the present
- ➔ top quality photos taken over the years by our members with amazing camera skills
- ➔ a page to introduce NatureKids, a program for youngsters 5-14 interested in living things and the environment. They always welcome new participants
- ➔ a 'links' page with access to great resources and other nature-related organizations





Blackburn Park Tree Planting - by Joyce Henderson

Thanks to the ten people who showed up at Blackburn Park on Friday, October 6, to plant trees and shrubs, lay landscape cloth and cover it with mulch. The end result looks great and means that the two areas we have planted are now self sustainable.

Shown here: Ken Raynor, Joyce Henderson, Pat Hutchins, Barbara Raynor, Di Wittner, Pat Danforth, Colin Spence.

The project began in 2020 when the Shuswap Naturalist Club celebrated being 50 years old. The decision on how to mark the occasion was to plant 50 native trees and shrubs in Blackburn Park in consultation with the City. The area by the picnic shelter was planted first. Fortunately, the area is watered by the City's irrigation system. Then in 2021 an area by Piccadilly Terrace was planted. There was no water available there, so volunteers faithfully watered every week during the summers of 2021 and 22. In 2023 there was no watering done, but in spite of the dry summer the plants have thrived. One of the Mountain Ash trees is loaded with beautiful orange berries.

The City mulched only the area by the picnic shelter. Weeds presented a problem in the second area. In 2022 landscape cloth and mulch were spread on that area, but the mulch was not spread as far as the City mowed. The October 6th work party solved that by mulching the perimeter.

A few of the trees were bought at local nurseries, but most were grown by Keith Cox, a forester, who also acted as the consultant on the job. Keith collected seeds from a Douglas Maple on Mt. Ida, planted them and several now grow in both areas. The five Mountain Ash trees were donated by Martin Albrecht.



The other workers of the day were Dave Danforth, Gord Carter and Janet Aitken, who we also thank for the photos.

And a very special thank you goes out to Joyce, who not only dreamed up this project, but oversaw and coordinated it all. And between group efforts, she could be found doing the extras, pulling weeds and such.

"The tree which moves some to tears of joy
is in the eyes of others only a green thing that stands in the way".
William Blake

