

# THE SAGEBRUSH CHRONICLE



### **Nature Presentation, By Wendy Nuttall**

Enjoy a photographic view of 10,000 year old ice in Iceberg Alley, Ancient rock and fossils, Ocean views, Fox Kits at play, Moose, Caribou, Whales and Prairie Landscapes. This first time presentation is a great introduction to the fascinating views of Nature.

## **Tuesday, October 24, 2017**

- **7:00 to 7:45 PM: Business Meeting**
- **7:45 to 8:00 PM: Socializing**
- **8:00 to 9:00 PM: Nature Presentation by Wendy Nuttall**

## Executive

President	Hugh Armstrong <a href="mailto:armstrongg.h@telus.net">armstrongg.h@telus.net</a>	526-1003
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## MH Interpretive Program

(Managed by Grassland Naturalists)  
Based in Police Point Park Nature Centre  
Open Year Round  
Tuesday to Sunday: 9:00AM to 5:00PM

Washrooms are on a timer and are open from  
7:00AM to 8:00PM daily!

To get up to date information on what is  
happening at the Nature Centre call the:  
Nature Line at (403) 529-6225  
Also find us on Facebook and Twitter  
[policepointpark](https://www.facebook.com/policepointpark)

**Backyard Bird Feeding: Saturday, October 14 from 2:00 to 4:00 PM.** Learn how to create a great bird habitat in your own backyard. Discover which birds you might attract and what types of feeders and seeds to use.

**Annual Beaver Walk: Saturday, October 21: 5:30 PM to 7:30 PM.** Led by Marty Drut. Meet at the first parking lot (by the pump houses) in Police Point Park.

**Coming in November: StoryWalk® "The Mitten" by Jan Brett, an all time favourite.**

The Sagebrush Chronicle is published ten times a year by Grasslands Naturalists. **Submissions of writing and artwork are welcomed but must be edited for publication. Deadline: the 10<sup>th</sup> 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](mailto: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:** 4<sup>th</sup> Tuesday, Sept. - May **Board Meetings:** 1<sup>st</sup> Tuesday Sept. - 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 529-6225**

**Annual Membership Dues: Eileen Cowtan**  
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!

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GN Website:

<http://www.natureline.info/gn>

GN Facebook:

<http://www.facebook.com/GrasslandsNaturalists/>

You must be a Facebook member to view most of it.

## Member's Corner

The president is away this month so no monthly report but following are a few reports concerning recent events.

### Casino Report by Dave McKenzie

Another successful casino has come and gone. Everyone showed up for their shifts and we all got to know one another much better. **Thank you** to everyone who helped out. I have to send out a special thank you to Neil Mitchell who endured a baptism by fire but came through with flying colours. (Editors Note: The Society owes Dave special thanks for volunteering to be the casino manager which entailed the filling out of a multitude of forms, getting volunteers, reminding volunteers of their assignments but especially for the many hours he spent volunteering at the casino. On Thursday he was there from 7:45 PM to well past midnight and on Friday was there from 2:45 PM until around 3:00 AM Saturday morning. Also special thanks to all who endured the very late shifts).



### Shoreline Clean-up Strathcona Park on September 30

Wendy Blackwell organized another very successful clean-up of the Strathcona Island Park. A total of nine volunteers picked up garbage along the river and creeks in the park as well as along the road and path sides. Less garbage was evident this year as compared to years past but the volunteers still managed to fill a number of trash bags as well as retrieving two tires (one complete with rim) a patio umbrella and a full sized car seat. Old shoes, backpacks, tents, and tin cans were recovered from two former homeless camps. Thank you to Wendy Blackwell, Ian Wallis, Eileen Cowtan, Dan Schiebelbein, Margie and Johan Booyens, Milt Spitzer, Chris Dalzell and Barb Mitchell.

### Upcoming Events, Field Trips and Announcements

**Saturday, October 14: Backyard Bird Feeding: 2:00 to 4:00 PM.** Learn how to create a great bird habitat in your own backyard. Discover which birds you might attract and what types of feeders and seeds to use.

**Wednesday, October 18 from 7:00 to 8:30 PM.** "Water from the Wild: Caring for the Headwaters." SEAWA and the Medicine Hat Public Library are pleased to invite you to this presentation by Kevin Van Tighem, former superintendent at Banff National Park. This presentation will be held in the Honor Currie Room of the Library.

**Saturday, October 21: Annual Beaver Walk from 5:30 to 7:30 PM.** Marty Drut will lead this walk. Meet at the first parking lot (by the pump houses) in Police Point Park.

**Tuesday, October 24: Monthly GN Meeting and Presentation:** Business Meeting from 7:00 to 7:45 PM with the presentation by Wendy Nuttall from 8:00 to 9:00 PM. See the cover page regarding details of Wendy's presentation.

**Sunday, September 16, 2018: Nature Alberta is planning a Pelagic Trip 40 km. off the shore from Ucluelet, BC. Tickets will go on sale in January, 2018.** For more information and to receive ticket sales notifications contact Nature Alberta, Pelagic Trip Coordinator, James Fox at [NApelagic@yahoo.com](mailto:NApelagic@yahoo.com).

### Exciting Sightings by Bob Frew

As we enter October, passerine migration has peaked, with small numbers of lingering **Yellow-rumped Warblers**; **Orange crowned Warblers**, and **Ruby-crowned Kinglets** continuing to be reported. Large numbers of sparrow species have also been passing through Police Point Park including; **White-crowned, White throated, Lincoln's, American Tree Sparrows**, several **Harris's Sparrows**, and a **Fox Sparrow**. Later this month large numbers of migrating **Snow Geese** can be expected at Sauder's reservoir and Murray Lake providing a climax to fall migration. Exciting sightings reported in the past month include the following:

Barry Anderson reported forty **Sandhill Cranes**, flying east over Ross Glen Coulee, and Dan Schiebelbein observed a flock of sixty flying over his acreage on the Holsom Road. Both sightings occurred on September 14<sup>th</sup>. Sandhill Cranes migrate in a southeasterly direction through the Oyen-Bindloss area towards Swift Current. The loud calls of these cranes can be heard for long distances. The closest they usually get to Medicine Hat is at Many Island Lake near the Saskatchewan border, where large flocks have assembled in previous years during fall migration.

Two **Rusty Blackbirds** were reported by Dan Schiebelbein at his acreage on the Holsom Road on September 14<sup>th</sup>. In fall Rusty Blackbirds can be distinguished from Brewer's Blackbirds by the rusty brown edging to their feathers. On September 17<sup>th</sup> Dan flushed a group of ten **Wood Ducks** from a small pond at Cherry Grove Farm, north of the city on September 17<sup>th</sup>. The brightly coloured males make this species one of our most beautiful ducks.

On a fall trip to Elkwater on September 21<sup>st</sup>, Phil and Annalora Horch reported an **Eastern Bluebird** on the Eagle Butte Road. This species is rare in the Cypress Hills; however there are several breeding records for the region.

Bob Frew observed two **Brown Creepers** at Police Point Park on September 13<sup>th</sup>, and Barry Anderson had one in his backyard on October 5<sup>th</sup>. Brown Creepers work their way spirally up tree trunks while foraging, unlike nuthatches which work their way down the tree trunk. Inconspicuous, and with a weak call, these diminutive birds can be easily overlooked.

A **White-breasted Nuthatch** was heard then observed foraging in a cottonwood tree, in the company of several **Black-capped Chickadees** and a **Downy Woodpecker** on October 4<sup>th</sup> at Police Point Park.

Following a snow storm on October 2<sup>nd</sup>, Dan Schiebelbein reported six **Harris's Sparrows** (photo on page 7) at his Holsom Road acreage. The largest of our sparrows, this species passes through the prairie region during migration, and can be detected by its pink bill, white belly, black facial markings, and distinctive call.

During the month of September Milt and Elaine Spitzer reported a total of seven **Palm Warblers**, two of them on separate occasions in their NW Crescent Heights backyard, and five of them on separate visits to Police Point Park. A boreal forest breeder, the species is uncommon in the prairie region, but may be seen during fall migration. This warbler pumps its tail regularly while foraging.

Other species of interest reported by GN birders at Police Point Park included a **Hermit Thrush** on September 27<sup>th</sup>, several **Golden-crowned Kinglets** on October 5<sup>th</sup>, and an immature **Northern Goshawk** on October 9<sup>th</sup>.

**Send your exciting sightings to Bob Frew: phone 403-526-4573, e-mail [Robert.frew@shaw.ca](mailto:Robert.frew@shaw.ca)**



## Field Trip Discovers Crane Surprise

Among most birders, Sandhill Cranes would rank near the top as favourite birds. They are elegant and even stately. They are the largest birds in North America along with the rare Whooping Crane. They nest in mysterious remote places and their haunting rattling call ranks up there with the Loon as a joyous distinctive sound.

On Saturday, September 16, 8 GN'ers led by Phil Horch set out for Sauder Reservoir with stops along the way at Echo Dale Park and Golden Sheaf Park. As we gathered in the A&W parking lot there was discussion that a couple birders had seen Sandhill Cranes in our area in the prior week.

This is unusual as the Crane's south migration path takes them on a line south-east from the Bindloss-Oyen area toward Swift Current. Usually the Many Islands Lake is the closest cranes make it to Medicine Hat most years.

Our stop at Echo Dale Park resulted in a few migrating passerines including White-Crowned and White-Throated Sparrows, Dark-Eyed Juncos, a Ruby-Crowned Kinglet, a Red-Breasted Nuthatch, a Brown Thrasher and several Wilson's Warblers. The river produced a Spotted Sandpiper, Killdeers, and a Lesser Yellowlegs.

Our stop at Golden Sheaf Park was surprisingly quiet as this island of trees serves as a migrant trap and often produces a bonanza of migrating birds. However, in fall, timing is everything as birds seem to arrive and pass through in sporadic flocks. We did add Yellow-Rumped and Orange-Crowned Warblers to our list.

It was at Sauder Reservoir that we were surprised with Sandhill Cranes. At first just 3 flew overhead much to our happy surprise. But as we stopped next to the lake we could hear many Cranes calling in the distance. With a little searching we soon spotted large flocks in the air on the far side of the lake close to the Hutterite Colony. Thereafter, every stop at Sauder Reservoir for the rest of the morning produced more and more Sandhill Cranes. They could be heard at every stop, including at the far south end of the lake at the end of the morning. Some were high in the air overhead, only visible through binoculars. Something has caused these birds to track away from their usual flight path. Does it have something to do with the drought which is even worse in Saskatchewan? Or maybe the forest fires? We may never know but these magnificent birds were the climax of this field trip!

That's not to say there were not other interesting sightings that day. We observed 3 falcons, the first being a powerful Peregrine followed by a Prairie Falcon and then a third that remained unidentified as it flew away from us. There were a good number of lingering shorebirds attracted by the mudflats created by low water levels at Sauder Reservoir. These included small flocks of Baird's, Semipalmated and Pectoral Sandpipers, an appropriately lone Solitary Sandpiper, 3 Marbled Godwits and both species of Yellowlegs. There were still good numbers of Pelicans and Cormorants present, many species of ducks, hundreds of Coots, and the occasional Red-Necked Grebe. Only 1 Common Loon was observed although many more should be showing up soon. Flocks of American Pipits were also gracing the shore of the lake. There were also a surprising number of Barn Swallows still present as well as 1 Tree Swallow.

Although this field trip intended to include Murray Lake on its route, we ended up spending so much time at

Sauder Reservoir which was unexpectedly bountiful with birds, that our ending time of 1:00 p.m. found us at Premium Sausage for lunch and no time left to go to Murray Lake. Our final tally ended up being about 65 species. Thanks to the birding efforts of Milt and Elaine Spitzer, Martha Gue, Dwayne Myers, Barry and Judy Anderson, and Phil and Annalora Horch. **(Photos by Dwayne Meyers)**



### **Heritage Homes Tour by Elaine Spitzer**

On September 28 six members participated in the Heritage Homes Tour along First Street SE. It was a gorgeous evening which was highlighted by a tour of the former Ezra Pearson House built in 1909. The current homeowner, Natasha Shannon, extended a special invitation to tour the inside of this home. Another highlight was the tour of the Duggan House. Attending this tour were Dee Armstrong, Eileen Cowtan, Linda Fisher, Patti Schnieder, Angela Turner and Elaine Spitzer (leader).

### **Many Islands Lake Birding Trip led by Ben Velner**

Only four participated in Ben's trip to the Many Islands Lake area; Ben, Bob Frew, Elaine and Milt Spitzer. The lack of participants was likely due to the bad scheduling on Milt's part as it was right in the middle of the Thanksgiving long weekend (inadvertently overlooked when planning the trip).

We did have a successful trip full of surprises in that we found the sought after birds in unlikely areas. We encountered flocks of Sandhill Cranes west of Schuler along Rge. Rd. 20 (likely close to 2000 feeding in harvested grain fields) and with these, or near to these birds, were large numbers of White-fronted Geese, Canada Geese and a smaller amount of Snow Geese. On Schuler Lake itself we found about 100 Tundra Swans along with a variety of other waterfowl. The surprising and disappointing part of the trip was that we saw very little at Many Islands Lake (should now be called Many Sloughs as the water level is very low). We heard Sandhill Cranes but did not see any near here and there weren't a great number of waterfowl using the lake nor flying overhead.

We had a bonanza of Lapland Longspurs as they were in groups of 20 to several hundred flying low over the harvested fields. We likely saw several thousand of this species and some even landed near to us providing photo opportunities. On the way to Schuler we also had a tailless Northern Shrike and along Highway 41 and around Schuler we saw about 20 Red-tail hawks, several Rough-legged hawks and a few Northern Harriers. On the way to Many Islands we saw a Peregrine Falcon amidst the flocks of Lapland Longspurs. In addition to birds we saw a number of Pronghorn, Mule Deer and 3 Coyotes.



## **Biking across Canada - presentation by Vern Hyde**

Inspiring and entertaining! These two words describe Vern Hyde's presentation to GN members at the General Meeting on September 26. With a mixture of magic tricks, slides, and commentary we relived Vern's 2012 cross Canada bicycle trip designed to raise funds for building a new school in Ethiopia. The good works of The Canadian Humanitarian Organization were Vern's motivation, in part, which resulted in raising \$130,000.00 (the equivalent of 3 Million dollars in Ethiopia).

Vern travelled 150 km each day, except for rest days on Sundays, on his 25 - 30 pound bicycle which he referred to as his "mule". A First Nations woman in Ontario recommended a sheep skin seat cover to make travelling easier, and Vern's self-designed bicycle "antlers" took the strain off his arms. It took two weeks for physical adjustment to the routine, Vern said, while the rest of the trip after Calgary was more of a mental exercise. Vern's riding partner, Mark, was his anchor throughout the entire 43 day trip.

Even as this speaker had everyone in stitches with his sleight of hand tricks and antics, his message of optimism and hope shone through. He stressed that looking for the good in people changes our lives. We can all do our part in helping others by contributing time and showing kindness. Personal happiness will be our reward. Vern also spoke about challenges making us stronger. Don't spend time asking "why". Instead, when hardships confront us try to ask "what can I learn from this?"

Thank you, Vern, for sharing this lively and thought-provoking presentation.  
Summarized by B. Rainville

**Harris's Sparrow: Photo by Dan Schiebelbein**



## **Carol Porter Bluebird Trail Results For 2017**

The Carol Porter Bluebird Trail consists of 92 boxes located along the Eagle Butte, Ranchville, Jackpot, Thelma and Wildcat Roads. This trail has been continuously monitored since 1989 with only minor changes to the number of boxes and locations of these boxes. These boxes are situated on fence posts along a 55 kilometer reach.

During the period April through August these boxes are visited and serviced weekly (on a three week rotational basis) by a devoted group of volunteers whose efforts result in optimal success in the fledging of young (Fledging is used in this report as the successful rearing of the young from eggs to departure from the box). These volunteers service the boxes affecting any necessary repairs and count and record the eggs and/or young at each box. After the young have fledged they clean out each box readying them for a second nesting or for the following year. In 2017 this dedicated group of volunteers included:

- Peggy and Mike Hansen
- Lorraine and Randy Stotz
- Mel Bender
- Ann and Dennis Hall
- Phyllis and Ross Strobel
- Beth and Ted Turner
- Ric Carrier
- Carol and Brian Lowery
- Dee and Brent Cowan
- Jim and JoAnne MacFarlane
- Donna Steele and Sue Higgins
- Ian and Angela Turner
- Vance Elder and Milt Spitzer

Hearty thanks to these volunteers without whom the breeding success would be much diminished. Also thanks to Ben Velnor who keeps us supplied with replacement boxes.

A total of 268 young bluebirds fledged from a total of 336 eggs. Both the number of fledglings and number of eggs laid were down from the past two years but the successfully fledged young are about average for the period of record as were the number of eggs laid. The reduced number of eggs laid is attributable to the much fewer, second nestings (7) as compared to the average of about 20. Sterile egg numbers (20) were considerably less than average while abandoned eggs (44) were about average. Abandoned eggs are defined as those eggs that disappeared due to predators as well as those that were simply left in the nest. The weather was great throughout the nesting period and as a result only 6 dead nestlings were found which is considerably below the long term average.

Tree Swallows also use the nest boxes and are in direct competition with the Mountain Bluebirds for the use of the boxes. Fortunately Tree Swallows arrive a little later than the bluebirds and thus the male bluebird will have staked out his box usually repelling all potential rivals. Squabbles still do occur at some box sites and duplicating boxes (on side by side posts) often can reduce the intense rivalry. In 2017 some 324 Tree Swallows were reared in the boxes. Tree Swallows in their own right are desirable species for their insect eating abilities but they are more numerous and are less dependent on man made cavities for successful nesting. Nesting boxes have principally been installed to provide nesting cavities for the bluebirds whose natural cavities have been usurped by alien species such as European Starling and House Sparrow.

While servicing the boxes Sue Higgins and her brother found a young Short-eared Owl in the long grasses near box A-7. While driving Eagle Butte Road there were many reports of Short-eared Owls hunting during the day. Obviously they were hunting to provide for their young. Also on his final trip Melvin Bender discovered a small bat in box M-26 likely taking refuge there during the day.

For more details and/or historical records contact Milt Spitzer at (403) 528-3120 or by email at: [milton.spitzer@gmail.com](mailto:milton.spitzer@gmail.com).