

Yellowhead Flyway Birding Trail Association Inc.

What's flying around....



Awareness and Well-being

Please join me in a brief search for gratitude. Each of us have “things” for which to be grateful; happiness, feelings of well-being, feeling safe or feeling secure serve as examples. Most importantly consider that each of us is fortunate to have choices.

We have choices because we have a great deal of control over the brains that determine those choices. We are capable of choosing our thoughts and our actions.

We can make choices that enable and enhance good feelings. We can choose acts of care, acts of kindness. We can notice pleasant things and share them. Something we notice may be a discovery or a mystery. We may share humour or awe or surprise.

These choices are predicated upon our awareness of our environment in specific moments of time—this is referred to in the literature as being “present in the moment”. I remind that you can choose Nature.

Nature contains a treasure-trove of sources of joy, of laughter and amusement, of discovery, and of mystery; all of which may be remembered and shared. A friend provided some advice, “When you go out in Nature, always be prepared to be surprised”.

Surprises, sightings and discoveries may well in themselves be sources of awe, of inspiration or of humour. These things may be personal sources of pleasure, joy, and/or happiness.

Often you will find an opportunity in Nature to act in a caring way. You might reduce speed or stop to allow that snake to cross the road.

Porcupine at Lunch-time



Photo: YFBTA member Cindy Smith

You might relocate a fledgling back into its nest. There are opportunities for kindness. You might restrain your dog from chasing that fawn. If you are focused in the moment and have made these choices you are likely to feel good. Feeling good is, in a giving way, good for you.

I write these things in the belief that YFBTA members care about Nature.

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We have a desire to be helpful and supportive and therefore, perhaps, a desire to engage with some of the initiatives of YFBTA. When we are focussing on being present in the moment these same desires may result in choosing Nature. Once we are aware of Nature we will find what is needed as we dial-in on feelings of well-being and happiness.

Editor's note: It is grammatically correct to capitalize the word "nature" only when one wishes to emphasize its uniqueness.

Water boatmen and Winter

Stephen Srayko

Winter is now here in most of Saskatchewan, leaving the fall migration season in its wake. But did you know that migration isn't just for the birds? Every autumn, common denizens of wetlands, known as Water Boatmen, undertake a journey to find suitable overwintering habitats across the prairies.

Water Boatmen, also known as corixids, belong to a diverse and highly adaptable family of aquatic insects, the Corixidae. Different corixid species are able to exist in a wide range of habitats, however they typically prefer areas of standing or slow-moving water, and reach the highest abundances in fishless, densely vegetated waters. Many corixid species are thought to feed primarily on algae and detritus, while others are predatory or employ multiple feeding strategies. They breathe by carrying bubbles of atmospheric air beneath the water, which must be periodically replenished. Many corixids can produce loud sounds to find mates by rubbing different body parts together, an act called stridulation. In temperate regions, most species breed during the spring and summer, producing one to two generations per year, however this may vary depending on species and climate.

Another interesting feature of corixids is their ability to fly. In the summer months, they often disperse at night, and are highly attracted to artificial light. But in fall, with the approach of winter conditions, the corixids that breed in shallow wetlands, many of which will freeze down to the bottom, must make the flight to deeper bodies of water, such as large lakes and rivers. These fall migrations usually take place on warm, sunny afternoons from September to November, in which these insects can sometimes be witnessed raining down from the sky in swarms, forming immense aggregations in the water.

The corixids reside in the water beneath the ice in these habitats until spring, returning to breeding wetlands and meltwater puddles along the way as soon as the ice breaks (see video by naturalist and corixidologist, John Acorn;

<https://youtu.be/3SxaM0cd6u8>).

However, these returning corixids are often waylaid by artificial surfaces that reflect light in a similar fashion to water, such as the windshields of vehicles- watch for them landing on your car in April or May.



An Aggregation of Corixidae
Photo: Andre Wade

While other species of corixids undertake perilous migratory flights in spring and fall, at least one species, *Cymatia americana*, has evolved to withstand freezing conditions, and is able to hunker down within the ice itself. If left without open water, *C. americana* becomes encased within bubbles in the ice, often in large groups, remaining for the winter until the warmth of the sun in spring sets them free into the surrounding meltwater of the pond. This can be a dangerous strategy, with a high chance of mortality within the ice, but perhaps it beats investing energy into developing the musculature necessary for flight- or ending up as a prewinter snack.

Corixids act as an important food source for a variety of predators, connecting both upper and lower levels of food webs, and also the productivity of the different habitats between which they travel. Migratory corixids that overwinter in dense aggregations in rivers are fed on by a number of fish species, particularly Goldeye and suckers, as well as avian consumers such as ducks and gulls, all taking advantage of this seasonally occurring resource.

In spring, when corixids climb onto the banks of rivers in preparation for spring flights, they are taken by riparian spiders. While in flight, corixids are also captured by aerial predators such as bats and swallows. Finally, these insects support a wide range of both vertebrate and invertebrate consumers in breeding wetlands and lakes.

With increased draining and drying of small wetlands in the prairies, the linkage that exists between these and larger habitats through the seasonal migrations of water boatmen are uncertain, underscoring the need for conservation to ensure that such connections are maintained. This will benefit not only the water bugs, but the myriad of consumers that use them as a food source.

So if you find yourself by a wetland this winter, see if you can spot the corixids in the ice, waiting for spring. And when that time comes, take a walk by the river, and watch the migrants taking flight to start the cycle again.

A Partnership and an Opportunity

Ryan Fisher & YFBTA member Rob Wilson

The Royal Saskatchewan Museum (RSM) and the University of Regina have begun work on a research project involving Great Horned Owls that includes a unique citizen science component. Great Horned Owls are one of the most common owls in Saskatchewan and occur across the province. Great Horned Owls have shown remarkable adaptability and now nest in trees that were planted around farmyards, abandoned buildings and other human-made structures. This adaptability is what makes these birds really unique and we are interested in how human modifications to the landscape in southern Saskatchewan have allowed this bird to be so successful.

Part of the project revolves around public participation and collaboration in the research - by having people share and contribute to data monitoring and collection. How can you help? We are looking for sightings of Great Horned Owls throughout southern Saskatchewan. At this time of year, there is a great opportunity for members of the Yellowhead Flyway Birding Trail Association to get outside and look and listen for owls in your town, city or yard!

We've developed an easy-to-use electronic form (<https://royalsaskmuseum.ca/research/biology/ryan-fisher>) to send us the location of any Great Horned Owls that you see. You can report the quarter section you saw the owl, a GPS location, or just the general area you were in when you saw the owl, but the more detail you can provide the better. You can also email us any observations or questions at

uofowlresearch@gmail.com.

Our research team is small (but mighty!) and unfortunately this means that we simply can't cover large portions of Saskatchewan to look for owls. This is why we are asking for help from nature organizations like yourselves and really value your assistance and partnership on this program. Going on regular bird watching walks or drives and simply having familiarity with an area both help us to find owls. Key information such as where you observed the owl and what the owl was doing (roosting, nesting) is important for our research to understand how and why these owls have been so successful occupying Saskatchewan's prairie and parkland regions.

Owls are extremely sensitive to disturbance, so please take great care when looking for them and try to keep as much distance as possible between you and the owl. There are some excellent guidelines online to reduce your impact on birds when birdwatching .

(<https://www.aba.org/aba-code-of-birding-ethics/>).

YFBTA encourages members to engage in this initiative. The most important part is to submit Great Horned Owl observations directly to the RSM. Additionally, YFBTA members are further encouraged to notify Rob Wilson (rjwilson@sasktel.net) of any submission or observation. Rob has volunteered to tally, on behalf of YFBTA, this data with a view toward demonstrating YFBTA's contributions and support of the owl research project. I volunteered to do this as a small measure to increase awareness of Nature among our members. Participation is also an act of caring that is also a small but positive action that is believed to have personall beneficial health effects.

If there is a YFBTA member who has data and is interested in sharing or ... who, for some reason, does not wish to do the digital work, contact Rob (1-306-744-8140). I will work to assist you or will, with your permission, provide the data on your behalf.



Canora: Ospreys and Eagles Challenged

YFBTA members Thom Carnahan and Oney Pollock

The Canora Osprey couple arrived last year on April 26, the same day as the previous year. Last year they had had two young and all four left together. The nest is north east of town near the weir on the Whitesand River.

During last winter we often travelled our beautiful rural areas for pandemic relief and discovered an eagle nest south west of town; so we decided to monitor both nests this year. Initially both nests consisted of two adults and two young. We visited both nests regularly. We all knew about the hot and dry climate we would be subjected to for the summer. Eventually both nests appeared to have one adult fewer and one fewer young. The adult was still physically feeding the osprey young in late August rather than eating food brought in by itself.



Photo: YFBTA member Oney Pollock

Early summer saw the level of the Whitesand River drop plenty and the water stopped flowing over the weir near the Osprey nest. The Whitesand was already low from last year. Then we could see the river bottom from the bridge over highway nine. Halfway through summer we noticed that First Nations members and locals quit fishing the popular spot below the weir.

Had the low water level and high heat decimated the fish population? Had both factors led directly to the poor survival rate of both species? That is certainly our presumption. This of course gives us plenty of concern for this coming year. Are other people seeing this kind of result for our warming climate?

Might Have Been the Work of a Cougar?

YFBTA member Allison Henderson

On March 16, YFBTA members Wayne Clark and Rob Wilson inquired about a possible cougar kill they had encountered while enjoying a ski in a remote area of the cross-country trails at Duck Mountain Provincial Park. The nearly intact carcass of a healthy White-tailed Deer was found just off the trail. Hair had been removed from its back and it had an opened abdomen. There was very little disturbance to both the carcass and the snow surrounding the scene.

Cougars are known to lick hair from their prey before consuming and are delicate in their removal of the organs that they consume first, so the image I received matched up nicely with those characteristics. They do, however, usually cache their prey, covering it with vegetation and consuming it over two or so days. In this instance, the cougar may have been spooked before finishing its dinner. Ministry of Environment Conservation Officer Nathan Dutchak confirmed that cougar have been sighted in the area over the years. Several years ago, a large male that had been collared near Meadow Lake was located just across the SK-MB in the Duck Mountains.

Whether you're out hiking or skiing in remote parts of the Duck Mountains, be on the look out for this majestic apex predator. Seeing one, or even finding a prey item like this, is a very, very rare happening

Carcass Adjacent to Ski Trail



Photo: YFBTA member Wayne Clark

Wildlife (& Rehabilitators) Need You

Living Sky Wildlife Rehabilitator Jan Shadick

Wildlife rehabilitators in the north learn to love the winters. That was a tough lesson for this girl from California, but it eventually happened. Winter is when we catch up on our sleep, get reacquainted with our families, and live something akin to a “normal” life. So, oddly enough, it is with anxiety and trepidation that we emerge from the darkness of winter to watch the snow melt, see our first robins of spring, and prepare for the chaos that is our life for the next six months. The joy of that first prairie crocus is often fleeting as we dash past it to catch an orphaned bird hopping away into the bushes. But this article is not supposed to be about us, rather it is intended for YOU.

How can you help wildlife in need?
Let me count the ways....

Individual Actions that make a DIFFERENCE:

Put markers on your windows to stop birds from colliding with the invisible glass.

We LOVE the Feather-friendly dots.
(www.featherfriendly.com)

1. Put tabs on your barbed wire fences to help owls and grouse and other birds from getting caught on the barbs and dying.
Tabs wrapped around the top wire every couple sections works wonders.

2. Don't use any poison (which includes no pesticides for insects!)

We have lost 80% of our aerial insectivores, likely due to pesticide use.

<https://www.snapinfo.ca/home>

3. Keep your cats indoors – AND keep them entertained!

Even the most outdoors of cats will learn to be indoors unless they get bored

4. Advocate for power companies to put up raptor protection on the power poles
These simple retrofits protect the birds from being electrocuted while landing
<https://powerlinesentry.com/>

5. Plant native plants which provide 80% more food for birds than ornamentals
It seems so logical that native insects live on native plants!

<https://www.npss.sk.ca/>

6. Advocate to keep habitats not just available, but connected, as wildlife corridors

Give the animals a safe passage through our built environments to increase biodiversity.

7. Create habitat; leave dead trees standing; keep raked leaves on your property to provide habitat for insects; put up a bird box
With so much habitat destruction done by mankind, we can help nature out & construct some for them

8. Plant trees, shrubs, protect or restore native prairie

Advocate for shelterbelts and re-planting of any removed trees in towns, etc.

9. Buy organic foods so more farmers are encouraged and will want to grow organic
Let's put our money where our beliefs are.
If they can afford to, they will.

10. Be careful with heated bird baths in winter – metal nearby is deadly

Think tongues and metal....wet bird's feet are the same. They get stuck and die.

11. Wash your feeders weekly; put out healthy seeds for the birds

Moldy food is bad for everyone as are dirty feeders that can pass diseases

12. Call your local wildlife rehabilitator if you find an injured or orphaned animal
We can help decide what, if any, help the animal needs.

We are also happy to accept donations!!

Cowbird Nestling



Photo: Shelagh Barclay

Prevention & Advocacy Projects:

Changing our own behaviour is one thing. Changing another's behaviour is what extends our impact exponentially further. Prevention in the form of education is a key component of helping our wildlife. By informing our increasingly environmentally aware youth of the value, importance and overall essential nature of our wildlife, their attitudes will echo into the future as they grow to become stewards of the land and the wildlife.

Additionally, advocacy has the same long-lasting effect. When we build a home today, it will stand for at least 40 years. That will either be 40 years of bird mortality, or 40 years of bird safety, depending on how we design the house, and what materials we choose. Education and advocacy efforts today can still have an impact in 40 years.

Tolerance married to patience: Just because an animal annoys you does not mean you should/need to/have the right to harm it. The crow that wakes you up at 4am? Ear plugs. The fox (with babies to feed) that's trying to eat your chickens? Stronger fencing. The owl (or Coyote) who is eating your cats? Keep cats indoors. The skunk under the shed who got "upset" last night and you woke to the perfume of eau d'skunk? Ok, but there are ways to convince them to move further away (deterrents) rather than shooting them. (<https://livingskywildliferehabilitation.org/species-info/skunk/>)

Value over inconvenience: The services rendered by our wild neighbours are invaluable and priceless. The scavengers remove hundreds of tons of rotting flesh from our prairies daily. Without the free garbage pickup, we would be slogging through a truly disgusting number of carcasses everywhere. The cost of pollination would be prohibitively exorbitant; food production would plummet, and humans would suffer. 2 years. That's how long humans can exist on earth if we suddenly lose our bird species. We have to learn to value and appreciate our wildlife and accept a bit of inconvenience to have them around. They are worth far more to us than the amount of nuisance or bother they can create for us.

These two esoteric ways of helping wildlife are perhaps some of the most valuable and noble. You are setting an example for others on how to behave. "Conflict with wildlife" is not a given. It is a choice.

We choose to behave as though the planet exists for the sole use and benefit of the human race without realizing our dependence and interdependence on all other species on earth.

Live and let live remains one of the hardest ethics to follow it seems. "Oh sure, we can kill mosquitoes. They don't count." ...Tsk tsk. That is a slippery slope you are creating. Once a species has been deemed "bad" or disposable, it is but a matter of time before the others follow.

Saskatchewan's rural roots dig deep into the soil of human hubris where we shall all be buried soon enough. Let's dig ourselves out, uproot our beliefs and biases about other species. Let's live and let live so we all may prosper, even the mosquitoes. (Birds gotta eat, too).

Tree Swallows: No Love Lost

Photo: YFBTA member Morley Maier

Didn't Migrate or Early Arrivals?

Jan. 26, 2022 Fox Sparrow
Rob Wilson Saltcoats

March 24, 2022 Tree Sparrow
Allison Henderson Yorkton

Young Writers' Corner

A Rare Sighting YFBTA member Kailliegh McCallum

The Northern Saw-whet Owl (*Aegolius acadicus*) is a very small short-bodied owl with a short tail. The large rounded head has no ear tufts. The face is light brown, outlined in dark brown and white streaks. Both males and females have brown-and-white striped chests and bellies, and their large eyes are yellow. The white eyebrows connect in a 'Y' over their beaks.

Like other raptors they have strong grasping talons for killing prey, and a hooked upper beak for tearing meat. Saw-whets mostly eat small rodents, given that the males only weigh 75g and females 100g on average. They mostly hunt mice that live in forested areas, especially deer mice, but also many voles. Males are 18 to 20 cm long and females 20 to 21.5 cm long, and adults have a wingspan of 45 to 60 cm.



Photo: YFBTA member Don Weidl

Saw-whets are the smallest owl species in Saskatchewan and Eastern North America. They are very, very elusive, and were first thought to be rare due to lack of sightings, but now scientists believe they are common, and just real good at hiding and camouflage. I guess that they have to be, because bigger owls will prey on them!

They also remain perfectly still when they are perched, and that's another reason why they often aren't even noticed.

There are not many Saw-whet sightings in our area, but my dad and I were very lucky to see one this winter on January 25th. A Saw-whet Owl flew right into our front yard and perched for a couple of minutes on a branch in a Mountain Ash tree, just a few steps outside of our front window! My dad was amazed at how small of an owl it was, looking about the size of a Robin. It was partially dark out, (they hunt at night) and it's colours blended in with the branches, so we didn't get very good pictures. But maybe we'll again be lucky enough to see a mighty mini-owl passing through again some day.

Our Friendly Neighbourhood Fox Squirrel YFBTA members Ewan & Ava Hunter

Our friendly neighbourhood Fox Squirrels like to steal food from our bird feeder. They are reddish brown with an orange belly, a bushy tail and a long and chubby body. One of them is quite an acrobat and makes us laugh! He steals our bird food by hanging upside down from the bird feeder by his back paws and feeding with his front paws. Fox squirrels have been coming to our feeder for two years or so. We are not sure if they are male or female, or if it is one fox squirrel or more. Watching them is a treat!

Fox Squirrel



Photo: YFBTA member Morley Maier

Results: 2021 Christmas Bird Count

YFBTA member Arden Bradford

December 18, sunny and cold, was chosen as the count day. The bird count covers an area from North of Saltcoats to South of Bredenbury on either side of the Yellowhead Highway.

There were 15 feeder watchers recording the birds they saw at their feeder stations or in their yards. Volunteers drove three separate routes, covering more of the rural area on the east and west of the highway. One couple walked the Town of Saltcoats and recorded findings.

In summary; 24 different species were observed; this totaled to approximately 932 individuals.

Notable sightings were a Northern Hawk Owl and a Snowy Owl. Also reported were large flocks of Red Polls and Snow Buntings as well as more Gray Partridges and Sharp-tailed Grouse than in recent, previous counts.

Editor's note: May 05 I drove to Lake of the Prairies.

Some spring sightings:

Common Loons Kingfisher
Hooded Mergansers Cormorants
Avocets Swans (Tundra or Trumpeter or both)
Meadowlark



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Active in Nature

YFBTA member Paula Maier

The Activities Committee has a great line-up of outdoor events to be held over the spring and summer. We do not have dates nailed down but will be sending out emails closer to the outing with all the necessary information. Most outings will be scheduled during the week.

In mid May, Kenn Wood will be leading a tour of the snake hibernaculum and old forts in the Pelly area.

YFBTA has been asked to lead a nature walk as part of the artist show, "Art for Animals" by Jeff Meldrum. Carol Bolt and Paula Maier will be leading a walk on May 28 from 12-1pm followed by the artist reception.

In late May, or early June there will be an excursion to find Mountain Bluebirds along the Anaka bluebird run. We hope to have Lorne Scott do a bird banding demonstration, with time for wildflower searching and general birding.

There are plans in the works for the return of the Annual Bird Count and Brunch at the Knudsens on a lovely spring day. We'll be looking for returning warblers.

There will be a day trip to Hudson Bay to search for rare plants visiting bogs and forest, with birding time, as well. This will be the third week of June.

A tentative day trip to Duck Mountain PP in July/Aug

Laurie Murray will show her photos at another meeting.

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