

Yellowhead Flyway Birding Trail Association Inc.

What's flying around....



Editorial: YFBTA Members Acting Out

I am delighted to document the emergence of our association from an inactive hiatus (exacerbated by a pandemic). Here is a partial listing of some of the activities:

- YFBTA members travelling to monitor some of the nesting boxes that constitute the Anaka Bluebird Trail (Highway #47). That check was done April 02 (no male Mountain Bluebirds observed that day).
- *members of the Road Allowance Committee working to have additional signs placed on designated road allowances. Some committee members have submitted reports to the media.
- members of the Loon Initiatives Committee inviting park staff and cabin owners to continue in 2023 to observe, document and report loon sightings to assist with preparation of a 2023 report to Birds Studies Canada.
- members submitting articles, sightings, cartoons, photographs and digital links for consideration for future issues of "What's Flying Around".
- observations, records and submissions to Living Lakes program contributing to on going monitoring of Anderson Lake in efforts to determine the state of the water, the shoreline and the diversity of species present.

- members who continue to support the Great Horned Owl online survey form. YFBTA is a partner with the University of Regina and the Royal Saskatchewan Museum.
- two of our members conducted Christmas Bird Counts, completed reports and submitted them.
- some members initiated plantings as a commemoration and celebration of Saskatchewan's Arbour Week.

Snow Bunting (SNBU)



Photo: Jameson Maier

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I consider it a privilege when I am "out in nature" and when I am working on behalf of Nature. There will be no spoken thank you from its biodiversity but I am aware of personal benefits.

Each thought and each supportive action reflects a care and kindness which, in turn, provides me with a feeling of "well being" and a joy. Getting "out-of-doors" enhances my physical and mental health.

The above mentioned actions and the engendered feelings fit like pieces of a puzzle. Thank you for acting out on behalf of Nature.

Ticks and Surveyors

Phil Curry

As we get out and enjoy the parks and trails this spring, it is important to be aware that ticks might be present as well. Ticks are most often found in tall grass, shrubs, or wooded areas. The shrubby areas along trails used by wildlife, such as rabbits or deer, are especially attractive to ticks. They will climb up on the vegetation and wait for a host to pass by. They cannot jump or fly, but will grasp onto wildlife, people or pets who brush up against them.

Ticks pass through four different life stages (egg, larva, nymph, adult) and the latter three stages all bite and take blood from a variety of hosts. The tick most commonly encountered in eastern and central parts of the province is the American Dog Tick (*Dermaentor variabilis*). They become active in late April and May and usually reach their peak in early June. Their numbers decline in late June and early July and they are not active for the rest of the year. Fortunately, the American Dog tick is not capable of transmitting Lyme disease. The tick that does transmit Lyme and a number of other diseases, the Black-legged or Deer Tick (*Ixodes scapularis*), is occasionally found in low numbers in Saskatchewan, usually collected from dogs, cats or people. These ticks are brought into the province as nymphs by migratory birds in the spring and some of them are infected with the bacteria that causes Lyme disease. They moult into adults and can survive in the environment and bite another host. Adult Black-legged Ticks are active in the spring and fall, while nymphs are found in the spring and summer months. Nymphs that are active during the summer are the most likely to infect people with Lyme disease. They are often not noticed by people due to their small size; about the size of a pepper flake.

Saskatchewan has 1,463,322 hectares (ha) classified as suitable habitat with some risk for establishment of the Black-legged Tick, with 181,984 ha classified as having a high risk potential for establishment of Black-legged Ticks. Surveys to monitor Black-legged Ticks to determine whether they are reproducing and becoming established in the province are conducted each year by staff from the Ministry of Health and the University of Saskatchewan. Surveys are done in shrub and wooded habitat throughout the province, including several sites along the Yellowhead Flyway Birding Trail in east central Saskatchewan.

Surveys are usually done in the late morning or early afternoon. These are not effective when it is raining, when the vegetation is wet (from rain or dew), or when temperatures are less than 4°C.

Surveyors use a dragging technique which consists of pulling a white flannel cloth (or drag) attached to a dowel, over and around vegetation where ticks may be present. The drag resembles a moving host and the ticks will grab onto the cloth as it moves by.

Surveying the Leflay Trail: Saltcoats



Photo: Phil Curry

Each survey consists of collecting and recording ticks every 25 m, for a total distance of 2 km. Temperatures are recorded and measurements are done on leaf litter depth, soil humidity, and canopy cover. Some of the survey sites are part of a long-term Canada-wide sampling effort to determine the risk of exposure to Blacklegged Ticks and Lyme disease, which varies greatly across Canada. Canadian Lyme Sentinel Network (CaLSeN) sites are sampled each year to determine if Black-legged Ticks are present and to measure yearly fluctuations in tick activity.

Ticks are removed from the drag cloth and the numbers and species are recorded. All male and female adult ticks and nymphs of any species from CaLSeN sites are placed into collection vials for identification. For all other sites, ticks are identified, counted and a sub-sample of ticks are collected. While high numbers of other tick species have been detected through these active surveys, no Black-legged Ticks have been collected. This suggests that the population of black-legged ticks remains low.

Get out and enjoy the many trails and natural areas we have in the province, but taking precautions when outdoors is the best way to reduce your risk of getting a tick bite. It is important to check yourself, your children and your pets for ticks after being outdoors.

To prevent tick bites:

Dense grass and shrubs along the edges of trees, open meadows, trails and edges of paths are popular places for ticks to hang out. Stick to the centre of paths when hiking.

- Wear light-coloured clothes so ticks can be easily seen.
- Wear pants, long-sleeved shirts, and shoes that do not expose your bare feet.
- Pull socks over your pant legs to prevent ticks from crawling up your legs.
- Use insect repellents that contain DEET or Icaridin. Apply repellent to clothes as well as your skin. Always read and follow the directions on the label. Some repellents may have age restrictions.
- In Canada, clothing that has been treated with the insecticide permethrin has been approved for use by people over the age of 16.
- Shower or bathe as soon as possible after being outside to wash off loose ticks and inspect for attached ticks.

If you find a tick attached to your skin or on your pet:

- Carefully remove it with fine-tipped tweezers and grasp the tick's mouthparts as close to the skin as possible.
- Pull slowly upward and out with firm, steady pressure.
- Be careful not to squeeze, crush or puncture the body after removal.
- Do not put Vaseline, gasoline, or other harmful substances on an attached tick.

You can submit digital photos of the tick using the eTick system, and please keep ticks in a secure container until you receive the identification results. Ticks can be euthanized by placing them in a bag and storing it in the freezer 24 hours.

People can submit photographs of ticks found on humans or animals using the eTick online system at www.etic.ca to receive timely identification of the type of tick that attached to a person, pet, or livestock animal and information on the risk of exposure to tick-borne diseases. While awaiting identification results, keep the tick(s) in a secure container. eTick administrators may request that some ticks be submitted, by mail, for quality control purposes or if the tick species is one of medical concern. Ticks should not be submitted by mail unless requested.

For more information on ticks and Lyme disease visit www.saskatchewan.ca/lyme

Interview with Doug Welykholowa

YFBTA member Laurie Murray

The Loon Initiatives Committee was set up by Rob Wilson and Doug Welykholowa in 2005 to survey the loons at Madge Lake (annually) for the Canadian Lakes Loon Survey (a Birds Canada program), and to provide education at Madge Lake on the Common Loon, in the form of brochures, awareness signage, and educational lectures in association with the Duck Mountain Provincial Park Interpretive staff. Doug provides an annual report to the Park, YFBTA, Nature Saskatchewan and groups within the park.

Common Loon (COLO) and Chick

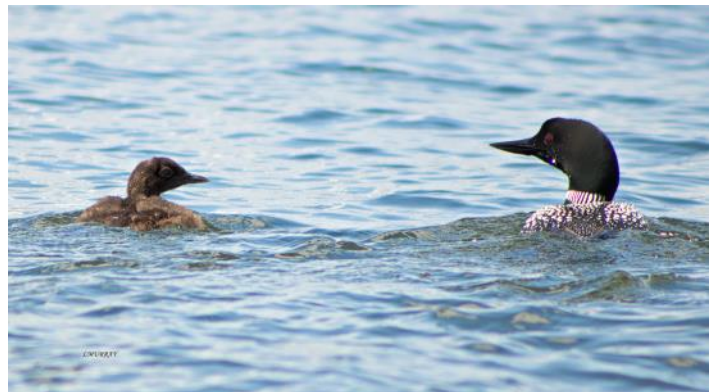


Photo: YFBTA member Laurie Murray

In answering my questions, Doug said. "We monitor the loons by boat and shore from May to September each year. We try to do a complete circuit of the lake and known loon nesting territories 3 to 4 times a month, in order to build up a proper database. We look for nesting sites, count territorial paired adults and unpaired adults, and follow chick growth and development. By surveying numerous times a month, we can build up an accurate picture of each territory, and a more accurate overall count. We also look for unusual events, such as adults that have not moulted or have only partially moulted during the year. We also monitor any potential predators (eagles, herons, racoons).

When we see loons in the breeding season (May to Sept.) they are in their normal iridescent black and white plumage (with distinctive white barred necklace on their throat and white patches on wing coverlets). The adults' coverlets are more mottled and a bit darker, with no scalloping".

"Our most exciting sighting was a pair of loons with four healthy chicks. 1-2 is an average number of young, 3 is rare, and 4 is very rare. According to researchers at Birds Canada, only ten sightings (ours is included) of a 4-chick family (in North America) have been reported in the past 40 years. We know that 3 of the 4 chicks fledged while the fate of the 4th is unknown.

Loons nest on a loose bed of mud and reeds/grass at the edge of the water. This may be on a beaver lodge, a downed tree on the shoreline or right on the shore. They find secluded spots that make it hard for predators to find them. The nest are very hard to spot from a boat. Of the 25-26 territories that we see each year, we have only discovered the actual nests in seven of them over the years. I spend a great deal of time carefully scanning the shoreline with binoculars in each territory each year trying to spot additional nests. One would need to spend days surveying the actual shoreline in a Kayak in order to stumble across the other nests. That is a job for someone much younger than me".

Editor's note: Doug is chairperson of the YFBTA's Loon Initiatives Committee. YFBTA is partnered with Nature Saskatchewan, Duck Mountain Provincial Park and the Madge Lake Cabin Owners' Association.

Prairie Wildflowers

YFBTA member Paula Maier

Our long awaited spring is here and in this part of the world it sometimes comes late and turns into summer in a hurry. The spring flowers have a short time to pop up, bloom and set seed. We live in the Aspen Parkland region of the province which is the transition between the Prairie and the Boreal forest. This means that we can at times find plants from different ecoregions growing here. This area is mostly under cultivation now so if we want to find native plants we need to search ditches, right of ways and peek over pasture fences. We all await the Crocuses, Lady's Slippers and Western Red Lily but there are many more interesting, lovely plants. Some of them are tiny and are easy to overlook.

Here are a few flowering plants that you might find in May and June.

Hoary Puccoon (*Lithospermum canescens*) is a lovely surprise in early spring — I will always know them by the name Cowslips. Though they are only about 6in. high, they are very noticeable with their deep green foliage and bright yellow to orange bunches of tiny funnel shaped flowers. They are highly perfumed and remind me of the perfumes we used to sample at the Woolworth Store.

Hoary Puccoon



Photo: Glen Lee

Pale Comandra (*Comandra palida* A.) have tiny white blossoms spread along the stem. They have the appearance of never quite opening. They are short plants that like sunny spots and appear the same time as the Puccoons.

Early Blue Violet (*Viola adunca*) produces the lovely tiny violets that grow in our lawns and parks. They are the first violets that we see in the spring. They are followed by the Western Canada Violet (*Viola canadensis*). These are white with yellow throats and almost heart shaped leaves and like to grow in shady, woodsy spots. As with the buttercups, there are several variations that prefer different environments and there are even yellow ones in the south west of the province. Violets are the host plant of the Fritillary Butterfly.

Saline Shooting Star (*Dodecatheon pulchellum*) are amazing, unique little flowers about 6in. tall with pink backward facing petals so they look like little darts. They like damp ditches and meadows.

Buttercups (*ranunculus*). These are low growing tiny plants with small yellow petaled flowers with conical centres. The flower is usually five petaled. There are several varieties that have their favorite environments in which to grow. They can be found in both dry and damp spots, but are always in a sunny location.

Three-flowered Avens (*Geum triflorum*). This is a common flower in ditches and pastures where it can turn the ground pink when it is allowed to spread. It features finely cut leaves and a reddish stem featuring three pink downward facing flowers that never seem to open. The seed heads are frothy and pink and this is why it is sometimes named as Prairie Smoke. These plants carry the feature of many prairie plants in that the stems and leaves are covered with fine hair that protects it from the harsh winds of spring. This plant makes an excellent garden plant.

Mealy Primrose (*Primula Incana*) are not as common, but are amazing to find. They look exactly like the primroses blooming in your garden except in miniature with a single stem arising from a rosette of grayish green leaves and topped with a posy of tiny mauve flowers with yellow eyes. They even bloom at the same time.

Seneca Root (*Polygala senega*) grows in a small clump with spikes of small white flowers and narrow green leaves. This plant used to be dug and the root sold to the pharmaceutical trade because of its medicinal properties. They seem to like to grow with the Yellow Lady's Slippers.

The Arrow-leaved Coltsfoot (*Petasites frigidis*) grows to a height of approximately one foot. Its thick, green stem is topped with a cluster of small white flowers. They like to grow right in wet ditches. They then display big fluffy seed heads and the first leaves emerge. This seems to be the time when they are noticed. Apparently they smell nice but I have never gotten close enough in the soggy ground.

This is just a small handful of the plants that bloom in the spring. You can identify wildflowers by using *Wildflowers Across the Prairie* by Vance, Jowsey, McLean or go to www.saskwildflower.ca This is the easy to use and informative website of plant photographer Glen Lee.

Indigenous Plants? Part of your Garden?

Debbie Hayward

Gardeners are well aware of the positive results of growing native plants in their gardens. What are native plants? Native plants are plants that are indigenous to a certain area and are well-adapted to factors such as local weather, rainfall, and temperatures. The advantage of growing “native plants” is that not only are they beautiful, but they are tough enough to survive in our area.

Leopard Frog



Talking about native plants brings the inevitable question of taking plants from the wild. Some want to enjoy them in their own gardens; some see it as a rescue mission, some as a cost-cutting measure to getting new plant acquisitions.

Others feel that plants should grow where they are settled in nature; some fear that harvesting wild plants will destroy delicate ecosystems, or that over-harvesting plants could lead to their disappearance from a certain location forever.

For readers such as yourselves, who are very conscious of nature, the fragility of the environment, and how natural spaces must be cared for and nurtured for the sake of all the wildlife that lives there, plant lovers must consider this. Plants in the wild provide food and/or shelter for many birds, pollinators, and beneficial insects, and sustain life in various forms. Removing them is potentially harming that very fragile ecosystem. The damage goes beyond taking “just one plant”.

However, wild gardeners can rejoice because there are options for ethically sourced plants from growers who specialize in native plants.

The Native Plant Society of Saskatchewan can direct wild gardeners to a native plant material and services supplier list. The list has dozens of wild growers. Their website says that "The Native Plant Society of Saskatchewan (NPSS) provides this list to support and promote the use of native plants. We hope that through the use of native plants, people will come to understand and appreciate their importance, thereby encouraging their conservation in the wild. The NPSS provides other material related to the native seed industry, growing native plants, and general information on native plants and ecosystems." Visit them at npss.sk.ca.

Here's another example: Prairie Originals at prairieoriginals.com. Their lovely website says that they "specialize in growing native prairie wildflowers and native plants for landscaping. We can help you work with Mother Nature to create an environmentally-friendly wildflower garden that is beautiful, rewarding and easy to take care of. We sell indigenous Manitoban Prairie Wildflower Seeds and Native Prairie Plants, Grasses, Shrubs & Vines. Our indigenous plants are great for butterfly gardens, prairie meadows, gardens for birds, perennial flower beds, shade gardens, seasonally flooded gardens, lakeshore buffers, pollinator gardens, rain gardens, rock gardens and green roofs." Further, they tell us that... "Manitoba Prairie Wildflowers, Manitoba Prairie Grasses and Native Prairie Shrubs and Vines help you create not just a flower garden but a sustainable, exciting community where you can share your space with nature's creatures like birds, butterflies, toads and frogs. Our native prairie plants provide the staples of life, food and shelter, and this encourages these fascinating visitors to stay and raise a family."

Doesn't that sound great? It is wonderful to plant native plants in our gardens, to help out the birds and the bees and insects, but it is far preferable to do so in this manner.

Plants in the wild belong to nobody...but they belong to *everybody* in terms of an ecosystem that lives quietly alongside of us, where a multitude of wildlife resides... and that ecosystem must trust us to care for it, or at least not deliberately harm it. We can expand the life circle of wild plants by adding them to our gardens, and by doing so give pollinators, beneficial insects and beautiful birds one more happy and healthy place to stop in their daily travels.



A Valuable Sighting? Owl Say.

Tory Hartley-Cox

The Great Horned Owl is an iconic and highly adaptable species, often considered a synanthrope. A synanthropic species is a wild animal (not domesticated) that benefits from an association with humans or an environment humans created. Within the Mixed-grass prairies across Southern Alberta, Saskatchewan and Manitoba, the population of Great Horned Owls has been expanding due to increased urbanization of the region. A research project in collaboration between the University of Regina and the Royal Saskatchewan Museum aims to understand what features within human-altered landscapes have allowed owls to succeed here in prairie Canada.

Great Horned Owl (GHOW)



Photo: Tory Hartley-Cox

The project is asking for Citizen science reports on Great Horned Owl observations, with an emphasis on nesting locations, to understand habitat selection and population density in the prairies. Within southwest Saskatchewan, a few adult owls have been selected for additional monitoring using satellite transmitters to learn more about hunting behaviour and territory use. If you would like to contribute to or learn more about this study, please visit the YFBTA website (yfbta.com). Tory has provided additional informative details.

You are invited to contact the project directly at uofrowiresearch@gmail.com.

Check the YFBTA website for more on this initiative and another Great Horned Owl (GHOW) photograph.

Young Writers' Corner

My Grandma the Tree-hugger YFBTA member Dougal Farquharson

My grandma, Joan Farquharson, loved nature and especially trees but there was this one particular tree called the Little-leaf Linden. This tree she loved because of its great smell, the flowers, and it felt like the right tree to hug. She called herself a tree hugger which she got from hugging that tree. She felt better in her heart after hugging that tree which sounds absurd but it's the truth.

Ohio Buckeye



Photo: YFBTA member Stephen Farquharson

The tree is one of the largest in the entire garden, in the summer it blooms and shows the most beautiful flowers. You can smell it from across the property from one end to the other filling the air with its great smelling flowers. The worst part is that shoots grow on the bottom that we have to clip, a hundred tiny branches growing every few weeks. The one that was planted in this garden was planted in 1978 by my grandparents, Walter and Joan Farquharson. These trees are some of the most beautiful and fascinating. They can live for over a few hundred years and can grow as high as 80 feet and spread 40-50 feet. Most though are 30-40 feet tall and spread 35-40 feet. They were very uncommon in the prairies until a few decades ago. Now you can see them in many towns and cities including Yorkton.

My grandmother also had another tree that she liked, the Ohio Buckeye Tree. This was her second favorite tree out of all of them. It stands in the middle of the lawn growing taller than most of the other trees around. Its branches span across half the fenced area dropping their seeds all across the yard making it impossible to mow the grass. The one we have in the yard was planted by my grandparents in 1978. Ohio Buckeye trees usually grow 30-40 feet and 20-35 feet long. Many Ohio Buckeye trees live for 80-100 years and they begin producing fruit after about 8 years. After you peel away the outside you can see the dark brown color that it has which looks like a deer's eye, a Buckeye, which is how the tree got its name. The tree is also closely related to the Chestnut Tree which makes sense because of their similar looking fruit. Squirrels and blue jays love their fruit too

because they love to hide it underground, This can cause many small Ohio Buckeye trees to grow. The squirrels don't just hide them underground though, they hide them in our shed in which they fill every nook and cranny with the fruit. This tree is not native to Canada but can be found all across the country.

My grandma loved every single tree in the garden but these two trees held a special place in her big, big heart.



Something Worthy of a Grouse YFBTA member Fred Phillips

In the middle of March I was walking in my yard. A Ruffed Grouse began to follow me. Over the next few days the grouse reappeared displaying aggressive actions. At one point it approached close enough to be between my feet. I couldn't get rid of it.

Within a week, it tried to land in my bag of groceries. It flew against the back of my legs, pecking. On day it situated itself behind my car. I opened the door to frighten it away from the car but instead of leaving, it attempted to get into the car with me.

During each of these aggressive actions it would have dark feathers around its neck puffed up.

Note: Check our website (yfbta.com) to see Fred's photo of this aggressive Ruffed Grouse.

Annette Labine also provided photos of a grouse.

Avian Occupancies at the Murray Farm

YFBTA members George and Laurie Murray

- 2010** The Murrays obtained 11 nesting boxes. Modifications were made and houses were set out. 22 eggs (Tree Swallows -) were observed in 3 of the boxes. Wrens were noted in another three boxes (no eggs observed). Disappointment as Bluebirds had been anticipated but were not observed.
- 2011** 28 eggs in 6 boxes (Tree Swallows). Wrens observed nesting in 2 boxes. 4 Bluebird eggs observed. 2 boxes were unused.
- 2011** The Murrays re-located 4 boxes away from trees thinking that this might deter Wren nesting and hoping for an increase in Bluebird occupancy. 11 boxes contained 50 eggs (Tree Swallows).
- 2013** 11 boxes contained 35 eggs (Tree Swallows).
- 2014** 11 boxes contained 32 eggs (Tree Swallows).
- 2015** 11 boxes contained 24 eggs (Tree Swallows).
- 2016** 10 boxes contained 32 eggs (Tree Swallows). Three Bluebird eggs were observed in 1 box. The Bluebirds did not remain in the house to attend to the eggs. Later in the season the unhatched and broken-shelled eggs were observed in the house.
- 2017** 11 boxes contained 18 eggs (Tree Swallows).
- 2018** 8 boxes (two had been toppled and a third had a damaged roof) contained 10 eggs (Tree Swallows).
- 2019** boxes contained 27 eggs (Tree Swallows). One box contained 4 bluebird eggs. Four Bluebirds were fledged this year.
- 2020** 8 boxes contained 48 eggs (Tree Swallows). At the end of the season four box boxes were re-located.

2021 22 eggs were observed (Tree Swallows). Some boxes were unused. The summer was noted to have been hot and dry.

2022 Five boxes were moved. 8 boxes contained 44 eggs (Tree Swallows).

Note: The Murrays have noted a pattern – each year following a year in which boxes were moved (2012; 2020 and 2022) there were more eggs than the previous year. George and Laurie are wondering whether there is a connection between moving boxes and total numbers of eggs in a subsequent year.

Longtail Weasel



Photo: Crystal Szabo

What's Flying Around: Newsletter Group Volunteers

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