

Yellowhead Flyway Birding Trail Association Inc.

What's flying around....



Editorial: Nature's Tax (NT)

The meaning of the word tax is mostly contemplated when it is employed as a noun. The word, when serving as a verb, means to "make a heavy demand on someone's powers or resources." I refer to the verb definition when I state that I am taxed by Nature. I frequently and continuously pay Nature's taxes.

I appreciate three species of woodpeckers (Downy – *Picoides pubescens*, Hairy – *Picoides villosus*, and Piliated – *Dryocopus pileatus*) that frequent my yard. I am pleased to view them. Providing food brings a modicum of pleasure as does the opportunity for yet-another photograph. Alas these Picidae, to the detriment of a number of trees on the property, are determined to peck, pry and chisel (NT). I am not sufficiently naive to entertain a belief that they will desist while enjoying the place with bulging digestive tracts (courtesy of offered Black Sunflower Seeds and animal fat).

Prior to the freezing of Anderson Lake, I could, from my window, see a few Muskrats swimming, diving, and feeding. They were afforded kindly treatment. My welcoming disposition was not sufficient to prevent a subsequent tunneling into the yard edge (NT).

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I host Trembling Aspens (*Populus tremuloides*) and Bur Oak (*Quercus macrocarpa*) trees, I take care to not break limbs, I water. I weed out competing species from their bases. These actions do not deter the aspen from producing numerous catkins and delivering them, via their sticky coatings, into my home and onto my floors (which sometimes become stained) NT. They will also, later, cover my yard with white fluff (NT).

YFBTA: visit to local road allowance



These aspens host Cankerworms (Family Geometer) and Tent Caterpillars (*Malacosoma Americanum*) – NT. I do enjoy the chickadees, warblers, Vireos, and Thrushes that dine in their midst. I am aware that Sharp – tailed Grouse (*Tympanuchus phasianellus*) depend upon dormant male flowers contained within fall buds. I feel good about harbouring a seed source for plants that are essential to carry these beautiful birds through the winter months.

In a vein of indifference similar to that of Trembling Aspen, the Bur Oak showers my driveway and the roof of my truck with baskets of oak nuts (NT).

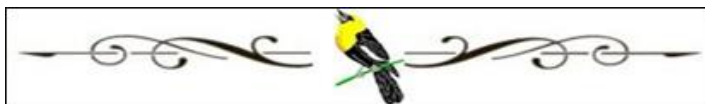
I smile, watching the Red Squirrel (*Tamiasciurus hudsonicus*) on an apex perch, separating these acorns (there is a nut in each cup) from branches. I also admire the squirrel's tenacity and resilience as it harvests and transports the results of its travail, leaving the non-digestible vegetation on the lawn, driveway, and my truck (NT).

A grape vine has self-planted on the southwest corner of my home. It receives none of the care afforded to the Bur Oak yet it thrives with astonishing aggression. Each summer I have to cut crawling vines from the nearby oak, from the lights (motion detector type which are triggered by waving grape leaves at unwanted times) above my deck and from the front of my kitchen window (NT). I fondly remember the time that a Catbird (*Dumetella carolinensis*) chose to build a nest among those leaves and vines just below the kitchen window.

I do not want to fail to mention the Barn Swallows that build their nests above my second story window ledges. The birds, unlike their poop, are a joy throughout the summer. They earn admiration and respect as they labour intensely to feed hatchlings. I am always mildly perturbed upon discovering that they have, unannounced, made a fall departure (perhaps becoming Snow Birds) without dismantling their no-longer-needed domicile (NT).

I offer contemplations of my willingness to pay NT. Nature provides moments. When I am engaged with nature, I am "present in a moment". In this state I am able to contemplate that which I am experiencing. Most observations (like the Catbird one) occur in spaces of peace and serenity. Some moments bring amazement—the tenacity of the squirrels for example. Other moments provide wonderment; how do animals manage to migrate; how do woodpeckers remember? Some times I find Nature to be mysterious. Many of these contemplations are derived vicariously from Nature.

Some moments bring a smile and occasionally a chuckle. Many of these moments become shared conversation pieces thus promoting social interaction. In short I appreciate the taxes.



Beavers: Pests or Stewards?

YFBTA member Kenn Wood

I have been infatuated by beavers (*Castor Canadensis*) since 1996 when we moved to our farm. Cussed Creek bisects the southern-most quarter section and has been a beaver haven for millennia. This creek dries up in most summers so why am I making the above statement?

The south bank features a steep drop (20 to 30 feet) to the creek for approximately a quarter mile. The water table on all our land is very high and there are several places where springs exit the bank (just a few feet above the creek). These springs run year round. Several beaver dams along the creek, on this quarter section, create ponds that provide ample drinking water for the cattle and wildlife that graze there in the driest of years. They also facilitate a beaver reproductive haven – a source of babies to repopulate areas decimated by drought or slaughter by human beings.

Otters (*Lutra canadensis*) on Cussed Creek



Photo: YFBTA member: Kenn Wood

Beavers are considered to be a "keystone species". This means that their activities facilitate the creation of an environment that fosters the proliferation of many different plants and animals. Woodpeckers are another example of a keystone species—many different species of birds nest in the holes created in trees as woodpeckers searched for insects.

These pale in comparison to the habitat modification of beavers. What are some examples of this?

The dominant tree lining the banks of most creeks in Saskatchewan is the Manitoba Maple. This is not because these trees have shallow roots requiring a high water table (maples were most common shade tree planted around the homes of early settlers). It evolves because beavers do not like maples. They do cut down the odd maple but the bark is nowhere as digestible as the bark of their favorite tree – the aspen. A beaver-downed aspen will be stripped of its bark and smaller branches for nutrition. Some branches of a downed maple tree may be used for construction purposes but most are left behind. For an aspen forest to flourish it must be distant from a beaver pond.

It must take decades for maple trees to become the dominant tree along Saskatchewan creeks. The aspen has a very shallow root system and if clear cut by beavers replacement trees rapidly spring from these roots (“suckering”) and a new forest will emerge in a few years. Beavers must repeatedly mow “suckers” in order for a Maple forest to come into being.

All animals need water to survive. In drought-prone Saskatchewan the water retention facilitated by beavers allows a multitude of species to flourish. The health and survival of waterfowl, rabbits, coyotes, foxes, bison, insects and a host of others are dependent on *Castor Canadensis*.

A species that appeared recently on our property is the River Otter. Otters usually need larger water bodies in which to thrive. They are sometimes seen down stream from the point where Cussed Creek joins the White Sand River. I believe that that the earlier mentioned springs facilitate this. Where springs run out of the hillside, ice remains open all winter—a doorway to an otter restaurant!

Creatures that have benefited the most from the activities of this keystone species are humans. The water retention facilitated by beavers has a tremendously positive effect upon a major prairie business - agriculture. The most profound effect of beavers was facilitation of a fur trade. The fur trade via the Hudson Bay and the Northwest Companies, over hundreds of years, ultimately facilitated the settlement of Canada by Europeans!

Believe it or not settlement was driven by a fashion for “top hats” in Europe! This fashion trend led, not only to European settlement of North America, but to the extirpation of beavers in many northern states.

The control of beavers is often a contentious matter. Many Saskatchewan farmers, after witnessing a “clear cut” of poplar bush near a creek or small lake, think that the varmints that caused the clearances should be murdered. Simultaneously, In the USA some northern states are undergoing a process of re-introducing beavers!

The Saskatchewan Association of Rural Municipalities operates a beaver control program that walks a middle ground. SARM provides bounties to people with trappers’ licenses (payment for a service of removing “nuisance beavers”). An example of a nuisance beaver would be one whose dam flooded a road. This strikes me as a sensible control program that recognizes an environmental benefit of beavers.

There are options, other than trapping, to control nuisance beavers. Pond levelers and “beaver deceivers” are two alternatives. The book *Eager: The Surprising, Secret Life of Beavers and Why They Matter* (Ben Goldfarb; 2019) contains descriptions of these. This book is a “must read” for beaver enthusiasts.

The beaver has been anointed as the Canadian National Mammal – a totally appropriate decision as was the choice to decorate the nickel with *Castor Canadensis*. These decisions encourage me to feel that I am a proud Canadian!



Submitted: YFBTA member Gloria Rathgeber

Awe and Wonder

Molra Theede

I remember a Thanksgiving Sunday, travelling on various roads throughout the countryside north of Saskatoon. I was scanning the fields near and far. Turning to my enthusiastic driver I said, "I see many, many blobs of white **way** over there and they can't be sheep as we aren't in New Zealand". As we headed west we saw a large slough on the north side of the road. At the north end of the slough, about 500 meters from the road, we could see a slope covered with Whooping Cranes! This was an awe inspiring sight to say the least.

This was our first sighting of wild Whooping Cranes. These birds have a narrow migration path stretching from Wood Buffalo National Park to Texas.



Out came the binoculars and the camera with the zoom lens. We were out of the van to get a better look. We made best guesses as to the number of birds. To this day I can shut my eyes and visualize the bobbing heads, feeding on wheat swaths. The light brown juveniles were easy to spot - seventeen of them here and there among the adults. The total count of wild cranes was 125. The feeding frenzy caused me to think that they hadn't eaten for a long time. Could they have flown non-stop from Wood Buffalo National Park?

The next day, with a friend, Dave, we again found the cranes in the same spot. This time they were more spread out. We headed down a narrow dirt road. In the distance we could see the edge of a small slough.

Nice, I thought to myself. It would be easy to photograph the ice surfaces with the early morning sun. Just before noon blustery snow arrived (contrary to the weather forecast). The winds were high and through my new camera video zoom I could see two adults sheltering a juvenile between them from the snow and wind. The juvenile was significantly smaller than the adult birds. The caring gesture just showed the instinctual protection provided for the young one.

As we came to a stop "D" whispered, "Lo-o-k"; nine Whooping Cranes, in the middle area of the slough, were walking across the ice. The adult cranes walked as if they had little grippers on their 3-toed feet. This was clearly a new experience for the juvenile. At first the young one would take a step and 'slide to the side for stability. Right - step & slide then left - step & slide. With a little bit of practice and getting closer to the other side of the slough, the juvenile was right in sync behind mom and dad. A rather nice ice dance. Then all eight adult cranes lined up on the far side of the slough knowing exactly how far apart to be and waiting patiently for the juvenile to get into position at the end of the row. As we watched they lifted and flew towards us. It was a choreographed event.

The large group of cranes stayed in the area for about three weeks. We experienced moments of delight especially when watching Whooping Cranes come in to land- legs straight (locked) and spread wide apart - and, once, touching the ground, taking a few short running steps before becoming fully grounded. In the strong winds, seeing them line up in a long row like cyclists drafting behind each other was a fascinating sight. One day the largest adult crane took the lead position facing directly into the wind with all the others lined up behind, some standing on one leg resting.

We witnessed Whooping Crane dances. Two or three birds would spread their wings (~7.5 feet) and bounce, sometimes with both feet. We assumed this action was related to defending personal space. On one of the last of our "Days with the Cranes" a male and female pair flew directly towards us and "checking us out as they did a very low 'fly over' of our van. An exciting moment. And I was very lucky to be leaning out the window with my camera in hand as they flew over. It really did feel like they were saying goodbye on that day in late October, 2018.

Deception

Shirley Pearson

There is a lot to be said about a name. The Pink Lady slipper gets its name from its pink, hollow pouch-shaped flowers which looks like slippers.

The Pink Lady Slipper is one of 52 species of the Orchid family - *Cypripedium*. The scientific name is *Cypripedium Reginae* (*Queen*) which is synonymous with *Cypripedium Spectabile* (*Spectacular*). Ergo the "*Spectacular Queen*".



Photo: YFBTA member Shirley Pearson

Years ago I was gifted some wild Pink Lady Slippers. Over the years, the cluster of six has become a cluster of 13 and the cluster of three has become a cluster of eight. I tried sharing with gardener friends, but with no success. I don't think the "*queens*" like to be disturbed. Most summers our pink ladies slippers have 1 to 2 flowers per stem. Four summers ago we had 3 to 4 flowers on each stem.

They really are "*spectacular*." I hear tell this orchid is hard to find and is quite challenging to grow. According to the [Wild Seed Project](#) "The pink lady slipper orchid is a good example of a wild creature that does not want to be tamed".

That being said, I feel truly grateful that these "*spectacular*" flowers have honoured our yard with their presence for more than 20 years. We have been able to share their beauty with friends, neighbours, and family each summer.

I imagine it is because of their "*spectacular*" beauty that in 1947 the province of Prince Edward Island officially made the Pink Lady Slipper the province's floral emblem. The Pink Lady Slipper is the state flower of Minnesota. It has also appeared on Canadian postage stamps.

My minimal research of the Pink Lady Slipper led me to a very interesting characteristic of this flower. The lady slipper has a very unusual way of pollinating.

According to the [US Department of Agriculture](#), "the Pink Lady Slipper requires a bee, mainly the queen Bumble Bee for pollination. The bee is attracted to the flower's bright colour and sweet scent. A slit in the front of the flower lures a Bumble Bee queen.

According to the [Natural Web](#) and the [North American Orchid Conservation Centre](#), Pink Lady Slippers invest a lot of energy to produce lovely flowers that entice pollinators to assist with cross pollination. The pollinators, of course, expect a reward in the form of nectar and pollen. Unbeknownst to the bee the entrance to the flower is one-way only. Once inside, the bee cannot retreat because the edges of the entryway are curved inward making a return exit impossible.

The bee is trapped until she finds a different way out, and the only way out was engineered by the plant. The bee is required to squeeze through a snug passage, past the flower's reproductive parts, to get to the exit. The bee will have to brush against the flower's stigma. This brushing will deposit pollen the bee may have brought with her. She then squeezes out of the plant carrying new pollen.

For all her hard work, the bee was expecting nectar and pollen. The Pink Lady Slipper does not produce nectar, and because of the design of the flower, the bee cannot ingest pollen. The bee got nothing. She was totally bamboozled (or, perhaps, bee-boozled) and was definitely **deceived** with the false advertising—beautiful colour and enticing scent.

That folks, is deception. It is The Spectacular Deceptive Queen - a.k.a. The Pink Lady Slipper.

You might like to check out the Farmer's Almanac Legends and Lore regarding the Pink Lady Slipper. You may learn why it is sometimes referred to as a "moccasin flower"

When in Naure, Be Prepared to be Surprised

Sighting: Jim Oliver

I saw a Hawk Owl (*Perdix perdix*) on November 16, a few miles north of Saltcoats. I was rattling for White Tails at the time. I believe the owl came to investigate. It watched me for half an hour (I passed on a fork horn buck that came in). When I got up to leave, it flew over and landed on an old barn. I was amazed when it let me walk out, very close to it. Very cool experience. Several times when coyote hunting, using a rabbit distress call, I've had Great Horned Owls approach. This Horned owl was the first to respond to rattling.

On one occasion I was able to get very close to *Accipiter gentilis*—a Northern Goshawk).



Hawk Owl
Photo; allaboutbirds.org

Sighting: Ray and Dorothy Riesz

While driving to Buchanan we saw a Red-headed Woodpecker (*Melanerpes erythrocephalus*) fly across the road . It landed land on a fence post on the east side of the highway. We watched it periodically pecking on the post and feeding on the ground. We were surprised at the sighting. We didn't think to take a picture (I have not seen this species before but Dorothy has).

We watched for that bird on our return trip. This time we had our iPad ready. Just as we got to the point where we had seen it before, it flew out of the ditch on the opposite side, almost hitting the truck. It landed on a fencepost on the east side of the road. This time we were able to get some pictures however, they were not very clear. This sighting took place on Highway 47 almost three quarters of a mile south of the culverts where Spirit Creek crosses under the road.



Photo; allaboutbirds.org

Will You Renew for 2024?

YFBTA is determined to be active in 2024. Road allowance, loon monitoring, Bluebird and Christmas Bird Count initiatives will continue. Outdoor social activities will happen throughout the year. YFBTA continues to support the University of Regina and the Royal Saskatchewan Museum (citizen science) by reporting sightings of Great Horned Owls.

Our aim is to encourage awareness of Nature. YFBTA Is particularly interested in youth and continuously searches for ways to connect young people with Nature.

Will you consider supporting YFBTA with a membership renewal and/or by "gifting" a 2024 membership?



Young Writers' Corner

Birding in the Duck Mountains Jaxson and Lucas Hanse

I, Lucas, woke up and Uncle Rob was awake so we sat and watched out the window. We saw a beaver and squirrel. We saw a White-throated Sparrow, a sapsucker and a hummingbird. We saw three crows too. We also heard a Merlin and a loon. Then my brother Jaxson got up and we headed out for our planned adventure.

Yellow-bellied Sapsucker (*Sphyrapicus varius*)



Photo: YFBTA member Rob Wilson

We got in the car and we drove toward Jackfish Lake. As we were driving we saw a Cooper's Hawk. Then we left Jackfish Lake and headed to a hiking trail. We saw a Golden-hawk dragonfly, Northern Flickers, Carpenter Ants, a Bufflehead, Indian Pipe, a Great Blue Heron, a dead darter and a Common Merganser.

After that we drove home and ate pancakes. Yum. It was a fun hike and we got to see so many cool things.

Editor's note: Can be viewed on YFBTA website

Published newsletters - 2004 - 2023

Loon Initiative reports - 2009—2023

Fluttering Wings

YFBTA member Rob Wilson

While banding Bluebirds with YFBTA in the spring of 2023, I noted the following species (common names) of butterflies:

Common Ringlet
Silvery Blue
Pearl Crescent
White Admiral
Monarch
Tiger Swallowtail
Clouded Sulfur
Cabbage White
Painted Lady

I also noted that Silvery Groundsel is a butterfly magnet. I do not know the species of butterfly that was so strongly attracted. I was informed that the above mentioned aster is important to that particular species. When mating and egg laying become dominant activities, the aster provides a timely and abundant source of nectar for the male and female butterflies.

Loon Survey of Madge Lake

YFBTA member Rob Wilson

Report re: A Survey of Common Loons (*Gavia immer*) on Madge Lake (only) within Saskatchewan's Duck Mountain Provincial Park

Loon Initiatives Committee: Warren Douglas
Welykholowa (chair)
Rob Wilson Bob Wynes

Date: Aug. 29, 2023

Participants: Warren Douglas Welykholowa; Rob Wilson; Morley Maier; Paula Maier; Jennifer Maier; Jameson Maier.

Notes (from discussions during August 29, 2023 loon survey of Madge Lake, only).

Loons on Madge Lake may belong to various groups. These groups frequent different areas of Madge Lake.

Groups:

- Paired loons defending territories (usually caring for eggs, chicks or juveniles);
- loons associated with a 2023 failed nesting attempt
- juvenile loons that failed to secure breeding opportunities;
- Individual loons not involved with breeding. Group may have “fly-ins” from water bodies other than Madge Lake

Some research has revealed that Common Loons do not migrate northward in the spring until they reach an age of three years.

The committee’s greatest interest is in determining a count of the 2023 loons, (raised only on Madge Lake) that have survived to the juvenile stage. It is assumed that those loons will attempt to migrate southward in September or early October. We do not have data which suggests the **success rate** of loons attempting to migrate for the first time.

An organized group of cabin owners, the Friends of Madge Lake (website: friendsofmadgelake.ca), wishes to support our Madge Lake initiative. Some of their members have committed to watching for loons, recording sightings and reporting to our committee (best management practices or BMPs).

Usually, when a survey during which all of the lake is observed, approximately 80 adult loons are noted. Many of these loons are not breeding loons.



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Some loon facts

Two adults and two chicks through the spring, summer and fall consume (estimated) 225 kg of walleye, jackfish, other minnows, crayfish, and other foods.

A loon is approximately the same size as a Canada Goose (wingspan 33-35 inches).

Adult loons weigh 9-16 pounds.

Unmated adult loons and sometimes one member of a mated pair will depart (up to six weeks) on their fall migration before the juveniles have developed flight feathers which enable them to fly long distances. One parent bird will remain to assist with the care of fledglings. Juveniles sometimes migrate independently of adult birds.

Editor’s note: Doug has prepared an extensive report for the federal government’s Birds Canada organization. This report contains maps and photographs. It has been shared with park staff, with Nature Saskatchewan, and with YFBTA members-in-good-standing. For your interest, YFBTA has placed the report on its website.

What’s Flying Around: Newsletter Group Volunteers

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