

Yellowhead Flyway Birding Trail Association Inc.

What's flying around....



Story

YFBTA member Gerri Knudsen

Nature often draws our attention, capturing an awareness. Becoming aware of Nature may create an emotional response. Such a response may be fascination, surprise and/or delight. It may bring joy. You may be in solitude or in companionship. These positive emotional responses are ones that we tend to share with others. An example might be the recounting of the sighting of one of the spring migrant birds such as that first goose or robin that has returned to its northern habitat.

Becoming aware of Nature may well lead to a caring for Nature. This too, is something likely to be shared. Nature can be appreciated, supported and shared in many diverse ways.

One on the finest sharing vehicles is that of the story. Below, Gerri Knudsen shares a personal story (filled with love of the land, of family and of Nature).

Growing up on a mixed farm in Saskatchewan over 70 years ago meant having nature all around. We had hay meadows, lots of trees in the pastures, country roads to bike down, many sloughs to wade, ponds in which to dip and get wet.

My Dad, Jim Trowell, knew the local birds and referred to them by their proper names, so I grew up knowing and feeding them. I loved being outside and would gladly do gardening or feeding animals instead of cooking, cleaning, or inside chores. (It's easier to slip away for a bike ride if you are already outside at chore time).

Swainson's Thrush (Catharus ustulatus)



Photo: Lee Carpenter
Taken from Internet

Inside this issue:

State of Canada's Birds Mercy Harris	3
Nuthatch Opinions Trent Wilson	5
A Wrenching Message YFBTA member Arden Bradford	7
Christmas Bird Count Summary YFBTA members	8

In the early '70s, Ron and I moved to an acreage east of Melfort. There was a large bush and treed yard which protected many birds and squirrels for us to watch. Our children took an interest in them too. Raising livestock meant we had a variety of feed available, so there were many species to watch.

Fast forward 30 years to Ron and I now living in Cranbrook, B.C. We had birding experts and fine mentors in this group.

Art Gruening recruited us to monitor one of his many Bluebird trails (Art was awarded a national medal for his naturalist work).

We lived near Elizabeth Lake and walked the lake area, finding birds and Painted Turtles there. We also visited Kimberley and Invermere areas for birding events such as Wings Over the Rockies.

We were hooked on our weekly walks along the trails, with the Purcell Mountain range as our back drop scenery. Being able to see the nests and the stages of bird's lives, eggs, fledglings and adult departures from the nests were gifts of Nature. We had a Chickadee nest once on our line (the box was placed too close to bushes), but, bonus, baby Chickadees are the cutest little baby birds I have ever seen.

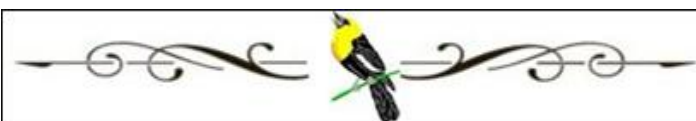
Upon retiring to Saltcoats, we immediately found the YFBTA to be a group within which we have continued our adventures with Nature.

Jim and Shirley Jowsey were glad to have a driver on outings. They gladly shared plant and bird knowledge. The YFBTA group continues to provide great fellowship and inspiration. This keeps our commitment strong.

Sharp-tailed (*Tympanuchus phasianellus*)



Photo: Internet BOTW
American Bird Conservancy



Interesting Sightings

March 31 on Anderson Lake

21 Bald Eagles were spotted feeding on a dead deer.

August 20 on Anderson Lake

5 Sora Rails spotted by Shevon Wilson

Bald Eagle (*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*)



Photo: Juvenile
Internet: Blair Dudeck
Macaulay Library

YFBTA Initiatives

- Monitoring of nesting Common Loons at Madge Lake throughout 2025
- Assisting with Nature Saskatchewan's Spring Meet in Yorkton
- Partnership with Saltcoats School to commemorate Arbour Day
- * Social gathering at Maier's Farm

Participate in the National Lake Blitz

Become a citizen scientist by sharing images of plants, wildlife, birds on iNaturalist under the Lake Blitz Lake Biodiversity Stewards Project.

<https://www.inaturalist.org/projects/lake-blitz-lake-biodiversity-stewards>

State of Canada's Birds

Submitted by Mercy Harris

If you're like me, you eagerly await spring so that you can watch the prairie skies fill with dozens of species of birds. I love taking mental notes about when I hear the first Song Sparrow, or how many Gadwalls I see dabbling in a wetland. Recently, however, I have found that some of my mental notes relate to the species I'm *not* seeing – how I haven't yet seen a Mountain Bluebird this year, or how the chorus of Western Meadowlarks seemed quieter this spring. When these thoughts pop in my head, I wonder whether I'm alone in not seeing these species, or if they are really becoming less abundant. It turns out that I'm not the only one wondering about the trends of Canadian birds.

In October 2024, Environment and Climate Change Canada and the non-profit Birds Canada jointly released a report called "The State of Canada's Birds". This report outlines how much the population of individual species (e.g., Gadwall) and groups of birds (e.g., waterfowl) have changed since 1970. I encourage you to view the report by [clicking here](#) and browse the profiles for individual species by [clicking here](#).

The report highlights that different types of birds are experiencing different trends. Some groups such as [waterfowl](#) and [birds of prey](#) have increased since the 1970s. For waterfowl, these increases are thanks to conservation efforts like the North American Waterfowl Management Plan, while for raptors bans on DDT have been critical. However, other groups of birds have declined dramatically. For example, birds like Barn Swallows that catch insects while in flight, known as "[aerial insectivores](#)", have decreased 43% since 1970. Even worse, birds like Western Meadowlarks that breed in prairie habitats, known as "[grassland birds](#)" have decreased 67%.

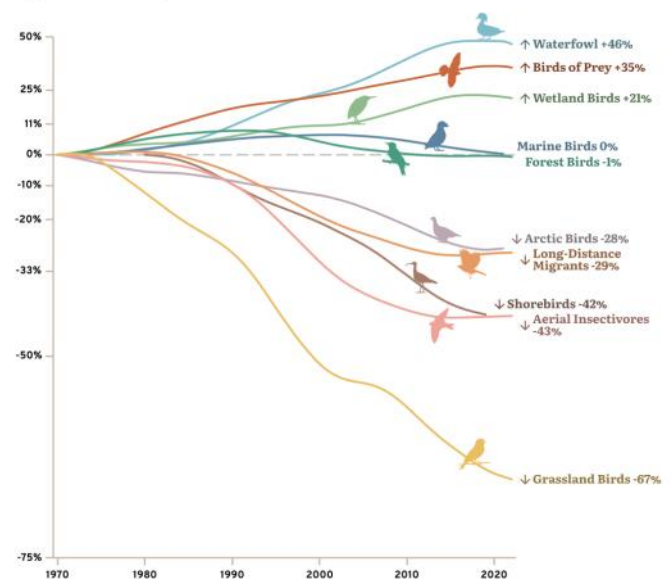
It is sobering to learn that many of the birds that fill our prairie skies are in decline. However, I believe it is important to remember that each of us can take action to help these birds. Below, I dive into what is causing the declines of aerial insectivores and grassland birds, and what we can do to make our prairie landscapes friendlier for birds.

Aerial Insectivores

If you've ever seen swallows swooping in pursuit of insects, you know what aerial insectivores are all about. This group of birds – which includes swallows, flycatchers, swifts (like the Chimney Swift), and nightjars (like the Common Nighthawk) – eat exclusively aerial insects like moths, gnats, and flies.

This group declined steeply in the 1980s and '90s, leading several species like the Bank Swallow and Chimney Swift, both of which declined by more than 90% across Canada, to be listed as Threatened.

Population change since 1970



The reasons for these declines are not completely understood. Given the group's shared reliance on aerial insect prey, these declines may be due to reduced availability of high-quality insect prey, possibly from increased insecticide use or degradation of insect habitat.

Further, some aerial insectivores that rely on specific habitat features – such as Bank Swallows, which often nest in the side of gravel pits – are also vulnerable to destruction of their nesting sites. Fortunately, some aerial insectivore species seem to have stopped declining in recent years, leaving conservationists with the challenge of restoring these species to their previous level of abundance.

There are several things we can do to help aerial insectivores recover. First, by protecting natural areas we protect the insect communities upon which these birds rely. Wetlands are particularly important to conserve, as insects like midges and gnats that emerge from wetlands contain fatty acid compounds that make them a highly nutritious food for some aerial insectivores. Second, reducing or eliminating insecticide use helps maintain healthy insect communities for aerial insectivores. Finally, if you see nesting birds – such as Barn Swallows in your barn – give them space so that chicks don't become scared and leave the nest before they are ready.

Grassland Birds

Grasslands birds are perfectly adapted for life without trees, nesting on the ground and often having streaky brown coloration to blend in with grasses. This group includes many sparrows, the iconic Western Meadowlark, and even some shorebird species like the Upland Sandpiper that nest in grass. These species have been in steep decline since the 1990s, and numerous species are listed under the Species at Risk Act, such as the Sprague's Pipit (Threatened) and the Chestnut-collared Longspur (Endangered). These declines are caused by conversion of native grassland to cropland; only 20-30% of native mixed-grass and shortgrass prairie remains in North America.

If you are a landowner, your land use decisions can make a difference for these birds. Maintaining any remnant native prairie along field edges, around wetlands, or in pastures provides valuable habitat for grassland birds. Additionally, grassland bird nests are often destroyed during haying; if you can delay cutting by even one week, it will allow more chicks to survive. Finally, if you eat meat, search for sustainable grass-fed beef, as pastures grazed by cattle also support grassland birds.

Editor's note: The YFBTA/YNS Road Allowance Project (supported by several area Rural Municipalities) provided the kind of habitats described in the article above.

Western Meadow Lark



Photo: Mercy Harris

Final Thoughts

The State of Canada's Birds report highlights the plight of many species in our own backyard. Though large-scale conservation efforts are needed to save species in decline, there are also small actions that each of us can take to make the prairies more bird friendly. And speaking of being bird friendly, one additional step that coffee-drinkers can take is to buy [Bird Friendly Coffee](#).

Though this doesn't directly relate to the situations faced by aerial insectivores or grassland birds, migratory forest birds like warblers benefit from conservation-focused coffee farming practices that conserve critical forest habitat in Latin America. With all this in mind, I hope that as you observe nature this summer, you will not only observe the beauty of the birds you see, but also be inspired to do your part to conserve them.

Nature Saskatchewan: Humanity in Harmony with Nature

Nuthatch– Awesome Bird

Trent wilson

Looking out the window on a VERY cold January day, I watched interestedly as a Nuthatch hopped between the spindles of the deck railing. It appeared to be grabbing hold of old spider webs and “wrapping” the web around and around its bill.

This sparked curiosity about the nature of the behaviour – was this a clever feeding behaviour - did it plan to eat some “remnants” of insect carcasses? Or was it gathering nesting material? This didn’t really make sense to me, in January.

I started learning more about this bird, and discovered it is a fascinating visitor to our backyard. Just what is so great about Nuthatches? Well, kinda everything ...

Species

First, the goodness is that there is MORE to love! There are 2 species of Nuthatch that you may see in your neighbourhood, and BOTH are noteworthy (and picture-worthy) sightings. Which brings us to our next applaudable attribute:

Attractiveness

Distinctive, recognizable, beautifully adorned, and even “cute”, according to my two daughters, the Nuthatch has visual appeal in spades. More commonly spotted is the smaller, Red-Breasted Nuthatch (it got the looks, although they both got the brains - more on that later).

The Red-Breasted Nuthatch is quickly identified by its beautiful blue-gray colour, contrasted with white-and-black markings across its plumage from head to ... toe? claw? talon? The intelligent dark eyes are prominent against a “mask” of white. It has a noticeable black cap like a Chickadee, but sports distinctive black and white eyelines. This small songbird presents with a short stocky body whose shape is reminiscent of a wren or even a hummingbird, without much of a neck.

What am I forgetting ... ?? Oh, yes! The RED-BREASTED Nuthatch has ... wait for it ... reddish colouration on the front part of its body, which may be described as a cinnamon, rust, or orangey-reddish colour.

The White-BREASTED NUTHATCH contrasts.

It has...yes, I WILL spell it out... white plumage on its breast. It is also a couple of centimetres larger than it’s cheeky little counterpart and may tend to be a little more shy (less commonly spotted).

The White-breasted Nuthatch still sports the distinctive dark crown-prominent in the males, but less so in the females (more blue-gray than black). This species also lacks the contrasting black-and-white “eye lines”- they are absent, or significantly less prominent than the Red-breasted variety.

The plumage on their back is comprised of contrasting light and dark feathers, or dark feathers with white tips amongst the blue-gray “base” colour, which can look “banded” or otherwise highly patterned.

Red-breasted Nuthatch (*Sitta canadensis*)



Photo: Gibbs Barrow
Lynnhaven River NOW

Both are handsome birds, to be sure, but we shouldn’t be so shallow– beyond looks, there is a LOT to like about this little guy.

Hardiness & Adaptability

The Nuthatch has perfectly evolved and adapted to live in the same environment as Woodpeckers without having to compete with them directly; and has even managed to benefit from their Hard-Headed cousins.

Nuthatches are the only birds that will “hop” DOWN TREES, giving them a unique perspective to find insects under the bark, that are apt to be missed by their rivals.

They manage this with their uniquely adapted foot design: the backward-facing toe (Hallux) is their longest toe, AND the entire toe has evolved into a claw-like shape. This unique adaption allows it to cling in an inverted position, and enables their unique behaviour of descending a tree while feeding.

Speaking of adapting on the fly (or perhaps adapting to a lack of flies!) Nuthatches prefer to feed on insects; however, they have been shown to adapt their diet for fat-rich nuts and seeds to survive the harsh conditions and reduced insect availability in Winter (which is why you may entice them to your feeder!)

They not only adapt – they adopt!! Nuthatches nest in natural cavities or holes made by Woodpeckers; and here we get our first glimpse of the intelligence these birds demonstrate. They have learned to “tag behind” their blunt-instrument rivals and make their home once the hard work of excavation has been completed.

Further, after the Woodpecker has smashed his face all day, insects that emerge from the bored-out holes seek refuge under the bark of the tree – easy pickings for our inverted valiant vertebrate feathered friend.

Ingenuity & Intelligence

This point has been made in describing the advantageous ways they benefit from rivals in their environment, but there are numerous further intriguing examples.

To keep out would-be predators and threats to eggs and young (SQUIRRELS!) as well as would-be parasites crawling along trees, Nuthatches will line the entrance to their cavity- or burrow-style nest with pitch - a pungent, super-sticky, mud/tar/pine/tree sap mixture. (Was THIS the purpose of the gathered spider web?).

What is truly amazing is that Nuthatches will use sticks to gather the noxious materials and “smear” them all around the entrance, in one of the very rare displays of TRUE applied tool use in the bird world (no, this is NOT the same as dropping clams on rocks or sticking bugs onto thorns!)

White-breasted Nuthatch (*Sitta carolinensis*)



*Photo: Denis Allard
Internet Macaulay Library*

While those afore-mentioned displays of cunning may “Shrike” fear into the hearts of other birds, the trick of using the environment to a feeding advantage is also matched by our cognitively-capable companion: The Nuthatch is so-named for wedging nuts and seeds into crevices to “brace” them to be split apart or “hatched” by their sharp bill.

At risk of “eggs-aggerating” their intelligence (I don’t want to “lay it on too thick”), Nuthatches have been observed to “Stash-and-cache” food for later retrieval; further proof of out-classing most bird-brained peers. (Would a tacky spider web be a good spot to stick some nuts and seeds for later – was I witnessing a mid-afternoon snack?)

Agility

The Nuthatch is no featherweight in this department. Remember that pitch-lined entrance to the nest that seemed like such a “goood” idea at the time? Perching birds cannot enter the nest, because they cannot LAND to enter the nest (which is protective of nest-raiding birds such as Grackles and Magpies).

How does our expert aviator “navigate” said problem? Agility! In a stunning display, the Nuthatch folds its wings and “bombs” DIRECTLY into the cavity-type nest to avoid their “booby trap”. No small feat! And no “small feet” can enter their nest, either.

Song

Haters Gonna Hate, and detractors will always find SOMETHING to “grouse” about; for our nifty Nuthatch, I will admit, the raspy vocalizations are far-less pleasant than numerous “songbird” counterparts. I will counter, however, that while the sounds of both Nuthatch species are not inherently pleasing, they ARE distinctive, and you may grow to LOVE that distinctive raspy sound, as it will announce to you the arrival of the Awesomest Bird – EVER – to your yard!!

In summary

Case Closed! If you could “Sittadae” in the life of a Nuthatch, you would observe the distinctive and exceptional physical, cognitive, evolutionary, and behavioural traits that the Nuthatch exhibits. No bird is more worthy of your attention, respect, and admiration.

Delighted by the prospect of a Nuthatch visitor to your feeder? I invite you to observe and learn further about this bird ... because ... There is MUCH MORE about this bird that will AMAZE you.

Great Crested Flycatcher (*Myiarchus crinitus*)



A Scolding from a Wren

YFBTA member Arden Bradford

I was cutting hay on 34 and I got the tractor stuck. Lots of hay on 34 but there is a price to pay for a moments inattention to ground conditions. So I got down from the tractor and began the long walk to the backroad, Sec 34 has very little cultivated land, the ground is very soft and can be dry one day and wet the next as the water table is very high and there are springs in certain areas.

It has very good combination of upland and slough hay that can be made into good cattle feed. I reached the backroad and turned and walked East to the old farm yard where I had parked my truck.

This walk goes through native pasture and hay land on both sides of the road. The road climbs a little and here you will find willow and poplar on both sides of the road and standing water that sometimes after a heavy rainfall flows over the road. As you walk along this portion of the road a wren will start talking to you and keep pace as you go. I couldn't spot her but she never stopped telling me to move along, move along, don't stop here and finally “good riddance “.

House Wren (*Troglodytes aedon*)



WANTED!

Newsletter editor for 2026. Contact us for details to see YOUR name in print.

Christmas Bird Counters

YFBTA members Arden & Donna Bradford
YFBTA members Ron & Gerri Knudsen

This year I have heard from many bird watchers that they do not have the numbers of birds coming to their feeders that they are used to seeing at this time of year. This observation is reflected in our bird count this year.

We have recorded 19 bird species on Dec.18 this year. On Dec.18, 2023 our bird count recorded 26 bird species observed by our fellow bird counters. The number of birds is also lower this year. The 2024 large flocks of snow bunting's were a great boost to our total number's recorded.

The reasons for the decline in numbers are speculative but unknown. It is certain that habitat loss is a factor. We do know that some birds are cyclical, Red Polls, in general terms for example, are here one year and not the next.

This year we did not have the same number of bird watchers that we have had in the past. Our main focus as a group is the area extending roughly 3 miles east and west of the Yellowhead Highway between and including Saltcoats and Bredenbury. Contact me if you know of someone who would join our Bird count.

We do have to abide by the rules but there is leeway allowed around the edges.

As coordinators we would like to thank you for being a part of the Christmas Bird Count and we will do it again on Dec.18, 2025.

It is a fun and interesting thing to do on a cold winter's day.



Snowy Owl (*Stix occidentalis*)

Photo: Andrew Peach

What's Flying Around: Newsletter Group Volunteers

Editor: Looking for new editor for 2026

Distribution: Monique Smith

Technical Consulting: Jim Huziak; Shevon Wilson

Memberships/Renewals:

YFBTA
Box 252
Saltcoats, SK S0A 3R0

yellowheadflywaybirding@gmail.com

E-banking available

Submissions:

Rob Wilson (editor)
Box 329 Saltcoats, SK.
S0A 3R0

Phone (306) 744-8140

rjwilson@sasktel.net



Printed by
Admin Centre Printing Services

111-2001 Cornwall Street
Regina, SK S4P 3X9
306-780-9210

adminprint@sasktel.net www.adminprint.ca