

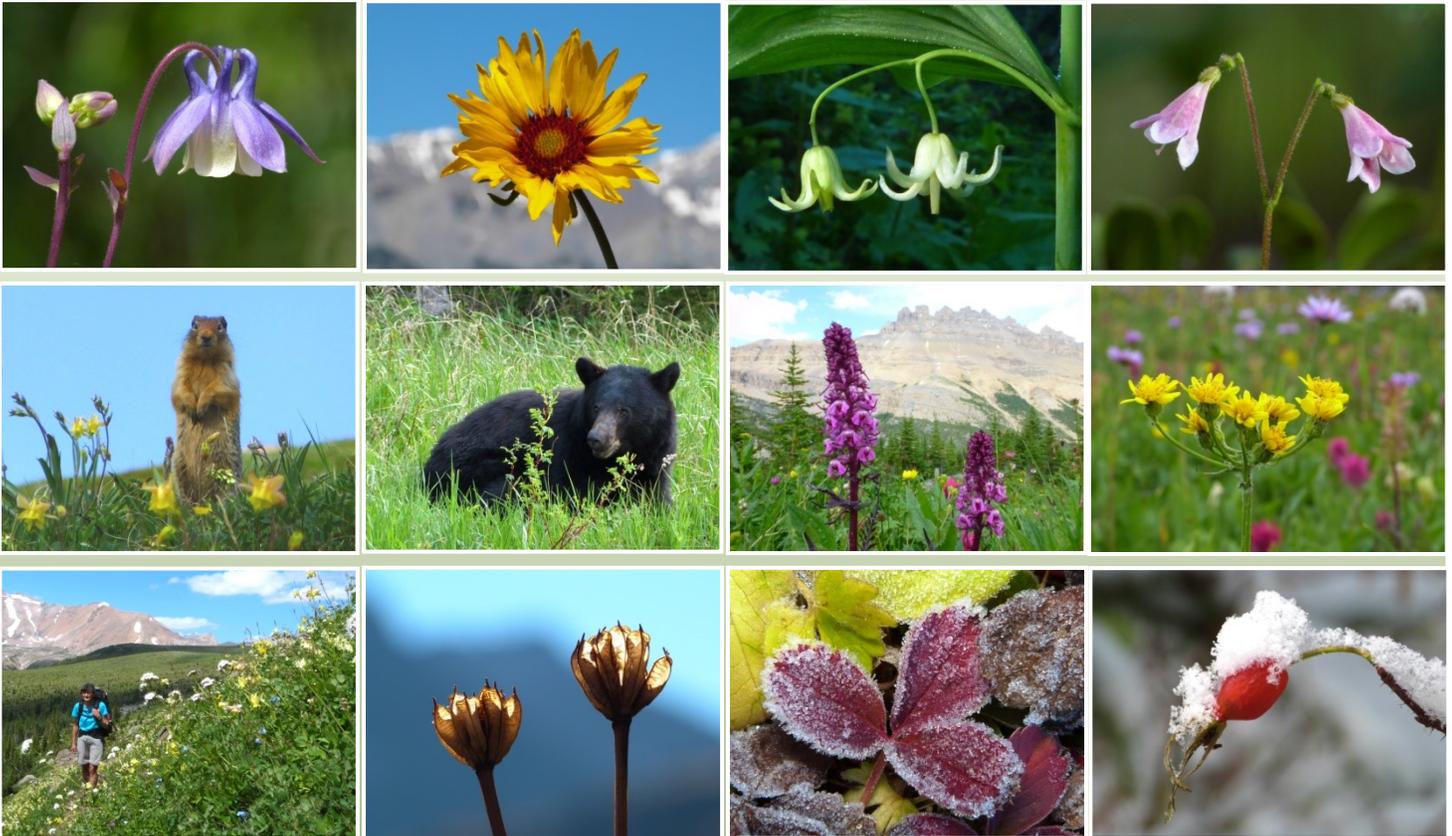


# The Red Deer River Naturalist

Editors: Myrna Pearman, Dorothy Dickson and Sally Stuart

April 2016

## Wildflowers of Banff Park



### A FOUR-SEASON MULTIMEDIA PRESENTATION

Ian Wilson and Jacinthe Lavoie

This colourful show features the best trails for wildflowers in Banff National Park. Five themes are set to music ... from bold blossoms to diminutive gems, wild creatures enjoying flowers, majestic mountain scenery and autumn colours.

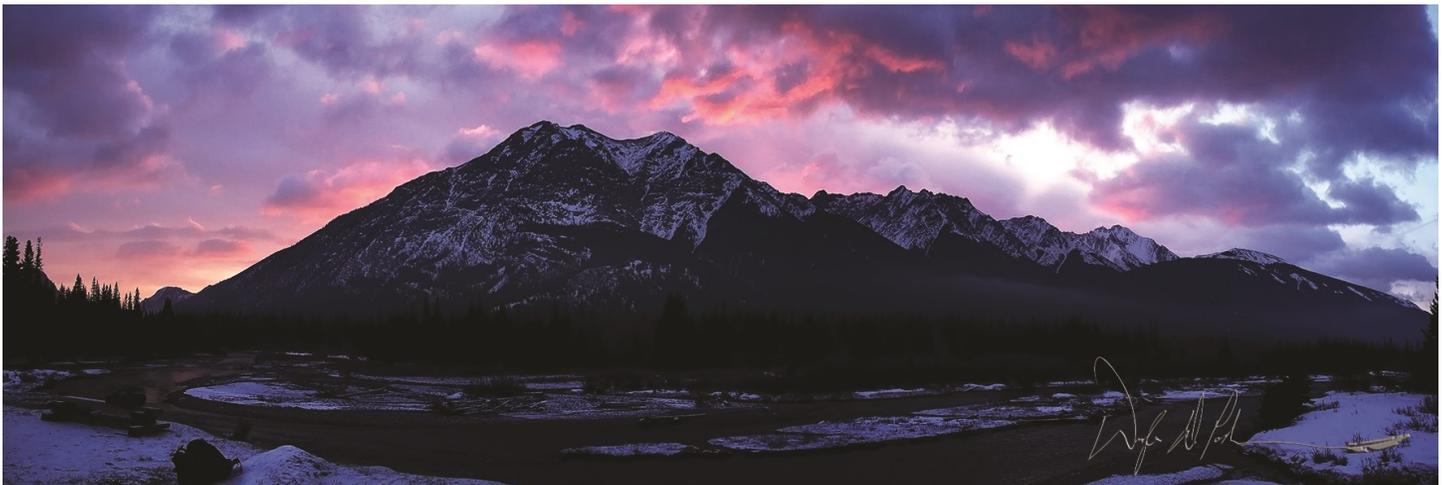
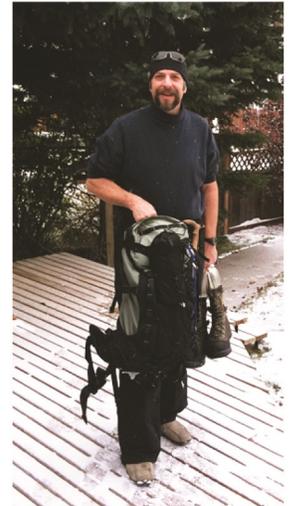
**Kerry Wood Nature Centre Thursday, April 28—7:30 PM**

**No Charge—All Welcome!**

# MEET THE BOARD: DOUG PEDERSON

My name is Doug Pedersen. One of the reasons I joined RDRN was that I looked at my environment and realized over time that I needed to be a good steward to that which is given to me - for my children and their children. A good steward is also one who can be a voice for that which has no voice. Thus some of the things I am involved in are species counts: the Christmas Bird Count and May Species Sount. Another species I am involved with is golden eagles. I am a member of the Rocky Mountain Eagle Research Foundation and help when I can, counting and aging golden eagles during the fall and spring migrations through the Kananaskis area. I enjoy the hunt (so to speak) and the recording. As I observe my environment, I see changes. It is these changes, short-and long-term, that I want to help monitor. One of the ways is by studying and keeping track of the wildlife that travels through my environment.

I current live in Blackfalds with my wife Judy. We have two adult sons and a daughter-in-law. I enjoy photography, art, the outdoors and work in the sign industry doing graphic arts. (Editors' Note: Doug volunteers his considerable talent to RDRN by designing the monthly RDRN posters. He also did the design work on the Red Deer and Central Alberta Birding Trail Guides).



## NOTICES:

- ⇒ The Annual General Meeting of the JJ Collett Natural Area Foundation will be held at 7:00 PM on May 27 at the Morning side Hall. For more details—<http://www.jjcollett.com>
- ⇒ The ANPC Workshop (Rare Plant Conservation) and AGM 2016 will be held on April 30 at the Stettler Recreation Centre, Stettler, AB. For more details—<http://anpc.ab.ca>

**SPRING SIGHTINGS: Birds** (listed as reported): American Robin, Merlin, American Tree Sparrow, Common Merganser, Rough-legged Hawk, Snowy Owl, Pine Siskins, Red-breasted Nuthatch, Hairy Woodpecker, Downy Woodpecker, Bald Eagle, American Crow, Great Horned Owl, Canada Goose, Tundra Swan, Dark-eyed Junco, Red Crossbill, White-winged Crossbill, Mountain Bluebird, Red-tailed Hawks, Northern Harrier, American Wigeon, Northern Pintail, Gadwall, Hooded Merganser, Common and Hoary Redpoll.  
**Mammals:** Mule deer, white-tailed deer, moose, coyote, skunk, porcupine, Richardson ground squirrel, jack rabbit.



Photo by Myrna Pearman

# SEASONAL SIGHTS AND SOUNDS OF ALBERTA: WESTERN MARSH WREN SINGS DIVERSE REPERTOIRE

By Sally Stuart

One of the many bonuses of living where we do is that our land borders “Cygnet” or “Burnt Lake” and the surrounding marsh. Spring is heralded sometime in mid- to late April by the arrival of the Marsh Wrens, and one of the first harbingers of winter is the young wrens finally leaving the willow bushes in mid- to late October.

Far too early, one Saturday in spring we wade out across the edge of the marsh, dragging a kayak loaded with camera, recorder, parabolic microphone and seats. Beneath our feet the semi frozen mud oozes, the smell produced not altogether pleasant. As a species, humans are far too noisy and we certainly are no exception; by the time we reach our destination—a small bank by the inlet of Cygnet Lake—all is silent. Sitting by a few willows, a pale blue sky above, we wait and listen. Time passes. Then a hard-to-describe, sort of buzzy and somewhat harsh sound begins. A tiny male bird weighing only a few grams is singing from the top of a cattail. Somewhat comical in appearance, his tail is pointing upwards and he is chattering away, rushing through his diverse repertoire. Marsh wrens are quite reclusive and secretive, but also surprisingly aggressive, actively destroying eggs in other birds’ nests. One way they attract females is by building large numbers of nests, another is by song. Donald Kroodsmá’s pioneer research of recording, then analysing, sonograms showed that there are actually two different marsh wren species. One in the east and one in the west. Western birds have a more diverse repertoire, singing up to 100 songs whilst their counterparts in the east sing only about 40. The song of the western birds is described as being more abrasive than that of the eastern species. Furthermore, where the two species overlap in eastern Saskatchewan, they do not interbreed. Song ap-



pears to be one of the ways in which female wrens can tell the different male species apart. Without sonograms, it would have been a difficult task to analyse the many different songs and distinguish the subtle differences between eastern and western species.

Why do marsh wrens in the west have a larger repertoire? Marsh wren males are polygamous (breed with two or more females), but also exhibit a specific type of polygynous behaviour related to the monopolisation of a critical resource. In the case of wrens, the critical resource is breeding territory. Western cattail marshes are relatively small in size, so those males that control larger areas of good breeding territory in the smaller areas breed with more females. It is these males that have bigger song repertoires. The female has to decide between choosing a mate who may not spend as much time helping the female out, or breeding in less than optimum conditions. Her preferred strategy is the former.

What enables male western marsh wrens to have a more diverse repertoire? In terms of structure related to function, western marsh wrens have somewhat larger brains than their eastern counterparts, larger areas of which control singing. Size of the brain is determined genetically but influenced by other factors (e.g., song sparrow research has shown that when birds are stressed and do not receive enough parental care or food, they have underdeveloped brain areas). Areas of the brain also change in size with the season and due to hormones, with males singing more during the breeding season. The more diverse repertoire of the male wren probably indicates a healthier male with more testosterone and a larger brain; perhaps attributes which would be advantageous for the female to pass on to her young.

So we doze, lulled by the warm sun and the singing wrens—unwilling to disturb the duelling males, each using their vast repertoires to try to outcompete the other.

Suddenly, complete silence descends as a marsh harrier swoops down. Stretching, we get up and make our noisy way back across the marsh. It’s definitely time for breakfast.

# BIRD FOCUS

Keith Kline will be starting his bird/nature walks again on Saturday mornings. All walks start at 10:00 AM.

**April 2: South of College.** Meet in the southwest parking lot by the weather station.

**April 9: South Bower Woods.** Meet in the northeast corner of the Bower Mall parking lot.

**April 16: North Bower Woods.** Meet in front of 35 Selkirk drive .

**April 23: Kin Canyon.** Meet in the rotary picnic ground parking lot.

**April 30: Maskapatoon Park.** Meet in the parking lot on Oak drive before Overland place. Left side. There's also a playground with the parking lot



The Saw-whets are nesting! Jim Potter reports that the saw-whet owls are incubating eggs at his property.

*Photo by Myrna Pearman*

# FLOWER FOCUS

**APRIL 20 - 10:00 AM**

**KERRY WOOD NATURE CENTRE**

Don Wales will be discussing members of the *Asteraceae* family.



Gaillardia and Goatsbeard. Photos by Don Wales.

## UPCOMING FLOWER FOCUS SCHEDULE

**May 18**—Flowers of the Mojave and Colorado Desert

**June 4 and 5**—Spring Flower field trip to the Bull Creek Hills

**June 20**—Devonian Gardens field trip



The Red Deer River Naturalists, the first natural history organization to be established in Alberta, was incorporated as a society in 1906. The objectives of the society are to foster an increased knowledge, understanding and appreciation of natural history, and to support conservation measures dealing with our environment, wildlife and natural resources.

Annual membership is \$15.00 for individuals and \$20.00 for families.

Regular meetings are held at 7:30 p.m. on the fourth Thursday of most months at the Kerry Wood Nature Centre, 6300-45 Ave., Red Deer, AB. Non-members are welcome.

Members are encouraged to contribute to this newsletter. The deadline is the last Friday of the month.

Box 785 Red Deer, AB T4N 5H2  
Phone/Fax: 403.347.8200

rd.rn@hotmail.com www.rdrn.ca

<http://wearenaturalwise.blogspot.com>

Our thanks to NOVA for underwriting the cost of newsletter printing

