



## OUR BACKYARD BATS AND THE EMERGING ROLE OF COMMUNITY-LED CONSERVATION

Thursday, March 23, 2017 @ 7:30 pm  
Kerry Wood Nature Centre, Red Deer

As the primary predator of nocturnal flying insects, bats are important for maintaining healthy ecosystems and for controlling a wide diversity of insect pests. Although rarely seen, they are among the most common wildlife in human communities, with many living in our own backyards. Few groups are as reliant on human stewardship for their survival and successful reproduction, making community-led conservation a particularly effective tool for the management and conservation of bat populations. This talk will provide an overview of Alberta bats, their habitats, conservation threats, and the Alberta Community Bat Program's emerging community-led conservation initiatives.



Cory Olson is the Coordinator for the Alberta Community Bat Program, a community-centred bat conservation program developed by WCS Canada, in collaboration with the Alberta Bat Action Team and Alberta Environment and Parks. He is a Professional Biologist and an environmental consultant with over 10 years experience working with bats and other wildlife in western Canada. He completed an M.Sc. in Animal Ecology at the University of Calgary, where he examined the roosting behaviour of bats in northern Alberta.

All photos by  
Cory Olson

- Admission free and  
open to the public

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# PRESIDENT'S REPORT

## TONY BLAKE

The RDRN is an Alberta society, dedicated to conserving and promoting our natural heritage. A volunteer board of directors elected at the Annual General Meeting is responsible for our day-to-day operations subject to the by-laws given to it the membership. We are involved in numerous activities and I'll try to describe the most important ones in 2016 and note the dedicated people that made these things happen.

RDRN is part of several other organizations including Nature Alberta, the Waskasoo Environmental Education Society, and the Ellis Bird Farm. Nature Alberta is a federation that provides services to Alberta Naturalist groups and coordinates province wide activities. I attended several meetings of Nature Alberta board in 2016. I'm happy to report that the administration partnership with the Land Stewardship Centre is working out well. Lu Carbyn was elected the new president of Nature AB at the last AGM. Don Wales continues to represent the Red Deer River Naturalists as a director on the board of the Waskasoo Environmental Education Society. Bonnie Mullen is the RDRN director for the board of the Ellis Bird Farm. EBF had another successful year and the details can be found in Bonnie's report.

RDRN's two focus groups provide opportunities for both new and experienced naturalists to learn and share. The Bird Focus group, led by Keith Klein, turns out for Saturday walks in local parks and local natural areas. The weekly outings have attracted many new participants and Keith is planning to restart the walks early next spring. Don Wales organizes the Plant Focus group and they try to meet monthly for an slide presentation accompanied by real (and often edible) plant examples.

The RDRN Speaker Series, organized by Myrna Pearman, is probably our most effective and popular education program. Five free lectures from recognized experts were presented last year: *Endangered species conservation, Burrowing Owls* - Cory Scofield; *Sonograms* - Sally Stuart; *Wildflowers of Banff* - I&J Wilson; *Predator Bounties* - Gilbert Proulx; and *Muskrat Habitat* - Brianna Lorentz. There appears to be a ready market for these talks and I'm hoping we'll find more volunteers who want to put on even more events in bigger venues.

At least three field trips were organized by RDRN volunteers during June; Phil & Bev French hosted a camp-out and hike on Bull Creek in Kananaskis Country; Don Wales took Flower Focus to the Devonian Gardens in Devon; and Judy organized another campout at Ferry Point in the Battle River badlands.

RDRN has two ongoing projects of note. The Piper Creek Restoration Agriculture Project (PCRAP), a joint project with Re-think Red Deer and several other partners, is entering its fourth season. The site is a former barnyard located on Piper Creek immediately south of the city landfill. RDRN's objective is to restore native vegetation the riparian area and improve habitat quality for all types of wildlife. The original funding came from the federal Environmental Damages Fund but we have been able to channel other grants to the project including \$2000. from the Alberta Conservation Association.

The Central Alberta Birding Trails project is ongoing. There is new signage and Judy Boyd and Doug Pedersen made good progress on producing brochures for a second birding trail. RDRN members participated once again in a May species count and a Christmas bird count. Judy made sure there was no duplication of coverage and she also compiled the results for submission to Nature Alberta.

After some debate the board opted for a smaller, simpler format for RDRN's banquet and awards night. Pioneer Hall, the log building near the old Arena, was just right for Michael Dawe's talk on the role of Naturalists in Central Alberta's history. The hall's collection of mounted wildlife seemed especially appropriate for the occasion. Attendee's seemed well satisfied with the venue and the caterer so we will try something similar next fall, probably in October instead of September.

Communications are a vital part of our business and the RDRN has several ways to present its message to its members and the public. Myrna Pearman, Sally Stuart, Dorothy Dickson and Doug Pedersen put out another year's worth of colorful, attractive and informative newsletters and posters. Fortunately more members are choosing to receive their newsletter electronically which amounts to a considerable saving to the organization. Even though Bill Heinsen no longer lives in Red Deer, he still helps out by moderating our Facebook group. Facebook posts continue to increase in volume and quality. Don Auten's trailcam videos are truly amazing.

Our RDRN website and events calendar has been operating reliably, however as the de-facto web master I'm not the most reliable when it comes to getting the updates done. If another volunteer wants to come to the rescue they don't have to feel intimidated - our user-friendly system comes with free tech support!

RDRN's membership is reasonably stable, but the trend toward older more urban members is still worrisome. A committee chairman exclusively focused on recruiting and tracking members is another item near the top of my wish list.

Conservation versus development issues continued to come thick and fast in 2016. RDRN is often expected to be our region's environmental conscience but our resources of time, expertise, and ready cash are totally inadequate to address most challenges. The best we can do is to educate our members to recognize poorly planned developments and to inspire them to challenge decision makers to consider the cumulative costs to our natural heritage. Last year I was only able to express my opinion on gravel extraction in the river valley upstream from Highway 2 and the city's redevelopment plan for the Riverlands neighborhood. Don Wales was probably more active behind the scenes. Never the less, several development initiatives including Northland Drive are taking big bites out of our river valley as we speak, and no doubt the silence of RDRN members is seen as tacit approval. Our natural habitats are also bleeding away through less dramatic processes such as fragmentation, direct loss from human encroachment, invasion by exotic plant species, and degradation from human abuse. The public is largely unaware of these trends and the losses will continue as long as governments choose to ignore the causes.

# ELLIS BIRD FARM ANNUAL REPORT

Bonnie Mullin (RDRN representative on the EBF Board)

Ellis Bird Farm opened to the public on May 23, 2016. Myrna, Ron, Claudia, Cynthia and summer staff spent many hours prior to the opening getting the gardens prepared and the Visitor Centre up and running. With the help of the EBF team, Ron designed and built more displays for the Visitor Centre. With Myrna's design Claudia and staff completed these projects. It is an ongoing process.

2016 proved very successful with over 12,455 visitors. Apart from the everyday workings of the farm we hosted Bioblitz, the annual Bluebird Festival, Bug Jamboree, Knee High Naturalists, Nature Day Camps and the North American Bluebird Society (NABS) Conference. The NABS Conference welcomed bluebird enthusiasts from all over North America. They were very impressed by the four day event put together through many hours of work by the committee, staff and especially Myrna!! Thanks also to Morris Flewelling for being our very competent Master of Ceremonies over the whole conference. The season ended on Labour Day, September 5, 2016.

The Cafe, operated by Matt Burton (Your Private Chef), had another very successful year, serving over 7,300 patrons.

Myrna Pearman, EBF's Biologist and Site Manager, spends a normal summer at a frantic pace. Add to it she has produced a new book! "*Beauty Everywhere: Nature Photo Essays by Myrna Pearman.*" It is a production of the essays she has done for the Red Deer Advocate monthly since 2010. It includes articles from 2010 to 2015. Of course it is a runaway best seller for Myrna and for EBF. The *Backyard Bird Feeding* book from last year continues to be a great seller as well. Congratulations, Myrna.

Work on the Ellis Bird Farm Board is divided into several committees. Each board member serves on at least two committees.

**Education Committee:** its main focus is school programs for Kindergarten through Grade Five. These programs run through May and June, are aligned with Alberta Education Learning Objectives, and are in great demand. A record 1,591 students participated in the school programs in 2016. Registration opens for these programs in mid January and is booked totally by the end of January. Ron Biel cut out 1,438 chickadee/wren kits and 168 bluebird/swallow kits for use though the year.

As usual, EBF has a great team of staff and contractors: Myrna Pearman (Site Manager & Biologist); Cynthia Pohl (Head Gardener); Ron Biel (Site Maintenance); Claudia Lipski (Fairy God Mother); and summer students Shalynn Westervelt, Jason Biel, Cheyenne Knight and Meagan Gabert. The Education Committee awarded the High School Environmental Scholarship to Sydelle Zukowski. This scholarship is designed to facilitate further study in areas of conservation and environment.

**Farming/Habitat Committee:** In 2015 the farming committee contracted Doug Crawford to a five year term. After one year Doug was finding it not quite in fitting with his own plans so the committee re-interviewed and has signed with Victor Zuidof for a five year term. The long-term plan of the farming operation is to transition to pasture and hay over the next few years, with a reduction in crop acreage and a ban on the planting of canola. A committee consisting of several board members met with Tannas Consulting regarding habitat assessments and recommendations.

**Research:** EBF has continued in 2016 to collect interesting data on Purple Martin migration using geolocator and GPS units, as well as new information about nest activities using RFID (Radio Frequency Indicator Device) technology. This year a record number of 101 pairs of martins fledged a record number of 412 young. Through the diligent work of graduate student Alisha Ritchie 440 Purple Martins were banded in 2016. Although EBF will not be involved with geo deployment in the foreseeable future, Dr. Fraser and EBF are continuing to cooperate on bluebird data analysis and are planning to partner on future research projects. EBF is listed as a co-author on all papers published where EBF data has been used. Alisha will graduate from the University of Manitoba and may return to assist with some EBF banding this summer. The EBF team will keep up efforts to retrap any birds returning with geolocators.

In 2015, Alisha and team deployed geolocators on nestling martins, and in 2016 were able to retrieve two units. These units are still in England so we aren't privy to their data yet, but once downloaded, EBF will be the first organization in the world(!) to ever retrieve yearling birds bearing geolocators.

**Ellis Cafe Committee:** The number of visitors at the Cafe seems to grow from year to year. Our new chef, Matt Burton, had a successful year, serving more visitors and bringing in more money than previous years. Besides the usual visitors at the Cafe, Matt contracted for the meals for the NABS Conference. Made him a busy chef! We are at present making a few changes to the contract and negotiating with him for return for the 2017 season. Comments on the menu and service have been favourable.

**Policy Committee:** Board member Leo de Groot has spent many hours developing a secure website for board members only containing policies, minutes, contracts, budget etc for quick access. This system enables board members to access all historical and current documents, and reduces the use of paper.

**Finance/Funding Committee:** Ellis Bird Farm is growing by leaps and bounds. We want more people to visit EBF, but higher visitation requires more staff and resources. This situation leaves us with additional funding challenges. Thanks to our Treasurer, Barb Shepherd for keeping a close watch on our finances. Thanks to our ongoing partnership with MEGlobal without whose funding we would not exist. The sales of *Backyard Bird Feeding: An Alberta Guide* has yielded over \$55,000 profit to EBF. These monies have been put in a special Education Legacy Fund, to be used specifically for education-related projects and items.

**Infrastructure:** With the new Visitor Centre now complete, our Infrastructure Committee has turned their attention to fences, pathways, landscaping and other structures. This spring more paved pathway will be installed between the Visitor Centre and the Cafe.

**Grounds:** A major pruning of the large poplars by the pond was undertaken during the winter, and when it became evident that the beavers died in the fall on 2015, a work bee was undertaken in late April to create wattle fencing from the branches and to create a new teaching node. The beaver lodge material was moved off the wheelchair path and a new bench installed.

**Going Forward:** EBF celebrates its 35<sup>th</sup> Anniversary in 2017, along with Canada's 150<sup>th</sup>. A committee has been struck to plan our birthday celebrations, with a focus on archiving, documenting and creating displays that celebrate Charlie and Winnie Ellis and Ellis Bird Farm. The main celebration activities will take place on July 21 & 22. EBF has hired Shalynn Westervelt to assist with administrative duties, archiving, display development and grant writing commencing January 2017.

**Highlights of the 2016 Breeding Season Report:** Approximately 50 pairs of MOBL nested in the EBF Management Area, up from 33 last year. Fledging success was high at 299, so we are hopeful that the population will continue to rebuild after the devastating snowstorm of 2008. Fortunately, bluebirds are rebounding in other areas, especially on the bluebird trail maintained by EBF board member, Brian Biggs, around the Lousana area. A big thanks to Claudia Lipski, who monitors the bluebird trail and bands the bluebirds. And a huge thanks to Myrna Pearman for her energy, leadership and endless ideas to make Ellis Bird Farm even better!!

Thank you so much to the Red Deer River Naturalists for your continued support of Ellis Bird Farm. Your support, both through funding and in-kind donations, has been instrumental in making Ellis Bird Farm the wonderful success it is today.



# FLOWER FOCUS

March 15, 2017

10:00 AM

Kerry Wood Nature Centre



*Wolves captured on a trail cam, near Rocky Mountain House January 2017*



## RDRN EXECUTIVE HARD AT WORK

*From lower right: Susan Van der Hoek, Elissa Odgren, Sally Stewart, Rod Trentham, Bev French, Tony Blake, Judy Boyd (top of head) Doug Pedersen, Lucienne Partridge, Aly Seymour.*

*Missing: Bob Kruchten, Don Wales.*

*Behind the Camera : Keith Kline.*



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. Deadline is the last Friday of the month.

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