

Central Alberta May Species Count 2017



Saturday May 27 and Sunday May 28

Count all species (birds, flowers, mammals, butterflies & amphibians).
Potluck supper at Kerry Wood Nature Centre 6:00pm on Sunday, May 28

Photos
by Myrna Pearman
& Doug Pedersen



**Registration is required to participate in the Count.
Please call Judy Boyd at 403-358-1098
for more information.**

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HOW TO CONDUCT A MAY SPECIES COUNT

The May Species Count is a census of all living organisms. Individual animal numbers (example: 6 mule deer) are to be tallied during the course of the count. If you see a rare bird (something that shouldn't be in this area), please note as much relevant information as possible – what the bird was doing, when it was doing it, how good a look did you get at it, did you get a photograph? When counting flowers in bloom, only the name of the species is needed. You don't need to count how many blooms you see. If you see a rarity, a photograph will also be required. Also, please note any odd situations; for example, profuse numbers of a species one year but rare the next.

Please count between 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. on either Saturday May 27 or Sunday May 28. Please use separate tally sheets if you are counting in different locations or on different days. For example, if you are counting in both Zone A and Zone B, you need to submit one tally sheet for Zone A and one for Zone B. If you are only counting in Zone A but are doing it both days, submit a tally sheet for Saturday and one for Sunday. And make sure that on Sunday you count in a different part of Zone A than you did on Saturday. Please ensure that you fill in ALL blanks in the information section of the bird tally sheet. May Species count information will be submitted to Nature Alberta and Bird Studies Canada, so please be sure that all count information is complete.

It's important that we know that you are participating in the count so no overlap of counting occurs. Please contact Judy Boyd at [403-358-1098](tel:403-358-1098) before May 24 if you will be counting or if you need a flower tally sheet. Your bird tally sheet is included with this newsletter. Please mail your tally sheet to the RDRN office: Box 785, Red Deer, Alberta, T4N 5H2 before June 15 or drop it off at the Nature Centre, attention: Judy.

There will be a potluck supper for participants starting at 6 p.m. on May 28. Bring food to share, your own plate, cutlery and drinks.

ANIMAL FUR PROVIDES GREAT NESTING MATERIAL

Fur and hair are used by many bird species as nest lining material. Help your backyard birds by setting out dog, cat or rabbit fur. Mesh bags can be used, but there is a chance the birds can get tangled up. Best to stuff the fur into a plastic suet block dispenser. Hang from a tree (or stuff in a metal frog's mouth 🐸) and enjoy watching the chickadees, nuthatches and other birds enthusiastically pack it away to their nests.



SEASONAL SIGHTS AND SOUNDS OF ALBERTA:

THE RETICENT AND RESERVED SORA

By Sally Stuart

We had lived on our acreage for many years before I ever saw the diminutive Sora (*Porzana carolina*). They typically arrive sometime in May, when we would hear their whinny like calls often late into the night. Such unobtrusive, secretive birds are seldom seen, living at the edge of the marsh amongst the cattails. Once sitting on the bank of the canal watching ducks, I happened to glance over my shoulder and caught sight of a Sora just a few meters behind me. Foraging for snails and insects, its incredible feet and toes provided such a large surface area that it allowed the bird to spread its weight and literally walk on the pond weed. Soras are small birds, weighing only about 70 grams (the weight of a typical mandarin orange!), attractive with a yellow beak, black mask, green legs and white undercover tail feathers. Squeezing in and out of the vegetation is quite abrasive and causes a great deal of wear and tear on their feathers. Probably this is why early in the season they undergo a prenuptial molt and then later in the summer they undergo a second post nuptial molt.

Several years ago, due to a particularly wet spring, the marsh encroached almost onto our gravel road. Adult Soras were often seen darting across from side to side. Unfortunately, at least one bird was squashed.

While walking the dog once, we encountered a family of young Soras, rather comical characters that resembled black fuzzy balls on short stilts! Lacking down on the top of their heads, they have a characteristic red patch above the beak. Like all members of this family, they also have disproportionately massive feet.

When birds hatch, ornithologists recognise different stages of development. Broadly speaking there are two main categories: “altricial” and “precocial”. Altricial is typical of song birds, which are naked, blind and immobile when hatched. Their brains are small and they are totally dependent on adults for their survival. Precocial young, such as ducks, are the complete opposite: they are covered in down, their eyes are open, they are mobile due to well-developed leg muscles, and they have larger brains. A substantial amount of energy is invested by the female in producing eggs, especially precocial eggs because they require considerable amounts of yolk for the



chicks to reach this advanced stage of development.

Strictly speaking, Soras are subprecocial. Research by Kaufmann showed that the young are still somewhat dependant on the parents,

relying on them for much of their food and warmth. When asking to be fed, they adopt a begging posture and bow their head so their bald cranium and scarlet coloured beak face the adult.

Colour in birds is often really important and the coloration of birds’ beaks is no exception. Apparently, those chicks which do not adopt this posture and display the red beak coloration are aggressively attacked by the parents. The situation becomes amplified as they age and lose this red pigmentation. It is far more likely that you will hear—rather than see—a Sora. Kaufmann determined that the whinnying call, which is produced by both sexes, is mostly used to defend territory and allow mates to communicate.

Male Soras aggressively defend their territory, with coloration and song both playing a major role. Sonograms show quite a variety in terms of the whinnying call, however, certain characteristics such as the series of rapid descending notes (often about 30), lasting for about 10 seconds seem to be common to these calls.

Soras produce many other vocalisations: the “keek” call is much briefer than the whinnying call, lasting only about 0.3 seconds. This call helps the birds to maintain contact in the dense marsh environment and acts as an alarm call. These calls can be incredibly loud, according to Tim Birkhead. In England, the Corncrake can produce a call of such intensity that if you are close to the source and exposed to it for a long time, it has the ability to damage your hearing.

Soras usually leave Central Alberta by October, often migrating large distances. Information in the Atlas of Bird Migration (Edited by Jonathan Elphick), shows some Soras migrate up to 4,800 km to islands in the Caribbean. This is both surprising and intriguing, as this species is very reluctant to fly, even when disturbed. They appear to have weak flight muscles, so it is hard to imagine them migrating such distances.

Once incredibly common, there is evidence that Sora populations have been in recent decline. The decline is probably human-caused. Records in the United States indicate that it was once a popular sport bird, with one person apparently shooting over 100 birds in a single day. Also, drainage of wetlands undoubtedly contributes to their decline.

Preservation of species such as the Sora is yet another reason to ensure we protect such areas. Living adjacent to a wetland is a unique experience, one which I feel privileged to encounter on a daily basis.



BIRD FOCUS

May 6—Hazlett Lake 27432 11A west. If you cross Highway 2 you've gone too far. I will be standing at the turn off

May 13—Joffre. Check the Nova Nature Trail website for a map

May 20—Slack Slough. Meet in the Slack Slough parking lot

May 27-28—May Species Count

June 3—Springbrook Natural Area.

June 10—Joffre. Check the Nova Nature Trail website for a map

June 17 and 18—Visit the Turkey Vultures at the Bjorge farm. We will meet 10:00 AM at the Ferry Point Campground. There will be a pot-luck supper on Saturday and crepes Sunday morning. Besides the vultures, some of the highlights of the trip might be Brown Thrasher, White-faced Ibis, Great Horned Owl, Mountain Bluebird, Cliff Swallow. Call Judy at [403-358-1098](tel:403-358-1098) if you plan to attend.

Meet at 10:00 AM for the other trips. Email Keith with any questions reddkline@gmail.com

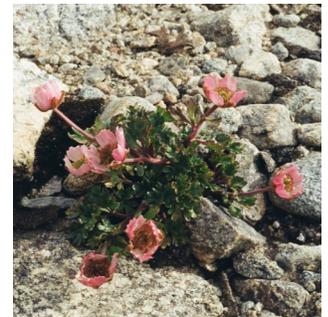
FLOWER FOCUS

May 17 • 10:00 AM • KWNC

Plants of the Ice Age

Bill Heinsen

Bill Heinsen will be looking at ice recession and the plant migration that went with it. Among other things, he will discuss the "islands" that didn't get glaciated during the last descent of ice. This would include portions of the Rockies and Cypress Hills where communities of alpine plants survived.



RELEASING BALLOONS HAS A DEVASTATING IMPACT ON THE ENVIRONMENT

When balloons fly, seabirds die

The release of helium balloons outdoors to mark special events or for promotional purposes has a devastating impact on Australia's marine wildlife, particularly seabirds. A 2016 CSIRO study identified balloons, along with plastic bags and bottles, as among the top three most harmful pollutants, inspiring the launch of a new campaign by Zoos Victoria and Phillip Island Nature Parks that calls on Australians to stop releasing them into the environment.

<http://www.buffingtonpost.com.au/2017/02/22/releasing-balloons-has-a-devastating-impact-on-the-environment/>

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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Our thanks to NOVA for underwriting the cost of newsletter printing

Photos by Myrna Pearman unless otherwise noted

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Front cover designed by Doug Pederson