

The Red Deer River Naturalist



May 2024

Editors: Myrna Pearman & Susan van der Hoek



CENTRAL ALBERTA

May Species Count 2024

Sat. May 25 & Sun. May 26

We invite you to help us document the animals (including birds, mammals, amphibians, reptiles, insects and spiders) and flowering plants in Central Alberta! You can count in your own backyard, check out nearby parks and natural areas, or drive the backroads. This event is a fun way for the entire family to get out in nature and celebrate spring!

For tally sheets and further instructions, please visit <https://rdrn.ca/programs/may-species-count/>

Please register for this count with Shelly-anne or John Goulet at 403-392-1894.



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SEASONAL SIGHTS AND SOUNDS OF ALBERTA WITH DR. SALLY STUART: ARRIVAL OF THE SWANS

It was April 10 at 9:30 PM when five magnificent Trumpeter Swans (*Cygnus buccinator*) flew overhead, bugling vociferously. No matter how often one hears the distinctive call of these swans, it is always incredible. When we moved here 24 years ago, it seemed that Tundra Swans were more common than Trumpeters.

The recovery of the Trumpeter Swan has been a success story. Hunted for meat and feathers, coupled with a loss of habitat, resulted in their near extinction in the early 1900s. According to *The Atlas of Bird Migration* (editor J. Elphick), only 2,000 individuals remained in the early 1960s. When the atlas was published in 2007, there were more than 25,000.

Huge birds weighing up to 7.5k kg, Trumpeter Swans nearly exceed the weight limit for migration. The difficulty lies in the extra weight gain required prior to migration. Physical constraints make it almost impossible for their wings to generate enough lift to make them airborne. They return to the same locations each year and visit the same stopover sites enroute. Migration route details are passed down through subsequent generations, with the offspring learning the route while travelling as a family group.

For the past 24 years, I have attempted to track the movement of swans during their fall and autumn migrations near Cygnet Lake. Their distinct vocalizations, which first attract my attention, make it easy to distinguish between the two species.

Trumpeter Swan that nest in Alberta tend to overwinter in the northern United States. They breed in small marshes mainly in the Parkland, Boreal and Foothill regions.

A study by Patton-Gross and Ficken (1992), identified six cygnet calls and eight adult calls. Adult calls are brief, in the frequency range 3-4 KHz. The trumpet,

heard at least a mile away, serves to keep each pair in touch with each other. The alarm call is often given if something gets too close to the nest and disturbs the birds. Predators may be deterred by the sheer volume of the alarm calls.

Pairs sometimes engage in a duet, with calls often accompanied by elaborate displays involving wing flapping and head bobbing. The honk call, like the trumpet call, is given when the birds are disturbed. While recording the birds at Cygnet Lake, I often hear them emit the foot clap when they jostle for space and prepare for take off. During this call, the birds fly close to the water and strike their feet against its surface. This call lasts longer than the trumpet call and is often concurrent with aggressive visual displays.

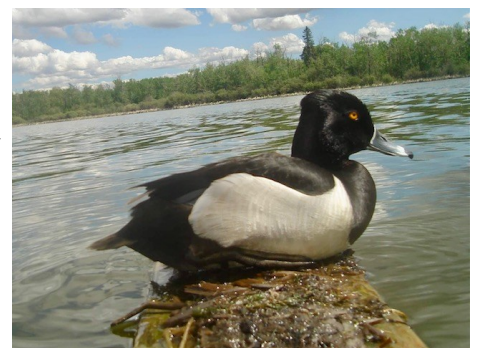
No scientific conclusions can be drawn from my limited seasonal acoustical data collected over 24 years. Spring temperatures fluctuate, the frogs call, swans return. What does it mean as the climate changes? The answers will only become apparent over many years. One thing is clear, citizen scientists play a key role in documenting changes in natural events, especially migration.



IN THE ALBERTA WILDERNESS WITH DON AUTEN

Spring is an exciting time of year for me due to the return of the ducks. The males are busy establishing and defending nesting territory and trying to impress the females with their flashy courtship colours. Every spring, I mount a trail camera on a float and poke it out into a shallow lake for the summer in an attempt to get some great photos.

The most common ducks that use my float are Lesser Scaups, Mallards and Blue-winged Teals but this month I thought I would share a photo of a Ring-necked Duck that stopped by for the first time.



- I would like to thank everyone who attended our monthly meetings/speaker's series. Our recent meetings attracted large crowds! Thanks to Sally Stuart for lining up excellent speakers and thanks to the Becks for looking after refreshments.
- Our membership now stands at 141.
- We have provided External Grants to the Medicine River Wildlife Centre (\$2,000) for their new *Wildlife Smarts* brochure and to RDP (\$5,000) to support their three-year research project establishing baseline data on native bee occupancy and diversity within the City of Red Deer. We also provided funds to the Central Alberta Regional Science Fair (\$1,250) and the Blackfalds Historical Society (\$2,000) for their Founders Project.
- This will be the last newsletter till September. Enjoy the summer!

SATURDAY BIRD FOCUS OUTINGS WITH CHRIS OLSEN

Outings start at 10:00 AM unless otherwise noted and usually finish up by about 1:00 PM. Directions, maps and travel details are posted on the RDRN website. Be sure to check the website for the summer schedule, and for possible schedule changes or destination updates. We're an inclusive group that learns from each other, and birders of all skill levels are welcome!

May 11— Migratory Bird Day! Raven Brood Trout Station – meet at the picnic shelter

June 1—Riverbend upper trails – meet in the main parking lot

June 8—Kuhnen Park trails (Blackfalds) – meet in the main parking lot

June 15—Radar Hill (meet at the end of the Rge Rd 260 access)

June 21-23—Ferry Point Birding Weekend at the Ferry Point Campground

June 29—Medicine Lake camping (June 27-29) and birding (kayaking circuit and walking trail options)

DID YOU KNOW WITH SUSAN VAN DER HOEK

A group of hares is known as a husk, down or drove. The two species of native hare in Alberta are the White-tailed Jackrabbit (*Lepus townsendii*) (far right) and the Snowshoe Hare (*Lepus americanus*) (left). White-tailed Jackrabbits or Prairie Hares are found throughout the prairies, parkland and cultivated regions of Alberta. Jackrabbits prefer an open habitat because they depend on their running speed for protection from enemies. Snowshoe Hares are found throughout Alberta except in the arid central and southern areas. These hares prefer a habitat that contains dense stands of woody shrubs, typical of the forest and parkland regions.

A group of rabbits is known as a colony or nest (or, occasionally, a warren, though this refers to where the rabbits live). The one species of native rabbit in Alberta is the Mountain (formerly Nuttall's) Cottontail (*Sylvilagus nuttallii*) (bottom right). Despite its name, it lives in the arid prairie regions of the province and requires areas with sufficient bushy cover. Rabbits and hares normally live only 12 to 15 months and in that time have approximately three litters of up to six young. Mother rabbits and hares do not stay with their babies during the day. Little ones are often found alone. If you find a baby, please do not touch it.

Both hares and rabbits moult throughout the year, but Alberta's native rabbit stays brown or gray year-round, whereas hares gradually turn white as winter approaches.

Alberta also has escaped feral domestic rabbits. A group of them together is sometimes called a herd. Domestic rabbits can be differentiated from wild rabbits by the variety of colours and sizes and are not protected.



NATURE CENTRAL UPDATE WITH CATHY STEELE



In addition to supporting the Saturday morning bird walks with Chris Olsen, we encourage everyone to join in on these other outings and events.

MAY

Thursday, May 16—Shuckburgh Slough Bird Survey with Buffalo Lake Nature Club buffalolakenature.com

Sunday, May 26—JJ Collett Natural Area Spring Walk with Buffalo Lake Nature Club buffalolakenature.com

JUNE

Sunday, June 2—Alix Nature Trail Society (A.N.T.S.) Bridge Dedication buffalolakenature.com

Thursday, June 6—The Narrows Provincial Recreation Area Lady Slipper Walk and Paddle buffalolakenature.com

Saturday, June 8—Bat Walk at DNA Gardens dnagardens.ca

Date TBD—Aquatic plant/paddling event with David Delafield; pre-registration will be required naturecentral.org

June 21-23—Bjorge Family Gathering at Ferry Point Campground (see page 3 for details)

Saturday June 22—Bat Walk at DNA Gardens dnagardens.ca

JULY

Sunday, July 7—Dry Island Buffalo Jump Prov Park Annual Butterfly Count buffalolakenature.com

Wednesday, July 10—Family Nature Night at Kerry Wood Nature Centre

naturecentral.org

Saturday, July 27—Bat Walk at DNA Gardens dnagardens.ca

AUGUST

Thursday, August 8 —Paddling event with Myrna and Claudia at Gabriel Lake, Eckville naturecentral.org

Thursday, August 15—Alix Lake Mushroom Walk buffalolakenature.com

SEPTEMBER

Sunday, September 15—Big Knife Provincial Park Picnic buffalolakenature.com

Tuesday, September 24—JJ Collett Natural Area Fall walk buffalolakenature.com

DATE TBD: Dry Island Buffalo Jump – guided hike with Ed Karpuk and Chris Olsen naturecentral.org

RDRN Social Media:
1948 Facebook Members
315 X Followers
476 Instagram Followers

FLOWER FOCUS WITH CAROLINE AND BRIAN HARRIS

Wednesday, May 15th

10:00 am @ KWNC

Wildflowers of Cypress Hills Provincial Park



Ferry Point Birding Weekend Details: The key organizer for this weekend was Myron Bjorge. Unfortunately, Myron passed away last fall. He is greatly missed by family and friends. This weekend will carry on in his memory.

The Ferry Point Campground is located on the Battle River. From Hwy 56, take Twp Rd 434 east for 9.6 km and then go north for 3 km on RR 184. The campground has outhouses but no hookups or power. The camping fee is nominal. Over the weekend, several sites within the Battle River valley and surrounding uplands will be visited. Judy Boyd and others from RDRN will be in attendance. No formal activities are planned for Friday evening. Saturday will focus on birding, beginning at 10:00 AM. Bring a bag lunch. Dinner will be potluck with burgers provided by RDRN. Please contribute a salad or dessert. On Sunday morning, a light communal breakfast will be served before a 10:00 AM departure to visit other sites. The day will conclude about 1:30 PM.

The Red Deer River Naturalists, the first natural history organization to be established in Alberta, traces its roots to the Northwest Entomological Society, founded in 1898. 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 7:00 PM on the fourth Thursday of most months at Kerry Wood Nature Centre. Non-members are welcome.

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

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