The Red Deer River Naturalist

October 2025 Editors: Myrna Pearman & Susan van der Hoek

Photos Provided by Ellie Coleman & Allison Scovil

Collaborating for Whooping Crane Conservation

23 October 2025

7:00 PM

Kerry Wood Nature Centre

Red Deer

With Speakers Ellie Coleman & Allison Scovil

Learn about the remarkable tale of the Whooping Crane, North America's tallest bird and a symbol of conservation success. Once on the brink of extinction, these majestic birds have made an incredible comeback thanks to decades of dedicated conservation efforts. Discover their fascinating lives, the challenges they've faced, and the ongoing work to support their recovery. Hear how the Wilder Institute/Calgary Zoo is contributing through collaborative research, community engagement and conservation breeding to ensure a future for these iconic birds.

Photos by Myrna Pearman

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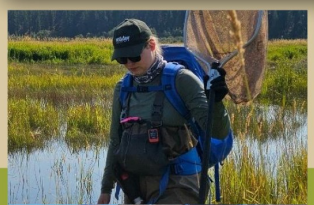

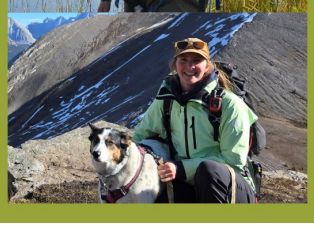

Ellie Coleman

Ellie is the Whooping Crane Conservation Associate at the Wilder Institute/Calgary Zoo. She supports all aspects of the Whooping Crane Program, including fieldwork, research and community outreach.

Allison Scovil

Allison is the Conservation Linkage Associate for the Wilder Institute/Calgary Zoo. She works to integrate information from initiatives that the Wilder Institute/Calgary Zoo leads or collaborates on, into engaging, cohesive, and accurate stories that appeal to broad and diverse audiences.

Photos Provided by Ellie Coleman & Allison Scovil

All are Welcome

SPONSORED BY RDRN RED DEER RIVER NATURALISTS

SIGHTS AND SOUNDS OF ALBERTA WITH DR. SALLY STUART: BEE FLIES

Bee flies are fascinating little insects that, upon first glance, look like bees. However, they are flies. As batesian bee mimics, they resemble bees but, without the ability to sting or bite, are harmless.

Flies belong to Order Diptera, with a single pair of wings being one of their key characteristics. However, the most distinctive feature of bee flies is their densely haired bodies. They also have relatively long thin legs and a pair of short antennae. Like numerous fly species, bee flies have incredibly large compound eyes. These sensory organs play a critical role in all aspects of their lives.

The bee fly in the photo shown here is probably the tawny-tailed bee-fly *Villa fulviana*, although it is extremely difficult to identify bee flies to the species level. According to *The Bee Flies of Ontario* (2008), species-level identification often requires examining the setae (hairs) as well as the wing veins and antenna.

As a group, bee flies have been well studied; one of the most detailed guides (*Bee Flies of the World*) was published in 1973 by Frank Hull following 21 years of research. Yet despite ongoing research, little is known about countless species.

Adult bee flies have high energy demands, so feed for extended periods of time on energy rich nectar, which they extract using their proboscis (tongue). During feeding, they transfer pollen, making them important pollinators. Males compete for females while defending their territorial flower plots through the performance of fantastically rapid aerial maneuvers and aggressive altercations. After about 30 minutes of this strenuous activity, the exhausted males rest or feed. Also energetically challenging is oogenesis (egg development), a process whereby thousands of eggs develop over a period of several weeks. Feeding strategies differ amongst species but is partially determined by the length of the proboscis which enables access to a particular flower shape.

Some bee fly species are generalists while others are specialists. Several species land on flowers while others feed while hovering in midair. Both sexes appear to eat pollen, but females require this high protein source for egg development, hence they are know as "obligate pollen feeders."

Perhaps one of the most fascinating features of bee flies is their life cycle. As larvae, most species are ectoparasitoids (external parasites which kill their host). The most common hosts are the immature stages of hymenopteran bees (e.g., of the genus *Andrena* [solitary ground-nesting bees]; however, hosts occur in at least six other insect orders and for many species of bee flies the exact host is unknown.

The challenge for the female bee fly is to ensure successful larval development, so she must deposit her eggs close to the underground nest entrance. How exactly she locates these nests is unclear. Some species have been observed following bees back to their nests, while other studies suggest that females select random dark areas which ostensibly resemble a nest entrance.

Females produce up to three thousand eggs per day, a strategy to hopefully ensure that at least a few will successfully locate the host. In Frank Hull's guide, he describes observing a female flying downwards towards a nest entrance about 210 times in 20 minutes. During this brief period, it was estimated she produced about one thousand eggs. Dr. Erica McAlister, senior curator of the *Diptera* at the Natural History Museum of London online, describes the behaviour of dark-edged beefly, which envelopes her eggs in sand and gravel. Upon locating the nest, a spine on her modified ovipositor flicks out the eggs.

Numerous bee fly species collect sandy soil with the tip of the abdomen before using powerful hairs to manipulate it into an abdominal holding chamber. These "sand chambers," which evolved in the Eocene period, confer obvious advantages because sand protects and camouflages the egg, prevents water loss and reduces odour. Finally, it adds weight, perhaps allowing them to be projected more accurately.

Eggs hatch into the first very mobile larval stage called the triangulin, whose role is to locate a suitable host. Shuffling forward using hairs and pseudopods (false legs), they enter the underground host nest. There, a feast of pollen meant for the developing bee rewards their strenuous efforts and they even eventually devour the bee larva and pupa.

Bee flies undergo hypermetamorphosis, in which the larval stages are radically different from each other. Following this first active stage, the larvae undergo a second metamorphosis, passing through various sedentary larval stages, molting and getting bigger before pupating and emerging as adults.

Bombyliids are extraordinarily successful organisms, with fossil records existing from the mid-Jurassic (169-194 million years ago). The female's anatomical adaptions to both disguise and ejecting eggs are remarkable. In parts of Africa, bee flies play a key role controlling tsetse fly larvae, which are responsible for transmitting diseases such as sleeping sickness. In the future, bee flies may play an even more important role as both pollinators and regulators of insect pests.

NATURE CENTRAL WITH ABBEY VAN HEUVEL

Thirteen participants joined us on Sunday, September 28 for the Open Creek Dam hike and paddle. We began with a 5-km loop around the lake, spotting Swamp Sparrows, Dark-eyed Juncos and even a Canada Jay.

After enjoying lunch by the water, we set out on the paddle and were treated to Belted Kingfishers flying across the lake. We wrapped up the day at Hawktail Brewery in Rimbey with a well-earned refreshment. We will soon be announcing our fall hikes. Stay tuned!

BUFFALO LAKE NATURE CLUB

WES OLSON:
THE ECOLOGICAL BUFFALO

Thursday, October 16 @ 7:00 PM

St. George's Anglican Church 4817-51 St, Stettler

DID YOU KNOW? WITH SUSAN VAN DER HOEK

The collective nouns for a group of Common Grackles (*Quiscalus quiscula*) include a *plague*, *cloud* or *quarrel*. Common Grackles are found across North America, especially east of the Rocky Mountains.

Male grackles have a glossy black appearance with iridescent purple and green hues, while females are generally less glossy and have a more muted brown coloration. Both sexes have bright yellow eyes and long tails. Their calls are often described as a series of guttural squeaks and high-pitched whistles, are sometimes likened to the sound of a rusty gate. Common Grackles thrive in various habitats, including agricultural fields, urban areas, parks and wetlands. They are known for their opportunistic feeding habits, often foraging for insects, seeds and even garbage. They can be seen strutting on lawns, pecking (vs. scratching) for food.

Common Grackles, which often nest in colonies, build well-concealed cup nests in dense trees (especially pine) or shrubs, usually near water, and occasionally in cavities or man-made structures. The female lays four to seven eggs.

The species sometimes practice "anting," whereby they allow ants to crawl all over their body and feathers. They use the ants' formic acid as a way to remove parasites and shed dead feathers. They are often seen in large flocks, especially during migration.

BIRDING TRIPS WITH CHRIS OLSEN

Outings start at 10:00 AM unless otherwise noted. Directions, maps and travel details (including schedule changes or destination updates) are posted on the RDRN website (Calendar of Events). Birders of all skill levels are welcome. Contact Chris for questions and details (780-581-4430).

October 11 – Maskepetoon Park – meet in the playground parking lot (Kerry Wood Drive/Oak Drive)

October 18 – Crimson Lake (Amerada Trail) – meet at the parking lot. This trail follows the lake perimeter for about 11 km. Plan for a lunch break at about the mid-point and expect about 4-5 hours of walking.

October 25 – Riverbend Upper trails – meet in the main parking lot

November 1 – Dickson Point/Trout Pond (south of Dickson for 4.1 km on Range Rd 31)

RDRN History Presentations

RDRN'S amazing historian, Rod Trentham, will be giving the second of his public presentations—**The Red Deer River Naturalists: Astonishing Volunteer Contributions** — on **Tuesday, October 28** at **7:00 PM** at the Golden Circle**.** These presentations are co-sponsored by the Central Alberta Historical Society and RDRN. Images from the September 24th presentation (*The Red Deer River Naturalists: Since 1898*): *From top left: Gilles Allard, President of the Central Alberta Historical Society, introducing Rod; Dr. Sandy and Dorothy Murray with Jennifer O'Brien; Rod with Bob Mills, Rod with Jennifer O'Brien, RDRN board members, Rhian Engle and Brenda Garret; Rod delivering his presentation.*

Congratulations to Jennifer O'Brien, who recently celebrated her 90th birthday!

UPCOMING SPEAKERS

November 27—Dr. Glynnis Hood (Muskrats)

December—Christmas Bird Count

January 22—Kevin van Tighem (AGM)

RDRN GRANTS

RDRN is pleased to support bat conservation in Alberta by providing a a small grant to Wildlife Conservation Society Canada to support the reprint of the bat colouring book and the development of a bat education kit.

Nature Alberta Celebrates 55th Anniversary: Several RDRN members attended Nature Alberta's 55th anniversary celebrations in Edmonton on Sunday, September 21.

Participants enjoyed an outdoor walk along Whitemud Creek prior to the luncheon, presentations and a live auction. Congratulations Nature Alberta!

naturealberta.ca

From left: Former and current Nature Alberta board members; Myrna Pearman delivered one of the five pecha kucha presentations.

IN THE ALBERTA WILDERNESS WITH DON AUTEN:

COMMON GOLDENEYE

This summer, I launched my trail camera float on a different lake and was able to capture photos of Common Goldeneyes throughout the season.

The first photo captures of them were on May 11 when the pair was active around the float for a few days. They disappeared, but must have nested successfully in the area because, on June 9, the female brought her nine babies to my float.

Goldeneyes are cavity nesters, using abandoned woodpecker nests up to 18 meters high, often close to water. Twenty four to 36 hours after hatching, the ducklings leave the nest by jumping out of the cavity to the ground. Mama then leads them to water.

The ducklings are tended by the mother, but are able to feed themselves soon after hatching. Like other diving ducks, their main food sources include aquatic insect larvae, small fish, crustaceans and some tuber and plant material.

An interesting fact about Common Goldeneyes is they are often called "Whistlers," a name given to them because their wings create a very distinctive whistling sound when they fly.

Social Media: 5174 Facebook Members; 300 X Followers; 542 Instagram Followers

The Red Deer River Naturalists, the first natural history organization to be established in Alberta, was founded in 1898 and incorporated 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 7:00 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.

Box 785 Red Deer, AB T4N 5H2 Phone/Fax: 403.347.8200
rdrn.nature@gmail.com
www.rdrn.ca
wearenaturalwise.blogspot.com
Facebook
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