

The Red Deer River Naturalist



January 2026

Editors: Myrna Pearman & Susan van der Hoek



Red Deer River Naturalists

Join us for our 2026 Annual General Meeting, Owl Award presentation, and a special wine-and-cheese evening with Kevin Van Tighem. Co-sponsored by RDRN and Friends of Kerry Wood Nature Centre, this event will feature Kevin reading from his new book *Understory: An Ecologist's Memoir of Loss and Hope*.

The Stories We Tell Ourselves

22

January

2026 7:00 PM

Kerry Wood Nature Centre Red Deer

WINE AND CHEESE:
5:30 PM to 9:00 PM

AGM -
6:00 PM to 7:00 PM

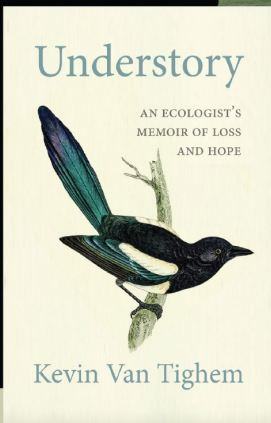
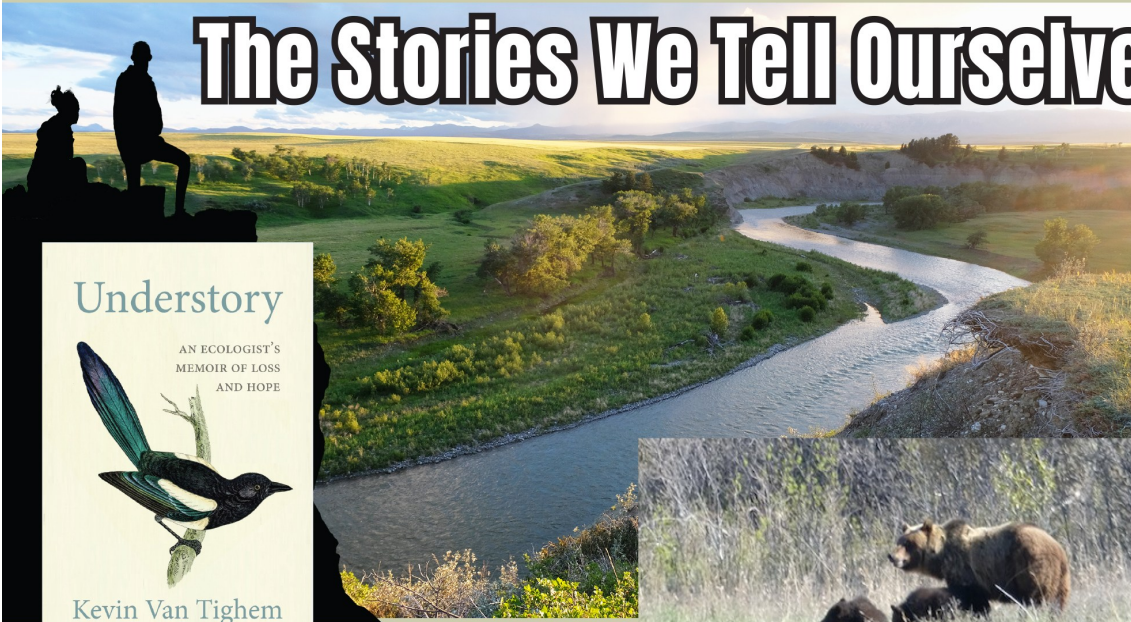
RDRN OWL AWARD
PRESENTATION:

7:00 PM to 7:15 PM

KEVIN VAN TIGHEM

READING:

7:30 PM to 8:30 PM



Photos provided by
Kevin Van Tighem



The Stories We Tell Ourselves examines the narratives that shape our relationship with nature and one another. Kevin argues that now, more than ever, we need to find better stories, founded on deeper relationships with places and the other beings with whom we share them. Based on his newest book, *Understory: An Ecologist's Memoir of Loss and Hope*, he'll share a few of his own stories and learnings after a lifetime in the wild places of our western plains, foothills and mountains.

Kevin Van Tighem's Alberta roots extend back to 1875. He worked for over thirty years in western Canada's National Parks as a Naturalist, Ecologist, Warden and Park Superintendent. Kevin is a life-long Conservationist and is the author of fifteen books, including his most recent release: *Understory: An Ecologist's Memoir of Loss and Hope*. He was recently awarded an honorary Doctor of Science by the University of Lethbridge, has received the Canadian Wildlife Federation's Robert Bateman Award, and now has a Blackfoot name translating to Rapid Rough Water. He lives with his wife, Gail, in High River.



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BY



NATURE CENTRAL WITH ABBEY VAN HEUVEL

On Sunday, December 14th, 16 participants joined Nature Central for a guided walk at the H.G. Lawrence Property on Pine Lake - a conservation area normally closed to the public and opened exclusively for this event.



Led by two Nature Conservancy Canada (NCC) representatives in collaboration with Nature Central, the group learned about the ongoing forest restoration project, including tree planting practices that have been shaping the property over the past few years. The hike meandered through open pasture, along the shoreline and beneath the trees, offering plenty of wildlife moments along the way. Highlights included sightings of mule deer, Pine Grosbeaks, Black-capped Chickadees, Red-breasted Nuthatches and Northern Flickers, plus the distant sound of coyote calls echoing through the site.



With mild winter temperatures hovering around -2° C, the afternoon wrapped up in the best way possible - hot chocolate and Tim Bits shared among new and familiar faces. A huge thank you to everyone who joined us and helped make this exclusive winter walk such a memorable one!



DID YOU KNOW? WITH SUSAN VAN DER HOEK COYOTES

A group of coyotes (*Canis latrans*) have several names: band, pack, rout or run—with "band" being most common since coyotes typically form family-based social units rather than the rigid packs seen in wolves.

Coyotes are adaptable and common canines, found throughout diverse habitats in both wilderness and urban settings. They typically weigh between 10 to 22 kg. Coyote families consist of the parents, which mate for life. During the breeding season, the older siblings help raise the pups. Most active at dawn and dusk, coyotes hunt rodents, fawns, rabbits/hares and birds, and also eat fruit, insects, bird seed, carrion and compost. Coyotes will occasionally threaten pets and livestock.

To reduce the risk of conflict, especially in urban areas, keep cats indoors and dogs leashed while out walking. If confronted by an aggressive coyote, try to maintain a distance of at least 20 m and, if necessary, yell, wave your arms and make yourself appear as large as possible. In Alberta, report dangerous situations to Report-A-Poacher at 1-800-642-3800.



BIRD FOCUS GROUP WITH CHRIS OLSEN

After our final walk of the season in Gaetz Lakes Sanctuary on December 13, we joined about 20 of our Bird Focus Group people in the Nature Centre and enjoyed coffee, donuts and sweet treats while we looked at the year past and discussed ideas for our winter/spring schedule ahead. I'll provide a complete summary for the AGM and next newsletter, but in my verbal report Saturday I noted our species count was 155, up 7 from this last year. We had 274 participants on 31 outings (not including Ferry Point, the Snow Goose Festival, or the Spring count). Our group walked 164 km, with groups averaging 9-10 people per outing. Ferry Point netted us 86 species this year, accounting for 16 of our total. For our regular walks, Kuhnen Park led for species richness this year (51), followed by Riverbend Upper (46 - great work Ron!) and Alix Lake (45). Thanks so much to Rick, Susan and the RDRN Board for their support through the year, and for this most excellent treat! Thanks to everyone in the group (130+) for their enthusiasm and participation, rain or shine!



NEWSLETTER EDITOR: Myrna Pearman is resigning as the Newsletter Editor as she takes on the role of President of RDRN. We are looking for a new editor! If you are interested, please contact Myrna at myrnapearman.nature@gmail.com.

WINTER BUG COUNT: The annual Winter Bug Count documents arthropods — insects, spiders and crustaceans such as sow bugs — in Alberta and Saskatchewan through December, January and February. Learn more about this exciting #CitizenScience project by listening to Nature Alberta Patron John Acorn's presentation on [Counting Winter Bugs with John Acorn](#). Accepted species include any free-living arthropod indoors or outdoors, excluding pets, specimens or pet food. You can contribute observations to this year's Winter Bug Count by sharing your observations on iNaturalist. Not sure what that creepy crawly in your basement is? Experts will help identify your find!

Follow these easy steps to participate:

Step 1: Install the iNaturalist app on your device or visit inaturalist.org on your computer.

Step 2: Create an account and join the [New Winter Bug Count](#).

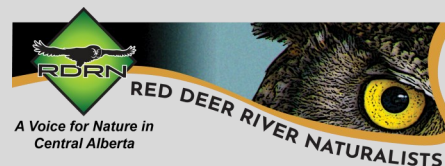
Step 3: Head outside to explore snowbanks and sheltered areas or head down into your basement to find a creepy crawler skittering across the floor. Try moving boxes or items that have not been disturbed in a while. Some bugs will just sit there, allowing an easy photograph to be taken. Other times, you'll have to be fast to take a picture, or catch the arthropod in a bug viewing container to get a clear photograph.

Step 4: Tap "Observe" to take a photo of your little critter. Review your photo and hit "Next" if it looks good.

Step 5: Optional: Identify the species by clicking on "What did you see?" Options will populate based on species that look like your photo. You can select one of these or look up a species name, if you know what it is. It's that easy! Your observation will automatically be included in the Winter Bug Count results. Now search iNaturalist's "Projects" for the Winter Bug Count to see what other small species are active in our part of the country at this time of year.

<https://naturealberta.ca/winter-bug-count/>

UPCOMING EVENTS AND SPEAKERS



February 26, 2026: Coastal Wolf Genetics with Michelle Hoang

March 26, 2026: Red Deer Polytechnique Student Presentations

April 23, 2026: Lorne Fitch reading from *Conservation Confidential: A Biologist Investigates the Clash between Progress and Nature*

May 2026: May Species Count

NATURE ALBERTA: Nature Alberta hosts interesting monthly zoom presentations—<https://naturealberta.ca/events/>

IN THE ALBERTA WILDERNESS WITH DON AUTEN: STRIPED SKUNK

Striped Skunks occasionally come by a trail cam that I set up for small forest animals. With their striking black and white colors and nasty defense system, they are one of the most easily recognizable species in the province.

Despite their bad reputation, the chances of being sprayed by a skunk are low because skunks are not aggressive and prefer to run away from danger. Even when threatened and in distress, skunks will spray only as a last resort. Their warning signs are easy to read: they will raise and puff out their bushy tails, stomp their front feet, and sometimes perform a quick and aggressive-looking charge. They may also hiss or growl at a perceived threat.



The reason that skunks are reluctant to dispense their famously foul-smelling spray is because the scent-producing musk glands contain only enough liquid for five or six shots at a time. It can take up to 10 days for the glands to recharge, so they are very vulnerable during that time.

Skunks are nocturnal omnivores, dining on insect grubs, bird eggs, rodents, select wild plants and human scraps. Since their eyesight is very poor, they spend their nights shuffling around using their nose to locate their food.

Although skunks are not true hibernators, they will put on a layer of fat for the winter and will gather in communal den where they enter a state of torpor. During winter warm spells, they may wake up and leave the den to find food.

The only regular predator of the Striped Skunk is the Great Horned Owl. Lacking a highly developed sense of smell, this owl does not seem to mind their odour.

Social Media: 6215 Facebook Members; 305 X Followers; 560 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
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