

# The Kestrel

Quarterly Newsletter of the  
Rocky Mountain Naturalists  
2014 winter solstice



Can you find a good kestrel picture [our local species, the American Kestrel] for the first page of the newsletter? If so, please email it to the newsletter.

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# Tony Wideski Memorial Walk, Bummers Flats October 5



On a beautiful, clear October afternoon 13 Rocky Mountain Naturalists and one international student, Max, from Switzerland, gathered at the Bummers Flats information sign near the Kootenay River to enjoy an easy walk along the river and to remember Tony Wideski, who passed away recently and is sadly missed. The sun was warm and the grasses tall as we spread out along the jeep trail, eventually drifting into smaller groups along the way.

Although birds were not plentiful we kept our binoculars handy, just in case, and were rewarded with sightings that included the following:

- Bald Eagle
- Ring-billed Gull
- Herring Gull
- American Kestrel
- Black-billed Magpie
- Common Raven
- American Crow
- Black-capped Chickadee
- American Robin
- Fox Sparrow
- Song Sparrow
- White-crowned Sparrow
- Western Meadowlark



Elaine, Peter and Sandi, who came down from Fairmont, went the furthest, out to the pump

house, and saw some Spotted Towhees and what they believe was a Short-eared Owl, a species that has been seen in this area before.

Kent shared information about lichens, and Max got photos of bear, wolf and coyote scat for his scatology collection as well as a shot of a small bear paw print on the trail. There were several large piles of fairly fresh bear scat at the drop-off to the river, near a copse of hawthorn bushes and snowberries. Daryl introduced some of us to milkweed, the only plant on which monarch butterflies will lay their eggs. The two-foot [60 cm] high plants were found alongside the jeep track, with their large pods split open, exposing silky tufts of seeds.



bear scat in the grass

The sun brought out black and brown [orange] woolly bear caterpillars, larvae of a species of tiger moth (*Pyrrharctia isabella*), which wriggled their way along the track, oblivious to our dangerous feet.



milkweed

As we turned and walked back the Kootenay River wound its way lazily alongside us, sparkling in the sunshine and reflecting the brush and trees on its opposite bank. The shrubs had already turned a hundred shades of gold and red and the river's mirrored surface threw back every detail in sharp relief.



woolly bear caterpillar

We could not have asked for a more beautiful day!



clematis close up

article and photos submitted by Helga Knot



clematis

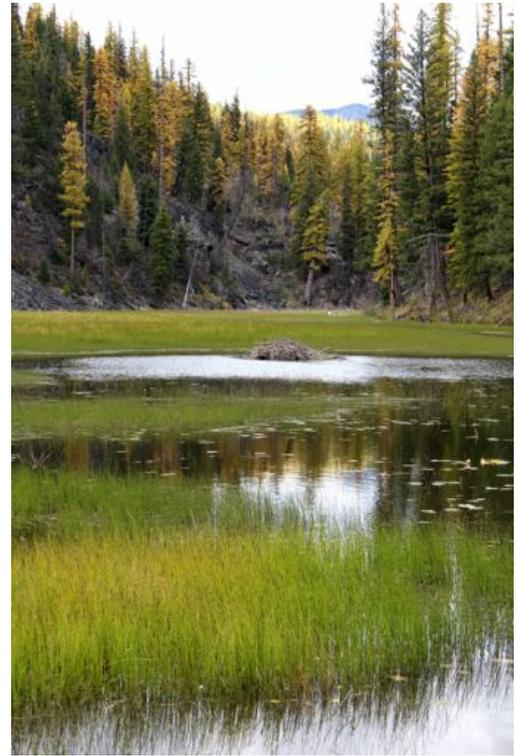
# Negro Lake Hike

October 12



Greg led twelve RMNs on a fantastic and challenging hike off the Lumberton Road. This was only a short 3 kilometer hike, but it included crossing a rocky talus slide, bushwhacking up a steep slope and descending an even steeper (and slippery!) trail. To get to such a spectacular area was well worth the hard work. It is also a reminder for all of us to pay attention to the difficulty rating for any hike in which we plan to participate.

Perceptions of difficulty differ and agreement on what constitutes “difficult, “moderate” or “easy” might be a topic for future discussion. We saw a beaver lodge in the first of several small ponds, old mine tunnels, massive rock formations, huge, old Western Larch trees and an



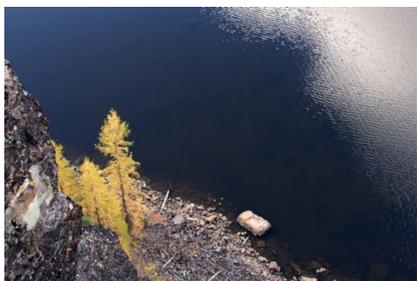
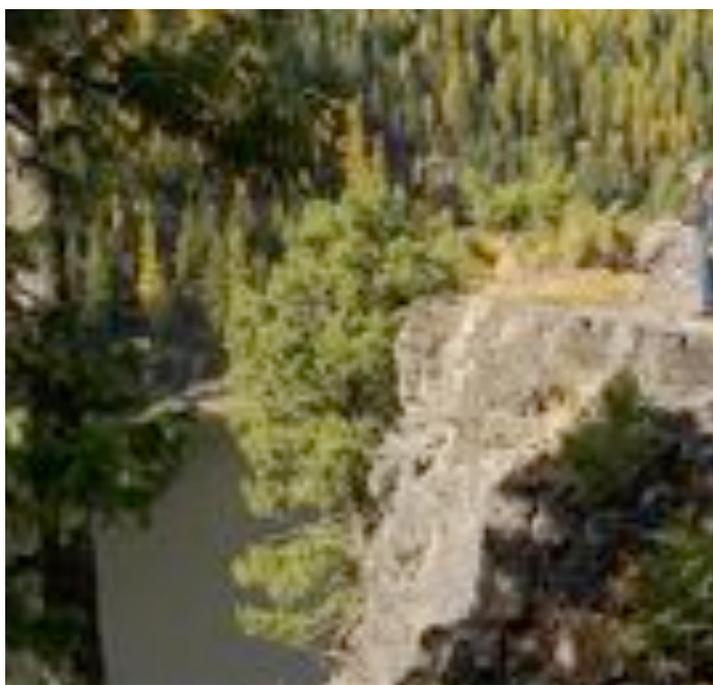
osprey nest overlooking the lake. There was even a geocache on the first section of trail. In spite of a chilly breeze that came up suddenly, lunch on the high



cliffs overlooking Negro Lake was a special treat!

by Helga Knot

pictures by Helga and Greg





Wigwam Edge Trail

In mid October, seven naturalists hopped on their two-wheelers and headed south along the Elk River canyon. We hoped to explore the unique and dramatic Wigwam Flats where glacial processes, rainshadow effect and fire history have conspired to produce natural grasslands within the Rocky Mountains. The grey skies did not contribute any moisture. Instead, small breaks in the cloud deck allowed



'spotlights' of sunshine to highlight various groves of quaking aspen, Douglas maple and western larch.



process of creating wildlife trees. The climbers prepared large trees by strategically removing bark with axe and saw and then infecting the trees with heart rot. The team intended to enhance the availability of suitable cavities excavated by larger woodpeckers. These cavities could then be used by Lewis's Woodpeckers and Saw-whet Owls. Curiously, the day's most abundant bird was the Townsend's Solitaire, while the most uncommon was my favorite, a Golden Eagle.

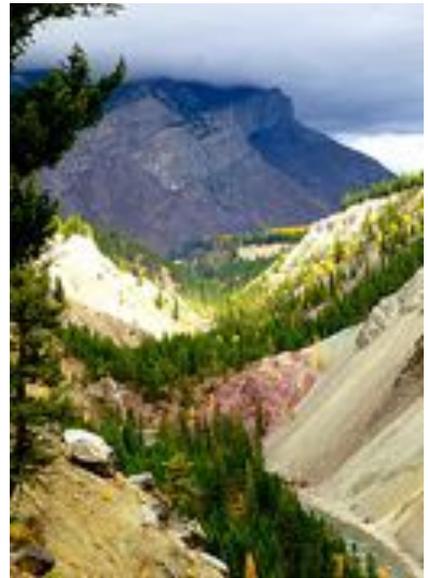
A crew of tree climbing experts was in the

After lunch in a group of Douglas-fir and juniper trees, we continued south across the heart of the flats, stumbling upon a wonderful viewpoint. We had unwittingly found the Purple Canyon carved by the Wigwam River. To the east, the





China Wall of Mount Broadwood towered above hoodoos and canyon walls colored with green, grey, mauve and purple rock bands and talus. Stunted Douglas-firs and ponderosa pines clung to the slopes along with golden



Hoodoos and Purple Canyon

cottonwoods. The Creston Formation, which is the youngest of the Fort Steele and Aldridge geologic formations, consists of siltstone and argillite units. Extremely finely divided hematite, the mineral form of iron oxide, causes the purple coloration.

Part way back, we turned south, passing the old orchard and homestead on our way to overlook the confluence of the Elk and Wigwam rivers. An unmistakable row of lilacs indicated early settlement in this dry and remote land. After pedalling and walking our bikes back up and down a few hills, we soon returned to the gate at the Elko-Morrissey haul road. Dinner at the Jaffray Pub provided a perfect opportunity to re-hydrate, re-fuel and refine our stories.

by Daryl Calder, with Greg's photos



Old Homestead Property



The RMNats who rode together on Booth Creek Road one day this fall found, as expected, a mosaic of golden larch and green Douglas-fir, roads covered in golden fallen larch needles, fruiting berry plants and mushrooms.



kinnikinnick



bunchberry



mushrooms pushing their way up



western buttercup



ox-eye daisy



strawberry



golden road

But this year the fall weather has been warm enough to confuse some of the flowering plants. The riders saw strawberry, ox-eye daisy and western buttercup blooming in October.

photos by Greg



# Parhelia and Light Pillars

Have you ever wondered about what you see in the sky?

During the clear skies of winter, you may see two small bright patches in the sky, flanking the sun. A constant precipitation of tiny ice crystals causes a haziness during the day. Sometimes the crystals create sun dogs - blurry images of the sun often with pale, rainbow-like colours. They appear 22 degrees right and left of the sun, which is the angle of refraction for ice. The ice crystals drift slowly toward the ground, keeping a more or less flat orientation, like that of falling leaves. The uniformity in orientation keeps the sun dogs, mock suns or parhelia in their apparent position.



Parhelia are a member of a large family of halos. They can be seen anywhere in the world during any season, but they are not always obvious or bright. Sun dogs are best seen and are most conspicuous when the sun is low. In summer, high, thin ice clouds, called cirrus, are composed of these same plate-shaped hexagonal ice crystals. During very cold weather, drifting in the air at low levels, the crystals are called diamond dust. If the crystals are randomly oriented, a complete ring around the sun is seen. Sun dogs are red at the side nearest the sun. Farther out, the colours grade through oranges to blue or green.

Light from the moon can also create glowing spots called moon dogs. They are rarer than sun dogs because they occur only when the moon is full or close to being full.



Generally seen in cold, arctic regions, light pillars are an optical phenomena where columns of light can be seen emanating from below or above a light source. Light pillars occur when natural or artificial light reflects off flat ice crystals in the air near the earth's surface. Light pillars caused by the sun are called Solar or Sun Pillars, while those caused by the moon are Lunar or Moon Pillars. Light pillars can also occur

due to the presence of artificial light.

Sun pillars generally fade 20 to 60 minutes after sunset. Under favourable conditions, eg. icy fog, pillars might stretch out 30 degrees above the sun although 5-10 degrees is most common. On rare occasions, regarded with awe in more superstitious times, a pillar may occur with part of the Parhelic Circle to give the appearance of a cross centred on the sun.



Submitted by Daryl Calder

[web images]

# Bird Irruptions

Every winter, backyard birders look forward to possible bird irruptions that will bring new and welcome guests to their feeders. But what exactly is an irruption, and what does it mean for birding?

An irruption is a dramatic, irregular migration of large numbers of birds to areas where they aren't typically found, possibly at great distances from their normal ranges. Several factors can lead to irruptive years for different birds. The most common cause is a lack of food in the birds' normal wintering grounds. Famine can force large numbers of birds to seek more plentiful habitats until seeds, flowers and insects return in the spring. Birds that feed on the seeds and catkins of birch, maple, pine, spruce and hemlock trees often irrupt when those types of trees have poor seed crops. Different birds of prey may also irrupt when the seed crops are poor and cannot support the necessary rodent populations for raptor food sources. Other causes for bird irruptions include unduly harsh, cold or severe weather, which may force birds to more temperate wintering grounds; or overbreeding, which may deplete even plentiful food supplies. No matter what the cause of the irruption, however, it is difficult to predict where or when irrupting species may appear.

Many bird species found in boreal and other northern habitats can irrupt if circumstances require it. Certainly, with the recent erratic weather patterns in the East Kootenay and elsewhere, we anticipate unexpected visitors at our feeders. When large numbers of birds appear, it is important to keep birdbaths and feeders clean to keep birds healthy. Provide a variety of fresh, high quality seed and suet. Sometimes, irrupting birds can bully or intimidate other backyard birds, restricting their access to feeders and monopolizing the seed. Birders can change the types of feeders and seed they offer to discourage such behaviour, or they can put up extra feeders to welcome all the new guests to their yard. Spacing feeders out will minimize territoriality and aggression while ensuring all birds can enjoy the buffet.

Bird irruptions can add excitement to winter birding. While birders should never count on an irruption, it can be a pleasant surprise when northern birds appear at southern feeders.

Some irruptive birds we may see this year are:

Pine Siskin	Common Redpoll	Hoary Redpoll
Bohemian Waxwing	Red Crossbill	Varied Thrush
Evening Grosbeak	White-winged Crossbill	Great Grey Owl
Boreal Chickadee	Northern Shrike	Snowy Owl
Pine Grosbeak	Red-breasted Nuthatch	Rough-legged Hawk

Feeder watchers are encouraged to help with the Christmas Bird Counts again this year. Keep an eye on your feeders, count the largest number of each species seen at one time and contact us with your list at around 5 PM on Count Day [dates and times on last page].

submitted by Daryl Calder

## Pine Siskins

Flocks of tiny Pine Siskins may monopolize your thistle feeder one winter and be absent the next. This nomadic finch ranges widely and erratically across the continent each winter in response to seed crops. Better suited to hanging from branch tips than to hopping along the ground, these brown-streaked acrobats flash yellow wing markings as they flutter while feeding or as they explode into flight. Flocks are gregarious, and you may hear their insistent wheezy twitters before you see them. Pine Siskins can temporarily store seeds totalling as much as 10% of their body mass in a part of their esophagus called the crop. The energy in that amount of food could get them through 5-6 cold night hours. The 'State of the Birds Report' listed them as a Common Bird in Steep Decline. Domestic cats, red squirrels, hawks, jays and crows can prey on adult birds or on their eggs or young. Pine Siskins' fondness for mineral deposits can lure them onto dangerously busy roadways salted to remove ice and snow. Loss of habitat from forest clearing may be balanced by replanting and by the siskin's willingness to nest in shrubs and ornamental trees. It's good to see the little finches have returned to our feeders.



by Daryl Calder      [web image]

## Club Information

### Executive

President	Peter Davidson
Vice President	Tara Szkorupa
Secretary	Marianne Nahm
Treasurer	Lois Gruenig
BC Nature Director	Greg Ross
Field Trips	George and Paula Rogers
Presentations	Marianne Nahm

### Other Committee and Club Representatives

Little Big Day	Greg Ross
Christmas Bird Counts	Greg Ross
Elizabeth Lake	Tara Szkorupa
Newsletter	Susan Walp

### Field Trips

Leader responsibilities:

Find a replacement leader if necessary.

Keep the group together.

Make sure everybody leaves the parking area safely.

Get someone to write an account of the field trip.

Carpoolers: Please offer to chip in for gas.

No dogs on field trips, please, unless otherwise specified

Upcoming Events

December	20	Saturday	Cranbrook Christmas bird count
			8:45 Elizabeth Lake Greg
January 1-March 31			Tony Wideski Winter Seekers Challenge Peter
January	4	Sunday	Kimberly Christmas bird count
			8:45 Platzl parking lot Dianne
	18	Sunday	snowshoe/ski trip followed by club dinner



If you'd like to see your dog here, please send its picture to the newsletter.

### Meetings

Held every two months, in odd-numbered months [RMNats general meetings]

Upcoming Meetings

January	21	Wednesday	7 pm COTR AGM and regular general meeting
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