

The Kestrel

Quarterly Newsletter of the
Rocky Mountain Naturalists
2017 spring equinox



web image

Inside this Issue

Field Trips

Trans Canada Trail	2
Beacon Hill Goat Trail	3
Wilks Woods Loop (Whiskyjack)	4
Isadore Steeples View	6
Back to Wilks Woods	8
Wasa Slough	11
Deer Mouse	5
Internet Links	10
Mystery Photo (answer from before)	12
(the new photo)	13
Club Information	14
Executive	
Committees	
Field Trips	
Upcoming Events	
Meetings	

Can you find a good kestrel picture [our local species, the American Kestrel] for this spot? If so, please email it to the newsletter at mnatskestrel@gmail.com.

Trans Canada Trail Snowshoe/Ski

2016 December 24

Despite the steadily falling snow, eight avid Nats headed out along the Trans Canada Trail starting from the Eager Hill/Fort Steele road. Six snowshoers and two cross-country skiers plowed their way through a snowy mixed forest of pine, western larch, Douglas-fir and aspen. Ravens, Red-breasted Nuthatches, chickadees and even crossbills could be heard serenading us on our journey. Various tracks of deer mouse, western red squirrel and the occasional



snowshoe hare could be seen beneath the fresh layer of snow flakes, while the more abundant tracks of deer and elk zigzagged across the meadows. Once at the meadow beside the small frozen lake one could see where the elk had been digging, trying to get at the bunchgrass buried beneath the snow piles. On returning to our starting

point, three more brave souls joined us for a lovely fire and many snacks and stories.

Paula Rogers

photos by George Rogers



Beacon Hill Goat Trail

2016 December 30

As soon as eight enthusiastic Nats started to snowshoe up the goat trail toward Beacon Hill, the valley fog began to lift, the sky turned blue and things were looking up – literally. The trail winds its



Bob pauses

Gerry Warner



doing the "fence stretch"

Gerry Warner

way south from Wilks Road through a variety of classic East Kootenay landscapes, eventually claiming the summit of a small rocky hill on the edge of Cranbrook. Thanks to a greater-than-average early season snowpack, we were able to take advantage of the lay of the land, maintaining a fairly steady grade through relatively rugged country. Our first bird-of-the-mist, a perched American Robin, was positively identified by its voice. Soon a flock of Bohemian Waxwings was accompanied by a few Red Crossbills. Up through an ecologically important antelope brush meadow, the



snow waves

Gerry Warner

number of deer trails increased, and areas where elk had dug through the snow for bunchgrass were evident. This unique antelope brush ecosystem, found mainly in the Okanagan but also here in isolated spots, is both fragile and complex (<http://www.env.gov.bc.ca/wld/documents/antelope.pdf>, http://www.trench-er.com/public/library/files/Grassland_Classification_2014.pdf). In the upper rocky meadows, snowshoe hare,



George looks

Paula Rogers



Paula Rogers

red squirrel and deer mouse had left tracks atop the powder. Such shrubs as western chokecherry, saskatoon and mock orange appeared in sunny spots. At the top, with no wind, the late December sun had some strength as we surveyed our domain.

Back at the home of Marianne & Daryl, it was satisfying to sit down for a bowl of tasty soup, butter the home-made bread and swap some tall tales.

Daryl Calder

Wilks Woods Loop (Whiskyjack)

January 1

Seven Nats tromped through the East Kootenay woods seeking an invigorating celebration of the new year. Relatively mild temperature and calm winds, along with significant snowpack, favoured excellent snowshoeing through varied forests.



In addition to the familiar prints of deer and elk, the deer mice (see box, next page) were active. Birds were not abundant, but on several occasions, fresh bits of debris littered the snow. Evidently, Red Crossbills were attracted to Douglas-fir trees bearing heavy cone crops. With their unique bills, they break cones apart, releasing the small, winged seeds. Elsewhere, bark flakes suggested the presence of nuthatches or woodpeckers (either Three-toed or Hairy).

About halfway along the loop, Nats rested by a small, warm fire, toasted the new year and enjoyed a splendid view to the north.

On top of 'Whiskyjack', we signed the logbook and pondered many of the fine, wild destinations within a short distance of Cranbrook. At 'sunflower hill', a view to the east included Lone Cone,



Brewery Ridge and the lower St. Mary River. While this hike is enjoyable in all seasons, naturalists will likely explore the Wilks Woods again before spring.

Daryl Calder
photos by George Rogers

Deer Mouse (*Peromyscus maniculatus*)

Deer mice are accomplished runners and jumpers by comparison with other mice. Their common name (coined in 1833) is in reference to this agility. Strongly nocturnal, this rodent does not actually hibernate. It will undergo bouts of light torpor lasting for up to several days, during which body temperature may fall several degrees.



deer mouse

web image

This semi-arboreal species climbs well, can swim and may forage in shallow water. The deer mouse feeds at dusk and dawn, preferring insects, seeds, nuts, berries and small fruits. These mice are important for spreading seeds of many types of plants and the spores of fungi. Also, they may control certain insect pest populations. In the wild, they provide food for carnivorous birds and animals. Unfortunately, if they get into our dwellings, they can destroy stored food and transmit a harmful virus.

Daryl





RMNats carpool Katrin Powell

With seven naturalists led by Katrin, we drove out as far as the city spray fields and parked directly across from Gate One. Under a low gray cloud deck and with the temperature hovering around -15°C , we went through a gate and across a cattle guard and plodded on a packed trail in half a meter of snow that was still light and fluffy after the marathon cold snap we'd endured for the previous six weeks. Bearing left, we crossed the Trans

Canada Trail and then followed a road for a while heading in a south-easterly direction before turning right twice and then beginning to climb in a westerly direction towards Isadore Canyon. After this it was mostly up and sometimes down as we climbed through a mixed forest of second-growth pine and Douglas-fir. After about half an hour of this, we began to climb more steeply, leaving the gloom of the thick woods behind and ascending a short, steep, rocky ridge that ended in a low peak crowned conveniently by an old wooden bench with a panoramic view of the spray fields, the Rocky Mountain Trench and the jagged peaks of the Steeples across the valley to the east. Except we could see very little of this magnificent view because the inversion cloud layer was still lying low over the valley, but finally starting to lift. After a short lunch and a couple cups of much appreciated hot coffee from my steaming thermos, we started back down. It wasn't long before the first sun rays broke through the clouds, lighting up the snow which was transformed from a dull, gray blanket to a wavy sheet of sparkling jewels. Too bad we hadn't left about two hours later



Katrin Powell

because we could have hiked in sunshine and really enjoyed that great view.

Gerry Warner



Katrin Powell

The photo on the left shows some bare branches at the top of the tall tree. That's the way they looked as the group made its way up to the viewpoint. While hikers rested up on top, crossbills landed on those branches (possibly to have a look



Helga Knote

at the strange intruders). The photo above shows the same branches as the group made its way down. There were

crossbills perched all around by this time.

Look closely at Helga's photo. You can see the crossed bills!

Susan Walp



Helga Knote

Back to Wilks Woods

February 12

Back in February, typically a bright, sunny, mid-winter month, several days of snowfall blanketed the East Kootenay. Snowshoe trails established and enjoyed since December virtually disappeared. In recent years, mild, dry winters with thin snowpack curtailed some recreation activities in the lowlands; now everything had changed. Nearly a meter of fresh snow on top of an unconsolidated base could only mean tough snowshoeing. The planned expedition to The Confluence would be neither crunchy nor appropriate.

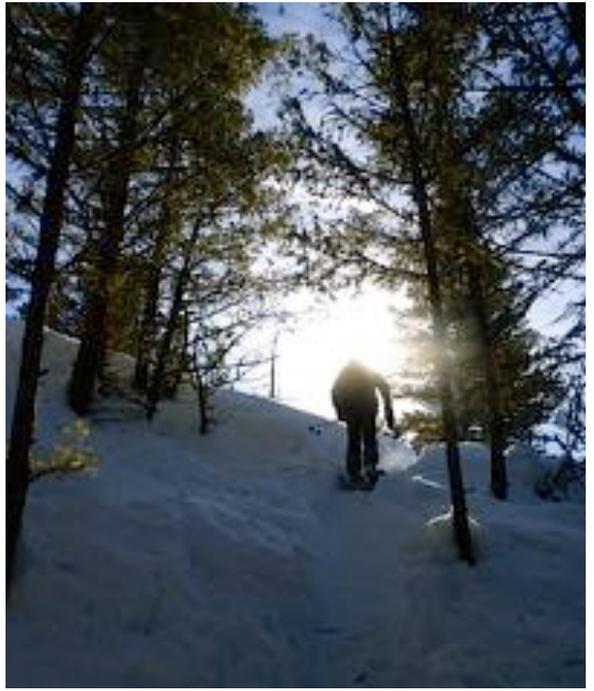
However, trip leaders were determined to provide an alternative adventure. Marianne and I set out to re-establish the Wilks Woods Loop which had not been snowshoed since New Years Day. Late one afternoon, we tromped in about 1/3 of the loop. Fatigue, nightfall and light freezing rain caused us to backtrack. Thoughts of the unfortunate Cypress snowshoers lost in the Vancouver North Shore mountains crossed my mind.

On the following day, with some new snow, we cruised up the freshly broken section, only to find that 'someone' was ahead of us. Bits of evidence, including tracks, scat, and apparent behavior, suggested that one or two large cats had stepped onto our trail during the night. Evidently, the animals circled around some trees where we had ended, then headed downhill. We continued to



punch in the high traverse. It was a relief to locate the faint ripple which was the New Years trail; soon we reached the section of trail which connects to 'Six Mile Lane' and is regularly used by our friend, Dean. To complete the loop, we encountered a variety of conditions; the deep sections were significant, but not mid-thigh as was the depth on the high traverse.





On February 12th, a fine group of enthusiastic naturalists thoroughly enjoyed the alternate woody outing. Hopefully our mid-March hike to the Matthew Creek-St. Mary River confluence will be somewhat crunchy and appropriate.

Daryl Calder



Thanks to Marianne and Daryl for leading us on this walk, providing such great weather and providing *apres-walk* goodies!!

Stewart Wilson
photography by Stewart Wilson



Internet Links

The website for Rocky Mountain Naturalists can be found at:

<http://www.rockymountainnaturalists.org/>

It has a calendar of events, a blog with photographs, archived newsletters, and more.

Make sure you are up to date on the latest techniques for keeping yourselves safe in the wild. Visit this site now and then to see how the science has given us new information.

www.wildsafebc.com

B.C. Big Tree Registry <http://bcbigtree.ca>

Antelope Brush Ecosystem

<http://www.env.gov.bc.ca/wld/documents/antelope.pdf>

http://www.trench-er.com/public/library/files/Grassland_Classification_2014.pdf

The Confluence remains, no doubt, but the Crunch was missing. We had to cancel the Matthew Creek-St. Mary River Confluence Crunch for the second time! Earlier in the winter, bottomless powder prohibited entry to this unique, variable area. Large pillows of snow hung in the treetops; an unfortunately timed 'plop' is something that could really ruin one's day. The rescheduled date, about a month later, was no better. Wet snow on top of a rotten snowpack would have created no end of unpredictable footing issues; 'misery slippers' would have been self explanatory.



Great Blue Heron

Bob Whetham

One successful series of outings continues to be Wednesday Early Birding. With some planning, our group has ventured out into the surrounding areas almost every week since last fall, documenting our sightings and challenging each other with questions. We are keen to solve puzzles, paradoxes and boggles. Until recently, our primary focus has been birds and habitats, also tracks and scat, but with retreating snowpack, we can look for emerging plants, buds and flowers.

About a dozen of us examined the Wasa

Sloughs in mid March. Some of us hope to see a particular bird, but most often, we just want to see and hear everything. Too early for swans, the slowly retreating snow and ice did expose the unexpected.

What's that brown thing? Not a bird, rather a mammal. The North American River Otter, (*Lontra canadensis*), also known as the northern river otter or the common otter, is a semi-aquatic mammal endemic to the North American continent, found in and along its waterways and coasts. An adult can weigh between 5.0 and 15 kilograms and is protected and insulated by a thick, water repellent coat of fur.

And what's this big brown thing? A large heap of earth and sticks piled on the shoreline could only have been made by



otter

Lyle Grisedale

an army of beavers. Many half-chewed chunks of wood floated in an ice-free opening. Beavers, (genus *Castor*) are among the largest rodents on earth. Their teeth never stop growing. Constant gnawing on wood keeps the teeth from growing too long. The two species are the North American and the European.

Now, what about this flat, brown bunch of feathers? At the base of a huge, dead ponderosa pine which once supported a sizeable Bald Eagle nest lay a scattering of miscellaneous feathers and white fluff. A large, oval wing with distinctive markings caught our critical attention. Several nats



owl wing

Bob Whetham

came to their own conclusions, but kept quiet. Certainly not a duck, how about a goose? Check those little buffy feathers near the shoulder. Maybe it was an owl's wing. Great Horned Owls, (*Bubo virginianus*) are fierce predators that can take large prey, including such raptors as Osprey, Peregrine Falcon, Prairie Falcon and other owls. They also eat much smaller prey such as rodents, hares, frogs and scorpions. Here, the tables had turned on this great one. It turns out that while Bald Eagles, (*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*) mostly feed on fish, and secondarily on waterfowl, they are opportunistic. Balds rarely take on evasive or dangerous prey on their own. Much of their food is carrion or prey stolen from other predators. We'll never know if the owl was injured along the highway, or was locked in mortal combat when it refused to part with its dinner.

Daryl Calder



Mystery Photo from the winter newsletter

I do not know for sure what these tiny critters are, which is why I submitted the photo to our newsletter. They had red bodies and black legs. Here's what my walking companion thought they were:

Hydracarina

Water mites are found around the edges of ponds and lakes. They are often brightly coloured, most often some shade of red or green. The adults are rarely larger than about two millimetres or smaller than 0.5 millimetres. They are often mistaken for tiny spiders because they have eight legs. Most water mites are free-living and carnivorous.

Virginia Rasch

Mystery Photo: Where is this?



Gerry Warner

This season's mystery has to do with location. This photo was taken on a Naturalist Club field trip in 2016. It also won First Prize in the Kootenay Country Fair at Ft. Steele last fall.

Where was this picture taken? Please submit your answer to rmnatskestrel@gmail.com by June 1. The answer will be reported in the next issue of The Kestrel.

Please submit your mystery photo and write-up to rmnatskestrel@gmail.com by June 1 for the summer issue of the newsletter.

Club Information

Executive

President	Virginia Rasch
Past President	George Rogers
Vice President	Helga Knot
Secretary	Marianne Nahm
Treasurer	Linda Hastings
BC Nature Director	Greg Ross



new years day in Wilks woods
George Rogers

Committees and Club Representatives

Little Big Day	Greg Ross	Bylaws and Policies	Virginia Rasch
Christmas Bird Counts	Dianne Cooper	Newsletter	Susan Walp
Elizabeth Lake	Stewart Wilson	Invasive Species	Frank Hastings
Field Trips	Paula Rogers	Trench Society	Jo Ellen Floer
Membership	Sue Ross	Bluebirds	Marianne
Presentations	Paula and Marianne	Turtle Monitoring	Greg Ross
Club Camp	Jackie Leach and Ruth Goodwin		

Field Trips

Leader responsibilities:

Take radios and first aid kits.

Find a replacement leader if necessary.

Keep the group together.

All leaders must have trip waiver forms [available from Paula] in case any non-members come along on the trip. Non-members must sign, and forms must be returned to Paula. Non-member insurance costs \$2.00.

Make sure everybody leaves the parking area safely.

Get someone to write an account of the field trip for the newsletter. Send it in to rmnatskestrel@gmail.com, along with pictures, as soon as possible.

Carpoolers: Please offer to chip in for gas. On a round trip with a driving time of under an hour the compensation should be \$5.00 and on a round trip with a driving time of an hour or more the compensation should be \$10.00.

No dogs on field trips, please

Upcoming Events These events are planned. Watch your inbox for more details, possible changes and additional events.

March	31	Kain Headstone
April		Columbia Headwaters/Dutch Creek Hoodoos
April		Creston - Balancing Rock
April		St. Mary Bluffs
May		Community Forest - Big Tree
May	27	Little Big Day
June		Cactus Mountain

RMNats meetings - every two months, on the third Wednesday of odd-numbered months

Next meetings - Wednesday May 17 College, Cranbrook

Wednesday July 19 Reade Lake