

# The Kestrel

Quarterly Newsletter of the  
Rocky Mountain Naturalists  
2016 spring equinox

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

# Winter Social Gathering



On Saturday, January 23, 2016, the RMNats met at Frank and Linda Hastings home in Gold Creek for a winter social. Those who arrived on time had the opportunity to go on a guided walk along the local forest trails. Thanks for sharing your forest knowledge, guys. Linda stayed at the house to welcome late arrivals and keep the pot luck goodies warm. After the hike, everyone got to enjoy the eats and drinks while chatting and watching Greg's video of historical Nat activities. Other videos, on Peter Davidson and friends, and

the May 2015 B.C. Nature Conference on Salt Spring Island, were watched by some attendees, too. A few brave Nats even tried the What's This? nature I.D. challenges. Luckily for me, the can of beer left in the snow bank by the front door did not explode before I rescued it



and thawed it in the fridge. It will be imbibed soon!



Frank Hastings  
pictures by Greg

# Salesbury Deep Woods

January 16



A handful of semi-experienced snowshoers didn't mind the huffing and puffing as we trekked the 5 or 6 km loop through the Salesbury Deep Wood trail up past Lumberton. Our mission was to find and identify any animal tracks we might come across, and we did: Lynx, Moose, Snowshoe Hare and Squirrel.



natural snow sculptures

# Confluence Crunch

February 20

It was a fine, bright February afternoon. Eighteen naturalists listened politely as Daryl explained some basic fluvial processes while we stood on the apron of the alluvial fan of Matthew Creek. This creek, along with Mark Creek to the east, supplies high quality drinking water to Marysville and Kimberley. When it exits the lower canyon, the flood waters of Matthew Creek lose some of their energy and drop their 'bed load' [of sediment] in a broad triangular-shaped deposit. Over the centuries, the main stream channel changes its path if and when the existing channel or channels become blocked by fallen trees, logjams and gravel. Planning and design are therefore crucial before roads, bridges or settlement can be approved.



We fitted our snowshoes and headed south down the gentle slope through several forest types. The descent of a steeper slope, formed by an old channel of the St. Mary River, provided some light entertainment. While standing on the shore of a curving pond, we enjoyed the quiet solitude, discussed groundwater and were fortunate to see a flock of White-winged Crossbills. Soon we



found ourselves in the shade of Puddingburn Mtn., working our way west, upstream along the riverbank. Large trees of many species, a significant snowpack, dark shadows and chilly water set the scene.

At this time of year, the volume of surface water at the bottom end of Matthew creek represents only a fraction of the flow out of the mountains to the north. Most of the flow finds its way through the gravels of the alluvial fan. Ground water is warmed and purified, thus explaining the ice-free clarity of the pond and river. We appreciated the mini-

lectures prepared by Paula and George. Two American Dippers which conveniently appeared in the dark, 'classified' water, highlighted the topics.

Back up the apron and across the St Mary Lake Road, we noticed the drier forest type and enjoyed warmth of the late-afternoon sun. A mixed flock, containing Chestnut-backed Chickadees, and a coyote skull rounded out another great trip.

Daryl Calder

# American Dipper

American Dippers (also known as water ouzel) range in size from 14–22 cm in length and 40–90 g in weight, with males larger than females. Their short wings give them a distinctive whirring flight. They have a characteristic bobbing motion when perched beside the water, giving them their name. While under water, they are covered by a thin, silvery film of air, due to small bubbles being trapped on the surface of the plumage. They can remain underwater for up to at least 30 seconds.

Wings are relatively short but strongly muscled, enabling them to be used as flippers underwater. To reduce their buoyancy in water, the bones are solid instead of hollow. They have dense plumage with



American Dipper

large preen glands for waterproofing their feathers. Relatively long legs and sharp claws enable them to hold on to rocks in swift water. Their eyes have well-developed focus muscles, which can change the curvature of the lens, as well as an extra eyelid to enhance underwater vision. Nasal flaps prevent water entering the nostrils.

Dippers perch on rocks and feed at the edge of the water, but they often also grip the rocks firmly and walk down them beneath the water until partly or wholly submerged. They then search underwater for insects and other prey between and beneath stones and debris; they can also swim with their wings.

A dipper nest is usually a large, round, domed structure made of moss, with an internal cup of grass and rootlets and a side entrance hole. Nests are often built under roots, in rock crevices or on stream banks. They usually have 4 or 5 nestlings which fledge after 20-24 days. Nestlings are fed by both parents.

Dippers' calls are loud and high-pitched, sounding like "Zeet". Dippers also communicate visually by their characteristic dipping or bobbing movements, as well as by blinking rapidly to expose their pale upper eyelids as a series of white flashes in courtship and threat displays. American Dippers are found from Alaska to Panama and mountainous regions of Central America.

Paula Rogers

# Willows



## *An illusion of spring*

The willows along Joseph Creek reflect late afternoon sunlight in late winter; Tamarack Mall, Cranbrook, BC. February 20<sup>th</sup>, 2016.

Spring arrives with the March 19<sup>th</sup> vernal equinox (PDT, MDT, & CDT).

The Joseph Creek willows have not leafed at all. Rather, the bright young upper branches reflect the sunlight so well that they give the illusion of having leaves.

Though I never removed my camera from my backpack on our February 20<sup>th</sup> snowshoe hike at the Saint Mary River & Matthew Creek junction, I encountered an arboreal scene worth photographing on my walk back home through the Tamarack Mall parking lot (above).

Dan Hicks

# Bird Counts

# Fernie

The first of three Christmas Bird Counts in the East Kootenay was held on Friday, December 18th in the Elk Valley, at Fernie. About 18 birders from the surrounding area spent a mild, snowy day searching the woods, riverbanks, fields and back alleys. Evidently, well stocked bird feeders played an important role, attracting a wide variety of birds. Due to mild weather, the low elevations had been free of snow and ice until a couple of days before the count. Normally, the lack of open water and bare ground tends to concentrate the birds in a limited area where food is available. This year, it was difficult to find birds because they were scattered far and wide. Common winter birds, including Pine Grosbeaks and Bohemian Waxwings, had apparently moved on because berry crops were stripped earlier in the fall. Winter finches like Common Redpolls, easily seen in October and November, appeared to have gone elsewhere to forage. We succeeded in finding 743 individuals representing 29 species, including some White-winged Crossbills during 'count week'.

## The Fernie List

- Mallard 121
- Common Goldeneye 138
- Barrow's Goldeneye 5
- Bald Eagle 4
- Eurasian Collared-Dove 1
- Northern Pygmy Owl 1
- Downy Woodpecker 4
- Northern Flicker 14
- American Three-toed Woodpecker 1
- Northern Shrike 1
- Steller's Jay 16
- Blue Jay 6
- Black-billed Magpie 17
- American Crow 24
- Common Raven 36
- Black-capped Chickadee 89
- Mountain Chickadee 5
- Red-breasted Nuthatch 3
- White-breasted Nuthatch 1
- American Dipper 7
- Bohemian Waxwing 77
- Song Sparrow 4
- Dark-eyed Junco 9
- Pine Grosbeak 85
- House Finch 13
- White-winged Crossbill (count week)
- Common Redpoll 8
- Pine Siskin 23
- House Sparrow 30



one [1]



three [3]



a bunch [several to many]

Grey-crowned Rosy Finch

Greg

Submitted by Daryl Calder on behalf of Rocky Mountain Naturalists originally published in *The Townsman*

## Barrow's Goldeneye

Barrow's Goldeneye, with its brilliant yellow iris, is a particularly attractive black and white diving duck. Birds of this species are often found mixed with flocks of Common Goldeneye. This species was originally described from a population living in Iceland. It is, however, primarily a duck of the western mountains of North America and can be found throughout most of the year in the East Kootenay. These birds forage underwater, eating aquatic insects, crustaceans, fish eggs and plant material, preferring not to compete with too many insect-eating fish. Their breeding habitat consists of wooded lakes and ponds. Because much of its nesting is done in cavities found in mature trees, the Barrow's Goldeneye is considered an arboreal bird species. The birds will also nest in burrows, in protected sites on the ground and in nest boxes. Females return to the same breeding sites year after year and also tend to use the same nesting sites. The males stay with their mates through the winter and defend their territories during the breeding season, then leave for the moulting site. Even though the pairs are apart for long periods of time over the summer, they reunite at the wintering areas. These ducks migrate in order to spend the winter in protected coastal waters or open inland waters. In particular, coastal estuaries provide excellent wintering and stopping places during migration. This is a quiet bird that generally makes vocalizations only during the breeding season, but, in flight, the wings make a low, whistling sound.



Barrow's Goldeneye

Like the Common Goldeneye, Barrow's are not too particular about holding on to their own offspring. A female may lay eggs in the nest of another goldeneye or other species of cavity-nesting duck. Once the ducklings come out of the nest, about two days after hatching, the broods of different females often come together and are taken care of by a single female. The young ducklings are highly independent, feeding on their own and requiring little parental care. For a duck, Barrow's is a long-lived species, often living 15 years or more, and populations appear fairly stable. At Elizabeth Lake, Cranbrook, goldeneyes and their ducklings can be seen in the spring, where they use nest boxes and natural cavities.

Daryl Calder, originally run in *The Townsman*

# Cranbrook Christmas Bird Count

A good number of naturalists from the East Kootenay and Crowsnest Pass joined forces on December 27th for the Cranbrook Christmas Bird Count. With the help of several feeder watchers, a wide variety of birds were counted on the cool, cloudy, calm day. Sometimes, a large number of individuals of a particular species, such as Bohemian Waxwings, will skew the total, but that was not the case this year. Similarly, the species count can be elevated when only one individual of each of several species is observed. This occurred with the Rough-legged Hawk, Eurasian Collared-Dove, Black-billed Magpie, Chestnut-backed Chickadee and Golden-crowned Kinglet, although these birds are not particularly uncommon. Unfortunately, such year round birds as the Great Blue Heron, Northern Goshawk, Red-tailed Hawk, Golden Eagle, Blue and Ruffed Grouse, Northern Pygmy Owl, Belted Kingfisher and Brown Creeper could not be found. Naturalists were pleased with their effort and opportunity to contribute to the 116th Audubon CBC.

The Cranbrook List: Total Species 49, Total Individuals 1876

Canada Goose	9	
Mallard	171	
Bufflehead	2	
Common Goldeneye	17	
Barrow's Goldeneye	2	
Hooded Merganser	7	
Wild Turkey	41	
Cooper's Hawk	2	
Bald Eagle	12	
Rough-legged Hawk	1	
Rock Pigeon	116	American Dipper 10
Eurasian Collared-Dove	1	Golden-crowned Kinglet 1
Downy Woodpecker	25	Townsend's Solitaire 5
Hairy Woodpecker	20	European Starling 25
Northern Flicker	28	Bohemian Waxwing 105
Pileated Woodpecker	6	Dark-eyed Junco 4
Merlin	5	Song Sparrow 15
Northern Shrike	3	Grey-crowned Rosy Finch 35
Grey Jay	6	Pine Grosbeak 105
Steller's Jay	8	House Finch 282
Blue Jay	18	Cassin's Finch 10
Black-billed Magpie	1	Red Crossbill 15
Clark's Nutcracker	22	White-winged Crossbill 10
American Crow	100	Common Redpoll 90
Common Raven	163	Hoary Redpoll 7
Black-capped Chickadee	169	Pine Siskin 6
Mountain Chickadee	84	American Goldfinch 9
Chestnut-backed Chickadee	1	Evening Grosbeak 12
Red-breasted Nuthatch	61	House Sparrow 24
White-breasted Nuthatch	2	

Submitted by Daryl Calder  
on behalf of Rocky  
Mountain Naturalists

originally published in *The  
Townsmen*

# White-breasted Nuthatch

One little, non-migrating bird common in mature, mixed woods is the White-breasted Nuthatch. All three species of North American nuthatch are found in the East Kootenay. The White-breasted is the largest; its clean markings give it a rather appealing look. It is successful because of its attributes and habits.

The name nuthatch is actually a corruption of the word nuthack, referring to the bird's tendency to wedge seeds into crevices and hack them open with its bill. Thanks to strong legs and toes; long, curved talons and a long, strong bill; this active, agile bird can walk up, down and sideways on tree trunks and large limbs. Starting near the top of a tree and spiralling its way down, the nuthatch forages intensively. Unlike the woodpecker, which relies on its stiff tail to keep it anchored, the White-breasted Nuthatch uses the long, claw-like hind toe on each foot to get a grip.

During the summer, when probing bark crevices, nuthatches prefer to eat spiders and insects, including ants, caterpillars, weevils and beetles. In winter, they switch to a more vegetarian diet with more seeds. They continue to eat many insects, which are pried from their wintering spots in bark crevices. In developed areas, they have learned to eat suet and peanut butter mixes as well. The White-breasted Nuthatch stores large quantities of food in winter by poking it into bark furrows and tree crevices. By using each storage site only once, food is dispersed across its territory, a practice known as scatterhoarding. The precious food stores are often covered up with bark flakes or lichen. With a life span of ten or twelve years, one can only imagine how much detail this bird will learn about its habitat.



White-breasted Nuthatch

Often heard before it is seen, its nasal 'quank' is distinctive and strong. The male performs a rather simple song, a regular series of 6-8 notes.

Pairs form long term bonds and remain on nesting territories year round. They do not generally excavate their own holes, but nest in natural cavities or old woodpecker holes. Occasionally, they use artificial nest boxes. The female builds the nest, which is a soft cup of bark fibers, grass, hair and feathers. Sometimes mud is added to the entrance of the cavity, perhaps to keep larger predators away. The female bird will also brush the nest, inside and out, with a crushed insect. The chemical secretions may keep predators away. The female incubates 5-9 eggs for 12-14 days. The male feeds the female while she incubates, and helps her feed the young when they hatch. The little ones leave the nest after 14-26 days, but stay with the adults for several more weeks until they become completely independent.

Daryl Calder

# Kimberley Christmas Bird Count

Six intrepid naturalists knew that birding would be quite good in Kimberley. January 2, 2016, a chilly, calm, grey day was uncomfortable for humans but did not deter the birds. To generate body heat, birds need to be constantly searching for food during daylight hours in order to survive the long winter night. With the help of four feeder watchers, a relatively large number of birds were counted for the benefit of the 116th annual Audubon Christmas Bird Count. Birders investigated grasslands, forests, rivers and streams, wild, rural and urban areas.

The species list was longer than average, including 19 types which have been observed on virtually all of the 24 Kimberley counts. Chestnut-backed Chickadee, Pacific Wren and Varied Thrush have only been spotted a couple of times. Even though the Cranbrook and Kimberley count areas are not far apart, eleven species detected in Kimberley this year were not found in Cranbrook, and vice-versa. Adding eleven to each count indicates that about 60 types of bird can survive the winter in this part of the East Kootenay. The eleven are an assortment of waterfowl, raptors, thrushes and winter finches which are not particularly uncommon in either area.

The Kimberley List: 48 Species, totalling 1845 individuals

Mallard	1	Pacific/Winter Wren	1
Common Goldeneye	15	American Dipper	2
Wild Turkey	4	Golden-crowned Kinglet	4
Bald Eagle	1	Townsend's Solitaire	2
Red-tailed Hawk	1	American Robin	2
Rough-legged Hawk	1	Varied Thrush	3
Wilson's Snipe	2	European Starling	4
Rock Pigeon	25	Bohemian Waxwing	490
Eurasian Collared-Dove	5	Snow Bunting	65
Mourning Dove	2	American Tree Sparrow	6
Northern Pygmy Owl	1	Dark-eyed Junco	12
Downy Woodpecker	31	Song Sparrow	2
Hairy Woodpecker	19	Pine Grosbeak	87
American Three-toed Woodpecker	1	House Finch	32
Northern Flicker	19	Red Crossbill	68
Pileated Woodpecker	7	Common Redpoll	311
Steller's Jay	17	Pine Siskin	2
Blue Jay	11	American Goldfinch	11
Black-billed Magpie	14	Evening Grosbeak	78
Clark's Nutcracker	51	House Sparrow	55
American Crow	49		
Common Raven	93		
Black-capped Chickadee	95	Submitted by Daryl Calder on	
Mountain Chickadee	80	behalf of Rocky Mountain	
Chestnut-backed Chickadee	6	Naturalists	
Red-breasted Nuthatch	32	originally published in <i>The</i>	
White-breasted Nuthatch	2	<i>Townsman</i>	
Brown Creeper	3		

# Blue Dot

Who will be the first Kootenay community to go blue?

42 communities in B.C. have taken the Blue Dot challenge, but none in the Kootenays.

Really? Not a single town in the Kootenays has gone green to become a Blue Dot community. Shocking is what I say.

The Blue Dot movement is a way for Canadian municipalities to pass a declaration supporting our right to a healthy environment.

As a project of the David Suzuki Foundation, this movement states that we have a fundamental human right to clean air, fresh water and healthy food. That's about as basic as you can get.

On October 14, 2014, Richmond, B.C., became the very first Blue Dot community in Canada, and the most recent B.C. addition was Surrey on January 11, 2016. To date, 42 communities in British Columbia have become Blue Dot communities but not one in the Kootenays. Not even Nelson. As Adele would say, "Hello?"

Person by person and community by community, the movement is gaining speed across Canada. Toronto was the 100th location to join on December 9th. To date, 106 Canadian communities are part of this blue wave.

The next surge will be for entire provinces to join this green movement and sign such a declaration. After that, the goal is to amend the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms to state our fundamental right to a healthy environment.

Now is the time to get involved. If not you, who? If not now, when?

There's an organizer's kit to get you started at <http://www.bluedot.ca/volunteer>.

Virginia Rasch



a photo of the Earth from space

This blue dot is what inspires the Blue Dot movement to preserve our precious planet.

This article first appeared in January at <http://kootenaybiz.com/greenscene/article/>

# Spring Singers

As spring lurks nearby, many of us listen for the first songbirds to begin their music! We could be hiking in the hills, raking the yard, or sitting on the deck with our morning coffee. Wherever we are, we are listening for the American Robins, Red-winged Blackbirds, Song Sparrows, and House Finches to serenade us.



House Finch

Out on the open lands in the valley bottom, bluebirds coo their soft song as they flutter amongst the trees and shrubs looking for juicy bugs. By the end of March, we should be hearing the more boisterous Western Meadowlarks. I remember former club member Ann Redfearne saying that song reminded her of "we were here a year ago". Chickadees, nuthatches, juncos and siskins are all making a joyful sound as they announce better weather is on the way.

Bird song of course is important in the life cycle of the species. These songs, usually sung by the male, let other males know that a territory is occupied and lets the females know that nests are available for scrutiny. The best nests would likely lead to successful mating.



Winter Wren

One of the earlier singers in the woods I frequent would be the Winter Wren. This drab, mottled brown member of the wren family is only about four inches long, with an upright tail, but has a voice that fills the woods. As the snow melts, the Winter Wren returns after spending the winter further south or at a lower elevation. Its song is easily recognizable for its bubbly, exuberant trills and lasts several seconds. It seems to always lighten the spirit. Expect to hear their song by mid April. They are seldom found more than a few meters off the ground and feed

on insects alongside a creek or scurrying in nearby undergrowth.

Other early woodland songbirds would be the Ruby-Crowned Kinglet, Townsend's Warbler and Varied Thrush. By the time I hear Swainson's Thrushes, later in May, all of our migrants have returned. Until around the second week in July, the prairies and woods are full of bird song in the first hours of light each day.



Varied Thrush

If you are interested in learning to identify birds by their calls and songs, pick a few common birds near your home or on frequent walked trails and focus on

those vocals. You might be surprised how easily it is to begin recognizing the songs of birds who are our frequent companions!



Ruby-Crowned Kinglet



Townsend's Warbler

Ruth Goodwin



Swainson's Thrush

## 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](http://www.wildsafebc.com)

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

Creston Valley Bird Festival [crestonvalleybirds.ca](http://crestonvalleybirds.ca)

Wings Over the Rockies <https://wingsovertherockies.org/>

Blue Dot campaign [bluedot.ca/volunteer](http://bluedot.ca/volunteer)

## Club Information

### Executive

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



### Other Committee and Club Representatives

Little Big Day	Greg Ross
Christmas Bird Counts	Greg Ross
Elizabeth Lake	Stewart Wilson
Newsletter	Susan Walp
Speakers	Paula and Marianne
Field Trips	Paula Rogers

Marianne Greg George Ruth Virginia Linda  
our new executive

### 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.

Make sure everybody leaves the parking area safely.

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

Carpoolers: Please offer to chip in for gas.

No dogs on field trips, please

### Upcoming Events

In next few weeks – Work bee at Elizabeth Lake to check on duck boxes and clean them up

Apr. 30 - Balancing Rock , Creston

May 1 - Memorial Walk

Some time week of May 2 – Turtle Day at Elizabeth Lake

May 7 - Hoodoos and Columbia wetlands

Creston Valley Bird Festival Friday, Saturday, Sunday, May 13 - 15

May 14 - Little Big Day

End May/beginning of June – Peter Davidson memorial hike

June 17-19 - RM Nats Annual Camp at Dry Gulch Provincial Park

Wings Over the Rockies Festival May 9-15

RMNats meetings - every two months, in odd-numbered months

Wednesday 18 May 7:30 pm College of the Rockies