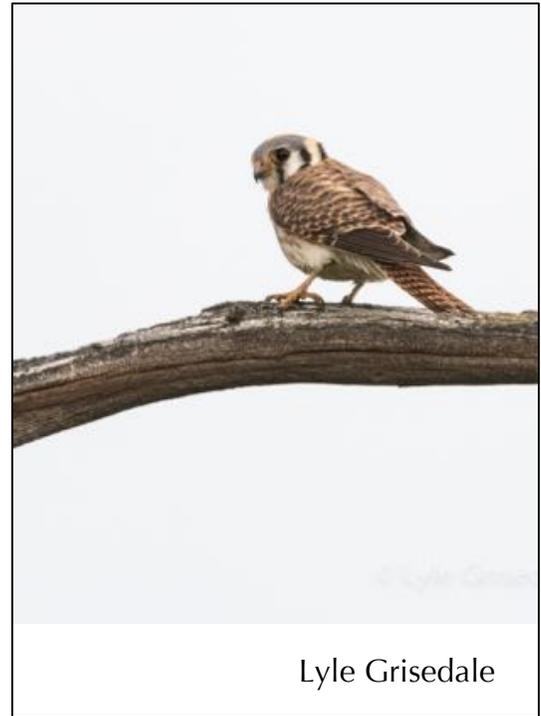


The Kestrel

Quarterly Newsletter of the
Rocky Mountain Naturalists
2017 summer solstice



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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 at rmnatskestrel@gmail.com.

April Fools' Afternoon

April 1

This may have been the naturalists' strangest outing ever. No huffing and puffing, and, as Ron was quick to point out, no need to cartwheel down snow slopes while wearing snowshoes. "Spend your Saturday afternoon wandering around in an old graveyard," would have been an appropriate invitation. Not just any old graveyard, but one that embraces the crux of the pioneer history which has shaped much of the East Kootenay. Twenty dedicated Nats decided to go for it.



Gerry Warner

A writer, a historian and a naturalist led a fine group of curious naturalists through the wonderful puzzles of the Cranbrook General Cemetery under grey, blustery skies on April Fools' Day 2017.

In an effort to provide a different sort of nature experience, to promote the story of Conrad Kain and to announce a unique film and presentation by Wildsight and Pat Morrow, the General Cemetery seemed to be a good place to start. Thanks to local archivist Dave Humphrey, publisher Keith Powell and historian Gerry Warner, we painted a bit of a picture of life and times in the East Kootenay a century ago.



Gerry Warner

Conrad Kain gained climbing experience in the Austrian mountains and became a guide to climbers from all parts of the world. He achieved dozens of first



Brian Clarkson



Brian Clarkson

ascents in the Purcell and Rocky Mountains with his clients. "His indomitable pluck and skill won for him the highest respect of those with whom he came in contact" [*Cranbrook Courier* 1936 October 1]. Because of this, a few admirers from the Alpine Club of the USA dedicated a large, natural granite monolith to be his headstone. The stone came from the Grey Royal quarries at Sirdar [near Creston], and this graceful gesture "has created much favorable comment in this district" [*Cranbrook Courier* 1936 October 1]. Conrad's wife Henriquetta, who died

a year earlier, was buried in the Roman Catholic section about 100 meters away.

Following the tour, several Nats walked at the windswept and still frozen Elizabeth Lake. High water is interfering with access and trails. Five or six killdeer circled noisily overhead or searched the short grass areas of the old logger sports site. This area was restored by naturalists several years ago, evidently recovering valuable habitat.

Daryl Calder



Gerry Warner

Turtle Day - Elizabeth Lake

April 25

A very successful Turtle Day was held on April 25. Thanks to all RMNats who volunteered. Adult turtles have been spotted recently on basking areas close to the Tourist Info Centre. There have been a numbers of sightings of goslings.

Stewart Wilson



Gerry Warner photos



Bird Conservation Conference

In late April, a significant conference regarding bird conservation was held at the Prestige in Cranbrook, titled "Avoiding Incidental Take of Bird Nests : From Law to Practice", hosted by The Columbia Mountain Institute of Applied Ecology, based in Revelstoke.

About 150 registrants from the western provinces, representing industry, government and other professions, sought to improve their natural resource management knowledge and decision making ability.

A number of RMNats attended the free evening showing of "The Messenger", a powerful film about migratory birds, the perils they face and studies to help understand the issues.

Early the following morning, several Nats helped guide groups of registrants, attempting to familiarize them with crucial areas of the East Kootenays. Dianne and Ruth guided four carloads of visitors along a route including Fort Steele, Wasa, Ta Ta Creek, LD Ranch Road, Mission and Cranbrook, stopping at a number of points of interest to the birders and resource managers. Another pair of guides met at dawn for a well received tour of Elizabeth Lake.

Our group of two dozen visitors was very impressed with the wide variety of bird species, habitats and peaceful scenes at Elizabeth Lake. It was obvious that these people were skilled observers because of the way that they quickly identified the birds, helped their buddies to see the different species, walked quietly and fell silent whenever we stopped. Conversations also demonstrated a deep commitment to their profession, a great caring for the environment and a willingness to seek realistic solutions.

Cranbrook and the Nats were very fortunate to play a minor role in this conference.

Daryl Calder

Spring Plant Identification

April 21, April 26, May 2



lupine seedling



mosses, lichens and fungi on a bed of larch needles



naturalists in action



grouse scat

Three morning plant identification walks, a week apart, at Potato Butte, Eager Hill and Wilks Woods, were enjoyed by keen members. Potato Butte lived up to its name, with several displays of western spring beauty, also called Indian potato. When cooked, the corms taste like potatoes and were an important food source for Interior indigenous people including the Ktunaxa. Yellow bells, mertensia and the basal leaves of shooting stars and balsam root were easily identifiable.

The second walk saw five of us poking along the eastern part of the Chewbacca Trail at Eager Hill. Dozens of fleshy bitterroot leaves were discovered, which could become a wonderful display of pink flowers, low to the ground, in early June (maybe this year it will be late June). Narrow-leaved and large-fruited desert-parsley were prevalent, along with nodding onion and the leaves of meadow death camas. The leaves of these two plants are somewhat similar in shape and colour, so amateur botanists need



rosy pussytoes



fallen squirrel nest



rosy pussytoes



woodland star

to be careful in their identification if tasting or gathering the onion leaves.

Our last outing found seven of us heading up Sunflower Hill in the Wilks area, being challenged to identify plants and shrubs by features of their leaves. Some shrubs noted



low larkspur (with desert-parsley in back)

were saskatoon (also known as serviceberry), chokecherry and antelope brush starting to leaf out. We enjoyed a great view of the St. Mary River and St. Eugene Mission from the top. With



narrow-leaved desert-parsley

some heat, the hundreds of balsam root bunches will cover this hillside in yellow.

Our goal was to find blooming *Calypso bulbosa*, or fairyslippers. Alas, my largest, favourite patches were just starting to emerge



large-fruited desert-parsley



shooting star



field of shooting star plants

from the cold soil with only a couple displaying buds. However, we will return in a couple weeks to enjoy these delicate orchids.



cut-leaf anemone (white)



cut-leaf anemone (pink)

Thank you 'Botany Ramblers'. I really enjoyed our walks and learned so much new information about our native flora.

Marianne Nahm
photos by Helga Knot



Holboell's
rock cress



pink twink

A group of naturalists met early in the morning and carpooled to Creston to hike on the Balancing Rock Trail with an option of an afternoon paddle on the Kootenay River. This well-established trail consists of four sections; a moderately difficult climb up a rocky slope with steep sections, a relatively flat and



slightly muddy upper section, a long, moderately steep decline and a relatively flat, uneven stroll back to the vehicles. The area is interesting because of amazing wildflowers, an array of birdlife, topographical variations and scenery.

[adapted from the
RMNats calendar]

skunk cabbage





puccoon Bob Whetham

The morning of May 23 saw a group of 14 avid wildflower detectives descend on the Crown land off the Mission Wycliffe Road. The meadows were awash with the blue-purple colour of the low larkspur while the hillsides were carpeted with the



star-flowered false Solomon's seal

Bob Whetham

brilliant yellow of the balsam root. Meadow death camas grew alongside alumroot, woolly fleabane, lupine, old man's whiskers, puccoon and small flowered anemone, to name just a few. Although we did not cover a great distance, numerous new species (for some of us) were discovered on our 2 1/2 hour meander through the meadows. Even though our



avid wildflower detectives

Gretchen Whetham



puccoon Lyle Grisedale

detective skills were fine tuned, there were still a few plants that eluded identification. A pair of hawks soaring and calling to each other and house finches singing allowed us to stretch our necks upwards from looking at the ground. After the meander, for those who brought their own lunches, birding and lunch were enjoyed on Leslia and Ron's back deck.

Paula Rogers



woodland star Bob Whetham



old man's whiskers Lyle Grisedale



meadow death camas
Lyle Grisedale



lupine Lyle Grisedale



prairie crocus Lyle Grisedale

Big Tree Hike June 6

There has been a lot of water this spring, making some of the trails wet, including through the grassland in the community forest. We wanted to hike to the big tree. Starting from the usual place at the college would have meant muddy feet, so we carpooled to the parking lot at the gasoline on 2nd Street.

Eight of us had a pleasant evening walk along Loggers' Lane to the big tree, spotting plants and birds along the way. Antelope brush was past its peak but blossoms were hanging on. Choke cherry was in full bloom. Roses were out, as was penstemon. Balsamroot was still blooming, and there were star-flowered false Solomon's seal blooms and many others.

We continued on to Mayook's Lookout (you can't see Mayook from there, but it's good place to look out from - you can see Cranbrook and the Purcells). From somewhere along the trail up there we heard a great horned owl. There was a bumblebee working over the blooms of the alumroot plants in the rays of the setting sun.

Susan Walp



larkspur Lyle Grisedale



larkspur Lyle Grisedale

a

Western Meadowlark

A very popular bird in the west and one of the most beautiful species in the Blackbird Family, the colorful Western Meadowlark flashes a vibrant yellow breast crossed by distinctive black V-shaped band. The buoyant, flutelike melody of the meadowlark ringing out across a field can brighten anyone's day. Unless you spot a male singing from a fencepost, these birds are more easily heard than seen. Look and listen for these stout ground feeders in grasslands, meadows, pastures and along marsh edges. Flocks strut and feed on seeds, insects and sometimes berries.



Formerly believed to be a destroyer of grain, the meadowlark is now recognized as one of the most useful allies of agriculture, standing almost without a peer as a destroyer of noxious insects and weed seeds. Its feeding behavior is called 'gaping'; it inserts its beak into the ground then forces it open. It can reach underground insects and grubs unavailable to other birds. Although it does eat grain, the meadowlark helps limit numbers of crop-damaging insects. Occasionally, it eats the eggs of other grassland species, and during hard winters, it may feed on roadkilled carcasses.

The meadowlark breeds from late spring to late summer, each male mating with two females. After mating, each female builds a nest on the ground, using her beak and making or enhancing a small depression in the soil. She then makes a woven, waterproof dome using grass and shrub stems. The nest may be completely open or may have a full roof and entrance tunnel several feet long. Both birds make trails or runways to the nest. They usually have two broods of 3-7 chicks; the chicks leave the nest about 10 days after hatching. Predators include skunks, foxes and hawks, coyotes, raccoons and snakes, and domestic cats and dogs. Meadowlarks are extremely sensitive to humans when nesting, and will abandon a nest if disturbed while incubating.

Although numerous, breeding populations have steadily declined by 50% over the last 50 years.



Declines may be due in part to conversion of grassland breeding and wintering habitat to housing, agricultural, industrial and recreational uses. Other factors include pesticide use, habitat degradation due to invasive plants and fire suppression that alters native grasslands. Meadowlarks must be respected and protected because many farmers regard them as one of their greatest assets.

Daryl Calder

Lyle Grisedale photos

Curlews in the East Kootenay

This is an exciting year for the Skookumchuck Prairie Important Bird and Biodiversity Area (IBA). We have our own banded Long-billed Curlews to track via satellite! Over the course of a couple of weeks in June, five curlew nests were found and seven satellite transmitters were fitted on some of our adult curlews.

We knew we had a good population this year because several RMNats reported their sightings in April and May. At one point, there were 22 curlews on the Lantz Farm field (formerly Dr. Green's)! Thank you all for contributing your sightings! It was very encouraging to the researchers. In June, Dr. David Bradley of Bird Studies Canada, Dr. Jay Carlisle of Idaho's Boise State University, biologist Wendy Easton of the Canadian Wildlife Service and Cayla Naumann, field technician, spent a dozen hours a day peering through their spotting scopes observing the curlews to try to pinpoint their nests.

Mildred and Solar:



me releasing Mildred: Note the identifying white leg flag with the black letters "AA".
David Bradley / Cayla Naumann photo



Mildred after her release, flying just fine. The transmitter's antenna shows above her tail, and her leg flag shows below.
Cayla Naumann photo

Hwy 93 / 95 on the Crown land north of the Lantz farm. Mildred, named after Mildred White, long-time local birder and botanist and founding member of the Rocky Mountain Naturalists, was the first curlew banded – and I got to name and release her!

Mildred's mate, Solar (leg flag AX), held by Wendy, being fitted with his satellite back pack by Dr. Jay Carlisle
Cayla Naumann photo





Mildred and Solar's nest with eggs – the size of small chicken eggs even though the body of the female curlew is much smaller than the average chicken Cayla Naumann photo



the empty nest - Three chicks were seen with their parents not too far away. Success! Dianne Cooper photo



a chick from a different nest waiting for its siblings to emerge

Cayla Naumann photo

Overall, one nest was found near the highway, three up above Gramophone Lake, and one was on private land north of Ford Road. One nest was lost to a predator – likely Common Raven - but there are about a dozen new chicks from known nests. At least three other territories were observed, but the nests were not located. Also, on Pine Butte Ranch in Wycliffe, one nest was found but unable to be relocated in the growing alfalfa. Another pair, possibly two, were in the vicinity but their territories not determined – those fields are vast and the birds are careful.

It is planned that an interactive map will soon be available online at <https://ibo.boisestate.edu/curlewtracking/locations/>. We will be able to see where curlews go in winter and their routes to and from their nesting grounds here in the East Kootenay.

I think my most excitement will be seeing where the curlews go in winter and which ones return next and subsequent years to the Skookumchuck Prairie IBA or possibly somewhere else. We will hopefully spot birds with white leg flags and know exactly who they are. Keep an eye out for them!

Dianne Cooper

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>

Curlew locations <https://ibo.boisestate.edu/curlewtracking/locations/>

Mystery Photo from spring issue



This photograph was taken by the shore of Cooper Lake on October 4 in 2015.

Mystery Photo: What plant is this?



More of these were blooming this spring than ever before. Some people think it is one thing, and some think it is another.

Does anybody know the true identity of this plant? Please submit your answer to rmnatskestrel@gmail.com by September 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 September 1 for the fall issue of the newsletter.

Club Information

Executive

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



prairie crocus seedheads

Helga Knote

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 are events planned at the present time. Watch your inbox for more details, possible changes and additional events.

June 23 to 25	Club Camp at Noke Creek
June or early July	Cactus Mountain

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

Next meetings - Wednesday July 19 Reade Lake

Wednesday September 20 college, room 190