

The Kestrel

Quarterly Newsletter of the
Rocky Mountain Naturalists
2018 winter solstice



web image

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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 mnatskestrel@gmail.com.

Eagle Migration

October 7

Volunteers associated with the Rocky Mountain Eagle Research Foundation have conducted annual spring and fall migration counts of raptors since 1992. The primary count area is Mount Lorette in the Kananaskis Country, Alberta.

Vance Mattson has been counting raptor migration on our side of the Rockies near Wasa since 2009.



Virginia Rasch

On Sunday, October 7, when most Rocky Mountain Naturalists were busy with Thanksgiving preparations, three naturalists joined Vance for the raptor count.

According to Vance, this week of the calendar is typically the period with the highest numbers of eagles in the autumn migration. However, bird migration is highly variable and weather-dependent. Sunny skies and the resulting thermals are helpful.

Here is Vance's report for the day:

(Abbreviations: BAEA, Bald Eagle; GOEA, Golden Eagle; RTHA, Red-tailed Hawk; SSHA, Sharp-shinned Hawk; a, adult; sa, sub-adult; j, juvenile; u, unknown age; CU, cumulus)

"It was a quieter day today with 22 migrants of four species moving between 11:45 and 6:45. The first migrant was a Sharp-shinned Hawk at 12:58 and the last, an adult dark morph Harlan's Red-tailed Hawk, at 6:01.

"The final tally was 4 RTHA (2 calurus: both light juveniles; 2 harlani: 1 dark adult and 1 dark juvenile); 11 SSHA (6a, 5u); 4 BAEA (3a, 1j); and 3 GOEA (2a, 1sa).

"It was 10 C, sunny (10% CU), with light variable breezes but mostly calm conditions.

"Many migrants appeared from behind the main ridge and were difficult to spot due to the cloudless sky. Luckily, three Rocky Mountain Naturalists were present to assist observation.

"Resident Golden Eagles were seen on two occasions, and 13 non-migratory Bald Eagles (8a, 4j, 1u) were also seen (with 11 of these, as yesterday, moving north along the ridge, including a group of 6 at 4:41)."

For the entire fall count (September 20 to November 15, 2018), Vance recorded:

Golden eagles: 170

Bald eagles: 115

Red-tailed hawks: 75

Sharp-shinned hawks: 72

And much fewer of the remaining raptors. "The Bald Eagle count was abnormally low this year (compare the previous three-year fall average of 243)," said Vance, "while the Golden Eagle count was above average for the site (compare the average of the same at 149)."

Thank you to Vance for hosting us this year.

Virginia Rasch

Big Hill Hike

October 13

Eight of us started our hike at the college trail head. We went east across the community forest to the big tree and Mayook Lookout. Then we crossed the power line onto private land and trudged up to Big Hill.

It was worth the climb, because we had a good view from the top. We could look to the west and see Windy Bluff and the entire community forest spread out below us, the city of Cranbrook past that and the Purcell Mountains beyond. To the east we could see Hobgoblin Lake, Hobgoblin Hill, Eager Hill, Fort Steele and the Rocky Mountains.



The hike took us past alkali lakes where we could observe waterfowl, through forests, grasslands

and rocky high country. We heard solitaires and chickadees. At one point we had a concert from a group of nuthatches. There were lots of badger holes and some ground squirrel holes as well. Larches were golden, aspens still had their leaves, and there were plenty of warm fall colours in the understory.

This was a good field trip, even though some of the mountain peaks were hiding in the clouds. We saw many things, got a good bit of exercise, and there were no biting insects. Not too hot, not too cold. Just right.



the Steeples, evergreens and golden larches

Susan Walp story and pictures



grasslands at Sylvan Lake



Devil's Hole

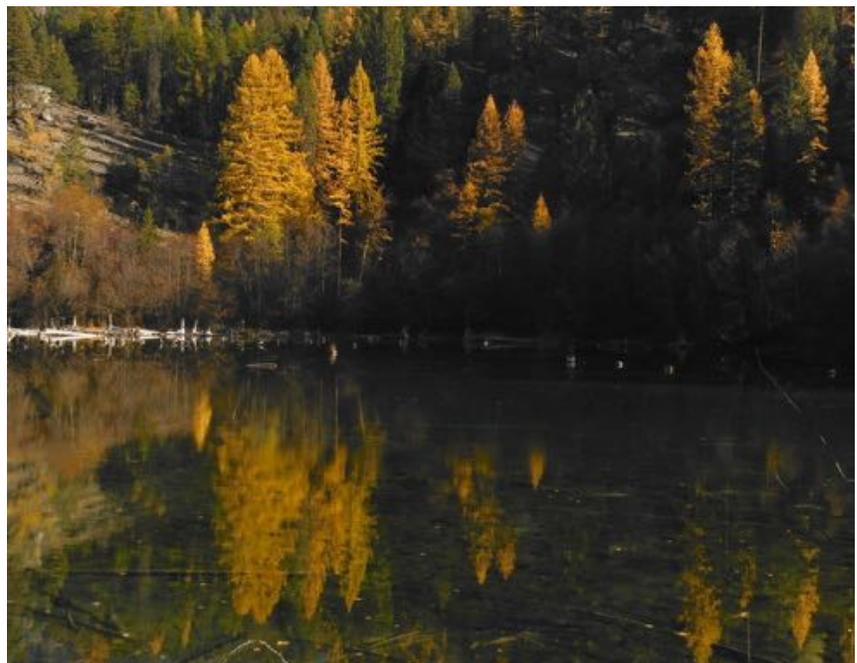
Gerry Warner

On a Tuesday morning, before Halloween, 13 Rocky Mountain Naturalists met and carpoled to a trailhead roughly northeast of Fort Steele to hike to Devil's Hole. The plan was to take the usual route to the bluff overlooking the little pond in Devil's Hole and then climb down and investigate. We wanted to find where the pond's water came from; standing on top of the

bluff you can hear water flowing but see no stream. We speculate that there is a stream flowing underneath the rocks into the pond and also an underground stream flowing out.

Some of the group tried to climb down the cliff to the rocks inside Devil's Hole, but had to turn back because it was too steep. Now another year has gone by and we still have no answer to our little mystery.

Disappointed but not defeated, we continued our field trip by driving to Lakit Lake, which is nearby, and having a look around.



Lakit Lake

Gerry



Some of us had noticed what looked like the remains of an old flume running by the place where we had parked to get to Devil's Hole. Marianne looked for its continuation when we were at Lakit Lake. Sure enough, there it was. Actually, this makes sense, because there was once a forestry operation in the area, and Lakit Lake used to be a mill pond (it is not a natural lake but was created when Lakit Creek was dammed to collect water for the mill to use).

The lake was originally used for sorting logs. You can see, sunken in the lake, a corduroy road made of mill slabs. It must have crossed the lake on the surface of the ice in winters once upon a time. Later on the lake was used as a source of water for irrigating crops. This explains the flume we saw; it was probably an irrigation ditch.

corduroy road in the reflective lake Gerry

As well as interesting history, there was lots going on in the present. We observed a group of crossbills in the tops of the Douglas-firs growing by Lakit Lake Campground.

We wandered around, looking at



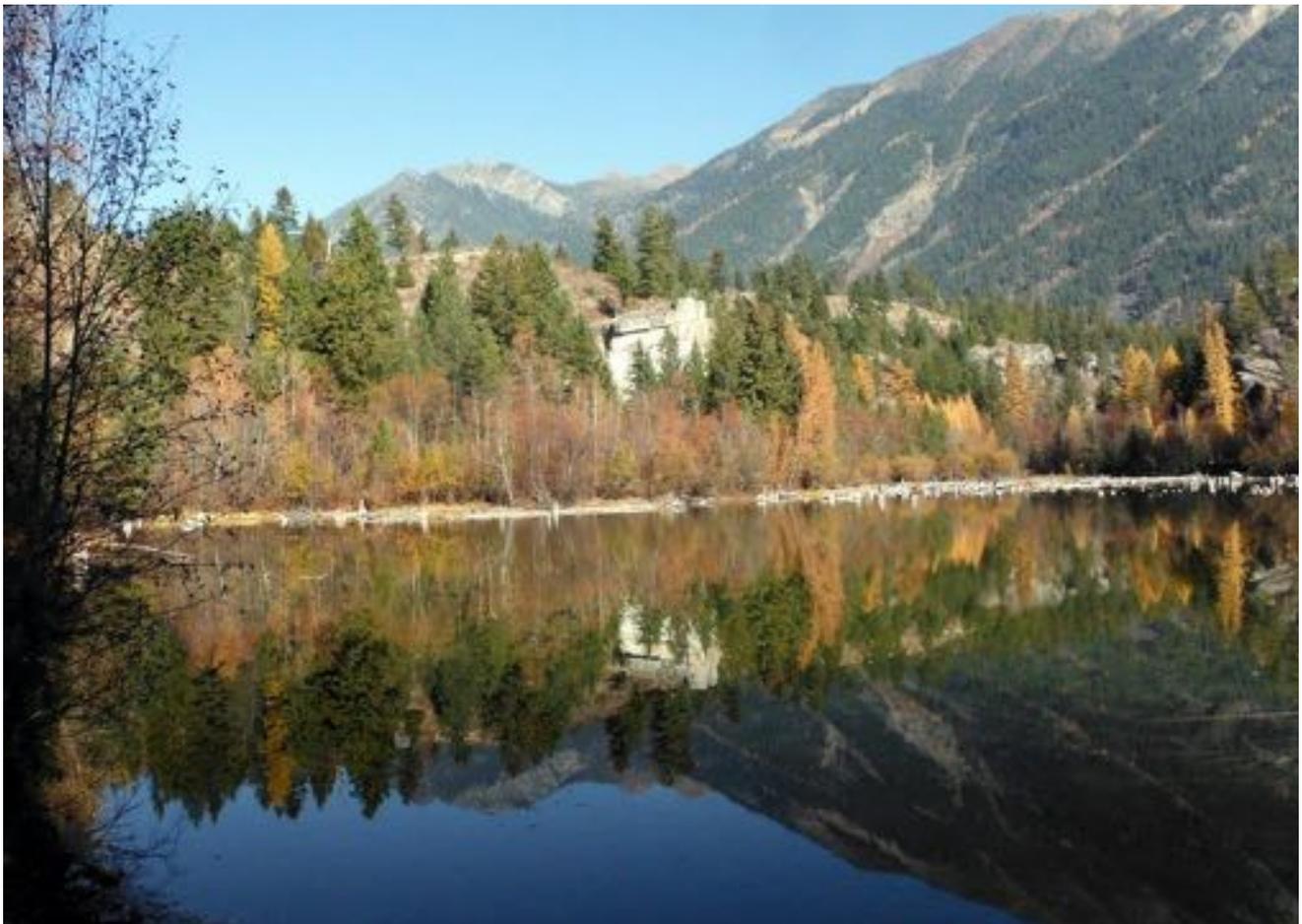
looking at birds in the trees Gerry

whatever was there and enjoying beautiful views of the mirror-like lake by the Rockies on that calm fall afternoon.

Susan Walp



Gretchen Whetham



looking north across Lakit Lake

Gerry

Environmental Educators Conference

Several keen birders arrived at St. Eugene Mission before 7 am on Wednesday 17 October, preparing to lead early birding walks on the Friday and Saturday mornings during the EECOM -Environmental Educators 2018 Conference entitled 'Classrooms to Communities'. About 340 educators registered for this national event.

Despite almost total darkness at that early hour, undaunted, we got right to work, making our way gingerly through the golf course. An amazing golden glow gradually backlit the Rockies, and bird voices sounded above the rippling water of the St. Mary River. First, the goose, followed by



osprey

Stewart



paper wasp nest

Stewart



muskrat

Stewart



elk crossing the St. Mary River

Stewart



walking group

Stewart

the robins, song sparrow, kinglets, nuthatches and chickadees. An hour later, daylight had replaced the magical dawn, and a couple of regular early birders joined us. We strolled east to the Prairie Bridge and returned via the Pighin Ranch and its feeders. Near the new campground, blending into birch foliage, we spotted warblers and goldfinches. With some difficulty, the Orange-crowned and Yellow-rumped warblers were identified. A fleeting view of a possible osprey was reinforced when it circled and plunged into the shallow, bouldery river, struggled for a



Stewart



the group

Gretchen Whetham

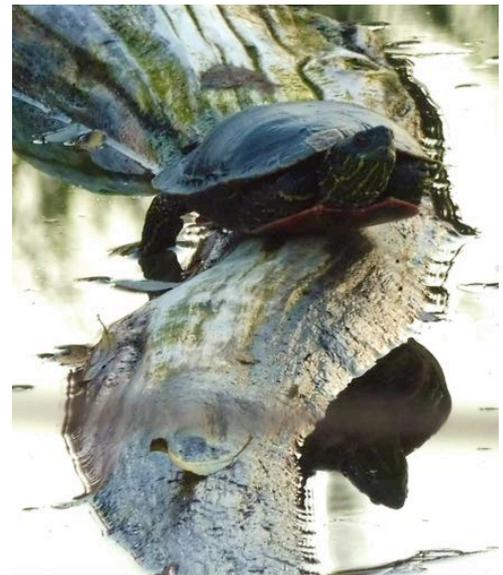
moment and emerged 'empty-handed'. Clearview Acres, a short drive away, is usually rich with bird life in all seasons. The elusive White-breasted Nuthatch, whose song is a series of soft, whistled nasal notes, could be heard at a distance. Later, groups of Pygmy Nuthatches entertained us with their 'high, hard, clear' peeping notes - bip-bip-bip. Thanks to Roger and Sharon for allowing us to prowl around their special property.

Friday morning arrived, and about a dozen keen educators joined our group of five, led by Stewart. Birding was off to a good start with a small

owl flying across the road just in front of the car on the way in. This particular dawn, with some high cloud, provided a very colorful scene for our guests. Again, the dawn chorus unfolded, and surprisingly, about 50 Common Mergansers, in small flocks, zoomed overhead.

On Saturday, our gang led the educators further upstream with less detailed birding. Several of our guests joined us on both mornings. Naturalists and Cranbrook are very fortunate to be available to assist with important events such as this. Thanks go to Stewart, Marianne, Gretchen, Wendy M. and Daryl for setting the alarm clock and sharing their knowledge of the area with conference participants.

Daryl Calder



turtle

Stewart

Jimsmith Loop

November 9

On Friday afternoon of November 9th, Naturalists walked a lovely loop trail in the Jimsmith Lake area. A couple centimetres of snow covered a carpet of larch needles on the north trail.

At the beginning of our walk, near the Jimsmith Park boundary, we checked out an animal lick that has been there for



many years. This is an area of exposed clay-like soil with two large burrows. It would be interesting to see what animal activity a trail camera could capture.

After a quick stop at the Westview bench, we looked at the very old, vertical mineral test hole before

starting back on the upper trail. At Badger Hill, we observed ravens playing on the thermals.

Thank you to 16 Naturalists who ventured out on a cloudy, late autumn day to enjoy this pleasant area, close to town.

Marianne Nahm
photos by Helga Knot



Wilks Woods

November 25

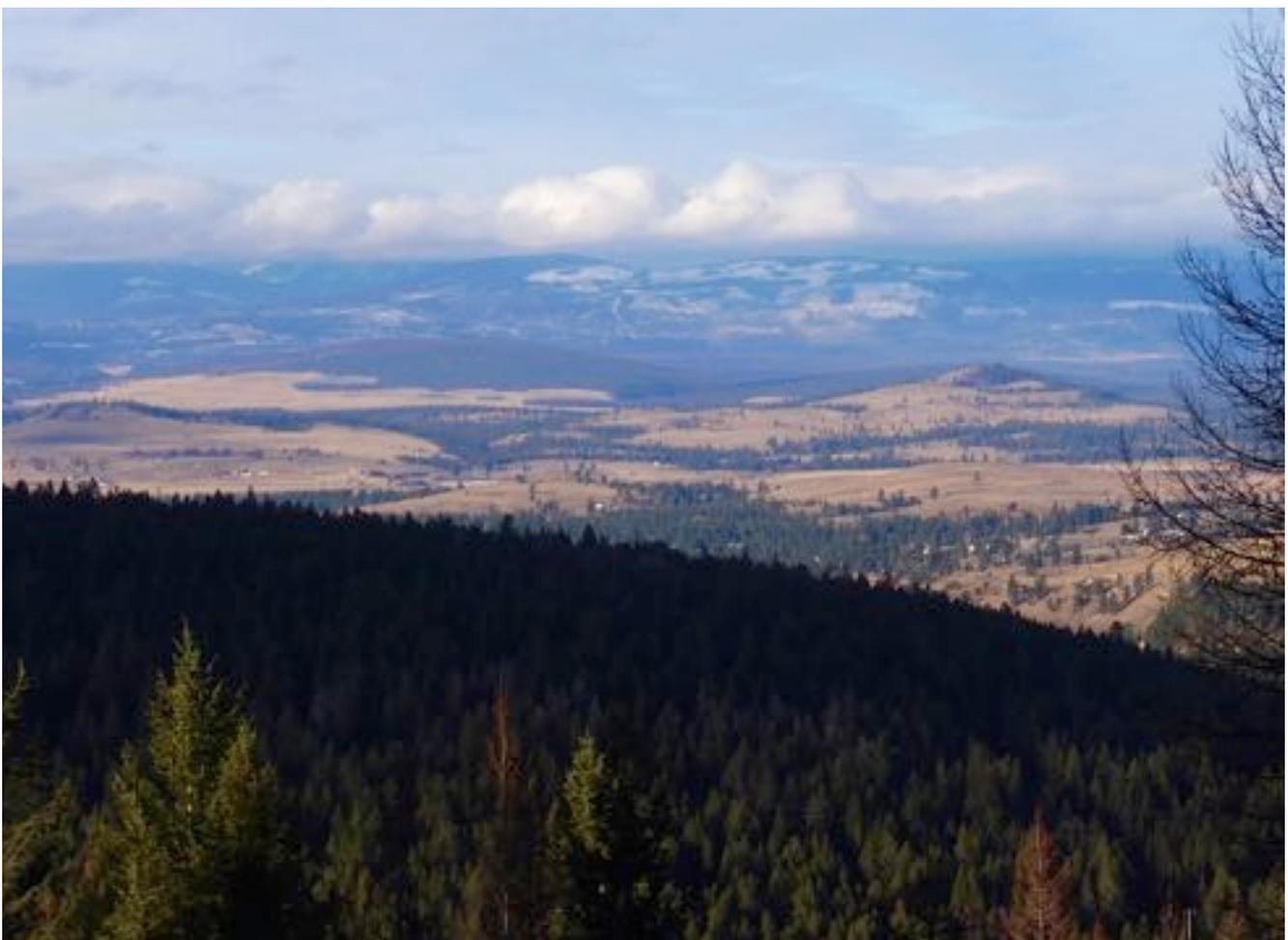
Another warm, sunny November 2018 day saw 18 Naturalists tramping along various trail



admiring the view



explaining about tending the Christmas tree nursery



the view across to the Buttes

surfaces in the Wilks-Kahn/6 Mile area. Bob was able to confirm the evidence of an old logging railway bed. It was likely used to move logs with a shay to the Staples Mill that had been located on the north side of the St. Mary River many decades ago.

Before heading upwards for a view of Wycliffe grasslands and ski hill, we viewed a Douglas-fir that had been struck by lightning earlier this year. Long, jagged pieces had splintered from the main trunk and been tossed in several directions with great force.

After enjoying views from Whiskey Jack and adding our club name to the log book, we headed to Sunflower Hill. Fine views of St. Mary River and the ?aq'am community were seen from this vantage point. A keen group of birders identified female red crossbills as we headed downhill to the



one of several lightning trees we passed on our walk



the view from Whiskey Jack



looking down the St. Mary River to St. Eugene Mission and the Rocky Mountain Trench from Sunflower Hill

trail which returned us to our starting point.

Marianne Nahm
Stewart Wilson photos



Community Forest Hike

November 29

Gretchen led a group of Rocky Mountain Naturalists up to the Cranbrook Community Forest (<https://www.cranbrookcommunityforest.com/>) in late November. Stewart Wilson came along, and he took these photographs.

There is always lots to see and do



(and even smell) in the community forest, at any time of year.

You come to the big snag (an old Douglas-fir) on the way to the big tree.



Then there is the big tree itself.

This ancient ponderosa pine measures 4.39 meters around. You can find it in the BC Big Tree Registry (<http://bcbigtree.ca>).





Sometimes you can smell a vanilla-like scent in the bark of ponderosa pines.

If you look, there are lots of beautiful things, many weird things and plenty of interesting things in the forest.

Susan Walp



South Hill Hike

December 2

Thirteen RMNs took part in a hike on the South Hill at the end of 12th



examining old mine workings



Avenue South by Pyatts Lake on December 2. This used to be the start of the Old Moyie Stage Route. The figure of eight hike took in some old mining excavations, a ruined cabin, Haggis Gorge, and the former Akloo Ski Hill, which was open for a short time in the early 1970s. Members also learned that there are native petroglyphs in the same area, protected by a provincial act. Towards the end of the walk the sun broke through the cloud cover, opening up views to Cranbrook and Baker Mountain to the east as well as



Haggis Gorge

vistas up
the Rocky
Mountain
Trench.

story and
photos by
Stewart
Wilson

Haggis Gorge



We had 13 on our walk today. We acknowledged that we were on Ktunaxa land. A short history



of the residential school was given, and how the ʔaq'am Band under the leadership of Chief Sophie Pierre





nest sites used by cliff swallows



decided to keep the building, and, since so many had lost their culture there, it should be the place where the healing should begin. It is now a showpiece for the St. Eugene Mission Resort.

After walking past an area covered in badger and ground squirrel holes, there were lots of animal tracks to examine, including deer, elk, rabbit, snowshoe hare, vole and squirrel. Bohemian waxwings, common goldeneyes and American dippers were spotted as well as nest sites used by cliff swallows and two bald eagle nests on the far side of the St. Mary River opposite the bluffs.

story and photos by Stewart Wilson



the bluffs above the St. Mary River

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

BC Big Tree Registry <http://bcbigtree.ca> This site lists the BC champions of various species, among other information.

Botanical names <http://www.winternet.com/%7Echuckg/dictionary.html>

Curlew locations <http://birdscanada.org/research/speciesatrisk/index.jsp?targetpg=lbcu>

Cranbrook Community Forest <https://www.cranbrookcommunityforest.com/>

Mystery Photo from fall issue



White Boar Lake - will be different now after the Meachen Creek Fire

Rob Woods

Mystery Photo



Where is this? And what are we looking at?

Please send your answer to rmnatskestrel@gmail.com by March 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 March 1 for the spring issue of the newsletter.

Club Information

Executive

President	Virginia Rasch
Vice President	Helga Knotte
Past President	George Rogers
Secretary	Myra Juckers
Treasurer	Gretchen Whetham
BC Nature Director	Rob Woods



Committees and Club Representatives

Little Big Day	Greg Ross	Mayook Lookout	Stewart Wilson
Christmas Bird Counts	Dianne Cooper	Bylaws and Policies	Virginia Rasch
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 Nahm	Turtle Monitoring	Greg Ross
Club Camp	Jackie Leach and Ruth Goodwin	Newsletter	Susan Walp

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.

Christmas Bird Counts

Cranbrook: Saturday, December 29, from 8:30am – 4:00pm

Kimberley: Saturday, January 5, from 8:30am – 4:00pm

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

Next meetings -	Wednesday	January	16
	Wednesday	March	20