

The Kestrel

Quarterly Newsletter of the
Rocky Mountain Naturalists
2020 spring equinox



Lyle Grisedale

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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.



Lyle Grisedale

A tour of Wilks Woods provides an opportunity to contemplate subtle forest intricacies. In winter, the presence of ants is not obvious. However, some birds know all about dormant ants, tree rings and forest cycles.

Carpenter ants (*Camponotus* spp.) are large ants indigenous to many forested parts of the world. In dead, damp wood, they build nests consisting of galleries chewed out with their mandibles. Unlike termites, ants do not consume wood but discard fine, sawdust-like material. This ability to excavate wood assists forest decomposition. Dead trees may topple because ants have been busy.

In northern forests (and southern forests - forests where there are seasons), a tree forms new cells each year, arranged in concentric layers called annual growth rings. Cell growth occurs in the cambium, a layer of cells just inside the bark. In spring, the tree's cambium produces numerous large cells with thin walls and no lignin, forming light-coloured "springwood". Towards the end of

summer, growth slows down. The cells manufactured at this time of year are small, with thick walls. Because of lignin, an organic substance which provides strength and resistance to decay, this "summerwood" appears as a darker ring. One year of growth is represented by a ring consisting of a light part and a dark part. The following year, a new two-part ring is added.

Carpenter ants search for dead, damp wood, which may be found at the base of standing timber or within fallen logs. Worker ants chew the softer



springwood component. The dense summerwood remains, forming parallel chambers, or galleries. Within these galleries, eggs are laid by the queen. Workers tend the eggs laid by their mother and care for the growing larvae. Often, satellite nests are constructed around the main nest. As winter approaches, the ants bulk up, acquiring up to 50% body fat, and seal themselves into the colony. Their natural antifreeze protects them from low temperatures. Carpenter ants perform a great service in an ecosystem, serving as part of the ecosystem's cleanup crew. Larger colonies can have up to 15,000 members.

Woodpeckers, as a group, eat far more ants than most other birds do. Other vertebrates avoid ants because of stings or noxious chemicals like formic acid.



galleries made in a Douglas-fir by carpenter ants, chewing away for a year or two

Daryl Calder



woodpecker worksite

Daryl



female Pileated Woodpecker

Daryl

Enter *Dryocopus pileatus*, the Pileated Woodpecker, perfectly equipped to harvest dormant ants and many varieties of insects.

Pileateds excavate deep into rotten wood to get at the nests of carpenter ants. They forage mainly by probing, prying and excavating, as evidenced by deep rectangular holes. The sticky tongue, about 10 cm long, is stretched into the galleries; hundreds of ants are swallowed whole.

Sometimes, woodpeckers clamber about acrobatically in small branches to access berries. In summer, they seem to recognize certain types of bracket fungus, a symptom of decay in standing timber. In winter, their memory of fungus location may help them find dormant ants. When snow is on the ground, chunks of woody litter near stumps and fallen logs become more obvious to us.



going up Whisky Jack Hill

Lyle

"Pileated" comes from the Latin for "crested". Common names used by early settlers include "stump breaker", "log cock", "laughing woodpecker" and "king of the woods".

Observing these important parts of the forest ecosystem was not the only thing to do out in the



the little fire

Lyle Grisedale



on top of Whisky Jack

Lyle



Sunflower Hill

Lyle Grisedale

woods. Our group of 17 enjoyed mild, calm, quiet conditions that day. A while after we started, the "thighmaster" was behind us, and a little fire blazed before us. Since it was New Year's Day, we bulked up on appropriate food and drink. With strength restored, we headed for the summit of Whisky Jack, then around to Sunflower Hill, exiting via the Jeep Trail. Nats know how to ring in a new decade.

Daryl Calder



from Sunflower Hill: looking down the St. Mary River to the St. Eugene Mission and distant Kootenay River (directly below cloud bank)

Stewart Wilson

South Hill

January 19

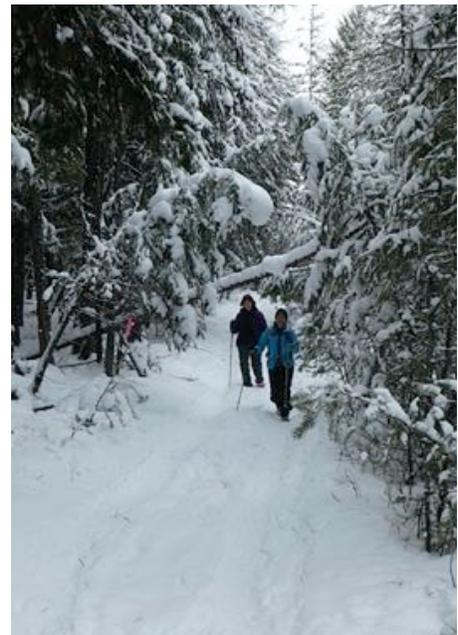
On Sunday, January 19, Stewart led a small group of three RMNs on trails above Pyatt Lake at the foot of 12 Avenue South, on what was originally part of the Old Moyie Stage Road. They stopped at a former exploratory mine site, as well as at a dramatic chasm with a drop of over 100 feet. During their hike they did some birding and spotted a Hairy Woodpecker, 3 ravens, a Black-capped Chickadee, 4 Red-breasted Nuthatches and a Townsend's Solitaire.



one of the mining exploration holes



chasm



Stewart Wilson
story and photos

Wanklyn Road Snowshoe

February 2

A dozen and a half naturalists did not expect to see their shadows as they made their way through



Lyle Grisedale

the shady woods. "Grippers or shoes" was the initial topic of discussion. A recent mild spell had given the modest snowpack a challenging crust. It was difficult to decipher tracks in the snow because the change in



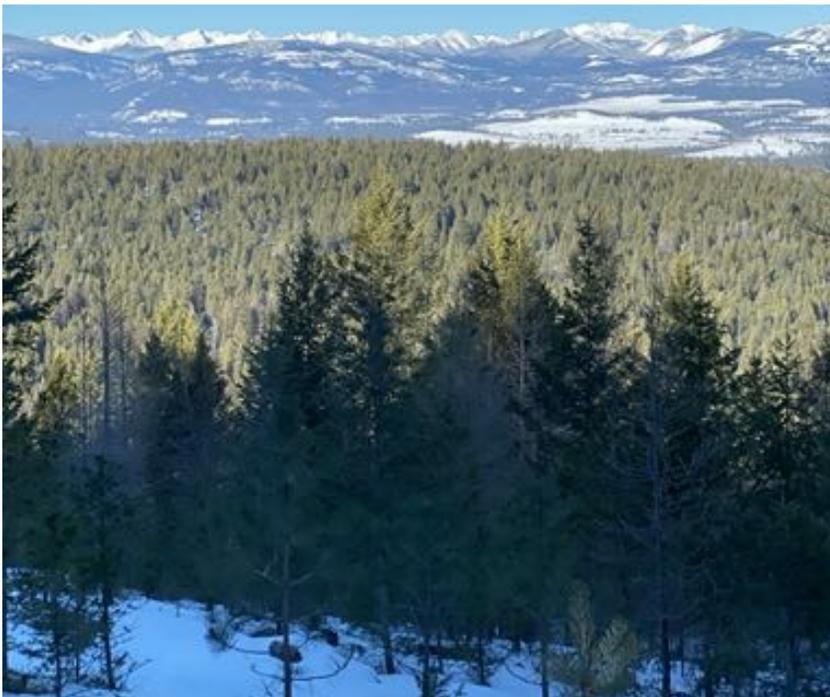
lunch and lots of talk around the campfire

Stewart Wilson



the view to the Steeples from Whisky Jack

Stewart Wilson



Purcells

Lyle Grisedale

weather had erased much of the detail needed for accurate ID. Particles of lichen, bark and conifer needles littered the snow; soil building processes became more obvious. What else would careful observation reveal?

Noisily we crunched up a new route beginning near the forgotten community of Wanklyn, overlapped the familiar Wilks Woods Loop and descended through varied forest types.

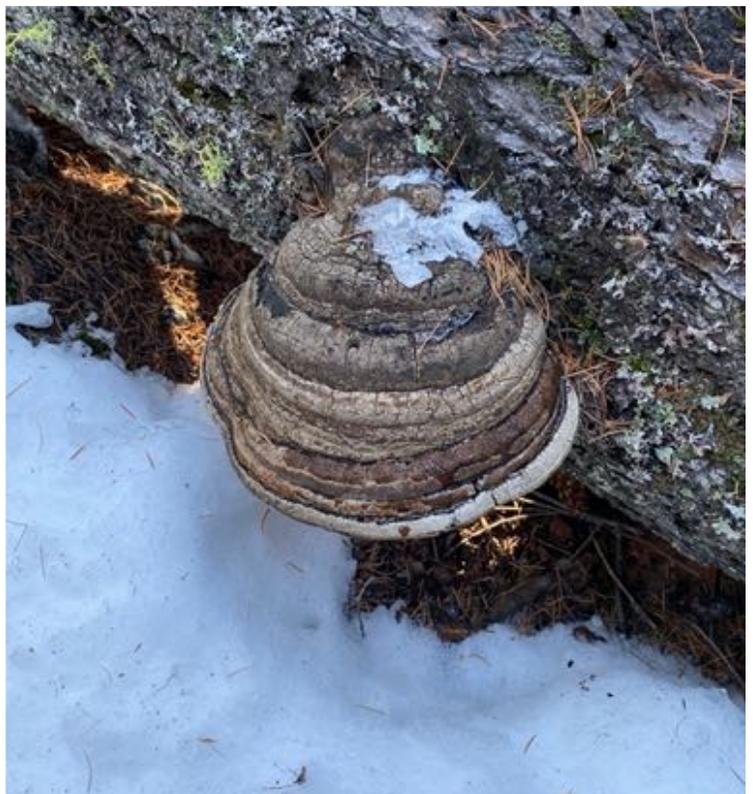
In order to get a sense of the forest history, we paid attention to the abundance of scattered stumps. Waist high, flat topped stumps

would have been created by "tie hackers" wielding cross-cut saws and axes. About a century ago, there was great demand for railroad ties and timbers, especially on the prairies. Seventy years ago, loggers used chain saws, skidders, cats and haul trucks to supply nearby mills. Demand for timbers and lumber was driven by mining activity and construction of growing communities. Where appropriate, steam locomotives hauled logs along short, hastily constructed rail lines down to the mills. When all the suitable wood was removed, rail spurs were torn up and relocated. The remaining stumps tended to be large diameter with a "hinge" or step.

As Christmas tree (C-tree) production swelled to a peak in the early 1960s, two distinct stump types emerged. C-tree cutters figured that all trees except Douglas-firs should be eliminated. The result is an abundance of smaller diameter, waist high, jagged, axe cut stumps of lodgepole pine, ponderosa pine, western larch and a few spruce. Christmas tree cutting, which targeted the tops of trees but left a tall stump with live limbs, created an entirely different stump. With the tree top gone, the remaining living branches began growing upwards and continued to reach for the light. These multiple-topped trees now can be 25-50 centimeters in diameter, with a nasty kink in the stem about two meters above the ground. Christmas tree managers should have returned a few years later and pruned the limbs in such a manner that the live stump could produce a series of quality C-trees. Unfortunately, only low quality saw logs remain. A great deal of slash will result when the next round of logging occurs.

As we traversed from the crown land onto the private District Lot, low, flat stumps occasionally poked above the snowpack. Here, in the early 1990s, a small feller-buncher and large rubber-tired skidder was the preferred combination. Logging of small patches was directed by the property owner in an effort to generate some income and enhance C-tree production. Seeds from nearby forest have reintroduced the larch and ponderosa pine to these disturbed areas. My 10,000 tree planting effort about two decades ago has further restored biodiversity. Beneath the snow are the very low stumps I created during the past 20 years. In addition to encouraging new saw logs and culturing C-trees, I have generated cordwood, fence rails and thinned the forest to reduce fire hazard.

Decaying stumps in the shade do not often provide much excitement. But, soon enough, nats clustered around a fallen log, pointing, checking devices and snapping photos. A fine example of Tinder Polypore Mushroom parasitized the bark of a Douglas-fir. Also known as Tinder Bracket Fungus or Hoof Fungus, *Fomes fomentarius* has very elaborate polypore fruiting bodies shaped like a horse's hoof. This species of fungus remains attached to the tree until the tree is



bracket fungus

Lyle



hoof fungus on alder trunk

Daryl Calder

dead, then initiates rot of the bark. Curiously, it lives on the bark as a parasite, and subsequently as a decomposer.

Fomes is not edible, despite its fruity smell, but has always been beneficial to communities near where it is found in the wild. People have traditionally used it as tinder because it contains an ingredient called amadou.

Amadou is a spongy material useful for starting slow-burning fires. Thin slices of the inner spongy layer are cut from the fungus; a precious resource for ancient people. Sparks generated by striking flint against iron pyrite were caught in the amadou. The smouldering punk could be fanned into other dry material, producing a flame.

Remarkable evidence of this was discovered in the 5,000 year old remains of Otzi the Iceman.

In September of 1991, the body of Otzi, a nomad, was found entombed in ice of the Swiss Alps. He carried a backpack on his cross-alpine excursion before his death. The pack contained what appeared to be a complex firefighting kit. Featuring over

a dozen different plants, including two species of polypore mushrooms, the kit held flint and pyrite for creating sparks.

Otzi was likely a high altitude shepherd, and close examination of his remains have yielded an amazingly wide variety of clues. Stomach contents, clothing and tool analysis have provided us with a detailed glimpse of the natural environment during the copper age.

Daryl Calder

Lone Pine Butte (and RMN potluck)

February 23



towards Lone Pine Hill

On Sunday, February 23rd, the Rocky Mountain Naturalists held the annual Winter Social. Despite a light snowfall, 23 hikers began a hike to Lone Pine Hill from a trail off Pighin Road. The snow and ice on the trail made the wearing of ice grips necessary. After we walked across a large field and were closer to the base of the hill, we saw two old cabins. Fairly fresh cougar tracks had been found below the cabins two days earlier.

It was a steady, but gentle, uphill climb to the top of Lone Pine Hill. However, we couldn't appreciate the view due to the cloudy weather.

Lyle Griesdale



one of the cabins



hard work going uphill

Lyle Grisedale



almost at the top

Lyle Griesdale

I always learn things when Marianne Nahm leads a hike. On this hike we saw trees with their bark rubbed off by ungulates, we learned the names of several plants and we identified pine marten deposits.



on the top of Lone Pine Hill

Lana Solomonova

After the hike 31 people enjoyed an awesome potluck dinner. Thank you so much, Hasi and Sandy Oates, for hosting the potluck!

Sandy McArthur



heading down

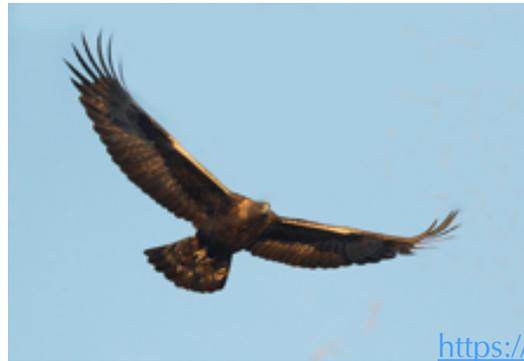
Lyle Griesdale

Golden Eagles Sighted by Early Morning Birders March 4, 11

On Wednesday March 4 at Cranbrook Effluent Irrigation Reservoir north, most of us early morning birders were keenly scanning ducks to pick out an elusive White-winged Scoter, detected by Greg and Lyle, and were quite oblivious to the little black dots soaring overhead. Meanwhile, Daryl had noticed the dots and that they were not all the same. One had a smaller, less protruding head, a relatively bigger tail that was not white, held its wings in more of a dihedral with the outer primary feathers curved up and fanned out like fingers – not a Bald Eagle but a Golden Eagle! My first in BC.



http://www.smedesphoto.com/Gallery_Golden_Eagle_Soaring.htm

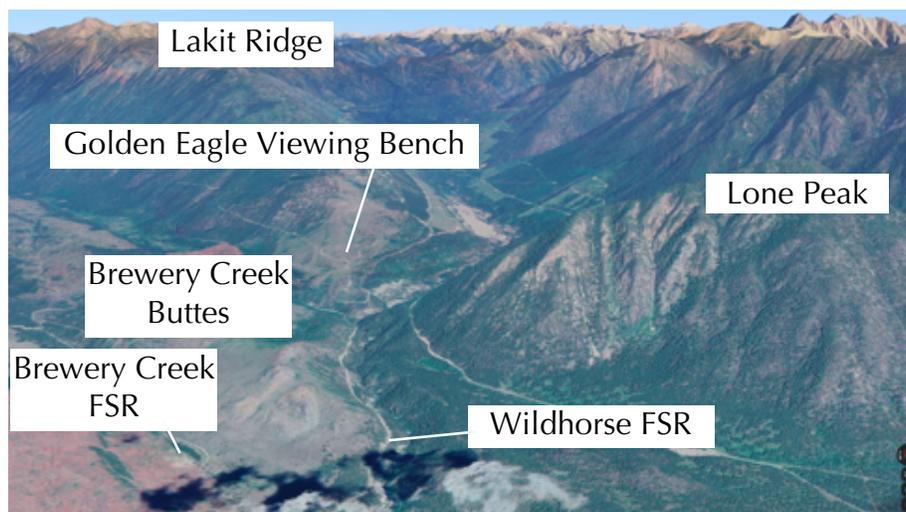


<https://williamthecoroner.wordpress.com/2011/04/02/today-in-birding/>

Bald Eagle (L) soaring on wings held in a flatter plane than the Golden Eagle (R).

Very close to Cranbrook are several spots ideal for viewing golden eagles, and the best time to see them is right now. This is because each spring, between late February and the end of April, they leave wintering grounds in the mountain areas of the western USA and collect along the Rocky Mountains which they use as a migration route north before dispersing to breeding grounds in the Yukon and Alaska. One major stream follows the front ranges in Alberta while another smaller one follows the Rocky Mountain Trench in the west.

Why the Rocky Mountain Trench? The steep upthrust western face of the Rocky Mountains runs SE to NW and is at right angles to the prevailing winds thus generating strong updrafts. The updrafts enable the eagles to soar with ease along the ridges



Golden Eagle Viewing Locations (from Google Earth)

towards their northern destinations, reaching speeds of up to 100 km per hour. Even with little wind, warm pockets of air can sweep up to the peaks and the migrants can travel without much effort by soaring up one thermal then gliding down to pick up the next thermal further north.

Where near Cranbrook can they be viewed? Just above Fort Steele the Wildhorse River forms a significant gap in the Rocky Mountains, overlooked by Lone Peak. Observers on the north side have wide-open views to watch eagles circling upwards over Lone Peak as they gain height to soar across the gap.



view north from Brewery Creek Buttes

Daryl Calder



view SW - Early Morning Birders hiking back over Brewery Creek Buttes

Daryl Calder

When can they be viewed? Golden Eagles, unlike most land birds, are daytime migrants. They roost on ridges during the night and start moving after dawn, reaching a maximum in mid-afternoon when soaring conditions are often best, settling down to roost again at dusk.

So, on the following Wednesday, March 11, the early morning birders headed out in the hopes of seeing migrating Golden Eagles up close(r).

We drove north from Wildhorse FSR up Brewery Creek FSR, parked at a bend in the road, and hiked up to the Brewery Creek Buttes. This was a worthwhile objective in its own right with extensive views up and down the Trench and across the Kootenay River to the Purcells.

A little black dot circling over Lone Peak was finally agreed to be a bald eagle. Other birds seen there and on the road behind the buttes circling back to the Wildhorse FSR included Canada Geese, Common Raven, Black-capped Chickadee, Mountain Chickadees, Red-breasted Nuthatches and

a

pileated woodpecker... but no Golden Eagles.

Undeterred, some of us then proceeded further up the Wildhorse FSR and turned off to a grassy shoulder - the Golden Eagle Viewing Bench - on the south side of Lakit Ridge, with a clear view across the Wildhorse River valley to Lone Peak. A raven was harassing something in the trees on the skyline of the slope above us. With the aid of Daryl's scope we identified a Golden Eagle perched in the treetop. Turning to face south, we saw several birds soaring and circling at speed above Lone Peak, and later we had better views of them from lower down – two were Bald Eagles, but a further four were golden eagles. A successful morning.

For further information about Golden Eagle migration, go to <http://eaglewatch.ca/>, the website of the Rocky Mountain Eagle Research Foundation. The foundation carries out a Spring Migration Count from March 1 to April 22 at Mount Lorette in Kananaskis country and at Beaver Mines in the Crowsnest area for the major migrating stream, and at a viewing site in the Steeples for the Rocky Mountain Trench stream. On March 11, the count at the Steeples site was also five Golden Eagles, recorded by Vance Mattson.

There is still time to see these magnificent birds during their spring migration, and there is also the option of watching them as they return south from mid-September to early November. Indeed, viewing may be better in the fall as the eagles descend the slopes of Lakit Ridge and come closer to the viewing bench before soaring up again above Lone Peak.

We'll see...!

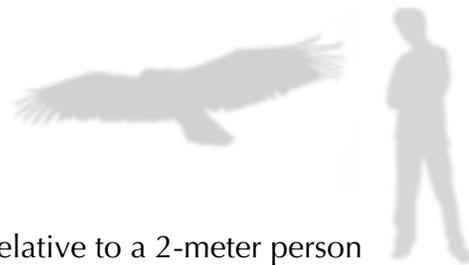
Golden Eagle facts:

scientific name: *Aquila chrysaetos*

average life span in the wild: 30 years

length: 82 to 95 cm; wingspan: 2 meters

weight: 13 to 33 kg



size relative to a 2-meter person

Golden Eagle pairs maintain territories as large as 155 square km and frequently return to the same nest to breed.

They can see their prey (mostly small to medium size mammals, birds and reptiles) over 3 km away and dive to catch it at over 190 km per hour.

Eagles kill prey with their four talons, each of which has a crushing strength of over 400 psi.

They need about 200 to 500 grams of food each day but do not need to eat daily; they can gorge on food when it is available and hold up to a kilogram of food in their crops.

The acids in their digestive systems can completely dissolve bones, which provide essential minerals for growth.

The Golden Eagle is the national bird of Mexico.

Hilary Anderson

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

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

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

Nature Conservancy of Canada (NCC) <http://www.natureconservancy.ca/en/>

East Kootenay Invasive Species Council (EKISC) <https://www.ekisc.com/>

Bird Observations <https://ebird.org>

Eagles <http://eaglewatch.ca/>

About Field Trips

Leader responsibilities:

- Radios and first aid kits are available from Paula.

- 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

Club Information

Executive

President	Helga Knoté
Vice President	Marianne Nahm
Past President	Virginia Rasch
Secretary	Jim Hurvid
Treasurer	Gretchen Whetham
BC Nature Director	Wendy Maisonneuve
Director at Large	Janice Strong



Committees, Co-ordinators and Representatives

Bats	Scott Bodaly
Bluebirds	Marianne Nahm
Bylaws and Policies	Virginia Rasch
Christmas Bird Count	Dianne Cooper
Club Camp	Jackie Leach/Ruth Goodwin
Communications	Virginia Rasch
Early Morning Birding	Jim Hurvid
East Kootenays Invasive Species Council	Frank Hastings
Elizabeth Lake	Stewart Wilson
Field Trips	Paula Rogers
Internal Communications	Paula Rogers
Kootenay Conservation Program	Helga Knoté
Little Big Day	Greg Ross
Membership	Sue Ross
Newsletter	Susan Walp
Presentations	Marianne Nahm/Paula Rogers
Records	Wendy Maisonneuve
Rocky Mountain Trench Society	Jo Ellen Floer
Skookumchuck Prairie IBA	Dianne Cooper
Turtle Monitoring	Greg Ross
Web Masters	Dianne Cooper

Whisky Jack Summit on
Groundhog Day

Lyle Grisedale

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

Club Camp Tuesday 16 June to Friday 19 June

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

Next meetings - Wednesday 20 May
Wednesday 15 July