

The Kestrel

Quarterly Newsletter of the
Rocky Mountain Naturalists
2020 winter solstice



Stewart Wilson

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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.

Two Bumps Hike, a rich flower and bird-filled experience for an amateur naturalist

July 5

“Two Bumps.” What kind of a name for a naturalists’ hike is that? Well, I found out after joining nine Rocky Mountain Naturalists members for a warm hike in early July.



The Steeples

The intriguing name comes from two specific rock promontories immediately to the west of Highway 3 south of Isadore Canyon near the Ramparts rest area, across from Gate 1 of the City’s spray fields. The promontories aren’t particularly high, but parts of the trails are steep. We were in for less than an hour of easy trail walking and scrambling up the rocky bumps. The first, north of the Chief Isadore Trail, is named Steeple View. The second, south of the Trail, is known as Tabletop. The latter has a similar height neighbour, separated by a natural stone notch through

which we eventually scrambled. In order to do this, we started on a trail of dirt, gravel and conifer needles from the plentiful ponderosa pine, Douglas-fir and western larch trees that shade the trail much of the way, along with many Saskatoon bushes covered with ripening berries. In barely a minute we crossed an old branch of the Trans Canada Trail – now renamed the Great Trail – and it wasn't long before we reached the base of Steeple View.



purple aster



naturalists identifying birds

The trail steepened at this point, but after 100 meters or so of climbing and puffing we were on the crest where there was a wooden bench that had a splendid view of the Steeples and the mostly green Rocky Mountain Trench below us. We could also see the two stone “bumps” to the west, one of which we were yet to climb.

The grassy hillside and rocky summit

were covered with flowers, the names of which are mostly unknown to this writer, but included paintbrush, nodding onion, penstemon, harebell, orange arnica, goatsbeard, bitterroot, yarrow, sagebrush mariposa lily and many others. There were also some blindingly white mock orange blossoms, on bushes, which contrasted sharply with the colourful flower display below them.

Then it was down again in the direction of the Chief Isadore Trail which for many years was the railbed for the historic CPR Crowsnest Line that gave birth to Cranbrook in the early 1900s. We walked along here a short way then up through the forested notch and up Tabletop. Its summit duplicated the scene on Steeple View with, if anything, more flowers. Here we had lunch and watched the deep, blue sky for birds, the names of which are mostly unknown to this writer but much appreciated just the same. According to a list I was given the birds observed included: Turkey Vulture, Northern Flicker, Clark's Nutcracker, Common Raven, Black-capped Chickadee, Mountain Chickadee, Violet-green Swallow, swallow sp., Ruby-crowned Kinglet, Red-breasted Nuthatch, Western Bluebird, Townsend's Solitaire, Swainson's Thrush, American Robin, Cedar Waxwing, Red Crossbill, Pine Siskin, Chipping Sparrow, Clay-coloured Sparrow, Darkeyed Junco, Vesper Sparrow, Spotted Towhee (by ear in ravine bottom), Red-winged Blackbird, Yellow-rumped Warbler and Western Tanager. After lunch it was (almost) all downhill as we re-crossed Chief Isadore Trail and returned to the vehicles. That completed the loop after about two hours of hiking, and a very enjoyable hike it was even for one who only knows a handful of flower names and even fewer birds.

But I recently set up a bird feeder at my house, and the day will come when I'll be able to identify a few of our feathered friends, but never as many as the dedicated members of the Rocky Mountain Naturalists.

Gerry Warner, story and photos

[Trail description and map can be found in the 2020 summer issue of *The Kestrel*. Go to the newsletter page of rockymountainnaturalists.org and select 2020 summer.]



searching for birds, a blooming mock orange to his right

Steeple View Hike

October 15

Ten RM Nats followed a meandering pathway through a forest of ponderosa pine, Douglas-fir and the occasional rocky mountain juniper. Along the way, we viewed signs of Christmas tree culture from many years before as well as trees encased in the brilliant green hued wolf lichen.

After reaching the summit following a short but steep climb, a beautiful vista greeted us, along with a sturdily



George Rogers



wolf lichen

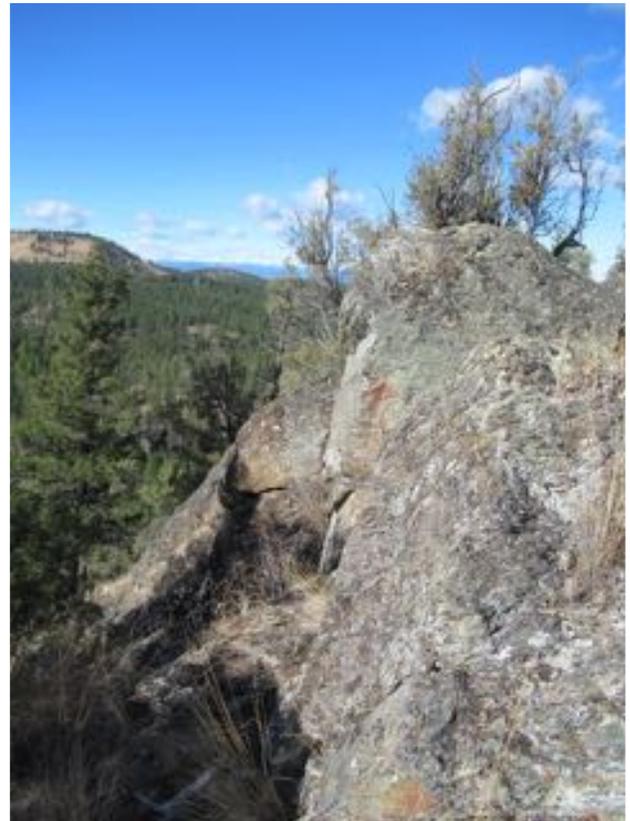
Judy Chapman

built wooden bench for those who needed a rest. The day was perfect for our adventure with the sun shining out of a clear blue sky giving us a wonderful view of the snow capped Steeples. One could see the Rocky Mountain Trench spreading in each direction from our vantage point with the yellow



the short but steep climb

George Rogers



view to the north, showing Eager Hill on the left



Gerry Warner

leafed aspen and occasional golden larch standing out from a green forest canopy.

A lone western red squirrel chattered its displeasure at us invading its forest while black capped chickadees and red breasted nuthatches serenaded us.

Paula Rogers



an old Douglas-fir tree with a cascade of pitch (resin), produced by the tree probably in response to an injury of some kind

Judy Chapman



Judy

Judy



Judy



Gerry

The Annual Bighorn Sheep Rut



Rocky Mountain Bighorn Sheep



Every year around the end of October and the beginning of November the bighorn sheep go into the annual rut. The big rams gather into scrums and challenge each other for breeding rights. It is a very excellent spectator event. The rams push each other around, with lots of kicking. They stick their tongues out at each other and curl their upper lips in flehmen behaviour, which allows them to sample the pheromone chemicals in the air. Ultimately they stand up on hind legs and lunge towards



each other, resulting in a loud ringing sound and of course a major head impact. This is known as Head Banging. While the big rams are jockeying for position the smaller rams are out taking care of the ewes, and the whole thing is great fun to see.

Fortunately one does not have to go out into the wilderness to be a witness. You can watch it in



downtown Radium, around the townsite and on the golf course. Each year Radium hosts the Head Bangers Festival around the the first weekend in November, unfortunately cancelled this year due to COVID. So put it on next year's calendar and head up to Radium for a very entertaining day.

Lyle Grisedale



Night Sky: Great Conjunction and other Planets

A close meetup of the planets Saturn and Jupiter is known as a Great Conjunction. Great Conjunctions occur regularly, about every 20 years, due to the combined effect of Jupiter's 12 year orbital period (1 Jupiter year), and Saturn's 30 year orbital period. Jupiter and Saturn last aligned in a Great Conjunction on May 28th, 2000. The 2020 Great Conjunction event is on December 21. The 2 planets appear very close together, separated by just 1/10th of a degree. The last time they were so close was almost 4 centuries ago, on July 16th, 1623.

Both planets have been positioned low in the southwestern sky for many weeks. On a clear evening, as the sky darkens, they are among the earliest bright objects to appear. Easily visible with the naked eye, they will become so close as to be seen as a single bright light in the sky. Jupiter appears brighter than any star. Saturn is slightly dimmer with a distinctly golden glow. Binoculars will make the 4 moons of Jupiter obvious too, adding to the spectacle.

Also, high in the southeast evening sky, orangey Mars is visible. In the morning sky, Venus is particularly bright in advance of the rising sun. Hoping for some clear December skies.

Daryl Calder



This is how Saturn and Jupiter looked in August, in the sky above the glow from Cranbrook. The two planets have been getting closer and closer since then and will be in conjunction on December 21. Then they will start moving apart again. picture from 2020 fall *Kestrel*

Night Sky: Two Winter Constellations

In the winter, stars shine brighter than at other times of the year. This is not just your imagination!



The generally colder air holds less moisture, so there is less scattering of the starlight. For this reason, now is a good time to do some stargazing.

The easily recognized constellation Orion rises in the East soon after nightfall at this time of year. Stars rise and set 4 minutes earlier every day, so Orion the hunter will be in the eastern sky for a few months. Orion looks like a set of two trapezoids joined by a belt of three stars. The reddish star at the left (closest to the North) is Betelgeuse. The southernmost is Rigel.

Another nearby constellation is Auriga, the charioteer. Its brightest star is Capella, which you can find by imagining a straight line starting at Orion's belt and passing through the head. Continue for another

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two Orion-lengths or so until you run into a bright star. This is Capella, and the pentagon of dimmer stars including Capella is the constellation Auriga.

Now all we need is a clear night sky with no light pollution so we can see these bright winter stars.

Susan Walp

Early Morning Birding (EMB)

In the midst of these unusual and most difficult times the commitment of the Early Morning Birding group provided continuity throughout most of the year for our participating club members.

Although Early Morning Birding was temporarily suspended along with all other activities in May, and now again during the recent restrictions, its resumption was met with strong resurgence with between 6 and 10 participants each week.

Like all current outings, the main difference now is that a participation sheet with emergency contacts is maintained in case of unplanned mishaps and to allow for contact tracing.

Adhering to club COVID-19 guidelines means that participation is capped at the first 10 replying to the outing's announcement. Another consideration is that carpooling is no longer allowed, so the locations are selected to accommodate a greater number of vehicles than before.

For those unfamiliar with the Early Morning Birding (EMB) program, it is a regular Wednesday morning field trip dedicated to birdwatching. The skill of the birders varies from beginner through expert level. Trips take the group different directions from Cranbrook, and locations are selected from experience based on quality habitat areas and knowledge of the expected bird activity at that time of year. Some mornings we stay close to the vehicles whereas others may involve some dedicated hiking. During July, a special trip usually involves birding on the water, taking the group through the Moyie Lake narrows by either canoe or kayak.

Species lists are prepared for each location where we try to be as accurate and honest as any birders can be. Typically 30 different species are detected each outing and these are entered into the Cornell University eBird database which serves to establish a historic and high quality scientific baseline for the area.

For the not so early risers, this activity provides the motivation to get up and out and to be exploring some of the unique nearby niches within the valley. The scenery of the morning is often spectacular with the early morning light illuminating, often in its own rare way, one of the most beautiful landscapes in Canada.



Taking the opportunity to just enjoy

Gretchen Whetham



Jim Hurvid

the sights or capture the wonderful panorama in photos is always an added bonus.

And other photo opportunities also present themselves for those who keep an open eye.

Exploring an area with a group of seasoned naturalists also rewarding as unexpected natural treasures which

otherwise would have been overlooked are often drawn to the attention of novices such as these ant lion traps found during the Bootleg hoodoo trail hike.

Experiencing the activity from a bird's perspective may, however, be a bit intimidating at times depending on how many sets of eyes are trained on you as you fly by, as the photo below reveals.



ant lion trap

Jim



Alba Traus

Although there are many exciting notables from each year, the recent March 18th Jaffray morning stands out for sure.

We EMBers had just recently observed a flock of Canadian geese feeding on a small pond. Then suddenly all hell broke loose.

The geese frantically flushed from the pond, when about 4 feet above the far embankment we heard what sounded like a fighter jet approaching. It turned out to be a golden eagle descending at high speed and pitch with its wings positioned in full dive attack mode.

The eagle singled out and chased one of the geese at high speed, and with a last minute flare of wings and minor adjustment made full contact to knock the goose to the ground below.

We watched as the struggle ensued and the goose tried its best to get out from underneath the eagle which was trying to subdue its next intended meal.

Not only did this take us by surprise, but we all also failed to notice a second golden eagle which suddenly appeared overhead from who knows where.

Then within about a minute of the attack there also appeared, again seemingly out of nowhere, a flock of about 8 ravens. They immediately began to take turns dive bombing the eagle as it stood on the goose.



Bob Whetham

I guess even a seasoned golden eagle can only take so much intimidation, as the eagle soon abandoned its prey and was chased away by the ravens. We continued to watch as they weaved back and forth across the distant fields for many times longer than anyone expected.

The injured goose miraculously got up and made its way back to the other side of the pond but unfortunately succumbed to its fatal injuries shortly thereafter.

This occurrence probably repeats itself often. However, we felt fortunate to experience this magnificent event which unfolded immediately before us. It is something we shall remember for quite some time.

If anyone wishes to get on the distribution list to receive the Early Morning Birding announcements, contact Jim Hurvid or an executive member, or you may send a request email through the RMN website.

Jim Hurvid

Christmas Bird Count

In the Christmas Bird Counts (CBC) conducted every year by amateur birders in the western hemisphere, we have a valuable source of data on winter bird populations. The institution dates to an unpretentious origin in 1900. Since then, the counts have engaged a steadily growing number of enthusiastic volunteers.

Birds Canada sponsors the Canadian CBC and provides advice on ways to remain safe despite the pandemic. The restrictions of the pandemic cannot diminish the enjoyment of counting birds, hoping for a rarity and connecting, even in a limited way, with fellow birders.

A new appreciation is developing for watching birds in backyards and neighbourhoods, recruiting new people into the world of birding and increasing knowledge in areas previously overlooked. More time spent at home may also inspire people to enhance their properties with native plants providing important food and cover for birds. Plants that provide late season berries, seeds and shelter can keep bird activity going into fall and winter.

Our region holds endless possibilities for discovery. This is particularly true during migrations and in winter, when birding holds a high element of unpredictability.

The ground rules for conducting Christmas Counts are established by the National Audubon Society. Every count must be completed within the 24-hour span of a calendar day. The day chosen must be within a two-week period surrounding Christmas, and each area censused must be contained within a circle of 12 km radius around a specific location. Different counts are thus comparable as to season, duration and area of coverage, but differ with respect to geographic location, types of habitat available, weather and intensity of coverage.

This year, there will be no carpooling for field counters, and count observations will be gathered by email. Feeder watchers report as usual via phone or email.

Please consider participating in the 121st Christmas Bird Counts in the East Kootenay. The Rocky Mountain Naturalists always welcome participants of all abilities. Our very dedicated 'count compiler' and organizer, Dianne Cooper, will ensure that everyone who wants to participate will have a chance to contribute in a meaningful way.

Pre-registration (required) to be a 'Feeder watcher' and/or 'Field counter' must be done via our website (<http://www.rockymountainnaturalists.org/christmas-bird-counts.html>) well in advance of the December 26th Cranbrook count and the January 3rd Kimberley count.

Daryl Calder

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

Bird Observations <https://ebird.org>

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

Trailforks trailforks.com

About Field Trips

Leader responsibilities:

Find a replacement leader if necessary.

Keep the group together. Radios and first aid kits are available from Paula.

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



Rocky Mountain Bighorn Sheep
Lyle Grisedale

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	Hasi Oats
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

Upcoming Events These are events planned at the present time. Watch your inbox for postings regarding events.

2020 Christmas Bird Counts	Cranbrook	26	December
	Kimberley	3	January 2021
Early Morning Birding			Wednesday mornings

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

Next meetings -	Wednesday	20	January
	Wednesday	17	March