

The Kestrel

Quarterly Newsletter of the
Rocky Mountain Naturalists
2021 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.

Backyard Visitors



This article and these photographs arrived in *The Kestrel's* mailbox last May. Keep your eyes open, be still and be patient, and maybe you will see something similar this year.

- editor

Last week I had a very fun visit from a bear family to my backyard. Yes, it's that time of the year when our wild critters decide to explore our environment, searching for easy meals, easier than in their own environment. And of course there are lots of humanoids who cannot figure out how to keep attractants

out of reach of the wildlife. While in my yard these visitors walked right past my compost bin, which is well ventilated and



Lyle

offers no odours, and headed straight to the patch of dandelions and lush grasses growing at the edge of my yard. The momma bear fed while her two little



cubs cavorted in the bushes and tall grasses, playing, not unlike puppies; wrestling, play fighting and exploring nooks and crannies in the woods behind my place. Of course I was out there with camera and at one point came a little too close so Momma gave me a firm huff to remind me to keep my distance.

It's so great to have wildlife in our yards as long as we have made sure there are no food attractants that will keep them returning, becoming a nuisance and finally habituated to humans and a problem which ultimately leads to the Conservation Officer having to dispose of the animals. So we should all be responsible and make sure this does not happen.

By planting the right trees and bushes we can attract all kinds of birds and butterflies to our yards. It is possible to live in close harmony with wildlife, and having wildlife around is good for our souls.

As I live on the edge of the woods I often have wildlife visit and pass through my property, and I love to see the creatures up close. If there are no



unnatural foods they won't stay long or become a nuisance . My visit from the bears

lasted about 20 minutes, and then they moved on looking for food back in the woods.

These photos are of my guests last week.

Lyle Grisedale



Night Sky: How to Locate Sirius

You can use the constellation Orion to find Sirius, known as the Dog Star because it is in the constellation Canis Major, which is Latin for "big dog".

First, find Orion. At the beginning of winter, Orion rose in the eastern sky around the time the sky turned dark (see *The Kestrel*, 2020 winter, rockymountainnaturalists.org/rmn-newsletter). Since then, it has been rising four minutes earlier each night. Also, the sun has been setting later and later. Nowadays, by the time it gets fully dark, Orion is already high up in the southern sky.

Second, imagine a line made by the three stars in Orion's belt. If you follow its direction down to the left for about twice the width of Orion you will come to a very bright star. This is Sirius. It is the brightest star in our sky.

Susan Walp



technationnews.com

Great Backyard Bird Count

February 2021

Rocky Mountain Naturalists encouraged members to participate in this global event over four days in February. This Family Day weekend definitely had colder than usual temperatures, but it did not deter 22 Naturalists from bundling up with binoculars in warm mittened hands. Members then recorded their observations using the eBird app on their phones or on computers from the warmth of their homes. Seven members who were not eBird participants signed up for eBird accounts in order to record their observations.

The eBird project is jointly run by the Cornell Lab of Ornithology and Audubon Society. It allows birders to track their sightings, learn more about birds and where to find them, as well as contribute to science, conservation and education.

Once the 22 members submitted their counts to me, the grand tally was 53 species, with 4588 individuals.

As a little extra incentive, our Club provided two gift certificates to Top Crop (more bird food?) in a random draw of participants. The lucky winners were Jane and Gretchen.

Thank you to all those members who participated in the 2021 Great Backyard Bird Count.

Marianne Nahm



Duck Box Cleanout at Elizabeth Lake

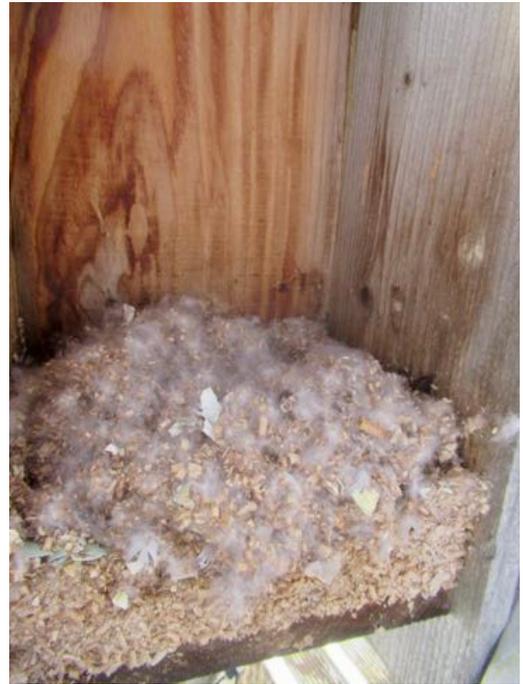
On 23 February 2021, five Rocky Mountain Naturalists braved crossing the ice and ventured to clean out the duck boxes at Elizabeth Lake. I say this because, for me, it was quite comical and a bit scary to be on the cracking ice with water puddles being created behind me as we walked! But I was relatively confident it was safe, as the week long cold spell was only a day or two behind us, plus we had a ladder, so I figured we could use that in an emergency! Now back to the duck boxes...



safely distanced duck box team crossing the ice with a ladder

Katrin Powell

In total, there were nine boxes that we cleaned out. All of the boxes, except for one, were put up by the Rocky Mountain Naturalists approximately six years ago, and they were very successful at attracting ducks to nest in them. In most of them we found one or two eggs that did not hatch, along with down and many egg shell fragments, indicating many hatched eggs. And the boxes were likely even more successful than they appeared, as they had not been cleaned in two years, so really, most of the eggs had hatched each year. The only unsuccessful box was found on the ground, as the tree that it was attached to had fallen



down and shell fragments in duck box after use - The wood shavings below the down were put in the box during the previous cleanout.

Katrin



Marianne holding a goldeneye egg
Katrin

down. That box did not have any eggs in it.

Most of the eggs were greenish/blue in colour, about 6 cm long and 4 cm wide, indicating goldeneye eggs. We suspected initially that they were from Common Goldeneyes, as we thought that these are the goldeneyes we see most often on Elizabeth Lake during breeding season. Plus, Greg Ross noticed that a Common Goldeneye was using a box (box #8), south of the tourist information centre near the turtle beds, last summer. However, upon further investigation with eBird, we learned that during breeding season last year on Elizabeth Lake, Stewart Wilson had a high count of six adult Barrow's Goldeneyes (three males and three females) on 18 May 2020, which is right around the time of chicks being born. Barrow's Goldeneye eggs are supposed to be slightly larger, but the sizes for both are right around the 6 cm mark (Common Goldeneye egg lengths are 5.8-6.0 cm, and Barrow's Goldeneye egg lengths are 5.7-7.0 cm). These eggs were about 6 cm long, so it is difficult



Greg opening up a duck box

Katrin Powell



One goldeneye egg and two Wood Duck eggs

to say which species of goldeneye they were from.

We had one surprise in a box on the east side of the lake (box #2), which had not only a goldeneye egg, but also what we believe to be two Wood Duck eggs. They were significantly smaller than the goldeneye egg (about 5.0 cm long and 3.5 cm wide) and were beige/creamy coloured. This was a pleasant surprise, as Wood Ducks seem to be more seclusive and harder to find. To put this in perspective, there were only two Wood Ducks recorded at

Katrin

Elizabeth Lake during breeding season last year.

Since we had trouble identifying what type of goldeneyes nested in the boxes, wouldn't it be great if our birding community happened to keep an eye on the duck boxes during breeding season (April-May)? If you notice anything, please let us know what species you observe going inside the duck boxes. The duck box number is written on the side of the box, or you could just take a photo of it or map it and we could figure it out. Please send findings to me or Greg Ross. Thank you!

Due to COVID, we did not announce this outing, as we wanted to keep the numbers to a minimum. Thanks to everyone who came out to help.

Thanks for your interest, and be safe out there!

Katrin Powell



Katrin in front of a duck box

Greg Ross



duck nest box locations

Greg

Telltale East Kootenay Tails: Birding at the Beginning of 2021

"Compelling" is an adjective used to describe interest, attention or admiration in a powerfully irresistible way. Birding during the first six weeks of 2021 has easily fit this definition.



Common Grackle

Lyle Grisedale

Back in January, rare bird reports indicated that a particular icterid was sighted near a feeder at Fort Steele. One afternoon, with no trouble at all, we found the "stretched" blackbird with a keeled tail perched in a tangle of willow and wild rose near a house with reliable feeders. The Common Grackle, *Quiscalus quiscula*, exhibited the most distinctive trait of icterids, a strong, straight, pointed bill.

Birds in the family Icteridae (meadowlarks, cowbirds, blackbirds, grackles and orioles) have an interesting specialization. The musculature controlling the opening and closing of the bill is modified in the icterids, allowing them to open

their bills with great strength. In a behaviour known as gaping, the bird inserts the bill into a substrate (soil, vegetation, mud, bark) and forcibly opens it. This creates a hole that allows it to reach food otherwise hidden and inaccessible. Many experts consider gaping the main reason why icterids have been so successful, able to expand their range. Our bird is likely an example of westward range expansion. In recent years, Common Grackles are regularly found in the back alleys of Fernie.

During a walk on the St. Mary Prairie, between Kimberley and Cranbrook, a small group of naturalists wanted to take a look at the "Big Crack", a fissure near the cliff edge. It seems that, at one point, the St. Mary River, which drains the Purcell Mountains to the west, joining the south-flowing Kootenay River at Fort Steele, has altered its course. Here, it swings across its floodplain, colliding with the base of a great thickness of glacial till. Now, the prairie edge is threatening to collapse, exhibiting some daunting fissures several meters back from the cliff edge.

Three diving ducks foraged in a clear pool directly below the Big Crack. Common Goldeneyes, *Bucephala clangula*, dove and popped back up at regular intervals. Due to the water clarity and aided by binoculars, we could easily see their behaviour beneath the surface. Quickly diving 1-2 meters, with great agility they probed the bouldery river bed, working their way upstream as a team.

According to our guide book, "These medium-sized diving ducks with streamlined bodies and short tails search for aquatic invertebrates and small fish." But we noticed more: the grey, fan-shaped tail seemed crucial for underwater maneuvering. The way that the buoyant birds returned



Common Goldeneye

Bob Whetham

to the surface, nimbly avoiding floating ice rafts; and their ability to remain submerged as they twisted and turned to follow the irregular bottom suggested that this powerful appendage must not be underestimated. Later, from the shoreline, we observed about 20 goldeneyes (plus three nearby American Dippers) diving and reappearing. Now it is possible to visualize the underwater activity with greater appreciation.

Looking to add a new species to our list, we attempted to observe a rare bird reported in the Cranbrook

suburb of Jim Smith Lake. For several days, one of the mimic thrushes (starlings, mockingbirds and thrashers) regularly returned to a certain yard with active feeders. On our second attempt, while walking in the vicinity of the sighting, we heard a harsh, dry, “chak chak chak chak” behind us. As we quickly reversed our steps and got our binoculars out, a Northern Mockingbird, *Mimus polyglottos*, perched on the tip of a small western larch in plain view. It soon dropped out of sight into barberry shrubs on the south side of a residence. The homeowner appeared on the north side, curious about our behaviour. Of course, we explained we were birding and had just seen a mockingbird, which sparked her interest. She sneaked around to the barberries and got an excellent glimpse of the handsome bird as it flushed into a nearby aspen.



Northern Mockingbird

Bob

This bird flipped its long, distinctive tail nervously and soon flew away with rather slow, steady wingbeats. Since then, temperatures dropped well below normal for ten days. We must hope that it can tolerate these conditions, avoiding any number of hazards, including predation by the Northern Shrike.

Around Christmastime, another neighbour had taken a short video of this unfamiliar bird. Eventually this video found its way to someone who provided a positive ID and submitted it to our Christmas Bird Count compiler. Fortunately, the case for identification was strong enough to give the mockingbird a position on the Count Week list.

Many of the most dramatic examples of recent changes in bird distributions involve human

influence. With increases in winter feeding of birds and the growing of berry-producing shrubs, species such as Northern Mockingbird, Tufted Titmouse and Northern Cardinal have expanded their ranges to the north and west.



Golden Eagle

Lyle

A large, dark bird has been seen with increasing frequency in February. Many majestic Golden Eagles, *Aquila chrysaetos*, are migrating along the Rocky Mountains, on their way to the arctic treeline. It is often difficult to distinguish between it and the somewhat similar Bald Eagle. A white band in the black-tipped tail of juveniles, tail length, bulging secondaries, relatively small head and a slight dihedral while soaring solidify the ID.

Goldens expertly read the topography, searching for thermal updrafts so that they can travel great distances while conserving energy by soaring. In our region, the mountains are favourably oriented for migration, adjacent to the semi-open Rocky Mountain Trench.

Where major west-flowing tributaries (Bull River, Wild Horse Creek etc.) cut through the mountain range, creating gaps of several kilometers, the updraft effect is interrupted and an eagle loses elevation. The bird must then locate a fresh set of thermals, providing observers with excellent viewing opportunities.

Usually found alone or in pairs, Golden Eagles favour partially or completely open country. One of the largest, fastest and most athletic raptors in North America, it captures prey on or near the ground. With excellent vision, it locates prey by soaring, flying low over the ground or hunting from a perch.

Rocky Mountain Eagle Research Foundation volunteers perform annual raptor migration counts during spring and fall. Their data contribute significantly to an understanding of the life cycle. To learn more about RMERF go to www.eaglewatch.ca

In the East Kootenay, it's not often that one can see any bird perching on hydro lines in mid-winter. This little guy, not much larger than a house sparrow, can grasp the cold wire, remain unobtrusive and wait for prey to approach. A rounded head, fluffy body and long tail make up the unmistakable silhouette of the Northern Pygmy-Owl, *Glaucidium gnoma*.

Usually this small owl perches inconspicuously within the tree canopy, tooting monotonously. Sometimes small birds such as hummingbirds, wrens, warblers, jays, chickadees and blackbirds will create a ruckus as they scold and mob this diurnal bird-hunter. A pair of spots on the back of the neck may help to fool attackers or mobbers into thinking this owl is watching them.

Northern Pygmy-Owls eat insects, dragonflies, chipmunks, lizards and birds, some as large as a Northern Flicker. If they find extra food, they may cache their prey in tree cavities or impale it on a thorn, similar to shrike behaviour.

Most owls have asymmetrically placed ears as well as flattened facial discs around the eyes. Both adaptations enhance hearing. Pygmy-owls lack these features; this may be because of their diurnal habits and greater reliance on vision.

Depending on such variables as temperature, snow characteristics and food availability, this small, aggressive predator makes elevational migrations, moving up and downslope.

Watch and listen carefully; don't forget to read the tail.



Northern Pygmy-Owl
showing its distinctive tail

Bob

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

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 mnatskestrel@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	Marianne Nahm
Vice President	Hilary Anderson
Past President	Helga Knot
Secretary	
Treasurer	Gretchen Whetham
BC Nature Director	Wendy Maisonneuve
Director at Large	Janice Strong



Northern Pygmy-Owl

Bob Whetham

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	Susan Walp/Gerry Warner
Community Forest Planning Team	Rob Roulston
Early Morning Birding	Jim Hurvid
East Kootenay Invasive Species Council	Frank Hastings
Elizabeth Lake	Stewart Wilson
Field Trips	Paula Rogers
Internal Communications	Paula Rogers
Kootenay Conservation Program	Helga Knot
Little Big Day	Greg Ross
Membership	Hasi Oates
Newsletter	Susan Walp
Personal Information/Privacy	Jim Hurvid
Presentations	Marianne Nahm/Paula Rogers
Records	Wendy Maisonneuve
Rocky Mountain Trench Society	Jo Ellen Floer
Skookumchuck Prairie IBA	Dianne Cooper
Turtle Monitoring	Greg Ross
Upper Columbia Basin Environmental Collaborative	Emma DeGroot
Web Masters	Dianne Cooper

Upcoming Events

There are no events planned at the present time. Watch your inbox.

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

Next meetings -	Wednesday	19	May
	Wednesday	21	July