

The Kestrel

Quarterly Newsletter of the
Rocky Mountain Naturalists
2022 summer 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.

St. Mary River Walk from St. Eugene

Saturday 2 April

First Group

On Saturday 2 April, I led the first of two groups on a walk along the St. Mary River at St. Eugene Mission at 9:30 am, with Marianne Nahm and her group starting at 10 am. We were fortunate to have dry weather during our two hour walk despite the forecast of rain or snow. As members were arriving, we had a sighting of 6 herons, which flew over heading towards the rookery located in the conifers above the maintenance shop.



Stewart Wilson

one of the herons

Before starting our walk we recognized that we were on unceded Ktunaxa land. We learned some of the history of St.

Eugene Mission, which originally was a residential school for First Nations children from across BC and Alberta. By the time the school closed in 1970 more than 5,000 children had passed through its doors. The story of how it was transformed from a residential school into the St. Eugene Mission Resort and Casino can be found on the St. Eugene website at <https://www.steugene.ca/en/about-us-culture-heritage/>.



Stewart Wilson

stopping to view the eagles

As we crossed over Joseph Creek, which flows into nearby St. Mary River, we stopped at the irrigation pond where recycled waste from the kitchens is mixed with water from the St. Mary River. We heard about Bill Baerg, a long time member of the RMNs, who passed away earlier this year. Bill was instrumental in helping St. Eugene Mission Resort receive Audubon Society Status for his tireless work with nature and the environment during his time there.

During our walk upriver, we stopped to view a pair of



Stewart Wilson

one of the eagles

mature bald eagles in a conifer on the far bank, then listened to the calls of Clark's Nutcrackers from the woods. The walk to the bluffs overlooking the Big Bend, where the St. Mary River almost completes a circle, afforded a panoramic view of the impressive bluffs as well as four beaver dams built across a side channel of the river.

Although we did not see any elk or western painted turtles, more than 20 species of birds were seen or heard. Interestingly, more than 150 species have been seen here over the years, according to eBird. Those of us less experienced in identifying birds by their songs or calls appreciated the expertise of the more knowledgeable group members, especially when golden-crowned and ruby-crowned kinglets were identified heard in a nearby tree.

Stewart Wilson

Second Group



Marianne Nahm

An outing to St. Eugene Mission on 2 April 2022 attracted over 20 members to enjoy the lovely early spring day. The second group of 10 was led by Marianne, who shared a brief history of the resort and mission.

The St. Eugene Mission "Industrial and Residential" school for Native children was

operated by the Catholic Oblate Order from 1912 to 1970, with up to 200 children resident at a time. About 5000 children attended the school over the years and suffered the trauma of separation from their families and culture. The facility was abandoned for 20 years. Then a movement in the 1990s to preserve and restore the school building was led by former student and chief



Stewart Wilson

above the river, where you can look down on the beaver dams

Sophie Pierre. Although some wanted to see the building destroyed, a referendum voted in favour of restoration. The resort is now owned and operated by 5 bands of the Ktunaxa First Nations. An Interpretive Centre located in the mission building reveals the local history and culture to visitors. Margaret Teneese is currently the archivist and is a residential school survivor.



Stewart Wilson

the beaver dams on 6 October 2021

The St. Eugene golf course is environmentally certified, and the Ktunaxa First Nation works to preserve and restore wildlife habitat within the golf course and resort area.



Stewart Wilson

Big Bend of the St. Mary
on 6 October 2021

As we strolled across the field we were greeted by some early sagebrush buttercups in the grasses. Several Killdeer were calling and displaying nearby. Marianne pointed out a large squirrel midden at the base of one of the large conifers. Along the golf course trail toward the river, we observed the thickets of red-osier dogwood. I read that the Native Americans used the branches of this shrub for weaving baskets and the inner bark for making tea. We noticed red glossy leaves of the Oregon-grape shrubs; these plants also have a variety of food and medicinal uses by the Native people. As we walked through the treed area we saw evidence of badger holes, but these were not currently occupied.



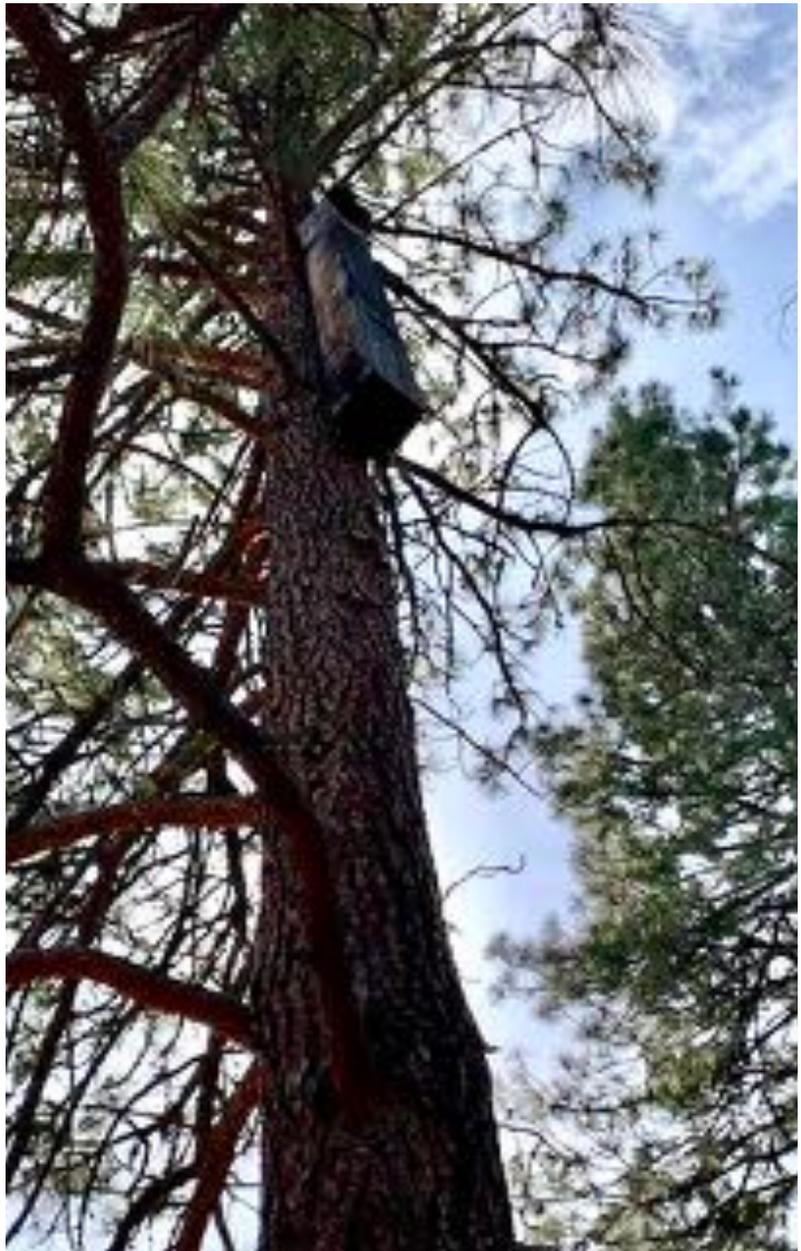
Betty Baker

a thicket of red-osier dogwood

Further along and looking out over the St.

Mary River to the far bank we saw high Bank Swallow nests and the birds darting about, joined by Violet-green swallows. Overhead a Bald Eagle circled, and on the river we spotted some Common Mergansers, American Wigeons and Barrow's Goldeneye surfing the moving water on the far waterway. We were hoping to see an American Dipper and maybe some river otters but did not today. On the way back towards the resort we heard the familiar call of the busy Redbreasted Nuthatch. It was a treat to see 3 Clark's Nutcrackers high in the tree, and it was interesting for me to learn that this nutcracker feeds on and caches the seeds of both the ponderosa and whitebark pines and begins nesting in late winter.

As we neared the end of the route Marianne pointed out the large Vaux's Swift nesting box on a tree, placed there because swifts nest in hollow trees, and such breeding habitat is in decline. The box is about 10m up the tree and appears to be about 2m from bottom to top and 30cm square, with the entrance hole near the top. It was not known if the box has been successfully used. Of interest is the fact that these swifts build their nests by cementing twigs together with their saliva. The young are fed with saliva balls of over 100 insects from up to 50 trips - 11,500 insects per day!



Betty Baker

the Vaux's Swift box

It was a very enjoyable outing. As one of several new members of the RMN, thanks to new friends, who love nature and care about its preservation.

Elizabeth (Betty) Baker

Cranbrook Community Forest Walk

7 May 2022

This was an introductory walk in the Cranbrook Community Forest led by Gretchen. The outing was offered specifically to new RMN members with the goal to provide an orientation to the forest trail system. There were 6 participants, and although the forecast was for a high chance of rain we were fortunate to have just a few sprinkles. The plan was to do an 8 km loop around Sylvan and upper Alkali Lakes and to do birding en route.

We met at the college upper parking lot where Gretchen provided an overview of the Cranbrook Trails map. She had recommended that we have the GAIA app downloaded on our phones, and she helped us set the route start points and get us going in the right direction. We also planned to use the Merlin app for bird identification.

From the Gateway trailhead we headed along the Sylvan Lake trail. Lovely shooting stars, prairie crocus, buttercups and desert parsley were observed en route. However, our main focus was on the birds. Some highlights of the morning we beginner birders observed, with the help of Gretchen's expertise, included:

- the Chipping Sparrow and the Dark-eyed Junco: identifying the similarities and differences between their calls and their appearances
- watching both the Violet-green and the Northern Rough-winged Swallows diving for insects over the Alkali Lake
- a Cooper's Hawk seen along the Fenceline Trail; an uncommon summer resident; similar to the Sharp-shinned hawk but larger with a bigger head and more rounded tail
- a Savannah Sparrow which was heard and seen, a more recent arrival
- multiple Killdeer nesting around Sylvan Lake, very vociferous in defending their nests from a large group of crows

We completed a shortened version of the loop due to multiple stops. According to our checklist, we observed 26 species, including 218 individuals. We saved our route on GAIA. Thanks to Gretchen for sharing her knowledge and expertise, and to my new friends for their observations and enthusiasm!

Betty Baker



Judy Chapman

phlox

This cool last day of April gave us perfect weather to stroll the Loop Trail at the far end of Wasa Lake Provincial Campground. We were two compact groups going opposite directions and passing en route. Our group was led by Marianne Nahm, our companions, by Ruth Goodwin.

After brushing our footwear in a device at the trailhead to give rogue seeds the "brush off", we strode forth unencumbered, plush-footed as panthers. The path cut a gentle slope through ponderosa and Douglas-fir forest, coulees, plunging and precipitously folded terrain, especially at the height of land. One gained a sense of the geologic drama of this place simply

moving through this small piece of it. And a sense of the connection of diversity of landforms to diversity of vegetation and hence all immediate wildlife.

Our guide drew our attention to many native plants, naming them as we encountered them up to the plateau then down the other side, knowing them even in their pre-blooming state. We saw bunches of balsamroot, a few on the cusp of flowering; immaculate star-flowered false Solomon's-seal; varieties of pussytoes; puccoon; locoweed; Drummond's rockcress; rabbit-brush; kinnikinnick with its pink-rimmed little jug-shaped blooms; three varieties of desert-parsley:



John Fendley

prairie crocus

narrow-leaved, fern-leaved and large-fruited; pasture sage; the tremendously common this year, yeah! dandelion; mat-forming phlox on the plateau; yarrow; three-spot mariposa lily; prodigious Oregon-grape; as well as the bushes: saskatoon and chokecherry. And elderberry. It had reddish leafage and we now know why, thanks to one of our knowledgeable confrères: In the early spring the leaves of some plants emerge red-toned to maximize heat when that can be scarce, later turning green.



Judy Chapman

phlox

In previous years this walk was a memorial to Mildred White, a founding member of the Rocky Mountain Naturalists, mentor to youth, and avid recorder of local flora and fauna whose data now reside at the Royal B.C. Museum. Three more former naturalists are now included in this tribute: Tony Wideski, Anne Redfern, and Peter Davidson. Marianne commented on their love of the natural world, and contributions toward preserving it, throughout our trek.

On the plateau overlooking the lake, we heard and saw a yellow-rumped warbler, as well as a raft of coots on the lake below. We were surprised by vocalizations of a loon and trumpeter swan, possibly from nearby Cameron Pond. The whole intact seam of forest was visible before us, still a uniform green, and the lulling lake, and beyond, the Purcell Mountains, where, we were told by possibly the same knowledgeable confrère, there is a 600 year old climax stand of larch tucked into the Mark Creek watershed.

In the day, so to speak, a long time ago, a massive glacier covered this area. Its movement caused mineral-rich gravel, clay and sand to sink deep below the ground. This, with the resultant lakes and wetlands, provides habitat for grasslands to flourish. Plants such as the prolific bunchgrass we saw have roots that go so deep they can survive even drought-like conditions. The calving off of a chunk of the glacier created Wasa, a kettle lake. It has no inflow, is below the water table through the impact of the glacier and is filled from the ground by sources such



John Fendley

pussytoes?

as Kootenay River.



John Fendley

phlox

These plants we encountered know deep time. In this world of alienation, displacement, adulation of the technological, the virtual, they are right here before us where they have been for thousands of years; the ground of our being. What can be more extravagant than things simply being exactly as they should be? These children of glaciers with their astonishing generosity and patience, leaves open-handed, palmate, shaking out miracles of oxygen and light. We benefit, we stay alive, from their assiduous, beautiful diligence, humming away just beyond our hearing. May they go on unharmed for a long, long time.

Pamella Wik

What a great spring for a wildflower wonderland! A group of nine Naturalists enjoyed a very pleasant June evening admiring and identifying open forest flowers and grasses on a 'Sunflower Hill' at the north end of Wilks Road a few kilometers northwest of Cranbrook.

The arrow-leaved balsamroot, also known as wild sunflower, presented swaths of dramatic yellow ground cover in the evening light. They've had a long blooming season due to cool, damp spring



Ian Adams

hillside covered with blooming balsamroot, seen in the evening light

weather. The balsamroot plant has a strong tap root, shaped like a parsnip, that can reach depths of 2.7 metres, with lateral roots that can grow horizontally for 60 to 100 centimetres. Deer and elk graze on the plants, especially in early spring when the young tissues contain nearly 30% protein.



Stewart Wilson
botanizing among the balsamroot

The seeds are eaten by birds and small animals. Indigenous groups used all parts of the arrow-leaved balsamroot for its important food and medicine values. The taproots were roasted or steamed and the seeds dried and ground into flour. Poultices made from the roots treated blisters, bruises and wounds.

In a shaded, damp area along a wide trail, a sharp eyed participant spotted several stalks of spotted coralroot, and suddenly, nearby, the group located a larger patch of coralroot stems growing from a decaying tree branch. The



Stewart Wilson

spotted coralroot

coralroots, both spotted and striped, lack chlorophyll, so must produce food by parasitizing certain fungi in the soil profile in order to survive.

Several other native plants included rosy and field pussytoes, shrubby pentsemon, meadow death



Ian Adams
spotted coralroot



Stewart
shrubby penstemon



Ian
puccoon



Ian Adams

view from the top

camas, alum root, silky lupine, arnica, puccoon, narrow-leaved and fern-leaved desert-parsley and a few mariposa lilies just starting to bloom.



Stewart Wilson
techno-botanizing

The arrow-leaved balsamroot and spotted coralroot, along with the botany discussions and lively curiosity of all members, were highlights during the evening ramble.

Marianne Nahm and Daryl Calder



heading home

Ian

On Friday 29 April, the Rocky Mountain Naturalists (RMN) held the Annual Turtle Day at Cranbrook's Elizabeth Lake to celebrate baby turtles.

One hundred kindergarten to grade five students attended Turtle Day from three Cranbrook elementary schools. The students learned about Western Painted Turtle lifecycles.

Turtle hatchlings are the stars of the program. Last year, about one thousand turtles emerged, but the average number is about five hundred per year. Although no data are available on their chances of reaching maturity, this hatchling program stabilizes Elizabeth Lake's turtle population.

The turtle program began several years ago to reduce the mortality of female turtles that crossed Highway #3 to lay their eggs. Rocky Mountain Naturalists (RMN), in partnership Fish and Wildlife Compensation Program (FWCP), built fences and constructed nesting habitats beside Elizabeth Lake. The barriers also reduced skunk predation on the nest sites. In addition, the focused location of nesting sites allowed the naturalists and the program to monitor nest success and hatch rates.



These baby turtles are only about 2 centimetres in diameter.



Greg Ross, member of Rocky Mountain Naturalists In conjunction with Fish and Wildlife Conservation Program, Greg Ross and Katrin Powell monitor and maintain the turtle nesting area at Elizabeth Lake.

The Western Painted Turtle (*Chrysemys picta*) is a BC blue-listed “species of concern” because of predation, traffic fatalities and habitat loss. Baby turtles’ lives are always in danger, as a high percentage succumb to predation by ducks, garter snakes, frogs, and skunks. With survival instincts set on high, newly emerged turtles hide, either in terrestrial shrubbery or by heading to the water, safely concealing themselves amongst the cattails.

During egg laying season, from late May to early July, turtle monitors use large garden rakes to rake the area daily. When females lumber across the sand, they are heavy with eggs and drag their bellies. This dragging makes a path. RMN members look for those distinctive tracks in the smoothed, raked sand to find the nests. They mark every nest they see and cover only about 30% of them with various cages or steel mesh to keep skunks out.

The eggs stay unattended during the dry and scorching summer. In late August or September, each baby turtle slices open its rubbery eggshell using its specialized egg tooth. Some emerge then, but most don’t leave the nest yet. Instead, those fully developed baby turtles stay under ten to fifteen centimetres of sand throughout winter’s deep freezes. They emerge from the nest when the weather warms in the spring, from late April to mid-May. Finally, baby turtles are ready.



more little turtles

Local naturalists Greg Ross, Katrin Powell, and other Rocky Mountain Naturalists members, plus Angus Glass from Fish and Wildlife Compensation Program (FWCP), instructed students at Turtle Day.

For more information,
see the video we made last spring at
<https://fwcp.ca/project/enhancing-habitat-for-non-game-species/>.

Janice Strong, article and photographs

Club Camp, Crawford Bay

31 May - 3 June



Janice Srong
wiener roast at club camp

Twenty-nine members welcomed the opportunity to become immersed in ecosystems that are different from the East Kootenay section of the Rocky Mountain Trench by camping at Crawford Bay, on the eastern shore of Kootenay Lake. Two different hikes led us down to pebbly beaches on the lake (400 square km: 104 km long and 5 km at its widest point). Here we enjoyed plenty of observations and conversations about the plants, birds, insects, mammals and fungi which we viewed along the trails.

Of course, the potluck dinner provided a wonderful variety of favourite dishes and desserts to be shared. The grassy common area around an unusual tripod-suspended fire bowl was the perfect setting for our gatherings.



Bob Whetham
skipping stones at Pebble Bay



Marianne Nahm
early morning birding along
Crawford Creek



Bob Whetham
forested trail to Boomer's Landing leading onto a sunny pebble beach



Marianne Nahm
evening paddle in Crawford Bay

Early morning birding walks beginning at Kokanee Chalets and Campground offered a challenge and opportunity to identify the many warblers, flycatchers, vireos, songbirds



Janice Strong
Pebble Beach pebbles



Janice Strong
devil's club plant in campground

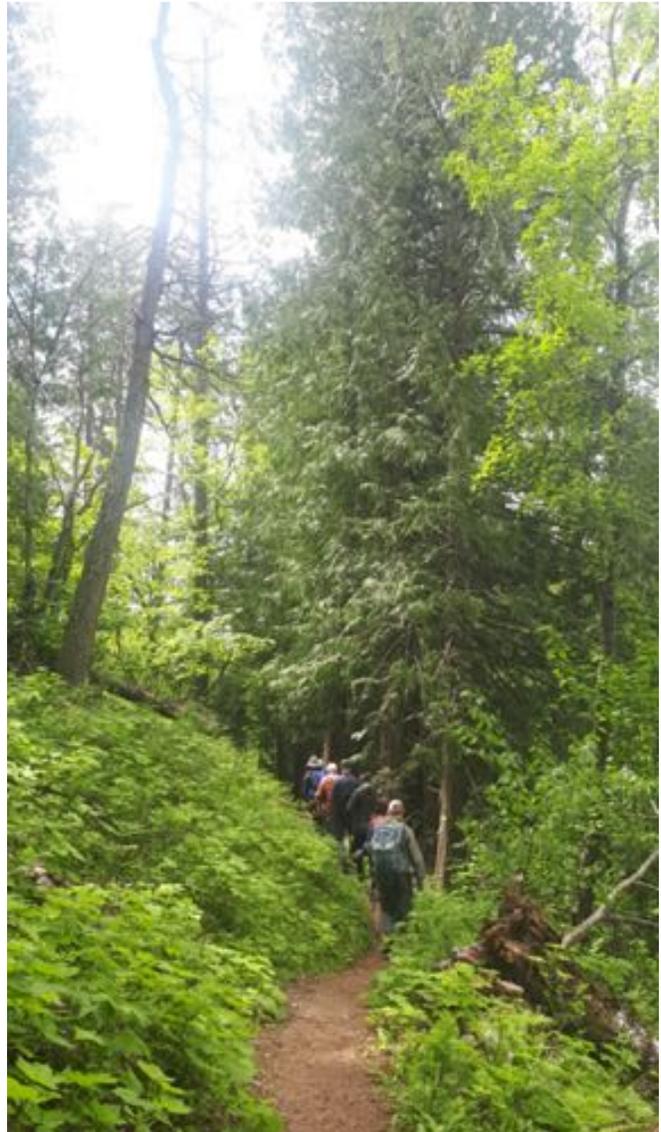
and others.

Luanne Armstrong, a lifelong resident of the East Shore, is an engaging storyteller. She shared knowledge of the local history and her perspectives of this rural community.

A few folks rode their bikes to explore the Crawford Bay townsite and local trails. On two occasions, paddlers explored Crawford Bay and Pilot Bay to gain a perspective of the Kootenay lake shoreline. Calm water and evening light were serene.

Thank you to all the Naturalist Campers for their keen participation and willingness to share their knowledge of the natural world, so we can strive to 'keep it worth knowing'.

Marianne Nahm and Daryl Calder



Emma Bourassa
hiking trail



Janice
Pebble Beach hiker on Granite Rock bluff

Elizabeth Lake Restoration Project

2022 spring



Helga Knoto

The physical aspect of the Elizabeth Lake Restoration Project began May 2 after considerable planning,



Stewart Wilson



Helga

ordering of materials and laying out the beds. An excavator worked on City of Cranbrook and Ministry



Stewart

of Environment property for four days, removing the top layer of grass and invasive plants. The following week Keefer Ecological staff and Naturalist volunteers spent five days filling each of the numerous beds with topsoil.



Stewart

Beginning on Wednesday, May 18, Naturalists, school children and Keefer staff began planting native shrubs and sedges. Shrubs included mountain alder, red-osier dogwood, water birch, willow and Woods's



Stewart



Stewart Wilson



Stewart



Stewart

rose. Once each bed was planted, metal posts were pounded into the ground and page wire fencing was attached to keep deer and geese from munching the plants. The fences will remain in place for five years. Planting of the 4500 plugs, sourced from a South Okanagan native plant nursery, took six and a half days. We had great help



Stewart

from many Rocky Mountain Naturalists who worked diligently with smiles and positive conversations. The Keefer Ecological folks were fine people to work alongside.

Of course, new plantings need water to get them established. Thank goodness the East Kootenay has been experiencing a cool, damp spring. So, along with these conditions and volunteers who have been watering their adopted fenced polygons, our plantings are looking healthy. We will need more volunteers to water as we head into summer.



Stewart



Stewart

Many, many thanks to all our members who have enabled the major part of this huge project get off to a good start.

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

For reporting invasive plant species <https://bcinvasives.ca/take-action/report/>

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

Bird Observations <https://ebird.org>

St. Eugene <https://www.steugene.ca/en/about-us-culture-heritage/>

Turtle Day <https://fwcp.ca/project/enhancing-habitat-for-non-game-species/>

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

About Field Trips

Leaders:

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

Events and Activities

These are the events planned at the present time. Watch your inbox for notices of events and activities, or check the calendar on the website.

Early Morning Birding

Wednesday mornings

See RMN Calendar on our website.

Club Information

Executive

President	Marianne Nahm
Vice President	Hilary Anderson
Past President	Helga Knot
Secretary	Theckla Sawicki
Treasurer	Judy Brunner
BC Nature Director	Stewart Wilson
Director at Large	



Stewart Wilson
working at Elizabeth Lake

Committees, Co-ordinators and Representatives

Bats	Scott Bodaly
Bluebirds	Marianne Nahm
Bylaws and Policies	Gretchen Whetham/Wendy Maisonneuve
Christmas Bird Count	Dianne Cooper
Club Camp	Jackie Leach/Ruth Goodwin
Communications	Susan Walp/Gerry Warner
Early Morning Birding	Daryl Calder
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 Natural Resources Society	Jo Ellen Floer
Skookumchuck Prairie IBA	Dianne Cooper
Turtle Monitoring	Greg Ross
Upper Columbia Basin Environmental Collaborative	Emma DeGroot
Webmasters	Dianne Cooper

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

Next meetings -	Wednesday	20	July	7 pm
	Wednesday	21	September	7 pm