

The Kestrel

Quarterly Newsletter of the
Rocky Mountain Naturalists
2025 spring equinox



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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.

New Year's Day Snowshoe Hike

2025 January 1

Eleven of us joined Marianne and Daryl for the annual New Year's Day outing through Wilks Woods. We were well advised to wear snowshoes and to bring walking poles for the snowy conditions, particularly for negotiating uphill and steep downhill sections of our hike.



Daryl drew our attention to 7 or 8 varieties of mammal tracks, including masked shrew, deer mouse, western red squirrel, coyote, snowshoe hare, deer (both mule and white-tailed) and elk. There was also the possibility of finding pine marten and bobcat/cougar prints. Snowshoe hare, deer and elk tracks were spotted. This deer mouse tracks photo (at left) was taken by Daryl in February 2023. He believes that the closely spaced tracks were made as the mice struggled uphill through the fluffy snow, while the spacing increased on the downhill cruise. The activity would have occurred during the night in order to avoid owl predation.

As for birds, the trackways of Ruffed Grouse were obvious at several points, made as they searched for seeds and buds. Bark particles dislodged by Pileated Woodpeckers were scattered on the fresh snow. Nine species of bird were seen: One Northern Flicker, one Blue Jay, one

Clark's Nutcracker, four Common Ravens, two Black-capped Chickadees, two Mountain Chickadees, one Red-breasted Nuthatch, one Brown Creeper, and one Townsend's Solitaire (Jo Ellen Floer). It was a good start to our 2025 eBird lists.

Many Douglas Fir and western larch trees were dying due to persistent drought and subsequent attack by bark beetles. We wondered how woodpeckers could detect stressed trees and their hidden insect food potential amongst hundreds of healthy trees. This dead ponderosa pine (at right) now serves as a wildlife tree, providing food and shelter for birds.



lunch with views towards the Kimberley Ski Hill and surrounding area



Daryl pointed out some “cat faces”, which result from wildfire or other injuries to a tree. As a fire runs quickly uphill through the forest, the tree's protective bark deflects the intense heat head on. However, on the upslope/leeward side, the fire may linger and burn off a vertical strip of bark without killing the tree. The tree heals itself over many years, adding annual growth rings and bark which curls around, covering the scar from both sides. If the tree is cut down many decades later, the cross-section looks like a cat's face with puffy cheeks. In this case, we could see that the live ponderosa pine had survived two fires. We noticed many cat faces nearby from fires around a century ago.

After climbing to Whiskey Jack Lookout and taking in the panoramic views, we headed downhill to another viewpoint, Sunflower Hill, which overlooks the St. Mary River as it flows east past St. Eugene Mission to where it meets the Kootenay River near Fort Steele.



Thanks to Marianne and Daryl for leading us on such a memorable outing and for giving us such a great start to 2025.

Daryl Calder
and Stewart Wilson
photos by Stewart

Big Meetings and Potluck at Manual Training School January 12

The Rocky Mountain Naturalists Club held its Annual General Meeting and regular January meeting on Sunday, January 12, at the Manual Training School that is attached to the Cranbrook Public Library. We decided to try a new format of having a daytime meeting, to make it easier for members driving during the winter, with an



28 members listening attentively to meeting topics



enjoying tasty food at the potluck lunch after the meetings

added bonus of a delicious lunch. It was a great success!

Over the past months, some members have donated nature themed books and bird feeders to share with other members. Donations to our COTR Scholarship fund were accepted when people found items that they would like to use. Thank you to all the donors.

Marianne Nahm

photos by Stewart Wilson



lively conversations during lunch

Hike to St. Mary River Slump

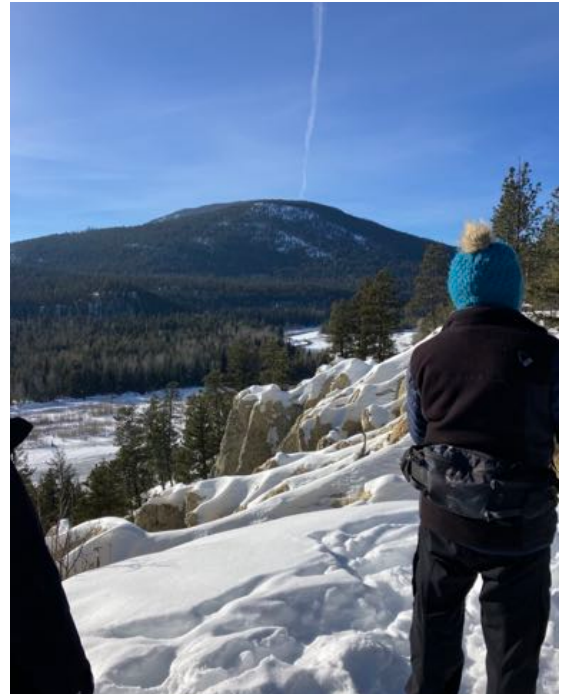
January 26

Our group set out on a beautifully clear and sunny Sunday afternoon for an outing to the St. Mary River Slump. We ventured in, with a Common Raven being the first of all the birds we saw to welcome us.



Jackie
St. Mary River below, the crack above, animal tracks in the snow

Along the journey, the topography was stunning. The bluff's steep edge was a wonderful viewpoint for iconic hoodoo formations, tops of trees and the river ice below, which was covered with tracks. We pondered what animals had made them.



Jackie Diveky
hoodoos in the snow



Jackie
a unique tree



Jackie Diveky

another unique tree, with tracks from various animals in the snow

analyzed to identify the various species of bats using that house. Along with the house's signage was a digital QR code to educate those who come across the bat houses and question their purpose. To learn more about the Wildlife Conservation Society's Western Bat Program (and look at photos of bats), go to wcsbats.ca.

Towards the end of our hike, we reached the slump in all its glory. Marianne, and a forester we had run into along the way, gave some details on the history of the slump, the progression of its crack, and what may happen in the future as the slumping continues to develop. We were keen to use the Peakfinder app, which helped us

There were some very interesting and unique trees on the trail as well. One of them seemed to have grown sideways from its upright counterpart, and another appeared to have been hit by lightning because of its characteristic cracks.

There was an abundance of bat houses installed on modified trees. These artificial "houses", made with BrandenBark (flexible artificial tree bark), have been installed near the tree tops to provide roosts for bats. Near the base of each bat house tree, a wood frame platform covered in screen has been constructed to collect bat guano. The guano's DNA is then



Jackie

modified tree, with BrandenBark "house" near the top and guano collection platform near the bottom



Catherine Singh

using the PeakFinder app to identify local hills and mountains across the St. Mary River



identify mountains surrounding us. In the direction of Bootleg Mountain, we noticed a Bald Eagle soaring high above, enjoying the clear skies and sun as much as us. There were also several Red-breasted Nuthatches we were able to identify from their calls and with the help of binoculars. On our way back, we decided to venture over to the



Marianne Nahm

the group at St. Mary Slump

Bluebird Trail boxes, where Luke Creek emerges from underground in the spring. It was nice to learn of a creek not many are familiar with or know about.

Jackie Diveky



Catherine

enjoying the sun's rays and conversation on a bluebird day in late January

Great Backyard Bird Count - South Country Loop Tour

February 15

On a relatively mild, grey, mid-February morning, four excited birders piled into the Toyota. It was the fourth consecutive February to make this drive a part of the Great Backyard Bird Count.



ebird.org

Rock Pigeon

Our intention was to find birds, to the south of Cranbrook, all the way to the Montana border. Conveniently, Gold Creek and its well maintained Forest Service Roads slice directly in a southerly direction through the Purcell Mountains.

Knowing that one species would be easily found as we left the Tamarack Mall, we swung by the former Kootenay Springs Building, built in 1925. Its demolition will be complete this month, and we wonder where the dozens of Rock Pigeons will now go home to roost.

Upon cresting the broad divide between Joseph Creek and south flowing Gold Creek, conversations revolved around forest types, especially the dense stands of young lodgepole pine. At Connell Creek Bridge, we hopped out to listen, and to look for tracks on the snow-covered creek. Only one trackway was evident, a narrow, shallow trough, with pairs of prints regularly spaced. The trackway headed downstream to the east. Elsewhere this winter, during Early Birding outings, we have seen River Otter trackways near remote lakes and the Kootenay River, but the animal

that travelled here was evidently alone, smaller than an otter - likely a mink.



Northern Pygmy Owl perched on a low powerline near the Phillips Reservoir



Pine Grosbeak

fleeting glimpse of something. Seven Pine Grosbeaks alighted in a creekside cottonwood, accompanied by a lone Common Redpoll.

At about 100 km we arrived in Newgate, pausing at a vantage point overlooking lower Linklater Creek and its meadows. A distant Townsend's Solitaire perched on a snag tip while a Northern Shrike watched us from a willow thicket. Suddenly, a long-



Red Crossbill male

Soon, Betty added three Canada Jays to the list, and sharp-eyed passenger Peggy, riding shotgun, caught a



Canada Jay

tailed bird of prey spooked the shrike and found a perch in a tall ponderosa pine. Helga succeeded in getting a good image of the American Goshawk, confirming the ID.

A dry "jip-jip-jip" prompted us to look for Red Crossbills in conifer treetops. There they were, strikingly colorful against the grey sky. In this vicinity, over 30 were listed.

The need for Wild Turkeys to add to our list was satisfied by scanning a cattle feeding compound near Twin Lakes. Two dozen pecked at the ground amongst the cattle herd. Curious ripples in the open water where Kikomun Creek empties into Lake Koochanusa were evidently made by fish,



Common Redpoll

possibly largescale suckers, and not diving waterfowl.

Quick stops near Jaffray, at the Sand Creek Bridge and Elkink Road provided a few birds, lovely winter scenes but nothing of interest species wise.

Our team was pleased to ultimately contribute 198 individuals, representing 22 species, to the East Kootenay Count. It's likely that this interesting loop will be traversed again in February 2026.

submitted by Daryl Calder

photography by Helga Knote, except for the Rock Pigeon (page 9)



Marianne Nahm

group picture

A warm, sunny February afternoon greeted thirteen Naturalists at the St. Eugene Resort and Golf Course area to bird together for the Great Backyard Bird Count. Gretchen led one group while Marianne led the second group. The groups went in

opposite directions, then met up to share sightings.

Everyone observed the tough little American Dippers hunting for their food along the icy edges of the St. Mary River. They dive and dip into the cold waters searching for aquatic insects (both adults and larvae) and small fish (both fish and eggs). Special adaptations for keeping the birds warm include an extra layer of feathers to trap air for insulation and an enlarged preen gland used for waterproofing feathers.



Theckla Sawicki

American Dipper



Theckla Sawicki

Black-billed Magpie



Marilyn Doggart

another group picture

A Northern Shrike was spotted perched on a stick of vegetation close to the water near several dippers. The shrike is adept at

catching small birds, small mammals and insects. Shrikes are sometimes called “butcher birds” because they store food for later use by impaling their prey on thorns or barbed wire for consumption in the future.

As one group stood on Prairie Bridge checking for waterfowl they observed a coyote chasing deer in the rancher's down river pasture.

We all enjoyed a fine birding afternoon on the last day of the 27th annual GBBC.

Marianne Nahm



Marilyn Doggart

The two groups meet.



Theckla

Northern Shrike

Winter Social

March 9



Twenty-one Rocky Mountain Naturalists gathered at the Wycliffe Regional Park campfire site for a social gathering and wiener roast. With daylight saving time upon us and above freezing temperatures, our annual winter social did feel more like spring. One group joined Marianne earlier for a longer walk around the park and a second group did a shorter walk around the disc golf field.

A draw was held for two \$30.00 Top Crop gift certificates. The names in the draw were all those who had submitted lists for the Great Backyard Bird Count in February. Lourdes and Marilyn D. were the lucky winners.

An enjoyable time was had by all, friends who share a love and appreciation for nature.



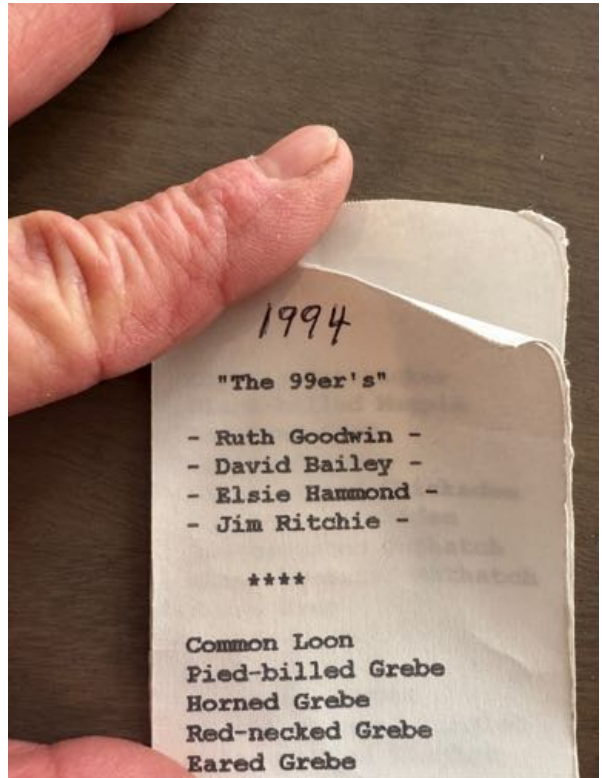
Betty Baker
photos by Marianne Nahm



LBD - History of the Annual Birding Blitz, Anecdotes etc.

Little Big Day (LBD) has been a favourite event for me with the Rocky Mountain Naturalists since we began this birding activity in 1994! If I remember correctly (and I often don't these days) Greg Ross and I were at a regional or provincial gathering of naturalists when we learned about Big Days, specifically the one in the Okanagan. On a Big Day, you start at midnight, bird all night and all day and stop at midnight, 24 hours later. Wow, that seemed too hard core for us! We decided a Little Big Day would suit us just fine, 6 am to 6 pm. A few rules were made: teams of 3 to 5 traveling together with two of the participants identifying a bird. Any unusual species should be written up. One year I was on a team that saw and heard a Dickcissel at Wasa, very exciting! (Greg and I did travel to the Okanagan in 2006 to do a Big Day. Yep, I like Little Big Days best...)

In those early years, the club formed numerous teams. Some took a more leisurely approach and started out with coffee on the deck for an hour or so (Greg's team), and some teams were off in a heated race at 6 am (my team). Strategy is required! Think about where



Gretchen Whetham

the winning team for the first Little Big Day in 1994, the 99er's



Bob Whetham

the 2023 winning team, the Dipperettes, with 116 species

and when you find species. You need forests, wetlands, lakes, grassland, etc. A good plan gets good results! Back in the 1990s there were no cell phones with apps to help you identify birds. You learned from others and from doing field work. One of our founding members was Mildred White who excelled in teaching many of us many things. There were also some cassettes and later some CDs that helped us learn the vocals of birds. LBD was a fun day for many of us! We gathered for dinner at the end of the day to share sightings, best bird of the day, the bird you spent most time looking for but never found etc. Greg would read through a species list, and each team would say if it did or did not see that species. The most species seen in a day

was in 2022 with 131 species. Wow, JoEllen, Wendy, Helga and Gretchen had a great day! The evening would end with taking a photo of the winning team being presented with our trophy. Bob Murdock, a friend of Greg's, made the very detailed birding trophy which has been used since the first year.

After a few years with the good fortune of being on some winning teams, I switched gears. I took out some novice teams and taught the art of quietly birding: how you walk, how you get in and out of the car, how you open fruit bars, how you dress. Alas, I continue to fail at this as I have the very bad habit of getting too excited when I see an interesting bird and holler! The bird flies away before others can see it. Another challenge for first time LBD participants was they could only get excited about a species once, then forget it. No, you have seen Red-necked Grebes numerous times today, we are not stopping again! I then was lucky to find some like-minded folks who would enjoy doing LBD on bikes. We did this a number of years. Our species number was much lower, but we were "green" participants and had found another way to enjoy being a bird watcher (or listener). These days, I enjoy a more leisurely outing on LBD but am always looking for the next find. 100 species by noon remains the goal!



Gretchen Whetham

the trophy, made by Bob Murdock, that is presented to the winning team at the wind-up dinner - Winners are required to get a plaque with their names on it and attach it to the trophy as well as insert a list of the species seen into a designated slot. The trophy has been expanded twice, most recently by Doug Hogg, and it's now got space for many more Little Big Days.



Lyle Grisedale

biking LBD - You see Shirley, Carol and me, with Lyle taking our photo. 83 species seen this day!

Have I convinced you that Little Big Day 2025 would be a worthwhile way to spend a day? This year it will be Saturday, May 24. If you would like to join a team you could ask Greg (grgross1950@gmail.com) or me (ragoodwi@shaw.ca) to help you find one. Teams can shape their day any way they want and enjoy a pleasant dinner of sharing!

Ruth Goodwin

Internet Links

The website for Rocky Mountain Naturalists can be found at:

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.

Western Bat Program <https://wcsbats.ca/>

BC Big Trees bigtrees.forestry.ubc.ca

Bird Observations <https://ebird.org>

BC Bluebird Society bcbluebirds.org

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

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

iNaturalist inaturalist.ca/observations

About Field Trips

Leaders:

Radios and first aid kits are available from Paula or Marianne.

Find a replacement leader if necessary.

Keep the group together.

Make sure everybody leaves the parking area safely.

Get someone (or several contributors) to write an account of the field trip for the newsletter. Send it in to rmnatskestrel@gmail.com, along with (captioned) pictures, as soon as possible.

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.

Group sizes are limited in order to provide a quality and safe experience for everyone. Carpooling can be organized from the meeting place for those feeling comfortable. If there is space, guests are welcome to join a field trip up to twice a year. A guest must complete a waiver form and pay \$2.00 per field trip.

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.
Turtle Day	April 22	Elizabeth Lake
Wings over the Rockies	May 5-11	Invermere
Little Big Day	May 24	
Club Camp	June 1-4	Canyon Community Campground (Creston area)

Club Information

Executive

President	Betty Baker
Vice President	Linda Digby
Past President	Marianne Nahm
Secretary	Theckla Sawicki
Treasurer	Jan Gordon-Hooker
BC Nature Director	Stewart Wilson
Director at Large	Lourdes Niehaus



Helga Knote

male Red Crossbill, South Country

Committee Coordinators and Representatives

Bats	Scott Bodaly
Bluebirds	Marianne Nahm
Bylaws and Policies	Gretchen Whetham
Christmas Bird Count	Dianne Cooper
Club Camp	Jackie Leach
Communications	Susan Walp
Duck Box Monitoring	Katrin Powell/Greg Ross
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 Knote
Little Big Day	Greg Ross
Membership	Hasi Oates
Newsletter	Susan Walp
Personal Information/Privacy	Jim Hurvid
Presentations	Marianne Nahm/Paula Rogers
Ram Creek Ecological Reserve	Marianne Nahm
Records	Helga Knote
Regional Wildlife Advisory Committee	Ian Adams
Rocky Mountain Trench Natural Resources Society	Jo Ellen Floer
Skookumchuck Prairie IBA	Dianne Cooper
Turtle Monitoring	Greg Ross
Upper Columbia Basin Environmental Collaborative	Hilary Anderson
Webmasters	Dianne Cooper

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

Next meetings:

Wednesday	21	May	7:00 pm
Wednesday	16	July	7:00 pm
Wednesday	17	September	7:00 pm