

# The VICTORIA NATURALIST

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### THE ARBUTUS YEAR

by Kaye Suttill

1976 has been The Year of the Arbutus on Southern Vancouver Island. Longtime residents say they never before saw such a tremendous flowering of Arbutus as this past spring when those large pannicles of waxen white bells seemed like living lace filling the shiny broadleaved trees amid the Douglas Fir and Garry Oak in May and June. Come December, their cycle rounded to clusters of flame berries. At places like Mt. Work and Beechy Head, the hillside vision was a soft focus scarlet swath reaching to the sky.

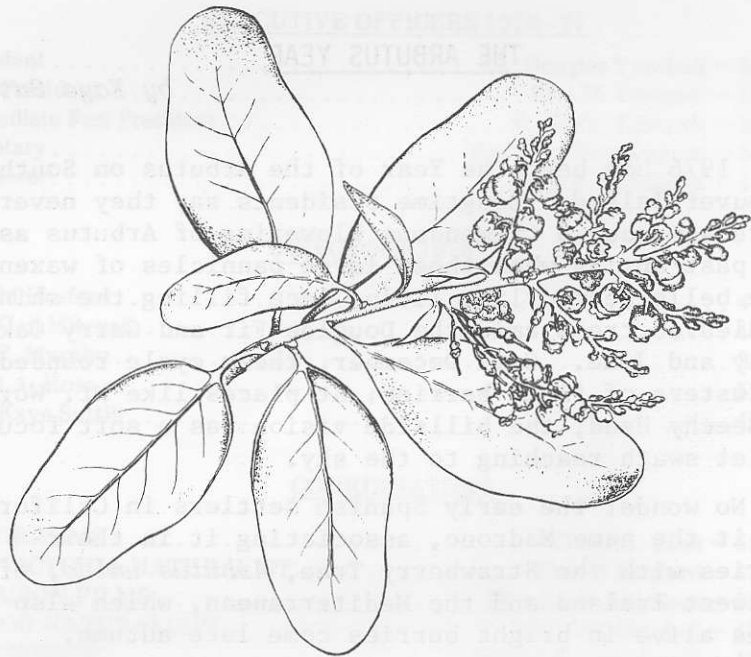
No wonder the early Spanish settlers in California gave it the name Madrono, associating it in their memories with the Strawberry Tree, *Arbutus unido*, of southwest Ireland and the Mediterranean, which also flames alive in bright berries come late autumn.

*Arbutus menziesii* honours Archibald Menzies, whom Sir Joseph Banks urged the Royal Society to appoint as naturalist on Captain George Vancouver's expedition. It was Menzies who first recorded seeing Arbutus, near Protection Island and Port Discovery in now Washington State. Since then, its range has been ascertained from

### COVER PHOTO

Black Oystercatcher by Bertha McHaffie-Gow

Bute Inlet on the mainland and Qualicum-Courtenay here on Vancouver Island, its northern limit, all the way down to Mexico and, so Mary Elizabeth Parsons in Wildflowers of California claims, eastwards to Texas. Usually it grows in a narrow strip along the coast, below 1000 feet, as a smaller shrub in its southern habitat, but reaching fuller growth farther north.



Around Victoria, Arbutus, this only native broad-leaf evergreen tree in Canada, is a very special one. Looking out the window or hiking the coast hill trails, the symmetry of its branching trunk, the fascinating peeling cinnamon-hued bark to the smooth satiny pale green wood, it is hard to believe this is really one of the Heather Family, for it superficially resembles the acacia gums and the fever trees of Zululand, in its smooth evergreen crown and the appearance of its wood and its myriad life-adapting shapes.

Seeing it you are glad it is too rare for much commercial use, even though its bark does contain up to 45 percent tannin and its hard close-grained wood has been used for furniture and transformed into commercial charcoal. The real "use" of Arbutus is for the Birds! Some years the Robins and Varied Thrushes hold their 12 days of Christmas feasting Arbutus, as well as dieting on it as long as the berries are there. Starlings, band-tailed Pigeons, Cedar Waxwings are Arbutus feeders, too, and Flickers and Pileated Woodpeckers when they are hungry.

The Birds feast Arbutus berries, we feast-with-our-eyes The Arbutus All, and rejoice in always the grace of its form, never seeming at any season to be hidden by its satin-shining leaves, thanksfilled for the cycle of The Arbutus Year.



#### BIRD REPORTS

by

Michael G. Shepard

It's almost spring and by the time this is printed, migrating robins and swallows should be passing through the Victoria area.

Winter birding has been rather unexciting, the best finds being Yellow-billed Loon, Whimbrel and Blue Jay. The mild weather may have tempted a few warblers to overwinter, but the lack of winter storms certainly has reduced the number of northern and oceanic visitors.

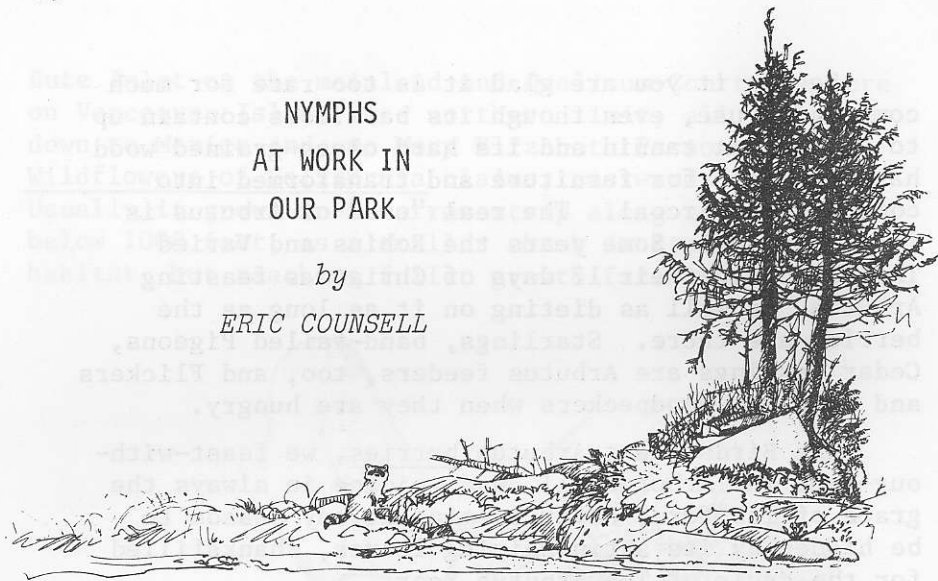
By mid-March, we should expect quite a few more signs of spring. Glaucous-winged Gulls are already on territory on Chain Islets off Oak Bay and soon the white flags of Pelagic Cormorants will be signaling from the rocks.

Please send any interesting February bird sightings to me at the Birds and Mammals Division, B.C. Provincial Museum, V8W 1A1 by March 7.



NYMPHS  
AT WORK IN  
OUR PARK

by  
ERIC COUNSELL



The Francis - Freeman King Park is administered by a board appointed by the Minister of Recreation and Conservation, but it is really OUR park, because the Victoria Natural History Society sponsored it, when it was created, and, as its sponsors, we are responsible for paying for its operation and maintenance. So it's our baby -- and what a lovely baby it is, a treasure-house for naturalists and a haven of peace for those who wander the quiet trails that wind through the twilight of its green mansions. To adapt slightly the poet's line, "no sound of hammer or saw is there".

But there was the sound of a hammer there one morning, as I parked my car. It came from down the Marsh Trail, and there I found the nymphs, busy putting up signs. Here is a letter to our President from one of them, telling us who they were and why they were doing what they were doing:

"This will be to inform you and other members of the Natural History Society of Victoria of the current welfare of Francis Park. I accepted the job in September of part-time 'Naturalist' of Francis Park, and I feel the Society would like to know how their money is being spent toward the upkeep of the park.

"Firstly, I share the duties of Francis Park with Mrs. Shirley Sheldrake, one of Skipper King's first Junior Naturalists. We feel that working together has many advantages. We both have deep sentimental attachments to Francis Park, as we spent many happy and informative hours there as teenagers and now as adults with our own children. I feel you will find us very happy and willing to carry out any duties set down for us by the Victoria Natural History Society.

"I would like to tell you a little of what we do at Francis Park. As you know, the salary paid is \$100 per month for 30 hours of work. We find most of our work at present involves arranging and guiding various groups of children on nature walks through the Park. Since our appointment in September, we have guided two Brownie packs and six school groups on tours. The talks of Skipper's that interested us as children, we pass on to other eager listeners.

"Apart from our tours, we try to keep up interesting displays in the nature house. We try to comply with requests of visitors when setting up displays. We visit Percy Dumbleton, the caretaker, each time we are out, and find him in good health. He did tell us, however, that he has been awakened in the night on many occasions by noisy partyers. We notified the Saanich Police, who told us they would patrol the area. Other than the occasional beer bottle, misplaced sign and littering in the out-houses, we have found very little destruction in the Park. Our current endeavour is to upgrade the trails and their signs, as many visitors have difficulties trying to follow poorly-defined trails, and have bothered Percy many times on this account.

"We have removed the metal bandings on adjacent trees as the wire was constricting the growth of these trees. We will give the bands to Mr. Moyer.

"We will be sending you further accounts of 'what's happening at Francis Park', and please feel free to offer suggestions of further duties.

Sincerely,

Janet Renfroe"

Through our membership in the Society, we support the Park with our purses, but we are expected to support it with our hands as well. Anybody feel like giving Janet and Shirley a hand in upgrading the trails and their signs? A good, accurate plan of the trails in the Park is sorely needed too. Anybody good at mapping? Now don't all rush off to the Park with hammers and axes and such like. Just phone me at 386-3989, if you are interested, and I'll try to arrange for you to meet the nymphs, if all this publicity doesn't scare them back into their green mansions.

### PELAGIC TRIPS - SPRING 1977

*by Michael G. Shepard*

Pelagic birding trips from Bamfield are now being planned for the spring.

Please contact me at the Birds and Mammals Division, B.C. Provincial Museum, 604 Belleville Street, Victoria, B.C. to obtain application forms.

### MEMBERSHIP DUES, 1977/78

In accordance with By-law 105 (c) of the Constitution, Treasurer Jack Hutchings is making the first of two reminders that the Society's fiscal year ends April 30 and that dues become payable on May 1. To avoid the possibility of your membership lapsing if dues remain unpaid after two months, prompt or advance payment is urged. See inside front cover for rates.

### BIRDING ON DALLAS ROAD

(January 9, 1977)

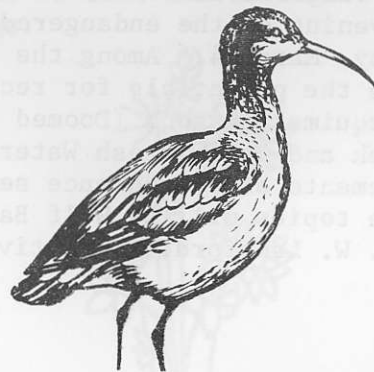
*by Tim Murphy*

The frost was just clearing under a bright sun as 22 birders gathered by the Beacon Hill Farm. First, we studied the regular group of Mallards and Wigeons which looked rather disgruntled because we were not feeding them like everybody else. We also had a good chance to compare a Thayer's Gull with a group of Glaucous-winged Gulls.

The party then walked along the edge of the farm, scattering a group of Golden-crowned Sparrows, and down to Holland Point. There we studied the various birds along the waterfront, among them Red-necked Grebes, Common Goldeneyes and Buffleheads.

The next stop was Clover Point. As we approached, two sea lions were sighted, as well as a group of Red-breasted Mergansers. The large flock of Scaups were all sleeping; it was later that they woke up and in the strong light, the purple glow to their heads marked them as Lesser Scaup. We skirted the large piles of earth, and "Keep Off" signs and stuck to the rocks. This gave us a Greater Yellowlegs, a Killdeer, two flocks of Black Turnstones and more than 200 Mew Gulls.

On the way back to the cars, we passed a puzzling loon. It was large -- like a Common, but the bill was very thin and pointed -- more like an Arctic; any ideas?



## GATEWAY TO VICTORIA'S BEACHES

Even to a life-long resident of Victoria and the Saanich Peninsula, the revelations about beaches and beach access found in "Gateway to Victoria's Beaches" must come as a surprise, to say the least. To a comparative newcomer, they were astonishing.

Researched and written by the late Barbara Chapman, and published by The Greater Victoria Environmental Centre, "Gateway to Victoria's Beaches" describes the access, natural history, classification, geology, and location of 190 beaches from Deep Cove to Clover Point. Each beach is numbered, its location shown on a map, its address given (which usually amounts to directions for finding) as well as a general description of its nature (i.e. gravel, sand, rock outcrop).

Also included is a list of 74 species of birds to be seen at these beaches, a list of books of interest, local groups which can provide more information, and the provisions of the Land Act of B.C. that apply to beach access. Sharp-eyed birdwatchers will spot several errors in the bird list, but these are small distractions from this otherwise excellent reference work.

The book sells for \$1.95 and is available at most book shops in Victoria.

## HELP FOR ENDANGERED HABITATS?

The Greater Victoria Environmental Centre presents an informative evening on the endangered habitats of Victoria on Friday, March 4. Among the topics to be discussed will be the potentials for recreation on Portage Inlet, Esquimalt Lagoon (Doomed by Development?), and Colquitz Creek and Other Fresh Water Habitats -- Community enhancements or convenience sewers? The speakers on these topics will be Wolf Bauer, J.E. "Ted" Burns, and Dr. R. W. Langford, respectively.

If you are concerned about the future of these valuable areas, do not miss this meeting. It will be held at 7:30 p.m. in Room 167 of the Elliot Building at the University of Victoria, on Friday, March 4.

## FIRST ANNUAL DINNER A RESOUNDING SUCCESS

If it comes to a vote again, there'll be at least 130 eyes for an annual dinner again next year. That's how many attended this year's dinner, held at Holyrood House on February 8th and from the comments heard in passing, their reaction was unanimously "Let's do it again".

Not only did everyone seem to enjoy their Gallus gallus domesticus but Dr. Richard Ring's presentation on Arctic insects, which followed, topped-off a thoroughly enjoyable evening.

## MEET SWAN LAKE

Here's your chance to find out where some of your money went at the Swan Lake Nature Centre. Programme Co-ordinator Doug Ross has arranged two orientation sessions at the Centre during which Terry Morrison will show you the ropes.

The sessions are scheduled for 12 noon Saturday, March 5, and 1:30 p.m. Monday, March 7. Each session is for 2 hours and, since the size of each group must be limited, you are asked to contact Doug (598-3614) ahead of time and arrange a place on one of these outings.





KILLDEER RESCUED*by Harry Davidson*

On a recent visit to Esquimalt Lagoon with the "Tuesday" birdwatchers, I noticed a Killdeer in difficulties. It was unable to fly and I was able to take hold of it carefully. Its feet and toes were tightly wrapped in fine nylon fish line which, in turn, was tangled in weeds.

Charlie Trotter manipulated a pocket knife with great dexterity and delicately removed strands embedded in the flesh of the toes. We were all almost as pleased as the Killdeer must have been when it ran quickly along the beach and took off.

The bird was very quiet during the operation and Bertha Gow was able to get photographs of it during the ordeal.

ODDS 'N ENDS

... Seems like the most popular topic of conversation at our first annual dinner at Holyrood House was Gallus gallus domesticus vernus. Thanks to Eric Counsell, who also gets belated credit for last month's piece publicizing the dinner, members of the Society enjoyed guessing who old Gallus might be. I heard everything from domestic pigeon to (facetiously, I hope) California Condor mentioned. Even after the dinner was over, there was still doubt about Gallus' identity in one or two minds with one diner firmly convinced that any similarity to the main course and chicken was purely coincidental. Oh well! You can't win 'em all ...

... Membership co-ordinators, the Suttills, report that the Society has grown to more than 500 members this year thanks, in large part, to the fine programme arranged by Doug Ross and his confederates ...

... For a few hours last month, Victoria had a Rare Bird Alert at least until Murphy's second law took over. According to Murphy (not Tim) in any field of human endeavour, anything that can go wrong will go wrong, and, according to Tim (Murphy that is) everything went wrong with our Rare Bird Alert. But it's all straightened out now and by the time you read this, it'll be in full operation. Dial 383-1661, and check for yourself ...

... The overflow crowds at last month's Audubon films caused some problems, particularly among season ticket holders who, arriving late, found they couldn't get seats. Hopefully, this will all be ironed out for the next films in March, but if you're a season ticket holder and want to ensure seats in the centre section, then make sure you arrive before 7:45 and avoid disappointment ...

KIDS COUNTRY  
THE WEST COAST TRAIL*by Brenda Curran*

(This is the first of a two-part story of a trip along the West Coast Trail. The second part will appear in April.)

Cautiously approaching the rapids, we carefully picked out unobstructed routes through the shallow water. It was easy because we remembered those many days of practising. It was a high school outdoors programme but it taught us more in one week than we could hope to learn about the wilderness in a classroom in a year. Twenty-four of the forty-five students who tried out for this 3-day backpacking and 3-day canoeing excursion were chosen because of their outdoor skills and basic know-how about the wilderness.

After a week of planning and preparation, we were split in two groups: one would start the trip canoeing the Nitinat Triangle, while the other group would begin backpacking along the West Coast Trail. Both groups would meet on the West Coast Trail, at Tsusiat Falls.

ADULT PROGRAMMESUN. MAR. 6

Ornithology - Esquimalt Lagoon - morning only. Meet 9:00 a.m. Mayfair Lanes or 9:30 a.m. at the bridge at the north end of the Lagoon.  
Leader: Harold Hosford (478-5794)

TUES. MAR. 8

General Meeting: Newcombe Auditorium  
Speaker: Kerry Joy  
Topic: British Columbia's Parks

THURS. MAR. 17

Marine Biology: A lab session with British Columbia's fishes. The presentation will include slides and face to face confrontations with fish from the Provincial Museum's collections.  
 Wear old clothes (you may get wet) and bring all the questions you've ever wanted to know about fish but have been afraid to ask.

Room 112, Provincial Museum, 7:00 p.m.

Leader: Alex. Peden

SAT. MAR. 19

Ornithology - Cowichan Bay  
 Meet at Robert Service Memorial, 9:30. Bring lunch.  
Leader: Ron Satterfield

SUN. MAR. 20

Geology: Place to be announced. Meet Mayfair Lanes, 9:00 a.m. Bring lunch.  
Leader: Robert A. Brown (385-2693)

SAT. MAR. 26

Botany: Thetis Lake - early spring flowers. Meet Mayfair Lanes 9:00 a.m. or Thetis, 9:30 a.m. Bring lunch.  
Leader: Ros Pojar (592-4786)

JUNIORS AND INTERMEDIATESSAT. MAR. 5

Arbutus Ridge, Goldstream.  
 Meet Mayfair Lanes, 1:30 p.m.  
Driver: Curran

SAT. MAR. 19

Beaver Lake ducks with Swan Lake Naturalist Janet Renfro. Meet Mayfair Lanes 1:30 p.m.  
Driver: Askey

Mayfair Lanes meeting place is the northeast corner of the bowling alley's parking lot at the intersection of Roderick and Oak.

AUDUBON FILMSFRI. MAR. 18

YOSEMITE: An Ecological Visit

andSAT. MAR. 19

Join Eben McMillan in an exploration of the geology and wildlife of one of the most popular National Parks in the United States.

TIME: 8:00 P.M. (both nights)

PLACE: Newcombe Auditorium