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The Victoria NATURALIST

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Chair, Publications Committee: Dannie Carsen, 384-4924
Editor: Warren Drinnan, Work - 598-0471, Home - 652-9618
Managing Editor: Diana Jolly, 388-4259
Editorial Team: Patricia Freeman, Bev Glover, Richard Watts, Alan Burger.
Advertising: Jennifer Emms, 479-6323
Distribution: Lyndis Davis, Connie Hawley, Sue Cumming
Desktop Publishing: Robert Allington, 595-7803
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Members are encouraged to submit articles, field trip reports, birding and botany notes, and book reviews with photographs or illustrations if possible. Photographs of natural history are appreciated along with documentation of location, species names and a date. Please label your submission with your name, address, and phone number and provide a title. We will accept and use copy in almost any legible form but we encourage submission of typed, double-spaced copy or an IBM compatible word processing file on a 360K 5.25" diskette plus printed output. Having copy submitted on diskette saves a lot of time and work for the publications group and we really appreciate the help. If you have an obscure or very old word processing program, call the editor, Warren Drinnan at 598-0471 or 652-9618, or Diana Jolly at 388-4259, or save the text in ASCII format. Blank diskettes may be obtained from the editor and we will return any of your own diskettes submitted. Photos and slides submitted may be picked up at the Field Naturalist, 1241 Broad Street, or will be returned if a stamped, self-addressed envelope is included with the material.

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Our Cover

Young Horsetails

By Steve Pridgeon

Steve Pridgeon, the photographer who produced the picture of young horsetails on our cover, has been taking photographs for over 14 years. After an Honours BSc. in Zoology from the University of Liverpool, Steve started to photograph a wide range of lifeforms—plants, small mammals and insects.

After moving to British Columbia in 1982, Steve began to record our local flora and fauna. Some of these photographs are featured elsewhere in the magazine. Steve has been fascinated with natural history since he was a child, and, after discovering photography, he realized that combining the two disciplines was what he most enjoyed doing.

As Steve relates: "The sight of horsetails sprouting always puts me in mind of ancient times when their giant relatives dominated much of the primordial landscape. Springtime finds the young horsetail in wonderful shades of brown, green, and white."

Book of the Month

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Hummers in Winter

By Les Waye

We did not realize the problem involved in feeding hummingbirds through the winter! It all started off innocently enough. We put a hummingbird feeder out last spring and were happy to catch the occasional glimpse of a hummer on its way through our area.

After a very wet spring hike in East Sooke Park, a group of us happened to stop at 17 Mile House where we noticed several hummers feeding outside a window. The way the birds were feeding amazed me. They were sitting still on perches—no wings flapping! One could actually get a really good look at them.

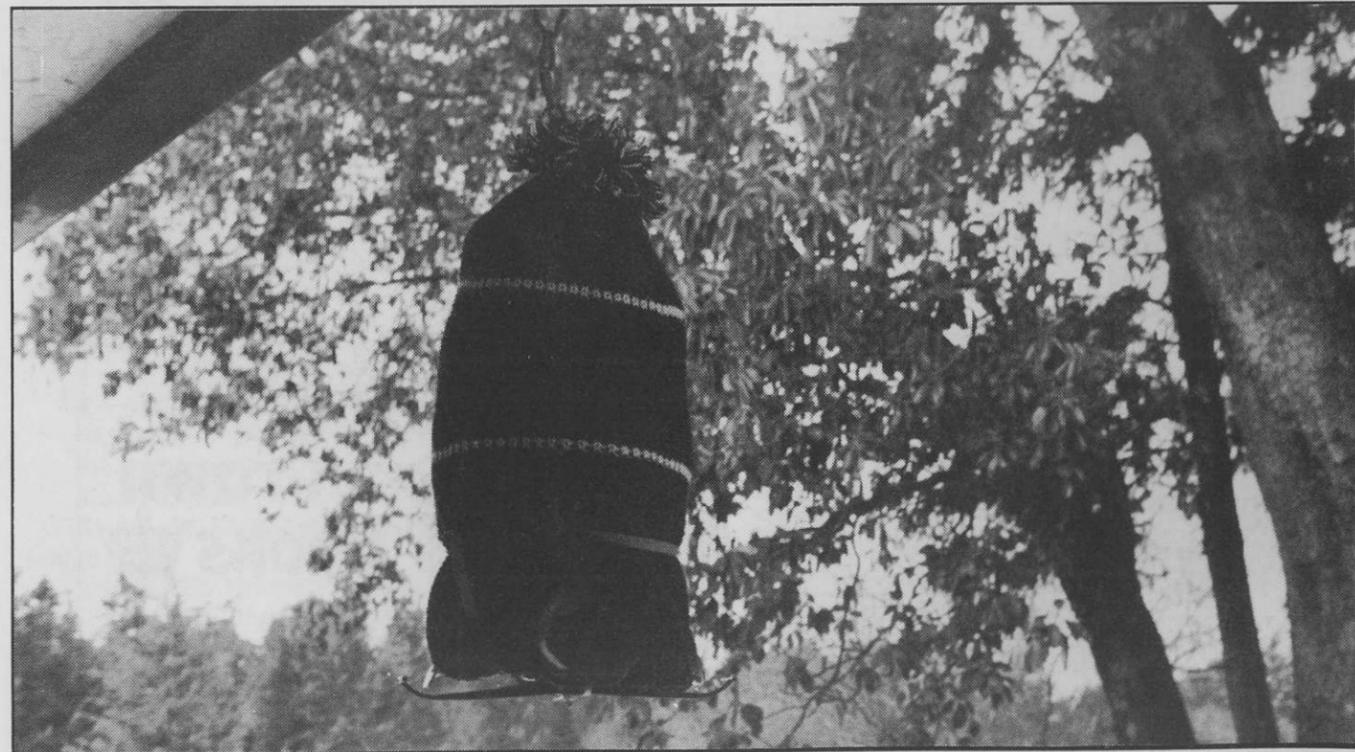
This new look at hummingbirds enticed me into buying the type of feeder which had perches. We were actually going to see the birds still instead of as a blur. I do not know whether it made much difference to the birds or not, but soon we had some regular visitors—a male and a female. Occasionally, there were other hummers, but they were chased off as intruders by our resident hummingbirds. The pair must have nested in one of the trees nearby for they were always around throughout the summer and we saw a couple of smaller versions at our feeder. We grew accustomed to hummingbird calls, and often were able to spy the tiny things on various tree branches. Since we were novices to this sort of thing, we had difficulty deciding which type of hummingbirds they were, but we finally decided upon Anna's.

There were just the two young ones with the mother

during the fall season. The mother chased away intruding hummingbirds very diligently, and all seemed well for the family. I don't know exactly when it was that we realized that the family was reduced to just one. One day, one of the juveniles was all that appeared at our feeder. Perhaps the mother and the other juvenile headed south for warmer climes. If the one that remained had known what was in store for him, I am sure that he would not have stayed in Victoria.

I must admit that we enjoyed seeing the little fella appear several times a day at our feeder through November and into December. Then, all of a sudden, came the mean blast from the North. The night of December 18th was one of very high winds. We awoke to find the hummingbird frantically checking all four ports of his feeder. It was empty! The back and forth swinging induced by the winds had shaken the liquid out. In fact, our living room window was sprayed with the fluid. Quickly, I made up another batch of sugar solution. When it was ready we discovered another problem. The window, our access to the feeder, was frozen shut. Jean ran for her hair dryer and we were able to open it after a few minutes, although it seemed longer because we were feeling desperate for our little hummer. After all, we had encouraged him to stay by keeping this feeder filled, so we felt responsible for giving him a steady supply of nourishment now that he was so dependent on us.

Luckily, neither of us went into work that day due to the very hazardous road conditions. I glanced at the feeder an hour later to discover that it was frozen solid. The cold temperature and wind combined to produce a wind-chill factor of about 30 below zero! After another stint with the hair-dryer at the window, I retrieved the solidified feeder, then Jean thawed it under the hot water tap, and we sacrificed one of my two toques



Keeping the Hummingbird feeder warm: In December, Les Waye was kept busy thawing this feeder for a juvenile hummer who decided to winter in Victoria. In a valiant attempt to keep the feeder warm, Les fitted it with a toque. (Photo: Les Waye)

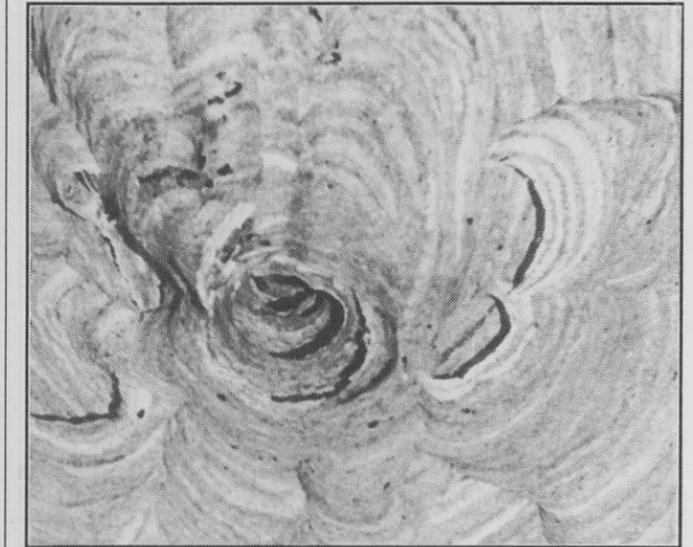
for the bird. A hole was cut in the top for the hanging chain, and cuts were made on the bottom so that it could fit around the feeding ports. We thought that this would put an end to the problem.

When we saw the bird next it was lunch time. He did not seem bothered by the toque cover on his feeder, but he did flit from one port to another. We realized that he wasn't able to get anything out of the ports. This realization threw us into the panic state again! The hair-dryer was needed to open the window again. In fact we used this valuable tool to open the window several times over a three day period. Upon examining the feeder we learned that the fluid had frozen solid in spite of the presence of the toque. After thawing it out again, I wrapped the feeder a few times around with a hand-towel and then covered this with the toque. This no doubt kept the main reservoir of fluid from solidifying, but I soon noticed that the little feeding tubes, being open to the elements, were still freezing solid.

At this point the older hummingbird feeder was retrieved from the basement. When this second feeder was filled, it was put outside while the first one sat inside for a thaw. The feeders were thus alternated whenever we could over the next few days. Both feeders spent the nights indoors. During all of this activity, I hope the bird got sufficient nourishment. We saw him frequently as he came for a fill-up of what must have been a very cold drink. As the temperature moderated somewhat the feeder no longer froze, and we were able to relax our vigilance.

Now that I have time to reflect on this situation, I wonder if we do the right thing when we maintain our hummingbird feeders into the fall season. Are we unwittingly enticing our

little feathered friends to stay in a locale where they might very well perish? After all, they are not equipped to survive a harsh winter spell here. If the birds become totally reliant on our feeders, then it becomes a strain for us to see that the feeders are functional, even in severe winter conditions. Right now, I don't know what to do next fall season. Maybe I will just take the feeder in, and hang a picture of sunny, warm Mexico in its place!



Hornet's home: this hornet's nest is huge—32.4 inches in circumference. (Photo: Mrs. Bertha McHaffie-Gow)

Vaux's Swifts Visit Duncan Home

By John M. Cooper

The Vaux's Swift is a familiar bird that regularly occurs on Vancouver Island and throughout the southern parts of the British Columbia mainland. In mid- to late spring, flocks of 50 to 100 swifts arrive in our province from southern wintering areas.

Little is known about details of their breeding biology, but the Vaux's Swift is known to nest in cavities in trees and chimneys. Flocks of migrants also use these spaces to roost for the night. Several observers have reported seeing flocks of Vaux's Swifts, just at dusk, swarming in rapid flight, then diving *en masse* into a hollow tree or down a chimney.

On May 21, 1990, Mr. and Mrs. Ewald Diversity returned to their Duncan home after a few days absence to find an unbelievable sight. Their house was filled with Vaux's Swifts! Small groups were found huddled in the corners of their living room and hallway. Others were perched on window ledges, book shelves, chairs, and behind framed pictures hanging on the walls. A few were lying dead on the floor. The rest were all in an exhausted condition. The Diversities rounded up as many as they could find and released them outside where they apparently all flew off. They continued to find more birds for two days afterwards! They estimated the flock to number from 80 to 100 swifts.

The house was a mess. The swifts had come down the chimney, thrashed around in the sooty fireplace, then struggled

through a hole in the fireplace screen. The swifts had been inside for at least two days. The walls, rugs, windows, and lampshades in several rooms were covered with droppings. Smudges of soot were on everything! It took a week to clean up.

The fate of the surviving swifts is unknown. Hopefully they were able to recover from their ordeal. This spring we should keep our eyes open for flocks of Vaux's Swifts and enjoy their arrival. We might even hope to see a flock dive into our chimney for the night. But do not forget to close your fireplace flue!

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copies) of the *Victoria Naturalist*.**

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Two Pileated Woodpeckers. (Photo: Barb McDougell)

Big-eared Burrowing Beavers

By Bruce Bennett

The very mention of the name Mountain Beaver, *Aplodontia rufa*, causes one to envision a rather large rodent with a broad flat tail living in mountainous streams and lakes. It is however, about muskrat (30 cm) size but is distinguished by having almost no tail, a head which is broad and flat with small eyes and ears, long whiskers and long claws on its feet (Cowan and Guiguet, 1956). In fact the Mountain Beaver is more closely related to the squirrel family than to the North American Beaver, *Castor canadensis*, (Valadka, 1989).

The Mountain Beaver's name may be derived from the damage they cause to Douglas fir and other species of trees, mainly conifers, in the 10 to 25 year age class (Neal and Borrecco, 1981). Unlike the North American Beavers, Mountain Beavers do not cut down the tree but often kill trees by girdling or by undermining their roots. They have also been known to climb larger seedlings to clip terminal and lateral branches (Martin, 1971).

"Whistler" and "Boomer" are two common names given to the Mountain Beaver by early settlers, however, they are more applicable to its distant relatives—the marmots—with whom the Mountain Beaver is sometimes confused (Valadka, 1989).

Mountain Beavers are the most primitive species of rodents; their genus, *Aplodontia*, contains only one species and seven subspecies. This species is found only in the wet, temperate climates west of the Cascade Mountains and Coast Mountains from southern British Columbia to the Sierra Nevada Mountains of central California. In British Columbia two subspecies may be found. *Aplodontia rufa rufa* may be found from Hope southwest to Aldergrove, mainly in the area around Sumas Mountain. *Aplodontia rufa rainieri* may be found in the Canadian Cascade Mountains from Hope to the Nicola Valley with the greatest occurrences reported in Manning Park.

Unlike the North American Beaver, the Mountain Beaver does not live in water, though the species is restricted to moist habitats and requires free surface water or succulent vegetation on a daily basis (Beier, 1989). As well, they are not restricted to mountain habitats as they may be found from sea level to 3,000 metres, and are often associated with coniferous forest (O'Brien, 1988).

Mountain Beavers have developed a primarily underground lifestyle which aids in keeping their internal body temperature regulated. Due to its unusual physiology, it begins to overheat at 29 degrees Celsius and will die within a few hours if temperatures reach 32 degrees Celsius or higher (Valadka, 1989). Johnson (1975) reported that the most active burrows have tent-like structures built over their entrances. Supporting sticks are placed above and across the entrances; then more sticks are placed perpendicular to these. Finally, either leafy sticks of the Big Leaf Maple, *Acer macrophyllum*, or Sword Fern, *Polystichum munitum*, or both are placed across the supports concealing the entrances. Vegetative material is sometimes left outside the burrow to wilt before being brought

inside, and in this way the rodent is capable of storing as much as a bushel of vegetative material in a central feeding chamber. Although the Mountain Beaver does not hibernate, this cache enables it to spend virtually all the cold autumn and winter months below ground (Valadka, 1989).

They require as little as 0.10 +0.01 ha of space per individual (Neal and Borrecco, 1981) but the amount of suitable vegetation and the size of clearings influences the size of their home range. The greater the percentage of openings in the home range, the smaller the home range (Neal and Borrecco, 1981).

The mention of the existence of such an unusual creature often causes incredulous looks from hikers. Once whilst inspecting a colony found beside a trail in Manning Park, two hikers stopped to ask if I was okay - I simply answered yes and when they inquired further I began to tell them about Mountain Beavers. I explained that they are the most primitive of rodents, that they are chiefly nocturnal though trappers in the area mentioned that they are sometimes seen during the day. Nodding politely, though I doubted that they believed a word I was saying, they simply continued on their way and I went back to inspecting the fresh excavations.

Traditionally spot fires, caused by lightning, provided openings in the forest suitable for the maintenance of Mountain Beaver colonies. Today, due to forest fire suppression, these small openings may be beginning to disappear. Forestry companies see the Mountain Beaver as a pest and have been developing ways of removing Mountain Beavers from tree farm areas. In Manning Park, where the highest concentrations of Mountain Beavers in Canada may be found, they have encountered an additional threat from one of its own relatives, the Columbian Groundsquirrel. The Columbian Groundsquirrel is a common sight to anyone who has visited Manning Park. They are found wherever humans have provided openings in the forests. Once established they increase in numbers to the extent of suppressing the vegetation surrounding their colonies. Will this relative and neighbour eat the Mountain Beaver out



Easter Lily. Dannie Carsen and Bev Glover invite members to explore the lilies and other early wildflowers of Cuthbert Homes Park on April 6. See Calendar for details. (Photo: Steve Pridgeon)

of house and home? Many questions have yet to be answered about the contribution the ancient rodent makes to the mountainous forests of southern British Columbia.

Works Cited:

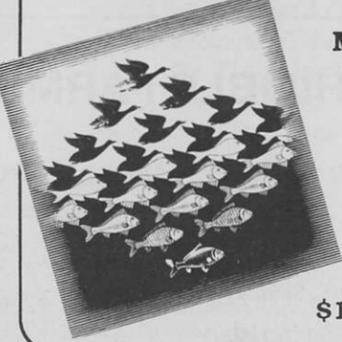
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Please Use the VNHS Scope

The society spotting scope is available for members to use for VNHS field trips and personal observations. Please call Dannie Carsen at 384-4924 and you may pick it up at 205-429 Linden Avenue in Fairfield. The scope is not being used much at present, and we would like to encourage those leading field trips and working on parks and conservation projects to take it along.



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Short-eared Owl Still Seen on Island—but Rarely

By Neil Dawe

November is perhaps the best time to see large numbers of coastal birds in the Parksville-Qualicum Beach area. Not only do we have the resident birds, such as the Canada Geese and some Mallards on our estuaries, but we also have migrants such as American Wigeon and Trumpeter Swans arriving from their northern breeding grounds.

Many of the migrants continue to areas farther south where they spend the winter. But many stay to winter here with us. Anyone who spends a little time walking along the foreshore during this blustery time of year, may see hundreds of wigeon, mallards, and teal around our estuaries. In the open waters adjacent to the estuaries, loons, grebes, scoters, and goldeneye are also common. But occasionally one will get lucky and see an uncommon bird—a special bird to the birder. In our area the Short-eared Owl is such a bird.

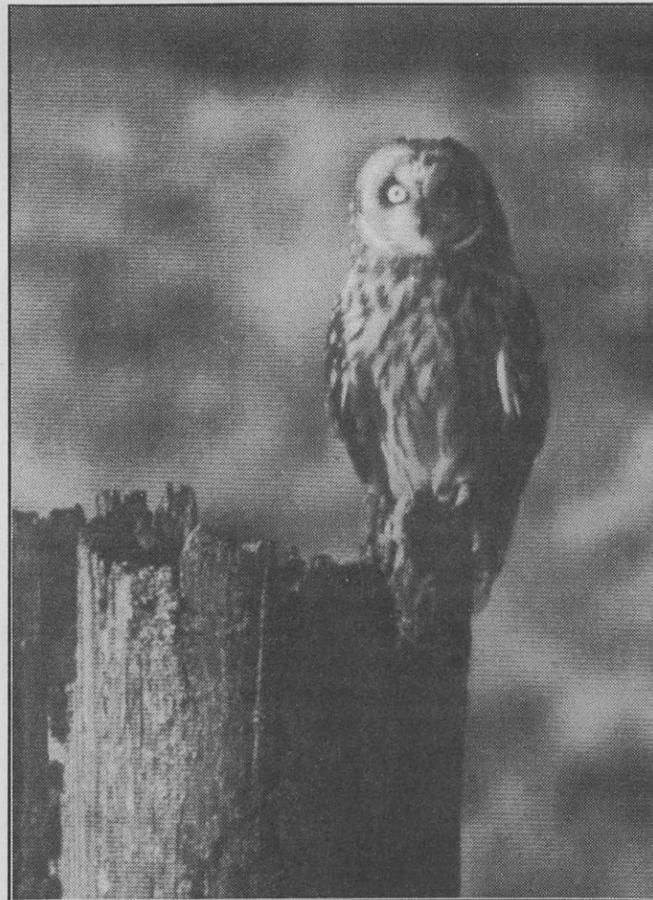
Most of the Short-eared Owls we see here are migrants, passing through to wintering areas such as the Fraser River delta. Occasionally, individuals will spend the winter on our estuaries, hunting meadow voles and avoiding being hunted themselves. Last year, on the Englishman River estuary, I found the remains of a Short-eared Owl—an obvious victim of a close relative, the Great-horned Owl. Even predators have predators.

Observant walkers may not see an owl itself, but may find signs of its presence in the form of a pellet of fur and bones. Pellets can often be found on the driftlogs that litter the estuaries. Most owls swallow their prey whole—fur, bones and all. After they have digested the meat, special muscles in their stomach roll up the bones and fur, and the owl regurgitates, or casts, a pellet. Biologists wanting to study the food habits of owls simply collect these cast pellets. From the skulls within the pellets they can determine who and how many came as, albeit unwilling, dinner guests.

Unlike many owls, the Short-eared Owl is a diurnal owl; it can often be found hunting during the daytime. The black feathers around its eyes help reduce glare much as does the black that football players use around their eyes. Its “short ears” are really just feather tufts on the top of the head that

serve to break up the smooth facial outline and better camouflage the bird.

All owls have a distinctive facial disk with both eyes facing forward like human eyes. With forward facing eyes, they have a wide field of binocular vision. The facial disk also channels sounds to their ears which are set asymmetrically on the sides of their heads. Thus, they not only have binocular vision, but binocular hearing as well, both of which allow them to accurately judge distance—important adaptations for a predator. To be able to see such a rare bird, in its buoyant, stiff-winged, flight, hunting over the meadow communities of an estuary is a special treat for anyone who loves the outdoors. Yet many of us may not get that chance.



Short-eared Owl. (Photo: Neil Dawe, CWS)

Winter roosts of over 100 owls were once found on the Fraser delta, but over the past 16 years Short-eared Owl numbers have been declining. The decline is mainly attributed to loss of old-field habitat to golf courses, subdivisions, and other developments. If wintering Short-eared Owl numbers continue their decline, it is unlikely that we'll continue to see this owl migrating through our area, stopping to hunt on our estuaries, or occasionally wintering here.

The costs of development are high. Slowing “progress” a little and securing some of the remaining old-field habitat on the delta is perhaps the best we can do. This is little comfort to some, and perhaps none at all to the Short-eared Owl.

(Reprinted with the permission of *The Parksville-Qualicum Beach News*.)

Balcony Birding

By Sue Cumming

About eight years ago I caught the “birding bug.” This is a malady from which you don't recover! I bought binoculars, bird books and records, took bird identification courses and ultimately joined the VNHS.

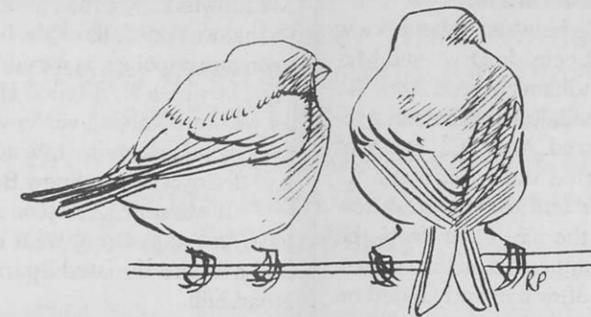
With a south facing view of the Olympics from an apartment in Fairfield, I've had a real vantage point from which to observe passing birds. Ducks and cormorants, crows and starlings, robins and sparrows have passed overhead. Great Blue Herons have flown from their colony in Beacon Hill Park out to their feeding grounds. As summer wore on and the nestlings required more food, the parents' flight seemed to become more ponderous. Without being too anthropomorphic, I thought the herons must be thinking, “If I have to make this trip one more time . . .” But these were all distant birds. A feeder on my balcony was the obvious solution to a desire for close encounters of the avian kind.

My first visitors were the ever-opportunistic House Sparrows, followed shortly by House Finches. As summer gave way to autumn, other species began to appear. When a suet brick was introduced the action really began to pick up. Pine Siskins, Dark-eyed Juncos, Chestnut-backed Chickadees, Bushtits and Red-breasted Nuthatches all gathered to indulge in my offerings. I noticed Northern Flickers perched on a nearby tree observing all the action and wondered what to provide for them. A piece of driftwood with holes drilled and filled with a paste of suet, peanut butter and millet proved successful. My first Flicker was followed by Downy Woodpeckers.

At this point I became interested in the behaviour of my visitors. Dark-eyed Juncos are the true early birds, arriving before first light. The interaction between birds of different

species was fascinating to observe. In the confined space of my balcony, I discovered that aggressive behaviour often existed between birds of the same species, but not necessarily between birds of differing species. Females chased males away from favoured perches and concentrations of food. Starlings constantly bickered among themselves over the suet. Bushtits, on the other hand, clung to it in a tight group with nary a squabble. A single Chickadee scolded and bossed everything in sight and succeeded in taking over the food source, even when outnumbered. A Flicker warded off harassing starlings by flashing its red underwings at them—and it worked. During spring courtship, female House Finches begged for food from the males in the same manner as their subsequent offspring begged from them.

Many birds are amazingly tame and very approachable. Bushtits have permitted me to come close enough to observe that the females (with their paler throats, darker flanks and grayer faces) have pale yellow eyes. I am able to sit on my balcony while the birds continue to come in and feed, many getting within two feet of me. Once a House Finch



House Finches. (Artist: Rosemary Partridge)

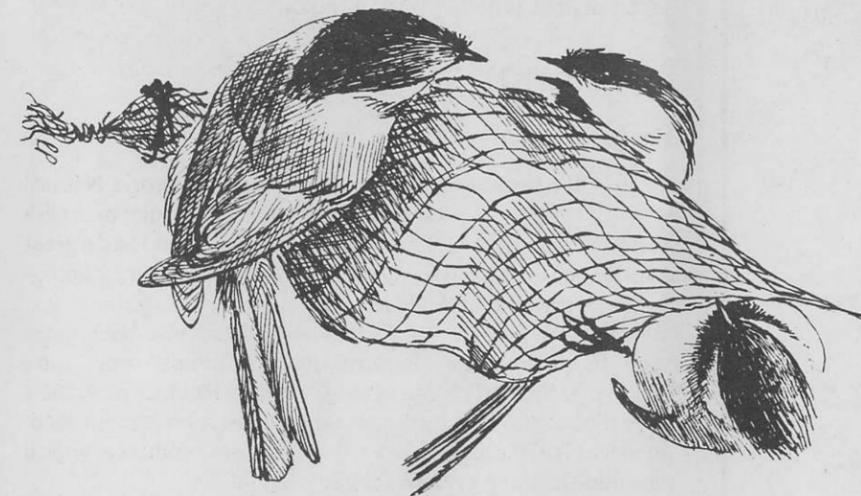
my foot was in it! Two Pine Siskins ate from my hand and allowed me to stroke their bellies. Undeterred, they continued eating. Hummingbirds have perched on an extended finger. Often, a Cooper's Hawk will alight in a nearby tree. All the balcony birds freeze and remain so until the danger has passed.

I can usually count on several visits in late autumn and early winter from individual immature birds, but this year, mature birds started coming in. They paraded up and down the railing in a posture that suggested utter frustration. The prey was in sight when the predator left its perch, but had either flown or hidden under strategically placed shelters. That poor hawk couldn't seem to figure out where the main course went. Sometimes the little birds are not so lucky. For sheer speed and agility it would be hard to equal the female Merlin who successfully navigated the small balcony space, got her sparrow and was off in the blink of an eye.

Occasionally something unexpected appears. Red Crossbills put in a singular appearance during the cold and snow of '89. Their target was a seed bell. A Robin was enticed with mush made from cornmeal, apples, currants and mashed banana.

Birds, being naturally inquisitive, perch in nearby trees and bushes watching the action. So, beyond my balcony I've observed various warblers, Cedar Waxwings, kinglets, vireos and, with luck, Turkey Vultures and Bald Eagles.

Of course, nothing can equal birding in the field. But, on days when you have to be at home, balcony birding has many rewards.



Chestnut-sided Chickadees on My Balcony. (Artist: Rosemary Partridge)



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Martindale Flats Wildlife Survey—January 5, 1991

By David Pearce

The sun rose in clear blue sky with a temperature of -2°C , as the five of us arrived at Island View Road to carry out the weekly Martindale Flats Wildlife Survey. It was 8:00 a.m. The entire flats were frozen solid after many days of freezing weather and our hopes of counting many birds were not very high. However, we duly split into three groups and agreed to meet on Martindale Road at 10:30 a.m.

Bryan Gates covered Area 'A', between Island View Road and Martindale Road between Lochside Drive and McHugh Ditch. Bev Glover and Chris Sandham covered Area 'B', between Island View Road and Martindale Road east of McHugh Ditch. Jeff Gaskin and I covered Area 'C', south of Martindale Road. As Jeff and I started out toward the 'L' Reservoir, two Bald Eagles flew over and there were a few Mallard and American Widgeon on the ice. Then, from the south, several flocks of Canada Geese appeared on the horizon heading toward us. They came in line after line and landed on the north side of Martindale Road, which was in Area 'B', so we knew we would have a possible double count problem.

There was no sign of life at the 'L' Reservoir except for a few Song Sparrows in the reeds, but as we hiked along Lochside

Drive we saw two Killdeer and an American Pipit. We then crossed a large field covered with corn stubble and in the south east corner of the field we were rewarded with the sight of two Lincoln's Sparrows and a Northern Shrike. In a ditch nearby we disturbed a California Quail, Ring-necked Pheasant and a Common Snipe. We returned to Martindale Road with a disappointing duck count of 397 Mallard and 97 American Widgeon in our area.

When we met the other two groups, they had seen some very interesting birds. Bryan had relocated the American Tree Sparrow on Lochside Drive, together with three Lincoln's Sparrows, 20 California Quail and 24 Eurasian Skylarks. Bev and Chris reported 35 American Pipits and four Western Meadowlarks. We then joined forces to re-cover all three areas so that we could all see the birds and were successful in finding even more species as we added 10 Trumpeter Swans, a Northern Harrier, a Red-tailed Hawk and a Cooper's Hawk. Then, as we were leaving we saw someone waving to us from the Widgeon Reservoir. It turned out to be Brent Diakow and he had discovered two Snow Buntings that had just flown in.

It was now 12:30 p.m. and we had to leave, but we should have stayed as Brent went on to discover a Harris's Sparrow and a White-throated Sparrow at the top of the Island View Road hill!



Song Sparrow. (Photo: Robert Allington)

In Memoriam

By Leah Halsall

Dennis Suttill was a member of the Victoria Natural History Society for 22 years. He was a quiet man with many interests. He painted mostly for pleasure, and had a great love for music. He was a Tuesday Birder, a nature photographer, a traveller and a hiker.

Over the years, our Society and others have been given many hours of sheer pleasure viewing Dennis' slides (and Kaye's), particularly those of the Canadian Rockies in all their magnificence, caught by the eye of an artist. One cannot mention Dennis without mentioning Kaye whose commentary lifted the slide-watching evenings to their height.

Dennis passed away on December 19, 1990, and he will be sadly missed by all who knew him.

Victoria Christmas Bird Count—1990

Introduction by David Pearce

It was not a very auspicious start to the 1990 Christmas Bird Count as Victoria had just received 6 weeks of heavy rain and the morning of December 15 was no exception. The rain started at 7:30 am and continued until noon without a break.

By then many observers were soaked to the skin and had to retire, but the weather fortunately improved and, by the end of the day, we had recorded our third highest count of 142 species. This was only five short of our Canadian record of 147 species, set in 1988.

All-time high totals were set for 19 species, including five first time records. These were a Green-backed Heron, a Lesser White-fronted Goose, three Mountain Bluebirds, an American Tree Sparrow and a Brambling. Notable among the all-time highs were 210 Trumpeter Swans and 43 Surfbirds, as both were more than twice their previous highs. There were also some notable high area counts. Martindale broke their record of 99 species set in 1988 when they recorded 102 species, including every duck species, except a Wood Duck. The usually remote and quiet areas like the Northern Highlands (12,001 up from 8,754), Central Highlands (4,314 up from 722) and Thetis

Lake (10,078 up from 3,717) experienced greatly increased total numbers of individual birds due to a record berry crop.

The post count gathering was held at the Gordon Head United Church and our thanks go to Margaret Mackenzie-Grieve for organizing it.

The organization of the Christmas Bird Count is now on the computer, including individual checklists and species counts for each area. At a meeting of the V.N.H.S. Bird Committee in February it was agreed that we will organize a second Christmas-Bird-Count-style survey in the spring. The tentative date is Saturday, May 11, and the count time will be from midnight (for owling) until noon. This will provide some interesting future

year-by-year comparisons of spring bird species. The existing Christmas Bird Count areas will be used with the same leaders and participants, to keep the organization as simple as possible.

We are also proposing to have the Birder's Night bar-b-que at 6:00 pm after the count to compare numbers and stories. Further information will appear in the next *Victoria Naturalist* and at future Birder's Nights.

All-time high totals were set for 19 species, including five first time records. These were a Green-backed Heron, a Lesser White-fronted Goose, three Mountain Bluebirds, an American Tree Sparrow and a Brambling. Notable among the all-time highs were 210 Trumpeter Swans and 43 Surfbirds



Stellar's Jay in flight. (Photo: Steve Pridgeon)



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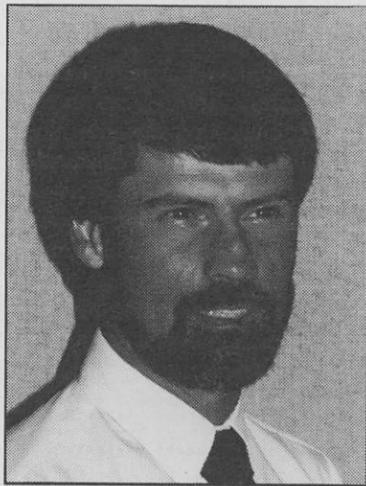


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President's Request



Mike McGrenere,
President, VNHS

The Annual General Meeting of the Victoria Natural History Society will be held on Tuesday, March 12, 1991, commencing at 8:00 p.m., in Begbie 159, at the University of Victoria. Board members and the executive of the Society will be elected at this meeting, and reports will be presented from committee chairpersons summarizing the highlights of activities over the past year.

An increase in membership fees will be proposed by the Board of Directors for your approval. This increase is expected to be in the range of \$3 to \$4 per membership category and will be in effect as of May 1991. This is required in order to cover the increased fee that the VNHS must pay to the Federation of B.C. Naturalists effective in January 1992 (see the B.C. Naturalist, September 1990, page 14) and the increased costs to the Society from our expanded conservation activities, special projects and the G.S.T. The budget for 1991 will be presented and explained at the meeting.

The business portion of the meeting is expected to take 30 to 40 minutes. It will be followed by an entertaining and informative talk by Bill Merilees, noted naturalist and author of *Attracting Backyard Wildlife*. I encourage all members to attend the Annual General Meeting.

Mike McGrenere,
President, VNHS

Welcome to New Members

- November 28 Robert Ward, of Leeds Crescent. Particular interest: birds.
- November 29 Tony Perodeau, of Grove Crescent, Sidney. Tony is interested in botany and birds.
- December 4 Pat Swift McAllister, of Seaview Road.
- December 11 Paul Chouinard and Jane Orsak, of Atkins Road. Both enjoy birding.
- December 11 Keith McCully, of Ross Street. Interests: birds and mushrooms.
- December 18 Joyce Lee Wayne and Arlo Erikson, of Michigan Street. Particular interest: conservation.
- December 19 Aurora Patterson, of Tofino. Interested in birding, raptors, and wildlife rehabilitation.
- December 19 Arlene Richardson, of Tofino. Gift membership from Aurora Patterson.
- December 19 John and Dianne Cooper, of Old Island Highway. Interests: birds, wildlife and wilderness conservation.
- December 20 Helen Oldershaw, of St. Charles Street. Helen studies medical and culinary use of native plants which ties in with her interest in the conservation of wilderness areas.
- December 27 Kathleen Williams and family, of Pembroke Street.
- December 31 Dana Griffith and Phil Argue, of McBriar Avenue. Interests: birds, wildflowers and marine mammals.
- January 1 L. G. Glentworth, of Amhurst Avenue, enjoys birding.
- January 12 Colin Barnfield and family, of Peacock Place.

- January 12 Doug Ruddell, of Inez Drive. Doug enjoys all wildlife, one day field trips, conservation and conversation.
- January 12 Bonita Russel, of Rossland, B.C. Gift membership from her mother Elizabeth Chatwin.
- January 12 Jackie Wrinch, of Century Road. Interests: birds, flowers and hiking trails.
- January 12 Joe Percival and Jeanette Graf, of Morland Road. Particular interests: ethnobotany and old growth ecology.
- January 13 Blake Ford, of Quadra Street, enjoys birding.
- January 14 Mr. and Mrs. J. P. Fogarty, of Beach Drive. Gift membership from Mrs. F. J. Gerry.
- January 15 William and Judith Kay, of Hampshire Road, enjoy birdwatching and wildflowers.
- January 17 Robyn Shortt and family, of Savannah Avenue. Interests: birding and marine and forest ecology.
- January 17 James and Jean Cosgrove, of Westport Place. Interests: scuba diving and underwater photography.
- January 17 Pam Glen, of Knight Avenue. Gift membership from Dr. N. J. C. Mathews.
- January 17 H. and K. Brown, of Greenridge Crescent. Gift membership from Lorraine Fontaine.
- January 18 Daphne Stacey, of Cadboro Bay Road. Daphne is interested in birds, walking, whales, wildflowers and biking. Gift membership from Robin Baird.
- January 18 Briony Penn and Donald Gunn, of Transit Road.
- January 20 Ed and Jan Etienne, of Poplar Street. Particular interest: birds.
- January 23 Nanette and Garry McKay, of Arbutus Ridge. Interests: birds and botany.
- January 23 Derrick Marven, of Duncan. Derrick is interested in birds.

Vancouver Island Shoreline and Adjacent Wetlands Preservation

By Connie Hawley, Vancouver Island Regional Coordinator, FBCN

VNHS is hosting a workshop sponsored by the Federation of B.C. Naturalists and Vancouver Island Clubs to look at the natural habitat on our east coast shoreline and adjacent wetlands, from Campbell River to Jordan River.

The goal is to identify areas requiring some form of protection, establish what can reasonably be preserved, and set priorities for acquisition and protection of habitat.

Conservation organizations, such as Nature Trust of B.C., and government agencies such as the Provincial Ministries of Forests, Crown Lands, Environment, Parks, the Federal Departments of National Defense, Fisheries and Oceans, Canadian Wildlife Service, and the Coast Guard, have been

invited to participate. Each naturalist club will send two or three representatives. The total number of participants has been limited to 80, to allow for free discussion. The workshop will be held on March 23, 1991 at the University of Victoria. Results will be reviewed at the Spring Regional Meeting in Nanaimo on April 6th, to which all VNHS members are welcome to attend.

The VNHS Conservation Committee has been working to identify and catalogue areas which are of particular concern to our members. If you know of some shoreline habitat or adjacent wetlands in need of protection in between the Malahat and Jordan River, please call Tony Embleton, Chairman, Parks and Conservation Committee, at 595-6812.

Herring Die—Gulls Feast

By Richard Watts

Record numbers of gulls gathered over Saanich Inlet this month in response to the mysterious mass death of young herring.

The VNHS's own Mike Shepard recounts how, on taking the Mill Bay ferry on January 13th, he noticed a large concentration of gulls and seals in his binoculars. "I looked around and saw a couple of thousand gulls there, and a couple of thousand over there, and there were gulls everywhere."

He estimates the number of gulls to be in the range of 18,000. With *The Birds of British Columbia* estimating the breeding population at 28,575 pairs, the concentration over Saanich Inlet was extremely large, particularly for this area.

To put that in perspective, Dave Fraser, another VNHS member and a biologist who leads the interpretive services at Goldstream Provincial Park, says 18,000 is well above any congregation he has ever noted. The largest number of birds Fraser recalls was 3,000-4,000 at Goldstream, right at the end of salmon spawning season, when the dead and dying fish provide large quantities of food and the gull numbers are at their peak. "That (18,000) is a phenomenal number of birds," says Fraser. (As an interesting aside, all the gulls Shepard noted were Glaucous-winged Gulls, with the exception of one Mew Gull.)

The birds were apparently gathering to feed on large numbers of dead and dying immature herring. Doug Hay, a research scientist with the federal Department of Fisheries and Oceans' herring section, is still largely unsure what caused the fish to die.

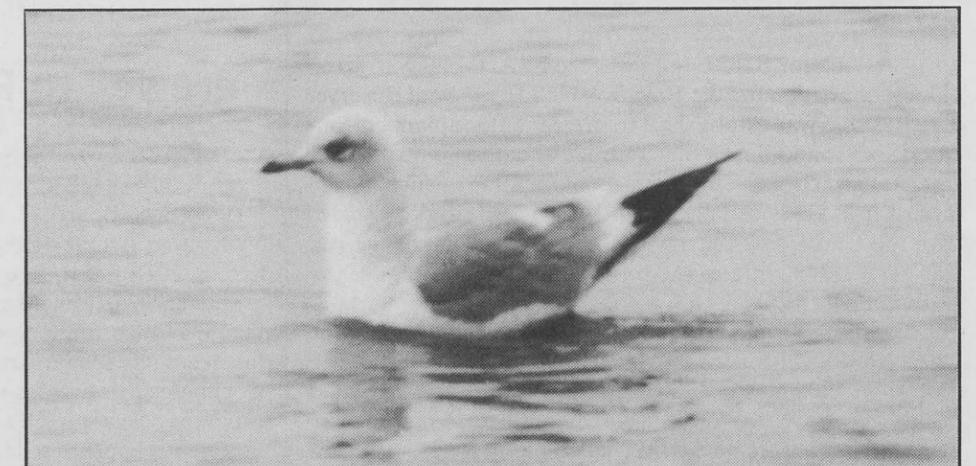
Hay explains that Saanich Inlet is relatively deep, over 100 metres in some places. At levels of 70-100

metres, the water forms a layer which is poor in dissolved oxygen. Most of the dead fish that were collected were found with their mouths open and their gill cavities spread wide, which is typical of fish that have been starved of sufficient oxygen.

Lack of oxygen at deep layers is not, however, sufficient reason to explain the large numbers of dead fish. Most of the dead fish were found in water ranging in depths of three to 20 metres. Hay says fish which strayed into the deep, oxygen-poor layer and managed to make it back to good water should have recovered. Experimentation has shown that fish can rapidly recover after exposure to oxygen-deficient water. Hay says he believes that the herring also suffered lethal doses of hydrogen sulfide. The gas is a product of decomposition in oxygen-poor conditions, and is found in high concentrations at the lower depths of Saanich Inlet.

The confusion arises as to why such a large number of fish (about 200 tonnes), most of them coming into sexual maturity, should die so deep. The fish kill and the large numbers of gulls were unusual enough to attract everyone's attention. This is not a normal occurrence.

"I really don't know why so many of them were down this deep," says Hay.



Mew Gull. (Photo: Diana Jolly)

FBCN Camp— May 12-19, 1991

The planning for the FBCN Camp (May 12-19) is taking shape very well and we have great outings planned for each day. One way our members can participate and meet naturalists from other parts of the province is to help with one of the field trips. We need resource people to provide general information on our area. Expertise is not required. If you can help with this or the making of goodies or serving of tea, see the details in the Bulletin section of this newsletter. Please offer to help.

As you can see in this issue's Calendar, there are two very

interesting lectures that members can attend. Neville Winchester looks at the Forest Canopy of Carmannah and Ian McTaggart Cowen will talk about the Nature Trust. See the calendar for details and mark your own calendar so that you don't miss these excellent speakers.

The *grand finale* is the Logging Show and Salmon BBQ at Sooke. What an evening that will be if most of our members attend! Buses will leave the UVic residence parking lot at 5:00 p.m. and will be back by midnight. The logging show is held indoors and features several of the usual logging competitions in 'miniature' plus two audience participation events. The dinner is an excellent home-cooked three course meal. There is also bar service. The orchestra plays western type music for dancing. Do come and help make the evening a success. Check this issue's calendar for more details.



Mink, at Fossil Beach, Sooke. (Photo: Steve Pridgeon)

Squamish Field Trip

By Henry Bauld

The January 26th field trip to the Squamish area to look for Bald Eagles was led by Al Grass who is the volunteer warden for the Baynes Island Ecological Reserve. The Reserve was established to preserve floodplain cottonwood stands and lies in the confluence of the Squamish and Cheakamus rivers. The eagle congregation, which is the largest in B.C., is usually around 1,300 birds and coincides with the Chum Salmon run in December/January. The run was early this year, and the birds started moving out at the beginning of the year.

It was a glorious day and we had spectacular views of the Coast Range which rises to over 2,000 m. here. We were even spared the cold north wind which funnels down Howe Sound at this time of year. We made stops on the Squamish estuary and on the levee along the river as well as in Brakendale. We counted 32 eagles, nearly all adults. We saw fewer other birds than expected, perhaps after the severe Christmas weather. In

particular, Belted Kingfishers seem to have virtually disappeared from this part of the coast. We saw a Harbour Seal up the river, and 16 other species of birds apart from the eagles.

Thanks to Al for an interesting trip and the excellent weather!

Farewell to Reuben Ware

Reuben Ware, Secretary, and Board Member since 1986, has resigned from the Victoria Natural History Society Board of Directors. Reuben will be leaving Victoria to assume a position with the Government of Nova Scotia, as Director, Records Management.

The Society and the Members of the Board would like to take this opportunity to thank Reuben for his organizing influence in creating a structure for the Parks and Recreation Committee. His untiring work for conservation, and his skill in producing clearly worded motions during executive meetings was greatly appreciated.

We wish Reuben well in his new position and hope that he remembers us when he is birding on the Atlantic shore.

The City Farmer

By Patricia Freeman

Some people have heard of them, and some have not. If you've travelled through the States much, chances are that you've come across one or two, since "City Farmers" are abundant there. But for some reason, there is only one in all of Canada. And it is right in our backyard. (Well, almost.)

In 1978, in central Vancouver, Michael Levenston was one of the original founders of City Farmer — a small, non-profit group designed to promote food-growing in downtown areas. Growing your own food right where you live was the obvious alternative to pesticide-covered produce and shrinking agricultural land space. Thus, the City Farmer aimed to educate the public and promote awareness about urban gardening. Call it, if you will, taking control over the quality of food that you eat.

Today, Mike heads the entire operation, teaching people how to set up just about every kind and size of city garden you can think of: in schoolgrounds, on office building rooftops, and in community parks.

Its mere existence after 13 years of hard work in the modest office on Homer Street, proves the City Farmer's success. Something is working. People are listening, paying attention, trying it out for themselves. And with the occasional grant from companies like Imperial Oil, extra staff is hired on a contract basis and the City Farmer can undertake projects such as the one in 1981, when they constructed a food garden in Kitsilano, alongside the Energy Information Centre. The organisation has recently been hired to instruct the engineering staff of the city of Vancouver about city gardens. Yet no money is spent on advertising; all publicity is word of mouth.

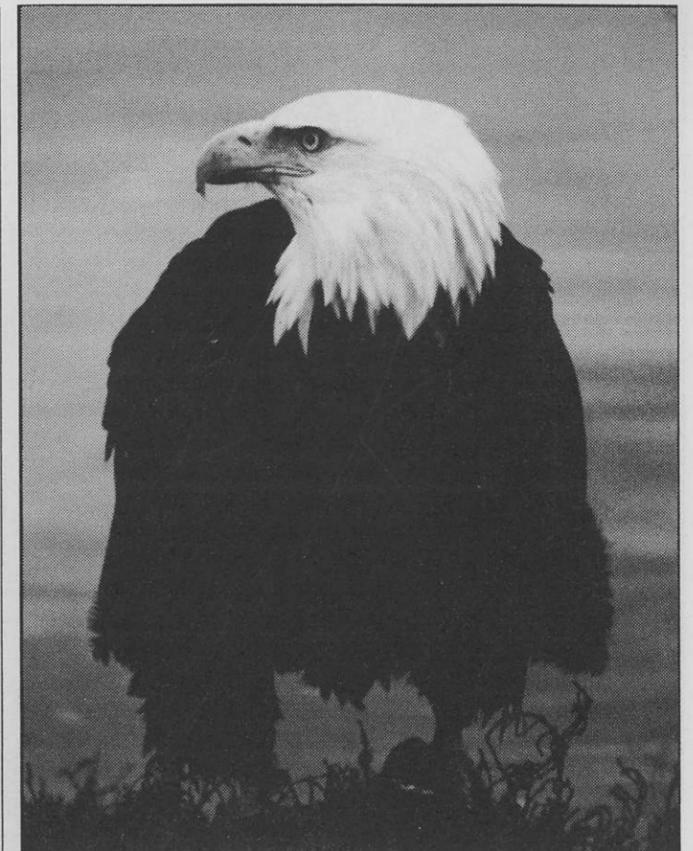
Every year, the City Farmer takes on a single issue for its main focus, the latest being home composting and waste reduction, both politically popular ideas. Mike particularly would like the public to consider using some of the new, very effective rodent-resistant composting bins.

If you would like to know more about urban gardening and/or home composting, City Farmer is listed in the Vancouver phone book at 685-5832. Maybe you'd like to start a City Farmer in Victoria!

1991 VNHS Distinguished Service Award Winners

Each year at its Annual Banquet, the Society recognizes members who have given outstanding service over many years. This year the following members received the Distinguished Service Award:

Mark Nyhof - former editor of the magazine
Ed L. Coffin - long time membership secretary
The society thanks them both for all they have done over the years.



Bald Eagle. (Photo: Steve Pridgeon)



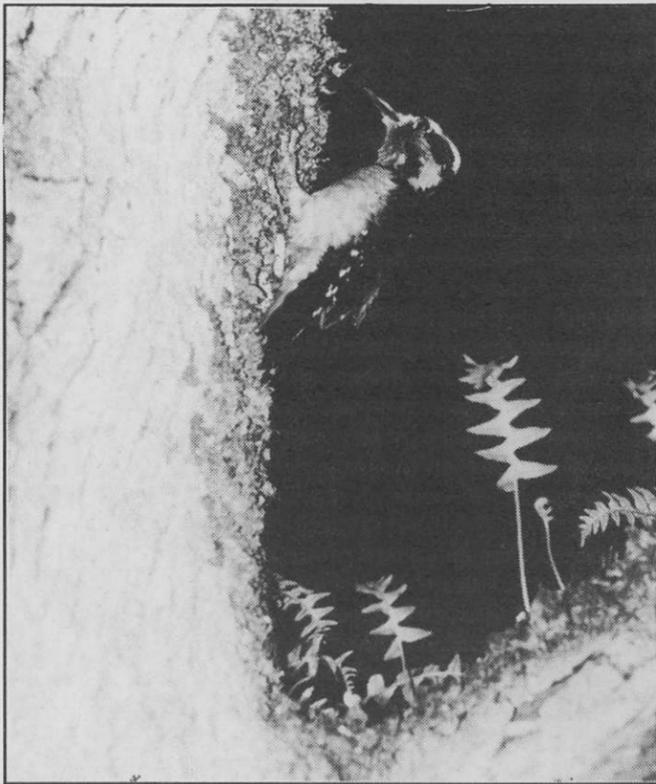
Photo credit: Alexandra Morton, Raincoast Research

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Hairy Woodpecker. (Photo: Steve Pridgeon)

Why Natural History?

By D. Scott Slocombe

As I sat in my office the other day, looking at the few providentially placed trees outside my window, I realized how important natural history is: what it has contributed to science, through great naturalists such as Charles Darwin and George Wallace and through the theory of evolution; what it has contributed to literature, through writers from Gilbert White to Barry Lopez; and what it contributes to society through encouraging individual alertness to environmental insanities and inanities.

I thought about how natural history links ecology (the science of the distribution and abundance of species) and aesthetics (appreciation for the beauty of the natural world from butterflies to mountains). Aldo Leopold put it concisely and poetically almost fifty years ago in *Sand County Almanac*: "A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise."

I thought about what individuals gain from engaging in natural history. These gains are as varied as the individuals themselves, but perhaps I can suggest some commonalities. First, through the most basic familiarity with the natural world around them, people realize the diversity of nature. From that diversity they gain a sense of the uniqueness, the beauty and the irreplaceability of nature.

Over time, often surprisingly little time, the naturalist comes to appreciate the interactions and relationships of the many, widespread, components of the natural world. This realization follows almost inevitably from the true meaning of natural history. It follows from taking time to observe and remember: looking and listening and smelling, through the seasons and years. Ultimately, it perhaps follows through decades.

Studying natural history means learning about species, visiting natural areas, looking for what you like best: flowers, birds, whatever. As in the pursuit of education, it is hard not to notice things other than those you set out to find. Some species are found only with other species, and only in certain habitats. Other species decline, perhaps because of hunting and habitat loss, near at hand and far, far away. A favourite natural area is complexly known through its parts. It is beauty and changes — and then gives way to the inexorable erosion of development. Studying natural history may not always bring peace to the soul, as nature's losing battles raise our blood pressure, but maybe it keeps us honest.

I thought of a Zen saying of Sunryu Suzuki's: "In the beginner's mind there are many possibilities; in the expert's there are few". The complexity of nature keeps naturalists beginners, avoiding the overconfident certainties that both ignorance and too many facts often breed.

(Editor's Note: "Why Natural History?" was a runner-up in the Victoria Naturalist story writing contest. Winning stories appeared in *The Victoria Naturalist*, 47.4).

Erratum:

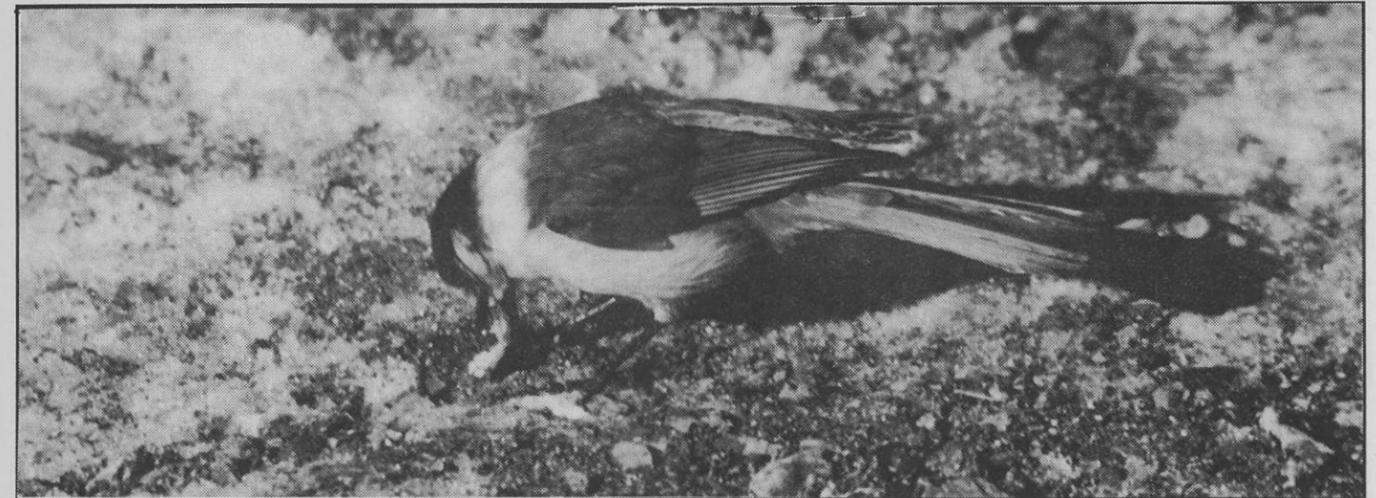
The Book Review on page 19 of the January/February issue was erroneously attributed to Pat Freeman. It was actually written by Richard Watts. We regret any embarrassment this may have caused.

Letter to the Editor

Editor,
The Victoria Naturalist

Regarding the identification of the "unknown butterfly" in the photograph on page 12 of *The Victoria Naturalist* 47.4, it is a *Papilio memnon* (male). This butterfly is a resident from India, east and south through southeast Asia. The species is quite variable over its range, but is illustrated in most books on butterflies of the world.

Chris Guppy
Biological Collections Section
Royal British Columbia Museum



Whiskey Jack (Grey Jay). (Photo: Diana Jolly)

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CALENDAR

 **REGULAR MEETINGS** are generally held as follows: Board of Directors meetings the first Tuesday of each Month; Botany Night the third Tuesday and Birder's Night the fourth Wednesday of each month. Locations are given in the calendar listings.

FIELD TRIPS. Please meet at the location indicated for each trip and **BRING A LUNCH.** Be equipped for changes in weather, with hat, rain gear and boots, if necessary. **Always phone the VNHS Events Tape at 479-2054 before a trip** to get further details or find out about changes in plans. On VNHS trips, participants usually pool vehicles to reduce parking problems and costs. The Board suggests that fuel costs be shared with the driver.

MARCH EVENTS

 **Friday, March 1.**
A West Coast Symposium at The Institute of Ocean Sciences in Sidney from 9:00 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. The ecology and status of marine and shoreline birds on the West Coast of Vancouver Island will be the main topic of discussion. Included will be paper presentations on the physical and biological environment, prey organisms, populations and feeding ecology of breeding waterbirds, and threats of oil spills, pesticides and logging on birds. There is a ten dollar registration fee, payable at the door. All attendees will receive a free copy of the proceedings. Contact Kees Vermeer (356-6537) or Rob Butler (946-8546) to register.

Tuesday, March 5.
Board of Directors' Meeting at 7:30 p.m. in Clifford Carl Reading Room, Cunningham Building, UVic.

Tuesday, March 12.
VNHS Annual General Meeting at 8:00 p.m. in Room 159, Begbie Building, UVic. This is an important meeting with executive elections and a fee increase proposal. Our guest is Bill Merilees, immediate past president of the Vancouver Natural History Society, Bill will give an illustrated talk on "Doing What Comes Naturally—A Look at What Naturalists Do Best in British Columbia". Bill will review the impressive contribution made by naturalists and discuss exciting new directions for us. He is Coordinator of Visitor Services for B.C. Parks, Strathcona district, and has extensive experience in linking naturalists with museums, parks and wildlife management.

Saturday, March 16.
Experience Owling! Alan MacLeod (382-3854) will lead a trip to hunt for local species. Meet at Red Barn of Sandwood Farms at 2:00 a.m. That's 2:00 A.M.! Bring a flashlight, very warm clothes and good spirits (nonalcoholic kind). See you there.

Wednesday, March 27.
Birder's Night at 7:30 p.m. in Begbie 159, UVic. Robert Ward presents "A Photographic Tour of Birds and their Locations in Greater Victoria". Included will be a discussion of where to go and at what time of year in order to capture certain species on film.

APRIL EVENTS

 **Tuesday, April 2.**
Board of Directors' Meeting at 7:30 p.m. in Clifford Carl Reading Room, Cunningham Building, UVic.

Saturday, April 6.
Lilies of Cuthbert Homes Park and Other Locales with Dannie Carsen & Bev Glover. We'll spend the morning looking for early wildflowers. Meet at the parking lot near Tillicum Mall at 8:30 p.m.

Tuesday, April 9.
VNHS General Meeting at 8:00 p.m. in Room 159, Begbie Building, UVic. Dr. Olga Kukal will present "Alive but Frozen: How Woolly-bear Caterpillars Survive Many Arctic Winters Near the North Pole". Olga, who recently joined the Biology Department of UVic, has conducted research at an arctic oasis on Ellesmere Island since 1981. She will first show the summer diversity of life in the oasis then focus in on a moth which survives in a frozen state.

Wednesday, April 24.
Birder's Night at 7:30 p.m. in Begbie 159, UVic. We are pleased to have Mark Ross, a biologist/ornithologist/photographer who will speak about "Birds of East Africa" with slides from Kenya, Rwanda, Tanzania, Zaire and Zimbabwe. Mark has lived in Kenya for 12 years and among his jobs he has been an interpreter and photographer for Time-Life and the New York Times.

Sunday, April 28.
Shorebird Trip to Witty's Lagoon with Bruce Wittington (652-1529). Meet at 8:30 a.m. at Helmcken Park & Ride or at 9:00 a.m. at Witty's Lagoon parking lot. If you have trouble with these birds or even avoided them, here's your chance to learn how to sort them out.

COMING IN MAY

 **Monday, May 13.**
FBCN Camp Open Meeting at 8:00 p.m. in Begbie 159, UVic. Neville Winchester of the University of Victoria will present "Life in the Tree Tops," a look at the ecology of the old growth forest canopy of Carmannah Valley. The platform of the Canopy Research Station allows a unique opportunity to study the temperate rain forest at the top end. Everyone welcome.

 **Wednesday, May 15.**
FBCN Camp Open Meeting at 8:00 p.m. in Begbie 159, UVic. We are pleased to have Ian McTaggart Cowan speak about the "Nature Trust". He will discuss areas that have been acquired by this organization to help preserve important natural ecosystems in the province. Everyone welcome.

Saturday, May 18.
FBCN Camp. Sooke Community Assn. Logging Show and Salmon BBQ. Open to club members (non-members also welcome). Tickets \$25.00 each from Lyndis Davis 477-9952. Leave residence parking lot on Sinclair 5:00 p.m. (and let the bus driver be your designated driver). Arrive 6:30 p.m., logging sports 7-8, dinner at 8:00 followed by dancing till 11:00 p.m.

BULLETIN BOARD

 **FBCN Camp**
Volunteers wanted to act as information and resource people on the camp field trips. No need to be an expert as any general information (history, weather, vegetation etc.) will be of interest to our visitors. The trip schedule is as follows:

- | | |
|---------------|---|
| Mon. May 13 | Esquimalt Lagoon/Fort Rodd Hill
Witty's Lagoon |
| Tues. May 14 | Goldstream Park
Thetis Lake |
| Wed. May 15 | Sidney Spit
Mt Tzuhalem Ecological Reserve/
Cowichan Bay |
| Thurs. May 16 | Botanical Beach
Swan Lake Water Life
Island View Beach/Bear Hill |
| Fri. May 17 | Provincial Museum/Beacon Hill Park
Swan Lake Water Life
Elk Lake-hike |
| Sat. May 18 | Butchart Gardens
Gowland Range
Island View Beach |

Choose the trip/s that you wish to help with and phone Hank Vander Pol 658-1924 to 'register'.

FBCN Camp May 12-19
Volunteers needed to make goodies, serve tea and coffee after evening lectures. Contact Lyndis Davis (477-9952).

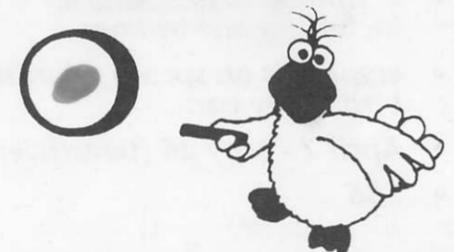
Volunteers Needed For Martindale Flats Study
The Victoria Natural History Society (VNHS) has embarked on a wildlife survey of the Martindale Valley. The purpose of this study is to provide the VNHS with quantitative information on the wildlife use of the area. This information will be used by the Parks and Conservation Committee of the VNHS to make informed submissions regarding land use of the valley. We will be concentrating on accurate estimates of the common birds of this area so one doesn't have to be an expert to be involved. If you can tell a Mallard from a Trumpeter Swan, then you qualify for the study. This survey will be carried out

for at least one year and involves volunteers contributing two hours on either a Saturday or Sunday morning. If you can only volunteer for one day for the whole year, that is fine. All surveys start at 8:00 a.m., at the Barn Market at the corner of Island View Road and the Pat Bay Highway. If you are going birding at times other than those already mentioned and would be willing to put two hours in, we could also use your help. Volunteer observers will be given a map and a checklist of the birds to fill in. **Please call Eric Walters at 385-0927** to register and he will give you further information. It is **VERY important that you register** with Eric so that he can give you the map showing the area you will be responsible for as well as making sure we have enough volunteers each week to make the study worthwhile.

Attention Junior Members of the Victoria Natural History Society The Editors of *The Victoria Naturalist* would like to announce a new page for members 18 years of age and under. Since a portion of our subscribers are families with children, we feel that young people, too, should have the opportunity to express themselves. We invite and encourage our young subscribers to submit articles and/or drawings on botany, biology, zoology, or any natural history topic that strikes your fancy. We'll print your name and age. Photographs and drawings should be black and white, if possible, since we are not equipped to reproduce from colour. We reserve the right to edit and condense articles when necessary. Send us something to put in the next issue.

Send to:
Diana Jolly
Managing Editor
4368 Wilkinson Rd.
Victoria, B.C.
V8Z5B7.

Seeing spots?



Do you have an orange dot in this circle? If so, you have not paid your dues prior to the January 1, 1991 deadline, and you have already received two free copies of the *Naturalist*. To ensure that you receive the next issue of the magazine and continue your membership in the Society, please forward your dues immediately to Box 5220, Stn. B., Victoria, B.C., V8R 6N4.



P.O. Box 5220, Stn. B
Victoria, B.C. V8R 6N4

Darren Copley
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VICTORIA, B C V8Z 6K2

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UVic Biology Department

- 1 introductory lecture
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- April 6 - May 11 (tentative)
- \$49

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the field-naturalist



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