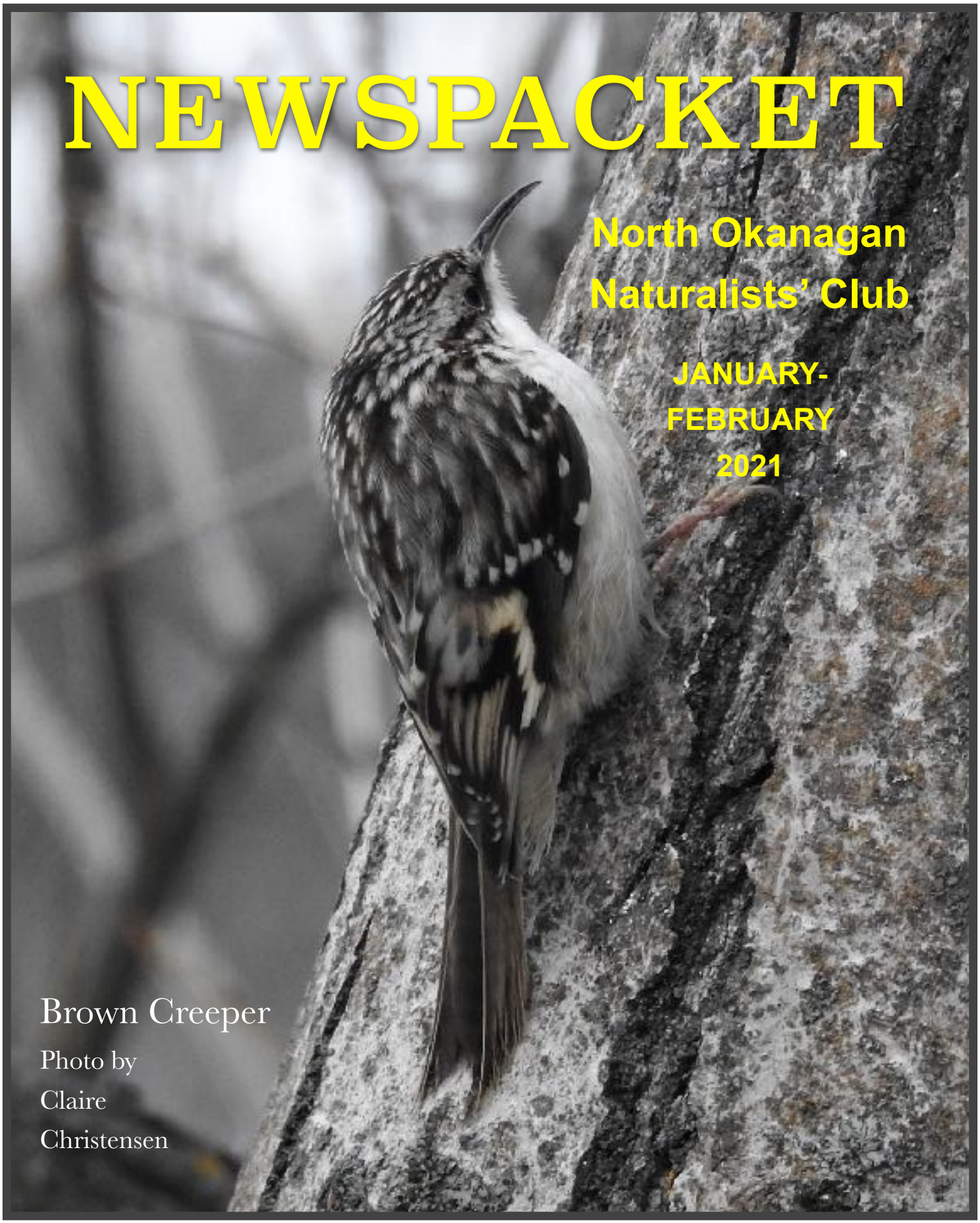
NEWSPACKET

North Okanagan Naturalists' Club

JANUARY-FEBRUARY 2021



Brown Creeper

Photo by Claire Christensen

How Do Birds Survive the Winter?

by Bernd Heinrich
All About Birds
from the Living Bird magazine, Winter 2019
via Margaret MacKenzie

IT seems logical that most birds flee the northern regions to overwinter somewhere warmer, such as the tropics. Their feat of leaving their homes, navigating and negotiating often stupendous distances twice a year, indicates their great necessity of avoiding the alternative—of staying and enduring howling snowstorms and subzero temperatures.

However, some birds stay and face the dead of winter against seemingly insurmountable odds. That they can and do invites our awe and wonder, for it requires solving two problems simultaneously.

The first is maintaining an elevated body temperature—generally about 105°F for birds—in order to stay active. Humans in the north, with our 98.6°F body temperatures, face the same problem during winter of staying warm enough to be able to function, as anyone walking barefoot at –30°F will attest to within seconds.

The second problem to be surmounted in winter is finding food. For most birds, food supplies become greatly reduced in winter just when food is most required as fuel for keeping them warm.
One might wonder if birds are endowed with a magic winter survival trick. The short answer is: they aren't. They solve the winter survival problem in many ways, often by doing many things at once. Although some species have devised the evolutionary equivalent of proprietary solutions, most birds follow a simple formula: maximize calories ingested while minimizing calories spent.

Black-Capped Chickadees
Chickadees (like most year-round northern birds) brave the winter in their bare uninsulated legs and feet. Yet their toes remain flexible and functional at all temperatures, whereas ours, if that small, would freeze into blocks of ice in seconds. Don't they get cold?

They do. Their feet cool down to near freezing, close to 30°F. Of course, a bird's comfort level for foot temperature is likely very different from ours; they would not feel uncomfortable until the point when damage occurs from freezing (ice crystal formation). But chickadee feet don't freeze, and that's because their foot temperature is regulated near the freezing point and may stay cold most of the time all winter, even as core body temperature stays high.

Every time the bird sends heat (via blood) from the body core to the extremities, it must produce more heat in the core for replacement. Thus, if a chickadee maintained its feet at the same temperature as its body core, it would lose heat very rapidly, and that would be so energetically costly that any bird doing so would quickly be calorie depleted. Birds maintaining warm feet would be unlikely to be able to feed fast enough to stay warm and active.

However, a chickadee's feet are provided with continuous blood flow. The warm arterial blood headed toward the feet from the body runs next to veins of cooled blood returning from the feet to the body. As heat is transferred between the outgoing and incoming veins, the blood returning into the body recovers much of the heat that would otherwise be lost flowing out.

Birds retain heat in their body core by fluffing out their feathers. Chickadees may appear to be twice as

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fat in winter as in summer. But they aren't. They are merely puffed up, thickening the insulation around their bodies. At night, they reduce heat loss by seeking shelter in tree holes or other crevices, and by reducing their body temperature—the smaller the difference in temperature between the bird and its environment, the lower the rate of heat loss. Still, the bird may have to shiver all night and burn up most of its fat reserves, which then must be replenished the next day in order to survive the next night.

Nighttime is crunch time for winter survival because no food calories are coming in to replace those being expended. It is a tight energy balance, but by lowering body temperature and turning down heat production at night, chickadees and other small birds of winter spare the cushion of fat accumulated during the day.

While physiology is a key component of surviving the cold by temperature regulation, the more critical factor is food input. That little chickadee's internal furnace must be fed and stoked. Following chickadees in the winter woods, and watching them closely, reveals another secret of their winter survival.

Chickadees in winter travel in groups. In Maine, I seldom see them alone. Exploring for food, they appear to pick at just about everything, and when one chickadee finds something to eat, its neighbours notice and join in. All the while the chickadee winter flock learns by trial and error, and from each other.

For foraging chickadees in winter, food options are still broad—from various seeds, spiders, and spider eggs, to insects and their pupae. Invertebrates may seldom be seen out in the open during winter in the frozen North, but they're around—hidden in the ground, under bark, even underwater—as they employ their own winter survival strategies.

Some caterpillars overwinter in a state of being frozen solid to tree branches. In one instance I found a flock of chickadees feeding on minute caterpillars hidden within the scale-like evergreen leaves of a cedar. Some lucky chickadee had discovered this cache of frozen caterpillars, perhaps with the help of a clue—a blemishing stain on the leaf from the caterpillars' previous munching.

Golden-crowned Kinglet photo by Claude Rioux

Golden-crowned Kinglets

These diminutive coniferous-forest gnomes (about half the weight of a chickadee) are, because of their size, the ultimate marvels in warm-blooded winter survival.

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Unlike chickadees, Golden-crowned Kinglets almost exclusively eat insects for their diet, yet they are too small to handle some of the larger food items—such as a silk-moth cocoon filled with a pupa. Kinglets are not cavity nesters like chickadees, and therefore not predisposed to enter tree holes for sheltering overnight. Thus, at both ends of the energy equation —food input and heat retention—Golden-crowned Kinglets seem highly challenged. Yet I have positively identified them in the Maine winter woods at –30°F.

Various scenarios have been proposed for how these kinglets manage to survive winter, such as overnighting in squirrel nests. But having followed them many winters, I found no evidence of that. The Golden-crowned Kinglets I have observed traveled in small flocks of about half a dozen, often accompanying chickadees, yet I was never able to find where or how they spent the night. It was always almost pitch dark when I saw them last, and then they vanished suddenly. Could they have disappeared where I had last seen them?

That turned out to be the case. On one evening I saw four kinglets disappear into a pine tree. Later that night, with extreme caution and armed with a flashlight, I climbed the tree and spied a four-pack of Golden-crowned Kinglets huddled together into one bunch, heads in and tails out, on a twig. One briefly stuck its head out of the bunch, and quickly retracted it—indicating it was staying warm, and not in cold torpor.

Using each other as a heat source, as a means of reducing their own heat loss, is an ingenious strategy, as it alleviated these birds from searching for or returning to a suitable shelter at the end of the day. By traveling as a group and converging to huddle, they were their own shelter instead.

Woodpeckers

Woodpeckers have the tools and behaviour to stay fed all winter. Their long, drill-bit bills and ability to cling to tree trunks and branches allow woodpeckers to access wood-boring insect larvae (Hairy and Downy Woodpeckers), and also hibernating carpenter ants (Pileated Woodpeckers). As for overnight shelter, woodpeckers do something that few other birds can do: make themselves a shelter specifically for overnighting.

Downy Woodpecker
photo by
Harold Sellers

Shelter-building is an evolutionary outgrowth from making a nesting cavity in spring, but their winter dens differ substantially. I usually find the first evidence of woodpecker overnight shelters after the first frosts in late October or November. On the forest floor, I look for accumulations of light-coloured wood chips on top of the recently fallen leaves or on snow; then I look up.

The excavated roosting cavity is usually in a rotting snag. In contrast, nesting holes are excavated in

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snags with more solid wood. The winter overnight shelters are often within about 6 feet of the ground, at least three times lower than a nesting cavity. The same woodpeckers attend their same roost hole nightly and may use it all winter long.

But not necessarily. Sometimes an overnighting hole, which can be excavated in as little as a day, is only used for a few days. Existing holes are also used opportunistically; in one case I flushed both a Downy and a Hairy Woodpecker out of the same hole. Usually, though, a hole is used by only one woodpecker at a time. I suspect the woodpeckers' shelters are so good, and their food supply so secure, that huddling in groups, as in kinglets, is not a necessity.

Ruffed Grouse

Ruffed Grouse can fly well for short distances when they have to, but they spend most of their time grounded. However, in winter their food supply is in the tops of the trees, where they feed on the buds of aspen, poplar, birches, and hophornbeam that are packed with nutrients and ready to burst into flower and leaf right after the first thaws of spring.

Winter is no time of food scarcity for grouse. A grouse in the top of a tree can pick enough buds in about 15 minutes to support its overnight needs. Similarly, at dawn it can feed again in a short time, filling its crop with enough buds to support its needs throughout the day. A half-hour is a trivial time investment in feeding, compared to a kinglet or a chickadee that can barely get enough food-as-fuel while foraging nonstop for the entire day.

Casual observers in the North Woods seldom see grouse in winter, even though grouse would seem to be hard to miss because of their large size. Bird watchers look for Ruffed Grouse at dusk and dawn, when they fly up into a tree, usually in the company of others, to quickly scarf down tree buds.

They can ingest so much food in just a few minutes because, unlike most other birds in the winter woods, they possess a large crop (a pouch-like extension of the esophagus where food can be stored). The crop is like a bag that, after being filled, can later deliver food to the gizzard for digestion throughout the day or night.

What then do Ruffed Grouse do with the rest of the winter day? For two winters I studied our local Ruffed Grouse in western Maine to find out. When there was fluffy snow, our grouse spent most of the day under the snow. The length of time they denned there could be calculated by counting poop. I found, from known snow-den residency times, that grouse produce on average 3.7 fecal pellets per hour. In one night, they produced about 60 fecal pellets, suggesting they may not just overnight in a snow den, but spend as long as 16 hours under the snow. That is, they also spent part of the day submerged.

Grouse are well known to burrow under the snow for insulation from the cold, and thus save energy. And grouse can access plenty of food, given the abundant tree buds available for them to eat. The winter survival problem to surmount, instead, is not so much to find enough to eat, but rather not to be eaten.

Grouse are a favourite prey of raptors in the winter woods. Unlike the Arctic ptarmigans, they do not moult into a camouflage of white feathers in winter. Ruffed Grouse stay earthen-coloured all year long, which makes them visible on white snow from afar. A plump Ruffed Grouse perched atop a bare tree is a convenient offering for a Great Horned Owl or

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goshawk. The Ruffed Grouse's snow dens, then, may also be a means of reducing predation.

It might be supposed that small perching birds might benefit greatly from snow-burrowing as well, at least during the night. But by and large, they don't. High Arctic–dwelling redpolls and Snow Buntings may shelter briefly under snow drifts, but no small birds in the northern United States and southern Canada den in the snow overnight.

The fact that they don't, given the huge potential benefit from insulation, is likely explained by the potential cost. Warming on some sunny winter days melts the top layer of snow, which then refreezes into a solid seal of crust at night. A whole population of small birds over a huge area, then, could be killed in a single night—locked beneath the snow to starve and be vulnerable to subnivian mammals. The large size of the grouse not only gives it a large advantage in energy balance, relative to songbirds, but that size also makes escape from the snow easier if needed.

Crows and Ravens

Every winter crows gather by the thousands in communal roosts where they sleep at night. Come morning they sally forth on their daily excursions, but again they return in groups at night. Such roosts are often in an urban area, where masses of crows convene in the same area each winter.

Like the snow-denning of grouse, this phenomenon is unlikely to be explained by one function only. Communal roosts serve as information centres. They are where knowledge of food locations is shared, probably unintentionally, as those crows that don't know where there is a dump or a corn field simply follow others, which then becomes the crowd. The presence of many crows together also spreads the risk of predator attack at night, as well as provides a social network for mutual warnings of danger.

Ravens are quintessential winter birds that live and thrive in winter like few others. They range into the High Arctic and begin nesting in mid-February in northern North America. Their large size is an advantage, as they have a slower rate of heat loss than other passerines. Ravens also exploit carnivores such as wolves (and perhaps human hunters), and they profit from each other's experiences, thus pooling information.

Ravens will kill almost any animal they can catch, but given their high energy needs, surviving winter for them means feeding on the carcasses of large animals they could never kill. Under natural conditions, ravens arrive at and feed on wolf kills within minutes after a pack kills an ungulate. In other areas, a single raven may locate a carcass and return to the nocturnal roost, at which point a crowd of ravens follows the discoverer to the food bonanza.

The first fortunate raven to discover the carcass probably does not share information with its fellow ravens willingly. During the breeding season a territorial pair of ravens will fiercely defend a carcass from others. But in winter, ravens share food as a crowd. By accessing large clumped food resources, ravens can range as far north as their providers—wolves, humans, and polar bears.

Ravens also capitalize on a temporary abundance of food by caching surpluses. Storing food is an insurance policy against the uncertainty of future food availability during the lean times of snow and cold. Surviving winter is not always survival of the biggest and strongest. It is a matter of mastering the equation of energy input versus output, taking into account all of the variables and always leaving enough calories to live another day.

Birds of the North Okanagan, Part 11: Autumn 2020 30 Oct. – 29 Dec.

by Chris Siddle

All sightings, unless otherwise noted, were made by the author. Sightings of unusual or rare birds require documentation in the form of carefully written physical description of the birds or (preferably) photography. Send your sightings directly to chris.siddle@gmail.com or enter them in the online program eBird.

Weather: The autumn was milder than usual, with temperatures 2 to 3 degrees Celsius higher than usual. Ponds froze over by mid-November but parts of Swan Lake stayed open until mid -December. Snowfall was minimum.

Contributors by initials: Roger Beardmore (RB); Loretta Bemister (LB); Rick Bonar (RBo); Don Cecile (DC); Chris Charlesworth (CC); Aaron Deans (AD); Glen Goerzen (GG); Jasmine Korcok (JK); Gail Loughridge (GL); Laurel Macdonald (LM); Pat McCallister (PMc); R. Newell (RN); Claude Rioux (CR); Harold Sellers (HS); Chris Siddle (CS); Scott Tompson (ST); Jack VanDyk (JVD): Lisa VanDyk (LVD); Marnie Williamson (MW). Many observers (m. ob.) Christmas Bird Count (CBC).

Waterfowl

Individual or very small numbers of Snow Geese, often juveniles, were spotted at Rawlings, Swan and Otter lakes from 30 Oct. to 16 Dec. Greater White-fronted Geese, which are rare to uncommon but yearly migrants in the North Okanagan from late August to late Oct. were recorded only once: two immatures with Trumpeter Swans and other waterfowl 1 Dec. at Grindrod (RB). Perhaps because of the mild weather Trumpeter Swan were present in smaller than usual number, with a top count of 37 at the Okeefe Ranch cornfield 12 Dec. Tundra Swans were almost absent this season. One juv.at Rawlings Lake 4 Nov. (ST; CS) and possibly the same bird at Okeefe Pond, variously labelled Trumpeter or Tundra swan 25 Nov. (m. ob.). An adult pair of Tundras was at Rawlings Lake 1 Dec. (ST).

Northern Shovelers hung in as a group of 34+ until after 16 Dec. when Swan Lake froze over completely. As usual Northern Pintails vanished as the season progressed with the last seven birds before the Christmas Count (20 Dec.) at the north end of Kalamalka Lake 12 Dec. (CS). An Eurasian Wigeon was at Goose Lake 2 – 22 Nov. (JVD) for a rare autumn sighting. Notable stray waterfowl included a White-winged Scoter on Okeefe Pond 1 Nov. (CS) and a Long-tailed Duck at the n. end of Otter Lake and Okeefe Pond 31 Oct. – 19 Nov. (JK). Of note was a beautiful hybrid drake Hooded MerganserXBarrow's Goldeneye, not this area's first by any means, discovered on Westside Road km 0.5 Pond 8 Nov. (CS) and photographed a few days later on the Armstrong Sewage Lagoons (CR).

Grouse, Quail, and allies

Habitat loss around Vernon is vividly illustrated by the dramatic decline in Ring-necked Pheasants in the North Okanagan. From 1999-2007 Christmas Bird Counts for Vernon of 200+ pheasants were frequent. In about 2008 a sharp decline begins, ending with only 52 counted on the 2020 count.

Doves

A summary of Vernon Christmas Count results 2017-2020 produced by complier Rick Bonar seems

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to indicate that Eurasian Collared Dove numbers reached a peak of just over 600 in 2017 and have since declined each year since. The 2020 tally was 281 collared doves.

Hummingbirds

An Anna's Hummingbird survived at Pottery Road throughout the fall and early winter due to a heated feeder (JVD). A second Anna's was discovered on Turtle Mountain 20 Dec. (HS).

Cranes

Some Sandhill Crane populations in western North America appear to be responding to warmer than normal autumns by lingering in their breeding ranges before migrating south to their winter grounds. A pair seen as late as 1 Nov. at Rawlings Lake (ST) and a pair at Swan Lake grasslands trail 16 Nov. (LM) were very late sightings.

Shorebirds

A few scattered Killdeer lingered with two at MacKay Reservoir 11 Nov. (ST; CS) and a very late one on the gull sandbars at Okanagan Landing 23 Dec. (JVD). A Dunlin at MacKay also 11 Nov. (ST;CS) was a good find. Dunlin are scarce annual transients through the North Okanagan in late spring, late fall and occasionally winter. The 2020 Christmas Count's only Wilson Snipe was found in its usual spot, foraging along the unfrozen streamlet in Kekuli Bay Provincial Park 20 Dec. (CS). Snipe usually overwinter in tiny numbers at such unfrozen sites throughout the North Okanagan.

Gulls

Gulls were top of mind for a few N. Okanagan birders who struggled to improve their gull identification skills. Five Bonaparte's Gulls at the mouth of Vernon Creek, Ok. Landing, 16 Nov. were quite late (GL). The juvenal Mew Gull with the unusually thin mandibles which was first spotted at n. Kalamalka Lake 24 Sept. remained through the fall showing up at Okanagan Landing and Kalamalka Lake Rotary pier several times. An adult Lesser Black-backed Gull appeared at Okanagan Landing for one day only on 23 Dec. (CS). Two first-year Glaucous Gull was first spotted at Okanagan Landing 9 Dec. and one remained among the gulls on the sandbars there through the end of the period (CS).

Herons

Fewer than usual Great Blue Herons are attempting to overwinter in the North Okanagan. On 2 Dec. the high count was 11 standing on a hanger roof along the shore of Swan L. (CS). On 20 Dec. during the Christmas count only 9 were spotted in the whole count circle.

Hawks and allies

Northern Harrier numbers continue to shrink in the N. Okanagan. Only 4 were tallied on the Christmas Count. Contrast this to thirty-three seen on the 1998 count or 22 seen on the 2015 count. Sharp-shinned Hawks seemed unusually scarce during the fall, except for semi-residents at well-established feeders, but Cooper's Hawks were fairly common. No doubt part of the problem is that Sharpies seldom perch in prominent places like tree and pole tops, whereas the bolder Coop habitually does so (B. Wheeler, *Birds of Prey of the West, A Field Guide*, Princeton, 2018).

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Birds of the North Okanagan continued

Northern Goshawks were reported three times: an imm. at Otter Lake 31 Oct. (CS); an imm. along the Grey Canal Trail near DeRoo Rd. 18 Nov. (PMc) and an imm. over Vernon Mountain 19 Nov. (CS). Red-tailed Hawks, including a few fairly well-described Harlan's Hawks, remained plentiful throughout the period. Observers are reminded that before you can claim a Harlan's Hawk you need to see (and hopefully photograph) the bird's tail pattern. To the inexperienced birder there's little difference between a dark morph Red-tail and a dark morph Harlan's. A classic dark morph Harlan's Hawk perched along Silver Star Rd. off and on 28 Nov. – 3 Dec. (CS).

Falcons

A male Peregrine Falcon atop a snag along Lookout Trail in Kalamalka Lake Prov. Park 12 Dec. was a stunner (CS). Although sightings of Peregrines have increased over the past decade in the N. Ok. the bird remains most uncommon in winter.

Flycatchers

A Say's Phoebe appeared at an Adventure Bay home 26 Dec. (LB). The bird, the hardiest of the New World Flycatchers, normally migrates well south of B.C. for the winter, but is one of our earliest songbirds to return in the spring.

Vireos

Sightings of a very late Cassin's Vireo were part of the collateral observations that resulted from birders' searches along the Polson Park pathway for the Prairie Warbler in very late October. The vireo was first spotted 28 Oct. and continued until 31 Oct. (CS, m. ob.)

Chickadees

A single Chestnut-backed Chickadee was detected at Polson Park pathway 31 Oct. (CC) and not seen again until 26 Nov. (ST).

Kinglets

Golden-crowned Kinglets were scarce this season. Ruby-crowned Kinglets, which normally migrate out of the North Okanagan for the winter, occurred in tiny numbers in sheltered places. One was found along the rail trail between Kekuli Bay Pr. P. 20 Dec. (CR) while two frequented the Polson Park pathway through the earlier parts of the season (GG, m. ob.)

Catbird and Thrushes

An injured Gray Catbird was seen at 8690 Okanagan Landing Road 21 Dec. (RN) and was added as a count week bird to the Vernon CBC. Western Bluebirds lingered or perhaps attempted to overwinter in the N. Ok. during the fall. A higher than usual count of 35, the total of three parties' sightings, was made on 20 Dec. during the CBC. Only one Varied Thrush was reported on the CBC; however, two days earlier five had been seen in MW's well-wooded neighbourhood. A Swainson's Thrush, a neotropical migrant usually departing the N. Ok in Sept. lingered along the Polson Park pathway and was spotted 26 Nov. (LVD, JVD, CS) through 1 Dec. (ST; DC; CS).

Waxwings

So far this winter Bohemian Waxwings have appeared in smaller than usual numbers, with only 538 reported on the CBC. Small numbers of Cedar Waxwings lingered around choke cherries along the

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Birds of the North Okanagan continued

Polson Park pathway in early Dec. (JVD; m. ob.)

Finches

House Finch numbers continued to drop throughout the region perhaps because of House Finch disease which is widespread. As usual for early winter Cassin's Finches appeared only as singles or doubles at a few feeders. Redpolls were almost entirely absent even as eastern Canada and the United States had a bumper redpoll year. Red Crossbills were present in the N. Ok. in small numbers, while White-winged Crossbills were even scarcer and restricted to upper altitudes. Two Snow Buntings on the Commonage 20 Dec. (ST) were special since this species is usually missed on Vernon CBCs.

Blackbirds

A single female Yellow-headed Blackbird was among a flock of Red-winged Blackbirds gathering prior to roosting in the marsh at the south end of Swan Lake 14 Nov. (CS). As usual Brewer's Blackbirds wintered locally at Coldstream Ranch.

Wood-Warblers

The Prairie Warbler, the Okanagan's first and B.C.'s fourth photographed Prairie, proved an off-and-on wonder along Polson Park pathway. Discovered in late Oct. (GG), the bird delighted dozens of birders during the 30-31 Oct. weekend, but thereafter was usually hard to find. The Prairie Warbler was last seen 26 Nov. (GL; ST). A lingering Wilson's Warbler was a little easier to find along the same boardwalk. It was last seen 8 Dec. (ST).

Tanager

An imm. Western Tanager at Bishop Bird Sanctuary 20 Dec. was a first winter record for the N. Ok. (AD).

A very big THANK YOU to all the members listed below who have donated so generously towards the Swan Lake Observation Tower. A total of $4,783 has been raised so far. Another special THANK YOU goes to Norbert Maertens who continues to oversee the project on behalf of our Club. He liaises with both the contractor, Harold and the RDNO staff and deserves recognition for the number of hours he has devoted to this project.

The donations received will be used for enhancements and improvements to the completed project such as signage and possibly a Club Founders memorial plaque. A raised natural walkway from the existing trail to the new tower is also planned so that the viewing structure can be accessed all year long. Stay tuned for progress reports on actual construction of the tower in the new year.

Donations have been received from Rod & Ruth Drennan, Christine & Gerald Driscoll, Marg Kelly, Julia Lissau, Margaret MacKenzie, Doug & Laura MacPherson, Everard & Barbara Miyasaki, Janet Parkins, Eva Royko, Paul Schorn, Harold & Linda Sellers, Chris Siddle, Karen Siemens, Jack & Lyn Smith, John Stelfox, Peter & Judy Stockdale, Bill & Deb Stowell, Bruce Tattersall, Jack & Lisa VanDyk, Bill & Fran Wagner, Paul & Marnie Williamson, Ray & Elizabeth Worley.

If you would like to make a donation, you can do so by e-transfer to Vernon2017fgm@shaw.ca or by sending a cheque to NONC at PO Box 473, Vernon, BC V1T 6M4. A tax receipt will be issued for all donations over $20. — Ruth Drennan, treasurer

Vernon Christmas Bird Count December 20, 2020

by Rick Bonar, Count Co-ordinator

UNDER cloudy skies and temperatures well above freezing (reaching a high of +8), 56 birders and 12 feeder-watchers participated in the 71st annual vernon CBC. Lower elevations were snow-free and there was plenty of open water. It snowed most of the next day!

Many reported a slow day and noted that there were far more birds around in the few days prior. During the day there were periodic bouts of strong winds which may have affected results. Our total count was 13,655, about 40% down from 2019. The biggest declines were for the species that are normally the most abundant: Canada goose (-24%), mallard (-84%), California quail (-63%), pigeons and doves (-45%), crow family (-37%), bohemian waxwing (-60%), house finch (-74%) and red-winged blackbird (-66%). European starlings and dark-eyed junco numbers were similar to 2019. There were notable increases for marsh wren (1 to 7) and western bluebird (0 to 45). Loretta Bemister photographed western bluebirds having a bath in her winterized fountain.

Western Bluebirds, Loretta Bemister photo

We still managed to find 92 species, just 4 down from 2019. Waterfowl species were down 6 and we missed a few regulars such as Virginia rail and short-eared owl.

Species found in 2020 that were not present in 2019 included tundra swan, Anna's hummingbird, killdeer and snow bunting.

The first bird of the morning for Aaron Deans was a spectacular juvenile western tanager eating grapes outside his kitchen window at the Bishop Bird Sanctuary. As best as I can tell, this is a new species for the Vernon CBC.

We have an Anna's hummingbird mystery this winter. A single bird has been regularly visiting feeders maintained by Jack and Lisa Van Dyk and Cathy Wilkins. They are about 2 km apart and have been trying to see if it is one bird going back and forth or two birds. Cathy got a photograph of her bird on the count day but Jack's bird didn't show up until 2 days later. To deepen the puzzle, Harold and Linda Sellers found and photographed an Anna's on Turtle Mountain on count day. It's possible there are 3 Anna's hummingbirds wintering in Vernon this year. Or maybe there's just one very mobile little hummer.

Western Tanager, Aaron Deans photo

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Christmas Bird Count continued

Anna's Hummingbird, Jack VanDyk photo

Every year there are several species with just one individual found and 2020 was no exception with 14 species (12 in 2019). Some of the one-bird-wonders repeat frequently (glaucous gull, American dipper, canyon wren, ruby-crowned kinglet), while others do not. Over the last 4 years 68 species were recorded every year.

Here are the results of the voting for the Bird of the Day for the 2020 Vernon Christmas Bird Count.

The winner with 16 votes is Western Tanager, Aaron Deans. The runner up with 9 votes is Snow Bunting, Chris Siddle party. Others getting votes were Killdeer (3), Anna's Hummingbird (2), Tundra Swan (1) and Western Bluebird (1). Congratulations to the winners!

For those interested, brief summaries of the 2020 B.C. CBCs are being posted on the B.C. Field Ornithologist's website https://bcfo.ca/ The results for the Okanagan Valley communities are all there now.

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raptors (birds of prey) in B.C. is found here in the Vernon area! We will soon lose this wildlife if we continue to allow grasslands to be cut up with housing developments and four-laned bypass highways.

Many people have fallen in love with the Vernon area and moved here in recent years. It may be the climate but it's also what they see as they are driving into the city. It may be the way the bare open hills around them suggest privacy and lack of development. They see the blue of the lakes, the fresh greening of the hills in spring, the golden browns of the summer hills and the light covering of snow on the hills in winter. They say, "We like it here because there is still some green space, some open land." Walking through grasslands in the spring and summer is a magical experience, filled with wild flowers and colourful butterflies and the song of the Meadowlark. Kal Park has only a small grasslands area that is being stretched to its very limits. In terms of high human usage, both vehicle and foot traffic, we are loving the park to death. Or to put it bluntly, to the death of the birds and animals that once had their homes here. With the population increasing in Vernon, one park is not enough to protect the grasslands let alone the wildlife that needs space to survive.

On April 10, 2007, Vernon Council passed a resolution supporting the creation of a Grassland Park in the Vernon area. On May 7, 2007, NONC followed this with its own resolution at the BC Nature AGM. The Bella Vista Highlands and the Commonage grasslands should be preserved from any further development including any highway bypass. Could we possibly preserve this area as a Grassland Park? There isn't room for existing development plus a Grasslands Park plus a major highway. Let's all support the idea NOW of preserving this environmentally rich and threatened grassland.

Keep the Birds Coming!

by Norbert Maertens

DURING the cold days of Winter, the local birds not only need food but also water. Keeping the water source from freezing is a challenge.

Over the years I have been experimenting, using several heated water basins. It is tempting to buy such a heated water basin at an animal food store, but those basins are not only expensive but tend to last only a few years as the bottom slowly corrodes and breaks apart, making the water source useless in winter.

A much cheaper alternative is to use an old slow cooker (small model - cost next to nothing at a garage sale or at Value Village). Take out the pressure switch and remove non-essential wiring, discard the insert container and cover the the inside of the cooker with aluminium foil, fill the cooker with dry sand and place the unit in a milk crate.

The tin foil is intended to keep the dry sand inside the cooker. Place a metal basin on top of the sand while the basin is supported and kept in place by the milk crate. Fill the basin with water and place a rock in the water so birds can access the water without drowning or can still get to the water when the water level becomes low.

The modified slow cooker filled with sand keeps the water from freezing and at just the right temperature without risking slowly cooking the visiting birds. Equally important is to place the water contraption

raised from the ground, so cats cannot easily sneak up on the unsuspecting birds while they have a drink or take a bath.

North Okanagan Grasslands Park

by Margaret MacKenzie

I wrote this article 13 years ago in 2007. Even then it seemed too late to attain protection of our grasslands. Now there is an opportunity to protect a large piece of grassland in the O'Keefe Range.

What is known as the Bella Vista Highlands, until recently, has survived development to a large extent. It is soon to be developed into monocultures of grape vineyards as properties sell to landowners who are interested in profit and have no ecological concerns for the existing environment. The one property has cleared extensively, removed and replaced the soil on the top of the highlands. What chance does specialized grassland wildlife have to live in the midst of sprays and cultivated lands?

The O'Keefe acreage is up for sale for 28 million dollars. This should not be seen as too large for any group, city, club, province etc. to purchase for the preservation of a red-listed grassland area, perhaps the last in the north-eastern part of BC. Monocultures of grapes and orchards are not conducive to an environmentally sound management of land. It is the death of a grassland habitat.

NORTH OKANAGAN GRASSLANDS PARK

WHAT, yet another Park Proposal? Yes, we know there is a movement for a National Grasslands Park in the Southern Okanagan in the Osoyoos area but why create a Grasslands Park here in the North Okanagan? And don't we already have Kalamalka Provincial Park. So why, you might ask, do we need another Park. And what's so special about grasslands anyway?

When I look out over Vernon from the top of Black Rock or Middleton Mountain to the open hills of the Bella Vista Highlands and the inviting hills of the Commonage, I am drawn to them because I know they are covered with clumps of wild Bunch Grasses and sweet Sage, with hillsides covered in blue lupines and yellow balsamroot. In my mind's eye I picture the pockets of Aspen woods with small peaceful ponds and perhaps a pair of Tundra Swans quietly resting or a Wood Duck family secretly nesting. I picture the Western Meadowlark, a true symbol of the Grasslands, calling from the top of a Juniper bush. To know that someday the beautiful song of the Meadowlark may be silenced forever for lack of habitat is a very real possibility.

What are grasslands? The Bella Vista Highlands and the Commonage are the only extensive tracts of grassland left in the North Okanagan. Grasslands are more than just grass, they are filled with shrubs of Saskatoon, Rose and Chokecherry. They have Aspen woodlands and small ponds, some which dry up entirely in the hot summers but provide spring nesting habitat for waterfowl, amphibians and reptiles. Where Grasslands have scattered Ponderosa Pine and Douglas Fir you find an abundance of Warblers and Nuthatches, Woodpeckers and Chickadees. The hills in the Bella Vista and Commonage are filled with Specialized grassland bird species such as Western Meadowlarks, Western Bluebirds, Lazuli Buntings, Vesper and Clay-coloured Sparrows. Other animals too are specialized only for living in grasslands such as the Yellow-bellied Racer, Great Basin Spadefoot Toad, Badger and Short-eared Owl. The Swainson's Hawk, Rough-legged Hawk, Northern Harrier, Golden Eagle and Merlin all require great expanses of grassland to survive. Until now, all have been soaring over our grassland hills. The largest concentration of wintering

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^ Okanagan Collaborative Conservation Program

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Find us on Facebook North Okanagan Naturalists Club

MONTHLY MEETINGS

currently suspended

On the first Wednesday of the month (September through May), we hold a meeting for members and visitors at the Schubert Centre (starting in May). Start time, 7:00 pm. Guest speakers, club news, refreshments.

photo by
Claude Rioux

NONC MEMBERSHIP

Clip or copy this form to begin or renew a membership with the North Okanagan Naturalists' Club. The form is also available on our website. Due to COVID-19 annual dues have been reduced to $20 for an individual or student and $35 for a couple or family. Every member should also complete a Waiver form, available at our website membership page.

Name(s): _____

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_____

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