

# MUSKRAT EXPRESS

WILLIAMS LAKE FIELD NATURALISTS

DECEMBER 2008 NEWSLETTER





The newsletter for the:  
Williams Lake Field Naturalists  
1305A Borland Road, Williams Lake BC, V2G 5K5

**Membership fees:** Family (\$27) or single (\$22) memberships can be mailed to the above address. Please include your address and phone number with your membership fee. For more information about the club please contact Fred McMechan at 392-7680 or e-mail [Fred\\_McMechan@telus.net](mailto:Fred_McMechan@telus.net)

**Executive of The Williams Lake Field Naturalists:** president Fred McMechan, vice-president Jim Sims, secretary Kris Andrews, treasurer Katharine VanSpall and directors Nola Daintith, Ordell Steen, Anna Roberts, Rob Higgins, Rick Dawson and Cathy Koot

**Editors:** If you have comments, suggestions or articles for the Muskrat please contact Margaret Waring (398-7724), Jim Sims (296-3636) or e-mail [simsj@telus.net](mailto:simsj@telus.net)

**Please remember to renew your Williams Lake Field Naturalist membership. A membership form is attached below. Please update your addresses if needed. If you do not need a paper copy please let me know at the above phone or email address. The next Muskrat will be published in late January and will feature a report on the Christmas Bird Count.**

## **Forest Health**

By Bill Chapman

Tuesday January 13 at 7:30pm at Scout Island Nature Centre

Root diseases are common in forests around the world. In managed forests these types of diseases tend to increase in severity with the intensity and length of management time. They can become so severe that they impede commercial production of timber. In the Cariboo we have developed a biological control for Armillaria root disease that is based on the principle that in natural forests, wood decay fungi compete with Armillaria fungus for resources and so limit its extent. The most significant change in a managed forest is that much of the wood is taken away and wood decay fungi and other wood utilizing organisms decrease dramatically in abundance and diversity. For example, most of the red listed species in Fennoscandia (where wood harvesting has gone on for much longer than in most of Canada) are wood utilizing fungi and insects. The consequences of improperly managing wood in forests is dramatic declines in biodiversity and increasing



difficulty in managing for a number of factors- particularly root diseases. It could be argued that

we already take too much wood from our forests and plans to convert woody debris to energy (biofuel) need to balance the value of the fuel versus the value of the services that decaying wood provides to a forest.

The attached picture shows *Hypholoma fasciculare*, our biocontrol fungus, happily eating a stump and so removing it as a potential source of inoculum for *Armillaria* root disease.

## **Geology of the Cariboo Chilcotin**

By George Barker

February 4<sup>th</sup> at 7:30pm at Scout Island Nature Centre

George, formerly head geologist at Gibraltar Mines, will tell us about the geology of the Cariboo-Chilcotin as part of our Naturalist talk series. Bring your geology questions and samples you want help identifying.



## **Help Needed For 41<sup>st</sup> Annual Williams Lake Christmas Bird Count**

The Christmas Bird Count organized by the Williams Lake Field Naturalists will be held on **Sunday, December 14<sup>th</sup>**. The Williams Lake Count began in January 1969 with 15 observers counting 414 birds of 21 species. Some of those original participants will be out counting again this year. The number of observers has risen over the years with around 50 people in the field and at feeders expecting to see at least 50 species with total counts of anywhere between 3000 - 5000 birds. Each year sets a new milestone with new birds added to the list or new records for species high counts.

Last year, the Williams Lake count had 55 bird species, tying for the second highest total since the record of 58 set in 2004. The count also tallied 2 species in record high numbers; 1,613 Bohemian Waxwings and 264 Mountain Chickadees. Some birds such as the Red-breasted Nuthatch and Evening Grosbeak appear to be in decline but only long term data can determine if this is a short term fluctuation or attributable to other factors such as food supply or weather.

About 70 million birds were tallied continent wide during last year's count by a record 58,000 volunteers across N. America. In Canada, 11,565 participants counted over 3.2 million birds on 371 counts. The data gathered by all this work goes into a database used by biologists all over the world to monitor the populations and distribution of North American birds. Some of it is key evidence for serious declines; recently Christmas Bird Count data provided critical information in the decision to list the Rusty Blackbird and the Newfoundland Red Crossbill under the federal 'Species at Risk' Act.

The Williams Lake Field Naturalists will be hosting a workshop on identifying winter birds in our area at the Scout Island Nature Centre starting on Thursday December 11<sup>th</sup> at 7:00 pm. This is a great opportunity to hone up your skills if you are planning on participating in the count or if you have a bird feeder and wonder what species you have in your yard. Everyone is welcome to

participate in the count, no matter what your skill level.

The count area is 24 km diameter centred at the Williams Lake post office. Some boundary points include:

- Bull Mountain in the north (including Wildwood but not Mountain House Road);
- 1/3<sup>rd</sup> the way up the hill to 150 Mile on Hwy 97 beyond Sugarcane,
- Onward Ranch on Mission Road,
- West end of Brunson Lake
- just beyond the Hydro transmission lines on Dog Creek Road in the south;
- the Moon Ranch at Meldrum Creek on the west side of the Fraser,
- the back end of Fox Mountain beyond the natural gas transmission line in the east.

Feeder watchers add greatly to the totals and anyone with an active feeder within the count area is asked to help. If you would like to participate please give count compiler Phil Ranson a call at 398-7110 and call in your feeder totals to Fred McMechan at 392-7680 after 6:00 p.m. on count day.

Results will be submitted to Bird Studies Canada who co-ordinate the counts in conjunction with the National Audubon Society. This information is used to determine trends ranging from the overall health of individual species to the effects of global warming on wintering bird populations. See [www.audubon.org/bird/CBC](http://www.audubon.org/bird/CBC) for more information on the Williams Lake and other Christmas Bird Counts.

Phil Ranson (bird count coordinator)

### Scout Island Nature Centre Notes

The **Art in Nature for Children** course lead by Kathy S teen was wonderful. Ian Higgins helped out each day leading the participants on an exploration walk to help them focus on nature. Then Kathy provided participants with guidance and materials as they explored drawing, pastels, and working with mixed media. We look forward to offering more art classes at the Nature House in the future.



I want to welcome our new Katimavik participant, Samantha Degroot. She is busy developing new quizzes for the Nature House and taking care of the live creatures (not Sue and Jenny). The Nature House is quiet right now as Jenny and I are writing reports on all of the great programs that happened in 2008 to the various organizations that have given grants. We are also busy writing several proposals so that we can add to the programs. We have already received a grant

from the W. Garfield Weston Foundation. One of their board members, Eliza Mitchell, lives in the Chilcotin and often visits Scout Island Nature Centre when in town. She called and asked about our programs and decided to encourage her board to give us a grant towards our “Students Working and Learning in Their Watershed.” That is the program that brings high school students out to work on the river with biologists at the Quesnel River Research Centre. Stop in and say hello and give Jenny and I a break from report writing. Why not borrow one of the books we have on nature in winter. It will give you a whole new perspective on this great season. Winter programs for schools and community groups will start again in January. **Don’t forget the first day of Tracking Club.** This is a great way to get outdoors in this season. Patricia Spencer is leading this. **Saturday Dec. 13<sup>th</sup> at 10 am is the first one at the Nature Centre.** Call her for more information 791 1901

### Great Gift for the Children in your Life—

The Wet Sock Guide, written in 1988 by Gina and Naomi Roberts, has been reproduced in a new format (thanks to Katimavik volunteer help). It costs \$5 and is the perfect companion to one of the magnifying scopes we have for sale (\$13). The two will provide never ending opportunities to look at the variety of life that can be found in water.

### Northern Pygmy Owl

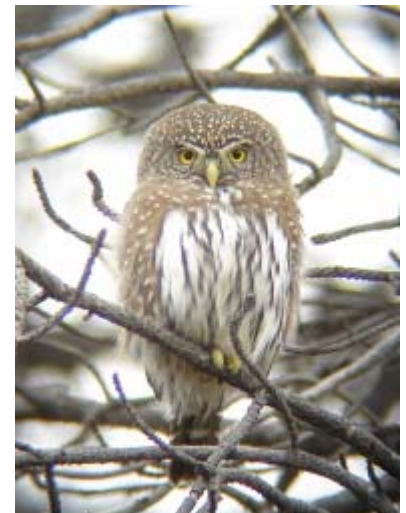
The Northern Pygmy Owl resides year round in the Cariboo but is most often seen in the fall and winter when it moves to lower elevations following the breeding season. It generally appears on the plateau and in the valley bottoms from late October where it perches prominently on the tip of a snag at the edge of a clearing, or sometimes uses roadsides hydro lines where it can be seen staring intently at the grassy banks for signs of prey.



Pygmy's false eyes

As its name implies, the Pygmy Owl is quite small measuring about 6” and those seeing it for the first time have mistaken it for a 'baby' owl. The colouration is typical of diurnal owls; dark brown overall with a brown streaking on the breast and a lightly spotted crown. This bird has one unique feature which is readily noticeable when it turns to reveal ‘false’ eye spots on the back of the head. Presumably this is an adaptation to deter predators – or potential prey - from striking from behind.

Like other owls, the Pygmy Owl prefers small rodents in its diet but will readily take small birds and will even attempt to take larger birds such as a Flicker, if driven by hunger. It is not uncommon for Pygmy Owls to frequent feeders in the winter months where chickadees seem to be favoured prey. As a result the presence of a Pygmy Owl is often



Northern Pygmy Owl

revealed by the alarm calls of small birds, particularly chickadees and nuthatches.

The regularly spaced 'tooting' calls of the Pygmy Owl are easily imitated, and can be used to attract both the Pygmy Owl and its prey. Small birds will respond readily to 'mob' this intruder. Using this imitation technique can add significantly to bird numbers seen on the Christmas Bird Count, particularly Chickadees, Nuthatches and Woodpeckers.

Most sightings cease after March as the bird heads up the mountainsides where it breeds in woodpecker holes in coniferous forests. Very few nests have been found due to the remoteness and often steepness of this preferred habitat. Up to 7 eggs have been recorded which are usually laid beginning in early June.

## American Dipper

In anticipation of the approaching Christmas bird count, the American Dipper has already begun to gather along the shores of Williams Lake Creek. We usually find about 30 dippers along the creek from the outflow of Williams Lake to the Fraser River. During mild winters with high dirty water there will be very few counted. This reflects their need for clear

water to see their prey on the bottom of the creek. Colder winters will freeze over their normal streams and rivers and will force them to find open water at lower elevations. During these years we find very high concentrations of over fifty birds along open water that is often restricted to only a few kilometres. Their presence is often given away by their rattling 'jhe' call as they fly low over the stream.



American Dipper



A blinking Dipper

The dipper is a stocky dark grey bird with long legs that it pops up and down on while it pauses before diving back into the water. It has white feathers on the eyelids that cause the eyes to flash when the bird blinks. It feeds on water insects and small fish fry by diving into fast flowing water and walking along the bottom. It uses its strong feet to hold onto the bottom as it forages on the bottom of fast moving water. It has some interesting adaptations that make it easier to accommodate this strange feeding habit; the dipper is equipped with an extra eyelid that allows it to see underwater, scales that close its nostrils when submerged and it also produces more oil than most birds, which may help keep them warmer.

Dippers can be found throughout British Columbia and along the mountainous western parts of North and Central America. They frequent the shallow margins of rapids and riffles in clear flowing streams. They can often be found along rivers that support Salmon and Steelhead populations. The high nutrient levels provide a food source for the insects they feed on. They will also feed on small fry during the spring. In turn they can also provide the occasion meal for a large fish.

The American Dipper's nest is a globe-shaped structure with a side entrance, close to water, on a rock ledge, river bank, behind a waterfall or under a bridge.

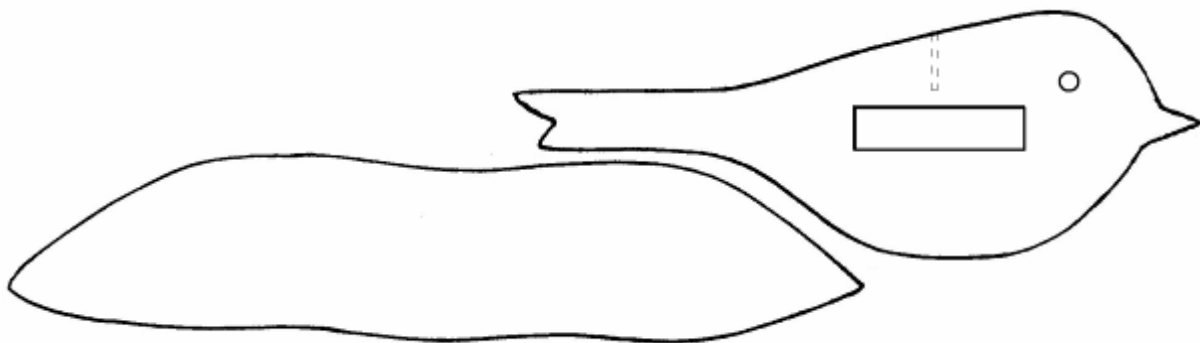
## A Scroll Saw Chickadee

Here is a scroll saw pattern for all of the wood worker members. Why not make a few chickadee Christmas tree decorations.

- Trace the pattern onto  $\frac{1}{4}$  inch board
- Cut out the body and wings
- Drill 2 or more  $\frac{1}{4}$  inch holes along wing slot in body
- Carefully chisel or scroll saw out the wing slot
- Fine tune slot to fit the wings
- Drill eye hole
- Drill fine hole for fish line into the top of the bird dotted line indicates approximate position. Move hole back or forward to make a different flight angle.
- Insert monofilament line into the hole and hold in place with the end of a tooth pick and glue
- Insert wings and give the bird a coat of varnish. Use the fish line to hang it while it dries.
- Once the varnish has dried you can paint on the black bib and cap of your favourite chickadee



I will provide a few pieces of  $\frac{1}{4}$  inch boards at the Nature Centre. If you make some, will you please consider donating a few to the Nature Centre so we have some to sell.



**WILLIAMS LAKE FIELD NATURALISTS MEMBERSHIP**

Name(s): \_\_\_\_\_

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

Phone: \_\_\_\_\_ email \_\_\_\_\_

Cost: Family membership \$27 \_\_\_\_\_ Single membership \$22 \_\_\_\_\_  
(Membership cheque made out to Williams Lake Field Naturalists. A charitable receipt will be given)

I have included a donation of \_\_\_\_\_ to the Scout Island Nature Centre Fund Raising Campaign  
(Please provide a separate cheque made out to Scout Island Nature Centre)

Please mail completed form and cheque to:  
Williams Lake Field Naturalists - 1305A Borland Road - Williams Lake, BC - V2G 5K5