

# Marshnotes<sup>®</sup>



**BRITISH COLUMBIA WATERFOWL SOCIETY  
FALL 2013**

# BRITISH COLUMBIA WATERFOWL SOCIETY

Managers of the George C. Reifel Migratory Bird Sanctuary Since 1963

*- dedicated to the conservation and study of migratory waterfowl-*

## Marshnotes:

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Submissions, articles, photographs and letters for publication may be sent to the above email address marked for attention of Marshnotes Editor. Please include your telephone number and the Editor will contact you.

## **DEADLINE FOR THE NEXT ISSUE OF MARSHNOTES**

**January 15th, 2014**

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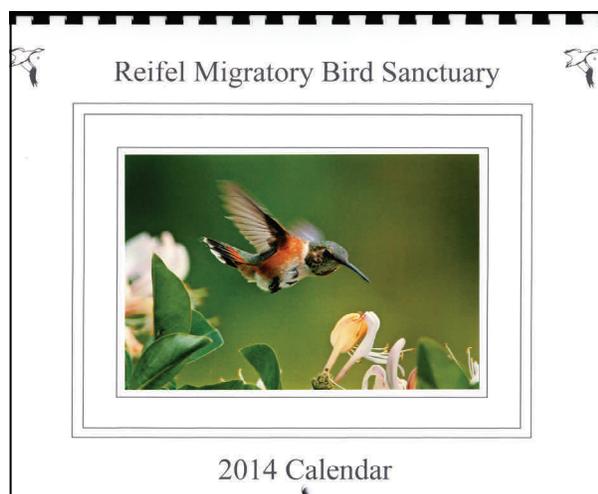
Sanctuary Manager: Kathleen Fry  
Gift Shop Manager: Varri Raffan  
Reception: Laura Jordison  
Biologist: Scott Walmsley  
Maintenance: David McClue

Hours of Operation: 9:00 a.m. to 4.00 p.m. every day. The Sanctuary is wheelchair accessible.

Admission:	Members:	Free
	Non-Members:	Adults: \$5 Children (2-14 yrs) and Seniors (60yrs +): \$3
	School Groups:	Special discounts available; pre-booking is required.

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## New Items in the Gift Shop



Think of us for your shopping needs as the holiday gift season approaches!

The Sanctuary’s 2014 Calendar is now available. Many thanks to the following members who contributed photographs this year: Pete Van Ryk, Carol Coleman, Cecil Ho, Kimberle Stark, Lauren Nicholl, Greg Raymond, Gary Jones, Michelle Lamberson, Ken Young, Emma Turgeon, Carol Coleman and Debra Herst.

We have also recently received a generous donation of hundreds of used books about birds and wildlife and they are on sale in the Gift Shop, but not all at once. Remember to check regularly, as every week or so we put new selections out. Books range from wildlife literature, older books with interesting colour plates, guides for backyard feeding and gardening for birds, stories for children, and basic birding books on up to specialized books, some of which are for other countries.

## About Our Covers

Front Cover:  
Peregrine Falcon at the Snag © Jim Martin

This is a classic view for the next few months, as the prominent snag across from the Gift Shop is usually claimed by Peregrines in winter as a perch.

Back Cover:  
Virginia Rail at the Tower © Ken Young

The pensive picture of a Virginia Rail is just one of hundreds of shots taken this year by the tower in August and September.

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# Bird Highlights

*July was a very hot dry month with no rain, but birds are keeping their schedules. July is when we start to see shorebirds coming back from northern nesting areas. The total species count for this month was 91.*

## June 30 – July 6

July 1<sup>st</sup> a Virginia Rail pair was spotted with a family of 10 chicks on the trail in Southwest Marsh. July 3<sup>rd</sup> a Green Heron was seen along the main trail heading to the tower. Our last Green Heron sighting was in March 2012 and before that, August 2009 when 4 were reported. The best time of year to see them is late summer to early fall. The Green Heron is small with head and upper breast chestnut brown. Its back and wings are green-gray. This heron is one of the few tool-using birds, often dropping bait on the water to attract fish to the surface. July 5<sup>th</sup> we had a report of a Turkey Vulture flying over the Gift Shop.

## July 7 – July 13

This week we recorded 60 species. July 7<sup>th</sup> an Eastern Kingbird was spotted at the south end of West Field. Also on the 7<sup>th</sup> were 2 female Kingfishers actively fishing on the House Pond. This week 2 Purple Martins were seen sitting near the nest boxes out in the marsh north of the tower. An immature Bullock's Oriole was spotted flying along the West Dyke. This was good news as the nest that was observed there in late May became very quiet and we figured it had failed. Perhaps they became quiet so as not to attract any predators to the site. The timing would be correct to see a juvenile flying in this week as eggs take 2 weeks to hatch and 2 weeks to fledge. The Bullock's Oriole is also a bird that we have had no previous nest record for at the Sanctuary, so it is an addition to our Sanctuary nesting species list.

## July 14 – July 20

Mixed in with 11 other shorebird species we spotted the first Wilson's Phalarope and Red-necked Phalarope returning south. Other good sightings for this week were Hooded Merganser, Blue-winged Teal, Black-headed Grosbeak and Swainson's Thrush.

## July 21 – July 27

First thing in the morning, the 2 young Great Horned Owls were seen in the trees around the picnic area. A Pied-billed Grebe seen in Southwest Marsh, a Double-crested Cormorant spotted offshore and one juvenile American Coot are all first summer return sightings.



*Great Horned Owl Young*

*Photo: Kathleen Fry*

An adult Black-crowned Night-Heron was first seen on the 27<sup>th</sup>. The Black-crowned Night-Heron is the most widespread heron with a range that spans 5 continents. At dusk and into the night is when they hunt for amphibians, snakes, rodents, and aquatic invertebrates. They have been recorded nesting in Washington, Oregon, southern Alberta, Saskatchewan and across the USA. April 2010 was the last time we spotted an immature Black-crowned Night-Heron here. It spent most of the summer at the Sanctuary as it was too young to breed. Apparently they reach maturity after 2 years of age. Prior to 2010, juvenile birds were recorded August 2005 and August 2006.

*August is the month when we start to see our weekly species grow after the quiet summer. More shorebirds, warblers, flycatchers and a few duck species are now showing back up along the coast. This month had a total count of 99 species.*

## July 28 – August 3

The 2 female Belted Kingfishers are back fishing in the House Pond. There are 2 different Peregrine Falcons here this week. With lots of shorebirds here now in the West Field they are pretty much stationed in that area waiting for a shorebird meal. All three species of Teal are still present.

## August 4 – August 10

The 2 Great Horned Owls are now venturing further afield, sometimes being spotted along East Dyke. August 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> 2 Sora Rails and 1 Virginia Rail were seen in the reeds below the new viewing deck on the northwest corner of the West Dyke. (Note that rails were observed regularly there for the following three weeks in August.) This week's list ended with 68 species.

## August 11 - August 17

The juvenile Bullock's Oriole is still being seen, and on the morning of the 15<sup>th</sup> it was sitting on top of the

Spruce tree outside the Gift Shop. A Black-headed Grosbeak, 2 Barn Owls, and a Baird's Sandpiper were other highlights this week. Purple Martins were seen last week near the boxes, and this week, 2 adult birds were observed feeding young in one of the boxes, making this our first nesting record for this species at the Sanctuary.



Belted Kingfisher

Photo: Laura Jordison

August 18 - August 24

On the 18<sup>th</sup>, our resident pair and the 4 subadult Sandhill Cranes were visited by a family of 2 adults and 2 young fledged colts. Also on the 18<sup>th</sup> 2 Vaux's Swift were reported. On the 22<sup>nd</sup>, Evening Grosbeaks and a Northern Goshawk were spotted. The Northern Goshawk at first glance looks like a larger version of a Cooper's Hawk but it is much grayer and has a broader chest with a very distinct white eye bar above the eye. Like the Cooper's and Sharp-shinned Hawks, the young are browner overall with yellow eyes. As these birds mature their eyes also change to a vivid red. As the name Northern Goshawk suggests it is usually found in the Northern hemisphere hunting snowshoe hares and grouse even in heavy winter. This week we also noticed a couple of days with large numbers of very acrobatic Ring-billed Gulls circling over head catching recently hatched flying insects.

August 25 – August 31

August 28<sup>th</sup> an Osprey was seen overhead and a Townsend's Warbler was found along the driveway. On the 30<sup>th</sup>, 65 Greater White-fronted Geese flew south over the Gift Shop, likely heading to the newly cut bean field just south of the Sanctuary. This week all our visiting and resident Cranes were absent from

the Sanctuary, but could be seen dining in the same bean field along with the Greater White-fronted Geese. August 31<sup>st</sup> an American Kestrel was spotted flying over the picnic area. Summer is the best time to see these small colorful falcons. In past years we used to have at least 4 or 5 Kestrel sightings per summer but now we're lucky to see 1 or 2 birds. An article in the *Wandering Tattler* (Volume 35 #7, March 2012) from the *American Raptor Population Trends* explains that the American Kestrel has been on a long term decline spurring conservationists to monitor and increase efforts to identify the cause.

*September has the highest count so far for this year with 144 species. Waterfowl are finally coming out of their molt and more dabbling ducks along with Snow Geese are showing up from the north.*

September 1 – September 7

A late and last sighting of a Rufous Hummingbird was reported on the 1<sup>st</sup> at the feeder by the picnic tables. The Horned Grebe, an unusual bird to find at the Sanctuary, was spotted in the Southwest Marsh for most of this month. A small flock of up to 25 Greater White-fronted Geese have been seen daily. This week was very active with 6 species of Warblers and 3 species of Flycatchers. The first fall reports of a Lincoln's Sparrow, Western Meadowlark and Varied Thrush were also in this week.

September 8 – September 14

September 10<sup>th</sup> we had 3 Ruddy Ducks reported. The first fall sighting of a White-crowned Sparrow was on the 8<sup>th</sup>. Also on the 8<sup>th</sup> a juvenile Sharp-tailed Sandpiper was seen in a flock of Dowitchers. It stayed for about 8 days and then disappeared for a short time to be found again on the 24<sup>th</sup> and 25<sup>th</sup>.

...../continued page 6



Sharp-tailed Sandpiper

Photo: Scott Walmsley

A Stilt Sandpiper was spotted in the West Field. A Short-eared Owl was seen flying out in the outer marsh. A few other highlights for this week of 92 species were the Cliff Swallow, Wilson's Snipe, Black-throated Gray Warbler, American Pipit, White-throated Sparrow and Red-breasted Sapsucker.

#### September 15 – September 21

The American Pipit is still around this week, after being absent from our records since October 2009. The American Pipit is streaked brown, and a sparrow-sized bird with white outer tail feathers. You will notice its tail is constantly bobbing as it walks. To get around on the ground Pipits walk instead of hop. This is thought to be done to avoid being blown about by winds when they are nesting on Arctic and Alpine tundra. Also if you get a close up view of their feet they have a long hind claw, better for gripping. On the 18th 2 Ring-necked Ducks were found at the south end of Display Pond and 3 Cackling Geese were mixed in with the Canada Geese on the 20<sup>th</sup>. Vaux's

Swift and Warbling Vireo were 2 other birds of note for this week.

#### September 22 – September 28

Sandhill Crane numbers are rising, with 22 birds on September 22<sup>nd</sup> and 36 on the 26th. Snow Geese arrived in large numbers this week probably with help from the winds of the past few days. Usually we get a couple of hundred at first then numbers build, but we suddenly had roughly 3000 visible along the foreshore on the 25<sup>th</sup>. This week we had a late sighting of a Violet-green Swallow. A Northern Waterthrush was seen along the north dyke towards the tower. Baird's Sandpipers have been seen mixed in with the 5 other species of shorebirds in the West Field and Southwest Marsh. A couple of Western Meadowlarks were spotted on the West Dyke. The next 2 months will bring a variety of northern birds as they migrate through our area to their southern wintering grounds.

Text: Varri Raffan, Gift Shop Manager

## **A Few Mysteries of Nature**

### **Who Made It and Who Ate It?**

In mid-August, one of our swallow boxes ended up completely encased in papery wasp nest covering, presumably by something like Yellow-jacket Wasps. The thing was a-buzz with wasps going in and out a hole that appeared to be lined up with the nest box entrance hole inside this construction. It looked very odd and a bit like a dangerous popsicle. A few weeks later it disappeared. When it was finally found by the edge of the pond, all the outside and the honeycombs had been licked clean, and it was back looking like a swallow box again.

### **What was Wrong with the Great Horned Owl?**

On September 20th, we called O.W.L (Orphaned Wildlife Rehabilitation Society) to see if anything could be done for the Great Horned Owl that had been looking weak and disoriented for more than a week. People had been noticing that it was behaving oddly, eating what looked like a leaf, sitting on the ground, and not navigating well enough in flight to clear one of our fences. O.W.L. was able catch it and take it to their facility, but were unable to save the bird. When it was caught, it seemed to be on the point of starvation, but with no obvious cause for this.

Text and photo: Kathleen Fry, Sanctuary Manager



*The dangerous popsicle.*

# The Pig and Corn Roast, September 7th, 2013



Our 25<sup>th</sup> Pig & Corn Roast Dinner was held under sunny skies, with 212 attendees dining on roast pork, apple sauce, local corn, salads and buns.

Special thanks are due to the following individuals for their help in making this dinner a success:

- ◆ Ray Fehr from Britco Packers for the donation of the 2 pigs.
- ◆ Our team of cooks Henry Parker, Leonard Brady, Gordy Tull, Gerry Lyon, and Dick and Bonnie Anderson.
- ◆ Our meat carvers, Helmut, Stefan and Derek Hoeckh.
- ◆ Our bartenders, Mary Taitt and Doug Raffan.
- ◆ The team of Barbara Warrick, Chris Brodie and Sue Cartman for taking care of raffle ticket sales.
- ◆ Irene Banack, Arlie Darby, Su Langlois, Karl Pollak and Brian Self for all the set up and serving of food.
- ◆ Robbie, Chris and Brandon Ross, Joyce Manary and Boudi VanOldenberg, plus everyone else who made short work of cleaning up at the end of the evening.
- ◆ All those who donated Raffle prizes.
- ◆ Wayne Diakow, one of the Sanctuary's Directors for 26 years, who did an excellent job as Master of Ceremonies.
- ◆ Varri Raffan, for coordinating this excellent event!



**Kudos to Varri Raffan  
for coordinating this  
excellent event!**

## Manager's Report

The summer was quiet here at the Sanctuary, with a spell of very hot weather in July and into August, followed by the onset of fall rains from mid-September onwards. Visitor use over the three months totalled 18,969 people, about average for this season.

It is a time of year to us to do some regular upkeep and for birders to watch for the summer's nesting species, the arrival of southward bound shorebirds and warblers, the associated arrival of many of our hawks and the fall return of the waterfowl.

Members may have noticed a few touch-up projects such as the handrail on the tower, and a major project in the far northeast corner of our trail system where there are two blinds. The most easterly blind looking out over Ewen Slough was built decades ago with funds from Dr. Adamson and Dr. Matsuda and family. It was extended in 1994 using students through Fraser Academy and Employment Insurance programs. It has functioned well over the years, and is a popular spot in winter, when visitors can hide from the weather and enjoy views of birds also sheltering in the slough.

This year, though, when trees growing against it were removed, we noticed major structural flaws, so in early August, the structure was rebuilt from the ground up. It still has that new cedar smell and we hope everyone enjoys this new facility (photo below). It is screened on either side so that people can enter it unobserved and view birds outside the structure by opening the slat-like windows. Please remember to close all doors and windows when you leave.



We have a new staff person in the form of Scott Walmsley, the successful candidate chosen to replace Shanna Fredericks. Shanna, our staff biologist for the past two years, has left our team to return to Nova Scotia, and was responsible for helping manage the Sanctuary's habitats and for keeping track of bird and other biological data. Scott is a recent graduate from the BC Institute of Technology (BCIT) and will be taking on these tasks as well as the usual "many other duties as required".

A new biology project this year is to work with the Purple Martin ("PUMA") Recovery Team to assess and update the special nest boxes that have been out on the intertidal foreshore north of the tower for the past 10 to 15 years. We have never had any proven use of these boxes but this August, Peter Candido, a volunteer with the PUMA program, was able to observe a couple of adult birds at one of the boxes, feeding the gaping mouths of young inside.

Purple Martins nest in colonies, and in the mid-1980's, BC populations were thought to have declined to just a few remaining pairs, probably due to discontinued use of wooden pilings that provided suitable nest sites as they aged. With a concerted attempt to provide more nest sites, the population has climbed to almost 1000 pairs in BC now. The common approach to providing nest boxes is to mount several boxes together on offshore pilings.

Apparently, our nest boxes are in an unusual location. BC senior PUMA biologist Bruce Cousens informed me, "As far as I know, with 65 colony sites in BC this year, Reifel is the *only* site with martins using nest boxes in a cattail marsh, either tidal or inland on fresh water. A few other nest box installations have been

tried in cattail marshes and other wetland habitats over the years, so far without success. Almost all nests are in boxes mounted on marine coastal pilings, either intertidal (ladder or boat access), subtidal/offshore (requiring boat access), or at marinas and other docks, with a few notable exceptions in cavities in decaying pilings.”

Martin nest boxes are also up in the Alaksen National Wildlife Area next door, so we had a meeting with people from the program, CWS biologist Wendy Easton, as well as Peter Ward (former BCWS Director), Tom Bearss and the Delta Naturalists who help with our other nest boxes. The discussions resulted in a plan to maintain and monitor use of the old boxes more regularly, but to also install some newer boxes in an alternative site just to the east of the existing boxes. Stay tuned for updates next spring!



*A Purple Martin chick looking out of one of our boxes.*

I don't know if it was the result of the very long dry hot spell in July and into August, but this summer has been particularly good for rail sightings. In August and September, both Sora and Virginia Rails were seen regularly in the Sanctuary. Rails are generally secretive, so this was a source of great excitement to our birders.

Both species were seen flying back and forth between patches of cattail, or trying to power walk across the very sticky mud. They are undoubtedly scattered elsewhere in the Sanctuary too, as we hear them calling from the foreshore every spring, and young were seen in July much further south in Southwest Marsh. The increased rail interactions may be a prelude to dispersal of young and migration. Soras sometimes migrate as far south as South America.

Virginia Rails have a shorter migration, and there are some present here year-round, although they are more scarce in winter. For such small secretive birds, rails can make very loud whinny-ing calls and something that sounds like “gaddick-gaddick-gaddick”.



*A mud-walking Sora.*

*Photo: Ken Young*

At the time of writing in mid-October, the Snow Geese have honed in on fields next to our picnic area and have been noisily feeding in the fog for days now on unharvested potatoes. I hope everyone has an enjoyable fall and early winter watching these migrants from Russia. Dr. Sean Boyd, Snow Goose researcher, estimates we will likely have about the same number of birds as last year (70-80,000 birds) shared between the Fraser and Skagit estuaries.

**Neck Collar Studies**

You can help with migratory bird research by reporting any marked birds. Some of the Lesser Snow Geese, for example, are wearing brown neck collars recently put on by biologists in the Skagit delta in the State of Washington. Some Cackling Geese, which look like very small Canada Geese, are also wearing some brand new yellow collars.

Neck collars generally have one or two large letters or figures written upright, and a couple more written perpendicular to those, so care is needed to obtain and report the full code. Any successful collar reading can be reported to the Canadian Wildlife Service office at 604-350-1900, attention Andre Breault.

Text and Photographs: Kathleen Fry, R. P. Bio Sanctuary Manager

**A Reference to Explore:**

BC Purple Martin Stewardship and Recovery Program

## What Bird When?

I am often asked for the best times to view particular species at the Sanctuary. I've put together a time line that might answer some of those questions. The dates mentioned pertain to Sanctuary recorded sightings.

The Violet-green and Tree Swallows are the first swallows to arrive back to the Sanctuary in the first part of March. The Barn Swallows follow in early April. By the third week of August Violet-green and Tree Swallows have left our area. The Barn Swallows depart by the end of September. Some years we do see a few Barn Swallows into December and January.

We can count on the Rufous Hummingbirds showing up at the Sanctuary on March 15<sup>th</sup> or 16<sup>th</sup> every year like clockwork. These hummingbirds will stay until about the middle of August, then they are off to spend the winter in Mexico.

The month of April early Warblers such as Yellow-rumped Warbler, Orange-crowned Warbler and the Common Yellowthroats start to show up. Also in April you will see a lot of nesting activity and first arrivals of Cowbirds, Cinnamon and Blue-winged Teal, Pied-billed Grebes, and Western Sandpipers.

By the middle of May we start to see young broods of goslings and ducklings. This is also a good time to see a variety of Flycatchers and Warblers as they pass through on their migration north to nest.

June is still a good month to view young birds. July tends to be our lowest month for species variety as a lot of them are breeding up North.

In early August we start to see the return of the Black-crowned Night-Herons. By middle of August the

American Coots return from the Okanagan. The third week of August through September is the best time to see larger numbers of Flycatchers and Warblers as they come back from the North.

Shorebirds at the Sanctuary are best viewed in the West Field from middle of August to the middle of September especially on a high tide.

Moving into fall, the first songbirds we see back at the feeders in early September are Dark-eyed Juncos, Golden-crowned Sparrows and White-crowned Sparrows. They will be joined by other sparrow species wintering with us until approximately the third week in May when they will head back North to nest.

Lesser Snow Geese are back in the Fraser River Delta by the last week of September until the end of December when they continue further south into the Skagit Valley, Washington. We see them again mid-March to middle of April prior to their return to Wrangel Island, Russia to nest.

The ever popular Northern Saw-whet Owl arrives back to the Sanctuary approximately the end of October to spend the winter with us, although we do not see them consistently until December. They leave our area by middle of March. Diving ducks make an appearance by the end of October.

Sandhill Cranes are present year-round, but large migratory flocks gather here from mid-September to mid-October. In November we start to see the Trumpeter Swans in surrounding farm fields.

December to February is the best months to view birds of prey (Hawks, Owls and Eagles).

Text: Varri Raffan, Gift Shop Manager



Special thanks to Rhys Blewett and his family for the donation of his birthday money.

The giant sunflowers beside the Gift Shop were grown from seeds donated by West Coast Seeds.

## The Volunteer Corner

### *Special Thanks To:*

- ◆ Our regular Sunday birding team of Mary Taitt and Brian Self, as well as Jim Martin, and Karl Pollak for helping host visitors.
- ◆ Bill Topping for helping in the Museum.
- ◆ Justin Malkonin, Eric Rossici, and Eileen Axford for bagging seed and filling bird feeders.
- ◆ Our summer newsletter mailout team of Jim and Jean Marsh, Eric Rossici, Eileen Axford, Laura Jordison, and Jim Martin.
- ◆ Steve Howard for his generous donation of hundreds of used bird books and other nature books for resale purposes.
- ◆ Su Langlois, Vera Maceluch and Mary Taitt for helping with the Sanctuary bird surveys.
- ◆ The team of Arlie Darby, Irene Banack, and Barbara Warrick for the flower gardens around the Museum and washrooms.

- ◆ Our local West Coast Seeds store for a donation of bird seed mix.
- ◆ New volunteers Tom Benmore, Murray Clark, Chris Martin and Bruce Reid for helping with blackberry pruning and painting work parties.

### *Volunteers Wanted This Fall For:*

- ◆ Regular Sanctuary Bird Counts, 8 am to 10 am every other Saturday. There is room for a couple more keen birders.
- ◆ Hosting visitors along trails on busy weekends. If you enjoy talking to people and sharing your knowledge about birds and the Sanctuary, the fall already promises to be a busy one, with lots of family groups and visitors new to the area and birding.

Call Kathleen (direct line 604 946-6985) or leave your name and contact information at the Office.

***Thanks very much, everyone!***

## Why be a Member?

### *As a Member, you receive the following benefits:*

FREE admission to the George C. Reifel Migratory Bird Sanctuary 365 days a year.

Quarterly issue of the BCWS publication "Marshnotes".

A 10% discount on purchases in the Sanctuary Gift Shop.

Membership in one of British Columbia's most respected conservation organizations.

### ***With your support the British Columbia Waterfowl Society is able to:***

Staff, maintain and expand facilities at the Sanctuary for the benefit of its visitors and members; provide interpretive and education programs, including guided tours for organized groups of all ages; contribute towards important scientific research on waterfowl to determine their life cycle needs for survival; and provide support for like-minded organizations who are working on waterfowl-related projects.

### *Enclosed is my cheque or VISA/Mastercard number for:*

SINGLE Membership:  **\$25**

FAMILY Membership:  **\$50**

LIFE Membership:  **\$500**

Donation (tax deductible)

VISA  Mastercard

VISA or Mastercard # \_\_\_\_\_

Expiry Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Name: (Mr. Mrs. Miss Ms.) \_\_\_\_\_

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

Postal Code \_\_\_\_\_

Please mail to **British Columbia Waterfowl Society**  
5191 Robertson Road, Delta BC V4K 3N2

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*Virginia Rail at the Tower © Ken Young*