

Marshnotes[®]



**BRITISH COLUMBIA WATERFOWL SOCIETY
FALL 2015**

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:

Editor: Kathleen Fry

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Circulation: 2,500.

Published four times a year.

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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 phone number and the Editor will contact you.

DEADLINE FOR THE NEXT ISSUE OF MARSHNOTES

January 15th, 2016

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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 (60 yrs +): \$3
School Groups: Special discounts available; pre-booking is required.

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Volunteer Now For The 2015 Ladner Christmas Bird Count

Volunteers in Ladner, Tsawwassen and south Richmond are needed for the Ladner Christmas Bird Count this year on Sunday, Dec. 27th. This seasonal tradition is part of a much larger count across the continent. It is a project of the National Audubon Society in the United States and is coordinated north of the border by Bird Studies Canada.

This will be the 115th year of the Christmas Bird Count, the Ladner count having joined in the 1950's. Last year, Ladner observers counted 144 species, ranking the highest count of anywhere in Canada.

Local birders are encouraged to participate in the count in a couple of ways. The first is by joining a small team of birders as they drive or walk around a designated area. Experience isn't essential, as teams need drivers, recorders and spotters. The other way to participate is to stay home and count the birds that come to your feeders or in your yard.

Bird Studies Canada notes that this year's Christmas count effort is expected to be larger than ever, with new count areas contributing to the increased understanding of the winter distributions of various birds.

Local counts are named for the center of the count's circle. Circles often include other communities, which is why south Richmond is within the Ladner count, as is Point Roberts, Washington, making our count one of the few to straddle an international border.

There will be a post count get together to tally up the birds seen on the day. It includes a dinner at the George C. Reifel Migratory Bird Sanctuary starting at 5 p.m. The cost for dinner is \$9.00 per person.

Please contact me for more information about the count or to sign up to participate.

Text: Jude Grass, Count Coordinator
Phone: 604-538-8774
Email: judegrass@shaw.ca

About Our Covers:

Front Cover: Great Egret © Alberto Vilca

Back Cover: Redhead © Jim Martin

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Bird Highlights

Late July we start to see the return of a variety of shorebird species as they migrate from their breeding grounds in the Arctic. Adult waterfowl are still in eclipse plumage (molting) and this year's young are still working on growing their flight feathers. The species count for July 2015 totalled 101.

June 28 – July 4

On the 28th an Osprey was spotted circling over Southwest Marsh. A single Common Goldeneye, one Barn Owl and the first late summer adult Black-crowned Night-Heron all showed up on the 4th. A group of 12 Sandhill Cranes are still feeding on the grain planted in the farm field off the East Dyke.

July 5 – July 11

We now see a turnaround from the low count of 58 species in June to the 77 species observed this week. Eleven of those species were shorebirds, and West Field often had large flocks of hundreds of Western Sandpipers. Pectoral Sandpiper, Wilson's Phalaropes, Least Sandpiper and Semi-palmated Sandpiper were the unusual ones in with them. A female Bufflehead first seen mid-June is still present at the Sanctuary. The Purple Martins can be seen feeding young at their nest boxes north of the tower. A Killdeer with one young and a family of five young Hooded Mergansers were both seen this week. On the 9th, we noticed the first American Coots returning from their breeding grounds in the interior. July 11th in the Southwest Marsh a single Lesser Scaup was found. Cackling Geese, Great Horned Owl, Pied-billed Grebe and Belted Kingfisher were some of the highlights of the week.

July 12 – July 18

This week had a few first sightings for the summer with a Wilson's Snipe on the 12th, on the 16th an Orange-crowned Warbler and on the 17th a Northern Flicker. It seemed that this week was particularly bad for mosquitoes especially along the shaded grassy trail and the Northeast corner. To the rescue we had Olive-sided Flycatchers, Willow Flycatchers, Pacific-slope Flycatchers, Western Wood-Pewee and Eastern Kingbirds showing up to feed on mosquitoes and other insects. From the swallow contingent, we had Northern Rough-winged Swallows, Barn Swallows, Cliff Swallows and Purple Martins also catching their share.

On the 18th, 2 Red-necked Phalaropes joined the many other shorebirds feeding in the West Field.

Shorebirds attract Peregrine Falcons much like insects lure in the flycatchers and swallows. 2 Peregrine Falcons spent part of this week hunting over the Sanctuary. Turkey Vulture, Hutton's Vireo, Black-headed Grosbeak and Bullock's Oriole were other birds of note for the week.

July 19 – July 25

On the 19th the first Brown-headed Cowbird was seen after being absent a few months. Two male Ring-necked Pheasant were seen at the "NO ENTRY" sign at the southernmost corner of the Seaward Dyke. Shorebird viewing is still very good with a Baird's Sandpiper joining the numbers. July 22nd a Black-headed Grosbeak was seen again.

July 26 – August 1

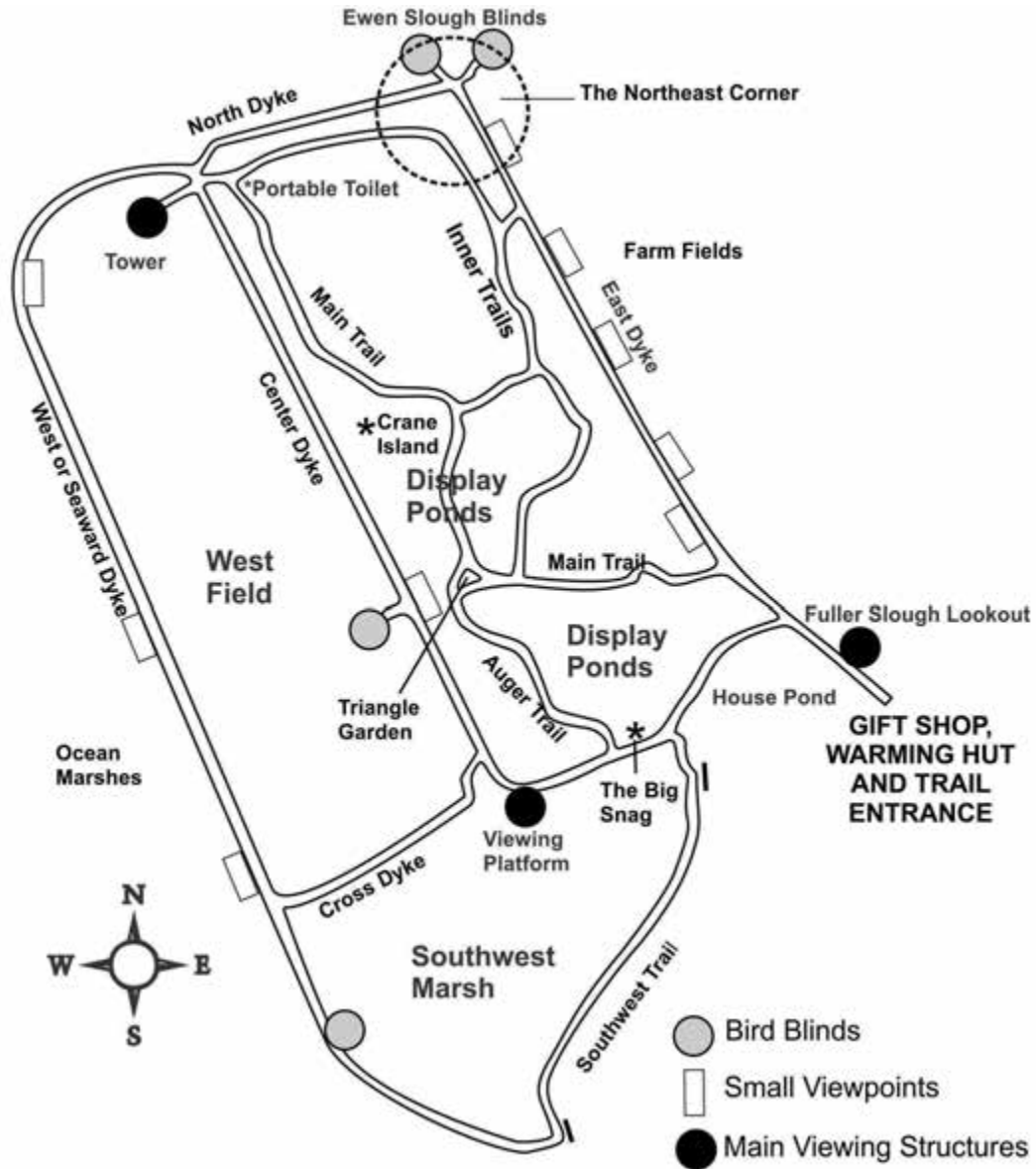
July 31st at the junction of the outer Seaward Dyke and the Cross Trail leading back to the Viewing Platform, members noticed a family of 5 Bullock's Orioles being fed by their parents. On the same day members had good views of a Golden-crowned Kinglet family along the North Dyke. August 1st a Sora with one chick was spotted along the reed edge at the Northeast corner. In the water channel along Center Dyke a Green Heron was spotted perched on a dead branch over the water. On August 2nd visitors could see 2 adult Black-crowned Night-Herons in their usual roosts near the Warming Hut.



Female Bullock's Oriole

*Photo: Jim Martin
...../ continued page 6*

Sanctuary Place Names Used in Marshnotes



Editor's Note: We have been meaning to put this map in Marshnotes for a while now, as both Varri and I often refer to certain landmarks or structures in our articles and readers sometimes ask for clarification. It was very tempting to get carried away with this and come up with creative names for lots more interesting spots along the trails, but we decided to keep to just the dykes, the structures and a few other landmarks that are natural stopping points for visitors.

(Continued from page 4)

August is always a good month to view shorebirds. By middle of August the Rufous Hummingbirds have left our area and are on their way to winter in Mexico. This month's list ended with 104 species.

August 2- August 8

On the 2nd we had an unexpected visit from a Ruff (a type of Sandpiper). Noticing the colored bands on its right leg, we figured it was not technically a wild bird and learned that it had escaped from an ongoing study by Dr. David B. Lank at the Simon Fraser University where they conduct studies on mating behaviour of this species. Occasionally we do get migrating Ruff at the Sanctuary, mainly in May. By the Viewing Platform, a pair of Western Tanagers was spotted. Families of American Goldfinch, Cedar Waxwings and Common Yellowthroat are all being found this week.

August 9 – August 15

Have you ever noticed large flocks of seagulls circling together in the sky? We had this happen this week. Usually they are Ring-billed Gulls which are after a hatch of Insects (probably termites). This is one of the few gull species that dine mainly on insects, grubs and grasshoppers. On the 9th a female Black-headed Grosbeak was seen at the front gate. The 13th saw the arrival of the 3rd Black-crowned Night-Heron, a juvenile this time. August 15th was a busy day for sightings, with Northern Rough-winged Swallow, Bank Swallow, Townsend's Warbler, Pacific-slope Flycatcher, Hammond's Flycatcher, Black-bellied Plover, Stilt Sandpiper and 2 Red Crossbills. This week ended with 73 species.

August 16 – August 22

Three Purple Finches were spotted on the 16th. The male Purple Finch is not so much purple as it is dusty rose red over most of its body and brightest on head and rump. August 21st in the water around the Tower 5 Pied-billed Grebe were located, and in the south end of that field a Stilt Sandpiper and Pectoral Sandpiper were observed. We had the first fall report of a Greater Scaup this week.

August 23 – August 29

There were many highlights from this week's 88 species, including the following: Lesser Scaup, Ruddy Duck, Green Heron, California Gull, Vaux's Swift, Western Wood-Pewee, Purple Martin, Swainson's Thrush, Northern Waterthrush, MacGillvray's Warbler, Black-throated Gray Warbler and Western Tanager. The Northern Waterthrush was seen from

the 23rd to the 26th at the Northeast corner of the Sanctuary. This thrush-like warbler prefers to be near water. It spends most of their time on the ground in thickets of mainly Alder and Willow searching for insects. Like the Spotted Sandpiper, the Northern Waterthrush also has the habit of constantly teetering its body.

The Lincoln's Sparrow was also found this week and it is even more fidgety than the Waterthrush as it constantly bobs and flicks its wings and tail. It looks much like a Song Sparrow but slimmer with a narrow white eye ring and a buff breast band. Locating these sparrows is hard as they are adept at keeping out of sight.

September gets busy at the Sanctuary, as the dabbling ducks return from the interior and the fall sparrows return from north. The warblers and shorebirds are still plentiful as they continue their migration south. The last week of September you can count on the Lesser Snow Goose returning from nesting grounds on Wrangel Island Russia. The total species observed September 2015 was 127.

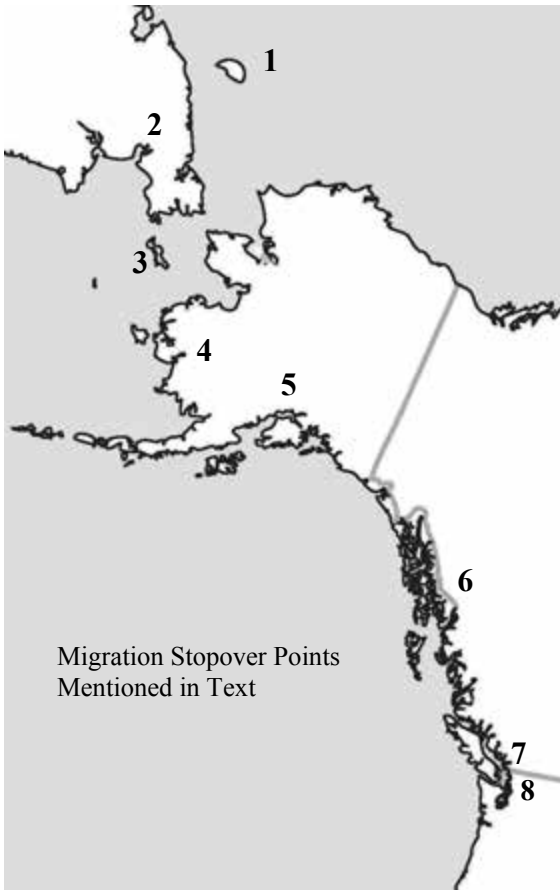
August 30 – September 5

This week ended with 92 species being observed. A big highlight was the spotting of a Great Egret on the 30th in Fuller Slough. Being all white with bright yellow beak and black legs, it really stood out. The last report of a Great Egret was back in August 2005 and before that a two week period in September 2001. All the Herons on our checklist were present this week with Great Blue Heron, Green Heron, Black-crowned Night-Herons and Great Egret (Heron Family).

Another unusual sighting this week was that of a Clay-colored Sparrow which was seen on August 31st out along the outer grassy Seaward Dyke feeding in a flock of mixed sparrows. The last time a Clay-colored Sparrow was seen was September 6th to the 10th, 1993. While looking up past statistics for this newsletter I came across an interesting unusual highlight from back on September 2, 2002 when a Green-tailed Towhee was observed out along the same Dyke. I guess scanning what you think might just be a flock of House Sparrows pays off. September 2nd is when we starting seeing Greater-white Fronted Geese showing up in flocks of Canada Geese. Via telescope on the 3rd White-winged Scoters and Surf Scoters were both seen offshore. The first Fox Sparrow, Black Swift, American Pipit and Red-eyed Vireo were spotted this week.

...../ continued page 8

Lesser Snow Geese



The Lesser Snow Geese that visit the Sanctuary annually are part of the population nesting on Wrangel Island, Russia. Wrangel Island lies in the Arctic Ocean, north of Siberia. Birds that nest on Wrangel Island split into two separate wintering sub-populations. One winters in California, and one winters locally and is known as the Fraser-Skagit sub-population, as flocks move back and forth between the two estuaries over the winter months.

Lesser Snow Goose Statistics:

Weight: 2.5 to 2.7 kg
 Wingspan: 38- 46 cm
 Lifespan: 10 to 20 years in the wild
 Nesting Behavior: Mate for life
 On Wrangel Island nests by June
 Raise three or four young per year
 Young able to fly by August

Distinguishing Marks:

White bodies, black wing-tips, a pink bill with black markings and pink feet. Male and female are identical. Young of the year have patches of grey and brown, grey beaks and feet, and are seen with their parents during migration.

Migration Routes: (see map to left for locations)

Scientists from Canada, the United States and Russia have marked and tracked several thousand of these birds during their migrations, and now know that they fly 5,000 km between Wrangel Island and the Fraser River Estuary. Their migration stops from Wrangel Island ① include the Russian mainland ②, St. Lawrence Island (Bering Sea) ③, the Yukon-Kuskokwin Delta (western Alaska) ④, Cooke Inlet (southern Alaska) ⑤, and the mouth of the Stikine River in northern BC ⑥. Some marked individuals have made non-stop flights between Alaska and the Sanctuary (2500 km) in less than 36 hours. When in the Fraser River Estuary ⑦, our local birds are often distributed all over the intertidal marshes of the Fraser River Estuary, farmland of Delta, grassy fields in Richmond, and even sometimes in certain locales up the Fraser Valley. In the Skagit River Estuary ⑧ in the State of Washington, USA, the birds are often in intertidal marshes and state wildlife areas and farms south of Mount Vernon, Washington.

Best Times To View Them At the Sanctuary:

Mid-Oct. to mid-Dec. and mid-March to mid-April.

Population Estimate:

Each January, an annual count is done of the Skagit and Fraser estuaries. Numbers have ranged between 70,000 and 80,000 in recent years.

Favourite Foods:

Starchy underground parts of intertidal marsh plants of the estuary; Spring green growth of pastures, grassy areas and marsh plants; Remnant agricultural crops such as potatoes, corn, beans, peas and grains.

For updates, visit our website page on Snow Geese at <http://www.reifelbirdsanctuary.com/snows.html>.

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

(Continued from page 6)

September 6 – September 12

A photo submitted to the Sanctuary for identification gave us a big surprise. A family had come across a bird in the afternoon of the 11th that they had never seen before at the Sanctuary and were able to get a clear shot of what turned out to be a juvenile White-faced Ibis. We have never seen one at the Sanctuary and it is a new bird for our checklist. The Great Egret was spotted again, this time along Robertson Slough. We saw the return of the Golden-crowned Sparrows this week. Six species of Warblers are still around with the Black-throated Grey Warbler and Nashville Warbler being more unusual.

September 13 - September 19

The first fall arrivals of Redhead, Canvasback and Ring-necked Ducks, Dark-eyed Junco, White-crowned Sparrow and Chipping Sparrow were in this week. On the 14th 2 Wilson's Snipe were spotted. There are now 33 Sandhill Cranes that sleep over in the West Field pulling out early each morning to forage in surrounding farm fields and foreshore. The Great Egret showed up again this time in the Southwest Marsh. Unfortunately we were never able to relocate the White-faced Ibis.

The Black-crowned Night-Herons are a bit elusive and are not so reliable this month. Normally they like the water across from the Warming Hut next to the Museum.

September 20 – September 26

On the 21st a single White-throated Sparrow was seen. As expected in this last week of September we see the first arrival of the Lesser Snow Geese. The first 4 were spotted on the 22nd. Canada Geese, Cackling Geese, Greater White-fronted Geese and now the Snow Geese were all present this week. A Turkey Vulture, Black Bellied Plover, Sharp-tailed Sandpiper, Chestnut-backed Chickadee and a White-throated Sparrow were all found on the 21st. As for the Sharp-tailed Sandpiper sightings, we are lucky to see 2 per year but back on September 25, 2006 an unusually high count of 12 were reported. On the 22nd Least Sandpiper, Western Sandpiper, Stilt Sandpiper and Vaux's Swift were all seen. The first fall report of a Varied Thrush was seen at the front entrance on the 25th. On Fuller Slough a female Ruddy Duck was spotted. This week's list totalled 90 species.

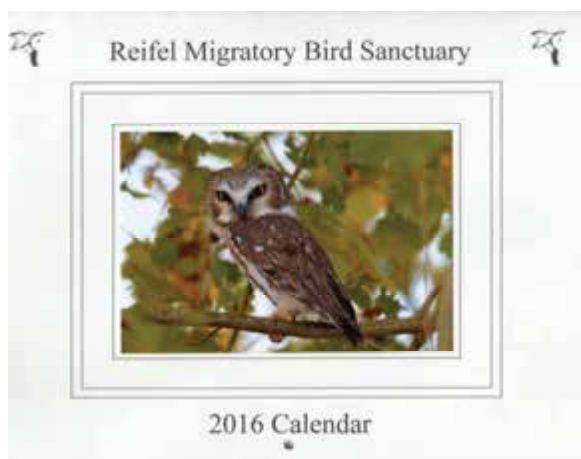
Text: Varri Raffan
Gift Shop Manager



Northern Waterthrush Photo: Michelle Lamberson

The 2016 Calendar

The 2016 Sanctuary Calendar, with its excellent photos by members, is now for sale in the Gift Shop.



Education Program Update

Our education program is quite busy this year, with regular school visits booked for most of the fall and well into 2016. After the past few years of reduced bookings due to job actions and reduced budgets at schools, it is good to see the enthusiasm and lots of classes coming out to learn about habitat conservation and to see the many diverse bird species.

A Project Wild teacher workshop was held here on October 23rd and was attended by 23 teachers from Delta, Surrey, Richmond and Vancouver. Project Wild is an inter-disciplinary approach to teaching about the environment, and a resource program sanctioned by the BC Ministry of Education. It is administered through WildBC in Victoria.



A special partnership with Nature Canada this fall will result in 25 classes from Metro Vancouver schools visiting the Sanctuary under their Naturehood program in the next few months. The Nature Canada grant allows us to cover costs for these classes and is part of a national initiative from Environment Canada to encourage urban youths to explore and connect with nature. Destinations such as National Wildlife Areas and Migratory Bird Sanctuaries are a high priority for this initiative, and we welcome Nature Canada and the participating schools!

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

Getting Feeders Ready For The Fall

Watching birds at feeders brings pleasure to a lot of people, but feeders take commitment and some thought. Bird species have different diets and often like different feeder styles. Most small birds are able to use the typical tube feeders, but platform feeders are better for sparrows, towhees, and juncos that have less agility to feed from a perch. Some birds are not likely to visit feeders. Warblers, vireos, creepers, kinglets, wrens and woodpeckers are insectivores and might spend more time in trees in your yard searching through leaves and bark for bugs.

Remember to keep feeders clean and free of any wet seed. Moisture can cause seeds to sprout, or promote the growth of *Salmonella* bacteria. Clean feeders under a running hose or tap while using a scrub brush to get into all the corners. Wooden feeders are a bit more work as wood holds more moisture and bacteria. Some people use a mild bleach and water solution. Remember to rinse well and dry feeders thoroughly before filling with fresh seed.

Black oil sunflower seed is probably the most nutritious and popular choice with the widest variety of birds. The millet (round beige or white seeds) in wild bird seed mixes is favoured by many of the

ground feeding species such as juncos, towhees, doves, finches and sparrows, and you will often find them scratching on the ground under feeders. Plain unsalted peanuts attract chickadees, jays and woodpeckers, but remember not to leave them lying around too long as they tend to go rancid fast and are easily contaminated by bacteria.

Some birds such as robins, thrushes, waxwings and flickers like fruity treats such as raisins, currants, raspberries, pears and apples. Niger and Thistle seed will attract goldfinches, siskins and redpolls. Special feeders are made to dispense these seeds.

Suet cakes are ideal for a variety of birds such as red-winged blackbirds, chickadees, nuthatches, jays and woodpeckers. A swarm of bushtits can make short work of a suet cake. Suet should only be put out in special feeders and when the weather is very cold so the suet does not spoil or melt and contaminate the feathers of the birds and leave them less insulated for the winter.

Text: Varri Raffan, Gift Shop Manager
(reprinted from Fall 2012 Marshnotes)

The Manager's Report

Visitor numbers for July, August and September totalled a high 19,630, in spite of fierce mosquitos in July, a lingering dead fish smell, winds in late August that felled trees, and washrooms under renovations for six weeks. Nothing keeps visitors away, it seems, if the weather is spectacularly clear, the shallows are full of shorebirds and the Sandhill Cranes are gathering. It is a good thing that Varri and Laura kept track of all of the comings and goings of visitors and the birds, as the past few months for the rest of us have consisted of fixing up things and investigating a few mysteries.

Considerable effort was spent removing some of the cattail, clearing pipes and channels and reconstructing the logs, rocks and gravel path down to the tower in West Field. Eroded shorelines in the Display Ponds have also been reconstructed, and a few areas have had trees planted to compensate for beaver snacking activities. We are nearing completion of a large bank reconstruction in the center pond system, and ask people to keep on trails and out of the area so that it can stabilize and grow a few shrubs in the spring.

On August 29th, gusts of high winds mid-day toppled some large stands of trees and caused an early closure of the Sanctuary. Once the professional tree fallers had cleared the wind-falls by the Viewing Platform, we put up a safety fence so that people could enjoy the resulting new view down into the Display Ponds.

Throughout the winter months, all maintenance activities of this nature will be greatly reduced so that visitors and birds can enjoy the peace and quiet, and so can the staff! We have already had our first Northern Saw-whet Owl sighting October 8th. The priorities in upcoming months will be to maintain our trails for visitor safety, and to ensure that everyone understands the importance of staying on trails and leaving birds and their habitats undisturbed over the winter.

One of the big mysteries of the late summer was a dramatic die-off of the large carp in Fuller Slough. For years, visitors have enjoyed seeing them rise to the surface when bird seed has been tossed into the water at the lookout. On August 16th, there were just a few dead fish seen in Fuller Slough, but by the 18th, we had hauled out more than 250 large dead carp from the water, eventually burying them to keep them away from scavengers and to reduce the smell around the waterfront lookout. The cause of death was more than

likely due to depleted oxygen levels in the water due to very hot days, a significant cyanobacteria outbreak, or some other unknown cause, or even a combination of all of the above. Just to make sure, a couple of fish and some water samples were sent off for general analysis, and results are not back yet. Cyanobacteria, formerly known as blue-green algae, can release very strong toxins as they die, and give water a peculiar contaminated look of spilled paint mixed with scum. Windy days may also have stirred up poor quality water or bottom sediments. Either way, our carp feeding spectacle at Fuller Slough is likely to be reduced for a few years until fish populations recover. Many of the fish that died were almost a meter long, heavy-bodied, and full of eggs. These were likely the mature fish of the slough. Carp can spawn several times a year and produce hundreds of thousands of eggs and small fry which feed a bevy of creatures from small micro-organisms to big fish-eating birds. They generally take 3 to 5 years to reach maturity, but can continue growing and can live more than 20 years.

The dead carp or the presence of raccoons, otters, and other mammals attracted to them may be why the Black-crowned Night-Herons have been absent in their usual Fuller Slough roosts for the past two months. Just recently now in late October, though, with the fall rains, two have finally returned, and the contaminated look of the slough waters has finally dissipated.

Extra Sandhill Cranes were in the area regularly in late August and September as in previous years. As early as July 4th, we started to see as many as 9 more cranes visiting our usual gang of 9 birds. By early September, we could tell that some of those were probably local birds, as the bird wearing the satellite transmitter ("Sat bird") and its friend "Hancock bird" were part of the flock. By late August, though, we were up to 25 cranes, then 33 by mid-September, peaking at 40 birds at the end of that month. There have been reports of a large flock of 50 cranes seen in flight over Richmond, and sometimes in Burnaby in October, but so far we have not seen such a large flock here at the Sanctuary.

Here's to a fine fall and winter at the Sanctuary!. October has been vibrant, with thousands of noisy Snow Geese passing back and forth between farm fields and tidal marshes, and the sloughs have been full of thousands of migrant waterfowl.

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

The Volunteer Corner

Special Thanks To:

- ◆ Our regular Sunday Bird Walk team of Mary Taitt and Brian Self, as well as Jim Martin, Emma Turgeon, and David Bruce for hosting visitors along trails.
- ◆ Bill Topping for hosting visitors in the Museum on Sunday mornings.
- ◆ Justin Malkonin, Eric Rossicci, and Eileen Axford, for bagging seed.
- ◆ Our summer newsletter mailout team of Eileen Axford, David Bruce, Jim Marsh, Su Langlois, Vera Maceluch, and Jean Gartner.
- ◆ Arlie Darby, Irene Banack, and Barbara Warrick for the flower gardens around the Museum and for cleaning all the Warming Hut windows.

- ◆ Our team of Sammy Penner, Georgia Taipalus, Kristina Breit, Ivy Whitehorne and Stacey Hilton for helping with bird inventories.
- ◆ A special thanks to Kristina Breit for her regular help with grimy maintenance projects.

Volunteers Wanted For This Fall and Winter:

If you are interested in being a trail host, particularly on long weekends, please leave your name and number at the office or email Kathleen at kathleen@reifelbirdsanctuary.com.

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

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Address: _____

Postal Code _____

Please mail to **British Columbia Waterfowl Society**
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