

# Marshnotes®



**BRITISH COLUMBIA WATERFOWL SOCIETY  
SUMMER 2012**

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

**OCTOBER 15th 2012**

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

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# 24th Annual PIG AND CORN ROAST

at the George C. Reifel Migratory Bird Sanctuary

## Saturday, September 8th 2012

**Tickets are now on sale at the Sanctuary Office**

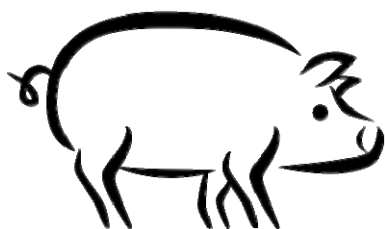
Adults: \$20 each

Kids: 6 years and under FREE

7-12 years: \$10 each

To order call 604 946 6980

(please pick up your tickets pre-event)



**Happy Hour starts at 5 pm.**

**Dinner Call between 5.30-6.00 pm.**

**Raffle prize draws after dinner.**

## About Our Covers

*Front Cover:*

*Male Mallard in Eclipse Plumage © Jim Martin.*

*Back Cover:*

*The 2012 Sandhill Crane Colt © Jim Martin*

**Volunteers are needed to help with food preparation, raffle ticket sales, event set up and tear down.**

**Please call Varri at 604-946-6980**

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## Bird Highlights

*April is the start of waterfowl nesting. A lot of the first clutches are lost to predation, forcing the ducks to re-nest. The first Canada Geese hatched on April 26<sup>th</sup> and the first Mallards hatched April 29<sup>th</sup>. The total species recorded for April 2012 was 98.*

### April 1 – 7

A Hermit Thrush was spotted this week. This bird is 7 inches long with heavy spots on upper chest and a reddish brown colored tail, which it bobs slowly when perching. Its song is one of my favorites with its airy flute like sound which starts low and rises in pitch. This thrush is on its way to Central Alaska and eastward across forested areas of Canada to nest. The Varied Thrush was still present along the entrance driveway most mornings. This species will also be heading out of our area for the nesting season. Trees Swallows have been very abundant and actively claiming nest boxes, particularly in West Field and many have found natural holes in the birch snags.

The well-camouflaged Brown Creepers were everywhere, prying with their curved bill in the cracks of the bark for insects and larvae. They ascend trees spirally clinging closely to the trunk as they look for food. We have noticed a Bald Eagle pair nesting in the trees along Robertson Sough. Looking back to this week in 1997, it has been 15 years ago now (Wow!) that the very large eagle nest and its tree blew down along the entrance driveway into Alaksen NWA next door. Some of you will remember this nest. Ring-billed Gull, Hairy Woodpecker, Eurasian Wigeon and Common Raven were other highlights for this week.

### April 8 – 14

This week we had the first spring sightings of a Cinnamon Teal, Pied-billed Grebe, Eurasian Collared Dove, Savannah Sparrow, Orange-crowned Warbler, Brown-headed Cowbird, Common Yellowthroat and Western Sandpiper. April 8<sup>th</sup> was the high count for spring for both the Ring-necked Ducks with 3 pair and Cackling Geese with 5 individuals.

### April 15 – 21

The big news for us at the Sanctuary was that this week the resident pair of Sandhill Cranes settled on last year's nest site, and laid two eggs on the 20th and 22nd. April 18<sup>th</sup> a flock of 13 Greater White-fronted Geese flew overhead. Further sightings of note for this week were Belted Kingfisher, Caspian Tern, Thayer's Gull and Northern Rough-winged Swallow. This swallow was one of 5 swallow species seen in this week of 73 different birds.

### April 22 – 28

The 24<sup>th</sup> was the last day Black-crowned Night Herons were seen. Most will be back in mid-August after nesting, although last year we had one early bird return by the first week of July. April 26<sup>th</sup> was the first hatch of Canada Geese. Only two pairs of Ring-necked Ducks were seen this week. The Eurasian Collared Doves were present every day and will likely be around the area over the summer. On April 28<sup>th</sup> a Barn Owl was spotted. In this week a variety of warblers made an appearance, especially in the shady areas in the Northeast corner where there are lots of insects.

This week, we had Orange-crowned Warbler, Yellow-rumped Warbler, Townsend's Warbler, Wilson's Warblers and Common Yellowthroat. Other interesting birds reported this week were Yellow-headed Blackbird, Lincoln's Sparrow, Spotted Sandpiper and Wilson's Snipe. There were 79 species this week.



*Tree Swallows in a natural nest cavity.*

*Photo: Karl Pollack*

**May brings in new arrivals of shorebirds, flycatchers, warblers and other songbirds as they move north through our area. At the same time Dark-eyed Juncos, American Coots, Northern Flickers, Fox Sparrows, Golden and White-crowned Sparrows leave our area to continue on their migration north. The species count for May 2012 was 98.**

#### April 29 – May 5

April 29<sup>th</sup> we spotted our first Mallard family. Also in this week we had the first spring sighting of Blue-winged Teal, with its distinctive white crescent shape on its bluish slate colored face. This species feeds along with Cinnamon Teal, and will remain in the area from the beginning of May until early August, favouring West Field and Robertson Slough. Warblers continued to grow in numbers.

More Caspian Terns were heard in this week. This large Tern with its unique scratchy cat-like call is usually heard well before you can locate them in the sky. We had 18 species of waterfowl this week. Within the next 2 weeks the numbers will drop as some of them will be moving on to their nesting grounds. There were 79 species this week.

#### May 6 – May 12

This spring 4 different hummingbird nests were reported, and they started hatching this week. The females are the sole providers of food (insects, nectar) for their brood of (usually 2) chicks. There were a lot of males active around the feeders all trying to stake claim to them. They seemed to be fighting each other off the feeders more than drinking.

Our first spring sightings of Olive-sided Flycatcher, Wilson's Phalarope and Pileated Woodpecker were reported in this week. On the 12<sup>th</sup> a single Band-tailed Pigeon was spotted flying eastward over the Sanctuary. We usually see 1 to 3 of these every year, although on August 26<sup>th</sup>, 2004 we had a flock of 12 birds fly over.

#### May 13 – 19

Cedar Waxwings have arrived now. They usually nest mid May to early August, a little later than most songbirds, probably because their main food sources such as salmon berries, other soft fruit and insects are then more abundant. Three male and 3 female Black-headed Grosbeaks were spotted around the northeast corner of the sanctuary. Three Wilson's Phalaropes were seen feeding with the Dowitchers in the West Field. May 15<sup>th</sup> a Turkey Vulture flew by. A single male Canvasback and 3 Greater White-fronted Geese were also seen this week.



*Reeve seen in West Field May 26th Photo: Kathleen Fry*

#### May 20 – 26

On the 20<sup>th</sup>, one of the Sandhill Crane eggs hatched successfully, with the second egg later seen abandoned. We had more different shorebirds and warbler species this week. Thirteen species of shorebirds were seen. Large flocks of Western Sandpipers were seen feeding on exposed mud flats along the foreshore and south to Roberts Bank. According to retired Environment Canada researcher Dr. Robert Elner they feed on "Biofilm" which is made up of mucopolysaccharides which is a high energy food source for these and other shorebirds fueling up before their migration north.

May 26<sup>th</sup> had a rare one-day sighting for the Sanctuary of a female Ruff Sandpiper (called a Reeve). Previous sightings for that species include September 6, 2006 (Reeve) and July 7, 2007 (Ruff).

***June is usually quiet as a lot of species have gone north, the resident birds, especially the songbirds, are on nests, and waterfowl begin their annual moult. Tent Caterpillars along the seaward dyke were very obvious this month, reaching full size, dropping out of trees and sometimes hitching a ride on visitors. The total species for June 2012 was 91.***

#### May 27 – June 2

May 28<sup>th</sup> 2 Barn Owls were recorded. On June 1<sup>st</sup> I was in the right place at the right time and saw a pair of Virginia Rails with their 7 very tiny black chicks walk across the channel at the base of the tower. Along the outer seaward dyke a single Marbled Godwit flew along the outer marsh calling as it went. On the 1<sup>st</sup> the first Black Swift for the summer was seen. Sadly, on June 2<sup>nd</sup>, the Sandhill Crane colt was found tangled in the bushes and dead of unknown causes.

*...../ Continued on page 6*

Some of the other 77 species this week were Western Wood Pewee, Western Tanager, Black-headed Grosbeak, McGillivray's Warbler, Bullock's Oriole and Yellow-headed Blackbird.

#### June 3 – June 9

June 6<sup>th</sup> a Great Horned Owl was seen in the northeast corner. We had a big white goose, feeding and flying about right at home with a flock of Canada Geese. . It was most likely part Emden Goose, a common domestic breed. More Black Swifts are being seen on cloudy days as the low pressure systems push them down. They are much like a swallow but bigger. They have a stiff wing beat and a body shaped like a cigar. They feed almost entirely on flying insects.

#### June 10 – June 16

June 11<sup>th</sup> we had 11 Sandhill Cranes out near the tower. On the 14<sup>th</sup> another group of 3 did a fly over. June 13<sup>th</sup> an Eastern Kingbird was reported. June 15<sup>th</sup> two Band-tailed Pigeons were seen at the northeast corner.

#### June 17 – June 23

This week we started to see a few more shorebirds coming back from the north. A single White-crowned Sparrow was reported. June 23<sup>rd</sup> 2 male and 2 female Wilson's Phalaropes and one Pectoral Sandpiper were seen in the north end of the west field. Also June 23<sup>rd</sup> a Bullock's Oriole was seen along the east dyke where the Black-headed Grosbeaks have been hanging out.

#### June 24 – Jun 30

This week had a total of 69 species. On the 24<sup>th</sup> a Purple Martin and 2 Belted Kingfishers were sighted. We tend to lose the Kingfishers from our area in the summer as they require vertical banks near water to

On the 27<sup>th</sup> a Great Horned Owl was seen in the morning along the shaded tree trail at the northeast corner. The alarmed chirping and cawing of the robins and crows gave him away. Our records show that in this week in 1997, a Red-necked Stint (a new bird for the Sanctuary's checklist) was seen. Sometimes taking the time to scan these flocks of little shorebirds can turn up a rarity.

Text: Varri Raffan, Gift Shop Manager

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**Marshnotes Archives**

## **In Memorium– James Hatter 1921-2012**

On May 19th, 2012, Dr. James Hatter passed away peacefully at the age of 91. When the BC Waterfowl Society was established in 1961 to create the Sanctuary, he was one of the fourteen signatories to the official incorporation of the Society, along with Dr. Bob Harris, Ernie Taylor, Dr. Ian McTaggart-Cowan, Frank Butler, Dr. Barry Leach, Arthur Benson, Jim Murray, Ed Meade, Alan Best, Ronald Jackson, Richard Littler, Jim Railton and Mike Cramond.

James or "Jimmie" Hatter obtained his PhD and became BC's first game biologist. He held positions including Chief Game Biologist and Director during a long career with the Fish and Wildlife Branch. Jim was a lifelong hunter and fisherman and enjoyed the pursuit of these activities into his 91st year.

# The Volunteer Corner

## Special Thanks To:

- ◆ Our regular Sunday birding team of Mary Taitt and Brian Self, as well as Jim Martin, Murray McDonald and Karl Pollack for helping host visitors on busy weekends. Special thanks to Bill Topping for helping in the Museum Sunday mornings.
- ◆ West Coast Seeds for a donation of wild bird seed mix for our feeders.
- ◆ Eric Rossici, Eileen Axford, Justin Malkonin, Karl Pollak, the students from Delta Secondary's Provincial Resource Program, new volunteers Andrew Dignon, Lori Cody, and Eileen Stevens for bagging seed and filling bird feeders.
- ◆ Principal Bob Thompson and his students from Neilson Grove Elementary School in Ladner for the opportunity to participate in their school Stream of Dreams mural project.
- ◆ The EBA consulting firm's Mining Section volunteers who spent April 12th with us helping to resurface gravel trails and prune back vegetation, with special thank to Derek Bartley for contacting us and coordinating his work crew.
- ◆ The York House School students Georgia, Taylor, Jessica and Emily who volunteered May 4th for their Social Responsibility Project.
- ◆ Our spring newsletter mailout team of Jim and Jean Marsh, Eric Rossici, Eileen Axford, Laura Jordison, and Jim Martin.

## Volunteers Wanted For:

- ◆ Hosting visitors along trails on busy weekends from August to October.
- ◆ August clean-up work parties around the Sanctuary on specific dates.

Please leave your name and contact information at the Sanctuary Office (604 946 6980).

## 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.

Provide support for like-minded organizations who are working on waterfowl-related projects.

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

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FAMILY Membership:  **\$50**

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Telephone: 604 946 6980 Fax: 604 946 6982

Website: [www.reifelbirdsanctuary.com](http://www.reifelbirdsanctuary.com)

## Manager's Report

From the start of April to the end of June, visitors totaled just over 20,000. April attendance was very high (8021) compared to past years, whereas June attendance (4900) was significantly lower than the past few years, most likely due that month being very cool and the wettest on record for the past 10 years.

Over the past three months, the blackberries, grass, mosquitos and flycatchers seemed to reap most of the benefit of fluctuations between warm weather and cold, rainy days. Maintenance was ongoing with mowing and pruning to keep trails accessible without unduly disturbing nesting birds. Last year's plantings of Indian Plum, Flowering Currant and Ocean Spray all put on a show in May. Fencing was re-established by the outlet pipe along the North Dyke, and some of the main trail near the entrance was resurfaced with fresh gravel during a work party with volunteers from the Mining Section of EBA Consultants. By June, the usual water transfers were initiated to help resolve the cyano-bacterial problem that occurs every year at this time, due to the high nutrient content of the water.



*Volunteers from EBA Consultants*

Lesser Snow Geese flocks destined for their northern breeding grounds on Wrangel Island (Russia) were last seen on Westham Island in the last two weeks of April. Many other waterfowl species also departed by the end of the month, leaving the usual local nesting populations of Mallards, Gadwall, Wood Duck, Canada Geese, and Sandhill Cranes.



*"Monty", our domestic hybrid, eventually fooled predators by nesting behind a dense Rhododendron bush.*

There were the usual little dramas in our waterfowl nesting community this spring. Many Mallard and Canada Goose nests were predated or otherwise disturbed or abandoned, but others survived and are now full-grown and almost flying. The Wildlife Rescue Association brought out a whopping crowd of 19 orphaned Canada Goose goslings to be fostered onto existing goose families. Wood Ducks seemed settled on nests in April, and although we have seen a few broods, most seem to have re-nested after being disrupted by European Starlings, other Wood Ducks, Mink and Squirrels. It will probably be the end of July before we have a full picture on Wood Duck nest success and start to see the first Gadwall broods.

Mink are one of the main duck predators and were very abundant this spring. Mink are in the Mustelid Family and have musk glands. Young Mink, by the time they are away from their parents are about the size of a full-grown squirrel. Full grown adult Mink are about the size of a small cat. April 24th in my log book has "Poooeey!" underlined, a commentary on an apparent domestic dispute between two Mink lurking underneath the Gift Shop, accompanied by screaming and a pungent discharge that then wafted up into the shop.

We can't blame all predation on Mink, though, as Raccoons, Northwestern Crows and Gulls are equally suspect. Raccoons were captured on night video, investigating trail edges and grass cover. Crows can figure out where nests are by watching people and seem to note locations of nests visited by other birds. Gulls are also very quick to steal eggs from unattended nests, particularly if the bird has been disturbed and has not covered the eggs before leaving it.



The family dynamics of some of our species such as Sandhill Cranes and Canada Geese are always very interesting in the nesting season. The young of these larger species take several years to be sexually mature, there is often an extended period of parental care and a tendency towards multi-generational assemblies after the breeding season. Bonds between parent birds and their previous young seem to be temporarily broken for the parents to have new young in the current year, but picked up again after in late summer.

Our Sandhill Crane pair, for example, marked the start of the 2012 nest initiation by chasing away their 2011 colt away in early April after parenting it all winter. "Junior 2011" was suddenly loitering by itself at the Gift Shop. As other local nesting cranes pairs were probably also chasing away their 2011 colts, it was no great surprise to see this bird joined by other non-breeding birds. Sandhill Cranes are sexually mature at 3 to 5 years. From eye colour and plumage, the one year old birds could be identified in these visiting flocks. Other extra birds were likely two year old birds. One of them had the distinctive all-grey face of our resident male. The odds were good that a youngish non-breeder looking like this was our 2010 colt, returned to its birth place.



*Red-eared Slider Turtle digging its nest.*

Throughout April and May, even as our resident pair incubated their nest, groups of younger cranes kept coming and going. From May 11th onwards, our pair and another threesome were most consistently present. The threesome consists, as best we could tell, of our 2011 colt, possibly the 2010 colt and most likely one of the 2011 colts from the pair in Richmond. As the unfortunate death of the 2012 colt after only two weeks has left our nesting pair with (apparently) nothing better to do than chase these three younger birds, the dynamics later on in the summer when there might be other birds here will be very interesting.

Much of this season was spent tracking some of our other Sanctuary inhabitants. We did regular bird surveys covering all of the Sanctuary trails every second

Saturday since March, and the process has been very helpful in tracking trends.

Based on evidence such as birds carrying nest materials or food, birds observed on nests, or fledged families feeding together, we had many nesting songbirds this year. Rufous Hummingbirds, Cedar Waxwings, Bushtits, Brown Creeper, Black-Capped Chickadees, Song Sparrows, Tree Swallows, Downy Woodpeckers, Barn Swallows, Common Yellowthroat, Marsh Wrens, and Red-winged Blackbirds were just some of species well-observed this year. One American Robin got creative and built its nest on the top of our workshop stepladder, giving us an excuse not to clear the downpipes of the Lecture Hall for several weeks.

The special baffles designed to keep House Sparrows out of the swallow boxes seemed to work this year, at least near the picnic area, where visitors were entertained by a portly House Sparrow trying diligently to squeeze into one of the retro-fitted boxes, sometimes even flying back a bit and lunging towards the hole.

Two Barn Swallows were banded last year, and seemed to have returned to their same nest sites over the door to the workshop and over the door to the former manager's residence. Throughout the Sanctuary, this species nests

sometimes just under the eaves of our buildings, but also in our bird blinds and underneath the various deck structures on site, (presumably to avoid notice of predators and disturbance). Every year, we see some fledged young, but there are many destroyed nests and predated young every summer.

Red-eared Slider Turtles, after sunning themselves for months on the logs in Fuller Slough, started investigating possible nest sites. To date (mid-July) we have three known nest locations, one of which was laid May 23<sup>rd</sup>, and is being monitored by BC Environment. It has a special soil temperature monitor in the nest of eggs. There is some uncertainty whether this

..... /Continued page 10

species can reproduce here in the wild, as it is native to the southern USA. The species is sold in pet stores, and most of the ones we see are thought to be individuals released into local wetlands once they had grown too large to keep.

The process of making a nest takes the turtles about two hours, as they first excavate a hole down about 10 cm by digging with their hind legs, then a bit of a cavern to one side is added and small white leathery eggs are laid into this. The Turtle then fills in the hole and tamps down the soils, and within a few days it is hard to see where the hole had been.

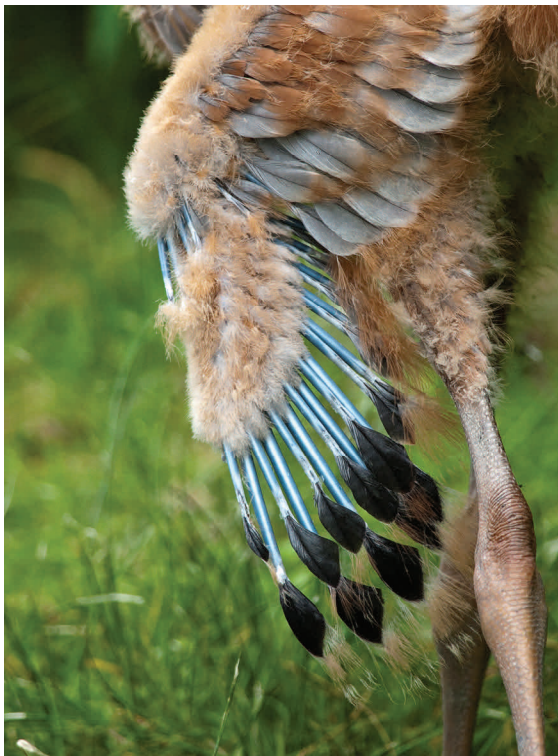
Every late summer we look forward to the southwards passage of the Arctic-nesting shorebirds, the gradual build up of flocks of Sandhill Cranes, and the return of

waterfowl from their breeding grounds across BC and Alberta, Alaska and the Yukon. The seaward dyke provides particularly good views into the ponds. Please note that some of the trails will be temporarily disrupted in order for maintenance to be done in August at the Southwest corner of the Sanctuary, and right at the Viewing Platform near the center. We apologize for any inconvenience, and we hope that the repairs will not take very long.

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

*Note: Members who know their local birds and who are able to get here at about 8 am are welcome to help with the Saturday morning surveys. Please contact me for dates and details of arrangements. Kathleen.*

## *A Look at Pinfeathers and Moulting*



*Pinfeathers on a young Sandhill Crane's wing.  
Photo: Michelle Lamberson*

By the end of May, our ducks started the process of replacing their worn out feathers, dropping the old ones all along trails and in favourite loafing and preening areas. By June, the place was littered with big feathers, little feathers, shiny "speculum" feathers from Mallard wing patches, Canada

Goose flight feathers, and even some Sandhill Cranes feathers.

All birds moult, although the gradual replacement of feathers is not very obvious in species such as Black-capped Chickadees or Cedar Waxwings, which have the same plumage all year. For many waterbirds, though, summer is a time of walking until they have grown new flight feathers, the process of which takes about a month. Many also change their overall look, especially the male Mallards, as a partial moult of body feathers into their "eclipse plumage" leaves them with a camouflage colouring much like the females.

In June and July, "pinfeathers" or growing feathers are most noticeable on the wings of moulting adult birds and young of the year growing their first flight feathers.

Pin feathers consist of myelin sheaths filled with circulating blood, attached to the skin through papillae, much like our hairs grow out of a hair follicle. The growing feathers unfurl from inside these sheaths as they develop, and the pinfeather arrangement looks much like a bluish straw with a feather growing out of the tip. When the feather is fully grown, the sheath often breaks off or the bird removes it through grooming. Pin feathers are not restricted to wing feathers, and when we see birds preening during their moult periods, they are often freeing themselves of the bits of sheath wherever they have recently replaced feathers.

# What's Eating Our Trees?

Visitors have had many questions about the outbreak of Tent Caterpillars here this year. Tent Caterpillars hatch from an egg mass laid the previous summer by a small brownish moth. The “nest” of up to 100 caterpillars construct a silk spider-web looking tent in which to live while they consume the leaves off their favourite food trees and grow to maturity. The Sanctuary’s Pacific Crabapple and Hawthorne trees along the western dyke were most affected.



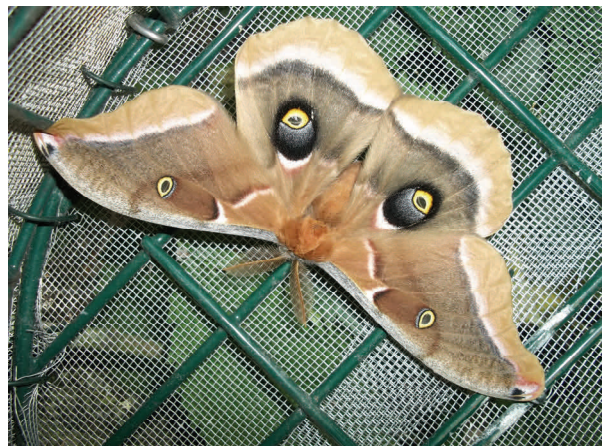
*Western Tent Caterpillar*

Dr. Judith Myers from the University of BC Zoology Department has been monitoring Tent Caterpillar populations here since 1976, using the number of tents in survey areas as an index. She reported that numbers are likely to be higher next year, as the population is not at its peak yet here, unlike in Victoria. “Last year we counted 30 tents here and this year 1427. In the last peak in 2004 we counted 4145.” By the mid-June this year, the caterpillars started to small yellowish cocoons.. After 3 weeks, moths emerged from these cocoons, and have likely mated, and laid eggs for the process to begin again next spring.



Some of our insects are being monitored to ensure there are no horticultural pests. Gypsy Moths are of greatest concern, as eggs sometimes arrive on vegetation coming in through local ports, and the caterpillar phase can destroy fruit-bearing potential of trees and ornamental shrubs and affect the horticulture economy. The Canadian Food Inspection Agency Plant Protection Division has put a pheromone trap on site to test for the presence of this moth. Traps are set out every year to ensure that any eggs gone unnoticed have not gone through the caterpillar stage and into an egg-laying moth form.

Some of the other caterpillars certainly munch on the leaves of our Sanctuary trees, but turn into fairly specular creatures. Last August, we found a very large green caterpillar of the Silkworm Moth which promptly transformed itself into a large fibrous cocoon. We found an identical cocoon a few days later attached to a fence post. Hoping to see the moths emerge from one of these, we kept these in an outside cage exposed to the elements, and were delighted to see both large moths emerge June 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup>, nearly 10 months later. Both moths were males, judging by the thick feathered antennae, and both made a bee-line for the same place somewhere behind our workshop. Perhaps they sensed a female of their kind. Most of these moths have only a few days as a moth, mating, laying eggs and dying without even stopping to feed. Their caterpillars probably make up for that.

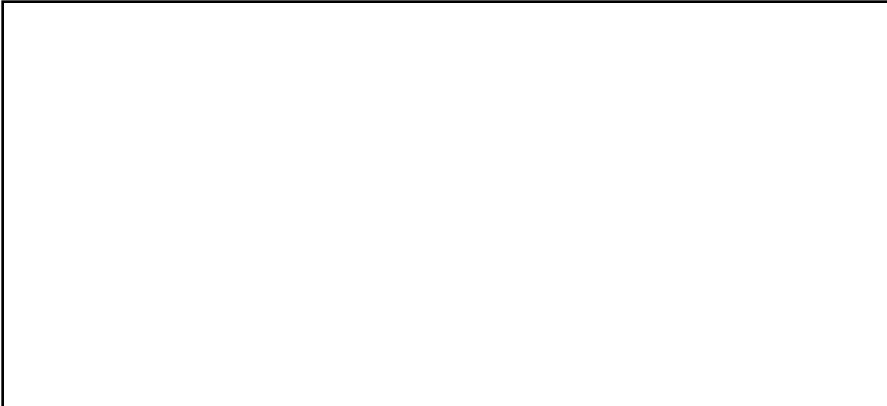


*The larvae (caterpillar to left) and the adult form (above) of the Silkworm Moth, BC's largest native moth.*

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

# BRITISH COLUMBIA WATERFOWL SOCIETY

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