

THE SAGEBRUSH CHRONICLE



Lorne Fitch- Prof. Biologist

Lorne grew up on a mixed farm in west central Alberta. He left the farm but the experience of growing up in semi-wild circumstances never left him. He has been a biologist for over 45 years, working on many issues related to use of land and water. Lorne is a professional biologist, a retired Fish and Wildlife biologist, the former Provincial Riparian Specialist with the Alberta Cows and Fish program and an Adjunct Professor with the University of Calgary. Lethbridge is home, where he pens articles and essays on issues related to Alberta's landscape and critters.

Hearts and Minds- Developing a Prairie Story

Stories are important- they help us navigate the world, make sense of it, see our place in it and understand the changes in terms of benefits and consequences. We lack a single, cohesive, cogent prairie story. What we have are myths, fanciful, flawed descriptions of frontiers, endless space and boundless opportunity. Myths are things that never were, but always are. They lead us, inexorably, to decisions that further erode the size, integrity and biodiversity of the prairies. We can do better, we need to do better, at telling the story of prairie.

Based on a career of interacting with prairie, managing it, and thinking about the issues, this presentation contains thoughts about the story we should be telling, to change the hearts and minds of people about this fragile, superbly interconnected, impressive and holy landscape.

Tuesday, January 22, 2019 at the Nature Centre

7:00 to 7:45 PM: Business Meeting

7:45 to 8:00 PM: Socializing

8:00 to 9:00 PM: Hearts and Minds: Developing a Prairie Story

Executive

President	Hugh Armstrong armstrongg.h@telus.net	526-1003
Vice-President	Anne Bernhardt	527-2792
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The Sagebrush Chronicle is published ten times a year by Grasslands Naturalists. **Submissions of writing and artwork are welcomed but must be edited for publication. Deadline: the 10th of each month.** If you would like to advertise in the Chronicle, more information is available from the editor. Submissions are to be sent to: milton.spitzer@gmail.com (403-528-3120). Do not imbed photos in articles but **do send** them separately.

The Society of Grasslands Naturalists encourages the study, conservation and protection of all components of the natural world. The Society provides educational opportunities, assists in the collection and provision of species data, acts as stewards of the environment, discusses environmental topics and organizes member activities. The Society also manages the Medicine Hat Interpretive Program.

General Meetings: 4th Tuesday, Sept. - May **Board Meetings:** 1st Tuesday Sept. - June

To join Grasslands Naturalists and/or send a tax-deductible donation, write:

Grasslands Naturalists
Box 2491
Medicine Hat, AB T1A 8G8

Contact info: Nature Centre 529-6225

Annual Membership Dues: Eileen Cowtan

Individuals \$20
Families \$25
Organizations \$25

Donations to Grassland Naturalists and Interpretive Program are another great way to support local nature and nature education. Tax receipts are issued for all donations over \$10. Your generosity is greatly appreciated!

EDITORIAL DISCLAIMER

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GN Website:

<http://www.natureline.info/gn>

GN Facebook:

<http://www.facebook.com/GrasslandsNaturalists/>
You must be a Facebook member to view most of it.

MH Interpretive Program

(Managed by Grassland Naturalists)

Based in Police Point Park Nature Centre

Open Weekends Only During Construction

Saturday and Sunday

9:00 AM to 5:00 PM

Washrooms are closed at present!

Portapotties are available!

Note: some progress has been made with the washroom situation. Hopefully open soon

To get up to date information on what is happening at the Nature Centre call the:

Nature Line at (403) 529-6225

**Also find us on Facebook and Twitter
policepointpark**

To date through January 27: Young Artists inspired by Nature: High School art show on display at the Nature Centre.

Sunday, January 27: 1:30 to 3:30 PM Celebrate Family Literacy Day with the Opening of the Winter StoryWalk®: "Froggy Gets Dressed" On a trail in Police Point Park through March 10.

Monday, February 18: 11:00 AM to 4:00 PM: Kiwanis Family Day: Volunteers will be needed for this event. Contact Marty Drut.

February 6 to March 31: What's the Connection? An Interactive Display from Parks Canada. At the Nature Centre

It is with great sadness that we report the passing of longtime GN member:

Bill Knibbs

See next page for an obituary.

Member's Corner

Grasslands Naturalists wish to express our condolences to Ann Knibbs and family on the loss of their husband, father and grandfather. When his health permitted it, Bill was a strong supporter of the Society and an enthusiastic volunteer; being at various times, a Board member, on many committees and especially the Chair of the Nomination Committee. We will all miss his congenial phone calls to the membership encouraging them to run for the Board or on different committees.

As an expression of sympathy donations may be made to the Grasslands Naturalists, Margery E. Yuill Cancer Clinic or to the St. John's Presbyterian Church Building Fund.

Our sincerest sympathies are extended to the family." (a more detailed obituary can be found in the Medicine Hat News of January 5)

President's Message-January, 2019

Happy New Year to everyone! I trust it started well for all!

It was a relatively quiet month for the Board and club over the Christmas season so there is not much to report:

However, starting the year off on a note of desperation is not how we should be doing things, but an organization is only as strong as its membership and volunteers. As I have written previously, we are in dire need of new committee and board members. There will be at least two openings on the Board and the Issues and Operations Committees have vacancies. These are the most recent areas to have positions available and there could be more. Please step up and support the Society by letting your name stand at the AGM in March.

Also, notice is once again given that nominations for a Lifetime Membership has to be in to any Board member 60 days prior to the AGM.

The Annual Christmas Bird Count on Sunday Dec 16th and subsequent Potluck Supper was a great success again. Thanks to Marty and all the counters. See his following report.

We had a joint GN and Parks meeting on December 12th which was very informative. See John's report.

Please remember to keep the Casino dates open, June 6-7, so you can *enjoy* one of our chief fund raisers!

Cheers,

Hugh

Reminders:

- 1. Volunteers are always needed at the Nature Centre, especially now that we have to start moving "stuff" back in.**

Nature Alberta Update by Ian and Angela Turner

A Nature Alberta meeting was held in Edmonton on December 8th, 2018 and it was listened to via teleconference. Following are some of the highlights of the meeting:

- A few new members were welcomed
- Currently Nature Alberta has a total of 35 member clubs
- The Nature Alberta magazine will continue to be distributed to all member club members via e-mail, so enjoy!!
- It was decided that there is a need to restructure or rewrite the Vision, Mission, Objects of the Society, Goals, etc. since Nature Alberta is getting close to 50 years old
- To date \$251,269 has been received from grant applications
- Alberta government is proposing "Big Horn" land west of Red Deer to be managed differently --- possibly a provincial park?
- The 50th Anniversary planning is starting for 2020
- At the AGM the Loran Goulden Award, Frank and Alice Harper Memorial Award, and Volunteer Award were presented

Upcoming Events, Field Trips and Announcements

Tuesday, January 22: Monthly GN Meeting: 7:00 PM Business Meeting, 8:00 PM feature presentation.

To date through January 27: Young Artists inspired by Nature: High School art show on display at the Nature Centre.

Sunday, January 27: 1:30 to 3:30 PM Celebrate Family Literacy Day with the Opening of the Winter StoryWalk®: "Froggy Gets Dressed" On a trail in Police Point Park through **March 10.**

Saturday, February 2: Elkwater Winter Festival and Cross-Country Skiing: Meet at the Elkwater Visitor's Centre at 10:30 AM. For more information contact John Slater at jslater@telusplanet.net.

Monday, February 18: 11:00 AM to 4:00 PM: Kiwanis Family Day: Volunteers will be needed for this event. Contact Marty Drut.

February 6 to March 31: What's the Connection? An Interactive Display from Parks Canada. At the Nature Centre.

April 4 and 5: Ecotrust Environmental Gathering in Calgary: GN Members are encouraged to attend. The GN Issues Committee has budgeted for financial assistance to one or two members for registration and transportation. Martha Munz-Gue (403 526-2226) has attended the previous 3 gatherings and can provide information concerning this gathering.

Notes from Meeting between Parks Officials and John Slater, Corlaine Gardner and Hugh Armstrong

A meeting was held December 12th at the City Parks Dept Office with Randy Taves, Scott Richter and Keziah Lesko-Gosselin and attended by Hugh, Corlaine and John. Topics discussed:

1. A report of the Shoreline Cleanup in Ranchlands Environmental Reserve performed by GN on October 6th was submitted with discussion concerning protection of the area, removal of the very large pieces of trash and having the area designated as dog on-leash for protection of the wildlife and ecological sensitivity of the flora and fauna.
2. The Parks Dept has designated Saamis Archeological Coulee Site to be dog on-leash as of January 1st. Seven Persons Creek riparian to be restored; perhaps with help from SEAWA and GN. A fenced area for dog off-leash may be installed.
3. Pollinator Garden at Police Point Park needs fencing and water source available for IP Staff to care for the garden.
4. Northland Storm Water Pond: Following the presentations by Randy and Scott at the GN General Meeting on October 23, a Neighbourhood Walk was conducted around the NECH Pond the next morning. Viewing platform and floating dock to be installed in 2019, and the existing bench and trash bins to be moved to the north side. Viewing of the other Storm Water Ponds in the City Southland area is planned; likely in the spring.
5. East Glen Nature Trail: nine bridges are being replaced but concern was expressed about the ecological disturbance to the native prairie by heavy equipment; particularly on the hill where the Prairie Crocus only grow. Ian Wallis, Hugh and John met on Dec 13 to view the trail and vehicle tracks caused to the prairie with replacement of two of the large bridges. Hugh sent email with pictures to Randy concerning protection of the Crocus Hill.
6. Joint GN and Parks Dept projects for 2019 to be discussed at later date.

John Slater

Exciting Sightings by Robert Frew

A relatively mild winter continues into January, and for those birders who keep records, it's time to start a new annual list of bird sightings for 2019. The so-called winter finches have been slow to arrive, with few reports of Common Redpolls, Pine Siskins, Crossbill species or Grosbeaks. Winter can also bring rarities, and one such report of a Brambling is documented below. Although local birders were preoccupied with various area Christmas Bird Counts in mid and late December, some exciting sightings outside of the CBC circles and count dates have been reported:

On January 1st, Phil Horch reported sighting a **Hooded Merganser**, among the hundreds of Canada Geese on the South Saskatchewan River at the Trans-Canada Highway Bridge. The species is considered a vagrant in the Prairie Region in winter. The large white fan-shaped crest, when raised is diagnostic for the male. Phil also observed a **Rough-legged Hawk** across the river from Police Point Park on January 1st, and a **Northern Goshawk** in the park on January 6th.

Dan Schiebelbein's report of a **Northern Shrike** on January 1st in NE Crescent Heights was the first sighting of this winter migrant for 2019. Dan also observed two female **Snowy Owls** west of the city later that day. On January 6th, Dan and Mark Schiebelbein encountered a flock of ~400 **Snow Buntings** on the snow-less prairie landscape along RGE Rd. 21, northwest of Many Island Lake. A second smaller flock of buntings numbering ~100 was observed along the Bull Trail, along with a small group of ten **Horned Larks**. Declining numbers of larks are being reported this winter, a trend that is corroborated by recent Medicine Hat, Manyberries, and Milk River CBC results.

On December 17th, Rob Wapple reported the presence of a **Brambling** at a feeder/water fountain in his Ross Glen yard. Rob observed the bird briefly on three consecutive occasions, and fortuitously its image was also caught on a motion camera focused on the water fountain. The Checklist of the Birds of Alberta by the Birds Record Committee describes this Eurasian finch species as accidental: less than 10 records.

Enroute to Manyberries on December 29th, Ben Velner and Bob Frew observed a **Prairie Falcon** perched on a power pole near the



Photo of Cape May Warbler by R and B Plant



Motion Camera photo of Brambling by R. Wapple

intersection of TWP Rd. 120 and The Black and White Trail.

A very late sighting of a **Cape May Warbler** by Rita and Barry Plant at their Ross Glen bird feeder on November 21st (reported on

December 18th) is worthy of mention, given the rarity of warbler species in winter. This wood warbler species breeds in the boreal forest and can be difficult to detect.

Park interpreter Marty Drut and others tallied six **Pine Siskins** at the Police Point Nature Centre feeders on January 5th. These brown, streaked finches can be identified by the yellow stripes on their wings, and are usually detected by their distinctive calls. Their numbers can be erratic.

Phil and Annalora Horch reported six **Bald Eagles**, three adult and three juveniles at Strathcona Island Park on January 7th. The eagles were attracted to a carcass on the river ice, where magpies were feeding.

Medicine Hat 37th Annual Christmas Bird Count (2018)

The 2018 Medicine Hat Christmas Bird Count (CBC) was held on Sunday, December 16. Many thanks to the 37 participants who surveyed territories during the count, including 2 new contributors. Also, a big thank you goes out to the 15 feeder watchers who participated. There were 2 new people that helped with the feeder watch part of the count as well. Starting in 2010, the Interpretive Program began soliciting Hatters with feeders to help with the count. Since then, there has been a consistent group of 15 to 30 observers annually. Having these folks participate usually adds one or more species seen exclusively by feeder watchers to the count's species total.

Count day temperatures were relatively mild (Low = -7°C/High = 7°C) and winds were moderate (E-SW 6 to 26 km/hr). Snow was virtually non-existent throughout the count circle. All of the 24 territories in our count circle were surveyed in 2018.

In 2018, 58 species were observed, which was 7 more than 2017. This number is similar to species totals since 2001 (average = 54), and about 27% above the long-term average (36 years) of 46. Total individual birds counted (28,677) were 8% above 2017's total (26,662) and well above the long-term and 10-year averages (14,041 and 20,487, respectively).

As in 2017, most of this increase was attributed to the record number of 21,586 Canada Geese observed in this year's count. The high for Geese likely involved some double counted birds as flocks moved across territories during count day but still represented an accurate picture of geese in the area. The individual bird total was not a count record but was the second highest observed (Highest = 29,541 in 2015). Mallards contributed heavily to the total as they were 23% greater in 2018 than 2017 (2,495 and 1,740, respectively) and 5% above the long-term average (2,387).

Other species, that make a notable impact on total birds annually, showed increased numbers from 2017. These included Northern Flicker (18%), Blue Jay (73%), Black-capped Chickadee (17%), Red-breasted Nuthatch (111%), European Starling (169%), and House Finch (77%) – see Species List page 8. Impact species that were down in 2018 were Ring-necked Pheasant (-43%), Rock Dove (-53%), Eurasian Collared-dove (-39%), Black-billed Magpie (-26%), and House Sparrow (-19%) – see Species List page 8. If this last group of birds were at 2017 numbers, the total individual bird count would have easily been a record.

Two species, Gray Catbird (1) and Brambling (1) were observed during Count Week but not on Count Day. Catbirds, common here in warm months, are rarely if ever seen this late in the fall and Brambling, a Eurasian visitor, have only a few records in Alberta. The Brambling was reported with photographic documentation to the international monitoring site for birds eBird. No new species to the count were found in 2017. Feeder watchers observed 1 species exclusive of those monitoring assigned territories: Common Grackle (2). Other species of note seen by feeder watchers included: Pine Siskin (4) and Common Redpoll (1).

Since 1997, high counts have been closely associated with Canada Goose numbers. Geese comprised about 20% of total birds from 1982 to 1996. From 1997 to present, that proportion increased to 48%. Non-Canada Goose totals have appeared to be relatively consistent over the count's history (see Figure 1).

In addition to Canada Goose, there were 3 species with high counts this year. They were Northern Flicker (167, previous high 143 in 2014), Blue Jay (130, previous high 83 in 2013), and Black-capped Chickadee (321, previous high 286 in 2012). One species, House Sparrow, had an all time low for the count (460, previous low 493 in 2013).

Regarding the Top Ten Species, the list remained consistent from 2017 with Canada Goose leading the way followed by Mallards. The most noticeable change was that Common Redpoll dropped off the list down to 13 observations as compared to 272 in 2017. Northern Flicker replaced Redpolls on this year's list. The other 7 species were on the list in 2017.

Other items of note:

Although Black-billed Magpie observations declined this year, they remain 3% above the long-term average and 55% above the 2004-2009 average when West Nile Virus likely impacted the population (524, 511, and 339, respectively).

Horned Larks continued to have few observations in recent years; from 2010 to 2018 there was only 1 year (2016, 79) when more than 4 were seen on the count.

Several species of "Winter Finches" or finch-like birds were seen in low numbers or missing from the count this year. These included Pine Grosbeak, Red and White-winged Crossbills, Common Redpoll, and Snow Bunting.

Fourteen species returned to the count in 2018. Six species had absences of 5 years or more and included: Canvasback (2008), Ring-necked Duck (2011), Harris's Sparrow (2012), White-throated Sparrow (2013), Purple Finch (2009), and American Goldfinch (2012). The remaining 8 species were last seen within the past 2 to 3 years – see Table 2 below for details.

There were 17 species typically seen on our CBC that were not observed in 2018. Seven species have not been observed for 5 or more years: Northern Shoveler (2013), Gadwall (2012), Northern Harrier (2005), Cooper's Hawk (2013), Short-eared Owl (2010), Red Crossbill (2012), and Evening Grosbeak (2007).

Good Birding!

Marty Drut

(This is an abridged copy of Marty's report. For the complete report along with tables and graphs contact Marty at marty.drut@natureline.info .

MANYBERRIES (ABMA) CBC 2018 Compiled by Rob Gardner

The count participants gathered at Tim Horton's in the Medicine Hat Mall parking lot at 8:00 am on Saturday, December 29, 2018. We introduced the new participant, Dianne Pachal, who drove in from Waterton Lakes National Park. Once fully fuelled, we headed south. After Ben pointed out a prairie falcon on a power pole just south of town, we reached the count area at 9:00 am. We headed to our respective areas, and prowled the gravel roads and listened at each homestead.

The highlight was finding two sage grouse, in a different location from previous years. Hairy woodpecker was a new species for the count. Snow Buntings and Horned Larks were less visible than they often are. Perhaps they were scattered across the bare fields instead of staying near the roads.

Overall, the totals of 15 species and 619 individuals were on the lower side of average. Next year, we will hope for bitter cold weather!

We gathered for lunch in Manyberries. It should be noted that a new operation, the Sage Brush Grill, provides excellent hamburgers & fries for \$10, but must be pre-ordered on the off-season. Call Tamra at 403-504-9175.

People participating in the 2018 Christmas Bird Count:

Rob Gardner	Corlaine Gardner	Ben Velner	Bob Frew	Dianne Pachal
Temperature	-1 to +3			

	Group 1	Group 2	Total
Golden Eagle	2	1	2
Black-billed Magpie	21	25	46
Sharp-tailed Grouse	4	15	19
Greater Sage-Grouse	2		2
Ring-necked Pheasant	9	1	10
Hairy Woodpecker	1		1
Eurasian Collared Dove		5	5
Black-capped Chickadee	1		1
Northern Flicker	1		1
Great Horned Owl	1		1
Tree Sparrow	3	30	30
House Sparrow	80	25	105
Snow Bunting	300	50	350
Horned Lark	25	20	45
Snowy Owl	1		1
Total Species	14	9	15
Total Birds	452	172	619

Please note that several birds were seen by both groups, so totals do not match.



Cross Country Skiing in the Cypress Hills in December.
There was great skiing conditions in the Hills when John Slater did a trip in mid December. If interested in future skiing trips contact John at jslater@telusplanet.net.



Snaps from the Xmas Count Potluck

The stories were great but the food and comradery was even better.

All photos by John Slater



Grasslands Naturalists
Box 2491, Medicine Hat, Alberta T1A 8G8



Membership Form for 2019

Name* _____ Name of 2nd Family Member ** _____

Address* _____ Membership: Individual \$20/year _____

City / Province* _____ Family \$25/year _____

Postal Code* _____ Organization \$25/year _____

Telephone+ _____ Donation _____ Tax Receipt Available

Email++ _____ **Total Enclosed** _____

Preference for receiving Chronicle newsletter*:

Post or Email or Neither

Current and recent Chronicles can be viewed and downloaded from the Grasslands Naturalists website www.natureline.info/gn

* Required information. ** Required information for family membership.

+ Optional Information. For phone number(s), please note if it is a residence, cell phone or business number.

++ Information required if you wish to receive the Chronicle or Nature Alberta Magazine by email.

Informed Consent for Field Trips

I may wish to participate in field trips and events organized by Grasslands Naturalists.

I affirm that as a participant I am prepared to stay with the group and follow the directions of the coordinator. If I choose to bring my child(ren)/ward(s), I will ensure they also stay with the group and follow the directions of the coordinator and activity leader. I affirm that, knowing my personal state of health, I feel that I am mentally and physically capable of participating in the trips and events that I choose to attend.

I acknowledge that I am aware of the inherent risks, hazards, and dangers associated with activities arising from my participation in trips and events which may result in injury to me or result in my death.

Therefore, in consideration of my participation in these trips and events, for myself, my heirs, my executors, my administrators, and my successors, I voluntarily assume all risks and hereby waive all my rights against Grasslands Naturalists and unconditionally release and discharge the Grasslands Naturalists, its members, directors, officers, its affairs and its coordinators from all manner of activities, causes of action, suits, claims and demands for damages due to personal injury, death, loss or damage to property, expenses or otherwise which may or shall arise in any way as a result of my participation in the above trips and events.

Signature of Member

Signature of 2nd Family Member

Date: _____

Date: _____



Grasslands Naturalists
 Box 2491, Medicine Hat, Alberta T1A 8G8



Consent Form

Consent to the Use and Distribution of Personal Information

Grasslands Naturalists (GN) collects personal information subject to *Alberta's Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act (FOIP)*. GN may, subject to your consent, wish to make some personal information public through, for example, its Chronicle, Website, Facebook page or newspaper article. Please indicate your consent to the following release of information and note any specific exclusion of a consent such as for children.

	Yes	No	Exclusion
Name	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	_____
Residence telephone	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	_____
Cell phone	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	_____
Business phone	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	_____
Email address	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	_____
Residence address	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	_____
Pictures	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	_____

As a GN Member, you can receive, free of cost, an electronic version of the quarterly Nature Alberta Magazine. To receive the magazine, GN must supply your email address to Nature Alberta so that it can email you the magazine. Please indicate your consent to receiving the electronic version of the Magazine by email from Nature Alberta. Yes No

Beyond the above consents, GN will not distribute personal information to a third party without your consent unless such information is required, by law, to be released to a federal or provincial government agency in order, for example, to maintain GN's non-profit organization status.

Consent to Receive Emails Related to Commercial Activities

GN may wish to send you emails to promote some of its commercial activities including those provided by its *Club* and *Interpretive Program*. Please indicate your consent to receiving such information. Yes No

Modification of Consents

You may modify any of the above consents, at any time, through a written request to the member of the GN Executive responsible for Memberships.

Signature of Member	Signature of 2 nd Family Member
Date: _____	Date: _____