



# Oystercatcher

NEWSLETTER

*Spring 2010*

Well-known feature in Mt Maxwell Provincial Park



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This newsletter is published by the Salt Spring Trail and Nature Club, PO Box 203, Ganges PO,  
Salt Spring Island, BC, V8K 2V9.

For information on the Board of Directors and weekly outings, please see our website: [www.saltspringtnc.ca](http://www.saltspringtnc.ca)

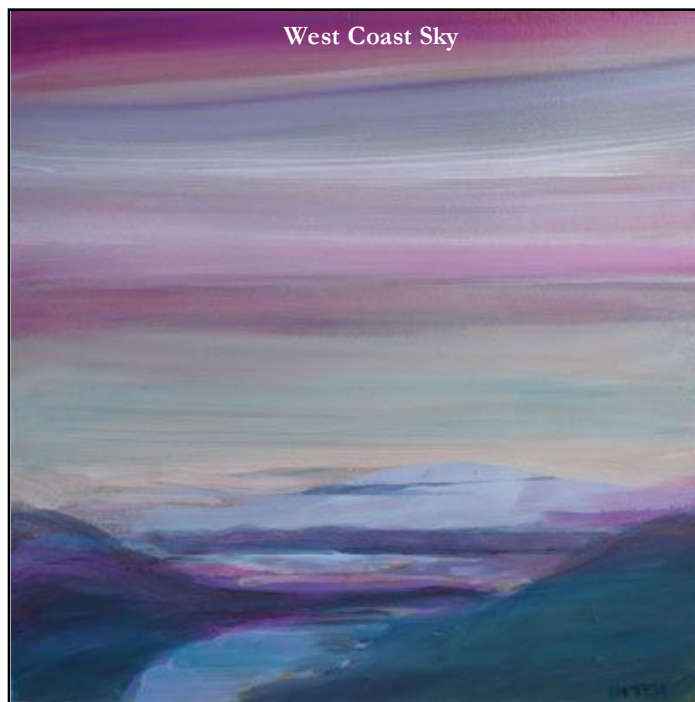
## Reflections on the SSTNC 's Annual General Meeting 2010

*By Richard Shead*

The Club's AGM was held at the Harbour House Hotel on Thursday, January 28<sup>th</sup>. The meeting was preceded by a luncheon and cash bar. At the luncheon, special birthday wishes were extended to Margaret Spencer. There were 32 members present at the AGM.

### **Below follow some highlights of the meeting.**

- \* The Treasurer reported that the Club had a surplus of \$2,110 as at year end.
- \* Membership is remaining strong at 213, while two new members signed up at the end of the AGM.



### **In his address, the President included the following successful events:**

- \* Fall trip to Cathedral Lake;
- \* Successful joint venture with the Pathways Committee to complete three new foot paths along Atkins, Crofton and Blain Roads;
- \* The club offered financial support in the amount of \$1,000 to support the assessment of a part of Tamar Grigg's property to the Island Conservancy. In the end the money was returned as sufficient funding from other sources had been obtained. The club will still be interested in offering future assistance if needed;
- \* Continuing maintenance of our island hiking trails;
- \* The adoption of a revised general by-law for the Club encompassing a gender neutral wording.

### **Your new Board of Directors looks as follows:**

*President – Kees Visser*  
*Vice President- Niels Gerbitz*  
*John Heddle - Secretary Treasurer (second year)*  
*Past President- Zeke Blazecka (acclaimed)*  
*Hiking Coordinator – Janice Dickie (acclaimed)*  
*Walking Coordinator– Marvella Roy (acclaimed)*  
*Ramblers Coordinator – Marilyn Harding (acclaimed)*  
*Membership- Barry Spence (for a third two-year term)*  
*Nieke Visser- BC Nature Director (second year),*  
*Brian Radford -Trails Coordinator (second year)*  
*Teresa Hitch - Nature Director (second year)*  
*Richard Shead - Recording Secretary (second year)*

### **In Memoriam:**

The President acknowledged all of the following members who had passed away during 2009: Mary Ashworth, Vera Pettapiece, Jack Fraser, Aileen Teal Shank, Fred Eaves, Bert McCann, Bruce Kirwin, Alice Andress, Mary MacGregor, Norm Iverson, Norbeta Martin, Barbara Hicks, and Peggy Jacobs. Many thanks to Betty Kirk for maintaining the Memorial Book.

Zeke Blazecka received compliments for his work and leadership as President for the last two years. Also recognized for their contribution were the following retiring directors: Lise Fraser, Dulcy Wilson, and Frauke Prystawik.

Finally, members are urged to e-mail or call in any suggestions they may have as to how to increase the attendance at both the annual Christmas luncheon and the AGM as the numbers attending each event have been dwindling. Contact Kees Visser (cnvisser@shaw.ca or 537-5443) or Niels Gerbitz (ngerbitz@shaw.ca or 537-5994)

## **PRESIDENT'S POINT OF VIEW**

It has been only six weeks since I took office and most of that time I was volunteering in Vancouver. Hence this very short report.

I was encouraged to see how many members like to contribute to the Oystercatcher; however I was discouraged to see how few of us attended our last AGM on January 28. At our next meetings your Executive will look at this and will discuss the format for future AGM's. Thanks to the weather the season is starting out fine. I have to emphasize again that our coordinators will need volunteers to lead activities, otherwise these activities will not happen. I know that most seasoned leaders are more than willing to help out newcomers.

Last but not least, I like to thank Zeke Blazecka for a job well done the last few years as President. It will be difficult to fill these large footsteps.

*Kees Visser, President*



## BIRDS IN MY BACKYARD

By Nieke Visser

The weather has been great in February. The salmon berry, Indian plum, and huckleberry are flowering, one month earlier than normal! My neighbours boast about rhododendrons that flower. Mine are not that adventurous, alas! The Robins are thriving, the pine siskins raid my feeder, the Downy Woodpecker that I have been seeing for years is finally trying the suet feeder and there are red crossbills in the cedars. One day I saw a bright yellow bird taking a drink from the bird bath. I think it may have been a Yellow Warbler. Or was it an escaped Canary? The Sparrows and Finches, however, are less abundant compared to the years before.

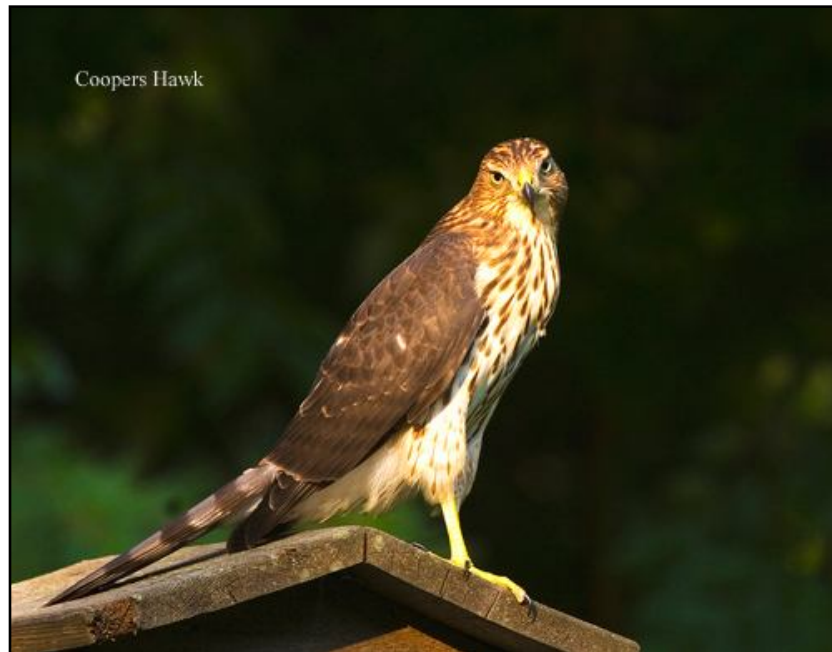
Lately, the presence of cats and dogs are blamed for an alleged decline in song birds. I do not own a cat, but we have a dog since September that is never unsupervised in the yard. Several of my neighbours have cats but I never see them. However, I have to deal with another predator: a Cooper's Hawk!

This feeder raider has now been in the neighbourhood for a couple of years. Last year an adult came around to show her (or his, to stay gender neutral!) offspring where the juiciest feeder opportunities were. Before that incident, I saw a Cooper maybe twice a year, now I see one almost every week! Although they hunt small rodents, they are also known to hunt birds that visit feeders. Their ability to move quickly through dense bush is amazing considering the fact that they measure over 40 cm! Their counterparts, the sharp-shinned hawk is capable of doing this too, but the customer who appears here regularly is definitely larger than 30 cm. I had ample opportunity to observe this bird of prey though my scope and binoculars. One day I saw a group of Pine Siskins chasing him away, proof that numbers count. It was the noise that attracted my attention. Quite a spectacle!

I count birds every week for Project Feeder Watch from November through March. This is my second year so I cannot see a trend yet in numbers and species. I think five years in a row would be the minimum. Still, there are some birds that were there last year but not this year. For example, this year I see no Steller's Jays and no California Quails.

That is not uncommon, it happened before and they likely will be back next year. The Flickers for example are here this year and so are the Red Crossbills. The little ones, such as Sparrows, Chickadees and Nuthatches are less in numbers. And so are the Finches. I normally see several Fox Sparrows, this year just one. Same story with the Golden-crowned Sparrow and the Song Sparrow. But wait, when I walk along the 1 km stretch of my lane, I hear Song Sparrows singing from every direction. Competing feeders perhaps?

Our Anna's Hummingbirds are down in numbers to the



Coopers Hawk

two females. Up to January we saw two or three males regularly, and at once we counted five Anna's at the same time. The males are gone now. The females are likely tending their nests. Their visits to the feeders are infrequent. We are now anxiously waiting for the little ones to show up!

Purple Finches have always been inconsistent in appearance. At the beginning of the winter season we had a large House Finch population: often

five or six at the time visiting the feeder. Now we are lucky if we see one or two. And this trend is of concern as it is obvious what is wrong here : eye disease.

This disease is caused by a bacterium of the mycoplasma family: *Mycoplasma gallisepticum*. I have seen our healthy population of house finches being decimated by this disease. It started about a month ago when I noticed a female sitting quite forlorn at the feeder. Closer inspection showed she had crusty eyes and looked in general not very happy. Then one after another showed up with the disease. To date we have just one male left alive, but not healthy (see picture).

Infected birds have red, swollen, runny, or crusty eyes; in extreme cases the eyes become swollen shut or crusted over, and the birds become essentially blind. Birds in this condition obviously have trouble feeding. You might see them staying on the ground, under the feeder, trying to find seeds. If the infected bird dies, it is usually not from the conjunctivitis itself, but rather from starvation, exposure, or predation as a result of not being able to see. (1)



House Finch with eye disease

The disease was first observed in 1994 in the Eastern part of North America. The epidemic expanded mainly North, probably carried along by House Finches on their return migration, then towards the SE, and later West. By March 1997 conjunctivitis had been reported from most of the eastern range of the House Finch. The prevalence of the disease seems to fluctuate seasonally, with increases in the fall, probably as a result of dispersing juveniles. House Finch numbers decreased throughout winter in areas with cold winters and high conjunctivitis prevalence, suggesting significant mortality associated with the disease. (2)

The Cornell Institute of Ornithology reports several studies on their related website. Hartup et. al. (1998) analyzed data provided by volunteers to identify potential risk factors associated with this disease in House Finches. Over two years, 778 volunteers provided 7224 monthly

observations by questionnaire at residential bird feeding sites in eight states of the eastern USA. Year, season, hopper and tube type feeders were associated with conjunctivitis in house. Further analysis suggests that increased risk was associated with cooler, non-breeding periods from September through March and the presence of tube style feeders. Platform feeders may have been protective against conjunctivitis. Prevention of disease transmission may include modifying bird feeding activities based on season and type of feeders in use.(3)

More recently, a study revealed unusually high numbers of House Finches with eye infections in the West. Our region is the most northerly range of House Finches. The data show that the disease began spreading epidemically in the Northwest in early 2004, 10 years after it began in the East. In February through April 2004, disease prevalence in the north-western states was half again compared with the highest levels previously observed there (British Columbia, Alberta, Washington, Idaho, Montana, Oregon, and Wyoming). By February 2004, disease prevalence had reached 15 percent in the Northwest. No similar increases were detected in California or in the Southwest.(4)

Program Feeder Watch also collects data on House Finches with eye disease. We are waiting until these data are analyzed as well.

So what can be concluded from these findings? One study points to the feeder types and suggests that only platform feeders are protective against transmission of disease. Such findings should be verified though and I have not found similar studies. The expansion to the West is not explained. It is also not explained why the infection only affects House Finches and not other finches or other song birds that share the same habitat. The disease seems to affect only House Finches in the colder climates. It could be that House Finches lack a defence against these bacteria because of the climate.

In summary, the mystery is far from resolved. Meanwhile, my House Finch population is dwindling. The one male in the picture is visiting from time to time, but his condition is getting worse. He has a hard time landing on branch. He is the last one of a substantial flock that used to come to my backyard.

#### References:

- (1) <http://www.birds.comell.edu/hofi/hoffaqs.html>
- (2) <http://wingsnthings07.blogspot.com/2008/04/house-finch-eye-disease.html>
- (3) Risk factors associated with mycoplasmal conjunctivitis in house finches: Results from a citizen-based study. Hartup, Barry K., Hussini O. Moham med, George V. Kollias, and André A Dhondt. 1998. *Journal of Wildlife Diseases* 34(2): 281-288.
- (4) <http://www.birds.comell.edu/hofi/news.html>

#### CALENDAR

**March 25, 2010**

##### PRESENTATION

**Who:** Sheila and Barry Spence

**What:** Travel in Iceland

**Where:** United Church lower level

**Time:** 7:30 PM

**April 22, 2010**

##### PRESENTATION

**Who:** Andrea Rankin

**What:** Hiking in Turkey

**Where:** United Church lower level

**Time:** 7:30 PM

**May 27, 2010**

##### PRESENTATION

**Where:** United Church lower level

**Time:** 7:30 PM

For details, see the Driftwood  
or the website

**June 15, 2010**

##### STRAWBERRY FESTIVAL

##### AND GENERAL MEETING

**Where:** Ruckle Park lower picnic area

**Time:** Noon

Preceded by a short walk/hike to rev up your  
appetite. Bring a bowl and a spoon.  
Watch the Driftwood or website for details.



## DAY HIKES IN PANAMA AND COSTA RICA

*Text and Pictures by Barbara Appleby*

January, 2010 started with a tour of Central America and my first day hike was in Parque Natural Metropolitano in the north of Panama City. The park can be reached by public bus and a short walk up the road (for the die-hards and budget conscious traveler) or by hiring a taxi. Dust off your Spanish you'll need a few phrases to get a good price.

Over looking Panama city the Metropolitan Park protects a wild area of tropical forest within the urban boundaries. There are 5 walking trails which you can link together to make up 4.7 km or 4 hours and 15 minutes. The terrain is not overly hilly but you'll need the time to take pictures, look for birds and to watch the leaf cutter ants haul all sorts of bits and pieces back to their home. There are also a couple of look outs: one over the city and one out towards the Panama Canal.

If you're up there early (they open at 7am) you are likely to see Titi monkeys, turtles, agoutis and some of the 250 bird species which have been spotted here.

In Panama my next stop and favourite place by far was El Valle. This beautiful little town of approximately 6,000 is only 1.5 hours west of Panama city. Many buses shuttle up there a day. I was originally drawn to the place as I had read that there is a large indigenous handicraft market on Sunday. Their little museum, next to the church, is also only open on Sundays. It has exhibits on the geologic and human history of the area - only in Spanish but easy enough to figure out.

By Monday I knew I was staying a week instead of two days and was fortunate to meet Isrel a local boy who said he could guide me up La India Dormida. This local mountain ridge resembles an Indian girl laying on her back sleeping. We accessed the trail head in the neighbourhood of La Pintada - entrance \$2 US. There are toilets here too for about another \$1. Both provide some local employment.

Shortly after the trail head you will come to some wonderful ancient petro glyphs depicting the history of the area as well as humans, animals and geographical locations. From here you climb past waterfalls up to the top of the Indian Girl's head. Most likely it will be blowing a gale but from

the top you get the most picturesque view of the area as well as down over the town.

The trail down is a little slippery so walking sticks are an excellent idea. You'll walk through other neighbourhoods on your way back into town at the end of the trail.

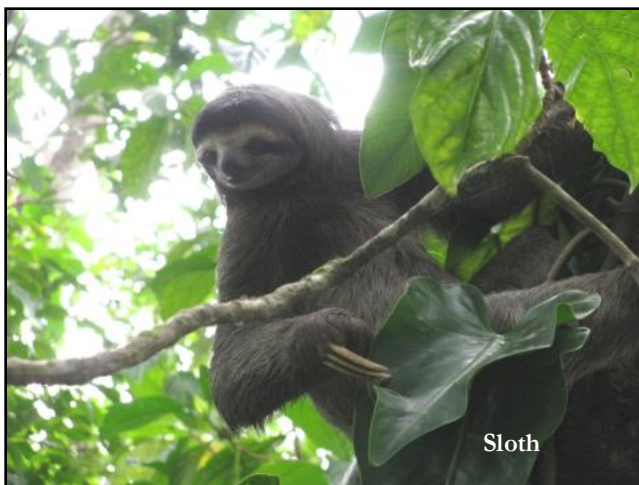
You can wear your shorts and t-shirts into the swimming holes at the bottom of the waterfalls. These locations are regularly used by the locals and modesty is appreciated.

The last stop in Panama was the tiny village of Guadeloupe near the border crossing into Costa Rica. Near here you can access the end of the Los Quetzales trail which winds its way up over the local mountains from Boquete. First a group of us, all staying at Los Quetzales Lodge did a morning jungle walk with a guide. We didn't see any birds during our walk but we did enjoy seeing the hummingbirds at the feeders.

Across the border into Costa Rica I have had a short 8km walk in Parque Nacional Cahuita on the Caribbean Coast. Entrance fee into the park is by donation and the trail is sandy with many tree roots.

Expect to see Leaf Cutter Ants,

shore and wading birds as well as sloths. Many of the sloths were only 5 - 8 feet away from the trail and one had a baby with her.



### Glendale Gardens Tour/Swan Lake Christmas Hill Nature Sanctuary Trip

#### Sunday, April 18.

Meet at Artspring at 8:50 am for carpooling to the 9:50 am Fulford ferry.

Bring binoculars, camera, water, (snack/lunch--lunch may be purchased at Glendale in advance)

For more information, including costs:

<http://www.glendalegardens.ca>;

<http://www.swanlake.bc.ca>

Trip is limited to paid-up SSTNC members only.

Please email your Nature Coordinator, Teresa

([tghitch@shaw.ca](mailto:tghitch@shaw.ca)), as soon as possible if you would like to join us.

## SPRINGTIME ON THE MOUNT OF OLIVES

by  
*Gil and Fran Schultz*

It is hard to believe, but it is mid-February and the temperatures in Jerusalem are reaching the high 20s during the day and are comfortable enough to have dinner outside in the evening. We go for a daily walk around the 55 acre campus of Augusta Victoria Hospital where we are doing volunteer work and are simply amazed at the plants that are coming out as a result of January rains. The most spectacular are the fields of red anemones, interspersed with wild cyclamen, blue irises and muscari (grape hyacinth). The almond and cherry trees are in flower and the bougainvillea is making a new set of blooms. Roses that should be holding off a little longer have started to flourish at the end of Janu-



**Field of anemones in February**

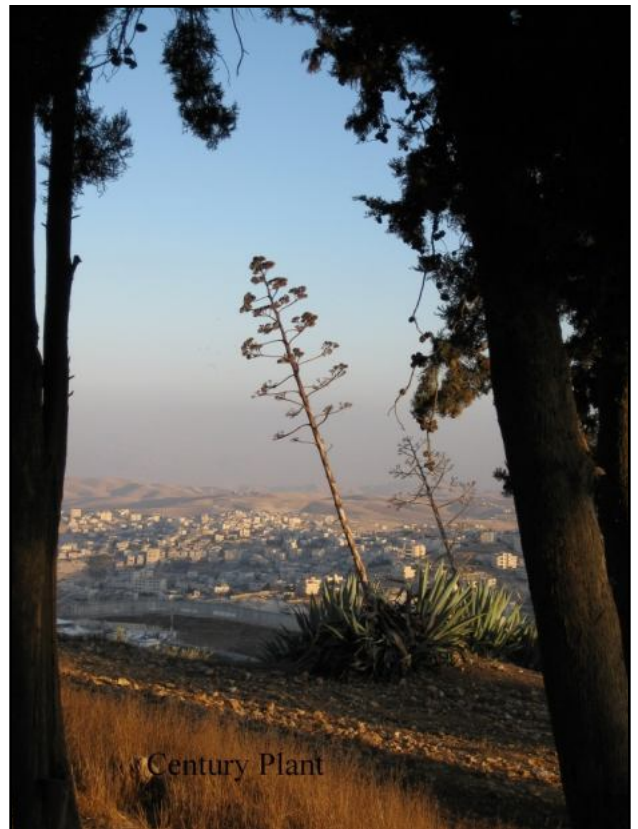
ary. It's been the warmest winter for nearly forty years. As we walk, we notice the birds. We missed the Christmas Bird Count on Salt Spring Island this year but we can tell you that here the four most abundant species are the English house sparrow, the hooded crow, the palm dove and the yellow-vented bulbul. We are fortunate to regularly see Syrian woodpeckers and a hoopoe on the property during our walks. There are no chickadees, but we have great tits and sombre tits and in terms of other LBJ -type birds, we have seen Sardinian warblers, chaffinches and green finches. One of our more spectacular sightings was a Palestine sun bird, like a hummingbird, brilliant in its iridescent purple plumage. Last fall, we also had some green parrots on the property before they migrated away for the winter. There are chucker partridges that dash around in the olive groves and we have seen the odd blackbird and European jay attacking the acorns on the oaks in the gardens. While there are not many raptors around right now, as it gets warmer, we again expect to see lots of kestrels as well as some large birds of prey like Egyptian vultures. They take advantage of the thermal gradients generated from the warmth of the Dead Sea which is not very far away and visible on clear days from the Mount of Olives.

It is kind of unique to be in a place where the gardens contain many plants often seen only in green-houses: hibiscus

of all shapes and colors, gardenias, cycads and date palms to name but a few. The citrus fruit trees are prolific and besides oranges, lemons and grapefruit, shops are full of pomegranate, kiwis, prickly pear and ugli fruit. We have a passion fruit growing over our bedroom window and we look out on some spectacular century plants that won't shoot up another fruiting stem for another hundred years. That aside, we are starting to really miss the Douglas firs and arbutus and look forward to seeing all of you again when we return in August.



**Palm Dove.**



**Century Plant**



January saw myself and husband Gerry, embarking on a 6-week trip to Central America. Planning started many months before, as the trips we plan are always off the tourist track. This one was no exception.

Nicaragua is a beautiful country, we always felt safe and the people were most welcoming. Many parts of the country, yes, are dirty, with garbage being thrown out of the windows of buses, and garbage scattered all along the road. I kept thinking to myself one could make a fortune if like Canada, we could pick up bottles and take them in.

In advance, we had planned a 5-day hiking trek over 4 mountain ranges, visiting with families along the way, and staying overnight with one family. We hired a guide, as our Spanish is poor. This turned out to be a trip of a lifetime, the hiking was hard, it was 38 degrees, very hot, but what we learned and what we saw will never be forgotten. We stayed with an organic coffee grower who sold free trade coffee, we shared so much with this family, yes with chickens in the house and no bathrooms inside, but when it was time to leave we knew by the grip of the handshake and hug there was a true meaning of friendship made. As Alfredo the farmer told us: "if at the end of the day he makes enough to feed his family and workers 3 meals, he is happy."

As we were hiking, the views, fauna, and animals were beautiful, seeing howler monkeys, many birds, and snakes first hand. We climbed the Negro Cerro Volcano in Leon and we sand-boarded down, what a thrill that was.

On the Island of Ometepe, I did some serious volcano climbing which took all the strength I had in places. I also rode a bike around the volcano going where no car can go, only me, a map, and the bike I rented. Because I was cheap and found a bike for half price, I soon found out, it had no brakes, and the seat broke on me. Seeing how isolated it was here, I asked myself if it was safe for me to do this alone, I never felt harm, and asked many for directions.

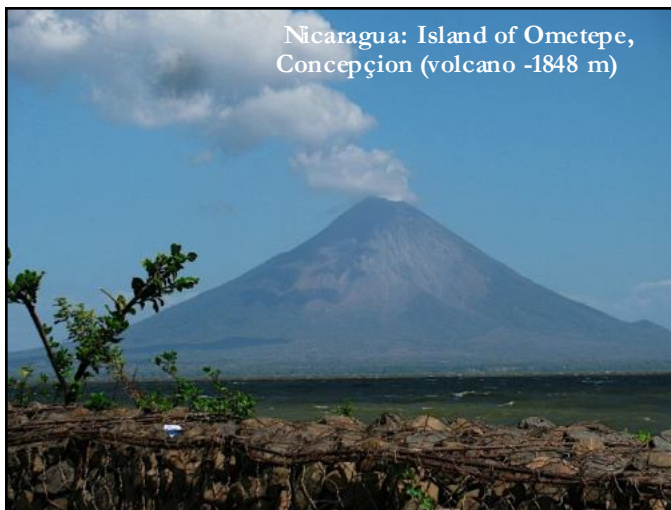
Meanwhile Gerry helped teach English to the students there. I arranged this before hand; it was a highlight for him. When we were about to leave one student came to our room and shared with us many stories, he is 12 years old and works from 6:30 in the morning to dark 7 days a week, taking time to learn some English. Now that regular school started he said he couldn't start, as he didn't have enough money for shoes, he first had to work more. Other students told us when we come back that we are welcome to stay in their homes.

We traveled mostly by the buses the locals use, (chicken bus), and yes there are chickens on the buses. These buses are the ones that the US don't want because of safety reasons so they take them, instead of being safe passenger limit of 40 they will put in 80 or more, people on the steps, bumpers, roof wherever, many times we were the only gringo on the bus and we felt at home.

After Nicaragua we went to Costa Rica for a couple of weeks, as we visited there last year and met locals that we wanted to see again, one of them being the oldest member of the Santo Domingo community. We had no guide this time for, and after a long uphill hike to the village we spotted her daughter, remembering her from last time.

When the mother heard voices she ran out of her home recognizing us right away, yelling "Canada, Canada". The love we held for each other, we didn't need the language to say it in words. It was a trip that we have so many good memories of, it is hard to put them down in a few paragraphs. We promised to go back to Nicaragua in 2 years to again see the beautiful people we got to visit.

For more pictures copy and paste this link in your browser:  
<http://picasaweb.google.com/lh/sredir?uname=dairyfarmer2&target=ALBUM&id=5441974334929678529&authkey=Gv1sRgCOSgnvDs8a-HQA&feat=email>



Nicaragua: Island of Ometepe, Concepción (volcano -1848 m)



People cut wood from the trees for fire starters, because it is dry, but many trees are dying because of this

## HONORARY MEMBER ELEANOR LLOYD 95!

Eleanor Lloyd celebrated her 95th birthday on January 12th after a sunny Ramble during a delightful Surprise party at Frauke Prystawik's house. Eleanor is one of the early member of the SSTNC. She has happy memories of hikes, walks and Rambles, over more than Thousands of Miles in about 40 years of membership.

Her Rambler Friends are looking forward to walk with Eleanor many, many more times.

*Frauke Prystawik*



## PHOTO CREDITS:



Page 1, Mt Maxwell: *Nieke Visser*

Page 2, West Coast Sky: artwork by *Teresa Hitch*

Page 3, Cooper's hawk: <http://frankwin.terrs.files.wordpress.com/2007/07/coopers-hawk-2.jpg>

Page 4, House Finch: *Nieke Visser*

Page 6, Palm Dove: [http://banfinches.co.uk/gambia/gambia\\_images/4409-PalmDove-CIS.JPG](http://banfinches.co.uk/gambia/gambia_images/4409-PalmDove-CIS.JPG)

Page 6, Anemones and Century plant: *Gil Schultz*

Page 8, Eleanor Lloyd: *Frauke Prystawik*

Page 8, Zeke Blazecka on Mt Erskine: *Lynn Thompson*.



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