



David Denning photo

Oystercatcher

Salt Spring Trail and Nature Club
Newsletter
Spring 2016



It will soon be that time of the year. Baby Canada geese photo by David Denning.

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Understanding Bird Song

John Neville

***Bird songs aren't just pretty melodies.
They're key to communication.***

The ethereal song of the Swainson's thrush, the vibrant and melodic vocals of a purple finch, the whistled song of a song sparrow - these are some of the bird song I enjoy in my own backyard.

I also travel each spring to record bird songs throughout North America. For the past 20 years my partner, Heather, and I have taken recording equipment into the quiet back country to catch more of these special sounds. For example, a few years ago we explored the boreal forests of Manitoba and Saskatchewan. There I recorded the four different calls of the common loon. These haunting sounds conjure up images of pristine, spruce-filled wilderness, calming waters and rolling landscapes sculpted by glaciers.

The year before, on a ranch in the Sandhills of Nebraska, I recorded the sounds of greater prairie chicken and sharp-tailed grouse. Both have songs that are part of a complex male display at their lek, including foot drumming, cooing and calls. Its beautiful to hear, and combines with their visual display to create a wondrous natural event.

*This newsletter is published by the Salt Spring Trail and Nature Club, PO Box 203, Ganges PO,
Salt Spring Island, BC, V8K 2V9. Editor: Gary Adams (gafrad@shaw.ca)
For information on the Board of Directors and weekly outings, please see our website: www.saltspringtnc.ca*

Calendar of Events

Thursday, Mar 3, 2016 The Bruce Trail

Susan Hannon, own hiking scientist and bird specialist, will talk about the Bruce Trail at the United Church at 7:00 p.m. The Bruce Trail is one of Canada's signature trail systems, on the edge of our World Biosphere Reserve of the Niagara Escarpment.

March 5 & 6, 2016 Film: The Messenger

The Salt Spring Film Festival is showing "The Messenger". On Saturday, Mar. 5, it will be shown in the Erskine Room at 2:30. On Sunday, Mar. 6, it can be viewed in the Vesuvius Room at 10:00 am.

Sunday, May 22, 2016 Kayaking Alaska

What do 6 friends in their 60s do when it turns out they are all retiring at about the same time? Why paddle kayaks to Alaska, of course! This rollicking presentation, co-sponsored by the Salt Spring Paddlers Club, may include the entire crew of intrepid travelers, and is guaranteed to be great fun. The tentative date is May 22, 7:00 pm at the Lion's Hall..



Bird Songs vs. Bird Calls

Although the terms "song" and "call" sometimes are used interchangeably, there is a difference. Calls are inborn and are produced instinctively. They are the exclusive sounds used by species like loons, grebes, ducks and hawks. Songbirds also use calls to communicate among a flock or a pair.

Songs, on the other hand, are the musical phrases delivered by songbirds, typically a male while perched. These are the vocalizations used by species like sparrows, warblers, thrushes, finches, wrens and more.

The male birds learn these musical phrases by listening to their dads at the nest site or from other nearby songsters. In fact, this process may begin while the chicks are still in the egg. Because songbirds learn their musical phrases, it leads to regional dialects, not unlike human accents. The northern flicker, red-breasted nuthatch and American robin all sound similar from one region to another. However, you can hear a difference if you compare East Coast species with their counterparts on the West Coast. The change in accent is gradual in these species.

For others I have noticed more distinct regional accents. These include the white-throated, white-crowned and song sparrows. The song

sparrow may also include imitations in its musical phrasing. It will learn from 8 to 11 songs during its life, whereas its call note "cheep" remains the same.

Showing their Vocal Chops

Birds use songs primarily during their breeding seasons. After choosing an area for nesting and raising the young, a male defends and advertises his territory by singing.

Generally, bird songs become richer and more varied as a bird ages and gets more experienced. This allows him to choose the best territory over his younger rivals. Because birds tend to return to the same area or neighboring locations year after year, competing males often will be brothers, sons or nephews. That's why song quality is an important way of establishing the hierarchy within a species.

Females use a male's song to evaluate his maturity and health and to pick a quality mate.

When territories come close together, males may sing to or against each other from adjacent trees, called counter-singing. When nesting is underway, a male advancing too close to another's territory might provoke a

dispute. Typically, feeders or birdbaths are considered neutral territory and disputes are minimized. A female knows that all is well if her partner is singing normally. This is yet one more meaning expressed in bird songs. I've been listening to and recording these sounds for years, but I am sure there are many other meanings still to be uncovered.

How Birds Sing

In humans, the voice box (larynx or Adam's apple) is at the top of the windpipe (trachea). In birds it's deep in the chest at the bottom of the windpipe, where the pipe divides to enter the right and left lungs, there is a vocal apparatus called the syrinx. It's divided into two compartments, one for each lung. Membranes and muscles control a pair of lips on each compartment, and can operate separately.

Using both sides in concert, a bird can produce more complex sounds. The air squeezed out of one lung is made to vibrate by controlling the lips as the air passes through them. The length of the windpipe also contributes to the pitch. Longer windpipes create deeper sounds.

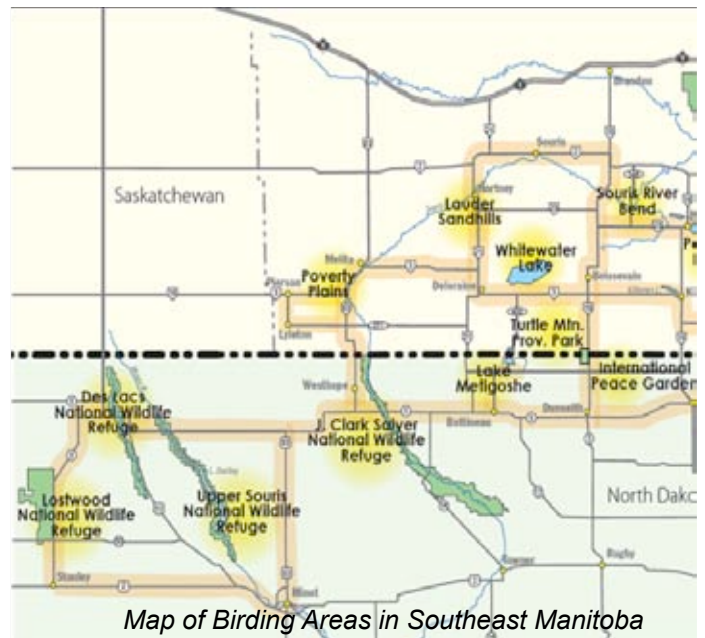
Here are some examples of how these parts work together. Canaries and goldfinches can produce songs for minutes at a time singing mainly through one syrinx compartment and breathing through the other. Northern cardinals sing at different octaves by creating lower notes through one tube and then switching sides for higher pitched notes. And combining sounds from each side helps explain how starlings, mockingbirds and others can create amazing imitations.

The Travelling Birder - Birding in Manitoba

Murray Coates

Given the current status of the Canadian dollar, many of us are probably looking at options for travel within Canada. For the birder, opportunities abound in every province. The spring migration offers the chance to not only see birds returning to nest locally but also to follow birds passing through on their way to northern destinations.

Our family spends the summer in a cabin located in Eastern Manitoba near the Ontario border. We usually start our drive east about mid-May and try to time it so I can take in a spring birding festival somewhere on the Great Plains. In 2015, I participated in the Grasslands Birding Festival in the southwest corner of Manitoba. This is a prime birding region with several important bird areas, including Poverty Plains and Whitewater Lake. This weekend event, organized through the Turtle Mountain Economic Development Office in Boissevain, usually coordinates with a similar North Dakota birding festival on a prior weekend operating out of Dakota College in Bottineau, ND.



Map of Birding Areas in Southeast Manitoba

Participants in the Canadian festival stay in the Turtle Mountain Bible Camp. It is located south of Boissevain near the USA border. It is a clear winner in the food quality category over Dakota College based on my 2013 participation in the Bottineau festival. This year's festival started on a Tuesday evening and ended on Thursday. The festivities typically start with a huge meal and then an evening bird walk. This year we only saw 11 species after dinner as opposed to other years when we have seen 30 to 40.

The day one agenda took us to the Poverty Plains area, which as shown on the accompanying map is in the far southwest corner of Manitoba. The map shows birding areas on both sides of the border. It is also noteworthy that the Bakken oil field encompasses much the same boundaries.

Prairie grassland birds are in decline due to a variety of reasons including habitat loss and climate change. The nature of farming has also changed as the number of farmers decrease and farm size increases. There is increasing economic pressure to clear more land and treed borders (shelterbelts) are being removed throughout the prairie. The Poverty Plains area is one of the last places to see lots of grassland birds.

The next day we were on the road by 6.00 AM to go to Whitewater Lake. This is a large wetland, which has been expanding over the last few years, flooding lots of farmland in the process. Good for the birds but not so good for agriculture. This area is home to 110 species of birds and over 40 other species. It is an important staging area for migratory birds and a wonderful place to visit during migration.

Navigating the roads that are still open in this vast wetland is tricky with lots of dead ends. Many of the roads have been kept open by the oil industry (perhaps up until now) as they extracted oil from under the lake by means of horizontal drilling. We shared the road with several oil well service vehicles.

We had a big day around the lake and our final tally was over 120 species. I was able to get 5 life birds. These prairie bird festivals are well worth the trip. With some judicious planning, it is possible to bird right

Poverty Plains Birding



One of our first sightings- both kingbirds. Photo by Murray Coates

Birds to See at Poverty Plains (from Manitoba Conservation): sharp-tailed grouse, loggerhead shrike, Baird's sparrow, grasshopper sparrow, Sprague's pipit, chestnut-collared longspur, bobolink, Say's phoebe, orchard oriole, brown thrasher, Swainson's hawk, ferruginous hawk, willow flycatcher, alder flycatcher and black-billed cuckoo.

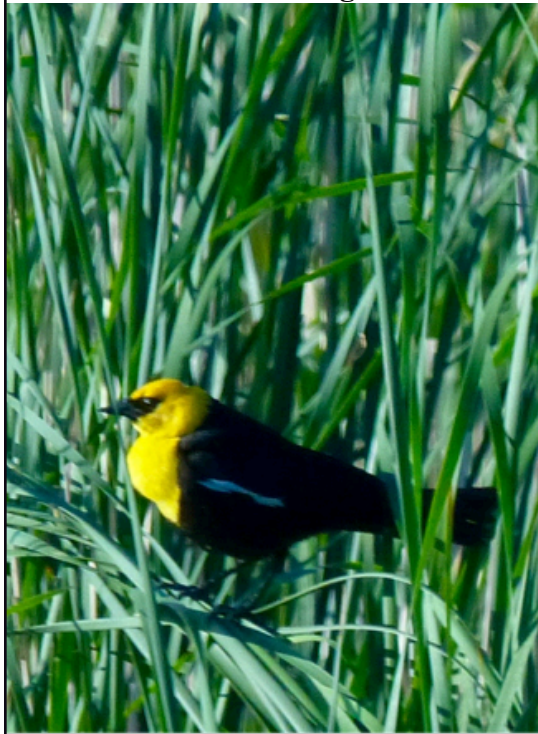
Rare Birds: burrowing owl, lark bunting, dickcissel and ring-necked pheasant.

We were able to see all of the above birds except for the Black billed Cuckoo.



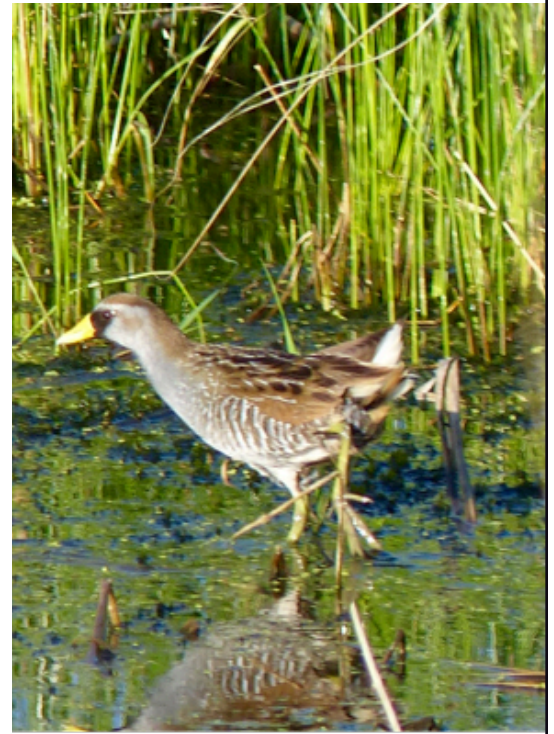
Ferruginous hawk . Blackbirds have no fear. Photo by Murray Coates.

Whitewater Lake Birding



Yellow-headed blackbird protecting his turf.
Photo by Murray Coates.

Birds to see at Whitewater Lake (from Manitoba Conservation): loggerhead shrike, brown thrasher, Swainson's hawk, ferruginous hawk, upland sandpiper, cattle egrets, orchard orioles, great horned owl, gray partridge, marbled godwit, pied-billed grebe, eared grebe, willet, spotted sandpiper, Wilson's phalarope, black tern, and white-faced Ibis.



Sora rail. These birds usually stay in the reeds.
Photo by Murray Coates.

across the prairies. If you time it right, it is possible to see well over 100 species in a short period of time.

Our guide for the festival was Calvin Cuthbert, an acclaimed author and expert on birding in this region. This is the link to the 2016 festival sites. <http://www.dakotacollege.edu/about/birding-festival/>.

Review: The Messenger.

John Neville

Imagine a world without birdsong. In ancient times humans looked to the flights and songs of birds to foretell the future. Today once again the birds have something to tell us.

The Messenger is a beautiful film depiction of birds, a wonderful use of new "slowmo" technology, by a very skillful director, Sue Rynard. If you would like to see the wonder of flight as you've never seen it before watch the movement of black-throated blue warbler, Baltimore oriole, magnolia warbler, indigo bunting and catbird, in their full breeding plumage. The director has used cameras with 1000 exposures a second, then slowed it down by a quarter for us to appreciate the biological wonder and grace, of a bird's flight! These songbirds are flying across the globe reminding us of the film's premise that we need to care more about environmental health. We all know that songbirds are declining; this movie takes on the challenge of showing us why they are disappearing. It's a step-by-step approach to the problem.

Sue Rynard has made full use of the knowledge and expertise of Bird Studies Canada, several Canadian Universities, Cornell University and European experts to draw our attention to window collisions, domestic cats, songbird poaching, habitat fragmentation, and a fascinating look at the emerging problem of neonicotinoid pesticides. In the 1960's Chairman Mao ordered his people on a national scale to exterminate sparrows from the Chinese landscape. The idea was to increase crop size for humans; unfortunately, the lack of sparrows allowed insects to multiply and substantially reduced crop production. Naturalists will know this bird as the Eurasian Tree Sparrow.

The birds are direct descendants of Theropod Dinosaurs and successfully survived the last Great Extinction on earth. Their numbers are in serious decline at present, mainly due to our thoughtless behavior. Can we as human beings recognize our position in nature, and with the coming epoch of global warming can we learn enough from "The Messenger" to save the birds and ourselves?

The Messenger is a visually thrilling ode to the beauty and importance of the imperiled songbird, and what it means to all of us on both a global and emotional level if we lose them.

A Hiker's photo-essay by Lynn Thompson.

From top to bottom. Hikers rest and take in the view to the east and north from one of Maxwell's bumps on a perfect late September day. Leaders were Gale and Dave Buffett – one year on Salt Spring and leading a hike – what a great example!

Al Lehmann leads hikers across the meadows near the summit of Mt. Tuam in late November. Sue and Al live at the base of the mountain and have shared several interesting routes in the area with our club. A rest break in the Mt. Tuam Ecological Reserve off Mountain Rd. on a damp January morning. Leader Jean Attorp (our club hike coordinator) walks the area daily.

Part of the annual south end adventure with Ashley Hilliard (another regular leader) includes a hike over the high point in Ruckle Park. February is a perfect time for this hike as the route is never more colourful. Waterproof boots essential!

Review: BC Nature Magazine *John Heddle*

Recently BC Nature came up in conversation but it seems, it often going into the recycle bin with scarcely a glance. This is a shame. In the latest issue, Winter 2015, I learned about Glass Sponge Reefs and the Mushroom Underground. Not to mention, wolves, bats, congregations of western garter snakes (who knew?), the western painted turtle, off-road vehicle registrations (again, who knew?), Mitlenatch Island, and When a Caterpillar Is Not a Caterpillar. Even if you are uninterested in the incredible efforts of small clubs in BC cleaning up and improving their local environment, the other articles make good reading for anyone.



Glass sponge reefs are new animals that look like plants. They were discovered in B.C. about 25 years ago after being extinct, or so it was thought, for 40,000,000 years. Some are as tall as eight story buildings. They have been dubbed “Jurassic Park Submerged”. The article is full of fascinating information about their lives, their destruction, and their conservation.

The mushroom underground may be pretty basic for a biologist but fascinating for those who know nothing of mycelia and hyphae. It was claimed a number of years ago that one such fungus in the Minneapolis area is the largest organism in the world, having colonized acres of land, underground, of course.

Add in congregations of snakes, turtles, bats and it becomes a really unusual issue. With luck, you can find your issue lying around.

Tour de France et de Londres

Jean Attorp

In early October 2015, while fellow SSTNC hikers climbed Mt. Maxwell, I was in Parc National de la Vanoise in southeastern France, hiking to the Col de la Vanoise (elevation 2500 m) in the French Alps. The autumn



En route to Col de la Vanoise

colours were on full display and alpine flowers were still in bloom. My daughter and I made the ascent from the village of Pralognan la Vanoise along a very popular hiking trail. We met no other hikers, encountering only marmots and ibex.



Alpine flower in Vanoise National Park

Our second day of hiking in the French Alps was a woodsy climb to Lac Rosiere in Courchevel. This trail did not take us very high, but it was also very beautiful. Again, we met no other hikers - another lovely day all to ourselves.

Following that, we mapped a route north to Strasbourg using our Michelin France map (no GPS in the tiny .Fiat). We travelled there in our little rented vehicle on the secondary roads to avoid the expensive major highway tolls. It was an all-day drive through stunning na-



Autumn colours of Courchevel



Mushrooms and chestnuts in the Alsace woodlands



Alsace vineyards.

tional parks, down and up river gorges, and into many small villages and surrounding farmlands. Friends of my daughter live in a village outside of Strasbourg that became our destination. We lingered there for two days, walking in the woodlands; collecting walnuts, chestnuts, and mushrooms; visiting a castle; roaming through some vineyards of Alsace; and eating the grapes remaining on the vines after the harvest.

We returned to London and my daughter's flat. My second week away was spent walking, walking, and walking some more in the parks and commons of London, on the pathways along the Thames River, and in the old villages that make up the City of London, including Chiswick, Highgate, Hampstead, Greenwich and Bermondsey.

I think I can say that we spent the entire two weeks out of doors, enjoying every daylight hour. A fabulous holiday for an avid walker!



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