



David Denning photo

Oystercatcher

Salt Spring Trail and Nature Club
 Newsletter
 Winter 2019



A juvenile yellow-headed blackbird at Frank Lake. Photo is from an article with photographs by Michael Grimminck.

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Editor's Report

Gary Adams

Sue Lehmann, our president, usually takes this space to provide us with an update on the work of the Club and its executive. However, this month, she is totally absorbed in other things, including "Scrooge" so we will have to be a little patient and await her President's report at the Annual General Meeting on January 30 at the Lions Club. See you there at noon.

Since this is my last newsletter, I thought that I would impart a few thoughts. The Annual General Meeting is looming and no one has even hinted at wanting to edit a newsletter so I am of the opinion that this is the last issue of the Oystercatcher. I would love to be surprised but it seems unlikely. Our sister newsletter, The Acorn from the Salt Spring Conservancy has not published a new issue in two years to the best of my knowledge, so we are not unique in this circumstance.

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, January 30,
2020**

Annual General Meeting

The AGM will be held at the Lion's Club. Doors open at 11:30 a.m. Enjoy a free lunch (gluten free and vegetarian included) before the meeting. Immediately following the AGM we will be treated to a special presentation by research biologist, Aaron Purdy, who will be speaking about our local whales. Aaron is a research biologist with Ocean Wise's Marine Mammal Research Program, and the coordinator of the S. Vancouver Island Cetacean Research Initiative in Victoria.

Wed April 15th, 2020 B.C.'s Extinction crisis

From 7-9 pm at the SSI Public Library, Sarah Cox will be doing a SSTNC Presentation on the Bear Den crisis in former old growth forest areas.

Please watch the Club's website for upcoming events. Expect to see announcements at the Salt Spring Library, likely on Wednesday evenings from 7 to 9 pm.

Regardless of the newsletter's fate, this is my last opportunity to express my appreciation to the many club members who have supported it over the past years. Correspondents like Nieke Visser and Murray Coates contributed articles on a regular basis to make issues successful. Many other members added an article or two with subjects as diverse as African safaris, local trails, grand tours, wildlife stories, even poetry. Others have given us photos of club members doing almost everything, lovely scenery, and some exceptional wildlife. I am also indebted to those members who sought out and captured some truly amazing articles from various scientists and experts. Thank you all.

You will note that this issue has a theme and an important one. It focuses on local environmental problems. We live in a blessed region, with more wildlife, diverse ecosystems, and protected areas than most of the world. However, even here, we have ongoing and growing issues of concern. I sure hope that this organization continues to inform and work actively to keep our environment safe. If we have no regular outlet to do this, the members need to find other ways to do it. I wish you the best of luck.

Let the Herring Live: A Report on the Forum

Bruce Coates

Cowichan Valley Naturalists - Conservation Committee

"Let the herring live". That was the cry at a forum held at the home of the Tsawout First Nations (FN) on Thursday November 7th, as Conservation Groups gathered with First Nations from all around the Salish Sea. The Elders spoke first, telling of the importance of the herring's coming, just at the end of winter, when food was scarce. At winter ceremonies, herring was the first thing on the table – always. It truly marked the arriving New Year. Tim Kulchyski, Cowichan Tribes, asked for a show of hands: who had tasted smoked salmon? Who had tasted smoked herring? His Elders can barely remember the herring – they've been gone for so long! Mention was made of a liver disease that especially affects FN's people because of a lack of fish fat in their diet. Another story told of a Cree Elder who remembers trading for coastal herring in faraway Alberta. A story explained that herring individuals first come to the shores on their own, and then report back to the school when the time is right to spawn.

Bill Recalma, Qualicum FN, has fished the coast for years. He remembers 1976 when they sewed up a huge bait ball of herring and in 15 minutes wiped out the whole resident stock. And again, at Jedway off Gwaii Haanas, a 700-ton set cleaned out another resident stock.

Terry Sampson, Stz'uminus FN (Chemainus) talked about 11 miles of kelp forested shoreline full of "Black Ducks" as he called them. In 1990, the herring fishery was opened and there have been none since. With them went kelp, the ducks and the rock fish.

Archaeologist Ian McKenzie then showed us a map of over 6,000 recorded settlements on the BC coast. Studying the middens in 220 of these revealed that herring were a far greater protein source than even salmon – just as the Elders said. Many of these sites are absent from Department of Fisheries and Oceans (DFO) maps of herring distribution.

Vanessa Minke-Martins, Marine Scientist with Pacific Wild talked about how DFO considers the Salish Sea as one population, calculated on biomass.

Only recently are they beginning to acknowledge that there is even such a thing as a “resident stock”. Fishery management takes place on a regional rather than local scale. Using this methodology, a “sustainable” harvest of 20% might meet the goal of maintaining the total biomass of 1951 levels, but meanwhile the number of local sites has diminished drastically. As we lose these local spawns we lose genetic diversity. Some evidence suggests that young herring “learn” from their elders where to spawn, so maybe the Elder’s story of the herring reporting back to the group was right!

Ray Zimmerman, a fisherman for many years, quoted from the 2017 DFO Integrated Fisheries Management Plan - the playbook for fishery openings. “At this time, there is no information available on the appropriate conservation limits for Pacific herring based on ecosystem considerations.” It is estimated that the 2018 catch of 21,000 tonnes would feed 100 humpback whales or somewhere between 600,000 – 900,000 salmon. About 90% of this biomass “meal” goes to farmed animals including farmed salmon. Clearly an ecosystem based approach to management is warranted.

Grant Scott, of Conservancy Hornby Island, believes that the spawn event between Denman and Hornby Islands in March is likely the highest concentration of spawning herring on the entire coast. Since 2017 they have hosted “Herring Fest”, including a dance at the end called the “Herring Ball”. He suggested viewing YouTube videos, of which there are many, by just searching Pacific herring; especially Bob Turners “Herring Spawn–Serengeti of the Sea” just out.

Locky McLean, captain of the Sea Shepard, talked about travelling the world to bring awareness of the plight of whales, sharks and blue fin tuna. He came home to do the same for the tiny herring. After working lately with Alexandra Morton on salmon farms they are ready and standing by.

In the afternoon we broke into discussion groups: Herring Restoration, Indigenous Research, Letter Writing – Media Strategy, Legal Avenues, Alternative Management, and Direct Action. If you are interested in taking action, contact any of the groups highlighted above. Or just come to the gathering in March.



Frank Lake – One Sweet Spot

Kathleen Maser (Photos by Michael Grimminck)

“Frank Lake? Michael, I’ve never heard of it.”

“Well no matter, it was just a suggestion that my photography professor gave me as a place to go with relatives, nuts about birding.”

Sometimes you make the right decisions. Within an hour we were southeast of Calgary, in the midst of pasture and agricultural land exclaiming with glee at what we were seeing, hearing and experiencing. Birds flying in all directions, swooping down from the air, stalking through the reeds, poking their bills into the silt of the shallow water, trilling out calls. They couldn’t have cared less about us!

Mid-June is full on breeding season, no time for timidity in the avian community. The adults are harried from sunup to sundown as they attempt to keep up with the clamour of their young ones. The newly hatched ducklings, were out of control as they zipped through the reeds, seeming to play hide and seek on their anxious parents. We were so close to nests! Nests of the stunning yellow-headed blackbirds and those too of killdeer, both very evident but there were many others hidden in the reeds – nests of elegant avocets with their long pretty pale blue legs, of black-necked stilts with their striking red legs, of the ruddy duck with it's infamous bright blue beak, and of pied grebes who, if you can believe this, have the cutest ducklings, striped black and white like little zebras! Coot babies also vied for this title, with their punk-like orange and red feathered hairdos. Delicate black terns swooped over our heads, doing aerial tricks in their attempt to catch insects or fish.



Black Tern.

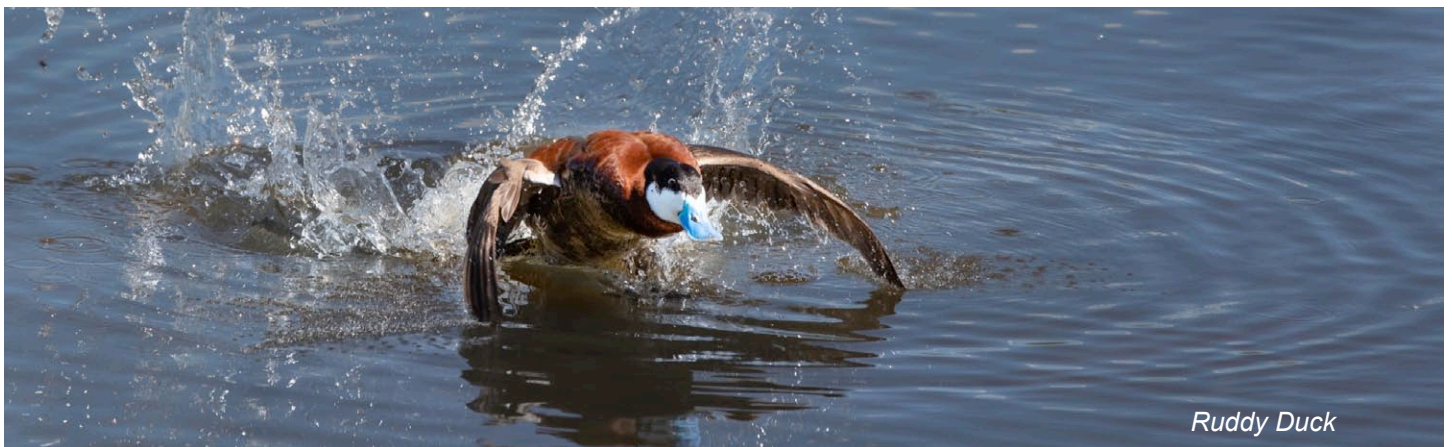
The Wilson's phalarope, so close by, gave us all the time in the world to confirm its identity. Far out on the lake, hundreds of pelicans paraded about, effecting their usual military precision in their movements. Sailing along in straight lines, veering off to make circles, reforming into double lines and pulling out onto distant islets covering them with their bright shiny whiteness. Far out in this huge lake we glimpsed the myriad variety of ducks usually observed on a good birding day, but we were just not interested. As the absolutely unexpected and the most thrilling sighting was yet to occur, that of the white faced ibis! I mean, do we have such exotic creatures in Canada? Whipping out the bird books we discovered that yes, it's at the northern edge of its breeding range. We scurried along the lake's grassy shoreline, catching glimpses of more ibis, some lifting off, and others feeding in the rushes. Most often, they slipped away out of view into the wetland. Sorry no pictures of these, not even my talented son-in-law could catch them.

Not since living in southern Africa, a part of the world renowned for the variety of its species have my daughter Rachel and I seen such a richness of bird life. Joyously we shared this with Michael and Rob, who I might add were equally entranced. As we were reluctantly preparing to leave, a van load of foreign photography tourists disembarked with huge cameras, dangling lenses the length of my arm. Whoa! Time to be on our way.

Why is there this exceptional richness of bird life at Frank Lake?

This is a restored wetland controlled by Ducks Unlimited, a highly respected organization in both the birding and conservation worlds, who manages the area using a number of interesting techniques. Firstly they ensure that the lake is a permanent body of water, a considerable challenge in years of low rainfall and runoff.

Secondly the primary inflow of water to the lake is from treated municipal and industrial wastewater from neighbouring communities, such as High River. Wastewater is also diverted from a meat packing plant



Ruddy Duck

in nearby Cargill. This source of effluents helps create an eco-rich littoral zone where an abundance of aquatic plants and algae grow feeding zooplankton, larvae, crawfish, snails, insects and small fish, many of the organisms needed to maintain healthy bird life. By the way, the water quality at Frank Lake is monitored by the Alberta Government, there's not a whiff of a smell.

Old-growth Logging Leaves Black Bears Without Dens

Sarah Cox

A longer version of this story appeared in [The Narwhal](#)

Wildlife biologist Helen Davis has been fond of bears for as long as she can remember. She's radio-collared black bears and tracked them on foot, squeezed into empty dens riddled with fleas and laughed at remote camera footage of bears sliding down plastic tubes in the forest, like children in a playground.

These days she hammers plywood roofs onto hollow stumps and builds plastic dens for black bears on Vancouver Island, where extensive clear-cutting of old-growth forests and the absence of rules to protect dens has left females with a severe housing shortage when it comes time to birth and nurture their cubs.

Eagle and osprey nests are protected in B.C. It's illegal to cut down forests where songbirds are nesting before their young fledge. It's also against the law to trash a beaver lodge or muskrat house. But there are no such protections for black bears — denning trees can be logged even with tiny cubs inside. It's up to individual forestry companies and landowners to decide whether or not to leave a bear den standing.

In April, Davis filed a complaint with B.C.'s Forest Practices Board, hoping the board would launch a special investigation that would lead to the protection of bear denning trees — mainly large-diameter yellow and red cedar trees in vanishing old-growth forests — and save some old-growth stands for future dens.

“Bears are still denning in stumps of trees that were cut down 80 plus years ago,” Davis told *The Narwhal*. “Those stumps are still sound, but they are rotting and they won't be there forever. We aren't allowing new forests to become large enough to become new dens. So, there's this dwindling supply.”

Female bears can fold into a cavity whose entrance is no bigger than 30 centimetres across and their dens are “like nests,” Davis said. The females carry moss, ferns, fireweed, tree boughs and shrubbery into their den, which can be used by different bears for decades, sometimes skipping years to avoid pestering fleas that wait inside. One female bear caught on remote camera piles up fireweed outside her ground level den, squeezes in and “keeps reaching out the entrance and pulling the bedding inside” to make what Davis describes as a “very, very delicate” home for her cubs.

“Some of the nests are just incredible. It looks like a bird's nest. They curl up into a little tiny ball. They're so well insulated with their fat and hair.”

Sitka spruce and balsam fir stumps are also sometimes used for denning, along with the “root bowls” — the place where the roots and stem of the tree meet — of trees blown over in storms.

“When they cut old-growth now they generally cut trees very close to the ground,” Davis said. “And in the old days a lot of the stumps were over my head — two metres to the ground from the top of the stump. They don't waste that kind of wood any more so any recently cut old-growth doesn't generally leave stumps that can be used as dens.”

B.C. currently protects black bear dens only on Haida Gwaii and in the Great Bear Rainforest.

“Dens are no less important to bears in the rest of coastal B.C.,” Davis wrote to the board in her notice of complaint, “but they continued to be removed and destroyed on Vancouver Island and other parts of the mainland coast where the supply is even lower due to extensive old-growth harvesting.” About 80 per cent of Vancouver Island's productive old-growth forests have been logged. Only eight per cent of the island's original old-growth trees have some sort of protection, either in parks or because they are within a designated old-growth management area.

The board rejected Davis' request for a special investigation but agreed to look into her complaint. However, since 2014, Davis has had support from two forestry companies that operate in the Jordan River watershed — TimberWest and Queesto, a partnership between the Pacheedaht First Nation and Canadian Overseas Log

and Lumber Ltd. — to put roofs on open old-growth stumps and build experimental black bear dens on logged land.

With funding from BC Hydro’s fish and wildlife compensation program, the wildlife biologist created artificial dens made of plastic culverts. Then, with help from an industrial designer, she built den pods, a molded form secured to the ground that mimics a natural den. “It’s kind of like an upside-down plastic boat, with an entrance and a chamber.”

The dens are designed for female bears, who are most vulnerable when they are with their cubs, sometimes preyed upon by wolves, cougars and other bears.

Subsequent monitoring showed that bears look for dens year-round and will find “anything you put in the forest,” Davis said. She’s amassed hundreds of 15-second video clips from different den pods, including footage of bears who play on top of the pods and slide down the plastic tubing.

“It’s absolutely hysterical. They seem to find them quite entertaining ... I thought I really knew black bears. And I had no idea how goofy they were.”

To make sure the bears spotted the artificial dens, Davis placed “horribly stinky” weasel lure — a mix of skunk essence, anise oil and glycerine — on branches and roots near the dens to create an interesting smell.

Davis said no one knows how swiftly black bear populations are declining because the B.C. government doesn’t do any population census work on black bears.

“Loggers and First Nations tell me that they think there’s fewer black bears but there’s no data to base that on, at least on Vancouver Island.

“It’s not on people’s radar,” Davis said. “People don’t care about black bears. They think they’re all over the place and they’re fine.”

Trail Report

Gary Quiring; Trail Co-ordinator

On Oct 8, 16 hardy volunteers assembled on the slopes of Mt. Tuam to complete the new KDOL Trail.

This was our third club outing to the area and I am proud to report the trail construction has been completed! The only remaining work involves creating and installing directional and information signage to keep trail users on the right path.

Feedback from both KDOL staff and from SSTNC members has been extremely positive and I can’t wait to lead some hikes there. Look for a trip on the schedule in the new year.

A CRD Mill farm interim management plan is finally taking shape after 20 plus years as a park reserve. We can look forward to the old trail system in the Mill Farm being mapped and signed in 2020. Stay tuned.

I hope to see you out on the trail,

[Editor’s note: Shortly after submitting this report, Gary resigned his position. A few days later, our former Trail Co-ordinator, Herb Otto, passed away. The trails of our fair island were well served by both of these individuals and they will be missed.]



KDOL trail crew. Photo by Gary Quiring.

The Auks of Salt Spring

Peter McAllister

Ruckle Park is a good place to spot oceanic birds called auks or Alcids. We have five of them. Almost always in pairs, the little black and white ones are marbled murrelets. Ancient murrelets look somewhat similar but they are usually seen in rafts. Rhinoceros auklets are more likely present in the spring and summer while the pigeon guillemots are the only auks that nest on Salt Spring. The largest family member is the common murre.

The populations of all these Alcids are relatively stable except for the marbled murrelet. This little bake potato sized seabird is almost exclusively old growth dependant. In late spring and summer when their plumage is a marbled brown, they fly up to 50 km inland to nest in the temperate rainforest canopy of big old trees with big mossy limbs. It wasn't until 1990 when the first nest in British Columbia was discovered up in a Sitka spruce tree in the Walbran Valley. They are on the verge of local extinction on Vancouver Island where numbers have plummeted. The last patches of old growth outside a few small protected watersheds are on the chopping block. There is no sign of reprieve as the provincial government policy of liquidation proceeds. Reduced but larger populations remain in the Great Bear Rainforest and to the north along coastal Alaska. Logging has greatly reduced their numbers in coastal Washington, Oregon and northern California but at least there, some measures have been taken to protect their last viable habitat.



Marbled murrelet. Photo by Peter McAllister