



David Denning photo

# Oystercatcher

Salt Spring Trail and Nature Club  
 Newsletter  
 Summer 2017



*Nieke Visser sent us a picture of the Pueo (Asio flammeus sandwichensis), or Hawaiian short-eared owl. “We came across this one last month while looking for another endemic Hawaiian bird (which we, again, did not find). This owl is considered a subspecies of the short-eared owl, occurring only on the Hawaiian islands where it inhabits forests and grasslands. The last two decades or so it is declining rapidly and now declared endangered on the island of O’ahu. Best chance of sightings are on up-slope Maui and along the Saddle Road on Hawaii island, where we spotted the one in the picture.”*

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## President’s Point of View

*Sue Lehmann*

It seems like Spring has finally arrived on the island. The flowers are blooming and the bees are buzzing. I hope to see you out on the trails during the last few outings of the 2017 season and don’t forget the upcoming Strawberry Festival that the walkers will coordinate for us this year. If you are looking for something to do over the summer, perhaps you can get involved with the Citizen Science projects with David Denning or trail development with Herb Otto.

As Gary and I were discussing this edition of the Oystercatcher, we were pondering the lack of a collective noun for the Tuesday outings. Hikers/Walkers/Ramblers is too awkward. We’re all “hikers”, regardless of the speed, distance or elevation of the hike. Sometimes, the focus of the hike is nature, as when the Hikers scrambled over the rocks at Fernwood Beach, the Walkers trekked to the Pacific Northwest Raptors Centre, and

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

## Calendar of Events

**Thursday, June 15, 2017**

### **Strawberry Festival**

The 2016-2017 hiking season ends with the Strawberry Festival at Ruckle Park. This year's event is being organized by the Walkers. Meet at noon in the lower picnic area to enjoy a scrumptious dish of strawberries and ice cream. Remember to bring a dish and spoon! Short walks will be scheduled before lunch.

**Thursday June 15, 2017**

### **It Was a Very Big Year**

Library – 7:00 pm -- Birder Extraordinaire, Ann Nightingale, Presents a Special Bird Multimedia Show: In 2015, Ann Nightingale of Rocky Point Bird Observatory attempted to set a Vancouver Island Big Year birding record by seeing more species of birds than anyone else ever had. Ann's slide-illustrated talk will focus on birds, but will also highlight the amazing scenery and wildlife of the area.

**June 23-25, 2017**

### **Tour de Isles**

Third Annual Tour Des Iles is once again coming to the Southern Gulf Islands. Three days of special events, local music, natural beauty and art displays on the Southern Gulf Islands. As part of the Festival, meet with friends and fellow hikers from the other Gulf Islands June 23rd, for a hike on Mount Maxwell led by Charles Kahn, starting at the Armand Way trailhead. On Sunday June 25th meet up with our visitors for a walk in Ruckle Park led by Sharon Sullivan.

**July 1, July 2, and August 7 2017**

### **Art & Nature Fest**

We invite you to experience a magical union of art and nature at Blackburn Lake Nature Reserve. Artists, musicians, dancers, troubadours, children's performers, buskers, movement instructors, circus performers and others will entertain and engage you and your family. Blackburn Lake Nature Reserve on July 1 & 2, 10am-4pm and August 7, 3pm-9pm

**July 2017**

### **Sooke Hills Wilderness Trail**

We expect the new 13km trail between Humpback Reservoir and the CRD - Cowichan Valley Regional District boundary and including a suspension bridge over Goldstream River to open sometime this month.

**Tuesday, September 12, 2017**

### **Blackberry Festival**

The 2017-2018 hiking season begins with the Blackberry Festival at Ruckle Park. Meet at noon in the Group Campground. Bring your lunch and a favourite blackberry goodie to share. Don't forget a bowl and a spoon. Short walks will be scheduled before lunch.

the Ramblers ambled through Blackburn Meadows. These are all hikes.

We'd love to hear your thoughts on what to call ourselves. Should we rename the most energetic group to something other than Hikers? Is there a collective noun that encompasses Hikers/Walkers/Ramblers/Nature?

Happy hiking!

## **BC Parks Trails Signage and Maintenance Project**

*Herb Otto, Trails Coordinator*

Trails signage has been designed and installed in Mt. Maxwell Park, the north side of Burgoyne Bay Park and Mt. Erskine Park over the last few years. This has been made possible in partnership with BC Parks and the SSTNC where BC Parks has provided the funding for the materials and the Club has provided the labour.

The final sections of trails signage are still to be completed for the remainder of Burgoyne Bay Park, south of the access road and the bay. Trail mapping, verification and clearing has been undertaken this winter to determine which trails will be signed. BC Parks have approved the proposed routing and are planning a final review before we proceed with the final design of the signage and the implementation. These will include some new sections of trail that will require some improvement, particularly on the slopes of Mt. Sullivan. It is hoped that this can be completed by the end of June this year. Particular recognition for much of this work should go to Charles Kahn, Nigel Denyer and Nicholas Courtier for the extensive scouting and mapping of the proposed trails

On a disappointing note, we have experienced theft and vandalism of our signage in Mt. Maxwell Park, particularly on Trail 3, The Girlfriend

Trail. Four of these signs had to be replaced last fall and several, in some cases the same signs, have to be replaced again this spring. It appears that the same signs are being targeted for some reason. If anyone sees anything suspicious on their hikes in this area, please inform the Club or myself.

During this winter we also had significant tree fall and debris on the Mt. Maxwell trails. A work party headed by Charles Kahn cleared much of this. One very large tree demolished one of our signs at the intersection of Trails #4 and #5 and the trail has been re-routed to circumnavigate the monster (see photo). Jesse McLachlin from K2 Park Services has been very helpful and active cutting away the larger trees so that we could deal with the smaller debris. It has been a very cooperative effort and we thank all those that came out.



*Fallen tree on Mt. Maxwell trail. Photo by Herb Otto.*

## **BC Nature 2017 Annual Meeting**

*Kathleen Maser, BC Nature Coordinator*

Preparing to attend our first BC Nature conference, Rob and I excitedly anticipated many things but not what we got! A number of fellow Gulf Island members set out for Lillooet on the route through Pemberton and on to the Duffy Lake Highway, number 99. On a surprisingly warm May day we were confident of arriving in Lillooet in time for the evening's first meeting. Not one of us made it that day or the next, due to snow avalanches laden with trees, mud slides, and to top it off, we even had brake troubles. Twenty-nine hours later, long after that meeting at which I was to represent our club, Rob and I arrived, exhausted and shaken. Expecting to be admonished by both past President Kees Visser and Regional Director John Neville, we nearly wept when John and Heather enveloped us in a big, loving Salt Spring hug. Word had got out about the closures and our plight.



*Duffy Lake slide. Photo by Peter McAllister.*

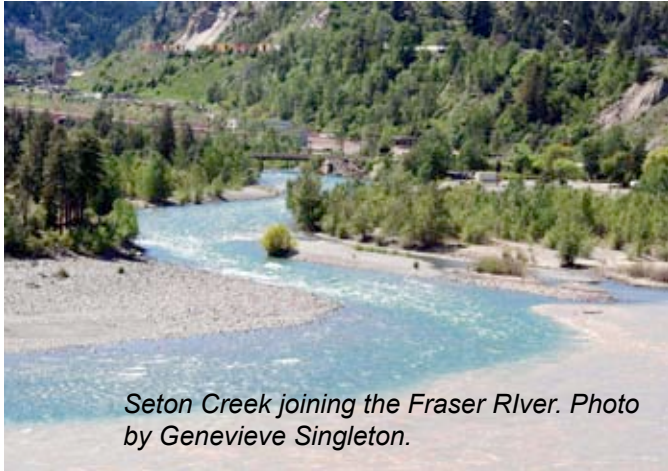
That left us with just 24 hours to experience this conference and we packed in more on that one day than you can imagine. We began with early morning birding, led by Lillooet birder, Ian Routley. We first spotted a male harlequin duck, confidently paddling about in a fast flowing stream, their preferred nesting area. He looked suspiciously like the last harlequin to leave our island! We had a feast of warblers, vireos and flycatchers conveniently displaying their colours for easy viewing in the deciduous shrubs. At one point, we had to break away from the scope to give our attention to two mountain goats scampering along the ledges of the mountains towering above us!

After breakfast and a presentation on the issues affecting the Xwisten, Bridge River band, we had two, one-hour sessions on fishers and wolverines. Very exciting research has been conducted to determine both the numbers and distribution of these animals. Ingenious ways of sighting them and gathering information have been devised, producing fabulous footage much of which turned out to be utterly entertaining. Imagine a wolverine with his teeth sunk into a huge piece of meat hanging many feet off the snow pack, leaping about like a jumping jack! Personifying the meaning of persistence, it took this particular wolverine nearly 30 attempts to rip off that piece of meat.

The afternoon's long AGM meeting was brilliantly conducted by our President Alan Burger. Kees Visser quickly led us through the intricacies of amendments to various by-laws. John Neville is an ardent and effective contributor, skillfully adding points where there is confusion. I was proud to be in the company of these Salt Springers who have given so much of their expertise and time to conserving nature. Together, and with Brian and Marjie Radford we enjoyed the evening's banquet and especially Ian Routley's beautiful slide presentation of Lillooet's flora and fauna.



*Balsamroot. Photo by Kathleen Maser.*



*Seton Creek joining the Fraser River. Photo by Genevieve Singleton.*

How extraordinarily interesting is Lillooet region's geography, geology, and natural history. We were swept away by the beauty of the area, hillsides highlighted by the clumps of yellow arrowleaf balsamroot flowers and purple penstemon, and, fortunately not by avalanches! A last lingering view of magnificence was the teal blue Seton River joining the swollen muddy Fraser.

*Lillooet conference participants. Upper photo, left to right are Kees Visser, John and Heather Neville. Lower photo is Marjorie and Brian Radford. Photos by Kathleen Maser.*



## SSTNC Citizen Science Projects

### *SSTNC Projects Coordinator, David Denning*

The Sea Star Recovery Project and Ganges Harbour Water Quality Monitoring Project is a citizen science project conducted in partnership with Salt Spring Ocean Stewards.. We are conducting activities related to two separate objectives. This report summarizes the activities undertaken recently

#### **The Sea Star Post-Wasting Disease Recovery Study**

The significant plague associated with Sea Star Wasting Disease in 2014-2016 necessitated a re-focus of our Citizen Science Research Project efforts to look at recovery of sea star populations. I have carried out research and liaison with scientists at Oregon State University to prepare for this re-focus. In the second half of April, I prepared training kits for training citizen science observer/volunteers to look for juvenile sea stars as a way of monitoring the progress of sea star recovery on SSI

On April 29 I conducted a two hour training session for 15 Citizen Science Sea Star Recovery Observers at Baker Road Beach. The response to the training was excellent, and we have a good selection of key observation sites chosen by the group. Observations will take place at low tides over the next 3 months. Data will be sent both to the Oregon State University web data collection site, and to me for tabulation. There are several people who were not able to make the initial training session, so we will hold a second session in late May. This will be widely advertised, and will broaden the pool of citizen scientists we can call upon to help us.

#### **Ganges Harbour Water Quality Monitoring –**

The 2017 monitoring season will begin in late May or early June. Dr. Maggie Squire, Limnologist at SFU, and local fresh-water science advisor, will be assisting us with the project. Rob James, local medical statistician, will be assisting with the data management issues. We have a list of potential volunteers, but the word will go out again for the project once we have begun the data collection.

In preparation, we have calibrated the YSI instruments for dissolved oxygen and salinity measurements and tested at the dock. I have arranged for the Coast Guard to store - and make accessible - the instruments so that volunteers can easily access them right at the dock

Our first meeting of the Ganges Harbour Citizen Science Volunteer Group will be in late May, and we will commence data collecting about that time.

## Has the Puzzle of Declining Bird Populations Been Solved?

### *John A. Heddle*

Those of you who have read Bridget Stuchbury's "Silence of the Songbirds"<sup>1</sup> will probably be frustrated, like me, by the lack of a single adequate explanation for the reduction in the numbers of many bird species, particularly small forest birds. At my Long Lake, Muskoka cottage, the whippoorwills have long ceased to sing. We now rarely hear meadowlarks, who are audible at very long distances in the fields to the south. Many other indicators of a decline are also evident. More scientific evidence comes from the capture and banding records of North America's first bird banding station at Long Point on Lake Erie.

The Long Point Observatory was set up two generations ago in 1960, to capture a large number and variety of species because it sits near the south end of the Niagara Escarpment over which Niagara Falls flows. The escarpment is a migration route for raptors and for many much smaller bird species but it ends at Lake Erie. The birds, facing a long journey over the Lake to the south, wander along the shore and concentrate at Long Point and Point Pelee that stretch out into the lake. Counts of birds captured there have diminished markedly over the decades, but the reason has been moot.

Among the reasons posited are cats (calculated as killing billions of birds annually) and other predators, such as rats; high-rise buildings that attract migrating birds to their lights and kill millions annually; insecticides, affecting fertility and viability; and loss of habitat to development. How much is attributable to each potential cause is a question lacking a definitive answer but, obviously, they act in concert to reduce bird numbers.

A study in Germany conducted on nature reserves, reported recently in the prestigious journal *Science* by Gretchen Vogel<sup>2</sup>, suggests a new reason, loss of insects. Over 100 reserves in Western Europe have been

monitored for almost 40 years. The annual data were highly variable, with some insects showing much greater declines than others and, sometimes increases, but the last two years have shown disastrous reductions in the overall biomass – by almost 80%. Imagine the consequences for the insectivorous birds with only about one fifth of the previous food supply available.

This, of course, only pushes the mystery back one step, leaving the question as to why the insects are being lost. For once, global warming seems an unlikely culprit. Who could doubt that insecticides are a major cause given their widespread use in agriculture - and this is important given the variety of bird species in decline - in forestry? The majority of insects are not eaten by birds but by other insects which are also hit by the insecticides sprayed on forest and field. Could it be that foresters and farmers are killing both major predators of the pests, insects and birds? Rachel Carson<sup>3</sup>, famous for her book “Silent Spring”, would not be surprised except that it has taken so long for us to wake up and to act. The researchers themselves are much more cautious because they lack data on pesticides in the reserves and because other information about the declines in the number of insects is so variable from one region to another. In addition, nearby development may be an important factor.

The question of why there are fewer birds now has been further complicated by this revelation, but as Stutchbury’s book implied, the answer seems to be that no single factor is involved but rather many. Clearly, we are responsible for this problem. We are the cause, acting in several ways, most of which we can moderate and, indeed, must moderate, if we and our ecosystem are to survive in recognizable form.

1 Stutchbury, B., *Silence of the Songbirds*, HarperCollins Publishers Ltd., Toronto, 2007. 256pp.

2 Vogel, G., “Where have all the insects gone?”, *Science* 256 (6338): 576-579 (2017)

3 Carson, R., *Silent Spring*, Houghton Mifflin, New York, 1960. 378pp.

## Walking into Nature.

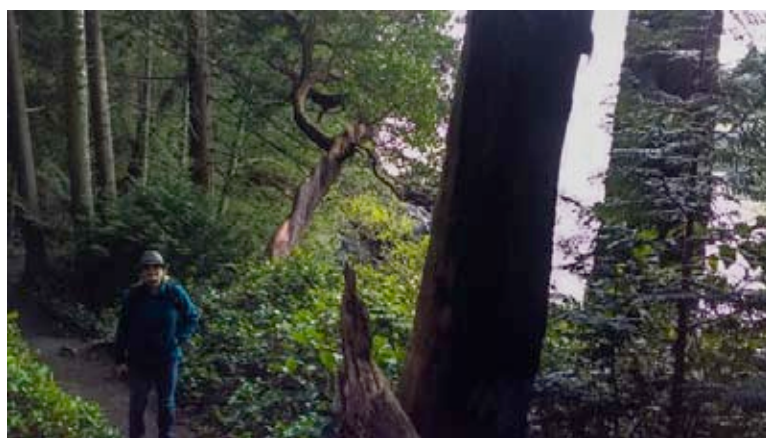
### Bill Gardam

*Seeing, in the finest and broadest sense, means using your senses, your intellect, and your emotions. It means encountering your subject matter with your whole being. It means looking beyond the label of things and discovering the remarkable world around you. - ‘Photography and the Art of Seeing’ Freeman Patterson*

We took a walk with a difference the other day. A leader who walked behind, choose your own path, lots of time, walk individually, meet you at the big stump for lunch.

As leader, I was presenting a workshop in photography as a way of seeing and recording nature more acutely, and that included finding one’s own path.

We tend to assume that a study of nature includes observing, recording and communicating in a scientific manner – kinds of rocks, flora and fauna etc.



and that is a powerful way of understanding the world, but I added a First Nations perspective as well, that for thousands of years along this coast, people understood the deeper meanings through stories passed down orally: this piece of coastline, a water spirit curled up against the living land. The rich and fecund place of the inter-tidal zone.

At our big stump noon stop I reviewed the ideas I had introduced earlier about photography; angle of view, selecting and organizing what will



be within the frame, the intensity and direction of the sun and so on. I demonstrated as I went and encouraging others to have a go. Later, as we walked along the coastline to complete our loop around a part of Ruckle Park. I encouraged every-



one to think and write about their experience later as a way of cementing their perceptions in the same way as they had taken photographs to both explore and record this natural world.

## Birding in the Southern Interior

*Kathleen Maser*

After the BC Nature conference in Lillooet my partner, Rob, and I travelled east to Cache Creek (that had flooded 2 days earlier), and then down through the interior via Highway 5, then 5A. Hoping to see mountain bluebirds, we instead had to settle on meadowlarks flashing their brilliant yellow breasts and decorative black V's from posts and wires, mile after mile. Oh well!

There followed a couple of perfect birding days in the Osoyoos area, simply dazzling in its plethora of colourful birds.

At our first stop, the Desert Centre, we saw the western tanager, nesting western bluebirds, the Calliope hummingbird and the Say's phoebe. Up

Anarchist Mountain were more western bluebirds, tanagers and the spectacular Lewis's woodpeckers busily active around their nesting hole in a Ponderosa pine tree. What entertainment!

Back down in the valley we stopped at Vaseux lake to admire the new viewing platform, a truly amazing structure with movable panels but sadly nary a water bird to be seen. Disheartened we returned to the parking lot where an unusual song attracted us and demanded our attention. The penultimate, it was a Lazuli bunting! This is the bird I have for far too long looked at longingly in my bird book. The turquoise colour is just glorious and it sits still begging to be admired!

Before heading off to celebrate by tasting some of the valley's fine wines we stopped at Haynes Point Provincial park on the Osoyoos spit. Here there is a wetlands and birding platform worth venturing out on but the entertainment came from further along the spit where several



*Meadowlark. Photo by Heather Neville.*



*Lewis's woodpecker. Photo courtesy of <http://www.naturespicsonline.com/>*



*Western tanager.*

pairs of Western grebes were attracting a considerable crowd of passersby. No, they were not displaying their extraordinary mating dance but were nonetheless highly entertaining in shrieking and squabbling over something important - nesting sites perhaps?

All in all, what a great area to travel to in the spring, beautiful blossoms and the brightest of birds, so easily viewed. The wine is not too shabby either!



*Lazuli bunting. Photo by Peter McAllister.*



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