

LESSER SLAVE LAKE BIRD OBSERVATORY

The Warbler



LSLBO No. 4

SPRING 2004

Chairman's Remarks

Robert W. Deacon

Welcome to spring in the Boreal. We observed three Canada geese winging their way over The Point Steakhouse on March 11 and felt very privileged to see a few of the first migrants. It looks to be a good year for all our projects and it has been a very busy winter season. All the news is good and I would like to share a brief overview with our membership.

The **Boreal Centre for Bird Conservation** project is well on its way and after many meetings with the design team led by Manasc-Isaac Architects we held our open house on March 24, at Northern Lakes College, in Slave Lake.

On the home front, the energy upgrade on the lab at Lily Creek is due to be completed by the middle of April. This project is being funded by Alberta climate change and constructed by myself (supervisor/volunteer) and Dave McConnell, a local alternative energy advocate. The weather has been less than cooperative so far but we have persevered. The additional power produced will make the site much more amenable to staff and volunteers alike.

During our winter downtime we contracted Liz Garratt, a business consultant, to work on two major projects with us. The

first was the development of a relationship strategy to define our affiliation with partners, patrons and clients. We are now in a position to move on to the second, and complementary project of completing a business plan for the BCBC. A one-day workshop held in Slave Lake in February contributed to the solidifying of the required components. The research information Liz has compiled on our organization has been outstanding. We now have a much clearer idea of who we are and where we need to go. Both these projects have been a co-funded by the LSLBO and Alberta Community Development.

Our sincere congratulations go out to Jul Wojonowski. Jul has accepted a position with the Edmonton International Airport. We wish him the best of luck. We are fortunate to have our Assistant Bander Tyler Flockhart returning this spring. Tyler will spend the summer at the LSLBO, then he is off to the University of Saskatchewan in the fall to begin his Master's Degree.

As a part of the BCBC project we are purchasing a new modular residence to house our staff and volunteers and plan to have it on site for use in June. The structure will be located near the new BCBC building site and will be tied into the overall project design.

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Lily Creek lab solar panels

Migration has started! If you are interested in volunteering with the LSLBO bird banding and monitoring programs please call the LSLBO office at 849-7117. We look forward to seeing you!

Just a reminder that the 10th Annual Songbird Festival will be held on June 5 and 6 this year at Lily Creek Banding Station. See you all there!



The Christmas Bird Count 2004

Contributed by: Steve Lane

There are always inherent challenges in organizing a Christmas Bird Count – not the least of which is finding a day over the fortnight period around Christmas when one can assemble the most counters. Slave Lake's CBC is still in its relative infancy, having gone about five years now, and we're still madly scrambling for intrepid counters by the time the census rolls around!

This year's auspicious day was January 3. Most of us woke up to a wind chill pegged at -44 degrees Celsius. The half dozen willing participants who showed up at the Sawridge Truck Stop at 7:30 a.m. repeatedly questioned our collective sanity but elected to soldier on. There was the usual litany of alibis, some people were understandably ill, others out of town, so we divided up the area (12 km in each direction from the north end of Slave Lake) into quarters and went out to embrace the invigorating conditions.

Ronda Groom and Bob Deacon roamed around the north end of the count area and turned up some gems like a *black backed woodpecker*, *boreal chickadee*, *snow buntings* and a *spruce grouse*, among others. Aaron Lehman and Wayne Bowles drew the urban Slave Lake area (surprisingly no arrests were made for being peeping Toms) and the river mouth section, which yielded one, no doubt, fairly frigid *Gold-eneeye*.

They also collected enough *redpolls* (including a *hoary*) and *bohemian waxwings* to create new historic highs for those species on this count.

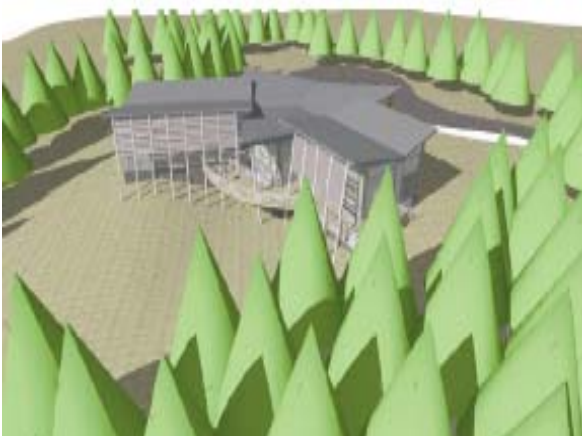
Joanne and Darrell Walde braved the elements in the easternmost sector of our count area for a few hours. Joe McWilliams and yours truly trudged around the south shore and a few points south of that, yielding a paltry nine species, but we did have a couple of *ruffed grouse* pose in a tree right beside our car window (must've known Joe would use their picture in the Lakeside Leader).

The most cruelest of ironies arrived at the end of the day (which, thanks to our latitudinal position, was mercifully short) when I checked in with my better half about activity at our own backyard feeder. She was able to count no less than 13 species, including the first *Dark-eyed Juncos* in SL count history – and provide well over half the species we managed to list in this census! Surprisingly, this was the first count with nary a bird of prey to be found.

My thanks go to our brave census takers – not only for this past year, but for their ongoing commitment to this cause. It is my sincere hope that our readers will jump in next year and give us a hand (and an eye or two as well). There has simply **got** to be more birds out there!

Christmas Bird Count 2004

Black Backed Three-Toed Woodpecker	1
Black Capped Chickadee	65
Blue Jay	8
Bohemian Waxwing	680
Boreal Chickadee	3
Common Redpoll	216
Dark-eyed Junco	4
Downy Woodpecker	5
European Starling	7
Evening Grosbeak	23
Goldeneye	1
Gray Jay	3
Hairy Woodpecker	7
Hoary Redpoll	2
House Sparrow	4
Magpie	27
Pine Grosbeak	82
Raven	271
Red Breasted Nuthatch	2
Ruffed Grouse	3
Snow Bunting	23
Spruce Grouse	1
White Breasted Nuthatch	3
Individuals	1395
Species	23



BCBC Southeast overhead view

LSLBO's New Home Takes Shape

Contributed by Frank Fraser, BCBC Planner

The ***Boreal Centre for Bird Conservation*** is taking shape and the LSLBO's new home looks fantastic! The architect, Richard Isaac, was asked to create a building that reflects bird flight.

As you can see from the schematic drawings, Richard captured the image of bird flight in the inverted roof design. With upward swinging roof lines, the BCBC looks ready for take off.

Another exciting feature of the building is the design meets LEED's (Leader in Energy Efficiency Design) silver certification. Points are awarded for initiatives such as using recycled building material and furniture, constructing a building envelope that retains heat,

reducing greenhouse gas emissions through mechanical applications like composting toilets, ground source heat pump, and rainwater catchment system for potable water.

The LSLBO can be proud of their contribution to the planning team. LSLBO Chairperson, Bob Deacon, has tirelessly attended many meetings with the team in Edmonton. Bob passionately represents the LSLBO's interests and defends the principle of building the Centre in as environmentally responsible a way as the budget allows.

As the centre project proceeds, I will offer further updates on the facility as well as the program area. An official ground turning date has not been set, but I anticipate it will be around the middle of August. Construction should start shortly thereafter.



BCBC Overhead view

Owls, Adaptive Masters of the Skies

Adam Cheadle, Visitor Services Specialist

For the serious birding enthusiast, Lesser Slave Lake Provincial Park is a must during a venture into Alberta's majestic northern forests. The park's bird checklist includes representatives from 238 bird species and increases every year. Although more popularly known for large



Boreal owl on perch

neotropical songbird migrations, the focus of this article is devoted to some of the more elusive residents of the park. These mysterious animals are the owls, birds more associated with myth and legend than fact.

The place of the owl in the collective consciousness of humanity is as varied as the species itself. In some cultures, owls have been revered and worshiped for their seemingly intelligent and majestic appearances; in others have vilified them as harbingers of death or even demons incarnate. For example in Greek mythology the owl was the symbol of Athena the Greek Goddess of Wisdom. She made the owl her favourite-

“The place of the owl in the collective consciousness of humanity is as varied as the species itself.”

feathered creature bringing people knowledge and luck. In ancient Rome, to hear the hoot of an owl implied the imminent death of the listener. An owl all supposedly foretold the deaths of Julius Caesar, Augustus Caesar and Commodus Aurelius. The negative connotation given to the call of the owl also appears in the mythology of the Cree First Nations People who believed the call of the Boreal Owl was a summons from the spirits.

If a person answered such a summons with a similar whistle and did not hear a response, then they would soon expire.

In reality, owls are impressive and adaptive birds, worthy of our respect. Owls belong to the raptor family, also known as birds of prey. These birds hunt and kill other animals for food and when it comes to hunting, there are few birds or predators that can match the efficiency of owls.

Owls use a wide variety of physical adaptations in order to fulfill their place as top predators in the food chain. As most owls are active nocturnally, hunting at dawn and



*The Great Horned Owl:
Alberta's Provincial Bird*

dusk during periods of reduced sunlight, it should come as no surprise that they have excellent eyesight. Owl eyes face forward giving them binocular vision; this allows them to see in three dimensions (length, width and height) and accurately judge distances between themselves and potential prey. Owl eyes are also relatively large in proportion to their bodies. In some species the eyes make up almost five percent of their total body weight. This would be the equivalent of a human having eyes the size of tennis balls! An owl's large eyes are equipped with dense concentrations of light sensitive "rod cells". This allows an owl to see extremely well in the low light conditions in which they hunt. However, due to the small amount of colour sensitive "cone cells" it is thought that owls see only in monochrome (one colour).

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Feeder Watch

Contributed by Aaron Lehman

On a cold, gray, bleak looking winter day, one may wonder if any birds can survive. It would be interesting to put radio collars on some of those birds and find out where they go. Few birds are found at the feeder when the wind chill is in the -40 C range. I suspect they are huddled within the



Dark-eyed Junco

protective branches of some thick stands of bushy spruce trees.

Sometimes you can see Redpolls and House Sparrows fluttering around as the sun starts to warm the edges.

As soon as the sun starts warming the bird feeders, the first Redpolls and Pine Grosbeaks start exploring what's available at the feeders. Soon a whole flock may descend and fight for space on the feeder and on the ground beneath. One or two Black Capped Chickadees may pick and fly, never staying at the feeder, but choosing to eat on a protective branch and then dashing back for seconds. Once in awhile, everything erupts into flight, a sure sign a Blue Jay or two has arrived. They too usually pick a seed and fly to a branch and eat. When they leave, the others return.

The most common birds at the feeder this winter have been the Redpolls and the Pine Grosbeaks. Evening Grosbeaks are sporadic and the White-breasted Nuthatch and the Downy and Hairy woodpeckers are unpredictable. The occasional Starling and flock of House Sparrows has been seen. Bohemian Waxwings left shortly after the Christmas Bird Count. Snow Buntings are sometimes seen along the roads and highway.

Since we are headed toward spring, keep an eye out for the courtship flight of the

Ravens. A pair will start high in the sky and do a modified free fall display, beak to beak, feet to feet in a lazy spiral and then bail out at tree top level. Something to spark up a bleak spring day.

News and Special Events:

Slave Lake Songbird Festival

The 10th annual Songbird Festival will take place on June 5 and 6, 2004 at the Lily Creek banding station.

Some of the events include the hourly guided Tropical Bird Safari, Bird Banding Demonstrations, Alternative Energy and BCBC displays, Human Banding Station, LSLBO Membership Table with Family package deals and merchandise, and Lily Lake Bird Hike. Get up early for the Pancake breakfast and stay for a fun filled day of activities the whole family will enjoy! See you there!

A New Face at the LSLBO

A new bird has joined the flock! The vacancy that Frank Fraser left at the LSLBO when he accepted the position of planner for the Boreal Centre for Bird Conservation has been filled. Amy Wotton has accepted the position of Manager for the LSLBO. To add to our diverse group, she brings with her a degree in Forestry, a love for the boreal forest and a smile. Frank will continue to be a valuable resource to the LSLBO.

Perhaps the most amazing physical adaptation possessed by owls is their hearing. Owls have one of the most advanced sound detection systems in nature, which contributes greatly to their success as hunters. The pronounced facial disk of an owl, such as the Great Grey, serves to amplify any incoming sound or light. The shape of the disk can be altered to the owl's advantage using special facial muscles. In addition to the facial disk, the ear openings of many owl species (the barn owl being the most drastic example) are asymmetrical, meaning one ear is higher up on the head than the other. When a sound is perceived, the owl is able to discern the exact direction of its origin due to the minute time difference in which the sound is detected in each ear. Due to its asymmetrical hearing, the owl is also able to discern whether sound is coming from above or below depending on how strong the signal is impacting each ear.

The end result is, when the sound of potential prey is detected the owl simply turns its head towards the source of the noise and is able to determine the exact distance and location. It is similar to having a guided missile with feathers and talons locked on to you. The outcome is rarely favourable for the intended target.

Numerous other physical adaptations make them raptors to be reckoned with. Two stomachs allow owls to shape and expel indigestible items such as fur, teeth, feathers and bones in the form of a pellet. A comb-like leading edge on the primary flight feathers breaks up wind turbulence, allowing owls to fly silently and listen for, or ambush unwitting prey. The feathers of an owl allow it to vanish into the background of its chosen habitat, camouflaging them from mobbing attacks of smaller birds trying to frighten them

away. Aside from their large eyes, the adaptation owls are best known is their large powerful talons which they use expertly to capture and dispatch prey items such as, voles, mice, rabbits, squirrels, other birds, snakes, rats and in some species, skunks.



Perching Barred Owl

A close encounter with an owl is a special experience the viewer will always remember. Species of owls that can be seen in Alberta include the: **Eastern Screech Owl, Great Horned Owl, Snowy Owl** (winter only), **Northern Hawk Owl, Northern Pygmy Owl, Burrowing Owl, Barred Owl, Great Grey Owl, Long Eared Owl, Short Eared Owl, Boreal Owl** and the **Northern Saw-Whet Owl**. To view these wonderful birds up close requires a keen eye and a large measure of patience. The best viewing time for most of these species is during dawn and dusk when they are the most active.

Owls have, for ages, imprinted themselves in the lore and imaginations of everyone who has been fortunate enough to cross their paths. Reactions have been varied ranging from adoration to stark terror. However, when stripped away of all their mystic, owls are revealed for what they truly are; superbly adapted predators who play an essential role in every food chain they inhabit. Take some time to try and observe these fantastic birds in the wild and see them for the incredible animals they are. It will be experience you will treasure for a lifetime.



Snowy Owl in flight
Copyright © David Flores



Great Grey Owl

Fundraising Report, Spring 2004

Contributed by Ronda Groom

As the excitement of spring builds, with the birds starting to migrate north, my volunteer duties as fundraiser are winding down.

Our organization relies on the funds raised each year to: pay professional staff who monitor the numbers and health of our boreal bird populations; purchase banding, lab and net supplies; provide public education about our environment and to deliver programs like the songbird festival.

The objective of the fund raising committee are to provide enough dollars each year to the observatory Board of Directors who use the funds to accomplish our objectives of public education and baseline bird research.

In our requests for funds to members, foundations, business and other non government organizations we try to align our programs so we have similar objectives, can cooperate on programs and provide coordination of services where requested. In this way we have operated for ten years and hope to find success and expansion of the operation in the

next ten years.

Two longer term goals that fund raising has developed are:

- 1) To set up an endowment fund to support program goals in perpetuity.
- 2) To increase dollars coming from memberships so that by 2006 one half of our operational dollars come from membership contributions.

The first goal is met by asking individuals in the community and members to consider taking out a life insurance policy with the LSLBO as the beneficiary. I was able to do this by calling Nelda Armstrong with Clarica at 780-849-2923. The cost for this policy is tax deductible.

The second goal will be met by starting a membership drive in the spring of 2004. Our office will have someone to answer the phone and membership queries. A report on how we're doing for memberships and life insurance policies will be in the next newsletter.

Until then.... If you would like to donate money to the Lesser Slave Lake Bird Observatory, or take out a membership please call us at 310-0000, then 849-7117. Thanks and happy birding!

Links for the Birds

2004 Alberta Birding Reports	http://www.web-nat.com/bic/albcal_1.html
Alberta Conservation Association	http://www.ab-conservation.com/
Beaver Hill Bird Observatory	http://www.beaverhillbirds.com
Big Country Tourism	http://www.biglakecountrytourism.com/
Bird Studies Canada	http://www.bsc-eoc.org/
Canadian Nature Federation	http://www.cnf.ca/
Ducks Unlimited – Western Canada	http://www.ducks.ca/conserv/wbf/index.html
Federation of Alberta Naturalists	http://www.fanweb.ca
Important Bird Areas of Canada	http://www.ibacanada.com/
LSLBO	http://www.lslbo.org
National Audubon Society	http://www.audubon.org/
Wildbird General Store	http://www.freenet.edmonton.ab.ca/wildbird/

Thanks to...



IMPORTANT BIRD
AREAS OF CANADA



LES ZONES IMPORTANTES
POUR LA CONSERVATION
DES OISEAUX AU CANADA

10th Annual Songbird Festival Presented by Lesser Slave Lake Bird Observatory Slave Lake, Alberta June 5 & 6, 2004



What's Happening?

- Bird Banding Demonstrations
- Tropical Bird Safari
- Birding Boutique
- Pancake Breakfast
- Special Movie Presentation
- Hike to Lily Lake
- Plus much more!

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