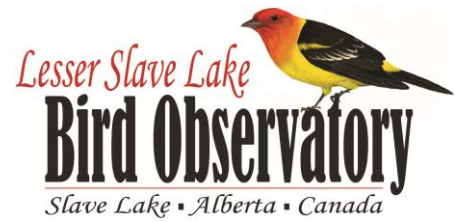


Lesser Slave Lake Bird Observatory: A Short History

Compiled in February 2009 by Nanci Langford



Beginnings

In 1991, Frank Fraser, then employed as Park Naturalist at Lesser Slave Lake Provincial Park, was interested in developing programs to engage residents in appreciation of the park's wildlife. He observed the abundance of migratory landbirds visiting the park and became aware that no one was observing and recording this phenomenon. By connecting to the Beaverhill Bird Observatory website, Frank connected with active bird enthusiasts from Beaver Hills (east of Edmonton) and in particular with Stefan Jungkind. Stefan was enthusiastic about the bird research potential of the Slave Lake area, as he had already conducted some bird breeding surveys and also collected migratory bird data in the area. In September 1992, a letter was sent by Stefan to Grant Kihn, Ranger in Charge, Lesser Slave Lake Provincial Park, to indicate an interest in setting up a bird banding station, and a research application was submitted. In the late spring and summer of 1993, with Stefan as chief bird bander, Frank, Stefan and Steven Lane undertook ten days of banding in the provincial park on the eastern shore of Lesser Slave Lake to band landbirds and determine the feasibility of setting up a bird observatory in the area. The results were very encouraging and by the spring of 1994 a certified bander, Jason Duxbury, was hired to collect seasonal data on the landbird population. Aaron Lehman recalls dropping in frequently that summer to watch and help with the banding activities of Jason and Steven Lane, another certified bander from Beaverhill Bird Observatory, at their pickup truck and later picnic table 'headquarters'.

The Lesser Slave Lake Bird Observatory was created with the active involvement of a local group of bird enthusiasts, who worked as banding volunteers under the supervision of the chief bander. And they all remember it was fun. As Marion Whitby,

who was a volunteer bander for three summers, commented: “The bird banding, it just blew my mind. To have a bird in your hand....to see them close up to me was phenomenal, fascinating. I just loved helping getting them out of the nets, that part I really enjoyed.” Aaron Lehman shared similar sentiments, that what “hooked” him was the banding experiences, “seeing the little birds up close”.

The organization operated for the first three years, 1994 -1996 as a “sister organization” of the Beaverhill Bird Observatory, adopting its bylaws, using its society designation and its administrative support, particularly the services of its treasurer. The manpower requirements during these first seasons were largely carried out by a group of seven volunteers supplemented by some visiting international students. A chief bander and several students were hired each summer to band and collect data. Work bees were organized by LSLBO members to build an office, develop walkways, set up nets, and to install a solar panel. Marion Whitby describes the volunteers as an “enthusiastic group” keenly interested in “a good cause”. “We made lots of progress and you felt good about that. It was a good bunch of people. There were only seven or eight of us to begin with”.

The LSLBO Society

In 1997 the Lesser Slave Lake group decided to create their own organization, and the Lesser Slave Lake Bird Observatory was officially incorporated as an independent society. The founding board was Marion Whitby (Chair), Frank Fraser, Steve Lane, and Stefan Jungkind. Steve Lane became the second chair of the Society, and Bob Deacon was elected to the chair at the Annual General meeting in December 1999.

The organization was founded on two major goals, research and interpretation/education. Stefan Jungkind stresses the partnership from the beginning with what is now Alberta Parks and Protected Areas, and in particular with the local Parks staff at Lesser Slave Lake, as both necessary and effective, and credits the local paper, *The Leader*, as instrumental in creating a profile for the organization. As a result, the LSLBO was able, he feels, with the support of Alberta Sport, Recreation, Parks and

Wildlife, to launch itself as an independent organization much sooner than anticipated. The leadership of June Markwart, in creating a part-time parks position (40% of the Visitor Services Specialist position) dedicated to the Observatory, and the team building that took place between Parks personnel and Observatory volunteers created the solid base for this newly independent organization.

Fundraising to support observatory operations is a major activity of the society. Financial resources changed from a “zero dollars” budget in 1993 to \$35,500 raised in 1997. By 1999, the budget was \$101,158 and in 2007, it was \$127,000. The completion of the BCBC brought new funding arrangements with Park and Protected Areas but securing grant funding is still a priority for the Society. Expanding programs and activities, and the staff and equipment required to deliver them, puts heavy demands on the Society’s fundraising director. Ronda Groom identified four goals for the Society: to acquire federal charitable society status; to build more partnerships to share resources, like the example of the Forestry Education Society; to build a strong membership base that would generate 20% of operating costs; and to increase the use of the BCBC as a research facility and LSLBO staff as researchers for corporations who need impact studies.

The Society has received financial support from forestry products companies, corporations, banks, foundations, conservation organizations, families, school clubs, and individuals. Government grants are sought each summer to support student employment. Frank Fraser was the fundraiser for the first seven years and Ronda Groom took over this responsibility in 2001.

Housing observatory staff was always a challenge in the early years and a variety of solutions, such as trailers, were provided. In 2004 a new modular staff residence was purchased in conjunction with the BCBC project and moved to the proposed BCBC site. Community support for the new residence was evident as ninety-five percent of the furnishings were donated.

Maintaining and upgrading the lab were also annual activities engaging the board's attention, funds and muscle power. In 1997 the lab received a large picture window, skylight, roof rafters and new asphalt shakes. In 1998 a release hatch was added, as well as insulation, paneling and new windows, installed by Dennis Verbeek, who also did the 1997 renovations, and Sara Wittkowski. In 2006 new solar panels were installed by Bob Deacon and Dave McConell.

To keep LSLBO members and supporters informed, the newsletter "The Warbler" started in 1997 as an email newsletter to all volunteers, partners and members of society. Over the years it has become the chief mechanism to share news, educational items and research with LSLBO members, friends, donors and affiliates. Starting in 2006, regular email announcements of programs and events are also sent between newsletter publication dates to keep members informed.

The LSLBO hired its first administrator, Amy Wotton, in 2004. Amy became the first Executive Director of the joint LSLBO and Alberta Parks initiative, the Boreal Centre for Bird Conservation, after it opened in June 2006. She was succeeded by Patti Campsall in January 2007.

The LSLBO website went online May 16, 2000 to inform and educate members, volunteers and the general public. A BCBC website was also created when the facility opened and the sites are linked for users to access both easily.

In 2002, the LSLBO was awarded the Partnership Appreciation Award by Parks and Protected Areas, Alberta Community Development for its successful partnership with the staff of Lesser Slave Lake Provincial Park. On September 16, 2006 the LSLBO was awarded the highest level of recognition by Alberta Parks and Protected Areas, the Green Shield Award. The award was recognition for the Society's extraordinary contributions in establishing the Boreal Centre for Bird Conservation. It is awarded annually to an individual or organization whose volunteer efforts have made a significant contribution to the preservation or conservation of land, water ecosystems and/or the plants and animals that live there. The government news release about the award

stated “the success of this endeavour can be attributed to the tireless work and determination of the LSLBO board and volunteers who have committed thousands of hours annually at great personal expense to make this dream a reality.”

On June 2, 2006 Bob Deacon, LSLBO Chair, and Ronda Groom, Director of Fundraising, were awarded the first two BCBC Stewardship Excellence Awards by June Markwart, Manager of Visitor Services, Alberta Community Development. The award is to be “presented to an individual or organization whose dedication and passion embodies our vision ‘Nurturing Stewards of the Boreal Forest.’ Their exemplary efforts inspired others to better ways of living and working that sustain the boreal forest ecosystem and the larger world in which we live”. Everyone in attendance at the Volunteer Appreciation Night enthusiastically endorsed Bob and Ronda as deserving recipients of this inaugural award. Other volunteers were recognized by gifts of birdhouses similar in design to the new BCBC.

The Society recognizes the critical role The Lakeside Leader has played in their success. Regularly informed coverage of LSLBO events, and publishing weekly reports by IBA educators and banders in charge during the banding and monitoring season have kept Slave Lake area residents informed about the observatory’s work and the organization’s activities, and most important, about the rich avian life and their habitat in their own community.

Research and Data Collection

Landbird migration monitoring, the first activity of the LSLBO, began in 1993, and over 50,000 birds were banded during spring and fall seasons of the period 1993-2008; the 50,000th bird was recorded on September 29, 2008. Ninety-nine different species of birds have been banded at the LSLBO over its 16 years.

Monitoring Avian Productivity and Survivorship (MAPS) began in 1994, and the LSLBO operates the only four MAPS sites in the boreal forest. The LSLBO is Canada’s northernmost

migration monitoring station and became a member of the Canadian Migration Monitoring Station in 1999. Christmas bird counts, initiated in 2000, involve about twenty volunteers and have been conducted every year since 2000. A census of nesting and staging waterfowl, in conjunction with Bird Studies Canada and the Federation of Alberta Naturalists, started in 2001. The Canada Warbler Research Project was introduced in 2004 and the Saw-whet Owl banding program was inaugurated in August 2004. The Saw-whet data is being combined with that of Beaverhill Bird Observatory.

The LSLBO achieved an important research milestone by earning an Important Bird Area designation in June 2000 for Western Griebe and Tundra Swan, and for its concentration of landbirds. Frank Fraser points out that the IBA designation is a unique one as it covers three categories, and in particular recognizes the concentration of landbirds in the fly-through area between the lakeshore and Marten Mountain, this concentration designation being a rare one in Canada. Fraser is unequivocal about both the reason for the designation and its importance. He credits the excellent research conducted on both land and water birds by the LSLBO for the IBA designations and indicates that they brought access to new funds for an IBA educator position.

Volunteers are integral to the success of research programs. Bird Banding reports show the hours of service by volunteer banders throughout the LSLBO's existence. Former banders in charge Stefan Jungkind and Jul Wojnowski provided countless volunteer hours and their expertise after their formal LSLBO commitments were over. Steve Lane took the initiative to establish the Christmas Bird Count as an annual LSLBO program and organized the first four counts. The Christmas count relies on volunteers and LSLBO members always show up, even when temperatures are extreme. Wayne Bowles was the chief organizer of the Project Feederwatch program, in which Aaron Lehman was also involved, and both were volunteer researchers, under Frank Fraser's direction for the birds of forested landscape project, recording sounds and activity of the Swainson's Thrush and the Hermit Thrush. Aaron has been a steadfast volunteer over the years, assisting Stefan Jungkind with his spring breeding bird surveys, contributing

to the Alberta Bird Atlas project since 1997, the Baillie Birdathon, the Tundra Swan study, and working on the Lakeshore Protection Committee.

By 2008, the research projects of the LSLBO include:

- Canada Warbler Project – The Canada Warbler (*Wilsonia canadensis*) is one of the least studied warblers in North America, however evidence suggest populations have been in decline for the last 30 years. This study of locally breeding populations helps researchers to better understand the breeding ecology of this species.
- Owl Monitoring Project – The Northern Saw-whet Owl (*Aegolius acadicus*) is a nocturnal owl species with a large breeding range that includes the boreal forest surrounding Lesser Slave Lake Provincial Park. This research monitors long term population trends to provide further insight into the demographics and biometrics of the owls.
- Migration Monitoring – The Lesser Slave Lake Bird Observatory is part of an international effort to monitor landbird migrations using daily mist-netting (capturing birds in nets using a procedure developed at the Manomet Bird Observatory), visible migration counts (recording every bird species observed within a defined space at set intervals) and casual observance.
- MAPS –The Monitoring Avian Productivity and Survivorship program was created by the Institute for Bird Populations to assess and monitor vital rates and population dynamics of over 120 species of North American landbirds. As one of just six MAPS sites in operation throughout Canada, the BCBC lies within the Boreal & Arctic Canada Region and contributes data of national significance.
- Christmas Bird Count – The BCBC is a participant in the annual Christmas Bird Count conducted between mid-December and early January in over 1800 locations across Canada, the United States and Latin America. This supports a huge ongoing database of information on the distribution and numbers of North American Birds.
- Project Feederwatch – Project Feederwatch is a winter-long survey of birds that visit feeders in backyards, nature centres, community areas and elsewhere in North America. This helps scientists track the broad movements of winter bird populations, and the long-term trends in bird distribution and abundance.

The LSLBO also prepares and conducts unbiased research on behalf of corporate and government agencies needing to collect data on the boreal forest. The creation of the Boreal Centre for Bird Conservation has allowed the LSLBO to expand its mandate, to offer independent researchers opportunities to study the ecosystem of Lesser Slave Lake Provincial Park.

The LSLBO facilitates and welcomes interest from a variety of researchers including:

- birders and naturalists, both as individuals or in clubs, with interests in conservation initiatives and citizen science,
- individuals working on requirements for MSc or PhD programs,
- educators looking to deepen their knowledge in related areas, and
- corporations needing to conduct environmental impact assessments of existing or planned activities in forestry, oil & gas and other industries.

In the fall of 2007, the LSLBO hosted the General Meeting of the Canadian Migration Monitoring Network, a group representing all the migration monitoring stations across Canada.

Education and Interpretation

The educational mandate of the LSLBO has been primary since 1995, when the first school groups visited the observatory operations. The cooperative relationship with Alberta Parks staff is demonstrated in these educational visits, as from 1995 to 2000 when an Important Bird Area Educator was hired, the seasonal park interpreter handled all the bookings for educational tours and shared responsibility for conducting them with the bander in charge. In 1995 one school group travelled from St. Albert to visit the observatory. Aaron Lehman, a local biology teacher until his retirement in 1998, was an active member of the Bird Club that became the LSLBO and he ensured local school groups were exposed to the observatory activities. Aaron, along with Wayne Bowles a long time LSLBO volunteer and Board member, were responsible for local training and promotion of Project Feeder Watch, a program of Bird Studies Canada. Aaron Lehman has been a long-term volunteer educator, providing interpretation tours at the Songbird Festival and the Forest Education Society camps.

In 2002 the Society sponsored a course at Northern Lakes College for bird banding assistants. Also in 2002, IBA educator Gordon Eade hosted a stewards' workshop, with 16 potential stewards attending, to launch an environmental stewardship program

focused on the lakeshore environment. In 2003 the first Important Bird Area Day was organized by Bryn Jonzon with 82 people in attendance.

In 2004 Penn State University held a summer credit course at the Observatory and Amy Wotton hosted the group of eight university students and their professor on behalf of the Society.

The addition of the IBA (Important Bird Area) educator position in 2000, which subsequently was replaced in January 2006 by the new position of Boreal Educator, to work in partnership with the Lesser Slave Forest Education Society, strengthened the outreach program to schools. In 2006 over 3500 people participated in education programs, including fieldtrips for 786 Slave Lake region students.

A junior birding club was created in February 2006 by Patti Campsall and Jeff Manchak. The aim of the Junior Bird Club is to encourage young people from the ages of 7 to 14 to gain experience and knowledge about local birds and the boreal forest. It is also a chance to team up with other families for fun and educational birding events. Every month, there is a fun-filled educational event planned for the club members.

In 2008 Richard Krikun, Bander in Charge, was featured in a National Geographic Wild Chronicles video project. Also in 2008 the BCBC hosted the Slave Lake Corporate Challenge, focused on bird education, and helped to organize the Home Energy Alternative Trade Show.

BCBC educators offer a menu of five standard programs to school groups, three of which can be delivered in school classrooms: Bird Banding 101, Banding Lab Tour, Leading the Way, LSLBO Research Programs, and Provincial Park Explorers.

Starting January 1, 2009, the BCBC is offering three new educational video conferences as part of a new Alberta Parks program. Now teachers and students can learn about the amazing boreal forest from their own classroom.

Songbird Festival

The inaugural Songbird Festival, located at the observatory site on the east shore of Lesser Slave Lake, was organized in 1995 by Marion Whitby. The festival was held for the first five years on the long weekend in May, but weather considerations resulted in a change to the first weekend in June in 2000. Attendance at festivals has always been something to celebrate, from 260 participants at the first festival to over five hundred participants in 2004. Increasingly, the festival draws a significant number of out of town guests, estimated at approximately half the festival participants in recent years.

The festival programs focus on outdoor birding activities. Bird banding demonstrations, tropical bird safaris (birding hikes in various settings) and a Sunday morning hike to Lily Lake have always been popular features. Guest experts participate in bird hikes and bird banding demonstrations and give talks. Children's activities at the festival include building bird houses and a human banding station. Newer activities added in recent years are the "habitat at home" presentations, where participants learn how to create bird friendly yards, "birding for beginners", and the participation of the Wildbird General Store of Edmonton who provided a "bird boutique" at the festival site.

A fundraising banquet was organized for the 1995 to 2002 festivals, and featured some excellent guest speakers and performers:

- 1995 - Dr. Jim Butler, University of Alberta
- 1996 - Precipice Theatre
- 1997 - Dr. Jack Clements, Founder of Wildbird General Store and Dr. Richard Thomas, Scientist with Alberta Environmental Protection
- 1998 - Roger Gagne
- 1999 - Brian Keating, Director, Calgary Zoo; Peter Brown, CBC Radio as guest MC
- 2000 - Candace Savage, Author
- 2001 - John Rappole, Smithsonian Institute
- 2002 - Dr. C. J. Ralph, Humboldt State University/Klamath Bird Observatory

Funds for the observatory were also raised at banquets through silent auctions, in the first year offering waterfowl art. In subsequent years a wide variety of donations from local and Edmonton businesses were included in the silent auctions. From 2003 on, fundraising dinners were not planned as part of the festival, and a pancake breakfast was added to the on-site festival program.

Special guests gave informative presentations at a number of the festivals. In 1996 Myrna Pearman of Ellis Bird Farm gave a presentation, and Margaret Chandler, editor of Encompass Magazine offered a slide show and talk. In 1999 Stefan Jungkind showed a slide presentation. Lisa Priestly of Bird Studies Canada and Phil Penner of Federation of Alberta Naturalists both gave informative talks at the 2003 festival. Phil Penner spoke about the Breeding Bird Atlas Project. The Beaverhill Bird Observatory collaborated with the LSLBO in 2003 and 2004, with a presentation focusing on the Saw-whet Owl in 2004. In 2004, festival participants also viewed the film "Winged Migration" at Northern Lakes College. In 2006 Chris Fischer, author, TV host and writer for the "Acorn the Nature Nut" TV series, was a special guest presenter. In 2008 a former LSLBO bander in charge Tyler Flockhart, presented the latest results of LSLBO's Canada Warbler Study, including some amazing video recordings of the nesting behaviours of Canada Warblers.

The first fundraising LSLBO Bird 5K and 10K Walk/Run was held in 2005. It was organized by Edith Mackenzie and Pat Potvin and has become a feature of the Songbird Festival weekend, with sixty runners turning out for the 2006 run.

In 2006 in conjunction with the opening of the Boreal Centre for Bird Conservation, the Songbird Festival was moved to the Centre site, accommodating both outdoor and indoor activities. And the indoor venue was welcome that year, as after braving cold winds and unrelenting rain all morning, participants crowded into the multipurpose room to hear and watch Chris Fischer's multimedia presentation.

The Boreal Centre for Bird Conservation (BCBC)

The first proposal for the BCBC was drafted in 2000, and by 2002 a combined Alberta Community Development/LSLBO steering committee's concept plan was accepted by the Alberta Government and the funds allocated. Then the Alberta Government implemented a freeze on all capital projects, so it was 2004 before a Centennial Legacy grant of 1.6 million dollars was awarded for the design and building of a Centre. Frank Fraser was reassigned by Community Development to be the BCBC Planner for two years in 2003, as the project was initially scheduled for completion in 2005, the year of Alberta's Centennial celebrations.

The Centre was designed to be both a research and public education facility to focus on bird research and boreal forest ecosystem research. An open house was held at Northern Lakes College on March 24, 2004 to share the Centre plans, developed by Manasc- Isaac Architects with the public.

Richard Isaac designed the building to capture an image of a bird in flight using an inverted roof design (which also catches rain water to use in the building) and to be environmentally friendly and certifiable as a LEED facility (Leader in Energy Efficiency and Design). Bob Deacon attended many planning meetings in Edmonton on behalf of the LSLBO to ensure the design remained environmentally responsible and met the intended research, office and public education needs.

A sod-turning on the BCBC site was held on a beautiful fall day, October 7, 2004. Pearl Calahasen, MLA and Community Development Minister Gene Zwozdesky assisted Bob Deacon, LSLBO Chair, with speeches and the shovel as fifty guests witnessed the symbolic beginning of the BCBC.

The official opening of the BCBC on June 4, 2006 was attended by over one hundred people including three Alberta cabinet ministers, the Honourable Denis Ducharme, the Honourable Dave Coumts, and the Honourable Pearl Calahasen and Native Elder Mike Beaver of the Bigstone Cree Nation. John Doll of Parks and Protected Areas chaired the opening ceremonies which included wonderful speeches by all three ministers and

Bob Deacon, Chair of the LSLBO, and a moving blessing of the site ceremony by Mike Beaver. Bob Deacon focused his remarks on the unique design features of the Centre, but he also reminded the crowd that

“This building is a testament to the ingenuity of man but the overall credit goes to four Alberta women. For June Markwart, Director of Visitor Services, Alberta Community Development, and Ronda Groom, Director of Fund-raising for the LSLBO, this is a long-standing dream completed. For Mrs. Colleen Klein, this is the project she and her Centennial Legacy Committee funded for the use of Alberta citizens and the world. And the Honourable Pearl Calahasen, who, at that crucial moment when the project had stalled, came to our aid and made it all happen. On behalf of the LSLBO I would like to thank Frank Fraser, PPA partner in this capital project who contributed his all, even in the face of great personal adversity, and Richard Isaac, who read minds and produced this awesome building.”

Informative tours of the building and its features were also provided to dignitaries and other guests. A ribbon was cut, a plaque unveiled, and coffee and cake was enjoyed by all.

The BCBC is the only educational and research facility in the world strategically located to study boreal birds on their breeding grounds. The BCBC offers 6,000 square feet of indoor and outdoor exhibits, interpretive programming, a gift shop and office space. It also provides research space and computer workstations for staff, volunteers, and visiting researchers and educators. In addition, an accommodation facility, “The Nest” has been built on the BCBC site offering hostel style living with six bedrooms and shared kitchen, washrooms, and great room. It is available to rent by researchers and others interested in a boreal forest experience. Both facilities depend on the partnership of the LSLBO with Alberta Parks and Protected Areas, as LSLBO is responsible for programming, bookings and hosting, and research activities in both buildings, while Parks and Protected Areas maintains and improves the facilities and surrounding trails and grounds. PPA interpretive staff also work at the BCBC and surrounding area in the Park providing educational programs.

The BCBC has changed the profile of the LSLBO and the reach of its educational activities exponentially. Visits to the Centre increased by 56% in its second year of

operation, creating a total of over 12,000 visitors in the first two years of operation. Its potential as a research centre and educational hub in the boreal forest, under the inspired and capable leadership of the BCBC staff and the LSLBO Board is very promising.

Appendix 1

LSLBO Chairpersons

Marion Whitby 1997

Steve Lane 1998

Bob Deacon 1999 -

LSLBO Banders in Charge

Stefan Jungkind, Steve Lane 1993 pilot

Jason Duxbury 1994

Lisa Zuberbier 1995

Laura-Jean Blonski 1996

Dennis Verbeek 1997, 1998

Stefan Jungkind 1998-1999

Rainer Ebel 1999

Jul Wojnowski 2000 - 2003

Tyler Flockhart 2004

Richard Krikun 2005 -

IBA Educators

Honey Pell 2000-2001

Gordon Eade 2002

Bryn Jonzon 2003

Chris Winarski 2004

Boreal Educator

Patti Campsall 2005-2006

Cori Klassen 2007 -

LSLBO Executive Director

Amy Wotton 2004 - 2006

BCBC/LSLBO Executive Directors

Amy Wotton 2006

Patti Campsall 2007 -