



President's Report

Groundhog day is upon us—but no matter what the famous marmot sees—the Arrowsmith Naturalists will be at their usual activities whether winter is long or short!

The planned Christmas Bird Count Day was cancelled due to potentially dangerous snow and cold—no problem! We just re-scheduled and once again gathered important information about bird species and populations out in the field and at home. As great winter outings are enjoyed, meetings occur, stewardship at the ER Estuary goes on, new members are welcomed, planning for the year continues—and so much more.

The Arrowsmith Naturalists really is an amazing group of people. We are truly doing all we can to “enjoy nature” and, as importantly, “to keep it worth knowing.” When others wring their hands about all the challenges we face, we’re out there doing all we can. For the present—and for the future.

Did you realize that this year marks fifty-two years since the founding of the “PQB Naturalists” that would eventually become the Arrowsmith Naturalists? What the Naturalists accomplished in the past reaches forward to today. And what we accomplish today, will also reach forward. What we each do--whether supporting our organization through roles that underpin the club's endeavours; volunteering in stewardship, citizen science, and public education efforts; advocating for the protection of local nature; mentoring children; engaging with government at different levels about issues that affect nature—and ourselves; and supporting each other in many ways when times are tough—will make a difference.

I appreciate all that Sally has done for our club and for our community over the past four years as our president. She certainly raised our club's profile. Little did she know though that she would be leading us through a pandemic! Suddenly, “business as usual” was out and adaptation was in—and adapt we did. From in-person meetings to Zoom and now back again. From having to cancel the Mushroom Festival due to gathering restrictions to planning the MFest's return in 2022—a fall with few mushrooms! No problem—we expanded the festival into the wildly popular Mushroom and Nature Festival! Through it all, our members voted with renewed memberships and the club is stronger than ever. Thank you, Sally. You earned that gavel!

Most likely, 2023 will bring other challenges. As we deal with climate uncertainties and threats to nature, it is good to know that we are a part of BC Nature and the larger PQB and MABR/MABRRI stewardship community. We really are “stronger together.”

Lynne Brookes

Qualicum Beach 19th Seedy Saturday
 February 4th 2023 – 10:00 am to 3:30 pm
 Qualicum Beach Civic Centre
 747 Jones Street, Qualicum Beach

Club/Membership Information

Check our [website](#) or [Facebook page](#) or request information by writing to:

Arrowsmith Naturalists, Box 1542,
Parksville, BC V9P 2H4

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Officers and Contacts

President: Lynne Brookes

Past Pres: Sally Soanes

Vice Pres: Derrick Grimmer

Stewardship: Dave Hutchings

Speakers: Committee

Promotion: Maggie Little

Exec.Secretary: Mark Mazurski

Mtg.Secretary: Elizabeth Salomon-de-Friedberg

Membership: Bonnie Mullin

Treasurer: Helen Davidson

BC Nature: Antonia Wyckoff

Outreach: Sue Wilson

Conservation/Enviro. Gary & Ronda Murdock

Directors: Claire Summers, Maggie Green

Archivist(s): Dianne & Jim Goodwin

Email & Zoom: Duncan Campbell

Website: Kerry Baker

Facebook: Tom Constable

Newsletter: Sylvia Riessner

ANats Outreach Person

At Arrowsmith Naturalists Club we care about nature, and we care about our fellow members.

If you know of someone who needs a few words of comfort or encouragement, please contact the new Outreach Person (formerly known as Sunshine Lady).

Sue Wilson 250-248-7280
susiebird@gmail.com

Sue Wilson took over this position from Pam Helem, who sent out many thoughtful messages over the years. She used David Helem’s beautiful photos to create lovely cards.

Now Sue is requesting that club members who have appropriate, high definition photos submit them for use on future cards. Ideally the images would feature local, natural scenes or subjects. Please send a variety of your .jpg files to Sue and she will credit you on the cards.

Upcoming Events

Qualicum Beach 19th Seedy Saturday

Saturday, 10am to 3:30pm – February 4

* Join us for this “all things garden” event. Seed exchange, plant sale, speakers, exhibits, food, and so much more. Look for ANats and other stewardship group’s information exhibits.

Englishman River Estuary – Broom Removal (ongoing)

starts → Thursday, 9:30am - February 9

* We try to gather on the 1st and 3rd Thursdays of each month.
Contact Dave Hutchings arrowsmithnats@gmail.com

Arrowsmith Naturalist’s Brant Count

Tuesdays, February 28 to April 25

*If you’re interested in volunteering, contact
Contact James Goodwin 250 248-0049 good_one@telusplanet.net

Brant Wildlife Festival

March 31 to April 9

*Enjoy bonus activities April 14, 15, 16

Hamilton Marsh tour

Saturday, 11am to 3pm - April 15

* Volunteers needed to help with set up and clean up, guiding visitors, and more. Contact Lynne or [Ceri Peacey](#)

NEWS FROM THE OUTINGS COMMITTEE

by Toni Wyckoff

We started out the new year on January 11 with an easy walk around Craig Bay. I think the promise of sun, and the fact that everyone has been stuck in the house with snow and rain, brought 30 members and guests out to enjoy this lovely bay.

Little Qualicum Falls on **January 21** was a little more challenging, but 16 tough members braved the rain and thoroughly enjoyed the walk.

I'm sure the spawning channels of the Little Qualicum Fish Hatchery will be just as popular on **February 1st**, with easy walking trail—unless the monsoons start again.

Unfortunately the walk at the base of Little Mountain was cancelled in November due to weather. The walk has been rescheduled for **February 11**. You'll be inspired by the gigantic conglomerate rocks of Boulder City (as it has been named) that once made up a much higher Little Mountain.

The April 15th outing to Beachcomber Park will be rescheduled as it clashes with the Hamilton Marsh tour that we do every year.

Keep an eye on our great new website for updates and changes to our schedule. We look forward to seeing you on the trails in the upcoming months.

Please be aware that the estimated time of a walk will vary with the number of people who attend. We suggest you always bring a snack, in case it runs into lunch or afternoon tea.

January 11th Outing: **Craig Bay**

STEWARDSHIP REPORT

by Dave Hutchings

AT THE ENGLISHMAN RIVER ESTUARY...

As the days gradually lengthen and temperatures moderate, another year of stewardship and partnership with The Nature Trust of BC begins. As most of you know, the bulk of our work concerns the control or eradication of invasive plant species on the Englishman River Estuary (ERE).

Despite the removal of almost all of the mature Scotch broom at the Estuary, there is still plenty of work to do. New broom seedlings need to be hunted down and pulled or cut. The other invasive species, such as English holly, spurge laurel (*Daphne*), and ivy, will require more of our attention and resourcefulness.

In December, the call went out to join with the Nature Trust crew in restoring two sites along the west bank of the Englishman River. During the summer, the crew had done extensive work to strengthen the river's bank and to provide better habitat for salmonid fry. This required them to cut some trees and remove native shrubs. Over 20 volunteers, from ANats, MVIHES and the community (one was a young Ukrainian refugee who came along with an ANats member) answered the call and planted over 800 trees and shrubs. The NT crew had allotted up to two days to complete the planting; the job was completed by **noon on the first day**. Just shows what can be accomplished with willing volunteers—aided by coffee and muffins.

(continued next page)

Stewardship Report (*continued*)**ANOTHER STAGE IN ERE RESTORATION...**

For the Nature Trust, the focus is not only on the conservation and restoration of this ecologically vital site, but to strengthen the Estuary's resilience in the face of climate change and the anticipated sea level rise. The newest step in this project has been the Mariner Way Spit Restoration. The former site of the Englishman River Art Gallery, the spit was purchased by the Nature Trust using funds donated by the Wilson Family Trust. The goal of the restoration efforts is to return the spit to its natural state and dynamic function as an evolving estuarine feature. When called upon, the ANats hope to be involved in restoring native vegetation to the site.

If you wish a tour of the property and a progress update on the project, Nature Trust staff will provide tours and information sessions on February 5th and 11th from 3:00–4:00 pm. Drive to the west end of Mariner Way and meet at the main gate.

ANOTHER IMPORTANT STEWARDSHIP PROJECT...

Sue Wilson continues the battle with *pervasive periwinkle* in Shelly Creek Park, an effort that will likely continue throughout the spring and summer. Kudos to Sue for seeing the need, taking this on as a project, and enlisting a willing group of volunteers from ANats and from the neighbourhood. If you wish to join Sue in this project, please contact her at friendsofshellycreekpark@gmail.com.

FOR BIRDERS...

Of interest to ANats birders is the ongoing Waterfowl and Songbird survey carried out by the Nature Trust's Curtis Rispin. The survey helps to provide an indication of the health of bird life on the ERE. Curtis notifies us of each survey day and invites ANats members to walk the ERE with him. The surveys usually occur on a Thursday and start at the Shelly Road entrance at 9:00 a.m.

AN INVITATION...

Stewardship is rewarding work. In working to maintain, restore and protect Nature's gems, such as the Englishman River Estuary and Shelly Creek Park, we are protecting Nature's biodiversity of flora and fauna in which naturalists delight and upon which future generations will depend. Help us restore the Englishman River Estuary to the state which Nature intended.

On the 1st and 3rd Thursdays of most months of the year, we gather—weather permitting—at the ERE. Club-owned loppers (and our new battery chainsaw) are sharp, oiled and ready to go.

JOIN US for our first work session of 2023 on **February 9th at 9:30 a.m.** More details to be announced.

Tree Identification and Abundance Survey

Lynne Brookes

The Arrowsmith Naturalists recently received a grant in the amount of \$4,900, through the BC Parks Foundation [25 x 25 initiative](#). The BC Parks Foundation is an independent, charitable foundation that serves as the official partner to BC's system of parks and protected areas.

As the Arrowsmith Naturalists is not a registered charity, the grant was made to the Federation of British Columbia Naturalists and funds have been transferred to the Arrowsmith Naturalists to accomplish this effort.

This grant will allow us to conduct a tree identification and abundance survey within the new French Creek Estuary Nature Preserve. This will provide valuable baseline information about the forest presently onsite. The study results will serve as a reference far into the future to enable measurements of changes over time within this newly protected area.



Courtesy of Randy Findlay Photography

Tree Identification and Abundancy Survey *(continued)*

The Arrowsmith Naturalists is working on this project in close collaboration with Vancouver Island University’s Mount Arrowsmith Biosphere Region Research Institute (MABRRI). And it’s great working with them!

This project runs from January through the end of March 2023. Work is progressing well, with teams in the field on January 20 and January 31st. Each team included 2-3 MABRRI staff, 1-2 VIU students and some of the fourteen Arrowsmith Naturalists who indicated their interest in participating.

Four study plots have been determined and work is nearly complete on plot #1. The next effort will take place on Monday, Feb. 6, with approximately thirty participants, including a class of 22 VIU Natural Resources graduate students who will begin work in the next two study plots.

We’re making good progress, learning some things, and having a good time doing it! And, YES! If you might be interested in participating, just let me know at rppsolar@yahoo.com or at or at 250-586-4595.

NatureKids BC Oceanside

by Sheri Plummer

Our January event, Crazy Critters, included guests from a birthday party and lots of members. The CJ Critter Company that belongs to NKO, were excellent presenters.

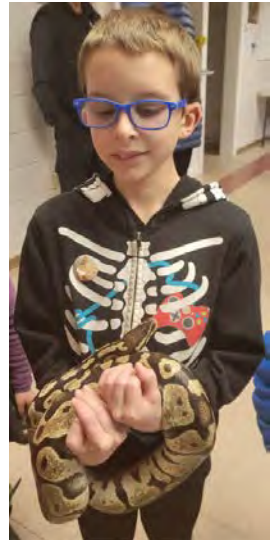
The NatureKids’ families were treated to exotic reptiles and spiders and snakes, which this amazing family has rescued over the years. Many of the children held a snake for the first time and learned about their habits and habitats.

The parents were as engaged as the children. They even took photos of each other with the boa constrictor, ball python snake and lizards.

Our next two events will be:

- **February 20** Family Day - We are planning a short hike along with a visit to the Qualicum Beach Museum for their special family program.
- **March 5** - We will take a trip to the Vancouver Island University marine facility.

Please contact us ahead of time, if you have a young family member who is interested in joining us.



Images courtesy of CJ Critter Company & S. Plummer



The 32nd Annual Christmas Bird Count Report

Jim Goodwin



View of Mt Arrowsmith Jan 2, 2023 – Susan Knoerr

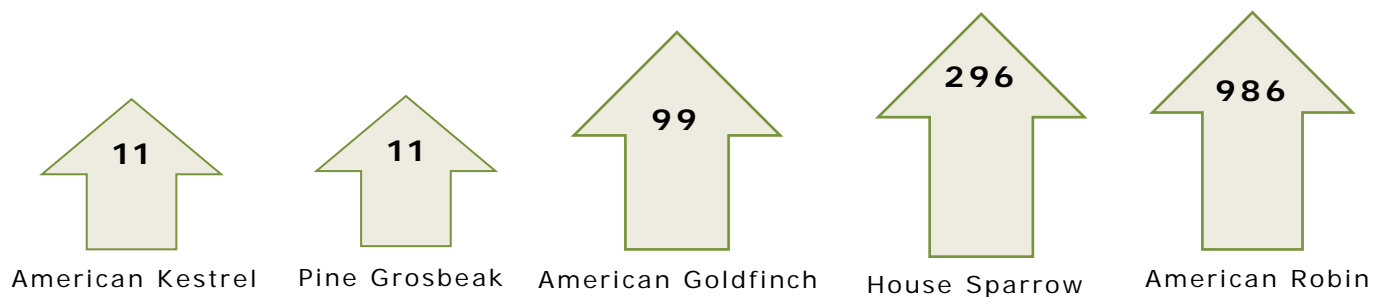
The 32nd annual Parksville-Qualicum Beach Christmas Bird Count started off with a twist. On the morning of Sunday Dec. 18, 2022 (the planned date for the count), worried count compilers awoke to heavy snow and wind. Messages were coming in from Nanaimo that volunteers were worried about our notorious highway. The count was postponed. Fortunately, January 2, 2023 was a holiday, allowing 60 observers in the field and 40 feeder watchers to try again.

The weather was nearly ideal, with temperatures from 3–7 degrees Celsius, overcast skies, and little precipitation. Unfortunately, the heavy snow and freezing temperatures of the preceding two weeks had an effect on bird numbers. Total species observed on count day was 114—less than the record high of 123 species.

The 2022 total bird count of 18,587, considerably lower than our 2020 high count of 37,893, reflected the situation in the field.

There were **five high species** counts:

American Kestrel 11, American Robin 986, House Sparrow 296, Pine Grosbeak 11, and American Goldfinch 99.



There were **six unusual species** on the count: Ruffed Grouse 1, Eared Grebe 1, Glaucous Gull 1, Red-throated Loon 2, Townsend's Solitaire 1, and White-throated Sparrow 1. It is interesting to note the only record low was **132 Bald Eagles**, presumably many having left to follow their food sources.

The number of feeder count participants was down this year. Some feedback received was that several regular participants had taken down their feeders due to avian influenza risks, particularly in rural areas where poultry and waterfowl are kept. The 40 feeder observers put in 79.7 hours of effort and counted 1,970 birds of 48 species.

Support for the feeder count was provided by:

[Buckerfield's](#) * [Mulberry Bush Bookstore](#) * [Cultivate Garden & Gift](#) * [North Island Wildlife Recovery Centre](#)

The return of our traditional Post-Count Potluck was an extra special addition to the day. Thank-you to Toni Wyckoff and her crew hosting this event. There is nothing better than lots of food and friends at the end of a cold day outdoors.

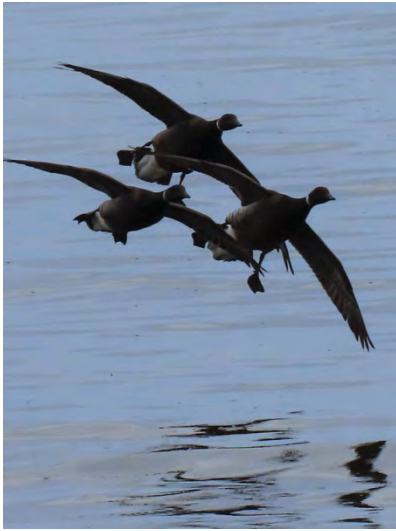
Our count results contribute to the 123rd National Audubon Society Christmas Bird Count, North America's longest-running citizen science project. Each year upwards of 2,000 circle counts are held in the Western Hemisphere by volunteer groups, with British Columbia conducting more than 90 counts. <https://www.audubon.org/conservation/science/christmas-bird-count>

A summary of the Christmas Bird Counts held in British Columbia can be found on the Birds Canada website: www.birdscanada.org/bird-science/Christmas-bird-count

The success of our 32nd annual Christmas Bird Count is the result of hard work of Lynne Brookes, coordinating the Feeder Count, and the organizing and compiling done by Susan Knoerr. These ladies must be acknowledged for their time spent rescheduling the volunteers during Christmas week. Thank-you to the Arrowsmith Naturalists members and the birding enthusiasts of our community that gave their time and experience to support our project. We also greatly appreciate the support of the private landowners allowing access to large tracts of farm and forest for this day.

The Arrowsmith Naturalists Brant Count

Jim Goodwin



The spring Brant Count has been an integral part of the Brant Wildlife Festival since it began in 1990. The Canadian Wildlife Service (CWS) conducted the earlier counts, increasing the knowledge of migrating Brant by observing tagged birds. During this time, members of the Arrowsmith Naturalists were involved in the surveys.

In 2015, the Arrowsmith Naturalists (ANATS) were asked to continue the surveys for The Nature Trust BC, and our volunteers have conducted the annual surveys until the present.

Nationally, our surveys contribute data to Environment Canada's international Brant Management Programs. The data gathered in the Parksville-Qualicum Beach Wildlife Management Area (PQBWMA) is also used to help the Ministry of Forests, Lands, and Natural Resources (MFLR) and BC Park staff manage our natural resources to protect, restore and conserve bird populations and their habitats for the benefit of future generations.

Beginning the first week of March, ANATS volunteers begin a weekly survey of the shoreline, from Little Qualicum River to the beaches of Rath Trevor Provincial Park, and continue until the end of April when the last of the Brant are moving through. Each count is conducted at a time near low tide when the eelgrass is exposed, and on the same day, by two or three teams, each in their own area. This spring migration period also coincides with the annual Pacific herring spawn, the eggs of which provide a nutrient rich boost to help the Brant on their flight to Izembek, Alaska where they stage for six weeks until flying on to the shores of the Arctic Ocean to breed.

I would like to schedule **every Tuesday, beginning February 28**, and continuing until April 25, plus allow a Wednesday alternate day for extreme weather events. Each survey takes approximately two hours, at low tide, either in the morning or afternoon. I hope we have enough volunteers to be able share the weekly schedules. There is no commitment to participate each week.

Ideally, participants will have birding experience and preferably have a scope or telephoto lens. There is also an opportunity for anyone interested in learning more about migrating sea birds to participate.



Contact James Goodwin for more information: 250 248-0049 good_one@telusplanet.net

BALD EAGLE AND GREAT BLUE HERON NEST TREE IDENTIFICATION PROJECT

The Nest Tree Identification Project is funded by a BC Parks Foundation "[25 x 25 Initiative](#)" grant to the [Save Estuary Land Society](#).

Leading the project is Sandra Gray, a long term Vancouver Island Wildlife Tree Stewardship (WITS) area coordinator (and ANats member) with over 20 years experience studying nesting habits and locations of Bald eagles & Great Blue herons.

Forty-five wonderful volunteers, including several from ANats, are in the field with binoculars and scopes observing 65 nests from Nanoose to Deep Bay. Since January we've received 165 observation forms, that's a lot of data! Thankfully, skilled staff at the Mount Arrowsmith Biosphere Region Research Institute have offered to compile the data for submission to the BC Ministry of Water, Land & Resource Stewardship to update their database.

The project runs until March 31st at which time we hope to secure funding to continue into July to gather information about nest success and birds fledged. THANK YOU to everyone involved for contributing toward the protection and success of these magnificent birds.

Denise Foster, Save Estuary Land Society

Hamilton Marsh Tour April 15, 2023

The popular annual Hamilton Marsh Tour will take place on **Saturday, April 15, 2023** from 11am to 3pm. The tour is a great way to introduce people to the spectacular 36 hectare marsh within 360 hectares of forested wetlands that surround and protect it. It also provides an opportunity to raise awareness of this biologically rich landscape and the importance of protecting it for the nature that depends on it and the role it plays in the French Creek watershed and more. This property is privately owned by Mosaic Forest Management, who gives us permission to hold this tour.

What is the actual "tour?" Arrowsmith Naturalists partners with the Friends of French Creek/Hamilton Marsh Committee, and the Arrowsmith Independent School, to provide a wonderful nature experience for the many visitors who come out for this opportunity. Arrowsmith Nats volunteers lead walks through the forest and down to the large marsh at the end of the rustic trail. Several years ago, Rosemary Taylor developed a large set of portable signs with images and information about native plants seen along the way. These signs are placed along the trail as an aid for guides and for those visitors who prefer to walk the trail on their own.



Once the visitors are down at the dock area, they can see an excellent display of marsh critters—provided by the Arrowsmith Independent School—for all to see and learn about. These fascinating creatures are handled carefully and are safely returned to the marsh at the end of the tour. Visitors can also walk out onto the dock for a closer look at the marsh, and take in the view Mount Arrowsmith across the marsh.

After the "trail guides" drop off each small tour group they led down the trail, they return to the parking lot to meet the next small group of visitors to take down the trail.

We will need volunteers to help with set up and breakdown; to host at our ANats display tables at the trail entrance; and to guide visitors down to the dock area. We'll send out a request for volunteers soon and there will be a signup sheet for volunteers at the March general meeting.

It's a lot of fun and visitors really enjoy the walks down to the marsh!

Many people have been working for years to protect this property as a nature preserve. The more people learn about this exceptional place, the better the prospect of securing its future.

For more information see: <https://hamilton-marsh.com/> and/or contact Lynne or Ceri Peacey

The Bowser Ecological Reserve—Feb 27/05 to Feb 1/15

by Maggie Little

The [Bowser Ecological Reserve](#) (BER) is a 116 ha pocket of under-represented Coastal Western hemlock (CWH), Douglas-fir and Western white pine habitat, surrounded by Crown land, on the east side of Vancouver Island. The BER has the capacity to support the growth of very large specimens of Douglas-fir. Peatlands within the Reserve support a high diversity of dragonflies, including the [red-listed Zigzag Darner](#) (*Aeshna sitchensis*). The University of BC has used it as a research site.

Living close to BER, three friends (and naturalists) became very concerned about the escalating destruction and disregard for this land. So Will Lemmon, Vi Chungranes and myself approached BC Parks in 2005 and were "unexpectedly" signed up as Eco Wardens. We were each gifted with an Ecological Reserve Warden cap. In other words - be visible!

Parks staff have enormous areas to oversee. But we felt that, at least, we had placed the BER on their radar. We subsequently visited every 3–6 weeks and became more familiar with the "lay of the land" and the "hot spots."

One of the positive outcomes, of our involvement and the location, was that personnel from the adjoining territories of Port Alberni and Courtenay began visiting also. Officers from BC Forests, BC Conservation, and Ministry of Environment visited the BER. The Alberni Forestry helicopter pilot began to include the BER on his frequent scouting trips.

Bowser Eco Reserve (continued)

As we familiarized ourselves with the BER and the wildlife trails, we were granted the use of a GPS unit, and two digital cameras placed in appropriate locations. We had the pleasure of viewing the resident bears, deer, squirrels, racoons and a "once only" sighting of a marten. We assisted in a huckleberry crop survey and a red squirrel midden occupancy survey. Terry Taylor, accompanied by Duncan Campbell, inventoried a site for mosses, lichens, grasses, ferns, plants, shrubs and trees in 2014, recording over 200 species. This was recognized as an "extremely valuable contribution to the Reserve inventory" by staff.

As time passed, the supervision of the Reserve was assigned to the Black Creek, Campbell River Parks Office. They promptly erected new signage and two main entry points along the Forestry Road were decommissioned.

Human impacts on the BER (observed by us)

- household garbage (office equipment and computers dumped down the banks of Sandy Creek)
- illegal logging of 10–100+ year old Douglas-firs (cut into mill lengths and ready for collection)
- a large shake operation (shingles prepped and stacked)
- cut cedar saplings (used in Floristry)
- many culturally-modified young cedar trees
- poached animal remains (elk)
- a "Grow op" (RCMP involved)
- illegal removal of tree lengths (we reported the license number – subsequently placed on Regional Alert list)
- dumping of invasive species (ivy and lamium)
- night-time removal of a 108 year old maple
- mushroom and salal pickers

When our involvement ended in 2015, Eco Wardens Bill Image and friend continued overseeing the BER.

Viewing wildlife

by Dave Erickson

If you are a new member, interested in viewing wildlife, you can check out the excellent [Bird Trail brochure](#) compiled by local experts. Keep an eye open for announcements about the upcoming Brant Wildlife Festival as there will be many opportunities to view wildlife areas and learn more about migrating birds and local ecosystems.

As an enthusiastic birdwatcher and photographer, I thought I'd share some images and ideas from my frequent visits to French Creek (noted on the Bird Trail map). This location usually has parking and there you can watch wildlife without having to walk too far.

You will likely encounter sea lions, basking in the sunshine along the seawall or cormorants elegantly drying their wings nearby.



When loons and grebes appear inside the marina, they seem quite relaxed and accepting of my presence, making for good photo opportunities.

A while back, I noticed a huge school of Pier perch swimming under the dock where fishermen clean their salmon. There were thousands of them and they were soon discovered by a hungry loon and other wildlife.

On the other side of the creek, you will find a railing next to the water. You may encounter the local Belted kingfishers who like to perch there. At times I've managed to park nearby and sit quietly with my camera. They actually sat right next to me and chattered away

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Keep an eye on the ocean as there is always a chance you'll spot small pods of Orca or groups of Humpback whales.



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A HIDDEN ASPEN GROVE

by Iris Bitterlich

Tucked away in the far northwest corner of Ermineskin Park, just south of the railway tracks, you will find some very large aspen trees whose trunks rise in long, straight columns above you.

At first you might not even know the trees are there because the crowns of the trees are high above you. However, if you are observant, you may spot slim, woody sprouts bearing rounded and finely toothed aspen leaves on the trail beside you. Look for the distinctive flattened leafstalks.

Aspen or *Populus tremuloides* is a member of the willow plant family. Despite being the most widely distributed native tree of North America, on Vancouver Island it is only found sporadically, in isolated groves on the east coast from Victoria to Campbell River. Aspen can grow under a wide range of conditions, but it prefers well drained, moist, loamy soils.

Individual trees are either male or female. Both male and female trees flower and the female trees set seed before the leaves emerge in the spring. Seedlings rely on disturbances such as fire or avalanches to establish themselves.

Once a seedling grows into a tree it puts out lateral roots that send up erect stems or “suckers.” From above ground the new stems look like individual trees, but in fact the whole stand is one tree called a “clone.”

How old and large is the Ermineskin Park grove? Individual aspen trees only live for about 200 years. However, since one tree is part of a clone, then as one tree/stem dies the clone continues to live on through its other trees/stems. Therefore, because there is a wide range in sizes of aspen trees in the Ermineskin grove, that cover what I estimate to be an area of 4,000 to 8,000 m² (one to two acres), the clone(s) might be very old indeed.

Ancient and Gigantic

In the Rocky Mountains of Utah and Colorado, some aspen clones have formed enormous groves. In fact, one male clone is estimated to be 10,000 years old. The clone is dubbed “Pando” and is thought to be the largest living organism on earth. Pando is made up of 47,000 individual stems covering 43 ha and weighing 6 million kilograms. This size is three times more than its nearest tree rival, a giant sequoia nicknamed “General Sherman.”

What’s that rustling?

Because the leafstalks of aspen are flattened, the leaves flutter in the slightest breeze. Some scientists speculate this may improve air circulation around the leaves, allowing more carbon dioxide to be taken up by the plant. Whatever the reason, the resulting dancing leaves are why the tree is known as “quaking” or “trembling” aspen. Some First Nations also call aspen “noisy leaf” because of the rustling sounds made when the leaves move.

As for the Ermineskin grove, there is much I would still like to know. Is it just one clone? Is it male or female? How old is the clone(s)? Watching the leaves can help provide an answer. In the fall if the trees all change colour and drop their leaves at the same time and in the spring if the leaves all emerge at the same time, it would be a good indicator that the grove is one clone. And, of course, in the spring I’ll look to see if the flowers produced are male or female. How old the grove is will have to remain a mystery because I can think of no easy way to determine its age.



iNaturalist - bombusmixtus CC-BY-NC

Aspen Homes for Pileated Woodpeckers

Pileated woodpeckers need large cavities to raise their young. Breeding pairs annually excavate new nest cavities in large, old trees. In subsequent years they use the cavity for roosting. Or sometimes the cavity is taken over by other animals such as owls, golden eyes and martens.

The Ermineskin aspen trees fit the bill perfectly for what the pileated woodpecker is looking for in a home. Many of the trees are large and mature with the start of natural holes at spots where large branches have fallen off. Indeed, I have seen [a female pileated woodpecker](#) expanding such a natural hole where a branch once grew and later moving down the tree to enter and exit an already existing larger cavity.

So as you walk the Ermineskin Park trails this spring keep your ears out for the hammering of the woodpeckers and the rustling of the aspen leaves.

Whale Sightings

Did you know that last year, there were a record number of sightings of humpback whales in the Salish Sea? Humpbacks were seen (and reported) on 274 days. And the year before (2021), a record number of humpback whale calves had been photographed – 21 calves (nearly twice as many as were reported in 2020). The resurgence of this population is very exciting to whale enthusiasts.

ANats member Kerry Baker and I spotted eagles and birds gathering near Judges Row recently. When we got to the beach access area, we spotted what appeared to be a young humpback (based on size and visible dorsal fin). We watched it for some time as it swam back and forth, sometimes curving up out of the water and diving down or just breaking the surface and creating small waves. We weren't sure whether there were two whales as we saw one in two different areas between Judges Row and Lasqueti. Unfortunately too far away for a good picture.

However, shortly thereafter, Kerry emailed a couple of images she took of an adult humpback breaching—just off Rath Trevor Park. Very exciting!



I mentioned the sighting to **Teri Hitch**, an ANats member and long-time whale enthusiast and supporter of the [BC Cetacean Sightings Network](#). She suggested that we should have reported the sighting as it helps to support conservation efforts. There are signs at Milner Gardens and Deep Bay with contact (and ID) information, or you can download the [Whale Report app](#). She also shared a 2022 sighting she experienced while walking along the Qualicum Beach waterfront in 2022.

“There was a mother teaching her calf how to feed, off Lasqueti, a few months ago. A few years ago, I saw a calf feeding close to shore, at JR (Judges Row). The mother was out in the bay, keeping watch, but giving her calf some time to learn some independence, is my best guess.

We are so honoured to have these majestic beings return. They were on a list of concern, and are making a comeback—as long as the transient killer whales don't kill the humpback calves, as they often do.”

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- p5 NatureKids Oceanside, <https://naturekidsbc.ca/find-a-club/vancouver-island/naturekids-oceanside/>
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- p3 3 Craig Bay walk images, A. Wyckoff
- p4 field sampling, Randy Findlay Photography
- p5 kids & snake, CJ Critter & Company; adults & snake, S. Plummer
- p6 View of Mt Arrowsmith, S. Knoerr
- p7 geese, counters, J. Goodwin
- p8 volunteers, L. Brookes
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