

**BOW VALLEY NATURALISTS
NEWSLETTER, Fall 2009**

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PROGRAMS/EVENTS

**BVN meetings:
7:30 pm., Banff Seniors Centre.**

Wednesday, OCTOBER 28

Alberta Fungi with Dr. Suzanne Visser

Wednesday, NOVEMBER 25

Caribou in Banff: Past, Present, Future with Jesse Whittington.

Banff-Canmore Christmas Bird Count

Saturday, December 19

Potluck supper and compiling of results will follow at 6:00 p.m. in the Banff Seniors Centre

For details, contact Diane or Mike McIvor at 762-4160

BANFF NATIONAL PARK PLANNING FORUM

THURSDAY, OCTOBER 29

FRIDAY, OCTOBER 30

The Banff Centre

The agenda is not confirmed but apparently the key focus for the first day will be the Banff National Park Management Plan. Be sure to attend to learn more and to state your opinions.

PARK RADIO

Allan Buckingham

As Park Radio (101.1 FM) continues to move towards being more community oriented, there are a few programs I thought worth highlighting for you. The first is Alpine Authors. Featuring local authors and books about the cultural and natural history of the mountains, Alpine Authors covers everything from children's books, to guide books, to books of fiction. Discover a new book, or learn more about an old favourite. Alpine Authors runs Tuesdays @ 7pm, Fridays @ 1pm, and Sundays @ 9am.

The second show I thought I should highlight for you is On Tape. This show features local talks and presentations from the Bow Valley. If you can't make it to a BVN meeting, a presentation at the Whyte Museum, or a meeting of the Rocky Mountain Section of the Alpine Club, no worries, you'll likely find the talk On Tape, Mondays @ Noon, Tuesdays @ 8am and Saturdays @ 6pm.

With 12 shows now on the air, plus the recent addition of Rocky Mountain Outlook news, Park Radio is your best choice for local news and information. If you have any comments or suggestions, please call our feedback line @403-762-1536 or e-mail FeedBack@ParkRadio.ca. You can also find out about all our programs by visiting ParkRadio.ca

ISSUES

**Pave Paradise, Put up a Parking Lot
But All is Not Lost**

Peter Duck

The Town of Banff is rebuilding its recreation centre to provide an improved building and parking for residents and visitors. Unfortunately, the construction of the new parking lot destroyed most of the rarest landform in the mountain national parks.

The downtown portion of Banff is built on the shore of an ancient glacial lake that filled the Bow Valley at Banff several thousand years ago. Important evidence of this lake exists in the pattern of undulations in the lower town that represent a complex of sand dunes. However, in the vicinity of the recreation centre is a unique pattern of subtle and repeating linear mounds. These ridges apparently represent the low strands of sand that were formed by waves lapping on the beach of this glacial lake as it receded to successively lower levels. The parking lot construction destroyed much of this landform and certainly that portion which was visible to residents and visitors to Banff National Park.

Next, our unique, unbroken and calm river views that are unmatched in the Canadian Rockies will be interrupted forever as we build a second bridge in Banff. But paradise is not lost. It just needs a little extra interpretation as it disappears or becomes masked by human endeavour. Any story that can be interpreted in the wider mountain landscape can also be told using natural elements of our urban landscapes. Recently, I had the pleasure of working with Sue Webb to publish a short natural history walking brochure that points out some of the more obvious remaining

natural features in Banff. We hope you will take it for a test walk and let us know how it might be improved in future editions.

Wildlife Corridors in the Canmore Area

In July, BVN wrote a letter to Premier Ed Stelmach and Alberta Sustainable Resource Development Minister Ted Morton offering “our strong support for your efforts to complete the designation of viable wildlife corridors in the vicinity of Three Sisters Mountain Village in the Town of Canmore.” We pointed out our long standing interest and involvement in these issues dating back to our participation as funded interveners in the public hearings convened in Canmore by the Natural Resources Conservation Board in 1992 to consider the development application from Three Sisters.

We went on to note the importance of adhering to the conditions and undertakings associated with approval of the project; the extensive amount of credible science – much of it conducted under the auspices of the provincial government – that has gone into determining standards for wildlife corridors and how these should apply to this land; and the significant level of public support, both locally and from farther afield, for ensuring that ecological connectivity is maintained between Banff National Park and provincial lands in the Bow Valley, Wind Valley, and beyond, to the Spray and Kananaskis river valleys.

In mid-October we followed this with another letter re-iterating our earlier position. We urged the provincial government to move forward in a timely fashion with proper protection for these corridors – protection that will demonstrate commitment to accommodating the needs of wildlife and respecting the desires of citizens. With lawyers for the receiver for Three Sisters Mountain Village employing bullying tactics in an attempt to obstruct progress on this matter, it is important for all of us to continue to remind local and provincial politicians that they know what should be done here and they can count on our support to do it.

National Parks Management Plan Review

Parks Canada is on the verge of releasing draft management plans for each of the 7 mountain national parks. In fact, the draft plans should be available by the time you receive this newsletter. The public will have only 30 days to review them and provide comments.

Based on what we have been hearing and seeing we are very uneasy with where things may be heading. It seems all too clear that senior management in Parks Canada is hell-bent on pushing for increased levels of visitation and more fun and games that we fear will divert visitors from the essence of the parks. What makes this so ridiculous is that the only people clamouring for this kind of thing are members of the business and commercial recreation sectors. As always, the Canadian public continues to express admiration for the parks as they are and a desire for them to remain that way.

As we reported in our Winter 2009 newsletter in January, we are very concerned that despite repeated assurances from Parks Canada officials that this 10 year review will not involve substantial re-writing of the plans, such re-writing is in fact occurring. We are far from optimistic that the changes will be positive for park values.

BVN strongly encourages all our members to participate in this review process. If Parks Canada management really is headed in the wrong direction, Canadians need to point out loudly and clearly, the error of its ways. We’ll try to keep you informed about various avenues for participation but folks with computers could begin with the Parks Canada website.

<http://www.pc.gc.ca/pn-np/ab/banff/plan/plan5_e.asp>

Comments also can be sent directly to

Parks.Chats@pc.gc.ca.

Follow-up Petition

Mike McIvor

In our previous newsletter (Spring 2009) we wrote about our disappointment over the response from Environment Canada Minister Jim Prentice to the petition submitted by the Jasper Environmental Association, BVN, and UTSB Research concerning Parks Canada’s approval of site guidelines for the Marmot Basin Ski Area in Jasper National Park. After further discussion amongst the groups a decision was made to compile a follow-up petition illustrating the inadequacy of the Minister’s response.

The Commissioner of the Environment and Sustainable Development (in the Office of the Auditor General of Canada) has accepted our follow-up petition and after reviewing it, forwarded it to the Minister responsible for the Parks Canada Agency, Jim Prentice. He is required to send a response within 120 days with a due date of January 7, 2010. We’ll let you know what he has to say. In the meantime, given the way things have gone with the long range planning process for Marmot Basin, we can’t help but worry over what some Parks Canada officials – perhaps some of the same ones – may be cooking-up behind closed doors for the 3 ski areas in Banff National Park.

Of Wild Things...

GRAND SLAM OF WEASELS

Dwayne Lepitzki

One doesn’t often make the McIvors envious when it comes to natural history sightings. But it did happen over the summer of 2009.

Towards the end of June I was walking back from the Cave and Basin, cutting across the recreation grounds in Banff and nearing the intermittent stream crossing just west of the tennis courts. Out of the corner of my eye, I caught some movement at my feet - a little brown, furry streak. What was it?

It disappeared, popping in and out of the landscaping rocks overlying the culvert. I readied my camera, waiting for a re-appearance. A few quick shots were taken as it ran across a flat rock. It stopped, and looked up, curiously - another few shots.

Hitting the guide books at home, we concluded that it was a Least Weasel. They suggested this was the smallest member of the Order

Carnivora, not only in Alberta, but the WORLD! These animals may have to eat almost their entire body weight of meat in a day. A hummingbird with fur and fangs?

We chatted with the McIvors: Least Weasel, eh? Are you sure? We've never seen one. Could it be a Short-tailed Weasel?

Short-tailed Weasels do have a shorter tail (4-9 cm or 18-28% of its body length) than the other four-legged weasel found in Alberta – the Long-tailed Weasel (12-19 cm or 35-38%). But, the Least Weasel has an even shorter tail: 2.2-4.2 cm (15-19%).

Back to the pictures. Yup, a short tail, approximately 17% of its body length. Least Weasel. Let's send the evidence to McIvors.

But the weasel sightings didn't stop. We saw a Short-tailed Weasel at Boom Lake, later in the summer. Then we had to travel to Cypress Hills to complete the grand slam – the Long-tailed Weasel. Unfortunately, no pics of either of these but the Short-tailed Weasel of Boom Lake was seen by other Bow Valley Naturalists. And was the tail of the Long-tailed Weasel ever long.



Least Weasel, near the tennis courts at the Banff Recreation Grounds.
Photo: Dwayne Lepitzki.

Lanterns in the High Country

Mike McIvor

Last year, during a hike in the high country of the Kananaskis, Ed MacInnis came across a gorgeous little flower he had never seen before growing in the scree. He sent some great photos of it to Peter Duck asking for an identification. Peter correctly identified it but passed the images along to us requesting confirmation. We recognized the plant immediately although we hadn't seen any for a number of years, and thanked Ed for triggering some wonderful memories of the few special places we knew it from.



photo: Ed MacInnis

As we leafed through a variety of flower books for the mountains we were struck by the difficulty botanists seem to have encountered reaching agreement on what to call it. Even the scientific name, usually expected to be more stable than common names, has changed twice since Porsild's classic Rocky Mountain Wild Flowers – the first field guide for many of us – was published in 1974. Porsild called it "*Melandrium attenuatum*" but in R.G.H. Cormack's Wild Flowers of Alberta, published 3 years later, it was labeled "*Lychnis apetala*". More recent books refer to it as "*Silene uralensis*".

When we looked it up after our first sighting many years ago we latched onto the notion of lanterns because Porsild described the plant's calyx as "resembling a miniature Japanese lantern". Yet the common name he chose was Bladder-Campion. Cormack called it Nodding Pink or Alpine Champion. Other books contributed other common names including some ethnic rivalry for the type of lantern: Nodding Cockle, Alpine Lantern, Apetalous Champion, and Chinese Lantern.

The authors of Plants of the Rocky Mountains (Kershaw, MacKinnon, Pojar), in contrast to Porsild describe the plant's calyx as "resembling tiny Chinese lanterns". They go on to point out that these calyxes "*form translucent shells which act like miniature greenhouses*". Apparently temperatures inside them can be 0.7° C higher than outside on cloudy days and as much as 5.2° C higher on sunny days. The advantages for a small plant trying to survive in a very short growing season above timberline are obvious.

We had the good fortune to see some of these lanterns in the Bow Summit area this summer. As we stood, then knelt, to admire them we couldn't help thinking that beyond the confusion over what to call them, even beyond knowing their remarkable adaptation to where they live, what really matters is the presence of their

A Moose in my Front Yard

It was a Wed. morning, July 22, 2009. I sat out on our deck at 135 St. Julien Rd. having a morning coffee. A large female moose bolted across our front lawn - bolting me to my feet. She was a frightened beauty, heading up and down St Julien Rd, her large hooves clicking on the pavement as if she had tap shoes on. I gave Sally Plunkett a call, in hopes that she would get a glimpse of the moose that was headed towards her home (corner of Moose & Grizzly). She had a sighting of a moose in her yard August 1985. Later in the day I heard that the moose had been seen on Tunnel Mountain. then she worked her way down to the Bow River by the golf course. Thankfully.
Jill Beleyme

extraordinary beauty in a beautiful place. Keep looking for them up high in the summers ahead. We can assure you, and we know Ed will agree, finding them will make your day. It might even make your summer.

Great Green Grig

Brenda Lepitzki

As a short sequel to an article in last autumn's newsletter, we have to tell of a recent sighting of a Great Green Grig, although not in Banff but in Waterton Lakes National Park this September. And, that's just the name I gave the creature that plopped onto the steep trail just in front of our waffle stompers. I've yet to establish an accurate identification of the cricket-like insect but it was clearly a member of the grasshopper family. She (because of the long ovipositor at the abdomen's end) tumbled out of thick vegetation just above the trail, perhaps startled by the vibrations from our pounding feet. What a complete surprise to see this huge insect in the harsh subalpine on an avalanche slope. We fully expected to see a grizzly bear instead, as we travelled through prime habitat and saw hedysarum plants dug up and fresh scat in the middle of the trail. I wondered how this delectable plump morsel evaded that hungry grizzly. She wasted no time scrambling back into cover above the trail, giving us just enough time to snap a picture. That has become one of my favourite photos from this trip to Waterton, not just for the image but for reminding me of the magnificent biodiversity thrumming behind the well known scenes of our precious mountain ecosystems.



photo: Dwayne Lepitzki

Outside the Window

Shelley Mardiros

Outside our windows, a great drama is unfolding: migration season is in full swing, with millions of birds battling winds and weather, fatigue and error, to reach more hospitable winter climes. We get glimpses of the grand paseo as we notice one day an invasion of robins in our berry trees and the next week a mixed flock of yellow-rumped warblers, ruby-crowned kinglets, and perhaps a Wilson's or orange-crowned warbler as well gleaning the snowy leaves in our backyards.

In early September, I twice saw a raven lurking around my deck, before I realized he was there to snack on the juvenile cedar waxwings that were flying into my windows and breaking their

necks. I have heard the theory that waxwings get drunk on fermenting mountain ash berries, but I think it more likely that the young birds are just naive about the deceptive properties of reflective glass. Even after I stuck multiple post-it notes on the windows, I would hear the occasional sickening "thud" of a window-strike. It was good to know that the raven benefited.

There are mystery deaths, too, like the merlin my neighbour Jill Beleyne found dead, but unmarred, in the cemetery, nowhere near a window. And – especially after a surprise winter storm – there are sad cases of a migrant being in the wrong place at the wrong time, like the doomed loon described elsewhere in this newsletter.

But, as naturalists, we get to observe the ducks and grebes and thrushes and raptors and shorebirds and passerines as they flow through our valley on their southward rush. And, if we're lucky, as I was this week, we may happen upon a quiet scene like the one pictured below. In a little inlet on the Bow River, the visiting dowitcher and the resident muskrat, less than a metre apart, probed the mud and gnawed on sedge roots, respectively, in companionable silence.



photo: Michael Shuster

No Room for Take-off

Mike McIvor

If there is such a thing as "The Canadian bird" it probably is the Common Loon. We all know it; by sight and by sound. Here in the Bow Valley we look forward to the return of loons in the spring, we hope for a successful breeding season, and we wish them a safe journey to the coast in the fall.

Loons are water birds; some might say they are underwater birds. With legs well back on their heavy bodies and relatively short wings, they are built for swimming and diving. But these same features make them extremely awkward on land where they spend very little time and although they are strong, fast flyers, they have to work very hard to become airborne.

Most people will have seen loons at familiar locations in the Bow Valley such as Johnson Lake or 3rd Vermilion Lake and will have watched individuals dash madly across the surface of the water, in many cases, particularly in calm conditions, covering several hundred metres before taking flight. Apparently, in ideal circumstances, which probably means gale-force winds to assist with the lift, they can manage with only 20 metres of aquatic runway. But the requirement for a substantial amount of open

water makes them vulnerable to being trapped by ice in years when freeze-up occurs suddenly.

Years like this one. Three days after winter stormed into the Bow Valley on October 8th I walked to a wetland east of Castle Junction, a place Diane and I sometimes check in the spring for amphibians. Most of it was frozen but one pond had a tiny pool of open water, perhaps 4 metres in diameter. And in that pool was a Common Loon.



photo: Mike McIvor

There were signs of escape attempts on the snow and ice: skid marks beginning a few metres from the pool indicating hopelessly failed attempts at flight and tracks showing a clumsy waddle back to the pool with wings brushing against the snow behind.

I left quickly, not wanting to add to the loon's stress, knowing there was nothing I could do, not knowing if intervening would have been right even if it was feasible. My consolation, for the trip home along the Parkway, was that this bird's life would continue in the form of other organisms, whether coyotes on land or aquatic invertebrates at the bottom of the pond.

Shifting Sands of Time

Peter Duck

You can wait for the flower to bloom. You can wish for a song bird to return each spring. Then hope it stands still for a teasing glimpse. If you're lucky a wolf will honour you with its presence now and again. These are the usual treats for Bow Valley nature watchers. But why not try for something less elusive? There may be times you have to dust off a bit of snow but stones are willing recipients of your admiration all year round and many fascinating species are found within the boundaries of our towns where they have paused in their geological migrations.

Let's get you started with an easy target. Next time you are out see if you can track down a piece of Gog Quartzite. This delightful stone sports a coat that varies from white to pink and even purple; its face is often marked by lines that intersect each other at a variety of angles. Watch for this stone along river beds, on stony hillsides, and sometimes in a stone garden or on building walls. Less common in a townsite than the ubiquitous Rundle Stone it can often be found in that habitat in its rounded "river rock" form. In very rare situations such as St. Mary's Church in Banff it is seen as

angular blocks. This is special because Gog is rarely cut into blocks; it is the hardest rock found in the Canadian Rockies – essentially pure quartz.



Photos: Peter Duck

Since your target is unlikely to run away take a close look. Turn your binoculars, an essential tool for close-up rock watching, upside down for a magnified (or is that magnificent?) look at the sands of time. You will find yourself looking at round grains of quartz sand bound together by a tough cement that is also made of quartz.

The sand grains originally formed as angular crystals in igneous rock that cooled to make up the great Canadian Shield possibly 2 to 3 billion years ago. They became rounded about 550 million year ago as Ma nature eroded the Shield and washed the grit across a continent to the sea in ancient rivers. Buried in this wet subterranean crypt the sand was marinated with fluid hot enough to carry dissolved silica into every pore which became the glue that now binds the sand.

About 140 million years ago the layers of now hardened sand were again exposed to erosion as the Canadian Rockies emerged from the sea. The quartzite we find around us is once again migrating back to the sea most recently accelerated by glaciers which have served to grind your ancient lump into a nice rounded stone.

So, like birds, rocks migrate in their own way and in their own time. There is nothing like a good pink piece of local Gog to tell that story.

Many of you will remember the year of the mushrooms, 2004. The woods came alive with fungi of all shapes, colours, and sizes. Everybody talked about the spectacular display. It hasn't been repeated since but every year, whether it is a dry summer like this one or a cold early fall, mushrooms will appear. This year was not a big year for them but we did see some amazing sights including one species we had not seen since the 1970s called a Violet Webcap (*Cortinarius violaceus*) a striking, deep purple, gilled mushroom.



photo: Diane McIvor

Although we had seen the Comb hedgehog (*Hericium ramosum*) before we came across this fresh, very large specimen in mid-August on a big, fallen poplar tree at Vermilion Lakes.



photo: Mike McIvor

Diane McIvor

BOOK REVIEW

WILD TREES / Richard Preston, 2007

Trees intrigue me. More and more and more.

A few years ago I wrote a short piece about a local lodgepole pine deprived of its upright status in the forest, roots bared to the elements. It took more than a year to die. Lodgepole pine is a *succession* species; they grow in abundance, up to 10 000 per hectare, soon after a forest fire. Their role is to protect the land from erosion and offer cover while other longer-living species recolonize a burned area. Lodgepoles are 'species-tall' at 35 metres and old at 150 years. Old lodgepole pine become susceptible to disease and fire and seldom pass their 200th year. In similar habitat, cedars, other pines — whitebarks and limber — and aspen clones may survive for well past 1000 years.

Now, *imagine* a living tree, a California redwood, growing from a seed while Egyptians toiled to build the Great Pyramids and

neolithic farmers experimented with barley cultivation on the Orkney Islands. Imagine a tree that stood tall while Chinese dynasties rose and fell, the Greeks fought the Peloponnesian Wars, was even taller during the European Renaissance, and still grew all through the Industrial Revolution. Imagine a tree that continued to develop while the North American bison were slaughtered and humans invented disposable plastic bottles — and stands, yet, within a few miles of the Pacific Ocean on the coast of North America.

At 800 years a California redwood has reached its maximum height, but has not finished growing. Eventually, the primary leader dies and falls a few hundred feet to the ground, signaling the beginning of more development. New trunks begin to grow from the tree, parallel to the main trunk, and as they grow, they form a grove of trees, iterations of the original, growing branches, growing larger, fusing, creating a complicated forest, two or three hundred feet above the forest floor. The Redwood reiterates itself over and over and over, up in the sunlight.

One known giant has created two hundred of its own trees in its crown. A forest of mature redwoods supports an aerial forest of linked trees that is the structural habitat for complex ecosystems. Some plants and animals found in the aerial gardens are familiar to ground-dwellers. And unidentified species of flora and fauna are being discovered and classified every research season.

Now, consider that this tree, 3500 years or older (impossible to age accurately because the core of this tree is hollow and because it is hard to know exactly when a redwood dies), is so tall that humans had likely never climbed to the top of its kind until the 1980s. Since the 1980s, it has been discovered that these trees seldom die standing. They sometimes die when fierce coastal storms knock them to the ground. But the vertical branches of fallen trees are likely to grow into new trees and those that are logged grow new trees in a ring from the perimeter of their giant stump, all genetically identical to the tree source from which they grow.

Wild Trees by Richard Preston (2007) is all about the giant trees, mostly California redwoods. It is not a scientific study and it is not a book of natural history. *Wild Trees* threads together the adventures of a few incurably curious people and a few wild, wild trees. It opens with a brash climb by two young men to the top of a 300+ foot California redwood giant — a species that has no branches for the lower third of its height. Their visit to the canopy opened an exotic new field of research, necessitated new strategies for climbing, especially for climbing trees without inflicting damage.

Wild Trees is a mystery story; it combines a whole bunch of love stories, death-defying explorations and scientific discoveries. It is current and complicated.

It left me wondering why we show trees so little respect — trees use nothing they do not need and recycle everything they use into some useful form, some form that benefits other species. It left me wondering why we strip forests and have so little resistance to 'cut down the trees, put up a parking lot'.

Wild Trees, without any explicit dialogue, justifies the reverence that ancient peoples held for trees of many different species. And all those trees in my garden please me even more after reading Richard Preston's book.

Colleen Campbell