

**BOW VALLEY NATURALISTS  
NEWSLETTER, WINTER 2012  
BOX 1693, BANFF, AB  
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**PROGRAMS/EVENTS**

**REMINDER!**

**Memberships are now due for 2012.**

**OUR FINANCIAL YEAR IS THE CALENDAR YEAR.**

We want to keep the membership at the low cost of **\$5.00**. If you have extra change to add to the pot when attending a meeting it would help us cover the costs of renting the hall for meetings and mailing the newsletters. We want to remind you that you will receive a charitable donation receipt for donations of \$5.00 or more.

**Wed., January 25 7:30 pm.**

**The Beetle Economy: A Modern Tale of Collapse and Renewal** with Andrew Nikiforuk.

Location: Banff Seniors Centre.

**Wed., February 22 7:30 pm.**

**The Wolverine Way** with Douglas Chadwick.

Location: Canmore Collegiate High School Auditorium.

**NOTE.**

February 22nd is the evening of our **Annual General Meeting and elections.**

Anyone interested in participating on the Board of Directors should contact Peter Duck (762-4335 - evenings) or Heather Dempsey (762-3056 - evenings), or any member of the Board before mid-February.

**Wed., March 28 7:30 pm.**

**African Journey** with Patrick Gibeau.

Location: Banff Seniors Centre.

**Wed., April 25 7:30 pm.**

**Winter weather determines summer alpine butterfly abundance** with Dr. Jens Roland.

Location: Banff Seniors Centre.

**2011 Banff-Canmore Christmas Bird Count**

*Mike McIvor*

Western Grebe	<b>CW</b>	Black-capped Chickadee	102
Green-winged Teal	8	Mountain Chickadee	237
Mallard	380	Boreal Chickadee	86
Northern Pintail	1	<i>chickadee sp.</i>	89
Redhead	1	Red-breasted Nuthatch	97
Common Goldeneye	6	White-breasted Nuthatch	<b>CW</b>
Bufflehead	2	Brown Creeper	5
Bald Eagle <i>adult</i>	3	Winter/Pacific Wren	<b>CW</b>
<i>accipiter sp.</i>	1	American Dipper	12
Merlin	1	Townsend's Solitaire	16
Ruffed Grouse	6	Bohemian Waxwing	211
Virginia Rail	<b>CW</b>	Northern Shrike	1
Killdeer	3	European Starling	<b>CW</b>
Wilson's Snipe	2	Spotted Towhee	1
Rock Pigeon	238	Song Sparrow	1
Belted Kingfisher	1	<i>sparrow sp.</i>	4
Downy Woodpecker	4	Dark-eyed Junco	28
Hairy Woodpecker	1	Rusty Blackbird	5
A. 3-toed Woodpecker	<b>CW</b>	Pine Grosbeak	83
Northern Flicker	1	Red Crossbill	76
<i>woodpecker sp.</i>	1	White-winged Crossbill	66
Gray Jay	31	<i>crossbill sp.</i>	6
Blue Jay	14	Common Redpoll	111
Clark's Nutcracker	34	Hoary Redpoll	3
Black-billed Magpie	146	<i>redpoll sp.</i>	6
American Crow	11	Pine Siskin	243
Common Raven	302	House Sparrow	295

**CW: reported count week**

**TOTAL SPECIES: 43**

**TOTAL INDIVIDUALS: 2982**

We had another great turnout this year, our 37<sup>th</sup> CBC, with 64 participants matching last year's high number. The weather was much different from count day in 2010 but while the warmer temperatures – 0° first thing in the morning compared to -24° last year – were most welcome, the winds were strong, gusty, and persistent throughout the day creating difficult conditions for observing birds, especially for hearing them.



Merlin

photo: Amar Athwal

## ISSUES

Results were interesting as always. After 3 consecutive years with below average numbers for species and individuals we struggled upward a bit with our species count, recording 2 more than last year, for a total of 43, very close to the long-term average of 43.5. But we found 2982 individual birds, over 1200 more than last year and almost 400 above the average. No doubt a good cone crop in some places was a contributing factor.

There was a variety of highlights and in some cases, lowlights. After 36 years, anytime a new species is reported it is exciting news. And this year we had 2: a Redhead in the Canmore area and a Spotted Towhee in Banff. The Redhead was first seen by Lawrence and Joey Hill on Canmore Creek where it remained for days. This allowed time for Jason Rogers to pin down the identification the next day and for Cliff Hansen to photograph it several days later. Jason was also the birder who found the Spotted Towhee in a residential area in Banff on the count.



Redhead

photo: Cliff Hansen

Common Goldeneye, that has been present in quite large numbers in the past, especially on the river, was very hard to find this year. Our total was 6, the second lowest ever, after 3 only in 1979. And for the first time since 2001, no one saw a Common Merganser. On the other hand, a Northern Pintail at the Cave & Basin was our first since 2000; 2 Bufflehead at Lake Minnewanka were the first since 2003; and a Merlin in the Vermilion Lakes area was our first in 7 years.

For the third year in a row we couldn't find any owls. But perhaps the biggest surprise, and disappointment, was that for the very first time not a single American Three-toed Woodpecker was reported. (We did hear of one that was seen the day after the count, but they certainly seem scarce this winter.)

Our total of 237 Mountain Chickadee was the highest since 1997. Also, 97 Red-breasted Nuthatch was a major increase over 19 reported in the 2 previous years. And more winter finches put in an appearance this year with 76 Red Crossbill, our first since 2007 and 111 Common Redpoll after a year we did not have any.

We'll continue to cling to the probably vain hope that ideal conditions will prevail for next year's CBC but know full well that no matter what the weather, we'll be out there again, counting birds and enjoying winter in the mountains.

## Brewster Glacier Discovery Walk

Mike McIvor

The Superintendent of Jasper National Park has declared that a determination on the environmental assessment and a final decision on this proposal will be made by the end of January. There has been a huge amount of opposition to this completely inappropriate project from Canadians near and far. The decision will be a real test as to how far Parks Canada is prepared to go in its current misguided attempt to peddle the parks for crowds and profits. Stay tuned! And be ready to let the decision makers know whether you approve or disapprove of the outcome. Let's hope they have been listening and we'll be able to congratulate them for a decision that reflects national park values.

## Actions Vs Words

Peter Duck

Before the holidays the Superintendent of Jasper National Park refused to grant a request by the public. At that time his "stakeholders" requested an extension of the 3 week period allocated for the public to review and submit comments on the environmental assessment report released in late November for the Glacier Discovery Walk proposal. Instead, the Superintendent explained that the public already had been given ample time to become informed by attending information sessions held by the project proponent over the previous several months.

The public has now submitted comments according to the Superintendent's deadline. The Superintendent has had time to see the reaction, read what the public thinks of the project proposal and has promised to make a determination on the environmental effects of the project by late January. But, before making that determination the Superintendent recently decided to provide the public with [more facts](#) and Parks Canada's interpretation of those facts.

The information released claims Parks Canada truly values public input in decision-making and wants to be sure Canadians are working with facts and not with inaccuracies. If this is the case why did Parks Canada defer to the project proponent to provide the public with facts prior to inviting comments? Why did the Park Superintendent deny a public request for more time to research accurate facts before submitting comments and then provide Park's version of facts when the public could not respond?

## Bow Valley Parkway Decision

Mike McIvor

The Bow Valley Naturalists were quick to inform the Field Unit Superintendents of Banff and Kootenay, Yoho, Lake Louise that we warmly welcomed the decision to provide a greater degree of protection for wildlife and greater certainty with respect to human use in an area of very important habitat that was announced at the end of November. This came following a long, drawn-out, difficult multi-stakeholder process. We don't have these opportunities as often as we would like so it was a real treat to provide Parks Canada with some positive feedback. The changes to the traffic regime – all human use between 5 Mile and Johnston Canyon restricted from 8 p.m. to 8 a.m., March 1 to June 25 – will take effect in 2013, along with upgrades to interpretive materials along the length of the Parkway. We will be watching closely and encouraging Parks Canada to stand firm on its decision.

## Southern Mountain Caribou Conservation Strategy

Mike McIvor

In November, Parks Canada officials, along with Environment Minister Peter Kent convened a news conference at the Calgary Zoo to announce the commencement of public consultation for a Conservation Strategy for Southern Mountain Caribou in Canada's National Parks. We'll place this process in the Better Late than Never-Hopefully, category.

The Banff caribou herd has been extirpated and 4 of the 5 existing herds – 1 in Mt. Revelstoke and Glacier, 3 of 4 in Jasper – have declined dramatically in recent years. In fact, each of the Columbia South herd (Mt. Revelstoke & Glacier) and the Brazeau and Maligne herds (Jasper) currently are estimated to have fewer than 10 animals in their populations.

With \$4.5 million over 6 years dedicated to this strategy for recovery Parks Canada should be strongly encouraged to move forward with actions that fulfill its stated commitments. We certainly are pleased to read that Parks Canada is prepared to take "**bold steps** in protecting caribou on national park lands". And people should be watching closely to ensure such steps are taken because in the past, efforts directed towards protecting caribou in the parks have been anything but bold. The deadline for public comments is January 31. The strategy can be viewed at the Parks Canada website.

[www.parkscanada.gc.ca/caribou](http://www.parkscanada.gc.ca/caribou)

## Of Wild Things

### And to think that we saw it on Buffalo Street...

Shelley Mardiros

In November, along with the usual influx of mountaineers, adventurers, film-makers and film-goers here for the annual Mountain Film Fest, a rare but very welcome visitor flew into town and hung out in the Banff Centre neighbourhood. The Great Grey Owl soon became a celebrity, complete with his own entourage of paparazzi, as he obligingly perched in plain view on traffic signs or tree stumps or branches over-hanging walking trails. Word quickly spread among local birders and photographers, who rushed to the owl's Bow River hunting ground to watch from a respectful distance, long lenses fixed on the magnificent bird. Passing tourists would stop in their tracks to click souvenir photos with their cell phones, and the lucky ones watched in awe as the owl swooped from his perch to seize a vole, invisible in the grass, for lunch.

"Wow!" said a visitor from Carolina. "Do you see this often?"

Indeed we do not. I have seen only one other Great Grey in Banff National Park in 18 years here, and even assiduous birders concede it is very rare in the Park. This individual owl was particularly tolerant of public presence and adoration, conducting himself with a certain noblesse oblige as he rested or hunted in broad daylight. I even observed the owl handling a potentially disturbing 6-magpie mobbing flyover with such calm unruffledness that one magpie alighted beside him and the two species sat quietly together for several minutes like polite strangers on a park bench.

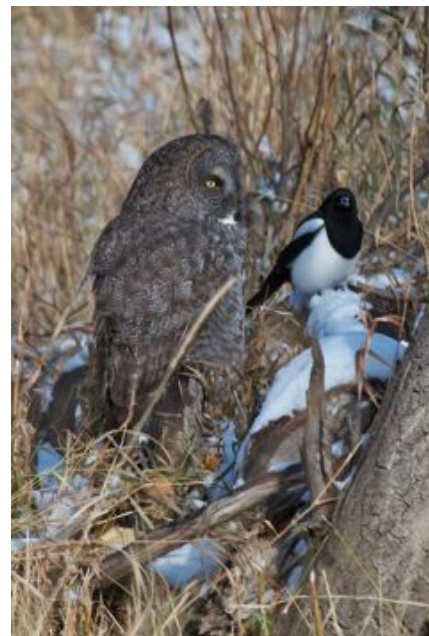


photo: Michael Shuster

The Great Grey Owl, *Strix nebulosa*, is found in northern latitudes across North America and Eurasia, and is the world's largest owl in terms of height (average 72 cm), but not in weight (~1 kilo), as the bulk of its apparent heft is plumage. The photo below of a cross-

sectioned specimen in the Zoological Museum in Copenhagen, Denmark illustrates the role feathers play in shaping the Great Grey.



Photo by Funk/Monk

The Birder's Handbook describes *Strix nebulosa* as one of the most diurnal owls, locating its prey (80% of which is voles, in Canada) by sound and capable of plunge-diving through snow to grasp subnivean rodents. The large facial disk, or ruff, and asymmetrical ear-openings assist the owl in accurately pinpointing sound.



Photo: Michael Shuster

Owls disperse south in low-rodent years, and that may have been the motivation for our autumn visitor. He was regularly observed in Banff for at least a month from late October to the 4<sup>th</sup> week in November, and appeared to be successfully raiding the grassy riverside pantry during his stay. Sadly, despite all the best hopes and whispered suggestions of local birders who enjoyed his visit, by December 17<sup>th</sup> he was gone. Total Christmas Bird Count owl tally: 0.

## High Elevation Localized Species

Mike McIvor

It is obvious from data sent to the BVN website that our members and others have been actively involved in our HELS project. Over 1,200 observations of the 4 species we are tracking have been recorded in two summers.

We have not had a chance yet to prepare a summary of the observations submitted in 2011 but will be working on that over the next little while. In the meantime, to see a map of the area and the locations for almost 500 sightings reported this year, check the website. Many thanks to everyone who contributed.

This coming season we will continue to collect random observations but also are hoping, with the assistance of people more knowledgeable than us about this sort of data collection, to identify methods for more focused observations.

Some very positive news from the Resource Conservation section of the Banff Field Unit is that their biologists are in the process of developing a long-term monitoring program for pikas. A number of potential sites were examined in a pilot project last field season and ongoing correspondence has occurred with Dr. David Hik at the University of Alberta who had given us a great presentation on this fascinating animal. His research in the Yukon indicated that a reliable means for monitoring populations is to count pika haypiles. The Parks Canada folks acknowledge that public interest played a role in the decision to pursue this monitoring in a structured way and that observations on the HELS page of the BVN website provided some assistance in identifying potential sites. It is expected that much of the leg – and eye/ear – work for the pika project could be done by volunteers so we will keep you posted as to any opportunities that may arise to assist Parks Canada.



Pika haypile

photo: D. McIvor

## **Wolverine on Wolverine Overpass**

*Karsten Heuer*

Researchers on the Highway Wilding Project here in Banff National Park got a welcome surprise last November while downloading pictures from the motion-activated cameras that help monitor the 40+ animal crossing structures along the Trans Canada Highway. Embedded in the thousands of images they sort through each week (many of which are snowflakes and wind) was a blurry photo of a wolverine going across the 50-metre-wide overpasses just west of the Sunshine Village turnoff. So what? you might say. It is, after all, called the Wolverine Creek Overpass. But as it turns out this is the first recorded passage of a wolverine on an overpass in the study's 15-year history. The first in 200,000 recorded crossings that have included every other large mammal species in the Park. So does this mean the highway isn't a barrier to one of the rarest and most elusive creatures in North America? Stay tuned for the results of Tony Clevenger's larger study on wolverine genetics that is attempting to answer this very question using non-invasive hair snagging techniques on both sides of the road. It is now in its second year.

## **Good, Bad and Possible**

*Colleen Campbell*

Banff National Park has had complex purposes since early in its history. Even designating the hot pools exclusively for Europeans was in conflict with historic use. Native peoples considered the springs sacred and had been using them for about 9000 years when Europeans arrived in the Rockies.

In 1883, when railway construction was suspended for winter, Thomas McCabe and two McCardell brothers stayed in the Bow Valley. During their local wanderings, they found the springs, built a shack nearby and were amongst several claimants of land in the area.

In 1885, while various other claimants dickered about claims and deceived each other, Prime Minister John A. Macdonald declared 16 square kilometres around the springs as Canada's first national park reserve. The Terrace Mountain (renamed Sulphur Mountain in 1916) hot springs would be protected from private development.

In Europe elaborate, well-choreographed spas at mineral springs were popular. Plans were already forming to lure visitors along the new railroad and the hot pools on the slopes of Terrace Mountain were inherently attractive. The springs would be exploited to draw travellers to a grand hotel and the area would become one of several 'luxury' stops intended to attract visitors and to relieve the tedium of the long train journey to the west coast.

In 1887, the Banff Hot Springs Reserve was renamed Rocky Mountains Park and increased to 673 square kilometres to include more wilderness. Banff Springs Hotel opened in 1888. Rocky Mountains Park became a great big spa: a bit of civilized warm, comfortable, luxurious and leisurely living surrounded by wilderness.

The new Park was presented as a "public park and pleasure ground for the benefit, advantage and enjoyment of the people of Canada" (Rocky Mountain Park Act, 1887). Additionally, the government legislated powers for park managers to make regulations for the

"preservation and management of local flora, fauna and minerals, to control the management and uses of the hot springs, to control mining, trade and leaseholds". However, in spite of legislative requirements to protect the environment, until the 1970s, wildlife policies in the Rocky Mountains Park were based almost entirely on assumptions about what would please tourists best. Herbivores — deer, elk, moose, sheep and goats, squirrels and hares, and some bird species were protected. A few black bears were 'acceptable'. Lynx and cougar, wolves, foxes and coyotes, grizzly bears, weasels, porcupines, badgers, owls, loons, mergansers, kingfisher and cormorants, eagles and falcons were marked for elimination because they either preyed on most of the other 'lovely' mammals or ate the fish considered important for sport. Some river damming was combined with introductions of rainbow trout to improve fishing opportunities for visitors while traditional aboriginal fishing practices were forbidden.

Rocky Mountains Park grew and shrank, grew more and shrank again with political decisions. Costs of surveying the complicated boundary options, hydro-development, logging and coal extraction and the inclusion of new habitat with wildlife to augment apparently decimated wildlife populations inside the park all led to periodic land swaps along both the spine of the mountains and the eastern slopes of the Rockies. The government also moved the park from department to department; each jurisdiction had different mandates and regulations that shifted with the political dynamic. At its largest Rocky Mountains Park was almost 11 400 square kilometers. Areas were removed and included in Jasper National Park; the Red Deer, Panther, Cline and Siffleur valleys have been in and then out, in again or partly in national parks; for many years much of the Kananaskis drainage was also in the park. The current IA highway replaced the original trail, now hidden under the dammed waters of Lake Minnewanka. Exshaw was inside the Park, a few kilometres west of the entrance gate. Banff National Park has been stable at 6 641 square kilometers since 1949, when some land in the Bow Valley was removed from the park. Much that was in Rocky Mountains Park is now part of other mountain national parks or falls within the complicated parks and natural areas of Alberta.



Part of concrete foundation of gatekeepers' house at site of original entrance gate to Banff National Park still visible east of Exshaw. Photo: D. McIvor



40-Mile Creek Dam. Now is the time to remove it and restore the flow. Photo: D. McIvor

The 1930 *Parks Act* replaced ‘Rocky Mountains Park’ with ‘Banff National Park’ (BNP) and established a standard for the quality of protected places and a concept of respect for all parks under Parks Canada jurisdiction. Partly in response to the growing awareness of environmental complexity during the second half of the twentieth century, the 1979 review of the *Parks Act* led to the important introduction of the principle of ecological integrity. The 1988 amendments formalized the principle of ecological integrity and identified it as the principal consideration. The 2010 amendment of the *Parks Act* maintains wording in two important clauses: Interpretation (Section 2: 1) *“ecological integrity means, with respect to a park, a condition that is determined to be characteristic of its natural region and likely to persist, including abiotic components and the composition and abundance of native species and biological communities, rates of change and supporting processes.”* and Administration (Section 8: 2) *“Maintenance or restoration of ecological integrity, through the protection of natural resources and natural processes, shall be the first priority of the Minister when considering all aspects of the management of parks.”*

During the early years of BNP, carnivore populations were controlled to benefit sheep, goat and deer species. From 1918-1920 about 280 elk were imported from Yellowstone to supplement the local population and further improve ‘wildlife’ viewing for those who visited the park. For decades, wolves were considered indiscriminate predators and targeted for elimination. Rabies has been rare in Alberta, but from 1952-1956 an anti-rabies campaign eliminated 90% of the wolves in Alberta, including those in the mountain national parks. By the late 1950s, the extirpation of wolves from most of BNP was considered one success of ongoing predator control policies. Wolves were phantoms in the local habitat. During the 1970s, coyotes were targeted. Solitary and sparsely distributed creatures — cougars, lynx, black and grizzly bears — were shot regularly by wardens. Not until the 1980s did the growing understanding of ecology lead to development of rationale for managing animal populations in Banff National Park. Some of the first scientifically driven wildlife research involved the wolves apparently repopulating the Bow Valley and black bears using habitat in and around the Banff townsite.

Early Banff, with luxury hotel and hot springs, offered a grand amenity to entice visitors to the natural attractions of the area. Now, Banff National Park competes with many other attractions. Remote places are now relatively accessible — Antarctica, New Guinea,

Greenland; a few people are already booked to visit the moon. Some people believe that Banff must now compete with other national parks, historic sites, amusement parks, exotic shopping destinations, all-in-one resorts and conference centres all over the world, .... places with water slides, ferris wheels, glass floors, dragon boat races, indoor ski facilities, via ferrata, Mickey Mouse, predictable shopping and fast food.

But the uniqueness of national parks is due to their natural attributes. Respect for natural processes, native species and ecosystems is paramount. Not to be mocked with ersatz amusement park activities. Why do we not do better with what is here? .... better! There are many places for more! more! more! more ordinary! more imitation! *plus amusant!* Rather, National Parks should focus on better! better service! better content! better honouring and respect for intrinsic attributes — glacial lakes, larch forests, bugling elk, lady slippers, alpine meadows, wild weather, fierce rivers, fearsome animals, jaw-dropping views!

The best way for National Parks to compete is to maintain unadulterated connections with nature. For that, we need genuine creativity! Imagination!



Important montane habitat for wildlife.

Photo: D. McIvor



Important wetland habitat.

Photo: M. McIvor

## Wasps as House Guests?

Peter Duck

My family has been enjoying the privilege of having a patch of ground to retreat to in the Columbia Valley. The surrounding yard seems to look after itself and rewards us with a seasonal display of blossoms, buzzing insects and other wildlife. Two Septembers ago we promised to pick all the crab apples from a tree that overhangs the front porch before the bears got to them. I arrived on September 4<sup>th</sup> two days after the neighbours reported a Black Bear had trashed the tree by sitting high in an arboreal throne and pulling branches loaded with apples toward its mouth breaking most of them in the process.

The tree was loaded with fruit this again year. We decided to pick the apples in August thinking the tree could not withstand another ursine trimming and preferring not to contribute to the habituation of another bear. Wanting to expedite the picking process we decided to place a blanket under the tree to collect apples. I climbed up and shook the daylight out of the branches. After all, we had seen this done in Italy with olives. Immediately I was surrounded by a horde of big black, buzzing hornets. A quick look behind me revealed a wasp nest approaching the size of a small football suspended in the adjacent branches. I dropped out of the tree with agility I had not shown for 45 years. Do the Italians ever experience this complication?

What to do? We did not want to spend the rest of the summer terrorized by these big black and white demons. So we did what any family would do; we headed to the computer. There we quickly learned that we were hosts to Bald-Faced Hornets (*Dolichovespula maculata*). A number of web sites tried to convince us that we were privileged to have them in our yard.



Bald-faced hornet in the Columbia Valley photo: M. McIvor

What else did we learn? These wasps are part of the “Yellow Jacket” group and not true “Hornets”. True Hornets are not native to North America. Bald-Faced Hornets are great at keeping the smaller but more aggressive yellow “yellow jackets” out of the yard. They are relatively docile beasts interested in only protecting their nest and otherwise not likely to be aggressive to humans. As time went by we were able to carefully pick the apples before the bears became interested and are enjoying crab apple crisp well past Christmas.

The overall diet of these insects is rich in protein and carbohydrates. They are mostly carnivorous and feed on other insects. It turns out these and many other wasps are beneficial in gardens because they prey on insects that damage plants. They also enjoy nectar for energy and use flower patches to search for smaller insects attracted to the blooms. And, they will take a bite of a well ripened apple from time to time. We decided the latter was a small price to pay for keeping the more aggressive “yellow” yellow jackets off the deck.

For the rest of the summer we watched the comings and goings of our new friends and watched the nest grow to be bigger than a football. Apparently a preferred source of paper for their nest building is old wood fibre. It was fascinating to see how they built rain-proof air vents in the top of the nest like the attic vents installed under the eaves of our own shack.

Apparently the nest simply goes dormant and the undeveloped larvae die off as cold weather settles in. The nests are not used the following season. With this in mind I had hopes of pruning the nest from its supporting branches and hanging it on the deck next year. This would discourage yellow wasps from drowning in my afternoon glass of beer the drinking of which is a task I prefer to complete myself. To our surprise when we checked out the nest in October it had been ripped open on one side before I could salvage it. Woodpeckers and other insectivores enjoy the orphaned wasp larvae as a late season treat when the nests are no longer defended by adult wasps. So over the next weeks the delicate paper football got smaller and smaller due to successive visits from our mystery predator. By early December there was little left of our “guest house”.

Some of the many web sites we visited:

[http://www.fcps.edu/islandcreekes/ecology/bald-faced\\_hornet.htm](http://www.fcps.edu/islandcreekes/ecology/bald-faced_hornet.htm)

<http://www.muenster.org/hornissenschutz/baldfaced/baldfaced.htm>

<http://www.seeds.ca/proj/poll/index.php?n=Yellow+Jacket+Profile>

## Collared Pikas are “Special Concern”, according to COSEWIC

By Dwayne Lepitzki, Ph.D.  
Member of COSEWIC

Remember the HELS (High Elevation Localized Species) presentation on Collared Pikas by Dr. David Hik from the University of Alberta last spring? Well, he and his students were the writers of the COSEWIC (Committee on the Status of Wildlife in Canada) status report on the species. At the most recent wildlife species assessment meeting (SAM) of COSEWIC in November 2011, the Collared Pika (*Ochotona collaris*) was assessed as Special Concern. This is the same status as the Grizzly Bear and designates a wildlife species that may become Threatened or Endangered because of a combination of biological characteristics and identified threats. The press release from the meeting states: “The effects of climate change on Collared Pika threaten its persistence and resulted in a status of Special Concern.”

The Collared Pika is a different species than the American Pika (*O. princeps*), the pika found in Banff and Jasper. The range of the American Pika extends as far south as California and as far north as about Prince George, B.C. while the Collared Pika is confined to Alaska, Yukon, and the western edge of the Northwest Territories. The best available information, much of it from the detailed studies

of Dr. Hik and his students highlighted in the presentation Dr. Hik gave BVN, was compiled into the COSEWIC status report. COSEWIC found that over half the global range for the species occurs in Canada and as such, the persistence of the species depends on its protection in Canada. COSEWIC also concluded that the Collared Pika may be particularly sensitive to climate change, including increases in precipitation variability which could lead to reduction in available habitat: “the potential negative impacts of climate change to the persistence of this species over the long-term is substantial.”

While the U.S. government concluded in February 2010 that the American Pika, including the five recognized subspecies, did not warrant listing under the U.S. *Endangered Species Act* as endangered or threatened “at the time”, climate change was one of the identified potential threats to the long-term survival of the species. Specifically, changes to temperature and precipitation regimes could directly cause adverse effects on individuals or populations and contribute to the loss of or change in pika habitat. According to the summer 2011 issue of the U.S. National Park Service (NPS) publication *ParksScience*, a “Pikas in Peril” research team was established between the Parks Service and three universities. The three-year research project, funded through the NPS Climate Change Response Program, began in 2010; it intends to address some questions about the vulnerability of the species to climate change and project the effects of climate change on the species’ future persistence. Unfortunately, the eight U.S. western national parks where this monitoring and research has or will occur does not include any close to the U.S. Canada border, the furthest north being Yellowstone although similar work has been conducted in Glacier National Park, Montana.

Having the Collared Pika assessed as Special Concern by COSEWIC means that the Federal Government must now decide whether to include the pika under the Canadian *Species at Risk Act*. If it does warrant listing under SARA, a Management Plan for the species will be required within three years of its listing. Public consultation will be part of the SARA listing process.

Note 1: As a bit of consolation to those of us who continue to pronounce the animal’s common name “pike-a”, as opposed to “peak-a”, a mimic of the actual call, the Terrestrial Mammals Species Specialist Subcommittee of COSEWIC concluded that the proper, Canadian pronunciation is indeed “pike-a”.

(Editor’s note: It seems peculiar that a group of biologists would make a pronouncement about pronunciation. Would a group of linguists make a declaration about the status of wildlife populations? The origin of “pika” is Russian so we checked with 2 people who speak that language. The consensus is that it would be pronounced peak-a not pike-a. So the debate continues. And at least some of us will be sticking with the pronunciation that mimics its call.)

Note 2: According to the publicly accessible COSEWIC web site ([cosewic.gc.ca](http://cosewic.gc.ca)), the next SAM will be held in Kananaskis, 29 April to 4 May 2012. It is possible for the public to attend sessions where the status of species is debated and voted upon. Of particular interest, the Grizzly Bear is among the 38 species scheduled to be assessed or re-assessed at the Kananaskis meeting.

## Book Review

### Eye of the Albatross by Carl Safina (2002) – 377 pages

Reviewed by Karsten Heuer

Living on the dry side of the Continental Divide and a long day’s drive from the Pacific Coast, it’s easy to lose sight of that big part of the planet that drives much of our weather in the Rocky Mountains. We hear about the ocean in the news, of course, of how it’s endangered by overfishing, carbonic acidification, plastic and chemical pollution, but it took the story of Amelia, a radio-tagged albatross who travels across that watery expanse an average of 600 km a day, for me to see it for the vast and unfathomably complex miracle that it is: upwellings, shear margins, seamounts and troughs populated by varieties of octopus, seals, sharks, fish and whales I’ve never heard of and likely will never see.

I gained an appreciation for it all through Carl Safina’s rich description of Amelia’s life, though, and through the lives of the researchers and fishermen Safina encounters as he chases after the travelling bird’s signals in an effort to cobble together her life story. This is the antithesis of tracking the sedentary Banff Springs Snail; Safina goes from the outermost Hawaiian Islands to the Aleutians to Kamchatka to the California coast and back again, and still only covers a fraction of what Amelia does over the same time period. But being a writer he more than makes up for it with his descriptions of Amelia’s “fluid world of wind and wild waters” where “everything is in perpetual motion and flux.”

“Land is little more than a necessary inconvenience for breeding,” writes Safina of the albatross, and yet it is this basic struggle – of raising a lone chick in one of the most inhospitable places on Earth – that allows him to strike the balance between emotion and scientific fact that carries the book from beginning to end. And the reader gets to know the ocean because of it, right down to such ‘invisible’ tragedies as albatross mothers choking on toothbrushes and other bits of human garbage despite being on islands at the ends of the Earth.

On what animal and region will Safina train his attention next? He’s also written about turtles and whales and his focus is on the ocean otherwise I’d write and invite him to come take a look at some of our local grizzly bears. Yes, the environment is wholly different and yet their greatest struggle – to coexist with us humans – is much the same.



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