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Wandering Garter Snakes (*Thamnophis elegans*) have been quite visible at the Cave and Basin warm springs this spring. See below for Kevin Barker's interesting note about a sighting in mid-winter.
(Patrick Purcell photo)

WHO DO YOU CALL WHEN THINGS ARE AMISS?

CONTACTS

Our list of federal and provincial contacts is posted on the BVN website. Please go there to find addresses of those who are responsible for ecosystem protection. Send us updates on the information if needed and let them know your mind.

PROGRAMS AND EVENTS

BVN hopes to continue our October to April program of free natural history presentations in the fall. Presentations occur on the 4th Tuesday of every month at the Banff Seniors Centre starting at 7:30 pm. Watch the "[Events](#)" tab on the BVN website for updates and the beautiful posters advertising these special social and informative evenings. Admission is free. Donations at the door.

NEWS AND ISSUES

Members are encouraged to follow these topics and take every opportunity to share your thoughts about the importance of protecting natural ecosystems with land managers.

ALBERTA PARKS - Now on Sale?

The Government of Alberta plans to save money by closing some provincial parks. This has serious implications for how, or if, these public lands are protected and how the value of protected spaces is communicated to Albertans. Sharing detailed information about this plan has been on hold for 2 months while the current public health crisis is addressed. While it is clear most Albertans speak strongly in favour of a robust provincial parks and protected areas system there is a real danger that protected areas will suffer even more as dramatic budget measures are likely to be implemented to address the financial crisis created by the recent pandemic. We encourage readers to review the [Canadian Parks and Wilderness Association's](#) and the [Yellowstone to Yukon Conservation Initiative's](#) information on this topic. Then let your provincial government representatives know that protected spaces are not a budgetary convenience. They are an essential foundation for our physical and mental health in these challenging times, always and forever.

BVN HOPES FOR A NEW NORMAL

BVN welcomes the establishment of a task force to look at recovery of our community once restrictions related to the Covid-19 pandemic begin to lift. BVN is very aware of the very real hardship local businesses and staff, many of whom are BVN members, are facing as a result of this event. At the same time, we are also very aware of the real challenges our community is facing as a result of continued growth and overcrowding in a landscape that faces economic as well as very real social, ecological and ultimately economic limitations. Responses to these challenges, such as building even more parking lots and increasingly restricting access in the name of crowding management were causing frustration among visitors and businesses alike. This frustration was occurring against a backdrop of the Alberta Government looking to stimulate even more tourism growth. We have seen what the visitation extreme looks like. Let's hope that the local task force will apply a community wide approach and use this rare opportunity to take time to engage, plan and think in a meaningful way about the future of both our community and ecosystems.

MOUNTAIN PARKS MANAGEMENT PLANS

Parks Canada staff are struggling with the same working disruptions that the rest of us are dealing with these days. In a recent email update Parks Canada indicated they would like us to know:

- All Parks Canada consultations and formal engagement on management plans are suspended until further notice, including consultations and engagement on the draft Banff National Park management plan.
- Parks Canada is committed to resuming all management planning activities for Banff National Park, including public consultations and formal engagement, once operations resume and capacity allows.
- For more information, please visit the Parks Canada website at <https://www.pc.gc.ca/en/pn-np/ab/banff/info/gestion-management/involved> or Let's Talk Mountain Parks at <https://www.letstalkmountainparks.ca/>

Readers are encouraged to visit the park management pages for the mountain national parks to view background documents. In particular, take some time to review the What We Heard document prepared from the results of public consultations.

OF WILD THINGS

From time to time we hear stories or get questions from our members. Here are some pieces we've collected over the winter and spring. Please send your nature notes or even just a short article about natural history. We like to learn about our local ecosystems but more general content is also welcomed.

EAGLES AND LYNX

Cliff Hansen

On the 21st of March, I was assistant observer for the Rocky Mountain Eagle Research Foundation (RMERF) migrating raptors count at Hay Meadows in Kananaskis Country. Business was slow so the Principal Observer decided to go for a short walk in the woods. Shortly thereafter, I noticed some excited and very raucous Ravens on the Kananaskis River flats in front of me. At first, I could not discern the cause but soon a movement that first resembled a rock moved. That is when I saw the Lynx. I grabbed (literally) my camera and got a series of shots. Soon my Principal returned and said he had spotted a couple of Chickadees. This time it was the "holder of the fort" that was in the right place at the right time. I had a story to brag about.



Canadian Lynx (*Lynx canadensis*). Cliff Hansen photo.

WINTER SWARM OF GARTER SNAKES

Kevin Barker

On February 6 at the top hot pool above the Cave & Basin interpretive building I saw a swarm of 20 to maybe 30 garter snakes in the hot pool which was a real treat. It was quite fascinating to watch this mass of snakes being so active on a partly cloudy, -7° C winter day. I took quite a few pictures and must add I was by myself and no one else with me when I saw these garter snakes. I hope this will happen again, whenever that will be in the future. Whoever else observes what I saw will be a lucky person. Have the best spring ever!



Wandering Garter Snakes (*Thamnophis elegans*).
Kevin Barker photo.

BRANCHLESS! A TREE MYSTERY

Joel Hagen

In mid-March, during my last guided snowshoeing tour before the novel coronavirus changed the world, my guests and I came across an unusual sight. Or maybe more than unusual. In my almost 30 years of exploring the Rockies, I'd never seen anything like it. A small Engelmann spruce tree was missing dozens of branches. They'd been snipped off just out from the trunk, and were lying in the snow below. When trees and animals meet, there are usually clues to help you figure out what happened, like tracks, or droppings, or teeth marks. Or, you'll see a pattern similar to what you've seen before.

In this case, there was nothing for this naturalist detective to work with. There were no tracks nearby, even though the branches were lying on top of the most recent storm snow. There was no smoking gun from above, like a big "tree bomb" of snow falling from a taller tree. The snipped-off branches hadn't been lopped off by a person with a knife or saw.

In the end, I took two pictures, and sent them around to my usual cast of nature forensics specialists, but there was no definitive answer. I even sent them to Susan Morse, one of North America's foremost wildlife trackers, and founder of Keeping Track. Sadly, I did not get a reply, but happily, mysteries in nature leave me curious and engaged. If you can figure out the story, please let me and BVN know what happened.



The mystery of the branchless tree.
Joel Hagen photo.

NAKED STEMS

Jill Robinson writes “Hi! Doesn't seem like elk, but what, then? Any ideas?” The culprit? Likely voles, who stay active year-round, even under the snow. They build tunnels under the snow through the loose snow or “depth hoar” next to the ground to travel from bush to bush. In the photo we get a good idea how deep the snow was last winter. Sometimes you'll also see where branches have been pushed down by heavy snow and the voles have merrily chewed their way along it.



Base of shrubs nibbled by voles.

Jill Robinson photo.

THE TIME OF THE MUSKRAT

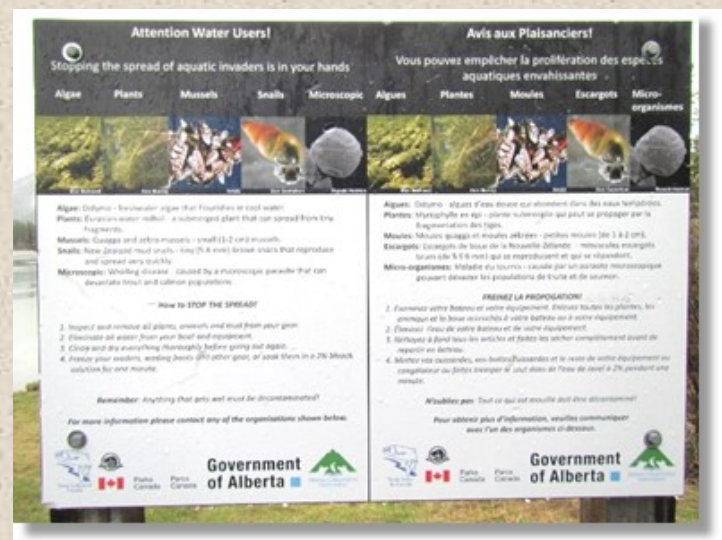
Peter Duck

There are likely a few BVN members who can remember the '80s. There were lots of Beaver and Muskrat out in the Vermilion Lakes then. What a time it was! We saw Beaver jams on Vermilion Lakes Drive as much as we might see a bear jam on the Icefields Parkway. I remember the Beaver that wandered into Central Park in Banff during Canada Day celebrations as if was part of the show. And then they were hard to find for many years. A disappearance likely related to the ecosystem upset caused by high numbers of browsing elk in the Bow Valley. They have been more visible in recent years and this year is no exception to that revival. Especially the Muskrats. And what great timing. With our other distractions limited these days, taking in a regular constitutional out at the Lakes has been common relief. It seems no matter when we go it is easy to find one or two Muskrats putting themselves on display. Perhaps when visitors return to the valley this watchable wildlife will once again steal the show and continue to connect people to nature.

ANOTHER EXOTIC FOR ALBERTA: CHINESE MYSTERY SNAIL

Dwayne Lepitzki,
Ph.D., Co-chair, Molluscs Species Specialist
Subcommittee of COSEWIC

By now, everyone who's spent some time around natural wetlands and water in Banff National Park has probably come across the signs about invasive aquatic species. These signs include molluscs: a snail and mussels. While New Zealand Mud Snail (*Potamopyrgus antipodarum*) may indeed be “tiny”, to some, at 5-6 mm in shell length, Chinese Mystery Snails (*Cipangopaludina chinensis*) are anything but tiny, at up to 10 times the size of the mud snail, with adults over 60 mm in shell length. Mud snails haven't yet made it to Alberta, with the



Aquatics invasives sign. D. Lepitzki photo.

closest being found in Idaho and on Vancouver Island ([Animated map for Mud snails at the USGS](#)). The map for [Chinese Mystery Snails](#) needs to be updated to include records from Canada, including Alberta, as does the [NatureServe map](#). According to the [Alberta Aquatic Invasive Species alert](#) Chinese Mystery Snails were found in Lake McGregor, approximately 100 kilometres southeast of Calgary and north of Lethbridge, in 2019. Yours truly was involved in the discovery of the same species in a protected area in [New Brunswick in 2014](#) (Article #5).

Chinese Mystery Snails are in the family *Viviparidae*, derived from the Latin *vivi* + *parous*, meaning producing live young. The parents release small, fully formed snails. A snail that was collected from Lake McGregor during survey work by the Alberta Aquatic Invasive group produced 25 babies in a tank in Edmonton, according to Invasive Species Specialist Nicole Kimmel (pers. comm. 19 May 2020).



Chinese Mystery Snail (*Cipangopaludina chinensis*) shells, including young that were within the adult shell, Grand Lake Protected Natural Area, New Brunswick, 11 August 2014. D. Lepitzki photo.

Opinions are divided on the ecological effects of this invasive species. It is not known how they arrived in Alberta although it has been illegal to possess them in the province since 2015. Maybe an aquarium enthusiast decided to release them when they became prohibited. Sleuthing has determined that these snails have been in Lake McGregor since 2015, so there is probably a self-sustaining population. No other populations have yet been found in Alberta, but we are asked to keep an eye out for this species.

IT'S HARLEY SEASON

And we do not mean the two-wheeled rockets out on the Highway 1A between Canmore and Exshaw. Harlequin Ducks (*Histrionicus histrionicus*) of course. Watch for these birds on the cobble bars in the Bow River. The colourful males are only here for a few weeks before returning to their west coast habitats late in June, while the females spend the season tending to their ducklings on the fast-flowing tributaries of the western mountains. Visit the BVN website to [read Cyndi Smith's article](#) about these fascinating fast water birds.



Harlequin Duck (*Histrionicus histrionicus*). C. Smith photo.

LARCHES ARE BEAUTIFUL IN THE SPRING

Colleen Campbell

Larch species grow at high elevations and northern latitudes, places where the weather offers contrasts of summer heat and winter cold. Of 10-12 species world-wide, three are native to North America; the one that attracts thousands of hikers to a selection of predictable locations in the Central Rockies every autumn is the Sub-alpine Larch (*Larix lyallii*). They are long-lived and grow in marginal habitats.

The question “Are the Larches changing?” precedes the advance of thousands of hikers searching for stands of Larch in their seasonal transition from deep green of summer through warmer greens and soft yellow before wind or an early season snow take their needles to the ground.

Larches are deciduous conifers. That is, unlike other conifers, the needles (leaves) fall from little nubs on the branches each fall and within each nub is the promise for next season. In spring, the colour transition is reversed as the bumps become lighter, and eventually show green centres and then the needles, barely discernible, start to reveal themselves. The tree seems enveloped in a subtle green veil before the needles grow to their full length. Each cluster can produce 30-40 needles that remain soft to touch all season long and offer a distinctive green hue to the treeline all summer.

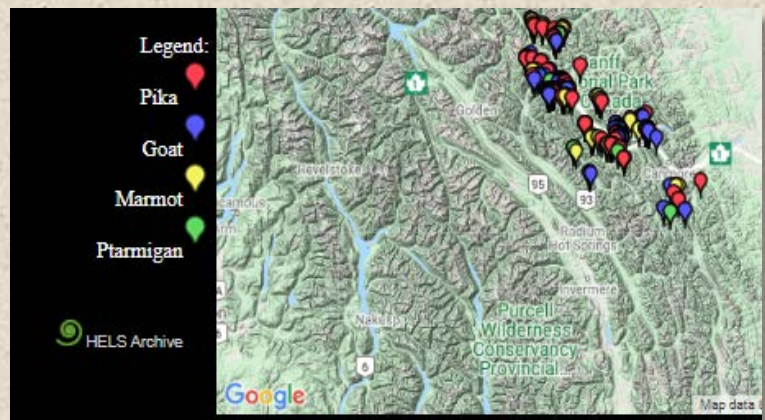
The trees I have been monitoring this spring are at only about 1400 metres above sea level, apparently happy in their valley location. Their local Alpine relatives are still living in snow at about 2000 metres and will offer the same show a bit later in the season. The spring transition is easily as beautiful as the autumn colour shift. Watch for new needles emerging when you make early season forays to the sub-alpine and alpine places. It is one of nature’s subtle magic shows.



Backyard larch. C. Campbell photo.

MAPS AND HELS UPDATE

Restrictions on national park research permits and the challenges of conducting work while maintaining proper social separation during the current health emergency make it unlikely BVN’s MAPS bird banding project will proceed in the normal manner for this season. Cyndi Smith is working with Parks Canada to confirm if a pared-down version of the project may proceed.



Screen shot of HELS observations posted on the BVN website.

On the other hand, we can all continue to watch wildlife at a safe distance from each other and from animals. Hopefully, there will be some access beyond roadside viewing. Whatever access is permitted, on trails or from the roadside, we

encourage readers to take advantage of our HELS project. Watch for our target High Elevation Localized Species (Ptarmigan, Marmots, Goats and Pikas) and enter the observations in our HELS data base on the BVN [website](#).

WHAT MEMBERS READ, WATCH, AND LISTEN TO

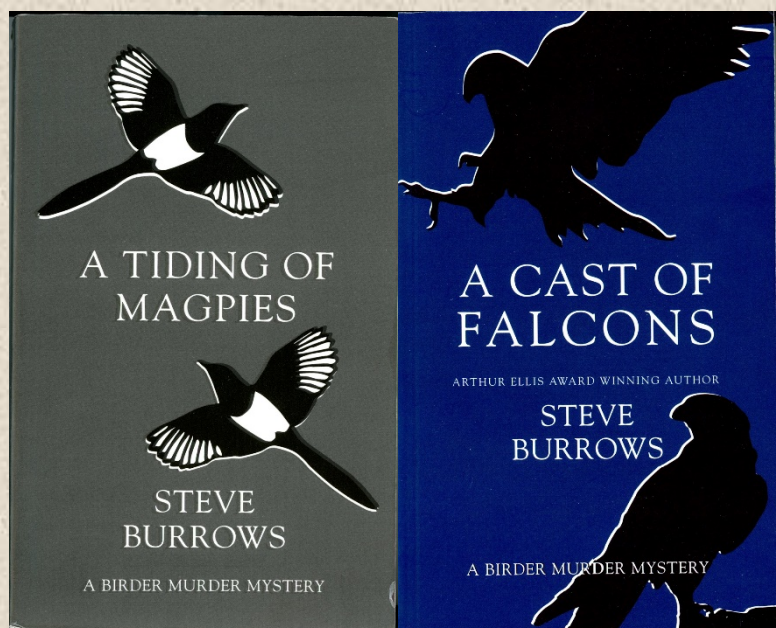
A CAST OF FALCONS AND A TIDING OF MAGPIES, Steve Burrows

Jeannette Fish

In "A Cast of Falcons", Chief Inspector Domenic Jejeune, a Canadian detective transplanted to Norfolk, is the lead character. Although often distracted at work with opportunistic birding, he solves convoluted murders involving a climate change and falconry project owned by wealthy foreigners. Birds, scenery, contemporary political issues and a cast of characters flesh out the crimes' solution aided by knowledge of gyrfalcon behaviour.

This entertaining, good read led me to "A Tiding of Magpies". The same characters solve murder and a kidnapping with a Magpie's help. Many birds feature in each book. Avid, knowledgeable birder Steve Burrows is the author. All five books in the series are available through the Marigold Library System.

"Did you know Magpies have been recorded as gathering in numbers around the corpse of a dead bird, laying sprigs of vegetation beside it and then observing a short silent vigil before flying away"?



ONCE THEY WERE HATS: In Search of the Mighty Beaver, Frances Backhouse

Colleen Campbell

This book is a multi-dimensional exploration of all things *Castor canadensis*. When Europeans arrived in the "new world" and discovered the wealth of fur resources, the greed that followed and persisted until the late 20th Century was unanticipated.

Castor canadensis is the North American species of Beaver. In the late 1490s, the landscape of North America was populated by millions of the little geo-engineers, regularly tinkering with landscapes and creating habitats for countless other species everywhere on the continent. While *Castor canadensis* thrived, the European species, *Castor fiber*, was under siege, being hunted to near extinction for its fur and its castoreum.

Humans fail, over and over, to understand any concept of restraint. We fail consistently to ask the question "if everyone in the world does what I am doing, what will the world be like, what will happen, what will be the outcome?" Cod, bison, beaver, oil - gosh! Dodo, salmon, tuna, pine trees and any number of other species. We insist on pushing ecosystems into imbalance through greed and then, sometimes, we try to address the consequences.

This book is in no way redundant to Ron Goldfarb's volume, *Eager: The Surprising, Secret Life of Beavers and Why They Matter*. Both make clear the benefit of Beavers for water tables, management and the amazing effect that they have on habitat for water and land species. Backhouse fills in the complicated relationship of the "economy" of the Beaver pelt, the importance of Beaver for settlers and explorers and, eventually, for First Nations. Thoughtful reading exposes a likely unintended analogy to the current state of our relationship with the petroleum-based economy. Both Beavers and oil have taken us on boom and bust roller-coasters rides as we failed to acknowledge the environmental impacts of our persistent harvesting activities. Interesting book. Worth reading. Excellent notes about sources are included at the back. This book is available in the Marigold Library System and local bookstores.

WILDLIFE AND HABITATS: Tracking and Natural History Essays, Susan Morse

Joel Hagen

Last year Susan Morse and her organization, Keeping Track, published a great collection of her tracking essays. Morse has been contributing to Northern Woodlands magazine for almost 20 years, and has amassed an impressive collection of stories and photos, all taken by her, about the signs that animals leave behind.

As an example, if you've seen trees here in the Rockies with their bark peeled off by bears, you might wonder which teeth the bears use to scrape up the cambium layer. So, what does Sue Morse do? She takes a bear skull replica around to the peeled trees, and matches them up with the scrape marks to show that bears use their lower incisors to get at the sweet cambium. Or, if you've ever wondered why your house cat rubs its face and chin against your pantlegs or your outstretched hand, kitty is scent marking with glands on its temples and under its jaw. The wild cousins of house cats, like Lynx and Bobcat, do the same. Sue Morse has amazing photos of wild cats rubbing their faces against trees and rocks.



Evidence of a bear feeding on inner spruce bark in the Middle Springs Wildlife corridor in Banff last spring.

P. Duck photo.

If you are a naturalist, this is an engaging read and an invaluable reference. Pricy but worth it and only available through Keeping Track's online store.

GETTING ENOUGH NATURE: A Collection of Connections - Submitted by BVN Members

Are you getting enough nature? Given the circumstances we are living under right now, we couldn't be in a better place to cope. We live in small friendly communities with great services, a low number of

COVID-19 cases, and we can safely go outside into some wonderful neighbourhoods and local trails to get our nature fixes. Birdwatching is booming with many new converts passionate about what they are seeing. Nature is also revelling in the quiet times. See: [Wildlife Thriving in U.S. National Parks](#).

Over morning coffee or tea what are you reading or viewing in these times? What are your go-to nature web sites? How do you keep in touch with ecosystem issues that are important to you? Let us know how you fill your time at home with nature so we can share those ideas with others. Here is a list of connection collections sent in by our members.

✓ Donna McKown has been enjoying the nature films on CBC Gem's Short Docs. Her favourites are [Toad People](#) in BC and [Fix & Release](#) about rescuing freshwater turtles in Ontario. These videos are highlighted on CBC's new feature: [Hello Spring](#). There are lots of things to view and participate in on this webpage. One great feature is [Show Us Your Spring where](#) you can send your own images in and see what others have submitted as well.

✓ You can go online to see what the local Osprey are up to in Exshaw on [Fortis' live webcam](#). It looks like there is now an egg in the nest since May 20!

✓ Like to listen to nature-related stories? May we suggest [The SideDoor](#): A Podcast from the Smithsonian Institution. A good starter is this season's Episode 2: [The Last Man to Know it All](#) about Prussian naturalist Alexander Von Humboldt. This podcast was also shared on [The Wild](#) out of Seattle and on NPR as well.

✓ For those interested in the science of tracking birds and bird behaviour, Bob Milko sent this in: [The secret life of godwits: Geolocators Give new insights into nesting Behavior](#).

✓ May 20, 2020 was World Bee Day. The United Nations lists bee resources on the [Word Bee Day web site](#). York University sponsored a virtual panel discussion with bee experts and have posted the [recording of the discussion](#) hosted by Megan Leslie along with another collection of [bee resources](#).

✓ Two Canadian online magazines worth checking out are [Hakai Magazine](#) about all things coastal and [The Narwhal](#) for terrific environmental investigative journalism.

✓ Cyndi Smith shared a great science podcast out of New York City called [Science Friday](#). It is two hours every week, on wide-ranging topics. Usually there is a listener call-in section, but not during the pandemic, with the host working from home and no one to manage the phones. The website also has great videos and links.

✓ BVN is has purchased copies of Sibley's new book titled [What It Is Like To Be A Bird: From Flying to Nesting, Eating to Singing--What Birds Are Doing, and Why](#) for our local libraries. Check the on-line catalogues to see if they are available for loan.

WHO DO YOU CALL?

You may come across situations or observations that you want to tell the authorities about. We recommend you have these phone numbers handy. Remember, cell phone coverage is spotty in the mountains so take notes if you need to move on to make a call.

Ambulance, Fire Department, Police (RCMP): 911

Banff Dispatch: 403-762-4506 for Park-related emergency only (avalanche, forest fire, mountain rescue, etc.)

Banff Dispatch: 403-762-1470 for Park non-emergency (e.g. bear or large carnivore sightings, human-wildlife conflicts, injured animal, illegal park activities such as fire, camping, drones)

Kananaskis Emergency Services 403-591-7755 for emergencies, bear, cougar and problem wildlife sightings, illegal activities. This is also the number to report a poacher. If you wish to remain anonymous while reporting a crime, phone 1-800-222-TIPS (8477).