

Marshnotes[®]



BRITISH COLUMBIA WATERFOWL SOCIETY
Fall 2025

BRITISH COLUMBIA WATERFOWL SOCIETY

Managers of the George C. Reifel Migratory Bird Sanctuary Since 1963

dedicated to the conservation and study of migratory waterfowl

Marshnotes:

Editor: Marissa Sasaki

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George C. Reifel Migratory Bird Sanctuary:

Prices: (effective September 1st, 2022)

Daily Admission:

Adults: \$8.00

Seniors: \$6.00 (65+ years)

Children: \$6.00 (2-14 years)

Bird seed: \$2.00/bag

Annual Admission:

Family: \$100.00

Individual: \$ 50.00

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Field Technicians:	Kristina Breit Kiera Fritsch

Hours of Operation:

Reservations are required for all visitors.
Open 9:00 a.m. to 4.00 p.m. every day except Mondays. (closed Mondays)
Entry is closed at 3 pm, visitors need to leave by 4 pm.
The Sanctuary is wheelchair accessible



We now send out a tweet from our Twitter (X) account @ReifelSanctuary when it looks like there is a weather alert, all reservation spots are full, or something interesting has been seen. Facebook account BCWS2023 has also recently been set up.

The 2026 calendar is now available



The 2026 Calendar is now available for sale in the Giftshop for \$23!

For the last 24 years, we have encouraged our visitors to submit their photos, and the resulting calendars sell quickly in the fall.

Grab yours soon while supplies last!

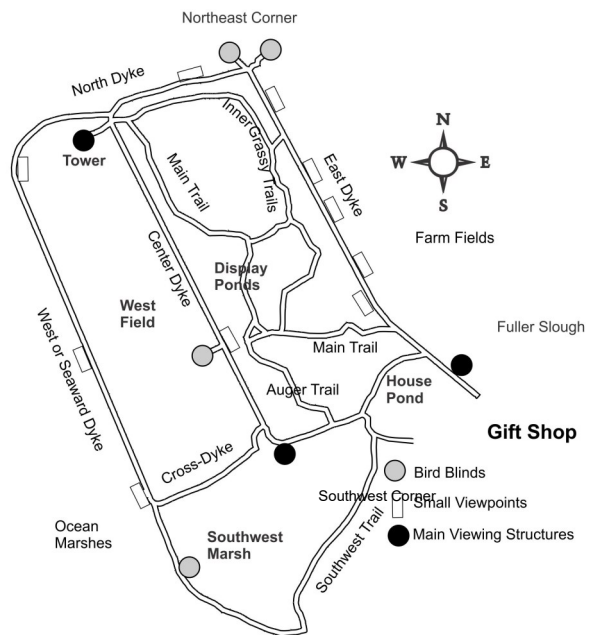
Sanctuary Locations Map

Please refer to the location map to the right to locate place names used in the Marshnotes articles.

About Our Covers

Front Cover: American Wigeon
© Jim Martin
Back Cover: Stilt Sandpiper
© Benjamin Zochert

Marshnotes is issued four times a year but is now available only in electronic format on our "Archives" page at www.reifelbirdsanctuary.com/archives.html. If you would like to be notified when a new edition is posted, email marshnotes@reifelbirdsanctuary.com.



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Varri Raffan
Kristina Breit
Evan Gogal

Kiera Fritsch



Pond supervisor (Canada Goose) amongst a flock of shorebirds

Photo: John Whitmore

Bird Highlights

Although July tends to be a quieter birding month we still had a total of 97 species, ending up to have been the highest July count for the last seven years.

June 29 – July 5

The five Lesser Snow Geese are still being seen offshore. The first returning Belted Kingfisher was spotted at Fuller Slough on the 5th. On June 30th, visitors had a short view of an Osprey as it flew over the Observation Tower. A single Spotted Sandpiper showed up in House Pond on July 3rd. Other shorebirds such as Least Sandpiper, Semipalmated Sandpiper and Western Sandpipers are already returning from their northern nesting grounds. Shorebird viewing will remain good, especially on high tides, until the middle of September.

July 6 – July 12

The list for this week totaled 73 species, with main highlights being the ten different shorebirds seen. Fox Sparrows are usually not at the Sanctuary over the months of June, July and August as they are up in Alaska and northern Yukon for nesting season, but on the 8th we had an early report of one along the Center Dyke. Perhaps this single Fox Sparrow never left the Sanctuary for nesting season. Duck variety remains low with only eight species observed this week with

most of them still in eclipse plumage. Come early September, they will have grown back all new flight feathers in time for the fall migration. New arrivals for this week were Pectoral Sandpiper, Wilson's Phalarope, Short-billed Dowitcher and Townsend's Solitaire.

July 13 – July 19

On the 15th and 16th, a Ruff (a type of shorebird) was found at the north end of West Field. Then on the 17th the bird moved to the front of the bird blind off Center Dyke, then over to the south end of West Field on the 18th. An interesting fact that I found in Vol. II of "*Birds of British Columbia*" was that the Ruff was first recorded in British Columbia in August 1971 here at the Reifel Migratory Bird Sanctuary. Since then it has been reported on and off usually in July, August and September. They breed in northern Eurasia from Norway to Siberia. The female Ruff is called a Reeve. This time of year Peregrine Falcon sightings become more frequent. Although Peregrine Falcons can be found year round at the Sanctuary, they seem to know when there are plenty of shorebirds to hunt. Shorebirds that fly an average of 50 to 60 kilometers per hour aren't quite fast enough to out fly the Peregrine Falcon who can reach speeds up to 390 kilometers per hour when in a dive.



Least Sandpiper

Photo: Dan Parlee

July 20 – July 26

Over the summer Northern Harriers have been quietly nesting in the marshes, but this week we are starting to see a couple flying low and slow over the marshes in search of voles, snakes, frogs and larger insects. Females have a rusty brown chest and belly, while the males have a silvery gray chest and belly. Both sexes sport a white rump patch. Two Belted Kingfishers are heard and seen every day this week. Their loud call is heard as they fly from one feeding area to another. The sightings list for this period ended with 81 species. The highlights included Sora, Pied-billed Grebe, Caspian Tern, Merlin and Western Tanager.

July 27- August 2

The first sighting since last spring of a Black-crowned Night Heron was on July 27th. The last week of July seems to be when we see the first early returning Black-crowned Night Heron. Since 1985, when accurate bird sighting records started, the Black-crowned Night Heron has showed up every year in the same spot. They are nocturnal, so at dusk and into the night they will hunt for amphibians, snakes, rodents and aquatic invertebrates. On July 30th, an adult Great Horned Owl appeared at the north end of the East Dyke. Same day, at the Observation Tower, visitors had a quick view of a juvenile Virginia Rail. It is hard to imagine how the pure black young Rails will ever grow to have the beautiful coloring and markings of their parents. On August 2nd, fifteen American White Pelicans were located offshore from the south end of the Sanctuary. Violet-green Swallows have now finished raising their young and are leaving our area to spend the winter in southern coastal California and down to southern Mexico. Northern Rough-winged Swallows and Cliff Swallows are also heading south for the winter: Northern Rough-winged Swallows will be along the southern coast of the USA down to Panama while the Cliff Swallows head to central Panama and central South America.

Coming out of the quiet summer months, August is when we start to see our weekly species list grow.

Shorebird numbers increase as the juveniles are now joining the adults on their migration south. Waterfowl are slowly coming out of eclipse plumage and are starting to look as they do in identification books. August 2025 had a total of 115 species. This was the largest tally for an August since 2019 that had 117.

August 3 – August 9

Shorebird viewing remains very good. A Solitary Sandpiper and both Red-necked and Wilson's Phalaropes appeared this week, bring the variety of shorebirds for this period to nine species. Over the last three years Common Ravens are more readily seen around the Sanctuary and Westham Island. Ravens are a good seven to nine inches bigger than the American Crows and have a much larger beak and a louder harsh call. The first return of an American Coot happened on the 9th. They had spent their breeding season on the lakes of the Okanagan and will be with us over the winter. Even though they don't have completely webbed feet, they are very good divers and swimmers. Their main food source is the aquatic vegetation. Coots are known to be opportunistic feeders and will take leftovers from dabbling ducks and steal plants brought to the surface by diving ducks.

August 10 – August 16

Eurasian Wigeon, Osprey, Hammond's Flycatcher and Hutton's Vireo were a few of the highlights from this week's list of 67 species. On the 10th a Spotted Sandpiper was found on the logs below the Ewen Slough bird blind. A Northern Waterthrush was located at the beginning of the East Dyke on the 14th. August and September seem to be the only months we are able to locate them in the Sanctuary. The best spots to look for them are along edges of watery pools where they will be lifting soggy leaves in search of small crustaceans and insects. Northern Waterthrushes aren't big birds, only about five to six inches long from head to tail, brown back with under parts tinged with yellow and streaked with dark brown. When they walk watch for their bobbing tails, much like Spotted Sandpipers. There are numerous thoughts on why some species do this tail bobbing. One reason could be to help stir up insects from the shoreline or aquatic vegetation that they are walking through.

August 17 – August 23

This was a big week with 80 species recorded. As fall approaches we will see growing numbers of Sandhill Cranes gathering in preparation for their southern migration. On the 19th and 21st five Sandhill Cranes were seen. Also on the 19th, four Red-necked Phalaropes and one Red-eyed Vireo were spotted. Not every year do we have Green Herons in our area, but on the 23rd, one Green Heron was found at the Southwest corner then later in the day at the south end

(...../continued page 6)

of Center Dyke. Also on the 23rd, the Northern Mockingbird was spotted at the north edge of the Southwest Dyke. To add to the excitement of the 23rd, the Northern Waterthrush was seen again in the ditch off the East Dyke. Other birds of note for this week were Cinnamon Teal, Wilson's Snipe, Vaux's Swift, Merlin, Peregrine Falcon and Western Tanager.

August 24 – August 30

Large numbers of Common Ravens are still being seen. On the 24th a flock of twenty Ravens flew over the Outer Marsh. Two Stilt Sandpipers showed up on the back side of House Pond on the 27th. We have not seen any Barred Owls since March, but on the 28th two appeared. One was along the entrance driveway and the other near the Center Dyke bird blind. This time of year there are more Great Blue Herons in the area which is due to the addition of this year's offspring. Great Blue Herons nest in May and June., taking 25 to 29 days to hatch and then another 50 to 60 days to fledge. The juvenile birds have a dark crown, an overall darker body and lack the plumes of adult birds. A Great Blue Heron attains full adult plumage when it is three years old. The Peregrine



Stilt Sandpiper

Photo: Jim Martin

Falcon is still in the area and keeping the shorebirds on their toes. The first return of Greater White-fronted Geese, Greater Scaup, Lincoln's Sparrow and Dark-eyed Junco were all found this week which had a total species count of 83.

September gets busy at the Sanctuary as the dabbling ducks return from the interior and the fall sparrows return from the north. Warblers and shorebirds are still plentiful but will soon be continuing their migration south. The last week of September we expect to see the first Lesser Snow Geese returning from nesting grounds on Wrangel Island, Russia. The total count for birds in September 2025 was 107.

August 31 – September 6

There were many notable bird highlights from this week's list which totaled 84 species. The Green Heron is still being seen on August 31st and September 1st. One of the Barred Owls showed up again on the 31st at the Center Dyke bird blind. September 1st we were still able to find eight to ten Purple Martins flying over the parking lot. September 5th a juvenile Yellow-headed Blackbird was spotted near the Observation Tower. Also on the 5th a Gray Catbird was found along the East Dyke around nesting box #322. Since the week of August 3rd to the 9th we hadn't seen any Rufous Hummingbirds so it was a surprise to find one on September 6th. The Northern Mockingbird showed up again in the same area as August 23rd. Fox Sparrows have now showed up bringing the sparrow species count to seven for this week. Once it gets a bit cooler and we put up the seed feeders these will be good areas to watch for sparrows.

September 7 – September 13

On the 7th we are still able to locate the Green Heron at the Southwest corner. A Great Horned Owl was located in a Douglas Fir at the north end of the East Dyke on the 10th. Ten Sandhill Cranes were seen flying over the Sanctuary on the same day. Then on



Dunlin in flight

Photo: John Whitmore



Barred Owl

Photo: John Whitmore

September 11th and 12th, up to 26 Sandhill Cranes were spotted foraging in a harvested field on Westham Island. Our family of three will likely be with them as they haven't been around the Sanctuary since last week. Once the wild cranes head south, our three will probably be back at the Sanctuary to greet visitors along the trails. Starting in August and through the winter, keep an eye out for Wilson's Snipe. They are similar in size to the dowitcher but the markings of Snipe are darker with bold cream colored stripes. They both have long bills that are good for probing earthworms, insects and crustaceans that hide in the mud. Unlike the dowitchers that hang around in large flocks, Wilson's Snipe are solitary. The best place to find them is along edges of boggy areas.

September 14 – September 20

In the Southwest Marsh we had a high count of thirteen Pied-billed Grebes. Pied-billed Grebes have a unique way of evading potential trouble. It's the reverse of "up periscope" to see what is going on. They sink straight down leaving their head above water to keep an eye on the nearby threat. Pied-billed Grebes can squeeze much of the air out of their feathers and partially deflate their air sacs enabling them to float at any level or submerge. September 17th was the first report for the fall of a Northern Saw-whet Owl. September and October they are moving through and only stop for a short rest or a quick meal. By late November we have more consistent sightings of the Northern Saw-whet Owl and other birds of



Sandhill Crane trio

Photo: Dan Parlee



Sandhill Crane

Photo: John Whitmore

prey. On September 17th, three Cinnamon Teal showed up and on the 19th an American Bittern was found. Like shorebird viewing, American Bitterns are more easily spotted during high tides. Offshore bird viewing produced Surf Scoter, Double-crested Cormorant, Black-bellied Plover, Ring-billed Gull and California Gull. A family of river Otters was located in the Display Ponds on the 19th. The last sighting of a Barn Swallow at the Sanctuary was on the 20th.

September 21 – September 27

Western Painted Turtles, Red-eared Sliders and Common Carp that were all noticeable on sunny summer days are now burrowed down into the mud and stay motionless over the winter going into hibernation. September 25th the first Short-eared Owl was located as it flew over the outer marsh. This month is good to find a crossover of species from the summer and the beginning of a diverse selection of birds moving south for the winter. Even if you are not searching for birds this is a pleasant time of year to enjoy a peaceful walk in these natural surroundings.

Text: Varri Raffan
Giftshop Manager

2025 Sanctuary Nest Monitoring Report

As in previous summers, we have monitored nests and nesting activity across the Sanctuary, including nest boxes and Barn Swallow nests on our structures. This year we documented 42 broods, which included instances where no nest was found but young were observed being taken care of by adults. In total 38 bird species were confirmed nesting or rearing young this season in the Sanctuary.

Despite being a spring and summer species, Barn Swallows were periodically present throughout the winter. After the arrival of our nesting pairs in April, it seems as if fewer pairs had returned for nesting compared to previous years. Our suspicion was confirmed by a lower number of clutches, as only 39 clutches were recorded this year compared to 57 clutches last year. The first active nest was found on May 9th, while the last nests were still active by late August. The largest colony remained under the warming hut deck.

Predation seemed to pose a particular challenge this year especially for waterfowl. Otter, racoon, and mink are the main egg-thieves at the Sanctuary. Raccoons and their young were continually observed throughout the nesting season and a family of River Otters with three juveniles were consistently seen in our ponds since mid-September. It looks like our predators were successful in raising their own young over the summer.

Waterfowl broods are typically recorded within a week of hatching. Only two broods of Canada Geese were seen this year and unfortunately, only one gosling made it to adulthood. In contrast 21 Mallard broods were recorded. Although most broods were documented within the first week after hatching, it seems that an additional six to eight broods went unnoticed until they were older based on later brood counts. Only two Gadwall broods were found in late June. Although we typically have low counts of Gadwall broods, this year was particularly low. Once again Cinnamon Teal also successfully nested at the Sanctuary. On July 27th, a brood of eight was confirmed in West Field. Another brood was reported earlier in the season, but this sighting was not confirmed.

The first Wood Duck brood was observed on June 28th. We observed both a newly hatched brood of ten and a single duckling estimated to be two weeks old in Robertson Slough. By the end of July, six broods were documented. On September 18th, fourteen juveniles were recorded in Display Ponds. A check of our Wood Duck boxes in mid-August concluded that 21 boxes had been used by Wood Ducks, however, many contained unhatched eggs. The cause for the abandonment of the eggs remain unclear.



Baby Cedar Waxwing

Photo: Kristina Breit

Nest box monitoring started in early spring based on visual observations. In June, two borescope cameras were added to assist nest surveys. The scopes allowed us to inspect the inside of nest boxes with minimal disturbance to nesting birds. The value of using these tools was quickly proven. While testing the camera with one of the nest boxes on the Warming Hut deck, we discovered four Chickadee chicks almost ready to fledge. This was a surprise since no nesting activity was observed at this box until we used this camera.

With continued visual observations and the addition of camera inspections, we confirmed the use of at least 106 boxes. Forty of the boxes were used by Tree Swallows, nineteen by House Sparrows, fourteen by Chickadees, and ten by Bewick's Wrens. Another 34 nest boxes showed signs of use by either Tree Swallows or House Sparrows, but nesting could not be confirmed. Maintenance and cleaning of the nest boxes over the winter will give us a more complete picture.

In addition to monitoring nest boxes and Barn Swallows, we conducted regular nest surveys along trails for hummingbirds since early spring. The first nest was found on February 22nd in the early stage of construction, and the last nest fledged two young on July 19th. These surveys took place after closing, when reduced disturbance made it easier to detect nests. In total, 103 natural nests were recorded through this survey.

A total of 57 hummingbird nests were recorded this year, 26 of which were Anna's Hummingbird nests and nineteen Rufous Hummingbird nests. Twelve nests have already fledged by the time we found them, so these nests could not be assigned to either species due to overlapping nesting characteristics. Out of the 26 Anna's hummingbird nests, fourteen successfully fledged young, but five were predated and four abandoned. The outcome of three nests remains unknown as vegetation obstructed the view of the nests overtime. Anna's Hummingbirds continue to display signs of nesting into fall, but no new nests were found. Of the nineteen Rufous Hummingbird nests, twelve nests successfully fledged young, two nests were predated, and three nests were abandoned. The first nest was found under construction on March 19th and the last active nest fledged two young on July 12th.

In tandem with nest monitoring, we continued our collaboration with Rocky Point Observatory's Hummingbird Project. This project monitors population trends, migration, and bird health for North American hummingbirds through banding. Dr. Christine Bishop, retired Environment and Climate Change Canada (ECCC) researcher, banded and assessed 122 hummingbirds at the Sanctuary this summer. These included 35 recaptures of birds banded in previous sessions from the same season or prior years. Of the 122 birds, 84 were Anna's Hummingbirds (61 new, 23 recaptures) and 69 were Rufous Hummingbirds (57 new, twelve recaptures). For the first time, all female hummingbirds were photographed as part of a study exploring whether individuals can be identified by the pattern of their gorget (throat) feathers. This could enhance understanding of nest reuse and site fidelity.

As in previous years, researchers from ECCC and Canadian Wildlife Service continued monitoring Spotted Towhee nests. This season the researchers found 24 nests and banded nineteen Towhees and five Brown-headed Cowbirds. The first nest found, which already contained nestlings, was found on May 6th. The last nest monitored by the researchers fledged on July 31st. However, we continued to see fledglings as late as September 17th.

Many other naturally nesting birds were recorded and monitored throughout the season. While we made effort to document nesting success, not all nesting outcomes could be confirmed. Some nests became inactive, others hidden by growing vegetation, and sometimes important observations were missed. Still, we did our best to record nest location, surrounding vegetation, and key details help understand nesting patterns.

Every year we are reminded just how many species nest within the Sanctuary. Eight American Robin

nests were recorded, starting as early as April 24th. Successful fledging could only be confirmed for two nests. Bushtits began nesting as early as March 10th and of the six nests documented, three successfully raised multiple broods. Bullock's Orioles were first seen improving the nest from last year on May 4th. By June 29th, at least three young successfully fledged. Cedar Waxwings began nesting around June 1st. Ten nests were documented, and four of them successfully fledged young as late as August 15th. The first natural Bewick's Wren nest was discovered on April 14th in a Viburnum shrub near the staff parking. Of the three natural nests found, we confirmed successful fledging for two while one was predated. Other nests observed included Northern Flicker (two nests), Downy Woodpecker (one nest), European Starling (three nests), Black-capped Chickadee (three nests), Red-breasted Nuthatch (one nest), Sandhill Crane, Bald Eagle (one nest), and Marsh Wren (over seven nests). This year's highlights included the Red-tailed Hawk nest along the Driveway that successfully fledged three young in June, and an abandoned Swainson's Thrush found on July 2nd.

While our ability to detect nests continues to improve, the nests of some bird species are harder to spot. We often rely on observing broods that led by adults, such as Killdeer and Virginia Rail, or by spotting parents feeding their fledglings. To learn more about which species raise their young at the Sanctuary, we have started to document incidental observations of broods as well. This year's brood observations included Great Horned Owl (one brood), Killdeer (three broods), Virginia Rail (two broods), American Goldfinch (two broods), Brown Creeper (one brood), Yellow-rumped Warbler (two broods), and several broods of Song Sparrow, Marsh Wren, and Spotted Towhee.

We would like to thank our volunteers, Dr. Christine Bishop, the Environment Canada's research team, and all visitors who shared their observations. Every sighting helps us to better understand bird life at the Sanctuary.

Text: Kristina Breit
Field Technician



Baby Killdeer

Photo: Dan Parlee

Manager's Report

Visitor Numbers for this quarter were slightly higher at 16,072 compared to 15,897 visitor for the same period last year. We saw higher visitation for July and August with September being slightly lower than last year. Weather was fairly warm, dry, and sunny for most of the summer. We only started to see rain a few times during mid to late August and again at the end of September.

With summer well under way, we saw many of our regular species for the time of year raising their young throughout the Sanctuary. Many Mallards and Wood Ducks spent most of July and August raising ducklings in the ponds. We also saw the Great Horned Owl pair with their juveniles throughout the early parts of July up in Douglas Fir trees along East Dike. Sightings of other regular summer species like Cinamon Teal and Blue-winged Teal became a regular occurrence throughout most of July and August, along with various shorebird species enjoying the shallows of the Sanctuary.

On July 15th, we were treated to a less common shorebird, Ruff. These birds typically spend the nesting season in northern Eurasia and winter in various countries throughout Africa. However, sometimes "vagrant" individuals make their way to

the shores of North America in the summertime. Often Ruffs are found enjoying our mudflats with flocks of other shorebirds like dowitchers and yellowlegs.

On July 27th we were treated to our first sighting of the Black-crowned Night Heron of the season. We often have one or two that spend the fall and winter in the crabapple trees behind our museum building along Fuller Dike. Sometimes we get a glimpse of one for a few days earlier in the summer, but they usually disappear until mid to late October.



Ruff in West Field

Photo: Ben Lambert



Some of the few odd looking geese we see as migrating Canada Geese come through

Photo: Dan Parlee

Aside from birds, the Sanctuary was active with other wildlife species throughout the summer. Sanctuary staff and volunteers conducted bat surveys again this year from June until August. The surveys follow the procedures outlined by the Community Bat Programs designed for British Columbia. The surveys consists of monitoring roost sites (mostly bat boxes) on several buildings in the Sanctuary just after sunset. Bats are counted as they leave the roosts to determine the number of bats that roost in the Sanctuary buildings.

Through guano (bat poop) DNA analysis last year, we determined that we have a species of bat called Yuma Myotis here at the Sanctuary. They are one of the fifteen bat species commonly found in British Columbia and are a vital part of our natural ecosystem here on the coast. Yuma Myotis, like many other local bat species, eats exclusively insects so they are well adapted to our wetland habitats here at the Sanctuary. These bats help to keep the insect population in check while providing valuable nutrients back to the soil in the form of guano.

Sanctuary staff were also busy this summer managing the habitat for wildlife. In late August and early September, our field crew cleared two areas of non-native and invasive shrubs and replanted them with a variety of native shrubs and flowers. One area was a large patch of non-native Multiflora Rose growing along the Inner Grassy trail and the other was a large area of invasive Himalayan Blackberry growing by the Southwest Viewing Platform.

The areas were selected for habitat restoration due to the lack of native plant diversity and the ease of maintenance access. Both Multiflora Rose and Himalayan Blackberry spread easily and often create a thicket of monoculture. Monocultures are created when one plant species overtakes an area and outcompetes all other species of plants. While the plants themselves may not be harmful, the monocultures can create large seasonal gaps in food production and can decrease the quality of habitat for our native animals. Replanting these areas with variety of native plants will increase the quality of habitat by providing variety in food and



*Inner grassy Garden after the Multiflora rose removal
Photo: Dani McRobbie*



*Restoration area on inner grassy trail
Photo: Dani McRobbie*



*New planting area by the Viewing Platform before (right) and after (left) the removal of blackberry
Photo: Marissa Sasaki*



(...../continued page 10)

roosting sites throughout the year. More diversity of plants also ensures that we meets the needs of many wildlife species that live in the Sanctuary. Increasing plant diversity will also improve the Sanctuary's ecosystem resilience to climate change and limit habitat degradation overtime.

As we moved later into September, we started to see a few more owls around the Sanctuary. Several Barn, Barred, and Great Horned Owls were spotted along the trails and in the trees off East Dike. A single Norther Saw-whet Owl was spotted mid -September but was gone the next day. These early Saw-whet sightings are often one-off appearances as they are birds moving through and not planning to stick around for the winter. We tend to see more consistent Saw-whets through the late winter from December to March.

On September 23rd, Sanctuary staff and volunteers ventured out into the Marsh to replace some Purple Martin nest boxes. Over the years, several nest box poles on the north side of the Sanctuary had been knocked down by the tide and drifting debris on the foreshore. Some of the older boxes have also rotted away and fallen off the existing poles. Three new poles, resulting in nine new boxes, were erected to replace old boxes and increase the nesting sites for Purple Martins come next spring. We will monitor the nests in the coming spring to see how many of our new boxes get used and determine if there is a need to add more in the future.

By the end of September, we started to see the return of many overwintering waterfowl species. Northern Shovelers, Northern Pintails, American Wigeon and Hooded Mergansers started to appear in small numbers. Many flocks of Cackling Geese and a few Greater White-fronted Geese also started arriving and spent some time in the Southwest Marsh and Fuller Slough. By this time, small flocks of Snow Geese were starting to arrive back in the Fraser Delta from their nesting grounds on Wrangle Island in Russia. We would often hear them flying over during the day and spotted them foraging in farm fields along Westham Island in the evenings. Most flocks at this point were not much bigger than 50 to 100 birds at a time. We usually don't expect to start seeing large flocks in the thousands of birds until mid to late October when the migration is in full swing.

On the very last day of September this year, we were briefly visited by a special guest in the Sanctuary. A Great Egret had landed in the pond behind our gift shop and stood on the rocks for several minutes, being admired by visitors before it flew off, not to be seen again. While we occasionally see one flying offshore, we have rarely ever had one of these egrets end up in our ponds. Great Egrets are much more common just south of the border so getting one in the Sanctuary is always a nice way to kick off the fall season.

Text: Evan Gogal
Sanctuary Manager



Great Egret in House Pond *Photo: Kristina Breit*



Staff and volunteers working out in the marsh
Photo: Kristia Breit



New Purple Martin boxes in and amongst the older nest boxes

Photo: Kristina Breit

2025 Christmas Bird Count Dates

Birds Canada is looking for experienced and novice birders, and citizen science enthusiasts alike to participate in the annual Christmas Bird Count survey. This volunteer opportunity is perfect for those who are interested in learning more about birds, or for those looking for a way to contribute to bird conservation in North America. The count has been taking place since the early 1900's, and the count relies almost entirely on volunteers. This year the count will be taking place between December 14th to January 5th across North America.

More information regarding the count and volunteer sign up for different count circles are available through the Birds Canada website. Count dates and contacts for some of the local count circles are also available below. Those interested volunteering can reach out to area coordinators directly via email.

Ladner: Sunday, December 14, 2025 (Yousif Attia: ysattia@gmail.com)

Vancouver: Saturday, December 20, 2025 (Peter Candido: cbc@naturevancouver.ca)

White Rock-Surrey-Langley: Saturday, December 27, 2025 (Kristina Breit: cbcwhiterock@gmail.com)

Pitt Meadows: Saturday, January 3, 2026 (Jennifer Tayes: jtayes@shaw.ca | Gareth Pugh: gareth2@uniserve.com)

Lower Howe Sound: Saturday, January 4, 2026 (Micaele Florendo: mmaddison@hotmail.com)

Kiera's Time at Rocky Point Bird Observatory

One of the most popular species at the Sanctuary through the winter is the Northern Saw-whet Owl. It is always a delight to find them roosting along our trails. Over the years of working here I have enjoyed learning about and watching out for them. So, when the opportunity arose to see them up close I just had to say yes!

Rocky Point Bird Observatory (RPBO) is a non-profit society based in Victoria. They manage two bird banding stations on the southern tip of Vancouver Island, which is an important migratory route for Northern Saw-whet Owls. Every year from September 15th to October 31st, nocturnal owl banding is conducted each night. Northern Saw-whet Owl activity typically peaks during the first week of October when over 60 individuals may be banded on a single night. Between the two stations, over 1,000 of them may be banded during a busy year. Since the start of owl monitoring in 2002, over 16,000 individuals have been banded. The data gathered at the banding station is sent to the Canadian Wildlife Service and the Bird Banding Laboratory of the U.S. Geological Survey where it is used for research purposes.



Northern Saw-whet Owl
Photo: Rocky Point Bird Observatory



Northern Saw-whet Owl wrapped in cloth bag
Photo: Rocky Point Bird Observatory

If you wish to see the banders at work, you can register as a visitor on their website through rpbo.org. Only the Pedder Bay banding station is open to the public and visitor slots are only available on certain nights which fill up quickly. To “whet” your appetite for this incredible educational opportunity, let me walk you through a night at the owl banding station.

As you approach the banding site, you can hear the “toot toot toot” territorial call of a male Northern Saw-whet Owl. The call comes from a speaker to entice nearby owls to investigate. The speaker is surrounded by several nets which catch the owls as they fly in to investigate the call. Volunteers check these nets for Northern Saw-whet Owls every twenty minutes, however, other species of owls around the banding stations occasionally get caught in these nets as well. When Barred Owls are caught, they are banded and released at the edge of the property at the end of the banding session. This is to prevent the larger owls, like barred owls, from making a meal out of the smaller Northern Saw-whet Owls while they are in the nets. So as an extra precaution, when predators are seen in the area, volunteers sit beside the nets to promptly extract the little owls as they are caught.

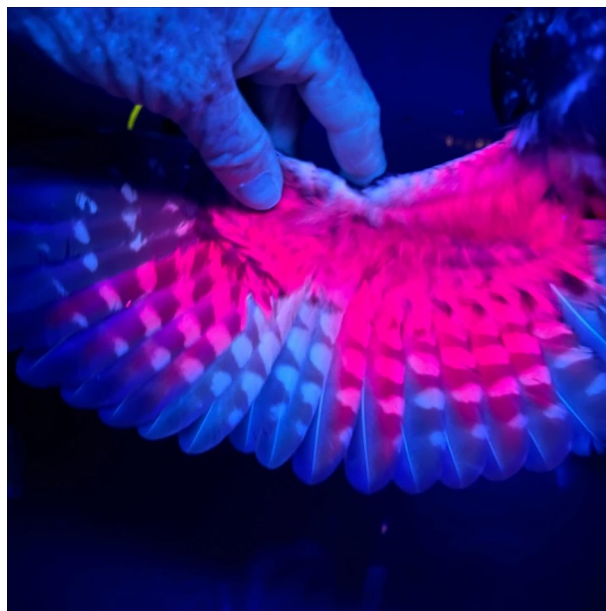
When a Northern Saw-whet Owl is in the net, it is carefully extracted by the feet first. It is then put in a dark cloth bag for transport back to the station where it will be processed by banders. Once banders are ready, they weigh the owl, place a number band on it, and take some measurements. Each owl has physically



*Northern Saw-whet Owl next to a eye colour chart
Photo: Rocky Point Bird Observatory*

unique characteristics, so banders take note of their eye colour, foot colour, bill tip colour, as well as the wing and tail length and muscle condition.

Each bird is then aged based on the feather quality. For this, banders examine the owl's wing under a special black light. Freshly replaced feathers will appear bright pink which contrast strongly with any older, paler, feathers. The owl is then placed in a special "owl hotel" for release, and is free to fly away once its eyes adjust to the dark. The whole process only takes a few minutes.



*Northern Saw-whet Owl wing under UV light
Photo: Rocky Point Bird Observatory*

Seeing Northern Saw-whet Owls up close and being involved in the research of them has given me a new appreciation for these creatures. Now, when I find one along our trails, I will be reminded of just how small they look in someone's hand, how subtly different each owl is, and how lucky we are to have them stay with us throughout the winter.

Text: Kiera Fritsch
Field Technician

The Volunteer Corner

Special thanks to:

- ◆ Mary Taft for leading our Sunday Bird Walk.
- ◆ Jim Martin and Brian Self for their year-round hosting of visitors on weekends.
- ◆ John Chandler, Benjamin Zochert, Yasmine Farrugia, and Carmen Prang for helping with trail maintenance during the week.
- ◆ Brian Self, Peter Candido, Ben Lambert, Janice White, Dirk Fleming, Sabine Jessen, Yousif Attia, and Benjamin Zochert for helping with bi-weekly bird surveys.
- ◆ Carmen Prang, Jasmine Farrugia, Margaret Gorham, Calypso Kenney, Brian Self, John Chandler, Syd Barber, and Benjamin Zochert for helping with the annual bat surveys.
- ◆ Margaret Gorham for hosting visitors at the museum every Sunday.
- ◆ John Chandler, Rebecca Friesen, and David Pawliuck for helping with installing new Purple Martin boxes.
- ◆ Our hard-working volunteer Directors.

Annual Admission Benefits

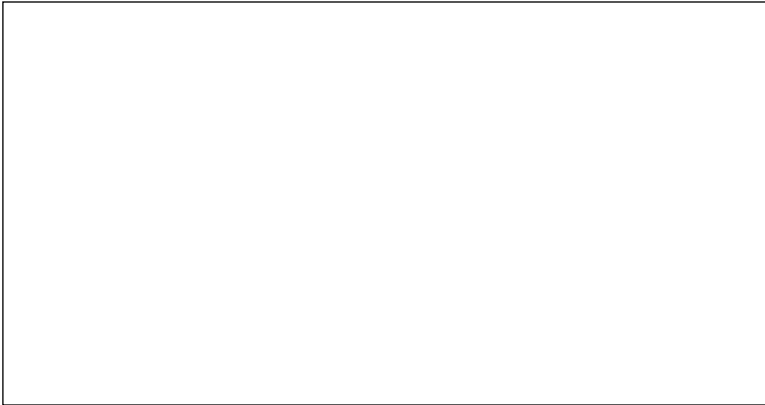
- FREE admission for a year to the George C. Reifel Migratory Bird Sanctuary .
- Quarterly issue of the BCWS publication "Marshnotes".
- A 10% discount on purchases in the Sanctuary Gift Shop.
- Support one of British Columbia's most respected conservation organizations.

With your support, the British Columbia Waterfowl Society is able to:

Staff, maintain and expand facilities at the Sanctuary for the benefit of its visitors and supporters; provide interpretive and education programs, including guided tours for organized groups of all ages; contribute towards important scientific research on waterfowl to determine their life cycle needs for survival; and provide support for like-minded organizations who are working on waterfowl related projects.

BRITISH COLUMBIA WATERFOWL SOCIETY

5191 Robertson Road, Delta, British Columbia V4K 3N2



Stilt Sandpiper © Benjamin Zochert