

Marshnotes[®]



BRITISH COLUMBIA WATERFOWL SOCIETY
Spring 2026

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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The British Columbia Waterfowl Society
5191 Robertson Road
Delta, British Columbia
V4K 3N2

Telephone: 604 946 6980
Facsimile: 604 946 6982
Website: www.reifelbirdsantuary.com
Email: bcws@reifelbirdsantuary.com

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George C. Reifel Migratory Bird Sanctuary:

Prices: (effective January 1st, 2026)

Daily Admission:

Adults: \$10.00

Seniors: \$8.00 (65+ years)

Children: \$7.00 (2-14 years)

Bird seed: \$2.00/bag

Annual Admission:

Family: \$140.00

Individual: \$ 70.00

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Sanctuary Manager: Evan Gogal
Gift Shop Manager: Varri Raffan
Biologist: Marissa Sasaki
Education: Dani McRobbie
Maintenance: Phoenix Black
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 3pm, 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.

This Spring edition of Marshnotes is being released earlier to accommodate the Notice of the Annual General Meeting.

NOTICE OF ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING
of
British Columbia Waterfowl Society
will be held at:
Ladner Community Centre
4734 51 Street, Ladner, BC
7:00 p.m. Monday, March 30, 2026

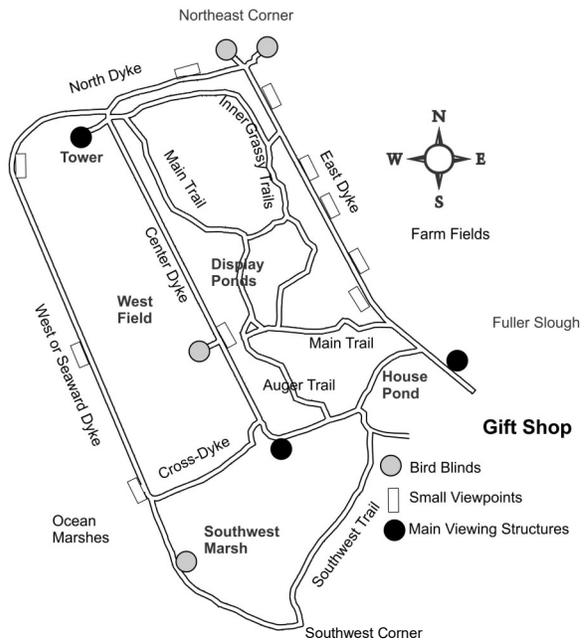
Sanctuary Locations Map

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

About Our Covers

- Front Cover: Mallard
© Kristina Breit
- Back Cover: Northern Pintail
© Kristina Breit

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



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Bird Highlights for January and February 2026



Great-blue Heron

Photo: Marissa Sasaki

A huge thank you to Varri, who has been writing the Bird Highlights section of Marshnotes for the last 16 years. I hope to do as good of a job as Varri to inform our readers of what has been seen in the Sanctuary! Moving forward the Bird Highlights section is going to look a little different. In addition to bird highlights, there will be an added segment of a species profile where we will discuss about their characteristics and some interesting facts. Please bear with us as we navigate this new chapter of the Bird Highlights segment.

With the unexpected and continuing closure of Westham Island Bridge resulting in less visitors scouting the Sanctuary for birds, the species list was not as robust as it typically is this time of the year. The bird survey still took place twice a month despite the closure to keep track of species present and their abundance, which allowed us to take a closer look as to who was hanging around the Sanctuary during the months of January and February. We did our best to keep an eye out for some exciting birds between avoiding contractors and equipment while doing our regular Sanctuary maintenance, but it is hard to match the keen eyes of the hundreds of birders we get within a week.

List of bird highlights by week	
December 28 th , 2025- January 3 rd , 2026	Canvasback, American Bittern, Black-crowned Night Heron, Great Horned Owl, Short-eared Owl, Northern Saw-whet Owl, Peregrine Falcon, Northern Shrike, White-throated Sparrow
January 4 th -10 th	Canvasback, Northern Saw-whet Owl, Belted Kingfisher, Merlin, Peregrine Falcon, Cackling Goose
January 11 th - 17 th	Cackling Goose, Mallard-Pintail Hybrid, Canvasback, Black-crowned Night Heron, Sora, Wilson’s Snipe, Great Horned Owl, Barred Owl, Peregrine Falcon, Northern Shrike, American Pipit, Cedar Waxwing
January 18 th -24 th	Eurasian Wigeon, Canvasback, Black-crowned Night Heron, Wilson’s Snipe, Great Horned Owl, Short-eared Owl, Merlin, American Pipit, White-throated Sparrow
January 25 th -31 st	Cackling Goose, Eurasian Wigeon, Canvasback, Ring-necked Pheasant, Black-crowned Night Heron, Wilson’s Snipe, Great Horned Owl, Belted Kingfisher
February 1 st -7 th	Eurasian Wigeon, Canvasback, Black-crowned Night Heron, Great Horned Owl, Short-eared Owl, Peregrine Falcon, White-throated Sparrow
February 8 th -14 th	Canvasback, Black-crowned Night Heron, Wilson’s Snipe, Great Horned Owl, Peregrine Falcon, American Pipit
February 15 th -21 st	Eurasian Wigeon, Canvasback, Black-crowned Night Heron, Wilson’s Snipe, Short-eared Owl, Peregrine Falcon, White-throated Sparrow
February 22 nd -28 th	Canvasback, Black-crowned Night Heron, Short-eared Owl, Peregrine Falcon, White-throated Sparrow

Despite the challenging conditions of the trails as the result of flooding, conditions temperature and weather wise were mild. January and February only saw a handful of days below freezing temperatures which kept the ponds available most days for overwintering waterfowl to use for foraging. The mild weather conditions seemed to also have resulted in at reduced return of ducks this winter, although this is an anecdotal observation. If mild conditions are also seen in the northern and eastern regions of B.C., many waterfowl may have opted out of completing their winter migration to preserve their energy and make use of resources that are available closer to their breeding grounds. However, the truth of this seemingly lower turnout of overwintering ducks could lie elsewhere as many factors can influence population trends.

In January we saw 84 species. Despite the lower volume of ducks, we still saw all of the usual species that occupy and make use of the Sanctuary in the winter. The first week of January brought a whole new pond system for ducks to explore as we experienced major flooding of the Display Ponds. Diving ducks like Buffleheads, Hooded Mergansers, and Ring-necked Ducks could be seen diving where there was once a trail. Triangle Garden was transformed into Triangle Island, where the shorelines were lined with dozens of Northern Shovellers interspersed with some Mallards, Northern Pintails, and American Wigeon taking breaks from swimming and foraging. Dozens of Common Mergansers were seen taking advantage of the deeper water ways, diving and emerging with fish in their beaks. The typically shy and nervous Pied-billed Grebes took advantage of the lack of visitors and ventured forth onto the flooded trail system as well, joining the other diving ducks on the feeding frenzy. Away from the chaos of Display Ponds, a flock of Canvasbacks made use of Robertson Slough, where they could be seen nearly every day diving for food. On the trails, the usual songbirds could be seen foraging the trail surfaces as machinery disturbed and unearthed new soil for them to find food in. Among the foraging ground sparrows, a lone White-throated Sparrow could be seen tagging along as they all shuffle aside leaves in search of food.

In February we recorded 65 species. Many of our songbirds have started singing in anticipation of nesting season once again. The once silent marsh is slowly springing back to life with little Marsh Wrens whispering as they practice their songs. Trees that line our Entrance Trail and Display Ponds are littered with dozens of Red-winged Blackbirds belting out a cacophonous chorus as they prepare to establish nesting territories and secure a mate. Offshore, Snow Geese are seen returning as they stage to refuel in preparation for migration northward to Wrangel Island. When the tide is low, hundreds of American Wigeon, and occasionally, a handful of rogue

Eurasian Wigeons could be seen offshore foraging for marsh plants. Among the saltwater marsh, flocks of Dunlin in the thousands could be seen flying across the water and intertidal mudflats with flocks of hundreds and thousands of ducks and swans foraging. In the tall cattail, dozens of Great Blue Herons could be seen hunkered down, either roosting or foraging for critters like voles. On some days, each of the Purple Martin nest boxes had a heron perched on top as if they were all looking across their saltwater marsh kingdom. In the Sanctuary, the flock of Canvasbacks continued hang around Robertson Slough and were seen nearly everyday of February.

As we hear the cheerful songs return to the Sanctuary, we are reminded that the lull of winter is coming to a close. Eagles in various parts of the Sanctuary are very intently remodeling their nests. A pair of Red-tailed Hawks are also starting to renovate their home along the Driveway. Canada Geese are paired up now and could be seen along the trails entering into property disputes with other geese. The winter-regular Black-crowned Night Heron will be departing soon to their mysterious nesting grounds as well. Along the trails plants like Osoberry and Red-flowering currant are starting to bloom as of mid February, meaning spring arrivals such as the Rufous Hummingbirds will be here in a blink of an eye.

Text: Marissa Sasaki
Sanctuary Biologist



White-throated Sparrow Photo: Marissa Sasaki
(...../continued page 6)

Canvasbacks: The Aristocrats of the Marsh

This winter, we were delighted to see up to nine Canvasbacks nearly everyday these last two months spending their winter days in Robertson Slough. I think this has broken a recent high record of Canvasbacks we have seen at one time in the Sanctuary since we typically only see a few individuals for a few days on and off in our ponds. Canvasbacks are a striking looking duck, particularly the males, where they have a dark chocolate coloured head, a piercing red eye, and a beautiful white back that resembles a blank canvas. Aside from their colouring, their silhouette is quite distinguishable from other ducks as well since they have a large beak that slopes gently down from their forehead. The females are a little more subdued in their colouring, appearing overall drab with a darker chestnut coloured chest and a light grey-ish back and belly.

Canvasbacks are a diving duck that feeds on both aquatic invertebrates and marsh plants. Their scientific name, *Aythya valisineria*, is derived from the scientific name of wild celery (*Vallisneria americana*) which is supposedly one of the favourite winter forages for this species. This plant is more commonly found in eastern Canada, so unfortunately it is unlikely that the Canvasbacks in the Sanctuary have had an opportunity to try such a delicacy.

In the Sanctuary, the only times we see the Canvasbacks are exclusively in winter. Sometime in spring Canvasbacks will return to their breeding grounds which is primarily restricted to central regions of North America. Some common breeding grounds are known as the “Duck Factory of North America”, which include the prairie provinces such as Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba, and states like Idaho, Montana, and North Dakota. Some populations will stick closer and breed in the interior of B.C., and some may even go as far north as the North West Territories, Yukon, or Alaska. Some smaller breeding populations can be found in little pockets of south-central USA.

Canvasbacks are known to return to the same nesting sites each year. These birds like to nest in areas with standing water such as ponds, shallow lakes, and marshes with plenty of semi-aquatic vegetation to use for foraging, nest building, and for camouflage. Nesting activities from nest construction to raising young, like most ducks, are done exclusively by females while the male guards the nest from predators and on-lookers like Redheads. Redheads are a duck that look similar to Canvasbacks, and they are known to lay their eggs in nests of Canvasbacks so they don't have to raise their own young. The behaviour of pawning off eggs to an unsuspecting bird parent is known as brood parasitism. Brood parasitism is a reproductive strategy that allows an individual, in this

Canvasback vs Redhead

Note despite the similar colouration between the Canvasback and Redhead, the Canvasback has a distinctive slope to the dark beak from the forehead. In comparison the Redhead below has a pronounced forehead and a dusty blue beak.



Male Canvasback

Photo: Jim Martin



Male Redhead

Photo: Jim Martin

case Redheads, to pass on their genetics and offspring without the need for them to spend energy on survival of themselves and their young. Some of our local and commonly seen birds like Wood Ducks and Brown-headed Cowbirds also use brood parasitism as a reproductive strategy. Evidence of brood parasitism is observable at the Sanctuary when a Wood Duck hen has an exceptionally large brood or when a little Yellow Warbler is tirelessly feeding a cowbird baby that is two times larger than themselves during nesting season.

When winter approaches, Canvasbacks will leave their breeding grounds and migrate in search of reliable food sources to sustain them over the winter. During this time they can be found spending their winter foraging in fresh water lakes, estuaries and harbours. However, where they spend their winter is primarily determined by food availability.

Although not endangered, Canvasbacks, like many birds, are living with the consequences of human activities that make survival difficult. Being a dweller of the wetlands, there are many aspects of human activity that surround their favoured habitat that threaten the stability of their population across North America. Pollution from agricultural fertilizer and pesticides often leach into wetlands which result in their food sources like plants and bugs being contaminated or killed by heavy metals and toxic chemicals. The wetlands where they raise their young and forage for food are often drained and

filled for human development, resulting in these birds having to search for the wetlands which remain in their breeding range. These are just some of the additional challenges birds like Canvasbacks have to face in addition to having to navigate the already tough survival in the wild.

In a few weeks time, much like our other overwintering ducks, we will be saying goodbye to these esteemed aristocrats. I hope they have a safe journey back to their nesting grounds and a successful nesting season. Hopefully they will return again in high numbers next winter and grace us with their presence in Robertson Slough to greet our visitors.

Text: Marissa Sasaki
Sanctuary Biologist

Source:
Mowbray, T. B. (2020). Canvasback (Aythya valisineria), version 1.0. In Birds of the World (A. F. Poole and F. B. Gill, Editors). Cornell Lab of Ornithology, Ithaca, NY, USA.
<https://doi.org/10.2173/bow.canvas.01>



Female Canvasbacks in Robertson Slough

Photo: Olaf Kringhaug



Flooded Display Ponds

Photo: Kristina Breit

Manager's Report

Visitor numbers for January and February were very low at 310 visitors total. This is obviously not normal visitor numbers for this time of year, with only the first four days of January having any visitors due to the closure of the Sanctuary.

The new year started off with many complications for the Sanctuary. On January 4th staff noticed moderate flooding in the inner Display Ponds. A few minutes later we found that the mix of king tides, heavy rains, and strong winds brought elevated estuary conditions which water overtop an isolated section of North Dyke. This caused the Sanctuary to close as conditions became unsafe for visitors. Over the next few days, more water came in causing additional flooding and damage some of our main trail systems. This called for swift action to make plans to repair the damage done and drain the Sanctuary as quickly as possible.

Repairs took longer than expected due to wet weather conditions at the beginning and middle of January. This caused further damage to non-flooded trails as they were the primary route for equipment to move around the Sanctuary. The unexpected additional damaged unfortunately created further delays. As we were coming close to a potential re-opening date at the

end of January, we were met with another complication that affected the entirety of Westham Island. On January 20th, a barge struck the 116-year-old wooden bridge that acts as the sole access point for the island. This event caused us to extend the closure of the Sanctuary to the public until the bridge reopens, which as of the release of this edition of Mashnotes, has not happened yet.

Despite the bridge closure, our staff pressed on and



Staff repairing waterfowl loafing logs

Photo: Evan Gogal

continued to make the complicated daily trip in to maintain the Sanctuary. This took the form of crossing the bridge on foot for some time and borrowing a Westham Island residents' vehicle on the island to complete the journey to the Sanctuary. Once the bridge repairs had begun, the bridge was then closed to foot traffic and staff had to take the provided water taxis to get onto the Island. Despite complications, TransLink and the water taxi contractors have done a good job to streamline this process which made it bearable for Sanctuary staff and island residents.

To make the most of this unforeseen closure and longer commute, staff focused on several larger habitat projects during this period. The first task was addressing a large patch of Himalayan Blackberry and a degrading slope by the Viewing Tower. The patch grows right by our water control structure at the intersection of West Dyke, North Dyke, Center Dyke and Main Trail, just below the retaining wall along West Dyke. Staff cut all Blackberry canes to the ground and dug up the root crowns to reduce its future regrowth.

The plan with this area is to replant with native shrubs and to reinforce the slope with terraced "wattling fences". Wattling is a natural construction technique that uses native shrubs to create a fence for improving soil retention and bank stability. The process consists of harvesting branches from native shrubs. Here at the Sanctuary, staff will harvest from Salmonberry, Red Osier Dogwood, Hardhack and native willows.



Harvested wattle fence materials

Thicker diameter branches are evenly staked into the ground as support posts while longer, thinner branches are weaved in between the posts, creating a wall of native shrubs. Soil is then back filled up against the wattling and over time the vegetative fence will establish roots back into the soil.

A single row of wattling can work well on shallow shorelines and very gradual slopes. For construction on steeper slopes, however, terracing is recommended for added stability. For our area we will be constructing three terraces to reduce the steepness of the slope and provide lots of areas for replanting native vegetation. Staff carted several wagons full of potted native shrubs and flowers onto the island during the closure in preparation for the planting in these terraces. Some of these native plants will also be used for revegetating other areas that staff are currently working on. For example, when not removing blackberry, staff have been busy removing a large English Ivy patch behind the Robert Harris memorial bench along the front entrance trail. This area will be replanted with a variety of native shrubs and wildflowers to increase species diversity and habitat value for our birds and other wildlife species.

Staff have also spent some time these last two months refreshing our nest boxes in preparation for spring arrivals. We went around cleaning the winter rodent nest material out of all our Wood Duck boxes and filled them back up with a thin layer of fresh woodchips to create a nice, warm base for the



*Photo: Marissa Sasaki
(...../continued page 10)*

(Continued from page 9)

upcoming nesting season. While we were out with the ladders, we also installed new metal guards on the entrances of some of our songbird boxes to help improve Tree Swallow nesting success. These new guards have a narrower, oval shaped entrance hole which still allows Tree Swallows to enter but keep bigger birds like invasive House Sparrows out. These narrower guards also better protect against nest predation by rats looking for swallow eggs as a snack in the spring.

While we haven't had any human visitors to the Sanctuary during this period, staff haven't been completely alone out here. The birds and other wildlife have been making the most of the closure as well. Many days we see River Otters, Beavers, Racoons and even the occasional Coyote roaming around the Sanctuary. These mammals feel much more comfortable out in the open during the day when there are fewer people around the trails.

Several Short-eared Owls have been seen by staff off the West Dyke while conducting our regular bird surveys every second Saturday. By Late February we were also starting to see several large flocks of Snow Geese stage on the foreshore, getting ready to make the long spring journey back up to Wrangle Island for the nesting season.

Several resident nesting species were starting to become quite active throughout the Sanctuary in

February. The pair of Red-tailed Hawks that were nested on the driveway last spring started rebuilding their nest in early February. They fledged three chicks here last year, but unfortunately, the winter winds and rain completely destroyed the old nest. The new rebuild has gone up quite quickly and we are eagerly awaiting the first sightings of this year's young.

Several pairs of Canada Geese have started scoping out nesting spots for the spring as well. Disputes between two goose couples around the parking lot have become a regular occurrence in the mornings. Several nest spots around our museum building are often quite contested by the Canada Geese as they tend to be quite successful in hatch survival. These nest spots also provide quick access to many visitors in the spring who like to give handouts of bird seeds to the defending male goose.

Our resident pair of Sandhill Cranes have been spending lots of time alone since the beginning of February when the larger winter flock dispersed, all going back to their individual nesting territories. The Sanctuary cranes have been spending lots of time renewing their pair bond in preparation for the coming nesting season. Small rusty patches are starting to appear on their plumage as a result of their feather staining rituals. This is an exercise where both cranes venture out into the marsh, dip their beaks in the mud and then rub it all over their bodies. The result is a lovely orange tint to their otherwise silvery-grey feathers from the iron oxide (rust) rich soils of the Fraser River Delta.



Racoons family in House Pond

Photo: Kristina Breit

With February coming to a close and the weather warming up, we have started to see a lot of our native vegetation start to “spring” back to life. Many shrubs and trees have small leaf and flower buds emerging. Many native wildflowers are also starting to send their first shoots of green up through the dirt. On February 27th, we even saw our first Salmonberry flower in bloom. With the warmer days and emergence of the spring vegetation, we expect to start seeing many of our migratory spring songbirds starting to arrive in the next few weeks. We are hopeful that as spring continues on, we will soon be able to reopen and see all of our regular visitors start to flock back to the Sanctuary as well.

Text: Evan Gogal
Sanctuary Manager



Salmonberry flower



Anna's Hummingbird

Photo: Kristina Breit

The Volunteer Corner

Special thanks to:

- ◆ Mary Taitt for leading our Sunday Bird Walk.
- ◆ Jim Martin and Brian Self for their year-round hosting of visitors on weekends.
- ◆ John Chandler and Janice White for helping with trail maintenance during the week.
- ◆ Brian Self, Peter Candido, Ben Lambert, Janice White, Dirk Fleming, Sabine Jessen, Yousif Attia, and Lelah Zimmerman for helping with bi-weekly bird surveys.
- ◆ Margaret Gorham for hosting visitors at the museum every Sunday.
- ◆ 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



Northern Pintail © Kristina Breit