

# Marshnotes<sup>®</sup>



**BRITISH COLUMBIA WATERFOWL SOCIETY**  
**Winter 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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## 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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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.

## Bird of the Year: Spotted Redshank

Monthly Highlights :

<i>January</i>	<i>February</i>	<i>March</i>	<i>April</i>
Turkey Vulture	Barrow's Goldeneye	Northern Mockingbird	Chipping Sparrow
<i>May</i>	<i>June</i>	<i>July</i>	<i>August</i>
Western Kingbird	Baird's Sandpiper	Ruff	Ruby-crowned Kinglet
<i>September</i>	<i>October</i>	<i>November</i>	<i>December</i>
Gray Catbird	Spotted Redshank	Northern Goshawk	Common Yellowthroat

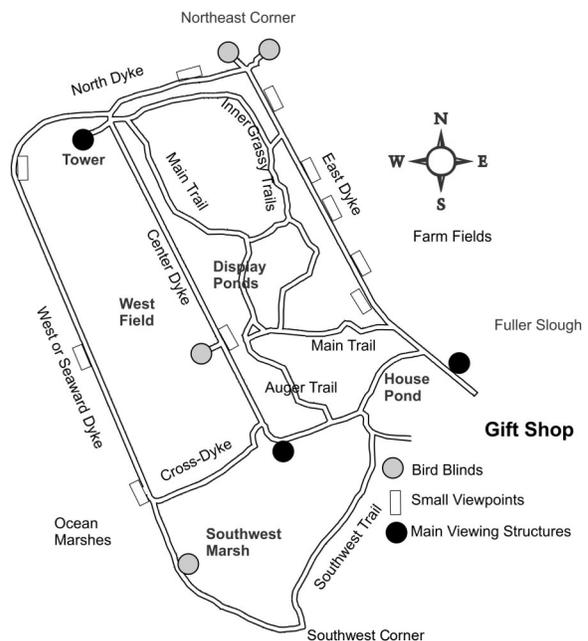


*Spotted Redshank  
Photo: Jim Martin*

Total Species Count for 2025: 178

## Sanctuary Locations Map

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



## About Our Covers

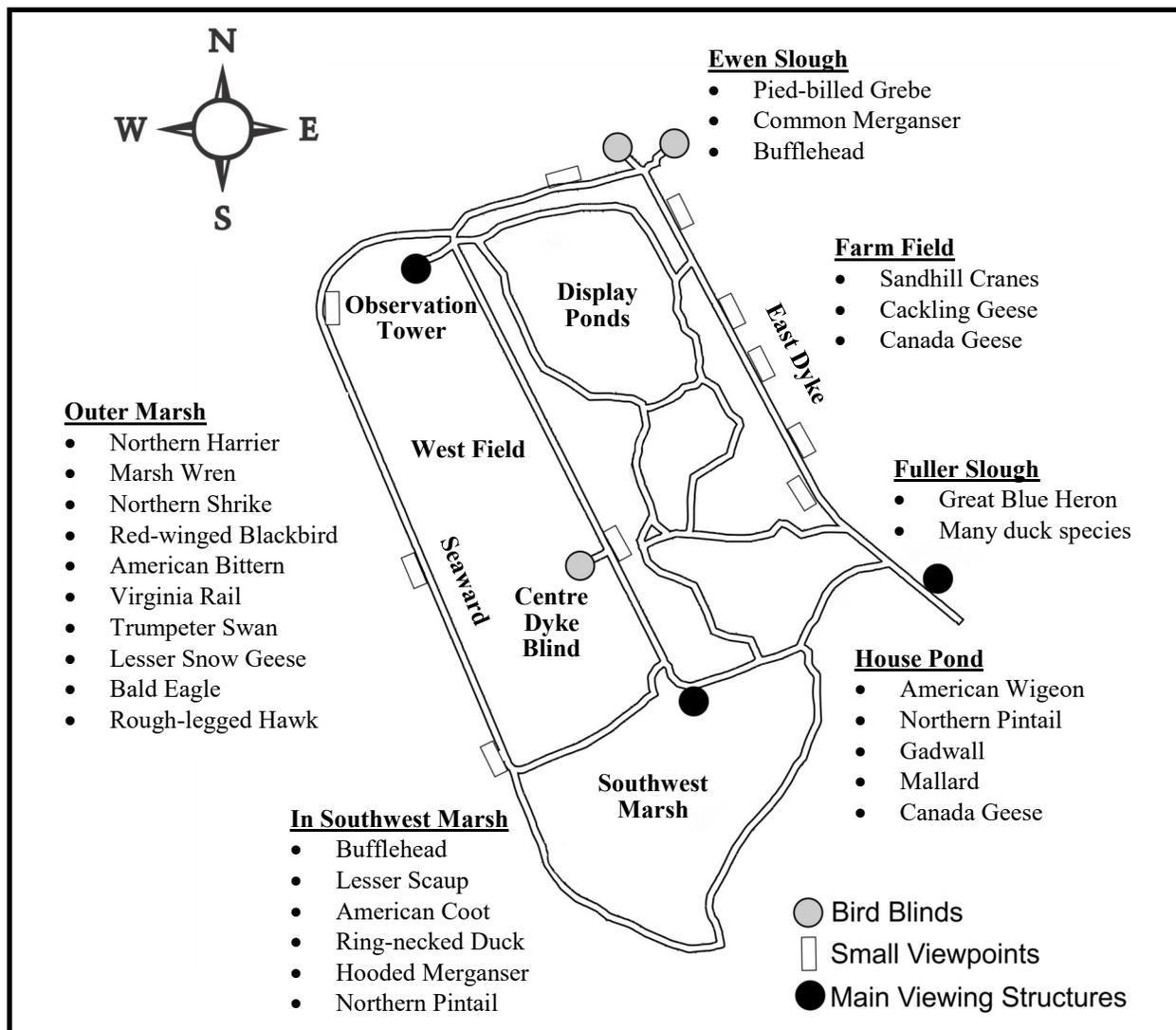
Front Cover: Spotted Redshank  
© Jim Martin  
Back Cover: Mallard  
© John Whitmore

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Varri Raffan  
Varri Raffan  
Evan Gogal  
Evan Gogal  
Marissa Sasaki



List of birds and their commonly found location within the Sanctuary from October to December

## Bird Highlights



Amanita Mushrooms

Photo: Dan Parlee

October brings cool dewy mornings with lots of cobwebs strung between trees awaiting capture by morning visitors. Amanita mushrooms growing along some of the shady grass trails are now in full color. October 2025 ended with 112 bird species.

### September 28 – October 4

I saw my first flock of 65 Lesser Snow Geese flying over on the 29<sup>th</sup> of September. On September 30<sup>th</sup> a surprise sighting of a Great Egret first spotted offshore and then for a short while in the House Pond. October 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> a female Ruddy Duck was located in the waterway below the Viewing Platform. By October 4<sup>th</sup>, there were close to 3000 Lesser Snow Geese feeding in a farm field near the Sanctuary entrance. Numerous highlights from this week's list of 82 species included American White Pelican, Turkey Vulture, Merlin, Swainson's and Hermit Thrush and White-throated Sparrow.



*Northern Shrike*

*Photo: Dan Parlee*

#### October 5 – October 11

A late sighting of a Pectoral Sandpiper in the West Field was reported on the 5<sup>th</sup>. On the 8<sup>th</sup> two Rough-legged Hawks were spotted at the north end of the Seaward Dyke. On October 10<sup>th</sup>, a Barred Owl was found along the entrance driveway. Virginia Rails are heard calling everyday this month from the tall grasses in the Outer Marsh. These elusive birds are always well hidden but on very high tides you might get lucky and have a short view of one moving out of the deep water. Their call varies depending on the time of year. The most commonly heard call sounds like “kiddick, kiddick, kiddick”. Winter shorebirds include, Greater Yellowlegs, Long-billed Dowitchers, Black-bellied Plovers and Killdeer, but October 11<sup>th</sup>, a Sharp-tailed Sandpiper was found in the West Field. It's not every year we have Sharp-tailed Sandpipers visit our area, but if they do, it is generally the middle of September to the middle of October. Every second Saturday our bird survey team meets up to do a careful inventory of birds of within the Sanctuary and usually come up with a big species list. October 11<sup>th</sup> was one of those surveys and their highlights were American Bittern, Sora, and Red-breasted Sapsucker, Northern Shrike, American Pipit, Northern Waterthrush and White-throated Sparrow.

#### October 12 – October 18

There was another big count this week with 86 bird species recorded. Most of October and into November, you can watch Bald Eagles breaking off sticks from the tops of trees and flying them back to their nest in preparation for the upcoming nesting season. Our Sandhill Crane family has now returned to the Sanctuary after a few weeks away. On the 13<sup>th</sup> a Northern Saw-whet Owl spent the day at the north end of the East Dyke. This week we saw the first arrivals of Bufflehead, Horned Grebe and American Kestrel. Throughout the week, six Western Meadowlarks were spotted in the tall bushes off the Southwest Corner. A few Northern Harriers, one Short-eared Owl and one Northern Mockingbird were also spotted in this same area. October 18<sup>th</sup> a single Barn Swallow was seen flying over the Display Ponds.



*Sandhill Cranes*

*Photo: John Whitmore*

#### October 19 – October 25

The big news for this week was the sighting of a Spotted Redshank. This shorebird was first located at the Sanctuary back in the Fall of 1970, then in 1980, and again in the Spring of 1981. So you can imagine the attention it got by visitors hoping to locate this unusual bird, which was unfortunately only seen for the 25<sup>th</sup> and 26<sup>th</sup>. Spotted Redshanks should be spending their winters in tropical parts of Africa and Asia and around the Mediterranean. We have noticed larger numbers of Cackling Geese this Fall. A flock of 250 to 300 has been seen feeding in the cover crop field over the fence behind the picnic area and off the East Dyke. Despite their similar markings to the Canada Geese, Cackling Geese are a separate species. They are not much bigger than a Mallard and their beaks are shorter in length and their honks are higher in pitch. October 19<sup>th</sup> the Black-crowned Night Heron showed back up in its usual roost site.

#### October 26 – November 1

Sandhill Crane numbers are increasing as they congregate before they migrate. Along with our family of three, there have been between 18 to 22 additional cranes around the house and off the East Dyke farm fields. The last Bank Swallow to be seen at the Sanctuary was on the 28<sup>th</sup>. This Fall we have had more American Kestrel sightings at the Sanctuary and around Westham Island. The American Kestrel is one of the smallest falcons close to the size of an American Robin. When hunting, they hover over

*(...../continued page 6)*

(Continued from page 5)



*Spotted Redshank*

*Photo: Jim Martin*

prey by rapidly beating their wings like Belted Kingfishers do. Male kestrels are very attractively marked with blue wings, orange-red tail and a double black downward mustache. A female Canvasback had been located in Robertson Slough on the 26<sup>th</sup>; by the 28<sup>th</sup> we were able to spot three Canvasback in the same area.

*November is a great month to view a variety of birds of prey, Trumpeter Swans, and Lesser Snow Geese. The species count for November 2025 was 102.*

#### November 2 – November 15

One of the most numerous dabbling duck in the winter along the coast is the American Wigeon. In the field behind the picnic area, hundreds of American Wigeon and Cackling Geese have been feeding on the cover crop planted in early Fall. An eagle would fly over the mixed flock every so often, sending them all airborne. After the threat had passed the flock would all settle back down in the field to continue feeding. The first seven Trumpeter Swans were documented on November 5<sup>th</sup>. Most of the swans that spend the winter in the Fraser Delta are Trumpeter Swans, although you may be lucky to locate a Tundra Swan among them. They are not easily identifiable just by looks, but the call of a Tundra Swan is quite different from the Trumpeter Swan. Trumpeter Swans, as their name suggests, has a call sounding like a trumpet while the Tundra Swan has a more musical and often quavering call. For a couple of days this week on Ewen Slough a Common Goldeneye was located. Many Spotted Towhees and Fox Sparrows are seen foraging along the East Dyke and Center Dyke. Both of these species prefer to find food on the ground opposed to eating at the seed feeders. As you walk along these trails you can hear them in the underbrush scratching and sifting through dry leaf litter. They use a unique jump and kick motion that sends both feet back to move aside leaves to reveal food.

#### November 16 – November 22

On November 16<sup>th</sup>, visitors reported a Northern Goshawk out at the Southwest Corner. Like Cooper's Hawk and Sharp-shinned Hawk, they are one of the three woodland raptors classed as Accipiter's. Northern Goshawks are the largest of the three and have a distinctive broad white stripe over the eye that the other two species do not have. One Great Horned Owl was spotted perched in a hawthorn tree at the south end of the Center Dyke. This is an unusual roost spot as they are mostly found in the Douglas Firs along the East Dyke. As I was walking the trails on the 17<sup>th</sup>, I had an unusually high count of approximately 80 Hooded Mergansers in the Southwest Marsh. I think they found this spot as a calm protected area from the strong winds this week. Even higher numbers were reported later in the week. Most of the Hooded Mergansers spend the winter along the coast in bays and inlets of the Strait of Georgia. On November 19<sup>th</sup>, three Northern Shrike were seen at the end of Robertson Slough by the parking lot. Then on November 21<sup>st</sup>, three Brewer's Blackbirds were found at the south end of the Seaward Dyke. We don't have many sightings of Brewer's Blackbirds here at the Sanctuary as they prefer pastures, ploughed fields and barnyards. The males have a glossy black body with a tinge of purple on the head and a light yellow eye. Females are an overall dull gray with a dark eye. In the winter watch for them in flocks of Red-winged Blackbirds, Brown-headed Cowbirds and Starlings.

#### November 23 – November 29

With 94 species on this week's list we nearly reached a third of the total of the 300 species on the Sanctuary checklist. On November 26<sup>th</sup> and 28<sup>th</sup>, three Canvasbacks were spotted again half way down Robertson Slough. November 28<sup>th</sup> had a late sighting of a Common Yellowthroat. On the same day we had a Barred Owl along the Center Dyke and a White-throated Sparrow spotted under the seed feeder by the Warming Hut. A single Barn Swallow and Mourning Dove were both reported on the 29th. By this time of year most of the waterfowl have moved down to the Lower Mainland from their northern summer homes. We were able to find 21 different species of swans, ducks and geese that will make this their winter home.

*December 2025 was a rather wet month with not too many visitors. In spite of this we still had a list of 100 species.*

#### November 30 – December 13

A few highlights in this reporting period included, Canvasback, Common Goldeneye, Merlin, Peregrine Falcon, Northern Shrike, White-throated Sparrow and Western Meadowlark. The elusive American Bittern was spotted in the tall grass off the Southwest Marsh trail. Not wanting to call attention to themselves,

bitterns will use their stripey earth toned feathers to blend in to the vertical lights and shadows of marsh plants. Another elusive bird at the Sanctuary is the Wilson's Snipe. They also have brown, beige and rusty colored feathers which blend in well to their surroundings. Both of these species tend to see you coming before you see them. Most of the time, all you see is the back end of the bird as they fly away. Orange-crowned Warbler, Yellow-rumped Warbler and Common Yellowthroat are still making the weekly list. These three are generally the first of the warblers to appear in the Spring and the last to leave in the Fall.

December 14, 2025 – January 3, 2026

Very heavy rain fell throughout this two week period, which resulted in lowered visitor attendance. Even though we had fewer visitors we were still able to find 73 species. On December 14<sup>th</sup>, the 126<sup>th</sup> Annual Christmas Bird Count was held in Ladner and the individuals that covered the Sanctuary property reported in with 77 species that day. On the 19<sup>th</sup> another Barn Swallow was found. Every year throughout the winter we are able to find a handful of them that stay in the Lower Mainland. Up to twenty Sandhill Cranes are still being seen daily throughout the Sanctuary. Tallying all the weekly checklists from

2025 we finished with a total 178 bird species. Let's see if in 2026 we can get over the 300 species that are currently on the Sanctuary checklist.

As I end my 2025 Bird Highlights, I would like to let you all know I will be stepping down after 16 years as the contributor to the quarterly "Marshnotes" section of "Bird Highlights". Other capable staff will continue to keep you posted in our future issues.

Text: Varri Raffan  
Giftshop Manager



*Male Hooded Merganser*

*Photo: Dan Parlee*



*Three Canvasbacks*

*Photo: Olaf Kringhaug*

## **Manager's Report**

Visitor numbers for this quarter were higher at 11,515 people compared to 9,931 visitor for the same period last year. This fall and winter had mild temperatures with more sunny weekends and dryer days overall compared to last year. By the end of November, the days started to cool off followed by frequent heavy rain and windstorms in December, which resulted in quieter days leading up to the holidays.

Migration started off with a bang this year. From October onward, we started seeing large numbers of Lesser Snow Geese arrive in the Fraser River Delta. Some days we saw flocks of close to 10,000 Snow Geese at a time. This continued for most of the fall until early December, until sightings of them slowed down as they settle into their overwintering grounds farther inland or south. Several storms in the Arctic earlier in the fall may have been the cause for such an immediate and large arrival this year compared to last year.

Along with the Snow Geese, large flocks of Mallard, Northern Shoveler, Northern Pintail, American Wigeon, and Cackling Geese started arriving all throughout October as well. Among them a few less common species of birds were also spotted. A Ruddy Duck appeared for several days in early October along with a small flock of American White Pelicans offshore. A Northern Mockingbird was spotted off the West Dyke again this year and a small flock of Canvasbacks floated in Robertson Slough along our

driveway for the last couple of months in 2025. We were also greeted by the return of a Black-crowned Night heron in mid October, who was last seen briefly in the summer. It showed up in the usual spot by the museum where it has stayed ever since.

Owls, hawks and other predatory birds started appearing as well. Several Rough-legged Hawks made consistent appearances in the intertidal marsh off the West Dyke early in October. They were later replaced with consistent sightings of Northern Harriers, Short-eared Owls, and a few Northern Shrikes. Infrequent Northern Saw-whet Owl sighting cropped up along our trails throughout this entire period, with as many as three at a time on some days. However, none of this years Saw-whets decided to stick around for long. The local pair of Great Horned Owls, along with a few Barn Owls and Barred Owls, also made scattered appearances throughout the fall and winter.

The most exciting bird for many of our visitors, however, was something very unexpected. On October 25<sup>th</sup>, a Spotted Redshank appeared on the logs floating in the Fuller Slough close to the lookout on the Entrance Trail. While easy to mistake at a distance as another Greater Yellowlegs, a keen observer noticed the orangey red hue to the legs and the distinct orange section of lower beak that was a key identifying feature. Spotted Redshanks are a shorebird found natively throughout parts of Europe, Asia and Africa. A record of these birds in British Columbia is very rare, with only a few sightings being confirmed. The most recent record before this was from 1982.



*Spotted Redshank next to a Greater Yellowlegs  
Photo: Evan Gogal*

The redshank stayed at the Sanctuary until October 26<sup>th</sup>, then decided to make a trip across the river up to Steveston and spend some time at the Britannia Shipyards.

Alongside the excitement of the redshank, there was also a lot of interesting activity happening with some of our resident birds. This time of year, is when our Bald Eagles start to do nest repairs in preparation for the spring. Repairing their nests is not only important for ensuring they're ready for the coming nesting season, but it is also an important pair bonding activity. The ability to bring large, good quality nesting material signifies to the eagles that their partner is strong, in good health, and can ensure a solid nest for years to come. However, the males spends more time bringing materials than the females, as they are physically preparing for the development of eggs.

Visitors are often surprised to see eagles starting their nest building activity over the fall and winter period. When in reality, these "nest-oration" activities can take place as soon as their young fledge the nest around late summer. As Bald Eagles build the biggest nests of all North American birds, with their nests weighing between 1000 – 4000 pounds, a lot of work and dedication goes into maintaining these nests. Every fall and winter we fondly watch our resident eagles work together taking turns bringing large branches (often broken directly from our trees in the parking lot) back to the nest to reinforce and reshape the structure to house new eggs in spring.

Our Sandhill Cranes were also quite active this fall. By the end of October, we had as many as 22 Sandhill Cranes in the Sanctuary, including couple of colts from this past nesting season. These extra cranes are the other pairs (some with their young) that nest in various parks, golf courses, and wetlands around the Lower Mainland. While most Sandhill Cranes in North America go down to the southern United States



*Juvenile Bald Eagle Photo: Evan Gogal*

or northern Mexico for the winter, our Lower Mainland population does not need to migrate as our winter climate is mild enough for them on the coast.

Despite staying local, the cranes still opt to all get together for the cold months in lieu of migration. Interacting with other Cranes is an important part of Sandhill Crane development, particularly for teaching the young how to socialize. Sandhill Cranes are social birds who have a wide variety of postures and vocal cues that are used to signal disposition and intent. As a result, we are often treated to various bouts of hopping, dancing, poking, and yelling whenever the flock is in the Sanctuary. These displays can mean anything from, "Stay away from me", to "Predator in the area", or even simply "Let's play".

On the smaller end of the bird spectrum, we received a visitor from the Yukon on December 4<sup>th</sup>. A Yellow-rumped Warbler who was in the care of Yukon Wildlife Preserve, was released at the Sanctuary. The Warbler was flown down from the Yukon to Vancouver as it would have had a very late start to its migration, making it very difficult to survive the journey. With the help of the dedicated staff at the Yukon Wildlife Preserve it was able to complete its migration safely and meet up with a few of its friends that were still hanging around the Sanctuary in early December.

Our local beavers were also hanging around the Sanctuary quite frequently this fall and winter. Several

*(...../continued page 10)*

*(Continued from page 5)*

trees along our front entrance were chewed on or completely removed by our aquatic furry friends. Some lucky visitors may have even seen one moving across the parking lot by Robertson Slough right after 9 AM on a few weekend mornings.

Beavers spend a good amount of their time in the early fall collecting and storing small branches in the water near their dens to act as a food cache for when things cool off. Beavers build the entrances to their dens underwater to hide them from predators, while the living space is above the surface. Having a submerged food stock is very important in case their chosen water body completely freezes over, leaving them trapped under the ice until things start to melt. As a result, we often find piles of branches in the ponds at this time of year while they are preparing.

Our staff were also busy this fall and winter managing the habitats within the Sanctuary. We removed several patches of ivy around the trail systems. English Ivy is removed when we find it as it is an invasive species that grows very large, thick ground mats that outcompete all other vegetation growing in the area. The monoculture of ivy it creates means that none of the native plants that our wildlife species depend on can grow in the areas where English Ivy is well established.

It also can grow up the trunk of trees, often covering their leaves, starving them from sunlight. The ivy growing on trees also adds additional weight that can contribute to trees coming down in the heavy windstorms we often experience here on the coast. Areas where English Ivy was removed will be

replanted with native vegetation in the spring. Plants will be selected to increase overall native plant diversity, providing a variety of food, shelter and nesting materials for our local birds and wildlife within the Sanctuary.

Text: Evan Gogal  
Sanctuary Manager



*Ivy patch removal by the entrance kiosk in progress  
Photo: Dani McRobbie*

## **2025 Christmas Bird Count Highlights**

The 69<sup>th</sup> Ladner Christmas Bird Count (CBC) took place on Sunday December 14<sup>th</sup>, 2025 (Count Day). The weather for the day was somewhat cool, windy and slightly overcast. A total of 135 species were recorded on count day, four less than last year's count, with another nine species being added during count week (three days before and after the count day). Of the 135 species on count day, 77 were recorded within the Sanctuary itself by our dedicated volunteers. Some highlights found during the Ladner CBC this year were a Hudsonian Whimbrel, a Mountain Blue Bird and six different species of owls.

This year marked the 126<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the annual Christmas Bird Count hosted by Birds Canada and their US partner, the National Audubon Society. Yousif Attia, a Birds Canada employee and the Ladner Count Co-Ordinator says "The Christmas Bird Count is a community event that helps document changes in bird populations over time. The annual tradition of counting birds stems from a historical Christmas Hunt and now is used as a tool for conservation."

If you would like to get involved in future Christmas Bird Counts in Ladner or anywhere else in the Lower Mainland, interested participants can visit the Christmas Bird Count page on the Birds Canada website for more information.

Text: Evan Gogal  
Sanctuary Manager

## Hello from the Native Plant Gardens

The native plants that were planted this year in various locations through the Sanctuary are facing their first winter in their new homes. This is the season where weather can be particularly unpredictable and unpleasant with long stretch of heavy rain days and random cold snaps, making survival difficult for both vegetated and warm-blooded creatures alike. It is over these winter months that I am reminded of the inspiring resilience and adaptability of our local wildlife and native plants.

Personally, for me, the winter season can be quite a somber and dreary season. When the going gets hard over winter, tending to the native plantings never fails to spark joy and gives me something to look forward to. Although over winter, plants tend to lose the spotlight and fade into the background after they drop their flowers and leaves, only after a short period of dormancy, they are prepared to take back the stage and put on a show in just a few months. While tending to the native plant gardens and monitoring their health, even on the bleakest and coldest days of winter, I can see the determination and the progress they are making through the formation of buds that ever-so-slightly increase in size week after week. Some plants, such as the newly added Blanket Flower, had fresh blossoms persevere through winter since their addition in our various native gardens in September. I wonder how this will impact their growing cycle come spring?

In just a month or so, many of our native plants will spring back to life. Tall Oregon Grape around the Sanctuary will be bursting with their fragrant yellow flowers. Red-flowering Currant and Salmonberry will

be showing off their bright hot-pink flowers to attract Rufous Hummingbirds, providing them with a much-needed refreshment after their long migration. The white, delicate flowers of Osoberry will be emitting their some-what off-putting scent to advertise a food source for newly emerging insect pollinators... Then the rest of the growing season is kicked off for another year.

With the addition of two new native plant gardens since last spring and fall, I am eagerly waiting for the growing season to come into full swing. This spring we will be able to assess how the plants have taken to the sites and watch new flowers blossom. Hopefully we will be able to observe our resident birds make use of the plantings as well. I hope the gardens will also be a source of joy and something to look forward to for our visitors and birds alike as we make our way through this last stretch of winter.

Text: Marissa Sasaki  
Sanctuary Biologist



*Blanket Flower*

*Photo: Dani McRobbie*

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## 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**



*Mallard © John Whitmore*