Haida Gwaii IBAs in the Spotlight

The archipelago of Haida Gwaii has a wealth of Important Bird & Biodiversity Areas - 19 of the 83 IBAs in BC - including seabird nesting colonies, wintering marine bird feeding areas, and staging areas for fall and winter migrants. Margo Hearne and Peter Hamel are volunteer Caretakers for three of those IBAs, in northeast Haida Gwaii.

At the tip of Graham Island, the northernmost island of the archipelago, McIntyre Beach & Rose Spit IBA includes Skonun Point, Yakan Point, and the beaches around Rose Spit, which divides Dixon Entrance from Hecate Strait. Originally designated for significant numbers of Brant, Sanderling and Semipalmated Plover; Black-legged Kittiwake, Sooty Shearwater, Pacific Loon, White-winged Scoter and Pelagic Cormorant also concentrate here.

Southward, Skidegate Inlet IBA lies between Graham and Moresby Islands, the two main islands of the Haida Gwaii archipelago. Designated for Brant, Black Oystercatcher, and Pigeon Guillemot, the inlet is also an important feeding area for Red-necked and Western Grebe, Surf, White-winged and Black Scoter, Greater Scaup, and Harlequin Duck.

Between these two IBAs, Lawn Point IBA encompasses the major migration corridor on the offshore Pacific Flyway between Rose Spit to the north and Sandspit to the south. Lawn Point was designated for Pacific Loon, Pigeon Guillemot, and Pelagic Cormorant. Shorebirds including Black-bellied Plover, Black Turnstone, Dunlin and Sanderling winter here.

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Important Bird & Biodiversity Areas in BC

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The largest communities of Haida Gwaii: Masset, Tlell, Queen Charlotte, Skidegate and Sandspit, are near these three IBAs, so creating awareness of the IBAs through education and public involvement and education about birds is a significant undertaking.

Margo Hearne and Peter Hamel have been volunteer IBA stewards since the BC IBA Caretaker Network was initiated by BC Nature over ten years ago. The IBA Caretaker role was a natural fit - they were already involved in bird monitoring and conservation and both are founding members of the Delkatla Sanctuary Society, which operates the Nature Centre at Delkatla in the village of Masset. The Sanctuary is a 290-hectare intertidal wetland within Masset, on the north coast of Haida Gwaii. Like the nearby McIntyre Beach & Rose Spit IBA, it is a critical land-point for birds on the Pacific Flyway because of its proximity to wild offshore waters.

Margo and Peter have birded throughout the islands since 1982 and keep detailed records. They wrote the first “Checklist of the Birds of Haida Gwaii” (2002) and the first book on the nesting songbirds of the islands: “Small Birds Cling to Bare Branches – Nesting Songbirds of Haida Gwaii” (2006) which includes charts that show the results of Breeding Bird Surveys they have undertaken since 1987.

Margo writes a regular nature column for the Haida Gwaii Observer newspaper, and also blogs about birds at haidagwaiibirds.wordpress.com She also produces an annual bird calendar, with both her own photos and those of many local photographers, as a fundraiser for the Nature Centre.

Margo and Peter have coordinated several Christmas Bird Counts around Haida Gwaii for more than 30 years, and have found many rare birds in that time. In many ways, their lives are devoted to birds!

By Margo Hearne & Krista Kaptein

**IBAs in BC Needing Caretakers**

- Cumshewa Inlet north to Sheldens Bay: inlet in Haida Gwaii
- Klaskish River & East Creek Watersheds and Megin, Moyeha, Watta & Pretty Girl Watersheds: forested sites on Vancouver Island
- Cleland Island & SE Clayoquot Sound: west coast of Vancouver Island
- Mussel and Kynoch Inlet & Sheep Passage: inlet on the North Coast of BC, north of Bella Bella
- Kotcho Lake: freshwater lake in northeast near Fort Nelson
- Cecil Lake: freshwater lake near Fort St John

Please contact Krista, BC IBA Coordinator iba@bcnature.ca if you are interested in one of the IBAs on the list!

Brant, Shorebirds, Ducks & Gulls in Skidegate Inlet IBA

Sunrise at Lawn Point IBA
Conservation in the Fraser River Estuary IBA

By James Casey, Fraser River Estuary IBA Conservation Program Manager

The importance of estuaries to birds & biodiversity is inescapably evident to naturalists in BC. Since starting with Bird Studies Canada (BSC) as the Fraser River Estuary IBA Conservation Program Manager six months ago, it’s been my privilege to get better acquainted with the impressive Fraser estuary region, its wildlife, and the passionate people dedicated to its conservation.

Since last spring, I have been treated to the unbelievable abundance of bird life that relies on the Fraser delta throughout the seasons. First, the spring migration of shorebird flocks, then warblers and flycatchers arriving, and, most recently, large flocks of Snow Geese flying overhead.

Excursions with IBA Caretakers, naturalists, and Bird Studies Canada staff who already have a deep connection to the Fraser River Estuary IBA have given me a wonderful introduction to this special place.

Getting to know the IBA in this way has sharpened my awareness of both its ecological significance and its fragility. IBA Caretakers are likely aware that the Fraser River Estuary IBA has been listed as an IBA in Danger by Birdlife International.

The unfortunate news is that neither the provincial nor federal government has yet taken the level of action needed to maintain the IBA as one of North America’s most valuable bird habitats.

Every day, habitat in the region is lost to various urban, industrial, & shipping-related infrastructure. Over time, the cumulative impacts of this continuous loss have reduced what was once a vast wetland into remnant pieces. Birds migrating from across the Americas are running out of places to go in this critical stopover on the Pacific Flyway.

Discouraging as this is, I have also been inspired (as have many others) by the tireless work of Fraser River Estuary IBA Caretakers Mary Taitt, Marg Cuthbert, and Anne Murray.

Everywhere I have looked in my research, I have come across evidence that these caretakers have been doing an amazing job standing up for the birds and the overall sustainability of the region.

Mary, for example, has been addressing the loss of agricultural lands to urban development, working with the Delta Farmland and Wildlife Trust on land management solutions that work for, and with, farmers.

Meanwhile, Marg and other leaders in the southern reaches of the IBA are struggling against the constant erosion of lands to development projects in the Little Campbell Watershed.

As for Anne, she and others have had success working with the City of Delta on developing a Bird and Biodiversity Strategy to inform development practices. These are just a few of their projects!

In order to advance conservation in the Fraser IBA, calls for government to provide meaningful protection need to be matched with local actions.

The dedicated IBA Caretakers and other leaders working on behalf of the Fraser IBA are setting a great example for the rest of us who are passionate about our region’s birds and natural habitats. We need to engage in every opportunity that arises to ensure decision makers hear that ecological health needs to take priority when it comes to activities in IBAs.

A current opportunity for discussion is the Roberts Bank Terminal 2 proposal. The decision to try and develop a major industrial site in the middle of such high-value and sensitive habitat is not beneficial for birds, to say the least.

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Fraser River Estuary IBA  continued from page 3

After digging through submissions to the Independent Panel reviewing the proposal, I see a wide community of people who care about the health of the Fraser, and are voicing concerns about (or outright opposition to) the project.

Another pertinent topic is flood management. Climate-driven coastal and riverine flooding is triggering a multi-billion dollar buildout of flood management infrastructure. As the intensity of flooding risk increases, now is the time to articulate a vision of the region that protects people and their homes while providing room for the river and the species that rely on it.

On these issues and more, IBA Caretakers and hundreds of others are acting on a shared vision of a healthy Fraser delta.

I believe that, over the years to come, we can find a way to translate our united actions into a direction for the Fraser that restores the estuary as the jewel of the Pacific Flyway.

Follow BSC on Twitter: @BSC_BC
Contact James Casey: jcasey@bsc-eoc.org

2017 IBA Meetings & More

• March: annual Okanagan IBA meeting in Penticton, organized by area Caretakers - representatives of local government & other stewardship groups also participate. Of note, the South Okanagan Similkameen Conservation Alliance has launched the South Okanagan Conservation Fund to provide support to projects in the area. www.soconservationfund.ca

• early May: BC Nature Annual General Meeting in Lillooet was an opportunity for meeting Caretakers, as well as a display on IBAs.

• mid May: an invitation to participate in the annual Skagit Valley Bird Blitz, including a presentation on the IBA program. This event gave renewed inspiration to the annual Strathcona Provincial Park Bird Search in June.

• July: an invitation to Government House in Victoria for the Urban Sanctuaries Project was also an opportunity to connect with several Caretakers in the area.

• September: BC Nature Fall Meeting in Vernon, included Caretaker visits as well as a presentation on IBAs and eBirding.

Support the IBA Program

Are you a member of BC Nature, & Bird Studies Canada? If not, please consider joining as an individual or group membership!

Benefits of membership:
• your support helps to keep the IBA program progressing toward its goal of conserving birds and their habitat
• you will receive regular communications about programs and bird conservation, including:

BC Nature
• BC Nature magazine 4 x year, including regular Focus on IBA articles
• opportunities for birding at BC Nature camps, field trips, Spring and Fall General meetings

Please contact: manager@bcnature.ca

Bird Studies Canada
• Bird Watch magazine 4 x year
• opportunities to participate in Citizen Science projects: e.g. Coastal Waterbird Survey, Project Feederwatch, Great Canadian Birdathon

Please contact: generalinfo@birdscanada.org
IBA Local Action Fund Launched

Thanks to a generous grant from the Gosling Foundation, Nature Canada and Bird Studies Canada are injecting new energy into the Important Bird and Biodiversity (IBA) program. Over the past 20 years, millions of dollars and tens of thousands of hours of volunteer hours have been invested in protecting birds at Canada’s IBAs. The partners are committed to keeping Canada’s IBAs as a centrepiece of site-related bird conservation work.

This year, a new phase of IBA conservation work has been launched: the IBA Local Action Fund. Twelve projects were selected, including two in British Columbia. The IBA Local Action Fund provides local organizations with grants for projects that engage more people in protecting local IBAs and that coordinate local actions to help protect, restore or enhance biodiversity and ecosystem integrity within threatened IBAs.

The Laskeek Bay Conservation Society received funding for their project “Fostering Local Champions to Protect Seabirds”. The Society will work with local individuals to monitor and manage invasive predator species, namely raccoons and rats, that are threatening breeding birds in Laskeek Bay IBA.

BC Nature received funding from the IBA Local Action Fund for a three-year project to work with First Nations Guardian Watchmen throughout coastal BC. First Nations Guardian Watchmen monitor and protect lands and waters on First Nations’ territories along the coast. The partnership will work to identify shared bird conservation issues and lay the groundwork to integrate bird monitoring into current Guardian Watchmen stewardship programs.

Due in part to remote locations, few bird-focused conservation measures and monitoring programs have been conducted within many coastal IBAs, despite the increasing threats of disturbance from shipping, oil spills, recreational activity, and fisheries.

The first year of the project will engage with the K’omoks Guardian Watchmen as partners in bird stewardship of the K’omoks IBA. The K’omoks IBA is within the traditional territory of the K’omoks First Nation, and is the second most important IBA in BC for over-wintering waterbirds.

A recent boat outing around the waters of the IBA with K’omoks Guardian Watchman Tony Billie was an opportunity to discuss marine and fisheries monitoring currently being done, as well as to take note sites of specific importance to congregatory waterbirds, for potential future bird monitoring. Tony has a great connection with the sea and land, having spent much time on the water in his earlier years as a fisherman.

K’omoks Guardian Watchmen Supervisor Cory Frank is a member of the K’omoks First Nation and is dedicated to making the Guardian department a staple in the K’omoks First Nation core territories. The Guardians work with many local Stewardship groups, educational institutions, and government departments, for environmental monitoring, mapping, surveys & more.

In subsequent years, the BC Nature IBA Local Action Fund project will be expanded to other IBAs that have Guardian Watchmen groups in the area, including Haida Gwaii and the North & Central Coast.

By Krista Kaptein

For more information about the K’omoks Guardian Watchmen: www.komoks.ca/guardian-watchmen

The Gosling Foundation
Haida Gwaii IBA Outreach

Outreach to remote Caretakers continued this year with visits to three IBAs and Caretakers in Haida Gwaii, thanks to funding from the McLean Foundation. The visit was also an opportunity to begin outreach to the Haida Gwaii Watchmen, part of the IBA Local Action Fund project described on page 5.

My first-ever trip to Haida Gwaii in October began in beautiful sun. Just after I landed at the Sandspit airport, a Peregrine Falcon landed on the distant grass. Crossing Skidegate Inlet from Moresby Island to Graham Island, on the small barge ferry, provided an opportunity for close-up views of Common Murre and Rhinoceros Auklet, which I had formerly only seen farther offshore. All this was just a sampling of the wealth of bird life in Haida Gwaii!

The archipelago is a truly wild place with the weather ranging from sunny to stormy. Rain had arrived the next day when I met with Viv Pattison and Stephanie Korolyk of the Laskeek Bay Conservation Society (LBCS), Caretakers of Laskeek Bay IBA. Field research and monitoring have been ongoing within the IBA at East Limestone Island for 28 years, and more recently LBCS has been involved with Bird Studies Canada in dealing with invasive alien species on the island.

At the beautiful Haida Heritage Centre at Kay Llnagaay, near Skidegate, I had the opportunity to meet with Upsy Moody, Haida Gwaii Watchmen Program Manager. The foremost mandate of the Haida Watchmen program is the safeguarding of Gwaii Haanas, with the presence of the Watchmen playing an important role in the protection of the sensitive sites, by educating visitors about the natural and cultural heritage of Gwaii Haanas and ensuring that visitors leave no trace.

The next day, the Centre was the location for Haida Gwaii Bird Day, an event hosted by Bird Studies Canada, as part of their Enhancing Biosecurity Planning on Haida Gwaii project. The event was facilitated by Co+Host, who had organized a multi-media event including graphic recording of the speakers’ topics. I had a chance to give a short introduction to the IBA Program, and to network with other participants including representatives from the Council of the Haida Nation; Parks Canada; Ministry of Forests, Lands & Natural Resources, and members of the Haida Gwaii community.

After visiting Skidegate Inlet IBA, it was time to travel north to Masset, passing through Lawn Point IBA, to visit Margo Hearne & Peter Hamel for a day of birding at several stops in McIntyre Beach & Rose Spit IBA.

By Krista Kaptein
BC IBA Caretaker Network Coordinator

Photos by Krista Kaptein

Laskeek Bay Conservation Society Lead Biologist Viv Pattison & Executive Director Stephanie Korolyk

Co+Host Collective facilitators viewing the IBA display at Haida Gwaii Bird Day

Graphic Recording of IBA Presentation

Margo and Peter’s Caretaker role and bird conservation endeavours are highlighted on page 2.

My visit concluded with a presentation at the Nature Centre at Delkatla, arranged by Margo and Peter, to a diverse audience of members of the Delkatla Sanctuary Society and new and long-time members of the Masset and Old Masset communities. Although only about 5000 people live in all of Haida Gwaii - about one-third Haida, who have always recognized that nature and culture are intrinsically connected – a good percentage of the community is engaged and interested in bird conservation, which gives hope for the future.
IBA Sign Projects Continue

In a continuing effort to increase awareness of IBAs, several small, site-specific signs were produced this year with the IBA logo for ‘Important Bird & Biodiversity Areas’.

IBAs receiving small signs in 2017 include Chain Islets & Great Chain Island IBA, Chopaka Customs IBA, Cowichan Estuary IBA, Englefield Bay Islands IBA, K’omoks IBA, Kilpoola Lake Area IBA, and Skookumchuck Prairie IBA.

In addition to the small IBA signs, several larger interpretive signs are planned for next year, thanks to funding received from TD Friends of the Environment Foundation.

The four IBAs planned to receive interpretive signs for this project are Skidegate Inlet IBA, and McIntyre Beach & Rose Spit IBA, both in Haida Gwaii; Skookumchuck Prairie IBA in the Rocky Mountain Trench of southeastern BC; and Little Qualicum Estuary to Nanoose Bay IBA which covers a 30 km stretch of the coast of Vancouver Island facing the Strait of Georgia.

Educational signs increase awareness of BC’s IBAs among the general public and specific user-groups, and promote activities and behaviours that are compatible with the long-term maintenance of bird populations and healthy ecosystems within IBAs.

Signage directly benefits wildlife conservation and education, directly educating the public. Each individual that becomes more aware of the importance of a local site for birds will be more likely to support conservation efforts of the local Caretaker, BC Nature, local government and program partners. Greater awareness will encourage activities and behaviours that minimize disturbance to birds: for example, at coastal sites, shorebird eggs laid on rocky beaches are extremely vulnerable to trampling, and greater awareness amongst beach users will help minimize damage during breeding season.

For this project, the volunteer Caretakers will take the lead, as well as involving additional naturalists and citizen scientists, BC Parks and Parks Canada personnel, and First Nations community members as appropriate for the individual IBAs.

The grant will result in an educational project in each IBA that will engage the local community. The volunteer involvement of the Caretakers and naturalists in the IBA program will be enhanced and strengthened, an extension of the Caretakers’ work within their local communities.

By Krista Kaptein

Vaseux Bird Blind Project Completed

The new bird viewing structure at Vaseux Lake IBA, seen here in March with Caretaker Eva Durance, was officially unveiled during the annual Meadowlark Nature Festival in Penticton in May 2017.
The BC Field Ornithologists have provided funding support for an eBird Protocol Survey to be held in Kilpoola Lake Area IBA in 2018. The IBA in the Okanagan region is located in rolling hills about 5 km west of Osoyoos, extending from the Canada-US border north about 5 km to Blue Lake. This IBA was designated for significant populations of Lewis’s Woodpecker and Sage Thrasher.

Counts of these rare species, as well as other birds, could be improved by implementing an organized bird count using the eBird Protocol developed by Bird Studies Canada. The protocol involves a thorough inventory of the IBA (50%+ of the IBA area) on a one-day count, similar to Christmas Bird Counts, but on a date best suited for the target species.

Both professional and amateur ornithologists will be involved in the count. The resulting data will help support the continuing value of the IBA designation for the Kilpoola Lake Area IBA.

By Krista Kaptein

For more information on BCFO: www.bcfo.ca

The Kilpoola Lake Area IBA is well suited to this initiative, since much of the area is accessible by roads, and could be covered in a day. There are skilled birders in the area, including Kilpoola Lake Area IBA Caretaker Doug Brown, and other Okanagan IBA Caretakers and ornithologists.

The proposed eBird count will take place in June 2018. Teams of volunteer birders will be supplied with maps, GPS, notebooks and full instructions on the process. After the event, the results will be entered into eBird, and an article submitted to the BCFO magazine.