BC Nature Magazine Articles: Important Bird Areas

BirdLife
IBA
IMPORTANT BIRD AREA

Articles from Spring 2007 - Summer 2015

compiled Fall 2019

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Focus on Important Bird Areas: Kootenay Region

Creston Valley Wildlife Management Area

By Linda Van Damme and Anne Murray

A nature trip to the Kootenays would not be complete without spending time at the Creston Valley Wildlife Management Area (WMA). This mosaic of wetlands, shrublands, deciduous and coniferous forests lies on the floodplain of the Kootenay River and along the south shore of Kootenay Lake, between the mountain ranges of the Selkirks and the Purcells. Creston’s wildlife riches are not confined to birds – this is the only known provincial site where northern leopard frogs occur. There are also red-tailed chipmunk, white sturgeon and rare Coeur d’Alene salamander. The WMA is surrounded by agricultural fields and forested rangeland, which are also productive habitats for birds.

The wealth of wetland wildlife qualifies Creston Valley WMA as a Ramsar site, considered a “wetland of international importance, especially for waterfowl”. It is one of only two sites so designated in BC (the other is Alaksen National Wildlife Area in the Fraser River estuary), although a number of other Important Bird Areas also qualify. Responsibility for designation lies with the provincial government, which has been less than willing to conform to this international program, which came into effect in Canada in May 1981 (www.ramsar.org). Creston is also one of two Important Bird Areas in the Kootenays, designated under the international, non-government IBA program, that recognizes sites meeting certain scientific criteria with regard to numbers and species of birds (see the winter issue of BC Nature or www.ibaca.org).

Waterfowl numbers are globally and nationally significant and migration time sees impressive flocks of northern pintail, American wigeon and greater white-fronted geese, as well as thousands of American coots. Although tundra swan numbers have declined significantly over the last 50 years, the WMA still hosts many hundreds of swans during spring migration with small numbers overwintering. The wetlands of the Creston Valley WMA are also home to many breeding birds, including significant populations of western grebes (one of only three colonies in BC), red-necked grebe, wood duck, black tern and American bittern. The only provincially known nesting colony of Forster’s tern occurs here. Flocks of American white pelicans foraging in Duck Lake delight summer visitors.

Riparian and shrub habitats support nesting black-headed grosbeaks and high densities of yellow warblers. Northern rough-winged swallows breed here and four species of hummingbird, including black-chinned hummingbird, can be seen. Mature black cottonwood stands are important nesting trees for bald eagle, osprey and the largest great blue heron colony in the Columbia Basin. Recent additions to the breeding avifauna of the WMA are western screech-owl, sandhill crane and double-crested cormorant, (one of two colonies in the interior).

Coniferous forest in the vicinity of Corn Creek is a habitat which contributes greatly to the biodiversity of the WMA. Although chestnut-backed chickadees and barred owls reside year round, species such as the Townsend’s warbler and varied thrush arrive each spring to breed and nest. It is surprising, therefore, that WMA managers have prepared a logging plan to selectively harvest this contiguous forest. BC Nature sent a letter questioning this action. We now understand that the logging has been put on hold. Other conservation problems include recreational disturbance, invasive plant species and competition from introduced species.

This IBA is well-supported by membership throughout the province and by many local volunteers. The Nature Centre is a focal point for wildlife education and tours. This IBA site will continue to host numerous birds of many species as long as people care about nature and are diligent in maintaining habitat conservation values.
Focus on Important Bird Areas: Okanagan Region

Vaseux Lake

By Anne Murray and Eva Durante

Vaseux Lake is renowned as one of Canada's top birding spots. As the only remaining wetland ecosystem of any significant size in the South Okanagan, it is a tremendous draw to both breeding and migrating birds. A good variety of habitats, ranging from pine forests and riparian thickets to freshwater marsh, arid grassland and rocky bluffs, makes this area very special for wildlife of many kinds, at any time of year.

The four-kilometre long lake lies in a narrow section of the Okanagan River Valley, between Okanagan Falls and Oliver. As well as birds, the area has a wide variety of other wildlife including California bighorn sheep, bobcat, pallid and spotted bats and Great Basin pocket mouse. The rarest snake in Canada, the night snake, occurs here.

The lake and surrounding forested area qualify for Important Bird Area (IBA) status by providing habitat for three nationally significant species: Lewis' woodpecker, white-headed woodpecker and yellow-breasted chat. There are also many regionally important species, such as Pacific trumpeter swan, Williamson's sapsucker, western screech owl and flammulated owl.

Spring migration at the freshwater marsh, at the north end of the lake, brings many warblers, vireos, swallows and other neotropical migrants, including colourful lazuli bunting, yellow-headed and red-winged blackbirds, Virginia rail, American bittern, wood duck and blue-winged teal stay to nest. Pine forest on the dry upland is home to pygmy nuthatches, rock and canyon wrens sing from the cliffs and wildflowers and cacti grow on the grassy slopes. There are 10 red-listed plant ecosystems in the area, including antelope brush, big sage, bluebunch wheatgrass, black cottonwood and water birch.

This idyllic spot lies on the main road through the valley and is easily visited. While most of the IBA has been protected in the Vaseux Lake Provincial Park, the Bighorn Sheep National Wildlife Area, or the federal Vaseux Lake Migratory Bird Sanctuary, alternative uses for the land are constantly being suggested.

The scenic McIntyre Bluffs at the south end of the lake must rank as one of BC's most attractive views. The bluffs and adjacent lands are known for rare plants and animal species, from bats to the peregrine falcon, yet it did not stop a hydro substation and a subdivision being built in close proximity to the river at the cliff's foot.

Aside from the outright destruction of, respectively, antelope brush and riparian thicket habitat, these intrusions into the highly sensitive ecosystem have other serious impacts on wildlife, such as domestic cats on songbird populations and the spread of invasive plants. A recent concern to naturalists is the suggestion that the old Kettle Valley Railway right-of-way, along the west shore of the lake and within the National Wildlife Area, be used as part of the Trans Canada Trail. This would bring recreational and possibly even motorized activities into the one area that has so far remained undisturbed.

BC Nature has set up an IBA Caretaker Network of volunteers who regularly visit and report on IBA sites in BC. Eva Durante has volunteered to monitor the Vaseux Lake IBA. If you would like to volunteer for a site near you, please contact Anne Murray at sanderling@uniserve.com or (604) 943-4460.
Focus on Important Bird Areas: Lower Mainland Region

Boundary Bay, Roberts Bank and Sturgeon Bank (Fraser River Estuary)

By Anne Murray

There are 597 designated Important Bird Areas (IBAs) in Canada, and the Fraser River estuary ranks top for the number of bird species meeting globally- and nationally-significant population levels. It is one of the key stopovers on the Pacific Flyway for shorebirds and waterfowl, and the best location in Canada for diversity and numbers of wintering raptors. About 50 species of shorebird have been recorded, and rare sightings are a regular occurrence during fall and spring migration, particularly on the shores of Boundary Bay and at Iona Island in Richmond.

Western sandpipers are the most numerous shorebird, though their numbers have dropped dramatically in the last eight years. Tens of thousands of dunlin winter in Boundary Bay and thousands more migrate through. An estimated three percent of the North American population of black-bellied plovers has been recorded in one day. Trumpeter swan numbers have increased steadily. And although overall numbers of black brant on the Pacific Flyway are decreasing, the number in Boundary Bay has rebounded from historic lows. Lesser snow goose populations have been doing well, and last winter saw about 90,000 of these dramatic birds taking wing from Westham Island.

Other waterfowl species with globally significant populations include American wigeon, mallard, green-winged teal, and northern pintail. Many sea ducks frequent the deeper waters around Ocean Park, near White Rock, and Point Roberts. Moulting western and red-necked grebes are seasonally abundant, as are loons, mergansers and other waterbirds. Huge numbers of glaucous-winged gulls frequent the Burns Bog landfill, mingling with flocks of bald eagles. In eruption years, in winter, snowy owls are a feature of the Boundary Bay dyke – 18 were counted on one day in 2006. Short-eared owl, barn owl, great horned owl, northern harrier, rough-legged hawk, red-tailed hawk, peregrine falcon and merlin can quite readily be found within a few hours of birdwatching in mid-winter. A major colony of the great blue heron (Ardea herodias ssp. fannini) is located on a wooded bluff adjacent to the BC Ferry causeway at Tsawwassen. This colony, the largest on the coast, was until recently in trees on the Point Roberts side of the border.

The habitats in this outstanding area have been extensively changed in the last 200 years by human developments. The Fraser River has been constrained in its course, dredged and trained. The delta floodplain is enclosed by over 600 km of dykes, and over 80 percent of the original wetlands have been lost. However, the Fraser continues to transport and deposit sediment on the active front of the estuary, and this has resulted in the growth of sand banks and marshland around the mouth of the river. Boundary Bay, in contrast, is a shallow marine bay sheltered from the active front of the estuary by the peninsula of Tsawwassen and Point Roberts (which was once an island). Roberts Bank has experienced considerable ecological change due to the construction of two four-km-long causeways across the sand flats, leading to the BC Ferry and Deltaport terminals respectively. The causeways have altered the flow of freshwater from the river (the plume) and created erosive currents on the sand banks.

Although eelgrass has grown in some areas, much open sandflat and mudflat has been lost, with potentially serious effects on migrating shorebirds. Western sandpiper numbers on the estuary have declined by 80 percent since 1994, although the reason for this is unresolved.

Farmland is a valuable habitat for many bird species, especially when winter storms and high tides displace waterfowl and shorebirds from outside the dykes. The Delta Farmland and Wildlife Trust has been successful in supporting ecological stewardship of agricultural land among the farming community.

continued
IBA: Fraser River Estuary, continued

Conservation threats to the Important Bird Area include the lack of recognition of the area by politicians and planners: although the criteria for Ramsar designation is met 60-fold for shorebirds and 30-fold for waterfowl, the provincial government has never designated more than the limited area of Alakseen National Wildlife Area as a Ramsar Site (a Wetland of International Importance). Western Hemispheric Shorebird Reserve Site status was assigned recently, but, like the IBA status, this does not carry any legislative weight. A serious threat is the loss of intertidal habitat from continued port expansion at Roberts Bank; new proposals would double the size of existing facilities. Increased marine traffic and chemical, light and noise pollution, can seriously impact Pacific salmon migrating into the river, other marine fish and marine mammals including endangered southern resident orcas (killer whales). There are also many upland developments associated with the port, such as the proposed South Fraser Perimeter Road (a major new truck highway), rail yards and container depots to be located on land within the Agricultural Land Reserve.

Anne Murray is the author of A Nature Guide to Boundary Bay with photographs by David Biecon. The book is available at independent bookstores or www.natureguides.com. The website also has species lists and links to birding, naturalist, conservation and research groups working in the Fraser River estuary.
Focus on Important Bird Areas: Vancouver Island Region

Comox Valley, Baynes Sound and Lambert Channel/Hornby Island Waters

By Art Mariell

The Comox Valley is one of the most significant areas for wintering and migratory waterfowl and waterbirds in BC and is very fortunate in having three IBAs on its doorstep. The Comox Valley IBA lies along the east-central coast of Vancouver Island and encompasses the estuaries, forests and associated lowland valley bottoms east of the Beaufort Range from the Oyster River south to the Trent River, including the Courtenay River estuary. Baynes Sound IBA includes the waters between the east coast of Vancouver Island and Denman Island south from the Courtenay River estuary to Deep Bay. Baynes Sound is a shallow coastal channel fringed by protected bays, open foreshore, tidal estuaries, inshore marshes and adjacent forests. Together with the Courtenay River estuary, these protected waters and their many freshwater streams function as a single estuary system. Lambert Channel/Hornby Island Waters IBA includes the waters along the entire northern shore of Denman Island and the waters within two kilometres of the entire shoreline of Hornby Island. The shoreline ranges from sand flats to rocky shorelines overlooking deep water.

Throughout the Comox Valley (including the islands), low elevation forests are dominated by Douglas-fir and western hemlock; dry uplands near the Strait of Georgia support scarce Garry oak/Douglas fir forests. The lowlands are a mixture of undeveloped second growth forest, areas of commercial pasture and cropland, small farms, urban and suburban development and light industry. From 1992 to 2002, 5.6 percent of the sensitive ecosystems were lost and 29.2 percent of modified ecosystems such as older second growth forests and seasonally flooded agricultural fields disappeared.

The region is one of the most productive Pacific herring spawning areas and shellfish growing areas in BC. Seven species of salmon, cutthroat trout and steelhead spawn in the area and six-gill sharks occur in the marine waters off Hornby Island. Within the three IBAs, 10 species of birds occur at globally significant levels and an additional three species reach continentally- and nationally-significant levels.

The Comox Valley is noteworthy for the trumpeter swans that overwinter from November to March each year. With the recovery of trumpeter swan from commercial overhunting, numbers increased steadily to the mid 1990s and stabilized at an overwintering population of about 2,100 birds, 12 percent of the Pacific population of this species. The population can increase to over 2,800 individuals in early and late winter as migrating swans move through the valley.

The marine waters support significant wintering populations of waterfowl, notably American wigeon, mallard, northern pintail, and black, surf and white-winged scoters, and provide an important feeding area for migrating black brant. Several thousand shorebirds of mixed species use the shoreline, estuary flats and farm fields for winter feeding and continually significant numbers of bald eagles gather here in winter.

Birds concentrate in Baynes Sound, Lambert Channel and the waters around Hornby Island in March to take advantage of spawning herring. Globally significant concentrations of Pacific loon, western grebe, harlequin duck, surf and white-winged scoters, mew gull, Thayer's gull, and glaucous-winged gull have been recorded at that time. The waters off Hornby Island also support globally significant concentrations of harlequin duck during late summer and early fall as a major site for moulting with concentrations of 4,000 to 5,000 birds recorded.

The populations of the towns of Courtenay, Comox and Cumberland, which lie within the IBA, have continued
doubled over the past 20 years. Development comes with associated threats, including runoff from sewage and suburban storm sewers, filled-in wetlands, new housing developments and disturbance from increased recreational activities. There is also a demand on the coast for increased aquaculture which needs to be monitored carefully for its impact on birds. There is limited protection in place within the IBAs, particularly for the marine waters; the most significant is the marine extension to Helliwell Provincial Park.

The birders group of the Comox Valley Naturalists Society has taken on the caretaker role for these three IBAs and is currently reviewing and updating the information base. We also plan to make presentations to local officials and others in the area to increase the awareness of the value of the IBAs.

Art Martell is chair of the CVNS birders group and is chair of the board of directors of Bird Studies Canada.
Focus on Important Bird Areas: Haida Gwaii (Queen Charlotte Islands)

McIntyre Beach and Rose Spit

By Margo Hearne

The wind howled and waves crashed on the beach. As we eased our small vehicles across the narrow strip of Rose Spit, the wave size increased. We stepped on to the sand and my husband Peter, spotting a snowy owl farther out, crept towards it with his camera just as a huge blue wave crashed on to the spit behind him. I screamed and he turned quickly to see his ATV being swept away. I vacillated briefly between grabbing his bike or the spotting scope as he rushed back through the foaming breaker. We had miscalculated the tide change.

As the huge, terrifying wave receded Peter grabbed his floating ATV and leaped aboard and I, with the scope, raced my vehicle back towards the higher dunes before another wave crashed in. At times we sped through a foot of water through the building seas. I dared not look back and it was with vast relief that we gained the safety of the high beach and stopped to catch our breath. "That was close," said Peter. Too true! The closer you get to the rim of the world the faster things change.

Rose Spit is a long, narrow tongue of sand that reaches towards the mainland for almost eight kilometres. As the shallow waters of Hecate Strait rush north, they meet the deeper waters of Dixon Entrance rushing east. This confluence scours the ocean bottom and creates the long sandbar. The powerful forces of moon, tide, sand and land cause shellfish, sand lance and euphausiids (krill) to concentrate in the surging seas. Birds and mammals love the wild, dangerous place. The spit itself constantly changes and deceptive high ridges appear ahead. If we head for the ridges on a rising tide, the sea will rise behind us, cutting us off. There's nowhere to go from there.

The Important Bird Areas of McIntyre Beach and Rose Spit are on the Pacific Flyway and every migratory bird goes through there twice a year.

While it was once thought that most migrants went offshore along the west coast of Haida Gwaii, it's becoming increasingly evident that they migrate through the relatively calmer waters of Hecate Strait. Records show that huge numbers of shearwaters, auks and other waterfowl move through, sometimes in the millions. This is an exciting discovery. It's not only seabirds that hurtle through. Land birds, including flocks of barn swallows, have been observed migrating through Hecate Strait during fall migration.

In winter Rose Spit is one of the most important feeding areas for marine birds on the islands. Christmas Bird Counts have shown thousands of murres, loons and other sea ducks sheltering and feeding in the lee. Fishermen running north before a storm have "run through ducks in the water for hours". Upwards of 35,000 Cassin's auks flew across Dixon Entrance one fall heading for Rose Spit, and thousands of September sooty shearwaters were counted as they skirted Egeria Bay at Langara Island.

Shorebirds feed on the beaches of McIntyre Bay. Surveys undertaken in the past few years show mixed flocks of sandpiper, semipalmated plovers, dunlin and western sandpipers in the thousands. Red-throated loons feed in the near shore during calm weather and one day, when it was fog-thick farther out, thousands of sooty shearwaters fed in the offing, appearing to float between sea and sky in the hazy blue ocean.

One of the problems associated with the delineation of marine IBAs is that the whole ocean is interconnected. To single out one part as being more important than another underestimates the importance of the whole marine ecosystem. For instance, although Skidegate Inlet and Lawn Point are also IBAs, birds fly through the air and feed in the sea between them. When the winds are down and the seas are calm, they move from shelter out into Hecate Strait itself. The Dogfish Banks are a bird haven. It's shallow and can be turbulent and rich in "feed". The deep trench on the eastern side of Hecate Strait attracts thousands, perhaps millions of seabirds and the euphausiids (krill) found there feed a variety of marine mammals, including grey, humpback and minke whales. Can we protect one area at the expense of another?

Rose Spit is not for the faint-hearted. Getting there is a challenge and staying there to count birds can be atrocious. But sometimes there are more important things in the world than comfort.

Margo Hearne is the IBA caretaker for four sites in Haida Gwaii.
Focus on Important Bird Areas: Strait of Georgia

Chain Islets

By Marilyn Lambert

(IBA caretakers are asked to report annually on their site, relating any changes in bird numbers, habitats or conservation threats. Thanks to Marilyn for this excellent example of an annual site report. Other site reports will be featured in future editions of BC Nature.

— Anne Murray)

Looking over the IBA website write up for the Chain Islets, the biggest change is the numbers of nesting double-crested cormorants. On a visit in fall 2007, I counted about 25 nests, down significantly from the 510 from the original report. Double-crested cormorant numbers have crashed in the Strait of Georgia and the main culprit for the decline of the Great Chain Island colony seems to be bald eagles. Eagles nest successfully on the nearby Chatham and Discovery islands, so it is an easy fly over for a meal of tasty double-crested cormorant chicks. I’m not sure what the current numbers are for nesting glaucous-winged gulls. I’ll try to get a guess estimate this season.

The plants (golden paintbrush, California buttercup and snakeroot sanicle) listed for Chain Island are questionable. The Chain Islets and Great Chain Island are part of the Oak Bay Islands Ecological Reserve. The reserve has three units, the largest (Great Chain Island and Chain Islets) being two kilometres east of Oak Bay. Jenney Jones Island is 2.5 kilometres north of Great Chain Island in Baynes Channel; Alpha Island, part of the Chatham-Discovery Group, is 5.5 kilometres east of Oak Bay. Although the plants occur on the other islands in the reserve, they haven’t been collected from the Chains, as far as I know.

One big happy family: A double crested cormorant colony in Chain Islets IBA.

My friend, botanist Adolf Ceska, says: "There is an old collection of snakeroot (Sanicula arctopoides) from Chain Island. Somebody mixed it up and listed everything that is at one of the Oak Bay Islands". Ranunculus californicus is on several islands (Alpha, Little Trial, Discovery etc.), paintbrush is on Alpha & Trial.

I was by the Chains several times in 2007. The islands continue to be visited by the whale watching boats passing by, particularly on days when killer whales have left the area. Most boats recognize the 100-metre buffer for going by seabird colonies. I didn’t notice any picnickers during my visits. I think with several hundred glaucous-winged gulls nesting there, it is a bit whiffy to enjoy a lunch!

Kayakers sometimes pass by quite close to shore. When I have stopped to tell them about the reserve and the possible disturbance they can cause they seem taken aback as kayakers (in general) think they are non-disturbing as they are quiet and non-polluting. However, the flash of the paddles and their quiet, stealth-like approach can be more disturbing than a noisy outboard motor.

I don’t know what the future holds for double-crested cormorants in Georgia Strait or the Chain Island Colony. My first visit to the Chain Islets was in 1974. I was working at the Royal BC Museum and we went to band glaucous-winged gull chicks with Wayne Campbell. At that time there were no double-crested cormorants nesting on the Great Chain Island. Nesting started there in the early 1980s, peaked in late 1980s and has been declining ever since.

It is a good thing that the Chain Islets are part of the Oak Bay Islands Ecological Reserve and an IBA, as this place will always be available for nesting seabirds. Marilyn Lambert is the caretaker for the Chain Islets IBA.
Focus on Important Bird Areas: South Okanagan

Osoyoos Oxbows

The Osoyoos Oxbows Important Bird Area (IBA) lies in the heart of the South Okanagan Valley, a region of great avian diversity and home to many rare species, including bobolinks and yellow-breasted chats that the IBA is renowned for. Doug Brown volunteered to be the caretaker for this site, as part of the BC IBA Caretaker Network Program. The following is taken from his first annual report.

By Doug Brown

There have been no large-scale changes to the Wildlife Management Area portion of the IBA, but a number of small changes have had positive effects. The river dyke access roads are now kept locked most of the time, which means less traffic in the area; this has stopped camping and illegal dumping of garbage. The roads are important access points for the IBA, so their closing certainly discourages most of the unwelcome visitors. Fishermen can still access the river and launch their boats. Fencing shrub and woodland areas to keep cattle out has had a positive effect on the nesting success of yellow-breasted chats, although cattle grazing continues to take place in the WMA and significantly affects the habitat. An iniminent threat to the IBA is the huge new development planned for Willow Beach, on floodplain directly adjacent to the South Okanagan WMA. Much of this area was formerly marshland; considerable fill will have to be brought in, which could affect the water table throughout the area.

The Road 22 area has gone through much more change. Several small acreages along the road have been sold and there are now two homes here; one has planted some orchard. The once tall alfalfa fields where bobolinks nested are now rural farmyards and there has been considerable illegal dumping of old vehicles and asphalt. The fragmenting of this area and the loss of habitat has seriously limited the breeding area for the bobolinks and long-billed curlews. There has been little change to the ecological reserve portion Vegetable continues to recover from the fire that scoured the area almost a decade ago.

Several research projects took place this year. Rene McKibben continued her ongoing monitoring of the yellow-breasted chat populations that has been taking place since 2001. This year the yellow-breasted chats had a spectacular year with 35 nests found in the Oxbows. That’s quite amazing when you consider that there were only two nests in 2001. Jukka Juntunen ran a Canadian Wildlife Service bird banding station throughout the summer. Two years ago our club built 19 new owl boxes, which we put up in the oxbows to replace the boxes Dick Canning had put up years ago. These are mostly for northern saw-whet owls but western screech-owls have been found roosting in them in winter. I monitor and clean out the boxes. This year we had just one saw-whet nest. There is considerable use of the area by a variety of people. The dykes are heavily used by locals for walks and cycling and especially for exercising their dogs. Fishermen are frequently encountered either along the river or at the ponds in the southeast section.

One of the largest draws for people is asparagus picking in the spring. This introduced plant is abundant in some sections of the oxbows and it’s not unusual to run into 15 or 20 pickers a day. Hunting also takes place in the wildlife management area but closing the dyke roads keeps out most; the decline in pheasant numbers limits the birds available.

The wildlife management area is also frequently used by marijuana growers. The thick shrubbery discourages most people from going into the wooded areas and isolates the operations from prying eyes. There are usually two or three grow operations in the area but most of these are done in pots and have little impact. One operation this year was planted into the ground and patches of roses and other shrubs were cleared to make way for the plants. Rose bushes are the principal nesting locations for the chats.

Among the species observed in the IBA are wintering western screech owls, nesting barn owls, bobolink, grasshopper sparrow, lark sparrow and Lewis’ woodpecker. Attempts in the 1980s to reintroduce burrowing owls to the area failed and this species is no longer found here, while long-billed curlew is now only seen on migration. Several prairie falcon nest sites have been taken over in the last two years by peregrine falcons, although prairie falcons continue to be seen in winter when they hunt the abundant pigeons at the feedlot south of Oliver. Their numbers seem to be increasing in the area though, so they are certainly still nearby. The yellow-breasted chat is a great success story as their numbers have gone up dramatically in the last few years.

Fall 2008 BC Nature
Focus on Important Bird Areas: Lower Mainland

Squamish Estuary

This article is based on Chris Dale's March 2008 site report, supplemented with information from John Buchanan in October 2008. Chris and John are the IBA caretakers for the Squamish River estuary. Chris keeps careful count of bird numbers on different walks around Porteau Cove, Squamish Estuary and Brackendale areas and on monthly censuses, recording the data on eBird. John has spent 42 years exploring the estuary and visits at least twice each week to pick up debris and monitor conservation threats.

The Squamish River and estuary are renowned for wintering bald eagles, trumpeter swans and western grebes. Peak numbers of eagles occur during mid to late December, with 2166 counted in December 2007, about average for the river. Once the eagles found there were no salmon they moved on (the chum salmon fall run was one tenth the usual number). The Brackendale Eagle Count, held on the first weekend in January, had only 893 adults and juveniles. More than usual the numbers of eagles hung around the municipal garbage dump, where 63 were reported on Mar. 14.

As many as 60 trumpeter swans winter in the estuary some years, but only a handful have overwintered recently. Flocks of 50 to 150 passed through in mid-March; a few stopped to rest before continuing north.

During the 1950s and 1960s large flocks of western grebes occurred, with 600 to 700 counted on Christmas bird counts. Lately, we are lucky if a few each year are seen, probably because of the decline in herring. During the early 1960s large schools of herring were seen during the spawning season, especially at night when they would be attracted by the lights at the boat floats. A few years ago the Squamish Streamkeepers checked under the docks at the deep sea port and found a large spawn had occurred but all the eggs laid on the creosoted pilings were dead. Since then the streamkeepers have wrapped many of the pilings with landscaping fabric and hung curtains of fabric in between the pilings to provide a non-toxic surface on which the herring might lay their eggs. This year, unfortunately, new pilings were put in for the small boat harbor expansion and creosoted pilings were used instead of non-toxic steel pilings. Once again all the eggs died. During the spawning period this year, personnel at the deep sea port reported seeing large schools of herring at night under the lights and there were large flocks of Pacific loons, as well as western grebes, red-throated loons, surf scoters, and a few common murres and marbled murrelets.

Habitat loss: A new townhouse development has been built on former wetland habitat in the Squamish estuary, creating new homes for people but less habitat for a variety of species that inhabits the rich wetland.

Hopefully the herring schools will increase and bring back the diving bird numbers.

The Squamish River Estuary has had some pressures put on it in the last few years, with the oil spill from a container ship in August 2006 (which deposited 29,000 litres of bunker-C oil onto estuary grasslands and channels), and the grounding of a log boom during a storm in December 2007 at the same site which exposed some of the oil that had not been removed during the first clean-up. On the plus side, the dredge spoils area in the central channel is in the process of being rehabilitated. This area of grasslands was filled to a height of 20 feet (6.1 m) with sand dredged from the harbour in the 1970s for a deep sea port that never happened. A few years ago the sand was removed down to the original level of the estuary and since then grass, sedges and rushes have begun to grow. A raised dike around the area was left and is a popular walk for the locals but it also encourages people to let their
died. During the spawning period this year, personnel at the deep sea port reported seeing large schools of herring at night under the lights and there were large flocks of Pacific loons, as well as western grebes, red-throated loons, surf scoters, and a few common murres and marbled murrelets.

Continued
dogs run off-leash, which is a problem when they chase the resident birds.

Lately, with the 2010 Winter Olympic Games coming, there has been exponential growth in housing in the Squamish and Brackendale areas with many of our greenbelts and wetlands disappearing to housing developments, golf courses and road construction. There are very few green belts remaining to allow wildlife to cross the Squamish Valley and some developments are encroaching into the estuary itself. The Cheekye Fan (an area of second-growth forest north of Brackendale) has selective logging taking place and the whole area may be lost to development in the future. One new townhouse development in downtown Squamish has been built right into what used to be part of the estuary, and a tree-lined slough next to it (which used to be good wood duck habitat) has been drained and the trees completely removed.

Another issue of concern is the many independent power projects that are being built in the area; the proposed Fries Creek IPP borders on the newly-designated Squamish Estuary Wildlife Management Area.
Pacific Spirit Regional Park was designated as an Important Bird Area (IBA) in 1996 to protect a colony of great blue herons of the coastal Ardea herodias fannini subspecies, which is nationally "vulnerable". Between 1996 and 1999 continentaly significant numbers of these birds (average 147 pairs) nested here. However, shortly after 1999, the herons abandoned the park, probably joining the large Stanley Park colony. It is well known that great blue herons move to new nesting sites once in a while, but in today's world their choices are increasingly restricted by loss of suitable habitat. So it is quite possible that the herons will eventually return to once again raise their young in the tall trees of Pacific Spirit Regional Park.

Even without the herons, the park remains an important area for birds. It supports a rich and diverse population of songbirds, flycatchers, hummingbirds, woodpeckers, hawks, owls, eagles and others, and is an important staging area for migrants. Birds are attracted to the park due to its size, location and habitats. It is the largest (700 ha) "wild" forested area remaining within the City of Vancouver, and the second largest lowland greenspace (after Burns Bog) in Metro Vancouver. The park is a forested "island", bounded by the sea, the North Arm of Fraser River, urban residential areas and the University of BC campus. Most of it lies on a gently sloping plateau 60 to 120 m above sea level, but it includes coastal bluffs, several streams and three deep ravines.

Pacific Spirit Regional Park lies in the coastal Douglas-fir zone, but due to past disturbances by logging, farming and fire, and variations in soil moisture due to impervious subsoil and undulating topography, there is a mosaic of vegetation associations and habitats. These range from older forest with tall conifers and little understorey, through mixed stands to almost entirely deciduous canopy. Local high points are dry and well drained while depressions have wet soils and standing water in winter - in some places impounded by beaver dams. Recently restored Camosun Bog is a small peat bog with sphagnum moss. Tree and understorey species include Douglas-fir, western hemlock, western redcedar, red alder and, less commonly, Sitka spruce, black cottonwood and bigleaf maple; understorey species include vine maple, red elderberry, salmonberry, red huckleberry, salmon, ferns and moss. Edge habitats, including shrubs and herbaceous species extend along some roadsides and wider trails, and occupy small openings.

Two areas near the park – UBC Farm and Cecil Green – are also included in the IBA. The former consists of locally uncommon open field habitats (10 ha) with hedgerows, and about 10 ha of old forest with many snags. The Cecil Green area is a narrow strip of land (2.3 ha) along the top of the coastal bluffs at the northern edge of UBC campus. This site, adjoining a broad stretch of open water, provides shelter and foraging areas that attract large numbers and great diversity of migrating birds.

The park is managed by Metro Vancouver Regional Parks. We are talking with parks staff to define how we can work together to benefit both the park and the IBA.

A major task now underway is to learn more about the significance of park habitats for various bird species, and to estimate the numbers of birds that utilize the park. As far as I am aware, little data is currently available; there are no systematic, long-term records. Information is needed about migrants that use the park as a staging area, and the summer nesting birds: warblers, vireos, flycatchers and others. I'm hoping that those of you who have birded in PSRP will be willing to share daylists and/or notes, whether recent or older. Please contact me at jmryder@telus.net.
IBA caretaker program continues to grow

By Anne Murray

This year has been an exceptionally active one for the BC Important Bird Area (IBA) Program, with a large increase in the number of partnerships formed and outreach achieved. Thanks to grants from Mountain Equipment Co-op, BC Direct Access, BC Ministry of Environment (in 2008), Nature Canada, Shell Canada and Bird Studies Canada (BSC), we were able to achieve most of our annual goals for the Program.

The caretaker network now covers 92 percent of the 84 IBAs in BC, with only seven very remote sites still lacking volunteers. IBA caretakers commit to visiting their sites at least once a year and reporting back. Site summary updates have been completed for about a quarter of the sites and the national website www.ibacanada.ca has been updated to reflect these. Some caretakers are also putting up signs, doing public outreach, stewardship projects or advocacy. Communication is facilitated by regular updates to the IBA page on the BC Nature website, a caretaker newsletter in May and September and regular articles in this magazine.

We also undertook a very strategic approach to outreach this year, giving PowerPoint presentations to environmental organizations and government agencies, explaining the IBA program and its relevance to government initiatives. Since May, we have met with staff from the BC Ministries of Environment, Agriculture and Forests, the Integrated Land Management Bureau, Department of Fisheries and Oceans, Parks Canada, Canadian Wildlife Service, Ducks Unlimited, Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society, BSC and The Nature Conservancy. Additionally, I was invited to Ottawa to present to Nature Canada provincial affiliates, staff and BSC staff on the BC IBA caretaker program and to help set up similar programs in other provinces.

Krista Englund, our IBA program coordinator, has done a marvelous job of running the program, and has also managed to fit in having a new baby boy. While she is on maternity leave, we welcome Karen Barry as part-time coordinator. Karen works part-time on BSC programs so she is an excellent fit. Krista will remain with the program on very reduced hours as our caretaker contact person. I would also like to acknowledge the invaluable support of Pete Davidson, BC programs, BSC.

In 2010, we plan a schedule of site visits to mark the 10th anniversary of the first IBA site dedication in BC, to check on the status of habitat at the sites, meet with caretakers and test the pilot monitoring form.

To learn more about the IBA Program and how you can be involved, contact Karen Barry at bcproms@bsc-ecc.org or Anne Murray at sanderling@uniserve.com @
Focus on Important Bird Areas: Scott Islands  
Waiting for Canada’s first National Marine Wildlife Area
By Veronica Lo

Imagine a windswept vista, wild waves crashing at the base of towering cliffs, while tens of thousands of seabirds soar above, every now and then snatching a fish from the ocean. Close by, several mighty Steller sea lions casually observe the ruckus while reclining comfortably among the rocks.

If you have ever had the fortune of getting a provincial permit to visit Triangle Island, you might have seen this vista. But few people ever step foot on the island because of its remoteness and harsh, windy and slippery conditions. Yet the island teems with life: more than two million seabirds call this place home between March and September – the densest congregation of breeding seabirds in the eastern North Pacific, south of Alaska. Most of these seabirds nest in underground burrows, making them sensitive to disturbances – hence the need to restrict visitors to the island.

Triangle Island is one of a chain of islands collectively called the Scott Islands. They are known as an Important Bird Area (IBA) in Canada, supporting globally significant populations of Cassin’s auklets, rhinoceros auklets, and tufted puffins. The common murre, Brandt’s cormorant, pigeon guillemot, black oystercatcher and other species occur in nationally significant numbers. The waters around the Scott Islands are also habitat for nationally or internationally threatened species of seabirds, including short-tailed and black-footed albatrosses, pink-footed shearwaters and marbled murrelets.

The rugged windswept terrain of Anne Vallee (Triangle Island) Ecological Reserve is but a part of the Scott Islands chain.

Clearly, the Scott Islands are a provincial treasure. The five islands are a provincial park, while Triangle, Sartine and Beresford islands are ecological reserves. While these reserves help protect the nesting sites of seabirds, the surrounding ocean, where seabirds spend 95 percent of their time, is not yet protected against a barrage of human threats. These include oil pollution by commercial shipping, marine debris and invasive species. Fishing is another major threat – the incidental capture or bycatch of seabirds occurs in longline and gillnet fisheries, while bottom-trawling alters seafloor habitats and communities, affecting seabird food sources.

In 2004, Environment Canada declared the waters surrounding the Scott Islands as a pilot site for Canada’s first-ever National Marine Wildlife Area (NMWA), which would protect the marine areas adjacent to the islands. An NMWA would not only offer protection to the birds that nest on the Scott Islands, but also to threatened seabird species that visit the area during their non-

The tufted icon of the Scott Islands

Puffins are famous the world over for their brightly-coloured beaks and comical, clown-like eyes. BC boasts 90 percent of Canada’s population of tufted puffins. These birds are distinguishable from Atlantic puffins by the ornate plumage on their heads. On the Scott Islands, most of the 25,000 breeding pairs of tufted puffins make their homes on Puffin Rock, a steep 100 m high islet connected to Triangle Island. Other fascinating facts:

- Tufted puffins are pelagic birds (meaning they live on the ocean), and only go ashore to breed in colonies
- Parents dig burrows to create nests, lining them with feathers and grasses
- Chicks are fed fish, squid and other invertebrates

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breeding seasons as well as to endangered marine mammals (including orca, blue and sei whales) that frequent nearby waters.

But progress has been slow, and the seabirds of the Scott Islands can wait no longer. With climate change looming, the Scott Islands and surrounding waters could become even more important as a refuge for migratory seabirds, including those from the south. We need the government to act quickly and complete the designation of the Scott Islands as Canada’s first NMWA.

Stay tuned. Throughout the fall, CPAWS-BC, in collaboration with BC Nature, the Comox Valley Naturalists and other groups, will be hosting presentations throughout Vancouver Island, showcasing the beautiful birds of the Scott Islands.

For more information about the Scott Islands, please contact info@cpawsbc.org Check the Scott Islands site summary at www.ibacanada.ca

Veronica Lo is the marine conservation planning coordinator for CPAWS-BC.

Please tell a politician that you support the designation of a National Marine Wildlife Area for the Scott Islands:

Barry Penner, Minister of Environment
PO Box 9047
STN PROV GOVT
Victoria, BC V8W 9E2
Tel 250 387-1187, Fax 250 387-1356
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Premier Gordon Campbell
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Victoria, BC V8V 1X4
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Jim Prentice, Minister of Environment
Parliament Hill
Tel 613 992-4275, Fax: 613-947-9475
Environment Canada
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10 Wellington Street
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Tel 819 997-1441, Fax 819 953-0279
Jim.Prentice@ec.gc.ca

Gail Shea, Minister of Fisheries and Oceans:
House of Commons
Ottawa, Ontario K1A 0A6
Tel 613 992-9223, Fax 613 992-1974
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Focus on Important Bird Areas: Sidney Channel

Buffleheads find sanctuary amid the waters near Sidney

By James K. (Kerry) Finley

Shoal Harbour Migratory Bird Sanctuary, part and parcel of Sidney Channel Important Bird Area (IBA) is one of the two original migratory bird sanctuaries on the west coast, established by an order-in-council of parliament in 1931. Part and parcel, because the two entities encompass the dual habitats of the bufflehead – critical feeding habitat in Shoal Harbour during the day and offshore roosting habitat in the adjacent Salish Sea (Strait of Georgia) at night.

The first census of Shoal Harbour Sanctuary was conducted by Neil Dawe of the Canadian Wildlife Service (CWS) in 1977/78, but systematic monitoring ended due to cut backs in funding. Beginning in 1991, local citizens began to monitor bird populations in the sanctuary and adjacent Sidney Channel, conducting an annual mid-winter survey by boat and using the earlier CWS survey points. In 1999, we began monthly surveys under Bird Studies Canada’s Coastal Waterbird Survey. In this way citizen monitoring contributes to the larger overview of the coast, and allows the establishment of a baseline index specific to Sidney Channel IBA, and allows us to see trends since Neil Dawe’s surveys. One of the most dramatic changes since that time has been the drastic decline in horned grebes, compared to the very consistent numbers of buffleheads.

Figure 1 illustrates the numbers of buffleheads counted on monthly surveys of Roberts Bay (site 39) over the period 1977 to 2007. These results are in agreement with the consensus that bufflehead populations, unlike those of most diving ducks, have remained stable in recent decades. It shows that buffleheads arrive late in the season and that peak numbers occur in November, decline in December and remain stable through winter. Surveys were not conducted in May so it does not show their late departure (relative to other waterfowl) in early May.

This graph demonstrates the value of long-term monitoring relative to the baseline set by Neil Dawe in 1977. Remarkably, though we take it for granted that government should monitor the weather and climate at strategic points in the country, we do not see fit to monitor wildlife populations in a consistent manner over long periods. This example of volunteer citizen-based monitoring is but one example of the importance of the work of Bird Studies Canada in association with the Canadian Wildlife Service and BC Nature.

In addition to the monthly Coastal Waterbird Surveys, I conduct daily counts of buffleheads on Roberts Bay during their arrival period from mid-October (All Buffleheads Day) through the period of the Great Bufflehead Crash (Nov. 4 to 5). All Buffleheads Day is a universal constant, marking the 298th day of the solar cycle, the official day when buffleheads first touch down on the Salish Sea. It falls on Oct. 15, within a narrow statistical average (+/- 2.4 days).

Buffleheads hold a record in the annals of phenology (the study of the timing of natural events in relation to environmental cues) as the world’s most punctual autumn

continued
IBA presentations inspire interest and involvement

By Karen Barry

With a recent Mountain Equipment Co-op grant secured by BC Nature, the BC Important Bird Area (IBA) team consisting of Krista Englund, Anne Murray (both BC Nature) and Bird Studies Canada’s Pete Davidson and Karen Barry, have been delivering presentations about the IBA program throughout this summer and fall.

The goal is to raise awareness about the program and build partnerships to strengthen stewardship and protection at the IBAs. Only about one quarter of the total area of BC’s IBAs is currently afforded some form of protection or conservation status. The sessions have drawn more than 200 staff from 18 different agencies and organizations responsible for land and resource management in the province.

Typically only 30 to 40 percent of attendees at any given session were previously aware of IBAs. Their response has been extremely positive, with a high level of interest shown in the program’s renaissance. Many representatives are following up and supporting the program by integrating IBA information into planning initiatives, assisting with signage, providing data, and requesting that additional presentations be held with other groups.

Buffleheads, continued

migrants, more punctual than the legendary swallows of San Juan Capistrano. All Buffleheads Day is a constant by which to gauge the onset of freeze-up and the development of large-scale weather patterns over the North Pacific (measured by the Pacific Decadal Oscillation index in computer models). It is hypothesized that the bufflehead’s highly regular migrations were closely related to the advance of the zero-degree isotherm and the establishment of the first sustained high pressure system over the continent.

The Great Bufflehead Crash follows about 24 days after All Buffleheads Day and marks the second and final influx of these birds to their wintering grounds. It was on this day in 1940 that a curious fall out of buffleheads occurred across Saskatchewan, one wintry evening. But that is another story!

James K. (Kerry) Finley is the caretaker for Sidney Channel IBA.

To learn more about the punctual buffleheads:
Focus on Important Bird Areas: Mount Arrowsmith Area Mountains

Vancouver Island mountains provide refuge for unique species

By Krista Englund, Anne Murray, Karen Barry and Peter Davidson

The only place in BC with Important Bird Areas (IBAs) specifically designated to protect an endemic bird is the central montane range of Vancouver Island. The Vancouver Island white-tailed ptarmigan (*Lagopus leucurus* ssp. *saxatilis*), a subspecies unique to the island, is found nowhere else on earth. Two IBAs lie on the central range, Strathcona Provincial Park and Mount Arrowsmith area mountains, and both have core breeding and wintering habitat for ptarmigan.

The Mount Arrowsmith IBA includes both its namesake peak (*kuthel-kuthelh* to the Albermi First Nations) and the adjacent mountains – Cokely, Moriarty and McQuillan. Long a favourite of mountain climbers, hikers, skiers and other backcountry enthusiasts, the Mount Arrowsmith area is wild and rugged. At 1,819 metres elevation, Mount Arrowsmith is the highest peak on southern Vancouver Island. The hike to the Mount Arrowsmith summit following the popular Judges Route is a strenuous climb, starting off as forested switchback and eventually leading into open rocky areas. The hike is steep but the rewards are beautiful coastal views and the unique plants and animals.

The Vancouver Island white-tailed ptarmigan uses a wider elevational range of habitats than the mainland ptarmigan, according to research by biologists from the Canadian Wildlife Service and the University of BC. On Mount Arrowsmith, the ptarmigan frequent subalpine fir, mountain hemlock and heather habitat in summer, and subalpine and upper montane forests in winter. In contrast, the birds in Strathcona utilize alpine habitat in summer and a range of alpine, upper montane forest and subalpine habitats in winter.

Other birds that can be observed in the Mount Arrowsmith area include blue grouse, northern pygmy owl, three-toed woodpecker, Barrow's goldeneye, spotted sandpiper, grey-crowned rosy finch, common raven, grey jay, pine siskin, red crossbill, chestnut-backed chickadee and Swainson's thrush.

As well as the rich bird life, Mount Arrowsmith IBA has many other ecological features. It is the headwater of two significant watersheds, the Englishman River on the north and the Little Qualicum River on the south, both of which are important wildlife corridors and salmon rivers, fed by the deep snow pack of Mount Arrowsmith for 10 months of the year. The Englishman River is the water supply for the growing town of Parksville on the east coast of Vancouver Island. The wild mountainous area is home to cougar, black-tailed deer, wolves, black bear and Roosevelt elk. A rare endemic mammal, the Vancouver Island marmot, used to live on the Arrowsmith Massif, but their numbers have dwindled to near extinction. Sightings have been few, although occasional whistles have been heard on remote parts of the mountain. It is hoped that the Vancouver Island captive breeding program will aid in the marmot's recovery and restoration. The Vancouver Island Marmot Program has successfully released some marmots to the area and scientists will study their movements, survival and reproductive success.

This exceptional IBA and the surrounding landscape were recognized as a UNESCO (United Nations Educational, continued
The bigger picture: The map above shows the approximate locations and boundaries of the parks, biosphere reserve and Important Bird Area in the Mount Arrowsmith area.

Scientific and Cultural Organization) Biosphere Reserve in 2000. This reserve is much larger than Mount Arrowsmith IBA, and includes the NanOOSE to Little Qualicum Estuary IBA on the coast, all watersheds between Lantzville and Dashwood, the adjacent waters in the Strait of Georgia, including the Ballenas/Winchelsea Islands, the communities of Parksville and Qualicum Beach and parts of the Regional District of Nanaimo. Biosphere reserves are designated under the Man and the Biosphere Program and recognized internationally by UNESCO to demonstrate practical approaches to balancing conservation and development. They are comprised of “one or more core protected areas, a buffer area in which activities compatible with conservation occur, and a large area of cooperation where sustainable resource management practices are promoted and developed.” There are 15 biosphere reserves in Canada, two of which are on Vancouver Island. The other is the Clayoquot Biosphere Reserve on the west coast.

With all these designations, it might be assumed that wildlife habitat on Mount Arrowsmith would be well protected, but only a tiny percentage of this valuable habitat benefited from legal protection until now. The new Mount Arrowsmith Massif Regional Park, announced in September 2009, covers 1,300 ha of alpine wilderness within the Mount Arrowsmith IBA and Biosphere Reserve, including ptarmigan habitat. This is good news for conservation and was also greatly welcomed by outdoor enthusiasts. The new park expands the area previously protected by Mount Arrowsmith Regional Park, which confusingly only encompassed the Mount Cokely ski area, not Mount Arrowsmith itself nor the summit of Mount Cokely. The park is managed by the Regional District of Nanaimo in cooperation with the Hupacasath First Nation of the Alberni Valley, the Federation of Mountain Clubs of BC and the Alpine Club of Canada. Conservation concerns still exist, primarily logging in the watersheds and recreational pressures in this fast developing region of Vancouver Island. 🌱
Focus on Important Bird Areas: Tofino Mudflats

Expanses of mud and sand provide critical habitat for migrating shorebirds

By Anne Murray, Krista Englund, Karen Barry and Barbara Beasley

Along the steep terrain of the rocky BC coast, places for shorebirds to rest and feed are few and far between. Tofino Mudflats Important Bird Area, located in Clayoquot Sound, is a unique location on the west coast of Vancouver Island that draws globally significant numbers of shorebirds during migration. Typically, tens to hundreds of thousands of western sandpipers and other shorebirds stop on their way to and from northern breeding grounds in spring and late summer. Western and least sandpipers winter as far south as Ecuador or Peru, while sanderlings and semipalmated plovers can go as far as Tierra del Fuego in Argentina. In their haste to reach the long daylight hours of the Arctic, they pause for only a brief period at various stopovers, including the Tofino mudflats. This short time, often just two or three days, is critical for feeding, as some birds will almost double their weight in an attempt to survive the journey to the next stopover point (Copper River Delta) and to eventually breed successfully.

BC IBA Program staff member Karen Barry visited Tofino this year for the 13th annual Tofino Shorebird Festival held May 7 to 9 and organized by the Raincoast Education Society. Beautiful spring weather made bird watching a pleasure, although the light was a little tricky because of all the sun! Western sandpiper, least sandpiper, whimbrel, dunlin, semipalmated plover, short-billed dowitcher and lesser yellowlegs were all seen during her visit, but she missed out seeing any rare red knot of the year before. Unexpectedly, the big excitement came on the land bird side of the IBA, when a male indigo bunting flew over and perched in nearby alders, a very unusual sighting for the West Coast. Tofino Mudflats was designated as an IBA shortly after becoming a provincial wildlife management area in 1997. As a critical stopover for western sandpiper, it is second only to the Fraser River Estuary in BC. The IBA is also an important wintering area for waterfowl, and a late summer feeding place for great blue heron (ssp. fannini). The IBA covers six mudflats on either side of Browning Passage, which are lined with salt marshes and forests and sheltered from the Pacific Ocean by the long peninsula on which the little town of Tofino is located. It also includes Sandy Chesterman Beach, an important roosting area for western sandpipers. This makes the IBA somewhat larger than the WMA. The whole area is also an integral part of the Clayoquot Sound UNESCO Biosphere Reserve.

In 2004, the Raincoast Education Society initiated the Tofino Mudflats Stewardship Program with support from the Habitat Conservation Trust Foundation, and essentially became the caretaker for the Tofino Mudflats IBA. This caretaker role was formalized last year, with the volunteer support of Barb Beasley, a Raincoast board member and coastal

continued
ecologist. She and her colleagues are working to help shape an environmentally sensitive future for the Clayoquot and Barkley Sound region through education and community stewardship. For example, their Building Better Birding Skills program gives enthusiastic birders and new birders alike an opportunity to learn from local experts. Other stewardship work includes participating with the local Tla-o-qui-aht First Nation and others in an advisory group that is updating the management plan for the WMA. Barb is also hoping to obtain Western Hemispheric Shorebird Reserve Network designation for the site.

Other active members, led by expert birder Adrian Dorst, conduct bird counts for Bird Studies Canada’s Coastal Waterbird Survey and other local monitoring programs. Counts from these surveys over the last few years consistently show the mudflats are not only critical for shorebirds, they also provide important foraging habitat for thousands of wintering ducks and geese. Dense growths of eelgrass and algae attract large flocks of American wigeon, with a few Eurasian wigeon among them, as well as green-winged teal, mallards, and lesser numbers of gadwall, northern pintails and northern shovelers. Almost every birding session includes an exciting glimpse of predators in motion – a stealthy peregrine falcon approaching at incredible speeds, or a bald eagle, maneuvering more cumbrosely but with mighty talons extended.

The Tofino Mudflats have limited access, which makes them all the more valuable to birds by minimizing human disturbance. For birders looking to enjoy the flocks, there is a new viewing platform at the end of Sharp Road, together with a parking area, good gravel trail and an interpretive sign about the Wildlife Management Area. A water treatment facility has been constructed on the old access point to ensure the severe water shortages of summer 2006 are not repeated. There is also parking and access at the Tofino Botanical Gardens (admission fee) or you can visit the southern part of the mudflats at Grice Bay within Pacific Rim National Park.

The BC IBA Program, which includes matching all designated Important Bird Areas in BC with volunteer caretakers to be the “eyes, ears and hands on the ground” is a partnership program of BC Nature, Bird Studies Canada and Nature Canada. To find out more, visit www.bcnature.ca and check out the Stewardship Programs/IBA pages on the website.

Anne Murray is BC Nature’s IBA coordinator, Krista Englund is the BC IBA program coordinator, Karen Barry is the BC IBA program technical coordinator and Barbara Bensley is the volunteer IBA caretaker for Tofino Mudflats.

Websites for more information:
Tofino Mudflats Wildlife Management Area
www.tofinomudflats.com
Raincoast Education Society
www.raincoasteducation.org
Important Bird Areas
www.ibacanada.ca
Clayoquot Biosphere Reserve
www.clayoquotbiosphere.org
Focus on Important Bird Areas: Citizen science

Help monitor BC’s Important Bird Areas

By Krista Englund, Karen Barry and Pete Davidson

On Apr. 20, the drilling rig Deepwater Horizon exploded and sank off the coast of Louisiana, spilling millions of barrels of oil into the Gulf of Mexico and along the US Gulf Coast – an area that is rich with globally important stopover areas for many birds, including over 100 Canadian species. Amazingly, it now appears that most Canadian bird species avoided direct impacts. "While we probably won't know the full environmental impact for several years, there is every indication that most Canadian bird species narrowly dodged a bullet, at least in terms of direct oiling," says Jon McCracken, BSC's Director of National Programs.

In the wake of the Gulf oil spill, bird conservation authorities are encouraging citizens to take part in bird monitoring programs to help scientists understand the long term impacts of this tragic event. But monitoring birds isn’t just important after a tragedy, it is a cornerstone of good conservation management. As SFU’s Dan Esler – an expert on Prince William Sound’s recovery since the Exxon Valdez spill 20 years ago – points out, in scenarios like the current Gulf crisis: "Monitoring data prior to these events are worth their weight in gold." This is precisely why monitoring is one of the primary tasks of caretakers for Important Bird Areas (IBAs). Data collected by such citizen scientists is increasingly recognized by professionals as not only credible, but indispensable to help researchers spot anomalies, compare results from one area or time with another, and distinguish trends. Combined with the power of the Internet, networks of citizen scientists provide "unprecedented opportunity to mobilize a community to address new environmental problems, almost like having the environmental equivalent of a ‘fire brigade’ ready to act as the need arises," notes Caren Cooper of the Cornell Lab of Ornithology in a recent issue of Ecology and Society.

However, even with more than 50 experienced and dedicated caretakers, monitoring BC’s 84 IBAs is no small task. Consider one of Greater Vancouver’s IBAs. The shoreline of English Bay-Burrard Inlet IBA stretches over 130 kilometres and spans eight municipalities. To effectively monitor bird populations and potential threats, and ultimately work towards long term conservation of IBAs, caretakers often need to enlist help from other birders, conservationists, educators, planners and media-savvy individuals. You may be able to help your local caretaker by:

- Offering to help caretakers with monitoring or other tasks (see www.bcnature.ca/pages/stewardship_projects/IBA_areas-caretakers.html or contact iba@bcnature.ca).
- Participating in a citizen science bird monitoring program, such as those coordinated by Bird Studies Canada (contact bcp@birdscanada.org for more information), including:
  - Christmas Bird Counts
  - Canadian Lakes Loon Survey
  - Project FeederWatch
  - Project NestWatch
  - Breeding Bird Atlas
  - Coastal Waterbird Survey
  - Nocturnal Owl Surveys
  - Baillie Birdathon
  - Beached Bird Survey
  - Canadian Migration Monitoring Network (e.g., Vauxes Lake station)

- Entering your bird sightings into an online electronic database such as eBird.org so that your observations can be used by caretakers and scientists to monitor change over time.
- Contacting the BC IBA caretaker coordinator at iba@bcnature.ca to learn more!

Your help in monitoring changes in bird populations over time is needed and valued now more than ever. We encourage you to get involved by recording and submitting your bird observations to an electronic database, particularly within bird hotspots such as Important Bird Areas.

Krista Englund is BC Nature’s IBA coordinator.
Focus on Important Bird Areas: Stuart, Tachie and Middle Rivers IBA

Trumpeter swan habitat benefits from attention

By Krista Englund

The Stuart, Tachie and Middle rivers are a series of connected rivers close to Fort St. James in northcentral BC. These waterways were designated as an IBA in the late 1990s because they support globally significant numbers of trumpeter swans. Swans that overwinter on the Stuart, Tachie and Middle Rivers typically arrive from their Alaskan breeding grounds in October and leave in April; they are the northernmost population of wintering trumpeter swans in BC. Throughout the 1990s, up to 550 swans wintered on these three sections of river, which represents about 2.5 percent of this species' global population. Similar numbers still use this IBA; caretaker Joanne Vinnedge counted about 450 swans during aerial and ground surveys in March 2009.

Residents of Fort St. James are fortunate that swans continue to use the Stuart, Tachie and Middle Rivers today. Trumpeter swans were historically hunted and harassed to the point that only 77 trumpeter swans bred in Canada in 1933. Today, as a result of an intensive international conservation effort, there are about 16,000 wild trumpeter swans and the species is no longer considered to be in danger of extinction. Ongoing pressures to swan populations include harassment by people and animals, wires strung over rivers, and extreme cold, which can cause ice to build up on wintering grounds like the Stuart, Tachie and Middle Rivers IBA, and reduce the amount of available feeding habitat. With an unusually dense layer of down (up to 5 cm thick!), trumpeter swans are well adapted to cold conditions and have been known to tolerate extended periods with temperatures as low as -30°C.

Trumpeter swans that depend on the Stuart, Tachie and Middle Rivers are fortunate to have a passionate caretaker and other local individuals who keep watch on their populations and habitat, and work to promote greater local awareness. With support from the Shell Environmental Fund and the Fort St. James Rotary Club, BC Nature and caretaker Joanne Vinnedge developed an interpretive sign about swans and IBAs for the Rotary Kiosk along the Stuart River this year. Situated in a high profile location at a main rest and picnic area at the Stuart River bridge crossing, this sign will be seen by thousands of visitors on their way to the Fort St. James National Historic Site as well as many residents who fish or walk in the area. The sign is designed to raise awareness of IBAs and the importance of the Stuart, Tachie and Middle Rivers for trumpeter swans, and to encourage local residents to support activities that will preserve this critical habitat for future generations. In addition, the sign helps create a template that can be used for signs for other IBAs across BC. If you know of an ideal location near an IBA to install interpretive signage or other educational information, please contact your local caretaker or the IBA coordinator at iba@bcnature.ca to share your thoughts.

For more info about the Stuart, Tachie and Middle Rivers IBA, check the site summary on the IBA Canada website (www.ibacanada.ca). Krista Englund is the BC Nature IBA coordinator.
Focus on BC Important Bird Areas (IBAs): Chilcotin Junction in the Okanagan Similkameen

By: Kris Andrews, IBA Caretaker

The wide grasslands and breathtaking canyon scenery of the Chilcotin Junction IBA make it an exciting area for birders and naturalists to explore. The IBA includes an extended area along both the Chilcotin and Fraser Rivers, upriver of the junction. It encompasses a mosaic of grasslands, big sagebrush flats, sand dunes, Interior Douglas-fir forest, steep slopes with hoodoos, and rock outcrops above roaring rivers below, riparian zones and small lakes and marshes.

The area was nominated to become an IBA by Cariboo naturalists, Anna and Gina Roberts, who recognized the value of its mature, old growth Douglas-fir forests along the river valley walls for providing habitat to one of the highest breeding concentrations of Flammulated Owls in Canada. Other species at their northern breeding limit in the IBA include: Lewis’s Woodpecker, Prairie Falcon, Sharp-tailed Grouse, Long-billed Curlew, Dusky Horned Lark. Sprague’s Pipit and Upland Sandpiper have been reported historically.

Exploring Chilcotin Junction

The eastern boundary of the IBA is intercepted 14 km west of Williams Lake on Highway 20 near the Fraser River. Fields near the river contain breeding Long-billed Curlew, while open slopes and ravines above the river provide nesting habitat for many bird species including: Long-eared Owl, Lazuli Bunting, Dullock’s Oriole, Eastern and Western Kingbirds. Doc English Bluff Ecological Reserve is five kilometers downstream of the bridge on the west bank of the Fraser River. In May and June, listen here for Flammulated Owls and Common Poorwills calling after dusk. White-throated Swifts and the occasional pair of Golden Eagles can be viewed at the Bluff.

The most popular locations for viewing wildlife within the IBA are the Farwell Canyon Road and the Junction Sheep Range Provincial Park. To reach these areas drive 45 km west of Williams Lake on Hwy 20 to Riske Creek. Turn south and drive 15 km on the Farwell Canyon Forest Service Road to the park sign. From here drive 9 km south through private property along a dirt access road with some steep slopes, deep ruts and slippery conditions when wet. The road ends at a memorial cairn within the Provincial Park.

The extensive protected grasslands of Junction Sheep Range Provincial Park provide habitat for the largest herd of California bighorn sheep in the world, as well as many other grassland species. It is possible to hike from the memorial cairn down to the scenic junction of the Chilcotin and Fraser Rivers, a long hot walk in summertime. The flats above the junction demonstrate evidence of historic Chinese placer mining activity. A loop road circles from the cairn back through the Park to its northern boundary. In late fall, bighorn sheep can be observed rutting and sightings of Snow Bunting, Lapland Longspur, Rough-legged Hawk or Northern Hawk Owl are possible.

If road conditions do not permit a visit to the park, drive on down the Farwell Canyon Forest Service Road to the scenic splendors of Farwell Canyon on the Chilcotin River. Here in summer, First Nations fish for salmon in the traditional way. The old log homestead and hoodoos upstream of the Farwell Canyon Bridge are very photogenic, but be advised the buildings are on private property. The riparian zone of Farwell Creek and shrub belt at the base of the silt cliffs at this old ranch site harbour much bird life including possible rarities such as Black-chinned Hummingbird. @

Map of the Chilcotin Junction IBA

Spring 2011 BCnature
Focus on BC Important Bird Areas (IBAs): Active Pass - Vancouver Island

By: Michael Dunn, Mike Hoebel & Krista England

Active Pass is a turbulent and scenic body of water separating Mayne and Galiano islands. It is also one of the most traveled boat routes in BC with five million people transiting it annually on BC Ferries between the lower mainland and Vancouver Island. The pass is also well used by a great diversity of birds. The average ferry passenger, however, is probably unaware of its importance for birds, though one could hardly miss noticing the large numbers of gulls that dance on the air currents surrounding the ferry as it churns through the pass.

Active Pass was designated as an Important Bird Area (IBA) because of the importance of the site to Bonaparte’s Gull, Brandt’s Cormorant, and Pacific Loon. Flocks of up to 10,000 Bonaparte’s Gulls are regularly observed during fall and spring migrations. Over 2,000 Pacific Loons historically gathered in the pass during the winter months, and up to 10,000 have been seen during spring migration. However, Pacific Loon numbers appear to have decreased an order of magnitude in recent years, with a daily maximum of only 200 observed in 2010. Brandt’s Cormorant numbers have also declined from 4,000+ overwintering birds to the highest daily maximum of only 15 in 2010.

The significance of Active Pass for fish-eating birds is linked to the rich feeding area that is created by the tidal mixing that occurs during the ebb and flow of the tide through the channel, particularly during the spring, fall, and winter. In addition to birds, orcas feed and travel regularly through the pass from spring to fall, while Dall’s and harbour porpoise and Steller’s sea lions are occasional visitors.

While the area is still ecologically rich, it is vulnerable to a number of potential threats. Birds using this area can be impacted by oil spills or oil discharges from ships, and possibly excessive disturbance from recreational and ferry boats. Pacific Loons are especially vulnerable during their winter flightless period when they undergo wing moult. Long term monitoring of the state (>birds, land use, habitat), pressures (=threats) and responses (=conservation activities) is a key component of the IBA program to help track changes over time and evaluate the impact of conservation activities.

Caretakers Michael Dunn (of the Mayne Island Conservancy Society) and Mike Hoebel (of the Galiano Conservancy Association) are taking a lead role in monitoring the Active Pass IBA. With help from volunteer stewards on Mayne and Galiano islands, Michael and Mike count the birds within the IBA on a monthly basis. Key habitats and conservation threats are monitored as well. For example, the Mayne Island Conservancy has been monitoring eelgrass beds since 2008 and just completed detailed mapping of eelgrass and kelp beds around Mayne Island. Early results suggest a decline in extent of eelgrass beds, which may be the result of extreme weather during maximum low tides and/or excessive Canada Goose browsing. The impact of the reduction of this prime marine ecosystem to the overall health of the IBA is not known at this time. The marine feeding areas used by the vast majority of birds (tidal upwelling, fronts and rapids) continue to be used heavily and appear to provide optimum feeding opportunities.

In addition to monitoring, caretakers Michael Dunn and Mike Hoebel are active in other stewardship and outreach activities, such as an annual beach cleanup on Earth Day. With support from the Mayne and Galiano Islands Park and Recreation Commissions, BC Parks, Parks Canada, and Vacancy, a stewardship project was undertaken to increase awareness amongst both residents and visitors of Galiano and Mayne islands (see www.activepassiba.ca). With help from local artists and photographers, interpretive signs were developed for Bellhouse Provincial Park on Galiano Island and the Gulf Islands National Park Reserve on Mayne Island. Small beach access signs to notify visitors of the IBA were also erected while brochures and posters were developed and distributed to reach a larger audience across the islands.

Building awareness about the IBA has expanded beyond the islands as well. BC Ferries has incorporated some information about the IBA in their Naturalist-on-Board presentations to local and international passengers during summer sailings. Hopefully, awareness of the importance of this ecologically rich marine area will continue to grow and inspire further efforts to ensure that human activities are conducted in a way that ensures its sustained use by birds and other species while in Active Pass and other parts of their range.
Focus on IBAs: Laskeek Bay Important Bird Area

By: Krista England

Waves crashing, Orca's breaching. Birds calling. These are all sights and sounds experienced by visiting volunteer citizen scientists on Limestone Island in Laskeek Bay Important Bird Area, Haida Gwaii. Since 1990, hundreds of volunteers, schoolchildren, and visitors have taken part in volunteer monitoring and stewardship projects run by the Laskeek Bay Conservation Society (LBCS).

It all started around a campfire in 1989 when Dr. Tony Gaston of the Canadian Wildlife Service (CWS), was lamenting the end of his six-year research project on Reef Island's Ancient Murrelets with some friends. Intrigued by this work, a handful of people recognized the need for long-term monitoring. An idea developed, which grew into a vision of involving local people and volunteers as volunteer citizen scientists in a long-term monitoring project. The following year, 1990, the Laskeek Bay Conservation Society (LSBC) formed and a field camp was established on East Limestone Island. The field camp has run every year since.

For three months each summer, volunteers are transported to East Limestone Island and spend a minimum of one week in the camp, assisting with the field programs and the tasks of running the camp. Since 1990, more than 550 volunteers have participated – approximately half from local communities. The others have come from across Canada and 15 other countries. Local schoolchildren and high school students also come to Limestone each year to experience first-hand biological research and gain work experience. Over the years, LBCS has touched most of the families on Haida Gwaii and their programs are regularly mentioned at high school graduations and in yearbooks as a highlight of the student's experience. In 2010, an intern program for senior year university students was initiated to provide them with invaluable field research skills to complement their studies. Since 1991, more than 20 university students have worked in the camp and undertaken studies on the island.

The key species of interest for the research and monitoring activities in Laskeek Bay is the Ancient Murrelet. The islands of Haida Gwaii are the only place in Canada where Ancient Murrelets nest, with approximately 50% of the global population breeding there. These seabirds connect the waters of the offshore marine environment, where it feeds, with the tall trees of the coastal temperate rainforest, under which it nests. Ancient Murrelets are at risk in Canada because of the threat of introduced predators; their populations have been devastated throughout their range in Alaska, Russia and Japan by foxes, rats, raccoons and other species. The LBCS undertakes a variety of activities to minimize the impact of introduced predators on Laskeek Bay's murrelets, and monitor the impacts of introduced predators and control efforts.

Laskeek Bay IBA is not only important for Ancient Murrelets. The Limestone Islands are a hotspot for biological productivity, and together with neighbouring islands and surrounding waters, support a variety of marine birds such as Marbled Murrelets, Cassin's Auklets, Pigeon Guillemots, Storm-Petrels, Glaucous-winged Gulls, and Black Oystercatchers as well as marine mammals and rare plants. The Society's 15 monitoring programs cover a broad range of the marine birds and mammals, rare plants, and introduced species (black-tailed deer, squirrels, raccoons and plants), making Laskeek Bay an exciting place to be a citizen scientist. The Society is also in an excellent position to share their knowledge - they distribute a bi-weekly newsletter, write articles for a local paper, and maintain an exhibit, a hydrophone for marine mammals, and nest boxes for Pigeon Guillemots at the Haida Gwaii Museum at Kaay Linagaay in Skidegate, BC.

LBCS has now compiled more than 20 years of data on the Ancient Murrelet, its life history and biology, and the population changes of a small colony threatened by raccoons. This is the longest running, continuous, seabird monitoring data set in British Columbia. It provides life history information needed for management planning and effective conservation decision-making and is invaluable for monitoring the effects of climate change, potential oil drilling, forestry, and wind energy projects. At a time when government funding is very limited and public interest is growing, the role of citizen science non-government organizations is increasingly important. The 20 years of work by the Laskeek Bay Conservation Society and their volunteers provides an exciting model.

For more information, to make a donation or to inquire about volunteer opportunities, please visit www.laskeekbay.org.

Laskeek Bay is an expanse of water open to Hecate Strait on the east coast of Louise Island, and north of Lyell Island on Haida Gwaii. The IBA includes the islands of Skedans, Low, South Low, Limestone, Reef, Lost and Kingsway Rock, which lie within the broad boundaries of the bay. Skedans, Limestone and Reef Islands are included within a provincial Wildlife Management Area, while the other islands are Crown Land and fall outside the boundaries of Gwaii Haanas National Park Reserve.

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Focus on IBAs - New signs for BC's Important Bird Areas

By Krista Englund

Caretakers for BC’s Important Bird Areas (IBA) are keen to spread the word about the importance of their local sites for birds. Over the past year, Caretakers from seven IBAs worked with BC Nature to raise funds, or raised their own funds, to develop interpretive signs for installation in Stanley Park, the Town of Sidney, on Gallo, Mayne and Mitlenatch Islands, and in the South Okanagan. In addition, Nature Canada provided $70,000 standard IBA identification signs that are being installed in 28 IBAs across British Columbia.

The Stanley Park (English Bay Burrard Inlet IBA) interpretive sign, inspired by Caretakers Krista Englund and Robyn Worcester (Stanley Park Ecology Society), profiles key birds including Surf Scoters and Barrow’s Goldeneye. With help from local environmental educators, Sidney Caretaker Kerry Finley crafted a sign for the Sidney waterfront that profiles birds like Buffleheads and Heermann’s Gulls. Funded by the Canadian Wildlife Federation and installed with support from the Town of Sidney and Vancouver Parks Board, these attractive signs will reach many residents and visitors from their high profile locations overlooking IBAs.

Interpretive signs for Active Pass IBA were erected at Bellhouse Provincial Park on Galiano Island and the Gulf Islands National Park Reserve on Mayne Island last fall. Local artwork is featured on the Galiano Island sign and the Mayne Island sign highlights wildlife found in the National Park. Development of these signs was led by Caretakers Michael Dunn and the Mayne Island Conservancy Society, and Mike Hoebel and the Galiano Conservancy Association, with support from the Mayne and Galiano Islands Park and Recreation Commissions, BC Parks, Parks Canada, and Vancity Credit Union.

Numerous volunteers from the Mitlenatch Island Stewardship Team have been working with BC Parks to develop an interpretive sign for Mitlenatch Island Provincial Nature Park. The sign, which highlights the island’s status as an IBA, will be installed this summer with funding support from Mountain Equipment Coop.

In the South Okanagan, three interpretive signs were recently installed at Vaseux Lake IBA (Vaseux Lake Provincial Park), Kilpoola Lake IBA (South Okanagan Grasslands Protected Area) and Okoosox Oxbows IBA (Haynes Lease Ecological Reserve). Caretakers Eva Durance, Doug Brown, Lois and Harry Nielsen, and numerous partners, helped to find the perfect text and photos to highlight the numerous species at risk found in the area, including Sage Thrasher, Yellow-breasted Chat, Lewis’s Woodpecker, and Fledgulated Owl. The signs were funded by a grant from the BC Parks Community Legacy Program and installed by BC Parks.

Interpretive signs are an eye-catching way to increase awareness by adults and children alike because they feature photos and information about site-specific birds and background on the IBA program. However, less expensive signs that notify visitors that they are entering an IBA are extremely valuable for locations where interpretive signs already exist or have not be installed due to limited space, lack of funds or some other reason. Last fall, Nature Canada produced 224 small, national ‘IBA identification’ signs with assistance from provincial IBA coordinators across the country. Caretakers in BC are in the process of installing 70 of these signs in 28 IBAs, including Creston Valley, Chilcotin Junction, Stuart-Tahoe-Middle Rivers near Ft. St. James, on Mitlenatch Island, and at three sites on Haida Gwaii, 10 sites on Vancouver Island, and four sites on the South Coast.

Virtually all of the IBA interpretive and identification signs installed in locations with cell phone service feature QR (quick response) codes. QR codes enable visitors who have smartphones or tablets to access the site summary for the IBA by simply taking a photo of the code. This technology is particularly valuable where only IBA identification signs have been installed because these small, standard signs do not include site-specific information, such as which birds are found at the IBA. The online site summaries contain a wealth of information about the site, including the target bird species, key habitats, and conservation threats and activities. Given the rapid growth in smartphone use and coverage across North America, utilizing free QR codes on IBA signs is an effective use to overcome the age-old dilemma of wanting to give visitors as much information as possible, while keeping signs small, uncluttered and attractive.

Photo: Patrick Bonifiet

Caretaker Lee McFarren shows off an IBA identification sign for Chopaka Customs IBA.
Focus on IBAs - Douglas Lake Plateau

Douglas Lake Plateau is one of the most valuable areas for birds in BC’s interior, and is particularly notable for the large and diverse population of migratory birds. Sandhill Cranes pass through on both spring and fall migration, sometimes numbering up to 10,000 birds. The site is also a major migration corridor for thousands of raptors, waterfowl, shorebirds, loons, grebes, gulls and passerines. At least 29 species of birds that are red-listed (endangered or threatened) or blue-listed (special concern) in the province occur here.

The importance of this site for concentrations of migratory birds - Sandhill Crane in particular - earned it the designation of Important Bird Area (IBA) in 2000. Stretching between Kamloops and Merritt, Douglas Lake Plateau is the largest of BC’s 16 interior IBAs. The site is a rolling plateau of bunchgrass grasslands, small marshy lakes, Douglas-fir/Ponderosa Pine forest, and Aspen parkland. Most of the area is privately owned and used for livestock rangeland.

The habitats found on Douglas Lake Plateau attract an impressive suite of breeding birds as well as migrants. Captive-bred, nationally-endangered Burrowing Owls have been released in the IBA since 1994. Some of the chicks reared in local nests have returned from their southward winter migration and should be adding to the breeding population. Nationally-Threatened Bobolink and Special-Concern Long-billed Curlew have also bred in the area. Common Nighthawk, a nationally vulnerable species, is a likely breeder and migrates through in August. Provicially red-listed Swainson's Hawk breed regularly, and American Avocet and Prairie Falcon have bred on the plateau. Numerous leks (display grounds) of the blue-listed Sharp-tailed Grouse, columbianus subspecies, have been found in the IBA. American White Pelican (red-listed), a regular spring and fall migrant, have also summered in the IBA for at least five years, but there is no known breeding colony.

With such a large and diverse population of birds, Douglas Lake Plateau is a favoured place for birding. Members of the Shuswap Naturalist Club monitored the area as the IBA Caretaker until 2011, when the Nicola Naturalist Society and Kamloops Naturalist Club stepped in to assist. To learn more about the area or how you can get involved, please contact nicolanaturalists@gmail.com.

Photo Left: Douglas Lake Plateau is a rolling plateau of bunchgrass grasslands, small marshy lakes, Douglas Fir Ponderosa Pine forest, and Aspen parkland.

Photo: J. Routley

A Pair of magnificent Sandhill Cranes in flight.
Focus on IBAs: White Lake

By Krista Englund

Nestled in the White Lake basin, White Lake Important Bird Area (IBA) is one of five IBAs in the South Okanagan-Similkameen. White Lake IBA and Vaseux Lake IBA are close to Okanagan Falls, Osoyoos Oxbows IBA is just north of Osoyoos Lake, and Kilopola Lake IBA and Choppaka Customs IBA are within the South Okanagan Grasslands Protected Area, located between Highway 3 and the USA border, west of Osoyoos. With their high diversity of birds and habitats, and easy access, White Lake and the other South Okanagan IBAs are premier birding destinations. Many birds and wildlife that live in South Okanagan grasslands are well camouflaged, secretive and most active at dawn and dusk. However, a patient observer is usually rewarded with sights or sounds of the many common and rare birds that live there.

Birds of White Lake - White Lake was originally designated as an IBA for Endangered Sage Thrashers; the basin is one of the few places this rare bird regularly breeds in Canada. Endangered Western-Screech Owls have been found in the forested portions of the IBA during winter and summer. Endangered White-headed Woodpeckers and Yellow-breasted Chats have also been seen in the IBA. Threatened Barn Swallows and Common Nighthawks occur in the area, as do provincially rare (red-listed) Brewer’s Sparrow, Grasshopper Sparrow and Lark Sparrow.

Careful planning or a dose of good luck may be required to catch up with some of the rare species that live in the basin. Many other birds offer an easier reward. With its beautiful blue plumage, the Mountain Bluebird seems to contradict the rule of blending in with the landscape. The Vesper Sparrow is the most easily seen sparrow, as it sits up on a clump of vegetation to sing. Western Meadowlark are usually present, and easily detected by their loud, lilting flute. Overhead, Sandhill Cranes migrate through the IBA northward in April and southward in September; it is possible to see several thousand in a day. A pair of Osprey have nested for years near the Dominion Radio Astrophysical Observatory buildings. American Kestrel and Northern Harrier are other birds of prey commonly seen soaring over the grasslands.

Conservation Status & Activities - Most of the lands within the IBA are privately owned by the National Research Council (NRC). These NRC-owned lands are leased to the Nature Trust of British Columbia and Clifton Ranch, and managed as the White Lake Basin Biodiversity Ranch. The remaining lands (approximately one quarter of the IBA) are protected within the provincial White Lake Grasslands Protected Area, which has limited public access.

The land owners and managers, along with Caretakers from the South Okanagan Naturalists’ Club and local partners, are working to protect the habitat within the IBA. Conservation activities conducted by The Nature Trust, the South Okanagan Similkameen Invasive Plant Society, and other partners involved in the South Okanagan-Similkameen Conservation Program include fencing and associated regeneration of riparian habitat, implementation of grazing rotation practices, and biological and manual control of invasive plants. Adjacent habitat at Twin Lakes was recently purchased by The Nature Trust of BC.

In spring 2012, supported by a grant from Environment Canada, BC Nature teamed up with local partners and Caretakers to complete a comprehensive review and action plan for White Lake IBA. The outcome of the process was an updated site summary in the online Canadian IBA database (see ibacanada.ca) and a list of actions needed to help conserve the IBA. One of the actions — a new interpretive sign for White Lake — was designed by BC Nature’s Anne Murray and Caretaker Doreen Olson, and installed in spring 2012 with support from Carl McNaughton and Nick Burdock from the Nature Trust of BC. Several other actions are underway and the informal White Lake IBA group will be meeting in fall 2012 to review progress.

Another significant conservation effort that could benefit IBAs in the South Okanagan-Similkameen is the establishment of the proposed National Park Reserve for the South Okanagan-Lower Similkameen. Parts of Vaseux Lake IBA and all of Kilopola Lake and Choppaka Customs IBAs are included in the proposed boundary outlined in the recently released Feasibility Assessment. Although White Lake IBA is outside of the proposed boundary, the establishment of a National Park Reserve would make it possible to create partnerships for White Lake and Vaseux protected areas, National Research Council lands, and other conservation areas adjacent to the proposed boundary.

Help Conserve IBAs! - You can help conservation efforts at White Lake and other IBAs by joining or making a donation to BC Nature or the South Okanagan Naturalists’ Club (SONC, www.southokanagannature.com), participating in bird monitoring programs coordinated by Bird Studies Canada or SONC, submitting your bird observations to www.ebird.ca, reporting rare bird sightings to Environment Canada at 604-940-4700, and supporting conservation efforts such as the creation of a new National Park Reserve in the South Okanagan-Lower Similkameen. To learn more about these special places, please contact iba@bcnature.ca or participate in a tour of White Lake or other IBAs during the Meadowlark Festival - www.meadowlarkfestival.ca, held each year in May. ❄️

Meadowlark
Photo: Rick Woolley

Sage Thrashers nest in mature sagebrush
Focus on IBAs: Somenos Marsh

By Paul Fletcher, Susan Lymberry and Krista Englund

Entrance to Somenos Marsh
Outdoor Classroom

Just a short distance from Duncan, Somenos Marsh is one of Vancouver Island's most accessible Important Bird Areas. In 2000, Somenos Marsh was designated as an IBA for the large number of Trumpeter Swans that overwinter here; up to 1,000 birds have been recorded roosting and feeding in the lake and flooded wetlands. Somenos also achieved IBA status for its population of Great Blue Herons who use the area for feeding. Somenos Marsh is well known as a good spring, fall and winter location for many bird species. In total, two hundred and seventy species have been recorded in the refuge, including passing rarities such as Tufted Duck, Eurasian Wigeon, Black-crowned Night-Heron, White-faced Ibis, Great Egret and Black-throated Sparrow.

Since 1989, the Somenos Marsh Wildlife Society (SMWS) has been working to protect the marsh. Projects have ranged from acquiring land in partnership with the Nature Trust and Ducks Unlimited to controlling invasive species and managing old field habitat to discourage growth of willows in the marsh. One of the most recent projects of the Society has been the creation of the Somenos Marsh Open Air Classroom—featuring a wheelchair-accessible elevated boardwalk and viewing platforms that enable everyone to access the marsh’s treasures and secrets. The Open Air Classroom project started over 30 years ago when the industrial property was purchased by the municipality of North Cowichan. Since then, the SMWS has raised and

walk, as well as the accessibility. The children reveled in the pretty blossoms and wild roses, even spotting a hatch of cinnamon-brown caterpillars on a railing.

Susan recalls: “Not a single soul wandered off the pathways. Not a scrap of litter was left behind this time, no ubiquitous brown-and-red coffee cups, although many carried them. One young man sat alone on a side bench, long legs outstretched, ankles crossed, head back and eyes closed to a warming sun: the very image of contentment—or more: something akin to bliss. An elderly woman, and then later someone “decently middle-aged,” each commented on another Somenos phenomenon—the pleasingly onomatopoic shrub of pea gravel beneath their feet. Others, I realized, reveled in bird song, even when they didn't know what species they were hearing. Most people cruised by the signage, the texts and images washing over them with the gales of the wind. Almost everyone stopped to read the biographical kiosk out front. My afternoon outing turned out to be as rich and varied as the life in the Marsh itself.”

Susan had arrived a somewhat harried grad student, but left with a greater appreciation of the full value of the classroom, a sacred space, a place rich with learning, reconnections and even re-creations. We thank the hundreds of volunteers such as Susan and the owners who rake and hammer and trim, and the community whose ongoing support has saved this precious resource for everyone, including those who’ve yet to visit.

To become a supporting member of Somenos Marsh Wildlife Society or make a donation, go to www.somenosmarsh.com

From left to right: Blair Hammond (Canadian Wildlife Service), Tasha Sargeni (Canadian Wildlife Service), Karen Barry (Bird Studies Canada), Krista Englund (BC Nature), Anne Murray (BC Nature) and Peter Davidson (Bird Studies Canada).

Celebrating a new IBA sign for Canada’s top ranking IBA: Boundary Bay-Roberts Bank-Sturgeon Bank (Fraser River Estuary).
Protection for Kilpoola Lake Area IBA Increased

By Krista England

The Nature Conservancy of Canada (NCC) and its partners recently purchased two grassland properties totaling 520 hectares within the 3200 hectare Kilpoola Lake Area Important Bird Area (IBA) near Osoyoos in BC's South Okanagan Valley. The Kilpoola Lake Area IBA is one of five IBAs in the South Okanagan Similkameen and nearly 600 IBAs across Canada that provide habitat for threatened birds, large groups of birds, and birds found almost nowhere else on Earth (see www.ibacanada.ca).

Kilpoola Lake Area IBA was designated in 2000 because it supports rare grassland birds including Sage Thrasher and Lewis's Woodpecker. These rare species depend on grassland habitat in the South Okanagan to nest, feed and raise their young. The purchase of these two properties will help to ensure that the land will be managed to benefit rare species.

The two properties purchased by NCC, called Sagebrush Slopes and Sparrow Grasslands, share their borders with the provincial South Okanagan Grasslands Protected Area and provide a critical migratory corridor for species moving between the Similkameen and Okanagan Valleys, and between the desert areas of the western United States and the dry grasslands of interior BC. Sagebrush Slopes, named for the fragrant bush that dominates the property, is one of the most extensive sagebrush landscapes in BC and supports thriving populations of the rare western harvest mouse and Great Basin pocket mouse. Sparrow Grasslands is notable for the abundance of bird species — including at least seven species of sparrow — that frequent the area.

The purchase was welcomed by Clarence and Sharon Schneider, former owners of the land now called Sparrow Grasslands. The purchase was also welcomed by the volunteer IBA Caretakers in the South Okanagan-Similkameen, who are part of a national network of volunteers who act as the eyes, ears and hands on the ground at IBAs. Volunteer Caretakers work extremely hard in their local communities to protect these special places and it is very encouraging when a substantial conservation achievement like this is made within an IBA.

Both the South Okanagan Naturalists’ Club and the Oliver Osoyoos Naturalist Club contributed to the purchase, along with many other partners, including the Government of Canada through the Natural Areas Conservation Program, Habitat Conservation Trust Foundation, Sitka Foundation, Dr. Sally Otto, Jean and Ken Finch, Okanagan Similkameen Parks Society, and other individuals.

You can help conservation efforts at Kilpoola Lake Area and other IBAs by joining or making a donation to the Nature Conservancy of Canada (www.natureconservancy.ca), the Oliver Osoyoos Naturalist Club (www.bcnature.ca/clubs-and-notices/regions/thompson-okanagan/oliver-osoyoos-naturalists/), the South Okanagan Naturalists’ Club (www.southokanagannature.com), or another conservation organization. Get involved by participating in bird monitoring programs coordinated by Bird Studies Canada or the naturalists or submitting your bird observations to www.ebird.ca. To learn more about the South Okanagan-Similkameen IBAs, please visit www.ibacanada.ca or participate in an IBA tour during the Meadowlark Festival (www.meadowlarkfestival.ca), held each year in May.
Focus on IBAs: Connecting BC IBA Caretakers

By Krista Englund

Volunteer Caretakers are the eyes, ears and hands on the ground at Important Bird Areas. Caretaker activities range from monitoring birds and assessing habitats and conservation threats to increasing local awareness and/or conducting conservation activities. IBA partners Nature Canada, Bird Studies Canada and BC Nature assist Caretakers by providing coordination, materials, support and guidance.

In May 2012, BC Nature received a grant from Mountain Equipment Co-op to help build the capacity of Caretakers and other volunteers. This grant provided IBA partners the resources needed to develop better materials for Caretakers, make materials more available through the BC Nature website, and provide guidance to Caretakers on using these materials.

The grant also provided an opportunity for Caretakers to network with each other through a series of three regional workshops held across BC. The first workshop was held in Tsawwassen in November 2012, the second in Nanoose Bay in January 2013 and the third in Osoyoos in April 2013. In total, thirty-five Caretakers and volunteers participated in the workshops. Topics covered at the workshops included the process to update online site summaries, monitoring IBAs, using eBird.ca, and communications. With help from a team of BC Nature, Bird Studies Canada and Nature Canada representatives, IBA Caretaker Coordinator Krista Englund continues to support the efforts of Caretakers across the province to promote conservation of their local IBAs.

Volunteers taking a break to take in some birding at an IBA caretaker workshop at the Little Qualicum Estuary looking out to Nanoose Bay
Focus on IBAs: By Krista Englund

IBA Amalgamation: Baynes Sound, Hornby Island-Lambert Channel & Comox Valley IBAs become K’omoks IBA

British Columbia has a new IBA, which is the result of amalgamating three Important Bird Areas that were originally nominated and designated separately in 2000. The new IBA, called K’omoks, includes the same areas covered by the original IBAs, namely the Comox Valley, Baynes Sound, Hornby Island and Lambert Channel along the East Coast of Vancouver Island (Figure 1), although the boundaries have been refined.

The idea to amalgamate the IBAs came from analysis that showed the three separate IBAs share a common population of trigger species. That is, waterbirds using the shores of Comox Valley, Baynes Sound and Hornby Island-Lambert Channel intermingle.

The amalgamation also makes it easier for the Volunteer Caretaker, Art Martell, to communicate about the IBA to local community members and decision-makers. Rather than explaining details about three adjacent but separate IBAs, Art can focus on the key message that the entire area is internationally recognized for its importance to birds.

The K’omoks IBA is named for the First Nation within whose traditional territory the IBA lies. Trigger bird species include Trumpeter Swan, Harlequin Duck, Thayer’s Gull, Glaucous-winged Gull, Mew Gull, Great Blue Heron and Peregrine Falcon. The numbers of Surf Scoter, White-winged Scoter, Western Grebe, and Red-necked Grebe also exceed IBA thresholds in some years.

More than 2000 Trumpeter Swans overwinter in the Comox Valley. Recent habitat loss and degradation from expanding development and loss of soil-based agriculture is a concern for Trumpeter Swans. However, some upland-habitat is owned and managed for wildlife by Ducks Unlimited Canada and the Nature Trust of British Columbia. The Comox Valley Waterfowl Management Project is a cooperative farm and wildlife extension program established to maintain wintering waterfowl populations in harmony with successful farming.

Aggregations of 30,000-60,000 Waterbirds occur each year during herring spawn. About a third of those birds are waterfowl, including significant numbers of Surf Scoter and White-winged Scoter in some years, and about 60% are gulls, including significant numbers of Mew Gull, Thayer’s Gull and Glaucous-winged Gull. Harlequin Duck also aggregate during the herring spawn at a few locations on the northeast side of Hornby Island, and they use the shores of Hornby Island to roost while molting in summer and early fall. Given the large number of species that depend on the herring spawn, any activity that negatively impacts the herring spawn (e.g. reductions in water quality, foreshore development) could significantly impact the IBA.

Historically, globally significant numbers of Western Grebe wintered regularly in the IBA, but the numbers have declined steeply in the last decade. This significant decline has been noted throughout British Columbia and Washington; the reasons for the decline are not clear but may be related to a decrease in forage fish on the south coast of BC and a subsequent southerly shift in wintering areas.

Several national species at risk occur in the K’omoks IBA, including Great Blue Heron (fannini subspecies), which has several colonies supporting up to 100 individuals; Marbled Murrelet, 50-100 of which occur regularly in the IBA most of the year; and Peregrine Falcon, which winters and nests in the IBA.

The local Caretaker, Art Martell, and other community members are involved in many monitoring, conservation and outreach efforts.

The IBA is recognized in some official community plans. Members of Comox Valley Nature have been conducting standardised bird monitoring for five decades, including the Christmas Bird Counts since 1961, Spring Bird Counts since 1976, and weekly Trumpeter Swan Counts since 1990. Volunteers also have been doing monthly surveys for the British Columbia Coastal Waterbird Survey since 1999 and the British Columbia Beached Bird Survey since 2002. Future efforts will seek to better document Harlequin Duck numbers and to determine if the IBA is a regular molting site for significant numbers of Red-necked Grebe.

By Tom Middleton

Harlequin Duck

By Ralph Hocken

Red-necked Grebe
Focus on IBAs: Creston Valley

While in Cranbrook for the BC Nature Fall General Meeting in September 2013, I took the opportunity to travel to Creston to meet with local birders and talk about how we might better monitor the Creston Valley Important Bird Area. Located on an important flyway, Creston Valley is a key stopover for migrating waterbirds. The site was designated an Important Bird Area in 2000 because it supports large concentrations of migratory waterbirds, specifically American Coot, Tundra Swan and waterfowl.

The IBA includes the Creston Valley Wildlife Management Area (CVWMA), a 7,000 hectare area that includes a lake and a series of managed wetlands in the historical floodplain of the Kootenay River, as well as other valley bottom areas that are primarily used for agriculture, and the southern part of Kootenay Lake. Tundra Swan numbers using the IBA have declined since the 1980s, likely due to changes in agricultural practices, but large concentrations of American Coot still pass through the area. Northern Pintail and American Wigeon can number in the tens of thousands during spring and fall migration, and Greater White-fronted Geese come through in increasing numbers in spring and fall.

With more than 300 bird species recorded, the valley is also a mecca for birders. American White Pelicans spend time on Duck Lake and Leach Lake each year. Twelve species of owls (not all common) can be found in the valley and surrounding hillsides, including Western Screech Owl, Long-eared Owl, Short-eared Owl and Northern Pygmy Owl. A hotspot for wintering birds of prey, the valley is also a great place to see Rough-legged Hawks and Northern Shrikes.

Not only does the valley support wintering and migrating birds, an interesting mix of birds breed there. The wetlands support one of the few breeding colonies of Western Grebes and the only breeding location of Forster’s Tern in British Columbia. A large colony of Great Blue Herons is present and Sandhill Cranes have nested successfully in the valley in the last decade. Double-crested Cormorants are another recent breeder in the valley. The riparian shrub and forest habitats surrounding the wetlands support one of the highest densities of Yellow Warbler and Wood Duck in the province. A seasonal list of all birds can be found on the site summary at http://bit.ly/HfeyCv and in Linda Van Damme’s recently updated Creston Valley Birds - When and Where to Find Them, which can be purchased at the Creston Chamber of Commerce, the CVWMA – Wildlife Centre gift shop, and several local businesses.

The valley’s richness and diversity of birdlife has benefited from the active management of the Wildlife Management Area, the plan for which was developed by Bob Harris of the Canadian Wildlife Service with input from Charter BC Nature member Dick Stace-Smith. Responsibility for management of the area rests with the Creston Valley Wildlife Management Authority, whose mandate is to manage the WMA for conservation and natural species diversity through active habitat and wildlife management, research and education. The Authority’s Marc-Andre Beaucher and Carla Ahern are the co-caretakers for this IBA. As a result of management activities, there are now more species and larger breeding populations of birds and other wildlife at the CVWMA than historically.

To celebrate the diversity and abundance of birds in the Creston Valley, the Creston Branch of Wildsight, an East Kootenay-wide conservation organization, hosted a community festival around International Migratory Bird Day in May 2013. BC Nature’s President John Neville presented on the "Owls of British Columbia" during the festival and numerous other bird experts led walks and gave talks. The Creston Valley Bird Fest planning committee is gearing up for another exciting celebration of the art, agriculture, and birds of the Creston Valley in 2014. Planned for May 9-11, the festival will include agricultural tours, birding expeditions, a series of presentations and workshops, and a keynote address from CBC’s “Adventure Guy” Dave Quinn. Mark these dates on your calendar and plan to attend. You can also help monitor this Important Bird Area by honing your counting skills http://bit.ly/1amFLL and entering your counts into www.eBird.ca while you are in Creston during the bird festival or any other time.

To learn more about the Creston Valley WMA, check out their website www.crestonwildlife.ca or listen to John Neville’s CBC interview on the Creston Valley with Peter Gzowski http://bit.ly/19cafGM, which helped to secure funding for the WMA in 1995. ♦
Focus on IBA: Bird Studies Canada coastal monitoring programs support the IBA Network

Approximately 60% of British Columbia’s 84 Important Bird Areas (IBA) are located along the coast. Monitoring birds within these sites can be a challenge, especially given the large size of many IBAs. A citizen science program called the BC Coastal Waterbird Survey (BCCWS), coordinated by Bird Studies Canada www.birdscanada.org, is one program that helps us monitor birds within many coastal Important Bird Areas.

Since 1999, about 600 Coastal Waterbird Survey volunteers have participated in this program and over 19,000 individual monthly surveys have been conducted at several hundred fixed sites along BC’s coast. The data collected is used to assess long-term trends in waterbird distribution and abundance (Ducks, Loons, Grebes, Cormorants, shorebirds, Gulls and other seabirds).

The data also have more specific uses for the IBA program, such as helping to refine boundaries of IBAs, update online site summaries (www.ibacanada.ca), and demonstrating that these areas continue to support globally significant numbers of birds. For example, BCCWS data from up to 52 survey sites on Vancouver Island, Hornby and Denman Islands helped to identify areas of high bird use and provide rationale for amalgamating three IBAs on Vancouver Island near Courtenay-Comox and defining a new boundary. BCCWS data demonstrated that the new IBA, called K’omoks, supports globally or continentally significant concentrations of Glaucous-winged Gull, Thayer’s Gull and Mew Gull.

BCCWS data were also recently used to update the English Bay, Burrard Inlet and Fraser River Estuary IBA site summaries. Both sites have extensive coastline areas, with approximately 40 individual BCCWS sites in English Bay Burrard Inlet and 22 in the Fraser River Estuary, although not all sites are surveyed regularly. BCCWS data helped demonstrate the importance of English Bay-Burrard Inlet to Surf Scoters and Barrow’s Goldeneyes. In the Fraser River Estuary, BCCWS data was particularly useful for demonstrating use of this IBA by globally significant numbers of Thayer’s Gull, Red-necked Grebe and Western Grebe. As these examples illustrate, one of the key advantages of the BCCWS is that it enables counts from multiple observers spread across a large area, like an IBA, to be combined. The data are freely and publicly available through an online data warehouse, Nature Counts (www.naturecounts.ca).

Numerous IBA Caretakers already participate in the BC Coastal Waterbird Survey. The program is a great way for other volunteers to support the IBA program as well. New volunteers are always needed and there are a number of vacant sites around Metro Vancouver, Greater Victoria, Nanaimo, Qualicum Beach, Comox, Tofino, Sunshine Coast, Gulf Island and northern coastal areas. Volunteers should have good bird identification skills and be available to conduct surveys on a monthly basis (e.g. second Sunday of each month at high tide).

Volunteers who are not able to participate in the Coastal Waterbird Survey can still contribute to the IBA program by participating in other citizen science programs, such as the Nocturnal Owl Survey, Beached Bird Survey, Christmas Bird Count, Breeding Bird Surveys, eBird, bird blitzes and other surveys coordinated by local naturalist clubs and organizations.

BCCWS surveyors have made great contributions to the BC Important Bird Areas program and we thank all past and present volunteers. For more information, please visit BSC’s website or contact Karen Barry at bcprograms@birdscanada.org or 1-877-349-2473.
Focus on IBAs  Conservation Action in South Okanagan-Similkameen IBAs

By Krista Englund

Environment Canada played a key role in establishing the Important Bird Areas (IBA) program in Canada in the mid-1990s and continues to support the program today. The five IBAs in the South Okanagan-Similkameen (Chopaka Customs, White Lake Area, Kilpoola Lake Area, Vaseux Lake Area and Osoyoos Oxbows) are particularly important from the perspective of Environment Canada’s Migratory Bird Program. Because they include key habitat for many Partner’s in Flight priority species, as well as numerous federal and provincial bird species at risk. Riparian habitat, well represented within IBAs, is arguably one of the most important and most threatened habitat types for a broad range of land birds, because it is highly productive for breeding, and critical for western migrating land birds, particularly during spring. It is estimated that more than 80% of riparian habitat has been lost in the Okanagan, making it one of the highest priority habitat types for conservation.

Partners in Flight (PIF) is a group of partners working together towards migratory bird conservation. The three pillars of PIF are “Keeping Common Birds Common,” helping species at risk and forming volunteer partnerships to benefit birds, habitats and people. In 2011, PIF helped BC Nature seek funding from Environment Canada to (a) update site summaries for the five South Okanagan-Similkameen IBAs and (b) develop and implement simple action plans for all five IBAs. Funding came through very late in the 2011-2012 fiscal year, so only two site summary updates and action plans were completed (White Lake Area and Osoyoos Oxbows). BC Nature advanced this work for Vaseux Lake Area IBA in 2012-13, and Environment Canada came through with additional funding in December 2013, which enabled site summary updates to proceed for Chopaka Customs and Kilpoola Lake Area. Updated site summaries for all five South Okanagan-Similkameen IBAs are now available online at www.ibacanada.ca.

Updating IBA information is a key priority for the BC program to maintain a strong technical basis for site designations and help inform land use planning and management. Updated information also provides an excellent basis for identifying gaps or actions needed to improve conservation of IBAs. Actions have been identified through a collaborative process involving local Volunteer IBA Caretakers (Doreen Olson, Bob Handfield, Eva Durante, Lee McCayden and Doug Brown) as well as numerous partners (see list below). Examples of activities completed since action plans were first developed include (but are not limited to):

- New interpretive signs produced for White Lake Area, Vaseux Lake Area, Osoyoos Oxbows and Kilpoola Lake Area IBAs;
- Dilapidated signs on an existing kiosk along Rd 22 in Osoyoos Oxbows IBA were replaced with 10 new panels and efforts are underway to landscape/restore areas around the kiosk;
- A strategy was developed for dealing with invasive plants at Osoyoos Oxbows IBA;
- Plans were developed to replace the bird blind and improve monitoring structures at Vaseux Lake Area IBA (fundraising is now underway with the hopes of rebuilding the blind in 2015); and
- Monitoring for species at risk within IBAs or on adjacent conservation lands has expanded; and
- Historic natural oxbows and streamside habitat were restored on 65 hectares of floodplain in Osoyoos Oxbows IBA in 2012-2013, led by Ducks Unlimited Canada and the Nature Conservancy of Canada; and
- 1262 hectares of private land was purchased by the Nature Conservancy of Canada in Kilpoola Lake Area IBA and 13.72 hectares is being secured by The Nature Trust of British Columbia in Vaseux Lake Area IBA; and
- Several parcels of Crown land within Osoyoos Oxbows and Vaseux Lake Area IBAs were added to the South Okanagan Wildlife Management Area by the BC Government; and
- Fencing has been fixed to prevent cattle from accessing riparian areas in the South Okanagan Wildlife Management Area in Osoyoos Oxbows IBA; and
- Discussions have started between various partners about priority locations for Burrowing Owl reintroductions and private landowner outreach.

This approach has been remarkably effective in bringing partners together to make work happen across jurisdictional boundaries. One individual involved in the process commended BC Nature and the IBA program for its leadership and for taking steps to evaluate progress and ensure that priority actions are implemented. This work could not have been achieved without the support and participation from volunteer Caretakers and numerous organizations, including Bird Studies Canada, BC Ministry of Forests, Lands and Natural Resource Management, BC Parks, Burrowing Owl Conservation Society, Ducks Unlimited Canada, Environment Canada, the Nature Conservancy of Canada, Okanagan Similkameen Conservation Alliance, Okanagan Similkameen Stewardship Society, Oliver-Osoyoos Naturalists, Partners in Flight, South Okanagan Naturalists’ Club, South Okanagan-Similkameen Conservation Program, South Okanagan-Similkameen Invasive Plant Society, The Nature Trust of British Columbia and Wildlife Tree Stewardship.

To support efforts in South Okanagan-Similkameen IBAs, consider making a donation to BC Nature in support of the IBA program, entering observations of birds seen when visiting IBAs into www.ebird.ca, and visiting www.ibacanada.ca to learn how you can get involved in the IBA program. To learn more about Partners in Flight, visit www.partnersinflight.org.
Focus on IBAs: Chehalis River Estuary
By Krista England

Kathy Stewart inherited a love of birds from her mother. As a longtime resident of Tapadera Estates near Harrison Mills, Kathy has been fortunate to live within one of BC's Lower Mainland's amazing Important Bird Areas (IBA) for the past 17 years. When the Caretaker Network was started in 2006-2007, Kathy was happy to act as the eyes and ears for the Chehalis River Estuary IBA. Over the years, Gord Gadsden from the Fraser Valley Regional District and Ernie Stewart, as well as many others, have greatly assisted with monitoring, outreach and stewardship activities in the IBA.

Chehalis River Estuary IBA - This IBA is located where the Chehalis River empties into the lower Harrison River, upstream of its junction with the Fraser River. Temperate deciduous and mixed forests and freshwater marshes sparsely cover an area of 127,000 ha surrounding the estuary. The Chehalis River supports a strong run of spawning Pacific salmon. This abundant source of food and nutrients, combined with the habitats provided within the estuary, attract a diversity of birds. In total, 179 bird species have been documented, including a recently-established breeding population of Purple Martin. The populations of Bald Eagles and Trumpeter Swans using the estuary met the global criteria for IBA designation when the site was nominated in the late 1990s, and these two species are considered "trigger" species for the site (i.e. species for which the IBA was designated).

The arrival of the Bald Eagles coincides with, and is completely dependent on, the return of spawning salmon. The concentration of Bald Eagles increases over the fall months, typically reaching 1,000 - 3,000 in late November. Very high numbers exceeding 7,000 were observed in 2011. In addition to needing salmon for food, the eagles require areas where they can rest undisturbed, and large trees to roost in at night. Trumpeter Swans, and in recent years an increasing number of Tundra Swans, return to the area in early November. The Tundra Swans rest for a month or so before moving further south while several hundred Trumpeters spend the winter, mainly in Harrison Bay. Overwintering Trumpeter Swans feed on aquatic vegetation, and need open water deep enough to support their large size, but shallow enough to allow vegetation to grow.

Issues in Chehalis River Estuary IBA - From Kathy’s point of view, the condition of the estuary has improved compared to 10 or 15 years ago, when 4x4s and ATVs frequently disturbed the habitat and wildlife. The number of people living within the IBA has increased and fortunately most have an appreciation for what a special place it is and take action to protect the area. However, an increase in population living within the IBA also increases the potential for disturbance. A fine balance is required to allow access and appreciation while not disturbing the birds and other wildlife. Some of the most recent forms of disturbance to the estuary include air traffic, off-leash dogs, hikers and boaters accessing sensitive areas. Kathy feels that improvements to the trail system and education of visitors on when, where and how to approach wildlife would benefit the IBA, as well as improved regulations complemented by necessary enforcement.

A comprehensive assessment of other potential issues within the IBA has not yet been conducted.

Current Initiatives - A variety of initiatives are underway within the Chehalis River Estuary that benefit birds and the IBA. Since 1995, the Fraser Valley Bald Eagle Festival (fuservalleybaldeaglesfest.ca) has taken place each November in the estuary. At a time when Bald Eagles, gulls and waterfowl concentrate to feed on the abundant spawning salmon. The festival celebrates the beauty and diversity of the Fraser River Valley by honouring the Bald Eagle and life cycle of Salmon. During the event, visitors can take in eagle viewing, listen to expert speakers, see environmental displays, enjoy a guided nature walk, and meet local green businesses. The festival provides an excellent opportunity to increase awareness and appreciation for the birds and their habitats, and promote proper viewing etiquette.

Another initiative that has recently come back onto the table is establishing a 1,515-ha provincial Wildlife Management Area (WMA) within the Chehalis Estuary. This area was first proposed as a WMA in 1997, but it was not approved due to strong opposition from local communities and certain stakeholder groups. Last winter, the Ministry of Forests, Lands, and Natural Resource Operations held a 45-day consultation process to re-open the discussion about establishing a WMA to help address some of the concerns within the community. Currently the Ministry has completed some follow-up on the consultation period and is awaiting a regional decision. It is hoped the WMA will have approval from cabinet by the end of 2014.

While advocating for a WMA that would provide better options for managing disturbance impacts to this ecologically sensitive habitat, a committee of concerned citizens recently initiated the Chehalis Flats Bald Eagle and Salmon Preserve, which encompasses the Chehalis Flats alluvial fan that spreads out into the Harrison River, just north of the Harrison River Bridge on Highway 7. The purpose of creating the Preserve was to educate residents and visitors about proper wildlife etiquette so that they can observe and appreciate nature without disturbing it. The Preserve boundaries are defined by space on a map as well as time of year (October - February), when many migrating and overwintering birds take up residence in the estuary. During that time it is urged that no foot, boat, or air traffic be allowed on the Flats; a suitable walking path and viewing area has been developed, and signage is provided to encourage access while minimizing disturbance.

Get Involved - For those not able to visit the Chehalis Estuary in person, Kathy maintains a blog on a nearly daily basis, at least during the "Eagle months" at http://ibabc033chehalisestuary.blogspot.ca as well as reporting occasionally on the IBA Canada Facebook page. In addition, the Hancock Wildlife foundation places streaming video cameras on the Chehalis Flats during the same time period. This can be accessed at www.hancockwildlife.org. Both the blog and the cameras can also be accessed from the website for the Fraser Valley Bald Eagle Festival.
Heerman's Gulls, looking like tanned cousins of their boreal cousins, the Mew Gull, share a common roost on Sidney's Surfside Islets, overlooking Sidney Channel Important Bird Area. They share these roosts with a diverse community of migratory shorebirds and seabirds in September and October. With Mount Baker in the hazy background, it is a spectacular vista.

Virtually the entire population of this handsome Mexican gull nests on a small island (142 acres), Isla Rasa, in the Gulf of California. It is entirely dependent on shoals of "forage fishes", anchovies, sardines and sand lance, and is often found in large mixed feeding aggregations with marine mammals and seabirds. In Canadian waters, they make their furthest north migrations in late summer and fall, and the largest aggregations occur around southeast Vancouver Island.

A video of Isla Rasa, an Important Bird Area, is shown here: www.youtube.com/watch?v=FUXZ_t1HySc.

Some of the largest aggregations (400 - 600) of this species used to occur in Sidney Channel, particularly over the large underwater dune field between Sidney and James Island, that formed the habitat for large Sanellance populations. Its no accident that the once thriving Chinook Salmon fishery coincided with this feature, and that knowledgeable fishermen followed the seabird frenzies.

Although the Heerman's Gull is not considered endangered, its extremely confined breeding habitat and its dependence on oceanographic conditions favouring small foraging fishes, make it highly vulnerable to fisheries practices and climatic-oceanographic patterns. Its abundance is a reasonable reflection of the state of the marine environment, and their northernmost extension into Canadian waters is an indication of particular ecological conditions unique to this country. It is no accident that exotic elements of the Coastal Douglas Fir ecosystem, such as the iconic Arbutus. Just as the endangered Sage Grouse finds its northernmost extension on the Canadian prairies, Canada has international responsibilities to protect the habitat of this migrant.

Last year, after inquiring about the status of the Heerman's Gull, I made contact with several Mexican and American biologists, concerning the apparent decline over the last decade or so, in Sidney Channel IBA. Regrettably I didn’t keep records of this species over this time, but as part of my volunteer counts for the BC Coastal Waterbird Count, I have kept regular daily counts of their roosting islets (Site 39). Their numbers have been very consistent at 80 - 100 through September. I have also conducted a few boat surveys of Sidney Channel and have seen very few; and practically none on their former sand spit roosts (James Island). It is apparent that they show strong preference for certain islets at the mouth of Shool Harbour Sanctuary and the IBA. These essential roosting sites and migratory stop-over places for many other species have no protective status.

This is the very first place in Canada, where, when visitors step off the ferry at Swartz Bay, or the international Anacortes ferry, or the Victoria airport, they can see a real Heerman's Gull, and an Arbutus, hand in hand, and get a sniff of the Salish Sea, and a taste of our Spanish heritage in Quadra, Galiano and Lopez.

James (Kerry) Finley has been a steward of Shool Harbour Migratory Bird Sanctuary and adjacent IBA for over thirty years. He initiated regular bird surveys in 1991, and became involved in the Coastal Waterbird Surveys in 1999. He joined the IBA network when it was formed. He is a founding member of the Friends of Shool Harbour, and has formed international ties with the Isla Rasa IBA site in Mexico.
Focus on IBA: The Marvel of Haida Gwaii

By James Bradley

Lying almost 100 kms west of the central coast of British Columbia, the rugged and windswept islands of Haida Gwaii are rich in cultural and natural heritage. Largely spared from the ravages of modern development and industrial expansion, they still support wildlife spectacles that rival any in North America, not to mention some ancient forests and stunning vistas. Picture flock after flock of Pelagic Cormorants coming in off the seas to roost, thousands cramming together onto a small rocky islet, or the sight and sound of twenty thousand Rhinoceros Auklets riding out a storm in the sheltered waters of a coastal bay stretching 40 kilometres from end to end. Equally memorable might be the sensory assault on the nostrils in one of the massive seabird breeding colonies scattered through the islands.

Eighteen Important Bird Areas have been designated in Haida Gwaii, comprising 22% of all British Columbia’s IBAs, with most of these comprising key sites where burrow-nesting seabirds congregate to breed each year. Globally important concentrations (i.e., >1% of the global population) of no fewer than eight species occur in Haida Gwaii IBAs, with a further five species represented by continentally important numbers. Collectively, more than 11% of the global population of Ancient Murrelet and more than 5% of the global population of Cassin’s Auklet are known to breed within IBAs on Haida Gwaii, while continentally and nationally important numbers (>1% of those populations) of other groups including waterfowl, cormorants, shorebirds and gulls also occur as non-breeding visitors or migrants. The vast and rich intertidal and shoreline habitats of Rose Spit IBA, for example, support more than 2000 each of Pelagic Cormorant, Semipalmed Plover and Sanderling numbers at key times each year.

Despite the remoteness of Haida Gwaii, the great variety of birds that rely on the islands face a mounting array of hazards. From tangible threats such as energy development or invasive species, to the more indirect effects of climate and oceanic change, these rich islands are not immune to the many anthropogenic activities affecting our environments today. Burrow-nesting seabirds on Haida Gwaii, having evolved life history strategies in the absence of mammalian predators, are particularly vulnerable to the effects of invasive species, and Haida Gwaii abounds with deer, raccoons and rats on some islands. As a result, conservation efforts there focus largely on monitoring and mitigating the impacts of invasive species, with multiple groups and agencies involved.

Parks Canada is one of the organizations actively involved in the management of rat and deer populations on several islands in Gwaii Haanas National Park, which encompasses many of the IBAs. BC Parks have also undertaken similar efforts on Langara Island, involving additional education and awareness building programs. Active research and monitoring in numerous key colonies is conducted by the Canadian Wildlife Service and has revealed an overall downward trend in breeding seabird populations. This has, in part, led to the recent re-assessment of Cassin’s Auklet as a species of Special Concern by the Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada (COSEWIC). Similar monitoring is conducted at Laskeek Bay IBA, where the Laskeek Bay Conservation Society operates a field research station that also undertakes the management of invasive raccoon and deer populations, as well as education and outreach.

To prioritize further invasive species management, including addressing the possibility of re-invasions following an eradication campaign, Bird Studies Canada is developing and implementing a rigorous biosecurity plan for all the IBAs in Haida Gwaii. Complementing these efforts, BC Nature is also playing a key role through the Caretaker Network. Volunteer IBA Caretakers Margo Hearne and Jamie MacDonald, with the valued assistance of Peter Hamel, are key assets in the conservation of some of Haida Gwaii’s most accessible and potentially vulnerable IBAs. By monitoring and reporting on threats, generating awareness and galvanizing conservation action locally, as well as supplying BC Nature with some of the all-important count data needed for online site summaries, this collaboration is an essential aspect of the IBA Program’s conservation mandate.

As in most wildlife conservation initiatives, public awareness and political will is half of the battle. BCN members can help in a variety of ways, from reading up and spreading the word about Haida Gwaii’s priceless natural heritage, to writing letters of concern to government, to donating directly to invasive species management efforts through BC Nature. To learn more about Important Bird Areas in Haida Gwaii, please have a look at the online site summaries at www.ibacanada.ca or get in touch with IBA Coordinator James Bradley at iba@bcnature.ca.
A First Count using the IBA eBird Protocol.

By James Bradley

On March 14, under cloudy and threatening skies, eight keen birders and conservationists gathered at a coffee shop in Parksville to get the first IBA (Important Bird Areas) eBird count underway. Site Caretaker for the Little Qualicum Estuary to NanOOSE Bay IBA, Christopher Stephens, arranged the count and had rustled together an additional five hardy volunteers. Including IBA Coordinator James Bradley, and a representative from IBA partner Bird Studies Canada, David Bradley, the eight present was a fitting number as Christopher proposed dividing the IBA into four zones, to be covered by two birders each. Each zone was delineated on the basis of local knowledge of where birds concentrated within the IBA, and several estuaries and other natural topographic breaks along the coast fit Christopher’s suggested zones well.

After a strong coffee and with a growing desire to know just how many birds were in the IBA, the count began at 9:00 am. Taking care to avoid double counting birds that were on the zone boundaries, or moving between zones, volunteers counted for three and a half hours before convening again at the coffee shop for a tally up. The count was a success, with the rain holding off and significant numbers of birds detected. The Global 1% threshold counts were tallied for both Thayer’s Gull (3,811 individuals counted) and Surf Scoter (10,221), and the numbers of gulls and waterfowl were impressive. A continental 1% threshold was also tallied for Mew Gull (6,828), and in total more than 41,000 waterbirds were present. Reliable numbers like this can be hard to come by, but the IBA eBird protocol is a standardized and replicable method, and it was a satisfying feeling to all present to know what species was using the IBA.

The numbers of birds counted (which can be viewed in eBird) show the continuing importance of this stretch of coastline for a variety of species. The seasonally rich marine system at the IBA, underpinned by the annual herring spawn, is what attracts the vast numbers of birds and what the IBA Program seeks to protect. Thanks are due to the Site Caretaker Christopher Stephens, for organizing the count, as well as to all the volunteers who helped to make it a success. We look forward to repeat efforts in the future and encourage other IBA Caretakers to give it a go! ☺