



the WILLET

Beaverhill Bird Observatory

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Steaks and Saw-whets!

© Chuck Priestley

September 24-25 At the Beaverhill Bird Observatory

The torch flames dance in the autumn evening. The smell of food being cooked over a bed of hot coals wafts among those who are gathered. The murmur of voices and laughter from friends old and new buzz through the air. In the distance another sound can also be heard... The soft repeated whistle of the Northern Saw-whet Owl!

Come out to the Beaverhill Bird Observatory for the 3rd Annual Steaks and Saw-whet event. Space is limited so book now.

If you would like to register, please contact Chuck Priestley at: charles@ualberta.ca

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Squirrely Tales

Jill Thompson

No doubt you have noticed the number of home decorating, renovation, and organization shows on television. Although I enjoy watching these programs from time to time, I find they all have the same message: spend money and you will become organized and stylish. Well, let me tell you a story sure to put any organization guru to shame.

This past summer I worked at the Beaverhill Bird Observatory (BBO) located a few kilometres east of Tofield, Alberta. Upon arriving at the BBO in May, we noticed the sunflower seed bin in the storage shed had been emptied over winter. Soon enough the mystery of 'who-ate-the-sunflower-seeds' was solved. A very healthy looking red squirrel was seen on a daily basis, especially near the feeder area. Now for those of you who have visited the Beaverhill natural area, you know this area is not prime squirrel habitat. There are only a handful of spruce trees spread thinly throughout the area, and no other squirrels call Beaverhill home. Speculations as to how the squirrel arrived in the area have been made, but nobody really knows the true story.

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Squirrely Tales Continued...



The chatty rodent was first spotted a few years ago by the Beaverhill summer staff, and over the years this creature has become part of the Beaverhill family. In fact he had been affectionately named Theodore. However, this summer Theodore over-stayed his welcome. We found mushrooms in one of the empty drawers inside the lab, as well as a lovely nest made of grass and insulation in a corner cupboard. Also, Theodore had managed to get into the ceiling of the lab and scurried about to all corners of our humble abode. Every day I would knock loudly on the thin wood panel walls hoping to scare him away. At first this tactic worked, but Theo was a brave squirrel and realized I was no threat. Finally, I used the end of the broomstick to poke the ceiling panel he was running across. Despite these slight inconveniences, Theo was a pretty good roommate. However, things soon turned for the worse.

After returning from a few days off we found more evidence of Theodore's activities inside the lab. The first thing I saw was a jar of peanut butter surrounded by small green shreds of plastic. The lid of the container had been chewed around the edge and flipped open like the way a can of soup is opened. Half of the peanut butter was eaten! Also, a package of corkscrew pasta had been ripped into; its contents devoured. At that point I decided our tenant had to be evicted.

It was a sad day when Theo was moved out. Trapped inside a wire cage, he left for a much nicer nearby squirrel friendly patch of spruce. Although I was happy I no longer had to deal with his tomfoolery, I missed his chatter.

The weeks went by and I soon forgot that we had had a squirrel problem. However, one fateful day in August, I was reminded. In between net checks, I decided to begin cleaning out the storage shed, which was attached to the lab. The shed was filled with everything from special event signs, tiki lanterns, water bug nets and even a lawnmower, used in the wetter days of the BBO. Upon opening the shed door, I suddenly remembered our fine furry friend.

Three nests were found inside, as well as a multitude of mushrooms, and this is where Theo's organizational abilities began to shine. Mushrooms were stored in every possible corner; however, there seemed to be order in Theo's stockpiling. Old coffee cans and glass jars filled with screws and nails had been topped off with all sorts of mushrooms. Empty tiki lanterns also served as a stowing spot. My favourite was Theo's use of an old 4-litre milk jug. In the bottom half of the milk jug Theo had placed the stolen corkscrew pasta. I can just picture



him stuffing a couple of the stiff pasta pieces into his mouth and scampering back to the shed only to return and repeat the process dozens of times. On top of the pasta were a handful of colourful mushrooms, each at a different point of decay. Not only was Theodore brilliant at organizing his food, he was a bit of a chef. Who would be able to resist a bite of mushroom medley corkscrew pasta?

The best example of Theo's resourcefulness was in the roll of chicken wire that sat on top of the lawnmower. One end of the roll was flush to the shed wall making the other end open and accessible. Theo crammed a bunch of mushrooms into the middle of the roll, and I soon discovered its true function.

While moving things out of the shed, I often bumped into the chicken wire and mushrooms would come tumbling out of the hole. Sheer genius: a mushroom dispenser! With very little effort Theo could have a steady stream of mushrooms whenever he desired.

When all was said and done, the total cost of this made-over space was less than twenty dollars, including all containers, paint and furnishing since we re-vamped all of Theodore original pieces. As you can see, with only a couple of dollars and some ingenuity, you too can have a well-organized food cellar! Now that's an organizational achievement to make a television show about.

The end of the year approaches and the staff has packed up for the season. For those who did not get to meet the 2004 field staff, they were:

Jill Thompson (left), Crystal Rausch (right), Tessa Vesak (sitting)



The Sunny Island of Onefour, Alberta

- Jason Duxbury

The past few summers, I have had the pleasure of conducting Burrowing Owl research in and around Onefour, Alberta. Onefour is an Ag Canada research station approximately 6km from the US border and 20km from the Saskatchewan border. The station is a compound of around 20 buildings that includes houses, an administration building, corals, pens, stables, and garages that are all surrounded by mature spruce, aspen, willow and Russian olive trees. Out side of the compound is prairie as far as you can see. There are a few oases like a small lake to the south and a few dug-outs in the pastures. Near some of the water bodies there are a few more old trees, but other than that, nothing but grass and the Sweetgrass Hills on the southwest horizon... absolutely stunning country.

The scenery is only part of what makes Onefour an interesting place. Besides the fact that you can see rattlesnakes, spade-foots, pronghorns, mule deer, elk, coyotes, porcupines, skunks, and if your lucky swift fox, it's the birds that make Onefour such a great place in the spring.



During the migration, Onefour must stand out as a sanctuary for birds passing through or over the prairie landscape. Not only is the number of species of interest, there are species passing through that are not expected. The usual species that would be expected in a wooded area in southeastern Alberta include Great Horned Owl, Common Nighthawk, Brown Thrasher, Mourning Dove, Western Kingbird, and Brewer's



Blackbird. However, during the spring species such as Red-headed Woodpecker, Red-breasted Nuthatch, Yellow-rumped Warbler, Black-throated Green Warbler, American Redstart and White-crowned Sparrow were also recorded.

The surrounding bodies of water, the ephemeral wetlands, and the nearby badlands each provided other species to the area's species tally. Out on the grasslands one could see Burrowing Owls, Short-eared Owls, Golden Eagles, Prairie Falcons, Merlins, Ferruginous Hawks, and Swainson's Hawks... and those are just the raptors. Other interesting grassland species include Long-billed Curlews, Loggerhead Shrikes, Chestnut-sided Longspurs, McCown's Longspurs, Lark Buntings, and Baird's Sparrows.



All in all, Onefour could be one of the best-kept birding secrets in Alberta and is worth a visit. Over 100 species were recorded in the spring. However, it should be noted that while the area is crown land, Onefour is a research facility under the management of local Ag Canada staff. If you go to visit the area, **you must first gain permission** from one of the managers and sign-in **before** going birding. They can usually be found near or in the administration building. Happy Birding!

Volunteer with the Edmonton Science Outreach Network



The Edmonton Science Outreach Network (ESON) is a non-profit organization that connects Scientists, Technologists, Engineers, and Mathematicians (STEMs) with teachers and students. Our STEMs are volunteers and may visit classrooms, answer science questions, host field trips or act as field trip guides, deliver teacher PD workshops, and lecture at science conferences.

ESON is recruiting volunteers from all science and technology fields. We believe that the members, staff and volunteers of the Beaverhill Bird Observatory have the skills and knowledge to assist teachers, inspire students and use their expertise to advance science education and promote careers in science and technology.

Volunteer with ESON

The Edmonton Science Outreach Network (**ESON**) invites Scientists, Technologists, Engineers, and Mathematicians (**STEMs**) to help us engage students in science & technology.

STEMs report that they volunteer with ESON because it gives the opportunity to:

- Encourage student participation in science & technology
- Share their knowledge with students
- Provide information to students on careers in science & technology

ESON volunteers may visit classrooms and share their passion for science & technology through hands-on presentations. The majority of our requests are from Elementary Schools.

Breaking Stereotypes

Our vision of a “*scientist*” is exceptionally inclusive. Part of our mission of promoting science education includes breaking down barriers and stereotypes. ESON is committed to changing the way students think about science and scientists. A classroom visit from a volunteer **STEM** can belie the image of a scientist as the “*mad scientist*” working in isolation in a cluttered, bubbling laboratory. **STEMs** work in a dizzying array of fields and ESON volunteers represent:

the Natural Sciences, Physics, Chemistry, the Petrochemicals Industry, Medicine, Astronomy & Space Science, Agriculture, Construction, the Mechanical Trades, Engineering & Technology, Geology, and Meteorology.

These examples are hardly exhaustive. In addition, STEMs may contribute expertise garnered from personal interests or hobbies like Bird Watching or Model Building.

Contact ESON

ESON is a non-profit organization that has connected volunteer **STEMs** with teachers for 14 years. To volunteer with ESON or for more information contact:

Dr. Michael Caley at
448-0055; esons@telus.net;
www.sciencehotline.ca

NEXT WILLET ISSUE

Material for the forthcoming newsletter should be sent to: Jason Duxbury, editor, The Willet, 146-52512 RR 214, Ardrossan, Alberta, T8E 2H1. Phone: 780-922-3326, Email: sjduxbury@telus.net. Next newsletter deadline: Nov. 1, 2004. Articles can be on bird banding, bird watching, wildlife viewing, etc.