the WILLET
Beaverhill Bird Observatory
Volume 25, Number 3 September 2012

Steaks and Saw-whets

September 28 and 29, 2012
at the
Beaverhill Bird Observatory

Join the Beaverhill Bird Observatory volunteers, staff and executive for an evening barbeque and netting of Northern Saw-whet Owls. Steaks, chicken, hotdogs, veggie burgers, corn, potatoes, and all the fixings are served. An assortment of homemade desserts is followed by setting up mist nets to capture saw-whet owls on migration. This annual event sells out quickly (already 50% sold) so please book quickly to ensure your spot!!

Time: Dinner served between 6:00 and 8:00 p.m. Nets go up at 8:00 p.m. and dessert served.

Cost: $25 for adults, free for kids under 12.

Contact: For more information and to register, contact Chuck Priestley at (780) 984-6957 or e-mail chuck@strixecological.ca .

Supported by Alberta Conservation Association, Edmonton Nature Club, Alberta Gaming and Liquor Commission, and Nature Canada (Charles Labatiuk Fund)

Beaverhill Bird Observatory Open Till November 1

The Beaverhill Bird Observatory lab will be open till November 1, 2012. Songbird migration monitoring will run till October 9 and Saw-whet Owl monitoring begins September 10 and runs till snowfall. Banding occurs almost every day if the weather is suitable (no rain or strong winds). We encourage you to come out and visit us.

Although most of Beaverhill Lake is dry, Lister Lake has plenty of water and there are great waterfowl viewing opportunities. Three species of geese going over in large flocks! Check the website www.beaverhillbirds.com every two weeks for updates on species being captured or observed in the area on our Summaries page. Please call to make sure someone will be on site (phone 780-819-9927). See you at the lab!

Duck, Duck, (Canada) Goose

by Meaghan Bouchard

Sara and Amélie with the multiple Baltimore Orioles caught in the mist nets

The Beaverhill Bird Observatory participated in the **Baillie Birdathon** once again this year. Run by Bird Studies Canada, the birdathon is an annual fundraiser in which participants have 24 consecutive hours in May to observe as many bird species as possible. The staff this year (Meaghan Bouchard and Amélie Roberto-Charron) chose to do our count on May 30th, and were joined by Sara Berk who was on-site working with the Tree Swallows.

Our 24 hour window started bright and early, with the migration monitoring nets opening at 4:45 AM. We caught a total of 6 species in the nets that morning, all of which were also observed around the natural area. The daily census through the natural area added the expected species to our list: Yellow Warblers, Tree Swallows, Clay-coloured Sparrows, American Crow and Common Raven. Several of the noisier species inhabiting Lister Lake were also heard from the lab, including the American Bittern, Sora and Canada Goose.

After a quick lunch break, hiked out to the weir to see what we could find on the water. We were not disappointed! A good variety of ducks were spotted on Lister Lake including Northern Shoveler, Blue-winged Teal, Gadwall, Pintail, Canvasback, Redhead and a pair of Cinnamon Teal. I particularly enjoyed watching the small flock of Wilson`s Phalaropes swimming in the shallows. The walk back also yielded a surprising number of species: a Song Sparrow, Alder Flycatcher, and Common Yellowthroat were all heard, and we were all pleasantly surprised to spot a flock of Cedar Waxwings in the treetops.

Binoculars in hand, we then piled into the car and headed out to explore! On the drive out to Kallal Pond (about a mile south of the natural area), we spotted a pair of Mountain Bluebirds, and a mixed flock of Brewer`s Blackbirds and Common Grackles. The birdlife on the pond did include a few new species for our list, with the colony of Cliff Swallows nesting under the bridge, and the Marbled Godwits and Willets foraging in the shallow water.

Unfortunately, the trip out to the gravel pits south of Tofield was slightly disappointing species-wise, as the American Avocet was the only new species present! The trip through the town itself was equally frustrating, as the resident (and always present) Merlin was nowhere to be seen or heard. It truly seems as though the birds conspire against us during the Birdathon, as several species that are seen on a daily basis, such as the Vesper Sparrows in the fields, disappear when you are looking for them!

Checking out the waterfowl

Our last stop for the day was the Blackfoot Recreation Area. A short walk was rewarded with a Red-eyed Vireo and Red-necked Grebe. Surprisingly, the drive home on the back roads was some of our best birding of the day! The water in the ditches and small sloughs were occupied by Ruddy Ducks, Lesser Scaup and one female Ring-necked Duck who was not interested in staying above the water for any length of time. We were also thrilled to finally spot a sharp looking pair of Swainson`s Hawks, after several misleading glimpses of Red-tailed Hawks throughout the day. Over the course of the day, we were able to observe a total of 71 species (see Table 1).

A portion of the funds raised through our birdathon will go directly back to the Beaverhill Bird Observatory, which can be named as a dedicated recipient by any participant. A huge thank you to all those who sponsored us this year: John Acorn, Geoff Holroyd, Peter Maser Claude Roberto, and Lisa Priestley.

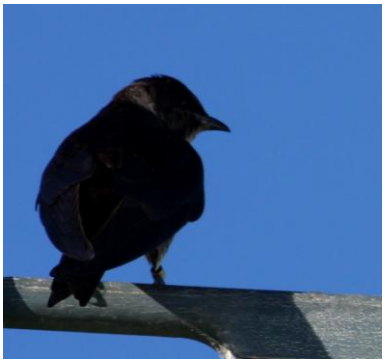
One of the last species of the day - a Swainson`s Hawk

Table 1. List of species observed in the BBO 2012 Baillie Birdathon

Alder Flycatcher	Canvasback	Killdeer	Ring-necked Duck
American Avocet	Cedar Waxwing	Least Flycatcher	Rock Dove
American Bittern	Chipping Sparrow	Lesser Scaup	Ruddy Duck
American Coot	Cinnamon teal	Lesser Yellowlegs	Savannah Sparrow
American Crow	Clay-coloured Sparrow	Mallard	Song Sparrow
American Goldfinch	Cliff Swallow	Marbled Godwit	Sora
American Kestrel	Common Grackle	Mountain Bluebird	Swainson's Hawk
American Robin	Common Raven	Northern Flicker	Swainson's Thrush
Baltimore Oriole	Common Yellowthroat	Northern Harrier	Tennessee Warbler
Barn Swallow	Downy Woodpecker	Northern Shoveler	Tree Swallow
Black Tern	Eared Grebe	Ovenbird	Warbling Vireo
Black-billed Magpie	European Starling	Pied-billed Grebe	White-throated Sparrow
Black-capped Chickadee	Forster's Tern	Pintail	Willet
Blue-winged Teal	Gadwall	Red-eyed Vireo	Wilson's Phalarope
Brewer's Blackbird	Gray Catbird	Redhead	Wilson's Snipe
Brown-headed Cowbird	Hairy Woodpecker	Red-necked Grebe	Yellow Warbler
Bufflehead	House Sparrow	Red-tailed Hawk	Yellow-headed Blackbird
Canada Goose	House Wren	Red-winged Blackbird	

Tracking Purple Martin Migration

by Amélie Roberto-Charron



Migratory species are species where the majority of the population partakes regular cyclical movements outside of their breeding range to a foreseeable destination at regular time intervals. Species commonly migrate to areas with seasonally abundant resources, where survival prospects are best, traveling to and from breeding and non-breeding habitat via flyways or migratory routes. It is estimated that 19% of the 9,856 bird species on earth are migratory and that more than five billion migrate across North and South America each year. Determining migratory routes enables the study of overwintering grounds and stop over sites that can be used for resting and feeding during migration. Pinpointing such areas helps ensure their conservation. Many different technologies exist to track migration, such as banding, acoustic monitoring, and various kinds of transmitters. Each technology has a number of associated advantages and disadvantages, such as cost, weight and accuracy.

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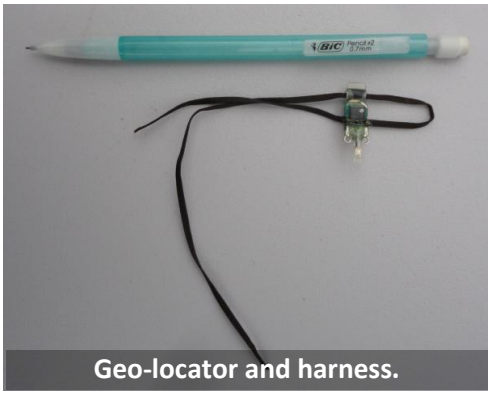
Geo-locator and harness.

A lightweight tracking method that has been recently gaining popularity is the geo-locator. Geo-locators are light data loggers, approximately the size of a dime, that record light levels and time of day. From these, latitude and longitude can be determined which can then be used to derive migratory routes. These devices are non-transmitting; so to obtain the recorded data the data logger needs to be retrieved. Their accuracy is of approximately 150km, and they can have a battery life of several years. The largest advantage of geo-locators, however, is that they are lightweight.

When tracking a species an important consideration is the weight of the device. The tracking device should be less than 5% of the animal's weight. If it is any heavier it could decrease the survival of the animal being tracked. The use of geo-locators allows us to map migratory routes of small songbirds, that were previously unable to bear the weight of transmitters.


Purple Martin House.

The Purple Martin, *Progne subis*, is the largest swallow in North American and is among the largest in the world. In eastern North America this species now breeds almost entirely in backyard birdhouses. Historically, they nested in abandoned woodpecker holes in tree snags. Only a few records of natural nestings east of the Rocky Mountains have been reported during the twentieth century (C.R. Brown, Birds of North American, 1997). Breeding bird survey data suggest that populations in northern North America are declining. Some potential causes of declines may be competition for nesting sites (in the man-made nest apartments) with European Starlings and House Sparrows (not-native species) and problems on their wintering grounds. Purple Martins migrate from South America to North America in the spring to breed; they can arrive in Alberta as early as mid-April. They do not remain long however, by the beginning of August they are already migrating south back to their wintering grounds. Their most northern breeding sites are in central Alberta. Camrose is well known for the impressive number of Purple Martins that reside there during the summer. Camrose is also home to a number of very passionate birders, Purple Martin house landowners, and ***Dr. Glen Hvenegaard*** of the University of Alberta's Augustana campus.


Purple Martin Equipped with Geo-locator.

It therefore comes as no surprise that Camrose was selected to take part in a study based out of ***Dr. Bridget Stuchbury's*** lab at the York University using these geo-locators to track Purple Martin migration. This June, ***Dr. Kevin Fraser***, a post-doctoral researcher from the Department of Biological Sciences from York University, with the assistance of many Purple Martin lovers trapped and equipped 30 Purple Martins with geo-locators in Camrose. Kevin also put 30 more on martins at the Ellis Bird Farm with the assistance of Myrna Pearman and others.

As these birds are insectivorous, and catch insects on the fly, these tracking devices were carefully placed at the base of the spine so as to not interfere with the bird's swift flight movements. Harnessing straps around the bird's legs secured the device in place. Purple Martins have high site fidelity and therefore migrate to the same breeding grounds each year. Next spring, these devices will be removed by recapturing the birds and by cutting the harness.

The Beaverhill Bird Observatory (BBO) was fortunate to get involved with this project. We collaborated with permit applications and provided yellow colored Fish and Wildlife bands. The BBO head bander, Meaghan Bouchard, and assistant bander, Amélie Roberto-Charron, and BBO board member Dr. Geoff Holroyd, spent a day in Camrose trapping and banding the birds that were being outfitted with the geo-locators. The Purple Martins were trapped using a very high tech technique; a paint roller was used to trap individuals once they were observed returning to the Purple Martin house. It is a very involved process with people standing watch at each side of a Purple Martin house, with many attempts being required to trap one individual.

On July 19 and 20, Geoff Holroyd returned to the Ellis Bird Farm and Camrose to attach another 20 geolocators that the York University made available. Even though it was getting late in the nesting season the adult martins were caught by the now-skilled trappers without incident.

Now the wait begins to see how many Martins with geolocators return next year to the breeding sites. The geolocators keep track of Universal time and light levels. This information can be used to calculate sunrise, sunset, and day length. With those three numbers and date, the researchers can estimate the longitude and latitude of the martins each day! The use of geo-locators is innovative, and costly. It is possible to help fund this leading edge research by sponsoring a geo-locator with a $250 commitment. For more information on this project and how to get involved, please contact ***Dr. Glen Hvenegaard***, a professor of environmental sciences at the University of Alberta Augustana Campus in Camrose, by email at glen.hvenegaard@ualberta.ca

Bird Nest – What Is It?

These photos were posted by a Karen Truman, a fellow biologist. The nest was found in a gravel pile in the foothills ecoregion. Can you identify the nest?

Answer to May 2012 issue What Is It? Red Crossbill

Membership Information

$10/yr for an individual, $20/yr for a family, $25/yr Supporting, $25/yr Corporate, $100/yr Sustaining, $500 (one time) Life Membership

Cheques can be made to the Beaverhill Bird Observatory and sent to: Box 1418, Edmonton, Alberta, T5J 2N5

Material for the next newsletter can be sent to:
Lisa Priestley, Editor, Box 1418, Edmonton, AB T5J 2N5.
Email: lisa@beaverhillbirds.com. Articles and photos can be on bird banding, bird watching, wildlife viewing, personal nature photos, etc. **Deadline:** August 15, 2012.

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We gratefully acknowledge Alberta Conservation Association, Alberta Sport Recreation Parks and Wildlife Foundation, Community Spirit Program, Shell Environmental Fund, and Nature Canada (Charles Labatiuk Fund) for their support.