

Editor: Julianne Hayes

Spring 2024 in Review: Activities at BBO

BBO Big Birding Day 2024

Jon Van Arragon, Assistant Biologist

Each year, the Beaverhill Bird Observatory staff do a full day of birdwatching together with the goal of seeing as many species of birds as possible while raising money to support bird conservation. This year's fundraiser took place on May 20th, a day that featured weather that was rainy and miserable. Despite the poor conditions, our team was able to see a total of 134 species of birds in just 24 hours!



Above: Birding at the shore of Beaverhill Lake. Below: The big birding day team for 2024. Photos by Jana Teefy.

We started out around the Beaverhill Natural Area, quickly picking up most of our duck species at the weir and a handful of shorebirds out on Beaverhill Lake. One unexpected visitor was a Sandhill Crane that hadn't yet migrated foraging out in the lakebed, as well as some lingering flocks of Snow Geese and Greater White-fronted Geese.



We continued onwards to Amisk Creek, stopping to appreciate the local Mountain Bluebirds and identifying a few more shorebirds foraging in the muck along the way. At the creek we saw Cliff Swallows and Barn Swallows, along with some Wilson's Phalaropes spinning away on the open water. After much effort we found a Cinnamon

Territorial Acknowledgement: Beaverhill Bird Observatory is located within Treaty 6 territory, a traditional gathering place for diverse Indigenous Nations, including the Plains Cree, Metis, Blackfoot, Saulteaux and Nakoda Sioux People, who are the original stewards of the Beaverhill Lake area since time immemorial.

Teal at a roadside pond; a Western Meadowlark sighting put us at 100 species for the day before lunch!

We went into Tofield for a quick lunch, noting some California Gulls and Ring-billed Gulls in the parking lot. We then ventured towards Elk Island, where we quickly got to 110 species thanks to sightings of Western Grebes, American White Pelicans, and a Barrows Goldeneye. We then trekked around the forest, spotting some Solitary Sandpipers and a Western Wood-Pewee. On our way out of the park we spotted a group of Surf Scoters, and with that sighting our species total was at 125!

On the way back to the observatory we spotted a Loggerhead Shrike that had eluded us earlier in the day, so we decided to keep birding even though the light was leaving the sky. We headed over to Lister Lake and were delighted to hear the rhythmic clicking of some Yellow Rails coming from the marsh! Some Great Horned Owls and American Bitterns were also heard calling, and just before midnight we located a Black-crowned Night Heron at the weir. Staff member Ethan Denton added a few more birds back in Edmonton, bringing the total to 134!

For the full list of every bird species seen on Big Birding Day, check out our [eBird trip report!](#)



*The team scouring the wetlands for ducks and shorebirds.
Photo by Jana Teefy.*

Thanks to volunteers Allan, Irene, and Jay who helped us out with the birding! An equally big thank you to anyone who donated - it's not too late to contribute to our fundraiser even though the birding is done!

[Click here](#) to make a contribution to Big Birding Day.

The 2024 Snow Goose Festival – “The Best Day Ever!”

Geoff Holroyd, Co-chair, Snow Goose Festival Organizing Committee

The white colour of the fields in Beaver County on April 27-28 wasn't snow drifts left over from the last flurry of winter. Rather, large flocks of Snow Geese were scattered throughout the county, sometimes in huge flocks, on cultivated fields and adjacent ponds. Pleasant temperatures and calm winds greeted the public that attended this second consecutive Snow Goose Festival, the 12th counting those from 1993 to 2002. Before the festival, the Tofield Mercury produced a 16-page newspaper souvenir issue with interesting articles about spring, geese, and avian flu among other topics. Over 6,000 copies were distributed throughout the region along with radio and TV interviews to promote the festival to the public.

A total of 1504 people bought tickets for the various events. The headquarters of the Festival was the Tofield Arena which had over 20 vendors and environmental groups with educational and interactive displays for the visitors. Kids could enjoy activities at the Nature Alberta and Backyard Birds Nature Shop booths, hold a Burrowing Owl and Red-tailed Hawk at the Beaverhill Bird Observatory booth, and learn from the many other stores and displays in the arena. Before and



Visitors attend the Snow Goose Festival booths in the Tofield Arena. Photo by Geoff Holroyd.



“This is the best day ever!” says a young visitor while holding Keith the Red-Tailed Hawk with the help of Helen Trefry. Photo by Geoff Holroyd.

after the tours, the public could get food and refreshments at the Tofield Curling Club concession in the arena. Four speakers made presentations during the day on topics including Avian Flu, Snow Goose Management, Bird Trends and Trumpeter Swan recovery. One young boy, while holding the Red-tailed Hawk said, “this is the best day ever!”. We may never know the impact that the festival with its many components has on the public, old and young.

At the arena, the Town of Tofield greeted visitors who had purchased tickets to take bus tours to see the geese and other birds. Every 30 minutes, a bus left on a two- or three-hour tour with two knowledgeable volunteer guides on board to direct the bus driver and to show the passengers the many species of birds on the route. The guides received their directions from Jim Lange who stayed at his desk in the arena

for both full days. He received regular updates from the birding scouts who were patrolling the rural roads tracking the mobile flocks of birds. Organized by Gerald Romanchuk and led by Garnet Raven, the scouts had to coordinate their travels to ensure each bus had up to date information every half hour.

Other buses with guides on board took the short ride to the Beaverhill Natural Area where they hiked a loop trail in the natural area, watched bird banding at the Beaverhill Bird Observatory, and heard about the many long-term studies of Tree Swallows, Least Flycatchers, Saw-whet Owls, and other species. One highlight was a Say's Phoebe, a bird of southern Alberta, that was perched on the fence.

Nature Alberta, with funding from the Edmonton Community Foundation, hosted 6 buses for Edmonton-based new Canadians and inner-city families. They took a hike at the Strathcona Wilderness Center and visited the Tofield Arena, the headquarters of the event for lunch. Afterwards, they headed out to see geese before returning to the city with a full day of new adventures to remember.



Visitors enjoyed a bus tour and hike at Strathcona Wilderness Center with support from Nature Alberta and the Edmonton Community Foundation. Photo by Ummara Ayyez.

On Saturday evening, a delicious banquet was enjoyed by 100 participants with original live music played by Jenn Guiton and learned about "Swallows, the 21st Century's Canary in a Coal Mine" from Dr. Geoff Holroyd, chair of BBO. The silent auction organized by Ruth Ball allowed participants to out-bid each other for specialty donated items which raised additional funds for the festival. Ron Ball not only MCed the banquet, he organized 4 speakers in the arena during the two days.

We thank the members of the steering committee: Town of Tofield (co-chair Vanita Eglauer, Cindy Neufeld), Beaverhill Bird Observatory (Geoff Holroyd co-chair, Jana Teefy), Beaver County (Kevin Smook), Strathcona County (Glen Lawrence, Sharon Sisson), Alberta Conservation Association (Chuck Priestley), Claystone Waste Ltd (Anne Ruzicka), North America Waterfowl Management Plan (Greg Hale), Nature Alberta (Kethu Mendis), Edmonton Nature Club (Brian Stevens, Gerald Romanchuk, Jim Lange), Beaverhills Biosphere (Brian Ilnicki), WildNorth (Kim Blomme , and Canadian Wildlife Service (Garnet Raven), Alberta Environment (Nathalie Olson). And we thank the funders: Alberta Conservation Association, Edmonton Community Foundation, Beaver County, Strathcona County, Claystone Waste Ltd, Home-Time Realty, Tofield Mercury, North America Waterfowl Management Plan, Beaverhill Bird Observatory, and Town of Tofield. We also thank the organizations and vendors who had displays in the Tofield Arena. A special thank you to the many volunteers who scouted for geese, those who were guides on the buses and the speakers.

Shorebird Surveys - Spring 2024

Ethan Denton

Beaverhill Lake is a designated Western Hemispheric Reserve Network based on large numbers of shorebirds seen during surveys in the 1980s. Numbers decreased in the early 2000s as the lake dried, but since then it has partially refilled. With the return of larger numbers of shorebirds, BBO undertook surveys in 2022.

Shorebird surveys took place again this year, starting May 1st. There are still more to come, but a look at the spring migration results shows a significant change from last year. Long-billed Dowitchers, were much less numerous this year than they were last spring, with 582 individuals the spring high count in 2024 compared to 9,139 in 2023. In contrast, the classic 'peeps' (Least and Semipalmated Sandpipers) have been observed in much higher numbers this year than last year. It's possible that this change is due to lower water levels, as peeps are quite small and short-legged and water levels have dropped this spring compared to last year.



Black-necked stilt. Photo by Ethan Denton.



Semipalmated plover. Photo by Ethan Denton.

Species diversity has been similar, down by two from 23 to 21. The lake has continued to dry up over the summer, and water levels have receded significantly. It will be very interesting to see how shorebird populations respond over the coming months. Anyone interested in keeping up with the results can see them posted to eBird under the Beaverhill Lake hotspot. A full report will be posted detailing the surveys and their results in the fall, following the conclusion of the shorebird migration season.

Want to volunteer to do surveys?
Please contact
biologist@beaverhillbirds.com

2024 Geoff Holroyd's Young Ornithologists' Workshop

Helen Trefry, Workshop Co-ordinator

The 8th Young Ornithologists' Workshop ran from August 2nd-8th, with keen participants from Alberta, British Columbia, Massachusetts, Pennsylvania and California. The focus of the Workshop was on daily early morning training sessions on scribing data, extracting birds from mist nests, measuring and banding birds, and the skills needed to use Pyle to age and sex the birds accurately. Other activities included: searching for butterflies with expert David Laurie; a Bioblitz; a Big Birding 110 species Day that ended with canoeing on Islet Lake (courtesy of Geoff Holroyd); talks by staff and Chair Geoff Holroyd (who also demonstrated hummingbird banding); a raptor field trip to Trefrys' falcon farm where, thanks to Kim Blomme from Wild North, they also released orphaned ducklings; and many other bird-related activities.



Geoff Holroyd, Helen Trefry, and Jana Teefy with the participants of the 2024 Young Ornithologists Workshop. Photo by Geoff Holroyd.

BBOs very capable staff now include 3 former Young Ornithologists and it is rewarding to watch them train even younger birders. The youth quickly bonded over their shared passion for birds and worked hard to improve their birding skills. Others included their interests in drawing birds and photography. While some are considering ornithology as a career, for others, birds will be a lifelong interest. Now they have new birding friends who share their common concern over declining bird populations across the continent.

BBO strives to keep this Workshop free to all participants and is grateful to the parents who donated to this Workshop afterwards. We are grateful for any donations earmarked for this special Workshop. All donations are eligible for a tax receipt.

Finally, a big THANKS to the staff who make a great extra effort to teach and host the youth and THANK YOU to the volunteers who helped with meal preparation and food; the students always appreciate a home-made triple chocolate cookie!

(Geoff's note: A HUGE THANK YOU to Helen Trefry who recruits and selects the students, makes travel arrangements to BBO, organizes the schedule and guest speakers, arranges the bird specimens from Ottawa, makes a lot of food and coordinates all the friends who make the rest. She coordinates the delivery of food to BBO, hosts an afternoon with husband Phil at their farm, and generally makes sure the workshop runs smoothly).

Upcoming Events & Opportunities

FALL EVENTS

AUGUST 24
Sat-Sun

Songbird Banding Events

Join the BBO biologists for a morning of bird banding and learn about our research
Get your tickets below!



SEPT 14
Thu-Fri-Sat-Sun

Owl Banding Events

Join the BBO biologists for an evening of owl banding and learn about our research
Get your tickets below!



SEPT 27&28

Supper and Saw-whets

Join the BBO biologists for a home cooked vegetarian meal, live entertainment, and owl banding
Get your tickets below!



Visitors can get up close and personal with a chickadee at a bird banding event. Photo by Jeff Dixon.

Sponsor an Owl

Donate or raise \$300 to fund a Northern Saw-whet Owl nanotag. Name and track your tagged owl to learn about it's migration and dispersal movements.
Donate Today!



Get Your Event Tickets [Here!](#)

Sponsor and Owl [Here!](#)

Saw-whet Owl Migration from Beaverhill Lake: Summer Update

Geoff Holroyd, Board Chair

Some Saw-whets overwinter in Alberta and are already on their nesting territories with the added advantage of a home before the migrants return. Listen for the owls in woodlots and ravines near your home. If you find nesting owls in central Alberta let us know and we will try to visit and check for a tag on the owl with our receiver. Write to chair@beaverhillbirds.com.

The autumn migration of Saw-whet Owls has been documented at the Beaverhill Bird Observatory for over 20 years. Band recoveries indicated that most owls flew east towards the Great Lakes and eastern North America with a few found to the south and west. However, most owl banders are to the east of us with few to the south and west. In 2023, members of the BBO donated \$300 each to purchase 50 MOTUS nanotags. The results have been surprising with all the owls' tags detected to the south and west of Alberta during October and November.



*BBO Chair Geoff Holroyd with a tagged Northern Saw-whet Owl.
Photo by Jana Teefy*

Get Involved – Sponsor an Owl!

We want to increase our sample size and repeat this project again in 2024. With your help, we will deploy 50 more tags on Saw-whet Owls in September and October at BBO. The cost to sponsor an owl is \$300, which covers the cost of the tag. All sponsors will receive a certificate with a photo and information about your owl, instructions on how to track your owl, and you will receive regular updates on the owl migration project.

[Sponsor and Owl Here!](#)

Alberta Young Birders

Julia Froese, Alberta Young Birders Volunteer

Led by high school and University students, Alberta Young Birders (AYB) is an Edmonton based group keen to provide a welcoming and inclusive environment for young birdwatchers to meet fellow bird nerds and collectively explore the parks and birds of the Edmonton area. We started this group to develop a network of eager young birdwatchers to connect them and the opportunities offered by the BBO. AYB is aimed for youth ages 10 to 17, however, if you are interested but exceed this age range, please reach out to get involved. Our monthly outings, each a few hours long, have been held at parks within Edmonton and plan to expand our reach to visit places such as the BBO, Elk Island National Park, and other great birding locations. Participation in our events is free and participants are encouraged to bring their friends!



Parents will be asked to complete waivers before events so we ask that you RSVP via email.

Contact us at albertayoungbirders@gmail.com and follow us on [Instagram!](#)

Members of Alberta Young Birders scout the wetlands of Big Lake in Lois Hole Centennial Provincial Park. June 22, 2024. Photo by Julia Froese.

Volunteer Spotlight

Julia Froese

My relationship with the BBO began as a visitor to a Supper and Saw-whets event in 2020, keen on discovering nearby places where my love of birds could be developed. I was charmed by the little banding building, enraptured with the birds, and incredibly eager to learn about the world of bird banding! By the time midnight rolled around I was begging my mother to let us stay “just one more net check” but eventually I left, with the promise that we would return, clutched safely to my heart.

Over the course of the next few years, I returned for many banding events and volunteered at the Snow Goose Festival to bide my time until I was eligible for the YOW. When my letter of acceptance arrived, I was ecstatic and could not wait until August rolled around. During that week (was it really just last summer?), I felt my world shift. A job spent in the woods, surrounded by birds and working for their protection was no longer just a dream, but something that could eventually become attainable. I learned how to scribe, hold birds, band birds, extract birds and make awful bird puns.

The inevitable end of camp was more painful than all the chickadees and sapsuckers I banded (which is saying something!) Since then, they haven't been able to keep me away and I have been back as a volunteer as often as my parents are willing to drive me, or by finding ways to carpool when I can!

I've learned an incredible amount while banding Saw-whet Owls, songbirds and nestling Tree Swallows, and been pooped on by an equally astounding number of birds. In addition to banding, I've had the opportunity to monitor Least Flycatcher nests, find Yellow Rails at midnight, and learn to preserve butterfly specimens. Outside of the natural area, it was fantastic to participate in both the BBO Big Birding Day and the Teacher's Convention where I got to handle Keith, the Red-tailed Hawk.

Feather or not at the BBO, I am eternally grateful to the staff of the BBO for sharing the world of field ornithology with me and allowing me to be part of such a special community. The skills, friends and experiences I've gained, and continue to gain during my time as a volunteer will be instrumental as I explore the world of ornithology and I can't wait for more adventures that will surely come my way!





Patrick Goa

I'm a young birder and aspiring bird bander from Edmonton, Alberta. Me and my brother Nikolas found out about the BBO sometime in 2020. We had recently gotten into birding and were extremely excited to get to see some birds up close. We were instantly hooked after the first time we went to one of their spring songbird events. We signed up for the BBO's Young Ornithologists Workshop in 2022 where we learned all about bird banding and running the station. We've been volunteering as much as possible ever since. I love getting to see all the wildlife surrounding the banding station and out by the lake, and of course the birds being banded. Now that I've graduated high school I have much more time to dedicate to birding and bird banding, and eventually, after I graduate from university I hope to turn this hobby into a

career.

Nikolas Robinson

I'm an aspiring biologist, who is currently taking a gap year. After participating in the 2022 Young Ornithologists Workshop me and my brother Patrick started our BBO volunteer career. What I love about volunteering is that I get to be hands on with nature (literally) and get a taste of my future as a biologist. Getting to hold a bird in your hand is genuinely so cool. The fact that it's possible to tell where an individual bird is at in its life through physiological characteristics is amazing. And understanding how and where they migrate fascinates me. A little bit of an insane dream of mine is to process the same bird on its breeding grounds and its wintering grounds. It's likely never going to happen but it's a fun thought. Along with banding, I enjoy birding in general, as well as taking as many photos of every living thing as possible.



[Apply to be a volunteer
HERE](#)

Bird Friendly Cities: Protecting the Future of Our Feathered Friends

Although BBO is not located in a city, our winter BirdSmart education program includes Edmonton and area. Some years ago, BBO joined the Edmonton Bird Friendly City committee to add to their application for Edmonton to be certified as Bird Friendly. Part of the application includes bird-related education which is what we do! BBO's contribution help the successful designation for Edmonton. Here is information about the BFC program from Nature Canada who coordinate this national conservation initiative.

"Birds have long been a source of inspiration and wonder for people all over the world. Their songs, vibrant plumage, and unique behaviors add beauty and life to our urban landscapes. However, the threats facing urban birds — especially species at risk — have become a cause for concern.

THREATS TO BIRDS IN OUR BUILT ENVIRONMENTS

Over the past five decades, urbanization and human activities have taken a significant toll on bird populations, particularly in North American cities and towns. Shockingly, we have lost a quarter of the wild bird population — nearly 3 billion birds. This decline is attributed to several factors, including:

1. **Predation by cats and dogs:** Domestic pets pose a threat to bird populations as they hunt birds for sport or food.
2. **Collisions with buildings and vehicles:** Birds in built environments often collide with glass windows and vehicles leading to fatal injuries.
3. **Pesticide use:** The use of pesticides in cities for lawns, landscaping and other uses can contaminate the environment, affecting both bird food sources due to insect declines as well as their overall health.
4. **Habitat loss:** Urban development without consideration for birds, along with habitat destruction, have left them with limited places to nest and forage for food.

THE ROLE OF BIRD-FRIENDLY CITIES, TOWNS AND VILLAGES

Recognizing the urgency of the situation, Nature Canada is taking a proactive stance to address the decline of birds, species at risk and biodiversity at large through our Bird Friendly City certification program. Cities, towns, and villages across Canada are showing the way by making impactful changes to become Bird Friendly Certified.

The goal is to create safe, thriving spaces for birds where:

- **Nature is restored:** Cities and towns commit to restoring natural habitats, providing essential resources for bird populations to thrive through Municipal Resolutions, Motions and Proclamations
- **The community is engaged:** Residents from all walks of life are encouraged to get involved in bird conservation efforts and celebrate the avian diversity in their areas. Find a local Bird Friendly Team near you!

- **Proper policies are implemented:** Nature Canada can help cities develop policies that safeguard and restore bird populations, such as Bird Friendly Design Standards, keeping cats indoors, and protecting biodiversity.”

For more information please visit this link: naturecanada.ca.

An Unusual Behaviour: Nest Reuse in Least Flycatchers at BBO

Emelie Dykstra, BBO biologist.

Least Flycatcher surveys in the Beaverhill Natural Area this year explored an uncommon behavior in open-cup nesting species. Most songbirds build new nests every year, but some Least Flycatchers were found to reuse old nests in 2023 from the previous seasons, 2022. Reusing nests could save time and energy, but it also carries risks, like increased chances of predation or nest damage due to weather after surviving the winter. Open-cup, canopy nesting species with small body size are especially vulnerable to predation when reusing nests, making Least Flycatcher nest reuse particularly interesting.



A Least Flycatcher on a nest. Photo by Emelie Dykstra.

40 old nests and 10 new nests were monitored during the 2024 breeding season to see how often old nests were reused and whether it offered any benefits. Surprisingly, 20% of the old nests (8/40) were reused. However, no significant advantage to reusing nests (n=8) was found compared to building new ones (n=10), as the timing of egg laying was not earlier than newly built nests. Interestingly, nests in poor condition from previous years were reused earlier in the season, suggesting that birds might be choosing old nest sites based on location rather than nest quality. Nests in better condition were reused later, possibly to make up for lost time if their first clutch failed. Birds that reused high quality nests laid eggs five to six days later than the average date of nests that failed, indicating that reused nests are often used as “second-chance” nests. The risks of nest reuse, such as increased predation or weather damage, were not significantly higher than in new nests, and there was no increased failure in reused nests when compared to new nests.

The Beaverhill Natural Area has an abundant arthropod population, including many spiders. Least Flycatchers are opportunistic in their nest building, with one individual in 1986 lining its nest with dragonfly wings (Briskie 1988). This suggests that the Least Flycatcher population in the natural area could be using more spider webs to reinforce their nests than in other areas, making their nests more resilient through the winters. This could explain why Least Flycatchers reuse nests in the Beaverhill Natural Area when previous literature suggests they don't elsewhere.

Despite the lack of obvious advantages, nest reuse has proven to be a common nesting strategy in the Beaverhill Natural Area, contrary to previous literature on open-cup nesters. Overall, this study provides new insights into Least Flycatcher nesting behavior and suggests that nest reuse may be more about making the best of available resources rather than offering clear reproductive benefits.



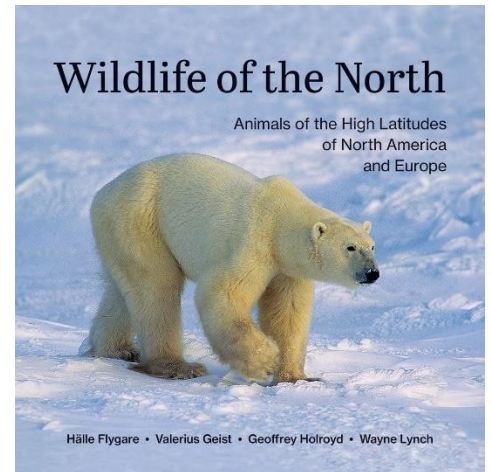
Least Flycatcher nest with eggs. Photo by Emelie Dykstra

Wildlife of the North

Read about the polar mammals, birds, plants, icecaps and glaciers of North America and Europe with stunning photos. Co-authored by BBO Chair and ornithology expert with 36 years' experience in the Canadian Wildlife Service, Geoff Holroyd.

Signed copies available through Geoff Holroyd for \$30 at the Snow Goose Festival and at the observatory. Unsigned copies available through Amazon.

Get your copy now!



BBO Merchandise

The BBO now has an online merchandise store! Purchase t-shirts, hoodies, crew necks, and more with the BBO logo or an adorable Northern Saw-whet Owl on it.

[Check it out today!](#)

Tru Earth Fundraiser

Please consider supporting the environment and BBO by ordering through our fundraiser link or scan the QR code to place



<http://tru-earth.sjv.io/BBO>

Help Beaverhill Bird Observatory
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The Beaverhill Bird Observatory is a proud member of the Beaver County and Tofield communities. We thank our many supporters and funders that are shown below along with personal donations including in memory of Mary Hughes Weir and the Wainwright Wildlife Society.

Visit www.beaverhillbirds.com for more information.



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