

volunteers in parks



This Season in Parks

Get Gullible!

AUTUMN 2006

Volunteers In Parks is a quarterly newsletter produced by Capital Regional District Parks



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Who's That VIP?

They're loud, they're feisty and they have an unfortunate habit of bombing passing hikers...but the winter gulls of Vancouver Island are a surprisingly diverse group. Though many of us are satisfied to lump them all together as "seagulls", it really isn't too difficult to learn the subtle field marks that set them apart. A pair of binoculars and an afternoon at the seaside are really all you need.

A word of advice before we begin: stick with the adults. Young gulls are grey-brown and difficult to distinguish—best leave them to the seasoned birder. That said, let's begin with the most common of all. The glaucous-winged gull is an abundant year-round resident, as much at home foraging for litter in city parking lots as it is patrolling the rocky coastline of **East Sooke**



Glaucous-winged gull

Regional Park. Look for its light gray back, its grey (not black!) wingtips, and the dull, gray-streaked head and neck it sports through the winter months. Loud and bold, this character will tolerate close scrutiny. I once had one land on the hood of my car at my local McDonald's and impatiently peck at



Western gull

my windshield while I finished my McNuggets.

Now, take that glaucous-winged gull and change its wingtips from grey to black, and you're looking at one of its close kin, the herring gull, here for the winter before it returns to northern lakes across Canada. If your view permits, have a good look at its eye: your herring gull should have a yellow iris. If that iris is dark, then you may have found yourself a Thayer's gull, an uncommon winter resident biding its time here in the balmy south before it returns to its Arctic nesting grounds.

Witty's Lagoon is a great spot for gull-watching and the best place I know to see the beautiful western gull. A close relative of the glaucous-winged, this one has a noticeably darker back and a brilliant white head throughout the winter, an easy diagnostic feature that separates it from the other large winter gulls with their dull streaked winter hairdos.

If all these subtle differences seem

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Very Rare Slugs... with Very Strange Names

What is in a name? The warty jumping slug and the blue-grey tail dropper slug are much more secretive than the common banana slug, and they've got much fancier names as well. Not much is known of these slimy leaf munchers, but these two rare and unusual species have been found in regional parks and trails, raising questions about how high the jumper jumps and whether the tail dropper grows a new tail.

In 2002, a new local species of slugs was discovered near Rocky Point in Metchosin. It was a fairly quiet event, but our inquisitive VIP Naturalist and Warden **Colin Ranson** had some details and reminded us to feature this creature in a newsletter. This first discovery in Canada was the blue-grey tail dropper slug (*Prophysaon coeruleum*), though there are records of sightings in the US. Researchers studying the slugs wanted to know if there were other populations of blue-grey tail droppers nearby and began research in several regional parks and trails. Two more locations were discovered in **Devonian** and on the **Galloping Goose** at Sooke River Road.

Not to be outdone by its curious cousin, the warty jumping slug

(*Hemphilia glandulosa*) was also located in a newly discovered population at **East Sooke**. Both are noted as species of special concern by the Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada, a government organization that tracks species at risk in our country.

Both these slugs have a very small extent of occurrence (~150 km²), and continuing decline is projected in the quality of their habitat. The areas they like to call home are found in remnant patches of older forest with a deciduous component (only five locations on southern Vancouver Island). Threats at these locations include heavy recreational use and the impacts of introduced plants and animals, including invasive slugs and snails. The more common banana slug is a native species, while the black licorice slug is introduced (the black licorice slug has also been considered one factor in the decreasing numbers of calypso orchids seen in local forests).

So what about those questions the researchers were asking? Let it be known that the warty jumping slug doesn't jump much at all and the tail dropper does re-grow a tail after predatory attacks.

Rare Snake Found at Mill Hill

Exciting news from the world of herpetology! A rare sharp tailed snake was found at **Mill Hill** in early summer by a UBC researcher investigating rare plants. The sharp tailed snake is a small



Sharp tailed snake

reddish brown reptile, less than 35 cm in length, with no back stripe, black and white belly bars, smooth scales and a distinguishing thorn-like spike on the end of the tail. It has been recorded in very few locations on southern Vancouver Island and little is known about the population. Researchers have been placing artificial covers in many locations on the southern island and Gulf Islands in hopes of finding sharp tailed snakes. So far, the Mill Hill sighting is one of very few. This is great news for species conservation and helps support the reasons for our extensive ecological restoration work in this park.

Autumn Lady

You are a field of proud goldenrod set in purple aster and laced with the wild, white flowers of stubborn Queen Anne. You have the back-sweet flavor of ripe tomato, the tart snap taste of a winesap apple. You bloom in your autumn. This is the season for which you were made. Be a blaze against my cold my winter arms.

Kem Luther

VIP Naturalist, Witty's Lagoon

VIP Recognition 2006

Reminder! **Saturday, November 4th, 8:45 to 11:30am** at Dunsmuir Lodge in North Saanich.

Volunteer at Our Annual Mill Hill Broom Removal!

Saturday, October 21 and/or **Sunday, October 29**

Morning and afternoon sessions available

Mill Hill Regional Park

Pre-register with Karen, 478-3344 or kpreston@crd.bc.ca

Get Gullible! (continued from page 1)

Fall Activities To Try

1. Voling – to go out in a meadow and gather berries, seeds, insects, mushrooms and worms, and to generally forage about in the grass.

2. Fossicking – to go out in the forest and gently lift logs, peer through a hand lens and meet the small forms of life hidden on the forest floor.

3. Mushroom Hunting – to go out anywhere, once the rains have fallen, and investigate the fabulous fungi that “blossom” at this time of year. Recommended book: *All that the Rain Promises* by David Arora.

4. Potlucking – to stay at home and have friends come over with the worms, berries, seeds and mushrooms they have collected while performing the above activities. Recommended food: blackberry crumble and squash soup.

Crossword Contest Winner!

Thank you to everyone who participated in the crossword contest in the last newsletter. The winner of the VIP Fleece Vest was **Dave Welsh, VIP Warden Bear Hill**. Congratulations Dave!

like splitting hairs, rest assured that the gulls feel the same. These birds think nothing of commingling where their ranges overlap. Hybrids of the above species pose a bit of a challenge to the advanced birder.

Let's leave these big birds alone for a moment and examine their smaller relatives. Take a herring gull, shrink it down a bit and change its pink legs to yellow, decorate its beak with a ring of black, and you're looking at a ring-billed gull. You might not know it from its modest numbers here on the coast, but this is probably Canada's most abundant gull, common as a housefly from Alberta to Quebec and about as discerning, too. The ring-billed takes over parking-lot duty across mainland Canada, with a soft spot for landfills and even road kill.

Now take your ring-billed gull, turn its yellow eye to brown and redecorate the bill a bit, and you've got its close cousin, the California gull (which, oddly, I have seen far more abundantly in Alberta than in California). These gulls show up here in great numbers in late summer as soon as they're finished breeding inland.

A particular treat for winter gull watchers in Victoria is the mew gull. It's smaller than the ring-billed and easily recognized by its graceful, pigeon-like head and genteel feeding habits. The mew gull can be found pecking coyly



Ring-billed gull

at the water's surface before taking wing with a cat-like “Mew!”

The tiny Bonaparte's gull with its crescent of black behind the eye is smaller still and will round out the winter gull-watching season. Watch for it next time you cross to the mainland—Active Pass is a great spot for these birds.

As summer rolls around again, keep your eyes peeled for the pièce-de-resistance of West Coast gulls, the Heermann's gull, fairly common at **East Sooke** and **Island View Beach** in late summer and early fall. An exquisite slate-gray body and bright white head make this gull a real treasure to find, and the easiest gull of all to identify.

Happy “gulling!”

Don Enright, Park Interpreter



California gull

Who's That VIP?

If you're looking for lessons on how to glide gracefully into a quiet retirement, stand clear of energetic and lively **Gail and Tom Austin**. The Austins have been active VIP Wardens on the **Gal-lop-ing Goose Trail** since 1990, and reliable VIP Naturalists at **Witty's La-go-on** since 1998, each giving close to 1000 hours to regional parks and trails. But that's not all. The Austins not only volunteer with CRD Parks, but also other agencies such as Wild ARC, the Victoria Natural History Society,



Tom and Gail Austin on the Aurora Explorer

the BC Seniors Games and several committees in Metchosin. But wait, there's more! Foremost on their horizon...the Beijing Olympics. No, not as competitors (they're not quite that active) but as volunteers. After volunteering at the Olympics in Athens 2004, these two Metchosinities set their sights on volunteering in Beijing. How do they do it all? Their energy seems to stem from a deep passion for the natural world and firm desire to give back to the community in as many ways as they can fit in a day.

Like many of us who love regional parks and trails, Tom and Gail had rich experiences with nature in their early years. Gail grew up in Vancouver and spent many weekends exploring the outdoors with her family at Cultus Lake, Goldstream Park and even Witty's Lagoon, where her grandparents' home overlooked the beach. These childhood experiences stayed with Gail through her adult years, fostering a desire to come "home" to Metchosin one day. While working in Vernon, Gail met Tom and together they relocated to Metchosin. Once back in "paradise," Gail worked at the BC Pension Corporation and managed offices for the Municipality of Esquimalt and the

Esquimalt Fire Department. Recently, Gail studied to become a certified master gardener, even though she says, "We can't garden much in Metchosin, because of the requirement to share so much with deer and rabbits!"

After they met in Vernon, Tom (originally from Ontario farm country and an expert creekside frog catcher as a boy) transferred from the Vernon School District, where he was secretary treasurer, and landed in at the Ministry of Advanced Education as Director of Finance. He then moved on to be Vice President of Finance at the newly opened Royal Roads University. Tom tells of many lunch hour walks looking for the famed resident cougar at Royal Roads, but with no luck. Tom retired from Royal Roads in 2002, and began a consulting practice working with the several BC universities. Tom is on the board of the Esquimalt Lagoon Stewardship Initiative group, an agency helping to clean up the lagoon and manage it for the future. He is also active on the board of Pacific Centre and the Juan De Fuca Youth Services Association. Tom was a member of the CRD Parks Sea to Sea Greenbelt Advisory Group.

Local adventures have included passage on the Aurora Explorer, a working ship that plies the waters between Campbell River and the BC mainland coast. Tom and Gail speak of sleek pods of orcas, noisy sea lion colonies, misty secret fjords and tiny fishing and logging hamlets. "It's a part of our marine environment that so few people visit. It's spectacular and we feel so fortunate to be able to see some of it," says Tom. Both Gail and Tom have a keen curiosity about all things in and around our oceans: they've taken numerous courses in marine biology though UVic, even exploring below the tide in gumboots by the light of the moon. Travels further afield include Australia and New Zealand and trips to trek and study ancient ruins and architecture in Libya, Turkey, Morocco and Greece, the home of the Olympics. No doubt we will hear more in the future about these international adventurers.

Jenny Eastman, Coordinator of Volunteers

"The larger the shoreline of knowledge, the greater the shoreline of wonder."

North American Proverb

"By continuing to improve our commitment to the conservation of natural areas, we can hold on to the last of the least and the best of the rest."

Phillip M. Hoose

The Nature Conservancy

Is Nature Dangerous?

Each summer we hear reports of wildlife that attack people. Here's a reality check. Each year in North America:

- Cougars attack 3.8 people and kill 0.2
- Dogs attack 222,000 people and kill 20
- Rattlesnakes bite 5,000 people and kill 12
- Bees sting hundreds of thousands of people and kill 40
- Lightning strikes hundreds of people and kills 80
- Cars kill 45,000

Source: Ian Ross. *The Cougar as Peaceful Adversary*. Wild Lands Advocate.