

the Acorn

The Newsletter of the Salt Spring Island Conservancy Number 46, Winter 2011

New Nature Reserve Becomes Reality



The largest land conservation project in the history of the SSI Conservancy will be completed by May this year. We have now secured enough funding to complete the purchase of 320 acres (129 ha) of beautifully forested land on Musgrave Road in the southwest region of Salt Spring Island. This ecologically valuable land adjoins the CRD Mill Farm Regional Park Reserve and will become the southern end of nearly 6,000 acres of continuous greenbelt running half the length of Salt Spring. The land will be permanently protected, becoming the island's newest nature reserve. Once permanent trails on the property are established, they will be open to the public for recreational hiking.

The land is an ecological treasure. It features a 4-acre lake, streams and many small wetlands. About half of the land is

in the Coastal Douglas-fir ecosystem, rarest in the province, which the BC Conservation Data Centre rates as 'Imperiled'. The other half of the land is in a dry Coastal Western Hemlock ecosystem, which has a similar conservation status. With the owner's permission, SSIC biologists have been mapping streams and wetlands and surveying for wildlife and plants. So far they have found 9 species at risk on the property. This background work was supported by funding through the Habitat Conservation Trust Fund, the Government of Canada's Habitat Stewardship Program for Species at Risk and the Canadian Wildlife Federation.

The new reserve will be named after Alvin Indridson, as the project would not have been possible without the vision of this long-time landowner who always wanted to see the land protected. His estate and family have been extremely supportive and have been major financial contributors to the project from the beginning. A portion of the value of the land is being donated to the SSI Conservancy under the Canada Ecological Gifts Program.

The project had been the subject of more than a year of negotiation, grant writing and fundraising behind the scenes. An early commitment of acquisition funds came from BC Nature Federation, which had received a bequest for land protection in the region. In October, we heard that our application for a major grant from the Nature Conservancy of Canada (NCC) was successful. They awarded the project \$777,450 through their federally funded Natural Areas Conservation Program. With a commitment to help with legal costs from the Island Trust Fund, this left us less than 9% of the \$2.6 million project to

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It starts with the owner

Our front-page story announces the creation of the newest 320-acre nature reserve on Salt Spring. This is a milestone for the Salt Spring Island Conservancy. Upon completion, scheduled for the end of April, it will be the largest area we have ever acquired, and the project size, at \$2.6 million, is a record for us. You may be interested in hearing how a project like this comes together.

The creation of a nature reserve, like any other complex undertaking, is the result of the work, skill and contribution of many people and organizations. It takes time – in this case a concerted effort starting over 18 months ago. It requires generous financial contributions from many individual donors and organizations. By the time the deal is completed, many will have had a hand in the process. However, it all starts with one person.

It is the owner who has to have a vision for the land, who has to decide what they would like to see happen with their land, and then who has to be willing to help make their vision a reality. In this case, it started with Alvin Indridson, a businessman, who acquired the land in the 1980s and who grew to appreciate its natural beauty. Over the years, observing the increasing development of Salt Spring Island, he began to nurture the hope that this land might be preserved as a nature reserve, for the benefit of the plants and animals that live there.

When the time came to decide on the long-term disposition of the land, through a fortunate circumstance, the owner's heirs met us in August 2009. In the course of our discussions, they expressed the hope that the land might be preserved, in accordance with the owner's wish, and asked if we could help. They expressed their willingness to work to make it happen. While they were clear that a full donation of the land was not financially feasible, they offered a major financial contribution and sufficient time for us to evaluate the land and explore options to secure the funding for the project. In the end, we were able to help, and the result is the reserve we are able to celebrate today.

Note that the initiative for the reserve did not come from the SSI Conservancy. Some people seem to have the impression that we have large financial resources and can buy up land that is of ecological importance as we wish. I assure you that is not the case. Our financial resources to acquire land are very limited. The focus of our work is to assist landowners on Salt Spring who wish to be good stewards of their own land.

However, the SSI Conservancy does have two resources that proved their worth in this case.

First, our biologists have extensive knowledge of the ecology of Salt Spring Island, i.e. of the plant and animal



species that inhabit the rare bio-geoclimatic zones on Salt Spring Island, resulting from the work over the years for the Federal Government's Habitat Stewardship Program. We know an ecologically important piece of land when we see one. In this case, we recognized the importance of the land, not only in itself but also for its location in connecting to other protected parcels. Fragmentation of habitat is one of the great threats to habitat on Salt Spring and across Canada.

Second, we were able to bring to bear our strategic knowledge of how to structure a transaction of this type and to identify possible sources of funding. Not only was our senior biologist aware of the joint Nature Conservancy of Canada- Federal Government's Natural Areas Protection Program as a possible source, she also provided crucial biological data, based on her years of research, that ensured that Salt Spring was ranked "priority 1" for conservation.

The result was a transaction that was logically structured and properly documented. With the strong financial commitment of the owner, we applied to NCC and received a major funding commitment in October 2010. Another key grant came from the BC Nature Federation (from a bequest). Then, we appealed to you, our supporters. Your support was immediate and extremely gratifying. A very generous grant from Shaw Communications Inc. provided the final push over the top.

We thank you all. It takes everyone's effort to finish, but it all starts with the owner.

~ Ashley Hilliard



Director's Desk

Besides the big, big excitement described in the cover story about the new nature reserve, we had many other good things to celebrate this year.

Thanks to all of you, our annual appeal last fall was the most successful yet. We exceeded our fund raising target of \$15,000 and acquired many new monthly donors. In fact, we went from having 6 monthly donors before the appeal, to having 32 monthly donors by the end of December. I am sure the generous pledge by Mouat's Home Hardware to match the first month of all new monthly donations in the fall appeal was a great stimulus and I particularly want to thank Kevin Bell and recognize Mouat's for their great support this year.

Special thanks go to Kate Richer's Owl class at the Salt Spring Centre School who raised funds to benefit the SSI Conservancy at the school's Winterfest in December. The class made their own display about the Conservancy's work and clearly did a great job, because they raised \$1,180 through donations and from sales of holiday cards. Thank you, students!

In December, SSIC Director Robin Ferry and I were invited to give a presentation to a meeting of the Board of The Land Conservancy (TLC). This is a separate organization from the SSI Conservancy, but as land conservancies, we are all working toward common objectives and TLC is a co-holder of some of our conservation covenants. TLC operates at a province-wide level and holds historic and agricultural properties as well as ecological lands. We were happy to provide an overview of the work of the SSI Conservancy. While we are a smaller organization, we punch well above our weight (in my humble opinion), when it comes to effective local conservation. TLC Board was interested to hear that, as a result of the work of our SSIC biologists on island ecosystems and species at risk, the Nature Conservancy of Canada now designates most of Salt Spring with a Priority 1 conservation status. The TLC Board was also interested to hear about the high level of local volunteer participation in our programs and projects.

And speaking of that last point—on behalf of our Board and staff, I would like to thank every one of those amazing volunteers that contributed so much over the past year. A final tally of our recorded volunteer hours came to well over 6000 hours for the year! We wouldn't be the effective conservation organization we are today without you.

~ Linda Gilkeson



The new Alvin Indridson Reserve

New Nature Reserve

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raise. So we carried on in late fall, writing grant applications and undertaking fundraising from private donors.

With the year running out, we decided to announce the project to the public in early December. The public fundraising campaign was spurred on by generous donations from Frank Arnold of The Pinch Group at Raymond James Ltd. who matched gifts of securities and another anonymous donor who matched gifts of cash. For the next month we received a stream of private donations toward the acquisition. We were then overjoyed to hear that our application to the Shaw Quarterly Grants Program in December was successful. Thanks to this major grant from Shaw Communications, the total project fund is now over the top. We have enough to purchase the property, pay all legal costs, set aside the management endowment fund, carry out initial clean up of a few derelict vehicles and other debris and do the baseline study for a long-term management plan.

The future management costs for the land are well provided for. It is an NCC requirement that such funds be secured for projects they support and that those funds remain tied to that particular property in perpetuity. The budget for the project includes a permanent endowment fund of \$308,000 to pay long-term management costs of the land.

Dedication day is planned for Saturday, April 30th, which is the closing date of the purchase. Mark it on your calendar and plan to help us celebrate!



Savouring What We've Won

Conservation work can be emotionally challenging. "Downers" are everywhere: more species in trouble, more wild places degraded or even lost under concrete, more evidence that people seemingly could care less. So success is to be savoured with joy – and I felt it when news came of the acquisition of the new Alvin Indridson Nature Reserve in the Musgrave outback!

I've tramped around in the area when incoming migratory songbirds sang their odes to spring: warblers, thrushes, flycatchers, vireos, red crossbills, finches, tanagers. My list is 45 species so far. I was lucky enough to watch a family of Red-breasted Sapsuckers feeding in pondside alders one summer day as I looked for frogs and watched tadpoles in mid-metamorphosis – as full of Zen possibilities as watching paint dry.

The four-acre pond on the Reserve, in fact, is special. It harboured more tree frog eggs than I have seen in any other wetland, and has Red-legged Frogs (federally of Special Concern), Long-toed Salamanders and Rough-skinned Newts. Beavers work around the shoreline. A pair of Wood Ducks calls it home, and Ring-necked Ducks, Buffleheads, Mallards and Hooded Mergansers use it. On a summer evening you can see Common Nighthawks (Threatened) calling overhead while hunting insects. Smaller wetlands scattered through the area host butterflies, amphibians and nectar addicts like Rufous Hummingbirds.

The forest is home to various slugs and snails that snag micorrhizal fungi spores on their sticky skin and disperse



Band-tailed Pigeon

them widely, ensuring the continuing good health of the trees dependent on the fungi for nutrients.

As you wander you will arrive at one or more grassy openings where a different suite of wildlife lives. Band-tailed Pigeons feed on berries atop arbutus trees, Black-tailed Deer browse with their fawns, Red Squirrels chatter at your arrival. One day I happened on a Sooty Grouse and her chick in the tall grass of such a meadow. In an instant they flew into trees, camouflaged to invisibility. If there is a law of physics that says two-thirds of an iceberg will always be underwater, there is a law of field biology that more than 99.2% of wild animals will always be out of sight.

I hope you can enjoy the blessings of this green and living treasure as you stroll its byways in coming years.

~ Laura Mathias



Ducks and Kids: Natural Partners

For 10 years Ducks Unlimited Canada ("Ducks") has permitted the SSI Conservancy to use its Ford Lake property for our schools program. Mark Hughes, Ducks' lease holding farmer, has been a patient and interested host. With a \$10,000 grant to the Conservancy this January, Ducks has become a full partner with island youth in the happy work of learning about nature.

It couldn't be a more natural joint venture. DU Canada is lauded internationally for its commitment to conservation of wetlands and the creatures that form and depend on them. It has proved repeatedly that it knows how crucial youth education is to wetland survival. As to the SSI Conservancy, our award-winning nature education programs for school youth prove their merit year after year.

Thank you, DU: our kids and their teachers and parents couldn't be happier!

And that's not all. The Hamber Foundation, managing the legacy of a former BC Lieutenant Governor and Chancellor of UBC, also has awarded a grant for our 2011

schools program. Finally, our consistent and cherished long-time supporter, the Salt Spring Island Foundation, is funding our pilot project with Kindergarten and Grade 1 students.

Two new members of the Schools Committee, David Paine and Jean Wilkinson, both with kindergarten teaching experience, will help develop that aspect of our work.

The 2011 program starts in March with Grade 8 people learning about marine environments. In April/May Grade 6/7s will study Ford Lake ecosystems. Burgoyne Bay becomes the animated classroom for Grade 4/5 students in May/June.

We are always looking for new volunteers. A bit of training will make you comfortable, you are sure to have a good time, and we certainly will make our gratitude clear. Please call Susan at 250-538-0318 or our school coordinator Kris Fullbrook at 250-653-9870 to volunteer. Or arrange to join us for a trial day in the field with the kids before committing.

~ Jean Gelwicks



In Beauty We Walk

Beauty is the great equalizer, felt by all, understood by none. Feeling beauty, we try to understand it, each with the means in which we place our faith, each moving toward wisdom but none approaching the end of seeking.

The way of art is not mine, nor the way of philosophy, revelation, or pure feeling. I am at home in nature. Along her paths beauty is strewn abundantly. Markers of insight and awe kindle in experience and are blown alight again in memory. There is a Navajo chant with these words:

In beauty I walk
With beauty before me I walk
With beauty behind me I walk
With beauty around me I walk
It has become beauty again
With beauty it is finished.

The trail has led me this far:

This is the beauty of form and color: the glow of rose quartz on its velvet pedestal, the grace of a flower in its vase, the captured beetle's iridescent elytra.

This is the beauty of the thing in its place: the dawn fox at its den, the shore pine on its cliff, the limpet in the golden seaweed.

And this is the beauty of being: the scarlet leaf that falls and falls apart and rises aloft again to cool the glen where the deer fern grows and in growing splits and splits again the rock that in the alchemy of browning leaves becomes the soil from which another tree arises, its scarlet leaves falling and falling apart.

The beauties of appearing, belonging and relating can be severed by our sharpened minds but in truth are one as the leopard's dappled coat is one with the shifting light at the tree's heart, as the wood duck's gaudy excess is made lovely in shadowed pondside coverts. Enveloping, permeating leopard and acacia, drake and dimpled water, are all of creation: bedrock, weather, soil, companion creatures and time. This is the grandest beauty of all, beyond the reach of esthete and philosopher, making all things out of all things, equal, indispensable.

When you next walk in woods, think of Wendell Berry's poem of thanks:



Feb. 26 Saturday - David Suzuki. In a special appearance, Dr. David Suzuki will lead a public discussion at Fulford Community Hall on February 26, following a screening of *Force of Nature: the David Suzuki Movie*. The documentary is a sort of 'last lecture', which he describes as – "a distillation of my life and thoughts, my legacy, what I want to say before I die".

We hope you will join David for what is sure to be a moving and inspiring discussion.

Tickets are \$20, available in advance at Salt Spring Books. Doors open at 5:30 pm. Film begins 6:30 pm. David will be on hand to sign books before and after the event. A portion of the proceeds from ticket sales will be donated to the Salt Spring Island Conservancy.

In The Peace Of Wild Things

When despair for the world grows in me,
and I wake in the night at the least sound
in fear of what my life and my children's lives may be,
I go and lie down where the drake wood duck
rests his beauty on the water,
and the great blue heron feeds.

I come into the peace of wild things
who do not tax their lives with forethought
of grief. I come into the presence of still water
and I feel above me the day-blind stars
waiting with their light. For a time

~ Bob Weeden



Alien Plant Invaders – a Growing Problem

Salt Spring Island has ideal growing conditions for a wide variety of plants from many parts of the world, which makes gardening here a joy. However, some non-native species that are sown or planted in our region have few or no natural pests or predators, and become invasive.

Invasive plants are defined as alien species that have the potential to create undesirable or detrimental impacts on humans, animals or ecosystems. Invasive plants grow rapidly, spread quickly, are tolerant of tough conditions and can form dense patches. They may displace native species and disrupt natural ecological processes in parks and natural areas. Many plants that are easily managed or even difficult to grow in other regions can become aggressive invaders in our mild climate.

World-wide, invasive species are the second most significant threat to biodiversity (topped only by habitat loss), and seriously upset natural plant communities. They can cost economies millions of dollars as they negatively impact range and pasture lands, forestry operations, recreation opportunities, and water quality.

While you may be managing some invasive plants within your property, they can easily spread to natural areas beyond, and create significant problems. It's also important to consider what may happen if you move or become less able or willing to continually control them in the future.

Gardeners and property-owners can help stop the spread of invasive plants in many ways:

- Grow native plants in your gardens, as they are naturally adapted to the local environment and mostly non-invasive.
- Learn to identify species that are invasive in your area, and do not purchase or grow them. Note that many plants which are difficult to grow in other regions flourish here and quickly get out of control.
- If you see invasive species for sale in nurseries, ask the manager to stop selling them.
- Be suspicious of non-native plants that are promoted as “fast spreaders,” “vigorous self-seeders” or “ground covers.”
- Consider removing invasive plants and replacing them with non-invasive alternatives.
- Clip off spent flowers, seedpods and berries of known invasive plants to prevent reproduction and stop their spread to other areas by animals and people.
- Carefully dispose of yard waste, seeds of invasive species and hanging baskets into a properly functioning compost pile or by drying them out sufficiently to kill vegetative parts.
- Use wildflower seed mixes with caution as many contain species that may be invasive in your location. Read the label.

-Contain creeping plants by growing them in containers.

-Talk with friends and neighbours about the impacts of invasive plants and the use of suitable alternatives. Trade only non-invasive plants and seeds.

-Avoid spreading the seeds of flowers from roadsides and other disturbed areas, as these are often invasive species.

-Clean footwear, equipment, tools and vehicles before leaving an area that is infested with invasive plants. Many parks and nature reserves have been negatively impacted by seeds unknowingly brought in by hikers and visitors.

-Access information and resources in “Grow Me Instead” at www.invasiveplantcouncilbc.ca, and at www.for.gov.bc.ca/hra/Plants/index.htm, www.coastalinvasiveplants.com, and www.greatplantpicks.org.

New Initiatives on Salt Spring Island

The Salt Spring Island Conservancy Stewardship Committee is developing a SWAT group to tackle the problem of invasive plants, and volunteers are welcome! Residents are also encouraged to report any plants they suspect are new to the island and/or spreading aggressively by contacting Linda at linda@saltspringsoapworks.com

A resource binder of information about invasive plants is being prepared for the Garden Club Lending Library by the SSIC Stewardship Committee and another copy is being kept for Committee and Conservancy members' use.

“Get Rid of Gorse” campaign –The SSIC Stewardship Committee is working with Mainroad Contracting and the Ministry of Highways to identify and remove gorse from roadsides, before it becomes as pervasive on the island as broom is now. We ask landowners to remove patches growing on their properties, and to help identify gorse sites by contacting Jen Healey at jonandjenhealey@yahoo.com.

PARC, the CRD and the Salt Spring Island Conservancy are sponsoring a free Drop-off Day in late April or early May beside the Rainbow Road Pool, where invasive plant material will be collected and chipped for high-temperature composting. So please take the opportunity this spring to remove these problem plants from your gardens, dispose of them responsibly, and replace them with non-invasive alternatives.

~ Jean Wilkinson and the Stewardship Committee



SSI Conservancy Scholarship



Alvin's lake at the new Alvin Indridson Reserve

In the spring of 2000 a member suggested that we give a scholarship to a GISS student. Maggie Allison, of GISS Career Counseling, was very helpful in circulating notices and collecting applications. By 2001 we were ready to offer the scholarship.

Originally we thought we would award the selected student \$2000, to be paid in two installments. A grade 11 applicant would be given \$1000 upon graduation from grade 11. If the student got on-the-job experience in some outdoor/environmental field that summer, and completed grade 12 successfully, we would award the second \$1000.

This wasn't feasible, mostly because grade 11 students typically don't apply for scholarships, and partly because getting appropriate summer jobs at age 17 years of age is hard. We switched to what is now our basic format: a \$1000 scholarship available each year at graduation to youth just completing grade 12, who have a serious interest in environmental stewardship. SSIC judges the applications and decides whether an award is to be made.

The original idea was to fund the scholarship via a spring birdathon. Before that could get under way, longtime member Marilyn Thadden Dexter gave a donation ensuring sure funding for several years. The gift was a memorial for her late husband who had very strong environmental ideals. Hence the name: the W. David and Marilyn Thadden Dexter Scholarship.

Most recently we have changed the name to the SSI Conservancy scholarship, though Marilyn still donates to it.
~ Deborah Miller

2001- Winner Jessica Courtier Jessica finished her BSc. which she started in Environmental Studies and then switched to Natural Resource Management and biology. She is now doing short term contracts such as working with the Ministry of the Environment in Prince George on sturgeon and small lake surveys using radio tags.

2002- no winner

2003- Cory Marshall. Cory finished his BSc. No further information is available at this time.

2004- no winner

2005- Hannah Munro- Hannah completed 2 summers of field work in the Aleutians studying bird populations. She finished her Bachelor degree and is currently in the final session of her Masters at Memorial University in St. John's. She is writing her thesis on seabirds and she recently received a NSERC grant (a top award for science). She will be doing a PhD but she hasn't chosen a university yet. She is interested in doing her research on the interaction between animal, plant and soil communities.

2006- no winner

2007- Fiona and Heather Munro Heather is in her final semester at Queen's. She is completing a civil engineering and environmental degree. She will be doing a Masters at Simon Fraser in Resource and Environment Management.

Fiona is finishing her degree at Queen's in Environmental Science and Geography. She will do her Masters in the same area at St. John's.

2008- no winner

2009- Kelsey Mech Kelsey is studying in the field of Ecology at UVIC. She has completed 2 summers with Greenpeace. She is now in her second year.

2010- Ali Jones. She has begun her Bachelor of Science degree with a major in Biology and Environmental Studies at UVIC.

Rock Wrens on Salt Spring Island

I had a delightful experience this summer, observing a pair of rock wrens (*Salpinctes obsoletus*) on Salt Spring Island. I certainly wasn't expecting to see my first Rock Wren when I was birding that morning, as Salt Spring is outside their normal range. (See Notes.)

June 23 promised to be a pleasant day, beginning with a lovely pink sunrise and clear skies. I was enjoying the first songs of Olive-sided Flycatchers as they reached me from the forest near and far, when I heard a voice that was new to me. I immediately began to track the unknown singer, who sang a wide variety of phrases, repeated three to six times. The song riffs ranged in quality from dry, electrical, well pronounced phrases, to soft bell-like trills. Intrigued, I searched and finally saw the singer perched on top of a boulder. A Rock Wren! There he was, head thrown back, long curved beak open to the sky, with throat feathers that pushed out and vibrated, as his song rang over the landscape. As is often the case with wrens, I marveled at the volume and force of sound from such a small bird.

Soon after I found the male, a second Rock Wren, I assumed to be female, flew up from the grass and began to explore the crevasses and gaps between the nearby boulders. The male flew towards her and she joined him in the air, where they tussled in flight, fell to the ground and disappeared in the tall grass for about five seconds. The male flew out first, landed on a rock and resumed his song. The female appeared soon after, perched on a rock, preened and bobbed up and down with deep knee bends, characteristic of the species.

I watched them for some time and saw that the male had many different perches he sang from, which he visited on rotation. His territory was oval shaped and covered approximately two hectares. In between singing bouts the male made short forays into the grass to feed. I chose a position, near one of his rock perches, sat down and waited for him to show up. On closer inspection of this rock, I saw that it was well decorated with his droppings, which increased my confidence that I had picked a good location for a close encounter. I didn't have to wait long before he appeared and immediately began to sing. After delivering his delightful concert, he flew down to the ground within eight feet of me and began to preen. He cocked his head to look at me and seemed undisturbed by my presence. He soon began to forage amongst the rocks. It was wonderful to be so close to this little fireball of a bird as he went about his business.

The following evening, I observed the pair as they walked, hopped and climbed amongst the boulders. This was the last

time I saw both birds together and I wondered if this was because the female was tight on a nest, hidden somewhere in the rocks. The only record of Rock Wrens nesting in our area was from 1970, when a pair successfully raised five young in Genoa Bay near Duncan, which, as the Rock Wren flies, is not so far from Salt Spring.

My interest in Rock Wrens continued to grow as I read more about them. I was not surprised to learn that they nest in cavities or crevices among rocks.

It was their curious behavior of building pavements or walkways that really caught my imagination. They build walkways with flat stones and other objects which lead from their nest site to the entrance of their nest cavity and sometimes beyond. The nest itself may also sit on a base built of rocks.

The following list has a surprising variety of objects collected by a pair to build their

nest base and pavement on Farralon Island in California: "1,665 objects including 492 small stones and 1 safety pin, 2 pieces wire, 2 pieces of scissors, 10 pieces of battery zinc, 2 fishhooks, 2 pieces of glass, 1 piece of leather, 4 copper tacks, 2 pieces of limestone, 4 pieces of plaster, 12 pieces of shingles, 9 bits of abalone shells, 20 bits of mussel shells, 106 nails, 227 bits of flat iron, and 769 pieces of rabbit, fish, and bird bones." (BNA, Online). Both sexes are involved in these constructions, but it is the female alone who builds the nest cup made of grass, wood, bark, moss and hair, which she lines with rootlets, hair, wool and spider silk.

I returned on June 29 and again on July 15, with the hope that I might see the adults carrying food into a nest site, but alas I didn't, although the male still sang on territory. The private property was a high elevation location with an open habitat of grass, rock outcroppings and, to the Rock Wren's approval, a large boulder field. With my new understanding of what to look for and a growing curiosity about a possible nest, I searched the boulder field to find external evidence of a pavement leading into a nest cavity. I didn't have time to cover the entire area and, unfortunately, I came up empty-handed.

I tore myself away that day with the awareness that it would be my last visit until late August, as I was heading off for a much needed summer holiday. The bond I had developed with these characters, as well as my interest in whether they had nested, led me to think of the wrens often while I was away. I made one last visit on August 30 and found one ragged, molting adult, foraging and preening in

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Two Good Books

Why Birds Sing, by David Rothenberg, 2005

Naming Nature, by Carol Kaesuk Yoon, 2009

I admit it: I'm a sucker for new ideas, or new patterns for old ideas, especially when they are packaged as books I can leave by my easy chair.

Take Rothenberg's book. After listening to a few million birds sing during the past 75 years I know only one thing for sure: I love to hear them. Maybe, through delight, attentiveness and repetition, I know a few other things, too. Like: birds that sing are mostly males, and they sing mostly in spring when growing daily light sends hormones a'journeying in the blood. Like: males sing to be heard by others of their kind - other males that need reminding of boundaries, females that just might be clients of e-harmony. Stuff like that.

Well, stuff like that is mostly true, but far from the whole fascinating truth. Rothenberg - philosopher, naturalist, clarinetist - weaves all three perspectives into his experiences with bird song, his questions about them, his suggested answers. Why is there such an immense variety in bird song? Why do some Poor Johnny One-Notes have just one song, while others have hundreds? Most bird calls (alarm calls, reminders that "I'm here" etc.) are simple and innate, while most songs are complicated and learned: why? Why do some birds learn to sing only during a few days or weeks of life, while others learn new songs as long as they live? How do you explain dueting, and why O why do many birds mimic everything from nearby birds to barnyard sounds to human speech? (Rothenberg relates a story that cracks me up. Two biologists studying captive starlings gave 5 of them the free run of the lab with all its hubbub and human banter. One starling needed treatment for an infected claw, and while being held, struggling, it screamed "I have a question! I have a question!")

Explore this book yourself. See whether you agree with the author that birds sing for all the reasons study can prove - but also just because they can, and enjoy it.

Rothenberg writes really well. Carol Kaesuk Yoon's work is an absolute joy. "Naming Nature" offers ideas that need some mulling over, but you hardly notice the complexities because her writing is so witty, informal, and right on.

Every human wants to find order in the world, and everyone has the equipment to do it. The "equipment" is a specific part of the brain, the temporal lobe, where the urgent need to live amidst order is located. The infant's temporal lobe seems to be a bit like a spreadsheet with rows and columns laid out but empty. Thereafter everything we sense in our maturing experience gets stuffed into place according to the mind's internal logic. The result is the *umwelt*, the order we find in our experienced world, the deep pattern we cling to

so tenaciously.

Through two million years of human prehistory the images we packed into our *umwelt* were the animals and plants that filled every child's personal world. Anthropologists first discovered the *umwelt* when they realized that in all indigenous societies people named the living things around them and put them in an orderly relationship (very much the same relationship being used by all societies). Plants are different from animals, trees are different from grasses, fish are different from furry animals, insects and birds are different even if they both might fly, etc. At a finer level are differences that may distinguish food from poison (mushrooms), weak from strong herbal medicines, or good from bad bow wood.

When Carl Linnaeus began his astounding project of naming and classifying all living things (1730) this instinctive *umwelt* propelled every decision. Sure, he measured everything he could and described every detail of smell or appearance, but gut feeling was final arbiter. *Umwelt*, binomial names, and endless comparisons of ever-growing hordes of new species were the materials from which the new science of taxonomy was built. *Umwelt*, however, assumes a static array of creatures. Why shouldn't it? Humans through the ages had no way of conceiving that life forms evolve. The robin of grandmother memory was the same as the robin of granddaughter experience, and ever would be.

Until Darwin came along a century after Linnaeus and upset the apple cart with his discovery that life forms do change, albeit (he thought) over thousands of years. Oddly enough, old-think continued to control taxonomic thought for another century after Darwin, each classifier nodding in agreement with the idea of evolution while still struggling to make every newly discovered form fit the ancient *umwelt* order. Even taxonomy by the numbers - the 20th Century fashion of assigning numbers to every feature and "adding them up" to determine the proper hole in which to put the pigeon - stumbled because weight had to be assigned to differences (if two flower specimens differ in the number of petals but have the same number of leaflets per stem, should petals or leaflets prevail?). Again, trot out the good old *umwelt*.

When Linus Pauling and followers discovered in 1950 that the chemical makeup of DNA traced genetic lineages, the end of *umwelt* loomed. Molecular taxonomy showed that people are no more than abnormal gorillas, so that's the way it is. They also concluded, as Yoon puts it, that "(We) are more closely related to the mushrooms on our pizza than the mushrooms are to the tomatoes beside them." Weighting still presented some problems, however. Then a guy named Hennig discovered that if you only use shared genetic novelties to decide when forms are related, instead of

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worrying about their similarities, you would put the pigeon on the right branch of the evolutionary tree. "Cladistics," the system is called, after the Greek word for branch. The most startling discovery of cladistics is that there are no fish. The ancient, unchallenged and commonsensical term "fish" doesn't refer to a related group. What we now think we know for sure is that lungfish and cows are more closely related than either is to salmon. Put that on your drying rack and smoke it! Death to the umwelt!

Well, not quite. For one thing, the instinctive relationships we find in nature are right far more often than wrong. For another, we still have the powerful inborn urge to organize our world so we can get along in it; we don't throw umwelt into the blue recycle box, we populate it with the huge variety of things we make, buy, and use to measure our worth. Youngsters today recognize, name, and remember far more brand logos than tree or animal names. But kids still have the innate urge and ability to order nature, as the fascination of generation after generation of kids aged from 3 to 8 with dinosaurs, which they rarely encounter except in virtual life, illustrates.

Yoon's advice? Render unto Caesar that which is Caesar's, but keep for yourself that which belongs to humanity. Encourage scientists to refine evolutions' pathways; they have fun, and we are all fascinated. Allow umwelt's partnership with nature to be the means to a universal, comfortable, bonding empathy with the world, the base from which science's discoveries and caring stewardship can rise. We balance the two realms every day with ease. At exactly the same time we "know" that the sun rises and sets, we "know" that it does no such thing. Just so, we can tightly braid a dual relation to nature, one strand of upwellings from umwelt, the other of rays from the high-hung lamps of reason. Why not trash umwelt and rely on science alone? Because the umwelt encourages and orders everyone's personal sensory experience. Science belittles experience, replacing it with abstractions inaccessible except through faith in someone else's reason.

~ Bob Weeden



Rock Wrens continued from page 8

the same location. There was no sign of a second adult or juveniles.

Unfortunately, the Breeding Bird Atlas won't receive a Confirmed Breeding Code this year for this rare rock wren occurrence, but perhaps next year they will be back. I certainly will keep an eye out for their return.

Notes:

In Canada, Rock Wrens breed mainly in the southern interior of B.C. and Alberta. In B.C. they concentrate in the Okanagan and Similkameen river valleys. Breeding has also been recorded at Ashcroft, 150 Mile House, Williams Lake and Perkins Peak in the western Chilcotin. Most migrate southward from these areas, which are at the northern limits of their breeding range and there are records of individuals who have remained as residents.

On the coast, the first and only breeding record was in 1970, from Genoa Bay near Duncan, where a pair successfully reared five young. Non-breeding records from the coast

include one individual seen in 1988 on Mt. Tuam, Salt Spring Island and one bird at McMicking Point, Victoria in 2004. The Victoria Natural History Society Annual Bird Report has records that include, one seen at Island View Beach, Victoria in 2005 and another individual also at Island View Beach, 2006-07.

~ Karen Ferguson



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