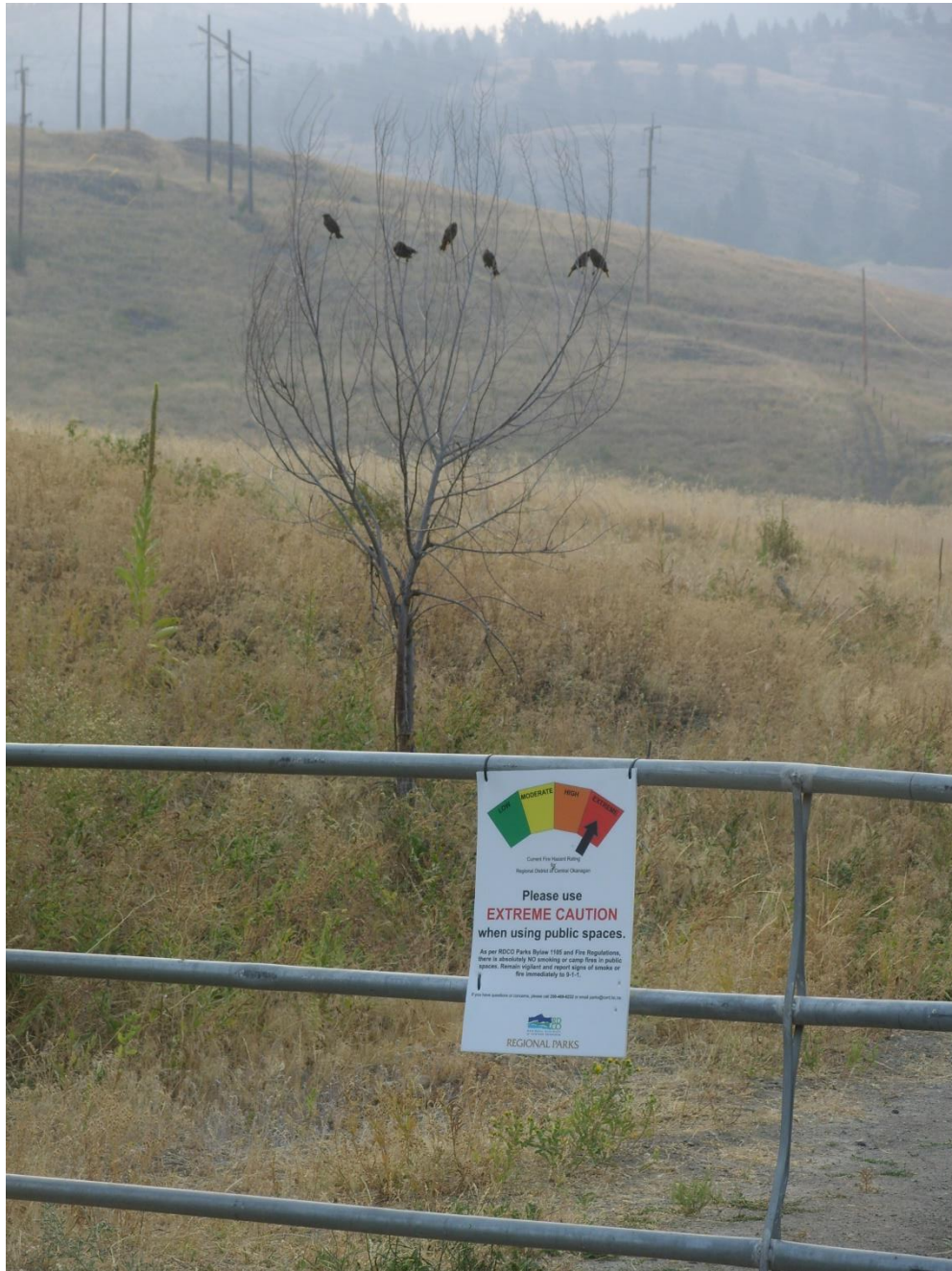


Friends of Black Mountain/sntsk'il'ntən Regional Park

September 2017 Newsletter



Hiking was suspended for the hot, hazy summer!

Squeamish about Slithery and Slimy Things?

By Carol Millar

I confess I'm a bit squeamish about amphibians and reptiles. However, those slithery and slimy things are unique and fascinating in their own way and deserve a little respect. Seldom seen, but in the grasses and under rocks, many reptiles and amphibians make Black Mountain their home. The four I have chosen to write about are all blue listed, that is vulnerable due primarily to habitat loss.

A few years ago, I was sitting on a southern facing slope in Bertram Creek Park and a little Western Skink poked its head out of a hole less than an arm's length away. I think it was more nervous about me than I was about it. It slithered out then retreated back several times, never really abandoning its hole altogether. The sky blue of the tail was very striking and its little front legs useless as far as I could see. This is one lizard of which I had no fear. Upon reading about the Western Skink, I determined that the one I saw was young as it still had its bright blue tail. Interestingly, if grabbed by a predator it will waggle its tail then eject it right off its body. The ejected tail will then freakishly thrash about for a while afterwards, perhaps to surprise and detain its predator. And, it will grow its tail back! Although I haven't seen a skink on Black Mountain, it has just the right type of grassland terrain where it might be found.



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I don't know if the unusually high water and flooding this past spring changed some amphibian patterns, but I have twice seen Western Painted Turtles trying to cross the four lane Gordon Drive by the Thompson Marsh. One was unsuccessful and the second was helped across by my partner as we were cycling along this stretch of road. Their striking yellow stripes along their appendages and the gorgeous red and yellow detailing on their underbelly, called the plastron, would impress Fabergé (artist of bejeweled and painted eggs). The carapace or upper part of its shell is dark green, no doubt to fit into its pond environment. It is the only native pond turtle in B.C..

A Western Painted Turtle's mating habits are amusing. When a female turtle gives the 'okay' by swimming quickly across a pond, several males will race to catch up and the first male to reach her will face her and even pat her head with its front claws. With a twinkle in their eyes, they sink to the bottom of the pond to mate. If the female is in the mood but doesn't get a reaction from a male, she might just chase after one herself – no point in just being a wall flower.



With the grasslands and talus slopes of Black Mountain, it is not surprising that there are a few snakes living here. Although I've not seen the large Gopher Snake, one was spotted by a couple members of our board. This snake is similar to a Western Rattler with the same body bulk and distinctive markings but does not have the large triangular head of its poisonous cousin and of course, not its tail rattle. Its head is small and sports a black line from its jaw to its eyes and across the head. It is the longest snake in B.C. reaching from 1 to 2 metres in length. It

is not venomous, but pretends to be by waving its tail in the dry grasses when threatened, giving off a rattling sound like a rattle snake. In case that doesn't scare you off it can also hiss and snort like a bull, hence another common name for the snake – Bull Snake. Although they primarily eat rodents they are known to eat insects, lizards, birds and their eggs. How do they get to the bird nests, you ask? They can climb trees!



Let's put that thought out of our minds and move on to the Great Basin Spadefoot Toad. This little hopper, uniquely designed to survive in dry grasslands habitat beside ephemeral ponds, has been heard (a low pitched clacking) in one area of Black Mountain. Ephemeral ponds are those that dry up mid-summer and so are not conducive to most amphibians. It gets its name from the long, spade shaped, digging foot it has on the end of each leg, to burrow into loose soil in the hot weather or to hibernate. A gelatinous gel also helps protect it from the heat. These hardy little toads can stand water temperatures up to 34 degrees Celsius. If pond waters evaporate early, Spadefoots have been known to clamour out of the pond in a desperate attempt to get into a burrow even eating others of their kind who might be in their way. Another hazard they have to face are deep cattle footprints at the water's edge in which the little toads can fall into and then not be able to climb out. With a donation from the Central Okanagan Naturalists' Society, fencing around the one ephemeral pond will help protect these little toads.



The more you learn about the different reptiles and amphibians, the more you respect their uniqueness and vulnerability. Humans are far more of a threat to them than they are to us.

All of the facts in this article were taken from the B.C. Ministry of the Environment, *Wildlife Atlas of Species at Risk* and can be accessed by going to:

<http://www.env.gov.bc.ca/okanagan/esd/atlas/list.html>

Image of Gopher Snake:

<http://www.californiaherps.com/snakes/images/pccateniferch2.jpg>

Image of Spadefoot Toad

<http://whatdoanimaleat.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/This-picture-is-showing-Spadefoot-toads-look-like-4.jpg>

Image of Western Skink by Dr. Gavin Hanke of the Royal BC Museum

<https://www.google.ca/url?sa=i&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=images&cd=&cad=rja&uact=8&ved=0ahUKEwjByNqty9fVAhUMwWMKHf5ACKUQjRwIBw&url=http%3A%2F%2Fstaff.royalbcmuseum.bc.ca%2F2015%2F06%2F25%2Fthink-skinks%2F&psig=AFQjCNFt-4IU7MfEliO2br 4 d2i3YBIQ&ust=1502829773160720>

Image of Western Turtle

<http://northcolumbia.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/PaintedTurtle.jpg>

Bluebird Box Initiative

by C. Millar

Inspired by Doreen and Lou Wierenga's enthusiasm for having a blue bird trail (line of bluebird boxes), the board decided to have new boxes made and put up along the new fence near the Swainson gate entrance to the park. In early March, when there was still lots of snow on the ground, word went out that the bluebirds had migrated back into the area. Optimistically, a few board members tramped a couple of kilometres along the fence line putting up the twelve boxes that Bob Would had generously made for us.

Our initial enthusiasm was dampened by circumstances beyond our control. Cattle got into the park through gates that were left open and several of our boxes were knocked down. What to do, what to do? Get better gate latches, hire a cowboy to herd the cattle out? This problem has yet to be solved.

Three of the bluebird boxes tell the story of our trials and tribulations this year. In early April we sighted both Mountain and Western Bluebirds near the nesting boxes. Western Bluebirds were seen popping in and out of box #1 on April 17th. A couple of weeks later, a Western Bluebird egg was spotted in a nest. Three weeks after that three baby Western Bluebirds hatched. Then disaster fell. Just four days later this box was discovered on the ground and all the babies were dead. We put up the box again at a higher height and by June 10th Tree Swallows were nesting in the box. Two weeks later two Tree Swallow eggs were in the nest and eleven days after that one baby bird was visible. By August 7 the nest was empty, so hopefully the one fledgling survived.

The old box beside the new box #4 showed promise in the spring. On April 2nd, we discovered a Western Bluebird inside on a nest. Three weeks later, there were six Western Bluebird eggs in the nest. On May 8th, the mother was sitting on the eggs in the nest when checked. But, by May 20th, the box was down as was the new box. We reinstalled *the* new box at a height of about five feet. By June 23rd, there were three Tree Swallow eggs in a nest in this box. But, by July 7th the box was again knocked down. It has been distressing for some of us who are feeling responsible for the deaths of all these birds. Most of the boxes have been left down until we can solve some of these growing pains.

Box #7 had some activity in it. On May 28th, we found three Western Bluebird eggs in a nest here. By June 10th, the box was down and we discovered six broken blue eggs on the ground. The box was reinstalled at a greater height and more Western Bluebirds built a nest in it. On June 23 there were six Western Bluebird eggs and by July 7th the birds had fledged. On July 18th we saw the family of bluebirds flying around the nest, resting on the fence and seemed to be doing well. Thank goodness! Mostly we had disaster, but at least there was one success story.



Fran Pattison's Bird Count this Year on Black Mountain



Fran spotted 62 species in all

Ducks, Geese & Waterfowl Mallard, Green-winged Teal	Tits, Chickadees & Titmice Black-capped Chickadee
New World Quail California Quail	Nuthatches Pygmy Nuthatch
Pheasants, Grouse & Allies Ring-necked Pheasant	Wrens House Wren
Hérons, Egrets & Bitterns Great Blue Heron	Kinglets Ruby-crowned Kinglet
New World Vultures Turkey Vulture	Thrushes & Allies Western Bluebird, Mountain Bluebird, Townsend's Solitaire, American Robin
Hawks, Eagles & Kites Northern Harrier, Sharp-shinned Hawk, Cooper's Hawk, Bald Eagle, Red-tailed Hawk	Mockingbirds & Thrashers Gray Catbird
Rails, Gallinules & Coots American Coot	Starlings European Starling
Plovers & Lapwings Killdeer	Wagtails & Pipits American Pipit
Sandpipers & Allies Spotted Sandpiper	Waxwings Cedar Waxwing
Pigeons & Doves Mourning Dove	New World Warblers Orange-crowned Warbler, Nashville Warbler, Yellow-rumped Warbler
Woodpeckers Red-naped Sapsucker, Northern Flicker	Buntings & New World Sparrows Chipping Sparrow, Dark-eyed Junco, White- crowned Sparrow, Vesper Sparrow, Savannah Sparrow, Spotted Towhee
Falcons & Caracaras American Kestrel, Merlin	Cardinals & Allies Western Tanager, Lazuli Bunting
Tyrant Flycatchers Willow Flycatcher, Say's Phoebe, Western Kingbird, Eastern Kingbird	Troupials & Allies Red-winged Blackbird, Western Meadowlark, Brewer's Blackbird, Brown-headed Cowbird, Bullock's Oriole
Crows, Jays & Magpies Black-billed Magpie, Clark's Nutcracker, American Crow, Common Raven	Finches, Euphonias & Allies House Finch, American Goldfinch
Swallows Northern Rough-winged Swallow, Tree Swallow, Violet-green Swallow, Barn Swallow	

