Christmas Bird Count 2016

We have had our share of bad weather this winter, but December 30th turned out to be a lovely day to count birds. It was sunny and the temperature was between 4 and 6 degrees. Unfortunately there was a stiff northwest wind blowing, which meant our usual teams that count by boat couldn’t go out far from sheltered water. As a result no alcids, or shorebirds, other than black oystercatchers were reported.

Thirty-five people counted this year and recorded 60 species, considered an average year. There were few “high counts” of any species, but also only a few of the usual species were not seen. There were no swans this year, although some have been seen since. 2 Eurasian Wigeons were seen as well as 51 of the more common American Wigeons. Marti saw 6 Virginia Rails, which is unusual and David and Andrew spotted an American Dipper. This is a rare bird for Lasqueti and has only been seen once before on a Christmas Bird count. They frequent fast flowing rivers and can often bee seen along the Englishman or Qualicum River, but this one was on a beach. No one saw a Hairy Woodpecker, a Bewicks Wren or a Hermit Thrush, but there were 6 hawks, lots of little Pacific Wrens and 12 stalwart Anna’s Hummingbirds.

I have to admit that our group was not as diligent as we have been in past years. We found a sun-warmed deck to sit on and spent a long time watching at least 3 Humpback Whales feeding between Lasqueti and Parksville.

This year, the Audubon Christmas Bird Count mobilized over 72,000 volunteer bird counters in more than 2,500 locations across the Western Hemisphere. The Audubon Christmas Bird Count utilizes the power of volunteers to track the health of bird populations at a scale that scientists could never accomplish alone. Data compiled on Lasqueti will record every individual bird and bird species seen in a specified area, contributing to a vast citizen science network that continues a tradition stretching back more than 100 years.

Another way to contribute as a citizen scientist is through www.ebird.org. I would really encourage other birders on Lasqueti to record their birding lists on this web site. It’s easy to do and not only keeps track of the birds you see, but allows you to see what birds others are seeing and what is likely to be around. Go to the website and check it out. You may become addicted to it, like I have. (Sheila Ray)

Lasqueti Island Nature Conservancy

linking people to nature on Lasqueti and surrounding islands

Issue #10, Fall 2016

Membership $5.00 annually
Donations to support our work are tax deductible
LINC, 11 Main Road, Lasqueti Island, BC V0R 2J0
250-333-8754 linc@lasqueti.ca
Charity BN #84848 5595
Several years ago, marine scientist Ramona de Graaf came to Lasqueti Island to hold a weekend workshop and introduce Lasquetians to a fascinating group of little fish called forage fish. These fish form the backbone of the marine food web in the Salish Sea, feeding on plankton and being eaten in turn by predatory fish, birds and mammals. Since that first workshop, the species we have been studying here on Lasqueti are Surf smelt and Pacific sand lance. Both species are drawn to our undisturbed, coarse sand and gravel shores. With magnetic attraction, they return here every year from the beginning of November through to the end of March to spawn, leaving their embryos buried in the surface sand and gravel just below the high tide mark.

Ramona, with her contagious enthusiasm for her field of study, easily convinced many of us to join her as volunteers for beach sampling expeditions and LIFFT was born!


More workshops followed and we learned how to set out a transect line, observe and record essential data, operate an Egyptian water level, and collect and preserve substrate samples. Using our local knowledge, we brainstormed and chose our beautiful and sometimes remote study beaches. Many thanks to those who allowed us to cross their private pieces of paradise to get to those beaches with difficult access.

We learned how to effectively organize ourselves, ordered more sieve kits which Ramona made herself, and formed up teams for collecting samples every two weeks over the summer and every three weeks throughout the winter for the next 2 years. LIFFT examined 13 beaches that were accessible down bone-jarring gravel roads, slippery trails, along boggy lanes and around treacherous headlands. You may have seen us out alone or in pairs or small groups; wind, rain, sleet, snow or sun, we were out there at low tide, with our sieve kits, buckets, data sheets, measuring tapes, dedication and optimism! What a team!

Thanks to Sue W. for her weekly e-mails, sending us tide charts and alerting us to when it was possible to collect our samples. We are grateful to Andrew F. for securing a grant from the Pacific Salmon Foundation and administering it to help us cover our basic expenses. Many thanks to Marie-Ange F. for her work in examining many samples under the microscope, seeking out fertilized embryos. Special kudos to Jodi Ayers and LIFFT friends for making the long trek on foot, along the shore at low tide, over slippery cobbles, and around the headlands to Marshall Beach with a pack of heavy equipment, to take sediment samples, enabling this very productive forage fish beach to be included in our study. Thanks to Ian G. for safely taking us in his boat, during the winter, to Marshall and other remote beaches. Through a chain of LIFFT members and friends, and thanks to Wendy S. and Susan M., all of our samples and data sheets made their way to Ramona’s home in Bamfield. Here, she examined our beach sediments for embryos, looked at sediment grain size and other variables, and entered our data for analysis.

Over the years, I heard over and over again what a wonderful activity we had committed ourselves to - we just had to go down to the beach, no matter the weather! Here’s what some of our fishy friends have to say about their experiences:

Paul St. Pierre: “Volunteering with LIFFT and learning the research protocol, I strengthened my commitments to the environment and local ecosystem. In the teamwork of gathering field samples, I became acquainted with other environmentalists and discovered beaches I had not visited before. Only after the project was completed and the data published did I
become aware of the scope of the research, and the importance of surf smelt and Pacific sand lance reproduction in the wider marine environment. Thus, LIFFT clarified my feeling of community on Lasqueti and made me more aware of my interconnection with sea birds, salmon, humpback and killer whales, and sea lions.”

Jessica Sachs: “It’s so easy to feel helpless in the face of so much disruption to our ocean environment. Participating in the Lasqueti Island forage fish study helped me feel like I was a little part of the solution. As Connie explained to us, researchers need to understand where these foundation species spawn before they can develop and propose effective protections. And of course, it was just plain fun to play scientist on the beach with such great neighbours. When’s our next project?!”

In 2013, LIFFT was given the Islands’ Trust Community Stewardship Award, to acknowledge the exceptional efforts of our group. In 2016, Ramona finished surveying all of our Island beaches. She is now in the process of creating our Lasqueti Island Forage Fish Map. It will highlight the information that was gathered by her and LIFFT over our 5 year study period. We hope to publish it in the summer issue of our LINC newsletter.

We especially thank Ramona who, with grace, humour and years of hard work, taught us how to be effective field scientists, processed our samples, analyzed our data and put our Lasqueti Island forage fish on the map.

Numerous fish, seabird, and marine mammal populations are in precipitous decline in British Columbia and scientists have started to look at the link between forage fish biomass reduction and these declining populations (de Graaf, 2014). Forage fish spawning beaches scattered around Lasqueti Island are particularly sensitive to human disturbance and pollution. Please remember to be especially careful from the beginning of November until the end of March every year when these little unassuming fish come onto our beaches to lay their eggs. Their future is in our hands.

Contributions to the funding of this project were made by Islands Trust, Pacific Salmon Foundation, Sea Watch Society, our LIFFT volunteers, and Ramona de Graaf. Our heart-felt thank-you to all who made this Forage Fish study possible!

For further information, see our LIFFT Forage Fish Brochure, “Forage Fish Matters” in 2016 LINC newsletters or website lasqueti.ca/linc

Beavers and their Habitat on the Gulf Islands

Many of us have witnessed beavers on our island, either walking slowly to a wet destination, or observing the damage done to trees and flooded land. I became interested in this beguiling creature when a pair moved in last fall. They quickly built a dam at my pond exit and my west field began to shrink, rapidly. The increased water volume was wonderful, my pond had thousands of gallons more water, the crowded willows were being thinned, and there seemed to be more birds and ducks with the increased wetlands. I became concerned when my pond edge crept up twenty feet further with no end in sight. I had a neighbour come and shot the male, leaving the female (I was relieved to learn they will re-mate when necessary) and then, I began to study them more in depth.

Beavers are the largest rodent in North America, weighing up to 60 lbs. One was recorded at 110 lbs! They are monogamous, have a litter of approx. 3-4 kits per year, in April-July, birthing in their second or third year of life. The kits are born fully furred with open eyes and ready for swimming. They live in colonies of 3-9 beavers: the parents, the teens, (1-3 years old) and the babies. All the members of a colony help with the rearing of the kits. They have two dens, one for drying off (their mudroom) and the second for family life. They’ve been known to share their dens with muskrats who have fallen on hard times.

Their amazing anatomy includes valves that close off their ears and nostrils, skin flaps that seal off their mouth so they can chew under water, and clear membranes that cover their eyes so they can see and work under water. This seemingly clumsy animal is extremely fast and agile in the water. Their tail not only acts as a powerful rud-
Amazing revitalization projects are happening in deserts in the U.S and around the world with the introduction of beaver. You have to see it to believe the transformation of deserts to lush valleys in a matter of 1-2 years. I’ve learned that their obsessive damming can be controlled to a great extent by changing the sound source of the water. A few T-posts driven in a pond where water is flowing will divert the damming to that site, enabling humans to direct the damming as needed. Especially if you’re able to run a culvert under the existing dam so that the water still flows, but silently. Many biologists believe that beaver are the single most important species capable of saving our parched and dying earth, especially in the southern regions of the planet. These under-appreciated engineers are invaluable in the protection of our planet. Having said that, harvesting is also recommended where over-population can cause starvation. The Peace River region in B.C. takes 50% of the B.C. harvest, followed by the Skeena and Cariboo regions. On Vancouver Island we claim only 5% of the harvest. Although beavers are generally a healthy lot, not susceptible to parasite and disease, they can contract a condition called Tularemia, a disease that attacks the liver, spleen, lungs and lymph. It can be transmitted to humans, but not spread human to human. It can be controlled with antibiotics. Cautious handling with rubber gloves and disposal is important. Some great websites for further study are:

The Beaver Manifesto: In defense of Tenacity
Beaver Management Guidelines-Min.of Environment

LINC is working with the BC Community Bat Program to monitor and learn about the bats in our area. The following is information from them.

White Nose Syndrome (WNS), a fungal disease responsible for the death of millions of bats in eastern North America, has moved to the west coast and was confirmed in Washington State in 2016. This is very worrisome for the health of bat populations in British Columbia, with near 100% mortality for some species of bats exposed to the fungus. Although devastating for bats, WNS does not affect humans.

The BC Community Bat Program in collaboration with the BC government is requesting the public’s help in monitoring the spread of this disease. “We knew this deadly fungus was moving westward across North America” says Mandy Kellner, Coordinator of the BC Community Bat Program, “but we thought we had many years to prepare”. Instead, the disease was confirmed near Seattle last March, and we are gearing up to look for it in BC this winter.

The typical first sign of this disease is bats flying during the winter, an unusual sighting at a time of year when bats are hibernating. Another sign of the presence of WNS is the appearance of dead bats as they succumb to the effects of WNS. “We are encouraging the public to report dead bats or any sightings of winter bat activity to the Community Bat Project (CBP) toll-free phone number, website, or email below. Bat carcasses will be submitted for testing for White Nose Syndrome and would provide the earliest indication of the presence of the disease in BC” says Kellner. Reports of winter bat activity will help focus research, monitoring and protection efforts.

If you find a dead bat, report it to the CBP (1-855-922-2287 ext 24 or info@bcbats.ca) as soon as possible for further information. Never touch a dead bat with your bare hands. Please note that if you or your pet has been in direct contact with the bat you will need further information regarding the risk of rabies to you and your pet.

Currently there are no treatments for White Nose Syndrome. However, mitigating other threats to bat populations and preserving and restoring bat habitat may provide bat populations with the resilience to rebound. This is where the BC Community Bat Program and the general public can help.