

The Trumpeter

A Publication of the Friends of Elk Island Society
Spring, 2003



Website: <http://www.elkisland.ca>

E-mail: membership@elkisland.ca

Beneath the Surface at Elk Island Park

by Rick Watts

Many of you will know that Elk Island National Park (EINP) is a remnant ecosystem representing a transitional zone between the boreal forest of the north and the grassland plains or prairie further south. Transitional zones such as these are of enormous ecological value. They not only support species from either side of the transition but also a flora and fauna that is unique to the transition itself. What you may not realize is these transitional zones exist on a smaller scale all around us in the boundaries between different types of habitat. Examples may be between the aspen woodland and the grassland in my backyard or, of more significance, between aquatic and terrestrial habitats on the shoreline of Astotin Lake or the other water bodies in the Park.

The most significant boundary zone in EINP is that between aquatic and terrestrial habitats. The shallow margins of the lakes, ponds and sloughs are far more productive than open water, where free-swimming organisms are easy prey for ducks and other predators. It's the convoluted margins with their stands of cattails and sedges where the red-winged blackbirds nest and a myriad of aquatic invertebrates go about their business.

The lakes in EINP contain a variety of invertebrates and each lake seems to have a different character. Some are so starved of oxygen by decaying vegetation that their



Rick Watts

Beneath these calm waters a whole different world exists!

rank and smelly mud contains little of interest other than a few leeches and snails. Others, by Highway 16, support rushes and sedges and a variety of waterweeds, but you can also see evidence of the oil that has drained into them off the highway. Some however are a real joy. These are the breeding grounds for the park's amphibians, the tiger salamanders, boreal chorus frogs and others. They are also home to tiny fingernail clams quietly filtering algae from the water, backswimmers that feed off any insect that gets trapped in the surface film, and whirligig beetles whose eyes are constructed in two halves so they can see both above and below the surface at once. These small beetles whiz across the water in a mad frenzy but dive down below as soon as danger threatens!

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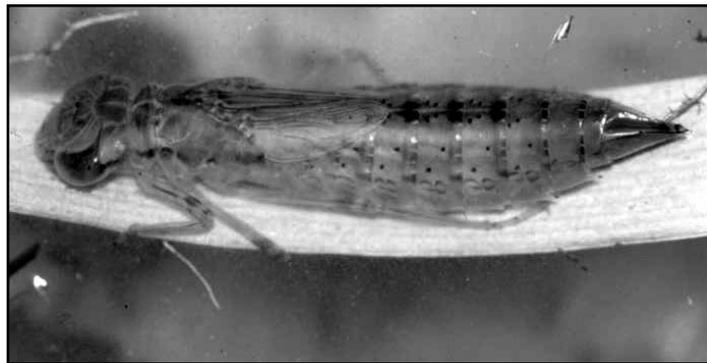
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There are snails grazing contentedly on 'fields' of algae, some species have gills and can breath underwater, whilst others have lungs and must surface from time to time for gasps of air.

These lakes and ponds are also home to predatory leeches, graceful swimmers that suck the juices from water snails and aquatic insects. Dragonfly nymphs lie in wait to ambush anything that swims past, snatching a meal with their vicious, extensible jaws. Also living here is a most impressive beetle, the diving beetle *Dytiscus*. Its voracious larva breathes air through it's tail, can grow bigger than your little finger and is such an effective hunter that some ponds can sometimes seem to contain little else other than these predatory insects!

Next time you visit the Park enjoy watching



C. Rice

Dragonfly nymphs lie in wait to ambush anything that swims past.

the bison, elk and moose but why not also consider the ruthless hunters and the graceful browsers that live just below the surface of the Park's wetland areas, players in an unobserved struggle of life and death between predator and prey.

Web Site Info Update

Since going live in October last year the Friends web site (<http://www.elkisland.ca>) has been going from strength to strength. As of March the server was receiving in excess of 50 page requests per day, not bad for a new site.

Here at the Friends we value the involvement of our members and three features of the web site are designed for just that purpose. If you've not yet visited the site please do. Have a look at the Bulletin Board and contribute your views and stories; see if any of the notices are of interest. Take a look at the Photo Gallery and if you've any interesting photos that you would like displayed email them to webmaster@elkisland.ca or post them to the Friends. Finally, subscribe to the mailing list and we'll e-mail announcements directly to your mailbox, keeping you informed of site updates and forthcoming events.

Not only does the site provide information relating to the Friends and the Park but it's also a source of revenue. In just four months the site raised \$800 in sponsorship fees. This has more than paid for the development and hosting of the site and as sponsorships increase this will become a significant revenue stream.

Comments regarding the site can be emailed to webmaster@elkisland.ca.

Message From The Chairman

by Rick Watts

As we go to print with this edition of *The Trumpeter*, this Board's first year in office is drawing to a close and now seems like a good time to reflect on what we have achieved so far and what we plan for the future.

Last summer we hosted our Summer Finale and it proved to be a great success. This was a first in many ways since it was the first event organised by the new board. It was the first time the Friends hosted a Labour Day event and it was the first time that the Park had seen the parking lot at Astotin Lake full! This winter we hosted two interpretive walks, each with an attendance of thirty or so people, and we held a successful Ski Day. We have also doubled the society's membership, with many old members rejoining following a period of absence.

Behind the scenes, the Board has been coming to terms with the running of the society. The long, clamorous meetings of the summer have been replaced with shorter, more orderly sessions as we settle into our roles. This, however, has not been without casualties, as our chairman, Les Campbell, resigned just before Christmas. Les did a great job, taking the helm at a time of uncertainty and leading the Board through its first six months. Thank-you Les.



*FEIS Chairman,
Rick Watts*

During the next twelve months we have much planned, a total of sixteen events for 2003. Details of these can be seen elsewhere in this issue and on the web site at <http://www.elk-island.ca>. In addition to these events we are in the process of negotiating with the Park regarding our use of the Visitor Information Centre. We are planning to run a gift shop here once again, offering a service to visitors and raising much needed capital for the society.

Now we come to you, our members. We thank you for being patient with us while we found our feet and for your continued support. Without you, this society could not fulfill its mandate to promote and support Elk Island National Park and the world would be a poorer place. Please remember that we need your help staging our events for 2003 and that without your support we would not be able to provide the service that we intend. If you're interested in helping out please give Liz or me a call at (780) 922-5203.

We're planning on holding a combined dinner and AGM in May and look forward to seeing you all there.

Rick

If you would like to take an active part in the staging of events planned for Elk Island National Park over the next year, please contact Liz Watts, Special Events Director, Friends of Elk Island Society. It is proposed to set up a small sub-committee which will be responsible for planning and managing all events – educational, social and especially fun! Please contact Liz at: 780-922-5203 or events@elkisland.ca

Our sincere thanks to STAPLES, Sherwood Park, for their support of The Trumpeter

It's a Hoot!

by Georgina Campbell

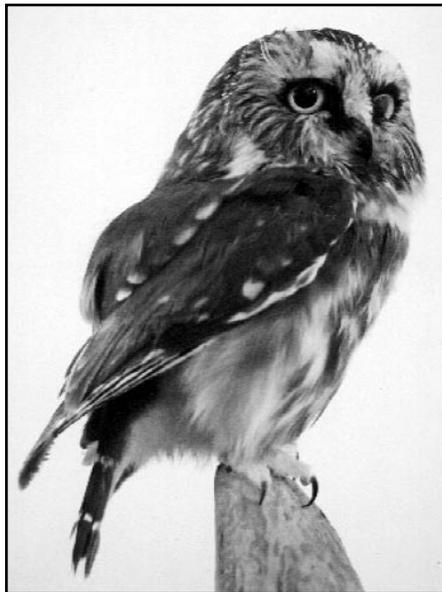
How do you start an owl prowl? Just ask Stephanie Grossman. Stephanie is a graduate student at the University of Alberta. Her research focuses on owl population responses to change in the amount of forest in and around Elk Island National Park (EINP) and other parts of east central Alberta.

On March 22, 2003, members of the Friends of Elk Island Society (FEIS) and other park visitors joined Stephanie at the Information Center at EINP for an animated introduction to owls. In addition to a good deal of background information on the birds, Stephanie provided taped "owl call" sounds. Visitors were encouraged to identify the sound with the species. Hopefully, that information would be valuable as the "prowl" continued.

Spectators then followed Stephanie to several areas where owls might normally be found. The plan was to play the taped calls to trick the resident owls into thinking their territory had been invaded.



Stephanie Grossman, a graduate student at the University of Alberta, led the March 22 "Owl Prowl." The Friends of Elk Island Society sponsored the interpretive evening.



The tiny saw-whet owl nestles contentedly in Elk Island National Park. He doesn't, however, always respond to owl prowl calls!

The resident owls would then respond with threatening words of their own.

Stephanie had demonstrated the tiny Saw-whet Owls, as well as more robust Great Gray Owls and Barred Owls during her introduction to the evening. Not only would we

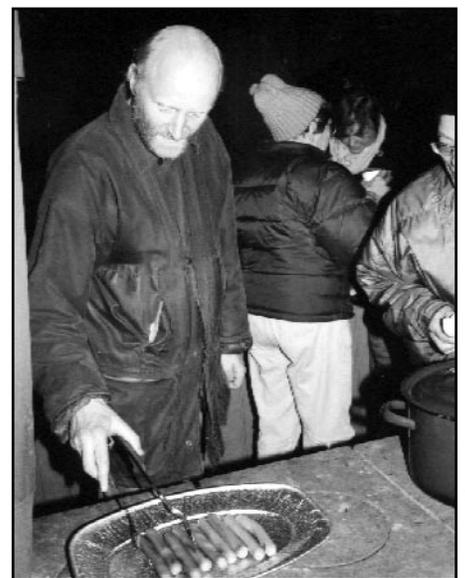
recognize the call of the owls, but we would even recognize the birds if we saw them. Other owl species, including Northern Hawk-Owls, Long-eared Owls, Pygmy Owls and Boreal Owls, also live in the Park. Stephanie, however, reports she has yet to hear them in EINP.

The group visited three sites in the Park, played the tapes and invited the owls to talk back to the unwelcome visitors. The owls, unfortunately, had other plans. They had decided to stay out of the wind and occasional rain, or perhaps were busy with other activities. Owl breeding generally begins in late February, through to April and the beginning of May. Intruders or no intruders, they apparently had other things on their minds.

The group of visitors, however, enjoyed the early evening atmosphere of the Park. The "owl sounds" were hauntingly real whether they came from a live owl or from a high quality tape recorder.

Finally the group left the owls to their own activities and moved on to the Tawayik Lake trail-head. It was easy to be enticed to the area where Liz and Rick Watts had organized hot chocolate, hot dogs, and the heat of a wood-burning stove.

The interpretive evening, sponsored by the FEIS, was in fact, "a hoot!"



Rick Watts, Chairman of the Friends of Elk Island Society, demonstrated his skill as a chef at the weiner roast.

FEIS Hosts Successful Christmas Bird Count

by Tom Nakashima

On December 26, 2002, the Friends of Elk Island Society (FEIS) hosted the annual Elk Island Christmas Bird Count, one of 10 Counts in the Edmonton area. The event was quite successful with some 50 participants spending around 60 hours within the defined count circle. The birders counted some 20 of the approximately 65 over-wintering species found near the Edmonton area.

Frank Chapman started the Christmas Bird Count (CBC), with other conservationists in the 1900's, as a protest to the traditional winter bird shoot. Previously, hunters gathered on Christmas Day and divided into teams for the annual "side hunt." The team that shot the most birds or small animals was declared the winner. You know, the old "Bird in the Hand" rule.

From its meager beginnings of some 30 participants in 27 locations, the CBC is now enjoyed by more than 50,000 people throughout North America in about 1800 counting zones. The CBC became the largest natural history project in North America, and a valuable tool for ornithologists to determine long-term trends of winter bird populations. It has also become a holiday tradition to get people outdoors to enjoy nature – and it's fun.

Each count zone consists of a 24-kilometer circle, covering 450 square kilometers, determined from the same center year to year. The Elk Island CBC circle, with its geographic center somewhere near the Tawayik Lake parking lot, encompasses the entire Park. Each circle is further divided into various sectors. Within the Park, the circle is divided by the 11 existing hiking/cross-country ski trails covering nearly 100 kilometers. The zone captain is responsible to ensure that bird counters cover most of the circle. The count must be completed within one 24-hour day during the official count period from December 14th to January 5th.



Bob Scott

A Downy Woodpecker, one of Elk Island's regular residents.

At the end of the day, the data is reported and sent to the National Audubon Society Headquarters, where it is compiled and published. The compiled results provide a large enough sample to allow a year-to-year and region-to-region comparison of the findings.

Bird populations and survival rates are extremely sensitive to environmental conditions and are used as an indicator of long term environmental health, not unlike the use of a canary to "test the waters" in an underground mine shaft.

The 2002 CBC takes on added importance because of the outbreak of the West Nile Virus in the Eastern United States and Canada. The virus has been identified in 27 states and several provinces and has infected some 2500 people, with about a 1% mortality rate. The symptoms of the virus are encephalitis or inflammation of the brain, and meningitis or inflammation of the lining of the brain. Mosquitoes can contract the virus by biting an infected bird, then transmit the virus to humans or horses. There are some 130 bird species capable of carrying the virus, notably the corvid family (crows, ravens, jays and magpies). Scientists are monitoring corvid populations to try to track the virus, which has already spread west to Saskatchewan.

You don't have to be a birder to enjoy the CBC. If you are a lover of the outdoors and the Park, then you should consider participating in the 2003 Christmas Bird Count.

Family Ski Day 2003

by Rick Watts

We awoke to the anticipation of a bright, sunny, Albertan, winter's day, but sadly the weather had other ideas. At eight o'clock, our yard was covered in a misty haze and the sun was refusing to put in an appearance. "Oh well never mind—I'm sure there's enough 'die-hard' skiers out there to come despite the weather."

The arrangements for the day had been made in advance. All that was required now was for me to drive to the Park to await the day's com-



Georgina Campbell

Dee Patriquin (left) and Glynnis Hood (right), after Glynnis finished an interpretive talk about the Park's beavers.

mercial contributors, while Liz drove to Sherwood Park to collect 200 donuts and 166 cups of coffee. We had the building at Astotin Lake opened up by eleven and our contributors - Mountain Equipment Co-op and Elk Island Retreat - were busy setting up. By noon, the first skiers were out on the trails and the sun was beginning to show through the cloud. The event had begun.

This was truly a family day. A patch of ice had been cleared on Astotin Lake. The Park's trails had been groomed and track-set and a small track had been set by the beach area for the skiing lessons hosted by Wayne Millar. Children brought their skates, and there were skis and snowshoes available for free from Mountain Equipment. For those less interested in the outdoor activities, the interpretive talks on the 'Spirituality of Water' and the Park's Beavers were a welcome opportunity to warm up with a coffee in the warm comfort of the theatre.

Despite the less than welcoming nature of the weather, there was a steady flow of visitors through the park gates, somewhere between 50 and 70



Georgina Campbell

Kacie Schneider enjoyed the Family Ski Day event and her first attempt at skiing!

vehicles in total for the day. Mountain Equipment was kept busy all day and none of their equipment was left idle. If our commercial sponsors consider the day successful, that seems to me to be a pretty good yardstick!

Our thanks to the sponsors of this event including:

Mountain Equipment Co-op
Elk Island Retreat
Tim Horton's (Nottingham)
BirdsAndBackCountry.Com
Jerry & Gisele Wood

RODENT ROMP, LITTER BLITZ AND BBQ

Saturday April 26, 2003 2-6 p.m.

Learn about the advantages and disadvantages of being a rodent in Elk Island National Park. If the weather permits, help clear litter from the trails, and round out your afternoon with a BBQ by Astotin Lake.

(Usual entry fee to the park applies.)



FEIS Calendar of Events- 2003

Date	Event
February 15 th	Family Ski Day, 10am-5pm
March 22 nd	Owl Prowl, 4:30pm-7pm
April 26 th	Rodent Romp, Litter Blitz and BBQ
May 24 th	AGM Steak BBQ by the lake
June 21 st	Aboriginal Day
June 28 th	BBQ pm TBA
June 29 th	Multiculturalism Day - Cakes of Canada
July 19 th	Take – A – Hike
July 26 th	BBQ pm – TBA
August	Music in the Park – TBA
August 23 rd	BBQ pm – TBA
August 31 st	Summer Finale
September 27 th	Evening Hike – TBA
October 25 th	Autumn Hike – TBA
November 22 nd	Winter Hike – TBA
December 26 th	Christmas Bird Count
<p>TBA – Time and place to follow. Please check the web site at www.elk-island.ca for additional details or call Liz Watts on 780-922-5203.</p>	

Wanted:

Person with education experience to volunteer on the newly formed Conservation, Research and Education (CRE) subcommittee

Responsibilities:

Sit on the CRE committee and attend meetings once every 8 weeks

Plan and assist in delivering FEIS education programs

Liase with EINP interpretive staff

Must have:

Appropriate education experience at any schooling level

Ability to work via e-mail and telephone

Contact:

Neil Darlow, CRE chair

E-mail: ndarlow@ualberta.ca

Tel: (780) 430-0106

Stories for the Trumpeter

Do you have an interesting story about Elk Island National Park to share? The Trumpeter always needs new material on all aspects of the Park. If you have a story, or an idea, please contact Georgina at 780-895-7399. We ask only that stories relate to the Park and be not more than 400- 450 words. They may be edited for spelling, grammer, clarity and length.

Photos are also welcome. Please send original prints (4 x 6) if possible, or if sent electronically, please scan in greyscale at 150 dpi in a 4 x 6 size. Prints will be returned, if you include your address.

Mission Statement — Friends of Elk Island Society The Friends of Elk Island Society is a non-profit, charitable organization that co-operates with Parks Canada to promote understanding, appreciation and respect for Elk Island National Park. The FEIS fulfills this mission by participating in conservation, science-based research, the operation of a sales outlet, special events and providing services to its members. The FEIS raises funds and administers donations to further the objectives of the Society.

Membership Form

Name: _____

Address: _____

Phone number: _____ Fax number: _____ E-mail: _____

Individual membership (\$10.00): _____ Family membership (\$15.00): _____

Donation: _____

If you are donating \$25.00 or more, please indicate whether or not you would like us to send you a tax receipt. Send your Membership Form and payment to: Friends of Elk Island Society Box 70, 9920-63 Avenue Edmonton, Alberta T6E 0G9 (780) 988-4842