

OUR MISSION -

“To ensure the preservation of the character and biological biodiversity of Wagner Natural Area for Educational, Scientific and Research purposes.”



Friends of the Fen



One of the many beautiful peat moss (Sphagnum spp.) hummocks that grow along the perimeter of marl ponds. Photo courtesy of: Kiera Coleman

WAGNER NATURAL AREA SOCIETY NEWSLETTER

Upcoming Event

Family Nature Nights: Guardians of Nature

Where: Lois Hole Centennial Provincial Park
400 Ray Gibbon Dr, St. Albert

When: August 23, 6:00 - 8:00 p.m.

Come see the Wagner display (and many others!) at this nature-themed festival organized by Nature Alberta! Everyone is welcome, and youths can collect a prize for visiting all of the nature stations.

Further Events:

Fall Clean-up Day

When: Saturday, September 23
9:00 a.m. – 2:00 p.m.

Litter clean-up, fencing repair, and what needs doing before winter sets in. All are welcome to join!

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Open House – Sunday, October 29

Date changed. Further details to come.
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All stories by WNAS Summer Student, Kiera Coleman, unless otherwise noted.

# Summer Student's Farewell

Summer is coming to a close which means I can no longer be a "summer" student. I suppose I will have to return to my university classes and be an actual student once more. Nevertheless, I had a superb summer working at Wagner.



*Summer student talking to some youths about wetland diversity at Big Lake's "Friends of Big Lake" nature interpretation week.  
Photo courtesy of: Meghan MacDougall*

What did I do? Well, anyone that has asked me that this summer has gotten a response along the lines of "A little bit of everything." I still think that is the best way to describe it. As I predicted in the May newsletter, I spent a lot of time looking at the ground and through a camera lens—in addition to "actual" work that is.

From what became a near permanent stoop, I ferreted out weeds like orange and meadow hawkweeds, wild caraway, and pale yellow iris from the surrounding vegetation to mark them for removal. Villeneuve Field appeared to be sprouting more flags (used to mark the weeds) than alfalfa once June rolled around. Running out of these precious markers was a recurring problem for Chris Saunders and I. But the flags were useful, making targets much easier to spot for volunteers during weed pulls and allowing us to see how extensive the weed distribution was. Thankfully, the other weeds I helped find and remove (common tansy,

## Support Us!



*The capsules of a Cruet Dung Moss (Splachnum ampullaceum) clump found on the eastern side of WNA.  
Photo courtesy of: Kiera Coleman*

The Wagner Natural Area Society welcomes new supporters, volunteers, and all people interested in natural history and the preservation of the ecological integrity of this delightful natural area.

### VOLUNTEERS / MEMBERS

People of all talents and interests are desired and welcomed to become more closely involved with the Natural Area and the Society.

Email: [info@wagnerfen.ca](mailto:info@wagnerfen.ca)

### DONATIONS

All donations help maintain the integrity of the Natural Area and its surroundings, provide educational material, enhance visitor experiences, and support on-going research studies and surveys.

**Please see page 18 for the donation/volunteer form.**

Manitoba maple, and European mountain ash) were easier to spot from eye level than the aforementioned intruders.

I also learned a lot about native plants while assisting Derek Johnson with the task of remeasuring WNA's permanent sample plots. Having grown up in a much drier part of Alberta, I found the diversity of mosses at Wagner to be particularly fascinating. (Hopefully someone else will enjoy the photos I have included in this newsletter!) A big thank you to Derek. He was very patient while I insisted that we identify every sprig of green in the 1x1 metre plots. I maintain that I found the smallest CIRSARV—Canada thistle to most—identifiable as such. He was also patient when I tried to discern meaning from the seven-letter code shouted to me. Who knew that smashing two fragments of a Latin binomial name together would create something that sounds like complete gibberish. PTILCRI with a silent "P" created some grave confusion the first couple of times. Regardless, I had a good time and committed several new plants to memory.



*The offending PTILCRI. Also known as Knight's Plume Moss or Ptilium crista-castrensis.  
Photo courtesy of: Kiera Coleman*

On the camera side of things, I hope that my decision to lug around roughly 15 pounds of photography gear most days has been worth it. I know my wildlife lens was at least useful during the May Bird Count. A yellow speck in a tree morphed into an American goldfinch with the help of that super telephoto lens. In addition to the newsletters, I also contributed new photos to the display material. I am working on a few reports about the invertebrates I photographed too. Most of the time, I had my camera for my orchid pollinator project (see next article), but it is hard to resist taking and sharing pictures of other subjects, especially at a place as unique as Wagner. All in all, my photography skills have certainly improved over the summer.

Yes, I did actual hard work too for anyone who was worried. I cut and hauled fallen trees off the Marl Pond Trail when they appeared, trimmed back overgrown sections, pondered why dog owners picked up after their pet but then left the bag whilst cleaning up garbage, and laid down planks over puddles on those rare wet days. My assigned tasks led me to fight thickets and debris piles while checking the Natural Area's perimeter. I ambled through the south fields near midnight while conducting the annual amphibian survey. I extracted a pain-staking summary from 30 years' worth of newsletters for the new management plan. And finally, I had the joy of talking to people about nature.

Indeed, I had a great summer! I am certain that I learned as much as I would have during a university semester but passed the time outside and got paid for it. Thank you to everyone who put up with me over the past four months, particularly to Dave Ealey who volunteered at least a few hours each week to spend with my usually silent self!

# Who Else Visits Wagner?

## Orchid Pollinators

Despite the incredulous looks I got when I mentioned how I was going to study orchid pollinators, I feel that my little study has been quite a success (sans a few stumbling blocks).

Now, planning to sit for an hour or two with a camera by a patch of orchids may seem unproductive. I can understand that feeling; sometimes it was unproductive for identifying pollinators. But I found a wealth of other invertebrates, plants, and vertebrates to keep me occupied while waiting. Most of the time, the wait was worth it.

My original plan was to identify pollinators for three orchid species at Wagner. The species I picked to study were the yellow lady's-slipper, the small round-leaved orchid, and the hooded ladies'-tresses. Unfortunately, the orchids do not wait for good photography weather to bloom. It was raining every day that I had time to monitor the hooded ladies'-tresses while they were in bloom, so I sadly did not get any information on pollinators for that species (other than one hoverfly I happened to spot when I did not have my camera). For each orchid species, I chose three sites to monitor throughout the Natural area and attempted to pick places with different site conditions (surrounding vegetation, ground cover, etc.) to try and cover a wider range of pollinators. At the end of the study, I went back to my selected sites and counted the number of seed capsules as a measure of pollinator success.

The actual monitoring was done by patiently waiting at each site with my camera ready. I was using a macro lens with a 2x teleconverter so I could sit a bit further away (I found my wildlife lens worked okay too, if I was more than 3 metres away). I quickly learned two things: 1) pollinators are fast and 2) they move constantly. Thankfully, my camera has a good auto-focus system because I could not manually focus nearly fast enough. I took photos of any potential pollinator with a photo of a blank card between each sighting to make the subsequent review process easier. I took field notes too but a few second glance at a bug makes for some pretty poor notes.

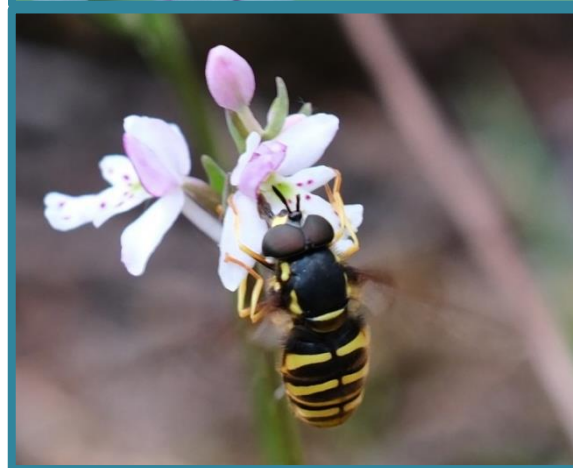
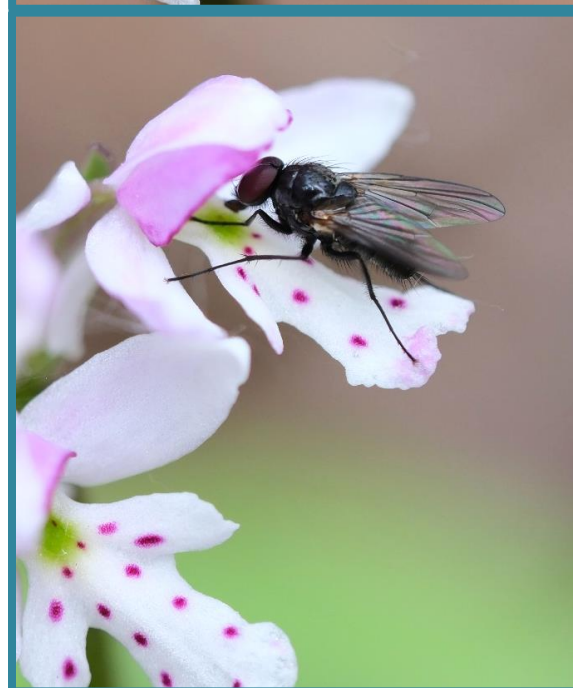
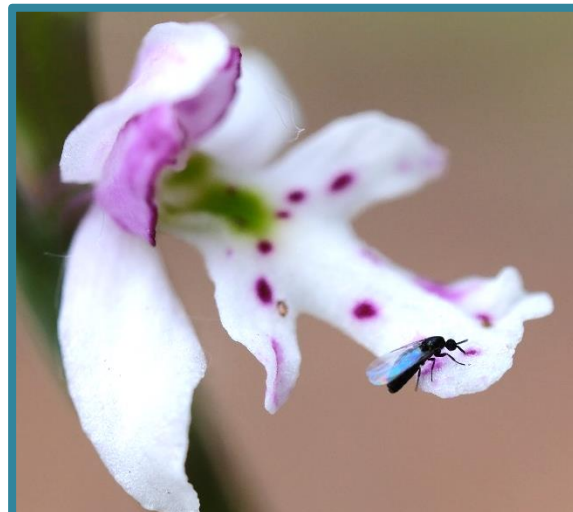
*Potential pollinators of the Small Round-leaved Orchid (Galearis rotundifolia).*

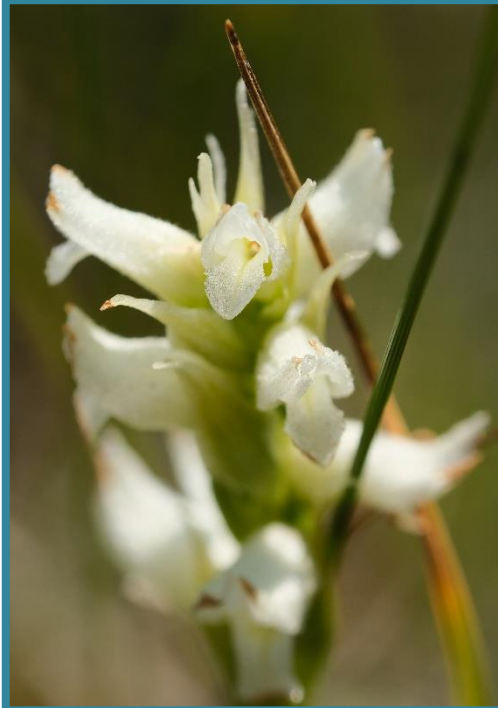
*Top: Minute Black Scavenger Fly (family Scatopsidae).*

*Middle: Muscoid Fly (superfamily Muscoidea).*

*Bottom: Meadow Fly (genus Chrysotoxum).*

*Photos courtesy of: Kiera Coleman*





Top: A *Sedgesitter* (genus *Platycheirus*) zooming to a *Yellow Lady's-slipper* (*Cypripedium parviflorum*).  
 Bottom: *The Hooded Ladies'-tresses orchid* (*Spiranthes romanzoffiana*) which I did not get to monitor.  
 Photos courtesy of: Kiera Coleman

I will refer to my observations as potential pollinators because I never noted any pollinia (the sticky pollen masses used by orchids for reproduction) stuck to the "pollinators".

For the yellow lady's-slipper, my most observed potential pollinators were hoverflies (family Syrphidae) making up 11 of 15 observations. The ones that I photographed were in the genus *Platycheirus*. The other observations were a bumble bee (genus *Bombus*), a burnt-orange coloured skipper with dark brown margins (family Hesperiiidae), a green lacewing (family Chrysopidae) and a small, black and white bee species that I have been unable to identify (mostly because the photo is terrible). The hoverflies tended to visit one to four flowers before moving on whereas the others mostly visited two flowers.

At one of my sites, nothing ever visited the lady's-slippers while I was around. The only thing that stood out to me as different about this site was that the undergrowth was taller than the orchids and overcrowding them. Overall, I would say there was very little pollinator success for the yellow lady's-slipper. I monitored ~250 flowers across all three sites and only counted 19 seed capsules later on.

The small round-leaved orchid was a different story. I counted 188 capsules on 104 stems and had monitored approximately 260 stems.

Their most common potential pollinators were hoverflies (5 of 16 observations; genera *Chrysotoxum* and *Helophilus*) and flies of the superfamily Muscoidea (5 of 16 observations). Minute black scavenger flies (family Scatopsidae) totalled 3 of 16 sightings, and the rest were: a bumble bee (genus *Bombus*; likely *Bombus cryptarum*); another unidentifiable small, dark bee species; and an ant (family Formicidae), though I doubt it was doing much other than visiting. A large number of mosquitoes were always resting on the orchids as well.

**Pollinator Results:**

| Yellow Lady's Slipper   |       |
|-------------------------|-------|
| Potential Pollinator    | Tally |
| Syrphidae spp.          | 8     |
| <i>Platycheirus</i> sp. | 3     |
| Bee sp.                 | 1     |
| <i>Bombus</i> sp.       | 1     |
| Chrysopidae sp.         | 1     |
| Hesperiidae sp.         | 1     |
|                         |       |
|                         |       |

| Small Round-Leaved Orchid |       |
|---------------------------|-------|
| Potential Pollinator      | Tally |
| Muscoidea spp.            | 5     |
| Scatopsidae spp.          | 3     |
| Syrphidae spp.            | 3     |
| Bee sp.                   | 1     |
| <i>Bombus</i> sp.         | 1     |
| <i>Chrysotoxum</i> sp.    | 1     |
| Formicidae sp.            | 1     |
| <i>Helophilus</i> sp.     | 1     |

If anyone else is crazy enough to try this in the future, I would advise monitoring a site every couple of days. I definitely did not get as much data as I wanted, and the orchids do not flower for very long. It may also be worthwhile to film the pollinators as you could potentially catch more angles than with photos alone.

On a side note, if you are looking to get into entomology, I would not recommend starting with flies. They are very cool (and so many people mistake them for wasps or bees!), but very difficult to identify. Maybe start with butterflies or something else that does not require staring at wing veins and hairs and learning half a dictionary.

A relatively friendly key to family Syrphidae:

Miranda, G. F. G., Young, A. D., Locke, M. M., Marshall, S. A., Skevington, J. H., Thompson, F. C. (2013). Key to the genera of Nearctic Syrphidae. *Canadian Journal of Arthropod Identification*, 23. <https://doi.org/10.3752/cjai.2013.23>

iNaturalist is a great way to start if you are completely lost on something (like I was with the minute black scavenger flies)!



Top: A Boreal Toad (*Anaxyrus boreas*) toadlet leaving the Hourglass Fen in southeast WNA.  
Bottom: A young Wood Frog (*Lithobates sylvaticus*).

Photos courtesy of: Kiera Coleman

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## Auditory Amphibian Survey

The results of this year's auditory amphibian survey tell the tale of an early and dry spring—who could have guessed?

Here is a quick run-down on how the survey works. Seven survey sites have been selected on WNA. The surveyor goes out to each of these sites at least half an hour after sunset and listens for amphibian calls for five minutes. The calls are then assigned a calling index based on the extent to which individual calls can be discerned. The index then correlates to an estimated number of individuals for a species.

The first survey day (May 15<sup>th</sup>) seemed promising with a good mix of species calling. The boreal chorus frog (*Pseudacris maculata*) was the most common caller of the night, followed by the boreal toad (*Anaxyrus boreas*), then the wood frog (*Lithobates sylvaticus*). Although, perhaps the signs of an early spring were already showing as May 15 is typically only the beginning of the boreal toad's calling period.

On May 18<sup>th</sup>, the marl ponds along the trail held tadpoles that were shown to an eager group of students during their pond study. By the 25<sup>th</sup>, my next survey date, these ponds were dry. I did not hear a single amphibian along the Marl Pond Trail for the rest of the summer. However, I did count ~40 boreal toads on the path each survey night.

The 25<sup>th</sup> proved to be quiet. Boreal chorus frogs were still the most common but far fewer were calling. Boreal toads made a ruckus, earning them the only calling index of 3 (meaning an estimated 10+ individuals) given out all year. But they were heard only at the South Beaver Pond. One sole wood frog made itself known by the Hourglass Fen.

For the final survey day, June 5<sup>th</sup>, not a single amphibian was heard. However, following some mid-June rain, I heard boreal chorus frogs calling from the South Beaver Pond on the 19<sup>th</sup> and from the West Beaver Pond on the 22<sup>nd</sup>. Both instances were in the late afternoon.

These results contrast with the amphibian survey from five years ago in 2018. Many more frogs were vocalising five years ago. Then, boreal chorus frogs commonly had estimates of 10+ individuals in mid-May whereas all estimates this year were under 10 individuals. Wood frogs were also a lot more vocal in the past. Only boreal toads were more common this year than in the past, likely due to this year's early spring as they are late breeders. I will also say that there are several notes of rain occurring during the surveys five years ago. We certainly did not get any rain this year.

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## May Species Count for Birds in WNA

By Dave Ealey and Sheila Hale

May 27, 2023

In contrast to last year, this spring had to have been one of the earliest on record...and driest! The May Flowering Plant Species Count will be of interest to many.

The birds observed this year seemed to be fairly standard for the end of May. American goldfinch were back, unlike last year when they were absent. A few nice surprises were the ruffed grouse, olive-sided flycatcher, western wood-pewee, and common grackle; these species are not often seen on Wagner May Counts.

We have been consistent over the past several years in surveying the Marl Pond Trail and the old beaver pond at the west end of Centre Field, but sampling of other parts of the natural area has varied in order to cover different habitats during the early morning survey period. Consequently, it's to be expected to have some variability among years. Only two survey areas were covered this year: the Marl Pond Trail and the east side of Wagner, extending into the Parkland Environmental Reserve.

Total count of birds amounted to 41 identified species and 254 birds; last year (2022), we counted 38 species and 192 birds on two survey areas; and the year before (2021), we counted 47 species and 348 birds on three survey areas.



*American Goldfinch (Spinus tristis) are definitely back! As evidenced by this one found on a nest on August 3. Photos courtesy of: Kiera Coleman*

The dry conditions likely were responsible for the absence of other duck species and the solitary sandpiper, although the latter species was seen subsequently on the natural area. One wetland species, the black tern, is rarely seen at Wagner, so it was good to see it show up this year.

The most abundant bird in May 2023 was the white-throated sparrow, followed by American robin and brown-headed cowbird tied for second place, and in third place, a four-way tie: least flycatcher, black-capped chickadee, chipping sparrow, and yellow warbler.

Accompanying the authors was the Wagner Natural Area Society summer student, Kiera Coleman. We look forward to having additional participation in the May Species Count next year.

| Species                 | Marl Pond Trail and Beaver Pond | East-Central Forest and Parkland County Environmental Reserve | Total Birds |
|-------------------------|---------------------------------|---|-------------|
| Canada Goose            | --                              | Few   | 1           |
| Mallard                 | Common                          | Few   | 8           |
| Duck sp.                | Few                             | --  | 2           |
| Ruffed Grouse           | Few                             | --  | 1           |
| Wilson's Snipe          | Few                             | Few   | 4           |
| Ring-billed Gull        | --                              | Few   | 1           |
| Gull sp.                | Few                             | Few   | 5           |
| Black Tern              | --                              | Few   | 3           |
| Hairy Woodpecker        | Few                             | --  | 2           |
| Olive-sided Flycatcher  | --                              | Few   | 2           |
| Western Wood-Pewee      | --                              | Few   | 2           |
| Least Flycatcher        | Few                             | Common  | 13          |
| Red-eyed Vireo          | Few                             | Few   | 8           |
| Blue Jay                | Few                             | Few   | 5           |
| Black-billed Magpie     | Few                             | --  | 1           |
| American Crow           | Few                             | Few   | 9           |
| Common Raven            | Few                             | --  | 1           |
| Black-capped Chickadee  | Common                          | Few   | 13          |
| Tree Swallow            | --                              | Few   | 2           |
| Ruby-crowned Kinglet    | Few                             | Few   | 3           |
| Red-breasted Nuthatch   | Few                             | Few   | 6           |
| White-breasted Nuthatch | --                              | Few   | 2           |
| House Wren              | Common                          | --  | 6           |
| European Starling       | Few                             | --  | 1           |
| American Robin          | Common                          | Few   | 16          |
| Cedar Waxwing           | Few                             | --  | 5           |
| Purple Finch            | Few                             | Few   | 6           |

(Continued on next page...)

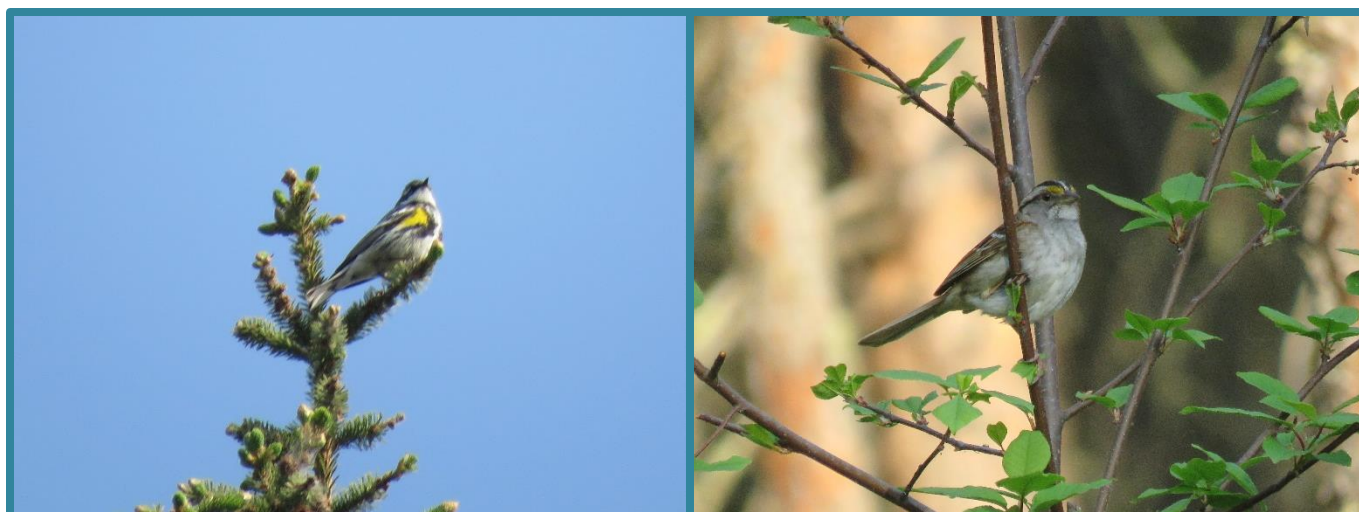


*A couple of Cedar Waxwings (Bombycilla cedrorum) feeding each other what appeared to be buds on the day of the count.  
Photo courtesy of: Kiera Coleman*

*Species List Continued*

| Species                  | Marl Pond Trail and<br>Beaver Pond | East-Central Forest and<br>Parkland County<br>Environmental Reserve | Total Birds |
|--------------------------|------------------------------------|---|-------------|
| American Goldfinch       | Few                                | --  | 4           |
| Chipping Sparrow         | Common                             | Few   | 13          |
| Clay-colored Sparrow     | Common                             | Few   | 11          |
| Dark-eyed Junco          | Few                                | Few   | 2           |
| White-throated Sparrow   | Common                             | Common  | 24          |
| Savannah Sparrow         | Common                             | --  | 6           |
| Song Sparrow             | Few                                | Few   | 5           |
| Lincoln's Sparrow        | Common                             | Few   | 8           |
| Baltimore Oriole         | Few                                | --  | 1           |
| Red-winged Blackbird     | Few                                | Few   | 8           |
| Brown-headed Cowbird     | Common                             | Few   | 16          |
| Common Grackle           | Few                                | --  | 2           |
| Yellow Warbler           | Common                             | Few   | 13          |
| Yellow-rumped Warbler    | Few                                | Few   | 9           |
| Western Tanager          | --                                 | Few   | 2           |
| Rose-breasted Grosbeak   | Few                                | --  | 2           |
| Total Identified Species | 33                                 | 30  | 41          |
| Total Birds              | 164                                | 90  | 254         |

Few: 1 to 5 birds; Common: 6 to 19 birds; Abundant: >20 birds



Left: A Yellow-rumped Warbler (*Setophaga coronata*).  
 Right: Our most common observation this year: a White-throated Sparrow (*Zonotrichia albicollis*).  
 Photos courtesy of: Sheila Hale

# Wildfire Safety and Awareness

By Kiera Coleman and Claudia Palylyk

As the WNA Board of Directors, we do our best as stewards of this Natural Area to be prepared for anything, including the hot topic of wildfire. To ensure that we are following best management practices, we implemented basic FireSmart™ protocols to reduce fire hazards this summer. We also engaged with Parkland County Fire Services (Acheson Fire Station) and our local neighbours.

We have been working with the Acheson Fire Station personnel to create a fire preparedness plan for WNA. This plan is used to establish a set of guidelines for fire control, fire hazard management, and to assess what local resources would be necessary in case of an emergency. One component of this plan takes a careful look at the different vegetation types within the Natural Area to determine fuel loads, which are associated with different vegetation communities. As well, the plan considers what water sources could be utilised for fire suppression and control. WNAS has collaborated with Acheson Fire Services personnel by hosting a reconnaissance site visit to share our knowledge of WNA. We provided details such as which areas are not suitable to cross with normal equipment (due to wetland areas, large accumulations of peat materials, and marl ponds) and ensured awareness of the fact that all open water onsite is very shallow.

Additionally, we did a joint walk-through of the area, and noted spots where FireSmart™ principles could be utilized to manage fuel loads. While we shared interesting facts about Wagner, the Acheson Fire Services personnel offered up specific ways that we could make WNA—especially the areas that the public interacts with—more “FireSmart”. We will continue this collaborative effort to strike a balance between the management of fire risk and the overall successional and ecological characteristics of the Natural Area.

To connect with our local neighbours on this crucial issue, we co-hosted a FireSmart™ Awareness Community Event with the Acheson Fire Station on July 22nd. This event was to answer any questions or concerns from locals regarding fire hazard management, as well as to provide knowledge and tools for preventing wildfires and reducing the damage caused by them. Naturally, we had a barbecue too! Moreover, the Fire crew showed off some new equipment and hosted activities for children, in support of FireSmart™!



For more on information on wildfire safety and WNA, refer back to our May 2023 newsletter.

To learn more about FireSmart™, check out <https://firesmartcanada.ca>.

*A couple photos from our FireSmart™ Community Event held just east of Osborne Acres.  
Photos courtesy of: Cheryl Johnson-Dempsey*

## Development in WNA's Recharge Area

Wagner Natural Area Society (WNAS) has been notified of a commercial/light industrial development planned for an area just south of Highway 16A and east of Spruce Valley Road. Said land overlaps with Wagner Natural Area's recharge area.

For a wetland like Wagner—especially the fens at Wagner—the steady discharge of good-quality groundwater is paramount. This discharge is due to a process at the other end of the system. There, in the recharge area, water infiltrates (enters) the soil or another porous material and replenishes the groundwater supply. Developments in the recharge zone can alter the amount of water that infiltrates the ground by changing the permeability of the surface, altering surface flows, or modifying the ground cover/vegetation. Consequently, these changes impact the amount of water dispensed at the discharge area (i.e., WNA).

The planners of Westlink Business Park, the development in question, reached out to WNAS early on in the planning stage. At the time of writing, the development is in the conceptual stage and will be submitted to Parkland County. The planners wished to address any concerns from WNAS before having the Conceptual Scheme approved because changes are more difficult to implement following approval.

As expected, WNAS' main concern is the effect of the development on our groundwater supply. Thus far, we have met with the planners and are currently reviewing information from their hydrogeotechnical report with the intent to provide feedback before the Conceptual Scheme is submitted for approval.

We have been told to expect an update from Parkland County once the concept has been approved. We will continue to monitor the situation and attend public engagement events relating to it. The first open house has already passed, and we were quite happy to see several members of the community share our concerns for Wagner. Watch for future newsletter articles as we learn more.

## A Thank You to our Volunteers

Evidently, the WNAS board is a busy group, and they too are volunteers. (Clearly, being a summer student is the best deal!) A small group can only accomplish so much on their own, therefore we are immeasurably appreciative of everyone else who also takes time out of their day to help protect and preserve the slice of wetland that we know as Wagner Natural Area.

For some volunteers, this time commitment means coming out to a weed pull. For others, a clean-up day or May Count day. For one, it means helping with whatever work needs doing and bringing his daughter along with him so that they can both benefit from the experience.

Our sincerest thanks to volunteer Brian Pratt. Not only for his generous donation of an electric chainsaw—it will be well used—and help with maintenance work around the Natural Area (I can personally attest to his determination to properly dig up every invading wild caraway plant), but for taking the time to inspire a curiosity and love of nature in someone else. We are sure that his daughter, Brinley, is just as grateful for the time that they have spent at Wagner as WNAS is.



*Dave Ealey, right, accepting the graciously donated electric chainsaw from Brian Pratt, left.*

*Photo courtesy of: Kiera Coleman*

Our August weed pull went splendidly by the way. Five people dug up more than 90 pale yellow iris clumps along Morgan Creek. A feat so astounding that we had to make additional plans for the second day of the weed pull! Unfortunately, pulling and deflowering Canada thistle on the second day was a lot more gruelling. But it was an important job nonetheless!

# History of Wagner Natural Area

Specifically, the history of the Marl Pond Trail and why it only covers a fraction of the Natural Area. The trail is 40 years old as of this summer! I have selected a couple excerpts from past newsletters that explain why the trail is as it is.

*From the October 2008 newsletter by Patsy Cotterill:*

Wagner Natural Area was set aside as a protected area in 1975, in recognition of its wonderfully biodiverse complex of open sedge fens and marl ponds. But it wasn't until early 1983, with the incorporation of its volunteer steward group, the Wagner Natural Area Society (WNAS), that attention was turned to improving the Area's accessibility to the public and developing educational and interpretive programming opportunities.

By the summer of 1983 clearing of an interpretive trail, to be named with unanimous consent the Marl Pond Trail, had begun in the west-central portion of the Natural Area. If I remember correctly, Terry Thormin, then president of WNAS, Natural Areas Program staff and Julie Hrapko, Curator of the Botany Programme at the Provincial Museum, were responsible for choosing and flagging the route of the trail. It was designed to provide, in a 1.2 km loop, a representative sampling of Wagner's varied habitats: willow thicket, mixed deciduous-coniferous forest, black spruce forest, open and shrubby fens and marl ponds, a wet "successional" meadow and drier upland fields. The Alberta Recreation, Parks and Wildlife Foundation (ARPWF) provided a grant of \$15,000 for construction of the trail, with smaller contributions coming from Labatt's Breweries and Northwestern Utilities. ARPWF's sponsorship is acknowledged on the main sign marking the trail head.

The minutes of WNAS' 11<sup>th</sup> meeting on August 24, 1983, recorded:

"Trail: - access construction is finished  
 - the trail has been cleared by volunteers for about 403 m  
 - John Rintoul will be hired for 4 days to lay 200 m of the Penroad/gravel trail

- Pat Seymour has people at the Devonian [Botanic] Garden who may be available at the end of September/early October to build boardwalk sections
- the boardwalk section will be laid and postholes drilled in winter
- Terry Thormin, Alice Hendry and Peter Lee will be on the Trail Construction Committee

Covering the trail with a permeable geotextile called Penroad, overlain by gravel, was necessary to allow drainage of the considerable overland flow that took place. (Those years in the 1980s were wet!) However, in fact geotextile was used only on the first (northern) section of the trail to be built and because of the wet, fragile nature of the ground, it was hauled in only in winter. The boardwalk was required for travel across areas of fen and marl pond, and it too would be installed during the winter.

Work on the trail continued throughout 1984. It had been decided early that the trail should be a self-guiding one, with numbered posts interpreted by means of a trail guide. On several occasions during the seasons WNAS members walked on the new trail, selecting points of interest for interpretation, where the posts would be situated.

By the spring of 1985 John Rintoul was reporting to the monthly WNAS meeting that "considerable work has been done on the trail by Land Management staff [then from the Department of Energy & Natural Resources], for example, grading, placing of culverts and painting of tree scars, with funds coming from government sources but with WNAS acting as the contractor. ... the boardwalk is finished. Planking is needed where the trail abuts on the marl pond, to confine the gravel."

Paul Cooper of the University of Alberta Devonian Botanic Garden built the boardwalk in sections.

By June, 1985, trail posts had been tamped into place and numbered, thanks to WNAS, staff of the Natural Areas Program and a fencing crew courtesy of the Alberta Environment Employment Program. Facilities consisting of two privies were situated in the northwest corner of the main field. Dave Person of WNAS took on the task of installing a box at each end of the trail to serve as dispensers for the trail guides. A draft trail guide booklet was being field-tested.

Spring 1986 saw a further flurry of activity as WNAS and government staff geared up for a trail-opening ceremony that morphed into a general natural area-opening ceremony, with political speeches and expressions of gratitude to our various financial sponsors and supporters of the trail and Natural Area. A picnic shelter, constructed by Rene Jones, went up in record time at the north end of the main field.

Dick Dekker, a local naturalist and graphic designer, was engaged to design the trail guide in its final, publishable form. Much of the text had been drafted by Patsy Cotterill, with considerable input from other WNAS members; Terry Thormin, Edgar Jones and Chris Miller created the illustrations. 500 copies of a “special commemorative issue” were printed off in time for the official opening on June 7, 1986. This first edition had a brown, heavy-stock cover featuring our signature view, a sinuous boardwalk crossing a marl pond amidst coniferous trees.

[...]

One could say that, metaphorically speaking, our beloved trail is a thread that winds through the lives of WNAS members and everyone else who visits the Natural Area frequently, binding us together.

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But, if you have seen a map of WNA, you know that the trail only covers a small portion of the Natural Area. Why is that?

I will direct you to the May 1988 newsletter by Terry Thormin:

The Wagner Natural Area Society has announced that the entire central portion—amounting to about one-half of the natural area\*—is now a no use/no access area.

“Even though the site has been established by the Alberta Government as a Natural Area under the *Wilderness Areas, Ecological Reserves and Natural Areas Act*” says Alice Hendry, President, “our Society was faced with this question: How can the purposes for which the site was set aside best be assured over time? Among other reasons, protecting a core area will allow regeneration of those habitats and species that may be lost on the periphery. It allows us to keep our future options open.”

The Society and the Government’s Natural Areas Program considers the actual designation by law as only a necessary first step in the overall long-term protection of the site.

“Without appropriate management, which now includes a large off limits zone” says Peter Lee, Natural Areas Manager, “those distinctive values that the designation seeks to protect could easily be lost to gradual and unnoticed attrition, especially by random public use.”

This use versus preservation dilemma is a common one faced by those managing protected areas. Some call it merely a choice among philosophical alternatives—the anthropocentric approach or the biocentric approach. Under an anthropocentric philosophy, the Natural Area would be managed primarily for its directly consumable human values (such as scientific, education, and recreation use) and management would strive to facilitate and serve those values. Actions to promote human use would then be taken, even if substantial impacts on natural ecological processes result. On the other hand, the biocentric approach would feature maintenance of the natural

*A view of the boardwalk. Clearly not from August because there is far more green now.*

*Photo courtesy of: Kiera Coleman*

*\*Note: One half of the Natural Area at the time. The area has been much expanded since.*

ecological processes as the primary objective, with restriction or even total prohibition of human use as a necessary measure to achieve this objective.

“Although some claim that those plants and animals of the Wagner Natural Area have a right to exist only insofar as they are useful to people” says Alice Hendry, “the members of the Wagner Society believe that these biological species exist

in their own right—they have an inherent right to share the Natural Area. To ensure their continued protection, we felt it necessary to declare a sizeable portion of the Natural Area off limits. Public use will still be welcomed along the trail. And as a side benefit for those who might ask—What good is a no use area anyway?—the idea of a core ‘ecological reserve’ or no use zone has excellent interpretive and educational value.”



*The Hourglass Fen, one of the many spots we try to protect. A great place for froglets, toadlets, Solitary Sandpipers, Red-winged Blackbirds, carnivorous plants, orchids, and so on, all relatively free from human disturbance.*

*Photo courtesy of: Kiera Coleman*

# BOARD BULLETIN:

By Dave Ealey

Managing a natural area, as described in the previous issue of *Friends of the Fen*, is a complex task. Your volunteer Board relies on many of our readers to help with site management (see Thank You earlier in this issue) on the natural area proper and in providing support when we face down incompatible initiatives outside our boundary.

The Board also benefits from building relationships with like-minded organizations that are willing to help enhance the WNAS capacity through supports of many kinds. This year, we continued to gain support from Nature Alberta (NA) with office space and access to expertise and reference material. As a Past President many years ago of the Federation of Alberta Naturalists (the predecessor of NA), I take personal satisfaction from maintaining this close relationship with the provincial natural history organization. Also, in the last week of August, I will be pleased to bring the Wagner Natural Area Society display to one of NA's Family Nature Nights at the Lois Hole Park in St. Albert (see front page of this issue).

The Big Lake Environment Support Society (BLESS) is another partner, with whom we have been active in their nature interpretation week and Migratory Bird Day activities. While networking with BLESS members, we have gained valuable insight into organizational management.

The Orchid Society of Alberta acknowledged our WNAS display as a significant educational contribution to their Orchid Show this past spring. Getting that kind of recognition is uplifting, but in addition, we get to meet many like-minded outdoor enthusiasts, including some who later come to Wagner Natural Area for a guided tour.



Photo courtesy of Dave Ealey

Other organizations WNAS is building relationships with are the North Saskatchewan Watershed Alliance (NSWA) and the Sturgeon River Watershed Alliance (SRWA). I sit on the Technical Advisory Committee of SRWA and value the opportunity to share our groundwater and wetland information. Wagner is located within the Sturgeon River watershed, a sub-watershed of the North Saskatchewan.

Recently, I was able to install a Boot Brush Station that was donated by NSWA. These useful installations are part of a North American initiative to manage invasive species, which has become a major part of the WNAS site management program. I hope you make use of the boot station on your next visit!!

## MEMBERSHIP – WAGNER NATURAL AREA SOCIETY

### Support / Donate / Volunteer

For more Information about Wagner Natural Area or the Society and about field trips and other activities, go to [wagnerfen.ca](http://wagnerfen.ca).

Wagner Natural Area is a Registered Charity. Donations will help maintain this very special area; \$20 or more are receipted for Income Tax purposes, CRA B/N119287522 RR 0001

Society's annual fee is \$10 for Supporting Members and \$15 for Voting Members. Voting Members are key to run WNAS; must qualify through nomination. See website. The Society's fiscal year is January 1 to December 31.

Annual fee (Supporting \$10/Voting 15): \$ \_\_\_\_\_

Donation: \$ \_\_\_\_\_

TOTAL: \$ \_\_\_\_\_

May the Society CONTACT you by: **EMAIL: Yes /No**

**PHONE: Yes / No**

**Email Address:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Phone:** \_\_\_\_\_

If you can VOLUNTEER to help with the Society with maintenance of the Natural Area (circle): **Yes**

**Name(s):** \_\_\_\_\_

**Mailing Address:** \_\_\_\_\_

Mail this form with cheque/money order, payable to Wagner Natural Area Society, to:  
Treasurer, Wagner Natural Area Society, 30531-118 Ave., Acheson, AB T7X 6M5

Or scan the completed form and pay online. Submit your membership/donation by Interac bank transfer to [treasurer@wagnerfen.ca](mailto:treasurer@wagnerfen.ca) [August 2023]

## Late Summer Finds



Top: *Greater-fringed Gentian (Gentianopsis crinita)*.  
Middle: *Marsh Grass-of-Parnassus (Parnassia palustris)* complete with a crab spider hanging off of the back.  
Bottom: *Tufted Fen-Moss (Paludella squarrosa)* growing amongst a red *Sphagnum* species.  
Photos courtesy of: Kiera Coleman