

# WAGNER NATURAL AREA NEWSLETTER

Volume 13 Number 2 October 1999



Newsletter of the Wagner Natural Area Society, Management Committee  
and Volunteer Stewards of Wagner Natural Area, Parkland County, Alberta

*Wagner Natural Area Society presents*

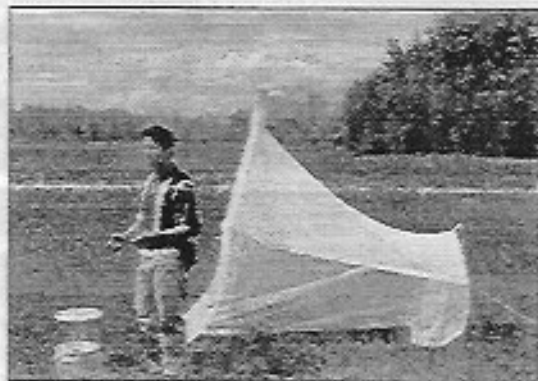
**Annual Members' Night 1999 on Monday, November 8, at 7:30 p.m.**  
Provincial Museum Ground Floor Lecture Room

**Kevin Timoney, PhD, of Treeline Ecological Research, will speak on**  
**"Roadside Herbicides: What You Need to Know"**

*Herbicides are commonly applied to rural roadsides by municipalities in Alberta. They are also used by power companies and the logging industry. Are they safe? Are they effective? What effect are they having on native plants? What we don't know can hurt us!*

\*Annual Report of the Wagner Society \*Treasurer's Report \*Membership Renewals  
\*Refreshments \*Admission Free \*Enter by the Archives door of the Museum

## A Summer of Research



Summer entomology student **Albert Ngui** demonstrates the Malaise trap (tent) and the ultra-violet light trap as moth-collecting tools.

*Photo: Irl Miller*



**Ksenija Vujnovic and Larry Nikiforuk** of Geowest Environmental Consultants sample vegetation and soils for Wagner's biophysical inventory this summer.

*Photo: Patsy Cotterill*



## The Wagner Grapevine



### Biophysical Inventory

The go-ahead for a biophysical inventory of Wagner (vegetation communities and soils) was given by the Alberta government (Natural Resources Division) this spring, and Geowest Environmental Consultants, based in Edmonton, were contracted to carry it out. The vegetation work was done by ecologist **Ksenija Vujnovic** and the soil samples were dug by Larry **Nikiforuk**, the pair working long days to take advantage of what good weather there was in July. A total of 91 plots were sampled and 18 permanent plots (for subsequent monitoring) were established. A report on the vegetation is due by the end of the year. The soil samples have been frozen pending analysis next year when further funding becomes available.

### Moth Project

**Albert Ngui**, University of Albert student, and Wagner summer student thanks to an employment grant from the federal Career and Placement Program, spent many a summer evening and night collecting moths in Wagner. This was the second year of collection and Albert managed to find 30 species of moths in addition to those collected last year, bringing the total number of species to just over 300. Chris Schmidt, also of the U of A, is working on the identification of these moths. *See pages 1 and 7 for pictures of some of the equipment used in collecting.* Congratulations to Albert for his contribution to entomology and our knowledge of Wagner biota.

### Natural Heritage Act (NHA)

The Act dealing with wilderness, parks and natural areas in Alberta introduced to the Legislature on March 1, 1999, met with such widespread criticism that it has been withdrawn by the government for re-drafting. In particular,

the Environmental Law Centre in Edmonton critiqued its legal implications (see their website [www.elc.ab.ca](http://www.elc.ab.ca) under "What's New") in detail. A committee of MLAs was set up during the summer to steer a process of public consultation prior to re-drafting, and in September stakeholder meetings were held in Calgary and Edmonton. The big environmental associations, and following their lead, Wagner Natural Area Society, boycotted the meetings, believing the consultation process to be flawed. However, the government is also soliciting input from the general public and everyone who is concerned about the future of our parks should take this opportunity to respond. (A special workbook-questionnaire has been produced for this purpose. The deadline for return is November 1, but letters to Premier Ralph Klein and Environment Minister Gary Mar will likely continue to receive attention after this date.) Two critical conservation messages should be conveyed to the government:

- no industrial use in protected areas; and
- no off-highway vehicle use in protected areas. (Areas should be specially designated for recreational ATV use and kept separate from protected areas.)

Another problem with the proposed Act is that so far it has left volunteer stewards of natural areas out in the cold respecting re-classification of their sites. From our preliminary consultations it would appear that Wagner will become a provincial park, a concept that may well work to the advantage of the site but will take some getting used to on our part. Come what may, we propose to retain the name Wagner Natural Area Society for our steward's group.

*See page 4 for further Grapevine news.*

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## Earl Erickson, Co-Founder of the Bluebird Trails of Parkland County

by Edgar T. Jones, H.L.L.D.

Tree swallow  
eggs in the  
nest.

Photo: Edgar T.  
Jones



During the winter of 1998-99, with deep snow throughout central Alberta, a friend, Cliff Kulak (a long-time resident of Parkland County), and I were looking around for any sightings of wildlife, i.e., animals and birds. Both seemed rather scarce but we did notice a large number of bird houses along the fence rows. It wasn't until June, after our spring migrant birds had arrived, that I realized that mountain bluebirds in the County were far above average numbers and that tree swallows were also using these nesting boxes in sizeable quantities.

As I hold one of Canada's older bird banding permits (having started my first banding of birds in the late '30s as a youngster), it was only natural that I should want to find out more about who originated and maintained this bluebird box building scheme. After many fruitless enquiries, I had the good fortune to meet Alvin Allen, who informed me that Earl Erickson, a former neighbour, was the man I was looking for. I made arrangements to visit him, now 93 and confined to the Devon Hospital, and received his permission to band some of the nesting bluebirds and swallows along his many miles of hand-made boxes. Mr. Erickson was very pleased to have someone take over his beloved bluebirds, which had been causing him concern, since he was no longer able to look after and maintain them. The problem—where were all the boxes he placed? In the 1930s when this program was begun marked range and township roads were non-existent, so although Mr. Erickson knew where the boxes were he could not identify their locations except in a general way. It was not until later that I learned about a second benefactor, Harry Scheideman (now deceased), a

friend and neighbour of Mr. Erickson's, who ran a similar 200-plus box program.

As I travelled Parkland County, it became apparent that the introduction of some 400-plus bluebird/tree swallow boxes had had an enormous effect on the success of these species, building up some of the highest reported densities in the Province of Alberta. The open, rolling countryside is good habitat for both species. It was not always so, however. As the rolling farmlands opened up new countryside, the bush was bulldozed out and roadside clearing of the ditches destroyed thousands of miles of valuable habitat. Fence posts, woodpecker holes, natural nesting sites for both species, and chokecherry, saskatoon and pincherry (food trees that support many thousands of migrating birds) were wiped out. Life thus became more difficult for our migrants. Despite several attempts to effect some change in these detrimental and destructive land clearing practices they have not changed significantly. Many parts of south-central Alberta are now completely without natural habitat and 95% of the roadside cover has been destroyed.

Many individuals and groups, in particular the Fish & Game Association of Stony Plain, deserve much credit for turning Parkland County into a haven for these beautiful birds. We are fortunate that we have had dedicated people like Earl Erickson who operated 296 houses on the fence lines and spent their excess time and money to promote the bluebird trails of Parkland County. It has always been my opinion that people who have made considerable contributions to saving wildlife should be recognized. Irl Miller and Stan Kozyra of Parkland County noted that a possible vehicle for such recognition could be the Stony Plain Fish & Game Conservation Award. In 1999 Earl Erickson and Harry Scheideman were awarded this accolade for their work in establishing the bluebird trails of Parkland County, a fitting tribute for the many years of service they have dedicated towards protecting and promoting our wildlife. The presentation to Mr. Erickson was made at the Devon Hospital on Tuesday, July 20<sup>th</sup>. Mrs. H. Scheideman accepted a plaque on behalf of her husband (now deceased) at her home near Genesee.

On a last note: It is pleasing to learn that the Stony Plain Fish & Game Association's efforts to promote

wildlife conservation have been directed towards Parkland's bluebird/tree swallow box program and that expansion with the support of the Government's Buck For Wildlife Program has greatly enhanced the situation. Stan Kozyra of Stony Plain Fish & Game has been looking after this program. More than 1,000 bird houses are in place and more are being added each year. There are several hundred additional boxes which have been placed by other concerned individuals within the County. For example, Kathleen Williams took over some 60 of Mr. Erickson's boxes and has another 90 of her own. It is interesting to note that after the bluebirds and tree swallows have nested, house wrens, a common Alberta songster, will frequently take over, particularly where bushes might have grown up. They fill up the box with small twigs and will raise six to eight young. As a result of this later take-over it is often August before the nest boxes can be cleaned out for next spring's arrivals. The suggestion

has been made that possibly the 4H Clubs or the Junior Forestry Wardens could help out with the cleaning at the end of the season. Bluebirds are very fussy and will not utilize a dirty box! They also do not like painted boxes.

*This article first appeared in Alberta Naturalist, Volume 29, Number 3, Fall 1999. Reproduced with permission of the publisher, the Federation of Alberta Naturalists.*

*Edgar Jones, a well-known wildlife photographer and film-maker, helped to establish Wagner Natural Area in the '70s, and is a founding member of the Wagner Society. He still regularly cleans out and repairs the tree swallow boxes in Wagner and experiments with boxes for owls and ducks. With the assistance of his wife Jeanne he spends much of his retirement banding, photographing, nest monitoring and doing other things to promote the welfare of birds and wildlife in general.*



### The Wagner Grapevine (continued)



#### Natural Areas Stewards Association (SAPAA)

Thanks to the initiative of Alison Dinwoodie and her communications assistant Marilyn Shannon, a general meeting to launch the Stewards of Alberta's Protected Areas Association has been called for Saturday, November 6 in Red Deer. The association aims to establish a network for stewards to exchange information and expertise, and to advocate for protected areas while working cooperatively with the government. A further aim is to increase public awareness and appreciation of protected areas. For more information call Alison at 437-7183.

#### Big Lake Water Study

Welcome to new Wagner executive member Ben Rostron! Ben, a petroleum hydrogeologist and assistant professor at the University of Alberta, has leapt into the fray as our representative on the steering committee of Parkland County's Big Lake Drainage Basin Study. UMA Engineering has been hired as the consultant for this study, which will evaluate surface water and drainage channels of the Big Lake drainage basin. Wagner, Acheson

Industrial Area and Highway 794 areas are included in the study, which should wrap up by spring of next year.

#### Wagner Field Trips, 1999

Our orchid walk in June 20 proved popular as usual. By contrast, our moss walk on May 8 led by Derek Johnson had little general appeal. This is a pity because, especially when viewed under a 10X or 15X hand lens, mosses, liverworts and lichens are fascinating. The field guide *Plants of the Western Boreal Forest and Aspen Parkland*, of which Derek is first author, has made these lower forms of green life much more accessible to the ordinary naturalist. Paying particular attention to lichens, Derek was able to add three new species to our existing list of about 30 lichens: *Melanelia subaurifera* on birch and *Ramalina dilacerata* and *Tuckermannopsis americana* on spruce. In our stroll around the Marl Pond Trail we examined, in greater or lesser detail, about 40 species of bryophytes, about a quarter of the total number we currently have listed for Wagner.

## Wagner Natural Area Society Volunteer Report

by Mel Movold

I started working as a volunteer for the Wagner Natural Area Society (WNAS) in mid-March of this year after retiring as a chemical engineer in the Power and Utilities Department at Dow Chemical in Fort Saskatchewan. Prior to joining Dow I worked for Cominco in their fertilizer operations in Trail, Kimberley, Calgary and Saskatoon.

My first assignment from Irl Miller was to compile the available literature and information on Wagner Natural Area (WNA) with the goal of putting abstracts of pertinent articles on the planned WNA web site and filing this information for future reference. Pat Clayton had several boxes of reports and articles on Wagner, but to ensure all information was compiled I also searched the following sources: University of Alberta Cameron, Rutherford and John Weir Libraries; Legislative Building Library; University of Alberta Departments of Biology, Civil/Environmental Engineering and Agriculture; Alberta Environmental Protection and other [government] departments; Land Titles Office; Edmonton Law Court records; Provincial Archives; Parkland County Office; and the *Stony Plain Examiner* newspaper.

All relevant reports, along with the articles held by Pat Clayton, were then gleaned and filed according an index developed by Pat Clayton and Alice Hendry. I also

- obtained copies of all the land titles for all the WNA properties, back to the patent titles, and summarized the ownership history for each of the properties;
- summarized the drilling, pipeline and seismic activity on WNA and surrounding properties;
- obtained a copy of the proceedings of a marl mining court case that took place between the CPR and William Wagner (who owned the property at the time).

The marl mining court case is interesting because it was a landmark case for Alberta. It initiated government legislation on surface rights and the ownership of marl (marl is calcium carbonate and is used in the manufacture of cement). Obtaining documentation of the case turned out to be a challenging and at times frustrating project. Irl Miller believed that the court case was between

Mr. Wagner and a cement company and took place some time during the Ernest Manning Social Credit era. Mr. Wagner presumably won the case as no marl extraction was ever done at WNA. Inland Cement had no records of any such case and searches of records at the John Weir Library, the civil court proceedings at the Provincial Archives (back to 1964), Land Titles, the Edmonton Law Court records and several government departments were also fruitless. The statutes manual at the Legislature Library which includes "An Act respecting Clay and Marl" that was assented to by the Alberta Government on April 12, 1961, was a key document in the search. This act declared that clay and marl at the surface of the land or which can be removed by surface stripping are and always have been owned by the owner of the surface. Further, clay and marl are not to be deemed a mine, mineral or valuable stone. The Law of Property and the Surface Right Acts were also amended at this same time. Based on this information I initiated a search of the microfilms at the Provincial Archives dating just before the passing of the Clay and Marl Act. A court case between William Wagner and the CPR was filed on September 17, 1957. The court case dragged on until 4 May, 1961, when Mr. Wagner, the plaintiff, discontinued court action. It can be assumed that this case prompted the Government of Alberta to clarify ownership of marl, thereby eliminating the CPR's claim. More details of this case can be found in the WNAS Physical Aspects files.

Currently, I am determining whether the quarter section of land immediately south and east of the WNA can be purchased or leased as a conservation easement. This quarter section was recently probated and it would make a great addition to the WNA. Concurrent with this project I am summarizing, from existing reports, the flora and fauna of WNA for input on the web site. When this has been completed I will write abstracts of pertinent reports, primarily biological studies, also for input to the web site.

To conclude, I have enjoyed getting to know the people involved with the WNAS as well as those working for the Federation of Alberta Naturalists (FAN) and the Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society. They are knowledgeable,

hard-working, dedicated to their causes and doing great things for our environment. I have learned much working for the WNAS and from my interactions with the other folks working here at the FAN office. My interest has been tweaked to learn more about and to do more for

our fragile environment. I hope my efforts will help in some way.

*Wagner Society thanks Mel Movold for his efforts on the Society's behalf and congratulates him on becoming a recruit to the environmental cause!*

### Wagner Society Executive, 1999

<b>President:</b>	<b>Pat Clayton (456-9046)</b>
<b>Past President/Treasurer:</b>	<b>Dave Ealey (422-0858)</b>
<b>Vice-President:</b>	<b>Irl Miller (455-3866)</b>
<b>Secretary/Editor/Membership:</b>	<b>Patsy Cotterill (481-1525)</b>
<b>Directors:</b>	<b>Leota Cummins (447-4256)</b>
	<b>Alice Hendry (962-4836)</b>
	<b>Beth Jenkins (458-1794)</b>
	<b>Derek Johnson (436-8231)</b>
	<b>Edgar Jones (436-5327)</b>
	<b>Ben Rostron (434-3839)</b>

### Wagner Contact Information

We regret that we no longer have a voice messaging system (988-4477). Our voice mail system was discontinued and we have been unable to find an equivalent to replace it. Also please note that Wagner Society has a new mailing address and letters/memberships /donations should be addressed to: Wagner Natural Area Society, 26519 Highway 16, Spruce Grove, Alberta T7X 3L4. Our (new) e-mail address is <wagnerfen@connect.ab.ca>. For information, or to report concerns, regarding the physical site, contact the office of Wayne Holland, Public Lands, Alberta Agriculture, Food & Rural Development at 464-7955.

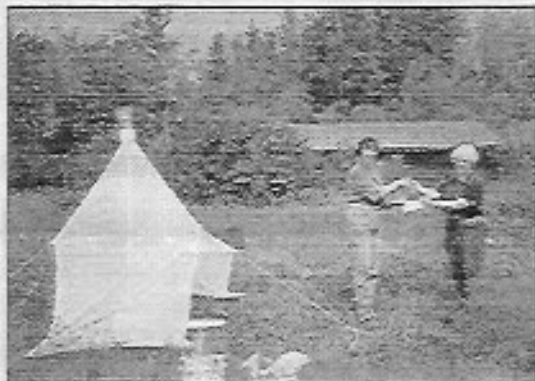
**Interested in native plants?** If so, you might like to join us at an Edmonton Plant Study Group winter-monthly meeting at the Provincial Museum. On **December 6**, Dr. Sean Graham, a botany professor at the University of Alberta, will be speaking on the evolutionary **origin of flowering plants**. On **January 10**, bryology students Nat Cleavitt and Jennifer Doubt will talk on "**Mountain adventures in moss conservation**." **February 7** is our own show-and-tell night with slides, pictures, arts

and crafts. On **March 6** Linda Kershaw will show slides of **New Zealand's vegetation** and on **April 10** Derek Johnson will speak on the **natural history and conservation problems of Madagascar**. All events take place in the ground floor lecture room of the Museum, begin at 7:30 p.m., and are free. The Edmonton Plant Study Group is sponsored by the Edmonton Natural History Club and the Alberta Native Plant Council.



## Wagner in Pictures

### *The Moth Project*

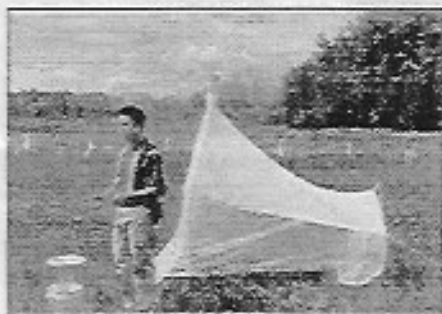


Joanne Archibald, of Canada Trust Friends of the Environment committee, giving a cheque worth \$3,065 to Pat Clayton, President of Wagner Natural Area Society (WNAS), for the moth-collecting project on June 30, 1999.

*Photo: Iri Miller.*

Summer student Albert Ngui demonstrating the ultra-violet light trap to (from left): Wayne Holland of Agriculture, Food & Rural Development, Katie Samoil, Beth Jenkins (WNAS), Alice Hendry (WNAS), Joanne Archibald, Pat Clayton and WNAS volunteer Mel Movold.

*Photo: Iri Miller*



Albert Ngui demonstrating the malaise tent and the UV light trap as moth collecting tools.

*Photo: Iri Miller*

### *The Biophysical Inventory*



Soil pit dug in an experimental plot as part of the biophysical inventory of WNA.

*Photo: P. Cotterill*

**Wagner in Literature:** If you want to learn more about Wagner Natural Area, read "Wagner's Wonderland" by Ed Struzik in the September 1999 issue of *Equinox* (pp. 55-61) and "The Alberta Fen Mosaic" by Rayma Peterson in *Wildflower* magazine, Summer 1999 (pp. 34-39).

## Wildflowers of Wagner No. 16

### Virginia Grape Fern Adder's-tongue Family

### *Botrychium virginianum* (L.) Sw. Ophioglossaceae

The grape ferns (*Botrychium* species) are an unusual genus of ferns which derive their name from their distinctive fertile fronds bearing clusters of tiny spore capsules (sporangia) somewhat resembling tiny grapes.

Drawing reproduced by kind permission of John Maywood.

Virginia grape fern is perhaps the species in the genus that most resembles common ferns such as the shield ferns (*Dryopteris* species). It has a well-developed, much divided leaf blade (sterile frond) and grows relatively tall (20 - 50 cm). The plant is anchored in the soil by a cluster of fleshy roots. From the top of the white or pale green common stalk or stipe arise the leaf (frond) and the modified leaf-stalk (sporophyll) which bears the spore cases (sporangia) along its tiny branches, the whole forming an elongated cluster.

The globose paired sporangia, each less than 1 mm across, are pale brown at first, becoming darker brown and opening by 2 rounded valves (somewhat like the valves of a mussel) to reveal the ball of white spores.

Virginia grape fern is a denizen of mixed-woods and deciduous woods throughout much of the province except the northernmost part, usually preferring moist soils. It is sporadic in occurrence but widely distributed, and may occur singly, or more commonly, in small populations of several plants. In Wagner it is very uncommon, known only from mixed-woods at two locations in the eastern portion of the site.

More than a dozen species of *Botrychium* occur in Alberta, most of them low-growing species with relatively undivided leaves that may not be recognized as ferns. Groups of similar species can present quite a challenge to identification; however, the Virginia grape fern is quite distinct and unlikely to be confused with other grape ferns in our area. Of these, leather grape fern (*B. multifidum*) occurs locally but uncommonly in dry, sandy grasslands and sand dune areas, while moonwort, *B. lunaria*, so called because its single leaf is divided into crescent-shaped leaflets, is common on well-drained soils in the mountains.

