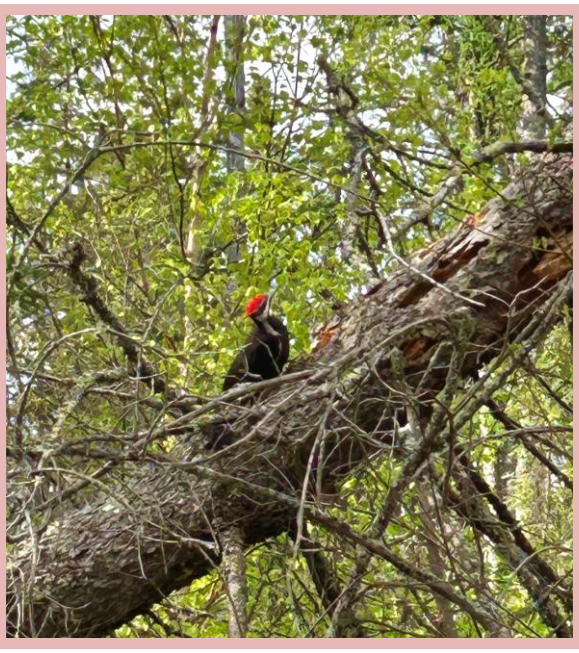
OUR MISSION

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

Friends of the Fen



Pileated woodpecker pictured on Marl Pond Trail. Downed and decomposing trees in Wagner Natural Area provide prime foraging opportunities for these deceptively large birds.

Photo courtesy of: Nathan Hempler

WAGNER NATURAL AREA SOCIETY NEWSLETTER

SUMMER 2025 WEED PULLS

When: June 7-8
July 19-20
August 9-10
Where: Meet in WNA parking lot--9 AM each day
Who: Volunteers interested in aiding WNA
What: Pulling weeds and tree management

Gloves/boots suggested. Dress for the weather. Training, tools, snacks and water provided.

RSVP by sending an email to info@wagnerfen.ca

ORCHID WALK

Join us on Father's Day to take a guided walk along Marl Pond Trail in search of Wagner Natural Area's many rare orchids! (and other flowering plants!!)

When: Sunday, June 15th (Father's Day)
- Three groups at 10AM, 11AM, and 12PM

Where: Meet at WNA parking lot

RSVP by sending an email to info@wagnerfen.ca

Summer Student 2025

By *Nathan Hempler*

Hello to all Friends of the Fen readers! My name is Nathan, and I am pleased to introduce myself as Wagner's Natural Area Specialist. If you have visited Wagner Natural Area in the month of May you have likely already seen myself and my colleagues working away.

I am a passionate outdoorsman and 2025 NAIT graduate with a diploma in Conservation Biology and I will be furthering my education at the University of Alberta in the fall. Conveniently, I reside in Spruce Grove less than ten minutes away from WNA (who doesn't love a short commute?). If you ran into me outside of Wagner it would probably be while on a hike or in an ice fishing tent. However, when you see me in the natural area, I will likely be studying a plant with my field guide in hand or blindly pursuing a bird call into the bush.

This summer while acting as Natural Area Specialist I have several professional goals that I hope to achieve. Namely, I want to develop my skills in writing, public education and project design. I plan to do this by producing an educational project that documents the development of WNA's native plants throughout the summer. I also want to learn more about what it takes to act as an effective land steward by spending time around the numerous experienced professionals involved with WNA.

My appreciation for the outdoors is ever growing so I personally look forward to experiencing the diversity of WNA's flora and fauna and I am equally excited to meet as many of WNA's passionate visitors as possible. If you happen to spot me don't hesitate to say hi as I am always more than happy to chat about the area and whatever is going on at the time. Educating people about the world around them is one of the many joys of working in biology and I believe it is a key step in connecting people to native Albertan wilderness.

Photo courtesy of: Nathan Hempler

I am thrilled to have this opportunity, and I hope to become a better, more well-rounded biologist by the end of it. See you on the trail!

Support Us!

Saline shooting star
(*Primula pauciflora)*
Photo courtesy of:
Nathan Hempler

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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

DONATIONS

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

Visit our website for donation/member form.

Name That Tune: White-throated Sparrows in WNA

By *Nathan Hempler*

When you visit Wagner Natural Area and make your way onto Marl Pond Trail you are likely to find yourself serenaded by a clear whistling song. Around the first five trail markers, under the cover of the balsam poplars, the sweet song emanates from all directions and just as one instance of the melody ends another almost always begins in response. If luck is on your side that day you may even spot one of the little culprits responsible for the singing, the white-throated sparrow.

The inspiration for this article struck me on the 13th of May when I met a Wagner visitor named Cheryl (who graciously contributed the photos accompanying this article). After a chat about the status of the area's marsh marigolds she told me that she had taken a picture of a bird on the trail, but she wasn't sure what it was. The picture showed a little bird with yellow lores (the regions between the eyes and bill) and white stripes on its head, a white-throated sparrow to be sure.

I then mentioned that we could hear the sparrow's song at that exact moment as the familiar sweet sound came from the trees around us. She responded to this in a way that many others have, "*I thought that was a chickadee!*". That response was the genesis for this article; the song of the black-capped chickadee is also a whistle and is sung at a similar pitch to that of the white-throated sparrow which often causes people (my recent self included) to confuse the two. Our conversation inspired me to write a bit about the white-throated sparrow to include in this newsletter to help readers pick it out visually or by ear when on the trail.

White-throated sparrow
(white-striped morph)
Photo courtesy of: Cheryl Moskaluk

The white-throated sparrow, *Zonotrichia albicollis*, is commonly found in Alberta's boreal forest and foothill natural regions. Generally, they are active near or on the ground as that is where they like to forage and nest. They can be identified visually by their yellow lores, white throats, and black-and-white striped crowns. This comes with the caveat that both sexes can appear in two different color morphs, those being white-striped and tan-striped. The features that distinguish one morph from the other are the color of their supercilia (eyebrows) and central crown stripes. In a white-striped morph these features are white and sharply outlined and in a tan-striped morph they are tan and drab.

But, as with most birds, you are more likely to hear the white-throated sparrow in Wagner than you are to see it. This makes it especially valuable to be able to recognize their song. As mentioned, white-throated sparrows produce a sweet whistle that is somewhat like that of the black-capped chickadee. Confusing the songs of these two birds is a very common mistake. The easiest way to differentiate the two is by their respective song's cadences and number of notes.

The song of the white-throated sparrow is the longer of the two and typically consists of between six and nine notes. It features distinct triplet patterns at the end and the cadence is remembered with the mnemonic "*oh sweet canada-canada-canada*".

The black-capped chickadee on the other hand has a shorter, simpler song consisting of only three notes. Its cadence can be remembered with the admittedly goofy but undeniably memorable mnemonic of "*cheeeese bur-ger*".

With all that information in mind I recommend that on your next visit you take an attentive walk down Marl Pond Trail. Listen closely and keep your eyes peeled, and I can all but guarantee that you will recognize one of our white-throated sparrows in one way or another.

White-throated sparrow
(tan-striped morph)
Photo courtesy of: Cheryl Moskaluk

May Cleanup and Weed Pull Report for Wagner

By *Dave Ealey*

While summer student Nathan was busy staffing the Wagner display on Migratory Bird Day (May 10) and Spruce Up Spruce Grove (May 24), I was documenting the fine work done by volunteers for our Spring Cleanup and our first Weed Pull Weekend for the summer.

Many thanks to all who helped with our Spring Clean-up on May 10 (a total of 13). An abundance of litter was cleaned up along our perimeter, the trail was given a thorough check, our picnic shelter received some FireSmarting work, brush was cleared at strategic locations, and some hazard trees were cleared.

Great work, everyone. Only 19 more weeks until Fall Clean-up (September 27).

Josefine displays a successfully extracted Manitoba maple. *Photo courtesy of: Chris Saunders*

Clearing picnic shelter roof – Firesmarting. *Photo courtesy of: Lu Carbyn*

Our first Weed Pull Weekend (May 24/25) of the year differed from last year, when we were down on our knees tackling the wily wild caraway in our hayfields. A little surprisingly, the caraway have been slow-growing this year and are too small to pull, so our focus was on removing Manitoba maple in all their forms (trees, saplings and seedlings). Our three volunteers (Josefine, Peggy and John) assisted our Weed Guru—Chris Saunders—and myself, as well as Nathan and our new Executive Director Tristan in pulling and otherwise extracting many, many, many maples!

Horticultural invasives like Manitoba maple and European mountain ash are very successful at spreading through wind and wildlife; we're hoping, through our strategic weed management efforts to keep these weeds from encroaching upon the sensitive unique vegetation areas in the interior of the natural area.

There will be lots of opportunities for volunteers to come out to help manage our weed problem; our next Weed Pull Weekend is June 7/8.

Green Jobs breaks down employment barriers for newcomer youth in Alberta

Article published in Canadian Parks and Recreation Association online newsletter, 2025

Isabela Bernsdorf
Photo courtesy of: Dave Ealey

As a recent newcomer from Brazil, Isabela Bernsdorf always had to try and prove herself when it came to employment opportunities in Canada. While she arrived with a background in biology, she had a tough time landing a job in the field.

That all changed in the summer of 2024, when she worked as an Environmental Project Specialist for the Wagner Natural Area Society in Edmonton, Alberta – a job made possible by the CPRA Green Jobs Initiative, which is funded by the Government of Canada's Youth Employment Skills Strategy program.

"Getting this job was a big, big break for me," says Bernsdorf. "I felt like I was finally being recognized here in Canada as a professional. It was validating and encouraging."

As an Environmental Project Specialist, Bernsdorf had many responsibilities for the Wagner Natural Area Society, a non-profit organization that looks after the Wagner Natural Area just outside of Edmonton. This small wetland of boreal forest serves as a home to precious wildlife including amphibians, butterflies, insects, and orchids.

Among many of her duties, Bernsdorf worked on site management, education and research projects, trail maintenance, and mapping invasive species. One of the most exciting parts of the job, she says, was managing the organization's wildlife camera pilot project funded by Parkland County. As part of the project, Bernsdorf set up cameras across the nature area that recorded wildlife living undisturbed in Wagner's interior forest. The project served many different purposes – such as educating the public, informing

where trail systems should be placed so they don't disturb habitats, and discovering new findings. For instance, the footage found that some of the area's white-tailed deer had atypical antlers, which Bernsdorf says could hint at inbreeding or injury.

"That's something that the Wagner Natural Area Society can monitor in the future," she says, adding that she also communicated the project's findings through the organization's newsletters and YouTube channel. "We had great feedback from the community, and that was our goal."

This opportunity, she says, gave her hands-on experience in wildlife monitoring and project management which she says will help her pursue a biology and conservation career in Canada.

Dave Ealey, president of the Wagner Natural Area Society, says that Bernsdorf brought great expertise and maturity to the role.

"We got a really good worker with strong knowledge," Ealey says, adding that the job gave her valuable environmental training that will help her in her job search. "Since she's only been in Canada a couple of years, this type of project allowed her to get experience in a Canadian setting. Now she can say she was employed in Alberta, and that goes a long way towards helping her get accreditation with the Alberta Society of Professional Biologists."

He adds that the funding helped the organization continue to provide young people with skills that will help them further their careers. Many youth employees who have worked at the organization have gone on to become biologists, he says, adding that one of their former summer students is now a board member and works for the Canadian Wildlife Service.

Ealey says he's confident Bernsdorf will succeed as a biologist in Canada, thanks to this opportunity. "Everything worked out really well for us and, I hope, for Isabela in her future career," Ealey says.

Isabela working on a wildlife camera
Photo courtesy of: Dave Ealey

Controlling Canada thistle in WNA

By *Nathan Hempler*

Despite its name, Canada thistle (*Cirsium arvense*) is a non-native plant species that was originally introduced to Canada by way of Europe. It is generally thought to be one of the first weeds that early settlers brought to North America.

Since this fateful introduction, Canada thistle has become naturalized in every Canadian province and territory, except for Nunavut (due to its harsh conditions). This naturalization means that Canada thistle has existed in Wagner long before the natural area was ever designated.

Provincially, Canada thistle is designated as a noxious weed under the Alberta Weed Control Act. This designation requires it to be controlled, meaning that landowners must prevent its growth or spread. This broad definition allows for various approaches to dealing with noxious weeds in Alberta—and, in our case, in Wagner.

The two primary approaches to the control of a noxious weed are chemical and biological. Chemical control involves the use of harsh herbicides to eradicate populations of noxious weeds. This method is generally the more popular of the two (especially in urban settings) due to its lower costs, ease of application, and perceived effectiveness. However, this "effectiveness" comes at the price of negatively impacting the surrounding vegetation and wildlife. In protected areas like Wagner, this type of control is rarely the first choice and is only applied if a population gets out of hand and can no longer be biologically controlled.

Biological control, on the other hand, consists of introducing organisms that naturally oppose the weed being managed. Examples of biological controls include predators, parasites, and fungi. This type of control provides a natural approach to weed management that leaves far less of a footprint on its surroundings compared to chemical control. In Wagner Natural Area, we have two primary biological control agents that help us manage Canada thistle.

The first is Canada thistle rust fungus (*Puccinia punctiformis*). This fungus is naturalized and almost always exists alongside Canada thistle, which is its only host. It was likely introduced concurrently with the initial introduction of Canada thistle. It can be identified by the presence of orange-yellow spores on the underside of Canada thistle leaves in the spring. Once it has infected a Canada thistle, it can kill the plant completely. It can be redistributed by introducing spore-bearing Canada thistle leaves to the rosettes of other Canada thistle plants.

The other biological control we apply to Canada thistle at WNA is the thistle stem gall fly (*Urophora cardui*) which I will refer to as TSGF throughout this article. Adult TSGF lay

their eggs on the stems of Canada thistle. Once hatched, the larvae migrate into the stems and form galls (ball-shaped swellings) in which they overwinter. During this time, they feed on the Canada thistle, reducing the plant's overall vigor. When the flies are nearly fully grown, they chew through the gall's outer wall and leave to lay their eggs on new Canada thistle plants. The easiest way to recognize an adult TSGF is by the distinct W-shaped pattern on its wings.

Adult female thistle stem gall fly reared from overwintered gall

Photo courtesy of: Chris Saunders

TSGF were originally introduced to WNA's Osborne Field in 2017 by an Alberta-based nonprofit providing biological controls. This summer, we are continuing our ongoing goal of redistributing them throughout the natural area to increase their population and impact more Canada thistle. TSGF tend to thrive in more humid spaces, so the ideal release site features both an abundance of Canada thistle and a permanent water source.

The most recent development in our biological control work occurred on May 25th, when we collected 12 Canada thistle galls from WNA's central field. Our weed management expert, Chris Saunders, will be rearing these flies at home to determine how many emerge from the galls. This will give us an idea of their success rate. Finally, these successful, parasitoid-free flies will be redistributed to further combat the Canada thistle in Wagner Natural Area. Between our thistle stem gall flies and rust fungi, we hope to effectively control Canada thistle in WNA without the use of herbicides.

New Canada thistle exhibiting a gall on its stem (August 2023)

Photo courtesy of: Chris Saunders

How To Transform Games of Chance Into A Charitable Service

By David Fielder

Casinos are the Wagner Natural Area Society's main source of revenue, allowing us to conduct a wide range of projects.

Our next casino is scheduled on Friday/Saturday, August 15/16, 2025.

We need 25 volunteers to work it. Please consider working the casino so that funds continue to be available to hire summer students, provide various outreach programs and conduct our many other activities.
All training will be provided and the event should be enjoyable—a free meal is included!

When: Friday, August 15, 2025 & Saturday, August 16, 2025
Where: Century Casino St. Albert;
(24 Boudreau Rd.)
Who: 25 volunteers needed
Positions: General Manager, Banker, Cashier, Chip Runner, Count Room Supervisor, Count Room Worker

Shifts:

Day 1 - Fri, August 15, 2025
Day Cash Cage: 9:00 AM - 7:00 PM
Night Cash Cage: 6:15 PM - 4:00 AM
Count Room: 11:30 PM - 3:30 AM

Day 2 - Sat, August 16, 2025
Day Cash Cage: 9:00 AM - 7:00 PM
Night Cash Cage: 6:15 PM - 4:00 AM
Count Room: 11:30 PM - 3:30 AM

To volunteer or if you have any questions, please email **treasurer@wagnerfen.ca** with your first and second choices for the following: position, day and shift.

General Requirements for Casino Volunteers

- Possess picture identification at all times during the casino event;
- Competent in handling money;
- Able to hear, see, speak or have an attendant with these capabilities;
- Alert and observant;
- Able to manoeuvre in the casino facility for the duration of the shift;
- Able to function in a noisy and possibly smoky environment;
- Able to use CasinoTrack system for certain positions as taught by the Casino Advisor;
- Able to pass a security clearance check; and
- Be a minimum of 18 years of age.

Casinos help fund displays for public outreach as here at the annual Orchid Show. *Photo courtesy of: Dave Ealey*