



# Y u k o n **WARBLER**

THE NEWSLETTER OF THE YUKON BIRD CLUB - WINTER 1994 (Vol.2, No.3)  
P.O.Box 31054, Whitehorse, Yukon, Canada, Y1A 5P7

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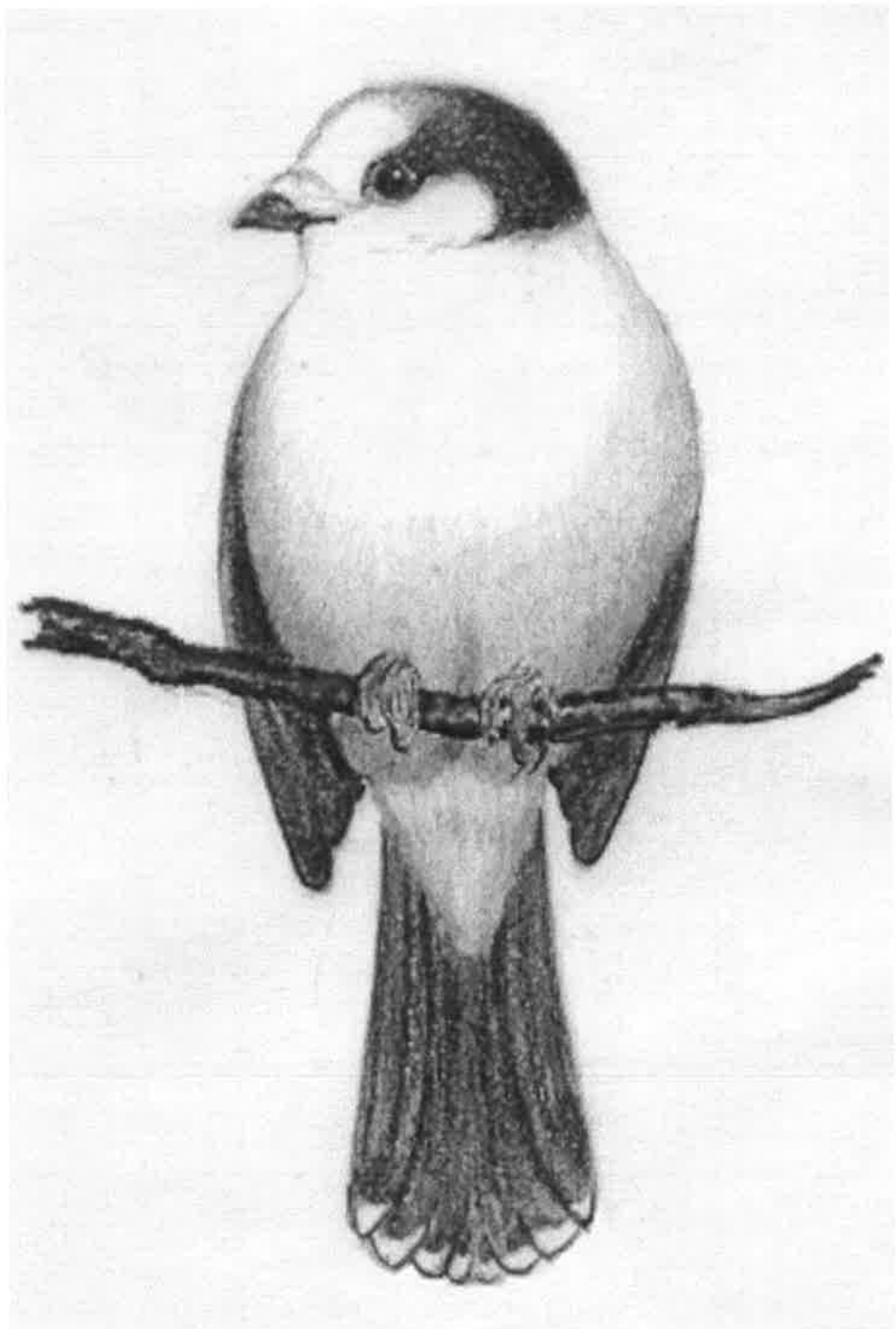
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*This lovely Gray Jay by Pam Sinclair appears on the cover of the Yukon Bird Club's new "Checklist of the Birds of Whitehorse"*

## Winter Field Trips and Events

**CHRISTMAS BIRD COUNTS** Field and feeder watchers with any level of experience are welcome to participate! Please note that there is a \$6.25 participation fee which covers national Christmas Count publication costs. For more information call the count coordinator listed below a few days before the count.

**Sunday 18 December. *The Marsh Lake Count.*** Call Helmut Grünberg at 667-6703

**Wednesday 21 December. *The Kluane Lake Count.*** Call Todd Heakes at 841-4561.

**Monday 26 December. *The Whitehorse Count.*** Call Wendy Nixon at 668-7572

**Monday 26 December. *The Watson Lake Count.*** Call Rob Florkiewicz at 536-2157.

**WEEKEND DAY TRIPS** Dress for the weather, wear appropriate footwear, bring a lunch and binoculars. For more information or to arrange a ride call Pam Sinclair at 667-4630.

**Saturday 21 January. *Tagish Birding Tour - Winter Edition!!*** Join Helmut Grünberg for the second annual winter waterfowl prowl. Participants on last year's trip will remember the spectacular view of a Northern Hawk-Owl, the hardy defiance of a lone Common Goldeneye, and the delightful antics of White-winged Crossbill flocks. Dress warmly, bring a lunch and **meet at Porter Creek's Super A at 10:00 am.**

**Saturday 18 February. *The All New February Feeder Round-up!!*** Join Wendy Nixon and friends for the first annual February feeder hopping tour. Those who came on last November's tour will not only recall the special birds such as Mountain Chickadee and Red-breasted Nuthatch but also the delightful social atmosphere which made the outing such a great success! Dress warmly and **meet at the Porter Creek Super A at 10:30 a.m.**

**Saturday 4 March. *Winter Ptarmigan Quest!!*** What better way to look for winter ptarmigan than to wait until winter is almost over! If the road is open we will drive to the top of Haeckel Hill and set out on a hike in search of Rock and Willow Ptarmigan and perhaps a Snow Bunting. Bring snowshoes, skis, or high winter boots, a lunch and dress for the weather. **Meet at the Porter Creek Super A at 10:30 am.**  
Leader: Cameron Eckert

### **GENERAL MEETING**

**Thursday 12 January. *Spring '95 with the Yukon Bird Club.*** Board of Directors should plan to attend and all members are welcome to attend this general meeting to discuss spring projects and plans for spring. **Meet at the Whitehorse Public Library at 7:00 pm.**

### **EVENING EVENTS**

**Wednesday 25 January. *Breeding Bird Explorations Along the Liard River.*** In this slide-illustrated presentation Cameron Eckert and Pam Sinclair will highlight an exciting summer of avian exploration and discovery in the Liard River's little-known riparian forests.  
**Meet at the Whitehorse Public Library at 7:00 pm.**

**Wednesday 8 February. *Natural History of Cape Vera, Devon Island.*** Stuart Alexander will take us on an illustrated tour of a most remarkable and isolated polar desert landscape. Rich seabird colonies, dramatic scenery and the mystery of polynias will make for an exciting evening!  
**Meet at the Whitehorse Public Library at 7:00 pm.**

*More events ...*

## More Evening Events

**Wednesday 22 February. *A Birder's Journey to the Edge of the Earth!*** This past summer the *Birds of the Yukon Project* sent Greg and Lee Kubica on an mountain birding odyssey in the remote Lansing area. Join them for a slide-illustrated presentation highlighting their discoveries.

**Meet at the Whitehorse Public Library at 7:00 pm.**

**Wednesday 8 March. *The Second Annual From Gizz to Gee Whizz Identification Workshop.*** Join Cameron Eckert and get the jump on spring with a slide-illustrated presentation exploring the myriad challenges of bird identification. **Meet at the Whitehorse Public Library at 7:00 pm.**

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## Fall Field Trip Report

*by Pam Sinclair*

Nine hardy birders who joined Lee Kubica's trek to the Stony Creek Uplands on September 24th were well rewarded. No fewer than six Golden Eagles were soaring over the alpine ridges, and a beautiful immature Northern Goshawk looked on from a nearby snag while the group stopped for lunch! Even the promised ptarmigan made a showing, when a flock of 20 were spied in the scope on a distant ridge. We managed to spot half-a-dozen passerine species as well, including four American Pipits, a lone Lapland Longspur, and a stealthy Northern Shrike. A couple of Dall's Sheep were a treat for the group as well.

High water at Shallow Bay prevented the October 2nd outing from being much of a shoreline hike, but eight waterfowl species brightened up the grey, blustery morning. 240 Tundra Swans, including 40 of this year's young, were feeding in the bay, along with a Greater White-fronted Goose, 70 Canada Geese, nine White-winged Scoters, and a variety of dabbling ducks. Flocks of Rusty Blackbirds and Lapland Longspurs,



*A female Pine Grosbeak - a star attraction on the feeder hopping tour. Photo by Cameron Eckert*

buffeted by the wind, were thinking seriously about heading south. In a spontaneous and unanimous move, the group then relocated to the Whitehorse Landfill to view Herring, Thayer's, and Glaucous Gulls, a Bald Eagle, and the antics of ravens and magpies.

Skagway, Alaska, offered more blustery weather on October 8th. A Steller's Jay blowing by far overhead at high speed was not quite the view we had in mind, but two American Dippers were very cooperative. The one duck of the day was a Harlequin, spotted from the still-solid White Pass dock, along with Glaucous-winged, Mew, and Bonaparte's Gulls. The lush rainforests provided views of the exotic Chestnut-backed Chickadee, as well as Golden-crowned Kinglets and an unusual but lovely bell (you had to be there).

Wendy Nixon's Feeder-Hopping outing on November 26th was great fun for the enthusiastic crowd of 15. Nineteen Pine Grosbeaks at Barb Studd's feeder, a delightful Red-breasted Nuthatch at Wendy's, and a rare Mountain Chickadee at Ann Jessup's were highlights, as were the delicious goodies and hot chocolate, and the exciting exchange of recent sightings by the participants. Thanks to all!

## ✓ A Checklist of the Birds of Whitehorse

Last spring the Yukon Bird Club received a \$300 grant from the City of Whitehorse Environment Fund to produce a checklist of Whitehorse area birds. Five Yukon Bird Club members formed a *Checklist Committee* to compile and produce the checklist. The goal was to concisely and accurately describe current knowledge of the seasonal abundance and breeding status of all birds recorded in the Whitehorse area.

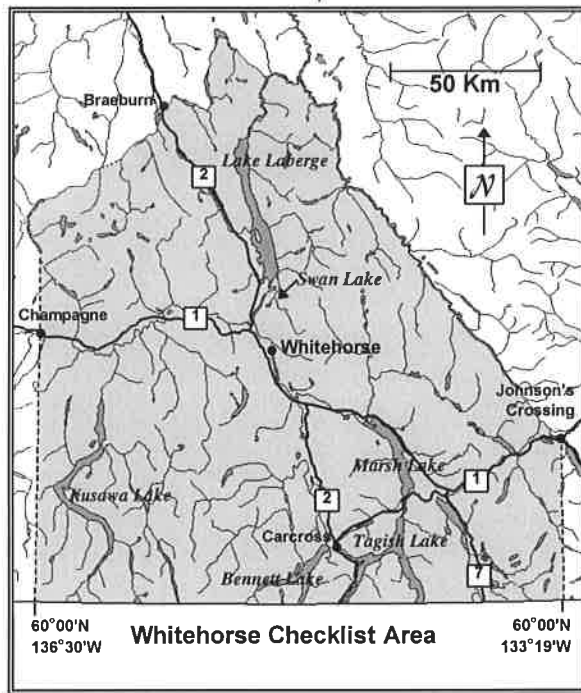
The first step was to define the extent of the checklist area. The city limits did not seem suitable as many Whitehorse birders spend much of their time exploring areas outside the city limits. Not wanting to exclude great birding areas like Swan Lake, M'Clintock Bay or Montana Mountain we defined a large area (shaded on the adjacent map).

The City of Whitehorse is the approximate centre, and the checklist area runs from Johnson's Crossing west to Champagne along the Alaska Highway (Hwy 1); from the B.C. border north to Braeburn on the Klondike Highway (Hwy 2); and south to the B.C. border on the Atlin Road (Hwy 7).

The next step was to define the seasons. While each person views seasons differently, we let the passage of birds set the definition. For example, even though March finds the Yukon wrapped in snow, spring migrants such as Snow Buntings are arriving and breeding is well underway for species such as Great Horned Owls and Gray Jays. Most would agree that mid-November has the feel of winter, yet late fall migrants are still fleeing south. Yellow-rumped Warbler, Ruby-crowned Kinglet, and Palm Warbler have all been observed in November.

We referenced stacks of field notes to accurately describe the seasonal abundance of each species and took great care to ensure that documentation was established for rare, casual or accidental species. Seasonal occurrences and breeding status are based on substantiated records rather than

assumptions. For example, Rosy Finches may be common breeders in the high alpine of the Whitehorse area, yet there are very few documented records and breeding has not been confirmed. Thus Rosy Finch is listed as casual in all seasons and breeding waits to be confirmed - perhaps on one of next summer's outings.



We used a rigorous definition for *confirmed breeding* requiring observations of an active nest or dependent, flightless young. While a bird feigning injury or an adult bird carrying food strongly implies that young are close at hand, these types of observations still have an element of "probability": one *assumes* that young are present, and thus we would describe such birds as "probable" breeders. To keep the checklist simple we did not include a code for "probable breeders".

In the Yukon individual birders can make valuable contributions to our knowledge of the territory's bird life. We hope that visiting and local birders will use the checklist and make special note when their observations can add new information to the checklist. Has anyone seen a Hooded Merganser in the summer, a Hudsonian Godwit in fall, or a Belted Kingfisher in late February? There are some obvious "misses" for confirmed breeders such as Northern Harrier, and Wilson's Warbler. We encourage all birders to help keep the checklist accurate and up to date. Please send written or photo documentation of rare, casual and accidental species or species not listed on the checklist, and details of breeding observations to the Yukon Bird Club.

# Christmas Bird Counts: *Winter Birding at its Best!!*

by *Cameron Eckert*

Don't miss your chance this year to participate in perhaps the world's greatest birding event - the annual *Christmas Bird Count*. Each count is a one day survey within a 24 kilometre diameter count area. Counts may be held on any day within a two week period around December 25. Not only are Christmas Counts an excellent way to experience the best in winter birding, they are also a great way to meet other birders.

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***“The Christmas Bird Count  
is perhaps the world's greatest  
birding event!”***

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Christmas counts welcome all birders regardless of their experience and there is no limit to the number of birders that can participate in a count. Whether you want to spend all day trekking the woods on snowshoes, or a couple of hours out skiing along your favorite trail, or recording birds at your backyard feeder - your participation in any or all of Yukon's counts is welcome.

Four counts will be held in the Yukon this year: The **Marsh Lake count** on December 19 (Call Helmut Grünberg @ 667-6703).

The **Whitehorse count** on December 26 (call Wendy Nixon @ 668-2285). The **Kluane count** on December 21 (call Todd Heakes @ 841-4561). The **Watson Lake count** on December 26 (call Rob Florkiewicz @ 536-2157). Birders should contact count area coordinators (noted above) a few days before the count.

Last year a total of 25 species and over 1100 individual birds were recorded on the four Yukon counts. The Marsh Lake count included open water at the Lewes dam where 2 Common Mergansers and 1 Common Goldeneye were observed. As well, a Three-toed Woodpecker, a Red-breasted Nuthatch, 72 White-winged Crossbills and 21 Gray Jays were tallied. On the Whitehorse count 13 participants turned up 26 species with unusual finds including a European Starling, a Mountain Chickadee and 3 Dark-eyed Juncos. Participants on the newly established Watson Lake count wasted no time in finding a variety of interesting species including 6 Evening Grosbeaks and a lone Ruffed Grouse. Kluane Lake count birders tallied a remarkable 8 Three-toed Woodpeckers and 2 Black-backed Woodpeckers. As well, they spotted a Boreal Owl.

***See you there!!***



***Christmas Count veterans take flight!***

*Photo-illustration by Cameron Eckert*

## Report on YBC's 1994 Annual General Meeting

This year's AGM proved to be a very enjoyable social event. YBC field trip coordinator, Pam Sinclair presented a brief yet eloquent field trip report. YBC treasurer, Jeremy Baumbach presented an organized and concise financial report. The main order of business was to elect the 1994/95 Board of Directors which went quite well. The Yukon Bird Club welcomes two new board members; Lee Kubica has undertaken the task of *Checklist Coordinator* and Dennis Kuch will serve as YBC's *Special Projects Coordinator*. All other board members were re-elected to their current positions.

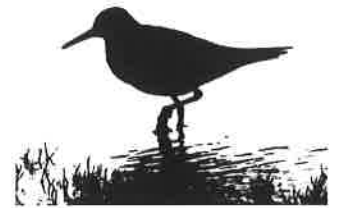
It was noted that YBC's constitution requires an amendment to include three Board of Directors positions which are not currently listed: *Sightings Coordinator*, *Bird-a-Thon Coordinator* and

*Checklist Coordinator*. It was decided that a vote would be held on the proposed amendment at a future general meeting (see below).

A door-prize draw made for good fun. Pat Swenson won a copy of National Geographic's *Field Guide to the Birds of North America* and Robin Fairburn won a copy of *Birds of Swan Lake, Yukon*. This seemed quite appropriate as Robin ventured out to Swan Lake on Helmut's wonderful September 17th field trip.

Great thanks goes to Lee Kubica who presented a wonderful slide show highlighting the birds and scenery typical of a trip to Skagway, Alaska.

*Thanks Lee!!*



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### *YBC members asked to amend Constitution*

At the **Wednesday March 8th** meeting members will vote on the following amendments to YBC's constitution. These changes will give constitutional status to newly created Board of Directors positions: *Sightings Coordinator*, *Bird-a-Thon Coordinator*, and *Checklist Coordinator*. Members Helmut Grünberg, René Carlson, and Lee Kubica were elected to these positions at the 1994 AGM.

#### **Proposed changes to YBC constitution section 2.5 (b):**

##### **Current text:**

*The General membership shall elect up to nine (9) members to following positions on the Board of Directors.*

##### **Proposed text:**

*The General membership shall elect up to thirteen (13) members to the following positions on the Board of Directors.*

##### **Proposed additions:**

- ix) Sightings Coordinator - who shall be responsible for collecting and organizing Yukon bird sightings and writing a seasonal sightings report for the newsletter.*
  - x) Checklist Coordinator - who shall be responsible for coordinating the club's involvement in producing and compiling bird checklists, and coordinating the collection and storage of documentation of breeding records and unusual sightings.*
  - xi) Bird-a-Thon Coordinator - who shall be responsible for coordinating the yearly joint Yukon Bird Club - Yukon Conservation Society Bird-a-Thon.*
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*I spy with my binocular eye ...*

# A Yukon Birder's Word Puzzle

*by Jeremy Baumbach*

*This tricky word puzzle challenges birders to identify various Yukon birds by the following characteristics. Then, using the numbers, fill in the letters to uncover a verse by Byron.*

1) white rump  
(2 solutions)

i) 11 13 4 1 2 3 4 11 2 7 4 4 5 3 4  
 ii) 11 13 4 1 2 3 4 11 20 9 5 16 23 3 4

2) pink feet

i) 2 3 4 4 5 11 21 21 10 9 9

3) yellow-tipped tail

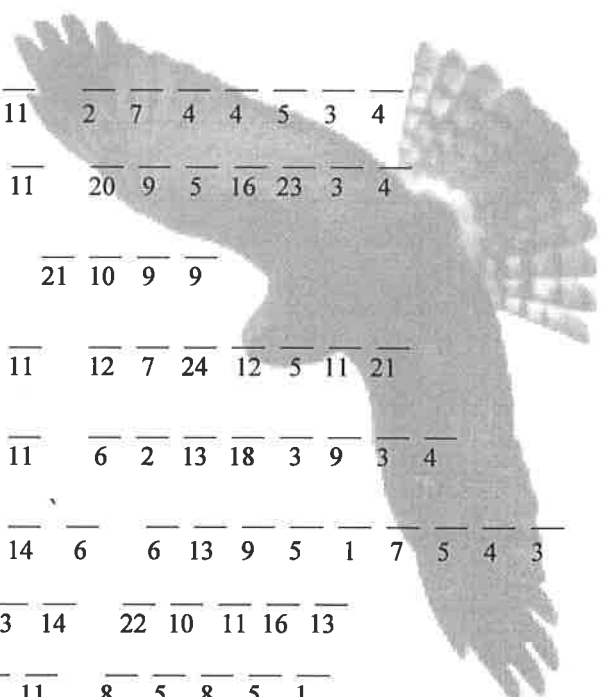
i) 19 13 2 3 17 5 7 11 12 7 24 12 5 11 21

4) broad elongated bill

i) 11 13 4 1 2 3 4 11 6 2 13 18 3 9 3 4

5) white outer tail feathers  
(3 solutions)

i) 1 13 12 11 6 3 11 14 6 6 13 9 5 1 7 5 4 3  
 ii) 14 7 4 23 3 15 3 14 22 10 11 16 13  
 iii) 7 17 3 4 5 16 7 11 8 5 8 5 1



*and the verse by Byron ...*

“  
1 2 3 4 3 5 6 7 8 9 3 7 6 10 4 3 5 11 1 2 3 8 7 1 2 9 3 6 6 12 13 13  
 14 6  
1 2 3 4 3 5 6 7 4 7 8 1 10 4 3 13 11 1 2 3 9 13 11 3 9 15 6 2 13 4 3  
1 2 3 4 3 5 6 6 13 16 5 3 1 15 12 2 3 4 3 11 13 11 3 5 11 1 4 10 14 3 6  
19 15 1 2 3 14 3 3 8 6 3 7 7 11 14 17 10 6 5 16 5 11 5 1 6 4 13 7 4  
5 9 13 18 3 11 13 1 17 7 11 1 2 3 9 3 6 6 19 10 1 11 7 1 10 4 3 17 13 4 3  
 20 4 13 17 1 2 3 6 3 13 10 4 5 11 1 3 4 18 5 3 12 6  
 ”

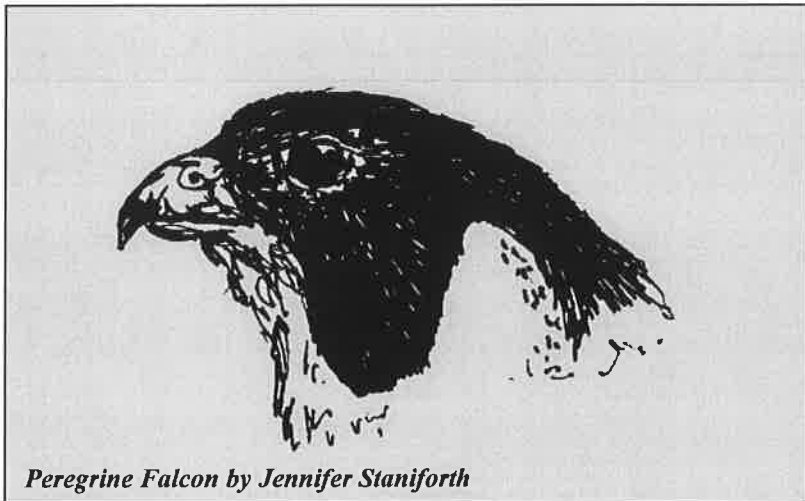
- Byron

*See page 16 for the solution*

## Discovering Swan Lake's Birding Treasures

by Helmut Grünberg

Trip leaders do not normally write about their own trips. There is always a danger of bragging. However, YBC's trip to Swan Lake on September 17th is different - *I have to brag about it!* Never before have 17 pairs of eyes scanned the lake and marshes of Swan Lake. The positive results were obvious. From the start I had suggested a friendly competition: Whoever finds a bird that has never been seen at Swan Lake in the second half of September wins a copy of *Birds of Swan Lake, Yukon*. The book was gone in five minutes when Dave Odlum discovered some Red Crossbills in a spruce tree.



Peregrine Falcon by Jennifer Staniforth

Before starting our walk around Swan Lake, we spent half an hour at the lake's edge. Several spotting scopes made observations easier and people were looking at the grebes and ducks on the lake. Pam Sinclair started a trend for the day: *finding raptors*. Casually she mentioned that she had spotted an Osprey on a tree top across the lake. A moment of great excitement ensued during which everybody got a good look at the beautiful bird. This was only the second Osprey record for Swan Lake; the first was 13 years ago in September. Just when everybody was finished looking at the

Osprey, Pam in her quiet way drew our attention to a Peregrine Falcon on the other side of the lake. Before most of us got a good look at the falcon, it took off and a moment later landed on the same tree just vacated by the Osprey! This was a special treat as most of the participants had never seen an adult Peregrine this well. The parade of raptors continued as we spotted Northern Harriers gliding over the marshes in their "uneasy" flight. One by one a total of five Sharp-shinned Hawks appeared over the trees to the north and disappeared beyond the trees to the south in their southward migration. A Northern Goshawk flew low over the trees passing right over some of the participants. We spotted Red-tailed Hawks and a Golden Eagle circling high over the forests, and about six American Kestrels migrating or lingering at the forest's edge. During our four hour outing we saw eight of the Yukon's thirteen species of hawks, eagles and falcons!

We walked along the lake through Shrub Birch and willow on trails made by horses and reached an open area southwest of the lake. This area is a marsh with ponds and sloughs and is a preferred habitat of shorebirds during spring and fall migration. Shorebirds tend to migrate earlier in the fall but we were still able to find four Pectoral Sandpipers with their streaked breast set sharp against a whitish belly.

As we made our way around the south side of the lake some of us with rubber boots walked to the water's edge to get another view of the water birds. We tallied about 430 ducks belonging to nine species, four Horned Grebes, and a lone Canada Goose. While these birds were not particularly unusual it provided an excellent opportunity to distinguish Greater and Lesser Scaup and Ring-necked Ducks. As well we compared a breeding plumage male Surf Scoter with a female White-winged Scoter. We reached our lunch spot after walking through meadows to the edge of a huge marsh. An area of ponds in front of us was nearly dried out. These famous "Rarity Ponds" did not do their name justice. I recommend that you go there next spring in early May when these ponds will be teeming with ducks and shorebirds.

*Continued on page 9 ...*



## *En route to Rarity Ponds ...*

Our final tally was 35 species. There were new and interesting ones for everyone; some were delighted by a good look at a Spruce Grouse, while others were intrigued by the nasal call of a Red-breasted Nuthatch. The smiles at the end of the day showed that there was enjoyment for each and every one of us. The more experienced observers happily shared identification tips. For me the observation of a Black-billed Magpie was particularly interesting as this species has only been seen three or four times in the past 18 years at Swan Lake. Most songbirds had already departed but we still saw about 15 species. Some like the Pine Grosbeak and Boreal Chickadee will stick it out for the winter and others like American

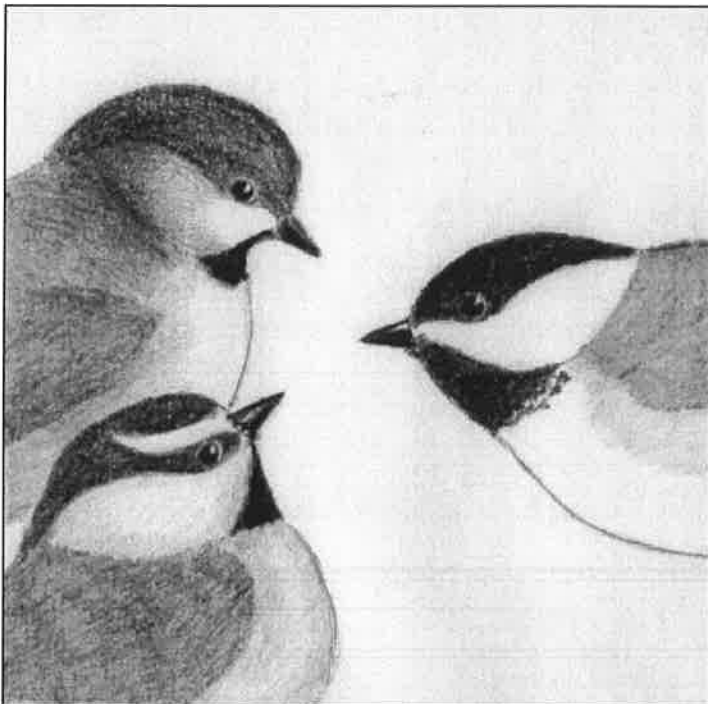
Pipit and Yellow-rumped Warbler will continue south.

We made our way back from "Rarity Ponds", each at our own pace. We even met some late-comers who had missed the obscure trail to the lake. They had birded other parts of the Swan Lake area and had a few goodies of their own to talk about. I hope that the newcomers to Swan Lake as well as the old-timers will remember this trip as a special one. Some of us still talk about the abundance and variety of raptors on that special outing. If you missed this year's trip then take note; *We're doing it again next September!*

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## **Little Brown Bird #4: *The Chickadees***

*by Wendy Nixon*



*A trio of chickadees - Boreal, Black-capped and Mountain by Pam Sinclair*

*day-day*". The Mountain Chickadee has an aggressive, harsher call than the other chickadees - a "*chick-adee-adee-adee*", and a three or four note descending song; "*fee-bee-bay*". The best way to sort them out is to find a spot with both Boreal and Black-capped Chickadees and spend a few minutes watching and listening! Once you can distinguish between the two common chickadees, you'll know a Mountain Chickadee is something new and different when you come across one.

The cheery little birds of winter known as chickadees could be one of four species. Boreal Chickadees are the most common in the Yukon, Black-capped Chickadees are quite common in settled areas, Mountain Chickadees are rare, and only the very lucky eventually observe the Siberian Tit. Here I will focus on the three more common species: Boreal, Black-capped and Mountain.

All of our chickadees have black chins, dark caps, pale breasts and grey tails. The Boreal Chickadee is the most colourful having a brown head and back, dark grey wings and reddish-brown sides and flanks. The Black-capped and Mountain Chickadees both have greyish backs, buffy flanks, and sharp color contrast between the black cap and white cheek patches. The Mountain Chickadee can be distinguished by its distinct white eyebrow.

Chickadee calls are a bit tricky. They all have a "*chick-a-dee*" type call, but the Black-capped Chickadee has the most clearly pronounced "*chicka-dee-dee-dee*" and a two or three note whistled song "*fee-bee*" with a high then low note. The Boreal Chickadee's call is slower, more nasal and high-pitched which some describe as "*tseek-a-*

## Great Birding Moments: *A Yukon First on Herschel Island*

by *Helmut Grünberg*

*July 21, 1991*

The water of the Arctic Ocean around Herschel Island in the northern Yukon was pretty choppy today. I had arrived by Zodiak three days ago and would continue my journey northwest in a few days. My tent was protected in a shelter made of driftwood with a large orange tarp over the tent to keep the rain out. Pauline Cove has a few historic and recent buildings. So I was among people today. I walked over to one of the buildings and met Bill Hedges. He knew that I was a birder and described a strange bird he had seen today. He described a small "tern-like" bird flying at the tip of the sandspit just past my shelter. He and I both knew that the only tern in the area is the Arctic Tern, and he indicated that it was definitely not an Arctic Tern. The gulls that regularly occur around Herschel Island are Glaucous Gulls, and they are much too large to fit the description. Our best guess was that he had seen a golden-plover. I did not give it too much thought because birds can fly, and if you see it once, you may not see it again at the same spot.

A little later I took a walk to the sandspit. I had half-forgotten the possible golden-plover sighting, a common bird on Herschel. There were the usual Common Eiders with young and some Glaucous Gulls. I slowly walked to the very end of the sandspit and was ready to turn back when a small gull suddenly flew off just in front of me. Instantly I knew that this was not one of the 10 to 20 species I had seen each day for the last week. In fact, I had never seen this bird before, and I did not have a field guide with me. Excitement, excitement! *Get a look at it! Stay around, bird ... don't fly too far!* It must have heard my thoughts.

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***"I saw its wedged-shaped tail and knew that neither the Little Gull nor the kittiwake have such a tail"***

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The small and unusual bird settled down nearby. I saw a juvenile gull which indeed had a tern-like flight (I guess all small gulls do). Its black wing-pattern reminded me of a Little Gull or a kittiwake, but I saw its wedge-shaped tail and knew that neither the Little Gull nor the kittiwake have such a



Juvenile Ross' Gull, July 23, 1991, Herschel Island, YT.  
*Photo by George Higgins*

tail. I recalled that only one gull has a wedge-shaped tail - but I could not remember which one. I rushed to my tent, got the field guide, hastily went to the gull section, and there it was: *Ross' Gull!* Wow! A first record for the Yukon! After a sighting like this there is a moment of great pleasure at having found something new.

The Ross' Gull primarily breeds in northern Siberia, and has been recorded from Hudson Bay, the Canadian high Arctic and Greenland as a rare breeder. Every fall Point Barrow, Alaska experiences a spectacular Ross' Gull migration as they move from their Russian breeding grounds to feed in the Beaufort Sea. The Ross' Gull has been described as the most strictly Arctic of all gulls and its winter range is poorly known.

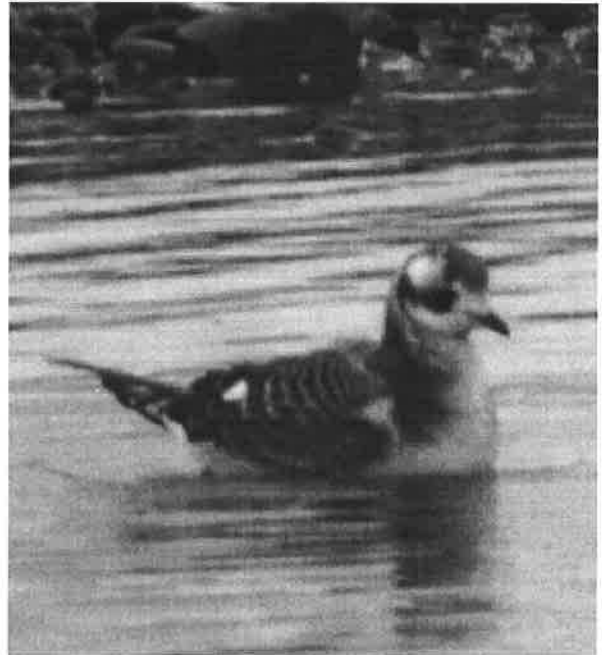
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## *Confirming the Ross' Gull ...*

My next thought was to confirm and document the sighting and to share it with others. I got my camera and hoped the Ross' Gull would still be there. I easily relocated the bird and began making notes and taking photos. The first photo was no larger than a dust speck. I hesitated to approach too closely as I was afraid the gull would fly off. It was sitting on the other side of a little pool. I dropped to my knees and began a slow crawl towards the bird, taking photo after photo as I moved closer. At a distance of 20 metres the gull flew off. I had taken 17 photos. I never did manage to get a good aerial view photo of the wedge-shaped tail - a near impossible task. Some photos "*sort of*" show it. Fortunately, other characteristics such as the pattern of black and white on the wings, the black tips of the central tail feathers, and the tiny bill clearly showed that this was a Ross' Gull.

I went back to find Bill and the Herschel Island park rangers. Several people were able to confirm the sighting, enjoy the bird, and take some photos. The two photos presented here were taken by George Higgins from Presqu'isle, Maine, who kindly sent them to me after he returned from his Arctic trip. I saw the Ross' Gull every day until July 24 when I left Herschel Island. Perhaps the most intriguing aspect of my Ross' Gull sighting is that the very young age of the gull and the early date of the sighting indicate that the bird could have come from a nest not too far from Herschel Island.

The sighting of this rare gull and my first observation of a Snowy Owl on its breeding grounds were among the most memorable moments of my trip to the Yukon's Arctic Coast. There is always the desire to return to the beautiful Arctic, and there are always more birds to be discovered in this land rarely visited by birders.



Juvenile Ross' Gull, July 23, 1991,  
Herschel Island, YT., Photo by George Higgins

## *Not the Loch Ness Monster*

by *Cameron Eckert*

Careful observations of winter plumage loons during fall migration over the past few years have revealed that Yellow-billed Loons are a rare but regular fall migrant through the Whitehorse area.

This immature Yellow-billed Loon was first discovered this fall on the Yukon River in Whitehorse on October 11th and delighted birders until its departure on October 24th. Despite the soft quality of the photo, it shows the pale tipped bill, uptilted head posture, pale head and darker ear patch which are all characteristic of a winter plumage Yellow-billed Loon.

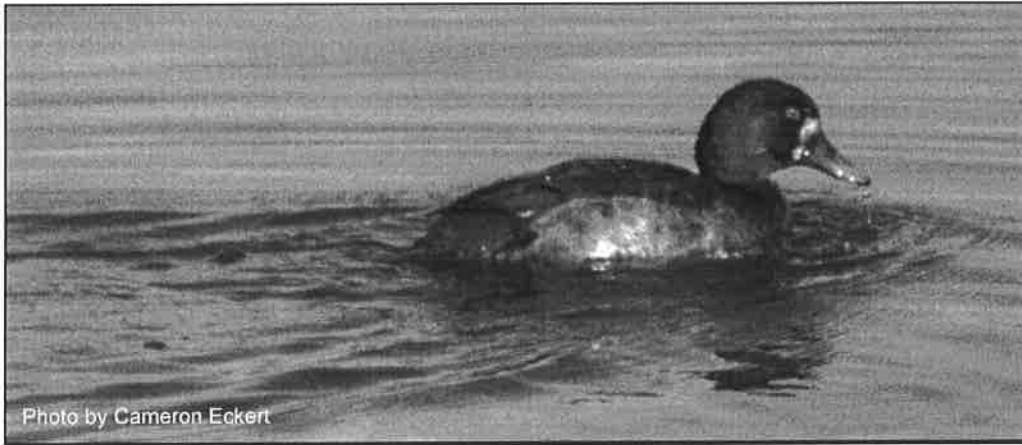


Immature Yellow-billed Loon, October 14, 1994,  
Whitehorse, YT. Photo by Cameron Eckert

# Never Duck an Identification Challenge

by Cameron Eckert

*Take a moment before reading this article to examine the photo and ponder its identification.*



On an autumn day at the edge of marshy bay a rush of Yellow-rumped Warblers, flashing their distinctive “butter butts”, erupts from the willows with a very intent Northern Shrike in pursuit. The panicked mass of avian acrobats disappears beyond the spruce forest. The bay is teeming with

migrating waterbirds and just at the water’s edge a lone fall plumage duck swims slowly - a textured blend of browns and greys. Virtually every feather can be seen, yet nothing about this bird is very obvious; no distinctive crest, no bold white wing bars, just a duck’s bill on a duck’s brown body. Rising to the challenge one wonders if more subtle features will provide clues to the bird’s identification.

The duck continues to dive but remains close. The body plumage is a very even dark brown. The smudged brown sides contrast slightly with a darker black/brown back. The lack of patterned mottling excludes all the fall-plumage dabbling ducks. It is not a Mallard, Northern Pintail, Northern Shoveler, Green-winged or Blue-winged Teal. However, it has a rather typical duck-shaped head and bill thus excluding Barrow’s and Common Goldeneye, Bufflehead, and the mergansers. The tail position, flat against the water’s surface, and lack of horizontal facial marking excludes Ruddy Duck.

A closer look at the face reveals a well defined white ring of feathers around the base of the bill. The combination of this feature on a dark brown diving duck excludes Redhead, Canvasback, Ring-necked Duck, and the scoters. This bird can only be a scaup. However, there are 2 species of scaup, Greater and Lesser, which are notorious for inspiring debate. Females of both species show the white ring of feathers around the base of the bill. The difference in head colour between breeding males (iridescent green on the Greater Scaup and iridescent purple on the Lesser Scaup) is very difficult to differentiate under most light conditions and useless for identifying female or young birds. Some field guides note that Greater Scaup are found on salt

water whereas Lesser Scaup are found on fresh water. This sorry generalization does not apply in the Yukon. However, National Geographic’s *Field Guide to the Birds of North America* provides some real help noting that a “smoothly rounded head helps distinguish Greater from Lesser Scaup”.



Try to temporarily ignore all other details and focus on head shape. When you concentrate on this single curve the essence of this bird’s head shape emerges very clearly. One can only describe the back of this bird’s head as *smoothly rounded*. A smoothly rounded head on a dark brown diving duck which shows a white ring of feathers around the base of the bill. I open my field note book and quickly jot down these features and record my observation of one Greater Scaup.

While the Lesser Scaup is more common than Greater Scaup in southern Yukon, the Greater Scaup is fairly common during spring, summer and fall. Both scaup species have been recorded breeding in the Whitehorse area. This Greater Scaup was photographed by the author in Anchorage, Alaska on October 1, 1994.

**RESEARCH NOTE**

## Putting the Yukon on the *MAPS*

*by Wendy Nixon*

In the summer of 1993 the Canadian Wildlife Service established a five hectare study site southeast of Whitehorse as part of a North American wide program known as *MAPS* (*Monitoring Avian Productivity and Survivorship*). This study is designed to give us an estimate of the number of birds produced at a site, and the survivorship of birds from year to year. This "demographic" information helps biologists identify factors causing population change in migratory songbirds. The site is operated once every ten days for a total of seven days from mid-June to early August. This year the program had the help of two individuals who were keen to start work at 5:00 a.m.; Sharon Russell kindly volunteered her time and Marylene Jules worked as a summer student.

Songbirds are captured in fine nylon nets called mist nets. The birds cannot see the netting so they fly into the nets and drop unharmed into the pocket formed by the netting. We check the nets frequently and untangle the birds from the netting, place them in dark cloth bags to calm them and carry them to the banding tent to be banded, weighed, measured and released.

In the first year of operating (1993) we banded 34 birds and in 1994 we banded 38 birds. This past

summer we anticipated the return of some of the birds banded in 1993 because we know that many species of forest birds return to the same area to nest year after year. We caught four that were banded last year! One was a male Blackpoll Warbler that probably wintered in Columbia or Brazil. Another was a male Lincoln's Sparrow that probably wintered in Central America. The last migrant caught was a male Swainson's Thrush that probably wintered in Central or South America. We also recaptured a resident bird - a female Three-toed Woodpecker.

The most common species at the site were Lincoln's Sparrow, Swainson's Thrush, Yellow-rumped Warbler and Dark-eyed Junco. The biggest challenge for banders were three Belted Kingfishers, with their no-nonsense bills. A pair of American Kestrels nesting on the edge of the study site preyed on numerous fledgling songbirds in the area. No doubt they will influence the "survivorship" estimates for our study site.

Data gathered from the site near Whitehorse are grouped with data from several sites in Alaska. Data for this region will be evaluated after five years of operation. For more information about the study contact Wendy Nixon at 668-2285.

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## *Not the Loch Ness Monster Part II*

*by Cameron Eckert*

Food was not a limiting factor for a Great Blue Heron discovered in late August by Gavin Johnston at the Icy Waters Fish Farm in Whitehorse. Helmut Grünberg observed the heron on August 22nd and noted that it had an all black crown establishing the bird as a subadult. The heron was mostly blue grey, with a long white-fronted neck and was approximately the size of an eagle. It showed a whitish belly, yellowish bill, long greenish legs, and rusty feathers at the base of the legs.

On September 1, the heron sat on a distant spruce tree long enough for a photo. Photos like this one show that you do not have to be a master photographer to establish documentation for unusual birds.



*Great Blue Heron, September 1, 1994  
Whitehorse, YT, Photo by Cameron Eckert*



## FieldNotes: *Observations from the Field*

Please send your sightings to YBC's sightings coordinator, Helmut Grünberg, (807 Wheeler, Whitehorse, YT, Y1A 2P8). Include as many details as possible such date, location, number of birds, sex and age, and observers' names.

Highlight observations that you think are particularly interesting. Please send your sightings according to the following seasonal schedule:

Winter:	December 1 - February 28 (deadline = March 5)
Spring:	March 1 - May 31 (deadline = June 5)
Summer:	June 1 - July 31 (deadline = August 5)
Fall:	August 1 - November 30 (deadline = December 5).

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### *The Fall Season*

Two **Red-throated Loons** were observed on the Blackstone River by the Dempster Hwy on Aug 6 (HG,JBr et.al.). An immature **Yellow-billed Loon** first discovered on the Yukon River in Whitehorse on Oct 11 delighted birders until Oct 24 (JBa,CE,PS,et.al.).

Quite rare was an immature **Great Blue Heron** at the Icy Waters Fish Farm in Whitehorse from Aug 22 to Sept 1 (CE,HG,GJ,PS). Flocks of 70 **Greater White-fronted Geese** and 50 **Canada Geese** were riding north winds over Goldenhorn on Sept 7 (JH). This fall's latest and highest count of **Greater Scaup** was 11 on Lake Laberge on Nov 6 (CE,HG,PS). **Harlequin Duck** observations included a female near km 75 of the Dempster on Aug 4 (HG), a female-plumage bird at the fish farm in Whitehorse on Sept 1 (CE,PS), and one or two female-plumage birds below the Whitehorse dam from Sept 25 to Oct 4 (JBa). Four to six **Oldsquaw** were tallied along km 71-102 of the Dempster on Aug 3-6 (HG,JBr,et.al.). A female **Ruddy Duck** was on Coot Lake, 8 km south of Pelly Crossing, on Aug 7 (HG).

Two **Osprey** were at Twin Lakes on Aug 15 (GK,LK), and one was flying up river in Whitehorse on Sept 25 (JBa). Single **Sharp-shinned Hawks** were seen at Haines Junction on Aug 1 (RP), Duke Meadows on Aug 4 (GK,LK), on the Swan Lake Road on Aug 14 (GON), in Whitehorse on Aug 22 (HG,GJ), and on McIntyre Mountain on Sept 10 (CE,PS). Three **Golden Eagles** were soaring over Sheep Mountain on Aug 5 (GK,LK). A **Merlin** was at Duke Meadows on Aug 4 (GK,LK). Single **Peregrine Falcons** were in Whitehorse on Sept 16, and at Tarfu Lake on Oct 9 (GK,LK).

A male **Ring-necked Pheasant**, not considered to be wild, was seen on the Yukon River Trail in Whitehorse on Aug 21 (JBa), and in Riverdale in the last week of November (MB). A **Spruce Grouse** was a backyard visitor in Teslin on Nov 8 (MGz). Three adult and 16 juvenile **Willow Ptarmigan** made a midnight appearance near km 71 of the Dempster on Aug 4 (HG). Two adults with five juvenile **Willow Ptarmigan** were at Kluane's Quill Creek on Aug 5 (GK,LK), and a covey of 5 was on McIntyre Mountain on Sept 5 (CE,PS).

Two adult and one juvenile **American Coots** were on Coot Lake on Aug 7 (HG), and one was on Rat Lake on Sept 4 (SBr,CE,HG,PS). A flock of 50 **Sandhill Cranes** were moving southeast over Goldenhorn on Sept 7 (JH). Flocks of **Sandhills** were regularly observed over Watson Lake in late September and early October (LE).

A fall-plumage **American Golden-Plover** was above treeline on McIntyre Mountain on Sept 5 (CE,PS). An **Upland Sandpiper** was near its known breeding grounds at Duke Meadows on Aug 5 (GK,LK). A fall-plumage **Ruddy Turnstone** feeding along Nares Lake on Oct 16 was only the second fall record for this species in the Whitehorse area (CE,HG,PS). Four **Surfbirds** were in alpine habitat at 6300 ft along the Dempster on Aug 5 (JBr,HG,et.al.). Quite rare were two **Sanderlings** at the Takhini Salt Ponds on Sept 4 (GK,LK). Also rare were two **Western Sandpipers** spotted among an amazing 300 **Least Sandpipers** at the Takhini Salt Ponds on Aug 4 (GK,LK). Two **Baird's Sandpipers**, an adult and a juvenile, were on the shores of Kluane Lake on Aug 6 (GK,LK). A late **Common Snipe** was flushed from the edge of Nares Lake on Oct 16 (CE,HG,PS).

## *More Observations from the Field ...*

In August, **Long-tailed Jaegers** were regularly observed at their breeding grounds along the Dempster. Two unidentified **jaegers** were noted on Teslin Lake on Sept 5 (JH). The regular fall passage of **Thayer's Gulls** through southern Yukon was in full swing on Sept 22 when 35 adult and 75 juvenile **Thayer's Gulls** were tallied among 270 **Herring Gulls** (CE). Two adult **Glaucous Gulls** were at the Whitehorse landfill on Oct 2 (PS,YBC). There was an unusual absence of immature **Glaucous Gulls** in the Whitehorse area this fall. The Whitehorse landfill hosted an apparent adult **Glaucous x Herring hybrid** first observed on Aug 31 and then on Sept 22 (CE). This fall's latest gull was a juvenile **Thayer's Gull** observed in Whitehorse on Nov 4 (CE).

Five different **Northern Hawk-Owls** were tallied along the Haines Road, one at km 163.5 (Yukon section) and 4 in B.C., on Nov 11-13 (SBr,CE,HG,PS). Another was near the Takhini River on Nov 19 (GK,LK). A **Short-eared Owl** was seen at km 72 along the Dempster on Aug 6 (JBr,HG,et.al.).

A female-plumaged **Rufous Hummingbird** was spotted at Tagish on Aug 2 and 14 (TG,WH). A pair of **Downy Woodpeckers** frequented a Porter Creek feeder through the season (TB,WB). A male **Downy** was at a Teslin feeder through the fall (MGz), and another was a delight in Watson Lake (LE). Both a Teslin feeder and a Watson Lake feeder had pairs of **Hairy Woodpeckers** through the fall (RF,MGb,MG). A very late male **Northern Flicker** spent the day at a Teslin feeder on Nov 8 (MGz).

A juvenile **Alder Flycatcher** was in Whitehorse on Sept 5 (CE,PS).

The big news of the fall season was the **Steller's Jay** invasion; At least nine different **Steller's Jays**, blown over from coastal Alaska in mid-September, were observed at a variety of locations between Tagish and Lake Laberge through November (JBe,LC,DD,CE,TH,EK,RK,LS,PS). One was also reported from Kluane Lake. Six **Black-capped** and six **Boreal Chickadees** have been regular visitors to a Teslin feeder this fall (MGz). **Mountain Chickadees** have been reported visiting feeders in Tagish, Wolf Creek and Porter Creek through the fall (CE,TG,WH,AJ,WN,PS).

A count of 100 **Bohemian Waxwings** was made in Teslin on Oct 21-22 (MGz). A flock of 40 **Bohemian Waxwings** was in Whitehorse on Oct 30 (WN). A record-late **Ruby-crowned Kinglet** was spotted along the McIntyre trails in Whitehorse on Nov 9 (PS). Two **Northern Wheatears** were in high alpine habitat off the Dempster on Aug 5 (JBr,HG,et.al.). Two **Townsend's Solitaires** were observed on the Coal Lake Road on Sept 25 (CE,PS). An **American Robin** was lingering in Wolf Creek on Nov 19 (AJ).

A **Yellow-rumped Warbler** at Shallow Bay on Oct 15 turned into a small sensation when it was identified as an individual of the *Audubon's* race for a first documented fall record (CE,PS). A record-late **Yellow-rumped Warbler** was in Whitehorse on Nov 21 (BS). A **Wilson's Warbler** foraging in a white snow-covered landscape was a strange sight at Swan Lake on Oct 30 (HG).

An **American Tree Sparrow** and an adult **White-crowned Sparrow** could still be found at Carcross on Oct 16 (CE,HG,PS). A **Chipping Sparrow** at Swan Lake on Sept 17 provided one of the latest fall records for this species (GK,LK). **Dark-eyed Juncos** lingered at three Whitehorse area feeders through November (CE,DR,SR,YS,PS). Six **Dark-eyed Juncos** were at a Teslin feeder Nov 8-10 (MGz). A lone **Lapland Longspur** closed out the season for this species at Kluane Lake on Oct 22 (JBr,HG). A flock of 40 **Snow Buntings** was observed at MacKintosh Lodge on Oct 23 (SBr,HG), and a flock of 10 were in Whitehorse on Nov 9 (WN). At the frozen landscape of Kluane Lake, three **Rusty Blackbirds** which foraged in a clear creek by wading through the water were an unusual sight (SBr,HG). Flocks of 10-30 **Pine Grosbeaks** appeared at many southern Yukon feeders through November. Two **Hoary Redpolls** were among a flock of 25 **Common Redpolls** on the Takhini River Road through November (CE,PS). Watson Lake continues to be the best Yukon location for **Evening Grosbeaks**; Five adult **Evening Grosbeaks** are frequenting Watson Lake feeders for the third consecutive winter (LE,MGb,RF).

**Observers:** Terry Barrick, William Barrick, Jeremy Baumbach (JBa), Janet Bell (JBe), Margaret Black, Johannes Brehme (JBr), Stefan Brehme, Ute Brehme, Wilfred Brehme, Linda Cameron, Doug Davidge, Cameron Eckert, Lois Everett, Rob Florkiewicz, Mary Gamberg (MGb), Margaret Garolitz (MGz), Terry Geroux, Helmut Grünberg, Wilhelm Harms, Tracie Harris, Jim Hawkings, Ann Jessup, Gavin Johnston, Ernie King, Ralph Klassen, Greg Kubica, Lee Kubica, Wendy Nixon, Genevieve O'Neil, Richard Peterson, Gary Putland, Lori Schroeder, Don Russell, Sharon Russell, Pam Sinclair, Barbara Studts.

## THE YUKON BIRD CLUB

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*"The goals of the Yukon Bird Club are to promote awareness, appreciation, and conservation of Yukon birds and their habitats."*

The Yukon Bird Club is a registered non-profit group and membership is open to everyone!

Membership fees are as follows:

Individual	\$10.00
Family	\$15.00
Senior/Student	\$5.00
Contributing	\$25.00
Supporting	\$50.00
Institutional	\$20.00

**Note:** Family memberships cover 2 or more members living at one address. Foreign or American members should pay with a Canadian dollar money order.

YBC will publish ads or notices of interest to its members. Members and non-profit groups may submit *non-commercial ads at no charge*. A reasonable rate is applied to commercial ads.

For more information contact:

**The Yukon Bird Club, Box 31054, Whitehorse,  
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## Membership . . .



*Please remember that our membership year is from April 1 to March 31 and that 1994/95 dues were due last April.*

*Please send in your renewal as soon as possible!*

### Solution to Yukon Birder's Word Puzzle...

- white rump:** 1) Northern Harrier  
2) Northern Flicker
- pink feet:** Herring Gull
- yellow-tipped tail:** Bohemian Waxwing
- broad elongated bill:** Northern Shoveler
- white outer tail feathers:** 1) Townsend's Solitaire  
2) Dark-eyed Junco  
3) American Pipit

*"There is a pleasure in the pathless woods,  
There is a rapture on the lonely shore,  
There is society where none intrudes,  
By the deep sea, and music in its roar;  
I love not man the less, but nature more,  
From these our interviews."*

- Byron

**Pg 7 - Northern Harrier photo by Pam Sinclair**

*Birders are invited to submit articles, stories, or drawings to the newsletter.*

**Please send your submissions to:  
Cameron Eckert, 14-11th Ave., Whitehorse, Yukon,  
Y1A 4H6 (Ph.667-4630)**