



Graham Sorenson

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## British Columbia Coast BirdWatch

The Newsletter of the BC Coastal  
Waterbird and Beached Bird Surveys

### New Name, Same Bird Conservation Goals

We are now [Birds Canada](#)! This past fall, we began the transition to our new operating name and logo, and our new and updated website will soon be active. We will continue to focus on our mission of conserving Canada's wild birds, but this name change is meant to reflect the broad scope of the work we do with your help. As Birds Canada, we will continue to be "your voice for birds". All across the country our work will continue in scientific research (including the BC coastal programs), public outreach and education, and science-based advocacy.

### BC Coastal Waterbird Survey Summary

This past season marked 20 years of the [Coastal Waterbird Survey](#)! Thank you to all past and current volunteers that continue to make this survey a success!

In the 2018-2019 season, 164 observers did 1221 surveys at 192 sites across BC! One hundred and eight target species (waterbirds, raptors, corvids) were detected. Some highlights from the season include Tufted Duck in March 2019 in Portage Inlet, Yellow-billed Loon near Cordova Bay in October 2018, and Brown Pelican on Clover Point in September 2018.

We are currently conducting an analysis to document

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- 2<sup>nd</sup> Annual Fraser River Estuary IBA Count

Written and prepared by Graham Sorenson, BC Projects Coordinator



**BIRDS CANADA**  
Your Voice for Birds

trends of BC's wintering coastal species using the 20 years of volunteer survey data. This analysis shows more declining species trends than increasing, but a majority of analyzed species show relatively stable populations in BC. Based on the analysis, species that have a deep diving foraging strategy (generally fish eaters) are showing declines while generalist and plant eating species have more stable populations. We will be excited to share the complete results of this analysis this year.

If you, or someone you know, may be interested in helping monitor BC's coastal birds, please email Graham Sorenson at [bcvolunteer@birdscanada.org](mailto:bcvolunteer@birdscanada.org).

## A New Generation of Citizen Scientists

Many people still think of birders as an older crowd, but there is a new wave of young, enthusiastic birders that are contributing to Citizen Science, public appreciation of wildlife, and conservation. Read a few short bios from some impressive BC young birders here!

### Bridget Spencer



I took an interest to birds beginning in late 2012 after my neighbours took my sister and I on trips to [Reifel Bird Sanctuary](#) to feed the ducks and chickadees. Aside from the occasional trips to Iona Island or Ladner, most of my early birding was confined to my neighbourhood, which quickly became my patch. I started to use [eBird](#) in 2014 and found it to be an invaluable resource for documenting and tracking the bird populations and species in my neighbourhood. Over the past few years, I have made an effort to bird the different [hotspots](#) in my neighbourhood as frequently as possible, finding enjoyment in filling in the [bar charts](#) for these hotspots. I find repeatedly birding my patch and getting to know the behaviour and distribution of species within my neighbourhood to be super interesting and rewarding.

As I became more involved in the birding world, I also began participating in local Christmas Bird Counts, and have helped with a Birds Canada count of the [Fraser River Estuary IBA](#). I plan on continuing to help with these surveys in the future, as well as eBirding wherever I go, to help with the conservation efforts for all the species I love.

### Liam Singh



I'm currently a Grade 11 student in Victoria, BC. I got into serious birding soon after a trip to Madagascar where I met avid birders. I found it to be a fun and exciting hobby that has stuck with me ever since. I joined the [Victoria Natural History Society](#) and by going on their weekly bird walks with experienced birders, my fascination with and appreciation of birds quickly grew. My knowledge soared as I began to learn the different calls and songs as well as behaviours of our local birds. In 2013, I learned about the banding done at [Rocky Point Bird Observatory](#). After seeing a Townsend's Warbler in the hand (along with many other passerines), I was officially hooked!

Over the past six years, I have spent over 750 hours volunteering with Rocky Point Bird Observatory, helping catch, band, and monitor local songbirds, migrating passerines, and Northern Saw-whet Owls. For three years I led the Sunday bird walks at Swan Lake Nature Sanctuary. I also do bird surveys for local parks and post my sightings on [eBird](#). I have volunteered in the mammal and bird prep lab at the [Royal BC Museum](#) (making study skins) and participated in many [Christmas Bird Counts](#) on southern Vancouver Island.

## Joshua Brown



I'm a 19-year-old young ornithologist from North Vancouver, and I have been fascinated by birds since the age of three when my parents took me to [Reifel Bird Sanctuary](#) for days out. I was mesmerized watching the ducks and Sandhill Cranes up close and my love of birds has grown ever since. At the [Young Ornithologists' Workshop](#) in Long Point I learned how to conserve and appreciate birds in many new ways. I enjoyed my time there so much that the following year I returned for an internship and dove deeper into bird banding, censuses, and conservation. I continue to band regularly and love learning more about birds' lives from the study. I have been involved with [eBird](#) and [Christmas Bird Counts](#) for many years, and my deepening appreciation of birds has spurred me on to become more involved with Citizen Science, and to study wildlife biology at McGill next year, after a gap year of working with bird conservation, including the [BC Coastal Waterbird Survey](#). I spent this past summer volunteering at [Spurn Bird Observatory](#) in England, and the [largest seabird colony](#) in Northern Ireland, where I was captivated by the antics of Atlantic Puffins, my favourite bird.

## Liron Gertsman

For as long I can remember, I have had a deep interest and engagement with nature. At age five, I began to

take a particular interest in the birds that I would see around my neighbourhood. I became volunteer bird monitor at the age of nine, participating in bird counts in Vancouver's Stanley Park, and beyond. At age 11, I joined [eBird](#), and have since submitted over 4600 checklists as a Citizen Scientist. Around the same time, I participated in my first [Christmas Bird Count](#), and led my local Christmas Bird Count area for the first time this year. In 2014, I attended the Doug Tarry [Young Ornithologists Workshop](#) with Birds Canada at Long Point Bird Observatory, where I furthered my skills as



Ian Harland

a Citizen Scientist. I have raised several thousand dollars for bird research and conservation as part of the Great Canadian Birdathon, which I have participated in every year since 2013. I am also a surveyor for the [Coastal Waterbird Survey](#). In addition to birding and bird monitoring, I am also an accomplished nature photographer. My [work](#) has been experienced by millions in museums around the world, including the Natural History Museum in London, England and the Smithsonian in Washington DC. I am currently studying biology at the University of British Columbia.

## BC Beached Bird Survey Summary

The [Beached Bird Survey](#) continues to be a useful and important survey in documenting baseline mortality along BC's coasts. Sixty-five volunteers, with the help of 97 assistants, surveyed 139 sites in 2018 and are on track to survey a similar number in 2019.

In 2016, there was a large Rhinoceros Auklet die-off in southern BC and Washington. The results of the Beached Bird Survey and efforts of the volunteers, both during and in the many years prior to the die-off, provided important data for an upcoming analysis being conducted by [COASST](#) (Coastal Observation and Seabird Survey Team) and Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife. We will be excited to share this research paper in BC once it is published.

Birds Canada spent some time this year summarizing findings from the past 18 years of the BC Beached Bird



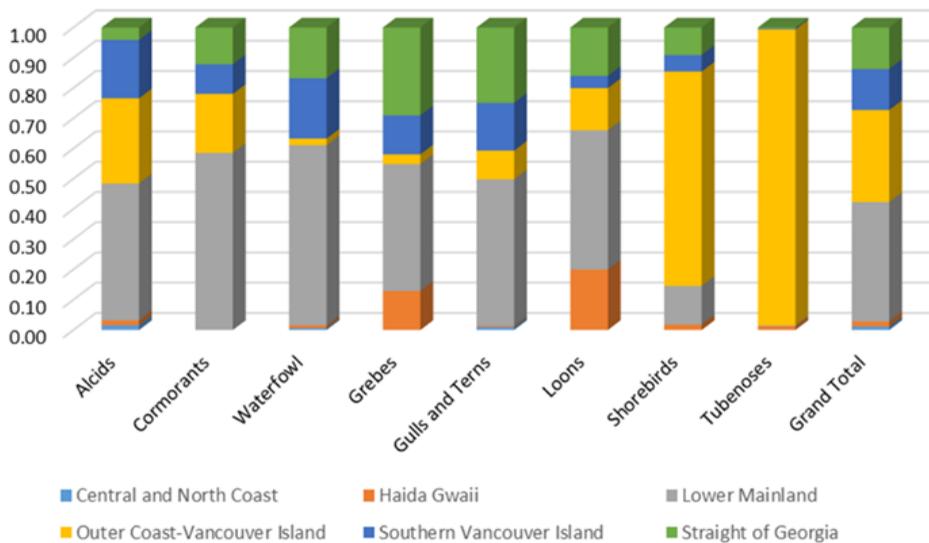
Common Loon, Toni Wyckoff

common alcids on our coast, both of which are prone to die-off events or fisheries bycatch.

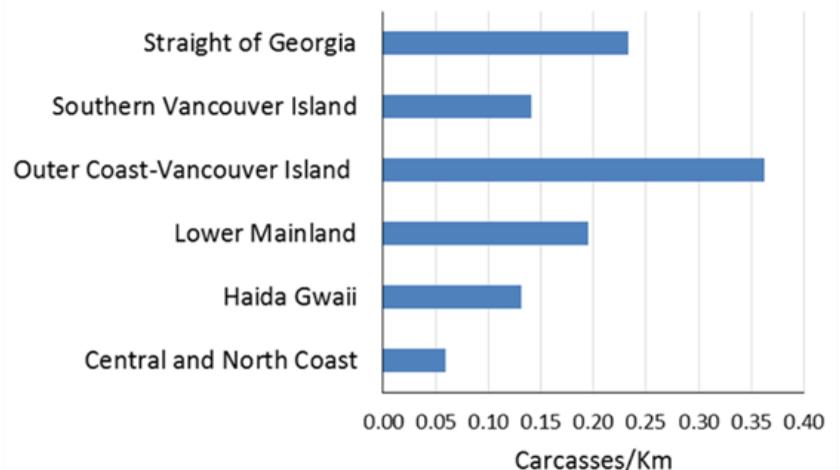
Carcasses detected per kilometre is a standard metric for measuring beached bird numbers. When we look at this detection rate across regions of BC's coast, the outer

coast of Vancouver Island shows the highest detection rate, again driven by the 2009 Northern Fulmar event. The Strait of Georgia (north of Vancouver and the Gulf Islands) had a detection rate of just under .25 carcasses per kilometre, which means about one bird every four kilometres surveyed. The central and north coast had very low detection rates, but also had low sampling effort due to lack of accessible coast and few participants.

Species Groups by Region



Survey. As many of our volunteers are aware, Glaucous-winged Gulls tend to be the most regularly encountered species. However, more Northern Fulmar have been found on the Beached Bird Survey, entirely the result of a 2009 die-off on the outer coast of Vancouver Island. Three hundred and twenty four Northern Fulmar have been detected total, while 273 Glaucous-winged Gulls have been detected. The Common Murre (170 individuals found) and Rhinoceros Auklet (60) are two of the most



## Coastal Protection Act

*James Casey, Fraser Estuary Specialist, Birds Canada*

This fall, Birds Canada added its signature to a coalition of groups calling for a Coastal Protection Strategy and Act. While the specific details of such an act are not yet determined, many threats are apparent to our coastal environment, and further legal protections are needed. Other provinces and states have already recognized the need for coastal management strategies and laws. The B.C. government can learn from these examples as it develops a comprehensive coastal strategy and act.

Many of the threats facing our coastal [Important Bird and Biodiversity Areas](#) (IBAs) occur because various levels of government do not always work towards the same goals. One example is the Shoal Harbour Migratory Bird Sanctuary on Vancouver Island. Here, the federal government has designated an area as a sanctuary for birds while the local and provincial government have been seeking to expand development in the harbour. A similar story is playing out further up Vancouver Island at the French Creek estuary.

Estuaries are a particularly challenging type of habitat to manage under our current regulatory system. Estuaries are some of the most productive habitats on the BC coast, and visiting an estuary is sure to result in an abundance of bird and other wildlife sightings. This biodiversity is produced by the fact that multiple ecosystems intersect at estuaries: ocean and river waters; and intertidal, marsh, and forest habitats. Yet this overlap of habitats means it is often impossible to establish which level of government has jurisdiction. The result is that development proceeds and the areas that host much of our coastal abundance is lost.

It is not just estuaries where the lack of clear government authority is problematic. Along BC's north coast, the [Marine Planning Partnership](#), a collaboration between the Province and First Nations, has identified many Protection Management Zones that overlap with IBAs. For instance, the Moore and Byers Islands and Banks IBA and the marine waters around the Lucy Is-

land IBA, along with a number of others, have been identified as Protection Management Zones. However, because the federal government decided to pull out of the marine planning process, the legal protection provided by these plans is limited. A Coastal Protection Act would ideally clarify the mechanisms by which we could finally provide the level of protection these ecosystems deserve.



James Casey

Even in a globally significant estuary like the Fraser River Estuary, we are constantly hampered in efforts to conserve birds and habitat by a lack of clarity about how management objectives are set and enforced. The Coastal Waterbird Survey and other research is pointing to continued declines in multiple waterbird species, yet no measurable objectives have been publicly released for either the Alaksen National Wildlife Area nor the Boundary Bay, Roberts Bank, and Sturgeon Banks WMAs. Without a Coastal Protection Act requiring objectives be set for our estuaries, beaches, and coastal waters, we will continue to see coastal bird declines.

To find out more about how you can help drive this important initiative forward, please visit the Canadian Parks and Wilderness website, [Protect Our Coast](#). Be sure to share stories of what you are witnessing along your favorite piece of shoreline so that we can build a Coastal Protection Strategy and Act that preserves the valuable bird habitat found all along the coast.

## Fraser IBA Count

The Fraser River Estuary is designated as an [Important Bird and Biodiversity Area](#) (IBA), a [Western Hemisphere Shorebird Reserve Network](#) site, and a [RAMSAR site](#). In 2018, Birds Canada conducted a complete bird count of this area to highlight the importance of it, increase awareness, and update counts of waterbird and raptor species present in the Fraser River Estuary.

On November 17, 2019, we organized a second annual count of the entire [Fraser River Estuary Important Bird Area](#). Forty-seven birders participated in the count, including many local birders and two partners of Birds Canada at Washington Audubon. Participants focused their counting on all waterbirds (shorebirds, waterfowl, gulls, marsh birds, etc.) and raptors, but also documented the presence of other avian species.

During the 2019 count, 130 species and 235,383 individuals were counted in total, highlighting the impressive winter diversity in the Fraser River Estuary. Significant species counts towards IBA status are presented in Table 1, and all data can be found at [this page](#).

Among the most common species groups, 24 duck, 11 shorebird, 7 gull, 5 hawk, and 5 owl species were observed, as well as 345 Bald Eagles. It is the high counts of waterfowl and shorebird species that trigger this as an IBA, but the diversity of raptors is amazing as well: Barn, Great Horned, Barred, Short-eared, and Northern Saw-whet owls in low numbers, many Red-tailed Hawks and Northern Harriers, and moderate numbers

of Cooper's, Sharp-shinned, and Rough-legged hawks.



Surpassing the global threshold for an IBA means that greater than 1% of the total world population of that species was present in on area. Both American Wigeon and Glaucous-winged Gull counts exceeded the global thresholds in our count! Dunlin exceed the Canadian threshold and Great Blue Heron (*fannini*) and Peregrine Falcon (Peale's) likely exceeded the subspecies thresholds (Table 1). Peregrine Falcons were not all identified to subspecies, but Peale's is the common subspecies in British Columbia, so it is likely several of the individuals were Peale's. Snow Goose and Northern Pintail totals surpassed 20,000 individuals, a significant number for Canadian IBAs.

The high wintering diversity and abundance of birds demonstrates the importance of this IBA during the winter months, especially in comparison with other IBAs in Canada. However, despite the wealth of biodiversity in the Fraser River Estuary, a large number of development projects are proposed and ongoing with-

Table 1: Summary of Fraser River Estuary IBA species counts for species that exceeded IBA thresholds.

Species Name	Latin Name	2019 Count	2018 Count	Thresholds for IBA Status		
				Global	Regional	COSEWIC Subspecies
Snow Goose	<i>Anser caerulescens</i>	48,018	28,536	75,600	75,600	
American Wigeon	<i>Mareca americana</i>	33,937	52,388	<b>22,300</b>	22,300	
Northern Pintail	<i>Anas acuta</i>	20,877	20,858	53,500	25,600	
Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>	48,315	63,844	55,500	<b>15,300</b>	
Glaucous-winged Gull	<i>Larus glaucescens</i>	7448	4840	<b>5700</b>	5700	
Great Blue Heron (Pacific)	<i>Ardea herodias fannini</i>	276	337	1200	1200	<b>45 (fannini)</b>
Peregrine Falcon	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>	20	8	12,000	3000	<b>2 (Peale's)</b>

in the IBA. There is cause for concern from a number of parties about the future of the IBA and the birds it supports. Birds Canada is working to raise awareness about the importance of this IBA through counts like this, furthering conservation and management goals within the IBA through work with partners, and by committing to outreach around the importance of birds in the Fraser River Estuary. You can help by [signing this petition](#) to tell the government to put a Fraser Estuary Restoration and Management Plan in place before any new industrial projects are approved.

All data collection for this count was conducted through [eBird Canada](#), primarily through the eBird app. There we used an [IBA Canada protocol tool](#) that allows all data submitted on the same day to be combined into species totals within the IBA boundaries. Anyone living near an Important Bird and Biodiversity Area can help monitor their local IBA by conducting counts following this protocol, using eBird whenever they are birding within the IBA, or by [supporting IBA programs](#). IBA locations can be explored on [this map](#).

## Photos From 2019



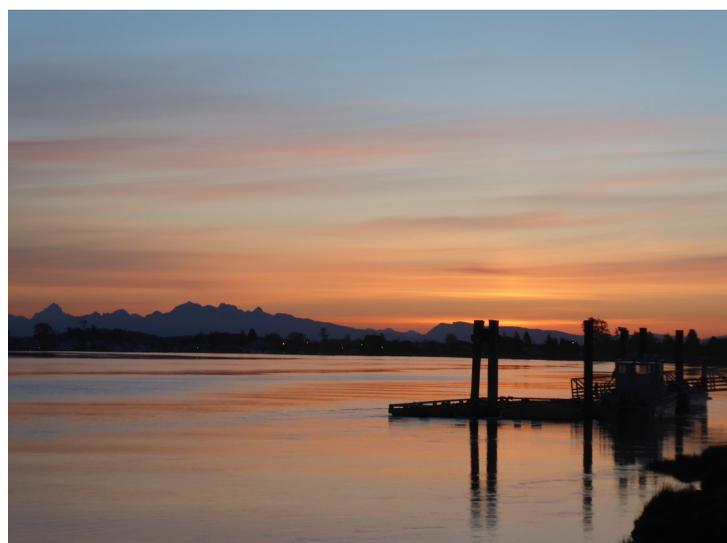
Parksville Training Workshop, March 2019, G. Sorenson



Black Turnstone during Beached Bird Survey, Ross Fisher



Tourism Richmond Birds and Bikes Tour, G. Sorenson



Sunrise at Canoe Pass, Delta, BC, James Casey

The Beached Bird and Coastal Waterbird Surveys of Birds Canada are supported by:



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