



Eagle River Nature Center News and April & May 2011 Programs

No. 47 Member Newsletter ~ February 2011 ~ Connecting People with Nature

In Search of the Water Ouzel

by Doris Ivory, *Naturalist*

During winter, we enjoy watching our resident birds such as chickadees, woodpeckers, grosbeaks, and nuthatches. Have you ever heard of a bird called a Water Ouzel? An aquatic songbird about the size of a robin, they resemble a dark gray softball with long legs and toes, a thin, dark bill, short wings, and a tail that is generally cocked up into the air. These amazing little birds spend their Alaskan winters in and along icy streams. Uniquely adapted to feeding underwater, they eat mainly insect larvae, snails, and salmon fry that live in the streams.

They can “swim” underwater by propelling themselves with a swimming motion of their wings. One of the few birds that can walk underwater, they cling to rocks on the stream bottom with their strong toes and can stay submerged for up to 15 seconds. The bitterly cold icy water is no problem for them. They have a heavy coat of insulating down feathers, much like ducks and geese, and their dense outer feathers are thickly coated with oils produced in a large gland at the base of their tails. This oily coating enables them to emerge from underwater, give themselves a quick shake, and they’re dry. Other adaptations include a third eyelid that allows them to see underwater, low metabolic rates, and extra oxygen-carrying capacity in their blood.

The Water Ouzel is also known as the American Dipper. This name comes from their curious habit of bending their legs so their entire body bobs up and down in a “dipping” motion. Not extensively studied or understood, no one really knows why they do this. One theory is it helps them orient themselves to the moving waters they feed in.

If you would like to try and see one of these amazing little birds, take a hike along the Rodak and Albert Loop trails. The spring-fed stream located along parts of these trails is a perfect habitat for the Water Ouzel. Fueled by geothermal energy from beneath the earth’s surface, the stream stays between 35 to 45 degrees



Fahrenheit all year long. Even in the deepest cold of winter, it doesn’t freeze all the way to the bottom and has many open water spots to feed in.

The small and large viewing decks along the Rodak trail and several of the wooden bridges spanning the stream along the Albert Loop trail are good places to look for the Water Ouzel. Scan the snow covered stream banks to spot them moving around and “dipping”. Look for the tell-tale water rings they make while diving. Their dark coloring camouflages them in the water but if you watch carefully, you might see them scuttle along the water surface, submerge, then bob like a cork to the surface a few seconds later, maybe with an insect larvae or salmon fry in their beak. On a quiet day, you can sometimes hear their high, whistle-like calls and beautiful, melodic songs. It’s hard to imagine this small gray bird surviving the winter in Alaska’s frigid waters, but the Water Ouzel is truly an amazing bird, a winter wonder, worth the effort to search for.



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The Benefits of Nature Centers

by Asta Spurgis, *Director*

I'd like to share the results of a study that was conducted by Karen Shragg (*PhD, University of St. Thomas*) on the relevance of nature centers to their communities.

She found that nature centers provide their communities with ecological, educational, economic, social and spiritual benefits:

Nature centers **protect and preserve** biodiversity, watersheds, habitat for local flora and fauna, native species through control of invasive ones, and a site for biological research.

Nature centers provide **educational opportunities** such as intern training, mentor programs, teaching of ethical stewardship, curriculum that helps students with graduation standards in science and environmental education, and hands-on learning for students with special needs.

Nature centers contribute to the **economic health** of a community by attracting visitors who patronize local businesses. Dr. Shragg found that property values increase in areas surrounding nature center property and that residents find their local nature centers to be a source of pride. They are tourist destinations which provide low-cost entertainment, education and recreation.

Nature centers are **social places**, providing communities with a meeting place, a gathering place for families, a place for volunteer interactions, and a place for social walking and exercise.

At the same time, nature centers **provide the individual** with green space for solitude and contemplation, a place to relieve stress by relaxing or exercising in a natural setting and to experience wildlife in their natural habitat.

Do you feel that the Eagle River Nature Center does this for you and our community? I invite you to share your thoughts with us. How has the Nature Center provided you a benefit? What can we do to help provide more benefits to our community? It takes time and effort to sit down and put pen to paper, so those of you who do take a moment to share your ideas with us will receive a 50% discount on a cabin/ yurt rental (minimum of 200 words). We will award a free cabin/ yurt rental to the top 3 authors selected by our staff and include your thoughts in our next newsletter.



Lynna Padavich receives her Jr. Astronomer certificate from Scott Girard (2/4/11). Congratulations Lynna!

2010 Christmas Bird Count

by Liza Sanden, *Volunteer*

Every year, throughout North America between December 14th and January 5th, volunteer birders participate in the Christmas Bird Count, the largest citizen science project and longest-running wildlife census. This year marked the 111th Christmas Bird Count, the 31st in Eagle River. On December 19th, twenty six birders scoured Eagle River, Chugiak and Fort Richardson to identify and count our local birds of winter. This year 2430 birds from 26 species were found in the Eagle River area. One of the day's highlights was not one but three (3!) unusual species: 3 Red-breasted Mergansers, 2 Gray-crowned Rosy Finches and 5 Townsend's Solitaires. We also had two species that are common in the area, but not usually seen in the count area in December – a saw-whet owl and rock pigeon (rock dove). Another highlight was the number of bald eagles – 347!! (previous high of 312 eagles in 2007). In the 'lowlight' category was the lack of any American Robins or Willow Ptarmigan. One hardy birder hiked to Site Summit above Arctic Valley, along the ridge and then down the bowl to try and scare up some ptarmigan – not a single bird or even a peep. The winter robin population had been steadily increasing the past years. 2010 was the first year with none spotted. Overall, it was a beautiful day with some of the only mild temperatures in December.



Photo: Asta Spurgis

Species	Number	
Mallard	194	
Common Goldeneye	9	
Common Merganser	4	
Red-breasted Merganser	3	New Species!
Bald Eagle	347	Record high
Willow Ptarmigan	0	Big surprise!
Rock Dove (pigeon)	26	
Saw-whet Owl	1	
Downy Woodpecker	13	Unusually low
Hairy Woodpecker	5	Unusually low
Gray Jay	2	Unusually low
Steller's Jay	5	
Black-billed Magpie	106	
Common Raven	270	
Black-capped Chickadee	527	
Boreal Chickadee	29	
Red-breasted Nuthatch	73	Unusually high
Brown Creeper	1	
American Dipper	2	
American Robin	0	
Townsend's Solitaire	5	Unusual species, record high
Bohemian Waxwing	389	
Ruby-crowned Kinglet	3	
Dark-eyed Junco	1	
Pine Grosbeak	152	
Common Redpoll	233	
Gray-crowned Rosy Finch	2	Unusual species
Total individual birds	2406	
Total species	26	

Outdoor Education at the Nature Center

by Ute Olsson, *Chief Naturalist*

As a member, you are probably already aware of the many weekend programs we offer: Junior Naturalist Programs for families with children K-6th grade, general audience programs on a variety of topics, and guided hikes throughout the year. What you may not realize is how many school children come to the Nature Center on fieldtrips to expand their learning beyond the classroom. Not only is the outdoors a great place for students to learning about geology, animals and plants, it also gives them the opportunity for physical activity, learn about Alaska history, or perhaps have some quiet time doing descriptive writing or landscape sketching.

Annually, over 3000 school children hike our trails. You are most likely to run into a school class in May: Last year over 1400 students visited during the first three weeks of May alone. Another 1200 students visited during September to early October. Roughly two-thirds were from the Anchorage School District, the remainder from the Matanuska-Susitna Valley, private schools, or home-schoolers.

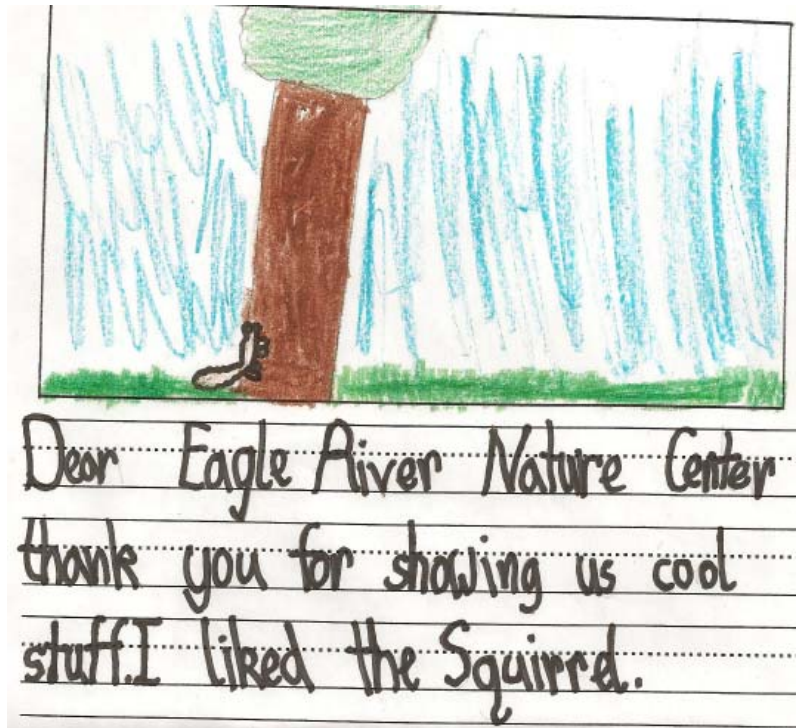
We teach a variety of topics, from exploring animal habitats to the uses of native plants. Some teachers choose to bring their class on a self-guided end-of-the-year fieldtrip with destinations such as Echo Bend or Heritage Falls. But there is plenty to do close to the center with the convenience of shelter, bathrooms and picnic tables for lunch afterwards.



Next time you're on the Rodak Loop, you may see Kindergarteners running through the meadow with butterfly nets, or 2nd-graders observing spawning salmon. In the cold season, a group of 10-year olds may be busy learning about winter survival, including building fires and shelters, or reading animal tracks in the snow. These and many other topics are also of interest to scout troops, youth camps and home-schooling families.

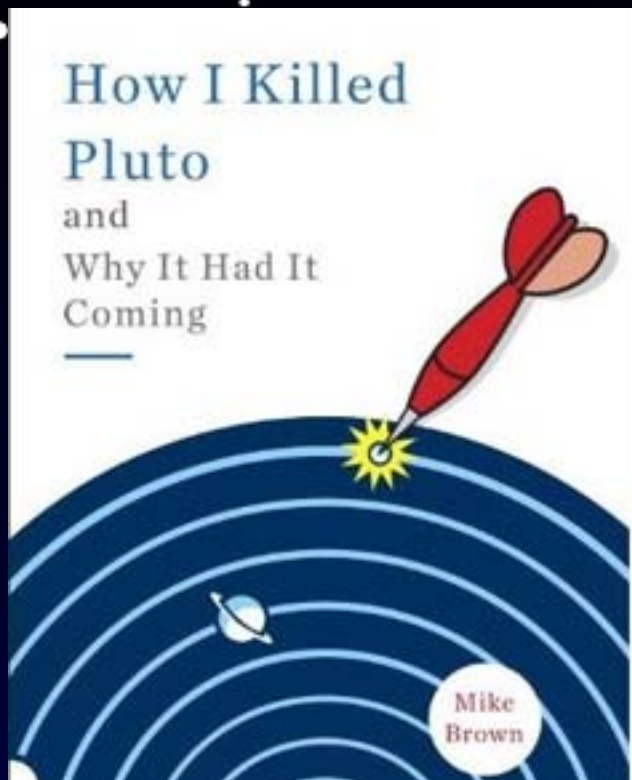
New this year is the establishment of a scholarship to assist schools that have funding challenges, particularly with transportation costs. We are excited to award the first such scholarship to the 5th grade class of the Alaska Native Cultural Charter School, who came this February to snowshoe and learn about animal winter adaptations. We welcome contributions from individuals and corporations to help make this possible.

If you are an educator and would like to learn more about outdoor learning opportunities at ERNC, please feel free to contact me at (907) 694-9255, email naturalist@ernc.org, or visit our website www.ernc.org for more information.



What happens when an astronomer finds a planet bigger than Pluto? Lots!

HOW I KILLED PLUTO AND WHY IT HAD IT COMING



FREE public lecture by Dr. Mike Brown
at UAA's Wendy Williamson Auditorium
Monday, March 28, 2011

7:30pm

Sponsored by the University of Alaska Anchorage
and the Eagle River Nature Center
with the generous support of

ExxonMobil

Alyeska pipeline

For more information
visit www.ernc.org
www.uaa.alaska.edu

NEWS & APPRECIATION



5th graders from the **Alaska Native Cultural Charter School** were recipients of a new scholarship fund created by Friends of Eagle River Nature Center to help fund fees and transportation for classes to attend our interpretive field programs. These 5th graders participated in a winter ecology program on snowshoes on February 8th lead by naturalists Ute Olsson, Doris Ivory and visiting intern Jack Noll. For more information regarding these scholarship opportunities or to contribute to the scholarship fund, please contact Director Asta Spurgis.



Have you noticed some extra seating benches on the Salmon Viewing Deck? Thanks to a generous contribution by **Peggie Manco** in memory of her husband SSgt. James Manco, Sr., trail and grounds crew volunteer **Dean Davidson** built two benches. Many thanks to Peggy and Dean!

Thank you to all our Dick Griffith Challenge Donors! (list as of 2/10/2011)

Anonymous *
Beth and Mark Doty**
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Sarah, Steve and Chelsea Wright*
Sue and Pete Panarese
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* **\$500 + donors**

Many thanks to **Ed Bennett** for his very generous donation of a 7 inch diameter Meade Refractor Telescope with mount, tripod and assorted eyepieces and accessories. Due to space constraints at the Nature Center, this telescope is being stored by Scott Girard, our astronomy program coordinator and lecturer. We hope that one day we will have a space dedicated to this telescope at the Nature Center.

Project Update: Planning for the Future of the Eagle River Nature Center

The Division of Parks and Outdoor Recreation would like to present to the public the final document for the Master Development Plan. DPOR would like to thank the many stakeholders, neighbors and organizations for their continued support and input during the planning process. The Friends of the Eagle River Nature Center and DPOR have approved this planning document. This document is intended as a planning tool to assist the Friends of Eagle River Nature Center in moving forward with the development of an improved facility for the community and many State Park visitors. That document can be found at <http://dnr.alaska.gov/parks/units/chugach/ernc/erncplanning.htm>

If you would like further information regarding what's next for the "Future of the Eagle River Nature Center" please contact Asta Spurgis at 907-694-2108 or info@ernc.org.

On May 14th, 2011, we invite our Eagle River Nature Center members and community to join us for a special event:

Friends of Eagle River Nature Center's 15th Anniversary Celebration and Auction

Boreal Forest Ball: A Black Tie and Fleece Event

5 p.m. to 10 p.m.
at the Eagle River Nature Center

Your eyes will first be drawn to our event by the amazing poster designed by the whimsical local artist Katie Sevigny. It will be all over town, boasting an extraordinary evening of music, drinks, food, live and silent auctions and dancing. You may be wondering where we are going to fit all these activities, when the Nature Center is already bursting at the seams for room. Well, let me illustrate for you what is going to be the event of the year at the Eagle River Nature Center!

On the evening of May 14th, you will enjoy a scenic drive down Eagle River Road, admiring the beautiful mountain valley in front of you. When you reach the North Fork Trailhead parking lot (Mile 7.4), this is where you will park your car. Don't forget your wallets, because from here we will whisk you away on the **Magic Bus**, as our naturalists entertain you for the duration of the ride to the Nature Center. Upon arrival, you will step into the "Boreal Forest Ball" tent, located in the ERNC parking lot. Inside, the celebration will begin with hors d'oeuvres, drinks and live music by **Mr.**

Misdemeanor. You will soon find yourself drawn to all of the wonderful silent auction items, donated from all of the incredible local businesses and community members. As you bid on your favorite items (bidding high and bidding often....it is a good cause after-all), the aroma of dinner prepared by Chef Al from the **Kincaid Grill** will lift you off your feet as you float towards your table. Once your stomach is full, the real excitement will begin! You will be captivated by our auctioneer, **Rayne Reynolds**, as he entices you to bid on the spectacular live auction items. Let me tell you, spectacular items we do have.....two **Alaska Airlines** tickets anywhere they fly, a **Yukon Yak Alpaca Packraft**, and a one-of-a-kind quilt created by our very own Naturalist, **Ute Olsson**. Are you excited yet? These are just a few of many fantastic live auction items you will be able to bid on. Hold on to your fleece, because that's not all we have in store for you. We will have another round of silent auction items, some mouth-watering dessert from Chef Al, and then one last chance to bid your paycheck away on another live auction item. At this point, you will want to top off your drinks, put on your fleece, and head out



Owl Tree by artist Katie Sevigny

to the back of the Nature Center. The lucky highest bidder of a live bird release, courtesy of **Bird TLC**, will have an experience of a lifetime releasing a great-horned owl back into the wild. Will that person be you?

Wow, what an evening. Just when you thought it couldn't get any better, we will end with dancing under the stars. When the night is over, the Magic Bus will once again whisk you back to your car. You'll leave with your fabulous auction winnings and a warm place in our heart knowing you have just supported the Eagle River Nature Center and its mission to continue connecting people to nature in the great state of Alaska.

Tickets will go on sale in March at our website: www.ernc.org. Cost: \$75.00 per person. Would you like to donate an item to our live or silent auctions? Please contact me, Laura Kruger, *Manager*, at admin@ernc.org or 907-694-2108. 7



EAGLE RIVER NATURE CENTER
 February 2011 Member News
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March & April Hours:

Friday-Sunday, 10am-5pm or by appointment.

May Hours:

Tuesday-Sunday, 10am-5pm. Closed Mondays.

IS MY MEMBERSHIP CURRENT?

Just look at the address label above for your expiration date. You can renew online, by phone or by mail.



**Sunday, March 6, 2011
 Noon-3pm**

Tudor Road DQ Grill & Chill
 611 E. Tudor Rd., Anchorage
 Next to the Home Depot
 Look for the dancing bear! We'll have a table inside with fun activities for the kids.

10% of all proceeds from purchases made that day between the hours of Noon to 3pm will be donated to the Eagle River Nature Center. For more information go to www.dqalaska.com or contact Laura at admin@ernc.org

Last days to donate to the **2010 Dick Griffith Challenge** and

receive a chance to release an eagle into the wild courtesy of the Bird Treatment and Learning Center. All donations will be entered in a drawing and the winner will be announced by Dick Griffith on **February 27, 2011 at 2pm** at the Nature Center followed by his talk 'Father of the Packraft'. To make a donation call us at 907-694-2108 or donate online at www.ernc.org. Every dollar helps. Gifts of \$500 or more will receive special recognition on our Giving Tree.



Our generous

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