

Nature Wise March 2015

## An Emerald in Penticton's Northeast Sector

Penticton Council recently discussed designating the Riddle Road Block, 300 acres of city owned land on the rocky bench in the northeast sector, as a community forest. The idea was welcomed by a variety of groups from mountain bikers to naturalists like us, who own adjacent property. The different groups have different reasons for supporting the Block as a green space.

Regardless, Penticton needs more natural (wild) parkland.

For years we have used this acreage as "our" park, shared with cyclists, hikers, horseback riders, joggers, birders, cattle and, lately," frisbee golfers."

The land has been rather neglected with many dead trees falling haphazardly. Some trees have been harvested for firewood but much debris remains as a fire hazard in this interface zone. The area is well forested where the land permits but patches need thinning. The few small pastures have been over-grazed and are now covered in weeds. There is bad erosion where trails are worn. Local land owners have done some work to alleviate these problems like cutting trees and branches off trails and fence lines, weeding to prevent noxious weed seeds from spreading and using bio-controls supplied by the Regional District Invasive Plant Program against knapweed, toadflax, St. John's-wort and hound's-tongue.

The land is varied from sand and silt banks, seepages, bedrock outcroppings to rocky gullies. It supports a surprisingly diverse group of native plants and animals. Despite years of cattle grazing there remains a large and varied assortment of native wild flowers such as sagebrush buttercups, pussytoes, several types of desert parsley, shooting stars, death camas, bitterroot, Okanagan sunflowers, scarlet gilia, shrubby penstemon, several orchids and even remnants of yampa, once collected by First Nations' women for food.

Bird life is abundant in season. Through the year about 80 species of birds use the block; for example pygmy nuthatches, pileated woodpeckers, Swainson's thrush, Clark's nutcrackers, pygmy owls, Townsend's solitaires, mountain chickadees, red crossbills, Poorwills and western bluebirds find food and nest sites here.

Mule and whitetail deer, black bear, coyotes, ground squirrels and red squirrels, Nuttall's cottontail rabbits, live here year-round. Few people know that part of the Penticton elk herd winters here, though their numbers are declining due to new fencing which prevents their easy access to Okanagan lake water. They are probably enjoying better browse that has grown after the fire in Okanagan Mt. Park. Keeping this property "wild" will help to keep wildlife where it belongs and not on Front St.

Future use of this area should be based upon an awareness that the existing populations of plants and animals on the land will not survive extensive human-based activities.

The South Okanagan Naturalists' Club's monthly meeting is March 26 in the United Church, 696 Main St., Penticton at 7:00 pm. The featured speakers, Eva Durance and Merle Kindred will show and tell us of their adventures in southern India.. All are welcome. For details see [www.southokanagannature.com](http://www.southokanagannature.com).

*Jim Ginns is a member of South Okanagan Naturalists' Club, BC Field Ornithologists and the Native Plant Society of BC but the views expressed here are his own.*