

# Significant bird observations by Maurice Ellison in the West Kootenay area of British Columbia, 1940 to 1997.

Bill Merilees

3205 Granite Park, Nanaimo, B.C., V9T 3C8; e-mail: bmerilees@hotmail.com

**Abstract:** Significant observations and first records of birds by Maurice Ellison for the West Kootenay area, B.C. between 1940 and 1997 are presented. Between 1948 and 1968, as vegetation was re-established near the Cominco smelter at Trail, the number of landbird species recorded gradually increased while the number of waterbird species remained stable.

**Key words:** Maurice Ellison, historic bird records, West Kootenay, Cominco smelter Trail

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## Introduction

Maurice Ellison lived virtually his entire life (1912–1997) in Trail, British Columbia. For 35 years, he was employed by Cominco (Consolidated Mining and Smelting Company of Canada Limited) as an ‘armature winder’ in their electrical workshop. His interest in birds began as a Rover Scout in 1933 at age 21 and at that time he began recording his observations. Maurice’s observations for Trail, B.C., 1933–1983, have been summarized (Van Damme 2008). The purpose of this article is to recognize his broader contribution to our knowledge of the West Kootenay’s bird fauna.

In 1968, when the author arrived in Castlegar and initiated the West Kootenay Bird Study, sponsored by Selkirk Regional College, Maurice was among the earliest participants. His letter of Sept. 15, 1968, states: “*I have been identifying birds in this area for more than 20 years and I would be very pleased to help collect the type of information you require*”. In a second letter (January 13, 1969) he described his primary ‘birding’ area thus: “*I do my bird hunting during the week after work, along the Columbia River behind my house in East Trail. Saturdays I often drive down river to Beaver Creek or further to the American border [Waneta twelve miles distant]. Sunday mornings I go up the mountain behind the Trail Hospital.*” In keeping with the author’s desire to put on record the ornithological history of the West Kootenay area (Merilees 2011, 2012, 2013, 2014a, 2014b, 2015), beginning with John Macoun and party’s visit in 1890, Maurice’s observations, at Trail and for the region, are the penultimate chapter in this story.

The Columbia River Valley at Trail (elevation 390 metres) is narrow, consisting of a number of terraces joined by steep gravel slopes that eventually reach the river. A number of creeks dissect these terraces but there are no ponds or wetlands of significance.

## Significant Observations

Maurice kept his bird records in school note books, recording the dates when he saw the species for the first time each year (1939–1968). After this time, at the encouragement of the author, his note keeping became more meticulous. He became a major participant in the West Kootenay Bird Study (1969–1975) making significant observations and adding new species. Later he contributed many records to the Birds of B.C. project at the Royal B.C. Museum and the B.C. Nest Record Scheme. Importantly, Maurice was active during the years 1948 to 1968 when Cominco began to address the destructive effects its smelter emissions were having on the Columbia Valley’s native vegetation. Post 1975, he remained in regular correspondence with the author sharing his and others significant observations into the 1990’s.

During his lifetime in Trail, despite the deplorable environmental degradation, Maurice Ellison was able to make a considerable contribution to our knowledge of West Kootenay ornithology (Table 1). He well deserves being recognized for this achievement. Due to his efforts, 19 species were added, bringing the known number of bird species for the West Kootenay Bird Study Area to 218.

Table 1. Significant observations and first records for the West Kootenay area, B.C., by Maurice Ellison. Records are based on Ellison's note books (1940–1968), West Kootenay Bird Study records (1969–1975), and personal correspondence (1976–1984).

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**Harlequin Duck** (*Histrionicus histrionicus*) – Up until 1977, the presence of this species in the West Kootenay area had always been considered as an Occasional Summer Resident, though a very small number of observations indicated it as being present from as early as February 5 to as late as December 12. During the winters 1977–1978 and 1978–79, nine observations were made by Maurice of as many as four Harlequin Ducks on the Columbia River at Trail (Ellison and Merilees 1980).

**Black Scoter** (*Melanitta americana*) – One record, a female, on the Columbia River at East Trail, October 31 to November 5, 1975.

**California Quail** (*Callipepla californica*) – First recorded, East Trail, February 9, 1950. Believed to have been introduced in the vicinity of Haywood's Draw, where they were present for two or three years.

**Ring-necked Pheasant** (*Phasianus colchicus*) – First observation, April 29, 1950, on the hillside below Montrose. Origin believed to be an escape from aviculture.

**Gray Partridge** (*Perdix perdix*) – Recorded twice, at Waneta, May 5 and June 27, 1977. These are believed to be from a local introduction.

**Common Poorwill** (*Phalaenoptilus nuttallii*) – First observation, on Heinz Mountain, August 31, 1969.

**Virginia Rail** (*Rallus limicola*) – First observation, Erie Lake near Salmo, July 1, 1963.

**American Avocet** (*Recurvirostra americana*) – On April 26, 1976, a presumed migrant flock of seven American Avocets landed on a gravel bar in the Columbia River at Trail and remained for some time. Kelso (1926) had reported a similar observation near Edgewood on Lower Arrow Lake, May 5, 1925.

**Wilson's Phalarope** (*Phalaropus tricolor*) – First observation, East Trail, Aug. 30, 1965.

**Red-necked Phalarope** (*Phalaropus lobatus*) – First observation, East Trail, Aug. 15, 1971.

**Long-tailed Jaeger** (*Stercorarius longicaudus*) – One observation, East Trail, August 3, 1984.

**Cattle Egret** (*Bubulcus ibis*) – One observation, two birds at Genelle, Nov. 10, 1980.

**Snowy Owl** (*Bubo scandiacus*) – First observation, Trail, December 10, 1973.

**White-headed Woodpecker** (*Dryobates albolarvatus*) – First observation, by May Boroughs, at Brilliant, (Castlegar), Nov. 23, 1983.

**Pacific-slope Flycatcher** (*Empidonax difficilis*) – One record, at Columbia Gardens, Aug. 15, 1979.

**Say's Phoebe** (*Sayornis saya*) – First observation, East Trail, April 4, 1940.

**Rock Wren** (*Salpinctes obsoletus*) – First observation, Heinz Mountain, August 3, 1969.

**Marsh Wren** (*Cistothorus palustris*) – First recorded, East Trail, October 10, 1979.

**European Starling** (*Sturnus vulgaris*) – The arrival of this species in British Columbia has been summarized by Myres (1958). Though European Starlings first appeared in the Okanagan at Oliver in 1947 and the East Kootenay at Cranbrook in 1950, it was W.E. Godfrey who reported the first West Kootenay sighting at Balfour, on Kootenay Lake, in 1956 (Myres 1958, p. 60). Maurice's observations at Nelson (June 21, 1959) and at Columbia Gardens, Trail (March 26, 1960) are the next earliest West Kootenay observations.

**Purple Finch** (*Haemorhous purpureus*) – First recorded, East Trail, at a bird feeder, June 18 – July 23, 1984.

**Lark Sparrow** (*Chondestes grammacus*) – First observation, at Columbia Gardens, August 12, 1939.

**Townsend's Warbler** (*Setophaga townsendi*) – First observation, at Balfour on the West Arm of Kootenay Lake, August 7, 1958.

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## Smelter Emissions, Environmental Degradation and Species Numbers

Residents of Trail, B.C. did not get their nickname 'Smoke Eaters' for nothing! When Cominco's smelting operations began in 1906, toxic fumes from the ore smelting process began turning the Columbia Valley near Trail into a virtual desert. Hamilton Mack Laing, looking down into the Columbia Valley from Rossland in 1922, described the scene thus: "My last view eastward disclosed at 2,000 feet below, the desert of the Columbia Valley – blue-hazy, burning: that man-made desert that is more gruesome than any work of Nature. The blight of the poison gas from the Trail Smelter has killed and left the blanched skeleton of a forest at its feet" (Mackie 1986, p. 150).

Health issues of residents and environmental degradation from smelter emissions have been a substantial and long time concern along the Columbia River valley around Trail, even to the present day. These have been documented in many studies and reports. In 1971, R. D. Hobson (1971)

studied the recovery and artificial re-establishment of vegetation at Trail from 1946 to 1969. Hobson, citing a report by the National Research Council of Canada (Katz and Lathe 1939), states that for "the area around the smelter there was little or no vegetation" and "conifers were practically absent in the valley up to a distance of twelve to fifteen miles south of Trail" (Figure 1a).

It is against this environmental background that Maurice Ellison's bird observations, are of particular interest. His observations, (1948–1968) are simply a series of annual lists comprising the date each species was first seen. Though neither systematic, nor formally intended to document changes in this area's bird fauna, this data set is unique. Because it coincided with Cominco's large scale re-vegetation and smelter emission reduction programs it provides a possible measure of Cominco's environmental improvement effort. For example, between 1948 and 1952, Cominco planted 512,000 exotic Black Locust (*Robinia pseudoacacia*) and Silver Maple (*Acer saccharinum*) as well as importing other vegetation (Hobson 1971). The vegetation at Trail in recent



Figure 1. Cominco smelter and area, Trail, B.C., about 1930 (a) and about 1978 (b). The contrast between the bare hillsides in 1930 and the revegetation in 1978 is clear.

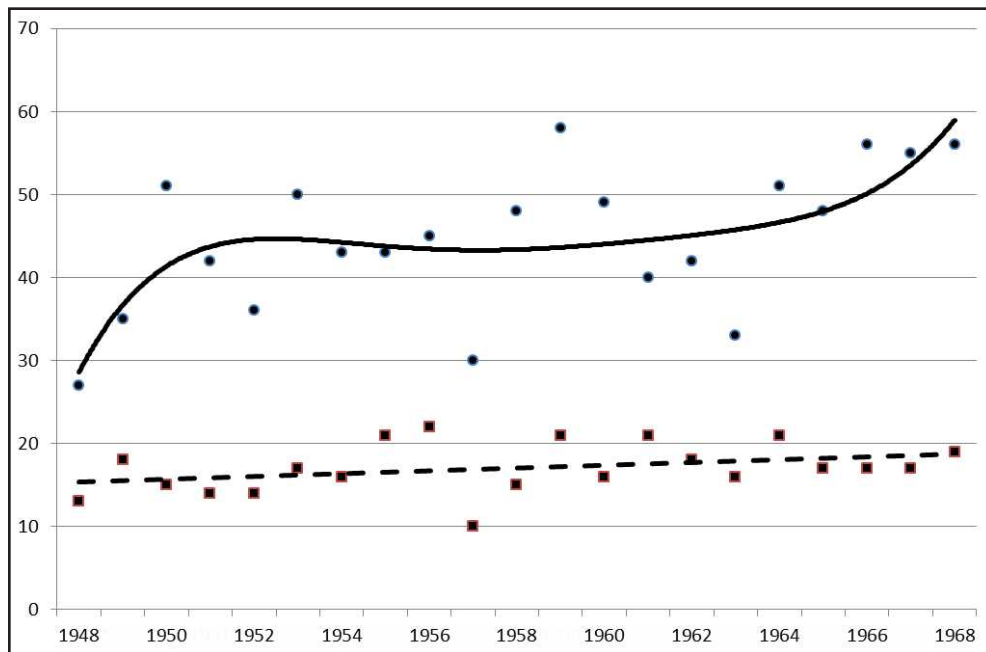


Figure 2. Numbers of landbirds (●; solid line) and waterbirds (■; dashed line) recorded at Trail, B.C., 1948 – 1968.

decades (Figure 1b) indicates that considerable improvements have taken place.

## Hypothesis

For the purpose of this article, the bird fauna's of the two dominant habitats in the Columbia Valley, at Trail, are compared. These habitats are the water course of the Columbia River and its immediate shore line, and the riparian and low elevation vegetated slopes adjacent the river.

The hypothesis: since the river and shore line habit has remained relatively unaltered, the annual number of bird species recorded here would continue stable while the number of species in the neighbouring riparian habitats would be expected to increase as vegetation improvements progressed.

## Results and Discussion

Maurice Ellison's annual lists of bird species recorded at Trail 1948 to 1968, inclusive, were examined and two lists were prepared. The first list, comprising 41 species of waterbirds (*i.e.* loons, grebes, gulls, terns, waterfowl, shorebirds, herons, osprey, kingfisher, and dipper). The second list, comprising 89 species of riparian and low elevation frequenting landbirds (*i.e.* raptors, grouse, owls, woodpeckers, hummingbirds, flycatchers, swallows, corvids, chickadees, wrens, thrush, warblers, vireos, sparrows, finches, buntings, etc.). As predicted by the hypothesis, the results suggest little appreciable change in the annual num-

ber of waterbird species recorded while the number of riparian and low elevation species suggests a small, gradual increase over this period (Figure 2). However, the trends in the annual numbers of waterbirds and landbirds were not statistically significant.

Environmental change in habitats is often very gradual. In the present case twenty-one years might not be long enough to produce significant vegetation improvements from Cominco's efforts to mitigate the serious environmental degradation cause by their smelting operations at Trail.

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