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BRANT WILDLIFE FESTIVAL: ...ONE SKEIN OF GEESE, CLEAVING THE MURK OF MARCH THAW, IS THE SPRING

By David Morrison

“Look deep into nature, and then you will understand everything better.”

– Albert Einstein (1879-1955)

Each and every spring for millennia the beautiful Black Brant has visited the eastern shores of this island. The goose flocks in great numbers to the beaches of Parksville and Qualicum Beach to recharge and refuel for another epic journey ahead.

This natural phenomenon is celebrated in the annual Brant Wildlife Festival, the birds’ arrival providing a spectacular excuse to generally highlight the amazing wildlife of this area. Through organized events this excellent festival offers opportunities for people of all ages to learn about and observe not only the Black Brant, but also a wide spectrum of the abundant and diverse wonders of the nature all around us.

I for one am dazzled by the remarkable fauna and flora with which we share our island home: from hummingbirds to elk, starfish to arbutus trees and black bears to goats on roofs, I feel privileged to live in this beautiful place. A man after my own heart and someone excited for the Brant Wildlife Festival is avid birder and fellow Brit, Jon Carter. His highly entertaining and fascinating blog, *A British Birder in British Columbia*, is a regular online destination of mine, particularly because I learn so much from it.

A lifelong birder and bona fide expert in his field of interest, Carter believes the Brant Wildlife Festival to be an event of considerable importance. Beyond his passion for winged life, however, his reasons for thinking so may come as a surprise.

“Having come from the UK,” he begins, “where bird and nature conservation are

huge, with organizations like the RSPB (Royal Society for the Protection of Birds), the British Trust for Ornithology and regional wildlife trusts, the Brant Wildlife Festival really stands out for me. Birding is a high profile pastime in the UK, with a lot of money in it. There are huge nature reserves all over the country, and people are used to seeing programs about animals and conservation on the television all the time. Here in North America, that doesn’t seem to be so much the case. There are organizations but they’re very grassroots and, generally speaking, conservation seems to go hand-in-hand with hunting; they’re integral here. Nature conservation seems to be connected to commodity, not for conservation’s sake and preserving species for biodiversity or enjoyment. So something like this festival is *really* essential, to try and get people interested in nature for nature’s sake, not as a harvest.”

Stimulating that interest in nature is the *raison d’être* of the similarly dedicated, conservation-minded folks behind the Brant Wildlife Festival. From the official opening on March 5 through to the close on April 23, the seven-week program of events aims to educate while having fun with nature via up-close interaction with the stunning location we are fortunate to call home. There are free and paid events including wildlife viewings, film nights, guided tours, botany walks, themed musical shows, tree planting and even a stargazing party! (Due to the limited number of places available for some events, it is advisable to pre-register to avoid disappointment. See below for details.)

As for the stars of the terrestrial show, the Black Brants will be quietly going about their business in preparation for their forthcoming flight north, just as they have for thousands of years, blissfully unaware of the festival fuss surrounding their presence.

“They’re returning from their wintering grounds in, mainly, Mexico, and California to some degree,” Carter explains, “and heading to their northern breeding grounds in Alaska and the Arctic Circle. And en route they stop here to feed. Their arrival coincides with the herring spawn, and even though they mainly feed on eelgrass and things like that, the protein-rich herring spawn supplements their diet. They’re already paired up by the time they arrive here, so are ready to nest. They used to

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winter here in their thousands and thousands a century ago, but now do that further south.”

Nature is a remarkable, mind-boggling thing. As you stand and watch those lovely black and white geese feeding at the tide-line, you are gazing upon an ancient species. For an incomprehensible passage of time they have arrived exhausted and hungry from their non-stop flight from Mexico, to use Vancouver Island as their area de descanso. This has happened since long before any humans dwelled here, since long before the bird itself and the places it leaves, rests at and heads to even had names. It's hard to get your head around it all sometimes, don't you think? Yet looking at it in this powerful light of day, it is indeed something to truly celebrate.

But as it states on the Brant Wildlife Festival website (URL below), all is not well in the world of this pretty goose: “Today, Brant numbers are decreasing. Many scientists attribute these declines to human-related disturbances, climate change and loss of crucial habitat, especially around migration stopovers.”

Although it may seem an innocuous everyday thing to walk a dog, one such “human-related disturbance” is a canine presence on the beaches during the festival. This is a source of great frustration for the festival organizers, birders and anyone who would generally prefer not to see the cycle of nature disrupted by an act of human irresponsibility. “There are signs up, but still people take no notice and take their dogs on the beaches,” sighs Carter. So hey, people, please read the signs and respond accordingly! Keep your mutts on their leashes! I thank you.

Like the British Birder in British Columbia, I find it strange that there are so few wildlife festivals, at least of this profile, both on Vancouver Island and in BC in general. Here we have the Pacific Rim Whale Festival, also in March, and a spotlight on the salmon run at Goldstream Provincial Park. Other than those and the Brant Wildlife Festival, it seems there is little else occurring, or at least visibly enough that people all across the island are aware of it. In fact, when Googling “British Columbia Wildlife Festivals,” which I imagined would yield a wealth of options and information, seven of the eleven results on the first page related directly to the one I'm writing about here. And including the aforementioned I have only uncovered twenty so-called wildlife festivals occurring with any regularity in the whole of BC, with twelve of those dedicated to salmon. Considering the magnificence and diversity of our provincial animal kingdom, this seems rather bizarre to me.

Last year was the United Nations International Year of Biodiversity, its aims including “increasing awareness of the importance of biodiversity for our well being,” and “to celebrate the success stories.” On the first initiative the Brant Wildlife Festival consistently hits the nail on the head. On the second, every single one of us should applaud and cherish its organizers and volunteers for their dedication in continuing to do so. But, I have to say, it does seem that we need a lot more like them...

For full information about the Brant Wildlife Festival's program of events and other ways you can support the festival, please visit <http://brantfestival.bc.ca>. To register for events, call toll free on 1-866-288-7878 or email rivers@naturetrust.bc.ca.

Jon Carter's birding blog, A British Birder in British Columbia, can be found online at <http://britbirderinbc.blogspot.com>.