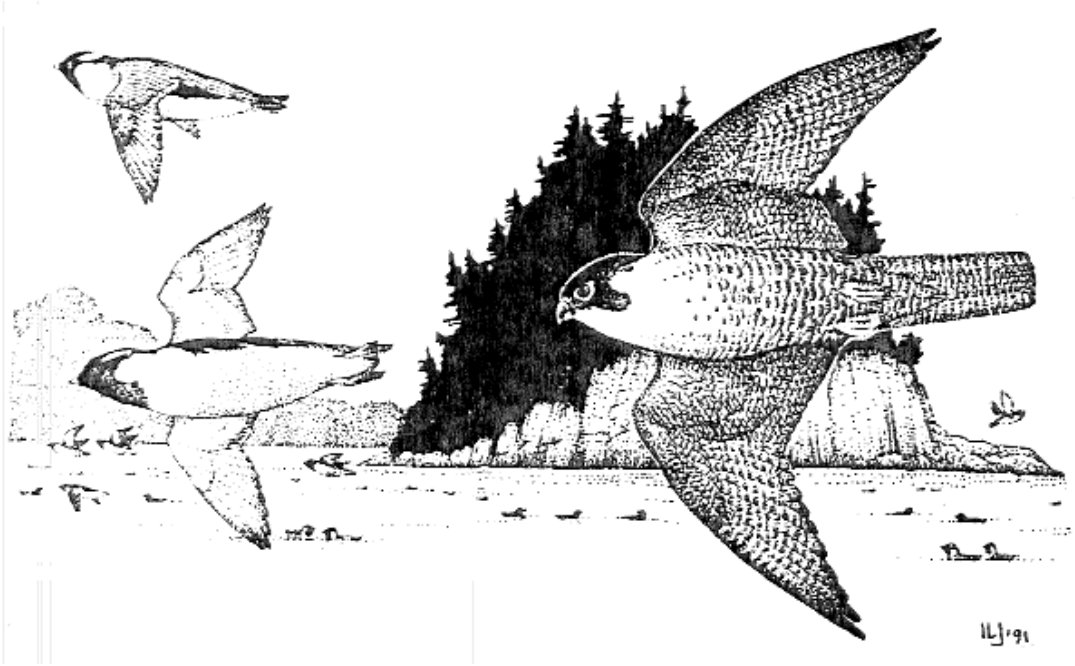
Laskeek Bay Conservation Society
SUMMARY OF THE 1996 FIELD SEASON



INTRODUCTION

This summary details the Laskeek Bay Conservation Society's research and interpretation activities in the islands and oceanic interface of Laskeek Bay, Haida Gwaii, during the 1996 field season. This marks the seventh year of long-term monitoring of Laskeek Bay ecosystems. It has seen the continued expansion of ecological learning opportunities for Haida Gwaii residents, as well as off-Islands and international volunteers. The season's program, similar in duration to last year's, commenced on 20 March and ceased on 11 July. The project was coordinated by an in-town administrator, and was run in the field by 1 or 2 full time staff, assisted by up to 4 volunteers per week.

This season was particularly significant in that groups representing every Islands schools participated in the interpretive programs. Our on-site full-time interpreter led all school groups, chartered tour groups, and other visitors through the seabird colony, orienting participants and teaching them about the interconnectedness of the marine and forest ecosystems.

Research centered primarily on the monitoring of the Ancient Murrelet colony on East Limestone Island. Other activities included investigations of Red-breasted Sapsucker nesting ecology; Black Oystercatcher banding; seabird, marine mammal, and intertidal surveys; studies of the impacts of introduced species; and observations of terrestrial birds, mammals, and plants. An emphasis was placed on passerine mist netting and banding during the latter half of the season.

PARTICIPANTS

Volunteers

The success of the program was made possible by the assistance of the 39 volunteers who contributed a total of 309 work days over the 17-week field season. Eighteen of the volunteers were Haida Gwaii residents; 5 of them were veterans of previous seasons. Interestingly, 15 of the volunteers came with family groups. An additional 55 volunteer work days were contributed by 4 volunteers who assisted in seabird projects on Reef and George Islands. As in 1995, nine volunteers made commitments of more than 1 week. The average stay of volunteers was slightly lower than in 1995 (mean=9.3 days).

At least 50 person days of volunteer effort prior to, during, and following the field season facilitated camp transport, and helped with equipment purchases, repairs, and fabrication. We are deeply indebted to all those who generously contribute their assistance.

Staff

Four people were paid by the Society to take on formal responsibilities for parts of the project this year. Responsibility for running the project was taken by Colin French (Supervisor, 12 weeks.), Ginny Collins (Interpreter, 10 weeks., Supervisor, 2 weeks.), and Greg Martin (Administrator, 11 weeks.). They dedicated a total of 246 staff days to the project. Colin French and Rob Kelly worked for 12 days under contract to the Canadian Wildlife Service, catching and banding Ancient Murrelets during the pre-laying period.

Researchers

Dr. Jean-Louis Martin and 2 graduate students from France returned to Reef Island to continue the research begun in 1995. They spent 36 days examining the impacts of introduced species on native vegetation and songbird nesting.

VISITOR INTERPRETATION

The Society's unique interpretative program on Limestone Island provides the only opportunity on the West Coast of Canada for students and adults alike to be directly involved in research in a sea bird colony. A major aim of the project is to involve non-scientist visitors in field-research situations, teaching them sound scientific techniques, and providing them with opportunities to use their new knowledge. Visitors participate in all aspects of research, developing the insights that help to promote a conservation ethic.

Schools Program

Five school groups representing all of the Islands schools visited the island this year, with a total of 12 adults and 38 students participating. This marked the fifth consecutive year of visits by the Kayak and Biology clubs from Queen Charlotte Secondary School. A group of students from A.L. Mathers School in Sandspit made their third annual visit to Limestone this year. In addition, we welcomed two first-time groups, the Outdoor Education class from G.M. Dawson, and the junior high students from the Living and Learning Center in Skidegate. Visiting school groups spent a total of 50 visitor nights in the colony.

Each group participated in a day-time interpretive tour, including a brief introduction to field research methodology, and an overview of ongoing research. The students and teachers returned at night to assist with chick capture and release. The staff and volunteers were very impressed by the students' knowledge, maturity, and high level of commitment to conservation research.

Touring Visitors

Three commercial tour operators, Bluewater Adventures, Maple Leaf Adventures, and Queen Charlotte Adventures, visited the island this year, bringing a total of 63 adult day-visitors over 7 visits. A total of 56 visitor nights, consisting of a daylight orientation and a night visit, were spent by this category of visitor in the Ancient Murrelet colony this season. Like the school groups, these visitors participated in interpretive walks during the day, and assisted in the catching, weighing, and releasing of chicks at night. Staff and volunteers were inspired by these visitors' enthusiasm and high regard for stewardship of the ecosystem, and greatly appreciated the generosity of the tour operators in providing meals, making donations and purchasing of T-shirts.

Travelers not on guided tours made an additional 13 visits, spending a total of 63 visitor days in the colony. The majority of these visits were made by the Reef Island crew. The 1996 visitor level was comparable to previous years, with 94 adult visitors compared to 87 in 1995 and 114 in 1994; and 94 evening visits compared to 105 in 1995 and 86 in 1994.

ANCIENT MURRELET BANDING PROGRAM

Adult Banding

A new approach to trapping adult Ancient Murrelets was developed this year. In previous years, adults were captured on the ground by staff and volunteers using hand-held salmon landing-nets. This year, we used a large, stationary,

flight net, strung between 2 trees. It was a struggle, but a worthwhile struggle, to raise the 420-square-metre flight net to trap Ancient Murrelets each night. This new method reduces the impact on the nesting area by minimizing foot traffic, and is less stressful to the captured birds.

Use of the flight net in three locations between 20-31 March and 1-4 June resulted in the capture of a record 284 adult birds. When the birds encountered the net, they fluttered to the ground, unharmed. The net was set at 0200 in the morning to trap those breeding birds departing from the colony, after the main period of arrival had occurred. In this manner, we were able to avoid catching egg -laying females. Of the record number, 164 were newly-banded birds, an increase of 19 birds over last year's figure. One hundred and twenty (120) were retraps from previous years, almost double the number (66) caught last year.

Three of the retrapped adults were banded as chicks in 1990 on Limestone Island, and returned to breed this year. The remaining retrapped adults had been banded as adults on Limestone Island. Four of these were banded in 1989, making them at least 10 years old. An adult banded as a chick in 1993 and retrapped in a burrow with its two chicks this season was found to be breeding at just 3 years old. The data from retrapped birds is providing valuable insights into the breeding habits and longevity of the Ancient Murrelet.

The crew on Reef Island recovered the remains of 2 previously-banded Ancient Murrelets; both birds were banded as adults on Reef in 1987 and 1988.

Chicks

As in the past, a network of clear plastic funnels on Limestone Island channeled emerging chicks to the measuring and banding stations, and the season's efforts began with the emergence of the first chick, and concluded after two consecutive nights of no chick appearances.. However, this year, the duration of the night-time capturing period was shortened.

In the past, researchers remained at the funnels until two hours after the last chick came down. This year, in order to optimize time for other research, all chick capture ceased at 0200 hours. Since figures from past years indicate that 12.5% of chicks were captured after 0200 hours, a 12.5% correction factor has been employed to project the total number of chicks this season.

Chicks were captured over 32 days, from 10 May to 10 June, 13 days shorter than last year's chick season. A total of 588 chicks were caught in the funnels. Employing the correction factor of 12.5%, a projected figure of "672" chicks captured in the funnels was arrived at for 1996. Therefore, a new welcome upward trend in chick production occurred this year, possibly due to 2 consecutive seasons without any raccoon presence in the colony.

The projected count of 672 is higher than the total number of chicks caught in any of the previous 3 years (617 in 1995, 618 in 1994, 653 in 1993), and is comparable to the 674 chicks caught in 1992. The peak of activity occurred on May 19/20, with a total of 48 chicks banded.

During the season, a total of 14 chicks were banded outside of the funnels, and 47 chicks were banded in the monitored burrows (10 more than in 1995). One especially determined chick made a mad dash and escaped from the funnels, bringing the total number of chicks banded in 1996 to 648. The last 2 chicks were banded from a monitored burrow on 12 June, 8 days earlier than last year.

On three different occasions, lone chicks were observed departing for sea in the early evening hours between 17:15 and 21:30. One chick came tumbling down funnel 5 near the cabin, and was picked up, banded, and released. It's wings were covered in spruce pitch, possibly indicating that it was stuck in vegetation, and had freed itself.

BURROW MONITORING

At the start of the season on 7 April, 4 burrows were found with first eggs . Knock-down sticks were used on eighty-nine burrows in the two study plots, to monitor the laying of first eggs. As in 1995, eggs were laid in 28 of these burrows. Laying occurred between 7 April and 3 May, with 11 May being the latest date on which incubation began.

One burrow contained an adult attempting to incubate 3 eggs. Two of the eggs were similar in shape, size, and pigmentation patterning. However, only 1 chick hatched and fledged from the clutch. In another burrow, the first egg was found to be predated by a squirrel, and was removed. The female subsequently laid a second egg, which successfully hatched and fledged.

Of the 34 adults examined in their burrows, 20 were retraps, 18 of which had been banded as adults (4 in 1989, 3 in 1990, 3 in 1991, 2 in 1992, 2 in 1993, 2 in 1994, 2 in 1995). Two (2) were banded as chicks in 1991 and 1993. Fourteen birds had been banded in the same burrow in earlier years. Three pairs captured in the same burrow had been paired together in earlier years.

One pair of birds (banded as adults in 1989) has occupied the same burrow in all but one of the years we've been monitoring. We weren't able to capture any birds in that burrow in 1993, although 2 chicks fledged successfully. Two burrows had at least 1 adult that had occupied the same burrow for 5 consecutive years. One burrow had at least one adult that had occupied the same burrow for 4 years. Eight of the burrows had at least 1 adult that had occupied the same burrow for 3 years.

Chicks fledged from 25 probe-monitored burrows; however, of those, 3 burrows fledged only 1 chick each. Two burrows were deserted, leaving 2 cold eggs: one early in the season before incubation had begun; and one, surprisingly, at the pipping stage. Squirrel predation occurred in one burrow, which nonetheless successfully fledged one chick. The overall fledging success rate in 1996 was 79%, compared to 75% in 1995, and 85% in 1994.

Ancient Murrelet Vocalization

This season, recordings of Ancient Murrelet departure calls were made at 12 burrows. This was done in order to vocally identify individual adult Ancient Murrelets, in order to use their characteristic calls as a way of augmenting banding as a method of estimating adult survival.

PREDATION

The seven predation transects were not monitored this season, as no evidence of predation was observed. A spotlight survey was conducted on May 9/10 , sighting one raccoon in the intertidal at Vertical Point. Shoreline circumnavigations of East and West Limestone Islands were undertaken on 2 occasions, on 26 March and 25 June. On the latter survey, 3 possible raccoon scats were collected on East Limestone Island. The scats were sent to Victoria for analysis.

GATHERING-GROUND COUNTS

Telescope-assisted counts of numbers of Ancient Murrelets flying over their gathering grounds between East Limestone and Low Islands were undertaken every evening. Counts were conducted for 10 minutes to give a relative index of birds visiting the colony that evening. The highest count was 125 on May 5, which is the lowest maximum noted in all 7 years of monitoring. Double-digit counts were noted in late April, and again in early May. The peak numbers in May coincide with maximum numbers of non-breeding prospectors visiting the colony. The visibility was obscured on 6 occasions during the breeding season.

SEABIRD SURVEYS

For the seventh consecutive year, bi-weekly boat surveys covering the near-shore and off-shore waters of Laskeek Bay were conducted to census birds at sea. Five complete surveys were achieved between 23 March and 7 July.

Two of the surveys had to be carried out over a 2 day period, due to inclement weather. New northerly routes across the mouth of Cumshewa Inlet were followed on 2 of the 5 surveys. Previous survey routes south of Kingsway Rock were omitted. On May 1, the only survey attempted east of Reef Island into Hecate Strait was aborted after 30 minutes of running , due to deteriorating wind and weather conditions.

Numbers of Marbled Murrelets sighted on individual surveys were similar to last year. A single, earlier peak was observed this year, occurring on 20-21 April, with a total of 492 observed. Peaks in previous years occurred on 21 June, 1993 (1,686 birds),16 May, 1994 (635 birds) and 2 July, 1995 (275 birds). Numbers of Marbled Murrelet recorded from 25 March to 7 July, 1996, typically ranged from 23 to 179 birds.

The peak number of Marbled Murrelets observed this year coincided with large numbers of spring migrants, including flocks of Brant, White-winged Scoters, Surf Scoters, Oldsquaws, and Pintails. A scattering of Horned Grebes, Surfbirds, and Common Loons were noted. On 8 May, an impressive 121 Pacific Loons were counted, along with 50 Red-necked Grebes. On 7 July, 119 Rhinoceros Auklets were counted, in association with a feeding frenzy of Glacous-winged Gulls, Bald Eagles, and 2 Minke whales. A total of 6 Common Murres were seen on the transect, the only Murres sighted for the season.

BLACK OYSTERCATCHERS

Surveys of Black Oystercatchers (BLOY) nesting and foraging in Laskeek Bay revealed a total of 33 occupied nests containing at least one egg, or having signs of a freshly-predated egg. Nesting appeared to be later this year than last year. The highest number of occupied nests was found on Lost Island (7), on the Bead Islets (6), on South Low (6), and on Reef (5). Only 12 chicks were colour-banded this year, compared to 22 in 1995 and 14 in 1994. Of the nests monitored, 27% experienced complete loss of eggs and/or chicks, and an additional 18% experienced partial loss. Predation was higher than in 1995, but was more consistent with the levels found in 1994.

Although the BLOY pair at the site near the cabin were observed copulating on 15 June, the three scrapes on East Limestone were unproductive, as was the nest site on West Limestone. No banded birds from previous years were sighted.

OTHER MARINE BIRDS

Visits to Glaucous-winged Gull colonies in Laskeek Bay were made in mid June in order to count nests and record numbers of eggs and chicks. A total of 230 nests containing at least one egg each were occupied in five colonies, compared to 217 in 1995. Lost Island was the largest colony, with 175 nests containing 1-3 eggs, an increase of 30 nests over last year's count. On Kingsway Rock, we counted 46 nests, 2 of which contained 5 eggs each, representing an overall decrease of 10 nests compared to 1995. Cumshewa Island contained 2 nests with eggs, half as many as last year. Low Island experienced an increase in nests from 1 in 1995 to 6 this year. Only one nest was noted at Skedans Islets, compared to 11 last year. Timing of nesting was similar to previous years.

Cassin's Auklet natural burrows and nestboxes were not monitored this year. Staff heard a few Cassin's Auklets and Fork-tailed Storm Petrels while conducting early-morning Ancient Murrelet banding.

MARINE MAMMAL SURVEYS

Opportunistic observations of eight species of marine mammals, including two pinnipeds and six cetaceans, were made in Laskeek Bay. Sea watches were again conducted from a high vantage point south of Cabin Cove. A total of 37.15 hours were spent scanning for marine mammals over 27 watches.

Steller Sea Lion numbers on the Skedans Islands increased steadily from 30 on 25 March, to 65 on 20 April, to a high of 100 on1 May. After mid May, the only spotting consisted of three animals observed on 1 July. On the Reef Island Rocks, there was a fairly stable population between 25 March and 1 May (459-530 animals), then a decline to 159 animals on 1 July. The counts and seasonal trends at both haul-out sites are consistent with data from 1993-1995. The only California Sea Lion observed was at the Reef haul-out site on 1 May.

Counts of Harbour Seals at intertidal haul-out sites were recorded on Cumshewa Head, Cumshewa Reef, and Skedans, Low and South Low, Reef, and Lost Islands. The largest group, 71 animals, was seen scattered across the Skedans Islands on 20 June. A lone seal often made an appearance in Cabin Cove, finding it necessary on 4 July to haul itself onto the rocks in the cove as killer whales approached. A dead Harbour Seal and a dead Steller Sea Lion were found west of West Limestone Island on 27 June.

Killer Whales were sighted 10 times, including multiple sightings on 22 April, 8 May, 23 June, 29 June, 4 July , and 6 July. Bull transient T70 was sighted twice on one day this season. A group of 5 Orcas, possibly Northern Residents, was sighted on 8 May, heading from Reef towards Skedans. Vocalizations were recorded and photos taken for identification purposes. Our photos and recordings contribute to the coastwide monitoring studies which have been ongoing since the late 1970's in B.C., providing information on the movement and associations of individual killer whales and humpback whales.

In addition, 2 other species of Odontocetes, or toothed whales, were seen. A total of only 2 Pacific White-sided Dolphins were observed, both on 4 July. This is in marked contrast to observations in 1994 and 1995, when several groups of 4 to 200 dolphins were seen. A total of 17 Harbour Porpoises were observed between 25 March through 5 July this year.

On 8 occasions, members of three species of Mysticetes, or Baleen whales, were observed: single Minke whales were seen on 5 May, 1 July, and 5 July; 2 Minkes were seen on 7 July; 3 Grey whales were observed on30 March, 4 on 16 April ; and 1 on 23 April; and 2 Humpback whales were seen on 28 June. Only a single sighting of Humpback whales occurred in 1996, compared to a dozen sightings of one or more Humpbacks in 1995, and a single sighting in 1994.

TERRESTRIAL SURVEYS

Eight species of terrestrial mammals were observed, including five species regularly seen at East Limestone Island. They were the introduced Red Squirrel and Sitka-black Tailed Deer, and the native River Otter, Deer Mouse, and Little Brown Bat. A Dusky Shrew was observed running under a log below the spring on 2 April. Caroline Wesley of Skedans informed us of observing a Black Bear on the West side of Louise Island on 7 July.

Red-Breasted Sapsucker Surveys

Red-breasted Sapsucker surveys were continued this year, and the location and condition of nest trees was again classified according to the established BC Wildlife Tree Classification System. Colour photographs of the wildlife trees were taken and organized in a notebook identifying the adult bird at the appropriate active nest hole. Some fecal sacs were collected near Red-breasted Sapsucker nest trees. A colour-banded Red-breasted Sapsucker breeding near the boat cove was observed feeding on amphipods in the kelp at the tideline.

The sample of 19 nest trees established in 1990 was increased to 48 trees this year, of which 21 were occupied. One wildlife tree has been occupied for 5 consecutive years, and 6 trees have been active for 4 years. Twenty-three trees

have been active for 1 year, and 12 for 2 years. This year, a pair of Chestnut-backed Chickadees shared a wildlife tree with a pair of Red-breasted Sapsuckers nesting a few metres below. A pair of Brown Creepers constructed their nest, juxtaposed between 2 pieces of bark, in a massive wildlife tree near the boat cove.

Four adults and 4 juvenile Sapsuckers were colour-banded this season. In addition, one Hairy Woodpecker was banded. At least 2 pairs of Hairy Woodpeckers were observed on East Limestone this year, and one pair nested in a marked wildlife tree. A female Hairy Woodpecker was sighted repeatedly, feeding her begging male offspring. Northern Flicker calls were heard from mid April though to the end of the field season, but no nests were located.

Songbird Point Counts

Songbird Point Counts were conducted at stations along the main trail from mid April through early June, in order to increase our song identification skills. Over the course of the season, we identified a grand total of 68 avian species from our daily checklists. Highlights included flocks of Whimbrels, a solitary Wandering Tattler, a male Ruby-crowned Kinglet, a flock of Semi-palmated Sandpipers, and the 4 Common Murres of the season.

Banding of Forest Birds

Dr. Rex Kenner of UBC spent 3 weeks training staff, and assisting in all aspects of the forest-bird banding program. Mist nets were set up in the boat cove area and in Spring Valley from 3 June until 5 July, and opened for an average of 7.7 hours over 24 days. One hundred sixty-four birds were banded in the course of 615 net hours, yielding a catch rate of 0.43 birds per net hour, similar to the rate of 0.44 observed in 1993. A total of 266 birds, comprising 16 species, were netted, including 11 Rufous Hummingbirds which were released unbanded, and 15 escapees.

Seventy-six birds of 11 species were retrapped (10 from previous years), and an additional 8 birds were retrapped on the same day. Many of the retrapped individuals were caught in the same net locality as in previous years, a fascinating observation when one considers that they were returnees from migrations to areas as distant as Mexico. The banding of numerous nestlings lays the groundwork for using data from future recaptures to secure valuable information regarding site-fidelity, juvenile dispersal, and longevity and survival.

Recoveries included 2 male Townsend's Warblers banded in 1993 as adults, making them at least 4 years old. A Hermit Thrush caught in the same net 3 years previously is now 5 years old. Seven others were retrapped from previous

years. Dr. Kenner's invaluable assistance has greatly expanded the efficacy of our passerine banding program.

Raptors

The Peregrine Falcon eyrie was active again in 1996, with 2 fledglings, and 2 young that were still on the nesting ledge as we were leaving. The presence of 4 young is unusual, in that 2 or 3 is the more usual clutch size; the large number of offspring is a probable indicator of a young breeding pair. This eyrie has been active for 5 out of the 7 years of our project. Fledglings were also observed at Reef Island in early July.

For the first time in 7 years, none of the Bald Eagle nests on East Limestone were occupied this year. In 1994 and 1995, two eagle nests were active. In all other years, a single pair of eagles was observed nesting.

INTERTIDAL SURVEYS

Three half-meter-square survey plots were established in May, 1994, at Cabin Cove, each at a different stage of the tide. The plots were visited on 5 April, 3 June, and 2 July at the lowest low tides to record all plants and animals present. Up to 20 plant species and 34 animal species were observed.

INTRODUCED PREDATOR STUDY

Dr. Jean-Louis Martin of Montpellier, France, along with 2 graduate students, investigated the impacts of introduced Red Squirrels and Sitka Black-tailed Deer on the forest ecosystems of islands in Laskeek Bay. In one study, 80 decoy nests stocked with quail eggs were distributed on Limestone Island. Resulting predation levels were 30% lower this year than last, in conjunction with lower numbers of squirrels censused throughout the season.

The second continuing study examined the impact of deer browsing on vegetation on the islands of Laskeek Bay. On 31 May, we conducted an island-wide deer census on East Limestone Island, and counted 16 deer, including a newly-born fawn. Samples of remnant Huckleberry and Salal shrubs were procured and sent to a lab in Victoria for age analysis. There is speculation that the remaining shrubs on East Limestone are between 60 and 80 years old, survivors from before deer were introduced.

CLOSING COMMENT

The Laskeek Bay Conservation Society has been providing excellent long-term trend data on the distribution and abundance of both marine and terrestrial

bird and mammal populations for seven years. We also have been providing educational opportunities for Haida Gwaii youth, volunteers, and visitors to Laskeek Bay. On 2 June, we proudly accepted the Kees Vermeer Award for "evincing the ideals of conservation as it applies to waterbirds, in a locally run and independent effort sustained over many years, with educational and scientific components, and the involvement of youth". We would like to take this opportunity to thank everyone involved for their commendable efforts in making this volunteer-run Society a model for conservation research and educational programs worldwide.

This report is a summary of our field activities, and will be followed by a scientific report describing the results in detail. Please contact LBCS for further information.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The Laskeek Bay Conservation Society is a non-profit, volunteer-run organization. We could not operate without generous support from a wide variety of groups and individuals. We gratefully acknowledge the contributions of all our supporters, and apologize to any we have inadvertently omitted from this list:

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- All of the in-town support people who bought groceries, met volunteers, and picked up the garbage;
- The many people who gave donations, or bought LBCS tee-shirts;

And finally, an enormous appreciation of each volunteer who came to East Limestone Island to discover and to help. We hope you challenged yourselves and took away memories to cherish. We extend our warmest invitation to come again.

Submitted by Ginny Collins, Field Assistant/Interpreter
Edited by LBCS

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