

## Saskatoon Junior Naturalists Celebrates its 40th Anniversary in 2008

Children have a natural curiosity about nature, but without an adult to foster that interest, the lifelong connection with nature may be lost. In 1910 the Junior National Audubon Society was established. The focus was on nature study, conservation, and how youth could make a difference. By the 1940s there were about 20 Junior Audubon Groups operating in Saskatchewan, including a short lived one in Saskatoon run by Farley Mowat. Some of these were well organized classroom groups, but as more often was the case on the Canadian prairies, many were just individual kids on the farm with a passion for nature. The catalyst came in 1942 when Isabel Priestly founded the *Blue Jay*. This journal of natural history and conservation for Saskatchewan and adjacent areas continues to be published four times a year. Priestly was a strong promoter of the Junior Audubon Societies and she included a Junior Naturalists section in the *Blue Jay*. This gave youth the opportunity to share their interests and observations and contribute to our understanding of the natural world. One of the first conservation projects undertaken by these Junior Naturalists was the establishment of Bluebird Trails. Mountain Bluebirds were in decline due to changes in its habitat. One method of helping the bluebirds was to build nest boxes and place them out along a country road. The nest boxes are monitored and the population numbers are used by scientists to chart the population trends in the species. In 1961 Jack Lane and his Brandon Junior Naturalists began the Prairie Bluebird Trail. Jack Lane's trail extended roughly from Winnipeg to Broadview. In 1963 Lone Scott, then a grade 10 student at Indian Head, connected his trail to Lane's. This extended the trail west to approximately Raymore. Then in 1968, 12 year-old Ray Bisha moved to Saskatoon from Brandon along with Mike and Rod Bantjes from Yorkton. The boys convinced Stuart Houston (who, in 1942 was a grade 9 student and an active executive member of the fledgling Yorkton Natural History Society) to start a Junior Naturalists Society in Saskatoon. With Stuart and Mary Houston as the "adult advisors" the Junior Naturalist Society began. They studied aquatic life, botany, and birds. Their conservation project was the Bluebird Trail. Inspired by success of Lorne Scott's trail, the Saskatoon Junior Naturalists built 270 birdhouses and created a trail over 200 km long to connect with Scott's trail at Raymore. Over the next few years the number of houses grew to 450 and connected with Jack Kargut's trail west of Saskatoon. The Bluebird Trail now extended from Winnipeg almost all the way to North Battleford. Mary Houston supervised and banded the birds along the Saskatoon portion of the trail. Forty years later Mary Houston still oversees the Junior Naturalists and their banding of the birds along the Bluebird Trail.

The Bluebird Trail remains a major activity of the Junior Naturalists. Today, the name has changed to the Young Naturalists and they continue to participate in a variety of nature activities. Like Stuart Houston, many of the adults who have volunteered to co-ordinate the Junior Naturalists were once youth members of a nature society. They know future conservation requires the nurturing of children's curiosity with the natural world. Special thanks to the Houston's, Bruce Donovan,

Nigel Caulkett, Ron Jensen, Robin Cohen, Ross Barclay, Bob Green, Guy Wapple, and Nancy Young for their dedication to the Junior Naturalists program over the past 40 years.

*Greg Fenty has co-ordinated the Young Naturalists' program since 1995.  
For information on the Young Naturalists' program visit  
[www.saskatoonnaturesociety.sk.ca](http://www.saskatoonnaturesociety.sk.ca)*