

BioBlitz an educational weekend of discovery

BY JUDITH LAVOIE, TIMES COLONIST APRIL 29, 2012



Andy McKinnon, left, Moralea Milne and Ken Luther search for life on Witty's Lagoon beach.

Photograph by: Adrian Lam, Times Colonist, Times Colonist

Crouching down, intently gazing into a tide pool on Witty's Lagoon beach, Andy MacKinnon fishes out a piece of limp seaweed.

"It's edible," he says, giving the Latin name for the benefit of fellow seaweed enthusiasts Moralea Milne and Ken Luther.

MacKinnon, Milne and Luther are organizers of next weekend's Metchosin BioBlitz, when biologists, with specialties ranging from algae to owls, will lead groups of non-scientists to specific areas to document the different species that make Metchosin their home.

During the inaugural event last year, 850 species were found, including a pair of western bluebirds - thought to have disappeared from southern Vancouver Island in the 1980s - rare bluegrey taildropper slugs and a tiny spider that had previously been seen on Vancouver Island only once previously, in 1930.

"It's a bit of a treasure hunt. We don't know what we're going to find this year," said MacKinnon, the author of *Plants of Coastal B.C.*, a book described as the bible of B.C. botany.

Serious science is at the root of the BioBlitz, and practical applications include identifying invasive species, such as giant hogweed, before they get out of control. "But it's more fun than you can possibly believe. It's better than Christmas," said Milne, a Metchosin councillor.

"It has to be fun, because we're all volunteers," he added.

About 50 taxonomists are expected to help lead the groups, and anyone who is interested can join the hunt.

"The more you know, the more you care," Milne said, "and then the more you want to steward it."

The BioBlitz is especially good for children showing an interest in science - whether it's a fascination with snakes or with butterflies, MacKinnon said.

The important element is to have many pairs of eyes on the ground, and that means the experts have no particular advantage when it comes to rare finds.

"Last year, a rare plant was found by a birder and a rare slug by someone looking at mushrooms," MacKinnon said.

Events start Friday evening at Metchosin District Office, 4450 Happy Valley Rd., with a talk about owls, followed by a chance to go out owling.

On Saturday, members of the public can meet the biologists and choose their groups at the Mel Cooper Cabin, 3900 Metchosin Rd., at 8: 30 a.m. and 1 p.m.

For those wanting something less strenuous, the Capital Regional District parks department has organized a beach walk at Witty's Lagoon at 10: 30 a.m., when the tide is low and a diverse group of marine organisms is likely to be found.

At 1: 30 p.m., the CRD will lead a forest walk from the grassy area adjacent to the main beach.

For more information, go to metchosinbiodiversity.com. jlavoie@timescolonist.com

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