

C4 ENTERTAINMENT

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PETER PUFFIN HERE THURSDAY



Photo submitted

Peter Lenton, aka Peter Puffin, is a biologist turned teacher turned performer.

Children's entertainer links music, natural world

BY LANA MICHELIN
ADVOCATE STAFF

It isn't every biologist who can get up on stage and perform original songs that enthrall crowds of kids and adults.

But then, Peter Puffin isn't your average scientist. Heck, the Juno-Award-winning biologist-turned-performer isn't even your typical, standard-issue children's entertainer, since he dresses up audience members in fish, bear and owl costumes, while belting out snappy songs about nature and the environment.

Peter Puffin, who will perform a story-telling concert about nature stewardship, peace-making, anti-bullying and bike helmet safety on Thursday at Red Deer's Scott Block, is really a guy named Peter Lenton.

And Lenton did once work in a scientific field, studying ducks in the Prairies, birds and whales in the Arctic, outback animals in Australia, and puffins on Canada's Atlantic coast.

It was while researching the funny-looking big-beaked birds near Labrador that Lenton said his enthusiasm for educating children was piqued.

He recalled that a group of kids who visited his field station from remote fishing villages, had previously only viewed puffins as a food source.

But when one of the friendlier birds was plunked down into their gloved hands, the children's eyes lit up with so much curiosity and amazement that the memory still fills Lenton with wonder.

"It sends shivers down my spine," said the 40-something performer, who was inspired to add a teaching degree to his previous biology one from Queen's University in Ontario.

Lenton always had an unorthodox approach to education, using stories and songs to help his students learn. But the idea really gelled after he attended a campfire sing-along for teachers in Canmore.

"That reinforced the idea of storytelling being a big part of our past, and encouraged me even more to use storytelling as a great way to teach and pass on ideas," Lenton recalled.

He became so involved in writing songs and stories that he took a leave of absence from teaching 12 years ago to perform his original material for children and their parents — and hasn't looked back since.

Please see **PUFFIN** on Page **C5**

PUFFIN: Costumes, props bring nature to show

Since Lenton believes that too many children are growing up without much exposure to nature, he brings "nature" into his concerts in the form of animal costumes — and even a river prop — that help young audiences visualize the concepts he sings about.

Three albums later, Lenton has won a lot of acclaim, including a Western Canadian Music Award, a Canadian Folk Music Award, an Independent Music Award, and finally a 2011 Juno for his last recording, *Proud Like a Mountain*, which is played on the CBC, CKUA and satellite radio.

The Juno win left him inundated by a "rainbow of feelings."

His acceptance speech, delivered at a podium only metres away from Neil Young, praised other professional entertainers for showing children that the arts can be a viable way to earn a living.

Lenton feels very lucky to be able to share his ideas with audiences in a forum that so many people enjoy — and not just kids.

"There was this one vintage gentleman who wanted me to take a picture of him (after the show) dressed as a bull trout.

"He said he wanted to send it to his fishing buddies!"

Tickets to the Peter Puffin's Whale Tales shows at 10 a.m. or 7 p.m. are \$15 at the door, or \$12 in advance from the Kerry Wood Nature Centre, or by calling 403-346-0402.

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