

## PROVINCIAL NOTES

J.R. Garden reports that winter birds have been scarce in the Wolseley district. He says, "So far this year at our feeding station in the garden we have only had visits from our old friends the Chickadees, the Downy Woodpecker, and one Magpie. I really should have shot the latter but did not do so. Last week, while watching the Chickadees feeding off a lump of suet, I suddenly saw them all look up in the air in a very startled manner and an instant later down flew a Northern Shrike, apparently bent on killing one of them. However the Chickadees all got away safely into a pile of scrub. This was the first time I had seen a Shrike try to kill birds."

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The problem of how the young of tree-nesting ducks reach water has long been a fascinating question to naturalists, as it is a performance very rarely witnessed. Some apparently reliable observers have reported seeing the mother duck carry the young in her bill, or between her feet, flying from the nesting hole to water. However the most common method seems to be for the young birds to scramble out of the nest of their own accord and topple down quite unharmed. This, at anyrate, was what happened in a case reported by F. Baines.

While hunting deer near Tisdale last November Mr. Baines was shown a disused chimney where eight little ducks were hatched in the early summer. The nest was about three feet down, placed on a narrow ledge. (See Birds of Canada for the Golden-eye Duck's habit of nesting in chimneys.) The owner of the property, Frank Pearce of Leacross, kept a close watch on the nest and one day noticed the mother bird down on the ground below, doing a lot of quacking. Presently all eight little ducks burst out over the top of the chimney, fell on the roof, and bounced onto the ground without injury. The old duck then led them off to a nearby creek but, unfortunately, a crow grabbed one of them before they all got safely to water. Mr. Baines was wondering how it was ever possible for the ducklings to get up the sides of the chimney. But according to authorities, the young of tree-nesting ducks, when first hatched, are endowed with sharp pointed toe-nails, by means of which they are able to climb to the entrance of the nesting hole.

Also when in the Tisdale district, Mr. Baines got a close-up view of an Arctic Three-toed Woodpecker (the solidly black-backed woodpecker with yellow crown patch), and the much larger Pileated Woodpecker, sometimes known as the "Cock-of-the-woods." Both these woodpeckers are characteristic birds of the northern forests and only rarely seen in the southern part of the province.

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From Arthur Ward of Burnham we received a snapshot of a colony of Cliff Swallows' nests on one of the towers of the Highfield Dam spillway. Most of the nests were fully finished structures with the downward sloping funnel entrance. For some reason the Cliff, or Eave Swallow as it is sometimes known, once so common in the West, has greatly decreased in numbers in recent years. Several reasons have been suggested to account for this - the ravages of the English Sparrow, the destruction of the nests by farmers, the inability of these birds to attach their nests to the smooth surface of painted barns and houses in contrast to the unfinished buildings of early settlement - but whatever the cause, the Cliff Swallow is not as common around western homes as it once was, so it is good to see a photo of a thriving new colony such as the one at Highfield. Mr. Ward also tells us that the Lazuli Bunting, a rare visitor from the west, nested in his garden in 1942.

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M. G. Street of Nipawin has sent in a most comprehensive list of the birds of the Nipawin district, (with breeding records). We hope to publish Mr. Street's list in the next issue of the "Blue Jay."

## PROVINCIAL NOTES (continued)

More and more it is being realized that the so-called "predatory" birds and animals are often far more beneficial than they are harmful. The value of many hawks is now generally recognized but we are still a long way from realizing the value of animal predators in the scheme of nature. In this connection some observations of H.M. Rayner, of Ituna, on the Long-tailed Weasels are of special interest.

Mr. Rayner's letter runs, "While driving in the country last week (October 22) I noticed a white object near the side of the road. It turned out to be a fine specimen of the large Long-tailed Weasel. He was nearly white, having only one small patch of brown and stood facing us boldly, his head held high and a fully grown mouse in his mouth. He had it by the back like a terrier and his eyes seemed to blaze with defiance, as if he were proclaiming, "Behold me the killer of killers, am I not the very picture of wild ferocity?"

"Weasels," states Mr. Rayner, "seem to be increasing in numbers in the Ituna district which, in my opinion, is a matter for satisfaction. They have, in the recent past, been relentlessly trapped. The good done by weasels, in keeping down destructive rodents, entitles them to careful protection and conservation. In nearly forty years experience not a single case of weasels killing chickens has come to my notice. The same cannot be said of the ground squirrels and rats which the weasel tirelessly hunts."

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Mr. S.A. Mann has loaned us his very complete volume of spring migration dates for the Piapot district for the past 16 years. Records such as these are a valuable addition to Saskatchewan bird-lore.

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The Christmas Bird Censuses show 30 species recorded for the province. Many of us will agree with Mr. Street's observation, "This is the first time I have ever taken a Xmas Bird Census, and I was quite surprised at the number of species and individuals seen when all totalled up." No Crossbills were reported and Evening Grosbeaks only once, otherwise all the likely winter birds seem to have been observed.

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### STATUS OF THE SHARP-TAILED GROUSE

There have been conflicting reports this last Fall regarding the number of prairie chicken (more correctly Sharp-tailed Grouse) around the country. In some places they have become so scarce that sportsmen are convinced that the "ten year" decline has set in while at other points there seems to be no apparent decrease in the number of birds present.

In the Yorkton district a shortage of prairie chicken was noted during the shooting season. W. Niven writing from Sheho reports that where there were hundreds of chicken in 1941, this season there were only a few flocks. And then, in contrast, from Ituna, not so many miles south of Sheho, H.M. Rayner writes, "In the district tributary to Ituna, no lessening in the number of Sharp-tails has been noted, nor has any diseased condition of any grouse or partridge come to my notice." Plenty of chicken were also noted in the Tisdale district further north.

Our Yorkton Xmas Bird Census revealed about the same number of prairie chicken as last year. In the Wolseley area J.R. Garden says that they are very scarce, and that one day he drove for 150 miles over country roads and only saw three of these birds. However chicken are plentiful at the Indian Reserve at Muscow, according to Frank Booth, Supervisor of the Reserve.

So it will be of interest to see if the decrease in the number of prairie chicken will have become general all over the province by next fall.