

THE HORNED LARK



February is the month of anticipation. As the sun rises higher and higher at noon each day and the hours of light increase, we all look forward to the first sign of spring - to something which will remind us the cold winter is passing and that balmy days and sunny skies will be with us once more.

Out on the wide open prairie, even when zero temperatures yet prevail, even when the snow is drifting on and on across this field and the ones beyond as far as the eye can see, that joyous herald of spring arrives about the middle of the month - it is the Horned Lark - the Desert Horned Lark of Saskatchewan. In spite of snow and the frigid air it comes to us to build its nest, often amid the snowdrifts of early spring. From the frozen weeds projecting above those drifts, it seems to view the desolate scene with satisfaction, as it gleans its hearty meal of tasty seeds.

Sometimes, though seldom, it stays all winter. Mrs. John Hubbard tells us of a flock of 23 of these birds which have been on their farm at Grenfell all winter. At the time of her writing (Feb. 3) they didn't seem to have any intention of leaving. Each day they get their meal along with 21 Hungarian Partridge which she has been feeding all winter. And at Hawarden, Mr. Harold Kvinge saw a lone Horned Lark on January 11, and one was again observed several times during the last week in January, and again on February 3rd.

And here is the most surprising report of all. "On the day before Christmas," writes Steve A. Mann, of Skull Creek, "I saw one of the largest flocks of Horned Larks that I have ever seen at one time, feeding on weeds along the roadside. I estimated there were between six and seven hundred in the flock. Never before have I seen a flock of more than eighty. Neighbors report that unusually large flocks of these birds stayed around their stacks during all the cold weather of January."

A PART OF OUR EVERYDAY LIFE By S. Stuart Frances,  
Torch River.

Our yard is full of birds all day long at the present time, January 29, and the following can be seen all at one time, either around the house or in the barnyard: Sharp-tailed Grouse, Ruffed Grouse, Canada Jay, Blue Jay, Hairy Woodpecker, Downy Woodpecker, Black-capped Chickadee, English Sparrow, Common Redpoll, Snow Bunting, Magpie. We have seen at the same time in the same maple tree, the Canada Jay, Blue Jay, Hairy and Downy Woodpeckers, and Black-capped Chickadees. I would estimate that on an average there are from 200 to 225 birds in my yard most of the time.

To these add the domestic and semi-domestic birds that we keep -- Light Sussex Chickens, Bantams, Ringnecked Pheasants, Turkeys, Tame Geese, Canada Geese, Snow Goose, Muscovy Ducks, Pigeons and a Canary and you will readily see that birds are a large part of our everyday life.

WINTER FRIENDS By Wm. Niven, Sheho.

We see Snowbirds, Sharp-tailed Grouse, Pine Grosbeaks, Chickadees and Hairy and Downy Woodpeckers every day. Have seen Evening Grosbeaks several times, although there are very few seeds on the maples this year, owing to the spring frost. I saw the first Snowy Owl (Dec. 15) that I have seen for quite a few years. The Pine Grosbeaks are more prevalent than usual. I have seen as many as thirty around the yard, feeding on the snowberries. They are a true Christmas bird, owing not only to the fine coloring the males, but to the fact that they are with us during the festive season.

COLD WEATHER FRIENDS

"Windy gusts chase clouds of snowflakes about the wintry fields.

Tiny shapes, like icy crystals come to life among the frozen weeds.  
And in the hedges, more feathered forms find sustenance  
Despite the chilly blasts."

--- Carling's

SNOWY OWLS

Reports from across the border tell how, this winter, the Snowy Owls "came soaring out of the north by the thousands, like great white ghosts. In most of the northern states, and as far south as the Carolinas, startled citizens spotted the big birds swooping over fields and swamps or perched haughtily on fences, haystacks and telegraph poles." The reason assigned for the invasion of 15,000 or more was that lemmings and other rodents were very scarce in the Arctic this winter, and that they were forced to either migrate or die.

The reports that we have received show no great evidence of their appearance in unusual numbers during their southern migration. It would be interesting to get a widespread report.

From Naicam, Mr. Yanchinski reports: "Late in December I saw these birds on two different occasions. Their appearance in the district is the first that I have noted in recent years, so I am curious to know if the occurrence of the Snowy Owls in the province has varied to any extent from normal this year." Mr. William Niven, of Sheho, saw one of these birds about a week before Christmas. It was the first one he has seen for quite a few years. At Saltcoats, Frank Baines saw a Snowy Owl on December 9. Mrs. Marion Nixon reports that none of these birds showed up at Wauchope during the month of December. From his farm home, northwest of Regina, Doug Gilroy writes: "Although this was to be the year for the Snowy Owls to come down in greater numbers, I have seen only one. That was early in December." Harold Kvinge writes that they are very scarce at Hawarden, and that he has seen only one, that was on Feb. 3rd.

WELCOME VISITORS

On December 23, Steve A. Mann and his son, while coming from Piapot to their home at Skull Creek, were amazed to see a flock of at least five or six thousand Snow Buntings. They were settling on the road a short distance ahead of the truck and, as they drew near, they flew away in one great cloud. It was a mid-winter sight they shall never forget.

Harold Kvinge tells us of a flock of several hundred Snow Buntings that were observed in the Hawarden district during January. A Hairy Woodpecker stayed around his grove during the same period. "It was very interesting," he writes, "watching it prying the grubs from under the old bark of the trees." A flock of 20 Hungarian Partridge have stayed near his buildings all winter.

Mrs. John Hubbard tells us that many birds are using their farmstead as a winter oasis, and greatly enjoy the handouts they get. Some snowbirds and chickadees are very tame. Prairie Chicken are eating the buds from the trees in her orchard.

FEW BIRDS THIS WINTERDoug Gilroy,  
R.R.2, Regina..

In my district wild life has been very scarce these last three months. Magpies seem to be the most plentiful bird around. One always sees a few down in the valley. Once in a while we see a Sharp-tailed Grouse but never any more than two or three together. During the second week in December a Short-eared Owl put in an appearance. He hung around for **about** a week, then disappeared.

Have had suet out all season. At first a nice little flock of about seven chickadees and one Downy Woodpecker found it daily. As the weather got colder the group got smaller till now only one chickadee is left with the woodpecker. Whether they perished in the extreme cold or just simply pulled out and left, I do not know.

I might mention here that if any of the readers want to hang out suet in a mesh bag, and can't find one, as I was unable to do, a big coarse hair-net really works like a charm - and is not expensive to buy.

A TAME CHICKADEE

Mrs. Harold Bray

For the third time our tame chickadee is with us, looking for suet every day. Last summer it brought four or five young ones around our door, presumably to meet us and to feed on the numerous aphids on the choke-cherries.

We also have two Downy Woodpeckers and one Hairy Woodpecker as well as six or seven Bohemian Waxwings, who are always looking for dried cherries. Unfortunately, there are none this winter.

DUCKS IN DECEMBER

Mrs. O. L. Wolters reports seeing thousands of ducks on the stubble fields, while returning home from Vermilion on December 1. There are several lakes south of the town and there probably was some open water there. This is very late in the season for large flocks of ducks. (Tolland, Alta.)

J. B. Belcher, of Dilke, reports that a Mallard landed on the ice of his farm dugout on Dec. 24. He also reports that an Eagle has been present in the Dilke district for some weeks.

GEESE

Here's a new late for Canada Geese at Yorkton: W. Dean Lightbody saw 150 Canada Geese on a field four miles west of Yorkton on Nov. 16th, 1949.

BIRDS AT SALT COATS

Frank Baines

While sitting in the car last June 28, a male Red-headed Woodpecker settled on a light-pole not more than ten feet from me. My son Dave, also, saw one about twelve miles south of this town three days before. Stuart Houston informs us that this is the third record of this species in the Yorkton district.

A Cormorant, probably Double-crested, was present on Anderson Lake, adjoining the town of Saltcoats, for about a week in the middle of December. Nearly every morning it was seen on a stone in the lake. At night it stayed on a tree. Several times it was tipping and balancing on the branch as though likely to fall - but it stuck to its perch.



BLUEBIRDS

Mrs. Harold Bray, of McLean, and Mrs. James Steeves, of Bluffton, Alta., both have observations to make about Bluebirds and their nesting habits.

Mrs. Bray writes: "I have found out that Bluebirds can raise two broods in one season. A nest built in an air-cleaner of an old tractor was destroyed by a neighbor's boy before I could stop him. It contained a number of young ones. The parent birds later sought a new place, but finally decided to rebuild in the old spot. They were successful in raising their second brood with the exception of one which unfortunately was taken by a cat when they were learning to fly. Incidentally Bluebirds are on the increase, I am pleased to report."

Mrs. Steeves writes: "I am a bird lover and have read the BLUE JAY with keen interest. In the latest issue Mrs. F. Bilsbury inquires if there are any records of Bluebirds raising two broods in one season. I can truthfully say, yes, they definitely do.

They do not raise two broods every year, but if conditions are suitable they do. As soon as the first brood can fly the father bluebird takes complete charge of them, after which the mother bird proceeds to raise a second family. When they are hatched she cares for them with occasional help from her mate, who never takes the first brood very far from the nesting place while the second brood are still unable to fly. Even after that they linger together around the buildings and nearby woods, well into the autumn.

I have never known two Bluebirds to nest in the same vicinity. After a pair have taken up residence they will not allow any Bluebird to come within calling distance; yet they will nest within a few feet of other birds, such as Robins, Tree Sparrows and House Sparrows, with apparent indifference.

WHOOPING CRANE

George Hooley, Swift  
Current.

Must tell of a wonderful sight I saw in the early part of September, which I didn't report at the time, thinking that many people who saw this sight would be reporting on it.

The observation of a Whooping Crane on a big marsh, four miles south of Cabri, was one I shall not forget for some time. I was in company with Corp. Lorne Rooney, R.C.M.P., officer stationed at Cabri, and C.D. Lee, Secretary-treasurer of our local branch of the Saskatchewan Fish and Game League. We observed it at approximately 150 yards with good 8-power binoculars. It was a huge and most beautiful bird.

DANCING GROUNDS

Mr. D. R. Robinson, Extension Specialist at the University of Saskatchewan, adds another to our list of Sharp-tailed Grouse dancing grounds. For many years there has been one on his brother's farm at Paswegin (west of Wadena), located near the centre of N.W., 17 - 35 - 14 - W2.

STARLINGS

George Hoocy, of Swift Current, picked up a frozen Starling in his barnyard on February 13. It was the first one he had ever seen in that district and he would like to know if others in that area have seen them.

"Before any other birds had returned last spring," writes Mrs. O.L. Wolters, of Tolland, Alberta, "we noticed blackbirds making all sorts of sounds. There were only five of them and on close observation found them to be Starlings. They are the first I have ever seen, but a neighbor said he had seen some the year before. They stayed around old flicker-holes in two adjacent bluffs near our house for nearly a week."

Mr. Arthur Ward, of Burnham, has this information to offer:

In past issues of the BLUE JAY, mention has been made of the Starling. Observing this bird as a newcomer during the winter time, many people in our district have asked the name of it. There are about 70 species, but perhaps only two in the United States and Canada.

Introduced in the year 1890 from Europe and released in the vicinity of New York, this bird has reached proportions of untold millions. Just how we are to regard this new addition to the plains may not be summed up by past experiences of those in the South and East. Observation here reveals the Starling to be immune to extremes of below zero temperatures. Considering the vast assemblies in the late summer they can be considered a nuisance. Grain Company agents don't like their noisy and messy nesting habits in the elevators. On the other hand, they can be regarded as an asset in the farming areas. Feeding immense quantities of grasshoppers and almost every other kind of insect to the two broods of from four to seven ravenous youngsters, greatly offsets the damage they do in the West.

AN ALBINO MAGPIE

By Mrs. O. L. Wolters

Last spring my children caught a young, pure white magpie with pink eyes. They brought it home and kept it as a pet for about a month. For the most part we fed it small pellets of bread soaked in milk. When it was sunny and warm he would take a bath. Sometimes when he was hungry he would come into the house and call me. Finally we disposed of him to King Brothers circus, in order that others might have an opportunity to see this unusual freak.

A GOLDEN EAGLE AND A FAWN

It is unfortunate that we do not have the facilities to reproduce photographs. Mr. John A. Klepack, of Hvas, sent us two most interesting pictures, one of his wife holding a bruised and battered fawn; the other of a Golden Eagle with a wing spread of 74 inches.

The fawn was caught after it had been bruised by dogs or other animals. The mother deer, which had been observed wandering around the yard, had probably been chased away and strayed from the fawn. For a time the fawn was nursed with a bottle. Its eye and head were regularly bathed and soon healed. Soon it began to sip milk and finally to graze. For some unaccountable reason it died after about three weeks.

The Golden Eagle was caught in a trap. It was set for weasels. It may have been dead for a week before it was discovered, as its eyes were dug out by Magpies.

Several Golden Eagles were seen in the Hvas district last spring.

"So the Bluebirds have contracted, have they, for a house?

And a nest is underway for little Mr. Wren?"

"Hush, dear, hush! Be quiet dear! quiet as a mouse.

These are weighty secrets and we must whisper them."

BLUEBIRDS AND TREE SWALLOWS

By Mrs. Jim Steeves,  
Buffton, Alberta.

My home is about 100 miles S.W. of Edmonton, in what is called the Blindman Valley, and I live close to the Blindman River. This seems to be an ideal place for Tree Swallows, as mosquitoes, of which there is an abundance, seem to be their chief diet. I put up a number of bird houses last spring. The Bluebirds took first choice and the Tree Swallows quarreled over the remaining ones until all was settled as to who should have which. After all were satisfied, they went about the business of rearing their families. Everything seemed to go well for a time, then I noticed a nest seemed to be deserted, so I investigated and found seven eggs which were all quite cold. A few days later another nest was abandoned, then for about two weeks nothing seemed to be amiss with the remaining occupants, when again desertion took place. This time I found the young swallows dead in the nests; out of eight pair only three pair succeeded in raising their broods to the flying stage.

I have wondered a great deal why the swallows left their nests. A pair of Sharp-shinned Hawks, who were nesting nearby, often flew around the bird-houses, and while the swallows always gave chase, sometimes seven or eight swooping and diving at the hawks in the air, I never did see a hawk catch a swallow and I always watched closely.

MORE NESTING TROUBLES

By Mrs. O.L. Wolters,  
Tolland, Alberta.

Last spring, just after the snow had gone, we put up a house for Bluebirds in trees along the road fence. No Bluebirds showed up, but about two days later I saw a pair of Chickadees carrying moss at a great rate, as though trying to fill it. Moss, protecting some ferns on the north side of the house, was found to be very convenient and they helped themselves. Their sweet love calls are always much enjoyed by me. This affair, however, was short lived as English Sparrows discovered them three days later and started to bring in feathers. I tried to put a block in to make the hole smaller but evidently didn't succeed. Then I put up another log we had saved when sawing wood, that had a small woodpecker hole in it. To my delight the chickadees found it right after putting it up, but the pesky English Sparrows, always on the alert, did too, so I gave up. Some weeks later, five of them put in their appearance at intervals, and since three of these were juveniles, I was pleased to know that the parents had succeeded in their third attempt.

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Mr. J. F. Roy, of Tullis, is now teaching high school at Meadow Lake, and has promised to give us some bird observations from that "neglected" corner of Saskatchewan. For our next issue we will be looking forward to the results of his birding expeditions. The spring flowers of that area are also interesting. Perhaps we can have some information about them.

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THE LOUSE AND THE SPARROW HAWK By S.P. Jordan, Saskatoon

You asked for constructive criticism and opinion. Here are a few suggestions I have thought of since reading the last four issues.

I do not agree altogether with your apparent condemnation of the magpie and the cowbird. I noticed articles concerning these birds in one or two of the past four issues. In both cases the magpies and cowbirds were shot. The magpies were killed by a young boy because of an apparent shortage of song birds. The cowbirds were shot because of their habitual parasitic nesting.

My theory is that there is a place in nature for every animal and bird, except the rat, but even here man is to blame for its advance of destruction. The Pack Rat leads quite a peaceful life. Man has been interfering in Nature's balance, without even partial success, for too long a period of time to even hope to make an improvement. If a cowbird wants to put its egg in a warbler's nest, then I consider that that's the cowbird's privilege. If a family of magpies kill a few song birds, then that too is their privilege. Such a policy of give and take, live or die, makes nature interesting - makes nature an analogous study of human life. What gain does society make by beating and isolating the criminal? Do not they become worse when turned loose from the penitentiary?

When making an analysis of human behaviour and animal behaviour the cause must be sought - and treated. These birds are parasites and murderers (if you like) because they are supposed to be. Here is an example of a delicate cycle. I believe this is correct. The cycle starts with a plant louse; the louse is eaten by the "lady-bug"; the lady-bug is eaten by the red-eyed vireo; the vireo is eaten by the sparrow-hawk. In every sense of the word this small hawk is entitled to kill the vireo, for a surplus of vireos means a surplus of plant lice - and a surplus of plant lice means a scarcity of trees and plants.

Turning a boy or a man loose with a gun in order to kill that annoying hawk, owl, or crow is poor training in conservation. More trouble will result because you are not seeking out the cause.

We would all have less trouble if we would reason this conservation problem through with rats and gophers and mice and rabbits and insects - and by reasoning I don't mean cyanide guns and shotgun pellets.

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MARSH HAWK AND YOUNG By P. Laurence Beckie,  
Bladworth.

On Sunday, Aug. 28, I was on one of my frequent nature hikes. The day was cloudy and cool. To my left I heard a call, which to my ears sounded like one of distress. The chick-like plaint was coming from the west; I glanced out in that direction and spotted a Marsh Hawk flying from the east. It was flying quite high, but when it sighted or heard, what I took to be its young, it dived down to the level of the other bird. When it came directly over the young it was about two feet higher than they were. At this time it dropped a morsel of food. The young bird, missing it, went diving down after it and soon had it in its talons. It then landed and began its meal, while the parent went on its way for more food.

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Mr. J. Turnquist, of Wallwort, has a very appropriate name for his farmstead. It is "Fogelhem," meaning Birdhome in the Swedish language.

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IN CALIFORNIA

While the rest of us have been shivering in the cold of Saskatchewan's hard winter, Mr. and Mrs. Arthur Ward, of Burnham, have been basking in the sun at Whittier, California.

But Mr. Ward cannot forget his bird banding. "In the garden with birds, butterflies and flowers," he writes, "I was not satisfied with just watching the birds, but had to make a trap, so that I could examine them in the hand." And he has done just that with many species, some of which visit us here in mid-summer.

Mr. and Mrs. Ward have had several interesting field trips with enthusiastic members of the Whittier branch of the National Audubon Society. From 50 to 100 species of birds were seen and discussed on some of these trips.

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CONDITIONS AT SCOTT

By F. Rouse

I have seen no Starlings since October. This is unusual as they have stayed around here all winter for the last few years. I received a report of heavy mortality amongst the English Sparrows that were making their homes in town, owing to the severe winter. There may have been some losses here at the experimental farm, but we still have hundreds of them around, where they have ideal conditions to roost inside straw shelters and eat at hog self-feeders. The Hungarian Partridges appear to be wintering well. Many of them spend the nights among the hedges and spruce trees here. With the exception of one Evening Grosbeak and one Bohemian Waxwing seen last fall, none of these birds have been observed this winter. Apparently these were scouts, here to size up the food supply. The report would be a pessimistic one as there were no seeds on the Manitoba maples or frozen fruits in the orchard.

FALL MIGRATIONS AT SASKATOON

It was unfortunate that we received Mr. A. McPherson's excellent review of fall migrations too late for publication in the last issue. The following is only a brief summary prepared by Stuart Houston.

Killdeers, Lesser and Greater Yellowlegs, Sora Rails and Palm and Orange-crowned Warblers were present in more than usual numbers. Wilson's Snipes, Wilson's Phalaropes, White-crowned Sparrows and Slate-colored Juncos were less numerous than usual. A definite decrease in the numbers of Hawks and Owls was noted around Saskatoon. The efforts of the Saskatoon Fish and Game League seem to have reduced the numbers of crows and magpies in the immediate vicinity of Saskatoon.

Mr. McPherson banded his first Water-thrush on Sept. 18 and his first Fox Sparrow on Oct. 1. Pine Siskins were noted on Sept. 3. Greater Yellowlegs were still present on Oct. 26. A Western Grebe was seen on the river on Nov. 2, and ducks were fairly plentiful on Nov. 19. The first winter visitors - Bohemian Waxwings and a White-winged Crossbill - were noted on Oct. 26.

A GOOD CAMERA

By Doug Gilroy

In the last issue of the BLUE JAY, Mr. Yaki, of North Battleford, asked for information concerning a good camera for photographing wild life. I do not claim to be an expert, in regards to cameras, but in my humble opinion a 35 mm. fills the bill. I own an Argus C 3 and have had good success with it. I chose a "35" because I wanted to take my pictures in colour. It is also the most economical of colour cameras, and also takes good black and whites. It is small and light and can be put in your pocket to carry around, if you wish.



QU'APPELLE VALLEY IN WINTER By Elizabeth Cruickshank

We had one memorable drive to the valley the end of December. The last time we saw it the trees were still wearing their gorgeous mantle of russet and gold-fawn and brown. The flats had been golden with light. But now, "winter had put a coldness on the hill."

The countryside was quiet, peaceful and pallid. Then the sun came out. We took a walk to revel in the transformation. Now the high hills glittered and shimmered in wide-flung splendor; the lowland was magically lovely - gleaming like a bed of pearl in the slanting sun. The rounded contours of the hills were gold, then blue as they merged into folds of deep shadows in the coulees. Longfellow's lines came to me as I felt the beauty of the scene -

"O my children  
Love is sunshine - hate is shadow  
Life is checkered - shade and sunshine,  
Rule by love."

Magpies flew about settling on the bare branches that took on a coat of purple against the blue of the sky; chickadees flitted from gleaming choke-cherry to rose bushes, their cheery call a delight in any weather.

We had hoped to see more birds but as the late afternoon sun filtered through the trees on the hill, filling the place now with silvery radiance, we wondered how many little folk were hiding in this same wood until darkness would make their appearance safer.

Day was done - a rainbow light swept the skyline with beauty calm, yet bright. "We felt the touch of the infinite." The first star found us battling snow and wind on the plain above, as we drove slowly homeward, leaving peace and beauty in the valley.

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ALL SET FOR BIRD BANDING

Maurice G. Street built himself a new house this summer at Nipawin and moved in on Armistice Day. The location is ideal for bird observations. On the large lot, half of which is natural bush extending right up to the kitchen window, he hopes to band 1,000 birds in 1950. Across the street is a natural park of some 20 or 30 acres of Jack Pine, Poplar, etc.

A pair of Catbirds nested on his new property last summer. He banded the four young as they left the nest, as well as the adults. One of these proved to be a male that he had banded June 2, 1947. He also retrapped a Blue Jay, October 3rd, which he had banded in September 1945. The band of this one was so thin that he had to replace it with another.

ZEBRA FINCHES

Maurice Street

One of my little daughters received a pair of Zebra Finches for a birthday present in September. We put them in an ordinary canary cage and put in a small cocoon, with a small hole in one side for them to sleep in. Imagine our delight, when after moving to our new house, they laid four eggs, two of which hatched. The two young left the nest for the first time on Boxing Day.

A remarkable thing about these finches is that while countless generations have been reared in this country, they still nest during October, November and December - spring in their ancestral home - Australia.

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Have you forgotten? Two hundred and twenty-five of our members have paid up for 1950. Let us try to make it 100%.

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