

Saskatchewan Sharp-Tailed Grouse Survey

By DR. STUART HOUSTON



Provincial Museum Sharp-tailed Grouse habitat case.

Much concern has been expressed over the declining numbers of the Sharp-tailed Grouse in some areas of Saskatchewan. Since the Sharptail is our provincial bird emblem, the Yorkton Natural History Society felt that a survey of this species would be a suitable project for Jubilee year.

Publicity was obtained chiefly through the courtesy of the weekly farm papers and the "Blue Jay". Our thanks is due to the editors of these papers and particularly to Doug Gilroy, editor of the "Prairie Wildlife" column in the Western Producer.

221 reports were received, and over half of those wrote an additional letter giving extra information, besides filling out answers to the questions asked. The reports represented all parts of Saskatchewan — the most southerly report was a dancing ground one-half mile from the U.S. boundary, south of Coronach; the most northerly was from Loon River in township 59. However, there were many fewer reports from the western half of the province than from the eastern.

Locations of 118 dancing grounds were reported. Some people with large land holdings reported more than one dancing ground, and some

sent additional reports of dancing grounds on neighbors' land. Twelve people reported that dancing grounds, used in years past, had been abandoned by the Sharptails. Twenty-seven people reported that they had no Sharptails on their land, either winter or summer. Although not requested specifically, 29 people volunteered that Sharptails in their district had decreased in numbers; 8 reported an increase in numbers in recent years; 3 said numbers were about the same. Fourteen volunteered that in their opinion there should be a closed season in their district.

There were not enough reports to make any estimate of the provincial population of Sharptails. **It is likely that the results given below are higher than the true average for the province**, for several reasons. Firstly, the question asking for sites of dancing grounds likely exerted a selective effect — people who had a dancing ground to report felt more inclined to write. Similarly, people with no Sharptails to report at any time of year may have had less inducement to write. Secondly, some reporters seem to have exaggerated. This is chiefly because a flock of birds, counted as wintering on a particular section, likely range over one or two sections, and may be the

only flock for a considerably larger area than that reported on.

Statistical Summary: 693 quarter sections had an estimated 4757 Sharptails (or 27.5 per square mile.)

496 quarter sections estimated the breeding population at 1162 pairs (2324 birds) or 9.36 pair per square mile.

Many people mentioned the "migratory habits" of the Sharptails, who appear to move about in a fairly definite pattern at different seasons of the year. Steve Mann estimated that less than 10% of the birds that winter on his ranch at the foot of the Cypress Hills remain to nest. Donald Hooper reported from Somme that "the sharptails here move into the farming areas in the winter from large meadows and tamarack swamps. About six years ago, hundreds and hundreds moved into our district in the winter time, compared to only six or eight pairs that nested on our farm that summer."

The Yorkton Natural History Society has turned full details of the Survey, including the original reports, over to the Provincial Game Dept. We hope that they may find it of value, and carry on this survey in a modified form from year to year. We have provided a basic list of good observers. We feel a winter count is best taken a little earlier — in late February and early March. Interesting excerpts from the letters received may be printed in a later issue of the "BLUE JAY" as space permits.

The Society's First Annual Field Meet

By CLIFF SHAW, Yorkton

The 50 or 60 people who attended our society's first summer field meeting June 18-19 in the Qu'Appelle valley heartily agreed that it was an unqualified success and fully merits a repeat next year.

The society's headquarters for the two days was Valley centre. The weatherman co-operated by providing ideal weather except for a brief storm on the Sunday afternoon as most of the members headed home.

During the two days 81 birds and over 100 plants, in flower, were identified.

Saturday morning the group took a familiarization tour of the valley around Fort Qu'Appelle, Lebret, travelled as far east as the dam near Katepewa and visited a number of the historic sites.

In the afternoon the party journeyed to the home of Mr. and Mrs. Ralph Stueck of Abernethy. Our past president is widely known across Canada for his waterfowl sanctuary and the fine work he is doing for conservation by showing films to boys and girls and many adult groups. Towards the close of our visit Mrs. Stueck and her helpers served lunch on the spacious lawns of her beautiful garden.

Saturday night a evening session was held in the Valley centre hall. Our president Jack Shaver showed films and a number of the members had brought along their prize colored slides.

Dr. Stuart Houston of Yorkton undertook to awaken the bird enthusiasts at 4.30 a.m. Sunday to take part in an identification hike led by himself and Manley Collin of Fort San. Mrs. Collin served coffee to fortify the hikers and Manley had put out extra clothing for those who had come unprepared for the cool breezes and dewey grass.

Of the 81 species identified in the two days those of special interest were Lark and Bairds Sparrows, a Cooper haw, Spotted Towhee, American Redstart, Orange Crowned Warbler, a Bobolink and a Yellow-breasted Chat.

Following the bird hike Lloyd Carmichael of Regina and Bernard DeVries of Fort San conducted a flower hike along the coulees, hill tops and shorelines finding and identifying well over 100 flowers in bloom.

We would also like to pay tribute to Dr. George Ledingham our efficient secretary and treasurer, and the executive for their splendid efforts in organizing the outing. It will be long remembered.

At an executive meeting later it was suggested that in 1956 the outing be held at Cypress hills possibly chartering a bus from Regina.