

DISCOVERY OF THE WORLD'S FIRST NEST OF THE SOLITARY SANDPIPER

C. STUART HOUSTON, 863 University Drive, Saskatoon SK S7N 0J8

The first reported nest of any species is a milestone event in ornithology. The Solitary Sandpiper, *Tringa solitaria*, nest discovery was especially noteworthy because this species was relatively common, yet its nest site had gone unreported for more than a century. The hero of this account is a sixteen-year-old Scottish immigrant farm lad in Alberta named Evan Thomson. Evan corresponded with John Macoun and Walter Raine, and Raine personally visited the Thomson farm at Red Lodge, Alberta, in 1906. Three of Evan's egg sets even commanded attention in England. The final oologist visit to Evan at Red Lodge was jointly by Fletcher J. Street and George Stuart in 1923.

Evan Thomson's arrival in the world was itself noteworthy. He was born 15 September 1886 on board the stern wheel river boat Princess as she passed Sandy Long Point on the upper reaches of Lake Winnipeg. It was the last trip that summer for the Princess; had Evan's pregnant mother not caught it, she would have been forced to spend the winter in Winnipeg. Evan's father, Colin Thomson, born in Rosemarkie, Scotland 3 September 1855, was a Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) clerk at The Pas, Manitoba, 1883-1890.¹ Colin had met Sarah Margaret McDonald at The Pas, and had married her in Winnipeg on 28 July 1884.

Sarah Margaret was the daughter of Alexander McDonald and Mary Ann McRae; the latter's father was Duncan McRae (1813-1898), the Scottish stonemason and architect who had

joined the HBC in Winnipeg in 1837 and later superintended the building of major churches in the Winnipeg area.² Colin Thomson retired from the Hudson's Bay Company on 23 August 1892 and returned for three years to Scotland, where he operated a bakery in Inverness; his two oldest sons, Hepburn and Evan received their only formal education at the Raining Stair school in Inverness.

In 1895, when Evan was eight and his brother Hepburn nine, Colin and Sarah Thomson moved their family of five children under the age of 10 back to Canada. Colin homesteaded on the southeast quarter of section 28, township 34, range 2, west of the fifth meridian, eight miles west of the hamlet of Bowden (map, figure 1). Colin filed on the southwest quarter for his son Hepburn who lived there until his death in 1977. Below Hepburn's home there was open water year-round on Olds Creek; because of a spring; watering cattle was not a problem. Until 1927 Evan farmed the northeast quarter of the same section 28. Bowden is 116 km north of Calgary and 37 km south of Red Deer. The first school within walking distance was Berrydale, 4 miles south, which opened in September 1897, followed by White Creek school three miles west, in March 1907, and finally Red Lodge school, just over a mile south, in September 1907.³ Hepburn and Evan missed out on the Canadian schooling that their younger siblings enjoyed.

To earn a little pocket money, Evan collected birds' eggs. In an age when egg-collecting was a more popular hobby

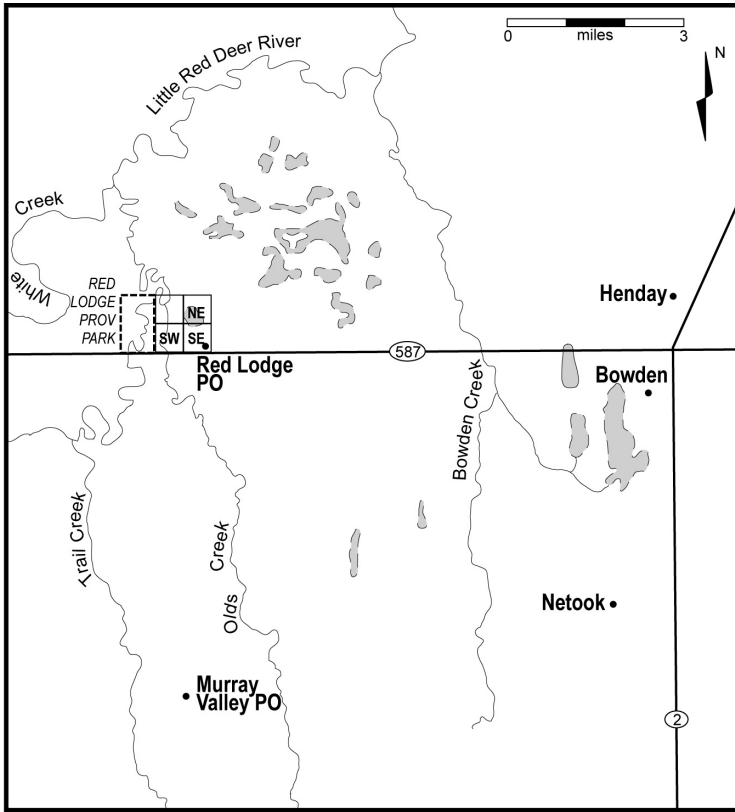


Figure 1. Map of Bowden and Red Lodge. By Carol Beaulieu

than stamp collecting, he carefully “blew out” the contents of each bird’s egg through a tiny hole in each end, and sent the eggs, carefully wrapped, by mail with their species identifications and sometimes their nests, to Walter Raine, Canada’s leading merchant of birds’ eggs, in Toronto, Ontario.

It seems highly probable, from indirect evidence, that Evan’s first contact with Walter Raine was in 1903, and that Raine paid him that year for his first shipment of eggs. If so, Evan’s still extant letter with what would then have been his second shipment, on 30 July 1904, was a reiteration of mention of the 1903 nest, as follows: “While collecting in Alberta last year 1903 on 16th June I happened

to come on an old Robins nest in which I found a Solitary Sandpiper sitting on eggs, but they [the eggs] were in too far a stage of incubation to preserve.” (Figure 2A, 2B). This pertinent fact, of four eggs that could not be emptied of their contents and hence were of little or no value, was omitted by Raine in his two published accounts.^{4, 5}

The following is Raine’s wording: “In the spring of 1903, I engaged Mr. Evan Thomson to collect birds eggs for me in northern [sic = western] Alberta, and when the season was over he sent me notes on the specimens he had collected, amongst which was a record of finding a clutch of sandpiper eggs [16 June 1903] in an old American robin’s nest built in a

tree top ... I was sure I had at last secured a clutch of solitary sandpiper eggs."⁴ For unequivocal verification, before this exciting discovery could be announced to the world, Raine directed Evan Thomson to collect an adult Solitary Sandpiper for unequivocal species identification, and its eggs from another tree nest the following year (1904). Evan located his second nest on 9 June, 1904, blew the eggs but left them in the grackle nest; the next morning the empty eggshells had disappeared and the adult was not visible. "On the 20th June ... I found another clutch and shot the parent bird as she flew from the

nest and secured the four fresh eggs ... [from] a cedar waxwing's nest in a spruce tree out in a swamp or muskeg." (figure 2a, 2b).^{4, 5} Raine purchased the Solitary Sandpiper specimen, the Cedar Waxwing nest and the four eggs from Evan Thomson.

In 1905, Evan Thomson found his fourth Solitary Sandpiper nest.⁶

Raine submitted his findings to two journals, one Canadian and one American.^{4, 5} The longer version, with a photograph of two eggs sets in their nests, appeared only in *Oologist*. In this way Raine successfully shared his new discovery with the widest possible audience. Such double publication was done occasionally at the time, although today it would be considered inappropriate.

Walter Raine: Raine was born in September 1861 in England. When only sixteen, Raine had presented a talk to the Leeds Naturalist Club, recounting his hikes through five adjacent localities within ten miles, searching for birds' nests. He had identified 86 bird species and located nests that contained 1074 eggs; of these he kept fewer than a hundred eggs for his personal collection, which he displayed at the meeting. The Leeds Naturalist Club published sixteen of Raine's bird notes and one about a polecat observation, in its bulletin, *The Naturalist*. A second talk to the club, on 20 August 1878, was mentioned favourably in the *Yorkshire Post and Leeds Mercury*.⁷

Raine emigrated to Toronto, Ontario in 1884. He continued to collect birds' eggs; this activity soon became his major source of income. He took his first trip by train to western Canada in 1891, stopping in Moose Jaw and Rush Lake, where the McCown's Longspur was the commonest small bird on the elevated prairies; Raine's specimens

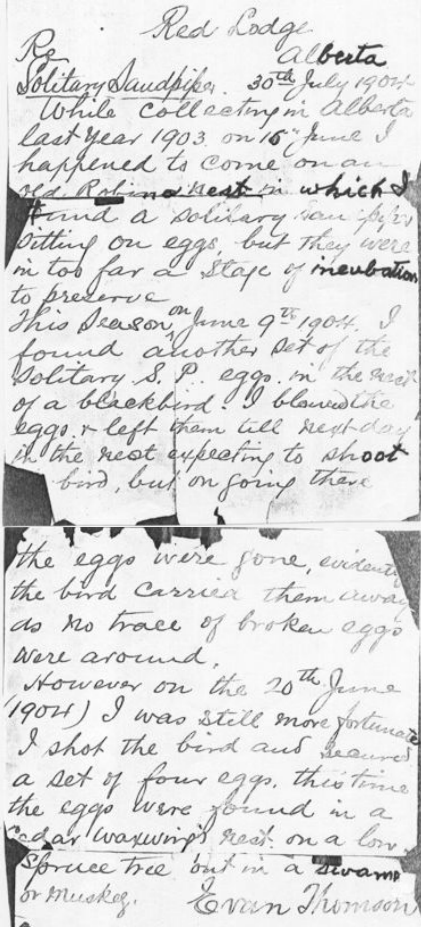


Figure 2A, 2B. Letter from Evan Thomson to Walter Raine, 1903

were the first of this little-known longspur to be deposited in the Geological Survey of Canada collection. In 1892, each McCown's Longspur egg listed at one dollar, a new listing thanks to Raine. [A Ferruginous Hawk egg listed for retail sale at \$2.50; a Sandhill Crane egg, \$2; a Whooping Crane egg, \$3; a Bald Eagle egg, \$3.50, and a Golden Eagle egg, \$6]⁸. Wishing to share his observations and collections, Raine prematurely and inadvisedly rushed into print with his 197-page book, *Bird Nesting in Northwest Canada*. Raine, in his first experience with birds on the western plains, was unaware that he had attributed several egg sets to a migrating wader species present nearby and not to the resident species that had laid them. Raine returned to western Canada in 1893; details of his sightings and collections appeared in five articles in six issues of *Nidologist*, an egg-collector's journal.^{7,9}

John Macoun: John Macoun enters our story in 1904, when Walter Raine passed on to him the incubating adult Solitary Sandpiper specimen collected at his behest by Evan Thomson on 24 June 1904 as it flew from the previous Cedar Waxwing nest.¹⁰ This set of four Solitary Sandpiper eggs, complete with the Cedar Waxwing nest, was promptly sold to oologist Colonel John E. Thayer in Lancaster, Massachusetts.⁵

It may be permissible to mention two of Macoun's missed opportunities. First, back in 1896, Macoun had in all probability missed his chance to find the world's first Solitary Sandpiper nest near Prince Albert, Saskatchewan: "On July 6th, 1896, while collecting plants in a swamp, I saw a bird of this species sitting on a small birch, but could neither raise the other bird nor find the nest. The next day I visited the same place and found two birds sitting on trees, but failed to find the nest."¹¹ Macoun did not think to look for a sandpiper's nest in the trees,

and thereby he missed his chance to add to his other important birds' nest finds: a colony of Passenger Pigeon nests on the Waterhen River between Lake Manitoba and Lake Winnipegosis on 23 June 1881 and the nest of a Connecticut Warbler in the Carberry swamp, 21 June 1883. John Macoun was the author of *Catalogue of Canadian Birds*, published in three segments in 1900, 1903 and 1904. John's son and assistant, James M. Macoun, joined him as the second author of the reprint edition in 1909. John Macoun waited patiently to assume charge of the national museum, the Victoria Memorial Museum in Ottawa, which did not open until January 1911.

Second, Macoun was in fact one of the few Canadians who might possibly have read about the tree-nesting habit of the European counterpart of the Solitary Sandpiper. The Green Sandpiper, *Tringa ochropus*, in the forests of Germany and Sweden, has a white rump but is otherwise similar in appearance to the Solitary Sandpiper. That the Green Sandpiper laid its eggs in trees in previous nests of other bird species had had been first noted as early as 1818, and in 1834 the identity of the host nest, a Song Thrush, *Turdus philomelos*, was first identified. However it was not until 1855 that Forest-Inspector Weise published the definitive article in *Journal für Ornithologie* ! Independently, H.W. Wheelwright in Sweden published a similar report in Britain's *Field* newspaper, 18 August 1860, in spite of doubts expressed [and years later apologized for] by the editor of *Field*.¹² Obviously, Macoun and virtually all other North American oologists, had not learned of the habits of the Green Sandpiper.

Walter Raine's visit, 1906: The fourth year, Raine determined to visit Red Lodge, Alberta, in person, from 5 to 11 June 1906. His aim was to see, first-hand,

a nest of a Solitary Sandpiper. In company with Evan Thomson, now nineteen, Raine reported:

“We were fortunate in finding three nests of this bird ... June 5th ... four eggs laid in the old nest of a Canada [Gray] jay ... in a small spruce tree five feet from the ground”; on June 8th, “four eggs laid in the nest of a Brewer [sic] blackbird about fifteen feet from the ground”; on June 11th ... “four eggs in an old [Eastern] kingbird’s nest at least twenty feet up in a poplar tree. So far, I have had nine clutches ...”¹⁰ These were the fifth, sixth and seventh nests found by or with Evan Thomson, who found two additional nests in 1906, his eighth and ninth, one in an American Robin nest in a tamarack on 6 June and another on 15 June after Raine had left (see Jourdain below). While at Red Lodge, Raine took a photo of Evan Thomson’s recently-built log shack (Figure 3) and took another photograph, now very faded, of the Colin Thomson family.



Figure 3. Evan Thomson’s bachelor shack, 1906. Photo by Walter Raine.

Following Raine’s double publications in 1904, illustrated with excellent photographs, egg-collectors now for the first time knew to look in trees for Solitary Sandpiper nests. By the end of the 1909 season Raine had been able to purchase another 12 sets of four eggs, four sets of three, two sets of two, and one single egg.¹³ Raine was so proud of his pre-eminence that he refrained from turning most of these eggs into a

quick, substantial profit; he knew that all major museums lacked a set of Solitary Sandpiper eggs. However, the double publication had no doubt enhanced his reputation and his sales of eggs of other species.

Raine remained in favour with John Macoun. During that same trip to Red Lodge, although perhaps before or after, Raine also collected the world’s first nest of the Short-billed Dowitcher. Time proved that Raine’s diagnosis of the bird being the *griseus* Short-billed race was correct though Macoun was doubtful.¹⁰ Only in 1954 did the American Ornithologists’ Union recognize the Short-billed and Long-billed Dowitchers as separate species.

F.C.R. Jourdain, 1907. Jourdain’s 1907 article in *Ibis* depicted four sketches of Solitary Sandpiper eggs, one (#4) sketched by Jourdain himself from an American Robin nest 15 feet above ground in a tamarack, collected 6 June 1906 by Evan Thomson. Raine had evidently sold this set to Major F.W. Proctor, an English oologist. The other three eggs were #1, from the 16 June 1905 nest already mentioned above, the egg itself still at that time in the possession of Raine. Number 2 depicted an egg from the set collected 15 June 1906 after Raine had left Red Lodge and which had already been sold by Raine to Jeremiah Matthew Goodall, another well-known English oologist. The provenance of the egg sketched by Raine in #3 is not explained by Jourdain’s text or legend.⁶ No doubt both Proctor and Goodall paid a premium for being the first Europeans to own these rare Solitary Sandpiper eggs. These “extra” nests were not mentioned in Macoun and Macoun 1909.¹⁰

Evan marries Annie Baines, October 1918. By working winters as a lumberjack in British Columbia, Evan had earned

sufficient to build a new house in 1916 or 1917 on the northeast quarter of section 28, the quarter section north of his parent's (Figures 4, 5). He had gained permission, after eight years of courtship, to marry Sarah Annie Baines, who went by "Annie," in October 1918. Annie's family, who emigrated from Coniston in England's "lake country" in 1897, farmed four miles to the south of Red Lodge, near the tiny settlement of Murray Valley. Evan's son Gerald was born 28 March 1920 and daughter Marjorie, 14 November 1922 (Figure 6). Evan shared his lifelong interest in wildlife with his two children.

Fletcher J. Street and George Stuart's visit in 1923: Evan Thomson (Figure 3) received his final recorded visit from an oologist, when J. Fletcher Street from Beverly, New Jersey and George H. Stuart 3rd from Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, arrived together at Bowden by train 28 May 1923. Evan drove them to

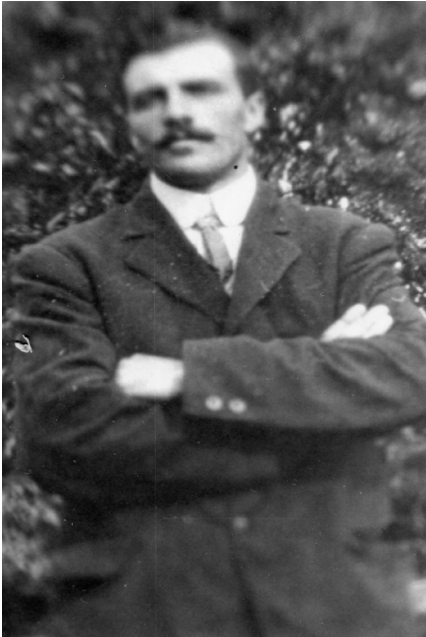


Figure 4. Evan Thomson as a young man



Figure 5. Evan Thomson's home under construction about 1916



Figure 6. Evan Thomson's wife, Annie, and children, Gerald and Marjorie, ca 1924

his "log cabin at the edge of the muskeg ... living alone in this wilderness without neighbors" Street's statement of Evan "living alone" was not true in 1903, when Evan was living with his parents and siblings, and was even less true in 1923, by which time Evan had a wife, a son and a daughter living in a frame house (Figure 7). On 29 May Evan took the two American oologists to his best hope, a chain of small lakes northwest of Red Lodge. There George Stuart was the one who located a Solitary Sandpiper nest with "four of the most beautiful eggs I have ever seen ... in a Robin's nest set

four feet from the ground in an eight foot spruce. ... Due to a lack of rainfall during the last four or five years ... what were once shallow ponds are now dried up muskegs. In places where the Solitary Sandpiper was once numerous it is hardly to be found at all.”¹⁴



Figure 7. Evan Thomson's home, ca 1926

The two Americans then continued farther north to Belvedere, Alberta, where Street published original observations of the nearly-as-rarely-found nests of the Lesser Yellowlegs near Belvedere.¹⁴ Street and Stuart were the guests of A.D. Henderson, an American who was Alberta's most prolific bird's-egg collector. Henderson became the second Albertan to equal Evan Thomson in finding five sets of Solitary Sandpiper eggs: in American Robin nests in 1914, 1922 and 1923, in a Rusty Blackbird nest in 1927, and in an Eastern Kingbird nest in 1941.¹⁵ In 1923, Henderson and Richard C. Harlow, an American, together found the first downy young of the Short-billed Dowitcher and in 1924, north of Fort Assiniboine AB, the second-ever nest, 1 and 2 June 1925¹⁶.

Later life: Evan Thomson sold his uneconomical farm in May 1927 and moved to Red Deer, where he was soon caught up in the Great Depression. He became a steam presser for a dry-cleaning firm for \$40 a month, but also raised silver foxes in an attempt to earn a little extra. Next he was in charge of the horses which worked underground for the Brazeau Colleries at Nordegg.

Finally he became a maintenance man for the Red Deer school division until his retirement in Red Deer in 1958 at age 72 (Figure 8). After two years in the Valley Park Nursing Home, his wife, Annie died in September 1977 at age 86, followed soon thereafter by Evan on 11 October 1977 at age 91 years.

Evan's daughter, Marjorie Kent, lives in Burnaby, B.C. Evan's niece, Beatrice Kure, daughter of Hepburn Thomson, lives with her husband Jens, have taken over her father's site. Bea reports (2 October 2011):

"The muskeg, a real muskeg that a man can sink down in, is still there on Evan's original farm. The moose love it in the winter. Some spruce trees have been taken out for lumber, leaving mostly small tamaracks, but some spruce still grow along the edge of the sandy land. Short pasture grass grows sparsely, with groves of poplar. It was never good farm land."

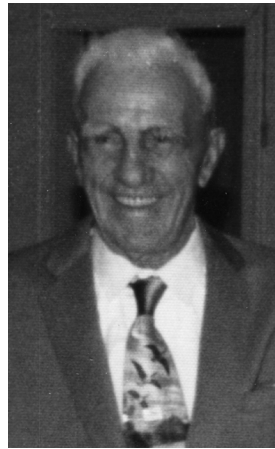


Figure 8. Evan Thomson as an older man

The geographical name of Red Lodge is today preserved in Red Lodge Provincial Park with 120 campsites, on the banks of the Little Red Deer River, 15 km west of Bowden and immediately west of Hepburn's quarter section where Bea and Jens Kure live. Nearby to the east is the

Red Lodge Guest Ranch, Bowden AB T0M 0K0, operated by Dale and Wendy Bradshaw, located 11 km west of Bowden on Highway #587.

Summary

It is noteworthy, in fact astounding and against all statistical probability, that Evan, without binoculars, somehow had access to a bird book. Evan correctly and without hesitation identified the Solitary Sandpiper -- three years before the inexpensive Chester Reed's Bird Guide appeared in 1906 in two small volumes.¹⁷ Identifying birds correctly was then extremely difficult; the norm was to shoot any unfamiliar bird and then spend an hour keying it out in the difficult manuals of that era.

While others on this continent kept their eyes on the ground when watching any Solitary Sandpiper pair that showed apparent breeding behaviour, Evan was the first to appreciate the significance of his bird landing on a robin nest in a tree! In spite of his limited education and limited access to books, he eclipsed thousands of much better educated people with infinitely greater opportunity. In the definitive Solitary Sandpiper species account #156 in the Birds of North America series of 716 species accounts, the timing of Evan's achievement is acknowledged without naming him, in Moskoff's brief 1995 statement: "... the nest was not discovered until 1903."¹⁸ I suggest that Evan deserves long overdue naming as the improbable but triumphant hero.

Acknowledgments

I am indebted to Marjorie Kent and Jens Kure for photographs and maps. Bea Kure copied relevant pages from Pioneer Legacy¹⁹ and offered constructive criticism of two drafts of this account. Martin K. McNicholl offered constructive criticism.

1. Thomson C (1993) Appointments and service, 1976 – 23 Aug. 1892. Hudson's Bay Company. Hudson's Bay Company Archives, Winnipeg, Manitoba.

2. Bumstead JM (1999) Dictionary of Manitoba Biography. University of Manitoba Press, Winnipeg, MB.

3. Baergen WP (2005) Pioneering with a piece of chalk.: The one-room country schools of Alberta 1885-1982. Printed by Full Court Press.

4. Raine W (1904a) Discovery of the eggs of Solitary Sandpiper. *Ottawa Naturalist* 18:135-138.

5. Raine W (1904b) Discovery of the eggs of Solitary Sandpiper. *The Oologist* 21:164-168.

6. Jourdain FCR (1907) On the eggs of some American Limicolae. *Ibis* xx:517-520.

7. Houston CS (1981) An assessment of Walter Raine and his Saskatchewan records. *Blue Jay* 39:168-181.

8. Lattin FH (1892) The Standard Catalogue of North American Birds Eggs. Third edition. Albion, N.Y.

9. Raine W (1893-4) Bird-nesting in North-west Canada. *Nidologist* 1:67-71; 84-87; 102-106; 117-120. *Nidologist* 2:9-10.

10. Macoun J, Macoun JM (1909) Catalogue of Canadian Birds, 2nd edition,

11. Macoun J (1900) Catalogue of Canadian Birds, volume 1.

12. Bent AC (1929) Life Histories of North American Birds, Order Limicolae, part 2. U.S. National Museum Bulletin 146.

13. Raine W (1910) Series of [69] Solitary Sandpiper eggs in collection of Walter Raine of Toronto, Canada (full-page photograph). *Oologist* 27(4), 15 Jan 1910.
14. Street FJ (1923) On the nesting grounds of the Solitary Sandpiper and the Lesser Yellowlegs. *Auk* 50:577-583.
15. Houston CS, Bechard MJ (1990) A.D. Henderson, Alberta's foremost oologist, 1876-1963. *Blue Jay* 48:85-96.
16. Henderson AD (1928) Birds of the muskegs. *Oologists' Record* 8:8-12.
17. Barrow MV Jr. (2000) A Passion for Birds. Princeton University Press, Princeton, N.J.
18. Moskoff W (1995) Solitary Sandpiper, *Tringa solitaria*. Birds of North America #156.
19. Anderson RF (1979) Pioneer Legacy: The History of Bowden and District. [Copyright Bowden Chamber of Commerce.] Colin Thomson, Evan Thomson, Hepburn Thomson, pp. 568-572
20. Raine W (1892) Bird- nesting in North-west Canada. Hunter Rose and Co., Toronto.



Solitary Sandpiper
<http://www.robinarnoldphotography.com>

Robin Arnold