

# Gray Gladiator

by Frank H. Brazier, Regina

A Townsend's Solitaire (*Myadestes townsendi*), which was first observed in Regina in the Legislative Grounds on December 3, 1960, occasioned a great deal of interest by spending the winter in the city.\* The bird was most often observed in the shrubbery behind the Legislative Buildings. Here a dense lilac thicket grows against the south wall, with rose bushes and honeysuckle at the west end surrounding an old Siberian crabapple tree. The crabapple entered this past winter loaded with its berry-like fruit, so that the bird had both food from the crabapple and shelter in the lilacs. To enhance an ideal spot, hot air from the vent of the restaurant in the Buildings modifies the air temperature, and a buried hot-water pipe passing from the power plant into the Buildings keeps a sizeable area of lawn free from snow. The Solitaire contentedly settled into this habitat which supplied all its winter needs—food and water (for I occasionally saw it eating quantities of snow from the lawn edge), shelter from the wind with a sunny exposure, and cover from our Pigeon Hawk (*Falco columbarius richardsonii*) which was regularly patrolling the neighbourhood, and a Prairie Falcon (*Falco mexicanus*) that roosted at the buildings during the winter.

I often saw the Solitaire perched on a twig about 18 inches from the ground protected from attack from the rear by overhanging shrubbery, basking in the sunshine which prevailed during the mild early winter. A sizeable pile of excrement which had accumulated under this favourite perch indicated that the main diet of the bird was crabapples.

Just before the cold weather really set in on January 20, Regina had been invaded by hordes of Bohemian Waxwings (*Bombycilla garrulus*), while ten Cedar Waxwings (*B. cedrorum*) had been seen on that day. I had occasion to drive by the Solitaire's domain during the mid-morning of January 26, a very cold day, and I found the even tenor of its ways rudely interrupted. The wax-

wings had found the Solitaire's pantry—a score or more Bohemians, three or four Cedars, and a lone Pine Grosbeak (*Pinicola enucleator*) had descended on its crabapple tree and were busily cramming in the crabs. The Solitaire reacted to this invasion with marked aggressiveness, no doubt recognizing the threat to its food supply. It darted between three lone perches, uttering harsh, scolding cries, and jerked its closed wings up over its back spasmodically. I suppose this could be a distraction mechanism. This behaviour was often interrupted when it dashed at nearby waxwings of both species, which invariably fled when assaulted; at such times it continued scolding, while it also fanned its tail. Twice it attacked waxwings well up in the tree but most of the attacks were on birds lower down and near its low perches. There were many waxwings in adjacent areas so that its efforts were frustrated—for every bird it drove into headlong flight two or three others would move in.

I watched the struggle for about fifteen minutes, and returned half an hour later. The situation remained unchanged except that the inroads made by the waxwings on the Solitaire's food supply were apparent. Undaunted, it continued scolding and attacking, but it could not stop their determined eating.

I drove by the tree again at 1.30 p.m. Our little gray gladiator was still at it, but the waxwings had mostly all gone, as had the fruit. I came by once more at 3.40 p.m.—the tree was bare and only a few waxwings (one Cedar) remained. The Solitaire was confining its efforts to protecting the dropped crabapples, noisily driving off such birds as essayed to feed on the fallen fruit. On occasion it would interrupt its harsh, scolding chatter with a musical flute-like call I had not heard before.

With the worst of the winter yet to come, and with its principal food store ravaged, I was concerned lest the Solitaire be forced to quit its territory in search of food, thus depriving us of the opportunity of observing a bird which had never before been

\* Margaret Belcher, 1961. *Birds of Regina*. S.N.H.S. spec. publ. No. 3.

seen in Regina in winter. At 9.00 a.m. the next day I caught a glimpse of it flying away, and left a handful of cotoneaster berries on the ground. Later, at 1.30 p.m., I left some raisins and bits of apple. An hour later I saw it busily eating the raisins. I scattered a handful of currants around that evening. I saw it briefly Saturday morning (January 28) but a cold, strong wind blew directly on the site; I did not see it again that day although I returned several times.

On Sunday Elmer Fox succeeded in photographing the bird from a car parked nearby. It was a cold, windy day and perhaps for this reason the bird spent much time well under the shrubbery, picking up and eating shrivelled fallen crabs, only occasionally venturing into the open. During its stay I kept it supplied with currants which it took regularly, a few at a time. I did not get the impression it was very hungry.

Considerable snow fell at the end of January and the weather turned much colder with biting winds. The Solitaire maintained its position well but I received quite a shock on Feb-

ruary 15. I had seen the Solitaire about 4.00 p.m. in active health, but when I drove down by the west end of the Legislative Building at 5.30 p.m. I noticed a scattering of feathers blowing across the snow. I stopped and looked under the gable and saw the Prairie Falcon on its accustomed perch for the night and concluded that the feathers were from a plucked victim. I gathered a few but as it was snowing and blowing strongly I could find nothing diagnostic. The next morning at 8.30 a.m. the Falcon was still on its roost and I was able to retrieve a casting at the foot of the wall. After drying it I showed it and the feathers to Dr. Nero at the Saskatchewan Museum of Natural History; he broke it up, found a small upper wing-bone (humerus) and a couple of grains of wheat which, with the feathers, indicated that the victim was a House Sparrow (*Passer domesticus*) and not our Townsend's Solitaire. I saw the Solitaire sunning itself the following day, and I continued to see it often and regularly thereafter until March 19, when I saw it there no more. The bird was last seen in this location on March 28 by Elmer Fox.

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