

Yellowthroat Versus Leconte's Sparrows

by R. D. Symons, Siltou

The nesting season of 1963 has been full of surprises, due, I suppose, to prolonged early rains and cold weather, followed by an unprecedented number of heavy thunder showers. The result has been sudden and unexpected floodings. Here at Siltou nearly all the first nests of grass birds, shore birds and ducks were rendered untenable and, as later events have proved, the damage was almost as great to second nests. Also, the force of the later storms blew down many already sodden nests from trees, bushes and banks.

The unusual incident I shall now tell can undoubtedly be put down to these conditions.

One of the most interesting places in this area is the valley of the Arm River just north of Findlater. Here, on the ranch of J. Edwards and sons are wide hay meadows with occasional spring-fed swamps. To this spot my wife and I went on June 12th of this year. This particular spring-fed swamp has its counterpart of many similar ones in various valleys, notably north of Jackfish Lake. The ground is boggy, with tussocks of coarse grass, some patches of tall slough grass, and many oozy runways and pools fringed with Baltic rush. There are scattered clumps of pussy willow, their green contrasting with the silvery hue of the swamp-loving hoary willow (*Salix candida*). This forms a typical habitat for Yellowthroats, rails and phalaropes. The latter grunted softly as they took wing at our approach. Overhead Common Snipes were "winnowing."

On the hay flats beyond Bobolinks fluttered and sang; and both Marbled Godwits and Willets clamored their uneasiness at our approach.

We found the water much higher than usual. The day was cloudy and cold with occasional showers between intervals of hot sunshine.

Very soon we became aware of sodden and abandoned ducks' nests, mostly of Blue-winged Teal; then we stumbled over a Sora's nest quite flooded. In most cases these nests had been robbed and their linings torn up. Even as we explored, a pair of magpies were diligently quartering the area, and we supposed

these birds to be the ones responsible. At one point a number of stained and rotten goose eggs floated placidly in the muck. These proved to be from a nest of Edwards' tame geese which had chosen to "steal" their nest in the swamp. Proceeding warily to avoid the deep runways we reached the centre of the swamp, attracted by a Yellowthroat's loud singing. We also noticed a pair of Leconte's Sparrows acting in an agitated way and were just getting the glasses on the male, who uttered his swishing notes from a small willow, when I flushed a bird from the ground. I heard, rather than saw the bird, as it left the grass at my feet, and instead of looking at it, I concentrated my gaze on the spot from which it had fled.

Almost at once I saw the nest, constructed with the minimum of material in the centre of a "nigger head" covered with short grass. This hump was higher than most and therefore several inches above the water. As I stooped to look at this nest, a male Yellowthroat flew from a nearby willow clump and attacked the sparrow who had remained on his perch at the nearer clump. The sparrow at once fled to a spot some 30 yards away, from which it "chipped" with rage. The Yellowthroat then turned his scolding on to me, coming within a few feet and peering from behind his mask as he "churred."

I resumed my examination of the nest. I saw only the sparrow's eggs—three of them—and then I saw the two smaller and paler warbler eggs. For a second I thought this was a Yellowthroat's nest containing three cowbird eggs—I have seen this before—but it was certainly unlike the usual deep and bulky basket of coarse material which these birds usually build. And never before had I seen a Yellowthroat's nest completely hollowed in the ground; but they are rather attached to nettles, rank grass, or the stems of shrubs, and from a few inches to several feet up.

But when I removed one of each kind of egg I saw that the larger were no cowbird's effort, but undoubtedly a Leconte's Sparrow's, al-

most exactly like a Savannah Sparrow's; while the other egg matched the Yellowthroat eggs I had several times seen before, being rather like a Yellow Warbler's. Puzzled by this, and aware that the male Yellowthroat was still scolding, we decided to retire to a distance of some ten yards, where we sat on our heels in the wet grass and watched. What appeared to be a female Yellowthroat soon slipped through the shrubbery and flew to the hump. I asked my wife to circle around and put the bird up, which she did. The bird flew at once to the same bush as before, and at twelve feet distance proved quite certainly to be a Yellowthroat. Her spouse then re-appeared and scolded my wife, but as the Leconte's Sparrow regained the first bush and uttered its "chip" note, the Yellowthroat turned on him and drove him off.

We, and the birds, repeated this performance three times at half-hour intervals. Meantime, we made a further search and found a Yellowthroat nest about twelve yards away at the bottom of a hoary willow. This nest was thoroughly drenched and the lining was torn out, although only a portion at the bottom was actually inundated.

The only conclusion we could come to was that the Yellowthroat had built, and perhaps the female had started to lay, when their nest was rendered untenable by the recent downpours, and then subsequently gutted by magpies. The female, under the necessity of laying at once, had, with the assistance of her mate (who no doubt in any case resented the proximity of the sparrows) driven off the sparrows and usurped the nest.

Heavy rain and violent wind drove us away that afternoon, and the weather remained so wet and rough that in spite of good intentions I did not return to the spot until June 29th. Miss Belcher and I then then visited the spot, but the water was even higher, the grass had grown much longer and we were unable to flush the bird, or indeed to find any trace of the nest. Very heavy rain soon drove us off again, but not until we had located the Yellowthroat apparently busy about a hundred yards to the west; while the Leconte's Sparrows were finally run down some three hundred yards to the east,

where the water was quite shallow and on drier knolls some saskatoons and chokecherries were growing.

In common with other observers I have often before noted the extreme and wren-like pugnacity of Yellowthroats on their nesting territory. This is mentioned briefly by the late P. A. Taverner in **Birds of Western Canada**. However, this is the first case I have met with of an actual usurpation by these birds of the nest of another species. No doubt this is simply a rare case due to abnormal conditions.

GEESE MAKE LONG WALK TO WATER

by **Bob Caldwell**, Wildlife Branch, Dept. of Nat. Resources, Saskatoon.

On Thursday, June 27, 1963, ecologists from the Wildlife Branch under the leadership of Jim Nelson and aided by Conservation Officer C. A. Reid of Maple Creek, banded a number of Canada Geese on the Martin Lakes, a series of small basins located on the edge of the Great Sandhills, northeast of Golden Prairie. Besides putting the conventional metal leg band on these birds, they were also marked with green plastic neck bands. Nine geese were captured and thus marked at this location, including three adults that were moulting.

The next day, while doing an aerial census of goose broods in the district, Nelson checked the Martin Lakes and also Bigstick Lake, situated several miles southwest. Geese were not seen on the former area, but several, including a large adult wearing a green neck band, were observed walking along the mud flats near the west end of Bigstick Lake. At that point the distance between the two areas would be approximately nine miles. As no other geese were banded in the vicinity other than those from the Martin Lakes, we can say without reservation that these birds, including both young and adults, walked not less than nine miles to reach the place where they were seen from the plane. While we think the distance is quite remarkable, so is the ability of the Canada Goose to locate another safe resting area by walking to it. Their built-in compass must work very well.