

## Notes from Letters

### PRAIRIE DOGS VISITED

This past summer I had the pleasure of visiting the prairie dog colony on the quarter section of land now leased by the Saskatchewan Natural History Society. Although the little creatures and I were strangers, I became interested in its welfare when I recently learned that its very existence was threatened. My trip to southwestern Saskatchewan was to see, and perhaps photograph, this prairie dweller.

It is through the efforts of past conservationists that we enjoy the existence of many of our wild creatures today, for example, the buffalo. The united voice of all persons interested in the preservation of our wildlife can do many things. But conservationists are not always active in time to save a species. In the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto there is a wonderful exhibit of Canada's once prolific but now extinct Passenger Pigeon. In the Natural History Museum in Regina there is a habitat group of prairie dogs. Do those persons who could destroy this animal consider that a museum display such as this is sufficient heritage to leave for the generations to come? Thanks to the Saskatchewan Natural History Society, and to Mr. Purask who kindly released his lease on the land occupied by the prairie dogs, the future of the Black-tailed Prairie Dog in Saskatchewan is practically assured.

I spent four days with this pleasing little fellow, and no longer consider it a stranger, although in that length of time it was still not prepared to accept me. It is an inquisitive fellow who tries to see all that is going on without exposing itself to danger, either apparent or fancied. It is timid and afraid of man (need I ask why?); even in this area which is now posted, it is still far too vulnerable.

The area surrounding the colony has a fascination about it that is

difficult to define. Perhaps I'm a sentimentalist. When I drove to the top of the last hill, I saw spread out before me in the valley below a page of the old west; the west of story books and the dream of youth. The wild flowers are there, the buffalo grass and prickly pear. The air resounds with the songs of birds. Our Black-tailed Prairie Dogs have their homes there. Only the buffalo are gone. What a wonderful wilderness park this valley would make!

My photographic endeavours did meet with some disappointments. I erected my photographic blind in a spot where the animals were most numerous, but the burrows where I had expected to get those beautiful close-up shots were untenanted, and the area adjacent to the blind was avoided by the animals during the four days of my visit. Those that I did photograph were a little too far distant for finer detail reproduction. The mosquitoes, however, were quite willing to share the blind with me, especially when I arrived early in the morning. However, with the aid of a little repellent their hungry humming soon diminished.

It doesn't take long for a colony of prairie dogs to win you over, especially when you are able to study them through binoculars at fairly close range. The untrained observer can't help comparing the behaviour of these animals with their human counterparts. The excited animal, with every muscle in its body working as though it were going somewhere in a great hurry, but never leaving one spot, its black-tipped tail flitting up and down, reminded me of a spectator at a ball game hardly able to retain his seat. There is the show-off, the "look ma, no hands!" individual who appears to somersault before diving into its burrow. One interesting action appears to be a little affectionate nuzzling, as one animal, already outside the burrow, is greeted by another animal just emerging.

To the observer, in sympathy with his surroundings, the rewards of a visit to this valley are many, and they are not measured in the number of feet of photographic film exposed. There are mental images, impressions gained regardless of sun, wind, or rain, memories of creeping noiselessly into your blind while darkness still blankets the land, to sit and listen while a coyote's lonely call rolls and echoes from among the distant hills; of hearing the first faint murmurings emitted from the numerous burrows, and the volume of sound increase as the inhabitants wait for dawn and a new day; of standing as though transfixed, when in that grey-purplish light that precedes dawn, you come face to face with a magnificent male antelope. Each stands staring for just a moment, and then you find yourself alone, as the antelope melts into the shadows. Experiences such as these have to be lived to be enjoyed.

I hope the Saskatchewan Natural History Society always receives the co-operation and enthusiastic support it deserves in its efforts to preserve our native wild creatures.—*Norman Orbell*, Port Credit, Ontario.

### BALD EAGLE SWIMMING

A Bald Eagle moving fast enough to leave a wake on the surface of a lake was spotted from the air by Ron Wilson, Department of Natural Resources, according to Ansgar Aschim. The adult eagle was seen "swimming" along on the water on Pease Lake, near Prince Albert, in the summer of 1965. When the plane dipped lower to allow a closer view, the eagle simply flew up off the water. We suspect that the eagle was being moved along by a fish which was too large for the eagle to lift, but too much of a prize to leave behind.

### NOTES FROM A BIRDING TRIP

All the visiting birders we have met from the prairies are always delighted to see the birds of Vancouver Island in their quite different habitats of sea, shore and forest, so we, in our turn, are very interested in the prairie birds, and last June (1965), between the 5th and 14th, we followed them from Calgary to Regina.

The Lark Bunting, Chestnut-collared Longspur and the Horned Lark were present in good numbers from west of Newell Lake in Alberta as far east as we went, while the McCown's Longspur though more localized, was found on the cattle country in many places. To walk over the cattle ranges, away from the highway, and watch these nesting birds was a new and wonderful experience.

The sloughs and lakes had plenty of water this year, and we must have stopped at every one of them. There were the grebes: Eared, Horned, and Red-necked; the teal: Blue-winged, Green-winged and Cinnamon; the other ducks: Ruddy, Mallard, Red-head, Canvasback, Scaup, Pintail, Ring-necked, Shoveler and the Gadwall; even more exciting were the Willets, Marbled Godwits, Avocets and the Long-billed Curlew. All these grebes and ducks, excepting the Gadwall, can be seen here in the winter months, on the sea and on the lakes, but it is quite a different matter to watch them on their breeding grounds and in their nuptial plumage.

In spite of a lot of wind, and it surely can blow on the prairies, and a certain amount of rain, the whole trip was most enjoyable. To us it was simply wonderful to see all these birds, as well as Yellow-headed Blackbirds and Black Terns, not to mention the Franklin and Ring-billed gulls, which rarely visit the coast.—*A. R. Davidson*, Victoria, B.C.

## FURTHER COMMENTS ON COLLECTING

My enjoyment of this magazine is marred by the accounts of "collecting" any new species of birds sighted. I understand it may be necessary to add to the scientific knowledge about birds, but I feel the written accounts of going "in search of a gun" and "finally it (the Ruff) was shot" will not do much towards discouraging young nimrods from shooting anything that flies. Even the term "collected" is very suggestive. We make a lot of effort to get the young folk to read the *Blue Jay*. Why make it seem desirable to shoot any new bird seen? —Mrs. Evelyn Christensen, Young.

**Editors' Note:** In studying birds, as in studying butterflies, there is need for a certain amount of specimen collecting; there should be no need to conceal this fact. Birds are now protected by law in this province (except for Snowy Owls!), and collecting can be done legally only by authorized persons. Permit holders are few in number and are expected to collect with judgment. University and museum study collections (available to any interested, competent person, whether stuffed birds or pinned butterflies) are obtained in this fashion. Routine collecting seldom yields specimens worthy of special mention in the literature, but occasionally, as in the collecting of a species which has not previously been recorded in a large geographical region, there is a need to communicate this information to other students or interested persons. Where specimens are being collected in the course of a regional study, the information may appear in a special report. In the *Birds of the Lake Athabasca Region*, for example, specific mention is made of specimens of Rock Ptarmigan, Glaucous Gull, Iceland Gull, and Little Gull, all representing first records and first specimens for Saskatchewan. Sight records of these species, not previously known to occur in the province, and unsubstantiated by specimens, would hardly be acceptable. This special report is

available to those who may be interested, one might say, and hence these records were not widely publicized. However, at a later date, in order to make these records more readily available, they were reported secondarily in the *Blue Jay*.

In the last few years several birds not previously sighted in Saskatchewan, or poorly documented, namely Poor-will, Pine Warbler, Black-throated Gray Warbler, Ruff, Snowy Plover, and Williamson's Sapsucker have been found in southern Saskatchewan and were collected to provide positive proof of their occurrence. None of these species is in any way rare as a *species*; all are abundant within their usual range, and occur here only as strays or accidentals. They are rare only as elements of our avifauna. Perhaps we should call them "stray birds" rather than the misleading "rare birds." A photograph will often allow substantiation of a sighting of a regional rarity. However, it is not always possible to get a good photograph (just as it is not always possible to collect a bird), and in some cases even a photograph will not serve to identify a species. In any case, the collecting of a new species for Saskatchewan is a rare event, though perhaps one can expect the number of sightings of unusual records to increase as the numbers of field observers increases. Since some collecting will of necessity always be carried out by a few authorized persons, and since there is need to report certain unusual records such as the Ruff, I think we should accept reports of collected birds as a matter of practice and in a spirit of understanding. This is the message I would pass on to young people.

We don't need to be concerned about the status of Snowy Plover, Pine Warbler, or Williamson's Sapsucker populations in Saskatchewan. They have occurred here only as accidental strays. We do need to worry about the status of our resident birds of prey. The welfare of Golden Eagles and Ferruginous Hawks, for example, should be of far more concern to us,

for these are among the endangered species, and young people can be encouraged to take a positive attitude toward their protection.

### HUMMINGBIRD AT CHURCHILL

Some years back I spent a number of seasons at Churchill. I paid a visit to the occupant of a three-roomed cottage, alongside of which some sweet peas were growing; as is usual with flowers in that setting the colors were really brilliant. I was attracted by a movement of some kind which on following more closely I was surprised to see a hummingbird hovering around the sweet peas. I can only supply these bare facts as quite a period of time has elapsed since this experience. — *H. White*, Winnipeg, Manitoba.

### GULL COMPANION

Some time ago, as an experiment, I raised a gull from the egg stage to full maturity and found it to be an affectionate and intelligent companion. After it was hatched, it had to be fed with bits of salmon and clam, previously chewed up, and dropped into its beak with an eye-dropper. We kept it in the house and until it grew its first feathers it never made a sound, and seemed to be content to sit on our laps and be fed scraps of fish at frequent intervals. Once having grown its first beautifully variegated brown plumage, it became increasingly noisy and mischievous, and had to be moved out of doors. From then on it transferred its affection to the dog, with whom it slept, cuddled up with its beak tucked into the dog's fur. The two could frequently be seen going off for long walks together, the gull hopping along beside the dog, or else, flying low over his head. It never made any attempt to leave us, but seemed to exhibit a definite fear of its own kind, cowering under a rock or tree whenever one of them flew overhead.

When it had reached its full growth, for its own sake, I took it several miles away to the breeding ground from which it had come, and released it. Although it did not return to me, several people in the vicinity reported seeing it on various occasions, flying in, and with no sign of fear, going up to any dog that had a long white coat.—*Margaret McIntyre*, Sechelt, B.C.

**Editors' Note:** Miss McIntyre is the author of the recently published book *Place of Quiet Waters*. This intriguing and readable book is available through the Blue Jay Bookshop, Box 1121, Regina. If you have not already done so you should also read *King Solomon's Ring* by Konrad Lorenz. Dr. Lorenz, internationally famous animal behaviorist, has written: ". . . It appeared to me as little short of a miracle that a hard, matter-of-fact scientist should have been able to establish a real friendship with wild, free-living animals, and the realization of this fact made me strangely happy. It made me feel as though man's expulsion from the Garden of Eden had thereby lost some of its bitterness."

### EGG COLLECTING

Mrs. K. D. Paton, Oxbow, suggests that we remind subscribers who may not realize it, that collecting eggs of wild birds may be done legally only under special permit from the Canadian Wildlife Service. This applies to protected species of birds, whether game or non-game.

### WILDLIFE CLUB

We wish to thank you for including the two photos of our Wildlife Club on page 101 of your June issue. Our club has had quite a struggle getting its facilities established and this publicity will be helpful. We keep a copy of the "*Blue Jay*" in our lobby for customers and other visitors to read and we hope this will result in memberships for you.—*J. N. Turvey*, Exec. Vice Pres., IPSCO, Regina.



Wolf Creek coulee

Photo by W. Rainville

### WOLF CREEK AREA, WOLSELEY

The picture of the hills was taken in the coulee of the Wolf (or Adair) Creek, about three miles north of Wolseley. One of the isolated hills in the middle of the valley is locally known as "Mount Witness." This quarter section is very interesting, with dry land plants like cactus and sage on the south side of Mt. Witness; ferns, ash, birch on the north-facing slopes; and many springs with boggy vegetation around them in the bottom of the coulee.—*Wilfred Rainville, Wolseley.*

### WHOOPING CRANES SIGHTED

On October 19 last Mr. James Sanderson and his son Donald of Rosetown, took me to see three Whooping Cranes, apparently two adults and one juvenile. (This was on the SW 10-29-14 w3). The cranes were standing in a farm field in a shallow slough. On our approach Mallards commenced to fly around and

the cranes arose and settled in a stubble field 200 or 300 yards to the north of the slough. The Sandersons saw the cranes on the same slough on October 20, when they were able to drive quite close without disturbing them.—*Stewart McKercher, Saskatoon.*

### FEEDING EVENING GROSBEAKS

Last winter I built a bird feeding station for the Evening Grosbeaks and it worked, so much so that instead of buying 10 or 20 pounds of sunflower seeds I had to buy 200 pounds at a time. All through the winter I had a flock of about 50 birds, especially after Christmas. They would consume a 50-pound bag of seeds in about 10 days. About a week ago [letter of April 23] they had already eaten 700 pounds. They were a real joy to my wife and her aged mother and me. The expense of feeding them was well worth the pleasure we got from them. Our neighbors appreciated their color and chatter too.—*Walter J. Krupp, Togo.*

## HOUSE SPARROWS VERSUS VIOLET-GREEN SWALLOWS

P. A. Taverner's *Birds of Canada* describes "the pugnacious and bulldozing habits" of the House Sparrow and the difficulties other birds have with it at nesting time. This past summer I witnessed a most vicious attack on the nest of a pair of Violet-green Swallows by these sparrows, and wonder if others have observed such behaviour.

The swallows nested in the eaves of our summer patio, and were feeding their young when I noticed a pair of House Sparrows annoying them—the latter would perch on the ledge right beside the nest, and prevent the swallows from feeding their young. I was attracted by the frantic chirping of the swallows, and chased the sparrows away. They were most persistent, however, and for two days I spent a lot of time dashing out after the offenders. Eventually a baby swallow was thrown from the nest, with its head pecked; it was alive, so I put it back, but very shortly it was again thrown out, dead, and another baby was found half dead beside the nest. Early one morning I heard the battle going on in full force, and found that two more babies had been killed, and the nest itself was half pulled from its shelf. From my observations the male sparrow appeared to be the guiltier of the pair. Strangely enough, having conquered the swallows and their nesting site, the sparrows lost interest and did not attempt to build.—*Mrs. A. Wootton, Vancouver, B.C.*

## MOSQUITO CONTROL WITH MARTINS

We note with pleasure that Junior Chamber of Commerce men in Havre, Montana have embarked on a study of the feasibility of establishing the

Purple Martin in all the towns from Havre to Glasgow, Montana, as a partial means of controlling mosquitoes. Russell R. Hoffman, Refuge Manager, Bowdoin National Wildlife Refuge at Malta, has been called upon as advisor. Persons who have enjoyed particular success in attracting Martins might well be able to offer assistance, and should correspond directly with Mr. Hoffman.

## GOLDEN EAGLE

I thought others might be interested in this photograph of a young Golden Eagle that was given to me in September by an employee of the Taltson Power Dam, near Fort Smith. The bird was found on the garbage dump at the Dam, apparently unable to fly. I kept the bird under observation for a week and then, as I could find nothing wrong with it, released it near Fort Smith—*Ernie Kuyt, Fort Smith, N.W.T.*



Photo by Ernie Kuyt  
Immature Golden Eagle



Photo by Doug Redley

Swift Current Creek, looking north, about three miles from the mouth

### SWIFT CURRENT CREEK AREA

Before leaving Beechy, I went with Dave Santy on a tour of the Swift Current Creek area. This is a fascinating place to visit. It is teeming with wildlife of all kinds, also weird rock and soil formations. This would be an ideal spot for a Summer Meeting. The photo was taken about three miles east of Stewart Valley and 22 miles north of Swift Current.— *Doug Redley, Birtle, Manitoba.*

### PURPLE FINCHES AT MINNEDOSA

At least two pairs of Purple Finches stayed around the yard most of the summer. As I had feed out on two crude feeders all summer they stayed and became very tame. I did not realize it was not common for them to stay around, so said little to Mr. Jack Lane when talking to him. When I finally told him he was quite surprised. If I had only known they didn't stay here to nest I would have suggested he try to get pictures of them in mid-summer. No doubt the birds nested here as they were around constantly.— *Miss Margaret Stringard, Minnedosa, Manitoba.*

### MARKED WHISTLING SWAN

#### SEEN

Maurice Street reports that a Whistling Swan with a yellow plastic neck-band seen by him in a flock of 165 swans four miles east of Nipawin on May 5, 1965, had been marked in the previous year in Michigan. According to information received by Street from John R. Frye, Manager of the Shiawassee National Wildlife Refuge, Saginaw, Michigan, 18 swans were captured and marked during April, 1964. "The birds were color-dyed on the neck and breast, however this would not be visible this year. A standard Fish and Wildlife Service metal band was placed on the left leg. A yellow plastic vinyl band was attached to the right leg and neck. The swan study was initiated to obtain additional information on population trends, migration routes, feeding habits (especially as related to competition between swans and other waterfowl), sex and age ratios, reproductive success, and mortality factors." (Pers. corres., M. Street from J. R. Frye, June 11, 1965.)