

Notes from Letters

EARLY YEARS AT THE QUILL LAKES

As a new member having just received my second issue of the *Blue Jay*, I would like to say how much I enjoy this excellent magazine. Some of the articles, "Signs of Spring" and the one dealing with the White Pelican colonies in the March number, brought back memories of my own residence in Saskatchewan 1911-1944.

Arriving from England in 1911 I was amazed at the variety and numbers of birds in the partly settled area southwest of the Quill Lakes. There seemed to be no book available to help me identify what I saw. I could only compare them with the old familiar birds of England. An avocet with a buff head, a blackbird with white eyes, and all shorebirds lumped together as "snipe." No wonder I was puzzled. It was not until Taverner's *Birds of Western Canada* came out in 1926 that I got any help.

Cranes, geese and swans came through in great numbers as well as myriads of ducks—Mallards, Pintails, Shovelers and Green-winged Teal. In the years before World War I there was always a band of half a dozen or more Whooping Cranes conspicuous amongst the hundreds of Sandhill Cranes resting in the marshes or feeding on the stubble. One year a pair of Sandhill Cranes nested on my homestead and raised their two young to be fully fledged.

I remember wading out to an island on the west side of Big Quill Lake where were congregated a large number of White Pelicans and Double-crested Cormorants. The island was not much more than a sand bar but there were small bushes and coarse grass growing on it. It was too late in the season for nesting when I visited it, but there was evidence of old nests. The birds did not fly away at my approach, but slowly moved off into the water. I was glad to see from your illustrations that a colony still inhabits the same area.—*C. K. Mathews*, Port Credit, Ontario.

GRASSLAND PRESERVE

The idea of a grassland preserve in Saskatchewan should be pushed to a conclusion as a centennial project, with as much original prairie as it is possible to obtain, and the least amount of human interference to the flora and fauna within its borders once it is a reality. In addition I would like to see special areas preserved for certain species such as the Black-tailed Prairie Dog, but this perhaps would be best handled by natural history groups.—*Gordon Smith*, Winnipeg.

I certainly hope that in any grassland "park" there will be provision for *protected areas*. Certainly, provision must be made for recreational and tourist facilities, but these should not parade as protective measures for wildlife. We must also have areas that are protected from public use, for we might as well face the fact that the average public crowds are not going to be too interested in pocket mice and bumble bees!—*R. D. Symons*, Silton.

WATCH SPRAYS!

At the Memorial Park in Reston, which I look after, we have had trouble with municipal spraying along the streets and roads killing trees, shrubs and also birds when the mist drifts in our direction. I found dead birds in the park during the summer, a dead cuckoo sitting on its nest, and a number of nests with dead young birds, and am certain that this is an indirect result of the spraying since the birds eat the poisoned insects. Spraying can serve a good purpose, but it has to be done with caution.—*A. Archer*, Reston, Manitoba.

In pesticide poisoning, with all its ramifications, I'm more and more concerned for our birds. We seem to see fewer and fewer of them, with hardly any around this winter.... What effort can we as a group make against indiscriminate spraying? We can talk against it, write against it, point up the hazards that are facing us from spray residue contamination, but

everything is loaded against us. The advertising and pressure continues, and I fear that our agricultural universities are among the worst propagandists for the chemical companies and their subsidiaries. They talk about "educating" the public in the use of sprays, and in the meantime irreparable damage continues! — *E. Symons, Rocanville.*

INVITATION TO "RIOME'S GROVE"

In August, 1964 I purchased the farm known as the Wilson Farm at Caron, 16 miles from Moose Jaw on the No. 1 Highway. Mr. Frank Wilson spent most of his working life on this farm, landscaping around 25 acres with trees of many varieties. I have visited here over the years and enjoyed talks with Mr. Wilson and I was prompted to buy the place just for its sheer beauty of trees and creek and general layout. Having a large quantity of nursery stock at my home in Moose Jaw, I transferred this material to the farm at Caron. It's truly a bird sanctuary. In the late fall this seemed to be the assembly place for migrating Mourning Doves—they were here in clouds, and then took off and not one was to be seen. In the winter there are a few pheasants to be seen, and "Huns" and chicken, and woodpeckers and chickadees feeding on the food I put out for them on trays fixed to the trees. This winter we also put out grain for the game birds.

I am anxious to share this place with others and trust that Natural History Society members will come and visit the farm at any time. I'd like them to feel free to come and go at will to this "natural history playground"—to picnic, or just to bird watch and rest. Later on I plan to put a sign at the entrance, such as "Riome's Grove."—*Walter W. Riome, Moose Jaw.*

A PLEA FOR THE PROTECTION OF PREDATORS

I feel strongly that we are now at a point where we should call a halt to the wanton killing of some of our so-called predators. I am thinking particularly of lynx, bobcat, coyotes, magpies, hawks and Bald and Golden

Eagles. These species and many others were at one time quite plentiful in the Beechy district where the fast flow of the South Saskatchewan River cut deep ravines with abundant trees and shrubbery that makes ideal habitat for the many forms of wildlife to which our climate may be suited.

For the past few years a campaign has been waged for the extermination of lynx and bobcat with such success by trap and gun that not one cat sighting has been reported in our district in 1964. The free use of potent 1080 poison has cleaned out our coyotes on the north side of the river. Such as we may see here now in the spring come via the ice route from the south side where the rural municipalities did not participate in the coyote control programme.

For years municipal councils paid three cents for gopher tails and 25 cents for three pairs of jack rabbit ears. Now we see but an odd rabbit in a day's travel amongst the hills and hear only the occasional report of a gopher seen at some location in our district. In earlier years many hundreds of dollars were paid out annually for weasel pelts; when, reader, did you see your last weasel? They are very scarce here now.

We will say little about magpies. A few years ago there were vast numbers here, and they took a heavy toll on cattle, sheep, and other birds' young and eggs. Specially constructed traps and poisons have brought them under control.

Hawks continue as "fair" targets for nimrods whose fair game should be waterfowl and upland game birds in season. The majority of such "sportsmen" are aware that most of the hawks are protected by law, but—. We sigh for the fate of the rare Golden Eagle. Our observations in recent years show that the annual mortality among them will prevent any increase in their numbers. The majority of the fatalities are caused by acts of humans. Eagles have the same protection as Whooping Cranes but this does not seem to be widely known. We believe intensive publicity could save the lives of many of our birds and mammals, and try to do our part locally through our weekly newspaper. — *Dave Santy, Beechy.*

LARK SPARROW'S NESTS FOUND

Last summer (June 28, 1964) some school boys found a nest some 70 yards from the hotel in Czar and brought an egg to me to identify. I knew it right away from seeing the Lark Sparrow's eggs pictured in my bird books, and I kept it in my collection, for I am an egg collector with an Alberta Government permit. The boys showed me the nest at the foot of a sweet clover plant, where they had found it with four eggs in it, but I did not see either of the birds and when I went to photograph it the next day the nest was gone.

A few days later Mrs. F. Speight phoned me to come over to her ranch near Cadogan to identify some birds she thought were Mockingbirds, so on July 6 I went over and confirmed her identification (see *Blue Jay*, 22:150). While strolling around the garden I flushed a Lark Sparrow from her nest. There were young birds in the nest, but I don't know how many because I did not want to flush the young out into the rain-wet grass. A few days later when Mr. H. W. Burns of Leduc and I went back to the Speights' to look for the Mockingbird's nest, the Lark Sparrow's nest was empty — the young had flown.—*Dennis Gallaway*, Czar, Alberta.

DANGER OF DISTURBING BIRDS' NESTS

In rural Ontario sixty odd years ago people did not seem to be very interested in nature, and I remember the school teachers deciding to do something to interest the children. They agreed to start collections of birds' eggs, asking the children to collect one egg from each nest and to try to identify the bird. Although the idea was prompted by a good motive, it had disastrous results — each child tried to make a collection for himself, and between nests trodden on and eggs broken, it was a sorry day for birds' nests. I think it is worth repeating now—years later—that it is impossible to discover half the nests without thoroughly disturbing the bird, and in every case there is a predator watching. It behooves us to give this careful thought before seeking out birds' nests.—*M. Robertson*, Indian Head.

DAMAGE TO TREES BY SAPSUCKERS

In answer to a question posed some time ago in the *Blue Jay* about damage done to trees by Yellow-bellied Sapsuckers, I received three interesting reports that I should like to quote to you.

Dr. W. B. Parsons, Red Deer, Alberta, wrote: "Two years ago, I saw a group of saskatoon bushes that were dying because the sapsuckers had stripped the bark in rings so that the continuity of the flow of sap was completely interrupted. The trees subsequently died. This was my first experience with this phenomenon."

Another report from Alberta came from Helge S. Abrahamson at Sylvan Lake: "Birch trees that grow around streams and lakes are more readily attacked due to the sweetness of the sap, but spruce are also attacked. When a tree is in its sap stage during the spring months, it is in a stage in which it can be easily killed or set back The sapsucker bores right through the bark in such great numbers of holes that the bark in some spots is like a screen and if it covers the entire circumference of the tree trunk it surely won't survive . . . some of the shrubbery I had to replace on my farm as it went dead due to the sapsucker damaging them so severely." Finally, a report from William Merilees, Black Creek, B.C.: "On the west coast our sapsucker is called the red-breasted sapsucker, a subspecies of the sapsucker which you mention . . . in one stand in particular, we found quite a few western hemlock trees dead, apparently killed from the work of sapsuckers, since each tree was well riddled."—*Mrs. Jean Bancroft*, Winnipeg.

HUNTSVILLE CHRISTMAS CENSUS

New species for the Huntsville Nature Club's annual Christmas Count this year (December 20, 1964) included a Red-tailed Hawk, a Mockingbird and a Towhee. The towhee visited us almost daily from December 21, but must have succumbed to the -40° weather on January 15. Saskatchewan readers may be interested in this note from an "eastern" census report.—*Mrs. Phil Bailey*, Huntsville, Ontario.

WINTER VISITORS

An unusual winter visitor was here on January 30, 1965 — a Robin, feeding on chokecherries around the house on a sunny afternoon with temperature at -6° . I have had Robins here before. I think that it was two winters ago that there was a flock of nine here all winter. The Bohemian Waxwing and a species of grosbeak are common visitors feeding on the chokecherries. I'm not sure of the summer feeding habits of the Gray Jay, but three of them have got into the habit of feeding on the wheat that I put out for the sparrows. The bobcat or lynx, I'm not sure which, has been around here for the past three years or so, and paid me a visit this year on February 2, leaving his big foot prints across my yard in freshly fallen snow.—*J. F. Hrabal, Langbank.*

WHOOPING CRANES IN FALL MIGRATION

Late last autumn (on October 22, 1964), we had the thrilling experience of seeing a pair of Whooping Cranes. They were noted on a slough several miles north of us about October 16, and caused a ripple of excitement. I think that anyone who went to see them was well aware that they had to be careful, and the boggy condition of the ground kept people at a safe distance. We watched the pair through the fog from half a mile away on the morning of the 22nd, and a few days later we heard that they had flown away.—*Christine D. Pike, Waseca.*

ABUNDANCE OF HORNED LARKS

Horned Larks were unusually numerous this past winter, especially before Christmas and to about the middle of January. They could be seen in thousands on a trip along almost any road in our area, in flocks of from 20 to 25 to several hundred. These flocks would not be very far apart, which gave one the impression that birds were always lifting off the road. I am afraid that there was a heavy mortality caused by traffic, especially at night when they seemed to fly into cars, not only windshields but sides of cars as well. I took a load of stock to Swift Current between Christmas and New Year's day and noted quite a few dead Horned Larks that had been ironed into the road.

A month later, on going along the same roads not more than a tenth of the former numbers could be seen.

Although it is not possible to say when the first migrant Horned Larks arrive, we were certain that a Slate-colored Junco, which my wife saw on March 8, was a first spring arrival because we had not heard of any staying over winter in this district. This seemed an early date for the first junco.—*Steve A. Mann, Skull Creek.*

ALBINO BOHEMIAN WAXWING

On November 22, 1964, when a few Bohemian Waxwings were fitting about in some spruce across the lawn I thought I saw a white bird among them. However, since they were about 40 feet away, I felt that it could have been a trick of the sun's rays that made the bird look white. The small group of waxwings grew to a flock of 50 or more which came every day to feed on the berries of the elders right outside the windows, but though we looked carefully we did not see the white bird again for some time. Then, on December 17, it appeared—a beautiful pinkish-white bird, the underpart of the tail cinnamon, washing out to pinkish-white. The other birds took it for granted, and for three days we were treated to close-ups of this bird and its bandbox-beautiful relations before they winged on their way.

Anyone wanting the pleasure of winter birds might plant the following: evergreens, cotoneaster, elderberry, mountain ash, and the non-suckering *Villosa* lilac. I wish those who ruthlessly destroy great acreages of trees would give some thought, at least, to the saskatoon and chokecherry bushes and the wild rosebushes on the fencelines which feed hundreds of birds.—*Christine D. Pike, Waseca.*

BALD EAGLE OBSERVATION

On April 11, 1965, we observed a Bald Eagle feeding on the carcass of a cow, about 100 yards from the house. After it had eaten its fill it walked about 10 feet into a slough nearby where it drank water. When we tried to get closer it flew away and landed in a field about a quarter mile away. I was surprised at the enormous size of the bird as it was the first one I had ever seen.—*A. Schon-delmeier, Jansen.*

WINTER BIRD OBSERVATIONS

After -30° weather in March I noticed a Bohemian Waxwing that looked sick and was shivering, and I was able to catch it and bring it into the house. It would not eat Mountain ash berries, but readily ate the fresh grapes that Tony Capusten suggested giving it. The next day it ate mountain ash berries, and later it ate diced raw apples, cooked apples, sweetened mashed potatoes, sweetened soaked puffed rice, and small pieces of figs. It also ate ice cream ravenously, which delighted the children who came every day to see it and called it "Tweety." I kept it in a box with air holes on the sides and a screen on the top from March 22 to March 28 and then released it, after colouring the yellow band on its tail black to keep a record of it. It kept coming back with another Bohemian Waxwing to my feeding station, where I saw it up to April 4.

I also have some interesting records of the Pigeon Hawk for the winter of 1965. On January 16 and on January 19 I saw a Pigeon Hawk in the city of Prince Albert, where the odd one remains over winter, and then on February 1 I saw one flying over heavy timber north of St. Louis, which I believe remained there this winter.—*Auguste Viala*, Prince Albert.



Photo by A. Viala

Bohemian Waxwing

WINTER BIRDS AT OXBOW

For most of the winter there were many Gray Partridges and as many

as 37 Sharp-tailed Grouse feeding along our road to town, and my husband threw out grain to them several times. A Snowy Owl was sighted only twice, but Snow Buntings were very numerous, and even on the worst stormy days we were visited by six chickadees, three Hairy and three Downy Woodpeckers — more birds than have ever before come to our feeder. The most unusual sight was an immature Harris' Sparrow which appeared at the feed tray on December 5 with the House Sparrows, but was not seen again.—*Mrs. Keith Paton*, Oxbow.

BLACK-BACKED THREE-TOED WOODPECKER

At Indian Head we have fewer winter birds than usual, probably due to the scarcity of seeds and berries after a dry summer. There are no Gray Jays, and only one Blue Jay seen February 19 where we usually have three or four around all winter. We have seven chickadees, one female Downy and one young male Red Squirrel visiting our feeder daily. Occasionally we see some of the 23 Pine Grosbeaks that are wintering at our spring, a quarter of a mile away, and on mild days a Turkey Vulture soars along the valley banks. In addition, we have a report from our usual reliable source, Ed Racette, of a female Black-backed Three-toed Woodpecker. We have checked the description against notes and pictures in the Peterson and Audubon guides and are certain of the identification.

Ed discovered the woodpecker on February 1 [1965] when he was gathering dry wood along the Qu'Appelle River about five miles east of Lake Katepwa (NE 12-19-12 w2). He heard a woodpecker hammering at the top of a dead willow. When he moved closer to see it two things surprised him: (1) it didn't take flight like our common woodpeckers and flickers; (2) its appearance of "blackness"—he expected to see a Downy or Hairy. He was able to study it and noted the unmarked black head and back, light-coloured belly, but the sides heavily marked with black and white.—*Mrs. Ken Skinner*, Indian Head.

EARLY ARRIVAL

After a long and cold winter, I was surprised on April 2 to see a Great Blue Heron. We had not had much thawing weather, there was no water in sloughs or ditches, and although the tops of the hills were showing some bare spots, there was snow pretty well wherever one looked. After a winter such as this, the arrival of spring birds is quite welcome, but a blue heron seemed so out of place. What could it feed on? To make things worse, we had a storm on the night of the second which gave us 10 inches of wet snow and a cold north wind.—*S. O. Jordheim*, White Bear.

EASTERN BLUEBIRDS IN ALBERTA

The Eastern Bluebird is exploding this way. I have watched it working from Morrin bridge to Munson ferry to East Coulee in the last four years. We came across some in our near coulee during the fall migration (1964).—*Esther A. Clappison*, Rose-dale, Alberta.

NEW HIGH SCHOOL BIOLOGY COURSE IN SASKATCHEWAN

A new course in biology was offered in a few of Saskatchewan's high schools in 1964-65. It is one of three courses recently prepared by the Biological Sciences Curriculum Study (BSCS) group of the American Institute of Biological Sciences. Parents and teachers with some concern for study of plant and animal life in Saskatchewan will no doubt be enthusiastic about this course, referred to as BSCS High School Biology, Green Version, for its main approach to biology involves the relationships of living organisms to one another and to their environment. It will be offered as a two year course (Grade Eleven and Grade Twelve), and is based upon a laboratory and field approach where the student observes, records, reports, thinks. In the 1964-65 school year schools located at Battleford, Elrose, Moosomin, Nipawin, Prince Albert, Regina, Saskatoon, Swift Current and Weyburn offered this course.

The course is woven around nine unifying themes:

1. change of living things through time,
2. diversity of type and unity of pattern of living things,
3. genetic continuity of life,
4. complementarity of organisms and environment,
5. biological roots of behavior,
6. complementarity of structure and function,
7. regulation and homeostasis (maintenance of life in the face of change),
8. science as inquiry,
9. intellectual history of biological concepts.

The nature of the laboratory exercises moves the student rapidly toward inquiry and speculation rather than memorization. The student moves as any life scientist does, from one series of questions asked of nature to the next logical series of questions.

Since field biology is involved in the course, naturalists, either individually or as members of local natural history societies, may contribute directly or indirectly to the success of these courses. Particularly where the stress is on interrelationships of living organisms as it is in the BSCS Green Version, active field naturalists may be of considerable assistance. Field studies demand a knowledge of local plants and animals, suitable locations for study and extra personnel for help on field trips. Members of natural history societies will no doubt be anxious to become involved in this new activity. *Natural history has a place in biology!*—*J. R. Jowsey*, Regina.

ORCHARD ORIOLE INFORMATION WANTED

David R. M. Hatch is preparing a report on the status of the Orchard Oriole in Manitoba. This eastern species has previously nested in south-eastern Manitoba, but it has not been recorded in Saskatchewan. Please send any records to David Hatch at: Box 3, Oak Lake, Manitoba.