

Notes from Letters

DESTRUCTION OF COLONIAL BIRDS ON AN ISLAND ON SUGGI LAKE

While field-collecting for the Saskatchewan Museum of Natural History in the Cumberland House area, I visited a colonial bird island on Suggi Lake on June 16, 1964. Suggi Lake lies about 40 miles northwest of Cumberland House in extreme east-central Saskatchewan. My interest in publishing this note is to call attention to the wanton destruction of pelican and cormorant nests in this colony site. The destruction of the nests of birds in this colony was first revealed to me by the local Conservation Officer, who stated that several days previously some members of a commercial fishing crew had camped on the island at the time the birds were incubating, thus forcing the birds to desert their nests.

A rather quick survey of the situation was made on the day of our visit. The major part of the nesting habitat had been previously occupied by White Pelicans, for we found about 300 nests. Several Double-crested Cormorant nests were found beside the pelican nests, and several Great Blue Heron nests were found in some adjacent aspen trees. A grassy point on the island was the site of a large colony of California Gulls. No pelicans or cormorants were seen on the island but the gulls did not seem to have been disturbed; the latter were present and flushed as I approached their breeding sites. Two herons, which took flight as our aircraft approached the island, were the only ones seen during our visit.

All of the pelican and cormorant eggs were broken open and it appeared that they had been eaten, probably by the gulls, after the



Photo from transparency by R. D. Carson

Destroyed pelican nesting colony, Suggi Lake

owners deserted. Two carcasses of adult pelicans were found lying beside their nests, apparently shot by the fishermen who had camped on the island. Two camp-fire sites were found beneath the aspen trees, under the heron nests and adjacent to the pelican colony site. It was apparent that the fishing crew had not only camped there for convenience in respect to their fishing operations, but were also concerned in extirpating the pelicans and "fish crows", their supposed fishing competitors.

Upon my return to headquarters at Regina, a Department of Natural Resources official, who was directly in charge of the northern area at that time, was contacted in the hope that official action would be taken for the following year in order to prevent a re-occurrence of disturbance of the colonial birds on the island. In his reply to me, this official condemned the pelicans as a serious menace to the fishing industry and further stated that no sanction would be given to the birds. Is this the right approach to conservation by a government? To my knowledge there are few colonies of such associated species in existence today. I would therefore recommend a resolution to further research on the status of the pelican-cormorant-heron-gull colonies in the province, and an enquiry as to a definite government policy towards the preservation of certain wildlife species which are on the decline and which have legal protection.

Elmer Fox of Regina, who visited and photographed the birds on this island on July 11, 1959, counted 500 adult and young pelicans, 100 cormorants in various stages of development, 40 to 50 clutches and young of California Gulls, and one Great Blue Heron that was incubating on a nest.

Although the history of this colony is not known to me, the name of the lake is a Cree Indian word—"Suggi"—which means pelican, and is therefore an indication that the pelicans had been nesting there for some time. The condition of the vegetation on the



Photo from transparency by R. D. Carson

Dead pelican and nest, Suggi Lake

island showed that the island had been well used by these birds in the past. If this is so, and if the birds had any effect on the fish population in the lake, it is a wonder to me that the lake still contains fish. Once again, it appears that the pelicans and the fish were doing very well before man came on the scene.

Some would maintain that a reduction in the pelican population would somewhat increase the yield of fish (providing these happened to wander into the fishermen's nets) and let it be said that it is so. However, any further reduction of the pelican population could mean their extermination for, being gregarious by nature, they will not survive unless they are permitted to breed in large colonies. Then it is a question of survival of the pelicans or several more fish. To some, and especially to the D.N.R. official who condemned the pelicans, a fingerling would undoubtedly have more value than a pelican.

That government official would probably educate his child from a book of drawings of extinct species, saying: "These are the species that are now extinct because they ate fish and we had to do away with them." I would like to educate my child from a boat—viewing a squadron-like formation of snowy-white pelicans rising buoyantly on huge outspread wings and vanishing into the blue.—*Ralph D. Carson, Edmonton, Alberta.*

GOSHAWK SIGHTING

One of the interesting observations for our area this past winter was the sighting of a Goshawk by Edward Racette on January 5 (1966), a clear, cold day with the temperature -10° . Edward was starting down the bank of the Qu'Appelle River about five miles east of Lake Katepwa when his dog flushed a grey-coloured hawk, "larger than a Sparrow Hawk or even a crow." About five feet away under an overhanging maple bough was a half-eaten cock pheasant. Edward's brother saw it in the same vicinity the next morning about 10:00 a.m. when it had probably breakfasted on a Ruffed Grouse, judging by the feathers on the river. Edward also told of seeing a similar hawk catch a Robin on the wing last fall.

We checked in Peterson's field guide and other bird books and made certain of the identification of the hawk that Edward had seen. It was also Edward Racette that reported the Black-backed Three-toed Woodpecker last year; this bird, incidentally, was also seen this year—on April 1 by Ken and Fred Skinner, and on April 7 by Edward Racette.—*Mrs. Ken Skinner, Indian Head.*

SAPSUCKER TREES

In 1961 a woodpecker drilled a number of holes in a pine tree here, and last fall the same tree had 13 rows of holes drilled in the bark, the holes being perpendicular. In 1964, the only pine tree in Stewart Valley had quite a number of holes in the bark, some of the holes being the size of a dime, but square in shape. I learned from the staff of the Museum that the holes would have been made by a sapsucker. Since then I have wondered why it would choose a pine when there was a mountain ash close by.—*Russel Drummond, Stewart Valley.*

Editor's Note: A. C. Bent (*Life histories of North American Woodpeckers*, Dover reprint) quotes from W. L. McAtee who reported (in 1911) sapsuckers attacking 246 species of

native trees and 31 introduced species. In a recent study in a major bird journal, Lawrence Kilham points to some of the problems of interpreting sapsucker feeding behaviour (*Auk*, 81:520-527, October, 1964). As many persons have noted, sapsuckers frequently pick on a single tree to the exclusion of others nearby. Also, wounded and weakened trees are often singled out from among healthy trees. The sap from trees attacked by sapsuckers is rich in sugar and, as Kilham suggests, repeated wounding of the same tree may lead to an increased flow of nutrients to the injured area. This would seem to explain the apparent preference of sapsuckers for trees which have previously been used.

THE WIRE FENCE HAZARD

The bird in the picture is an American Coot which was found hanging in this way on a wire fence; it seems as if a barb had caught it above the knee joint, probably during its landing or take-off in the dark hours of the night.

I believe fence wires strung across a pond such as this have taken their toll of many pond birds, as they seem always to be in the line of flight during landings and take-off, especially during the dark hours.—*Larry Morgotch, Yorkton.*



Photo by L. Morgotch
American Coot impaled on fence wire

PIGEON HAWK TAKES WAXWING

Around noon on February 6, 1966 while I was trying to count the number of birds in a flock of Bohemian Waxwings in the Brandon Fair Grounds, I saw a larger, hawk-like bird flying off with a waxwing in its talons. After a few minutes of searching I sighted a female Pigeon Hawk near the top of a poplar tree. It had the waxwing under its feet. Later in the day waxwing feathers seen strewn over the snow were evidence that the hawk had made a meal off this bird. —*Mamie McCowan*, Brandon, Manitoba.

CARNIVOROUS TENDENCIES OF RODENTS

Reading about the "Carnivorous tendencies of rodents" in your March issue reminded me of an incident of some years ago that it called to mind. I had some very young turkeys in a runway near the house. Evidently, I must have had them hatched out by a

hen because if the mother turkey had been with them, she would have protected them. Hearing a lot of squawking on one occasion, I went out and saw a wee chipmunk pulling one of them by the leg and making good progress with it. The young turkey was twice the size of the chipmunk. So it seems there is some evidence that the rodents like a little flesh in their diet. —*F. D. Twillam*, Swan River, Manitoba.

DOUBLE WILD ROSE

We have growing in this part of Saskatchewan a double wild rose. The early settlers found it growing here, but to them it seemed to be just another flower. During the '30's these roses couldn't be found, but today they seem to be on their way back. They grow well when planted in a garden; not as big as a tame rose bush, but very pretty, with the true wild rose fragrance.

Does this multi-petalled wild rose grow in other parts of Saskatchewan? —*C. H. Shulver*, Woodrow.



Photo by Munro Murray

Winter visitors, Bohemian Waxwings in Saskatoon, February, 1966.
[We counted 285!]

INTERESTING WINTER VISITORS AT PRINCE ALBERT

On the afternoon of December 19, 1965, I drove with my daughter Shirley to check an area with a few stunted poplars where we had tied suet to three different trees to encourage chickadees and jays. On the way to this spot we saw several small flocks of Bohemian Waxwings feeding on crabapples and a few Pine Grosbeaks feeding on maple seeds, and when I arrived I immediately cast my eyes on a very small owl, approximately 50 feet away, sitting on a bent poplar branch about four feet off the ground. With my 35 mm. camera and telephoto lens I approached the owl, getting within 3½ feet, where I took several close-up pictures at minimum telephoto lens focusing range of 5½ feet. While my daughter and I watched it, the owl simply stared at us and remained on the tree, occasionally turning its head from side to side. When we moved, the owl took to the air and settled on a branch about 100 feet from us. It was approximately seven inches long, with a dark beak, and a brownish back when it flew. It appeared amazingly tame. The pictures that I took have identified the owl as a Boreal Owl.—*J. Luschyk, Prince Albert.*



Photo from transparency by J. Luschyk
Boreal (Richardson's) Owl

WHOOPING CRANES IN 1938

After several years I have again become a member of the Saskatchewan Natural History Society, receiving a number of back issues of the *Blue Jay*. In the March 1962 issue, the annual report on the Whooping Crane population was of great interest to me, as we lived right in the middle of their flyway (west of the north end of Last Mountain Lake). As you may remember, 1937 was the driest year on record for Saskatchewan. I was the only one in our district to use commercial fertilizer, and therefore had a nine-bushel-to-the-acre crop of wheat, and a clean stubble field. Because this was the only such stubble field in the district, in the spring of 1938 I had several thousands of Sandhill Cranes feeding there, and I had the thrill of my life one day when I saw two Whooping Cranes feeding on my field.—*Rudolph Ronning, Box 601-X, Valley Center, California 92082.*



SNHS CREST

SNHS crest decals are now available from the Blue Jay Bookshop, Box 1121, Regina, at 40 cents each (plus tax), or 3 for \$1.00 (96 cents plus 4 cents tax). They will be on sale at the SNHS Summer Meeting at Rocanville, June 10-12.