

Letters and Notes

PREDATORS DEFENDED

I note in the March 1968 issue of the *Blue Jay* a letter by Richard Bothner of Beechy on the subject of predators. Statements of the kind he makes about predators seem to me irresponsible. I admit that raptors consume some game birds, but what is the percentage they take? Many of the imported partridges and pheasants that he is concerned about could have died from other causes—weather conditions, domestic cats, dogs, wires, chemicals, road kills, etc. It is easy to put the blame on predators, but I would investigate before acting. If a predator is causing trouble around a farm, removal of that individual may of course be necessary, but declaring war on all predators is complete nonsense.

Another question I would like to ask Mr. Bothner is how many cats he has on his farm. In Alberta, the cat is doing more damage to the sportsman's "huns" and pheasants, and to songbirds, than all the crows, magpies, hawks, owls, coyotes, etc., can ever do.—*Michael J. Hampson*, R.R. 3, South Edmonton, Alberta.

In his letter to the *Blue Jay* (March, 1968) Mr. Richard Bothner of Beechy commented that "there are too many people writing to the *Blue Jay* in support of predators." He seems to feel that when prey species are not in surplus, predators should be controlled by man. I think Mr. Bothner has missed the point of predator protection, and does not understand the mechanisms of natural control of populations. Those of us who deplore the destruction of predators support the protection of non-predators as well. We are simply asking that man not put himself in the role of a God ruling over nature, but that he let nature rule herself. When prey are scarce, predators will migrate or die of starvation without man's intervention. When prey are abundant, predators will help to keep the prey popu-

lations in check and, in fact, act to maintain stable populations of both predators and prey. I certainly sympathize with Mr. Bothner when he has a family of partridge around the house and most of them disappear over the winter. A covey of birds is a pleasant sight, especially over the winter months, but I would suggest that if we let nature take her course, the partridge will survive and come back in a short time, and he will find that a natural environment that regulates itself is far superior to the kinds of environment that man tends to create.

The Saskatchewan Natural History Society and its members should be commended for their actions in support of predators and should do more rather than less. There is, for example, no serious justification, scientifically or economically, for control of coyotes and wolves in Saskatchewan. One of North America's most famous wildlife biologists, Starker Leopold, has shown that the predator control program of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is a farce. Millions of dollars have been spent to control coyotes, for example, when in fact the coyote is probably more beneficial than harmful and certainly is not a serious enough threat to livestock to justify a control program. The poisoning of wolves in Northern Saskatchewan is even more ludicrous. No one seriously suggests that the timber wolf is a threat to big game populations, yet the Saskatchewan Government has supported poison campaigns against this species for years.

One of the most vicious examples of predator control in Saskatchewan, however, is the annual slaughter of hawks and owls at the Forestry Farm and the Game Farm near Saskatoon. Steel traps are set on poles and the birds are caught by the leg and often left to dangle until they die. Hundreds of Great Horned Owls and many hawks are killed every winter at these

two locations, all for the supposed protection of a few pheasants, an introduced species of doubtful value. Leading members of the S.N.H.S. have been aware of this situation for years, but nothing that I know of has been done about it.

While I sincerely appreciate the concern of Mr. Bothner and others who feel that predators sometimes overstep the mark, the history of man's actions toward predators, or his fellow man, have not convinced me that we are sufficiently civilized or knowledgeable to improve on natural laws of population control.—*Richard S. Miller, School of Forestry, Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut.*

CANADIAN WOLF DEFENDERS

For about two years I have received the *Blue Jay* and find this publication most interesting. Included here is some information which I hope is in keeping with the basic ideals of the Saskatchewan Natural History Society and worth covering in a future edition.



CANADIAN WOLF DEFENDERS

Recently, "Canadian Wolf Defenders" was formed by a group of interested people. It is a society to emphasize conservation and appreciation of the wolf, which we believe is very necessary if this magnificent animal, symbolic of wilderness and freedom, is to last out this century. The wolf has a definite part in the traditional balance of nature and is well worth future study. We urge others to take a stand for this predator and help develop a favourable and more realistic outlook.—*Robert G. Guest, President, Canadian Wolf Defenders, 10989 - 126 St., Edmonton, Alberta.*

RIVER OTTER FEEDING ON GLAUCOUS-WINGED GULL

During the summers of 1966 and 1967, two River Otters (*Lutra canadensis*) inhabited Mitlenatch Island Nature Park, B.C. (for a description of this area see *Blue Jay*, 23:158).

On Mitlenatch Island River Otters have been observed feeding on ling cod (*Ophiodon elongatus*) and raiding Pigeon Guillemot nests. Adult otters have been seen among the Glaucous-winged Gull colony but my first actual sighting of the mammal feeding on gulls was on August 7, 1967. An adult otter was seen approaching the top of West Hill, 160 feet above sea level. Parent gulls gave cries of alarm and harassed the mammal. The otter, however, not bothered by this, disappeared behind the crest of the hill. It reappeared in a few seconds and in its mouth was a young Glaucous-winged Gull. The bird was carried by the back of the neck and its wings flapped wildly in an attempt to escape. The otter carried the gull part way down the hill and disappeared into a dense thicket of hardhack, ninebark, and wild rose. It is quite possible that the young otters were waiting there to be fed.—*Ken Kennedy, Burnaby, B.C.*

THE HUNTER HUNTED

One fall when I was hunting ducks I had an interesting encounter with a skunk. I was hiding in some tall weeds and cattails in a dry water run near a slough bordered by willows and poplar when I noticed a large skunk coming towards me over the summerfallow, casually searching for food as he followed the edge of the tilled land. When he reached the edge of the dry run he halted momentarily but he had not yet seen or smelled me. On the spur of the moment, I snarled in the most realistic dog manner that I could muster. The skunk hesitated no longer. Up went his flag aggressively and he came for me as fast as his stubby little legs would permit. Although I had a shot-

gun, I didn't want to shoot him, so I jumped up and ran off to a position where I would be upwind of him. He stopped short when he winded me. One front paw froze in mid-air. Cautiously he moved back a step or two as though saying to himself: "Boy, have I made a big blunder!" Turning around, he ran off at full steam into the willows. I was quite amused at being charged by a skunk which thought I was a dog, but I felt guilty that it should have been afraid of me.—*Sam Beaton, Churchbridge.*

ENDANGERED SPECIES

I am not happy to see listed in Jonas Bros. catalogue of taxidermy items "rug shell and wall" forms for a number of animal species listed as endangered by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature; such species as polar bear, muskox, and oryx. The head illustrated in the catalogue is the gravely endangered Arabian oryx species. Surely, if there is a demand for these "shells" to mount skins of these animals there must be a large number of them still being shot. Museums are becoming daily more enlightened about their responsibility for restricting collecting, so this demand is probably from the hunting world. Do you think it is possible that Jonas Bros. are unaware of the need for immediate conservation of certain endangered species — in respect to their future trade, if for no more enlightened a reason? — *Mrs. M. A. Galloway, 1549 Spadina Crescent East, Saskatoon.*

SEEN BY A SEER

Rats and mice are very fond of bale stacks, especially those with grain in them, and even wheat straw where they find a few unthreshed heads. They thrive much better here than in loose feed stacks. We have managed to keep the rats away from our stacks by cleaning them up regularly and carefully. But in spite of the help of a half dozen good barn cats, after a few months mice seem to get estab-

lished gradually in the bale stacks, even multiplying during the winter months, particularly during prolonged mild spells. On February 10, 1968 I found, on removing a wheat straw bale from the ground layer of a stack, the largest "pile" of baby mice I have ever seen. They were not in a very cosy nest as they sometimes are, but there they were—about 50 of them piled up together. They were of varying sizes, but none large enough to run away, and there was no sign of an adult in charge. Although no adults were in evidence, I believe these were the common house mice.—*J. Boswell Belcher, Dilke.*

Editor's Note: Both white-footed mice and house mice frequently have combined litters, particularly in situations where space is at a premium. Possibly also, the young crawled together for warmth, increasing the crowding.

MIGRANT AND RESIDENT SPARROWS AT SHEHO, SASKATCHEWAN

I was interested in William Anaka's account in the December, 1967 *Blue Jay* of the Lark Sparrow seen on his farm June 6, 1967. I also wish to report that several males of this species were observed here in our yard for the first time on May 14, 1966. They were also seen the following day and I had a good opportunity to observe them at close quarters, feeding with a mixed group of sparrows. Their facial markings and white outer tail feathers were distinctive. There may have been females with them, but the males were noticed especially as their singing first drew my attention. I looked for them again in 1967, but didn't see any. The late Maurice Street reported in the March, 1965 *Blue Jay* that he had found a breeding colony at Nipawin in June, 1964. Since Nipawin is nearly straight north of here, the Lark Sparrows I saw might have been on their way there.

Many birds have changed their range since the earlier bird books were written. The reports of Lark Sparrows in central and northern Saskatchewan, and reports of Mockingbirds and Yellow-breasted Chats, that have appeared in recent years in the *Blue Jay*, would seem to indicate this.

We had breeding colonies of Chestnut-collared Longspurs here each season from 1942 to 1949, and Mrs. Priestly also found a colony at Yorkton at that time. Since then I have never seen them. In the years 1944 to 1950 I observed at least one pair of Baird's Sparrows each summer, presumably nesting, but I have not seen them here since.

Our native resident sparrows are the Song, Vesper, Savannah, Clay-colored and Le Conte's. Spring and fall bring migrant sparrows in varying numbers. Some seasons the White-throated Sparrow has been heard singing in the woods in late June, so possibly an occasional pair has nested here.

The Le Conte's Sparrow has taken to nesting in the tame Brome Grass fields, especially where the grass is long and tangled. It is practically impossible to find their nest until the field is cut and raked. There seem usually to be two broods; the young of the first nest are sometimes barely able to get out of the way of the machinery in mid-July and the second nest with its eggs is usually destroyed during haying. This nesting in hay-fields is a case of adapting to existing conditions, as overgrazing by cattle has spoiled much of the grass cover around sloughs.

The increased numbers of cattle and resulting overgrazing is reducing the grass cover over much of the country. This spoils the habitat for many of the ground-nesting birds, and I find species such as Meadowlarks and Sharp-tailed Grouse much less common than they used to be.

Also thousands of acres of bush are cleared every year. It is inevitable, of course, that parkland should be

cleared to bring new cropland into production, but in my opinion too much marginal land—especially in community pastures—is being cleared, with resultant reduction in wildlife. More undisturbed sanctuaries are needed, but they will have to be provided by the Government, not individuals.—*William Niven, Sheho.*

CURIOUS BEHAVIOUR OF A BOHEMIAN WAXWING

In the early afternoon of Sunday, January 28th, 1968, I observed a Bohemian Waxwing in the yard behind my home on Lakeview Avenue, Regina, deliberately eating frozen snow heavily impregnated with the urine of our Scottish Terrier, alternately with clean snow, each a few beakfuls at a time. I have not observed this habit before, nor have I seen it recorded.

A flock of up to 100 of these birds frequent a stand of mature Russian Olives in this yard daily at this time of year.—*John E. Brindle, 2819 Lakeview Avenue, Regina.*

Editor's Note: In 1965, in a paper published in the *Auk* (82:606-623) it was noted that "Crossbills, like other cardueline finches, avidly eat salt whenever it is available, and there are many records of these birds ingesting rock salt placed on roads to melt snow, material from salt blocks of the type supplied for cattle, salt spilled around ice cream freezers, material leached out of cement, wood ashes, and urine-stained snow" They also report that "Ingestion of salt increases the osmotic concentration of the body fluids, and this results in stimulation of osmoreceptors that ultimately leads to a drinking response by the birds." The reason for this "curious behavior" is still not clear.

CORRECTION: In the Grizzly Bear article in the December 1967 *Blue Jay* (25: 190-191), the locality should read Township 29 instead of Township 24.

GREEN HERON

I would like to point out an error: sight record of Green Heron at Delta, Manitoba in the December, 1967 *Blue Jay* left hand column, "a possible sighting of a Green Heron at Saskatoon, Saskatchewan" should read "along a small creek draining into Payne Lake east and south of Radville, Saskatchewan."

Also if it can be claimed as hypothetical for Manitoba, a distance of 80 miles north of the 49th parallel, on the basis of their observation, then I feel we can also regard it as hypothetical for Saskatchewan, a mere 20 miles north of the border.—*Clifford Matthews*, Prairie Migratory Bird Research Centre, Saskatoon.

INTERESTING BIRDS AT MIAMI, MANITOBA

I would like to mention a few of the unusual birds I have seen in the past two years 1966 and 1967.

In 1966 in May we had a pair of Mockingbirds here for a whole week. Shortly after, we saw an Indigo Bunting while we were cleaning seed grain, and it stayed for an afternoon. In 1967 I saw two Indigo Buntings in July.

Other birds that were of interest to me were a Great Horned Owl, a Prairie Falcon and a Peregrine Falcon. On the night of February 4, 1967 we were sitting playing a game in front of our picture window when a Screech Owl hit the window. Fortunately it was not hurt.—*Gregory Mustard*, Miami, Manitoba.

EARLY SPRING ON THE PRAIRIES

A letter from my brother at Boissevain, Manitoba mentions the unusually early return of geese to the White-water Lake area this year. He saw the first flock on March 8 and at the time of writing the letter at the beginning of April, estimated there were between three and four thousand Canadas feeding on one of his fields.

I have just looked through my checklists (old and yellow) that I used to

keep when I lived at Boissevain and my earliest record for Canadas was March 25, 1948.

I miss the time and opportunity to study the birds that I had when I farmed at Boissevain but there are many interesting species here, particularly sea birds, and I still get the opportunity occasionally to try and get acquainted with them.—*Hal G. Duncan*, 13410 Crescent Rd., R.R No. 3, White Rock, B.C.

SOME MOCKINGBIRD RECORDS

Some observations of Mockingbirds in California in 1966 allowed me to recognize the alarm call-note, a kind of "churr", shortly after my return to Saskatchewan. On May 2, 1966 I heard the same distinctive "churr" along the banks of Doghide Creek, near Tisdale, and shortly saw a Mockingbird. I saw this bird for several days in the same location. I later learned that one had been seen about a mile farther south, almost in Tisdale.

Last spring, on June 4, 1967, we had occasion to drive to Leader. We found the ferry non-operative because of high water, so drove along the north bank of the South Saskatchewan River for a picnic. Again, the now familiar "churr" sounded, and sure enough, there was another Mockingbird in the Saskatoon and chokecherry bushes along the river flat.—*Elwin Baines*, Box 8, Tisdale.

PREDATOR GULLS

Gulls in flight we must admire, but some of their habits are hard to accept. Last summer while I was driving the tractor, two or three Ring-billed Gulls followed my every move. When I moved half a dozen duck eggs they ate them, and they gobbled down every young bird they saw. The gulls would fly after and catch the young birds that were just learning to fly.—*C. H. Shulver*, La-fleche.