

“Signs of Spring”

Harley Ranson's experiences of spring migration in the Tyvan district 1916-1934

Reported by **Margaret Belcher**, Regina

In 1916 a young farmer at Tyvan, Saskatchewan, began to record the arrival dates of birds that returned each spring to the farm. He did not know all the prairie birds, so he had to rely on careful study of each new bird and on being able to identify it by using Reed's bird guides. He had no binoculars, and made all his observations with the naked eye. Looking back now on the birds he came to know in 19 years of keeping spring arrival dates (1916-1934), Harley S. Ranson recognizes that he may have made some errors in identification, for he worked alone without being able to compare his records with other observers'. However, these would be mainly errors resulting from confusing birds with similar characteristics. They could, of course, involve species for which the normal range does not extend to Saskatchewan, for in those early years there was no readily available check-list of the province's birds.

For 19 years, spring migration records were carefully kept, each bird being recorded as it arrived at the farm some eight miles northeast of Tyvan (18-13-12 w2). At the end of the period, Harley Ranson moved to Manitoba and was unable to continue his work. On three occasions when Harley Ranson was away in the city, the spring records were kept by his brother, Fred Ranson.

Although the Tyvan records could not be continued beyond 1934, and although they represent only the simple record of arrivals without further data, they are of value for several reasons. In the first place, they provide almost 20 years of *continuous* records. Secondly, they record observations for the early years in Saskatchewan when few people were keeping such notes, and for an area not covered by any other survey of local bird life either published or currently in preparation. Although Mr. Ranson was an untrained birder working on his own, his carefully kept notes contribute to our understanding of the birds of the Tyvan district, just as they increased his own knowledge of them.



Ranson farm at Tyvan

Tyvan is a small prairie village 50 miles southeast of Regina in grain-growing country that is treeless except for farm shelterbelts. However, the Ransons' farm eight miles to the northeast of Tyvan was situated just on the western edge of what would now be termed parkland, and although there was no natural tree growth all the way from the farm to Regina if you travelled west, the presence of trees to the east made the farm itself a good place to see birds. The farm was rolling and had several good "sloughs" or pot-holes which attracted waterfowl. When Harley Ranson's father homesteaded in 1903 there were only a few small aspen poplars (*Populus tremuloides*), but he planted trees on three sides of the yard and protected everything that resembled a tree. By the time Harley began to make bird notes there was some tree cover in the farmyard and wherever there were low spots or sloughs in the fields. About a mile and a half west of the farm ran the Manybone Creek (a tributary of the Wascana), and the day the creek began to flow was as eagerly awaited a sign of spring as the arrival of the first Horned Larks. The creek had no trees along it, however, most of the creek bottom being hard clay where trees just did not grow. The highest part of the farm was the height of land dividing the run-off to the Manybone Creek from that of the Little Stoney which empties into Gooseberry

Lake, and the elevation above sea level of this height of land would be approximately 2,000 feet.

Harley Ranson recorded more than the arrival of the first birds, for in the country people watch for every sign of the coming of spring. On the Saskatchewan prairies, after a long winter, there is special meaning in the sound of the first frogs, the appearance of the first "gopher" and the blooming of the first "crocus," and from year to year there is a comparison to be made between the first dates of farming operations, the first day the farmers are "on the land." So Mr. Ranson's records become a kind of journal of a country spring.

Take, for example, the dates that are circled on the calendar for 1917. On March 5 the first Horned Lark was seen, then on March 19, Harley's father saw a gopher, and on March 31 Harley killed his first gopher of the season. By April 17 the farmyard ducks and turkeys had laid their first eggs; by the 19th there were catkins on the poplars and by the 20th the first crocus was in full bloom and frogs were heard. These dates, of course, vary from year to year. In 1918 the first crocus was noted on March 24, and frogs were heard, almost a month earlier than in 1917; and the good weather permitted a game of tennis to be played on March 21 and the car to be used on March 24. Ordinarily buggies and wagons preceded the car, as in 1919—"went first time in buggy" April 3 and "had first car ride" on April 17. Then on a suitable day in April field operations got under way: "started to harrow and seed" April 26, 1919; "started on the land" April 30, 1920; "started seeding" April 28, 1921; "started on the land" April 26, 1922 and "to seed" April 27; "started on the land" April 30, 1923 and "to seed" May 1; "started to harrow" April 19, 1924 and "to seed" April 22; "started to plough" April 14, 1925, "to harrow" April 17, and seeding April 21; "started seeding" April 21, 1926; "first work on land" April 15, 1927; "started to seed" April 30, 1928; "started on land" April 17 1929 (but "some were harrowing three weeks before this") and "started seeding" April 19; "we started on land" April 19, 1930, and "started sowing" April 22; "started to harrow" April 7, 1931 ("some started April 4") and "started to seed"

April 10 [this being the dry, early spring following the mild winter of 1930-31] "some started to plow" April 17, 1933, but "work not yet general"; "started to plow" April 12, 1934 ("some started on the 5th"). This sequence of dates establishes the regularity of the pattern of spring operations on the prairie farm, for it will be seen that only an especially mild and dry winter appreciably advances the date of the first cultivation. This was true in the spring of 1931, one of the driest years in southern Saskatchewan.

Mr. Ranson's usually terse notes are amplified to record the unusual weather conditions of the winter of 1930-1931 and the following spring and summer:

"The winter of '30 and '31 was mild and we had very little snow, the summerfallows being bare almost all of the time. The spring was backward but land work began on April 4. On April 8 the first of many severe dust storms occurred; the ground was very loose and there had not been enough moisture to cake the surface. The summerfallow crops that were seeded germinated well and came up nicely but the severe dust storms from all directions kept them cut off. Then in the latter part of May there were one or two severe frosts, followed by a severe dust storm. After that most of the crops on fallow land died and only small patches survived at all. Many crops sown on spring and fall plowing came up and withered away.

"Practically no rain fell until after the middle of July, and then we had a few good rains which started some of the late crops (oats and barley). These were later cut for green feed as the frost held off until very late in the fall. Many people had neither feed nor seed, while others had crops which yielded from 3-4 bushels per acre of wheat. Some flax was harvested but practically no rye, oats or barley was cut except for green feed. The sloughs did not produce any hay and the upland pastures might be said to have never changed color unless it was to become a little more black from dust and heat. This was the first virtual crop failure in southern Saskatchewan."

The mild winter of 1931-1932 encouraged an unusual bird population. Horned Larks were seen all winter, regularly after January 20, and some

kinds of hawks remained all winter. A crow was seen on Christmas day and one on January 25, and a Robin was seen at Christmas and again in January.

It is only in this setting of everyday farm activities that the arrival of the first spring birds has its full meaning. Taken out of context, Mr. Ranson's list may seem unimpressive because it records no rare ornithological finds, but as part of the picture of the country coming alive in spring his bird arrivals have real significance. The same early spring unlocks the waters of the Manybone Creek and brings back the first Horned Larks: in 1934 the creek was flowing about February 15 and the Horned Larks were back on February 22, whereas in 1922 the creek opened on March 8 and the Horned Larks appeared on March 7. The Marsh Hawk appears with the first pussy willows (e.g., hawks and "willow catkins" on March 15, 1934), and it is time then to get out the wagon and buggy, perhaps even the car. After the first insects—butterflies, mosquitoes, "rain flies"—will come the warblers and the swallows, and by the time the first lady bug

appears it will also be time to watch for the Rose-breasted Grosbeak. So the pattern of the season establishes itself, a complex of many "first arrivals."

Besides being signs of spring, first arrivals often meant impressive sights, as for example when migrant cranes and geese came in. Mr. Ranson writes that "all the years that I lived at home it was common to have a 40-acre field covered with Sandhill Cranes and on the next half-section there would be flocks of Canada Geese. These would both remain for a week or more and then continue northward."

Among the first arrivals reported each year by Mr. Ranson, I have of course taken a special interest in the birds. Here, where space does not permit the publishing of his journal in its entirety, I think it is worthwhile to abstract from it a table showing comparative spring arrival dates for all the well-established species of birds in the Tyvan district. People in other parts of Saskatchewan will be interested in making comparisons between these arrival dates and the dates that would be normal for their areas.



Golden Plover during spring migration

Photo by Fred W. Lahrman

	1916	1917	1918	1919	1920	1921	1922	1923
Horned Grebe			My10	My18	My 2	My15	Apr23	My
White Pelican								
Double-cr. Cormorant								Ap
American Bittern								
Whistling Swan				My 1	Apr19	My 5		
"Geese"	Apr11	Apr22	Mar25	Apr 4	Apr 8	Apr12	Apr 4	Ap
Mallard								
Pintail								Ap
Canvasback								
"Ducks"		Apr 8	Mar22	Apr 1	Apr12		Apr 4	
Hawk (Marsh?)	Mar19	Mar30	Mar21	Mar25	Mar26	Mar23	Mar28	Ma
Sparrow Hawk				Apr21	Apr18	Apr 5	Mar29	Ap
Sandhill Crane	Apr 1	Apr 9	Mar25	Apr 3	Apr11	Mar31	Apr 4	Ap
Sora							My 9	Ju
American Coot					June 7		My23	My
Killdeer	Apr11	Apr 7	Mar25	Apr 2	Apr17	Apr13	Apr 4	Ap
Am. Golden Plover								My
Black-b. Plover								My
Upland Plover					My10	My16	My 8	
Willet						My 1	Apr27	Ap
Marbled Godwit	My 4	My 2	My 1	Apr26	Apr29	My 1	My 1	My
Wilson's Phalarope								
Franklin's Gull	Apr27	Apr28	Apr25	Apr18	Apr29	Apr24	Apr23	Ap
Black Tern		My16	My16	My19	My21	My20	My21	
Mourning Dove				My26	My13-14	My12	My18	My
Burrowing Owl						My 8		
Common Nighthawk					June 6	My29	June 1	Ju
Yellow-sh. Flicker			Apr27	Apr25	Apr25	Apr16	Apr14	Ap
Yellow-b. Sapsucker				My 4				
Eastern Kingbird	My 1	My 19	My12	My18	My21	My20	My21	My
Western Kingbird								
Least Flycatcher			My13					
Olive-s. Flycatcher							My10	My
Horned Lark		Mar 5	Mar 2	Feb20	Mar 3	Feb11	Mar 7	Jan Feb
Tree Swallow			My13					Ju
Bank Swallow			My 9					
Barn Swallow		My17		My10	My 7	My 9	My 8	My

	1925	1926 F. Ranson	1927 F. Ranson	1928	1929	1930	1931	1932 F. Ranson	1933	1934
10	My 9	My11	My 1	My 1	My11	My 7			My14	My 2
								My 6		
23				Apr 3						
29		My24	My27	My17		June 5				
18	Mar29	Apr30	Apr19	Apr26	Apr24	Apr18	Apr17		Apr18	Apr25
13 24 y)	Apr 5	Apr18	Apr 9	Apr 3	Apr12 Apr27 (Wavies)	Apr11 (Gray) Apr12 (Wavies)	Mar21 Apr13 (Wavies)	Apr 4	Apr14	Apr10 (Can.)
					Apr 4				Apr16	Apr 7
					Mar28				Mar30	Apr 3
					Apr19	My 5			Apr29	Apr15
3	Mar28	Mar20	Apr 6	Mar22		Apr 2	Mar23	Apr 4		
30	Mar24	Mar24	Mar29	Mar18	Mar17	Apr 1	wintered	Mar31	Mar19	Mar15
20	Apr12		Apr 8		Apr 1	Apr13	Apr16	Apr 6	Mar31	Feb29
12	Mar28	Apr 9	Apr 2	Apr13	Apr10	Apr 9	Mar24	Apr 4	Mar29	
2		My12	Apr29	My10	My19	My12			My26	
25	My 3	My11	My11	Apr29		My 9			Apr30	My16
7	Mar30	Apr11	Apr 2	Apr 1	Apr12	Apr 6	Apr 8	Apr 4	Mar30	Apr 7
					My10		My11	My13	My15	My 8
5	My12	My18	My16	My 9						
4	My13	My 7	My12	My12	My13	My10		My 7	My13	My18
25	Apr24	Apr20	Apr28	Apr26	Apr27	Apr17	Apr30	Apr24	Apr18	Apr26
28	My 1	Apr28	Apr28	My 8	Apr27	Apr28	Apr30	Apr28	Apr30	My 2
						My11			My14	
26	Apr15	Apr25	Apr17	Apr28	Apr20	Apr27	Apr17	Apr18	Apr18	Apr21
0	My21	My20	My20	My17	My13	My19		My21	My18	
1	My14	My17	My24	My22	Apr11	My11	My 2	My 8	My14	Apr27
	June 3	June 7	My25		My27	My26	My30	My13	My22	
6	Mar30		Apr18	Apr17	Apr16	Apr13	Apr18	Apr15	Apr15	Apr27
0	My 4				My19	My11			My14	
5	My14	My18	My19	My19	My21	My25	My17	My14	My16	My18
1	My22	June 7			My22					
1							My 4		My18	My18
1	Feb13	Feb26	Mar4	Feb11	Feb10	Feb19	wintered	wintered	Feb 9	Feb22
7	My19		My23	My19		My 5	My 1		My21	My 8
									My22	My15
5	My15	My 4	Apr29	My 7	Apr27	My 6	My15	My 6	Apr29	My 6

	1916	1917	1918	1919	1920	1921	1922	1923
Common Crow	Mar17	Mar27	Mar20	Mar21	Mar22	Mar22	Mar23	Ma
Red-br. Nuthatch							My 9	
House Wren								
Catbird				My26	June 1	My20	My21	
Robin	Apr13	Apr 6	Apr 1	Apr 4	Apr15	Apr 4	Apr 8	Apr
Eastern Bluebird				My26				
Ruby-cr. Kinglet								
Cedar Waxwing								
Loggerhead Shrike					Apr30			My
Black-and-wh. Warbler								My
Tennessee Warbler								My
Yellow Warbler			My12					My
Myrtle Warbler								
Bay-br. Warbler							My15	
Blackpoll Warbler								
N. Waterthrush								My
American Redstart								
Bobolink			My17	My25	June18			
West. Meadowlark	Apr 1	Apr 3	Mar26	Apr 1	Apr 8	Apr 1	Apr 4	Apr
Yellow-hd. Blackbird			My 5	My25	My16	My 6	My 8	My
Blackbird [sic]	Apr12	Apr 8	Mar25	Apr 4	Apr 9	Apr 5	Apr 7	Apr
Baltimore Oriole		My25		My24	My25	My24	My21	My
Brewer's Blackbird								
Common Grackle								Ap
Br.-hd. Cowbird								
Rose-br. Grosbeak						My20		My
Evening Grosbeak								My
Common Redpoll	"really a winter bird, but seems to migrate"					Apr 4	Mar11	Feb
Am. Goldfinch		My25		My24	My13	June 5	My28	My
Lark Bunting							My21	My
Vesper Sparrow							Apr30	Ap
Sl.-col. Junco						Apr 4	Apr 1	Ap
Tree Sparrow		Mar31		Apr 1	Apr 3	Mar30	Apr 5	Ap
Chipping Sparrow			My13					
Harris' Sparrow				My5-10		My14	My12	My
Wh.-cr. Sparrow			My10					My
Wh.-thr. Sparrow					My 3	My 1		
Song Sparrow			Mar25					
Lapland Longspur					Apr28	Apr23	Apr27	My
Chestnut-c. Longspur							Apr16	My

	1925	1926 F. Ranson	1927 F. Ranson	1928	1929	1930	1931	1932 F. Ranson	1933	1934
24										
Mar26	Mar23	Mar20	Mar17	Mar17	Mar19	Mar17	Mar22	Mar31	Mar19	Mar21
27										
					Apr19		My30		My 2	My 2
		My24	My27		My 3		My23		My30	
Mar14	Mar29	Apr11	Apr11	Apr16	Apr 4	Apr 2	Apr12	Apr 7	Apr15	Apr14
Mar 8					Apr14				Apr17	
						My 5				My 3
	My31									
Mar26			Apr27			Apr24			My 7	
							My27			
22		My18	My24	My19	My19	My21	My20	My19	My21	
			My24		My18	My16	My 4			
						My27			My21	My18
19	My13								Apr17	
line 1										
		June 9			My24					
Mar 6	Mar28	Mar30	Apr 2	Mar27	Apr 1	Apr 2	Mar27	Apr 6	Mar24	Apr 8
7 6	Apr20	My11	My 3				My17	My10		
Mar14	Mar29	Mar26	Apr 4	Mar30	Apr 4	Apr 7	Apr10		Apr16	Apr18
28	My19	My19	My27	My19	My19	My26	My25	My12	My17	My17
								Apr 9	Apr18	My 4
		Apr14	Apr13		Apr10	Apr10	Apr10	Apr12	Apr18	Apr23
						My 5		My10	My 6	Apr25
30					My19					
	Mar24	Mar14	Mar10	Mar25	Mar29				Feb 6	
	My26	My29	June 7			June 4	My23	My25	My30	My18
31		My30						My27		
		My 9	Apr27		My 3	Apr27	Apr27	Apr16	Apr25	
Mar12	Mar29	Mar24	Apr 2	Mar28	Apr 5	Apr 3				Apr18
Mar 6	Mar29			Mar22	Mar27	Apr 3	Mar22		Mar31	Mar28
4	My13				My19	My10	My15	My 9	My 5	
4	My15			My10	My 5	My 7	My 4		My10	My 4
					Apr20	My26		My20		
9	Apr 5	Apr10		Mar27	Apr25		Mar29	Mar10		Mar 3
Mar23	Apr16		Apr24	My 1	My12	My 2	My 1		Mar31	Mar20