

Notes from Letters

TAKE A CANOE TRIP THIS SUMMER

Every move and pronouncement toward the setting aside of wilderness areas is met with feelings of real appreciation by many nature lovers. I, for one, have seen enough of our so-called "multi-purpose" parks. I have sought the beauty and solitude of a park and have been endlessly annoyed by the sound of oil wells pumping and oil trucks howling by. My heart does not exactly "leap up" when I behold in the midst of this "natural environment" some farmer's cows grazing in the park. Nor am I thrilled by the racket of a tractor and mower coming into the park to cut hay. And yet I wonder whether, through the years, people will slowly and unconsciously come to accept this state of affairs as part of our natural surroundings. Or can more of our younger generation of nature-minded people be led to leave the well-marked nature trails for an adventure into our wilderness? I believe they can and will, and that the canoe camping trip will some day be a significant holiday for those looking for more than the usual "two or three weeks at the cottage."

In September, 1965 I took a trip by canoe to hunt moose and ducks along part of the historic route from York Factory on Hudson Bay to the site where Winnipeg now stands. We travelled north and east from Norway House as far as Robinson Portage, a distance of 85 or 90 miles. The trip was unspectacular in many ways and broke no records for length or for feats of daring and skill, but I shall always remember it with the utmost satisfaction.

We left Norway House on a windy Monday afternoon laden down with enough supplies to last a week. Our canoe was a 17-foot canvas-covered one pushed sleekly through the water by a 10-horsepower motor. Being a novice at canoe travel I was glad to

get off the rough waters of Little Playgreen Lake and into the quieter waters of the Nelson River, but my good-natured Indian friend, who has spent all his life travelling by canoe, just laughed at my uneasiness.

Eighteen miles "down north" of Norway House the first portage is made at Sea Falls, an operation that simply involves the hard work of carrying everything over the rise of rock to the place below the falls where it is again safe to enter the water. We paused a moment to watch the water roar over the falls and to wonder again at the steel pegs and rings in the rock in the middle of the river by which the York boats of early days were hauled up the falls. Later in the day, after our evening meal of beans and bannock, we came to the stretch of the river the Indians call "Mistii Miscowen", which means "the place where it is hard paddling", and the canoe traveller must be cautious in the swift current and small rapids. I was thankful that I had an experienced guide, and noted that even he was happy to put the fast water behind us!

We pitched our tent at night on an island in the middle of the river. There is something about the thrill of camping by a fast-flowing river in the wilderness which is hard to put into words. A person in this setting sees more clearly his true relation to the rest of nature.

The next day, after we had each completed our tasks in breaking camp, we moved on north through majestic high rocks and more swift water. At the place where the little Echimamish River flows into the Nelson we turned into the slower river running lazily between banks covered with high alders and willows. This led us after several dozen turns into Hairy Lake, which, as its name suggests, is a lake full of tall grasses and reeds. It is well known locally for the large numbers of waterfowl, but as we moved from opening to opening in the reeds

and made our way across the lake we were disappointed to see so few ducks and geese. However, we continued to be moved by the beauty of the scenes around us, and I was particularly interested in this little lake where I could see, perched on an island and cosy in its surroundings of evergreens, the trapping cabin of an old friend of mine who visits me often and extolls the charms of the area. The black mark on the lake and along much of the river was the blackened trees and debris left by a forest fire which had come all the way from a woman's trash pile at Norway House to the south end of this little lake and beyond.

The trip up the Echimamish river is worth any amount of time and effort. The wildness and quiet beauty of this country would be therapeutic treatment for anyone. My guide and friend knew that I was interested in the history of this route and took time to point out places and to pass on stories about them which had come down through the years. At an old dam, for example, he explained how men had dammed up the river in several places to make the water deep enough for the York boats, and he showed me Pork Rock, a traditional stopping place for the York boat crews where they ate their ration of pork. From travelling these wild places I now have the utmost respect for those courageous settlers and their brave wives who came all that way to this frightening land.

Hector also kept me posted on whose trap line we were passing through. It was interesting to note how one trapping area would have lots of muskrats swimming along beside us, and a beaver house every few miles, while another would have very few of either. Hector answered my questions by pointing out that this was simply the difference between a good trapper and a poor one, showing so clearly how one man could have such an effect on his environment.

One of the most interesting places along the Echimamish is the spot

which gives it its name, meaning "flowing both ways." Here the water in a large shallow marsh flows out both to the east and west. Boulders just under the surface of the water were numerous, and it required all Hector's skill to pilot us — this alone is reason enough to take a competent guide on a canoeing trip.

We made a second night's camp at Robinson Lake, where we hoped to find moose. We had in fact been further encouraged in our hopes by an encounter along the canoe route with friends returning from the lake with their canoes laden with moose meat! However, two days of trying to track moose brought no results, and we took our satisfaction instead in the other interesting sights around us. Leaving the lake by the Hayes River on our way to Robinson Portage, we were amazed to find large flocks of Buffleheads surprisingly tame. Robinson Portage itself is very interesting, with old strips of iron track lying in the bush where a railway with hand cars was once in use to transport goods along the mile stretch between Robinson Lake and Logan Lake.

One beautiful sight as we left on our return trip to Norway House was a pair of Bald Eagles which perched beside the river on tall spruce trees and watched us glide by. We arrived home tired and bearded, and without any moose, but I was deeply satisfied with my first long canoe trip. I think any readers of the *Blue Jay* who could start to make plans now for a canoe trip this summer would never regret it.

I would be pleased to supply anyone interested with information about the Norway House area, and there are many other sources of information about canoe trips that you can take. The Hudson's Bay Company, for example, advertises a "U - Paddle Canoe Rental Service." Anyone concerned about the initial expenditure of buying a canoe can take advantage of this latest service in wilderness outfitting. Aluminum canoes can be rented by experienced canoe-trip fans at various points throughout the

north, including Yellowknife, Waterways, Ile-à-la-Crosse, La Ronge, Norway House, and may be picked up at one company post and turned in at another. Further advice can be obtained from the Northern Stores Department, Hudson's Bay Company, 79 Main Street, Winnipeg 1, Canada.

Take a canoe trip this summer, Canada's waterways are calling you.—*Rev. S. C. Fowke*, Norway House, Manitoba.

Editor's Note: Pamphlets on canoe routes in Saskatchewan are available from the Department of Natural Resources, Conservation Information Branch, Regina.

WINTERING ROBIN

On December 5, 1965 I was out bird watching with my friend Jack Luschyk, who is very interested in photography. At Bryant Park we sighted three White-winged Crossbills, a Blue Jay and five Pine Grosbeaks. In the Little Red River bridge area, about a mile and a half north-east of Prince Albert, we sighted 11 Pine Gosbeaks feeding on snowberries, 25 Bohemian Waxwings feeding on Saskatoon berries, and 17 Evening Grosbeaks busily cracking stones of dried chokecherries to get at the kernels. While I was looking elsewhere, Jack saw and photographed a Robin which he had found with the Evening Grosbeaks. Later there was a report in the P.A. Herald that a Robin had been seen in the west hill area at 251 19th St. West. Mrs. Spencer was home and told me that a Robin had been at their place since December 23, feeding on crabapples. On January 10 Mrs. Spencer phoned me saying that the Robin was back again, and eating crabapples. On that day it was 35° below zero; between January 1 and January 9 it had been as low as 44° below zero. Mr. A. O. Aschim, President of the Saskatchewan Natural History Society, told me he saw a Robin on November 28 at his home about four miles north of P.A. We talked over these records and decided that this may have been the same

Robin.—*Auguste Viala*, Prince Albert.
Ed. Note: It is possible that P.A. had at least three wintering Robins; note that the Regina Christmas Bird Count recorded *eight* in the city on December 27.

SANDHILL CRANES FLYING WITH FEET DRAWN UP

In the September issue of the *Blue Jay* (p.121) there was an article under the title above. My son Fred was reading this recently and remarked that last spring in the migration (May 12, 1965) 15 Sandhill Cranes stayed around a dugout that we have in the centre of cultivated land. Fred was seeding in the area and they were around for a week, and he saw some flying with their feet drawn up as reported by Mr. Bard. My diary for that date shows the weather to have been nice: temperature around freezing in the morning, and up to 50° or 60° in the afternoon.—*Mrs. Ken Skinner*, Indian Head.

PROTECT ROAD ALLOWANCE

My interests lie along ecological lines; during the past few years I have been doing considerable study of the organic foods and their possible benefit to mankind. Always the trail points to our errors in respect to the destruction of our many friends and benefactors from the lower forms of life. A Society such as ours should look with grave concern on the present practice of farmers annexing the Crown-owned road allowances for their own selfish gain of growing grain. I am a farmer, but recognize the rights of our flora and fauna to co-exist with us, invariably to our advantage. What better way could be found than by having the "powers that be" insist that the unused portion of the road allowances be declared out of bounds during the nesting season, and a program be instituted to develop as game and bird sanctuaries the countless number of acres that are today either lying idle, or being incorporated into the adjoining farms.—*C. P. Rycroft*, Kincaid.

BUILDING A POOL FOR BIRDS

During the months of July and August when the young nestlings of the year are trying out their wings and staying under cover, and the adults are passing through the moulting period, they usually stick to the heavy underbrush or the treetops. The hot days discourage us from expending too much effort in looking for them, so it is then a small bird pool in the garden pays dividends. Even though you may live near water (we are on the banks of the Seine River) birds seem to like the man-made pools. If you are fortunate enough to have trees in your yard, one end of the pool can be placed among them. It isn't a good plan to place a pool too close to evergreens as their low ground-level branches afford excellent cover for cats and a bird soaking wet isn't too agile.

It is no longer necessary to buy gravel and cement which makes a mess on the lawn, and ordering ready-mix in such small quantities is not economical. Instead there is a ready mixed dry cement called Redicrete on the market. It comes in fine, medium, and coarse, and all you need do is break the package and add water. It can be obtained in nearly all hardware stores and retails for around \$1.20 a bag here in Winnipeg. A pool of this size takes about eight bags, depending on the thickness, five bags of coarse for the base, and three bags of fine for the finish coat. The actual mixing can be done on the sidewalk as it is easily washed off with the hose when finished. Your base coat should be mixed fairly stiff; it is easier to form the sides of the pool if this is done. Then, before the cement has set hard, the fine coat can be added and finished. Very little time is wasted in this way. There isn't any laid down plan as to shape. We built a pool of irregular shape five and one-half feet long, varying from two to three feet in width, and from two inches to four inches in depth. The important thing is DON'T make it too deep and DON'T make it too

elaborate. Two to four inches is plenty deep enough and if you keep it saucer-shaped, the birds have no trouble getting in or out.

After you have chosen the area you intend to use be sure it is in such a place that you can sit and see the birds as they use it. Dig your excavation about four inches deeper than the finished pool depth. No special treatment need be given the hole. It doesn't need to be smooth, but shouldn't have any lumps of loose earth. If you wish, it can be tamped down; it makes it a little easier to work the cement. No reinforcement was used in ours and it has been in use now five years and shows no cracks. If you wish to use reinforcing wire by all means do so. When the hole is ready for the cement, mix the coarse mixture and dump it in your excavation. The cement, if fairly stiff, can be worked with a trowel to form the bottom and sides. It will set enough that the finer mix can be mixed and used almost at once. It is important not to let the coarse mix set too hard as you actually want a blending of the two for the finish. As to the edges, there are two ways of forming these. If you don't care whether they show, merely roll the cement out onto the ground with a trowel to form a rim. If you want to conceal the edge go an inch below the ground level and finish the cement with a small trough around the margin so that the grass will grow over it to the water's edge.

A pool of this type can be swept out with a broom in a few moments. We have transplanted lady's slippers around our pool and ground cedars cover most of the earth. Ours is placed partly in the sun and partly in the shade of some tall oak trees. We leave it full of water and let it freeze that way in the fall. An old piece of driftwood root placed in the deepest part, and anchored with a stone, makes an ideal landing perch. That's all there is. Good luck with your pool; it will draw many varieties of birds.—*Leroy Simmons, Winnipeg.*

WATER BEETLES IN THE WINTER

I was looking through some back issues of the *Blue Jay* and ran across a very interesting letter written by Joe Michel in the Junior Naturalists section (March, 1963, p. 36). He tells about finding water beetles swimming around in the water which was seeping through a crack in the ice over a spring. On December 5 we were out for a drive in the Brandon Hills, about eight miles south of town. We took a walk across a large frozen pond and found quite a number of spots in the ice that looked as though they had been open water a short while before, or maybe the day before. They were round holes, perhaps eight inches in diameter, with fresh black ice; frozen into the ice were dozens of water boatmen, some on the surface still alive. We drove on a couple of miles and examined the ice on Lake Clementi, also in the hills, and found the same occurrences. This was something I had never found before although we've often walked across frozen ponds in the winter. Another interesting note was a number of muskrat breathing-holes on both ponds. The holes were stuffed with some kind of under-water plant.—*Mrs. Barbara Robinson, Brandon.*

LATE DATE FOR BARN SWALLOWS

On October 2, 1965, late in the afternoon, I had taken out my binoculars to watch the great flocks of Canada Geese flying southward at Flaxcombe (west of Kindersley). Much to my surprise I saw three swallows circle overhead. When they came closer I discovered they were Barn Swallows. I was quite amazed because I had not expected to see any swallows so late in the fall. In my copy of *Life Histories of North American Flycatchers, Larks, Swallows, and their Allies* (By A. C. Bent), a record of fall migrating Barn Swallows at Eastend was September 22.—*Denny Kopan, Calgary.*

SOME INTERESTING NEST RECORDS

Of all the nests I observed during the summer of 1965 I thought the following were of particular interest. On June 24 I found a Catbird's nest attached to a thick stand of grass, even though there were chokecherry, willow, saskatoon and other bushes nearby. The nest was built with weeds and grass and was lined with fine grass. The parent was on the four eggs but left when I approached. This nest was near the Little Red River, two miles northeast of Prince Albert. Two miles south of Prince Albert on June 29 I found a Common Grackle nest on some flattened bulrushes in a one-acre slough. There was a small amount of mud used in the making of this nest. There were seven pairs of Red-winged Blackbirds nesting in the same place and some of their nests were only a few yards away from the Grackle nest. The Grackles seemed to be living in harmony with the Red-wings. In the back yard of a cabin at Sunset Bay on Emma Lake, I found a Slate-colored Junco nest on July 14. The nest contained three Junco eggs and one Brown-headed Cowbird egg. Three weeks later when I returned to the nest, the Cowbird egg and one Junco egg had hatched. One Junco egg was missing, another was infertile. The young Cowbird was, of course, quite large compared to the young Junco. I watched the nest from a distance and noticed that the Cowbird got most of the feedings; however, the young Junco cuddled under the Cowbird's wing, so it got warmth in return for the Cowbird's board.—*Auguste Viala, Prince Albert.*

BLUE JAY SIGHTED

We have a Blue Jay here (letter December 6, 1965); this is the first one I have seen in the 25 years we have been living in this locality. This year we have also had flocks of red-polls; this is the first time we have seen them in such numbers at this time of the year.—*Mrs. Leo Ebell, Amulet.*

SNHS SUMMER MEETING ROCANVILLE, JUNE 10-12, 1966

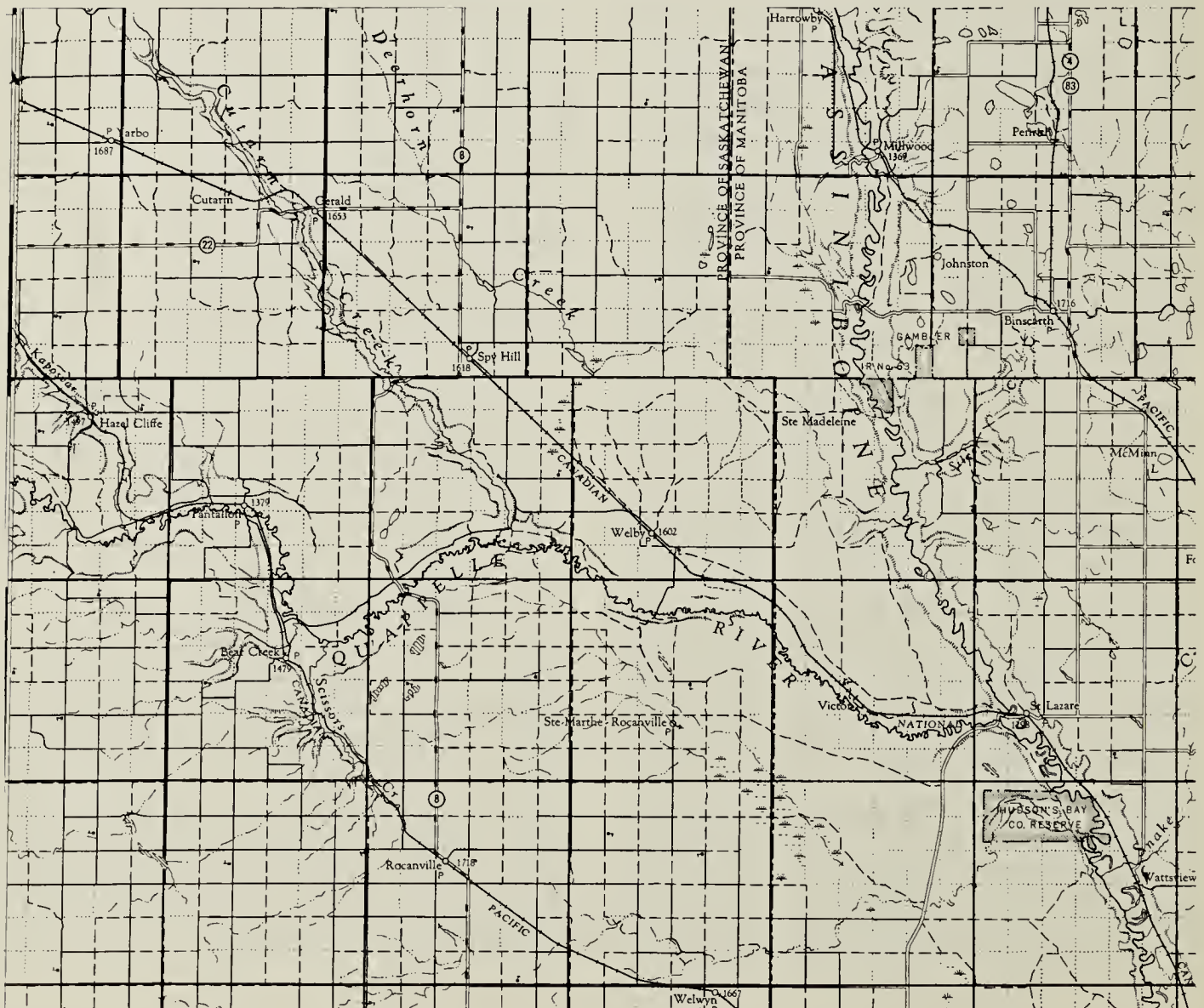
The 1966 SNHS Summer Meeting will be held in eastern Saskatchewan with headquarters at Rocanville and field trips into the Qu'Appelle Valley. Members will register Friday evening, June 10, or Saturday, June 11 at the Rocanville Hall, and field trips will leave from the Hall on Saturday and again on Sunday morning. Special host for the event will be Ernie Symons of Rocanville, who has often extended an invitation to the Society to visit his part of the Valley. Areas of interest that will likely be studied on the field trips include Symons' "refuge" (a quarter section of virgin land 12 miles from Rocanville), the confluence of the Qu'Appelle and Assiniboine Rivers near St. Lazare and historic Fort Ellice, and the Valley north of Rocanville. Members who can stay longer than the two days devoted to the meet will want to explore the area further.

It will be seen from the map that

the 1966 meet will allow excursions into Manitoba. Since the Society's activities have been faithfully supported by its Manitoba members, and since distances keep them from some of the summer meetings, we hope to see many of them this June.

Different vegetation zones have been represented in the locations chosen from year to year for the SNHS Summer Meet. This year, we shall be in the aspen parkland, with the influence of the eastern deciduous forest giving us an opportunity to see oak woods. The Yellow Lady's Slipper in Mr. Yanchinski's photograph is a typical flower of the moist woodlands of eastern Saskatchewan.

ACCOMMODATION: Particulars will appear in the next *Newsletter* re: camping sites (e.g. public campsites at Moosomin and Spy Hill), hotel accommodation in Moosomin and other neighboring towns, and billets (a limited number of billets can be arranged by writing to Ernie Symons). Make hotel reservations early.



Three Studies . . . by W. Yanchinski

Eastern
Phoebe



Yellow
Lady's
Slipper

Least
Chipmunk





"On the Trail"

Sketch by Robert D. Symons

DONATION TO THE SOCIETY

A most generous gift of \$200.00 was made recently to the Saskatchewan Natural History Society by one of its active Alberta members, Charles H. Snell of Red Deer. With Mr. Snell's cheque came this explanation: "I note that your financial condition for next year may be short of a grant [the conservation grant from DNR which has now been discontinued] . . . so felt impelled to send you the enclosed to help close the gap, and prevent a possible dropping of some of your activities."

Mr. Snell has long been an active supporter of natural history and conservation activities. Born over 80 years ago in Torquay, Devonshire, he came to Canada in the early 1900's as a homesteader. After a brief period as a storekeeper, he became a surveyor and is widely known and respected for his work in this field. Always a naturalist, he became one of the leaders of the Alberta Natural History Society founded in 1904, serving with distinction as secretary, president, and executive member.

Ornithology became his life-long hobby and he has helped many young naturalists, as instructor and friend. On a survey trip to establish the 29th

and 30th base lines west of Lake Athabasca in 1916, Mr. Snell saw one of his rarest birds. The cook of the party proudly announced he was serving the crew a wild white turkey he had shot. After the meal, Mr. Snell examined the discarded parts of the so-called turkey and sadly realized he had eaten a Whooping Crane! However, this same trip produced proof that bison were still living in the wild state west of the large lake, and as a result of the surveyors' recommendations, the Canadian government established the now famous Wood Buffalo Park. It was the second sanctuary Mr. Snell helped to establish; the first being the Gaetz Lake Sanctuary at Red Deer, 200 acres of a nature park still enjoyed by many district residents 30 years after Mr. Snell's work in setting up the wildlife refuge.

As a member of the Saskatchewan Natural History Society, Mr. Snell has for several years personally collected and submitted membership fees from all of the local members of Red Deer. The generous donation which is the latest expression of his interest in our Society deserves our heartfelt thanks.