

Notes from Letters

SHOULD RARE SPECIES BE COLLECTED?

Collecting questioned

I read with interest in the last September *Blue Jay* (1964) the account by Mr. and Mrs. Wade of their Buck Lake trip and the sighting of the Snowy Plover. The narrative was very stimulating but I can't help feeling that the ending was rather tragic.

I suppose that the pros and cons of "collecting" species have been argued countless times. In my opinion, it is definitely important for the biologist to obtain specimens for his examinations, particularly when his work is directed to the conservation of the species. I am not convinced, however, that the collection of a rare species is justified solely on the grounds that the bird is rare (or even locally rare).

About two years ago, a colleague of mine reported a possible sighting of the rare Short-tailed Albatross near the coast of Oregon. More than one well known American ornithologist urged that the bird be collected to establish its identity definitely, if it were seen again. Yet, according to the latest statistics on this bird, it would take only about 40 "identity establishments" to render the species totally extinct. I realize, of course, that the Snowy Plover is not generally rare and that collecting the Buck Lake bird did not endanger the species. However, it was locally a "rare find", to quote Mrs. Wade, and it hardly seems in the spirit of the "protective hand" (symbolised in the S.N.H.S. crest) to rush out and kill it just to prove that it was there.

If there are other reasons for making such a collection, I would be pleased to hear about them. It might also be good for the younger members of the Society to find out why it is "scientifically desirable" to kill rare or unusual species. — *Robert K. Lane*, Corvallis, Oregon.

Collecting defended

In a paper on "Collecting birds and conservation" (reprinted from the

Ontario Field-Biologist, No. 12, 1958, pp. 16-18, by the Royal Ontario Museum for distribution among friends of the Museum) Dr. L. L. Snyder of the Department of Ornithology, ROM, deals in a general way with the value of collections, and then discusses the collection of regional rarities. This part of his paper attempts to answer the same question that has been raised by Mr. Lane:

"It is presumed that there are people who would endorse the foregoing [i.e., the need for scientific collections] but would question the value of collecting regional rarities¹ which excite so much popular interest. This attitude is understandable if we acknowledge that the interest of most bird observers is more pronouncedly stimulated by the unusual. It is also evident that this interest has a value but there is no way of measuring and weighing it against the value of a collected specimen. What are the values of a collected rarity, those extralimital erratica of the bird world?

a) An erratic collected, labelled and preserved proves beyond all doubt, both to us and to posterity, that a representative of a given species did occur extralimitally at a certain time. No other evidence is as absolute and the specimen can be referred to again and again. This is the simple demand of a science especially when dealing with the unusual.

b) A collected specimen can be weighed and measured; its sex determined by dissection; its age class established; its normalities or abnormalities observed, the latter including starvation, injury, disease, parasites, hybridity and other matters. Such biological data may indicate why the bird occurred extralimitally and critical examination may even indicate whence it came.

c) A specimen taken extralimitally often marks the occasion when some biological event is taking place far away in the heart of the range of the species involved. The specimen is simply an undeniable basis for correlation, now or at some time in the future.

¹ Vanishing species, such as the whooping crane, are not included in any reference to rare occurrences. The welfare of such species is as much a concern of scientific collectors as anyone else, probably more so.

d) A regional rarity is not always a waif or stray. It may prove to be a pioneer of range change and thus a collected specimen becomes historically important. Certainly the collecting of a pioneer will not thwart population expansion if it is under way any more than Indian massacres stopped the settlement of this continent.

e) It is well known that many waifs and strays do not survive displacement. A specimen in a research collection will be useful for an estimated thousand years or more. Its remains on a beach or field make small contribution to the scavenger or soil.

It is on these premises that the Department of Ornithology of the Royal Ontario Museum has conducted its work and will continue to do so. . . . Perhaps the following comments will be the most informative of all, to critics of our procedure: Over the past ten years the Museum has collected exactly 13 specimens which would classify as regional rarities, waifs and possible pioneers. One proves the first and only occurrence of a species for the whole of Canada. Two represent European species having no breeding outposts in the New World and the chances of these individuals reaching home would seem slight. Five were hybrids, the living existence of which could have meant nothing to the parent species. Two proved that previous field identification of them by local observers was incorrect. The other three were important for various reasons including sole age and plumage representation for the province."

Alternatives to collecting, as proposed by other authorities

a) Distinct, clear photographs through which the bird may be identified by anyone wishing to establish the species at the time or on a later occasion.

b) A Rarities Committee responsible for evaluating sight records. The British, who are not allowed to shoot rare birds, submit their records to the Rarities Committee of the magazine *British Birds*. This committee has stringent rules, but their certification or non-certification of sight records is accepted as if it were law. Detailed notes, written in the field, must be submitted in substantiation of the

records. Dr. M. T. Myres, urging the strict examination of all sight records in an article in *The Ontario Naturalist*, June, 1963 entitled "Ontario naturalists, science, and sight records", quotes some of the British Rarities Committee's pronouncements: "notes taken on the spot and before a book has been consulted are the only ones of real value", "we should be given an opportunity of considering the observer's *original notes* as distinct from an edited or abridged version", "no observer should allow himself to imagine that he can see a shape, colour or pattern when distance, poor light or movement prevent certainty, just because he thinks a particular feature should be shown by the species he believes he is looking at," "all field-notes should be included in the record when it is submitted, even if it is thought some points militate against the identification claimed." No one, however expert, is exempt from these requirements if he wishes his record to be published. Indeed it is increasingly frequent for a rarity record to be submitted under several names with several field descriptions by different observers — meaning, as Myres points out, that the most satisfactory means of substantiating a record is to have another ornithologist come and see the bird as well, if this is at all possible.

SPARROW HAWK MIGRATION

While travelling in southern Saskatchewan and Manitoba during the week of April 19, 1965, I was struck with the number of Sparrow Hawks which were seen. On the rail-liner at Hanley I finally started counting them and between Hanley and Dundurn saw 20. Between Dundurn and Indi I counted a further 12, then they dwindled out while we were passing through the bushier type country. A further four were seen around Grasswood, bringing the total to 36 in about 30 miles. Telephone wires and poles were their favorite perches. They seemed to prefer the open field type terrain rather than bluff country, and also each pair seemed to have an area staked out as they were sighted at fairly regular intervals.—
Colin Ward, Saskatoon.

FALL BIRDING IN ENGLAND

Some readers may recall that the SNHS summer meeting at Moose Mountain (1959) was visited by an enthusiastic birder from England, *Tim Dixon*, returning through Canada from a world birding tour. Last year's fall migration in England was described by Tim Dixon in a letter to Mrs. Cruickshank part of which read: "My first success came in mid-September at Radipole Lake, which is a very reedy lake almost in the middle of the town of Weymouth. After several fruitless visits I was at last lucky enough to see a Spotted Crake which had been there for a considerable time. Although Peterson's map indicates it may be found anywhere in Southern England it is in fact extremely rare and difficult to see. The bird I saw emerged at dusk at the muddy fringe of a reed bed and at one time I had a Water Rail and a rat in the same binocular view. Unlike the Water Rail it has a short bill. Its lower breast is strongly speckled with white and this is quite a characteristic feature. At about the same time other interesting birds were present at Radipole—two Little Gulls, Ruff (in winter plumage, alas), Greenshank and Black Tern.

As early autumn was very fine and sunny there was not a good fall of passerines at our observatory at Portland Hill. For the same reason, sea birds kept well off-shore and few skuas (jaegers) were seen. However, on one occasion I was very lucky to see a Dotterel there. Like the Spotted Crake, the Dotterel was a completely new bird to me. It was a bird I had visited Scotland to search for in late May 1956 on its breeding territory in the Cairngorm mountains. Unhappily the snow remained late that year and despite the fact that a friend and I climbed to the high tops on several occasions we did not see a single one. The bird at Portland was in the drab plumage of a juvenile male but its thick-necked plover shape and incipient breast band gave its identity away. It was very tame, as members of this species usually are. It was keeping company with a Golden Plover.

Waders came through in normal numbers. There were Green Sandpipers at several local places including Fordingbridge (R. Avon), and Ware-

ham Sewage Farm, Greenshank at Christchurch and Poole Harbours, Black-tailed Godwits (up to 40) at Poole Harbour, and a very few Little Stints—one at Wareham Sewage Farm and two at Christchurch."

PRONGHORN SIGHTING

On May 28, 1965, I was driving down the road five miles south of Yellow Grass when I came upon a Pronghorn feeding at the side of the road. It ran down the road forty feet in front of the car and then into the field. When I stopped the car it was about one hundred feet away in side profile and alternated grazing with watching. The two white rump patches were very distinct, as were its brown back and white underside.—*Thomas White, Regina.*

CLUSTERED BROOM-RAPE OR CANCERROOT

This summer while walking over our sage meadows I noticed a pink object on a sage plant. I expected it to be a piece of feldspar or a stone artifact washed up on the sage by run-off water, but was surprised to find it was a flowering plant. There were, in fact, two plants growing from the sage, one on each side of the root-stalk and both in flower. There were five beautiful flowers on each, on separate stems. Later flowers were smaller but more numerous. The trumpet-shaped flower opened into five dainty rounded petals, pink to purple, with purple veins. The calyx had pointed sepals, beige-brown in colour. The hairy stems came from a bulb with a thick scale-like leaf on each side. Two roots grew from this side of the bulb into the sage root. I felt it was parasitic. Mrs. W. K. Cruickshank, of Regina, confirmed details and added to them from Budd and Best (1964. *Wild Plants of the Canadian Prairies*. Queen's Printer, Ottawa.) This plant which was new to me and to everyone I had asked, turns out to be a common parasite on sage known as clustered broom-rape or cancerroot (*Orabanche fasciculata* - Nutt.) I found it blooming on our sage from late June to mid-July.—*Esther A. Clappison, Rose-dale, Alberta.*

OBSERVATIONS OF NESTING SHORT-EARED OWLS

On April 30, 1964 while driving through flax stubble I flushed a Short-eared Owl from a nest with seven eggs (five eggs is the most I had ever seen before). Several days later I found that the last egg had just hatched and one young was still in the nest; two more young were found in the stubble close by. I was disappointed that I could not see any evidence of mice having been brought in for food, for most nests that I have seen always have several dead mice close by. In this case, I found only the remains of what must have been a meadowlark. This is the only time that I had ever seen a Short-eared Owl take a bird for food.

A few days later, I was checking my irrigation water about five o'clock in the morning when a Short-eared Owl dropped down into the alfalfa about 100 feet away. I expected that it would fly up with a mouse in its claws, but in a couple of minutes it flew up without carrying anything. It repeated this twice before flying away, and while this was going on two sparrows were making a terrible commotion. I didn't connect the owl and the sparrows until I was coming down a ditch through the field when I noticed on the ditch bank a small immature bird which, though dead, was still warm and limp. This was about 500 feet from where I had watched the owl 20 minutes earlier, so I wondered whether the owl had caught the young bird.—*Sam Alberts, Brooks, Alberta.*

Editor's Note: The following information on the Short-Eared Owl from A. C. Bent's *Life Histories of North American birds of prey* (Dover reprint, 1961) may be of interest to Mr. Alberts. The Short-eared Owl may lay anywhere from four to nine eggs, and rarely even more; but the commonest numbers are five, six, or seven. Rodents of various kinds, particularly meadow or field mice, are the favourite food, but there are many recorded instances of birds being found in examinations of stomachs and pellets, including meadowlarks, and some observers have reported cases where these owls were apparently feeding entirely on small birds!

I.U.C.N.

The above initials stand for the International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources, an independent international body. IUCN represents those who are concerned at man's modification of the natural environment through the rapid spread of urban and industrial development and the excessive exploitation of the earth's natural resources, upon which rest the very foundations of his survival.

Individual membership is available at the modest sum of \$3.00 per year, in return for which members receive four bulletins a year, keeping them posted on conservation developments throughout the world. A long time member of the Saskatchewan Natural History Society, Dr. William A. Fuller, Department of Zoology, University of Alberta, Edmonton, is now a member of the Executive Board of IUCN.

EARLY PURPLE MARTIN SPRING ARRIVAL

On April 14, 1965, a lone male Purple Martin—the first record of a martin ever seen on our ranch—was sighted here. It was reported to me first as a swallow, which I said was a mistake as swallows weren't due for nearly a month; however, I saw it myself that evening and identified it as a Purple Martin. The bird remained for several days, and perched on an insulator under the eaves one night, sitting all morning of the next day on one of the kitchen window frames. It looked rather bedraggled and let us get quite close, making no attempt to fly. I don't know just when these birds are supposed to arrive back from wintering quarters, and so I should like to request others to give dates of arrival in their localities.—*Steve A. Mann, Skull Creek.*

Ed. Note: The earliest arrival date given in the *Birds of Regina* (1961) for Purple Martins in the Regina area is April 29, 1958 and 1959, but this spring (1965) Bob Taylor recorded one on April 20. An interesting note on the spring migration of Purple Martins appears in A. C. Bent's *Life histories of North American flycatchers, larks, swallows, and*

their allies (1942) where it is observed that there is not the marked regularity of appearance with martins that is characteristic of many other northward-bound species. The martin moves northward rather leisurely, with the vanguard of the spring migratory hosts from South America crossing the Gulf of Mexico in late January, followed by a leisurely northward movement from late January to early May. However, "April appears to be *the* time throughout much of the northern half of the whole range across the country." It is also noted, as in Mr. Mann's observation, that as a general rule, the males arrive in advance of the females.

WHOOPING CRANES REPORTED SIGHTED

I would like to report a sighting of Whooping Cranes at noon on July 3, 1965, at Turtle Lake, Saskatchewan (about 60 miles north of North Battleford). There were three of us who saw them and we counted 21 in the flock. They circled overhead for about five minutes and were not so very high so we got a real good look at them. As we are very familiar with geese, Sandhill Cranes, and other birds we feel very strongly that there was no mistaking these birds. They were large white birds with black wing tips, and also had long necks and legs. They circled in much the same way as do Sandhill Cranes. These birds were seen at the south end of Turtle Lake; after circling overhead they flew off in a westerly direction.—*M. A. Rindero, Acadia Valley, Alberta.*

WHOOPING CRANE NEWS CLIPPINGS WANTED

If there is any reader of the *Blue Jay* who would be interested in sending me news items from any of the western papers with information on Whooping Cranes, giving the name and date of the paper, I would gladly send him or her stamped and self-addressed envelopes. I would also like to hear from any member who would

care to write to me on the subject of Whooping Cranes. I have been a member of the Saskatchewan Natural History Society for quite a number of years and am a member of the Whooping Crane Conservation Association.—*C. S. Williams, P.O. Box 119, Orangeville, Ontario.*

UNUSUAL MIGRATION OF RED-TAILED HAWKS

What may well be the largest number of migrant Red-tailed Hawks yet reported in Saskatchewan was observed at Indian Head by Mrs. K. H. Skinner who recorded 768 Red-tails between 1:00 and 6:00 p.m. on April 14, 1965. We wish that we had been there to see them!

NATURE NOTES FROM FAIRY HILL, QU'APPELLE VALLEY

Spring birds arrived almost on schedule; Bluebirds, which for many years have come on March 26, were not seen until April 1. Crows and two Starlings appeared on April 2. Geese, ducks, cranes, and meadowlarks arrived from April 17 to April 24. Great flocks of Sandhill Cranes made vocal the upper air on May 9th. On the 12th of May the Brown Thrasher sounded his syllabic song. On June 1st I heard the Baltimore Orioles' plaintive calling as they wait for the females to appear a week after they arrive. Today, June 12, "summer is here", for the cuckoo perched in the ash tree and called twice.—*Clarissa Stewart, Fairy Hill.*

LONG-BILLED CURLEW NOTED

On May 16, 1965 I saw a Long-billed Curlew in Ernest Tedford's pasture two miles north of Outram. As I haven't seen one in years I thought this might be worth reporting.—*Mel Adair, Torquay.*

BIRD NOTES FROM ARRAN

A swamp begins in our yard and cuts through our farm, hence our place is a haven for wildlife: deer,

bear, rabbits, coyote, fox, etc. We have had some very interesting experiences with nature since we moved to this land about three years ago. And certainly we have learned to identify birds: the Pileated Woodpecker is perhaps one of our greatest thrills. We feed the birds the year round. Last fall a pair of grackles stayed with us until early winter. The previous winter a pair of Brown-capped Chickadees fed with our regular winter birds—Hairy and Downy Woodpeckers, Gray and Blue Jays, Black-capped Chickadees, a very shy Magpie, and others. This year the number of red polls, juncos, and Purple Finches increased tremendously. We counted over 50 *male* Purple Finches at one feeding. One day we'd like to make a sanctuary of our farm; but in the meantime, we must get it "on its feet." *Mrs. J. R. Collard, The Oasis, Arran.*

FERRETS DISCOVERED IN SOUTH DAKOTA

Paul F. Springer writes to tell us that several Black-footed Ferrets have been discovered in South Dakota (August, 1964). The South Dakota Cooperative Wildlife Research Unit, of which Dr. Springer is leader, is now conducting a study of the life history, ecology, and distribution of this species. We understand that movies made by the Research Unit and shown at the Mammology Society meeting at Winnipeg in July were considered outstanding. We urge readers of this journal to help in this study to save this endangered species. If you see this native ferret dead or alive, please report it as soon as possible to: *Russell Robbins, State Game, Fish, and Parks Dept., 3305 W. South St., Rapid City, S. Dakota 57701; telephone: 343-8532.*

CALGARY BIRD CLUB ACTIVITIES

From the *Bulletin* of the Calgary Bird Club comes frequent news of the active programme of this organization of 80 members under the presidency of Dr. M. T. Myres, Department of

Biology, University of Alberta at Calgary. Dr. Myres is both President of the club and Editor of the newsletter, which appears frequently enough to direct the activities of the society as well as to report on them.

When a field trip is being planned, members are notified of arrangements through the bulletin, even if the Editor has to tie up a long weekend to get the announcement into their hands in time for a meeting the "coming Saturday." The warmly personal tone adds to attractiveness of the *Bulletin*, but doesn't obscure the scientific interest of the observations recorded.

Myres is well known for his zoological studies and his championing of conservation programmes, so it is not surprising to find that he and his Calgary Bird Club have given such strong support to the Prairie Nest Records Scheme. Robert R. Taylor's report of the 1964 operations of the scheme shows that the Alberta group submitted the largest number of nest record cards for the season.

The Calgary Bird Club has involved itself in other scientific studies. For example, they are co-operating with Dr. Otto Höhn at the University of Alberta at Edmonton in supplying information on Wilson's Phalarope, even though the questions for which Dr. Höhn is seeking answers are often sophisticated ones—which sex arrives soonest in the spring, the exact incubation period, descriptions of display behaviour and territorial behaviour, whether an individual phalarope always spins in one direction, etc. Such a project gives members of the Club, and especially the younger people, a real insight into the why's and wherefore's of biology—the kind of processes that biology consists of, and the kind of enquiries which a biologist seeks answers to.

Some of the projects for which the Club's assistance is solicited are of course Dr. Myres' own study projects at the University. This year he is requesting information on observations of Harlequin Ducks, locations of Cliff and Bank Swallow colonies, the habits of Starlings at the Inglewood Bird Sanctuary roost, and breeding sites of grebes, since grebes are among the species in which very high levels of pesticide residues have been discovered.