

Letters and Notes

SOME THOUGHTS ON CONSERVATION

Recently I received a copy of a little booklet published by the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds which summarizes in popular language the provisions of the British Protection of Birds Act, 1954 and the amendments added by the Protection of Birds Act, 1967, I am reminded by this little publication of the good work being done in Britain by the RSPB. They have a mass of traditional "hobby activities" to fight. From time immemorial British working people have taken live birds to cage—we can partly forgive this when we realize the exodus from Chaucer's green England to the "dark satanic mills" which sprang up everywhere at the time of the industrial revolution. I, as a child, was accustomed to seeing caged larks, goldfinches, etc. hung in wicker cages in the homes of the urban poor. It was an attempt to bring something of the countryside to brighten their drab homes. They did love their birds and cared for them as best they could, weekly renewing the green sod in the cage. The other side of the story is not so easy to countenance, for in the catching of these birds many were killed or injured. Still another abuse arose in the activities of "professional" skin and egg hunters, for among the well-to-do it became popular to form collections, although here again the motive was a real interest in the fauna of the British Isles.

All these activities had to be exposed for what they were, and birds are now legally protected against these abuses. If Britain was slow to adopt strict measures, it was on the basis that *custom* has always been respected there. We have little of such tradition to combat in Canada, but with us another tradition grew up, much regretted by conservationists—

the right of every man to carry a gun and shoot at whatever took his fancy.

Another conservation question of recent concern has been the killing of baby seals. This situation is touchy, for there are people depending on the seal hunt for a living, although this cannot excuse unnecessary brutality. Also, it is obvious that, if there is any chance of reducing the number to a dangerously low level, something should then be done. Similarly, in the trapping of fur-bearing animals, a little more thought might be given to the problems of our native population; some commentators do not appear to know much about the industry. Trappers do not visit their traps "only occasionally", leaving animals to suffer for days, if for no other reason than that the pelts would be damaged and worthless due to attacks of wolverines, eagles, foxes, etc.! In some cases, as in the shooting of deer, if the "sentimentalists" had their way, there could be population explosions defeating the end of conservation.

The situation is really very complex. All prohibitive measures are in a sense *negative*. I am much more in favour of *positive* protective measures—leaving roadside cover, leaving bluffs and potholes (even if they have to be rented from the landowners). In this connection I am always amazed at the amount of wildlife occupying railway rights-of-way. No one intrudes on these, and although the maintenance men burn the grass frequently, it is usually done in very early spring, before nesting. Our local section foreman tells me of fox, badger and skunk dens, as well as nests of partridge, ducks and bluebirds (which nest in the snow fences). Most of these men who travel the lines daily on their scooters are not the least predatory, but enjoy the companionship of the wildlife they come in contact with in the course of their work.—R. D. Symons, Silton.

UNUSUAL FEEDING HABITS OF HARRIS' SPARROW

During the period immediately following a spring snowstorm which ended May 17, 1968, I put various foods out around my bird feeder, including peanut butter for Gray Jays and woodpeckers which I smeared on the side of a four inch diameter post about four feet above the ground. To my surprise, at least a dozen times during the day a Harris' Sparrow (*Zonotrichia querula*) clung to the side of the bare pole in order to get at the peanut butter. Each time was over one minute in duration and the longest over three minutes. At no time did I observe the tail being used as a prop in the manner of a woodpecker. The body angle was approximately 75 degrees from the horizontal. I was unable to determine whether one bird or several were involved in this manner of feeding. Also, during the first day after the snowstorm, Harris' Sparrows fed at the roofed feeder, two at a time, usually with single White-crowned, White-throated, or Song sparrows on the shelf, while one or two other Harris' Sparrows waited on the roof. In all the time I have had a feeder up, I do not remember seeing Harris' at the feeder itself. By May 19, all of the Harris' Sparrows were feeding on the ground again in their usual manner. — A. Edward Wilson, Island Lake, Manitoba.

AN OBSERVATION OF THE PEREGRINE FALCON IN NORTHERN SASKATCHEWAN

In the April, 1968 *Auk* (85:179-91) Clayton M White indicated a breeding locality for the Peregrine Falcon at "Fon du lak" in northern Saskatchewan. Apart from the obvious misspelling of Fond du Lac, a settlement on the extreme east end of Lake Athabasca, I was interested in knowing the basis for this record. As pointed out earlier (Nero, 1963, *Birds of the Lake Athabasca region, Saskatchewan*, p. 29) there has been no defi-

nite record of this species nesting in the province, and not even a good sight observation for northern Saskatchewan.

Upon enquiry I was informed that an adult female Peregrine Falcon had been shot in early August, 1947, by a geologist named Adam Henderson, apparently closer to Goldfields (a former mine site southeast of Uranium City) than to Fond du Lac. Henderson, when contacted by White in 1959 in California, claimed that the bird was "with a young one" and he thought it had a nest near there. He was considered by White to be a "rather good amateur birder" and he had several good color photos of another geologist holding the bird. This seems insufficient evidence for a breeding record and White admits that he may have "been quite wrong in believing they bred there" (pers. corres., June 1, 1968). Nevertheless, the species can now be added to the list of northern Saskatchewan birds.

The rock cliffs along the north shore of Lake Athabasca appear to offer suitable nesting sites for Peregrine Falcons and a careful search might yet yield an active nest of this species. Meanwhile, I think we must consider that evidence is still lacking for the breeding of this species in Saskatchewan.—Robert W. Nero, Manitoba Museum of Man & Nature, 147 James Ave., Winnipeg 2, Manitoba.

WILDLIFE MANAGEMENT

In the March, 1967 issue of the *Blue Jay*, I read a very interesting article on the "skidoo". I do agree with what is said about the new wildlife menace.

With winter close at hand, perhaps this "nature-destroyer", if you want to call it that, will be out on one of its most popular errands soon. It is not really the machine that is the destroyer; it is the person operating it who is the one that is carelessly destroying our wildlife.

This speedy, but costly, machine is well-known in many areas and is used

regularly for hunting coyotes and foxes. Many who use these machines think it is fun to see how fast and how far coyotes and foxes can run before they tire out and can be killed with a club. If they are not run down by the skidoo, and are able to make it to a bluff, they are easily approached with the .22 calibre rifle. Too many people forget that coyotes and foxes are out in the fields destroying the harmful mice that are so plentiful in the absence of natural enemies.

I am sure that when this machine was manufactured, it was not meant to destroy wildlife, but for useful travel and for sport. True, not everyone that owns a snow toboggan uses it for destroying wildlife, but since so many people do use them for that purpose, I would like to see a good strict law against this type of destruction. We need better wildlife management, but it is only we, the people of this province, of Canada, and of the world that can help save our diminishing and useful inhabitants of the "great outdoors."—*Mac Welch*, Birch Hills.

OCEAN-GOING PINTAILS

In October of 1966 I was privileged to be a passenger on board the motor ship "Cap Blanco" en route non-stop from Los Angeles, California to Sydney, Australia. The voyage required 16½ days and no land was sighted until we saw the mainland of Australia.

No days passed without sighting birds of some sort. Most of them were of the long distance flying variety, such as terns, gulls, petrels and albatrosses. About eight days out, I was up on the prow of the vessel looking for birds. It was a sunny, warm morning with a light following breeze. Our location was about 1000 miles southeast of the Hawaiian Islands. Three Pintail ducks flew by about 30 yards away and only 30 feet above the waves. They were coming from the

direction of Hawaii, and they continued southeast toward Easter Island or mainland South America. Either objective would be about 3000 miles or more away.—*Elwin Baines*, Box 8, Tisdale, Saskatchewan.

GOLDENEYE NESTING IN CHIMNEY

This summer our family spent the last weekend of June in a cabin at the south end of Turtle Lake in the northwest area of Saskatchewan. While we were preparing to light the wood stove early Saturday morning a strange squeaking noise was heard. Attributing this slight distraction to mice in the walls we went on with the fire making. However, the noises continued and were definitely not the squeaking of mice; nor were they coming from the wall. They were birdlike and located in the chimney well.

The next avenue of investigation was from above, on the roof. With the aid of a flashlight it was possible to look down the square cinder block chimney and perceive, some nine or ten feet below, the shining eye of what was apparently a duck.

Returned to ground level, we decided to try and remove the seemingly well-hatched family by reaching several feet down through the hole where the stove pipe entered the chimney. Efforts to remove the adult resulted in her making a scrambling exit up the narrow vertical chimney. Two of the young ducklings took this same escape route in the next few minutes and were retrieved unhurt after their fall from the cabin roof. Eight of their brothers and sisters were removed from the soft nest of gray down. These ten were placed in a box and carried to the edge of the lake where they were released. The little flotilla swam slowly out and were met by the anxious mother who had remained a few dozen yards off shore.

The little black ducklings were speckled with white and were com-

pletely white on the underside including the area under the neck. Their most distinguishing characteristic was the presence of little claws on the toes of their webbed feet.

In addition to the ten ducklings in the nest, there were two very dark colored eggs, each the size of a large hen egg.

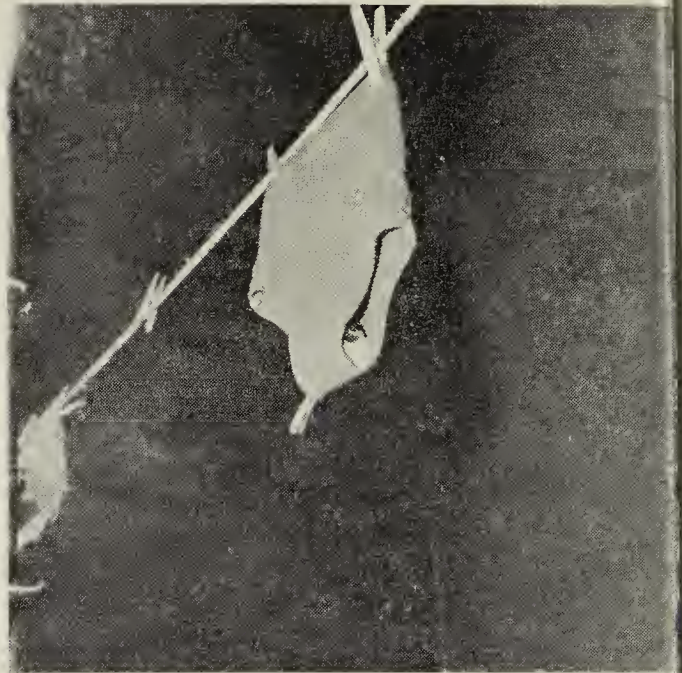
Although this was our first experience with the hole-nesting Goldeneye Duck, our parents who also use the cabin, say this has been an annual occurrence for the past four or five years.—*Mrs. Mary Thacker, Saskatoon.*

SOME OBSERVATIONS ON EAGLES

On February 23, 1968 two men and myself found an eagle "grounded" in deep snow. From the way it floundered along through the snow we thought it was injured, but after following it through the dense willows we came to the conclusion that it was just weak. We helped it along until we got it on a road. With the three-foot elevation of the grade and a firm surface it was able to get off the ground and it flew up to a dry tree about 50 yards away. This bird was dark brown with a light head [Ed.—probably a Golden Eagle]. Its wingspan was between five and one-half and six feet. It had apparently come down where a dozen magpies were feeding on a dead rabbit caught in a snare. Perhaps it had been feeding in a similar manner previously as several half-eaten rabbits had been found in their snares.

Last fall I sighted a pair of adult Bald Eagles with what I presumed to be a young one in this same area, on the Manitoba boundary east of Welby, Saskatchewan. The white heads and white tails of the adults were truly distinctive. Other years, they have been sighted first in April; last year they were feeding on a young deer that had died near a trail through my hayfield. However, the above record is my first for winter.—*Eric Selkirk, Spy Hill.*

ROCK-A-BYE-BABY



The enclosed picture was taken at Pigeon Lake, Alberta. A child had been water-playing. Now while he had his afternoon nap, his bathing trunks were hung on the line to dry. A chickadee had also been playing and spying a ready-made cradle he settled into the swing to take his rest. An amused photographer recorded the delightful incident.—*Pearl Guest, Regina.*

A FLY-IN OF STARLINGS

Early this spring, when visiting friends on a ranch south of Calgary, I saw what I understand is something unusual in nature's long list of strange phenomena. This was a "fly-in" of starlings. How many birds took part, I have no real idea. My friend said a million; but he was bitter — he had to clean up after them.

It was after dinner that my host said, "Say, you're interested in birds, aren't you? Come out and have a look." Outside, the sun was well down and the chill of a spring night was already in the air. Overhead, the earliest stars were twinkling and a segment of silver moon was nearing the zenith. In front of the house we could just distinguish the row of closely planted spruce that, reaching well above the telephone wires, surrounded the large lawn on three sides. Behind us and to the right, the hills

were silhouetted by the light of the hidden sun. It was one of those still, clear nights that fill the observer with wonder at the beauty of the universe.

Suddenly my friend said, "Here they come."

Immediately the night was transformed. There was a whirring, rushing sound that grew in intensity as it came closer and then it was as if a sudden, violent gust of wind were passing over our heads. And as it passed there was no moon, and no stars. Quickly the sound faded, and the moon and the stars were seen again. From the spruce trees came a mighty twittering and chirping and chattering as thousands of birds settled for the night.

Again came the flurry of sound. Our eyes were now accustomed to the dusk so that by peering hard into the darkening sky we could recognize a moving black shadow in the southeast. This grew rapidly in size and clarity, then swung to the north and almost faded away but came back into sharp focus as it swung toward us and rushed past with a mighty "swoosh". Again the moon and the stars were hidden, but as the flock passed directly over our heads we could distinguish individual birds, though they were so closely packed that it was difficult to believe that the air could hold them all. Momentarily, I expected a shower of starlings.

But they passed by, and again from the spruce hedge came the clamorous chorus that could have been a wrangling over space. All the perching room on every branch must have been taken up; otherwise, the number of trees available couldn't have accommodated the many thousands that kept pouring in. That these limbs could have supported all this weight seemed unbelievable, but a check in the morning showed all branches intact though covered deeply with droppings which also covered the needles on the trees, the surrounding rail fence, and the ground underneath. When the birds left, it took shovels and wheelbarrows to bring the grass back into the sun.

The starlings' night was shorter than ours. At first light of dawn I slowly wakened from a crazy dream. As I gradually came to my senses I realized what was going on! The starlings were awakening. I looked out the window; the loud chattering was continuous and didn't seem to decrease in volume although every few minutes a black mass rose from the trees as a few thousand birds took off for the day.

At breakfast time, I asked my host what he thought was the reason for the birds stopping at his place.

"Don't know," he said. "Suddenly they're there, and about six weeks later, suddenly they're gone. But if I knew why, and could do anything about it, you can be darn sure I would. But I'll show you something after breakfast."

We went out to the pastures. Through the winter these fields had been the home of three thousand steers. Where the steers had fed, the ground was a black mass of birds. At intervals they moved a few feet and it was like a wave on a sea of rolling black water.

Probably in the pastures and feed lots lies the answer to the birds' presence. Whatever the reason, they are there, and to watch the flight of the countless thousands is a memorable experience. — *W. B. Parsons, M.D., Red Deer, Alberta.*

CINNAMON TEAL

On June 5, 1968, R. Kent Brace called my attention to a particular duck swimming in a roadside slough, approximately 20 feet away. After careful observation by Mr. Brace and myself with 7 x 35 binoculars, we concluded that it was a Cinnamon Teal. After a few moments of observation the duck flew to the other side of the slough (a distance of approximately 50 feet) and then flew off a few minutes later. The location of the slough was the southwest corner of Section 18, Township 10, Range 21, W3.—*R. I. Johnson, Department of Natural Resources, Saskatoon.*

GOLDEN-WINGED WARBLER

The use of a tape recorder led to my discovery on June 2, 1968 of the Golden-winged Warbler, a new bird for the Regina area. I had been using the tape recorder to capture moods of different environments and seasons for use in our parks interpretative programme. The Golden-winged Warbler is a northeastern American species whose range reaches into the southeastern parts of Manitoba. So far as I know this is the first time that it has been reported in Saskatchewan. I hope to give more details in the next *Blue Jay*.—Fred G. Bard, Director, Museum, Regina.

CORRECTION

In the March *Blue Jay*, pages 40 et seq., the herbarium of the University of Calgary has been abbreviated UC. In the *Index Herbariorum* ed. 5 1964, published by the International Bureau, that herbarium was abbreviated UAC. The *Index* allotted the code letters UC to the University of California at Berkeley.

As you know, I have been reviewing Canadian herbaria for the Systematics and Phytogeography Section of the Canadian Botanical Association. Hence my concern to keep the record straight.—W. K. W. Baldwin, National Museum of Canada, Ottawa

PROPOSED REVISION OF SNHS CONSTITUTION

Note: The Executive of the Saskatchewan Natural History Society has approved the following proposal for the revision of the constitution and will present it for consideration to the 1968 Annual Meeting. Legal advice in preparing the revision was kindly given by David Wright of Saskatoon.

SPECIAL RESOLUTION #1

Resolved that the name of the Society be changed from "The Saskatchewan Natural History Society" to "Saskatchewan Natural History Society".

SPECIAL RESOLUTION #2

Resolved that the Objects of the Society, as outlined in paragraph #2 of the "Declaration Under the Benevolent Societies Act" under date of July 15th, 1957, be cancelled and the following substituted therefore:

The objects of the Society shall be to stimulate, develop and maintain an interest in and understanding of nature in all its forms and the conservation of our natural resources of every nature and kind, and, without restricting the generality of the foregoing:

1. To stimulate and develop the study by individuals and others of all forms of nature and of all of our natural resources.
2. To stimulate, develop and maintain the interest of the general

public and of individuals, firms and corporations in the conservation of our natural resources.

3. To prepare, print, publish, sell, distribute, collect and otherwise deal in all forms of natural history publications and more particularly, to promote the publication and distribution of the Society's magazine "The Blue Jay".
4. To encourage and assist in the formation and operation of local natural history societies in Saskatchewan and elsewhere in North America.
5. To stimulate and maintain an interest in nature and our natural resources among young people through special projects of the Society.
6. To promote and develop an awareness of the importance of our natural resources through the presentation of scholarships, bursaries, citations, awards and presentations to persons, firms or corporations making a conspicuous contribution in the field of nature study or conservation.
7. To initiate and maintain educational programs to promote the conservation of our natural resources.