

WILL C. COLT'S 1893 MIGRATION RECORDS FROM OSLER, SASKATCHEWAN

by C. Stuart Houston, 863 University Drive, Saskatoon

A recent trip to Washington, D.C. and a side trip to the nearby Patuxent Research Refuge allowed me to solve a small mystery of long standing. Years ago I obtained a set of the mimeographed Bird Migration Memoranda of the U.S. Biological Survey, 1936-1941. The second published an honour roll of bird migration observers with the longest periods of service, and on this list was Will C. Colt of Gilroy, California. He had sent in migration records for 48 years from South Dakota, Saskatchewan, Washington and California, but no Saskatchewan date or locality was given. I had also noted in Bent's *Life Histories of North American Birds*, numerous 1893 migration dates from Osler, Saskatchewan, without any clue as to the observer involved. Both omissions were explained when, through the kindness of Chandler S. Robbins, I was able to see the original submission from Osler, Saskatchewan, N.W.T. by Colt in 1893.

These records were submitted to Professor Wells W. Cooke as chairman of the bird migration committee of the American Ornithologists' Union and became the property of the U.S. Biological Survey in 1901 when they appointed Cooke to their staff to continue and extend this work. Colt had already submitted migration data from Harrison in southern South Dakota in 1889, 1890 and 1891. Thus he was an experienced observer and his records appear more reliable than those of many others of his day, before the time of good field guides and binoculars. His excellent list of 110 species is the only record we have from within the area of the forthcoming *Birds of the Saskatoon District* and is a valuable addition to our knowledge of bird distribution and abundance in the days of early settlement.

Following the columns of the official forms supplied, Colt listed for every species the date first seen with

the numbers of each seen that day. No further numbers were requested (one regrets that there was not a column for maximum number seen in one day) but one can obtain some additional indirect evidence from the two days next seen (if abundant, they would be recorded for each of the next two days) and by his statement of either "Common" or "Rare", two terms he used without modifying adjectives. A final "last seen" date is supplied for migratory species that went on further north. Also of value are nesting dates for 27 species.

The names used were those of Elliott Coues' standard text of that time: such as Yellow-rumped and Summer in place of Myrtle and Yellow Warblers, Brown Thrush for Brown Thrasher, Silver-tongued Song Sparrow to differentiate from the Swamp Song Sparrow, Buzzard for Vulture. I would assess his sight identifications as exceptionally accurate for his time, although at least some of his flock of 10,000 McCown's Longspurs must have been immature and female Laplands and his Herring Gull may have been a California or Ring-billed. His identification of two species of scaup, and of the Black Duck, may have been inaccurate; his nesting Winter Wren was certainly in error, and his Prairie Falcons might have been Peregrines. His April record of a shrike was correctly given as Northern, but the June nest must have been that of a Loggerhead.

Some of the larger birds, such as Turkey Vulture, Whooping Crane, Upland Plover and Long-billed Curlew, were commoner then than now. He had one record of the Whip-poor-will (there are also a number of records from the earliest settlers in the Yorkton area at about the same time). Our three commonest species of gulls can now be seen daily throughout the summer but were either rare or absent in 1893 before cultivated fields were common — one

presumes that these species have since increased with the advent of agriculture. No doubt Colt failed to notice some of the smaller sparrows and flycatchers through lack of familiarity with their songs, but of greatest interest are the other species he failed to record. The Eskimo Curlew and Passenger Pigeon were no longer present and the Mourning Dove had not yet become common. Mountain Bluebirds then were largely confined to the southwestern corner of the province and the Black-billed Magpie was not yet ubiquitous. Due to the ravages of wide-sweeping prairie fires, heavy bush was scarce or absent except in the coulees along the river bank and the Ferruginous and Red-tailed Hawks were not recorded. The Blue Jay, Baltimore Oriole and American Goldfinch likely became common later when poplar bluffs grew up, and the Bohemian Waxwing likely increased in winter numbers after domestic fruit trees were planted.

Colt lived on the banks of the South Saskatchewan River (12-39-4 W3) just downstream from Clark's Crossing, and about 18 miles from the village of Saskatoon which then had a population of less than 100. Colt probably arrived in Saskatchewan in the fall of 1892. He lists the "N. Partridge" (Ruffed Grouse), Sharp-tailed Grouse and Great Horned Owl as winter residents, with an entry for 100 Snow Buntings seen on January 1, 1893. His last record was for June 30 and his submission was dated July 14; so it is likely that he left that summer. He did not file for a homestead. One suspects from his extensive observations that he spent more

time birdwatching than farming, if indeed that is what he was supposed to be doing. In this regard, a check of an 1893 calendar failed to show any "clumping" of observations on Sunday, as might be expected with a working man.

Perusal of *The North Battleford Herald* confirms that the spring was very late in 1893. Colt saw his first gopher on April 6, though the ground was still covered with snow on April 10. On April 14 he saw the first water on the river ice. Monday, May 1 was a beautiful warm day with the still-present snow melting very fast and that day and the next came a remarkable migration of large numbers of many species all at once; the river ice went out on May 4.

We do not know Colt's whereabouts for the next five years, but 1899-1902 found him sending records from Badger, Holt County, Nebraska. In 1904 he moved to Washington, first at Mission, then Argyle, then Cashmere in 1905. In 1907 he moved to Modesto, California, and then settled finally in Gilroy in the Santa Clara valley of California. There in 1915 he did a summer bird census for Wells W. Cooke and reported 36 pairs of 10 species nesting on a 60-acre tract of wooded hillside. He submitted migration dates continuously until 1941.

I wish to thank Chandler S. Robbins, Chief of Migratory Non-Game Bird Studies, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, for allowing my sons and me to copy these records; thanks also to D. H. Bocking for providing information from the Saskatchewan Archives.

Birds observed at Osler, Saskatchewan by Will C. Colt, 1893

Species	Date first seen (number); next two dates; last date	Occurrence; Breeding?
Common Loon	May 16 (10); May 19	Rare; No
Horned Grebe	May 16 (2); May 24, 28	Common; Yes—May 30
White Pelican	May 1 (10); May 2, 5; May 18	Rare; No
Great Blue Heron	May 10 (1); May 14	Rare; No
American Bittern	June 10 (1); June 12, 19	Rare; —
Whistling Swan	May 1 (15); May 2, 4; May 20	Common; No
Canada Goose	April 1 (1); April 16, 26	Common; Yes—June 20

Species	Date first seen (number); next two dates; last date	Occurrence; Breeding?
White-fronted Goose	May 1 (12); May 2, 8; May 21	Rare; No
Snow Goose	May 1 (20); May 2, 4; May 22	Rare; No
Mallard	May 2 (1000); May 3, 4	Common; Yes—May 30
Black Duck	May 2 (6); May 4, 7	Very rare; —
American Widgeon	May 2 (12); May 6, 8	Rare; —
Pintail	May 2 (300); May 4, 6	Common; Yes
Shoveler	May 2 (500); May 4, 7	Common; Yes—June 21
Green-winged Teal	May 2 (50); May 3, 4	Rare; Yes
Blue-winged Teal	May 2 (50); May 3, 4	Common; Yes
Redhead	May 2 (10); May 4, 7	Rare; Yes—June 21
Ring-necked Duck	May 2 (10); May 6, 7	Rare; —
Canvasback	May 2 (10); May 4, 6	Rare; —
Greater Scaup	May 2 (75); May 6, 8	Common; —
Lesser Scaup	May 2 (15); May 6, 7	Common; Yes—June 20
Common Goldeneye	May 2 (50); May 4, 6; May 18	Common; No
Bufflehead	May 2 (25); May 4, 6; May 10	Rare; No
Ruddy Duck	May 7 (2); May 9	Rare; Yes
Turkey Vulture	May 1 (10); May 2, 8	Common; —
Broad-winged Hawk	Apr. 22 (2); Apr. 25, May 3	Rare; No
Swainson's Hawk	Apr. 29 (2); Apr. 20, May 4	Common; Yes—May 29
Marsh Hawk	Apr. 14 (1); Apr. 17, 19	Common; Yes—June 10
Bald Eagle	May 2 (1); May 5	Rare; No
Prairie Falcon	Apr. 11 (3); April 14, 23	Common; —
Pigeon Hawk	May 8 (2); May 9, 13	Common; Yes—May 16
Sparrow Hawk	Apr. 22 (2); Apr. 24, May 5	Rare; Yes—May 21
Ruffed Grouse	Present in winter	Rare; Yes
Sharp-tailed Grouse	Present in winter	Common; Yes
Whooping Crane	May 1 (3); May 2, 5; May 25	Common; No
Sandhill Crane	May 1 (12); May 2, 5	Common; Yes
Sora	June 10 (1); June 14, 17	Common; Yes—June 13
American Coot	May 1 (50); May 2, 10	Common; Yes
Killdeer	May 1 (25); May 2, 3	Common; Yes—May 12
Golden Plover	My 8 (150); My 9, 10; My 27	Rare; No
Upland Plover	May 14 (10); May 17, 18	Common; Yes—May 27
Common Snipe	May 8 (6); May 9, 13; May 25	Rare; No
Long-billed Curlew	May 7 (25); May 8, 9	Common; Yes
Willet	May 10 (2); May 12, 15	Common; Yes—June 1
Lesser Yellowlegs	June 20 (25); June 23, 27	Common; —
Solitary Sandpiper	My 19 (20); My 20, 30; Jn 10	Common; No
Least Sandpiper	My 19 (70), My 20, 30; Jn 19	Common; No
Dowitcher sp.	June 20 (50); June 13, 30	Common; —
Marbled Godwit	May 10 (2); May 12, 17	Common; Yes
American Avocet	June 1 (4); June 5, 6	Rare; Yes—June 21
Wilson's Phalarope	May 19 (2); May 20, 23	Common; Yes
Northern Phalarope	May 19 (50); May 22, 23	Common; —
Her. Gull (? Cal-CSH)	May 1 (2); May 2, 10; May 20	Rare; No
Franklin's Gull	May 2 (2); May 3	Rare; No
Bonaparte's Gull	My 2 (20); My 10, 20; My 25	Rare; No
Black Tern	May 24 (500); May 25, 29	Common; Yes—June 13
Great Horned Owl	Present in winter	Common; Yes
Snowy Owl	Feb. 3 (2); Feb. 13; June 10	Rare; No
Longeared Owl	April 18 (1); April 22, 25	Common; Yes—May 27
Saw-whet Owl	Jan. 10 (1); Jan. 21; June 1	Rare; No
Whip-poor-will	June 4 (1)	Rare; —
Common Nighthawk	June 4 (2); June 5, 7	Rare; —

Species	Date first seen (number); next two dates; last date	Occurrence; Breeding?
Belted Kingfisher	May 8 (1); May 9	Rare; No
Yellow-shafted Flicker	May 1 (4); May 4, 10	Common; Yes—May 28
Red-shafted Flicker	May 1 (2); May 3, 11	Rare; Yes—June 15
Eastern Kingbird	May 17 (6); May 19, 24	Common; Yes—June 28
Horned Lark	March 18 (1); March 20, 30	Common; Yes—May 28
Tree Swallow	May 16 (2); May 17, 19	Rare; No
Barn Swallow	May 17 (2); May 20, 22	Common; Yes
Common Raven	March 28 (3); March 31	Rare; No
Common Crow	April 2 (6); April 6, 15	Common; Yes—May 20
Blk.-capped Chickadee	Jan. 25 (4); Jan. 30, Feb. 9, 10	Rare; No
W.-breasted Nuthatch	My 10 (1); My 14, 18; My 21	Rare; No
House Wren	May 17 (4); May 20, 23	Rare; Yes
Winter wren (Error-H)	June 10 (2); June 14, 19	Common; Yes—June 27
Catbird	May 29 (2); May 30, June 11	Common; Yes
Robin	April 6 (1); April 7, 10	Common; Yes
Brown Thrasher	May 16 (4); May 18, 20	Rare; —
Swainson's Thrush	May 10 (2); May 11, 15	Rare; No
Northern Shrike	April 12 (1); April 14, 20	Common; Yes—June 4 (Loggerhead—CSH)
Yellow Warbler	May 17 (4); May 20, 24	Common; Yes
Myrtle Warbler	My 4 (25); My 5, 7; My 15	Common; No
Blackpoll Warbler	May 24 (2); May 27, 30	Rare; —
Yellowthroat	May 25 (2); May 27, 30	Rare; Yes
American Redstart	May 17 (1); May 18, 24	Rare; —
Bobolink	June 10 (2); June 12, 15	Rare; Yes
Western Meadowlark	April 10 (1); April 12, 24	Common; Yes
Yellow-hd. Blackbird	Apr. 22 (1); Apr. 24, May 2	Common; Yes—June 10
Red-winged Blackbird	May 1 (25); May 2, 3	Common; Yes—June 3
Brewer's Blackbird	Apr. 26 (10); Apr. 27, May 1	Rare; No
Common Grackle	May 1 (100); May 2, 3	Common; Yes
Brown-hd. Cowbird	May 1 (12); May 2, 11	Common; Yes
Rose-b'sted. Grosbeak	May 17 (2); May 24, 25	Rare; —
Evening Grosbeak	Feb. 1 (10); Mar. 2, 15; May 1	Rare; No
Pine Grosbeak	Jan. 10 (12); Jan. 15, 27; Jan. 29	Common; No
Purple Finch	My 4 (100); My 5, 7; My 15	Common; No
Common Redpoll	Ap. 2 (8); Ap. 3, 10; Ap. 20	Rare; No
Rufous-sided Towhee	May 10 (1); May 12, 17	Common; —
Lark Bunting	May 1 (2); May 2, 8	Rare; —
Slate-colored Junco	Apr. 14 (10); April 16, 21; Apr. 30	Common; No
Tree Sparrow	Apr. 6 (2); Apr. 8, 20	Common; Yes (Error—CSH)
Harris' Sparrow	My 14 (2); My 15, 16; June 2	Common; No
W.-crowned Sparrow	May 5 (20); May 6, 7; May 29	Common; No
W.-throated Sparrow	May 5 (1000); May 6, 8	Common; —
Swamp Sparrow	May 4 (12); May 6, 8; May 19	Rare; No
Song Sparrow	May 4 (12); May 6, 9; May 15	Rare; No
McCown's Longspur	May 5 (10000); May 6, 8; May 31	Common; No—very bad on crops
Lapland Longspur	May 8 (1000); May 9, 15; May 30	Common; No—very bad on crops
Cht.-collared Longspur	May 7 (25); May 8, 9	Common; Yes—June 26
Snow Bunting	Jan. 1 (100); Jan. 2, 5; May 20	Common; No