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THE LAND, THE BIRDS

Through 50 Years In Aspen Parkland

by WILLIAM NIVEN*

My parents and uncle, originally from Scotland, moved from Winnipeg to our homestead in the aspen parkland, 5 miles north of Sheho in July, 1910. I was about 4 years old, and my brother George about 2. My brother and I still work together, farming the original 2 quarter-sections and about 5 more which we acquired later. We raise mostly beef cattle, growing also feed grain, for which this immediate district is best suited.

I became interested in nature, especially birds, while attending Newburn country school. Some of the teachers and some of the boys were also interested and I learned from them. Since then, I have simply observed the birds as I went about my daily farm work or on trips to Sheho, Invermay or Foam Lake.

My first bird identifications were based on Nuttall's "A Popular Handbook of the Birds of the United States and Canada", obtained in 1920, and later on Taverner's "Birds of Canada", bought in 1943. I have had binoculars for about 15 years.

Most years I recorded only spring migration dates for each species, although I have a few fall dates. I had recorded 86 species by 1924, 140 by 1943, and my list now includes 181 species.

The Land

Before the arrival of the white man, wildlife had been relatively undisturbed. The Indians took buffalo and other animals for food and trapped others for the fur-trade. With the change to agriculture, the environment changed greatly. Some species adapted, some so well that they increased noticeably, while others decreased.

In the parkland north of Sheho, there was a greater variety of plant and animal life in the early 1900's than on the open prairie. For this reason, the changes with settlement affected more species here.

When we arrived, the country was fairly heavily treed in places, mainly along the creeks, with trembling aspens, balsam poplars and willows. There were many large open grassy areas around lakes and marshes, as well as on the lighter sandy or gravelly lands. The amount of open area varied greatly from one quarter-section to another. Some land had very little bush and was readily broken for cultivation but the better land was usually 50% to 75% bush. The average in this district was about two-thirds open land and one-third treed.

At first, only the best of the open land was broken by the plough. Gradually fields were enlarged by

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Using oxen to break land. Archives of Saskatchewa

taking out small bluffs of poplar and willow. Land clearing was a very slow and laborious job in the early years. The most primitive method was to dig out the roots with a grub-axe. Later a team of oxen or steady-pulling horses were used, hitched to a long chain, after one had cut the roots on one side. After the first World War, some of the larger farmers hired gangs of immigrants at 50 cents a day to cut bush and dig roots. At the same time, they usually had a large steam or kerosene-burning tractor to pull out the large trees and to pull a large single-bottom breaking plow. A few had hand-powered stump-pullers. At one time we had a stump-puller powered by a team of horses, pulling a pole attached to a cable drum. A stump-puller is simply a winch, anchored to a larger tree. For a while, we also used a heavy steel-wheeled tractor for direct pulling. At most we would take out a few willow and poplar bluffs to enlarge fields, never more than 1 or 2 acres a year. Some of the larger operators, depending on how much help they had, were known to clear 20 or 30 acres a year.

None of these methods can compare with the modern bulldozer. Thousands of acres of both private land and community pasture are now cleared yearly in our district. Whereas the older methods had little effect on wildlife, now substantial areas of wildlife habitat are being destroyed each year.

In the early days, only the better soils were cleared for grain farming. Now, even poor marginal land is cleared of trees, particularly in community pastures. Perhaps the worst example is the former "Beaver Hills Forest and Game Reserve", 24 miles south of here and once ideal habitat for deer and other wildlife. This has been cleared too extensively. Surely less complete clearing would have allowed slower runoff in spring, more retention of water and less flooding downstream — and the increased water and shelter would have benefited its use as a pasture. Willows along a stream prevent erosion and those around sloughs retain moisture; both offer ideal habitat for wildlife. I have seen places where every tree has been taken out, even on the steep banks of streams.

Sloughs were once more numerous than today. We have also many small lakes, forming a chain extending northwest to the Fishing and Quill Lakes. Thus we are on a migration route for waterfowl. Extreme variations between flood and drought have occurred over the years. Severe

drought occurred in the late 1890's, when oldtimers report most of the lakes were dry. Another marked drought occurred in the 1930's. Wet spells were prevalent about 1912 and again in the 1950's when all sloughs and lakes were filled.

Prairie fires were a hazard only in the early years, particularly in dry periods in spring and fall.

The Birds

In the days of the threshing machine, straw stacks were an attraction to Sharp-tailed Grouse, Meadowlarks and others, because of the waste grain in and around them. Now the combines often leave as much on the fields for the birds, though it is less concentrated. When grain was in stooks, it was only occasionally damaged by ducks and geese. Now most of the grain lies in windrows after swathing and is more available and often heavily damaged by waterfowl, particularly if the harvest is delayed. Geese can usually be kept off by scarecrows and other devices, but ducks, once they start feeding on a field, are almost impossible to scare off.

With the drainage of smaller potholes and sloughs in fields, some species of birds have decreased. The Red-necked Grebe was once a common resident of the larger sloughs and lakes, but now is much less abundant. The same is true of the Canvasback, Redhead, Lesser Scaup, Ruddy Duck and White-winged Scoter. Many species of ducks have decreased in numbers since the early days, for the reasons already mentioned and because of the destruction of edge habitat. This especially affected the Mallard and Pintail. In the early days, Sandhill Cranes nested sparingly; I

Stump pulling with horses - 1910 Archives of Saskatchewan

saw one pair with young about 1920 on the flats 4 miles north of here. For the past 3 years, Sandhills seem to be increasing again and I saw migrating flocks totalling thousands in the fall in 1972. They do not nest here now. Bobolinks were more common in the damp meadows in the 1920's and were seen yearly until 1942. None were seen between June, 1942, and June, 1948, but a few have been seen in most of the recent years.

The destruction of bush habitat has resulted in even greater changes. Ruffed Grouse were once common all year, but now persist only in the areas where sufficient heavy bush remains. For similar reasons, there has been a decrease in the numbers of Great Horned and Long-eared Owls, Downy and Hairy Woodpeckers and Yellow-shafted (Common) Flickers. Purple Martins, which nested in hollow trees, have decreased and only a few remain where their holes have not been taken over by Starlings. Black-capped Chickadees and Baltimore (Northern) Orioles have also declined as the wooded habitat decreased and even the Crow has shown some decline in recent years.

Some species of the open prairie suffered when it was converted to cultivation. Most severely affected was the Upland Plover (Upland Sandpiper), once common on grassy meadows when the settlers first arrived. They disappeared entirely about 1927, reappeared in smaller numbers in 1939, but became scarce again after 1960. More recently, with heavier overgrazing of pastures, the Marbled Godwit has also decreased. Greater Prairie Chicken (Pinnated Grouse) first appeared from Manitoba about 1905, according to the early settlers. At one time they had a dancing ground on our farm and were fairly common until about 1925 or 1926. As a larger percentage of the land became cultivated and fields became larger, they found it difficult to adapt, seemingly needing fairly large areas of wild grassland. They disappeared entirely in the 1930's.

Sharp-tailed Grouse showed better adaptation than the Pinnated Grouse, especially in the days of stooking and threshing of grain. In the dry 1930's, flocks of 100 and more gathered to feed at stacks of wheat and oats containing immature grain, cut for feed. There were three dancing grounds within 3 miles of our farm: 1/2 mile west, 1 mile north and 3 miles northeast. Now there is only the one dancing ground, 3 miles northeast. The largest flock in the past year was 25. I saw only two broods in 1972, one with one chick and another with five; many eggs may have been frozen during the cold nights of late May and early June.

The Western Meadowlark, once an abundant resident of fields and pastures, has decreased in numbers in the past 10 years as overgrazing has become more common, with less nesting cover.

A. R. Smith

The decrease in nesting hawks seems unrelated to decreasing areas of bush, since the Swainson's Hawk, which prefers open areas, actually decreased as more bush was cleared. This oc-

curred most noticeably in the early 1940's, coincident with a decrease in the numbers of its chief prey, the Richardson's Ground Squirrel. There was then a corresponding increase in Red-tailed Hawks, but this species has also decreased in the last 2 or 3 years, now that nesting trees are becoming more scarce. Sparrow Hawks (American Kestrels) once resident, are now seen only in migration. Pigeon Hawks or Merlins have not been seen in migration for many years.

Decreases in other species seem unrelated to changes in habitat. The White Pelican, prior to 1950, was much more common in migration, with flocks of up to 300 birds. The Slate-colored Junco (Dark-eyed Junco) was very common in spring and fall migrations for many years but has come through in smaller numbers since about 1960. The Water Pipit was a fairly common migrant, especially in spring, until about 1966; since then it has been totally unnoticed and presumably very scarce. I have no idea why the numbers of breeding Brewer's Blackbirds and Common Grackles decreased; both nested in small colonies around farmyards but the Brewer's is now an uncommon resident and the Grackle only a migrant. In recent winters, Snow Buntings have not occurred in the large flocks of previous years.

Unlike the situation in cities and towns, where tree planting has greatly increased the numbers of winter birds, we have noticed only a few changes here in the country. The Gray Jay, not present in the early days of settlement, became fairly common in fall and winter sometime in the 1920's with six or 10 moving about the district. Then, until 1946, there would be only a few some winters, and since then most winters have had none, or at other times a single individual has been seen. Ravens were not recorded until September 23, 1947, and since then, up to two or three have been present most years at some time between late fall and spring. An unusual invasion occurred in 1972 through the end of December, with a high of 19 Ravens on November 7. Evening Grosbeaks were absent until 1935 or 1940, when the maples grew up and produced seed; apart from the winter of 1970-71, when only one individual was seen, they have occurred most winters since.

Several species were unknown in 1910 and later appeared. The first Mourning Dove was seen in 1920 (May 30); there were few at first but they steadily increased in numbers over the years. The first Gray Partridge appeared about 1928 and quickly increased until there were two or more coveys around each farmyard. For the past 5 years, however, there has been only a single covey in the 5 miles between our farm and Sheho. The first Western Kingbird appeared in 1942 (June 7); since then it has nested once in a spruce tree in a farm shelterbelt, 3 miles northeast of our farm. We seem to be at the northern edge of its range. Usually only one or two are seen each summer.

No Black-billed Magpies were seen in our neighborhood until about 1926. They increased greatly in 1938, with large numbers for the first time in 1939; since then they have become very plentiful. They have few natural enemies, but I have seen a weasel climbing to a magpie nest and afterwards found feathers on the ground below. The Mountain Bluebird was not observed here, even in migration, until 1938 (April 3). Now they are common in spring and fall migration and a few pairs nest in suitable woodpecker holes. Barn Swallows were completely absent when the district was first settled. The first pair I saw were nesting in a deserted house about 1917, but my first recorded arrival date was May 23, 1920. There were no Cliff Swallows during all the early years, but J. R. Foreman of Yorkton reported a colony of 600 at a farm 2 miles north of Sheho in 1942, and my first recorded arrival date was May 29, 1943.

The Great Crested Flycatcher was not observed prior to 1956 (June 23). They were also seen in 1959, 1963 and

since 1967 have appeared each year. In 1972, a pair with nearly full-grown young was seen and, no doubt, nested nearby. Starlings first appeared in this area on April 16, 1944 and since then have increased enormously. For many years, they did not winter, but now a few stay around feedlots all winter. They migrate south in large flocks in fall and usually return in the last half of March. I did not recognize a Pine Siskin until October 14, 1944; most years they are now seen erratically in spring, summer or fall.

The changes in habitat produced by more intensive farming have proved attractive for a few species. The Killdeer, which requires little or no grass cover for nesting, has increased over the years. Horned Larks have also increased, as they are exceptional in their preference for cultivated fields over other habitat. Though many nests are destroyed by spring cultivation, they usually renest with success. The Eastern Phoebe has also increased, particularly as buildings have aged or become deserted. The Robin has become common with settlement and is almost semi-domesticated. In the last 10 years, with an increase in the number of cattle in the district, Cowbirds have shown at least a proportionate increase, and have become a greater menace to the nests of small ground-nesting birds. The Crow at first increased with settlement, thriving in the presence of man, and his agriculture, but as the number of trees has diminished in recent years, they have shown a downward trend once again.

In spite of diminishing water areas, a few birds associated with water have actually shown an increase. The Great Blue Heron was first noted on May 28, 1943, but apart from fall records in 1947 and 1949, was not seen again until June 20, 1952. It has since been fairly common in spring migration, with an occasional solitary bird or pair seen during summer or fall. They have not been known to nest near here. The larger subspecies of Canada Goose has definitely increased with settlement, particularly in the last 10 years, perhaps partly due to larger grain fields for feeding. They have always nested around the local lakes and marshes and had a very successful year in 1972. Snow Geese were seen in spring migration in 1919, 1923, 1926, 1927 and then not until 1947 and 1954, but they have been seen most years since.

White-fronted Geese were not recorded in migration until 1939, but have been seen almost every year since. One wonders whether this indicates a change in their migration pathways. American Avocets were not recorded until June 2, 1945, and were then seen in 1946, 1960, 1962, 1963, 1965 and 1966. The Spotted Sandpiper was not recorded until May 20, 1951, but has been seen most years since then, and nests at suitable places, including our dugout in June, 1972.

The Black-billed Cuckoo has had cycles of abundance and scarcity, being quite common most years until 1944, and particularly common during the tent caterpillar invasion of 1940-42. It was then absent in 1945 and 1946, seen only once in 1947, present from 1948 through 1952 and then absent until 1956, present through 1967, absent in 1968 and 1969 and common again in 1972.

Smith's Longspurs were unusually common in migration for 11 years between 1944 and 1955, missing only 1953, but haven't been seen before or since! Our first record was October 14, 1944, when fairly large flocks of up to 300 began a 3-week stay. In 1945, 1946, 1947, 1949, 1950 and 1952, they were seen both spring and fall.

Chestnut-collared Longspurs were first noticed May 31, 1942. They established two or three small nesting colonies in this district on grassy upland meadows, one immediately north of Salt Lake and the other just east of Silver Lake, with 10 to 20 pairs in each colony. This seems to be the northern limit of their range. They were present in 1943, 1944, 1945 and 1949, but absent since, apart from a possible nesting pair seen July 6, 1971. Baird's Sparrows are an uncommon

Clearing stumps by bulldozer — Archives of Saskatchewan

species here. They were first noted and presumed nesting on ungrazed upland meadows immediately north of Salt Lake on May 28, 1944. They were also seen or heard in 1945, 1946, 1948, 1949 and 1950, but have not been noticed since.

In conclusion, I predict that there will be a great deal more wildlife habitat destroyed in our district as time goes on. Our native birds, animals, trees and flowers will continue to decrease. Our natural resources, in my opinion, have a value that transcends economics, in providing beauty, variety and an interest outside our daily work, without which life would be drab indeed. I, therefore, wish to suggest that more wildlife sanctuaries be established in suitable locations, particularly along rivers and lakes, before these areas too are cleared for pasture. There are still many such places which are better suited for wildlife than for any other purpose. Now is the time to plan land use in order to retain wildlife for future generations.

I wish to thank Dr. C. Stuart Houston for his encouragement, for his many questions and suggestions and for typing two drafts of this article.

Less Common Species:

Eared Grebe: recorded only 5 years, all between 1947 and 1954.

Western Grebe: only two or three observations in 54 years. Only recorded date is May 12, 1950.

Pied-billed Grebe: recorded only in wet years. A pair with young on a large slough, partly on my farm, on July 27, 1957.

Osprey: only one record, May 10, 1949.

Peregrine Falcon: only one record, June 2, 1945.

Willow Ptarmigan: though I did not see it, a neighbour reported a straggler that failed to return north, May 21, 1958.

Ruddy Turnstone: seen only once, on Salt Lake, May 22, 1959.

Red-backed Sandpiper: two records, May 18, 1950 and May 15, 1959.

Buff-breasted Sandpiper: one record of two on May 20, 1955.

Hawk Owl: one record, May 3, 1946.

Red-headed Woodpecker: one record, July 6, 1946.

Say's Phoebe: one in a flock of Mountain Bluebirds on August 27, 1947, and another on April 20, 1962.

Western Wood Pewee: arrival dates only for 1939, 1940 and 1942. A pair was present in the poplar bush near our north field from June 3, 1948, and stayed to nest; the young were seen with the parents on August 10.

White-breasted Nuthatch: a single record, May 22, 1920.

Cape May Warbler: once, May 29, 1947.

Black-throated Green Warbler: once, May 29, 1927.

Chestnut-sided Warbler: twice, May 29, 1927, and June 2, 1945.

Ovenbird: one record, May 22, 1959.

Mourning Warbler: once, May 29, 1927.

Lark Sparrow: once, several at cattle feed trough, May 14, 1966.