



THE BIRDS OF MANITOBA

By Ernest E. Thompson

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The republication after 84 years of *The Birds of Manitoba* by Ernest E. Thompson, better known as Ernest Thompson Seton, is a landmark event. The decision to republish resulted largely from the enthusiasm and determination of Mrs. Ardythe McMaster, chairman of the exhibits committee for the 1975 annual meeting of the American Ornithologists' Union, held in Winnipeg. This is a photolithographic reproduction of the separate volume published in June, 1891. The reprint contains an informative one-page introduction by Robert W. Nero.

It is most appropriate that this reprint appeared for the first A.O.U. meeting in Manitoba and the second in western Canada. Seton was one of the first 87 Associates elected at the founding meeting of the A.O.U. in New York City on September 26, 1883, and Seton attended the third annual meeting, also in New York, on November 18, 1885. Seton was an important early contributor to *The Auk*. In its first volume (1884), he reported the first recorded nest of the Connecticut Warbler, found in a swamp south of Carberry, Manitoba. In Volume 2 (1885), Seton contributed four articles. When a new class of member

(now called Elective Member) was established in 1901, Seton was in the first group to be elevated to this rank. He maintained his A.O.U. membership continuously over 63 years, until his death in 1946. Seton collected notes from all known amateur naturalists of the time, including George F. Guernsey of Fort Qu'Appelle (Saskatchewan). Most of these observations would not have been published, much less preserved, had it not been for Seton. Seton also persuaded Professor John Macoun (Botanist for the Geological Survey of Canada) to provide him with his observations, "specially revised and corrected", in much greater detail than Macoun was to use later in his own *Catalogue of Canadian Birds*, 1900-1909. Especially important are Macoun's observations from the Etomami, Swan and Assiniboine Rivers within present-day Saskatchewan.

In Volume 3 of *The Auk* in 1886, Seton published a 22-page annotated list of 257 species from Manitoba, with a 258th species added in a one-page supplement later that year. Thanks to Seton's compilations, no other area on this continent has a more complete record of bird life as it changed in the first years of settlement. The detailed accounts of the rapid spread with settlement of the Greater Prairie Chicken (Pinnated Grouse), Mourning Dove and Eastern Bluebird are particularly valuable, as are the details of the first nests ever found of the Connecticut Warbler and Philadelphia Vireo, the latter near his homestead at Runnymede, Saskatchewan. Interesting items abound, including the discovery of both species of Wood Pewee on the western slope of the Duck Mountains and the influx of Hawk Owls into the Carberry area in the fall of 1884.

When J. A. Allen reviewed *Birds of Manitoba* in 1891, he noted that: "Many of [Seton's] own notes are given as actual transcripts from his field journal, and have thus the freshness and inspiration of direct contact with nature." This is very true; a few examples are Seton's first-hand accounts of the Black Tern, American

Bittern, Common Snipe, Sharp-tailed Grouse, Swainson's Hawk, Great Horned Owl, Nighthawk, Eastern Kingbird, Meadowlark, Lapland Longspur and Clay-colored Sparrow.

Seton seems to have made no errors in identification of specimens collected, with the exception of the "Acadian Flycatcher", which was probably a Traill's Flycatcher. The reports of Barrow's Goldeneye provided by Hunter and Hine are questionable.

There is a real problem in trying to assess frequency of occurrence from the terms used — extremely abundant, abundant, common, tolerably common and rare. "Rare" or "very rare", when used by Seton, usually meant a single record only. "Tolerably common", sometimes interchanged with "somewhat common", meant only one or two pairs, and must be interpreted in modern terminology as "uncommon". Seton tended to use superlatives such as "extremely abundant" where other observers such as Macoun and Guernsey would use "abundant" and "abundant" where they would use "common. As a further complication, Seton changed his terms for a number of species between his 1886 and 1891 lists.

The reader must be warned about the very unsatisfactory punctuation of the original printing, reproduced exactly in the reprint. The first statement for most species is a general statement pertaining to the entire province of Manitoba; this obviously should have been followed by a period. Instead, for most species, except near the end of the publication, there follows a semicolon, and then the observations from Pembina of Dr. Elliott Coues. Thus at first glance the whole first sentence might be thought to represent Coues' observations, a rather serious source of confusion for the casual reader.

There are a disappointing number of typographical errors throughout the publication. In his autobiography, *Trail of an Artist-Naturalist*, Seton tells of his disappointment that the galley proofs were not sent to him in Paris,

France, where he was studying art: ". . . the resultant publication, instead of being my joy and pride, came out overflowing with errors and misprints that have made it one of the dark spots in my memory ever since."

Many of the typographical errors were trivial spelling slips, but there are two misleading errors in dates in the Bibliography and a few undoubted errors in the dates for observations. Macoun's Great Blue Heron was shot on the Swan River on 28 August, not 28 April of 1881 and Macoun's Avocet from the "base of the Coteau" (south of Moose Jaw) is variously given as 25 and 28 July in Seton's two lists.

In one respect, it is perhaps a pity that the republication had to be rushed for the A.O.U. meeting. It would have been nice to include an extra page or two listing Seton's Carberry migration dates given only in his first paper. Even more useful would have been his 1893 paper in Volume 10 of *The Auk*, telling of the changes in bird life noted when he returned to Carberry in 1892.

Republication of Seton's classic will allow everyone access to Manitoba's rich heritage of early bird records.

Since birds are accurate indicators of environmental change, we can hope that better understanding of the past will assist better preservation of our dwindling habitat in future. At this low price, no one can afford to be without a copy of this important book. — C. Stuart Houston, 863 University Drive, Saskatoon, Saskatchewan. S7N 0J8.



Upland Sandpiper

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