



Two Sharp-tailed Grouse.

Larry Morgotch

BIRD NOTES FROM THE MANITOBA BOUNDARY

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On a recent visit with Dr. Stuart Houston in Saskatoon, I was encouraged to place some of my reminiscences in print.

I was born on a farm one mile from Orcadia, just west of Yorkton, in October 1910. My brother, Bill, was born 17 months later. In February, 1916, our parents moved to Hyas, where our home was in the village and our farm immediately adjacent to the north.

Bill and I became interested in birds and learned the various species from our copy of Taverner's *Birds of Western Canada*. When we decided we would like to band birds, we were unable to satisfy the requirement of recommendation by two ornithologists or game guardians, for we had never met anyone who shared our interest.

We asked the local Justice of the Peace whether he was a game guardian and he replied, "Yep, ex officio." He then wrote the following letter: "To Whom it May Concern. This is to certify that I have known William Wotherspoon for years and he is quite capable of identifying any birds in this area." It is surprising, knowing the great difficulty in obtaining a banding permit today, that Bill's permit came through quite promptly from Ottawa.

Bill and I together banded 937 birds in Saskatchewan between 1931 and 1945. I can still remember the excitement when we received our first recovery in the mail: a robin banded at Hyas on June 5, 1932, was shot at Wells, Texas, on February 9, 1933. I don't know why he shot it but I



Loggerhead Shrike.

Gary Anweiler

remember his name well: M. E. Halcomback. Of our 18 recoveries from birds banded in Saskatchewan, eight were from Marsh Hawks. This represents a 40% recovery rate, for we banded only 19 nestlings and one adult caught unharmed in a trap set on a fence post. We had three recoveries from four young Marsh Hawks in one nest, and both of two nestlings in another nest. All eight Marsh Hawk recoveries were from the United States. Stuart Houston summarized our banding results in the *Blue Jay* 3: 16, March 1945.

We also banded 73 starlings while residing at Niagara Falls, Ontario, in the winter of 1934-35. Seventeen local recoveries resulted from the Niagara-Welland-St. Catherines area. The most interesting occasion was on March 2, 1935, when we read an item in the *Niagara Falls Review* telling of 1,175 starlings trapped by Frank Mottola on Roberts Street. We visited him and obtained bands from seven of our

birds. He used a wooden-frame drop trap about 5 feet square, covered with 2-inch chicken wire, propped on a stick. When the starlings entered to eat the bait of bread and cake crumbs, Mottola pulled the string. He pulled their heads off through the mesh and then strung the heads on long cords as trophies, later used in a vain effort to persuade neighboring fruit growers to pay him a bounty. He said he did this in revenge for the destruction of all the fruit on his large pear tree by starlings. He admitted that he had enjoyed many meals of tasty starling stew.

Our most unusual banding experience at Hyas involved goldfinches that flocked to new plants raised from seeds we had been given. We caught 24, mostly in a drop trap baited with water. These full-grown, flying goldfinches lost all fear after eating these seeds. Some could be picked up as they sat on a bush. They would lie quietly in our hands for minutes before flying. One lay there 25 minutes, then rolled



Western Meadowlark. Larry Morgotch

off and lay on the ground, looking at me for another 30 minutes. It was another 30 years before I deduced the reason. These were hemp plants and in retrospect, I realized the goldfinches had become "stoned" on marijuana to the point that they didn't care about banders or anyone else!

In 1956, I moved to new land which had been opened for settlement and transferred to the Lands Branch of the Saskatchewan Department of Agriculture, following forest fires. Our home is now on the Woody River in section 24, township 37, range 30. The Porcupine Hills Forest is immediately adjacent to our property on the north and west, while the Manitoba border forms the eastern boundary of our section 24. We are 15 miles west and 5 miles north of Swan River, Manitoba.

Although we are only 36 air-miles northeast of our previous farm at Hyas, the bird life is remarkably different. Unlike Hyas, here we have no Tree or Bank Swallows, no Loggerhead Shrikes, no Catbirds, no Brown Thrashers, no Veeries, no nesting Orioles and no Eastern Kingbirds. In fact, Eastern Kingbirds are rarely seen north of Highway 49 at Pelly and Arran. A Western Meadowlark has been seen only once

in 20 years. Robins are less plentiful. Sloughs and marshes are few, with a different plant life, so that we have no American Bitterns, no Soras, no Yellow-headed Blackbirds and ducks are scarce here compared to Hyas. Our first bittern, a migrant, was sighted September 22, 1976. Sharp-tailed Grouse are less common than at Hyas, though we have had coveys of up to 31 birds, and I wrote earlier about their continued dancing as I seeded grain amongst them on their dancing ground (*Blue Jay* 18: 12, March 1960). A few Purple Martins nest here in hollow trees.

Unlike Hyas, we have here the Pileated and Arctic Three-toed Woodpeckers. We have had three sightings of Red-headed Woodpeckers in 20 years. Great Blue Herons are more often seen than at Hyas and Belted Kingfishers occur regularly along Woody River. Myrtle Warblers nest here and a male Chestnut-sided Warbler once died on hitting a truck window, the worm in his mouth suggesting that he was carrying food to young nearby. Unlike at Hyas, we occasionally hear Whip-poor-wills; one summer about 1956 they were calling all night beside buildings 2 miles north of us.

Perhaps the most remarkable sight was the immense flock of Common Redpolls that invaded a 50-acre field of unharvested flax in the winter of 1973-74. They came in December and their numbers gradually increased to a peak in January, when a solid cloud of redpolls literally carpeted the field, "wall to wall". I estimated more than a hundred thousand, perhaps even close to a million, redpolls. They left after every flax seed had been eaten.

Since I am on the slopes of the Swan River plains, I am now actually 200 feet closer to above sea level than I was at Hyas. The differences in bird life, therefore, cannot be due to altitude, but to different soils and the close proximity to the largest area of mixed coniferous forest at this latitude in Saskatchewan.

