

SOME SOUTHERN ALBERTA ANIMALS — 1974

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While engaged in biological research during the spring and summer of 1974, observations of some interest to naturalists were made. Most of the observations come from the Lost and Milk Rivers in and near the Pinhorn Grazing Preserve of extreme southern Alberta. Other observations came from the Middle Sand Hills (Empress area), Hand Hills (northeast of Drumheller) and the Waterton Lakes National Park area.

BIRDS

RED-NECKED GREBE: One pair with a nest containing (at least) several eggs was found in a roadside pond near Mountain View (June 11). This area is on the eastern edge of the front range of the Rocky Mountains near Waterton Lakes National Park. Red-necked Grebes have only seldomly been reported as nesting in the foothills and mountains.

FERRUGINOUS HAWK: Despite intensive field work, only one active eyrie was found in the Lost River-Milk River area. Numerous old and deserted eyries were found, e.g., 40+ in several miles of one large coulee. It appears that the scarcity of these birds is correlated with the apparent absence of ground squirrels in the area. It is interesting to note that the one occupied eyrie was close to the cultivated fields of northern Montana and contained the remains of the only ground squirrel seen in the Pinhorn.

GOLDEN EAGLE: In contrast to Ferruginous Hawks, Golden Eagles

were comparatively common. Four active eyries were found in coulees leading into the Milk River. Each eyrie contained either one or two young towards the end of the fledging period. This indicates a fair reproductive success. Each eyrie was built on a relatively inaccessible cliff with a commanding view. It appears that the staple food item was Cottontail Rabbits which were common.

MERLIN: Three Merlin eyries were found in 5 square miles of aspen groveland in the Hand Hills near Little Fish Lake. This seems to be a relatively dense population for a raptor species whose population has declined drastically in the last little while. Each of the three eyries contained at least 3 young; one contained 5 young. It appears that the high passerine population of this area may be one factor explaining the relatively high density of Merlins.

PIPING PLOVER: One pair was present through the summer on the west end of Little Fish Lake. Although no nest was found, nesting was definitely indicated.

BLACK-BILLED CUCKOO: This seldom seen bird appeared to be quite common in a small stretch of the lower Red Deer River near Empress. At least 3 males were observed during the summer, and one immature was noted in mid-July. One male was also heard in the Hand Hills on July 11.

BURROWING OWL: Despite intensive searching of vast tracts of grassland, only two pairs of Burrowing Owls were seen during the summer. Both pairs were in the Middle Sandhills region near Hilda. Both pairs were apparently occupying nesting holes.

WILLOW FLYCATCHER: One male was observed, apparently occupying a territory in a dense willow-rose tangle along a

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small creek heading into the north end of Little Fish Lake. This was on June 19. Several weeks later there was no sign of this individual.

VIOLET-GREEN SWALLOW: One nest was found June 10 in a steep coulee leading into the Milk River. The presence of several more pairs in other coulees seems to indicate a thinly distributed nesting population throughout suitable areas of the Milk River valley. This population may derive from birds following the Milk River downstream from its source in the Montana Rocky Mountains; or may result from a nesting population in the nearby Sweetgrass Hills of Montana.

BLACK-THROATED GREEN WARBLER: Three ringing males were found June 16 in Waterton Lakes National Park. They appeared to be on territory. This species is seldom found in the mountains, but is apparently a scarce summer resident in Waterton (park checklist of birds).

NORTHERN ORIOLE: Fairly large numbers were found in the cottonwood stands of the Milk River valley. This population appeared to be equally divided between the Baltimore and Bullock's forms. Also, numerous hybrids covering a wide spectrum of characteristics between the parent forms were observed.

BLACK-HEADED GROSBEAK: Several males were observed along a river valley in Waterton Lakes National Park during June. Several males were also observed in cottonwood stands in the Milk River valley during the summer.

GRASSHOPPER SPARROW: This species was found to be quite common in some areas of the Middle Sandhills. Areas where they were found ranged from near Empress to near Hilda. It appears that this species was associated entirely with the rolling sandhills vegetation of this area.

MAMMALS

YELLOW-BELLIED MARMOT: Only one was observed in a coulee leading into the Milk River on May 3. Other areas of suitable rocky outcrops apparently

contained no Marmots. It may be that the population is still too thin to occupy all available habitat.

BUSHY-TAILED WOOD RAT: Active dens were noted throughout badland sections of the Lost and Milk Rivers.

THIRTEEN-LINED GROUND SQUIRREL: One was observed at Del Bonita (SW Alberta) June 12 and two were observed in the Middle Sandhills near Empress June 24. This ground squirrel appears to be quite scarce in southern Alberta.

BOBCAT: This species appears to be thinly distributed throughout the Milk River valley, primarily in badland sections. Tracks were noted frequently, while one was heard screaming in mid-summer.

RED FOX: This species appeared to be quite scarce in the Milk River valley. Only an occasional set of tracks were noted, while one was seen near Aden in cultivated fields.

WOLVERINE: Two sets of tracks were seen high in the Carthew pass area of Waterton Lakes National Park on July 28. Apparently wolverines are still present in this region of the Rocky Mountains, but in small numbers.

REPTILE

SHORT-HORNED LIZARD: One was found on the edge of the Milk River valley on May 1. Despite intensive searching, no other sites were found. During late June and early July, as many as 8 individuals of various sizes were found at this one site. Besides being very locally distributed, indiscriminate collecting appears to have contributed to the scarcity of Short-horned Lizards.

SPIDER

NORTHERN WIDOW SPIDER: On July 2, one female was found in the mouth of an old Coyote burrow along the Lost River. This species has the typical red hour-glass shaped pattern on the lower abdomen, and appears very similar to the closely related Black Widow Spider.

