

KEEPING SASKATCHEWAN NEST RECORDS — A SUMMER PASTIME

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Two years ago I started keeping nest records for the Prairie Nest Records Scheme. This worked out very well since I like to take long walks in the deep woods in summer. Most of my observations were carried out along a 3-mile strip of land adjacent to Turtle Lake, 70 miles north of North Battleford. It is 27 miles long, following the park belt on the south side being engulfed in boreal forest on the northern half. I live on a peninsula near the middle and so enjoy the flora and fauna of both.

My first summer of searching was eventful except for the day we encountered a family of baby Wilson's Ptarmigans. We studied them briefly, noting that they appeared to move a lot faster than the baby Killdeers that we see there every summer.

In 1976 we captured the young from four nests of Spotted Sandpeppers. Since none of these birds stays on the nest for more than a few hours after hatching, a nest watcher must be patient as well as persevering to see them at all. We found all four nests while they still contained the four large blotched eggs, and then carefully kept tab on them without disclosing their whereabouts to people or predators.

These fluffy little bundles of energy are a delight to behold. We noted that they do not seem to follow a set pattern for leaving the nest. Nest #1 hatched on June 16. The first three chicks hatched hours ahead of the last, all remained in the nest until the mother was ready to go. Nest #2 presumably hatched early in the morning for the nest was vacant by 10:00, June 27. Nest #3 hatched between 0900-1000 July 4, and the young left the nest before noon. Nest #4 hatched early in the morning of July 14; the young stayed in the nest

until afternoon and returned in the evening. We observed them under the mother in the nest at 1700. Nests 2, 3 and 4 were all within 30 feet of the water. We were able to observe them on the deserted beach in early evening being taught by the mother. One *CHEEP* and they all ran for cover.

Most of the other nests were fairly easy to identify; however, some presented a challenge. One baby Red-tailed Hawk near Asquith was positively identified by Mary and Stuart Houston on June 29 when they came to band it.

The dozens of swallows we kept tab on along the lake were of four species: Barn, Tree, Bank and Cliff. Eastern Phoebes occupied ledges and eaves of buildings about 150 feet apart along the lakefront. Every successful nesting pair renested. The second nests contained only four eggs, not the six or seven of first nests. One nest fell from its perch following a violent rainstorm. All babies died. Humans destroyed three other nests, and the adults apparently abandoned one with partly grown young.

Robins were prolific in 1976. They nested on the "Point" in the birch and spruce trees for the first time since 1970. They also used light fixtures, ledges and a power transformer. House Wrens had a banner year both in numbers and ingenuity of homesites. We found six nests in wren houses, one in an abandoned gas pump, one in the loose siding of an unfinished cottage, another in the broken signal light of an old bus, and the last in the elbow of a fork lift of a front-end loader. Since the owner didn't share my love of birds, this brood survived only three days.

Identifying the nests is only part of the fun. I spent many futile hours

looking for nests of Connecticut Warbler, oriole and Yellow-rumped Warbler, all within 200 feet of my cottage. Following is a partial list of the 18 species and over 110 nests that I recorded during the summer: Near Asquith: Clay-colored Sparrow (two nests; each contained a cowbird's egg. One nest destroyed.) Mountain Bluebird, Red-winged Blackbird, Vesper Sparrow (five fledged July 12), Savannah Sparrow. Catbird at Semans, in a lilac hedge; four young July 17. The remainder were all from Turtle Lake: Yellow-shafted Flicker, Yellow-bellied Sapsucker, Slate-colored Junco, Ruffed Grouse, Robin, House Wren, Barn Swallow, Cliff Swallow and Bank Swallow.

One nest, however, was to require almost five months to positively identify. I found it while picking strawberries in a meadow near the lake. The female flew from under the leaves of a dandelion. Her nest, mostly of woven grass, contained four eggs. They were greenish-white, sprinkled with spots and blotches of brown and lavender. The bird resembled a sparrow, similar in color, etc., but had only a few streaks on the breast. Its tail seemed a bit more prominent (white edge) than a sparrow's. I deleted the Lark Bunting from the list of possibles when I reread the egg description of that species — unmarked. Perhaps I noted the wrong details but, then I never saw the male. For 12 days I visited the site cautiously, coming from all directions and at all times of day. I only saw the bird again four times and then only for an instant. It disappeared into the clover and grass clumps within seconds of flying up. Many other species of songbirds seemed to be nesting within a short distance of MY bird. Their songs made it even more difficult to identify her.

On day 13, two eggs hatched, then the third on day 14. The fourth egg did not hatch, so I took it home for future reference. The following week the three young were almost ready to fly, and when I next visited the nest one was left behind. It had died. I wrapped it in a dandelion leaf and put

it in my freezer until I returned Saskatoon.

Once home I contacted Slimmon, who is considered to have one of the best collections of egg prairie birds. He and I checked the egg against all of the other sparrow eggs as well as a number of other similar species. They all proved negative. We listened to recordings of 20 or more birds only to conclude that we still had not found the right one. I took the bird up to the University for some help. Dr. Maher promised to examine it and compare it with some other references. However, disaster hit the deepfreeze one weekend; it stopped working, so everything had to be thrown out. End of the road.

Our Oct. 1 deadline for mailing the nesting record cards came and I mailed in all of the others. I never have discovered what my bird was had I not ordered a copy of the newly updated "Birds of Alberta" by Salt & Salt. When I opened it a small piece of paper fell out. It was marked "errata" and stated that the titles for Snow Bunting and Chestnut-collared Longspur were transposed. I returned the paper to its place and decided to read about the Chestnut-collared Longspur, just to compare it to Godfrey's "Birds of Canada" which had been my most used guide.

The description of the eggs seemed familiar, as did the nest, but upon "remarks" the description of the bird's habits left no doubt. It was the bird.

I telephoned Jim Slimmon with the news and asked him to double check. He called back to inform me it was correct. It was indeed the egg of a Chestnut-collared Longspur. Because all of my bird books showed it to be a resident of the prairie around Edmonton and near Saskatoon, I had never looked for it 125 miles north. I will now close the page on 1976. A year counted for. Thanks to J. B. Godfrey, A. Slimmon and W. J. Maher for their assistance. I intend to keep the record more and, hopefully, better records in 1977.