

THEN and NOW

BY the late MARION NIXON, Redvers, Sask.

(NOTE: the following notes have been edited from a long and sometimes not-easily-decipherable letter written after Aunt Marion had her first stroke; it was submitted to the *Blue Jay* May 25, 1969, and set aside for editing — C. S. Houston).

My nephew, Dr. Stuart Houston, has been nagging me to write a comparison between wildlife “now” and “then” — which could be taken two ways. “Then” might be my childhood at Tyvan, Sask., where the trees were saplings planted in the new shelterbelts and tiny willows beginning to rim the sloughs. Or, “then” might be 1921-23 when I first came to this semi-parkland around Wauchope and Redvers in the extreme southeast corner of Saskatchewan, at the time when the first poplar “bluffs” were beginning to appear and White-tailed Deer were just moving into the area.

As a child in the prairie area at Tyvan, I knew only ground-nesting birds. The Upland Plover decreased markedly in numbers soon after settlement, and the Willets and Marbled Godwits also declined.

We had a slough in the pasture that was a rallying place for ducks in the spring. The surface would be crowded for a few days. We also had large quantities of Red-winged Blackbirds, Brewer's Blackbirds and Cowbirds and the cattail-ringed sloughs were populated by a few Yellow-headed Blackbirds, Coots and Bitterns.

At Wauchope, we had a shallow run-off slough between the house and the barn where I could watch the following pairs nearly every spring: 2 Mallard, 1 Pintail, 1 Shoveler, 1 American Widgeon, 2 or 3 Blue-winged Teal and several Coots. In the 1940's we even had Muskrats tunnelling in its banks. When the slough began to dry, most summers, the ducks were attracted to a creek just a few rods beyond a little height of land.

At Tyvan, in the years before 1920, we used to see Pinnated Grouse (Greater Prairie Chicken). I have never seen one at Wauchope, although Sharp-tailed Grouse are common and, until we moved, we had several dancing grounds on our farm, one just a quarter mile from our kitchen window. Neither the Ruffed Grouse nor the Ring-necked Pheasant were to be seen in my youth at Tyvan nor in the early years at Wauchope, but now pheasants walk up the front drive of my son-in-law's farm just west of Redvers, and a Ruffed Grouse eats poplar buds a few yards from my window. Gray Partridge arrived in 1927 or 1928, some years after I moved to Wauchope.

Sandhill Cranes were once common in migration, equally at Tyvan and Wauchope. My husband reports that one pair nested near Wauchope in 1906 or 1907. I remember counting three Whooping Cranes in a large flock of Sandhills, over Osage, (the village next to Tyvan,) where I was teaching in the spring of 1921. These were the only white cranes I saw, and since then the flocks of Sandhills have become smaller and fewer.

One bird that was quite common both at Tyvan and Wauchope in earlier years was the Wilson's Snipe, with its distinctive winnowing flight. Also the Nighthawk's boom was common at both places. Now we rarely hear either.

Here at Redvers and Wauchope we have Bobolinks. In July, 1945, five pairs nested in a 3-acre pasture by our creek, with willows to perch on as they sang. Though the Loggerhead Shrike was usual at Tyvan and on the road from our farm to Wauchope, I have not seen one since moving 12 miles closer to Redvers. The Sparrow Hawk was once very common at Wauchope, but seems to have disappeared in the last 10 years or so; I have not seen one since we moved near Redvers in 1965. The Marsh Hawk remains the most common hawk in all areas.

The various swallows — Barn, Tree, Bank and Cliff — seem to be in larger numbers now than they were in the early days.

As our shelter belt with 23 rows of trees and the poplar “bluffs” grew up, bird-life certainly altered at Wauchope. It became a challenge to identify the various songsters, beginning with the Robin and Eastern Kingbird first thing each dawn. Mourning Doves, Warbling Vireos and Black-billed Cuckoos had to be learned, as they appeared. The identification of the Warbling Vireos was confirmed when I finally found Matthews’ book with bird song charted as music. Baltimore Orioles and Yellow Warblers of course were easy to identify. The Western Kingbird did not arrive at Wauchope until 1935, but now there are more Western than Eastern Kingbirds.

I remember the winter I first saw and heard the sweet whistling calls of the Pine Grosbeaks. This may have stimulated me to start a weekly nature column for the *Saskatchewan Farmer* in 1939, after my better-qualified husband had declined a request to write it. I have since seen Evening Grosbeaks in two winters and a Rose-breasted Grosbeak one spring.

The overbearing Bronzed or Common Grackle is now a menace to the birds of the shelter belt — the Least Flycatcher, Eastern Phoebe, House Wren, Yellow Warbler, Baltimore Oriole, and the two species of kingbirds.

The Black-billed Magpie was unknown in my youth at Tyvan. At Wauchope its numbers have shown a steady increase beginning about 1925, and particularly from 1939 to 1949. This prolific bird is now much too common. Starlings first arrived at Wauchope in the winter of 1939-40 and in 1940 a pair nested in an elevator at nearby Parkman.

On April 25, 1950, I saw a major migration close at hand when “a half mile of robins,” two or three birds per square yard, migrated through our yard. The minor notes of the song of the Harris’ Sparrow are the most hauntingly beautiful music I know and it is my favourite as the birds pass through in migration each spring.

Additional comments (C. S. H.): On reading the above, Marion’s brothers J. Stewart Houston of Tyvan and Dr. Clarence J. Houston of Yorkton, and her niece, Janet Houston Mark of Redvers, offered the following notes:

The Houstons settled nearly three miles north of Tyvan on section 9-13-13-W2. The father, Stewart Houston and his oldest son, J. Stewart, arrived in 1903 and were joined the next spring by the rest of the family, including four-year old Clarence and Marion, not yet two. On this land there were three stone rings where Indians had pitched their tents, and there were six buffalo skeletons around one slough alone.

The nearest firewood was 28 miles NNE at Lake Marguerite, where they obtained poles for their first stable. The last major prairie fire, passed across the north of their land in 1904, but was diverted by the men at a large slough north of the buildings. Mrs. Houston and the younger children put out those flames that jumped across the slough. By 1913, all 480 acres were broken, except for 60 acres of pasture. Even during the first breaking, there were gulls following the horse-drawn ploughs. Three major sloughs were drained partially in 1911, 1912 and 1915.

The first trees were planted in 1907, with a small shelter belt set out in 1912, the year the big stone house was built. In 1915, J. Stewart Houston built his own house and barn and in 1917 he planted a large shelter belt around his buildings.

Richardson’s Ground Squirrels seemed to increase as the land was cultivated. J. Stewart Houston remembers setting a tablespoon of grain, coated with cornstarch, corn syrup and strychnine mixture at 1,200 ground squirrel holes in one year about 1916 or 1917 and shooting 550 adults squirrels on 320 acres one spring in the 1920’s. They decreased greatly in the 1940’s.

House Sparrows appeared within a few years and Barn Swallows perhaps as late as 1915. Sharp-tailed Grouse were much more common then and Pinnated Grouse (Greater Prairie Chicken) were present until about 1914 or 1915. Crows occurred, but were not common because they lacked nesting sites anywhere nearby for many years; their numbers increased later. Marsh Hawks were common, but there were no tree-nesting hawks on the farm. Great Horned Owls were never seen in the first 20 years and Mourning Doves were absent at least until 1920, though Harley Ranson saw one four miles further east in 1919 (*Blue Jay* 23: 3-9). About 1910 or 1911, there was a small colony of Burrowing Owls in the pasture; there were snakes in some of the burrows.

Black-billed Magpies were completely absent until at least 1920 and uncommon until the 1940's. Lark Buntings were absent until at least 1920;

Harley Ranson reported his first in 1922. In winter, there were fewer birds than today, but Snow Buntings appeared every winter.

Janet Houston Mark thinks her first bird recollections date back to 1934 when the shelterbelt trees were 20 feet high, growing slowly in the drought years. In 1937 and 1938 she became interested in nature when their teacher Miss Ferne Barker, had their class join Dick Bird's "Camera Trails Club." They listened to Dick's nature broadcasts received his club bulletin, and went on at least one nature hike when he visited their school. Janet remembers Baltimore Orioles, Eastern Kingbirds, Robins, Yellow-shafted Flickers, Brown Thrashers, Loggerhead Shrikes, and House Wrens at first, Western Kingbird arrived later, likely about 1937, though Harley Ranson reported them regularly after 1924.

In Remembrance: MARION NIXON (1902-1972)

"Nature — by Marion Nixon, Wauchope, Sask." was the title of the column in the Saskatchewan Farmer which I had been reading for several years, enjoying its precise observations and deft descriptions. I always admired the writer's ability to give unity and artistic form to a day's grab-bag of sights and sounds, caught in spare moments of a busy farm life.

Finally — and this would be exactly 30 years ago this March — I sat down and wrote to Marion Nixon. Back came the swift response, grateful for the appreciation and offering friendship full and free. She introduced me to the *Blue Jay* and to a writer's magazine, and, within the year, she had found a berth for me in the writers club to which she and her husband both belonged.

It operated by mail — a fat little "budget" wherein each member submitted a manuscript to the judgement of his peers. Only once did we assemble from our separate hinterlands, in January, 1945, in conjunction with a press women's gathering in Regina. I mention it here because guest speakers on that long ago night were two elequent forerunners of the gospel of conservation. Fred Bard and R. D. Symons!

The *Budget* eventually folded, but my friendship by letter with Marion Nixon highlighted by infrequent visits, continued through the years to the last letter in August, wavering but still comprehensible. Partially paralyzed by a series of strokes both reading and writing had become difficult for her, and creative thinking impossible.



Marion Nixon and Sweetheart