

AN ALBINO BARN SWALLOW AND TWO ALBINO HOUSE SPARROWS

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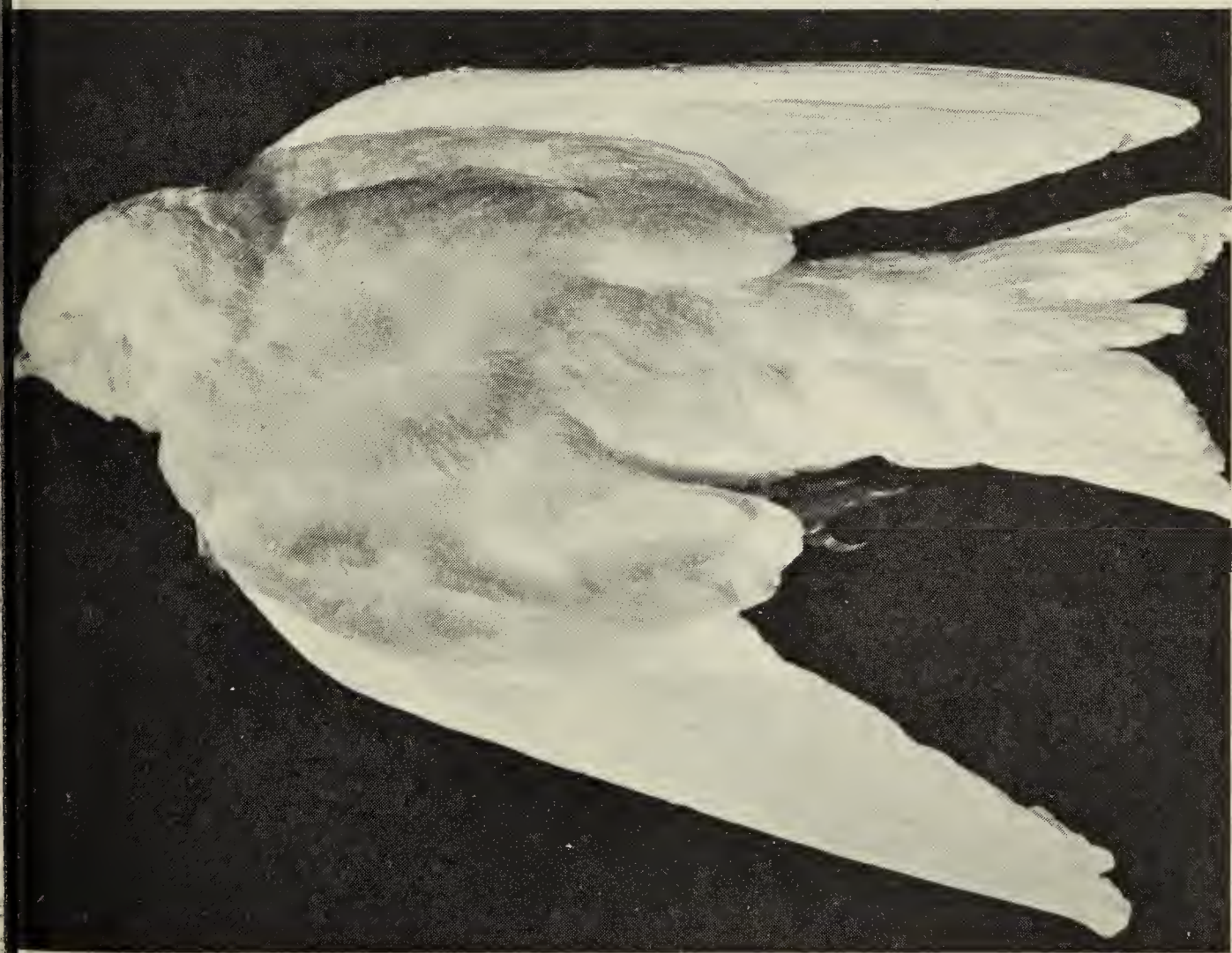
The purpose of this note is to describe an almost pure white juvenile Barn Swallow from Mozart, Saskatchewan, and to record a pale juvenile House Sparrow from Saskatoon and an albino House Sparrow at Langham.

Albinism is a conspicuous plumage abnormality of birds, usually of genetic origin, and albino individuals always excite interest. A true albino lacks all skin pigment and hence has

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white feathers and pale horn-coloured bill and claws. The bill, feet and eyes appear pink from underlying blood vessels. Many albinos have some traces of pigment and such individuals are more accurately termed pale or leucistic. Their colour can range from almost true albinism to a slightly pale version of the species' normal colour.

A pale Barn Swallow was sent to me by A. W. Cottam of Mozart on August 28, 1973. The bird was seen alone flying weakly and finally settled on a man's hand. It died shortly afterwards.



Albino Barn Swallow.

The bird is a juvenile, with the swollen, yellow corners of the mouth typical of nestlings. Its small size (wing 97.4 mm; tail 47.3 mm) suggests that it had recently fledged. It weighed only 11.6 grams.

The specimen (see photo) appears to be pure white; but closer inspection discloses that it is not. The areas which are cinnamon coloured on a normal Barn Swallow, the undersides, throat and forehead, are indeed pure white. All of the back behind the forehead, the wing and tail feathers, which are normally blue-black, are tinted tan or cinnamon. This pigment is unevenly distributed, the scapular (shoulder) feathers and wing coverts being darkest. Pigmentation in primaries and secondaries is light and is darker near the base of the vanes than peripherally. The tail feathers are also pale tan. The white tail spots of the normal swallow are evident but do not show in the photograph. The bill, tarsus and feet lack pigment and the pupil of the eye is pink but there is some dark pigment in the eyeball.

A pale juvenile House Sparrow was seen at about the same time that the Barn Swallow was received. It was in a large flock of juvenile sparrows on the University of Saskatchewan, Saskatoon Campus, on September 2. This bird was also not a true albino but was generally light in colour.

A completely albino House Sparrow was obtained from Langham in mid-November. It appears to be an adult. At least 29 records of albino or partly albino birds have been published in the *Blue Jay* (Table 1). There are 18 species in the list; 14 of them represented only once. Four species account for half of the records. They are the Robin, House Sparrow and Barn Swallow, with four records each, and the Crow with three records.

A. O. Gross¹² analysed 1,847 records of albino birds in North

America. His records show that, as in the records above, albinos are much more frequently reported in some groups than in others. The House Sparrow with 104 records (5.5% of total records) was second only to the American Robin with 152 records. Albinism is also common in the Barn Swallow as indicated by 25 records (1.4% of total records) of albino individuals. Thus, albino birds appear to be recorded on the prairies in roughly the same proportions as in all of North America.

Some of the records from the prairies are interesting for other reasons. Albino or partly albino individuals are readily noticed and individually recognizable and some have been seen for more than one season. They thus provide some interesting information on how long birds live in the wild. A partial albino male Red-winged Blackbird was seen near Regina for 5 successive seasons.¹⁵ A partly albino female House Sparrow nested for at least 5 seasons at Nipawin²⁷ and a partly albino female Mallard nested at Waterhen Marsh near Kinistino for 2 seasons.³

In almost all birds pigments are either melanins which produce black, brown, dull red and dull yellow colours, or carotenoids which produce red, orange and yellow colours. Albinism usually involves only melanin pigments. Albinism involving carotenoids is rare but does occur.¹³ If a bird has both types of pigments, albinism will usually involve only the loss of the melanin pigments and the carotenoids are retained — thus the albino Yellow-headed Blackbird and the redpoll reported above retain their yellow and pink pigments respectively.^{8, 14} The Common Crackle record⁷ is also interesting because the description of the specimen indicates that, as with the Barn Swallow reported here, the normally blue-black

idescent plumage of the grackle had some pigment. Thus, it was an incomplete albino.

Table 1 — Records of albino or partly albino birds in the Blue Jay

Species	No. of records	Reference
Canada Goose	1	19
Mallard	1	3
Green-winged Teal	1	20
Sharp-t. Grouse	1	6
Sandhill Crane	1	18
Tree Swallow	1	1
Horn Swallow	4	2,5,17,28
Black-b. Magpie	1	31
Common Crow	3	11,24,25
House Wren	1	22
American Robin	4	5,9,16,23
Wh. Waxwing	1	21
House Sparrow	4	4,26,27,30
Yellow-head Blkbd	1	8
Red-winged Blkbd	1	15
Crewer's Blkbd	1	10
Common Grackle	1	7
Redpoll	1	14
TOTAL 18 species	29 records	

VERILL, Mrs. E. 1955. *Nature notes from Crocus*. Blue Jay 13(1):7.

IRD, D. 1944. *Bird notes*. Blue Jay 2(2):11.

RACE, R. K. 1972. *Albino Mallard nests at Waterhen marsh*. Blue Jay 30(2):95.

READNER, J. 1958. *Albino sparrow*. Blue Jay 16(1):31.

UCEUK, Mrs. W. 1950. *Albino robin*. Blue Jay 8(3):14.

OATES, C. R. 1947. *Sharp-tailed Grouse*. Blue Jay 5(3):31.

⁷DEW, J., and D. SHUBA. 1960. *White blackbirds at Regina*. Blue Jay 18(2):74-75.

⁸DEMIANYK, J. W. 1972. *Albino Yellow-headed Blackbird*. Blue Jay 30(2):129.

⁹DOWNING, Mrs. H. 1944. *Robin*. Blue Jay 3(4):34. (also 4(2):15).

¹⁰FOREMAN, Mrs. J. R. 1942. *An albino blackbird*. Blue Jay 1(1):3.

¹¹GREENBANK, J. D. 1953. *Interesting glimpses of nature*. Blue Jay 11(2):8.

¹²GROSS, A. O. 1965. *The incidence of albinism in North American birds*. Bird-Banding 36(2):67-71.

¹³HARRISON, G. J. O. 1963. *Non-meleaneic, carotenistic and allied variant plumages in birds*. Brit. Ornith. Club. Bull. 83: 90-96.

¹⁴JORDHEIM, S. O. 1972. *Albino redpoll*. Blue Jay 30(2):135.

¹⁵LEDINGHAM, G. F. 1963. *Partial albino red-wing sighted for fifth year*. Blue Jay 21(3):105.

¹⁶LEE, N. 1972. *Albino robin at Selkirk, Manitoba*. Blue Jay 30(2):131.

¹⁷LYSTER, B. 1961. *An albino swallow*. Blue Jay 19(2):94.

¹⁸MILLER, R. S. 1961. *A partial albino Sandhill Crane*. Blue Jay 19(3):112.

¹⁹MORGOTCH, L. A. 1966. *A partial albino Canada Goose*. Blue Jay 24(4):201.

²⁰NERO, R. W. 1963. *Imperfect albinism in a Green-winged Teal*. Blue Jay 21(1):6.

²¹PIKE, C. D. 1965. *Albino Bohemian Waxwing*. Blue Jay 23(2):108.

²²PYLYPEC, B. 1962. *The House Wren and their albino*. Blue Jay 20(4):170.

²³REPCHINSKI, A. 1958. *You were asking*. Blue Jay 16(4):185.

²⁴SCHAEFER, C. 1943. *Albino crow*. Blue Jay 6(3):9.

²⁵SEALY, S. 1967. *Record of white-barring in Common Crow*. Blue Jay 25(3):121.

²⁶SOUTHEY, C. F. 1954. *An albino sparrow*. Blue Jay 12(4):5.

²⁷STREET, M. G. 1947. *English Sparrow*. Blue Jay 5(3):31.

²⁸UNDERWOOD, K. 1960. *The albino swallow*. Blue Jay 18(4):175.

²⁹VAN TYNE, J., and A. J. BERGER. 1959. *Fundamentals of ornithology*. John Wiley and Sons: New York. 624 pp.

³⁰WARD, A. 1955. *The unwelcome albino*. Blue Jay 13(2):15.

³¹WOLTERS, Mrs. O. L. 1950. *An albino magpie*. Blue Jay 8(1):9.

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MOOSE is an American Indian word, from *mus*, as spoken by the Massamaquoddy tribe, and *moos*, as spoken by the Massachuset tribe. The word means "he strips, eats off," and specifically refers to the eating habits of the moose. *Mary Durant. In Pursuit of the Mous, the Snaile and the Clamm.*