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CLARKE'S NUTCRACKER AT SASKATOON

by STAN SHADICK*

On November 18, 1972, Mr. Ben Simpkins who owns a farm at Beaver Creek, 8 miles south of Saskatoon, reported to us that there was a strange bird in his yard. He had looked it up in a birdbook and decided that it must be a Clarke's Nutcracker. Realizing this to be far from its normal range, John Shadick, Ron Bobowski and I went to have a look at it in the afternoon. Upon arrival, we saw the bird in a shelter belt some 10 yards from the farmhouse. The long pointed bill, white patches on otherwise black wings and tail, as well as the jay size enabled us to confirm the identification as a Clarke's Nutcracker, a species which my dad and I have seen several times in the Rockies. The bird was generally darker than that shown in pictures of adult birds, indicating it to be an immature.

While we watched, the bird appeared quite tame and allowed us to approach to within 15 feet. During this time it was feeding on a recently slaughtered pig's head as well as some sausage meat which had been set out for it.

Before leaving I reported the sighting to the local "Rare Bird Alert" and

several observers from Saskatoon were able to come out and view this rarity. Dr. Stuart Houston brought out a trap to band the bird but was unsuccessful. The nutcracker was able to steal the bait without getting caught. Alan Moulton reported that he had no trouble in approaching within 8 feet of the bird. The bird was last seen by the Simpkin family on November 23.

According to Salt and Wilk, the Clarke's Nutcracker is restricted to the sub-alpine coniferous forests of the mountains in summer, but descends to lower altitudes in late fall and winter. On these occasions it has been seen frequenting settlements and farmyards.

There have been several records of this species at great distances from its breeding range. In Alberta, it has been seen at Porcupine Hills, Beaver Lodge and Belvedere.¹ In Saskatchewan, it has been seen on several occasions in the Cypress Hills region as well as at Moos Jaw on March 24, 1968.²⁻⁴ There are in addition at least two records for Manitoba.¹ However, this sighting at Saskatoon represents a significant range extension of this straggler for Saskatchewan.

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