

RUFF IN CHURCHILL, MANITOBA

by Mrs. BARBARA A. RIBBLE*

We had been in Churchill 10 days and had only picked up one lifer since the 4th day, a Harlequin Duck, so little did we expect this warm, breezy Sunday (June 23) to be the bonanza it turned out to be. To the three little Texas "ladies-in-tennis-shoes," however, every day was fascinating in this North country frontier town, the likes of which we had never seen. We were seeing the beautiful mating costumes and displays of the shorebirds, longspurs and others that winter with us in drab disguise. Tundra and muskeg were things of great wonder to which we were introduced by our friend Mrs. Blanche A. Smith, co-author of *Birds of the Churchill region, Manitoba*.

Cape Merry is the outstanding scenic attraction of the area and there had been migrating lines of geese and swans the preceding morning, in addition to the usual scoters, jaegers, Arctic Terns, and Snow Buntings. We decided to spend most of the day there, with stops, going and coming, at the ponds by the grain elevator which we had been checking daily since our first day, when we had seen several Sabine's Gulls. I almost missed the Hoary Redpoll picked up by my friends Doris Winship and Kay McCracken as I busily photographed Arctic Rhododendron. Unaware they had seen him, I perched on a rock an hour later where I could photograph redpolls coming to the edge of a pool



— and here he came with two Common Redpolls. A beautiful pink-breasted male, many shades lighter all over than the others, and with the unmistakable unstreaked rump. My day was made for sure. Gerald McKeating and the Massachusetts Audubon Society people had seen him, but we had not hoped to be so lucky.

We napped after lunch and checked the granary ponds about 3:00 p.m. Hudsonian Godwits, Short-billed Dowitchers, Winoaning Snipe, two Dunlin, three Semi-palmated Plovers, some Northern Phalaropes, Least Sandpipers, Arctic Terns, Bonaparte's Gulls and a Pintail. Not as many species as we had seen late Friday (June 21). The Turnstone was gone, not Baird's or White-rumped. No Stilt Sandpipers or Semipalmated Sandpipers.

We had dinner with Mrs. Smith and

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he returned to the granary ponds with us about 8:30 p.m. Our Ruddy Turnstone was back and there were more plovers and Dunlin than before. Also Stilt Sandpipers and one or two Lesser Yellowlegs. Across the pond stood a single American Golden Plover. Between us and it standing on a rock was what I thought was a beautiful dark Hudsonian Godwit. As always, it captured my attention. Beautiful reddish bill, dark breast, it really looked black, and there was something funny about his shape . . . He shook his feathers, RAISED them, really, and hopped off the rock. As I heard a small voice behind me say, "Hey, what is that dark bird out there?" Some idiot (I suspect was me) began to shout: "A Ruff, a Ruff, it's a Ruff!"

And it *was* a Ruff, in appearance similar to the one farthest right in the drawing on p. 139 of The Crescent edition of Fisher and Peterson's *World of Birds*² or the dark one in right foreground in the May 1974 Audubon magazine, p. 15.¹ Many attempts at photography in poor light that "afternoon" and again the next morning (June 24) yielded identifiable but poor results. Three photos show the bird preening with raised ear-tufts. Adjacent Semipalmated Plover, Northern Phalarope and Short-billed Dowitchers give an idea of size. Two flight pictures failed to show the huge white ovals we saw on the tail.

Our party had a zoom 60, a Sr. telescope and two sets of 7 X 35 binoculars on the bird at distances of 100 to 140 feet or so. On the 23rd we observed the bird from about 8:30 to 8:15 p.m. We frightened him away in trying to get close enough to photograph. The next morning we watched him at the same distance from 8:30 to 8:15 a.m. While wading out into the pond to photograph the Ruff, I got within 75 or 80 feet. It finally flew away and was not seen again. The

following details of its appearance were recorded: bill — red-orange to red, a brilliant colour; legs — bright orange; ruff — black with white spots; ear tufts and head — black with white spots; back — dark brown with dark feather edging; underparts from legs back — white; tail in flight — two large, white oval spots.

Doris and Kay had seen a reeve (female Ruff) in the last 4 years or so in Corpus Christi, Texas, and Doris had also seen a Ruff in Europe, though it was not in as good a plumage as the Churchill bird. I've studied questionable reeves, but regard this sighting as my first positive, hence a "lifer" for me. In addition to Doris, Kay and myself, the bird was seen by Mrs. Smith (her second record for Churchill) and by ornithologist Dr. John New of State University of New York at Oneota and his wife. He kindly loaned me a tripod which I ungraciously used as a cane to keep me from sinking into the mud, and without which I'd have had virtually no pictures.

Editor's Note: The photos enclosed by Mrs. Ribble leave no doubt of the identification of the Ruff. The best one is reproduced here. The previous sighting of a Ruff at Churchill by Blanche Smith and others was made, by a strange coincidence, on June 23, 1970. Unlike the present sighting, which appears to have been a bird in breeding plumage, Ron Pittaway noted that the 1970 bird was closer to fall plumage (see *Blue Jay*, 1971: 61). As reviewed in the latter report, some authors have suggested that the Ruff may breed in this region. Thus, this new observation, the second sighting for Manitoba, has special interest.

¹CHRISTIANSEN, ARTHUR. 1974. *Orgy at the lek*. Audubon 76: 12-15.

²FISHER, JAMES and R. T. PETERSON. (1964). *The world of birds*. Doubleday and Co., New York. 288 p. (p. 81)

³JEHL, J. R., Jr., and B. A. SMITH. 1970. *Birds of the Churchill region, Manitoba*. Spec. Publ. No. 1. Manitoba Mus. Man and Nature, Winnipeg. 87 p.





Piping Plover

R. E. Gehlert

PIPING PLOVER NESTING AT DIEFENBAKER LAKE, SASKATCHEWAN

by PAUL C. RUMP*

I was most interested to read Wayne Renaud's report on nesting records for the Piping Plover in Saskatchewan, which was published in the September issue of *Blue Jay*.

I would like to add Lake Diefenbaker as another breeding locality for this species. One of my favourite camping spots is on the west side of the Qu'Appelle Arm of Lake Diefenbaker. In 1974 we visited this sand dune area on the weekend of June 15 and 16. On the 16th, while on a shoreline walk with my family, we discovered two nests of the Piping Plover. The nests, which were about 1/2 mile apart, were located about 2 miles southeast of the former rail point of Aiktow. The nests were within pebble patches on the otherwise sandy beach. Each nest contained four eggs. The eggs were very well camouflaged amongst the pebbles

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and we had to wait patiently at a distance for the birds to return to the nest before we eventually pinpointed and found them. At the second nest site, the adult bird went through an elaborate broken wing display to try to lure us from the nest. This, the camouflaged eggs, and the simple nest were ideal learning experiences for my young children.

SHRIKE CAPTURES BLACKBIRD

by S. O. JORDHEIM*

During the fall and winter months we are visited occasionally by the Northern Shrike which preys on House Sparrows around the yard. On October 30, 1974. I was surprised to see one ignore the sparrows which were circling in a dense group and give chase to a Rusty Blackbird.

At first the blackbird kept a healthy lead and did not seem perturbed about its pursuer, but the shrike kept doggedly on and, when getting close would try to grasp the blackbird which would then put on a burst of speed and get a lead of 20 to 30 feet. The chase continued around the yard and pastured several times at a height of 25 to 40 feet and, I would estimate, a distance of 2.5 to 3 miles. The blackbird was tiring but the shrike seemed to get stronger making more frequent attempts to capture his victim. Finally the shrike grasped it in the air and both birds plunged to the ground.

I was surprised to see the shrike attempt to capture an apparently healthy bird of this size. At no time did the blackbird attempt to get into trees or bushes as the sparrows do.

On another occasion a shrike captured a House Sparrow about 20 feet from where I was standing. It very quickly killed it by biting it in the throat area and then, seeing me, hastily flew away carrying its prey with its feet, the same as a hawk does.

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