

# BIRDS AND BIRDERS AT CRANE LAKE, SASKATCHEWAN

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Few people driving along Number One Highway between Tompkins and Maple Creek have any concept of the birder's paradise that once existed nearby when Crane Lake covered over 11,000 acres (4,450 ha).<sup>12</sup> To remind one of the early history, a plaque commemorates the "76 ranch" on a slight rise immediately south of what was the Crane Lake railway station for 20 years after the arrival of the Canadian Pacific Railway in 1883.

Three years before the Canadian Pacific came through, John Macoun visited Crane Lake.<sup>9 11</sup> He left Fort Walsh on 15 August, went to English's Ranch 21 mi (34 km) west of Fort Walsh on 17 August, then northeast to Bitter Lake. Travelling east, he had difficulty in crossing Bear Creek but then was delighted by the sight of "a beautiful lake, glistening in the sun." (Bear Creek is now defined as entering Piapot Creek about 5 mi (8 km) south of Crane Lake; it continues as Piapot Creek to the lake. In the 1800s, however, Bear Creek was the name of the stream flowing into Crane Lake). He was disappointed in the hope of finding water for men and horses alike, for "our beautiful lake was liquid mud, with scarcely an inch of water on the surface."<sup>9</sup> This was almost certainly Crane Lake and here he collected five species of gulls. He then went northwest to "Big Stake Lake," no doubt Bigstick Lake, before heading for Humboldt where he joined the Carlton trail.<sup>9</sup>

The first naturalist to stop off at Crane Lake station itself was Walter Raine, a guest at the adjacent ranch headquarters from 2 through 6 June 1893.<sup>13</sup> Raine had been invited there

while a guest at the sister ranch at Rush Lake, where he had also stayed for 6 days in 1891.<sup>8</sup> The two large ranches were part of a chain of 10 ranches, 6 in Saskatchewan and 4 in Alberta, founded by Sir John Lyster-Kaye's Canadian Agricultural, Coal and Colonization Company in 1887.<sup>1 6 14</sup> The name "76" is derived from the branch which came with the cattle purchased by Lyster-Kaye from the Powder River ranch in Alberta. The 76 ranch, occupying 23,000 acres (9300 ha) was 7 miles wide and was bounded on the north by Crane Lake, nestled into the southern edge of the Great Sand Hills. The south shore of the lake was 2.5 miles (4 km) north of the railway.<sup>12</sup>

The ranch manager then was D. H. Andrews. One of Raine's favourite birding spots, just east of the ranch buildings, is now named Andrews Lake. A few hundred yards farther east was Skull Creek, with a wooded valley which enticed Raine to make several short excursions southward along it. Only on Sunday was it possible for a cowboy named Palmer to take time off from other duties and escort Raine to Crane Lake. It was one of Raine's most memorable trips. First the buckboard became mired in waist-deep water in the attempt to cross Bear (Piapot) Creek, south of where it entered Crane Lake. The horse narrowly escaped drowning and the buckboard could not be freed for several days. The two men carried the canoe the rest of the way on their shoulders. On reaching Crane Lake, they paddled over to the first island, white with non-breeding pelicans; there they found the *nest of a Canada Goose*. When they had waded



*Canada Goose Nest.*

*Stan Shadick*

to a second island, a storm came up. They hurriedly waded through 3-foot (1-m) waves, which splashed over their shoulders, to the first island where they took refuge under the canoe just as large hail stones began to fall. As the lake rose with the rain and heavy winds, part of the island was inundated, and they had to drag their canoe shelter to the center of the island; even here they were only one foot (30 cm) above the water level. Their lunch was ruined and inedible, they were drenched to the skin and miserably cold, and the inky black sky was relieved only by sheets of lightning. As Raine wrote later, "This was one of the dark sides of egg collecting" and offered a moral: "Boys, never go bird-nesting on Sunday."<sup>13</sup>

John Macoun returned to Crane Lake in 1894 with William Spreadborough and made an "immense collection" of eggs of 64 bird species between 8 and 22 June.<sup>10</sup> D. H. Andrews from the 76 ranch accompan-

ied Macoun and Spreadborough to Crane Lake. They waded to an island "where we found a wonderful collection of water fowl and took a large quantity of eggs . . . Crane Lake had a greater bird life than any other part where I had been before in Canada."<sup>11</sup>

In 1905 Crane Lake was visited by Arthur Cleveland Bent of Taunton, Massachusetts, Chester S. Day of Boston, and Reverend Herbert K. Job of Kent, Connecticut. Bent arrived at Maple Creek on 29 May, several days after the others. Bent left on 17 June and Job one week later. They explored the north edge of the Cypress Hills, 20 mi (32 km) to the south of the Maple Creek; Hay Lake, a few mi to the east; Bigstick Lake, 26 mi (42 km) to the north; and Crane Lake, 16 mi (26 km) to the east. They made 5 visits to Crane Lake, on 2, 7-8, 13, 15 and 17 June.

Bent reported: "The most interesting locality of all was the duck island in Crane Lake and its surrounding

sloughs at the mouth of Bear Creek, where the waterfowl were breeding in such great profusion and in such a limited area, less than one square mile, as to make it the crowning glory of the whole region." Bent noted that "in all 35 species of birds, mostly water-fowl and shore-birds, . . . either breeding or probably preparing to breed within this limited area . . ." In two hours of dragging a rope on the island on 17 June 1905, Bent and Job flushed 61 ducks of 8 species, including 23 Gadwalls, from their nests, and estimated that "at least 150 pairs of ducks were breeding or were preparing to breed on this one island."<sup>2</sup> They also saw several Common Mergansers, a White-winged Scoter and one Cinnamon Teal on the island, where on 2 June there had been 2 nests of the Canada Goose. A colony of *Common Terns* nested at the tip of the island and a pair of Crows had a nest in "the only tree," a small willow, one of the few pairs of crows seen during the entire trip. A pair of Short-eared Owls had a nest with one egg and 9 young. Marbled Godwits, Wilson's Phalaropes, Spotted Sandpipers and Savannah Sparrows also were breeding on the island. This island measured "about 300 or 400 yards in length by about 100 yards in width" with several small ponds near the center. In the marsh nearby were a number of *Eared Grebe* nests and a fair-sized colony of Franklin's Gulls. "Thousands of *Yellow-headed Blackbirds* . . . kept up a constant din." Upland Sandpipers and Burrowing Owls nested on the nearby mainland. Five mi (8 km) east of the 76 headquarters at "Lake of the Narrows" just north of Sidewood, there were 15,000 to 20,000 nests of Franklin's Gulls, in an area "1000 yards wide by 100 yards long."<sup>2</sup>

In 1906, Bent returned on 5 June with Louis B. Bishop of New Haven, Connecticut. Alfred Eastgate of North Dakota joined them 2 weeks later as

taxidermist and general assistant. Bent left on 1 July but soon after this Bishop was joined by Dr. Jonathan Dwight, Jr. of New York City and they stayed into August to study the fall shorebird migration. The entire party was in the Crane Lake area from 22 to 26 June. Now for the first time, Lark Buntings were very common near the lake, and they learned to recognize the song of the Sprague's Pipit "up in the sky almost out of sight." On visiting the island in Crane Lake, they were disappointed to find only three duck nests: "A coyote had been living on the island and had cleaned out all the nests and driven the ducks away." However, the nearby Western Grebe colony had doubled to "several hundred pairs."<sup>2</sup>

In 1907, Frank M. Chapman, editor of *Bird Lore*, came to Crane Lake and Bigstick Lake to secure material and data for a Western Grebe habitat group for display in the American Museum of Natural History in New York.<sup>5</sup> Accompanied by the famous bird artist, Louis Agassiz Fuertes, Chapman arrived at



*Eared Grebe.*

Gary Seib

Maple Creek about 8 June and left on 2 July. They stayed on the west side of Crane Lake at Mr. Andrew Scott's sheep ranch on Section 1, Township 11, Range 24, where they "occupied a wool shed within a few yards of the corral into which two thousand sheep were driven nightly, while awaiting their turn in the shearing pens. The experience gave us a lasting conception of the vocal abilities of sheep and lambs . . ."4 On the grassy island nearby, "two hundred yards long and half as wide" and about 150 yards (135 m) from shore, there were 2 pairs of Canada Geese nesting "in spite of the fact that their eggs are always taken."4 In addition about a dozen ducks, chiefly Gadwalls, a hundred or more Common Terns and several hundred Ring-billed and California Gulls nested there. They also visited the island where Bent found so many duck nests in 1905, on the south side of the lake near the mouth of Bear (Piapot) Creek. The rancher had cut the grass and a pair of mink were present in addition to the coyote evident in 1906, so that in 1907 Chapman found only 6 duck nests on that island.

Chapman wrote on his return: "The region has well been called the nursery of the wild fowl, as at one time were our border states to the south. But the advance of civilization, which first transforms a buffalo range to a cattle country, and later to a wheat ranch, has already reached the early stages of its agricultural development about Maple Creek, and the forced retreat of the wild fowl to the remote north is only a question of time. The Canadian Government would do well to set aside some of its still unsettled lands as permanent breeding reservations, to which each year, the water-fowls could return to nest. Such reservations would in truth be nurseries, and, in permitting a bird to reproduce, would be of infinitely more importance than preserves which afford protection only

during the winter."3 When Harry Coulter boarded with Mrs. Andrew Scott in the nearby village of Piapot in 1926-27 (Piapot village was built on land purchased from the 76 ranch company in 1910 and after 1911 Piapot station replaced the Crane Lake station to the east), she proudly displayed the original paintings sent her by Fuertes.

In August 1920, P. A. Taverner pitched his tent for a few days at Coulter's ranch at the extreme north-east corner of Crane Lake, and had meals with the Coulters. He subsequently sent them an autographed copy of his *Birds of Western Canada*. In later years, R. D. Symons stayed for a week at the Coulter ranch, and Clarence Tillenius came there to paint Mule Deer, which had first appeared about 1922 (White-tailed Deer did not come until about 1938). Harry Coulter himself collected what was probably the first Saskatchewan specimen of the Kangaroo Rat in 1933, and took it to the editor of the *Tompkins Progress*.

In June 1980, my wife, Mary, and I visited with rancher Harry Coulter and were told about the history of the water levels and of visiting naturalists. When Harry's father, George Coulter, settled on that spot in 1901, the area was almost totally devoid of trees, due to repeated prairie fires. Geese and ducks appeared in clouds. Swans, almost certainly Trumpeter Swans, summered in the marshy area east of the lake for the first year or two. Indeed, Harry Coulter told us that the first crop planted on the east shore of Crane Lake, by Sandy McCarthy and Charlie Bertram, was a lure crop to entice swans, in order to obtain swans' down.

Crane Lake had peak water levels, reaching the highest shoreline marks in 1972 through 1929 when George Coulter operated a large motor launch on the lake. By 1933, levels had drop-

ped so that the remaining stagnant water was filled with algae, and the Coulters had 30 cows die from drinking it. By 1935 there were only scattered potholes of water left in the lakebed. In 1951, the heavy runoff breached two major dams, the Canadian Pacific Railway dam and the Caswell dam, on the draining creeks, and the lake suddenly filled again.

On 18 May 1958, on an island near the old Scott ranch, Steve Mann counted 256 nests of the White Pelican, 87 of the Double-crested Cormorant, 58 of the *Common Tern* and 428 of gulls, chiefly California with a sprinkling of Ring-billed near the center of the island.<sup>7</sup>

On 23 June 1960, Mary and I went with Steve Mann to this island 2 days after a heavy downpour of rain. There were nearly 1000 recently dead young gulls and a roughly equal number of

healthy-looking young together with about 200 young pelicans and over 150 young cormorants.<sup>7</sup>

On 27 June 1961, water levels were down greatly and only a narrow channel of shallow muddy water separated the island from the mainland. About 200 young cormorants and 100 young pelicans were present but there were no active gull nests. At the west end of the island was a small group of dead downy gulls, obviously dead for some weeks, perhaps dating from the hailstorm of 4 June that year.<sup>7</sup>

Water levels have remained very low ever since. Now much of the tributary water coming down Piapot and Bear creeks is expended for irrigation, and there is almost no hope of this "dead" lake, without an outlet, ever being restored to its former size or levels. For this reason, Ducks Unlimited has undertaken a major project



*Common Tern.*

Wayne Lynch

to conserve the remaining water in smaller, deeper containments, and thus prevent total loss from evaporation in dry years. This is all that can be salvaged. The myriads of waterfowl that once drew so many distinguished naturalists to the area, regrettably are mere memories of the ever-more-distant past.

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- <sup>1</sup> AULD, F. H. 1961. The Saskatchewan Agricultural Societies' Association. *Saskatchewan History* 14:1-16.
- <sup>2</sup> BENT, A. C. 1907. Summer birds of south-western Saskatchewan. *Auk* 24: 407-430.
- <sup>3</sup> CHAPMAN, F. M. 1907. A season's field work. *Bird Lore* 9:256-263.
- <sup>4</sup> CHAPMAN, F. M. 1908. Camps and cruises of an ornithologist. New York: D. Appleton. 432 pp.
- <sup>5</sup> CHAPMAN, F. M. 1933. Autobiography of a bird-lover. New York: Appleton-Century. 420 pp.
- <sup>6</sup> COMMERCIAL (WINNIPEG). 20 August 1888. A great farming scheme. Quoted in *Saskatchewan History* 10:115, 1957.
- <sup>7</sup> HOUSTON, C. S. 1962. Hazards faced by colonial birds. *Blue Jay* 20:74-77.
- <sup>8</sup> HOUSTON, C. S. 1981. An assessment of Walter Raine and his Saskatchewan records. *Blue Jay* 39:168-181.
- <sup>9</sup> MACOUN, JOHN. 1881. Extract from a Report of Exploration in the North-West Territories. IN: Report of the Department of the Interior for 1880. 44 Victoria. Sessional Papers (No. 3) pp. 8-40.
- <sup>10</sup> MACOUN, J. 1896. Natural history. pp. 116A-119A. IN: Annual Report, Geological Survey of Canada, 1894. Ottawa: S. E. Dawson.

- <sup>11</sup> MACOUN, J. 1922. Autobiography of John Macoun, M.A., Canadian explorer and naturalist. Ottawa: Ottawa Field-Naturalists Club 303 pp. [Reprinted 1979, Spec. Publ 1 Ottawa Field-Naturalists Club, with new introduction by Richard Glover, Editorial Notes & Bibliographical Essay by W.A. Waiser, pp. 307-335].
- <sup>12</sup> PIAPOT HISTORY GROUP. 1979. Piapot prairie trails. Altona: Friesen Printers, 784 pp.
- <sup>13</sup> RAINE, W. 1894. Bird-nesting in north-west Canada. *Nidologist* 1:67-71, 84-86, 102-106, 117-120; 2:9-10.
- <sup>14</sup> VIDETTE (QU'APPELLE). 26 September 1889. Quoted in The Newspaper Scrapbook. *Saskatchewan History* 6:30, 1953.

## BAIRD'S SPARROW INFORMATION REQUIRED

The Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada (COSEWIC) is interested in determining the status of the Baird's Sparrow in Canada. A report is being prepared by *Wayne S. Miller*, 1-351 River Avenue, Winnipeg, Manitoba R3L 0B5. If you have any information on the current or former status of this species, your input would be welcomed.

The following information would be especially useful: a) present breeding locations—give distance and direction to nearest town/city, area of site (square mile), estimated number of pairs; b) former breeding locations, including the above information and the last year known for site use by Baird's Sparrows. Please include name, address and telephone of observers.