

# THE FIRST NESTING COMMON POORWILL IN SASKATCHEWAN

HEIDI SUTHERLAND, 1305 Aveune D North, Saskatoon, Saskatchewan. S7L 1P2

On 27 June 1983, Rick Zapf, the Cypress Hills Provincial Park Interpreter, and I were hiking in the West Block of the Cypress Hills. We were in rather open spruce habitat and as we rounded a knoll near the Mysterious Rock Pile a grey-brown bird flopped into the air directly in front of me. It was so well camouflaged that my next step would have been dangerously close to it.

Needless to say I was startled, but did catch a fleeting glimpse as it disappeared behind a large spruce tree. I noticed it was a fairly heavy set bird with moth-like flight. It left two white eggs in a barely detectable nest directly on the ground.

Rick and I examined the nest, then waited on an adjacent knoll by the Mysterious Rock Pile for about an hour in hope that the bird would return to the nest. We carefully and slowly returned to the site but to our disappointment the bird had not returned. It was nearing dark and we had about an hour hike back to our vehicle, so we left.

Later when looking through bird books I mentioned to Rick I thought we had seen a poorwill. I tossed this over in my mind for several days. Then on 29 June I casually mentioned it at work at the Prairie Wildlife Interpretation Centre to Jon Triffo, our avid birder and wildlife photographer.



*Common Poorwill by eggs*

*Jon Triffo*



*Common Poorwill*

*Jon Triffo*

He became immediately interested and twenty minutes later, after identifying the eggs from a page of pictures he and I were on our way to the Cypress Hills.

We picked up Rick and headed over to the West Block. A typically vigorous "Cypress Hills Thunderstorm" was in the brewing. So a race against time ensued to get to the nest before the rain. Fortunately a security officer gave us a ride part way from the public parking lot at Fort Walsh. The journey was not without additional event. A large cow moose allowed us several good photos.

We hiked vigorously, the sky darkening at the same rate. Both Rick and I remembered the location of the nest, but the bird's superb camouflage made it hard to spot. Rick picked it out first. The three of us slowly crept up and got a good look at the bird and yes indeed, it was a Common Poorwill! It was not flushed, but fluttered several inches from the eggs, allowing the photo you see here to be taken. The poorwill was hissing at us dur-

ing our observations and photographs, but remained perfectly still except for the eyelids which periodically closed. We were within three feet of the nest.

The sky was virtually black by this time. Rick and I had neither flash nor tripod, but Jon got several excellent photos with his flash.

We hurried away so that the bird would return to the eggs before the rain came. We made it just in time. Several minutes later the three of us were drenched but ecstatic. The first nesting poorwill had been recorded in Saskatchewan.

Rick visited the nest a week later to check on the bird and photograph it. The poorwill exhibited the same behaviour, hissing and closing its eyes, but this time it stayed right on the nest.

Special thanks go to Jon Triffo and Rick Zapf and to the managers and staff of the Prairie Wildlife Interpretation Centre for allowing the trip to take the photographs.