

# THOMAS EDMUND RANDALL, NEST-FINDER SUPREME\*

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Tom Randall was one of the coterie of 16 men and 1 boy who banded ducks for Ducks Unlimited in western Canada from 1943 to 1945 [That boy is senior author of this paper].<sup>2</sup> Randall's most significant Saskatchewan contributions were made at Kazan Lake, west of Ile-à-la-Crosse, in 1942.<sup>22</sup> Although the terrain was such that he banded only 285 ducks, at Kazan Lake he identified 153 species of birds, found nests of 104 species, flightless young of 2 more species and empty nests of another 2 species. Of 557 duck nests located there, 243 were of the Lesser Scaup. Important nest records for this otherwise unstudied area included those of the Black-and-White Warbler, a first for the province, as well as the Yellow-bellied Flycatcher, Philadelphia Vireo, and Magnolia, Blackpoll and Palm Warblers. Robert W. Nero deserves credit for having persuaded Randall to publish this important material in the *Blue Jay*.<sup>8 22</sup>

At that time Randall provided a brief autobiography, the first portion of which was as follows:

"I was born June 21, 1886, at Rodmersham Green, Kent, England. My first ten years were spent around the orchards, fields and woods. Early in life I got interested in the beauties of nature, especially the birds, and I soon acquired the ability to recognize the many species I met with. While quite young I saw such rarities as four Waxwings in an apple tree and a pair of Golden Orioles in a plantation of larches. Just before my eleventh

birthday my parents moved to the district bordering the Thames River estuary [Clinch Street, near High Halstow] and here I soon became acquainted with the bird life of the extensive marshes along the estuary. I soon came to know the gamekeepers and marsh shepherds and was allowed to ramble through woods, fields and marsh with perfect freedom. I observed many comparatively rare birds, found large numbers of nests and acquired a thorough knowledge of the bird life of the district . . ."<sup>22</sup>

Randall came to Canada in 1912, to farm 4 miles southwest of Drinkwater, Saskatchewan. His best sighting there was a Gyrfalcon on 12 December 1912.<sup>23</sup> When the war broke out, he joined the Army and served in Europe. Wounded in action at Vimy Ridge, he returned to Canada in September, 1919, settling on a farm 13 miles southwest of Castor, Alberta, aided by the soldier settlement scheme. He married Ruth Ross on 3 September 1926. His daughter, Barbara, reports that he was not cut out to be a farmer. However, farm life did allow Randall to indulge in his hobby of ornithology. He wrote a column, "Weekly Observations" in *The Brooks Bulletin* and he contributed 9 notes to *The Oologist's Record*, published in England, concerning nest finds near Castor. He was visited at least once by Professor William Rowan, and over the years made some noteworthy observations for the area, including Lazuli Bunting, Varied Thrush, Lewis' Woodpecker,

\* Fourth in a series on oologists of the Northern Great Plains



*Bonaparte's Gull on nest*

*Chris Adam*

Pine Warbler,<sup>9</sup> and nesting Lark Buntings.<sup>12</sup>

In 1927 Randall spent several weeks with A.D. Henderson at Belvedere, Alberta, in the swampy, mixed-woods region northwest of Edmonton.<sup>8</sup> When Randall wrote of their exciting finds together, his address was now Camrose, Alberta.<sup>10</sup> Whether Randall had developed a taste for northern bush and muskegs or whether his move was predicated by his wife's opportunity to teach there, the two of them next moved on 4 April, 1928, to Athabasca, north of Edmonton.

This area offered great opportunities for an oologist. That June, on exploring a shallow, 40-acre "lake," he found four nests of the Short-billed Dowitcher<sup>16</sup> and on a mile-long lake 25 miles south of Athabasca he found an incredible 19 nests of the Bonaparte's Gull.<sup>20</sup> That year he was visited by Dr. Harry C. Oberholser of the United States Fish and Wildlife Service. In late January, 1929, the Randalls moved east to Donatville, Alberta, 12 miles north of Boyle, where Mrs. Randall taught school for six years. Here he found his first, almost-completed nest

of the Gray Jay on 10 February and by spring he had found 19 nests of this species that, like the Great Horned Owl, nests while there is still snow on the ground.<sup>11</sup> More experienced, he found 43 Gray Jay nests, 23 with eggs, in 1930.<sup>11</sup> On 8 June, 1931, Randall located a set of 4 eggs of the Spotted Sandpiper near a lake at Rochester, west of Boyle. On 12 May, 1933, Randall located a set of 5 eggs of the Rusty Blackbird near Donatville, and later on 27 May, he located a nest of Bonaparte's Gull at Grassland, 10 km northeast of Donatville. These three sets now reside in the collection of the Provincial Museum of Alberta.

The concentration of birds Randall encountered south of Athabasca was quite extraordinary. On one 320-acre upland location in 1931 he found a total of 130 occupied nests after 15 June, a time when many broods had already fledged.<sup>13</sup>

Early in 1936 (letters of 30 April), Professor William Rowan wrote to P.A. Taverner and Hoyes Lloyd, telling them of the superb qualifications of Randall for

a position as a museum field assistant or as a park warden. Rowan's letters were successful, for in May and June, Randall accompanied P.A. Taverner and Ronald Smith to Manitoba, collecting along the Hudson Bay railroad about 100 miles southwest of Churchill.<sup>5</sup> There Randall collected 50 egg sets from species such as Lesser Yellowlegs, Merlin and Blackpoll Warbler. He found no less than 23 nests of the Harris' Sparrow,<sup>22</sup> a species whose eggs had first been found near Churchill in 1931; ten sets were collected for the National Museum of Canada and one infers that an additional nine sets were taken by Randall for sale or trade.<sup>5</sup>

In 1937 Randall became a warden at Elk Island National Park east of Edmonton and began a series of monthly reports, some of which are still extant. In April, 1937, he documented 80 species of birds in the park, including a Mew Gull, and located 25 active nests of the Red-tailed Hawk in the north half of the Park alone.

Searching the islands and shorelines of Astotin Lake, he located 56 Mallard, 5 Bufflehead and 6 Canvasback nests. Noting much predation of duck nests by crows, he destroyed 54 crow eggs, 13 young, and 7 adult crows. During May he also found 7 nests of the Lesser Yellowlegs, 3 of the Common Loon and 7 of the Great Blue Heron. He also found nests of the Red-necked, Horned, Eared, and Pied-billed Grebes, Sora, Wilson's Phalarope, 12 nests of the Connecticut Warbler, 6 of the Gray Jay, 4 of the Olive-sided Flycatcher, and 1 of the Rusty Blackbird. Randall added 62 species to the park checklist in May alone.

In June 1937, Randall, banded 198 Red-winged Blackbirds, 2 Bronzed Grackles, 2 Brown-headed Cowbirds, 3 American Robins, 3 Killdeers, 3 Red-tailed Hawks, 1 Downy Woodpecker, 3 Wilson's Phalaropes, 3 Northern Flickers and 5 Richardson's Merlins.

In July he banded another 99 birds before his supply of bands was used up. He also destroyed another 69 crows, estimating that they had consumed eggs from 30% of the duck nests on the island of Astotin Lake. That year he compiled an annotated checklist of the birds of Elk Island Park.

No report for 1938 exists, but his 1939 report indicated that waterfowl numbers in 1938 were comparable to those of the previous year. The Redhead, however, showed a decided increase. Randall found a Bonaparte's Gull nest in the park in 1938, the second of only two locations known to him south of the North Saskatchewan River. In 1938, 676 birds of 50 species were banded, of which 284 were waterfowl.

In 1939 his efforts at finding nests on Astotin Lake were curtailed by not having access to a boat. A tireless walker (Edgar T. Jones, pers. comm.), Randall located 236 nests of Mallard, Northern Pintail, American Wigeon, Green-winged Teal, Bufflehead and Common Goldeneye along the shore of Astotin Lake. Randall also located a second nest of Bonaparte's Gull.

Although Soper reported a nesting of the Surf Scoter in the park<sup>24</sup> based apparently upon Randall's observations, Randall's reports note this species only as a rare migrant. However, Randall did locate nests of typical northern species, including Common Loon, Lesser Yellowlegs, Olive-sided Flycatcher, Gray Jay, Boreal Chickadee, Palm Warbler and Rusty Blackbird, whose range extended south into the areas of boreal forest located within the park.

In 1939, the Randalls moved to Tofield, a short distance from Beaverhill Lake, where he found 28 Marbled Godwit nests in 1940.

When the war broke out, Randall tried to enlist in the Army but was turned down because of his age. He then began work-



*Ducklings in nest*

*Unknown*

ing for Ducks Unlimited, and in 1940 placed bands on 1,694 ducks at Ministik Lake near Tofield and the next year banded another 476 ducks there before moving to the home of the Trumpeter Swan at Swan Lake on the British Columbia boundary near Tupper, B.C.<sup>2</sup> In 1942 he spent some time at Mortlach, Saskatchewan, where he found 28 Willet nests<sup>20</sup> before moving north to Kazan Lake. In 1943 he banded 165 ducks at Many Island Lake, Alberta, before moving to the Brooks area, where he made the first observation and found the first nest of the Virginia Rail in Alberta, on 6 June.<sup>15</sup>

In 1944 Randall located many waterfowl nests near Brooks, Alberta, recording dates for each. He found 63 Mallard nests, with a peak nesting period between late May and early June; 107 Northern Pintail nests showed a late April to mid-May peak in laying and a second minor peak of re-nestings in early to late June; 46 Gadwall nests demonstrated a peak laying period from early to late June; 107

Northern Shoveler nests were mostly between early and late June; 34 Blue-winged Teal nests had a peak laying period around mid-June, and 66 Lesser Scaup nests were from mid to late June. Randall also located 2 nests of the Cinnamon Teal, 15 of the Redhead, 4 of the Canvasback and 3 of the Ruddy Duck. That year Randall also collected one set each of Willet, American Avocet, Wilson's Phalarope and Black-billed Magpie eggs. He also banded 1,835 ducks.

In 1945 Randall recorded in the Brooks area an additional 102 Mallard, 111 Gadwall, 28 American Wigeon, 4 Green-winged Teal, 101 Blue-winged Teal, 40 Shoveler, 159 Northern Pintail, 22 Redhead, 8 Canvasback, 173 Lesser Scaup, 1 White-winged Scoter, 6 Ruddy Duck and 7 Canada Goose nests. In total, these nests contained 6,168 eggs. He also collected eggs of the following species: Eared Grebe, American White Pelican, White-winged Scoter, Canvas-



*American Avocets*

Gary W. Seib

back, Gadwall, Green-winged Teal, California Gull, Ring-billed Gull, Say's Phoebe, Horned Lark, Barn Swallow, Loggerhead Shrike, Chestnut-collared Longspur and Black-billed Magpie. The two species of gulls were in a large mixed colony and the nests of the Say's Phoebe and Barn Swallow were located in concrete culverts. In the same year Randall collected one set of Northern Shoveler eggs and one Canada Goose clutch.

In May, June and July, 1945, while working at the Ducks Unlimited Project dubbed the "Louisiana Lakes", Randall banded 1,573 ducks and also kept records of waterfowl nests parasitized by other species. He located 2 Mallard nests containing Ring-necked Pheasant eggs and 7 other containing up to 6 Redhead eggs. He located one American Wigeon nest containing 2 Lesser Scaup eggs. He discovered three parasitized nests of the Northern Shoveler, 2 by the Redhead and 1 by a Lesser Scaup. Two Northern Pintail nests were located, containing 1 and 2 Redhead eggs. He discovered 5 Gadwall nests parasitized by Redhead and 3 parasitized by Lesser Scaup. A Gadwall nest contained 3 Lesser Scaup eggs and 2 Redhead eggs, in addition to 8 of its

own. The Lesser Scaup was the most heavily parasitized species with 16 nests parasitized by Redhead, 1 by Ring-necked Pheasant and 2 by Ruddy Duck. One Blue-winged Teal nest had been parasitized by a Redhead and another by a Lesser Scaup.

From 1946 until retirement in 1951, at the age of 65, Randall then worked for the Eastern Irrigation District, Alberta Department of Agriculture.

In 1950 Randall collected eggs of the American Bittern, Redhead, Blue-winged Teal, Burrowing Owl and McCown's Longspur at Brooks. In total, 25 sets of eggs of 24 species, collected by Randall in the Brooks area, are in the collection of the Provincial Museum of Alberta.

Randall would spend the winters wherever his wife was teaching, including Dickson and Rocky Mountain House, Alberta. After leaving Brooks, he spent a few years running the pool hall in Banff, then moved to Edmonton to live with his daughter Valerie. Here, as a result of the death of Professor William Rowan, who had promised to write certain shorebird accounts for David A. Bannerman's encyclopedic multi-volume works *Birds of*

*the British Isles*, Randall wrote some of the most interesting accounts of his life.<sup>16-21</sup> These are unknown to most North Americans and consequently were not listed in *A Bibliography of Alberta Ornithology* in 1981.<sup>7</sup> Bannerman's preface to his 9th volume tells the story:

"The sudden and tragic death in June 1957 of my esteemed friend William Rowan of Edmonton, formerly Professor of Zoology at the University of Alberta, deprived this and the next volume of several essays from his scholarly pen which he had agreed to undertake. His loss to Ornithology was grievous, as those who remember his articles in *British Birds* (vol. XX) on Canadian waders will readily agree. My thanks go to his friend Tom Randall of Edmonton — an Englishman by birth — who used to accompany Rowan on many of his expeditions, for filling the breach at short notice. Mr. Randall has contributed notes to this volume on the distribution and breeding habits of the dowitcher and of Wilson's Phalarope and will be responsible for further contributions in volume X."<sup>1</sup>

In Volume 10, Randall wrote accounts of the Lesser and Greater Yellowlegs,<sup>18, 19</sup> in volume 11 for Bonaparte's Gull<sup>20</sup> and in volume 12 for the Sora.<sup>21</sup> Mrs. Barbara M. Jensen, Randall's daughter, kindly loaned the senior author typescripts of the manuscripts her father submitted to Bannerman and these have been compared with the printed versions. Randall wrote so well that virtually no editorial changes were made.

Randall had more experience with the nesting habits of some species than anyone else in the world, before or since. Imagine having access to personal field notes with details of over 1000 nests of Wilson's phalarope,<sup>17</sup> 43 nests of the Short-billed Dowitcher,<sup>16</sup> over 40 nests of the Greater Yellowlegs,<sup>19</sup> and over 50 nests of the Gray Jay!<sup>11</sup> Randall collected egg sets at only a fraction of the nests he found and was a virtual one man Nest Records Scheme. It is a pity that his field

notebooks are no longer extant. Fortunately, some of his interesting finds have been recorded, in addition to the four Bannerman volumes, in three regional birds lists, in one short note in *Oologist*, nine in *Oologists' Record*, two in *Blue Jay* and nine in *The Canadian Field-Naturalist*. A few of Randall's observations from the Kent marshes were published in *Countryside* between 1907 and 1909, and a letter appeared in *Field* on 22 September 1955. His youthful reminiscences were summarized in the 1957 Kent Bird Report.<sup>3, 4</sup>

Randall managed his son-in-law's property in Kootenay Lake, British Columbia from 1962 to 1969, then retired to live with his daughter, Barbara, in Brooks, Alberta. Randall died on 20 December 1974 in Colonel Belcher Hospital, Calgary, after a long illness. He is survived by two daughters, Mrs. Barbara Jensen of Calgary, Mrs. Valerie Cowie of Toronto and a son, Tom, of Calgary.

#### **Acknowledgments:**

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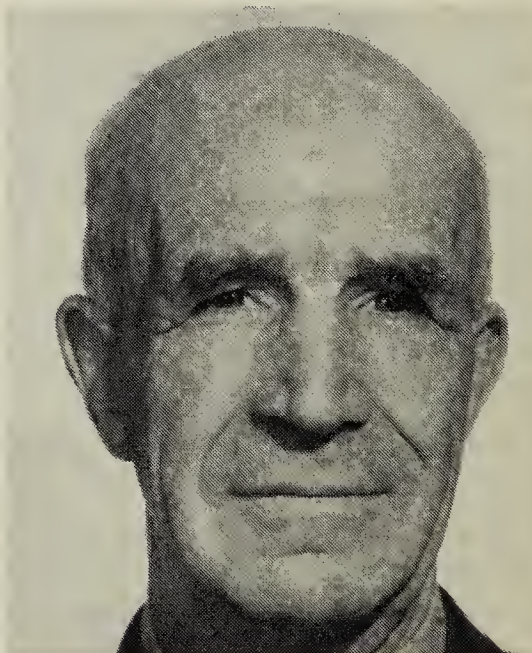
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