

WILDLIFE OBSERVATIONS ALONG SASKATCHEWAN'S SOURIS RIVER 1978-1980

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Few residents of Saskatchewan would consider the Saskatchewan portion of the Souris River a wildlife paradise, much less a potential river for canoeing. The author's opinion was definitely changed during three spring canoe trips along the Souris River in 1978, 1979 and 1980. With the provincial government's proposal to build the Rafterty Dam on the Souris River, the author felt it was important to document the wildlife observed during these canoe trips.

The headwaters of the Souris River are in the Weyburn - Colgate - Goodwater area, with several small tributaries converging to form the main river channel. The river flows east through Estevan, swings south to Minot, North Dakota, and then loops into Manitoba, joining the Assiniboine River southeast of Brandon. Most of the valley is used for grazing or other agricultural purposes. The valley varies from a depth of approximately 15 m west of Estevan to 40 m east of Estevan. The valley width varies from 900 to 1690 m.

The banks of the section of the river canoed are covered with dense vegetation, the trees in some areas forming a closed-in canopy. Eastern Cottonwood (*Populus deltoides*), Manitoba Maple (*Acer negundo*) and Trembling Aspen (*Populus tremuloides*) are the major tree species.

The three canoe trips were along a stretch of the Souris River between Highway #39 and #9 (Fig. 1). All of the excursions were one-day spring or early summer river trips: 20 May 1978, 30 June 1979 and 17 May 1980. The length of the river covered varied from 44.0 km in 1978 to 20.25 km in 1979 and 1980. Fauna observed was recorded

and photographed when possible. The author was accompanied by George Anderson on the 1978 trip, George Anderson, Pearl Arlt and Ron Jensen in 1979 and Doug Boivin, Terry Toews and Barb Weidl in 1980.

A total of 87 bird species was identified during the three outings. Table 1 gives the species observed each year. Highlights include a pair of Wood Ducks, observed each year. A dead Golden Eagle was found on the river bank in 1980. Other interesting species were as follows: Ring-necked Pheasant, Belted Kingfisher, Northern Rough-winged Swallow, Black-and-white Warbler, Yellow-breasted Chat, Rose-breasted Grosbeak and Fox Sparrow. It should be noted that some of these species were "transients" and do not normally breed in this area.

The abundance of mammals observed along the river was a photographer's dream. Beaver, Mink, weasel, Raccoon and White-tailed Deer were observed and photographed. A total of 34 White-tailed Deer was observed throughout the day during the 1978 trip. Fox Squirrels were also sighted during all three outings; four of these shy squirrels were observed in 1978 with 8 and 9 respectively in 1979 and 1980. The identification was made using the characteristics of size found in Burt, and pelage given by Collins.^{1 2}

The highlight of all three outings was the opportunity to observe and photograph Western Painted (*Chrysemys picta belli*) and Common Snapping (*Chelydra serpentina serpentina*) turtles. A total of 202 Western Painted Turtles was observed in 1978, with

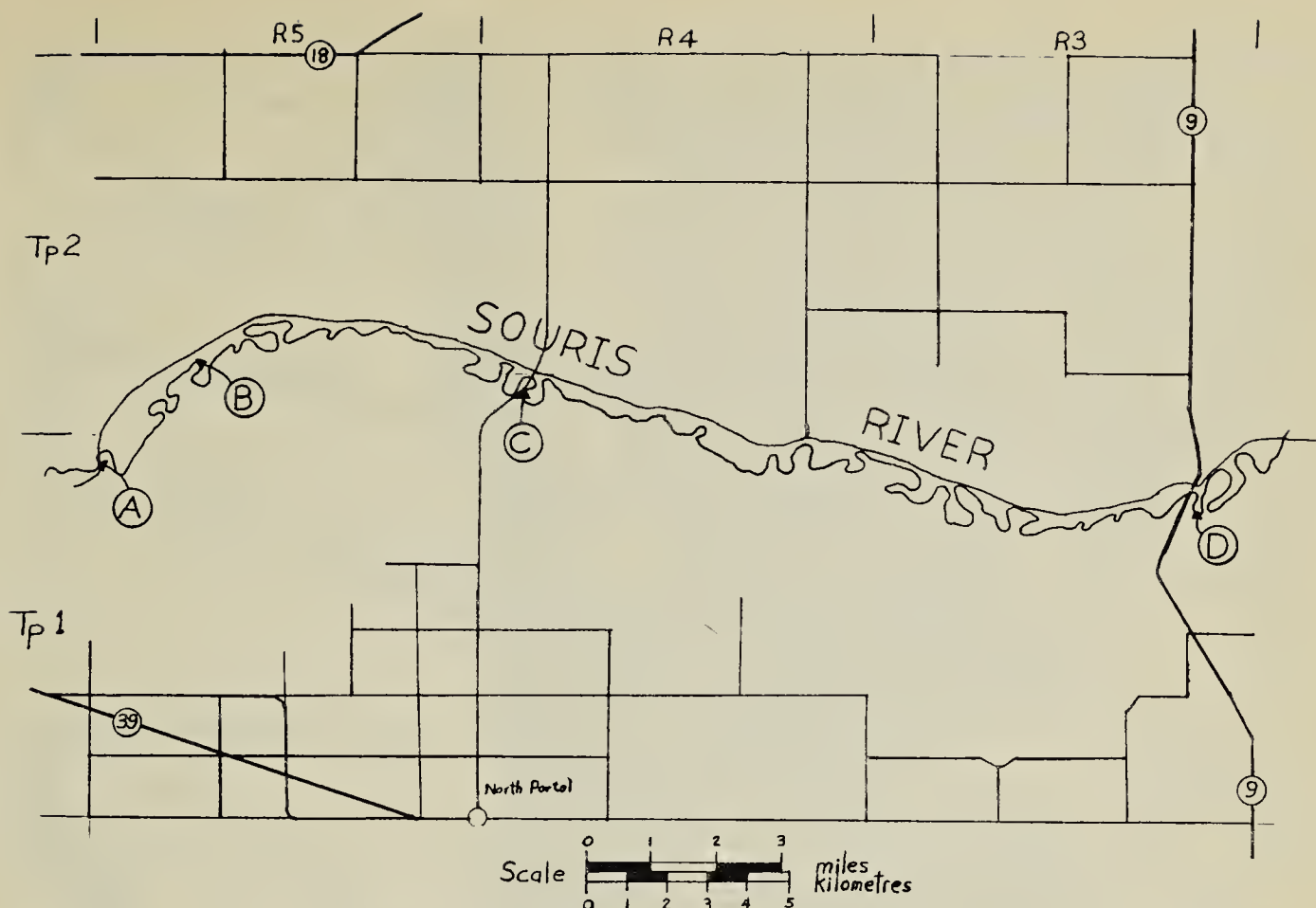


Figure 1. The areas of the Souris River covered by the canoe trips: B-D, 20 May 1978; A-C, 30 June 1979 and 17 May 1980.

15 in 1979 and 131 in 1980. In both 1978 and 1980 there were five snapping turtles observed, with only two in 1979.

The Common Snapping Turtle is the larger and by some standards the uglier of the two species of turtle that occur in Saskatchewan. Its general colour is a muddy brown without stripes, spots or other markings. The head is massive and the neck long. The tail is relatively long for a turtle and is studded with keels, reminiscent of restorations of some of the ancient armoured dinosaurs. A large adult may weigh nearly 14 kg with a shell length of 30-47 cm.³ Several of the turtles observed during these outings were estimated to be at least this size. The snapping turtle is definitely one of Saskatchewan's most interesting species of reptiles and one that most residents will not have an opportunity to see.

The prehistoric appearance and large size of the snapping turtles was something to make one's mouth drop open. These turtles

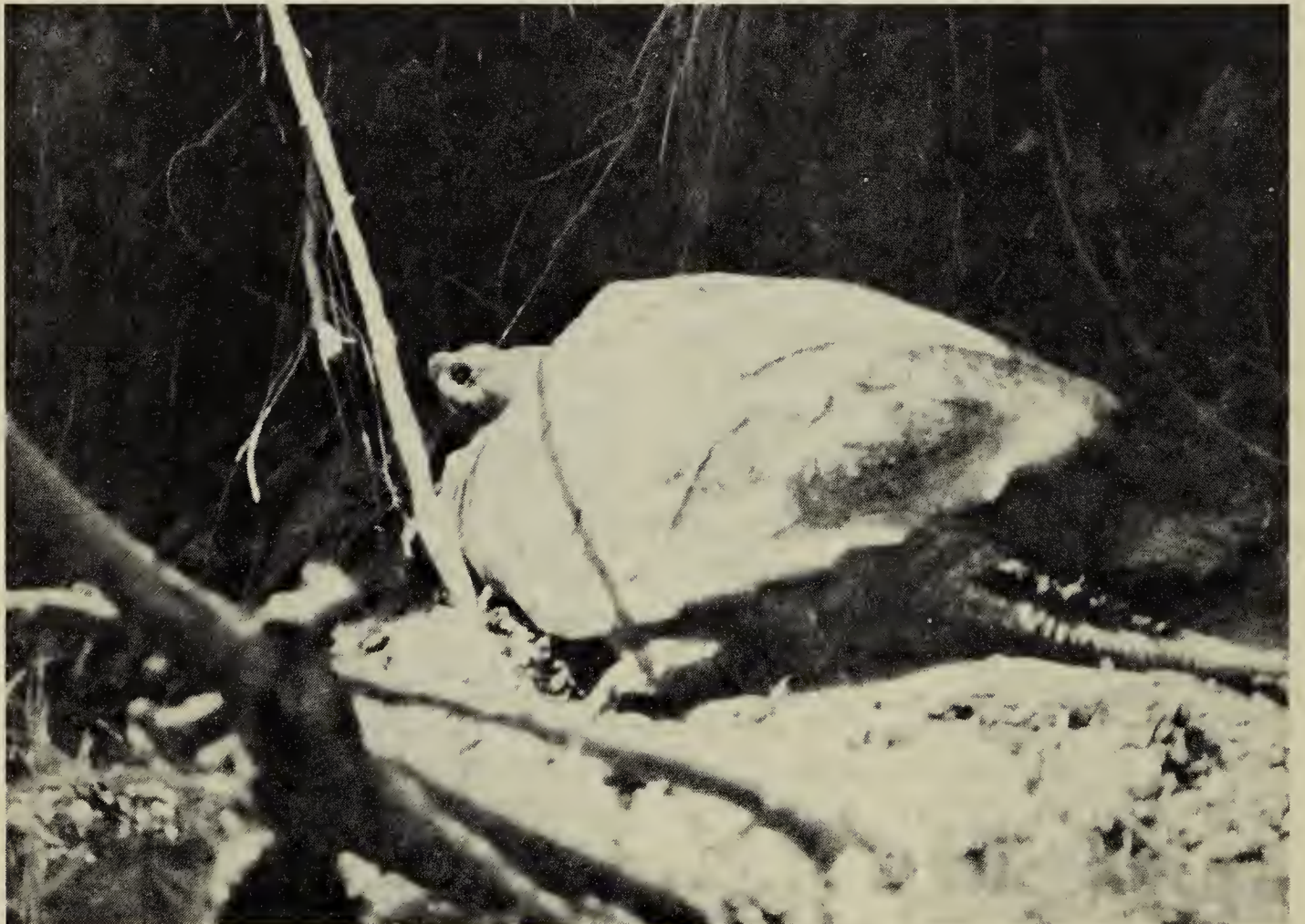
were very shy and were only observed for a few seconds before they crawled off the bank into the murky water of the Souris River. After several minutes of sitting patiently in the canoes, we would often see the turtle slowly emerge with only its nostrils breaking the surface of the water. On one occasion after a long wait, a turtle's snout emerged within a few feet of the bow of one of the canoes and noisily expelled air and water before submerging again. The result was, in the bow of the canoe, a very startled person who had not seen the turtle emerge.

It should be noted that water levels in certain parts of the Souris River are often quite low and not sufficient for canoeing. Low water levels 17 May 1980 resulted in some time spent dragging canoes over deadfalls and shallow parts of the river, a tiresome and frustrating experience. The potential for observing wildlife, however, far outweighs these hardships. Little is known about this unique area of Saskatchewan and a visit or canoe trip is highly recommended.



Fox Squirrel on Souris River in 1979

George Anderson



Common Snapping Turtle on Souris River

George Anderson

Table 1. AVIAN OBSERVATIONS ALONG THE SOURIS RIVER

| <i>Bird species</i> | <i>20 May 1978</i> | <i>30 June 1979</i> | <i>17 May 1980</i> |
|-------------------------------|--------------------|---------------------|--------------------|
| Eared Grebe | | x | |
| Great Blue Heron | x | | |
| Black-crowned Night-Heron | x | | |
| Canada Goose | x | | |
| Mallard | x | x | x |
| Gadwall | x | | x |
| Northern Pintail | x | | x |
| Green-winged Teal | x | | |
| Blue-winged Teal | x | x | x |
| American Wigeon | x | x | x |
| Northern Shoveler | x | | |
| Wood Duck | x | x | x |
| Northern Goshawk | ? | | |
| Cooper's Hawk | | x | |
| Red-tailed Hawk | x | x | |
| Swainson's Hawk | x | | x |
| Golden Eagle | | x | |
| Northern Harrier | | x | x |
| Ring-necked Pheasant | x | x | x |
| Sora | | | x |
| Killdeer | x | x | x |
| Upland Sandpiper | x | | |
| Spotted Sandpiper | x | x | x |
| Solitary Sandpiper | | x | |
| Willet | x | | x |
| Marbled Godwit | x | | |
| Franklin's Gull | | | x |
| Black Tern | x | x | |
| Rock Dove | x | | x |
| Mourning Dove | x | x | x |
| Great Horned Owl | x | x | x |
| Burrowing Owl | x | | |
| Common Nighthawk | x | | |
| Belted Kingfisher | x | x | x |
| Northern Flicker | x | x | x |
| Hairy Woodpecker | x | | x |
| Downy Woodpecker | x | x | |
| Eastern Kingbird | x | x | x |
| Western Kingbird | x | x | x |
| Great Crested Flycatcher | | x | |
| Eastern Phoebe | | x | |
| Least Flycatcher | x | x | x |
| Western Wood-Pewee | | x | |
| Horned Lark | x | | x |
| Tree Swallow | x | x | x |
| Bank Swallow | x | x | |
| Northern Rough-winged Swallow | x | x | x |
| Barn Swallow | x | x | x |
| Cliff Swallow | x | x | x |
| Blue Jay | | x | x |
| Black-billed Magpie | x | x | x |
| American Crow | | x | |
| Black-capped Chickadee | x | x | |

Table 1. (continued)

| <i>Bird Species</i> | 20 May 1978 | 30 June 1979 | 17 May 1980 |
|---|-------------|--------------|-------------|
| House Wren | x | x | x |
| Gray Catbird | x | x | x |
| Brown Thrasher | x | x | x |
| American Robin | x | x | x |
| Veery | x | x | |
| Sprague's Pipit | x | | |
| Cedar Waxwing | x | x | |
| Red-eyed Vireo | x | x | |
| Warbling Vireo | x | x | |
| Black-and-white Warbler | x | | x |
| Yellow Warbler | x | x | x |
| Yellow-rumped Warbler | x | | |
| Palm Warbler | | | x |
| Northern Waterthrush | x | | |
| Common Yellowthroat | | x | |
| Yellow-breasted Chat | | x | |
| American Redstart | x | x | |
| Rose-breasted Grosbeak | x | x | x |
| Rufous-sided Towhee | x | x | x |
| Baird's Sparrow | x | | |
| Vesper Sparrow | | x | x |
| Chipping Sparrow | | | x |
| Clay-colored Sparrow | x | x | x |
| White-crowned Sparrow | | | x |
| Fox Sparrow | | x | |
| Song Sparrow | x | x | x |
| Bobolink | x | | x |
| Western Meadowlark | x | | x |
| Red-winged Blackbird | x | x | x |
| Northern Oriole | x | x | |
| Brewer's Blackbird | | x | x |
| Common Grackle | x | x | x |
| Brown-headed Cowbird | x | x | x |
| American Goldfinch | x | x | x |
| House Sparrow | x | x | x |
| TOTAL # SPECIES | 66 + 1? | 56 | 56 |
| Total number of species seen in the three years | 87 + 1? | | |

Acknowledgements

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² COLLINS, H.H. Jr. 1981 Harper and Row's complete field guide to North American wildlife. Eastern Edition. Harper & Row, New York.

³ SASKATCHEWAN DEPARTMENT OF NATURAL RESOURCES n.d. The resource reader.

¹ BURT, W.H., and R.P. GROSSENHEIDER 1964 A field guide to the mammals. 2nd Edition. Houghton Mifflin Co., Boston.