

WILLIAM G. NEAVE (1874-1924), EVESHAM SASKATCHEWAN'S NATURE CORRESPONDENT

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Among the few nature records from early settlers in west-central Saskatchewan are Will Neave's "Nature Notes from a Saskatchewan Farm." These appeared in the nature column edited by Ernest G. Ingersoll in the Montreal farm weekly, the *Family Herald and Weekly Star*, in 1922 and 1923.

Born at Leiston, Suffolk, England in March 1874, Will was described by his aunt as "a country boy of a sunny affectionate disposition whose instincts were all with the out-of-doors." Will attended school in the local Quaker meeting place and later went to the Quaker's Ackworth School in Yorkshire, where he joined the Natural History Society.

After apprenticeship in the Leiston engineering works, he worked on sheep stations at Poverty Bay, New Zealand, and Queensland, Australia, before returning to work at "uncongenial things" in business in Britain. He married Gulielma Fryer and the two emigrated in 1906 to homestead on good land, NW 16-41-22W3, north of Unity. Although Will had a creditable 93 acres broken by 1909 when his brother Hal arrived, Hal persuaded him to trek farther west. When they reached the Eye Hill Creek valley near the present site of Evesham and looked down on knee-high grass, the valley looked like a naturalists' paradise — and the sandy land looked misleadingly verdant. Will and Hal each filed on valley land, Will taking the SW 4 and NW 9-40-27W3.

Will worked in Macklin for a few winters and broke 12 acres on his new homestead in 1911 and 10 acres each in 1912 and 1913, cropping 12 acres in 1912 and 22 acres in 1913, by which time he also had 27 cattle. Gulielma, unfortunately, died of tuberculosis in 1919. Will then visited England and returned the next year with Ada Cullen as his new bride.

In his "Nature Notes from a Saskatchewan Farm," Will described many of his observations of the weather, plants, insects, mammals and birds. He described how "the time between 'freeze-up' and the coming of the snow is the bleakest of the year. Everything looks brown and bare . . . when the snow comes it takes the keen edge from the cold." As an all-round naturalist he thrilled to every sign of spring, such as the first Mourning Cloak butterfly, then called the "Camberwell beauty", which appeared on 9 April 1922 and 16 April 1923, the swallow-tailed butterflies on 30 May 1922, and the White Admiral, then called Banded Purple, on 18 June of that year.

He made remarkably few errors in identification, although the Song Sparrows he reported singing on 1 April 1922 were probably migrating Tree Sparrows, and the 30 April date for Mourning Warblers seemed improbably early.

A few of the interesting passages and a brief annotated list of additional bird observations have been culled as



William G. Neave

follows from the newspapers from 1 March 1922 through 26 June 1923. These contained Neave's dated observations, though obviously just a summary of what he felt most interesting, from January 1922 through 6 May 1923, a period of nearly 16 months.

JACK-RABBIT

January 1922: "In . . . sixteen years . . . I have never seen so many jack-rabbits before. . . . Each morning I walk down to the creek, a distance of about 300 yards, to chop a hole in the ice for the cattle to drink from and I seldom see less than six rabbits on my way — they quite understand that the thing over my shoulder is only an axe and not a gun, and they stand straight up on their hind legs to watch me pass. . . .

"My dog is the butt of the whole rabbit community. When they hop, sort of casually, just past his nose, he can never resist the temptation of giving chase. One would think that after dozens and dozens of attempts he would learn by experience that it is impossible for him to catch them but no,

the greater part of his life is spent in chasing elusive bunnies."

28 July 1922: "There can be no doubt whatever that rabbits do considerable damage to the grain. . . . This year all the grain fields have straight hard beaten tracks through them made by the feet of many rabbits, and as much of the wheat is short, their black-tipped ears can often be seen above it."

RICHARDSON'S GROUND SQUIRREL

22 March 1922: "The first gopher was seen today. Our feelings towards him are mixed, as a harbinger of spring he is welcome, but as the enemy of our crops we hope to poison him before long."

23 June 1922: "I saw a weasel leave a dead gopher and run across the road. As it was only a short distance from my henhouse I shot the weasel and then examined the gopher. It has been freshly killed and had a blood stain on the back of the neck, so I concluded that the weasel had killed it."

BADGER

21 August 1922: "I came upon a full grown badger in a remarkable predicament this afternoon. He was on his back underneath a barbed wire fence with the loose skin of his chest twisted round a barb of the bottom wire. Evidently in the first place he had caught on the barb while walking over it and in his struggles to get away had turned himself round the wire. If he had been the right way up or even if the wire had been tight probably he could have torn himself away, but lying on his back fixed to a wire that gave to every pull he made, he was quite helpless. I cut the skin that held him and he scuttled off down a hole in the bank."

COYOTE

9 October 1922: "Coyotes have ventured closer to the shack than usual; of all dreary sounds surely their howl is the most dreary."

19 October 1922: "I frequently see coyotes walking among the cattle. I think

probably in this way they find it easier to approach the jack-rabbits that sit browsing in the grass, than if they stalked them in the open. The cattle get quite used to the coyotes and resent their presence less than they would that of a dog. I have seen an old cow that chases every dog that comes in sight, yet this evening I found her peacefully feeding in a grassy hollow while ten yards away a large coyote sat eating a jack-rabbit."

AMERICAN BITTERN

22 July 1922: "I saw a bittern this evening, the first this summer. Bitterns were once very common here, I believe the reason that they are not so now is that they object to cattle and horses tramping round their nesting-places."

SWAINSON'S HAWK

6 August 1922: "Among the sandhills today I came upon two Swainson's hawk nests, built in small stunted poplar trees. From my position on the back of the pony I could look right into them. Both contained young ready to fly."

GYRFALCON

8 January 1923: "A distinguished visitor is here from the Arctic in the person of a white Gyrfalcon. My pony was plodding silently through the snow, when only a few yards in front of us rose what I took to be a snowy owl; but as it wheeled around showing its long pointed wings and shapely head I saw it was a magnificent hawk as large or larger than a Swainson's, as graceful as a sparrow hawk and as white as a snowy



American Bittern

Stan Shadick

owl. Surely a prince among hawks."

RUFFED GROUSE

26 April 1922: "Although I hear the grouse drumming very frequently, I saw him at it the first time this morning. He sat upright on his log, and his wings, after a few powerful strokes, vibrated very rapidly for several seconds. This evening I came across him again in a poplar tree; he was very active and graceful, running quickly along the boughs and reaching for the long tail-like catkins adorning the poplars just now."

GREATER PRAIRIE CHICKEN

15 April 1923: "Yesterday a neighbour brought me a very fine male Pinnated Grouse which had killed itself by flying against the wire."

SNOWY OWL

13 April 1922: "First thing this morning I saw something that rather puzzled me — a small bunch of ducks flying high and close behind them, apparently chasing them, a large snowy owl."

BOREAL OWL

January 1922: "... a few evenings ago a very small owl sat on the top of my stack and watched me do the chores. . . . The next night I met him again in the thick willow bluff . . . when I tried to stroke him he fluttered off into the shadows as silently as a great moth."

17 March 1922: "I fear that I may be over-run with mice, as the little Richardson owl or "Richard" as we called him who has been hunting around the shed for the last two months, is dead. I found his frozen remains at the foot of a willow bush . . . I quite miss Richard; nearly every day he would sit on a fork-handle with his head on one side and watch me feed the cows, and once I picked him up and carried him into the shack. He was always alone, but a few days after his death another one appeared . . . timid in manner, slim of body, and with very elevated eyebrows which gave its face a questioning



Boreal Owl

Ken Lumbr

expression . . ."

8 February 1923: "There was Richardson's owl in the woods this morning, so intent on watching my dog that it did not notice me until I lifted it off the bough. When I let it go again it flew onto a tree twenty yards away, where it sat and watched us, with an expression of astonishment and indignation in its big brown eyes. Again in the dusk this evening it passed me, nearly brushing my coat in its swift, silent flight."

HAIRY WOODPECKER

26 March 1922: "I have just been watching a hairy woodpecker at work on a willow. What a tremendous energy he had and with what force he drove his sharp beak into the wood. After awhile he drove him away, and cut the bough off which he had been at work to pierce . . . At its very centre were two tiny maggots. If he has to peck his way through all the wood every time, for so small a reward he has need of all his energy."

DOWNY WOODPECKER

30 October 1922: "A lady tells me that while in the woods today a downy woodpecker lit on the skirt of her dress and hung there for several seconds (and really I can't blame the bird)."

BLACK-BILLED MAGPIE

4 October 1922: "Last week I saw a magpie, the second only in fifteen years."

20 November 1922: "I thought the magpie, which still continues to favor us with its presence, was a solitary individual, that had in some way lost its bearings, but yesterday I saw two together."

15 December 1922: "I see the magpie nearly every day; a few mornings ago it came down and drank at the hole in the ice which I chop out for the cattle to drink from."

24 December 1922: "I rather think it is not only the water but the minnows and water beetles that attract it."

COMMON CROW

29 March 1922: "Crows — crows — crows — a whole flock of the black pirates. Last year more than half of the wild birds' nests on my visiting-list were plundered by crows."

6 May 1923: "A very large proportion of the wild ducks' nests that I come across are afterwards robbed by crows. In some cases the eggs are spiked within a few hours of my first discovering them. The reason I think is this: when a duck leaves her nest in the ordinary way, she covers the eggs with grass and feathers, making them very difficult to see, even from a short distance. When, on the other hand, she is frightened from her nest she does not often stop to cover her eggs, but leaves them exposed. A nest full of duck's eggs is a very conspicuous object and must be easily seen from above by the crows flying past. Recently, when I noticed a duck fly from her eggs at my approach I have covered them up with the loose bits of grass and down from around the nest; and so far this plan has been quite satisfactory."

MOUNTAIN BLUEBIRD

10 May 1922: "Several bluebirds were resting on the railroad fence. A

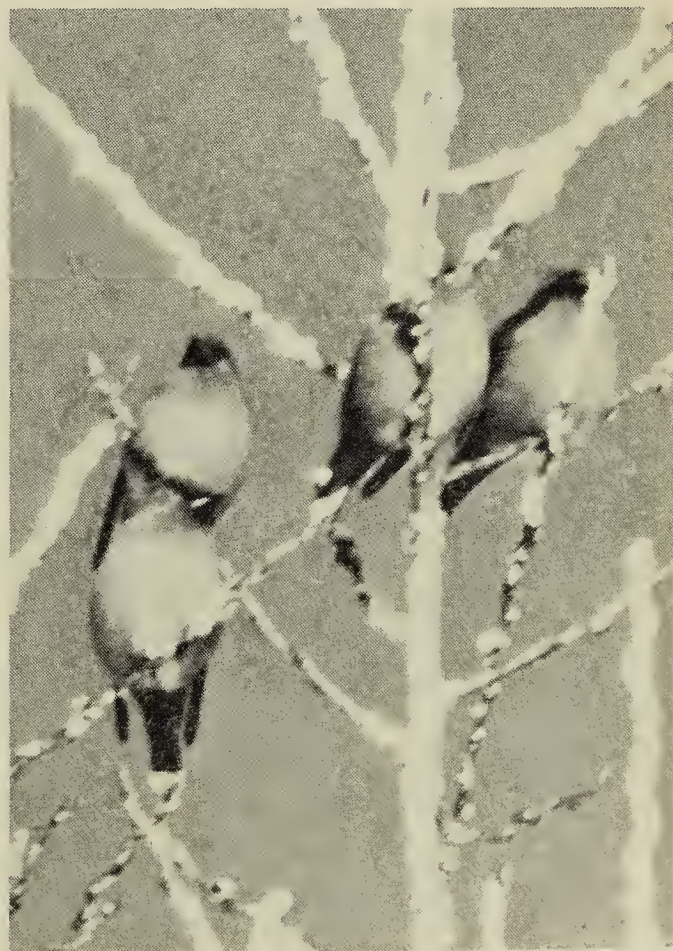
neighbour tells me that a pair of bluebirds nested in a disused pigeon-box in his yard last year. Personally I have only seen these birds in small flocks in spring and late summer."

28 August 1922: "A flock of about fifty bluebirds passed this afternoon working its way south in short flights from bluff to bluff."

4 April 1923: "I saw no robins during the first two years I was here, and bluebirds were only occasional visitors until last year, when they were quite plentiful."

BOHEMIAN WAXWING

January 1922: "This is the first winter that I have seen waxwings. A flock of about forty have been visiting our woods at frequent intervals — jolly little crested things that look as if they had fluttered out of a design on a Japanese teacup. . . . Perhaps it was the ground-cedar berries in the sandhills that attracted them here; anyway I have not seen them since a fall of snow on the 17th of January covered the berries."



Bohemian Waxwing

Juhachi Asai

NORTHERN (BALTIMORE) ORIOLE

24 May 1922: "Baltimore orioles! Surely we are honoured. Previous to this season I have only seen an occasional one, but this year there must be at least three pairs nesting in the neighborhood."

Annotated list of other bird species:

(all dates 1922 unless otherwise stated)

Horned Grebe, nest in small slough at Evesham, 20 May, young hatched before June 30.

Great Blue Heron, wading in shallows 20 May, also 10 August.

Canada Goose, flocks on 6 and 20 April and 9 November, 1922; also 12 April 1923.

Snow Goose, large flocks 25 April and 14 May 1922 and 17 April 1923.

Mallard, first brood 2 June.

Pintail, first two drakes 4 April, nest with 8 eggs on neighbor's stubble 5 May, brood ready to fly 3 July 1922. Arrived 12 April 1923.

Green-winged Teal, female with 18 young of two sizes 3 July.

Blue-winged Teal, 7 May; 7 half-grown late young 8 September.

American Wigeon, a small bunch 2 May and nest with 8 eggs 14 May. Arrived 14 April 1923.

Northern Shoveler, one 7 April.

Lesser Scaup, a drake 7 July was the last drake of any duck species.

Bufflehead, one male and two females on slough at Evesham 17 April 1923, the first he had seen.

Goshawk, harrying jack-rabbit 10 August.

American Kestrel, hovering 4 April 1922 around tree in which they nested in 1921. Arrived 1 April 1923.

Sharp-tailed Grouse, nest with 7 eggs 5 feet from wheel-track of public road 15 May 1922, female sitting close on same nest 10 June. Another family "strong on wing" 1 July.

American Coot, 17 April 1923.

Killdeer, first pair 23 April 1923.

Common Snipe, quite plentiful in fall, one in mid-October.

Curlew (species?), one flew by me, a dreary call, the very voice of loneliness and desolation, 3 May.

Marbled Godwit, a pair at a slough 11 May.

Wilson's Phalarope, 25 May.

"Sea-gulls", flocks 13 May.

Bonaparte's Gull, one 27 April.

Long-eared Owl, 6 October.

Common Nighthawk, several catching insects over grassland in brilliant sunshine 19 July.

Belted Kingfisher, along creek 8 September.

Flicker, arrived 26 April; family parties flying by 18 July.

Downy Woodpecker, pair pecking holes in buildings in November 1921.

Eastern Kingbird, nest with 4 eggs 29 June.

Eastern Phoebe, one in woods 7 May.

Red-breasted Nuthatch, 23 May, 10 and 28 August.

American Robin, arrived 28 April 1922; nest 18 June (see note under bluebird above).

Cedar Waxwing, flock of 25 on 13 June.

Loggerhead Shrike, young out of nest 11 July.

Black-and-white Warbler, one 11 May.

Yellow Warbler, pair 11 May.

Magnolia Warbler, several 30 April, their black and yellow breasts looking very bright in the sunshine. (?misidentification-CSH)

Mourning Warbler, male seen closely 21 May.

Western Meadowlark, arrived 9 April 1922 and 15 April 1923.

Brown-headed Cowbird, young able to fly 26 June.

Red-winged Blackbird, large flock arrived 17 April.

Rose-breasted Grosbeak, male 12 May 1922; a few years earlier a pair stayed all summer.

Pine Grosbeak, a female for a few days 23 October; another six 9 November 1922; a small flock 22 January 1923. "Seldom seen" prior to this very mild winter.

Common Redpoll, a large flock 15 December, "a little unusual here, as more often I see them in small companies of about a dozen." Feeding around stacks for last few days 22 January 1923; last seen 12 April 1923.

Slate-colored Junco, arrived 13 April 1922; a flock 6 October, a few 17 October and one around stable 20 November 1922.

White-crowned Sparrow, a great many arrived 10 May through 14 May.

Fox Sparrow, a great many 14 May.

Lapland Longspur, a considerable flock 2 May.

Snow Bunting, 29 October.

After nearly a year of notes from Will Neave, Ernest Ingersoll commented that Mr. Neave "is furnishing a practical illustration of what I have been teaching. . . . Intelligent attention to what is going on in the natural world about you."

Six months after his notes had ceased, Betty L. North of Kalamazoo, Michigan, wrote to the *Family Herald and Weekly Star* (6 February 1924 issue) to enquire after Will Neave: "I have read his notes joyously for so long, as so many others must have been doing, that I feel quite certain I'm voicing the wish of nearly everyone when I ask you to stop and chat with us a few minutes about the man."

Neave's regular notes stopped, but he wrote a letter concerning the breast feathers of bitterns and herons, published in the 24 October issue, and three years after his death, Ingersoll used a Neave photo of young Long-eared Owls in the 10 August 1927 issue.

Posthumously, three nature stories written for young boys by Will Neave were published under the "Canadian



Yehill Creek

C. S. Houston



Will Neave farm — 1979

C. S. Houston

Scene" heading in the forty-eighth annual volume of *Young England*, published in 1927 by Pilgrim Press in London. These stories were titled "Musky" (pp. 198-199), "Snow in the West" (p. 103), and "A Canadian Bird Rendezvous" (p. 20).

In July 1924, while taking his daily swim at the community swimming-hole in the creek on the property just west across the road allowance, Will dove off the bank into deep water and ruptured his eardrum. A brain abscess and meningitis developed, and he died in a Saskatoon hospital on 10 August 1924.

Epilogue

On the beautiful warm harvest day of 15 September 1979, Lisle Sumner helped us locate Will Neave's grave in the Macklin cemetery. A simple brass plaque made in England has been affixed to a simple fieldstone from the Neave farm. We also explored the beautiful property along Eyehill Creek, though the site of the shack, which had no foundation, could not be located. Except for one small corner of Will Neave's former farm, the soil was almost pure sand, and in two places there were open sand dunes among the rather scraggly aspen trees which have grown up since Will's death. We visited with 91-year-old Mrs. Margaret Kidd, Will's long-time

neighbor to the south, as well as with Lisle and Ritta Sumner.

We were pleased to see that Neave had not been forgotten when Evesham published a 75-page *Homecoming Booklet* in 1968, in which two pages were devoted to the Neave family. Although published in 1968, 46 years after Will's nature notes, they were not forgotten, for the booklet stated: "Will Neave will be remembered best for his Natural History column in the *Family Herald* where he wrote about the various birds and animals which came and went and stayed on his ranch."

No one today, not even a dedicated naturalist, would try to eke a living from a half section of such poor land. Yet we are grateful that Neave had the priorities he did, and left us a glimpse of what an observant settler could see nearly 60 years ago.

Acknowledgements

We are grateful to Lloyd Rodwell of Saskatchewan Archives for access to both of Neave's original homestead records, and to Will's nephew, Hugh Neave, of Francois Lake, B. C., who provided information and photographs — and who carries on in the family tradition with a nature column, "Lakeshore Lines" in the *Lakes District News*, the newspaper for the Houston and Burns Lake region.