

GEORGE LANG — PIONEER ORNITHOLOGIST OF INDIAN HEAD

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Born in Ottawa on December 22, 1872, George Lang came west with his parents, who began farming two miles northeast of Indian Head in 1887. George's father became the first gardener at the Experimental Farm and George purchased 480 acres of land for \$6.00 an acre, five miles east and two miles north of Indian Head. In 1908, George rented his farm and became the first full-time secretary-treasurer of the Experimental Farm, where he remained until increasing arthritic problems forced his retirement in 1933.

In 1923, Lang became one of Saskatchewan's first three bird banders. In the 17 years through 1939, he banded 6,313 birds of 55 species; from these there are records of at least 60 recoveries of 8 species. His banding work has described in the Blue Jay in 1945, and his 31 Black-crowned Night Heron recoveries were listed in detail and mapped in 1967.^{1,2}

Prior to becoming a bird bander, Lang submitted spring migration dates to the United States Biological Survey, beginning in 1903. Photocopies of his submissions for the years 1903 to 1909, inclusive, and for 1912, 1913 and 1915 were made available through the courtesy of Chandler S. Robbins, Chief of Migratory Non-Game Bird Studies, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Fall migration dates were available only for 1904. The 11 reports include data on 153 migratory species and offer considerable insight into the status of bird life in the early part of this century.

The combined migration dates of George Lang and his brother-in-law, George C. Harvey, also of Indian Head, were published in the annual report of the North West Territories' Department of Agriculture for 1903; George Lang's dates were in the annual report

for 1904; and the dates of George Lang and of E. W. H. Trood of Cotham post office appeared in the 1905 report. Lang and Trood then combined with R. H. Carter of Fort Qu'Appelle and Laurence B. Potter of Eastend to collect spring migration dates under the name of the Territorial Natural History Society in 1907, 1908 and 1909; these were published with the support of the Department of Agriculture of the new province of Saskatchewan.

The names used by Lang in his early reports are of interest. In those days, Carolina Rail was an acceptable name for the Sora and similarly Grass Plover and Bartramian Sandpiper were terms for the Upland Sandpiper, Wilson's Tern was used for Common Tern, Shorelark for Horned Lark, Golden-crowned Thrush for Ovenbird, Black and White Creeper for Black-and-White Warbler and White-winged Blackbird for Lark Bunting.

The name of Bluebird, without any adjective, was used by the authorities of the time for Eastern Bluebird. This species was rare, with two noted on May 20, 1907, two on May 26 and again on May 28, 1909, and two on May 24, 1915. Mountain Bluebirds, then rare east of the Cypress Hills, were not recorded at Indian Head through 1915.

Species singled out for special mention as new for Lang's list of Indian Head birds included Red-headed Woodpecker on May 24, 1903; (as well as May 10, 1904 and May 27, 1908); Indigo Bunting, May 13, 1907; Old-squaw Duck, May 20, 1907; Audubon's Warbler, May 27, 1907; Scarlet Tanager, May 22, 1908 (second sighting not listed but third sighting was June 13, 1913); Virginia Rail, May 27, 1908 (and three in storm, May 19, 1920); Barn Owl, May 19, 1910, with the same individual collected June 10 by George C. Harvey; Western Kingbird, June 2,



George Lang



Whooping Crane

Fred W. Lahrman

1910, with two pairs staying on to nest on telephone pole crossarms (later arrival dates of this new, northward-spreading species were for May 25, 1913, and May 29, 1915); Lazuli Bunting, May 27, 1912 (though George C. Harvey had seen one May 18, 1903); Cape May Warbler, two on May 16, 1913.

Lang did not see his first Yellow-bellied Sapsucker until May 12, 1904, and found a nest the same year. Two Pine Siskin nests in 1911, a Black-billed Cuckoo nest in a low bush on the Government Experimental Farm in 1915 and fully fledged Horned Larks on May 20, 1905 complete the nesting records mentioned incidentally on the migration forms.

Whooping Cranes were seen in three spring migrations. In 1904 Lang sighted three of April 19, with the next date of April 21 and the last seen date of April 24, remarking that more were seen that year than ever before; that fall, two stopped off near Indian Head from September 25 to October 2. In 1905, five Whooping Cranes were seen on April 26 and again the next day, with

the last sighting May 1. Five were seen on April 27, 1910. These records were listed in R. P. Allen's monograph, while A. C. Bent listed a final migration record by Lang for April 15, 1920.

Other records of interest include Red-shafted Flickers, probably hybrids, on May 10, 1904 and May 26-30, 1908. A Crested Flycatcher was seen May 20, 1906 and two on May 22, 1907, with additional sightings to June 10 that year. Golden Eagles were recorded on April 7 and 14, 1907 and May 23, 1907. Ospreys were sighted four times between April 7 and May 23, 1907, three were recorded April 27, 1913 and two were noted on April 18, 1915, with a last date of May 2 that year.

Before too much prairie succumbed to the plough, the Upland Sandpiper was a plentiful breeding species, but by 1910 Lang noted that it was becoming rare. Say's Phoebe must have appeared around buildings and Lang gave it an arrival date of May 27, 1907 with a notation as common and breeding. On the other hand, the Eastern Phoebe on May 17, 1905 was the first Lang had ever seen; he listed it as rare and not breeding.

In the early days of settlement, before fireguards were ploughed and roads were built, occasional prairie fires still swept everything before them, sometimes along a 100-mile front. Poplar roots and stunted remnants were present, but they had no chance to become good-sized trees. Many birds which were later attracted to the small groves, were still scarce. Cedar Waxwings, listed as rare and seen only once in 1903, later became common. The Rose-breasted Grosbeak, not seen in 1903 and only moderately common in 1904, 1905, and 1906, was listed as common in 1907. Ruby-throated Hummingbirds were listed as "rare, not breeding" with only three sightings in the first 7 years. Purple Martins, also rare and not breeding, were only recorded in migration four times in 10 years. The Brown Thrasher was not recorded until 1910 and was then listed as breeding. Purple Finches were recorded in migration only once in 10 years. Bald Eagles and Red-tailed Hawks were not recorded once, the latter a striking contrast with the thousand birds of the latter species which Mary Skinner reported over the same area on April 1, 1976.

It is not as easy to explain why the Marbled Godwit was recorded only once (April 16, 1907) or the Wilson's Phalarope only once (May 12, 1909, with a notation of "scarcer every year.") The Lark Bunting was only noted in four years, beginning with a small flock visiting on June 17, 1904; it was then listed as breeding in 1906, 1908 and 1915.

Turkey Vultures were sighted June 20, 1904 and April 28, 1913, each time with the notation "now seldom noted but used to be very common." Sharp-shinned Hawks were recorded five years, three times with the notation "becoming scarcer every year." One Cooper's Hawk was seen May 7, 1907, with a note "used to be plentiful here, but very rare now." All three species were presumably more in evidence when Lang arrived in 1895.

One must appreciate the difficulties

involved in identifying birds accurately in those days. Available bird books stressed identification of specimens in the hand; any colour illustrations were few in number and poorly done. Field guides were nonexistent except for Chester Reed's booklets. Binoculars with centre focus and coated lenses, and bird song recordings, were still many years in the future.

With this in mind, it is interesting to trace Lang's increasing proficiency over the years. For example, LeConte's Sparrow and Warbling Vireo did not appear on his lists until 1906, the Ring-billed Gull in 1908, and Lincoln's and Lark Sparrows in 1913. Rough-legged Hawks were not separated by Lang into two species until 1910, when the American or Common Roughleg, migrating towards the far north, arrived on April 1 and the Ferruginous, listed as a moderately common breeder, arrived on April 8. Each year, late March and early April dates under "Chipping Sparrow" must have referred to the Tree Sparrow; if Lang owned field glasses, they could not have been effective at short range. The total absence of any mention of Sparague's Pipit until 1915 indicates that only then did he learn to identify the characteristic flight song of his ubiquitous prairie bird.

At the time, it is doubtful whether anyone in Saskatchewan apart from Laurence B. Potter at Eastend, was any more skilled in identification. Lang's records are a valuable documentation of bird life in the early years of settlement.

Lang moved to his daughter's at Cawston, B.C., in September, 1939, and died on September 12, 1941.

I wish to thank James H. Lang of Indian Head for information concerning his father.

¹HOUSTON, C. S. 1945. Saskatchewan Bird Banders — No. 3. George Lang. Blue Jay 3:28.

²HOUSTON, C. S. 1967. Recoveries of Black-crowned Night Herons banded in Saskatchewan. Blue Jay 25:112-113.