# FOUR RANCHER-NATURALISTS OF THE CYPRESS HILLS, BASKATCHEWAN

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The correspondence of the late teve A. Mann, loaned to us by his vidow Mrs. Marjorie Mann, provides formal glimpses of Mann and his hree fellow naturalists in the typress Hills area. In addition to teve Mann at Skull Creek post of ice, 12 miles south of Sidewood, the ther three were Laurence B. Potter of Gower Ranch near Knollys Siding, bout 5 miles west of Eastend; Spener Pearse, who lived 5 miles northast of Ravenscrag, and Charles F. Holmes of Cloverley Farm, 7 miles outh of Dollard.

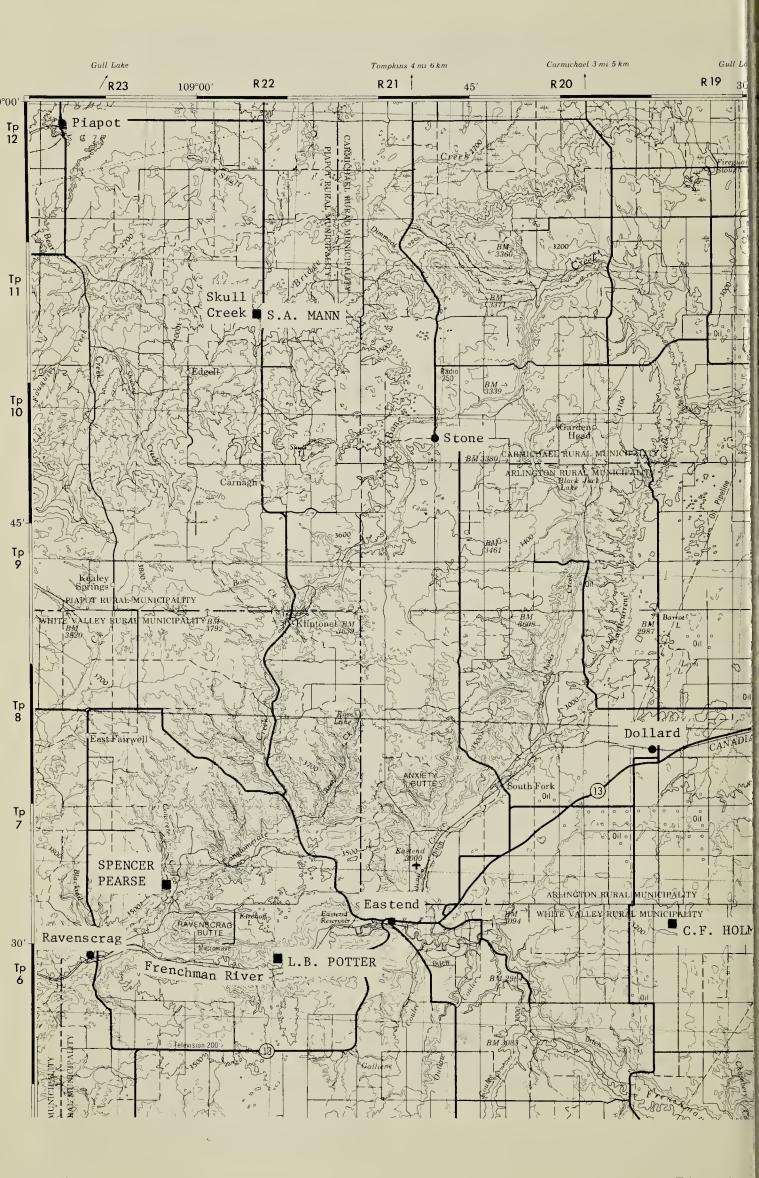
Letters from Potter mentioned that e had contributed to Ernest Ingeroll's Natural History column in the amily Herald and Weekly Star, Moneal, so one of us checked microfilm opies of this column for 15 years, 921 through 1935. Mrs. Mann also ave us a copy of Our Pioneers, ublished by the Cypress Hills ioneers Association. D'Arcy Hande f Saskatchewan Archives located omestead entries.

Not only is the area perhaps the nost interesting ecologically of any the province, but nowhere else in askatchewan were there four esident naturalists covering a elatively small area over a period of bout 40 years. Reading these letters their entirety gave us a real feeling or the people and the times in which hey lived, and we hope we can coney a little of this interest to the eader.

The letters to Mann were written

in the 1930's and early 1940's, when poor roads made it difficult for these men to see each other often. Even Pearse and Potter, who lived 6 miles apart as the crow flies, got together infrequently. On 1 January, 1934, Potter wrote: "I want to visit Pearse soon, we always make a walk up his coulee in search of the elusive dipper, some of these days we may be successful." On 8 March 1936, Potter mentioned: "I have seen nothing of Pearse since mid-December when he spent a night here." On 27 May 1937, Potter said: "Pearse rode over here on the 25th but unfortunately I was away all day and never saw him."

Potter and Pearse, on the south side of the hills, had to plan a circuitous route over the hills to visit Mann on the north slope. They did not get together very often. On 8 May 1932 Potter wrote to Mann: "This afternoon Pearse and I were discussing plans for the 24th, and we agreed that we would like to have another try to get over to see you. Both Pearse and I are keen to study water birds rather than any other." A similar letter on 26 April 1933 contained the following: "Had weather permitted you would have had a visit from myself with three friends. We got as far as Stone Post Office and there began to strike real mud and steady rain. So we got the chains on and turned homewards. My friends were Mr. Jickling, Mr. Nutt, our vicar, and Corky Jones. The latter met your father many years ago and was keen



o render acquaintance, and I also wished him to view your collection of ossils, etc. We are of course disappointed, as one day earlier would have been all right . . . Jickling is not interested in birds, but is quite a gardener. [H.S.] Jones is the recognized fossil man. Mr. Nutt is too short-sighted for a bird man, though he is very keen on the subject."

On 26 April 1936, Potter wrote again: "I might be able to prevail on Jickling to motor me and Jones over on a Wed. to visit you people, as we attempted two [three] years ago, but that is just an idea and don't build too much on it. Too bad our communications, road and phone, are so sketchy."

Later letters continued in the same vein. On 6 November 1936, Potter said: "Sorry another year has passed without our meeting. Our old car is scarcely reliable though for long trips. Lately I was talking to Pearse and telling him how many times you have asked us both to visit you. He said 'We must go over there on Empire Day next summer,' so there is a promise we hope to fulfill." But the letter of 27 May 1937 told the same story: "Another Empire Day has come and gone without meeting.''

Potter reported more encouraging news on 4 October 1937: "We got another car this year, a model A runabout, which I like very much. Perhaps we may manage an Empire Day meeting next year."

### **Visitors**

Whenever a museum party made a trip to the southwest corner of the province, they called in on some of the farmer-naturalists. H. Hedley Mitchell of the Provincial Museum, Regina, stayed at Potter's ranch during his first collecting trips to the south edge of the Cypress Hills in

May 1917 and June 1919.<sup>4</sup> <sup>5</sup> P. A. Taverner camped on Potter's ranch in 1921,<sup>35</sup> and J. Dewey Soper, then of the National Museum, Ottawa, spent two weeks at Potter's ranch in 1927.<sup>55</sup> Fred G. Bard of the Provincial Museum collected birds at Ravenscrag and Eastend from late May to mid-June 1934, visiting with Pearse and Potter.

Potter wrote to Mann on 8 March 1936: "Fred Bard is hoping to be down this way again next summer. You might try writing him and ask him to come through by your place on his way . . . Hugh Knowles, son of the bishop, also wants to visit these parts . . ."

On 26 April 1936 Potter wrote: "If Knowles visits us I very much want to go with him and Holmes to Val Marie to visit the prairie dogs." On 6 November 1936 Potter wrote: "We expect to see Hill, the Game Commissioner and Dewey Soper, Migratory Bird Officer, here next summer." Soper indeed stayed with Potter 3-4 July 1937, and returned in early June 1939 and mid-June 1942.

On 4 October 1937 Potter wrote: "Hugh Boyd, who writes the bird articles in the Sat. Leader Post (Regina) called here lately along with a Mr. West, who is a professional photographer. I got them to take the Bullock Oriole nest to Regina for the Museum."

On 2 May 1944 Holmes wrote Potter about a Mr. Plowden-Wardlaw who had been staying with him since 16 April, collecting birds for the Sydney Museum in Australia. Then on 26 June Holmes reported that "Wardlaw collected over 100 specimens including 35 species and subspecies and has returned to B.C. after staying here six weeks."

# **Collecting Specimens**

Hedley Mitchell obviously applied



The Frenchman River Valley near the Potter Ranch.

Gary W. Seib

considerable pressure on all four men to collect specimens of species they had not seen before. A specimen was then the only way of adding a new species to the official provincial list, and sight records by amateurs, before the days of field guides and good binoculars, were regarded with great skepticism.

In the Family Herald and Weekly Star of 9 March 1927, Potter told of identifying 160 species in southwestern Saskatchewan in 25 years, and listed the ten he had seen only once (Screech Owl, White Pelican, Townsend's Solitaire, Lazuli Bunting, Pinon Jay, Rose-breasted Grosbeak, Blue Jay, Olive-sided Flycatcher, Eastern Phoebe, and Black-crowned Night Heron). He then explained why he had not collected some of these:

"The chief reason is that on most occasions when I was fortunate enough to see some unusual species I was either busy with farm duties or out walking without a gun. In some cases in the early days, as with the

screech owl, for instance, I was not aware that I had seen anything of special note. I did not always know that in order to establish a new record it is necessary to produce the specimen."

In a letter to Mann on 8 April 1936, modified his position somewhat: "Now that it has been ascertained by actual specimens that we get other species besides the Ruby-throated it will be necessary to shoot them to be sure just which the particular one may be; and of course the average bird lover doesn't shoot them, and that is mainly why we are in a state of ignorance just what population of our Hummingbirds are Rubythroats, Rufous, or Calliope. I was not greatly surprised at Calliope having been found here. It is a bird of the high lands and the Cypress Hills at our back doors rise pretty high. Moreover the Rubythroat is not recorded for Montana, whereas Rufous and Calliope are . . . "

Mann must have taken offence at

the thought of shooting hummingpirds. Potter wrote him again on 26 April 1936:

"You must decide for yourself about bagging hummingbirds, but as for the sentimental side, a man who goes out shooting ducks and taking his legal bag is really a much greater offender today. Ducks as we know are in a precarious state, that is, certain species . . . Taking two or three hummers in order to identify them and for scientific purposes will not hurt anyone. It is not in order to prove that these birds appear in August, but to decide whether the Rubythroat or other kinds are the prevailing species."

## **Drought and Dams**

The letters through the 1930's contained remarkably little mention of the severe drought until 27 May 1937 when Potter wrote to Mann: "Isn't the grass shortage a serious business?" Again on 4 October 1937 Potter said: "I am selling [cattle] down very low, there seems no other way out, without having to worry whenever it storms. Pasture is so limited that whatever we keep will need a lot of feed."

Considering the severity of the drought, and that his neighbor Spencer Pearse had shown that irrigation could be practical on a small scale, it is a little surprising that Potter was not more enthusiastic about the dam that was built on the Frenchman below his ranch. On 8 April 1936 Potter wrote to Mann:

"The dam is about a 1½ mile above town, it will back the water a long way into my land, permanently flooding the lower end. Unless I get some kind of pumping rights I don't know that I shall be benefited in any way. I only wish it was flooding me clean out instead of just spoiling my place, as it looks like doing. From the

esthetics angle, it will benefit and I shall do all I can to have the whole sheet of water made into a Wild Life Reserve. My road to town will not be affected." The next summer Potter added a non-committal report:

"There is a great body of water now created by the new dam . . . The head water extends above this place another 300 yards."

By 1942, things were looking up, when Potter summarized the year on 22 October: "On the whole, we have been fortunate . . . the barley ripened early . . . all combined by Aug. 26 . . . A pretty heavy crop, about 130 acres at 50 bushels. We threshed oats, 1000 bus. from 18 acres on Oct. 20, just before the weather broke. I have been without a man since Sept. 1st . . . I am so skinny the wind blows through my ribs."

## Gardening and Horticulture

As practical pioneers, these men had large gardens, and Potter made a name for himself in horticulture as well as ornithology. He tells about this in a letter to Mann on 27 December 1941:

"We are growing a fair amount of fruit now, crab apples, plums, cherries, raspberries, goose-berries and currants of various kinds. The crop of each was pretty good, except the raspberries, but one couldn't expect a repetition of 1940 which in my opinion stands out above all others. . . . My collection of wild currants has interested the Morden Experimental Station and when they set out their new small fruit garden next spring, they are going to put all my varieties, 10 in number, apart as the L. B. Potter Collection. I sent 8 varieties to the Arnold Arboretum which is connected with Harvard University. These currants are not described in any reference book, and now they will be where they can be examined by real

experts. . . . The strange part about them is they all grow within about a couple of square miles upstream and several I did not catch on to until I had planted them at home; nor can I find exactly where they came from or procure any more."

## Ornithology

All four men were keen observers of bird life, and each became more proficient with experience. Potter, Holmes and Mann kept spring migration dates; from 1907 to 1909 Potter contributed his to the Territorial Natural History Society<sup>57</sup> and from 1909 through 1940 Potter sent his as well to the United States Biological Survey. Mann's migration dates from 1927 through 1968 are still in the possession of Mrs. Marjorie Mann. Holmes mentioned to Mann on 26 June 1944 that he had already recorded 102 species for the year.

Holmes had a scientific collecting permit and a personal collection of 500 bird study skins "representing nearly every species to be found in the Cypress Hills region." Many of these are now in the Shaunavon Museum. Holmes was interested in subspecies, and expressed surprise that Potter did not try to identify the recognizable subspecies of the Horned Lark. Holmes also had a banding permit from 1932 to 1943 resulting in one Pintail recovery in Colorado and five recoveries of Swainson's Hawks. 12 13

Potter attended several meetings of the American Ornithologists' Union, including the 1926 meeting in Ottawa, and Mann attended AOU meetings in Regina in 1959 and in Toronto in 1967. Mann served many years as a director of the Saskatchewan Natural History Society and served as president, 1962-64.

Potter published 9 Christmas bird counts between 1919 and 1935, 2 in

Bird-Lore and 7 in the Canadian Field-Naturalist. He published 29 other articles and notes, 19 in Condor, 8 in Canadian Field-Naturalist, 1 in Auk and 1 in Blue Jay. Mann wrote 8 notes for the Blue Jay, and took yearly Christmas bird counts, beginning in 1943. For future use, the above references are cited at the end of this article.

Some of the more interesting records of these men are summarized in the following annotated list:

PRAIRIE FALCON. A prairie falcon nest with 4 eggs was found by Holmes and E. H. M. Knowles in the Frenchman River valley, 15 miles southeast of Eastend, on 23 May 1936.<sup>49</sup> Potter reported this as the first Saskatchewan nest. Holmes banded two of the young on 12 July 1936 and found another nest in 1937.

Two earlier nest records have since come to light. A set of 5 eggs was taken "in Assiniboia" 19 May 1904 by W. A. Bowman. 56 A set of 4 eggs taken by J. E. Bowman at Battle Creek, Cypress Hills, 3 May 1914 is in the National Museum of Canada.8

RUFFED GROUSE. Spencer Pearse was instrumental in having the ruffed grouse introduced into the Cypress Hills, the only major wooded area in Saskatchewan where they did not naturally occur. Pearse gained the cooperation of Fred Bradshaw. Saskatchewan's game missioner, with the first release in 1922.40 In the early months of 1924, Pearse released 23 birds at Ravenscrag after they had been livetrapped and banded by R. H. Carter, Jr., at Muscow, Saskatchewan.6 By 1929, the hills had been populated by these birds.40

LITTLE BROWN CRANE. The little brown crane, *Grus canadensis*, was listed as a separate species from the sandhill crane, *Grus mexicana*, until



A Ruffed Grouse chick.

R. E. Gehlert

he AOU Check-list of 1931.1 Individuals from the dwindling preeding population of the larger ace were collected from time to time n Saskatchewan, but strangely there was no verified museum specimen of he smaller race which migrates hrough the province in housands, until Steve Mann submitted a little brown crane which he collected at Skull Creek on 8 May 1930.<sup>53</sup> The new "species" lasted only about one year on the provincial list, until it was dropped to mere subspecific status in 1931.

SCREECH OWL. The observation by Potter in 1904 placed this species on Mitchell's hypothetical list as the first Saskatchewan sighting.<sup>24</sup> <sup>54</sup>

POOR-WILL. For two or three nights this species "appeared in the willows close to the house, uttering the 'poorwill' cry in June 1905." This Potter record was a Saskatchewan first and placed the species on the hypothetical list.<sup>24</sup>

RUFOUS HUMMINGBIRD. The first Saskatchewan specimen was picked up dead in Eastend and sent by Potter to the Provincial Museum for identification. Other specimens, apparently of this species were found in Eastend on 18 August 1932 and on Holmes' farm south of Dollard on 31 July 1933; both were preserved.<sup>48</sup>

CALLIOPE HUMMINGBIRD. The first Saskatchewan specimen was shot in a Shaunavon garden on 22 August 1935 by Holmes and sent to P. A. Taverner at the National Museum.<sup>48</sup>

PINON JAY. Potter's sight record of this species on 16 September 1910 was Canada's first,<sup>54</sup> and was cited in the 5th AOU Check-List.<sup>2</sup> Without a specimen, it did not merit inclusion in Godfrey's *Birds of Canada*.<sup>9</sup>

CLARK'S NUTCRACKER. Spencer Pearse was credited by Mitchell with the first Saskatchewan specimen, collected on his ranch on 17 September 1919.<sup>24</sup> Pearse saw another in September 1925.<sup>54</sup> MOUNTAIN CHICKADEE. The only Saskatchewan sighting was of an individual that was first seen by Mann on 30 November 1966. It visited his feeding trays daily from 3 December until the end of March and then occasionally until 22 April 1967.<sup>22</sup>

MOCKINGBIRD. The first published Saskatchewan sighting was by Steve Mann at Skull Creek on 2 May 1927.<sup>47</sup> Potter saw his first on 31 May 1928 and collected it as the first Saskatchewan specimen on 4 June.<sup>39</sup> Mann collected the next one he saw on 1 November 1929 and saw others in 1932, 1934 and twice in 1964.<sup>19</sup> <sup>47</sup> One was collected at Dollard by Holmes on 9 June 1935<sup>8</sup> and one stayed at Holmes' farm 6-16 July 1946.<sup>11</sup>

SAGE THRASHER. The first Saskatchewan specimen was taken by Holmes in the Frenchman River valley south of Shaunavon on 24 June 1933.<sup>50</sup> On 12 June 1934 Potter and Fred G. Bard together found the first Saskatchewan nest, with 5 eggs, on Potter's ranch.<sup>50</sup>

EASTERN BLUEBIRD. Young just out of their nest on Potter's ranch on 16 July 1922 represented Canada's furthest west nesting record for more than 50 years.<sup>28</sup>

TOWNSEND'S SOLITAIRE. The first Saskatchewan sighting was by Potter on 19 April 1908.<sup>54</sup> C. G. Harrold collected the first Saskatchewan specimen at Old Wives Lake on 9 May 1922,<sup>10</sup> while Holmes at Dollard collected the second specimen in 1929 and another in 1931. Potter made his second sighting on 24 April 1941.<sup>54</sup> and Mann collected a specimen on 22 April 1945.<sup>3</sup>

YELLOW-BREASTED CHAT. Potter's first observation of a chat was on 7 July 1922.<sup>28</sup> The first Saskatchewan nest was found by Potter on 21 June 1935, when it contained one egg.<sup>46</sup> Potter returned 8 days later with

Holmes, and the nest contained chat eggs and 1 cowbird egg.<sup>46</sup>

BULLOCK'S ORIOLE. The firs

Saskatchewan nest was found with three newly-hatched young at Pot ter's ranch on 1 July 1937.<sup>51</sup> One of the young birds, the last in the nest was collected by Holmes on 10 July as the first Saskatchewan specimen GREEN-TAILED TOWHEE. The second Saskatchewan specimen was taken 18 May 1944 by Holmes and described in a letter to Mann on 26 June 1944. This unpublished record is worth quoting:

"I made quite a catch, too, bagged a Green-tailed Towhee female — had never seen one previously, but knew what it was . . . the moment it landed almost at my foot in my garage door — realizing from its overall green coloring that it was something new. It then flew to a wagon box 5 ft. away, sat there a moment and raised its red cap at me. . . . I ran for my gun. . . . It took me over 3 hours to locate it again. . . . I made a good skin of it and it is now in my collection."

GRAY-CROWNED ROSY FINCH. Potter saw his first two of this species on 8 November 1912.<sup>27</sup> He collected a male, the first specimen received by the Provincial Museum on 27 November 1921, and then took 2 more from a flock of about 30 on 18 January 1922 and 2 more on 18 March 1922.<sup>28</sup> <sup>45</sup> [Richardson's type specimen had been collected at Carlton 95 years before, as Potter recognized.]

Then on 3 February 1933, Spencer Pearse identified a dozen rosy finches with grey faces, then known as Hepburn's Rosy Finch, Leucosticte tephrocotis littoralis. Pearse collected a male on 1 March, the first provincial specimen of this subspecies.<sup>53</sup>

LARK SPARROW. Potter's first sighting was of a singing male which

e collected on 6 June 1922 as the rovincial Museum's first specimen, f a species he is sure was absent uring his first 21 years at Eastend.<sup>28</sup> then spread and increased in numers until by 1946 Holmes had five airs nesting in his yard.<sup>11</sup>

VHITE-CROWNED SPARROW. Poter and Mitchell together located the rst Saskatchewan nest, with five ggs, on Potter's ranch on 18 June 919.23

# nd of an Era

Spencer Pearse, the first to arrive, ame from Norfolk, England and built is house in the spring of 1895, quatting for 8 years before he made is homestead entry. He was also the rst to leave, selling out and moving a Vancouver Island. Pearse wrote otter after 12 months to tell of aining 20 pounds, and then wrote gain to tell of his impending narriage on 1 February 1943, 5 months before his 70th birthday. He died Victoria in 1964.

Laurence Bedford Potter followed years after his brother Ernest, who rrived in 1894 from Gower, Monnouthshire, England. His final illness aused his admission to the Grey luns' Hospital in Regina from 18-26 May 1943. He returned to sell his anch to Reuben Stredwick of Eastend, and then went back to Regina or resection of a bowel cancer on 11 June. He reported to Mann: "My peration . . . was a tough one and eft me very weak, but I came away n July 3 and left Regina 10 days ater. My sister [M. Isabel Potter] and are now staying in rooms in Eastend. . . . We are making trips in the ar up to the ranch and getting our pelongings away. It is quite an pheavel [sic] losing one's home after 42 years, with no settled abode n prospect.''

Potter's last letter to Mann was

dated 21 September 1943 and described a pleasant supper with Mr. and Mrs. J. Dewey Soper at the farm of Holmes, but later that night Potter took a "bad turn" and the doctor was called out from Eastend, 12 miles. Potter died with "intense suffering on the day following his sixtieth birthday," on 5 November 1943. Holmes wrote to Mann of "the passing of a friend of thirty-five years and one of his calibre and irreplaceable. I shall miss him terribly for neither ever saw a new bird without going into a huddle over it. It was not that I saw very much of him, but one knew that he was always there."

Charles Fredrick Holmes, who came from England via Boissevain, Manitoba, took up residence on his homestead on 8 November 1908. The third to come, he was the third to leave, retiring to Salmon Arm, B.C. in 1947.

Steve Mann was the first white child born in the Skull Creek area, in 1895. His father, James Mann, had come from Leeds, England, to Canada in 1888 and settled at Skull Creek in 1894, the year before Steve was born. Steve's father, James, died when his team bolted and knocked him down, and Steve died after being thrown against the pommel on a bucking horse, in 1968.

These men are all dead, but their accomplishments live on. We shall not see their likes again.

<sup>1</sup>AMERICAN ORNITHOLOGISTS' UNION. 1931. Check-list of North American birds, 4th ed. American Ornithologists' Union, Lancaster, Pa.

<sup>2</sup>AMERICAN ORNITHOLOGISTS' UNION. 1957. Check-list of North American birds, 5th ed. Lord Baltimore Press, Baltimore.

<sup>3</sup>BELCHER, M. 1969. Steve Mann, rancher-naturalist of Skull Creek, 1895-1968. Blue Jay 27(3):122-128.

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- <sup>5</sup>BRADSHAW, F. 1920. Report of the Chief Game Guardian for the year ending April 30, 1920. King's Printer, Regina. 51 pp.
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- <sup>7</sup>BRADSHAW, F. 1930. Report of the Provincial Museum of Natural History for the year ending April 30, 1930. King's Printer, Regina. 14 pp.
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- <sup>13</sup>HOUSTON, C. S. 1968. Recoveries of Swainson's Hawks banded in Saskatchewan. Blue Jay 26(2):86-87.
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- <sup>17</sup>MANN, S. A. 1962. President's page. Blue Jay 20(4):138.
- <sup>18</sup>MANN, S. A. 1964. Further reports of Iynx. Blue Jay 22(2):85.
- <sup>19</sup>MANN, S. A. 1964. Mockingbird at Skull Creek. Blue Jay 22(4):175.
- <sup>20</sup>MANN, S. A. 1965. Abundance of Horned Larks. Blue Jay 23(2):108.

- <sup>21</sup>MANN, S. A. 1965. Early Purple Martin spring arrival. Blue Jay 23(3):150.
- <sup>22</sup>MANN, S. A. 1967. Mountain Chickade€ in southwestern Saskatchewan. Blu€ Jay 25(2):76.
- <sup>23</sup>MITCHELL, H. H. 1919. Bird notes from Saskatchewan. Condor 21:222-225.
- <sup>24</sup>MITCHELL, H. H. 1924. Birds of Saskat chewan. Can. Field-Nat. 38:101-118.
- <sup>25</sup>POLLOCK, G., compiler. Our pioneers. Cypress Hills Pioneers Assn. (n.p. n.d.)
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- <sup>38</sup>POTTER, L. B. 1927. Freak nesting site of a magpie. Condor 28:249.
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Froded sandstone at Jones Peak, west of Eastend.

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