

A REFUGE FOR WILDLIFE

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One hundred years ago, on 8 June 1887, the Government of Canada created the first bird sanctuary in North America by reserving the islands and shores at the north end of Last Mountain Lake, Saskatchewan, as breeding grounds for wildfowl. Wildlife abundance in the area was recognized by the government. In the lake's rich history wildlife often played a major role in drawing people. Native people, fur traders, explorers, government officials, land companies and farmers all have their place in the story of the lake. The establishment of the bird sanctuary was only the beginning of a long struggle to develop wildlife protection in Canada, the achievement of which we can all be proud as we celebrate the centennial of the Last Mountain Lake Bird Sanctuary.

Indians people, buffalo and the fur trade

When Henry Kelsey crossed the western plains in 1690, the native peoples there were still living a nomadic life. They followed herds of buffalo which provided them with food, shelter, clothing, tools and weapons. Every summer they waged war on other tribes to the south.³ By the mid-1700s the fur trade was expanding rapidly into the interior, pushed by competition between trading companies and the near depletion of furs in the east. Company employees, such as Anthony Henday of the Hudson's Bay Company, were sent to the prairies to persuade the tribes to bring their furs to the large fortified forts on the rim of Hudson Bay. Many Assiniboine and Cree Indians soon became dependent on the fur trading companies



An Indian camp

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for a supply of European goods, and many became the middle men between the English traders on the Bay and the Blackfoot tribes further west.¹¹ The Indian lifestyle had begun a rapid change.

Traders from the Montreal-centered North West Company travelled west to trade directly with the Plains Indians. One such trader was David Harmon who established trading relations with the Indians on the east side of Last Mountain Lake in 1804. Harmon noted that the natives called it "Great Devil's Lake."⁸ To compete with the North West Company's direct trade, the Hudson's Bay Company opened trading posts on the plains. The Fort Touchwood Hills Post (1849 to 1909) was strategically located on the Carlton trail, an important transportation route.

Henry Youle Hind, a University of Toronto professor, was sent on an exploring expedition to the area in 1858 as a result of increasing government interest in the settlement of the plains. Hind visited

the Touchwood Post and noted the new importance of Last Mountain Lake:

"The Plain Crees are not fishermen . . . they did not know how to catch fish when the attention of the people at the Touchwood Hills Fort was first directed to the treasures of Last Mountain Lake . . . [they] first observed the whitefish under the ice in November of 1854, and since that time they have established a fishery which provides the fort with an ample supply for winter consumption."⁷

Hind also mapped Last Mountain Lake and described the landforms surrounding it, including "Last Mountain," the hills 16 km east, which were a landmark for early traders.

Although Fort Qu'Appelle (established in 1852) became an important fur trade centre, the Assiniboine, Cree, Sioux and Metis also visited wintering posts such as Last Mountain House, which was



Cree family

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established on the east shore of Last Mountain Lake (across from Lumsden Beach) in 1869. A year later the Hudson's Bay Company sold "Rupert's Land" to the new Dominion of Canada. Company officials did not stop operating although long term prospects looked grim. The first year's trade at Last Mountain House showed good profit, with many Indians trading pemmican, furs and leather for weapons and utensils. In the next few years Metis free traders and American whiskey traders took away much of the post's business.

The deciding factor in the fate of Last Mountain House, and many similar trading posts, was the great decline of the buffalo. Isaac Cowie, a clerk at the post 1869-70, reported one of the last large herds of buffalo at the north end of the lake: "They blackened the whole country, the compact; moving masses covering it so that not a glimpse of green grass could be seen the earth trembled, day and night, as they moved in billow-like bat-

talions over the undulations of the plain."² The lucrative trade in hides caused Indians, Metis and white hunters to kill off the animals with devastating efficiency. In 1870 Cowie recorded that only 50 bags of pemmican had been brought to Last Mountain House and fewer to Fort Qu'Appelle.² There was insufficient business to keep the Last Mountain Lake post open. The fur trade was breaking down. By the end of the century all that was left of the buffalo was their sun-bleached bones and soon they, too, were harvested. Metis and settlers began in 1881 to burn the vegetation to expose the bones for picking. In 1884 the first loads of buffalo bones were sent from Regina to the mills of the central United States, where they were ground into fertilizer. Prices ranged from \$5.50 to \$8.00 per ton; hundreds of thousands of buffalo skeletons were collected by the end of the century.⁵

A new era was beginning on the prairies. The Canadian government continued nation building, and began plans



Running bison

Local History Room, Saskatoon Public Library



Piled bison bones

Local History Room, Saskatoon Public Library

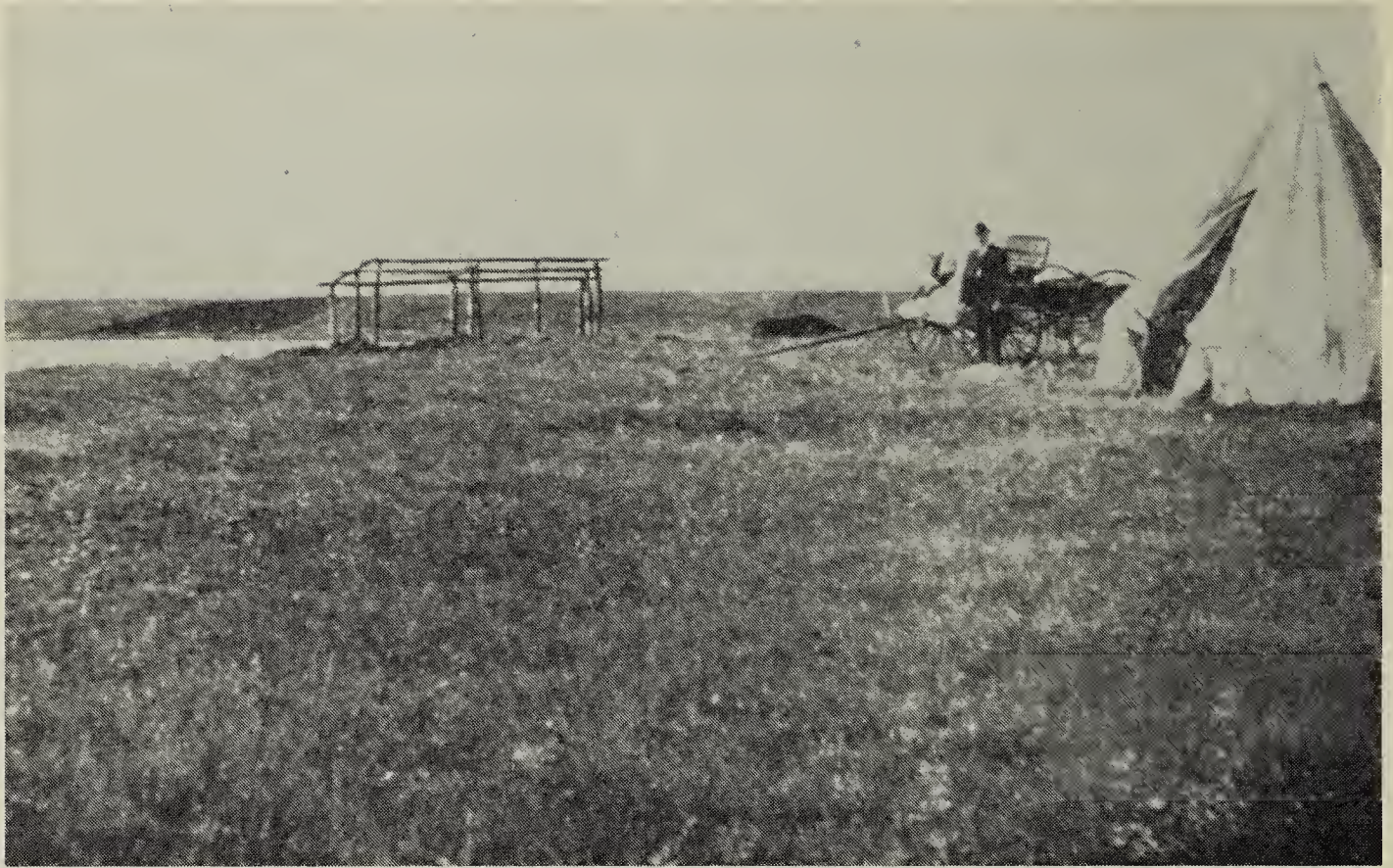
to settle the west. In 1872 the Dominion Lands Act was passed, which dealt with the sale of crown lands, and a system for the survey of townships, school lands, railway grants and land for free homestead.⁶ The most crucial step towards peaceful settlement and agricultural development was the surrender of Indian title to land. In September

1874, Treaty ⁴ with the Cree and Salteaux Indians, included those of the Qu'Appelle-Touchwood area. Negotiations were difficult, but due to the precarious position that the Indians were in, with the buffalo nearing extinction, and with poverty, sickness and starvation on the rise, there was little alternative for the native people except to agree to the terms of the government in return for protection and assistance. The North West Mounted Police force (created in 1873) began working to confine the natives to their new reserves.¹¹ Government agents were sent to teach farming methods to the Indians. The nomadic way of life was gone forever.



Last bison shot in the prairies
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It had only taken 200 years from the appearance of the European on the plains "for man to emerge as an ecological dominant and for the European economic system to effect major changes in an ecosystem that apparently had been in a relatively steady state for thousands of years".¹¹ Already the buffalo had vanished. How would the coming of settlement and agriculture affect the wildlife of



Survey party near Last Mountain Lake

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Last Mountain Lake?

The railway, settlement, and the bird sanctuary

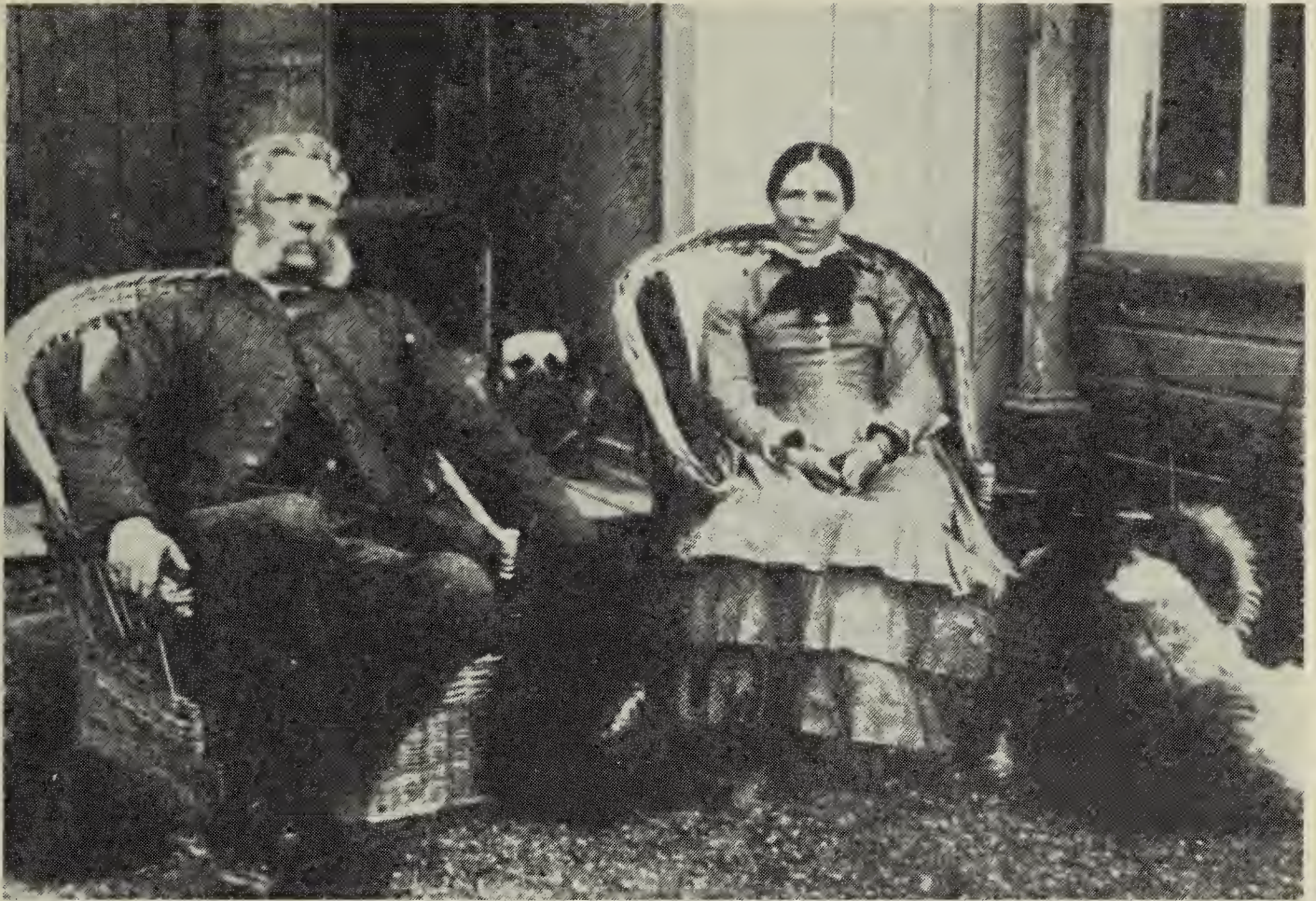
The Canadian government recognized that transport systems were the prerequisite to building a nation from coast to coast by settlement across the prairies. Although the Elbow - Touchwood Hills and the Last Mountain - Fort Qu'Appelle trails provided some access to the Last Mountain Lake area, travel was long and arduous and the mosquitoes were relentless. The idea of a railway across the nation became popular; throughout the 1870's surveyors and scientists were sent west to find suitable routes.

John Macoun was a botanist sent in 1879 to study the flora and fauna of the plains. Partly due to his careful observations the potential of the southern part of the province for agriculture was recognized. Macoun camped near Last Mountain Lake on the largely unspoiled and unsettled land there. He made note of the bird life: "Multitudes of pelican, geese, ducks, avocets, phalaropes, water hens,

and grebe, besides innumerable snipe and plover were everywhere, in the marshes at the head of the lake or along its shores, or on small islands lying to the south of the camp. This was early in July and experience tells me that not one tenth was then seen of the bird life assembled in September and October."⁹

Fortunately, Macoun was not alone in recognizing the importance of the area for bird life. By 1883 the Canadian Pacific Railway was stretching across the plains; a company, calling itself the "Qu'Appelle, Long Lake and Saskatchewan Railroad and Steamboat Company" built a railway from Regina to Craven in 1886.⁸ The possible consequences of the railroad and the accompanying settlement caused the Lieutenant governor of the North-West Territories, Edgar Dewdney, to write in March 1887 to Thomas White, Minister of the Interior, saying:

"The reports of the probable extension of the Long Lake Railway this summer has drawn some attention to the land in that neighborhood. I think it would



Edgar Dewdney and his wife

Local History Room, Saskatoon Public Library

be very desirable to reserve the Islands near the north end of the lake . . . these islands are the favorite breeding grounds for almost all the different varieties of wildfowl we have in the North-West, from pelicans to snipe . . . the shores of the islands are literally covered with eggs in the breeding season."¹²

As a result, on 8 June 1887, Sir John A. MacDonald and 13 members-in-council set aside approximately 2,534 acres (1,025 ha) of land, including the islands, peninsular land and 11 miles of shoreline.¹² Since sanctuaries in other provinces were not established until 1920, this act was indeed a remarkable accomplishment.

Dewdney's foresight was crucial in protecting these lands from development that could have destroyed valuable breeding grounds. Settlement was quick to follow the railway. In 1902 an Englishman, William Pearson, was impressed with the

possibilities offered by Last Mountain Lake: "From the first, the lake attracted his attention, and much time was spent in exploring its vast reaches, in sounding its depths and taking note of the qualities of the water, the stock of fish, its suitability for navigation, and the prospect for good town and camping sites upon its shores."¹³ Shortly after he formed the William Pearson Company and bought up much of the land between the hills east of Davidson on the west side of the lake and the Last Mountain and Touchwood Hills on the east side of the lake. Pearson christened the area the "Last Mountain Valley;" a vigorous advertising campaign led to the rapid development of the area. Not surprisingly, his pamphlets praised the wildlife of the lake area, including the abundant fish, fowl and deer.

In 1906, Pearson commissioned several freight barges and steamers to carry freight, home seekers and other travellers to various points along the lake. Lumber yards, elevators, shipping docks and



W.M. PEARSON CO. LTD. LANDSEEKERS
EXCURSION TO LAST MOUNTAIN VALLEY, SASK.
JUNE 4, 1912.

William Pearson Co. with land seekers travelling to "Last Mountain Valley" in June 1912.
Saskatchewan Archives Board

towns sprang up along the shore, but the completion of roads and branch railway lines, such as the Regina-Bulyea line completed in 1911, soon brought the steamboat era to an end. The last survivor was the "Qu'Appelle", a passenger steamer capable of carrying 200 people up and down the lake for "picnic and pleasure parties;" it was pulled up on the beach in 1913.⁸

Within a few short years the land had been transformed from a wilderness of prairie into thriving farms and towns. With less land for homesteading a conflict arose over the reserved lands of the bird sanctuary that threatened the sanctuary's existence. The government began to be swayed by the economic benefits of opening up the land and late in 1910 the Dominion Lands Agent in Regina was ordered by the Department of the Interior to "instruct the Homestead Inspector to visit each of the parcels of land mentioned in the Order-in-Council and report whether any good purpose is being served by the

continuance of this reservation." In March 1911, 21 settlers in the area signed a petition at Nokomis asking that two sections of peninsular land included in the sanctuary be thrown open for homestead entry.¹² It must be remembered that at this time the importance of breeding grounds for birds was often undervalued or ignored completely, because this new land seemed so rich in wildlife. This mistaken belief in the superabundance of wildlife has often been a cause of the quick decline of many species in North America.

Before the petition was acted upon, one of its signers made an active protest of his own against the bird reserve. In 1908 E.O. Taylor applied to homestead a parcel of land that was part of the reserved land. He "was advised that his entry could not be allowed to stand, but he appears to have gone into residence upon the land and made application for patent therefore on the 17th November, 1911."¹³ Taylor would have to wait a few years while the government decided what to do with the



Cabin of the S.S. Qu'Appelle

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bird sanctuary.

Meanwhile a Homestead Inspector's report, dated 1 December 1911, suggested that in cases where the land was fit for cultivation, the reservation should be discontinued, but that alkali and peninsular land as well as the islands should continue to be reserved. The inspector also felt that the lakefront should be reserved because "the time is coming when the lakefront will be sought after for camping purposes . . . to say nothing of fishing . . ." and would "prove valuable as a public playground."¹²

In 1912, the Minister of the Interior decided that "the lands are to be allowed to stand as they are for the present," but finally in 1913 he recommended that since Taylor had completed his required settlement duties on a portion of the bird reserve, he should be granted patent for the quarter section.¹² The adjustments were made, but fortunately for the sanctuary, such cases were few and most of

the land was retained for the wildfowl. Even as late as 1919, settlers made inquiries about the land, and requests for boundary adjustments were continually turned down. The sanctuary survived the settlement crisis.

Development of wildlife protection

The establishment of the bird sanctuary at Last Mountain Lake did not signify a popular movement towards wildlife protection by the government or the public. When men such as Gordon Hewitt began working towards improving government policy concerning migratory birds, no mention was made of the sanctuary at Last Mountain Lake. In Hewitt's "Protection of Birds" report in 1916 he mistakenly declared that Canada possessed no government bird sanctuary.⁴ The reserved lands were remembered, however, when the Migratory Birds Convention Act was passed in 1917, "a landmark in the evolution of the Canadian government's role in wildlife protection."⁴ A federal Migratory Bird law had been passed in the United



Settler's log cabin

Canadian Wildlife Service

States in 1913, but since these birds summered high in the Canadian Arctic and travelled the length of the continent to winter in the southern states and Mexico, such legislation was ineffective unless Canada and Mexico passed similar laws. Finally in 1917 migratory birds were recognized as an international resource, the protection of which would require federal intervention to set up international and interprovincial cooperation.

Under the Migratory Birds Convention Act, the Governor-General in Council was given authority to make all necessary regulations to protect migratory game, insectivorous and nongame birds inhabiting Canada at any time during the year, and to appoint game officers. The Act listed each species and set forth open and closed hunting seasons in each province.⁴ In 1915, while treaty negotiations were in progress, steps were taken towards the establishment of more bird sanctuaries in Canada. All vacant quarter sections adjoining certain lakes in Saskatchewan

were reserved from settlement.¹⁰ In 1917 and 1918 R.M. Anderson, a zoologist for the Geological Survey and a member of the Advisory Board in Wild Life Protection, visited and evaluated each of the proposed sanctuaries as well as the one at Last Mountain Lake. Of the latter he wrote "This is a very good breeding ground, with many large ducks, canvasbacks, redheads, and mallards; a few Canada geese nest on the islands, also cormorants and gulls. It is well posted as a provincial game refuge. It should by all means be retained as a Sanctuary."⁶

In 1920 regulations were passed that governed bird sanctuaries and prohibited the killing and molesting of birds, the destruction of their nests or eggs, and the carrying of firearms or appliances for killing birds on sanctuary land. No person was to use any part of a sanctuary unless he had a permit, licence or lease to do so. The Director could "by permit, authorize in any year a person to shoot wild ducks and geese in such portion of a bird sanc-

tuary and during such time as the Minister may from time to time decide."¹⁰ This clause which seemed to contradict the basic purpose of a sanctuary became even more pronounced when Last Mountain Lake Bird Sanctuary was brought under the provisions of the federal regulations contained in the Migratory Birds Convention Act on 26 July 1921. The sanctuary was expanded to include the entire water area of the lake as well as certain small islands and land areas, and a new clause stated that: "The lawful shooting of game birds in the open season shall be allowed on all portions of the Last Mountain Lake Bird Sanctuary except the islands north of and including Pelican Island."¹¹ ¹² Unless hunting continued to be permitted, the game preserve could not be brought into the federal scheme.

At this time, administration of the sanctuary was carried out by the federal National Parks Branch in Ottawa. To ensure that all the new laws were followed, early policing of the sanctuary was conducted by the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, provincial game guardians, or volunteer game guardians acting without pay. Captain William C. Huggins of Imperial Beach was a volunteer game guardian from about 1921 to 27 March 1925, when he was appointed part-time caretaker of the Last Mountain Lake Bird Sanctuary at a salary of \$50 per year.¹

Huggins encountered many difficulties in trying to protect the sanctuary. In a 1923 letter to J.B. Harkin, the Commissioner of the Canadian National Parks Branch, Huggins wrote: "So far the game birds are not molested in the closed season, but in the open season the hunters go after the birds. The north end of Last Mountain Lake is acknowledged by all the game bird hunters as the best hunting grounds in the Province of Saskatchewan. But the birds are very poorly protected . . . as the grain harvest is on at the time that the birds are going south the guardian can not get away, and the hunters know

that and do as they please . . . it is common for two men to get 100 to 125 ducks in forenoon."¹ Other problems included illegal hay cutting, fencing and grazing on sanctuary land. In most cases the RCMP were called in to investigate.

Another problem erupted concerning weed control on the sanctuary. Noxious weeds such as sow thistle grew in the long grasses required for nesting cover. Farmers believed the seeds from such weeds were a menace to surrounding farmlands, and many complaints were filed by farmers who felt they should be allowed to hay or graze animals on the sanctuary land "to control the weed problem." No funds were available for weed control on bird sanctuaries, but eventually the Municipal Weed Inspector instructed local day laborers to mow patches to keep them from going to seed. Examination showed weeds in the sanctuary were no worse than on surrounding lands. Farmers were using the weed problem as a reason to seek haying and grazing rights. However, by 1929, Huggins was instructed to cut all sow and Canadian thistles and other noxious weeds on the islands and portions of the mainland sanctuary.¹

In 1925, an Order-in-Council passed in Ottawa stated the purposes of establishing bird sanctuaries in Saskatchewan: "That the Great Plains region of Canada contains probably the most valuable breeding grounds in North America for the wild water-fowl of the Continent and that it is important that measures should be taken to set apart permanently certain areas for the propagation of bird life, a resource of economic value in providing sport and food; . . . That the advance of settlement, followed by cultivation of the land, the drainage of lakes and marsh areas for development purposes, has seriously restricted the areas suitable for the propagation of wild water-fowl and under present conditions it is necessary that proper means should be taken to check the decrease in the number of these birds to

guard against the danger of extermination
...''¹⁰

The federal government appeared to understand the real purpose of the sanctuaries, but was having problems administering to their needs. In 1930, the sanctuary lands were turned over to the provinces under the Natural Resources Transfer Agreement. The Province of Saskatchewan agreed to preserve the Last Mountain Lake Bird Sanctuary, and administered it until 1951. From the National Parks Branch in 1947 came the Canadian Wildlife Service, which was given the administration of the sanctuaries across Canada.⁴

In the 1930s, the drought caused many changes in the bird sanctuaries of Saskatchewan. At Last Mountain Lake, farmers were allowed to apply for permits to cut hay for feed for their livestock on sanctuary land.¹ While other sanctuaries dried up, the permanency of Last Mountain Lake ensured its importance as migratory bird habitat. In 1946, as a result of the drought, agriculturalists who wanted more pasture land and people who felt that many sanctuaries were not serving the purposes for which they had been established, pressured the authorities to amend the Natural Resources Transfer Agreement. Bird sanctuaries and public shooting grounds could be dismantled.¹⁰

The entire system of bird sanctuaries came under review. In 1948 and 1949-50 Last Mountain Lake Bird Sanctuary was inspected for suitability for a waterfowl refuge, and then to determine whether adjacent land should be released for sale. J.D. Soper, the Dominion Wildlife Officer for the prairie provinces, concluded that at Last Mountain Lake only one half section of land had been dried out excessively and made untenable.¹⁴ All of the other land was retained. Many of Saskatchewan's other federal sanctuaries were either discontinued or newly established without land areas.

In 1957 the Canadian Wildlife Service recorded data on the physical characteristics of the Last Mountain Lake Bird Sanctuary and the amount of migratory bird and public utilization. Once more, the area was evaluated as excellent grounds for a sanctuary where public use could be compatible with the protection of wildlife. It was recommended that federal government aid be granted to further develop public areas.¹ The area that had been operated as a beach since 1954 by the Govan-Nokomis Fish and Game League was enlarged to 72 hectares and withdrawn for development as a regional park. The open shoreline was transformed over a period of years into a treed park with a beach, playground, boat launch, golf course and camping facilities.

During the 1960s, management efforts were increased by the Canadian Wildlife Service. Conflicts between agriculture and wildlife protection continued. Increased agricultural use of the lands adjacent to the sanctuary reduced the quality and quantity of wildlife habitat. Crop depredation by waterfowl and sandhill cranes became a major problem. From 1960 to 1963, the Canadian Wildlife Service biologists conducted research on control of crop damage. The Canadian Wildlife Service and the Wildlife Branch of the Saskatchewan Department of Natural Resources cooperated to design a permanent management scheme for the area. As a result, in 1966 negotiations began with local farmers for the purchase of land around the north end of the lake; by the end of 1967 approximately 5,260 ha had been purchased by the Canadian Wildlife Service.

In early 1971 Canada and Saskatchewan signed a Memorandum of Understanding which dedicated the federal lands which had been acquired and 3,230 hectares of provincial lands to wildlife conservation. This created the first cooperative wildlife area in Canada, to be known as the Last Mountain Lake Wildlife



Breaking prairie in section 28-28-24-W3, early 1900s

Saskatchewan Archives Board

Management Unit. Since 1968 the Canadian Wildlife Service has employed an Area Manager who lives on the management unit all year. His job is to maintain the natural habitat and its wildlife and to reduce conflicts between the wildlife, agricultural and public recreational activities in the area. Lure crops, which had been attempted in the early 1950s readily grew on the newly purchased farmland, creating feeding areas in close proximity to the natural marsh.

Ducks Unlimited Canada has contributed significantly to management of the area by constructing dams to control water levels in some of the marshlands, thereby improving waterfowl habitat.

The Last Mountain Lake Wildlife Area was selected in 1970 as part of the International Biological Program, a world-wide research plan concerned with the examination and inventory of the remaining natural ecosystems of the world, the assessment of the adequacy of the present

national protected-area systems, and recommendations of areas for preservation or improvement. The once forgotten sanctuary had become part of an international conservation plan.

Last Mountain Lake was given further recognition in 1982 when the Migratory Bird Sanctuary and Wildlife Management Unit lands were designated under the Ramsar Convention on the Conservation of Wetlands of International Importance, as an internationally valuable wetland of high biological productivity and consequent human interest. International recognition of the importance of this site ensures that every effort will be made to prevent jeopardization of its integrity.

The Future

On 5 June 1987, the Honourable Tom McMillan, Minister of the Environment for Canada, and the Honourable Colin Maxwell, Minister of Parks, Recreation and Culture for Saskatchewan signed an *Agreement for the Establishment of Last*

Mountain Lake National Wildlife Area. Under this agreement provincial crown uplands totalling over 3200 ha will be transferred to Canada to be included in a National Wildlife Area. Part of the north end of the lake will continue to be administered as a federal Migratory Bird Sanctuary.

It was fitting that this event took place on World Environment Day and that His Royal Highness The Duke of Edinburgh, Prince Philip was witness to the Agreement. Over 1500 people, including local citizens, school children and delegates to the 16th Annual Canadian Nature Federation Conference participated in the celebrations.

Today, the Last Mountain Lake National Wildlife Area and Migratory Bird Sanctuary contains over 14,300 ha of lake, wetlands and prairie. Beginning as a plot of reserved lands, it has survived many human use conflicts. Yet, even today, with so much being done for wildlife protection, increased public use of the lake affects the sanctuary through pollution and disturbance, and threatens to cause future declines in wildlife.¹⁵ Only with public understanding and cooperation can this important wildlife area survive another century.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the staff of the J.G. Diefenbaker Centre, University of Saskatchewan, Saskatoon for providing me with archival material and the staff of the Canadian Wildlife Service, Saskatoon, especially Phil Taylor, for giving me access to their records and library.

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