

EARLY MANITOBA OOLOGISTS*

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The first collector of natural history specimens in what is now southern Manitoba was Donald Gunn, Senior. Born at Halkirk, Caithness, Scotland, in September 1797, Gunn entered the service of the Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) in 1813 and was stationed successively at York Factory, Severn and Oxford House. In 1819 Gunn married Margaret, daughter of James Swain and his native wife of York Factory. He left the company service in 1823 and settled at St. Andrew's, just north of present Winnipeg. Here he was the first teacher and first librarian, and for about 20 years Judge of the Court of Petty Sessions. He was a member of the Legislative Council of Manitoba, equivalent to a senate, from 1871 until its abolition in 1876.¹¹ In 1880, Gunn (posthumously; he died in 1878) and C.R. Tuttle published *A History of Manitoba From the Earliest Times*.¹⁰

In 1857 Gunn submitted specimens of at least 40 bird species to the Smithsonian Institution. A few of these were collected for him by John Isbister. They arrived in three boxes at St. Paul, Minnesota on 31 July, carried in Red River carts by freighter Charles Cavalier of Pembina — who also collected specimens for the Smithsonian (D. Zochert, pers. comm.). In addition to the bird specimens were a shrew, *Sorex palustris*, and a vole, *Arvicola xanthognathus*, both the first of either species that Baird had seen. The birds arrived in time for publication in Baird's 1005-page *Birds*.² Gunn was thus the first of a long series of fur-traders who responded to the enthusiastic requests of Baird, one of the most prolific letter writers of all time.

Gunn, often accompanied by his son, Donald Gunn, Jr., continued collecting for the Smithsonian. In 1862 he took a set of Piping Plover eggs on Lake Winnipeg, where he also observed Common Terns nesting on gravelly islands.⁵ This trip was helped by a \$50 expense account from Baird.⁷ In 1865 and again in 1867, when he left Fort Garry on 10 June, Gunn made eggging expeditions to Shoal Lake, northwest of Winnipeg.⁹ Here he found hundreds of Western Grebe nests holding 2, 3, or 4 eggs each, and collected 63 sets. He found males incubating the eggs and described their courtship behaviour "raising themselves out of the water, and flapping their wings, their white breasts glistening in the sun like silver." Black-crowned Night-Herons were nesting among the reeds in great numbers and one set of eggs was taken. He also collected 1 set each of Double-crested Cormorant and Forster's Tern, 12 sets of Eared Grebe and 8 sets of Franklin's Gull. Later three sets of Ring-billed Gull and one of Herring Gull were taken at Lake Winnipeg. Duck sets, collected chiefly in 1865 and 1867, some at Lake Winnipeg, included Blue-winged Teal (2), Northern Shoveler, Gadwall, American Wigeon (2), Redhead (4) and Ruddy Duck (2). A Spotted Sandpiper set was taken at the Red River settlement and a Sharp-tailed Grouse set near Lake Winnipeg. Land birds were less of an attraction, in part because they were so difficult to identify, but the Smithsonian collection still contains undated Gunn sets of the American Crow, Sedge Wren, Veery, Brown Thrasher, Red-eyed Vireo, Common Grackle, Northern Oriole and six eggs of the Brown-headed Cowbird.

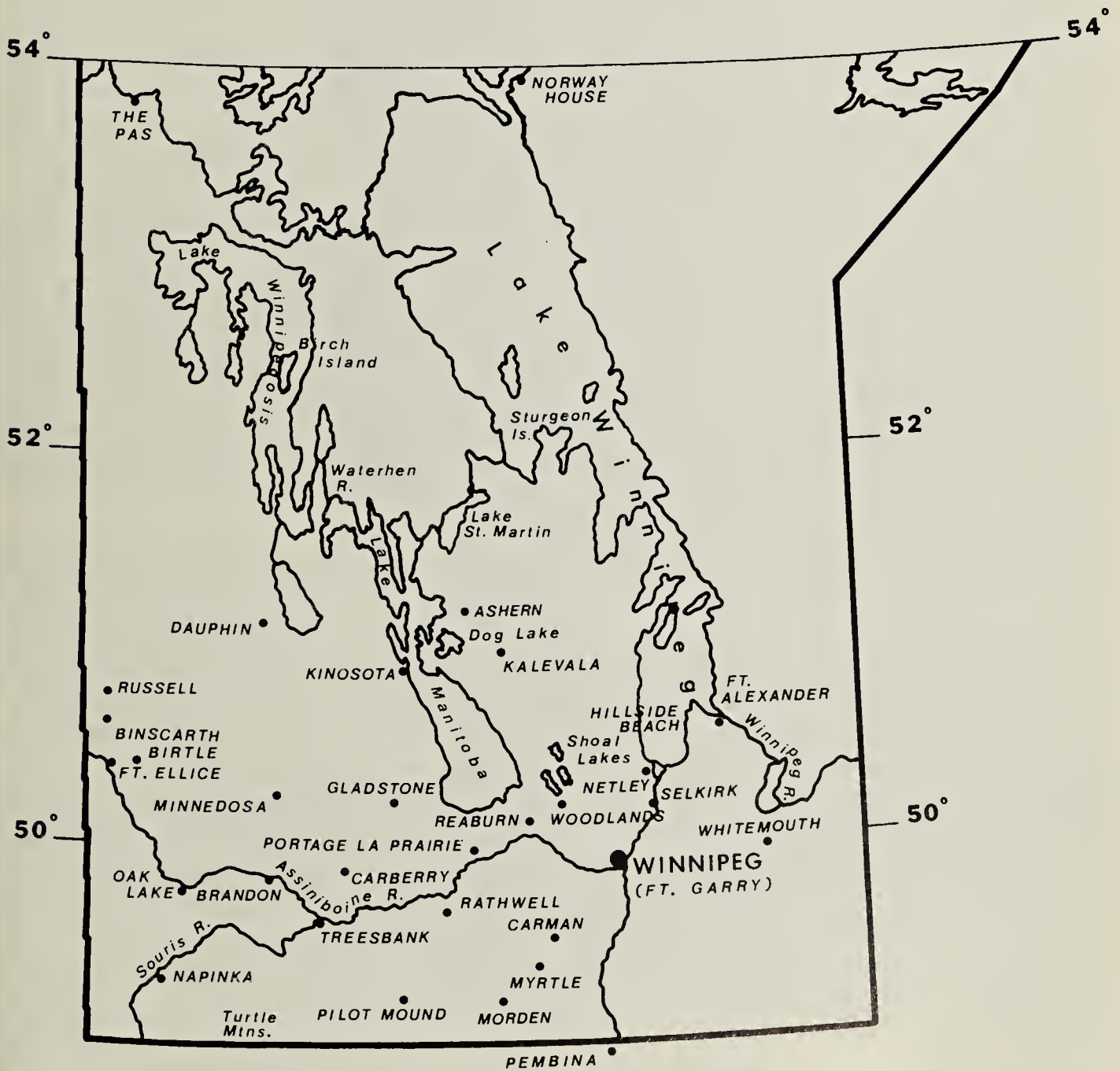
*sixth in a series on oologists of the Northern Great Plains



Donald Gunn (frontispiece to his posthumous book, with C.R. Tuttle, History of Manitoba.)

Sometimes, as with the oriole, the nest was submitted as well. Finally there were dated sets of Clay-colored Sparrow eggs taken in 1860, Cedar Waxwing in 1864, and Black-billed Cuckoo, Gray Jay, Blue Jay and Rose-breasted Grosbeak in 1868. All of the above eggs (108 sets of 30 species), including those of the Piping Plover, are listed in the computerized catalogue of National Museum of Natural History (NMNH) holdings at the Smithsonian Institution. There is also a set of five Western Grebe eggs in the American Museum of Natural History (AMNH).

[Later generations of the Gunn family continued an interest in natural history. Donald Gunn, Jr., had a timber lease and sawmill 30 miles northeast of Birtle, Manitoba, then married a granddaughter of Peter Fidler, "Canada's Forgotten Surveyor" and moved to Fort Qu'Appelle where his son John was born in 1883. Beginning in 1887, the Gunns ranched on the south shore of Good Spirit Lake, northwest of Yorkton in present Saskatchewan. John Gunn told the late Mrs. Isabel Priestly of the changes he had observed in his 46 years' residence there. Four years after



Map of southern Manitoba.

Donald Jr.'s death in 1927, Good Spirit Provincial Park became one of the six original Saskatchewan parks. John's daughter Joyce and her husband Bill Anaka, for some years editors of the SNHS Newsletter, continue bird observations at Good Spirit Lake.]

Three contemporary fur traders each contributed one set of eggs to the NMNH collection: Yellow Warbler from W.S.Morgan, Song Sparrow from W.M.McIntosh, and Rose-breasted Grosbeak from William McMurray, while he was stationed at Fort Alexander at the mouth of the Winnipeg River.

Coincidentally, 1857 was also the year for southern Manitoba's first visit by a professional naturalist in the person of a 21-year-old American, Robert Kennicott. Born in New Orleans on 13 October 1835, the son of a physician, Kennicott grew up at The Grove, near present Glenview, 20 miles northwest of Chicago.³² He received little formal schooling, but studied natural history under two well-known physician-ornithologists, Dr.J.E. Kirtland of Cleveland and Dr.P.R. Hoy of Racine, Wisconsin. This training was sufficient to gain him the leadership of a natural history survey of Illinois in 1855 and appointment as the first curator of natural history at Northwestern University, Chicago, in 1857.²⁶

Kennicott's first collecting trip outside of Illinois, at an inappropriate time of year for this purpose, took him up the Mississippi to St.Paul. On 31 July 1857 he joined Charles Cavalier's cart train to Fort Garry, the same conveyance that had just brought Gunn's specimens south. They did not reach Pembina until 5 September. Kennicott spent only about one week (at least from 5 through 10 September), at the Red River or Selkirk settlement (D. Zochert, pers. comm.) Chief Factor William MacTavish, headquartered at what is now Winnipeg, befriended the young man as he collected ethnological artifacts, and bird and mammal specimens

which had been preserved in alcohol. Kennicott met Donald Gunn, leaving him alcohol for specimen preservation and tools for his wife to skin specimens. Later, Kennicott described Gunn to Baird as "a fine old Scotsman who likes distinction and likes to be praised" (D. Zochert, pers. comm.)

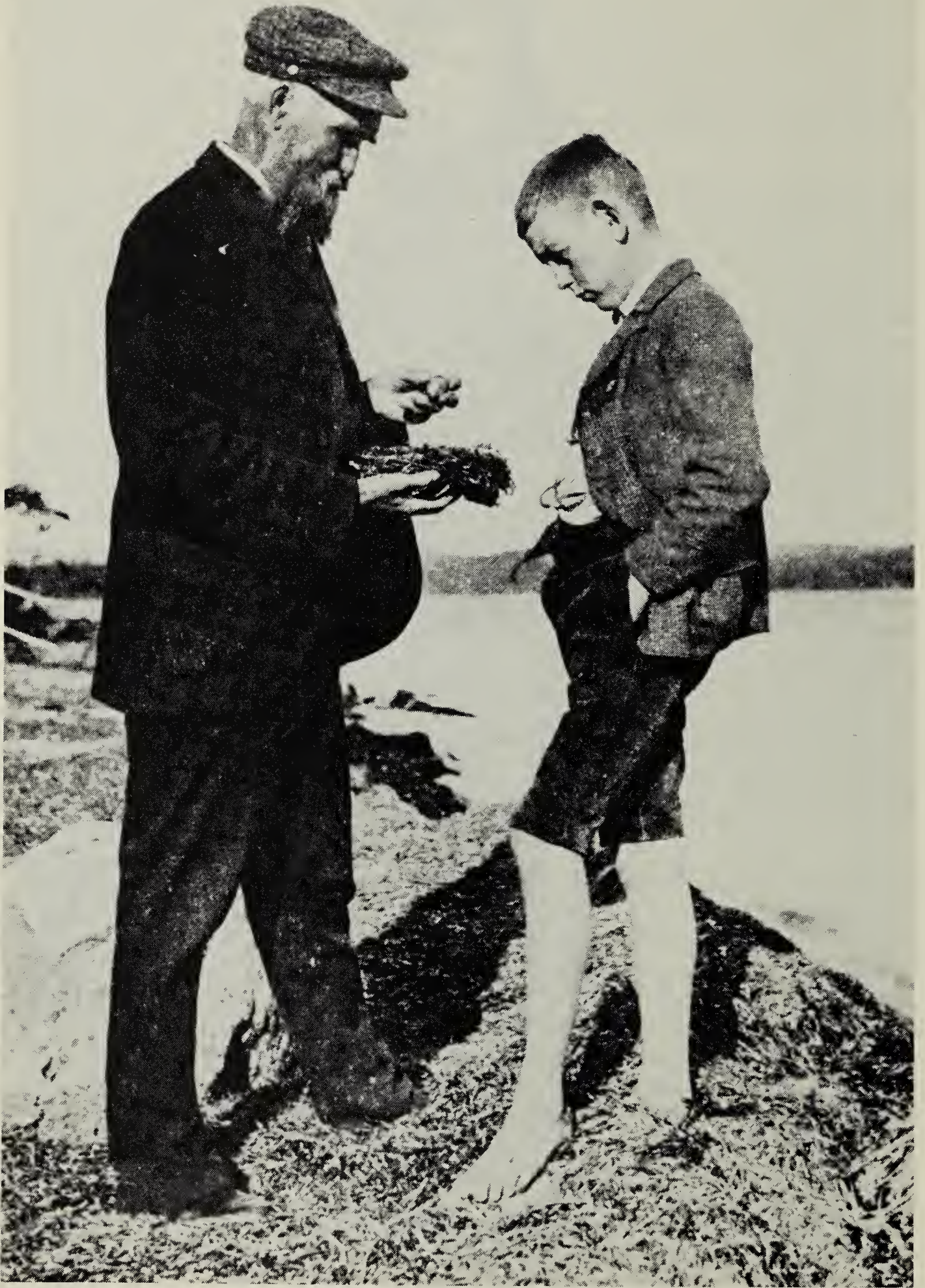
After returning through St.Paul on 14 October and making a brief stop in Chicago, Kennicott spent the winter at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington under the tutelage of Spencer Fullerton Baird. When he left at the end of April 1858, Kennicott had fashioned a grand design for a personal collecting trip to northwest Canada, to be augmented by collections from interested fur traders throughout the vast territory under the control of the Hudson's Bay Company. This double-pronged effort was "destined to add, by his travels and collections, directly and indirectly perhaps more than any other collaborator, to the riches of the Smithsonian Collection."⁷ Letters from the Smithsonian gained the strong support of HBC Governor Sir George Simpson, who offered "full co-operation and free transportation for any collections," a most unusual concession to anyone, least of all a young American.²⁶

After a year of preparation, Kennicott left Chicago in April 1859, travelling by steamship via Collingwood to Fort William and thence by canoe through Fort Frances (where he met William McMurray) and Lake of the Woods to the Winnipeg River, where he collected a Merlin nest with two eggs on 2 June.¹⁵ From Fort Alexander at the mouth of the Winnipeg River, he travelled north along Lake Winnipeg where he collected three sets of American Crow eggs, two of them on 6 and 9 June, and two sets of Song Sparrow, on 8 and 17 June, plus sets of Brown Thrasher and Herring Gull (NMNH). He was at Norway House 11-15 June.¹⁵

Charles A. Hubbard of Milwaukee, a relative (probably nephew) of Dr. Hoy's,



Robert Kennicott.



John Macoun about 1895 (Courtesy Macoun Field Club, Ottawa; donated by Mary Macoun Kennedy, granddaughter of John Macoun).

had accompanied Kennicott as far as Fort Alexander, but Hubbard then turned south to Fort Garry, where he collected sets of Veery, Gray Catbird, Yellow Warbler, Clay-colored Sparrow and Brown-headed Cowbird for the NMNH.⁸ Kennicott continued on to Great Slave Lake and the Mackenzie River. Though Baird wrote that “the eggging . . . is the main point,” Kennicott collected many skins of birds and mammals as well.⁷

Richard H. Hunter, the second resident Red River valley oologist (after Donald Gunn), made a visit to West Shoal Lake, north of Woodlands, on 1 June 1878 and counted 600 White Pelican eggs and 700 eggs of the Double-crested Cormorant on a small half-acre island. He took only a small sample of these.²⁹

John Macoun deserves mention, though his first two western trips were as a botanist without expertise in ornithology — first with Sandford Fleming and Rev. George M. Grant, seeking a route for the Canadian Pacific Railway in 1872, and then exploring northern British Columbia and northern Alberta in 1875. In 1879 and 1880, Macoun first collected a few birds and mammals as well as plants, when he ascended the Assiniboine on a steamboat, before continuing west.¹⁷

On 23 June 1881, Macoun made his most important oological find — about a dozen nests of the Passenger Pigeon along the Waterhen River. The nests were “such flimsy structures that the eggs were clearly seen through the interstices from below, and one old bird was shot as she sat. Only two eggs were taken.”¹⁸ [Surprisingly, these Passenger Pigeon eggs are not now in the National Museum of Canada (NMC) collection]. Macoun’s added another important nest record for Manitoba on 12 June 1896, when when he found North America’s second Connecticut Warbler nest in a tamarack swamp at Sewall, south of Carberry.¹⁸

Ernest Evan Thompson, who later took the name of Ernest Thompson Seton, first

arrived in Manitoba in the spring of 1882. Living with his brothers Arthur and Charlie near Carberry, he made trips south to Turtle Mountain and northwest to Fort Ellice, Binscarth and Russell. In June 1883, he sent egg sets of Upland Sandpiper (3), Swainson’s Hawk (2), Mallard, Sharp-tailed Grouse, Common Nighthawk, House Wren, Gray Catbird, Clay-colored Sparrow, Red-winged Blackbird, Brewer’s Blackbird and Baltimore Oriole to the NMNH. Most noteworthy in this collection was North America’s first nest of the Connecticut Warbler, found near Carberry on 21 June.^{22 27} In August, Seton and his friend, R. Miller Christy from England, visited the Criddle family near Treesbank, and showed sons Norman and Stuart, only 8 and 5 years of age, how to prepare bird skins. Seton’s October 1883 trip to locate a homestead near present Runnymede, Saskatchewan, and his return visit in June 1884 have been described in detail.¹³ During the latter trip Seton found North America’s first nest of the Philadelphia Vireo on 8 June, in a willow 10 feet from the ground, the only nest recorded for another 19 years.²⁸ He found both species of Wood Pewee, Eastern and Western, on the slopes of Duck Mountain and also found Connecticut Warblers resident in a tamarack swamp there.²⁹

Seton’s autobiography states that he worked in New York from September 1885 until October 1886, yet in the NMNH are 1886 Carberry egg sets of the Horned Grebe (31 May), Ruffed Grouse (18 May) and Sharp-tailed Grouse (no date), perhaps collected for him by his brother.²² Seton did return to the Carberry area in 1892, noting how the Upland Sandpiper, Chestnut-collared Longspur and Sprague’s Pipit had virtually disappeared and the Swainson’s Hawk had become greatly reduced in numbers as the prairie succumbed to the plow. In contrast, the Eastern Bluebird had become quite common, the Mourning Dove had increased phenomenally, and the new immigrant from Minnesota, the Greater Prairie Chicken, was now everywhere.^{13 30}



Ernest Thompson Seton, a self-portrait in 1879.

We know almost nothing about four men who collected eggs in the 1880s. L.D. Schultz collected at Lake Winnipeg from 1877 through 1886. On 9 May 1877 he took a set of two Whooping Crane eggs, now in the Western Foundation of Vertebrate Zoology (WFVZ). He took two sets of Horned Grebe eggs — on 2 July 1882 (AMNH) and on 7 July 1885 (NMNH). Raptors are represented in the WFVZ by a set each of Sharp-shinned Hawk on 24 May 1883, three fresh Merlin eggs from "a natural cavity 50 feet above the ground" on 28 May 1884 and a misidentified "Rough-legged Hawk" set on 22 May 1886 (WFVZ).⁴ W.W. Worthington took another set of similarly misidentified hawk eggs at Fort Alexander on the eastern shore of the same lake on 1 June 1885.⁴ O.G. Turner, Jr. collected the following sets: Golden-crowned Kinglet at Minnedosa on 28 May 1886, Goshawk from near Gladstone on 20 May 1887, and Peregrine Falcon on 20 May 1887.³ Review of the latter eggs with Lloyd Kiff suggests correct identification, but no one can conceive where a 13 m clay cliff could be found near Gladstone. In 1889, D.B. Bowles collected American Crow eggs from Sturgeon Island, Lake Winnipeg (NMC).

During geological explorations around Lake Winnipegosis, Lake St. Martin and Lake Manitoba in 1887 and 1889, Joseph Burr Tyrrell collected a few sets including those of White Pelican, Double-crested Cormorant, Spotted Sandpiper, Herring Gull, Common Tern, Common Grackle and Red-winged Blackbird, the last nest including a Brown-headed Cowbird egg (NMC).¹⁶ Not all of the early collectors fared so well. In fact two lost their lives in the 1880s. The first was Willie Brodie, Jr., the son of Toronto dentist and naturalist Dr. William Brodie, Sr., for whom Toronto's Brodie Club was named. Willie Brodie, a close friend of Thompson Seton's, returned once to Toronto and presented "Notes of the Natural History of Manitoba" to the Natural History Society of Toronto. These notes were published

in the *Canadian Sportsman and Naturalist*.⁶ Willie drowned in 1884 when his canoe overturned in the upper Assiniboine River just south of the present site of Kamsack.

T.B. Wood from Middleton, near Manchester, England, settled at Brandon, then terminus of the CPR, at the end of May, 1882. For 18 months he kept careful records of his bird observations and specimens collected. These were published in *The Zoologist*.³¹ In addition to the birds collected as specimens, he took 129 ducks, 119 Sharp-tailed Grouse and 14 Ruffed Grouse for his fall and winter food in 1882. Wood, as far as we know, collected egg sets only of the Blue-winged Teal and Killdeer. In late October 1883, aged 26 years, he shot a Bufflehead on a slough. "He incautiously waded into the water up to his waist to retrieve the bird, thereby contracting a severe cold and inflammation, which resulted in his death in a very short time."³¹

Oology became the main, rather than merely a secondary motivation, for collectors who came to Manitoba during the 1890s. Edward Arnold made egg-collecting trips to the prairies almost yearly from Battle Creek, Michigan, beginning in 1894.¹⁴ Manitoba sets of Red-necked Grebe (2 sets from West Shoal Lake), Sharp-tailed Grouse, Le Conte's Sparrow (a single egg from Reaburn, 6 June 1894) Sharp-tailed Sparrow (4 eggs from near Rathwell, 15 June 1904), and a Savannah Sparrow set from Reaburn are in NMNH. Sets of American Bittern, Blue-winged Teal, Sharp-shinned Hawk (2), Black Tern and Forster's Tern are in WFVZ. Sets of Broad-winged Hawk (Woodlands, 2 eggs, 11 June 1894) and Yellow-headed Blackbird are in NMC.

G.F. Dippie and Walter Raine were both dealers in bird eggs in Toronto. Dippie took a set of five Le Conte's Sparrow eggs (WFVZ), as well as Horned Grebe (WFVZ) and Killdeer sets (NMC) at Reaburn in early June 1893, and Ring-billed Gull and

Forster's Tern sets at Lake Manitoba two weeks later. It is probable that sets of two Whooping Crane eggs, collected at Oak Lake on 16 and 18 May 1900 by T.W. Richards and an unknown collector, passed through the hands of either Dippie or Raine.¹

Raine came almost yearly to the Prairie Provinces; his Saskatchewan records have been thoroughly assessed.¹² His Manitoba collections include sets of Whooping Crane eggs collected at Oak Lake in 1891, 1893(NMC) and 1894(AMNH), and another from the Netley-Libau marsh in 1891. Other Raine sets from southern Manitoba still extant in the NMC, NMNH, AMNH and WFVZ include those of the Red-necked Grebe, Double-crested Cormorant, Black-crowned Night Heron (Lake Manitoba, 6 June 1893), Canada Goose, Ring-necked Duck, Lesser Scaup, White-winged Scoter, Bufflehead, Common Merganser, Red-breasted Merganser (8 sets from Lake Winnipegosis in 1902, 1903 and 1906), Common Merganser, Sharp-shinned Hawk, Merlin (from Oak Lake and Napinka), Greater Prairie Chicken (Reaburn, 9 June 1894), Sandhill Crane (2 eggs from Long Lake near Reaburn on 18 June 1891), Ring-billed Gull, Franklin's Gull (3 nests from Lake Winnipegosis in 1903, and others from a swamp near the south end of Lake Manitoba in 1894, 1896 and 1899), Forster's Tern (identified correctly only in 1912, when three eggs were taken from a platform of dead rushes at Lake Manitoba on 20 June), Black Tern, Short-eared Owl, Boreal Chickadee (Lake Winnipegosis, 1903 and 1906), Brown Creeper (5 eggs from Lake Winnipegosis on 1 June 1903), Marsh Wren, Leconte's Sparrow (5 eggs at Reaburn 21 July 1893, 2 eggs at Shoal Lake 10 June 1894 and 2 eggs at St. Marks at the south end of Lake Manitoba 12 June 1894), Sharp-tailed Sparrow (2 eggs at Reaburn 15 June 1893), Song Sparrow, Vesper Sparrow, and Brown-headed Cowbird. At Lake Winnipegosis in June 1903 he took Boreal Chickadee sets of 6, 7 and 8 eggs in

decayed stumps and sets of Sedge Wren, Solitary Vireo and Northern Yellowthroat.

The Ornithologist, an interesting but short-lived English publication edited by Harry Kirke Swann, contains a previously overlooked six-page article by Walter Raine, who with Edward Arnold spent five days collecting at West Shoal Lake in the second week of June 1894. Sets from this trip, including those of Red-necked Grebe, are in NMNH, WFVZ, and NMC. The next week, on 18 June, Raine returned. The low island, which had been covered with Common Terns and Ring-Billed Gulls the previous week, was forsaken due to waves having washed over it during a storm. Raine had a folding canvas boat with which he was able to reach two other islands, the first of which contained White Pelican and Double-crested Cormorant nests. They left the second island at 10 p.m. as it became dark, the front of their boat heavily laden with eggs. They reached Pelican Island, in high waves, their boat full of water; after redistributing the eggs and gear into the rear of the boat they were able to reach the mainland safely. Next morning Raine spent three hours blowing the eggs. Raine reported that this was "one of the roughest times I ever experienced in North West Canada."¹⁹

Raine's article may have prompted the visit of Charles Doncaster Swann, who perhaps met his death in the manner that Raine narrowly escaped, although Swann's nephew does not know the details, apart from a brief obituary in *The Ornithologist*. "The death at Shoal Lake, Manitoba, on July 27 (as the result of the most lamentable accident) of Charles Doncaster Swann removes a most promising and enthusiastic field-naturalist and collector. He was the younger brother of the editor of this magazine, and was only in his 19th year; he left England four months ago."²⁵ [Harry Kirke Swann had visited Nova Scotia in 1891-92, published *Nature in Acadie*, and later became a natural history bookseller.²⁴ He had one of the world's largest birds-of-prey egg col-

lections, which after his death went to Herbert Brant of Cincinnati and thence to the Museum of Comparative Zoology of Harvard University.]

Although the following records were overlooked by A.W. Schorger in his masterful monograph, *The Passenger Pigeon*, its Natural History and Evolution, it appears that Manitoba may claim some of the last known nests of the Passenger Pigeon, even after those found by John Macoun.²¹ A single Passenger Pigeon egg from the A.C. Bent collection, taken by J. Bell at Oak Lake, Manitoba, on 2 June 1883 is now in the USNM. Reed's *North American Birds Eggs* illustrates an egg collected by Joe Flamay on the "southwest shore of Lake Manitoba, June 1, 1891. Nest of twigs in an aspen tree." This egg is much too large to risk being confused with that of a Mourning Dove.²⁰ (The only other Flamay egg set extent seems to be a Canvasback set of 9 eggs taken at Lake Manitoba on 2 June 1909; WFVZ). Finally, Messrs. Stevens in London, England, sold at auction on 13 March 1928 a set of two Passenger Pigeon eggs obtained on 3 June 1894 at Oak Lake, Manitoba, but the presence of two eggs instead of the usual one makes this set suspect.²³ Most likely Flamay and the unknown Oak Lake collector sent their eggs to Walter Raine or another Ontario egg dealer.

Acknowledgements

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Margaret Belcher provided constructive criticism.

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