

# BLACK-NECKED STILT IN SASKATCHEWAN

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Two Black-necked Stilts, rare visitors to Saskatchewan, were seen by Jim Wedgwood and Jim Slimmon on 30 May 1987, beside Blackstrap Reservoir. The pair's nest was spotted by Phil Taylor on 8 June for the first confirmed provincial breeding of this southern shorebird.

North of the north dam in Blackstrap Coulee, southeast of Saskatoon, is a 1-km long slough split into two ponds by an east-west grid road. When first spotted from a car by Wedgwood, who was familiar with this species in Texas, the stilts were so close to the foot of the road's

north shoulder that they could be seen by Slimmon only after the vehicle was turned. Initial notes were made: avocet-like form, striking black and white plumage, long bright red legs, 12:30 p.m., clear day, distance 5 m. The birds flew to the north end of the slough where Nigel Caulkett and Stan Shadick later relocated them. During the next several days many observers saw the birds, including field parties from the Canadian Nature Federation Conference on 4 and 5 June.

At 8:00 a.m. on 8 June Alan Smith visited the site and saw a Black-necked



*Black-necked Stilt at Blackstrap Coulee*

*Jim Slimmon*

Stilt south of the road near the end of a point in the northeast corner of the pond. The bird crouched down, the way long-legged shorebirds do when sitting on a nest. Deducing that the bird was nesting, Smith withdrew.

Taylor, unaware of Smith's observation, visited the area the same afternoon. From the dam he observed a stilt feeding on the south shore of the south pond. After about 10 minutes the bird flew to the east shore, chased off a crow, then spent 3 minutes loafing and feeding. Next it flew to the point where Smith had seen the stilt and vanished into the vegetation. A stilt suddenly appeared on the end of the point and flew to a small wet meadow about 75 m to the east. From the sudden vanishing and appearance Taylor assumed he had seen one stilt relieving its incubating mate. He then walked slowly out onto the point. A stilt flushed and he saw the nest about

8 m away. Through binoculars he counted four eggs. The bird circled, landing in the water beside Taylor who was retracing his steps. The second stilt flew in and joined the first as Taylor left.

Bob Luterbach, who did not know about the nest, observed one bird on 9 June feeding in the southwest of the south pond.

Taylor revisited the site during a lull in the rain on 10 June. Seeing no stilts as he drove by, he stopped and walked to the point, flushing a Wilson's Phalarope which had been incubating 2 days previously. He found egg shells on the partly flattened stilt nest, evidence of predation. There were no tracks and the stilts were not seen. The site was photographed and the shells collected. Bernie Gollop searched the slough unsuccessfully on 11 June and on 14 June Tom



*Location of stilt nest (arrow), Blackstrap Coulee, 10 June 1987*

*P.S. Taylor*

Table 1. BLACK-NECKED STILT OBSERVATIONS IN SASKATCHEWAN TO SEPTEMBER 1987

| Date         | Location         | # Birds | Observers                        |
|--------------|------------------|---------|----------------------------------|
| 20 May, 1955 | Arcola           | 3       | P. McLellan <sup>9</sup>         |
| 7 May, 1971  | Rosetown         | 1       | D.H. Renaud <sup>10</sup>        |
| 5 June, 1977 | Richlea          | 8       | E.G. Smith (fide A. Smith, 1987) |
| 6 Aug., 1980 | Willowbunch Lake | 5       | W.C. Harris <sup>7</sup>         |
| 30 May, 1987 | Blackstrap Res.  | 2       | J.A. Wedgwood                    |
| 3 Aug., 1987 | Old Wives Lake   | 3       | Burke Koral (pers. comm., 1987)  |

Riffel also failed to find a stilt.

This slough is highly saline and the point containing the nest was muddy alkaline soil. The base of the point was sparsely vegetated but the heavier growth of bulrushes (*Scirpus americanus* and *S. acutus*) towards the tip where the nest was situated averaged 25-30 cm in height. The nest was about 5 m from the water's edge and not more than 21 m from the grid road. Constructed of rushes, it was in the form of a truncated cone about 12 cm high with a top diameter of 16 cm and a depression of 3 cm.

Although all shell fragments at the site were collected, it is doubtful if there is enough for more than two eggs. Shell edges were broken inward and no evidence of embryo residue or chick or down remains was seen. Though cracked, slightly more than half of the pointed end of one non-glossy shell was whole, allowing its diameter and shape to be evaluated. The diameter was 29.8 mm compared to an average of 30.5 in a range of 28-32 mm given by Bent for Black-necked Stilt eggs.<sup>1</sup> Based on the diagrams shown in Harrison for this species, the pointed end was judged to be oval-pyriform in outline whereas Harrison gives the egg shape as subelliptical-oval.<sup>8</sup> However, there was close agreement on shape with the illustration given in Harrison. The eggs were pale brownish-buff with very dark brown spots

and blotches overall, being slightly more marked than the typical stilt egg illustrated in Harrison.

### Comments

Though a first for the Saskatoon area and the most northerly yet recorded in Saskatchewan, these were not the first Black-necked Stilts observed in the province. All reported sightings to September 1987 are listed in Table 1.

There have been 5 and 38 birds reported in Manitoba and Alberta, respectively, over 27 years, including the most northerly at St. Albert (Cleve Wershler, 1987, fide J.B. Gollop).<sup>2 3 6</sup> A small incursion may have occurred on the prairies in 1987, a total of 17 stilts being reported in Saskatchewan and Alberta, including 12 birds seen 10 May At Pakowki Lake in Alberta (Cleve Wershler, 1987, fide J.B. Gollop). More sightings have been made in each decade following the 1950s. However, these increases may have resulted from more birdwatching and not necessarily from more stilts.

Godfrey in *Birds of Canada* stated that perhaps the Black-necked Stilt has previously bred in Saskatchewan, "Qu'Appelle, June 1894, eggs in National Museum of Natural Sciences collection not certainly identifiable."<sup>5</sup> Thus the 1987 nesting appears to be the first confirmed breeding record in the province. It is not,

however, the first for the Prairie Provinces. Three nests have been reported in Alberta, at least one of which was successful and downy young were photographed.<sup>3</sup> The Black-necked Stilt's usual breeding range is the American southwest, northward to Wyoming, Utah and eastern Oregon.<sup>11</sup> While the recent nesting records in the Prairie Provinces are significant extensions for the species in North America, similar irregular breeding north of the normal breeding range occurs in Europe and is apparently a characteristic of this species.<sup>4</sup> (Many authorities recognize the European and North American stilts as a superspecies. In Europe the American Stilt is considered to be a subspecies of the European Black-winged Stilt.)

The absence of tracks, the disappearance of two eggs, the lack of egg residue and the partial flattening of the nest all suggested an avian predator. Gulls, crows and magpies were present.

The authors were troubled by the predation of the nest. This was a lone pair rather than the more usual stilt nesting colony. When faced with intrusion of the nest area, loners react passively, sneaking away from the disturbance or quietly standing aside, which they did when Taylor flushed the incubating bird. Colonial nesters react aggressively to an intruder, diving, screeching and performing a variety of distraction displays in the air and on the ground, and they are joined by other stilts in attempts to discourage and divert predators.<sup>1</sup> The birds may also have been inexperienced first-time breeders which are known to be less successful nesters.<sup>12</sup> The odds may have been against a successful nesting. In Europe, the species avoids areas of human disturbance but readily accepts human activity not involving direct interference.<sup>4</sup> The question remains: to what extent did the human traffic and activity in this area influence predation? We do not know.

## Acknowledgements

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- <sup>4</sup> CRAMP, STANLEY, Ed. 1983. The handbook of the birds of Europe, the Middle East and North Africa. Volume III. Oxford Univ. Press. 913 pp.
- <sup>5</sup> GODFREY, W.E. 1986. The birds of Canada. National Mus. of Nat. Sciences. 595 pp.
- <sup>6</sup> GOLLOP, J.B. 1984. Prairie provinces region. *Am. Birds* 38:926.
- <sup>7</sup> HARRIS, W.C. 1980. Prairie provinces region. *Am. Birds* 35:195.
- <sup>8</sup> HARRISON, COLIN. 1978. A field guide to the nests, eggs and nestlings of North American Birds. Collins, Toronto. 416 pp.
- <sup>9</sup> McLELLAN, PETER. 1955. Sight record of Black-necked Stilt. *Blue Jay* 13(3):21-22.
- <sup>10</sup> RENAUD, W.E., and D.H. RENAUD. 1975. Birds of the Rosetown-Biggar district, Saskatchewan. Sask. Nat. History Soc. Spec. Publ. # 9. 121 pp.
- <sup>11</sup> SCOTT, S.L. 1987. Field guide to the birds of North America. The National Geog. Soc., Washington. 464 pp.
- <sup>12</sup> WELTY, J.C. 1963. The life of birds. Alfred A. Knopf, New York. 546 pp.