

# AMERICAN WOODCOCK SEEN IN EAST-CENTRAL SASKATCHEWAN

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On the afternoon of 13 May 1984 Marilyn Pollock and I were "Sunday driving" (i.e. birdwatching) west of Preeceville, on the Assiniboine River in east-central Saskatchewan.

We drove west of town on highway No. 49 and, upon reaching the Hazel Dell access road turn-off [about 14 mi. W], we turned north onto the municipal grid road rather than towards the hamlet of Hazel Dell, which lies about half a mile south of the highway.

Before I had gone even 10 meters down the grid road and was, consequently, still travelling at a slow speed, Marilyn shouted at me to stop as she had seen a bird alongside the road. I brought the vehicle to a stop as quickly as I could without alarming the bird. Marilyn was already flipping hurriedly through the field guide we had with us, "Birds of North America" by Robbins et al, knowing what she had seen but too excited to remember the name.<sup>9</sup>

Finding the shorebird section, she pointed to the illustration of the American Woodcock and exclaimed, "There!" I immediately replied that it must have been a Common Snipe as we don't have the woodcock in our area, but she objected vehemently that she *knew* what she had seen, citing the cinnamon color of its underparts and the lateral black marking on its head.

Getting excited myself, I jumped out of the van and began to move cautiously down the road. Spotting the bird on the shoulder of the unpaved road, I quickly focussed my 7-15x35 binoculars on it and then "zoomed in." It was a plump, short-

legged, long-billed bird with large eyes set high in its head, of a general cinnamon color on the underparts, its back darker with a scaly pattern — beyond a doubt, a woodcock!

I quickly noted these details in my mind, for the bird had "ducked down" out of sight amongst the weeds on the road side slope of the ditch. In the bottom of the ditch, which was very muddy yellow clay, was a large puddle of runoff water. Opposite this, across the ditch, was an aspen-willow thicket, which may have been used as a cattle pasture.

In *The Birds of Canada*, Godfrey writes that they may be found "in spring...in or near areas of low—mature open mixed-wood or hardwood or alder-willow thickets...are likely to be found in the vicinity of soft, moist soils suitable for the production of earthworms. Sometimes in dusk or darkness the birds feed in open fields or roadside ditches at considerable distances from woodland."<sup>1</sup>

I caught another glimpse of the bird, nervously eyeing me as I edged closer, until it suddenly "exploded" from its cover and rose swiftly high into the air with a peculiar flight. Its wings, which were positioned rather high on its back, made a distinct whistling sound as it flew rapidly away with a swift, direct flight, first to the west, and then south across the highway, dropping suddenly and abruptly into a row of willows in the middle of a large, partially-submerged haymeadow.

Although I immediately drove as close as I could to this spot, it was too far away from the road to even hope to see the well-camouflaged bird again and, lacking

the proper foot wear to cross the sodden meadow, we had to be content with the sighting we had, which was easily sufficient for an unquestionable identification.

It was not until later, after obtaining a copy of the Field Checklist of Saskatchewan Birds (6th edition) by Saskatchewan Culture and Recreation (compiled by Robert Kreba of the Museum of Natural History) that I realized that this species remains on the hypothetical list for this province.<sup>4</sup> Had I only taken our camera that day, I could have documented its occasional presence in Saskatchewan to place it on the official checklist.

Although the American Woodcock was on the first official checklist, in 1911, of species occurring in the province, it was subsequently removed because, as Houston, Houston and Gollop say, "There are unusually dubious sightings for Woodcock."<sup>3</sup>

It was put on the 1911 list by virtue of a record by J.B. Tyrrell, who wrote that on 8 August 1892, his party flushed a woodcock from "among the willows over a soft muddy, swampy flat" along the Fond du Lac River between Middle Lake and Stony Lake.<sup>6</sup>

Although this record was cited by Preble (1908) and by Robert W. Nero, the latter wrote "...it has long been supposed that Tyrrell was mistaken in his identification of this species, e.g., it is not listed by Macoun and Macoun (1909). W. Earl Godfrey informed me (pers corr., 1961) that he has not used the record for his range summary for Canada. C. Stuart Houston, in an unpublished article, expressed the belief that a Common Snipe or a dowitcher had been flushed and mistaken for a woodcock. Unfortunately, Tyrrell does not say how he distinguished the bird.

"That this record is not beyond the bound of probability is suggested by a

generally accepted record for a woodcock in the end of August, 1879, at York Factory near the mouth of the Churchill River on Hudson Bay (Dr. R. Bell in Preble, 1902:94)."<sup>6</sup>

The second record of the species' occurrence in Saskatchewan consists of "vague reports of possible sightings at Oxbow and Moose Mountain by Mitchell," without sufficient detail to make a judgement as to their validity (Kreba, pers. comm.).<sup>5 8</sup>

Nor was there any detail provided with the third record for the province, a sighting in the Qu'Appelle River valley east of Craven by Sylvia Harrison and Pearl Guest in 1960,<sup>2</sup> which was "considered doubtful" by Nero and Houston, and the species was "not admitted to the provincial list" in their revision.<sup>7</sup> Kreba, too, considers the "record dubious" (pers. corr.).

The only other published record of the possible occurrence of the species in the province is by Kreba, who "heard one or two on the shore of Little Kenosee Lake, Moose Mt. Provincial Park, on May 5 and 6, 1978."<sup>3</sup> However, he has since come to doubt the accuracy of this voice identification, believing instead that the "peent" notes which he heard "from a distance away across the lake...were likely from goldeneyes, not woodcocks." (pers. corr., Jan.28, 1986).

The only other known possible identification of the species in Saskatchewan is an unpublished sight record, apparently in the Regina area, by Bob Luterbach, the details of which were not made available to me.

As noted previously, Godfrey did not mention any of the then-known records in his range summary for the species in *The Birds of Canada*, in which he wrote, "Breeds from southeastern Manitoba ..."

However, Kreba wrote me that "The Moose Mountains could support a small population of breeding woodcock...There could also be a small breeding population in your general area as well."

While I would not hypothesize on the possibility that the species may breed in the upper Assiniboine area, there is no doubt whatsoever in my mind as to the identity of the species which we saw that day!

### Acknowledgements

I wish to thank Bob Kreba, who provided me with data and particulars regarding the previous sightings of American Woodcock in the province.

- <sup>1</sup> GODFREY, W.D. 1986. The birds of Canada. National Museums of Canada, Ottawa. 595 pp.
- <sup>2</sup> HARRISON, SYLVIA. 1960. Woodcock sighted in Qu'Appelle valley. *Blue Jay* 18(4):160.
- <sup>3</sup> HOUSTON, C.S., M.I. HOUSTON and J.B. Gollop. 1981. Saskatchewan bird species — hypothetical and rejected. *Blue Jay* 39(3):196-201.
- <sup>4</sup> KREBA, BOB. 1983. Field checklist of Saskatchewan birds, 6th edition. Museum of Natural History, Regina.
- <sup>5</sup> MITCHELL, H.H. 1924. Birds of Saskatchewan. *Can. Field-Nat.* 38:101-118.
- <sup>6</sup> NERO, R.W. 1963. Birds of the Lake Athabasca region, Saskatchewan. *Sask. Nat. Hist. Soc. Spec. Publ. No. 5*, Regina.
- <sup>7</sup> NERO, R.W. and C.S. Houston. 1963. Additions to the checklist of Saskatchewan birds. *Blue Jay* 21(4):132.
- <sup>8</sup> NERO, R.W. and M.R. Lein. 1971. Birds of Moose Mountain, Saskatchewan. *Sask. Nat. Hist. Soc. Spec. Publ. No. 7*. Regina.
- <sup>9</sup> ROBBINS, C.S., B. BRUUN, and H.S. Zim. 1983. *Birds of North America*. New York, NY.

ED. NOTE: This woodcock sighting is about 180 mi. (285 km) northwest of the 1983 nest reported by Nero (*Blue Jay* 44(2):120-122), although less distant from other sightings within Riding Mountain National Park. Although farther northwest than known breeding sites it is still 550 mi. (880 km) SSE of Tyrrell's siting and about 530 mi. (848 km) SW of the one reported from York Factory.

## FIRST BAND-TAILED PIGEON IN YORKTON AREA

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On 28 August 1985 I had the birding highlight of the summer. As I walked out to look at Good Spirit Lake from the south shore a large, unfamiliar, pigeon-like bird landed on top of a dead tree 50 ft. away. For approximately 5 minutes I watched it through 8 x 10 binoculars while it watched me with interest — head weaving and bobbing.

While observing it I jotted down its characteristics on a piece of paper I had in my pocket. The most obvious were the black-tipped, yellow beak, red eyes and yellow feet. There was a white strip behind the eye and a very dark, almost black area behind the white strip. The body was overall a very pale, light brown with a hint of darker color in the wings but no wing marks, bars or other marks other than those noted on the nape of the neck and head.

I drew a rough sketch of it before it flew off. It went about 100 yards west along the lake bank and again landed on a dead tree. I went to pick up the camera but before I could get into range the bird flew off to the south. I checked the area but could not locate it again.

With the aid of my sketch and notes on field marks Bill identified the bird as a Band-tailed Pigeon. This is the first sight record of this species for this part of Saskatchewan.