

SUCCESSFUL BREEDING OF BLACK-NECKED STILTS IN SASKATCHEWAN

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The first successful breeding of Black-necked Stilts in Saskatchewan was observed near the village of Bradwell in summer 1989. Three young were fledged. The first confirmed breeding record in the province was in 1987 at Blackstrap Reservoir, just southwest of the 1989 site, but the eggs were lost, probably to avian predation.⁵ A breeding record from Qu'Appelle in 1894, based on collected eggs, is now considered suspect.² The 1989 nesting was on an alkaline slough southeast of Bradwell and just west of Bradwell Reservoir. The slough is divided by a north-south grid road used frequently by people travelling to the reservoir to fish. The nest was located on a grass- and reed-covered island in the center of the western part of the slough.

A single stilt was originally spotted by Craig and Lorriene Salisbury at 7:00 p.m. on 5 June 1989, feeding on the shore east of the road. The unique shape and coloration of the bird left no doubt as to its identity, which was confirmed by the Peterson field guide.³ Members of the Saskatoon Natural History Society were notified and the sighting was again confirmed. On 6 June John Patterson spotted a single stilt sitting on the island. Because of the cool and windy weather, it was not clear if the bird was on a nest or simply seeking shelter. However, it flew up several times to chase two gulls flying overhead

and then returned to the same resting site each time. On 8 June Craig Salisbury also spotted the bird sitting on the island. It left the resting position to feed on the shore of the island and several times scolded American Avocets feeding nearby. After approximately 5 minutes the stilt returned to the same location on the island and used its bill to arrange materials under its body before carefully lowering itself. Several minutes later a second stilt flew in and began feeding near the resting bird. From these observations it was concluded that the birds were incubating. The stilts were sharing the island with several pairs of nesting avocets.

During the next 3 weeks the pair was observed frequently by the authors, the usual pattern being one bird feeding and the other on the nest.

On 1 July both adults were spotted feeding east of the road. Two Frank's Gulls were seen hovering several meters above the nest site, but they did not land and soon flew away. On 3 July, two downy young were spotted in the reeds along the shore of the eastern part of the slough, with one parent feeding nearby. On 16 July, at 9:30 a.m., three chicks, now approaching two-thirds adult size, were observed and photographed feeding with the adults in the same area. On 28 July an adult bird was feeding in a freshwater slough 1 km north of the



Black-necked Stilts, one on nest and one in water

Craig Salisbury



Black-necked Stilts, downy young in water

Craig Salisbury

breeding site. The other parent and three chicks were feeding on the rapidly drying breeding slough. By 5 August all had moved to the freshwater slough, although only two chicks could be located. Two adults and two young, now nearly fully grown and displaying a drab version of the adult plumage, were last seen on the freshwater slough on 18 August. None was observed in the area afterwards and it was assumed that they had migrated.

Discussion

The normal breeding range of Black-necked Stilts includes the west and midwest United States and its gulf and southeastern coasts.^{2 4} In western Canada only isolated observations have been reported.^{1 2} Godfrey suggested that drought conditions in the normal breeding range accounted for breeding records in Montana and Alberta in 1977.² The drought conditions suffered in the midwest United States over the past 3 years are presumably a factor in this Saskatchewan breeding record.

Wedgwood and Taylor were troubled by the predation of the nest reported in 1987, citing the passive nature of the breeding pair and human activity as possible causes.⁵ The birds described in this report reacted more aggressively to intruders such as gulls and neighbouring avocets and also to human activity. Although exposed continually to significant motor vehicle traffic, the stilts re-

sponded to stopped vehicles with frequent alarm calls and, in one instance when one of the authors left a vehicle, one adult approached with head lowered and wings spread while calling loudly. This defensive behaviour intensified when the chicks appeared. Because of this, the authors made no attempt to visit the nest and limited the duration of visits to the breeding area. The location of the nest in the centre of a slough surrounded with barbed wire probably discouraged visits to the nest by other observers. The 1987 nest at Blackstrap was located 21 m from a grid road and was more accessible. Colonial nesters, the stilts, are likely benefitted from the presence of nesting pairs of avocets on the island in keeping natural predators away.

¹CHAPMAN, B., J. P. GOOSEN and I. OHANJANIAN. 1985. Occurrences of Black-necked Stilts, *Himantopus mexicanus* in western Canada. *Can. Field-Nat.* 99: 254-257.

²GODFREY, W. E. 1986. The birds of Canada. National Mus. of Canada, Ottawa 95 pp.

³PETERSON, R. T. 1980. A field guide to the birds. Houghton Mifflin Co., Boston. 384 pp.

⁴SCOTT, S. L. 1983. A field guide to the birds of North America. National Geo. Soc., Washington. 464 pp.

⁵WEDGWOOD, J. A. and P. S. TAYLOR. 1988. Black-necked Stilts in Saskatchewan. *Blue Jay* 46:80-83.