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# NOTES AND LETTERS

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## **“TRUCK” SWALLOW, “TRACTOR” WREN**

Fairly common birds to most of us. The names suggest that we should find these feathered friends nesting in a farmyard. In a barn. In a house. Quite simple. What about “Truck” Swallow and “Tractor” Wren? Seeing birds as we go about our farm work is one of the joys of the occupation. This past summer (1995) some unusual occurrences added “amazing” to the list of adjectives that describe birds.

Every year, after the seeding is done, the summerfallow tilled, and the spraying completed, we usually have a few days to haul some grain to the elevator. On this occasion the first load was loaded and ready to go when I decided to make one last inspection: the tires. As I walked around the truck I noticed that a barn swallow flew out from underneath. There are usually a few Barn Swallows around, nothing unusual. I had seen the swallows fly out from under the truck a day or two previously. I said to my father, “Why would those swallows be roosting under the box of the truck?” I thought perhaps they were getting drops of water as the rain drained out of the box. Dad said, “Maybe they have a nest under there.” I thought, wouldn’t that be great. They build a nest in a truck that is about to make twenty 16-mile trips to the elevator. Dad suggested I look under the box when I had it raised up in the elevator. So, away I went on my inaugural trip.

At the elevator, you raise the box with hydraulic power, emptying the grain into a pit. Once the box was raised I could clearly see a nest,

your usual Barn Swallow nest made out of mud and small stalks of grass or branches, tucked away in a neat little corner of the truck box infrastructure. After the grain had run out I said to the elevator operator, “I see there is a swallow nest under the box of the truck.” We walked around to the passenger side to have a closer look. He could plainly see the nest and said to me, “You want me to tear that nest out of there!” “Well, no, I think we’ll leave it and see what happens,” I replied. I would never destroy a nest without a very good reason. So I left it. I put the box down and started off for the farm and another load.

As I drove back to the farm over the eight miles of gravel road, I wondered if there were any eggs in the nest. Would the parents return to the nest? Once back at the farm I got a mirror and looked into the nest. There were four eggs. We continued loading the wheat from the grain bin into the truck. Over the next few days and several trips to town we made sure that the swallows followed us as we moved from bin to bin. Always parking the truck in the yard overnight.

During the next three weeks the swallows entertained us with their perseverance and adaptability. Each time the truck returned to the yard they would only be a few seconds landing on the nest after the truck stopped. In fact, Dad, who usually waited at the farm while I went to town, was able to watch the adult swallows’ habits during the period when the truck was gone. It usually took an hour to get back. The adults would follow the truck through the yard as it went up the lane to the



*"Who Dat?" reproduced from the graphite original by Saskatchewan artist Dennet Woodland.*

main road. Never leaving the yard. When the truck was gone they would fly in their unique patterns catching insects but just flying here and there. As the truck approached the yard the swallows would start to fly in closer proximity to the spot where they thought their nest on wheels should stop. Could they hear that truck coming? Once the truck turned in the lane the swallows would meet it and follow it to its stopping place. In a matter of seconds, and sometimes even before the truck stopped, they would be inspecting their nest. This continued for several days but now it was time to haul grain from a bin two miles away from the yard. What would happen?

I knew that I would have to return the truck to the yard at night but how would they react to being separated from their nest for at least five hours? The day was a good summer day and fairly warm so I wasn't concerned about the eggs getting cold, but what if something should happen that I couldn't return the truck to the yard. I needed to make three trips to town. I had few options. Away I went, swallows following me up the lane.

Once again they stayed in the yard. The day progressed favourably and I was able to make the trips with no trouble, staying in town for lunch. The truck was away from the yard for most of the day. Upon my return in the late afternoon the swallows greeted me as I drove down the lane. I parked the truck for the day and got out to see if the anxious adults would return to the nest. No problem. They were sitting on the nest before I could get out of the truck and walk around to the other side to see if they were there.

I made a conscious effort to haul most of the grain before the eggs turned into little birds but, not knowing exactly how long the eggs had been there, I did have to make a couple of trips in late July with little birds on board. The truck remained parked the rest of the time, although we moved it from time to time in the yard. We kept a close eye on the developing birds. The parents were busy each day catching insects and swooping into the nest to feed their family. By early August the young birds were getting quite big and had filled the nest. It would only be a few

days before they would be ready to leave the nest. I took a couple of pictures and continued to look in at them now and then.

On a rainy, cold morning I arrived at the farm to check on some things and I stopped near the grain truck. The adult swallows seemed to be very agitated, even more than when the truck was being used for hauling. Upon close examination I noticed there were some dark spots on the grass. I went over and found the four little swallows lying on the ground. They were alive but unable to fly. Crawling around on my hands and knees I was able to gather them up and put them back in the nest, the parents swooping down at me all the while. I would get three in and go for the fourth when they would all jump out again. Finally after three or four attempts I managed to get all back home. Things seemed to settle down then. I wondered why the young jumped out of the nest. I assumed that they were chased off the nest by some other bird. I waited for a while to see if they would stay in the nest. Things seemed normal. A single swallow was flying into the nest and then out again. Then two adult swallows came swooping in, chasing this want-to-be parent away. I suspect this third swallow had disturbed the nest and evicted the young swallows before I arrived. I was not sure how long the young birds had been on the ground. They were lucky an owl, magpie, or crow didn't happen along.

About a week later the young birds left the nest and started earning their pilot's licenses, landing anywhere and everywhere. We saw them several times, all perched in a row. I was disappointed that there were only three young birds in the row. Later I discovered that one had fallen out of the nest when I wasn't there to res-

cue it. The family continued to fly their circuits above the yard and stayed until the first part of September. Then one day the swallows were gone. I hope they make it back next year. I'll encourage them to pick a more suitable site.

While hauling grain we needed to use an old tractor that was parked in a coulee about a mile from home. It had been parked at the edge of a grass slough near a bluff of willow, aspen poplar, and chokecherry trees since May when we used it for picking rocks. The coulee setting provided a great place for birds.

I could hear a House Wren singing in the bluff as I climbed up on the tractor to start it. Dad drove it home and parked it in the yard. After lunch, while we were repairing a rod-weeder, I kept hearing what I thought were little birds chirping, perhaps House Sparrows. I moved the old tractor and unhooked the rockpicker in preparation to use the tractor for running a bin sweep. I could hear those birds chirping again. I continued to prepare for the job ahead. Later, as I approached the old tractor I could hear birds chirping again. Where was this chorus coming from? I stood silently near the tractor. It took only a minute for the young birds to begin chirping. The noises were originating from under the seat of the tractor. I looked in but could not see much but a lot of dry little sticks, a wren nest no doubt. And there were hungry young birds in the nest. The tractor would have to be driven back to the coulee in the hopes that the parents would return to the nest. I measured the fuel and headed south to the coulee. I hoped that I would be able to wait long enough to see the reunion but the mosquitoes were buzzing and biting. I would have to return.

A couple of days later I walked over to the old tractor in the coulee. I could see the adult wren scurrying among the branches of a nearby willow tree. It was continually chattering and scolding. I didn't see it fly over to the tractor but thought this was a good sign. A week or so later another visit to the tractor revealed three or four wrens flitting among the poplar trees. I took this to mean that the parents had found the tractor again after its six-hour absence and successfully nurtured the young birds.

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### **A POSSIBLE SIGHTING OF AN ESKIMO CURLEW**

On 20 May 1996 near Kipling, Saskatchewan, Boyd Metzler and I flushed a large shorebird from a summer fallow field about 200 m from Kipling Marsh. The bird was instantly recognized as a curlew species from the down-turned bill. It was not a Long-billed Curlew as the bill was too short. I had never seen an Eskimo Curlew or a Whimbrel, but I knew it was one or the other. The bird landed on a spit leading out into the marsh/lake. The conditions for observing the bird were excellent. The sky was clear with a moderate breeze. The bird was about 70 metres away from us and the sun was at our backs when looking at the bird. We observed the bird from 6:30-7:30 p.m. from our vehicle using a 16-36 power spotting scope.

The overall plumage was grayish brown. After the bird landed, it adjusted its wings, lifting them above its body exposing the wing lining. The lining was reddish-brown. The bird had a faint eye line. I had a good view of the crown when the bird

faced us. It was darker than the rest of the body plumage with no discernible stripe down the centre of the head. The bill had a gentle down curve with a slight kink near the end.

I could not estimate the size of the bird, as it was sitting by itself with no other shorebirds near by. The bill seemed thicker and somewhat longer than what our field guides described as an Eskimo Curlew bill. Unfortunately, at the time, I was not aware of other field marks such as markings on the primaries. Boyd felt it was a Whimbrel based on the bill shape and length. However he didn't observe the wing linings or the crown patch.

Unfortunately the bird flew after 30 minutes and neither of us were able to get a second look at the wing lining and primaries. This bird had some characteristics described for an Eskimo Curlew but further study was needed to make a positive identification.

The next day Boyd and I returned to the same location. It was overcast and drizzling. We couldn't see any birds as we drove along the field where we flushed the curlew the previous day. Suddenly from the summer fallow field three curlews took flight. The birds were greyish. I didn't have time to get a good look through my binoculars but I rolled down the truck window and shut off the engine. I heard one of the birds calling "tu, tu, tu, tu, tu" five times. Based on the song I heard and comparison to a tape of bird songs, I concluded that at least one of the birds was a Whimbrel. Since all three birds resembled each other, I assume they were all Whimbrels. The birds flew off northward and disappeared in another marshy area several kilometres away.