

ATLAS OF SASKATCHEWAN BIRDS

ALAN R. SMITH. 1996. Nature Saskatchewan, Regina. Hard cover, \$45.

I'll admit from the top that my firsthand experience with Saskatchewan birds is limited to a visit to a dry alkali lake one blazing hot summer day about 25 years ago. But after reading through the new *Atlas of Saskatchewan Birds* (hereafter the *Atlas*) by Al Smith I feel that I could find out almost anything I needed to know quickly and easily. As someone who loves maps almost as much as birds, I was looking forward with great anticipation to seeing this book, and I was not disappointed.

This is not a breeding bird atlas like the recent volumes from Alberta, Ontario, Quebec and the Maritimes. Breeding bird atlases, through a burst of frenetic activity by volunteers over a period of five years or so, attempt to provide a snapshot of the breeding season distribution of birds in a given area. In most Canadian provinces these efforts are bound to come up short, with vast areas only marginally covered or not covered at all. The *Atlas* is instead a compilation of thousands of records, historical and recent, for **all** seasons. It therefore simply provides a detailed picture of what we know about bird distribution in Saskatchewan. In this it is similar to the map section of the *Birds of British Columbia*, a four-volume work still in progress.

The 740 mapping units used in the *Atlas* are the 1:50,000 map sheets in Saskatchewan, each subtending 15 minutes of latitude and 30 minutes of longitude. Northern map sheets, as would be easily predicted, are poorly covered but that would have still been the case with a breeding bird

atlas project. Four hundred and nine species are mapped, for a total of more than 46,000 map units filled. The most widespread species was the Common Raven, recorded in 462 map sheets. Mallard was the most widely reported breeding species (400 map sheets) and Snow Bunting the most widespread wintering species (344 map sheets).

Bird atlases are difficult to design, especially those trying to pack information from all seasons onto one map. The *Atlas* gives almost every species a complete page, with large map, a key to symbols, a short but informative paragraph that adds to the information on the map, and a pen-and-ink sketch of the species. The sketches are generally very good, and clearly show that the artist knows what birds look like in the field.

I found the maps to be remarkably easy to read. The up and down triangles used for migration are intuitively interpreted as spring and fall respectively, so a simple glance at the Whimbrel map tells me that I'm much more likely to see that species in spring than fall. Items of special interest are added when available, such as lines showing historical range boundaries or population concentrations. Map sheets with historical records for a species but none in the last 30 years are indicated with clear symbols. In several cases this plainly shows recent range contractions (an obvious instance is the Greater Prairie-Chicken, but it is also shown in the Whip-poor-will and Chimney Swift maps). The only thing I didn't like about the maps was the peripheral screens, designed to show the species' status outside Saskatchewan. I found the six screens too similar, forcing me to continually compare the map with

the key to figure out what was meant. Perhaps three screens covering breeding, migration and wintering would have been adequate and easier to understand. Three overlay maps allow the reader to compare the distribution maps with coverage, map sheet numbers, and most importantly, biotic regions.

The *Atlas* has very informative introductory sections, including data sources, status categories, how to interpret the maps, the biotic regions of Saskatchewan, human history and the flora and fauna of Saskatchewan. As a non-prairie naturalist, I found the latter sections extremely useful. In the Preface, Al Smith makes a very good case for the high species diversity of Saskatchewan birds, although he may have overstated his case somewhat when he claims more breeding species in certain parts of the province than anywhere else in Canada. These areas might have 180 species as claimed, but I must stand up for my home ground in the Okanagan Valley, which according to the latest checklist has 194 breeding species, not 170 as given by Smith for the entire southern Interior of British Columbia. I also think the claim that Saskatchewan has more than 50% of the Common Poorwills and Sage Thrashers breeding in Canada is unlikely to be true, especially for the poorwills.

Several very useful appendices include the details (date, place, number, reference) of all reports of very rare birds, a gazetteer, and summaries of Christmas Bird Counts and Breeding Bird Surveys. The latter table provides information on population trends for many Saskatchewan breeding species.

The real fun for me in reading a bird atlas is in the details on the

maps. Here I learned that several species I thought were completely eastern in distribution, maybe sneaking into Manitoba, were found regularly in eastern Saskatchewan — Eastern Wood-Pewee, Yellow-throated Vireo, Black-throated Blue Warbler and Orchard Oriole are examples. And it's always surprising to see all those western mountain species — Red-naped Sapsucker and Townsend's Warbler, for instance — tucked away in the Cypress Hills.

But, as in any good bird atlas, one of its greatest contributions will be in clearly illustrating the huge gaps in knowledge that exist everywhere. Some species are extremely well known, particularly the waterfowl and raptors. The Swainson's Hawk has been confirmed as breeding in 158 map sheets, the Ferruginous Hawk in 109. The Black-capped Chickadee on the other hand, a "permanent resident throughout the province" and a species easily attracted to nest-boxes, has been confirmed as breeding in only 20 map sheets. The Dusky Flycatcher, a common summer resident in the Cypress Hills, has no recent breeding records and flycatcher nests aren't that hard to find.

In short, I think that Al Smith has produced a wonderful book — easy to use, a pleasure to read and packed with useful information. Birders from Saskatchewan now have a bible that tells them all they need to know about where birds have been found in their province, and more importantly, where they can go and what they should look for to add to the huge body of avian knowledge compiled in this atlas.

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Virginia Rail, by Alan R. Smith (reproduced from The Atlas of Saskatchewan Birds).