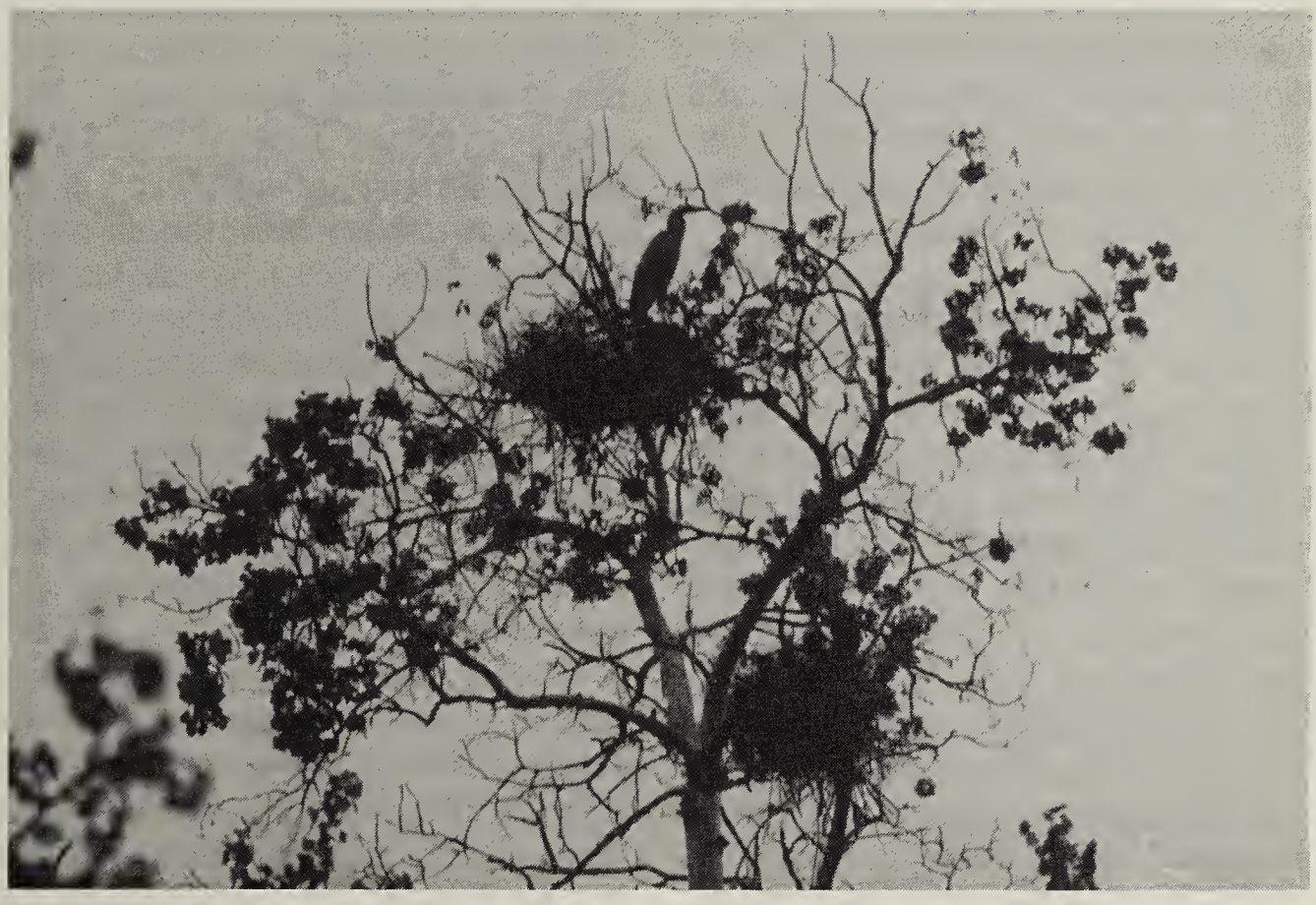
NOTES AND LETTERS

CUTARM HERONRY

The Cutarm Creek heronry is located on private property about two miles west of the village of Gerald, Saskatchewan, half a mile east of the IMC-K2 potash mine. There are about 25 nests in various stages of use or abandonment, though leaf growth and windfalls made it difficult



Cutarm Heronry *Anthony J. Hruska*

to count nests accurately when I visited on 2 June 1996 (Figure 1). We assumed hatching was in progress, judging from the number of egg shells at the base of the trees. The parents were quite excited and cautiously returned quite soon after being flushed off the nests. The nests are large and heavy, and some former nests have fallen (Figure 2), as the supporting branches of the mature aspen trees have collapsed under the weight of the nests. Each year the herons reline old nests that have survived the winter.

The Great Blue Heron, *Ardea herodias,* is the largest Canadian member of the heron family. It haunts shallow waters, such as the Cutarm Creek and adjacent sloughs and ponds, where it feeds on frogs, snakes, small fish, etc. It will stand motionless for a long time, then suddenly bend its neck to strike some frog or other edible morsel.

Fifty years ago I did not know what a heron looked like. It is only in recent years that this easily recognized species, which flies with its neck folded back, has been seen in the Gerald area.

- ANTHONY J. HRUSKA, Box 38, Gerald, SK S0A 1B0

OF BOOKS AND BIRDS

Book tours aren't a lot of fun, and "doing the Canadian West" can be gruelling — a plane a day, a different bed each night, one interview after another, the book reading, the signing, and you're lucky to get lunch. So it was a rare surprise when I hit Saskatoon in mid-October to find that the publicist, Jean Gordon, and Carol Blenkin of CFQC had arranged a special excursion for me. Knowing of my interest in birds, they'd planned Carol's interview early so all three of us could go off with Roy John of the *Blue Jay* in search of the migrating whooping cranes.

It wasn't warm, but the sky was clear and the colours were intense — brilliant gold, vivid blue, splashes of orange and red. There was a parka for me, and an extra pair of binoculars. Carol and Jean had made an excellent picnic lunch, and we sat in the car eating it while Roy, our guide, drove along the back roads searching for the cranes. White, bigger than a swan, smaller than a cow, and more than one of them — that's what we were looking for. There were several false alarms, and then, a couple of fields away from the road, there they were — seven adults and one brown juvenile, calmly grazing. Two birds we assumed were the parents of the youngster kept a sharp eye on us, but we were far enough away to pose no threat. We had a long look through binoculars and scope, and then — as if by arrangement — they put on a slow but magic dance — jumping up into the air, wings spread, one after the other.

It made my book tour!

- MARGARET ATWOOD, Suite 900, 481 University Ave., Toronto, ON M5G 2E9

NESTBOXES AND THE DECLINE OF BURROWING OWLS

The continued decline of the burrowing owl "for about 20 years," documented by Houston et al.,[1] is distressing indeed, but the decline began even longer ago, before pesticides like carbofuran were in use.[2] Certainly, carbofurans are detrimental to the owls,[1,3] but there are other factors that need to be taken into consideration in developing a

management plan for this species. Habitat loss and fragmentation is one of the most important factors, however, I believe that ecological change resulting from the decimation of coyotes in the 1960s, and the resultant explosion of the red fox population, was also an important factor.[2] I recall that during the mid 1960s there were several traditional nesting sites of burrowing owls on small patches of prairie within about 6 km of Luseland (west central region). None of these remained by 1970; some were lost due to the breaking of the prairie, but I remember one burrow that was taken over by foxes. I'm certain that the owlets were easy prey for foxes, and I'm quite certain that they played a significant role in their decline in this region. I suggest that we need to bring back some ecological balance by bringing back the coyote, which should eliminate the red fox, and bringing back the Richardson's ground squirrel and some badgers to make some real burrows, before we resort to artificial homes.

1. HOUSTON, C.S., D.G. HJERTAAS, AND R.L. SCOTT. 1996. Experience with burrowing owl nest-boxes in Saskatchewan, with comment on decreasing range. *Blue Jay* 54:(3) 136-140.

2. FINLEY, K. The Red Fox invasion and changes in wildlife populations in west central Saskatchewan since the 1960s. *Blue Jay* 54(4): 206.

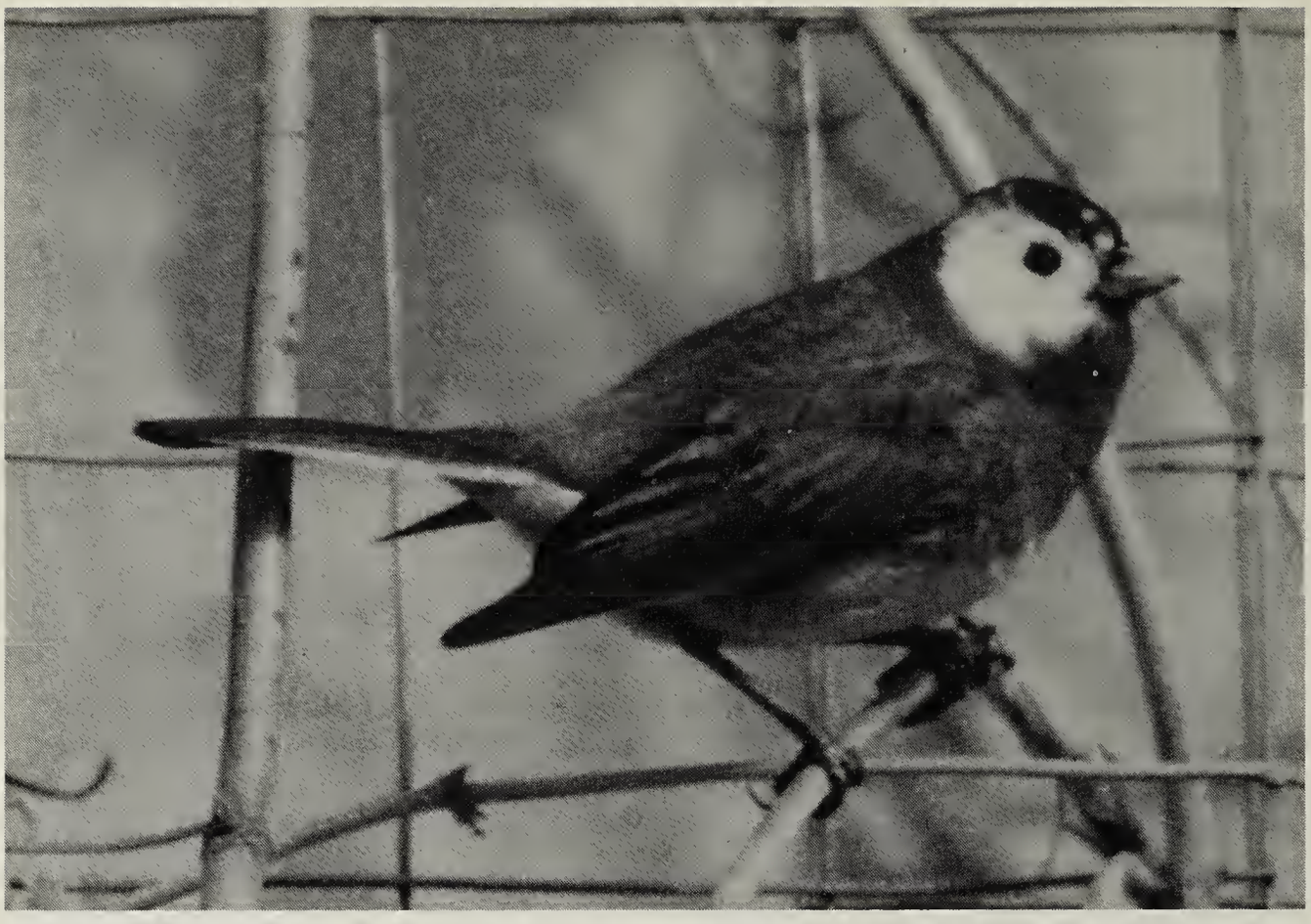
3. JAMES, P.C., AND G.A. FOX 1987. Effects of some pesticides on productivity of burrowing owls. *Blue Jay* 45: 65-71.

- K. FINLEY, Box 8, Luseland, SK S0L 2A0

FAVOURITE SPRING MIGRATION OBSERVATION

On 23 April 1996 as I was returning home from work, I saw a strange looking bird in my backyard. It was in a group of normal looking dark-eyed Juncos, but the BIG EYE RINGS made it look like a tame bird I had seen in a pet store. I ran into the house, got my camera and took a few pictures until it flew away with the rest of the flock. When I turned around to go back into the house, on

Dark-eyed Junco *Bob Green*



Dark-eyed Junco *Bob Green*

the far side of the yard, was another bird about the same size as the first bird, except it was an equal combination of white and grey. I managed to get a few pictures of this second bird, but I couldn't get as close as I could to the first one. I phoned a member of the Natural History Society to see if he could come over and confirm my observations; he was busy, but said, "If you can see the outside tail feathers when it flies it is a Dark-Eyed Junco, but partial albino." I checked the next time they came back to the yard and Yes, the bird with the Big Eye Rings had the white tail feather showing when it flew, but the other had too much white to see the white on the tail feathers. The weather turned stormy the next day and I never saw them again, although I checked all the flocks of Juncos, as they passed through our yard, but they all looked normal, even in the fall migration.

Two partial albino dark-eyed Juncos in my backyard at the same time — Can Birding Get Any Better Than That ???

- BOB GREEN, 1521 Avenue E North, Saskatoon, SK S7L 1T9

ANOTHER UNUSUAL LOGGERHEAD SHRIKE NESTING LOCATION

I am writing this letter in response to the article "An Unusual Loggerhead Shrike Nest Location," *Blue Jay* 54(2), June 1996 wherein Hendrik Kiliaan reported a nest site in a pile of tangled chain-link fencing. The author reported that this is "possibly the first observation of a shrike nest in an 'artificial' location." This letter documents another unusual nest sighting for Loggerhead Shrikes.

As an employee of the Environmental Affairs department of Trans-Gas Limited, one of my responsibilities is to provide assistance to company staff on matters regarding the environment. In early 1996 I was

contacted by Howard Harder, an operator at the TransGas compressor station near Hatton, in southwest Saskatchewan. Howard was aware of concerns regarding declining Loggerhead Shrike populations and, knowing that shrikes preferred to nest in shrubs and trees, he was inquiring what species he should plant around the compressor station to encourage shrike nesting in their natural habitat.

As it turns out, Loggerhead Shrikes were nesting in the cable trays attached to the buildings at the compressor station. Cable trays are long, three-sided, perforated metal structures, similar to eavestroughing, that enclose electrical cables. The cable trays are supported by vertical poles extending approximately 2 m from the ground. Although Loggerhead Shrikes nested successfully in the cable trays in the previous year, there is always the potential for nest failure due to required maintenance and station operation activities. Howard's intention was to provide natural nesting habitat in the vicinity of the compressor station, and thereby reduce the chance of the birds using the "artificial" structure.

Shrubs were obtained from the PFRA Shelterbelt Centre in Indian Head. In 1996, TransGas staff from the compressor station planted a total of 300 plants: 100 thorny buffaloberry (*Shepherdia argentea)* and 200 hawthorne (*Crataegus spp.*) shrubs. It will take several years before these shrubs will be mature enough to offer potential nesting locations for Loggerhead Shrikes.

In 1997, an additional 300 shrubs will be planted at the Hatton compressor station site offering a greater number of potential nest sites in the future. We will be monitoring the Hatton compressor station site to determine whether shrikes continue to use the cable trays or are selecting natural nesting sites in the planted shrubs.

- KERRY HANLEY, Environmental Affairs, TransGas Limited, 1945 Hamilton Street, Regina, SK S4P 2C7

THE OSPREY AND THE GOOSE

I was visiting relatives who told me this story about friends of theirs that have a cabin at Windermere Lake. An Osprey had a nest in the top branches of a tree quite close to the Windermere cabin. The tree was getting old and, afraid it would fall on the cabin, they contacted the Wildlife Federation to see what they should do. They were advised to cut the top of the tree and lower it to the ground. Men were hired to do this job, but they were afraid to climb the tree because it was too dangerous, so they cut it down. Again the cabin owners contacted the Wildlife Federation who advised them to build a tower and replace the nest.

The next spring a goose flew over, saw the nest and claimed it for herself, forcing the Osprey to watch the proceedings. When the goslings hatched the mother flew out of the nest and they all tumbled out after her. Then the osprey took over and raised her young. They still continue this way from year to year, geese first, followed by Ospreys.

- MARJORIE MILLER, Box 426, Saltcoats, SK S0A 3R0

CAPTURING A BEAVER

It is my habit to walk around Wascana Park almost every morning. The occasion I am going to tell you about is late fall and the lake has

been frozen over for a week. I see two tree stumps that I have not noticed before, obviously the work of a Beaver. I have always thought of myself as being very observant; how could I have missed seeing those stumps before? They must have been cut out before the lake froze over, and I have somehow missed them.

Arriving in the same area the next morning, I cannot believe my eyes ... another stump! This time the tree is still where it fell. There must be a Beaver here. I go down to the lake, and sure enough, there is a hole in the ice. Aha! I am going to get a picture of this Beaver. I will come back tonight with my camera and flash and catch him in the act. On looking around, I see that he has been gnawing on a couple more poplars, but he must have been scared off as only the bark has been chewed off.

Night falls. My wife and I drive to the area and park, with lights turned off. We sit and wait. But no Beaver!

When I come back the following morning, I see that more small trees have been cut and hauled away. I know that the Beaver is still around, so we shall try for pictures again tonight.

When we drive into the parking lot this time, my wife spots the Beaver working on one of the trees from which the bark had been chewed off the night before. The bottoms of these trees are black. The park people have apparently painted them with tar to try and save them. But the tar does not deter the Beaver! I leave the car lights shining on him and get out to approach the Beaver. I stop about 12 feet away and take two pictures. Then — wouldn't you know it — I am out of film! I go back to the car to watch. At the rate the Beaver is working, he will soon clear out this area. We must stop him.

We drive home to get a large metal garbage can. In the past, I have caught a Porcupine by laying the can on its side and herding the animal in, then putting the lid on and transporting the Porcupine safely out of town.

When we get back to the "logging site," the Beaver is still working on the same tree. My plan is to walk up to him while he is blinded by the car lights. But the Beaver begins to run. I chase him down the hill, then up and over another hill, trying to put the garbage can over him. Anyone watching would think that I am out of my mind.

The Beaver must have got tired — I certainly have! I finally get him covered. I sit on top of the can to regain my breath and composure. Here I am sitting on top of a garbage can in the park in the middle of the night! I can't let the Beaver go or he will continue his "logging operations." My wife and I finally get the lid under the can, flip the can over and tie down the lid, with the Beaver inside.

When I get my prize home, I phone the Conservation Officer to let him worry about what to do with it. No luck — he has taken his wife out for the evening! These officers are like police officers — never around when you need them! Next, I phone the Wascana Park Naturalist to ask what he wants done with his beaver. I have a hard time convincing him that I have actually caught a Beaver in such an unorthodox manner, but he finally tells me that he will send someone over in the morning. He is true to his word. My wife will have to wait another year for a fur coat!

- KEITH BARR, 40 Richardson Crescent, Regina SK S4S 4J3

ROAD KILLS OF MIGRATING GARTER SNAKES AT THE PAS, MANITOBA

On 1 September 1991, during a trip to the Landry Lake area of Manitoba to collect plant specimens, some observations worth recording were made on the dead and dying snakes found on the highway.

In the course of travelling between Frog Creek and Landry Lake, a distance of some 20 miles, I noted 32 dead Garter Snakes on the gravel road. In the remaining 10-mile stretch of road from the railway track where Highway 287 and Moose Lake Road meet, another 10 Garter Snakes were found on the road to The Pas. Thus a total of 42 crushed, dead snakes were counted in a 48-km stretch of road. This area, near The Pas Airport, has long been known as a Garter Snake winter denning area. The limestone dens have never been found, but were reportedly known to the late Fred Kowalchuk, who ran a summer store on the beach area for many years. The area between Landry Lake and Frog Creek, on the Moose Lake Road, is hereby reported for the first time as a likely winter snake denning area.

The dead snakes were on the smaller side, perhaps averaging 18 inches. Only two were juveniles — one very thin and 14 inches long, and the other only as thick as a pencil and perhaps a foot long.

Two of the less damaged, road-killed snakes were repeatedly washed in rain water until blood ceased to appear in the wash water. This removed all the grit and gravel from the wounds. The two specimens plus the 14-inch snake have been preserved in liquid and added to the writer's collection. Local road kills of Garter Snakes by the airport, in particular, have been going on for over 50 years now *(anecdotal information obtained by interviewing local residents)*. In this time, vast numbers of snakes have been killed by the passing traffic. Snake crossings are concentrated in the two-mile stretch of highway 287 near the airport.

If signs alerting drivers were erected and the traffic slowed down, it is likely that the carnage would decrease. Since this is the only snake species we have this far north in the province, some efforts to inform the public of the value of snakes would also help. I suggest that everyone interested in snake conservation at this site should write:

The Mayor of The Pas,
The Mayor's Office,
Town Hall,
The Pas, Manitoba

- WALTER KRIVDA, P.O. Box 864, The Pas, MB R9A 1K8

A NORTHERN HAWK OWL AT MY HOME — A REGINA FIRST

At 8:15 pm on Wednesday, 29 May 1996, in front of my Regina home, I heard a House Sparrow (*Passer domesticus*) scolding as they do when they discover a predator. I saw a large bird perched up about 40 feet in a 50-foot Northwestern Poplar in my neighbour's yard, near the boundary line of our two properties. I got my 10 x 40 Zeiss binoculars from the house and returned to where I could focus on the bird. I saw an owl with a round head and a rather long tail sitting with its back to me. When it heard me it turned its head 90 degrees to look at me and then flew south. As it did so I noted that the long tail, which it spread at the start of its flight, was

barred, thus confirming I had seen a Northern Hawk Owl (*Surnia ulula*).

I checked *Birds of Regina* (revised ed., 1980, Nature Saskatchewan Special Publication #12) by Margaret Belcher and noted that it was not mentioned. None of the knowledgeable birders I consulted had seen one in the city in the subsequent 16 years. I believe that this is the first record of a Northern Hawk Owl for Regina. I have seen the species before at Fort Qu'Appelle and in the Prince Albert region.

- FRANK H. BRAZIER, 2657 Cameron Street, Regina, SK S4T 2W5

EVENING GROSBEAKS ATTRACTED TO VEHICLES

On 11 June 1995, I was running my annual Breeding Bird Survey along the Bird River route in southeastern Manitoba. Breeding Bird Surveys (BBS's) consist of a series of 50 three-minute stops at 0.8-kilometre intervals along a predetermined route, starting half an hour before sunrise. At Stop No. 29, shortly after I stopped my van, a flock of six male Evening Grosbeaks flew into a roadside sapling nearby, then flew underneath the van, where they foraged on the gravel road. This brought to mind two similar incidents, two years earlier. At one stop on the same BBS route on 19 June 1993, a single Evening Grosbeak hopped under my car after almost colliding with me as I stood alongside. The following day, an Evening Grosbeak also hopped under my car at a stop on the Springer Lake BBS.

Both the Bird River and Springer Lake BBS routes are in sparsely populated, mixed-forest regions in or near Nopiming Provincial Park. What would induce this odd behaviour in Evening Grosbeaks? In common with some other *fringillid* species, especially crossbills, Evening Grosbeaks are noted for their appetite for salt.[1,3,4,6,7] In one field study, Fraser documented wildlife seen visiting natural sodium-rich springs and salt-contaminated roadside pools in northern Ontario.[2] Evening Grosbeaks represented 157 of 270 observations (58%) of birds at roadside pools, the other two common visitors being Purple Finches and Pine Siskins.

In my home town of Pinawa, Evening Grosbeaks are common feeder users. They frequently visit driveways, often foraging near or underneath parked vehicles, where they appear to pick up sand and/or salt. Some years ago, Evening Grosbeaks repeatedly visited a driveway where salt had been dumped after the home's occupants had used a salt-ice mixture for ice-cream making![5] I suggest that the birds I saw on the surveys had become habituated to finding salt near vehicles in driveways in winter. Subsequently, in the early summer, the arrival of a vehicle along a gravel road in their forest habitat was sufficient to trigger an immediate search for salt.

Acknowledgements. I thank Robert W. Nero and Rudolf F. Koes for information and helpful comments.

1. DAWSON, W.R., V.H. SHOEMAKER, H.B. TORDOFF, and A. BORUT. 1965. Observations on the metabolism of sodium chloride in the Red Crossbill. *The Auk* 82:606-623.

2. FRASER, D. 1985. Mammals, birds and butterflies at sodium sources in Northern Ontario forests. *Can. Field-Nat.* 99:365-367.

3. LAWRENCE, L. de K. 1980. To whom the wilderness speaks. McGraw-Hill Ryerson Ltd., Toronto. 180pp.

4. NERO, R.W. 1983. Ravens eating salt? *Blue Jay* 41:211-212.

5. TAYLOR, P. 1983. Wings along the Winnipeg: the birds of the Pinawa - Lac du Bonnet region, Manitoba. Eco Series No. 2, Manitoba Naturalists Society, Winnipeg.

6. TOZER, R. 1994. Red Crossbills feeding at mineral sources. *Ontario Birds* 12:102-108.

7. WILLOUGHBY, E.J. 1971. Drinking responses of the Red Crossbill *(Loxia curvirostra)* to solutions of NaCl, $MgCl_2$, and $CaCl_2$. *The Auk* 88:828-838.

- PETER TAYLOR, Box 597, Pinawa, MB R0E 1L0

DUTCH ELM DISEASE — PRO AND CON

The article "The Native Elm Bark Beetle: Primary Vector of Dutch Elm Disease in Saskatchewan" in the September 1996 issue of the *Blue Jay* was somewhat inappropriate for a journal of natural history and conservation. Once again it appears that when we find a way to disrupt our environment, this time by the introduction of the fungus *Ceratocystis ulmi* to North America, we feel justified in using any means necessary to correct our mistake. Our scapegoat is the native Elm Bark Beetle, and our solution is the "community-wide" application of the pesticide chlorpyriphos (Dursban) to effect its eradication.

In a recent hazard ranking of pesticides used in California, chlorpyriphos was ranked in the "top ten" for negative impact on human health and natural resources.[1] As for spraying by licensed applicators, if it's the same outfit that sprays weed killer on my neighbour's lawn on the windiest days of summer, then licensing is of little consolation. What's worse is Dursban is available at so-called garden centres, and once the word is out, every weekend zealot will be spraying his/her trees to their heart's delight.

The experience of communities in the northeastern United States during the 1950s and 1960s demonstrated that a committed program of pruning and tree removal was far more successful than spraying pesticides. Spraying resulted only in the indiscriminate obliteration of all insects, and the poisoning of many bird species in the process.

While the loss of native elms will have a significant impact on rural and urban landscapes (and property values), we are not discussing the extinction of the American Elm. Resistant seedlings have survived the disease in eastern North America, and their genetic material will be the source for a new population of elm trees.

An integrated program of tree sanitation, pruning restrictions, and a ban on firewood transportation will delay the spread of the disease and give us time to develop a program of tree replacement in urban settings, and time to contemplate the folly of monoculture boulevards. It will also give us time to dust off those old copies of *Silent Spring*, and to put things into perspective.

1. NEWMAN, A. 1995. Ranking pesticides by environmental impact. *Environ. Sci. Technol.* 29:324A-326A.

- CRAIG SALISBURY, 2205 Ewart Avenue, Saskatoon, SK S7J 1Y1

REPLY

I am writing in response to Craig Salisbury's concerns about the use of the pesticide chlorpyriphos (Dursban Turf) to fight Dutch elm disease as described in "The Native Elm Bark Beetle: Primary Vector of Dutch

Elm Disease in Saskatchewan" (September 1996 *Blue Jay.*)

According to the 1995 *Saskatchewan Agriculture and Food Pesticide Ruling Handbook,* Dursban Turf has a medium oral and a medium to low dermal toxicity value, with a LD50 value of 160. The chemical is applied to the bottom couple of feet of healthy American elms using a low pressure applicator, usually a backpack sprayer with a hand wand. The pesticide remains effective for a period of two years if spraying is carried out in the fall.

Salisbury is correct that the chemical should only be applied on calm days (winds of less than 5 to 8 kms/hr). Because spraying is done by hand on the base of the tree, drifting is of minimal concern. As with all pesticides, however, precautions do need to be taken. Applicators should wear protective clothing, masks, and eye shields.

Once the pesticide organically bonds, after about an hour, a toxic effect can only occur through ingestion of a significant amount of the bark that has been sprayed. Used properly, basal spraying will not, as Salisbury claims, cause the "obliteration of all insects, and the poisoning of many bird species." The chemical will only kill the few insects that bore through the bark of elm trees.

In earlier uses of chlorpyriphos for control of the elm bark beetle, the crown of the tree or sometimes even the whole tree was sprayed. It was this more hazardous, high pressure spraying that has been found to be unnecessary.

Manitoba has one of the most successful Dutch elm disease programs in North America. They have been fighting the disease since the 1970s and have managed to keep their urban tree losses to under 2.5%. This has been achieved through an integrated, comprehensive management program that includes such strategies as pruning of dying branches from elms, an annual pruning ban, prompt removal of diseased trees, and firewood checks. Basal spraying is a key component of this program, reducing the elm bark beetle population by more than 98%. All the strategies available need to be used to keep from losing our elms. A number of municipalities in Saskatchewan, including Regina, are already basal spraying as part of their Dutch elm disease management program.

Salisbury raises particular objection to the "community-wide" application of Dursban recommended in the article. To clarify this point, individual home owners should *not* have their elms sprayed, unless their area has undertaken a community-wide basal spraying program. Otherwise, the pesticide will kill the elm bark beetles on the elms sprayed, but will not prevent beetles from unsprayed trees on adjoining properties from flying to the treated elms. A more diluted form of chlorpyriphos is available to individual home owners to spray on their own trees, although it is recommended that they hire a licensed applicator.

Dutch elm disease is well-established in eastern Saskatchewan and has the potential to destroy most of the province's majestic American elms. If that happens, it would be 60 to 80 years before new trees grow to the same size as those lost. At risk are most of the mature boulevard trees that form lush green canopies over our urban streets.

In winter, birds such as woodpeckers, chickadees, nuthatches and