
NOTES AND LETTERS

COYOTES

I can't really say where my interest in coyotes came from, except that perhaps, as I got to know the raptorial birds and came to have a great deal of admiration for them, so I also began to admire the "mammalian raptors" — the hunters (rather than just "the killers"). Then, too, the coyote is so much like a dog, and I liked dogs so much. On several occasions in my early life, I recall coyotes coming very close to me. And once when I came very close to a coyote.

Ever since I can remember, I've always been fond of skating. In fact, I can remember having to attach a pair of skates to one's ordinary shoes — by means of clamps, for which you needed a special little screw-driver. You could buy the skates for a dollar or so a pair, so I had them. Ultimately, when I was in high school, I became the possessor of a pair of real skates — not just ordinary tube skates, but tube speed-skates, which had a blade of around 15 to 18 inches.

In 1925 when I taught north of Craigmyle [Alberta], Long Lake was a walk of two miles from my boarding house. On a nice day — probably in December, because Long Lake was completely frozen over — I walked to the lake with my skates. While it was frozen, there was practically no snow on it, probably a quarter of an inch of loose snow — a vast expanse of whiteness stretching across to a sandy point which would be half a mile away and which stuck out into the lake, creating a bay of a quarter-section or more in extent. The point itself was not wooded, but it gave me a reference with respect to the lake, which must have been a couple of miles across, and ten

or twelve miles long. I put on my skates, left my shoes where it was easy to find them, and started following the shore toward the east, away from the point.

The shoreline was covered with bushes and I suppose I thought I might see something as I went along. But I wasn't satisfied of course to skate in a straight line, I found it most invigorating, most exciting, because this was the first time I'd been able to skate that fall. I was absolutely alone. I started skating backwards, right turns, left turns, enjoying it thoroughly. Finally I decided it was about time for me to get back, and I headed toward my shoes. As I approached the bay, a coyote came out of the bush and started across, without apparently noticing me. I was already going at a fairly good clip, my hands behind my back in the approved style of the skater, and the minute I saw him, I thought, 'Oh here's a good chance,' and away I went in the direction of the coyote.

He didn't see me, I'm sure, and I made no noise except the swish of my skates through the little bit of snow on the ice. It retarded me slightly, so the skating was not perfect, but I could get up pretty good speed. So, it was not until I was a couple of hundred yards behind him that he looked back, and all at once realized that here was something in pursuit. Away he went. Though the footing on the ice wasn't that good for him, the bit of snow retarded me and helped him, and he got up to a pretty good pace. I can see him to this day, glancing around occasionally as he put on speed, looking at me with my arms now flailing from side to side. I took as long and as strong a stride as I could, and I was closing in on him.

It was fortunate for both of us, when I come to think of it, that there was that sandy point in the distance – because, as I got closer and closer to that Coyote, and could see him only a few feet in front of me, I thought ‘Now what am I going to *do* if I catch up with him?’ It may be that I slowed down a little when this thought came to mind — but I doubt it, because I was young and foolish, and I had a pair of gloves on. I did get extremely close to him, but then he finally reached the point, where of course I had to stop, while he had sand underneath his feet. The last I saw of him was a no doubt *very puzzled* Coyote, disappearing across the other side of the low point. It was one of my finest memories of Coyotes – one of my earliest memories of seeing a Coyote close-up. And I was close up, within a few feet of him.

- *W. Ray Salt* Extracted and edited by Jim Salt from tape-recorded memoirs , <jrsalt@Pacifcoast.net>

THE COYOTE AND THE BADGER

I want to tell you a story about a puzzling little event. It happened four years ago on a Priddis, Alberta ranch but it wasn't until some months later that I finally understood what had actually taken place.

It was a hot August afternoon and I was seated on a hillside working on an oil painting, when I sensed some movement on my left. About 30 m away, a coyote appeared and glancing at me only once, headed down the hill at a



Coyote

Pen & ink drawing by W.Ray Salt

steady trot. The ranch land was dotted with Richardson's Ground Squirrel burrows and the coyote seemed intent on checking them all out.

At the same time I sensed more movement and, looking up, to my amazement, a large flat badger arrived and hurriedly followed in the coyote's tracks. I straightened up, anticipating a furious battle when the two met. It never happened. Both the badger and the coyote maintained a respectful distance between them and worked the gopher holes, sometimes both digging rapidly and the coyote occasionally pouncing, yet each animal always working to a personal agenda.

After a while, they moved around a bend in the creek and disappeared from my view. I was totally mystified by their tolerant and cooperative behavior to each other. Later that year, a television documentary on the animals of Yellowstone National Park answered my questions. The narrator spoke about

the unique hunting relationship that has evolved between the coyote and badger, and that this special "brotherhood" has contributed to many legends in the traditions of the native American peoples. Everything fell into place and I felt very privileged to have witnessed this extraordinary phenomenon of nature.

- Louise Cook, 21 Phillips Crescent,
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Badger

Pen & ink drawing by W.Ray Salt

BOB NERO, BANDING OWLS

[In response to Bob Nero's article on Great Grey Owls in the June issue, *Blue Jay* received the following "letter" from Gene Walz.]

In a familiar green Subaru
On a farm road packed with snow
Two silhouetted figures sit
Working at their winter passion.

We honk, pull ahead of them,
Stop, and swarm around their car.

Behind the steering wheel
Bob Nero is tense and busy.
On his lap he holds what we'd hoped to see —
A supine, unprotesting Great Grey Owl,
Its fierce talons caught in Bob's firm grip,
Its head covered by a funny, white tuque.

Herb, his long-time partner,
Hands Bob a small, silvery ring.
In one deft and sudden movement
He crimps it on the owl's left leg,
Then reads aloud its coded number.
He also adds a yellow ribbon.

Leaving the car in perfect unison,
The banders meet at fender's edge
Where Bob, with quick and practiced hands,
Removes the tuque and dips the owl head-first
Into a ragged pair of panty-hose
Which Herb swings from a well-worn scale.

Pulling it out, talons-first,
From its brown, constricting pouch
Like a magician gracefully extracting a bouquet
Of thorny-stemmed roses from his magician's hat,
Bob turns the owl erect for our applause.
Yellow owl-eyes blink wildly in the stifling cold.

With an old showman's sense of the moment
Bob calls us all around.
Pushing his glasses back up his nose,
He stares directly at those yellow globes,
Then calmly bows his head, in mock submission,
Mere inches from the raptor's flexing talons.
As if on cue, the disarmed bird leans down
And combs the hair on Bob's white head
With its now-gentled beak.

Frozen in time we stand transfixed,
Afraid to clap or laugh or cheer
Lest we provoke a bloody climax
To this unscripted roadside drama.

Finally, turning his back on us,
Bob lowers his tiring arm.
The bird tenses, spreads its wings,
And frees itself from the master's grasp.
With slow and silent wing-beats
The great owl finds a distant branch:
Another ruffled but majestic "Grey"
Banded by a gentle poet's loving hand.

- *Gene Walz*, 525 River Road, Winnipeg, MB R2M 2R3.
walz@cc.UManitoba.ca

HUNGER CALLS OF YOUNG LONG-EARED OWLS

"Crazy as a hoot owl" is an old saying, now rarely heard. In fact, I have not noticed any crazy owls, but those here this summer at our farmstead 13 km north of Waseca are driving *me* crazy.

Beginning on July 13, I heard a bird squeaking loudly at 8 or 9 PM each night, and continuing until 3 AM. The maker of the sound was hidden in thickly branched spruce and Manitoba Maples. My ten-year-old great-niece would stand with me for ten minutes at a time, staring up at the top of an 80-foot spruce, the



Long-eared Owl young

B.E. Gehlert

site of the noise. Each squeak was a little drawn out, and occurred every 1 to 16 seconds. The pitch was "D," the second "D" down from the top of the piano. It was not until just after dark that the young owls came out of the thickly branched trees onto bare limbs of a drought-killed spruce. By this hour it was difficult to see well enough to identify them, were it not for their hunger calls and the fact that they were accompanied by a slightly larger, more compressed, and easily-identified adult Long-eared Owl, no doubt the parent. By July 17, there were six immatures on the bare limbs after dusk. The adult owl uttered a low, bark-like "chook" every now and then, but did not remain with the young.

I was intrigued by the fact that these owls would seem to "stalk" me in the dark. The last individual I saw was about July 31, a single bird in aspen at the watercourse above the New Dam 0.8 km from the farmstead. He followed me in the dark, emitting an occasional "squeeeek," until he finally settled into an adjacent bush.

- *Christine Pike*, Box 117, Waseca, SK S0M 3A0

Editor's note: There have been only a few previous Saskatchewan records of a Long-eared Owl pair raising six young to fledging age.



Long-eared Owl on a nest

Gary W. Seib



"A butterfly came pelting by to pause on a goldenrod, its wings closed up like hands held palms together; it untouched itself to go winking and blinking, now here, now there, echoing itself over the empty, wind-stirred prairie."

W. O. Mitchell, *Who Has Seen the Wind?*

YELLOW-BREASTED CHAT NEAR GLASLYN, SK

A Yellow-breasted Chat, heard singing on territory, approximately 50 km north of North Battleford at 53° 13' N, 108° 20' W, is some 150 km north of any previously known records within the province.^{1, 2}

On June 5, 2000, the natural history tour that I was escorting through Saskatchewan visited Nature Saskatchewan's Turtle Lake Sanctuary with Muriel Carlson as our local guide and resource person. We stayed overnight at a Bed & Breakfast about 0.5 km east of Highway 4, on Canyon Road, midway between Cochin and Glaslyn. About 8:30 PM, on Muriel's suggestion, we descended the road into the nearby deep coulee a short distance to the east. There we heard the remarkably varied vocalization of the chat. Although we searched visually from the road for approximately one hour, and again next morning from about 7:00 to 7:30 AM, we were unable to obtain a glimpse of it, even though it sang almost continuously.

The chat sang from a site about 150 m to the north of Canyon Road and about 300 m east of the base of the hill. The valley, running east-west, parallel to the road, contains a series of flooded beaver ponds interspersed with dense willow growth and had stands of poplars at the base of the steep, south-facing slope. This habitat provided a warm microclimate that seemed optimum for the chat's normal breeding requirements. Gaining access to the north side of the wetlands, in the hope of getting a glimpse of this secretive bird, would have been time-consuming.

The vocalization of the Yellow-breasted Chat is a series of loud

squawks, grunts, groans, whistles, churrs and laughter-like sounds, which, once learned, is unmistakable. I have encountered this species on numerous occasions during the breeding season, in Ontario (Point Pelee), Texas (Big Bend National Park) and Alberta (Writing-on-Stone Provincial Park/Dinosaur Provincial Park). Because this bird sang almost continuously, it may have been unmated. Once paired, song is much less frequent, unless there is a high density of birds, such as along the Rio Grande River in Texas.

Acknowledgements:

I am indebted to Muriel Carlson for showing me this area, and to Stuart Houston for encouraging me to prepare this note.

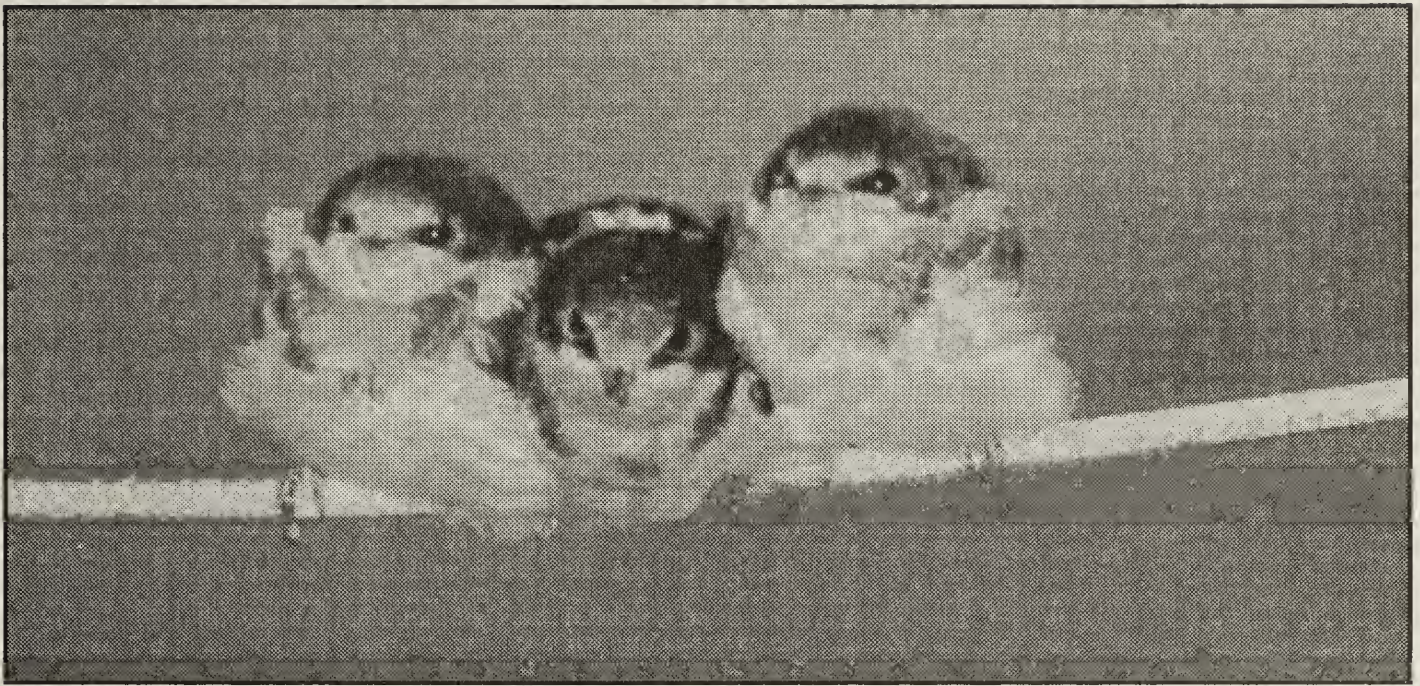
¹ Godfrey, W. Earl, 1986. The Birds of Canada, Revised Edition

² Smith, Alan R. 1996. Atlas of Saskatchewan Birds

- *Gustave J. Yaki*, 420 Brunswick Avenue SW, Calgary, AB T2S 1N8
E-mail: gyaki@calcna.ab.ca

BARN SWALLOWS COME UNGLUED

A pair of young Barn Swallows built, then abandoned, a nest under the eaves of our house, leaving four eggs. The next couple of weeks were spent by these birds in a half hearted attempt at building another nest on a nearby pot light and becoming involved with another pair that had hatched their first batch at the rear of the house. During this time the abandoned nest was filled with sticks by an industrious House Wren, no doubt adding to his extensive real estate. I was curious to see



Barn Swallows. A number of years ago these three were abandoned near death; they and the nest were swarming with mites. We raised them to release – another marvelous experience, but that’s another story. Bob Davis

whether the swallow eggs were still there and while investigating, noticed that the nest had become detached from one wall and was loose. On a whim I got my hot-glue gun and glued the nest firmly to the wall. To our pleasure and great surprise, the swallows returned to the nest, laid more eggs and raised four young! We have a fondness for these wonderful little birds and have the joy of seeing about forty new birds go off our house every year.

- Bob Davis, Box 597, Eastend, SK
S0N 0T0

POSSIBLE CAT PREDATION ON BURROWING OWLS

On July 10th 2000, in a quarter section of native prairie 10 km west of Leader, Saskatchewan, I observed a very interesting event at a Burrowing Owl nest.

Reinhold Ausmus, the landowner of the quarter section, is a participant of Operation Burrowing Owl (OBO) and reported three pairs of Burrowing Owls nesting in a field 0.25 km from his farm.

As a wildlife biologist working on a Burrowing Owl banding project with the cooperation of OBO, Canadian Wildlife Service (CWS) and the Beaverhill Bird Observatory, I went there to band owls but stumbled upon something else. Here are the details of what I observed that afternoon.

As I scanned the open prairie at about 1400h my attention was suddenly drawn to a slight flicker against the horizon. Crawling across the grass, sleek and inconspicuous, was a domestic cat. I watched the cat creep through the grass for approximately ten minutes with its body position low and tail lying flat, stopping briefly at each ground squirrel burrow. This easily distinguishable hunting posture intrigued me, especially when the cat slowly disappeared down one of the burrows. Knowing that Burrowing Owls had been reported in the field, I decided to see what the cat was up to.

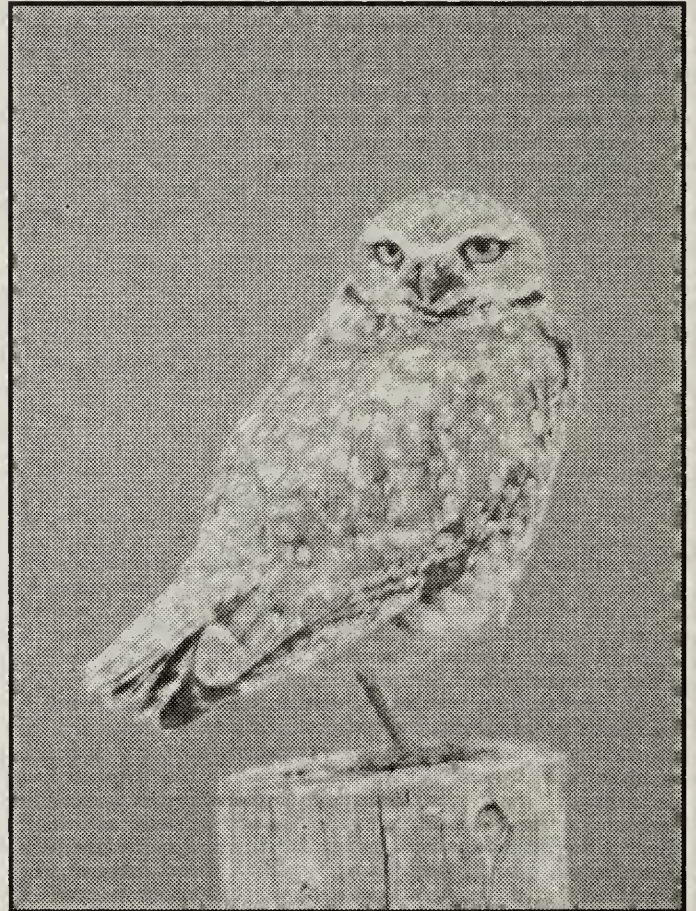
As I slowly approached the burrow, I realized that it was actually an active Burrowing Owl nest site. The burrow looked to be well used, judging by the colourful pieces of grasshopper legs,

pellets and dried cow manure scattered around the nest entrance. Two feet within the burrow I could see the eyes and ears of the cat. It was facing outwards and appeared to be crouched low to the burrow. We stared at each other briefly before it sprang out and ran away. I continued to search the field for burrowing owls. Reinhold had seen three pairs of owls and many juveniles (as many as four at one nest), two weeks prior to my arrival. I found four active-looking nest sites but did not see a single owl. Two of the burrows had Burrowing Owl feathers scattered outside. The condition of the feathers was consistent with removal by licking rather than plucking, as some feathers looked to have been partially moistened. When I examined the burrows, I discovered that a small mound of loose dirt (a cup or two) was evident two feet within the burrows. The markings were similar to that left in the burrow the cat was found hiding in.

Considering the evidence, I feel that there is a good possibility that the cat had hunted Burrowing Owls in this field. The cat behavior I observed when it crept from burrow to burrow strongly indicates that it was hunting. The cat hid in a Burrowing Owl burrow facing outwards, barely visible, suggesting that it may have been setting up for a surprise attack on the returning Burrowing Owl. The marking left by the cat as it laid within the burrow matched very well the markings found within two of the other three burrows, indicating that the cat had been at the other two nest sites. The feathers outside the two nests showed that at least two owls had been killed, and the condition of the feathers point more to what a carnivore would leave behind than a bird of prey. I conclude that the domestic cat may have been preying on Burrowing Owls based on my observations and the three missing families of owls.

I'm curious to know if anyone else has observed similar incidents. If you know of any related observations please contact me at <jeffsleno@hotmail.com> or the OBO office at 1-800-667-HOOT (4668), or geoffrey.holroyd@ec.gc.ca.

- *Jeff T. Sleno*, 23 Ash Crescent,
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Burrowing Owl

Teresa Dolman

THE FOX IN THE GARDEN

A couple of years ago, we noticed the presence of a Red Fox who showed little concern at our comings and goings around the yard of our farm, 13 km west of Eastend. Usually anything resembling a human being would make a fox disappear into thin air. Our initial fears that she might have rabies were quickly dispelled by her gentle and quiet behaviour.

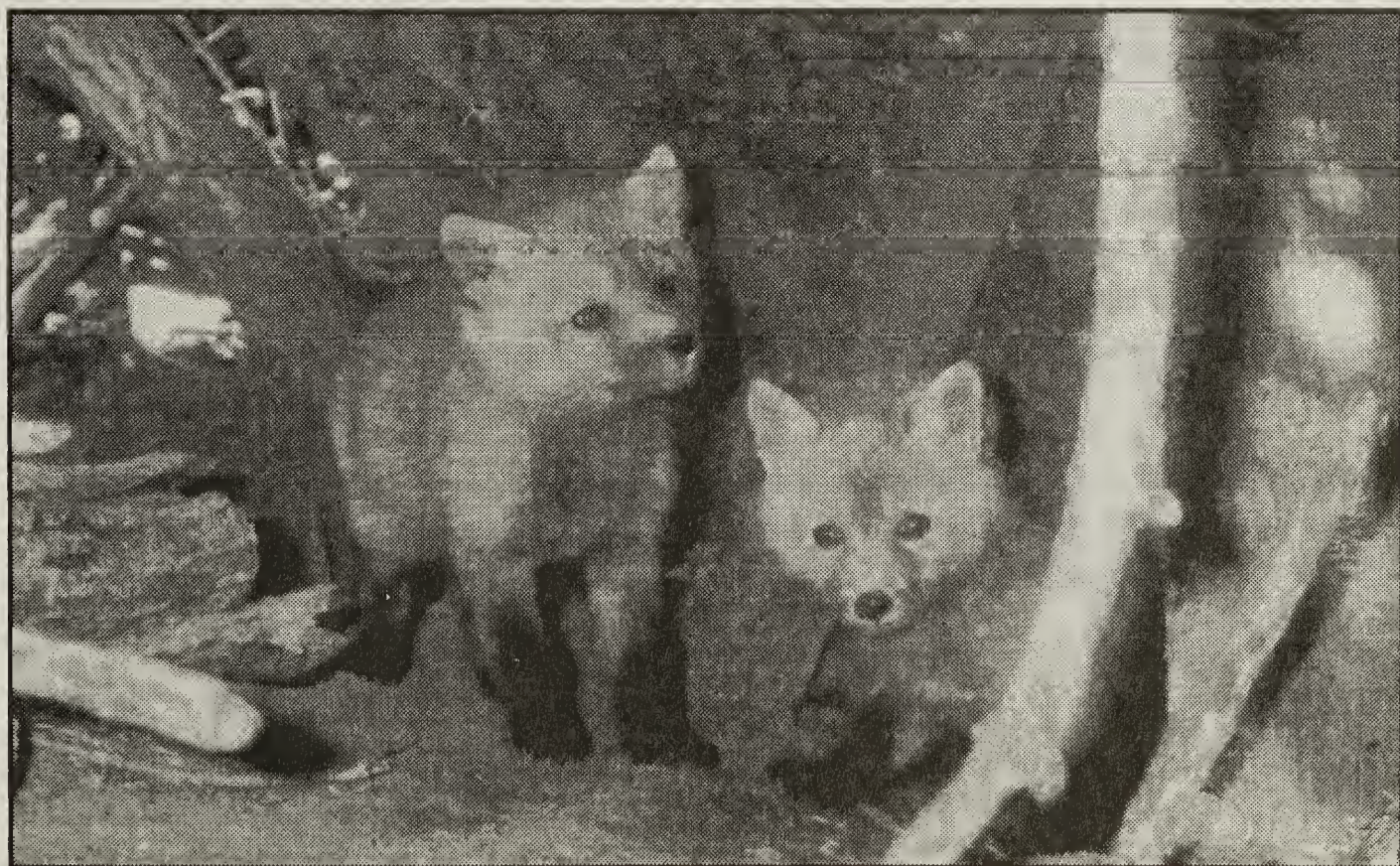
She began to join me in the garden, which lies just outside the gate in a chain link fence that surrounds the yard. As I worked in the garden, she would appear

out of nowhere, sometimes nibbling on a strawberry or kitchen scraps left for the compost, but mostly she would just sit quietly watching, or curl up and have a nap.

As the summer progressed, I thought a lot about her and wondered about this bond that seemed to be developing between us. I particularly began to think about the hard winters wild animals must experience in Saskatchewan and I began to leave food for her in the garden just beyond the gate. We soon discovered that this offering had to be left out quite late in the evening because those magnificent magpies rapidly discovered the food drop and would never pass up a free meal. She would appear very soon after the food was left and eat what she wanted while completely ignoring the pack of Wirehaired Dachshunds barking in a frenzy behind the fence not 10 feet away. Her favourite was dry dog food but table scraps were okay (except for pasta) and a cooked egg or buns were usually carried away to hide for another day.

Winter progressed, and in February, breeding time for foxes, the vixen clearly had a friend. He appeared with her at mealtime, and although he wasn't allowed to eat with her, he did his best to get her attention by rolling around at her feet.

In early spring, we were summoned outside by a commotion that only a pack of Wirehaired Dachshunds could create and, sure enough, six little fox kits were sunning themselves by their den under an old building not 15 feet from the fence. We watched the kits grow, and except for the first weeks when a visit to the shed would find them inquisitive enough to come over and sniff my shoes, they didn't show the same trust that the vixen did. By the end of June they were still slight, but growing those magnificent red tails that are the pride of any fox. By the end of July the youngsters weren't around, and the vixen was rarely seen. Perhaps she felt the need to move on, or maybe the coyotes who began to appear at the food drop forced her away. We miss her, and we hope she'll be back to sit outside the fence, wander through the garden



The Red Fox kits

Betty Davis

and make life just a little more interesting for us and the hounds behind the fence.

- *Betty Davis*, Box 597, Eastend, SK S0N 0T0

ON FLYING MINERS

Around noon on a warm and sunny Tuesday in July, a flying miner visited and surveyed a site in the driveway one metre south of the concrete floor of the garage and three metres west of the walkway. The flying survey being completed, work commenced on the task of excavating a vertical shaft measuring in width the diameter of the miner's body...approximately 5 mm. The gravel from the excavation was disposed of over an area not more than two metres away in a series of flights numbering a dozen or more. I had by this time acquired a chair and in the cool shadow of the garage observed the progress of the operation...a sidewalk super, sort of. The miner was headfirst and three-quarters of the body length in the shaft when it was completed...a depth of approximately 25 mm. At this point there was a change in behaviour of the miner. On reversing out of the shaft there was no flight, but a hurried walk around the job site to find, as it turned out, a round stone approximating the diameter of the entrance to the shaft, which was quickly popped in place and remains there to this day.

Then the miner vanished! Well, perhaps the miner flew away...my eyes are not what they were...but if it did, it was awfully quick.

I have my suspicions of course, what with all these stories of U.F.O.s and the rings in the fields one is bound to wonder, eh! And did I mention the disguise? Oh dear, how remiss. Well,

the miner was disguised as a Thread-waisted Wasp (*Sphex procerus*) – black and orange with transparent wings.

Very crafty, but they weren't quick enough. I saw the space craft in the west bluff...disguised as a crow.

- *Daniel B. E. Thomas*, R.R.1, Grandora SK, S0K 1V0

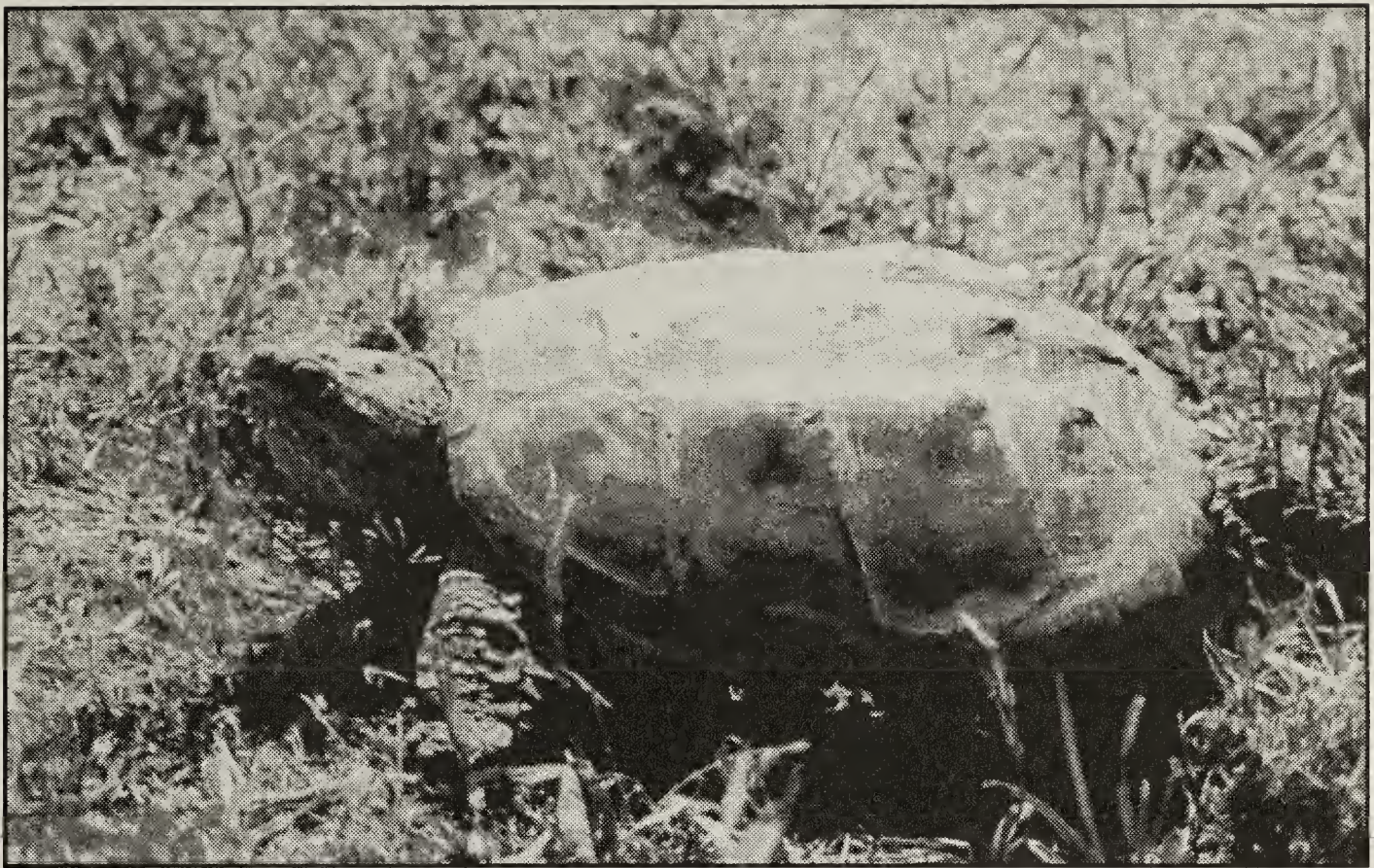
Editor's note: This is the beginning of a fantastic tale. A paralysed but living insect is placed at the end of the tunnel. The wasp lays an egg on it and it is consumed by the wasp's larva. The immature stages of the wasp overwinter in the tunnel and an adult emerges in the summer.

SNAPPING TURTLE NEAR SASKATOON

On August 23, 2000, Bob Russell called the Saskatoon Nature Society to ask that someone come out to his farm south of Saskatoon near the South Saskatchewan River to identify a snapping turtle that he had found in one of his fields, several hundred metres from the river.

Society members David Cook and Bill MacKenzie drove out to meet the Russells and their turtle. During the photo session, the turtle surprised us by moving very quickly to get on its way, being able to walk rather than crawl - a characteristic of snapping turtles. The Russells had built a fenced enclosure with a small pond and hoped to keep the turtle for a few days for those interested in seeing it.

Some weeks later, we called out to the farm to see if Bob had been able to weigh or measure the turtle. (Its carapace was 12 inches from front to



Common Snapping Turtle near Saskatoon

Bill MacKenzie

back and it weighed about 20 lbs). Bob laughed and said that just after we had gone and the turtle was alone, it had climbed over the 4 ft. fence and headed for a nearby slough. It left a clear trail to the water and hasn't been seen since.

- *Bill MacKenzie*,
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Editor's note: The only species of snapping turtle in SK is the Common Snapping Turtle, *Chelydra serpentina*, recognized not only by its size but also by the saw teeth on the top of the tail and the reduced plastron. This individual could be either a local release or a vagrant from the closest known natural population which is in the Qu'Appelle Valley. Chances of surviving the winter in a local slough are poor.



"Biology teachers in high schools in New York have told me they have eased botany out of the syllabus because it bores their students. ... When teachers do perform their jobs, parents may try to spare their children a botanical ordeal. Mothers look up my name in the university directory and ask me to design their kid's projects or provide them with literature. 'If you don't send my son any information, he may have to go to the library,' said one concerned mom."

Peter Bernhardt, *The Rose's Kiss*, 1999.