
NOTES AND LETTERS

EASTERN BLUEBIRDS AT LINTLAW, SK

Because Eastern Bluebirds are so few and far between in our area of east-central Saskatchewan, sightings always come as a pleasant surprise. Seeing *nesting* Eastern Bluebirds is extremely rare and calls for quickly buying a lottery ticket. Members of Nature Saskatchewan who attended the 1999 spring meet in Preeceville may recall a nesting pair near the Assiniboine River just west of Preeceville. This pair has not returned there since.

Spring of 2003 found us returning late to our summer home at Lintlawn, 43 km west of Preeceville. Consequently we didn't get our bird houses up in our yard early enough for their usual residents, the Tree Swallows. In early June, we noticed an Eastern Bluebird resting on our deck. Later we saw a pair hunting in our yard. Getting suspicious, we checked the bird houses and found five young Eastern Bluebirds in one of them. We felt as though we had won the lottery!

We have our fingers crossed that they will return in 2004 but looking back at past



*Eastern Bluebird nesting at Lintlawn
June 2003* Shirley Johnston

history this seems doubtful. But to paraphrase the old song, for a while we did have "bluebirds on our windowsill."

- Don and Shirley Johnston, 102 MacLean Crescent, Saskatoon, SK S7J 2R7



ARACHNOPHOBES BEWARE: RECORD NUMBERS OF THE BANDED ARGIOPE (*Argiope trifasciata*) SEEN IN 2003.

The Banded Argiope (*Argiope trifasciata*) is one of our largest and most dramatic-looking spiders. The female's body, which can be up to an inch long, has striking, narrow bands of white, cream and pale yellow on the abdomen. This widely distributed species occurs across much of North and South America, and extends into grassland regions of western Canada in southern Saskatchewan, Alberta and interior BC. In

Saskatchewan, it is found as far north as Saskatoon.

Banded Argiopos construct large webs in tall grass or against low shrubs and, unlike many of our other orb-weavers, spend the day in the center of their webs. The sturdy webs are capable of capturing and holding grasshoppers which appear to make up a major portion of their diet.

Females mature in late summer, mate with minuscule males—a fraction of their size—and produce egg sacs in autumn. These large bags of white silk, convex on one side, flat on the other, hang in the female's web.

Usually, Banded *Argiopes* are uncommon in southern Saskatchewan and Alberta, and extremely rare at the northernmost edge of their range. In the previous 30 years I have found only two individuals near Saskatoon. However, this summer several people brought specimens from the Saskatoon area to me or to the University of Saskatchewan and, in one part of the city at least, it was locally abundant. At the north

end of Saskatoon between Marquis Drive and 71st Street, there is a hundred-foot-wide strip of grass separating Highway 11 from

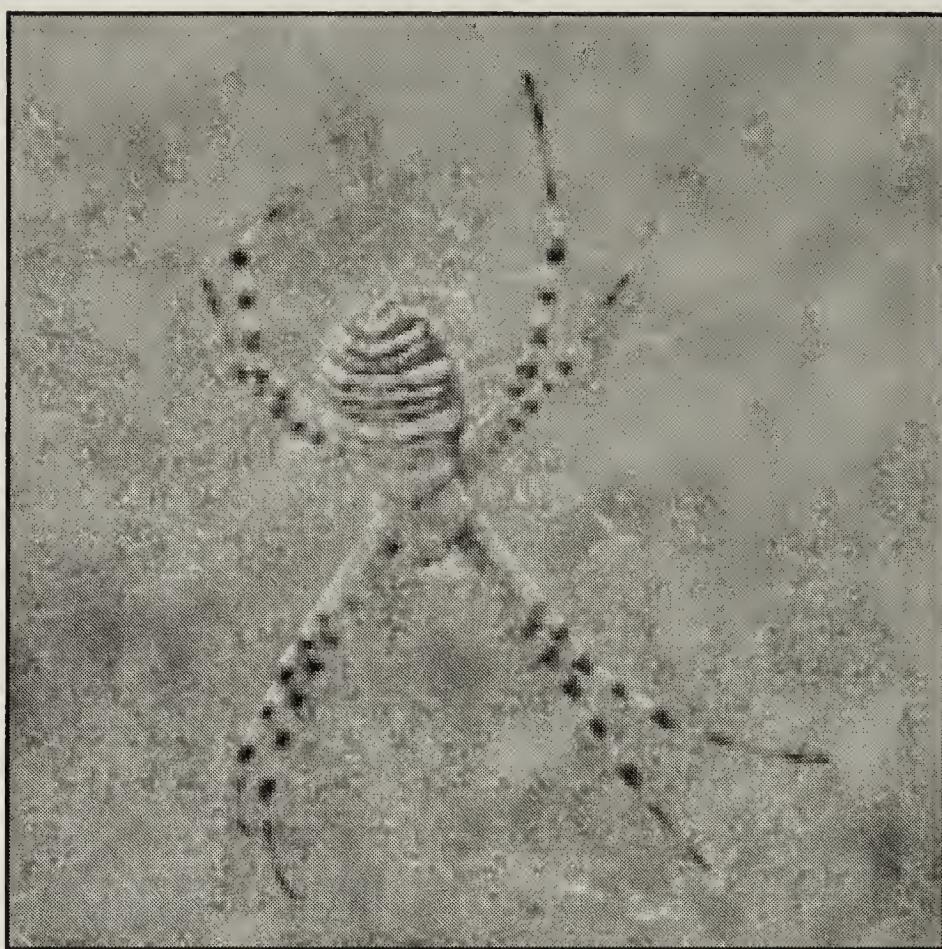


Figure 1. Female Banded Argiopes in web Don Buckle



Figure 2. Banded Argiopes females showing dorsal (right) and ventral (left) surfaces

Dan L. Johnson

the service road to the east. A row of lamp posts runs down the middle of this strip and in early September, 2 or 3 mature females had strung their webs from the mowed grass to the base of each lamp post.

Keith Roney, of the Royal Saskatchewan Museum, reports that the Banded Argiope, normally rare around Regina, was the most common spider brought to the museum for identification this year. With over 16 reported for the province, it beat the usual record holder, the Plains Orb-weaver (*Araneus gemmoides*), a large species described in an earlier article.¹

According to Dan Johnson (pers. comm.) Banded Argiope numbers have also risen in Alberta. They were rare to uncommon in southern Alberta between 1983, when his

observations began, and 1999, but became suddenly abundant in 2000. Their numbers dropped in 2001 and 2002 then rose again this year, though to levels significantly lower than in 2000.² He thinks that their recent increase in numbers in Alberta is related to drought conditions there.

- Don Buckle, 620 Albert Avenue, Saskatoon, SK S7N 1G7

1. Buckle, D. The Plains Orb-weaver, *Araneus gemmoides*, in Saskatchewan. *Blue Jay* 57(4):196-198

2. Johnson, D.L. 2000. Great increase in abundance of web-spinning grassland spiders during drought in southern Alberta: banded garden spider (*Argiope trifasciata*) and funnelweb spiders (*Agelenopsis*). Proceedings of the Annual Meeting of the Entomological Society of Alberta, Edmonton, AB, Oct 13-15



LETTERS FROM MATADOR

[In these short notes, Dan Zazelenchuk shares his bird-banding encounters near his home at the Matador Farming Pool farm site. The letters began on September 30 after three Saw-whets were caught near Dan's house; he attracts them to a mist net by playing a recording of their calls. The total number of Saw-whets banded in the area this fall was 25 individuals, a few of which are reported here. Eds]

Northern Saw-whet Owl (Figure 1)
September 29, 2003.

Hey, we're on a roll! I caught my first NSWOW, a hatch year female, on Sept. 22 here at the farm. Then, Marten Stoffel and the osprey crew caught an adult male while on the "osprey platform building" trip to Loon Lake on Sept. 27. And then last night, Sept. 29, I caught an adult female here at the farm. So, it would appear that they are on their way south.

It was the first cold night here; the temperature got down to -6°C. I set up the net at 9:00 PM, but all I saw until midnight were a white-tail doe and her fawn which were within 50 feet of my net each time I went out to check. It was very quiet. I could hear the geese and ducks talking to each other at the dams, both of which are over half a mile away. At 11:00 PM, I did hear a small, sharp barking noise from one of the trees behind me in the yard, but it wasn't repeated, and I didn't see anything. I went out at midnight to close up the net so I could get up early for work. This owl was in the second pouch from the bottom, but since the net had sagged a little, it was lying almost on the ground. I think it must have just gotten caught because its wings and feet weren't entangled and there were just a couple of threads around its head. I left the net up until 2:00 AM, but there was no more action. I kept hearing rustling from the Green Ash tree where the owl had gone after release, but on investigation found that the noise was from leaves falling in clumps because of the frost.

grey blue + b + w upper face.



Apr 26 '99 overcast light rain

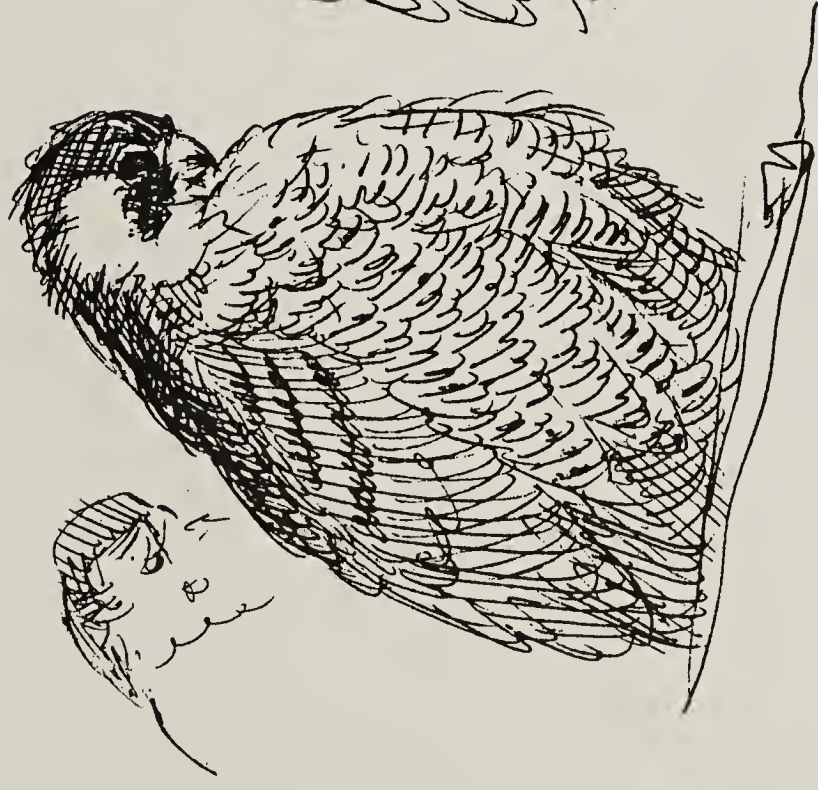
wind lifting
plumes

S. of M. Jaw
on H. pole.



black mustaches

meets a ...
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surprisingly long neck
in preening.



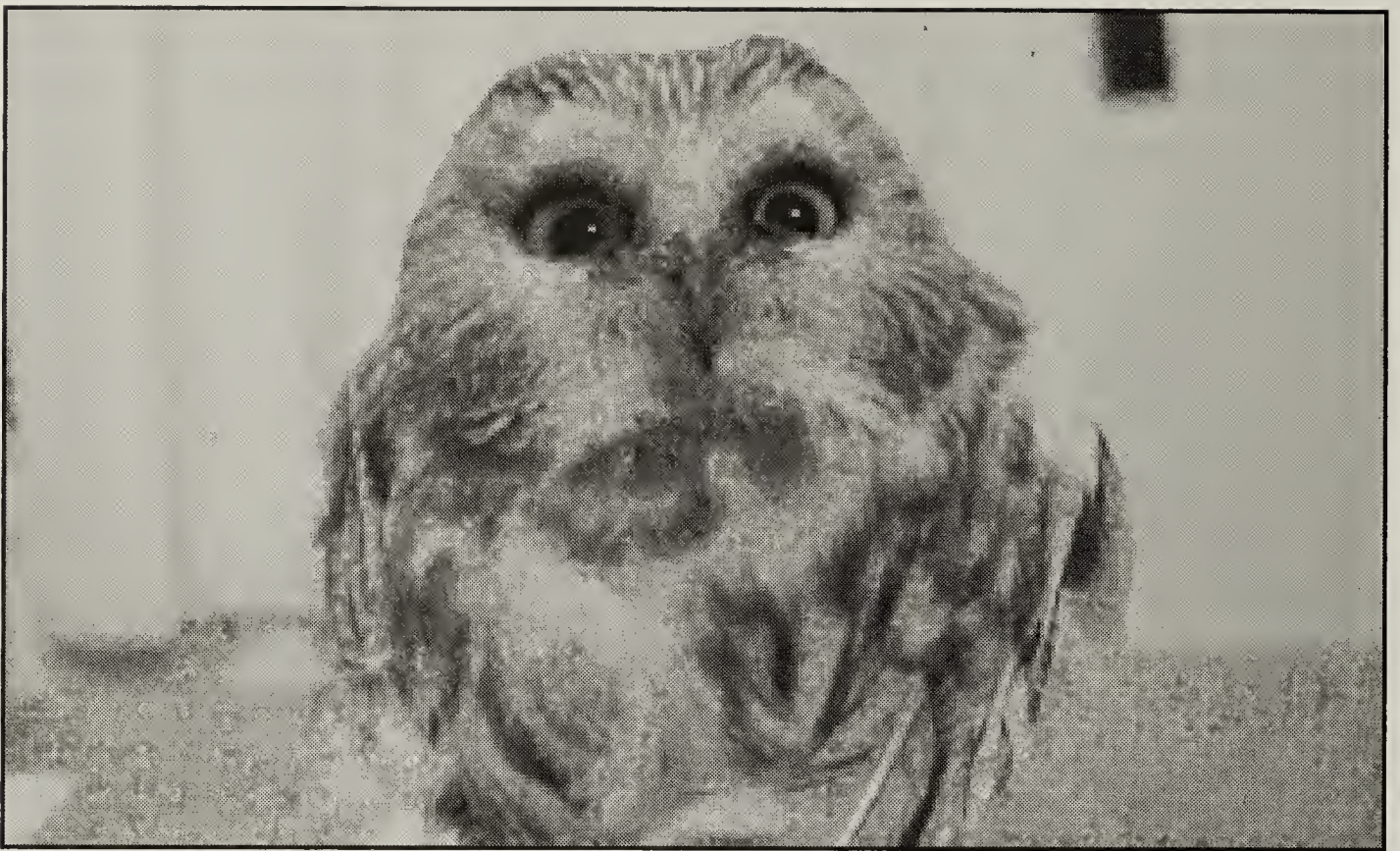


Figure 1. Northern Saw-whet Owl, 29 Sept. 2003: After hatch year female; wt. 93 g; wind chord 143 mm; tail length 68 mm; condition - good.

Northern Saw-whet Owl (Figure 2)
October 6, 2003. 9:15 P.M.

By its appearance, I expected this little guy to be at least a year old, but the moult was all new feathers. I moved the net in behind my garage to try to hide it from the moonlight, but was only partially successful. Even to my eye, the top of the net was clearly visible all night. However, parts of the net were sometimes in shadow, and I guess it was enough. This owl got in behind the net by the CD player and was caught flying away from the sound. While I worked to free it from the net, another owl called from the trees to the northwest. Later, Glen Pederson and I were able to watch that owl (or another one) make several large looping passes at the recording and the net. By that time, the moonlight was even brighter and the owl was able to avoid the net. Throughout the rest of the night, whenever I went to check the net, I could hear at least one and sometimes several Great Horned

Owls calling from the north, likely discouraging any more saw-whets from coming our way. Norman Smith (at the Blue Mountain Banding Station in Boston) had told me that these little owls would remain quiet if you laid them on their backs, almost as if they are hypnotized, and it does work.

Northern Saw-whet Owl (Figure 3)
October 14, 2003. 8:30 P.M.

I checked the net at 7:30 and at 8:00 and there was nothing. I checked at 8:40 and all three of these beauties were there in a triangle near the CD Player. Two are almost certainly female, while the third I have to put down as unknown, although I suspect it is female as well. From 9:00 to 11:15, while the moon was up, I caught no more.

- Dan Zazelenchuk, Box 39, Kyle, SK S0L 1T0. E-mail: danzaz@sasktel.net

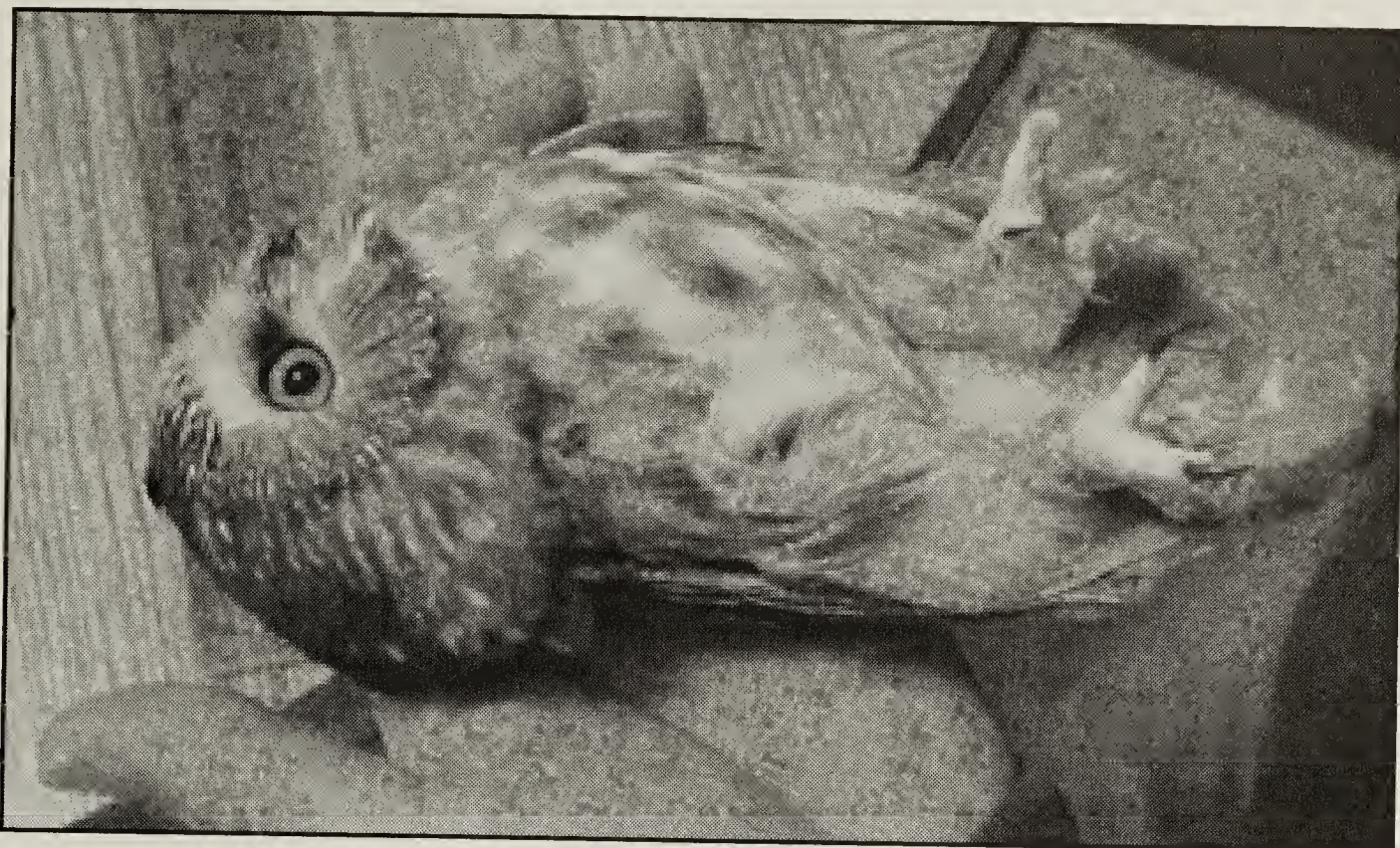


Figure 2. Northern Saw-whet Owl, 6 Oct. 2003: Hatch year male; wt. 86 g; wing chord 137 mm; tail length 66 mm.



Figure 3. Northern Saw-whet Owls; wt. 85g, 95g, 90g; wing chord 136 mm, 145 mm, 133 mm; tail length- 65 mm, 66 mm, 67 mm.

