NOTES AND LETTERS

HOME INVASION IN BIRDLAND

This story is about Cedar Waxwings and Least Flycatchers in our farmyard about 4 miles SW of Strathmore, Alberta. Around the middle of June 2004, we noticed a pair of waxwings building a nest in the hawthorn bush visible through the patio door and about 20 feet from our dining table. It soon became apparent that a pair of flycatchers was also watching the construction with interest.

By early July, we did not see much of the waxwings, but the flycatcher was in the waxwing nest area. On July 4, when I set my eight-foot step ladder up in a position to get a view of the nest, I saw that the nest was occupied by the flycatcher.

On July 7, when I looked again, the flycatcher flew off revealing two Cedar Waxwing eggs and two Least Flycatcher eggs. The flycatcher was definitely in charge (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Least Flycatcher on nest built by Cedar Waxwings. Photograph taken on 7 July 2004. *Earl Brown*

On July 9, there was no change so I phoned Reid Barklay and explained the situation. He was quite surprised as he was unaware of any behaviour of this nature.

On July 12, Don Stiles of Calgary Field Naturalist Society bird study group visited and checked the nest. There were still two Cedar Waxwing eggs and four Least Flycatcher eggs. On July 13, I found one waxwing egg had hatched and there were still four flycatcher eggs. On July 14, the waxwing chick was gone and the other waxwing egg was opening. On July 16 there were no waxwing eggs or hatchlings. There were still four flycatcher eggs though (Figure 2). I believe that the flycatcher had disposed of the waxwing chicks and the shells too because they were not able to do this while the waxwing eggs were whole.

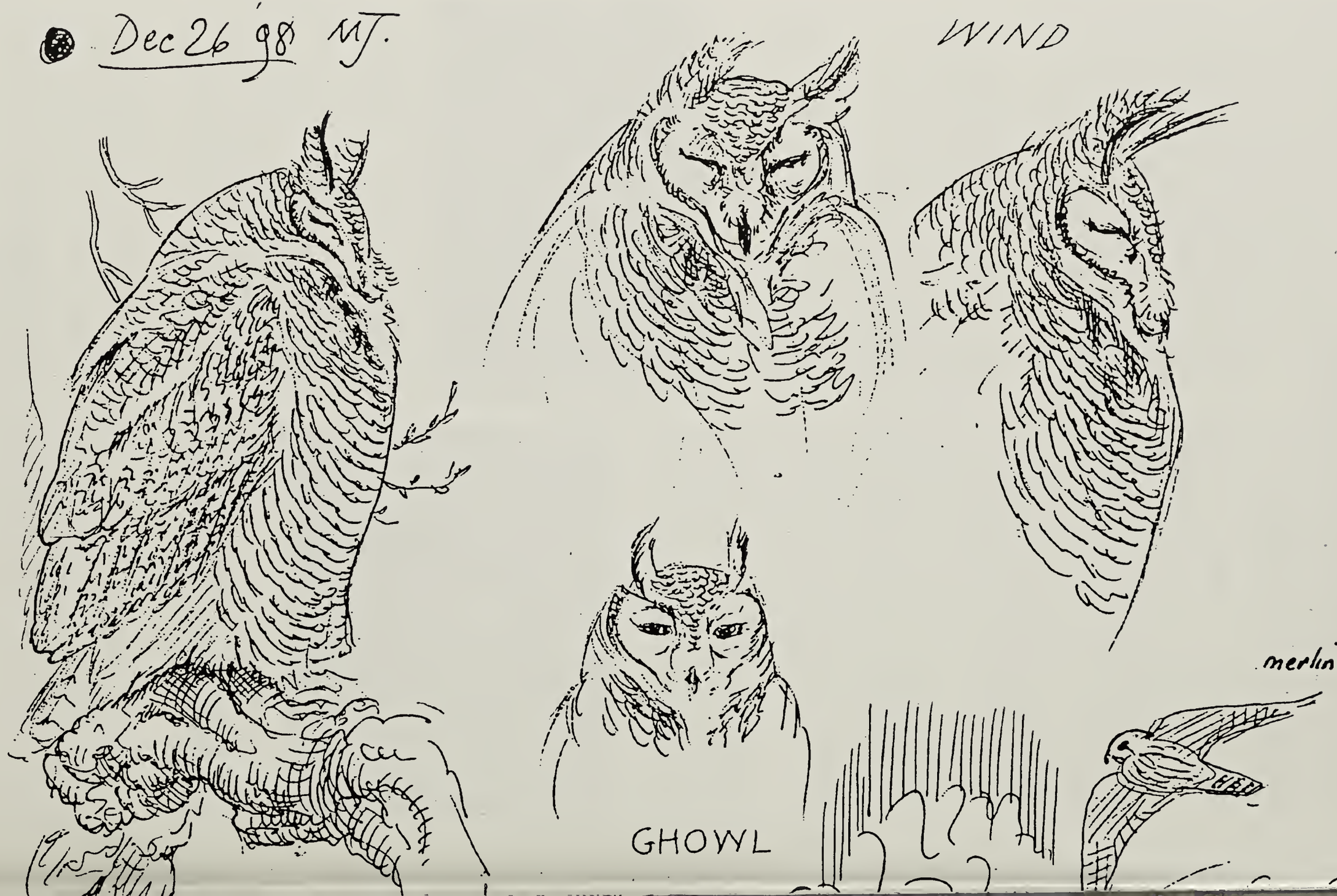
Then the flycatcher eggs started to hatch: one on July 17 and a second on July 18. But on July 19, there were no chicks in the nest, only one whole egg and part of a shell.

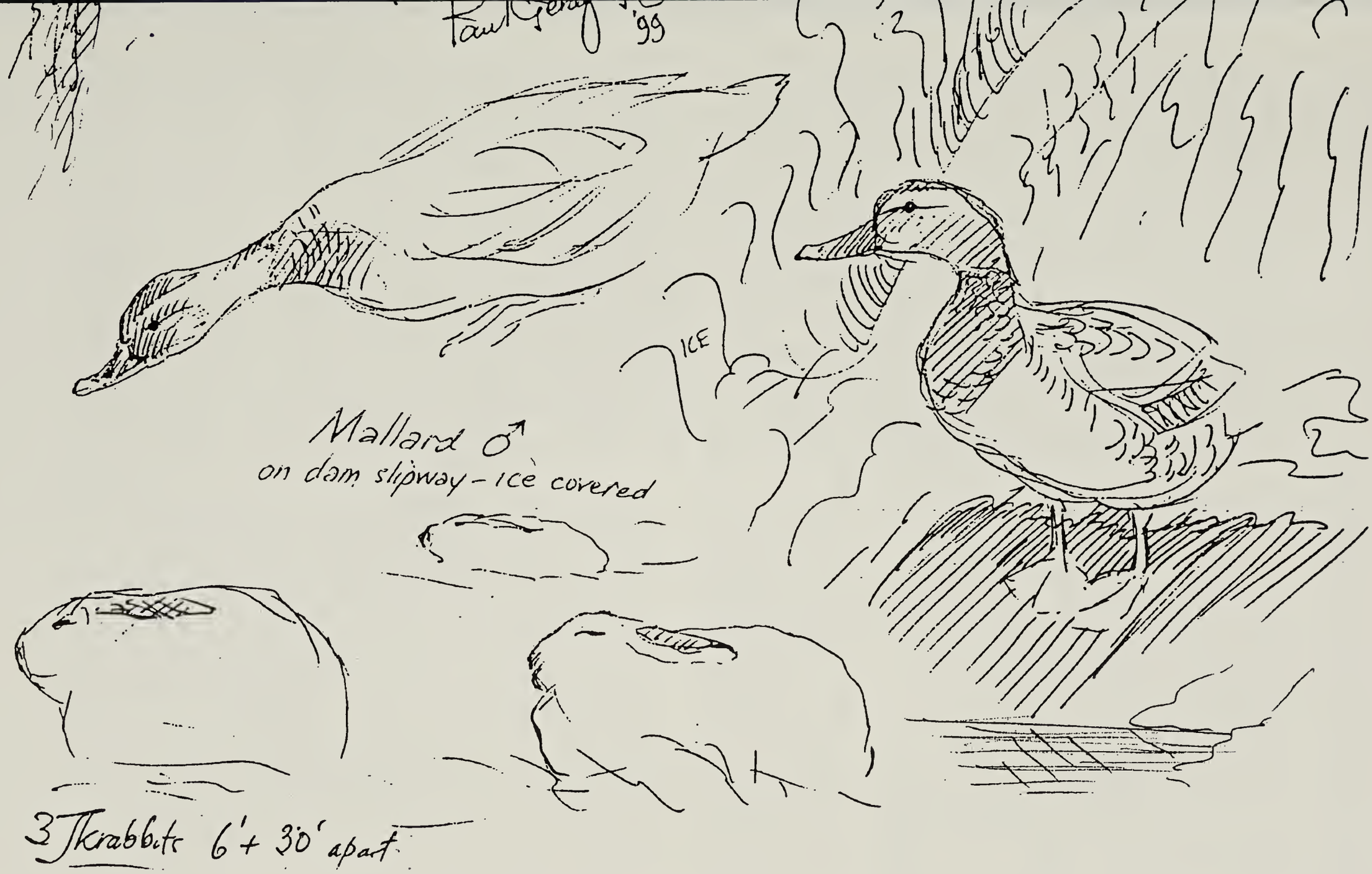
Figure 2. Four Least Flycatcher eggs on 16 July 2004. *Earl Brown*

I don't know what happened but I had recently seen a shrike in the yard about 100 yards from the house. Another possibility may be that a crow or magpie took the young birds. I would like to hear from anyone who may wish to comment on this happening.

Regarding the note in the September 2004 issue, I would like to add that Cedar Waxwings eat our apple blossoms too.

- *Earl G. Brown*, Box 11, Site 6, RR 1, Strathmore, AB


Dec 26 '98 MJ.
WIND
GHOWL
merlin


Paul Geraghty '99
ICE
Mallard ♂
on dam slipway - ice covered
3 Jackrabbits 6' + 30' apart

OSPREY'S SECOND TRIP TO COSTA RICA

In 2001, a female Osprey of undetermined age was fitted with a solar-assisted satellite-radio transmitter at her nest near Rosthern, Saskatchewan.[1] This bird's migration route to and from wintering areas in Costa Rica was monitored through signals received daily via the transmitter and a map of the route was published in a previous article.[1] The Osprey, one of 87 North American Ospreys fitted with satellite radios (Mark Martell, pers. comm.) set several trip records: the fastest three-day trip (1785 km) and the longest stopover (four weeks) short of her wintering grounds.[1]

Since the transmitter is solar-assisted and has a potential life of two to five years, the transmitter was left on the bird for a second year to learn how consistent one osprey's travel may be in consecutive years. Figure 1 shows her migration route in 2002 - 2003.

In 2002, in comparison with 2001, the Osprey left the Saskatoon area two days later, deviated up to 300 km farther east through Oklahoma and Texas, and crossed into Mexico nine days later than it had the year before. It reached its first major stopping place in Chiapas, the most south-easterly state in Mexico, nine days later than in 2001, and stayed six weeks, extending its former record long stopover by another two weeks. Evidently the Angostura Reservoir is a favourable place for fishing. Not until November 19, 22 days later than the previous year, did she reach what we presume must be an equally attractive fishing site, the Tempisque River in Costa Rica. She remained there until March 24, in Canadian terms a "snowbird winter holiday" of over four months.

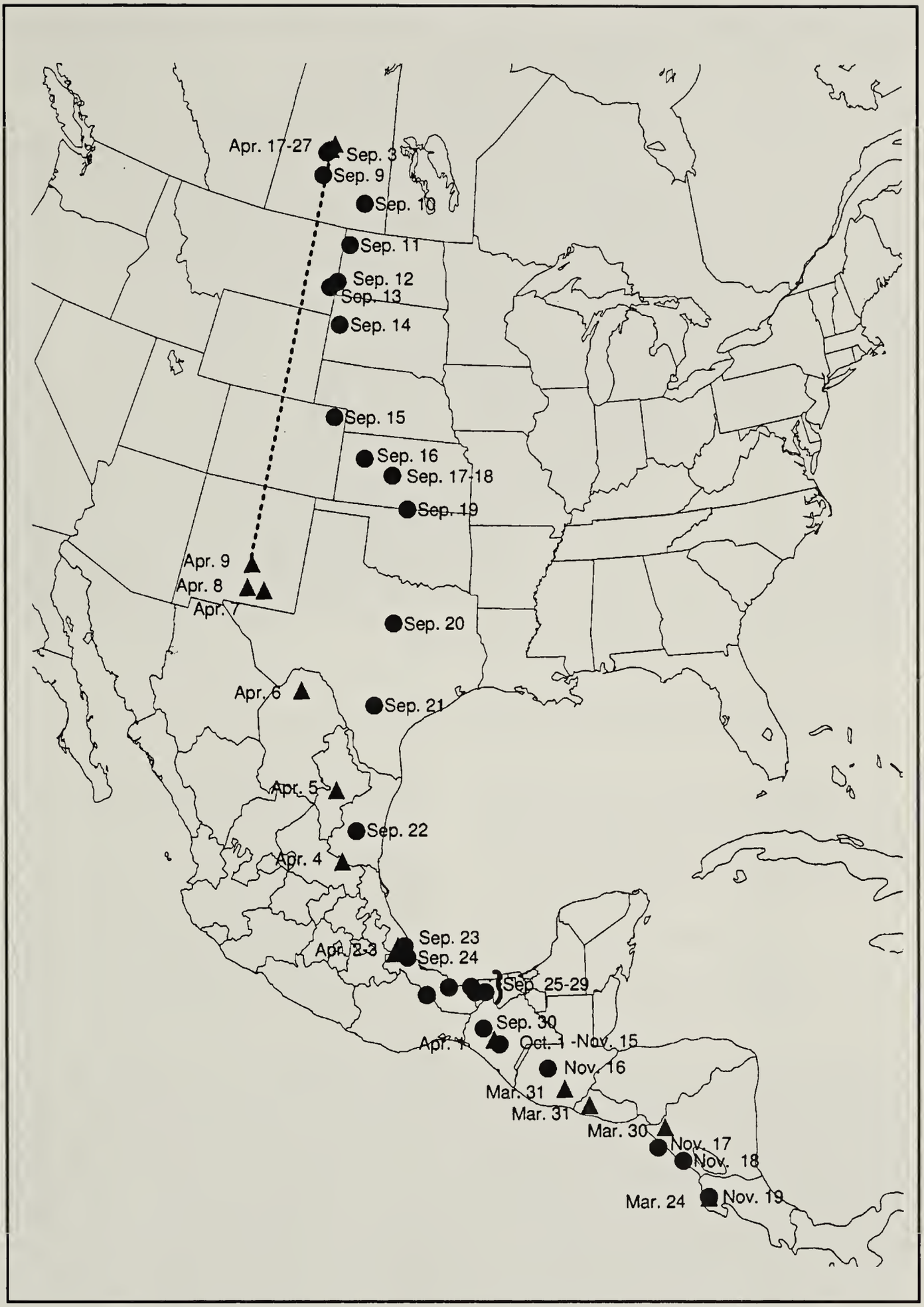
In the spring of 2003, the Osprey's northward migration began when she reached northern Nicaragua on March 30, at the same time as the previous year. She reached southeastern New Mexico on April 7, three days earlier than in 2002, and was back on her nesting pole at Rosthern on Good Friday, April 17, where the transmitter gave off its final feeble signal on April 27 and then stopped functioning, having provided no useable signals after April 9, as indicated by the dashed line in Figure 1. The Osprey was re-trapped on her nest pole on June 11, 2003 by Martin Gerard, and the radio transmitter removed. The transmitter, showing evidence of many dives into both fresh and salt water, was sent back to Microwave Telemetry in Maryland for refurbishing, and was placed on a nestling Turkey Vulture on August 5, 2004.

Acknowledgments

I thank the Saskatchewan Power Corporation, through Rae Ann Furber, and the Osprey/Turkey Vulture Tracking Fund of Nature Saskatchewan; each contributed half the cost of the transmitter (and its refurbishing), and the ARGOS satellite reports. Martin Gerard ably recaptured the Osprey. Mark Martell of St. Paul, Minnesota kindly handled the satellite reports for the southward journey until October 31, 2002. Francois Messier, at the University of Saskatchewan, took over after the Osprey Satellite operations in Minnesota ceased.

1. C. Stuart Houston and Mark Martell. 2002. Speedy Migration: Saskatchewan's first Osprey satellite transmitter. *Blue Jay* 60 (2): 74

- *C. Stuart Houston*, 863 University Drive, Saskatoon SK S7N 0J8



Adult female Osprey's second trip to Costa Rica and back. Triangles represent the locations on the northbound journey; circles those on the southbound journey; dashed line, interval when no radio signals were received. Map by K. Meeres.

Figure 1. Brood of ten tree swallows, 18 July 2001 *Shonna McLeod*

UNUSUALLY LARGE TREE SWALLOW BROOD

This report documents the apparent successful fledging of a brood of ten Tree Swallows in a nest box 50 km southwest of the Calgary, Alberta city limits in 2001.

Nest box (#18) was one of 56 along a 40 km stretch of secondary road #773. It was a top-opening plywood box with floor dimensions of 125 x 125 mm and no roof overhang. All other boxes on my nest box trail are larger, 140 x 140 mm, with 20 mm roof overhang. This east-facing box was nailed to a fencepost adjacent to a pasture containing long grasses, shrubs and dense stands of trees. A large cattail marsh was about 500 m to the southwest.

When I first visited the box in mid-morning on May 24, I recorded a few strands of grass in the bottom of the box signaling the start of nesting activity. On June 1, the nest had been completed and three Tree Swallow eggs were recorded. The weather was cold and rainy from June 3 to 6. Seven eggs were noted the third visit, June 6. On the fourth visit, June 11, eight eggs were found and an adult female Tree Swallow was banded. Ten eggs were noted on the fifth visit, June 17. Ten chicks, first recorded on July 2, were banded on July 10. One of the nestlings had a foot deformity, with three front toes permanently bent under. Figure 1, taken on July 18, shows the ten chicks of a similar size. The box was empty and all ten were assumed to have fledged by the final visit on July 24.

Current literature indicates that Tree Swallows are determinate layers with typical clutches ranging from 2-8 eggs, with averages of 4 to 7 reported.[1,2] Most large clutches are believed to be the result of egg dumping by one or more additional females. I conclude that this brood belonged to one female because, during my brief visits, only one female was noted at or near the box and only the banded female was seen after June 11.

An alternative interpretation is that two females were involved. One bird may have laid the first seven eggs found on June 6.

June 3-6 was a period of unusually cold and persistently rainy weather. Tree Swallows feed on flying insects that would have been scarce during this period and abandonment could have occurred due to starvation. Swallow eggs remain viable before incubation in cool weather. A second female, the one banded on June 11, may have arrived to lay the final three eggs and incubated the large clutch by itself.

Acknowledgements
I wish to acknowledge Grahame Booth, Doug Collister and Ross Dickson who encouraged me to document this unusual brood.

1. GILL, F.B. 1990. Ornithology. F.H. Freeman and Company, New York.

2. ROBERTSON, R.J., B.J., STUTCHBURY, and R.R. COHEN. 1992. Tree Swallow. *In* The Birds of North America, No 11 (A. Poole, P. Stettenheim, and F. Gill, Eds.) Philadelphia: The Academy of Natural Sciences; Washington, DC: The American Ornithologists Union.

- *Shonna McLeod*, 615 Brookpark Drive SW, Calgary, AB T2W 2P8

DROUGHT-STRICKEN REDWING

The drought has been severe near Kindersley. There is a slough, a mere widening of a shallow, sinuous creek bed 5 km east of our home and 16 km north of Kindersley, that has been maintained by a small dam built by Ducks Unlimited. I have kept my canoe there for many summers, paddling up and down to photograph the birds. Good numbers of Red-winged and Yellow-headed blackbirds have nested there each year.

This water body was totally dry in 2001 and 2002, so the usual dense growth of cattails and bulrushes withered away to nothing. The Yellow-headed Blackbirds disappeared completely and the Redwings moved to nest in trees and shrubs around the farmsteads.

Following the best snowfall in years, the slough contained a nearly normal amount of water in the early spring of 2003. With hot weather, however, water levels fell quickly and there was no resurgence of the bulrushes and cattails. The Yellow-heads did not return. A pair of Redwings, lacking dead bulrushes and cattails from previous years, in apparent desperation used a twig and the lower rung of a barbed-wire fence as a substrate from which to hang their nest. A weed stalk, possibly Kochia (*Kochia scoparia*) lying across the barbed wire appears to partly support the nest (Figure 1).

- *Jean Harris*, Box 7, Kindersley, SK S0L 1S0

Figure 1. Due to lack of old cattails, this Red-wing used the wire fence and a weed stalk caught in the wire. No rain, no water, no cattails. ***Jean Harris.***

COVENS OF TURKEY VULTURES

In the summer of 2001, 12 Turkey Vultures roosted for the entire summer in Cottonwood trees on the north bank of the South Saskatchewan River across the river from the western edge of downtown Medicine Hat. The roost was about 1 km east of our condo and was along a path that is my main bird-watching route. The birds would usually leave the roost in mid-morning, sometimes after sunning themselves on the nearby river bank, and would return to roost at night. A few characteristic two-tone primary feathers accumulated at the base of the cottonwood trees. As Turkey Vultures do not breed for a few years, the birds were assumed to be non-breeding young. Starting in late July of this summer, up to eight vultures were roosting in the same general area. People living directly across from the river from the roost had numerous sightings of the vultures.

On September 14, 2004, Al Smith of the Canadian Wildlife Service and I were visiting with Ross Dickson during his hawk migration watch at Last Mountain Regional Park in Saskatchewan. The watch is basically similar to Frank Switzer's May 'sit' in Wascana Park in Regina, except that instead of Frank's one-day sit, Ross does it for six weeks. Truly a work of dedication. Suddenly a flock of six Turkey Vultures flew over us with two more in about five minutes and another two after an additional five minutes. All the birds were drifting with the wind that was blowing from the southwest. Several birds had red heads indicating their adult status. None of the birds had green and white wing tags which would have indicated that they had been banded in the C. S. Houston vulture-banding project. The vultures were the first seen by Ross in his current project and Al Smith, in his many years of banding at Last Mountain Regional Park, had never encountered one there.

James L. W. McKay, 1135 - 3rd Street N.W., Medicine Hat, AB T1A 7Y4

Turkey Vulture ***R. E. Gehlert***

LATE FLIGHT OF WHOOPING CRANES AND OTHER OBSERVATIONS FROM THE BIRCH HILLS AREA OF SASKATCHEWAN

On 1 November 2004, I received a phone call from Peter Jensen of Birch Hills who informed me about three Whooping Cranes he had seen just west of Muskiki Lake located ten kilometers south of Cudworth. They were near Highway #2 but when Peter and his wife, Shirley, stopped the truck for a better look, two of the birds became agitated and began hopping into the air and flapping their wings in an abbreviated imitation of their spring mating ritual. The other bird, which appeared to be somewhat smaller and of an off-white color with some suggestion of rusty coloring on its breast and neck, seemed reluctant about reacting to any possible danger and continued foraging in the stubble. However, after a few minutes, all three birds took off and flew towards the large alkaline lake. In flight the three birds showed very little difference in size or coloring.

Flying slowly and with no apparent sense of direction a meter or so above the surface, the three birds seemed to have intentions of landing in the lake before finally gaining altitude and flying south toward some distant stubble fields. Since the sighting was made on the last day of October, Peter commented that he's never seen whoopers this late in the season. We speculated that maybe they were late nesters and that the smaller bird, a juvenile, may have needed more time to 'find its wings'.

In conjunction with this, Peter also commented about hunting deer northeast of Prince Albert near Shipman when, in fairly dense bush, he and his party flushed several lone greyish Ross's Geese who flew away with no appearance of physical injury. He speculated that maybe these were young birds that had become exhausted and landed wherever they happened to be until they were rested enough to continue their journey.

Peter also remarked on the numbers of Bald Eagles that passed through his farm this year. Another bird watcher, Otto Opseth of the Hagen district, told me that in mid-October there were as many as fifteen eagles hanging around Jumping Lake, nine miles south of Birch Hills. Since that's a popular hunting spot, it's possible that the eagles were attracted to the bodies of wounded waterfowl that died after gliding into the lake and then floated to shore.

Finally, on a personal note, on the way back from Saskatoon on October 23, my wife, Marg, and I saw Rough-legged Hawks all along Highway #41. It was amazing. They were everywhere, some roosting on snags or fence posts but most soaring or flying. It was as if they had all decided that this was 'the day' for traveling. However, we'd just been through several blustery days with snow and freezing rain and the change to more seasonable weather may simply have allowed them to finally find more favorable flying conditions and a good tail wind.

- *Maurice Mareschal*, Box 301, Birch Hills, SK S0J0G0
E-mail: <m.mareschal@sasktel.net>

[In mid-November, this letter appeared in modified form in Prince Albert's *Rural Roots* edited by Ruth Griffiths.]

"Root touched root across this empire. The harsh edged leaves locked fingers, and the thoughtless west wind bore the pollen to the feathery purple stigmas of the husk-cupped flowers."

- Donald Culross Peattie, *A Prairie Grove*, p.11

DISCARDED DRINK CONTAINERS SAMPLE SMALL MAMMALS

During the mid-1970's while studying small mammals in central Alberta, I often noted empty drink containers, some glass and some aluminum with pull-tab openings, thrown from passing vehicles into the ditch. I knew that these containers acted as traps for some insects, and in the course of my study I discovered that they also captured small mammals, particularly the shrews. If the container happened to lie with its mouth and neck inclined upward, then the mammal entering it would be unable to climb up the smooth interior and escape. These captures scarcely qualify as a "field method" but I found that, both in the Pigeon Lake region and elsewhere, they sometimes provided supplementary information on the species present. The remains were usually decomposed and identifiable only by skull or dental characteristics. On occasion a bottle contained the remains of more than one individual.

During more than two decades of field studies throughout south and central Alberta, I recorded seven species of small mammals in discarded bottles and cans. They were Masked Shrew, *Sorex cinereus*; Arctic Shrew, *Sorex arcticus*; Dusky Shrew, *Sorex monticolus*; Meadow Vole, *Microtus pennsylvanicus*; Red-backed Vole, *Clethrionomys gapperi*; Deer Mouse, *Peromyscus maniculatus* and Meadow Jumping Mouse, *Zapus hudsonius*. The most frequently-encountered species was the Masked Shrew. Mice and voles were almost always immatures, small enough to enter the narrow openings.

- *Jim R. Salt*, Email: <jrsalt@Telus.net>

A REQUEST FOR INFORMATION ON FRESHWATER WORMS

I wish to describe a natural history phenomenon I saw sixty-odd years ago in the summer of 1942 and have never seen since nor ever read any explanation of nor even any allusion to. In a road ditch, a rain-fed pool had an alluvial mud bank in it under some six inches of water. I forget how big the pool was, but if it was in a road ditch, it would have been at most a couple of feet wide, but likely several feet long. At any rate, one could stand or crouch on the road edge and see what was going on in the water.

Worm-like creatures some 4 - 5 cm long in visible length had their rear (?) ends embedded in the mud of the bottom. Their red-brown bodies were some 0.5 - 1.0 mm in diameter and were embellished with short legs (?) or cilia (?) about 1 mm long. Their bodies writhed ceaselessly from side to side in the sunlit water. I don't recall any visible head. The cilia or legs extended all the way up from the surface of the mud bank to the free tip of the beastie. I can't remember whether the cilia or legs were on one side of the body or all around its circumference; the creatures may have been writhing too steadily for one to decide between these choices, or even to think about placement of the cilia.

The location was at the east edge of N.E. 1/4 4-13-12 W. 2nd, seven miles north of Osage, SK. The earthen road ran north and south within a shallow ravine also draining north to south. Thus there would be enough gradient upstream in the road ditch for rainwater to erode the ditch upstream and deposit a mud bank in any pool produced by levelling out of gradient. I have a vague recollection of seeing this phenomenon on more than one sunny day in the period mid-June to mid-July.

One reads of marine worms extending from their burrows in a muddy bottom and wriggling about to catch small aquatic life-forms, but I've never read of any similar freshwater life-form.

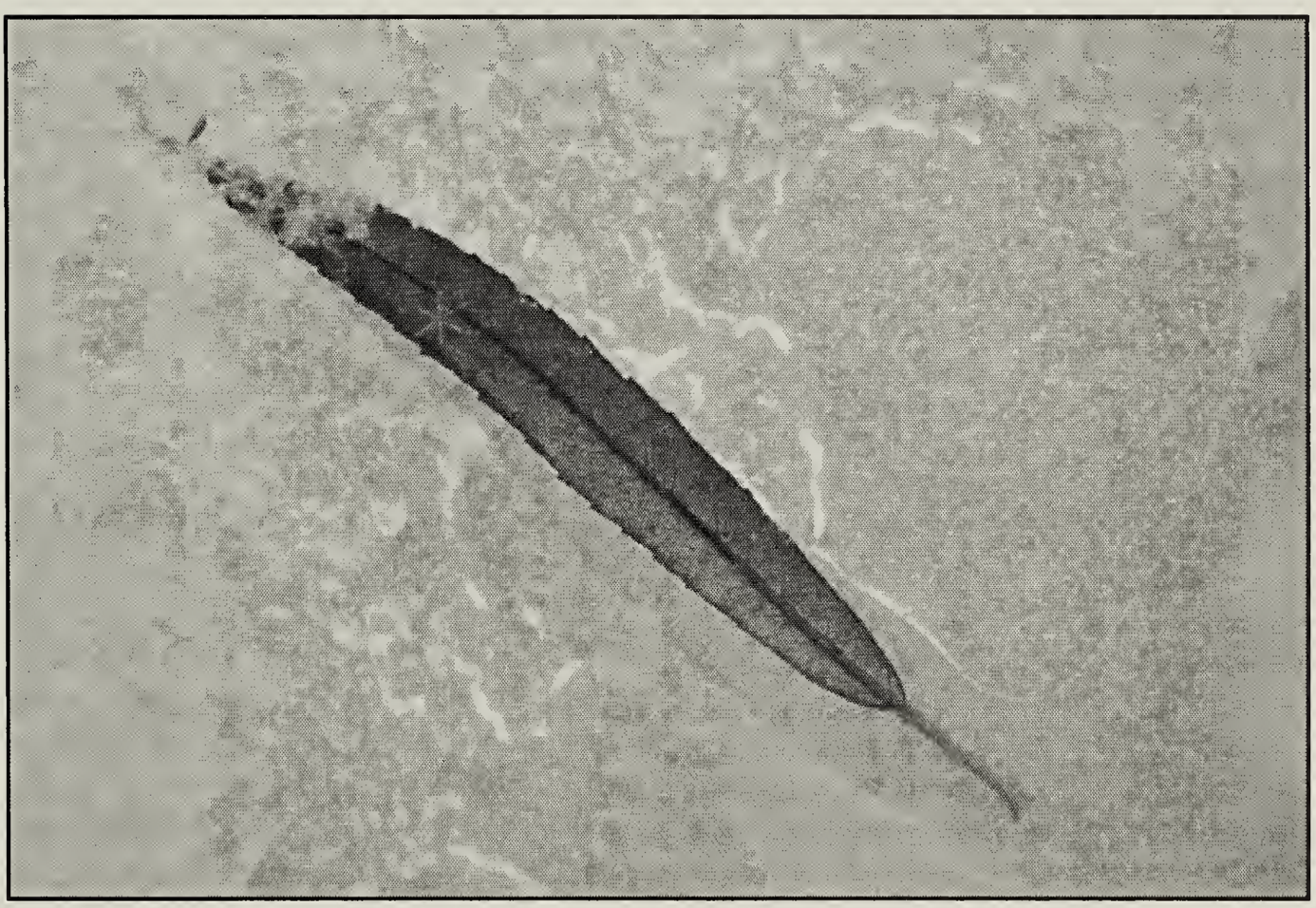
- *John Hudson*, 103 Richmond Crescent, Saskatoon, SK S7K 1A9

POETRY

WIND SHOWER

Once again December winds
have scattered willow leaves
across the clean white snow...
Torn from our neighbors' tree
long after we've put away rakes
their dark sinuous shapes
lie like swimming smelt
schooling down the shoveled path
or trapped in our dog's plunge holes...
artful forms overlooked when fallen
and blown on autumn's lawn;
now sprinkled on top the snow
these double-pointed leaves
provide unexpected excitement.

- Bob Nero



Willow leaf in ice ***Anna Leighton***