

BIRDLIFE OF THE CHURCHILL REGION: STATUS, HISTORY, BIOLOGY.

JOSEPH R. JEHL, Jr. 2004. Trafford Publishing, Victoria, BC. 152 pp., soft cover. ISBN: 1-4120-3107-9. Available from Churchill Northern Studies Centre, Churchill MB for \$24.95 plus shipping and handling.

The avifauna of the Churchill, Manitoba region has been studied longer and in more depth than that of almost any other area in North America. Following the construction of the railway to the town in the 1920s and the subsequent opening of the port in the early 1930s, professional ornithologists have flocked to the area to study its bird life. There is currently no other place in North America, and possibly the world, where the sub-arctic can be visited with such ease and in such comfort, at a relatively low cost.

In 1970 Jehl and Smith detailed what was known by then about the local birds in *Birds of the Churchill Region, Manitoba*. Much has changed since. Research has flourished, with on-going studies of geese, shorebirds, longspurs, and other species. Annual visits by birding tour groups and individuals, particularly since the 1970s, have led to numerous discoveries of rarities. Some breeding species common half a century ago, such as Semipalmated Sandpiper and Lapland Longspur, have all but disappeared, while others, such as Ross's Gull and Black-backed Woodpecker have become established in the last few decades.

Now Joseph Jehl Jr. has documented all these changes in *Birdlife of the Churchill Region: Status, History, Biology*. A handsome Hudsonian Godwit—one of Churchill's signature species—balancing atop a tamarack, graces the front cover. The chapters follow a fairly standard order: Foreword, A brief ornithological history, The

setting, Changes in the environment, and The avifauna, followed by The birds of Churchill, an annotated species list, which makes up the bulk of the text. The individual species' accounts range in size from a few lines for some accidental species to four pages for Snow Goose; they include information from as recently as the summer of 2004. In general, larger species, such as geese, shorebirds and gulls, receive more extensive write-ups than songbirds, reflecting which groups have been studied most.

Scattered through the introductory chapters are a number of black-and-white photographs, maps and graphs, while a signature of eight pages shows 24 species in the middle of the book. The colour reproduction of these otherwise excellent photographs could be improved.

Of particular charm and interest are numerous side-bars, written by Jehl and other scientists, highlighting research on certain species. Anyone interested in learning about the damage Snow Geese have wreaked at their La Pérouse Bay colony, or the sex life of Smith's Longspurs, will find a wealth of information here. Several accounts are introduced by a brief quote from Samuel Hearne's 1795 treatise on Churchill's birds, another nice touch.

The bibliography, listing some 300 references, is followed by two appendices, which detail Christmas Bird Count results and clutch sizes of Churchill birds.

There appear to be few, if any, factual or typographical errors; none is major.

For anyone who has visited the area, this book will bring back fond memories. For those who have yet to go, *Birdlife of the Churchill Region* should provide ample stimulus to do so.

Finally, it should be mentioned that all proceeds will be used in support of bird research. At \$24.95 this book is a steal; make it part of your bird book collection. Better still, bring it along when you come and visit this birders' paradise.

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PRAIRIE: A NATURAL HISTORY

CANDACE SAVAGE. 2004. Greystone Books and David Suzuki Foundation, Vancouver. 308 pages, 119 colour photographs, 116 black and white drawings, 19 maps, 26.0 cm by 19.7 cm. ISBN: 1-55054-985-5. Hardcover. \$60.00 Can.

This impressive book by noted Saskatchewan author Candace Savage neatly describes many aspects of the natural history of the Great Plains from Canada to New Mexico and Texas. The information in this book was meticulously researched and reviewed by an advisory panel of Great Plains experts from Canada and the United States. Colour photographs primarily by James Page, but also by Arthur Savage, including several outstanding bird close-ups (the photo of Burrowing Owls is my favourite), and line drawings by Joan Williams amply illustrate the 300 pages of readable, informative text. Even before you open the book, the front cover photograph, a captivating portrait of a prairie landscape by Branimir Gjetvaj, foretells its beauty. Maps are an important part of a book that covers a region as large as the Great Plains of North America and they are given due attention. Prepared by Canadian Plains Research Centre, the size and layout of each map clearly and attractively displays the information inherent in each.

The book is divided into nine chapters. After the introductory chapter, 'Where Is Here?', chapters 2 through 8 cover geology of the prairie region, grasses, soil, animals that live in rangeland, water, woodlands, farming and the future. Chapter 2, 'Digging into the Past', describes the fascinating

geological and paleontological history of the Great Plains. 'The Geography of Grass,' Chapter 3, explains how evolutionary adaptations, climate, grazing and fire allow grasses to dominate most of the Great Plains and determine the regional differences in plant communities. The fourth chapter, 'Secrets of the Soil,' examines the formation and types of soils and their biota, the role of nitrogen fixing bacteria, and the impacts of burrowing mammals and exotic invasive earthworms on the soil. 'Home on the range,' Chapter 5, discusses the impact of herbivores and predators and the role of natural disturbance and pollination to healthy, patchy grasslands. 'Water of Life,' looks at the importance of marshes, rivers, and lakes to the biodiversity of the Great Plains, 'the duck factory,' and how marsh drainage and river damming and channelization affect aquatic and riparian ecosystems. In Chapter 7, 'Prairie Woodlands,' topics such as planting of shelterbelts and the role of fire suppression in promoting woody vegetation are covered. 'The Nature of Farming,' Chapter 8, discusses how farming has affected the Great Plains ecosystem in the last 100 years. The final chapter, 'Long-Range Forecast,' deals with man-made stresses and climate change on the Great Plains ecosystems, the resilience of these ecosystems and the positive actions of many landowners.

There are two appendices: a list of scientific names of species mentioned in the book and a list of the vertebrates endemic to the Great Plains. An extensive but selective bibliography and an index are included. Although the author minimized technical jargon as much as possible, a glossary would have been helpful to readers unfamiliar with the technical terms used in the book.

No single book on a subject as large as the Great Plains can cover all topics equally. Several topics that I feel didn't receive sufficient coverage are fish communities, natural island forests such as the Cypress Hills, First Nations and their traditional knowledge of the Great Plains, prominent expeditions and naturalists during 16th to 20th centuries and impacts of human demographic changes on the Great Plains.

Candace Savage is a wonderful writer who has lived her whole life in the prairie environment, observing details and learning the fundamentals. In this book she combines her love and appreciation of the prairies with a wealth of scientific knowledge. With her

delightful and straightforward writing style, she takes us through her home landscape, introducing us to the small inhabitants ("waterbears, that waddle through the film of water around soil granules") and the largest structures, "the Earth's core—the yolk of the planetary egg". She also carefully examines the interface of nature and the human activities that the prairies support. The balanced view that the author brings to this topic reflects her long association with the prairie environment and its people.

I highly recommend this book to anyone interested in the Great Plains. Seldom do writing craftsmanship and respect for scientific fact come together to make such a readable book. *Prairie* is a pleasure to read cover to cover, one chapter at a time or in small pieces by just sampling the text boxes and illustrations. This book is truly a gift to all interested in the natural history of the prairies.

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Some of the 40 cormorants perched on the power lines just south of the weir in Saskatoon on 27 August 2004.

Vera Giesbrecht