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NOTES AND LETTERS

FRANKLIN'S GULLS KILL WOUNDED INDIVIDUAL

On a beautiful September day about 15 years ago, I was watching flocks of Franklin's Gulls feeding on grasshoppers and mice while I was summerfallowing, about 5 miles southwest of Kyle, SK. One gull struck an overhead power line and fell to the ground. It walked around with its broken wing hanging out painfully. Within

seconds, other gulls spotted this situation and immediately attacked and killed the wounded bird. Then they left it in the field and went about their regular routine of soaring and feeding. Could this have been a case of mercy killing?

- *Cameron Brose*, 627 Advent Bay, Calgary, AB T1X 1N8

PAINTED TURTLES IN WASCANA LAKE

The Painted Turtle shown in the inside back cover was photographed on the south shore of Spruce Island in Regina's Wascana Lake on August 25, 2006. On one hot afternoon in 2006, I saw eight turtles sunning themselves in this area. It surprised me to see so many turtles because three years ago the lake was totally dug out and no turtles could have survived that event.

- *Diether Peschken*, 2900 Rae Street, Regina, SK S4S 1R5.

Editor's note:

Painted Turtles are native to southern Saskatchewan and commonly found in farmyard dugouts, sloughs and areas of quiet river water. Although turtles would have been impacted by the dredging of Wascana Lake, these reptiles do move to colonize new areas. They are also frequently relocated by people releasing pets or helping females across roads in the spring when the animals are looking for nest sites.

GREAT HORNED OWL LONGEVITY RECORD FOR SASKATCHEWAN

On September 7, 2000 an injured adult Great Horned Owl was found on the southeast edge of Saskatoon by Margaret Fisher. It was recovered in the same latitude-longitude block in which it had been banded. She brought the injured owl, which had a bloodied face, to the SPCA in Saskatoon. It in turn was forwarded to Colette Wheler at the Western College of Veterinary Medicine in Saskatoon. After careful examination, its injuries were deemed so severe that the bird was euthanized that same day. The bird was banded (608-08252) so Stuart Houston, a local and avid bird bander, was contacted. He in turn asked Ursula Banasch of the Canadian Wildlife Service in Edmonton to check her records for the band number and identify where, when and who banded the bird. She contacted me about this bird as I had banded it on 1 June, 1977. The owl was one of a family of three young Great Horned Owls banded on the southeast edge of Saskatoon about 1 mile east of Highway 11 (Banding records indicate location as lat-long block 520-1063).

The young owl was banded in the nest and would have been about one month old at the time. Therefore, on the date the bird was brought into the veterinary clinic, it would have been 23

years and 4 months of age. The oldest Great Horned Owl on record for Saskatchewan was a bird banded by Stuart Houston which was 20 years and 8 months old at its death¹ and the oldest North American Great Horned Owl was a minimum of 28 years and 7 months at the time of its death^{2,3}.

The age of this owl banded on the outskirts of Saskatoon would rank it as the second oldest Great Horned Owl recorded for North America and the oldest bird recovered to date in Saskatchewan. Even though this owl was old, it had not dispersed far from the nest site where it had fledged. This record shows that when provided with suitable habitat, some birds will live long and healthy lives.

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- Gerard W. Beyersbergen, Canadian Wildlife Service, Edmonton, AB

BIRDS OF A FEATHER, PLUS ONE

A few years ago a neighbour of mine, Gordon Fox, informed me that a flock of pigeons had made their home in a machine shed, measuring 28' x 32', on a vacant farm that he was renting, and living in the same building was a Great Horned Owl.

I have raised pigeons since 1932 and my experience has been that pigeons

will soon abandon any building if Great Horned Owls gain access. On opening the door to my neighbour's shed, the first thing I saw was a Great Horned Owl sitting on a rafter and a pigeon no more than three feet from it. The pigeon was more perturbed by my presence than by its proximity to the owl. On investigating further, I found 78 pairs of wings from pigeons that had been consumed by the

owl, and still the pigeons accepted its presence.

This was hard to understand, but perhaps, in this situation, the owl was a quiet presence that the pigeons had come to accept. The shed had no windows; the entrance by owl and pigeons had been through the roof, where shingles had blown off. The hole where the owl got in measured approximately 9" x 9". The owl is a night hunter, rarely killing in daylight. The pigeons had nests on shelves where parts for machinery were stored, so the main victims would be males and unmated birds. The owl is almost soundless in flight, and when it seized a bird with its powerful talons, death would have been instantaneous and quiet, as pigeons do not give loud cries of distress.

CABBAGE WHITE BUTTERFLIES IN REGINA

Beginning on August 10, 2006, I noticed unusually large numbers of Cabbage White butterflies in our back yard in south Regina. I estimated 400 butterflies within 10 minutes. Similar numbers were observed in Wascana Park in Regina for 10 days (over 1000 individuals in 20 minutes). Numbers gradually declined after 10 days. I did see them regularly in much smaller numbers until the last one, on October 6. I am sure untold millions of these butterflies were killed on the highways. As I wrote this note, there were still dozens of Cabbage White butterflies that could be counted in a few minutes fluttering about in the back yard, visiting our flowering plants. In sufficient numbers at the caterpillar stage, cabbage white butterflies are considered pests of cultivated members of the mustard family such as cabbage and radishes.¹

Having had wounded owls and fed them, I have learned something of their habits. One winter I had a Snowy Owl with an injured wing and fed it mice, magpies and sometimes a beheaded pigeon. When fed a pigeon, if the owl was hungry, it consumed the entire bird, including most of the body feathers, leaving the flight and tail feathers, and the keel or breast bone. Even the legs and feet were swallowed. Then it did not eat for two or three days, when it would disgorge large pellets and be ready to eat again. Assuming the Great Horned Owl ate a pigeon every three days, this owl must have been there for seven months.

- Sig Jordheim, Box 544, Kyle, SK S0L 1T0

1 LAYBERRY, R.A., P.W. HALL, and J.D. LAFONTAINE. 1998. *The Butterflies of Canada*. University of Toronto Press; Toronto, ON.

- Robert Warnock, 3603 White Bay, Regina, SK S4S 7C9. E-mail: warnockr@accesscomm.ca



*Cabbage White butterfly in Saskatoon,
13 August 2006* Don Buckle

CURVE-BILLED THRASHER AT FEEDER IN DALMENY, SK



Curve-billed Thrasher at Dalmeny, December 5, 2006

Nick Saunders

which has smaller, arrow-shaped breast spots and a straight lower mandible with a pale base. Its back is much darker than the Curve-billed Thrasher illustration on page 413 in the First Edition of *The Sibley Guide to Birds* published in 2000. It more closely matches the illustration on page 105 of the first edition of *All the Birds of North America* except that the Dalmeny bird was in fresh plumage and displayed two thin wing bars. This feature plus its clear breast spots would suggest it belongs to the *oberholseri* subspecies.

After a 'tip off' from Trevor Herriott that a possible Curve-billed Thrasher was coming to a feeder owned by David and Carol Fraser in Dalmeny, Saskatchewan, Stan Shadick, Robert Johanson and Ryan Dudragne visited the Fraser residence on December 4, 2006 and confirmed that indeed, a Curve-billed Thrasher was present. A second group of Saskatoon Nature Society members led by Michael Williams went out the following day when Nick Saunders was able to obtain some photographs. This bird has since been observed by birders on a daily basis through the time of writing on 16 December, 2006. Some visitors have come from as far as Vancouver, BC and Barrie, Ontario to see it.

The thrasher exhibited a dark gray-brown back and strongly decurved tip to the bill on both the upper and lower mandible. It showed white spots at the edge of its tail. Its breast had large spots. The eye was yellow-orange. These features eliminate the somewhat similar Bendire's Thrasher,

David Fraser can definitely remember seeing the bird on a daily basis since 16 November but he thought it arrived about a week before that. He later mentioned seeing it on a day in November when it rained heavily. According to records from Environment Canada, the only day with heavy rain in November was November 8, so it would seem that the bird had been present continuously since that date.

Curve-billed Thrashers are permanent residents of parts of Mexico, Colorado, Arizona, New Mexico and Texas. The Dalmeny bird was about 1500 km north of the northern limit of the range in southeast Colorado.²

The Atlas of Saskatchewan Birds lists one previous hypothetical sighting of a Curved-billed Thrasher in Saskatchewan.⁵ It was seen and heard by Wayne Harris near Raymore on 27 July 1986.³ This sighting was the first report from anywhere in Canada.³ A Curve-billed Thrasher also arrived in St. Claude, Manitoba in early November

1998 and stayed until April 4, 1999.⁴ Another bird was seen in Barrhead, Alberta from August 1998 through April 1999 when it became blind after being caught by a cat and was forwarded to the Calgary zoo, where it still resides.¹

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4. MANITOBA BIRDING NEWS: www.web-nat.com/bic/manitoba.html

5. SMITH, A.R. 1996. Atlas of Saskatchewan Birds. Saskatchewan Natural History Society, Regina, SK.

-Nick Saunders, 618 4th Street East, Saskatoon, SK and Stan Shadick, 903 Temperance St., Saskatoon, SK, S7N 0N3. E-mail: shadick@usask.ca

MALLARD ESCAPES BEING EATEN BY SNOWY OWL

Returning from an outing to Gardiner Dam, about 4:00 PM on December 2, 2006, one of the coldest days of the year, seven members of the Saskatoon Nature Society spotted three Mallards in a stubble field adjacent to the graveled grid road north of Cutbank, 90 km south of Saskatoon. When they flew up, a Snowy Owl (body heavily barred, only the head pure white) which had been perched on the snow near them, remained behind, facing us, about 35 metres distant. We noted something flapping behind the owl and at first thought it might be a piece of plastic.

As we looked, we saw the green head and a portion of the chestnut chest of a Mallard drake emerge from under the owl. The owl was sitting on it to hold it down. Quite likely the owl had descended silently upon the feeding Mallards, pinned one of them to the ground and was now preparing to eat it.

For a few minutes, we watched as the struggling Mallard sought to free itself from the clutches of the owl. Finally, the owl, uncomfortable with our presence, rose from the ground, losing control of its prey. In a flash the Mallard was airborne, apparently unharmed, flying with incredible speed over our heads.

Strong and heavy, Snowy Owls can take prey as large as Snowshoe Hares and Sharp-tailed Grouse. Female



Snowy Owl sitting on Mallard

Nick Saunders

Snowy Owls weigh in the neighborhood of 1960 g; males average 300 g less.¹ A Mallard drake weighs about 1100 grams. The usual practice of Snowy Owls is to kill and consume their prey at the spot where the attack has taken place. Lynn Oliphant and Marten Stoffel, both familiar with Snowy Owl behavior, were not particularly surprised when told of the incident. Stoffel suspects, in fact, that certain owls, knowing that Mallards feed in stubble fields north of Gardiner Dam, remain in the area, relying on Mallards as a major food source.

Oliphant has witnessed a Snowy Owl's capture of a Mallard.

Members of the group felt privileged to learn, first hand, a little more of Snowy Owl behavior. Their only regret: they had likely prevented an owl from having a duck dinner that evening.

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- J. Frank Roy, 912-606 Victoria Avenue, Saskatoon, SK S7N 0Z1

CLUSTERED BUR-REED, *Sparganium glomeratum*, IN MANITOBA



Figure 1. *Sparganium glomeratum* plant emerging from the water Kevin Szwaluk

Clustered Bur-reed (*Sparganium glomeratum* (Beurling ex Laestadius) L.M. Newman) plants were located at Pine Falls, Manitoba on July 6, 2006 (Figure 1). This plant apparently is rare in North America, and is consistent over its circumboreal range.¹ It is found in western Canada as well as in Ontario,

Quebec and Labrador.^{1, 2} It is locally common along the western end of Lake Superior.¹ This is the first collection of Clustered Bur-reed in Manitoba.

The town of Pine Falls is approximately 90 km northeast of Winnipeg. At the west edge of the town,



Figure 2. Staminate (arrow) and pistillate flowers are separate in dense round heads Kevin Szwaluk

near the General Hospital, we walked along a trail in the forest in search of the plant. Tom Reaume had visited the area four years earlier and recently became suspicious of his previous identification of this bur-reed. The site with the bur-reeds is at latitude 50°33'53" N and longitude 96°12'49" W. Several plants were found along a bank of a marsh in an opening among *Salix* sp., *Carex* sp., *Calla palustris*, and *Lemna* sp. Three plants were picked and pressed; several photographs were taken.

Unique characteristics of the species include leaves and inflorescence emergent and erect, inflorescence unbranched, and one terminal staminate head with several pistillate heads below (Figure 2). The plants were identified in the field using the Flora of North America.¹ Other bur-reeds in Manitoba include *Sparganium americanum*, *S. angustifolium*, *S. emersum*, *S. eurycarpum*, *S. fluctuans*, *S. hyperboreum*, and *S. natans*. The plants collected were donated to the herbaria at the Manitoba Museum, University of Manitoba, and the Manitoba Conservation Data Centre.

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- Tom Reaume, 212 Sherburn Street, Winnipeg, MB R3G 2K6 and Kevin Szwaluk, 203 Browning Boulevard, Winnipeg, MB R3K 0L2. E-mail: kszwaluk@shaw.ca



“Some flowers reward their pollinators with warmth. A large blossom or a stalk of tiny flowers can produce a temperature higher than that of the surrounding atmosphere. The phenomenon was first noted in some wildflowers on the Alaskan tundra whose dark petals act as solar panels, absorbing the sun’s heat. A warm flower offering a little nectar or pollen is a preferred site for a fly or small bee whose ability to forage declines on days when the air is cold.” Peter Bernhardt,

The Rose’s Kiss: A Natural History of Flowers, p.132