

NOTES AND LETTERS

STUDENTS BAND AMERICAN KESTRELS AT MORSE, SK



Herbert School students participate in American Kestrel banding. From left to right: Kristen Jahnke, Josh Driedger, Miranda Haughian, Dane Hildebrand.

Randy McCulloch

On June 22, 2007, my grade 6 class and I went with teachers Alden Seib and Randy McCulloch to Morse, SK to help band young American Kestrels. The event took place at the old CPR dam north of Morse where a science class from Morse School had placed some kestrel boxes five years ago.¹ Kestrels are banded mostly so that people can track their movements.

Lorne Scott told us about the equipment that is used for banding birds. He showed us many sizes of bands and a special pair of pliers that he uses to close the bands. Jared Clarke used spikes and a climbing harness to climb the nest tree. After taking the chicks out of the nest box, he lowered them down to Tyler in a

knapsack. Once the birds were down, we were able to have a close look.

There were four chicks and all were females. Jared could tell this by the brown colour on their backs; the males have more blue. Lorne Scott banded the birds and Sydney recorded the information about each bird in his notebook. This was a very exciting day for me because I enjoy exploring the abundant wildlife the prairies have to offer.

1. McCOLLOCH, R. 2006. Nest box project at Morse School. *Blue Jay* 64:172

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Jared Clarke taking American Kestrel chicks from the nest box
Randy McCulloch



Josh Driedger and American Kestrel nestling
Randy McCulloch



Lorne Scott with Herbert School students

Randy McCulloch

WHERE ARE THE ROSY MALE PINE GROSBEAKS?

Throughout most of January 2007, JS witnessed daily visits by Pine Grosbeaks to his bird feeders on his acreage, 18 km southwest of Saskatoon. Once he counted up to 22 of them. The numbers of Pine Grosbeak remained relatively constant at the feeders (from 10-20) throughout February, but gradually diminished until March 7, when the final visitor was seen. The females had yellowish/bronze topped heads and rumps, with gray backs and underparts. All the birds had the white wing bars and a few (likely first year males) had a brownish gray or slight rosy tinge to their heads, barely distinguishable from the other birds in this sexually dimorphic species.¹ Only once, very briefly on February 10, was the group joined at the feeder by a single rosy-plumaged male! Unlike first year males, this male had a solid and brilliant rose coloured head, neck, rump and breast. Why was only one male with this colouration spotted at the feeders?

A similar lack of rosy male Pine Grosbeaks was recorded in banding data from Saskatoon in 1969. From 15 to 21 October 1969, 23 Pine Grosbeaks were caught at 863 University Drive during dawn-to-dark mist-netting of fall warblers. They were aged by "skulling." Twelve had partly ossified skulls and were classed as hatch-year birds; ten had ossified skulls and plumage suggesting they were two years old or more ('after-second-year' or ASY)

females, and only one of the 23 was a bright rosy ASY male.

From 12 to 24 March 1972, also at 863 University Drive in Saskatoon, 18 Pine Grosbeaks were caught and banded in walk-in traps set for Black-capped Chickadees and Blue Jays. Fifteen were predominantly bronze, but three were bright rosy ASY males, roughly in keeping with the expected proportion of mature males. If, for argument's sake, one could assume an average life span of three years, based on bird-banding recovery rates for small birds, then one might expect one-third of males to be brightly-plumaged. Since the numbers of males and females should be roughly equal, one might expect one-sixth of a Pine Grosbeak flock to be rosy-colored males.

We know of no published study in North America that provides such figures. We therefore encourage readers to answer this: What proportions of rosy males are coming to your feeder?

1. ADKISSON, C.S. 1999. Pine Grosbeak (*Pinicola enucleator*). In *The Birds of North America*, No. 456 (A. Poole and F. Gill, eds.). The Birds of North America, Inc., Philadelphia, Pa.

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LEAFY SPURGE HAWKMOTH IN MANITOBA

I am writing regarding the interesting article in the June 2007 *Blue Jay* about the Leafy Spurge Hawkmoths in the Saskatoon area.

Some 5-6 years ago, our friends Louise Kernatz and Leon Pewarchuk discovered hawkmoths while they were spraying a patch of leafy spurge on their

property four miles west of our home in south central Manitoba. Louise, a retired teacher, was really a scientist at heart. She set to work and eventually discovered that the hawkmoths in question were Leafy Spurge Hawkmoths that feed on the dreaded spurge. She photographed some of them and was excited to share her discovery with us. We were all amazed! We pored over the photos, noting the identifying features.

Naturally then, I was surprised to read about the Saskatoon population,

and the history of these moths. Unfortunately, the photos are no longer available, so I cannot offer proof or evidence of Louise's hawkmoths being Leafy Spurge Hawkmoths, other than the fact that the larvae were feeding in the spurge when found. We wonder if there are other isolated populations scattered across the prairies.

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RARE BACKYARD VISITOR IN REGINA

In Regina, during the fourth week of August 2007, May and Frank Switzer at 1301 Shannon Road, Lucille Lipka at 115 McDougal Crescent and Joe Jozsa at 63 Empress Drive, all saw a male hummingbird that did not appear to have the red bib typical of the Ruby-throated Hummingbird. The bib was described independently by these four observers as black, deep blue, a deep iridescent blue and an iridescent purple. All sightings were brief and at feeders where the bird stayed only long enough to insert its bill to feed. One of the locations, Lucille Lipka's yard, had four feeders in the backyard. The other two locations each had one feeder. It was in the yard with the four feeders that the bird fed for any length of time. In discussing our observations, we concluded that all had seen a male Black-chinned Hummingbird.

The Lipka and Switzer feeders are within a city block of each other; both yards back onto Elmwood Park. There are at least three other known feeders in the immediate neighbourhood and at least three twining honeysuckles were in bloom at the time. The Jozsa feeder is about 6.25 km to the

northwest, backing onto Wascana Creek. The observations were within the five week period of fairly intense feeder visitations by juvenile and female Ruby-throated Hummingbirds that were passing through on their fall migration. Several neighbourhood feeders noted an apparently larger number of these visitors than in previous years.

Black-chinned Hummingbird, described as a 'scarce breeder in southern British Columbia' and a 'casual visitant to Alberta,'¹ is listed as hypothetical in the Field Checklist of Saskatchewan Birds. Two previous sightings have been reported for Saskatchewan, one in Regina on 1 June 1970 and the other in Weyburn on 11 August 1986.²

1. GODFREY, W. E. 1986. The Birds of Canada. National Museums of Canada, Ottawa, p.338.

2. SMITH, A. R. 1996. Atlas of Saskatchewan Birds. Special Publication No.22, Saskatchewan Natural History Society, Regina.

- *Frank Switzer*, 1301 Shannon Road, Regina, SK S4S 5K9

A SUMMER RESIDENT TUNDRA SWAN

On Sunday, June 10, 2007, my wife, Dorothy, and I discovered a lone Tundra Swan on an island in a slough about 6 miles west of Alvena (on NW 1/4 Sec. 12, Twp. 41, Rge. 2, W 3rd). Remembering Blenkin's account of nesting swans on an islanded pond near Patience Lake potash mine east of Saskatoon,¹ I thought this might be another such instance, but examination with binoculars revealed no bulky nest.

The slough occupied about 5 acres and the island less than an acre. In fact, the island, 4-5 feet above water level, still showed stubble from a previous year's crop, suggesting that this spring's runoff may have enlarged the slough considerably (a 4-inch rain a week later, June 10, did increase its size by an acre or two). The distance from my car on the road allowance to the swan was 500 feet. The swan had not moved during my hour stay, except for swivelling its head.

Five days later, the swan was again sitting on the sandy south shore of the island in the identical spot as if it had never moved. But encircling it, in a companionship of waterfowl, were two Canvasbacks, Redheads and Mallards, plus four Blue-winged Teal, and an American Coot, all sunning themselves. The swan, meanwhile, raised and lowered its head, presiding, as it were, over its court.

I continued my weekly observations. On June 22, the swan was in the same place with its circle of companion ducks, but it was standing now, preening its feathers.

A local farmer stopped by and explained the swan's summer presence. He had seen it at a nearby slough earlier in spring with three other swans, which had apparently flown to their nesting grounds to the north. There had been something wrong with its leg and he was surprised that it had even made it to the safety of this slough with its island. Pough tells us that swans "have to run over the water quite a distance to build up speed for a takeoff."² Possibly, this swan had limped its way here.

A week later, I saw the swan swimming without trouble. Another week later, it was not only swimming but actively feeding, thrusting its long neck deep down and rooting among the water plants, which were now flourishing. It also did a lot of preening, particularly on its right side, and continued to do so while standing in shallow water.

I returned to the site July 21, and on August 12, and did not see the swan again, although it could easily have been concealed among the vegetation. Swans moult their flight feathers in midsummer and try to keep out of sight. It is hoped that this swan did survive and join a southward migrating flock in fall.

1. BLENKIN, C. 2004. A summer of swans. *Blue Jay* 62(1):31, 34-37.

2. POUGH, R. H., 1951. Audubon Water Bird Guide. Doubleday and Company, Garden City, N.Y.

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