
BIRDS

BIRD OBSERVATIONS FROM NORTHERN SASKATCHEWAN, AUGUST 1973

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The first organized study of the birds of northern Saskatchewan, was conducted by Nero³. While concentrating on the Lake Athabasca area of northern Saskatchewan, preliminary visits were made to Stony Rapids and Black Lake (1960 to 1962) and Hasbala Lake (27 July to 3 August), the most northeasterly lake in Saskatchewan. From 1963 to 1965, Nero focused his studies on the lichen woodlands and muskegs to northeastern Saskatchewan: 26 June to 31 July 1963 (Stony Rapids/Black Lake), 9-29 July 1963 (Hasbala, Patterson and Warren Lakes), 1-14 July 1964 (Milton Lake and Porcupine Rivers); 18-24 July 1964 (Charcoal Lake); 20 April to 8 July, 1964 (Wollaston Lake), and 27 June to 27 July 1965 (Reindeer Lake)⁴. Later, in 1977, studies by Secoy and Maw were undertaken from 28 May to 16 August at Boland Lake, Higgins Lake, Nekweaga Bay at the southern tip of Wollaston Lake: they recorded an impressive total of 77 species⁶. To date, these appear to be the only published work based on long-term ground-based ornithological research programs, from this, the most remote and least accessible area of Saskatchewan.

In the summer of 1973, the author and John Rowe, Jr. embarked on studies of rare and representative plant ecosystems in Saskatchewan. These studies were part of 'The International Biological Program'[IBP] which were

funded through the Department of Plant Ecology, University of Saskatchewan, Saskatoon and conducted under the supervision of Dr. J.S. Rowe. Three 'IBP' sites were located in the extreme northern and northeastern areas of the province, and within the study area of 'The Birds of Northeastern Saskatchewan'. These unpublished records were made from 8 to 24 August 1973.

Although the documentation of birds was not the focus of our study, I diligently recorded all the birds which were observed during our visit. The records of birds presented here were made in the following areas: Lefty Falls and Stony Rapids on the Fond du Lac River (59°-16'N; 105°-50'W), Fir Island/Black Lake (59°-11'N; 105°-25'W), Elizabeth Falls/Fond du Lac River (59°-03'N; 105°-33'W), Bonokoski Lake (59°-44'N; 103°-22'W), and Hara Lake (59°-05'N; 102°-03'W) [Figure 1]. At Bonokoski Lake and Hara Lake, research was done both on foot and by canoe (approx. 50% each). We portaged onto adjacent lakes, ponds and calmer, wider areas of water. The absence of groups of tall trees and shrubs gave us excellent views of distant bodies of water; hence the bias towards more observations of water-related bird species. At Fir Island, the largest island on Black Lake, most observations were made along the water-edges, with brief trips into the intermittent evergreen forests and muskegs of the interior.

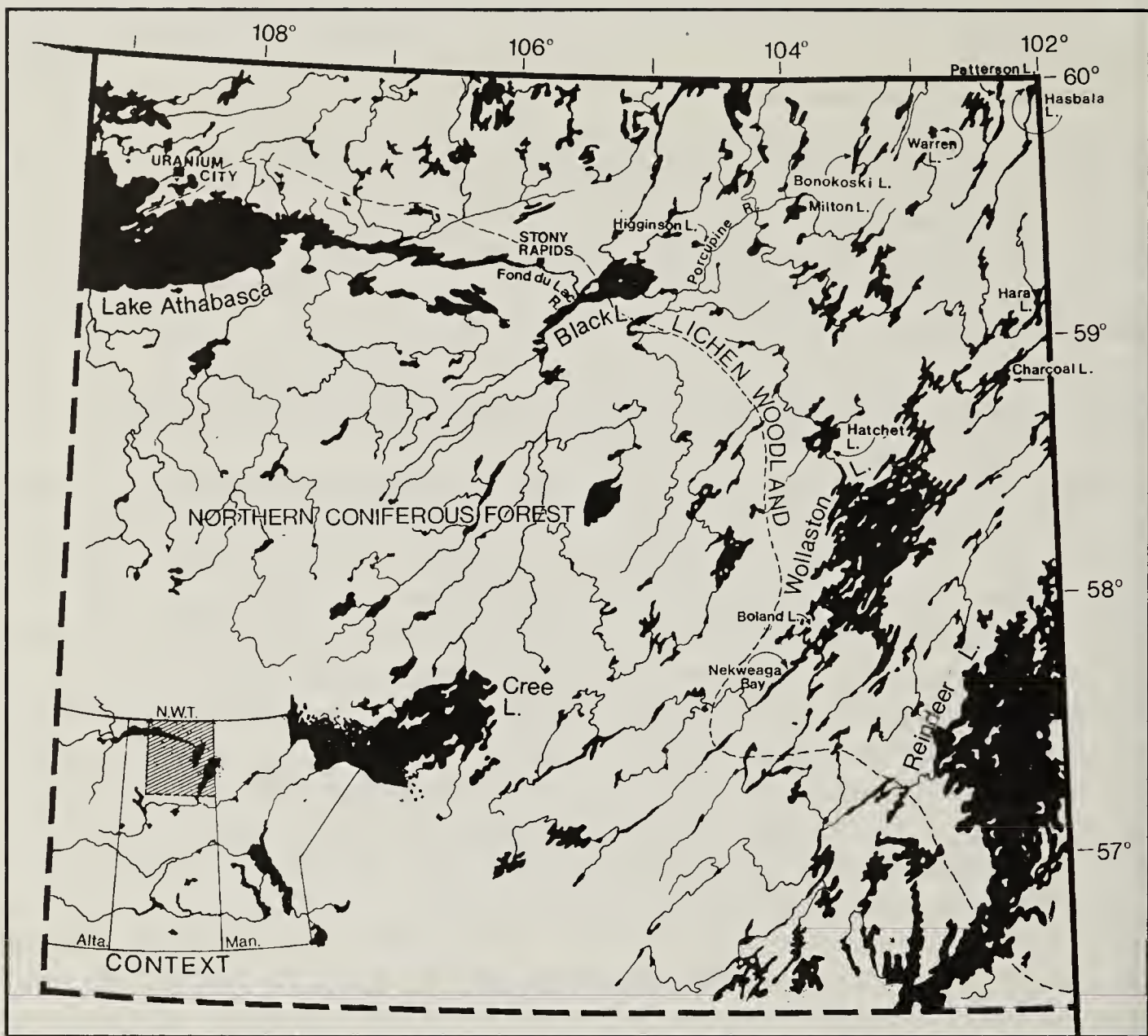


Figure 1 - Wayne Renaud

Neither Bonokoski Lake nor Hara Lake was visited by Nero^{3,4}. All areas visited during this study are located within the 'sub-Arctic avifauna' zone and within the 'Lichen Woodland' vegetation zone. Forty-eight species were recorded during our visit⁴.

Significant breeding records are presented here for Common and Red-breasted Mergansers, Ring-necked Duck, Bufflehead, Black Scoter and Arctic Tern. Observations of Osprey, Rough-legged Hawk and Red-breasted Nuthatch further clarify the status of this species in this area.

Abbreviations used in the following species accounts: ad=adult; y=flightless young; imm=flying juvenile; yr=year;

Ag=August; date format: Ag 15=month, day.

SPECIES LIST

Common Loon

Hara Lake [2,1ad +1y, 3 = 7—Ag 16; 1ea —Ag 14, 15, 17 and 18; flock of 5 —Ag 19]

Canada Goose

Black Lake/Fir Island [flock of 15—Ag 14]; Bonokoski Lake [flock of 76—Ag 20]

Mallard

Black Lake/Fir Island [1 female—Ag 9]; Elizabeth Falls [1 female—Ag 10].

Ring-necked Duck

Hara Lake [1 female—14—15 Ag; one

group of 8 females + 18 flightless y—Ag 16). Nero cites two June records for Wollaston lake with no direct evidence of breeding; both Godfrey and Smith show the nearest confirmed breeding record for central Reindeer Lake 200 km to south^{4,2,6}.

Lesser Scaup

Hara Lake [1 female + 8 flightless y—Ag 16]. Godfrey indicated that the southwestern edge of the breeding range of the Greater Scaup is located on the 60th parallel of latitude (the N.W. T. border), a mere 30 km north of the north end of Bonokoski Lake². Great care was taken to correctly identify this female scaup, because of the possibility of recording greater Scaup nesting in this area. No greater Scaup were identified by Nero, but he did record “Lesser Scaup” and scaup species in most areas visited, and all these accounts are listed together under ‘Lesser Scaup’. To date there appear to be no confirmed breeding records of Greater Scaup for Saskatchewan (Smith).

Surf Scoter

Hara Lake [1 female with six flightless young—Ag 16]; carefully watched for 20 minutes at distances down to 20m with full front lighting. Identifying field marks included the two strong white spots on sides of the dark head of the female and young, and the lack of a white patch on the female when she fluttered her wings. Nero recorded two females at Hasbala Lake on 29 July 1962 and found them to be common breeders in Lake Athabasca area³. Between 9 and 14 July 1963, Nero cited three observations of this species: two females together, a mated pair, and a female behaving as though it had a nest nearby—but with no definite breeding record for Hasbala Lake. In other areas of northern Saskatchewan Nero provided scattered records of Surf Scoters, some of which were exhibiting

breeding behaviour: Stony Rapids, Black Lake, Milton Lake, Wollaston Lake and Reindeer Lake^{3,4}. Secoy and Maw recorded two broods at Boland Lake on 6 and 8 on July 5, 1977. Smith cited confirmed breeding records only for Reindeer and Southern Wollaston Lakes. The latter location, 180 km southwest of Hara Lake (presumably referring to Secoy and May’s two records), is the nearest location of a definite breeding record⁵. This Hara Lake breeding record thus represent one of only five verified breeding records for all of northeastern Saskatchewan⁷.

Bufflehead

Hara Lake [1 female +6y—Ag 16]. Nero recorded a brood at Hasbala Lake 110 km due north near the boundary of Manitoba and N.W.T⁴, Smith acknowledges Nero’s record, as well as citing additional confirmed records of breeding for southern Reindeer Lake, central Wollaston Lake, and Little Gull Lake south of Lake Athabasca^{3,6}. This current record fills the gap in between these four breeding areas in northern Saskatchewan.

Common Merganser

Black Lake [1 female + 6 y—Ag 15; female + 5y—Ag 16]. Nero cites one breeding record for the area between Stony Lake and Woodcock Rapids. These may be the first confirmed breeding records for Black Lake⁴.

Red-breasted Merganser

Elizabeth Falls [group of 5 males; 1 female +8 flightless y—Ag 10]; Hara Lake [1 female with 6 flightless y—Ag 16]. Nero recorded this species in most lakes surveyed but with no definite breeding records; he, does however, cite one nest record in Buchanan for Reindeer Lake [from July 12, 1914—overlooked in Smith]^{4,1,7}. However Smith cited what appears to be a confirmed breeding record for Hatchet Lake, 110

km southeast of Hara Lake⁷. Secoy and Maw, recorded them on Boland Lake, southwest of Wollaston Lake, but with no evidence of breeding⁶. This Hara Lake record is likely, then only the second confirmed breeding record for northeastern Saskatchewan.

Osprey

Black Lake-Fir Island [1—Ag 9]; Hara Lake [1—Ag 15]. Nero, on August 1, 1962, recorded a single bird at Hasbala Lake; however, none was observed there during 21 days of observations in 1963³. Secoy and Maw cited four records for the southern Wollaston Lake region⁶. This Hara Lake sighting may provides the second record for extreme northeastern Saskatchewan.

Bald Eagle

Bonokoski Lake [1 ad—Ag 15].

Sharp-shinned Hawk

Stony Rapids [1—24 Ag].

Rough-legged Hawk

Hara Lake [1—Ag 18]. The only definite record for extreme northeastern Saskatchewan was made at Hasbala Lake by Nero: a pair noted 31 July 1962 with reference to potential breeding habitat in nearby cliffs, though no nest was found^{3,4}. Smith interpreted Nero's sighting as a confirmed breeding record, and further suggested that this was the only area in Saskatchewan where the species has nested⁷.

Semipalmated Plover

Stony Rapids [1—24 Ag]. Not recorded by Nero, but a small population nests in the sand dunes south of Lake Athabasca.

Lesser Yellowlegs

Bonokoski Lake [1—Aug 22].

Solitary Sandpiper

Hara Lake [1—Ag 16]; calling in flight—

very agitated—then perched on top of a spruce and continued to calling until we left the area fifteen minutes later]. Nero and Secoy and Maw found them to be regular, and likely breeding, in most areas which they surveyed in the northeastern Saskatchewan^{4,6}.

Spotted Sandpiper

Hara Lake [1—Ag 16].

Least Sandpiper

Black Lake/Fir Island [9—Ag 9]; Bonokoski Lake [1—Ag 21].

Baird's Sandpiper

Black Lake/Fir Island [1—Ag 9]. Nero listed two records from Reindeer Lake.

Common Snipe

Stony River [2—Ag 24].

Ring-billed Gull

Black Lake/Fir Island [8—Ag 9].

Herring Gull

Black Lake/Fir Island [10—Ag 9]; Hara Lake 91 first-yr imm—Ag 17-20]; Stony Rapids 93ad + 4 flying imm—4Ag].

Arctic Tern and unidentified terns

White terns were regularly seen during our visit but only two definite identifications were made: Black Lake/Fir Island (3—Ag 8); Bonokoski Lake/Tern Island [colony of 50+ mixed adults and recently-fledged young; the remains of an undetermined number of nests were found on a bare, stony area on highest part of the island; we found one immature tern which was not yet old enough to fly—Ag 22]. Unidentified white terns were recorded as follows: Black Lake/ Fir Island [3 - 4; Ag 9-10]; Hara Lake [6—Ag 15; 2—Ag 16]; Bonokoski Lake [8—Ag 20; 1—Ag 21]; Stony Rapids [5—Ag 24]. Two nearby colonies were documented in Nero⁴. In 1964, his team discovered a colony of 45 pairs on an island in Milton Lake

approximately 32 km southwest of our Bonokoski Lake colony. On July 9, 1963, a group of three pairs were found nesting on a barren ridge at Patterson Lake, approximately 50 km east-northeast of Bonokoski Lake. Nero did not record any Arctic Terns on Black Lake, but did see one flock of four on the Fond du Lac River which flows into Lac Lake⁴. Smith did not acknowledge Nero's sightings from northeastern Saskatchewan as confirmed breeding records, but he cited four other records for extreme northwestern Saskatchewan in the vicinity of Lake Athabasca where Nero found them nesting in 1960 and 1961^{7,3}. Secoy and Maw identified a single bird at Boland Lake at 12 June 1977⁶.

Common Nighthawk

Bonokoski Lake [1—Ag 22]; Lefty Falls/Stony Rapids [20 in flock Ag 23].

Belted Kingfisher

Black Lake [1 or 2 each day from Ag 8—13].

Black-backed Woodpecker

Black Lake/Fir Island [1 female—Ag 10]; Bonokoski Lake [1 male—Ag 20].

Northern Flicker

Hara Lake [1—Ag 15].

Cliff Swallow

Lefty Falls/Stony Rapids [2—Ag 23].

Barn Swallow

Lefty Falls/Stony Rapids [10—Ag 23].

Gray Jay

Black Lake/Fir Island [1—Ag 11 and 12]; Hara Lake [1-3—Ag 16-19]; Bonokoski Lake [1—Ag 21 and 23].

Common Raven

Stony Rapids [4—Ag 9]; Elizabeth Falls [4—Ag 10-13]; Hara Lake [2—Ag 14-17]; Bonokoski Lake [1—Ag 20]; Stony

Rapids [flock of 20 Ag 24].

Boreal Chickadee

Hara Lake [1—Ag 16; groups of two and three—Ag 17 and 18; 1—Ag 20]; Bonokoski Lake [groups of 1 and 3—Ag 21; 4—Ag 22].

Red-breasted Nuthatch

Hara Lake [1—Ag 15 and 16]. Not recorded in Nero^{3,4}. Smith showed the nearest sighting, a possible breeding record, as northern Reindeer Lake, 120 km to the south of Hara Lake⁷. Secoy and Maw found several pairs and groups of up to 5 at Boland Lake from 5 June to 16 July 1977⁶. This Hara Lake sighting represents the most northeasterly record for Saskatchewan.

American Robin

Hara Lake [1—Ag 15]; Bonokoski Lake [1—Ag 22 and 23].

Yellow-rumped Warbler

Black Lake [3—Ag 11]; Bonokoski Lake [1—Ag 20 and 21].

Palm Warbler

Stony Rapids [1—Ag 24].

Blackpoll Warbler

Hara Lake [2—Ag 17].

Northern Waterthrush

Stony Rapids [1—Ag 24].

Savannah Sparrow

Bonokoski Lake [1—Ag 21].

Fox Sparrow

Bonokoski Lake [1—Ag 16].

Lincoln's Sparrow

Black Lake [1—Ag 11]; Hara Lake [1—Ag 17].

White-throated Sparrow

Black Lake [1—Ag 11].

White-crowned Sparrow

Hara Lake[1—Ag 15 and 16].

Dark-eyed Junco

Elizabeth Falls[15—Ag 10]; Hara Lake[1—Ag 13].

Rusty Blackbird

Hara Lake[10—Ag 16]; Stony Rapids[3—Ag 24].

Pine Grosbeak

Hara Lake[groups of 1, 1 and 6—Ag 15].

Common Redpoll

Hara Lake[flock of 50—Ag 14; flock of 100—Ag 15; flock of 10—Ag 16; flocks of 6, 15 and 18—Ag 17]; Black Lake[flock of 6—Ag 20].

Acknowledgements

I thank Robert Wapple, Guy Wapple and Allan Smith for reviewing the initial manuscript and encouraging me to publish these forgotten records.

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Of 77 Common Loons found dead in New England, more than half had died from lead poisoning, and half of these had eaten lead fishing sinkers. Lead sinkers are banned in great Britain and the Environmental Protection agency is investigating whether they should be banned in the United States.