
NOTES AND LETTERS

SURPRISES ALONG THE *OTHER* MEWASIN TRAIL

In Loon Lake on Nov. 1, 1999, my husband, Geoff, and I had some free time for hiking in the area. We chose the Mewasin Trail because we thought that the one and only trail by that name was in Saskatoon. Also the hike was recommended by our Loon Lake host and it is included in Robin and Arlene Karpan's book, *Saskatchewan Trails*, which we carry everywhere.¹

The Mewasin Trail is located in Makwa Lake Provincial Park. The leafless trees and lack of snow did not promise an interesting hike, but frequent signage gave us an idea of what we might see given ideal conditions. The signs were designed and made by Loon Lake teacher and environmentalist, Kathy Hirschfeld, and members of her high school science classes. Each sign includes a drawing or photograph of the featured animal or plant, an interesting fact about it and its role in a native legend or folklore. Fifty of these trail markers entertained us along the way. So much so, in fact, that when we did see some flesh and blood wildlife, we nearly jumped out of our boots.

Responding to crackling branches in a nearby Jack Pine, we looked up to see a chestnut-furred Fisher. This beautiful, catlike animal stared back at us and then made a quick exit down the tree, weaving in and out of branches, before leaping to the ground and then slinking off into the understory of alder, saskatoon and wild rose. By the time I had prepared my camera for a shot, the prize had disappeared. After this blunder, I kept my camera close at hand.

Geoff discovered our second surprise of the day. He noted a hammering beat coming from a stand of white birch. We looked more closely and discovered a male Black-backed Woodpecker pounding with all his might on a large black scarred patch just above eye level on a birch trunk. He appeared oblivious to us, so I took many photos. Between the dark background of the scar and the imposing dusk, the bird was well camouflaged and difficult to see on film.

At the halfway point of our hike, we were acknowledged by a large flock of chickadees, quite an eyeful (as well as an earful) for us city dwellers who enjoy no more than four at a time in our home feeder. Our next treat was to see three white-tailed deer. They stared at us for a few precious moments, as deer do, before taking flight. Scat along the trail told us that coyote, rabbit and skunk had also shared this path. The Karpan's guide book warns of bears. These we did not see.

Although the hike is not challenging lengthwise—a two km short loop or a three km long loop—it is well worth taking, as a flock of chickadees convinced us along the way.

1. Karpan, Robin and Arlene. 1999. *Saskatchewan Trails: A Guide of Nature Walks and Easy Hikes*, Parkland Publishing, 501 Mount Allison Place, Saskatoon, SK. S7H 4A9.

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TWO UNUSUAL LOGGERHEAD SHRIKE NESTS

Between 12 May and 15 June 1997, I conducted wildlife surveys 50 km south of Hanna, Alberta in Twp. 25 & 26, Rge 15 & 16-W4M. On 12 May 1997, I noticed a lone Loggerhead Shrike perched on a barbed wire fence in an area of open mixed grass prairie. At the time, I didn't pay much attention to the presence of the bird. Shrub cover, including sagebrush, was lacking and I felt that the bird was probably passing through the area.

However, I saw a shrike in the same area on 15, 17 and 19 May 1997. By this time my curiosity was peaked, so I stopped to watch the bird for a few minutes. Within five minutes, I observed the bird fly into a pile of tumbleweed (identified later from photographs as primarily Russian Thistle, *Salsola kali*) that had gathered in the corner of a fence (Figure 1). The tumbleweed was piled about 1.2 m high. Two shrikes flew out from the pile of tumbleweed as I approached. Closer examination revealed a nest containing six eggs, in the middle of the pile, about 50 cm



Figure 2. Shrike nest in tumbleweed
Greg Wagner

above the ground (Figure 2). All was well with the nest when I checked it on 31 May and 10 June.

When I checked the nest on 14 June it was empty. However, an adult was still present in the area and as I was walking away from the first nest I discovered a second nest about 4 m from the first. It was located in a small pile of tumbleweed that had collected

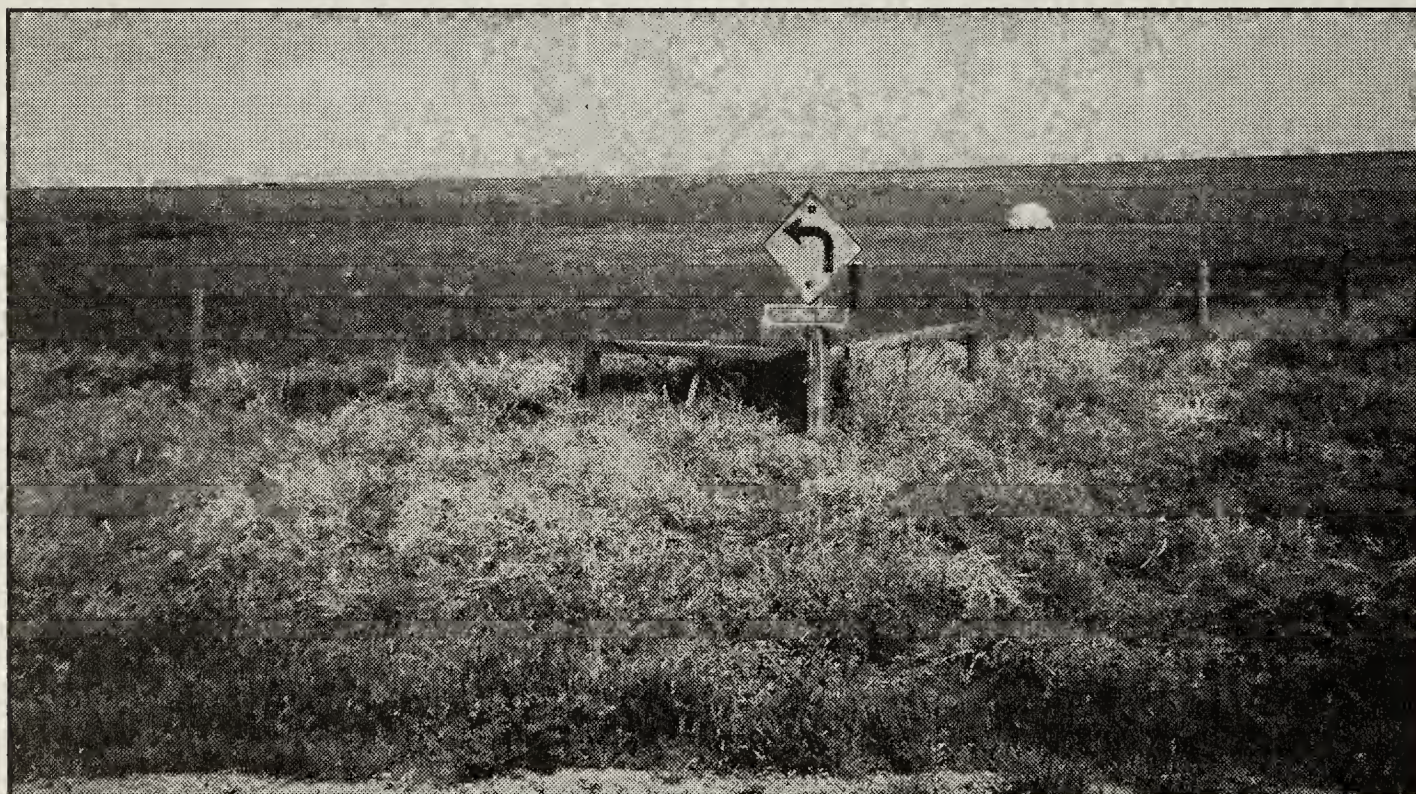


Figure 1. Pile of tumbleweed with shrike nest.

Greg Wagner

along the bottom wire of the fence to a height of about 30 cm. This nest was approximately 25 cm above the ground. It contained 7 eggs. Unfortunately, I did not have a chance to revisit this nest to check on its progress.

In southern Alberta, Loggerhead Shrikes typically use small trees, shrubs and, occasionally, sagebrush for nesting.²⁻⁴ Although uncommon, three nest sites in tumbleweed have been reported in Alberta^{3, 4} and one in California.¹

1. Bent, A. C. 1950. Life Histories of North American Wagtails, Shrikes, Vireos and Their Allies. Dover Publications Inc., Reprint 1965, New York. 411pp + plates.

2. Bjorge, R. R. and D. R. C. Prescott. 1996. Population estimates and habitat associations of the Loggerhead Shrike, *Lanius ludovicianus*, in southeastern Alberta. *Canadian Field-Naturalist* 110:445-449.

3. Collister, D. M. 1994. Breeding ecology and habitat preservation of the loggerhead shrike (*Lanius ludovicianus excubitorides*) in southeastern Alberta. M.D.P., Faculty of Environmental Design, University of Calgary, Calgary, AB. 161 pp.

4. Wershler, R. M. 1989. Nesting habitat and abundance of the loggerhead shrike (*Lanius ludovicianus*) in two key areas of southern Alberta. Prepared for World Wildlife Fund Canada and Alberta Fish and Wildlife. 27pp.

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TO SAVE A MOCKINGBIRD

Reserve, Saskatchewan, 54 km from Hudson Bay, once a bustling little town with post office and stores in the early '40's, is now a collection of hunting cabins occupied year round by only two families. It comes alive during the hunting season. Completely surrounded by tall forest, you feel there a peace and serenity of unhurried times. My son Curtis and I visited Reserve on March 29, 2000 on a special mission. A quiet sunny day, the pungent smell of wood smoke wafted our way. Terry Tretiak, a Yorkton resident who owns a cabin in Reserve, was boiling down the maple sap he had collected from his own trees on a wood-fired heater in his yard. We greeted him, but hurried on to the home of Betty and Fred Darmochid to see the mockingbird that they had rescued from certain death.

Betty, Fred, and their fourteen year old son, Shane, have a deep love for the land, the forest and all creatures. Deer, moose and elk wander down the dirt street or are seen in the nearby forest. Bear tip over the garbage cans. Squirrels over-winter in a nest box the Darmochids lovingly erected in a tree and filled with wool and car-cushion stuffing. Bird feeders are everywhere. Betty's animated voice tells of the chipmunks they have raised in a cage, of the chickadees they kept, of the Song Sparrow who, left behind in the fall migration, was fed and sheltered through the winter, and of the one-legged "whiskey-jack" (Gray Jay) they feed. The jay nested in nearby trees and brought her babies to show them in early May last year.

It was in November 1999 that the Darmochids first noticed the "different" bird. At first, Betty thought it was a skinny whiskey-jack. Then she noticed the slender bill, the white wing patches, the

white on the tail, and the yellow eyes. It didn't fluff out its feathers to provide insulation from the cold as the other birds did.

As coincidence would have it, Betty's friend had left a bird book - *Birds of Canada* - after a late fall visit.¹ "In case you see a different bird," she had said. Betty soon discovered that the skinny whiskey-jack was a Northern Mockingbird, whose range is the southern states of the United States. The *Atlas of Saskatchewan Birds* showed some sightings of the Northern Mockingbird in Saskatchewan, most in the southern part of the province and gives its status as "a rare summer resident or transient, and very rare winter visitant."²

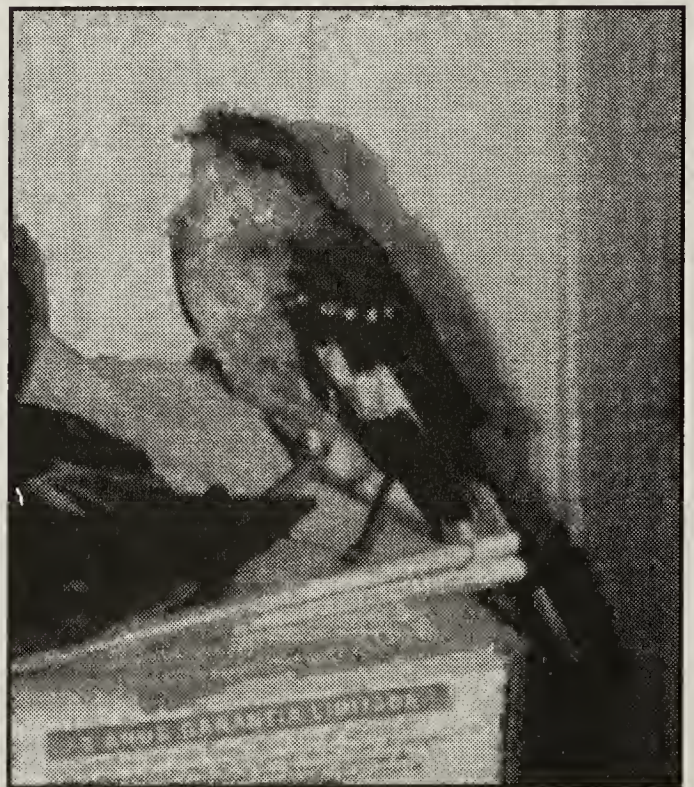
Throughout November and December, the Darmochids attempted to catch the mockingbird, who was obviously suffering, but to no avail. On January first, at -35° C, Fred Darmochid went outside, looked down, and there, huddled by the wall, near death, was the mockingbird. Luckily, the cat had declined a trip outdoors earlier in the day because of the cold weather! The bird was brought indoors where the warmth soon revived it.

Now, what does one do with a mockingbird? Betty got on the Internet and found out that its food was, among other things, seeds and cranberries. Sunflower seeds and thawed cranberries were offered and declined. By experimenting, Betty found out what foods it would eat. These included: strawberries, watermelon, honeydew melon, cooked meat (with a strong preference for Black Forest ham - Betty limits this because of the salt content), apples, warmed-up potatoes with onions, and newly-caught flies. It does not like raw meat, pasta or blueberries.

After about two weeks, the toes on the left foot dropped off due to freezing, leaving only a stump. Some time later, part of the lower jaw dropped off, so that only about one quarter of an inch of the lower bill remained. These handicaps make it difficult for the bird to pick up food, but it perseveres, getting food on the side of the bill, then flipping it into its mouth with a shake of the head. The bird also can't preen itself, so Fred and Shane give it a bath once a week, which it dislikes.

Most of the time, the mockingbird lives in its cage by the window in the dining room. When it has no food, it goes to the corner of the cage and watches Betty in the kitchen. It likes Betty. When she sits crocheting by the table, it gets on the side of the cage closest to her and chirps.

Sometimes the mockingbird is allowed freedom in Shane's room, where it flies from picture to stove pipe to deer antlers to the house plants, perching with difficulty. Even the toes on the right foot don't seem to close around things tightly.



The Darmochids' Mockingbird
Leona Pollock

"The bird," as Betty calls it, is bright-eyed and lively, seemingly in good health. The Darmochids are not sure what the next step will be - let it go free when the weather warms up, or build a large, enclosed pen outdoors where they can continue to feed and care for it. For now, it is well cared for and has provided much interest and enjoyment for this nature-loving family.

1. W. E. Godfrey. 1986. *The Birds of Canada*. National Museum of Natural Sciences, Ottawa.

2. Smith, A.R. 1996. *Atlas of Saskatchewan Birds*. Special Publication No. 22, Saskatchewan Natural History Society (Nature Saskatchewan), Regina.

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CALIFORNIA CONDOR AT KERROBERT, SK

April 27 was just another ordinary day at the farm. Lance, my husband, was out doing chores. David, 13, and Jessica, 9, are home-schooling and they were studying at the table. Tamara, 19, was also at the table working on a dental assisting course.

At about 9:45 the phone rang and Lance said excitedly, "Look above the house. There's a big bird!" We all ran out onto the deck and looked up. Seconds later Lance joined us. The bird was so big and so different that we could hardly believe our eyes. David ran back in and got the binoculars.

As the bird circled above the house, we all had an excellent view. Our first thought was that it was a Turkey Vulture because the head looked so disproportionately small and tucked between its huge black wings. Lance's

parents, who came outside to look, thought the same thing. They had seen many in Alabama while visiting their daughter. Puzzling, though, were the creamy wing patches. The wings were held straight and had very jagged tips. It soared around in the blue sky, never flapping.

The bird drifted to the northwest and, within 10 minutes of the first sighting, it was a speck in the sky. Not once did it flap those enormous wings.

Later that day, Lance and David were out in the field, harrowing. They got out to adjust something and while Lance was working, David was searching the sky. Suddenly he yelled, "Look, there's that bird again!"

This time it was quite high, but the creamy white wing patches were very visible. They watched for about 5 minutes as it again drifted northwest and disappeared. Whether or not this was the same bird, it was definitely the same species.

The next day was a busy one again and little thought was given to the sighting the day before. Little did I know, though, the wheels were turning in the mind of our nature lover, David. I thought he was in his room doing Science. He was! But instead of the books he was supposed to be studying, he was poring through stacks of old National Geographics! This came to light when he came upstairs and calmly showed me the picture of a California Condor in the May 1970 issue. There was the bird we had seen the day before! After reading that there were only 50 left in the world, I was rather excited.

When Lance came in for dinner that day, David showed him the picture. He had to agree. This was the bird we had seen. We needed to report our sighting

to the proper authorities so later that day, I phoned the university and was referred to Joe Schmutz. When I told him we believed we had seen a California Condor, he said, "Oh." Pause. Pause. "That is very" pause, "surprising, isn't it?"

From the lack of conviction in his voice, I presumed he didn't believe me. As I described the bird and related the story, he sounded a bit excited. By the end of the call, he sounded thoroughly convinced. Later, I received a call from Stuart Houston, who asked some questions and said it was a very possible reality.

So here is our story, and, as Joe said, it is truly the sighting of a lifetime.

- *Judy Simonson*, Box 787, Kerrobert SK, S0L 1R0

[Editors' Note: A possible sighting of a California Condor also was made at Beaverhill Lake, Alberta (se of Edmonton) 15 April 2000, and another was made a week earlier. It will never be possible to know for sure whether or not these sightings were truly of this rare bird. The descriptions by the observers are convincing. Yet, according to Lloyd Kiff, Science Director of the Peregrine Fund, there have been no records of California Condors in Canada in the past 180 years, and the only fully validated sightings ever from Canada were made in British Columbia. The bird's presence on the Canadian prairie in the spring of 2000 must remain a tantalizing possibility.]

BUZZING BALL BAFFLES BOTANIST

One of the pleasures of routine field work is finding unexpected things – like an abandoned mouse nest that buzzed. I encountered this oddity last summer near Last Mountain Lake, while

searching through thick vegetation for spindly, little Western Red Lily plants (*Lilium philadelphicum* var. *andinum*). The tedium of the work made me pick up the nest; curiosity made me hold it, waiting for the buzzing thing to emerge and show itself. It didn't, so I put the buzzing ball of dried grass back on the ground and resumed the search for lilies.

That was 1 July 1999 and the nest lay undisturbed until 5 October when Bonnie Lawrence and I returned to the plot to do another survey. Because a thick tangle of Northern Reed Grass (*Calamagrostis inexpansa*) covers the area, I didn't see the nest again until I was right on top of it. The remains of the mouse nest was where I'd left it and under it was a bumble bee nest 13 cm across (Figure 1). Only the top was visible. When we lifted the bee nest out of the ground, we found that tiers of cells filled a cavity 8 cm deep.

A few bees had had the courtesy to die in the cells providing us with a



Figure 1. The bumble bee nest as found in the ground

Anna Leighton



Figure 2. Close-up of excavated nest showing the peanut-sized cells

Anna Leighton

sample to send to Phil Curry for identification. According to Phil, this bumble bee, *Bombus fervidus*, is a fairly regular inhabitant of the prairies. It occurs across the southern third of the province in mixed grass prairie and Aspen parkland. Mated females overwinter and in spring or early summer find an abandoned rodent or bird nest to start a colony.¹

Phil suggests that on July 1 the queen was probably incubating on a nest. Bumble bee nest-building is a complicated process. "After selecting her site, the queen forms a hollow in the center of the nesting material, builds a wax cup in which she lays eggs, and incubates them until they hatch. The queen also forages for nectar and pollen to feed herself and her developing larvae. After about 10 days the larvae spin their cocoons and pupate."¹

Worker bees are produced first, and take over all foraging and brood rearing activities while the queen remains in the colony laying more eggs. Males and

new queens emerge later in the summer. Colonies may attain a size of 400 bees in one season. Ours, with about 150 cells (Figure 2), was a bit above the normal range of 30 to 100 bees per colony.¹

Could these bumble bees be important pollinators of the Western Red Lily? This nest was less than 50 m from a fairly dense population of plants where, on the day we found the nest, we counted 202 lilies in flower and 168 in bud in a rectangle 10 m wide by about 70 m long. The foraging range of *B. fervidus* is about 50 m in length and most foraging trips last about half an hour.² And, although the nectar would be hard for bees to reach, lilies are rich in pollen and it may be possible that the bees were using these lilies as a food source. It would be ironic to have stumbled upon an important pollinator in this way, since in our five years of field work to date on the Western Red Lily we have noted only a few instances of pollination and that was by swallowtail butterflies.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Phil Curry for his assistance with all stages of preparation of this article and Bernie Gollop for his helpful comments.

1. Curry, Philip S. 1984. Bumble Bees of Saskatchewan (Hymenoptera: Apidae) A Survey of their Geographic Distribution. Saskatchewan Culture and Recreation, Museum of Natural History, Regina.

2. Heinrich, B. 1979. Bumblebee Economics. Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA.

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BARN OWL AT GRASSLANDS NATIONAL PARK

I saw the Barn Owl on Wednesday, May 17, 2000, just around sunset. My companion and I had driven into

Grasslands National Park from the north gate. We parked our car at the Ecotour Signpost 2 (see the 1999 GNP West Block map). I had walked maybe a hundred feet/yards south along the road as it dipped down into the Frenchman Valley when I noticed the owl flying beside me, and not that far above me. It seemed to have come out of one of the draws to my left (east) and was quite close to me. I thought it must be a Short-eared Owl; I had seen one two days before. However, I noticed it didn't have the wandering, wavering motion of a Short-eared. And then it turned its head to look at me. I noticed the white face with its unusual shape. The owl circled a quarter turn to the right, turned its head to look at me again, made another quarter turn and disappeared into a draw on my right. The whole time I don't think it moved its wings much at all; its flight was very steady - I say flight, it was in fact gliding more than flying.

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“The larkspur and its close relative, the delphinium, are both named from the shape of their flowers. The larkspur flower looks a bit like the claw of a bird, and the delphinium flowers ‘especially before they be perfected’ (Gerard), resemble the bottle-like nose of the dolphin, *delphis* being the Greek for ‘dolphin’”

(p.115)... “The name ‘forget-me-not’ comes from the Old French *ne m’oubliez mye*, which in turn was a translation of the German *vergiss mein nicht*. The best known legend about the flower is of a German knight picking a posy of forget-me-nots for his beloved as they strolled together on a riverbank. He slipped and fell in, but before drowning he threw her the flowers, crying, ‘*Vergiss mein nicht*.’ This excruciating story could really only have merit were it to be sung onstage with a suitably distraught and bosomy soprano and some excellent trap-door mechanisms. Botanically it doesn’t hold much water.” (p.72).

Diana Wells, *100 Flowers and How They Got Their Names*