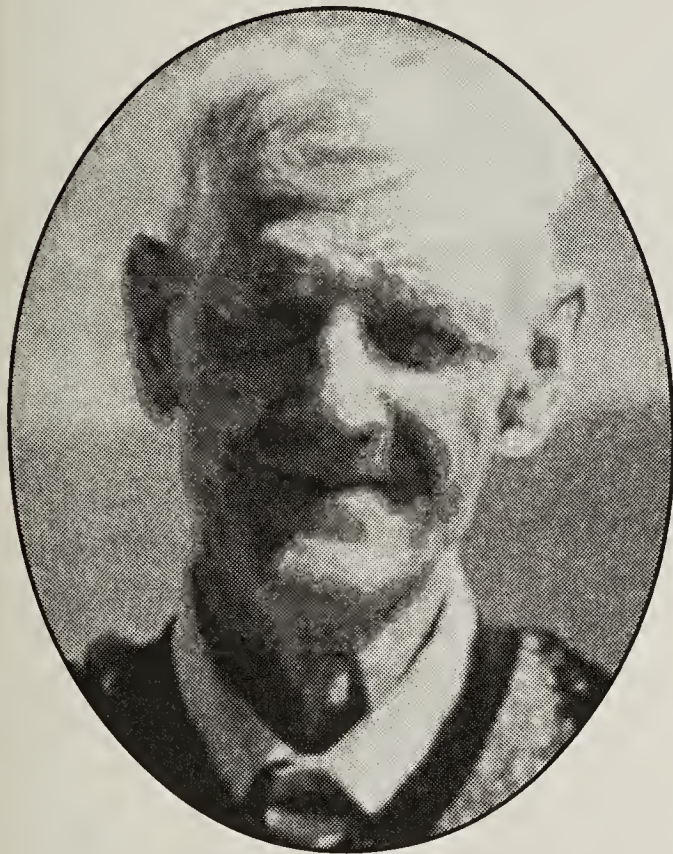

IN MEMORIAM

WILLIAM MCINTYRE NIVEN, 1906 - 2001

C. STUART HOUSTON, 863 University Drive, Saskatoon. SK S7N 0J8



William McIntyre Niven

William McIntyre Niven was born in Winnipeg, Manitoba on 12 May 1906. His parents, recent Scottish immigrants to Canada, settled on a homestead in aspen parkland 5 miles north of Sheho, Saskatchewan, in July 1910. Bill Niven became interested in birds while attending nearby Newburn School. During the 1920s he worked for the Royal Bank in Sheho for about a year. During the Second World War he spent six months in the Canadian Army, but was discharged after suffering a jaw injury during army drill in Halifax. The remainder of his life was spent farming with his younger brother, George, beside Salt Lake; the two bachelors eventually added 800 acres to the initial 320 acre homestead.

In 1920 Niven purchased, second-hand, a 1903 one-volume printing of Nuttall's *A Popular Handbook of the Birds of the United States and Canada*. This book sufficed until 1943, when he invested in Taverner's *Birds of Canada*. He did not purchase binoculars until 1958. He began keeping bird migration dates in small notebooks in 1919. A frugal man, he crowded migration dates for 1919-1927 onto 38 pages, and for 1939-1945 onto 26 pages. From 1946 through 1973, he entered his records in four successive copies of the *Farmer's Pocket Ledger*, each a 52-page booklet supplied free by the John Deere farm equipment company, with the name of the local dealer printed on the outside cover: in turn, F. Wunder of Sheho, Richard Sandness of Foam Lake, and then two booklets from William and J. R. Taylor of Invermay. From 1974 through 1989, he filled all 50 pages of a United Grain Growers booklet.

When the Yorkton Natural History Society was formed in the fall of 1942, Niven was one of the first subscribers to the mimeographed *Blue Jay*. He felt this publication was worth more than the 25-cent-a-year fee and sent a donation of one dollar to the editor, Mrs. Isabel Priestly. My correspondence with him began at that time, and three years later I visited the Niven farm for the first of many times. Late in 1942, he sent Mrs. Priestly spring dates for 1942 and notes on abundance for 155 species. Niven contributed regularly to the early

volumes of *Blue Jay* (six observations and 8 short articles). He corresponded regularly with Mrs. Priestly until her death in 1946; his final *Blue Jay* contribution, to the 50th anniversary issue in September 1992, was a reminiscence of this correspondence.

Sheho was one of 8 localities in Saskatchewan's first province-wide Christmas Bird Count in 1942, with Niven's count of 10 species and 102 individuals. He again contributed Christmas Bird Counts from 1946 through 1955, observing 8 to 12 species during daily chores on the farm, often on Christmas Day or Boxing Day. Only in 1954 and 1955 did he augment his count by travelling 5 and 3 miles, respectively, by car. In 1954 he walked 3 miles and in the 1955 count, his last, he walked six hours looking for birds.

When "Birds of the Yorkton district, Saskatchewan" was published in the *Canadian Field-Naturalist* in 1949, nearly half of each year's early spring arrival dates were from Niven's observations at Sheho, since he was literally "in the field" each day. Most Yorkton observers who contributed dates relied mainly on Saturday and Sunday observations. Although an enthusiastic conversationalist whenever he encountered a fellow birder, he could almost be categorized as a recluse. He rarely ventured from the farm, and then only for short trips to Sheho, Invermay and Foam Lake.

Early in 1973 Niven sent me his lifetime annotated list of 201 species. Bernie Gollop and I then asked him for additional information and expansions on certain observations. The result was a superb article, "The land, the birds, through 50 years in aspen parkland," which appeared in *Blue Jay* in December 1973 (31:223-229), telling of the changes in habitat and bird life.

His brother George died in 1974. In 1980, Niven sold his land to Jim and Evelyn Laird, and purchased a house near the north end of the village of Foam Lake, overlooking the countryside. There he transplanted trees and grasses from the farm and kept an immaculate garden with magnificent flower displays and sunflowers for the birds. He retained the use of the farm home as well, mostly for visits of a few days or a week until about 1993 when he could no longer drive. He was plagued by persistent deep ulcers on his legs, and from 1998 was confined to a wheelchair. With his strong arms, a healthy dose of stubbornness and a keen mind, he maintained his independence. In 2000 he purchased a motor scooter, with which he could visit downtown Foam Lake, half a mile away. From the scooter he also planted and weeded his garden, did some fall clean-up ... and, yes, Evelyn tells us, he got stuck.

Evelyn Laird's eulogy correctly described Niven as "very resourceful, thrifty and fiercely independent. He loved to recite poetry or quote historical facts and the Bible. If it happened that a whistled tune fit in the story, then the listener heard that, too. ... he could whistle [bird] songs to you, clap out the rhythm of their wing beat or pattern of the notes they sang."

After only three days in hospital, Bill Niven passed away at the Foam Lake Health Centre on 1 February 2001. As Evelyn Laird said so well, "Bill chose a solitary life ... the road less traveled." His 1973 *Blue Jay* article is his legacy to posterity.