

## RODDICK LAKE BIRDS, 76 YEARS AFTER MITCHELL AND BARD

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“Traveling northward from Regina, over the bare prairie, one comes to the first evergreen or coniferous trees, near Roddick, in the Pines [Nisbet] Forest Reserve, some 25 miles south of the City of Prince Albert. Not far from the small railway station is the forest ranger’s house and lofty look-out tower. From the latter the naturalist gets a fine view over his chosen collecting ground; a ‘rolling’ country, with many lakes and muskegs among the jackpine and spruce trees. Here on May 21st [1927], assistant biologist, F. Bard and I pitched our camp on the shore of Birch [Roddick] Lake, well sheltered from storms by poplar, birch and spruce trees.

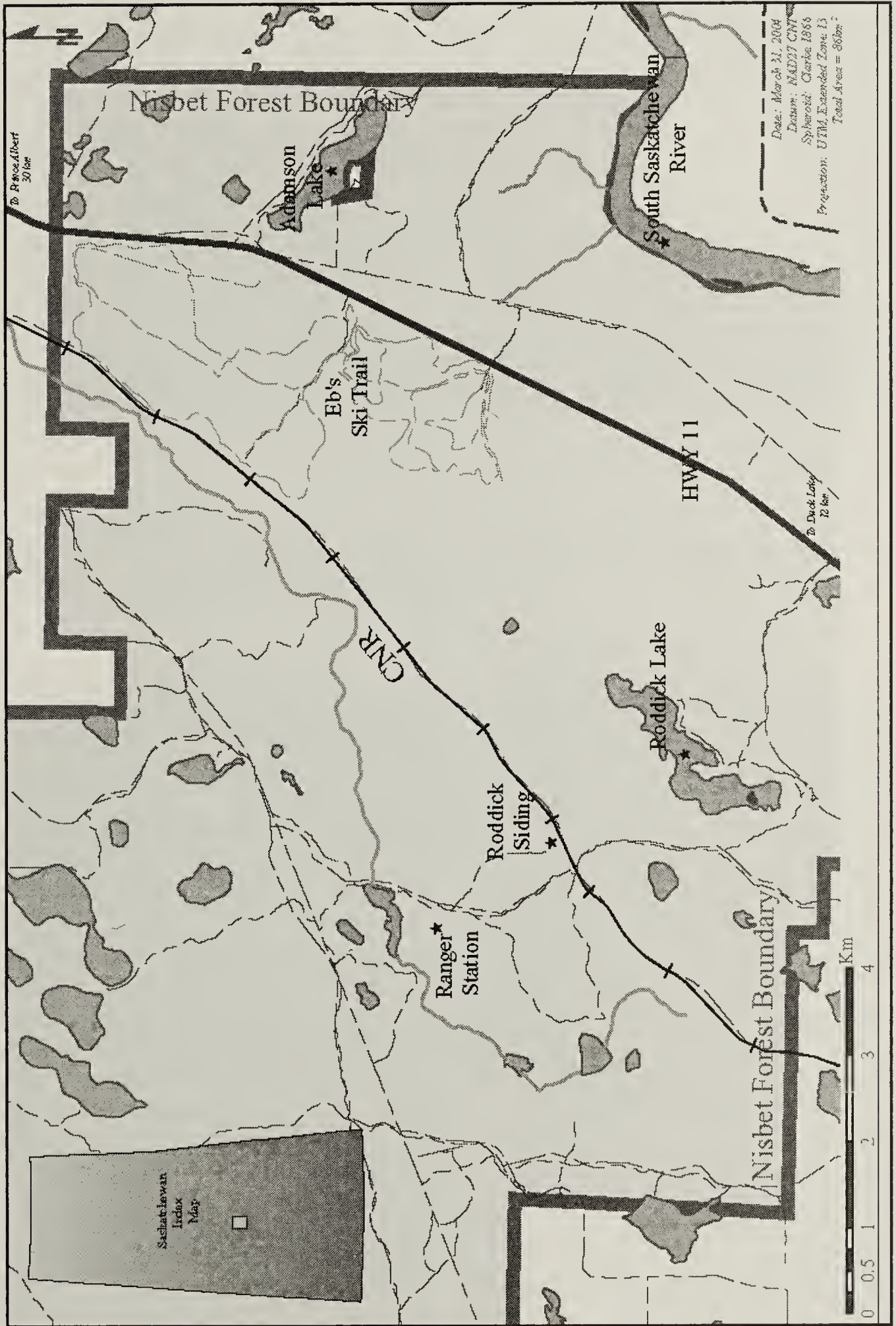
“In that forested country waterfowl are not, of course, as plentiful as on the prairie lakes and sloughs to the south, but ring-necked ducks, lesser scaups, mallards, white winged scoters and some other common ducks were noted, evidently nesting in the marshy bays around the lake. Woodland birds, as expected, were found in greater numbers and variety; the phoebe, so well-known in eastern Canada, was surprisingly common, at least eight pairs of these small flycatchers were noted nesting in the district; a nest, eggs and specimens of this species collected were much needed acquisitions for the museum, as was also a yellow-bellied flycatcher taken on May 30th. Other important finds were a set of four eggs of the sharp-shinned hawk—laid in an old nest of a crow’s—a set of [five] eggs of palm warbler, a male Philadelphia vireo [May 30], besides other specimens, listed elsewhere, as acquisitions to the museum, including material for three small bird-groups. ... During

our stay of a month in that district a lot of rainy days were experienced, as usual in the wooded areas at that time of the year, but we secured over 100 insect specimens, mainly butterflies, several of which were new to the collections already in the museum.”<sup>2</sup>

The foregoing is quoted from H.H. Mitchell’s report covering the Saskatchewan Museum 1927 collecting expedition. Mitchell was at the time the provincial naturalist and Fred Bard was the assistant biologist. They spent May 21 to June 22 observing and collecting specimens for the provincial museum.

Stuart Houston had access to the field notes of Mitchell and Bard at Roddick Lake in 1927 and cited them for each of 97 species in his 1959 publication.<sup>1</sup> (A recent search in his files and a search by the staff at the Royal Saskatchewan Museum has failed to relocate them). According to Stuart, with only a few exceptions, Mitchell and Bard provided little information regarding abundance, or evidence of breeding.

I thought it might be of interest, and of some scientific value, after a lapse of 76 years, to revisit the site at the same time of year that Mitchell and Bard were there. I began to set up camp on May 14 and by the next evening everything was in place. My pickup and camper would be home for my old dog and myself until June 22. A 4m x 4m dining tent was set up over a picnic table, to provide an escape from the anticipated mosquitoes and flies. It also served as an entertainment center and sleeping quarters



**Roddick Lake Area**



*Roddick Lake Camp 2003: the author and granddaughter Jessica Watt*

*M. Kyle*

for the friends who stopped by regularly to help me search for birds.

In spring 2003 the water level of Roddick Lake was very low, and the 100m wide beaches provided an ideal feeding and loafing area for resident and migrating shorebirds. A long time local resident remarked he had never seen so little water in the lake in May and June, and by October 2003, Roddick Lake was completely dry. He went on to say that the water level from about 1940 through 1980 had been at least 2m higher, and a look at past beach locations quickly confirmed this. The higher water level in 1927 would have provided very little shoreline for the wading birds to forage and explains why Mitchell and Bard recorded fewer shorebirds.

Since I am hearing impaired, especially for higher frequencies, I use what I refer to as the “cowbird” method of locating birds – I sit quietly and watch. The system works for me. Fortunately I have friends with excellent ears and birding skills willing to assist me; two of them, Don Weidl and Carman Dodge, visited June 21<sup>st</sup> and 22<sup>nd</sup>, and their birding by ear added several species to my total.

Table 1 compares the 1927 and 2003 species observations; some of the highlights are given below.

In 2003, good breeding records were obtained for Black-and-white Warbler and Brown Creeper. On May 31, while sitting quietly, watching for birds, I was fortunate to observe a Black-and-white Warbler carrying nesting material. I was able to document the nest building to the fledging of 5 young on June 24<sup>th</sup>. The nest of this warbler has been found on very few occasions in Saskatchewan.

Alan Smith discovered a nesting pair of Brown Creepers while leading the Saskatchewan Natural History Society group on the June 7<sup>th</sup> spring meet bird walk. The nest entrance was so well concealed that the adults carrying food seemed to just disappear into the trunk of the nest tree.

Barred Owls were sighted and heard on several occasions, and although no nest search was conducted, the evidence strongly suggests a breeding pair. Another highlight was Murray Kyle’s brief sighting of a Northern Mockingbird on May 21<sup>st</sup>, a bird

near the northern limit of its range for sporadic wandering.

The lack of 2003 sightings of the White-winged Scoter, Upland Sandpiper, Franklin's Gull, Common Nighthawk, Cliff Swallow, Loggerhead Shrike, Western Meadowlark, and House Sparrow would be consistent with decreased numbers or a retraction of ranges since 1927. The lack of Marsh and Sedge Wren sightings probably relate to dying off of bulrush during drought years and a declining lake level.

My 2003 observations will provide some comparisons should someone decide to repeat the project again after the passage of another three quarters of a century.

#### **Acknowledgements**

I thank my friends Murray Kyle and Alan Young, who gave freely of their time and expertise whenever possible. Carman Dodge,

Alan Smith and Donald Weidl added greatly to the data. I would also thank Dana Jones for her assistance with the maps, my granddaughter Jessica Watt for her cheerful manner, nest finding ability and patience teaching grandpa to use a computer, and Stuart Houston for his ongoing encouragement and assistance in preparing this report.

1. HOUSTON, C.S., and M.G. STREET. 1959. Birds of the Saskatchewan River, Carlton to Cumberland . Saskatchewan Natural History Society, Special Publication no.2.
2. MITCHELL, H.H. 1928. Museum collecting, season of 1927, pp. 34-36, and Acquisitions to Museum 1927-28, pp. 36-67, In: Bradshaw, F., Report of the Game Commissioner ... during year ended April 30, 1928.



*Black and White Warbler on nest, 10 June 2003*

*M. Kyle*

SPECIES	1927	2003	SPECIES	1927	2003
COMMON LOON	O	C	COMMON SNIPES	O	C
PIED-BILLED GREBE		B, C	WILSON'S PHALAROPE	O	C
HORNED GREBE	O	C	FRANKLIN'S GULL	O	
RED-NECKED GREBE	O N	C, B	BONAPARTE'S GULL	O	
WESTERN GREBE	O		RING-BILLED GULL		C
AMERICAN WHITE PELICAN		U (30)	CALIFORNIA GULL		C
DOUBLE CRESTED CORMORANT		U	BLACK TERN	O	C
AMERICAN BITTERN	O	U	MOURNING DOVE		C, Y(2)
GREAT BLUE HERON	O		BLACK-BILLED CUCKOO	O	U
CANADA GOOSE		U	GREAT HORNED OWL	O	U
GREEN-WINGED TEAL	O	C	BARRED OWL		U, B
MALLARD	B	C, B (30)	COMMON NIGHTHAWK	S	
NORTHERN PINTAIL	O	C	RUBY-THROATED HUMMINGBIRD	O	U
BLUE-WINGED TEAL		C, B	YELLOW-BELLIED SAPSUCKER	N, S	C
NORTHERN SHOVELER		C	DOWNY WOODPECKER	O	U
GADWALL		U	HAIRY WOODPECKER	O	U
AMERICAN WIGEON		O	NORTHERN FLICKER	O	U
CANVASBACK	O	C	PILEATED WOODPECKER		U
RING-NECKED DUCK	B	C, B	OLIVE SIDED FLYCATCHER		U
LESSER SCAUP	B	C	WESTERN WOOD-PEWEE		U
WHITE-WINGED SCOTER	N, S		YELLOW-BELLIED FLYCATCHER	O	U
COMMON GOLDENEYE	O	C	ALDER FLYCATCHER		U
BUFFLEHEAD	O	C, B	LEAST FLYCATCHER	O	U
RUDDY DUCK	O	C, B	EASTERN PHOEBE	N, S	U
TURKEY VULTURE		U (2)	GREAT CRESTED FLYCATCHER	O	U
BALD EAGLE		U	EASTERN KINGBIRD	S	C
NORTHERN HARRIER		C	PURPLE MARTIN	N, S	U
SHARP-SHINNED HAWK	B, N	U	TREE SWALLOW	N, S	N
COOPER'S HAWK		U	BANK SWALLOW	O	U
NORTHERN GOSHAWK		U	CLIFF SWALLOW	O	
BROAD-WINGED HAWK		U	BARN SWALLOW	O	U
RED-TAILED HAWK		C, B	GRAY JAY		U
AMERICAN KESTREL		C	BLUE JAY	O	U
MERLIN		U	AMERICAN CROW	S	U
RUFFED GROUSE		C	COMMON RAVEN		C
SORA	O	U	BLACK-CAPPED CHICKADEE	O	C, N
AMERICAN COOT	O		BOREAL CHICKADEE		U
SANDHILL CRANE		C	BROWN CREEPER		B, N
SEMIPALMATED PLOVER		C	HOUSE WREN	N, S	C, N
KILLDEER		C, N	SEDGE WREN	O	
AMERICAN AVOCET		C, B	MARSH WREN	O	
GREATER YELLOWLEGS		C	EASTERN BLUEBIRD	O	
LESSER YELLOWLEGS	O	C	MOUNTAIN BLUEBIRD	O	
SPOTTED SANDPIPER	O	C	VEERY		U
UPLAND SANDPIPER	O		GRAY-CHEEKED THRUSH	N	
SANDERLING		C	SWAINSON'S THRUSH		U
LEAST SANDPIPER	O	C	HERMIT THRUSH	O	C
STILT SANDPIPER		C	AMERICAN ROBIN	O	B, N
SHORT-BILLED DOWITCHER		C	GRAY CATBIRD	S	U
LONG-BILLED DOWITCHER		C	NORTHERN MOCKINGBIRD		U
BROWN THRASHER		U	SPOTTED TOWHEE		H
SPRAGUE'S PIPIT		H	CHIPPING SPARROW		C
CEDAR WAXWING		C	CLAY-COLORED SPARROW	S	C
LOGGERHEAD SHRIKE	O		VESPER SPARROW	O	U
WARBLING VIREO	O	C	SAVANNAH SPARROW		U
PHILADELPHIA VIREO	S	U	LE CONTE'S SPARROW	O	U
RED-EYED VIREO	O	B, N	NELSON'S SHARP-TAILED SPARROW		U
TENNESSEE WARBLER	O	U	SONG SPARROW	S	C, B
ORANGE-CROWNED WARBLER	O	C	LINCOLN'S SPARROW		U
NASHVILLE WARBLER		U	SWAMP SPARROW		U
YELLOW WARBLER	S	C, N	WHITE-THROATED SPARROW	O	C
CHESTNUT-SIDED WARBLER	O	U	WHITE-CROWNED SPARROW	O	
MAGNOLIA WARBLER	O		HARRIS'S SPARROW	O	U
YELLOW-RUMPED WARBLER	O	C, B	DARK-EYED JUNCO	N	C
PALM WARBLER	N, S		RED-WINGED BLACKBIRD	O	C, N
BAY-BREASTED WARBLER	S		WESTERN MEADOWLARK	S	
BLACKPOLL WARBLER	O		YELLOW-HEADED BLACKBIRD		U
BLACK-AND-WHITE WARBLER	O	N, Y(5)	RUSTY BLACKBIRD	S	
AMERICAN REDSTART	O	C	BREWER'S BLACKBIRD	O	
OVENBIRD		U	COMMON GRACKLE	O	
NORTHERN WATERTHRUSH	O		BROWN-HEADED COWBIRD	S	C
MOURNING WARBLER	O	U	NORTHERN ORIOLE	O	C, B
COMMON YELLOWTHROAT	O	U	PURPLE FINCH	O	C
WILSON'S WARBLER	S		AMERICAN GOLDFINCH	O	C
CANADA WARBLER	O		EVENING GROSBEAK		U
ROSE-BREASTED GROSBEAK	O	C	HOUSE SPARROW	O	

*Bird species noted in 1927 and 2003 near Roddick Lake, SK. B-breeding; C-common; H-heard only; N-nest found; O-observed; S-specimen taken; U-uncommon; Y-young. Parentheses surround the number in a flock, the number of young etc.*