
NOTES AND LETTERS

CRASH LANDING OF AMERICAN WHITE PELICANS

These are pictures I took on June 30, 2002. As you can notice, my dog isn't camera shy! This field on which about 50 dead pelicans were found was a mile east of Eyebrow, SK (NE 19-21-1 W 3rd). The results of the necropsy were consistent with severe trauma from impact with the ground (Trent Bollinger, Canadian Cooperative Wildlife Health Centre, Western College of Veterinary Medicine, Saskatoon, pers. comm.).

- *Nathan Nash*, Box 173, Eyebrow, SK S0H 1L0

[Sudden death of whole flocks of birds due to impact with the ground has been observed in wild geese on the prairies as well as in these pelicans. Some of these incidents, including this one, appear to coincide with severe local thunder storms, and they may be the result of a panic response by the birds to the sudden frightening noise combined with very poor visibility. The birds do not see the ground and fly into it at full speed when seeking escape. - Eds.]



Figure 1. American White Pelican that hit the ground flying



Figure 2. Some of the 50 pelicans found dead near Eyebrow

BLACK-BACKED WOODPECKER NESTS NEAR LA RONGE, SK

My first observation of the Black-backed Woodpecker nest was during our spring canoe trip, June 21 to 30, 2003. We arrived at our favourite island on Sulphide Lake, north of La Ronge, to set up camp on June 21. We had visited this location (N 55° 21' W 104° 53') many times previously. As we landed our canoe, I heard chattering from the nearest tree and realized that there was a nest, approximately six feet above the ground in a dead pine tree. (Figure 1) The adult woodpeckers arrived shortly to check on their brood. (Figure 2)

That evening, as we set up camp and cooked supper, we saw the adult birds flying back and forth to the mainland and bringing grubs to feed their noisy young. This continued the next morning. They were increasingly busy trying to meet the demands of the voracious young. The last time we saw the female adult was June 24. After that, the male alone was frantically feeding the babes.

As the young got bigger, they began poking their heads out of the nest. (Figure 3) At first they scolded us soundly, but, later became accustomed to our presence as their parents had.

On June 29, I awoke to a noisy chattering and peeling of bark in the trees above our tent on the higher side of the island. Crawling out of the tent, I had a marvelous surprise: the male adult and two of the young were up in the trees. They had fledged! The adult was teaching the young to search for grubs under the bark (Figure 4). When I went down to where our landing site and food preparation area were, I heard a chattering still from the nest tree and realized that not all had fledged! One young woodpecker was left behind. During the next 24 hours, the adult male came back occasionally to feed this little one, but he was left alone for long periods. We could only hope that he would soon find his wings! When we left the island to return home on June 30, this last babe had not yet fledged.

We returned to the island in late August for our second canoe trip of the year. On the morning of August 29, as I sipped coffee, a family of four Black-backed Woodpeckers flew to one of the trees near our canoe landing spot. They peeled some bark and fed briefly before moving on. I like to think that this was our family from the spring.



Figure 1.

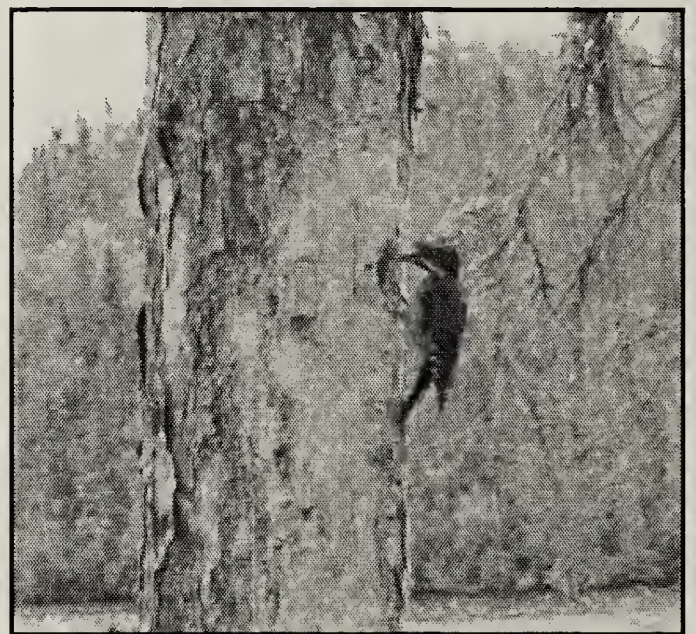


Figure 2.



Figure 3.

We returned to our island in 2004. On arrival on June 3, we saw that the Black-backed Woodpecker nest of the spring before had been taken over by flickers, which had enlarged the nest cavity. Where were our Black-backed Woodpeckers? On June 6, I finally spotted a female, and then the male, up the hill. Watching their movements, I was able to locate their new nest site. A fire had gone through the higher part of the island the fall previous. This nest was about five feet above ground in one of the burned trees. (Figure 5) The eggs had not hatched by the time we left the island on June 12.

We returned for our second trip in late August, 2004. Again I observed family groups of Black-backed Woodpeckers and assume



Figure 4.

that they had successfully raised another brood.

- *Oney Pollock*, Box 506, Canora, SK S0A 0L0

[These are the eighth and ninth nest records for Black-backed Woodpecker nests in Saskatchewan, and this is the only site with nests recorded in two consecutive years. Locations and dates of previous nests are Kazan Lake (1942), Cluff Lake (1982 in a burned Jack Pine), Shoal Lake (1990 in a fire-killed spruce), Weekes (1991 in an Aspen stump), Turtle Lake (1995), Little Bear Lake (two nests in 1998 both in burned Jack Pines). - Eds.]



Figure 5.

SPRING ENCOUNTERS WITH LONG-EARED OWLS

Near dusk on March 29, 2005, while I was gathering a load of firewood in my backyard in the Charleswood area of Winnipeg, my attention was drawn to an unusual 'chittering' call coming from the trees towards the rear of our well-wooded property. The strange sound, an oscillating tremolo, lasted for about 15 to 20 seconds and seemed to originate from the woodlot canopy. The outer branches of a spruce tree were shaking violently against a Wood Duck nest box mounted at a height of about 4m on the trunk of a large trembling aspen. I glimpsed a crow-sized bird flying off the back of a second similar bird. The latter remained perched for a second before also flying away. I surmised that I had just observed mating behaviour that ended with copulation.

I strode to the back of the property where both birds had flown and observed a Long-eared Owl perched on an aspen branch where it had just landed. The owl turned to face me, then stretched up into an elongated pose and remained motionless for a couple of minutes. Bob Nero's photo of a tame Long-eared Owl gives a fair idea of that upright display. I went back to the house and about 20 minutes later, when I returned to the back yard, I heard a male Long-eared Owl's distinctive advertising song; another owl called softly in the distance.

In early April, Craig Hammett, a neighbor across the street, told me that for several nights in a row, a large bird had been flying over his yard, and that this bird frequently

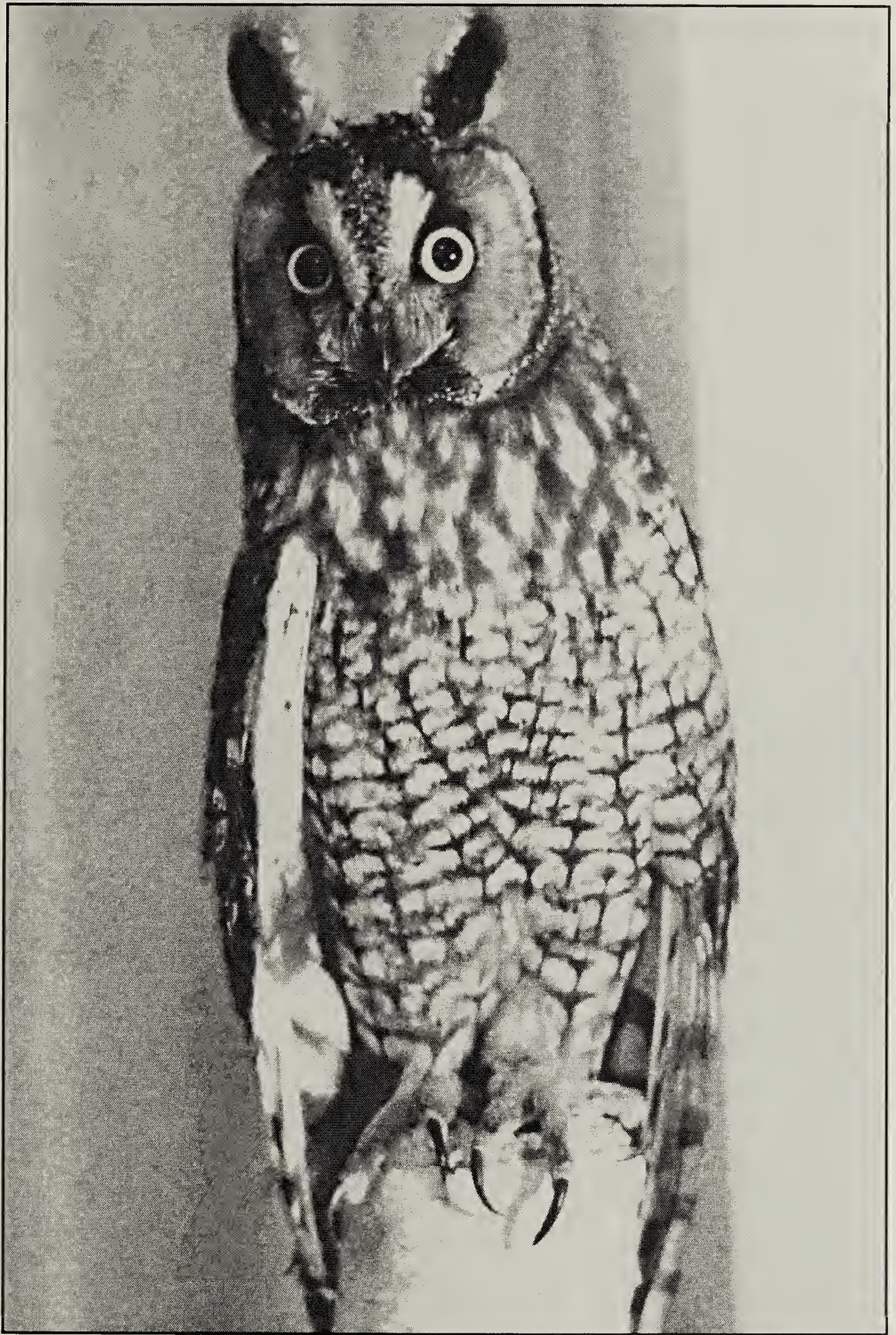
made loud, 'wing-clap like' sounds at around 11:00 p.m. This may have been a Long-eared Owl. Males perform courtship flights over suitable nesting habitat and both sexes are known to wing-clap, a display presumably used in courtship and agonistic encounters.² Although I have not since seen or heard a Long-eared Owl in my yard, I presume that this pair is now nesting somewhere nearby.

I discussed the possibility of this pair nesting in, or being attracted to, a cavity such as in my Wood Duck nest-box, with my friend and neighbour Bob Nero. Although Long-eared Owls usually nest in old nests, such as American Crow or Black-billed Magpie nests, they have been known to nest in cavities in trees or cliffs, or even on the ground.² I was unable to find any literature that supported whether or not Long-eared Owls have ever nested in artificial nest-boxes. It should be noted that in Manitoba, Long-eared Owl "egg dates range from 13 April to 27 June, with the majority in May and early June."¹

1. MANITOBA AVIAN RECORDS COMMITTEE. 2003. *The Birds of Manitoba*. Manitoba Naturalists Society, Winnipeg, MB.

2. MARKS, J.S., D.L. Evans and D.W. HOLT. 1994. Long-eared owl (*Asio otus*). In *The Birds of North America*, No. 133 (A. Poole and F. Gill, eds.). The Birds of North America, Inc., Philadelphia.

- Robert Berger, 807 Coventry Road, Winnipeg, MB R3R 1B8



Long-eared Owl

Bob Nero

SHARP-SHINNED HAWK HITS WINDOW

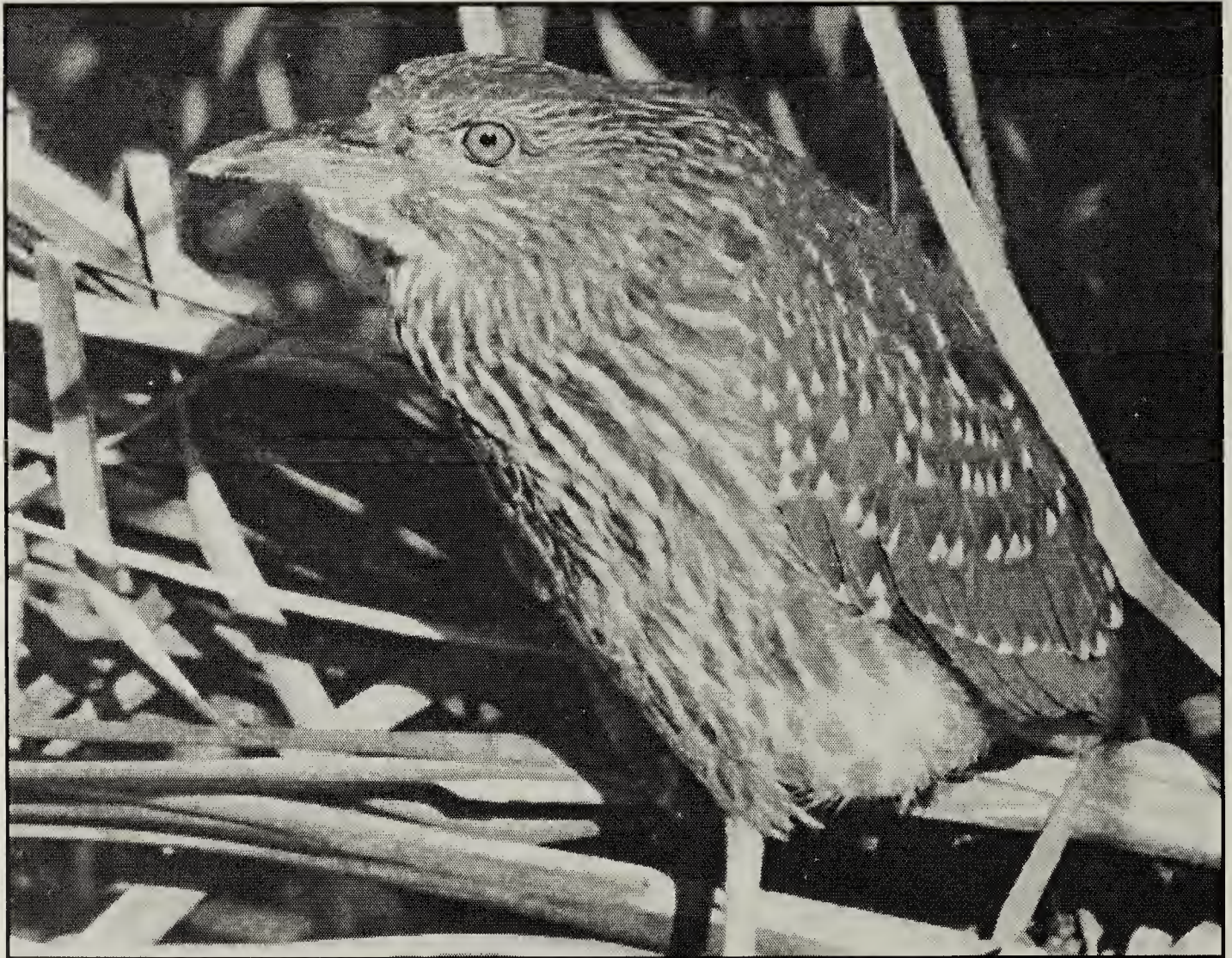
On Sunday, January 11, 2004, while having lunch in the kitchen, we heard a noise from the front of the house (facing south) which I took to be a door being blown shut by wind. I live in Haysboro, a neighbourhood with many mature trees in southwest Calgary only a few blocks east of Heritage Park and Glenmore Reservoir.

On investigation, I noticed a large bird standing motionless on the front step. The bird was visible through a glass storm door and I observed the bird for several minutes. First it blinked its eyes and then slowly turned its head from side to side as if in a daze. After some slight body movement, it hopped over to the three steps and down to the path, leading me to think it was as yet

unable to fly. Then it picked up a small bird that had been lying out of my line of sight and, once it had secured the bird, it flew off.

Reflecting on the incident, I realize that there had been two thumps, one smaller and one larger, in quick succession. My guess is that the hawk had been chasing a sparrow that flew into the storm door. I identified the hawk as a Sharp-shinned Hawk from *Birds of Calgary* (p.46) and the prey as a House Sparrow. The bird, a little larger than a magpie, was facing me at about 45° and resting back on a squarish tail, so the most significant feature that I saw was the light brown and white stripes on the breast.

- Ian Sandilands, 16 Holden Place SW,
Calgary, AB T2V 3E5



Juvenile Black-crowned Night-Heron near the Bessborough Hotel along the South Saskatchewan River in Saskatoon, September 2004

Eric Hedlin

MORE TIPS ON PREVENTING WINDOW COLLISIONS

Many times I have read from your distressed readers about birds flying into windows. Our deck windows reflect the trees in the yard and after many unsuccessful attempts at hanging strings, we were successful by inserting small cup hooks into the window sill 7 inches apart, and offsetting the top cup hooks into the window casing 7 inches apart and stringing plastic binder twine between the hooks. The strings are

removed for window washing and then replaced. We have three large windows (5' 6" by 4') and the strings are quite unobtrusive to our viewing. [A version of this string technique was described by Peter Jonker in the June 2001 issue of *Blue Jay*. - Eds.]

- April Sampson, 417- 5th Avenue S.E.,
Weyburn, SK S4H 1Y4



Flora Obscura: snapshot of identifying a rare plant. Since rare plants can't be picked, the field botanist has to bring the laboratory to the plant. This involves heavy books, small magnifiers, careful consideration of where to sit, and often, patient staring at an unremarkable, immature or even dead plant. On some days, the only warmth available is from heated discussions with fellow botanists. Why then is field botany one of the best careers? The thrill of discovery, the prairie wind that carries your conversations and the beauty in that unremarkable plant.

Jennifer Neudorf, (© Environment Canada, 2004)