
NOTES AND LETTERS

PREDATION TRIAD: PRAIRIE FALCON, AMERICAN KESTREL AND HORNED LARK

Raptors are not necessarily safe from other larger raptors. This may be especially true when one is distracted while killing and eating its own prey.

On July 29, 2000 at 2045h, while surveying for Burrowing Owls in the west block of Grassland National Park in southern Saskatchewan, we observed a female Prairie Falcon on the ground at the north end of the Larson Black-tailed Prairie Dog colony, (49E15' N, 107E5' W), about 21 km southeast of Val Marie, SK. The Prairie Falcon was clearly visible in the short cropped vegetation of the prairie dog colony and was obviously plucking a dead bird. We watched the falcon with binoculars for about 30 minutes at dusk, then drove closer causing the falcon to fly off with its prey. A pile of feathers remained. Close inspection showed that the feathers were those of a female American Kestrel. However, there was a totally plucked carcass and feathers of a Horned Lark under the pile of kestrel feathers. The head of the lark was missing but the body had not been fed upon.

We surmise that the kestrel had killed the lark and had just finished plucking it when the Prairie Falcon surprised the smaller falcon and killed it on top of the lark. We surmise that the kestrel was very obvious in the short vegetation of the prairie dog colony. The fact that the kestrel feathers were on top of the lark feathers, suggests that the kestrel probably did not see the larger falcon approach. If the kestrel had had any warning, we assume that it would have tried to leave with or without the lark

body, and its feathers would have been found distant from those of the lark.

American Kestrels are not common breeders in the Park but they appear to nest in a building about 1 km from the Larson Colony. Prairie Falcons have occasionally attempted to nest in the Park but are usually not successful. We commonly see Prairie Falcons in the Park in July after the year's young falcons would have dispersed and in fact a week earlier, on July 20th, we recorded a female Prairie Falcon landing on the ground in the same prairie dog town.

Horned Larks are not a common food item for kestrels but have been included in the published list of prey items.⁴ Only 6% of kestrel diet is small birds, but a horned lark is certainly within the size range of bird prey.⁵ However, no records of Prairie Falcons preying on other raptors were noted by Sherrod's and Steenhof's reviews.^{4,5} A kestrel is well within the size range of Prairie Falcon prey.⁵ Prairie Falcons often pursue prey using a high-speed flight very low to the ground^{1,2} and such a hunting strategy would be effective as a surprise attack on this particular kestrel. Our observation appears to be unusual since it involved a raptor killing a raptor while it was preparing to eat a prey.

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2. HAAK, B.A. 1982. Foraging ecology of Prairie Falcons in northern California. Master's thesis, Oregon State University, Corvallis, OR.

3. HOLTHUIJZEN, A.M.A., P. A. DULEY, J. C. HAGAR, S. A. SMITH, and K. N. WOOD 1987. Piracy, insectivory and cannibalism of Prairie Falcons (*Falco mexicanus*) nesting in southwestern Idaho. *Journal Raptor Research* 21: 32-33
4. SHERROD, S.K. 1978. Diets of North American Falconiformes. *Journal Raptor Research* 12:49-121.
5. STEENHOFF, K. 1998. Prairie Falcon (*Falco mexicanus*). In: The Birds of North America, No. 346 (A. Poole and F. Gill, eds.). The Birds of North America, Inc., Philadelphia, PA.

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TREE NESTING DUCKS NEAR GRANDVIEW, MB

Grandview is a small Manitoba community nestled between the Duck Mountains and the Riding Mountains about 40 miles east of the Manitoba-Saskatchewan border. The Valley River, which originates in the Duck Mountains and eventually empties into Lake Dauphin, flows more or less all summer and meanders along the edge of town.

Three species of cavity nesting ducks, Hooded Mergansers, Common Mergansers and Common Goldeneyes, make the river their summer home and are common near Grandview. I have placed nest boxes along the river on a friend's property about three miles north-east of Grandview. Most years, both goldeneye and Hooded Mergansers nest in these boxes. (Hooded Mergansers are the most common in this area.) One nest box larger than the others has had as many as 38 eggs, about equally divided among the three species of ducks. This nest has never had an incubating female. On two occasions, however, we have observed a Hooded Merganser successfully hatch goldeneye eggs, two on one occasion and three on another. We have also observed a Goldeneye successfully hatch two Hooded Merganser eggs.

My house is situated approximately three blocks from the river in a residential area of town. I have a nest box about 20 feet above ground in a Manitoba Maple just a few feet from our deck. We have had both goldeneyes and Hooded Mergansers lay eggs in this nest. On two occasions, a Hooded Merganser has successfully hatched young. We have not had goldeneyes nest successfully, but they have laid eggs in the nest. In 2001, the nest contained seven goldeneye eggs and eight Hooded Merganser eggs. It was finally deserted by both females.



Our nest box with two female Hooded Mergansers apparently inspecting and perhaps sorting out property rights.

John Ross

The school in Grandview is two blocks from our home and about five blocks from the river. Across the street from the school was an old house with an unused chimney. Most springs since 1967 and over roughly a 20 year period, I was able to watch a Common Merganser enter the chimney from the top to get to its nest inside. On three occasions students brought "pointy-beaked" ducklings to the class thinking, I suppose, they were orphans. On each occasion, the birds were released when the female was nearby and the brood continued its interrupted march to the river.

One day in the early 1980s, a friend and I were sitting on our front step. It was early afternoon in mid-May and a typical gusty spring wind was blowing. I observed the female Common Merganser flying along the school grounds coming from the direction of its nest. As it neared I could see it was

carrying something in its beak. A particularly strong gust of wind caused the bird to dip and drop what it was carrying about 30 yards from where we sat. The bird flew on towards the river. We went over to the spot where the object had fallen and found a broken egg containing a fully developed embryo, (but the yolk sac was still outside the body indicating it was not quite ready to hatch). The embryo was still moving when we arrived. The bird had successfully carried the egg two and one-half blocks, about half the distance from its nest to the river. I watched for the remainder of the day, and the following day to see if the duck would attempt another "run." She did not and I have not observed this behaviour since. If anyone has observed similar behaviour, I would appreciate hearing from them.

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EURASIAN COLLARED-DOVE NEST WITH TWO BROODS IN DELISLE, SK.

Tom Lawton phoned on July 16, 2005 to say a Eurasian Collared-Dove was on its nest in a spruce in his front yard at 119 Third Avenue East in Delisle (Figure 1). On August 12, when EMH climbed 9 m to the nest he found two tiny young about three days old. They were too young to band, so we returned on August 19 when the nest contained two nestlings, one alive, the other dead. EMH banded the live bird, which fledged about a week later and partook of food at the Lawton feeding station. He removed the dead bird, which had its intestines hanging out and may have been killed by a Common Grackle; Tom Lawton had observed one disturbing the doves the previous evening.



Figure 1. Nest tree in Delisle

The female must have soon laid another two eggs in the same nest and began incubating because when Erik climbed again on 25 September, a nestling flew from the nest. After a flight of about 20 m, the bird landed in shrubs near the front step of the Lawton's neighbour, two doors to the west. Simultaneously a Sharp-shinned Hawk, which had been perched in a tree across the street, flew directly at the dove. The nestling dove had four visible body puncture wounds as a result. It took a few deep breaths and then became very still. We felt certain it was dying but after about three minutes of warming in our hands, it appeared to revive. Ten or so minutes later its condition appeared stable, so we banded it and Erik replaced it in the nest. There was also an addled egg in the nest. To everyone's amazement, the injured nestling survived and within two days it was feeding with its parents on the Lawton feeding table, where it visited off and on for another week.

This was the first fully documented Eurasian Collared Dove nest for the

Saskatoon Bird Area. The first presumed Eurasian Collared-Dove nest was found on July 17, 2004 by Margaret Madsen, about 11.6 m above ground in a different large spruce in Delisle, but that nest apparently had been vacated prior to David Miller's climb and inspection on that date.¹

Eurasian Collared-Doves are known to nest two or three times in a summer, even at this northern latitude.² This is the first pair in Saskatchewan reported to raise young successfully twice in one year – and, unusually, from the same nest.

1. HOUSTON, C.S. and B. LUTERBACH. 2004. Northward extension of Eurasian Collared-Dove in Saskatchewan. *Blue Jay* 62:28-30.

2. ROMAGOSA, C.M. 2002. Eurasian Collared-Dove (*Streptopelia decaocto*). *The Birds of North America*, no. 630.

- C. Stuart Houston, 863 University Drive, Saskatoon, SK S7N 0J8 and Erik M. Hedlin, 830 Swan Crescent, Saskatoon, SK S7J 5C7

POPULATION EXPLOSION OF DWARF CANADIAN PRIMROSE NEAR THE PAS, MB

I was surprised to find Dwarf Canadian Primrose, *Primula mistassinica*, at Atikameg Lake north of The Pas in mid-May, 1950. Quantities were growing in moss, covering limestone rocks on the shores of the lake. The crashing waves of clear, crystal water of this vast lake kept the moss wet. A narrow ribbon could be seen of the pink flowers along the beach, a rare white form occurring with the pink flowers. The late H. J. Scoggan confirmed the identification of the specimen and annotated my herbarium sheet.



Dwarf Canadian Primrose just northeast of Nipawin, SK May 31, 2005
John Hauer

Since World War Two, clay has been taken from the sides of the road to the lake (Hwy 10), leaving saucer-shaped shallow ditches on both sides for many miles. In the early 1960s, the primrose became established here and spread rapidly in the wet ditches. With good drainage, the water would be only a few inches deep and even this would evaporate leaving only wet clay.

A remarkable thing began to happen. The plants increased at first in the hundreds, then into many thousands.

Now 55 years later, there is a pink haze filling the ditches for miles as one drives along Hwy 10. Curiously enough, there does not seem to be any visible variation in the plants; the white form has failed to show here.

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SNOWSHOE HARE AND FISHER ENCOUNTER



Snowshoe Hare, February 11, 2006
Brent Terry

As licenced bird banders, we travel across the boreal forest area almost every weekend during the winter in search of Great Gray and Northern Hawk owls to band. Some winters, like 2004- 2005, yield large numbers of owls, while in most winters, spotting and banding these elusive birds proves time consuming and we have only limited success. Lack of food (small rodents) forces these owls to hunt outside their natural habitat only every four years or so.

The winter of 2005-2006 would be classified as a typical year in terms of banding: lots of time, thousands of

kilometers, and only a few owls. On February 10-11, we traveled from Prince Albert east along Hwy 55 to Hwy 9, north to The Pas, Manitoba, then back south along Hwy 9 to Hudson Bay and along Hwy 3 to Saskatoon. Based on the fact that we caught five Northern Hawk Owls and one Great Gray, we considered the trip successful but what we witnessed on February 11 made it one that we will remember forever.

While heading south on Hwy 9 towards Hudson Bay on the afternoon of February 11, we noticed an animal cross the road 1/4 km or so ahead of us. Before we could reach for our binoculars to identify it, the animal disappeared into the bush. As we continued along slowly, a Snowshoe Hare crossed the ditch and proceed down the road toward us. Then we noticed a dark, slender animal in pursuit, which we realized as it approached us, was a fisher.

The fisher chased the hare across the ditch and into the thick bush but as we were about to get back into our vehicle, the hare reappeared from the ditch and ran down the road toward us again. A few seconds later, the fisher also reappeared and gave chase once



Fisher, February 11, 2006

Brent Terry

more. Both prey and predator literally passed within a meter of us, as we stood beside our truck. The hare would disappear for varying amounts of time, 5 to 20 minutes, before reappearing. The fisher spent a lot of time running and snuffling in the snow along side the road when the hare was not visible, but when the hare reappeared on the

road, it went after it. This scene played out before our eyes for a good hour or so before both animals disappeared into the dense bush for good.

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Northern Hawk Owl, late December near Candle Lake, SK

Mike Blom

SQUIRRELLY ACTIVITY AT WASKESIU, SK

My family has long suspected that our portable cabin in the Waskesiu townsite, within Prince Albert National Park, belonged more to a lineage of Red Squirrels (*Tamiasciurus hudsonicus*) than to the seasonal human occupants. The extent of squirrel domestic activity was revealed when we raised the cabin in preparation for renovations in early summer 2000.

Like all the portable cabins built in Waskesiu in the early 1950s, the main structure measured 14 by 20 feet and was supported by three wooden 6" x 8" beams that ran the length of the building. The beams or skids rested on cement blocks 10" high so that the entire building could be easily lifted and

removed if necessary. Due to the gradual slope of our lot toward a stand of young White Spruce, the upslope side of the cabin was lower to the ground and, with rapid accumulation of soil, not only the cement blocks on this side but several inches of the wooden support beam became buried in the ground. Thus, this side became a protected space. On the downslope side, the attached deck, enclosed with lattice, kept the topography of the area unchanged. (Figure 1)

Upon raising the cabin, the extent of the squirrel's nest (A in Fig. 1) located on the upslope side was revealed. A mound of largely fiberglass insulation, measuring about 3 ft by 6 ft, filled the

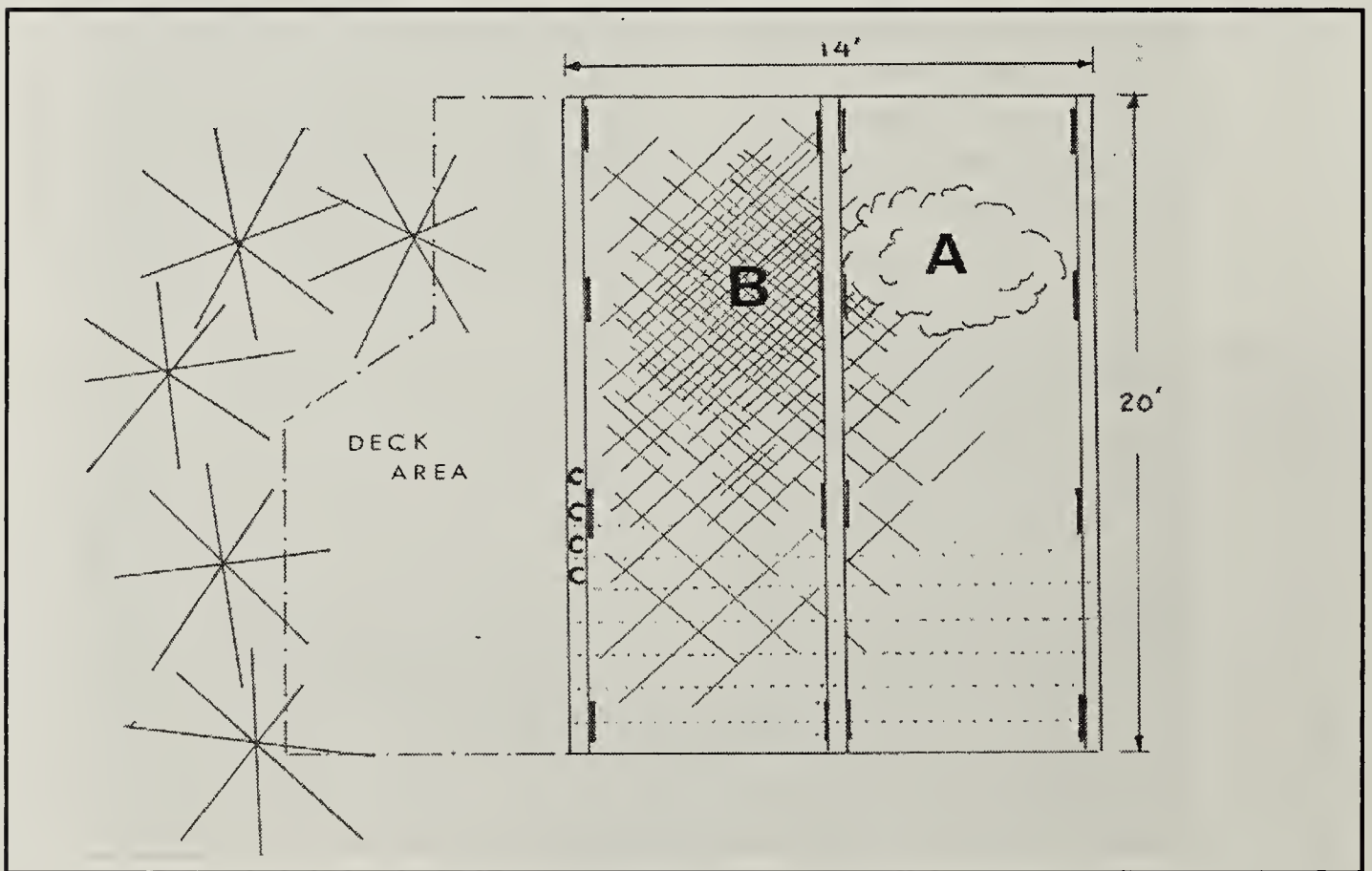


Figure 1. Figure 1 shows the lower support structure of the cabin in relation to the deck area and area of spruce trees. The nest location is indicated by letter A. The area of spruce cone litter, B, is indicated by crosshatching and the density of lines connotes depth of the piles of cone scales. The four small Cs located next to the deck area are the positions of bones and teeth located on a 6"x8" support timber and placed between the 2"x 4" floor joists that are at one foot centers. The joists (not all shown) are indicated by the dotted lines.

space to a depth of a foot. The yellow and pink strands of insulation created the impression of a huge ball of spun candy. In volume, it filled a large green garbage bag. Although the squirrels most likely began to occupy this site in the 1960s, fiberglass insulation wouldn't have become available until the advent of a few new insulated cabins in early 1980s. Many hundreds of foraging trips to at least two sources of insulation, judging from the mixture of colours of fiberglass, would have been necessary to construct such a large nest. Shortly after we removed the bulk of the nest to put in plumbing, we observed the squirrel, wisps of insulation in its mouth, making quick forays to a neighbouring cabin that remained low to the ground.

Signs of long time squirrel occupancy were present on the downslope side of the cabin as well. Here piles of scales from spruce cones formed drifts of loose fill ranging in depth from three to 14 inches (area B in Figure 1). The deepest pile was adjacent to the nest.

Assuming an average depth of 6 inches, there was a minimum of 70 cubic feet of shelled spruce cones under the cabin.

The most amazing discovery, however, was the presence of two bones and two teeth placed on top of the beam in four adjoining joist spaces. This gave the impression of an orderly cupboard stocked with bones (C in Fig. 1). The bones showed evidence of rodent chewing. Squirrels collect bones and antlers as a source of dietary calcium and to maintain the chisel sharpness of their teeth. Bones, as part of the Red Squirrel diet, are particularly important during the lactation period.² The two bones had probably been collected after a barbecue as they had been cut by a saw. The teeth were from a deer species, most likely elk as they frequent the townsite. The squirrel may have obtained these teeth from a substantial distance indicating a large foraging territory as the park service would remove a carcass that was close to the townsite. The home range of the



Red Squirrel

Wayne Lynch

Red Squirrel is reported to be from 2.73 to 6 acres.¹

Over the years we have become accustomed to the rhythm of squirrel activity: the young of the year demanding constant maternal vigilance in early summer, the late summer 'pelting' rain of tight green cones from the tops of the spruce onto the roof and deck of the cabin, the timely harvest of the *Boletus* mushrooms, which grow at the base of the birch. Not all is work, for we have observed the squirrel basking, stretched on its belly along a major branch enjoying the

warmth of autumn sunshine. We now have new appreciation for the ability of this resourceful species to "squirrel" things away.

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2. FITZPATRICK, L.A., G.F. FROELICH, T.B. JOHNSON, R. A. SMITH and R. B. SPICER, 1993. Mount Graham Red Squirrel *Tamiasciurus hudsonicus grahamensis* Recovery Plan [http:// www.fws.gov/ifw2es/Documents/R2ES/MtGrahamRedSquirrel.pdf](http://www.fws.gov/ifw2es/Documents/R2ES/MtGrahamRedSquirrel.pdf) Accessed May 4, 2006

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LARGE EARTHWORM AT THE PAS, MB

The 4th of June 2004 produced a large earthworm on the cement sidewalk at Cressly Avenue and Third Street in The Pas. The worm was almost a foot long, thick as a pencil and the tail end, flat, resembling a leech. This was the first earthworm I collected that year. Other specimens have been taken in town previously and are preserved in fluid in my collection.

Is this the Dew Worm of fishermen? It may have been introduced here by live bait brought in from a commercial source. It seems to have been established here for the better part of ten years. This species makes extra-large and pointed heaps of excrement in lawns. These harden into cement in hot weather which has been known to make cutting the grass a greater chore.

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[Editor's note: It is generally believed that the earthworms found in much of Canada and the northern USA are non-native invasive species from Europe

and Asia, introduced by settlers. Any native earthworms that may have existed in the region were probably killed during the last glacial period leaving the way open for colonization by these introduced species. The first earthworms probably arrived with imported plants or in ships' ballast and spread through trade in plants and plant products, and more recently through their use as bait for fishing.

Although most people believe that earthworms are always beneficial, research from Minnesota has indicated that earthworms may change the structure of hardwood forests that developed in the absence of earthworms and lead to a loss of biodiversity in forest floor species. Anyone wishing to contribute to the knowledge of earthworm distribution in Canada can participate by reporting their observations to <www.naturewatch.ca>. Note contributed by Bill Watkins, Biodiversity Conservation Section, Wildlife and Ecosystem Protection Branch Manitoba Conservation, Winnipeg, MB]

NET BUTTERFLY RECORDS

Traveling insect collectors with several nets in use sometimes produce strange records. A classic case of this was a specimen of the Common Checkered Skipper 'collected' the first week July 1961, at Flin Flon, Manitoba by Steven Chermock, then 20, when he was visiting with his father, the veteran collector, Franklin Chermock.

On returning to The Pas in the evening and looking over our catches of the afternoon, amazingly a specimen of the Common Checkered Skipper was in the lot. I mentioned to them that in 18 years of local collecting at The Pas, 80 miles to the south of Flin Flon, I had never taken this species before. Indeed as a further confirmation that it does not occur this far north, I have never seen a local specimen from 1960 to 2005!

After looking over their eight insect nets they had with them, Steven remembered netting the solitary skipper 500 miles south of The Pas! Such 'net records' can be avoided by

clearing a net completely before collecting with it in a new area.

The Common Checkered Skipper doubtless occurs at Riding Mountain National Park, yet I failed to collect it in 1960-1964 when I was a part naturalist there. It also failed to show up at Prince Albert National Park where I was the first park naturalist in 1965.

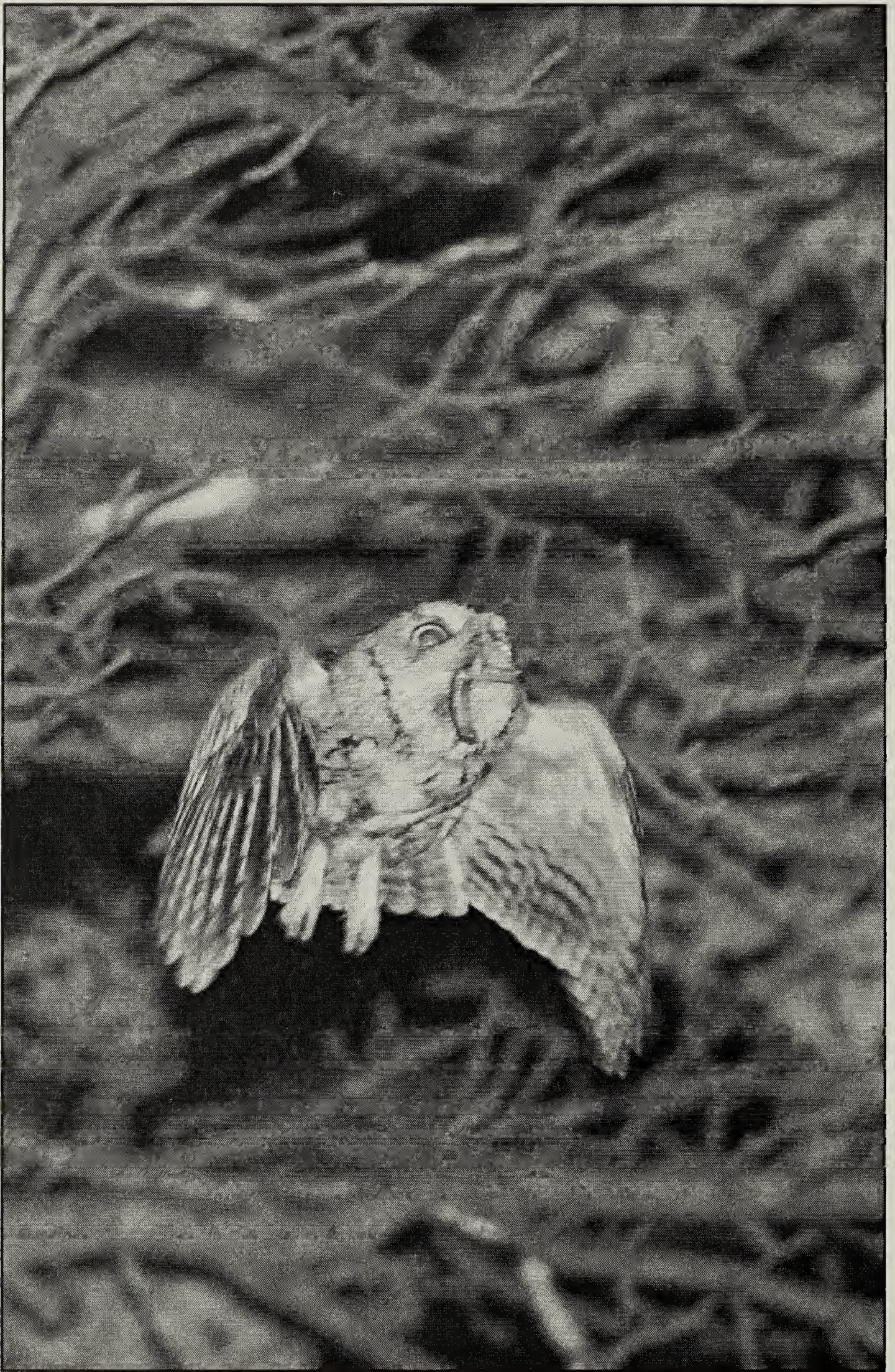
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[Editor's Note: The north-easternmost Saskatchewan records of Common Checkered Skipper were taken by John Kozial as follows: one near Bjork Lake, 15 September 2001; two near Bjorkdale, 21 June 2003; one along Silica Sand Road, northeast of Armit, 29 June 2003; one near Bjork Lake, 8 August 2003. It seems to be extending its range northward. Caterpillars of the Common Checkered Skipper feed on plants of the mallow family so it should be looked for wherever this family is represented.]



"Grebes routinely eat their own feathers, often in large quantities, and also feed feathers to their chicks. The reason seems to be as protection for the stomach against the sharp bones of fish, which make up most of the rest of the grebe's diet.

- *Scott Weidensaul*, *The Birder's Miscellany*, p.55



Eastern Screech Owl carrying a night crawler to its nest, Winnipeg, 18 June 2004.

Christian Artuso