
NOTES AND LETTERS

FIRST RECORD OF A TRICOLORED HERON FOR SASKATCHEWAN

On 23 July, 1996 we conducted a survey of colonial nesting water birds east of the Last Mountain Lake National Wildlife Area headquarters and north of the viewing tower (see map on page 69) to determine the location and size of a suspected Black-crowned Night-Heron colony. The day's weather was sunny, with little wind.

We used an airboat for the survey. The boat, though rather noisy, is maneuverable and can turn quickly in any direction as well as move slowly when the engine is throttled low. The observers sit approximately 2m above the water level, affording excellent elevated views of the surrounding marsh and water. We carried 8X and 10X binoculars and field guides.

As we moved toward the suspected heron nesting area, we saw several night-herons standing in the vegetation, with more flying overhead. The birds did not seem startled, several circling and returning to the bulrush stand. Then Taylor saw a medium-sized, greyish bird spring from the matted bulrush, less than 5m from the airboat off the left bow. The first impression was of a heron-like bird similar in size to the nearby night-herons but lacking any black on the upper parts of the body or head. As the bird rose into the air, in front of and then beside the airboat, the bird's head and neck were outstretched and its legs dangled conspicuously below the body. It had a very long slender neck and head, long pointed beak, long legs and large wings with rounded tips. The body was slender, making the wings appear even larger. This slenderness was very striking when compared to the stocky night-

herons flying nearby, and this was evident from the moment the bird first took to the air. The bird's wing span was similar to that of the night-herons.

The wings appeared to be an even grey colour above, with no pattern that might be caused by a difference between the primaries and the rest of the upper wing. The bird's upper body and breast were grey, similar to the wings. The head and neck were also grey and no pattern was seen on either. The impression of the uniformly coloured plumage of this bird was in sharp contrast to the boldly patterned night-herons nearby. As the bird rose above the observers, Taylor saw extensive clear white feathering on the heron's under parts – belly and vent area. White under-wings were not noted. We followed the bird's progress upward and away from the site.

The bird continued to fly with its neck outstretched at first, then gradually retracted it in towards its body. The 'S' shape posture of the neck was striking for a few moments. We did not hear any calls due to the engine noise of the airboat. The heron continued to fly in a southerly direction at a height of 75-100 m and was finally lost from sight. The total time of this observation was less than 3 minutes. We concluded from the observed field marks that the bird was a Tricolored Heron. Unfortunately, we did not have time to take a photograph.

There are several species of medium-sized heron that might be confused with the Tricolored Heron. The Green Heron is smaller, darker and lacks the white underparts. The Little Blue Heron and the Reddish Egret are

most similar in size to the Tricolored, but both lack the diagnostic white underparts of the Tricolored Heron. While in flight, the Tricolored Heron's general shape is reminiscent of the Great Blue Heron, however the latter's much larger size and dark belly plumage separate it from the Tricolored Heron. Taylor is familiar with all of these species and believes this bird had the diagnostic field marks of an adult Tricolored Heron. Dunlop had not seen the species before. To our knowledge, this is the first record of a Tricolored Heron for the province of Saskatchewan.³

The occurrence of Tricolored Heron in Saskatchewan is not unexpected, as the species has a tendency to wander north from the southern United States where it is a common resident of coastal wetlands. In Manitoba it is described as an occasional visitor, with over 16 records dating back to 1924.² For Alberta there are fewer than eight documented records and it is considered an accidental visitor, the first confirmed sighting being 1981.¹

HIGHLIGHTS OF A SOUTHERN SASKATCHEWAN NEST TOUR IN JUNE

On June 9, 2007, Kevin Fitzsimonds took David Miller, Martin Gerard and I out in a jet boat to the Bald Eagle nest on the island where the Red Deer River flows into the South Saskatchewan north of Leader, Saskatchewan. The river was rising fast, dotted with little icebergs of foam and floating debris, but the jet boat made the trip to the island much easier than our first trip by canoe described in the September 2005 issue of *Blue Jay*. For the third year in a row, there are three eaglets in the nest. Since it is rare for Bald Eagles

Acknowledgements

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1. HUDON, J. 2007. The official list of the birds of Alberta. The Royal Alberta Museum, Edmonton, Alberta. [Online]
<http://www.royalalbertamuseum.ca/birds/birdlist/taxon.htm#LCICO>

2. MANITOBA AVIAN RESEARCH COMMITTEE. 2003. The birds of Manitoba. Manitoba Naturalists Society, Winnipeg.

3. SMITH, A. R. 2004. Field Checklist of Saskatchewan Birds. Ninth edition. Nature Saskatchewan, Regina

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to have three young, this is unusual to say the least.

The adults have added more material to the nest, so I couldn't see into most of it, but I did find heron wings and a fish skeleton in the part of the nest I could reach. A good ball player could likely throw a stone into the heron colony from the nest, so maybe that handy supply of protein explains the phenomenal success of this pair. The two adults sat in a nearby tree to watch the proceedings, but David said one of

them made a close flyby while I was at the nest. The day I feel the wind of an eagle is the day I quit banding eaglets; I liked it better when eagles were more shy. Later that day we visited Prairie Falcon eyrie near Lemsford, which is active for at least the fifth consecutive year and this year had four three-week old young. (Figure 1)

On June 10 we visited a number of hawk nests. The Ferruginous Hawks' nest along Hwy 4 near the Leinan Road contained four nestlings, and a nearby nest had a melanistic Ferruginous Hawk with four well advanced young

that should fledge in the next two weeks. Another Ferruginous Hawk nest just a little further on is again successful with three young. There is also a Red-tailed Hawk that roosts very close to the first nest, a pair of Swainson's Hawks soaring nearby, and the nest with three Red-tailed Hawks (Figure 2), just a couple miles north, next to the highway. There are scads of Richardson's Ground Squirrels dead on the road, so there is likely to be adequate food for all.

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Figure 1. Three week old Prairie Falcons near Lemsford.

D. Zazelenchuk



Figure 2. Richardson's Ground Squirrels in Red-tailed Hawk nest with three young.

D. Zazelenchuk

WHITE-TAILED KITE NEAR MAPLE CREEK, SK



Figure 1. White-tailed Kite in willow

Keith Bell

Around noon on Sept 5, 2006, I was driving west along an unnumbered road south and east of Nekaneet First Nation (approximately 35 kilometers southeast of Maple Creek), when I noticed a bird with a brilliant white front sitting on top of a small, gnarled willow. Through my binoculars I could see large eyes, a slanting black “mask” and yellow cere. Feet bright yellow. Head and back grey; wings darker grey with black markings; a long unbanded tail with contrasting white and dark feathers. I didn’t know what it was but I did know that I had never seen one.

The bird was still there, on the same bush, when I came past in the other direction six hours later, but this time it was plucking prey. And the next day,

when I came back to check for it, this time with Keith Bell, we found it sitting on another willow a few hundred yards away (Figure 1). By now we had checked and eliminated all the likely possibilities and knew that “our bird” was a long way from home: the first White-tailed Kite ever seen in Saskatchewan.

We checked under the bush in which the bird had been plucking prey and found pellets full of what I’d guess was Deer Mouse fur, so perhaps that is what the kite had been catching.

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Figure 2. White-tailed Kite near Maple Creek

Keith Bell

HIGHEST SWAINSON'S HAWK NEST RECORDED IN SASKATCHEWAN

On July 16 2006, I was asked by Stuart Houston to climb a large spruce tree at 812 5th Avenue North in the City Park area of Saskatoon to band Swainson's Hawk nestlings. The nest had been reported by the Ireland family who live nearby.

After struggling up through thick branches, I broke into the open, near the top. There I could have enjoyed the panoramic view high above the city were I not being hit around the ears by the stooping, irate, adult hawk. Three good-sized young were banded under these difficult circumstances. Not surprisingly with such a large and feisty brood, there was no food in the nest. After the young had fledged, we returned with a tape measure and I again climbed the tree to determine the height to the top of the nest. It was 72 feet and 7 inches.

In many trips to band Swainson's Hawks with Stuart Houston, the majority of nests I have seen were in Trembling Aspen trees, with most nests between 15 and 30 feet. In southwestern Saskatchewan where not many trees are available for nest building, low bushes are sometimes used. Extremes of height range from 3 feet in a willow to the nest described in this article. Less than two percent of nests would be over thirty five feet tall. (Stuart Houston, pers. comm.).

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"The fairy tern of the tropical Pacific lays but a single egg, and it does so in the most unlikely of places—on the bare branch of a tree. The egg is balanced perfectly on the bark, undisturbed by the incubating parent." Scott Weidensaul, *The Birder's Miscellany*, p.45

A VISIT TO THE SWAN FAMILY

Photographs by George Tosh



The Tundra Swan pair rest in front of their nest on a small island near Patience Lake potash mine, east of Saskatoon on June 11, 2007. Where are the cygnets?



The six cygnets having emerged from under the parent on the right, head for the water



Then the family crosses to the lee shore of the lake.....



.....to feed.

②

May 6/02

in yard notes

TUNDRA SPARROWS

- Harris' Sparrow (Black-capped)
- White Crowned Sparrow.



Paul Geraghty ©



Harris's Sparrows and White Crowned Sparrows.

Paul Geraghty