
NOTES AND LETTERS

BOBOLINKS AT PADDOCKWOOD

JOHN J. DINIUS, Box 27, Paddockwood, SK S0J 1Z0

On 30 June 1997, during inspection of our bluebird boxes, we reached the boxes on the Nadine Wilson pasture — section 11, township 53, range 25 w2 — land seeded to grass about four years ago. Here we spotted a bird we hadn't seen before in our area, a Bobolink. We saw a second a mile farther on.

Early on 1 July we returned on horseback to confirm the identification. At the second site a bird flew up and treated us to his beautiful bubbling song. The next day we returned and found three male bobolinks sitting on the fence beside the road. While I was taking photographs two smaller, slightly brownish grey female bobolinks appeared. Two handsome dudes immediately flew above them, and forced each female down into the grass.

Bobolinks have not been sighted previously near Paddockwood by any of our neighbours, although Maurice Mareschal has recorded them three times on his annual Clouston Breeding

Bird Survey; 1 in 1981 and 2 in 1983 between Clouston and Highway 2, and another 2 in 1983 near Davis, both only 50 km south of our observation. Other Saskatchewan Breeding Bird Survey sightings have been on the Edam, Brightsand and Turtleford routes (Muriel Carlson and Michael Williams). The nearest breeding records are those of a completed nest and later a flightless young bird by Maurice G. Street at Nipawin in 1959, and by Wayne C. Harris, west of Turtleford, a nest with eggs (year not known).

I wish to thank Alan R. Smith for providing detailed information from which he made his maps for the *Atlas of Saskatchewan Birds*, and for details on the Breeding Bird Surveys. Stuart Houston helped me prepare this note.

(Editors note: the bird was clearly identifiable in three accompanying slides. These were not suitable to publish)



Maximum butterfly longevity: Cabbage Butterfly: 3 days for female/ 17 for male:
Tiger Swallowtail, 3/12; Spring azure, 4/2; Orange Sulphur, 14/25;
Viceroy, -/17; Great Spangled Fritillary, -/22;
Paul Opler and George Krizek,
Butterflies East Of The Great Plains.

NEW BIRD RECORDS FOR THE MCLENNAN LAKE AREA, SASKATCHEWAN

DIANA BIZECKI ROBSON, 811 Avenue E North, Saskatoon, SK S7L 1S7

Northern Saskatchewan is the most under-explored area of the province. The lack of exploration is evident when studying the Atlas of Saskatchewan Birds.¹ While bird records are quite extensive in southern areas, northern parts of the province contain many record gaps. In general, if a map sheet has fewer than 40 species recorded for it, the area is likely under-explored not ornithologically impoverished.

In June of 1998 I was able to explore the McLennan Lake area. The Atlas indicated that only 47 species of birds had been seen in the map sheet containing McLennan Lake (73 P- 16). However, I documented sightings of seven new bird species for the map sheet during my brief visit: Ruffed Grouse, Downy Woodpecker, Eastern Phoebe, Hermit Thrush, Cedar Waxwing, Philadelphia Vireo and White-throated Vireo. Most of the birds were exhibiting breeding behavior when they were seen (i.e. singing, nest building, catching food, etc.).

Rick Kolstad and Debbie Peters, long-time residents of the area and amateur naturalists, were interviewed regarding their bird sightings over the last few decades. They have seen 95 species of birds in map sheet 73 P- 16. Thus, 41 of the bird species that they observed in the area had not been verified for the map sheet or seen by myself. The 41 new species for the map sheet were: Great Blue Heron, Tundra Swan, Snow Goose, Brant, Green-winged Teal, Bufflehead, Common Merganser, Northern Harrier,

Northern Goshawk, Golden Eagle, Merlin, Willow Ptarmigan, Sandhill Crane, Least Sandpiper, Franklin's Gull, Common Tern, Great Horned Owl, Great Gray Owl, Northern Saw-whet Owl, Ruby-throated Hummingbird, Rufous Hummingbird, Pileated Woodpecker, Horned Lark, American Crow, Red-breasted Nuthatch, Mountain Bluebird, American Robin, Varied Thrush, European Starling, Red-eyed Vireo, Black-and-white Warbler, Rose-breasted Grosbeak, Savannah Sparrow, Lincoln's Sparrow, White-crowned Sparrow, Red-winged Blackbird, Rusty Blackbird, Common Grackle, Pine Grosbeak, Hoary Redpoll and Evening Grosbeak. Data regarding these new sightings were sent to Al Smith for incorporation into the Saskatchewan bird database for the province. Looking at surrounding map sheets it is possible that an additional 82 bird species may occur in map sheet 73P- 16.

Given the lack of records for northern Saskatchewan and the need for data in these areas, I encourage all avid birders to visit those map sheets that have few bird records. New species for map sheets should be carefully documented and sent to Al Smith with the Canadian Wildlife Service.

Acknowledgements

Thanks are extended to Rick Kolstad and Debbie Peters of Forest House Lodge, who acted as tour guides and hosts during my visit to the area.

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HOW WE HELPED A RED-BREASTED NUTHATCH

EDNA SPROULE, 1338 Colony Street, Saskatoon, SK S7N 0S7

In April 1998, we were relaxing in our backyard, soaking up the sun, when we heard a persistent tapping sound. Upon investigating further, we realized that the noise was coming from a Red-breasted Nuthatch, pecking away at a knot in our neighbour's apple tree trunk. It was trying to enlarge the hole, exactly 2 m above the ground, and kept at it for more than two weeks. The knot was so hard that the bird could make very little progress.

Finally, my husband, Jack, took pity on the nuthatch and lent a helping hand. He successfully drilled out the knot hole. The pair then had an adequate cavity, at least 10 cm deep, and took up residency. We watched the male as he brought sunflower seeds from our three

hanging backyard feeders to his mate in the nest hole. We were away from 25 April to 3 May and suspect the young fledged during that time.

Our neighbors, on the other side, have a cavity in another ornamental crabapple tree, occupied by Black-capped Chickadees in 1998. That hole is less than 1 m above ground. The chickadees and their resulting brood were also constant visitors at our feeders.

Now it is April 1999. A pair of nuthatches, presumably the same pair, after eating at our feeders all winter, are visiting the nest site again. We are happy to have them nesting so close by for a second year, and proud that we were able to make this possible.



Come forth into the light of things. Let nature be your teacher.
William Wordsworth.

EXTENSION OF RANGE OF VIOLET-GREEN SWALLOW

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Three times in recent years, in 1992, 1996 and 1998, I have had the unexpected pleasure of finding groups of Violet-green Swallows flying around "badlands" cliff faces on the north side of the South Saskatchewan River. These pretty little swallows resemble Tree Swallows apart from the white patch completely across the rump.

Because my visits were a week or two before the optimum time for adults feeding young, because I could spare only twenty minutes of careful observation before returning to Prairie Falcon banding nearby, and especially because during incubation their nests in tiny crevices in dirt cliff faces are difficult to find, we failed each year to obtain proof of nesting. I am reasonably confident that their behaviour was that of swallows on territory; if so, this represents an extension of their breeding range north and east from the badlands near Val Marie.

On 7 June 1992, David Miller and I identified two pairs of Violet-green Swallows exhibiting territorial behaviour near the Prairie Falcon "Lookout Eyrie" which looks down on the Bill Friesen ranch in the river valley, south west of Eston, and 70 km east of the Alberta boundary. The next two falcon sites, 1.5 and 3.0 km east of the ranch buildings, also had two and four pairs, respectively.⁴

No Violet-greens were seen during the next three years, but on 15 June 1996, there were four pairs of these swallows at one of the 1992 sites in Powerline coulee, 1.5 km east of the Friesen ranch buildings. Again, on 14 June 1998, Bruce

Hanbidge, Paul Gully and I counted at least twelve swallows in the first coulee west of the west road down to the Lancer Ferry, about 6 km east of the Friesen buildings. Knowing of the predilection of Western Kingbirds to build nests in the same tree or the tree adjacent to active Ferruginous Hawk nests, and of Cliff Swallows to build their mud-bottle nests in close proximity to active Prairie Falcon holes (Mike Gollop, pers. comm.), one cannot help but speculate that the Violet-green Swallows may possibly have been doing the same, seeking security from other predators under the protection of the falcons.

Although the traditional Rocky Mountain nests of the Violet-green Swallow have been in inaccessible sites such as abandoned woodpecker holes in tall tree snags, during this century this swallow has learned to use nest boxes along the Pacific coast. East of the mountains in extreme southern Alberta, Violet-greens were reported by Salt and Salt⁶ to nest in fair numbers along the Milk River and Belly River, but not, at that time, the South Saskatchewan River. Evidence for breeding along the latter river at Medicine Hat, and downstream from there, came only with publication of *The Atlas of Breeding Birds of Alberta* in 1992.⁷ All of these areas in Alberta are in rough terrain known as "badlands," offering cliff faces as nest sites (where they are sometimes associated with Mountain Bluebirds and Rock Wrens).

The Violet-green Swallow has been increasing in numbers and extending its

range in Alberta,⁷ and for at least thirty years this process has extended into Saskatchewan.

The first evidence of Saskatchewan breeding came at the summer meet of the Saskatchewan Natural History Society at Val Marie on 14 June 1969, when I had an opportunity to find and photograph the first Saskatchewan nest of the Violet-green Swallow. Once we identified the swallows, and suspected that nesting was a possibility, Arnold Nijssen, David Riome, Donald Houston and Keith Hobson, the latter two part of the Saskatoon junior contingent, assisted me in scanning the clay cliff face. The one nest we found was lined with fresh feathers, but no egg had yet been laid.³

The second Saskatchewan nest record was in similar "badlands" habitat, but much farther east, in Goose Creek valley south of Constance, Saskatchewan. Here Gary Anweiler found suitable nest holes with droppings in a steep clay cliff, on 12 July 1975.²

On 19 July 1977, Margaret Belcher found a pair flying in and out behind a sandstone outcropping, locally known as "Jones' Peak," the easternmost part of Ravenscrag Butte, on the north bank of the Frenchman River valley, eight miles west of Eastend. Wayne Harris found them at the same site in July that year.^{1,8} Michael Gollop (pers. comm.) has seen pairs there each year since 1975.

Unequivocal proof of production of young was provided by Bob Luterbach, who found at least four adults feeding young near Eastend, 7 July 1996. Evidence that their numbers continued to increase in Alberta was gained 15-19 June 1997 during a river trip by Bob Kreba, who found them common along the South Saskatchewan River, with over 200 found between Medicine Hat, Alberta and Estuary, Saskatchewan (13

km inside the western boundary of Saskatchewan).⁵ In 1998, Rob Wapple (pers. comm.) found a pair along the cliffs of the North Saskatchewan River north of Leader.

Not only has this swallow increased in numbers and in range in Alberta, it now occupies some of the "badland" territory in Saskatchewan. If its numbers and range continue to increase, it should be watched for everywhere that clay cliffs and rough "badlands" are present.

Acknowledgements

I wish to thank Michael Gollop, Bob Kreba and Rob Wapple for unpublished information.

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A SWIMMING SQUIRREL

PENNY DAVIS, Group Site 317, Box 2, Rural Route #3, Saskatoon, SK

Late last June my husband and I were canoeing at the north end of Makwa Lake. There was a moderate wind and small waves on the surface. As we paddled, from time to time, we could see a small dark head in the water that we assumed belonged to a Muskrat. However when we went to look more closely we realized that it was a Red Squirrel dog paddling strongly out into the lake. By that time it was about 50 metres offshore. We managed to turn the animal back towards shore by

paddling around it, and we eventually saw it climb out onto the bank, shake itself and disappear into the bush.

Close to the site where we first saw it swimming there was an old tree leaning out over the water. We guessed that it had fallen onto the lake and, because of the choppy surface, had been unable to decide which way to swim. Have any other readers witnessed an aquatic squirrel?



WINTERING SAVANNAH SPARROW IN SASKATOON

VI COUTU, 1713 Sommerfeld Ave., Saskatoon, SK S7H 2S7

In November, 1991, after the last of the juncos left our backyard feeder for points south, a lone immature White-throated Sparrow remained. We observed him taking shelter from the heavily snowbound yard under one of two overturned canoes stored there. He did not permit the House Sparrows to eat from the feeder when he was there.

On November 29 he was joined by a Savannah Sparrow which he did not permit to eat beside him, but did allow on the feeder. As the temperature dropped well below zero we noticed that the Savannah occupied the other canoe. The feeder was located just outside our patio doors and several members of the

Saskatoon Natural History Society observed both birds from inside our house.

In no time both sparrows were occupying the same canoe, and eating together on the feeder. The White-throated Sparrow was more aggressive; activity inside our house did not affect him, whereas the Savannah left the feeder when there was movement indoors. The Savannah would fly to the nearby Lodgepole pine and perch for long periods of time.

On January 5 1992, perhaps frightened by the holiday crowds milling around inside and outside our house, the Savannah Sparrow disappeared. The White-throated Sparrow remained until Spring.

CLEVER MAGPIES OPEN PIZZA BOX

Photo story by Richard Marjan, Saskatoon Star-Phoenix, 204 Fifth Ave., North, Saskatoon, SK S7K 2P1

Late in February, while driving along Saskatchewan Crescent East, near the corner of 15th Street, overlooking the South Saskatchewan River, I noticed three Black-billed Magpies attacking a supposedly empty pizza box. One of them carried a band that I later learned had been placed on its leg in Stuart and Mary Houston's yard, less than two city blocks distant.

It seemed to me that the magpies were curious as to whether there was any food left in the box. I watched for about fifteen minutes, taking

photographs at appropriate moments, as the magpies took turns trying to open the box. Each used its beak as a tool — with persistence and eventual success.

The photos corroborate what Candace Savage tells in her book, *Bird Brains*: namely that corvids are among the smartest of all birds.

(Editor's note: These photos were in the centre of the front page of the *Saskatoon Star-Phoenix* on Thursday, 25 February 1999, and are reproduced by courtesy of the Star-Phoenix.)



Figure 1 - Banded magpie lifts up corner of box with beak to see what is inside.

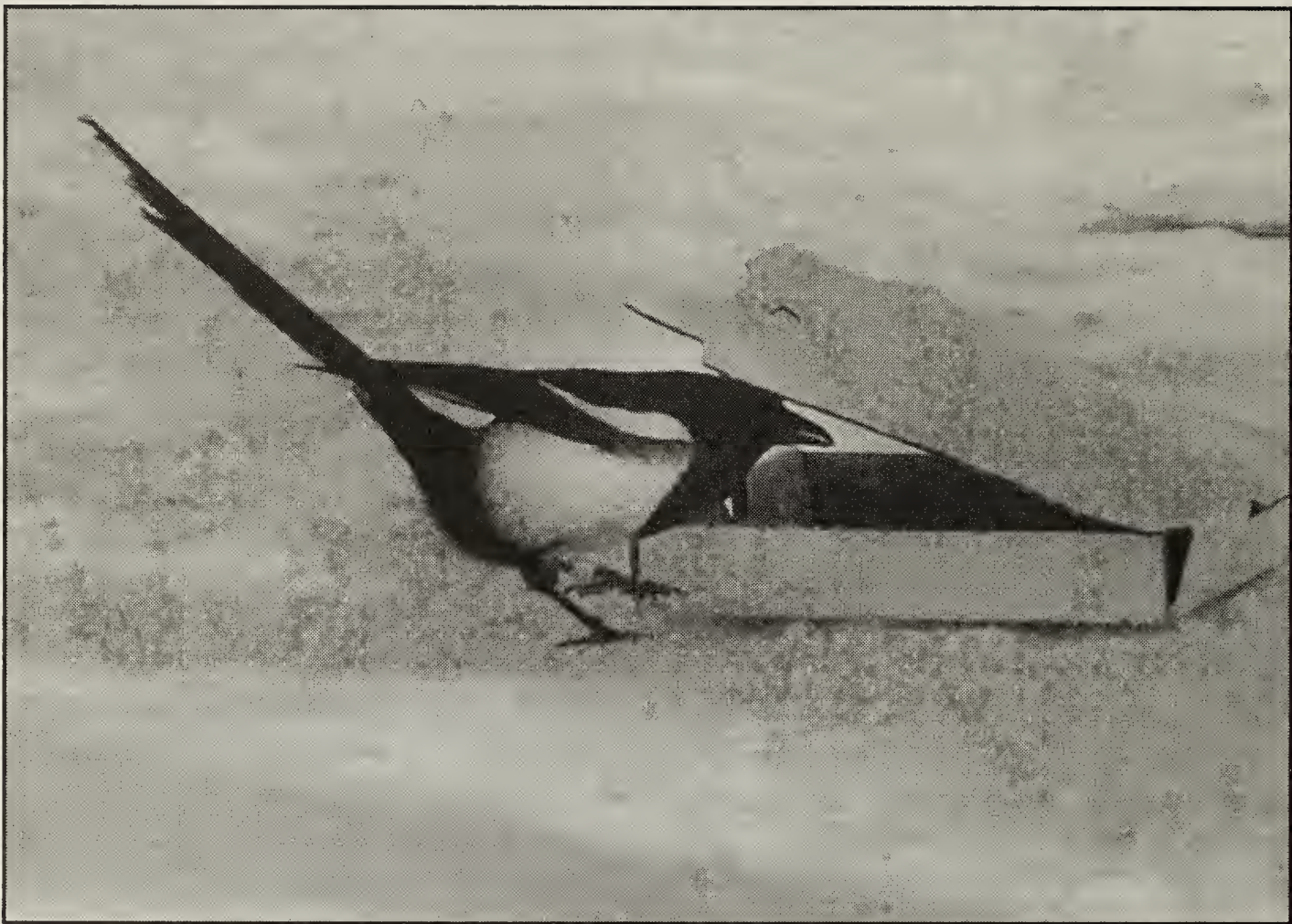


Figure 2 - Banded magpie ducks under cover for better look.

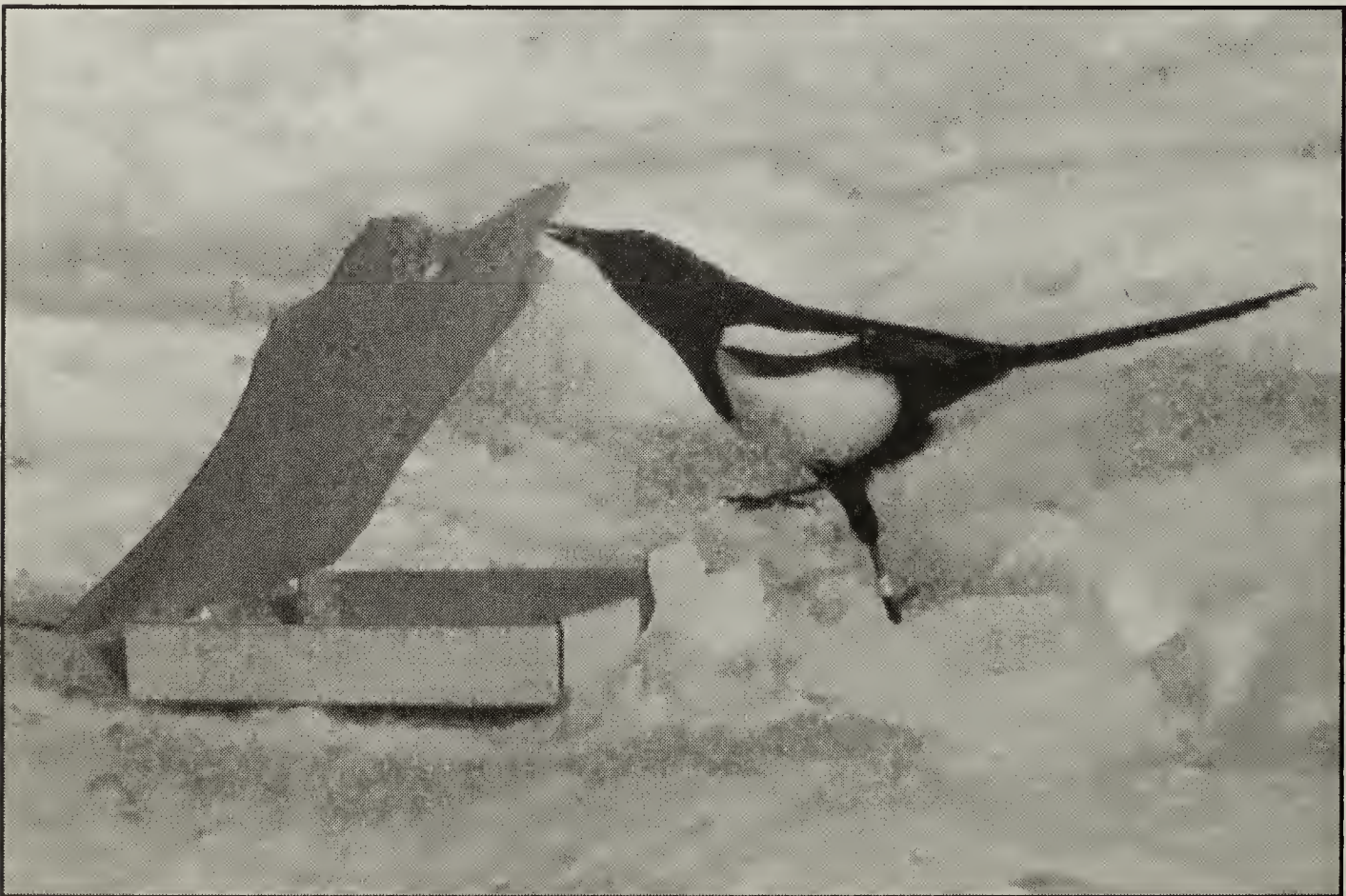


Figure 3 - Banded magpie pushes box top higher.

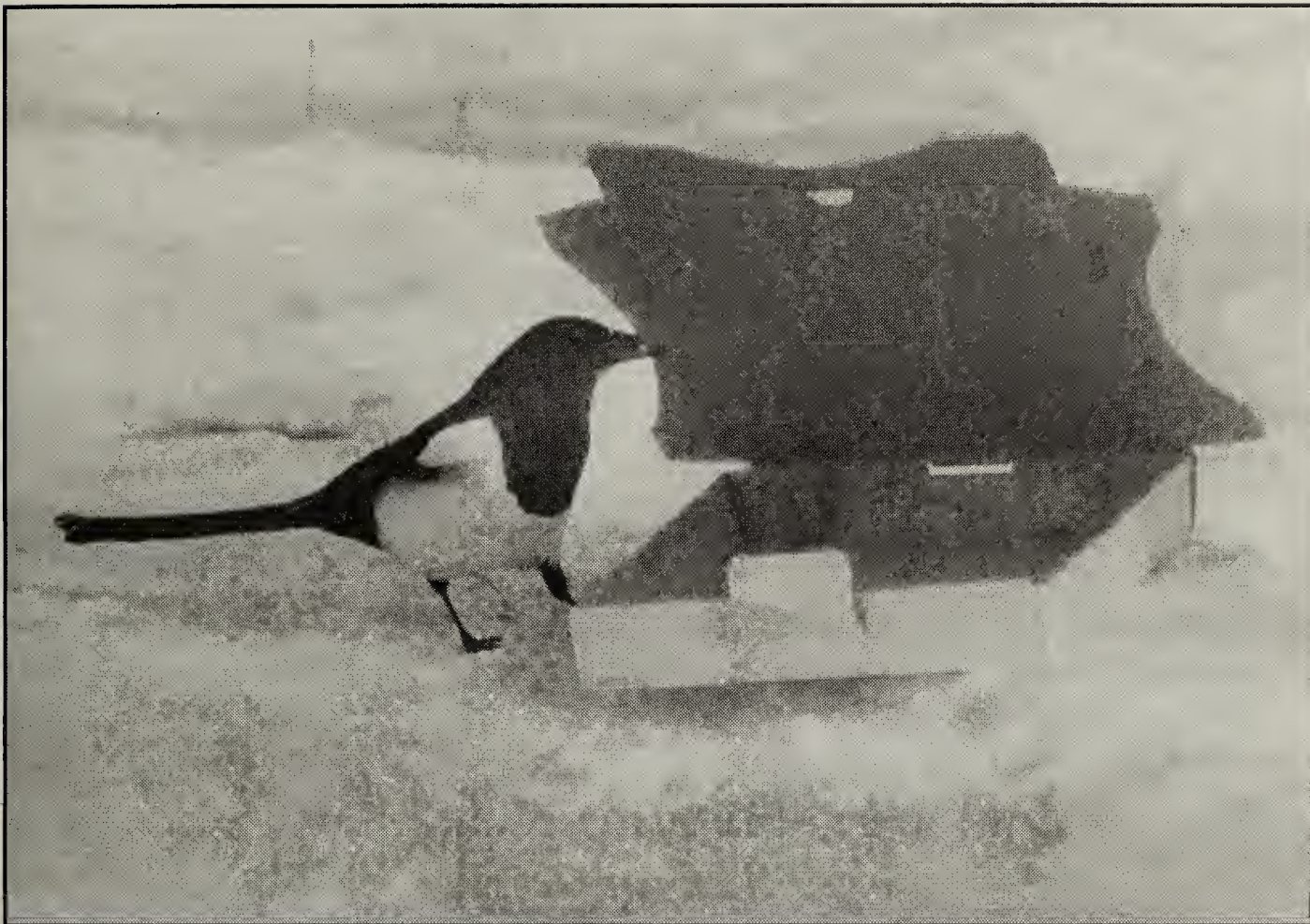


Figure 4 - Unbanded magpie takes his turn.

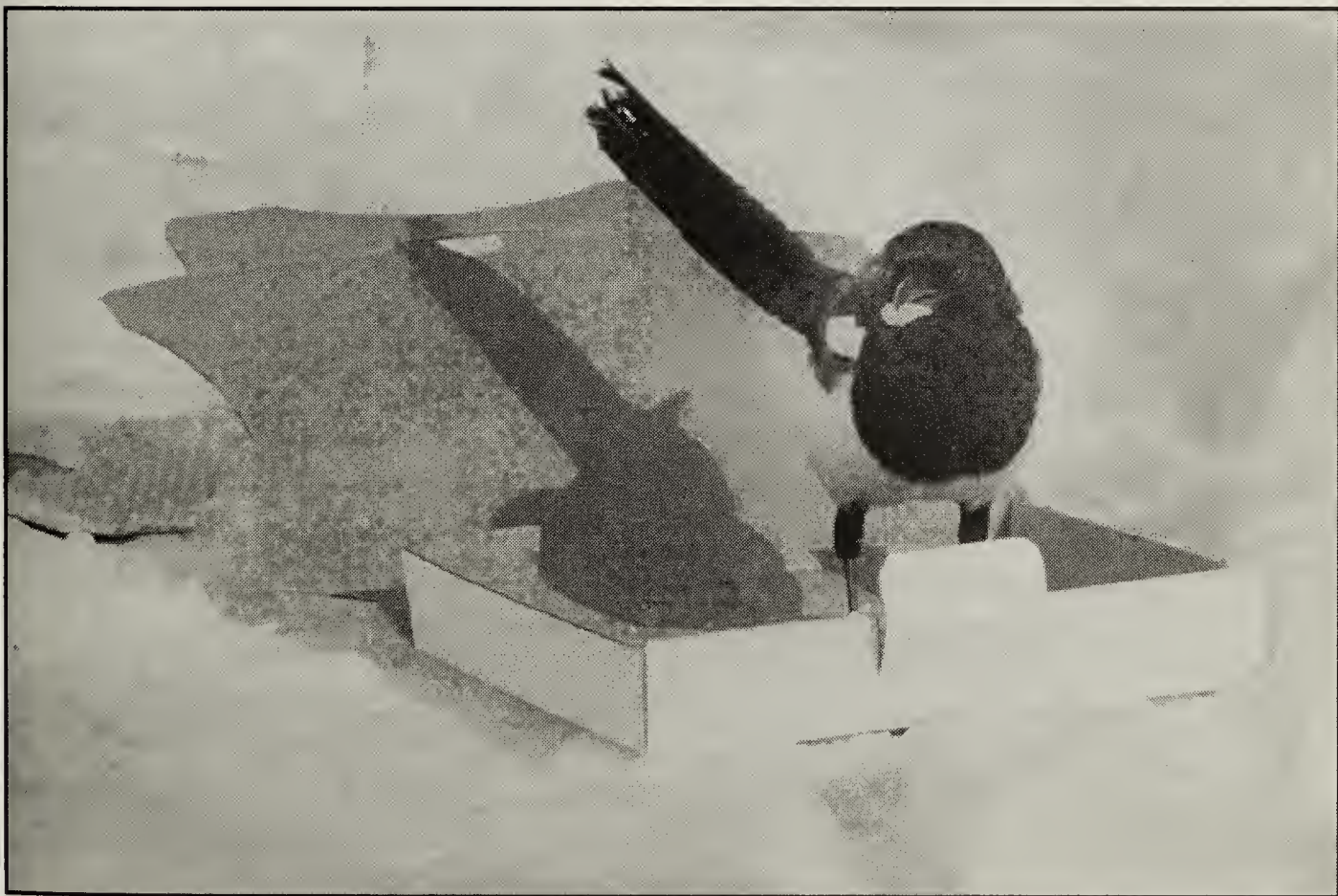


Figure 5 - Success! Box is open. There are some crumbs in the box; at this point the banded magpie holds a piece of green pepper in its mouth.

A SHORT-TAILED SHREW — COMMON GRACKLE ENCOUNTER

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We have become accustomed to seeing Short-tailed Shrews (*Blarina brevicauda*) coming out to forage for sunflower and other seeds on the ground in our well-wooded urban yard. Their excursions onto the lawn in full sunlight, however, seem reckless, especially given the frequent occurrence at the same time of Red Squirrels (*Tamiasciurus hudsonicus*) and Blue Jays (*Cyanocitta cristata*), species known to prey on small mammals.^{3, 4} Less vulnerable, we assumed, was a shrew that often came out from its lair in rocks beside our ground-level birdbath for a drink, for it was never far from cover. This creature, or one of its kind, inspired a recently published poem.² The birdbath is readily visible from our living room window.

Common Grackles usually appear in our yard in numbers in late July and August, coming to drink and bathe in the birdbath, and to feed on cracked corn and acorns, and sometimes to *ant!*¹ About 30 grackles, apparently all adult males, were present on 10 August 1998, a bright, hot day, reaching 31°C. One of us (RFN) was fortunate enough to see a grackle in the birdbath struggling with a shrew. Hopping about with the shrew in its bill, wings flapping in the water, the grackle lost its prey, grabbed the shrew again, then lost its grip a second time, whereupon the shrew escaped, darting into a crevice in the adjacent rocks. The grackle then flew off to join the rest of the flock nearby on the lawn.

Presumably, the grackle and the shrew had met by chance at the edge of the birdbath. These were well-fed grackles; a hungrier bird might well have managed to subdue the shrew, as was reported by an observer in Kentucky who chanced upon a grackle attempting to predate a Short-tailed Shrew.⁵ That shrew apparently survived owing only to the intervention of the observer.

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FIFTY YEARS AGO - Excerpts from Blue Jay Volume 7, No. 2, June 1949

Selected by Mary I. Houston

This was the second issue edited by Lloyd T. Carmichael and published by the newly- formed Saskatchewan Natural History Society. Mrs. Isabel M. Priestly had founded the Blue Jay and edited it from September 1942 until her sudden and unexpected death on 23 April 1946. Cliff Shaw carried on as editor for three years, but the undertaking proved too great for the Yorkton Society alone.

Executive members of the new provincial society were: Honorary President, Dr. W.P. Thompson, University of Saskatchewan; President, Dr. G.F. Ledingham, Biology Professor, Regina College; 1st Vice-Pres., Cliff Shaw, Yorkton; 2nd Vice-Pres, Maurice G. Street, Nipawin; Secretary-treasurer, W.F. Whitehead, Regina. Directors were H.C. Andrews, Moose Jaw; Fred Bard, Regina; Dick Bird, Regina; E.W. Brooman, Prince Albert; A.W. Brownlee, Regina; A.C. Budd, Swift Current; Stuart Houston, Yorkton and Winnipeg; L.T. McKim, Melfort; Lloyd Peterson, Indian Head; R.J. Priestly, Regina; F.W. Robinson, Regina; E.W. Van Blaricom, Tisdale.

Cliff Shaw, Yorkton:

"Ten Cedar Waxwings were seen April 11 on a crabapple tree. ... These are, no doubt, the same group of birds that have been around during the winter. Five ... were observed at the time of the Christmas count. During January ... ten ... in the downtown section. ... Normally the average spring arrival ... is June 1."

"A lone Purple Martin was seen inspecting one of the bird houses at the

city hall, April 23. This was one day earlier than any previous record here. The species arrived in full force five days later, April 28. The average date has been May 4."

"A Brown Creeper was seen inspecting the bark of an elm tree on a Yorkton street, April 26. ... two days earlier than other years."

"Heaviest migration of hawks ... ever noticed ... Yorkton, April 10 ... Twenty-five Buteos were seen between 9.30 and 10.30 a.m., all except five were observed during the first half hour ... with the exception of one Rough-leg, all appeared to be Red-tails. ... in ones and twos."

Wilkie district:

"It is most unfortunate than another Whooping Crane has been wantonly destroyed. Early in May the body of one was found in the Wilkie district, and it is thought that it was shot last fall ... This is the rarest of North American birds. ... Careful counts have been made of the number left. Last winter there were only 33."

K.E. Baines, southwest of Saltcoats:

We also had a dancing ground of the Pinnated Grouse [Greater Prairie-Chicken] five miles west of Saltcoats, on either side of the road, as well as right on it. These birds are much more showy when courting, but they are very scarce there and I have never seen one at Tisdale."

A. McPherson, Saskatoon:

"Trapping birds this spring for banding was poor; they did not seem to care for food in the traps, so for a change I started using more water in them and got better results. ... This year I have banded more thrushes than I have done before and the trap I catch them in is just one for water. I had an unusual bird around my place this spring — Townsend's Solitaire. It stayed around my bird traps from April 10 to April 13. ... It was not the least bit afraid of people. We got quite close to it and didn't need our field glasses to identify its field marks. It stayed around my bird trap all day. ... On seeing one, it would fly down, catch the insect, then back to the same perch again. ... I even tried putting trout flies in my traps, suspended from the top, but with no luck."

Harold Kvinge, Hawarden:

"I have observed three Western Grebes on our pond, May 3. The Long-billed Curlews seem to be more numerous this spring. ... A pair of Avocets, also a pair of Burrowing Owls are nesting near the pond. The McCown's Longspurs are quite numerous around here, although they are rare in many parts of Saskatchewan. Red-winged Blackbirds have not been so numerous in our trees for many years. They sing almost continually."

Flora of the Farming and Ranching Areas of the Canadian Prairies

"Arch C. Budd ... has finished compiling a book describing in detail the flowering wild plants of the prairies, extending from the prairies to the foothills of the Rockies. ... written primarily for the Saskatchewan agricultural-representative service ... about 200 copies have been printed."

Blue jay subscriptions as prizes:

"Charles Leech, chief supervisor of the Youth Centre, Regina, is to be highly congratulated on the enthusiasm which he and his staff have aroused among their classes in connection with wild plant and animal life and their conservation. ... for two weeks or more the boys and girls were busy visiting the museum and obtaining information from various sources... a contest consisting of a quiz and dealing with purposes of National Wildlife Week, with wild plants, with birds and with other animals, was announced. ... The quiz was held April 19, over 100 contestants participating. For prizes, seven yearly subscriptions of the *Blue Jay*, two copies of Taverner's *Birds of Canada*, fourteen copies of Taverner's *Bird Houses and their occupants*, and fourteen copies of *Game and Fur in Saskatchewan*, were awarded."



The dandelion tells me when to look for the swallow, the dogtooth violet
when to expect the wood thrush, and when I have found the wakerobin
in bloom I know the season is fairly inaugurated.

John Burroughs.