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RARE OR UNUSUAL BIRD SIGHTINGS FOR BEAVERHILL LAKE, AB, 1996-2000

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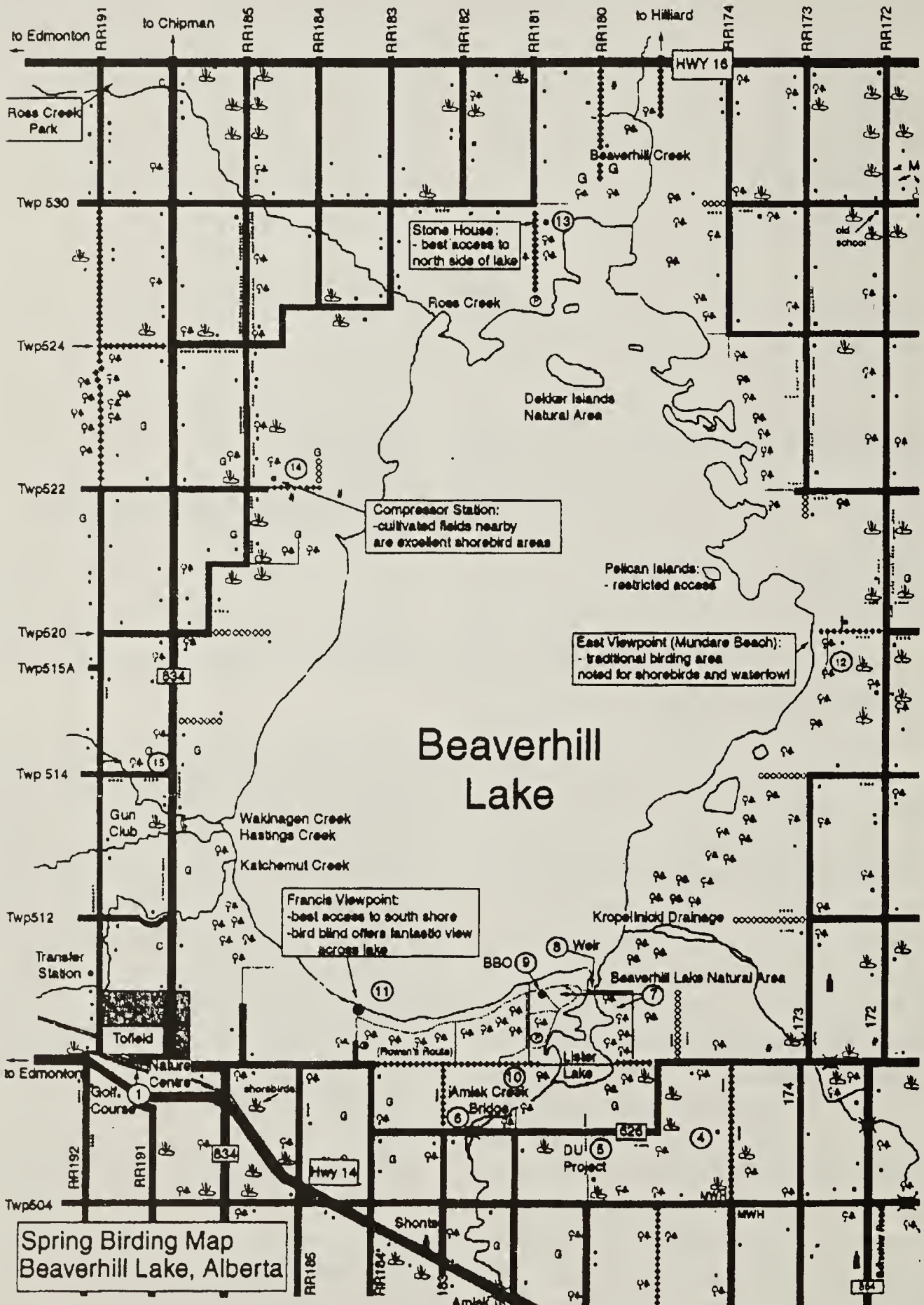
Beaverhill Lake, situated near Tofield, Alberta is one of the best birding spots in Alberta and western Canada. It has been compared to Point Pelee for its bird diversity and prime habitat. ⁴ Designated as a RAMSAR site (a wetland of international significance) in 1987, it boasts a list of nearly 300 bird species.^{4,15} Besides the thousands of Snow Geese that arrive each spring, the plethora of warblers that flit through the trees and the huge numbers of shorebirds that congregate on the mudflats, there are rare and unusual species recorded each year. This article lists the rare or unusual sightings from 1996-2000 in the Beaverhill Lake area.

The bulk of the following information comes from the Beaverhill Bird Observatory (BBO) located on the south

shore of Beaverhill Lake (Figure 1). Here, the full-time summer staff conducts bird banding and a daily census from late April to late September, and keeps comprehensive records. The Beaverhill Lake Sight Records compilers have been Roy Fairweather or Kevin Kardynal and Gretchen Peterson during the report period.^{6,7,8,9,12} Other sightings are from birders who frequent the Beaverhill Lake area.

The area covered in this report is referred to by BBO as the Beaverhill Sight Records zone. It encompasses all of Beaverhill Lake as well as Aspen Poplar woods and pasture land surrounding the lake, and is bounded by Highway 16 (north), Highway 14 (south), Secondary Highway 834 (west), and Range Road 172 (east).

Figure 1. Beaverhill Lake, Alberta. (Map reproduced from the Edmonton Bird Club brochure "Spring Birding at Beaverhill Lake" by Bob Parsons and Roy Fairweather.)



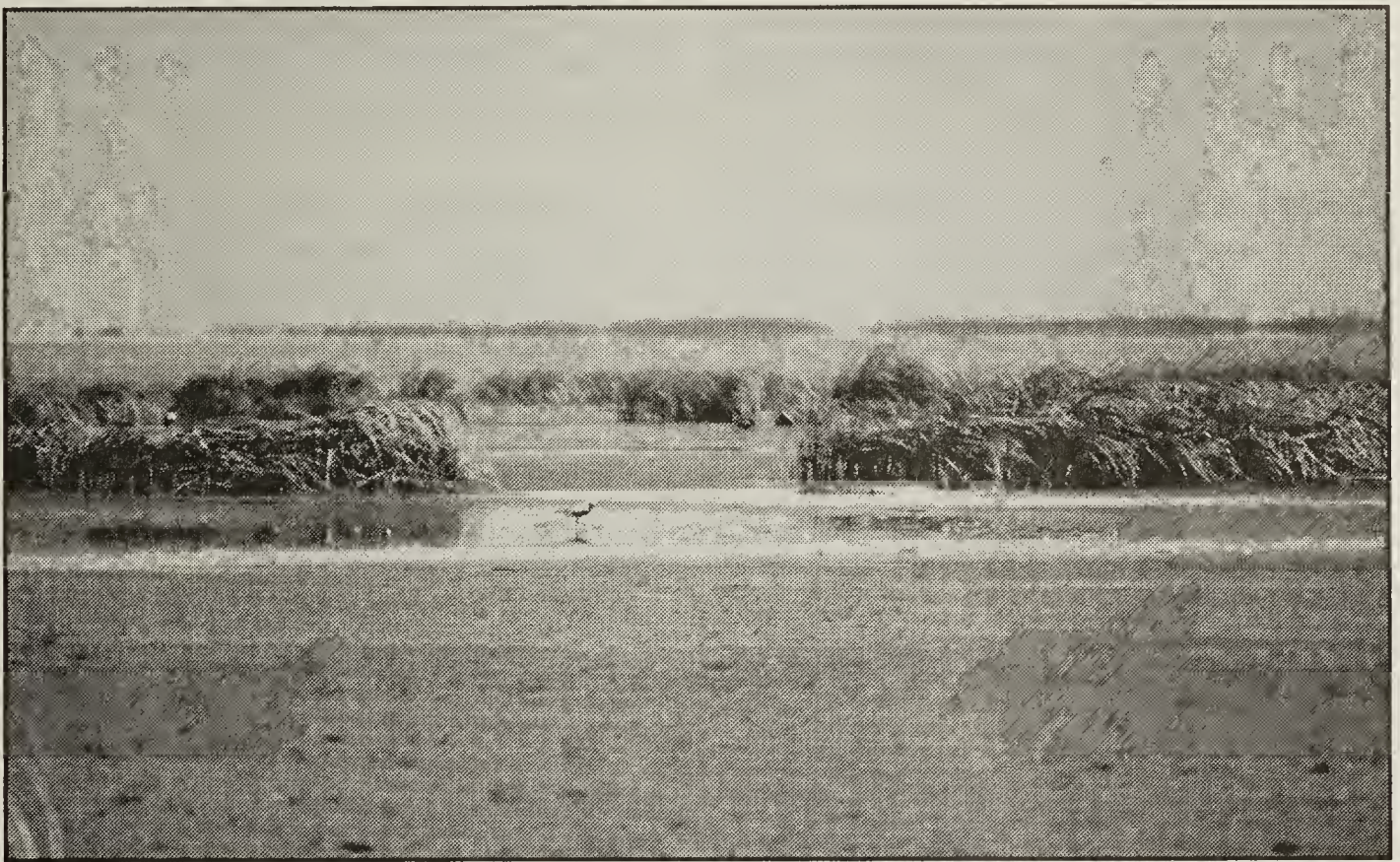


Figure 2. Beaverhill Lake, May 2000

Tyler Flockhart

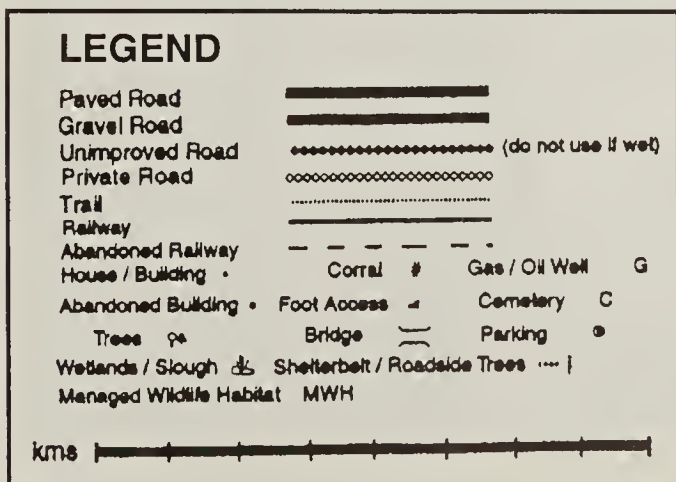
The lake itself is 18 km long and 10 km wide, yet only 1.5 m at its deepest point, giving it a slough-like nature which is a major attraction for migrating waterfowl (Fig. 2).^{2,4} The shoreline usually is muddy and vegetated by cattails, however, with major fluctuations in water level, it varies between years from vegetated to muddy to sandy. Currently, the shoreline is densely vegetated with cattails.

The annual sight record reports include a species total for each year. In 1996, a total of 209 species was reported, with two species that had never been reported before. In 1997, a total of 210 species was reported and

although no birds new to the area were recorded, one species made an appearance after an absence of 20 years. In 1998, a total of 197 species was recorded with one new species and another that reappeared after a 70 year absence. In 1999, the total was 216 species and two of these were recorded for the first time. In 2000, no new species were recorded and 176 species were listed.

The following list is presented in AOU taxonomic order.¹ The status assigned to each species refers to its occurrence at Beaverhill Lake. Unless otherwise noted, designations of rare and unusual are based on Dekker.⁴ Species labeled as 'rare' have been recorded fewer than 6 times in the past 40 years, while species labeled 'unusual' are characterized as having "been reported, but not each year and on an irregular and unpredictable basis".⁴

Great Egret. Rare. A single individual was observed June 5, 1998. These huge wading birds are found only occasionally in Alberta and have been



reported at Beaverhill Lake in two previous years, in 1987 and 1991.¹⁰ Observer: Dick Dekker.

Snowy Egret. Rare. A lone Snowy Egret was spotted in the southeast corner of the lake May 16, 1999. The bird seemed to light up the nearby drab cattails as it fed. This species was last seen at Beaverhill Lake in 1984. Observer: Ross Dickson and Ed Mah-Lim.

White-faced Ibis. First record. The highlight for 1999 was undoubtedly the pair of White-faced Ibises seen on May 11 by BBO staff. In Alberta, this species was first documented in 1941, and first confirmed breeding in 1992. The most northerly location previous to the Beaverhill Lake sighting was Big Hill Springs Provincial Park (1990).^{5, 11} Observer: Jason Duxbury and Charles Priestley (BBO).

Wood Duck. Rare. On June 9, 1996, two drakes were seen at Beaverhill Lake. These ducks are rare in Alberta except at Inglewood Bird Sanctuary in Calgary where they have been

introduced.¹⁰ This species was recorded at Beaverhill Lake in 1980 and 1985. Observer: M. Powell.

Eurasian Wigeon. Rare. An individual was spotted during the annual Snow Goose Festival held April 26 and 27, 1997. Other sightings of this European duck occurred at Beaverhill Lake in 1990, 1994, and 1995. Observer: Snow Goose Festival Participants.

Harlequin Duck. Rare. A single drake was seen on June 13, 1996. The last previous sighting for a Harlequin was in 1991. Observer: Terry Thormin.

Surf Scoter. Unusual. Two individuals appeared on May 13, 1999. This species migrates through the Beaverhill Lake area, however, they are usually found in the middle of the lake, well out of view of most spotting scopes. Sightings were also made in 1984, 1986, and 1991. Observer: Randal Hoscheit.

Osprey. Unusual. Seen on April 26, 1997 and in only three other years in the previous two decades (1984, 1993,



Figure 3. Northern Mockingbird

Tyler Flockhart

1994). Beaverhill Lake, although large, is shallow and does not support fish of any appreciable size. Observer: Bob Parsons.

Gyrfalcon. Unusual. A single bird was sighted on October 12, 1997. The last previous sighting of this species was November 16, 1991. Observer: BBO staff.

Piping Plover. Unusual. During a census of the shoreline of Beaverhill Lake in June 1996, seven breeding pairs were discovered. With changing water levels, there are some years when there is no shore available as nesting habitat for this endangered species. Due to present high water levels, this species is now rarely seen at the lake.¹⁰ Observer: Michael Barr, Roy Fairweather and John Folinsbee.

Black-necked Stilts. Rare. Though still rare, sightings are now made almost every year due to the species northern expansion. The first reports of a successful nest of Black-necked Stilts in Canada occurred at Beaverhill Lake in 1977.⁴ The first sighting in 2000 was May 3, when this species was seen on the south shore in an area frequented by many shorebird species. Observer: BBO staff.

Upland Sandpiper. Unusual. Their abundance in the Beaverhill Lake area is low; the only sightings in the last decade include 1991, 1995, and this undated record from 1997. Observer: Josh Bilyk (BBO).

Long-billed Curlew. Classified as "unusual" although no additional dates are given for Beaverhill Lake.⁴ A single Long-billed Curlew was seen at Beaverhill Lake on May 17, 1998. Salt and Salt have an undated record, while Dekker reports over a dozen records.^{4,13} Observer: Bob Parsons.

Parasitic Jaeger. Unusual. On September 6, 1999, a Parasitic Jaeger was flying along the south shore. This species has been seen four times in the past two decades (1983,1995,1996,1999). Jaegers sometimes can be seen in fall at Beaverhill Lake, one of the only inland areas where they have been seen with some degree of consistency.^{4,10} Observer: Richard Wiacek.

Long-tailed Jaeger. Rare. At least two, and possibly three, were seen from Francis Point on the southern shore on Aug 31, 1997.^{7, 10} The last previous sighting of this species is from 1977. Observer: Chris Fisher.

Little Gull. Rare. On September 12, 1996, a second-winter Little Gull was reported; the last sighting occurred at Beaverhill Lake in 1989. Observer: Jason Duxbury and Lisa Takats.

Mew Gull. Rare. This sighting of two individuals on the south shore near Lister Lake occurred on August 26, 2000. Mew Gulls were seen only twice previously on August 8, 1988 and September 7, 1991. Observer: Randal Hoscheit and Charles Priestley (BBO).

Glaucous Gull. Unusual. On May 3, 2000, an adult was spotted on the south shore. This individual appeared briefly, then disappeared, ghost-like, into heavy fog. This species has been seen twice previously in the past two decades, in 1985 and 1992. Observer: Charles Priestley (BBO).

Band-tailed Pigeon. First record. From June 25 - July 1, 1996, a single Band-tailed Pigeon was observed and photographed in the Tofield area. Observer: R. Pellerin.

Black-billed Cuckoo. Unusual. On the morning of July 12, 2000, a strange call was coming from the trees, and it didn't



Figure 4. Long-eared Owl

Tyler Flockhart

take long to realize that a Black-billed Cuckoo was around. These birds (previously spotted in 1986, 1987 and 1992) are most frequently encountered at Beaverhill Lake during tent caterpillar outbreaks. Although the bird was never seen, over 6 people and several groups identified it by its call during a week-long stay. Observer: BBO staff.

Long-eared Owls. Unusual. Long-eared owls (Fig. 4) were particularly abundant in 2000, yet are considered rare to uncommon throughout Central Alberta.¹⁰ BBO banded four adults during the summer and fall, and four were seen roosting communally in a tree on August 30, 2000. First heard on April 29, 2000, these birds seemed to be setting up territories (having nested in previous years), yet no nests were located after extensive searching. Most sightings at Beaverhill Lake are in the southern portion of the area. Previous sightings were in 1988, 1992, 1994, 1995 and 1997. Observer: BBO staff.

Northern Hawk Owl. Rare. Seen within the Beaverhill Lake Natural Area

on the south shore on October 5, 2000. This species was last observed on October 13, 1973. Observer: Richard Krikun (BBO).

Belted Kingfisher. Rare. Reported on May 9, 1999. Other years in the past decade this species has been seen include 1990 and 1996. Observer: Brian Hornby.

Loggerhead Shrike. Unusual. One individual was observed on June 1, 1996. Other sightings include two hatch-year birds (fledglings) banded on Aug 9, 1987; an adult that was also present was not caught. This seemed to be a pre-migration family group and suggests a local, successful nest.³ Semenchuk reports this bird breeding in the Beaverhill area.¹⁴ Observer: G. Scollon.

Violet-green Swallow. First record. One was observed May 22, 1999 and one was seen in a flock of Tree Swallows, May 26, 1999. Whether these were the same bird is unknown. Observer: Loney Dickson (May 22) and Jason Duxbury, Charles Priestley, and Tyler Flockhart (May 26).

Winter Wren. First record. A single individual was captured and banded at BBO on September 26, 1996. Precise measurements made while banding the bird confirmed that it was a Winter Wren. Observer: BBO staff.

Townsend's Solitaire. Rare. April 27, 1996 brought a Townsend's Solitaire to the east shore of Beaverhill Lake. Observer: Ross Dickson, Ed Mah-Lim, Terry Thormin and others.

Wood Thrush. First record. The first Wood Thrush recorded at Beaverhill Lake was banded (adult, sex unknown) by Edgar T. Jones on May 19, 1998. Observer: Edgar T. Jones.

Varied Thrush. Rare (not listed in Dekker). An adult female was banded at BBO on May 26, 1998, while another was seen on September 26, 2000. The only previous sighting was on September 26, 1994. Observer: Shannon Quinn 1998 and Richard Krikun 2000 (both BBO).

Northern Mockingbird. (Fig. 3) Rare. The capture of 1999 at BBO was a Northern Mockingbird on June 8. This was the first time it has been banded at Beaverhill. Other years that this species was recorded are 1975 and 1993. Observer: Tyler Flockhart (BBO).

Black-throated Blue Warbler. Rare. After a 70-year absence from the woods surrounding Beaverhill Lake, an adult female was banded May 26, 1998. The only other record from this area dates from October 4, 1928.¹³ Observer: Edgar T. Jones.

Each day spent birding at Beaverhill gives the viewer and naturalist memories that never fade. Due to the location of Beaverhill Lake and its attractiveness to various birds, rare species reveal themselves each year.

Many of these rare species are seen by many people, however, more than likely, many others go unnoticed.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Roy Fairweather for spending many volunteer hours compiling the information used within this report, and Lisa Takats for support and encouragement to write it. I thank the Beaverhill Bird Observatory where I worked for the past two summers banding birds and conducting research, gaining more knowledge than I ever thought possible, and helping me realize my path in life. Without doubt, these were the best two summers of my life. And, lastly I acknowledge the big giant slough known as Beaverhill Lake, a treasure that goes unnoticed by many who don't know how beautiful it really is.

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SLOW NORTHWARD SPREAD OF THE LARK SPARROW

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Walley documented the northward spread of the Lark Sparrow in west-central Manitoba, citing nest records for Birtle, Riding Mountain National Park, and Dauphin between 1971 and 1993.¹⁵ In Saskatchewan its northward spread began soon after 1900. These extensions of range were not known to Martin and Parrish, when they compiled the Lark Sparrow account for the Birds of North America series.¹

Saskatchewan's only two pre-1900 records of the Lark Sparrow are from the southwest and both by William Spreadborough: a specimen taken at Old Wives Lake on 22 May 1895 and a pair sighted at Sucker Creek near Cypress Lake on 1 July 1895.⁹ Not one

was recorded on trips to the Cypress Hills by Bent in 1906 and 1907, Taverner and Laing in 1921, nor Mitchell in 1917, 1919 and 1921.^{3, 6} The best early documentation is by Laurence B. Potter in the Frenchman River Valley on the southeast aspect of the Cypress Hills, 5 miles west of Eastend. Prior to 1922, when two pairs took up residence, Potter had a few, short, mid-May visits from Lark Sparrows, although not every year.¹¹ In his reminiscences, Potter recounted that "the Lark Sparrow is a striking example of a bird formerly uncommon, that has increased with the settlement of the prairies. ... of late, this sparrow has increased perceptibly and has extended its range. ... [I] discovered a