

# NOTES AND LETTERS

## A PLUM OF A NEST SITE FOR WAXWINGS

My Flowering Plum died in the winter of 2001. When I cut it down early in the spring of 2002, there were two branches extending out horizontally to either side almost on the ground, that seemed to retain some life. These I tied upright into a vertical position and attached with nylon pantyhose to a broomstick stake that I had driven into the ground. To my surprise, the two branches began to grow. By late July, the plum had developed into a nice little tree, 6 feet high.

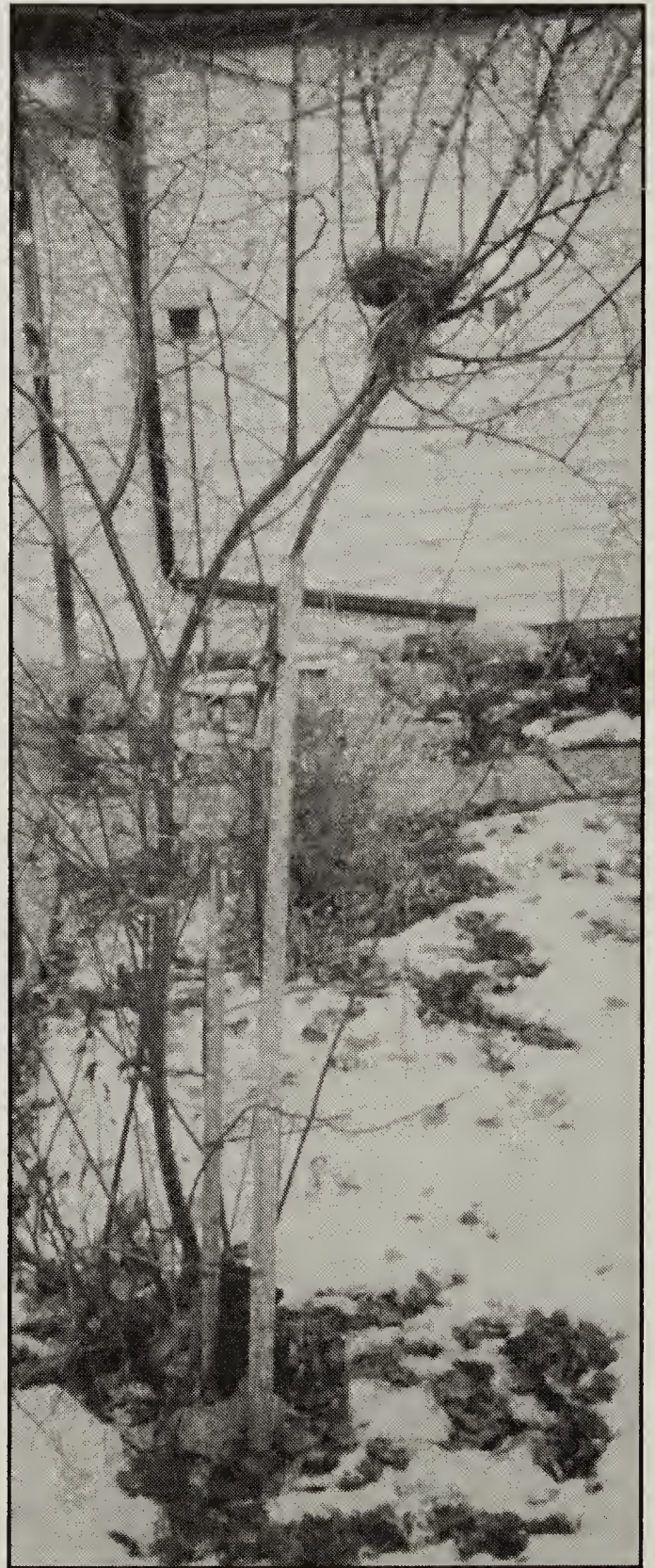
About August 1, I noticed a pair of Cedar Waxwings perched on a wire cage around a delphinium near the little plum tree and realized that they were building a nest in my resurrected Flowering Plum. It seemed late in the summer to begin a nest, until I learned that Cedar Waxwings breed unusually late to coincide with berry ripening.

I cut some string into four-inch strips and placed them on the wire cage. One of the waxwings swooped down, gathered them up and placed them in the nest it was building. I cut several more pieces of string and it came down again and took them all. I thought that the waxwing must have enough, but it sat staring at me on my chair only four feet away as if to say, "Is that all?" It was really quite comical.

I placed a low stool on the patio, so that every few days I could stand on it and look down into the nest. On August 3, a waxwing was sitting. On August 9 and 10, there were three eggs. On August 24, young birds were evident and four days later I could see three feathered heads. A heavy rain storm on September 1 did not disturb them and all three fully-feathered young were still in the

nest on September 5. By September 7, after the expected 12 days of incubation and 16 days in the nest, the young had left the nest. I did not see them again.

- Audrey McKibbon, 10 Mitchell Street, Saskatoon, SK S7H 3G1



*Figure 1. Plum tree nest in early winter.*

*Mary Houston*

## THREE WAVES OF JUNCOS IN SPRING 2002

More juncos than usual appeared at our feeders on 863 University Drive in the spring of 2002. By banding 79 of them and recapturing 27 on 51 occasions, we determined that they came in three waves.

Although juncos arrive in the Saskatoon area during the last week in March, they customarily do not appear at our feeders until about April 10.<sup>1</sup> In spite of the cold spring in 2002, the first birds banded were only one to four days late. The first junco appeared in our yard on April 11; one was banded on April 12, and 41 more were banded in the next seven days. Nine banded birds were recaptured on 16 occasions. These juncos did not tarry long; all had left our yard by April 19.

After a gap of four days, a small wave came through from April 24 to 27. Nine were banded; seven of these were recaptured a total of nine times before the last of this group departed on April 30.

No new birds were caught until the third wave appeared on April 28 when nine birds were banded. Nineteen more were banded by May 8. Eleven were recaptured 26 times (including one bird recaptured 14 times!). All banded birds had left us by May 9.

Might the three waves have had different origins?

1. LEIGHTON, A.L., J. HAY, C.S. HOUSTON, J.F. ROY, and S. SHADICK, eds. 2002. *Birds of the Saskatoon Area*. Nature Saskatchewan, Regina.

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## SNOWY OWL AND JACK RABBITS GALORE

At approximately 3:00 P.M. on February 22, 2003, I was trying to catch a female Snowy Owl for banding. The day was slightly overcast, but still bright with fresh snow. The temperature was -25 C with a slight breeze. I was 4 miles north of Elrose, parked just off the Bickleigh Road on the crest of a hill overlooking a 40 acre pasture to the west and north of the road. The owl was sitting on the west fence approximately 250 yds north of the road and about 400 yds from me. The net with the tethered pigeon was sitting along the road on the far side of the pasture, about 500 yds away.

There is a corral attached to the pasture on the east side, the side closest to me. The only relief, other than barbed wire fences and corrals, is a tiny breached earthen dam with a short row of Caraganas along it, about 75 m north of my position.

As I waited to see if the owl would go for the pigeon, I noticed a pair of jack rabbits moving in the Caraganas. Then I saw three more jack rabbits move from behind the snow banks at the base of the Caraganas. I haven't seen more than four jack rabbits at any one time since the 1970s, so I started watching the rabbits. Another six rabbits came from beyond the Caraganas. Eleven jack rabbits. I kept checking the owl, which also was watching the new activity, and I also started looking carefully at the surrounding area. I could see at least four more rabbits crouching up against corral posts in the snow banks in the wooden corrals. Two rabbits left, hopping north along another fence line until they disappeared over a hill, but the rest stayed close to the corrals and Caraganas for cover. When I tried to walk a little closer for a photograph and was about halfway to the Caraganas, a covey of 18 Grey Partridge exploded from the tree row and the rabbits

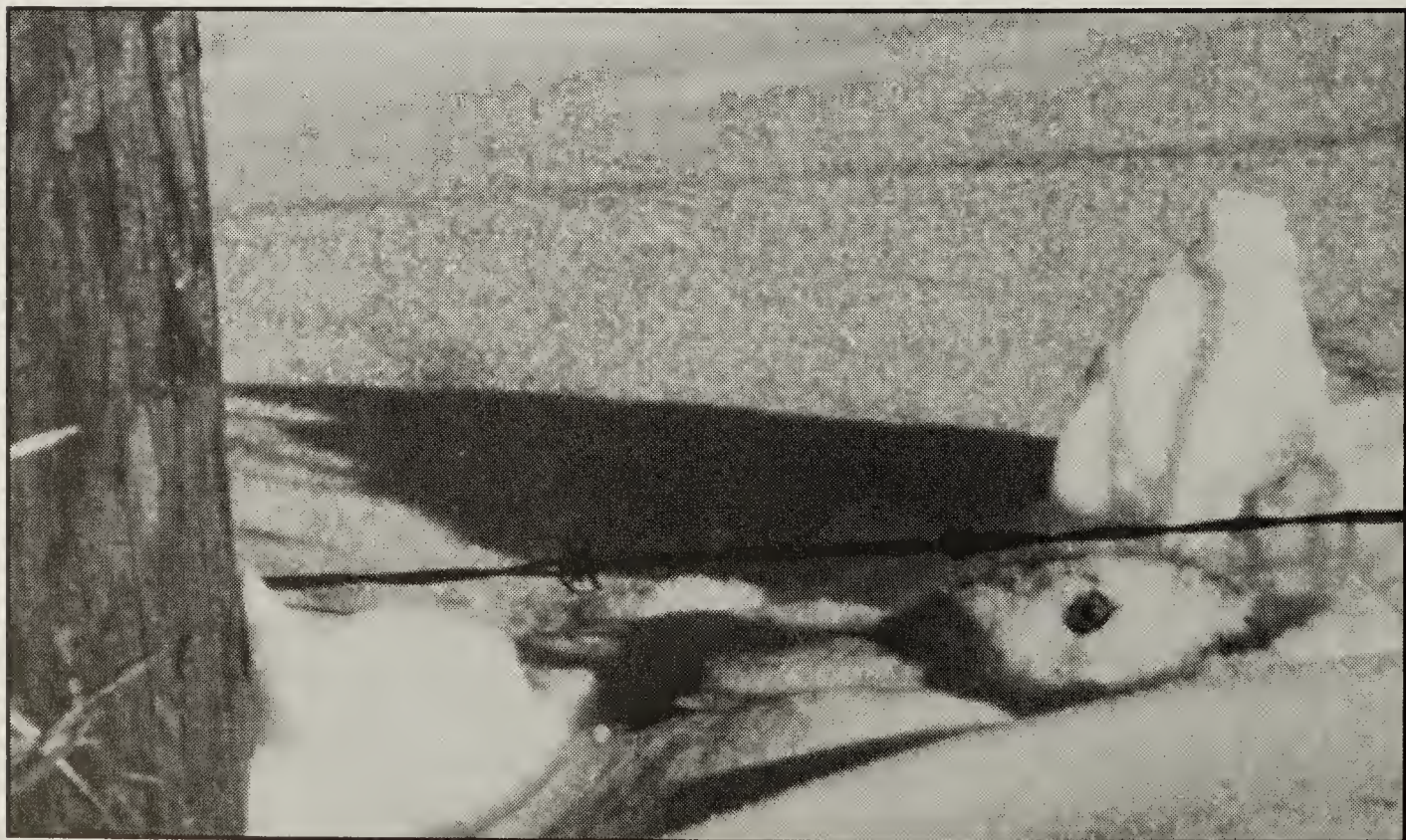
scattered. Altogether, including the two rabbits that had gone north, I counted thirty jack rabbits in an area the size of a tennis court!

But it doesn't end there. The rabbits scattered, but they didn't want to leave the shelter of the corrals, the tree row and the fence lines. As I watched, a group of twelve rabbits started making their way along the fence line, first south and then west to the southwest corner of the pasture. They were now straight south of the owl. These twelve rabbits stayed in the corner, never more than a few yards from the protection of the fence. As I watched, the owl suddenly flew down the fence line, landing on the top brace of the corner posts, directly above the twelve rabbits. The rabbits were startled, and bolted, but almost immediately came back to the safety of the fence. Incredibly, the rabbits actually started moving towards the owl. A rabbit would take a quick step, pause, take another quick step, pause, gradually moving until the owl had to crane its head to look down below its feet at them. If the owl shifted its feet, the rabbits would dart away, but immediately they came back to the fence. This went on for ten minutes. Then, as four or five rabbits milled around at its feet, the owl dropped in amongst them.

Although I've seen Snowy Owls feeding on jack rabbits, I've never seen an owl attack a rabbit. And I still haven't. The owl dropped to the ground, the rabbits moved away briefly, but then they came back again. And, there they sat, the owl among the rabbits. The rabbits were as tall as the owl and likely twice as heavy, but I still thought something would happen. Nothing did. The rabbits stayed a body length away from the owl and never turned their backs to it, but they didn't back away, either. Finally, the owl flew back up onto the other cross brace and turned its back on the rabbits.

I would have waited to see if anything else would happen, but it was still three hours until dark and I suspected that the owl might wait until then before doing anything. And I wanted to keep looking for more cooperative owls (I did see 19 Snowy Owls that day, catching none). I got about halfway to the owl in my vehicle before it flew. But it didn't go far. It flew over the pasture and landed east of the Caraganas where I suspect it waited for dark, and perhaps a rabbit meal.

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*Jack rabbit in snow along a fence line*

*R. E. Gehlert*