

ACTIVITIES OF JUNIOR BIRDWATCHERS IN SASKATCHEWAN, 1915 - 1974

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In an earlier article, I described the contributions of junior naturalists to the *Blue Jay* through its columns Nature Schoolhouse and Junior Naturalists, 1954 - 1972.⁹ In the decades prior to the 1950s, a few young people were actively engaged in nature-oriented groups, building bird houses and observing birds across Saskatchewan. The article focuses on some of their activities and accomplishments.

As early as 1917, the Saskatoon Boy Scouts, under the aegis of the Saskatoon Naturalists' Club (1915-1921), constructed 300 bird houses for use by the Saskatoon Parks Board. In 1922, the Collegiate Nature Club in Prince Albert elected 17-year-old Owen Cecil Furniss as its president.¹ In the late 1930s a group of boys, living on farms isolated from one another and calling themselves the Bird Circle, began circulating a "round-robin" letter. Each contributed bird migration dates and other notes twice a year. Members were Hartley Fredeen at Macrorie, Ralph Hedlin at Renown, Tom Harper at Simpson, and Horace Beach at Ernfold. The only surviving round-robin letter, their fourth, was mailed from Hartley on December 5, 1938. The Regina Natural History Society, which began in 1933, organized museum tours for children as early as 1934, and high school students Billy Whitehead and John Hunt gave talks to the society in 1945.¹⁰

The Yorkton Natural History Society began in the fall of 1942 with strong

junior involvement. Among its executive of seven, the secretary-treasurer, Stuart Houston, and two executive members, Harvey Beck and Vernon Barnes, were students in grades 9 (Barnes) or 10. The next year, Jim Smith, in grade 12, was elected to the executive to replace Harvey Beck. After each issue of the *Blue Jay* was mimeographed, students (on one occasion, Beck, Black, Houston, Smith, and Michael Priestly) gathered to fill in the title letters with blue crayon, and to collate and staple each eight-page copy. Stuart continued as secretary-treasurer until he left for the University of Manitoba in September 1945, the same time that Harvey Beck began classes at the University of Saskatchewan. Vernon Barnes continued on the executive until June 1946.

Isabel Priestly, founder of the *Blue Jay*, was a strong promoter of Junior Audubon Societies, of which 20 already existed across Saskatchewan when the Yorkton Natural History Society was formed. In the first issue of *Blue Jay*, she singled out the Bertwell Junior Audubon Society for special commendation.²

Blue Jay gave young people an opportunity to communicate with each other, to share their interests and information, and see their observations published. In the Oct.-Nov.-Dec. 1943 issue of *Blue Jay*, the student president (not the teacher!) at Mamornitz rural school near Buchanan submitted an interesting account of a Ruby-throated

Hummingbird nest found by Peter Bodiuk in Grade 3, and visited daily from the time the second egg was laid until the young fledged; the account was accompanied by excellent drawings.

For many, the opportunity for early involvement in nature-oriented activities led to interesting lifetime hobbies, and for others a lifelong career. I found it interesting and more than coincidental that the promise shown by the three leading contributors to the Junior Naturalists section in *Blue Jay*,⁹ was fulfilled in later life. Bohdan Pylypec did an honours B.Sc. in biology, followed by a Master's degree, writing a thesis on the Chestnut-collared Longspur at Matador under William J. Maher. After his third degree, a B.Ed., he taught at Humboldt for two years before Stan Rowe and Robert Coupland enticed him back to the Plant Ecology department, now Plant Sciences, at the University of Saskatchewan. Bohdan accompanied Stan Rowe on ecological surveys of the Athabasca sand dunes; he has been employed by the department ever since. One of his 2005 projects is a study of the birds on the University's Kernen Prairie property. Rosemary Nemeth graduated from the wildlife resources course at Kelsey Institute and became Saskatchewan's first female conservation officer. She trained fire control officers and was a driving force in establishing the conservation officers' museum north of Prince Albert prior to being killed in a car accident in 1995.⁷ Brian Irving, whose first *Blue Jay* subscription was a gift from his aunt, Sylvia Harrison (later Sylvia van Brien), farms southwest of Kelvington. Brian has continued his active membership in the Saskatchewan Natural History Society ever since, has twice served a three-year term (1991-1993 and 2000-2002)

as a member-at-large, and is steward of the nearby Van Brien Land Nature Sanctuary.

From the first, young people participated in Christmas Bird Counts (CBC). The first Yorkton CBC, December 29, 1941, was undertaken by three students, Stuart Houston, Vernon Barnes, and Neil Black, and one adult, C. J. Houston.² In 1942, five of the nine Yorkton CBC participants were students, the three mentioned above plus Michael Priestly and Jim Rogerson. That year, Rogerson also did a solo CBC at Saltcoats, as did Frank Roy at age 14 at Tullis. High school students Mary Black and Ray Adam joined the Yorkton count in 1943 and 1944, respectively.² During these years, after freeze-up but before the first major snowfall, juniors on ice skates counted all the muskrat houses along more than 20 miles of shoreline on Upper and Lower Rousay Lakes west of Yorkton. In 1945, Gus Yaki, a grade 8 student at Sandwith, began annual CBCs, and that year David Wright, a grade 9 student, joined his mentor, Maurice G. Street, for the Nipawin CBC. Lorne Scott, while in high school, took Indian Head's first CBCs alone in 1965 and 1966.²

During the late 1960s and early 1970s, bird nest boxes proliferated on fence lines across the prairie provinces, contributing to the eastward spread of the Mountain Bluebird and the westward spread of the Eastern Bluebird. Tree Swallow pairs on the Brandon Juniors bird box trail reached 2,505 by 1974, while Eastern Bluebird pairs increased from 34 in 1963 to 150 in 1973, and Mountain Bluebird pairs from 36 in 1963 to 825 in 1973.²

Saskatoon's Junior Natural History Society was formed in 1968 when Rod

and Michael Bantjes arrived from Yorkton at the same time as Ray Bisha from Brandon. All three boys had benefitted from the junior societies in those cities, and demanded that Saskatoon instigate a similar group—and build bluebird houses as Jack Lane had pioneered at Brandon. Lorne Scott, who at age fifteen in 1963 had begun building bird houses on his farm south of Indian Head, was mentor to the Saskatoon group, who joined their trail with his near Raymore on April 5, 1970, to form “the longest bluebird trail in the world” (*Blue Jay* 28:176). Saskatoon club reports on the increasing success along their bird box trail appeared in the *Blue Jay* in 1969, 1970, 1971 and 1974.

An appreciable number of juniors throughout Saskatchewan took part in activities in addition to the CBC and building bird boxes. Juniors constituted about one-third of the contributors to the Cooperative Spring Migration Study. Saskatchewan results of this continent-wide program were published in *Blue Jay*, 1959 through 1969, excepting 1964.² Students submitting individual reports were Spencer Sealy, Battleford; Paul Fowler, Carrot River; Rick Sanderson, Deschambault Lake; George Chopping, Dubuc; Harry Harder, Dundurn; Ross Lein, Estevan; Steve and Anton Waycheshen, High Hill and Kelvington; Jacob Jmaeff, Kamsack; Brian Irving and Dianne Sloan, Kelvington; Glen Fox, Kindersley; P. Woycichowsky, Kinistino; Donald Buckle, Lady Lake; Gary Anweiler, Melville; David Riome, Nipawin; Keith Harper, Pleasantdale; Don Karasiuk, Prince Albert; Wayne Harris, Raymore; Greg Bobbitt, Regina; Bill Horseman, Saltcoats; Stan Zazelenchuk, Stornoway; Darwin Mazur, Derwent Mazur, and Bohdan Pylypec, Yellow Creek.

The annual meeting of the American Ornithologists' Union (AOU) in Regina in 1959, the first such meeting in western Canada, was also a great stimulus for young people. Sponsoring organizations were the Saskatchewan Museum of Natural History, the Regina Natural History Society, the Saskatchewan Natural History Society, and Regina College of the University of Saskatchewan. The meeting set records for registration by non-AOU members, especially young people. Saskatchewan juniors who attended the AOU scientific sessions were Gary Anweiler of Melville, Glen Fox and Richard Fyfe of Kindersley, Bill Horseman of Saltcoats, Lawrence Ostoforoff of Kamsack, Spencer Sealy of Battleford and Frank Switzer of Rokeby.³ Influenced by their personal contacts at the meeting with leading experts such as Ernst Mayr, Fran Hamerstrom and Roger Tory Peterson, ornithology became either a professional career or a major life passion for each.

One spinoff of the AOU meeting preparations was the initiation of the Prairie Nest Records Scheme in 1958. This program, designed to “collect information on nesting birds in the three Prairie Provinces,”⁴ had substantial contributions from juniors: Spencer Sealy in Battleford and Glen Fox in Kindersley, but also Bill Anaka of Spirit Lake, Stanley Zazelenchuk of Stornoway, Jacob Jmaeff of Kamsack, Walter Chudzik of Canora, Ross Derkatch of Stornoway, Victor Schmidt of Melville, Larry Morgotch of Hyas, Maurice Maurer of Duff, and Ivan Yaholnitsky of Mikado.⁸ Another spinoff was that Glen Fox, age 16, studied nests of the Clay-colored Sparrow on the edge of Kindersley, the results of which were published in the *Auk*.⁶

Some of the above juniors made important contributions to the *Blue Jay*. Beginning in 1943, Frank Roy contributed nature notes from Tullis; his best sighting was the first nesting record of a Belted Kingfisher in the Elbow region of Saskatchewan. Glen Fox's nesting study of the Horned Lark⁵ won the first Cliff Shaw memorial award at the annual meeting of the Saskatchewan Natural History Society in 1959. Spencer Sealy began his lifelong contributions in 1960, together with Gary Anweiler in 1960 and Ross Lein in 1961.

It is difficult to be certain what effect youthful experiences have on people's activities later in life, except that the participants themselves continue to use terms such as "life-changing," "career-shaping," and "unique mentoring." Prior to his untimely death in 2002, Wayne Harris, compiler of CBC and Christmas Mammal Counts for many years and a *Blue Jay* editor, became an expert on every aspect of natural history and Regional Ecologist with the Department of the Environment. Lorne Scott is the only person to have been president of both the Saskatchewan Natural History Society and the Saskatchewan Wildlife Federation; he also served as Saskatchewan's Minister of the Environment, 1995-1999. Frank Switzer, retired from SaskPower, now is interviewed regularly on CBC radio about birds of interest. Richard Fyfe was made a member of the Order of Canada in 2000, in recognition of his lifetime of raptor research with the Canadian Wildlife Service. Glen Fox continues his research in wildlife toxicology with the Canadian Wildlife Service in an emeritus position as of 2005. Gary Anweiler has retired from work as an environmental consultant and is a leading lepidopterist in

Edmonton. Gus Yaki has recently retired from leading world-wide environmental tours. Spencer Sealy has had a prodigious output of scientific papers in ornithology, concentrating on seabirds and on cowbird parasitism, throughout his career with the Department of Zoology, University of Manitoba. Three Saskatchewan-raised Fellows of the AOU were prominent at the AOU annual meeting in Quebec City in 2004: Stuart Houston was presented with the Marion Jenkinson Award for 21 years as chair of the Memorials Committee, Ross Lein was serving his second term as Secretary of the AOU, and Spencer Sealy was named the new editor of *The Auk*. In 2005, Frank Roy, educator, conservationist and author of *Birds of the Elbow*, received an LL.D. from the University of Saskatchewan and was inducted into the Saskatchewan Order of Merit.

As one who has kept in touch with those mentioned above, it is my firm conviction that *Blue Jay* and provincial nature groups exerted a positive, formative effect on a number of its junior contributors, during those simpler, less complicated decades, the 1950s and 1960s.

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SUPERNORMAL FORSTER'S TERN CLUTCH AT DELTA MARSH, MANITOBA

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Figure 1. Six-egg Forster's Tern clutch in nest on 20 June 2005 at 22 Bay, Delta Marsh, Manitoba.
Justin Rasmussen

A clutch of eggs that exceeds the average number of eggs by at least 50% has been described as a 'supernormal clutch'.³ Supernormal

clutches have been reported in several orders of birds: Procellariiformes,^{7,14,22} Pelecaniformes,¹⁹ Charadriiformes,^{4,5,10,17,18} and