
NOTES AND LETTERS

WILLOW PTARMIGAN IN THE PRINCE ALBERT AREA

On the afternoon of February 15, 2007, as I was returning along the driveway to our home about 10 km northeast of Prince Albert (53° 17.2' N, 105° 39.5' W), I noticed what appeared to be grouse tracks leading from the road into a row of Laurel Leaf Willows (*Salix pentandra*) that border the driveway. I paused to see if I could spot what I suspected to be a Ruffed Grouse or, possibly a Sharp-tailed Grouse. The tracks led to a white lump in the snow and I soon realized that I was looking at a ptarmigan. I grabbed the camera and attempted to approach close enough for a clear shot, but the bird kept moving to the far side of the willow clump while I circled the bush in my street shoes through waist deep snow banks. I was grateful, however, that he did not fly and my patience was eventually rewarded with several reasonably clear images. I quickly drove home and changed into more suitable footwear. When I returned, the ptarmigan had walked 30 m to a clump of native willows and appeared to be feeding on the buds. This time I was able to acquire several top quality images.

This bird was pure white with the exception of the dark beak and eyes and black shafts of the primaries. When he became agitated, the crescent-shaped red comb above his eye became evident and the feathers on his head rose into a distinct crest (see photo on the inside back cover). At no time did the bird betray any black in the tail. I felt it necessary to flush the bird in order to observe tail coloration and thus be more certain of its identification. The ptarmigan was

reluctant to fly and its 'furry' feet could propel it much more quickly over the waist-deep snow than my feet could. Eventually, though, I did manage to flush him for a 20 m flight and the black feathers in his tail were almost startlingly evident. This was the only time the bird was sighted; later attempts to locate it were unsuccessful.

Identification of this bird as a Willow Ptarmigan is based on several factors. The black on the tail separates it from the White-tailed Ptarmigan which has a completely white tail. The male Rock Ptarmigan has a black mark between the eye and the bill (lores), but the females of both species are difficult to distinguish. The willow habitat in which this bird was found supports the identification of this bird as a Willow Ptarmigan, as does the relatively heavy bill. Peterson's 1990 *Field Guide to Western Birds* lists willow scrub as habitat of the Willow Ptarmigan, while the Rock Ptarmigan is found on arctic tundra and above timberline in mountains.²

The Willow Ptarmigan normally migrates southward into northern Saskatchewan during the winter months to about latitude 57°.³ Its occasional winter incursions to the Parkland and farmlands as far south as the Qu'Appelle Valley, Saskatchewan, prior to about 1950, is well documented.³ Historic records of Willow Ptarmigan from Prince Albert date from the winters of 1897, 1898, 1914 and 1927-28.¹ Ptarmigan sightings in central Saskatchewan have been rare during recent decades.

Certainly, its presence here in recent decades is unusual.

Acknowledgements

I thank C. S. Houston for checking this article and providing helpful suggestions in its preparation.

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2. PETERSON, R. T. 1990. A Field Guide to Western Birds. Houghton Mifflin, Boston.

3. SALT, R. W. And J. R. SALT. 1976. The Birds of Alberta. Hurtig Publishers, Edmonton.

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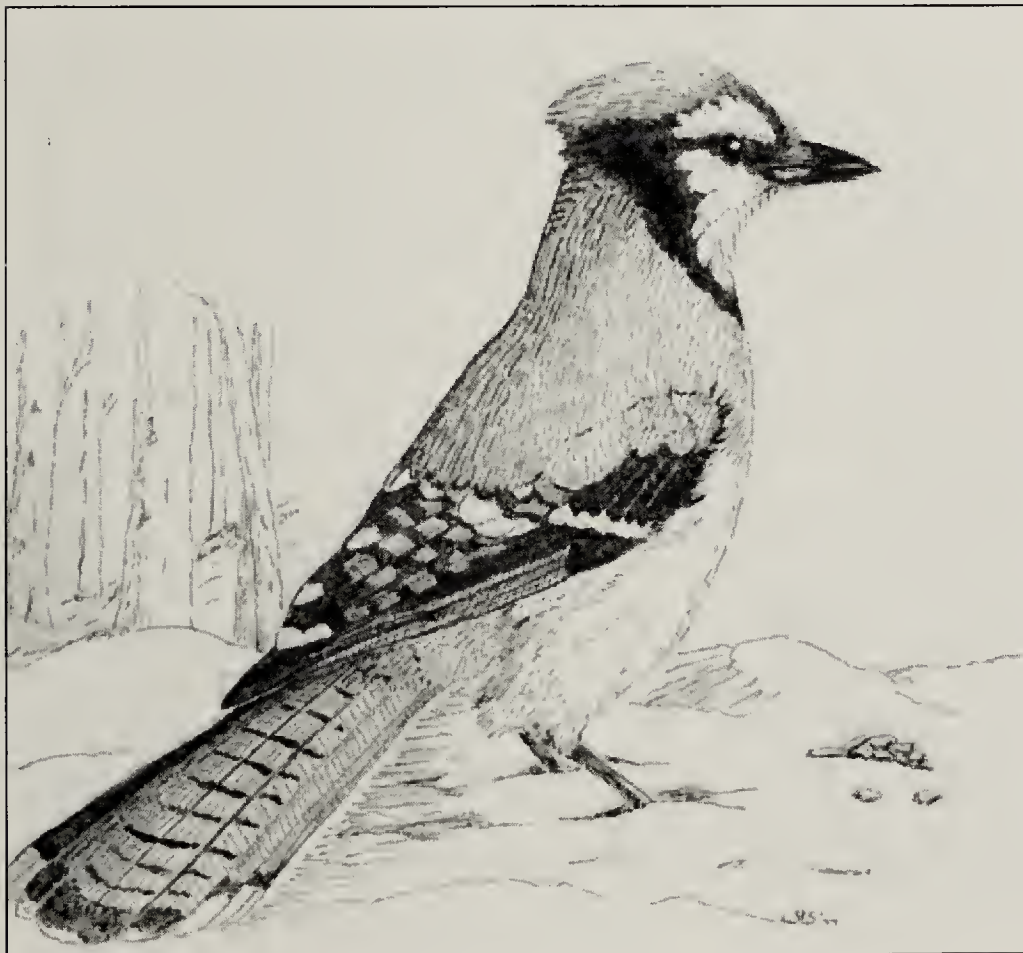
RAPID RECOVERY

In early December, Don and I noticed that one of the eight Blue Jays regularly visiting our feeders had no tail. We noted that, while the stately elegance of the Blue Jay is certainly diminished without that beautifully marked blue tail, the flight of "Mr. No Tail" did not seem to be impaired by his loss, that he was feeding well, and that he was not harassed for his difference by the other Blue Jays.

Knowing nothing of the biology of feathers and their growth, we wondered how long it would be before a new tail

would grow. Would he have to wait until next moult? Till spring? We waited and watched with great interest.

We did not wait long! Within ten days, we were sure that we could see new growth beneath his folded wings as he fed. Another week passed and we re-named him "Mr. Short Tail." In three weeks the new tail was fully grown! Our bird was still identifiable, however, for he carried his fine new feathers fanned into a V-shape, beautifully exposing the white border framing his brilliant blue tail.



Blue Jay

W. Ray Salt, 1978

By mid-January, we could no longer identify our bird. All of our eight Blue Jays had beautiful long, blue tails, straight when they perched, fanned when they flew. And we have answers to some questions we had previously never even thought to ask!

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SNOWY OWL AND PRAIRIE FALCON WINTER ENCOUNTERS

On 21 January 2007, I observed a Snowy Owl sitting on a utility pole near a wooden granary that houses a small flock of pigeons, 3 kilometres East of Tyner, SK. Based on the uninterrupted barring on the back of the head and lightly barred undertail coverts, I guessed that the owl was a juvenile. In the field north of the owl, I started to set up a mist net to try to catch the owl for banding. However, as I completed the set-up, I saw the owl leave the pole and fly out into the field about 200 m away, landing in a row of kochia (*Kochia scoparia*) partly covered with snow.

Within a few seconds a Prairie Falcon appeared and dove at the owl. The falcon stooped on the owl extending its talons as it passed over the owl. The owl crouched and then, timing the falcon's approach, kicked both feet upwards to present its talons to the falcon. The owl could only get its talons level with its eyes. The falcon passed over the owl missing it by several centimetres. The owl dropped onto its wings and tail, and then struggled to its feet, pushing on the ground with its wings to right itself. As the falcon passed by, I observed that it was missing at least one inner primary flight feather on the right wing. The falcon swooped up, turned 180 degrees, and dove at the owl again. The owl turned to face the falcon and again tried to kick its feet over its head to meet the falcon as it passed from the opposite direction. As I watched, the falcon made 12 passes at the owl before landing on a utility pole.

Perhaps because of its preoccupation with the owl, I was able to get close to the falcon. I could see

by the plumage and the yellow cere and feet, that it was an adult. It also was banded. I had banded an adult female Prairie Falcon at this same spot on 23 December, 2006 and had watched a Prairie Falcon catch a pigeon here on January 13, which suggests the possibility that I was watching the same territorial bird.

After approximately five minutes, the falcon resumed diving at the owl, which responded to each dive with the same double leg kick. The falcon made eight more passes before returning to a utility pole.

The owl appeared to occasionally look at the caged pigeon placed on the ground behind the mist net, so I moved my vehicle closer to the Prairie Falcon to try to move the falcon away. The falcon let me get within about 30 metres, the closest I have ever been able to approach a Prairie Falcon, but then it flew to the next pole farther away and again watched the owl. I moved closer until the falcon flushed to one pole further away. We did this several times, but then when the falcon was about two hundred metres west of the owl, it flew in a semicircle back to the owl and resumed diving at it. When I packed up my net and collected the pigeon, the falcon was still making passes at the owl.

On 3 February, 2007, I caught and banded an adult male Snowy Owl near the same granary. When I let the owl go, it flew back to the pole it had been sitting on before I had caught it. After I packed up my gear and passed by the owl, I noticed that a Prairie Falcon was sitting on the adjacent pole, so I stopped at the next approach to watch.

Both birds sat quietly for a few minutes, but then the falcon flew from its pole and at the owl. This owl behaved differently from the juvenile owl. As the falcon approached the owl, the owl opened its wings slightly, but otherwise didn't move. The falcon pulled up before hitting the owl and continued on, landing on the pole on the opposite side of the owl, and then sat quietly. When the falcon flew I could see a gap in the flight feathers of the right wing, suggesting that this was the same individual as in the first incident.

After about five minutes the falcon made another pass at the owl. Again, the owl hunched its shoulders and opened its wings slightly, but otherwise didn't move. When I left ten minutes later the two birds were still sitting on adjacent poles. Several hours later, after sunset, I returned by the same spot and could see that the owl was still there but the falcon was gone.

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Snowy Owl, March 6, 2007, 7 miles northwest of Kyle

Dan Zazelenchuk

TURTLES IN WASCANA LAKE: SUCCESSFUL CONSERVATION DURING THE “BIG DIG”

When I sent in the picture of a Painted Turtle on Wascana Lake in Regina, SK (*Blue Jay* December 2006), I should have provided some detail of how their habitat, especially their overwintering site, was preserved when the lake was deepened during the winter of 2003/2004. In that large operation, dubbed the “Big Dig,” both the west basin and the east basin (locally known as ‘The Marsh’) were drained. The west basin was deepened and a temporary road was built through the east basin to remove the excavated material from the site.

In previous years, many Painted Turtles overwintered in the mud under the water of a dugout on Goose Island. This dugout is 5-6 m deep. According to the original plans, the dugout was slated to be filled in and Goose Island to be enlarged to accommodate some of the material excavated from the west basin. Upon the urging of Lorne Scott, a former naturalist with the Wascana Authority, and others, the dugout was not filled in, its water was not drained and the overwintering turtles could survive the “Big Dig” and subsequent winters. Instead, Pelican Island was created with some of the excavated material. The haul road, originally

planned to run the length of The Marsh, was shortened to preserve the habitat south of the Wascana Mountain where many turtles were seen during the previous summers.

These conservation efforts were successful. Gary Seib reported that at the Wascana Festival in the summer of 2006, 6-8 turtles basking in the sun could be pointed out to groups of students. Bob Ewart, Park Naturalist with the Wascana Authority, told me that in the summer of 2006, 23 turtles were seen on one day south of Wascana Mountain. The turtles even recolonized the west basin, which is where I saw eight painted turtles in 2006 as reported in the December issue. It should be mentioned also that a shallow strip, at least 10 m wide, was created around the shores of the west basin to stabilize the shoreline and to create habitat for plants and aquatic wildlife such as turtles.

I thank Bob Ewart, Lorne Scott and Gary Seib for supplying the above information.

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“Among the different members of the fungus tribe, certain kinds of spores are shot out from catapults, others are propelled through the air by a jet propulsion mechanism, others are carried about by insects which act as the unwitting agents of dispersal, and still others are splashed by rain out of special minute cups that harness the force of falling raindrops.”

Harold J. Brodie, *Fungi, Delight of Curiosity*, p. 13.