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# NOTES AND LETTERS

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## NORTHERN HARRIER - BALD EAGLE INTERACTION

On Tuesday afternoon, October 19, 1999, I left work earlier than usual and drove to Oak Hammock Marsh, north of Winnipeg. A Cattle Egret had been spotted the day before and I hoped to see the bird as they are not common here. I also wanted to see what might be flying around during this time of heavy migration.

Taking the east road off Hwy 7 into the northern part of the marsh, I noticed an unusual number of Bald Eagles—17 in total—cruising the area. Never tiring of looking at these magnificent birds, I would get one into view in my binoculars and observe it as it flew about, effortlessly patrolling the sky and fields below. After following one immature eagle for a short time, I saw another one in mid-air a short distance away with a grey mass struggling to free itself from the eagle's grip. Through the binoculars, I saw the bird had the unmistakable long, grey tail and prominent white rump of a male Northern Harrier. Whether the eagle had found an injured bird on the ground or had picked one from the sky, I have no way of knowing.

The eagle struggled to gain altitude with its uncooperative passenger, but it kept losing altitude until it was about 40 or 50 feet off the ground. Meanwhile, a female harrier, possibly a mate, repeatedly dove at the eagle, clearly trying to harass it into freeing its prey.

The harrier's efforts paid off and the eagle dropped the captive from about 30 feet above the ground in a stubble field. The harrier bounced a few times and then righted itself. The eagle made several attempts to recapture its prey, but never came close because of the constant bombardment from the female harrier, and it flew off. The female then made several passes over the injured male and then she too flew off leaving him to his fate.

My first reaction was to go out into the field to see the extent of the bird's injuries. However, the area was surrounded by water and I didn't have rubber boots. Through my scope, I could clearly see the head of the bird above the stubble and I watched painfully as it struggled to regain its balance. Unable to fly, it could only sit in the field and wait as darkness overtook him and nature took its course.

Previous reports in *Blue Jay* of eagle interactions with waterfowl, including predation on geese on the wing, may be of interest to readers.<sup>1,2</sup>

1. NERO, R.W. 1987. Additional records of Bald Eagle predation of waterfowl. *Blue Jay* 45: 28 - 29.

2. WALLEY, W.J. 1998. Snow Goose successfully counterattacks Bald Eagle. *Blue Jay* 56:193-194.

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## BIRD SIGHTINGS NEAR MOSSBANK, SK

While Linda Van Damme was in Mossbank from Creston, B.C. this fall in September and October to see the fall migration, she saw a Townsend's

Solitaire. Around the same time, on October 4, 2007, I also saw a Townsend's Solitaire, but it was miles away from Mossbank, sitting on a fence

just off the dirt road on the east side of what was once Bishopric near the southeast corner of Old Wives Lake. I always carry my field glasses in my car so had a good look at the bird: a slim grey bird with the distinctive white eye ring.

About 7 miles north, the dirt road comes to an end at a road that goes east to Crestwynd about three miles away, and west to Old Wive's lake about the same distance. At that corner there is a beautiful prairie slough just on the west side of the Missouri Coteau. It is deep enough to have diving ducks such as Canvasbacks, Redheads, Scaup, and some Buffleheads. There are some tall poplar trees at the south end of the slough next to the road with no leaves on them at this time of the year. At the very top of one of these trees sat a dark-colored bird. I could see through my field glasses it was a Bluebird of some kind. I watched it for several minutes, then it flew over to the fence beside the road only 50 or 60 feet away, so I got a very good look at it. I would say it was a Western Bluebird; it was more chunky than a Mountain Bluebird

and was mostly blue-gray all over with a hint of rusty brown along the sides and on the back. It may have been a female or young male. I can say I have never seen a bird like it around here before. I have never seen a Townsend's Solitaire before either, and I saw them both on the same road just minutes apart on the same day.

Another bird that was not seen here until the last few years is the Blue Jay. Three were in my yard this fall at my bird bath, coming for a drink of water and a bath. This was a great year for Snow Geese again—the mid-October skies were filled with them. It seems like the Canadas and White Fronts move out to make room for them.

On February 10, Brent Anderson, who has a house on the north side of town, saw a Boreal Owl. This is another bird I have never seen. He said the four Blue Jays that are now here in town certainly saw it and made quite a fuss.

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*Another Boreal Owl seen in southern Saskatchewan this winter, photographed in Herbert, SK on 21 February.*

*Brad Cornelson*

# AN ALBERTA BANDED TREE SWALLOW RECOVERED IN EAST TEXAS

Another Tree Swallow banded in Alberta has been recovered at a latitude similar to four previous Tree Swallows, two of which had been banded in Alberta and two in Saskatchewan.<sup>4</sup> The most recent recovery was in 2003 near Anahuac on Trinity Bay in East Texas (29°50'N, 94°40'W); the previous ones were at latitudes 29°40' and 30°10' in western Louisiana.<sup>4</sup>

The 2003 Tree Swallow, band number 1771-38886, was banded as an adult male in an empty nest 11 miles west and 3 miles south of Airdrie, Alberta. It was the first Tree Swallow caught that year, on May 12, by Isabelle Orr, a subpermittee of mine. It was found dead by Michael Wirfs of Lumberton, Texas on November 15, 2003. Michael was in the army, but I contacted his father who confirmed where the swallow had been found. He suspected that the bird had been shot.

November is a good month to find Tree Swallows there. In an article in the *Louisiana Ornithological Society News* of August 1993, Ronald J. Stein, a local resident of Reserve, Louisiana, tells the story of Tree Swallows congregating in large numbers in sugar cane fields near Edgard, Louisiana, (across the Mississippi River from Reserve, LA) in late October.<sup>2</sup> Most leave by mid-December after the sugar cane is cut, presumably for points farther south.

Only a few stay to be recorded on the Christmas Bird Count. They return to the area in March, which is when two previously recovered Tree Swallows were found dead near Lake Charles, LA.

On a related topic, Hosner and Winkler recently reviewed 4162 band encounters, 3345 of which were either found dead or caught alive during a subsequent breeding season between May 1 and July 20.<sup>1</sup> The great majority were within 100 km of the banding site, but 13 had dispersed in a subsequent year to a distance of between 500 and 1000 km, and 7 to distances over 1000 km. Of these seven, four had been banded in the 1980s in Alberta. The details of these recoveries have already been published.<sup>3</sup>

1. HOSNER, P.A. and D.W. WINKLER. 2007. Dispersal distances of Tree Swallows estimated from continent-wide and limited-area data. *Journal of Field Ornithology* 78:290-297.

2. STEIN, R.J. 1993. Tree Swallow Staging Area. *Louisiana Ornithological Society News* 154:1-3.

3. STILES, D.J. and M.I. HOUSTON. 1994. Distant Travels of Tree Swallows of the Prairie Provinces, 1968-1992. *Blue Jay* 52:206-212.

4. STILES, D.J. and M.I. HOUSTON. 2003. More United States Tree Swallow Recoveries. *Blue Jay* 61:201-203.

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## PINK LADY'S - SLIPPER POPULATION AT REED LAKE, MB

Reed Lake is 144 km north of The Pas. The area consists of pristine White Spruce (*Picea glauca*) forest. The great trees are widely spaced, producing a park-like effect. The ground is ankle-deep in lichen. The colony of Pink

Lady's-slipper (*Cypripedium acaule*) at Reed Lake is in heavy shade under the White Spruce trees. It has not been disturbed or burned in over 100 years.

Catherine Peterson has observed

this orchid in her 'back yard' at Reed Lake for many years. In 1997, she noted that new green shoots were visible above ground by 2 June, and that the green pods were visible by 4 July. She also noted that in 1997, 90 plants bloomed, 56 had flowers and 21 had seed pods. In 1996, she noted 55 flowers and in 1995, 140 plants and 60 seed pods.

I have noted that the stems with seed pods elongate as the pods mature in

this species as well as in some 60 clumps of Showy Lady's-slipper (*Cypripedium reginae*) under observation here at The Pas, and Venus-slipper (*Calypso bulbosa*) which blooms at The Pas around 20 May. In most years there is good seed set in Showy Lady's-slipper; seed set occurs after the plants turn yellow in September.

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## PREY IMPALED BY LOGGERHEAD SHRIKES

Loggerhead Shrikes prefer open areas for feeding with shrubs or trees nearby for nesting, particularly native thorny shrubs such as hawthorn (*Crataegus* sp.) and Thorny Buffaloberry (*Shepherdia argentea*). Shrikes can be found in roadside shelterbelts, active and abandoned farmsteads, cemeteries, golf courses, and shrub patches in pastures and riparian areas.

Up to 68% of the Loggerhead Shrike's diet in the summer consists of insects such as grasshoppers and beetles.<sup>1</sup> Shrikes also eat mice and voles, frogs, snakes and small birds (usually sparrows and warblers).<sup>2</sup>

Nature Saskatchewan, through the voluntary stewardship program, Shrubs For Shrikes, works with landowners to help the Prairie Loggerhead Shrike, (*Lanius ludovicianus excubitorides*). In the last four years, while working for the program, I have collected photographs of shrike prey items impaled on barbs or twigs. A selection of these photographs is shown in Figures 1-6, p. 54 and p. 55. Not shown here are photographs of a vole, a headless baby bird wedged in the "Y" of a branch (taken at the Central Butte cemetery), a bumblebee and grasshopper (both taken at Grasslands National Park), and

a Gray Partridge hatchling in a tree (taken at the Craik cemetery). Other prey items include approximately 15 baby garter snakes impaled along the south barbed-wire fence at the Bethune cemetery where a shrike pair was nesting in 2005. In 2006, 8-10 impaled Wood Frogs, a species previously documented as prey by Brian Johns, were seen at a farm near Kenaston, SK.<sup>3</sup>

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2. GRAHAM, G.G.. 1990. Loggerhead Shrike takes House Sparrow. *Blue Jay* 48 (1): 41-42.

3. JOHNS, B. and D. JOHNS. 2001. Loggerhead Shrike larder and prey. *Blue Jay* 59 (3): 125-129.

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*Fig. 1. beetle at the Craik golf course.*

*A. Eade*



*Fig. 2. Wood Frog near Kenaston, SK.*  
*M. Yaskowich*



*Fig. 3. baby garter snakes at the Bethune cemetery.*  
*A. Kolylak*



*Fig. 4. headless mouse near  
Glentworth, SK.*

*G. Peterson*



*Fig. 5. cricket at the Saskatchewan  
Burrowing Owl Interpretive Centre in  
Moose Jaw, SK.*

*C. Sanders*



*Fig. 6. House Sparrow head at the Kindersley cemetery.*

*A. Kolylak*

## TWO COMMON RAVEN NESTS NEAR REGINA

As Common Ravens continue to repopulate their former breeding range in the prairies,<sup>2, 3</sup> a number of sightings over the last six years have suggested that the birds have re-established near Regina (Table 1). These sightings, including two family groups seen in 2002 and 2005, made during the breeding season (March to July),<sup>1</sup> provide strong evidence that the birds were breeding in the area. No nests were located, however.

In April 2007, while searching for Great Horned Owl nests, we located two active Common Raven nests. The first nest was found with an adult on it, on 31 March, 10 m above ground in an Aspen Poplar (*Populus tremuloides*) at White Butte (50°27' N, 104°23'), a nature preserve several kilometres east of Pilot Butte. We returned to the nest on 25 May and banded four young only a few days from fledgling. The second nest was located on 6 April, 13 m above ground in an Aspen Poplar 12 km southwest of Lumsden at the top of the Qu'Appelle Valley (50°35'N, 105°02'W). Both adults were present at this nest. We banded the two young on 24

May. The cup of this nest was lined with fine hair and grass. Ravens commonly line their nests with hair.<sup>4</sup>

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**Table 1. Sightings of Common Ravens near Regina during the breeding season**

Date (dd/mm/yy)	Location and Activity	Observer <sup>1</sup>
<b>Qu'Appelle Valley</b>		
19/03//01	2 adults (possibly carrying nesting material) seen between Craven & Hwy #6	RK
02/07/02	A family group seen SW of Lumsden	RL
03/07/05	2 adults & 2 juveniles (eliciting begging calls) seen SW of Lumsden	RL
09/04/06	3 adults (in aerial display) seen between Craven and Hwy #6	JC, JN, RL
16/07/06	1 adult seen W of Lumsden	JC, JN
<b>White Butte</b>		
10/06/03	3 juveniles seen at White Butte	JN
28/03/04	1 adult seen at White Butte	JN

<sup>1</sup>RK= Robert Kreba, RL= Robert Luterbach, JN= Jim Nordquist, JC= Jared Clarke