
HISTORY

SASKATCHEWAN'S FIRST GAME GUARDIAN: NEIL GILMOUR, 1859 - 1940

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Portrait of Neil Gilmour

Neil Gilmour was a Saskatchewan pioneer in natural history and conservation, a dedicated educator, and for 20 years the right-hand man for Saskatchewan's Chief Game Guardian, Fred Bradshaw. In 1922 Gilmour found what was, for 30 years, believed to be the last Whooping Crane nest in Saskatchewan; this earned him unusual prominence in Bent's *Life Histories*.^{1,18} Despite his contributions, little information about Gilmour has been published; this article is intended to fill that gap.

Neil Gilmour was born at Brucefield, Ontario, on 6 February 1859, into a family of 13. In 1883, the Gilmours moved west to homestead in Saskatchewan south of

Buffalo Pound Lake, 3.5 km south of the present-day Buffalo Pound Provincial Park. Neil's homestead quarter was SW 6-19-25w2; Blofield School was later built on his property. For 6 weeks during the Riel Rebellion in 1885, Neil Gilmour freighted military supplies from Swift Current north to Saskatchewan Landing, from where they were sent downstream to General Middleton at Batoche.

Neil left the farming to his father and brothers and trained as a teacher at the Toronto Normal School. For 3 years he taught school at Banff, Alberta, where he "batched" with Reverend Charles W. Gordon, who later wrote under the pen name Ralph Connor and became "the most successful Canadian novelist in the early 20th century"⁸ and "the most famous Canadian of his generation."²¹ Gilmour served as an Indian agent, first at Norway House, Manitoba, and then on the reserves in the Qu'Appelle Valley north of Sintaluta.⁹

In 1907, Gilmour was appointed by the Department of Agriculture as the first full-time Game Guardian in Saskatchewan (two other men held brief appointments).⁶ Gilmour resided in Moose Jaw and served the southwest quarter of the province,⁶ 5 years before his close friend, Fred Bradshaw, in the same department, was promoted from clerk in the Weeds and Game Branch,² to Chief Game Guardian.³ Bradshaw and Gilmour together would have profound influences on conservation in Saskatchewan.

Gilmour arranged trips to Old Wives Lake for Fred Bradshaw and H.H. Mitchell, taxidermist at the Provincial Museum (now the Royal Saskatchewan Museum). In 1913, they used a motorboat from the southeast corner of the lake, but all subsequent visits left from the farm of Thomas McCrae, a rancher at the northeast corner of the lake since 1901,²³ using McCrae's boat. McCrae was keenly interested in natural history. On 8 July 1919, they visited the Isle of Bays, 5 km offshore, described by Bradshaw as "one of the most wonderful island bird sanctuaries on the North American continent";⁴ that year the island had produced about 1,500 young American White Pelicans. They took Byron Harmon of Banff as their cinematographer.⁴ In July 1920, accompanied by Thomas's 19-year-old son, Hugh McRae, Gilmour took an American, "Mr. Fleckinger [=Flickinger], the Ford camera man" to photograph the pelicans and other colonial birds for a silent documentary movie called "Bird City."²² The pelican numbers had declined drastically, attributed by Gilmour to the harmful effects of Flickinger's week-long residence on the island the previous year.

Gilmour subsequently visited the McCrae farm most summers, as did Fred Bradshaw, who once stayed for 3 weeks. Between visits, Hugh McRae collected important specimens such as the Dickcissel (in a very dry year), Cinnamon Teal, and Red Knot, which Gilmour passed on to Bradshaw at the Provincial Museum in Regina. After Hugh collected two Hudsonian Godwits on 3 May 1931, Bradshaw arranged for Hugh to obtain a collector's permit from Ottawa to make it legal for him to collect unusual species (H. McCrae, interview, 11 September 1967).

Bradshaw's annual report of 1921 reprinted in full the nine-and-a-half page

talk on the Economic Value of Birds given by Gilmour to the Public School Teachers' Convention at Shaunavon, 20 September 1920. After discussing the aesthetic value of birds, Gilmour used the published ornithological and entomological evidence to calculate the number of birds in the 100,000 square miles or 64 million acres of agricultural Saskatchewan – a figure of 32 million birds. He also estimated that this population daily consumed 12 billion insects.¹²

Gilmour's diligent and successful search for a Whooping Crane nest in 1922 became known across the continent. In 1926, in the sixth volume of his *Life Histories of North American Birds*, A.C. Bent considered Gilmour's one of the most important nest finds in North America. He devoted an extraordinary two pages of small print to Gilmour's account of how he watched an adult pair of Whooping Cranes from two different points on Shallow Lake, eight miles WNW of Kerrobert. This water body, 5 km long and from ~1.5 to 3 km in width, comprised upwards of 1200 ha but was nowhere deeper than 1 m. After 2 hours "playing hide and seek," each time ducking down out of site for 20 minutes to allow the crane to re-settle on its presumed nest, Gilmour moved along the shore until he had lined up the bird with a distant building. When the bottom of the marsh became so boggy he could not proceed, Gilmour walked around the south and west sides of the marsh until he could see the crane from a different angle. After a long slog in his hip waders, he came to an open sheet of water 10 m in diameter with a nest on the mound a foot above water.¹

The best description of the nest itself was not in Bent but in Gilmour's annual report: "The nest resembled a half submerged cock of hay, flat on top and completely surrounded by water.

Carelessly on the top of this mass of grass, was deposited the two large brownish buff coloured eggs, about four inches in length."¹⁴ Bent mentioned the second nest with 3 eggs that Bradshaw had found in the same district on 28 May that year; the third egg was added and collected for the Provincial Museum.^{1,24} In 1924, Mitchell reported details of both of the 1922 nests, adding that "It is probably advisable for the present to withhold exact locality of these breeding grounds."²⁴ Mitchell knew about, but did not reveal, Bradshaw's third 1922 Whooping Crane nest at Kiyiu Lake south of Plenty.¹⁸

In 1955, R.D. Symons commented that the Gilmour nest in 1922 was "closely followed as to habitat and terrain in making up the museum case of the Whooping Cranes, and was a most valuable aid. Neil was another dedicated man whose work was ... a labour of love, for the mere pittance such men received could not otherwise repay them for the long hours they spent in the field and exposure to the elements in open vehicles. Gilmour spoke in hundreds of rural schools and was indefatigable in spreading the gospel of conservation."²⁶ More recent historical sleuthing by Hjertaas shows that Gilmour himself saw pairs of Whooping Cranes at Luck Lake in June 1926 and 1927 and that Steve West, Frank Roy's uncle, had proof of nesting at Luck Lake in 1929.²⁵

Apart from one year, Gilmour's annual reports were published in each of Bradshaw's Reports of the Chief Game Guardian, within the Department of Agriculture, from 1912 through 1926. In 1913, Gilmour told of the benefits that accrued from closure of the former spring duck-hunting season and proposed that the fall hunting season be advanced from September 1 to September 15, to allow more of the ducks to reach the flying stage before the season opened.¹⁰ Gilmour also noted the decline of antelope and other

big game species throughout southern Saskatchewan; he stated in 1921 that "the southern portion of our province is no longer the home of our big game animals."¹² By 1925, big game remnants existed only in Moose Mountain and Cypress Parks.¹⁶ Gilmour voiced strong support for creation of national antelope parks that were eventually legislated by the federal government in 1922 south of Maple Creek and in southern Alberta.¹⁹

In both 1920 and 1922, Gilmour found evidence of "duck sickness" (now known as botulism) with carcasses of birds scattered around the margins of Old Wives Lake.^{11,13} In 1923, he was perhaps the first to note the beginning decline in numbers, little more than two decades after their arrival, of the "Pinnated Grouse" [Greater Prairie Chicken],¹⁴ and mentioned that Gray Partridge had progressed east as far as Belle Plaine, where a nest with 20 eggs had been reported.¹⁴ In 1925, Gilmour's territory was extended and he mentioned a November 1924 raccoon pelt obtained from the White Bear Indian Reserve north of Carlyle.¹⁶ This was the second raccoon record for Saskatchewan, the first having been from the Pipestone Valley in extreme eastern Saskatchewan in 1918-19.²⁰

Gilmour was a strong proponent of conservation education. In 1922, he and Fred Bradshaw gave 65 lectures about birds and mammals to 11,224 school children on the "better farming train" that toured the province.⁵ As part of his final annual report in 1927, he commented about the resiliency of the Coyote, whose numbers remained much the same, despite continuously having a price on its head, a testimony to the "great hardihood and the remarkable cunning of the coyote."¹⁷ Gilmour retired after the 1927-28 season, but in 1929 a set of four charts, each displaying 25 different bird species in colour, were provided to him,

together with lantern slides, to show in schools.⁷

After Neil married Sarah Dunbar, the couple adopted a native girl from Norway House, Wanda, who later married a medical doctor in Winnipeg. Neil's brother Hugh's wife died in childbirth, and Hugh died about 2 weeks later; Neil and Sarah raised their three sons, the oldest of Hugh's five children, and two other branches of the family raised the two youngest, both daughters. Neil Gilmour died at Moose Jaw on 22 June 1940.²⁷

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