
NOTES AND LETTERS

A QUERY FROM THE DISTANT PAST – MAGPIES VERSUS “HUNS”

Table 1. Locations of Gray Partridge (“hun”) and Black-billed Magpie sightings

Location	No. huns	No. magpies
NE of Delisle	6, 11	8 × 1
Near Harris	11, 7	6 × 1, 1 × 2
Near S. Sask River bridge	10	1 × 4
Stewart Valley	5	0
N of Swift Current	8	1
Total	58	21

On 8 March 1962, I drove from Saskatoon to Swift Current, on a chilly winter afternoon with high overcast and a stiff NE wind sending scurries of snow over the road. Birds were few, and well-scattered, mostly Horned Larks.

En route, I also noted seven coveys of Gray Partridges (“huns”), but was more intrigued to realize that all of the Black-billed Magpies that I saw (21 in total; Table 1) were within a couple of miles of a hun covey. In between, there were stretches of 16, 36, 86, 6, and 12 miles with neither huns nor magpies.

Huns have large clutches, so they must lose a lot of each year’s reproduction over the winter, but it seems unlikely that scavenging such losses would keep magpies in their near vicinity regularly. Were my observations merely coincidental (i.e., was the sample size too small), or have others noted similar associations and, like me, neglected to report them before now?

- A. J. (Tony) Erskine, 16 Richardson St.,
Sackville, NB, E4L 4H6

LYNX PREDATION ON A YOUNG BEAVER

On 27 March 2001, I found clear evidence that an adult Canadian Lynx had killed and eaten a young American Beaver in Riding Mountain National Park, Manitoba.

Two days before, beaver tracks were observed where an individual had exited a pond via two separate burrows under

the snow and ice. The pond had no open water and it appeared that the level of water impounded by the beaver dam had declined over the course of the winter. Based on the tracks, the beaver was collecting branches from a live White Spruce (*Picea glauca*) and was dragging them back to the burrows.

When I revisited the area on 27 March, I found evidence that a lynx had killed a beaver in the area where the tracks had been seen two days before. The conditions were ideal for recording the incident as it had snowed approximately 2.5 cm during the early morning, and there was a hard crust of melted snow under the fresh snow. The lynx tracks were identified by the size and the characteristic round shape, and by the lack of claw marks, eliminating members of the dog family. The beaver tracks were distinctive as well, showing the large webbed hind foot and the distinctive marks made by the flat tail.

Judging from the fresh tracks, it appeared that the beaver had been feeding on Beaked Hazel (*Corylus cornuta*) and branches from a Trembling Aspen (*Populus tremuloides*) that had fallen the previous autumn. Most of the beaver's foraging had occurred approximately 45 m from the two burrows or access holes. Based on the size of the lynx tracks (13 cm × 13 cm), the individual was likely a large adult male.^{3,4}

Marks in the snow indicated that the beaver was killed about 2 m from its access holes. The trail left by the lynx as it dragged the beaver was easy to follow, and led to a protected spot about 250 m from the kill site. The lynx had dragged the beaver over most of the distance, but, based on the tracks, had lifted the entire carcass off the ground from time to time.

The lynx buried the carcass in the snow at the sheltered site that was surrounded by fallen trees on three sides and a standing White Spruce on the fourth. The carcass was mainly intact, although the head was separated. Close examination showed that the skull had one obvious puncture wound below the left eye. The skull was collected for age verification.

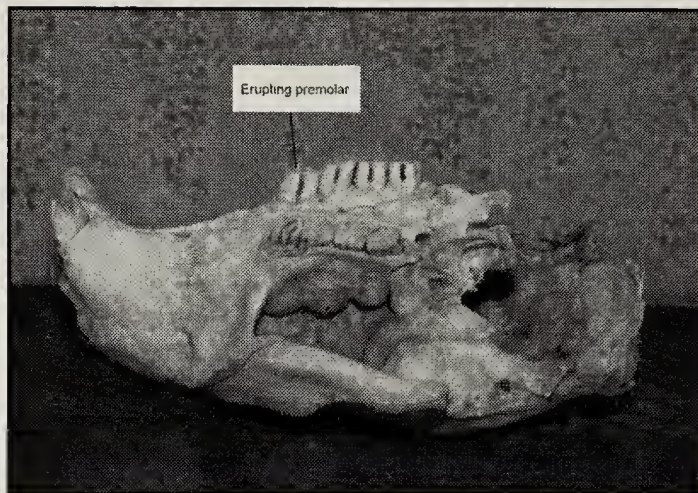


Figure 1. Dentition of a lynx-killed beaver showing eruption of premolars.

No measurements of the beaver were taken.

I revisited the carcass cache site on 28 March. The stomach contents of the beaver were all that was left. The tracks indicated that a lynx (assumed to be the same one) had followed my snowshoe trail from the day before, suggesting that it was unperturbed by my previous visit.

Prey caching by lynx is not uncommon, and food items are often buried in snow as described above. As well, caches are generally consumed within 2 days, as was the case in this example.³

Beaver typically make up a limited portion of lynx diets. While lynx prey on Snowshoe Hares throughout the year, predation on animals other than hares occurs mainly in the non-winter months.³ This makes my observation noteworthy.

The dynamics of the event are interesting. The lynx was likely an adult, but the beaver was immature, and likely relatively small. Based on the fact that the premolars were still erupting, I estimate the beaver was 9 to 11 months old (Fig. 1). The premolar eruption process is usually completed by 1 year of age.² I assumed that the beaver was born in the previous spring, as the average birth date for beavers in North America is late April

to June.¹ The evidence that the lynx was able to lift the entire beaver carcass from time to time also suggests the beaver was not a mature individual.

1. BOYLE, S. and S. OWEN. 2007. North American Beaver (*Castor canadensis*): A Technical Conservation Assessment, February 6, 2007. Prepared for USDA Forest Service, Rocky Mountain Region, Species Conservation Project. Available via the Internet at <http://www.fs.fed.us/r2/projects/scp/assessments/northamericanbeaver.pdf>.

2. COOK, A. and E. MAUNTON. 1954. A study of the criteria for estimating the age of beavers. *New York Fish and Game Journal* 1:27–46.

3. MOWAT, G., K. POOLE, and M. O'DONOGHUE. 1999. Ecology of Lynx in Northern Canada and Alaska. In: Ecology and Conservation of Lynx in the United States, USDA General Technical Report RMRS-GTR-30WWW. Available via the Internet at http://www.fs.fed.us/rm/pubs/rmrs_gtr030/rmrs_gtr030_265_306.pdf.

4. REZENDES, P. 1992. Tracking and the Art of Seeing. Camden House Publishing Inc., Rochester, New York.

- Ken Kingdon, Box 314, Onanole, MB, R0J 1N0; E-mail:<ken.kingdon@pc.gc.ca>

BLACK-CAPPED CHICKADEES AND WHITE-BREASTED NUTHATCHES SCAVENGE A DEER CARCASS

The carcasses of mid-sized to large animals comprise a high quality food resource for both predatory and omnivorous animals, especially during the winter months when few other food resources may be readily available. A number of our local winter birds make significant use of carcasses, including Ravens, which often are among the first animals to arrive at a carcass, and Black-billed Magpies and jays, which do best after carcasses have been opened by other animals. Black-capped Chickadees, White- and Red-breasted Nuthatches, and Hairy and Downy Woodpeckers might all be expected to scavenge carcasses, based on their use of suet feeders, but there are few well documented observations of their activities in this respect. Here we report carcass scavenging by two of the latter species.

In mid-January 2010, we found a group of three dead White-tailed Deer along the banks of the Assiniboine River just west of Winnipeg, Manitoba. The site had been visited by Coyotes, Red Foxes, and possibly local farm dogs, which had opened the carcasses and consumed about 50% of the muscle mass

of the deer. While we investigated the remains, a mixed flock of Black-capped Chickadees, White-breasted Nuthatches, and a Downy Woodpecker moved into the immediate area. The chickadees showed a particular interest in the deer we were examining, repeatedly approaching it but always turning away just before landing. We stepped back several feet from the carcass to allow the birds more room. Shortly thereafter, a chickadee launched from a small shrub, landed on the exposed femur of the deer, reached under the deer's skin, and pulled off a tiny strip of muscle. After taking a few seconds to consume the small piece of meat, it reached under the deer's skin again, tore off a second piece of muscle and then flew off with the tissue in its beak. We reached for our camera and set up near the deer to try and document this activity.

Over the next 20 minutes, we observed at least five chickadees and two nuthatches repeatedly scavenging small pieces of muscle from the deer carcasses. The accompanying photographs provide documentary proof of this activity: a Black-capped Chickadee lands on a deer carcass (Fig. 1, see inside back cover, top), reaches into it and pulls off a small