
NOTES AND LETTERS

A NORTHERN SAW-WHET OWL EGG IN A TREE SWALLOW NEST

The Northern Saw-whet Owl is an uncommon year-round resident of the Saskatoon area and much of south-central Saskatchewan.^{1, 2} Only 13 locations with confirmed breeding for the entire province were reported by Smith.² Although one can often hear territorial males in wooded areas around Saskatoon, and some nestlings have been banded,¹ I know of no accounts of nests with eggs. This note reports an egg record for this species and some curious circumstances surrounding it.

In the fall of 1995, I erected 45 nest boxes within and just south of Saskatoon, aimed at attracting American Kestrels. These boxes measured 37 x 23 x 20 cm with a 7.5 cm entrance hole.³ Most were placed on power poles in open areas; however, I deliberately put box number 13 on a tree within a wooded area in the hope that it might be used by a Saw-whet Owl. The area is a hydro right-of-way adjacent to the Chappell railroad yard just south of the city along township road 362-A. The right-of-way is grassy with scattered trees and is adjacent to a wooded area several hundred metres across. The dominant tree species in the right-of-way is poplar (*Populus* spp.), with some Siberian Elm (*Ulmus pumila*) and White Spruce (*Picea glauca*), along with hedges of willow (*Salix* spp.) and Caragana (*Caragana arborescens*). To date, box 13 has not been occupied by either a kestrel or an owl. However, an adjacent box, number 12, on a power pole in the open was used by a Saw-whet Owl in 1996.

On 11 June 1996 I checked each nest box for nesting activity. Box 13 contained a partial nest of a House Wren. Box 12 had a Tree Swallow nest that covered the entire bottom of the box. Towards one corner of the box, where the nest cup was located, a female Tree Swallow was incubating a clutch. However, in addition there was a conspicuously large, white egg positioned on top of the nesting material in the middle of the box a few centimeters away from the swallow. When I next returned to this box on 5 April 1997, the large egg was intact and in the same position it was when last seen. Based on the size, (29.7 x 23.2 mm), shape and colour, and a comparison with eggs in the collection at the Biology Museum of the University of Saskatchewan, I conclude the egg could only have come from a Northern Saw-whet Owl.

There are three things that are curious about this observation. The first is that despite the availability of nest box 13 surrounded by trees, the owl chose box 12 which was on a power pole surrounded by grass (about 100 m from the woods). Usually, Saw-whets are described as being birds of dense woods.⁴ Although box 13 was occupied by wrens, this is likely of little consequence. Owls are on territory in April long before the spring arrival of wrens, so it seems unlikely that the owl was prevented from laying in the box in the woodland. Secondly, this must have been a very late nesting owl. As 1996 was the first year these boxes were available for breeding, the Tree Swallow nest was built in late May or early June and the owl egg was clearly laid on top of the completed nest. Salt and Salt report that egg sets have been found in Alberta as early as 18 April and as late as 8 June.⁴ However, to begin laying in

early June is exceptional, for young Saw-whets in the Saskatoon area are known to fledge by mid- to late June.¹ Thirdly, what was the swallow doing while the owl laid? At the time that the owl egg must have appeared, the Tree Swallow was either incubating a full clutch, or still laying.

Nest box 12 has been used annually by kestrels since 1996, and box 13 has been unoccupied.

Acknowledgements

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1. Houston, C.S. Northern Saw-whet Owl. In: Birds of the Saskatoon Area, Nature Saskatchewan, In preparation.
2. Smith, A.R. 1996. Atlas of Saskatchewan Birds. Nature Saskatchewan, Regina, SK.
3. Bortolotti, G.R. 1994. Effect of nest box size on nest-site preference and reproduction in American Kestrels. *Journal of Raptor Research*. 28:127-133.
4. Salt, W.R. and J.R. Salt. 1976. The Birds of Alberta. Hurtig Publishers, Edmonton, AB.

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SERENDIPITOUS BIRDING

Birding is sometimes frustrating, at times difficult, but always wonderful. Occasionally the unexpected will happen, giving a memory never to be forgotten.

On Thursday, May 25, 2000, I was in Waskesiu for some meetings, and had a little time over the dinner hour to do some birding. I drove to the Waskesiu River, and when approaching the footpath, saw a flock of eight small colourful birds resting on the guardrails. I knew they were warblers, but I had never seen the species before. I walked towards them, watching them in my binoculars and uttering the birder's prayer: "Please, don't fly away until I know what you are!"

I was able to walk within 20 feet of the birds, put down my binoculars, pull out my bird book and leaf through the section on warblers. I came to what I thought was the appropriate page and again looked at the birds. While in this position, and holding the book in both hands, one of the birds flew towards me and landed on the book. He gazed at me intently, for at least 30 seconds. His look seemed to say, "I know you're having trouble identifying me; I know I'm a rare bird, so have a good look." It was remarkable because my book was open to the right page, and I was able to see his picture while looking at the real thing.

The bird was a Cape May warbler, and no, it didn't point to its picture on the page.

- Doug Schmeiser, 22 Simpson Crescent, Saskatoon, SK S7H 3C6

CONCENTRATION OF BLACK TERNS

On Sunday, June 11, 2000, I arrived at what is locally called Fish Lake, 10 km north and 4 km east of Canwood, Saskatchewan, near the southern boundary of Prince Albert National Park. The former Blue Heron post office was at the tip of this lake. It was windy, cold

(7° C) and raining. The lake is over 4 km long, but narrow.

Many thousands of Black Terns were flying over the lake, against the wind. I presumed they were feeding but they did not pick up fish; their beaks barely touched the surface of the lake. Each tern would fly against the wind for about 100 m, then let the wind carry it back, and then fly again over the surface of the water. This lasted all day until dark.

Monday morning was sunny and warmer. The terns were back, but not as many of them. They were feeding on mosquitoes at tree-top level along the shore. By noon, most had left.

Can anyone explain where so many terns came from, and why? They should have been paired and nesting in marshes. I have never seen so many Black Terns in one place, and never before flying against a strong wind when it was cold and wet.

It looked great from inside my warm cabin.

- *Mel Moline*, Box 185, Asquith, SK S0K 0J0

THE HISTORY OF COLLARED-DOVES IN WEYBURN, SASKATCHEWAN

In April of 1999 John Whitell noticed two doves that were different from the Mourning Doves that he normally saw in the Weyburn area. He contacted some of the birding folks in town. It was their opinion that he was seeing escaped Ringed Turtle-Doves.

In the autumn of the year he met me and asked me to go out to the eighteenth

hole of the golf course where the two doves roosted.

Subsequently, Carol Bjorklund and Bob Luterbach viewed the birds and concluded that they were, indeed, Eurasian Collared-Doves as I suggested after my rendezvous with John.

Two European field guides and the usual complement of North American field guides were consulted to establish the identity of these birds as Eurasian Collared-Doves. As well, Bob Luterbach drew on his previous experience with the species.

Over the winter John maintained his bird feeders at the golf course. The two doves remained all winter and made use of John's food supply. Come spring the two Collared-Doves were still to be found at their favoured roosts. They continued to be seen as a pair until the beginning of May, 2000. Then only one was regularly seen, while the other disappeared.

The singing bird was seen and heard at intervals throughout the period. Finally, on July 14 both birds were seen perched together on a branch in one of their favourite trees. No young were seen. It is assumed that the female remained long on an unsuccessful nest.

We now wait with interest to see whether the two birds will once again winter at Johnnie's golf course feeder.

Jonsson, L., 1993, *Birds of Europe*, Christopher Helm Ltd., London.

Field Guide to the Birds of North America, 1999, National Geographic Society, Washington, D.C.

Mullarney, K. and L. Svensson et.al., 1999, *Collins Bird Guide*, Harper Collins, London.

- *Martin Bailey*, 102 - 1833 Coteau Avenue, Weyburn

GREAT BLUE HERON COLONY AT DORÉ LAKE, SASKATCHEWAN

In the last issue of *Blue Jay*, Lenita Hanson and Al Smith requested that observations of Great Blue Heron colonies not already documented in their data be placed on record. To this end, I offer the following entry from my field notes made at Smith Island, Doré Lake, SK (54° 48' N., 107° 35' W.) on 14 July, 1996.

"In the white spruce-aspen forest about 250 m north of the southwest tip of Smith Island and halfway between the east and west coasts is a breeding colony of Great Blue Herons with about 10 to 15 nests. The nests are all at about 10 m height in the branches of aspen trees and consist of 0.75 to 1.5 m diameter, 0.5 m high masses of small branches and twigs. The nests with young can be identified by the 2 to 3 m diameter areas of white droppings on the forest floor below. Other things on the ground below the nests include egg shells – some containing yolk rests and thus not hatched – twigs, feathers of adult birds, and three carcasses of downy and partly feathered chicks. Each active nest appears to contain one or two adult-sized chicks which have feathers and are at first sight mistaken for adult birds. However, younger chicks may be present but out of view. In the half hour we spend below the nest, about five adults arrive. When an adult lands on a nest, the chick(s) respond(s) by uttering loud raucous calls and then uttering shorter begging noises until – presumably – it/they is/are being fed. Within a few minutes, the adult leaves the nest. It was this calling of the young

which alerted us to the presence of the colony. Some of the chicks look at us but neither chicks nor adults appear alarmed at our presence."

This Great Blue Heron breeding colony had been noted a few years earlier by Rod Laliberte of Doré Lake town when he spent a few days camping by the sandy bay on the southwest side of Smith Island. After he told me about it in 1994 or 1995, I went to look in the area that he indicated, but did not find the colony site. Kevin Keel and I came across it by chance in 1996, as described here.

- *Thijs Kuiken*, Middenmolenlaan 141, 2807EV Gouda, The Netherlands



Red-breasted Nuthatch

Edna Sproule

THE NUTHATCH STORY CONTINUES

My first article describes how we helped a pair of nuthatches excavate a nest cavity in our neighbour's crab apple tree in April 1998.² The story resumes on April 27, 2000.

I was visiting Mary Pattison, on Bottomley Avenue, Saskatoon, and I saw a pair of nuthatches pecking a knot-hole in her Mountain Ash tree, 7 feet five

inches above the ground. Bits of wood pulp were flying in all directions. The ground at the base of the tree was white with pulp. Mary and my six-year-old grandson, Christopher, watched with me for fifteen minutes as the birds prepared the nest hole. We left so as not to disturb the birds but returned each day until the cavity was complete. Our guess is that incubation began about May 1.

On May 13 we watched the male bring insects and sunflower seeds to the incubating (or brooding?) female who poked her head out of the hole to accept them. On May 21, after accepting food, the female went for a short flight with her mate to a spruce tree; after several minutes she returned and hovered at the entrance several times before settling in. That day, the nuthatches were clearly feeding young, bringing food every few minutes. The heads of the young appeared, accompanied by much chirping, each time an adult arrived. On May 27, both adult nuthatches were absent for more than 30 minutes, but finally did return with food. Perhaps all but one of the young had already fledged.

Ghalambor and Martin tell us that the incubation period is 12-13 days and that they leave the nest when 18 to 21 days old.¹

Meanwhile, my neighbour's knot-hole in the apple tree, used by the nuthatches in 1998, has been used by Black-capped Chickadees this year. We first noticed them at the hole, six feet above ground, on April 18. By May 17, the incubating female chickadee came out of the nest, stretched her wings, and then flew off. By May 27 and May 29, they, too, were busy feeding their young every few minutes.

We did not observe the young nuthatches or chickadees leave their

nest cavities. We hope both knot-holes will be used again in 2001.

1. Ghalambor, C.K., and T.E. Martin, 1999. Red-breasted Nuthatch (*Sitta canadensis*), *In* The Birds of North America, No. 459 (A. Poole and F. Gill, eds.). The Birds of North America, Inc., Philadelphia, PA.

2. Sproule, Edna. 1999. How we helped a Red-breasted Nuthatch. *Blue Jay* 57:115.

- Edna Sproule, 1338 Colony Street, Saskatoon, SK S7N 0S7

REMOVAL OF NEST MATERIAL FROM A NEST BOX BY WHITE-BREASTED NUTHATCHES

My observations of a pair of White-breasted Nuthatches expand on those of Polish ornithologist Tomasz Wesolowski. He states: "Causes of the disappearance of nest material [in natural cavities] are unknown."¹ He also notes " ... it is the accumulation of old nest material rather than the removal of such material, that distinguishes nest boxes from natural cavities."

In the mild winter of 1999-2000, I transferred a nest box from our front yard to a position about 2.5 m up and on the side of a large spruce tree by our back window. This box, about 0.6 m above a bird feeding tray, was originally put up to attract House Wrens. A young Red Squirrel had taken it over the previous fall, enlarged the opening to about 5 cm diameter, and filled the box with fine bark strips and dead grass.

The day after I moved the box, the squirrel discovered the new location and re-occupied it. It would stay in the box,

come out to feed, and then return to its snug quarters. After all, it lived only 0.6 m above a tray of sunflower seeds. Sometimes it emerged to drive off other squirrels. Now and then it simply peered out, then went back to sleep.

In February, I live-trapped about six squirrels from our yard, including the nest box occupant. Thereafter, a number of birds, all regular visitors to the several feeders in my yard, showed an interest in the vacated nest box, occasionally flying up to it and peering into the opening. These included House Sparrows, White-breasted Nuthatches, and once, a Downy Woodpecker and a Black-capped Chickadee. In late March, nuthatches could be heard calling almost daily. A pair, showing courtship display and aggressive behaviour towards other nuthatches, one day entered the box. My wife and I were excited, for it looked as if they might nest there.

The male nuthatch, with brighter plumage, was the first to enter the box. Once, briefly, both were in the box at the same time. For about a week in early April, the presumed female nuthatch entered the box almost daily and brought out old squirrel nest material. This was exciting. On several days she would disappear into the box, only to emerge a few minutes later with a wad of debris in her bill. Several times we saw her poke her head out of the hole, drop debris, then disappear back in again. Other portions of the debris were placed carefully to one side of the nest hole and some were deposited on the roof of the box. When the female remained inside the box for several minutes, we wondered what she was doing – redecorating? Our hopes were high, but always, after a few minutes, the pair flew off. Perhaps they had a natural cavity nest site elsewhere?

A month later, long after the nuthatches had ceased visiting the nest box, I examined it. Nothing remained of the copious fibrous bedding left by the squirrel. The nuthatch, or nuthatches, had emptied the box except for about 1 cm of old dusty fine material on the floor.

It appears that the White-breasted Nuthatch, which nests in natural cavities and boxes, has an interest in visiting alternate nest sites. It may even spend time and energy on extensive renovations, removing nest materials. Might it do the same in natural cavities?

Jim Duncan kindly commented on this note.

¹ Wesolowski, T. 2000. What happens to old nests in natural cavities? *Auk* 117:498-500.

- Robert W. Nero, 546 Coventry Road, Winnipeg, MB R3R 1B6

LIFE AT A NORTHERN BIRD FEEDER

On husband Gordon's retirement on 1 July 1994, we moved from Coleville to our home on the shores of Murphy Lake, 13 miles west of Loon Lake, Saskatchewan.

At first, we had trouble with White-tailed Deer eating our sunflower seeds – until we put out rancid flour; this seemed to drive them away. Red Squirrels proved useful in one respect; they drove away the House Sparrows.

Our feeder is four feet above the ground, just outside our living room window. The winter of 1999-2000 was great for birds – we used 1400 pounds (28 bags) of black sunflower seed and

120 pounds of niger seed. Each day we had a dozen Blue Jays, 20 or 25 Black-capped Chickadees, two Red-breasted Nuthatches and two White-breasted Nuthatches visiting us. For much of the winter we had 65 to 70 Evening Grosbeaks and four Pine Grosbeaks. Six Hairy and four Downy woodpeckers visited our suet block. All winter we had an unprecedented 150 Common Redpolls; the first Hoary Redpoll appeared with the Purple Finches in early April.

We continued to feed the spring migrants and summer residents. In mid-May, a pair of Gray Jays brought their four young to our feeder, the first family of this species to visit us. There were two pairs of Rose-breasted Grosbeaks that came and went from opposite directions and later brought their families to the feeders. We also had two pairs of Baltimore Orioles, the first to visit us in six years. A pair of American Robins raised their young on our suet. We had Ruby-throated Hummingbirds at our five plastic sugar feeders (containing one part sugar to four of water) and a Rufous Hummingbird stopped briefly in late May.

The biggest thrill was a tiny nuthatch with a gray-brown cap, which we identified as a Pygmy Nuthatch. It stayed for two days in mid-May and as it visited our suet, it allowed us close views and comparisons with our field guide (*A Guide to Field Identification; Birds of North America* by Robbins, Bruun, Zim and Singer). I have learned since that this is a species that breeds in southern British Columbia, northern Idaho and extreme western Montana, but is known to wander outside of its breeding area in winter.¹ We did not take its photograph and thus cannot fully document the apparent first record for this species in Saskatchewan.

In July, a yearling Black Bear was a pest. It ate two plastic hummingbird feeders. Then, on July 7, it entered a bear trap brought for the purpose and the conservation officer hauled it the minimum distance of 40 km.

1. Campbell, R.W. et al, *Birds of British Columbia*. Volume 3. pp. 286-291

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A LETTER ABOUT SLIME MOLDS AT CANDLE LAKE

While hiking in late June on a trail in the Candle Lake area maintained by Sask Forestry Association (Aschim Homestead Trail), I stopped to admire a large clump of Spotted Coralroot and was thrilled to find a slime mold on a fallen aspen. I could clearly see the wispy strands of slime, showing its progress up the side of the log and along its upper surface, much in the same way a slug leaves a slime trail. It looked like the coral slime on page 90 of *Mushrooms of the Boreal Forest* by Eugene Bossenmaier. The next time I got back there, July 24, there was a crusty brown/black residue on the log but none of the stringy white trails or puffy white fruiting bodies seen previously. Any suggestions as to where to look for more information on slime molds? They aren't usually covered in the regular mushroom books.

- *Ruth Griffiths*, 17 24th Street East, Prince Albert, SK S6V 1R3