
NOTES AND LETTERS

MIGRATING WINTER WRENS – LOOK IN THE WOODPILE

On October 9, 1999, a Winter Wren was in my yard in Tyvan, SK. I heard it, then saw it as it skulked within a cotoneaster hedge on the edge of my garden. Ten minutes later, as I searched the area, it flushed silently from a nearby gooseberry bush, then flew a short distance to an adjacent shelter belt and disappeared into a brush pile. After this, I heard it call briefly as it moved quickly through the dense understory of the shelterbelt. I was unable to find it again.

During mid- to late September and throughout October, I search for this elusive bird in wood and brush piles, which seem to be choice foraging sites during migration. In spring and fall, I have found Winter Wrens foraging within several large wood piles at the Little Red River Park near Prince Albert. Also, on September 18, 1992, an unusually early date, I found a migratory bird exploring Carman Dodge's wood pile near St. Louis, Saskatchewan.

These birds are hardy. I have seen them as late as September 29 at a regular breeding site along the Tree Beard Nature Trail in Prince Albert National Park. I saw one in a brush pile near Emma Lake, just after an October 19 snowfall when the temperature was -12 C. On October 24, 1981 in Regina, when there was snow on the ground and temperatures of -5 C, I saw my first migrant Winter Wren, an individual first discovered by Paule Hjertaas.

In summer, Winter Wrens are resident within many areas of Saskatchewan's mixedwood forests including Christopher Lake, Emma Lake, Candle Lake, Prince Albert National Park, and along Highway 121 from the A.E. Campbell dam at the outlet

of Tobin Lake, to Cumberland House. I have also found them singing on territory within the Nisbet Forest, along the North Saskatchewan River across from the city of Prince Albert. Robert Kreba (pers. comm.) had several recent summer sightings along the Red Squirrel Trail in Duck Mountain Provincial Park. Kreba also made a tape recording of a bird singing on July 1996, along the Valley of the Beavers Trail in the Main Block of Cypress Hills Provincial Park. Burke Korol (pers. comm.) has an early April 1988 record of a singing Winter Wren in the Cypress Hills.

Winter Wrens, noted for the virtuosity of their prolonged, high-pitched, vibrant songs, also have surprisingly loud single or doubled scold notes, very different from those of House Wrens. Each single syllable *sked!* or *chet!* sounds very similar to the alarm or scolding call of the Song or Swamp Sparrow.

Winter Wrens are not uncommon within their breeding haunts. However, they are rare and elusive migrants. Knowing their habitat preferences and calls will enhance your opportunity to find them both within their breeding areas and during migration.

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PINK TREE SWALLOW EGGS

On June 2, 2002, I found that Tree Swallows were just getting started with egg laying on the Rube Johnston Bluebird Trail, south of Vegreville, Alberta. In a normal year, their eggs are white, with pink eggs being a rarity. On this day I found 44 light pink eggs and only one white egg in 26 boxes, on a 69-box trail. Egg numbers per box ranged from one to five.

My thoughts were that the food available for the birds must be different from the usual, due to the cool and critically dry start to the season. Normally, there would be wet fields and sloughs all along the trail and no lack of insects for the swallows to choose from. Not this year. The following day, on a new and isolated section of the trail, where there is a creek with ponds of water, I found 18 white Tree Swallow eggs in three boxes.

When I sent out a message by e-mail, asking what may be causing the pink eggs, I did get a few replies from other people who monitor nest boxes. Myrna Pearman, biologist at The Ellis Bird Farm in Lacombe, Alberta explained: "In my experience, all Tree Swallow eggs have a pinkish colour when they are first laid, and then become whiter as the embryo develops. Usually, by the time the eggs are ready to hatch, they are almost a 'charcoal' white". David W. Winkler of Cornell University in Ithaca, New York, who researches Tree Swallows, agreed with Myrna's observations, adding: "We think the pink colour is from transmitted light through the egg and yolk, and that the eggs get opaque when the embryo begins developing the chorio-allantoic membranes around the inside of the egg, blocking out the light". David further asked if the pink eggs hatched properly.

To follow-up on the question of egg viability, I checked for unhatched eggs. In late July, after the Tree Swallows had finished nesting, I found that two nests, each with six eggs that were still pink, had not been successful. In one of the boxes, the parents had re-nested and laid four eggs, all of which hatched but only two of the young had fledged. In the 67 remaining Tree Swallow boxes there were only eight more unhatched eggs, some pink and some white. Even with the cold weather and slow start to the season followed by extremely dry weather, most of the nests had been successful. Interestingly, the five boxes with Mountain Bluebirds did not appear to be affected by the drought. Four of the five Mountain Bluebird boxes



Tree Swallow

John Lane

had two broods and all eggs and nestlings looked normal.

As far as whether it was just newly hatched eggs that I found with a light pink colour, all I can offer is that all pink egg clutches ranged from one to eight in number. I found eight light pink eggs in one late-starting Tree Swallow nest. And then, just to confuse the issue, I found a nest nearby with six white eggs. Unfortunately, I was not able to monitor often enough to see if these pink eggs eventually turned white before hatching. In the previous year on this trail, I saw only one or two pink eggs.

Another thing that I found this year that I had not seen in previous years, was empty

snail shells in two of the Tree Swallow boxes. There were four shells in one box, two in the other. David Winkler explained that they see empty snail shells in the nest quite often. The birds feed their nestlings shells, an excellent source of calcium which insects as food do not provide. He also said that once in a while a shell doesn't make it down the nestling's gullet and is then found in the nest after the birds have fledged. If any of the readers have made similar observations, please feel free to contact me.

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A TALE OF TWO SWAMP PUMPS

My wife, Carolyn, and I love to go for a stroll in Wascana Park in the Natural Area south of the Regina Hill or Mountain (depending on your point of view). On the evening of May 21, 2001, we heard an American Bittern doing his booming pumping call in the area of the second lagoon along the Wascana Nature Trail. Thinking this might be an opportunity to see a bittern calling at close range we approached the area cautiously and were rewarded by a good view of a bittern moving around in a stand of dead bulrushes (*Scirpus sp.*), left over from the previous year's growth. The bird was pumping occasionally, then stumbling a few feet somewhat awkwardly through and over the bulrushes. He would move, then call once or twice, then move again. This bittern, we noticed immediately, looked different than any bittern we had seen before. On each shoulder and over his upper back area, he had a large white patch of fluffy feathers, which at first glance, made him look like some unknown beast but when viewed through binoculars were clearly epaulets that comprised part of his costume.

Before we had a chance to really digest what was happening here, a second bittern suddenly appeared. This bird did not have

the white patches but appeared all fluffed up like a broody hen with the feathers on its head and neck fully erected and wings partly extended. This second bird charged the first, covering 5 or 6 feet in one or two hops. The displaying male didn't retreat but instead turned quickly and appeared to jump on the charging bird. Much wallowing and commotion ensued in the rushes. We could not see what was going on because our view was completely obscured by the marsh vegetation. We guessed we were witnessing copulation. Within about thirty seconds the male, his white shoulder patches still very visible rose up out of the vegetation and stalked off across the bulrushes for approximately three meters where he stopped in a small relatively open area, gave his pumping call twice, then hunkered down and sat there silently.

For a while we were unable to see the second bird (presumably the female). But eventually I was able to make her out in the same area as the struggle had taken place. We could see her pulling pieces of vegetation in toward her as though she was adding material or re-arranging material in a nest. We concluded that we had had the rare opportunity to witness bitterns mating at a nest or potential nest site. The picture of the male with his white shoulder patches was worth the price of admission alone.

The Birder's Handbook states that the male American Bittern is known to display these white fluffy feathers on its back while uttering its booming call and displaying for the female.² Gibbs et al. in quoting Brewster (1911) indicates that, in ground encounters between territorial male American Bitterns, they approach each other in a defensive crouch while showing white plumes between their shoulders.³ Brewster quoted by Bent, describes the white feather patches from the side view as appearing to be a band of white as broad as one's hand extending between the shoulders across the back.¹ This description generally fit our own

observation. We also saw the male's adornments from the rear very briefly and they appeared to us as two patches on the top of the shoulders. Brewster described them appearing almost like two separate wings, close to the size of a pigeon's wings, standing out from above the shoulders. These references also describe how repeated aerial chases often ensue after ground interactions involving two or three males, or a male and female bittern, where the white shoulder feathers are prominently displayed on the males. We did not observe an aerial display on this or any other occasion.

Bitterns are normally very shy and either remain motionless, trusting to their cryptic colouration and silhouette outline to hide in the reeds and rushes, or they flush at considerable distance. These birds in Wascana Waterfowl Park seemed totally oblivious to our presence despite the fact that we were in plain view, although quiet and slow moving. Eventually we slowly moved off and continued our walk around the nature trail. Occasionally we could hear the swamp pump calling out his message that this was his area of marsh and no one should forget it. When we left the area at dark he was still calling. We returned to the lagoon area several times later in the spring but never saw or heard the bitterns again. Perhaps they had been chased away by too many other visitors or maybe they just reverted back to the more typical secretive ways of bitterns and we missed them.

1. BENT, Arthur Cleveland. 1963 (1926). *Life Histories of North American Marsh Birds*. Dover Publications Inc. New York.
2. EHRLICH, Paul R., David S. DOBKIN and Darryl WHEYE. 1988. *The Birder's Handbook, A Field Guide to the Natural History of North American Birds*. p. 32.
3. GIBBS, J.P., S. MELVIN and F.A. REID. 1992. American Bittern. In *The Birds of North America*, No 18. (Poole, P. Stettenheim, and G. Gill, Eds.). Philadelphia:

the Academy of Natural Sciences; Washington, DC: The American Ornithologists' Union

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FLIGHTLESS GREAT HORNED OWL SURVIVES THREE MONTHS

A pair of Great Horned Owls spent the summer in my farm shelterbelt near Richlea, Saskatchewan. On July 15, I noted that the larger of the two owls was unable to fly and it appeared that she had a broken wing. Almost every day I would see her walking and hopping along the ground. Although there were mice in the yard, I doubted that she could catch them on foot and I didn't expect her to survive.

Over the next two months, her wing healed so that she could make brief flaps about a metre above the ground and get up onto a cultivator or onto a bench. She still could not fly well enough to gain elevation to any tree branch. She would sit on her perch all day long.

My sister, Mrs. Katherine Rodin, was concerned about the owl and phoned Stuart Houston, who then contacted me. We agreed that the owl was unlikely to survive the winter. I didn't wish to shoot her to put her out of her misery, since she seemed to be eating something, somehow. Nor did I wish to kill her merely to confirm her sex, learn the extent of her injuries, and her state of nutrition. I decided to just watch her and allow nature's experiment to continue.

She finally died on the first of November and her body was brought to the Canadian Cooperative Wildlife Health Centre at the Veterinary College at the University of Saskatchewan for examination. The cause of death was starvation. The owl was

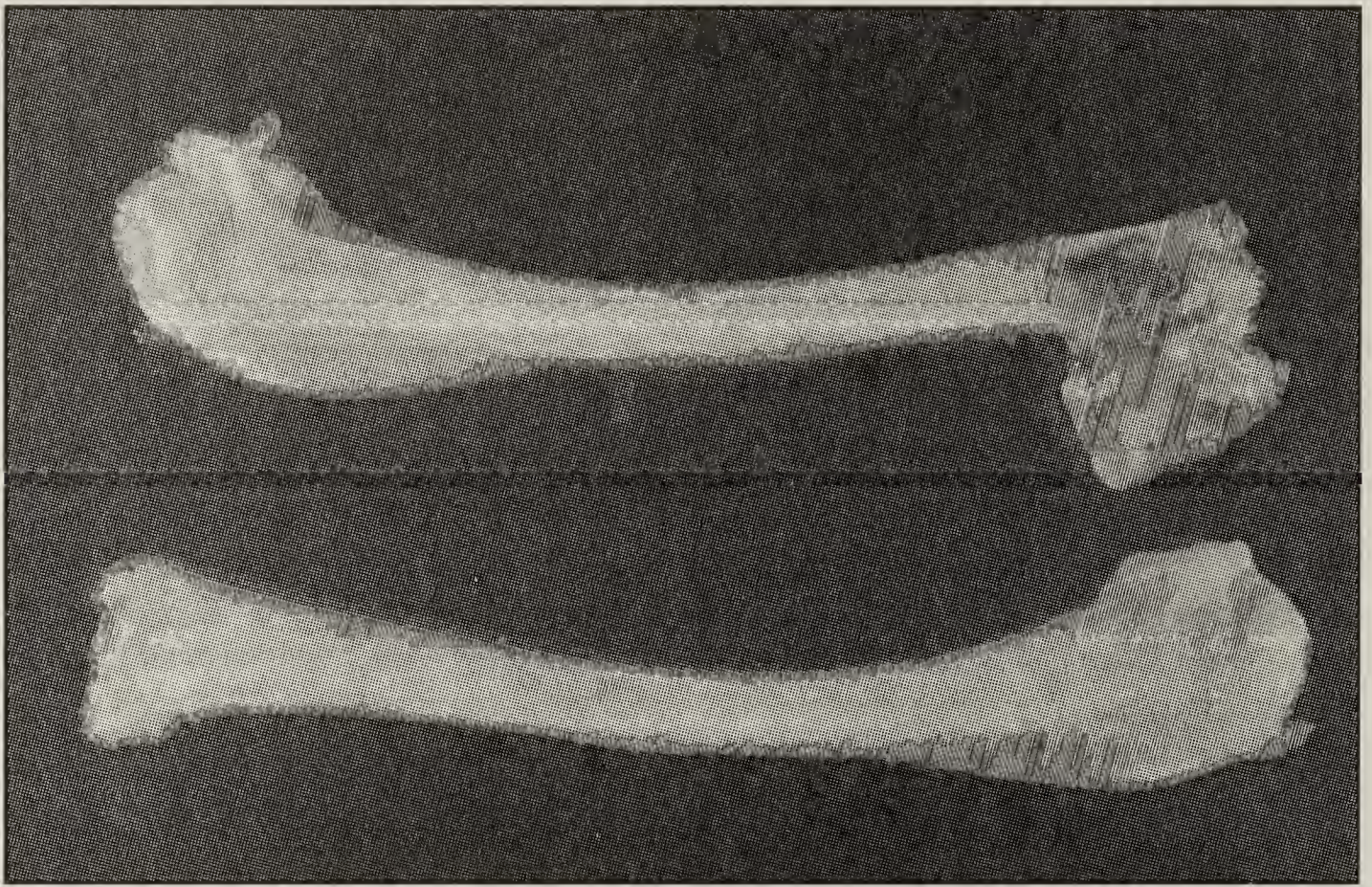


Figure 1. Wing bones from the Great Horned Owl. Upper: the fractured left humerus with the right end (that articulates as the elbow) broken off and reattached to the side of the bone. Lower: the undamaged right humerus for comparison (but in reverse orientation).

severely emaciated, weighed only 850 g and had no fat and virtually no pectoral muscle. There was a partially healed fracture of the left distal humerus just proximal to the elbow joint. The distal fragment was affixed to the side of the large proximal fragment which had placed the articulation 90 degrees off its normal direction (Figure 1). The attachment of the distal fracture fragment to the proximal fragment was mostly cartilage and there was no firm bony union. Thus, the fracture had healed in non-alignment and resulted in a permanent inability to fly.

How this owl survived for 3 months without being able to fly is a mystery. Was she catching mice on foot? Or was her mate, who stayed with her, feeding her during late evening, night, or early morning, as male Great Horned Owls must do each spring during incubation of eggs and small young?

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RUFFED GROUSE ENCOUNTERS CHAIN LINK FENCE

On December 9, 2001, I observed a Ruffed Grouse attempting to cross a chain link fence at a residence compound near Lac La Biche, Alberta. As the bird was in no imminent danger and because there has been discussion and recent interest about wildlife corridors as well as movement barriers for wildlife species, I decided to observe its attempts to cross this structure. For the entire period of observation I was hidden in a building. The following is a brief description of what I observed.

At approximately 12:15 PM, I noticed the grouse emerging from a patch of forest and walking east towards a road that provided access into the compound. Its posture was upright, but as it approached the road it crouched and proceeded to run across. A 6-foot-high, mesh wire fence, located about 15 to 20 feet on the far side of the road



The fence which represented a barrier for a Ruffed Grouse that had walked across a relatively open area (on the left) to gain access to a treed area (on the right).

Joe Niederleitner

(Figure 1), stood across the direction of travel by the bird. There were no openings between the fence and the ground, which was covered by a few inches of snow. With the exception of a few trees, there was no forest cover along the side of the fence approached by the grouse.

Upon reaching the fence, the grouse walked back and forth, (north and south) for short distances in either direction along the fence, keeping close to the fence, (about 2 to 3 inches away). At first, it did not try to walk or fly through the fence (it tried this later). It pecked at the fence posts and subsequently fanned its tail. After several tries to walk around the fence by walking in either direction, it eventually began to walk more quickly and for longer distances along the fence. Interestingly, when it followed the fence line, it did not walk towards a larger road, which provided access to the compound; instead it walked longer distances in the opposite direction. Eventually it reached a gate that had been folded back against the fence. The opened gate could have

provided easy access to the area the bird was attempting to travel into, however, rather than walking around the gate and through the fence, the bird walked into the wedge created by the folded back gate. Then the bird reversed direction and spent more time, some distance back from the gate opening, again walking back and forth on the same side of the fence.

After about 1.5 hours, ravens and a magpie landed in nearby trees. One of the ravens flew down and began to approach the grouse. The grouse then flushed and tried to fly through the fence; it did not flush away from the fence, which one might have expected. When it landed again, the grouse fanned its tail and walked away from the approaching raven, and then finally flew over the fence into the forested area it had so diligently tried to reach.

I have observed other Ruffed Grouse (as well as other birds) flying over the compound, unobstructed by the fence. Since the grouse observation described above, I

have seen Ruffed Grouse perched, feeding in trees within the compound (then later flying out of the compound) as well as White-tailed Deer entering or leaving through an open gate. For a bird that chose to walk across the compound, however, the chain link appeared to be a significant barrier. Although one can speculate about why this bird was unable to resolve its

predicament more effectively (was it a young or inexperienced bird?), it did spend about 1.5 hours during a 9-hour daylight period trying to reach its goal on foot when it could have been feeding.

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Ruffed Grouse drumming

Robert A. Mitchell

BLUEBIRD TRAILS OF THE SOUTHWEST NATURALISTS

The Southwest Naturalists maintain two bluebird trails. The first was set up in 1997 on property owned by Dave Zacharias, the NW 4-15-14 W3 and the SE 5-15-14 W3 about 8 km southwest of the city of Swift Current. The 18 boxes are on fence posts along a road that runs through farmland and passes through a coulee in natural prairie at the south end. A Caragana and Siberian Elm hedgerow extends approximately 0.8 km along the east side of the road and there are some buildings and a stackyard in the same quarter. The two quarter sections adjoining those that the road passes through are natural prairie with some Aspen, Choke Cherry, Saskatoons and Western Snowberry. One of these quarters also contains a well-treed farm site about 1/4 kilometre west of the road.

The second trail, established in 1998, travels through pastureland in the SE 21-16-

14 W3 and SW 22-16-14 W3, 6 km north of Swift Current. Here 15 boxes are located along the fence lines on several well-treed acreages on the north side of the road.

October 24, 2001, the 33 boxes were inspected and cleaned out. Only two had not been occupied. Some nests were lined with Partridge feathers. Eight of the occupied boxes contained the following identified dead birds or egg remains: House Sparrow in two boxes, (one box had four broken sparrow eggs in addition to the adult bird); two unhatched eggs with brown speckles (probably House Sparrow); a mature Tree Swallow; a young Tree Swallow; five young Tree Swallows; one swallow egg; and two swallow eggs. The ninth nest contained an unidentified bird. The mortalities could be attributed to a very warm, dry summer. More ventilation in the boxes is needed.

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Mountain Bluebird nest hole, Rockglen

Chris Adam

BIRD OBSERVATIONS FROM KYLE, SK

One day in May, I noted a male Spotted Towhee in hot pursuit of another male towhee east of my farmyard at my Big Dam. The pursued towhee took refuge under a goose nest, a square stack of railway ties 5 feet high, and topped with boards and flax straw. The pursuer landed on top of the nest platform, and while travelling around the edges expecting the pursued towhee to reappear, would every little way raise one wing directly overhead and vibrate it violently.

On June 6, I was packing a newly seeded field when I noted one of the packers was not tracking right. We had a very strong west wind and when I pulled the packers to the leeward side of the yard to correct the situation, I noted a small flock of birds fly into the nearby shelterbelt. One of these birds was a male Indigo Bunting, definitely not a bluebird. I saw an Indigo Bunting in my yard previously and at close range on June 22, 1953 as reported by Frank Roy in *Birds of the Elbow*.

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LAZULI BUNTING AT REGINA

On June 9, 2002 at about 8:45 AM, Ken Walton and Lynn Sayers found an adult male Lazuli Bunting singing just south of the Royal Saskatchewan Museum in the shrubbery near Wascana Lake north walkway and Albert Street. We were using 8x50 Leitz and 8x30 Bushnell binoculars. Ken Walton has seen this bunting many times in Colorado, where he lived for years, and knew the song right away. The Lazuli Bunting is rarely seen in the Regina area.¹

1. BELCHER, M. 1980. *Birds of Regina*. Saskatchewan Natural History Society, Regina.

- *Kenneth Walton and Mary Lynn Sayers*,
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AN OBSERVATION OF COYOTES KILLING A WEASEL

In the evening of 27 May 2002, while I was quietly watching shorebirds on the west side of Beaverhills Lake, Alberta, a Coyote emerged from the reeds and walked across the mudflats, which were about 300 m wide. Ignoring the many sandpipers that thronged the shallows, the Coyote lapped up some water. Presently, among the reeds about 150 m away, I discovered a second Coyote. It appeared to be chasing something in between the dry stands of bulrush. Evidently, the prey escaped into a dense clump of about 1.5 m in diameter. The Coyote excitedly ran around it and thrust its snout into the reeds. After a minute or two, the Coyote went out of sight.

Turning my attention back to the lake shore, I was just in time to see the first Coyote run back, leaving a trail of black prints on the mud. It was chasing a weasel. Quickly overtaken, the weasel dodged erratically, turning and twisting back and forth. Its fate was sealed very soon after the arrival of the second Coyote. One of them grabbed the weasel and gave it a violent shake. Judging by its size, I think the victim was a Short-tailed Weasel. Both Coyotes, one of them carrying the limp prey, disappeared into the reeds. Whether or not the weasel was actually eaten or simply cached, perhaps because of its unpleasant smell, remained hidden from view.

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UNUSUALLY LARGE PLAINS GARTER SNAKE

Forty years ago I reported finding a Plains Garter Snake (*Thamnophis radix*) near McLean, SK that was 1092 mm in total length. At that time, the previous known record, which was collected by Francis R. Cook near Souris, MB in summer 1960 was 1029 mm. ¹

On June 3, 2000, alerted by my dog's strangely cautious but persistent examination of something in the weedy verge of a dirt road, I discovered an apparently freshly-shed skin of an even larger snake lying on the ground in a lifelike sinuous position. This was about 9 km west and 4 km north of Elm Creek, about an hour's drive west of Winnipeg. Identification of the skin, which was in remarkably good condition, as that of a Plains Garter Snake was confirmed on June 12 by William B. Preston, who thought it was a male. We measured the skin, care being taken to not pull it out of normal shape. Thus, a conservative snout-vent length of 934 mm and a total length of 1162 mm were obtained. The largest specimen measured by Bill previously in Manitoba "...was 746 mm (29.4 inches) in snout-vent length."²

1. NERO, R. W. 1960. Large Plains Garter Snake Found. *Blue Jay* 18:184

2. PRESTON, W. B. 1982. The Amphibians and Reptiles of Manitoba. Manitoba Museum of Man and Nature, Winnipeg.

- Robert W. Nero, 546 Coventry Road,
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EUROPEAN SKIPPER AT THE PAS, MANITOBA

The small brown European Skipper first appeared in The Pas on the Grace Lake Road July 18, 1998 in a moist, sedgy ditch bordering a sphagnum bog with Black Spruce

and Tamarack trees. On July 20, 2000, four specimens were collected and are in the writer's collection. These also were taken on the Grace Lake Road. This road terminates about 2 miles east of The Pas at Grace Lake and a small airport. I have collected along this road for some 50 years now so it was a great surprise to net a new butterfly species and one from Europe at that.

It also proved something of a surprise in July 2001 to fail to collect it at The Pas. However, a number was seen in 2002 and on August 25, I saw a European Skipper at my farm on the other side of Grace Lake, 10 miles east of the first collection on Grace Lake Road.

On Grace Lake Road in 1998, the species was flying with the following butterflies which were collected and preserved : Common Ringlet, Greenish Blue, Eyed Brown, Silver-bordered Fritillary, Dun Skipper, Atlantis Fritillary, Dorcas Copper and Least Skipper. They are for the most part moisture loving species. The ditch in which the European Skipper and included species were collected, contains several species of sedge (*Carex* species) and cotton grass (*Eriophorum* species).

It should also be mentioned in passing that the Common Wood Nymph appeared here a few years ago, also along the Grace Lake Road. It appeared earlier by a few years and did not occur with the European Skipper when it was taken.

Several more recent records are known for European Skipper in southern Manitoba and two in Saskatchewan. It will be a very interesting study to watch its spread northwards in Manitoba - which it may well do as the roadsides of our provincial highways have sometimes been sown with Timothy (*Phleum pratense*) which is the preferred food plant.

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