
NOTES AND LETTERS

BLUE PHASE ROSS'S GEESE AT GOVAN, SK

On April 22, 2003, the first day of my annual birdwatching trip to Central Saskatchewan, the primary objective was to see Whooping Cranes. Govan, my hometown, is my base of operations and the usual area of interest is within a 15 mile radius surrounding Govan. Whooping Cranes are to Govan as Canada Geese are to Wawa, Ontario; giant lobsters are to Shediac, New Brunswick; and Ukrainian Easter eggs are to Vegreville, Alberta. They are Govan's Big Thing. As I left Govan I waived to Walter, the three-times life-size Whooping Crane statue that presides over the eastern entrance to the town. About a week previously, six Whooping Cranes had been sighted and photographed near Fransher's Lake, about 10 miles to the northwest of Govan. While I have seen whoopers as late as May 6, whoopers are relatively early migrators and 2003 had good conditions for migration (good weather and south or south-easterly winds). As Whooping Cranes only stop for a few days, I had a sinking feeling that Walter might be my only whooper sighting, as it proved to be.

Just north of Govan, a large flock of white geese was feeding in a stubble field, in a low spot next to the railway adjacent to Highway 20. In the fall, large flocks of Ross's Geese come through the area but in the spring only a few attach themselves to the large flocks of Snow Geese. On the chance that there might be a Ross's Goose

in the flock, I stopped opposite the geese. There was a good mixture of blue-phase and white-phase birds, tightly grouped. When I examined the flock with binoculars, the closest bird, (about 80 yards away) was a white Snow Goose but immediately behind it were two blue-phase midgets. They could only be blue-phase Ross's Geese.

While one of the little geese faced away from me, the other was full-face toward me. As pictured in National Geographic's *Birds of North America*, the belly was white although not quite as rounded; it had a half-inch blunt wedge pointed up the neck. The colour pattern was much different than the two patterns found on the blue-phase Snow Geese. Because the flock was so tightly packed, size comparisons were obvious but if there were more Ross's Geese (white or blue), I did not see them as they were eclipsed by the larger birds.

So, how rare are blue-phase Ross's Geese? While National Geographic describes Whooping Cranes as "endangered", blue-phase Ross's are the only birds described as "extremely rare." Kaufman states they are "quite rare." Hundreds of Ross's Geese are shot every year in the Govan area and no blue-phase ones have ever been noted.

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GLAUCOUS-WINGED GULL AT LAST MOUNTAIN LAKE NATIONAL WILDLIFE AREA

On April 23, 2003, I went to Last Mountain Lake National Wildlife Area (LMLNWA) at the north end of Last Mountain Lake. Over the years, one of the most productive places to see birds has been at the dam on the terminus of Lanigan Creek where it flows into an arm of the lake. The dam is located about a mile and a half east of LMLNWA headquarters and is reachable by a system of gravel and dirt roads. A small parking area is located about 200 yards from the dam, and if you wish to get closer to the dam, you are directed to walk.

Lanigan Creek is a spawning area for suckers and northern pike, and in years with water flowing over the dam, fish congregate downstream from the dam. The fish attract American White Pelicans, Double-crested Cormorants, Black-crowned Night-Herons, gulls and terns, and the odd rare birds such as a Cattle Egret.

This year when I reached the parking lot, there was a mob scene at the dam with hundreds of pelicans in the water and hundreds up on the bank as well as many cormorants and gulls. Eventually my binoculars came upon a large, strange gull amongst the swimming pelicans. The gull was feeding on something that was barely covered by the flowing water. The gull appeared light grey with no dark patches on its wings, body, tail or head. Occasionally the gull would rise, and from below, the wings had a marked two-tone effect with the flight feathers white and the front part of the wings slightly darker. The bird was too far away to note eye,

beak or leg colour. None of the other gulls tried to steal what was obviously its prize food object.

I attempted a slow stalk to get a better look at the gull but my route was very exposed and, with the horde of birds present, there were a number of nervous ones. By the time I got close to the food object, the gull had disappeared. After consulting my bird books, I tentatively identified the gull as an immature Glaucous or Glaucous-winged gull.

My next visit to the dam was on May 2. Not much had changed except that there were far fewer pelicans and most were up on the bank. The water had receded but the big gull was still there eating at the same place. This time, my stalk was more successful. Even before I got to a point 60 feet from the bird, I determined that its eye was dark, that its beak was all dark and its legs were pink. The food was a very large fish about the colour and size of a large buffalo fish. My bird books indicated the gull was a first-year Glaucous-winged Gull, although the books show a washed-out pink leg colour while this bird was a definite pink. My books did not show a view from below of such a gull but two days later when I checked the new Sibley book, the two-tone effect that I had seen on April 23 was illustrated.¹

Later in May, Phil Taylor of the Canadian Wildlife Service told me that he had seen the gull on May 6 and also concluded it was a first-year Glaucous-winged Gull. I visited the area several additional times in May, but never saw the bird again. The last time I visited, three California Gulls were still feeding on the large fish.

Glaucous-winged Gulls are birds of the

Pacific Coast. *Atlas of Saskatchewan Birds* lists four previous sightings, two of which were immatures.²

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THE POWER OF LIGHTNING

On July 8, 2002, a severe thunderstorm struck the South Saskatchewan River area north of Leader. The next day I photographed a Cottonwood tree on our ranch that had been struck by lightning. The tree was split down the centre from the branch forks to below the ground (Fig. 1). The force of the strike lifted chunks of sod around the tree roots (Fig. 2) and peeled long strips of bark off the trunk. This tree, which was in perfect condition before the storm, has a circumference of 9 feet at the base.

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1. SIBLEY, D.A. 2000. *The Sibley Guide to Birds*. Knopf, New York.

2. SMITH, A. R. 1996. *Atlas of Saskatchewan Birds*. Saskatchewan Natural History Society Special Publication No. 22. Regina.

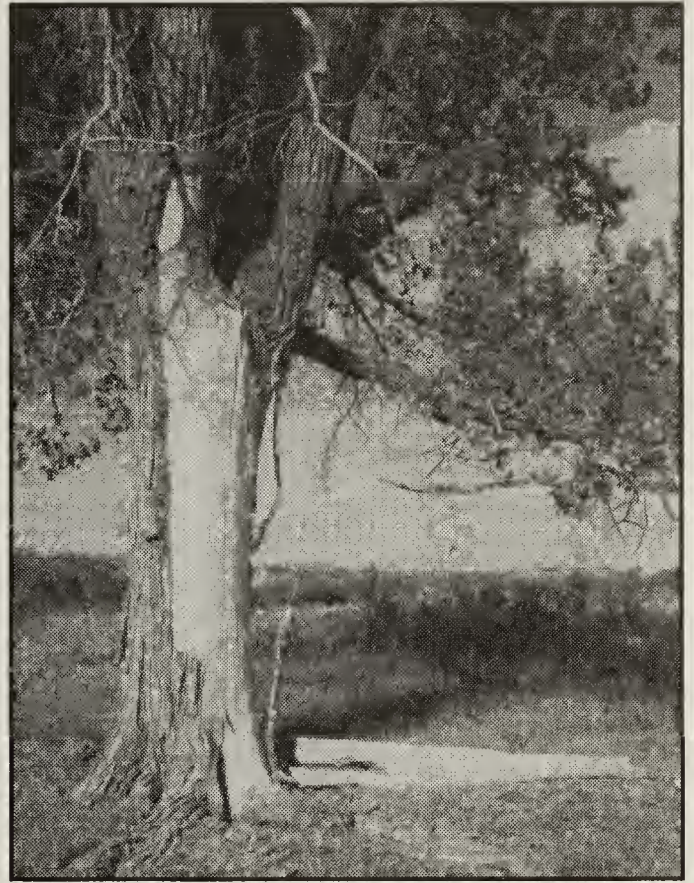


Figure 1. Tree trunk split by lightning strike
Daisy Meyers

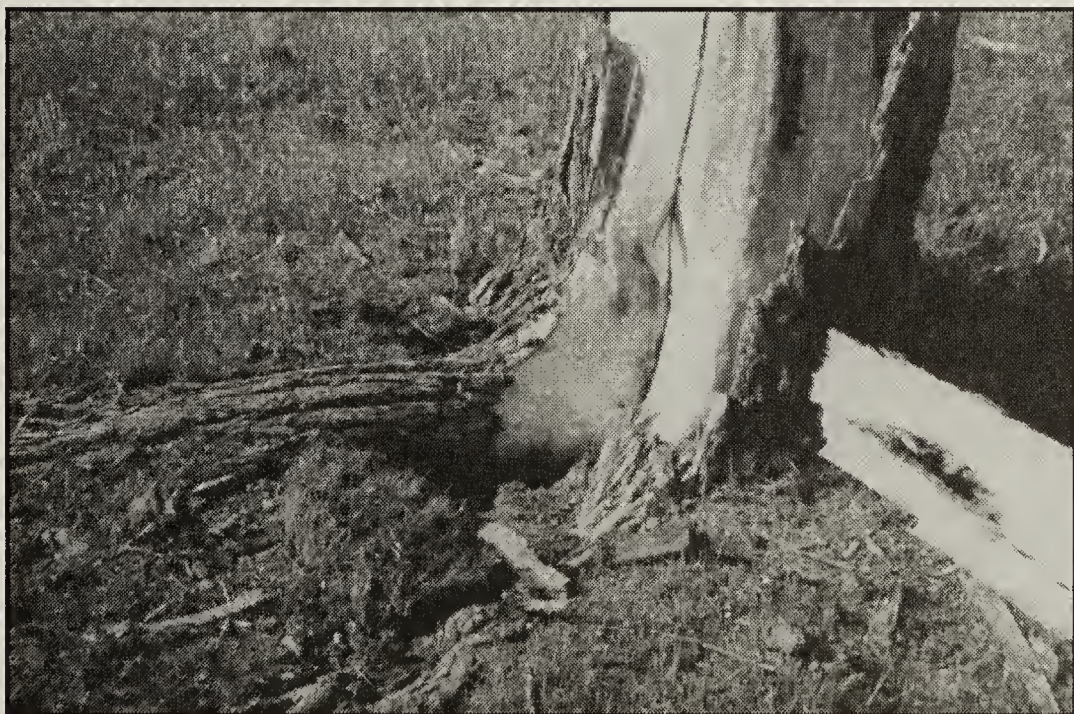


Figure 2. Sod disturbed at tree roots by lightning strike

Daisy Meyers