
NOTES AND LETTERS

AMERICAN COOT CAUGHT ON BARBED WIRE



Entangled American Coot near Rosthern

Victor C. Friesen

On May 9, 2005, my wife, Dorothy, and I drove from Rosthern to Duck Lake via the 'scenic route,' a linkage of back roads west of Hwy 11, hoping to see more birds that way. Two miles north of Rosthern, a built-up municipal road leads directly through a small slough.

There, hanging head downwards from a barbed-wire fence within the water, was an American Coot. Its back feathers were twisted about and snagged tight on a barb of the first wire above the water's surface. 'The poor bird!' was my thought –'What a way to die!'

I decided to record the circumstance on film. I had already taken one photograph when the coot began to move. It was not only still alive but energetically so, its former torpor

seemingly just exhaustion from previous struggles to break free.

Now I was obliged to free it, first returning home for some old slacks, sandals, stout gloves, two pairs of pliers and screwdriver to possibly loosen the barb, and also scissors and a canvas jacket. These last two items would prove to be the most useful.

At the slough, I approached the coot along the fence line, and it was ready for me. Standing mid-thigh in the icy water, I had to fend off the bird's attacks with the jacket. My thought was how assuredly, this coot, like all birds, evolved from some dinosaur ancestor, what with its outstretched neck and head swinging from one side of the fence to the other, above and below the wire, to get at me (shades of a scene

from the movie *Jurassic Park*). Herbert K. Job (cited in Pearson) notes that coots 'in the breeding season are said at times to make a rather too free use of their sharp beaks.'⁴ I could well believe it.

I gingerly reached out with the scissors and made two quick snips. The coot plumped into the water and immediately began swimming to the far side of the slough, 'bobbing its head with each swimming stroke,'¹ only now also turning its head backward to see whether I was in pursuit. At the water's edge, it walked up the shore and disappeared behind a clump of willows.

Coots frequently inhabit roadside sloughs with boundary fences. When taking wing, as reported by Al Hartley and Jim Hay, 'they have to run along the surface of the water for quite a distance.'² If they are swimming in the ditch between the road and the fence, and alarmed by a passing car, such flight could readily result in

entanglement. Yet, I have seen only this one coot snagged on barbed wire.

Addendum: While out driving in the Rosthern area several years ago, I saw a Short-eared Owl dangling from a fence. I assumed it had been shot and hung there by the shooter. This sighting occurred before I read an article referring to 'accidental entanglements of birds on barbed-wire fences.'³ There were 40 species involved, eight of them owls. I wish I had stopped to examine the owl.

1. GODFREY, W. E. 1966. *The Birds of Canada*. National Museum of Canada, Ottawa.
2. LEIGHTON, A. L., J. HAY, C. S. HOUSTON, J. F. ROY, and S. SHADICK. 2002. *Birds of the Saskatoon Area*. Saskatchewan Natural History Society, Regina.
3. NERO, R. W. 1993. Northern Flying Squirrel and Red Bat caught on barbed-wire. *Blue Jay* 51:215-216.
4. PEARSON, T. G. et al. 1936. *Birds of America*. Garden City Books, Garden City, N. J.

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American Coots near Laura, SK in 2006

George Tosh

JUST AN ORDINARY SATURDAY AFTERNOON

On this cool and cloudy Saturday of the May long weekend, 2006, the Park Nature Centre in Prince Albert National Park was 'humming' with activity. In more ways than one, I was soon to find out.

About 3:00 PM, an hour before closing time, a hummingbird (Ruby-throated, the only kind we get here and a male as it turned out) was seen hovering below the peaked roof of the main exhibit hall. The bird seemed quite confused but somehow made its way out into the front entrance where it flew *everywhere* but out the door. It landed on the wing of the white pelican, perched on the back of the broad-winged hawk and clung to the nylon lines that held these birds aloft. It flew backwards, forwards, right side up and upside down. Sometimes it would perch on a ledge with its wings outstretched - obviously exhausted. I pointed out to visitors how vulnerable these birds are to literally running out of fuel and crashing for good, particularly when they have just completed their northerly migration. Periodically I asked visitors to clear the entrance way so the bird could fly through the open doorway. But it was pretty tough because new groups of people kept coming in and I could hardly blame them for being thrilled by this aeronautical display.

However, at four o'clock, closing time, everyone (but the hummingbird and I) had left the Nature Centre. I opened the doors and pried loose one of the windows. The bird just stayed put so I tried directing it towards the open door with a broom. The hummingbird just flew east and west instead of north. If I just left the bird there overnight, I mused, it might go into torpor, conserve its

meagre remaining resources and survive to the next day. Then what? I continued trying to guide it with the broom - and then - tragedy! The 'feathered helicopter' hit some cobwebs, got tangled and - PLOP - crashed head first onto a hard stool. It lay there with its heart pulsating rapidly. The web had basically strait jacketed the bird's torso, and web material was in its mouth and on its feet. I removed most of the cobwebs and carried it outside. I could see dishevelled feathers on the top of its head, the point of impact with the stool, and I suspected it had suffered some neurological damage. It lay still in my hand, breathing but making no attempt to fly off.

I didn't think it would survive and considered putting it under a bush, where when dead, it would provide nourishment to other, equally significant, life forms. That's nature's way. However, as I reflected that I now held in my palm a living being that had endured, among other things, an 800 km flight across the Gulf of Mexico just to get here, I felt that somehow this bird deserved a more respectful exit from this life - at least from me. I found a container, with a lid that could be left partially open, put in some paper towels and gently placed the bird on them. My intention was to leave it overnight, maybe put in some sugar water solution for it, and if it died, well, that's life.

As I was closing up, I heard a 'thump-thump' from the container. The hummingbird was propped up against one of the sides, its wings stretched out. Apparently it wanted to get out. I carried the bird outside in the container, fully opened the lid, and waited.

Nothing. Mr. Ruby-Throat remained still with his wings folded tightly. I gently picked up the bird, held it in my hand while gently stroking its back and in a blink of an eye - WHIRRRR - it was off. It alighted on a nearby tree branch, seemingly none the worse for the experience.

The sun came out as I gazed at him and I wondered what he was thinking, if hummingbirds can be said to think. Maybe he was wondering the same thing about me! Perhaps we were sharing a mutual reflection on mortality and the fragile nature of life. His close brush with death was but a temporary escape; it would find him again and relatively soon. I am no different. How many times had visible and invisible hands, often without my even realizing it, plucked me from the precipice of eternity? Yet I, too, perhaps before the

next sunrise, would 'meet my Maker'. In the meantime, the prism of life beckons us both, and our respective spectrums will disclose both the profound and the mundane. Mr. Ruby-Throat has to focus on establishing a territory, finding a mate, staying out of the clutches of predators, and – if he makes it that far – fueling up for the rigors of the fall migration. I, too, must bear the tangle of responsibilities, risks and opportunities that cloaks my future. But, for the moment, our paths had mingled, and his presence has been imprinted on my memory on this ordinary – but extraordinary – Saturday afternoon.

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Ruby-throated Hummingbird

R. E. Gehlert

NEST BOX PROJECT AT MORSE, SK

In 2001, I had the luxury of a small class (5 students) in my grade 9 Science class at Morse School. A small number like this allows for some special projects to be tackled. Our goal that school year was to enhance the birding trail on the edge of the village of Morse. Toward that end, the class constructed 12 bluebird boxes and 4 American Kestrel boxes in the winter of 2001-2002.

Within a week of mounting the bluebird boxes on April 14, 2002 they were all occupied by tree swallows. These boxes have been occupied every spring by tree swallows.

The springs of 2002 and 2003 were a failure for the kestrel boxes. We saw no kestrels in the area in those years. On April 10, 2004, the larger of the four kestrel boxes was occupied by a



Morse School students, Clayton Weppeler and Brock Beach, put up one of the kestrel nest boxes the science class built.

Randy McCulloch

breeding pair of American Kestrels (see back cover photograph). This box was mounted 15 feet above the ground in a tree near the water at the old C.P.R. dam. Situated about ½ mile west of the school, on the north side of Morse, the dam and wetland cover approximately 4 acres.

On April 14, 2005, both kestrel boxes at the C.P.R. dam plus one of the houses mounted in town, were occupied by breeding pairs. (The other nest boxes were mounted 20 to 25 feet above the ground.) In 2006, on April 6, both nest boxes at the C.P.R. dam held breeding pairs.

Three of the kestrel boxes had the following dimensions: interior floor size— 9x9 inches, interior height of box—

18 inches, entrance hole diameter—3 inches. The fourth and largest kestrel box had interior floor size—11x11 inches, interior height—16 inches, entrance hole diameter—3 inches.

On reflection, the project was very rewarding for the class; the students were thrilled to finally see their kestrel boxes occupied. It is the hope that students and members of the tourism committee will continue to maintain and/or monitor boxes. Similar nest boxes were subsequently constructed and put up along the Eric Kurz memorial walking trail at Palliser Park near Riverhurst.

- *Randy McCulloch*, Box 630, Herbert, SK S0H 2A0

CRESTED SHIELD FERN (*Dryopteris cristata*) AT THE PAS, MB

I have been collecting and studying plants within a 100 mile radius of The Pas since 1945. It therefore proved to be a very pleasant surprise to discover a new plant, Crested Shield Fern, on 12 May 2003. It was taken on my farm seven miles east of The Pas on the east shore of Grace Lake (Regina Lake in early maps and a local name still).

The total area of the farm is 100 acres. It's an alluvial flood plain with not a single stone or pebble. The different slight elevations of land were likely produced by shallow creeks changing their directions in earlier times. With several dams on the Saskatchewan River, upstream, this no longer floods periodically as it did in the 1940s and 1950s, drowning out standing wheat to waist high.

Between the higher land and the lake there is a 'flood plain' that hasn't seen a flood since 1948.

A bit above this is a poplar-willow forest and the whole is fronted by a sedge meadow. There are large willow trees, and many large Trembling Aspen (*Populus tremuloides*) and Balsam Poplar (*Populus balsamifera*), have fallen and are decaying, providing good habitats for fungi and lichens.

It proved to be a great surprise to find a single clump of *Dryopteris cristata*. Only one frond was fertile. The plant was knee high. So far, it's a unique clump. No others have been found here to date although a considerable part of the heavily wooded area has not yet been explored. This collection at The

Pas is the most northerly collection made to date in Manitoba. Specimens are housed in the herbarium at the University of Winnipeg and in my personal collection.

Acknowledgements

I am indebted to Diana Robson at the Manitoba Museum in Winnipeg and Richard Staniforth at the University of Winnipeg for confirming my identification and that The Pas is at this species' most northern collection point to date.

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UNUSUAL JUNCO AT FEEDER

During the first week of April, 2006, a large number of Dark-eyed Juncos visited our feeder. This population of migrants exhibited considerable color variation, including 'slate-colored' and 'Oregon' forms. On the morning of April 4, a flock of 20 or more juncos was feeding on sunflower and canola seeds beside the feeder. One individual

Editor's Note:

There have been collections of Crested Shield Fern elsewhere in Canada from locations farther north than The Pas (53° 50' latitude). In Saskatchewan, these locations include (1) Meridian Creek ne of Amisk Lake, near Creighton & Flin Flon, at about lat. 54° 30' N (1953, *J.H. Hudson #1414*); (2) Little Deer River near Southend, at lat. 56° 20' N (1982, *J.H. Hudson #4360*); and (3) Hutchings Lake, at lat. 55° 52'N (1990, *D. Robson #40*).

attracted immediate attention. This bird was clearly a junco, as evidenced by its coloration and behavior, but with large white cheek patches. This bird remained in the yard for several days and was photographed on April 6.

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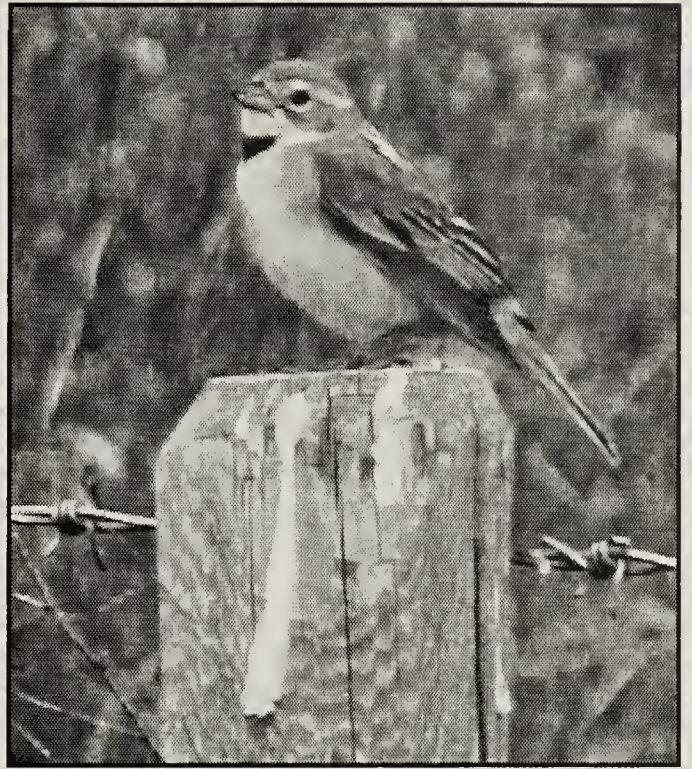
Unusual junco at Prince Albert

Harold Fisher

DICKCISSEL AT MOSSBANK, SK

On June 20, I drove out west past Singbiel's slough, about ten miles N W of Mossbank. I had the window down in my car, and I heard a bird song that I had never heard before. I backed up and there on a fencepost next to a very thick alfalfa field was a Dickcissel. I went back quite a few times to see if the bird was still there and in fact there were two males. I didn't see any females, or didn't notice them, because they look like female House Sparrows.

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Dickcissel near Mossbank

Marlene Hart



Dickcissel singing from a wire near Estevan, on 27 June 2006. A nest with one young and a cowbird egg was found in the same area.

Philip S. Taylor

ALBINO ROBIN

This partial albino American Robin visited my bird bath in October 2005. On the morning of October 3, when I took these photos, the bath was frozen so I removed the ice and filled the bath with hot water. At noon, I noticed that the bath was drawing quite a crowd: sparrows, finches and robins. Then I

noticed this oddball. It was the first time I had seen this bird, so I don't think it was a resident. I haven't seen it since that day, nor has anyone else I have talked to.

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