

NOTABLE RECORDS FROM THE MANITOBA BREEDING BIRD ATLAS 2010 SEASON

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After many years of dreaming and more than a year of detailed preparations, 2010 saw the much-anticipated first year of data collection for the Manitoba Breeding Bird Atlas. This project will have 5 years of data collection (2010–2014), and volunteers are being sought to cover all areas of the province. The Atlas follows a similar protocol to those used for several other completed or ongoing provincial breeding bird atlases.¹ Mapping is based on a grid of over 7000 squares (10 km × 10 km), divided into 14 administrative regions (Fig. 1) and a set of criteria that define observations as “observed” only or as “possible,” “probable,” or “confirmed” breeding records. This article summarises the most noteworthy breeding-season records gathered by Atlas volunteers and crew in 2010. Since data entry is not yet complete, this article will only briefly discuss general trends noted (up-to-date summary statistics can be viewed at: <www.birdatlas.mb.ca>). A meeting to review unusual records was held in Winnipeg on 16 August 2010, and this article refers primarily to records reported before that date.

Exceptional Breeding Season Records

Three of the season’s most significant records involved members of the family Cardinalidae, as recently expanded by the North American Classification Committee of the American Ornithologists Union (AOU) to include the *Piranga* tanagers (see <<http://www.aou.org/checklist/north/>>). Scientific names of all birds mentioned in this article can also be found at the AOU website.).

At least one adult male black-headed grosbeak has held a singing territory annually in the same patch of riparian woodland along the Souris River south of Melita since 2006 (K. De Smet et al.). There were some reports of a subadult male and probably also a female present in at least one of those years. On the evening of 15 June 2010, Ken De Smet observed the male feeding nestlings in a nest 2 m above the ground in a tall shrub just inside the woodland from the roadside ditch edge. Although there are as many as 40 records (mostly migrants, and many unconfirmed) in Manitoba, this

Administrative Regions

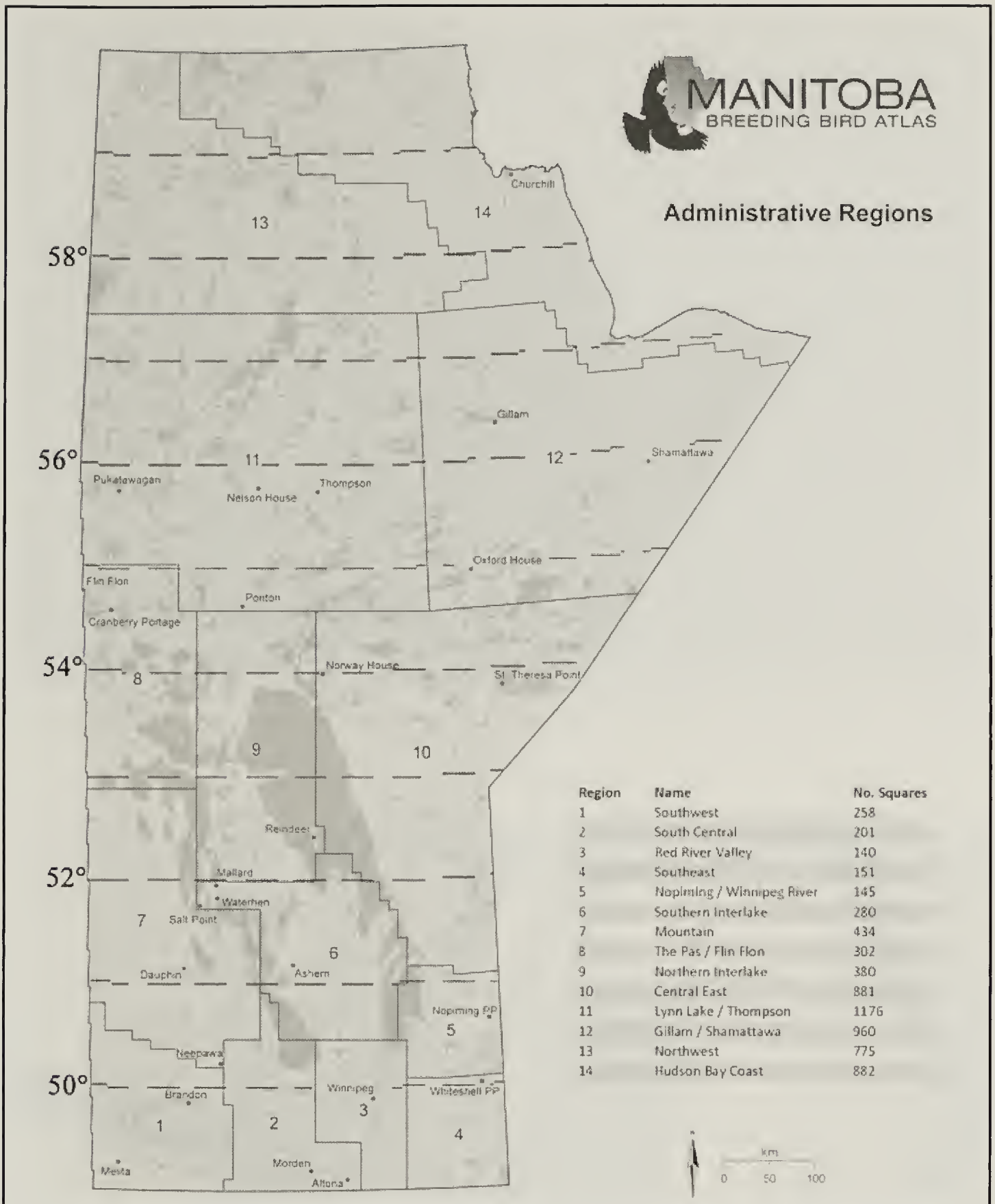


Figure 1. Administrative regions (n = 14) of the Manitoba Breeding Bird Atlas.

is the first confirmed breeding attempt of this species in the province.² The female was not seen on the above date, nor on any occasion in 2010, so it is not known whether this is a hybrid pair (i.e., black-headed × rose-breasted); rose-breasted grosbeaks occur regularly in the same area (Fig. 2).

Western tanager is another western species that has been suspected of breeding in Manitoba but never confirmed.² On 5 June, David Raitt found a pair, as well as an unpaired male, while atlassing in the Root Lake area north of The Pas. Although he did not find a nest, his subsequent observations of both adults



Figure 2. Rose-breasted grosbeak.

Linda Boys



Figure 3. Western tanager north of The Pas, Manitoba, 12 June 2010. David Raitt

carrying food that was not for their own consumption indicated that they probably had young in the area (Fig. 3).

Wayne and Gloria Tingey observed a male lazuli bunting visiting a seed feeder on their property along the Antler River southeast of Lyleton on 25 May. Although it visited the feeder only sporadically, this bird was subsequently heard and seen by several observers on the Tingey's property. Repeat observations from late May until early July, all within 200 m of the house (W. & G. Tingey, R. Porteous), and observations on 20 July (K. De Smet) and on 30 July (C. Artuso & J. Swartz; Fig. 4, see inside back cover, top) suggest that this bird remained on territory in an area with sparse riparian woodland and overgrown weedy fields. It used the same song perches repeatedly, in particular the uppermost dead branches that emerged above the foliage of two living Manitoba maples (*Acer negundo*), within an area of 0.85 ha, alternating between them for non-continuous song bouts lasting as long as 13 min (C. Artuso). Gloria Tingey reported seeing a female *Passerina* bunting earlier in the nesting season that she believed had the markings of a female lazuli; however, it was not seen regularly at the feeder, nor was it seen later in the season by other observers. Although this species occurs regularly in southeast Saskatchewan, there are fewer than 30 sightings in Manitoba, and breeding has never been confirmed.²

Equally notable to the three cardinalid records was the discovery of a recently fledged family of four young green herons at a Steinbach golf course on 19–20 August (R. Reimer) and confirmed by several other observers. This discovery followed sightings of two adults earlier in the month (H. Lane). While the species has been recorded about 100 times in Manitoba, this is only the second confirmed breeding record for the province.²

Improved Definition of Northern Range

With the notable exception of coastal regions near Churchill, there remains much to learn about bird distribution in central and northern Manitoba, especially north of a diagonal line running northwest-to-southeast from about The Pas to Bissett. One of the key aims of the Atlas is to improve the definition of these limits beyond what proved possible in *The Birds of Manitoba*.² This should provide a more reliable reference against which to detect future changes that may arise, for example, from habitat alteration and climate change.

While some farmland species, such as western meadowlark, reach boundaries that are sharply defined by the extent of agricultural development, the range limits for most forest and wetland birds are diffuse and much more difficult to define than most published range maps might seem to suggest. This is equally true with the southern range limits of northern birds, the northern limits of southern birds, and all boundaries for those species restricted to the boreal forest. This problem is compounded by difficulty of access and low human population density, which result in very limited historical knowledge of boreal bird distribution, since isolated pockets of habitat are often inaccessible and rarely if ever visited by birders or professional ornithologists.

Volunteers and field crew in western Manitoba recorded several species that are associated primarily with the Aspen Parkland in areas north of their expected ranges (Table 1). American woodcock was recorded above 51.3° N in both the Interlake and the Duck Mountains; however, this species was recently recorded as far as 52.7° N in the Porcupine Hills and 53.0° N just south of Grand Rapids (C. Artuso, unpublished).² The single record of warbling vireo 25

km southwest of The Pas was heard only (J. Kayer). Veery was recorded in three squares in Region 8 (The Pas / Flin Flon), the northernmost being near Goose Lake, approximately 15 km south of Cranberry Portage, and in eight squares in the Porcupine Hills, but not in Region 9 (northern Interlake). The gray catbird found approximately 20 km north of The Pas (D. Raitt) was at a similar latitude to a recent Breeding Bird Survey record at Minago River (P. Taylor). Additional species recorded near The Pas, towards the northern periphery of their ranges, include wood duck, marbled godwit, and sedge wren (many observers). Some of these species have been found in recent years in areas modified for agriculture in the Carrot Valley and around Ralls Island (D. Raitt). Recent surveys by Bird Studies Canada have found other unexpected species in the Porcupine Hills area, including chimney swift near Barrows, yellow-throated vireo near Whitefish Lake, and indigo bunting near Birch River (C. Artuso, unpublished).

The most notable record from Manitoba's Interlake region was a singing male pine warbler found on 19 June at 52°N in suitable breeding habitat – an extensive, mature jack pine (*Pinus banksiana*) stand near Highway 6 south of Tan Creek (P. Taylor). Further exploration for the species in this area is planned. Although there are a few previous records of migrant pine warblers away from their known breeding range in southeast Manitoba, including two fall records on Hecla Island (19 August 2002, G. Holland; 2 September 2002, A. Courcelles), this is apparently the first territorial bird recorded in the Interlake during the breeding season. Northern parula was found in at least five locations in the Interlake in 2010, including three singing males close to 53°N (Katimik Lake, P. Taylor; Long Point, P. Goossen and R. Mooi; and near Grand Rapids, R. Mooi), providing

further evidence of a breeding population in central western Manitoba, as recently described.³ Eastern bluebirds were found in at least four locations north of their principal range including three Atlas squares in the central/northern Interlake (Region 9) and also near The Pas. The north–south highway and transmission-line corridors and associated structures in the Interlake region seem to have provided an opening for this species; a pair was found breeding at Ponton (54.6°N) in 2007.⁴

Turkey vulture was recorded near Thompson (R. Koes and R. Staniforth), well north of the known breeding range, but in keeping with scattered reports north of 53°N in recent years, possibly involving wandering subadults. A singing winter wren was exceptionally far north near Twin Lakes, southeast of Churchill (R. Koes). In a visit to Dunlop's Fly-In Fishing Lodge at Waskaiowaka Lake, north of Split Lake, from 10 to 17 July, Rudolf Koes and Richard Staniforth found several species north of their expected ranges. American white pelicans were recorded in various sections of Waskaiowaka Lake, although these may have been wandering non-breeders or long-range commuters from distant colonies. Common grackles were recorded much farther north than expected in seven Atlas grid squares in this same region, including four confirmed breeding records. Red-winged blackbirds were recorded in five squares, including three instances of fledged young. Other unexpected finds around Waskaiowaka Lake were black-capped chickadees (in five squares), hairy woodpecker, least flycatcher, and red-eyed vireo. Black-billed magpies are known to occasionally irrupt northward into the boreal forest,² but a family group with five young, photographed by Brian Taylor at Paint Lake (55.5°N) on 2 August, was still a surprise.

Table 1. Notable northern records from summer 2010. Calculations of distance from expected range are based on maps drawn in *Birds of Manitoba* that indicate “regular breeding”, not including those areas where the species is described as “rare migrant or visitor”.² Only the northernmost records for each of the following areas are given: W (western Manitoba), I (Interlake), and N (northern Manitoba), as indicated in Column 2. Elsewhere in the table, N. = north / northern. Atlas codes are X: bird observed in breeding season but not in normal nesting habitat (level = observed); H: bird in breeding habitat and S: bird singing (level = possible breeding); A: agitated behaviour, M: more than seven singing males detected in one square on one day, P: pair (level = probable breeding); FY: fledged young, CF: carrying food not for own consumption (level = confirmed breeding). An asterisk (*) beside a code indicates that this was the highest code for the given Atlas region.

Species	Locality	°N	Distance from known range. ²	Observer(s)	Code
American white pelican	Waskaiowaka Lake (N)	56.5	150 km N.	R. Koes, R. Staniforth	X*
American woodcock	Grahamdale (I)	51.4	N. edge of range	P. Taylor	H
	Duck Mountains (W)	51.3	N. edge of range	A. Stone	H
Black-billed cuckoo	Proulx Lake (I)	51.8	N. edge of range	P. Taylor	M*
	Duck Mountains (W)	51.6	N. edge of range	J. Willans	S*
Whip-poor-will	The Pas (W)	54.1	N. edge of range	D. Raitt	S*
Hairy woodpecker	Waskaiowaka Lake (N)	56.5	N. edge of range	R. Koes, R. Staniforth	P*
Least flycatcher	Waskaiowaka Lake (N)	56.5	N. edge of range	R. Koes, R. Staniforth	S*
Great crested flycatcher	Porcupine Hills (W)	52.6	N. edge of range	A. Stone	S*
Red-eyed vireo	Waskaiowaka Lake (N)	56.5	N. edge of range	R. Koes, R. Staniforth	S*
Warbling vireo	The Pas (W)	53.6	N. edge of range	J. Kayer	S*
Black-capped chickadee	Waskaiowaka Lake (N)	56.5	200 km N.	R. Koes, R. Staniforth	S*
Winter wren	Churchill (N)	58.7	250 km N.	R. Koes	S*
Marsh wren	Katimik and Kaweenakumik Lakes (I)	52.9	100 km N.	P. Taylor	S*
Eastern bluebird	The Pas (W)	53.6	200 km N.	J. Kayer	CF*
	Grand Rapids (I)	53.3	150 km N.	J. Kayer	A
Veery	Cranberry Portage (W)	54.4	50 km N.	J. Kayer	S*
Gray catbird	The Pas (W)	53.9	200 km N.	D. Raitt	S*
	Long Point (I)	52.9	125 km N.	D. Raitt	H*
Pine warbler	Tan Creek (I)	52.0	200 km N.	P. Taylor	S*
Northern parula	Grand Rapids (I)	53.1	150 km N.	R. Mooi	S*
Red-winged blackbird	Waskaiowaka Lake (N)	56.5	150 km N.	R. Koes, R. Staniforth	FY
Common grackle	Waskaiowaka Lake (N)	56.5	100 km N.	R. Koes, R. Staniforth	P

Southern Range Extensions

Much fewer southward than northward apparent range extensions were detected, which is not surprising given the much better knowledge of bird distribution in the more populous south, and perhaps also a greater potential for range contraction near the southern fringes of the boreal forest.⁵ Nevertheless, the comments about limited coverage of the boreal forest also apply to extreme southeast Manitoba, and there is potential for surprises just an hour's drive east of Winnipeg.

One of the most notable southern range extensions recorded in 2010 occurred when Vic Reimer found a nest of Bonaparte's gull, approximately 7.5 m high in a black spruce, on 16 June at Windy Lake (northeast of Richer at 49.7°N). This is easily 200 km south of the species' expected breeding range. Rudolf Koes and Richard Staniforth found a pair of tundra swans with two cygnets at Waskaiowaka Lake, over 200 km southwest of the nearest known breeding locations near the Hudson Bay coast. Interestingly, both Bonaparte's gull and tundra swan have recently been recorded breeding far south of their expected ranges in Saskatchewan.^{6,7}

A fox sparrow was recorded as probably breeding about 20 km north of The Pas, based on repeated observations of a singing individual in suitable habitat (D. Raitt). This is the third year in a row that singing fox sparrows have been encountered in this area. In 2009, seven were heard singing from presumed territories, and one nest with four young was located on 16 June 2009. White-crowned sparrows were recorded in eight locations around Waskaiowaka Lake, including recently fledged young, and both common redpoll and Bohemian waxwing were also found there (R. Koes, R. Staniforth). This is along the very southern periphery of these species' known ranges.

Declines and Disappearances

One of the more difficult topics that the Atlas, by virtue of its intensive coverage, will help address is the current distribution of grassland species that appear to be experiencing range collapse in Manitoba. The ranges of grassland specialists such as burrowing owl, Sprague's pipit, Baird's sparrow, grasshopper sparrow and chestnut-collared longspur extended, as recently as the 1980s, to the easternmost edge of the greater prairie ecosystem in Manitoba. Sprague's pipit and grasshopper sparrow even occurred, albeit with patchy distribution, in parts of the boreal transition zone with long-standing agricultural development. These species have usually only been recorded in extreme western Manitoba since the 1990s. The situation is different with ferruginous hawks, which had become quite rare by the 1920s and thereafter went unreported until a few were seen in the extreme southwest in the 1970s and nesting was confirmed in the early 1980s.^{2,8} Happily, since then a small nesting population has persisted in the southwest.

In 2010, a grant from Environment Canada's Habitat Stewardship Program permitted a crew of three to undertake intensive fieldwork in mixed grass prairie and fescue prairie in the northern portion of Region 1 (north of the Trans Canada Highway) and the southern portion of Region 7, mostly south of Riding Mountain National Park. This work complemented the grassland bird monitoring and management conducted annually since the 1980s Manitoba Conservation (K. De Smet) in the southwest corner of the province.

The vast majority of the 2010 records of Manitoba's grassland specialists came from Region 1. Following an extremely successful nesting season in 2009, when all but one of 35 pairs produced young,

ferruginous hawks increased to 41 nesting pairs in 2010, including two nests south of Glenboro on the eastern edge of Region 1 (K. De Smet). Although fewer than half of these pairs produced young, two dark-morph females in the southwest each successfully raised at least one dark-morph young. Five burrowing owl nests were found (down from nine in 2009) including three in extreme southwestern Manitoba, one near Cartwright, and one north of Wawanesa (K. De Smet et al.). This species was formerly recorded locally as far east as the Winnipeg area;² however, it seemed to disappear from the province between the late 1990s and 2006 (K. De Smet).

Three grassland sparrow species most strongly associated with native and native-like grasslands in Manitoba – Baird's sparrow, grasshopper sparrow and chestnut-collared longspur – are now largely confined to the westernmost areas of Region 1. Of these, the grasshopper sparrow normally ranges farther east and north; in 2010, territorial individuals were recorded in three squares in Region 2, north of St. Claude (C. Braden), near Mariapolis (K. De Smet), and near Mather (L. Veelma), and one was found in southern Region 7 near Cracknell, west of Riding Mountain National Park (N. Melnycky). A report of a pair of grasshopper sparrows feeding young near Whytewold in the southern Interlake (C. McPherson) was convincing but not confirmed. Baird's sparrows were recorded in only a few squares in the extreme southwest, in the Pipestone–Lyleton area and along the “blind Souris River” valley south of Melita to the U.S. border (K. De Smet). The only record of Baird's sparrow outside the extreme southwest was one heard on 7 July on a plateau with suitable native prairie and some shrubs above the eastern bank of the Assiniboine River west of Lenore (M. Prill); however, two subsequent attempts

to find this individual were unsuccessful. Chestnut-collared longspur observations in 2010 were largely confined to the same range as Baird's sparrow (see above), but a population also persists in the St. Lazare area near the Assiniboine River in extreme western Manitoba (C. Artuso et al.). There was also a single observation of several birds on territory in native prairie between Shilo and Brandon (K. De Smet). Although both chestnut-collared longspur and Sprague's pipit were recorded in Alonsa Wildlife Management Area east of the Riding Mountains in 2009, none was observed there this year, perhaps due to poor weather conditions and difficulty of access.

Despite wet conditions and reduced surveys in the traditional southwestern monitoring and management area, Sprague's pipits were found in about 200 sites altogether. These included over 100 locations north of the Trans Canada Highway, as far north as Asessippi Provincial Park, with a concentration in the Ellice-Archie community pasture near St. Lazare (C. Artuso et al.). A few were observed as far east as the Shilo-Brandon area (K. De Smet, R. Koes). Many were found in grazed tame pasture habitat, although numbers are probably greater in native-like haylands and pastures. None was found in areas of former occurrence east of Regions 1 and 7.² Nonetheless, Sprague's pipits are still much more widespread in Manitoba than either chestnut-collared longspur or Baird's sparrow.

A loggerhead shrike photographed in a remnant patch of native prairie near Glen Elmo just south of the westernmost part of Riding Mountain National Park on 27 June was exceptional (C. Artuso, J. Spallin). In recent years there have been occasional observations of shrikes in other areas well north of the Trans Canada Highway, e.g., in the Neepawa-Eden area. Nesting

observations during 2010 were primarily restricted to the extreme southwest, south and west of Pipestone; even there, fewer than 40 pairs were noted, marking a steep decline in the last 20 years (K. De Smet). An additional three presumed pairs were observed in the Brandon-Shilo region (K. De Smet). The plight of the eastern loggerhead shrike (race *migrans*) in the Winnipeg area also appears dire, as numbers have been steadily decreasing from a dozen breeding pairs in 2000 to one pair in 2009 and no known breeding records in 2010 (K. De Smet, R. Porteous).

Other Notes

Eurasian collared-doves are extending their range into Manitoba more slowly than they did in Saskatchewan, but they continued to increase, being reported in 2010 in at least nine locations across southern Manitoba, all south of the 50th parallel, from Lyleton in the southwest (many observers) to Whitemouth in the southeast (W. Jansen). Excluding sightings of spring transients, trumpeter swans were reported from four locations, near Steinbach (V. Reimer), near Whytewold (C. McPherson), in Churchill (R. Koes), and a pair north of Powerview (F. Machovec). Northern mockingbirds were found carrying nesting material in two locations, near Pierson (C. Artuso, J. Swartz) and at St.-Georges (S. Labossière). There was one record of dickcissel, a singing male near Waskada (K. De Smet), one of only a handful recorded in Manitoba since an irruption in 2003 and a post-irruption “echo” in 2004.

While forests were tinder-dry in parts of the north, the summer of 2010 was extremely wet in many parts of southern Manitoba, with several towns experiencing record rainfalls and some such as Emerson being forced to declare

states of emergency after downpours.⁹ Environment Canada’s Brandon weather station recorded 152 mm of rain in May, over three times the long-term average of 50.1 mm.¹⁰ Data for June and July have not been published yet, but these were also very wet months. Consequently, sedge wren (238 atlas squares reporting this species before 16 August), Le Conte’s sparrow (233 squares), Nelson’s sparrow (73 squares), and yellow rail (41 squares) were all recorded in high numbers and in many unusual locations such as flooded pastures. Yellow rails call more frequently in daylight hours than is generally realised, and many were recorded during routine atlassing activities. Of special interest, yellow rails were heard regularly at several locations within the city of Winnipeg, with up to six singing individuals present in one small area along the Harte Trail in Charleswood (many observers). Virginia rails were observed with fledged young in Winnipeg (S. Oikawa) and Kleefeld (D. Fast); the species is rarely encountered at these locations. Conversely, both yellow and Virginia rails proved relatively difficult to find in some boreal marshes, presumably because of the wetland bounty elsewhere, and possibly also due to displacement from traditional areas by high water levels.

The Manitoba Breeding Bird Atlas has an extraordinary capacity to engage volunteers of all skill levels. With sufficient participation, this project will greatly augment current knowledge of bird distribution and abundance in Manitoba. Out-of-province volunteers are especially welcome, particularly for collaboration with Manitoba birders and researchers to improve coverage in remote areas of central and northern Manitoba. If you might be able to get involved in any way, please either register via the website or contact the authors.

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"If a man walks in the woods for love of them half of each day, he is in danger of being regarded as a loafer. But if he spends his days as a speculator, shearing off those woods and making the earth bald before her time, he is deemed an industrious and enterprising citizen."

-Henry David Thoreau