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# NOTES AND LETTERS

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## GREAT BLUE HERON SWALLOWS MUSKRAT

The great blue heron (*Ardea herodias*) consumes a variety of small animals. Some of its larger prey include large fish, frogs, salamanders, lizards, snakes, young rats, pocket gophers, and ground squirrels. On occasion, rails and phalaropes are killed and eaten by herons.<sup>1</sup> An impressive sequence of photographs of a large heron drowning and swallowing a Richardson's ground squirrel (*Urocitellus richardsonii*) was presented by Sykes (1996).<sup>2</sup>

"Tanneroon Swamp" is my name for a 20 ha swale through which Jackfish Creek meanders 1.6 km south from Moon Lake to Tanner Lake in the northern sector of Riding Mountain National Park, Manitoba. P.T.H. 10 passes near a beaver-created pond on the NE side of the swale, then curves westward just south of Moon Lake. An old beaver lodge lies near the S edge on the pond about 75 m west of the highway.

On 23 June 2006, a great blue heron stood in the water NW of and 3 m from the beaver lodge. I first saw the heron as it turned and slowly walked away from me. Shortly thereafter, it turned and followed the edge of the old beaver dam, providing a side view. Protruding from its bill was the posterior portion of a furry animal, its hind legs and tail dangling down. Anticipating its flight at any second, identification of the prey took precedence over photography, and in the ensuing 30 to 40 sec before it flew NW, the bilaterally compressed tail, hind leg traits, and its brown fur - as noted through 7 × 35 binoculars - left no doubt that the prey was a muskrat (*Ondatra zibethica*).

The heron flew WNW some 250 m and alighted at the edge of Jackfish Creek,

about 60 m south of the west end of the highway curve. In less than 1 min, I drove around the curve in time to see the large bulge in the bird's neck, the muskrat having been swallowed. After a minute or so, the heron took a drink from the creek, presumably to facilitate the swallowing process.

I used the heron's bill as a 'measuring stick' against which parts of the muskrat could be estimated. The culmen of the big marsh bird averages about 14.3 cm.<sup>3</sup> The head and both front legs of the muskrat were out of sight in the heron's throat. Thus the distance from just back of the front legs (the base of the heron's bill) to the tip of the snout was estimated to be 9 cm, with the upper mandible reaching to within 6 cm of the posterior of the body. The 16 cm long tail gave an estimated total length of approximately 45 cm.

In Canada, the average total length of adult male and female muskrats is 57.3 and 56.1 cm, respectively.<sup>4</sup> In Manitoba, young muskrats are born about mid-May and are on their own in 1 month.<sup>4</sup> Was 45 cm a reasonable total length for a juvenile muskrat for 23 June? Probably. On 27 May 1985, my class of biology students had watched in amazement from near, and on, another beaver dam a few km from this location. A mother muskrat had swum 50 cm below the surface and within 1.5 m of us as it dragged four young along by their mouths holding on to her teats. These young showed coarse, sooty hair which aged them at 5 to 15 days.<sup>4</sup> Their estimated total length was 20 cm.<sup>5</sup> This was 35% of that of an adult. At 45 cm, the 23 June 2006 muskrat was believed to be 80% full length.

On 24 June, another great blue heron, possibly the same individual, was seen exactly where I had observed it the day before: some 3 m WNW of the edge of the old beaver lodge. Poised, it was ready to strike precisely where the muskrats had been seen emerging from the lodge earlier in the spring. With my arrival, the heron soon flew off. Within seconds of its departure, a sub-adult muskrat emerged from the dense sedge (*Carex* sp.) and swam directly toward the beaver lodge and dived at the spot that had been the heron's point of interest. Subsequent brief stops at the area throughout the summer produced no more sightings of the heron or muskrats. Could this heron have found these aquatic rodents, siblings or otherwise, to make "filling" meals - and wiped out an entire complement of young?

## UNUSUAL LILY

On my farm I have native prairie upon which I have a conservation easement. During the growing season it is certainly a pleasure to walk the area at various times to view the plants and animals. Very late in June 2009, I found a Saskatchewan floral emblem area. Within this area was one bloom that stood out: It was most perfect with its seven flower petals. I know they are to have only six. I got my disposable camera and took various photos that Saturday. On Monday, family came for a visit, and I took them out to view the various flowers. I went to show them my seven-petalled lily. Alas,

1. Terres JK (1980) The Audubon Society Encyclopedia of North American Birds. Alfred A. Knopf, New York, NY.
2. Sykes J (1996) Great Blue Heron eating a Richardson's Ground Squirrel. *Blue Jay* 54: 165-171.
3. Godfrey WE (1986) The birds of Canada. Revised edition. National Museum of Natural Sciences, Ottawa, ON.
4. Banfield AWF (1974) The mammals of Canada. University of Toronto Press (for the National Museum of Natural Sciences, Ottawa), ON.
5. Walley WJ (1985) Young muskrats transported underwater by nursing mother. *Blue Jay* 43:253-254.

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something (perhaps a deer) had eaten that flower. No others - just my seven-petalled flower. It was truly beautiful to see and photograph. What are the odds of a SEVEN-petalled lily?

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**EDITORS' NOTE:** Unfortunately, the photo submitted with this letter was not of print quality. However, for another unusual lily, see the photo by Sarah Vinge on the inside back cover of this issue.



*There is a way that nature speaks, that land speaks. Most of the time we are simply not patient enough, quiet enough, to pay attention to the story.*

- Linda Hogan