

BIG YEAR BIRDING IN SASKATCHEWAN

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A "Big Year" in birding jargon refers to an individual's attempt to see a maximum number of species in a given geographical area within one calendar year. I made such an attempt in Saskatchewan in 1983; this article provides some highlights of my Big Year.

The whole concept of a Big Year has been promoted by *Birding*, the journal of the American Birding Association. Each year they publish life and year list statistics, and a quick check of data from recent years showed the Saskatchewan one-year total rising steadily, with Wayne Harris setting one new mark after another.¹ The record showed:

1977	263 species (79.7%)	Wayne C. Harris
1980	267 species (80.9%)	Wayne C. Harris
1982	276 species (83.6%)	Wayne C. Harris

The percentages represent a comparison against the rounded-off all-time provincial list of 330 confirmed species. Being naturally competitive, I was excited by the thought of trying to set the new record, but didn't actually start in earnest until after a highly successful June trip to the Cypress Hills.

The year began with two Glaucous Gulls on the river in Saskatoon in January after which I stayed indoors for a couple of months while winter had its way. A mid-March trip along the Squaw Rapids — Cumberland House road yielded five Great Gray Owls, as well as a grey phase Gyrfalcon and Hoary Redpoll on the way there. Two weeks later most of the other

northern owls were recorded in the Prince Albert National Park (P.A.N.P.) area: Barred, Boreal and Northern Saw-whet. In early April Sherwood Forest near Regina contained an Eastern Screech-Owl. A week later one of the two Townsend's Solitaires in Saskatoon's Woodlawn Cemetery was seen.

In late April spring migration began in earnest and I was in the Saskatoon area until the end of May. Although no real rarities were seen some of the interesting species included Greater Scaup, Forster's Tern, Osprey, Peregrine Falcon, Red Knot, Dunlin, Ferruginous Hawk, Hudsonian Godwit, Virginia Rail, Buff-breasted Sandpiper, Philadelphia Vireo and Sharp-tailed Sparrow. By the end of May 197 species had been seen, only one of which appeared on the revised provincial checklist as a "straggler", namely the Glaucous Gull.²

In the hope, vain hope it turned out, of finding Mountain Plovers, I took a week off to bird the Cypress Hills area. A Piping Plover at Gardiner Dam on the way there, as well as Lark Sparrow at Saskatchewan landing were of note. At Jones' Peak near Eastend Prairie Falcon, Rock Wren, Turkey Vulture and Violet-green Swallow were added to the list, while the Cypress Hills produced Cinnamon Teal, MacGillivray's Warbler, Trumpeter Swan, Common Poorwill, Wild Turkey and Dusky Flycatcher. Farther south near the ghost town of Govenlock McCown's Longspur, Brewer's Sparrow, Sage Grouse, Say's Phoebe and a breeding pair of Northern Mockingbird were the highlights. My return trip to Saskatoon via the newly-created Grasslands National Park (a must for anyone who



Sedge Wren

Fred W. Lahrman

likes wild places) yielded Yellow-breasted Chat and Willow Flycatcher.

Back in the Saskatoon area were Grasshopper Sparrow and Yellow Rail, and a mid-June trip to the Squaw Rapids area produced Whip-poor-will and Chimney Swift as well as many warblers and flycatchers. A late June visit to the southeast corner of the province produced an Indigo Bunting in the Qu'Appelle River valley near Tantallon, and an Orchard Oriole in Estevan. At the end of June 246 species had been recorded but still only the one straggler.

Not all trips were successful. I looked for an Eastern Wood-Pewee in Greenwater Provincial Park in early July but did not find it. A week later a trip to Dore Lake yielded Caspian Tern, Yellow-bellied Flycatcher and a Northern Hawk-Owl with two fledglings. On that same trip a Sedge Wren was seen near the southwest corner of P.A.N.P. In late July I visited P.A.N.P. again, finding Spruce Grouse and Nashville Warbler. At the end of the month I drove down to Regina to see a Lazuli Bunting, the same trip producing two sightings of Wood Ducks. By the end of July I'd reached 259 species.

In August I added only four species. Labour Day was spent in the rain in P.A.N.P. and the Emma Lake area

where Winter Wren, Smith's Longspur and a second straggler — Northern Parula were added. Blackstrap Lake near Saskatoon had a mid-September Harlequin Duck and Buffer Lake an American Black Duck. Then another straggler, an Arctic Loon in breeding plumage showed up at Blackstrap Lake, and Whooping Cranes at Buffer Lake. By the end of September I'd reached 273 species including four stragglers.

An early-October trip to Buffalo Narrows yielded no species, but on the way back I stopped in Biggar to see the Varied Thrush reported there. Then near the middle of October a pair of Barrow's Goldeneye were found at Blackstrap Lake and later that month a King Eider. At the end of October I travelled to Buck Lake south of Regina where I saw Brant that had been reported from there. By month's end my count stood at 278 species, including 7 stragglers.

Yet another rare duck turned up at Blackstrap Lake in early November when a Black Scoter was found. The next day a pair of Oldsquaw were seen at Broderick Reservoir near Outlook. In the middle of November a trip to the Cypress' Hills yielded Rosy Finch. I capped off my year's list with Willow Ptarmigan which I saw in Stony Rapids on a well-timed business trip.



Lazuli Bunting

Fred W. Lahrman

The final total was 282 species, including 8 stragglers, out of a confirmed provincial all-time list of 338 species including 47 stragglers. My Big Year has taken up about 680 hours of field work and I had driven about 25 thousand km! Of the 17 non-stragglers that I did not see (at least 10 of which did show up in Saskatchewan in 1983 as they were reported by others, marked by * below), the Passenger Pigeon is extinct; Greater Prairie-Chicken, Chukar and Mute Swan are either extirpated or very rare; a trip to Lake Athabasca in June would have likely turned up Red-throated Loon, Parasitic Jaeger*, Mew Gull*, and Arctic Tern*; time spent in the eastern Qu'Appelle and Souris River valleys would probably have produced Red-headed Woodpecker*, Eastern Bluebird*, Black-throated Blue Warbler*, and Scarlet Tanager*; and always hard to find because they occur so sporadically are Great Egret*, Cattle Egret*, Sage Thrasher, Blackheaded Grosbeak* and Dickcissel.

Stragglers which were seen in the province in 1983 by others but which I did not see were: Snowy Egret, Eurasian Wigeon, Whimbrel, Sabine's Gull, Eastern Wood-Pewee, Clark's Nutcracker, Pine Warbler and Golden-Crowned Sparrow. Thus the total provincial list for 1983, to the best of my knowledge was 300 species (almost 88.8%). Is it possible to see (over 90% of the provincial total) in one year 305 species? With a full year of effort, and a network of birders on the lookout for rarities, yes it probably is. Who will answer that challenge?

¹BIRDING — Supplement to Volume XV, No. 1, February 1983, Amer. Birding Assoc.

²KREBA, R. 1983. Field checklist for Saskatchewan birds, sixth edition. Mus. of Nat. Hist., Sask. Culture & Recreation.