
LETTERS

SKULL CREEK OBSERVATIONS IN A YEAR OF DROUGHT

Midsummer of 1984 brought the longest continuous spell of hot weather that I have experienced since I came west in 1922. Water sprayed on the garden seemed to evaporate as fast it was put on and there was little growth. In later summer the grasshoppers ate what was left. The carrots and beets were just spikes. Fortunately the grasshoppers seemed to have an aversion to roses, pansies and some English phlox, so I had a few cut flowers.

During the severe drought of 1937 we were also afflicted with grasshoppers. My late husband, Steve, came all smiles one day that year and said "The grasshoppers are nearly gone." Hundreds of gulls had settled across a field in a long row, all facing the same direction, eating as they moved ahead. The ones behind would move up in front, so that they were moving in a rolling motion across the field. Occasionally some gulls would go to the creek for a drink.

In 1984 I noticed hundreds of crows on the big hill in front of our house. They were all facing the same direction and going through the same rolling motion as the gulls had done in 1937. On another day my daughter-in-law, Betty, watched the same phenomenon. After that we had few grasshoppers left.

In my wanderings over the hills, there were no lovely waving grasses, silvery weeds, or flowers — just the cracked earth with wisps of dried grass that crumbled beneath the feet. We had no crop except for a little hay on sub-irrigation land. Insects were more prevalent than other years.

Blister beetles cleaned the leaves off all the honeysuckles. I left the beetles alone, and learned to live with mere skeletons of honeysuckles, because I know that blister beetles are also enemies of grasshoppers. Small insects were more prevalent as well.

When I was working in the garden, small midges would get beneath my glasses, in my eyes and hair and in my clothing. One day in the garden I looked down. The ground at my feet seemed to be moving. Hordes of black ants were all travelling in the same direction, in a uniform column about eight inches wide. They were like a platoon of marching soldiers. The line was at least 30 feet long. On another day I observed a column of red ants, each of which carried a little white egg.

For the first year since 1922, I did not have a House Wren in my bird house. There was no wren to waken me in the morning, its little throat bubbling with cheery song.

Also, we lost our apples and plums, for their blossoms froze hard in the late spring snowstorm. On the other hand, this snow melted in the low areas along the creek, resulting in the best crop of gooseberries, saskatoons and black currants in years.

This year there are many more deer — hundreds between here and Maple Creek. Motorists beware! Sixty, mostly does and fawns, were counted on our homestead one day — most years we would have about a dozen, back in the woods. I looked out my kitchen window one morning and saw a beautiful buck enjoying the cotoneaster berries. He looked unconcernedly at me and ambled off. In fact, this year there are more deer than we care to feed, since we have to import all our expensive hay and food pellets from as far away as Prince

Albert. Why the deer chose our barren pastures this year is hard to understand unless they were driven south by the prairie fires north of the Trans-Canada highway. — *Marjorie Mann*, Box 250, Piapot, Saskatchewan. SON 1Y0

BANK SWALLOW TENANTS, RUFFS AND REEVES.

Regarding Dale and Paule Hjertaas' trespassers on Bank Swallows (Blue Jay 42 (4): 210-211), with Rob Owens and his wife and Richard Palindat, I saw House Sparrows wintering in Bank Swallow holes about 20 miles east of Calgary one winter around 1973. None of us had seen such a thing elsewhere, but in most areas of the east there would be no foraging for House Sparrows around most Bank Swallow colonies.

Regarding Reynolds' displaying Ruff and Reeves at Churchill (Blue Jay 42 (4): 219-221), one of each, were around Cape Jourimain NWA, New Brunswick, for most of the summer of 1972, with no other breeding evidence; a male was present for part of the following summer. So his is another inconclusive observation, though in more likely habitat. — *A.J. Erskine*, P.O. Box 1327, Sackville, New Brunswick. EOA 3CO

RAPTOR MISIDENTIFICATION

I enjoyed the article in Blue Jay on trees and the Red-tailed Hawk (Houston, Blue Jay 41 (2):99-109). But the editor mislabeled the raptor on page 104. It is an immature Swainson's Hawk, not a Red-tailed Hawk. — *Bill Clark*, 9306 Arlington Boulevard, Fairfax, Virginia. 22030

NOTES FROM WHITE BEAR

Our ducks and geese left us a month earlier than usual, with the advent of early winter. Now in December (letter of 21 December) we have at least three Northern Goshawks visiting the bird feeders and harassing the pigeons almost daily. They certainly make the Ring-necked Pheasants, Sharp-tailed Grouse and Gray Partridge wary. I am amazed at the speed the goshawk can attain on a short run — it will overtake a pigeon quite handily, and if the pigeon could not manoeuvre so well, it would be doomed every time. Luckily the goshawk cannot keep speed up for long, so soon lands and waits for the pigeons to settle down, then tries again. I find the goshawk a far greater threat to the pigeons than any of the falcons. I have never seen a goshawk pursue anything smaller than a pigeon or partridge. The goshawk totally ignores Black-billed Magpies, in fact a magpie will come within a foot of the goshawk and pick up morsels of its prey.

Deer make themselves right at home here and often bed down right by the house. When I do chores they are right with me looking for a little oats. I snapped the enclosed picture of a spike buck that was watching me through the window. — *Sig Jordheim*, White Bear, Saskatchewan. SOL 3L0

