RECENT OCCURRENCE AND CONFIRMED NESTING OF THE BLACK-NECKED STILT IN THE BATTLEFORDS AREA, SASKATCHEWAN

Spencer G. Sealy
Winnipeg, MB R3T 0J5
Spencer.Sealy@umanitoba.ca

Orval Beland
Denholm, SK S0M 0R0

Introduction

The Black-necked Stilt (*Himantopus mexicanus*; hereafter, stilt) has expanded its range northward in western Canada in recent decades.[1-3] In Saskatchewan, widespread observations and reports of stilts nesting in several areas have increased since the late 1980s and post-breeding flocks have been recorded in late summer.[4,5] Analyses of these and additional records have led to the suggestion that the northward expansion has established the Black-necked Stilt as a regular breeder on the Canadian Prairies, but the species' sensitivity to fluctuating water levels may find individuals nesting at one site in one year and at different sites the next.[6] Observations we report here made over several decades in the Battlefords area are consistent with these findings.

We report the first observations and nesting behaviour of the Black-necked Stilt in the Battlefords area of west-central Saskatchewan over a period of 60 years. Sealy observed birds south of Battleford in the late 1950s and early 1960s, and during short visits to the area through 2023, but the first stilts, a pair, were not observed until 2016. Beland, who returned to take up residence near the family farm south of Denholm in 2000, observed individual stilts and adults with young between 2018 and 2022, but neither of us recorded stilts in 2023, by which time some of the smaller wetlands were dry. Our observations augment those reported to eBird and confirm the stilt's recent occurrence and nesting in another part of Saskatchewan, the Battlefords area.

Observations

We observed stilts at mostly unnamed wetlands (hereafter, sites) of various size (Figure 1), each identified by latitude and longitude. We refer to local, unofficial names of wetlands if available. Most observations were made from roads that passed alongside or divided the sites. This reduced disturbance but precluded searching habitat for nests and young; parts of some of the larger wetlands were inaccessible. Nevertheless, nesting was confirmed when developed young and broods became visible and, in at least one case, the date one family group left the area. Defensive behaviour exhibited by many presumed pairs also strongly suggested nesting. American Avocets (*Recurvirostra americana*; hereafter, avocets) nested at many sites where stilts were recorded.

Battleford

Sealy moved with his family to Battleford in early July 1958 and observed birds at all seasons through the late summer of 1961 before moving on to university. Except for spending the late spring and summer there in 1962, visits to the Battlefords generally of a few days occurred in the ensuing decades at various times of the year, including the post-breeding season in many years, a few breeding seasons in some of the early years, and during the breeding and post-breeding seasons over most of the last 10 years. Although different habitats and wetlands were visited south and southwest of Battleford during each visit, six wetlands were surveyed during each visit (see below). One putative pair of stilts was observed in 2016, several stilts, including pairs, were observed in 2019, and a single stilt was observed in 2022 (there were no visits during the pandemic in 2020 and 2021). Stilts were not observed at any sites in 2023. Aggressive defense by individuals toward the observer and probable pairs suggested nesting. We recorded some adults as male, with their glossy black backs that contrasted with the brown heads of females, and in males, bills that contrasted sharply with white underparts and very long pinkish legs.[10]

Observation Sites

N52.66762°, W108.29985°
("Fisher's Lake" / "Galbraith's Lake"; site 1 in Figure 1)

At 09:40 hr on 25 June 2016, an agitated male stilt was observed flying back and forth between a flooded area on one side of a road to the other side that separated the two large "lakes". Later that day, a male and female that behaved as a mated pair were observed for 20 minutes beginning at 12:50 hr. The single female observed the following day performed the well-described "broken-wing" display, frequently crouching on the road as if incubating eggs before moving to another spot and repeating the performance.[7] Up to five avocets loafed within 30 m on the shore during each observation period.

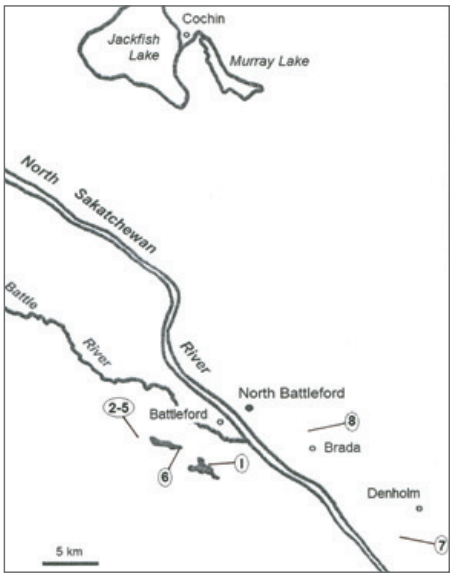

FIGURE 1. Map of the Battlefords area, showing locations of wetland sites 1-8 where Black-necked Stilts were recorded, south and west of Battleford, and southwest of Denholm, in at least one year from 2016 to 2022. No stilts were observed in 2023. Map prepared by N.L. Sealy.

Stilts were not observed at this site in 2019, or 2022 and 2023.

N52.68957°, W108.42545°
(four unnamed wetlands, within 5 km; sites 2-5 in Figure 1)

On 18 June 2019, defensive behaviour suggested nesting. Stilts and avocets were present at each site. Three stilts, plus apparently a mated pair, were observed at sites 2 and 3, respectively. Seven stilts and up to nine avocets behaved aggressively at sites 4 (Figure 2) and 5, which were about 150 m apart and separated by a road and cropland. Stilts flew back and forth between these sites. No stilts were observed in 2016, or 2022 and 2023.

N52.681939°, W108.42545°
(Winniford Lake; site 6 in Figure 1)

A single male foraged amid dead trees at the flooded edge of Winniford Lake, about 10:30 hr on 8 and 9 June 2022; the contrast between this habitat (Figure 3) and that of site 4 (Figure 2) is evident. The bird was absent at 12:00 hr on 19 June and not seen again. The water level of this lake was receding when the bird was first observed, and the site was dry on 15 September. No stilts were observed there in 2016 or 2019 when the water level was high.

Denholm

Beland returned to reside near the family farm south of Denholm in 2000. Beginning in 2006 he recorded natural history observations, particularly of birds at two sites, which permitted recognition of the first appearance of stilts in the area, late in the season of 2018, and eventually to confirm nesting. No stilts were observed in 2019, 2021 or 2023 because sloughs previously visited were dry, but several pairs were recorded in 2020 and 2022, and juveniles were recorded. Most observations were made from a vehicle; in 2022, observations were made almost daily.

Observation Sites

N52.60847°, W108.04246°
(unnamed wetland, 2 km NW Beland home; site 7 in Figure 1)

The first observations of stilts were of two adults (with "redder legs and blacker feathers") and apparently two young (family group?) on 24 August 2018. The pair may have nested out of sight at the far end of this large wetland or the group had moved into the area during the post-breeding period, prior to migration. The same (?) family group was observed until 26 August but was gone the following day.

Stilts were observed almost daily from 8 June through 24 August 2020, beginning with at least three individuals engaged in courtship displays on 8 June, and one-to-four adults were recorded through 6 July. Presumed family groups observed from 7 through 29 July generally consisted of two adults with one or two young, possibly the same family, but not all young were visible every day. On 30 July, four different stilts were observed, three of them apparently young. Adults with young were recorded almost daily through 24 August, with the first flying young observed on 6 August; by 10 August all young were flying. No stilts were observed from 25-31 August. Family groups were most visible when they foraged in shallow water near the road that divided the wetland. Up to three broods may have been reared at this wetland given that on 4 August, one adult with one young were observed, but later, two adults and two young were recorded on the road as well as one adult with three young at the west end of this wetland.

At least two family groups were confirmed, first on 18 June 2022 and daily through 5 July, and also from 31 July to 14 August, the last day family groups were seen. The number of young observed, generally with one adult, was between one and four, depending upon their visibility or whether they were from other

FIGURE 2. Black-necked Stilts and American Avocet at site 4, 18 June 2019. Habitat at this site contrasts sharply with that of site 6 shown in Figure 3. No stilts were observed at this site in 2016, 2022 or 2023. Photo credit: N.L. Sealy.

FIGURE 3. Male Black-necked Stilt (centre), foraging in different habitat (site 6), a flooded backwater of Winniford Lake, Saskatchewan, 8 June 2022. This site was dry on 15 September 2022, and in June 2023. Photo credit: N.L. Sealy.

groups. No stilts were observed from 15-18 August, but Gerard Beland (pers. comm., 6 September 2022) observed nine to 11 stilts "one day in late August."

N52.72927°, W108.18134°
("Charabin Marsh", 1.6 km N Brada; site 8 in Figure 1)

On 8 June 2022, Sealy observed at least 13 stilts and 22 avocets; many individuals of both species exhibited defensive behaviour and one avocet could be seen incubating. Beland recorded at least six adults (3 June), "many adults" (25 June), at least 10 adults and 12 "very young" stilts and at least seven adults and eight young avocets (30 June) and two avocets but no stilts (23 July), by which time the water level was low. This site was under cultivation in 2023.

Discussion

Our observations of Black-necked Stilts generally fit the pattern revealed by other recent reports from elsewhere in Saskatchewan. Of the 44 observations (some possibly of the same birds) in the area submitted by birders to eBird between 2018 and 2022[8], most were observed in May and June, but 20 birds were observed during the post-breeding season at Jackfish Lake (Figure 1) in August 2016, and six were recorded at Brada Marsh in August of both 2018 and 2019.

Our observations confirmed that individuals moved into the area and nested in the same year, but the same or different individuals used different wetlands in subsequent years, possibly because of changing water levels. No stilts were recorded near Denholm in 2019, whereas the largest number of stilts was observed that year and several pairs apparently nested south of Battleford. One stilt was observed south of Battleford in 2022, whereas several pairs nested at Denholm. Our observations confirmed that the birds' use of local wetlands may change from year to year.

Several authors[5,6] noted that stilts that moved northward in recent years were possibly forced there by drier nesting conditions brought about by the deepening drought in the southwestern United States and the species' core breeding area.[9] Will the Black-necked Stilt's breeding range shrink again when the southern droughts recede?

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