

BIRD LIFE IN THE YORKTON DISTRICT IN THE 1890's

Through the courtesy of B. W. Cartwright, Chief Naturalist, Ducks Unlimited, we received a most interesting article by R. P. Rooke, formerly of Yorkton, now of Winnipeg, on his experiences with bird life in the Yorkton District in the 1890's. Extracts from Mr. Rooke's notes, as copied below, we believe will be of much interest to readers of the Blue Jay.

In the early spring of 1890 we settled on homesteads in the Rothbury district, 15 miles from Saltcoats. The settlement was in the rolling park-like country, about 20 miles west of the valley of the Assiniboine, on the east side of which were the densely wooded hills of the Duck and Riding Mountains. This area, (no doubt due to it) being contiguous to the Assiniboine Valley, it was one of the main migratory routes of the northern birds, and when standing on a high ridge on a fine morning in spring, it would sometimes appear that the sky was full of the flocks winging their way northward.

Of the larger birds, the Canada Goose came first, but were usually in small flocks when they arrived, as many of them nested in this area, but a week or two later, innumerable flocks of the smaller geese, Wavies, Blues, etc., would pass over. On a sunny day, the gleaming white wings of Pelicans, Whistling Swans, and Whooping Cranes could be seen gleaming in the sun, high in the sky, with, at lower altitudes, flocks of Sandhill Cranes, Cormorants and others.

It was rarely on a spring morning that the loud rattling cry of the Sandhill Cranes could not be heard in one direction or another, as many of the flocks came down to feed on the sandy ridges, and where there were permanent marshes, many pair nested.

Among the game birds which nested and were very plentiful in our vicinity were the Sharp-tailed and Ruffed Grouse. The Pinnated Grouse were not known until about 1905 and were then known as the "Manitoba" Prairie Chicken, as they arrived via that province.

Around the north and east sides of our settlement there was a belt of heavy white and black poplar bush about six miles long and three to four miles wide. In this area were many wild hay meadows with reedy patches in the centre, where marsh birds such as Red-winged and Yellow-headed Blackbirds, Tern, Coots, Grebe, Rails and some of the waders nested. In the bush were many fire-killed poplar trees and stumps in which Woodpeckers, Swallows, Bluebirds, etc., nested and in the taller trees the large hawks; such as the Red-tailed and Rough-legged had their dwellings.

Among the birds that were rare at the time, but are more plentiful now, were the Mourning Dove, Bluebird and Canvas-back duck, etc.

With intensive settlement, many species which were plentiful in the area in question have disappeared, owing to their nesting and feeding grounds being cultivated, and the droughts of the 1930's drying up the small lakes and marshes, but it is still, I believe, a well populated bird area.

In January, 1893, I went to work on a horse ranch 20 miles west of Yorkton. About two miles south of the ranch, there was a depression in the prairie which we called the "ravine." It was about $1\frac{1}{2}$ miles long and 200 yards wide at the bottom. There was no stream in it, but at several places some hundreds of yards apart, there were springs that welled up through low, muskegy hillocks. Around each of these marshes, formed by the springs, grew a wide belt of bulrushes and reeds. This was the only place I knew of where the Sandhill Crane nested in numbers, and on one occasion when I made a fairly thorough search, I found 10 nests, each with two eggs.

BIRD BANDING NOTES

C. Stuart Houston, Yorkton bird bander, reports two returns this year of birds banded in 1946. A Chipping Sparrow, banded June 10, 1946, was retrapped June 30, 1947, while a Robin, banded May 10, 1946, was found dead in the yard where banded, July 8, 1947. At Nipawin, M. G. Street had returns of the same species; a Chipping Sparrow, banded June 24, 1945, was retaken May 22, 1946, and again this year on May 28. The Robin, banded June 28, 1946, returned to the same trap May 11, 1947. Street also had an interesting recovery of a Common Redpoll which was banded at Nipawin, Sask., March 8, 1946. This small bird was shot at Bluevale, Ontario, some 40 miles from London, Ont., on February 14, 1947. Another Common Redpoll, also banded March 8, 1946, returned March 20, 1947 to the same trap where it was banded.

DISASTERS TO BIRD LIFE

Mr. Dick Bird F.Z.S. of Regina who through the medium of inspiring movies and lectures, is probably doing more in the cause of conservation education than any other person in the province, reports several disasters to bird life in the province.

One of these occurred early in July, on Last Mountain Lake north of Regina, where Mr. Bird was taking pictures of a pelican colony nesting on a gravelly sandbar half a mile from shore. A sudden windstorm lashed the water during the night and washed over the lower part of the bar and destroyed about 25 pelican nests with newly hatched young, a number of grebe nests, common terns and several ducks' nests.

Among "human hazards" encountered this spring by Mr. Bird were "results of misguided individuals whose rifle-sighting eyes were keener than their wits. Four of our Swainson hawk families were wiped out by the demise of parent birds as they sat confidently on roadside telephone poles." Mr. Bird noticed the five defunct Swainson hawks, each killed by a .22 rifle bullet, decorating a fence. He reports that he took the birds off the barbed wires and hid them, with shame, in the grasses by the road,

A final tragedy is told of a large hole in a corner fence post where Flickers have nested for the past five years, and wherein Mother Flicker had hatched out her usual eight which Mr. Bird hoped to band. Some sadistic individual ("I'd like to find him!" vows Mr. Bird) "went to a great deal of trouble to find a stick of the right shape and length to poke down inside the hole to kill the young...The weapon remained in the nest."