



SPRING 2024 VOLUME 82.1

BLUE JAY





The Yellowhead Flyway Birding Trail Association's Loon Initiatives Committee conducted its annual survey at Madge Lake over the spring and summer of 2023. See page 6 for the results.



The yearly persistence of Little Gulls in the Churchill, Manitoba area suggests that they are still breeding regularly. Following an extreme rainfall event in July 2023, 10 adults and two flightless chicks were observed along the Churchill River.



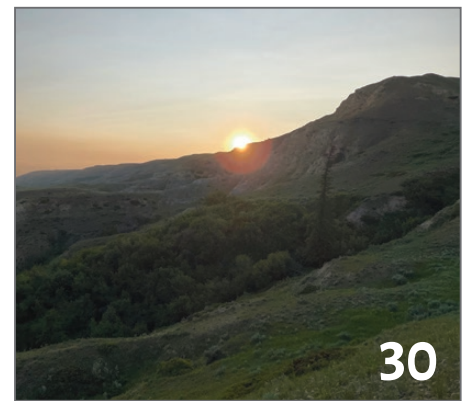
Several natural history specimens collected by the Rev. John H. Keen on the Queen Charlotte Islands (Haida Gwaii), in the 1890s, were undescribed. Among the "new" species was an Ermine. The type specimen was deposited in a U.S. Museum, but Keen's attempts to have additional specimens displayed in a local museum were met with disinterest.



Long persecuted as a pest species, magpies are here to stay, and that's not such a bad thing, says Lorne Fitch.



John Patterson, Stan Shadick and Marten Stoffel share the details of the first confirmed nesting of Northern Pygmy-Owl in Saskatchewan.



In this issue's edition of Human Nature, Nathaniel Hak — Nature Saskatchewan 2023 summer assistant — highlights how those who say Saskatchewan is "flat" and "boring" perhaps just aren't visiting the right places!

WHAT'S INSIDE

- 5 **Celebrating the 75th Anniversary of Nature Saskatchewan**
- 6 **2023 Loon Initiatives Report: Madge Lake, Duck Mountain Provincial Park**
Doug Welykholowa
- 10 **Little Gull (*Hydrocoloeus Minutus*) Breeding Evidence Following a Storm Event in Churchill, Manitoba**
Olivia Maillet
Andrew Brown
- 13 **Nature Saskatchewan Member Spotlight: Lawrence Beckie**
Ellen Bouvier
- 14 **Book Review**
Streams of Consequence: Dispatches from the Conservation World
Joel Cherry
- 16 **Haida Ermine: A New Species, But Why Weren't All Curators on Board?**
Spencer G. Sealy
- 19 **Poetry: The Wildlife Photographer**
Brian K Jeffery
- 20 **Villain or Victim: The Black and White of Magpies**
Lorne Fitch
- 21 **The Natural World**
Brian K Jeffery
- 22 **First Confirmed Nesting of Northern Pygmy-Owl in Saskatchewan**
John Patterson
Marten Stoffel
Stan Shadick
- 27 **In Pictures: Looking Back on 75 Years**
- 28 **Nature Saskatchewan Member Spotlight: Muriel Carlson**
Darlene Roth
- 30 **Human Nature: Prairie Saskatchewan's Deceptive Reputation**
Nathaniel Hak
- 31 **Mystery Photo**

FROM THE PRESIDENT

Lorne Scott

President, Nature Saskatchewan

With the year 2024 marking its 75th anniversary, Nature Saskatchewan can proudly reflect on many accomplishments since its inception in 1949. Nature Saskatchewan (Saskatchewan Natural History Society) has been a credible, strong and consistent voice for nature conservation in our diverse province.

In the early years, efforts were directed toward the protection of Saskatchewan's provincial floral emblem, the Western Red Lily. There was a strong lobby to have birds of prey protected from indiscriminate killing. Throughout our history, inventories and surveys of native plants and animals have occurred, and continue to this day.



ON THE FRONT COVER

An adult Northern Pygmy-Owl photographed at Meadow Lake Provincial Park, Saskatchewan, in June 2023. Photo credit: Scott Currie.



ON THE BACK COVER

An adult Northern Pygmy-Owl keeping watch as its young fledgling was nearby. Photo credit: Boyd Coburn.

The 1970s saw the campaign for a Grasslands National Park in southwest Saskatchewan move into high gear. The protection of birds' nesting colonies on islands in lakes was achieved. The removal of native habitat in community pastures was fought, and met with some success. Opposition to a poorly planned dam on the Churchill River resulted the proposal being scrapped.

Each decade brought new challenges. In the 1980s, emphasis on endangered species such as Greater Sage-Grouse and Burrowing Owls were profiled. Responsible lobbying resulted in the provincial *Wildlife Habitat Protection Act*, which eventually secured some 3.4 million acres of Crown land from being sold or developed. Some view this as one of the major accomplishments of wildlife conservation in the province's history. Unfortunately, whittling away at the Act by subsequent governments has resulted in it being weakened and some public land being removed from protection. The Heritage Marsh program was launched to protect some of our important wetlands from drainage and development.

By the 1990s, Nature Saskatchewan had acquired its first paid staff. With an office and staff, outreach work expanded to species at risk and more detailed attention was given to conservation issues. With support from groups like Nature Saskatchewan, the province was a leader in implementing the North American Waterfowl Management Plan. A new forestry management act and conservation easements legislation was achieved. And, after 50 years of dedicated effort, Grasslands National Park became a reality.

The 2000s saw the Society to continue to grow with landowner stewardship programs recognizing those who provide habitat for Burrowing Owls, Loggerhead Shrikes and rare plants. We voiced strong opposition to a province-wide Coyote bounty program, which was eventually halted.



Lorne Scott

Today, two of our major challenges are the continued loss of natural landscape and the continued uncontrolled drainage of wetlands. In the agricultural portion of Saskatchewan, south of the forest fringe, we have lost close to 90 per cent of our natural landscape to agricultural development, roads, urban centres, etc. Consequently, grassland birds are disappearing at an alarming rate — more than any other group of birds in North America. It is imperative that we find ways to recognize landowners who are dedicated to preserving natural areas for biodiversity. We and all concerned citizens need to work hard to have a wetland policy for Saskatchewan, which will lead to their protection. We are the only province to not have a wetland policy.

National surveys have consistently shown that more than 80 per cent of Canadians state that biodiversity and abundant wildlife is important to them. Yet less than 10 per cent of Canadians are members or supporters of conservation organizations. With your help, we need to close this gap.

A special thanks to our volunteer Board Members, our dedicated staff and the hundreds of landowners who provide a home for nature.

Thank you to Nature Saskatchewan members as well — your ideas, concerns and input are needed and welcome. Please feel free to reach out to us, and thank you for caring. 🦉



BLUE JAY

Blue Jay, founded in 1942 by Isabel M. Priestly, is a journal of natural history and conservation for Saskatchewan and adjacent regions. It is published quarterly by Nature Saskatchewan.

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Blue Jay welcomes all submissions, preferably by e-mail (although hand-written or typed manuscripts will be considered to accommodate those who do not have access to computer equipment), polished or in need of some editorial assistance. All items for publication should be sent to the editor electronically (in a Microsoft Word document) by e-mail or on CD. Hard copies and CDs can be mailed to the editor at the address above.

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January 1 for the Spring issue, April 1 for the Summer issue, July 1 for the Fall issue, and October 1 for the Winter issue. For detailed information, please see the "Guidelines for Authors" under the Publications section of the Nature Saskatchewan website.

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CELEBRATING THE 75TH ANNIVERSARY OF NATURE SASKATCHEWAN (WE ALSO WANT TO HEAR FROM YOU!)

The year 2024 is very special for Nature Saskatchewan, as we are celebrating our 75th anniversary of conservation, research, friendship, nature appreciation and education. Nature Saskatchewan (formerly the Saskatchewan Natural History Society) grew out of the desire of local naturalists to share their passion for the natural world.

There will be many ways that we will celebrate our anniversary throughout the year, starting with the unveiling of our new 75th anniversary logo! Our original marshland logo (shown bottom left) was designed in the early '60s by member Marie Capusten, a graphic artist who studied at the Ontario School of Fine Arts. This logo was unanimously picked by a panel of judges as part of a contest held by the society! It was used in things like our Nature Views newsletter and would have bore our original name Saskatchewan Natural History Society.

Although we loved the look of the original logo, it was time for a refresh so our logo could be more accessible for all of our needs. As such, we worked with Rhea Leibel, a graphic designer, illustrator and art director from Regina to make it happen. We really wanted to honour the feel of the original logo while giving it an update, and couldn't be happier with how it turned out (shown bottom right)!

We look forward to everyone coming together to celebrate the 75th anniversary at both the Spring Meet in Saskatoon and the Fall Meet in Regina, and have a committee working hard to make these events the highlights of the year! More details will be released soon, so stay tuned!

Throughout this year, we will be sharing stories, photos and memories of the last 75 years both in the Blue Jay and on our social media channels. We would like to encourage you to share your memories and photos as well. For instance, you could send us a little note about what being a member of Nature Saskatchewan means to you!

Please send submissions to Ellen Bouvier, Nature Saskatchewan Communications Manager, at ebouvier@naturesask.ca. We would love to hear from you! 📧



LOOKING AHEAD

CONSERVATION AT THE CORE: KEY MOMENTS AT NATURE SASKATCHEWAN

January - March 27, 2024
Regina Performing Arts Centre

75TH ANNIVERSARY SPRING MEET

June 21-23, 2024
Saskatoon, SK

75TH ANNIVERSARY FALL MEET

September 13-14, 2024
Regina, SK

STAY TUNED...DETAILS AND
FURTHER EVENTS WILL BE
ANNOUNCED SOON!



2023 LOON INITIATIVES REPORT: MADGE LAKE, DUCK MOUNTAIN PROVINCIAL PARK



Doug Welykholowa

Chairperson

YFBTA Loon Initiatives Committee

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In 2023, the ice went off the lake on 13 May. As in previous years, once there was enough open water for them to land and take off, loons began to arrive, which was about a week before the ice disappeared. Our first spotting of loon chicks was on 18 June — about the same time as last year. The two chicks spotted that day were less than a week old.

Total numbers of Common Loons this year were similar to previous years, with a high count of 79 adults (Table 1). We found 10 chicks/juveniles on the lake, all of which survived into September. Four of the 10 were only spotted as of 17 July. On 29 August, we spotted two additional juveniles swimming in relatively close proximity to the two adults and their two juveniles at Bird Island. The Bird Island pair and their offspring were first spotted on 18 June as the first pair of the season, and additional chicks/juveniles were never spotted in the same area, so we are confident that the two extra juveniles were fly-ins from neighbouring lakes. Extra juveniles have been spotted on the lake in late August and September every year once the adults start leaving. They likely gravitate to Madge from the nearby smaller lakes once their parents have left to fly south.

A total of 24 nesting territories were observed this year, compared to last year (Figures 1 and 2).

One item of note is that over the years, we have noticed that the 29 occupied and abandoned territories depicted in Figures 1 and 2 rarely vary in location. Sites that are abandoned in one year will often be reoccupied in later years. For some reason, the loons prefer these locations over other areas of the lake. It may have to do with availability of fish in those locations, water depth, shore development or some other factors.

Three nests were directly observed on

SURVEY YEAR	TOTAL ADULTS	# OF TERRITORIAL PAIR	SURVIVING JUVENILES	# OF CHICKS OR JUVENILES LOST
2010/13 AVERAGE		25	29	
2013	75	26	14	2
2014	86	26	9	2
2015	78	26	6	2
2016	82	26	10	0
2017	78	25	16	1
2018	72	26	12	0
2019	75	25	7	1
2020	72	26	10	2
2021	80	23	14	1
2022	82	25	10	2
2023	79	24	10	0

TABLE 1. Madge Lake Loon Count Summaries 2010-2023.

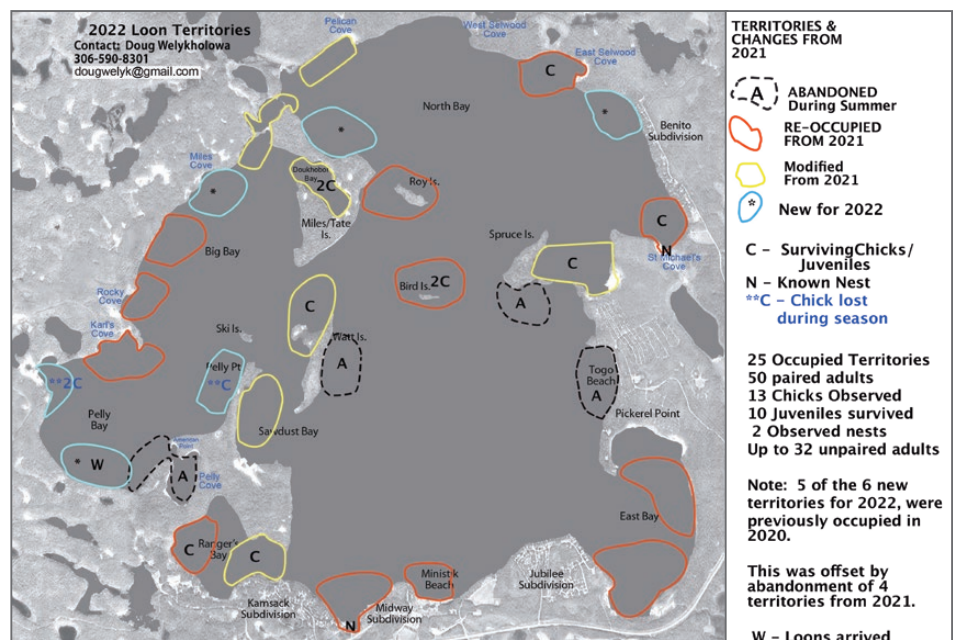


FIGURE 1. 2022 Loon Territories

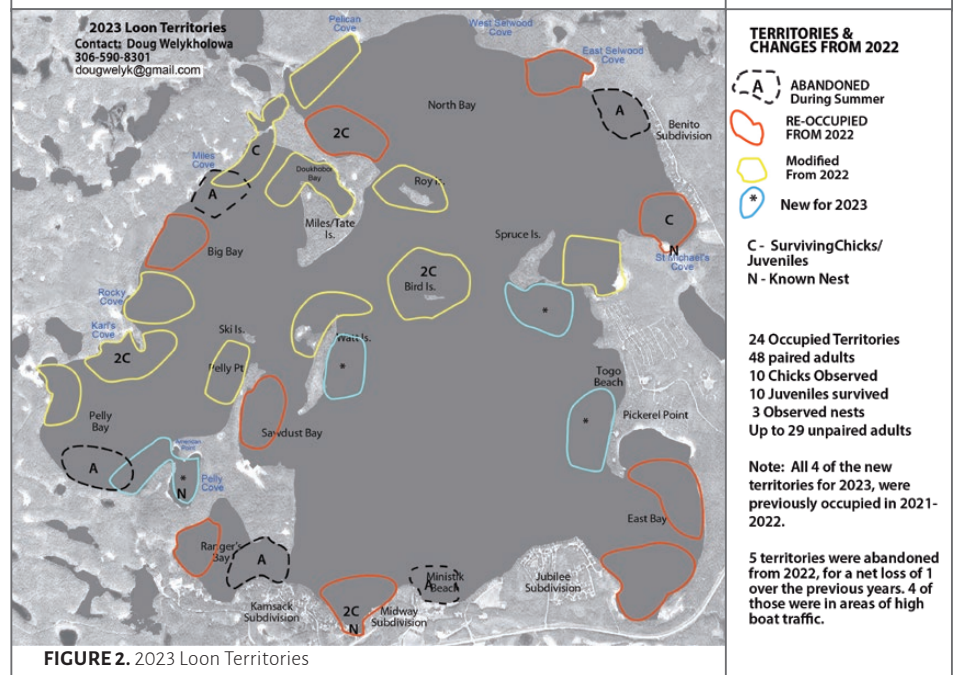


FIGURE 2. 2023 Loon Territories

the lake this year. The one at St. Michael's Camp was on the same beaver lodge that the same pair occupied in previous years. Two eggs were spotted there, but only one chick survived. The second was located on the edge of the small island in the old boat lagoon (Figure 3). Two chicks hatched successfully at that location (Figure 4). After the loons left the nest, it was occupied by a family of Northern Shoveler ducks with five chicks. The third nest was spotted in a bunch of drowned willows in the small cove off Pelly Bay. In 2021, that nest was built on a beaver lodge in the middle of the cove. That beaver lodge was drowned in 2022. There were no successful hatchings from that pair this year.

Based on their size and colouring, eight of the 10 chicks hatched between the middle and end of June. One pair of chicks in Pelly Bay was first spotted on 17 July. At this time, they were approximately one week old, and were riding on one of the loon's back, making them at least three weeks younger than the others. They may be the product of a second laying, after the first eggs were likely lost.

What was very unusual about this pair and their chicks is that they showed no concern with us being near them. In fact, they allowed us to approach to within 15 feet, and made no attempt to swim away. They appeared calm and made no noise, other than a couple of low-level hoots. When we first approached them, there were no signs of the two chicks, but I noticed that one bird's wings were bulged up, so I suggested to Mieka and Derek Tomlin and Ron Nimetz, who were

accompanying me, that we wait for a bit to see what happens. Shortly afterward, one chick popped up from beneath one wing, then a second appeared from under

the other. We then watched as one chick got in the water in order to be fed by the second adult. We got fantastic pictures (Figure 5 and 6).



FIGURE 3. Loon on nest in boat lagoon, 17 June 2023. All photos courtesy of Doug Welykholowa.



FIGURE 4. Adults and chicks from boat lagoon nest, 25 June 2023.



FIGURE 5. Loon in Pelly Bay with two chicks on back, 17 July 2023.



FIGURE 6. One Chick being fed in Pelly Bay, 17 July 2023.



FIGURE 7. Older chicks being fed near boat lagoon, 17 July 2023.



FIGURE 8. Juveniles being fed near Bird Island, 13 August 2023.

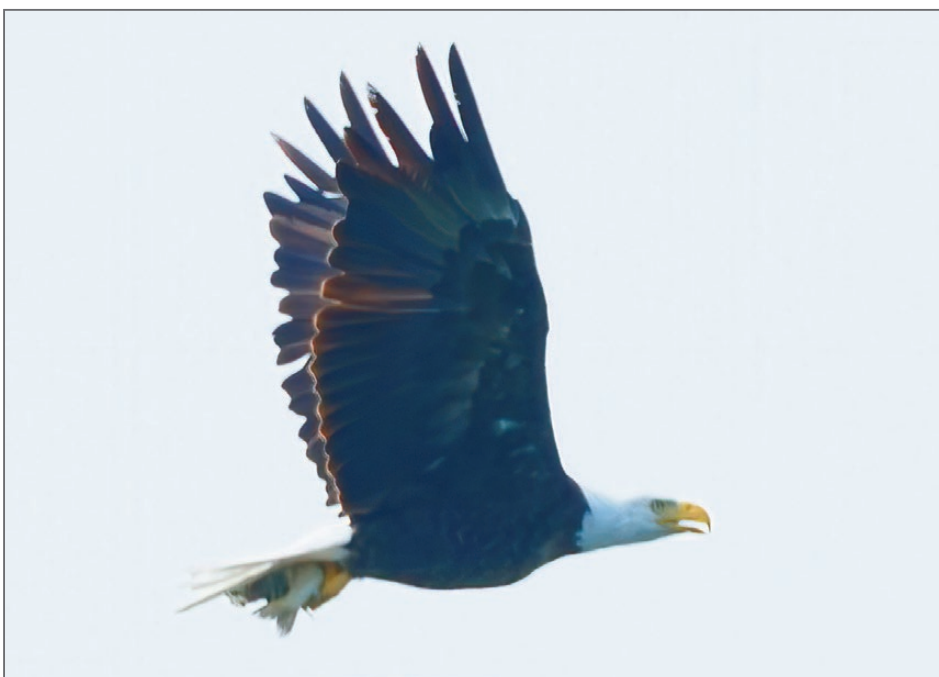


FIGURE 9. Bald Eagle with large fish in its talons.

As in previous years, the lake played host to a large number of unpaired young adults (three-to-five-year-olds). These loons were often spotted in different locations on the lake with each count, and group size varied from three to 24 birds, depending on the day. It is quite common for these young adults to gather in larger groups in the middle of the lake during the evening, learning to socialize, while dispersing during the day to feed in other locations, including the many nearby kettle lakes surrounding Madge. Most of these groups allowed us to get fairly close to them, without them getting too concerned, unlike the majority of the territorial pairs, which usually warned us away if we got closer than 100 m to them.

The loon population on the lake appears to have remained stable over the last 14 years of data collection. Total numbers of adults have varied between 72 and 86. As mentioned in last year's report, the one steady factor is the number of occupied nesting territories, which average just over 25 territories per year.

The disturbing trend continues to be the average number of surviving juveniles produced on the lake. Long-term studies by Birds Canada and organizations in the northern states show that in order to maintain a viable loon population, the average number of surviving chicks (reaching six weeks maturity) has to be above 0.47 chicks per breeding pair. Over the last 14 years, Madge Lake has averaged only 0.41 chicks surviving to six weeks per breeding pair. This indicates that the loon population on the lake may not be sustainable at the current levels in the future. As I have noted in previous reports, this is a trend right across North America. In the eastern provinces and northeastern US, acid rain, pollution and resulting increases in methyl mercury are a main cause. Climate change is also a contributing factor.

Here at Madge, pollution and heavy metals are not thought to be significant, but this is an area that has not been properly studied. Predators, such as eagles, are also not believed to be a significant problem; however, other predators could be a problem. The one

trend that we have observed, which is of concern, is a significant increase in power boat traffic each year since we have kept records. Our observations indicate that the breeding pairs are taking extra measures to hide their young and keep them out of the high traffic areas, in most cases. In addition, most pairs that occupy territories with high boat traffic are usually unsuccessful in producing viable chicks. More research is required to produce definitive answers, but this is well beyond our local capabilities. Whatever the answer is, the loons are an excellent indicator of the health of our environment. What affects them will have broad-reaching consequences in the future, and that should concern us all.

In addition to the loons, we spotted a number of other species, including a Bald Eagle flying with a large fish in its talons (Figure 9), a family of six otters in east bay, and a Coyote swimming off Watt Island, toward Miles Island. Pelicans, Osprey and Great Blue Heron were also seen, as well as at least one pair of Trumpeter Swans. The lake is also host to a large number (>120) of Red-necked Grebes.

Thanks to everyone who accompanied Bob Wynes and I on our surveys — Nancy Welykholowa, Lorne and Barb Koroluk, Rob and Shevon Wilson, Barb and Doug Elsasser, Delaney Boyd, Morley, Paula, and Jennifer and Jamison Maier. A special thanks to Mieka and Derek Tomlin and Ron Nimetz who accompanied me for one survey, then went out on their own to assist in the counts. Thank you to Greg Podovinnikoff and the Park for the support they provide us every year. Thank you to YFBTA, the Kamsack Times and Nature Saskatchewan, which continually publish this annual report. Also, a special thanks to Friends of Madge Lake (FOML) for agreeing to partner with us in our future endeavours.

This winter, Rob Wilson and I will be applying for a grant from the Saskatchewan Fish & Wildlife Fund to revamp our loon awareness signs, teaching materials, teaching aids, loon brochure and handouts in order to help us continue to educate visitors in the park on the Common Loon. 🦉

CELEBRATE IN STYLE



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LITTLE GULL (*HYDROCOLOEUS MINUTUS*) BREEDING EVIDENCE FOLLOWING A STORM EVENT IN CHURCHILL, MANITOBA

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The Little Gull (*Hydrocoloeus minutus*) is the world's smallest gull species, breeding mainly in the Palearctic in Northeast Europe and Siberia, with sporadic nesting records in Western/Central Europe.¹ Their North American breeding range is poorly understood with less than 100 confirmed, probable, or possible nests from 1990-2012.¹ The majority of these breeding records were from the Great Lakes region, with confirmed breeding evidence from various locations on Lake Ontario, Lake Erie, Lake Michigan, and Lake St Clair. Other nesting records include the St. Lawrence River in Quebec and the Hudson Bay Lowlands in Northern Ontario and Manitoba.¹ Of these nest records, even fewer are confirmed with nests found or flightless young.

Arrival on the breeding grounds in the Hudson Bay lowlands (including Churchill, Manitoba) typically begins in late May and early June. This is the time when the largest concentrations of Little Gulls are usually seen in Churchill, with a historical high count of 14 individuals submitted to eBird on 17 June 2006.² However, high counts in any given year are typically less than 10 birds. Nests are likely completed in mid-June and thus probably hatch roughly 24 days later in mid-July.³ Therefore, juvenile Little Gulls in Churchill likely fledge by late July or

early August depending on the nest initiation dates, which for other local breeders can be quite variable depending on spring weather conditions. This timing is supported by the peak of juvenile Little Gulls moving through James Bay in the last weeks of July through August, with the peak numbers arriving in the first week of August.⁴

In the Churchill region, Little Gulls have been recorded in low densities since at least 1970, with the first confirmed nest record at Akudlik Marsh in 1981 (Figure 1) though were likely breeding long before due to the presence of adults in potentially suitable habitat.^{5,6} From 1981-2012, approximately 30 confirmed breeding records occurred in the Churchill region.¹ In the 1990s to early 2000s, Little Gulls were either confirmed or likely to have nested locally (young seen in town), at Landing Lake, and for several years on islands in the river (Figure 1).⁵ To our knowledge, the

most recent confirmed breeding records occurred during the Manitoba Breeding Bird Atlas (MBBA) at the west Twin Lake in 2010, approximately 30 km southeast of the town of Churchill (Figure 1).⁷ Many probable breeding records exist, for example at Landing (Farnworth) Lake in 1992 (Figure 1), and possible and probable breeding evidence until 2013 elsewhere in the Churchill region according to the Manitoba Breeding Bird Atlas.^{5,7} The yearly persistence of adult Little Gulls in this region during the summer months suggests they are still breeding regularly.

On 18 July 2023, we observed 10 adult Little Gulls with two young on a very small rocky mudflat along the Churchill River (Figures 2, 3).⁸ This site is approximately 3 km south of the Churchill River Weir and 16 km south of the river mouth flowing into Hudson Bay (Figure 1), officially on Churchill River Road; however, the northern section is locally known as Goose Creek Road and

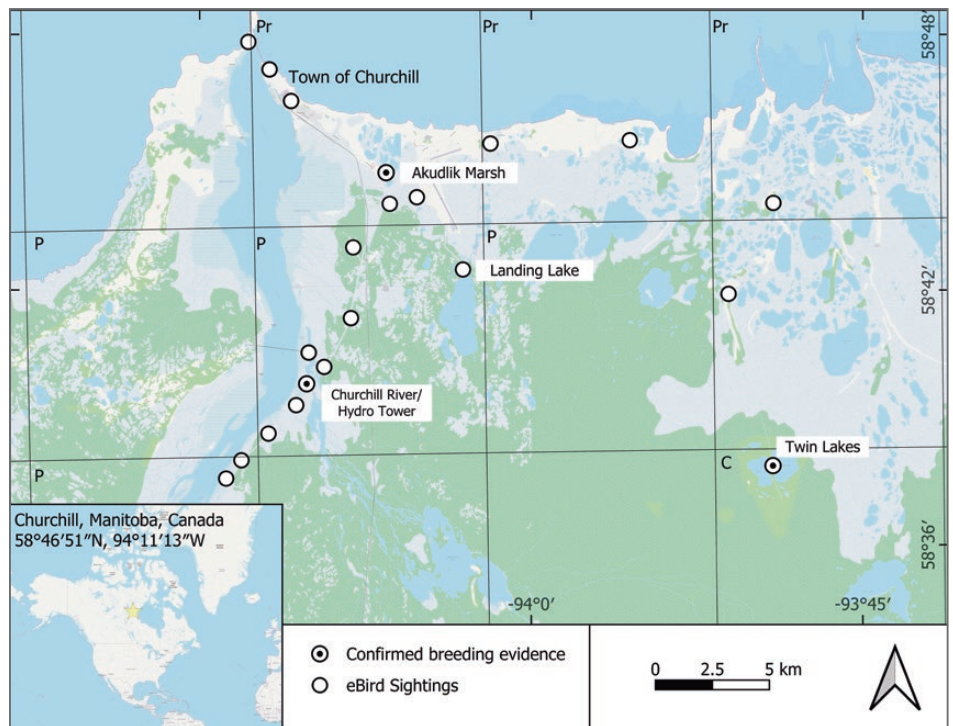


FIGURE 1. Summary of Little Gull (*Hydrocoloeus minutus*) activity in Churchill, Manitoba area: general locations of Little Gull eBird sightings, 2010-2014 Manitoba Breeding Bird Atlas breeding evidence and examples of other available breeding evidence in the region. To reduce spatial inaccuracy, eBird data were filtered to include only properly assigned "Hotspots" so some records may be missing.¹¹ Atlas squares in which breeding evidence was recorded are indicated in the top left corner of each square by P—possible, Pr—probable, C—confirmed.^{15,16} Map generated in QGIS, basemap from ©OpenStreetMap.^{17,18}

the southern section as Hydro Road. The adults were among a group of adult Bonaparte's Gulls (*Chroicocephalus philadelphia*) and both adult Arctic Terns (*Sterna paradisaea*) and their flightless chicks. The Bonaparte's Gulls would periodically fly or land too close to the Little Gull chicks, and their parents would defend their young with aggression towards the intruders.

The chicks were flightless, head and underparts covered in downy feathers, wings not fully developed, and slightly smaller than the adults. Although they did hop short distances (with wings spread, Figure 3) they were incapable of sustained flight. Therefore, this record qualifies for confirmed breeding evidence following the North American Ornithological Atlas Committee Handbook.⁹ We observed the group for more than 20 minutes, during which the entire group of adults would repeatedly take off and land again, leaving the young Little Gulls and Arctic Terns on the mud. Several times over our observation period, the Little Gull chicks would flap their wings and attempt to hop but did not appear to be able to leave the ground. They spent time standing, walking back and forth on the mud, climbing small rocks, begging when the adults came near, and occasionally preening.

Prior to our observations, Little Gulls had been sporadically reported for weeks, since 28 May, as is typical for the region. An average of two \pm 1.1 and no more than four Little Gulls were reported on any checklist prior to the 12 individuals we observed simultaneously on 18 July. On 21 July, we visited this site and observed three adult Little Gulls.¹⁰ We returned to this site twice more (27 July and 7 August) and did not observe any Little Gulls; however, the water levels had since dropped significantly. Several other checklists from the general area were submitted to eBird in July and August but none reported Little Gulls.¹¹ Time constraints and high traffic from construction vehicles involved in repairing the weir made frequent visits to this area difficult.

We believe this record was made possible by extreme flooding in the area. After a very dry spring, there were



FIGURE 2. Little Gull (*Hydrocoloeus minutus*) chicks begging on a mudflat on the Churchill River in July 2023. Photo credit: Andrew Brown.



FIGURE 3. Little Gull (*Hydrocoloeus minutus*) chick with outstretched wings on a mudflat on the Churchill River in July 2023. Photo credit: Andrew Brown.

multiple extreme rainfall events in late June and early July. In the month of July there was a total of 144.8 mm of rainfall with 65.2 mm falling between 13 and 15 July alone, exceeding the station's historical average total precipitation for the entire month of July of 59.8 mm.^{12,13} The mudflats and rocky shorelines that typically host large numbers of migrating shorebirds and gulls were almost completely submerged in water. Fewer shorebirds were present than normal, mostly consisting of the long-legged Lesser Yellowlegs (*Tringa flavipes*) and Greater Yellowlegs (*Tringa melanoleuca*) that were still able to forage in the deeper water. The Little Gull chicks very likely hatched from a nest in a nearby coastal marsh or small island along the Churchill River. After the water level rose, they would have been forced to swim closer to the shoreline and onto a suitable patch of remaining dry land. This is likely to be what brought the Little Gulls closer to the road that runs parallel to the river.

Last year, on 30 and 31 July 2022, we observed one fledged juvenile Little Gull (Figure 4) near the same location on Hydro Road (Figure 1).¹⁴ This individual appeared to have an injured or deformed left foot but was fully fledged and effectively hawking insects. This sighting is what led us to initially suspect breeding in this area and return in the following year; however, since this bird was fledged and independent, we did not consider this previous year's sighting as confirmed breeding evidence. Although it is impossible to be certain of the origin of this bird as it was already fledged (and thus could have originated elsewhere), it is very likely of local origin given the history of this species breeding in Churchill and the age of the bird.

In *Birdlife of the Churchill Region*, it is noted that in 1996-1997, two-to-three pairs of Little Gulls nested on an island on the Churchill River that became inundated after the construction of the weir. When a new island was constructed, pairs likely returned to breed in 2000.⁵ Recent construction activity at the weir may similarly influence the Little Gulls breeding on islands in the Churchill River.



FIGURE 4. Juvenile Little Gull (*Hydrocoloeus minutus*) flying over a marsh on the Churchill River in July 2022. Photo credit: Andrew Brown.

Acknowledgements

We are grateful to Chip Weseloh for his helpful insights on this paper.

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NATURE SASKATCHEWAN MEMBER SPOTLIGHT: LAWRENCE BECKIE

Ellen Bouvier

Communications Manager
Nature Saskatchewan

Many of us can identify that moment in our lives when something or someone ignited the spark needed to become excited and passionate about nature. For Lawrence Beckie, that spark happened when he was just 12 years old.

I recently had the pleasure of speaking with Lawrence about his relationship with Nature Saskatchewan, as well as the impressive number of bird counts in which he has participated!

Lawrence's involvement with the then Saskatchewan Natural History Society (SNHS) began after he learned about the SNHS through an article written in the *Family Herald* in 1949. This particular article was written by Marion Nixon who, before her marriage to John Nixon, was known as Marion Houston — aunt of Dr. Stuart Houston and relative of the Belchers, on her mother's side. Marion wrote about the *Blue Jay* and encouraged people to contribute and follow along. This is what 12-year-old Lawrence did. He contacted Marion and she promptly sent him a copy of the journal. This is all that was needed to ignite that spark, and soon Lawrence became an avid reader of the *Blue Jay*. In fact, he has been reading the *Blue Jay* since 1949!

Lawrence attended a rural school in Saskatchewan and, in 1943, had been encouraged by the school teacher, Martha Kerpan, to keep a journal of spring arrivals. Amazingly, Lawrence has been recording migration records ever since.

Although migration journals introduced Lawrence to a general love of nature, he quickly developed an interest in many other aspects of nature through reading about them in the *Blue Jay*. While he became interested in archaeology and botany, there was one contributor that became a favourite of Lawrence's. During our interview, Lawrence mentioned Doug

Gilroy and the stories and articles that he would write for *Blue Jay*. After searching for his name in our online archive (www.bluejayjournal.ca), I discovered many of his articles, written between 1949-1970. Most were about bird species, as well as anecdotal stories about wildlife encounters and photography. It quickly became a rabbit hole that I followed as well, and it is no wonder that a young boy with a passion for nature would be eagerly awaiting the next issue of *Blue Jay*!

Something about Lawrence that not many others can say is that he has been a participant in 73 consecutive Christmas Bird Counts! When asked why he enjoys the Christmas Bird Counts, he pointed to the varied landscape around his area of Kenaston, SK, which lends itself to various species. After this many consecutive bird counts, naturally my next question was about the changing landscape and species that Beckie must have encountered. He pointed to the use of large machinery and the associated landscape changes needed to accommodate such large machines. Overall, he has seen a decline in corvid populations in his area (crows and magpies). He still enjoys seeing many Horned Larks, Snow Buntings, Great Horned Owls and Snowy Owls, and Lawrence has no plans to stop taking part in Christmas Birds Counts anytime soon!

When asked what advice he would have for young people who wanted to get involved with nature, Lawrence's advised to find people your age with the same interest you have, and listen to older adults while trying to learn as much as you can from them. The benefits will follow you throughout your life. Lawrence says that his passion for nature has been a blessing. Not only does a new sighting bring a feeling of excitement, but it will bring a sense of calm and balance.

At the end of our interview, Lawrence mentioned two influential friends —



Lawrence Beckie.

his special connections with Dr. Stuart Houston and Frank Roy — whom he attributes to promoting a more profound interest in nature.

Based on my conversation with Lawrence, the theme of connection was prominent — not only a connection to nature, but a connection to each other as a way of strengthening our enjoyment of nature.

As part of our 75th anniversary celebrations, we are interviewing and writing articles that highlight active members who have had a significant impact on Nature Saskatchewan, as nominated by fellow members. If you would like to suggest someone to be recognized, please reach out to ebouvier@naturesask.ca. 🐦

STREAMS OF CONSEQUENCE: DISPATCHES FROM THE CONSERVATION WORLD

LORNE FITCH. OCTOBER 2023. ROCKY MOUNTAIN BOOKS LTD. 232 PP. ISBN: 9781771606691. \$25.

Joel Cherry

Regina, SK

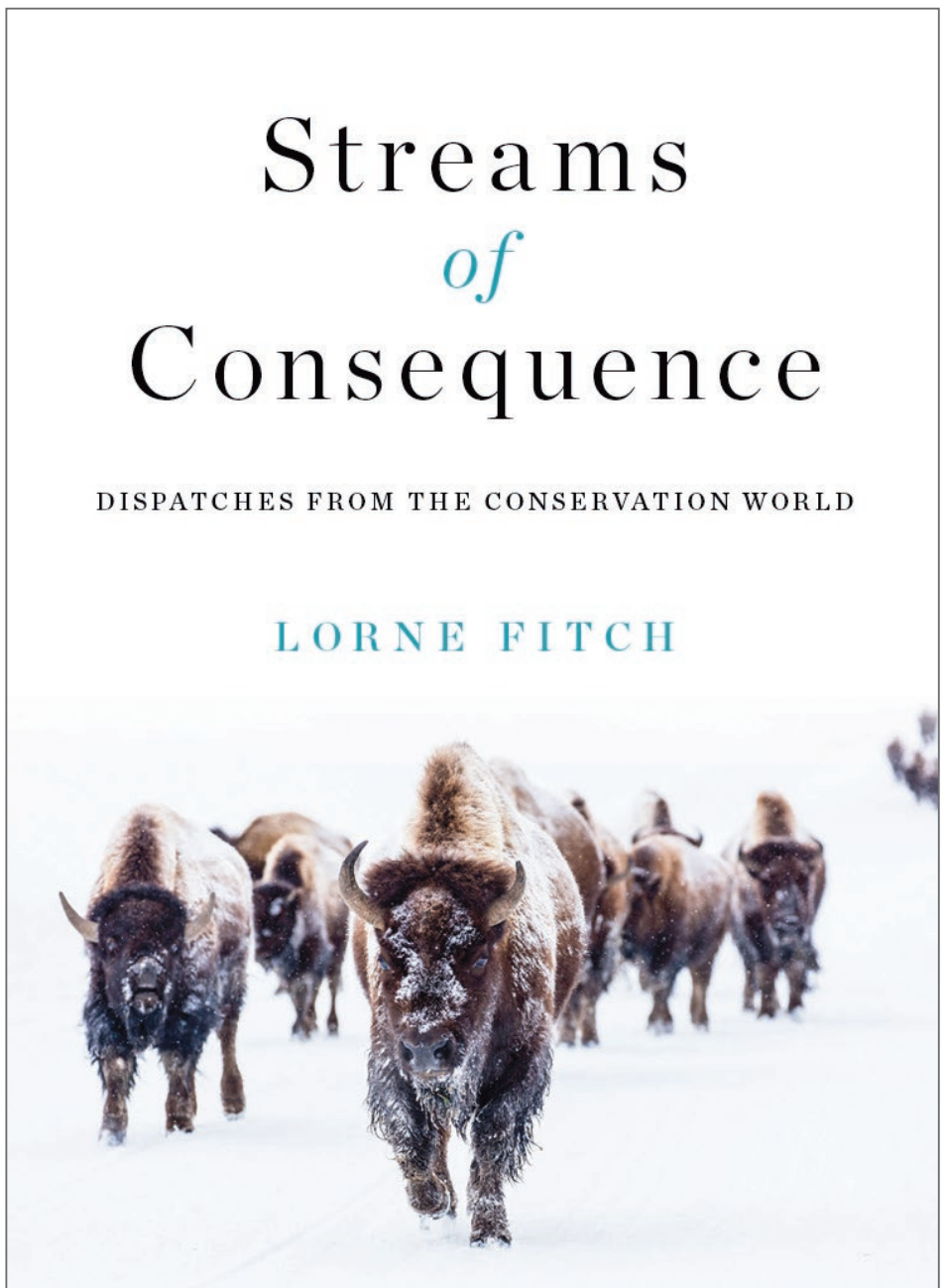
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With its mountains, rivers, prairies and forests, Alberta is a place of undeniable natural beauty. It is also home to vast reserves of oil and other natural resources, which have been voraciously extracted and exploited in the name of economic growth. In *Streams of Consequence*, author Lorne Fitch draws on his decades of experience on the front lines of conservation in the province to deliver a powerful and thoughtful call for stewardship of our shared ecological heritage before it's too late.

A professional biologist and former provincial fish and wildlife scientist, Fitch's work has taken him far and wide across Alberta, giving him deep and broad knowledge of the land and its wild inhabitants. Countless meetings with bureaucrats, industry representatives, ranchers and others have also given him an understanding of the economic forces and political philosophies that led to broken prairie, forests crisscrossed with logging roads, and streams and rivers filled with sediment.

Streams of Consequence brings these two threads together in a series of essays that offer a crash course in the ecology of Alberta while highlighting conservation issues. Each essay serves the narrative flow of the book as a whole, however I can see myself revisiting individual essays for reference in the future as well. Several pieces pay homage to species both iconic (caribou) and obscure (hare-footed locoweed) without sugar-coating their challenges, often due to industrial or agricultural expansion into their habitat. The role of water, wetlands and in particular the headwater streams of the eastern slopes as critical trout habitat is also discussed in some detail.

Fitch drives home the enormity of the current situation by placing it within



a deep historical context. The caribou, the rough fescue grass, and the arctic grayling are all survivors, with millennia of geological history written into their bodies by countless generations of slow adaptation. These species and others were well-suited to the western Canadian landscape forged by the retreating glaciers at the end of the last ice age, but they simply can't adapt to the landslide of rapid changes occurring in their

environment because of human activity. Species that have existed and thrived since before humanity emerged are now disappearing in a virtual instant.

The situation Fitch describes in Alberta has also played out in Saskatchewan, in the rest of Canada and across the world, as the ecological heritage of past and the stability of the future are traded away for material wealth in the present.

Streams of Consequence was influenced by the great American writer-naturalist Aldo Leopold, who is quoted frequently. While reading, I was reminded of Leopold's quote that "one of the penalties of an ecological education is that one lives alone in a world of wounds."

Fitch shares his sadness and frustration with the current trajectory of things in a letter of apology to the future, in the form of his young grand-niece and grand-nephew. This letter is one of the best bits of polemic in the book, sharply criticizing the greed and short-sightedness of his own generation, while expressing grief at what has been and will be lost. "I wish you could have seen trout swimming in water so clear they seemed to float," he writes, but "... in the end there was no refuge where trout could escape hook, heat, or mud."

The trout are a recurring theme in the book. When he was a boy, Fitch had encountered a bull trout in a log jam on the Tay River. Though still vivid in his mind, the species has been extirpated from the river for decades and is unlikely to ever return. If not, the author has at least sent them off

with a proper eulogy.

Fitch argues for a long-term view of prosperity and an acceptance of limits, rather than the ideology of endless growth that dominates our modern politics. In advocating for environmental protections, he has consistently heard the usual arguments that economic interests trump environmental concerns. Indeed, he has heard "greenie" or even "environmentalist" itself thrown around as a pejorative.

Fitch has even come to believe that the label may not be useful since it separates environmental concerns into a separate basket, when economic and environmental concerns should be two sides of the same coin. In effect, we should all be environmentalists if we realize that our very survival is dependent on the natural world around us.

While we need to think big to save what remains of our natural heritage, and we will need well-informed public policy to carry that out, studies and data alone are not adequate to win over the public imagination. Understanding on an intellectual level that we are reliant on

the natural world for our own survival is crucial, but that on its own will not save endangered species.

Fitch's love for his land and the creatures it supports is the most inspiring and even hopeful aspect of the book for me despite the generally dire situation. For people to truly care and support conservation, there is no substitute for engagement with and love for wild nature, and strong nature writing such as *Streams of Consequence* is an excellent gateway to new places and new creatures. I may or may not ever spot a cutthroat trout in a mountain stream, but I know that I care about them and their survival after reading this book.

Fitch is pragmatic, but he believes that Albertans have love for the east slope of the Rockies in their very DNA. If worst-case scenarios can still be avoided in Alberta, or anywhere else, it will be because of love.

Joel Cherry is a birder, communications professional, and former journalist. He is a regular contributor to the Blue Jay. 🐦



PHOTOGRAPHY

Submitted by David Larson.

Confusing times. Is this flowering moss phlox (*Phlox hoodii*) the last remnant of a dying fall or the harbinger of spring? It was flowering 16 km south Maple Creek, SK, on December 22 — the day after the winter solstice — so should it be looked at as a late season record or as the first flower of the coming spring? December 2023 followed the rest of its year with warmer than usual temperatures as average daily highs and lows were +4.2 and -5.0 °C, respectively (Environment Canada, Cypress Hills Park). However, the flower's time in the sun was brief for by January 14, it was under several cm of snow and the low temperature was below -40. Hopefully it will make a comeback at a more usual time, like April.

HAIDA ERMINE: A NEW SPECIES, BUT WHY WEREN'T ALL CURATORS ON BOARD?

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Introduction

Few naturalists had reported on the fauna of the Queen Charlotte Islands (Haida Gwaii) when the Reverend John H. Keen (1850–1950) arrived there in 1890 to serve as an Anglican missionary. Armed with a broad interest in natural history and unlimited energy, Keen collected specimens of anthropological objects and animals, from invertebrates to mammals.¹⁻³ Keen had left his native England knowledgeable of the regions in which he would be working, and he was aware that new discoveries were certain to be made on the Queen Charlotte Islands. Indeed, it turned out that some of his specimens represented taxa new to science, and some were named in his honour.^{2,3} Among the “new” mammals was the Haida Ermine (hereafter, Ermine). Keen learned of the Ermine’s presence soon after his arrival in 1890⁴, but had he collected specimens or observed it in the wild, he surely would have commented on its habitat and behaviour, as he did in the accounts of

the other species of mammal recorded in an overlooked, unpublished manuscript prepared in 1897.³ His first of several weasel specimens was not obtained until a few months after that list was prepared.

Deposition of the specimens

Keen knew the Ermine was special, but he also knew that its significance — whether new to science — must be confirmed by a specialist with access to a collection of related species. He needed to find a museum curator with access to such a collection and a willingness to study the specimen. Finding a home for what became the type specimen of this mammal turned out to be straightforward, but attempts to deposit voucher specimens in other museums were not, and they provided a glimpse into the responses of early curators, in British Columbia and beyond, who worked under different constraints of time and resources, including a museum in its infancy.

Keen’s desire was to have his specimens deposited permanently in museums. The Ermines were sent to curators in Washington, D.C. and Victoria, British Columbia. Keen was always anxious to receive news of the

significance of each specimen, whether it was new to science or to the region. Disposition of two of the Ermine was straightforward. Both were sent to Edward A. Preble, an associate of the United States Department of Agriculture, Biological Survey, in Washington, D.C.⁵ Keen began to correspond with Preble shortly before he left the mission at Masset, and continued during the early years of his tenure at Metlakatla on the mainland coast of British Columbia.⁴ In a letter written to Preble dated 5 April 1898, Keen expressed his delight in obtaining a specimen of the Ermine he knew would be of interest to the scientist:⁶

I have not forgotten my promise last summer to send you some skins in return for the small museum traps you kindly gave me at Fort Simpson. But this is the first opportunity I have had of writing, as we have no mail communication during the winter.

I am sorry to say I have been unable to get any woodpeckers’ skins, but I am now sending what I think you will value quite as much — an ermine [Keen’s emphasis] in spirit. It was killed by an Indian on the 18th of last month [March], and is in an interesting stage of change of colour.

As far as I am aware, no ermine from these islands has yet been examined by competent authorities.



FIGURE 1. Examples of Haida Ermine collected several decades after Rev. Keen’s tenure on Haida Gwaii ended. Top, winter pelage (RBCM 10196, female, 1979/1980); bottom, summer pelage (RBCM 21238, 2 July 2008). ©Royal BC Museum/Shane Lightner.

This specimen is therefore worth carefully looking at, and I shall be glad to hear what you make of it.

Preble was indeed interested. This specimen became the type on which Preble based the description of a distinct species of Ermine, *Putorius haidarum*, which he dedicated to the Haida people.⁶ Catalogued in the United States National Museum as USNM 94430, the specimen was taken on 17 March 1898 (not 18 March as Keen had written). Soon merged with the genus *Mustela*⁷, this taxon has since been recognized as a subspecies of the Short-tailed Weasel or Ermine, *M. e. haidarum*.⁸ Initially considered endemic to the Queen Charlotte Islands, results of recent DNA studies revealed that Ermines on Haida Gwaii and islands of the Alexander Archipelago in southeast Alaska are genetically distinct from mainland populations.^{9,10}

Attempts to deposit the other Ermine specimens frustrated Keen, as revealed in letters written to curators at the British Columbia Provincial Museum (now Royal British Columbia Museum, RBCM), and to long-time associate and friend, Dr. Charles F. Newcombe, a private collector of natural history and

anthropological objects in Victoria.^{11,12} Although a specimen sent to James Fannin, the Museum's first curator of natural history, in spring 1898, was recorded in the addendum to Fannin's preliminary catalogue of the collections of the Provincial Museum¹³, neither it nor any other Ermine that Keen sent to the Museum was entered into its permanent catalogue, and it was never displayed.

Writing to Newcombe on 15 October 1898 while on furlough in England, Keen announced that the weasel proved to be a new species and, alluding to Fannin's silence on the matter, assumed Newcombe would pass on this information to the curator.¹⁴

I am delighted to be able to tell you that the weasels of the Q.C. Islands, a specimen of which I gave to M[r.]. Fannin last spring, has proved to be a new species.

Mr. Fannin will find the description published in the report of the Biological Society of Washington, Vol. XII, p. 169.

As soon as I get some copies of the paper I will send him one. The new mammal has been called *Putorius haidarum* [underlined to denote italics].

On 18 January 1899, Keen wrote again to Preble, and mentioned the Ermine that was sent to Fannin, but that he had heard nothing.¹⁵ Nevertheless, Keen was "... glad to get [Preble's] printed description of my *Putorius haidarum*, for which I had waited so long. I can now quite understand how the delay occurred."¹⁶ Keen also requested that Preble send a copy of the printed description to Fannin, "... telling him that you send it at my request. I deposited with him a weasel, similar to the one I sent you, for that museum, & I am anxious that he sh[ould] also have the printed description of it." Now stationed permanently on the mainland, Keen wrote again to Preble, on 9 August 1899, stating that, "I shall pay occasional visits to the Queen Charlotte Islands. I hope to cross there this autumn, & shall try, whilst there, to get another specimen or two of the new weasel [Keen's emphasis] you kindly named for me."¹⁶ Although the new species was not named for Keen, Preble expressed his indebtedness to him for sending it.¹⁵ A few years later, Keen sent another weasel to the Biological Survey (USNM 147351), this one in summer pelage, dated May 1905, which he acquired during a visit to Masset.⁴

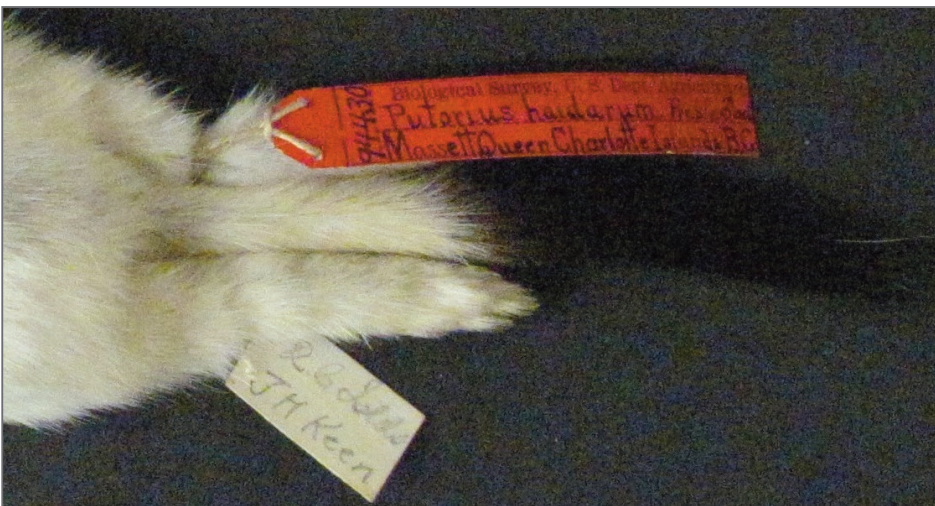


FIGURE 2. Red label denoting the type specimen (USNM 94430) of Ermine (*Putorius haidarum* Preble) collected on the Queen Charlotte Islands by the Rev. John H. Keen, on 17 March 1898. Originally described as a distinct species, the Haida Ermine was merged with *Mustela* and is now considered a subspecies of Ermine, *Mustela erminea haidarum*. This specimen was originally preserved in "spirits", but later was prepared as shown here. Looking closely, a few brown hairs of the summer pelage are visible on the Ermine's head. Courtesy of the United States National Museum.

Fannin's silence continued. In a letter to Newcombe on 5 July 1899, on his return from furlough, Keen wondered why Fannin apparently was not interested in the Ermine specimen, noting that it was the first of this species for the Museum's collection.¹⁷

I paid a hurried visit to the Museum whilst in Victoria, & was disappointed to find that Fannin had not yet set up either of my new mammals – four of which (two mice, bat, & weasel) are now in his hands & have been for about a year. Of course he is busy, but one w[ould] have thought that as new mammals turn up so seldom they w[ould] have received a little more attention.

In a post-script to a letter written to Newcombe on 9 August 1899, Keen expressed his chagrin that he still had not heard from Fannin.¹⁸ He requested Newcombe to “Please persecute Fannin till he has set up my new weasel! I shall have a new mouse to send him shortly.”¹⁸ Did this specimen actually end up in Newcombe's hands? The label of a Haida Ermine catalogued in the American Museum of Natural History (M-19353) bears only Newcombe's name and the date of collection, 1 September 1900, which suggests that Keen had obtained it, but this could not be confirmed from archived records.

On 24 April 1905, Keen sent another Ermine specimen to the Provincial Museum, this one to Francis Kermodé, Fannin's successor as curator of natural history.¹⁹

By this mail I am sending you a weasel. The skin was made & given me by an Indian, so is somewhat rough, but I have no doubt that your skillful hands will be able to make it presentable.

It is a specimen of Putorius haidarum – the new species from the Queen Charlotte Islands described for me years ago by M[r.]. Preble of Washington.

As it is in summer [Keen's emphasis] dress, it will form a nice companion for the same species which you already have in winter dress.

[P.S.] This weasel's distinguishing

feature is the long [Keen's emphasis] black marking on the tail.²⁰

This was the second Ermine specimen Keen sent to the Museum in Victoria and about which he heard nothing. Perhaps naively, he had expected both specimens to be displayed, but neither was and they cannot now be located. However, Keen assumed that Fannin still had this specimen, “... in winter dress”, as stated in his letter to Kermodé, but the provenance of the specimen sent to him remains buried in archived correspondence. Keen speculated later that Fannin's inaction upon receiving mammal specimens may have reflected his primary interest in birds²¹, because he was more forthcoming upon receiving bird specimens.¹

Common or rare?

Although Keen did not collect his first Ermine until late in his tenure on Haida Gwaii, he believed the species was “Common everywhere, but not now hunted for, there being no demand for its skin.”²³ But he never explained what he meant by “common everywhere.” He did note, however, “white skins obtained in winter were formerly much prized, being largely used in making head-dresses and other ornaments for use in the Indian dances.”²³ Their use in ceremonies may have been what led Keen to describe the Ermine as common, assuming the “white skins” were obtained locally, not on the mainland. But Keen was silent on this matter, and the demand for the skins to decorate headdresses and ceremonial clothing had apparently ceased.²²

Numerous authors have commented on the rarity of the Haida Ermine.²³⁻²⁶ Hints of the species' rarity emerged when neither Charles J. Guiguet nor J. Bristol Foster observed or trapped the species during episodes of collecting between 1946 and 1952²⁷, and during eight months of field work throughout the archipelago in the summers of 1960 and 1961.²⁴ Foster noted “The local people observed that ermine were generally very scarce and only one trapper ... claimed that he had recently seen one.” He commented further that “It is difficult to explain the

scarcity of this subspecies over at least the last twenty years, since shoreline food, if taken, would always be available. Small birds also are generally plentiful and, in the last few years, deer mice have been abundant.”²⁴ Cowan's assessment of the status of mammals on Haida Gwaii, led to the conclusion, “... the Haida Weasel is perhaps the rarest of all British Columbia mammals.”²⁴ Knowledge of the Ermine's rarity may have strengthened Keen's efforts to convince museum curators that these specimens were important, not only because the species was new to science.

Epilogue

Keen continued to collect specimens on the mainland through 1915, some of which were new to science, but frustration over the apparent lack of interest and acknowledgement from curators in Victoria continued.¹ Months-long delays between mail deliveries had ended, but postal regulations and the cost of sending specimens, particularly to the United States, remained obstacles.⁴ Keen persevered, however, and under difficult field conditions, and amid the busy schedule of a clergyman, he left a legacy of written notes on the ecology and habitats of several previously unknown species, a prolific correspondence, and specimens deposited in museums in Europe and North America.

Acknowledgements

Anna Chinn (Royal British Columbia Museum) and Eleanor Hoeger (American Museum of Natural History) provided information pertaining to specimens, the latter concerning Newcombe's Ermine specimen from Haida Gwaii. Shane Lighter (Royal British Columbia Museum) and Suzanne Peurach (U.S. National Museum of Natural History) photographed specimens, including the type. Ann ten Cate and Kelly-Ann Turkington made available the Newcombe family papers archived in the Royal British Columbia Museum Archives, and Sheila Norton searched correspondence for information pertaining to Newcombe's specimen.

Margo Hearne (Delkatla Sanctuary Society) responded to inquiries for information. I thank them all.

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POETRY

THE WILDLIFE PHOTOGRAPHER

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VILLAIN OR VICTIM: THE BLACK AND WHITE OF MAGPIES



Black-billed Magpie. Photo credit: Annie McLeod.

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My grandparents weren't bird watchers, they were homesteaders carving out a living in a new land. When they settled west of Red Deer in 1900, even if there had been spare time and they had been observant birders, the resplendent, obvious magpie would not have made the bird list.

It's not that magpies were ever absent from the native wildlife assemblage of western Canada, but they did go missing for a while. Magpies were part of the bison ecosystem and they too all but vanished along with the bison. With the extirpation of bison from grassland, parkland and boreal landscapes, the

food they provided — dung, insects and their carcasses — disappeared. So too did many of the wildlife species associated with this food resource like coyotes, wolves, bears, ravens, crows and magpies.

In step with the collapse of the bison economy, by the late 1880s there were no magpies left in Central Alberta. The bird was unknown to early settlers (like my grandparents) in the Red Deer District according to Frank Farley, an early Camrose hunter/naturalist. A remnant population survived in the Cypress Hills of southeastern Alberta.

As my grandparents and other farmers began raising crops and livestock, some vestiges of a substitute food source for magpies was established.

With agricultural expansion magpies began to reappear, around the time of World War I. By 1939, their range had extended north to Grande Prairie, and they became a much more commonly encountered bird.

The phoenix that was the magpie did not seem to receive rave reviews for their reappearance. Fine proportions and colouration coupled with intelligence did not make magpies friends with farmers. Even Kerry Wood, the famous Red Deer naturalist, who observed reasoning ability among magpies contended the birds were "devoted to evil pursuits at all times of the year." Magpies were seen as implacable foes and if not the Devil incarnate, at least his standard bearers.

In the farming community I was

raised, it was taken as the gospel that magpies were evil. Didn't they pick out the eyes of new born calves and lambs? They competed with livestock at feed troughs, raided farm poultry yards, killing young chicks and other valuable, insect-eating birds. When I worked for one of the neighbours, he became almost apoplectic at the thought of magpies eating some of the grain put out for cattle. I was instructed that the rusty pump shotgun in the pumphouse was to be used liberally and without mercy to shoot magpies.

In an ecologically deficient age, when random observation and stories trump evidence, wildlife deemed as nuisances are persecuted. Magpies had started to develop a bad reputation even as early as the late 1920s and by the 1940s had become defined as "vermin" in popular opinion and among government agencies, hunting groups and conservation interests. The invective was based on poorly informed but well-established notions that led to a variety of "control" programs.

Bounties were established, with cash rewards for egg collections and legs of birds. One can only speculate on the stench from rotten eggs and putrefying legs turned in at collection depots. Blood thirsty and cash-poor children, myself included, raided nests for eggs, chopped off legs and destroyed nests (not realizing in the process we were eliminating the source of wealth).

Military style, armed marches with gunners lined up in formation along the four sides of a hunt area were organized to kill coyotes, crows and magpies. No records exist of any of the participants being shot as the circle of excited gunners tightened. Advice was provided on shooting magpies over bait, especially in the winter. Designs for magpie traps were provided. One of my early mentors and I built these and learned magpies were smarter than us. In 1959, the government of Alberta began to set out strychnine poison baits to control magpies.

Hunters, seeing a decline in waterfowl and upland game birds beginning in the 1930s, saw magpies as one of the array of enemies of sought after quarry.

Something had to take the blame and although overhunting, drought and changes in habitat from agriculture were the most evident causes, magpies and their ilk took it on the beak.

In this full scale war on birds like magpies, there was a split. Farmers and many hunters saw only the black side of the bird. Others on the white side, perhaps more enlightened, argued the birds created a net benefit to society by consuming more insects and weed seeds than cereal grains, poultry and game bird eggs.

Beginning in the 1960s, the ardor for bounties and control programs diminished. Rational reviews of engaging and recruiting children to kill thousands of gophers, crows and magpies deemed this was unethical and those practices stopped. Science began to provide evidence about the futility of control programs on predators and nuisance wildlife.

Bounties and other methods of population control have proven to be mostly a triumph of activity over progress. Removal of too many animals undermines population stability, the ability to self-regulate. It can and has resulted in not less, but more of the problem species. Removal of some species can cause cascading effects down the food chain, increasing populations of wildlife species that were not a problem before control programs.

The net effect of the war on magpies (and others) was the reality this was improving the lot of those remaining birds, allowing them to raise larger families. The birds were able to easily fill the void created by our feeble efforts at population control. In effect, magpies won the war.

We still harbor ill will towards magpies. If I were defending magpies in a court of law, in front of a dispassionate judge, I would turn to the plaintiffs. "If you so dislike this bird for its predatory habits and waking you up early with its raucous racket, why did you create such ideal conditions for it to live?" Because that is the case, the evidence. With our urban landscaping, fruit trees, gardens and especially our garbage, magpies

have hit the mother lode, a nirvana of habitat conditions. In country settings with livestock and cereal crop production we have done the same. We have become the new bison for magpies.

If ever there was a time for reflection on wildlife that share space with us, it is now. The magpie is an elegant, immaculately attired bird with a saucy attitude. They are smart and resourceful and will profit from living with us, no matter what we do to thwart their efforts. We might as well resign ourselves we are in this together.

The magpie had a friend in singer-songwriter Ian Tyson. He sang lyrically of "You old coyote in the sky." With a sense of insight, prescience and admiration the lines, "You know the west ain't never going to die, Just as long as you can fly," provide a fitting tribute to the bird.

Lorne Fitch is a Professional Biologist, a retired Fish and Wildlife Biologist and a former Adjunct Professor with the University of Calgary. He is the author of Streams of Consequence — Dispatches from the Conservation World. 🐦

THE NATURAL WORLD

Brian K Jeffery

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The natural world is like a puzzle. It is complex but fascinating. As we learn about the various parts, we acquire knowledge. As our learning progresses, we develop understanding, as now we see how all the various parts are interconnected. The "big picture" is revealed. In time, we realize that we have developed a passion for the natural world. We enjoy the excitement of discovery and sense the wonder. We long to spend time here and so we return again and again over the seasons, to refresh and to energize. "Let's go outside!"

FIRST CONFIRMED NESTING OF NORTHERN PYGMY-OWL IN SASKATCHEWAN

John Patterson

554 Bornstein Terrace
Saskatoon, SK S7N 3Y1

Marten Stoffel

RR 4, Box 183
Saskatoon, SK S7K 3J7

Stan Shadick

903 Temperance Street
Saskatoon, SK S7N 0N3

The range of the Northern Pygmy-Owl (*Glaucidium gnoma*) in Canada has generally been understood to extend from the Rocky Mountain Foothills to the coast of British Columbia, but in the past 15 years the species was observed in diurnal breeding owl surveys in the boreal forest as far east as Cold Lake.¹ Nesting was confirmed at Calling Lake (1995)² and Lac La Biche (2018)³ and copulation was observed 25 km southeast of Calling Lake (2004).⁴

Since 2010, the regular presence of this pygmy-owl in Saskatchewan was suspected based on responses by agitated avian prey species to playback of its call at locations from Cold Lake east to Green Lake.⁵ Prior to 2016, there had been only a single observation in the province, at La Ronge on 12 October 2014, where it was first spotted by Richard Gruchy and photographed multiple times.⁶

The next observation in Saskatchewan was on a Christmas Bird Count, 27 December 2016, when Stan and Jan Shadick heard and saw a Northern Pygmy-Owl 20 km north of Pierceland.⁷ A group of nine birders returned to the general area a month later and heard and saw a Northern Pygmy-Owl 2 km northwest of the previous observation. Since then, the species has been observed several times in the Cold Lake area, including 10 April 2017, during the presumed breeding season.⁸ An attempt to locate a nest failed and the owl could not be relocated on 3 May 2017. A single individual was seen and photographed by Shelly Fisher and Dale Jefferson

farther east, in Prince Albert National Park, on 26 September 2022.⁹

On 8 March 2023, Dan Zazalenchuk and Marten Stoffel heard a Northern Pygmy-Owl from Saskatchewan Road 919, north of the Cold River Campground in Meadow Lake Provincial Park, near the eastern shore of Cold Lake. Warren and Vicki St. Germaine heard it again on 24 and 25 March 2023. John Patterson and Marten Stoffel traveled there on 25 May 2023 to relocate the owl and search for a nest.

We arrived shortly after noon, played the Northern Pygmy-Owl call, received an immediate response and headed into the bush west of the road in the direction of the owl, which continued to call. As we approached the owl it became increasingly difficult to get a fix on direction and being so small and still, we did not spot it. When we thought we were close, about 70 m from the road and 300 m from the lake shore, in a semi-open area of mixed coniferous/deciduous forest (Figure 1), we watched and waited. The Northern Pygmy-Owl is known as a “sit-and-wait” ambush predator, remaining stationary for extended periods as it watches for prey.¹⁰ Eventually we spotted it about 10 m up, when it moved from branch to branch.

It was in view for the next 30 minutes and changed perch only once. It actively scanned for prey the entire time, finally flying off out of sight to the north. In less than a minute it returned, having captured a small bird. It plucked a few feathers, flew to the trunk of a live trembling aspen (27 cm diameter at breast height), directly above one of us, disappeared briefly into the trunk and flew off without the prey. Stepping away from the tree and looking up, we could see a small entrance hole about 10 m high (Figure 2). It had perched, for the entire time we watched it, within 5 m of the hole. We monitored the hole for another 90 minutes, but there was no further activity. There was no nest-related debris at the base of the tree, such as pellets or feathers, which is consistent

with previous observations at Northern Pygmy-Owl nests.¹¹

This species may cache prey items on branches but unlike the Eurasian Pygmy-Owl (*Glaucidium passerinum*) and Ferruginous Pygmy-Owl (*Glaucidium brasilianum*) it is not known to cache food in cavities, so we were confident this was an occupied nest.¹⁰ We came that day with a nest inspection camera (3.2 cm diameter) on an extendible pole, but the cavity entrance was narrower than the camera, so we couldn't see the nest occupants.

On 4 June, Marten Stoffel, John Patterson, Harold Fisher, Stan Shadick, Valerie Horner and Ron Jensen returned to the site. We brought a smaller nest inspection camera this time (2.9 cm diameter). The owl was located at 13:45 h, about 2-3 m from the cavity, where it remained for about 45 minutes. After the owl flew off, the nest camera was raised to the entrance hole and partially inserted, but it was still too wide to penetrate the cavity, so again we could not see the nest occupants.

On 22 June, Stan Shadick returned to the site with Scott Currie and Jim MacDonald and nestlings made their first appearance. At about 13:30 h, with an adult owl perched near the hole eating a mouse (Figure 3), one gray-headed nestling peered out from the hole (Figure 4), and later what was believed to be a second nestling appeared at the entrance. It appeared that no additional nestlings had left the cavity, as no



FIGURE 1. The location of the Northern Pygmy-Owl nest, near the eastern shore of Cold Lake, 10 km from the provincial border.

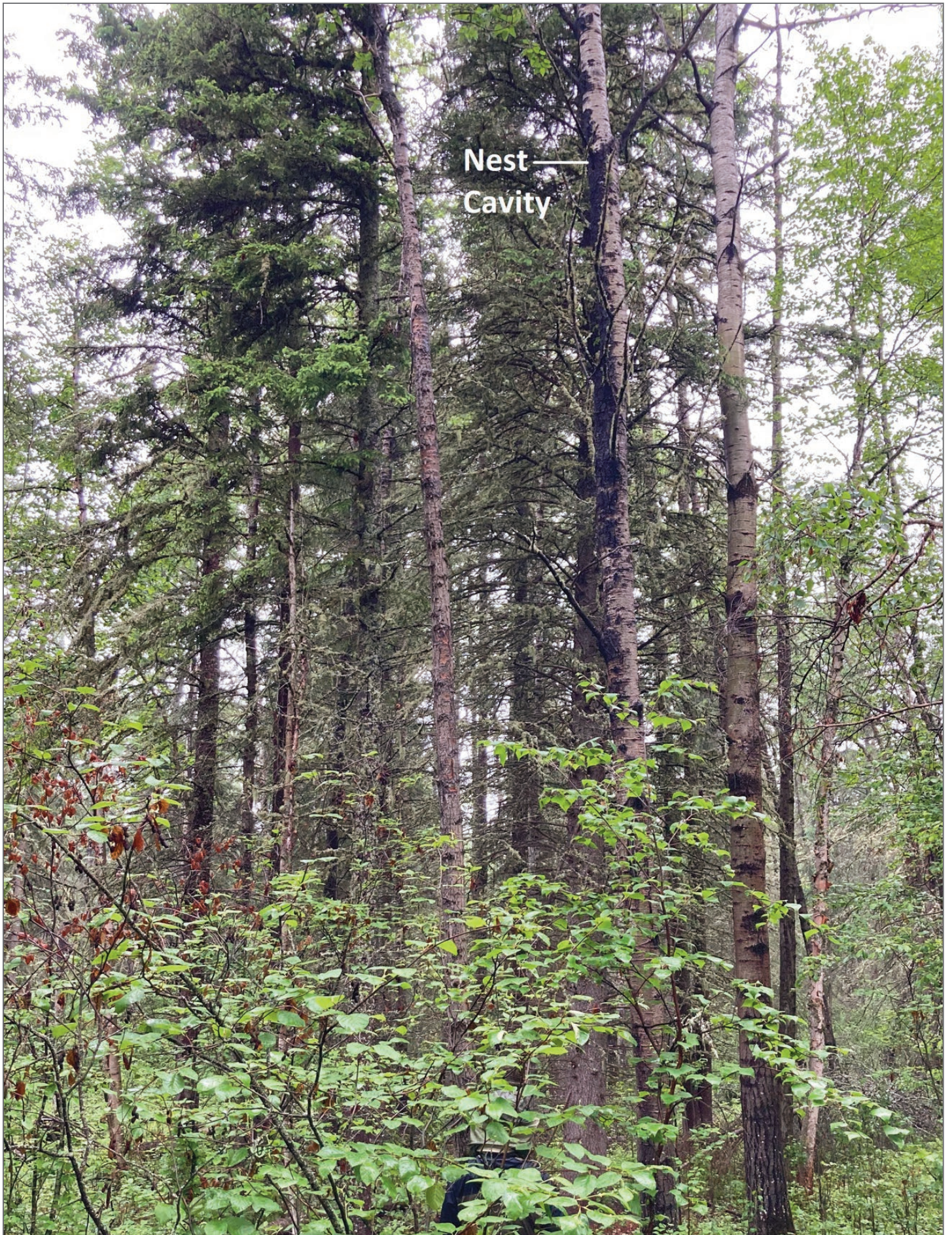


FIGURE 2. The location of the nest cavity, 10 m high in a trembling aspen. Photo credit: John Patterson.



FIGURE 3. Adult Northern Pygmy-Owl with a mouse, which it consumed. Photo credit: Scott Currie.



FIGURE 4. A nestling peering from the cavity entrance in a live trembling aspen on 22 June 2023. A 2.9-cm diameter camera could not be fully inserted into the entrance. Photo credit: Scott Currie.

fledged young were noted in nearby trees, nor did adult behaviour suggest that any of the nestlings had fledged.

The following day, Marten Stoffel and John Patterson returned for a third time, at 12:40 h. This time we had a very small industrial endoscope mounted on a paint roller handle and extendible pole that fit into the cavity. It was empty. After a search of nearby trees, we spotted a fledgling at 13:15 h, when an adult that had been feeding it flew from a spruce tree, at almost the same height as the nest and 10-15 m from it. The fledgling was perched adjacent to the trunk (Figure 5). We later briefly observed a second fledgling, but it was a better flyer and spent little time in our vicinity. Two adults were feeding the fledglings.

The first fledgling remained on the same branch for almost an hour, moving at one point from the trunk about 2 m farther out on the branch. It had been fed an unidentified prey item when first spotted and was fed again 45 minutes

later, when an adult brought a large, seemingly intact dragonfly (*Aeshna* sp.), with wings still attached. The feeding was captured on video.¹² Ten minutes later, the fledgling flew from the branch, which was also captured on video.

Audio recording at the site was difficult due to hordes of buzzing horse flies, but before we left the site at 15:00 h, sets of barely audible, repeated notes from both an adult and a fledgling were captured using a parabolic microphone (Figure 6). The fledgling vocalization was centred on 6400 Hz, with notes 0.092 seconds apart. The slightly faster repeated notes from the adult were at 1600 Hz, 0.075 seconds apart.

On 26 June, Stan Shadick returned to the nest site with photographers Boyd Coburn, Wendy Erickson and Deborah MacEwen. At least one adult and two juveniles were photographed. The juveniles had moved much higher than the nest to near the top of the forest canopy about 100 m north of the nest

tree where they were fed by an adult.

The nest was 10 km east of the Alberta border, but how far the breeding range extends into Saskatchewan remains to be determined. An agitated response by avian prey species to the pygmy-owl call has recently been noted by us in Prince Albert National Park, where the owl has been observed once already, which suggests that the eastern extent of the range may be at least 250 km from the Alberta border. We will attempt to confirm this in the future.

1. Personal communication, Lisa Takats Priestley.
2. Hannah K (1995) eBird checklist: <https://ebird.org/checklist/S16207656>. eBird: an online database of bird distribution and abundance [web application]. eBird, Ithaca, New York. Available: <http://www.ebird.org> (Accessed November 1, 2023).
3. Personal communication, Lisa Takats Priestley.
4. Personal communication, Mike Russell.
5. Unpublished data, Marten Stoffel.



FIGURE 5. A recently fledged juvenile, as first observed 23 June 2023, near the trunk of a spruce tree. Image captured from a video posted at <https://ebird.org/checklist/S142772314>. Photo credit: John Patterson.

6. Taylor P (2019) Northern Pygmy-Owl. Page 346 in *Birds of Saskatchewan* (Smith AR, Houston CS, Roy JF, editors). Nature Saskatchewan, Regina.
7. Shadick J, Shadick S (2017) Successful quest for a second Saskatchewan Northern Pygmy-Owl. *Blue Jay* 75(1):22-23.
8. Shadick S (2017) eBird checklist: <https://ebird.org/checklist/S35889488>. eBird: An online database of bird distribution and abundance [web application]. eBird, Ithaca, New York. <http://www.ebird.org> (Accessed August 23, 2023).
9. Taylor PS (2023) New and notable records of Saskatchewan birds: 2022. *Blue Jay* 81(1):6-17.
10. Deshler J (2023) Northern Pygmy-Owl (*Glaucidium gnoma*), version 2.0. in *Birds of the World* (P. G. Rodewald, Editor). Cornell Lab of Ornithology, Ithaca, NY, USA. <https://doi.org/10.2173/bow.nopowl.02>
11. Holt DW, Norton WD (1986) Observations of nesting Northern Pygmy-Owls. *Journal of Raptor Research* 20:39-41.
12. Patterson J, Stoffel M (2023) eBird checklist: <https://ebird.org/checklist/S142772314>. eBird: An online database of bird distribution and abundance [web application]. eBird, Ithaca, New York. <http://www.ebird.org> (Accessed August 23, 2023). 🦉



Dancing Grouse Tour
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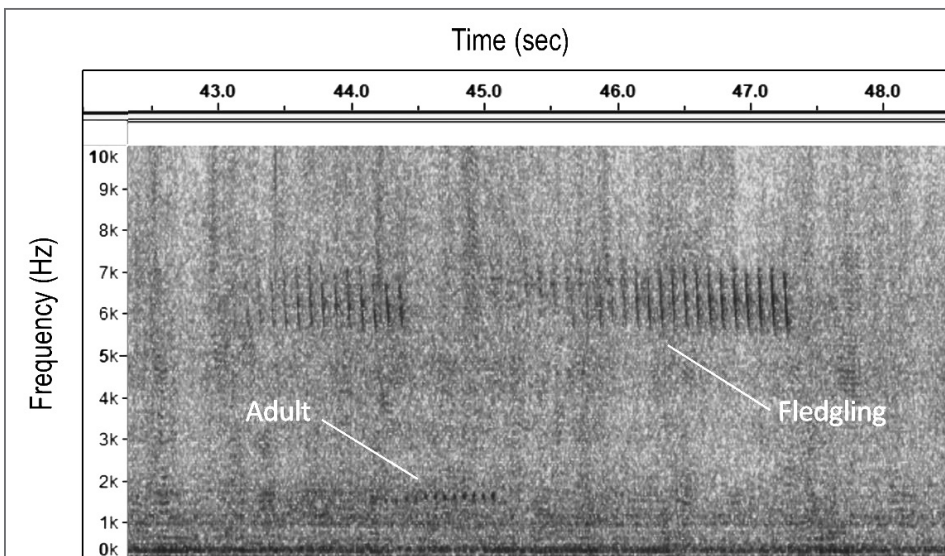


FIGURE 6. Spectrogram showing fledgling and adult Northern Pygmy-Owl vocalizations. Full audio posted at <https://ebird.org/checklist/S142772314>.

IN PICTURES: LOOKING BACK ON 75 YEARS



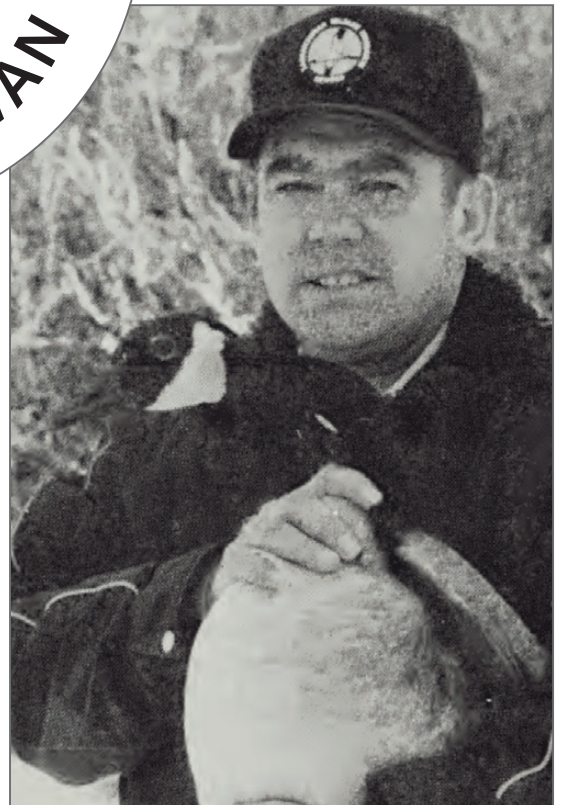
Isabel M. Priestly brought the *Blue Jay* to life in 1942 as the first president of the Yorkton Natural History Society and editor of the mimeographed bulletin.



In 1999, the Kelsey Ecological Society hosted the Spring Meet (May 28-30) and presented this beautiful cake for the 50th Anniversary of Nature Saskatchewan.
Photo credit: Shirley Johnston.



Touring the new Maurice Street Sanctuary property at the 1968 Spring Meet.



Lorne Scott is a familiar and respected name and face within the conservation community in Saskatchewan. Lorne, currently the President of Nature Saskatchewan, is pictured here in 1990 while banding a Canada Goose.

NATURE SASKATCHEWAN MEMBER SPOTLIGHT: MURIEL CARLSON

Darlene Roth

Steward, Turtle Lake Nature Sanctuary

Let me start out by saying that there is no other sanctuary under Nature Saskatchewan's care and guidance that could be as proud as we at the Turtle Lake Nature Sanctuary are to be part of this 75th Anniversary celebration!

For the new readers of the *Blue Jay*, the Turtle Lake Nature Sanctuary is located in the boreal forest. It is between North Battleford and Meadow Lake on Highway #4. Its combination of mixed wood forest is a sure haven for many animals, birds and plant life. It hosts more than 100 migratory birds, as well as mushrooms, wild orchid, deer, bears, beavers, and more. It also includes the beautiful Franklin Lady Slipper, grasses, geo-caching and just some great old earth grounding, groomed trails (3 km) for hiking pleasure. Our boundary defuses a spectrum of mother nature's beauty that will not disappoint the eyes and minds of visitors.

This little gem of a property would not have been obtained if it wasn't for one of the founders. Muriel Carlson (Indian



Muriel Carlson.

Point) was one of the main spearheaders along with E. Merle (Rob) Robinson (Turtle Lake Lodge). Although I know very little about Mr. Robinson, I am sure that their hearts beat to the same drum. Their same passion for nature, and their strong commitment to get these 120 acres to be part of Nature Saskatchewan, can only be

rewarded by your presence walking the trails and seeing the vision they had for this property through their eyes. Walking on this property themselves, years ago, made them realize that it could not be anything other than a sanctuary. They began fundraising, including obtaining corporate sponsorship, to buy the parcel of land from Saskatchewan Wildlife, for Nature Saskatchewan. Under the guidance of Doug Schmeiser, then president of Nature Saskatchewan, their dream came true on June 13, 1994, when the Turtle Lake Nature Sanctuary was born.

One can't imagine the hours and dedication it took of these two people to make this happen. The red tape, the legal process, and the determination leaves a legacy like no one else could leave for our area.

Muriel's love for birds began at the early age of five. Her school backpack would always be full of bird books, she said. The Blackburnian Warbler was soon to be her favourite bird, and still is to this very day. It was these bird books that influenced her love for birdwatching and I have often referred to her as a "walking set of encyclopedias." As a



Main entrance to the Turtle Lake Nature Sanctuary.



Darlene Roth, Brenda Rutz and Muriel Carlson.



Darlene Roth and Muriel Carlson.

highly educated woman with university education, Muriel loved involving her children in her birding activities, including banding hummingbirds with them, which is a fond memory. Her work with the Breeding Bird Survey, for 34 years, is only one of the organizations to which she belonged.

Muriel and Gary lived at Indian Point, which is on the east side of Turtle Lake, in their lakefront cabin for many years. Although the winters would call them to their other home in Victoria, B.C., the first signs of spring would bring them back to the lake and the Turtle Lake Sanctuary would soon again feel Muriel's footsteps. Her care and documentation of bird sightings, mushroom counts and wildflower blooms in the spring would occupy many hours of her day. Muriel's love for this sanctuary led her to pursue bird banding with the Bird Banding Society, and her involvement with the Archeology Society, based out of the University of Saskatchewan, truly showed that her heart was with the well-being of nature. Belonging to the Canadian bird surveying group, which was a 25-mile radius of Turtle Lake, gave her the satisfaction that her observations were published in many books.

Speaking of books, Muriel had more books than most small-town library could ever dream of having, and she would loan her books to those interested in Saskatchewan wildflowers, birds, mushrooms, and more. She has always been eager to share her passion. Losing

a daughter early, mother nature gave back to Muriel with a peace of mind and tranquility that kept her drive alive inside and outside of the sanctuary.

When I sit and ask Muriel a few questions, hours can pass by as she tells amazing stories, many of which focus on the importance of Nature Saskatchewan in her life. The endless list of friendships that grew over the years, along with new friends and the passing of old friends, hold deep in Muriel's heart. She was a great advocate for the sanctuary, offering guided school field trips. Artwork has been posted at the property, created by school classes, on species found in the sanctuary. The school in St. Walburg has been featured, and now artwork from Glaslyn school is displayed as Darlene Roth carries on this tradition. Muriel's main focus always remained balancing city, rural and nature to live in harmony. Saying the health of our earth lies in the health of the ecosystem, mother nature is the boss and should be respected. This was something Nature Saskatchewan always focused on, she said.

Nature Saskatchewan's spring and fall meets were always on Muriel's calendar as a must attend. She would often take one of her dear friends, Brenda Rutz, to the meets as well. Brenda, who is an avid amateur photographer, has captured the pure beauty of the Turtle Lake Nature Sanctuary — including animals, birds and plant life — in many of her photos. Muriel encourages everyone to attend these educational and fun

meets. Muriel has always commented that the continued support of Nature Saskatchewan will ensure nature has a voice, through education, and is represented in the future.

Hats off to you, Muriel, for sharing your love for nature with everyone you have met throughout the years. Muriel is well known through the Ancient Echoes Interpretive Centre at Herschel, Saskatchewan. Her love for nature, which also comes through in her stories and experiences, touches people young and old. Muriel is known as the "bird lady" and we are so proud to have her in our lives at the Turtle Lake Nature Sanctuary. Muriel and Gary now reside full-time in Victoria, as the time came to leave the workload of the lake home. While Muriel misses the sanctuary, she enjoys reading reports in past and present issues of the *Blue Jay*, and I am sure she has every issue of the *Blue Jay*.

In closing, I would just like to say thank you, thank you, thank you, Muriel, from all that have entered the Turtle Lake Nature Sanctuary and for those yet to come discover this wonderful place.

As part of our 75th anniversary celebrations, we are interviewing and writing articles that highlight active members who have had a significant impact on Nature Saskatchewan, as nominated by fellow members. If you would like to suggest someone to be recognized, please reach out to ebouvier@naturesask.ca. 🐦

HUMAN NATURE: PRAIRIE SASKATCHEWAN'S DECEPTIVE REPUTATION

Nathaniel Hak

Summer 2023 Habitat Stewardship Assistant
Nature Saskatchewan
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If you've lived in Saskatchewan for some time, you've likely heard your fair share of jokes — made by folks from out of province, your fellow Saskatchewanians, or even yourself — about how “flat” and “boring” Saskatchewan is.

In my position as a Habitat Stewardship Assistant at Nature Saskatchewan last summer, I was fortunate enough to spend lots of time travelling our province, particularly throughout the southwest. I can definitely say that Saskatchewan is most certainly not boring — in fact, it's far from it.

While, admittedly, we may not be able to compete with the rocky peaks of Alberta and British Columbia, our province has some gorgeous landscapes, if you know where to look (which is to say, if you detour off of Highway 1). A personal highlight of mine this past summer was seeing the Frenchman River Valley, home to Scotty the Tyrannosaurus rex. My coworker Liz and I were lucky enough to be able to hike the Jones'

Peak area, located just a few minutes outside of the town of Eastend. We spent a few hours hiking up and down the storied valley through native prairie, spending time with monarch butterflies, bluebirds, and Common Nighthawks, all while admiring the native plants and wildflowers that are becoming increasingly rare across the Prairies.

I also enjoyed the chance to visit the land title holders and managers who participate in our Stewards of Saskatchewan programs, all of whom have gorgeous pockets of land made up of plentiful coulees, valleys, and wetlands that lay host to all manner of flora and fauna, including many species at risk.

I had the opportunity to assist with some rangeland health assessments near Grasslands National Park in the southwest, and was amazed by the beauty of the surrounding landscape. Even the short hike from the car into the pasture seemed to reveal something hidden beyond each hill crest, and the descending, twinkling call of the threatened Sprague's Pipits soaring above only added to the wonder of the incredible views that surrounded us.

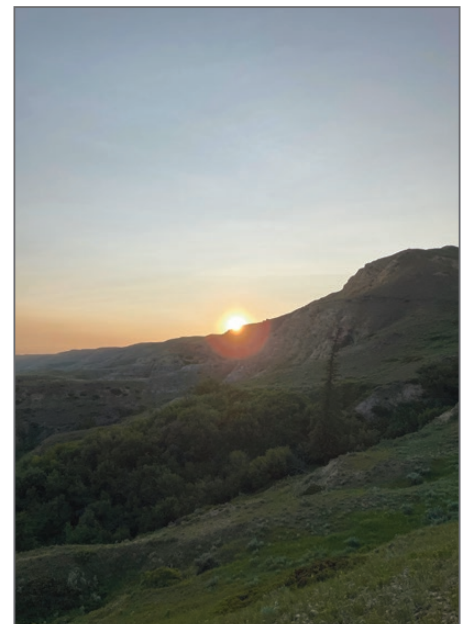
And of course, the rest of the prairie portion of the province boasts a wealth

of stunning landscapes. Grasslands National Park is breathtaking in and of itself, an oasis of intact native prairie that offers a haven for a mosaic of prairie species at risk. The Qu'Appelle Valley, located less than an hour from Regina, also appears out of thin air. I remember when my aunt, who lived in Ontario at the time, visited the valley with my family. She was amazed by how the flat landscapes that surround Regina suddenly dip into a deep, winding valley full of lakes. Nearby Deer Valley, which is just north of Regina and home to the popular Wascana Trails, offers equally impressive views, as well as important wildlife and plant habitat. The same can be said of the South Saskatchewan River Valley that winds its way through Saskatoon, where I was fortunate to spend lots of my time last summer, enjoying its equally unique topography and ecological communities.

And, while I won't ignore the elephant in the room — it's true, *some* parts of Saskatchewan are quite flat — even these landscapes can be special. You never know what you'll find in a “boring” old pasture or native prairie community — like, for instance, a family (or two!) of Burrowing Owls. 🦉



Grasslands National Park. Photo credit: Nathaniel Hak.



Jones' Peak. Photo credit: Nathaniel Hak.

MYSTERY PHOTO



SPRING 2024

QUESTION:

What species are the youngsters shown in this picture?

Photo credit: Randy McCulloch.



WINTER 2023

ANSWER:

The bird that left the impression in the snow, after a cold winter's night at Gord Hammell's farm near Erickson, MB, was a Ruffed Grouse.

During frigid nights or inclement weather, Ruffed Grouse will fly into the snow, and burrow underneath it, to keep warm and stay safe.

Photo credit: Gord Hammell.

Do you have a image that would make for a good mystery photo challenge? Send it to the *Blue Jay* editor at bluejay@naturesask.ca!



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