



WINTER 2025 VOLUME 83.4

BLUE JAY





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Double-brooding has rarely been recorded in the Red-breasted Nuthatch, with one reported case of a second nest attempt in the wild and one in captivity. Dale Hjertaas reports an attempt at double-brooding by a pair of Red-breasted Nuthatches in Regina, SK.



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Brandon Holden documents the first record of Henslow's Sparrow for Saskatchewan, in the rural municipality of Enniskillen, about 55 kilometres east of Estevan.



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On his way across Canada to take up permanent residency in British Columbia, naturalist and egg collector Solomon J. Darcus recorded birds and their nests at his brother-in-law's ranch in the Cypress Hills region during a year-long stopover in 1919-20. Spencer Sealy places some of Darcus's records in the context of the species' current status.



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Annual monitoring and farm stewardship activities can greatly benefit bird conservation. Learn about ways that the efforts of a researcher and landowner near Killam, Alberta, merged to support awareness, outreach, and tangible projects to help conserve birds in the threatened aspen parkland region.



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The 2025 Nature Saskatchewan Fall Meet, based in Moosomin, was held on September 19 and 20, with a bonus optional tour on September 21. Read all about this gathering, including what may have been a meet first!



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The summer of 2025 flew by as a lot of work was accomplished through Stewards of Saskatchewan programs. Learn more about the efforts of Nature Saskatchewan staff and get updates on the various programs!

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FROM THE PRESIDENT

Joe Muldoon
President, Nature Saskatchewan

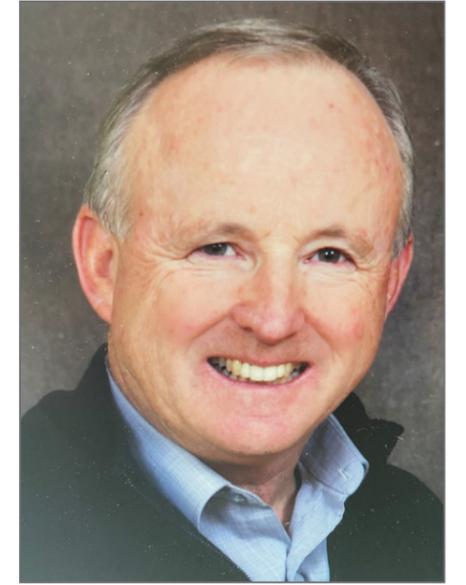
Hello to all *Blue Jay* readers.

I hope that you are enjoying the beautiful fall. As I write this, birds are flying and — for the most part — are still here in Saskatchewan and thrilling us with their presence.

Speaking of fall, Nature Saskatchewan had a wonderful Fall Meet, hosted by Gateway Nature Society from September 19-21 in Moosomin, Saskatchewan. Fall colours were on full display as we visited Fort Ellice and surrounding property assisted by the Nature Conservancy of Canada on Saturday. Following a great field day was an excellent banquet on Saturday night and those wanting to further explore the area were treated to the Blyth property tour on the Pipestone Creek, which was hosted by Nature Saskatchewan Board member Jody Blyth and her husband Clint. At the Saturday night banquet, Nature Saskatchewan's 2025 awards ceremony was celebrated with Deanna Dodgson receiving the Cliff Shaw award; Jan Shadick, Barry Mitschke and Chuck Deschamps each awarded the Conservation Award; and Shelly Fisher receiving the Volunteer Award. Read on in this issue to learn more about their significant contributions.

Mark your calendars for the 2026 Spring and Fall Meets! The Spring Meet is tentatively planned for June 19-21 with the Annual General Meeting to occur on Saturday to give those that need to meet Father's Day requirements the opportunity to be home on Sunday. Swift Current is the planned location, with tours down into the southwest Grasslands to see some of the unique features and patrons of the area. The Fall Meet is tentatively planned for September 18-20 and is to be hosted by the Kelsey Ecological Society in Preeceville. Stay tuned for more details!

Given that it's now fall, it's an appropriate time to provide an update on the Last Mountain Lake Bird Observatory (LMBO). LMBO has been monitoring



Joe Muldoon

songbirds through our bird banding program in Last Mountain Regional Park since 1989. We operated out of an aging trailer for many years, but it no longer adequately serviced our needs. Through financial support from Environment and Climate Change Canada, and a generous donation from the estate of Bill and Joyce Anaka, we have been able to build a new banding station.

The new building houses a much larger public space for banding demonstrations, as well as a banding lab and residential suite for banders. The building will be dedicated as the "Bill and Joyce Anaka Banding Station" to recognize their significant contribution. At the time of this writing, there are only final touches required to the interior before final inspection. The new banding station will allow us to continue monitoring songbirds and to connect visitors to nature. A grand opening of the station is planned for Spring 2026. Stay tuned for further announcements on this, and please plan to join us to celebrate this milestone.

I had mentioned in the last *Blue Jay* that Nature Saskatchewan's newly updated three-year Strategic Plan speaks specifically to the need of meeting

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ON THE FRONT COVER

Many Canadians were captivated by the Toronto Blue Jays this October. While the final outcome wasn't what many of us wanted, they had a good run and the excitement brought more attention to the beauty of the team's namesake!

Photo credit: Randy McCulloch.



ON THE BACK COVER

A Sharp-shinned Hawk photographed in January 2025 in Regina.

Photo credit: Annie McLeod.

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.

Editor: Annie McLeod
3017 Hill Avenue
Regina, SK S4S 0W2
E-mail: bluejay@nauresask.ca

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Main Office

Nature Saskatchewan
206 – 1860 Lorne Street
Regina, Saskatchewan S4P 2L7
(306) 780-9273
info@nauresask.ca
www.naturesask.ca

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FROM THE PRESIDENT

Continued from page 3

with member societies and affiliates to discuss and understand both Nature Saskatchewan and your local programs throughout the province. In these meetings, Nature Saskatchewan hopes to explore opportunities where we can work more closely together, attract more memberships and continue to act as and strengthen our united voices in this most critical time of conserving our natural

resources. If you are interested in further partnership to pursue this important cornerstone of our joint goals, I encourage you to contact the Nature Saskatchewan office, me, or any Board member so that we can begin the process.

In this column, I also want to formally thank the Dykes family (John Dykes) who bequeathed the gift of a quarter section of land in the Norquay area (north of Duck Mountain Lake Provincial Park) for

conservation purposes. We are indebted to David Dykes, nephew and Executor for John, for working with us in this process. The land is located in a beautiful area of the province and we will be diligent in undertaking the land stewardship on behalf of John Dykes. We will be installing a recognition of John's gift onsite.

In closing, I wish everyone a pleasant ending to this beautiful fall.

Yours in conservation.



Left to right: Joe Muldoon, Morley Maier and David Dykes.

ATTEMPTED DOUBLE-BROODING BY THE RED-BREASTED NUTHATCH

Dale G. Hjertaas
15 Olson Place
Regina, SK S4S 2J6

Double-brooding has rarely been recorded in the Red-breasted Nuthatch (*Sitta canadensis*), with one reported case of a second nest attempt in the wild and one in captivity.¹ Here I report an attempt at double-brooding by a pair of Red-breasted Nuthatches at Regina, Saskatchewan.

In 2024, Red-breasted Nuthatches nested in a birdhouse I had hung in the spruce tree in our front yard at 15 Olson Place, Regina. This was a plywood nest box constructed for House Wrens (*Troglodytes aedon*). The nest box had been used successfully by House Wrens in 2022 and by a pair of Black-capped Chickadees (*Poecile atricapillus*) in 2023.

I became aware that the nuthatches were using the nest box at 07:40 h on 22 April when I observed a male nuthatch feeding the female at the entrance to the nest box. I attempted to inspect nest box contents using a fibre optic device at 08:50 h on 5 May, but I could see only the female sitting tightly on the nest contents. I therefore did not determine the size of the first clutch.

At 16:30 h on 8 May I observed adults carrying food to the nest, indicating hatching occurred between nest inspections on 5 May and 8 May. Adults were feeding large young at the nest box entrance on 26 May. On 30 May I observed at least two young in the spruce tree near the nest box, indicating successful fledging. Young Red-breasted Nuthatches typically leave the nest when they are between 18 and 21 days old.¹ If the young began to hatch on 8 May, they would have been about 22 days old on 30 May when I observed fledged young.

On 5 June I was surprised to observe the male nuthatch feeding what I first assumed was a chick at the nest box. Later that day I saw the male again bringing food to the nest box. I was confused, wondering why young would be returning

to the nest box after fledging, but on 6 June when I observed the male bringing food to the bird house, I realized it was feeding the female, which had laid a second clutch. On 7 June at 14:30 h, I used my fibre optic device to confirm a second clutch, counting seven eggs.

Female Red-breasted Nuthatches typically lay one egg per day.¹ A clutch of seven eggs observed on 7 June indicates she initiated the second clutch no later than 1 June, only two days after I first observed fledged young. While the adults were not marked, the very rapid initiation of the second clutch is strong evidence this was the same male and female that raised the first brood.

Paule Hjertaas and I continued to observe the nuthatches regularly and their second attempt appeared to be proceeding successfully until 06:30 h on 13 June when we noticed that both nuthatches were active around the nest box. We thought they were putting more spruce sap around the nest entrance (Figure 1). Placement of conifer sap around the nest entrance is thought to deter predators and competitors from entering the nest cavity.¹ McCowan described a pair of nesting Red-breasted Nuthatches at Brandon, Manitoba



FIGURE 1. Male Red-breasted Nuthatch at nest-box entrance. Note spruce sap spread on walls of nest box around the entrance. Photo credit: Paule Hjertaas.

making repeated trips to a pine tree for resin that was placed on the bark around the nest hole.²

Then we noticed a House Wren (*Troglodytes aedon*) singing in shrubs adjacent to the spruce tree, directly facing and about 1.2 m from the nest box. The male nuthatch frequently perched between the wren and the nest box on a slightly higher branch. It attacked the wren several times, sometimes knocking it off its perch as both fell out of my view. Although the nuthatch defended vigorously, after each attack it appeared more disheveled with feathers out of place. My impression was that the wren was getting the better of these battles. We did not observe the female nuthatch take part in these battles but observed her watching the nest while the battle proceeded. Paule photographed the female nuthatch at 06:36 h (Figure 2).

By 06:37 h, the House Wren had advanced and was singing from the tip of a dead spruce branch approximately 1 m from the nest box (Figure 3), a significant advance toward the nest box from its previously more hidden location in the shrub. At 07:03 h, the wren sang from a position about 0.3 m in front of the nest box. The nuthatch male watched from

above but no longer attacked. We could no longer see the female, which may have been in the nest box or may have moved out of sight. At that point we had not seen the wren attempt to enter the nest box. The wren then dropped down, out of our field of view. At 07:14 h, the nuthatch male was perched again in front of the box, calling loudly. We did not see the House Wren or the female nuthatch.

We were away for most of the day and next checked on the nest box at 18:50 h. The male nuthatch was perched near the nest box, leading me to believe the box was still in its possession.

The next day, 14 June, I did not see any activity near the nest box all morning. I inspected the nest, and it appeared empty. However, at 12:40 h, the male nuthatch perched in the spruce tree near the nest box and scolded.

On the morning of 15 June I observed no sign of the nuthatch near the nest box. At 17:50 h, the House Wren exited the nest box. Upon opening the box, I confirmed there were no longer any eggs in the nest, but several broken eggshells were on the ground below the nest. I concluded the wren had ejected the nuthatch eggs from the nest box.

Bird houses and natural cavities are an attractive but limited resource for cavity-nesting birds. One of the challenges for any cavity-nesting bird is defending the cavity from other birds. The House Wren cannot excavate its own cavity so is totally dependent on securing an existing cavity. The female House Wren appears to focus primarily on quality of the nest cavity when selecting a mate, so possession of nest cavities is of crucial importance to a male House Wren when establishing its territory and seeking to attract a mate.³ House Wren usurpation of nest sites of other species, sometimes accompanied by destruction of eggs or young, has been documented many times.³ Indeed, loss of nest cavities to House Wrens has been reported to be a primary source of nest failure for several cavity nesting species, including Prothonotary Warbler (*Protonotaria citrea*), Tree Swallow (*Tachycineta bicolor*) and chickadees.³ Brewer, in a study of

Black-capped and Carolina Chickadees (*Poecile carolinensis*) noted “House Wrens are probably the most constant and successful competitors for nest sites of both species of chickadees over much of their ranges”.⁴

Brewer reported the crucial point in an attempt by a House Wren to usurp the nest is the wren entering the nest and throwing out the nest and contents.⁴ I did not think to look for ejected eggs and did not notice the eggshells until June 15, but the lack of activity around the nest box on the morning of 14 June suggests the wren ejected the eggs sometime on 13 June, the day I first noticed the conflict.

Interestingly, after gaining control of the nest box in our yard, the House Wren did not nest in it. Subsequent observation showed it placed several twigs in the nest (Figure 4) as male House Wrens do after claiming a cavity.³



FIGURE 2. Female Red-breasted Nuthatch watching nest box as House Wren attempts to claim it. Photo credit: Paule Hjertaas.



FIGURE 3. House Wren on dead spruce branch in front of nest box. Photo credit: Paule Hjertaas.

Failure to follow up usurpation of the nest with actual nesting suggests the wren did not attract a female.

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FIGURE 4. Interior of nest box after House Wren usurpation, showing wren has added twigs, but no nest was constructed. Photo credit: Dale Hjertaas.

HENSLOW'S SPARROW AT ENNISKILLEN: THE FIRST RECORD FOR SASKATCHEWAN

Brandon Holden
London, ON
peregrine13@gmail.com

On 8 July 2014, I was part of a team conducting habitat assessments and detection surveys for the endangered Dakota Skipper (*Hesperia dacotae*). Our target habitat was dry hilltops containing purple coneflower (*Echinacea purpurea*) and porcupine grass (*Stipa spartea*) on select sites in the Rural Municipality of Enniskillen No. 3, about 55 km east of Estevan, Saskatchewan. The weather was warm with a mix of sun and cloud and a steady breeze. While returning from the target habitat, we passed through a multi-year fallow area of tall, mixed-grass prairie that appeared to have a seep or spring widely pooling (or draining) below the vegetation. The northwest corner of the tall grass plot appeared to hold more water than the rest, and contained several singing Sedge Wrens (*Cistothorus platensis*). The remaining 90 per cent of the plot had an unusual abundance of singing Grasshopper Sparrows (*Ammodramus savannarum*). It was unlike other habitats or avian communities visited during our fieldwork in the region. While traversing the habitat at roughly 14:00 h, I first heard a short insect-like song of a Henslow's Sparrow (*Centronyx henslowii*) and paused to listen. After several minutes, I was reasonably confident a second clear yet short song of the Henslow's Sparrow had been heard. Being new to Saskatchewan, I used a smartphone to verify that the province is outside the normal range of Henslow's Sparrow. After waiting several more minutes, a single, poorly defined and unconfirmed song was the only additional audio observation. My unfamiliarity with many aspects of the local fauna and their noises, time of day, brevity of calls, range disparity and a pressing work schedule led me to dismiss the short calls and we traveled to our next survey site.

Early that evening, I conducted additional research, noting that Henslow's

Sparrow did not appear on the official checklist of birds for Saskatchewan or Manitoba.^{1,2} A query of the eBird database showed numerous records in Minnesota with sporadic occurrences in North and South Dakota.³ Further reading was focused on the Henslow's Sparrow's preferred habitat requirements, listed in the Canadian Recovery Strategy as tall and dense grass cover, a thick thatch layer, a lack of emergent vegetation, large areas of grassland habitat and low-lying wet areas.⁴ Many of these features were matched by the habitat where the potential Henslow's Sparrow songs had been heard earlier in the day.

Considering the habitat preferences and the potential calls heard, I decided to drive back to the site in an attempt to confirm the observation, arriving at dusk, with digital recordings of the Henslow's Sparrow song and a portable speaker. The wind had dropped and the skies cleared, with a large moon rising above the horizon. LeConte's Sparrows (*Ammodramus leconteii*) were now the only birds singing. After a few minutes of silent listening and no results, the playback was initiated and repeated 40-50 times without response. I then ceased playback and began preparing to leave the site when a loud song of the Henslow's Sparrow was clearly heard very close to where I was standing. It was so prominent that I thought the recording had accidentally played while idly held. Playback was initiated again with six or seven additional songs but none received a response. It wasn't until playback had been stopped that the loud, clear song of a Henslow's Sparrow was heard once again at close range. Over the next several minutes, brief 2-3 plays of the digital song were used to elicit a response from the inquisitive male Henslow's Sparrow. The light was not suitable for photographs, so recordings of the song were made with "video mode" on a standard point-and-shoot camera (Canon Powershot SX30). After securing audio documentation, I left the site. Our busy survey schedule and the bird's presence

on private property prevented any further observations from being made.

Identification

The identification rested on the brief but distinctive, insect-like song heard several times during two visits on 8 July 2014. Each song was a distinctly two-syllabled, insect-like *sic-tlic*, less than a second in duration. The double note and short duration of the songs is unlike those of closely related species such as Grasshopper, Nelson's (*Ammodramus nelsoni*), or LeConte's Sparrows. Calls of other sparrow species were considered, as well as the potential for other birds or even insects to produce a similar noise. It was the second site visit that put any questions about the identification to rest, providing the ability to simultaneously compare the song at close range, in direct response to the Henslow's Sparrow playback, with little other background noise. The song was almost identical to playback with only slight variation, and the vigorous response further solidified the identification. The digital recording of the song is available, and two sonograms have been produced (Figure 1). The cluster of five strong features within the frequency range 4-10 kHz and barely half a second total duration closely resembles published sonograms and appears to be diagnostic for Henslow's Sparrow. An absence of visual evidence, the secretive nature of the individual, providing little viewing opportunity despite close proximity, match the behavioural traits of the species.

Habitat

The habitat was a tall stand of multi-year, fallow mixed-grass prairie, notable in having very shallow pools of water beneath the thatch layer. Using Google Earth, the core habitat was measured as roughly 500 m east/west by 200 m north/south, roughly 10 ha, with a sparse border of deciduous shrubs and trees. Within the core habitat, the northwestern corner appeared to be the water outflow

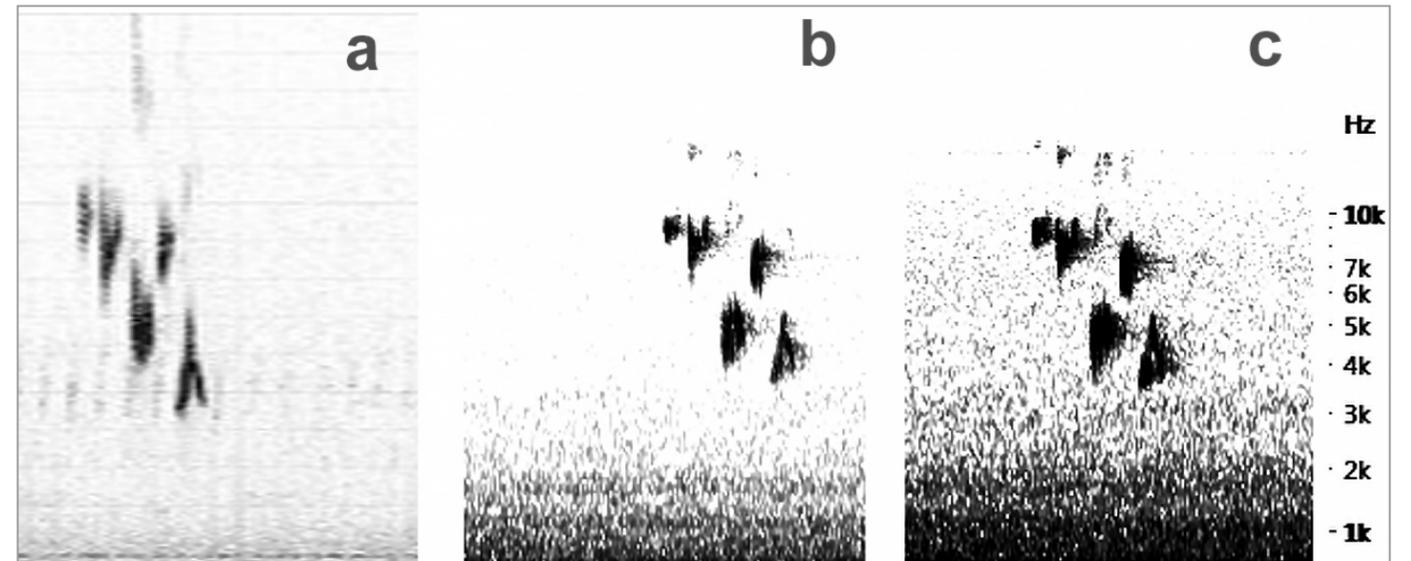


FIGURE 1. Sonograms of Henslow's Sparrow songs: (a) reference sonogram adapted from Ref. 12; (b) and (c) recorded at Enniskillen, Saskatchewan, 8 July 2014. Note that the frequency scales for (b) and (c) are logarithmic, while that for (a) is linear. This makes (b) and (c) vertically compressed as compared with (a). The two scales are aligned at a frequency of 10 kHz, and the duration of each clip is 1 second.

source, suspected of being a seep or spring. The ground in this area was uneven with scattered tussock features. The remainder of the core habitat (90 per cent) was the level grass underlain with pools, as described above. Similar habitat was likely present ~200 m beyond the western and eastern limits of the core habitat although it was not visited. On the northern edge, dry level prairie extended several hundred meters beyond a slight treed ridge. To the south, dry short-grass prairie hills containing the target species of Dakota Skipper, purple coneflower and porcupine grass stretched for ~100 m before levelling off over a broad floodplain. Measuring all immediate prairie habitats yields an area of 30 ha, with an extended area of 150 ha before prairie or grassland habitats are no longer the dominant vegetation community. Due to the nature of the observation, an inventory of plant species was not completed. Four photographs were taken, facing N, E, S and W from the centre of the core habitat; the southward view is shown in Figure 2.

Discussion

The northwestern limit of the Henslow's Sparrow's breeding range is commonly mapped within Minnesota, where it is classified as an endangered species.⁵ Igl discusses the historical and recent status of the Henslow's Sparrow



FIGURE 2. View from the centre of the core habitat, looking south.

in South Dakota; where it is classified as a rare breeder.⁶ Nest records exist for North Dakota, but the species is generally considered irregular in the state.⁷ These records extend as far northwest as J. Clark Salyer National Wildlife Refuge, about 130 km southeast of Enniskillen, SK.⁷ An endangered species in Canada, most records of migrants or territorial individuals have occurred in southern Ontario.⁸ Sporadic breeding has occurred in extreme southern Quebec, and wayward migrants have been recorded in Nova Scotia.⁸ This singing male at Enniskillen, responding to playback in damp, tall prairie grasses, likely represented a territorial individual. The Canadian recovery strategy suggests

that wetter sites may be the historical preferred breeding habitat as it would be "the most stable vegetation structure from year to year", and it has been reported that Henslow's Sparrows are more abundant at specific sites in Illinois during years with increased moisture conditions.⁹ Due to the nature of the Enniskillen observation, there are many questions left unanswered surrounding potential breeding or site fidelity. A singing male in seemingly suitable habitat at Paskwachi Point in the Hudson Bay Lowlands of Ontario from 27-29 July 2009 sets precedent for a vagrant yet territorial individual of this species.¹⁰

This observation from Enniskillen on 8 July 2014 represents the first documented

Henslow's Sparrow for Saskatchewan and the Canadian Prairies. Cryptic and highly secretive, the species is known for running through the grass rather than flushing, and for singing its short, insect-like song more regularly at night than during the morning.¹¹ It is hoped that the details in this account will help those hoping to identify additional occurrences of the inconspicuous Henslow's Sparrow.

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Editorial note from the late C. Stuart Houston after seeing an early draft of this article back in 2021:

John James Audubon was not only world-famous as a bird and mammal artist, but showed brilliant potential as a taxonomist. He described "Henslow's Bunting" as a brand-new species, based on its plumage and its pitifully weak song in 1829 — amazingly early for such a difficult identification. This was based on his observations in Kentucky in 1820, across the Ohio River from Cincinnati. Audubon had befriended John Stevens Henslow during his extended visit to Great Britain between 1826 and 1829. On March 9, 1828, Henslow presented in Audubon's words "an impressive sermon on Hope" at Great St. Mary's church in Cambridge. In 1831, dissuaded from accepting the post of naturalist on HMS Beagle for a two-

year voyage to South America (including the Galapagos Islands), Henslow instead successfully proposed his protégé Charles Darwin for the position. Further, Henslow's eldest daughter Frances Harriet married Sir Joseph Dalton Hooker, a world-famous botanist, who succeeded his father William Jackson Hooker as director of Kew Gardens, and was a close friend of Darwin. Among the many plants named in honour of the Hookers are several species native to the Prairie Provinces.

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SOLOMON J. DARCUS'S NESTING RECORDS OF BIRDS IN THE CYPRESS HILLS REGION, SASKATCHEWAN, 1920

Spencer G. Sealy

Department of Biological Sciences
University of Manitoba
Winnipeg, MB R3T 2N2
Spencer.Sealy@umanitoba.ca

Introduction

Naturalists and ornithologists were drawn to the Cypress Hills and surrounding grassland and wetlands of southwestern Saskatchewan and southeastern Alberta in the early decades of the 1900s. Most spent only a few days or weeks collecting specimens in the area, whereas different circumstances saw naturalist and egg collector, Solomon J. Darcus (Figure 1), spend a little more than one year in the region in 1919-20. This was during a break in a protracted move from New Brunswick to take up permanent residence in British Columbia. After emigrating to Canada from Ireland in the early 1900s, Darcus served in France during World War I. Upon his return to Canada in 1919, and following a brief visit with family and friends in Fredericton, New Brunswick, he boarded a train for Maple Creek and the Cypress Hills. His final destination was the homestead and

ranch operated by his sister May (née Darcus) and brother-in-law, Ernest W. Allen, near Battle Creek, southwest of Cypress Lake (Figure 2). Darcus arrived on 20 July 1919 and remained there for little more than one year. He recorded detailed notes of the birds observed throughout the fall and winter and the first arrival of some species in spring, but most of all he pursued his passion for egg collecting that resulted in many nesting records for the area, some of which were supported by egg sets now held permanently in museums. These and other records are detailed below.

Many species were new to him, amid a landscape not previously experienced. By late October 1920, Darcus was back in Fredericton, but a few months later he travelled to British Columbia, initially to the west coast of Vancouver Island, before settling permanently in the southern Okanagan Valley.^{1,2}

Darcus did not publish his observations of birds in the Cypress Hills region, which meant they were unavailable to early students of the birds of that region³ and of Saskatchewan.⁴ Through correspondence in the ensuing decades, however, some of

Darcus's discoveries began to reach the ornithological community. In particular, records were sent to Herbert Friedmann in response to pleas for information to be included in catalogues of species parasitized by the Brown-headed Cowbird (*Molothrus ater*).^{5,6} Correspondence with Allan Brooks, among the important naturalists in the Okanagan Valley at the time, brought to light additional details of the records from the Cypress Hills region. And in a letter packed with information written to the editor of a nature column in a Montreal newspaper after he returned briefly to New Brunswick, Darcus commented that he had been "a close student of ornithology for some twenty years and have always read the Natural History column with keen interest."⁷

On 31 October 1920, he observed a Yellow-headed Blackbird (*Xanthocephalus xanthocephalus*) associating with a flock of American Robins (*Turdus migratorius*) near Fredericton. Although the bird was far out of range, he was confident of his identification, stating "I was very familiar with the yellow-headed blackbird on the marshes in the Cypress Hills in Saskatchewan, but this is the first time



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FIGURE 1. Solomon John Darcus (1886–1973) and hiking gear, Canyon Ranch in the southern Okanagan Valley, 1926. Courtesy of Penticton Museum and Archives (PMA 3243).

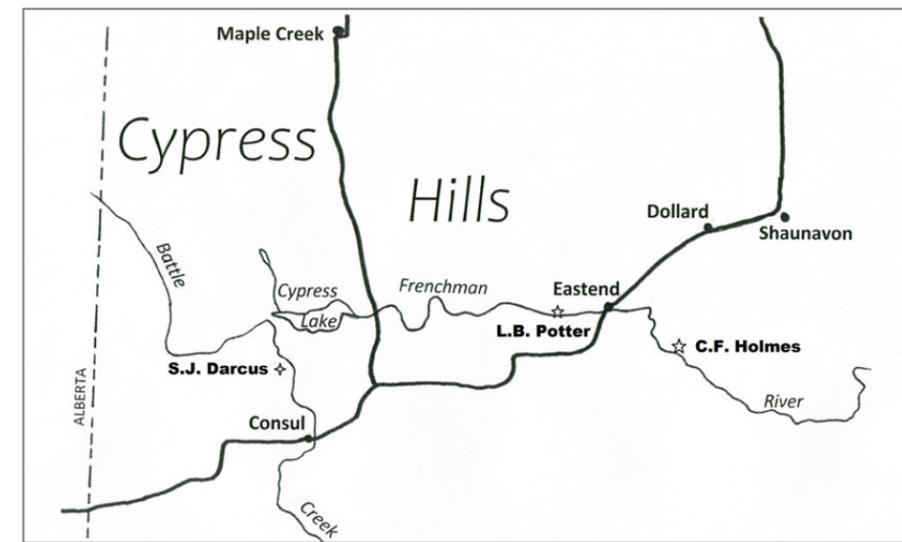


FIGURE 2. Darcus observed birds during a stay of a little more than one year (1919-20) at his brother's-in-law ranch near Battle Creek (49° 25' 57" N, 109° 50' 53" W) in the southern reaches of the Cypress Hills, Saskatchewan, before settling permanently in British Columbia. Battle Creek eventually flows into Cypress Lake, as mapped in Godfrey's account of the birds of the Cypress Hills region.² The locations of the homesteads of naturalists Laurence Potter and Charles Holmes are denoted by stars. Sketch map prepared by N.L. Sealy.

I have met with it east of Manitoba.”⁷ The editor, Ernest Ingersoll, commented that “The presence of a yellow-headed blackbird in New Brunswick is the first instance on record, I think; but it has been observed occasionally as a straggler to Ontario and Quebec. Ornithologists will be glad to know of the abundance of birds in the Cypress Hills.”⁸

Nesting records

I initially extracted details of observations and nesting records from digitized copies of Darcus’s field notes and scans of photographs⁹ provided by grandson, Patrick J. Darcus, from notes transcribed by Jeannine Darcus. Having recently received the original notes, I checked everything again and uncovered a few more nesting records in photo albums. (Darcus’s field notebooks and photographs are now held in the Penticton Museum & Archives, to augment already-archived material and a portion of his egg collection.) Notes prepared during Darcus’s stint in the Cypress Hills region covered the period from arrival on 19 July 1919 through 3 June 1920, when the notes had been removed. I relied on egg sets and photographs for egg dates and natural history notes recorded after 3 June. Most photographs, some undated — taken by Darcus more than 100 years ago — are faded or out of focus, but they back up early records of the discoveries during his brief stint in the region. As nests were generally visited only once, clutches may have been incomplete and their initiation dates were approximate. The notes revealed often difficult conditions under which Darcus worked — usually alone — and a work ethic characteristic of other naturalists that were active in this region at the time, and whose observations also were made when time could be spared from the demands of rural life.¹⁰ Twenty-mile walks during all seasons, frequently called “tramps”, with some requiring overnight stays in deserted “shacks”, were conducted regularly. Quoted passages from Darcus’s notes provide glimpses into the weather, habitats and other conditions that surrounded the discoveries of the nests, and status of several species, some of which would become critically endangered.

Common among egg collectors, eggs collected by Darcus during his stint in the Cypress Hills region passed from collector to collector² before being deposited permanently in the following museums: Canadian Museum of Nature (CMNAV), Ottawa, Ontario; Royal Alberta Museum (RAM), Edmonton; Royal British Columbia Museum (RBCM), Victoria; and Western Foundation for Vertebrate Zoology (WVZ), Caramillo, California. Photographs of nests and eggs reproduced in the species accounts were taken by S.J. Darcus.

Annotated list of species

Horned Grebe (*Podiceps auritus*). Darcus recorded large numbers of Eared Grebes (*P. nigricollis*) and a few pairs of Western Grebes (*Aechmophorus occidentalis*) in spring, whereas the presence of the Horned Grebe was confirmed in an undated, labeled photograph of a nest that contained three eggs (Figure 3).

Sora (*Porzana carolina*). Darcus described his first encounter with this species: “Fine day [11 May 1920] after a wet night; strong easterly wind with temperature between 55°[F] and 60°. I made the acquaintance of another new bird today, the Sora Rail. It was in some bushes by the creek and swam across to the opposite shore after being disturbed. I had a good opportunity of observing it at close quarters. Its bright yellow bill was very conspicuous and black forehead and chin.” On 13 June this species was encountered again and a nest with eggs was photographed.



FIGURE 3. Nest and eggs of Horned Grebe, Cypress Hills region, Saskatchewan, 1920.

Canada Goose (*Branta canadensis*). First observed on 22 March 1920, when “... ten [were] observed flying northward”; about

40 were recorded on 25 May. A nest was photographed, showing its construction amid outbuildings on the Allen ranch (Figure 4). One nest with four eggs placed amid low bushes was depredated by 23 May, “...evidently by [American Crows]”, which were nesting in the vicinity; Darcus did not observe the event.



FIGURE 4. Nest and eggs of Canada Goose, Cypress Hills region, Saskatchewan, 10 June 1920.

Mallard (*Anas platyrhynchos*). Two flocks were observed on 25 March 1920, with Northern Pintails (*A. accuta*). Darcus photographed a Mallard’s nest constructed in an abandoned hawk’s nest.

Northern Pintail (*Anas acuta*). In addition to individuals observed above with Mallards, a nest was photographed on 27 June 1920.

American Avocet (*Recurvirostra americana*). In the letter to the Montreal newspaper quoted above, Darcus mentioned nesting by the American Avocet⁷; one egg set (RBCM E0151A) from two nests observed was collected on 29 May 1920 (Figure 5). In the notes for that day, Darcus described the discovery of this nest during one of his “long trips to the hills”, this one with horses.

On one of the lakes we saw the first young ducks of the season, a pair of Pintails, with young ones. There were quite a number of other ducks to be seen, Mallards, Canvasbacks, Baldpates [American Widgeons], and numbers of American Eared Grebes. At one small lake at which we stopped for a short time we found two pairs of American Avocets nesting, one nest containing four eggs, and the other one. The nests were in dry situations, amongst stones just hollows lined with a little grass. The birds were very much excited when the

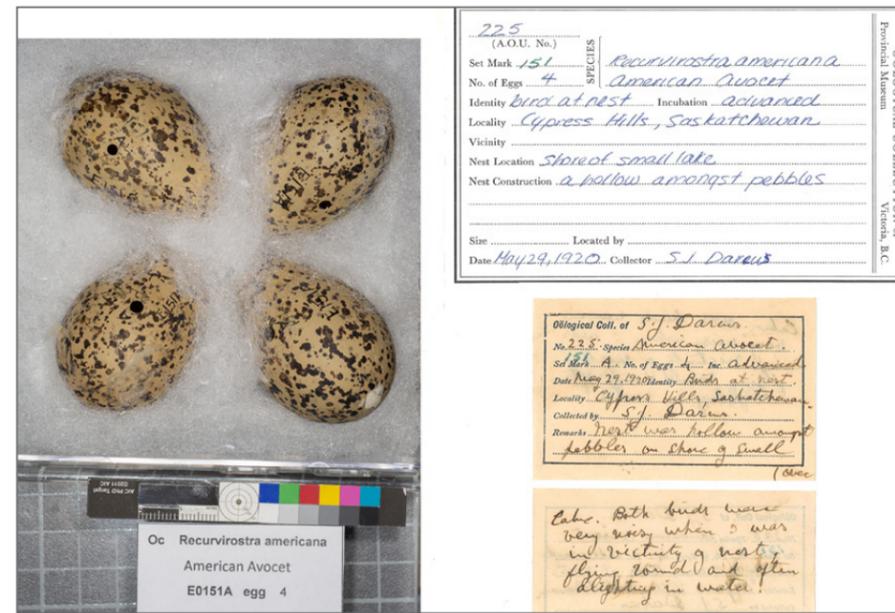


FIGURE 5. Set of American Avocet eggs (RBCM E0151A) taken in the Cypress Hills region, Saskatchewan, 29 May 1920; data-slip is penned in Darcus’s hand. Courtesy of Royal British Columbia Museum.

vicinity of the nests was approached. The avocet is an excellent swimmer, frequently alighting in the water.

The next morning, following the night spent in a “shack” near a lakeshore, Darcus and an unnamed companion, “constructed a raft with some poles and crossed to the island”, where they observed avocets, but nesting was not indicated.

Long-billed Curlew (*Numenius americanus*). Also in the letter quoted above⁷, Darcus commented on an article “from a Saskatchewan correspondent, [who] stated that the long-billed curlew is now extremely scarce. I am glad to be able to state that in the part of the Cypress Hills in which I was last spring and summer, I met with [this species] and found several nests on 8 June [1920]... which I photographed ‘in situ’” (Figure 6). Darcus recorded an individual on an island in the lake visited above on 30 May and on the following day while “crossing the prairie.”

The article and “Saskatchewan correspondent” to which Darcus referred were not identified, but the correspondent may have been Hedley Mitchell, who had been working west of Eastend before Darcus arrived in the summer of 1919. They evidently did not meet, but did they correspond? Mitchell was especially interested in the Cypress

Hills and its birds, and published notes on several little-known species recorded during the summer of Darcus’s arrival, although the Long-billed Curlew was not among them.¹¹ Five years later, Mitchell stated that the Long-billed Curlew was “[a]pparently decreasing in numbers in some parts”, which corroborated what Laurence Potter, a local naturalist who ranched near Eastend, noted: “Twenty-five years ago the Longbilled Curlew swarmed everywhere; today it has become a rarity in the [Frenchman River] valley, but a few may yet be seen on the prairie.”¹²

Killdeer (*Charadrius vociferous*). First observed on 13 April 1920, but followed by several individuals observed on 26 April, “... becoming quite common now on the flat ground by the creek.” Nests: 29 May, 1 egg (“hole amongst stones lined with pebbles”).



FIGURE 6. Nest and eggs of Long-billed Curlew, Cypress Hills region, 8 June 1920.

Common Tern (*Sterna hirundo*). Darcus initially had difficulty distinguishing between Common Tern and Forster’s Tern (*S. forsteri*), but a colony of the former species on an island visited on 30 May 1920 contained “... six of the Terns’ nests containing eggs from one to three in number.”

Spotted Sandpiper (*Actitis macularius*). An undated photograph of a nest and four eggs was taken near Battle Creek.

American Bittern (*Botaurus lentiginosus*). Darcus flushed an American Bittern and three Wilson’s Snipes (*Gallinago delicata*) “from some rushes” during a long walk in the hills on 24 June 1920. A bittern’s nest had been discovered on 13 June (Figure 7).

Least Bittern (*Ixobrychus exilis*). Darcus’s description of a Least Bittern at Coulee Lake in the Cypress Hills was considered plausible and augmented the species’ status as hypothetical in Saskatchewan, but his assertion of breeding was questionable.¹³ Darcus visited Coulee Lake as he travelled south of Maple Creek on his way to his brother’s-in-law homestead on 19 July 1919. He was impressed with the many species of birds observed there but there is no mention of an observation of a Least Bittern.⁹ Nevertheless, Darcus later recounted an observation of this species to Allan Brooks, naturalist and wildlife illustrator¹⁴, whom he met during his residency in the Okanagan Valley. In a letter written on 17 May 1930



FIGURE 7. Nest and eggs of American Bittern, Cypress Hills region, Saskatchewan, 13 June 1920.

to Charles F. Holmes, one of the early rancher-naturalists of the region who homesteaded south of Dollard^{10,15}. Brooks listed several specimens of birds from southern Saskatchewan that he desired for his collection. Last on this list was the Least Bittern, to which Brooks added that “I have added the last [species] as I have just had a visit from [S.J.] Darcus who says he found it breeds at Coulee Lake south of Maple Creek.” Had Darcus collected birds, as he did their eggs¹, this record may have been confirmed and the species would have been removed from the hypothetical list. That occurred a few years later when a specimen of Least Bittern was collected some years before 1927 at Moon Lake, south of Saskatoon.^{13,16} The species’ status in Saskatchewan is currently listed as “Accidental.”¹³

Northern Harrier (*Circus hudsonius*). Spring arrival: 3 April 1920. Darcus first noted nesting on 27 May: “... a pair... nesting amongst some low bushes not far from the house by [Battle] creek. The male is doing the nest building. He has been bringing sticks to the nest all day carrying them in his talons. I only saw the female in the vicinity of the nest for a few minutes. At times the male has been performing antics in the air taking head dives and soaring and screaming. He is a fine specimen in the light blue phase of plumage.” A clutch of six eggs was collected on 10 June (RBCM E0157A) — “in dry situation on ground among low bushes. Composed of twigs and dry grass” (Figure 8) — apparently from this nest.

American Kestrel (*Falco sparverius*). Spring arrival: 15 April 1920, becoming common by 1 May; frequently noted as “numerous.” On 30 May, Darcus and companions found themselves in the “higher ranges” of the Cypress Hills. “Early in the afternoon we broke camp, hitched up the team and started for the highest range of the Cypress Hills... We soon arrived at the highest point of the hills. Here we are in wooded country, a great contrast to the prairie. Saw several Ferruginous Rough-legged Hawks, Swainson’s Hawks and American Sparrow Hawks and found an old hawk nest with young Horned Owls in it about a week

old.” On 31 May, they found a kestrel’s nest with four eggs “in an old Flicker’s hole in a dead stump ten feet from the ground.” Not mentioned in his notes was whether this clutch was collected that day, or, whether it was collected the following day when it contained five eggs. This egg set was eventually catalogued in the Western Foundation of Vertebrate Zoology (WVZ EN-10481), but it cannot now be located (R. Corado, pers. comm., 15 October 2024).

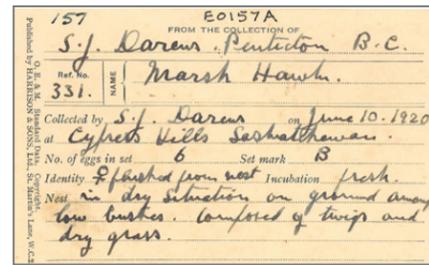


FIGURE 8. This data-slip accompanies a clutch of six Northern Harrier eggs (RBCM E0157A) collected by S.J. Darcus in the Cypress Hills region, Saskatchewan, 10 June 1920. Courtesy of Royal British Columbia Museum.

Ferruginous Hawk (*Buteo regalis*). Spring arrival: second week of April 1920. The two clutches from among the 15 nests Darcus discovered provided an important early reference point for the documentation of the decline of this species in Saskatchewan, and revealed the region still supported “reasonable numbers” of the species.¹⁷

American and Ferruginous rough-legged hawks were among several species Darcus had not observed prior to his arrival in the Cypress Hills region. He recorded American Rough-legged Hawks regularly throughout the nonbreeding season in 1919-20, whereas the first Ferruginous Hawks returned during the second week of April 1920. In his notes for 2 May, he referred to a nest on “the clay cliff by [Battle Creek]”... the hawks have been in the vicinity for three weeks and added more sticks.” After an arduous trek on 9 May, Darcus described the collection of three eggs (RBCM E0149A) from another nest:

As [Battle Creek] is in flood and is a raging torrent I could not cross it so follow [sic] its winding course for some miles upstream. The Ferruginous Rough-legged Buzzards had three eggs in the nest in the Willow bush by the stream. The species is apparently the

first of the family to nest here. It is a very useful species destroying numbers of gophers or prairie dogs. In fact it seems to subsist almost entirely on that little pest. There was one hanging on a branch beside the nest. The nest which apparently has been used for several years was composed of sticks and birch with grass and chips of horse manure.

Darcus described Battle Creek, “... south of the Cypress [Hills] [as] quite a large stream with marshes in places.” The second clutch, of four eggs (RBCM E0148A), was taken on 16 May 1920 (Figure 9) from a nest “... in a large Poplar tree. A few hundred yards up the coulee another pair was nesting in a Poplar tree 35 ft. from ground.” Darcus noted that this species appears to be the most common of the large hawks and the first to nest. Two more nests were recorded, on 23 May (3 eggs, “not far from the lake”) and 24 May (4 eggs, “the lowest one seen, being only six feet from the ground”). Darcus was impressed as four nests were discovered “in this part of the hills within a radius of two miles.”

Swainson’s Hawk (*Buteo swainsoni*). Spring arrival: 11 April 1920, “several in light phase.” Darcus commented that Swainson’s Hawk “is the most common hawk there. Both the [Ferruginous] rough-leg and Swainson’s hawk are very useful species, their prey consisting of that injurious little animal, the gopher [Richardson’s Ground Squirrel, *Urocitellus richardsonii*]. I have seen many gophers strung up in the willows and on the edges of the hawk’s nest; the male bringing them to the female while she is incubat[ing].” Five nests in willows: 23 May, 2 eggs; 24 May, two with 2 eggs (both photographed), 3 eggs, and 4 eggs. Darcus commented that “[this] species is almost three weeks later in nesting than the Ferruginous Rough-legged Hawk.”

Of a dozen nests noted, two egg sets were collected on 24 May 1920 (WVZ EN-29153, 3 eggs; WVZ EN-29154, 4 eggs): both nests were built of “... sticks, lined with grass in willow”, 9 and 10 ft. from the ground, respectively. Having noted that the Ferruginous Hawk nested earlier than Swainson’s Hawk, Darcus’s observation of “a pair of Swainson’s Buzzards repairing an old stick nest on a



FIGURE 9. Set of Ferruginous Hawk eggs (RBCM E0148A) collected by S.J. Darcus in the Cypress Hills region, Saskatchewan, 16 May 1920. Note variation in spot patterns among the eggs. Courtesy of Royal British Columbia Museum.

cliff”, on 25 April, probably involved the Ferruginous Hawk, which returned in spring about this time, as acknowledged above. “Proceeding up the Coulee the first hawks [sic] nest I found was a Swainson’s with three eggs. The nest of the Swainson’s Hawk is not nearly as large as that of the Ferruginous and all I have seen were built in the top of the willow while the Ferruginous Rough-legged which builds a much larger nest, constructs the nest about half way up in the bush or in the crotch of a large popular tree.”

Great Horned Owl (*Bubo virginianus*). Year-round resident. Nests: 30 May 1920, discovered “... in an old hawk nest with young Horned Owls in it about a week old. It was in a large poplar tree on the edge of a dense wood. We saw no sign of the parent birds.” This nest was apparently photographed on 1 June.

Northern Flicker (*Colaptes auratus*). The “Flickers” that Darcus observed frequently were of the “yellow-shafted” form. Had Darcus collected specimens, “hybrids” between this and the “red-shafted” form may have been identified.^{3,18} First observed on 4 May 1920, “apparently crossing the prairie now to the wooded country northwards.” Nests: 24 May, “... in a hole six feet beneath the [Ferruginous] hawk’s nest”; 30 May, “several pairs... nesting in old stumps”; 31 May, “quite common all incubating now.”

Eastern Kingbird (*Tyrannus tyrannus*). First recorded on 24 May 1920: “... has arrived now. I met with it the past two days everywhere in the hills and flats where there are bushes.” Darcus reported a nest of this species parasitized by the Brown-headed Cowbird “from Saskatchewan.”⁵ Other than mentioning the kingbirds’ arrival in spring, Darcus did not note details, such as number of eggs of host and cowbird, of this or most other records of parasitism. That he generally visited nests only once meant it was not determined whether the cowbird’s

egg was later removed by the kingbird, which is the typical response to cowbird parasitism by this species.¹⁹ In the notes for 15 August 1919, however, Darcus “saw Kingbirds in several places and one by the house here is feeding a young cowbird.” Also lacking details, this was a rare record the Eastern Kingbird feeding a fledged cowbird²⁰, and one overlooked in a recent compilation of cowbird hosts on the Canadian prairies.²

Loggerhead Shrike (*Lanius ludovicianus*). Darcus observed the Northern Shrike (*L. excubitor*) during his residence in New Brunswick, and several times in winter in the Cypress Hills region, but a “new” species, “White-rumped Shrike” (Loggerhead Shrike), was observed on 9 May 1920, attending a nest “in a Willow Bush close to the bush which contains the nest of the [Ferruginous] Rough-legged Hawk... The nest was completed and the bird was sitting on it but there was nothing in it. Further along the creek I met with another pair of Shrikes”; 20 May, nest with two eggs; 23 May, nest with four eggs.

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American Robin (*Turdus migratorius*). Robins were frequently noted as numerous and their pleasing song was appreciated throughout the spring. On 23 May 1920, “Robins are numerous and serenaded us until late in the evening”; on 1 June, “The wooded valley resounded with song of the American Robin.” Nests: 16 May, “just building their nests”; 24 May, four eggs.

Black-billed Magpie (*Pica hudsonia*). Year-round resident. Nest: 24 May 1920, five eggs; other nests found but not detailed in the notes.

American Crow (*Corvus brachyrhynchos*). One observed on 30 March 1920, but additional individuals and flocks were observed during the ensuing week. Nests: 16 May, “nests containing eggs”; 23 May, “[a] number of Crow’s nests in willows contained eggs”; 30 May, “pairs of crows nesting in willows and Pines.”

Horned Lark (*Eremophila alpestris*). Individuals and flocks were observed regularly throughout the winter and spring and by 11 April 1920, “are to be seen in pairs now.” Nests discovered on 30 April (two eggs) and 6 May (two nestlings “about three days old”) prompted Darcus to comment on the species’ early nesting, “where there is still much snow on the ground.” Another nest contained three eggs on 16 May about which Darcus stated “[t]he species only lays two or three eggs in its first clutch”, whereas the last nest noted, on 18 May, contained five eggs. Recently fledged young observed on 15 May. A parasitized nest with three eggs plus one cowbird egg taken on 8 June was reported to Friedmann.⁵

Bank Swallow (*Riparia riparia*). First recorded on 27 May 1920: “The bank swallows which arrived at their nesting quarters last Sunday have been busy since then excavating in the bank by the creek as the bank sloped this spring destroying their old nesting holes.”

Vesper Sparrow (*Poocetes gramineus*). Spring arrival: 4 May 1920; “... its song is to be heard”, and by the following day noted “... as very common now.” Although not noted in his field notes, Darcus reported

a parasitized nest (contents unknown) discovered in June 1920.⁶

Chestnut-collared Longspur (*Calcarius ornatus*). This species was “... very common on the prairie” by 4 May 1920. Darcus provided one of the earliest records of cowbird parasitism on this species, which Friedmann acknowledged: “... Darcus sent me data on one record from Saskatchewan — a parasitized nest he found at Cypress Hills on June 1, 1920.”⁶ The egg set, if collected, cannot be located, and the nest’s contents is unknown.

Thick-billed Longspur (*Rhynchophanes mccownii*). First observed on 7 May 1920. Darcus correctly recorded this species as McCown’s Longspur, but the common name was changed recently to Thick-billed Longspur by the American Ornithological Society, in an effort to remove eponymous names of birds.²¹ The eggs from a nest containing three eggs recorded in his notes on 20 May was apparently not collected, whereas information gleaned from the accompanying data shows another clutch of three eggs collected on 29 June (CMNAV E5591) (Figure 10). Darcus’s record of cowbird parasitism on this species was among the earliest recorded

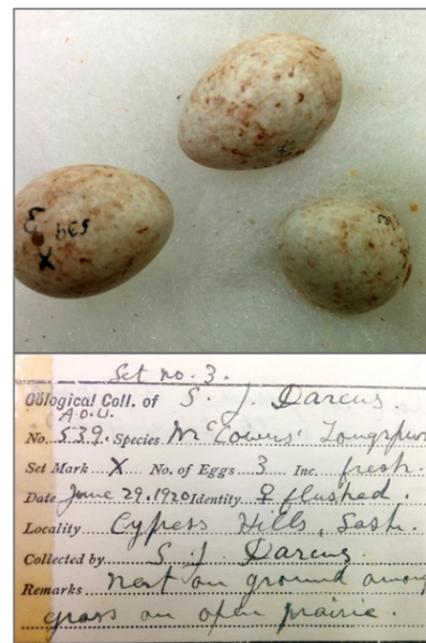


FIGURE 10. Unparasitized set of Thick-billed (formerly McCown’s) Longspur eggs (CMNAV E5591) collected by S.J. Darcus, Cypress Hills region, Saskatchewan, 29 June 1920. Courtesy of the Canadian Museum of Nature.

for this species, which Friedmann acknowledged: “Darcus sent me data on one record from Saskatchewan — a parasitized nest found at Cypress Hills on June 7, 1920.”⁶ If collected, this egg-set was not located.

Brewer’s Blackbird (*Euphagus cyanocephalus*). Darcus recorded the first spring observations of Red-winged Blackbird (*Agelaius phoeniceus*) and Brewer’s Blackbird on 2 May 1920. He described that day as “the first real spring day we have had, the sun being quite warm and there was very little wind.” He found at least two Brewer’s Blackbird nests, the first on 28 May (eggs not located, if collected) was “built on the ground amongst low bushes and containing six eggs.” The other nest contained two blackbird eggs plus two Brown-headed Cowbird eggs (RBCM E178A, E179B) taken near Battle Creek on 26 June (Figure 11).

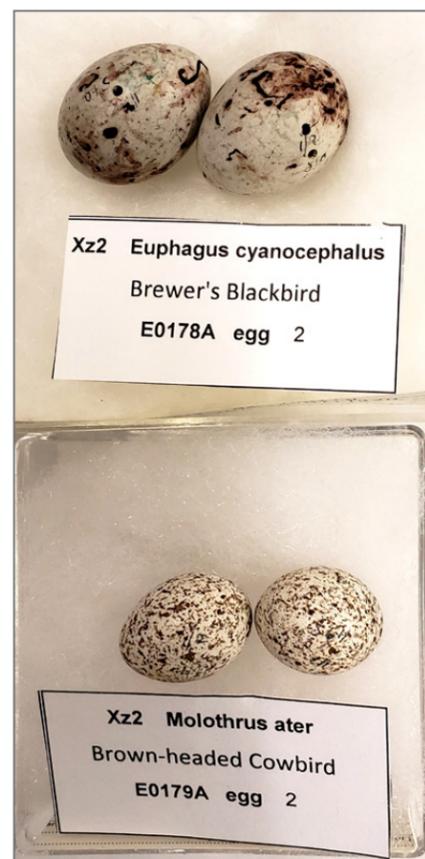


FIGURE 11. This parasitized clutch of Brewer’s Blackbird (RBCM E0178A, E0179B) was collected by S.J. Darcus near Battle Creek, Cypress Hills region, Saskatchewan, 26 June 1920. The nest contained two blackbird eggs and two cowbird eggs. Courtesy of the Royal British Columbia Museum.

Western Meadowlark (*Sturnella neglecta*). Spring arrival: 2 April 1920. Darcus described the discovery of a meadowlark’s nest with five eggs (RAM Z83.70.361): “Early in the afternoon we broke camp hitched up the team and started for the highest range of the Cypress Hills. On the way up we found a Meadow Larks [sic] nest with five eggs.” Noted on the data slip was the “nest well concealed in tuft of grass.”

After the Cypress Hills

Darcus left the Cypress Hills region in the fall of 1920 and nothing in his field notes indicated that he ever returned. Following his sojourn in the region, he began a new chapter that was highlighted by experiences with many new birds and their nests observed on the west coast of British Columbia and eventually in the southern Okanagan Valley. Egg collecting continued, initially focused primarily on seabirds,^{22,23} but Darcus’s conservation ethic grew in the ensuing decades and he became guardian of the Vaseaux Lake Bird Sanctuary²⁴, which was established in 1923 and remains today. His lectures on birds were well received by local naturalists²⁵, and his expertise on a wide array of nature was sought by others, among them, naturalist H.J. Parham, whose book, *A Nature Lover in British Columbia*¹, included reminiscences of Darcus’s years in residence in the South Okanagan. Darcus’s egg sets have made their way into museums across North America and in Europe, and many sets held in the Penticton Museum & Archives were listed in reports of the British Columbia Nest Record Scheme. All in all, Darcus’s place among the pioneering field naturalists in British Columbia was assured; previously hidden contributions to ornithology in Saskatchewan add another facet to his legacy.

Acknowledgements

Patrick J. Darcus responded with great interest and supported numerous inquiries regarding his grandfather’s field activities in the Cypress Hills region. He provided digital copies of field notes painstakingly transcribed from the original notes by his sister,

Jeannine Darcus, and scanned several photographs. Patrick eventually sent me Darcus’s photographs and original notes that stretch through the early 1960s, which are now permanently held in the Penticton Museum & Archives, British Columbia.

Thanks to personnel of the following institutions who augmented online searches for egg sets or provided additional information or photographs of egg-sets: René Corado (Western Foundation of Vertebrate Zoology, Caramillo, CA); Gavin Hanke and Lesley Kennes (Royal British Columbia Museum, Victoria); Jocelyn Hudon (Royal Alberta Museum, Edmonton); Dennis Ooman (Penticton Museum & Archives, Penticton, BC); and Gregory Rand (Canadian Museum of Nature, Ottawa). Hudon scanned a letter from Allan Brooks to C.F. Holmes that is archived in the Royal Alberta Museum. I thank the anonymous reviewer for insightful comments on the manuscript. Noreen L. Sealy sketched the map.

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SYNERGIES BETWEEN BIRD SURVEYS AND STEWARDSHIP AT SUNRISE FARM IN CENTRAL ALBERTA

Glen Hvenegaard

6306-42 Avenue
Camrose, AB T4V 2W7

Don Ruzicka

5809-37 Avenue Close
Camrose, AB T4V 4A8

Introduction

Bird populations in grassland ecosystems have declined by 67 per cent since 1970, more than any other group of birds.¹ Many grassland birds are at risk of extirpation or extinction, largely due to the loss or fragmentation of grassland habitat through cropland expansion.² Other reasons include increases in human development, agricultural activities, tree and shrub encroachment, fire suppression, climate change, urban areas, roads, oil and gas extraction, climate change, and pesticides.^{1,2}

We can take action to reverse these trends. Most importantly, through environmental stewardship, we can work to protect the remaining grasslands and to restore grasslands wherever possible.² There are many ways to engage in local environmental stewardship, which can be defined as: “the actions taken by individuals, groups or networks of actors, with various motivations and levels of capacity, to protect, care for or responsibly use the environment in pursuit of environmental and/or social outcomes in diverse social-ecological contexts.”³ Achieving environmental stewardship in grassland ecosystems could involve setting specific targets for grassland protection, restoration, or sustainable management, and then supported by appropriate policy measures, such as monetary payment programs (e.g., incentives, compensation programs, payment for ecosystem service provision), non-monetary programs (e.g., providing information about grassland-friendly management practices to producers, recognition for such actions), and regulation (e.g. based

on improved legislation, monitoring, and enforcement).⁴ Furthermore, we can use market-based approaches that support agricultural products that come from sustainably used grasslands (e.g., ecolabel programs such as Habitat-Friendly Winter Wheat through Ducks Unlimited Canada and providing information about management practices required for certain agricultural products). We need many of these actions and research results at the ecosystem scale, but we also need information and actions at the local or farm scale.^{5,6}

Only 25-30 per cent of original grassland habitats in Canada remain in their original condition.⁷ Furthermore, of the remaining prairie grasslands about 32 per cent is owned privately, and additional grassland is leased to individuals.⁸ Therefore, we should support the conservation actions of local wildlife stewards on these important lands. One type of support comes from synergies that develop between wildlife-based researchers who monitor local wildlife and the landowners who may undertake stewardship activities for bird conservation.⁹ Conservation benefits can result in several ways. Whether landowners actively participate in data collection or not, the interactions between researchers and landowners can improve landowner knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors related to conservation.^{10,11,12} Moreover, interactions between the landowners and others in their networks can trigger additional conservation benefits, through advocacy and stewardship by others.¹³ Last, conservation benefits might result from changes to the researcher through the sharing of research results, ideas for future research, and engagement and advocacy for bird conservation with other landowners and stakeholders.

The purpose of this article is to describe how a partnership between a bird researcher and a wildlife-loving

landowner in east-central Alberta produced valuable conservation benefits for the researcher and landowner.

Sunrise Farm

Sunrise Farm is located in the Parkland Natural Region in east-central Alberta near Killam, about 160 kilometres southeast of Edmonton. Don and Marie Ruzicka owned the farm from 1983 to 2020. The farm consisted of 600 acres of mixed grasses and legumes and 200 acres of native prairie, aspen (*Populus tremuloides*) forest, riparian areas, and wetlands. Until 1995, they used traditional, industrial farming techniques, growing grains and beef for the commodities market. After taking a holistic management (<https://holisticmanagement.ca/>) course in 1996, they changed their approach. Their philosophy was simple: “decide what you want in life, link it to your production model and open your mind to a new way of thinking.” What they wanted in life was found in their new vision: “Enduring stewardship contributing to maintaining and promoting a healthy landscape with abundant biodiversity resulting in resilient ecosystems.”¹⁴ The Ruzickas wanted to tie the sustainability of the land (e.g., clean water, healthy soil, fresh air, and abundant wildlife) to the sustainability of farming economics (e.g., financially viable and satisfying farming lifestyle). They believed that if they managed the land well, it would reflect on the health of the plant communities and in the food production with nutritious and great tasting beef, pork and poultry. The Ruzickas believed that birds can be effective indicators of the overall health of the land.¹⁵ Moreover, they subscribed to claims by E.O. Wilson (biologist, naturalist, ecologist, and entomologist) that “when it comes to the diversity of species that exists in an ecosystem, the flexibility of that ecosystem is what keeps the system healthy, growing and resilient to change.”¹⁶

As a result, the Ruzickas “changed from a conventional way of farming to a grass-based, certified organic, niche way of farming.”¹⁷ Even before becoming certified organic in 2000, they began raising and selling products from a small herd of cows, along with pigs, chickens, turkeys, and laying hens. The Ruzickas slowly developed a committed group of consumers that wanted to support sustainable and wildlife-friendly agriculture. They also offered custom cattle grazing on their pastures. By monitoring available grass, the Ruzickas rotationally grazed small herds of cattle with temporary electric fences. They delayed grazing around their 15-acre wetland until mid-July to allow breeding birds a chance to nest and fledge in the native pasture. They rotationally grazed their pigs, chickens, and turkeys by pulling relocating self-contained outdoor pens to new pastures each day.

In 1992, Ducks Unlimited Canada re-established an 11-acre wetland along Iron Creek. Between 1997 and 1999, the Ruzickas fenced off 10 dugouts and natural riparian areas to keep cattle out, and used a solar-powered pump to provide water to cattle away from the water bodies. There are about 60 acres of wetlands across the five quarters of land. In 2003, the Ruzickas began planting trees and shrubs in the riparian area along the creek and wetland. The riparian health assessments by Cows and Fish indicated that scores rose from 77 per cent in 2001 (i.e., healthy but with problems) to 84 per cent in 2006 and to 87 per cent in 2017 (i.e., both meaning healthy).

Over the years, the Ruzickas engaged with the community in many ways. Students from the University of Alberta’s Augustana Campus completed many community service-learning projects on wildlife, farming, and sustainability projects. Service groups, researchers, interested citizens, and consumers visited the farm for workshops, projects, or private tours. Most left with a greater appreciation and support for the possibility of sustainable agriculture.

Bird monitoring

In 2004, Don and Glen met at a prairie conservation conference in Calgary where Glen gave a talk about birds in remnant aspen patches around Camrose. We quickly shared our passions for birds, wildlife, and sustainability. Soon after, Don invited Glen to conduct a bird survey on the Ruzicka’s farm. As a result, every year from 2004 to 2020, Glen conducted 10-minute unlimited radius point counts¹⁸ at Sunrise Farm, from 05:30 h to 09:30 h, on one morning in June (Figure 1). Don and Glen visited nine sites around the farm that were representative of the various habitats and management strategies. Glen counted birds only in conditions with low wind speeds and no precipitation. He included all birds

seen and heard, and took steps to avoid double counting.

Over 17 years, we recorded an average of 46.6 species per year (range = 40-56), with little variation each year (SD = 3.1). We recorded new species almost every year, but at a declining rate over time. The resulting species accumulation curve (Figure 2) indicates that we were close to seeing most of the species present. On our very last count, we celebrated by reaching 100 species recorded over 17 years. The number of species recorded each year did not vary by which date in June the survey occurred. On average, we recorded 272 individual birds each year (SD = 44.9, range = 215-390), with no clear trends over the 17 years. For comparison, Glen conducts an annual



FIGURE 1. Glen conducting 10-minute bird counts at Sunrise Farm.

Breeding Bird Survey route near Halkirk, Alberta (about 70 km southeast of Sunrise Farm), involving three minutes of counting birds in a similar manner at each of 50 sites. With more sites, but a shorter time at each site than at Sunrise Farm, he recorded 117 species since 1995, with an average species count per year of 63.2 (range = 47-74), and an average abundance per year of 1,134.6 (range = 837-2,068; <https://www.pwrc.usgs.gov/BBS/>).

We recorded many common species every year, including the Canada Goose (*Branta canadensis*), Least Flycatcher (*Empidonax minimus*), Warbling and Red-eyed Vireo (*Vireo gilvus* and *V. olivaceus*), Black-billed Magpie (*Pica hudsonia*), American Crow (*Corvus brachyrhynchos*), Tree Swallow (*Tachycineta bicolor*), Northern House Wren (*Troglodytes aedon*), American Robin (*Turdus migratorius*), Yellow Warbler (*Setophaga petechia*), three sparrows (Chipping, Clay-colored, and Savannah; *Spizella passerine*, *S. pallida*, *Passerculus sandwichensis*), Red-winged Blackbird (*Agelaius phoeniceus*), and Baltimore Oriole (*Icterus galbula*). We recorded some species on only one year, including Great Blue Heron (*Ardea herodias*), Black-crowned Night Heron (*Nycticorax nycticorax*), Common Goldeneye (*Bucephala clangula*), Northern Goshawk (*Astur atricapillus*), Northern Harrier (*Circus hudsonius*), Greater Yellowlegs (*Tringa melanoleuca*), Ring-billed Gull (*Larus delawarensis*), Downy Woodpecker (*Dryobates pubescens*),

Horned Lark (*Eremophila alpestris*), Grasshopper Sparrow (*Ammodramus savannarum*), Common Grackle (*Quiscalus quiscula*), and White-winged Crossbill (*Loxia leucoptera*). Among Canada's species at risk in 2025, we recorded Sprague's Pipit (*Anthus spragueii*, Threatened, recorded on nine years), Barn Swallow (*Hirundo rustica*, Threatened, 15 years), and Horned Grebe (*Podiceps auritus*, Special Concern, five years).¹⁹

After classifying each sampling site according to habitat, the average number of species was highest for wetland habitats (38.6), followed by native pastures (27.3), tame pastures (27.1), aspen forests (23.6), and the homestead (12.7).

Stewardship benefits the birds

Meeting up each year, we quickly caught up on family and work news as we travelled to the survey points. As we conducted the bird surveys, we anticipated bird sightings at each stop. Will we see Sprague's Pipits? Will the new Purple Martin (*Progne subis*) house have nestlings? What new species will we record this year? After counting birds and eating breakfast together, Glen shared insights about conserving birds, educating students, the power of research, and connecting with local conservationists. As well, Don shared his passion for sustainable farming, wildlife, and healthy living. We developed a common bond, which deepened each year.

Among the many birds on their farm, a few species seemed to have extra meaning. In 1994, the Ruzickas cleared 20 acres of native prairie and brush where Sharp-tailed Grouse (*Tympanuchus phasianellus*) had a dancing ground. No longer finding grouse since that time was a loss for the Ruzickas. Similarly, many years earlier, Don's father had cleared another area of mixed aspen forest and native prairie for grain farming. It became apparent that the productivity of this land would not provide adequate returns. Therefore, Don planted alfalfa (*Medicago sativa*) and four different grasses in 1997, to restore some grazing potential. However, the bird diversity that returned to the area never matched its original bird diversity (compared to an adjacent parcel of land with intact native vegetation).

Nevertheless, many conservation efforts produced positive results for birds, even before bird monitoring began. After changing his grazing regime, a key turning point for Don was hearing a Western Meadowlark (*Sturnella neglecta*) sing in May 2000, the first he had heard in 11 years, when it was once prolific. Don always thought that the presence of meadowlarks indicated whether the pasture was overgrazed. Meadowlarks provided a good indicator of healthy natural grassland ecosystems, and helped to show how long to graze cattle in one area. As Don later wrote:²⁰

Their spirited song became a catalyst for working at becoming more intimate with nature.... The western meadowlark requires abundant litter from native forages for nesting. The rest periods had enabled those forages to grow and thrive, providing a home for the meadowlark and also abundant grazing for our cattle. This lesson suggested that nature would become a barometer and a major player in helping us to make decisions on how to manage the ecosystem.... The western meadowlark became the face of our farm as their return was the first visible sign that it was possible to repair and restore habitat.

Indeed, the meadowlark became the welcoming bird on the farm's entrance sign.

With information from the bird

surveys in hand, we can make some links between stewardship activities and bird sightings on the farm. We break down these links by habitat. First, riparian health played a major role in providing quality habitat for wetland birds. With an 11-acre wetland established in 1992 to water cattle, our surveys confirmed that wetland birds benefited. In addition to the common duck species, we recorded new riparian species on our surveys, such as Double-crested Cormorant (*Nannopterum auritum*) in 2016, Great Blue Heron (2018), and Common Yellowthroat (*Geothlypis trichas*, 2018).

In 2009, Don finished fencing all of the sloughs to keep cattle out and to avoid disrupting nesting birds (Figure 3). This fencing improved the wetland habitat, allowing us to record waterfowl and shorebirds regularly (e.g., Sora [*Porzana carolina*], American Avocet [*Recurvirostra americana*], Spotted Sandpiper [*Actitis macularia*], Lesser Yellowlegs [*Tringa flavipes*], Marbled Godwit [*Limosa fedoa*], and Willet [*Tringa semipalmata*]), and wetland-associated sparrows (e.g., LeConte's and Nelson's, *Ammodramus leconteii*, *A. nelsoni*) sporadically. Don placed floating nesting boxes for Canada Geese on four of the dugouts in 2004, round flax straw bales on four more dugouts in 2006, and two bales in the eleven-acre wetland in 2007, all with successful goose nests (Figure 4).

The Ruzickas also carefully managed their small patches of aspen forest with fencing and managed grazing. Such activities contributed to birds first recorded on our surveys, such as Northern Goshawk (2016), American Kestrel (*Falco sparverius*, 2011), Pileated Woodpecker (*Dryocopus pileatus*, 2012, Figure 5), Western Wood-peewee (*Contopus sordidulus*, 2011), White-winged Crossbill (2013), and Red-breasted Nuthatch (*Sitta Canadensis*, 2017). Of course, we regularly recorded Baltimore Orioles and Least Flycatchers throughout their forests. Don and Marie especially appreciated the ability of Red-tailed Hawks (*Buteo jamaicensis*), which nest in the aspen trees, to control rodent pests, such as Richardson's Ground Squirrels (*Urocitellus richardsonii*). Don



FIGURE 3. The fenced dugouts keep out cattle and the solar-powered system provides water away from the dugout.



FIGURE 4. Floating platforms provided nesting locations for various waterfowl species, such as Canada Geese.

had unfinished plans to erect a nesting platform in the native prairie to entice more Red-tailed Hawks to nest.

The native prairie on the farm received special management attention. Don rotationally grazed cattle in a way that maintained grass cover patterns desired by target species. We were especially delighted to record Sprague's Pipits, another favourite for Don and Marie, on nine of 17 years. The pipits were always in a patch of native pasture singing high above the moderately grazed grass. Don often wondered what the most effective grazing strategies were to attract pipits. As Don wrote later:²⁰

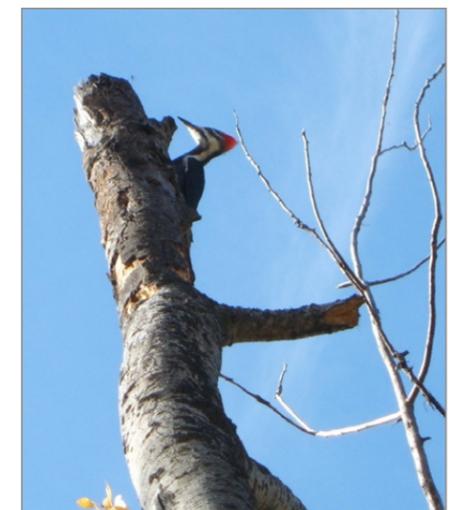


FIGURE 5. The Pileated Woodpecker found sufficient habitat in an aspen stand with minimal grazing.

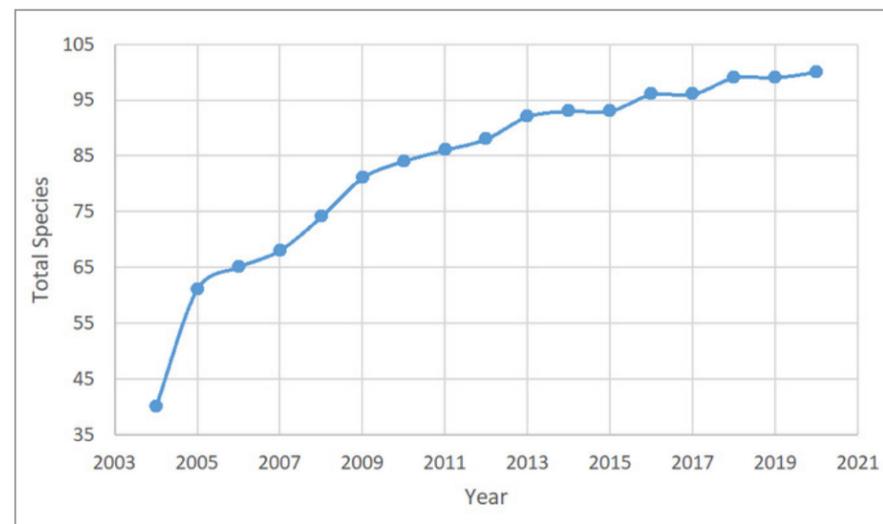


FIGURE 2. Species accumulation curve from bird surveys at Sunrise Farm, 2004-2020.

Well managed native pastures of a diversity of grasses and legumes entice them to nest. Their diet is made up of small seeds from various grasses as well as terrestrial insects, with grasshoppers being a favourite. They seldom make their nests in pastures but if there is enough litter, they show up. Their young are fed mainly insects.

It was a highlight day when Marie discovered and photographed a pipit nest along the route of her regular walks. While we did not record Loggerhead Shrikes on our surveys, Don and others did see these birds on their land, making use of thorny buffaloberry (*Shepherdia argentea*) shrubs within patches of prairie.

Don had an extensive system of cavity nest boxes along fence lines, and was rewarded with a 97 per cent occupancy by cavity-nesting birds (Figure 6). Don targeted Mountain Bluebirds (*Sialia currucoides*), but Tree Swallows and Northern House Wrens were the primary beneficiaries. However, we recorded Mountain Bluebirds on 13 of 17 years. These insectivorous birds helped keep insect populations in check, which aided the Ruzickas in their decision to avoid using insecticides. Moreover, swallows used the chicken feathers left behind each morning to build nests when the chicken pens were moved. Had they stayed on the farm, Don planned to mow some areas so that bluebirds could access more terrestrial insects.

A nearby friend of the Ruzickas banded Mountain Bluebirds at Sunrise Farm from 2002 until 2019. In the early years, he suggested that Don enlarge the entrance holes of the nest boxes from



FIGURE 6. While the nest boxes targeted Mountain Bluebirds, other species were common users, such as the Tree Swallow.

1½" to 19/16". This change allowed larger males to gain easier access to the nest boxes, resulting in a noticeable increase in bluebirds on the farm. The bird bander kept meticulous notes (including nesting age, GPS location, time, and date) which he sent to the North American Bluebird Society for further continent-wide analyses. Knowing that Hantavirus is a disease carried by deer mice (*Peromyscus maniculatus*) through contact with their droppings or urine, Don discouraged mice from entering the nest boxes, by placing an aluminum sleeve around the fence post a few inches below the entrance to the box. As a result, Don never found signs of mice were in the nest boxes.

Upon hearing from neighbours about their success in attracting Purple Martins, the Ruzickas erected a martin nest box in 2008, which enticed martins from 2010 onward. These delightful birds return in the spring to locations near where they were hatched and fledged. Their cheerful chirps and rattles were a pleasure to anticipate, experience, and remember.

Around their home, the Ruzickas provided Niger seed at bird feeders, attracting a variety of species, including American Goldfinches (*Spinus tristis*) regularly and Pine Siskins (*S. pinus*) starting in 2013. In the winter, the Ruzickas stocked feeders with sunflower seeds for the Black-capped Chickadees (*Poecile atricapillus*) and other winter residents.

In 1984, learning that they could order trees and shrubs at no cost from the Prairie Farm Rehabilitation Administration Shelterbelt Program, the Ruzickas placed their first order for seedlings for two- and four-row

shelterbelts throughout the farm. These trees provided a range of ecosystem services, including windbreaks, retained snow, nesting habitat, sequestered carbon, and wildlife travel corridors. Flagstaff County supplied the tree planter and two summer students did the planting. Later on, they became more intentional by establishing wildlife habitat plantings, which consisted of one acre of 10 rows of trees, including deciduous trees, conifers, and berry bushes (Figure 7). Last, they planted what they call eco-buffers, consisting of three sections: 1) two rows of chokecherries (*Prunus virginiana*, flowering for three weeks); 2) three rows of 10 varieties of flowering trees (flowering for five weeks); and 3) seven rows of 21 different tree species and 20 native flowers (flowering from April to October). Thus, pollinators had access to flowering plants throughout the growing season. We recorded Ruby-throated Hummingbirds (*Archilochus colubris*) occasionally since 2008, largely attracted to the flowering shrubs now available. In the last few years, we started monitoring birds in the areas planted to trees and shrubs, but did not have enough years elapsed to detect any changes. We recognize that bird diversity is increased through the provision and management of a variety of habitats.²¹

The Ruzickas have received many awards for their innovative stewardship efforts. While they hesitate to brag about their awards, these awards were able to raise awareness and gave the Ruzickas opportunities to share their passion and expertise. Some of these awards included:

- 2019 Outstanding in Stewardship Award, Battle River Watershed Alliance
- 2012 Farmer-Rancher Pollinator Advocate Award for Canada, North American Pollinator Partnership
- 2011 Alberta Emerald Award for Individual Commitment, Alberta Emerald Foundation
- 2008 L.B. Thomson Award from the Prairie Farm Rehabilitation Administration and Environment
- 2007 Growing Alberta Leadership Award for Environmental Stewardship, Alberta Agriculture
- 2007 National Stewardship Award, Countryside Canada
- 2003 Excellence in Grazing Management Award, International Mountain Section of The Society for Range Management.

In 2020, the Ruzickas sold their land to new owners, who naturally will take the farm in new directions. Normally, when land changes hands in this area, new owners drain wetlands and sloughs, and clear trees to make every acre of land pay. However, the Ruzickas decided that the best way to honour all of those people who helped paint the canvas of their farm was to place some of the land into a conservation easement.¹⁴ With the County of Flagstaff acting as a land trust, a conservation easement ensures that the new owners will maintain fencing, restrict grazing, and maintain trees on 45 acres of the land (i.e., wetlands, sloughs, shelterbelts, wildlife plantings, and eco-buffer plantings). In addition, the new owners shared the Ruzicka values and respect for the land that has provided them all with a great deal of satisfaction.

Conclusion

Of course, our efforts faced many limitations of time and information. Glen could make himself available for one day a year, but surveys that are more thorough would have taken several days. It would have been helpful to have more years to survey birds in the wildlife plantings and eco-buffer areas. Given the size of Sunrise Farm, we focused surveys on just nine sites; expanding the breadth of coverage would have resulted in more bird records



FIGURE 7. Wildlife habitat plantings provided cover, food, and travel corridors for many species of wildlife.

over time and a deeper understanding of bird relationships with habitat. Our discussions occasionally continued when we met in other venues or through email, but most of our insights arose from those yearly visits. Moreover, the Ruzickas' stewardship activities were influenced by many other people and organizations. Last, since many stewardship activities began before, or happened tangentially to, the bird surveys, we can only make indirect connections between them. These stewardship activities also benefited species from other taxonomic groups, such as common Garter Snakes (*Thamnophis sirtalis*), Thirteen-lined Ground Squirrels (*Ictidomys tridecemlineatus*), and native bees.

Nevertheless, these bird surveys, annual visits to Sunrise Farm, and the genuine connection over environmental stewardship helped develop a positive reciprocal relationship, with benefits to Glen and to the Ruzickas. First, Glen found that watching the Ruzickas engage in many kinds of stewardship activities was a wonder to behold. They were passionate about sharing their insights with anybody who visited their farm: students, consumers, neighbors, government officials, researchers, and family. Their style of interaction was engaging and positive, and helped Glen and the Ruzickas make greater connections to the land. The Ruzickas were willing to try new techniques, often raising eyebrows in an otherwise conservative farming community. In turn, these interactions increased Glen's desire to monitor bird populations at their farm and elsewhere. Some opportunities arose through Don's involvement with the Iron Creek Watershed Improvement Society, and some developed as Glen expanded his networks. These bird surveys triggered other connections between his university and Sunrise Farm, through student field trips, volunteering, community service-learning students, and guest speaking engagements. Professionally, Glen expanded these initial bird surveys to a larger research project that he shared with others (through conference presentations, publications, community talks, and conservation efforts).

Second, the Ruzickas gained some benefits as well. They expressed appreciation regularly for the long-term dataset about birds on their property. After each survey, we talked about how that information helped drive their desire for more stewardship. Of course, awareness of the species present, and their unique requirements, helped the Ruzickas make land use decisions to support a healthy landscape. Visitors to the farm gained insights from the Ruzickas as they made connections between their farming decisions and bird populations. As Don says, "in observing people who have visited our farm ..., I have noticed that some have a yearning that is aching to be filled. When they come in contact with nature being cared for, it seems to give them some hope."²² In effect, Sunrise Farm became a positive demonstration and outreach site that illustrated, among many other topics, how to manage for both wildlife and sustainability. Don often said, "We can make a difference, despite the rapid changes elsewhere." Moreover, he enthusiastically invoked E.O. Wilson (1986) by saying that "we can infect people with biophilia."²³

We realize that most farms in the Canadian Prairies operate an industrial model that intensively uses carbon and pesticides, converts habitat, and drains wetlands.²⁴ However, the Sunrise Farm made an important transition towards a sustainable-food-system. Many factors can trigger and support a transition toward wildlife stewardship activities by landowners, including connections to the land, personal norms, information, mentors, capacity, and emotional attachment.^{25,26} The interactions that we have described illustrate these triggering factors, and helped Glen and the Ruzickas pursue environmental stewardship at Sunrise Farm and beyond. We hope that some of these examples resonate with readers with a connection to wildlife and the ability to contribute to stewardship activities. Scaling up local solutions to large-scale adoption of sustainable agriculture will not be easy, but will require a careful attention to collaborations, integrated systems, economic viability, suitable policies, and new and emerging technologies.²⁷

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NATURE SASKATCHEWAN 2025 FALL MEET RECAP

Ellen Bouvier

Communications Manager
Nature Saskatchewan

Jennifer Moser-Aikman

Office Administrator
Nature Saskatchewan

The Gateway Nature Society hosted a wonderful Fall Meet, based in Moosomin, at the end of September. Although rain was threatening as attendees arrived on Friday evening, the skies soon cleared and the weekend was full of sunshine, friendship, and nature.

Friday night began with a presentation by Elizabeth Bekolay with One School One Farm. This uplifting and inspirational presentation was exactly what the group needed to start the weekend off. We even sang a song together, which we believe may be a first for a Nature Saskatchewan meet? Another "first" for the meet was some nature trivia, presented by Kendra



Parrish with Gateway Nature. We have some competitive (although still friendly) members in our midst!

Saturday couldn't have been more perfect as far as the weather was concerned. Blue skies and no wind meant that the day could be thoroughly enjoyed.

We started the day at Fort Ellice, welcomed by Réanne Blouin, president of CDC P'tite Fourche, and her father Roland Blouin, as well as Tim Gompf and Christine Chilton from the Nature Conservancy of Canada (NCC). We heard stories about the historic site and were invited to explore the new interpretive walk and the surrounding NCC property, which looks out over the valley and the Assiniboine River. The stations of the footpath were beautifully created and a wonderful way to learn more about the important site. Also featured were First Nations, Métis and Cairn (Settler) monuments. In the afternoon, we visited NCC's Beaver Creek property and the Fort Ellice Project, which is one of NCC's native grass restoration sites. After that, we headed back to Moosomin for a little down time before the evening event.

Saturday night at the Moosomin Armoury started with the Fall Business

Meeting before we were all treated to a lovely meal from a local restaurant, The Cork and Bone Bistro. After dinner, the annual awards ceremony was held prior to our evening presentation from Jordan Rustad, Conservation Coordinator with Nature Saskatchewan and Bander-in-Charge at the Last Mountain Bird Observatory (LMBO). Jordan spoke about the history of the observatory, some new advances in MOTUS technology and migration trends throughout the time of LMBO. We also got a small sneak peek at the new banding station, which is set for a grand opening in the spring of 2026!

As a bonus on Sunday morning, we were invited to explore the property of Jody and Clint Blyth, and it may have been the highlight for many that attended the Fall Meet. About 30 of us spent time on the banks of Pipestone Creek where one group saw four otters feeding on freshwater mussels, and another got first-hand experience with how fishy otter feces are! Turtles were also seen, but with the recent rise in the water level and the presence of otters, they were mostly floating and observing us. It was truly a beautiful and peaceful way to wrap up a busy and fun-filled weekend! 🐼



NATURE SASKATCHEWAN 2025 AWARD WINNERS

Each year at the Fall Meet, Nature Saskatchewan recognizes outstanding service and contributions that Society members, and/or affiliate and partner organizations have made towards Nature Saskatchewan's objectives and goals.

Recipient of the Nature Saskatchewan 2025 Volunteer Award Shelly Fisher

Shelly has been volunteering at the Last Mountain Bird Observatory (LMBO) for more than a decade and worked at the banding station in 2011 and 2012. While Shelly now works in Environmental Consulting, she still finds the time to volunteer to band birds at LMBO year after year. Shelly is a highly skilled biologist and bird bander. She holds a Master's Banding permit in Saskatchewan and has banded more than 200 species of passerines, doves, woodpeckers, and raptors, and has examined approximately 250 species in hand.

Shelly is also a fantastic cook. She cooks delicious meals for her fellow banders after a long day of bird banding. Shelly has been a reliable and extremely valuable volunteer for LMBO and Nature Saskatchewan, and we are incredibly grateful for her time and commitment.

Recipients of the Nature Saskatchewan 2025 Conservation Award Jan Shadick

Jan Shadick is the founder of Living Sky Wildlife Rehabilitation and has been the executive director (unpaid) for the charity since its inception in 2010. It is the largest wildlife rehabilitation facility in Saskatchewan. Each year, more than 2,000 injured or orphaned wild birds and mammals are brought to the facility for care by concerned individuals across the province. Jan was the first Saskatchewan resident to be licensed both federally

and provincially to care for injured wildlife. The motto of Living Sky Wildlife Rehabilitation is "To provide a safe place for injured and orphaned wild animals to grow and mend until they can return to their natural habitat while encouraging public tolerance and understanding of wildlife."

Jan supervises staff of 16 young people plus many volunteers who help her run the facility. Because calls from the facility are forwarded to her personal phone number in off hours, she is often woken up in the middle of the night to deal with a wildlife emergency. More information about her charity may be found at <https://livingskywildliferehabilitation.org/about-us/>.

With extensive training in wildlife rehabilitation, Jan mentors other wildlife rehabilitators at other centres and in rural areas of Saskatchewan. She regularly teaches the wildlife rehabilitation course offered by the International Wildlife Rehabilitation Council. She also guides new rehabilitators through the bureaucratic requirements for obtaining a licence for their work. In 2016, Jan led a small group of Saskatchewan wildlife rehabilitators who were the first qualified persons on the scene to care for oiled birds at the Husky oil spill on the North Saskatchewan River.



Left to right: Chuck Dechamps, Jan Shadick, Barry Mitschke and Nature Saskatchewan President Joe Muldoon.

Through her birds and windows campaign, Jan advocates for Saskatchewan residents to take simple measures to reduce the injuries to songbirds that fly into our windows. Learn more at birdsandwindows.ca.

Barry Mitschke

Barry served as a Saskatchewan Natural History Society (SNHS) Board member from 1979 to 1983. As a new Board member in 1979, he offered to handle the Society's grant applications. He used assertiveness and "know how" in preparing the documentation required for the application under the Cultural umbrella. (Persistence and some "assertiveness" required). The process took some time but at the August 14, 1982 Board meeting, Barry announced that efforts to be eligible for lottery grants had succeeded. More specifically, the SNHS had been recognized as a provincial cultural organization, making it eligible for significant grant funding in support of its core programming.

Lottery funds allowed substantial growth in the Society's actions and continue to be crucial, providing \$175,000 last fiscal year. That core funding means donations and grants can be devoted to conservation, education and research. Barry's work in getting the Society recognized as a Provincial Cultural

Organization and eligible for lottery funds has been a huge factor in the Society's success, allowing it to operate a series of conservation programs. In truth, without that ongoing grant support flowing from Barry's work, the Society would not have the administrative capacity to manage its conservation programs.

Barry also had a column published in the Waterfront Press, which has served Lumsden and area for more than 25 years. In this column, which focused on the Qu'Appelle Valley, Barry had a weekly conservation message. This message took many forms. Some weeks he wrote about a plant, mammal or bird found in the Qu'Appelle Valley. In other issues he discussed the landscape or aspects of ecology. Some columns discussed environmental issues and, throughout the columns, he developed what Barry referred to an Ecosophy — looking at aspects of living with nature, First Nations learning, and concepts like Ecological Goods and Services. More recently, Barry has gathered the columns into two books titled *Qu'Appelle Valley Views: Perspectives on Life, Living and Lifestyles* volumes 1 and 2.

Through his column, Barry brought conservation thoughts and ideas in front of thousands of people on a weekly basis, year after year. This conservation education work is, in itself, worth a conservation award. Combined with Barry's role in developing the sustainable funding source that allows Nature Saskatchewan to deliver its conservation programs, Barry's conservation contribution is immense.

Chuck Deschamps

Chuck Deschamps recently ended a 42-year career working with governments and non-profits on wetland conservation initiatives in the three Prairie provinces. During this time, Chuck promoted a variety of ecotourism programs. His main area of work was directed toward wetland conservation and management, and he has worked with hundreds of landowners to successfully promote the protection and value of wetlands and natural habitat.

Chuck has devoted years of work

with Ducks Unlimited Canada as a policy specialist, engaging the Ministry of Agriculture, Water Security Agency, watershed groups, agriculture organizations and conservation organizations to protect native prairie on Crown land and to conserve wetlands. His efforts, along with others, resulted in Conservation Easements being placed on Crown lands that were sold. He also spearheaded initial efforts in getting the Water Security Agency to require the retention of some wetlands when issuing drainage approvals.

Chuck would be the first to admit that Saskatchewan must do a lot more to conserve all natural landscapes, including wetlands and native prairie. We desperately need a Wetland Conservation Policy that values and protects wetlands for the public good.

It is an honour and pleasure to recognize Chuck Deschamps for a lifetime commitment to conserving the unique and diverse natural attributes of our vanishing prairies.

Recipient of the Nature Saskatchewan 2025 Cliff Shaw Award Deanna Dodgson

Each year, the *Blue Jay* editor selects the recipient of the Cliff Shaw Award. This award provides special acknowledgement of an article that appeared in one of the most recent four issues of the *Blue Jay* and made a significant contribution to any branch of natural history.

This year's winner is Deanna Dodgson, whose article "Four Jumping Spiders New to Manitoba" appeared in the fall 2024 issue. In the article, Dodgson documents the distribution, habitat preferences, behaviour and other data related to the Fine-fringed Ornamented Jumping Spider, the Prairie Ornamented Jumping Spider, the Maddison's Jumping Spider and the Short-bellied Slender Jumping Spider, all of which were previously unconfirmed in Manitoba.

Jumping spiders, or salticids, can be found across the world and have adapted to many habitats, so Dodgson's searches took her to a variety of locations and ecoregions, ranging from sand hills to

forests to marshes. The meticulous records are accompanied by excellent photos taken by the author of each of the species — even an arachnophobe would have to admit that these creatures have a certain charm!

In addition to contributing meaningfully to the natural history of Manitoba and the Prairies, "Four Jumping Spiders New to Manitoba" has the potential to increase appreciation of, and encourage further research into, these potentially overlooked species.

An honourable mention goes to the late C. Stuart Houston, the late Richard W. Fyfe, Dan Zazelenchuk, Dale Paton, Kirby England and Josef K. Schmutz for "Distribution, Ecology, and Conservation of Golden Eagles (*Aquila Chrysaetos*) in Canada", which was published as a standalone special 75th Anniversary *Blue Jay* issue in 2024. This wide-ranging and insightful report brings together decades of data with fresh analysis that can help guide conservation action for Golden Eagles on the Canadian prairies and far beyond. 🦅

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Living Sky Wildlife Rehabilitation

REFLECTING ON A REWARDING SUMMER FOR STEWARDS OF SASKATCHEWAN

Ashley Vass and Grace Pidborchynski
Habitat Stewardship Coordinators
Nature Saskatchewan

The summer of 2025 flew by and feels like a blur, but thanks to the efforts of three coordinators and seven summer staff, we got a lot of work done!

Operation Burrowing Owl (OBO), Rare Plant Rescue (RPR), Shrubs for Shrikes (SFS), Plovers on Shore (POS), and Stewards of Saskatchewan (SOS) banner program staff visited 126 potential participants across southern Saskatchewan, with 67 joining at least one of the programs.

Altogether, a total of 1,243 program participants are conserving and monitoring 1,065,580 acres of prairie habitat and 223 miles of shoreline habitat for species at risk. Staff were also able to sit down and catch up with 147 current participants, of which 22 received site specific Beneficial Management Practices (BMP) plans that detail life cycle milestones and recommend specific habitat needs for target species.

We were grateful to have all returning plant crew staff to the RPR program this summer. With each team member



Loggerhead Shrike.

already having one or two years under their belt, we were able to implement a new survey system with ease. Employing Survey123 and Field Maps as a data collection tool has streamlined data entry and improved efficiency in data collection with surveyors now able to collect data straight to their phones.

Altogether, the plant crew surveyed 170 quarter sections for target rare plants. This includes 124 population revisits across 29 different quarter sections, resulting in locating past populations of Buffalograss, Smooth Goosefoot, Hairy Prairie-clover, Small-flowered Sand-verbena, and

Western Spiderwort. We also found 242 new occurrences of rare plant species — including new locations for Small-flowered Sand-verbena, Smooth Goosefoot — and documented the number and distribution of Western Spiderwort plants on a property that RPR had never been to before.

This past summer, RPR was also able to partner with several different organizations. We joined forces with the Native Plant Society of Saskatchewan (NPSS) to help pull Downy Brome on some of our RPR stewards' pastures. We found an additional 32 occurrences of noxious weeds and were able to share

their location with the respective land managers and potentially help them eradicate these harmful species through our partnership with the NPSS's Rare Plants and Ranchers program.

We were also able to join the Water Security Agency during their Piping Plover nest checks to survey for Small-flowered Sand-verbena, Smooth Goosefoot, and Western Spiderwort along the shoreline of 72 quarter sections, while at the same time keeping an eye out for Gibson's Big Sand Tiger Beetles. Of course, this meant we were able to observe some extremely adorable Piping Plover chicks running (and sometimes falling) along the beach as well! Lastly, we combined efforts with the Saskatchewan Conservation Data Centre to verify and search for Smooth Goosefoot in an area that is likely to be the furthest north this species has ever been found, and we found several occurrences!

The Stewards of Saskatchewan participant census is going strong for OBO, SFS, POS, and SOS. We have already had reports of Burrowing Owl, Loggerhead Shrike, and Piping Plover families, as well as Ferruginous Hawks, Sprague's Pipits, Tiger Salamanders, and Northern Leopard Frogs to name a few. Our milkweed monitoring initiative continued, and participants conserving milkweed and prairie habitat for Monarchs helped fill data gaps on knowledge of Monarch habitat use and population in their prairie range. In addition, more than 120 species sightings were submitted by the public this summer through our toll-free HOOTline. This is on top of the 243 species at risk observations by staff across southern Saskatchewan.

Program success is only possible with participating stewards conserving important habitat and sharing species observations. Nature Saskatchewan would also like to give a big shout out and thank you to Maizie Andersen, Amy Bailey, Ty Cherepuschak, Abbey Derow, Tory Frankl, Brandon Melnechenko, and Vanessa Wagner. The amount of work accomplished in this 2025 field season would not be possible without you! 🐦



Pink and purple Western Spiderwort.

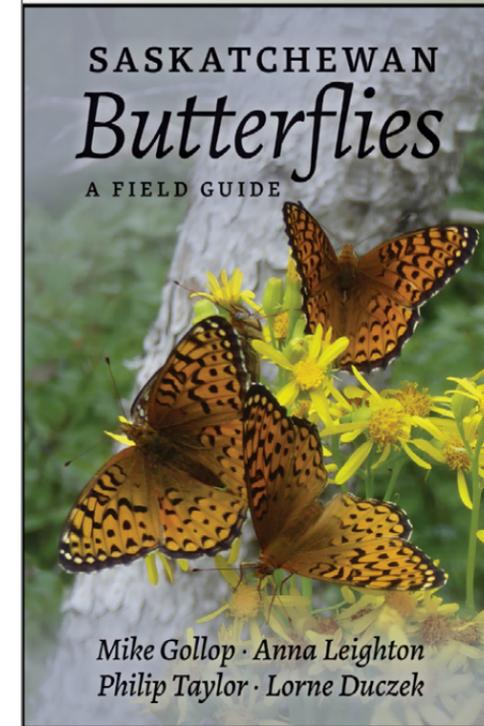


Brandon Melnechenko and Maizie Andersen in the sand dunes.



Dotted Blazing Star.

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2025 MARGARET SKEEL GRADUATE SCHOLARSHIP RECIPIENT: JAY GHANSHYAMBHAI VAVADIA



I spent much of my childhood in the countryside and wilderness, shaped by my family's farming background. I am from Gujarat, a state in western India that is the only place in the world where Asiatic lions still roam free. Growing up, the wilderness

was my playground and encounters with lions and leopards were part of everyday life rather than distant or abstract experiences. Watching these animals move through their habitats sparked a lasting sense of wonder and inspired questions about how such magnificent species survive, adapt, and interact with their environment. Over time, my fascination with big cats, especially the elusive and majestic Royal Bengal Tiger, evolved into a deep commitment to understanding and conserving wildlife. I had never imagined transforming this passion into a career until I took a conservation biology class with my current supervisor, Dr. Christopher Somers, during my undergraduate studies at the University of Regina. That experience ultimately led me to pursue graduate studies in wildlife conservation.

I am now a second-year Master of

Science student at the University of Regina, supervised by Dr. Christopher Somers and Dr. Ryan Fisher. My research focuses on the Turning Sun Solar Facility, a 100-megawatt project under construction near Estevan, Saskatchewan, on an agricultural landscape. As solar energy expands worldwide, offering a clean and renewable alternative to fossil fuels, there remain critical gaps in our understanding of its ecological impacts. My project examines the pre-construction and construction-phase effects of this utility-scale solar facility on local bird and mammal communities. By addressing these knowledge gaps, my work aims to inform conservation strategies for future renewable energy developments. I have completed my first field season and am currently analyzing data collected through automated recording units for birds and trail cameras for mammals.

MYSTERY PHOTO



Photo credit: Jody Blyth.

CALL FOR APPLICATIONS TO THE 2026 MARGARET SKEEL GRADUATE STUDENT SCHOLARSHIP

The 2026 Nature Saskatchewan Margaret Skeel Graduate Student Scholarship, in the amount of \$3,000, will be awarded to assist a graduate student attending a post-secondary institution in Saskatchewan in the fields of biology, ecology, wildlife management, environmental education and environmental studies, including social sciences applied to advancement of conservation and sustainable use of natural resources.

The scholarship is awarded to a student pursuing studies in a field that complements the goals of Nature Saskatchewan: to promote appreciation and understanding of our natural environment, and support research to protect and conserve natural ecosystems and their biodiversity. Nature Saskatchewan works for the sustainable use of Saskatchewan's natural heritage, ensuring survival of all native species

and representative natural areas, as well as maintenance of healthy and diverse wildlife populations throughout the province. We aim to educate and to stimulate research that increases knowledge of all aspects of the natural world. Research that will contribute to resolving current conservation problems have a special priority.

The Margaret Skeel Graduate Student Scholarship must be applied to tuition and associated costs at the named institution. For more information, contact our office by email at info@naturesask.ca or by phone at 306-780-9273 (in Regina) or 1-800-667-4668.

Application Guidelines

Please include the following documents:

- An updated resume with a cover letter
- A full description of your present and/ or proposed research

- A transcript of the undergraduate and graduate courses completed so far and those in which you're currently enrolled
- An indication of what other source(s) of funding you hope to rely on to complete your studies
- Reference letters (optional)

Application deadline:

December 31, 2025

Winner announced:

January 31, 2026

Please submit your completed application to the Scholarship Committee:

info@naturesask.ca or
Nature Saskatchewan
206 - 1860 Lorne Street
Regina, SK S4P 2L7

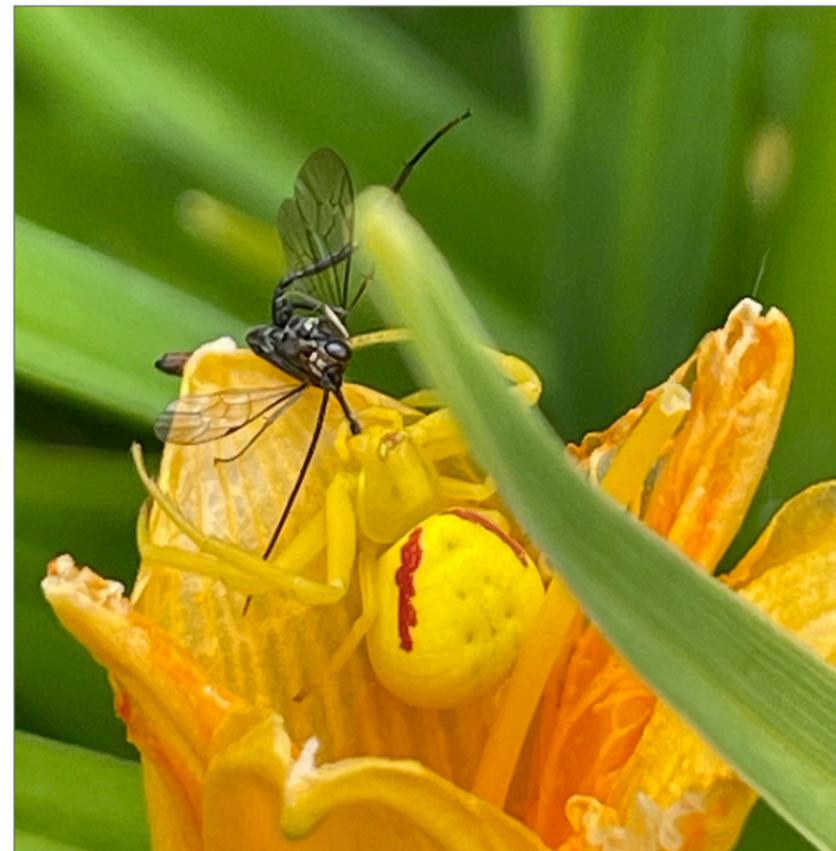


Photo credit: Courtney Nell.

WINTER 2025 (top)

QUESTION:

What creature are we seeing a portion of here? It was observed by Jody Blyth southeast of Moosomin, near the Pipestone Creek, in August 2025.

FALL 2025 (bottom)

ANSWER:

The spider shown in the Fall 2025 Mystery Photo is *Misumena vatia*, which is found in both Europe and North America. They are commonly called Goldenrod Crab Spiders in North America as they can be found hunting in milkweed and goldenrod plants. These spiders are usually white or yellow, or a pattern of both, and are called crab spiders due to their ability to walk sideways in addition to forward and backward. They may also look pink or pale green and can change colours based on their surroundings.¹

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

1. iNaturalist. <https://www.inaturalist.org/taxa/55746-Misumena-vatia>



206 – 1860 Lorne Street
Regina, SK S4P 2L7

