

# Prairie Provinces



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The Region was hit by the coldest spring since comprehensive records began in the 1940s. March was by far the coldest month of the winter, and much-below-normal temperatures persisted until late May. Most of the Region remained dry; violent winds whipped up dust storms and fanned forest fires, including a massive 250,000-hectare burn near Fort McMurray, Alberta. Several snowstorms occurred in May, one on the 22nd dumping up to 40 cm of snow across southern Alberta and Saskatchewan. Ponds and lakes remained frozen well into May (June in the north), and vegetation leafed out weeks behind schedule. Major migrant waves passed through the south on 11–14 April and 11–12 May, while classic “fallout” conditions on 4–5 May and 21–23 May resulted in the best viewing opportunities in memory, as aquatic birds crowded the available open water and songbirds packed in around backyard feeders.

**Abbreviations:** I.B.S. (Inglewood Bird Sanctuary, Calgary, AB); W.M.L. (Wascana Marsh and Lake, Regina, SK).

## LOONS THROUGH RAPTORS

As in the cold spring of 1996, Red-throated Loons turned up in numbers in s. Manitoba: 15+ on the Winnipeg R. near Seven Sisters Falls 5 May (PT), one at Winnipeg the same day (AE, m. ob.), and at least 4 more on the Winnipeg R. 13 May (PT). Common Loon concentrations

included 600+ on the Winnipeg R. 5 May (PT), 200 passing by there in 2 hours 11 May (PT, RZ), 33 on the Red R. in Winnipeg 5 May (RK), and several counts of about 50 in s. Alberta (MH, TK). Grebe concentrations included 150+ Pied-billeds at W.M.L. 3 May (BL, TR), with another 75 at Blackstrap Res., SK 7 May (GW, HL), 600+ Horneds at W.M.L. 3 May (BL, TR), 220 more at Winnipeg 5 May (RK), 600+ Red-neckeds on the Winnipeg R. 4 May (PT et al.), and 420+ Eareds at W.M.L. 5 May (BL, TR). A Pied-billed Grebe at Churchill 5 May was out-of-range (BCh).

The only notable waders were a Little Blue Heron (about the 16th for Manitoba) at St. Ambrose 25 May into Jun (TB, GH, ACs, m. ob.), a Green Heron in Winnipeg 28 May (R&TU), and a White-faced Ibis near Regina 24 May (*vide* LH). A Turkey Vulture at Calgary, AB 26 May (AC, m. ob.) was locally rare.

Hawkwatchers at Windygates, MB counted 423+ Greater White-fronted and 100 Ross's Geese 13 Apr (RK et al.); a flock of 31 Ross's Geese at Whitewater L., MB 25 May was late (DF). Above-average concentrations were reported for many of the commoner ducks, especially in Saskatchewan. Twenty-three reports of Eurasian Wigeon in Alberta 24 Mar—8 May included three hybrids (*vide* MH). Single hybrid Blue-winged x Cinnamon Teals were found at Irricana, AB (AS) and at Thunder Cr. Marsh, SK (BL, JC), both 4 May. A male **Garganey** near Cymric, SK 23–27 May was seen by many (*vide* ASm). At least 50 Greater Scaup were at Brightwater Marsh, SK 21 Apr (*vide* RJ). One of 2 wintering Long-tailed Ducks at Calgary remained until 21 May (GY). Yet another hybrid was a probable Common Goldeneye x Bufflehead at Chestermere L., AB 28 Apr (TK, J&MM), likely the same bird that was seen nearby in spring 2000.

In Stonewall, MB, a Cooper's Hawk was seen pulling a Purple Martin from a martin house 9

May (KG). A remarkable 60 “Harlan's” Hawks, including 9 rare light-morph birds, passed Sheep River Valley 10 Apr (WS). The diurnal raptor migration in s. Manitoba was diffuse and protracted, without spectacular peaks.

## GROUSE THROUGH WOODPECKERS

A Virginia Rail, locally rare, was noted at Medicine Hat, AB 26 May (PHo). The only Whooping Crane reports came from Reston, MB 12 Apr (*vide* DB) and Cedoux, SK 18 Apr (CB), with 2 birds in each case. Black-necked Stilts are now regular in s. Alberta, but duos in Saskatchewan at Thunder Creek Marsh 27 Apr (PJ, BL) and near Ogema 13 May were noteworthy (NH). Five early American Avocets were near Outlook, SK 13 Apr (WG), with singles the next day at Oak Hammock Marsh, MB (JS) and near Brandon, MB (MR, MY). Three hundred Whimbrels at Taber, AB 17 May represented one of the highest counts ever on the Canadian Prairies (LB); notable Manitoba counts included 31 near Pinawa 23 May (PT), 45+ at Whitewater L. 23–24 May (KD), and 20 at Oak Hammock Marsh 25 May (ACs, GH). Other high shorebird counts were 360+ Hudsonian Godwits 27 Apr at Thunder Creek Marsh, Reed L., and Chaplin L. (BL, PJ); 2000+ Sanderlings at Chaplin L. 17 May (DS); and 83+ Buff-breasted Sandpipers at Buck L. 28 May (BL). Lone Western Sandpipers were near Chestermere L. 7 May (TK) and at Frank L. 26 May (IH, m. ob.). Three Baird's Sandpipers near Manitow, MB 13 Apr were remarkably early (CA, RP, JS, LV).

An ad. Little Gull was enjoyed by many near Irricana 4–10 May (AS, m. ob.); there are fewer than 10 records in Alberta. Herring Gulls peaked at 610 at I.B.S. 20 Apr (TK). An Iceland Gull at W.M.L. 15–16 Apr (BL, m. ob.) was followed by 2 at I.B.S. 20 Apr (TK). Manitoba's first **Slaty-backed Gull**, videotaped 11 May at the PR. 227 dump ne. of Portage la Prairie (DF), is awaiting review. Five Glaucous-winged Gulls were spotted in Alberta between 27 Apr and 29 May (RW, BW, TK, TH, RKI), and a Great Black-backed Gull visited the PR. 227 dump 25 Apr (PT, RK). Four Arctic Terns at Calgary 19 May were rare (CW, RW).

The Band-tailed Pigeon seen in early winter at Brandon, MB was rediscovered there 21 Apr (AW). Eurasian Collared-Dove reports came from Mortlach, Val Marie, and Eastend, all in sw Saskatchewan (MF, SL, HJ). Twelve active Great Gray Owl nests were found in se. Manitoba, compared with none last year (J&PD). A wintering Red-bellied Woodpecker in Regina remained until at least 8 May (TR, m. ob.), and 2 were seen in sw. Manitoba (JJ et al.).

## PASSERINES

Saskatchewan's first **Cassin's Vireo** was banded



This adult Little Gull (at left) near Irricana, Alberta 4-10 May 2002 (here 5 May) provided one of fewer than 10 records for the province. *Photograph by Terry Korolyk.*

**SA** Passerine migration was severely disrupted by the cold spring. Heavy mortality was noted, especially in s. Alberta; elsewhere, crows were seen preying on weakened passerines. Breeding Bird Surveys may reveal the extent of the damage. Early arrivals such as lone Say's Phoebes near Condie Res. 6 Apr (BL) and at Underhill, MB 13 Apr (DH), and a Barn Swallow at Windygates 13 Apr (RK, BC), were surely doomed. Tree Swallows undoubtedly suffered heavy losses as one cold storm after another crossed the Region. Many observers noted *Catharus* thrushes grounded in large numbers for much of May. The warbler migration was spectacular, not for rarities, but for the sheer numbers of grounded and lingering birds. Many resorted to ground-level and over-water feeding, or were forced to subsist on cankerworm and tent caterpillar eggs. Daily counts were often 5-10 times the norm.

Highlights of this event included a huge, extended Tennessee Warbler migration in Saskatchewan after the 22 May snowstorm, while 435 Tennessees were tallied in the Medicine Hat, AB area 26 May (DBa). Eight Cape May Warblers were found in s. Alberta 24-26 May, compared with one most springs. Up to 8 Cape Mays visited a single feeder at Lundar, MB, along with a phenomenal 50+ Baltimore Orioles (BE). Yellow and Blackpoll Warbler numbers warranted special mention in Saskatchewan. Ovenbirds are normally inconspicuous migrants, but 55 were seen in one Winnipeg neighborhood 16 May (RK). Most n. sparrows arrived late, then lingered for weeks. For example, Fox and American Tree Sparrows were still numerous in se. Manitoba 10 May.



This Siberian Accentor showed up at a Calgary feeder five times between 20 March and 6 April 2002; despite a good deal of searching by Alberta birders, it was observed only by the homeowners! This image was taken 5 April. *Photograph by Walter Zwick.*

at Last Mountain Regional Park 23 May (ASm) Out-of-range Rock Wrens were at Regina 3 May (RM) and at St. Ambroise 24-26 May (T&RU, m ob.). Saskatchewan and Manitoba had 2 Townsend's Solitaires each (m. ob.). A Northern Mockingbird at Sibbald Creek, AB 24 May was unusual so far west (B&TG). The bird of the season was without a doubt the **Siberian Accentor** that visited a Calgary feeder on five occasions 20 Mar-6 Apr; never seen by any of the birders who searched, it was fortunately photographed by the homeowner (WZ) after it had apparently visited another area home earlier (E&MK). A Nashville Warbler provided a rare spring sighting at Kinbrook Island PP, AB 24 May (CS). Other rare warblers were all in Saskatchewan: lone male Black-throated Blue Warblers at Weyburn 14 May (KS) and at Ogema 26 May (NH), a Pine Warbler at Ogema 11 May (NH), and a MacGillivray's Warbler at Wascana Park 18 May (BL).

Summer Tanagers are almost annual in Manitoba now; this year, birds were at Seven Sisters Falls 15-16 May (RL, m. ob.) and at Vita 28 May (SF). A Western Tanager was a good find at Bradwall, SK 25 May (KK, RJ), as were Spotted Towhees at Brandon Hills 12 May (R&TW) and at Winnipeg 22 May (CA). At least one Black-headed Grosbeak visited Melita, MB in late May (KDS, AW, CC). Seven Lazuli Buntings were reported in Saskatchewan; the lone Manitoba bird was in Winnipeg 22 May (ND). Orchard Orioles invaded s. Manitoba: 88+ were reported 20-31 May, mainly in the southeast, often at feeders or in flowering trees. Common Redpolls were plentiful in Saskatchewan; a female apparently feeding a fledged young in Saskatoon 12 May was well s. of the known breeding range (PH).

**Observers** (provincial compilers in boldface): C Artuso, D. Baresco (DBa), L. Bennett, C Bjorklund, D. Braddell, T. Buhl, B. Carey, B Chartier (BCh), A. Cole, A. Courcelles (ACs), J Cummings, C. Cuthbert, K. De Smet (KDS), N Duncan, J. & P. Duncan, A. Enns, B. Eyolfson, D Fast, M. Flack, S. Foy, K. Gardner, W. Gierulski, B & T. Goulet, I. Halliday, P. Hardie, D. Hatch, L. Heinze, **M. Harrison**, N. Hentze, T. Hindmarch, G. Holland, P. Horch (PHo), R. Johanson, H Johnson, J. Johnston, P. Jones, R. Koes, R. Klauke (RKL), E. & M. Knight, T. Korolyk, K. Krueger, F Lahrman, S. Lamont, H. Lane, R. Lofstrom, **B Luterbach**, J. & M. Macdonald, R. Meyers, R Parsons, M. Reed, T. Riffel, K. Sakatch, S. Savage, A. Slater, A. Smith (ASm), W. Smith, J. Swartz, P Taylor, R. & T. Underwood, L. Veelma, A. Walley, G. Wapple, C. Wershler, R. Wershler, R. & T. Will, B. Wilson, G. Yaki, M. Yorke, R. Zach, W. Zwick

