

A miserable May evolved into one of the worst summers on record, ranging from cool and wet in southern Alberta to the sixth coldest on record in Saskatchewan and the coldest in Manitoba since regular observations began around 1875. Wind and rain prevailed. Populations of many species, passerines in particular, had little chance to recover from the losses suffered in May's snows.

The Hudson Bay lowlands were still snow- and ice-bound in early June, causing geese and shorebirds to linger until mid-month. Few birds initiated nests and those that did suffered high predation. Snow Geese experienced total failure, and the success rate of Canada Geese, ducks, and shorebirds was not much better. Large flocks of non-breeders (e.g., Hudsonian Godwits, Stilt Sandpipers, Short-billed Dowitchers) were present by late June. The woods were also deserted; even Yellow-rumped Warblers and Dark-eyed Juncos were scarce. Some of the comments of long-time Churchill observers included "it is so quiet that it is scary" (BC) and "there were just no birds around" (JJ).

In northern and central Alberta, songbird numbers were down at Calling Lake (PM) and the lowest in 14 years of visits to Sir Winston Churchill P.P. (RT). Neotropical migrants seemed especially hard hit, but so were "half-hardy" species such as Ruby-crowned Kinglet and Chipping Sparrow (*vide* MH). A curious byproduct of conditions appeared to be the high incidence of mixed pairs of Eastern and Mountain Bluebirds in Manitoba, with as many as eight such pairs noted on one bluebird nest box trail near Brandon (BR). It would appear that bluebirds had difficulty finding partners of the same species after high mortality in May.

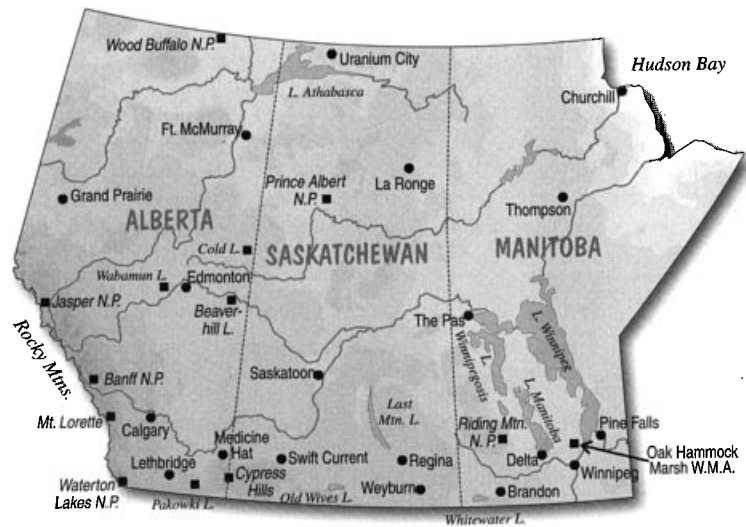
If there was a silver lining to the rainclouds, it was lush growth on the Alberta prairies, which seemed to benefit species such as Sprague's Pipit, Le Conte's Sparrow, Nelson's Sharp-tailed Sparrow, and Bobolink; all were present in higher numbers than during the past few years.

CORMORANTS THROUGH FALCONS

A Double-crested Cormorant at Churchill, MB 15 Jun was a local rarity (BD, LB, LK). Only in Manitoba were rare waders reported, all at Whitewater L., where there were 2 Snowy Egrets 5 Jun (BD et al.), several Cattle Egrets in early Jun (m.ob.), and 4 White-faced Ibis 5-8 Jun (BD, DF, m.ob.). A concentration of 75+ Black-crowned Night-Herons there 8 Jun was also notable (DF); one at Churchill 16 Jun was the 2nd ever there (BD).

A Greater White-fronted Goose at Churchill 13 Jun was a locally rare migrant (RK et al.). Flocks of white geese at Churchill contained up to 40% Ross's Geese in early and mid-Jun (RK et al.). A Mute

Prairie Provinces



Swan at Buffalo Pound L., SK 8-11 Jul was unbanded and believed to be from a wild population (BL, DH, CB). Out-of-season Tundra Swans in Saskatchewan included 2 at the Clavet Mine ponds 23 Jul (where a pair bred last year) and 7 at Davidson 25 Jul (ML, GK). A pair of Wood Ducks near Lac la Biche, AB 19-20 Jun was well beyond normal range and may have bred locally (GN, RT). A count of 30+ Cinnamon Teal near Stavely, AB 12 Jun was high (TK). Also near Stavely was an odd-looking duck, believed to be a Northern Shoveler x teal hybrid, 26 Jun (TK). A pair of Harlequin Ducks near Churchill 8 Jun was at Goose Cr., an unusual location for the species (RK et al.). Ferruginous Hawks in sw. Manitoba had their highest productivity since monitoring started in 1987, with an average of 2.0 young raised to fledging in 44 nests (KD). A melanistic Prairie Falcon at Sheep River Valley, AB 2 Jun may be unprecedented (WS).

SHOREBIRDS THROUGH WOODPECKERS

Black-necked Stilts were widespread in s. Alberta, with 35 ads. and 3 juvs. at L. Newell, Brooks 8-9 Jul being the highest number reported (GN, RT). A pair of Lesser Yellowlegs at Shepard, near Calgary, AB 3 & 9 Jul appeared to be on territory, far s. of the usual breeding range (ph. TK). At the n. edge of their range were 10 Marbled Godwits near Athabasca, AB 2 Jul (DS). A count of 400 Wilson's Phalaropes at Clear L. near Stavely 26 Jun was high for the time of year (TK). A Red Phalarope in the Souris R. valley 24 Jul (CB) and a Parasitic Jaeger at Rafferty Dam 1 Jun (GM) were both Saskatchewan rarities. Churchill hosted a Great Black-backed Gull

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3 Jun (BFz) and 2 Black Terns 10 Jun (RK et al.).

Other than sightings at Mortlach, SK—now a traditional area—the only Eurasian Collared-Dove report, involving 2 probable birds, came from Fort Macleod, AB 27 Jun (TK). Common Poorwills reach the n. limit of their breeding range in and near Cypress Hills P.P., which straddles the Alberta-Saskatchewan border. With few if any observations in recent years, it was heartening to receive poorwill reports from both provinces this summer (DD, MO, BFw, BV, AH). Sightings included what may be the first confirmed Alberta nest, containing two eggs, on 22 Jul (MO, BV, BF). Chimney Swift sightings in Regina, SK in Jun were indicative of possible local breeding (m.ob.). Red-headed Woodpeckers made a strong showing in the w. parts of the Region, with reports

from Etzikom, Jenner, Onefour, Rosemary, and Wardlow, AB and from Eastend, Tyvan, and Val Marie, SK (m.ob.). A Downy Woodpecker in the Twin Lakes burn 18 Jun was a first for the Churchill area (BD, LB); on the same date, a Hairy Woodpecker was also there, a locally rare species noted in the area since at least 1999 (BD, LB, LK).

PASSERINES

An Olive-sided Flycatcher at Medicine Hat, AB 21 Jun was likely a late migrant (JM). Wandering Scissor-tailed Flycatchers reached Riding Mountain N.P., MB 9 Jun (BF et al., ph. NM) and the Wildhorse, AB area 6 Jul (DD, MO). A Loggerhead Shrike at Bow Valley P.P., near Camrose, AB was unexpected in the mountains (K&MB). An Eastern Bluebird at Medicine Hat 17 Jun was rare (JM), as was a Western Bluebird pair through the period near Coleman, AB (BP,

m.ob.). A Sedge Wren, very rare in s. Alberta, appeared to be on territory near Turner Valley 5 Jul (WS). Four Northern Mockingbird observations in Alberta (Banff N.P., Calgary, Millarville, and Rosemary) 2–19 Jun were more than usual (m.ob.). A belated report of a Sage Thrasher at the Clifford E. Lee Nature Sanctuary near Devon, AB 24 May involved a well-documented bird far n. of its usual range in the extreme se. of the province (C&MM, ph. CM).

Locally rare warblers included a Nashville at Churchill 4 Jun (BFz), a Black-throated Blue at Saskatoon, SK 1 Jun (MW, RJ), and a MacGillivray's at Regina 4 Jun (GK). A Scarlet Tanager at Moose Mountain P.P., SK 3 Jun was a good find (CL). Also of note were 6 Western Tanagers in s. Saskatchewan, s. and e. of the breeding range, 6 Jun–21 Jul (GT et al.), as were 7 extralimital Black-headed Grosbeaks in s. Alberta 3 Jun–4 Jul (m.ob.).

A Field Sparrow near Lauder, MB 16–24 Jul was seen by many (KD, m.ob., ph. CA). A Harris's Sparrow at Kleefeld, MB 22 Jun was out of season (C&LP). An Eastern Meadowlark was on territory at Ste. Genevieve, MB 2 Jun–3 Jul and possibly later (GB, m.ob.).

Observers (subregional compilers in bold-face): C. Artuso, K. & M. Barker, C. Bjorklund, L. Brown, G. Budyk, B. Chartier, K. DeSmet, D. Dickinson, B. DiLabio, D. Fast, B. Filemyr, B. Frenz (BFz), B. Frew (BFw), M. Harrison, A. Hartley, D. Hjertaas, J. Jehl, Jr., R. Johanson, R. Koes, L. Kollgard, T. Korozyk, G. Kratzig, M. Lewis, C. Linkcor, B. Luterbach, C. & M. Manly, P. Marklevitz, J. McKay, G. McMaster, N. Murphy, G. Newton, M. O'Shea, B. Parsons, C. & L. Penner, B. Robinson, W. Smith, D. Stirling, G. Taylor, R. Thomas, B. Velner, M. Williams. 🐦

State of the Region

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While the term "Prairie Provinces" reflects the importance of agriculture to the Regional economy, former or actual prairie occupies only about a fifth of this portion of western Canada, as defined by the Prairie Potholes Bird Conservation Region (BCR 11). Three forested BCRs are strongly represented in the three provinces: from southwest to northeast, they are the Boreal Taiga Plains (BCR 6), the Boreal Softwood Shield (BCR 8), and the Taiga Shield and Hudsonian Plains (BCR 7). Three other BCRs are marginally represented, namely the Boreal Hardwood Transition (BCR 12) in southeastern Manitoba, the Arctic Plains and Mountains (BCR 3) in a narrow coastal strip north of Churchill, Manitoba, and the Northern Rockies in southwestern Alberta (BCR 10). Some species approach their breeding range limits within these regions, thus adding substantially to the Prairie Provinces' overall biodiversity, but they are perhaps less significant from a continental perspective.

Without doubt, of all these ecoregions, the Prairie Potholes have seen the greatest changes since European settlement, and many bird populations have risen or fallen dramatically with the advance of the plough from the 1880s onward (Cridle 1929). Habitat alteration favored range extensions for a number of species (e.g., Mourning Dove, Barn Swallow, Western Kingbird), and some native grassland birds sustained high populations (e.g., Western Meadowlark, Savannah Sparrow). The fortunes of a few, such as the Greater Prairie-Chicken (now extirpated) and Black-billed Magpie (now common and widespread again), fluctuated immensely with changing agricultural practices (Houston 1977, 2002). For many species, however, suitable habitat has become increasingly fragmented, and their populations and breeding ranges have contracted sharply: Ferruginous Hawk, Burrowing Owl, Long-billed Curlew, Loggerhead Shrike, Sprague's Pipit, Lark Bunting, Baird's Sparrow, Chestnut-collared and McCown's Longspurs have all declined in the southern prairies. Fluctuations and longer-term cycles of water levels sometimes cause range limits to oscillate, masking long-term trends, but there is little question that all of these species have declined substantially.

Increasingly intensive agriculture, and especially the encroachment of cultivation onto vestigial prairie, have accelerated these declines to the point that some grassland birds—Burrowing Owl and Loggerhead Shrike are examples—may well disappear from one or more of the Prairie Provinces in the near future. Some other species, which were abundant until recently, are also now showing disturbing declines (e.g., Horned Lark, Upland Sandpiper). Bucking this trend are occasional success stories such as the re-

establishment of Ferruginous Hawks in southwestern Manitoba since the 1980s, and the ongoing, general success of nestbox projects for both Mountain and Eastern Bluebirds.

More mechanized farming methods often eliminate locally important areas for both breeding and migrant birds, such as road allowances and small woodlots, potholes, and marshy spots. Waterfowl and shorebirds, in particular, are adversely affected by increasingly aggressive water-management (mostly drainage) practices, though this is partly offset by a number of wetland restoration projects. Declines of many waterfowl species that raised concern in the mid-twentieth century have largely been stemmed or reversed, with a few disturbing exceptions, notably the sharp drop in scaup and scoter populations and the ominous northward retreat of White-winged Scoter's breeding range.

Bird population trends in the three forested BCRs are, with few exceptions, very difficult to evaluate. Human populations are sparse, access is limited, and historical information is scarce to non-existent, especially for small passerines. Furthermore, many of the permanent resident species (grouse, woodpeckers, owls) are difficult to monitor, and several have cyclic or fluctuating populations that make overall trends difficult to measure. Dramatic local changes in habitat and avifauna are evident from the piecemeal expansion of agriculture, mainly at the southern boundary of the Boreal Taiga Plains region, and from forestry activity that now extends well onto the Boreal Softwood Shield. Most of the accessible portions of these BCRs are mosaics of second-growth, and one can only speculate about bird populations in mature forest prior to European settlement. The regions are poorly represented in Breeding Bird Surveys, Christmas Bird Counts, and other surveys, but recent research indicates a general decline in species diversity at the southern fringe of the boreal forest (Cumming et al. 2001). There are concerns about the possible impacts of increasing resource extraction and recreational activities on bird populations, and these are addressed to varying degrees in development plans, but post-development surveys and long-term trends are usually lacking. There are fears, too, that boreal ecosystems are particularly vulnerable to ongoing climate change.

The Boreal Taiga Plains region includes a number of major lakes and associated waterbird colonies, some of which are globally important (Vermeer 1970). Populations of Double-crested Cormorants and American White Pelicans have increased dramatically from mid-twentieth-century lows, while most gulls, terns and other fish-eaters also appear to thrive (Koonz and Rakowski 1985). There is a politically difficult situation, however, with depressed lake fisheries—and with those who see the birds as being in conflict with their livelihood, who sometimes launch devastating raids on remote bird colonies (Koonz 1982, Hobson et al. 1989).

Because of the Churchill area's importance for ornithological research, as well as

being a major birding destination, population trends are better known for parts of the Hudson Bay coast than for the boreal forest (Jehl 2004). Evidently, this relatively remote region is not immune to change. Disturbing recent developments include dramatic declines in breeding numbers of Semipalmated Sandpiper and Lapland Longspur; it is unknown whether these are due to local climate change, to associated changes in vegetational communities, or to problems in these species' winter ranges or along migration routes. Also mysterious is the apparent, prolonged continent-wide decline of the Rusty Blackbird (Greenberg and Droege 1999), whose breeding range includes much of the northern Prairie Provinces.

In conclusion, true prairie ecosystems and their associated avifaunas are the most altered and vulnerable within the Prairie Provinces region, largely because of the continuing intensification of agriculture. Bird population data for most boreal forest species are too sparse to detect many significant trends, but perceived threats include expanding resource extraction and climate change. Colonial waterbird populations are currently healthy but are a controversial source of conflict with lake fishing interests. Even in the far north, some bird populations are declining and/or retreating for reasons that remain unclear but that appear to accord with models of global climate change.

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The term "Prairie Provinces" for Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba is somewhat misleading, as only about one-fifth of the provinces' land area was (or is) prairie. The rest is composed of a variety of forests, tundra, or wetlands. Perhaps no species is more emblematic of this wild northern country than Great Gray Owl, a species occasionally observed well south of the boreal forest during "flight" years. Photograph by Larry R. Lynch.

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