

IMPRESSIONS OF WILDLIFE IN CANADA IN THE SPRING OF 1958

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ARRANGEMENTS were made by the Nature Conservancy for two members of the Wildfowl Trust scientific staff to visit Canada in the spring and summer of 1958 to observe the techniques of aerial surveys which are carried out by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service at that time of year. We had recently commenced aerial surveys of wildfowl in this country but a few months' flying had sufficed to demonstrate the many difficulties inherent in the technique, so it was hoped that such a visit would enable us to learn something from the experience of the Americans who have been flying these surveys for many years. The necessary funds were generously supplied by the Nature Conservancy and, in order that the grant should be used to its best advantage, the visits were made separately so that an observer could be in Canada for both the spring and summer surveys. I was there during May when the surveys of breeding pairs are made, while Mr. Hugh Boyd watched summer surveys of broods flown in July. It is not my intention to give a detailed report of the aerial survey techniques—some attempt at that has been made elsewhere in this Report—but perhaps a few of the many impressions gained of Canada and its wildlife may be of interest.

We had not long sailed before it was impressed upon me that I was soon to see many new and strange wild birds and mammals, for on the second day at sea an Albatross, a wanderer from the southern seas, kept pace with the ship, flying low over the water, using the upcurrents of the wind over the waves to keep it aloft. No less spectacular that day was the sight of the S.S. "United States" plunging through the rough sea at what must have been nearly 30 knots as she overhauled our not inconsiderable ship as quickly as if we had been some small tramp steamer. A further adventure next day relieved the monotony of the ocean when we passed within a few feet of a school of dolphins. Luckily I happened to be watching that part of the sea when they surfaced and I think I was the only person on the deck to see them. After that the many Fulmars that accompanied us for the last few days of the voyage seemed almost commonplace. The passage up the St. Lawrence was most impressive and we stopped at Quebec just long enough to enable me to obtain a glimpse of the old city. The walk from the docks to the town is long and unprepossessing and left very little time to see very much although I was rewarded by my first glimpse of a Mountie.

The next day I disembarked at Montreal and began the long train journey to Regina, Saskatchewan, where my tour was to begin. The route took us through pleasant wooded country and skirted the shores of Lake Superior which I found difficult to believe was a fresh water lake as I watched the huge breakers rolling in from a wide and watery horizon to crash ponderously upon a rocky coast. Although the skies were blue and the sun shone, there were indications that winter had not been left far behind. There were piles of snow in the woods and broken ice on the ponds and I was glad enough to climb back into the heated train when I got out to stretch my legs at Winnipeg. Once out on the prairie I began to see why I had come all this way, for everywhere there were ponds or sloughs, as they are called out there, and on each slough there were several pairs of ducks. Pintail and Mallard

predominated while Shoveler, Baldpate (American Wigeon) Blue-winged Teal and Lesser Scaup were very common. The Gadwall was seen occasionally but the Canvasback and Redhead were not much in evidence, although they are not rare.

Regina, I am told, is a beautiful city and certainly it has some fine modern buildings, but its unrelieved flatness did not strike me as attractive. However, whatever deficiencies it may have had were more than made up for by the warm hospitality of its people. Mr. Tom Harper of the Saskatchewan Wildlife Branch was most kind to me and introduced me to many of the men who had been making aerial surveys and I was able to hold many long and fruitful conversations with them. I was also privileged to meet Mr. Fred Bard, Director of the magnificent Provincial Museum of Natural History which was opened in 1955. The museum appears to be doing very good work for, although its collections are not large, the exhibits are displayed to their best advantage in large showcases with skilfully painted backgrounds. Teaching and research play a large part in the activity of the museum staff. There is a fine lecture hall in which films and lectures by staff members or visiting naturalists are well-attended. The museum scientists are responsible for plotting the track of the Whooping Crane which migrates through this part of Saskatchewan. Mr. Bard is a member of the twelve-man Whooping Crane Advisory Committee and the museum naturally takes a close interest in the status of this very rare bird which is on the verge of extinction. In the spring of 1957 only 27 Whooping Cranes were seen on their migratory route which passes from Texas through Saskatchewan to the Canadian Arctic. Because of this long migration, made twice each year, the natural hazards to which the birds are subjected, form a grave threat to the perpetuation of the species and it would appear desirable that an attempt to save the bird should be made through an avicultural programme. The successful work of the Trust with the Ne-ne is an obvious parallel. However, there is strong opposition from several well-known ornithological societies in America to the capture of any wild Whooping Cranes. This is unfortunate as the maximum reproductive potential of the species is not being realised in the wild for, although two eggs are usually laid, no more than one young is ever seen in a family party. If an analogy can be made with the Sandhill Crane, a near relative of the Whooping Crane, it is probable that the first young to hatch causes the death of the younger nestling by preventing it from feeding. If the breeding grounds of the Whooping Crane were not so isolated it might be possible for the second egg to be taken and hatched in captivity. Failing this, however, if only a few of the young birds were captured each year, it should be possible to build up a captive flock, for the birds have been bred in captivity. At present about half a dozen are being kept and there is a breeding pair in the New Orleans Zoo, but no properly co-ordinated effort at a rearing programme is being made. It seems that if nothing is done this magnificent bird will very shortly join the ranks of the Dodo and the Passenger Pigeon.

While I was in Regina I had the opportunity of visiting the Wascana Waterfowl Park which is being developed under the surveillance of Fred Bard. The project is as yet new but seems to have great possibilities, for the area, a shallow natural lake surrounded by marshy ground, lends itself for a wildfowl sanctuary. There is, however, much local apathy and unfortunately the civic authorities have destroyed much of the habitat by 'tidying up' the shoreline with vast quantities of soil. The area is unfenced and a lot of trouble

was being experienced from dogs which were disturbing the nesting geese. As a protective measure Mr. Bard is experimenting with raised nests which seem to be successful as long as the nesting birds cannot see each other. Canada Geese were brooding while I was there and many species of duck were in evidence. I was perhaps more intrigued with many strange song birds, such as the Bronzed Grackle, Yellow-headed Blackbird and the Red-winged Blackbird which were new to me. The American Robin, a thrush and less elegant than our own Redbreast, was also very common.

At Regina I met Fred Glover of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and flew with him to Edmonton, Alberta. The flight took us over some of the most productive duck country of North America, in fact the area is known to the hunting and biological fraternity as the Duck Factory, and from the air it was not difficult to see why the region is so suitable for ducks. The first part of the trip was over grassland prairie which is dotted with small sloughs of an average area of less than $\frac{1}{4}$ acre, giving the impression of a battlefield scattered with craters, each the home of one or more pairs of ducks. After a while the countryside changed and we were over the parklands, which resemble the grassland prairies except that each slough is surrounded by a grove of aspen trees. The effect from the air is particularly attractive. The next day we flew to Calgary, among the foothills of the Rockies which could be seen on the horizon. Calgary, like Edmonton, is a city where the American influence is quite marked. From Calgary I was able to fly with the survey crew who were carrying out their regulation flights along transects over the prairie in making an inventory of the breeding pairs of ducks. The four hour flight at a height of 100 ft. gave me a good opportunity of getting a close look at the country. The trip to the Saskatchewan border was over a large area of bald prairie, that is grassland prairie which has not been cultivated and which must appear now much as it did before the first settlers came, except that Hereford cattle have taken the place of the herds of Buffalo (American Bison) that once wandered all over North America. It is magnificent country, wild and undulating with occasional creeks and rivers in impressive gorges, of which the most striking was that of the Red Deer River which is spectacular and yet unspoiled. A few miles of such a river in this country would, I am sure, become a popular tourist centre with its concomitant plethora of hotels, restaurants, ice cream kiosks and car parks. Besides the many ducks we saw several Coyotes and I counted nine Antelopes in pairs or singly. This is the only antelope found outside Africa, although it is not closely related to the African forms. Their white rumps flashed prominently as they dashed wildly away at the approach of the aircraft but the Coyotes were more blasé and barely managed to look up as we passed over.

That afternoon we flew back to Regina, passing a large breeding colony of the North American Pelican on an island in Lake Johnstone, otherwise known as Old Wives' Lake. The origin of this more romantic name goes back to the time of the Indian tribal wars when a strong band of Indians had one evening besieged a smaller tribe near the lake. While waiting to administer the *coup de grâce* in the morning the invaders were careful to keep an eye on their foes, making sure that they did not escape during the night. Realising this, the would-be victims decided to sacrifice the old women of the tribe who dressed up as braves and tended the guardposts for the rest of the night while the wily young warriors made their escape across the lake. The old women were less fortunate and were slaughtered in the morning but they are

remembered in the name of the lake where now only the mild quarrelling of the nesting Pelicans disturbs the peace of this beautiful spot. Although I would not have missed this sight of the colony from the air, it was not until later, when I saw single Pelicans soaring overhead, that I was able to appreciate fully the size and also the grace of these apparently ungainly birds.

Before I left Regina I was taken on a car tour around Last Mountain Lake north of the city. The lake is about 50 miles long although never more than about two or three miles wide. We saw many ducks and I was able to appreciate the tediousness of ground surveys which were, and in some places still are made from the roads in lieu of the aerial transect system. The trip took us to some of the remoter farming country and the small towns had the appearance of a film set for a Wild West show.

I was sorry to leave my many friends in Regina but arrangements had been made for me to stay at Kindersley in west central Saskatchewan where I was able to see some of the fine work on the nesting behaviour of the Mallard which is being carried out by Bernie Gollop and Alex Dzubin of the Canadian Wildlife Service. For this purpose a study area of 10½ square miles had been set aside near Pinkham, about 12 miles from Kindersley. This area is rather too large for two men to work without help, but the Canadian Wildlife Service and the Provincial Wildlife Branches have instituted the admirable office of Summer Assistant which is filled by University students on vacation. Summer vacations are rather longer in Canada than in England and consequently the student obtains some four months' experience of wild life management and first hand acquaintance with the many problems and hardships of field work. Such experience is probably instrumental in deciding many young zoologists to seek laboratory posts. The work has the additional advantage of helping to pay the student's way through college. How much better this seemed than vacation jobs as dishwashers, etc., which, whatever questionable value they may have in developing character, add nothing to the students academic education. At Kindersley four summer assistants were helping with the work on the Mallard nests which were first located by a systematic beating out of the rosethorn vegetation, here growing to a height of a couple of feet. This is a tiring and painful operation, even with the protection of canvas trousers, and the lack of these excused me from jobs more onerous than the mapping of various nests as they were discovered. This is an excellent way of finding nesting ducks and also any other wildlife that happens to be using the brush, including porcupines which it was extremely difficult to dissuade one of the dogs from attacking, despite a period of veterinary treatment necessitated by a previous encounter. Porcupine quills are barbed and can cause festering wounds in the mouth of any dog foolhardy enough to bite one. The Canadian Tree Porcupine is supposedly strictly a forest creature as it feeds on the bark of trees, but here it was maintaining itself on the bark of the rose bushes. They make no attempt to escape when discovered and defend themselves against attack with their tails. On one occasion we disturbed a family party and I was surprised to find that the young is black in colour.

The Striped Skunk was also quite common amongst the brush to which it was attracted by the ducks' eggs. They, too, made little attempt to escape and, although economical in the use of their scent glands, needed to be treated with respect. One of the party discovered a specimen by tripping over it and was

lavishly sprayed as a result. The smell is quite peculiar and most unpleasant. I discovered by experiment that their range was not quite 10 ft. although the specimen I was prodding had already had a go at someone else and was perhaps not at its best. Their defence posture is tail up and back to the foe which is closely watched over the shoulder. The dogs would never attempt to press home an attack upon a Skunk. Skunks and Coyotes were believed to be the principal nest predators although the Thirteen-lined Ground Squirrel and Franklin's Gull are also known to take eggs. A high proportion, sometimes as much as 80%, of the nests which we found were subsequently discovered to have been destroyed.

Several nests of the Short-eared Owl were revealed. One of these contained six young in markedly different developmental stages, as well as an egg. The eggs are laid at intervals and incubated immediately.

Many of the duck nests were at considerable distances, sometimes well over a mile, from the nearest pond and the losses of young birds during the long trek to water soon after hatching are known to be considerable. Originally the females had nested by the side of sloughs but these had subsequently dried up for the rainfall had been slight that year. In this way the effect of a wet or dry spring on wildfowl production can be profound and for this reason a count of the number of wet sloughs is made during the spring and summer aerial surveys and is used in forecasting the number of duck that will be available for shooting in the autumn.

While I was in Kindersley I accompanied Bernie Gollop and Alex Dzubin on two of the weekly censuses of the ducks in the study area. The principal events on these particular censuses were the sighting of three Buffleheads (a pair and a juvenile male) and two pairs of White-winged Scoters, but only two Canvasback were seen. As far as possible the census is made from a car as this seems to have a less disturbing effect upon the ducks than an observer on foot. The art appears to be to effect a compromise in choosing an observation point that is close enough to the birds to allow for adequate identification and counting, yet sufficiently far away not to flush them to another slough where they might be counted again. While returning from one of these censuses we were surprised to see an Antelope cross the road in front of the car. It is most unusual for this animal to be seen so far north.

One evening Bernie Gollop took me for a forty mile run down to the South Saskatchewan river which here is fast flowing through an impressive gorge, with minor valleys or coulees running at right angles to it. Antelope, Canada Geese and the Golden Eagle are reported to live here but we saw no sign of them on our visit. However, I was delighted to see at close quarters two male Mountain or Western Bluebirds which were quite as colourful as I had expected them to be. I was intrigued by the ferry across the river. It was attached to overhead cables but its sole motive power was the flowing river itself which acted hydrodynamically upon the boat when it was pointed upstream. It was a beautiful spot to which Bernie would retire whenever he felt the need of spiritual refreshment after a frustrating day in the field.

I left Kindersley with regret as my two weeks there had been most enjoyable but I was looking forward to seeing something of the parkland prairie at Vermilion, Alberta, which was to be my home for the next few days. Here I was well looked after by Harry Webster and Bob Harris of the

Canadian Wildlife Service. Harry Webster, with the help of Jim Lowther, a summer assistant and the only bearded man I met in Canada, was working on a study area in the form of a transect 50 miles long by 220 yards wide, running from the North Saskatchewan River near Elk Point, 30 miles north of Vermilion, to Buffalo Coulee, 20 miles south of the town.

Intensive ground counts are made of the duck within this area, a procedure which takes three men working from dawn to dusk four and a half days to complete. For comparison counts are made from the air of the same transect. That this is a simpler technique is illustrated by the fact that the transect is flown in half an hour. The results of this and similar work elsewhere are extremely valuable in evaluating the accuracy of the extensive aerial surveys which are made of duck populations in North America. One day I was taken along on a demonstration ground 'beat out' which I found most interesting and enjoyable although I can well believe that four and a half days of it are quite enough. I was privileged to be given a few flights over the transect. This was most instructive and Harry and I were able to compare notes which surprisingly did not wildly disagree as far as the identified birds were concerned. The weather was perfect while I was in Vermilion, similar to the best summer weather that England can produce, and the countryside was free of the gigantic mosquitoes which occupied a deal of my attention at Kindersley. Consequently my memories of this stay are of the pleasantest. The beauty of western Canada lies in the countryside, particularly the wild countryside, for the towns are shoddy and unattractive, reminding one of a rundown holiday camp. Perhaps in a few years the small Canadian town will not exist as most of the young people are migrating to the big cities while more and more farmers are shutting up their farms for the winter, which, in Canada, means October to April, and moving to the city.

Towards the end of my visit Harry and Bob decided that I ought to see a bit of the wilder spots and arranged for a fishing trip to the Frog Lake region, east of Elk Point. Here the country is well wooded, being on the fringe of the coniferous forests which stretch far north to the treeless Arctic. The area was an Indian reservation and I was eager to see something of this attractive race. The route to the lake led us past a monument recording, tactlessly I thought, the massacre of white settlers by a rebel Indian chief towards the end of the last century. According to a little Indian boy, to whom we had given a lift, the best place for fishing was not Frog Lake itself but the appropriately named Fishing Lake a few miles away. This was reached at the end of a narrow twisting lane where we hired a boat from a blue-eyed Indian who was delighted to meet someone from England, as he had been stationed in Sussex with the Canadian forces during the first war. We had brought our own canoe so with Harry and I in the boat and Bob and Jim in the canoe we started to fish. As a fishing trip it was a farce for, although we saw fish occasionally, none condescended to bite. Our inferiority was impressed upon us by the only other occupants of the lake, two men in an outboard, who slipped past us on the way home weighed down with fish of all descriptions. We felt that they must have denuded the lake until, on returning to the shore and when only a few yards from the jetty, I felt a tug on my line as I was winding it in. I am an absolute novice as far as fishing is concerned and, in fact, I can only remember fishing on one other occasion previously, so it gave me no little satisfaction to reel in a fair sized 'jack pike,' while the experts had to land empty handed. However the fishing was

incidental to the enjoyment of the afternoon. We got to within a few yards of a Great Northern Diver, the Loon, whose wierd cry Bob was able to imitate in an attempt to persuade it to call back to us. There were many ducks, coots, grebes and strangely marked gulls, while a pelican sailed lazily past about 50 feet above us. The sun shone through its wings, outlining the limb bones and with its long snout reminding me a little of a Pterodactyl. We paid off the Indian for his boat and Bob bought two fish from him—no doubt this is a lively trade with unsuccessful fishermen. On the way back we had a good view of a large Porcupine standing in the road. We stopped as it made off and found its den of pine needles in the roots of a fallen tree. Also on the road was a dead Ground Hog which had been hit by a car. As it was not badly damaged it was taken on board by Bob who wished to prepare and mount the skin. The animal, with which I was not familiar, is a large rodent. A further stop was made in an ineffectual attempt to catch the sitting hen of a Hungarian Partridge whose nest had previously been located. This introduced bird, which is identical with our own Partridge, is remarkable for its large clutch and this specimen was brooding 24 eggs.

The next day I was due to leave Vermilion and Harry ran me into Edmonton, about 120 miles away, where I was to catch a train to Medicine Hat and stay the weekend with relatives. On the way in we paid a visit to Elk Island National Park which is the home of a large herd of Buffalo, besides Elk (Wapiti) and Moose. The park is densely timbered so that it is very difficult to see anything in it. It was raining heavily when we arrived and the dirt roads had become rivers of mud. We were very nearly bogged down on several occasions and had to turn back without seeing any Buffalo, much to my disappointment.

After an enjoyable stay at Medicine Hat, where I was introduced to the drive-in movie amongst other modern amenities, I moved on to Delta in Manitoba, stopping for the day in Regina to pay my farewells to the many friends I had made since arriving there. Careful readers of these Reports will be familiar with Delta so there is no need for me to expand further, save to say that the hospitality of Al Hochbaum was all that I had been led to believe. I enjoyed meeting Frank McKinney, late of Slimbridge, who had just returned from a couple of months in Alaska where he had been studying and filming the social and sexual behaviour of Pacific and Steller's Eiders. One event at Delta I feel I must mention was the sighting of a pair of Hooded Mergansers, the first I had seen in Canada.

And so my tour of Canada had ended. I stood on deck late at night as we slipped down the St. Lawrence and saw for the last time a wonderful display of Northern Lights. The sky was quite clear and was covered from one horizon to the other by a changing shimmering pattern of light. The next day in the Atlantic we passed close to icebergs which, as a result of the spring thaw, had by now reached the shipping routes. The remainder of the voyage was boisterous but uneventful and we arrived home to find England in the midst of a heat wave. Even after such a short absence, I was impressed by the lush greenness of England compared with the more arid conditions of the Canadian prairie.