

Notes

Little Gull Nesting on the James Bay Lowlands, Ontario

While working on the Ontario Breeding Bird Atlas Project in 1984, Peter Burke and I had the opportunity to participate in a low-level aerial waterfowl survey in the vicinity of Attawapiskat, Kenora District, Ontario. A Jet Ranger helicopter flew us, along with Ken Abraham of the Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources, along a route from Akimiski Island, Northwest Territories, in James Bay to Moosonee, Cochrane District.

On 15 July 1984, while flying at an altitude of about 50 m, we spotted a group of eight adult Little Gulls (*Larus minutus*) flying low over a small pond, southeast of the Big Willow River, south of Attawapiskat. The pond, which measured approximately 10 m by 25 m, was surrounded generally by dwarf willows (*Salix* spp.) and fairly dense sedges (*Carex* spp.). In the center of the pond, a small "island" was evident, whose main features included sedge cover over two-thirds of its area, and a broad unvegetated mudflat on the remaining part.

Six of the Little Gulls immediately left the area upon our approach. The remaining two adults became very alarmed as we descended. They continually flew tight circles directly below the helicopter, until we were about 20 m above the ground, at which point they retired to an adjacent pond.

During the period of observation (2 minutes), we noted a small nest platform directly below the circling birds. The nest was poorly constructed and consisted of broken sedges, presumably of the same species growing nearby, laid flat on the mud immediately adjacent to the vegetated part of the island. A shallow cup was evident, which had presumably been formed by the body of the incubating adult(s). One unhatched egg and two live young were clearly visible in the nest.

In order not to disturb the birds unduly, we briefly inspected the nest through binoculars, while the helicopter hovered above it.

The egg was generally olive coloured with extensive dark blotching evident overall. The young were quite dark on the back with some lighter colouring, enhancing their cryptic appearance. They appeared to be very young, perhaps only one or two days old, as they were covered in what was assumed to be soft down, and were only slightly larger than the egg. The parents quickly returned to the immediate area of the nest upon our departure, but were not seen to land.

This sighting represents the first known nesting of Little Gulls in northern Ontario. The species first nested in Ontario in 1962 near Oshawa, Durham R.M. (Scott 1963), an occurrence which also

represented the first breeding record for North America. Since then, Little Gulls have been reported nesting in several additional widely scattered southern Ontario localities: Rondeau Provincial Park, Kent County (Kelley 1978), Bassett Island, Lambton County (Godfrey 1986), Cranberry Marsh, Durham R.M. (Tozer and Richards 1974), and North Limestone Island, Parry Sound District (Mills 1981). Elsewhere in Canada the species has nested at Churchill, Manitoba and LaSalle, Quebec (Godfrey 1986).

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Little Gull (left) and Bonaparte's Gull, Churchill, Manitoba, June 1983.
Photo by R.D. McRae.

A Melanistic Broad-winged Hawk at Thunder Bay, Ontario

On 7 May 1985, while driving down Highway 61 about 5 km south of Thunder Bay, Thunder Bay District, at about 2000 h, I passed an extremely dark buteo sitting on the top of a 7 m sapling a short distance from the road in an old field that had grown up in aspen (*Populus* sp.) and spruce (*Picea* sp.). The bird was anxiously looking downward in all directions and was obviously hunting. It was the size of a Broad-winged Hawk (*Buteo platypterus*).

I stopped and carefully studied the bird with 7 × 35 binoculars and, later (when it flew to another tree), a 30X spotting scope. The light was excellent since the sun was behind me. The hawk's wings and back were a uniform brown, the neck and head were greyish-brown, and the entire ventral surface from throat to undertail coverts was a dark chocolate-brown. The tail had a narrow white terminal band, above which wide black-and-white bands were visible as the bird perched. The legs were feathered in dark brown to the tarsi, and the feet were yellow. The strongly decurved bill was bluish with a black tip, and the cere was yellow.

When the hawk flew to the other tree, the black-and-white banded tail and the alternate flapping and gliding on stiff horizontal wings were typical of the Broad-winged Hawk. After several minutes on this new perch, the raptor flew again, this time back toward me, across the highway, and disappeared behind the trees on

the west side of the road. The undersurface of the wings was paler than the body, but not conspicuously white like a typical bird.

The bird was not seen again, and was presumably a migrant. Although the Broad-winged Hawk is a common breeding species in this area, I had not seen a melanistic individual before, and to my knowledge this is the first record of this phase in Thunder Bay District.

The melanistic Broad-winged Hawk is rarely encountered anywhere; like the dark phase of other raptors, it is believed to occur in the western part of the species' range, which in this case is central Saskatchewan and Alberta. It has never been seen at Hawk Mountain, Pennsylvania.

The dark phase of the Broad-winged Hawk was first described by Robert Ridgeway in 1886 (Bailey 1917). Bailey (1917) proposed that it be considered a new subspecies, the Iowa Broad-winged Hawk (*Buteo p. iowensis*), a designation which has since been dropped.

At least four specimens of melanistic Broad-winged Hawks exist from Iowa (Burns 1911; Bailey 1917), two from Manitoba (Burns 1911), one from Alberta (Evans, pers. comm.), and one from Missouri (Amadon, pers. comm.). An adult bird was banded in Minnesota in the spring of 1971 (Evans, pers. comm.). There have been, in addition, at least two sight records from Minnesota (Evans,

pers. comm.), two from Iowa (Bailey 1917), one from Illinois (Kleen 1972), one from Colorado (Kingery 1985), three from California (Roberson 1980), four from southern Florida (Robertson 1967; Evans, pers. comm.), and one from Ontario (Wormington, pers. comm.). In California, where the Broad-winged Hawk is scarce in any season, an unusually large proportion are of the dark phase, which supports the theory that melanism is a western trait (Wormington, pers. comm.).

The previous Ontario sighting occurred at Grimsby, Niagara R.M.; David Copeland, Eric Single and Walter Klabunde saw a melanistic bird in a flight of 585 Broad-winged Hawks on 30 April 1978 (Wormington, pers. comm.).

All of the records for which exact dates are available have involved spring and fall migrants, except one of the Florida birds, which was present all winter. One of the Iowa specimens was taken on 30 October 1893, a very late date.

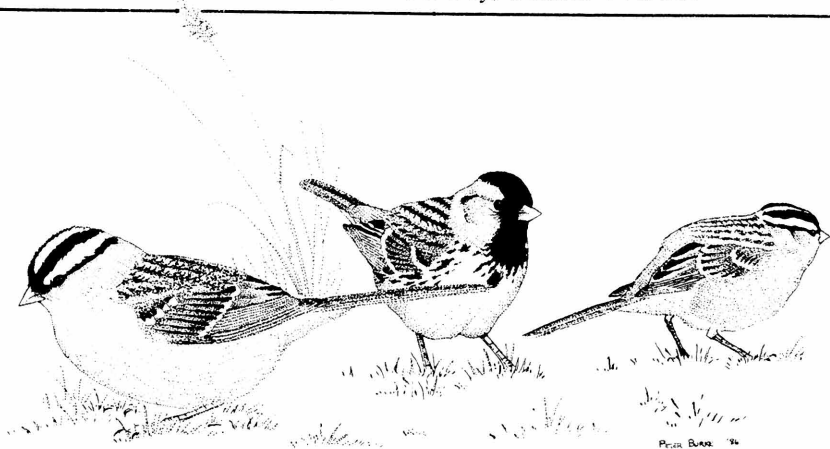
Acknowledgements

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Harris' and White-crowned Sparrows / drawing by Peter Burke.

An Unusual Black-billed Magpie Nest Location

While birding north of Rainy River, Rainy River District, on 3 May 1986, with Mary Elder and Nancy Bray, I noticed a Black-billed Magpie (*Pica pica*) in a grove of trees beside River Road, opposite a large microwave tower. A pair of Black-billed Magpies was present in the same area during most of the spring and summer of 1985.

We stopped the car to watch the magpie when a second magpie flew out of an open hay barn in a field beside the road. We walked to

the hay barn and NB noticed a collection of sticks under the eave on the east side of the barn, about 5 m from the ground. The pair of magpies remained in the grove of trees and scolded us occasionally. We assumed that the birds had built their nest in the hay barn, an unusual site. Alan Wormington visited the site on 19 May, noted the presence of the magpies and photographed the barn and the nest (Figures 1 and 2).

Black-billed Magpies typically build large oval-shaped nests of

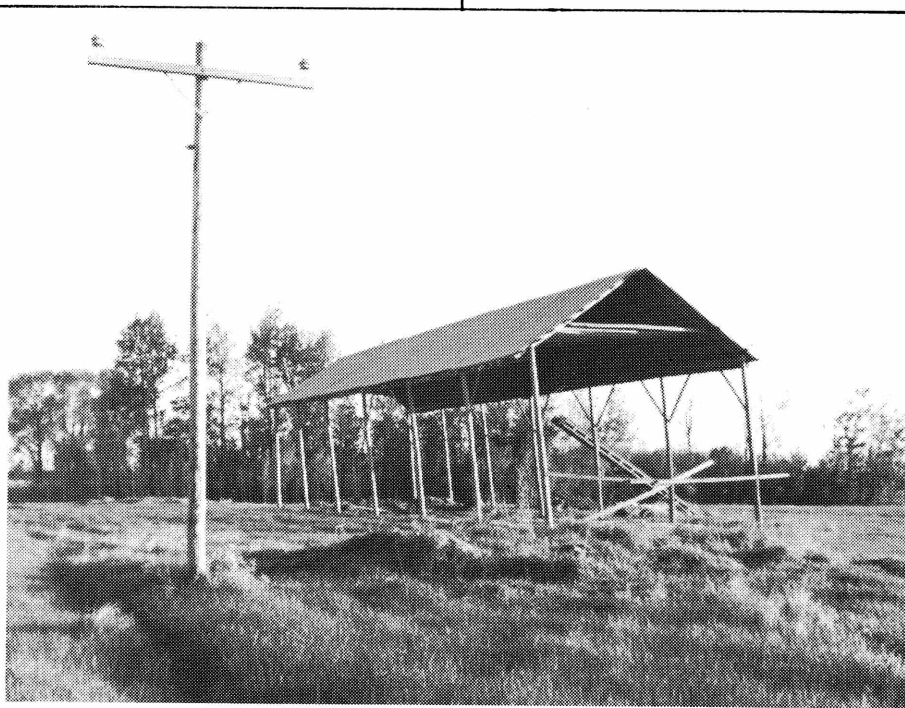


Figure 1: Site of Black-billed Magpie nest, Rainy River, 19 May 1986.
Photo by Alan Wormington.

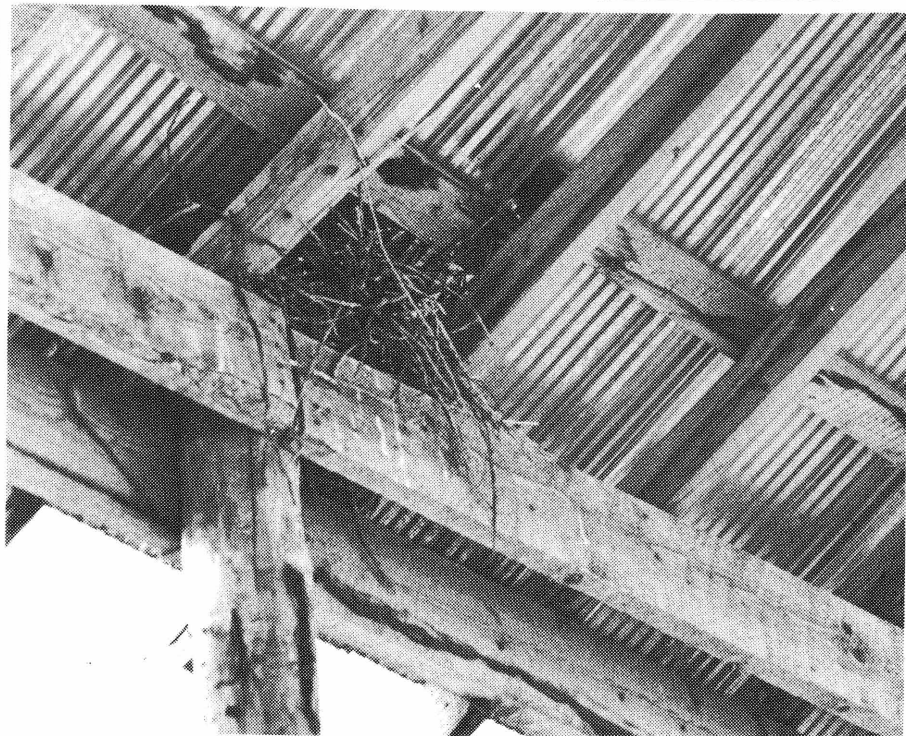


Figure 2: Magpie nest, Rainy River, 19 May 1986.
Photo by Alan Wormington.

sticks in trees and tall bushes. In the Rainy River area, nests are usually placed in thick clumps of willow (*Salix* spp.). Speirs (1985) notes that the first breeding record for Ontario was obtained on 4 May 1980 by J. Lamey near Rainy River. A review of the literature revealed only one reference to Black-billed Magpies nesting in a site other than a tree. Bent (1946) cites a record of a nest built in a railway trestle.

Acknowledgements

Alan Wormington kindly provided photographs and confirmed the use of the hay barn as a nest site for Black-billed Magpies.

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Solitary Sandpiper Breeding Records in Northwestern Ontario

In their opus on the breeding birds of Ontario, Peck and James (1983) cite only one Solitary Sandpiper (*Tringa solitaria*) nesting record, from Sutton Lake, Kenora District. This paper presents breeding data we obtained during a parasitological study of the Solitary Sandpiper in northwestern Ontario during June 1980.

In search of Solitary Sandpipers, we drove roads north of the Trans-Canada Highway accessible to our non-four wheel drive vehicle. Where possible, birds that were sighted were shot and, within six hours, examined for internal parasites. Notes on reproductive condition were also included on most specimen labels. Specimens were prepared and donated to the National Museum of Natural Sciences in Ottawa.

Ten Solitary Sandpipers were collected, all in northwestern Ontario in the Boreal Forest Region as defined by Rowe (1972). Most birds were found in widely scattered localities north of Savant Lake, Thunder Bay District, and

were paired and feeding in borrow pits along roadsides. None was found along lakeshores. Of the ten, five were breeding females (Table 1). The remaining males could not be positively identified as breeders by gonad measurements but might be assumed to be so because of the condition of the females. A male and female collected on 4 June acted as though they were a mated pair. Curiously, two males collected 20 km north of Savant Lake also flew and fed together. Our findings provide some data to substantiate Peck and James' (1983) assertion that "although there are very few records of breeding, the species probably nests in wetland . . . throughout the forested regions of northern Ontario . . ."

Acknowledgements

We are indebted to Steven G. Curtis of the Canadian Wildlife Service who issued our permits to collect in Ontario. The Sigma Xi Scientific Research Society

Table 1: Locality Data and Gonadal Condition of Female Solitary Sandpipers Collected in Northwestern Ontario, 4-14 June 1980.

Field No.	Date Collected	Location	Breeding Evidence
4746	4 June 1980	5 km N Ear Falls, Kenora District	Oviduct huge; 1 fully developed egg in oviduct and 1 moderately sized yolky egg in ovary.
4750	7 June 1980	20 km N Savant Lake	Oviduct = 3 mm; ruptured follicle in ovary.
4752	8 June 1980	32 km N Savant Lake	Oviduct swollen; 2 ruptured follicles.
4754	13 June 1980	50 km N Geraldton, Thunder Bay District	Oviduct swollen; ruptured follicles present.
4755	14 June 1980	30 km W Geraldton	Oviduct swollen; largest ovum = 2 × 2 mm.

partially funded our Canadian research.

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American Robin Nestling Predation by an American Red Squirrel

On 31 May 1986, I observed the predation of an American Robin (*Turdus migratorius*) nestling by an American Red Squirrel (*Tamiasciurus hudsonicus*) in the Lake Marie-Louise Campground of Sibley Provincial Park, Thunder Bay District.

The squirrel was observed sitting at the base of a pine (*Pinus* sp.) tree with the robin nestling, which was still alive, in its jaws. The squirrel was being attacked by an adult robin, which repeatedly swooped down at the squirrel, pecking it with its bill and scolding it loudly, in an attempt to rescue its offspring. After several minutes a second adult robin arrived to help

its mate in attacking the squirrel. This lasted for about ten minutes, after which the squirrel disappeared behind a boulder with the nestling still in its jaws. The parents then ceased their attack but lingered in a nearby tree.

This interesting encounter is not entirely unusual since the American Red Squirrel is known to be much more carnivorous than other tree squirrels and has been known to eat robins as well as other nestling birds (Banfield 1981).

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