PRAIRIE BIRDING THROUGH NEW ENGLAND EYES

by John C. Young

How I came to be estimating the size of longspur flocks out in the unrelenting wind and wide horizons of the South Dakota prairie is another story. But there I was, recording a narrow slice of the great midcontinental southbound bird migration. For two months, I was actually getting paid to sit in a box atop a pickup truck and watch one of North America's great spectacles.

Our crew of seven consisted of both birders and free-lance wildlife researchers. The afternoon following Labor Day 1989 we gathered at the Ramkota Inn in Aberdeen to begin our orientation and training. Aberdeen, South Dakota's third largest metropolis, is barely the size of Keene, New Hampshire.

Some sixty-odd miles from that hustle and bustle, and thirteen miles from any store, we set up housekeeping in an old farmhouse. Our adopted home was nestled between shelterbelts that were planted after the dust bowl of the 1930s. Also nearby were a woodlot, feedlots, and seedy, weedy places. Short strolls out the door sometimes turned up species atypical of the plains, such as Red-breasted Nuthatch, Brown Creeper, Varied Thrush, Ovenbird, and Mourning Warbler.

But that was not the birdwatching we had traveled west for. Out to the stations at first light, the morning-shift birders huddled alone against the chill wind, hoping that dawn would bring a ray of warmth. For hours at a stretch, every bird or flock seen passing within binocular range was recorded according to species or taxon, number or estimate, direction of flight, distance away, angle

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above the horizon, and estimated altitude. That flock of unidentified longspurs might be recorded as numbering three hundred and fifty, flying southeasterly over a point three hundred meters west of the station, one degree above the horizon, and twenty feet above the ground. Height estimates would be checked later by triangulation.

The vast landscape was ideal for monitoring the overall directional movement of birds. Detecting bird movement in Massachusetts is often a matter of noting appearances and disappearances. In South Dakota skulking into the foliage is minimal. Movement of birds is visible—if you are watching.

I expected a continuous, if irregular, southbound flow of migrants. Often, this was not the case. On one heavily overcast September morning, some forty flocks of Barn Swallows, each with one-to-two hundred birds, passed high overhead northeast toward a promising sky, all within about an hour. On other days the southward progress was apparent; such was true on one November day, when skeins of Snow Geese were overtaking the white clouds below them, all heading south.

From Boston Aberdeen, South Dakota, was a long three-day drive. Bay State birders driving out only as far as the Mississippi River are not likely to see many new birds. Red-headed Woodpeckers become rather common in the upper midwest; migrant Tundra Swans and Sandhill Cranes are a possibility; Dickcissels and Clay-colored Sparrows are somewhere out there off the highway; a detour to north central Michigan could net Kirtland's Warbler. By and large, though, one travels through oak-hickory and northern hardwood forest, towns, farms, and marshes, each with birdlife to match similar places back home.

Beyond the old edge between forest and prairie, the mix of birds begins to change. If you are traveling along interstate highway 90, this happens near Minneapolis. The meadowlarks sing a different tune, the kingbirds come in two patterns, and the buteos are variable in shade and pattern—Red-tails and Swainson's in the summer. Most wondrous are the sloughs and lakeside marshes, which are inhabited by blackbirds with yellow heads, swarms of Franklin's Gulls, a scattering of Forster's and Black terns, flashy avocets, huge white pelicans, and a nice assortment of ducks.

The passing months bring new species. This birder added Sedge Wren, Lark Bunting, Harris' and LeConte's sparrows, and Chestnut-collared and Smith's longspurs to his life list of brown streaky species. Also of interest were the occasional Bald Eagle, Ferruginous Hawk, Peregrine, Prairie Falcon, Sharp-tailed Grouse, Short-eared Owl, and Baird's Sandpiper. In addition, there were excellent opportunities to become more familiar with species such as Lesser Golden-Plover, Eastern Bluebird, Vesper Sparrow, and Lapland Longspur. I did not track down a Greater Prairie Chicken; that will wait for another adventure.

One of the odd things about September 1989 in the area between the Hecla sandhills and a broad ridge called a *coteau de prairie* was the presence around many farmsteads of flocks of half-a-dozen yellow-green songbirds, decidedly larger than House Sparrows, each with a sharp, slightly decurved bill, wingbars, a medium build, and a call much like a Red-winged Blackbird's "chuck." I am apt to be hesitant in new country; with each passing day it seemed stranger that they could be Orchard Orioles, which are reliably scheduled to depart there in July, just as in New England. Finally, I got Bruce Harris, co-author of "The Birds of South Dakota" and member of the field team, to confirm my odd discovery. There were no adult or first-year males among dozens of these orioles. I am speculating that, whether there was widespread success or failure of a first brood, an entire population of birds somehow elected to raise a second brood that year in that place.

My other observation of general natural history interest was of a markedly sequential abundance of migrants. This was most apparent due to the continuity of our coverage and the emphasis on counting or estimating flock sizes. It may

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or may not be characteristic of the prairie. In a more or less weekly sequence, we bird tallyers were overwhelmed trying to count Mourning Doves, then Barn Swallows, followed by mixed blackbird flocks, Franklin's Gulls, more blackbirds, hawks, larks with longspurs, and finally, tens of thousands of Mallards and Snow Geese. Actually, counting hawks was never a problem, not like estimating a maelstrom of blackbirds.

The rest of eastern South Dakota birding is better experienced than described: ululating Upland Sandpipers; singing Horned Larks holding their own, high against the wind; a small V of Tundra Swans flying across a spectacular sunset, whistling; the prehistoric calls of Western Grebes, American Coots, and Sandhill Cranes; and the distant clamor of Snow and "Blue" geese that sparkle in the bright blue sky.

Don't miss it, if you have a chance to go.

JOHN C. YOUNG discovered that watching the whole fall migration in the pothole country of Dakota was a far cry from his usual office-bound life, writing assessments of hazardous waste sites from a human health risk perspective for Metcalf and Eddy, Inc., of Wakefield. John has been birding various corners of Massachusetts since he was introduced to birds by Jeff Harris and Betty Anderson as a nine-year-old day camper at Wellfleet Bay Wildlife Sanctuary. His reputation among Massachusetts birders was made when he found a Swainson's Warbler in the Beech Forest in Provincetown in 1982. A resident of Jamaica Plain, John enjoys birding by subway and bicycle.