BIRDS OF PERRY RIVER DISTRICT, NORTHWEST TERRITORIES

BY ANGUS GAVIN

THE following notes on the birds of the Perry River district, Northwest Territories, Canada, were made during the four years (April 1937 to July 1941) that I was stationed at the Perry River post of the Hudson's Bay Company. My stay was interrupted only from August 1939 to March 1940.

The post is about 75 miles north of the Arctic Circle, near the mouth of the Perry River (Lat. 67° 48′ N.; Long. 102° 10′ W.) which empties into Queen Maud Gulf. For convenience, I repeat here with only slight variation a description of the district given in my earlier paper on the mammals (1945. *Jour. Mamm.*, 26:226–230). To the south, from the coast to the Garry Lake–Back River system, some 85 miles inland, lay an unmapped and unexplored territory. The Ellice

Figure 1. Perry River region.

AMERICAN REDSTART
Setophaga ruticilla

Immature male photographed at Washington, D.C., May 24, 1947, by Ralph E. Lawrence

River is about 45 miles west, Sherman Inlet about 90 miles east, of the Perry River. The territory between the Ellice River and the Inlet is in general flat and marshy. Many rivers not shown on maps flow into the Queen Maud Gulf from innumerable lakes, large and small, that dot the landscape in every direction. From the coast inland, low hills relieve the general flatness in a succession of ridges, tending to run east and west, which gradually increase in elevation from about 600 feet near the coast to 3,000 feet in the vicinity of the Garry lakes. Between these ridges are flat valleys, varying in width from a quarter of a mile to 8 or 10 miles, that are cut by so many marshes, lakes, and streams that one's general impression is that there is more water than land. I made my first journey into the interior in March 1938, when I accompanied hunters of a tribe of Caribou Eskimos to the Garry lakes, returning alone about two weeks later. This, a traverse of 85 miles, was, I am told, the first penetration of the territory by a white man. During the summers, from 1938 to 1941 inclusive, I journeyed into the interior for varying distances up to 30 miles. At this season the hills are ablaze with red, yellow, orange, and gray-green lichens and white, yellow, and purple heather. In the valleys are acres of white arctic cotton, but red arctic poppies, purple dryas, and a blue flower like a forget-me-not, make glorious patches of color. Foot-high grass grows abundantly in the marshy places of the valleys, and the tundra is green with mosses upon which the caribou feed. The prostrate arctic willow is common on the hills and in the valleys. The vegetation makes remarkably rapid growth after the ground is exposed in early June, the first growth starting in the marshes, at river mouths, and in the valleys. August is the most colorful month in the arctic summer.

This area, about 120 miles wide and approximately 80 miles deep, with its innumerable lakes, marshes, and streams, is an ideal waterfowl breeding ground. Off the coast are literally thousands of small islands, only a few of which are shown on existing maps, that are the favorite fawning places of the Barren Ground caribou and the nesting places of ducks, geese, and gulls. The geology is mainly Pre-Cambrian, with patches here and there of sedimentary rocks. The average mean temperature (Fahrenheit) from November 1 to March 1 is about 38° below zero; from April 1 to November 1, it is about 30° above. In four years the lowest temperature I recorded was 58° below zero; the highest, 80° in the shade (July 1937). The average temperature in July and August at mid-day was about 50°. In winter, high winds are frequent and commonly reach a velocity of 50 miles per hour; in summer they are less frequent and less violent. Break-up in the rivers takes place from June 5 to 14. The sea ice persists throughout the year except in August and September, when the sea is usually clear, but at times, even during these two months, north winds drive heavy pack ice into the gulf, completely blocking it.

A band of Kogmuit Eskimos, numbering about 35 all told, live 15 miles inland from the Perry River mouth. "Kogmuit" means "the people who live at the place of the swans" or, more briefly, "the swan people." Their name for the Perry River is *Kog-yuak,* meaning "the place of the swans." The Eskimo names given in parentheses in the following annotated list are those in use by this tribe. The list comprises 41 forms of birds that I recorded in the Perry River district.*

Loon (Tood-lik). *Gavia immer* subsp.

Abundant breeding species on freshwater lakes from near the coast back into the interior for at least 25 miles, nearly every lake having one or more breeding pairs. I never saw more than two eggs in a nest. The loons appear in the spring with the advent of open water (May 15-25). In fall they gather in large rafts on the sea, after all inland lakes are frozen, and sometimes remain till the first week in October when the sea ice is forming. Occasionally some get frozen in. In this region loons become very fat and in calm weather have great difficulty getting off water; they sometimes paddle over water a mile or more without being able to get into the air. Rafts vary from 60 to 100 birds.

Pacific Loon (Mal-ar-ek). *Gavia arctica pacifica.*

Fairly common breeder. In a radius of 15 miles I usually found 2 pairs as compared with 20 or 30 pairs of *immer* and *stellata.* Nests in similar situations. Arrives May 15 to 25.

Red-throated Loon (Kaa-raak). *Gavia stellata*

Quite as abundant as *Gavia immer.* Nests in similar situations, and both species may be found nesting on the same lake. Arrives about mid-May.

Whistling Swan (Kog-yuk). *Cygnus columbianus*

Abundant breeder on the inland lakes. Never more than one pair of swans to a lake, intruders being driven away. Nests are large mounds of moss, reeds, and grass, placed on marshy islands in the lakes. Six nests that I examined contained two eggs each. The swans arrive about May 20 and depart about the end of August. (None have been seen later than August 31.) Nesting is general by June 15. On July 4, 1940, the majority were flightless; by the end of the second week in July, all were again capable of flight. Adults and young gather on the inland lakes early in August; they are never seen on the sea. During the spring migration, many pass over Flagstaff Island, 12 miles off the mouth of the Perry, to nest on islands to the north.

Lesser Canada Goose (Ood-loon). *Branta canadensis leucopareia*

Only one subspecies of Canada Goose is found in the district. Individuals weigh five to eight pounds, but no specimens were saved. They

* I wish to acknowledge the kind assistance of B. W. Cartwright in the preparation of these notes.

nest abundantly on islands in lakes close to the coast and in large colonies on islands of the sea, close inshore. They are rarely found more than three or four miles inland. An exception was a solitary pair found nesting among the Ross's Geese (*Chen rossi*), about 15 miles airline from the coast, on June 25, 1941. Some 20 pairs nested on an island about 300 yards long by 60 yards wide with 20 feet elevation. The nests were grouped on the highest part of the island and were from 18 inches to 6 feet apart. These geese arrive the latter part of May and depart during the first 10 days of September.

American Brant (Nerg-lik). *Branta bernicla hrota*

Thousands of American Brant nest on coastal islands from the mouth of the Ellice River eastward to Sherman Inlet. From 1937 to 1940, about 40 pairs nested on an island at the mouth of the Perry River, but in 1941 only 12 pairs were present. (This island is raided for eggs by the Eskimos, but in 1941 the natives moved their camp to a spot 15 miles away and did not molest the birds that year.) The nests are from 3 feet to 50 yards apart. The Brant arrive about June 1 and depart about September 1. The peak of the flightless period is about July 10. After the breeding season, they raft along the rocky coast among the islands.

Black Brant (Nerg-lik-nak). *Branta bernicla nigricans*

Much less common than the American Brant. About 20 pairs nested in the marshes and adjoining tundra in the delta of the Perry River, the only breeding colony I found in the territory. They were never seen on the coastal islands during the breeding season, and there was no intermingling of the two forms. The nests were widely distributed—200 to 300 yards apart. The eggs and down are darker than those of the American Brant. The dates of arrival, departure, and the peak of the flightless period are the same for the two forms. After the nesting season, the Black Brant gather in flocks on the sandy flats at the mouth of the Perry.

White-fronted and Tule Geese (Kig-e-uk). *Anser albifrons* subspp.

In June 1941, I found two forms of *Anser albifrons* nesting in the district, but, unfortunately, neither photographs nor specimens were taken. The geese I identified as *Anser a. albifrons,* which weighed about five pounds, nested on a small lake some 20 miles inland and about 6 miles east of the main branch of the Perry. Those I identified as Tule Geese (*Anser albifrons gambelli*), whose breeding grounds have not been previously discovered, nested on a large lake some 6 miles away from the White-fronted Geese. They weighed about nine pounds.

Lesser Snow Goose (Kang-o-wak). *Chen hyperborea hyperborea*

Not common. Every year 10 or 12 pairs nest on an island two miles up from the mouth of the Perry River. I know of no other colony in

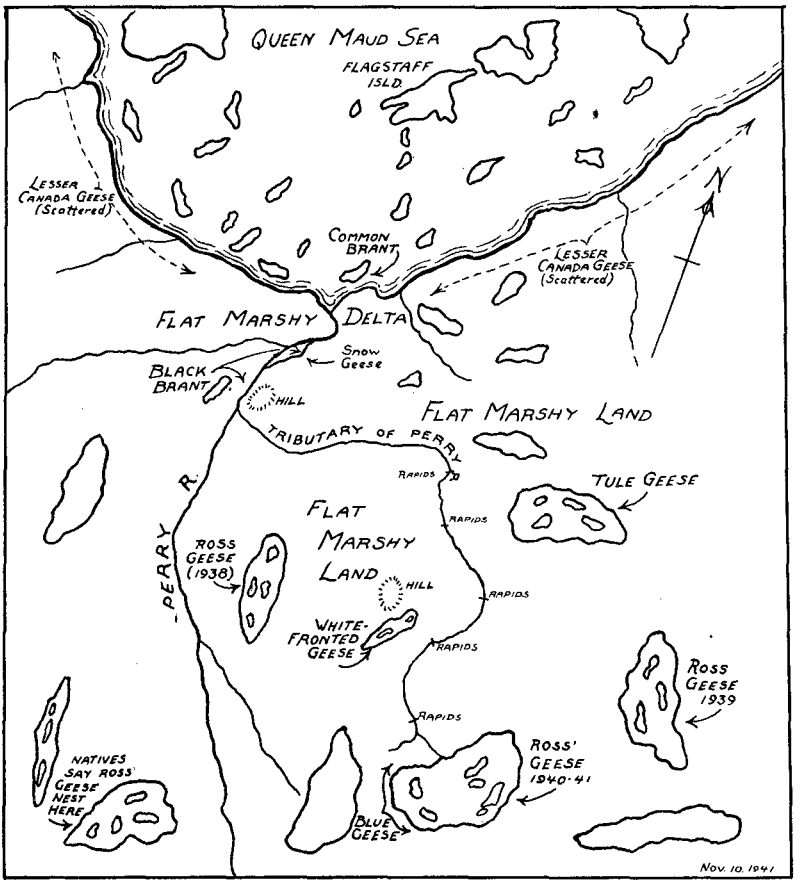

Figure 2. Diagram of study area.

the district. On June 21, 1941, I found two, three, and five eggs, in nests placed four or five feet apart; egg laying was still in progress.

Blue Goose. *Chen caerulescens*

Four pairs were found on July 2, 1940, nesting in a grassy bay of the lake in which Ross's Geese were nesting. One male standing guard at a nest was shot and photographed. This species had not been observed before in the district. The Eskimos had not seen it and had no name for it. This observation extended the breeding range of the Blue Goose approximately 600 miles west and was the first mainland breeding record (Taverner, 1940. *Can. Field-Nat.*, 54:127–130).

Ross's Goose. *Chen rossi*

I first found the previously undescribed nest of Ross's Goose in June 1938, on an island in a small lake about 12 miles up the Perry River, and 8 miles southeast along a tributary (Taverner, 1940. *Can. Field-Nat.*, 54:127–130; Cartwright and Gavin, *Beaver*, Dec. 1940:6–9). I again visited the colony in 1939, 1940, and 1941. In 1941, about 100 pairs were nesting on four islands, an increase of about 50 per cent over the number in 1940. In 1940, the largest clutch noted contained six eggs; in 1941, there were several nests with seven eggs, and two nests with eight and nine eggs respectively. These geese were also found on two lakes near by. About 600 pairs nest on the three lakes. The Eskimos informed me that Ross's Goose nested right down to the coast when they first arrived there, but had retreated in face of raids on their eggs by the natives. They are now, however, quite unmolested by the Eskimos.

American Pintail (Kir-kaak). *Anas acuta tzitzihoa*

Thousands of Pintails nest on the sloughs and river banks over a wide area from Ellice River, 45 miles west of Perry, to the Kolgyuak River, about 45 miles east, and for at least 20 miles inland. No other surface-feeding ducks have been observed in the Perry River district. Nests contain from 7 to 12 eggs. The flightless period extends from July 1 to 14; the peak is about July 7; on July 3, 1940, most of the males and some females were flightless.

Old-squaw (Ah-hang-nirk). *Clangula hyemalis*

About as abundant as the Pintail. Breeds on sea islands, along the coast, along the river banks, and on islands and shores of freshwater lakes. Nests are well concealed in grasses and reeds, usually within 12 feet of water. Nests contain from 12 to 15 eggs.

Pacific Eider (Meet-tirk). *Somateria mollissima v-nigra*

Nests only on sea islands. Most abundant around Kent Peninsula. There are few in the immediate vicinity of Perry River, and they are not numerous east of Perry, but I have seen one or two pairs on the islands of the southwest coast of King William Island.

King Eider (King-a-lik). *Somateria spectabilis*

Abundant breeder on the coastal islands and mainland; in the interior along river banks, and on islands and shores of freshwater lakes. I occasionally saw nests with seven or eight eggs.

American Rough-legged Hawk (Keel-gavik). *Buteo lagopus s.johannis*

Fairly common and quite well distributed. Nests on rocky ledges among the hills back from the coast and on the coast where high cliffs are found. Only the light phase occurs in the district. Nest is composed of twigs of prostrate arctic willow and grasses. Eggs two to four,

more or less splotched and spotted with brown on a pale buffy ground color. Preys on lemmings; occasionally seen chasing small birds.

Pigeon Hawk. *Falco columbarius* subsp.

More numerous than the Rough-leg. Nests on ledges on cliffs in the most inaccessible places. A few twigs and grasses compose the nest. Two to four eggs, dark brown, splotched with darker brown markings. I have examined dozens of nests but never found more than four eggs in a set.

Willow Ptarmigan (Ah-kid-le-ge-ak). *Lagopus lagopus albus*

Abundant year-round resident on the mainland. Very tame. Nests on tundra. Eggs 7 to 17.

Rock Ptarmigan (Ah-kid-le-ge-ak). *Lagopus mutus* subsp.

Less abundant than the Willow Ptarmigan. Most common among the hills, coming down to the lower country during the winter. Nests on tundra in the higher ridges. Eggs 7 to 13.

Little Brown Crane (Ta-tid-le-gak). *Grus canadensis canadensis*

Thousands nest on the flats up to at least 25 miles inland. It is possible to see a hundred or more in flight, or walking around on the flats, at any time during the breeding season. Nests are mounds of reeds and grasses visible from a mile or more away, especially when the bird is on the nest. Two eggs.

Semipalmated Plover. *Charadrius hiaticula semipalmatus*

Common summer breeder. Arrives about the end of May.

American Golden Plover (Tood-lee). *Pluvialis dominica dominica*

Fairly common summer visitor. Arrives about the end of May. One nest found contained four eggs.

Black-bellied Plover (Tood-leet). *Squatarola squatarola*

Fairly common summer visitor, arriving about the end of May.

Pectoral Sandpiper. *Erolia melanotos*

Common in summer. Nests on tundra. Four eggs.

Stilt Sandpiper. *Micropalama himantopus*

Fairly common nester. Arrives about the end of May.

Semipalmated Sandpiper. *Ereunetes pusillus*

Quite numerous. Arrives about the end of May.

Red Phalarope (Heg-gariak). *Phalaropus fulicarius*

Abundant breeder, along marshes and on the tundra. Never seen on the sea in this district. Arrives the latter part of May.

Northern Phalarope (Heg-gariak). *Lobipes lobatus*

As abundant as the Red Phalarope and nests in similar situations. There is no ecological segregation of the two species.

Parasitic Jaeger (Ee-hong-gak). *Stercorarius parasiticus*

Common nester on tundra, inland from the coast. Two eggs.

Long-tailed Jaeger (Ee-hong-gak-pom-e-ok-talik). *Stercorarius longicaudus*

Less common than the Parasitic Jaeger but breeds in the same locations without noticeable segregation. Two eggs.

Herring Gull (Now-ya). *Larus argentatus* subsp.

Two forms of Herring Gull (possibly *Larus a. smithsonianus* and *Larus a. thayeri*) breed in the Perry River district. They are abundant breeders on coastal islands and on islands of inland freshwater lakes. Arrive about May 15.

Sabine's Gull (Now-yat). *Xema sabini*

Not common. Have not found them breeding at Perry, though I have seen them flying overhead occasionally. However, in 1934, I found them nesting at King William Island.

Arctic Tern (Mit-ko-tai-lak). *Sterna paradisaea*

Abundant; breeds in large colonies on coastal islands.

Dovekie. *Plautus alle alle*

In late November 1940, an Eskimo trapper brought me a Dovekie (partly eaten by some predator) that he had found on the beach five or six miles northeast of the post. This bird was freshly killed and had possibly been blown out of its range by the heavy storms which had prevailed two or three days before. It is the only known occurrence of the Dovekie in the district.

Snowy Owl (Ook-pik). *Nyctea scandiaca*

Abundant breeder on knolls or hummocks on the tundra in years of lemming abundance. Very few seen when lemmings are scarce. Eggs are pure white, two to six in number. I have seen dozens of nests but never found more than six eggs in a clutch. The food of the Snowy Owl in the Perry district is almost exclusively lemmings, though I have seen them (very rarely) prey on small birds. *

Horned Lark (Sik-inik-tarieu). *Otocoris alpestris* [*hoyti?*]

Abundant nester. I have never noticed a Horned Lark in the district with yellow on the throat (*O. a. alpestris*).

* I used my observations on Snowy Owl abundance to govern extension of credit to the Eskimos. When the owls were abundant, I knew the lemmings were also, and that in consequence the white foxes would be abundant the following winter. I could, therefore, extend liberal credit to the Eskimos with every assurance that the white fox catch would be good and they would be able to liquidate their debts.

Northern Raven (Too-le-gak). *Corvus corax principalis*

Seen only in the winter from November to April. Feeds on lemmings and on white foxes caught in traps. Regarded as a nuisance because it destroys the fox pelts.

Redpoll (Ku-pan-o-wak). *Acanthis flammea* subsp.*

Abundant. Nests on the ground among prostrate willow on the tundra. Arrives about May 20, and departs the first week in September.

Lapland Longspur (Kap-an-o-wak—*also:* Poo-took-e-luk *and* Ah-moule-gak-nak). *Calcarius lapponicus lapponicus*

Very abundant. Breeds on tundra on coastal islands and in the interior. Arrives about May 20, and departs about the first week in September.

Eastern Snow Bunting (Ah-mou-le-gak). *Plectrophenax nivalis nivalis*

Very abundant nester on coastal islands and in the interior. Arrives in March usually, in February occasionally, and leaves about September 10.

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* Mr. Harrison F. Lewis (with the concurrence of Oliver H. Hewitt and Austin L. Rand) informs me that both *Acanthis flammea* and *A. hornemanni* "are known to occur at Coronation Gulf and at Chesterfield Inlet, and it is our opinion that both are to be expected at Perry River."—Ed.

HUDSON'S BAY HOUSE, WINNIPEG, CANADA