

# Y u k o n *WARBLER*



Newsletter of the Yukon Bird Club - Spring 1997

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Evening Grosbeak at Watson Lake - March 15, 1997  
Photo by Cameron Eckert

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Spring Events ♦ North American Migration Count ♦ Winter Sightings

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## Spring and Summer Field Trips

**WEEKDAY AND WEEKEND OUTINGS** Dress for the weather, wear appropriate footwear, and bring binoculars. For more information or to arrange a ride call Stuart Alexander at 633-5193.

**Tuesday 22 April. Takhini River Ponds - Shrike and Bluebird Prowl.** Jump into spring with a search for Northern Shrikes and other early migrants along the Takhini River. **Meet at the Porter Creek Super A at 6:00 pm.** Leader: Lee Kubica.

**Sunday 27 April. The Annual Tagish Birding Tour!** One of the premier birding trips of the spring, this popular tour will explore a variety of habitats between Whitehorse and Carcross. Bring a lunch. **Meet at the S.S. Klondike at 9:00 am.** Leader: Helmut Grünberg.

**Saturday and Sunday, 3-4 May. Chilkat Pass to Haines Alaska.** This unique trip will have you skiing or snowshoeing in the warm, spring, alpine sun in search of ptarmigan, followed by an exploration of marine bird life in coastal Haines, Alaska. Dave Mossop will be conducting censuses for ptarmigan in the Chilkat Pass area in late April and early May and invites all interested birders to join him on a Saturday afternoon tour of the area. After that, the group will head down to the coast to spend the night in Haines, Alaska. On Sunday morning, Dave will lead a tour to some of Haines' best birding areas. **On Saturday, meet at the Chilkat Pass at 12:00 noon.** Meet at the small, green cabin about 50 metres off the right-hand side of the highway (heading towards Alaska), approximately 1 km past Nadahini Creek, at the base of Nadahini Mountain, at Milepost 69 (i.e., 69 miles or 111 km from Haines, Alaska). Participants will be responsible for their own accommodations and meals in Haines. Bring food for lunches, and skis or snowshoes for the Chilkat trip. Rainwear would be prudent.

**Thursday 8 May. The Astonishing Shorebirds of Lewes Marsh!** If you find shorebirds hard to identify then you won't want to miss this trip. Leader Cameron Eckert will be on hand to help you find and identify many of the shorebirds that occur in Yukon wetlands during spring migration. **Meet at the Airline Inn (Alaska Highway) at 6:00 pm.**

**Saturday 10 May. In Search of the Jelly Bean Robin!** Kids are invited to bring their parents and join Wendy Nixon on this special trip to learn about birds, from dabbling ducks to swooping swallows, at Whitehorse's premier birding location, McIntyre Creek. **Meet at the Porter Creek Super A at 2:00 pm (trip will last about 1 hour). Rubber boots are recommended.**

**Wednesday 14 May. Lakeside Birding at Jackfish Bay!** An exploration of bird habitat on Lake Laberge where last year a Double-crested Cormorant was among numerous more common lake and wetland species. **Meet at the Porter Creek Super A at 6:00 pm.** Leader: Linda Cameron.

**Saturday 24 May. McIntyre Creek Bird Song Workshop.** This outing is designed to tune up bird-song identification skills for Birdathon and Breeding Bird Survey participants. All birdwatchers interested in learning the songs and calls of birds are welcome. Bring snacks, a pencil and a notepad and **meet at the Porter Creek Super A at 7:30 am.** Leader: Pam Sinclair.

**Sunday 25 May. Haunka Creek, Atlin Road - A Northern Songbird Paradise!** This trip, the highlight of the 1996 field season, explores rich songbird habitat in wetlands along the Atlin Road. Bring a lunch. **Meet at the Airline Inn (Alaska Highway) at 8:00 am.** Leader: Cameron Eckert.

## More spring and summer field trips ...

**Wednesday 28 May. *Migration Finalé at Judas Creek.*** This area offers a fantastic diversity of habitats and birds including Short-billed Dowitchers, Least Flycatchers, Belted Kingfishers, and Bonaparte's Gulls. **Meet at the Airline Inn (Alaska Highway) at 5:30 pm.** Leader: Jim Hawkings.

**Thursday 5 June. *The Birding Treasures of McLean Lake!*** McLean Lake? Where's that? Whitehorse boasts many small lakes that provide excellent evening birding within city limits. This trip takes you to one of the less well known lakes, which sits just off the South Access Road. **Meet at the Airline Inn (Alaska Highway) at 7:00 pm.** Leader: Wendy Nixon.

**Saturday and Sunday 7-8 June. *Birds and Barbeque at Mendenhall Marsh!*** George Darbyshire will be hosting a special overnight trip to his cabin near Mendenhall Marsh, west of Whitehorse. There will be 2 easy-paced walks, one short evening hike on Saturday at 7:00 pm, after a barbeque, and one longer hike on Sunday at 9:00 am. There is room for 4 people to sleep in the cabin, so call early for a reservation (Stuart Alexander 633-5193). Otherwise, there is nearly unlimited space for tents. Please bring your own food, utensils, camping, and sleeping gear. Also, there are trails suitable for biking for those so inclined. **Meet at the Porter Creek Super A on Saturday 7 June at 2:00 pm.** If you would like to come later on Saturday or early Sunday morning, call George at 667-4851 for directions on getting to his cabin.

**Saturday 14 June. *Hidden Lakes - Riverdale's Backyard Treasure.*** Expect surprises on this tour of Riverdale's Hidden Lakes. Some past surprises have included a rare and elegant Eastern Kingbird, Pacific Loons, and a very young family of Green-winged Teals. **Meet at the S.S. Klondike at 9:00 am.** Leader: Dave Odium.

**Friday, Saturday, and Sunday 27-29 June. *Alpine Birding at the Haines Summit!*** This is a trip not to be missed, with spectacular mountain scenery and two excellent and knowledgeable guides, Lee and Greg Kubica. There will be a long hike on Saturday and shorter hike on Sunday morning. The main hikes will be of moderate difficulty in mountainous terrain but easy enough that light hiking boots will suffice. Lighter hikes will be arranged if there are those who prefer a more relaxed pace. **On Friday, meet at the Porter Creek Super A at 5:30 pm or at Madley's General Store in Haines Junction at 7:00 pm.** Bring camping gear, food, and light hiking boots.

**Sunday 13 July. *Montana Mountain - Birds, Flowers, and Yukon History!*** A day-trip in search of White-tailed Ptarmigan, Blue Grouse, Dusky Flycatcher and the extraordinary Timberline Sparrow in the high alpine habitat of Montana Mountain, where once miners built crude houses of broken rock and Buddhist monks meditated at tree-line. And with a little blessing, alpine flowers will be in peak bloom. **Meet at the Airline Inn (Alaska Highway) at 8:30 am.** Leader: Cameron Eckert.

**Saturday 26 July. *Hidden Lakes Revisited - The Sequel of the Season!*** Join Dave Odium for a second look at this rich and accessible wetland during the "baby season." Last year, participants were surprised and perhaps a little awed by the sight of two Dark-eyed Juncos apparently tending a young but somewhat larger Brown-headed Cowbird. **Meet at the S.S. Klondike at 9:00 am.**



## News and Notes

### Birding access to Icy Waters Fish Farm

McIntyre Creek wetlands is well known to birders as one of the City of Whitehorse's premier birding locations. The rich wetland habitats support an astonishing diversity of species, many of which are not readily found elsewhere in the Whitehorse area. Golden-crowned Kinglet, Hammond's Flycatcher, Warbling Vireo and many warbler species are relatively easy to find in the woods around the wetland. The wetlands are best viewed from the overlook on at the southwest side of the junction of the Fish Lake Road and Copper Haul Road. From here, a short walk either south along the Copper Haul Road or west along the Fish Lake Road offers excellent birdwatching opportunities.

Many birders also enjoy birdwatching on the Icy Waters Fish Farm property, located just northwest of the junction of the Copper Haul Road and Fish Lake Road. Birdwatchers have been welcomed by the Fish Farm staff for many years and a number of Yukon Bird Club field trips have visited the Fish Farm including the annual birdsong workshop. In recent years ownership of the Fish Farm has changed and this spring there will be a new manager on site. Please do not assume that your once familiar face is still familiar to the new management and staff. Birdwatchers are still very welcome at the Fish Farm, however, it is very important that **birders who wish to venture on to Fish Farm property check in with the staff each and every time**. It must be stressed that there are no standing offers of access and birders must check in each time they visit. During business hours check in at the main office and after-hours or on weekends check in with the staff who live on site (the two main buildings near the lower ponds). Introduce yourself by name and let them know that you are a birdwatcher. Field trip leaders or birders planning to visit the Fish Farm with larger groups should drop by or call the Fish Farm ahead of time to let them know you are coming. This basic courtesy will ensure our continued enjoyment of this remarkable area.

### Birdathon Committee adopts a team approach

This year the Yukon Birdathon will be coordinated by a newly formed Birdathon Committee. While Linda Cameron has signed on as YBC's Birdathon Coordinator she is backed by a committed team including Sheila Serup and Bob Murkett. Interested people who would like to lend their help to the Birdathon should contact Linda at 667-2142.



### Swans gain an unobstructed fly-way at Tagish Narrows

Swans will now have an unobstructed fly-way across Tagish Narrows. In late March, Yukon Electrical removed the 25 kilovolt overhead power line spanning the Narrows at the Tagish bridge and switched to an under-bridge cable system. The old line was a hazard to migrating swans and other waterfowl who use Tagish Narrows as an important staging area. Early in spring, the area is an important feeding area as it is the only large stretch of open water.



### Clean feeders for the birds!

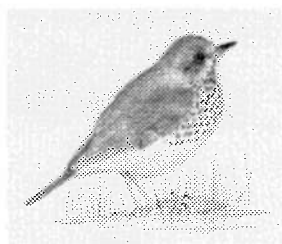
This year, when you are making your list for spring cleaning, put your birdfeeders at the top. Maintaining clean birdfeeders and a clean area around your feeders is very important to the health of the birds which visit your feeders. You can limit the spread of avian diseases among birds which flock at your feeders by consistently raking up the piles of seed shells which accumulate below your feeders - old seeds and shells make excellent compost. Move any unopened seeds which are still fresh away from wet areas where mold can be a problem and spread them around dryer areas in your yard. Providing a safe environment for the birds we attract to our yards is a high priority for all backyard birding enthusiasts.

**Special report****High densities of Three-toed Woodpeckers near Kluane Lake, southwest Yukon****by Cameron Eckert**

This winter the White Spruce forests southeast of Kluane Lake in southwestern Yukon have hosted an unprecedented density of Three-toed Woodpeckers, and to a lesser extent Black-backed Woodpeckers. The high density of woodpeckers coincides with a very healthy Spruce Bark Beetle population and considerable numbers of standing dead trees in the area. A record count of 23 Three-toed Woodpeckers on the December 28 1996 Kluane Lake Christmas Bird Count inspired Todd Heakes and Helmut Grünberg to organize a more thorough count of the area focusing specifically on woodpeckers. On March 9 1997, Cameron Eckert, Helmut Grünberg, Todd Heakes and Pamela Sinclair spent the day walking transects through White Spruce dominated forests and counting all birds heard or seen at any distance from the transect. The total distance covered by all four observers over the course of ten hours was approximately 14.8 kilometres. The results were astonishing. A total of 54 woodpeckers was recorded including 40 Three-toed Woodpeckers, 4 Black-backed Woodpeckers and 10 woodpecker sp. (either Three-toed or Black-backed). The totals by sex for Three-toed Woodpeckers were 14

males, 24 females and 2 unknown. Eight other species observed included 1 Northern Goshawk, 1 Spruce Grouse, 4 Great Horned Owls, 16 Gray Jays, 3 Common Ravens, 34 Boreal Chickadees, 33 Bohemian Waxwings and 3 Common Redpolls. Yukon forest managers have described these forests as "beetle infested" and, despite the desire of the community of Haines Junction to let natural processes determine the life of these forests, forest managers have actively promoted clearcut logging as the best option for dealing with such an "infestation". Our survey clearly shows that these forests provide important habitat for an extraordinary density of Three-toed Woodpeckers. Further, it is possible that local surges in beetle populations provide a basis for maintaining healthy populations of woodpeckers over much larger areas. The view that clearcut logging is an appropriate response to increases in beetle populations ignores the complex relationships between insects, forests and the associated communities of birds and wildlife which depend on those forests.

*Note: This article first appeared in Birders Journal 6(2):75.*

**Yukon Warbler reprints ...**

Due to a high demand for *Yukon Warbler* back-issues, the Yukon Bird Club has reprinted the complete. To order any of the following issues send \$3.00 per issue to the Yukon Bird Club, Box 31054, Whitehorse, YT, Y1A 5P7. The cover species is noted for each issue.

Volume 1 (1993): Spring (Black-bellied Plover); Summer (Little Gull); Fall (Yellow-billed Loon); Winter (Snowy Owl)

Volume 2 (1994): Spring (Bonaparte's Gull); Fall (Lesser Yellowlegs); Winter (Gray Jay).

Volume 3 (1995): Spring (Trumpeter Swans); Summer (Fairy Tern); Fall (Double-crested Cormorant); Winter (Willow Ptarmigan)

Volume 4 (1996): Spring (Red-breasted Nuthatch); Fall (Black Tern); Winter (Short-eared Owl).



## Winter Field Trip Report

*by Stuart Alexander*

**Tagish Birding Tour - Frigid Edition.** The trip that couldn't be run in 1996 due to extreme cold attracted nine people this year, albeit in still cold but tolerable conditions. Three open-water locations were visited, the Yukon River at the S.S. Klondike and the Lewes Marsh bridge, and the Tagish River between the bridge and California Beach. Waterfowl, three male Common Goldeneye and one female Common Merganser, were seen only on the Tagish River. Other species seen during the trip were among the usual winter residents: four Common Ravens, two Gray Jays, two Black-billed Magpies, three Black-capped Chickadees, 12 Pine Grosbeaks, and in town, one Rock Dove.

**February Feeder Round-up.** This year's February 9 feeder tour visited six Whitehorse locations. By far, the most abundant species was Common Redpoll, which tallied in at over 150. Next in line was 39 Pine Grosbeaks. Most unusual was a lone Dark-eyed Junco scratching among the shrubs in Helmut Grünberg's yard. Another sight visible from Helmut's living-room window was the host of Common Ravens that hang out around the south-facing bluffs overlooking downtown Whitehorse. The bluffs can be seen from many downtown locations and provide particularly entertaining views of Ravens cavorting in updrafts and loafing in the sun. Other highlights included woodpeckers at two locations. At one, only drumming was heard, while at the other, the patient group chanced upon a female Hairy Woodpecker while trying to extract a vehicle stuck in soft snow along the roadside. That was some woodpecker!

**Winter Ptarmigan Quest.** The annual March Ptarmigan Quest has become a tradition based on much more than the search for these elegant grouse. The outing to Fish Lake is a curtain-call for winter, a welcome to spring, and a chance to enjoy a ski or snowshoe in one of Whitehorse's most scenic areas. Fortunately, the richness of this tradition overshadowed the fact that the nine participants did not actually see any ptarmigan this year. The highlight was two American Dippers foraging along Fish Creek and occasionally bursting into song. A couple of Black-billed Magpies and a single Common Raven added to the tally. The group also checked McIntyre Creek wetland where ten Mallards, five males and five females, appeared to have successfully wintered. An adult Bald Eagle, a Gray Jay, and the odd Boreal Chickadee rounded out the day.

## Swallows: Clues to identifying those colourful birds which fly so fast and eat so many mosquitoes.

*by Wendy Nixon*



Swallows with their slender bodies, swept-back wings and short perching legs, are built to feed on the wing. There are five species of swallows commonly seen throughout the Yukon, and a sixth species, only occasionally seen in southern Yukon, will test your discerning eyes. The Barn Swallow is the most distinct with its deeply forked tail, reddish-brown throat, cinnamon belly and steely-blue back. No other swallow has a tail so long and forked that it is visible even when the bird is perching. Barn Swallows build open mud nests in or on any structure that provides some overhead protection.

*Continued on page 7 ...*

### Taking note of swallow tails

Now for more of a challenge: Tree and Violet-green Swallows. Both species have relatively short, slightly forked tails. The males of both are dark blue-green above (appears black in dull light) and nearly white below. The females are not as dark and glossy as the males. The difference is - Violet-green Swallows have a white flank patch that extends up the sides of the rump, and a white cheek patch that extends above the eye. It takes practice to distinguish these features. Try to identify perching swallows first as swallows in flight are a challenge! Both Tree and Violet-green Swallows nest in tree cavities, nest boxes and other cavities.

Cliff Swallows have a relatively short tail that appears square in flight. Cliff Swallows are dark glossy blue above except for a buffy rump and pale grey below except for a dark throat and whitish belly. They are most often colonial nesters and build enclosed mud nests usually under structure such as bridges, rock cliffs or eaves of

buildings. Bank Swallows have slightly forked tails, and are greyish-brown above and white below with a greyish-brown breast band. Bank Swallows also nest in colonies, excavating their nest burrows in sand, clay or gravel cut banks along rivers or other open cut banks.

Now for the final challenge - the Northern Rough-winged Swallow is similar to the Bank Swallow, but has a greyish-brown chin and breast, as opposed to a distinct breast band. The Northern Rough-winged Swallow also nests in crevices, natural cavities or burrows. And there is a seventh species of swallow to watch for. Striking in both size and colour, the Purple Martin has been seen only very rarely in the Yukon.

McIntyre Creek Wetlands is the best place in the Whitehorse area to view all six regularly occurring species of swallows. By mid May hundreds of swallows feed over the wetlands and birders will enjoy ample opportunities to test their identification skills. A good location for viewing swallows is the overlook at the southwest corner of the Fish Lake and Copper Haul Roads.

## Spring welcome crossword by Jeremy Baumbach

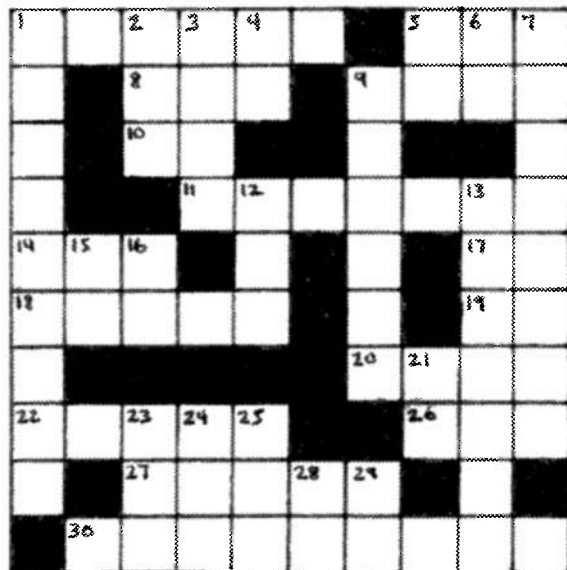
### Across

- 1. Yukon's harbinger of spring (6).
- 5. Building extension (3).
- 8. We all do this (3).
- 9. Starling species: \_\_\_pean (4).
- 10. Swainson's Hawk winter home (2 abbrev).
- 11. Flocks of this bird look like snow squalls (7).
- 14. Flocks pass through Whitehorse: Pi\_\_ (3).
- 17. Steamship (2 abbrev).
- 18. Frequenter of Whitehorse dump (5).
- 19 Spicy sauce (2).
- 20. For birders, perhaps Rodger Tory (4).
- 22. A beautiful heron not found in the North (5).
- 26. A kind of evergreen (3).
- 27. A kind of island (5).
- 30. Viewing site for 1 Across and 1 Down (9).

### Down

- 1. See 1 Across (9).
- 2. Bird's home: \_\_\_t (3).
- 3. Fall plumage in contrast with spring plumage (4).
- 4. Common component of local address (2 abbrev).
- 5. Trading block (2 abbrev).
- 6. Ground dweller, like 14 Across & 7 Down: \_a\_k (2).
- 7. Flocks of this bird pass through in the spring (8).

- 9. Major bird activity prior to migration (6).
- 12. Purpose (3).
- 13. A masked hunter and early migrant (1 abbrev, 6).
- 15. Iowa (2 abbrev.).
- 16. Her it's not "\_\_\_ IF" but "\_\_\_ it's spring" (2).
- 21. Common beginner sighting: \_\_\_o (2 abbrev).
- 23. State of bird's food (3).
- 24. For swans it is late March/ early April (3, abbrev).
- 25. What a ton of feathers weighs (3).
- 28. This hormone triggers ovulation (2 abbrev).
- 29 City known by its initials (2 abbrev).





## Christmas Bird Count Report 1996/97



One of two adult Bald Eagles at McIntyre Creek on the Whitehorse Christmas Bird Count. December 16, 1996.  
Photo by Cameron Eckert

### *Haines Junction - December 21, 1996*

The Haines Junction count drew nine people out for a cold but enjoyable day of birding. A total of 242 birds of eleven species was counted. Walking in the woods produced a surprisingly low number of forest birds. However, the number of people feeding birds in the area has steadily risen over the years and the results of this count were dominated by feeders. This year 35 Black-capped Chickadees were counted which is much higher than an average of just under eight per count on five Haines Junction counts from 1973 to 1977. From 1973-77 observers spotted an average of approximately 7 Pine Grosbeaks per count as compared with a total of 81 this year. Although direct comparisons are risky because of yearly variation in both the numbers of birds and observers, the results are interesting and perhaps future counts may show a trend. *Compiled by Todd Heakes.*

### *Marsh Lake - December 22, 1996*

In the Yukon winter birding can be a lonely pursuit. Most birds have escaped to the warm south or are found near feeders. Christmas Bird Counts guarantee that you will find at least a few birds in the wild. Eight warmly dressed birders came out to enjoy the Marsh Lake count at temperatures between -28°C and -43°C, probably the coldest Marsh Lake count yet. The snow was just 30 cm deep, quite manageable, and there was only a light breeze during the “warmer” part of the day. While the total number of species observed this year (12) was just shy of last year’s total (13), we counted just half as many birds this year (294) as last year (588). The major source of this difference was the very low numbers of crossbills this year (8) as compared with a last year (236). My thanks go to all the participants who made the day such a success and to Julie Lefebvre who warmed Swan Haven for our lunch-time respite from the cold. *Compiled by Helmut Grünberg.*



**Whitehorse - December 26, 1996**

A dozen participants welcomed reasonable winter conditions (-22°C) to counted 21 species. This year's total (1342 birds) was well below last year's total (2096 birds). The main reason was the low numbers of redpolls this year (22) compared to last year (401). Ice fog made for poor viewing and a Common Merganser seen a day before and after the count was missed on count day. Such are the vagaries of winter birding. The fog cleared long enough to spot a Common Goldeneye. McIntyre Creek wetlands clearly offer exceptional habitat for winter birds as evidenced by the two adult Bald Eagles and seven Mallards. *Compiled by Wendy Nixon.*

**Kluane Lake - December 28, 1996**

An overnight low of -30°C did not deter the four participants on the Kluane Lake count. While the area is usually snowshoe country by mid December, low snow this year made for relatively easy walking through the forest. A total of 78 birds of nine species were counted with a high count of 28 woodpeckers. Three-toed Woodpeckers are quite common these days in the White Spruce forests of Kluane and 23 were seen. Great Horned Owls started calling around four p.m. and eleven were heard by the time darkness set in. *Compiled by Todd Heakes.*

Yukon Christmas Bird Count totals for 1996/97				
Species	Haines Jnt. Dec. 21	Marsh Lk. Dec. 22	Whitehorse Dec. 26	Kluane Dec. 28
Common Goldeneye			1	
Mallard			7	
Bald Eagle			2	
Willow Ptarmigan			4	
Spruce Grouse		1	9	2
Ruffed Grouse			1	
Rock Dove			350	
Great Horned Owl	1			11
Downy Woodpecker			1	
Hairy Woodpecker	3	2	1	
Three-toed Woodpecker	3	2		23
Black-backed Woodpecker				1
woodpecker sp.	2	1		4
Gray Jay	9	8	11	7
Black-billed Magpie	29	34	44	1
Common Raven	48	80	661	6
Black-capped Chickadee	35	22	16	
Boreal Chickadee	15	43	12	19
chickadee sp.			2	
Red-breasted Nuthatch		2		
American Dipper			4	
Bohemian Waxwing			9	
Dark-eyed Junco			1	
Pine Grosbeak	81	88	176	
White-winged Crossbill	14		2	4
crossbill sp.		8	5	
Common Redpoll			22	
Hoary Redpoll	2			
redpoll sp.		3		
House Sparrow			1	
<b>Total number of species:</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>Total number of birds:</b>	<b>242</b>	<b>294</b>	<b>1342</b>	<b>78</b>
<b>Number of participants:</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>4</b>

**Watson Lake's Evening Grosbeaks****by Cameron Eckert**

Not long ago Evening Grosbeak was considered "accidental" in the Yukon. However, for at least the past five winters small flocks of Evening Grosbeaks have been regular visitors to Watson Lake and Teslin feeders, and a few have strayed as far west as Whitehorse. In summer this species has regularly been observed only along the Beaver River and La Biche River in the extreme southeast Yukon.

The male on the cover and the female to the right were among the regular visitors to Mary Gamberg and Rob Florkiewicz's feeder in Watson Lake this past winter.



Female Evening Grosbeak a welcome sight at a Watson Lake feeder. March 15, 1997. Photo by Cameron Eckert



## North American Migratory Bird Count Report May 11 1996

by **Cameron Eckert**

Last spring, for the first time ever the Yukon participated in the North American Migratory Bird Count. On Saturday 11 May 1996, counts were conducted all over North America as part of a project designed to track bird movements during the peak of spring migration. In the Yukon, twenty-one participants covered a variety of habitats in the Whitehorse area and tallied all birds either seen or heard. The results were impressive with a total of 15,144 birds of 97 species.

Locations covered included Shallow Bay, McIntyre Creek, Fish Lake, Hidden Lakes in Riverdale, Hidden Lake and the Beaver Pond in Porter Creek, the Yukon River Trail in Whitehorse, Schwatka Lake, Swan Lake, Marsh Lake, M'Clintock Bay, Judas Creek, Lewes Marsh, the Tagish Road, Nares Lake and Carcross, Wolf Creek, McLean Lake, Paddy's Pond, Pilot Mountain, and Fish Lake.

Twenty-seven species of waterbirds (loons, grebes, swans, geese and ducks) accounted for just over 70 percent of the total number of individuals. A number of areas including Swan Lake, Lewes Marsh, M'Clintock Bay, Judas Creek, Schwatka Lake and Shallow Bay, which are critically important for migrant waterfowl. Green-winged Teal had the highest total of any species. An astonishing total of 250 Horned Grebes at Swan Lake was over double the total ever before recorded at that location before (Grünberg 1994). The rarest duck was a single Ruddy Duck at Swan Lake which also provided a record early date for that location (Grünberg 1994). The complete lack of Blue-winged Teal reflected the fact that this species is a rather late migrant in our area.

Shorebirds were represented by fifteen species with a total count of 870 individuals. Lesser

Yellowlegs was most common with the highest numbers at Lewes Marsh. Also impressive was a count of 200 Common Snipe at Lewes Marsh. The only Wilson's Phalarope was one at Swan Lake which provided a record early date for that location (Grünberg 1994). The highest numbers of Solitary Sandpipers were found at McIntyre Creek. Among the ten species of shorebirds at Nares Lake were ten Semipalmated Plovers, six Baird's Sandpipers, and a single Hudsonian Godwit which departed to the north at dusk. Mew Gulls accounted for about fifty percent of the 1646 gulls and terns tallied. Bonaparte's Gulls were quite common with the highest numbers at Swan Lake (another record high count for that location - Grünberg 1994). The only unusual gull was a Glaucous Gull at M'Clintock Bay.

McIntyre Creek is well known as one of the best Whitehorse area locations for swallows. Among the 300 Violet-green Swallows present there were ten Tree and two Northern Rough-winged Swallows. McIntyre Creek also hosted the highest numbers of a variety of songbirds including Hammond's Flycatcher, Ruby-crowned Kinglet, Yellow-rumped Warbler, American Tree Sparrow, and Savannah Sparrow. The second week of May is still early for warblers in the Yukon; The only species recorded was Yellow-rumped and over one third of the total was recorded at McIntyre Creek.

Thanks goes to all the volunteers who made this first ever Yukon count such a great success: Stuart Alexander, Jeremy Baumbach, Lauren Bradley, Linda Cameron, Rene Carlson, Cameron Eckert, Helmut Grünberg, Lee Kubica, Paula Kubica, Denis Kuch, Jeanette McCrie, Elaine Monaghan, Richard Mueller, Bob Murkett, Wendy Nixon, Dave Odlum, Pam Sinclair, Nigel Sinclair-Eckert, Heather Thompson, Gerry and Mary Whitley.

### References

Grünberg, H. 1994. Birds of Swan Lake, Yukon. Keyline Graphic Design. Whitehorse, Yukon.

**Whitehorse area May Migration Count - Saturday 11 May 1996: Totals for all species and locations where maximum counts (Max) were recorded.**

Species	Total	High location	Max
Pacific Loon	5	Hidden/Schwatka	2
Common Loon	9	Schwatka Lk.	7
Horned Grebe	398	Swan Lk.	250
Red-necked Grebe	38	Schwatka Lk.	31
Tundra Swan	8	M'Clintock Bay	4
Trumpeter Swan	7	M'Clintock Bay	6
swan sp.	163	M'Clintock Bay	150
Gr. White-fronted Goose	1	M'Clintock Bay	1
Canada Goose	20	M'CB/Judas	6
Green-winged Teal	6730	Lewes Marsh	6000
Mallard	484	Lewes Marsh	250
Northern Pintail	359	M'Clintock Bay	200
Northern Shoveler	118	M'Clintock Bay	50
American Wigeon	1192	M'CB/Lewes	500
Canvasback	259	M'Clintock Bay	150
Ring-necked Duck	64	Lewes Marsh	20
Greater Scaup	68	M'CB/Lewes	20
Lesser Scaup	123	Swan Lk.	27
scaup sp.	20	Swan Lk.	20
Harlequin Duck	10	Schwatka Lk.	6
Oldsquaw	26	Lewes Marsh	15
Surf Scoter	53	Lewes/SwLk	20
White-winged Scoter	22	Swan Lk.	15
Common Goldeneye	33	Lewes Marsh	12
Barrow's Goldeneye	230	Swan Lk.	50
goldeneye sp.	1	Sima Road	1
Bufflehead	179	Swan Lk.	80
Common Merganser	32	M'Clintock Bay	10
Red-breasted Merganser	41	Lewes Marsh	20
Ruddy Duck	1	Swan Lk.	1
Bald Eagle	9	McIntyre Cr.	4
Northern Harrier	7	Lewes Marsh	3
Red-tailed Hawk	3	Alaska Hwy West	2
eagle sp.	1	Alaska Hwy West	1
American Kestrel	3	Alaska Hwy West	2
Merlin	5	Swan Lk.	2
Spruce Grouse	5	Swan Lk.	3
Ruffed Grouse	4	McLean Lk.	2
American Golden-Plover	12	Lewes Marsh	6
Semipalmated Plover	14	Nares Lk.	10
Killdeer	10	Lewes/AHW	3
Greater Yellowlegs	2	Alaska Hwy West	2
Lesser Yellowlegs	495	Lewes Marsh	200
Solitary Sandpiper	20	McIntyre Cr.	6
Hudsonian Godwit	1	Nares Lk.	1
godwit sp.	2	Shallow Bay	2
Least Sandpiper	7	Lewes Marsh	6
Baird's Sandpiper	7	Nares Lk.	6
Pectoral Sandpiper	5	SwLk/AHW	2
Short-billed Dowitcher	2	Lewes/Judas	1
Long-billed Dowitcher	24	Swan Lk.	16
dowitcher sp.	15	Shallow Bay	9
Common Snipe	247	Lewes Marsh	200
Wilson's Phalarope	1	Swan Lk.	1

Species	Total	High Location	Max
Red-necked Phalarope	4	Swan Lk.	4
Bonaparte's Gull	391	Swan Lk.	126
Mew Gull	870	Schwatka Lk.	500
Herring Gull	190	Yukon River Trail	87
Glaucous Gull	1	M'Clintock Bay	1
gull sp.	114	Quartz Road	112
Arctic Tern	80	Hidden Lks.	40
Great Horned Owl	1	Pilot Mnt	1
Short-eared Owl	2	Marsh Lk	2
Belted Kingfisher	1	Porter Cr.	1
Yellow-bellied Sapsucker	2	Swan Lk.	2
Downy Woodpecker	2	McLean Lk.	2
Hairy Woodpecker	3	Pilot Mnt	2
Northern Flicker	8	Swan Lk.	3
woodpecker sp.	3	Porter Cr./SwLk	1
Olive-sided Flycatcher	1	Wolf Cr.	1
Hammond's Flycatcher	4	McIntyre Cr.	2
Say's Phoebe	1	Lewes Marsh	1
Tree Swallow	13	McIntyre Cr.	10
Violet-green Swallow	339	McIntyre Cr.	300
N. Rough-winged Swallow	2	McIntyre Cr.	2
Gray Jay	11	Judas Cr.	3
Black-billed Magpie	7	Alaska Hwy West	3
Common Raven	9	McIntyre Cr.	3
Black-capped Chickadee	12	Pilot Mnt	3
Boreal Chickadee	22	Porter Cr.	6
Red-breasted Nuthatch	6	M'CB/SwLk	2
Ruby-crowned Kinglet	52	McIntyre/Lewes	10
Mountain Bluebird	5	Nares/AHW	2
Townsend's Solitaire	3	WCr/SwLk/AHW	1
Swainson's Thrush	4	Hidden Lks	3
American Robin	163	Lewes Marsh	40
Varied Thrush	18	Swan Lk.	5
thrush sp.	1	Schwatka Lk.	1
American Pipit	97	Lewes Marsh	30
Bohemian Waxwing	41	Swan Lk.	34
Yellow-rumped Warbler	111	McIntyre Cr.	40
American Tree Sparrow	4	McIntyre Cr.	2
Savannah Sparrow	11	McIntyre Cr.	5
Fox Sparrow	24	McLean Lk.	12
Song Sparrow	1	Hidden Lks	1
Lincoln's Sparrow	1	Alaska Hwy West	1
White-crowned Sparrow	32	Marsh Lk	16
Golden-crowned Sparrow	1	Porter Cr.	1
Dark-eyed Junco	84	Porter Cr.	20
Lapland Longspur	582	Swan Lk.	150
sparrow sp.	10	Swan Lk.	10
Red-winged Blackbird	14	Nares Lk.	6
Rusty Blackbird	156	Lewes/Nares	40
Pine Grosbeak	4	Pilot Mnt/Hillcrest	2
Purple Finch	1	Yukon R. Trail	1
Red Crossbill	21	Pilot Mnt	15
White-winged Crossbill	2	Lewes Marsh	2
Common Redpoll	6	Lewes Marsh	3
redpoll sp.	1	Swan Lk.	1

Place name abbreviations: Alaska Highway West (AHW), Hidden Lakes in Riverdale (Hidden), Lewes Marsh (Lewes), McIntyre Creek (McIntyre), M'Clintock Bay (M'CB), Nares Lake (Nares), Schwatka Lake (Schwatka), Swan Lake (SwLk), Wolf Creek (Wcr), Judas Creek (Judas).



## Bird identification

(why it was, what it was,  
according to where it was)

by Jeremy Baumbach



Where you see a bird will often help you to identify it. The geographical location is, of course, most helpful when a bird is found in only a small area of the country, like for instance the Wandering Tattler. Conversely, the American Robin is so widespread that where one sees it is not a very useful identification clue. A species' geographical location also varies with the time of year. Consulting the range maps in your field guide, local bird checklists and other area-specific resources (e.g., for the Whitehorse area, *Birds of Swan Lake, Yukon* by Helmut Grünberg) will help orient you as to what birds are likely to be present at which times of the year. These resources will also help you rule out highly unlikely "identifications". Early in my birding efforts in Regina, Saskatchewan I was quite sure I had seen a Great Kiskadee - the bird seemed to match the field guide's picture very well (and the range map was tucked away at the back of the book). Wow! How deflating to find later that the Great Kiskadee ventured no further north than Arizona and Louisiana! For the beginners, range maps can serve as the brakes on the most extreme identification errors. Having said this though, range maps are not gospel. Sometimes they have not been updated to reflect current knowledge of birds' distributions, and even the most up-to-date maps may well be inaccurate for remote settings, like ours, where relatively few bird surveys have been done.

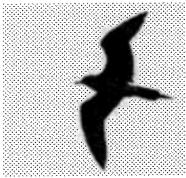
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A bird's location refers not only to its general geographical range, but also to its specific habitat. Aspects like vegetation type, nearness to water, altitude, and availability of food and safe nesting sites help to define the habitat that will suit a particular bird. The more you understand about a bird's habitats and needs, the better you will understand its choice of habitat - which will cue you to be alert to its presence when in such settings. Within a particular kind of habitat, birds occupy niches congruent with their behaviour (especially their food sources). For example, in a coniferous forest, we might find a Fox Sparrow scratching on the forest floor, a Western Wood-Pewee perched part way up a tree, a Blackpoll Warbler foraging higher up, and a Red-tailed Hawk soaring overhead. Although occupation of habitat niches is less the case during migration, one would likely still not see a flycatcher scratching about on the ground.

In sum, habitat awareness can help narrow your identification options. If you are planning to visit a certain habitat, judicious review of the field guide first can help you to focus on specific critical field markings (e.g., I might see a Townsend's Solitaire up Grey Mountain - now, exactly what do I look for?). With increased practice and skill you will know where to go to see what. This is the basis of most field trips, and perhaps represents the transition from reactive to active birding. Happy birdfinding to all!

## FieldNotes: Observations from the field



Please send sightings to Helmut Grünberg, (807 Wheeler, Whitehorse, YT, Y1A 2P8). Please include details such as date, location, number of birds, sex and age, and observers' names. Highlight interesting observations and include descriptions of rare species. This report contains documented and undocumented sightings. Please send sightings according to the following seasonal schedule: Spring (March 1 - May 31), Summer (June 1 - July 31), Fall (August 1 - November 30), Winter (December 1 - February 29).

### The Winter Season

Thank goodness we did not have any prolonged cold spells as we had last year. However, we did have a few short ones with temperatures in the -40 to -50°C range. December and January were slightly colder than average and February was warmer than average with a few days of temperatures above freezing. Most southern Yukon areas experienced less snowfall than usual. Thirty-eight species were reported this winter including all YBC winter field trips and Christmas Bird Counts.

Seven **Mallards** were observed at Johnson's Crossing on December 1 (CE,HG,PS). **Common Mergansers** were seen at Johnson's Crossing on December 1 (CE,PS). An immature **Bald Eagle** flew over the Yukon River near Burma Road on January 11 (BC). A **Northern Goshawk** was feeding on a Red Squirrel at km 31 along the Aishihik Road on December 29 (TH).

**Spruce Grouse** sightings included two at Squirrel Camp, five kilometres north of Mendenhall River bridge on January 11 and one on February 1; three along the trails near Squirrel Camp on January 25 (GD); two were taking in sand from a little bluff at Swan Lake on January 12 (HG,BM); one was seen near Long Lake in Whitehorse on February 2 (HG,BM); one was at the Takhini Hotsprings Road during winter (DC,dR). **Grouse** numbers appeared to have decreased at Squirrel Camp, which the observer attributed to low snow cover which may have caused loss from predation (GD). A single **ptarmigan**, most likely a Willow Ptarmigan, was flushed at Swan Lake on February 2 (HG,BM). A lack of **ptarmigan** was noted in the Squirrel Camp area where they are common in most winters (GD). Two **Ruffed Grouse** were observed at Horse Creek on February 28 (KO), and one pair was seen repeatedly at the Takhini Hotsprings (DC). **Ruffed Grouse** sightings near Squirrel Camp included three on January 3 and four on January 18 (GD).

A male and a female **Great Horned Owl** were calling at Swan Lake on January 18 (HG,BM), and two were heard at Burma Road on February 24 (BC). A **Northern Hawk-Owl** was seen near km 1614 Alaska Highway, southwestern Yukon, at the end of January (KA). A **Great Gray Owl** was seen near Watson Lake in mid-January (RM,JS). This species is accidental in winter in the Whitehorse area and so a report of one west of Jake's Corner on February 28 was very noteworthy (MC,AM). A January 12 trip to Swan Lake produced the Whitehorse area's first documented winter record for **Short-eared Owl** with an observation of three hunting over the frozen, snowy marshes (HG,BM). A **Boreal Owl** was seen at dusk in Porter Creek on January 4 (TH) - it is possible that it was the same bird released after rehabilitation just two weeks earlier at a nearby Porter Creek location.

**Downy Woodpecker** sightings included a male at Horse Creek on February 8 and 18 (KO); one at Strawberry Lane near the Takhini River throughout the season (LG,JH); a female at a Teslin feeder on February 14 (PA,DS); a male and female at a Porter Creek feeder through February (CE,PS); a male and female at a Haines Junction feeder through the winter (RJ,WJ); and a female along the Takhini Hotsprings Road (DC,dR). **Hairy Woodpecker** sightings included a male and female at a Porter Creek feeder through February with the male drumming on February 16 (CE,PS); a male and female at a Haines Junction feeder through the winter (RJ,WJ); a male and female along the Takhini River Road (DC,dR); one at Strawberry Lane through the winter (LG,JH); a female at Burma Road (BC); and a male and female at a Horse Creek feeder (KO), and one in Teslin on December 1 (CE,HG). A female **Three-toed Woodpecker** was an unusual feeder visitor at Strawberry Lane (LG,JH). Two **Three-toed Woodpeckers** were noted at Squirrel Camp on February 15, with one or two along the trails nearby on January 11 and 18 and February 1 and 8 (GD). Three **Black-backed Woodpeckers** were seen near km 1670 Alaska Highway, southwestern Yukon on February 16 (TH).



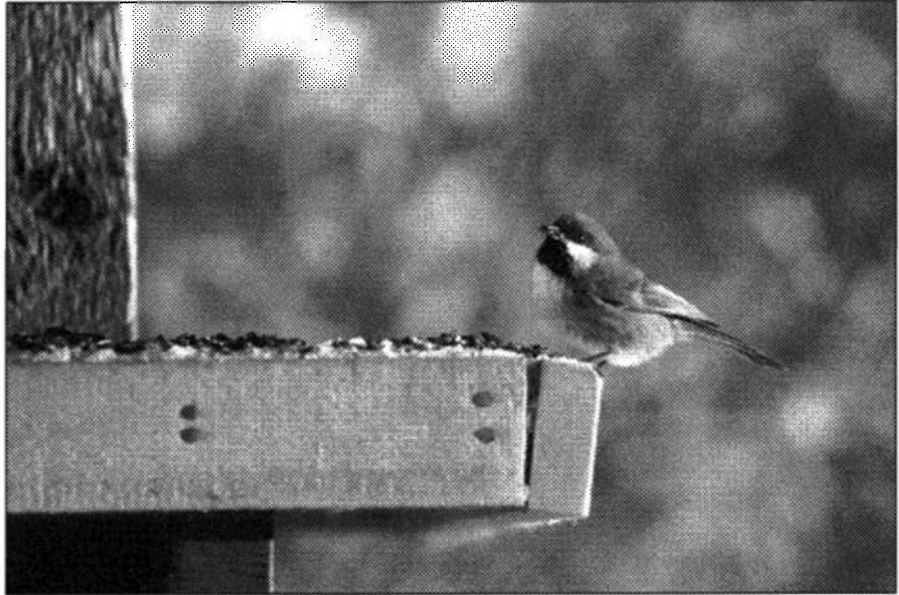


**The Winter Season** **Gray Jays** were regularly seen in the Whitehorse area. The five reported from Burma Road, two distinct groups of two and three, was unusually high for a single location (BC). **Black-billed Magpies** were common in Whitehorse around town, at the landfill and at feeders throughout the season. **Black-capped Chickadees** were common at feeders with a maximum of ten at Burma Road on January 22 and February 2 (BC). A surprisingly high number of seven **Black-capped Chickadees** was seen along the trails near Squirrel Camp on January 11 (GD). In Hillcrest, the numbers of chickadees seemed to drop when the redpolls arrived in February (LC). A single **Mountain Chickadee** was seen sporadically at a Teslin feeder on February 9-17 (PA,DS); one was seen at Cowley Lake in mid-February (NB). **Boreal Chickadees** were common in the woods and at feeders throughout the season.

Flocks of up to 100 **Bohemian Waxwings** were noted around the Whitehorse area throughout the season. The only **Northern Shrike** reported this winter was one observed in Teslin on February 24 (PA,DS). Two **Dark-eyed Juncos** frequented a Whitehorse feeder throughout the season (HG). Two others were spotted along the Yukon River trail in Riverdale on February 22 (CE,PS). Rare in winter was a lone **Snow Bunting** at the Yukon River in Whitehorse on December 18 (CE); a single bird was also seen at Horse Creek on February 21 (KO). An adult male **Rusty Blackbird**, present in Teslin on December 1, was the only one reported this winter (DD,CE,HG,PS).

A male **Gray-crowned Rosy Finch**, first observed in late November, lingered at a Hillcrest feeder until December 5 to provide a rare winter record for this species (LC,CE). The beautiful **Pine Grosbeaks** are a pleasure to watch in winter: Numbers seem to be down from last year in some areas, especially at Hillcrest where a maximum of 25 was observed as opposed to last winter's maximum of 55 (LC). The highest numbers reported were 55 on February 15 at Horse Creek (down from last winter's maximum of 75)

(KO); A flock of 46 was at Burma Road on December 14 (BC). A at the Takhini Hotsprings Road feeder had up to 22 (DC,DR). Because they are quite tame, some of them fell prey to cats this winter along with some redpolls. **Red Crossbills** apparently winter regular in just a few Whitehorse area locations, primarily Riverdale and Pilot



Boreal Chickadee visits a Teslin feeder on December 1, 1996. Photo by Cameron Eckert



Male Rusty Blackbird in Teslin, December 1, 1996. Photo by Cameron Eckert



## The Winter Season

Mountain. This year the first **Red Crossbills** in Riverdale, a male and a female-type were seen on January 12 (AS); A single **Red Crossbill** was singing and calling at the edge of a pine forest in Riverdale on February 19 (CE). A faithful flock of five **Red Crossbills** spent the winter at a Pilot Mountain feeder (BM). Twenty **White-winged Crossbills** were observed in Whitehorse on December 15 (RC). Where are the redpolls? That's what most Yukon birders were asking in December and January given the unusually low numbers of **redpolls** observed. Well, the numbers finally picked up in early February. Totals from around southern Yukon included about 100 **Common Redpolls** at a Whitehorse



Gray-crowned Rosy Finch a rare visitor in Hillcrest. Dec. 5, 1996. Photo by C. Eckert

feeder from February 8 and on (HG); at least 150 **Common Redpolls** at a Burma Road feeder from February 14 on (BC); up to 60 at a Hillcrest feeder (LC); up to 60 in Teslin in late February (PA,DS); up to 45 on the Hotsprings Road (DC,dR). At a Porter Creek feeder, about 50 were observed from February 10 (CE,PS). For comparison, in the previous winter, the influx of **Common Redpolls** began in early December (CE,PS). At Squirrel Camp, the **redpolls** arrived around February 22 (GD). During an 18 km river trip on the Dezadeash River, three flocks of **redpolls** totaling 22 birds were encountered on February 15 (GD). From Whitehorse the following account was received about a resident squirrel: "the squirrel chases a redpoll to the end of a branch; then the redpoll flies away to another spot - drives him crazy" (BS). **Hoary Redpolls** were reported at Burma Road (BC) and Horse Creek during February (KO); one was at a Porter Creek feeder on February 22 (CE); and one was at a Whitehorse feeder on



The Mortimer's female House Sparrow in Whitehorse. Dec. 24, 1996. Photo by Cameron Eckert

February 25 (HG). The star of the winter birding season was a female **House Sparrow**, perhaps the same bird seen in Whitehorse in August, which was discovered on December 24 (CE) and last seen on December 29 (HG). This bird was provided both a first winter record and an excellent opportunity for Yukoners to observe a species which is so

abundant elsewhere in North America but extremely rare in the Yukon. It lasted long enough for the Whitehorse Christmas count on December 26 and was seen again on the 29th but was not present at its usual location above the Mortimer's front door after the early January cold snap when temperatures dipped to  $-45^{\circ}\text{C}$ .

**Observers:** Pat Allan, Ken Anderson, Norm Barrachello, Linda Cameron, René Carlson, Bev Combs, Marc Connor, Darnel Coots, George Darbyshire, Denny Denison, Cameron Eckert, Linda Gerrand, Helmut Grünberg, Todd Heakes, Jürg Hofer, Rita Jux, Walter Jux, Arlene Kubica, Angela Milani, Richard Mueller, Bob Murkett, Wendy Nixon, Katie Ostrom, Duchaine Richard, Dan Shavchenko, Pam Sinclair, Jennifer Staniforth, Barbara Studts.



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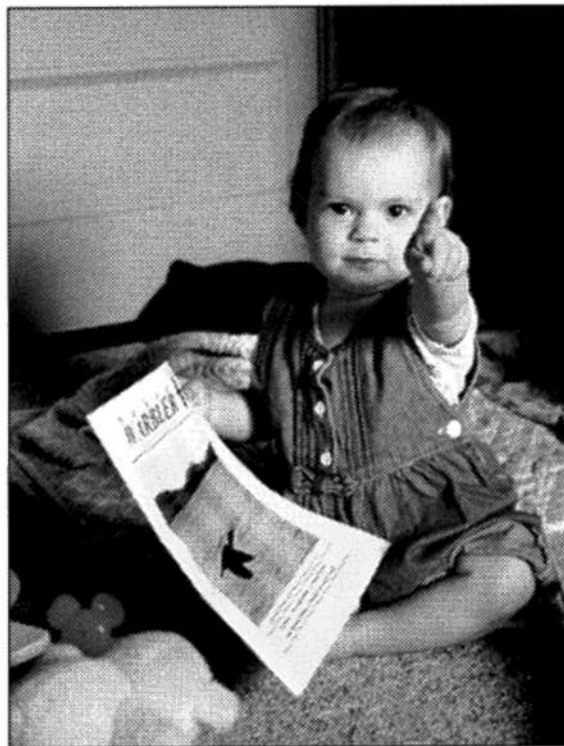
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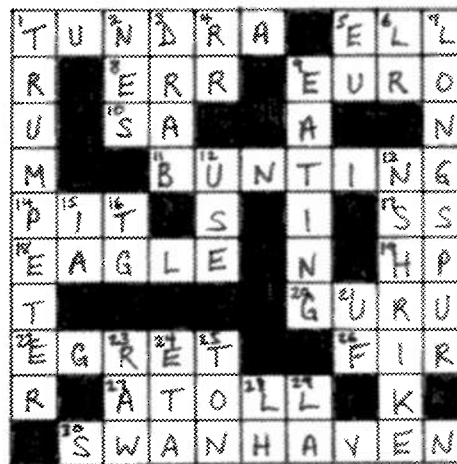
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