

Nature Notes, December 2022

Birds of Saskatchewan: A labour of love

By Donna Bruce

Birds of Saskatchewan is a hefty book—certainly not a field guide.

Laced with attractive photos and a wide range of information, it can tell you more than you might want to know about the 437 species presented. Published in 2019, it was the culmination of the dreams and life's work of the editors - Alan R. Smith, C. Stuart Houston, and J. Frank Roy - and the work of many, many others over many years.

The idea may have originated in 1949, when a young Stuart Houston hosted Farley Mowat on a three-day visit to gather material for a book about the birds of Saskatchewan (it was never written).

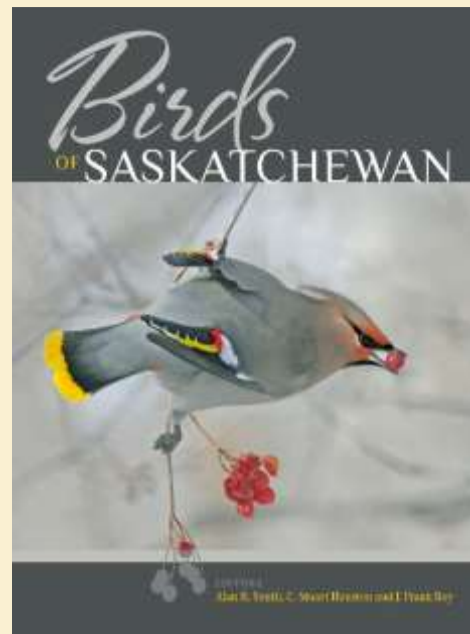
In the late 1950s, two presidents of the then recently formed Saskatchewan Natural History Society (Frank Roy and Manley Callin) promoted the idea of involving society members in producing a book about Saskatchewan birds. A series of small publications, each focused on a specific region, seemed the logical way to start. Houston, Roy, Callin, and Smith were all involved in producing at least one of this series, eventually 15 in number.

After some internal wrangling, a substantial bequest to the society from Callin following his death in 1985 was directed to fund the series and the final compilation. Smith's *Atlas of Saskatchewan Birds*, published in 1996, and the data he continued to gather and compile would provide the foundation for *Birds of Saskatchewan*.

Birds of Saskatchewan went beyond simply drawing on information from member observations, counts, and surveys. Invitations were extended to over 100 society members and friends to compile and submit species accounts following the provided template. You can imagine the challenge; some invitees were more responsive than others, and the inclination to follow the guidelines varied, contributing significantly to the 10+ years required to finalize the publication.

After all 437 species accounts had been added and revised by all three editors, one intrepid volunteer edited the lot to provide consistency and clarity. It was not a speedy process.

Aided by Callin's bequest, Roy persuaded his colleagues that *Birds of Saskatchewan* must include colour photos. They agreed to a call for photographers. Roy and three volunteers sifted through thousands of images using several criteria: Does it clearly and accurately depict the species? Is it a male? female? juvenile? Does it show habitat? Which should be the highest priority and which set aside if space is tight? There was a lot to organize.



***Birds of Saskatchewan*: a labour of love, planned for decades and in preparation for ten years, is unsurpassed with accounts of 437 species, based on several lifetimes of observation, research and writing.** Photo provided by Nature Saskatchewan.

Despite making huge progress, much remained to be done. The introductory material and appendices were completed next, some by volunteers whose task included compiling a list of every provincial place name mentioned and its location coordinates—a huge job! We secured expert help to review the species accounts and verify the factual content. Maps and tables were produced and formatted. Following a professional copy edit, fresh eyes were needed for final checking and proofreading.

Then came the cover. As part of their deliberations, the photo committee had set aside some 90 images for possible use. Unsurprisingly, some members of the core group - now eight in number to include the publisher's perspective - had strong ideas on this subject. With the help of our designers, consulting and voting ensued. The three favoured species all ended up on the cover, though not where and how everyone wanted them.

Producing *Birds of Saskatchewan* was a massive job that probably should have started in earnest a little earlier than it did, when everyone was younger, but, remarkably, willing volunteers were always found. The editors' personal networks, and the goodwill of society members and nature-lovers in general, made it possible. We all wanted to see this book published. Involving all these people also guaranteed a healthy number of buyers when the book was finally done—a welcome outcome indeed!

It makes a wonderful gift for any nature enthusiast.

Donna Bruce is a member of the Saskatoon Nature Society and Special Publications Editor for Nature Saskatchewan.