

WEST OF THE BLINDMAN
March 26, 1958

Some notes on wildlife March 19, 1958.

The Pine Grosbeaks that have been with us since November have gone and they have left a partial vacuum, heading northward before the arrival of the spring migration from the south. The flock which, in mid-February numbered around fifty birds, had dwindled to three by March 8.

The first arrivals from the sunny south are usually the crows which always rush the season by getting here before the snow has gone from the fields. The earliest date I have for their appearance this far up the Blindman is March 19, but if any were around today they were mighty quiet about it. More often it is the end of the month when the first welcome caw-caw-caw is heard.

The house sparrows showed up in this vicinity during the first mild days of March, and Harry and I have been pinging at them with .22s but our aim has got to improve if we are to be rid of them by the time the box nesting birds arrive; the bluebirds, swallows and wrens.

The concentration of mice in this, a peak year of their cycle, is one of the heaviest we have had for a long time. The pests are everywhere and their myriad runways beneath the snow can be exposed by scooping away a shovelful. I gloomily predict that the disappearance of the snow will reveal extensive damage to shrubs and perennials in the garden and possibly to some legumes in the field.

Rabbits are hardly an economic factor this year. I put on snowshoes one day and tracked one to his daytime hiding place beneath a willow root. It evoked memories of the days when they were worth five cents apiece, frozen and footless, for fox meat. I wouldn't care to have to have to earn pocket money that way now if they were worth a dollar apiece.

If rabbits do become thick again, coyotes shouldn't bother them too much. From what I can gather, these animals are in short supply all up and down the Blindman Valley: "1080" may very well be given the credit - or the blame, depending on how you view the situation. I still have no love for "1080", despite the fact that it is no longer such diabolical stuff as it used to be.

The sharptails, or prairie chickens that walk long distances into the straw stacks these crisp March mornings, will soon set up their dancing circles on the three dancing grounds I know between here and Medicine River. They use these identical spots year after year and nobody knows how many years into the past this use extends.

There are a few Spruce Partridge about this spring. These birds, often called fool-hens because they are so unwary, can usually be found in wild, evergreen forest areas but not often in the farming regions. I hope it is a sign that they are becoming more plentiful.

I will be listening shortly for the drumming of the Ruffed Grouse in the deciduous woodlands and the cry of the kiltdeer in the pasture. When I hear these sounds, and, a little later, the sky-high clamor of the northbound Canada Goose that sets the blood a-tingle, I will know it is spring, regardless of what the weather may be doing.

WEST OF THE BLINDMAN
May 7, 1958

I like maps: old maps or up to the minute ones; maps of faraway places or of the old home township; of the Alberta foothills or the Gobi Desert. Maps are indispensable, informative and very often entertaining. They will tell you so much about the region and impart knowledge that you could get in no other way.

No map, unless it gave the location of the Lost Lemon Gold Mine or of buried pirate treasure, could interest me more than a good map of some part of western Alberta, and there are certainly a variety of maps that do just that. The oldest map that I have which shows that part of the world in which I live and travel about is the Palliser Map of 1863 and this is also one of the most interesting. The most up to date maps I have are based on the aerial photos of the province made during the past decade. Even these maps which go so far as to show the building sites on individual farms are still short of 100% perfection, due mainly to errors in the interpretation of the photos, but they are a far cry from the earliest maps of the province. Captain Palliser, one hundred years ago, and David Thompson, fifty years before that, had to do a great deal of guessing to fill in the areas that were not known to them first hand.

For years the most useful maps of the provinces were the ones based on the land surveys of half a century or more ago. The one covering our area is known as the Brazeau Sheet and is still a good buy at \$0.25. For more complete coverage I have a number of the old survey maps of individual townships. These give such details as to where each survey stake is driven and the type of stake and mound, also the number of acres in every quarter section, which varies from one hundred fifty eight to one hundred sixty two, although most are the traditional one hundred sixty. Many of the old cross country trails are shown, if not always with complete accuracy. One other thing that interests me is that the northwest branch of the Blindman River which runs by Iola is named "Istapta Creek" on these old maps, which date back to 1903.

I also have an aeronautical map of this area, which gives, among other things, the compass delineation of our region, which may be worth knowing. At Bluffton or Rimbey, for instance, the compass needle will point about 25.5 degrees to the east of true north, due to the magnetic pole being located on Prince of Wales Island, a thousand miles and more from the North Pole. Possibly the most familiar map to the average person is a road map. If you rely on the ones distributed by the oil companies, you may find it best to rely on several, then what one doesn't tell you, one of the others might. But by far the best road map is the official Alberta Highway Map which is issued yearly and kept pretty well up to date.

Not the least important to some are the maps you get with your angling permit, showing what fishing streams are open and which are closed. And in the fall, one to show the complicated jigsaw pattern of all the hunting zones.

No one map will give you all the information you might wish about any given region. You should have at least a dozen.

WEST OF THE BLINDMAN

June 4, 1958

What might have been an afternoon of fishing on the last Sunday in May became, instead, a drive around the country. It was much too windy to enjoy fishing so we watched the scenery go by - when we could see it for the veil of smoke that greyed everything more than a mile away.

Some of the things we saw.

Apple trees white with blossom at Linds' and several other places. This delighted my mother who spent her girlhood in Ontario.

Too many acres of freshly burned brush and woods. Many burns indicated that the destroying flames had been out of control. Yet there is some protest about the tightening of fire laws.

Whitecaps and near-deserted beaches at Mameo. The weekend crowds were sitting out the blow around their cottages and cabins.

The still smoldering ruins of the old store at Mulhurst. It had burned the evening before.

Twenty-odd fishermen along the banks and on the old bridge at Fisher Home at the very northwest tip of Pigeon Lake where the water was protected from the high wind and almost calm.

A bevy of the small girls of Breton out on their bikes, and one lone boy walking up from the creek and swinging a wet pair of swimming trunks.

Miles of good looking crop land along the road to Buck Creek and hundreds of acres more being cleared and broken.

Three children's swings in a yard near Alder Flats; a short one, a medium high one and a tall one. Brings to mind the story about the old homesteader who had three cats and three holes in the door. Explained he, "When I say `scat` I mean SCAT!"

Also near Alder Flats, a field of oat stooks. They looked to be in better shape than one would expect after the ravages of an Alberta winter and the mice, squirrels and birds that must have made good use of them.

Stretches of forest felled along the Alder Flats - Medicine Lake road. Could this be a part of the work being done on the road from the Flats to Rocky Mountain House?

A hanging garden of masses of wild clematis in bloom along the road between Hough's mill site and Medicine Lake.

Hordes of mosquitoes in this area.

Not a sign of game in all these miles of wilderness, with the exception of one dusky Spruce Grouse, but when we were less than a mile from home, we came upon a really magnificent mule deer, sporting a most insignificant set of antlers in the velvet. He trotted up the road in front of us for a short distance, then bounded over the and into the woods. I would certainly like to see what that rack of antlers looks like next autumn.

WEST OF THE BLINDMAN

June 18, 1958

Beware the Muskeg Grizzly

If you ever go camping in the back of beyond in Alberta's mountain wilderness regions, keep a sharp eye out for the Muskeg Grizzly. This is an animal to be reckoned with. No ordinary bear, he is a cross between the common black bear and the rather uncommon grizzly. But I don't want to scare you, so let me add that muskeg grizzlies are so uncommon as to be very, very rare, and your chances of running into one are pretty slim. Furthermore, I don't think you will find a description of them in any of the books on North American animals.

I first heard of the muskeg grizzly one day last winter when one was described to me by a man who had seen a specimen at very close range. The man is Walter Waddell, who lives not far from Medicine Lake. The encounter took place in the summer of 1957 on a fishing trip to an unnamed lake. The party had set up camp and gone fishing for the day. When they returned, they found that a bear had entered the tent from the rear by simply slashing his way in, and had then proceeded to scatter, despoil and ruin almost everything within, even dragging some blankets off a short distance from the tent. It was late when the fishermen returned and later still by the time they had the place cleaned up and some sort of order restored. Before they finally turned in, they rigged up a stack of metal utensils outside the tent, so that if he bear returned and investigated, they would be awakened.

Along toward morning, the bear did return, and proved difficult to frighten off. There were no firearms in camp, and I'm sure that you will agree with me that the boys can be granted a certain amount of reluctance when it came to chasing the bear empty handed. Had they known more of this particular bruin's ancestry, they might have displayed even more reluctance. However, some of the men did go outside the tent to find an outsize bear with grizzled guard hairs on his chest, and a white-muzzled snout of a different shape from that of an ordinary black bear, and it

was evident to these fishermen that this was no run-of-the-mill camp snooper. Eventually he betook himself into the timber and troubled them no more.

On their return to civilization, they sought information from the game warden, who told them that what they had seen was a muskeg grizzly, a most unwelcome visitor to any human camping place. Muskeg grizzlies, it seems, possess certain characteristics of both their parents. They have much of the grizzly's high intelligence, most of his quick, mean temper, and some of his size. But unlike the true grizzly, who usually shuns the haunts of man, this half-grizzly inherits the snoopiness of the black bear, and his fondness for camp food.

The Indians who roam about the regions where this black sheep of the bear family is to be found, believe that the animals have a diabolical fondness for small babies. A crying child, they will tell you, will bring a muskeg grizzly from afar. (They probably tell their kids that too.) In country where one of these mad bears has been reported, they never leave a child alone, even for a moment.

One point - and it could be an important one, that I have been wondering about -- what kind of claws does this hybrid bear possess? Black bears, with short, heavy claws, can climb trees. A grizzly bear has long, curved claws, which make climbing rather difficult. It might be well to know which kind the muskeg grizzly wears, in case I ever run into one. Note -- This column has been revised slightly from the original, mainly to include Walter Waddell's name.

WEST OF THE BLINDMAN
June 25, 1958

Tiny, shimmering green, living helicopters in our garden. Weighing a tenth of an ounce, moving almost faster than the eye can follow, they dart from flower to flower, sipping nectar. They are the smallest feathered creatures; the only bird that can fly backwards; and their wings whir at speeds up to two hundred beats per second. They are the Ruby-throated Hummingbirds.

We have them every summer. They come when the delphinium spikes are tall and blue in the hot sunshine of late July. But these are always the females and the juveniles not long from the nest, dull metallic green in color, with light under parts, and without the ruby throat patch that gives the species its name.

But this year, for the first time, we have been seeing the male birds, and truly they are the living jewels they have often been called. They have been here daily since about the first of June, sometimes one; sometimes two; sipping first on the caragana blossoms and later on the columbines as they came out. They make themselves known by the sound of their wings as they hover briefly at a blossom or flit to the next. And when they leave for other parts they take off like the Avro Arrow.

They appear to pay little heed to a person standing near and they can frequently be observed at arm's length. They are never still, even when perching, which they often do; and they are far from motionless when hovering. The tail wags from side to side and the long, slim bill thrusts to the farthest reaches of the flower. Their ruby throat does not always appear red. In some lights it shows up black, or sometimes russet.

Any hummingbird seen in Alberta east of the mountains is likely to be a Ruby-throat. They nest in this region each summer, and in most other parts of the country as well. I once found a hummer's nest, but it was in October and the birds all back on the Gulf of Mexico.

However, the tiny structure was still in perfect condition. Made of tree lichens and spider webs, its inside measurements were a little more than an inch across and an inch deep. This would have been stretched from a scant inch across at building time by the growing birds. It was fastened securely, well out on a branch of a small birch tree which grew at the edge of a swamp. Had I found it in the summer before the fledglings hatched, I might have touched the bird before she flew off the eggs, which would have been two and tiny and white. The newly-emerged babies would be the size of a honey bee, but in three weeks would be fully grown and in another few days would be flying.

Hummingbirds do not live on nectar alone. They also eat quantities of the tiny insects that gather about the flowers. Later in the summer they may be attracted to the premises with vials of sweetened water, fastened to some support at a 45 degree angle.

The males won't be here much longer. They will be gone long before this is printed. Once the females are settled on the eggs, their spouses disappear, not to be seen here again until the following spring, or anywhere at all for the next several weeks. And no one knows where they go. It is one of the many mysteries that still baffle ornithologists.

WEST OF THE BLINDMAN
October 1, 1958

There have been no tall tales from the west of the Blindman for some time - and I hope no one will contradict me on this. Two of these are old ones with a twist. The other is unique so far as I know.

Every hunter has heard the yarn about the chap who shot the moose, and, by the time he had it dressed, found it was too late to make his way back to camp that night. So, with no firewood handy, and extreme cold bearing down, in desperation he crawled inside the carcass to utilize its warmth. Trouble was, by morning, he found himself frozen in, and I can't for the life of me remember how he got out.

An old pioneer rancher of southern Alberta tells much the same story with a happier ending. He was out on the range, so he says, far from home or any habitation, on a bitterly cold day, when his pony put a foot in a badger hole and broke a leg. He then did the only thing possible to save his own life. He shot the horse, removed the innards and crawled in for

the night; and, of course, by morning he was imprisoned there. But this was in the early days when buffalo roamed the plain in their multitudes. As two of the shaggy brutes wandered by, he managed to reach out to grab their tails. The great beasts, naturally, took off to beat six of a kind, and the rancher, after a mile or two, learned to steer them, and drove them right past the ranch house door, where he let go and called for one of the cowboys to chop him loose with an axe.

The latest fishing story going the rounds is about the fisherman out looking for bait out where the big ones were jumping. He noticed a large grass snake bowling merrily along with a frog in its mouth. It was a simple matter to catch the snake and snatch the frog, but the snake looked so woebegone at losing its prey that the fisherman decided to pay for the frog. So he took a flask of snakebite cure from his pocket, poured a little down the reptile's throat and let him go.

He had hardly resumed his fishing when he heard a considerable rustling in the grass behind him, and looking around, he was astonished to see twenty or thirty snakes, each with a frog in its mouth, and each looking expectantly up at him and wagging its little tail.

This final tale purports to be a true one, and, being plausible, is possibly the best of the three, bearing in mind that some individuals have a decidedly warped sense of humor. Anyway, I find it amusing, so I pass it on to you.

A party of big game hunters went west into the foothills one day, and stopped at a ranch to ask permission to hunt on the property. One of the hunters, named Bill, was a friend of the rancher and it was he who went in to get the go-ahead, while the others waited outside.

"Sure, Bill," said the rancher. "Hunt all you want, but do me a favor in return. My old pinto pony is out there in the pasture. He is twenty six years old and he went blind this summer. He'll never last another winter. He has to be destroyed, but I haven't the heart to shoot him, so how's about one of you boys doing it for me?"

Bill agreed, but being a practical joker, said nothing about the horse when he rejoined his friends. They drove out on the ranch a ways and parked their car close to where the old pinto was grazing. They all piled out and began loading their guns, eager to head into the woods. Then Bill said, "Say, I wonder what it would feel like to shoot a horse?" and he raised his rifle and shot the old pony between the eyes. His companions thought he had gone crazy and proceeded to give him a real tongue-lashing, which rolled off Bill like water off a duck. He never let on he heard. Finally he said, with a faraway look in his eyes, "I wonder what it would feel like to shoot a man?" In seconds the pasture was empty save for Bill and the dead horse. It took him an hour to round up all his companions and let them in on the joke. And not one of them has ever gone hunting with Bill from that day to this.

WEST OF THE BLINDMAN
November 5, 1958

Here it is, the first week in November. Freeze-up time, if this is an average year. The busy autumn is past; the last of the harvest is in - a harvest that began in the hay fields four long months ago. It has been a fine autumn; better than most, and a great deal of land has been partially prepared for the coming spring. But freeze-up brings an end to tillage, if not to the fine weather. Now the land can rest for half a year, and the farmer can rest a little too, for he has been so busy doing all the things that are done in the fall that he has hardly seen fall go. But with the coming of freeze-up, he suddenly realizes that it is fall no longer.

The dying leaves, that, a month ago, made the landscape bright, have been torn from their moorings by the autumn gales, and now lie limp and withered on the frozen ground, waiting for snow and mold and eventual decay, and oneness with the earth. Yet color is not gone from the landscape; rather it is subdued. We can now appreciate the deep green of the conifers, the crimson of the dogwood stems in the woodlands and the willows along the creek, and the purple hue of the swamp birch in the moist places.

November sky is a paler blue, when it is not obscured by cloud, but if freeze-up brings us snow, the air can be crystal clear. There is no dust and no smoke; only sometimes fog in the mornings.

The winter constellations already shine throughout the chilly nights. The bright cluster of the Pliedes, in the constellation of Taurus, the Bull, are high in the southeast before midnight; and then below them, Orion, the Hunter, rises in splendor unsurpassed. The Square of Pegasus, the Winged Horse, is overhead; and in the north, the Big Dipper, swinging low, holds its contents until after midnight. Bo-otes, the Herdsman; Cygnus, the Swan and the other summer constellations, dip early below the northwest horizon.

The wind has a different sound at freeze-up. It is sharper in tone, less friendly than before, even sinister at times. All sounds are different. They are sharp, unmuffled by foliage: they carry, and are magnified, 'til you cannot judge their distance. The sharptails can be heard two miles away on a crisp morning, talking back and forth as they march, strung out, across the frost-rimmed stubble. A barking dog may be heard four miles away. A cow, bawling for her newly-weaned spring born calf, will make herself heard for a similar distance. Five miles for the school bus, climbing out of the valley; six for the coyote's howl when the last star fades; ten and sometimes more for the diesel locomotive growling up the grade from Nugent to Winfield, evoking appellations like "The Peanut", "The Muskeg Special", "The Toonerville Trolley", and "The Cannonball Express".

Freeze-up dates in my records range from October 14 (in 1951) to November 14 (1949). Average is November 5, but in only four of the past fourteen years has freeze-up occurred in October.

How, you may ask, can we set a date for freeze-up, which is a process rather than a day on the calendar? Some years it is a simple matter to point to the day. At other times freeze-up comes so gradually that we cannot pinpoint a time. On the farm, freeze-up has arrived, for practical purposes, when it is no longer possible to till the soil. "That is how I have arrived at otherwise indefinite freeze-up periods. If you have kept records of the weather, including the times of freeze-up in the Blindman Valley, your dates are not likely to be much different than mine. Regardless of date, freeze-up is the time when the ground freezes more during the long, cold nights than it thaws in the ever shortening days. Freeze-up has to come, and the later the better.

WEST OF THE BLINDMAN
November 12, 1958

There is no snow at time of writing to give much indication of wildlife numbers by the tracks they leave, although there are many places where animal tracks show very plainly in the dust that lies thick on the trails. Jack rabbits, deer, porcupines, coyotes and various other like to follow a farm trail beside a fence line or windbreak. Mice, squirrels, weasels and muskrats would rather cross a trail than follow it.

From tracks I do see and from animals sighted, it seems safe to say that the increase in rabbits, both jack and snowshoe, has reached a point that is slightly disquieting to anyone who remembers the plagues of the 1920s and '30s. If they are going to peak to major proportions again, it should be in 1960, or perhaps 1961.

Mice in this area barely rate comment. In the fields, the rather pretty red-backed mice are almost as common as the ordinary vole, which is in a decline. Red-backed mice are supposed to be woodland dwellers, but we quite often find them in the fields at harvest time.

Skunks are beginning to make themselves noticed hereabouts after a decade or more of extreme scarcity. It is almost twenty years since they were very thick, and it has been no hardship to get along without them. A very pretty and very interesting little animal, they can be a first rate nuisance at times.

In all my life in western Alberta, I don't ever remember seeing so few migratory game birds in any fall before. There were a few ducks along the river, and one flock of geese, that must have been steering by a faulty compass, flew over. I didn't see them, so I haven't seen a flock of geese or a flock of Sandhill Cranes since last spring.

I did see a flock of about twenty five waxwings one day, whether Cedar or Bohemian I do not know. The handsome yellow and black and white Evening Grosbeaks, when they came south in October, looked in vain for seeds on the Manitoba maples. The blossoms were withered by the frost last June 11. Pine Grosbeaks, too, were back in October. I hope they winter here in numbers equal to last year, when about fifty spent the midwinter months with us.

Magpies are certainly numerous. Years ago they were better held in check. Every boy in the country walked miles to collect eggs and feet for the meager bounty which netted him a little pocket money. These days pocket money is a sight easier to come by.

Another wildlife group that seems to show a definite increase is upland game. Sharptails are about in flocks of fifteen to fifty, but most flocks seem quite wild; almost unapproachable. Many Ruffed Grouse have been shot though, and I have seen a few Spruce Hens, which I hope the hunters will forebear from potting. It would hardly be sport to shoot one anyway, and they are such handsome birds and so generally scarce, that in my view, they are worth more in the deep woods than they are on the table. Hungarian Partridge don't seem at all numerous.

As for big game, the hunters know where it is, but they can't, of course, be expected to divulge everything they know. The game got a reprieve early this month due to dry weather and the dangerous fire situation, but it might be only a reprieve. Days lost from this end of the season are to be tacked onto the other end.

WEST OF THE BLINDMAN
November 26, 1958

Until 3:00 PM on November 12, I had never attended a ribbon cutting ceremony of any kind, but I was present that day at the official opening of the fine, new million dollar bridge spanning the North Saskatchewan River just east of Drayton Valley.

The afternoon was dull and rather chilly, with thickening grey clouds to southward, and a low, blue-green arch of open sky being pushed gradually below the northern horizon. I could not help thinking what a glorious occasion it might have been had the time been six weeks earlier, when the beautiful Saskatchewan Valley, highly scenic at any time, and ruggedly so here, would have been dressed in autumn finery; and I thought too, as I watched the crowd shivering in the chill air, how welcome the warm October sun would have been. But on this dusty, dull November day, the brightest aspects of the scene, color-wise, were the scarlet tunics of the two Mounties who were directing traffic and keeping things orderly.

The short program featured several speakers, including a cabinet minister, two M. P.s, M. L. A.s, mayors, councilors, chief engineers and members of chambers of commerce; representing constituencies and towns and municipalities on both sides of the river.

The main speaker was Mr. Gordon Taylor, Minister of Highways, a very capable orator. He stressed the tremendous progress in highway transportation into that area in recent years, and all this meant for the present and future economy of the region. He then snipped the red and white ribbons, declaring the bridge officially open. Below, the grey-green waters of the river made a hissing, swishing sound as floes of slush ice jostled each other and the frozen margin of the stream. The Saskatchewan was freezing up.

This bridge has been in regular use since last spring, when it replaced the ferry a couple of miles up the river. The steel and concrete structure is well supported with heavy buttresses, and was built to take the heaviest loads that the oil producing industries can mount on rubber tires. It is a thousand sixty five feet in length and has a twenty eight foot traffic surface. It is not level, but slopes perceptibly to the south. The bridge is arrived at via a broad new highway which cuts many miles from the former routes between the Leduc and Pembina oil fields. Traffic is surprisingly heavy, and evidently is expected to become heavier. A forty two foot grade will provide for two twelve foot traffic lanes and two nine foot shoulder lanes when the road is blacktopped, as Mr. Taylor stated that it would be. It is built on a two hundred foot right of way, to allow for further widening at some future date.

One of the outstanding features of this highway is the neatness of the backsloping and the general tidying up. It almost has the appearance of having been landscaped, but this may be marred to a considerable extent by the run-off in the spring. There are no piles of dirt or debris left anywhere, even through the roughest terrain; and some of that terrain is pretty rough.

While November 12 may not have been so nice as the days preceding it was much better than the days to follow. It was the last decent day on which the opening could have been held. The day before was still Indian Summer. The next day was winter.