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GEORGE F. CHIPMAN, Editor and Manager
 Associate Editors: John W. Ward and Ernest J. Troft
 Home Editor: Francis Marion Beynon

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Common Prairie Birds

By Dr. H. M. Speechly, Pilot Mound, Man.

Article III.

The earliest migrating bird on these prairies is the prairie horned lark, sometimes called the shore lark by people who come from down East. Birds that leave us in the fall and return in the spring are migrating birds. The horned lark is the only true lark native to the continent of North America. It is



THE CANADA GOOSE
 One of our earliest migrating birds

called "horned" on account of the two dark feather tufts at each side of the back of its head. It leaves us late in October—in mild winters I have heard people say that it stays in Manitoba in sheltered spots, but I have never seen that happen—and returns on some date close to March 1. In my records I see that once it appeared as early as January 25 in 1908 and again as early as February 17 in 1907. After driving all the winter on the open prairie and seeing that snow-birds are the only small birds on the trail, you suddenly become aware that here and there a fawn-colored bird is feeding on the trail off weed seeds and horse droppings. As your horse approaches, this bird swings off with a graceful leap to one side, whistling as it goes. Note that it has a black collar where breast to neck join, and a curved black line leading downwards and backwards from the bill. These birds become very common by the end of March and eat weed seeds mostly, but later on about 20 per cent. of their food is of such insects as May beetles, white grubs, leaf beetles, weevils, grasshoppers and cutworms. Its nest is of grasses on the ground in some suitable hollow, which nest the cow-bird—like the old country cuckoo—finds a convenient place for hatching its egg. Hence you often see a horned lark feeding a young cow-bird about twice its own size away on in June. The horned lark's eggs are pale bluish, with small brown spots.

Next at the end of March you may expect to see several birds besides those of the geese and duck tribe, to which I do not intend to allude. Nor will I

make more than a passing allusion to sand-hill cranes or pelicans, just to show you that I am aware of such visitors, because space forbids. We have already noticed the common crow and shown how useful a bird it is, despite occasional "breaks" in behavior, but during the present season I have watched the splendid scavenging the crows have been performing all round the well-cultivated fields of this district. Expect crows pretty punctually about March 25, and a little earlier along the rivers and bush districts than on the open prairie.

The Humble Sparrow

A few days later great flocks of the sparrow tribe arrive. Every little bush by the trail is alive with them, and the bush districts are lively with the twitterings of these little native sparrows. Remember that the English sparrow stays with us all the winter and is not a migrant. What, then, are these millions? Those that infest the wayside bushes and the denser bush districts are probably of three sorts as seen from the end of March till April 10. The field sparrow, the clay-colored, and the tree sparrow. Don't worry about the difficulty of distinguishing them. First recognize them as sparrows. After that you will find that the tree sparrow, with its bright chestnut crest on the top of the head and the one dark brown—it looks black in the distance—dot on its grey breast, is not difficult to distinguish. A cousin of these is the sprightly finch—sparrows are finches—known all over the continent as the junco. The junco is a friendly bird which spends roughly the first three weeks of April here and passes on to Northern Manitoba, Saskatchewan and Alberta to nest, returning in the latter half of September. My friend, A. G. Lawrence, of Winnipeg, has a record of a junco nesting on the banks of the Red River, so we are just within its

nesting range. Owing to the variation in color between the females, the young males, and the fully grown males many people are puzzled about juncos. A good male specimen has a flesh-colored bill, dark to sooty upper parts, especially the head, and white underneath. Whenever a junco flies off the ground, it shows on each side of the tail a white feather, which it hides directly it alights on the ground. The bird seems to disappear and doubtless this little trick of the tail saves it from being caught by hawks time and time again. While we are on the subject of these early sparrows, have



Hawk's nest and eggs fifty feet above ground

you not noticed when cultivating the fields a small bird which hides behind clods of earth and tufts of dead grass so well that, the flocks of its kind are there, you cannot tell till they run or fly? The male birds have a deep black waistcoat on neck, breast and belly and at the back of the neck is a pretty reddish-

brown patch—rufous, we naturalists call that color. As usual the females look like any other sparrow, but if you have a specimen male or female in your hand you will find that its hind toe-nail is as long as the toe itself. This bird, then, is the Lapland longspur. Don't confuse this with the snowbird which stays here all winter, but nests far North, and is the only small bird in the West that has much white feathering mixed with bright chestnut and a little black. As to the diet of these sparrow birds, their beaks declare them to be "chief among seed-eaters," according to Frank Chapman, whose "Birds of Eastern North America" is well worth having in any house.

Good and Bad Hawks

Now we will turn to the three earliest hawks which should be carefully preserved in the interests of the farm and country generally, because all three live on large numbers of gophers, snakes, mice, rats, beetles, frogs and grasshoppers. These three, the marsh hawk, the red-tailed and the red-shouldered return Northwards either late in March or early in April. It is easy to tell the Marsh hawk, which slowly and gracefully quarters over the fields quite close to the ground, a large grey bird with white at the root of its silvery-grey tail, which is irregularly barred black. The other two are brown hawks of larger and stronger build than the marsh hawk, the one with the rich reddish-colored tail being the red-tailed, and the other with a like color on its shoulder, but a dark, almost black, tail, barred white and white-tipped. These two hawks are wrongly called hen or chicken hawks—it's a libel.

The true chicken robbers are Cooper's hawk, the sharp-shinned hawk, and the goshawk. The two former are so much alike that one general description will be sufficient. Their upper parts are slaty-grey, the throat is white, the under parts barred white and reddish buff, but the tail is white-tipped with black bars across an ashy grey ground. The sharp-shinned hawk has a square tail, but that of the Cooper's hawk is rounded.

Continued on Page 26

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