

Sidney S.S. Stansell, Alberta's First Christmas Bird Counter

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Sidney Stansell was an Alberta teacher who not only conducted the first Christmas Bird Counts in Alberta, but also founded the provincial Audubon Society. He published several articles about the birds of central Alberta between 1907 and 1912. While some of his early contributions have been noted elsewhere (Houston and Houston 1976; Spalding 1981). we have found other publications that are worth noting. In this article we also tell a little of his personal history.

Sidney Smith Stout Stansell was born on 18 August 1877 in Illinois and travelled to Alberta in 1906 as a teacher (J. Fraser, Provincial Museum of Alberta, pers.com.). He homesteaded in various areas of Alberta including Highland Park, Carvel, Manly and Provost. He made numerous records of birds and sent his records to the U.S. Biological Survey. (We have not attempted to trace these records).

He conducted four Christmas Bird Counts (CBC): 1906 in Edmonton, 1907 in Stony Plain, 1909 in Edmonton, and 1910 at Noyes Crossing. On the first count, he recorded 246 birds of 11 species in 8 hours of observation. Notable records were 3 Goshawks, 6 Rough-legged Hawks (an Edmonton record high number), 1 Golden Eagle (recorded only seven times on Edmonton CBCs), 7 Hawk Owls (another Edmonton high), and 10 Gray (Canada) Jays (an Edmonton record until 1990). The 1909 Edmonton count was less productive with only 4 species seen in 5 hours of observations, but did include a Black-backed Woodpecker. On the 1907 CBC in Stony Plain, he reported 6 species in 5 hours, including 4 Gray (Canada) Jays, 1 Rough-legged Hawk and 200 snowflakes (Snow Buntings). At Noyes Crossing in 1910, he saw 14 species including 8 Ruffed Grouse, 20 Sharp-tailed Grouse, 5 Black-backed Woodpeckers, 2 Three-toed Woodpeckers, 2 Blue Jays and 7 Gray (Canada) Jays.

In addition to conducting Christmas Bird Counts, Stansell published six articles on the birds of central Alberta (Stansell 1907b, 1909b, 1909c, 1910b, 1911b and 1912). His observations reveal some interesting changes in bird populations that have occurred in the 85 years between 1906 to 1912 and the early 1990s.

Cooper's Hawk and Sharp-shinned Hawks were not very common, but he did report Goshawks as quite common, probably the reverse order of abundance today. Near Stony Plain, Red-tailed Hawks bred locally "but few were seen," yet to the east they were quite common, comparable to Edmonton's current population. Broad-winged Hawks were "quite common nesters" in birch forest before 1912, but are less common in central Alberta today. Interestingly, he never mentioned Peregrine Falcons or Prairie Falcons in his articles. Merlins were "seen but once," and he had not recorded them nesting up to 1908. Subsequently (1912), he reported they were not common, but he had found a nest each year. In comparison, Edmonton's current population is about 100 pairs (Palaschuk and Holroyd 1994) Golden Eagles were "fairly common in the wooded portions where they nest in the tallest spruces, or more commonly in poplars," but do not nest in trees in central Alberta today. Some questionable records are Rough-legged Hawks and Snowy Owls as occasional local breeders. On June 10 1909, he reports a Snowy Owl nest with six eggs, which all hatched two days later. Today, both of these species nest in the Arctic and it seems unlikely that they nested on the prairies. Hawk Owls were quite numerous during the cold winter of 1906-07, but they were rare afterwards. He records them as an occasional nester in central Alberta, whereas today they nest well north and west of Edmonton.

Sharp-tailed Grouse were very rare in the early 1900s, as they are today, although they were more common in between. Sidney saw 6 or 8 Woodcock in the summer of 1909 and had others reported to him. This species no longer nests in Alberta. He did not appear to have confused Woodcock with Snipe, which he reported as "very common". Greater Yellowlegs were "fairly common" breeders and Yellowlegs (presumably Lesser) were

"less abundant." Both are much less common local breeders today. He encountered only one pair of Wilson's Phalarope, which is much more common today. He makes no mention of Franklin's Gull, which is common today and Bonaparte's Gull is listed as very rare, but is uncommon today. Black Terns were "very abundant, nesting in nearly every accessible pond or lake," and therefore may have been more common than today.

The (Northern) Three-toed Woodpecker was a winter resident only, and the Black-backed Woodpecker bred in central Alberta, the opposite of what we see today. The Yellow-bellied Sapsucker was a common woodpecker in the summer, as it is today. Sidney notes that the Northern Flicker was scarce in 1906 but common by 1909, as they are today. The Common Nighthawk was very common but has since become quite rare in the Edmonton area. Gray Jays (now Canada Jays) were more common than Blue Jays, the reverse of the current situation. Interestingly, Black-billed Magpies were not reported by Stansell and appeared later north of Camrose (Henderson 1923).

Sidney Stansell makes no mention of the White-breasted Nuthatch, and the Red-breasted Nuthatch was very rare, but today both are fairly common. Both Cedar and Bohemian Waxwings were common in the summer, but unlike today, Bohemian Waxwings were not seen in winter.

He saw Yellow-headed Blackbirds only once in five years, yet today they are very obvious in most large marshes. Red-winged Blackbirds were quite common, Rusty Blackbirds were more common and Brewer's Blackbirds were the most common blackbird, quite different from today. Today in central Alberta, Red-wings are the most common, Brewer's less common and Rusty Blackbirds are migrants. In one 1907 article, he noted that three species, Rose-breasted Grosbeak, House Wren and American Goldfinch, which he found here in the summer, "are not listed as breeding this far north by several hundred miles" (Stansell 1907b). Yet all three now breed much further north in Alberta than Edmonton (Semenchuk 1992).

Chipping Sparrows were "very rare" breeders at Stony Plain in 1907-08, but Stansell later found them quite common, especially in the vicinity of evergreens. These sparrows are quite common today. Fox Sparrows were very common but today only occur much further north in summer. Gray-crowned Rosy Finch was an abundant winter resident, whereas now it is rarely seen in the Edmonton region in any season. When he arrived in the spring of 1906, English (House) Sparrows "did not seem to be very abundant", but the following autumn "numerous flocks could be seen at most any time of day chattering in the trees or flying about over town".

Some of the abundances reported in two articles of Stansell (1909 b,c) appear to contradict each other. W.E. Saunders, an ornithologist in London, Ontario, wrote to both the *Canadian Field-Naturalist (CFN)* and the *Auk* pointing out the discrepancies between the two articles and with his previous knowledge of the birds of the region. Curiously, Saunders' two lists of discrepancies do not agree with each other. Saunders concluded, "It is unfortunate that so many errors should have crept into such an interesting paper, and it is hoped that Mr. Stansell will have an opportunity of revising this work in the near future" (Saunders 1910a). Stansell replied very effectively in the *Auk* (1910b). He points out that the article in *CFN* was written from records that he submitted to the U.S. Biological Survey by the journal editor, not by him; it was for two years only (1907 and 1908); and was for the Stony Plain area only. Mr. Stansell did write the article in the *Auk* (1909c) from his collected records from 1906-1909 over a broader region of central Alberta. Most of the so called discrepancies result from the different geographic areas and time periods. One can only wonder at the effect that such a criticism might have had on Mr. Stansell's enthusiasm for publishing. Stansell was presumably a fairly isolated observer teaching in small Alberta towns for 17 years. He only published two short notes after this exchange, even though he stayed in the province for another 13 years.

One additional noteworthy record appeared in the *Auk* (Stansell 1909b). Stansell reported Whooping Crane as "a very common migrant, stopping at least for part of the summer along the larger lakes. One nest was

located, which was afterwards abandoned." This record was challenged by W. Saunders who thought he must have meant Sandhill Crane. But Mr. Stansell stood firm with this statement is correct" (Stansell 1910b). However, Whooping Cranes were becoming rare by then.

Sidney Stansell was also an accomplished bird photographer. His photographs illustrate some of his articles (Stansell 1907b: robin feeding young in a nest, and a nest and young of Swainson's Thrush 1908 a, Gray (Canada) Jay on a nest, 1909a, Common Loon on nest and Solitary Sandpiper nest). In his 1909a article he describes how he set up a remote trigger on his camera using 30 feet of stout linen thread that he pulled to take the photograph of the loon.

In 1917, Stansell was again living in Spruce Grove. In 1921, he took one course in the summer session at the Faculty of Arts but did not enroll in a degree program. After 17 years teaching in Alberta he left the province. In 1933, he graduated from Leland Stanford University with a Masters of Education. His thesis was titled "Rise of Primary Education in Alberta." While he was a graduate student he lived in Taft, California. J. Fraser of the Provincial Museum of Alberta could not find any obituary of Sidney Stansell after 1933 in the *Auk*, *Canadian Field Naturalist*, *Beaver*, *Canadian Dictionary of Biography* or the *Oxford Companion*. We do not know what he did after he graduated with his Masters of Education.

Sidney Stansell left us with many interesting bird observations including the province's first Christmas Bird Counts. We have not found any other references to the Audubon Club that he began. Possibly someone else can tell us more about his other activities in Alberta.

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- 1907a. Seventh Christmas bird census: Edmonton, Alberta, Canada. *Bird Lore* 9(1):31
- 1907b. Some Edmonton, Alberta, birds. *Bird Lore* 9(3) 118-120
- 1908a. The bird that nests in the snow. *Bird Lore* 10:7-9
- 1908b. Eighth Christmas Bird Count: Stony Plain, Alberta. *Bird Lore* 10:38
- 1909a. Two interesting photographs from Alberta. *Bird Lore* 11(3):108-109.
- 1909b. Birds of Stony Plain, Alberta. *The Ottawa Naturalist* 23: 125-127
- 1909c. Birds of Central Alberta. *Auk*. 26:390-400
- 1910a. with G. Chadwick. Tenth Christmas Bird Count: Edmonton, Alberta, Canada. *Bird Lore* 12:36
- 1910b. Birds of central Alberta *Auk* 27 89.90
- 1911a. Eleventh Christmas Bird Count: Noyes Crossing, Alberta. *Bird Lore* 13:43.
- 1911b. Woodpeckers of Alberta. *The Oologist* 28(4):75-76.
- 1912. Raptors of central Alberta. *The Oologist* 2(2):231-232.

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