

Immersed in the Southern Alberta Grasslands with Gus Yaki:



By Angela Waldie, PhD

For three glorious weeks this spring, my days were framed by movement and discovery. Rather than sitting at my desk, I spent my time walking across pastures, through nature reserves, along gravel roads and hiking trails with a group of fellow wanderers. I had met most of my travelling companions only a few weeks earlier. Mostly amateur birders and botanists, we shared a desire to learn more about the species of southern Alberta. We also shared a deep respect for the knowledge and dedication of our guide, Calgary-based naturalist Gus Yaki.

To celebrate Canada's 150th birthday and raise funds for conservation, Yaki organized a walking tour of southern Alberta. Between May 19 and June 22, he guided

participants westward from the Saskatchewan border. On the trip we documented many species of birds, mammals, reptiles, amphibians, and plants; we familiarized ourselves with the diverse ecosystems and varied topography of southern Alberta.

At 85, Gus has the energy of many people half his age. He attributes this to a vegetarian diet and daily walks with others who care about the natural world. He leads birding classes year round for the Friends of Fish Creek Provincial Park Society and botany classes twice weekly throughout the growing season. Since retiring to Calgary in 1993, he has also coordinated the monthly Elbow River Birding Survey, leading birders along a stretch of the Elbow River on the first day of each month and recording the

bird species seen along the route.

While much of his guiding is now within Calgary, Yaki is no stranger to extended journeys. As owner and operator of Nature Travel Services, he spent many years guiding participants on birding excursions worldwide. Throughout these travels, he estimates that he's seen 5,000 of the world's approximately 10,000 bird species.

In comparison to his international expeditions, a trek across southern Alberta is more local and intimate. Yaki had initially thought of completing this journey on his own, but then decided "it would be much more fun and productive if other interested folks came along—for a day, or two, or a week, or the whole trip." When he extended the invitation to his network of birding and botany enthusiasts, he quickly filled all available spots on the trip as well as a waitlist of others hoping to join him.

The trip began in the southeast corner of the province on May 19 and ended in Waterton Lakes National Park on June 22. The route was divided into two sections, from the Saskatchewan border to Writing-on-Stone Provincial Park, and from Writing-on-Stone to Waterton. Because of the popularity of the grasslands, Yaki guided two groups across the southeast section before proceeding to Waterton. He timed the walk so that most of the migratory grassland birds would have arrived at their breeding grounds and begun nesting when we began, while delaying our arrival in Waterton in hopes that the winter snowpack would have melted from the trails.

Altogether, Yaki spent a full month in southern Alberta – waking to a chorus of



Great horned owl fledglings at John and Kathy Ross's PHOTO: © A. WALDIE



Gus and birders near Del Bonita campsite PHOTO: © A. WALDIE

birdsong that began earlier each morning as the days stretched towards summer solstice. Twelve participants joined him for the entire route, and 25 more completed one part of the walk. I participated in the first part, from May 19 to 29, and the final part, from June 12 to 22. The route did not consist of a continuous path, but participants who completed both parts of the walk covered much of the terrain between the Saskatchewan and BC borders. Yaki arranged for eight different campsites along the way, most of which served as our home base for two or more days of the trek. He also obtained permission from landowners and leaseholders for us to walk across private and leased public lands.

One of the great luxuries of this journey was having the time and permission to explore this landscape on foot. Driving across stretches of southern Alberta in the past, I've seen meadowlarks perched on fence posts or pronghorn sprinting through fields, but these glimpses were fleeting and distant. Walking allowed me to immerse myself in the landscape, rather than simply

observe it.

On the first day of our trek, we walked across leased ranchland to the Saskatchewan border in order to begin at that marker. Shortly after we embarked, we saw an endangered short-eared owl, which seemed to foretell a safe journey with its fluid, intentional flight. As we walked amid buffalo beans, prickly pear cacti, and blue gamma grass, I began to feel the rhythms of the prairie around me. Horned larks and chestnut-collared longspurs flitted among the sagebrush, pronghorn monitored our progress with guarded curiosity, and storm clouds circled the vast horizon. Wind was always with us, whether subtle or insistent.

There is a sense of exposure on the prairie that I've experienced in few other places. Of the grasslands on the Saskatchewan-Montana border, Wallace Stegner wrote, "The drama of this landscape is in the sky, pouring with light and always moving." We witnessed this drama on our first morning as we tried to predict the direction of the storm that circled. As we approached a fence marking the Alberta-Saskatche-

wan border, the clouds unleashed thunder, lightning, rain, and hail, and we huddled together in whatever rain gear we'd had the foresight to bring.

Less than an hour later we gathered around a slough in warming sunshine, stripping off our raingear as we marveled at the number of species on this small wetland. On water still furrowed by wind, we identified northern shovellers, blue-winged teal, green-winged teal, ruddy ducks, American wigeon, Wilson's phalarope, and eared grebes. The brilliant orange heads of American avocets appeared through the grass as killdeer and willets explored the shoreline. Helping us to locate one of the willets, Yaki instructed us to "Look at the Sweetgrass Hills – find the highest point on the right and come down to the shore." The Sweetgrass Hills, which would be our constant companions throughout much of the journey, proved valuable wayfinders from the very first day.

As we moved across the landscape, we encountered many birds in their nesting habitat, but we also intersected other spe-

cies on their northward migrations. Some found sanctuary on their migratory journeys in rare stands of trees, which indicated past or present human settlements.

On our third day, we stopped for lunch at the townsite of Onefour, a small cluster of buildings abandoned when the federal government closed this Agriculture Canada research station in 2012. As we lounged in the grass after lunch, we noticed many birds flitting through the deciduous trees. A walk through abandoned streets revealed a remarkable array of species, including endangered loggerhead shrikes, American goldfinches, blackpoll warblers, a yellow-rumped warbler, an American redstart, and a lazuli bunting. In deserted backyards, birds sheltered in lilac hedges and flowering fruit trees. Devoid of human habitation, this town vibrated with colour and song.

Farther along on our journey, we found an oasis of trees that had grown from an unlikely origin. Near the Milk River south of Foremost there are two perpendicular rows of cottonwoods framing a farmhouse. A plaque reveals that these trees grew from green poles that the Hall family pounded

into the ground to build a corral in the early 1900s. More than a century later, these remarkably straight rows of cottonwoods provide valuable habitat for a myriad of bird species.

Today's residents assisted our journey in several ways. Not only did many landowners grant us permission to walk across their pastures, some also offered to act as our guides for a day. Lee Finstad, for example, guided us across his land on the north side of the Milk River, taking us to the site of a former NWMP outpost and through an underground cavern carved by the river. As we walked, he entertained us with stories of the species he's seen in a lifetime spent on the land.

Hearing firsthand from ranchers about their knowledge of the species that occupy the land gave us much to think about. Dianne Leonhardt, a geologist from Calgary who participated in the full walk, was struck by "the intricacies of ranching and grazing." As she explains, "I was amazed at the thought, effort and various opinions of all the people that we met and talked to along

the way. I guess you don't just put cattle into a field and walk away.

Shortgrass prairie is one of the most endangered ecosystems on the planet, threatened primarily by agriculture. Although ranching is generally not as detrimental to bird species as farming, it can still have a negative impact if native plant species are replaced by non-native ones. As we moved from pasture to pasture, becoming adept at rolling under barbed wire fences, we noticed that pastures where the native grasses remained undisturbed, or only minimally disturbed, hosted a far greater abundance and variety of birds than those where the native grasses had been largely replaced. On healthy native grasslands, we saw an abundance of lark buntings, vesper sparrows, chestnut-collared longspurs, as well as endangered long-billed curlews and ferruginous hawks. It was heartening to see these species, but also concerning to realize that the habitat on which they rely has been shrinking for decades.

Some species – such as greater sage-grouse and burrowing owls – were notable in their absence. We didn't anticipate seeing sage-grouse as we had planned to stay away from known leks in order not to disturb them. We looked for burrowing owls, guided by the knowledge of landowners who knew the sites of burrows they had occupied in previous years. One evening, as we stood with binoculars trained on last year's nesting site, one participant believes she may have briefly seen the head of an owl, but this sighting remains unconfirmed – as ephemeral as the species itself.

The walk was haunted, at times, by stories of past abundance. In 2012, Environment Canada reported that the number of breeding pairs of burrowing owls was over 3,000 in the early 1980s. By 2012 there were less than 800 pairs. Anecdotally, when we heard the calls of Sprague's pipits high above the Onefour Heritage Rangeland Natural Area, Gus remembered that when he walked to school in Saskatchewan each spring he would hear



Savannah sparrows at Police Outpost Provincial Park PHOTO: © A. WALDIE

these calls throughout his entire walk. On our trek, we heard the Sprague's pipits only above the healthiest of grasslands, and each one felt like a privileged encounter with rarity.

Walking allowed us to hear the symphony of birdsong that still inspires the grasslands. Song was often our first indication of the presence of a bird, whether it was the liquid music of meadowlarks, the trills and warbles of chestnut-colored longspurs, or the ethereal skysong of Sprague's pipits. Kingley Blades, who has helped Gus to facilitate the Friends of Fish Creek Provincial Park Society birding courses, compared hearing birdsong to hearing a favourite song on the radio. "I love music," he said, "And you know how you can sometimes recognize a song by just one note? Bird calls are like that."

In places, the birds shifted ahead of us as we walked along fence lines – meadowlarks, vesper sparrows, lark buntings, and horned larks appeared frequently on fence posts and scattered like musical notes along the wires. We had to watch carefully where we walked to avoid stepping on nests. On a number of occasions, we saw clutches of eggs camouflaged in the grasses, and we also saw a nest filled with newly hatched chicks stretching their tiny mouths towards the sky. As we moved away to avoid bringing the nest to the attention of predators, I was awed by both the resilience and vulnerability of life in the grasslands.

Gus recorded 160 species of birds over the course of the entire walk, as well as 27 mammal, four reptile, and two amphibian species. We encountered rattlesnakes fairly regularly from the Onefour Heritage Rangeland to Writing-on-Stone Provincial Park. At Onefour we also saw the endangered short-horned lizard.

Although I knew few grassland plant species before beginning this trip, I learned to name many of the plants that characterize the grassland landscape, including pussytoes, scarlet mallow, evening primrose, wild tomato, and many others. Gus also showed us how to iden-

tify and remove invasive species such as dalmatian toadflax. When identifying plants, he encouraged us to rely not simply on sight, but also to engage our sense of smell and, when appropriate, taste. Over the course of our journey, we sampled delicacies from the grassland buffet, such as ground plums and mint. Sometimes when asked of a new species, "Can you eat it?", Gus would playfully reply, "You can eat anything once."

Reflecting on the prairie walk, Ann Lawson, a retired veterinarian who has been birding with Gus for years, said: "It was a privilege and a thrill to join Gus for this walk. His knowledge and love for the flora and fauna we encountered was an inspiration, and I truly appreciated his enthusiasm to share this experience with the group."

Gus and his fellow participants raised tens of thousands of dollars for conservation organizations, including the Al-

berta Wilderness Association, Bird Studies Canada, and the Nature Conservancy of Canada. This walk also brought vividly to life the species and ecosystems these organizations are working so hard to preserve.

Gus has given a number of illustrated presentations documenting the journey and has more upcoming. He has also received numerous requests to organize a similar walk next spring. 🐦

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Gus Yaki watching a rattlesnake near the Onefour Heritage Rangeland Natural Area PHOTO: © A. LAWSON