

Bird observations by John Macoun and party in the West Kootenay area of British Columbia, June – July, 1890

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Abstract: Details of the unpublished notes made by John Macoun during his 1890 field trip to the West Kootenay region of British Columbia are presented. When cross-referenced to information published in Macoun's three volume *Catalogue of Canadian Birds* (1900–1904), a total of 78 species are mentioned, of which 76 are considered sufficiently documented for this area. Included are the first provincial records for Barn Owl and Red-headed Woodpecker, which are discussed.

Key words: John Macoun, historic bird records, West Kootenay, British Columbia, Barn Owl, Red-headed Woodpecker

Introduction

The primary purpose of this paper is to make available John Macoun's (Figure 1) unpublished bird notes for the West Kootenay portion of his expedition. These notes, stored

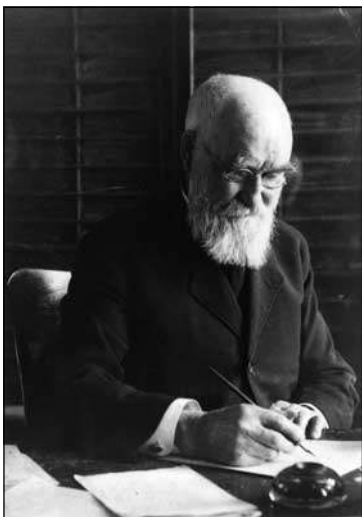


Figure 1. John Macoun. Photo courtesy Canadian Museum of Nature, Ottawa, Canada.

in the National Museum of Natural Science are not easily available. A second purpose is to evaluate certain of the Macoun party's observations in light of present knowledge.

The West Kootenay Bird Study Area, here defined, is the area north of the Canada-United States border and south of 50° North; between the height of land to the west of the Columbia River (the Monashee Mountains) and the North Arm of Kootenay Lake to the vicinity of Balfour, and then via the height of land south along the Selkirk Range, back to the International Border (Figure 2). This area is characterised by steep-sided valleys, deep lakes and entrenched rivers.

With the discovery and exploration of the Columbia River by David Thompson between 1808 and 1812, this waterway

became part of the great east-west travel corridor linking York Factory (Toronto) to the Pacific Northwest. With the completion of the trans-continental Canadian Pacific Railway in 1887, the opportunity for easy and speedy access (by 1890 standards) to many destinations in British Columbia was facilitated. John Macoun conducted the first major natural history expedition to the West Kootenay, focusing primarily on birds and plants.

John Macoun (1831–1920) was a singularly happy man (Parker, 1923). An enquiring mind, a zest for exploration, a habit of diligence and the ability to gather and assimilate vast amounts of information and then communicate this accurately were his great strengths. His primary love was natural history. In this endeavour he was self taught. Though primarily regarded as a botanist, his natural history interests extended to birds, insects, marine life, soils, geology and weather. After immigrating to Canada at age 19, he became a farm hand, a school teacher, a field botanist and, eventually, Assistant Director of the Geological Survey of Canada; a truly remarkable accomplishment. A fascinating 'read' is his autobiography *John Macoun, Canadian Explorer and Naturalist* (Macoun 1922). The introduction was written by Ernest Thompson Seton.

For the summer of 1890, Macoun planned a collecting trip from Revelstoke, down the Columbia River through the Arrow Lakes, to Nelson, Ainsworth Hot Spring and return. In his autobiography (Macoun 1922:258–260), Macoun describes, as part of his goal: "to find out the lines of bird migration in Canada, west of Ontario. ... In the spring of 1890, I sent William Spreadborough, [a noted bird and mammal collector] early in March, to Revelstoke, B.C., and he collected there the next two months. I went in

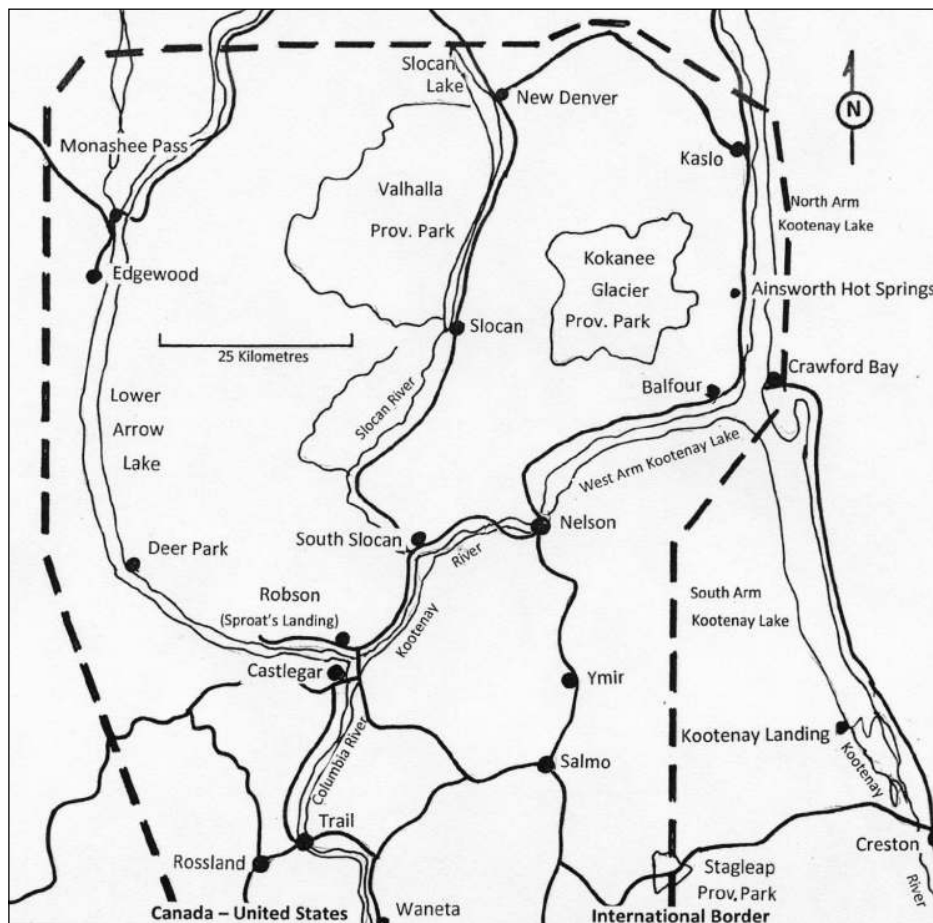


Figure 2. The West Kootenay Bird Study Area.

April and made botanical collections while my son James M. came in May and, shortly after, we went down the Columbia [on the steamer *Kootenai*] to Deer Park and stopped there a couple of weeks [June 3–17] making collections on the Arrow Lakes. We then went by canoe down the Columbia to Pass Creek, close to Robson [Sproat's Landing], where we camped [June 18–29] and made large collections there. This being the year that the Canadian Pacific Railway was building the road from Robson to Nelson, there was a tote-road between the two places and I engaged pack animals to carry our stuff across to Nelson. ... Ainsworth, where there is a hot spring, was the next place where we made a camp for the following three days. [After which we returned to Nelson where] my son and William S. climbed the hills [Toad Mountain] ... for a week ... and obtained many fine specimens. We then returned to Revelstoke.”

When Macoun's party was at Deer Park and Pass Creek, (June 3–29), the spring bird migration was virtually over and the species present were breeding. Therefore transient species, such as waterfowl, northern breeding songbirds, and other migratory species collected earlier by Spreadborough at Revelstoke, had already passed through the Arrow Lakes/Columbia River Valley corridor.

Methods

Macoun's accounts of his 1890 expedition were acquired from the National Museum of Natural Science in Ottawa through the courtesy of J.H. Soper. The notes, quoted below, are taken from a number of sources. The primary source was *Notes on British Columbia Birds, observed or shot, in the summer of 1890* (Macoun 1890a), which appears to be a post-trip, unpublished summation of the birds collected or observed, organised by species. When these notes were compared to the text of Macoun's three-volume *Catalogue of Canadian Birds* (Macoun 1900, 1903, 1904), a number of omissions were noted. Most observations made during this expedition are included in both sources, but there were 19 from the notes (marked with an * in the following list) that were not entered in the Catalogues and six species (marked **) that are included in the Catalogues that were not found in the notes. A complete set of field notes, if one exists, could not be located (Soper 1971). One additional observation, taken from an untitled reference given the name *Field Diary of John Macoun 1890 – Revelstoke to Pass Creek* (Macoun 1890b), includes a more detailed account of the American Barn Owl observation than the information in Macoun's

"Notes". Copies of this original material, acquired by the author, will be deposited in the library at Selkirk College, Castlegar, so that they can be more easily accessible for ornithological research.

Many of Macoun's names for bird species are different from those accepted today by the American Ornithologist's Union (2010), which are followed in this paper. Where these differ, the names used and as spelled by Macoun, are included in parentheses. The gender of specimens collected is indicated (M) male and (F) female.

Results and discussion

Common Merganser (Red-breasted Merganser)

A pair noticed at Deer Park. A pair evidently nesting at Pass Creek

Since the Red-breasted Merganser nests far to the north and west in British Columbia (Campbell *et al.* 1990a) and the Common Merganser commonly breeds along the rivers and lakes of southern B.C., Macoun's original identification is considered in error and has been corrected here.

***Ruffed Grouse** (Gray Ruffed Grouse)

Breeding at Deer Park and Pass Creek.

***Spruce Grouse** (Franklin's Grouse)

At 1,500 ft. altitude at Pass Creek, June 26, 1890.

***Dusky Grouse** (Richardson's Grouse)

Breeding at Deer Park and Pass Creek.

***Common Loon** (Loon)

seen flying down the Columbia at Pass Creek.

***Horned Grebe**

Seen in Arrow Lake at Deer Park, June 8, 1890.

Turkey Vulture (Turkey Buzzard)

Three seen sailing around at the Deer Park, June 7, 1890. Seen also on June 9, 1890. Occasionally seen at Deer Park and Pass Creek.

***Osprey** (Fish Hawk)

Breeding along the Columbia River on tall stubs. (M) June 13, 1890. Occasionally along the river. A nest at Sproat's Mouth of Pass Creek.

***Sharp-shinned Hawk**

Common at Deer Park. Seen at Pass Creek.

Red-tailed Hawk (Large Hawk, *Buteo borealis*)

Two pairs nesting in the cliffs at Deer Park. One pair nested

under the cliffs near the mouth of Pass Creek.

American Kestrel (Sparrow Hawk)

Rather common at Deer Park, a few at Pass Creek.

Prairie Falcon

One flew over camp at Deer Park, June 9, 1890.

***Spotted Sandpiper**

Breeding along the rivers and lakes. At Deer Park and Pass Creek.

***Greater Yellowlegs**

One seen at Pass Creek, June 24-25, 1890.

***Herring Gull**

Others seen on Lower Arrow Lake, June 20, 1890.

Barn Owl (American Barn Owl)

On 4 June 1890 John Macoun recorded the following in his field diary: *Owing to the rain I was able to collect a fine lot of lichens on the rocks in rear of the tents. A number of rare and interesting birds are in this neighbourhood as this evening I caught an American Barn Owl on the ground.*

This would be the first record of this species in British Columbia (see Campbell *et al.* 1990b:352). That this significant record was omitted by Macoun and Macoun (1909) appears odd since the above statement by Macoun is quite emphatic. No additional information appears available.

Common Nighthawk (Western Nighthawk)

Heard occasionally at Deer Park, June 6, 1890. Breeding in numbers on the rocks, 700 ft. above the river, west of Pass Creek. Nest on the bare rock. Eggs, two. Bird often flies in the daytime.

Vaux's Swift

Common at Deer Park and Pass Creek. Always flying high.

****Calliope Hummingbird**

While camped at Deer Park, in the early part of June I took seven specimens and they were so abundant that many others could have been taken. They were not observed examining flowers but were seen perching on small trees and chasing small flies and returning again to their perch just as small flycatchers do. Further down river, at Robson, this species was quite rare.

Rufous Hummingbird (Rufous-backed Humming Bird)

Very rare at Deer Park, occasionally seen at Pass Creek.

***Belted Kingfisher**

Breeding in the neighbourhood of water, at Deer Park and Pass Creek.

Red-headed Woodpecker

Seen on the rocks above Pass Creek, June 25, 1890.

That such a distinctive bird, with which this well-travelled observer was most likely familiar from his years living in Belleville, Ontario, could be misidentified, "is unlikely" (Godfrey 1986). Macoun and Macoun (1909) stated "a pair was seen at Pass Creek, near Robson Columbia River, B.C." but when Macoun was asked about this sighting years later, he could not confirm, nor recollect, this observation (Brooks and Swarth 1925:129). Macoun at this time would have been in his late 80s. Godfrey (1986) did not include this record, and up to the present it continues to be overlooked (Campbell *et al.* 1990b:484). The first and second documented observations of this species in B.C., 11–13 June 1965 near Vernon (Grant 1966), and 22 June 1998, in the East Kootenay (Franken and Gillies 2001) and an unverified sight record at Skookumchuk, 18 June 1989 (Kinley 1989), occur in the same season as Macoun's. In Alberta the Red-headed Woodpecker is considered to be a "casual wanderer" (Semenchuk 1992). On the basis of this information, it may be reasonable to now accept this observation as possibly the first sight record for this species in British Columbia. The status of *Accidental* (Campbell *et al.* 1990b) for the Red-headed Woodpecker in British Columbia remains appropriate.

Red-naped Sapsucker

Breeding in numbers at Deer Park. (M) June 7, 1890. Breeding at Pass Creek.

Downy Woodpecker (Gairdner's Woodpecker)

Rather common in the woods around Pass Creek. Shot June 25, 1890.

***Hairy Woodpecker** (Harris' Woodpecker)

Seen at Deer Park and Pass Creek.

Northern Flicker (Red-shafted Flicker)

Not uncommon at Deer Park, (M) June 5, 1890. Only a few seen at Pass Creek.

***Pileated Woodpecker**

Seen at Deer Park, June 14, 1890 and at 4,200 ft. altitude at Sproat's Landing [mouth of Pass creek] June 24, 1890.

Olive-sided Flycatcher

Common at Deer Park. (F) June 5, 1890 and Pass Creek.

Western Wood-Pewee

Common in woods at Deer Park. (F) June 9, & (M) June 10, 1890. Breeding at Pass Creek. Nest on a limb of a fir, in the fork of the branch.

***Willow Flycatcher** (Little Fly-catcher - 'pusillus')

Distinguished easily from Least Flycatcher by its bill being

larger. Rather common at Deer Park. (F) June 7, 1890.

***Least Flycatcher**

Rather Common at Deer Park. (F) June 11, 1890.

****Dusky Flycatcher** (Wright's Flycatcher)

Breeding at Deer Park and Robson on the Arrow Lake and below it. [Specimen from Deer Park].

Western Kingbird (Arkansian Flycatcher)

One pair seen about 8 miles below Deer Park, June 18, 1890. (M) June 18, 1890.

Eastern Kingbird (King Bird)

Breeding at Deer Park, (M) June 3, 1890, and Pass Creek.

Cassin's Vireo

Heard at Deer Park, June 4, 1890. (M) June 5 & (M) June 10, 1890. Breeding in the wood at Pass Creek.

Warbling Vireo (Western Warbling Vireo)

Common and breeding in numbers at Deer Park. (M) June 14, 1890 and Pass Creek.

Red-eyed Vireo

*Breeding in Pass Creek Valley in the fork of a *Cornus [stolonifera]* bush. (M) June 20, 1890.*

Gray Jay (Rocky Mountain Jay)

A young one shot on the mountains at Deer Park, June 6, 1890. Seen on the mountains at Pass Creek, June 26, 1890.

Steller's Jay (Black-headed Jay)

Young June 19, 1890, only one family seen at Pass Creek.

****Clarke's Nutcracker**

They are common at Deer Park. On June 4, 1890 fully fledged young were shot. At Robson, B.C., they were abundant on the mountain sides later in the month.

American Crow

Heard at Pass Creek, June 25, 1890.

Common Raven (American Raven)

A few seen at Deer Park and Pass Creek.

Violet-green Swallow

Common at Deer Park breeding in the cliffs. (2F) June 6, & (M) June 14, 1890. Common, breeding in the cliffs west of Pass Creek.

Northern Rough-winged Swallow

Breeding at Pass Creek in large numbers. (M) June 21, 1890.

Barn Swallow - *Seen on the mountain on the west side of Pass Creek, June 26, 1890.*

Black-capped Chickadee (Long-tailed Chic-a-dee)
Common at Deer Park. (F) June 7, 1890 & (M), June 13, 1890. A pair built a nest in an old tree leaning over the water at Pass Creek. Nest contained only 4 eggs, June 24, 1890.

Mountain Chickadee (Mountain Chic-a-dee)
Three shot on the mountains at Deer Park, June 6, 1890. In the woods at Pass Creek, young full grown and fledged, June 26, 1890.

Boreal Chickadee (Hudsonian Chic-a-dee)
Shot on the summit of Toad Mountain [Nelson], July.

Red-breasted Nuthatch (Red-bellied Nuthatch)
Common at Deer Park [June 10 & 12, 1890] and Pass Creek.

White-breasted Nuthatch (Slender-billed Nuthatch)
Rather common at Deer Park. (2F) June 7, (F) June 8, & (M) June 12, 1890. Common at Pass Creek. Breeding.

House Wren (Parkman's Wren)
One pair breeding (nest in a hollow tree) on the rocks, 700 ft. above Pass Creek, June 20, 1890.

American Dipper
Three miles up Pass Creek, June 26, 1890, young full grown.

Golden-crowned Kinglet
Breeding in the woods at Deer Park. Young, June 10, 1890.

Mountain Bluebird (Arctic Blue Bird)
Numbers of young birds in the trees on the cliffs 700 ft. above Pass Creek, June 20, 1890.

Townsend's Solitaire
One seen at Deer Park, 2,000 ft. above Arrow Lake, June 9, 1890.

****Swainson's Thrush**
A few seen at Deer Park and breeding in numbers at Robson in June 1890. A female and young male, in nesting plumage, were shot at Nelson, B.C. where they were fairly abundant.

American Robin (Western Robin)
Breeding in numbers at Deer Park and Pass Creek. Very wild and difficult to shoot.

Varied Thrush
One seen on the mountain top at Deer Park, also seen at an altitude of 4,200 ft. at Pass Creek.

Gray Catbird (Cat Bird)
Heard in the bushes at Deer Park, June 6, 1890. (2M) June 21, 1890. Breeding in the valley of Pass Creek.

Cedar Waxwing (Cedar Bird)
Shot at Deer Park, June 12, 1890. (M) June 13, 1890. Common in flocks at Pass Creek. Only building on June 20, 1890.

Nashville Warbler (Calaveras Warbler)
Seen at 1,000 ft. altitude at Pass Creek, June 26, 1890.

Yellow Warbler (Western Summer Warbler)
Rather common at Deer Park. (M) June 10, 1890, (M) June 12, 1890. Breeding at Pass Creek. Nest in a fork of a Balsam Poplar, 40 ft. from the ground, June 21, 1890.

Yellow-rumped Warbler (Audubon's Warbler)
Breeding at Deer Park, (F) June 4, 1890. Young full grown, June 24, 1890, at Pass Creek.

American Redstart (Red Start)
Breeding at Deer Park and Pass Creek in low thickets. Nesting in a little poplar tree.

MacGillivray's Warbler (Macgillivray's Warbler)
Not uncommon at Deer Park, (F) June 6 & (M) June 10, 1890. Rather common around Pass Creek. Keeps near the ground.

Common Yellowthroat (Western Yellow Throat)
Breeding in the valley of Pass Creek.

Spotted Towhee (Oregon Towhee)
*A pair shot at Pass Creek, June 26, 1890, nesting on the ground under a bush of *Ceanothus laevigatus* on the brink of the terrace about 500 ft. above the river.*

Chipping Sparrow (Western Chipping Sparrow)
Common at Deer Park. (F) June 5, 1890. Occasionally seen at Pass Creek. Breeding.

***Song Sparrow**
Breeding in Pass Creek Valley, June 21, 1890.

Dark-eyed Junco (Pink-sided Junco)
Common at Deer Park and Pass Creek. Young at Sproat's Landing, June 20, 1890.

***Western Tanager** (Louisiana Tanager)
Common at Deer Park. (M) June 10, 1890. (M) June 14, 1890 and Pass Creek.

Black-headed Grosbeak
Breeding in the valley of Pass Creek.

****Brown-headed Cowbird**

In June a number of males were seen along the beach at Deer Park.

Pine Grosbeak

One seen near the summit of the mountains at Sproat's Landing [mouth of Pass Creek], June 24, 1890.

Red Crossbill (Red-winged Crossbill)

Seen on the mountains at Deer Park, June 5, 1890. (F) June 6, 1890. Not uncommon on the mountains on both sides of Pass Creek.

***Common Redpoll (Red-poll Linnet)**

Seen at lower end of Lower Arrow Lake, June 18, 1890.

For a redpoll to be at this location, in this habitat and at this time of year seems highly improbable. Spreadborough did collect 5 specimens of the Common Redpoll near Revelstoke in April. The suggestion would be that this observation is more likely that of a Cassin's Finch, a species not recorded by Macoun, which is considered to be an uncommon resident in this area.

***Pine Siskin (Pine Creeping Warbler, *Dendroica pinus*)**

In flocks in the woods near the mouth of the Illecillewaet [River, Revelstoke]. One shot, female, May 20, 1890. Seen at Deer Park and Pass Creek on the very summits of the trees, apparently in flocks, always very far up on the trees.

The Pine Warbler *Dendroica pinus* has not been recorded as occurring in British Columbia (Campbell *et al.* 2001). Macoun's notes fit the character of the Pine Siskin (*Carduelis pinus*), a common but nomadic species in the West Kootenay. This initial confusion and misidentification was corrected by omitting the Pine Warbler from the 1909 edition of Macoun and Macoun's Catalogue of Canadian Birds (See Brooks & Swarth 1925:131). The specimen taken by Spreadborough near Revelstoke is no longer in the collection of the National Museum of Canada (Gosselin 2010).

****Evening Grosbeak**

Quite common along both Arrow Lakes in June 1890. Rather common in small flocks at the mouth of Pass Creek, near Robson, B.C. They were apparently getting ready for a second brood June 21, eating polar buds.

Summary

On the basis of the Macoun party's field work in the late spring and summer of 1890, 78 species were reported, of which 76 are considered reasonably documented for the first time in the West Kootenay Bird Study Area. The exceptions are the Common Redpoll, which seems improbable, and the

Pine Warbler, which is questionable on the basis of the information available. This report also includes additional information, such as specific dates, which were not reported in Macoun and Macoun (1909).

The observations for Barn Owl and Red-headed Woodpecker have been evaluated comparatively to current information and, to me, appear worthy of acceptance.

Acknowledgements

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