

Exploring Manitoba

The Manitoba Naturalists' Society recently hosted the Canadian Nature Federation's 10th annual general meeting in Winnipeg. Over 300 people from Newfoundland to British Columbia participated in the well organized event. The conference began on Sunday, August 24 with a number of field trips. Naturalists had the opportunity to visit a tall grass prairie in its original state, see aspen parkland and boreal forest, and inspect the pothole country and large marshes for which the Prairies, and Manitoba in particular, are noted.

One trip of special interest took us to the inland dune region of Carberry where Ernest Thompson Seton gathered material for his books on animal lore. The Carberry Sand Hills lie on an ancient delta formed where the Assiniboine River flowed into Glacial Lake Agassiz, which at one time covered much of southern Manitoba and some of Saskatchewan. As the lake receded hills of sand were left exposed to the winds. Today the dunes, which undergo many of the successional patterns common to P.E.I.'s coastal dunes, are partly enclosed by Spruce Hills Provincial Park. Part of the area has been recommended for permanent preservation as an ecological reserve by International Biological Programme workers.

The southern portion of Manitoba is visited by

at least 311 species of birds, and I had the opportunity to visit two birding "hot spots". The first of these is the 35,000 acre Delta Marsh, probably the most famous marsh in the world. Here waterfowl were everywhere, and as one interested in ducks I was amazed by their numbers. It was therefore humorous to watch local birders barely glance at the mallards, coots and gadwalls, but become quite excited over a great blue heron.

The second birders paradise was the recently created Oak Hammock Wildlife Management Area with a mere 3,500 acres of marsh. Again waterfowl were pervasive and indeed, I confess, I got sick of looking at American coots. Migrating shorebirds were feeding on the flats and it was a sight to watch prairie falcons sand them into erratic flight. Unfortunately the peregrine falcons which had been spotted earlier in the week did not put in an appearance that day. However, it was a contentment to see the numbers of merlins and prairie falcons which did. In terms of the beauty of their flight, white pelicans in flocks of up to 50 put on quite a show for us. We also saw the locally rare sharp-tailed grouse, abundant numbers of long- and short-billed marsh wrens, yellow-headed blackbirds, eared grebes, and lots of hawks including Cooper's, Swainson's, red-tailed and two early migrant routh-leggeds. The