

BIRDS OBSERVED ALONG THE SIKANNI CHIEF RIVER, NORTH-EASTERN BRITISH COLUMBIA 1992-1997

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Abstract -- An annotated list is presented of 134 bird species observed along the remote Sikanni Chief River 1992-1997, along with a review of the sparse literature published previously on birds of that area. Direct breeding evidence (active nest or flightless young) was obtained for Canada Goose, Mallard, Green-winged Teal, goldeneye sp., Red-tailed Hawk, Ruffed Grouse, Killdeer, Greater Yellowlegs, Lesser Yellowlegs, Northern Hawk Owl, Great Gray Owl, Hairy Woodpecker, Northern Flicker, Eastern Phoebe, Violet-green Swallow, Barn Swallow, Gray Jay, American Robin, Chipping Sparrow, Lincoln's Sparrow and Dark-eyed Junco. A Ruffed Grouse nest had the largest clutch reported in B.C. to date. The published British Columbia ranges of Wood Duck and California Gull are extended to the northeast, those of Black-throated Green Warbler and Yellow-headed Blackbird to the north and that of Vesper Sparrow to the northwest. Hammond's Flycatchers were fairly common in three years far to the east of their described range in B.C. Records are documented of several other species seldom reported in northeastern B.C. The earliest arrival date in British Columbia for Yellow-bellied Flycatcher is moved forward to 2 June.

Key words: Avifauna, northeastern British Columbia, Sikanni Chief River.

Erskine and Davidson (1976), in their pioneer work on the birds of the Fort Nelson lowlands, lamented that the north-eastern corner of British Columbia was "little known ornithologically." This situation has changed only slightly during the intervening 22 years. Funding by Forest Renewal B.C. has resulted in recent research by consultants (R. W. Campbell personal communication to M. K. McNicholl 1 January 1998), but their results have yet to be published.

Away from the Alaska Highway, the area is remote, with difficult access, and devoid of human population. Mosquitoes and bears are constant considerations.

From late May to mid-June in each of the years 1992-1997, I was in the area of the Sikanni Chief River at its confluence with Niteal and Gutah creeks (58° 00' N, 121° 00' W). Although I was in the area to complete contracts to plant 500,000 tree seedlings in each of the six years, I was able to record bird observations incidentally to the work. In this paper, I present an annotated list of 134 bird species observed, with details of breeding evidence, and comments on their habitat use and abundance.

STUDY AREA

The area is 110 km. south-east of Fort Nelson, B.C. and 200 km. north north-west of Fort St. John, B.C. (Figure 1). It is within the Fort Nelson Lowland Ecoregion of the Taiga Plains Ecoprovince in the Sub-arctic Ecodivision of the Polar Ecodomain (Demarchi *et al.* 1990).

This is an extensive lowland area dissected by tributaries of the Liard River. The Sikanni Chief River and Gutah Creek are incised deeply into the plain. Streams, small lakes and

extensive muskeg cover much of the area, which has been essentially unmodified since the retreat of the glacier after the latest Ice Age.

The region has a continental climate with the greatest temperature extremes in British Columbia. Winters are long and dark, with temperatures plummeting to -50° C. Summer days are long because of latitude, with temperatures rising into the mid 30°s C. Precipitation is low with summer maxima because of afternoon convection showers. Many mornings and afternoons are pleasant, but some days are hot and humid. Thunderstorms are regular and cause a variety of potential problems, including lightning strikes, wind squalls and "twisters" that bring trees down. In 1993, a dry lightning storm ignited three forest fires in a triangular pattern around our camp, putting us in imminent danger of evacuation. The clay logging roads of the area are extremely tiresome to walk on when wetted by rain, because of the instant adherence of heavy clay to boots.

The climax forests are white spruce (*Picea glauca*) on drier, elevated areas and black spruce (*P. mariana*) and tamarack (*Larix laricina*) in the muskegs. Seral trembling aspen (*Populus tremuloides*) stands are everywhere due to the ubiquity of forest fires in the region. Spruce and aspen forest understory includes prickly rose (*Rosa acicularis*), soopolallie (*Shepherdia canadensis*), willows (*Salix* spp.) and alders (*Alnus* spp.). The floodplain meanders of the Sikanni Chief have a mixture of giant balsam poplar (*Populus balsamifera*) and white spruce, with an understory of alder, willows, red-osier dogwood (*Cornus stolonifera*) and horsetails (*Equisetum* spp.). The world record white spruce was recorded in this area.

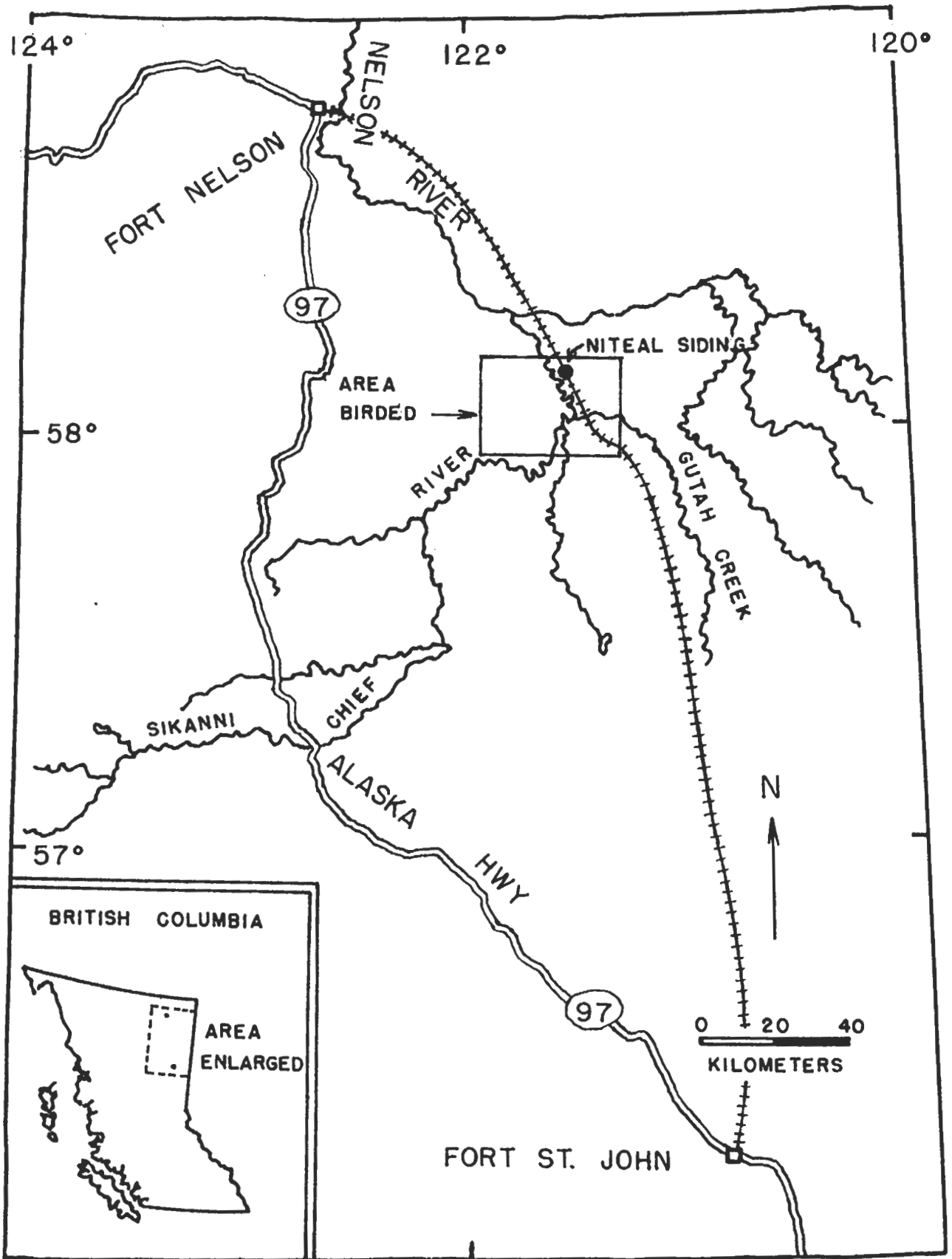


Figure 1: Northeastern British Columbia, showing the Sikanni Chief River study area in the vicinity of Gutah and Niteal creeks.

Wetlands are numerous, with black spruce and tamarack muskegs containing understory Labrador tea (*Ledum groenlandicum*), cloudberry (*Rubus chamaemorus*) and deep *Sphagnum* mosses.

Most of the ecoregion is unmodified by humans except for scattered impacts from the forest and oil extraction industries.

In the Sikanni Chief area, forest harvesting is practiced on the floodplain meanders of the river and its main tributaries as well as in better drained, elevated areas where white spruce grows. Clearcutting is the method of logging, but aspen, balsam, black spruce and poplar are left as residual trees after the spruce is removed. These generally blow down in subsequent years. Site preparation and planting with white spruce seedlings follows logging.

The ecoregion is traversed by hundreds of seismic lines that criss-cross the area from horizon to horizon oblivious to all landscape features. [A seismic line is a swath of cleared forest or other vegetation a few metres wide that allows seismic exploration for oil or gas.] The lines intersect each other to meet at anonymous junctions in the muskeg. There are no active oil or gas producing facilities in the immediate area.

Transportation impacts are limited primarily to the Fort St. John to Fort Nelson railbed of B.C. Rail. There are logging roads from the Niteal Siding railhead out to the cutblocks to the south-east, but these are functional only after freeze-up. In the summer, they are too soft for wheeled traffic.

The resident human population of the immediate area is zero, but the Niteal logging camp has a winter complement of loggers, and Kenai Camp (now removed) was used for silvicultural crews in May/June. The only other visible sign of human habitation on the landscape is a trappers' cabin on a bend of the Sikanni Chief River just north of the Sikanni-Gutah confluence.

This area is notorious for insects. While no particular problems are experienced on many days, early mornings and evenings can bring clouds of mosquitoes and "no-see-um" flies, as can overcast, humid days, particularly after rain. They were especially troublesome in 1997. Horseflies and deerflies are also present. Repellent and "bug hats" are sometimes necessary for even a modicum of sanity.

The Taiga Plains Ecoregion is the centre of abundance in B.C. of breeding Lesser Yellowlegs¹ and Solitary Sandpipers. It is the only area in B.C. in which Bay-breasted Warblers are known to breed. Other notable bird species include Cape May, Black-and-white and Canada warblers, Rose-breasted Grosbeaks and Le Conte's Sparrows.

Flights over this region reveal the extensive and dynamic impact of Beavers (*Castor canadensis*). Their dams and ponds are abundant, with widespread modification. Moose (*Alces alces*) are abundant, with Black Bear (*Ursus americanus*), Gray Wolf (*Canis lupus*) and Canada Lynx (*Lynx canadensis*) the common carnivores. Black Bears are abundant and more aggressive towards humans than coastal bears. A treeplanter was killed in the general area in the 1980s. We had an extremely dangerous confrontation with one in 1992 and a dog accompanying a treeplanter was mauled in 1994. Carrying bear spray is a recommended procedure for dealing with emergency situations. Wolves in this area also have a reputation among the loggers for aggressiveness, but a huge, lone white wolf passed within a few metres of me on the floodplain of the Sikanni Chief River in June 1992 without incident.

PREVIOUS ORNITHOLOGICAL WORK

Although general breeding ranges for north-eastern British Columbia are mapped in Godfrey (1986), these are based largely on "distributional probability" as so few records are available for the area. Extensive portions of this remote area of the province remain unexplored ornithologically.

Erskine and Davidson's 1976 paper summarizes knowledge of birds in the Fort Nelson lowlands, based on observations of birds in the Fort Nelson area and along the Alaska Highway corridor. Fort Nelson is approximately 110 km. northwest of the confluence of the Sikanni Chief River and Gutah Creek. The Alaska Highway corridor is 75 km. due west. Previous observations along the British Columbia portion of the Alaska Highway were published by Rand (1944) for the whole corridor and Griffiths (1973) for Summit Lake Pass. In June/July 1982 Campbell and McNall visited Kotcho Lake, the largest water body in north-eastern B.C., 120 km. due north of the study area for about one month (Campbell and McNall 1982). Publication of recent work by consultants and government researchers will expand our knowledge of the avifauna of the area. Phinney's (1998) publication of bird observations in the Dawson Creek area, south of the area covered in the present paper, provides a recent example.

The only previous ornithological penetration of the actual Sikanni Chief River known to me was by M. Y. Williams in 1922. He travelled overland from Fort St. John to the Sikanni Chief River and thence by canoe to Fort Nelson.

He left Fort St. John on 16 May, reaching the Sikanni Chief River on 31 May (Williams 1933a,b), the same time of year as reported in the present study.

¹ Scientific names for bird species are given in the annotated

