



Bulbous Beauties

The Bufflehead duck's odd name was derived from "buffalo head" because the male's bulbous head seems out of proportion to its small body. At first glance, the male is a striking black and white, but when he turns his head just right, the neck plumage shows a dazzling mix of metallic-looking purple, violet and green. Nicknamed the Spirit Duck, this graceful swimmer often glides across the water with little apparent body motion, barely causing a ripple, then disappears below the surface in the blink of an eye. The Bufflehead is North America's smallest diving duck and, according to the Canadian Wildlife Service, one of the scarcest. Fortunately, in parts of Saskatchewan's woodlands, it is fairly common.

Our farm in the aspen parkland of the Thickwood Hills is blessed with exceptional waterfowl habitat. Of all the birdlife that thrives here, it's the diminutive Bufflehead that has a special place for us. For seven consecutive years, a Bufflehead hen nested

in a tree cavity just a few metres from our back door. While we can't say with certainty that it was always the same duck, her changing behavior over the years suggests that it was.

To begin with, the mother duck seemed skittish. When she sat in the tree with her head out of the nest hole, the first sign of us would send her popping back inside or flying away. In early evening, she often returned to the nest just when we were outside enjoying a barbecue. If she saw us, she would do a quick fly-by, often accompanied by the male: our cue to move. At first we would have to be almost out of sight before she would fly into the nest. Later, she was comfortable if we were only a short distance away. Later still, it didn't seem to matter. We could be sitting close by and suddenly there would be a brief swoop as this fast and graceful flyer made the most inelegant plop onto the edge of the nest then wiggled in as if she were an oversized cork being stuffed into a bottle.



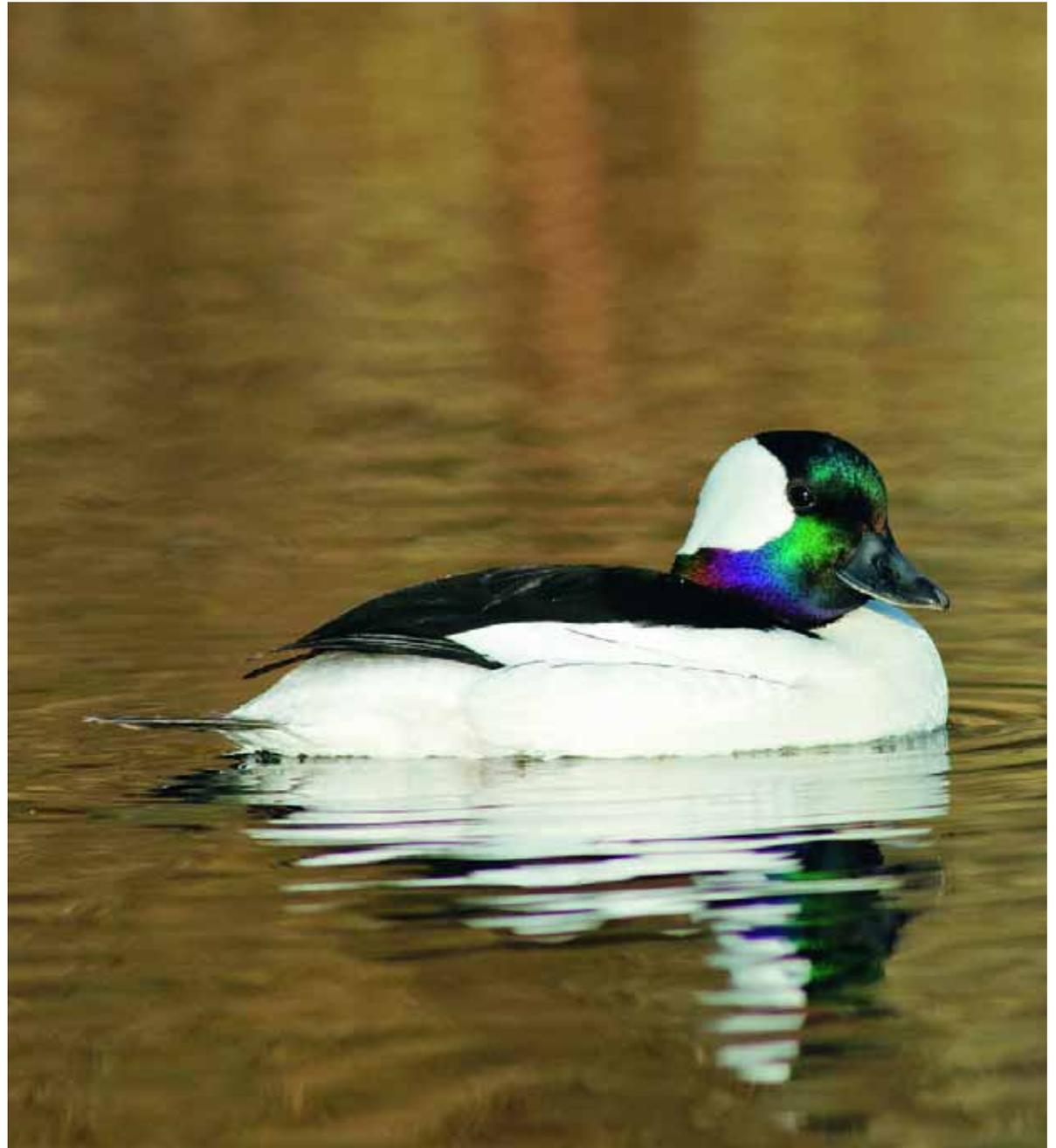
Also in later years, when she rested at the entrance to the tree hole, she didn't seem at all bothered as we went about our business.

A few times we were fortunate to be around, usually the second week of June, when the ducklings hatched and popped out of the nest, bouncing on the grass like tiny fuzzy tennis balls. The mother would lead them to the nearest water, about 200 metres away. Sometimes she headed out before all the ducklings had left the nest. When this happened, we did our best to "herd" the late-comers in the right direction, staying close by across an open stretch while hungry ravens flew overhead. One little peeper was determined to go in the opposite direction, no matter what. Finally, we picked it up and carried it to the water's edge, where the mother immediately accepted it.

All good things eventually come to an end. The poor tree died, then the top two-thirds broke off in a wind storm. But the remaining three metres or so continued to be prime real estate. Besides the hole claimed by the Bufflehead, another hole was home to Tree Swallows almost every year, and a third was often used by a Hairy Woodpecker for winter shelter. We kept propping up this bird condominium as long as possible, but it eventually disintegrated. In the meantime, we put up nesting boxes closer to the water to help keep the bulbous beauties around.

OPPOSITE TOP: *Female Bufflehead in nest entrance.*
OPPOSITE BOTTOM: *Female Bufflehead and ducklings.*

RIGHT: *Male Bufflehead in breeding plumage.*

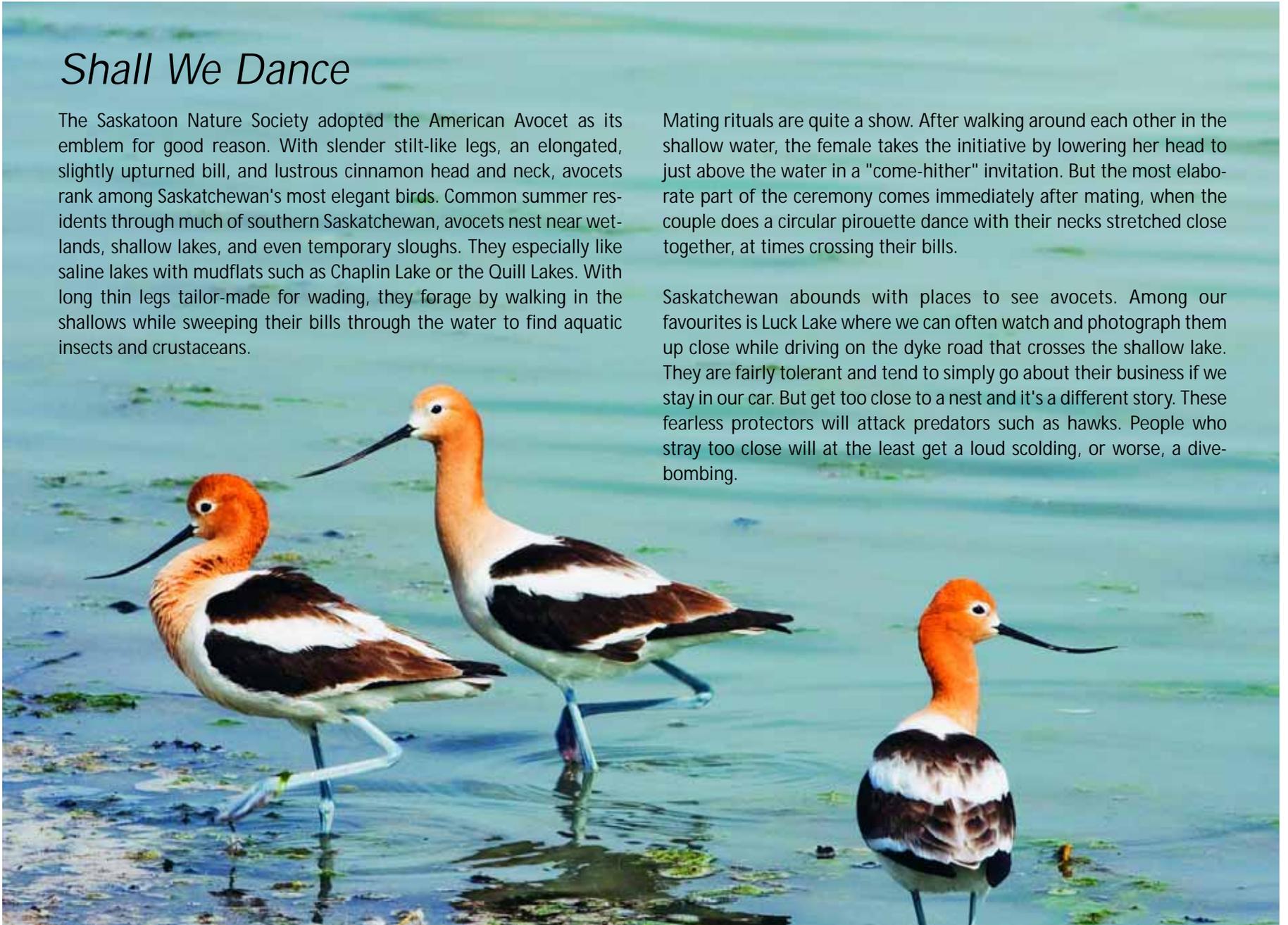


Shall We Dance

The Saskatoon Nature Society adopted the American Avocet as its emblem for good reason. With slender stilt-like legs, an elongated, slightly upturned bill, and lustrous cinnamon head and neck, avocets rank among Saskatchewan's most elegant birds. Common summer residents through much of southern Saskatchewan, avocets nest near wetlands, shallow lakes, and even temporary sloughs. They especially like saline lakes with mudflats such as Chaplin Lake or the Quill Lakes. With long thin legs tailor-made for wading, they forage by walking in the shallows while sweeping their bills through the water to find aquatic insects and crustaceans.

Mating rituals are quite a show. After walking around each other in the shallow water, the female takes the initiative by lowering her head to just above the water in a "come-hither" invitation. But the most elaborate part of the ceremony comes immediately after mating, when the couple does a circular pirouette dance with their necks stretched close together, at times crossing their bills.

Saskatchewan abounds with places to see avocets. Among our favourites is Luck Lake where we can often watch and photograph them up close while driving on the dyke road that crosses the shallow lake. They are fairly tolerant and tend to simply go about their business if we stay in our car. But get too close to a nest and it's a different story. These fearless protectors will attack predators such as hawks. People who stray too close will at the least get a loud scolding, or worse, a dive-bombing.





OPPOSITE: *American Avocets.*
TOP LEFT: *American Avocet giving a scolding.*
BOTTOM LEFT: *Well-camouflaged avocet eggs in nest.*
TOP AND BOTTOM RIGHT: *Mating dance.*

Hummers



Female Ruby-throated Hummingbird.

Male Ruby-throated Hummingbird.

Our smallest bird also ranks as one of the most beautiful. The Ruby-throated Hummingbird is named for the male's dark red, metallic-looking throat patch. Not much bigger than a large insect, this tiny bird migrates all the way from its wintering grounds in Mexico and Central America, and is capable of flying non-stop over the 800 kilometre expanse of the Gulf of Mexico. It is the only hummingbird that nests in Saskatchewan. We find it primarily in the southern forest, the parklands, and Cypress Hills, with fewer numbers in open prairie.

Hummingbirds always seems hyperactive; they constantly dart about, abruptly change direction, hover for a second or two, then shoot off like

bullets. They have devised a series of manoeuvres as mating rituals or as intimidation to discourage rivals. The ones that nest near our farm yard seem especially partial to the "flying U", where they fly swiftly in a wide U-shape, the sound made by their wings rapidly changing pitch with the ups and downs—a performance that we usually hear before we see it. Hummingbirds can become reasonably comfortable around people; we could be two metres or less from our feeders, and they will still zoom in to feed. If one of us goes outside wearing a red hat, it's usually not long before we hear a "vroom, vroom" only inches away as an inquisitive hummer bolts in to investigate this odd-looking "flower".

Splendour in the Grass

The ultimate in resplendence, the male Ring-necked Pheasant is embellished with an iridescent blue-green head and neck, fire-engine red face, turkey-like wattles, formal-looking white collar, feathers with a complexity of chestnuts and coppers, and ending with a long elegant tail. Originally from Asia, pheasants aren't native here, but since they were introduced over a century ago, they have adapted well to many parts of central North America. In Saskatchewan, we see them most often in southernmost areas of the province. We came across this dapper male crossing a road just outside Estevan.

Male Ring-necked Pheasant.

Black-tailed Prairie Dog

Saskatchewan is the only place in Canada that is home to black-tailed prairie dogs, and the only place in Saskatchewan to see them is along the Frenchman River valley in and around Grasslands National Park. Here they occupy the northern tip of their range that stretches south along the Great Plains to northern Mexico.

Driving along the valley road through Grasslands National Park, it's easy to assume that these prairie dogs are thriving, judging by the seemingly countless burrows as far as we can see. These social animals live and work together in colonies to raise their young, and protect the colony using several different warning screams. They are easy and entertaining to watch since many burrows line the road, and the dogs normally tolerate people who stay in their cars. Constantly scurrying about, they pop in and out of the burrows, make a variety of chattering and chuckling sounds, or let out a sharp warning scream if they sense danger. Watch for the unusual "jump-yip" display where a prairie dog jumps into the air while making dog-like yipping sounds, thought to be an "all-clear" signal to the colony.

In some ways, prairie dogs resemble ubiquitous Richardson's ground squirrels, better known as gophers, found throughout southern Saskatchewan. However, they are considerably bigger than gophers and have distinctive black-tipped tails.



RIGHT: *Black-tailed prairie dog keeping a lookout.*

OPPOSITE TOP LEFT: *Family greeting at a prairie dog burrow.*

OPPOSITE TOP RIGHT: *Prairie dog getting ready for a "jump-yip".*

OPPOSITE BOTTOM: *Prairie dog picking up lunch.*



Carpets of Colour



Saskatchewan's diverse ecosystems make for a wildflower extravaganza, with different regions of the province having their own specialties. If we had to pick one part of Saskatchewan for wildflowers, it would be the Cypress Hills. Not only do we find grassland and forest species, but also plants more common in alpine altitudes. We can return throughout the summer and be rewarded with different displays. Late May and early June are prime times for orchids, whose number and diversity cannot be matched anywhere on the prairies, while mid-summer's splendid array of grassland flowers blankets the hillsides.

Any place with native prairie is prime flower habitat, such as Grasslands National Park, the parks and natural areas around Lake Diefenbaker, and pastures almost anywhere. Traditionally dry areas of the southwest such as near the South Saskatchewan River and Red Deer River forks can also be rewarding.

When conditions are right, a carpet of magenta covers the ground with low pincushion cactus blossoms, and at other times it's a vivid yellow with prickly pear cactus.

Another of our favourites is Duck Mountain Provincial Park, where mixed woods combine with a southern boreal forest. Early summer in this upland environment brings flashy displays of yellowy-orange hoary pucoons, blue lungwort, and showy marsh marigolds along creek beds.

The north also has its share of specialties, such as pinkish-red stemless lady's-slippers, expanses of yellow sand heather on sandy areas, or hardy plants that manage to survive in impossibly small cracks in rocks in the Canadian shield.



OPPOSITE: Summer tapestry of wildflowers in the Cypress Hills highlighted by bright yellow gaillardia in the foreground.

ABOVE: Prairie rose.

RIGHT: Prairie coneflower.

