

The Shoal Lakes IBA vital to preserving species

By Patricia Barrett

Manitoba's Important Bird Areas (IBA) play a critical role in species preservation, providing breeding habitat and staging grounds (feeding and resting) for migratory birds.

The three Shoal Lakes, which lie between Highways 6 and 17 and which are connected to Lake Manitoba by underground reservoirs, are one of the province's 38 IBAs.

"The birds choose the IBA," said Donna Martin, who has been the caretaker of the Shoals IBA for about two years. "If we alter habitats that are necessary to maintain these large concentrations of birds, we can lose them."

IBA caretakers monitor the welfare of birds, record population numbers, take note of changes in their habitat and report their findings, which are used by scientists.

"IBAs are created based on strict criteria, such as huge concentrations of birds in migration," said Martin, who moved to Gimli from Prince Edward Island four years ago.

The Shoals are "globally significant" for their high concentrations of birds, among them the American white pelican. In the 1980s, 2.3 per cent of the global population of those birds were found nesting around the three lakes, according to IBA Canada.

An avid bird lover whose father taught her to appreciate nature, Martin volunteered with Nature Manitoba to become the Shoals' caretaker.

"[Birds] return to the same spot every year to breed," said Martin, who was involved in birding activities for several years on P.E.I.

Some birds also "hopscotch along" to breeding sites farther north, stopping long enough to fatten up.

Martin's caretaking duties entail periodic day-long trips to and around the three lakes, which cover an area of about 211 square kilometres.

You really have to love birds to travel around the Shoals because many of the roads — particularly around North Shoal Lake — beggar belief.

The road to West Shoal Lake from Inwood, however, was a doddle up to a marsh fringing the lake.

At the sound of our approaching motor, between 350 and 400 pelicans (Martin can estimate flock numbers in mere seconds) took to the wing. The clunky-looking birds, with the witch-like wart they develop on their massive orange beaks during breeding, have made the Shoals home for decades.

A jaunt up to North Shoal Lake is when things took an unpleasant turn.

As you travel past abandoned farm houses perched on the lip of marshes created after the 2011 flood on Lake Manitoba, the unpaved roads to another major bird site are littered with frost boils.

Martin said the roads weren't bad last year, but this year, many stretches are "horrific."

A road named Ideal (12 W), for instance, is grossly misnamed. Massive volcanic-looking eruptions cover extensive stretches of road, and some of the potholes are the size of septic tanks.

Narrow causeways built up between North Shoal and permanently flooded farmland are the only "good" stretches of gravel. But travel along them can endanger some bird species that like to nest close to or on their margins, such as killdeer and piping plover.

Killdeer make little hollows in gravel roads and



Willetts, a common shorebird found throughout Manitoba, were feeding on the shore of West Shoal Lake.



TRIBUNE PHOTOS BY PATRICIA BARRETT
American white pelicans make the Shoal Lakes IBA home. Between 350 and 400 were spotted a few weeks ago in a marsh bordering West Shoal Lake.

lay eggs, said Martin. Vehicles or ATVs can unwittingly destroy their nests.

Martin has seen them suddenly pop up from the road and perform the "broken-wing" ruse to lure potential predators away from their eggs.

A young snowy owl was lying on the side of one causeway. Martin jumped out of the car to examine the bird, hoping it may have been injured rather than passed on.

Piping plovers have not been sighted in the province for a few years. Flooded habitat around the Shoals may have contributed to their disappearance.

"When you raise water levels, it alters available nesting sites for birds," said Martin.

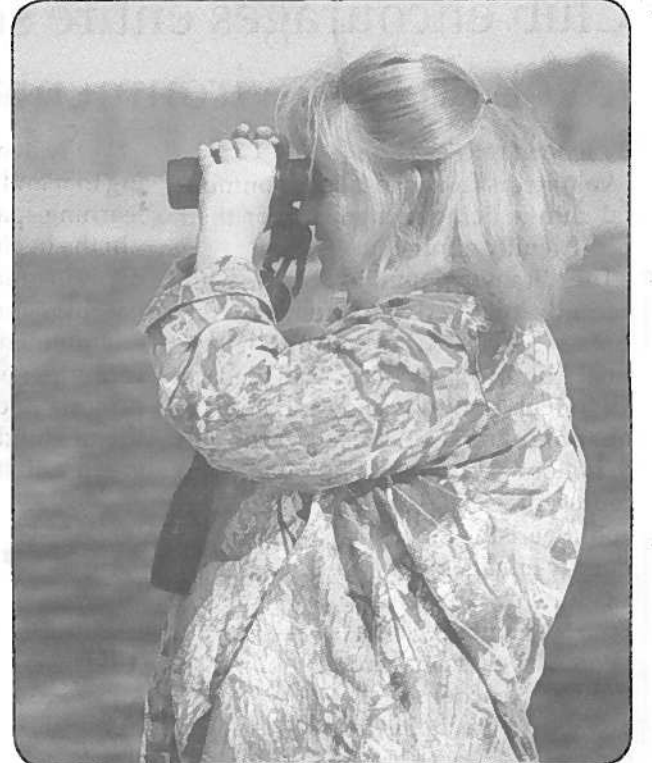
In addition to American white pelicans, great blue herons, double-crested cormorants, northern shovelers, bald eagles, greater yellowlegs, gadwells, red-necked and pied-billed grebes and green- and blue-winged teals were among some of the species Martin identified during the five-hour drive.

Property owners whose land has been "chosen" by large numbers of bird species have an important role to play as far as helping environmental groups such as Nature Manitoba monitor populations.

"We're trying to do more outreach with landowners," said Tim Poole, IBA co-ordinator of the not-for-profit organization that was founded in 1920. "We'll talk to them and get permission to go on their land and monitor the birds."

Poole said the organization's ultimate goal is to work with them to find a balance between their "vision" for their land and species stewardship.

"We want to build up a picture of what's happen-



Gimli resident Donna Martin counts bird species and numbers around North Shoal Lake. The bird advocate is the caretaker of the Shoal Lakes IBA.

ing to the birds over time," said Poole. "Are they fluctuating? Are they going down? What's happening to their habitats?"

The population of American white pelicans, for instance, may have decreased in the Shoals because of fluctuating water levels. Nature Manitoba started recording their numbers a few years ago to compare with baseline counts completed in the '80s. Their nesting colonies "may be vulnerable to site-specific disturbances such as pesticides," according to IBA Canada.

Not everyone is enthusiastic about protecting birds or letting bird advocates traipse across their property to conduct counts, said Poole.

"That's their prerogative."

But as far as access to the Shoal Lakes IBA, there aren't many impediments as the birds can be monitored from public roads.

Poole said the 2011 flood was both good and bad for certain bird species in the Shoals.

"The water level was so high, it wiped out the breeding habitats of some birds," he said. "The piping plover, a Manitoba species at risk, has not been seen for a few years."

Martin echoed that sentiment.

"When you lose good environments," she said, "you'll lose the birds."

This time of year, though, is still too early for many species that nest in or pass through the Shoals.

"A week makes a huge difference to bird arrivals," said Martin.

Other than this year's road conditions, Martin loves volunteering as "watchdog" and educating others about the importance of birds.

"If you can make people love an area and get them to stand up and fight for it," she said, "it's worth it."

For more information on the Shoal Lakes IBA, visit www.ibacanada.ca. Not all of Manitoba's 38 IBAs have caretakers. To volunteer as caretaker, contact Nature Manitoba at 204-943-9029.