



Ruffed grouse



Baltimore oriole



Coyote pups



# *Take a Springtime* WILDLIFE PHOTO SAFARI

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*It's time to grab the camera and hit the road. Spring is the most exciting season for wildlife viewing and photography. In Saskatchewan it's the dazzling bird extravaganza that takes centre stage as our feathered friends flaunt their finest spring regalia and are ready to party. Love is in the air with guys impressing the gals by showing off and engaging in imaginative, and sometimes bizarre, mating rituals.*





Redhead ducks

Spring mating season happens everywhere, so what makes Saskatchewan so special? The province has long been known as “North America’s Duck Factory.” One in four of the continent’s ducklings is raised here. With the North America duck population numbering a bit over 40 million in recent years, that’s a lot of quacking. For many species such as mallards, canvasbacks, and redheads, Saskatchewan usually has more ducks than any other province or state, thanks to the proliferation of ponds, potholes, and wetlands that ducks like and need.

We almost take pelicans for granted, probably because we have close to half of Canada’s population. We also have the world’s largest inland concentration of bald eagles, the world’s largest concentration of white-winged scoters, a quarter of the world’s endangered piping plovers, nearly half of the world’s migrating sanderlings, and half of Canada’s designated sites in the Western Hemisphere Shorebird Reserve Network. Southern Saskatchewan is among the last Canadian strongholds of some increasingly rare and endangered grassland birds, the most famous being the burrowing owl.

Burrowing owl



Bald eagle

Eastern kingbird





Swainson's hawk

But it's not all about the most or the rarest. Everyday encounters are just as rewarding—a meadowlark announces the arrival of spring, woodpeckers carve a tree nest, marsh birds flit about the reeds, hawks soar above. The best part of all? Those of us lucky to live in Saskatchewan never have far to go. Wildlife-rich locales abound such as Ducks Unlimited projects, national and provincial parks, heritage marshes, and national wildlife areas. But in spring it's often a simple matter of going for a drive and stopping at some of the countless wetlands next to the road.



Meadowlark



Black-necked stilt



Horned grebe

Wetlands attract a wide array of birds in addition to ducks. Grebes are among our favourites to photograph, such as red-necked grebes with their long elegant necks, or eared grebes and horned grebes with piercing red eyes. They tend to be more relaxed than ducks, allowing you to come closer for photography. Adjacent uplands and bushes are also hubs of spring activity with songbirds, hawks, owls and larger wildlife.

## Sanderlings



Saskatchewan is a hotspot for migrating shorebirds, especially in spring. The Western Hemisphere Shorebird Reserve Network, dealing with important shorebird habitat throughout the Americas, has identified three places in Saskatchewan: Last Mountain Lake, the Quill Lakes, and Chaplin Lake. The latter is so important that it is designated as having "hemispheric significance."

Migrating shorebirds make epic journeys from wintering grounds as far south as South America to as far north as

the High Arctic, where many nest. Between late April and early June, over 100,000 descend on Chaplin Lake to rest and refuel. The more than 30 migrating species include ruddy turnstones, red-necked phalaropes, red knots, black-bellied plovers, dowitchers, and various sandpipers. The highlight is the huge flocks of sanderlings, their mesmerizing blur of wings like an aerial ballet as they dart around in unison, abruptly changing direction with choreographed precision. Estimates are that close to half of the world's sanderlings migrate through Chaplin Lake.

## American avocets



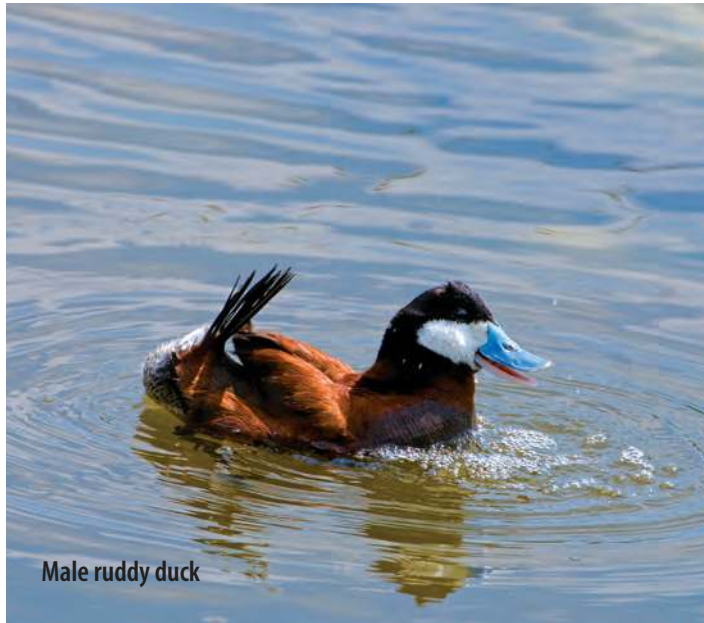
While portrait photos of birds are fine, it's more fun to capture some of the spring mating rituals. Among our favourites is the American avocet tango. The male and female pair cross their bills, one puts a wing over the other, and they do a quick pirouette dance. If you see an amorous couple, get ready because this happens in a flash.



A more difficult ritual to capture is the fast and furious “running on water” display of buffleheads, our smallest diving duck. Watch for the light to catch the iridescent violet and green on the male’s neck. Couples or competing males tend to half-run and half-fly across the surface of the water, making a loud fuss and the biggest possible splashes.



Buffleheads



Male ruddy duck

Fortunately, some behaviour is easier to photograph, such as the odd performance of the male ruddy duck, who uses bubbles as part of his act. He inflates an air sac in his thick neck, then pumps his brilliant sky-blue bill up and down, whacking the underside of the bill against the inflated neck. This produces a drumming sound as well as an impressive array of bubbles. He finishes by opening his bill and belching. What female wouldn’t be impressed?



Sharp-tailed grouse, Saskatchewan’s official bird emblem, resemble a bunch of out-of-control wind-up toys as males puff up their feathers, point their heads down and tails skyward, and propel themselves around with rapid-fire foot stomping. Their leks (an area birds gather during breeding season) or dancing grounds are usually on open native prairie such as in Grasslands National Park. The Saskatoon Nature Society usually runs a spring field trip to see the phenomenon close to the city. While these trips are for members, joining is easy and a bargain.



Sharp-tailed grouse



Pheasant



Fawn



Purple finch



American bittern

An effective way to photograph is to find wetlands or other suitable habitat close to the road and stay in your vehicle. If you get out of your car, chances are that you will spook the birds and they'll fly off. But if you stay inside, many birds and other wildlife may continue going about their business and not be concerned.

It's not practical to use a tripod when shooting from a vehicle. A beanbag is much more useful to keep a camera and long telephoto lens steady. These are simply bags filled with beans or other material; we find that dried field peas work great. A rolled-up jacket will do the trick as well.

Ideally, look for backroads with little traffic, or head to natural areas such as Last Mountain Lake National Wildlife Area which, by the way, is North America's oldest bird sanctuary. The 14 km driving tour route goes beside the lake and wetlands, native prairie, and across dykes. Since the narrow road passes close to so much water, it's a prime spot for photographing waterfowl and other birds. This is our top go-to spot for photographing pelicans, which often feed or congregate at the outlets of water control structures on the dykes.

The most exciting part is that surprises are around every corner. At this time of year, it's almost impossible to be disappointed.

