

157
CWS-11-49


49-11

Colls, D.G.

Deterioration of wildlife habitat
Churchill, Manitoba. [Winnipeg, Canadian
Wildlife Service, 1949].

71.

1. Wildlife - Habitat - Manitoba. | Title.



M-755
DETERIORATION OF WILDLIFE HABITAT - CHURCHILL, MAN.

By *D. G. Leal*

In a memorandum from Head Office dated November 22, 1948, I received the following advice: "From the Department of Conservation and Use of Natural Resources, American Museum of Natural History, New York, we have received a protest against deterioration of wildlife habitat in the immediate vicinity of Churchill, Manitoba, as a result of wood-cutting and other human activities!" It was suggested that I keep this matter in mind and obtain pertinent data whenever I was visiting the Churchill area.

On August 22, 1949, I left Winnipeg by C.N. Railway, arriving in Churchill on the afternoon of the 24th. Enroute I was lucky to find a most congenial companion in the person of a Major S. MacDonald, O.C. Training Wing, Canadian Army, Churchill. From him I was able to learn in advance much of the general topography, the industries of Churchill, and some of the Army activities in relation to wildlife. I am also much indebted to Lt/Col. J. Tedlie, D.S.O., Camp Commandant, Churchill, for his extremely helpful cooperation in allowing me to roam the camp area, in providing for two days a guide and some transportation, and for offering me sleeping quarters at the camp for the first three days of my visit.

My first afternoon at Churchill consisted of getting settled and having a long talk with Col. Tedlie and several N.C.O.'s, all of whom are intimately familiar with the area. The remainder of my stay was spent in walking 15 - 20 miles a day over the country in the immediate vicinity of Churchill, plus two short boat trips up the Churchill River. The weather was not in the slightest cooperative throughout my visit. As the train pulled into Churchill the skies darkened, the winds increased in velocity, the sea and river became too rough for safe passage in an 18 foot canoe, and a cold, driving rain started to fall. These conditions stayed precisely the same up to the day I left. I am told that that sort of weather is not at all

unusual for Churchill at this time of the year.

Factors contributing to the deterioration of wildlife habitat.

1. Wood-cutting:- The mention of wood-cutting brings a smile to the faces of residents of the townsite of Churchill. When one visits the area it is easy to understand why. The trees, dominantly Spruce, are for the most part no taller than an ordinary man. The trunks are usually the size of a man's wrist, or smaller. Dwarf birch and scrubby willow are scattered here and there. The wood is not at all suitable for heating or cooking. The only wood burned in Churchill is the old wooden cribbing used to hold grain in box-cars arriving at the elevator, or the remains of packing crates. This is used only as a kindling with which to start their fires. Coal is used extensively to heat the homes and to cook over. Some oil heaters are seen in the newer homes and in the two small hotels.

About 8 miles south of Churchill one sees trees with a much larger diameter. The only persons who use this wood supply are trappers living in the wilderness area on either side of the railway line. There are very few such trappers, there being for example only three within sight of the railway for 70 miles south of Churchill. There are Section Houses every 12 - 15 miles along the railway which burn little but coal supplied by the railway.

The R.C.M.P. and the staff of the Army Camp at Churchill discount entirely the idea that woodcutting is destroying any appreciable amount of wildlife habitat. I am in agreement with their views.

2. Fire:- Because most of the country is muskeg and quite damp, fire in the bush is practically unknown. All persons interviewed could not remember ever seeing a bush fire near Churchill.

South along the railway line small patches of burned bush could be seen, apparently for the purpose of clearing obstructions away from the very low-slung telegraph line. These small burns are insignificant as the proximity of the railway line would be more than sufficient to disturb a strip of habitat along its length.

Tundra fires, on the other hand, are remembered by a few. These fires burning in the dried mosses and small shrubs no doubt would destroy large areas where caribou might otherwise feed. There has not been such a fire in the immediate vicinity of Churchill, but I believe that further south along the railway it has happened.

It would appear that fire can be disregarded as a cause of the deterioration of wildlife habitat in the immediate vicinity of Churchill.

3. Construction:- The town of Churchill does not at present show signs of an expansion program. It is scattered hither and yon over a fairly large area which could stand considerable development without affecting new terrain. There are several large ponds in the townsite, artificially created, which have been, and still are, good places to observe many species of birds. According to local authorities the numbers and species to be seen here have been going downhill, due naturally to the increase in traffic over the areas. It is not unusual for a spot in the center of a small but busy town to lose its appeal to large numbers of birds.

The Army Camp at Churchill is at present undergoing a large construction program. I understand that the camp area covers about 10 square miles, over which there will be little, if any, of the original natural habitat remaining. Large areas of solid rock are being blasted away as footings for buildings, other areas of muskeg are being filled in with gravelling and concrete. Gravel roads

have been built to open up most of the area within the campsite. Southeast about 4 miles from the center of the camp area is the Radio Range Station. Alongside the road to the station is a large area set aside for the disposal of garbage accumulated by the camp. At this garbage dump I saw large flocks of gulls and I was told that many had nested there this summer. This is all within the 10⁵⁰ miles previously mentioned.

There is no doubt that the construction program at the Army Camp has seriously affected wildlife habitat within the camp boundaries. For example, Col. Tedlie took me to a rock ridge paralleling the sea coast where gaping holes had been blasted, and buildings were starting to take shape. This area, he told me, used to be a nesting site for a good many Hudsonian Godwits. He told me also that a visiting American ornithologist had literally "torn his hair" when he had seen the spot. The fact that a few of the nesting sites of birds often go "by the boards" seems inevitable in the face of modern civilization. The loss of this site is regretted, but as was pointed out by many persons in Churchill, the ornithologist could find other areas if he would only travel a little further away from town.

4. Other Activities:- Army training exercises might possibly destroy a very small amount of wildlife habitat. The numbers of service personnel taking part in these exercises is not great. Their campsites and trails are therefore not too extensive. I was assured by the staff that little in the way of terrain was ever affected by these exercises.

The use of firearms, indeed explosives in any form, is strictly controlled. I was told by some of the staff that they warned their exercise personnel that the killing of any wildlife

would net those responsible at least 7 days C.B., except of course in cases of near starvation.

The only other activities in which humans are engaged in the Churchill area are the Whaling Station, The Grain Elevator, the National Harbour Board, and the railway. The most recent of these, the Whaling Station, consists only of a small wooden building about $\frac{1}{2}$ a mile southwest of the town, on the edge of the Churchill River. It is so small that it could not be said to have destroyed any available habitat. The Grain Elevator, the Harbour Board, and the railway enter the picture, as far as I am concerned, only because they employ men who, from thaw to freeze-up, might add to the shooting population of Churchill. The buildings themselves do not show signs of expansion at present, and even if they should start to build additions they would not influence any more wildlife habitat. There are great open spaces around the whole townsite which are now unsuitable for wildlife so that future construction would not change a thing.

Summary and Conclusions.

It can be stated that within a radius of about 1 mile from the townsite of Churchill, human activities have made the habitat unsuitable for wildlife. It can also be stated that within the Army Camp, an area of about 10 square miles, wildlife habitat has been unavoidably destroyed. Natural conditions exist in abundance a few short miles outside of the center of human activity. I was informed that many of the persons who have visited Churchill to study the avifauna during the last few years did not go further afield than the Army Camp, the old Fort Prince of Wales, Eskimo Point, or Cape Merry. One party recently took a motor-car to Churchill, from which I am told they made most of their observations. Observers will now find it necessary to go further afield.

The Shooting of Migratory Birds in the Churchill Area.

During my discussions with the R.C.M. Police at Churchill I was interested to learn something of the number of shooters, etc., in the area.

The total population of Churchill at the time of my visit was estimated by the R.C.M.P. to be around 2600. This number was broken down as follows:-

Construction workers.....	1500
Service personnel.....	700
Townsite (Indian and White).....	400

It is expected that construction will be suspended at the onset of winter. Few of these workers are interested in hunting, and the few who are are very short on shotguns. Of the Service personnel approximately $\frac{1}{2}$ are American soldiers. The Manitoba Game Branch allows them the resident licence fee after 6 months residence. Few are willing to spend the \$25.00 non-resident fee. All Canadian service personnel are considered by the Manitoba Game Branch as being resident and are therefore entitled to the resident fee. Many of the service personnel wish to hunt, but there is again a shortage of shotguns. I believe there are only 12 among the approximately 350 American soldiers. I do not know how many are owned by Canadian soldiers. The R.C.M.P. question each man as to what will be done with any birds obtained. If the soldier is married, and lives in the married quarters, he usually gets his licence to help out with his food bill. If he is single and lives in barracks, his application is not seriously considered.

Many of the townspeople are Indians. They are allowed to shoot, in season and under licence. Only under conditions of near starvation are they allowed to shoot out of season. Distress rations issued to Indians by the R.C.M.P. include such

Colls, D.G.

Deterioration of
wildlife habitat

Churchill, Manitoba.

DATE

ISSUED TO

CWS 49-11

1

Colls, D.G.
Deterioration of wildlife habitat at
Churchill, Manitoba.

LIBRARY
ENVIRONMENT CANADA
PRAIRIE & NORTHERN REGION
EDMONTON, ALBERTA, CANADA