

THE NEWSLETTER

OF THE TORONTO FIELD NATURALISTS' CLUB
Number 5

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Of all the people who go down to Sunnyside during the winter to feed the ducks how many ever stop to ask themselves whether these birds are wild or tame? Toronto bird observers may be divided into two groups: those who record these ducks in their observations as regular wild birds, and those who refuse to enter them on their lists since they regard them as tame, or as living under unnatural conditions. The original stock from which these ducks have sprung was raised and loosed several years ago by the Toronto zoo. They were encouraged to stay in this area, and to breed, by protection and feeding. They all nested originally in High Park but the number has so increased that they have spread out to occupy nearly all the marshes in the Toronto region. The wintering flock, made up almost entirely of blacks and mallards--and it is with these two species that we are here concerned--now numbers about three hundred. Although Toronto is well within the breeding area of these species they were not known to breed here--in the records now existent--before this stock was loosed. They are not therefore introduced species like the starling and house sparrow, but rather native birds liberated within an area natural to their kind. That these birds have chosen to stay is understandable, just as other species, of whose wildness there is no question, have stayed and prospered when protective sanctuary and food have been offered them. These birds are free to go wherever they choose, and that they can take care of themselves is in no doubt as they have settled in marshes distant from High Park and any artificial conditions. They have, however, cross-bred on a large scale so that specific types have been blurred and the distinction between black and mallard has become impossible to determine in many cases. Crossbreeding between these two species is by no means unknown, but it has here reached a very intense stage. Some of the products are rather ludicrous. The wintering of these ducks in this area is more astonishing than their breeding. Would they stay here without the great amount of food that is given them by the visitors at Sunnyside? Probably not, but then other birds swarm about feeding-stations too, and are eagerly watched as wild birds. Could they survive a winter in this area without such feeding? Again, probably not; but they would almost certainly migrate in that case. Nearly all of them have been banded, and a number bearing these bands have been shot in the southern states, proving that a proportion of them do migrate now. The ones that migrate and return can hardly be counted as tame birds, but they are difficult to tell from the others that remain. And are those that remain any less wild for staying? Perhaps you can decide.

Botanical observations which have been coming to the notice of the Newsletter reveal the effects of the very mild fall and early winter period. Many members have seen or collected pussy-willows in blossom. Swelling buds on many trees and shrubs have been common. Lilacs in leaf are reported by Mrs. E.M. McKendry. Sprouting skunk-cabbage was collected in November at Lambton Mills (J. Simon) and was seen at the marshes along the Humber below Bloor street until late December by others. Three kinds of ferns are to be found in the woods at Armour Heights at this time--the Christmas, wood, and marginal shield species (J.S.). These are evergreen in character so that this is not an unseasonable observation.

Dormant insect life is present everywhere at this time of year to the eyes of the initiated, and forms a good part of the food of a number of winter birds. An example of such dormant life may be seen in the shiny, symmetrical brown masses that occur usually on choke cherry bushes. These are in reality the egg-masses of the tent caterpillar. If taken into a warm room they will develop in about a fortnight into a crawling mass of caterpillars. The collection and hatching of cocoons is a winter hobby with some naturalists. A member of the club showed us a box of cocoons which had been given her as a Christmas present.

This issue will reach you just in time to remind you of the all-day convention of the Ontario Federation of Naturalists on January 28th at the Royal Ontario Museum. Meetings are designed to suit all interests, and you will certainly find some of them worth a visit.

On Sunday morning, January 29, at 9 o'clock, the Field Naturalists' Club is holding its second winter trip. The meeting-place is the railroad station at Sunnyside (foot of Roncesvalles Avenue). The leaders will be: R.D. Ussher and J.L. Baillie, Jr. Parties of twenty will be sent off as soon as they accumulate. The trip will include visits to Sunnyside Beach and to Ashbridge's Bay. Will those with extra room in their cars let the leaders know as soon as they arrive so that those arriving by street-car may be accommodated? Come early and be sure of transportation. Who will find a kittiwake at Sunnyside, or a saw-whet owl at Ashbridge's Bay?

The following new members have joined the club since our December issue:

Miss Mayme Mahr
Miss Grace Johnson
Miss Lillian J. Payne
Mr. H. B. Gardner
Mrs. H. B. Gardner
Mrs. E. McKendry
Mr. A. E. Moysey
Mrs. A. E. Moysey

Miss G. L. Millar
Miss Lillian G. Simons
Miss Catherine Woodworth
Mrs. A. E. Calvert
Miss Edna Boissonneau
Miss Dorothy Bond Hill
Miss Margery H. Young
Mr. W. Gordon Mills