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THE NEWSLETTER

OF THE TORONTO FIELD NATURALISTS' CLUB
Number 7 March 1939

In our last number we discussed the study of the pileated woodpecker which is being carried on by two of our members. Perhaps you would like to hear of another study being done by another local naturalist, Clifford Hope of the Royal Ontario Museum of Zoology. Mr Hope is well known for his able analysis of the great number--over one thousand--of short-eared-owl pellets which were collected at York Downs Golf Club grounds. In this analysis he showed that the owls were living almost exclusively on field mice and deer mice. But Mr Hope is also interested in the northern shrike which he has been studying for several years.

This shrike is a winter visitor which comes to us in greater numbers some winters than others. This variation is probably cyclical in character, varying with the prevalence of food, i.e. mice, shrews, etc. in the north. The length of the cycle has not been clearly worked out in the case of this bird as yet, though it is better known for others like the snowy owl and the goshawk. The shrike was relatively relatively common this last winter though rare the previous two winters. It closely resembles the migrant shrike, its relative, which nests here during the summer, and which is just now arriving with the first wave of spring birds. The winter bird is larger, and has fine markings on the breast. It is a trim bird in mature plumage--with its motif of grey, white and black. But many of our visitors are very brown, being first-year birds. A casual observer might easily mistake the shrike for a mockingbird but one glance at the bill will reveal the error, for the shrike has a heavy hooked bill. Further examination will show that its color pattern is different. Yet it resembles the mockingbird in voice as well as in dress, for he who has been privileged to hear the brilliant, rollicking spring song of the shrike will have to confess that the mocker can scarcely do better. Lonely and silent as a rule with us, the shrike, if at all vocal, is usually given to rattling croaks, wheezy, creaking sounds, and jubilant shouts of 'joiee, joiee' when in possession of prey--so that it comes as a startling revelation to the observer to suddenly hear this fine, rich, prolonged song from the butcher bird.

The northern shrike lives on mice and small birds mostly. It is bold, fierce, and courageous, taking birds as large as starlings and attacking even crows and hawks. What it catches and does not eat at once it hangs in the crotches of bushes not far above the ground--two to four feet on the average.

Sometimes it impales the prey on thorns, especially in hawthorn trees. This bird plays its part, a valuable part, in the balance of nature along with the gentler birds, and it has its own wild beauty like the peregrine falcon.

If you should find the prey of the shrike fixed in bushes while you are on a walk, collect it and send it to Mr Hope at the Museum, with full details of where it was found, i.e. height from ground, hung in crotch or impaled, kind of bush or tree, etc. If you observe shrikes in winter it should be reported as this helps the museum to check up on the cyclical theory. Do shrikes have a definite feeding territory in winter as other birds have in the breeding season? Any help in solving such questions will be appreciated.

One or other rare visitor from amongst the birds is always likely to be around the city. How many of these will be found depends in large part on how many observers are in the field at any one time. An increasing number of competent observers has been chiefly responsible for the greater number of rarities reported in recent years. Of course, most reports of 'rare birds' come from novices. It is a natural desire to want the thrill of seeing something rare, and with birds as with other things, it is emphatically true that a little knowledge is a dangerous possession. Caution and care are always advisable. As these qualities are cultivated the number of rarities reported by any individual will diminish but that observer will have the enhanced thrill of being sure of his observation when he does report such a find.

By and large the number of rarities seen by any one person who has acquired the essential familiarity with our common birds, which is the basic requirement, will vary with the amount of time he spends in the field, and the character and extent of the territory he covers. The more he is out, and the greater variety of habitats he visits, the more he will see. Persistence and intensity of observation will also count. It does not pay to pass a flock of redpolls casually--they may harbor a hoary redpoll, just as any flock of starlings about Toronto in winter may conceal a redwing, a cowbird, or a grackle. Constant study of even the commonest phenomena is requisite to the discovery of rare specimens. 'Nothing is too trivial to pass over' is a good watchword. Some observers pass by certain spots on their walks, or refuse to go certain places because they have convinced themselves that there is never anything there. Such spots may be poor but sooner or later something rare will show up in just such places and only the persistent observer who looks five times and sees nothing will find the rarity on the sixth time. Some observers appear to be lucky in this matter, but a proper consideration of their activities will, we believe, discount largely any so-called element of luck.

Anyone who discovers a rarity is well-advised to get as many people to see it as possible. It is part of the code of etiquette of bird watchers that they shall help each other. 'Hogging' and a 'dog-in-the-manger' attitude are as undesirable in this field as in any other. Moreover, a rarity that has been seen by a number of competent observers can be placed on

the permanent records with an assurance that cannot accompany observations by single persons no matter how able they may be. But if you are not sure of your observation, and can get no one to help you to check up on it, then keep it to yourself for your own sake.

The executive of the Field Naturalists' Club wishes to extend its cordial thanks to Mr Halliday for his generous co-operation in displaying his striking photographs at the last meeting of the club.

New members to be reported in this issue are:

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| Miss Augusta E. Knight | Mrs F. V. Winnett |
| Mrs J. H. Bunker | Mrs Graham Campbell |

Our secretary-treasurer, Mrs L. F. Jaquith wishes to make the annual financial statement of the club as follows. This statement has been duly examined and passed by Mr Rupert Davids.

The Statement of The Toronto Field Naturalists' Club
1938 - 1939

Receipts		Disbursements	
Balance brought forward		Stationery	\$ 8.79
from 1937-38	\$ 78.19	Newsletter	8.25
Membership fees	243.00	Printing	34.50
Bank Interest	1.14	Postage and mailing	51.80
Sale of Wild Flower books	<u>6.10</u>	Rent of theatre	51.00
	\$328.43	Rent of 198 College St	3.00
		Expenses of Dr Allen's	
		lecture	39.17
		Flowers	9.00
		Affiliation fees	16.40
		Film rental	2.00
		Book for Junior Club	3.00
		For Wild Flower books	<u>6.10</u>
			\$233.01
		Balance	<u>95.42</u>
			\$328.43

Out of the balance of \$95.42 will be paid the expenses of the April 3rd meeting, the payment for the Wild Flower booklets distributed to members and leaders of certain groups who have young people in their care, the payment for the card of Spring Outings, and other debts already contracted but not paid. The remaining balance will not be large.

There have been seven lectures given to date, with a total attendance of 1548.