

THE NEWSLETTER
 OF THE TORONTO FIELD NATURALISTS' CLUB
 Number 20 January 1941

Last winter at this time the city of Toronto was being visited by one of the largest flights of barred owls on record in this region. So far this season only four of these birds have been observed in the Toronto area and none within the city limits. (The present definition of the Toronto region is all the area within a circle having a radius of 25 miles and centring upon the City Hall.) The four observations of barred owls made this winter are as follows: one at Lambton, one at Sunnybrook Park, one at Woodbridge, and one at Maple. Last winter there were 32 seen in the city, as many as three in one day by one observer (J.L.B.). In the previous two winters (1937-8, 1938-9) they were also in the city though in fewer numbers.

It would appear that this owl has a definite cycle of abundance and scarcity as does its relative, the snowy owl, and certain other predatory birds like the goshawk, the rough-legged hawk, and the northern shrike, which appear in numbers during some winters and are absent in others. These cycles have not been clearly or finally worked out for these species but sufficient evidence is on hand to indicate their existence and their close relationship to similar cycles in the development of their chief sources of food. In the case of the snowy owl the chief item of food in its home area is the lemming, which has a four-year cycle, and so about once in four years we have quite a number of snowy owls in the Toronto region. So far as the barred owl is concerned, since this bird is normally a woodland bird, the determining factor in its winter incursions into the city may be the cycle of the white-footed mouse. If this proves to be true, we may expect a considerable incursion of barred owls every third or fourth winter.

Last winter's invasion seems to have left its mark in breeding-records in the province. Up to 1940 there was only one breeding record for the barred owl in Ontario, made in 1933 at Katrine by R.J.Rutter. In 1940 four breeding records were made: one at Fort William, one at Barnesdale, one at Port Carling, and one at Maple. The last three were made by members of this club, i.e., Mrs Carl Proctor, Frank Banfield, and R.J.Rutter. These owls always retire to the woods, of course, for purposes of breeding and nesting.

Looking out of the window and seeing the snow swirl past, hardly makes one think of birds nesting. And yet our earliest nesters are already pairing, beginning their mating antics, and selecting nesting sites. On the afternoon of January 25th, a cold crisp day with the temperature hovering around zero in King township, we pushed into a dense clump of cedar and hemlock trees. Immediately a vague brownish mass sailed off through the

branches, a great horned owl. He had been roosting close to an old hawk's nest in a hemlock. That fellow was very likely considering taking over that old nest for his own family.

On January 4th John and Robert McArthur, Donald Macdonald, and ourself were standing in the road that runs through the Maple woods, just at dusk. We were being entertained by a horned owl duet. Donald had detected it first when we were in the woods north of the road, a low vibrant hooting, softened by intervening trees. We worked south towards the road, stopping between each hooting, until we stood on the road. There the hooting was loud and clear, coming out of the woods to the south of the road. The deep tones rang through the thickening dusk, a message to transfix mice and rabbits. In perfect sequence they came--hoo, hoo-hoo, hoo-hoo, hoo-hoo, hooooo. A short interval of two or three minutes and again the low hoo, hoo-hoo, hoo-hoo, hoo-hoo, hooooo. The moon was rising as we listened, and the snow-crusted evergreens began to glisten in its silver light. Suddenly another owl began to answer the first. This one had a higher-pitched voice, and it called hoo-hoo-hoo-hoo-hoo in an unbroken stream. On and on went the duet, every few moments repeated, as we listened entranced. We tried to imitate them, to talk to them. Perhaps they answered us, perhaps not. They were so busy talking to each other. Those birds, we believe, were thinking of mating--maybe were already mated. The nesting season was coming on for them. The great horned owl is, indeed, our earliest breeder among the birds.

It often lays its eggs in February, even sometimes in January. Snow storms may roar in gusts, and humans may shiver with the cold, but the horned owl will raise its young despite all. This owl has to start its nesting early for it takes about four weeks to incubate its eggs. Then the young stay in the nest about six or seven weeks, and are incapable of flight until they are ten to twelve weeks old. If the eggs should be laid about the first of March, as probably most of them are around here, it will be the middle or last of June before the young are able even partially to shift for themselves. All this time, and probably for some weeks longer, they have to be fed wholly or partially by the parents. They are extremely voracious eaters, and their food is not too easy to obtain, so it is much easier for the parents to supply their needs before the summer foliage becomes too dense. This year it may be easier, for rabbits are very common, as any hike in the woods or fields will show, the fresh snow being criss-crossed with their tracks. Sometimes the eggs gets frozen. Sometimes the nest, and even the incubating bird, get covered with snow. Almost always the careful mother keeps the eggs and the centre of the nest dry and warm.

Downy young owls of any kind are a delightful sight. One of my most valued memories is the sight of two snowy-white young horned owls peering over the edge of the huge old eagle's nest at Rondeau some seventy feet up in the air. Perhaps they were trying to look fiercely at us out of their big yellow eyes, but they only succeeded in looking babyish, and incredibly soft and fluffy.

Now is the time to start looking for these nests. Large as they are, they may not be easy to find for more often than not they will be hidden away in the uppermost parts of some tremendous evergreen. But watch for pellets on the ground for that is a good sign of where to look. We well remember finding a large pile of pellets under a huge hemlock not far from Paul Hahn's cabin at Pottageville last spring. Peering up into the tree we could just make out the shadowy outline of a large nest, but the trunk was free of branches for some distance up, and far too big around to climb. All our tapping on the trunk and hurling of sticks aroused no sound or sight of birds. So, though we had little doubt that the nest was doing good service for a horned owl family, we had to go our way not quite certain. The parent bird will usually flush from the nest if you make enough commotion, and if you are specially energetic you may climb up to see the nest and eggs, or young, without any particular danger from the parents, fierce as they are to their prey. If you are fearful on this last ground, wear a strong leather coat, some tough head-covering, and gloves. Authentic accounts of attacks upon humans even when climbing to nests are extremely rare, and almost never serious. There is nearly always a horned owl's nest in the Hogg's Hollow area, or in Sunnybrook Park. Here is your chance to test your birdmanship.

On January 11th quite a number of the naturalists were entertained at Thistle town at the home of Mr and Mrs Bruce Metcalfe. It was a beautiful clear day, the ground and trees covered with fresh fallen snow. Two carloads had a very pleasant field trip and tour of the district. These were: Dr and Mrs L.E. Jaquith, Miss Mary Light, Miss Grace Malkin, Miss Elizabeth Price, Miss Edna Boissonneau, Mr Wilder, Miss Wilder, Dr and Mrs R.M. Saunders. Birds were not plentiful but the fresh snow had a world of tracks to study--field-mice, rabbits, hares, skunk, squirrels, and fox. Indeed we were treated to the sight of a sly red fox padding across a field. And when we came to his tracks we found that he had speeded up so much ^{when he spied us} that he was travelling in tremendous bounds that disappeared far across the fields. Mrs Metcalfe, as a matter of fact, has a very successful feeding-station that is visited daily by the cardinals.

On January 19th we spent a delightful day afield with a trio of ardent observers from Aurora, Mrs L. Sisman, Mrs E. Williams, and Mrs V. Wilcox. These ladies belong to a group of enthusiasts in Aurora who, we are told, got started on observing birds in this interesting manner. Some of them, a few years ago, were incredulous when a school teacher asked some of their children to make a list of 25 birds seen around Aurora. They said it wasn't possible. They got to discussing the matter. Mrs Sisman, who had been already initiated into the bird world, said 'Let's go and see'. They did, and they have been going and seeing ever since. On the 19th our most noteworthy sight was a splendid flock of snow-buntings (150), redpolls (100), and Lapland longspurs (25), feeding on weeds in a field along the second concession of King township.

This was our first sight of these three species mixed together in one flock. When disturbed they all flew up into nearby trees. Snow buntings perched in trees is a sight one seldom has a chance to see.

On Jan. 26th Arthur Smith of Newmarket, John Crosbie, John McArthur, Tom Murray and ourself made a visit to the Hamilton district. It was a bitter day with a 50-mile-an-hour wind whipping straight from the east up the lake and piling the waves and snow up on Burlington cut-off in savage fury. Despite the waves crashing over the breakwater at Burlington we found there a fine male ring-necked duck, our first winter record of this bird, a red-breasted merganser, and several other ducks. Up on the mountain along Gage street we stopped to look for European partridge, and after nearly an hour's tramping across fields in the teeth of the gale we put up a flock of these birds, one beautiful male and seven females. Off they shot squeaking like an uncoiled piston but we followed from field to field and got very satisfactory looks. They made the trip worth while, for these partridge are very locally distributed, this being the only place near Toronto where one has a chance of seeing them.

One of the most unusual observations made this month was the sight of a Canada jay (whiskey Jack) at Thornhill golf course on Jan. 5th. This bird rarely gets this far south, as it is not a truly migratory species. The observation was made by Mr Walter Hahn.

Mrs Sisman reports having a flicker at her feeding-station in Aurora on Jan. 20th, another unusual winter visitor. Professor Knox had two cardinals at his garden on Avoca Road about the middle of the month, and Professor R. Flenley had a cardinal at his feeding-station on Delisle Avenue about the same time.

Do not forget the Jaeger lecture on February 3rd, at Yorkminster Church lecture hall.
