

THE NEWSLETTER

OF THE TORONTO FIELD NATURALISTS' CLUB
Number 22 March 1941

Mid-March again, and time to seek out the omens of spring. Saturday we thought to direct our search in Cedarvale ravine. This fifteenth of March was one of those typical March days, neither bright nor dark, cool and damp, but with a touch of warmth from the veiled sun behind its filter of clouds. A playful breeze made the leaves of yesteryear dance in the bare spots on south-facing slopes where the winter's blanket of snow had lain deep but a few days before. Steadily, under the relentless urge of the climbing sun, the snow was trickling away. In rills and rivulets it ran, down glistening banks to the tumbling brook whose gurgling waters spoke of a glad freedom from icy bonds. On the north-facing slopes, and under the trees on the level ground the snow still was deep and white, but it was on those brown, gleaming slopes which looked southward that the sun was writing the signs that heralded the coming of spring.

The birds in the ravine were still the birds of winter. And yet not quite, for though they were the same birds, or the same sort of birds we have been seeing here all winter, nevertheless Saturday there was about most of them an enhanced vigor, a tendency among the males to burst into song, ruffle their feathers, and assume aggressive poses in prominent positions in the open. Excited cock house-sparrows danced about dingy females to a torrential accompaniment of harsh chatter, strenuously endeavoring to attract attention. Starlings in shiny black breeding plumage and smart yellow bills filled the air with squeals and whistles. Many of these birds were doubtless fresh from the south since unmusical squeals were punctuated by lilting bits, often beautifully rendered, from the songs of mockingbirds, catbirds, cardinals, Carolina wrens, and tufted titmice. The less-travelled brethren continued their imitations of killdeers, meadowlarks, and jays, learned last summer and which they have contributed to the backyard chorus all winter. On the bank below Ardwood Gate there is a tall oak which starts to branch some twenty feet from the ground, and just at that point is a fine nesting hole. Two starlings were busy exploring this hole, perhaps the same pair that nested there last spring. We have always hoped to see a screech owl looking out of that hole but so far we have only found starlings.

High among the trees on the same slope a couple of male downy woodpeckers chased each other madly about, filling the air with shrill clamor. Each one, no doubt, had in mind to possess himself of this desirable area as a building site. Atop a slender white pine a crow cawed lustily. Here was a fine tree for a crow's nest. Why couldn't a mate show up? These black fellows have been moving in for two weeks or more now, but it is just about this time of month that the big wave passes over Toronto. Indeed, W. H. Gunn counted more than 1700 crows passing over the Old Mill in less than two hours on March 14th.

Mrs O. Mitchell reported crows passing over her apartment near St Clair and Yonge by the hundreds on the same day. These were possibly the same birds, as they migrate from southwest to northeast in this region, probably following the old lake shore as hawks do in the reverse direction in the fall. There is some doubt, however, as to whether crows migrate through the Toronto area on a wide front or following certain narrow lanes. Mr Ivor at Erindale reports flights of as many as 10,000 crows passing above his property on some March days. These do not appear to be the same birds as are seen over Toronto, as the general north-east direction of flight would carry them to the north of the city. Somebody should be making a chart of points where heavy crow-flights are seen in this region in order to resolve this problem.

To return to the ravine, above the Spadina overpass the stream pours over a battered little wooden dam. Here the bank was all clear of snow and the leaves were dancing in the wind. For a moment we saw only the leaves but all at once we realized that not all the dancers were leaves. Dull brown birds were hopping about gleaning seeds, or dormant insects among the leaves but so skilfully camouflaged were they that once we had taken our eyes off any one it was a real hunt to find it again. They proved to be a number of female purple finches. Close by them were two brown creepers busily inspecting the trunks of trees and whistling to each other. One left the trees to work over the ground underneath an overhanging brow of turf. This was a new habit for this bird in my experience, as was also the rather starling-like note that the creeper that kept to the tree-trunks was making. They were evidently intended to be a song, and we wondered if this was a mated pair.

Over the dump above St Clair herring gulls were sailing as usual, swooping low each time they fancied they spied some choice morsel. Several of them stood about on various mounds of brown mud that were emerging from the snow. When we appeared they took off complaining bitterly. Down along the stream again, enclosed here in a narrow defile, we came shortly to Cardinal Corner. Just as we got where we could see around the corner a brownish bird popped up from the weeds and perched in a small tree to the east. It was a song sparrow, but it refused to sing. At the same moment three other birds shot up into a shrub to the west. On inspection these turned out to be purple finches, two males and a female. Both males burst into song, whilst the female preened her feathers. As we stood still the males got more and more curious, and hopped out on to the most exposed branches nearest to us, only a few feet away. They were in gorgeous plumage, a rich wine colour on head, breast, and rump, with semi-crests raised up, dark eyes gleaming, and carolling songs, they were a picture we hated to leave. As we glanced back at the song sparrow we discovered a plain grey-breasted bird sitting beside it. In the glasses it soon showed that its head was delicately green-tinted with a hint of yellow. The other bird in the little tree proved to be the same sort. The song sparrow had simply disappeared and been replaced by these two while we had watched the purple finches. And these two were goldfinches. Face onwards they look very different than from

other angles. They too began to whisper a song. For as long as we stood still the finch chorus continued to east and west. But one move on our part and the choristers departed in alarm. Cardinal Corner did not have a cardinal, but it was hardly missed, so fascinating were its finch relatives.

Not another bird did we see until we were in the fields near the Bathurst Street viaduct. Then redpoll calls could be clearly heard, but nowhere in the trees, nor in the air could they be seen. Finally we traced them to the ground and found a flock of sixteen hard at work extracting seeds from goldenrod heads that had been flattened under the snow and were now exposed. This was a prime opportunity to study birds that are usually far above our heads when we see them. To our amazement we found that three of this flock were hoaries, and we had all three of the light ones in the field of our binoculars at once. Later when we returned we found the flock perched in a shrub, with their feathers fluffed up so that the hoaries were even more conspicuous than before since their white rumps were fully exposed.

On the way back down the ravine we found juncos on the bank above Cardinal Corner. They were not there on the way up. Apart from the hoaries the birds we had seen had all been common birds. Often people ask us why we continue to look at the same birds week in and week out, year after year. Somehow they don't seem to realize that a sort of friendship springs up between observer and birds. And who ever comes to the end of wanting to see friends and to learn more about them?

On Sunday morning, the sixteenth, we continued our search in High Park. It was much the same sort of day, a little colder and damper. Along the little stream that flows into Grenadier Pond is always a good place for birds. And Sunday it was crowded with songsters in full song--purple finches, song sparrows, tree sparrows, and juncos. In the middle of this spring festival we detected a lisping little song quite unknown to us, pleasant and warbler-like. There were so many purple finches about that we had a feeling it must be one of them, and yet it was so much thinner in tone that we wondered. On looking about we spied a brown creeper upon a tree trunk not far away. Having never heard a creeper sing, or thought of a creeper as singing, we kept trying to locate the supposed finch. But failure and curiosity prompted a closer surveillance of the creeper--and this revealed to our astonishment that it really was the singer. Pe-e-see/ pe see/ see/ see/ it sang, the first phrase rising, the second a bit lower, the third high, and the last dropping down. Here it was, the brown creeper's song, a high-pitched, modest melody, quite becoming to the modest little worker, and gently attractive like the whisper of a tiny breeze in the evergreens. In years of watching we had never been granted the privilege of hearing this gentle song before. Another reason for seeking out the common birds repeatedly. Like other friends they reveal themselves only little by little. They grow upon you.

Along Grenadier's west shore we met Mr K. Nielsen in front of his home which overlooks the marsh. He was, like ourself, seeking the birds of spring. As we stood looking into the reeds we saw the gadwall that has been wintering there with the blacks and mallards. A sedate, inconspicuous fellow, the gadwall, sometimes hard to distinguish unless he exhibits the white patch on the lower part of his wing. We walked along the west shore with Nielsen, noting that the channel was breaking open, and that two boys were so foolish as to be walking across the obviously rotten ice. Not far along we heard one of the sounds our ears were seeking, the cheery conk-a-ree of the redwing. A little looking showed us our bird singing loudly from the top of a tall pine tree. Another sign of spring! All these little signs added together tell the story. Spring is nigh upon us.

On February 23, the Sunday morning after the very successful meetings of the Federation of Ontario Naturalists, a number of the naturalists, five cars in all, took up Dr W.E. Saunders's suggestion and made a general tour of the waterfront from the Eastern Gap to Port Credit, ending with a hike through Lorne Park. The highlight of the day was the sight of four glaucous gulls at Port Credit, two of them so close, standing on the harbour ice, that every detail could be seen with the naked eye. Ten great black-backed gulls in one compact group on the lake beyond the shore ice was another sight not often seen around Toronto. The harbours at Port Credit, Oakville, and Bronte are all excellent places to look for gulls.

On March 9 Dr and Mrs L.E. Jaquith, Douglas Miller, and Dr and Mrs R.M. Saunders had a fine trip in the Toronto area, starting at Grenadier Pond and combing the best spots eastward to Highland Creek where they inspected the bear swamp that some of the field-naturalists remember from last fall. Hundreds of gulls and ducks featured the trip, and Dr Jaquith spied a snowy-plumaged glaucous gull standing on an ice-cake among some herring gulls off Exhibition Park. Pussy willows were coming out in the bear swamp and a large Cooper's hawk dashed overhead while we were there.

Mr E.B. Elliott of Thistle town reports that he has had the good fortune of having a golden-crowned kinglet visiting his feeding-station. This is good fortune, indeed, for though these birds are around all winter they seldom come to feeding-stations. A large number (10-25) of short-eared owls are still residing at York Downs Golf Club in the ornamental evergreens and have been seen by several observers, most recently on March 16 by Tom Murray. Mr Russell Dingman tells us that sixteen years ago he planted some mountain-ash trees by his home in York Mills. No better permanent bird-feeding station could be thought of than a grove of such trees. This year, and for some years now, Mr Dingman has been reaping the reward of his foresight, for each winter brings such visitors as purple finches, pine and evening grosbeaks, cardinals, cedar waxwings, and recently, among the last, a splendid Bohemian waxwing. The lesson is clearly, plant mountain-ash trees.

There follows the annual financial statement of the club, drawn up by Miss E. M. Boissonneau, which we are sure will meet with your favour.

ANNUAL STATEMENTRECEIPTS

Balance from 1939-40	\$186.53
Membership fees (1941)	316.00
<u>Canadian Nature</u> rebates & donations	9.80
Bank interest	<u>2.19</u>
	\$514.52

DISBURSEMENTS

Stationery	\$18.64
Printing	44.48
Postage and mailing	70.75
Rent - Theatre and committee room	78.00
Expense of lecture	4.70
Affiliation fees	10.50
Flowers (J.H.Fleming)	5.00
Honorarium (Jas.Moore)	10.00
<u>Canadian Nature</u> subscriptions	<u>1.60</u>

\$243.67

Bank Balance

270.85

\$514.52

Watch for the spring programme. It 's going to be a good one.