

THE NEWSLETTER

OF THE TORONTO FIELD NATURALISTS' CLUB

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Until the recent heavy snowfall and the freezing of the lake behind the breakwater, this winter has been the most open ever recorded in this area. The effects of this unusual season have been felt strongly in the bird world, and, hence, amongst the bird-watchers. The number of individuals of species that normally winter somewhat further south which have been lingering in the neighbourhood of Toronto has been very large. Judging by reports that keep coming in, and by our own experience, birds such as robins, crows, song sparrows, whitethroats, savannah sparrows, meadow larks, grackles, redwings, rusty blackbirds, kingfishers, and marsh hawks have not been particularly hard to find. A few individuals of these species are customarily about in this region during any winter but not the numbers that have been present this season. What the present situation will do to these lingerers is yet to be seen.

It is doubtful whether at this late date any of these would start to migrate southward. A good many of them will probably perish for lack of food. Heavy snow is their worst enemy in that respect. But fewer will die now than formerly because of the number of feeding stations which now exist. Perhaps some of you who possess such feeding stations may have noticed that when the ground is bare, and the temperature mild, fewer birds appear at your stations. Some of your favourites disappeared leaving queries in your minds as to their fate. Have they frozen to death? Did the cat get them? No, probably not. Food, under those circumstances, is simpler to find and spreading out eases the competition. If you have noticed this, then you will have also observed how the birds flock back to the feeding station when the snow begins to fall, especially when it gets to a depth that covers most of the available natural food supply as the present snow cover does. Now your favourites will reappear and your doubts be dispelled. Among the chickadees, nuthatches, and creepers, watch for the kinglets. Along with the downies and hairies look for the flicker, even the redhead. When cardinals and bluejays come, have an eye for robins, grackles, or any of the rest of these lingerers. A glance, now and then, at your feeding station may be especially rewarded these days.

The north end of Grenadier Pond is one of the best places to look for unusual birds in the wintertime. A little over three weeks ago (January 18) some of us were standing on the bank overlooking the marsh. The brown flags were crushed and matted down. In the distance the pond was frozen. Overhead dark clouds raced by. It was a barren, unpromising scene. But past experience had taught us never to take such a scene at its face value. So someone tossed a piece of clinker from the dump into the reeds just at the

point where the tiny stream seeps out from beneath the bank. In an instant up shot the zig-zagging shape of a startled snipe. Had Jim Baillie not already seen the bird twice before this occasion, we would have been as startled as the snipe. And yet why should we be? Two or three years ago there was a gallinule spending the winter in those matted reeds. A song sparrow or two are always there. Often there may be a swamp sparrow, a redwing, or some other interesting winter resident. The reason would seem to be that in this relatively sheltered spot the marsh seldom freezes up entirely. Neither does the little stream that seeps from under Bloor street, and flows down to the marsh. Food, drink, and shelter are there. What more could a bird ask?

Again on February 1, we walked along this stream and stood on the bank above the marsh. This time the snipe was not to be roused though we doubt not that he was there, hugging secretively to some hiding-place in the reeds. But two song sparrows darted out of the rushes to 'chunk' excitedly at our pebbles. Two crows cawed from a tree on the bank. And along the stream redpolls called. These last we followed till, half way to Bloor street, we came close upon them. There were only two, feeding in the birches on the High Park bank. As we stood still to watch they dropped down to the stream; then, as we still stood rigid, they blithely made their way from weed to weed up to our very feet. No need of glasses to observe these birds. One was dark and heavily lined; one was light, scarcely marked. As they fed they called constantly, fluttered about, spread their wings. The latter had a clear white rump. Two birds, two redpolls, one a common redpoll, one a hoary. It was a thrilling experience.

It has been very heartening of late to see the number of young fellows who are constantly abroad in all manner of weather in search of birds or mammals. A good many of these fellows have been introduced to these interests through the efforts of our Junior Club. Knowing that you would be interested in their activities, we take pleasure here in presenting a sample of the kind of observational notes which are kept by a number of them. This is the account of a winter bird trip taken by Robert Lanning and two others. The account is from Mr Lanning's notebook.

"December 22, 1941. Upon meeting Bob Sacks and Alex Cringan at Queen and Yonge streets, at 9,40 a.m., we proceeded east along Queen street by street car to Leslie street, and then walked south to the lake shore.

A heavy south-east wind was rolling large breakers in upon the shore. There was a slightly overcast sun most of the day and so the light was not good. The temperature was about thirty-eight when we started, forty-four at the warmest, and forty when we left. There was no snow on the ground except a little in the most sheltered places.

On Leslie street we saw Rock Doves, starlings and English sparrows around the buildings and in the air. On the east side, at the foot of the street, in some small bushes a flock of ten juncos were seen. On the west side a sparrow hawk was

patrolling the fields. From the foot of the street no ducks were visible on the surface of the rough lake. We went east along the path and found considerable rabbit fur, evidence that the great horned owl residing here did not go hungry. After another fifty yards along the path, Alex pointed out a dark spot in a bare willow on the other side of the jungle, which was identified as a great horned. (x 8, Lanning) Intent upon getting a close look at the owl, we proceeded about one hundred yards on the path, when we came upon a flock of thirty redpolls and tree sparrows in the willows. While getting a look at the flock, we stirred up five pheasants in the edge of the marsh. By now the owl had disappeared, so we went leisurely on for about five hundred yards, when we turned into the jungle where we were going to try to flush the owl. We had barely penetrated it when we found it alive with numerous finches, (10 juncos, 5 tree sparrows, 3 siskins). Chickadees, downies and several white-breasted nuthatches were foraging in the larger trees. We had progressed about ten yards when the owl flushed seventy yards ahead and we quickly followed but could not find it. We went to where we last saw the owl and as we could not see it we made a circle northward to the cut to have a look at the gulls. We found the three common species (30 herring, 1 ring-billed, 1 great black-backed) and on our way back along the finches we flushed ten pheasants and saw four redwings (1 male). Upon finding the finches, we worked out way along the flock and along a line of trees toward the lake. Downies were unusually numerous, fighting, chipping and pecking in the long canes. After progressing about twenty yards along the trees, we again flushed the owl, close at hand, and he flew to the big willow by the lake. We approached to within seventy-five yards of it and then it flew down toward the ground and disappeared in the weeds and could not be flushed.

The trip from Leslie street to the gap was uneventful except for a red-tailed hawk, seen near the foot of Leslie street. We saw no ducks on the lake hereabouts.

In the bay and in the end of the gap there was a large flock of gulls and several big rafts of ducks. In the end of the gap there was a small flock of old-squaws and right beside the pier was a brown duck smaller than a scaup and sitting very low in the water. While the others were looking around with their glasses, I crept up till I was right over the duck and then looked down. I identified it as a ruddy by its brownish plumage, light grey cheek-patches and dark crown. Its bill was blue and the general shape, from above, was round. In a large raft there were two hundred scaups, five golden-eyes, and three black ducks. A loon flew from near the inner end of the pier. While we were eating we identified a ring-necked duck on the edge of the one big raft.

We got a lift from Cherry to York street and at the foot of York street saw six red-breasted mergansers and more were seen out in the lake.

We covered the breakwater from Tip Top building to the Argonaut Rowing Club and saw numerous old-squaw, scaup, herring gulls and several great black-backed gulls and a ring-billed gull. Several American mergansers were seen as well as our only white-winged scoter.

As we started to go around the rowing club we saw a sparrow hawk and found two black wings and a diving duck's foot. As we went down the bank Alex asked if the object on the breakwater was a snowy and I identified it as such with my glasses. Eight buffle-heads were encountered between here and the Humber river. Numerous black ducks and mallards were seen and just before we came to the Humber a very white merganser was inside the breakwater. As we came to the Humber a snowy flushed and flew to the other side of the Palais Pier where he was mobbed by gulls. We found the remains of a mallard . . . where the snowy flushed from but it was probably a diseased bird of which the flock was better rid.

There was nothing but a few gulls on the almost frozen surface of Grenadier Pond. There were two song sparrows in the marsh by the tracks at the south end of the pond. And so ended our day at five o'clock with the total of thirty-three species after about seven hours in the field."

We would remind you again of the Annual Conference of the Federation of Ontario Naturalists which will take place on Saturday, February 28. This club is a member club of the Federation, and its members should support the meeting of the larger organization. But quite apart from that you will have a chance to see, hear, and meet members from the other clubs all over the province. And finally, the programme promises real entertainment and enlightenment. It commences at 2 p.m., so far as the papers are concerned, and finishes in the evening, after the dinner, at Convocation Hall with the lecture by Professor Paul Kellogg of Cornell University on "Songs of Wild Birds", illustrated with recordings from actual life.

We would also call to your attention once more, so that you can check the dates on your calendar, the meetings of the North American Wild Life Conference which will take place at the Royal York Hotel on April 8, 9, and 10. This is one of the great conventions of naturalists on this continent. You will certainly find much of interest in the programme when it appears and it will certainly be worth your while to make a point of attending some of the meetings.