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THE NEWSLETTER

OF THE TORONTO FIELD NATURALISTS' CLUB

Number 29

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The morning of March 15th dawned with a pink flush filtering through a maze of thin clouds. Banks of heavier clouds passed across the sky in triangular formation. Once up, the sun was pale. Yet despite its curtain of cloud its warmth could be felt, and its effects were everywhere visible. Now and then a rent in the clouds let through a glow and heat that made one think of May and June. There was, indeed, a touch of spring in the air. Why not? The first wave of robins had arrived in the city two days before. In the morning of the 13th their songs could be heard in almost all parts of Toronto

Nine o'clock found us ready, and a few minutes later Art Smith, Jim Baillie, and Tom Murray came along. In twenty minutes we were at the east side of Coatsworth's Cut behind the Woodbine Race Track. This bit of willow scrub is relatively unknown to bird-watchers. No doubt it will be visited more and more as Ashbridge's Bay disappears into the disposal plant. Jim Baillie and Ed Shore had seen a saw-whet owl here on two occasions recently. That is what we were looking for. But high and low through the bush as we searched, we could not discover more than a pile of little pellets showing where it had been. Still there was a song sparrow in full song amid the reeds. He too felt the touch of spring. And over on the top of the break wall Art saw a killdeer arise for a moment from amongst the gulls, call briefly, then disappear behind the bank. Another of the fingers of spring.

Then in the face of the evident onset of the new season--the fresh reddening of the osiers, the crocuses opening against south-facing walls, the dripping of sap from the maples--we decided, perversely it may seem, to chase the winter. So we turned northward and over more and more dubious roads--the last hill had a washout right down the middle of the road--we made our way to Vandorf and the woods of the Canada jays. When we arrived these birds were not to be seen. We climbed over the fence, walked up the lane, pushed through the dumbly watching sheep, passed the log house that snuggles beneath its tall spruces, and went on through the orchard to the open ridge that overlooks the serpentine woods in the vale. Reward was ours. Faintly, far off to the east, Jim detected the sharp penetrating 'whit-see-ou' of the pine grosbeak. Following our ears we came to the border of young pines that edges the bushland. There the calls were clear and loud--but the birds we could not see. No harm. We had chased the winter and caught up with one of those lovely winter visitors that none of us (except Art) had seen since last December.

White-winged crossbills we could not find. Then we must leave over as something to anticipate in the autumn. It is late to see any of these northerners--March 15th is the latest date on

which we have ever seen pine grosbeaks--late in any season but notably so in this early spring. When we got back to the barn a dozen or more crows were making such a racket in the hemlocks and cedars to the north that Tom and ourself went to investigate. It might be an owl or hawk that they were cussing, though the tone of voice wasn't quite right. Indeed we found neither hawk nor owl. These black fellows were just bursting with spring spirits and in their raucous way letting everyone know it. The snow beneath the cedars was marked with interlacing patterns of crow tracks. Were they in search of food? We could not tell. One of them was seen flying off with something bright red in its beak--perhaps a bit of carrion.

Screaming blue jays and cawing crows gave us the musical accompaniment to the scene of dark evergreens overtopping melting banks of snow beneath the racing clouds of March. No sooner were we back on the roadway when Tom spied a Canada jay slipping down in its silent manner from a white pine to a slender birch. As we watched, it stripped some bark from the tree and disappeared with it in the evergreens. Soon it was back to repeat the performance. While Tom kept guard we made a detour, and, plunging into the dense evergreen growth, came up behind the bird only to find that we were not as cunning as he. He had gone, vanished silently in the impenetrable tangle. But that stripping of bark--What did it mean? This is the nesting time of the Canada jay. These birds--three were eventually seen this day--have not left for their northern homeland. Here they have good food, a sheltered bush closely similar to their northern home, a little-disturbed area. Can we hope that they will stay to nest? It is certainly a possibility and that stripping of bark makes one wonder. Who will add a new breeding-record to the Toronto list? Watch the woods at Vandorf.

On the way over to Aurora we saw a groundhog nosing about in a ploughed field. The week before we had seen one near Gormley, and Art had seen one in this region during the week--again evidence of the early season. In Aurora we went to Mrs King's feeding-station where a flock of 30-40 evening grosbeaks has been resident all winter. Last week we had looked at them face to face from the second-storey window. They customarily come to feed on the windowsill. On that day Dr and Mrs L.E. Jaquith, Mrs R.M. and Sally Saunders had been with us. And before we left, Herb Southam, Gordon Lambert (on his last leave), and three friends came to band the birds. A flock of evening grosbeaks is a lure to all bird watchers for miles around. This week there were none, however, and we went on to the woods behind St Andrew's College. Pileated woodpeckers had been seen there within a few days by Mrs Elma Williams of Aurora and others. Today fresh workings of the great woodpeckers were seen in a number of places--even dry chips on top of the snow--but not a sight or sound of the birds could we see. Judging by the number of their drillings, however, they are constantly present along the well-wooded ridge that here runs north and south. Back in Aurora another short stop permitted us to hear one evening grosbeak calling somewhere to the east of Yonge Street, though we did not see the bird.

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Back in the city we headed for the north end of Grenadier Pond. There a songsparrow was singing as were several juncoes. The swamp sparrow was about but he made no sound--simply kept on popping in and out of clusters of reeds in the manner of his kind. At Sunnyside there was still one white gull of each species--an Iceland and a glaucous--and amidst hundreds of blacks, mallards, golden-eyes, and old squaw, we found one female shoveller paddling back and forth in the gap of the breakwater. There have been shovellers in the region all winter. This may be one of them, or it may be another spring arrival. Spring had arrived in spirit for all the ducks, if we take into evidence the way in which males were chasing each other belligerently and then kow-towing deferentially to females. Up at the Old Mill a redwing was singing his 'conk-a-ree' beside the rushing river. Last year it was the 31st of March before the Humber broke open. Now all the streams are open, and even the marshes and ponds are coming clear along the edges.

Having taken Jim home we returned to Sunnyside to look again for a small gull that might have been a kittiwake, but which we all agreed was a queer-looking ringbill, after prolonged observation. Now, though we had had a good day, we were just a bit disappointed by this last admission, and we were ready to go home well tired out. So home we went. As we were getting out of the car our wife opened the door and exclaimed excitedly that Jim had called up to say that he was going down to the jungle at Ashbridge's Bay to see a Richardson's owl! You should have seen us get back into that car. We didn't stop for explanation. Action, not words was what we wanted. Fast as we dared, and as the red lights would permit, we rushed to Ashbridge's Bay. Parking along the spur tracks, we ran over the tracks and along the path. We caught sight of Ed Shore first, away across the marsh; then we met Jim and his daughter Florence under the willows by the path. Quickly we learned that there were ten of us assembled to find this rare owl. What the telephone and a rare bird will do to bird-watchers, even tired ones! But we weren't tired now! Herb Southam and his associates had come too, hoping to catch the bird for banding. Now we were here, Where was it? Bob Lanning had found it first, halfway down the west side of the jungle, perched in a willow a few feet above the ground, with a half-eaten meadow mouse in its talons. Its fresh droppings were there--but not the bird. It had disappeared. The others had been searching some time. An air of despondency was beginning to creep in. We spread out to look once more all through the jungle.

When we heard the shout we were 'way over towards Coatsowrth's Cut. The shout was faint and from the west whence we had come. Knowing its meaning we turned at once, and ran shouting to get our directions sure. In a moment we saw Jim and Florence running, Ed Shore from another direction, and others. We all converged towards the southwest corner of the jungle on the marsh edge. Once in the open, we could see Tom, Art and Herb standing there, and waving us on. Herb had found the owl; and found it, let it be known, sitting quietly in a willow, four feet above the ground, right beside the path that all of us had followed in! All had passed within a few feet and had not seen. All together we

stood and watched, everyone richly rewarded, and all except Herb seeing this rare visitor for the first time in the wild.

As we looked on, while an assistant kept the bird's attention towards us, Herb deftly worked a small noose attached to a long pole over its head. With one little pull it was snatched from its perch into Herb's hands. Releasing the noose, he held the bird in his hand while we all marched along in an admiring procession to his car. There he produced a box from which, incredibly, he took another small owl, the saw-whet we had been looking for in the morning. So side by side, one on each hand, he held the two small owls. Close relatives, but virtually never seen together. When we had compared them in every detail, he let Florence Baillie take the saw-whet, which had already been banded, and allow it to go free. It flew just a few feet to a branch above our heads, where it perched unconcernedly till we went. The Richardson's went into the box to be taken home, there to be banded and released. The great experience was over and with all fatigue had gone. For days the memory of that wonderful sight will banish weariness.

Remember the North American Wildlife Conference which will be holding its sessions at the Royal York Hotel on April 8,9,10.

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ANNUAL STATEMENT
1941-1942

RECEIPTS

Balance from 1940-41	\$270.85	
389 Membership Fees (1942)	389.00	
75 Partial Membership Fees	18.75	
Donations	7.20	
		<u>\$685.80</u>

EXPENDITURES

Printing	\$87.66	
Rent - Theatre	105.00	
Lecture Expenses (Dr Sutton, film rental)	93.45	
Stationery	18.09	
Postage, mailing, stencils	81.40	
Affiliation fees	10.50	
Floral tributes	10.50	
Sundries	7.75	\$414.35
Bank Balance		<u>\$271.45</u>
		<u>\$685.80</u>