

THE NEWSLETTER

OF THE TORONTO FIELD NATURALISTS' CLUB

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Is there going to be an early, long and hard winter? Nearly every day for the last three weeks or so we have met some person who has ventured to prognosticate the forthcoming of such a bitter season. Every year about this time, of course, the prophecies of the knowing begin to fall upon our ears. The columns of the rural press begin to glow with these gems of knowledge, displayed thus at harvest time as a proper act in the seasonal rites. "They say" runs the traditional introduction to prophecy; or "an old Indian says", "the oldest inhabitant says". If identified at all the sentient being is usually someone to whom fortune has assigned the task of outliving his contemporaries. This assignment not falling to the lot of most of us, those younger folk who dwell beside the survivor, gaze in wonder at such a phenomenon and hasten to attribute wisdom to the ancient days. This is a habit less apparent of late years, perhaps, now that we live in an age of youth, but it holds on none the less. An aged habit is not easily foregone. So is born a seer, an author of "they say". If he be an Indian of many years so much the better, provided the repeater of his soothsayings need not come into contact with him or his. Our school text and popular writings still foster the legend of the noble red man, brother and confidant of all the furred and feathered folk -- hence the authority of an ancient Cree or Ojibway. The easily credulous receivers of these legends find the realities too much for their delicate senses as did their ancestors in the past. But coming from the romantic remoteness of some half-known village or far-off island or northern lake, the climatological pronouncements of these prophets fall upon eagerly receptive ears even in our great cities.

Is there going to be an early winter? The unanimity of opinion this season that there is going to be is in itself strange. Customarily those who prophesy "a long, cold winter ahead" vie with those who foretell a "green Christmas". The oldest inhabitant, or his son, if you wish, has perhaps shot a richly furred skunk or woodchuck. Immediately the cry of a hard winter ahead goes forth. Then the next day or the next the second oldest inhabitant, who has, we feel, a spark of rivalry in his soul, and who aspires to the rocking chair of seerdom in their community, goes out and shoots a less sumptuously clad woodchuck. Henceforth the battle of prophecies is on. The listener and readers may take their choice. That is a normal season. But so far this year the "green Christmas" prophets have not been heard. Perhaps they are holding their fire, relying upon the present prolonged hot spree to dissipate the vapourings of their competitors. On the other hand it must be said that the "evidence" upon which the seer habitually rely is all against them. This is a season of early migration for the birds, of nest-building for squirrels; and numerous thick-furred creatures have been shot. And what does it mean?

That it means something we may agree. That it means whatever the weather prophets suggest is a matter for exceeding doubt. To our knowledge, and in this we believe, that those of you who have made some effort to know more than folklore about birds and animals will concur, there is not the meagerest evidence that these creatures can foretell the weather of a coming season. A careful study of the prophecies based upon their actions and appearances will certainly show that the prophets contradict each other and cancel each other's authority by so doing; that any particular seer has been wrong about as many times as he has been right. The trouble is the gullible public forgets the errors and gapes in amazement at the guesses that proved right. Having now disposed of all our rivals, we wish to make our own prognostication. There is going to be an early winter. Indeed, also, perhaps. You don't know. We don't know. In all frankness we don't think anybody knows, nor in the present state of long-time weather forecasting can know. Nor will the birds and animals help him. They don't know.

On the other hand we have a sneaking suspicion that this early fall migration is to be correlated with an early spring migration of which you will remember we made remark in the last Newsletter. Our feeling is that when the birds come early, they proceed to perform their domestic duties in the usual length of time. This means that they finish earlier than usual, having started earlier, and that then the customary urges to depart appear in the usual time after the ending of the domestic cares,-- hence the departure at an early date. This we hasten to add, is a surmise. But we dare to hope that if some of you would care to compare the meteorological records with the migrational records, both of which are available for study, over a suitable period of years that you will find that there is little or no correlation between weather and the fall migration of birds, and that there is a correlation between early spring migration and early fall departure. You may protest that there is a relationship between the spring migration and the weather. To this I would assent, at least so far as concerns the earlier part of the spring migration. But that is a reaction to weather. The prophets are concerned with an anticipation of weather not a reaction to weather. We might point out in that respect that the early spring migration this year in no way foretold a long hot summer. The summer has on the whole been a relatively cool season. Beware the prophets of weather in whatever guise.

During the last two months the southward migration has been heavy and persistent with only short gaps between "waves". Beginning with shorebirds in July it reached its peak in great surges of warblers and flycatchers in August and early September. One of the greatest waves, the first large passage of warblers, came on August 12 and 13. On the latter day we spent two hours of the early evening with Alex. Cringan in upper Cedarvale. During this short time we saw 14 species of warblers, 5 species of flycatchers, and, of all things, a blue-grey gnatcatcher, not to speak of other birds. Warblers have been extremely common throughout the migration and species like the Cape May, Wilson's and Tennessee which we usually think of as among the less common varieties have frequently been as numerous as birds like the chestnut-sided, black-throated green and the redstart. The most tantalizing experience of the whole migration is to hear the night air full of the calls of passing birds. You may recognize the sibilant little notes of warblers, the fuller, richer notes of thrushes, and the louder calls of some larger birds but except for an occasional individual you are forced to stand and listen to the passing multitude, unseen, un-nameable, yet provokingly present. Most of the birds have now gone, but the bulk of the sparrows has yet to go through and many stragglers will be seen until November.

The most interesting observation which we have made during this period came on the afternoon of September 8 at Sunnyside. It was a dull, dark afternoon, warm, but with a strong east wind spitting rain. We had scarcely alighted from the streetcar near the "Wonderbar" and crossed to the shore side of the boulevard before we found our attention rivetted by a tiny bird swimming near shore. We thought to ourself, -- "Phalarope", at once and hurried down to the water's edge to make certain. Phalarope it was, alright, spinning about and feeding busily in the wind-ruffled water. Moreover, to our delight it was a northern phalarope, which we had never before seen. Now sure we rushed back to the "Wonderbar" and called up Jim Baillie. He hesitated only a moment -- he had never seen the bird in Toronto -- and then said he could be right down.

When we got back to the water the bird was still there, swimming towards Ellis Avenue outlet. Not wanting to frighten it, and feeling it would stay about, we left it and turned toward the Humber. For a few minutes a man and two boys evidently hunting frogs for bait, made us apprehensive that they would scare it away but they

withdrew from the shore and our fears abated. Meanwhile we examined the gulls and terns near the Humber. While doing this the wind stiffened and blew in great gusts across the point. In the midst of the blow a shorebird came weaving by the point. We saw at once that it was the phalarope and again feared that it was going, but after zig-zagging about over the Humber mouth, it beat back into the wind, veering and tacking with expert skill, and finally made a landing on the point at the eastern edge. This put our fears to rest but we did wish Jim would hurry. Actually he arrived in 36 minutes, very quick time. After meeting we went towards the point by the Humber where the bird had been swimming behind a bit of sheltering debris when last seen.

Sure enough it was there, and we examined it at will. Standing within 12 feet we could see every detail: its slender, elongated neck; squarish head; thin, long bill; the snipe-like pattern on the back with its golden V and yellow-edged brown feathers; the dark wings which had a sharply-defined white stripe when raised; the white underparts; shell-pink tones on the sides of the neck, merging with dusky under the chin; a few dark hues on the shoulder joint; a whitish forehead; black phalarope eye-mark and dark head, really reddish brown in good light -- this dark colour forming a definite stripe down the nape to the back. Always the bird was incredibly active, bobbing ceaselessly, turning here and there, constantly picking some minute food from the water. A passing dog caused it to fly a few feet but it returned at once paying no attention to us. We tried to get closer and in fact got to within ten feet. Then stopping, we kept still. Whereupon the unbelievably tame bird let the wind push it to no more than five feet of us! It apparently found unrestricted nourishment in the dirty water so full of uprooted weeds and floating trash. No doubt the east wind, which the bird always faced, was driving the food into this wee cove. It had no care for the waves, riding them like a bufflehead or old squaw, sometimes fluttering its wings as a stronger wave nearly broke over it, or stepping onto a floating board which got into its way. When it did this we could see its bluish-grey legs.

We had been watching this fascinating and accommodating bird for some time when the attention of some other shorebirds was attracted to it. One or two of these flew over it several times, clearly curious. You could see them say to themselves, "What sort of shorebird creature is this? It swims!" One semi-palmated sandpiper dived at the phalarope repeatedly as if to drive away the queer stranger. The phalarope paid no heed. Finally, the semi-palm, as if in admiration or exasperation literally tried to settle in the water beside the swimmer! Almost it said, "If this fellow can do it, so can I!" and it was so evident that the phalarope was garnering a grand meal. However, the semi-palm learned he was no swimmer, and flew off in disgust to the sandy point. We hated to leave. Once more we had had a magnificent demonstration of what experiences even a cold and gusty day can produce for the bird-watcher.

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