

# THE NEWSLETTER

OF THE TORONTO FIELD NATURALISTS' CLUB

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Mrs. Olive Barfoot, a member of the Club, sends in the following account which indicates the extraordinary energy and persistence of the house wren. We quote: "In an unused mail box [at Terra Cotta] I found a deserted wren's nest. The large mound of sticks interested me so much that I started in and counted up to 900 sticks. I had to stop then as the insects were also very numerous! The sticks counted measured from about eight inches in length at the most to tiny bits at the least. In addition there was, of course, the usual dried grass of the nest. Earlier in the season I had the fun of watching this wren tug the large sticks through the letter slot into the box. This nest was probably the home of a second brood." Some of the more enquiring members of the Club might calculate how much energy was used by the wren in making such an accumulation. When they figure that out then they might estimate the number of insects it took to provide the energy!

Such accumulations of sticks are customary with house wrens though this is the first time we have heard of anyone taking the pains to count the number of sticks. We are glad it was a member of our Club who showed that kind of initiative. When the male house wrens first arrive in the spring, ahead of their mates, they proceed to fill up any suitable nesting places in their neighbourhood with sticks in order to keep other birds from using them. After mating has taken place, the female will usually choose one of these marked sites, throw out all the sticks and start all over again! The final nest-building is carried on by both male and female. An unmated male will sometimes go on nest-building on his own. And mated males have been known to spend their free time building one or two nests in the vicinity of the one where the female is brooding. These nests are just rough accumulations of sticks and other material. Once in a while the female will finish off one of these piles to use for a second brood. In any case the entrance holes to all the accumulations will usually be blocked with sticks to keep out other birds.

The site of this nest in an unused mail box is also of interest. It reminds us that house wrens will choose almost any kind of a cavity in which to nest. Incidentally, so far as unused rural mail boxes are concerned, house wrens might very well have to compete with starlings for possession since those belligerent foreigners show a strong predilection for such nesting sites as anyone who travels country roads in the springtime with their eyes open has reason to know. Now a battle between our doughty house wrens and their bellicose immigrants would be a thorough roughhouse to watch. Someday one of us may be favoured with such a spectacle. In that eventuality our advice would be to place your money on the smaller birds. Such buzzing ferocities they can be. Remember, a hummingbird can intimidate an eagle.

House wrens will come readily to nesting boxes. On the other hand, if they find some other cavity more to their taste, they will nest in it right beside the box. We saw two examples of this during the summer on the Melville golf course when one fine wren box on a fence post was snubbed in favour of a knot hole in the adjacent post, and another box, quite the right proposition, was passed by for an old woodpecker's hole in a cedar tree. A curious site for a nest was found on the farm of Prof. Ralph Flenley, a member of the club. This was also at Melville. The wrens had built in an ancient fence post whose interior was apparently much rotted away near the ground. However, the wrens did not enter by any convenient hole on the side of the post near the ground, for there was none. Instead they found their door in the middle of the top of the post! Thus they dove down into the nest as if they were entering the funnel of a ship. Moreover, this funnel was from two to three feet in depth! How they navigated it with such speed and dispatch as they did remains for us quite incomprehensible. The hole was certainly not wide enough to permit the use of spread wings so that the birds must have had to simulate brown creepers in their goings and comings. Nevertheless a wren, well laden with insects or caterpillars for the young, would hesitate at the entrance only a moment, not to puzzle the means of ingress but to see if any danger lurked about, and then disappear like magic. In a few

moments the bird would reappear, not crawling laboriously out of the hole, but abruptly as if it had some secret means of propelling itself in one great impulse from the nest, near the bottom of the post to the top where it popped out like a jack-in-the-box. The process remained an unsolved mystery. We remember encountering a similar nest at Melville a year ago, only this one was ensconced at the bottom of a tube of somewhat larger proportions, and was occupied by starlings. The hole, however, was scarcely larger in proportion to the size of a starling than was this one for the wren. It was discovered to be a nesting site when we rapped on the post with a stick, a rewarding practice in nesting time, by the way. The starling, brooding its eggs, no doubt, when we knocked so rudely shot out of that tubular hole as if we had touched off a rocket! Now, how did it do it? You solve the riddle, we couldn't!

While we are speaking of queer wren nests we should mention the one found by a lady near Port Severn in a clothespin bag. The bag was half full of clothespins and was hanging on a line full of drying clothes. The nest was built and occupied between the time when the clothes were hung out to dry and when the housewife came to take them in, a matter of a few hours. She was so touched by this avian intimacy that the wrens were left in possession. They completed their brood and successfully brought up the lot. They had evidently got a taste for laundry, however, for the next nest was built in the seat of the same lady's slacks when hung on the line to dry! This time the lady was not so tolerant. The structure was dumped out, and the persistent wrens took to a proper wren box instead.

Within the last month several members of the Club have told us that the robins have gone. It is true, no doubt, that many robins have left for the south but actually a very large number of robins is still with us. What has happened is that the robins have quit their nesting areas and have flocked together at points where food is plentiful. When they have finished nesting, robins gather in flocks and fly about the country in search of the wild fruit which will constitute the main part of their food until the next spring. Just now in mid-October they are living on the last of the elderberries and wild grapes, the hawberries and mountain ash berries. Anyone who knows where any of these shrubs, vines or trees grow will be able to find plenty of robins. The robins will stay as long as the fruit lasts, even all winter in many cases.

Another way of finding robins at the present time is to locate a night roost. Community roosts are customary with robins when nesting duties are finished. Old males and young of the first brood resort to such night roosts even in summer. There are several of these roosts in Toronto as the careful study made by Mr. and Mrs. J. Murray Speirs, members of the Club who now live in Ancaster, has shown. The largest known roost is that in Lawrence Park where thousands of birds go every night. Another large one is in Wychwood. This roost happens to be near our house so that we are able to see robins going to their nightly rest every evening. They are still passing by scores each night during the half hour before dark. Since they come from all directions to a roost this means that observers placed in a circle about the site of a roost would be able to make a very close estimate of the number of birds occupying the roost. Incidentally, it was by such a method that the Speirs made their counts at the Toronto roosts. Large numbers of starlings, grackles and various blackbirds also occupy these roosts with the robins. It is of interest that most starlings arrive much earlier at the roost than the robins. They apparently like to sit around and jabber before going to sleep.

Another comment made to us recently by a member is that birdlife has reached an uninteresting stage in the season's development. This statement was rather baffling for such a possibility had not occurred to us. For us bird life is always interesting. Birds come and go, are numerous or few, but they are always alluring and worth watching. To test this member's view, we made two short trips to Cedarvale last week. Cedarvale is a limited area in the heart of the city. It would provide a good measure of the birdlife about in an area easily available to a great many people. It does not have the ponds of High Park, nor the marshes of the Humber, nor the beaches of the lakefront. Indeed in the part between St. Clair Ave. and Bathurst St. where we went, it is an overgrown dump, an old orchard, a tangled vale with a tiny stream, and some fields.

The afternoon of October 6 was sunny with a blue sky striped by long streamers of cirrus clouds. We arrived on the dump a little after four o'clock. The air was cool and exhilarating. A quick survey of the sky showed no hawks moving so we concentrated our attention on the ground and grasses. Across the dump the dry titter of a junco caught our ear. Consequently we went over to the edge of the tiny ravine just above St. Clair bridge. Standing on the brink we could see the flashes of white tail feathers as juncos darted in and out amongst the weeds below us. A song sparrow chunked, then another, and another. Several myrtle warblers sped about, their yellow rumps gleaming like tail lights in the sun.

Walking northward we rounded the corner of the dump and stopped short for below us now on the other slope were countless robins. This hill is covered with hawthorns, and every tree had dozens of robins. They clamoured, complained, fought and ate all in mad haste so that the air was full of sound and flying bodies dashing from tree to tree. Sliding down the dump slope, we soon stood beside the stream in the midst of these hordes. To the robins were added tens and tens of myrtle warblers that we had disturbed from the golden rod and asters. It was like being in Union Station at a rush hour. Birds flashed by in all directions, dozens in the air at once, others gathered on the branches of haws, or on the tops of weeds, spectators, intent on looking over the intruder. Robins, starlings, song sparrows and white-throats sped before us as we walked slowly along the stream taking up their positions in every shrub and tree like the watchers at a royal procession. More than one robin and sparrow burst into song at our passage. Wading hip-deep among the golden rod and asters, we flushed so many myrtle warblers that their yellow rumps looked like vagrant blossoms detached from the faded goldenrod by the breeze. Now and then a warbler popped out of the golden rod clumps that was not a myrtle. Its ashen head, entirely green body, lined duskily on the underparts, and brightening on the rump gave it away. It was an orange-crowned warbler. No orange crown is visible at this time of year but at this season you have a chance to study a bird right at your feet which is very rare in spring migration, and which then usually travels high in the trees. This bird is by no means the rarity which many observers believe it to be. During October any good weed patch, especially golden rod clumps, is likely to give the watcher orange-crowned warblers to study.

At Cardinal Corner there is the thickest tangle we have ever seen. We had to fight our way through burs, reeds, and vines to stand at the corner. There were no cardinals today. It is a curious fact that cardinals are less in evidence in September and October than at any other time of year, even after a very successful breeding season as this one has been. There was no touch of colour to be seen, however. Overhead a fine elm spread its yellow mantle to the sunlight. Everywhere trees and shrubs were mellowing from green to yellow. The dark pines on the northern slope were beginning to stand out in winter distinction. Lemon-leaved grapevines festooned nearby willows and haws. Garlands of wild cucumbers, like crazy strings of pale jade Japanese lanterns hung in profusion on shrubs and trees. The last serried ranks of purple asters; the bared raspberry canes, ranging from baby blue to mauve and magenta in hue; the brilliant red leaves of the sumachs all added richer tones to the world of green and yellow.

Birds were here, too. White-throats, summoned by the K-note, hopped about midst the thickets complaining of the disturbance. Myrtles chipped. Robins, song sparrows and even a catbird joined in the chorus of complaint. Meanwhile we could look at them all at our pleasure. A very yellow palm warbler came out from some seeds on to the mud by the stream. We wondered if it could be "the" yellow palm, but could not be sure. From a telephone wire up the slope a flycatcher was hunting his insect prey. As we studied it we found that it was a pewee! This astonished us as we had never seen this bird after September 28. This year we had not seen one since September 17. So we marked down our latest record for the pewee. A chattering behind us caused us to turn just in time to see a dark little winter wren dashing back to cover under some willow

roots. A flash of wings seen in the corner of the eye directed our gaze upwards to a fine sparrow hawk shooting across from the old orchard towards Bathurst St.

From thicket to thicket we pushed on up to the field below the Bathurst viaduct then back on the western slope to the dump above St. Clair. How many flowers were still in bloom! The last asters; here and there a yellow head of golden rod; dandelions, blue chicory, tansy, pink and white clover, yellow and white melilot, sunflowers, butter and eggs, sow thistles and viper's bugloss. And in the midst of all these were birds. Our last bird sight of this walk was a noble white-crowned sparrow just below our feet over the edge of the dump. In an hour and a half we had seen 28 kinds of birds, including 200 robins, 150 myrtle warblers, a gray-checked thrush and a towhee.

On Saturday afternoon, October 10, we got back to Cedarvale for another short walk, -- about two hours this time. It was again a bright, sunny day though it was cooler and dark clouds threatened in the north. The scene had not changed much. The greater fluffiness of the milkweed pods told us that the season was a little older. The great elm at Cardinal Corner had lost most of its yellow mantle. But it was still a world of green and yellow with a dash of sprightlier colours. How lovely were the yellow hawthorns, freckled with carmine and vermilion fruit. And the purple fox grapes peeking from beneath lemon-coloured leaves. How much had the bird life changed in four days was the question that concerned us this afternoon.

First of all the ravine near St. Clair Ave. was almost deserted. There were no robins in the haws at the corner. The myrtles were scarce. No sparrow hawk flashed overhead, nor did we see a pewee. The graycheek was gone, and the kinglets were few. Nevertheless there were two towhees instead of one. Near the path to Forest Hill Village we found an olive-backed thrush in a haw thicket. If there were fewer myrtles there were eight orange-crowns instead of four! And Cardinal Corner gave us our first tree sparrow of the season, our earliest record by two days, and three rusty blackbirds. Later near Bathurst viaduct we were able to entice a rusty so close by using the K-note that we could almost feel the velvety gloss on the rusty breast.

The highlight this afternoon came when we met a fellow we had never seen before carrying field glasses, and wearing a Peterson in his hip pocket. He told us that he had seen an owl in the hawthorns near the old orchard. He thought it might be a long-eared. This got us all excited as we had not seen one of these owls this year. We had never seen one in Cedarvale. He had flushed the owl which had flown over to the western bank, so he thought. We bent our steps in that direction immediately. Crossing the stream, we investigated the cedars, pines and thickets right up to the apartment houses without result. Then we followed the path northward along the slope where it plunges into the midst of dense thickets of sumach and other shrubs. It was a hopeful quarter but as we stood in the dark centre of the thickets and peered about it seemed that we would be disappointed. Just as hope was sinking a bit, the owl flushed directly over our heads, and went rocking off in the direction whence we had come, weaving its way through the thickets. We raced after and in a few moments found it again sitting in a sumach. But it flushed once more being very nervous at all this commotion. It flew northward again so we turned our tracks another time. Now we crept forward cautiously. A robin began to complain a short distance ahead. Some juncos and kinglets joined in. As we came in sight of the robin we stopped and searched the sumachs on the bank above us. By following the direction of the robin's gaze we found our owl. And this time he did not flush. Long ears raised, this beautiful bird of mottled browns sat quite still, oblivious to the small birds, peering steadily at us, but apparently considering itself well hidden. We studied it long and left it undisturbed as we turned to go. The owl was so absorbing of attention that our unknown helper got away before we discovered his name. Thus our two October walks in Cedarvale lead us back to the same opinion with which we started. Birds are always interesting.