

THE NEWSLETTER

OF THE TORONTO FIELD NATURALISTS' CLUB

Number 32

November 1942

The advantages of the Toronto region for the observation of birds is seldom appreciated by Toronto birders. They take them for granted. Outside of the Point Pelee area, which is probably the most favoured spot in Canada east of the Rockies, the Toronto region is as well situated for bird observation as any area in Ontario, and in most respects better so. Now that war conditions are confining us more and more closely to our home areas we may well be glad that it falls to our lot to be confined to the Toronto region. We stand almost at the point of the spearhead which the Carolinian Zone thrusts up along the shore of Lake Ontario (there is an island of Carolinian influence east of Toronto in Prince Edward County), and so may hope to see many of the southern birds which inhabit the shore of Lake Erie. On the other hand we are far enough north so that many winter visitors from the northern forests and the tundra come to us in the cold months, finding in our midst the far south of their winter sojourn. Often these winter visitants, some of our most beautiful birds, fail to penetrate beyond our region. In that case even observers from Hamilton have to come here to seek for crossbills, pine grosbeaks, and Canada jays.

We note this advantage over Hamilton advisedly for Toronto observers are more likely to cast envious eyes towards Hamilton with its fine bay, its beaches and the Dundas Marsh than towards any other place. No doubt, Hamilton, being south and west of Toronto, is more apt to be visited by southern birds and western stragglers but Hamilton's advantage in either respect is small. Her main superiority in the estimate of Toronto observers has been in the number and variety of waterfowl to be seen in the bay and the marsh. But during the last two years the advantage with respect to waterfowl has been with Toronto rather than with Hamilton. The reasons for this are not very clear. The level in the Dundas Marsh has risen appreciably: there is the disturbance caused by the gun-proving station on the bay -- but the result is that there have been more ducks, more gulls, and more waterfowl generally in Toronto.

East and north of Toronto there are no places in the province which can compare in suitability for general observation of birds with this area. Inside the Toronto region (an area of 25-30 miles around the City Hall) Toronto is itself the most favoured spot. This fact was wistfully and a little enviously noted by a member of the Club who lives in Aurora when she remarked, "Down in Toronto you have a doubleheader with the birds". Some moments of reflection upon this cryptic assertion revealed what she meant. We have a lakefront, not to mention our ponds and marshes and Aurora does not. She is right, we can play a doubleheader with the birds, a land game and a water game. Were we limited to inland observation we should be reduced to a short list of birds indeed, especially in winter. How brief a list it would be, could be easily told by some one of our birders limiting himself to observations in Sunnybrook Park during the cold season. Toronto's situation upon the lake shore, and its endowment of bay, marsh and pond vastly increase the number of birds that may be seen. This is due not only to the provision of fitting localities for waterbirds, but also, in winter, to the moderating climatic influence of the lake which creates a narrow belt of territory near the lake in which many individuals from amongst our summer resident birds may survive in relative comfort throughout the wintry months, survive to be counted by the birders. In the last number of the Newsletter we told of walks to an inland spot, Cedarvale, -- this time we will give an account of a walk along the waterfront.

On the morning of November 8th we got up at 6.15. Getting up early is accounted a virtue by some. But crawling out of the covers into the pitch darkness of a winter's morn does not at the moment of emergence appear a very virtuous act. It just seems

silly. Only by dint of stubborn, unthinking persistence can one grapple with cold clothes and proceed towards the rewards to come. If you think about what you are doing you may not do it - but retire to the warm comfort, unwillingly deserted at the clamorous insistence of an alarm clock. And then you will never know what it means to stand on the lake shore with dawn breaking above the lightening waters. This morning we met Van Hatten at eight in the Sunnyside railway station.

When we reached the beach behind the Palais Royale, the sun was just rising from the midst of a bank of clouds over the Island. Streamers of pink and rose shot out across the sky, whilst the edge of the dark cloud bank turned to molten gold. Except for a man and a dog we were alone upon the sand. Rapidly the shadows fled before the climbing sun. The unmoving waters of a becalmed lake became a burnished mirror upon whose breast an incredible number of ducks stirred and swam. From the bathing beach to the Humber there were no fewer than a thousand birds at the most conservative estimate, all inside the breakwalls. So thickly were they massed in places that it seemed quite feasible to walk out to the walls atop their bodies.

That no such familiarities would be countenanced we soon discovered. These birds were extremely wary. Though we walked slowly and circumspectly along the shore the swimmers kept rising from the water when we were from 150-250 feet distant. This is very unusual for the ducks which come in behind the breakwalls usually pay but little heed to passers on the beach. At the most they swim out closer to the walls or make their way unhurriedly through the gaps to the open lake. This morning, however, there was a constant patter of agitated feet beating the waters, a steady whirr of wings as we walked westward. At times so many ducks rose together that their take-off was like a distant roll of drums. The extreme caution shown by the ducks made us feel that they must be refugees from areas where they had been subjected to considerable shooting. The sight of men by the water's edge in the dim light of dawn had become a danger signal meaning, "Get away before those fellows get within gunshot".

Inside the breakwalls scaup, both greater and lesser--the bluebills of the hunters -- predominated whereas out on the open lake old squaws constituted the overwhelming bulk of all the birds in sight. Indeed, out on the lake were ducks as far as eyes could see even with added power of strong binoculars. There were at least 2000 old squaws that could be reasonably identified. Yet beyond them were untold crowds at whose numbers and identities we dared not guess. Blacks, mallards, red-heads, and mergansers were inter-mingled with the shoreward scaup. Most conspicuous of all in the motley flock were the male buffleheads, smart, saucy, immaculate, as always the sprightliest of the winter ducks. There were some sixty buffleheads in all, a large number hereabouts. The eighty coots bobbing perkily about created comic relief from the masses of stodgy scaup. A white-throated, stiff-necked Holboell's grebe, framed in one of the gaps, caught our attention like an extraordinary individual at a crowded reception.

Grebes will assemble in large masses or rafts like scaup, though never pressing quite so close together as the bluebills. There was such a raft of Holboell's grebes off Lorne Park a good part of the summer. What is it that makes birds mass together in this way? Is it the kind of gregariousness that makes most men love a crowd? Do they get a feeling of strength or good fellowship from such gatherings? Old squaws in a mass gabble at each other incessantly, -- hence their name. Scaup, however, are silent birds. One might think that in the winter they went in masses for warmth, or to keep a bit of water from freezing by the movements of so large a number of bodies. Since they foregather before the freeze-up, though, that idea would not seem to have much weight. We are driven back to the theory that it is plain sociability. No doubt it is the same urge that makes starlings, redwings, bobolinks and many other birds to travel in vast flocks during the winter. Yet some birds, it seems, have scarcely any of this feeling. Woodpeckers, for example, travel about singly, or at most in twos and threes. It is a line of investigation well worth following up.

As we walked along the shore towards the Humber mouth an idea we have long harboured was greatly strengthened; namely, that the ducks which are to be found later in the morning in these waters are a mere remnant of the flocks that roost there by night. As flock after flock rose before us, flying out to the open lake, there alighting, our theory was confirmed. By the time we had reached the Humber hardly more than a hundred ducks remained in the stretch of water along which we had walked. The great wariness of the ducks this morning may have increased the number of those departing. Yet it must still be true that anyone who wishes to see the waterfowl in numbers must plan to do so at dawn or soon after. Our experience may also explain why the ducks we usually see at Sunnyside do not fly away. Since as a rule we arrive later in the day the ducks which are there must be the less scary individuals that did not leave when the others were frightened off. However that may be, we had found a reward for getting up early. The earliest observers sees the ducks. The next fellow sees what's left.

Other birds than waterfowl were rare along the shore. There were no shorebirds save four killdeer which kept just ahead of us from the bathhouses to the Humber. They would wait until we came almost up to them, whereupon they would arise, filling the air with complaining cries, fly a short distance ahead and settle. The performance would be repeated as soon as we approached. Before we reached the Humber this play had gone through twelve acts, each one the same. Perhaps this had something to do with the precipitate flight of so many ducks. It is a well-known fact that hunters are often exasperated with killdeers for frightening off game birds.

Migrational flight over the beach was slight, being restricted to a few flocks of blackbirds (rusties, cowbirds, grackles), goldfinches and two pipits. The two last are the only such birds we have seen this fall.

We decided to follow the Humber upstream on the east side. Hence we walked up the road until we struck the path going down the cliff to Marsh Number Three. This marsh was full of ducks, too, only here baldpates, blacks and mallards formed almost the entire population. Amongst them was a sprinkling of buffleheads, coots and ring-billed gulls. We had not gone far along the path before we came upon a Chinese stand-in in a foot or two of water raking! This astonished us so much we stood and gaped. Evidently this worried the Chinese since he stopped raking, returned our stare for a moment, then grunted an anxious "Hello". We then asked him what he was doing. When he replied, "Digging potatoes", we were more aghast than ever. For a moment we thought he might be pulling our leg, but decided that he must be after some roots for which he knew no other English name. We puzzled over this for some time without reaching any satisfactory conclusion. Some days later we consulted Prof. Lehmann and he suggested that the man might have been seeking the roots of cattail rushes. Apparently these were once eaten by the Indians. Our consultant did not recommend them, however.

We followed the east path to Bloor Street and found a good many land birds on the way. One of them was a Maryland yellow-throat, discovered in the reeds of Marsh Number Five. A low chattering note first attracted our attention to this bird. It took a good deal of ploughing through the tangled reeds, and much squeaking before we got a good view of the elusive creature but in the end we were satisfied. This makes our third November record for the species. Whilst looking for it we also raised a swamp sparrow. A few moments later we were able to use the K-note with effect when a pair of cardinals were enticed to within eight feet as we stood still beside a thicket. By the time we had reached Bloor Street we had seen 43 species of birds, a very satisfactory record for November.

Some of the more important of recent observations are the following: an immature golden eagle in the Don Valley, seen by D. Beacham on October 18; a gyrfalcon (black) over Cedarvale, seen by R.M. Saunders on October 18; a Mocking bird at Gormley seen

by A. Smith on October 19; an Arctic three-toed woodpecker in Strathgowan woods, seen by Prof. Dwight on November 4, also by J. McArthur and D. McDonald on November 15; a snowy owl at Leaside seen by E. Shore on November 8; a gadwall at Grenadier Pond seen by K. Nielsen on November 11; a brant at Sunnyside, seen by J. Crosby on November 11; a red-throated loon on Grenadier Pond, seen by A. Smith and R. M. Saunders on November 15. The Carolina wren which spent the winter at Mrs. K. Stilwell's feeding station on Donwoods Road last winter has stayed through the summer and is still to be seen.

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We have had the following interesting communication from a member of the Club who now lives in Hanover, Miss I.E.Park. She writes: "It may surprise you to learn that beaver abound in this locality to the extent that there is an open trapping season for them during the month of November and it was my privilege to see one at close range last week for the first time although they have been in the vicinity several years. The unlucky fellow I beheld was a dead 35-pounder which had been lured into a neighbour's trap."

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We regret that due to existing conditions - paper shortage and the higher cost of having our "Newsletter" mimeographed - it will only be possible to send future copies of the "Newsletter" to 1943 members.