

THE NEWSLETTER

OF THE TORONTO FIELD NATURALISTS' CLUB

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A few days ago we received an interesting letter from Mrs. Lois M. Sisman, one of our members in Aurora. She writes: "These are a few bird notes from our district. I have been feeding three grackles in my small garden for the past month and my male flicker called on me on November 1; he visited each suet holder and found them empty so flew away in disgust. However he came back again; we have a small feeding tray just outside of our kitchen window for chickadees and nuthatches, and much to our delight he made a desperate attempt to get into this tray but of course was not successful. We are pleased to have him come back every few days for suet. On Sunday, December 6, I had two male evening grosbeaks feeding on the maple keys and later during the afternoon walk to St. Andrew's woods, I saw a flock of purple finches, some very brilliant males in the group, about fifteen birds altogether. We have one lonely robin in town. He seems to spend most of his time in a mountain ash tree, just sitting. On Saturday, December 12, I drove to the Vandorf area, 5th concession and walked miles looking for those Canada jays, but saw only a flock of redpolls, about 100."

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On November 22 we had one of the most extraordinary and one of the most satisfying of our experiences with birds. It was a beautiful setting for observation, a bright, blue sky, brilliant sunlight, and a land encased in gleaming frost. Every tree, every shrub, every blade of grass bore a dainty burden of crystals. The landscape was a study in silver, green and brown, framed in an arch of vibrant blue.

We wandered through the frosted evergreens along the Sunnybrook drive looking for owls. Of these there were none. At the bridge we paused to watch the running water. In the quieter parts it was filmed with ice. Elsewhere it was a mirror of the glistening world that edged its banks. Passing through the police quarters we climbed the lane past the squeaky windmill to the field on the top of the hill. We visited the little nursery but only succeeded in rousing a flock of tree sparrows from the shrubs. Re-crossing the field to the north we followed the lane eastward towards the ravine hearing a longspur fly overhead as we did so. The dry harsh rattle it gives soon guided our eyes to the bird. From the trees across the ploughed field to the north a large hawk skimmed circling over the field a moment, and then sailing to a poplar tree on the edge of the ravine ahead. When we focussed on it we could see that it was a redtail. As we watched the hawk the air was suddenly full of the calls of finches---goldfinches and purple finches. The flock, flying along the edge of the ravine, settled near the hawk. Snatches of song from the purple finches raised my hopes of finding crossbills amongst them -- but when we had reached the woods and were carefully getting nearer, the first hawk slipped away down the valley, then the finches flew off before we could get a good look. An owl's pellet near our feet caught our eye and we scoured the hemlock above for the owl, but, though there were droppings, there was no bird. This was the low point of the walk.

A few steps further on brought us within hearing distance of a woodpecker's tapping. Inasmuch as a three-toed woodpecker had been seen at Strathgowan woods a few days before we were at once very alert. We made our way slowly along the path that runs westward up the little side ravine. It was some two hundred feet before we spied a burnt pine stub in the path ahead. Immediately we thought "three-toed" to ourselves as this bird has a well-known predilection for burnt-over pine barrens. But no, the woodpecker was not there. However, perhaps twenty or thirty feet further there he was, a splendid Artic three-toed woodpecker, tapping vigourously on a half-dead white pine. Our first

reaction was one of surprise at the size of the bird. Our only other observations of this species have been fleeting ones, save one in Cedarvale in 1934 which had become dimmed in recollection, and we had come to think of the three-toed as little larger than the downy. But this bird was larger than a hairy and very stockily built. To our delight it was a male, the first we had ever seen.

For ten or fifteen minutes we watched the bird at work. It would tap the trunk rapidly for a while over quite an area until at last it would find a spot that satisfied it, whereupon it proceeded to flake off the bark with sidewise strokes, delivered after the manner of a chopper. Having bared a circular spot, the size of a silver dollar or a bit larger, down to the reddish inner bark, it would start a rapid drilling and probing process, which seemed to be as much pushing through soft material as drilling, though at moments it resembled a dentist's drilling remarkably. This went on until the bird's bill was buried up to and including the first feathers of the face, --- almost to the eyes in one case, --- when, in a few seconds, the bill would emerge holding a white grub in triumph. Doubtless this grub was a wood borer of some sort. After this morsel was swallowed the three-toed wiped its bill on a bit of bark and started to tap the trunk again until it had discovered another hidden grub to excavate. All the holes were small, only large enough to permit the bill's entry. Since the bird had been working for some time on this tree the trunk was covered with signs of its labour. They seemed to us to be quite distinctive, very different from the marks of other woodpeckers' work. The trunk was spotted with red circles, each with a small hole at the centre, through which a grub had been pulled out. Other woodpeckers drill holes of some size, but do not in our experience lay bare section of inner bark, and then merely pierce the crucial spot with a hole the size of the bill.

After a while we decided to try to get as close as we could. When within eighteen feet of the tree, the bird remaining unperturbed, our attention was suddenly diverted by the sound of another woodpecker at work not far away. The peculiar resonance of the tapping so resembled the noise made by the bird in sight that we at once decided that it must be another three-toed though this seemed unbelievable. To see one three-toed in five years at Toronto is great good fortune. To see two is beyond expectation. Nevertheless when we traced the sound to another derelict pine tree we found a second three-toed at work? And this one, to cap the experience was a female! As we watched the male flew over and lit on the same tree!! For a moment he tapped a bit. Then, apparently jealous, or desirous of showing authority, he dashed at the female. She darted around the trunk. Round and round the tree they flashed, until the female settled on a nearby tree and the male returned to his tapping. In a moment the female came back to the same tree as the male, and started to work some feet above him. This time he eyed her a bit but offered no opposition.

With the sun shining full upon them they were a handsome pair. The yellow crown of the male shone like a burnished gold coin, whilst the dark nape and back, which looks black in death, glistened in steely-blue iridescence. Blue and gold, a striking combination of colours. The dark barring on breast and flanks added a somewhat bizarre touch, yet one not out of place. The whole colour scheme was one that would provide remarkably effective camouflage against dark trunks, and in a deep forest where light and shadow are more sharply defined. The solidly dark back would be particularly suited for concealing the bird against a burnt trunk.

The ability of these birds to creep up or down the trunk with great rapidity was another uncommon habit. They backed down, of course, tail first as do other woodpeckers. But, whereas other woodpeckers proceed by hops and drops, these birds appeared to place one foot after the other. The movement was so rapid, however, that we cannot be entirely certain of this.

Having watched the actions of the birds closely for some time we again set out to approach as near as might be. Walking forward slowly and with marked caution we were astonished to see them go on with their work, unafraid, as we crept to within twelve feet, then ten feet, eight feet, six feet, at last to the tree itself! There we stood, in utter amazement, catching the chips in our hands as the two birds knocked them off the trunk!!! Once or twice we had to close our eyes to save them from falling bits of bark. At the nearest we were only two feet from the male. He cocked one eye at us for a second. Deciding that we were harmless he went calmly about the important business of grub-getting.

Every detail was as clear, even clearer with a live bird in the sunlight, as if we were in the Museum, holding a skin in the hand. The flecks of white in the primaries, the white outer tail feathers, the three toes, the whisker marks, even the yellowish rim to the dark eye stood out. When the male dug out a grub we saw first the grub, then the gulp that took it in, and the lump rolling down the inside of the throat. As he finished this job the male remembered the female working above. He made another dash at her, and again they swept madly around the trunk in a rush and roar of wings. We had to withdraw a few paces for fear of getting hit as they shot past our face, inches away, the wind of their passing puffing into our nostrils. Eventually the female settled right in front of our eyes, two feet away and the male went to work higher up, probably on the excavation where the female had previously been, and from which he had ousted her. In a short while, whether because of our nearness or for some other reason we could not say, the female decided that another tree would be a better place. She flew off, giving a low, scarcely audible cry as she went. This sounded like "wee-wee" and had a nasal quality that reminded us of the nuthatches. The male craned his head away from the trunk to see her go. When she landed on another pine a few yards distant he returned to work, but not long after he hopped onto a twig, perching like a robin across the twig, finally taking off in pursuit of the female. The two birds seemed to be travelling together. One would like to know if they had been a mated pair last summer or were simply two individuals that happened to become travelling companions. When the two eventually disappeared we saw them go with a reluctance that was tempered by the deep satisfaction of having been able to study these unusual birds so closely, a feeling, we may say, that far outweighs the thrill of seeing some rarity for an instant that flits and is gone.

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Several times in the Newsletter we have pointed out the variety and number of birds which are to be seen around Toronto during the winter time. A few days ago James L. Baillie showed us a list of the birds which he has seen in the Toronto region during the months of December, January and February in the last twenty years. The list came to a total of 104 species. Lest the reader draw the conclusion that it takes twenty years to accumulate a total of this sort we hasten to say that we drew up our own list, covering the last eight years, and found that it totalled exactly 100 species. The conclusion to be drawn from this is that there are about 100 kinds of birds to be seen in this region during the winter, and that any active birder will find this to be so over a relatively short period. We suspect that the bulk of this hundred species could be found in two or three winters. At any rate there are always plenty of birds to be seen around Toronto.

To test this idea we went to High Park and Sunnyside yesterday morning (December 20) when the temperature stood at 16 below zero as we left the house. The usual route along the west side of the Park and along the shore to the Humber yields between 20 and 25 species during the winter months. Yesterday morning, though the water behind the breakwalls was frozen solid except at the Humber mouth - and there it was freezing;

though the lake was steaming like a bath tub so that only the rare duck that rose for a moment out of the steam could be seen; though it was bitterly cold everywhere this traditional route produced its 20 species. They were on the sunny banks, in the protected dells, above the tiny open stream but they were there. Two crows, sitting in an oak tree, were fluffed up as large as ravens, but a flock of tree sparrows interspersed their feeding with bits of song.

The number of cardinals seeking shelter in the ravines is evident to any observer who is getting about these days. This is evidently a regular winter procedure. Places like Cedarvale, Harvie's Glen, the Humber and Don valleys are annual gathering places. Tom Russell reports the sight of numerous cardinals near the Old Mill on December 6; John Crosby and Robert Lanning saw 19 of these birds in the same area on December 19. The cold spell through which we are going, is the most severe weather to which the cardinals have been subjected since their arrival in numbers in this region. We await with some anxiety the passing of the winter to know if they can survive. Whether or not they do may depend to a large extent upon the naturalists and their feeding stations. Now is the time to put out food for these birds. Cardinals prefer sunflower seed but will eat other seeds and cracked corn. Such food can be bought most cheaply in large quantities at the seed stores downtown. It would be advisable for several families or individuals to buy their supply at one time so as to take advantage of this fact. At any rate feed the cardinals, and the other birds, but it is these beautiful southerners that need the special attention most.

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Professor Dwight has just told us of a noteworthy instance of the effect of the unusual cold snap in the city on birds. On Saturday night, December 19th, some twenty pigeons crowded into the shelter of a gable on a house at 10 Lytton Boulevard. The next morning two of these birds were found dead on the roof of a garage below the gable. On Monday morning three more pigeons were discovered. We suspect that these birds died because of lack of food, a condition which would lower their resistance to the cold. The bodies of the birds should be examined, however, before final decision can be made to make certain that they were not diseased birds.

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We are asked by the Executive Council to state again that this Newsletter, now in its fifth year of publication, has been, and is prepared, i.e., compiled, if there are contributions from members; or written, if there are not, by Richard M. Saunders.

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