

THE NEWSLETTER

OF THE TORONTO FIELD NATURALISTS' CLUB

Number 36

March, 1943.

For days now the air about the city has resounded to the raucous calls of that harbinger of spring, the crow. No doubt some of the voices that swell the growing chorus come from the throats of birds that have spent the winter with us. There have been quite a few this season. But the greater number now proclaiming their presence and the forthcoming spring, are black cohorts returning from the south. They began to make their appearance during the thaw in late February, small flocks passing over the city in a northeasterly direction. When the heavy snow of March's first weekend blanketed us the immigration came temporarily to an end. For a day or two the movement of crows was visible. Then on the third day following the storm crows were seen flying to the southwest, in the direction, that is, usually taken in the fall. This continued throughout that day and the next. The only explanation possible for this event seemed to be that the crows, being very sensible birds having found the snow cover to be very heavy and food correspondingly scarce, had turned back towards more suitable regions. Then another thaw set in, the snow melted away under the onslaught of the sun for three days with the result that this last weekend of March 13th and 14th, the crows were once more moving in bound for their summer homes. This time they came in large numbers.

The arrival of the black brethren is a sure herald of spring but which of the sable crew is to be duly discovered by some watchful eye and proclaimed through the press as the "first crow" is a nice question. We fear that the "first crow" like the "first robin", is a myth and must remain so, thanks to those hardy members of these avian tribes which brave our wintry blasts with as much success as though they were the gentler breezes of Virginia or Carolina. The day when the corvine flocks begin to flap their way across the city, northeastward bound, that we can tell. And so, too, the day when the robins come into the city, present everywhere all at once, that also can be told. But pick the first comer, we cannot do. We should only succeed in picking upon the fat red-breast that has been eating mountain ash berries in the neighbour's tree all winter, or upon the black fellow that has been scavenging about the dumps of the city. No, no. If we must have a "first" arrival, let us seek the first bluebird, the first phoebe, or the first swallow. They, at least, have no wintering relatives to confuse our searches.

Crows are a noisy lot at almost anytime. Even during nesting they cannot desist from bits of conversation, a fact that often gives away the presence of the nest. In these days of travel and arrival before the business of breeding has begun, they are particularly vocal. A flock of ten or so of these migrants dipped low over the campus the other day in order to pass very jeering remarks about the students or the professors or just the appearance of things. In the ravine last Saturday there was a very excited flock near Bathurst viaduct. Their jabbering and shouting was so strident that one suspected some hapless owl had been found out in its daytime retreat, or that a passing hawk was being cursed. A close search, however, revealed only crows---a crowd of animated, vivacious spring arrivals telling each other all about the journey north, and each one trying to make his story sound bigger, or at least, drown out the others, all very much like a crowd of people on a picnic.

Any day these first comers may be joined by huge flocks of their kind. Watch the skies on warm sunny days when the wind is from the westerly quarter. You may have the good fortune to spy one of those huge flights that is the nearest thing we have to the one-time migrations of passenger pigeons. Sometimes the crows go by in thousands. One day last spring we stood on the eastern bank of the Humber

near the Old Mill and counted more than seven hundred crows in forty minutes, all coming from the southwest. A longer stay would have run our total into thousands without trouble. On and on they come across the sky, twenty, thirty, seventy, a hundred or more at a time, one group not out of sight before another is in view. In the Mississippi valley, flights have been seen that come two miles wide and which took hours to pass, one, indeed, taking an entire day. In such flights the birds would be counted in hundreds of thousands. It is a well-known fact, in spite of centuries of persecution by men, the crows are now more numerous, tremendously more numerous, than in the days when the colonists first came to America. Man has hounded them and harassed them but he has also destroyed their enemies,-- the hawks, the owls, the ravens, -- and he has created for them an ideal homeland midst his farms, woodlots and parks. The wily crow evades man's attack, and battens upon man's plenty. He is an intelligent bird, the crow, and he profits from his study of man.

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This year, the period from mid-February to mid-March, perhaps the lowest point in the annual bird calendar, has been enlivened by the discovery of a new bird for the lists of Eastern Canada, Ontario and Toronto. Mrs. Margaret Mitchell first reported the appearance of a strange-looking junco among the flock that was visiting her feeding station at Streetsville. After examining the skins at the Museum, she was convinced that her visitor was an Oregon junco. As a result, Mr. Shortt, of the Museum staff, visited her station, was shown the bird and collected (It should be pointed out here that authentic scientific records of the appearance of a new species in a region can be established only by the collecting of a specimen, or specimens, by the proper authorities). A few days later, to everyone's astonishment, a second specimen was sent to the Museum by Dr. E.L. Brereton of Barrie. This bird was likewise collected from among slate-coloured juncos at a feeding station. Both specimens have been tentatively assigned to the Montana subspecies of the Oregon junco. This form is not as highly coloured as the Pacific coast bird though it has all the distinctive features. These are a very dark head--blackish to jet black in hue--; a russet-brown back contrasting sharply with the black head. This colour pattern distinguishes the bird from the common slate-coloured junco. The Oregon junco also has a black bib which turns up at the sides, leaving an edge of grey or white on each side, rather than sending fingers of grey-black down the flanks as in the slate-coloured junco. There is more brown or fawn tone along the flanks than our bird has. It is to be noted, however, that some of the slate-coloured juncos show considerable brown on the flanks and that females and young of our common species have some brown on the back. The sharply contrasted head and back, in addition to the peculiar bib pattern are necessary to identification.

Since the discovery of these two strangers in places some distance apart, it has been felt that it was possible an eastward movement of Oregon juncos had taken place this winter. This would not be unlikely, as there are previous records for this bird on the Atlantic coast in New England. Hence the bird-watchers have been on the look-out, scanning all flocks of juncos with care. Yesterday morning with Art Smith and Bill Smith we were busy on this endeavour in Cedarvale above Cardinal Corner when we saw Cliff Hope coming down the valley. We found that he was intent upon the same pursuit. As we stood talking over what we had seen our ears were stirred by the songs of a flock of birds on the western bank near the Forest Hill path. We walked over. There were tree sparrows, song Sparrows, a white-throat, even, and many juncos. Suddenly one of the juncos feeding in the sun beside a weed stalk caught our eye. We shouted to Cliff and the others hardly daring to believe our eyes, yet from our study of the skins in the Museum, certain that we were looking at an Oregon junco. Cliff, who had prepared the Museum

specimens, confirmed our opinion at once. We were thrilled to the core. This bird before us was the third Oregon junco to be seen in Ontario and the first inside the city limits of Toronto. It was very tame, easily observed, and clearly quite different in appearance from the others. It seems likely there will be others around. So, have a look.

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On the morning of Saturday, March 13th, we spent a short while in Cedarvale ravine. On Boulton Drive near the entrance to the ravine we had been watching gulls circling about over head when our eyes were attracted to a white bird very high above us. Its wings flapping evenly and slowly flashed in the sun. The manner of flight and the size of the bird told us it was no gull. Hastily focussing our binoculars upon it we were astounded to see in our field of vision a magnificent whistling swan, long neck outstretched, tipped by a shining black beak, flying swiftly towards Hamilton Bay. The sight of this bird, which we had never seen before at Toronto, was even more astonishing than that of the flocks of snow geese, which some of the members of the club saw on one of our Wednesday morning walks in Cedarvale last spring. It seems probable that the swan flew across the lake from Niagara, the usual spring meeting place for swans in these parts, circled about the city, and headed off for Hamilton Bay which is on the swan migration route.

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Once more we bring to your attention the lecture to be given at Oakwood Collegiate Institute on the evening of April 2nd, by Mr. Ellsworth Jaeger. Mr. Jaeger is again donating his efforts to the furtherance of war relief in Canada. On this occasion the proceeds of Mr. Jaeger's lecture will be given to the British War Victims' War Relief Fund. Members of the Club are urged to give this meeting their full support. In addition to Mr. Jaeger's lecture, Mr. Hugh Halliday will show a selection of slides made from his own nature photographs.

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The ANNUAL MEETING and NATURALISTS' CONVENTION of the Federation of Ontario Naturalists' will be held on Saturday, April 10th, 1943 in the Royal Ontario Museum.

- 9.30 A.M. - Directors' meeting in Room 64, Royal Ontario Museum.
- 11.00 A.M. - Annual business meeting opened to members in Room 64.
- 2.00 P.M. - Naturalists' Convention in the Royal Ontario Museum Theatre, including a report of the Ganaraska survey and a new sound motion film on Conservation.
- 6.00 P.M. - Buffet supper in the Museum tea room with informal discussion and showing of the Summer Nature School pictures.

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Owing to war conditions, it is necessary to know the exact number of persons wishing to attend the buffet supper. RESERVATIONS MUST BE MADE IN ADVANCE AND AN EXACT NUMBER OF TICKETS ONLY WILL BE PROVIDED. Supper will cost 75 cents per person.

Write: Federation of Ontario Naturalists,
198 College St. Toronto.

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A N N U A L S T A T E M E N T

RECEIPTS

Balance from 1941-42	\$271.45	
Membership Fees (1943)	<u>352.00</u>	<u>\$623.45</u>

EXPENDITURES

Printing	\$174.51	
Postage, mailing and stencils	90.18	
Rent (theatre, committee room)	110.00	
Lecture Expenses	11.06	
Gifts, honoraria, floral tributes	32.44	
Purchase of Guelph Conference Memoranda	25.00	
Affiliation fees	10.50	
Donation to Junior Club Library	<u>10.00</u>	<u>\$463.69</u>
Balance on hand March 15, 1943:		<u>159.76</u> <u>\$623.45</u>

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