

THE NEWSLETTER.

Of The Toronto Field Naturalists' Club

Number 38

October - 1943.

One of the exciting events of the Fall to which we always look forward is the coming of the owls. Some of these cryptic creatures are always with us, to be sure, but in the autumn owls generally begin to move about. They will continue to wander like woodpeckers throughout the winter season. Some owls such as saw-whets are more or less regularly migratory along accustomed routes but most of them seem to move rather aimlessly hither and yon in search of food. Migrant or vagrant, it matters little, for no birds surpass the owls in beauty and interest. They are all worth our attention. And if we keep our eyes open these months of October and November as we tramp the ravines and woods, the parks, and even the city streets we will certainly come upon some startled owl, standing stiffly against a tree trunk, hoping that our eyes will pass him by as a bit of dead limb, as indeed we would did we not know that unusual bulges on trees are likely to turn out to be camouflaged owls.

Of course this fellow may not be standing against the trunk of some open-faced oak or maple but hiding in the depths of a murky evergreen. More likely than not that is where he will be since any owl hates to be found in the daytime when his peculiar advantage of seeing in the dark is no advantage at all. Moreover, he is well aware that his finders, whether chattering squirrel, screaming jay, raucous crow, or hostile man, will make life thoroughly miserable for him. So he seeks the benevolent shadows of pine and hemlock, balsam and cedar. Yet, even there, he is betrayed by his droppings, gleaming white on trunk or branch, on the green needles, or on the ground beneath. Seeing those signs the knowing will peer into the darkness above, to be rewarded by sight of a shadowy figure peering down at them through wide frightened eyes. Sometimes it's a great horned owl who glares at you and patiently asks you, "What the dickens do you mean by playing the peeing Tom in my domain?" Again you may not see him at all before he suddenly flushes from some dark cedar you were just passing by. Then you must follow him to his new perch. It won't be far away as a rule because he wants to get out of sight of all possible pest-erers as quickly as he can. Then if you approach slowly and quietly you will be able to get very close to him, and watch to your heart's content.

Your ears may find an owl for you just as well as your eyes. It works this way. When some pert chickadee, bouncing about in a pine in search of grubs suddenly finds himself a foot from a long-eared owl's face, he sets up such a dee-dee-ing that all his friends and associates for acres around come rushing to investigate and stay to curse the wretched owl. Soon the jays and squirrels will join in. And if the crows come too there will be an unholy clamor. Now where you are out in the woods and hear a racket of that sort don't fail to look it up for you'll more often than not find an owl in the center of it, though once in a while it will be a hawk instead. In either case it's worth your trouble.

Just recently, on October 3rd, Bill Smith and I were walking in the woods near the Holland River Marsh. We were intent on the glorious coloring of the foliage, and on a mixed flock of fall migrants when we heard a tremendous din set up by crows further on. As we looked overhead we could see other crows flying towards the hubbub from all directions. It was, perhaps, fifteen minutes before we came near enough to see a large white pine just crowded with the noisy black horde, and a circle of surrounding trees filling with the incoming sympathetic brethren. Obviously there was an owl in the pine but peer as we might we could not penetrate the dark fastness of this huge tree. However, a hundred feet or more to the north in another pine we did spy a magnificent great horned owl, dark reddish-brown in color, standing close to the trunk about fifty feet above the ground. It was clear that he was not the one on whom the crows were intent. They hadn't found out about him yet. As an experiment Bill pounded on the trunk with a piece of wood. For quite a while the big owl didn't budge -- a reluctance quite understandable in view of the bellowing black mob close by -- but at last he spread his wings and shot from his perch in a long

glide through the trees. Immediately the crows gave chase, their clamor rising in the explosive outburst that always marks such an occasion. But now the other owl also flew, and the crow flock finding itself drawn by two such magnets, split in two, as one owl fled east, the other west. Later we found that others of the party -- Ott Devitt, John Crosby, Art Smith, and Ross Robertson -- from whom we were separated at the time had seen one of the owls as it was flying through the woods.

The day before Art Smith and I had flushed a long-eared owl from a hawthorne grove in upper Cedarvale. We had not seen it to begin with. Realizing that it would not go far we went across the valley to the west side towards which it had flown. There after a brief search we found it sitting in a hemlock. Long-eared owls often move about in large groups at this time of year. Between twenty and thirty have been found roosting at one time in the evergreens that mark the entrance to Sunnybrook Park. For myself, I have never found more than six or seven at any time. Often they are alone like this one in Cedarvale.

There was another one in that ravine, however, a week or so later. It was on Thanksgiving Day afternoon my daughter Sally and I found it. We had walked up to St. Clair Avenue, and were on the way back. There had been quite a few birds, but not on the main path, where there were too many people and dogs. So we turned up along the fence below Ardworld to get to the less disturbed area. As we climbed up towards our goal we heard jays screaming excitedly. Then as we got nearer we could hear chickadees, juncos and the twangy alarums of hermit thrushes. Soon we could see them all dancing about a small hemlock just over the fence. At first we could not see the owl, but squatting down brought him into full view -- a slim grey long-eared owl (the one of the previous week was brown). His eyes showed alarm but he did not move until two shouting boys came ram-paging up the hill. Then he flew, and though he is a big bird in flight neither of the boys noticed him go. As he lit higher up the hill out of sight a new voice was added to the scolding chorus. Killy-killy-killy it rang out above all the others, announcing the owner even before we saw the beautiful sparrow hawk circling over the trees at the top of the hill. This was the first time we had seen a hawk paying any heed to an owl. It was strange to see him join the little birds. Evidently they thought so too, for they soon went quiet and disappeared. When we started for home the killy-killy notes were still ringing in our ears.

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The story of the following extraordinary observation was submitted by Miss Lilian Payne. "On Thanksgiving Day a small group of us were walking alongside the marsh and pool on the property of Mr. Henry Cooper near Gormley. Just ahead of us a stir in the cat-tails caused us to look, and there, not fifteen feet away was an American Bittern. Wandering why it moved but did not move away, we looked again and saw that the bird had a two-foot garter snake by the neck and was trying to kill it or get it into position to swallow.

"Efforts to break the snake's neck did not succeed very well for the snake wrapped its tail around a nearby branch and held on! Whereupon the bird let go the head and grasped it near the tail end. Gradually the Bittern worked its beak along the snake's body until it got one end into its mouth and proceeded to swallow it four inches or so at a time, the snake still wriggling and protesting the process, though more feebly. Finally the snake's head also disappeared, and even then there seemed to be convulsive movements in the bulge in the bird's neck.

"The whole affair took about fifteen minutes, in full view of four spectators, and when we moved on the Bittern was standing head in air, as if it had never seen a snake."

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Out of the many rich experiences of the Summer Nature School comes this description of a most unusual sight of insect life written by Dr. L.E. Jaquith. "Four members of the FON Summer Nature School in Algonquin Park:

Mrs. Metcalfe, Miss Malkin, Mrs. Jaquith and I were near the dam between Joe and Canoe Lakes on July 11, 1943, when we had an entomological adventure. A visitor, one of the Sphex genus, a solitary digger wasp, disturbed us by coming over the ground directly at us as we rested against a perpendicular granite wall eight feet high. It made us all exclaim to see this 1-1/4 inch wasp with its threadlike waist carrying a fat two inch caterpillar many times its own weight. Since some beetles have pulled 850 times their own weight experimentally, the equivalent of a man lifting seventy tons, we should marvel at insects' strength. We were sorry for the wasp but resisted the temptation to help it as it struggled across the ground toward the rock face. Apparently the wasp had injected the usual general anaesthetic both deep and permanent which authorities tell us has also a preservative effect so that the wasp's egg is first incubated, then later fed by this caterpillar meat. The wasp carried the caterpillar with the legs up so that they would not drag while the wasp held his long burden close under its own body.

Proceeding in a straight line, she arrived with her load at the base of this rock where unhesitatingly the ascent began in a direct line over the slightly-weathered smooth surface at 3.35 p.m. For three feet she ascended without stopping, except momentary hesitations, which excited us still more because we marvelled at such strength and speed. Surely she would stop soon, but she did not until she had relentlessly crawled for five minutes to the one yard line. Then she rested for five minutes in the vertical position with no shift of the caterpillar. At 3.45 she continued upward amid encouraging cheers. She climbed faster now to our amazement the next yard taking only two minutes. Still more excitement as the last two feet upward occupied only one minute. This last five feet, done in three minutes, was slightly less perpendicular. As the summit was attained amid jubilation and cries of "Over the top! 3.48!", our wasp walked onward without resting until it had gone for two minutes in a straight line for nine feet over everything in its path. A slight detour would have provided a level route but instead it went across the tops of three inches club mosses, etc. After a one minute rest, a brisk walk of three feet in thirty seconds brought the wasp 'home' at 3.51 $\frac{1}{2}$ where it put down its load for the first time.

This Sphex (Mrs. S.) lifted aside some twigs disclosing a quarter inch diameter hole in the ground. Entering and inspecting took very few seconds before she emerged to drag in the caterpillar ere a bird or enemy should get it. Backing into her front door she quickly used her jaws and fore feet to tug the large caterpillar head-first down this hole which appeared too small. Mrs. S. apparently arranged things underground in nursery and pantry, laid an egg on the caterpillar, and emerged at 3.52 $\frac{1}{2}$ to pick up dirt to drop in the hole, carrying small pebbles or filling it with small bits of wood, all of which were placed with fore feet and carefully stamped down. As nearby filling material was exhausted, pebbles over one-eighth inch diameter were brought from over a foot away until the hole was level. We did not wonder that she flew away at 3.54, agreeing she had done well and that was the last we would see of her. But at 3.55 she returned to inspect the job and immediately collected more material from farther spots and of larger size. Some were dragged and others flown in. Unerringly she picked sticks or objects which were right, wasting no time or effort attempting ones too large or heavy. Heaping and stamping the debris over the egg and caterpillar tomb kept her incessantly busy twelve minutes before final departure.

Telling our entomological professor, Dr. E.M. Walker, about this and the tramping process, he said we were fortunate to have witnessed a fine evidence of insect intelligence, and if the wasp had used a stone in its grasp as a tool or an object as a broom, it would have been still rarer. We hope for next year.

This list of books on CONSERVATION was prepared by the Circulation Division of the Toronto Public Libraries and sent to us through the courtesy of Mr. D. Bruce Murray:

GENERAL

- Ashley, C.A., ed.
Reconstruction in Canada, lectures given in the
University of Toronto. 1943.
- Royal Society of Canada, Ottawa
The wise use of our resources. 1942 (Pamphlet)

NATURAL RESOURCES

- Furnas, C.C.
The storehouse of civilization. 1939.
- Sears, P.B.
This is our world. 1937.

AGRICULTURE

- Moreland, W.S.
A practical guide to successful farming. 1943.
- Northbourne, W.E.C.
Look to the land. 1940.

FORESTRY

- Kylie, H.R.
C.C.C. forestry. 1937.
- Hawley, R.C.
Forest protection. 1937.

WILD LIFE

- Baker, J.H.
The Audubon guide to attracting birds. 1941.
- Gabrielson, I.N.
Wildlife refuges. 1943.
- United States. National park service.
Fading trails; the story of endangered American
wildlife. 1942.

REHABILITATION

- Haythorne, G.V. and Marsh, L.C.
Land and labour. 1941.

TORONTO FIELD NATURALISTS' CLUB

NOVEMBER MEETING

THE BARREN LANDS OF NORTHERN CANADA

Illustrated with lantern slides.

By C.H.D. Clarke, B.Sc.F., Ph.D.

November 1, 1943.

in the Royal Ontario Museum

8.15 p.m.

Dr. Clarke is one of our own Toronto Graduates both in forestry and biology, and is now on the staff of the National Parks Bureau at Ottawa. He has travelled and explored extensively in the Northwest Territories, investigating problems of the caribou and the musk-ox.

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NOVEMBER OUTING

HIGH PARK

Saturday, November 20, at 2.00 p.m.

Meet at the Howard Park Ave. entrance to High Park where the Carlton cars loop.

Leaders will be available for various branches of natural history.

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