THE NEWSLETTER

of the Toronto Field Naturalists' Club

Number 39 November, 1943

One of the charming features of a club like the Field Naturalists' Club is to be found in the number of personal friendships which are made through its activities. These result in an informal but very considerable extension of the club's influence through privately arranged jaunts, field trips, and other ventures in nature-study. One of the most fruitful and interesting of such spontaneous developments in our club has been the more or less regular pilgrimages which have been going on for some time between Aurora and Toronto. These two areas, especially with regard to birds in winter, are largely complementary; Aurora members of the club finding in Toronto the water birds of the lakeshore, and Toronto members finding in the winter a much better chance of seeing northern birds among the hills about Aurora. However, a practice which may have arisen from such considerations as this has developed into a round the year affair, showing that good naturalists find each other congenial at all times, and through their common interests are never at a lack for worthwhile things to see, hear, and explore.

On October 17th, one of these pilgrimages took place, this one being from Toronto to Aurora. Quite a number of club members were present; Mr. and Mrs. J.L.Baillie, Mr. and Mrs. T.Proctor, Mr. and Mrs. R.M.Saunders, Messrs. Alfred Bunker, Arthur Smith, Frank Smith, and Herb Southam of Toronto; and Mr. and Mrs. Davies, Mr. and Mrs. Sisman of Aurora with a number of friends who were not club members. The party assembled at the Sisman home about eleven and then proceeded to the Vandorf Woods. At the first stop we had a hunt for a great horned owl that is living just beyond the railroad tracks. Signs of the owl were seen but not the bird, but in the search Mrs. Proctor discovered a new-born calf which had been deserted by its mother. It was a fateful find, for the calf, attracted by attention immediately adopted Mrs. Proctor who forthwith couldn't move a step without the calf. No amount of walking, evading, or expostulation would prevent the calf from pushing along beside the new-found benefactor, and stepping on her feet. At last there was nothing to do but find the owner. A farmer was found, though not the owner, and the calf was led to a car to be transported to its home barn. With some relief Mrs. Proctor and the others saw it go. The day was saved for us and for the calf, which must surely have died of exposure if it had not been found before dusk. As we were standing in the road waiting for the scattered members of the party to collect, a large dark bird, about crow size, sped across from one group of trees to another, showing flashes of white in the wings as it flew - a pileated woodpecker! This is one of the birds Torontonians go to Aurora to see.

The next stop was the Devens farm where the Canada jays were seen last winter and spring. Here it was that whilst some of us were walking through the open fields toward the hardwood bush we came up a rise and stood suddenly face to face with as fine a red fox as any of us had ever seen. Curiously enough, since we were up wind, he had not scented us, perhaps because he was very busy, nose to ground, trying to capture some prey, perhaps a field mouse. What a startled look he gave us. You could see the alarm shoot into his eyes as he hesitated for several seconds. Then the decision made, he turned and bounded like lightning across the field, running in a zig-zag course, his magnificent red brush flaunted high, disappearing at last over the fence at the far end of the field nearest the wood. It was the first sight of a fox for some, and a noble sight for all, one that Toronto could not provide, hence another reason for the trip to Aurora. In the woods we saw no more of the fox, but a red-tailed hawk rose from the ground to circle above our heads. It was the floor of the forest, however, which held us rapt, for we were walking on a carpet of scarlet and gold in a world of flaming oaks and maples. There was no sun, yet the whole woods was aglow with radiance. It seemed sacrilege to walk here, yet, looking back after we had passed, no evidence of disturbance showed. We were small creatures, allowed to enjoy but not to impress this great panorama of nature. Bluebirds called as we wended our way back to the road. When the party had reassembled we drove back to Aurora,

stopping here and there, once to observe a flock of some 300 grackles, migrants, feeding in a field. The day's adventures were topped off with a group supper at the Sismans', after which Alfred Bunker showed some of his movies of birds and flowers.

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A week later, on October 24th, Mr. and Mrs. E.C.McNeillie drove Prof. T.F.McIlwraith and me to Scarboro Bluffs and Highland Creek. It was a day of heavy clouds, ominous with threats of rain, but when we stood on the bluffs near Miss Stoakely's, where the club had a fall field day a year ago, we found that the visibility was superb. I have noticed that this is often true, On a sunny day the sparkle on the water and the glare reduce the distance at which one can make out birds or other objects to a minimum. The calmness of the water also added to the possibilities of observation. The lake was dotted as far as one could see with birds. There were hundreds far beyond possible identification, but below our feet, from the base of the cliff out, ranged mergansers, old squaws, loons, Holboell's grebes and gulls. Amongst the loons were 7 red-throated loons - the smaller fellow with the grey back and the slight, upturned bill. There were 56 of the common loons along the bluffs that morning.

As we were standing looking at the loons we heard behind us suddenly a nasal 'day-day' which made us turn around like a shot, for no ordinary chickadee makes that peculiar sound. Sure enough, in a tree right over our heads were two of the brown-capped chickadees. They stayed but a moment, then travelled on westward with the host of little birds that was moving along the cliff this morning. Brown-capped chickadees appear in this region very rarely; the last were seen six years ago, and before that it was many years to the last previous record. What takes them from their northern homeland is hard to say, as the question of food doesn't seem to apply in their case. When they do appear they are likely to be travelling with black-capped chickadees as in this instant. This season there is a tremendous movement of chickadees, in great contrast to last winter when there were almost none at all. It was a great wave of this movement upon which we had chanced. In fact that was the outstanding feature of the day, the steady stream of migrants in the largest late fall migration I have ever seen. Hundreds of rusty blackbirds went over; passing bluebirds called almost incessantly whilst we were out; hawks, including a peregrine falcon, robins, tree-sparrows, juncoes, kinglets, chickadees all swept past. Of these all were going west save the robins which were travelling eastward. That is to say most of these birds were headed probably for Point Pelee and the Mississippi flyway, or for the spur of the Atlantic flyway which follows the Appalachians southward from Niagara Falls. The robins were headed for the Atlantic coast, probably via Prince Edward County and the Mohawk-Hudson Valley route. Prof. McIlwraith flushed one woodcock, however, that didn't bother about conventionalities; he just headed straight across the lake and kept going, doubtless landing in some New York woods a little later. In all, that day's flight brought us the sight of 55 kinds of birds, ending with the observation of a close-packed flock of 3000 American mergansers below the bluffs at the Scarboro golf course. Hundreds more were coming in to this flock from all over the lake. This raft was no doubt a roosting flock finding at this spot protection for the night.

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A trip to the Island with Arthur Smith on October 31st revealed the presence of hundreds of migrating ducks concentrated in the lagoons, beyond the breakwater at Centre Island, and near the Yacht Club in the bay. But the greatest interest was aroused by the ridiculous antics of a dozen buffleheads behind the breakwater at Centre. The males were chasing each other like a number of small boys showing off. They would shoot along the water, their necks outstretched flat on the surface, making little piping sounds. Like a flash one would spring into the air only to settle at once with a tremendous splash, its chest puffed out like a pouter pigeon's. The other males would all follow suit. To change the procedure each male would select a female and chase the lady through, over, and under the water until tired out. Was all this just fun? Or do mating antics start this early in the season? As if drawn to see the show a red-throated loon poked its way around the

edge of the breakwater for a few moments, but deciding it was none of its business soon disappeared out in the lake again.

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On November 7th Jim Bailie, Ed Shore, and I investigated Ashbridge's Bay jungle. It was the first time I had gone there since the area had been fenced in. We were in search of owls as Ed had seen great horned, long-eared and saw-whet owls there the week previous. The jungle has thickened a good deal since being cut off so that it is even better than formerly for owls. They congregate in this area chiefly, I suppose, because of the rats in the dump, but they find this tangled willow scrub a convenient daytime roost. This is the region in which Herb Southam and his colleagues do so much banding of owls. Today we were to be favored by two owls only, a great horned which flew round and round the jungle lighting in one big tree after another, and a long-eared which plunged into the scrub and disappeared. Without question, the most striking sight this morning was not the owls but the shoreline. I was astonished to see that the lake has washed away the land to the depth of at least a hundred feet since last spring. Even the large willow trees are gone, lying prone in the water or entirely disappeared. Indeed, only the railroad fill is preventing the lake from claiming the whole marsh as its own. If the storms from the south and east keep on this winter even the railroad will give way. It is further evidence ence of the extraordinary high water this year.

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On November 13th I made one of my regular visits to Cedarvale. It was a cold afternoon, for a sharp northwest wind was blowing across the dump as I came in from St.Clair Ave. Across the sky white clouds and sunny blue patches played tag with each other. Surely this was the weather for hawks. To confirm my thought a large buteo sailed over from the east. My upturned binoculars showed me the black wrist marks of a rough-leg. Just above the church he ceased to sail and began to circle, then to soar. Slowly, gracefully he rose until in five minutes he was only a speck, even through my glasses. A mistiness about him made it seem likely that he had reached the bottom of the cloud. At that height he sped off in another glide, going so fast as to be lost to sight in a few seconds. Though the favorable northwest wind continued unabated no other hawk appeared all afternoon. Only herring gulls used its currents to circle above the valley in search of food.

The ravine was empty up to and including Cardinal Corner save for a flock of bedraggled-looking English sparrows at the corner. I was beginning to think I had drawn a blank when a possible hermit thrush flew up from the stream bank and up the western slope. When I hurried over to the spot to make certain a great horned owl burst from a cedar tree on the slope and sailed over my head toward the old orchard. At the moment I was intent on making sure of the hermit thrush as it would be my latest record. The stream was too wide to cross, however, so I turned upstream along the east side. A few steps brought me in sight of a rusty blackbird walking along a dead stick which was mired in the river. So close to the water was he that his rusty head and wings were mirrored exactly below him. Through the hawthorn thicket I came to the path by the orchard. Before reaching it I was aware of jays screaming, and I knew they had found the owl. From the path a jabbering chorus of small birds reached my ears. Looking about I soon spied the owl atop a dead pine, a most surprising perch. He was very nervous, twisting his head constantly. The strong wind was catching him full so that he swayed in its blasts, and his ears were flattened back on his head with each gust. He could not have seen me for all at once he quit this perch and sailed swiftly past my head towards the bank where I had first put him up.

The owl had roused all the birds, and the 'empty' raving was now crammed. Juncoes, tree sparrows, chickadees and goldfinches paraded by me, working along the ground and through the weeds below me on the hillside. They were feeding low down possibly to escape the wind. I walked slowly up the path towards Forest Hill Village scanning the flocks. A creeper's sizzle was finally connected with its maker who, upside down, was peering into the cracks of a cedar branch. Scratchings on the south facing bank of the pine knoll

found to come from a fox sparrow. This discovery delighted me for it was my latest record. Then as I peered carefully amidst the shrubs above the scratcher I was startled by the large white bill of an evening grosbeak. This I could scarcely believe, even though Mrs. McNeillie had reported a flock from the ravine a week before. I had missed them then, and I have missed them often, these being one of the species I do miss. Nevertheless this was one! A female or young bird with a grey head which displayed a rippling collar of yellow-green as it turned its head. In a moment another appeared. Both were feeding on the buds of the shrub, a food I have never seen this bird take before. I watched them for several minutes as they worked along the stems, picking and swallowing the buds systematically. Only then did I become aware of the magnificent male sitting quietly in the midst of the bush, his bright eyes peering keenly at me from under his yellow eye-shade. When I started up the bank they began to call to each other, their ringing, musical notes betraying their finch family connection. I did not go near enough to frighten them away, as I hoped to come back later and find them roosting for the night. There have been many reports of these grosbeaks this fall. They are apparently about in numbers. These were the first I have seen in a year and eight months so they were very welcome indeed. They may very well stay around the ravine for some time as there are a good many Manitoba maples with a heavy crop of seeds.

I proceeded back downstream in search of the hermit thrush which I never found. But in the hunt I flushed the owl again from the very same spot as the first time. Now he made off downstream and was not seen again. In the same dark evergreens I found four cardinals, including one young male which flew out to perch on a thorn tree in exactly the pose, and showing exactly the same coloration as in the Horsfall illustration. Not finding the thrush I turned once more upstream, and keeping this time to the west bank I chanced upon the goldfinch flock midst the goldenrod above the Forest Hill path. As they flew up I heard the thrill 'shree-ee' of a pine siskin. I have heard it several times up here this fall but have never seen the bird. This time luck was with me, for I spied it a few feet away in a hawthorn, its bright yellow wing patches and heavy breast and flank stripes setting it apart from the goldfinches. The four cardinals I had flushed kept along the bank just ahead of me. With them were five bluejays. The mingling of deep blue and deep red against the dark brown earth was like an animated painting. Having made a turn about the field below Bathurst Street where I found nought but a pheasant, I made my way back to the pine knoll hoping to see the grosbeaks again. Unhappily they had gone, so I do not know where they went to spend the night. My last observation for the afternoon was the sight of herring gulls sitting on top of the church just above St.Clair Avenue. Cedarvale had kept its reputation of always having something of interest to see.

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Mrs. Olive Barfoot writes as follows: - "Are there more winter wrens than usual about this year? On Sunday November 7th I had the pleasure of watching a pair down by the little stream in Sherwood Park. I was quite close to them but they did not seem to mind too much, although one of them did hop up on a bush every few minutes and tell me off. On the same day over in Glengowan Woods I saw three pairs of them. They gave themselves away by that loud alarm note. In Glengowan I also saw blue jays, kinglets, a white and a red-breasted nuthatch, downy woodpeckers, chickadees, a tree sparrow amongst a flock of juncoes, and a flock of goldfinches. In the open field at the end of the woods, believe it or not, pussy willows are showing their fur. Whilst picking a few branches of them I saw a large red-tailed hawk soaring above. I had a very good view of him for as he wheeled quite low I was able to see creamy patches on his back as he turned in the wind. Crossing homeward through Blythwood schoolyard I saw a sparrow perched on the fence. On account of the stripes on the breast I thought he was a song sparrow, but he flew, showing the white outer tail feathers. I was surprised for I thought the Vesper had gone south long since."

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