

# THE NEWSLETTER

of the Toronto Field Naturalists' Club

Number 42

February, 1944.

For ten years Reg. James of Willowdale has been devoting himself especially to a study of owls. He has found this group of birds an absorbing subject, and has achieved results of the greatest interest. Some of his findings he sets forth in this brief article. They deserve a much fuller treatment, which, I hope he will sometime give us.

Mr. James writes: - "Perhaps some of the readers of the Newsletter may be interested in a sidelight of my experiences with birds of prey.

"Ten years ago, in the Humber Valley, I carelessly picked up an empty nail keg and tossed it into a willow. The following Sunday a Screech Owl was sheltering itself in the keg. This gave me an idea. Obtaining a large number of discarded nail kegs from builders I closed in the top, cut a hole in the side large enough for a Screech Owl to enter and, after camouflaging the kegs with paint, erected them in spots which I thought Screech Owls would frequent.

"Until 18 months ago, when I commenced banding, I did not keep records of the number of owls that found shelter and also nested in these barrels. And since then, owing to transportation difficulties, I have visited regularly only 6 of the 112 barrels which I placed within a 25 mile radius of Toronto. These six barrels have produced 14 different owls.

"On the Christmas census, December 27, 1942, I banded an owl in a barrel near Oriole. Half a mile up the Don I banded a second owl in a different barrel. Last March 24 both owls were together in the first barrel with five eggs. This February I found one of these banded owls in another barrel. Four years after a red-phase owl was banded in a barrel, I revisited the barrel and found the same owl.

"Since I commenced observing Screech Owls by using barrels I have been astonished at the variations in the color of their plumage. One specimen, collected for the museum, was a vivid rose shade. Others showed color mutations from gray through orange to chestnut.

"On six occasions I have found nestlings in the barrels. Of course, numerous other barrels have been occupied by nesting birds but the opportunity to visit them at the right time never presented itself. On one occasion I discovered dead young in a barrel and also numerous articles of fresh food. The mother evidently had come to a tragic end and the male owl, following blind instinct, continued to push food past the entrance.

"So far about 20 of the barrels have been destroyed. The rest, at one time or another, have been used by Screech Owls either as nesting quarters or as daytime shelters. The owls, however, were not always at home when I called, but there was plenty of evidence that the barrels were being used."

Such projects as the one which Mr. James has set for himself are deeply and persistently rewarding, not only to the one who carries them but to all those who share his findings. It would be particularly worthwhile if some such studies

of certain species or groups of birds, or for that matter of any animals or plants, could be started by members of this club. Such a plan need not be confined to an individual but could be worked on by a small group, perhaps a group living near together, The results of such studies would make excellent contributions to the club, and would give the participants a very real sense of accomplishment. As for choice of subjects, the field is wide open. Even the commonest birds, for instance, are imperfectly known.

§ § § § §

We may congratulate Mr. C. Allan Lauder of Inglewood upon his good fortune in making the observation which he records in the following letter: - "Even though at the present time I am living some thirty-seven highway miles from downtown Toronto, one mile west of the village of Inglewood, I felt that you would be interested in an observation that I made yesterday, the twentieth of January at two o'clock in the afternoon.

"I was working near the lower corner of our large orchard when suddenly I was aware that a flock of American Goldfinches were feeding on the tender leaf buds of the apple trees. As I watched them flit from branch to branch and from tree to tree more birds arrived. They were flying in from due north in flights of from fifty to a hundred birds. They were arriving every twenty or thirty seconds and their southward migration lasted for twenty minutes. There were, therefore, over a thousand Goldfinches in this, the greatest flight I have ever seen."

§ § § § §

Since the last Newsletter another letter from one of our Toronto birders, Clifford McFayden, now sailing in the Merchant Marine, has come to my attention. It was mailed from Melbourne, Australia. The birds mentioned in it indicate that he made the trip by way of the Mediterranean. He writes.- "Well, all I can say is I hope you are enjoying yourself half as much as I am because actually it has been just like a swell holiday except for a few booming noises now and then, but you get used to that. There'll be a lot to talk about when we all get back home again, I guess, because there's really nothing I can say now.

Have been seeing lots of super birds, which banishes dull moments, for there is always something to look at. Most of them I have not proper identification for yet, but some I have managed to specify, - Flamingoes, Yellow-nosed Albatrosses, Lesser Black-backed Gulls, White Terns, Hoopoes, Wilson's Petrels (Atlantic), Levantine Shearwaters, Pelicans, Buff-backed Egrets, and Black Swans, plus many other species of Shearwaters and Fulmars. It just about drives me nuts seeing millions of birds, the names of which are unknown to me. However, there is a big museum here which should have some information for me.

By the way, this is quite a nice place we're in. There are Bower Birds and Kookaburras here, as well as Black Swans and White-Browed Robins. The people too are extraordinarily nice and hospitable."

§ § § § §

The afternoon of February 5th was rather dark, windy and drizzly, though warm, a good time to find something surprising. Mr. and Mrs. Greer Roberts and I spent somewhat less than an hour on York Downs looking for Short-eared Owls which we did not find, and then drove down Sheppard Ave., to the Don. Here we climbed the fence and

took the path along the north side of the river in the direction of Yonge Street. The cedar grove at this point always looks inviting, but like most cedar groves it yields little or nothing as a rule. Consequently I walked right through with only a cursory survey of the trees, only to have my a priori judgment immediately shattered. Finding the Roberts lagging behind I glanced back to see what was keeping them. Mrs. Roberts was beckoning, and Mr. Roberts had already turned back. I went to them and found to my delight, and to my chagrin - for had I not passed it by without a suspicion because of a fixed idea? - that Mrs. Roberts had detected a Long-eared Owl perched high (25') in a cedar tree. The bird was quite alarmed. It had drawn in its plumage so that it seemed almost as thin as the branch upon which it stood, and was craning its head so as to peer fixedly down at us. When we had watched long enough I tried to dislodge the owl that we might see it fly, but despite its evident nervousness it was loath to quit the obviously safe perch. I had to rap scrape and bang several times on the trunk, finally being forced to resort to shaking the tree before it spread its wings and flopped awkwardly through the thick branches into the open. It flew a few trees away and disappeared into another cedar where we left it. On February 19th, Mr. Roberts tells me, he returned and found three Long-eared Owls perched in the same tree.

§ § § § § §

On the morning of February 20th Mr. and Mrs. Eric McNeillie and I set out on a little trip to the westward of the city. Stopping at Sunnyside on the way we found hundreds of gulls lined up on the breakwall, all facing westward into the teeth of a strong southwest breeze, which, for all its southerly origin, had a bit too much of a nip in it. The duck population was about as usual for this time of year except that not a single Old Squaw was to be seen! They have been very scarce this winter but this is the first occasion when not a single one could be found. Two Crows sat lumpishly on a willow by the Grenadier outlet saying nothing. They have been about all winter. Occasionally a Horned Lark flew along the shore westward, a harbinger of spring.

At Mimico Creek a considerable flock of Scaup was led by a harum-scarum Merganser with its head feathers blowing about wildly in the wind. We saw a number of other Mergansers having this particular kind of head trouble. At Port Credit the fishermen were not active so that there were no gulls, and but a few scattering Golden-eye out on the Lake. Amongst some willows were three more Crows. They were flying about. Do they know that the first warm days and the disappearance of the snow will bring vast hordes of their sable brethren trooping in? Perhaps not. But we do. Watch the skies to the west for incoming flocks of Crows in the next week or two.

Lorne Park looked especially lovely in the bright sun, the immaculate grey trunks and light green needles of the red pines giving the central grove a very distinguished appearance. The lake front here was almost deserted. We spent some time in quest of the author of a wailing hoot who was most likely a Barred Owl, but we never caught up with him to be introduced properly. During the hunt our noses took us to a recently killed and skinned skunk. By this time, with a bird here and there, our day's list of species seen had reached eighteen.

After lunch we drove up the Mississauga Road to Erindale. The view up the valley of the Credit just as Erindale church came into sight was one of the finest winter scenes I have ever known. The smooth white ribbon of the Credit slipping through groves of orange-brown willow, backed by the further hill tinged with blue and purple, flanked with mottled white fields and dark green pines, and topped by a shimmering blue sky was a picture that asked for a painter.

We paid a visit at Mr. Ivor's. The club knows Mr. Ivor from the field trip at Erindale when we went over to his house in the woods. The lane was blocked so we

walked in. But a few steps along the lane brought us a welcoming committee of Chickadees and Nuthatches, demanding to be fed, very annoyed when we produced nothing. This vanguard was joined at the house by others. Mr. Ivor welcomed us cordially, and showed us about his aviary, after which we walked about his wood looking for a possible owl.

On our return Mr. Ivor asked us if we wanted a Screech Owl that he wanted to get rid of. He didn't want it around his tame birds. I promised to take the owl into the city and loose it. - So Mr. Ivor got out a ladder, set it against a tall maple, climbed up to the owl's roosting hole, and detached a wire which he keeps hanging beside this hole permanently because so many Screech Owls have come to roost in it. He then set about lifting the owl out by inserting the wire in the cavity until he could feel it under the owl. It took a bit of manoeuvring but finally he pulled the owl up till he could reach it, then lifted it out. Quite naturally the little owl protested, snapping its bill like a tiny machine gun. Mr. Ivor put the captive in a carton and tied him up. Then we took him to the car and put the carton on the floor behind the front seat where Otus got a very rough ride as we navigated the icy roads. We could hear him scrambling about trying to get free.

At last he was brought safely to my house and placed in the back hall. Several people, whom I had called up, were coming to see him so he was left in quiet until they should come. However, while I was eating supper a great scratching and thumping in the hall made me rush to a window from which I could see the window in the outer door to the back hall. There, sure enough, was Otus banging away against the pane! He only tried it twice and then quieted down, so I left him alone, knowing he could not get out. There was some loose suet on a shelf. I thought he might eat that but he did not. Save for scratching sounds no more was heard from him until the people began to arrive. Then I put on gloves and went into the hall.

The little fellow was perched on the top of a board standing against the wall. He started at first and seemed ready to fly, but ended by hunching down on his perch and closing his eyes till they were just slits. Thus he let me pick him up with only a little bill snapping, and let himself be stroked by the children, quite closing his eyes then. When replaced on the perch he hunched down in the same way and looked steadily at me, scarcely altering his gaze even when others moved. An hour later some other people came to see him. He was shown off again in the same way without objection on his part. We proceeded this time to paint part of his left leg a bright orange. We had no band, and the banders could not be reached, but we did want to find out if he would go back to the tree in Erindale, so the paint was the best alternative to a band.

If you should find such a Screech Owl (grey phase) with an orange-painted leg, do let me know at once. He was freed at 9.45 p.m. at 9 McMaster Ave. After sitting for a few moments on top of a post, when we could have picked him up again quite readily, he seemed to feel sure of his liberty and went swooping off in an arc that took him to the roof of the door of the house across the street. That was the last we saw of Otus from Erindale.

§ § § § §

The Toronto Public Library suggests to the members of the club:- "Coming down the Wye" by Robert Gibbings is a lovely book both in contents and format. Written and illustrated by one of the best wood engravers in Great Britain (known to many of you through his "Sweet Thames run softly") it tells the story of a journey on foot and pony following the course of the River Wye through England and Wales.

It is written by one who is responsive not only to the beauties of nature, but to people and places, and he has the power to re-create for the reader the atmosphere of his encounters with farmers and poachers, fishermen and innkeepers, squires and shepherds. He knows the ways of birds and beasts in the countryside, and this is reflected in the beautiful engravings that illustrate the book.

It is a book for the person who loves the appeal of an old countryside with its lore and legend, its history and beauty. All that is here transcribed in a prose that is deft and delightful.

"Dune boy; the early years of a naturalist" by Edwin Way Teale is the story of the boyhood of the author, who is both a naturalist and a photographer of note, true evidence of which was his beautiful and fascinating book "Grassroot Jungles".

There are no photographs in "Dune Boy" but the black and white sketches that head each chapter create the spirit and environment of the halcyon days of a youth spent on his grandparents' farm in the dune country of Lake Michigan.

Here the boy grew up amid "scenes of simple living and high thinking", and here was born his first consciousness of the beauty and forms of nature. His first introduction to entomological literature was the Annual Yearbook of the United States Department of Agriculture, its dreary reading occasionally lightened by coloured plates, and articles on birds and insects!

The many anecdotes with their home-spun humour contribute to a picture of a section of rural life fast disappearing from the American scene. This was the background that helped to mould the boy of yesterday into the naturalist of today, the naturalist in whose writings the freshness and appeal of the personal reaction is never obscured by the scientific.

"It is", says Richardson Wright, "a boy's book for grown-ups."

§ § § § §