

T H E N E W S L E T T E R

of the Toronto Field Naturalists' Club

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Last Sunday (March 12) as four of us were driving along a country road between Agincourt and the Rouge Valley I noticed a familiar-looking bird landing in a large maple tree. We stopped at once and upon getting out were rewarded with our first sight of a bluebird this season. Not only one, for beside the tree, swaying on a telephone wire were two more. It was a stirring sight. All three were males dressed in the brilliant attire of springtime - radiant quivering blue, burnished chestnut-red, immaculate white. It comes almost as a shock, certainly as a pleasurable thrill, to rediscover each spring how breathtaking is the beauty of the bluebird. After the dull, dragging latter weeks of winter, what is more suited to raise flagging hopes of coming flowers and warm sunny days than this polished herald who delivers his message in such gently harmonious accents? Our sight was a brief one for in a few moments the three were off over the fields to the east on a new stage of their vernal journey. But that short view made the day for us, and it has carried us through this last grim week of icestorm, sleet and snow which seemed to deny every word in the bluebird's message.

What of these early comers during this savage onslaught of winter? Of all the hazards which they have to face the prolonged icestorm is the worst. Trees, bushes, weeds, and ground encased in an unbreakable icy lacquer means that food is reduced to a minimum. It is hard on all birds, but many save themselves at feeding stations. Bluebirds, however, rarely come to such refuges. As a result of this cutting off of food supply they sometimes die in huge numbers. During the winter of 1895 - 1896 they were so overwhelmed by storms and cold that it took a decade for them to restore their numbers to normal in some areas. In the 1930's they were again reduced by similar conditions but, happily, their numbers are once more recovered.

Not always do they succumb. Since they are early migrants they are to a degree equipped to withstand the buffetings of late winter storms. On severe nights they frequently take refuge in hollow trees, old nesting boxes and chimneys, huddling together for warmth, several in a single hole. For food they resort to sumach seeds by preference, or to whatever of last season's fruit still clings to mountain ash trees, and the like. All the more reason for planting such trees and shrubs as hold their fruit through the winter around farms and country summer places.

Bluebirds have not only to contend with the weather, but have also to meet the heavy competition of house sparrows and starlings. Before the advent of these two quarrelsome species the bluebird was a fairly common bird around towns and cities. But the battle for nesting sites was won by the sparrow who stayed all winter in town and seized the nesting site before the bluebird would get back in the spring. Also the sparrow was much more adept at gang warfare than the bluebird. Later the starling added his belligerency to the contest. But it was in the countryside that this new undesirable was most damaging to the bluebird, for he stole woodpecker holes, hollow fence posts, and other desirable nesting sites, driving the bluebird farther and farther afield.

Fortunately, however, it is impossible for starlings to enter a hole less than two inches in diameter. Since downy woodpecker holes are about $1\frac{1}{2}$ inches in diameter and quite common they have been one secure refuge for the bluebird. There is no doubt, on the other hand, that the bluebird population was for a time considerably reduced by the competition of starlings. In the last ten years or so bluebirds have benefitted much from the erection of nesting boxes suitable for them but with holes too small for starlings. Keep this in mind. And if you do not yourself have a place suited to the erection of bluebird boxes you certainly know someone who does. Persuade your country friends to put up all the boxes their lands will accommodate. But be sure they are the right size, or you may be encouraging starlings, not bluebirds. The bluebirds have a strong preference for old orchards and fence rows not far from water.

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An owl to the fore again! On the afternoon of March 1st I was picking my way up the western slope of Cedarvale above Cardinal Corner. About halfway in the ascent I glanced up the bank into the sun, and realized that a fair-sized bird was silhouetted in the middle of a bush. Turning my glasses upon it I discovered a small owl but I could not determine the species. There were no ears visible, and the size seemed about right for a Richardson's. Excited at this prospect I climbed the path hastily and hurried along the crest of the hill, thinking to look down upon the bird. But when I got into position and peered down upon the bush I could make out no sign of the owl. Feeling reasonably certain that it had not flown I went back, and found it still in place. This time I approached directly through the undergrowth to within a few yards. I was on the same level now, hence could get a fine look. Careful examination showed me that it was a sawwhet owl, but so puffed up and fluffed out that it seemed twice the size of any sawwhet I had previously seen. Presumably this was a protection against the cold wind. It showed no particular alarm at my presence, only opening its eyes now and again to stare a moment, closing them almost immediately. I went no nearer than 15 feet not wishing to make the owl fly. From this vantage point it was possible to see why I had been unable to see it from above. A thick vine grew over the top of the bush, the whole so arranged as to resemble an umbrella. For the owl it was a superb perch. Only from the path, and only by such a chance as let me to see him was the sitter visible at all. The silhouetting by the low western sun did the trick. At any other time of the day the vine-covered bush was a perfect hiding place. There I left him, feeling as always the peculiar charm of these little owls.

On Sunday evening (March 4th) about 7.45 I set out again for Cedarvale intent upon rediscovering my sawwhet owl and hearing him "sing"..

For some minutes after my arrival there was a multitude of disturbing noises in the neighborhood - barking dogs, grinding motors on the road, banging doors - but shortly they diminished and I was alone in a quiet, bright, wild world. The transition in the valley, once calm descended, from city to wildness was much more complete than in the daytime. Standing alone under the gaunt pines in the moonlight, my ears straining to catch any slightest sound, I became aware of being in a world undreamed of by the noisy city dwellers so few yards away. This was the wild-living still in the midst of insensitive, encroaching civilization.

The nearly full moon, pouring down its soft gleams from a clear sky onto shimmering white snow, cast an illusion of light over the scene. One thought to see all as in the daytime, only to become aware, in looking about, of deep crevasses and abysses of darkness, caves of gloom into which no human eyes, even with the aid of powerful binoculars, could penetrate. Sharply defined seemed all the trees and bushes and stream, yet all was suffused with a silvery sheen that blurred every outline like heat waves dancing over sand. It was an eerie night world as well as a world of the wild.

Standing there on the hillside I caught hints of living things moving stealthily about me. My ears, not my eyes, told me what was going on. Only once did I catch a glimpse of movement when a largish animal bounded from cover up the hill not far away. In the open it stopped, disappearing instantly! So completely, in fact, I was not sure whether or not it had turned back, though I had detected no sign of its doing so. In the daytime I should have known at once what manner of beast it was, but for all the brightness about me my eyes would not tell me now. So I turned my glasses on the spot, and was thrilled to see a large cottontail sitting quite rigid on the snow, just where it had come to a stop, making itself another shadow in a world of shadows. In a moment it hopped off in a leisurely way, unfrightened, probably not sensing me as I was down wind and made no abrupt movement.

Below me in the valley a small scuffling sound and the crackle of paper made me suspect a skunk at work, possibly tearing open some abandoned sandwich or garbage. I could not see the animal so it remained a mystery.

The search for the owl did not seem to prosper. Little by little however, I found my attention drawn to a strange noise near at hand. Gradually I fixed its source in a dark clump of cedar trees directly in front of me at a distance of 60 to 70 feet. The sound was an entirely new one to me, and I could not put a name to its maker. Of all the sounds it was the eeriest I heard, - a sort of gasp with a liquid gurgle at the end. It was low-pitched, not unlike a person struggling for air. It had a definite pattern which might be rendered by the syllables - chi-ulk, sssh-ulk, si-oulk - the first note being higher, the last coming in a descending rush but always ending in the liquid sound. Once there was a clear whistled note which seemed to come from the bank below me. To neither of the sounds did I attach a body or a name.

When I got back to my study and was able to consult the authorities on the notes of the sawwhet owl I found that Dawson in Birds of California gave an exact description of this gasping, gurgling note almost in the identical syllabification that I had used, and which I have noted above. His form is si-oolk, the resemblance being obvious. This convinced me that the author of the strange sounds was no other than the little fellow I sought. The clear note may have been an answering mate for such whistles are quite characteristic of the species.

The sawwhets, which nested in the valley last spring, may well be planning to take up residence there again this year. What a find if we can locate the nest!

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Mr. A.A. Outram sent me this amusing item from the Saturday Evening Post of February 26th. It is entitled "G.I. Joe Looks at the Birdies".

Just as the North African campaign was approaching its last crucial hours, there arrived in Washington a message from General Eisenhower to his brother Milton. It contained no news from the front, no hint of the great impending victory. It said, "Please send at once several good bird books."

The general is not the only member of our fighting forces writing home from zones of action for information on natural history. On the contrary, so many letters are pouring into museums and colleges from servicemen of all kinds, and from all points of the compass, that it begins to look as if our men overseas constitute the biggest nature-study group in history. Whenever there is a lull in the fighting, apparently, they look around them. And what they see in the way of bird and animal life would startle Marco Polo.

They write like this: "He has a long blue beak, a yellow top-knot that he can raise up, red eyes, and blue tail feathers that he can spread out like a turkey's. Please tell us what it is. P.S. This is to settle a bet."

The boys ask about animals, too, but bird questions are so much in the majority that anyone reading the letters might wonder if this war is being fought entirely by amateur ornithologists. Birds have special traits that tend to keep them around fighting men; they have an insatiable curiosity, a strong attachment to their home locality, and are far less apt than animals to be disturbed by the sights and sounds of battle.

On the other hand, more animals than birds are finding their way back to America as pets. Already, enough of these exotic visitors have arrived in New York City to bring forth expert advice on their care from the famous Bronx Zoo, which has, moreover, opened a "Mascot Menagerie" to house those wild animals that have turned out to be more menace than mascot around the house. So far, the collection includes a margay cat from Brazil, two flying phalangers - tiny animals like squirrels - and a Madagascar lemur.

- William Abbott.

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Few people can resist the appeal of a beautifully illustrated book, particularly when it presents the form, the colour, the detail of a subject dear to the reader. With this in mind the Toronto Public Libraries suggest the following books which have a special significance for naturalists, and which are distinguished by the beauty of their illustrations and format.

Birds of America, --

by J.J. Audubon, with foreword and descriptive text by
William Vogt. 500 colour plates. (Macmillan edition 1941)

Wild violets of North America, --

by V.B. Baird, with colour illustrations by F.S. Mathews,
(In Reference Library only)

Birds of America, --

ed. by T.G. Pearson, illustrated by drawings by R.I. Brasher,
R.B. Horsfall, Henry Thurston, and 106 plates in full colour
by Louis Agassiz Fuertes.

Look at life! --

by L.M. Chace.
A collection of nature photographs by L.M. Chace.

American song birds, --

by M.A. Edey, with colour plates by Louis Agassiz Fuertes.

American water birds; also hawks, owls and game birds, --

by M. A. Edey, with colour plates by Louis Agassiz Fuertes.

Our American game birds, --

by V.C. Hulner. Paintings (in colour) and drawings by
L.B. Hunt.

Wild flowers, --

by H.D. House. 364 full colour illustrations with complete
descriptive text.

Birds in the garden and how to attract them, --

by Margaret McKenny, with 16 illustrations in full colour
and 32 pages in half-tone.

This green world, --

by Rutherford Platt. Illustrated with black and white drawings and colour photographs by the author.

Some Canadian wildflowers, --

by The Lady Rockley. Illustrations in colour.

The tree book, a popular guide to a knowledge of the trees of North America and their uses and cultivation, --

by J.E.Rogers. 16 plates in colour and 160 in black and white from photographs by A.R.Dugmore.

Coverts and casts, field sports and angling in words and pictures, --

by W.J.Schaldach. Illustrations in black and white and colour.

Birds of Canada, --

by P.A.Taverner. Illustrations in colour by Allan Brooks and F.C.Hennessey. 173 colour plates and 488 black and white illustrations.

Canadian land birds, a pocket field guide, --

by P.A. Taverner. Illustrations in black and white and colour, by Allan Brooks, F.C. Hennessey and P.A. Taverner.

Canadian water birds, game birds, and birds of prey, a pocket field guide, --

by P.A. Taverner. Illustrations in black and white and colour, by Allan Brooks, F.C. Hennessey and P.A.Taverner.

This is living, a view of nature with photographs; text by D.C. Peattie; photographs selected and book designed by Gordon Aymar.

These books may be borrowed from any branch of the Toronto Public Libraries, with the exception of "Wild violets of North America", the only copy of which is in the Reference Library.