

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

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This afternoon, December 13th, the first day after the great blizzard of 1944, I spent two hours exploring the upper part of Cedarvale ravine. Deep snow is almost the worst hazard with which our winter birds have to cope. I was interested to see how they were faring.

Approaching from Tweedsmuir Avenue, I plunged down over the first slope and across the field to the edge of the dip overlooking the stream. Right at the edge I came upon a song sparrow. The heavy alarm notes drew my attention to the bird which was feeding on weed seeds near at hand. Otherwise no birds were visible or within hearing. Somewhat further along, where I could look down on the east end of Cardinal Corner, I found the usual large flock of house sparrows in the willows, as jubilant and perky as ever. Of course, with a bright blue sky, dazzling white snow, and a snap to the air one had to be exhilarated.

At this point I started down the main slope and was at once in to snow up to my hips, slipping forward, more or less in command of the situation, until, at last, I unexpectedly and unpleasantly upon a submerged burr bush! Refusing to be daunted I extricated myself, removed the burrs, and ploughed on. Soon I came to an abrupt halt, for the snow ahead was marked with a remarkable pattern. For eight feet a bird had floundered across the surface marking each advance with a complete pattern of its wings, the impression of every feather being clear and sharp. The initial marks showed a hollow, corresponding to the body. The depth of this indentation indicated that the bird had landed with force. The distinctiveness of the wing markings in its subsequent progress revealed that it had made a great effort to move quickly, each flap having forced the wings well into the snow. The trail led up to a thorn tree and ceased as abruptly as it commenced. What is the story behind this snow picture? Hard to say -- but it looked to me as though some small bird -- perhaps a tree sparrow or junco as the wing spread was between 8 and 9 inches -- had been severely frightened. It dashed down, possibly being pursued by the owl or hawk, hit the snow, clambered across the surface to the nearest shelter, and took refuge in the thorn tree. There were no marks of blood by the track so it probably got away.

To my delight Cardinal Corner had three cardinals to-day. The first two announced their presence by chipping loudly, though it took me some time to hunt them out. In the process I surprised a fine cock pheasant standing in a hawthorn. The third cardinal, a wonderful male, was perched, silent and unmoving, in the crotch of another hawthorn, its deep red a startling stain against a fluff of immaculate snow.

A few open places along the stream were being well patronized by eager avian bathers. These ablutions had been going on for some time as the snow thereabouts was well tramped by the ardent ones. Standing in the snow up to my middle gave me no proper comprehension of their eagerness. I plodded on, only to plop into a hidden pool with a sudden squish. Little by little, with many pauses, I made my way up the slope again to the old orchard.

There the paths of skiers made the going much easier. And birds were plentiful here -- juncos tittered, flying up from my feet; the sparrows called their thin alarms; a nuthatch yanked -- and most interesting of all, a male towhee preened his striking plumage -- black and white and robin red -- in an apple tree, but a few yards from my eyes. Every weed pile, still above the snow, was crisscrossed with an intricate network of tracks, the marks of those busy seedeaters. Chicory and pigweed were the favourite food, but golden rod, burrs, and other plants got attention as well. Later I found the same flock along the south-facing bank of the pine knoll hard by the Forest Hill path. There they were working quietly under hawthorns; for what, I could not detect, perhaps for seeds blown down from birches. The towhee foraged in the midst of a grapevine, searching along each stalk and stem, probably for hibernating insects or insect eggs. A chickadee accompanied him on similar quest. On the ground beneath, two whitethroated sparrows appeared with the tree sparrows and juncos. Overhead the nuthatch, a whitebreast, busied himself with the examination of white pine cones, extracting seeds or insects from the seed compartments. The presence of a noisy crowd of skiers and sliders nearby seemed to have no effect on the industrious flock. I watched the animated scene for twenty minutes, and before I left the towhee gave me a few good towhee calls, just to show he was aware of me.

At the end of the pathway nearest the Village, I stopped again to look at a grey squirrel. This animal was making considerable noise packing oak leaves into a nest. Whether it was an old one being repaired, or a new one being finished, I could not say. The squirrel, travelling by one of those astounding aerial routes, which they know so well, would go from the pine, where the nest was, to a neighbouring white oak. This tree still held some tawny leaves. These it would clip off and then, with a mouthful that scraped noisily at every step, it would return, via another route, to the nest where it would carefully pack the leaves into the structure, always losing one or two. This rather noticeable procedure was going on almost over the heads of a group of boys who were tobogganing, but they were quite oblivious to it all.

Just before entering the village I looked up into the sky, now filling with clouds, and my eyes fixed upon a red-tailed hawk circling over the village. It was soon lost to view to the west -- but it was fitting finish for a most profitable afternoon. Cedarvale averages between twelve and fifteen species in the winter. And to-day, blizzard or no -- it had lived up to its standard for I had seen fourteen species.

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Miss Velma L. Peters of Uxbridge has sent in the following interesting observations, which I have the pleasure to include here:--

"That the gentle little bluebird will vigorously defend his rights, when occasion demands, was well demonstrated here one day last spring. Early in April, I had a bluebird house erected on a pole and placed near the house, and directly in line with the kitchen window. One sunny morning, about a week later, a low soft warble brought me to the window, and I saw, to my great delight that a pair of bluebirds had taken possession of the box. They soon became quite accustomed to us going in and out and, before the serious business of nestbuilding had commenced, would often perch on the outer window sill, where I had scattered some crumbs. Soon they were busily engaged on a nest.

"Just at this time, a pert wren, that had made her nest in the wood-pile in previous summers, decided that the bird-box was a much better site for a nest. The fact that the box was taken made no difference whatever to her designs. During the rather long intervals when the bluebirds were away gathering nesting material, she would enter the box, ruthlessly pull out the material and drop it to the ground. This continued uninterrupted for some time, but I soon noticed that she was becoming slightly less

accurate in her timing -- barely escaping detection, at times. One day the male bluebird flew to a near-by apple tree and watched intently. Not being greatly observant, the wren again entered the box and continued her work of destruction. Instantly, like a bolt of doom, the bluebird flew in after her, hauled her out by the neck, banged her head several times against the side of the bird-box and dropped her, contemptuously. The wren, utterly humiliated, retired to the wood-pile; and for the remainder of the nesting period, the bluebirds had undisputed possession of the box.

"For several summers we have had the good fortune to have a Veery come to our woods here at Uxbridge. On calm evenings during June and July we could hear its crystal fluting quite clearly up at the house. The melody is so utterly lovely when wafted from a distant woods, that I determined to go to the woods and listen to the melody at close range, and at the same time try for a picture. One still morning, armed with a camera, I made my way down into the dense woods, as quietly as possible. I chose a hiding-place in some tall shrubbery--directly opposite the tallest tree in the woods, and waited. All the time I could hear its vibrant call-note, "Peerrrr!" ringing like a silver bell in the silence of the woods. Suddenly it flew to the top of the tall tree and I had my first glimpse of this shy, graceful songster -- the spirit of the woodland glooms. The bird seemed tense and nervous at first, peering intently at the surrounding shrubbery; but it soon became more at ease, and finally flew to a lower branch of the tree and rocked on a dead twig, affording me a splendid view. I despaired of a picture however, as the bird was alert to the slightest movement; but at least, I had the pleasure of listening at close range, for a few moments, to the heavenly song of the Wilson's Thrush."

In a recent letter (November 21st, 1944) from Corporal Douglass Miller (RCAP) stationed in England, he quotes Captain Frank Banfield, one of our members with the Canadian army in Italy, to the effect that "the surprising thing about it is that many of the common English birds are absent or rare here (Italy). No crows, rooks, robins, yellow buntings. I've only seen a few blackbirds and one wren. Last summer, while on a rest, I really went on some bird jaunts, and just couldn't find more than 25-30 birds a day, while now 5 to 10 species is usual.... Perhaps this winter will produce some migration or wintering populations from northern Europe." (The slaughter of small birds by trapping, netting, and liming by Italians is enormous. This has doubtless cut down the numbers of resident species greatly. Ed.)

R. M. SAUNDERS,

Editor.