

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

of the Toronto Field Naturalists' Club

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On December 24th, 1944 the Brodie Club held its twentieth annual Christmas census. As usual a good number of our members took part. The results were surprising, for it had been supposed that deep snow would make it difficult to cover the routes and might also reduce the number of birds to be seen. But when all the reports were in it was found to be the most successful census ever taken here, a fitting celebration of the twentieth anniversary. Sixty-seven kinds of birds were seen, the highest number of species for the census. And five species, never before seen on the census, were added to the twenty-year list, which now stands at 114 species. These were bald eagle (at Sunnyside by T.M.Shortt and K. Nielson), surf scoter (at Eastern Gap by H. Southam and party), red-throated loon and American scoter (at Frenchman's Bay), Holboell's or red-necked grebe (at Whitby Harbor - the last three by R.M.Saunders and D.Clarke and party. Four parties saw thirty species or more. This has never happened before. In all sixty-people took part in the census. This census is above all a cooperative venture, and it is the pooled results that are significant. Nevertheless, I venture to include here an account of the trip made by the party with which I was associated, as an example of the experiences of a census party.

Our party was made up of Dr. Douglas Clarke, T.R. Murray, Greer Roberts, and myself. We were assigned to the eastern route; that is, we were to visit the better spots between Woodbine Ave. and Whitby Harbor (the Toronto area being considered to include the region within 30 miles of the City Hall).

We started before dawn, about 8.10 a.m., and made a stop by special order on Jarvis Street to see if we could find the barred owl that had been living there this winter. No other party would be near this area, and the owl should be on the census list. First looks about the owl's haunts showed no owl but, as we were walking back to the car, I noticed the owl fly into a tree in the garden behind the house. Evidently it was just arriving back from the night's hunting, about a half-hour before sun-up. Duly seen and counted the owl, somewhat of a rarity, gave our census trip an auspicious start, so that we went on to Scarboro Bluffs with great hope.

At the main bluff we parked on top of the inner hill for fear of not being able to get back up the slope if we should drive down. Walking out on the bluff we were just in time to see the sun rise, a vast ball of fire, out of a purple lake into a cherry red bank of clouds, from whose upper edge shot streamers of pastel orange into a pale blue sky. It took nearly an hour for the sun to climb through the dense bank of cloud and emerge in full glory above. During that time the ever-changing play of colors upon the lively waters of the lake, and upon the clouds, was an unforgettable drama of tint and hue. Save for a few gulls the sky was empty of birds and life. The great bluffs, filmed with snow or brown where the slope was too precipitous for snow to cling, looked more austere, more forbidding, than I have ever seen them. Today they were a fit subject for a painter like A.Y.Jackson who has come to love the Arctic scene with its bare, basis topography. A painting done this morning, and named "Sunrise on the Coast of Baffinland" would pass for a realistic portrayal of that bleak coast without demur. A snow bunting flying along the bluff, calling its plaintive tee-oo confirmed in me the feeling of the far north. Only along the friendlier inner slope, slighter and tree covered, did we find many birds. But the Carolina wren, which we looked for particularly here, eluded us.

At Stop 25A we parked again atop the inner bluff and walked down. A good thing we did, too, for half-way down the road we came upon another car stuck in the middle of the road with a flat tire! And below that point the road was covered deep with drifted snow. This was definitely not a profitable stop. The snow was too deep to get about in easily, and the birds were non-existent. Out on the edge of the bluff Dr. Clark discovered one thing of real interest, the fresh trail of a New York weasel, a trail none of the rest of us had ever seen.

The next stop was at Highland Creek where we walked down into the valley south of the highway. An astonishing number of people are living in their cottages there, and as a result the paths were well tramped down, good news for us. This is always a good place for birds in winter. Our ears were soon filled with the sharp chirping of cardinals - we found seven of them - and with the calls of chickadees. After a good look around during which we added several species to the list, we drove up beyond the schoolhouse north of the highway. We stopped at the path which goes down to Golden-wing Swamp and took this path into the valley. The skiers had helped us here by packing the path. We didn't expect a great deal as the area is bird poor in winter but it is the one place on this route where we might see winter finches. Almost at once we found a large flock of goldfinches feeding on the birch trees. An interesting example of complementary feeding was seen in connection with this flock. Whilst the finches ate busily in the trees a steady rain of seeds and husks fell onto the snow below, it being quite yellow with them. There a flock of juncoes eagerly garnered the manna from above. The two groups seemed to move about together as if an understanding had grown up, the juncoes being content with the fallings did not try to overcrowd the trees. Amongst the goldfinches was a single redpoll, the first this winter, and the only one seen on the census. Tom and I went on to Golden-wing Swamp whilst the other two tried Cedar Path. We found little and soon made our way back to the car. While waiting for them we saw a crow flying westward along the migration route, possibly a belated migrant that had finally decided he could not make a living in this snow-laden land. When the other came they told us of surprising a ruffed grouse from its snowy bed beneath a cedar tree.

After lunch and a short rest we got on to Frenchman's Bay. There our luck reached a peak. Tom and I went east along the beach lane whilst Clarke and Greer went westward to the bay opening. The snow had blown off the road so that walking was easy. Off shore a fair number of winter ducks was feeding, and amongst them we soon added several species to the day's list. Halfway to the concession road we stopped to gaze over the lake. At once a solitary bird somewhat beyond a flock of greater scaup caught our attention. Tom and I studied it for several minutes before we arrived at the conviction that we were looking at a red-throated loon, - our first winter record, and the first for the Christmas list! It swam west and out into the lake until we lost it from view. Meanwhile two blackish ducks amidst some golden eyes further east had aroused my curiosity, so we went to the fence that marked the concession road and studied the birds by resting our binoculars on posts. We saw immediately by their shape that these ducks were scoters. But what kind? Resting our glasses on the posts made it easier to wait patiently for the ducks to raise their wings so that we could see the wing pattern, if any. Eventually this happened and, to our delight, there was no pattern. Now we could be sure that these were American scoters! Another new bird for the Christmas list! And our first sight of this species this year. As if sensing our excitement a beautiful collie dog came bounding across the fields barking. He smelled our hands, jumped all over us, putting his paws on our shoulders to examine our faces. Having satisfied himself he followed us back to the car. On the return we were astonished to find that the red-throated loon had come back in to shore and was now preening its feathers a few yards off the sand! In fact Greer, who had returned from the bay beach had been watching it for some time. This close view was very welcome for it gave us a chance to study all the details with

surety. The only disappointment was that Doug could not be called up as he had gone roaming over the ice of the lagoon to the reed bed beyond and was now far off in the cattails. By the time he got back the loon was off again. But when Doug did return along the lagoon we saw a flock of snow buntings come wheeling and flashing ahead of him, at one moment settling on the ice almost at his feet, then rising to go whirling away over the reeds to the fields beyond the marsh. One last touch was that the collie went bounding up to Doug only to recoil with snarls and fierce barks. I asked Doug what he had done to him, and he said, "I let him smell the wolf collar on my parka!"

Our last objective for the day was Whitby Harbor. Here the town dump had a bustling flock of starlings (250) and sparrows (50) feeding on the refuse while a fat sparrow hawk, perched atop a bush, looked leisurely on. The falcon must have been full and somnolent, or have known that food was to be had without trouble. The feeding flock paid no heed to the hawk. When flushed by us flock and hawk took refuge together on the telephone wires and poles! The cattails beside the dump proved to be full of pheasants. At least fourteen burst noisily out when we walked into the reeds. On the harbor ice was a roosting flock of more than 300 gulls, all herring save seven black backs. Many of the gulls were badly marked with oil. In the open water were a few golden eyes, and a red-breasted merganser which we followed out to the harbor mouth before deciding upon its identity. During the chase we discovered a Holboell's or red-necked grebe. This we later found, was another new bird for the Christmas list! It popped up suddenly out of the dark water almost under our feet, and disappeared again almost as quickly as only hell-divers can do. Out of a neighboring field a single Lapland longspur, the second of the day, went tittering away as we walked past.

On the way back to Toronto we stopped once to see a sparrow hawk sitting in a pine tree, and once to watch a large flock of snow buntings in a field. We has followed the flock for a mile or more along the highway, and found that it was travelling at a speed of 35 to 40 miles an hour. Without warning the flock pitched down into a weedy field and we halted to watch. We looked but a few minutes when up went the flock again, calling loudly as it went. The reason - a sparrow hawk had dashed into the midst of the feeding flock. But it got nothing for it returned to sit on a telephone pole on the south side of the road.

The census ended for us with this sight. We now had a list of 35 species for the day, the best record ever for this route, and we had added three new species to the twenty-year list. It was a thrilling day.

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In spite of Christmas censuses and the appearance of Toronto at the present time spring is not so many weeks away. So far as the birds are concerned the horned owls will be nesting by February, and the first migrants, the horned larks, will begin to arrive early in that month. Consequently it is time to bring out another chart. This time it is the spring arrival chart for the earliest group of migrants. Mr. J. L. Baillie has again cooperated in making the chart. His figures cover a twenty-five year period. My own cover an eleven-year period. The abbreviations used are: S. for Saunders, B. for Baillie, Su for Summer, Occ.W. for occasionally winter, Res for resident. It will be noted that only one species in this list never winters here, i.e. the bluebird. All the rest are represented fairly frequently during the winter; many of them like the robin, every winter.

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Early Migrants -- Spring Arrival Chart

Name of Bird		Average Arrival date	Average Departure date	Earliest date	Latest date	Number of years seen
Baldpate	S	Mar. 24	Su.	Occ. W.	Su.	11
	B	Apr. 10	Su.	" "	Su.	15
Pintail	S	Mar. 22	May 5	" "	June 20	10
	B	Apr. 5	Apr. 29	" "	June 5	11
Green-winged Teal	S	Mar. 18	Apr. 29	" "	May 16	10
	B	Apr. 27	May 4	" "	May 30	6
Redhead	S	Mar. 6	Apr. 17	" "	May 3	9
	B	Apr. 12	Apr. 21	" "	May 30	10
Ring-necked Duck	S	Mar. 30	May 2	" "	May 23	10
	B	Mar. 30	Apr. 27	" "	May 15	15
Canvas-back	S	Mar. 19	Apr. 15	" "	May 15	10
	B	Apr. 16	Apr. 27	" "	May 31	7
Hooded Merganser	S	Mar. 23	Apr. 30	" "	June 9	9
	B	Apr. 12	Apr. 19	" "	May 28	16
Cooper's Hawk	S	Mar. 30	Su.	" "	Su.	7
	B	May 15	Su.	" "	Su.	7
Red-tailed Hawk	S	Res.	Su.	Res.	Su.	11
	B	"	Su.	"	Su.	25
Red-shouldered Hawk	S	Apr. 6	Su.	Occ.W.	Su.	9
	B	Apr. 26	Su.	" "	Su.	15
Marsh Hawk	S	Mar. 31	Su.	" "	Su.	11
	B	Apr. 16	Su.	" "	Su.	24
American Coot	S	Mar. 23	Su.	" "	Su.	10
	B	Apr. 26	Su.	" "	Su.	19
Killdeer Plover	S	Mar. 22	Su.	" "	Su.	11
	B	Mar. 26	Su.	" "	Su.	25
Ring-billed Gull	S	Res.	Su.	Res.	Su.	11
	B	"	Su.	"	Su.	25
Mourning Dove	S	Mar. 31	Su.	Occ. W.	Su.	11
	B	Apr. 23	Su.	" "	Su.	21
Belted Kingfisher	S	Feb. 16	Su.	" "	Su.	11
	B	Apr. 8	Su.	" "	Su.	24
Horned Lark	S	Feb. 9	Su.	" "	Su.	11
	B	Feb. 24	Su.	" "	Su.	25
American Crow	S	Res.	Su.	Res.	Su.	11
	B	"	Su.	"	Su.	25
American Robin	S	Mar. 18	Su.	Occ.W.	Su.	11
	B	Mar. 19	Su.	" "	Su.	25
Bluebird	S	Mar. 26	Su.	Mar. 12	Su.	11
	B	Mar. 26	Su.	Mar. 10	Su.	25
Eastern Meadowlark	S	Mar. 24	Su.	Occ. W.	Su.	11
	B	Mar. 27	Su.	" "	Su.	25
Red-winged Blackbird	S	Mar. 18	Su.	" "	Su.	11
	B	Mar. 19	Su.	" "	Su.	25
Rusty Blackbird	S	Mar. 8	Apr. 17	" "	May 24	9
	B	Apr. 9	Apr. 22	" "	May 12	17
Crow Blackbird	S	Mar. 27	Su.	" "	Su.	11
	B	Mar. 24	Su.	" "	Su.	25
Cowbird	S	Apr. 1	Su.	" "	Su.	11
	B	Apr. 3	Su.	" "	Su.	25

Recently there has come to our attention a new book of some interest to the members of the club, *The Murre of Wings*, by Leonard Dubkin. It is quite as much, if not more, autobiographical than ornithological in content but the lives of birds are inextricably bound up with the story of the man. This man is a city man whose background and later career seem almost to preclude such an interest. From the rough and tumble of city streets to the noisy frenzy of an urban newspaper office does not usually produce a deep concern with birds and nature. But with the author the interest started early and persisted despite all. True, it is to the birds of the streets, the sparrow, starling, and pigeon -, to the herring gulls of the Chicago River, and to the park ducks and robins that he gives his heart. He has never gone afield, or sought to go - if so he does not mention it -, nor does he deign to bother with the migrants that must swarm through Lincoln Park at certain times. Because of this special preoccupation with the few and the common he has seen the habits and lives of those birds, that so many simply take for granted, with a penetration that is born only of patience and affection. His descriptions are full of understanding and beauty. Mr. Dubkin is sensitive to the touch of beauty in common things. Perhaps, too, there is an undercurrent of defiance. The author isn't yet quite certain of himself and his love of birds, for it isn't yet quite the thing to do in the circle in which he moves. One has to be on the defensive about it. Also, one feels that the author considers he has always had a rough road to hoe and therefore he sympathizes with the underdog, in this case the city bird. He is rather hoity-toity about the country birds that have an easier life, not having to meet the rough tests of the city. In fact Mr. Dubkin often paints the starlings and sparrows and the others in duller, uglier colors than they deserve, just to make sure, I suppose, that they are underdogs. Is there no Field Naturalists' Club in Chicago? Such a man could soon have found companionship in Toronto that seem to be lacking in Chicago.

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