

# THE NEWSLETTER

of the Toronto Field Naturalists' Club

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On January 21, 1945, I went to the Aurora area with Jim Baillie, Tom Murray, and Eric McNeillie, in search of winter finches. We found vast quantities of snow but few birds. Snow fences everywhere were mostly obliterated, and often we drove along the roads between walls of white higher than the car. In one place we saw snow two-thirds of the way up the telephone poles. With such conditions there was little food for seed-eaters showing in the fields, and we were not surprised when we failed to find any redpolls, or flocks of snow buntings. A single bunting was shown to us by Mr. and Mrs. Davies and Mrs. Sisman, along the railroad track. This was the last remaining member of a large flock that had been thereabouts for some days. Along the embankment there were still some seeds showing where they could feed. This bird, however, was in between the tracks picking up cinders or gravel. It was remarkably tame, or in dire need of this digestive aid, for it refused to budge until we were within six feet. Then it proceeded slowly ahead of us for a hundred yards when it finally flew up, circled around us and immediately settled down where we had dislodged it. When we returned, it flew up the bank to a fence post from which perch it uttered a plaintive tee-oo call. My imitation caused it to cock its head in my direction and to repeat its call.

Also along the tracks near the flour mill we came upon a male sparrow hawk atop a telephone pole. There it was busily consuming its evening meal -- a house sparrow we decided after some watching. This bird was unwilling to be disturbed. He carried his meal from one pole to another and another as we came on, finally, doing as had the bunting, circling around us and alighting on his original perch to continue his supper in peace. His fine colors showed brightly in the setting sun.

We had spent the morning at the foot of the 6th concession of King in the marsh. The going was very arduous in the deep snow. In fact it was impassable except where we could find a trail of hardened footsteps. Such a trail led by a devious route through the cedar swamp on the north side of the town line road. We crossed the canal on the ice and followed this trail, stepping with much care in each step of the maker of the trail. If we missed a print or slipped to the side we immediately sank up to our middle in soft snow. Once Tom, who was in the lead, fell sprawling. The trail went along a log over a little stream but this was not at all evident until Tom fell off the log into the stream, because the deep snow had covered all. Fortunately he did not get seriously wet. Outside of a lively flock of chickadees (28) there were no birds here. The complete lack of grouse in this favorable quarter was astonishing. Not even a track was seen. They must be at the bottom of their cycle. Rabbit tracks were plentiful -- cotton-tails, jacks, and snowshoe rabbits. The large elliptical prints of the last are very distinctive. Also common, very unusually so, were the tracks of weasels. Most of these appeared to be those of the larger species, the New York weasel. Throughout the day, however, we saw but one mouse trail! Clearly they are well hidden in runways under the deep snow. The weasels, I suppose, were after rabbits.

We failed to find a pileated woodpecker at Mullock's Woods but succeeded in seeing one in an aspen near the gate of the Devons' farm at Van Dorf. I have never seen this bird working on such a tree, or on so small a tree. As usual I was led to it by that dull, deliberate tapping which is so characteristic. Of the others only Jim managed to get to me in time to see it before it flew. Last winter I saw one of these birds in this same woods.

In Aurora we saw a fine flock of cedar waxwings near the high school and one male purple finch near the tannery. We were told of a robin which made its way through a broken pane of glass into a local greenhouse last fall. Finding food, shelter, and conditions to its liking it took up residence, and still remains, spending almost all its time inside the greenhouse. It has even come to like radio broadcasts, (the gardener has a radio in the hothouse), and it takes particularly to hockey broadcasts! It will start to complain when they are turned off! We went over to the greenhouse but could not get in, to our disappointment, as no one was about.

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On February 9th I decided to pay a visit to Cedarvale, my first since the club's field trip in January. As it was thus about a month since I had been in the ravine I was anxious to see whether there had been any perceptible changes in the bird life, especially to note any evidence of effects of the hard winter.

Starting at Boulton Drive I went up stream as far as the near end of Bathurst Field. All along the depth of the snow struck me afresh in this new setting, though on our streets and highways it has become an old story. Walking along the hard-packed path you are startled into realization that you are actually proceeding on a level high enough in places to place you on top of shrubs, the branches of which reveal themselves as a few black twigs peeping out of the snow at your feet. It is an eerie feeling. There is a sense of unreality as if you are not quite safe, are really treading on air, and may suddenly plunge disastrously downward at any moment.

All the way to the reservoir the stream was tightly imprisoned under a snow comforter whose immaculate surface recorded the travels of many black squirrels and one wandering bunny. Just below the towering white slope of the reservoir, almost a mountain in its wintry mantle, came the first bit of open water. From then on the stream was mostly open to my great astonishment. I am told the explanation is the heavy snow cover which, keeping the frost out of the ground, also tends to keep the underground water moving and the streams open. Along the banks of the stream the shining snow curved down to meet the dark steaming water in voluptuous undulations. And every boulder that raised its head above the water's surface was capped with a puffy white tam o'shanter. It came to me that I was gazing at a Heming painting. I could not make up my mind whether that artist's work had ceased to be fantasy and become reality about me, or if I had suddenly been transported into his whimsical world.

Above St. Clair Avenue the ravine took on a more normal appearance though quite as heavily snowladen. There had been ten species of birds in the lower part of the ravine, including a jolly flock of goldfinches feeding on a yellow birch, but birds had seemed secondary to my unusual surroundings. Now I could get down to the serious business of observing birds and other wild life. Perhaps it was the fact that the

hard-packed path gave out and I had to plow laboriously through the deep snow that brought me to a more sober frame of mind. Just at the top of the dump by Cardinal Corner I heard a familiar alarm note, and sought about with my eyes until I discovered a sparrow sitting in one of the hawthorns below me. The long-drawn-out see---eep, high and thin in tone, had said, "I am a white-throat", and after some looking I was able to discern the whitish throat, now somewhat greyed from too long residence in our sooty atmosphere. I was not surprised to find this bird; its hoped-for presence was in fact the main reason of my trip, for it had been reported by various people as being in the ravine ever since November, and I had not yet seen a white-throat in 1945. On the other hand, I was really amazed when, upon this fellow's departing to the nearby weed patch, a second of his kind appeared in the hawthorn. I would have thought that I had failed to see the first return, that there was really only one bird, had I not stayed long enough to see the first come back to perch beside the second.

As I slid down the slope the white-throats made off to the weed patch to forage for food. Incidentally, of the weeds still showing above the snow there were only burdock, goldenrod, and chicory that seemed to offer any source of nourishment, and there were not too many of these.

At the foot of the dump by the stream I found that the scrub willows had so bent under the snow as to form a natural cavity into which led a firmly trodden rabbit trail. In the past I have known pheasants to make a comfortable shelter in this particular thicket; but to-day the bunnies were in full possession. Near the entrance to the den stood a hawthorn whose trunk and lower branches were almost cleaned of bark, without doubt the work of hungry cottontails. Not far from the thorn tree a large wing had left its imprint on the snow, hard beside the rabbit trail, tell-tale evidence of the effort of some owl or hawk to catch a traveller on the trail.

In the floor of the valley I found the going so arduous that I was forced to reascend the slope, make my way to the path that crosses the old orchard, and by it get on to the Forest Hill path. At the foot of the Pine Knoll, beyond the junction of the two paths, I heard the alarm notes of a cardinal. Standing to watch I saw three of these birds, then four others, come out of the hawthorn grove below the pines. They all alighted close to the path in a thorn tree which was festooned with chains of wild cucumber lanterns. Then, like so many chickadees, they began to hammer and tap, to thrust and probe the light brown pods. Evidently they got much satisfaction from their labors for it was quite possible to see them extract and swallow the flat black seeds which are inside the pods. It was a beautiful sight for there were four bright males amongst the seven birds. Later I was to get even closer to the flock when it was feeding on another cucumber vine. On that occasion one brilliant male perched on top of the vine-covered shrub and kept an eye on me whilst the others fed. That, at least, was how it seemed; as if he were standing guard.

Along the Pine Knoll were three trees, dead or dying pines, which showed very fresh marks, the working of a three-toed woodpecker. The flaking of the bark, often in circular patches with a slight hole bored in the center of the patch which this bird makes, is quite typical. Those who saw the work of this species in Strathgowan Wood or Sunnybrook Park a winter or two ago will remember this. There was no sign of the bird to-day other than its work, and I have not heard of anyone who has seen it as yet.

Another thing I noted to-day was that the supposed silence of winter was by no means evident in the ravine. There had been a cardinal singing in the lower ravine! Can you imagine a cardinal singing in a Heming winter scene? No other birds were heard in song but they called to each other, or uttered alarms all along the walk. The pleasant tu-lit calls from tree sparrows in the weeds, and the pit-pits of the purple finches in the birches overhead; the subdued musical chatter of goldfinches, broken occasionally by per-chic-oree calls as a newcomer arrived; the jaunty, rather boisterous pronunciamento of a hairy woodpecker, and the shriller, more petulant efforts of his smaller cousin, the downy; the squalling of the black squirrel, and the red squirrel winding his clock; all these and others too made the walk as interesting by the ears as it was lovely through the eyes.

In the beginning I said I had gone out to see what effects the heavy winter was having upon the birds in the ravine. I can do this best perhaps by comparing the results of our January field trip in this same area with my observations to-day. On that occasion we saw 17 species, and to-day I saw 13 species. Then it was 175 individual birds, and now 138 individual birds. The shrike seems to have gone, but he may have been hiding around a corner. The most evident change was that the pheasants were absent. I saw but one track, and that two or three days old. I fear much that this deep snow has been disastrous for them. Their food is covered up for the most part; and quite possibly many of them have died from being caught in ground roosts by heavy snowfalls. To a certain extent they avoid the latter difficulty by roosting in trees above the snow, but then, of course, they are exposed to attack by various predators. It is possible that they have retired from the ravine to the areas of feeding stations. At any rate they were absent. The cardinals quite patiently were surviving satisfactorily. It might be pointed out, however, that in eating the wild cucumber seeds they become direct competitors for food with the pheasant which normally feeds on that same plant during the winter. In this competition I would think that the cardinal has the advantage, being able to get at the vines and pods with greater facility, and probably greater efficiency, than the pheasant. How well the cardinal can survive without aid from feeding stations in such a winter as this is uncertain. We may be sure, though, that if it can survive this winter in Toronto it can get through any other that is likely to occur. As to the other birds, I found the goldfinches fewer and the juncoes absent. These birds are quite capable of taking care of themselves in winter, and have no doubt wandered off to some area where food is abundant. My general conclusion was then, that so far, save for the pheasants possibly, the winter has had little damaging effect upon birds in these parts. This should be qualified, I think, by the possibility that the next month may be the worst period for them as the winter's influences are likely to be cumulative, the food getting progressively scarcer as the stocks are depleted.

Before quitting the ravine I scanned the sky from the top of the western slope. Out of the west came four golden-eye ducks, wings whistling as they flashed on the way across the city towards the Don. This was my first sight of these ducks over Cedarvale. But one never knows for I saw a flock of five golden-eyes flying over Davenport Road by Bedford Road the other day!

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Remember the Harwell lecture in April. You will need your T.F.N.C. membership card in order to get in to a reserved seat in Convocation Hall.