

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

of the Toronto Field Naturalists' Club

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Our members will recall with great pleasure the exhibits of lovely flower sketches painted by a fellow-member, Henry S. Saunders, which have been shown at previous meetings of the club. There is a delicacy of touch about Mr. Saunderson's work, both in his handling of design and of coloring, which partakes of the tender beauty of the flowers, his subjects.

No doubt many of us have wondered just how long it took our fellow-member to develop his art, and how he began such a valuable hobby. I am delighted to be able to answer these questions through an article written by Mr. Henry Saunders himself and previously published in the interesting new magazine called Best Years, a magazine for the older person. The article is entitled "Flowers That Bloom in the Paint Box". It reads as follows:

"Fifty years ago I made about a dozen sketches of flowers but it ended there for the time being. It was not until 1941 that I took up the interest seriously. Then the thought came to me: why not make a collection of native and other plants in this form?

"From our earliest youth my father, by example and encouragement, had interested his children in natural history, especially entomology and botany. We had our own collections of insects and each of us had a section in the garden into which we could bring roots of wild flowers. Later on we made collections of pressed plants. (My own collections of both were destroyed by fire, but I made new ones, which I gave away or sold in 1901).

"Now, however, I wanted to collect flowers again, but in the form of paintings because in painted flowers there is no drying up, with everything becoming brittle and turning brown, as there is in pressing flowers. What is done is permanent and keeps its colors.

"I remember my astonishment when in less than two months my sketches reached the number of 100; now, after three and a quarter years, the number is over 1,500, which includes 300 or more made especially as Christmas cards. In the collection proper there are now nearly 300 species of native plants: 60 of shrubs, 125 of trees, 110 of garden plants, and 100 of greenhouse plants.

"I have given quite a number of exhibitions: three in the local branch of the public library; two in a nearby public school; and two at the Field Naturalists' Club meetings. These all attract much attention.

"The time taken to make a sketch depends upon the amount of detail in the subject and runs approximately from one to three hours. It is not continuous work for I find it necessary to lay the sketch aside frequently to dry before making additions.

"The way I work is to look at the sketch before me, sketch it lightly in pencil, and color it as closely as possible to nature. I do not put in backgrounds but make them appear like pressed specimens. Of course some subjects are more difficult than others -- double flowers, for instance, the technique of which I haven't by any means mastered.

"It is astonishing, really, how attractive simple little sketches are, even that of a weed like plantain -- just green leaves with stalks bearing seeds. My subjects are weeds on streets or vacant lots, street and park trees, wild flowers in the woods, flowers in greenhouses.

"In painting them I favor the colors guaranteed permanent. I use eighteen colors or more ranging from lemon yellow to black. (One color I cannot find is a brilliant purple that is required for some cattleyas -- the common orchid of florists' windows).

"I use mostly French ultramarine, cerulean blue, alizeron crimson, spectrum red, rose madder, mauve, cobalt violet, new windsor green (light), oxide of chromium (green), olive green, lemon yellow, aurora yellow, cadmium orange, raw umber (brown), Davy's gray (light), Payne's gray (dark), ivory black, white (tube). These are all guaranteed colors except the olive green. They are for the most part Winsor and Newton's half pans.

"A quantity sufficient for a long period costs me \$4.30. Add to this two fine brushes at about \$1 apiece, a box for paints at \$1.50, and a sheet of water-color paper 31x23 inches (which I cut into eleven 6x9 sheets) costing 25 cents. The total cost is \$7.20. For finely cut white flowers I often use sugar paper, which is pale gray, but whenever possible I use white, putting a pale gray shaded background around the petals with very diluted black paint. For veining leaves or doing other fine work, I use a crow quill or any fine pen.

"Of all the hobbies I have had, which included stamps and coin collecting, studying Esperanto, book-binding and collect-Whitmaniana, I find this new one the most enjoyable. I don't think it requires any special talent -- I never had any lessons in painting. I would therefore urge my readers to get the inexpensive outfit required and try it. The field is unlimited."

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The lake beyond the beach at Frenchman's Bay, on March 3, 1945, was a sparkling, lively mass of dancing waters. A rare white block on the blue surface revealed the presence of a few ice cakes, the last remnants of departing winter. The huge ice ridge on the beach was mostly gone so that it was possible to walk along the sand by the water's edge.

We strolled east on the marsh road first. All along, the willows which flanked this lane were full of pussy blooms, the entire trees being covered with white fluffy balls. The marsh ice was rotten and water was beginning to appear at the edges. A few ducks far out on the lake, were the only birds that could be found in that direction.

Upon our return, I turned my binoculars on the bay inlet. There on the ice on the near side I spotted a lump of white which seemed more bird than ice. I guessed snowy owl but said nothing until we reached the car when I took another look to be sure. Then I shouted and the rest jumped. We marched along the beach westward and came finally to the landward limit of the inlet's east wall. At this point we were not more than 100 feet from the owl, a magnificent mature bird. It cast a considerable shadow as it stood straight and erect upon the ice, and was a very white specimen, so much so that its eyes stood out like dark buttons. At last, growing restless at our close approach, and because of some dogs on the farther shore of the inlet, he spread his wings and flapped slowly across the water to the east. We thought he was heading for the distant point, or an ice cake on the lake, but instead, when well past the cottages, he veered inshore and swooped up to land on a telephone pole along the lane where we had first walked. In that upward glide the under plumage shone out brilliantly white. It had quit this perch before we got back to the car, but where it went we did not see. This is the first snowy owl I have seen in nearly two years. They have been very scarce this winter, so it was an unexpected and thrilling sight, especially when seen so close.

After the owl left we walked to the bay end of the inlet. The ice was breaking away and a bit of open water extended into the bay ice. In this restricted area three large Chesapeake setters were disporting themselves -- one in particular was floundering in the water, swimming excitedly about. The other two raced up and down the shore or out onto the rotten ice to their master's despair. A fourth dog, a little terrier, also joined in the sport. Only after some moments did we realize the stimulus for all this when we saw a male old squaw rise abruptly from under the

ice to the surface of the water by our feet. Upon its appearance the swimming dog yelped madly and made frantically towards the duck. The other dogs barked, one rushed onto the ice, but did not essay the frigid water. The old squaw looked at us, then at the dog, and dove. This time it reappeared far over on the other side of the open water but close to the dogs on the land. They were so surprised as almost to plunge into the water. Instead they raced onto the ice which cracked ominously under their weight so that their master called them back. The swimmer turned and bore down on the duck which again dove, appearing this time after a long interval well out in the channel. The panting dog, outwitted, swam to shore -- but ran along the shore towards the duck. We thought the latter would naturally depart to the lake, but no, once more it dove, only to come up again almost at our feet. The Chesapeake was in the water again, in noisy pursuit. Was the old squaw having a bit of fun at the dog's expense? There was no evidence that it was injured in any way -- for it conducted itself superbly in its graceful dives. And it didn't look too alarmed when it eyed us, just coolly calculating. It could easily have escaped into the lake, either by diving and swimming or by flight. Yet it chose not to do so. Perhaps there was choice food hereabouts that it preferred to stay near. We had to leave before the dogs were tired out, but I am certain the old squaw drake had the better of it.

We stopped at the northeast end of the bay area to look through the woods for a possible hawk owl that has been reported in the vicinity. We had no luck in this search but we did see a goshawk darting along above the highway at this point. He was going east fast; a few flaps and a sail in true accipiter fashion.

The fields were largely bare of snow, only the fence and hedgerow drifts and the road pile remaining. Most of the smaller streams were open, some flooding. Horned larks and crows were much in evidence. Everything heralded an early spring.

At Highland Creek we tried Golden-Wing Path. Just at the head of the path Doug Miller spotted a bald eagle flying eastward over the valley. It was an immature bird, perhaps the one which has been around the city all winter. Very soon along the path we heard siskins and at the junction with Cedar Path we saw a nervous flock feeding in the cedars. We were able to get right below the trees and to see the heavy lining and the yellow patches to perfection. The birds kept up a constant mellow calling, like the pit-pit of the purple finch but much more musical. Now and then the shree-ee calls would sound, more prolonged and rippling in quality than I remembered them. A few goldfinches and purple finches were associated with the siskins but they seemed to keep to the birches. Siskins are almost the only birds I have known to feed on the cones of cedars. This flock was going at its business with great avidity. Also in this area were numerous chickadees. This region has been almost barren on the two previous visits this winter. I wonder if these are not the birds that went through here last fall, spent the winter further south, and now are returning en route to the north.

Our final stop was at Scarboro Bluffs. There was little on the lake. We noted how much erosion was going on. Huge blocks of earth were sliding down the bluffs, and thick mucky water was oozing down. Near the Carolina wren bank we saw and heard two cardinals and a song sparrow. In the distance old squaw could be heard on the lake -- a curious blending of winter and spring.

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On March 11 we made another trip east to Frenchman's Bay. On the way we stopped along the Markham road just north of Stop 24 on the Montreal highway in order to look for a Bohemian waxwing that was seen there last Sunday and Monday by J.L. Baillie and others. We saw no sign of it, however, though we called in here again during the afternoon on our return trip, when we did find two groups of cedar waxwings. The Bohemian was associating with cedars when seen. The cedar waxwings were feeding on mountain ash berries, and on buds of silver maple.

We also stopped at Golden-Wing Valley on the way out, looking here for siskins. A few were heard and glimpsed flying about, but we got no close views as a week ago. On this bright clear morning visibility was perfect. Consequently we had a magnifi-

cent sight of a huge rough-legged hawk which circled and sailed just a hundred feet above our heads. The bird was in a dark phase, having all the body black, but the wings were in the normal plumage, silvery white underneath with the black shoulder patches. This was my first sight of this species this year. There should be others this spring as the rough leg flight was heavy last fall. Just after the hawk disappeared a flock of finches flew along the pine ridge. They were fairly large and some seemed to show considerable white. To me the feeling came that they were white-winged crossbills -- but though we tramped a good way up the valley we did not succeed in coming upon the flock. So we had to let it go unnamed. Jays were numerous and noisy, chasing each other from tree to tree above our heads. Crows, too, were plentiful, filling the air with raucous cries. Alongside the path we found skunk cabbage some three to four inches high! This seems very early, especially as the snow only disappeared from this spot during the past week, and still lies deep just in front of the place. Fresh muskrat tracks crossed the snow near the swamp, and a weasel's track went along the path for some distance.

Near Dunbarton we pulled up beside a weedy field, attracted first by a line of birds on a wire. One of these proved to be the first bluebird of the season, but unfortunately he vanished abruptly. The other birds were goldfinches, and when they dropped down into the field we discovered a large flock feeding amongst the weeds. There was a good deal of coming and going in this flock. Several birds would rise, fly off over the fields some way, and circle to return to the flock. There seemed no reason for this save a desire to work off energy. Some were singing, but not a full song. One unusual episode occurred while we stood watching here. A horned lark that we had heard singing made its appearance and perched on top of a fence post. It was a male bird. The "horns" were very prominent as it turned and twisted nervously, keeping an eye on us all the while. I tried a few imitations to see if it would react, and I was pleased when it became annoyed by this, showing its vexation by uttering sharp, complaining whistles, then bursting into song. As it sang goldfinches, that had been on the wires above, plummeted down to the high weeds and shrubs along the fence. A good number arranged themselves just behind the lark until finally the singing lark was framed in a crescent of golden-green finches. It would have made an extraordinary color photo. Had a painter imagined such a thing on canvas he would have been completely ridiculed.

At the Bay we had hoped to have another sight of the snowy owl but it was nowhere to be found. The bay ice had become thoroughly rotten. A good deal more water was visible near the channel but ducks were almost absent despite this. Three golden-eyes and an old squaw -- possibly the same male as last week -- were feeding close to the edge of the retreating ice. The willow trees were so enticing that most of us picked bunches of pussy willows, and were severely criticized by the caretaker of the beach for doing so. He was undoubtedly right, but they really were a great temptation. Curiously, there were no redwings in this marsh though we had noted two males singing along the Markham Road. (Frank Smith saw a large flock land in Ashbridge's Marsh on Friday).

After lunch on the Danforth we drove up to Cedar Woods at York Mills and spent an hour there. Outside of a flock of siskins (40-50), a downy, a creeper, and two sharp-shinned hawk there were no birds. We had hoped for an owl in the evergreens but were disappointed, though I did see very fresh droppings under one hemlock.

When I arrived home I discovered that a robin had come to our garden, the first this year. We saw robins at various spots today and heard one singing. Others have seen newcomers for several days in other parts of the city.

I would judge by the dates of bird arrivals, the state of the streams (all open), and of the plants, that the season is now about a week to a fortnight early. This impression of an early spring was confirmed by a letter from Mrs. Davies of Aurora. She wrote on March 9th, "The horned larks are quite numerous and have been back since the 25th of February. We also had our first robin on the 6th (March). Crows were first seen on the 10th of February. What we consider an early record for the redwing was our seeing them today, a large flock of 150 or more. The 9th of March is unusually early for them in this area, and looking back over our records of previous years the earliest date was March 20th."

Don't forget that the Harwell lecture on April 2nd, our next meeting, will be held in Convocation Hall, and that members will be asked to show their membership cards in order to gain entrance to the section of reserved seats. The seats can only be reserved until 8.05 p.m.