

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

of the Toronto Field Naturalists' Club

Number 55

November, 1945.

The unusually good birding this fall continues with but little abating. Now it is the arrival of early winter visitors that holds the attention of observers. The coming of these migrants from the north promises an excellent winter for the bird watchers. It also confirms the many reports that have come to our notice of the shortage of seeds and fruit on the trees and bushes in the north. There is a similar lack in our area, save for the heavily laden Manitoba maples. These trees will doubtless attract large numbers of evening grosbeaks before the winter is out, but other species that depend upon evergreens especially may have to move about a good deal in order to find an adequate food supply.

One of the earliest of the winter visitors to arrive from the north woods was an arctic three-toed woodpecker. This bird was first detected on October 18th by Professor Dwight in Sherwood Park. On October 21st, Mr. and Mrs. Eric McNeillie and I, following Professor Dwight's directions, headed for Sherwood Park in search of the rare bird. First we tried the pines on the hill north of the stream and across from the cemetery. There we found evidence of the bird's working on a fallen pine log, but no bird. Then we crossed the open field to the north towards Blythwood Road. When we were a little over half way across I heard a woodpecker tapping with a rhythm that sounded suspicious. Soon located on a dead pine at the western edge of the field it proved to be the bird we sought. To our great delight it was a bright-colored male, crowned by a gleaming yellow head patch. Like most of its kind it was very tame, working steadily on whilst we approached by easy stages and many pauses to within ten feet. This was particularly happy as the McNeillies had not until now had the good fortune to come upon one of these fellows. We studied it until every detail was noted. The velvety back especially impressed us. Its changing hues as the light struck it from various angles was particularly interesting. At one moment quite black, it would alter abruptly to a rich dark green, then to a steely blue, and back again to jet black. A series of white spots showed along the outer folded edges of the wings near the ends, and black dots on the outer tail feathers. The legs and feet appeared grey-blue in color. The bird worked unceasingly, mostly scaling off bark with strokes of the bill directed alternately from right and left. Once or twice it drilled small holes from which it extracted fat white grubs. Although most of the time it worked laterally along a horizontal branch, for a while it searched the main trunk, moving backwards and downwards with great ease, seeming to prefer this rearward descent to an upward head first movement. On several occasions the bird uttered a note that I had never previously encountered. It went thus: churk, churk, somewhat resembling a single, short squeak from a rusty hinge. Though the whole of the large tree showed signs of having been assiduously worked over the bird seemed to find plenty still to keep it busy. So we left it, as oblivious of us when we went as when we came.

Since that time a good number of the club members have seen this bird, either in Sherwood Park or in the neighboring Strathgowan Wood. The bird is still about, and well worth looking for. A female of the same species has

also taken up residence in the same area. A third such bird has recently been seen by Professor McIlwraith on Donwoods Drive in York Mills, and a fourth by William Smith, Secretary of the Toronto Ornithological Club, at Donalds Farm in the Don Valley. No doubt there are others of these unusual birds around this year. The habitat most favored by the species is dead or dying pine wood. For my own part I have never seen them in any other situation.

Another arrival from the north, from the tundra this time, is the snowy owl. A flight was expected this year, as this is the fourth year since the last large flight. The invasions from the north come with surprising regularity about once in four years. This cycle is linked to the four year cycle of the collared lemming, the chief food supply of this owl. When the lemmings decrease many of the owls have to come south to escape starvation. Most of those that leave their Arctic homeland never return, for the guns of countless farmers and hunters are turned on these spectacular birds. Few elude the fateful barrage. Human ignorance and the lust to kill are all against the owl. Yet how can any thinking being desire to destroy a bird that is beautiful, even magnificent, to behold; one that is largely beneficial in its food habits, being a superb mouse-hunter; and one that sits quietly, gazing with confident unconcern whilst the gunner walks up to within a few feet and blazes away! For sport one might as well select a Plymouth Rock hen. Even so, our newspapers the last few days have allowed their pages to be decorated with boastful portraits of proud shooters who have successfully bagged snowy owls. One fellow got one, indeed, with a twenty-gauge shotgun!

It is interesting that all the snowy owls seen up until today (November 11th) have been males, in very white plumage. Reports of their arrival began to come into the Royal Ontario Museum about the middle of October. Since then the reports have been steadily accumulating. Many club members have been fortunate enough to find one or more of the great birds. The observations have been well distributed over the Toronto region. Mr. W. H. Martin has found as many as three on the breakwall along Sunnyside a favorite place. Mrs. Edna Prince saw two at Thistletown; and Mr. Arnold Dawe discovered two at Thistletown in the fields. Jim Baillie saw one in a tree near Avenue Road and Wilson Avenue, and another at Hanlan's Point on the airport. Gordon Lambert detected one sitting out in the middle of Ashbridge's Bay. More than a hundred members of the Club were able to observe one sitting on a breakwall near the Sunnyside bathhouse on the November field day (November 10th)

My own sights have included five individuals to date. Three of these were seen on November 3rd in company with Greer Roberts and Doug Miller. Two of them were in the fields along Eglinton Ave. just west of the General Engineering Plant in Scarborough. As we drove along we kept close tabs on all the haystacks in the fields for they are favorite perching spots for the snowy owls. Doubtless they are advantageous lookouts from which field mice and other prey may be detected, and potential dangers as well, though again it should be said this owl is astonishingly fearless. This is probably in part the result of lack of acquaintance with humans; and in part due to the fact that there can be few if any other creatures that would attempt to molest so powerful a bird. Finally I found a white spot atop a stack, and examination through the binoculars showed it to be an owl. We watched it for some time during which it seemed to be busy preening its plumage. We had

turned away, got in the car, and Greer had just started the engine when Doug suddenly shouted, "What's that?" Greer stopped the engine and we all jumped out, Doug pointing to the field on the north side of the road. There indeed was another snowy, this one in flight, low over the black furrows of the ploughed field. It alighted in a moment on a black clod near the crest of a slight rise. There he sat gazing about, looking for all the world like an animated snow dwarf left miraculously in the black field when all the rest of the snow had gone. The third owl we found a mile further east, squatting in the grass at the edge of another ploughed field. Thinking to experiment a bit I climbed the fence and tip-toed carefully along the grass towards the owl. Until I was within 20 paces he did no more than scan me occasionally with his gleaming yellow and black eyes. When I was at a distance of 15 paces he rose a foot or two off the ground and flapped slowly across the field. Just at that moment I became aware of the farmer. He had been standing on a haystack, just in back of his house, in direct line with my binoculars, as they were levelled at the owl! What he thought about my actions I shall leave to the imagination. But when the owl moved the farmer, who had presumably not seen the bird before, though it was sitting within 75 feet of the haystack, leaped down and ran headlong towards the barn. That he was after his shotgun appeared to me very evident. But whether he intended to go after the owl, or after me I could not be sure. Deciding that discretion was the wiser course I retired hastily to the fence, got back to the road and into the car, and departed at a good speed for Frenchman's Bay, the farmer not having reappeared. On our return trip we saw no sign of this owl - and we feared that the worst had happened to it. Of the three owls only the one on the haystack was still to be seen late in the afternoon.

That same afternoon (November 3rd) we were lucky enough to see still another of the boreal visitors, a northern shrike...This bird was perched atop a tree at Gentian Woods, Scarboro Bluffs. Such a perch is typical of this species. Like most predators they do their hunting from such lookouts. This was a brownish specimen, probably a bird of this year's brood. I was to see another of the same species in Cedarvale the next morning. This one was discovered by Cliff Hope whom I met in the ravine. Like the Scarboro shrike this bird was perched atop a tree, in this case a dead pine. Several other shrikes have been seen in the last ten days, three at least in the Don Valley. It will pay observers to scan the tops of dead trees, telephone poles, high points in hedge rows, and similar places during their winter rambles. Also it is well to listen for the quite remarkable song of this bird, a song that resembles that of the thrasher or the catbird.

Among our most lovely winter birds are the grosbeaks. Last winter they did not come down at all. This season the first ones have already been seen. Ott Devitt and Bill Smith met the first southbound flocks of evening grosbeaks near Lake Simcoe on October 21st. On November 3rd Cliff Hope heard a flock flying over his home in the city. The next day he and I observed a group of five of these birds flying above Bathurst Field in Cedarvale. And today (November 11th) Earl Stark found a group of 7 feeding in a Manitoba maple near the church at Purpleville. Five of us, Stark, Jim and Florence Baillie, Bob Trowern and myself, had the great pleasure of seeing this flock for ten minutes. We stood right beside the tree and listened to the powerful bills of the grosbeaks crack open the maple seeds. Six of the seven birds were males, three of them in very bright plumage. This is an unusually high percentage of

males. They are ordinarily very much in the minority in winter flocks. A few moments before taking off the flock set up a low chattering, very similar to that of purple finches - so much so that we looked carefully for finches that we might be overlooking. But soon characteristic evening grosbeak notes came into the medley - and then they were off. Watch the Manitoba maples for these beautiful gold and green and black grosbeaks.

This morning, too, whilst apart from the rest of the party, Trowern and I chanced upon firstly, a splendid mature goshawk, which first flew then sat atop a dead tree for us to look at it; secondly, a flock of 7 pine grosbeaks bounding through the air in their regular way, and calling their loud careee calls. We would have liked them to stop but they did not. At least we know they are about, and we shall go again, hoping to find them feeding on some evergreen tree when we can watch their roseate beauty at leisure. These and other sights are the harbingers of a rare, good winter ahead of us.

: : : : : :

Mr. James A. Simon has sent in the following list of asters and goldenrods, specimens of which species he collected at Highland Creek at the time of the fall field trip there. Several members of the club have asked that this list be published in the Newsletter. We are glad to present it here. The rare Lowrie's Aster, included in the list, was found by Mrs. L.E. Jaquith.

ASTERS

Aster macrophyllus	- Large leaved aster
Aster cordifolius	- Heartshaped aster
Aster Lowrieanus	- Lowrie's aster
Aster novae-angliae	- New England aster
Aster tradescanti	- Tradescant aster
Aster lateriflorus	- Calico aster
Aster azureus	- Sky blue aster
Aster sagittifolius	- Arrow leaved aster
Aster ericoides	- White heath aster
Aster Lindleyanus	- Lindleys aster

GOLDENRODS

Solidago graminifolia	- Flat-topped goldenrod
Solidago ohioensis	- Ohio goldenrod
Solidago nemoralis	- Gray or Dwarf goldenrod
Solidago altissima	- Fall goldenrod
Solidago canadensis	- Canada goldenrod
Solidago squarrosa	- Stout ragged goldenrod
Solidago latifolia	- Zigzag goldenrod
Solidago caesia	- Wreath goldenrod
Solidago juncea	- Early goldenrod

R. M. Saunders
Editor