

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

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The lure of the unexplored, the beckoning finger of novelty - what field naturalist can pass them by? The chance of finding a new bird, a new flower, the hope of having a new experience with some old friend of the wild in some new setting - these are sure enticements to send the ardent naturalist afield in search of adventure.

Three or four weeks ago the alluring possibility of finding a new bird - new to my experience I mean - not far from Toronto suddenly commanded my attention. As readers of this Newsletter will know from the previous issue, Arctic three-toed woodpeckers have been appearing this fall with unusual frequency. It occurred to me that such a flight might very well portend an incursion of their close relative, the American three-toed woodpecker. True, only three records of the occurrence of this species in the Toronto area exist. Two of these are from many years ago. The third is of a bird seen by Mr. Ivor at Erindale in 1930. For some people such evidence of rarity would seem disheartening. But for others it is a challenge, and the current influx of northern birds becomes an opportunity to take up the challenge.

In the north the two species of three-toed woodpeckers have a very wide range. The Arctic's range is continental in extent, reaching from Alaska to Labrador and Newfoundland. The American three-toed is really a North American race of a species that is circumpolar. Both species occur in high mountains far, to the south in the United States. Wherever they live they are largely non-migratory as their normal food is ordinarily as available in winter as in summer. Occasionally movements of the sort we are now experiencing do occur. These seem to be the result of some unwonted lack of food; or perhaps they occur because an unusually successful breeding season overcrowds the home area with a surplus population that has to move out. Though both species have been known to move south in such incursions, the Arctic three-toed seems more prone to do so than the American. No satisfactory explanation of this difference has been found. It is all the more difficult to explain because it is quite customary for the two species to inhabit similar, even the same, areas in the north. Moreover their habits and way of life are markedly alike. A.C. Bent points out in Life Histories of North American Woodpeckers that the "feeding habits of the American three-toed woodpecker are almost identical with that of the Arctic three-toed". However, most writers agree with E.H. Forbush who says in Birds of Massachusetts and other New England States that the American three-toed "is perhaps more closely confined to the spruce growth or its neighborhood than the black-backed species." He goes on to state that this characteristic "may affect somewhat the winter distribution of the (American) three-toed woodpecker in southern New England, where most of the spruce woods have been cut off and replaced by deciduous trees." This remark is obviously quite as applicable to southern Ontario as to southern New England. As this presumed fondness for spruce appeared as the only marked difference in habit between the two birds it was that which set me thinking about the possibility of locating a likely spot near Toronto where there might be some hope of spotting one of the rare "ladder-backs".

Where is there a good-sized stand of spruce near Toronto? That is the question I posed myself. The first and only answer that came to me was Holland River Marsh. But second thoughts made me realize that with all the clearing, draining, and cutting that has gone on in recent years in those parts, there is very little of the original spruce-tamarack bog left. Unable to answer my question myself I turned for help to better informed members of the club. Professor Dwight gave me the first lead when he told me of several "flooded valleys" in the direction of Lindsay which might have black spruce in them. Professor T.M.C. Taylor was even more specific, recommending the area around Zephyr which he had explored botanically. Finally I found that Herb Southam had done some birding in this latter part, especially along Pefferlaw Creek at Mud Lake, and that he remembered seeing spruce in that area. However, he had rarely been in the region in winter. After such co-operation from club members, and a close examination of the topographic maps I was ready to set out.

The expedition took place on December 1st, four club members taking part - Mr. and Mrs. Greer Roberts and Mr. and Mrs. R.M. Saunders. We got away at nine o'clock. It was a cloudless, brilliant winter's day, stimulating from the outset. None of us foresaw - we could not have done so - that this day was to prove one of the most exquisitely beautiful days we have ever spent afield, a day when every quarter of the terrain, every fragment of the horizon was informed with loveliness. Once we had passed through Unionville we ran into a world of breathless delight - not a tree, not a fence, not a wire nor a bending weed but was sheathed in sparkling ice. At Vivian Forest where we made a brief stop, icicles, rainbow-hued in the glinting sun, hung pendant from every needle clump on the massed evergreens. But it was at Pefferlaw Creek that we encountered the perfect Christmas card forest. Pine, hemlock, spruce and cedar rose in clusters and groves, their many hued verdancy overlain with a soft light mantle of fresh-fallen immaculate snow. Their brethren, the bare deciduous trees, were totally encased in glistening ice. The robust blacks and greys of sleeping oaks and beeches had by such magic been transformed into radiant pastels. Underfoot the fluffy, dry snow received every footprint vaguely; gleaming flakes tumbling into the hollows and blurring them, as if to defy intrusion in this perfection. Overhead the fleckless sky stretched its arch from horizon to horizon, but the vibrant blue at the apex gave way gradually toward the farther edges to a cool sea-green. Towering dark spruces, snow-bedecked and framed in this setting of blue and green, seemed like some giant's artistry. The whole scene was unbelievable; a fairyland, in which no doubt all the rabbits and squirrels, mice and foxes, whose tracks we could see dotting the snow, talk to each other, and dance by the light of the moon. Whilst we stood there there was not a sound - a hushed silence pervaded all, as if the denizens of this fairy world were waiting mute, eager for the human intruders to go away. And go we did - with some reluctance, for whenever again would we see a scene like this? And yet, with some relief, for there does come a moment when sheer, intense loveliness is overwhelming.

A half-mile or more from our first stopping place, along the road toward Sandford, stands a bridge over the creek. The stream was open, running black and smooth between its white banks. We stopped, for open water is always likely to be haunted by birds in winter. We were rewarded at once with the sight of a little flock of four redpolls. They were busily eating the seeds of a low tamarack near the bridge, and were quite undisturbed by our close approach. While we were watching the redpolls quite a crowd of chickadees came along, making a great fuss and

chatter. In the distance a pine grosbeak called, but failed to make himself visible. Our attention was being divided hither and yon by this sudden outburst of activity. Into its midst came a dry harsh rattle. It caused me to shout, "Canada Jay!" and to rush about trying to find the author. It seemed most curious about us, and peered down at us intently without a sign of fear. So fixed was my mind on the idea of Canada Jay that for a long moment I thought this fellow really was one. But then I became aware of the black marks through the eyes, of the slight vermiculation on the underparts, and, when it flew, of the white patches on the wings. It was a fine mature northern shrike, not a Canada Jay. But that "almost Canada-Jay" was so exciting that we decided on the spot to rename the bridge - which bears the prosaic title of Smith Bridge - as Almost-Canada-Jay Bridge!

We went on to Mud Lake, exploring the lay of the land for future reference. The miles and miles of tamarack-spruce-cedar lowlands in the Pefferlaw valley were a revelation. It was plain we had discovered an area that would repay many a future trip.

Of all our bird sights on this trip, without doubt the most stirring was a wonderful flock of snow buntings, discovered by Greer feeding in a field just north of Vivian Forest. When we got out of the car they were still feeding but were very restless. They kept moving rapidly about, running along the ground and jumping up at weeds; or flying up, circling about with loud twitters and husky whistles, and alighting again in some other part of the field. To our delight, in one of these circling flights, the flock came directly over our heads - showing all their handsome white bodies and black-tipped wings against the bright blue sky. This time they came down right at our feet on the road! Some perched on the fence wires. But in a trice they were up and away again - not frightened however, for they alighted again immediately in the field on the other side of the road. Before we started the car they were off again - headed northward. We followed beside them the better part of a mile, losing sight of them at last as they vanished over the top of a hill. I find it very unusual to see buntings on so fine a day. Usually for me they are seen in the gusts of snow flurries, birds of the storm and wind. This flock was my first sight of buntings this winter, and thus becomes the latest date of arrival for this species that I have.

We had not found a three-toed woodpecker on this trip, but we had discovered a most promising area. So the next week on December 8th, Jim Baillie, Greer Roberts and I paid another visit to Pefferlaw Creek. This time we approached by the road that leads east from Newmarket through West Franklin; a most interesting road for birders that, but not too trustworthy in winter. Along it we came upon two fine flocks of redpolls, nearly 200 in all. The first flock was most accommodating. It fed along the ground as we slowly followed it across a field, and amongst its members were a surprising number of rosy-tinted males. Most exciting was the presence of two hoary or Arctic redpolls - those little fellows that look like ordinary redpolls that have been dipped in flour. The white or pinkish, unstreaked rumps are the best mark for them. Unhappily the flock took off before Jim or Greer got a look at those two. We examined all the other redpolls that day with minute care but could not find any more hoaries.

At Pefferlaw Creek we stopped first at the western corner of the woods - stopped because there, right beside the car, feeding on weeds

by the road's edge were two pine grosbeaks - a brilliant rosy male, and a gold-green female. We watched them for a good while. These birds are always exciting, not merely because they are rarely seen, but because they are so eminently beautiful. During our stay in this area we heard the loud, tuneful calls of pine grosbeaks several times. And just as we were leaving we saw several, feeding like the first two, on weeds alongside the road. The conditions of observation could not have been more favorable.

This time we hiked a good distance down stream, across the bog to the west, and back up the lane to the road. We saw much pileated work, and came on one dead pine that had been recently worked over from top to bottom by a three-toed woodpecker. However, we did not find the bird. There will always be a mystery as to which one of the three-toeds did the work. In the middle of the bog, as we were plodding heavily through the unfrozen wetness, we put up a large white rabbit. It hopped slowly ahead of us, pausing several times before making off at a tangent. Jim recognized the animal as a snowshoe rabbit, or varying hare. Neither Greer nor I had ever seen one. It is an animal of the north and is to be seen in this area only in such "northern islands" as this bog. It changes its color in the fall from brown to white. This specimen was almost wholly white. The snowshoe-like tracks were very common in the bog so there must be a large number of these rabbits there. Once again we heard a low, husky rattle from some bird, but today we saw neither shrike nor jay.

On the return trip we travelled over a new road to Vivian Forest, and this road revealed to us still another lovely spot to be explored. Vivian Forest itself is worth a great deal of attention from the naturalists.

Our quest for an American three-toed woodpecker has not yet resulted in the finding of that bird. On the other hand it has revealed to us a whole new region of unexplored valleys and bogs and woods. Most of these are within the Toronto area. With King and Maple it is the most promising winter birding area that we have. And it may exceed the better-known areas in what it produces. It has almost greater possibilities, both ornithological and botanical, for the warmer season than for winter. In other words, it is a neglected part of our Toronto region. Why have we failed before this to realize its possibilities? How many other such neglected spots are there in the Toronto region? There are many no doubt. Let the members of the club get about, and find out the resources of this region they call their own.

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Interesting Birds of Our Country. By S. Kip Farrington, Jr.
Illustrated by Lynn Bogue Hunt. Garden City Publishing Co. Garden City, N.Y. \$2.19. (In Canada, Blue Ribbon Books (Canada) Ltd., Toronto.)

Here is a book that will be of very great interest to beginners in bird study. The birds chosen for consideration are amongst the most striking and attractive in our bird world. They have been selected to illustrate certain habits, habitats, color groups, and ideas, and they are grouped in that manner. "Game Birds that Drum and Strut," "Birds Extinct Since the Settlement of America", "Birds of Graceful Flight", "Smart Birds", are some of the headings of sections of the book. Each page has four colored illustrations by Mr. Hunt. They are impressionistic habitat studies rather than detailed identification portraits, and for

that very reason are more useful for identification since they catch the spirit of the bird in action, as an observer is likely to see it. It is a pity that some of the colors have not been reproduced faithfully, but on the whole this is not a serious drawback in this book. I cannot agree with the rather unfavorable appraisal of the duck hawk, nor with the free hand given to farmers to kill hawks in the discussion of the goshawk. On the other hand it is fine to see the author's appreciation of the good done by such predators as the snowy owl, the barn owl and the screech owl. The last two sections are devoted to "Bird Feeding" and "Bird Houses". The cover is a magnificent study of whistling swans in flight.

Three Mile Bend. By Kerry Wood. Illustrated by Hugh Weatherby. The Ryerson Press, Toronto. \$2.50

This is one of the most amusing books I have seen for a long time. Written by a man who has discovered through long personal contact how much happiness there can be in the enjoyment of the simple things of nature, and of human companionship. In this collection of essays there is a lot of common sense philosophy of life, one or two tall stories, some uproariously funny episodes that might happen to anyone, and a great deal of love of nature. This man likes to be afield. He is a field naturalist in the broad sense - unspecialized, so that in his book he writes about all kinds of wild life - owls, skunks, mushrooms, flying squirrels, mosquitoes and much else. There is something for everyone in this book. It is just the sort of thing you would like to have in your home, to read over and over, because it is good reading in itself, and it will remind you of a lot of interesting things that have happened to you and your friends. There is a lot of good sound knowledge of nature hidden in this author's chatty style.

The black and white illustrations are really first-class. They have a bookfull of laughs in themselves. Any of you who have a summer place will simply burst over the one entitled, "Shrubs fill space and don't need mowing."

On the more serious side I cannot refrain from quoting the author's evaluation of hawks. Remember it comes from a man who lives at Red Deer, Alberta, and out in the Prairie Provinces hawks are many times more common than in Ontario. He says (p.45) "It is always safe to assume that you'll see twenty good hawks for every rare bad actor of the family, and therefore, unless you can positively identify one hawk from another, it pays to give all hawks the benefit of the doubt until such time as one provides proof of an evil disposition. They are truly valuable agricultural assets, and in many ways they constitute our most interesting bird family. ... The hawk is Nature's most important link in the chain of life in the wilds and their presence insures the healthy condition of our woods and farm fields. So give them a break from now on and start Saving instead of Shooting hawks."

This is a book any field naturalist ought to own - for its good fun, its good sense, its revelation of sound values of living through the experiences of a brother naturalist.

Richard M. Saunders,
Editor.