

Toronto Field Naturalists' Club

FEBRUARY MEETINGS

Royal Ontario Museum, Monday, February 3, 1947, at 8.15 P.M.

ARCTIC ANIMALS SEEN ON EXERCISE MUSK-OX

by

Lt. Col. W. W. H. GUNN.

This talk will be illustrated with coloured slides.

ROTUNDA DISPLAY

MEMBERS EXHIBIT. This will be a display of members specimens and collections.

There is still space available for a few more exhibits. If you have some things to show the other members of the club please write to Mrs. L. E. Jaquith, 72 Hudson Dr., Toronto.

The exhibits should be clearly labelled with the name of the specimen and the owner's name. They can be left at the Royal Ontario Museum at any time up to 5.00 P.M. on Mon. 3rd February, addressed to The Secretary, Toronto Field Naturalist's Club.

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SATURDAY AFTERNOON HIKE

SHERWOOD PARK Saturday Feb. 8, 1947, at 2.30 P.M.

Meet at the end of Sherwood Avenue at the entrance to the Park.

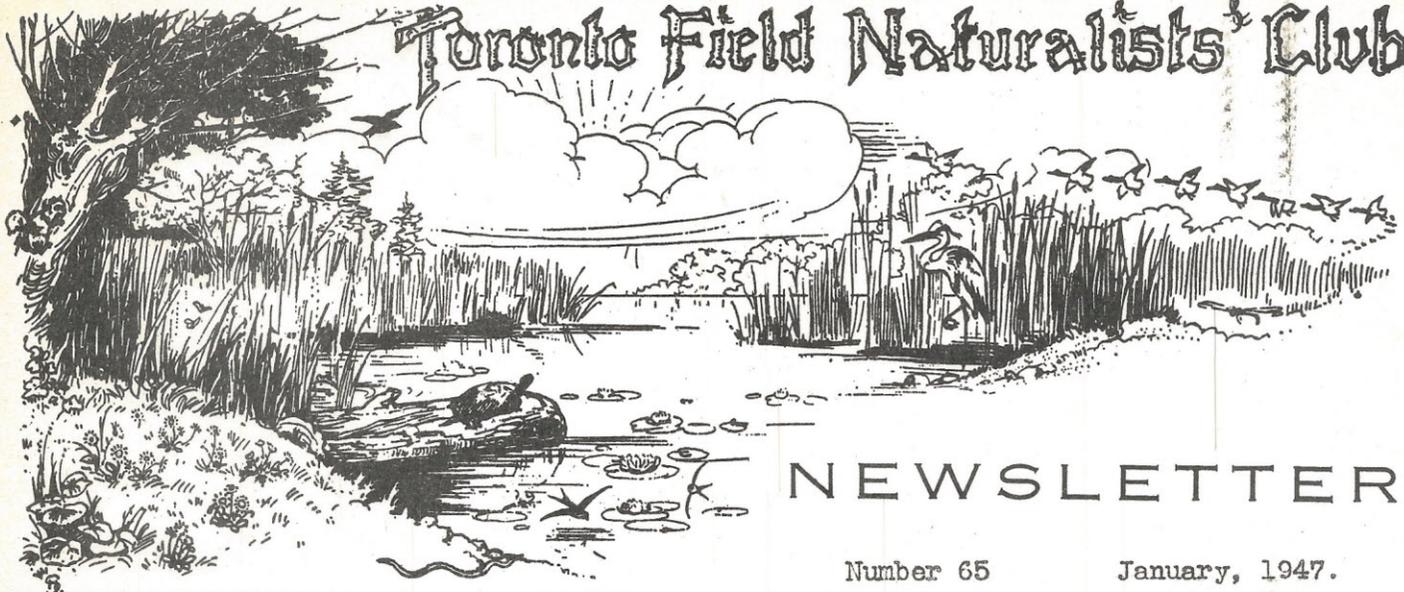
Leaders will be: -

Mr. W. Carrick BIRDS

Mr. O. Devitt BIRDS

Mr. L. Owen TREES

Toronto Field Naturalists' Club.



Number 65

January, 1947.

Beginning the New Year's birding is always a great adventure. The records for the old year have been brought up to date, the totals compiled and entered. Heavy lines have been drawn beneath the final entry in the journal. A fresh page has been turned, a new clean sheet is in the record book. All is in readiness for dawn on New Year's Day and the start of a new series of adventures - and the drama is about to commence. Who knows what its plot will be? When and how will the actors appear? Everything now is fresh, novel and pristine. With the coming of light, perhaps a little before, on January 1st, the curtain will rise, the play begin. But we bird watchers are actors as well as watchers in this play. We must be up and doing, enter upon the stage ourselves or we shall not see what goes on.

Thus as the first light of 1947 thrust its way through lazily falling snowflakes three of us: Greer Roberts, Michael Powicke and I - stepped out of my house into the New Year. We were stowing ourselves and our lunches into Greer's car when a redpoll chattered overhead. So prone are we to lose ourselves in things prosaic that the dramatic import of this moment, of that gentle, well known sound slipped my mind until Greer exclaimed, "First bird of the Year!" Then I came to with a start. Redpoll, first bird of 1947; this would be the first name on my list. With this realization came a sense of astonishment, for I live on McMaster Avenue in the heart of the city. Sometimes I have been outside of the city by dawn. Then such a beginning is no surprise. But, standing here by my own doorstep and starting the annual bird list with a redpoll's chatter falling down midst the snowflakes is indeed a wonder. In mid-Toronto one expects, - and the chances are overwhelming that one's expectations will come true -, to begin the year with one of three species, house sparrow, starling, rock dove. In fact the likelihood is that all three of these urbanites will appear on the list before any others.

This year it was to be unexpectedly different. The unusual prevalence of redpolls this season and the fact that this northern species gets going earlier in the day than our common city birds gave us the novel beginning. Yet after the initial redpoll we neither saw nor heard another bird until after we had picked up Tom Murray and were driving up Yonge Street just beyond the Don Valley. There a hen pheasant ran suddenly out from some shrubbery onto the highway, was terrified by the on coming car, tried to stop, lost its footing and went sliding along on its rump like some schoolboy showing off. We swerved to avoid it, and the bird, recovering itself, scuttled back to safety in the shrubs. Our third bird was chalked up when a flock of snow buntings rose from a field near Oriole and swept across the road, greater snowflakes amidst lesser, to dip down and vanish in the tumbling snowdrifts beyond. Not until we were nearing Unionville, and after we had seen a second

pheasant - a luckless bird that, dead upon the road - dod one of the ubiquitous three - a starling - fly onto our list. Markham gave us house sparrow and rock dove in quick succession. The ordinary had now caught up with the unusual - but not quite, for all-year long this 1947 list will be headed by redpoll, pheasant, and snow bunting.

We were heading for Pefferlaw Brook, become since last December our favorite winter haunt. The snow was letting up, and clear blue patches in the east, whence the storm was coming, promised sunlight soon. A single blue jay; a second flock of buntings; two juncos picking up gravel on the road - all near Vivian - were the only other birds we encountered before reaching our destination. There it was necessary to drive on to Sandford in order to find a place to turn around for though the main roads were in fine condition, ploughed clean and wide, the side roads and the farm lanes were mostly uncleaned so that it was difficult to find turning places. Returning we parked at the bridge over the brook.

Scarcely had we descended from the car when I heard a pine grosbeak whistling in the distance. Without conscious hope of response I started to whistle in imitation. For a moment the bird ceased, no doubt to listen, then resumed its melodic calls but did not appear to come nearer. Then all of a sudden, bounding through the air as only this species can do, came the whistler. Over the trees from the east, right to the roadside he came, settling briefly in a poplar as if to have a look at us; then, satisfied, he dropped down onto the road but look at us; then, satisfied, he dropped down onto the road but a few feet in front of me where he began to feed eagerly. We have no more beautiful bird than the male pine grosbeak, deep rose and luminous grey all over. Now the four of us had a magnificent chance to observe such a one under perfect conditions. So bent was I upon the brilliant coloring of the bird's plumage, and so astonished at being successful in attracting it, that I did not quickly see what it was eating. When I did enquire into this I found that the bird was swallowing beakfulls of discolored snow, some horse had recently gone along the road. At that discovery I remembered that most finches are fond of salt, and I concluded that this discolored snow must have a strong salty flavor pleasing to the grosbeak. When he had filled himself Pinicola flew up to a tree, paused for an instant, then flew away toward the woods where we had first heard it calling. Indeed its calls were now resumed, but no imitation on my part would again entice it back. Either it had had its fill and did not for the moment care, or it was certain there really was no rival about to challenge its privacy along the road.

The promised sun broke free at last from grey concealing clouds, and for the next two hours under a shimmering blue sky we tramped along crusted trails through the midst of snow powered trees. One of those soul-stirring winter days, for which no Florida beach can compensate the loser, burst upon us.

How many animals had written the stories of their wanderings in the new fallen snow? To us it seemed as if all the rabbits in Ontario had been chasing helter-skelter through this wood. Everywhere was an endless network of their spoor. Single tracks meandered hither and yon, ran in all directions. Every so often we traversed some hard packed rabbit highway. Such a trail could always be seen leading by the shortest way from one dense tangle to another. Strangely or so it seemed to us, most of the tracks were those of the snowshoe rabbits, cottontails being much in the minority. Such evidence bespoke plainly of the northern character of this valley.

Foxes had been out early this morning too. Their tracks were well distributed over the area. How many had been about is hard to say. One fox will roam far and wide

making many tracks. Often it could be seen where wily Renard had picked up and followed some rabbit's trails, stopping once in awhile, to sniff the air perhaps in hopeful anticipation. Or to puzzle over a cross trail. Twice we spied weasel tracks. And once there was a trail of prints much larger than those of a fox, possibly the farmer's dog, but we could not decide for they did not appear quite like dog's tracks. All this activity must have gone on early this morning, as the new snow would have obscured older marks. As it was the light powder of snow upon a hard crust recorded each beast's slightest move as faithfully as a finger printer's paper takes impressions. So much life, and so little to be seen!

Redpolls and chickadees, a busy downy woodpecker, and a covey of ruffed grouse comprised the bird life. The grouse went rocketing out of the same cedar grove where we saw them a month ago. It must be a favorite haunt. We were led straight to this refuge by their trails. For them the tell-tale snow is a terrible hazard. It is only too good a guide not only to predatory animals but also to that much more dangerous menace the fellow with the ever ready trigger finger.

By the time we regained the road a stiff breeze was blowing down the hill from the east. With the temperature hovering between five and ten below zero this wind proved trying, burning the face like fire. However we tarried long enough on the way to the car to watch a sturdy female hairy woodpecker tearing out sizeable chips from a birch stub beside the road. Turning from the woodpecker we caught sight of a movement on the other side of the road and were fortunate enough to see a large snowshoe rabbit - all white save for paws and legs - hopping rapidly along the ditch. It must have been sitting quietly until we started to move on when it took fright. Happily it continued in view for several yards before turning into the bush so that everyone had a good look. Of all the animals whose tracks we marvelled at this was the only one that we actually laid eye upon. But how many, pray tell, did we pass by secure in frozen immobility from the unrecording eyes of mere humans.

A bit of lunch with some coffee to warm us up and we were ready for the return trip. The sky had clouded over again. Snow was falling fast as we reached Markham. But we were content that a proper beginning had been made to birding year 1947.

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The second chapter to this new story was not long awaiting for in the afternoon Mrs. Saunders and I set out on a jaunt up Cedarvale ravine. All the lower part was full of skiers. The reservoir slopes were jammed with a merry crowd, skis, sleds, toboggans were flying in all directions. Why collisions were not occurring every minute remained an unsolved enigma. The great bump halfway down the main slope was being run with heedless verve. Toboggans and riders were hurled two or three feet into the air only to crash onto the slope below in an indistinguishable tangle of bodies and toboggan, encompassed by a fog of snow out of which came shrieks of glee.

Above Spadina Viaduct we found no less than seven Field Naturalists searching for the Carolina Wren! Seen less than two hours before by Fred Helleiner and a friend there was high hope that it might be found again. In the hunt for it Messers. Sharon and Martin had discovered a barred owl in a hemlock tree high up the southern bank. All nine of us repaired to the evergreen retreat, before looking further for the wren, in order to gaze upon the gentle faced Strix. So numerous and so persistent were we

that even this stoical owl became somewhat nervous. It began to twist its head around to see, doubtless, if there was a good chance of escape should such rude attentions be pressed much further. However we withdrew before forcing Strix to abandon so secure a hideout, hoping that our too well marked trail through the snow would not lead other less considerate to discover the hidden one. All of us went over to the tangle where I had previously seen the wren. Yet though I did my best to squeak it out, and cardinals and juncos responded readily to such blandishments, no wren appeared. Leaving the others to comb the thickets nearer Spadina Road Mrs. Saunders and I went on up stream.

While we were gingerly manoeuvring across the icy mounds that preface the new construction work above St. Clair Avenue I caught the sound of redpoll chatter. Finding a safe perch where we could pause we looked around soon spotting a flock of little birds feeding on and under an ice matted stand of goldenrod. A few birds flew out, circled, and settled again in the same dense growth. The goldenrod thicket was animate with countless little movements, accompanied by occasional bursts of chatter and rippling trills. Not all the flock were redpolls for the trills were made by juncos, and at least one tree sparrow stood out boldly upon a bare stem. Many of the birds were concealed from us, close as we were, since they were feeding beneath clumps of grass, or behind the massed and matted goldenrod stalks. With the sun low in the west and the birds to the east of us we had a splendid opportunity to watch the red polls flashing. Every time one of these linnets turned its head downward toward us a tiny gleam of garnet fire burst forth. When several happened to do this together it was like a cluster of jewels breaking into sudden flame.

The present construction has caused a temporary road to be excavated along the stream as far as Cardinal Corner - convenient for the time being if ominous for the future. At the corner we slid down the lowest icy bank and, after testing the ice, walked up the stream. This is the only time I have ever known the stream to be so thickly frozen as to be safe for walkers. Possibly this is because the construction work has dammed it and slowed the current at the corner. We pursued our way as far as mid-Bathurst Field looking carefully for owls in all the pines and cedars without success. Our quest led us back to the Pine Knoll where we found Gordon and Bill Giles who told us of seeing a horned owl at Cardinal Corner. A wonderful male cardinal held us rapt for a while but we hurried back to the corner intent on the owl.

They had said it was in the thickets on the southern bank so we peered diligently into each one. In so doing we frightened out from the now gloomy coppices at least five cardinals, four of which were brilliant males. Evidently we had hit upon the sleeping refuge of the cardinals. However our objective for the time being was a horned owl so we hastened on, being rewarded at last when Anne caught sight of the big owl perched, not in a thicket at all, but high in a white pine on the north bank. Extraordinary light grey in color the owl had its back to us. It was hunched over with head bent down, eyes fixed upon the bank of the dump. So glued was its attention that we were able to approach to the base of the pine tree, despite crunching snow, before the owl turned. The glare it rivetted on us was one of utter malevolence. Can any creature other than the horned owl concentrate such unrestrained ire in one savage stare? Possibly a tiger, a some other great predator can, but I have never seen it. Most surprising was the lack of fear or prudence shown by this owl. Bubo is as a rule a very wary fellow, hard to get near, and quick to fly, But this specimen showed no inclination to go, only continuing to stare down at us in fierce resentment. Since Anne had never seen a horned owl fly except amidst trees where its size and manner of flight are not easy to discern, I undertook to give her a chance to see this one take off across the valley. But could I do it? I jumped, shouted, waved my arms, threw snowballs - whilst Bubo only wagged his great round

head to follow my antics and the course of the snowballs to better advantage! Such a horned owl! Are birds ever predictable? Finally I climbed the bank behind the tree, and from that vantage point hurled a large stick up into the pine. Even then I had to make two tries though the first throw was not far off Bubo's perch. At long last he took off, no doubt in complete disgust - across the valley over Anne's head, but even then going only to the nearest pine tree where he settled to glare back at us with reinforced savagery. It did not occur to us for some time that possibly we had disturbed Bubo at the moment when, with falling dust, he had got his eyes on a possible supper - a rat perhaps on the dump. No wonder he was irritated. Then too, as this light colored Bubo was probably a visitor from the far northern wastes he is doubtless little used to humans, and so showed neither fear nor caution. This naivetté may yet cost Bubo his life but this evening it provided us with an experience much more satisfying than the mere glimpse of a great brown shape slipping away through darkening trees.

The redpolls and other little birds were still in the goldenrod thicket when we got there. Clearly with dark gathering fast they were staying the night. And where could a better spot be found? Just below the top of the bank, sheltered from north and east, with a steep approach in all directions and with the dense growth made all the thicker by its covering of ice, it was an ideal shelter. We wondered if we could return after dark with a flashlight and find the birds asleep. Some time we will try such an experiment. Next morning when a strong northeast snow-storm was blowing we puzzled over the old mystery. Did these birds in seeking such a well situated shelter, protected from north and east, sense the coming of a storm from that quarter?

At the Carolina wren tangle I tried squeaking once more. This time I raised two song sparrows - welcome upon this New Year's day - but again no wren. Yet we were not disappointed. We can come another time. The New Year's birding had been well and truly initiated.

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Mr. R. Nights, a fellow member of the club, has sent in the following account of his own experiences upon New Year's Day.

"Stan, another ardent outdoor friend having a cottage on Dufferin Creek, invited me to spend this day outdoors with him, making his cottage our haven against the sub-zero weather.

Managing to get in only three hours sleep after the New Year's Eve celebration we arrived at the Creek about 9 a.m. amidst snow flurries and with a temperature of ten below; we had brought a few bags of coal along with our supplies and soon had the two stoves warming up the cottage.

After putting in a few chores and banking down the fires we started our trek through the woods in a southerly direction dressed like Daniel Boones and wondering if there were other bird seekers crazy enough to brave the elements this stormy New Year's Day. However, in the invigorating air and the tough going we soon forgot about the cold..

Our first glimpse of bird life was three field sparrows chipping away with their call note tsip-tsip-tsip, as they flitted from the seed stalks, protruding through the snow, clinging and swinging like little acrobats on the slender stems, picking away at the seeds, shaking them down over the snow-covered ground and continuing their feast. Such tiny little creatures! One wonders how they could keep a spark of life in their bodies on such a cold day, but they seemed quite happy, never still and not the least bit concerned when we were close to them.

Continuing south and breaking through the crust of the snow with every footstep warning all the wild life that intruders were abroad, we decided to take a chance and follow along the frozen river. This was quieter and much better going. Around the first bend in a small open waterhole a black duck was resting in the current. As we came near he would rise and wing his way down the river to the next waterhole where our approach would stir him up again.

Leaving the river bed and striking out west through scrub and briar thickets (the hideout of the bunnies) we stood and watched two cottontails hopping around.

Farther on through a clearing of scattered brush piles a cock pheasant rose from one of these and threaded his swift flight through the openings in the trees. Judging from his quick getaway he must have been sitting camouflaged on top of the pile although we did not see him until he flushed.

Still farther along perched on a branch of a tall elm and towering above the cedar swamp was a horned owl and nearby on the same limb a white breasted nuthatch was busy pecking away.

Following along a frozen tributary of the Creek where fox tracks were plentiful we came across deer tracks. The cleft hoofs had broken through the snow crust which let us to the fenced side road and then were lost. No doubt the deer had jumped the fence and gone on along the snow packed road.

Leaving bush and coming over open fields we jumped a jack which made great strides and was soon out of sight a mile away over the distant hillside.

All day long, whipped by the north wind, the snow flurries had continued to fall and our spirits rose as we came across the trail that led to home. Arriving back to the warm cottage about 4 p.m. we soon prepared a hearty meal and after resting awhile made for home (through the snowdrifts and icy roads) which we reached safely.

A day well spent."

R. M. SAUNDERS

Editor.