

Toronto Field Naturalists' Club

MAY MEETINGS

Royal Ontario Museum, Monday 5th May, 1947, at 8.15 P.M.

ANNUAL MEETING - REPORT OF THE PRESIDENT

ELECTION OF OFFICERS

This will be followed by natural colour series of motion pictures

CAMERA TRAILS ALONG NATURE TRAILS

by

DICK BIRD, A. R. P. S., F. Z. S.

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ROTUNDA DISPLAY

EXHIBITION OF BIRD CARVINGS by FRANK SMITH

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OUTDOOR MEETINGS

The spring program of outdoor meetings has already been sent to all members. Additional copies may be secured at the Royal Ontario Museum, or by writing to the secretary, 100 Queen's Park, Toronto.

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Do you know anyone who owns a station wagon?

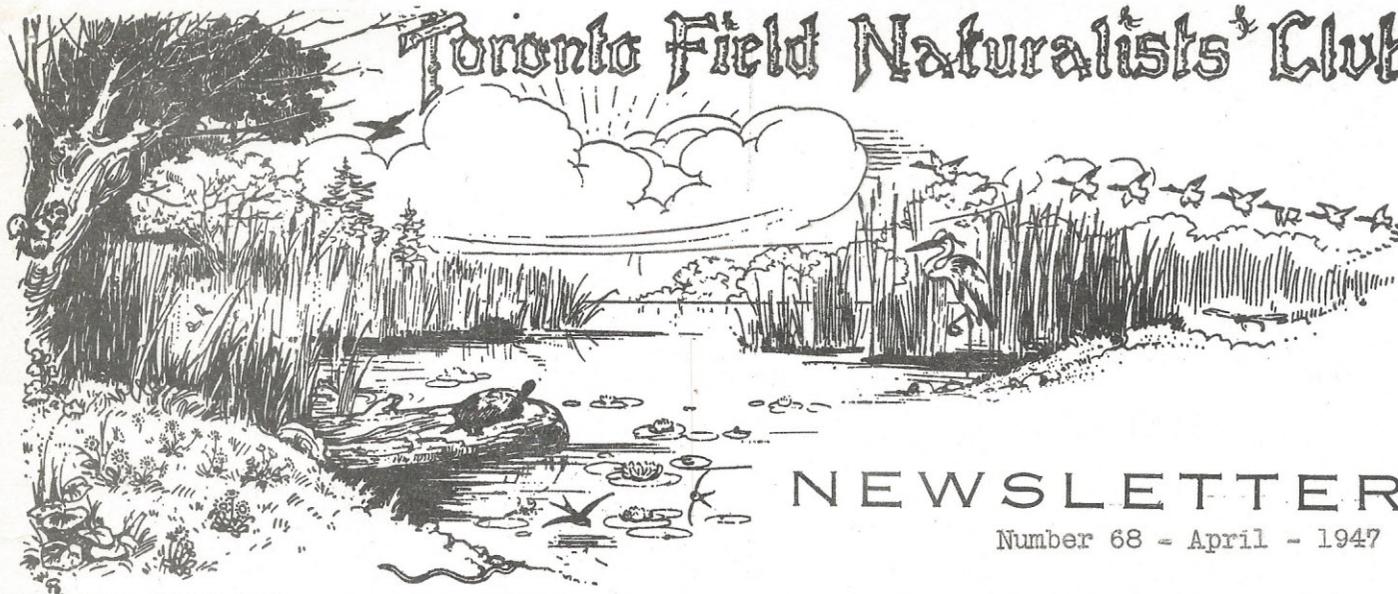
Could you help the Junior Club by asking the owner to lend it on the last Saturday in May to the mineralogy group?

This is all that is needed to complete plans for a successful field trip.

If you are able to help please get in touch with Dr. V.B. Meen, or the Secretary at MI 6641.

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Toronto Field Naturalists' Club.



NEWSLETTER

Number 68 - April - 1947

The old adage about an ill wind was never proven more true than on Easter Day this year. I was eating dinner when the story begins with the ringing of the telephone. A voice, unknown to me, asked for me, and when I answered, immediately launched into an excited account of seeing a hooded warbler in Strathgowan Wood! Making appropriate appreciative rejoinders I thanked him without discovering who he was, and hung up, half-sceptical, half-believing. The possibility of such an observation seemed so remote as to be incredible, and yet the incredible does occasionally happen. In that frame of mind I called Greer Roberts, found he had an hour to spare and would call for me at once. Shedding my church attire and donning more suitable birding clothes I was ready when he arrived.

It did not take us long to get to Strathgowan Wood where we parked at the western end near the Blythwood school. A violent wind was battling the countryside, and had been for many hours. So fierce were the gusts that serious damage was being wreaked upon the wood. Shattered and fallen trees were common. We had to keep a wary eye for falling branches and flying debris. How we were to find one small bird in this furious turmoil of wind and noise was a nice question. Yet the weather might, and I hoped would, keep the bird close to where it had first been seen. This spot I had been told was near the old greenhouse along the brook that makes a tiny swamp behind it. There we betook ourselves.

A great gust burst through the wood as we reached our destination, and leaves began to hop and dance madly. Seeing a flash of yellowish color sweep up from the little swamp I shouted, "There it is," only to realize a moment later that I had mistaken a wind-whipped leaf for a bird. The first nasty misjudgment was followed by a patient conning of the wood, each of us taking a separate route so as to cover more ground. Greer stayed more in the woods whilst I followed the brook down past the greenhouses. Every bush, every thicket and sombre hiding place was closely scrutinized. Each whirling leaf raised an momentary flicker of hope.

Greer and I met again. No results to report save that we both had noticed the numerous fresh workings of pileated woodpeckers. As we stood talking Greer heard a bird calling. We tried to attract it by squeaking but the tumult of the wind smothered all our efforts. Again we parted to make new circuits through the wood. Twice more we met, and marched off on new routes. At last Greer's time was up, he could stay no longer, so we started back to the car. On the way I heard birds near the house at the northwestern corner of the wood, only to be disappointed once more for they were chickadees, juncos and goldfinches. I had about made up my mind to return with Greer when I got to the car, but when Greer came up he told me of meeting T F McIlwraith, his daughter Peggy, and Ted Dwight entering the wood. This news decided me to stay. Hence I left Greer who had to go, and

hurried back to find the others, catching up with them just at the wet spot behind the greenhouses.

Then it was that I discovered that Ted Dwight had seen the warbler in the morning, had identified it as a hooded warbler, and had now come back to show it to the McIlwraiths. This meant, however, that someone had seen the bird independently of Dwight, for he knew nothing of anyone else's having seen it, and he had not called me as he believed me to be out of town. We walked along the path towards the northern edge of the wood, looking into a sheltered corner in that quarter where we found a hermit thrush, our first of the season, associating with several robins. Back on the path we discovered the three Helleiner boys just arriving to seek the warbler. At last the name of my informant was revealed. He was Neil Field, a friend of the Helleiners. He too had seen the warbler in the morning, probably about the same time as Dwight but just enough apart so that they did not see each other. He had called the Helleiners and me and others. When told of the hermit thrush the Helleiners went off in search of it, and we did not see them again.

We now commenced the same tactics as Greer and I had followed. First we investigated the flock of mixed birds I had seen near the house, for Ted Dwight said the warbler was associating with such a flock in the morning. All the morning's flock was indeed there only excepting the bird of our quest. So we took to circling through the woods. Once more my route lay down the stream, this time as far as Blythwood Avenue, and including the hedgerows that border the field east of the greenhouses. Again a blank. Upon reaching the others I found that they also had failed to find the bird, but they had heard a loud chipping. This was still going on at intervals, and all efforts were concentrated upon tracing its author. The "chipper" was in the evergreens not far from the house of the mixed flock. I listened some moments before catching a note but as soon as the chipping recommenced I was assured that here at last was our bird, for the chip was precisely that of the hooded warblers I had heard in South Carolina, and of the two individuals that I had been fortunate enough to see in Toronto. But where was it?

Scanning the hemlocks and pines we could make out various little birds flitting through the depths of these darkening evergreens but not a bird stayed put long enough to be named. Unless fortune smiled upon us soon darkness might fall before we could catch a sight of the "chipper". Nearby a black squirrel squalled, and crows called stridently from overhead. Was it in derision at our futile efforts? Finally T. F. and I pushed ahead into the evergreen grove and on to the overgrown gravel pit. The little birds had come down from the trees and were darting about us from shrub to shrub - golden-crowned kinglets, chickadees, a white-breasted nuthatch. Suddenly a brief flash of yellow caught my eye as a bird shot up over the edge of the pit and vanished. Crying out to T. F. I hurried cautiously toward the spot. He had seen the flash too. Edging up to the head of the bank we peered eagerly over. And when our eyes were adjusted to the new scene we found ourselves face to face with a glorious hooded warbler a few feet ahead. After two and a half hours' search our bird was found.

Now the others came up. The warbler, a magnificent male in highest plumage, shone like an exotic jewel in this strange northern setting, velvety black hood and breastplate, golden cheeks and forehead, bright jet-black eyes, brilliant yellow beneath, soft green above - all its colors glowing in the contrasting dusk. What a romantic southerner to be gracing April snow and ice under evergreens!

As if in reward for our long search, for the next half-hour we were permitted to follow the visitor's every move. Keeping close to the ground - a customary procedure with the species - he worked back and forth along the banks of the little stream. It squeezed our hearts to see that it got so little to eat.

One or two darts to the ground were the only efforts that seemed to bring recompense. We wondered how long it could survive on such thin fare. And how could it hope for more so early in a belated spring. Yet it appeared alert and lively. Every pause on a twig was marked by a perky flirting of the tail, again a characteristic action of the species, which has the effect of flashing the wide patches of white that border the tail. Twice it made droppings, indicating that there had been some success at least in feeding. Finally and reluctantly we decided to leave, hoping against hope that so beautiful a bird need not succumb to the cold night, falling so fast.

Next morning I was back again to check up, and to try to show the warbler to Greer Roberts and Eric and Mrs. McNeillie. All the way to the wood we were wondering if it had survived the night; and, considering the first long search, how long we might have to hunt for it. We brought the car to a halt by the lane at the northwesterly corner of the wood. Opening the door I glanced at the snowdrift between us and the first bushes and there saw a small bird gleaming some food from the surface of the snow. Scarcely could I believe my eyes, for the gleaner was indeed the hooded warbler !!! Two and a half hours' hunting yesterday; present to greet us as we drive up today! Birding is certainly full of surprises.

Everyone got an excellent chance to study the bird at leisure for it was as approachable as yesterday, and followed the same habit of feeding near or on the ground. That it was getting more to eat today than previously was evident, but what it might be we could not tell. Whatever it was was chiefly to be found amongst the detritus left on top of the snow by the process of melting. Possibly it was insect life too minute for us to detect. That the warbler did appear to be getting a meal was what delighted us. Fred Helleiner came out of another part of the woods soon after we had discovered the bird so we called him over to join us in admiring the southern beauty. At one point the warbler perched for several moments while giving its plumage a good preening. Such care for its plumage rather indicated that it was yet in good physical condition, and not hungry. When we left we were pondering, as yesterday, how long this unusual southern visitor might survive.

By this time you may be asking yourselves why all the excitement about one bird. But if you will examine the facts with me you will see why. First of all, only fifteen of these birds have made an appearance in our region in a hundred years. The earliest record held by the Museum is about 1885, a specimen. The next record was made in 1907 by Stuart Thompson. All the other records have been concentrated in more recent years. The latest previous record was an observation made last spring on one of the T.F.N.C. Wednesday morning walks in Cedarvale on May 15th. I remember vividly the uproar in birding circles caused by the discovery of a hooded warbler in High Park in 1937, again in mid-May. Upon that occasion an important birding authority from Ottawa was present. He was extremely skeptical; indeed, obviously quite convinced that such a bird was not to be seen in Toronto. It took several observers two hours then to "discover" the bird to his satisfaction, but in the end they were able to convince him.

The second point is that all the previous records have been made in May. Hence the bird this year is weeks ahead of the time when it might be expected, that is if any such rarity can be "expected". The hooded warbler winters in the region from Vera Cruz in Mexico to Panama. It is true that its breeding range extends as far north as southern Michigan, but it is primarily a southern bird, an associate of Spanish moss and cypress swamps. Early in April it normally could hardly be expected north of the southern Mississippi valley, possibly a few as far as Arkansas or southern Missouri. The question at once arises in consequence as to how and why

this individual should be in semi-winter in Toronto on April 6th.

The answer to this query brings us back to the "ill wind" with which we started. You will remember that the Easter weekend was marked not only by the violent winds already described but by prolonged winds and storm conditions for two or three days. According to meteorological information given in the papers this storm center followed a course from Oklahoma across the Mississippi valley to the Great Lakes and through our area. The only conclusion, therefore, which we can come to in explanation of the hooded warbler's arrival at so unseasonable a date is that it was caught up in the storm, could not command its movements, and was blown up (or flew with the wind in self-defense) perhaps for hundreds of miles, before being able to land safely at Strathgowan Wood in Toronto. This might be only a fancy theory did we not that there are many well-authenticated records of birds being blown far beyond their normal range by violent storms. Doubtless other rare records of other species are of birds thus brought into our area.

The confirmation of this theory, however, in this particular instance has come, I believe, in the form of other observations. The sights, all on April 6th, of a parula warbler in Harcourt by Earl Atark, J.L. Baillie, R. Trowern and W. Smith; of a chimney swift and a least flycatcher at Scarboro Bluffs by W.W.H. Gunn; and of a wood peewee seen at Todmorden by Earl Stark, appear to me to be of birds similarly storm-borne into a region where they would not normally appear for weeks. The nature of their customary food supply - insects - would bear this out, for extremely little in the way of active insect life is to be found here thus early, this being the explanation of the normal late arrival of such species of birds. The passing of a few days brought news of other astonishing records. A second hooded warbler, a female, was discovered at a feeding station near Runnymede Road. It was reported to the Museum as alive but died soon after and was sent in as a specimen. Then on Sunday, April 13th, J.L. Baillie, whilst observing at Baby Point on the Humber discovered still another, a third hooded warbler, another male bird. This bird was very much alive, so too was a fourth hooded warbler which appeared in Prof. J.W. MacArthur's garden on Glencairn Avenue on April 13th and 14th. Incidentally these four birds are included in the 15 records for the region. It would seem that the storm caught up a group of migrating hooded warblers and other small birds and whisked them far up into this inhospitable late spring.

On April 12th I was pleased to hear that the male hooded warbler (I assume it to be the Strathgowan bird) had been seen in a garden on Rochester Avenue for three days. It was observed there again on the 13th. This gives me hope that it, and others of its kind may survive after all their harassing experiences as victims of the storm. Should they do so, it is conceivable that they might establish themselves as breeding birds in our region, for without doubt this is one of those southern species which has been steadily spreading northward in the last generation. Certainly no more acceptable addition to our list of summer residents could be found than this handsome warbler. Members of the club should keep an eye open for hooded warblers especially this season.

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Two interesting communications from club members have arrived recently. The first dated April 2nd, is from Mr. James R. MacIntosh whose favorite area is the Don Valley near Sunnybrook. He writes:

On a very wet and chilly Saturday recently I went for a prowl down the Don from Bayview to Sunnybrook, where I had such good luck on Nov. 30th last year.

I saw one bedraggled jack rabbit and that was all. Later I sat by my living-room window with my book and pipe, bemoaning the weather, when my wife drew my attention to what was the first of the evening grosbeak invasion. We counted 50 or so as they descended in a cloud on the only tray containing sunflower seeds. Along with the evening grosbeaks were a pair of pine grosbeaks, a pair of cardinals, juncoes, tree sparrows, redpolls and siskins, and in the trees some distance away 2 downy and one hairy woodpecker. Everywhere you could look those friendly little mites the chickadees were darting about. Evidently none of these mind the rain.

The evening grosbeaks have cleaned up 120 lbs of sunflower seeds in my garden since they arrived late in February. My advice is if you see the grosbeaks near your house buy a ton of sunflower seeds and place your trays 100 yards from the house. A glance at my back yard will convince you of the disdom of this precaution. In common with other finches they are extremely dirty.

There was a news item in the "Tely" last week about two "heroes" from Delhi who killed a great horned owl. Eight shots from a .22 and three from a shot gun finally brought the bird to earth. I wrote to the "Tely" and they were good enough to publish my letter. I would suggest that more members of the T.F.N.C. should write to those papers which publish such stories about the shooting of interesting and useful birds.

On our stretch of the Don at the moment we have 2 mallards, 5 black ducks and a great blue heron. Pretty soon I hope we shall see the kingfisher and the spotted sandpiper.

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The other notes are from Mr. R. Knights.

Sun. April 13.

Don Valley

10 a.m. to 2 p.m.

Clear and hazy although the air was cool. It was warm in the sun. Took Joey with me as he loves the woods and I could not very well leave him home today as I would not take him yesterday on the club tour. Parked car at market gardener's house, went and saw his tiny plants in the greenhouse. There were lettuce, cabbage and tomato plants. He told me he could not tell the variety until the third leaf springs forth. He gathers his seed from the gardens in the fall and does not keep track of them. He gardens about 50 acres.

I showed him a picture of the pileated and he said he had never seen any bird like it around. Trekked across the gardens to the ravine, heading for the spot where I found the nest two seasons ago. At the edge of the gardens and the ravine birds were in abundance. The song sparrow was sending forth his spring song from the bushes. A large flock of at least one hundred juncoes arose at my approach and scattered in bunches down the ravine, their white striped tails showing in flight.

A pair of killdeers were tripping over the gardens, now bare earth, waiting for the plough. A pair of bluebirds were perched on a birch tree nearby. The meadow larks were zooming over the dead grass. Towards the highway one was perched on a treetop singing. All this I saw within 100 yards of the house even before I entered the ravine which gave promise of a fruitful morning's observation.

Descending the valley I saw several kinglets among the evergreen trees. At the bottom of this narrow ravine was a tiny spring brook about two feet across with a hard sandy bottom. Climbing the far bank near the place where I had found the nest two seasons ago. I knew I was going to be disappointed in my quest as I

noticed that all around several trees had been taken down this winter, and signs of recent woodcutting activities (by man, not birds). I had quite a time locating the tree and found that it had broken off at the top right at the hole where the nest had been.

Working further east, following the top of the valley which twists and turns, even to half a circle, sometimes looking down as I went along, I could get an excellent view of this early April day among the leafless trees and bushes. With the aid of the glasses I could pick out an ovenbird (#) down among the dead leaves. About half a mile further east I came across very recent workings of the pileated. They looked so fresh I imagine they were made this morning on a live and apparently healthy pine tree which stood at the top of the ravine bank. There were five oblong rather than square holes about 1 1/2 inches high and 1 inch wide, the first hole about a foot from the ground. I took a few close up pictures of these for future reference.

Across the open fields which border the ravine the meadow larks were there in numbers, with the occasional phoebe perched on a lone bush also giving forth his song. I watched a marsh hawk thru the glasses patrolling the meadow, and once in a while he would thread his way thru the trees searching for what he could find. It had a white patch on its rump.

Going down the bank to an open grove below there were several pine windfalls rotted with age, and here again I saw working of the pileated, great long strips of bark and wood had been ripped away and lay scattered around. Further along there was a high peaked peninsula jutting into the ravine. Here on top I stopped for lunch and a rest and looking down through glasses into the dense leafless undergrowth, I could once in a while get a glimpse of the ground haunting species, and at one time thought I saw a thrush (##) but could not be sure, although it was larger than the ovenbird and had no crown patch and being up above I could not see its breast.

By this time Joey was getting restless - he cannot understand this inactivity and these silent waits - so he set off all by his lonesome to chase a flock of crows which had come cawing and flying just overhead, not seeing us as we were down under the top bank out of the wind. Towards early afternoon it became overcast and the wind felt like rain so we started back, this time part way up the ravine bank which was tougher going but I wanted to give that part of it a check from all angles.

Reached home about 3 p.m. quite pleased with the day's observations and looking forward to a further visit.

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Editor's note - #This ovenbird observation is another very early warbler record.
Presumably a hermit thrush. They are well-distributed hereabouts now.
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Since writing the above further records of storm borne birds have come in: a nighthawk seen at Ashbridges Bay on April 6th by G. Lambert; a red-eyed vireo seen in Cedarvale by E. Waters on April 7th; a red-eyed vireo seen at Meaford on April 9th by C. Beamer; a chimney swift seen at Hamilton by G. North on April 10th; three black and white warblers, one at Sherwood Park on April 11th by Miss G. Hambleton, one at Grenadier Pond on the same day by T.M. Shortt, one (possibly same as above) at Sherwood Park on April 11th by J.B.C. Runnings; a blue-grey gnatcatcher at Scarboro Bluffs on April 17th by W.W.H.Gunn.

R. M. SAUNDERS,
Editor.