

TORONTO FIELD NATURALISTS' CLUB

October Meetings

Royal Ontario Museum

Monday, October 6th, 1947

at 8:15 p.m.

Professor J. L. Van Camp, graduate of the School of Forestry, Purdue University, Lafayette, Ind., will speak on Conservation.

R O T U N D A D I S P L A Y

Original Sketches of Dr. R.M.Saunders New book, "Flashing Wings" by T. M. Shortt.

Also end maps by Barbara Worth.

Saturday Afternoon Hike:

Sunnyside - October 11th.

Meet at the Sunnyside Bathing Pavilion at 2.30 p.m.

Toronto Field Naturalists' Club.



NEWSLETTER

Number 69 - - - September, 1947

Swathed in soft grey veils of ground mist the sun ascended sedately above the fields of Myrtle on the morning of September 6th. For a moment it hung like a captive balloon just above the treetops, a huge vermilion sphere, approachable for human eyes. But no victim this of earthly bonds. The red behind the veils was fire. And soon thrusting off the ashen cloak of dawn, Helios rose free into a cloudless sky to subject the breathless fields and all life to his scorching regime for another day. August was reaching into September, an August of unparalleled heat and humidity, when every summer cottager was a hundred times glad that he was within momentary reach of cooling lake and stream. The heats of summer were yet upon the land as far and wide the shimmering haze revealed.

Beyond Myrtle a few miles we came abreast of a cornfield whence across a veritable bedlam of chatter. A group of birds working along the ground through the rows of corn caught our yey. First glance, when we had stopped, made me think them cowbirds, but soon I saw a flash of red on several wings. Closer examination showed the flock to be entirely made up of red-winged blackbirds, mostly females and young with a smattering of individuals showing the red epaulets. They were gleaning some cherished food, probably insects, mostly from the ground, and chattering incessantly to each other as they fed. As we walked toward them some three or four hundred rose into the air. Then I clapped my hands loudly and the whole cornfield exploded. In a moment there were surely three thousand red-wings in the air. Not a single bird of another species could we detect. Hundreds flew up into the tall maples by the highway but the bulk of the birds dropped back into the corn, moving in a little further from the road.

Such flocks as this are a sure sign of fall. They are wandering about, settling for a while, as here, wherever they find good feeding, then moving on, all the while edging gradually southward. Theirs is no dramatic, long sudden flight such as some shorebirds and water birds make, but a journey made in easy stages, pursued only as fast and as far as weather and feeding require. In a cornfield such as we were watching, where the huge flock appeared to have found an insect harvest, they were doing a wonderful service to the owner of the field.

Near Port Perry Greer's keen eye caught sight of a dead bird lying on the road. Curious as to its identity we backed up and investigated. Well that we did for the bird was no less than a sora rail, obviously only recently killed, and showing no external sign of injury. My memory immediately conjured

up the picture of another sora rail, lying on the ground beneath a power line at Van Wagner's Beach several years ago. It had been killed during migration by flying into a wire and breaking its neck. Looking upward it was easy to see that probably precisely the same thing had happened here. A southbound bird, flying low, as soras apparently do in migration, might easily have collided with the many wires that paralleled the road to the north. The tragedy must have occurred very recently, doubtless just before dawn - we had heard many migrants calling overhead when we started our trip, and at places en route - and there had been no traffic along the road to injure the specimen. Its perfect condition led us to retrieve the body to be taken to the museum for preservation. Later we were to see several other birds on the road, badly damaged by traffic. The toll taken from the ranks of migrating birds by such means as this must be tremendous. We know a good deal about spectacular death traps like lighthouses - where, indeed, prevention measures have been taken in many places - but the less striking hazards, of which this was an instance, are little known or appreciated. Yet their cumulative effect is probably far greater than the more dramatic cases. This would seem to be an aspect of the relation of bird life to civilization which might well be the subject of a careful enquiry. At any rate this find was another sign of fall. Birds are on the move even when we do not see them; only some episode like this may reveal the fact to us.

At Birdseye Point, Lake Scugog, no one was yet up so early on a Sunday morning. We had the marsh and the lake and the birds to ourselves. The calm lacquered water of the cove, "paved" now with lily pads, was serving as a perfect parade ground for numerous gallinules. Here, there, and everywhere they were to be seen, now walking primly from pad to pad, now madly dashing after some choice prey, sinking the lily pads, splashing into the water, flaunting their white flags for all to see. Further out where the "paved" area ended a kingfisher perched in watchful silence upon a channel marker. Half immersed in still low hanging night mist, he appeared nearly the size of a green heron. Only when a jealous rival of his own kind rattled too close and forced him into the air did he assume his true proportions. Overhead blackbirds, gulls and group after group of bobolinks passed by. Though the birds were seldom seen the nasal peent, peent calls of the bobolinks came constantly to our ears from out the sky, another omen of the coming of a new season.

All along the dyke rustlings and little chips told of the presence of birds hidden in bushes and reeds. We had only to pause and begin to squeak to have the neighborhood come alive with long-billed marsh wrens, swamp sparrows and yellowthroats. Once we stepped down onto a walk that led over the water to a boat-house and there commenced our squeaking. In a moment the answering chatter of an annoyed marsh wren came in response. Then another and another joined in. Soon we had the three of them hopping from branch to branch until they were excitedly examining us from perches so close, and on eye level, that we could not focus binoculars upon them. Nor did we need to; the roddish caps, bright white eye-stripes, decurved bills, and saucily cocked tails were as clear as if the birds had been dancing on our fingers. One of them proved to be a young bird whose curiosity lasted but briefly, when he began to quiver his wings and plead for food. And the parents, for the other two soon responded, set to feeding the urgent youngster with insect gleanings made whilst they kept wary eyes on us. Anyone who wants to learn how to squeak up birds should start with some of these wrens - any wrens for that matter - for encouragement's sake. They respond most readily.

Chief of the attractions of Birdseye Point is a hidden path, a secret way into the heart of the marsh. If you did not know of its existence you would pass the entrance by as just another thicket, peeping in perhaps for a glimpse of some flitting warbler. But knowing, you would do as we did this morning - take

a few steps down the edge of the dyke, stoop and peer ahead. You would see a mysterious green tunnel looming before you, walled and roofed with leaves, every leaf patterned and surfaced with glistening dew. At odd intervals clusters of china-red nightshade berries hang pendant from the green roof-like lanterns placed to show the way. Somewhere yonder there is a whisper, and you step onward taking care not to break the long grey stick that bars the entrance to all save knowing eyes. Dewy leaves brush gently against your cheeks. Red berries gleam in your eyes. And then you are in a world apart.

No longer are you on the outside peering in. You have entered the world where the birds are at home. It is their world, not yours. If you behave properly there is no telling what you may see. Without any coaxing, if you but stand still, warblers will come, busily intent on minute insects that they hunt from twig to twig and leaf to leaf. Not oblivious of you, but accepting you for you are now inside their world. So came magnolias, and yellow throats, redstarts and yellows to us. Of course you may try a gentle sort of squeaking, and soon you will have a host, for being inside their world anything that happens is very much their concern and must be investigated. We tried it and to the warblers were added marsh wrens, catbirds, rose-breasted grobeaks, swamp sparrows, a cedar waxwing, and alder flycatcher and a downy woodpecker.

It was while we were intent on the flycatcher that I glanced sideways and saw a dark pullet-sized bird with long legs and a longish bill picking its way daintily through the soft ooze that edged the narrow path. Nudging Greer I called his attention to the newcomer. Stabbing repeatedly at the mud with its bill, the rail, for such it was, evidently had no trouble making a sumptuous breakfast. Once it stopped to go under a low stick. This forced it to sink deeper than it liked so that when it emerged it raised one leg very high behind and shook it vigorously to dislodge the muck. Then it set out to preen itself, taking each feather in turn along the wings, ruffling the back plumage, straightening this and smoothing that - a Virginia rail in its boudoir! The ruddy throat and breast, the bright, black-lined chestnut back, and the jailbird-striped belly all told us that this was an adult bird. For minutes we were on intimate terms with a bird that is so shy that it is seen once for every hundred times it is heard. Whether because of some movement of ours, or for some other cause, the rail finally disappeared behind the cattails. Once safely hid it began a plaint so like someone tapping a tiny gong in a 2-2 rhythm that it was hard to recognize in this call the well-known kid-dick, kid-dick of the marsh. When we had moved off a little it was easy to see that distance caused a marked alteration in the quality of the sounds, making them identifiable as the familiar sounds. No doubt the increasing number of objects between hearer and rail explained in large part the change. Later we heard some explosive grunts - doubtless from the same bird. It was almost as if he were telling us we had stayed long enough. It was time to go.

Go we did, thankful for a visit into the very heart of the birds' world such as is seldom vouchsafed.

Although I spent most of the summer in Chicago I was able to have a week at Leith, a pleasant little spot on the south shore of Owen Sound about five miles east of the city of that name. There I became better acquainted with one of the most attractive, but not very well-known, of Georgian Bay's summer residents, the Caspian tern.

More graceful and lovelier to watch than the gulls the great "sea swallows" hunted daily along the shore. Usually when we were in swimming during the afternoon one or more would be seeking out glimmers of fish in the waters near the floating "dock". Recognizable at long distance by glossy white shoes on the

upper surface of the wings, and by its lighter, sometimes rocking flight, with rather shallow wing beats, the Caspian tern becomes dramatically charming when its course brings it close to the observer. Then its half-crowned jet black crown, and its gleaming red bill stand forth in startling contrast to the satiny white wings. As it glides overhead, ever watchful for finny prey beneath, the darkened underparts of the primaries come into view, adding a new note to the striking pattern.

Suddenly the hunter pauses, hovering a moment kingfisher-like, until sure its sharp eyes have located exactly a flashing gleam of silver beneath the surface ripple, then plunging headlong in a breathtaking dive. Upward shoots a finger of white spray, a miniature geyser, as the doughty tern vanishes below. Reappearing a moment later with a glistening prize securely prisoned in coral-red bill, the triumphant hunter rises a few yards above the water, rearranges his catch, and swallows it at once with a rather ludicrous gulping shake, much like a starling trying to get down an over-sized lump of bread. This done the hunt recommences, and sometimes plunge after plunge will follow each other in quick succession, each one rewarded by a capture, betokened by the tolltale gulp. Occasionally the tern misses its intended victim, probably because the fish has made some abrupt change of direction. Usually in such an event the tern sees the move before actually striking the water and veers off just above the surface rising to circle about and return for another look or try. This process may be repeated several times. It would be interesting to know if the fish below sees or senses the tern's attack, and darts out of the attacker's way. This seems unlikely though the bird's shadow on the water might occasionally frighten a fish.

How the tern is able to control its muscles so as to break its mad plunge at will without causing itself bodily injury is a mystery. It is no more of a mystery, however, than the kingfisher's similar capacity to plunge into a brook a few inches deep and to emerge with a fish after having instantaneously reversed its plunge to an upward-returning flight. Indeed the Caspian tern is a bird that will reward study in many ways. Those who have cottages along the shores of Georgian Bay have an opportunity in the presence of this species which they should not miss.

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The novel and unexpected may occur with even the commonest of birds. There is always something new to learn about them. This was demonstrated very clearly one afternoon at Leith, again when we were swimming from the Fleming "dock".

The water was roughened by a northwesterly breeze so that light waves were running, just large enough to break occasionally into whitecaps. The "dock", now an isolated platform, no longer connected with the shore, stands perhaps 150 yards from the beach. As we were lying on the "dock" our attention was caught by the sound of swifts chattering above our heads. Looking up we saw a flock of some 20 chimney swifts flying from the shore, hawking for insects as they went. They did not go far beyond the "dock", perhaps 50 to 70 feet, when they started to circle. After a few seconds the circling was halted, and first one, then another, and then several of the swifts skimmed on set wings down towards the water. I thought they had discovered insects just over the waves, but, to my astonishment, instead of missing the water almost every one, if not every one, actually struck the water so that little splashes and flying spray could be seen. Could this be miscalculation, I wondered. But in this I was soon set right when the same procedure was repeated time after time. By close watching I

could easily see that the swifts deliberately dove into the tops of oncoming waves, entering the face of the wave a few inches below the crest and emerging from the back in a shower of spray, the reappearance being accompanied by a vigorous shaking of wings. So often repeated this was certainly no miscalculation. Nor could it be insects they sought in the waves. One possible explanation seems to be that this was the swifts' way of taking a bath, or of getting a drink, or both. A second, and more likely explanation is that the swifts were simply having fun, playing a game. As we all know many birds and other animals do gambol and frolic. This was likely such a case. Not only have I never seen this happen before, I can as yet find no one else who has seen it; nor can I find mention of it in Bent or in Forbush. I conclude therefore, that it is an unusual occurrence; or else it is one of those bird habits more common than we suppose but overlooked. The whole procedure took about 10 to 15 minutes. When satisfied the swifts flew back to shore and vanished behind the trees.

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From time to time we have evidence of the birdlife that exists in the very midst of our city. Just after the last Newsletter went to print I received an account of observations made at her home by Mrs. Gladys Taylor, one of the T.F.N.C. members. I take great pleasure in presenting them here. Mrs. Taylor writes:

"I am going to try my hand at telling of the 'Wild-Life' I have seen by looking through the windows of my home, south of Bloor Street, right in the city. We live on the south side of St. James Cemetery, fortunately, right beside the high fence. It is a magic fence from a naturalist's point of view. We call it the Squirrel Highway.

Sitting by my window on the soft rainy spring morning of April 30th, I heard all kinds of contented soft warbles, chirps and calls of happy birds feeding. I saw a pair of flickers and several robins (permanent residents) dragging worms out of the soft wet lawn. And right in close to our fence an ovenbird was walking about looking for food.

But I really want to tell of the many birds I have seen since coming to this vicinity four years ago. Each fall, from early September to mid-October, myriads of warblers arrive and stop to rest and feed, for a week or a little longer, before continuing on their way south. The large maples and elms just outside our windows seem alive with these wee birds, flitting about feeding on minute insects. They hardly rest long enough for us to get a glimpse of them but some of them stop occasionally and we were able to identify a few of them. Last fall a flock of flickers (seemed like hundreds) rested for a day or two. The cemetery lawn was literally covered with red spots.

We've had a snowy owl the last two winters, perching for a couple of days at a time about half way up a large maple tree. During his stay our squirrel population dwindled to almost nothing. There was about a score of squirrels using the fence as a highway when we first came here, but this spring there seems to be only two. There is one cardinal that stays around all winter; we hear him whistle and occasionally see him perched upon the highest branch of the highest tree, a brilliant splash when everything else is drab.

A couple of blue jays stop over for a few days in spring and fall just to rest before going some place else. Wish they would take up residence nearby for we like their raucous calls and their bright blue and white coloring. The last week in April there was a fair-sized flock of redpolls, about a dozen, feeding amongst the weeds and low bushes for a few days. We had six juncoes with us all winter but a number more joined them this spring and fed around amongst the flock of redpolls.

We had a pair of red-breasted nuthatches feeding in our back yard for just one day last winter. There were black-capped chickadees around here all winter; we did not see them often but heard their chick-a-dee-dee-dee even on the coldest mornings. Their song has changed to a softer chicka-dee this spring. On two of our warmer days about the middle of April we had an eastern winter wren hopping about and feeding close to our old wooden fence. We positively identified this wee bird by Peterson's Field Guide to the Birds. For almost a month now we have heard the sweet song of the song sparrow, and have occasionally seen a pair. We do hope that they plan to take up residence close to our house.

Three winters ago we had a flock of seven pheasants come to feed on grain and crumbs right beneath our window on the cemetery side of the fence, and when spring came we had the rare opportunity to see the two cock pheasants fight a battle royal for the possession of the flock of five hens. The vanquished one spent a very lonely and bedraggled spring and summer. We would see him mornings and evenings, always at a safe distance from the flock which was closely guarded by the victor. This lovely flock seems to have diminished this spring as we have seen only two and they seem scarey and keep closer to the edge of the ravine, Rosedale Valley Road, on which the cemetery borders.

One day last winter we saw a flock of snow birds; they seemed to come with a blustery snowstorm and melted from view as mysteriously as they appeared. They weren't visible for more than a few minutes.

We have a pair of mischievous crows that make regular trips up from their home in the ravine or the Don Valley and create an awful uproar amongst the birds and small animal residents of the cemetery. This pair seem to be around from early in February till late November. But we never see or hear them during the colder part of the winter. We often see brown creepers walking up the tree trunks and picking out insects and whatever else they eat from the crevices in the bark.

We occasionally see rabbits feeding mornings or evenings, and have smelled skunks but have not been fortunate enough to see one of the little "critters". Of course we have our quota of house sparrows, starlings, pigeons and night-hawks, with many groups of wild ducks flying to and from the lake, We see and hear gulls when they fly inland as storms approach, and a few weeks ago we heard the honk of wild geese flying over in the dead of night.

We don't know our birds the way we should or we probably would see a lot more. Hope this resumé will be of interest to the members of the club."

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During the summer Mr. A.T.Wilgress, another member of our club, wrote to tell me that he has been sharing his copies of the Newsletter with a keen young field naturalist in Guelph, a Mr.Innes Allan. Now the latter has sent to Mr. Wilgress, who has forwarded it to me, an account of a hummingbird's nest building that certainly merits recording. Very few people ever have the opportunity of seeing one of these feathered mites at work, consequently this is an unusual observation. Mr. Allan writes:

"We have a ruby-throated hummingbird nesting in our garden. The nest is saddled on a small branch about twenty-five feet above the ground and almost directly over the walk. We noticed it first about June 9 when it was partly built. Though the bird now appears to be sitting on the nest I noticed her yesterday (June 18) still working on it. She gathers spider silk from the webs of funnel-web spiders and related species by remaining stationary in the air and tugging at the strands with her beak. She appears to work this into her nest by placing and fitting it as

though it were a long piece of thread. I also saw her tug at the bark on a dead twig and gather bits of dry paint which were flaking off an eaves-troughing near by. The bark and paint she pressed against the outside of the nest with her beak. When each day I turn on the lawn sprinkler at noon she flies down for a bath in the spray and then adjourns to a peony leaf to flutter her wings in the manner of other birds and preen herself in the sun - the only time (so it seems to me) when her actions are decidedly those of the ordinary bird. Hummingbirds appear almost never to remain completely motionless; our lovely little guest constantly keeps turning her head from side to side even while sitting in her nest."

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Roger Tory Peterson: A Field Guide to the Birds. Second Revised and Enlarged Edition. Houghton, Mifflin Co. (In Canada, Thomas Allan, Ltd. Toronto) 1947. Pp. 290. Price \$3.50.

A new edition of the birdwatcher's "Bible"? This is an event of major importance to all field naturalists. For a dozen years Peterson's Field Guide has held first place as a manual of identification in the field. It has been used far and wide and has contributed mightily to the rapidly spreading popular interest in birds. Such success might have satisfied another man. Why change a best seller? Not so Roger Tory Peterson. He has been alert all these years to collect criticisms and recommendations for improvements in the Guide. When his war duties were finished he started upon a revision, profiting by the experiences and advice of many faithful users. Now the revised Guide (really a third edition) is ready. So great are the changes and improvements that the two previous editions (1934 and 1939) are put quite in the shade. Holders of the older editions will want to replace them as soon as possible. This new 1947 edition makes certain that Peterson's Field Guide is without a rival. It is more than ever the bird-watcher's "Bible".

The most important changes are that all the illustrations are new and that there are many more illustrations, especially new color plates. The wrens, the vireos, the thrushes and the swallows - these are now all given in color. So too are the shore birds and the marsh birds, the hawks and the ducks. All this helps tremendously. One of the great lacks in the earlier editions was adequate illustration of autumn warblers. Now there are plates of spring warblers and of "confusing fall warblers". The figures of the warblers are larger and much clearer. Beginners will be especially interested in this change. The sound principle of portraying in black and white birds which are most easily recognized by some striking wing pattern is retained. But now these black and white illustrations are supplemented by color plates, e.g. the shore birds are shown in flight in black and white but in color in the standing position. One very helpful innovation is the introduction of a number of silhouette illustrations. You do in fact recognize a great many birds by their shape as they sit on a fence, in a tree, or as they stand in a field, etc. A glance at any one of these novel silhouette illustrations will show you how much that is so.

There are many additions to and alterations in the text as well as new illustrations. Information about songs and calls (voice), about range and distribution, about the distinctions between similar species, has been added. Abbreviated field marks are now given on the page opposite the appropriate illustration as well as in the text.

The final conclusion is that no bird watcher can afford to be without this new edition of Peterson's Field Guide.

John Keiran: Footnotes on Nature. Doubleday and Co.Inc. (In Canada
McClelland and Stewart, Ltd. Toronto) 1947. Pp. 279. Price \$3.00

This is a mighty attractive book, full of the outdoors, bubbling with fun, and ornamented with just enough literary erudition to let you know that its author is John Kieran of Information Please. When he takes you stumbling down a dark, wooded bank in the middle of the night to dip for smelts with "our valiant Master of Smelt Hounds" or when he lets you in on the secret of that maple syrup with sugar-coated beetles in it, you've really had an experience you won't forget. And you know John Kieran is a true bird man for he goes traipsing off to Jones Beach on Long Island to see surf scooters, or up to a Connecticut beach for snow buntings, or slipping and sliding along the ice-coated Palisades in search of bald eagles at the drop of a telephone receiver. But he is more than a bird watcher, for insects crawl into his pages, flowers nod from its lines, and a sense of the wonder of nature pervades all. John Kieran is a field naturalist of first rank, and moreover a truly cultured man whom any one of us would be delighted to walk afield with any day. Short of that pleasure we must resort to his written words. That is an experience I recommend to all.

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Malcolm Macdonald: The Birds of Brewery Creek. Oxford University Press,
Toronto. 1947. Pp. 334. Price \$3.50.

Of all the problems peculiar to the life of a statesman and diplomat, one of the most serious is the lack of privacy. Rt.Hon. Malcolm Macdonald is a bird watcher, and he shows in this book that because of his hobby of bird watching he was able to solve this problem. Long before official Ottawa began its daily round Mr. Macdonald would be paddling his canoe across the Ottawa River, or crossing the ice on snowshoes, to get to a bit of wild life along the banks of Brewery Creek where he could spend an hour or so with his friends, the birds, before returning to his office desk and administrative routine. Every morning, save when the river crossing was impossible, or when he was away from Ottawa, he kept up this practice.

By such perseverance he learned a good deal about, what were for him, the strange new birds of the Ottawa region. His own observations are pleasantly, often vividly, recorded which make one wish all the more that he had refrained from including so much general information from the book. Of course if his book is addressed primarily to an English audience the inclusion of such material is comprehensible, but to his Canadian audience it brings a number of dull patches. Yet, on the whole this book is a charming memento of the High Commissioner's stay in Canada's capital, and an interesting addition to the nature literature of the country.

The photographic illustrations by Dr. A.A.Allen of Cornell University, and by Mr. W.V.Crich of Toronto are striking examples of the high quality that bird photography has achieved to date.

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R. M. SAUNDERS

Editor.