

T O R O N T O F I E L D N A T U R A L I S T S ' C L U B

NOVEMBER MEETINGS

Royal Ontario Museum :

Monday, 3rd November, 1947 at 8.15 p.m

Speaker - Prof. John D. Robbins

of Victoria University

Author of "The Incomplete Angler"

ROTUNDA DISPLAY

Nature photographs by Hugh M. Halliday,
Staff photographer of The Toronto Daily Star,
and former Secretary of the Toronto Field
Naturalists' Club. Mr. Halliday is interested
in all creatures from skunks to birds, and his
exhibit is sure to have a wide appeal.

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SATURDAY AFTERNOON

HIKE

Cedarvale Ravine - Saturday November 8th,

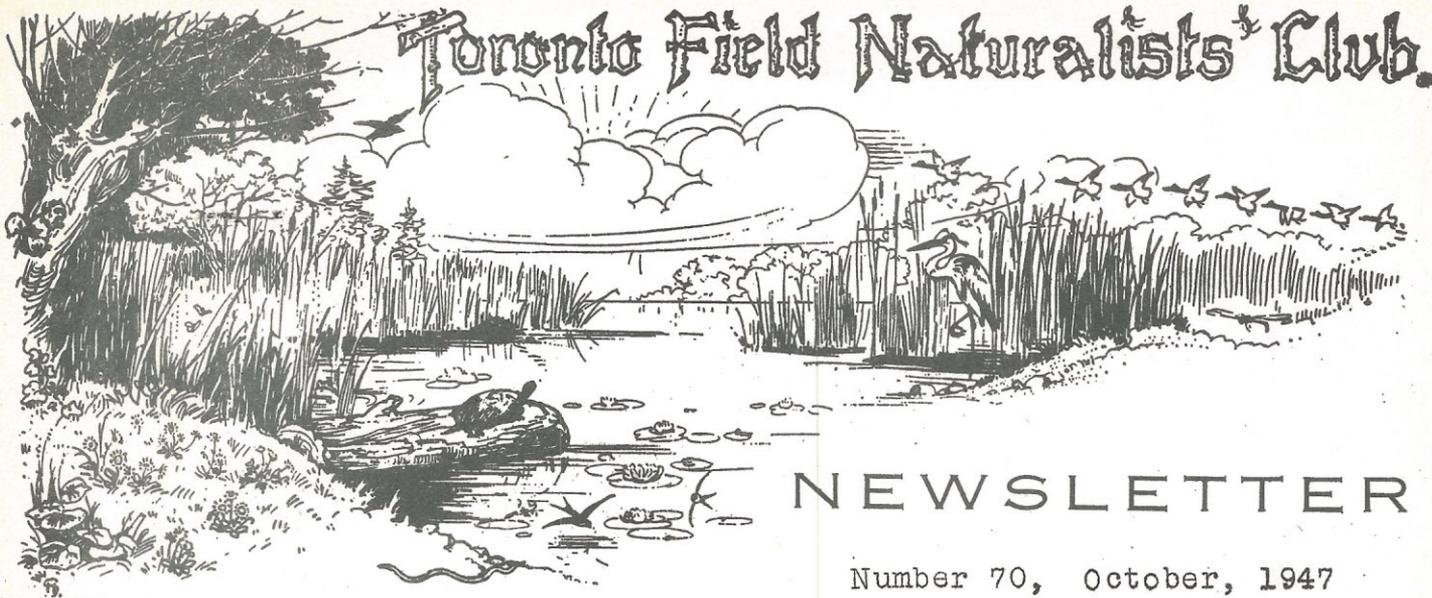
at 2.30 p.m.

Meet at the corner of Bolton Drive and

Cottingham Street.

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Toronto Field Naturalists' Club.



NEWSLETTER

Number 70, October, 1947

Soft and gentle comes the autumn this year; no great storms, no days of skies filled with racing clouds, no flaming hills, rather a gradual mellowing of the landscape under hazy, cloudless skies and scarcely perceptible southwesterly breezes. The woods and slopes are painted in pastel shades. Russets and tans, orange, yellow and gold predominate. Only here and there does a scarlet maple, a wine-red ash, or a clump of fiery sumachs add a touch of startling drama to the glowing scene. Most lovely of all the trees (to me) this season are the lone elms in the fields. Perfect in shape, rising high like fountains of gold they stand transfixed against a soft blue sky. The majestic splendor of one such tree seen against the horizon as you are climbing a hill can so entrance you that the passage of time becomes of no account. Yet over the whole scene it is not these vivid moments that count so much as the feeling of a beautiful old age, the passing of a lovely summer in calmness and serenity, the giving way with infinite grace of one season to another.

Bird movements have been in harmony with the season; no great hawk flight, no striking migration of jays or crows, no waves of warblers. Instead a steady flow of migrants across the country has taken place. Everyone has found favorite ravines and hedgerows never quite devoid of migrants, never really swarming with the hordes that sometimes pass through. The common experience is to come on some busy flock of little birds, companions of many species all travelling together, and having identified all this group, to walk on a half mile, more or less, before discovering another such flock. Then if one keeps one's ears open of an evening it is possible to hear the tiny calls of similar little birds coming out of the darkness as they pass overhead. Those who turned their binoculars on the full harvest moon this year could see the dark shapes of some of these migrants, hastening southward in the night. On every favorable day and night such movement has been going on, but at no time has it swept over us in overwhelming tides. Perhaps the chief reason for so leisurely a migration is the plentifulness of the food supply. The prolonged warm weather tends to keep insect life swarming and the crop of wild fruits this year is phenomenal.

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About mid-afternoon on September 18th, I learned that Mrs. Barfoot, President of the Junior Field Naturalists' Club, had called up to tell me that a friend had called her to tell about a flock of "unusual birds" in the Alexander Muir Gardens. The description given to

Mrs. Barfoot was very vague but it suggested possibilities that were worth investigating so I decided to go up and have a look.

The gardens are a narrow strip of parked land opposite the Yonge Street side of Mount Pleasant Cemetery. A formal terraced garden occupies the central portion of the little park. The roar of Yonge Street traffic is unceasing. It would not seem to be a spot favorable to birds; yet one never knows. I went up full of curiosity but without much hope.

When I arrived my little hope sank to the vanishing point as several people were sitting or walking about the park. In fact I scoured the park from end to end without discovering a sign of any birds to answer the description. No doubt the people had scared them off. A group of mourning cloak butterflies clustered in a Manitoba maple and on the ground beneath it, and two yellowthroats, were the only things of interest I saw until I wandered into a blind path at the south end of the gardens. This path leads to a tool shed sheltered in shrubbery at the foot of a tangled bank.

Looking up this bank I detected movements and soon made out several robins feeding on hawberries that had fallen to the ground. I commenced some squeaking and quickly commanded their attention. To my right I caught sight of a catbird popping up from the ground to perch within a bush whence it could get a good look at me. Then a cardinal appeared. Just at this moment a workman who had been cutting the lawns came to put his tools away. He was very much startled to come on me so suddenly but I pacified him by pointing out the birds. He assured me that there were usually a good many around. After a little chat he went about his work leaving me alone.

Free to scan the bank again I looked up and found facing me, perched on an open branch a few feet away, the catbird. At least I thought it was a catbird upon first glance. It was slim, grey, long-tailed, and had a dark curving bill. But as I looked I suddenly saw that this "catbird" had no reddish underpart! Then as it turned I caught a glimpse of white on the wings. At once I searched the tail, and, sure enough, its outer feathers were white. This was no catbird at all but its distinguished relative, the mockingbird. My first since 1940!

Staying only long enough for full verification of the observation I rushed to the nearest telephone and let some others know about this find. Thanks to Mrs. Barfoot I had arrived at Alexander Muir Gardens in time to find a very unusual bird. Unusual, that is, for the Toronto region.

However, mockingbirds are more likely to be seen in this area during the winter season than at other times of the year. Also, some years ago one stayed around the Mount Pleasant Cemetery all winter. Consequently it might be well for observers in that area to keep a watch for this bird during the next few months.

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Mr. A.W.F. Banfield, at present mammalogist with the National Parks Bureau in Ottawa, was formerly one of the most active naturalists in Toronto. During his residence here he made a very careful study of the winter feeding habits of the short-eared owl in this region. The results of this study were incorporated in a M.A. thesis for the University of Toronto, and Mr. Banfield has published an article based on this thesis in the Canadian Journal of Research (April, 1947). In

view of the importance of the study and its local interest I take pleasure in reprinting here the Absctact which appears at the beginning of the article. It reads:

"The winter feeding habits of the short-eared owl (Asio flammeus Pontoppidan) were studied during the period of 1936 to 1942 in the vicinity of Toronto, Ont. The owls used restricted roosts in several groups of Douglas fir (Pseudotsuga taxifolia) on a golf course. By means of frequent owl population censuses and collection of pellets, food requirements and correlations were calculated.

The winter incursions of the owls were found to be cyclic and to coincide with the local meadow vole (Microtus pennsylvanicus) cycle and to be independent of meteorological factors. Roosting behaviour was found to vary with snow cover.

From an analysis of 3000 pellets it was found that the meadow vole formed 82% of the food taken. The next animal most commonly preyed upon was the deer mouse (Peromyscus leucopus), which comprised 17% of the food, while birds formed 1%. No significant seasonal change in diet was noted over a period of five months.

It was calculated that a short-eared owl eats between 700 and 1600 mice per year. The average figure is thought to be nearer the minimum estimate. Translated to weight of mice this is equivalent to between 55.5 and 127 lb.

It was demonstrated that the amount of snow on the ground affected the relative availability of meadow voles and deer mice. This fact was reflected in changes in pressure on the population of the two mice species due to owl predation.

The data presented pointed to the possibility that concentrations of avian predators could have an appreciable effect on local meadow vole populations. In the case under study it was estimated that winter short-eared owl predation might account for 10% of the vole population.

The data also suggested that during periods of deep snow, because of decreased availability of meadow voles, less food is taken, and during open periods increased availability of these mice is reflected by increased food consumption.

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Edward H. Graham: The Land and Wildlife. Oxford University Press, Toronto. 1947. Pp.232 \$4.00

No man has put more clearly than the author of this readable and revealing book the intrinsic relationship between man's proper care of the land he lives on and the abundance of wildlife. And no field naturalist who feels any responsibility for the future of his country, and who desires to hand on to his children the chances of enjoyment of nature which he has himself, can afford to neglect an interest in the proper use of land in the widest sense of the word. Consequently such a book as this is of paramount interest to the field naturalist.

Though descriptive of conditions in the United States this book is in every way applicable to Canada. It is a true guide book of what has been done, and what can be done to put our land - now woefully

abused - back into a healthy condition, and keep it there. That this is of intense importance even to those who are interested in wildlife and nature only for the sake of entertainment goes without saying. As Mr. Graham points out, "Wildlife flourishes when man has succeeded in adapting himself to the land on which he lives and where he has attained a degree of bountiful living. Wild birds and mammals are not abundant where man and the land are not in harmony."

Many people, even field naturalists, have no clear idea what is now meant by the term "conservation". No longer simply a negative idea of merely saving, it is a dynamic concept. Mr. Graham has stated it most convincingly at the end of the book in these words:

"For the most part, however, conservation today means not preservation but 'wise use'. This is a reasonable objective, for renewable resources such as soil, water, trees, grass, and wildlife can be both used and preserved. They are subject to management. Living things produce a surplus over that needed to perpetuate them in good thrift. Man can make use of this surplus. We need only substitute for exploitation a program of careful use, of husbandry. This we are learning to do more and more capably. We must learn to do it or suffer in loss of wealth health, and social order. To care for the things we use, to substitute frugality for waste, is a major problem facing all of us, not only in our own country but everywhere.

Perhaps such an approach brings us to what we really mean by conservation. Conservation is not alone something we do, it is something we feel. It is very close to the respect, kinship, and awe with which primitive man looked upon the rain, trees, and wild animals that helped to create the habitat in which he lived. Conservation brings us face to face with the realities of environment. When conservation becomes a kind of thinking, a way of life, it takes on real and substantial meaning. If we act prudently instead of wantonly when we deal with our natural resources, we shall be living conservatively. After all, conservation is little more than living within our means.

When we have learned to conserve the land and, in our use of it, handle every unit and every parcel in accordance with its capacity for use, we shall have contributed materially to the benefit of our nation's wildlife. For when all is said and done, it is a home that wildlife needs above all else: a place to feed, hide, raise its young, sleep, play, and seek shelter. The way we manage the land determines whether wildlife shall have a place. The land-use practices described in this book are believed to be some of those that provide a place for wildlife as an integral part of the new land pattern that is taking shape. When we have accomplished land conservation, we shall have gone a long way toward achieving wildlife conservation."

This very attractive book is enlivened throughout with lavish illustrations, excellent photographs that drive the author's point home with telling vigor.

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Through the kindness of Mr. Ross Anderson, a member of this club, my attention has been drawn to a review in a recent number of Time of the new British nature film The Tawny Pipit, which has been drawing much favorable attention in New York. Written humorously

around the life history of one of the rarest British birds, a relative of our own pipit, this film is highly commended by New York critics. The film will be shown in Toronto at the International Cinema (Yonge Street north) in about six to eight weeks' time (between the middle and end of November). It should be of interest to members of this club.

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R. M. SAUNDERS

Editor.

Richard M. Saunders, M.A., Ph.D., *Flashing Wings*. McClelland and Stewart, Ltd., Toronto. 1947. Pp.338. \$4.50.

The editor of the Newsletter is far too modest to include a review of one of the most charming books on birds that has appeared in many a year. Those of us who have been hoarding our copies of the Newsletter to read over from time to time will be delighted to have now in book form so much of the material that appeared there. Not that Flashing Wings is limited to such material, for Dr. Saunders has used mostly the entries in his personal journal where he has recorded so many of his birding trips in the Toronto region and elsewhere. His familiar inclusion of so many of his friends, whom we also know at least by name, almost takes us as well into that favored group who travel far and wide in any weather to see birds, and who know every 'chip' and 'cher' by name.

This book is in no sense another bird guide in the accepted meaning of that term, but may well be used as a directory of places and seasons for the birds that occur in the Toronto region. As the author himself says, "Though in no way intended as another handbook of birds, I have arranged the entries from my journal so that this book may be consulted as a guide to the birds that one may expect to see in this region at any time of year. For this reason I have taken all the entries for one month, regardless of the order of the years, and have arranged them in order from the beginning to the end of each month. - - - If anyone prefers to follow a particular year's development, he has only to skip over the intervening entries from other years. Many readers contemplating a walk will want to open this book at some date to see what birds my friends and I saw on or near that time. That will give them an idea of what they may hope to see. When they have done that then I trust they will go out and see the birds for themselves. Perhaps they will prefer to consult this journal when they get back for the sake of comparison. At any rate it is a book to dip into rather than to read straight through."

It is certainly a book that will bring up memories of pleasant walks in fields and woods, along country roads and by the lakeshore. Terry Shortt's fine drawings and his painting of whistling swans will add greatly to our enjoyment, and the complete chart of arrivals and departures of the birds of the Toronto region will be of inestimable value to all birders in this part of the country. Those who have not yet dipped into this delightful account of our local birds have a treat in store for them.

L.J.P.