

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

J a n u a r y M e e t i n g s

Royal Ontario Museum

Monday, 5th January, 1948 - 8.15 p.m.

Speaker - Mr. Ernest C. Overholtzer

President - Quetico - Superior Council

Subject - Quetico - Superior Wilderness

(Illustrated)

Rotunda Display

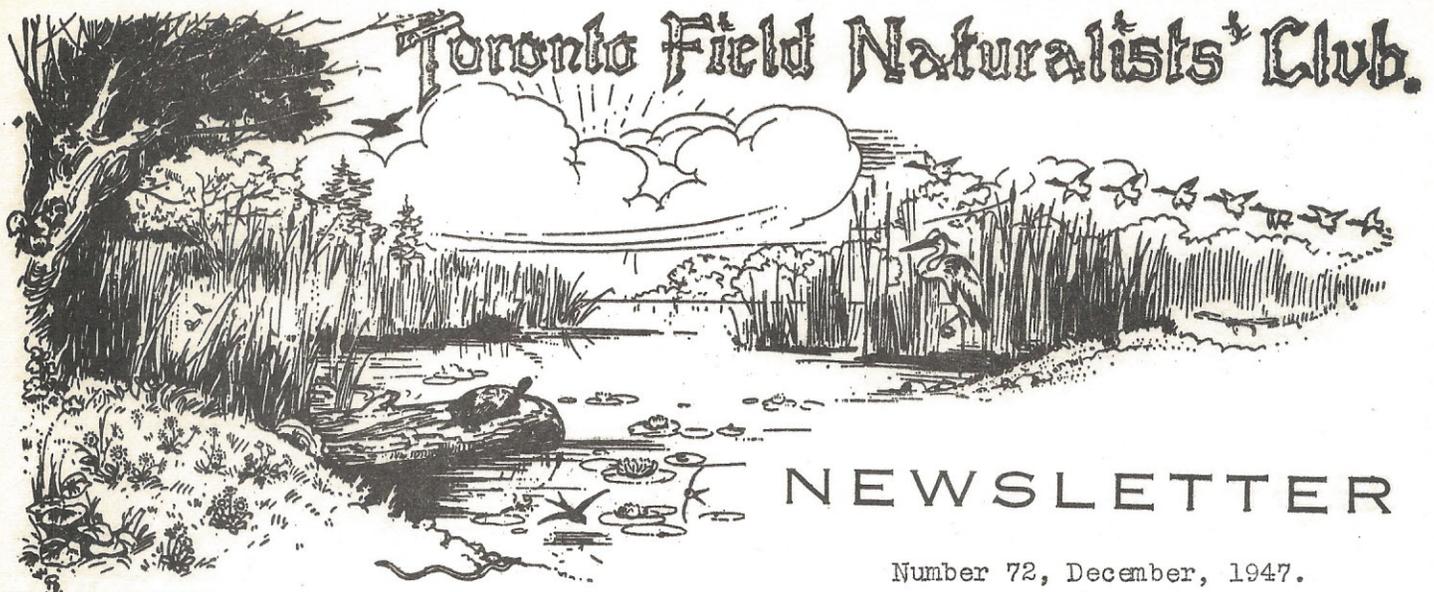
The work and activities of The Toronto Intermediate Naturalists, including plant collections, skins of small mammals, photographs and paintings and live specimens.

Saturday Afternoon Hike

Saturday, January 10th, at 2.30 p.m.

Meet at the east end of Donwoods Drive,

York Mills.



All day long, December 14th, the grey winter sky was full of menace. Stinging grains of snow beat on our faces for a few moments early in the morning as we stood on the shore at Sunnyside scanning the wildly tumbling waters of the lake. The breakwalls were swept clear of gulls by crashing waves. Not even the hardy old squaws were braving the riotous breakers beyond the walls. Doubtless the bulk of our winter ducks were seeking haven in the quieter bay. A great many paraded before us in the sheltered reaches near shore. The gulls, that could find no footing on the water-scoured walls, were congregated in a mass on the ice of Grenadier Pond. This is a favorite winter refuge for them save when the skaters take over. So far the ice is too thin to permit of skating and the gulls have it all to themselves.

Along the Humber above the Old Mill we found hundreds of ducks. Mostly mallards and blacks, but one elegant pintail male gave a touch of aristocracy to the scene. This stretch of the river always attracts many ducks on winter days, but on a day like this it is crammed. Gulls too find refuge and food in the rapids below Dundas Street. Another bird that may be seen nowhere else in the Toronto region at this season of the year, but which is almost certain to be along this part of the Humber is the kingfisher. Greg Clark picked one out winging its way up stream as we were standing on the bridge at the Old Mill today. A little later another, or the same one, was seen flying downstream near Lambton Mills.

Water birds, however, were not the chief attraction in this quarter. A wonderful pocket of winter residents was discovered along the high western bank opposite Baby Point. Golden-crowned kinglets bouncing in the willows first brought us to a halt. But as soon as we were out of the car we could see that the bank was alive with birds, and we were scurrying hither and yon, calling to each other, and peering frantically into trees and thickets, trying to see them all, hoping not to miss any. There were cardinals, shouted one. Yes,

not one - or two - but three - five - seven - eight of the lovely birds flying and calling above our heads, diving from cover to cover, taking off across the river. There are chickadees, shouted another. And juncos, tree sparrows, a white-breasted nuthatch. Here's a winter wren, called Bill Smith. Everyone rushed. The wren, as its wont, dove out of sight into a tangle. There it is! No, it's gone. Well it was there. There it is, just by that bush. I can't see it. There, right there. Where? By the stump. What stump? Finally it is forced out of hiding by Bill's dashing into the tangle, and everyone is satisfied. Up the hill, up the hill, in the rowan tree, shouts Jack Satterly, cedar waxwings! Yes, sir - twelve waxwings busily plucking rowan-berries and stowing them inside to make heat. It was quite a while before we finished with this lively flock and betook ourselves towards York Downs.

Our route lay by way of Scarlett Road and Weston. Bill Smith, Jack Satterly, Earl Stark and I were in the second car. We were speeding along Scarlett Road just beyond the Humber, some yards behind the other car, when I spotted a sparrow hawk teetering on a telephone wire, our first for the day. A few rods farther on Bill spied what we thought was a second falcon atop a willow tree, but a second look showed the slimmer form of a northern shrike. This was a real find and we stopped to look more closely. When we caught up to the others, who had waited when they saw we were not behind them, they were much chagrined to think they had missed these birds. They turned back to hunt them up - whilst we waited. Soon they returned and demanded that one of us go back with them to point out the birds. Bill went. But to no avail. Both hawk and shrike had vanished.

So far as the little falcon was concerned it made little difference for we were to see six more individuals during the day. Indeed we had scarcely reached York Downs along Wilson Avenue before we spotted first a bright male sparrow hawk perched on a fence, then a fat female with a field mouse clutched securely in her talons, glowering at us from a lumber pile. Our stopping, too close, set her off, and she flew haltingly off with the heavy mouse dangling beneath.

A week ago Jim Baillie, Bill Smith, Earl Stark and Bob Trowern saw 17 short-eared owls standing on a pile of rubbish in the field near the De Haviland airport. Today when we wanted especially to show Greg Clark such an aggregation we focussed our binoculars on this spot - in vain. Nor did we fare better sweeping the fields all about with our glasses. However, there was one last resort for these owls, the evergreen trees on the York Downs Golf Course. Thereto we bent our way. Jim and Greg got off at the north end of the second row of evergreens to walk. We others rode down the road a bit and entered the golf course by the lower gate. Earl headed for one clump of trees whilst I took another. Earl it was who had the fortune to find and to flush the owls. As he neared his clump five short-eareds burst into the air. One sped towards Bathurst Street and alighted atop a telephone pole. The others wove intricate patterns against the grey December sky as they circled and sailed above our heads. Momentarily seeking refuge in other trees they were soon in the air again as one or other of us approached too near. Once one owl, evidently not seeing me, settled into a glide straight towards my head, looking like a plane with a weirdly-painted fuselage diving at me. It veered off a little and came to rest on an

evergreen a few yards beyond me in such a position that I could see only its beautiful tail. Evidently it could see me for the tail twitched nervously and I could detect jerking movements behind green twigs where its head must be. In a moment it took wing again, and joined its companions drawing designs on grey clouds. This aerial manoeuvre was a lovely sight, and though I have seen them many times they never pall. There is an endless variety to the scene, a ceaseless attraction. As we left the owls disappeared again into the depths of the fir trees, hidden anew from all save the prying eyes of those who know their haunts.

Between the Downs and Purpleville the fields were almost wholly devoid of birds for buntings, redpolls and winter residents that in other years caused us to halt beside rail fences, to dash across farmers' fields, are this year as yet rare or absent. When we did reach Purpleville Woods we paused long enough to have lunch before plunging into the hemlocks and pines at the east end.

We were expecting good luck here. Had we not been welcomed by 17 bluejays when we arrived? Like sentinels in blue uniforms, stationed along the eastern wall of trees, they sat and screamed at us as we drove up. Only when we stopped did they retreat to take up their stand in the darker deeps of the wood.

All was quiet as we crunched the thin crust of snow for a hundred yards from the road. There was life about, no doubt, for Jim and I discovered a fox's tracks, tracing a trail from stump to stump and interweaving with the dainty prints of a red squirrel. While the party was studying this story in snow we heard the guardian jays screaming in the trees quite a bit ahead. We turned thither, and soon we heard other birds. Then, as we hurried down a bank and out to the inner edge of the woods we found ourselves in the midst of another lively flock of winter birds. Juncoes flew up from our feet by the dozens, chickadees jabbered and called overhead. Kinglets darted bewilderingly, or called mysteriously from dark cedars. Jack Satterly caught sight of a red-breasted nuthatch high up in the crotch of an elm. Everyone came running for a look. Before all were satisfied the jays set up a terrific clamor and a large bird went speeding away across the fields and over the rise. The racket in the wood did not cease. A moment or two later another huge bird flapped heavily away through the trees with the jays in raucous pursuit. A hawk and an owl? Two owls? Not a one of us could say. Jim rushed up the rise to see if he could glimpse the "hawk" but it was out of sight. Then we scoured the woods for the other bird. No luck there either. But in the hunt somebody found a yellow birch tree that was jumping with pine siskins. What a chattering and calling! The air was quivering with their sibilant shree-ar notes, and seed covers rained downward to dapple the snow. We lined up on the ice of a little pond to watch, leaving only when the busy flock took a notion to try some other tree's bounty and whirled away. Later Earl and I came on the flock again, or perhaps another, feeding just as industriously on the seeds of hemlock. Only a gentle subdued chattering gave their whereabouts away. This time I clapped my hands just once and the whole flock blew out of the hemlock like a puff of smoke and vanished from sight. The action of such flocks - siskins, redpolls, finches - is inexplicable in this respect. Sometimes they take off like this at the least provocation, or for no evident reason at all; at other times they will not budge though you create a riotous din beneath their very feet. The rest of the woods had few birds, though many fresh signs of pileated woodpeckers' work, and we soon gathered at the Purpleville churchyard to begin our

next stage.

That took us over to Kleinburg and a mile and a half north on Route No.27 to a little wood where we saw an Arctic three-toed woodpecker on November 16th. Today there was not a single bird in the whole valley, not even a sparrow or a junco, a chickadee or a kinglet! Such are the fortunes of winter birding, first a flock of many species travelling together that causes everyone to dance excitedly about, then nothing for miles. But there is always another flock somewhere!

We headed southward again on Number 27, bound this time for Britannia Wood, another haunt of owls. En route we were not wasting much time for our wintry day was darkening, betokening the coming close of our short day. Nonetheless we did not forget to survey the fields, giving special attention to the tops of trees and poles. One never knows what may turn up. We had gone many miles without seeing anything when near Woodhill Earl saw a bird flapping across a field. "Looks like a crow," he cried. And Jack and I both agreed as we glanced in the bird's direction. We were all wrong. In a moment our bird began to hover, then pitched up into an elm tree. I got my binoculars set on it just as it raised its wings as it was settling on its perch - and at once I saw the jet black wrist patches of a rough-legged hawk. I whooped. It was my first this year. I had feared that this species would escape me in 1947, for only a few have been reported, and I have looked for it far and wide without finding one. Here it was at last - what a magnificent specimen too. Soon it was in flight again, hovering once more over the field, seeking some scurrying mouse and displaying to us its gleaming white rump and black-edged tail. Almost eagle size it is one of the most colorful and dramatic of all our birds, and one that may be easily observed as it is remarkably tame, coming as it does, out of the far north to us where hostile man is virtually unknown to it. We did not see the rough-leg for long but it was one of the memorable sights of the day.

We did eventually reach the owl woods near Britannia, and were soon threading our way through cedar thickets in search of long-eared owls. Here we were not disappointed. Brown shapes were soon hurtling from dark cedar to dark cedar ahead of us, over our heads. Now and then we saw briefly a gaunt, stick-like form, out of which, miraculously, yellow eyes gleamed at us, until it too became transformed into a brown shape floundering away towards some new cedar retreat. All long-eared owls - these shapes? How many were they? This was hard to say for one never knew whether it was a new owl or one of the ones previously disturbed. On our tramp through these woods we met two other watchers, Messrs. Martin and Sharon, who told us they had put up 7 owls at one time but that that was the most they could be sure of. In the end we set our figure at 6, and felt that we were safe with that estimate. That gave us 11 owls for the trip. Not bad we thought.

The day ended with another survey of the waterfront where we added a canvasback and black-backed gulls to our list. This gave us a total of 43 species - a remarkable record for a winter's outing in the Toronto region. The Christmas census will of course turn up many more birds than this, but on that occasion there will be possibly 70 observers afield, whereas today we had but seven: Jim Baillie, Bob Trowern, Bill Smith, Earl Stark, Jack Satterly, Greg Clark and I.

As if to confirm this record of an excellent day of winter's birding, the lowering sky that had held the world in grey enthralled all day long broke asunder to reveal a glowing, coppery-red sun poised in majestic splendor above the now playful waves of a calming lake.

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Mr. R. Knights' encounter with the mouse family at Whitevale, on November 1st will interest the club members. He says -

"What a day... If it had not been for the absence of the leaves on the trees one would have taken this warm sunny day for early fall.

I noticed that the bluebirds are still with us and tree sparrows mixed with juncoes were everywhere. There were hosts of red-wings up in the treetops, the brilliant red patch of the males now turned to a more drab color; but to offset this the females appear to look more sleek now than in the spring.

With the leaves shorn from the trees and shrubs exposing the summer nests, I came across one that I stayed to examine, anxious to know the species that had built it. The nest was placed at the tip of a shrub six feet high, just above a wire fence along the roadside. From a closeup I noticed that the inside material of the nest seemed quite fresh and was puffed up with some kind of fluffy material. Quite curious as to what it was I investigated with outstretched hand. Imagine my surprise when out of all this came a large mouse (the mother I presume) with five young ones hanging onto her coat by their teeth. The parent clung to the top rail of the wire fence from where she dropped from rung to rung with the young still clinging on by their teeth until she reached the ground, where she dragged them under cover beneath the leaves. Halfway down one of the youngsters fell off and froze itself to the top of a leaf wedged in a fork of the shrub.

I cannot describe here the thrill I experienced watching these acrobatic manoeuvres - a hanging, swinging mass of rodents. The parent mouse was quite large, the color of its sleek coat resembling a deer, with pure white underparts, and very much streamlined. A beautiful creature for a mouse. The young were about the size of our common house mice. Fortunately I had my camera and took a random closeup of what I would call "The Mice on the Trapeze".

(These mice were doubtless deer mice. Ed.)

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The following note, sent in by Mr. James R. Mackintosh, provides further evidence of the mild fall season this year. He writes -

"I stirred up a few oddities on Armistice Day in my favorite stamping ground, Bayview to Sunnybrook, both banks of the Don, - a red fox, a 'coon, a garter snake and a monarch butterfly, the two latter somewhat slow but alive, and a flock of robins in which one bird had a white ring on the neck an inch wide. I have seen this robin since on the J.S. McLean property on Bayview. I would like to hear more of him, and would like to get him within reach of Dick Robinson's or Vic Crich's camera.

Among the birds feeding on my windows at the moment are three cardinals and some nuthatches, one of which has lost a leg. Downy and hairy woodpeckers, juncoes, tree sparrows and, of course, the ubiquitous house sparrow are about.

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Rutherford Platt:      Our Flowering World.    Dodd, Mead and Co. New York.  
1947. In Canada, McClelland and Stewart, Toronto.  
Pp. 278. Price \$6.00

Two years ago Mr. Platt's earlier work, This Green World, won the coveted John Burroughs medal as the year's "foremost literary work" in the field of nature writing. Many members of the club know this book, and fully appreciate the dramatic vigor and enthusiasm with which the author reveals the entrancing mysteries of trees and flowers.

Our Flowering World is such another book. This time the theme is the story of the evolution of plants, of the march of trees and flowers around the world according to the laws of nature, and under the impact of ceaseless physical change. Though they incorporate the findings of palaeontologists and biologists, of evolutionist and geologist, Mr. Platt's pages glow with the imaginative appreciation and zeal of the amateur who is treading the footpath of nature for the first time. This book is a magnificent work of popularization. You have only to turn its pages to have your interest gripped.

You meet on the very first page - as "actors in a singular story of mystery and adventure," "the trees and flowers of our wild landscape." You are swept on into the story of "life's greatest invention" - the living cell, and of the emergence and development of plant life until you come to the "tidal wave of flowering plants." For us, who live in the midst of its debris the most fascinating chapters are those concerning the southward march of "the big ice, ...God's big plow." Yet what field naturalist will not turn hurriedly to the chapter on "Seed Machines" where such alluring sub-titles fill the pages-- e.g. the touch-me-not rocket, the baseball machine of wild geranium, the New Jersey tea time bomb, the violet squeeze machine!

Let Mr. Platt use his own words to tell you the thrill of climbing a mountain. "As you climb," he says, "you are travelling north at the rate of six hundred miles per hour! In a matter of minutes you pass through each continental zone - the hickory, elm, sugar maple, ash on the deep glacial drifts of the Housatonic Valley; upward through the hemlocks, the spires, the scrubs, to a touch of the arctics on the bright rocks at the top. A thousand feet up - and in an hour you have gone from Massachusetts to the Gaspé Peninsula. Look up ten feet - that is six miles farther north. This is the magic adventure of climbing a mountain.

"No animal except man has the inborn urge to climb a mountain. The mountain sheep is no exception, for he has never known any place else than the high rock. When we climb mountains, the valley softly gathers into itself our worries and the discords of man's world. The woods at the foot of the mountain say to the spirit, "Peace! Be still!" That mysterious feeling we call second wind is born in such a place.

Each zone brings fresh vigor. At the top, the beating pulse sings a song of mastery and achievement. Often I have shouted and called out, when the wind snatched away my voice and carried it instantly off into outer space. Surely the most strategic ground which the Devil could choose was the mountain top when he promised mastery of the world."

As a confirmed mountain climber myself I can only say, Amen! to Mr. Platt's views. This excerpt is characteristic of his style. It alone will tell you that the book should stand upon your library table. Yet you must add to his colorful words the wonderful display of beautiful photographs - 168 in all, 58 in full color - which illustrate the book. Almost any one of them will make you want to put on your hiking clothes and go afield.

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Sally Carrighar: One Day on Beetle Rock. Illustrated by Henry B. Kane. Alfred A. Knopf, New York. 1945. Pp.196.Price \$3.25  
One Day at Teton Marsh. Illustrated by George and Patricia Mattson. Alfred A. Knopf, New York. 1947. Pp. 239. Price \$4.00

Where did you first become introduced to the enchanting pen of Sally Carrighar? In the pages of the Saturday Evening Post, perhaps, where some of the Beetle Rock stories first appeared; in some article on conservation; or in her first volume One Day on Beetle Rock? It does not matter. For, wherever it may have been, you know now that you have met a naturalist and a writer of sensitive genius. You have become acquainted with a woman who had the insight and the character to give up a succession of jobs in motion pictures, radio, advertising, and with a technical monthly, when she saw that "success" in each of these careers would mean for her a "caged life". The love of nature would not let go of her, and, at last, she realized that she could be happy only when she was writing about nature and wildlife. She has given herself to that work. It is of gratifying interest to Canadians to know that Miss Carrighar's taste for the things of the wild was deeply strengthened in her earlier years by the experiences of two long summers spent in the Canadian woods. Her conviction that her genius lay in the line of nature-writing was fully justified by the appearance of One Day on Beetle Rock, a gem for any naturalist's library.

This is a collection of stories based on the lives of nine animals which frequent Beetle Rock, a remote, exciting spot some 6,500 feet above a valley in the High Sierra of California. In a daring and brilliantly successful piece of artistic creation Miss Carrighar weaves about the events of a single day in these creatures' lives their whole life histories. On these pages are printed the product of months of patient observation, as well as untold hours of study. Of all this you, the reader, know nothing for the author has so adroitly effaced herself that you seem to step inside the animals themselves, breathe their breaths, beat with their hearts, live their every moment. These are stories indeed: but as one scientist has said of them, "The tales are fiction, yes, but fiction closely parallel with fact. This a real natural history." And always it is touched with sympathetic understanding and a feeling for beauty. When time passes and posterity gives judgment this book may well emerge as a classic in its field.

Miss Carrighar's new book, One Day at Teton Marsh, is, as the title would indicate a new collection of stories in a similar vein. This time the scene is a marsh in the magnificent Jackson Hole area of Wyoming. The creatures chosen are: otter, cutthroat trout, osprey, mosquito, scud, mink, varying hare, American Merganser, moose, clepsine leech, leopard frog, physa snail, trumpeter swan, beaver.

Had the Beetle Rock volume not appeared, this book would have shone with greater lustre. As it is, the first book overshadows the second. The former is a perfect bit of artistry, the latter a good, sound performance. Not that there are not pages and pages of the same delicacy and penetration, of the same stimulating insight as in the first book; for in fact there are. The treatment of the otter, the trumpeter swan, the beaver and the varying hare are particularly fine. But there are places where the author has tried to crowd in too much information. This palls, and the dramatic unity of the story is lost. The attempt to include stories based on the mosquito, the scud, the leech and the snail is a tribute to the author's ingenuity, and to her desire to see nature as a whole. However, these stories appear to me to be really tours de force. A feeling of unre-alism develops upon reading them. Can it be that a technique which has been applied so well to creatures like the black bear, the weasel and the coyote is scarcely suitable to beings of this sort?

Unfortunately, too, the illustrations in this second volume are by no means as convincing as the bold, striking and lifelike drawings of Mr. Kane. These are not without merit but they strike me on the whole as being vague, impressionistic in an unpersuasive manner.

One Day at Teton Marsh is definitely a worthwhile book, one worth having, but in comparison to its predecessor, it is a lesser book.

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R. M. Saunders.

Editor.