

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

A P R I L M E E T I N G S

Royal Ontario Museum

Monday, April 5, 1948 - 8.15 p.m.

Speaker: Mr. S.C. Downing
 Royal Ontario Museum of Zoology

Subject: "An Introduction to the Small
 Mammals of Ontario" - Illustrated

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

In charge of the Junior Field Naturalists
Club.

Clay Modelling of birds and animals
 by the youngest group.

Drawings - by the General Interest Group.

Bird Carving - by Mr. Frank Smith's Group.

Specimens - by Mr. Cameron's Tree Group.

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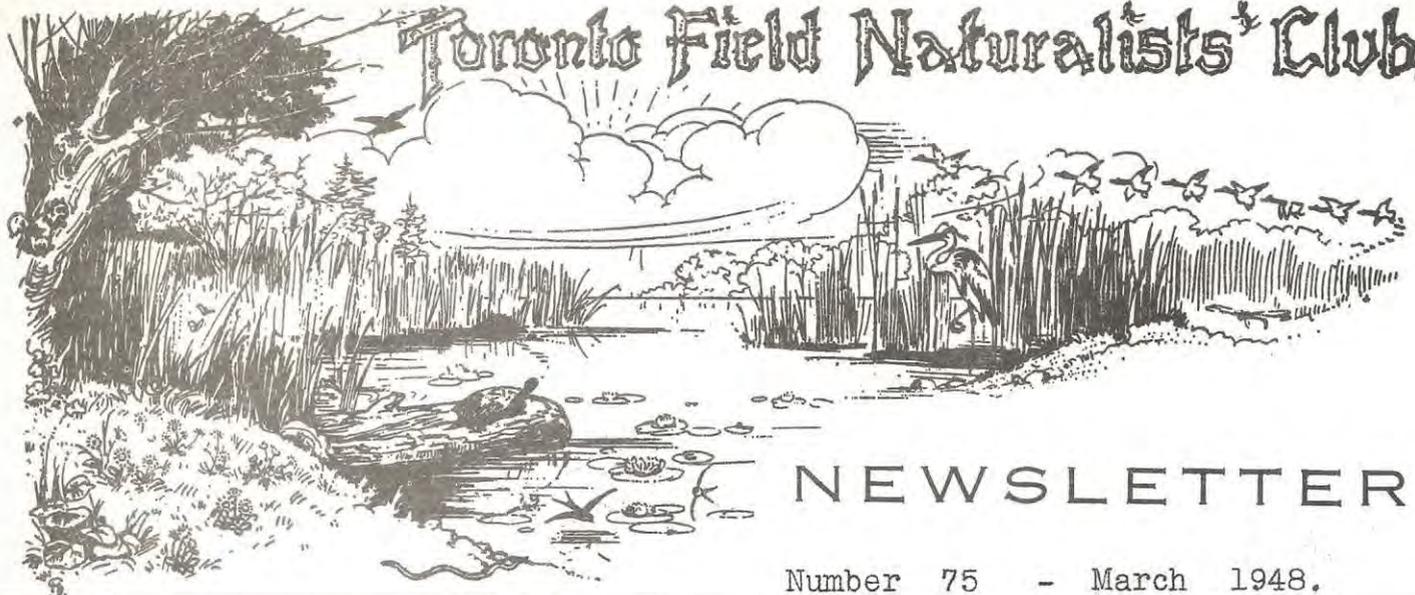
SATURDAY AFTERNOON HIKE

High Park - Birds.

Saturday April 10th, at 2.30 p.m.

Meet at the Howard Park entrance to High Park, at the
end of the Carlton car line.

Toronto Field Naturalists' Club.



NEWSLETTER

Number 75 - March 1948.

An appeal to the Legislative Assembly of the Province of Ontario for legislation giving further protection to the birds of prey in Ontario has been made this month by the Federation of Ontario Naturalists. Since this club is a member of the Federation, and since the subject is one of deepest interest to the members it has been thought worthwhile to present here in full the Memorandum which was laid before the members of the Legislative Assembly.

SPONSOR

This appeal to the Legislative Assembly of the Province of Ontario for protection of the birds of prey found within this province, is sponsored by the Federation of Ontario Naturalists. Within that Federation, representing seventeen affiliated clubs and societies, is a membership which includes a substantial percentage of the well-informed conservationists, naturalists and biologists, as well as a strong representation of persons interested in protecting our agriculture, conserving our natural resources including wild life, and preserving our natural beauty spots. It is a Federation which is useful and altruistic in purpose, and is detached entirely from any financially gainful purpose or motive.

PURPOSE

From well-sifted scientific evidence, the Federation is convinced that the birds of prey should be given more protection because of their NECESSARY function in destroying disease-carrying and crop-destroying rodents. This is a factor of great importance not fully appreciated, especially in regard to the health and economic welfare of Ontario. These birds are a vital link in the Balance of Nature upon which mankind depends for his economic prosperity, in the last analysis, for his very existence. Interference with this balance, whether by wholesale forest destruction, soil impoverishment, the slaughter of wildlife or the introduction of foreign insects, birds and mammals, frequently results in disaster, as history in this province and elsewhere testifies.

EVIDENCE

Unfortunately, what the general public learns about these birds is often from some newspaper photograph of a hawk or owl shot because it was raiding the barnyard. Let us make it plain here that there is no question whatever of depriving the farmer of the right to protect his barnyard with a gun. Sometimes an individual hawk or owl of certain kinds becomes a "rogue" and turns to the barnyard as an easy means of getting a living. Domestic fowl must, of course, be protected. But the evidence obtained from the officially recorded examinations of the stomachs of such birds shows that many kinds are never "rogues". The broad view is, that while domestic poultry is sometimes taken, the number is insignificant when compared with rats, mice, starlings and destructive insects which are detrimental to man, or other food items of no value to man. Against the loss of an occasional chicken, the farmer should remember the increased hay, grain and fruit crops following the destruction by birds of prey of field mice, rats, and injurious insects in their thousands.

SPECIFIC EXAMPLE

During the winter of 1945-46, there was a periodic influx into southern Ontario of Snowy Owls from the sub-Arctic tundra. Scores of these magnificent white birds were shot. At the Royal Ontario Museum 511 regurgitated pellets from Snowy Owls spending the winter in farming areas, were carefully examined to identify the food items consumed. From the bones therein 2,053 such items were listed. Of these, 1,739 were meadow mice; 226 other species of mice; 45 house and barn rats; and 3 rabbits. Birds ranging from Old Squaw ducks to pigeons and starlings made up the small balance. In all, 2,021 mammals--almost exclusively harmful rodents--and 32 birds were identified from the skeletal remains. Tables and graphs analysing the food habits of other owls and hawks of Ontario are available.

MICE AND HAY

It has been estimated that 1,000 mice devour 11 tons of green or potential hay, in one year. Periodically mice will reach plague proportions. If we do not preserve a reserve army of hawks and owls there can be disastrous results. In the winter of 1935-36, meadow mice occasioned much damage to young trees and shrubs in the Toronto region. Short-eared owls converged on the area affected and the destruction was halted.

TAVERNER ON BIRDS OF PREY

"It is a natural psychological fact that we ourselves feel a definitely known, concrete loss more keenly than we do a much greater one that we have unwittingly escaped. The loss of a single partly grown chicken to hawks is more keenly realized than the absence of some hundreds of gophers that never intruded themselves upon our consciousness. The one fact is taken as a calamity, the other as a matter of course. It is such warping of judgment that we must particularly guard against in estimating the real value of our Birds of Prey".

Page 113, Birds of Canada. (P.A.Taverner, Canadian ornithologist and author of several works on Canadian Birds. His reference to the gophers of Western Canada applies with equal force to the mice and other rodents devoured by hawks and owls in Ontario)

PREVENTION OF TREE GIRDLING

Inestimable damage is done to orchard, sugar-bush, and wind-break trees by the girdling or ringing of trees by mice and other rodents. Red-shouldered, Red-tailed, Broad-winged, Rough-legged and others of the hawks, as well as all the owls of Ontario find their chief food items among the tree destroying rodents, and the damage and destruction of trees is reduced to a negligible point where the birds of prey mentioned are unmolested.

"GRASSHOPPER" HAWKS' GREAT SERVICE

There is no such species as the Grasshopper hawk---but that name should be given to the so-called Sparrow hawk. They feed on grasshoppers exclusively when these destructive insects are available; mice are next in popularity, and the small birds they devour provide but a small percentage of their diet. Of 291 stomachs examined and officially recorded---the sparrow hawks being from agricultural areas---no less than 215 were found to contain destructive insects exclusively; 89 contained mice, 13 were found with the remains of other mammals, and the rest made up of birds and reptiles. There is no more efficient or valuable friend of the farmer than the Sparrow hawk despite the name which is not only a misnomer, but a definite slander. Incidentally, this grasshopper destroyer is a small, but the gayest coloured of all Ontario hawks.

X-RAY CONFIRMATION

While the customary method of examining regurgitated owl pellets to discover the feeding habits of the birds is the obvious one, experimentally, x-ray examination for permanent record was undertaken in Toronto recently. More than a score of pellets, picked up in farming areas near the city, all contained the bones of rats and mice exclusively. In the radiograph herewith, the pellet of a Snowy Owl, the skeletal remains of 8 field mice were identified, representing but a few hours of mousing by that bird.

ECONOMIC STATUS OF SPECIES (Tabulated by Taverner)

Turkey Buzzard (Rare in Ontario)	A scavenger, entirely beneficial.
Swallow-tailed Kite (also rare)	Feeds on insects, snails and reptiles only.
Red-shouldered hawk	Both destroy rodents in large numbers, and more rarely, birds. Definitely beneficial.
Red-tailed hawk	
Rough-legged hawk	Of 45 stomachs examined, 40 contained mice and rats, a mouse-hawk par excellence.
Broad-winged hawk	Kills an occasional small bird, but main food is mice, reptiles and insects. Beneficial.
Sparrow hawk	Should be called the "Grasshopper" hawk. Rated as one of farmer's best friends.
OWLS	With the single exception of the Great-horned owl (the depredations of which have been over-stressed)

all owls are worthy of protection for their services in the destruction of rats, mice, and other rodents which destroy crops and carry disease.

PROTECTION URGED

Hawks and owls listed below are, beyond question, entitled to immediate protection: Red-tailed hawk, Red-shouldered hawk, Broad-winged hawk, Swainson's hawk, Rough-legged hawk, Caracara, Sparrow hawk. Snowy owl, Barn owl, Screech owl, Hawk owl, Barred owl, Great Gray owl, long-eared owl, Short-eared owl, Little Boreal owl, and Saw-whet owl. Also worthy of protection are the Turkey Vulture and Swallow-tailed Kite. All the foregoing can be graded as beneficial in a high degree to man's interest. They should be added to the three commendably protected by law at the present time; "Eagles and Osprey (or Fish Hawk). Two exceptions, the Gyrfalcon and Peregrine falcon, are so rare that immediate safeguard against extinction is imperative.

LESS URGENT PROTECTION

On purely economic grounds the case for protection of four additional species is less strong, but is recommended nevertheless. These are: Cooper's hawk, Sharp-shinned hawk, Marsh hawk and Pigeon hawk. Admittedly they may conflict with man's interest, but they are now too rare, or limited to wilderness areas, or their diet is so balanced as not to constitute any serious threat biologically or economically. And while the scientific view of the wildlife situation in its relation to economic welfare, is that legal protection could be granted with benefit to all birds of prey, it is conceded on purely economic factors, that two species, the Goshawk and the Horned owl, might be eliminated from the list of birds of prey in present need of protection. Such protection would be indicated should their existence, at some future time, be actually threatened.

PROTECTION ELSEWHERE

As an indication of the trend of thought concerning wildlife protection as manifested by legislators, conservationists, ecologists and biologists in recent years -- and this following extensive investigation and research - it is encouraging to note that in 40 of the 48 States of the U.S.A., all or a part of the hawks and other birds of prey are protected by law, and the tendency is always to increase and enforce that legal protection.

BIRDS DO BECOME EXTINCT

While the Passenger Pigeon is the most familiar example of a bird species to become totally extinct--in this instance slaughtered by the million until the markets were glutted with barrels of pigeons ---there are many other examples. One of them, the Great Auk, suffered total extinction about a century ago when thousands of this species were killed every year off the Newfoundland coasts to supply feathers for mattresses. Even as museum specimens, the Great Auk is only represented by about 70 mounted birds in all the world. As recently as the late war, the Layson Rail and the Layson finch, both ground-nesting birds, and found only on Midway Island, were destroyed to the last bird when Norway rats from war and transport vessels invaded that island for the first time. Whooping cranes,

once abundant nesters in the Canadian prairie provinces, are now near enough to the point of extinction, and largely through the killings of trophy hunters, to cause grave concern. In 1947 as in 1946, a search by plane will be made over the Canadian Northland in an attempt to locate their few remaining nesting places and bring protection for these magnificent white birds.

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A friend of the club recently asked for a statement of the value of keeping underbrush in the city parks and ravines. The following account was provided.

The Toronto Field Naturalists' Club, a club with almost a thousand members, conducts some 75 public walks a year in the parks and ravines of Toronto and vicinity. Its members and their friends -- there are a great many people, and a rapidly growing number of people who are interested in the study of nature -- are afield in these same areas at all times of the year. Though every form of nature commands the attention of field naturalists most of these people are especially interested in birds.

High Park is one of the places where they go most commonly to observe birds. They find that the parts of High Park where they are most likely to see birds are: 1. Along Grenadier stream at the western edge; 2. Along Parkside ravine in the eastern area; 3. Among the wet hollows near Howard House, Catfish Pond and the Elk pens in the southern section. In other words High Park, which like the other parks and ravines in the city offers a place of refuge to birds, especially to migrating birds, in the midst of the urban area has its particularly favored spots.

When we ask what it is that makes these spots so favored, so much more attractive than other parts of the park to birds we easily discover that these are the only areas where underbrush exists to any extent.

Underbrush means safety and protection to birds. It provides cover for them and spells security. A clear, open area means danger to most birds and they will avoid it if possible. Even when an abundance of food such as weed seeds entices them into the open they prefer to stick as close as they can to bushy cover, to thickets and tangles. For many birds there is more food to be found in underbrush as well as protective cover than anywhere else. Migrating birds follow well-thicketed stream banks as safe highways of travel. The two streams in High Park are an example of this.

When it comes to nesting underbrush is even more vital to birds. Except for fields adapted to ground nesting birds -- and even they prefer uncropped, weedy fields --, most land birds prefer areas of thick underbrush, shrubs, small trees, and thickets as places for rearing their families. Again it is first of all a matter of protection, protection from predators both animal and human. It is also a matter of necessary privacy. Except in the case of a few species open, clear woods do not provide suitable nesting or feeding conditions. As a result clear, parklike woods are relatively devoid of birds, and of other animals whose living requirements are similar.

Now it is realized that Toronto's parks are not woods, and that they necessarily serve many purposes. They are pleasure grounds and breathing spaces for many different groups of people with many varied interests. Some of these interests require clean, cleared, open spaces. The naturalists do not, and cannot, of course, object to or disagree with such uses. They do feel, however, that since they are a large and growing group of citizens making regular, year-round use of these public parks and ravines that some parts of these areas might well be left as, or even carefully developed into the kind of "wild spots" or "natural areas" where they can hope to find birds, flowers, and other bits of nature.

The parts of High Park already mentioned could well be preserved and protected as natural areas. If they are not so protected they will soon disappear as their steady restriction over the years has shown. If left alone under protection the underbrush will grow up satisfactorily. But much could be done in the way of planting berry-bearing shrubs and other cover plants to make them much more attractive to birds. Moreover, well-chosen planting could make these areas centers of great beauty even while preserving a relatively wild character for them. A Parkside ravine, for instance, planted with hawthorns along its banks from Catfish Pond to Bloor Street could in time become as much a delight to Toronto citizens and to the city's visitors as the rock gardens in Hamilton are to that city. Thus not merely naturalists but a very wide public would be served.

What I have said about High Park and the preservation of natural area is really meant in a general way as a statement of principle to be applied to parks, ravines, and similar areas wherever possible. Cedarvale ravine is certainly another area where some such development could profitably take place. Again the Humber marshes, though outside the city proper, offer a magnificent opportunity for the preservation of a natural area in the Toronto region. This area could with proper planning be preserved and at the same time be made into one of the most distinctive beauty spots of a great city.

I would recommend therefore that in those parts of our parks, ravines, and associated areas which can and should be preserved as natural areas: 1. That the clearing of underbrush be stopped; 2. That protection be given these sections so that natural growth of underbrush will be possible; 3. That natural growth and protective measures be accompanied by wise planting.

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Miss Winnifred Chute, a former member of the club, now a missionary in southern India at Vellore, North Arcot, has sent the following interesting account of some recent bird observations. They were handed on to the Newsletter by Miss Mary Kirkwood. Miss Chute writes, -

"The bird population has changed over the last few days, as many take on their mating plumage and the migratory birds return for nesting. I am not very well informed yet as to how many do return, or if it is that they start to sing more beautifully now and so are more noticeable. I heard a song a few mornings ago which I was sure was a thrush's song. On consulting the bird book (Salim Eli) I found this on the only thrush which could be in this part of India - 'For the most part it (the blue rock thrush) is silent while with us (arrives

in October and leaves in April) but the male's sweet whistling song may be heard just before the birds depart for the nesting ground.' So while I did not see this bird I likely heard the blue rock thrush singing.

Due chiefly to the bauhinia tree having just lost its blossoms the small bird population which has filled this tree, hovering like butterflies over its white blossoms, gave place this morning to much larger birds which perched on the old rain tree (achia) which is next to the bauhinia tree. These are three of the small birds which have been around the tree while in bloom, the iora, the purple sun bird (its mate is so different, she is chiefly yellow) and the tailor bird. All the birds on the tree this morning were large ones. The barbets (coppersmiths) were very numerous, chasing from tree to tree, always in pairs, which made me wonder if this is their mating performance. The white-breasted king-fishers, with turquoise back and large red bill, were sitting like watchmen on the top branches of this tree and another near by.

Today to my joy two birds appeared which I have not seen before. The first was the blue-tailed bee eater, two or more alternately flying swiftly after some insect then returning to perch quietly for a long period. They have long curved bills, central pair of tail feathers prolonged into blunt pins. In color they have a greenish blue tail, black stripe through the eyes, yellow throat and chestnut upper breast. The other bird was exciting as it was my first woodpecker. This was the golden-backed woodpecker, large with a fine red crest. These were in pairs also and worked up and down the trunk of the rain tree, so near to my veranda that I did not use glasses to watch them.

Always in the background are the house crows and the kites. The kites can be seen and heard soaring high between the hills in typical flight. The mynas (common and braminy), the jungle babblers and the house sparrows are all busy at nests. This seems a perpetual affair with these birds. The sparrows flit in and out of my room through open windows and doors looking with no success for a place to nest. The rosy-ringed parakeet is a beautiful bird with many shades of green as different lights play on it. They fly in flocks so swiftly, a flash green across the sky. I saw a crow on a tree on the compound the past week, and one also came this morning and perched on the rain tree. These are birds which usually frequent lonely places, so it was a surprise to see one here."

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R. M. SAUNDERS

Editor.