

THE TORONTO FIELD NATURALISTS' CLUB

MAY MEETINGS

Monday, May 3, 1948 at 8:15 p.m. at the

Royal Ontario Museum

Speaker - Dr. W. Sherwood Fox, of London, Ontario

"Reminiscences of a Roving Botanist"

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A Wild Life film, by Mr. Wm. Carrick will also be shown.

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ROTUNDA DISPLAY

by Mr. Wm. H. Carrick.

The photographs on display are to be used as illustrations in Mr. Carrick's forthcoming book "Water Fowl" to be published by the American Wildlife Institute.

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NOTE: The Holland River expedition on Sunday May 9, will not move off until approximately 9.35 a.m. instead of 9 a.m. as noted on the leaflet. This is in order to allow those who wish to come by bus to do so. The bus leaves the Bay Street terminal at 8:10 a.m.

For other field trips for May, see the Spring Outing leaflet.

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# Toronto Field Naturalists' Club.



## NEWSLETTER

Number 76 - April 1948

A trip which has through past experience proved one of the most profitable of early springtime jaunts for local birders is that to Long Point Bay. The last weekend in March, or the first week in April, is usually the best time to make this trip, at least for those who are seeking a sight of Whistling swans. Several of us, intent upon that quest, made the trip this year on March 26th.

As we drove out of Port Rowan that morning and faced the open water of Long Point Bay we seemed doomed to disappointment. Not a duck, not a gull, not a bird was in sight. I was reminded sharply of the counsel of a well-known observer from Woodstock, Mr. Milnes - "To see waterfowl at Long Point Bay get to Port Rowan by dawn, and go out onto the pier there. You will find yourself in the midst of the flocks. As soon as people begin to move about the birds retire to the farther parts of the bay." It did appear that this morning, arriving at quarter to eleven, we were too late, an impression confirmed rather than weakened by the discovery of a little group of five birds - three ringnecks and two coots - feeding close to the edge of the cattails west of the pier. I did not mention my apprehension to my companions - Jim Baillie, Bob Trowern and Jack Satterly - but I felt a sinking of hope as we drove on toward the causeway gate. It is a long way to come from Toronto to Long Point to be disappointed. And today we had started under cloudless skies with a warm spring sun, but now the clouds had closed in, the breeze was heavy with the promise of rain.

From the gate to the edge of the marsh takes a few seconds in a car. For that length of time my spirits flagged, perhaps also those of my companions. Then in one moment all such sombre thoughts were swept wholly away. Out of the emptiness to the east, in effortless onrush of arched snowy wings, sped a squadron of seventeen whistling swans, bearing straight upon us. In awed wonder we watched them come, growing greater and greater in size, calling to each other in mellow musical converse. Suddenly the causeway, our car, the end of open water - something caused the leader to veer. The formation broke up, a hurried colloquy followed, and a new decision was made. The line reformed and swinging now away, the regal white swans, fluting their calls between grey sky and grey waters, vanished into the eastern emptiness whence they had come.

Where now was the enfolding dejection, the sickly hue of the landscape, the menace of forthcoming rain? Gone, vanished, fled away on the flashing white wings of majestic swans. One touch of beauty, one vision of grace, and the whole outlook was vibrant with expectancy.

Nor were hopes so dramatically raised to be denied. Scarce had the welcoming swans turned back when a dark body came hurtling across their path of flight, shooting over the causeway's towering poplars, and splashing down onto a marsh pool beyond - a brilliant-plumaged shoveller drake. A pair of blue-winged teal flashed in and out of the reeds as if to greet the newcomer. Far over the western woods a great blue heron flew sedately, blackly silhouetted against steely blue clouds.

All was life now, the magic touch had peopled the wilderness. Mergansers patrolled the creek mouth. A gaunt giant of a tree away to the west harbored an eagle's nest, and a bald eagle stood rigidly on guard. Onward we rolled a few score yards and two small birds nervously swam away from the road; one a coot, black and bouncy, one a ruddy duck, pert and wary. Red-winged blackbirds called, battled and sang everywhere about us.

Fishermen crowding the third outlet to the inner marsh glanced at us in mild curiosity as we pulled to a halt beside them. But we had no eyes for them; all our attention was rivetted upon the massed crowds of bobbing ducks and coots between us and yonder reeds. Had we ever doubted the existence of waterfowl on the Bay every query was put into oblivion by the sight before us now. Beginning almost at our shore with a spattering of jocose and monkeyish coots, there stretched in steadily thickening lines a myriad of birds ending against the farther reeds in a great raft, solid with bodies, peppered with heads. Every one of us was busy for minutes to come trying to put names to the members of this vast assemblage. Our studies completed we could say with assurance that there were fully 500 coots between us and the reeds. Against the reeds were at least 1000 canvasbacks, possibly more. With them were some 300 lesser scaups and a goodly number of redheads and other ducks. In the distance past the reedy spit other flocks reached away into the open bay, nameless to us for they were far beyond the power of our binoculars to reveal their identity. Once before, in Bradley's Marsh at the mouth of the Thames River, have I seen so many coots in one place, and only once before, last year at Long Point near this same spot, such an aggregation of canvasbacks.

Nor were waterfowl the only birds along the Point today, for as soon as we had passed from the causeway onto the sandy plain of the point proper we began to meet flocks of small land birds migrating towards us from the eastern tip. Some were moving along the wet, grassy fields where the Henslow's sparrow will soon be offering their ridiculous ditties. But most of these small birds favored the jack-pines and other evergreens planted in groves to hold the sand. Several times we stalked squeaks and whistles in these groves to discover golden-crowned kinglets, brown creepers, song sparrows - and especially juncoes and tree sparrows - north-bound remnants of winter flocks.

Once we ventured onto the lake beach but withdrew quickly at the sight of a tumbling lake dotted with voyaging ice cakes bound

from the upper lakes for the great plunge at Niagara. The beach and the evergreens were a barrier against the wintry waste. We retreated behind the barrier into the midst of teeming life and the promises of spring. To reassure us bluebirds called softly over our heads as we re-entered the jackpine grove.

From bird to bird, stop by stop, we made our way towards the old lighthouse, turning off a little before reaching it along the lane to Cut-off Point, then forking again onto a little finger of sand where a line of boathouses stands ranked, their foundations in the water of the bay. As we drew up alongside this row we had to turn to one side as a man behind us honked peremptorily. Looking back we saw that he was hauling in a boat on a trailer. He threw us an irritated look and pulled up by one of the boathouses. We paid him scant attention for we were now hungry and intent upon our lunches. It was whilst we were reaching for sandwiches, and there was a rustling of paper bags, that abruptly there came a pause, and simultaneously a shout of "Swans!"

There they were straight out in front of us, the nearest not more than a hundred yards away. Heads raised, long necks stiffly alert above snow-white bodies, eyes turned in our direction, every bird ready to clear out at the slightest sign of danger. But we kept quiet watching. One by one the heads dropped, stiff necks relaxed into graceful arches, snowy bodies tipped up and the search for food was resumed. The man of the boat departed, stopping to ask if those were swans. We had the noble birds to ourselves. Like the swans we too turned to our lunches. For an hour we sat there with the car doors open, facing the swans, and eating a leisurely lunch.

In the nearest group were seventeen swans - perhaps the very flock that had greeted us at the gate. Now that we were so close we could see the grey-necked young birds of last year's brood in clear contrast to the immaculate white older birds. The larger part of the group near to us was made up of such young birds in fact. The division in the seventeen was ten grey necks to seven white adults. It was noticeable that though the flock returned to its feeding when we quieted down, at no time while we were watching were all the birds feeding. Always there were one or two on the alert, seemingly guards for the flock, and always these were older birds. All the grey necks were busy dabbling, the unwary young.

Between the open water of the cove where this flock was feeding and the bay proper rose a line of yellow and brown cattails. Beyond them another flock of nearly a hundred swans rested on the water, and here and there across the bay were little groups of two or three or more swans. Occasionally some of these would take to the air, or a line of six or more would come gracefully sweeping over the water from over the dim horizon. We would wait expectantly to see if they would venture into our cove, and several times they did. Pressing down their wings in slow, mighty strokes they sped effortlessly towards us, circling above the feeding flock to look over the surroundings, often deciding not to stay, but once in a while circling again to return and alight. What grace, what control, as they dropped down! Ducks are all rush and splash and bother when they alight. But these wonderful birds slow down with utmost ease, arch their wings in a beautiful bow as they glide in, then, when a few feet above the water, raise their wings more acutely, flap slowly and powerfully to break the drop, extend their jet black legs and feet straight out

from the body, levelling the feet alone to a horizontal position just before settling into the water. Scarcely a ripple rolled away as each of these great birds settled down. It was an extraordinary exhibition of power and controlled grace. The mellow, horn-like notes that filled the air with each incoming flock - for they called only when in flight - were a lovely and fitting accompaniment to such a stately, rhythmic performance.

If there is a perfect bird surely it must be the swan. Elegance, loveliness and majesty are here combined with serenity and assurance. Courage and endurance mark this bird. Its qualities and beauties are legion. Its perfection was evident in every moment of the scene we had before us today, but most of all, I think, when the great snow-white birds glided in majestic parade above racing, rippling waters across the face of the billowing purple clouds.

When we were through lunch we started on our return trip. At Cut-off Point we met another carload of observers from Toronto. We told them where the swans were, and after a quick survey of this area, where we saw a towhee, two fox sparrows and a Bonaparte's gull, we resumed our homeward journey. The rain, which had threatened for two hours, started to fall as we reached the causeway. Once more the wisdom of heading straight for one's main destination on a long birding trip was demonstrated. We had had two hours and a half of good visibility and comfortable observing conditions because we had not tarried. When near the Port Rowan end of the causeway we met two more cars with Toronto observers this feeling was confirmed anew. These people had stayed along Hamilton Bay so long that they must do Long Point under very difficult circumstances. They would miss many birds and see others but poorly.

Fittingly enough on this day our last bird at Long Point was a lone swan, asleep by a cattail clump not far from the north end of the causeway. Those of the belated two cars had found it and pointed it out to us. With its long neck and head concealed beneath its wing it looked so like a last remaining ice cake as to take careful looking to make sure it really was a swan. But indeed it was - and we felt that a final messenger, trustingly asleep, had been detailed from the flocks on the Bay to bid us farewell, and remind us that this was undeniably Swan Day at Long Point Bay.

We stopped at several point along Hamilton Bay on the way home but though large numbers of gulls and ducks were evident, the steady downpour prevented us from seeing any of them to advantage. But we had no complaint. Our two and a half hours at Long Point Bay had made a day and a trip as satisfying as any we could ever expect.

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The Summer Nature School is one of the most important activities carried on by the naturalists of this province. Many of our members are particularly interested in it. They will be glad of the information which the Newsletter received from Camp Billie Bear under the date of March 17th, just too late for the last issue. This communication states: "Dr. and Mrs. L.E. Jaquith are at Camp Billie Bear making final arrangements for the Summer Nature School sponsored by the Federation of Ontario Naturalists. The school will be held July 3rd to 17th in that lovely woodland district on Bella Lake.

The Jaquiths report that the finches are there in numbers. The purple finches stayed all winter and their songs are delightful mingled with the chatter and calls of the pine siskins. There are also quite a number of pine grosbeaks and evening grosbeaks about. Crossbills, white-winged and red crossbills are heard and seen frequently. Chick-a-dees are noticeably scarce as well as nuthatches, but hairy woodpecker is here as well as downy. This afternoon the Arctic three-toed woodpecker was seen and the pileated woodpecker called from the near-by woods.

Jim Bennett, a local trapper, tells of several ravens in this district up until Christmas. He hadn't seen any for several years before. He also reported seeing otter tracks and slides near Heck's Lake. Jim says it was an otter that made an opening in the beaver dam near Camp Billie Bear and that the beaver have moved to a meadow farther over. If young people engaged in leadership of groups (or those who intend preparing for the leadership of natural history groups) wish more information regarding the Summer Nature School they may address inquiries to The Federation of Ontario Naturalists, 100 Queen's Park, Toronto 5.

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Another letter that will be of interest is that from Mrs. H. E. Woolley of 37 Baby Point Crescent. This was written on April 2nd, and relates some pleasant experiences at a successful feeding station. Those other members who found their own feeding stations rather sparsely patronized because of the scarcity of northern visitors this winter, may feel a bit envious. Mrs. Woolley writes: "My three year old daughter Heather and I are in the habit of partaking of breakfast at the big bay window of our dining room, which overlooks the 'free lunch counter' beneath the oak trees in our back garden.

We are very pleasantly entertained each morning by our winter visitors. These include from two to seven squirrels, which have most voracious appetites. They are mostly black, but there is one beautiful grey fellow whom I call the Grey Prince. He has a gorgeous brush of a tail which, when the sun shines upon it, glints with golden brown lights. He is very handsome and very greedy.

One female ring-necked pheasant is a regular visitor (occasionally there are two). She takes both grain and bread crumbs. Sometimes she sits still for minutes at a time, with her tail in the snow behind her. I love to watch her sprint across the garden, with her tail erect and spread out like half of a large brown fan, every part of her recently placid body alert and her bright eyes registering alarm. Sometimes she is sufficiently frightened to take wing but frequently she slows down after a few yards, looks enquiringly about, and if satisfied there is no real danger, returns to her feeding.

Mr. and Mrs. "Downy" enjoy the suet stick and "bird dinner", as do also two chick-a-dees, two white-breasted nuthatches, from one to three brown creepers, a brilliant male cardinal and numerous starlings. A pair of handsome blue jays are frequent guests and the gleaming flashes of white from the tails of our little junco flock (some 18 or 20) are a joy to our watching eyes.

One morning in February, when the temperature was hovering around the zero mark we noticed what appeared to be a rather large chunk of bark broken away from but still adhering to the trunk of an oak tree a few feet from the window. We thought the downies must have been exceptionally busy. From time to time, while watching the birds feeding, I glanced at this peculiarly projecting piece of bark, thinking how like a small bird it was in shape. Why it even had a decurved bill like the little brown creeper. Suddenly I snatched up my binoculars. Yes, it was the creeper!

Leaving Heather in her high chair to watch, I slipped quietly out through the back door taking with me a small stool step ladder. To my certain knowledge the bird had been without motion of any kind for twenty minutes or half an hour and probably had been there all night. As I stood directly beneath it (it was about eight feet up) not a feather quivered. The eyes were closed. "Why, it must be frozen," I thought, and bent my head to see that the legs of the step ladder were placed firmly in the snow. When I looked up second later it had flown. I wonder if brown creepers usually sleep that way - just stuck on the trunk of a tree, in all kinds of weather.

(Ed. note. It is customary for creepers to conceal themselves in this way when startled and frightened. They may remain rigidly still for comparatively long periods. Whether or not they sleep like this is more difficult to say as little is known of their sleeping habits. It seems more than likely that they seek shelter beneath some bit of projecting bark or in a convenient hollow or crevice)

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Louis Bromfield. Pleasant Valley. With drawings by Kate Lord. Harper and Bros. (In Canada, Musson Book Co.) 1945. Fifteenth edition. Pp. 301. \$3.75.

"The fields had reached the final infamy, that last step before a farm dies; they were rented out to neighboring farmers who, having no interest in land which they did not own, took everything from it and put nothing back." "...I wanted to prove that worn-out farms could be restored again."..."I knew in my heart that we as a nation were already much farther along the path to destruction than most people knew. What we needed was a new kind of pioneer, not the sort which cut down the forests and burned off the prairies and raped the land, but pioneers who created new forests and healed and restored the richness of the country God had given us, that richness which, from the moment the first settlers landed on the Atlantic coast we had done our best to destroy. I had a foolish idea that I wanted to be one of that new race of pioneers."

These quotations embody the thesis of Pleasant Valley in which Louis Bromfield has convincingly and entertainingly told the story of the rejuvenation of three old farms which he bought in the hill country of Ohio. The book might well be a handbook for anyone who farms or owns land in any part of this country; but it is much more than that. It is full of information, entertainment and amusement for the general reader. His account of the rebuilding of one of the old houses will delight those who like to do such things; his stories of his dogs, cat, mongoose and other pets will please those who love animals; his observations of plants and birds will give enjoyment to nature lovers. But above all his clear expression of

the misuse of land and what can be done to save it for our own and future generations will be of absorbing interest to those of us who have this matter at heart.

The story of the Smiths tells succinctly what happens to a family which systematically robs the soil. "The first Smith came from Germany and was a good farmer and settled on virgin land in the hills. He married an American wife and their sons were less good farmers than the father. In the succeeding generations, the land, not only of the original farm but of the farms worked by the sons, grew poorer with each generation through erosion and the process of leaching and robbing the soil. With each generation, as the soil grew poorer, the income diminished and the diet became a little more meager, until presently it consisted largely of meat and potatoes and not much else. But the few vegetables and fruit eaten by the children had less and less calcium in them, less and less phosphorus, less and less magnesium and other minerals. As the children grew up they lacked the intelligence, the energy and the health of the first and second generations. Consequently, they grew more listless and less effective as farmers and their soil grew still poorer. The endless vicious circle has left in the fifth generation, nine male descendants of the original stout healthy immigrant. Of these, two still cling to worn-out farms and their children are subnormal as to health and intelligence. There is no will to work because in their bones and bodies and glands there is not enough of those minerals which make for human health and intelligence and energy".

The story of "My Ninety Acres" farmed by Walter Oakes who loved his land with deep understanding of the things that grow and live on it is as charming a piece of writing as one will find anywhere. "They sat in a little circle in a tiny nest, none of them much bigger than the end of one of old Walter's big thumbs - seven tiny quail. They sat very still not moving a feather, lost among the dry brown leaves. I might not have seen them at all but for the brightness of their little eyes...

"Old Walter stood up and said, 'They used to laugh at me for letting the bushes grow up in my fence rows, but they don't any more. When the chinch bugs come along all ready to eat up my corn, these little fellows will take care of 'em. There's nothing a quail likes as much as a chinch bug. Last year Henry Talbot, down the road, lost ten acres of corn all taken by the bugs. Henry's a nut for clear fence rows. He doesn't leave enough cover along 'em for a grasshopper. He thinks that's good farming."

One could quote many passages of lovely description which will delight the naturalist. Here are just two.

"In winter on a moonlit night I have seen as many as twenty rabbits feeding on the terrace just outside my window. You can sit inside in the darkness and watch them nibbling at the grain, suddenly raising their long ears in alarm, hopping off hysterically at the slightest sound, to return presently, in little tentative sudden advances until their alarm is dissipated and they begin their nibbling all over again. After you have watched them like that, night after night, silently in the moonlight, something happens to you. I do not know exactly what it is save they come somehow to be your friends. Watching them, living very close to them, gives you a vague and curious sense of participating in the mystery of Nature itself, of being an integral and humble part of something very great and very beautiful."

"Cheeriest of all the night chorus is the music of the frogs. They make a kind of part singing, ranging from the shrill call of the

spring peeper to the 'jug-o-rum' of the bullfrog. The tree frog, especially on hot nights, sings a kind of obligato and the leopard frog sings baritone. Last year a friend in the Game Control gave me five hundred giant tadpoles of the big Louisiana frog. I distributed them among the ponds, dubious of their survival in the cold northern winter, but some of them at least managed to live, for this summer there is a new voice in the part singing - a deep basso like that of Wotan."

This is a book to read slowly, to reread for pure enjoyment of its choice parts, and to keep on your bedside table to chase away the day's worries and direct your mind toward pleasant dreams.

L.J.P.

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The members of this club should give all the aid they can to Dr. James H. Soper, of the Botany Department of the University of Toronto, in his preparation of a check-list of the vascular plants of southern Ontario. When finished this check-list will be of great service to all field naturalists in this region. For this reason we reprint here an appeal for aid drawn up by Dr. Soper.

#### Notice of a Check-List of the Vascular Plants of Southern Ontario

A study of the flora of Ontario is being undertaken by Dr. James H. Soper at the Department of Botany of the University of Toronto. Field work involving the collection of specimens for the herbarium as well as the taking of notes and photographs describing natural vegetation has been carried on for a number of seasons since 1937. It is proposed to publish as a beginning a Check-List of the vascular plants of southern Ontario. This will be based on specimens already collected and identified, collections examined at various institutional and private herbaria, and a number of records from the literature for species needing substantiating specimens.

The first publication to be issued shortly will be a Preliminary or Provisional Check-List with the aim of stimulating the interest and cooperation of all naturalists and amateur or professional botanists to contribute specimens verifying literature reports and adding new records to the list. Since our herbaria contain relatively little material from the vast area of northern Ontario, it is likely that more concentrated exploration and collecting will have to be done before an equally complete list can be published for that part of the province. The Preliminary Check-List will include the ferns, fern allies, conifers and flowering plants found growing without cultivation. It is hoped that similar work on the algae, fungi, mosses and liverworts will be undertaken by people who are specializing in those particular fields. It is intended to present the scientific names which are in accordance with the International Rules of Botanical Nomenclature and which are appearing in most modern check-lists, catalogues, floras, and manuals. This will be in line with the system of names being used in the 8th edition of Gray's Manual, currently being prepared by Prof. M.L.Fernald at Harvard University.

The ultimate aim is to prepare a "Flora of Ontario" which would contain keys for the identification of our species as well as notes or maps giving their geographical distribution within the province. The next step towards this goal will be the accumulation in a single collection or herbarium of a series of specimens as the factual evidence of all species to be included in the Flora. For the vascular plants at least, a number of sheets of each species will be required to indicate both the range of variation in form and the geographical distribution. Those who have an opportunity to collect in various parts of the province could contribute immeasurably in building up this basic collection. Nature clubs, individual naturalists, amateur and professional botanists may wish to co-

operate in the project. The more specimens we have, the more complete should be the final report. The preparation of the Flora will undoubtedly take a number of years, but from time to time the first Check-List could be revised, incorporating corrections and additions from the accumulation of herbarium specimens. A program of field work is being drawn up to supplement the collections already available for study and to cover areas not previously explored.

The Preliminary Check-List is to be sponsored jointly by the Department of Botany of the University and by the Federation of Ontario Naturalists. It will probably be mimeographed in its first form and sold at cost. Any persons interest in this project are asked to fill in the attached questionnaire and to mail it either to the Department of Botany or to the Federation of Ontario Naturalists.

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\_\_\_\_\_  
Name (Please Print)

\_\_\_\_\_  
Street Address

\_\_\_\_\_  
City or Town

\_\_\_\_\_  
Province

Check where applicable by placing an X in the brackets:

- ( ) I have a collection of plants which includes specimens from Ontario
- ( ) I have specimens or duplicates which I would submit to the project of building up a collection as the basis of a "Flora of Ontario".
- ( ) I would be willing to submit duplicates in return for identification.
- ( ) My specimens include: Ferns and allies ( ): conifers ( ); flowering plants ( ); others, (explain): ( )
- ( ) My specimens were collected mostly in the county of \_\_\_\_\_; (If in several localities or from no specific area please explain.)
- ( ) I would like to have some information on the preparation of botanical specimens for the herbarium. (i.e. methods of collecting and pressing plants)
- ( ) I would be interested in having a copy of the Preliminary Check-list when it appears. (This is not an advance order but a guide in estimating the number of copies to be printed.)

Signed \_\_\_\_\_

Mail to the Department of Botany,  
University of Toronto,  
or to the  
Federation of Ontario Naturalists,  
100 Queen's Park, Toronto.

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R.M.SAUNDERS,  
Editor.