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THE TORONTO FIELD NATURALISTS' CLUB

NOVEMBER MEETINGS

Monday, November 1st, 1948 at 8:15 p.m. , at the

ROYAL ONTARIO MUSEUM

Speaker: Mr. Kenneth Wells

Author of "The Owl Pen"

ROTUNDA DISPLAY

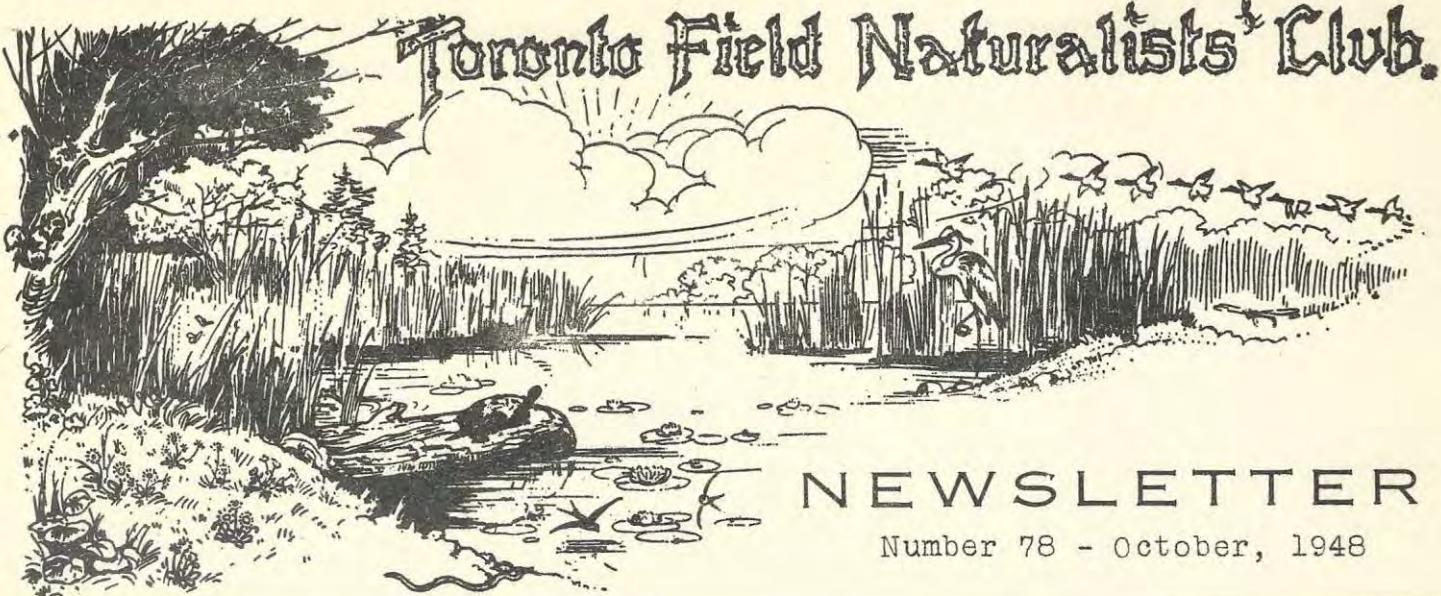
Mrs. Kenneth Wells, who, besides being the wife of the Author of "The Owl Pen", is herself an accomplished artist, will show some of her very attractive wood cuts, which are used to illustrate her husband's books.

SATURDAY OUTING

Saturday, November 13th/48.

Cat Fish Pond - Sunnyside - Humber Marshes 3 & 4.

Meet at the Sunnyside Car loop, at the corner of Parkside Drive, at 2 p.m.



# Toronto Field Naturalists' Club.

## NEWSLETTER

Number 78 - October, 1948

The annual fall field day of the F.O.N. was held at Midhurst Forestry Station this year on September 12th. The Forestry Station, which most of us had never visited before, proved to be a very beautiful spot. The many roads winding amongst well-kept trees and trout ponds invite exploration at every turn. The extensive, well-planned, and attractively-kept park facilities and picnic grounds were a great surprise. Judging from the crowd of visitors who appeared during the afternoon the development here is very much appreciated and used by the people of the neighborhood. Fortunately for those who are responsible for the upkeep of the station there are no large cities near by. Otherwise it would be much more difficult to maintain the immaculate appearance which so impressed us. The lack of evident rubbish, and the undamaged trees and shrubs were in striking contrast to what one too frequently sees in our large city parks. We all felt that the Ontario Department of Lands and Forests is to be highly congratulated upon the establishment at Midhurst.

About seventy field naturalists turned up for the field day. Most of these came from Toronto but it was a pleasure to see fellow naturalists from Collingwood, Meaford, Elmvale, Angus, Barrie, Newmarket, and Aurora there as well. It is meetings such as these that encourage and enable naturalists from wide areas, who seldom have a chance to see each other to get together and exchange experiences in the good fellowship of the field day.

The botanists and the people particularly interested in trees had a most prosperous time, finding many unusual plants and trees, and collecting a good many specimens. The bird watchers did not fail to enjoy themselves though they found their quarry scarce. Presumably we made our visit in between two waves of bird migrants, and, consequently saw only a few laggards in the area. The heat of the day -- the temperature reached 88 -- probably kept many birds deep in the swamps and thickets where our groups did not penetrate. Also in a stretch of woodland and bush as wide as this one birds are never so concentrated as in the ravines and limited wild areas of a city like Toronto.

Perhaps the outstanding sight of the day was a remarkable beaver dam shown to one of the groups by Mr. Buie, the local game warden. The "four miles" which we drove through a bewildering maze of byroads and lanes was nearly as remarkable as the dam itself. When we asked our genial guide about the distance at the end he readily agreed that maybe it was a "bushman's measure". The beaver dam is the largest I have ever seen, being more than 300 feet in length. I am told that dams of two and three times this size are not uncommon in the north. Although Matheson Creek is only a small stream a pond of considerable extent was impounded behind the dam. At the forward part of the pond the water near the dam is eight feet deep. It seems that a group of eighteen beaver inhabit this pond. Their large house at the upstream end of the pond stood out prominently. This community has sent out a colony which has built further upstream. Unfortunately a portion of the valley has been flooded which interferes with some farmer's cattle passing from one pasture to another, and a complaint has been made. As a result the officials of the Department of Lands and Forests are expected to trap the beavers, break the dam, and remove the animals to some other sites. It is a tribute to our game laws, and the efficiency of our wardens if a farmer will appeal for removal of animals he dislikes rather than going out with a shotgun and destroying them.

After lunch at the Forestry Station everybody had two hours free to do what they liked before the next scheduled event. Other people did not inform me as to their activities during this period so I cannot record them. But the experiences of Messrs. Roberts, Walkinshaw, and Saunders may be illustrative of the possibilities of the area.

We drove through the Station grounds to the southward to the country beyond in search of a road that cuts across a section of the neighboring Minnesing Swamp. Enroute we stopped alongside a cedar grove in the Forestry grounds. A small flock of birds flitting in the trees had drawn our attention. This flock, a group of chickadees soon made off, but in the meantime Greer Roberts had discovered a most lovely natural phenomenon. Swung from the green fronds of one of the cedars, in an opening where a shaft of sunlight played upon it, was a small spider's web, no more than three inches across its central mat. A common thing, often seen, you will say. But no, not as we saw it today. For the lacy fabric of this web by some magic was breaking the sunlight into all the rays of the spectrum so that a double rainbow, a complete circle of color shimmered and billowed in the tiny breeze. No moisture was visible on the web. The effect must have been caused by the refracting action of the strands of silk in the web. All the colors of the spectrum were present, twice repeated in the arcs which formed the circle. As the web puffed and swayed in the breeze the location of the bands of color altered somewhat only to return to their earlier position as the web settled back. Like a delicate lace screen, worked in glowing jewels, this beautiful web shone in the midst of the dark cedars. No one of us had ever seen such a sight before. Once again was it shown that nature has ever new beauties to display even in her commonest handi-craft.

When we left the cedars we drove out the gate of the Forestry Station nearest the swamp and along the ridge road. A mile or so farther on we came to a large field full of turkeys. There must have been 2000 birds, possibly more. The afternoon being very hot all these turkeys were languidly lying on the ground, looking all fagged out. As we drove by, however, two or three plucked up energy enough to gobble, and rear up. On the spur of the moment Greer stopped, and I answered the gobbling. That awakened a few more. They also stood up and gobbled. I replied. Others joined in. This game was so successful that soon the whole 2000 turkeys were massed at our end of the field. Then it was just like a cheer leader leading a crowd in a college yell at a football game. I would gobble in my best manner. The turkeys would wait respectfully until I was through. Then there would be a roaring outburst as the entire company burst into a responsive gobble. Followed a moment of silence, and I would gobble once more. Another salvo of gobbles gave me reply. On and on we went, until we were nearly all in convulsions. Walkinshaw said that's the first time he had ever seen anyone "talk Turkey". It was without doubt the most appreciative audience I ever had. How long we could have held the turkeys in trance I do not know but we caught sight of the farmer's wife sitting on her lawn across the road. Ostensibly she was knitting and not watching us. However, we were a little taken aback and quickly drove off. All in all it was a most amusing experience.

We found the swamp road, crossed the swamp, and returned to the Forestry Station well in time for the meeting where the several leaders of the field groups summarized the findings of the day. An interesting talk by the Assistant-Superintendent of the Station, Mr. Day, was followed by a tour of the grounds and the plant. This event brought to a close a very successful field day.

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#### COMES THE NIGHT

Many an evening at Melville have I sat, wrapped in the peace that comes with the setting sun upon a summer's eve, watching streamers of flame pinking the clouds, and wondering how the purple of night was filling the valley about me. Close under the brow of yonder hill I could see it forming in vast pools at the mouth of those yawning caverns which mark the foot of the gigantic black-green cliffs that were the edge of the woods when the sun was riding high in the sky. For a long time I thought these empurpled pools filled and filled until they just naturally overflowed, and night's purple stream came pouring down every shadow-revealed gully and ravine until the flood spread over the valley to envelop us all. Yet the more often I watched the more I was convinced that, though these velvety pools grew larger and larger, until perhaps they joined into one long ribbony lake below the darkening cliff, they did not send out streams at all. Nothing from them flowed down the vanishing slopes. How then could it be that slowly or quickly, sooner or later, but always mysteriously, I, and the valley were cloaked over with night?

At last the secret seemed to come to me. Not a flowing stream this ceaseless, silent coming of night. Nothing so tangible, so formful as that. No, 'tis a gently falling dew - a crystallizing out of nothing of dancing purple motes and particles. If I watch ever so closely I may see them hovering, quivering, multiplying between me and yonder hill. More and more they come. Most usually I do not see them forming at all. Very suddenly, whilst I have been concentrating on the far purple pools, I realize that all around me is the same limpid, lambent velvet - the gentle veil of night has formed about me. I have been drawn into the world of darkness, unbeknownst even as I was waiting to meet its flood pouring down the hill. The last flicker of flame, the last pink fluff has faded to grey and ashen blue. I bring my eyes to home. I am in the night.

But even as I sense the mystic darkness I look behind me and find the rising, silver moon has taken up the burden of the sun: night has come, another world. Yet for man and beast a light there still will be. Fiat Lux.

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Since the last issue of the Newsletter I have received notes on two interesting observations from Mrs. Barfoot, President of the Junior Field Naturalists' Club. In the first she raises a query about the nesting of goldfinches in our area. "On reporting to one of our experts," she writes, "that I had found an almost completed goldfinch's nest on the tenth of July, 1943, at Terra Cotta I was told that the birds sometimes build practice nests. On the seventeenth of July this year (1948), also at Terra Cotta, I was taking two young friends down through our orchard to see a catbird's nest, and to get a glimpse of the bluebirds sitting on their second brood when a small flock of goldfinches flew overhead. I began carefully to explain to my young friends that goldfinches do not nest until late in the season, on into August, when to my amazement, right there on a level with my eyebrows in a thorn bush only a few yards from the catbird, was a goldfinch sitting on a nest. On flushing her we could see the four pale bluish eggs. If it had not been for the eggs we might have concluded that she was baby sitting for a friend."

On the ninth of July, 1948, again at Terra Cotta, Mrs. Gordon Wright saw goldfinches gathering nesting material from goatsbeard or salsify. Is it possible that the goldfinches anticipated the hot, dry spell ahead? However, there is a big question mark in my mind regarding those practice nests."

(Ed. note. There is every reason for Mrs. Barfoot to doubt the statement about "practice nests". It is of course true that some birds build partial or entire nests before selecting a final site and constructing a nest which they really occupy. In some species where male birds precede the females in migration, they indulge in this sort of activity, almost invariably having their efforts scorned by the females later. Again with most, if not all, of the wrens "dummy nests", built by the males as a part of the courtship performance apparently, are common. However, there is no evidence that I know of which indicates that goldfinches are at all addicted to such practices.)

Secondly, as to the dates of goldfinch nesting, it is correct to say that goldfinches are late nesting birds. This means that they are "late" in comparison with most other birds which, in our region, nest in May and June. However, the dates of Mrs. Barfoot's observations are on the early side for goldfinches though they are not out of line with what we would expect. Forbush, for instance, gives the dates of nesting for this species in Massachusetts as "July 10 to August 11"; and in Maine as "July 20 to August 18". Inasmuch as our region has virtually identical records with those of Massachusetts it may be seen that Mrs. Barfoot's dates fall at the beginning of the normal period of nesting. Consequently there is no need to ask ourselves if the goldfinches anticipated an unfavorable stretch of weather. The "anticipation of weather" by birds and other animals is a much-debated point amongst naturalists, but again so far as I know, there is no adequate evidence to show "Anticipation." Animals react to weather conditions but do not foresee or foretell them.

Thirdly, the observation of the goldfinches taking nesting material from goatsbeard is very interesting. Goldfinches have traditionally been supposed to delay their nesting until thistledown was available. There is no question about their preference for this material, and their liking for it has earned them the name of "thistlebirds" in many parts. Nonetheless it seems now that they wait for a good crop of seeds to ripen before nesting so that plenty of food to feed the young will be ready and then use thistledown because it is the best and easiest thing available at the time. Goatsbeard, a member of the chicory family, is a relatively new comer to us. It is a European plant, either escaped from cultivation or introduced unwittingly into North America. Fruiting earlier than thistles and providing large seed heads of downy character much like enormous dandelions, it may well be that as it becomes common, and it is spreading rapidly, it may provide goldfinches with both seed and nesting material in sufficient quantity to enable them to advance their nesting in our neighborhood by a few days. Such a change in ecological relationship might very well occur, and the possibility of them doing so can make a worth while problem for some of our field naturalists to study. The relation between birds and plants ought always to be kept in mind by both ornithologists and botanists. It is an admirable field of investigation for those interested in both.)

Mrs. Barfoot has also sent in a record of an observation, the like of which makes every field naturalist tingle with hope for it can happen to any of us. She writes, "While holidaying at Lake of Bays this summer early in August we (Mr. and Mrs. Barfoot) were returning from visiting some friends one evening at about 10 p.m., walking toward our tent along a narrow path at the edge of the lake. Suddenly we were startled by a weird noise, almost blood curdling, as of an animal in pain. We realized at once that it must be a bird as the sound came from the lake side of a tree close by. So we got in the canoe, Joe paddling as quietly as possible whilst I held the flashlight searching. Then all at once we spotted him, a beautiful barred owl! Joe manoeuvred the canoe right under the tree. I kept the flashlight steadily upon the owl until we were right underneath him, so near that but for fear of unbalancing the canoe I could have touched him. For quite a few minutes we were able to look directly into his big brown eyes and to admire the pattern of his feathers. We were just thrilled. Then the paddle splashed and

away he flew. The weather had been dull, the skies grey, but as I leaned over the dock to wash my face in the soft lake water I remarked that life can be interesting if only one knows where to look, and Joe, gleefully rubbing his hands together, said he wouldn't have missed that for a thousand dollars!"

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If members of the club have not received copies of the recently published Reports on Conservation in South Central Ontario, and on the Humber Valley Conservation project they should make every effort to do so. They are issued by the Ontario Department of Planning and Development, of which the Hon. Dana Porter is Minister, under the supervision of Mr. H.H. Richardson, Chief Conservation Engineer. The first contains the papers given at the Conference on Conservation in South Central Ontario held in Toronto in November, 1946, at the request of the Community Councils Co-ordinating Committee of the Toronto District. The second embodies the recommendations and summary of the findings of the Humber Valley Conservation Authority made during the past several months of study and investigation. This is a working programme of greatest importance to all naturalists. The Department of Planning and Development has done a fine job of reporting to the public. From such splendid beginnings we look forward to fruitful results.

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R. M. Saunders

Editor.