

nm/48

Toronto Field Naturalists' Club

DECEMBER MEETING

Monday, December 6th, at 8.15 p.m., at the

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ROYAL ONTARIO MUSEUM

The Toronto Intermediate Naturalists will be in charge of this meeting. The speaker will be Mr. J. B. Falls, his subject "The Mammals of Algonquin Park". Mr. Dick Robinson will show movies.

The Rotunda Display will be an exhibition of Allan Cruickshank's outstanding photographs.

Saturday Outing

Saturday, December 11th/48.

Hogg's Hollow. Meet at the river at the east end of Donwoods Drive at 2 p.m.

N. B. Fees are due and payable NOW. Newsletter will hereafter be sent to paid-up members only.

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Number 79 - November 1948

When Marshal Bartman and I started for Pefferlaw Brook on October 30 the dull gray blanket of fog which had risen and lowered over Toronto for four days was hanging well above the tree tops. As we entered Richmond Hill it was trailing only a few feet over the ploughed fields. To all appearance it looked as though I was to have my first experience of the Pefferlaw valley in a fog. However, a few miles east of Newmarket we commenced to see blue patches in the grey, and when we jumped from the car to watch a red-tailed hawk wheeling above the field at the start of the West Franklin Road it was to see the great buteo's tail glowing against a cloudless, blue sky. This road, one of the best birding routes in our region, was today a ribbon of grey, cut into jigsaw patterns by bold black shadows, running mile after mile straight across the landscape, heedless of hill or dale, burrowing through thickets of flaming sumach and somber cedars, unrolling along hillsides of russet oaks and saffron maples, leading us at last to the brown waters of Pefferlaw Brook.

We had seen flocks of tree sparrows, juncos, purple finches and others in the thickets along the road. Not a few had filled the sunny air with snatches of song, a lively accompaniment of the color-filled autumnal scene. As we settled down to our lunch beside the brook the surge of activity amongst the birds, which had greeted the lifting of the fog, had spent itself. Save for the occasional call of kinglet or chickadee silence prevailed. So much so that a sudden splash in the stream brought our eyes around sharply to that spot in time to see a small trout leap free of the water and fall back in a silver cascade. Several times this happened, as a school of these fish swam from under the bridge into the pool by our feet. We were reminded that this is one of the well-known trout streams of the neighborhood. A few minutes later Marshall spied a small animal making rapid headway across the stream, again beneath the bridge. At first glance I thought it might be a muskrat but we soon saw that this creature was much tinier than a muskrat. We expected to see it when it made shore but in this we were disappointed. Not a sign of the animal came to us from the shadowy black mud bank. It simply vanished, leaving us none the wiser as to its identity.

Lunch over we drove back to the Grouse Path and entered the woods along it. Quiet still maintained but diligent squeaking elicited response from secreted chickadees, kinglets, and a downy woodpecker. The clearing was empty except for two juncos, again brought out into view by the K. note. Retracing our steps I led the way towards the sugar woods only to find that this path has become so overgrown as to be invisible in spots. A flock of birds was enticed out of the trees long enough to let us see a creeper, some kinglets and black-caps. Marshall also saw a late myrtle warbler but I missed that. The deer-runs which bisect this path we noted were well-tramped and fresh. Last spring the deer seemed absent from this area but they must be back in the vicinity. On the way out to the road along the Grouse Path Marshall spied a porcupine rolled into a ball, asleep high up in a white pine. I was a little chagrined to have missed it for all along the path I had been scanning the trees in hopes of surprising a porky, and I had glanced into this very pine but without giving enough heed to the dark mass near the top. A large hemlock close by showed large patches of recently-barked wood, no doubt the work of this or another porcupine.

Our second venture into the woods was along the Western path. Here we met the grouse that we had expected along the other trail. A cock bird burst out of an evergreen grove and went whirring along the trail into the glade of the tall, pointed spruces. Shortly we started a covey of four grouse from the cedars at the far side of this opening. We have learned in the past that this is the haunt they favor as a winter roost.

A mixed flock of juncos and tree sparrows feeding along the borders of this glade contained, we found, two fox sparrows. We were able to get close to these birds and to watch them springing enthusiastically into the fallen leaves, hurling them vigorously behind them as they searched the bared ground for seeds. On our return trip the flock had moved across the path, and were examining the recesses of the ancient rail fence. We were able to follow them right out to the road during which time the fox sparrows gave us several chances to see them clearly as they alighted on bare twigs or fence rails.

Our course along this path took us to the field of the old log cabin. There were few birds. However on the way back I looked up into the sky to see two gulls wheeling about. As I was looking at them, having shouted "gulls", Marshall called "No, that's a rough-legged hawk". Shifting my binoculars to his line of watch I saw that he had indeed caught sight of one of these huge hawks at the same time as I had seen the gulls. I was very pleased as this buteo had hitherto eluded me all year. A few minutes later when we were eating a snack beside the road we again saw the roughleg, sailing not far above the trees, evidently looking for prey. It disappeared southward up the valley in a long easy glide.

We left Pepperlaw and drove across to Vivian through the golden haze of the Vivian School Woods. When we reached Markham the fog had closed in once more to bring to an end a beautiful October afternoon.

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Recently I received a letter from Mrs. Vivian G. Wilcox, one of the Aurora members of this club, who has been enjoying a long visit to South Africa. Mrs. Wilcox is an enthusiastic bird watcher, and like all the fraternity she finds opportunities to pursue her avocation wherever she may be. Writing from Johannesburg, she says:

"I arrived in Johannesburg at the end of winter when birding is not at its best but perhaps that is just as well for one cannot take in too much at a time.

I've had the good fortune to go on several outings with Dr. Gilges who has introduced me to a whole new bird world. Dr. Gilges is chairman of the Witwatersrand Bird Club, the local club of Johannesburg, which is just a year old.

When one remembers that the Union of South Africa is only slightly larger than Ontario and has nearly 1000 species of birds, one realizes what an enormous task one faces this new club in undertaking to list those birds which can be seen in and around Johannesburg. At the September meeting last Friday night the first check list was ready for distribution. A great many species were left off because members of the committee could not agree that they were seen locally, but the list is an impressive one, nevertheless. They had American and British cards but I was pleased to learn that our Toronto card, which we sent them, is the one they have copied most closely in compiling their list.

The Club is trying to persuade the city fathers to proclaim Melrose Dam, in the heart of the city, a bird sanctuary. It is now virtually a sanctuary as 93 species have already been seen there. Armed with our binoculars and two bird books from the library (both out of print) there is nothing comparable to Peterson for identification in the field) a friend and I went to this dam one Saturday afternoon. It was alive with water birds, a great many red-knobbed coot and moor hens; maccoa ducks, dabchicks, black crane, white-breasted swallow, treble-banded plover, blacksmith plover and Indian Myna starlings were among the species we were able to identify. But the best sight of all was just at sundown when everyone had left the park except ourselves and the native guard. As we watched cattle egrets, grey and black-necked herons came in to roost. Presently dark dots appeared along the horizon growing larger and larger until we were able to identify 25 sacred ibises flying in V formation against the glowing sunset sky. They flew directly over our heads and settled in the bluegum trees that border the dam. That will always be one of my lovely memories of South Africa. A few feet from where we were standing a coot slipped off her nest with her two babies and proceeded to give them their supper of slimy-looking weeds, quite unconcerned by our presence."

With her letter Mrs. Wilcox sent a copy of the bird check list of the Witwatersrand Bird Club. According to the heading this "Field Card" includes the more common birds occurring in the area between "the Magaliesberg and Vaal Rivers and extending seventy-five miles east and west of Johannesburg." It is of interest to note that an area very much greater in extent than the Toronto area has been chosen. Because of the large number of species that may occur, only the commonest are listed, but there is a space reserved for writing in other species seen.

The card is very similar in appearance to our own Royal Ontario Museum check list. Many of the names of birds on the list are fascinating and curious to our ears, and make us want to see the originals, e.g. Martial eagle, halfcollared kingfisher, yellow-fronted tinker, familiar chat, titbabbler, puffbacked shrike, red-billed oxpecker, malachite sunbird, red-collared widowbird, king-of-six, streaky-headed seedeater.

A copy of The Bokmakierie was also received. This is the journal of the club. It is apparently a quarterly, and this is the number for October 1948 (Vol. 1, No 3). In addition to club news and announcements there is an article on the Field Characters of Waders - of particular use in an area which has no 'Peterson' or its equivalent - a historical article on Who's Who in South African Ornithology, reports on observations from several points, and other items. This copy of the Journal opens with a poem on Bird Watchers, the last stanza of which we quote here.

" There are men of peace, who tread
The kloof where bokmakierie sings,
And quietly wait for breathless hours
A glimpse of wild elusive wings.
So much to learn of birds! And then
No time to hate their fellow men."

The Bokmakierie from which the journal takes its name is, it is gratifying to record, a shrike. A beautiful bird and a fine singer, but few bird clubs would have the courage to place the name of a shrike on their title page.

The members of the T.F.N.C. will be pleased to know that at the time when the Johannesburg club was being organized, copies of our Newsletter, of other publications of this club, and of the R.O.M.Z. Field Checking List were sent out through Mrs. Wilcox's kindness. We believe the literature to have been of some service to this sister club in a sister Dominion, whom we wish the utmost success through the years.

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Roger Tory Peterson. Birds Over America. Dodd, Mead & Company. (Canada) Limited. \$6.50

For few men are lifework and hobby synonymous terms. Perhaps it is an attitude of mind more than anything else which makes the difference between these two things, the concentration on the one tends almost always to drive out the other. It is an oft-repeated tragedy, common to every pursuit, wherein the first bloom, the vernal zest of the novice gives way to the blinkered solemnity of the professional. The specialist may rush to his own defence with the affirmation that only through canalized concentration may new knowledge be gained, and professional advancement assured. Perhaps so. But something of real importance may also be lost. The specialist is always in danger of losing a measure of his humanity, of getting out of touch with people. He may even lose a grasp of the breadth of the field in which he works, and of its wider relations. It is the great achievement of Roger Tory Peterson that combining lifework and hobby, with

widening experience and deepening knowledge, he has avoided the pitfalls that beset the path of the professional. He has retained a freshness of approach to his beloved subject of ornithology which makes it the joy of his own life, and makes it possible for him to interpret and to pass on this joy to a multitude of people, far and wide. He is enriching the lives of countless persons. He is serving the science of ornithology. He can do both only because he remains the perennial amateur at heart.

In this new work, Birds Over America, the author of the Field Guide, that "Bible" of North American bird watchers, has written a saga of bird watching, woven from the threads of his own experiences with birds and with those who seek them. From coast to coast, from the hard-pounding surf on rocky New England shores and the recesses of southern swamps to the fantastic wonders of Arizona's deserts, the ethereal beauties of the great Rockies, and the crashing waves of the Pacific he takes his readers for there are birds everywhere, and wherever they be Roger Peterson seeks them out. In every place this ceaseless quest takes him he finds others embarked upon the pilgrimage. Of his discoveries and acquaintances he spins a fascinating tale.

The story of his life with birds and birders is superbly illustrated with eighty pages of wonderful photographs, a selection of the best results from "ten thousand negatives" that he "has exposed during the past twenty years." For those readers who are keen photographers he has added a "Photographic Postscript" describing the cameras he uses.

For me, and, I am sure, a great number of readers the most absorbing part of this fine book must be the autobiographical account which the author gives, explaining how he became a watcher of birds, and how he has gone through several stages in his attitude towards that pursuit. He has some very shrewd remarks to offer upon the connection between the interest in nature and conditions of modern urban life. He believes that his own evolving attitude reflects the experience of a "thousand others". With this I heartily agree. This autobiographical section, called "Birds and I" he brings to the significant conclusion, "Reluctant at first to accept the strait jacket of a world which I did not comprehend, I finally, with the help of my hobby, made some sort of peace with society. The birds, which started as an escape from the unreal, bridged the gap to reality and became a key whereby I might unlock eternal things."

Bird watchers, field naturalists, photographers, and readers who revel in accounts of travel, spiced with human experience, will all find enjoyment and pleasure in this book.

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Frank C. Edminster. The Ruffed Grouse. Its Life Story, Ecology and Management. Macmillan. New York. 1947.
Pp. xxvi, 385. Price \$6.00

There is no such thing as a complete life history of any particular bird or animal. But no one has come closer to giving all the

answers to questions about one of the birds of greatest interest to the people of North America than Mr. Edminster in this scientifically exhaustive study of the ruffed grouse or partridge.

Increasingly with the advance of the twentieth century both Canadians and Americans have become apprehensive concerning the fate of their game birds and animals. Studies of their status multiply steadily. Conservation and protective measures are commanding government action and public attention more and more. The present work, product of fifteen years of careful investigation, is the outcome of this sort of concern. Three times since 1900, we are told, "The ruffed grouse has suffered severe and quite sudden reduction in numbers in the northeastern states", with similar declines occurring in the Great Lakes region and in Canada. Each of these catastrophes has evoked an investigation. Mr. Edminster's study is the most complete report that has been made. In it he gives us not only the results of his own research but summarizes all the known information.

The ruffed grouse has had to endure the same kind of thoughtless slaughter that destroyed the passenger pigeon, the great auk, and the heath hen. We are too well acquainted with the still too-widely prevailing mentality which considers our natural resources unlimited to wonder that our ancestors thought that there was no end to the wild life of this continent. Even when the signs were pointing to fearful reduction if not annihilation they refused to believe. The author gives a sad example of this point of view when he quotes from a newspaper of 1832. Here the inhabitants of a county near Philadelphia are congratulated for "giving heed to the preservation of game", since few grouse are to be seen. "Let us encourage this growth and we shall be repaid by purchasing them a few seasons hence at fifty cents a dozen." Despite a declining grouse population an end was not made to this sort of commercial hunting of the grouse until near the beginning of the present century. More astonishing is the fact that this bird, once the "fool hen" of the pioneers, to be killed with sticks and stones, has survived both man's direct attack, and man's alteration of the environment so as to still exist today in reasonable numbers close to centers of dense settlement. It has done this only by a gradual adaptation that has changed it from an unwary "fool hen" to one of the most cunning of game birds. The historical "Chronicle of the Ruffed Grouse in Eastern United States" from which these facts are elicited is one of the most fascinating parts of this book.

No less so is the "Biography" of the species, written as the story of a single family. Although this book is fundamentally a scientific study there is a remarkable amount of fine, imaginative writing, a fact that gives the book a wide popular appeal. Such a passage is the following from the Biography: "Just beyond the slashing was a woodland of young maples and beech. A logging road traversed this woods from the slashing, and wound its way down over the hill to the farmstead in the valley below. As the young hen bird leisurely picked at fresh spring greens and jumped for the first insects of the season, the sun came up higher through the lower tree branches and the old trail with its grassy edges seemed very homy. She was nervous. Something within tugged at her emotions. There was an increasing urge

to respond to an unknown need. And it was not long in coming. A strange sound rent the air. Hardly had the first few beats of its thumping passed before she was tingling with anxiety to the tip of every nerve. Surely this was what she had been seeking, all unknowingly.

Slowly she made her way back towards the edge of the slashing -- the direction from which this strange sound had come. Stealthily she chose her footsteps so as not to expose her presence. In just a few minutes the thrilling beats started again -- slowly at first, then at an increasing tempo, until at the end they blended into an indefinite whirl -- as though the speed had so increased as to have passed the field of audible vibrations. The hen bird's heart was in her throat as she came closer. Then suddenly, as she peered around the end of an old windfall, she beheld the object of her search. It was the grandest grouse she had ever seen. She froze in her tracks."

The relationship of the ruffed grouse to mammals and to other birds, to plants, and to man; its requirements and use of different types of cover, of food and water; its reaction to weather conditions; its diseases; the problem of fluctuations in grouse population -- all these aspects of the species' existence are examined with minute care. Each section is accompanied by bibliographical references to the literature on the subject. A series of excellent photographs illustrates the text.

It is worthwhile noting that the last chapter is on "The Management of the Ruffed Grouse". In other words the author's view is that of the modern, scientific conservationist who regards our natural resources, our wild life as potentially permanent possessions to be wisely managed and properly used. There seems no reason why there should not be ruffed grouse and other birds and animals in plenty forever if that attitude becomes established in the minds of our people. The contrary view which has countenanced irresponsible slaughter leads obviously to ruin and barren solitude.

This is a work of first class merit. It is attractive and instructive, popular and scientific. It speaks a lesson to every hunter, naturalist, and citizen in the land.

RICHARD M. SAUNDERS,

Editor.