

# Toronto Field Naturalists' Club

## F E B R U A R Y M E E T I N G S

Note: Due to the fact that the Audubon Screen Tours conflict with our regular meeting night, this month, the February Meeting will be held on Tuesday, Feb. 1., at 8.15 p.m. at the Royal Ontario Museum. It is members' night, and the speakers are:

DR. R. M. SAUNDERS - B i r d s

DR. E.M. & DR. NORMA FORD WALKER -

"Random Notes on a trip to Cape Breton"  
Illustrated.

MRS. E. L. JAQUITH -

"Scenes from the Federation of Ontario  
Naturalists' 1948 Summer Nature Camp"

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

A display of materials dyed with vegetable dyes and also an exhibition of spinning will be given by Mrs. Macpherson, who will be in the Rotunda from 7.30 and also at the close of the meeting to provide information relative to her art to interested members.

## HANDICRAFTS OF INTEREST TO NATURALISTS - -

Pottery displayed by Joseph Barfoot, Vera Clark  
and Virginia Kohler.

Costume Jewelry by Rill Brown and Archie Reid.

## SATURDAY OUTING

Saturday, Feb. 5, 1949. Cedarvale Ravine.

Meet at corner of Bolton Dr. and Cottingham St.  
at 2 p.m.

Secretary: Mrs. J.B.Stewart, 21 Millwood Rd. HY5052.

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Number 81 - January, 1949.

On the field check list of birds issued by the Royal Ontario Museum, a little less than halfway down the second column, occurs the name of king eider. To most observers of this region, I fear, that name remains only a curious, alluring title for his Majesty King of the Eiders, visits Toronto but seldom. When he does appear amongst the heaving ice cakes along our waterfront in the height of winter doubtless he is often overlooked for he comes clothed in his duller raiment and might easily be passed by for another "black". This is far less possible now than formerly with the steadily increasing number of capable observers who are combing the lake front on winter days.

Yet it would be easy to miss a king eider even for the best of observers, especially if the bird were some distance away. This fact was illustrated on January 2nd when such a group of stalwarts as Jim Baillie, Bob Trowern, Bill Smith, Jack Satterly and Earle Stark took more than an hour to satisfy themselves that two "queer looking ducks" out on the lake were in fact two king eiders. It was certainly no discredit to them that they took so long. Quite otherwise. It is a tribute to their persistence and their desire for accuracy for the birds were at such a distance to begin with as to require the use of a telescope. In the end the birds swam in closer and could be seen with more comfort and assurance. It was a great find. Without question one of the best this winter will produce.

My own birding activity at this time was severely limited due to difficulties with my feet which scarcely permitted one to hobble. When I heard about the eiders I was fearful that I might not be able to get around soon enough to see them. It may easily be imagined, therefore, with what alacrity I accepted the invitation extended by Jim Baillie and Jack Satterly to be driven out to Port Credit to look for these rare ducks from the car window.

Consequently on the morning of January 3rd Jack nosed his car down the road along the east-side of Port Credit harbour, heading for the beach. My hopes were high, but not too high, for I know how often one misses seeing the bird which someone else has seen. Bob Trowern had lent us his telescope, and we were just getting ready to take it out of its case as we crunched onto the ice-covered sand at the beach. Before we could carry out our intention Jack looked out the window and spied the two king eiders on the water not a dozen feet off the edge of the beach! We had only to run down the windows, level our binoculars - even these were hardly necessary -- and observe the visitors from the Arctic to our hearts content.

Both birds, although one was very much darker on the back and belly than the other -- the one being a black-brown, the other a light chocolate brown -- were young males. On each bird the bill and processes showed orange shading into yellow on the apex of the frontal shield. Each exhibited a large area of white on the neck, throat and breast, though these parts were lightly flecked with brown. Possibly one bird was a juvenile male, the other a second year male, the difference in darkness being accountable in this way. A very little white showed on the wing when raised but underneath a dark line stretched from midway along the outer edge of the wing to the lower body. The heavy build, the thick neck, and the way in which they rode high in the water set this pair apart from the golden-eyes and mergansers nearby. Also their sudden manner of diving was distinctive. Instead of taking a leap forward before submerging, like their neighbors, they tilted and plunged directly downward, apparently propelling themselves under with vigorous thrusts of both feet and wings. The fanned tail with the spines of the feathers strongly outlined was prominently displayed at the moment of submergence. Perhaps our presence, but more likely the arrival of a truck to dump snow, disturbed the eiders and they swam rapidly out into the lake. How fortunate we had been was shown when we returned an hour later for another look only to find them nowhere in sight.

Fred Helleiner, who hastened out to see them in the afternoon, also failed to find them upon his arrival. However after a considerable wait he was rewarded by the sight of the two eiders returning from the lake to settle in the harbour. As dusk was falling they were unquestionably coming into this refuge to spend the night. Presumably they are making Port Credit harbour their base of operations for awhile. If so other observers may have a chance to see them there. It should be noted that Gordon and Bill Giles saw a third king eider at the Eastern Gap, a favorite spot for the species when in the Toronto area, on the previous day. These three birds and a fourth individual found dead on the beach at Sunnyside by Ron Scovell on December 12th show that these rare ducks should be looked for this winter.

Why it is the king eider and not the common eider of the St. Lawrence Gulf that visits Toronto is hard to say, except that the former favors fresh water much more than the latter. By what route the species comes to this region is also unknown. Possibly it flies up the St. Lawrence Valley from the sea. A number winter along the Atlantic coast as far south as New England and Long Island. A few individuals may diverge erratically from this group and take the St. Lawrence route. They have been known to occur as far west as Lake Michigan and even further. This western occurrence suggests the alternative possibility that they may fly overland from the Arctic where they breed, perhaps accompanying flocks of oldsquaw, goldeneyes, buffleheads, and scoter. The fact that the king eider seems to be much more abundant in the western Arctic gives some support to this idea. The mystery may eventually be solved by banding the birds as so many problems of migrational routes have been.

There are several species of eider ducks and together they constitute one of the most valuable groups of birds to man in terms of dollars and cents. This is because their eggs are edible and they are the source of eiderdown, a perfect material for the making of quilts, puffs, sleeping bags, pillows, and the like. Their value has long been recognized in Scandinavia and in Iceland, where every possible measure is taken to protect them. An interesting letter written from Iceland to Mr. Aaron C. Bagg and quoted by Forbush in Birds of Massachusetts, states that "Everything possible is done by landowners to coax these ducks to nest in a region where they are in the habit of gleaning each spring, and there is quite a bit of rivalry in this respect, for the down belongs to the man on whose land the ducks nest. Even bright colors are hung up and musical bells rung when the ducks are coming. Much is also done to protect the nesting ducks. Small sheltering hills are built to shield the nests from storms ... All shooting about the nesting ground is strictly forbidden under penalty of a heavy fine ...". Another authority pointed out in 1905, "The one offence against the Icelandic bird laws which a native cannot commit with impunity is the slaughter of the eider duck. What is more important than many laws, namely, public opinion protects the species. ."

Yet while Scandinavians and Icelanders long ago learned to "farm" this valuable bird and to protect it the people on this continent treated this natural resource like all their others, as if there were no end to them. In this case the valuable possibility of the development of an eiderdown industry was quite disregarded. Ruthless slaughter of the birds brought the eider ducks well on the road to extinction by the opening of the century. All the ornithologists from Audubon to the present time have spoken out against the destruction of eider ducks along the Labrador coast, in the St. Lawrence gulf, in Newfoundland, and southward to Maine, the northernmost breeding area. In 1914 Dr. Charles W. Townsend wrote the most vigorous of all condemnations of this reckless, foolish slaughter. His article, "A Plea for the Conservation of the Eider", published in the The Auk, 1914, has undoubtedly had much to do with the evoking of a healthier attitude. His contrasting of the protection and use of the eider in Norway and Iceland with the wasteful destruction in North America set people to thinking and provoked action.

How can the present senseless habit of destruction be stopped...?, asked Dr. Townsend. He suggested that it might be done by establishing bird reservations with eider farms after the Icelandic pattern. When Dr. C. Gordon Hewitt, Dominion Entomologist, wrote his work on "The Conservation of the Wild Life of Canada, in 1919, the eider had been placed on the protected list for ten years under the migratory Birds Convention but he still looked forward to the day when "an eider-down industry may be developed on the coasts of Canada, Newfoundland and Labrador".

The hope of these far sighted men did not find fruition until 1933 when a small industry of this sort was established on the islands of the Gulf of St. Lawrence in the eastern part of Quebec, a cooperative endeavour of the federal government and the Province of Quebec. The local inhabitants of the region who leased the islands for the purpose of gathering eiderdown were soon convinced of the profit of protecting the eider ducks. As Dr. Harrison F. Lewis points out in his excellent article, "Where Business Helps the Ducks, (Bird Lore, July-August, 1938), "The lessees of the eiderdown production areas realise that it is to their interest to have as many eiders as possible nest on their leased islands, and they therefore seek to induce the ducks to nest there by protecting their areas, in the nesting season, against poaching, including not only illegal shooting of the eiders, gathering of their eggs, and unauthorised collecting of their down, but also illegal killing or molestation of other species on the area, because any shooting or trespassing on the islands might disturb the eiders and tend to drive them away. Thus the lessees become valuable allies of the game officers in protecting birdlife against unlawful destruction or disturbance anywhere in the leased areas... The growing eider-down industry on the north shore of the Gulf of St. Lawrence is thus proving to be a real force for conservation, while at the same time it prevents waste of a useful natural resource, provides added revenue for people whose possible sources of income are limited, and makes an especially suitable material available for covering in which lightness, resiliency, and retention of warmth are the chief qualities desired"

If and when you next see an eider duck remember that the history of man's relation to the eiders is another chapter in his slow and painful learning of the invaluable lesson that true conservation is the proper use of natural resources. The encouraging part of this story is that in this instance he seems to be learning it in time though the fight is by no means won.

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Mrs. Elma F. Williams, an Aurora member of the club, wrote to me on January 2nd, describing certain recent observations which should be recorded. On December 26th, Mrs. Williams was along the fourth concession of King Township. She writes, "I got out of the car and started to walk back along the road hoping to get a glimpse of snow buntings and redpolls. It was sunny but there was a bitter wind from the northwest. I had not gone far when a fair-sized bird flew into some low shrubs. Maybe a junco I thought. Imagine my surprise and delight when I got my glasses focussed on him, to find it was a handsome male cardinal. For twenty minutes he fed on weed seeds by the roadside, clinging to the dry stalks or

going down right on to the snow. I did not know whether there was method in his system and that by clinging to the stalk he could shake out the seeds and then feed on them more leisurely on the ground. What do you think?# Once he flew up into a ragged pine to eat dried fruit off a wild grape vine. Then I realised the attraction of that lovely country road for him with vine-covered fences and shrubby bushes. All the way along from the third to the fourth concession there is a succession of gentle hills with the road bordered by trees, shrubs, and in one place a lovely woods. It fortunately has been left undisturbed and is a great stretch of beauty.

I kept hoping that a female cardinal might arrive but in all that countryside this brilliant male was the only bird of any kind to be seen.

On December 5th Mrs. Sisman (another Aurora member) and I saw a cardinal up north of Holland Landing in the pine-clad park area. It was accompanied by what we thought were two pine grosbeaks. They were in the treetops and did not linger and as the light was poor we could not get a good look at them. Definitely however we identified the cardinal.

Earlier still Mrs. Sisman had seen a cardinal in the St. Andrew's College area. We are delighted that these beautiful creatures are apparently coming northward".

A note on January 4th from Mrs. Williams adds that"...When Lois Sisman, Carol Proctor and I were out at the corner of the 4th King and the Aurora townline on Monday, January 3rd, we were delighted to see our cardinal gay as a lark, in spite of the huge quantities of snow. This time he was feeding along the 4th where the weeds were exposed. He had a flock of a dozen or so tree sparrows to keep him company, and the whole band were very busy, the sparrows twittering sweetly."

These observations of cardinals in the Aurora - King area are of particular interest because they show that this species is continuing to prosper in southern Ontario, and is beginning to fill in the gaps in territory occupied. The original influx of cardinals was confined largely to the edges of the lakes (Lake Erie, Lake Ontario, Lake St. Clair and northward around the southern shore of Lake Huron and Georgian Bay) Consequently places like Meaford and Collingwood had cardinals established in their area before more southernly spots on the intervening highlands. The expansion from the lake shores has naturally been up the river valleys. Only quite recently have cardinals begun to appear on the higher ridges and plateaus between the valleys.

The expansion into the Aurora - King may well be coupled with the evidence of the increase of cardinals noted in the recent Brodie Club Christmas Census. Exactly 100 cardinals were recorded in the Toronto area on the census day (Dec. 19th), the highest number yet to be seen on a census here.

R. M. SAUNDERS

Editor

# Ed.note: Seed eaters like the cardinal customarily glean the seeds which drop to the ground as a result of their feeding on the seed heads. Redpolls, buntings, tree sparrows, juncos may all be seen feeding in this way.