

# Toronto Field Naturalists' Club

## MARCH MEETINGS

Monday, March 7th, 1949 at 8.15 p.m.

at the

## ROYAL ONTARIO MUSEUM

Speaker - Prof. T.F. McIlwraith

Professor of Anthropology - Head of the Department of Anthropology - Associate Director of the Royal Ontario Museum of Archaeology.

Subject - "What Animals Mean in the Life of the Eskimo"

- - Illustrated.

Film - Eskimo Arts & Crafts .

## ROTUNDA DISPLAY

The rotunda display will be an exhibition of the work of the Junior Toronto Field Naturalists Clubs. It will include clay modelling, posters, and other work of the various groups collections.

### Saturday Outing

Saturday, March 12, 1949. Old Mill, Humber and River Road. Meet at Old Mill Bridge on Old Mill Road at 2 p.m.

: : :

We regret that some of our friends were unable to find seats at the last meeting. If everyone will endeavour to be on time it will be easier for us to help them obtain seats before the lights are lowered.

: : :

Mrs. J.B. Stewart,  
21 Millwood Rd.  
Secretary-Treasurer



## NEWSLETTER

Number 82 - February, 1949.

.The winter which is now drawing to a close has been marked amongst bird watchers by the variety of birds to be seen. The presence of a large number of lingerers from the summer residents has already been noted here. Now at the end of winter has come a considerable influx of northern finches and other visitors. Since mid January redpolls, pine and evening grosbeaks, crossbills, snow buntings, longspurs, and northern shrikes have all been reported within the Toronto region. Where these birds come from so late in the season is a moot point. Are they returning from the south, having gone through here in November, or is this a related southward movement? In view of the fact that only scattered individuals or small flocks of most of these species, and of some, such as redpolls, none at all were reported in the late fall, I am inclined myself to consider this a late winter arrival from the north. It is true that normally a wave, of varying proportions, of northern birds passes through this region in November, goes on south, and returns in early March. However, this winter that movement was scarcely perceptible. Whether they come early or late the northern visitors are usually gone by Mid-March except the odd flock or scattered individuals which may be seen into May.

The variety of birds evident this winter re emphasizes the fact that there are always many more birds around at this season than most people realise. On the other hand it is of course obvious that in comparison to the rest of the year birds are relatively scarce. It is this latter fact which causes us to recommend the winter as the best season for beginners to start their bird watching. By the time of the first spring migration they will have learned a few birds securely and will have thus acquired a sure foundation upon which to build their knowledge. The lack of foliage in the winter also makes that season advantageous for the starter. He does not have to begin by seeking sights of confusing warblers darting to and out of thickly leafed trees.

There are certain conditions of winter bird watching which should be borne in mind, however, if undue disappointment is not to result. These conditions were strongly illustrated at the time of the January field trip at Purpleville Woods. On that occasion some eighty people turned out upon a beautiful afternoon, and exactly four species of birds were seen. What was the explanation?

First of all I would say the time of day was comparatively unfavourable. Amongst bird watchers it is a common saying that after one o'clock in winter time nothing is to be seen. This, of course, is a great exaggeration but it has a real kernel of truth in it. The afternoon in winter is a markedly poorer time for birding than the morning. Birds go quiet, hide away in the densest cover, or just vanish. Mostly it is the last. What happens to them is still an unsolved mystery. They must still be around for the next morning if you come back to the same spot you will find them active and easy to see. Since they are undoubtedly present you could expect to scare them from their hiding places by simply ploughing through the bush. But this does not occur as a rule. In an area such as Purpleville woods or Pefferlaw Creek I have seen it happen repeatedly that whereas the woods were bubbling with a bird activity in the morning they would be almost completely devoid of birds in the afternoon. Nor could any amount of searching discover the birds of the morning. What is true of these favoured spots is doubly true of less favoured spots. This is an enigma over which many have long puzzled without a satisfactory solution. This does not mean, I hasten to add, that you cannot see birds of a winter's afternoon but it does mean that you will usually see much less than in the morning.

Secondly the very fine weather was curiously enough, probably a restricting factor. On mild, sunny days in winter, especially when the snow cover is limited so that much ground and many food bearing plants are exposed, birds tend to spread out over the country. This doubtless lessens the competition between them for food. It means though, that few birds are likely to be seen in any one place. When the clouds come, the snow swirls, and the ground is covered up then the birds will resort to the more favoured spots where food and shelter are most readily available. Hence there will be or is likely to be a concentration in such "good spots" under these conditions.

Thirdly, there is always a very strong likelihood that inland woods, inland areas generally, away from bodies of open water, even if only a few miles removed, will be empty of birds. In such areas in winter birds tend to be very sporadically distributed. A flock may be seen at one spot, consisting often of a variety of species, then for miles you may see no bird at all, until suddenly, for no apparent reason, you come upon another lively flock. This means that if you happen to spend your time in an empty spot, a temporarily blank area, then you will see no birds. So far as inland areas are concerned moving about over a fairly large region is advisable if it can be managed. Otherwise you must be content to make the most of what can be seen where you are, knowing that it may be very little. However, it may be something of extraordinary interest. To visit an inland wood in winter is a real gamble. You may see nothing. You may catch sight of something very wonderful. You must take your chances.

There are, of course, certain concentration points that are more steadily reliable. The city ravines are such places. It is more difficult for birds to spread out into the urban area from these spots so they are more likely to be there all the time, once they have taken up winter residence. They will still be harder to find in the afternoons. The dumps are always excellent areas to look for birds in winter,

chiefly because food is usually plentiful thereabouts. Along open water, whether it be the lakefront or streams is another favoured region. Indeed, the lakefront is the most stable of all areas for winter birding, and waterfowl the most reliable of birds it one wants to be sure of seeing something. I need scarcely add that visiting feeding stations is a profitable winter endeavour.

It should be remembered too, that in winter as at other times of year to increase the number of people in any party seeking for birds means inevitably that the number of birds seen will be reduced. The greater the size of the group the fewer the birds that will be found. At any season a large number of people moving through a bush, even along a path makes much noise. In winter this noise is often greater because of crunching snow. All this warns whatever birds are in the neighborhood, and they depart usually well ahead of the crowd. If you want to see birds under the best circumstances go out in twos and threes and proceed as quietly as possible. One can often make observations singly that are impossible even with one companion but as a rule two or three observers will see more together than one alone. In addition there is the joy of shared experience.

In what I have written I have not been arguing against field trips. They serve a real purpose. They enable people to become acquainted. They show observers new areas, and make known the resources of the region. On most field trips most people see or learn something they have not known before. There are, however, certain limitations to field trips which should be known and accepted. Several members have asked me about winter field trips recently. I hope that in what I have said above I have answered their questions. If not other queries will be welcome.

: : : : :

As we drove into Aurora this morning (February 6th) Greer slowed down so we could scan the Manitoba maple trees for evening grosbeaks. Seeing none along Yonge Street we turned east on the street north of Williams's house to go around the block. Not far along this street a car behind us began honking. The banks of snow on the sides of the road made passing impossible. We proceeded. The honking went on and on. We reached the corner and turned. Still the car kept up with us at the next turn, always with its clamor. Greer turned again and stopped, and we all jumped out, ready to swear. By now the following car had stopped too. When its doors opened, out got Mrs. Sisman, Mrs. Williams, Vaughan Williams, and Mrs. Devens. They had just been starting for Toronto to look at birds and had spied up on Yonge Street. They turned and followed us. We were all smiles now, especially when they offered to show us a flock of evening grosbeaks.

Their car now took the lead while they guided us to the high school area. Near there are some large Manitoba maples, and in these we found the grosbeaks. The Aurora party was worried because there had been about 30 birds shortly before, and when we arrived there were but a dozen. We did not mind really as we had splendid opportunities to

watch the ones that were still on hand. While we were watching them a woman in the nearest house opened the door to ask, "What kind of birds are they?" I told her, and she said, "Pretty, aint they". Despite the ungrammatical comment I was pleased to have her take notice of them, and to see they were beautiful. The grosbeaks flew away one by one. We took to the cars and started on when the Aurora group stopped again just around the corner. They had discovered the whole flock in another seed-laden tree. We counted them and made it 28. This time when the cars started the Aurora party headed for Toronto, and we turned northward en route to Pefferlaw Creek.

Between Aurora and the eastern outskirts of Newmarket we drove through a vista of whited trees. Mostly it was only the tops of trees, as if some aviator in a helicopter had hovered over them and sprayed them. Yet, how could he have done so neat a job for several feet below the uppermost plumes the snowy effect was cut off along a horizontal plane as evenly as if some invisible barrier had intercepted the spray and prevented it from reaching further down. The depth of penetration varied, we noticed, with the elevation of the land. On the higher spots whole trees were sheathed in white. We first thought the effect was produced by icing but as we looked more closely we could see this really was whiteness and not the glassy tint of ice. It was indeed hoar frost, thick rime deposited in layers along every twig and branch. How could such an effect be made? We puzzled over this, finally decided that there must have been a low-lying cloud in this area, touching only the tops of trees in some parts, whole areas in others, and leaving wherever it reached this gleaming witness of its presence. The feathery ornaments, white and gleaming, which these trees had taken on, arched and twined in arabesques against gunmetal-hued clouds were an unforgettable sight. The area affected was very narrow, not more than three or four miles wide as we cut across it.

After crossing the highway to Lake Simcoe we dared not venture onto the West Franklin road, as is our wont, for this road, attractive because of its isolation and unkempt hedgerows, is commonly ignored by ploughs. Scarcely more than a lane over most of its length it can be left untended. Instead we followed the Uxbridge road for several miles until some urge prompted us to turn north along a concession road that would bring us to the West Franklin route near the hamlet which gives the road its name. It was well we did for within a mile Greer noticed some birds feeding in a weed patch close to a barn. We all said rather casually that they probably were sparrows. The rest of us would have passed them by but Greer, fortunately, had less assurance about their identity. He stopped. When we got out it didn't take us long to see that they were redpolls, not sparrows. Moreover they were very accommodating redpolls, waiting for us while we walked cautiously up the farmer's land. Indeed, they even flew down towards us to make it easier. And amongst them we had no trouble spotting a very white fellow. Flying from weed to weed with the flock, or sitting side by side with a dull-plumaged female redpoll, this bird was very conspicuous. The unlined white rump showed to marked advantage as it spread its wings, and told us conclusively that this was an Artic or Hoary redpoll. As the flock

worked along the ground or in weeds well below our eye level, and within a few feet the contrast between the Hoary and its associates was easy to make. We were highly pleased for a less well observed bird of its species often leads to endless dispute. On this individual we all had no trouble agreeing.

The West Franklin road where we joined it was quite passable, . Just east of the hamlet, on the hill above it, there is a large field rich in weeds, and planted largely to young pines, an ideal spot for winter seed-eaters. We have often seen flocks here in winter. Today was no exception. As we drove up the hill small birds rose from the weeds, and came flying across the road ahead of the car. We stopped. As soon as the doors were open we could hear the shrill notes of pine siskins, and the soft cha-cha calls of redpolls. Others appeared, straggling one by one past our observation point. When we swept the field with our glasses to see if more were still feeding we immediately detected a large bird perched on top of one of the young pine trees. The position, the stance, and the flicking of the tail betokened a northern shrike but the size seemed too great. We toyed with the idea that it might be a sparrow hawk until, following the smaller birds, it launched into flight, flapped heavily across the field and pitched up onto the telephone wires near the car. Then there could be no doubt. The black face stripes and all the other marks were now obvious. It was still an extraordinarily large shrike. Tarrying only briefly on the wire it soon took off in the wake of the redpolls and siskins.

Today we were not denied access to Pefferlaw Creek along the Sanford road because of snowdrifts as we had been on January 2nd. In fact in all our peregrinations today we found nearly all the roads well cleared and easily navigable. At Pefferlaw piles of logs stacked near the road showed that the farmers had been taking advantage of the season to replenish their wood supply. The mixed size of the logs, and the rough nature of the cutting indicated that firewood was the intended use. Happily the cutting must have taken place some way from the road. We saw no fresh-cut stumps but we did see several trails stretching away into the bush where logs had been hauled out on sleighs. Greer, Doug, and Bill explored the western path to return with a report of juncoes and redpolls. During their absence I was busy trying to get a decent look at a bird which I had flushed from a tree where it had evidently been perched in full view, only I didn't see it until it quit its perch. Then with a rush of wings, it dove into a cedar tree without giving me a chance to see what it was at all. My annoyance at having failed to note it before it flew was increased by my failure to find it in the cedar tree into which I saw it fly. And every hemlock and cedar in the vicinity was just as empty. Finally, in disgust, I had to abandon it as one of those birds that are "almost seen".

Having rejoined forces we drove to the bridge and settled down for lunch. Little save political argument disturbed this re-creating procedure. But no sooner had we reached the final crumbs than the jabber of a flock of chickadees caught our attention. They passed by, keeping to the evergreens. A moment or two after they vanished a shrike came into view, alighting on top of a lofty dead pine beside the stream. From

this perch the predator surveyed the country, gazing with intense eagerness in the direction where the chickadees had gone. Clearly it was on their trail. That it had some difficulty in detecting their whereabouts was evident from the fact that it stayed several minutes on the tree top before resuming the pursuit. By this time we were all out on the road ready for another walk. We intended taking one of the trails running northward from the road but before we reached the one we thought preferable we once more heard the chickadees. Their nasal complaints indicated that the shrike had caught up with them and that they were upset. We turned south along a logging trail in search of them, and had not far to go. The shrike soon came into view, again perched on a bare tree top. The chickadees, though very vocal and excited showed considerable discretion in keeping well to the interiors of evergreens. They could be seen in flashes as they danced frantically inside a hemlock or spruce, or darted from one tree to another. But they were giving the watchful Lanius no chance to take a mortal swoop at them. I was astonished, therefore, suddenly to see a redpoll, all the while calling loudly, fly brashly into the shrike's face. Perhaps the shrike, too, was astounded at such boldness for it made no move to punish this temerity. The redpoll did not make a second attack. Possibly it had had too close a view of the hunter's black hooked beak. When the chickadees decided to move on, always keeping low in the cover, the shrike followed. This shrike was an immature bird, in brown plumage, much smaller than the big fellow of the West Franklin road.

The trail we had been following beckoned us on. The soft, powdery snow, fresh-fallen, deadened the sound of our steps, and the hard-packed logging ruts underneath gave us sure footing. It was perfect going. We pushed on revelling in the snow-bedecked evergreens that crowded the trail, dropping their burden in filmy veils or clouds as we brushed against them. Shortly we picked up a fresh fox trail. When it led up an eastward fork of the path I took this whilst the others kept to the main arm. The fox had probably been trailing a snowshoe rabbit for the wide pads of this animal's track paralleled the fox's for some distance. Finally the fox had made a sharp right-angled turn, left the path and entered the swamp. At this turn I found a dropping. As I had never really identified a fox dropping before I picked it up and carried it back to show the others. This is known, so Doug tells me, as a "twisting", a name given because fox droppings have an obvious twist at one end. This was verifiable in the specimen I had.

Before we drove out of the valley towards Sandford we once more saw the shrike and the chickadees. They had made a large circle and were now a half a mile or more northeast of where we had last seen them. I wonder if such persistence on the part of a shrike is often noted. It is usually observed that predators, once they have failed to catch some prey, give up the attempt and go off in search of other victims. This was astonishing doggedness.

At Sandford we turned north heading for Zephyr. We had half a mind to visit Mud Lake but found the side road blocked. Several miles brought us to the end of the ploughed section of the road we were on for it plunged into one of the deep tamarack cedar bogs in which this

area abounds. From Sandford to this point we had seen but one bird: however, this was a third northern shrike. Perched in a tree close beside a barn this individual was probably watching a flock of house sparrows which we could not see. We made no attempt to approach closer. Had I not glimpsed birds flying across the swamp lane ahead we would have turned around at once and taken another route. As it was we parked and hurried along the ruts made by heavy logging sleighs, I suppose, to try for a closer look at these birds. As we drew near in the first trees we noticed a large flock of redpolls flying. They settled quickly in tamaracks near the lane. These were not the birds I had seen. Those were much larger, being robin-sized. They may have been pine grosbeaks, but whatever they were they had gone, so we devoted ourselves to the redpolls. Of these there were some seventy-five, a much larger flock than that of the farmer's yard. But they were just as accommodating for they stayed, feeding avidly on the tamarack seeds, while we stood a dozen feet away. In this flock there were several magnificently-tinted males with a beautiful rosy flush on the breast. We watched them at ease for ten minutes before they decided to try some weed seed for a change. Then they flew into a near field only to stay a few moments. Obviously they preferred tamarack seed for soon they were all streaming over the field to another tamarack tree, this one being right in the fence line by the lane. As we walked by we could nearly reach up and pick the scarlet-capped birds off the twigs. They paid us no heed, and we walked on without disturbing them.

Having turned around Greer was just driving back up the valley slope when a flock of birds larger than redpolls could be seen flying over the bog down to the west, nearly a mile away. They were coming towards us or we would never have seen them. On they came until they were only a long field distant when they suddenly swerved into an elm tree and alighted. So far their identity was an enigma. They were still a considerable distance away but as we scanned them in the tree I became convinced that they were snow buntings. It is highly uncommon to see buntings in a tree though this does occur. All of us had seen it happen before. Still we could not agree too quickly on such an unexpected sight. We were just making up our mind what the best route to approach the tree would be when the birds again took flight and settled our minds. Even in the distance the brightly-contrasted black and white wings confirmed our impression. Nor had we long to wait for a closer view. We had only driven to the top of the hill when we found them feeding quite normally in the tangle of pigweed near a sandpit.

The east-west road into which we now turned took us eventually to a hill overlooking the valley in which Zephyr Station is situated. We were poised on the brink of this hill when Bill Smith shouted that a flock of birds was flying by. We all had a quick look before the flock dropped into the trees in the swamp. It took a bit of looking, trying to peer into the swamp from the hilltop, before we finally detected the birds perched. They were sparsely distributed in several trees. Once we had got our binoculars on them we had no

trouble seeing that they were evening grosbeaks. The gold and black males showed up well, the females only poorly. We were between one-third and one-half a mile distant. The flock did not stay long. When it flew northwestward across the swamp. Why the birds alighted in the swamp at all we could not say save that it seemed a brief rest in a flight. Possibly they were bound for a night roost. We were interested to note that with them when they flew was a large group of smaller birds. These flew in a finch-like manner, and were probably either redpolls or siskins, but at the distance we were they appeared merely black dots soon lost to view.

Our route from here took us past Zephyr Station, then out to the Markham Mt. Albert road, a little north of Mt. Albert. We were much impressed with the great extent of enticing swamp and bog area in this region none of which have we explored. We certainly will make return visits.

The return to Toronto by way of Vivian and Van Dorf brought us the sight of only a few birds but these included another flock of snow buntings, and another group of evening grosbeaks. By the time we reached the road south from Van Dorf a cloud blanket had erased the sun, and snow was swirling off the drifts in clouds under the impact of a strong easterly wind. The roads were going to need the ploughs before long. How strong that wind was we could not really tell inside the car. Then we got out to look at a "supposed fourth shrike" and the flying snow stung our face. The last bird we saw told us in another way of the force of the wind. This was a sparrow hawk, sitting on a low branch only five or six feet above the ground, a strange perch for the falcon, except that it was carefully sheltered from the wind in the lee of a huge elm tree. A shrewd bird that sparrow hawk.

Our day's jaunt, from 9.30 - 4.30, had taken us over a route of some 100 to 125 miles. From my account it will be seen that we saw a good many birds of interest. Equally it will be noted that we did not see them in any one place. We got them here, there, and everywhere. Roaming the countryside is likely to be one of the most rewarding ways of looking for birds, especially for the northern visitors, in the winter.

: : : : : :

The following observations of special interest have been made during the first two weeks of this month: sawwhet owl (G. Francis, J. Woodford at Starling's Bush), Feb. 2; white-winged crossbill (one at Purpleville by G. Francis, J. Woodfords on Feb. 5; one at Cedarvale by T.F. McIlwraith on Feb. 13) bronzed grackle or crow blackbird (one on Eglinton Ave. near Mt. Pleasant by M. & O.E. Devitt, Feb. 2 - 11); cowbird (one in Swansea through period by V. & R. Trowern); great blue heron (one in Don Valley, Glendon Hall Estate, by S. Francis on Feb. 10.); horned lark (four at East York Collegiate grounds by

J. Calladine on Feb. 8); Carolina wren (one at Harcroft by F.Helleiner on Feb.8); winter wren (one in Cedarvale by W. Smith on Feb. 12); white-winged scoter (one at Western gap by R. Anderson on Feb. 13).

: : : : : :

We record here with sadness the passing of Miss Lilian Payne at Queen Elizabeth Hospital on Sunday, February 13. For years Miss Payne has assisted with the preparation of the Newsletter. This is but one small way in which she has given of herself to the Toronto Field Naturalists Club in all its activities. It is on loyalty like hers that this club has laid its strong foundations. Her interest in nature was intense and varied, and it brought her happiness to the last. She was a true field naturalist. Like most good naturalists she made friends far and wide. That host of friends, inside and outside this club, will miss her. One of our staunchest members has gone.

R. M. SAUNDERS

Editor.

: : : : : :

Designed to make more Canadians conscious of the need of conservation of our natural resources and of our wildlife of forest, field and stream, an interesting series of broadcasts, "The outdoors club of the air", are now being heard over station C F R B, Toronto, every Wednesday evening from 9.45 to 10.00 o'clock.

These broadcasts, written and narrated by Frank H. Kortright, President of the Toronto Anglers' and Hunters' Association, are of interest to every member of the family but to lovers of nature and the outdoors in particular.

In the series, Mr. Kortright, who believes that a deeper appreciation of nature is the first concept of a conservationist, deals with little known but interesting facts about out-of-doors, wildlife, plants, flowers and insects.