

T O R O N T O F I E L D N A T U R A L I S T S' C L U B

April Meetings

Monday, April 4th, 1949 at 8.15 p.m.

at the

ROYAL ONTARIO MUSEUM

An evening of movies

Four short films will be shown:

- 1. Realm of the Wild (Mammals)
- 2. Roadrunner Battles Rattlesnake
- 3. Temagami Ranger
- 4. A fish is born.

ROTUNDA DISPLAY

The rotunda display will be an exhibition of pictures taken at the Summer Nature Schools, These pictures, most of which are in colour, were taken by Mr. J.M.Barnett, and Mr. G. M. Bartman.

Saturday Outing

Saturday, April 9, 1949. High Park.
Meet at Quebec Avenue at 2 p.m.

SPECIAL SUNDAY OUTING

A special outing has been arranged in conjunction with the Hamilton Nature Club, for Sunday, April 3. Members will meet at the Brant Inn at 9 a.m. and will proceed from there to Hamilton Bay and the Dundas Marsh. Birds of chief interest will be waterfowl. Bring lunch. Leader Mr. Geo. North.

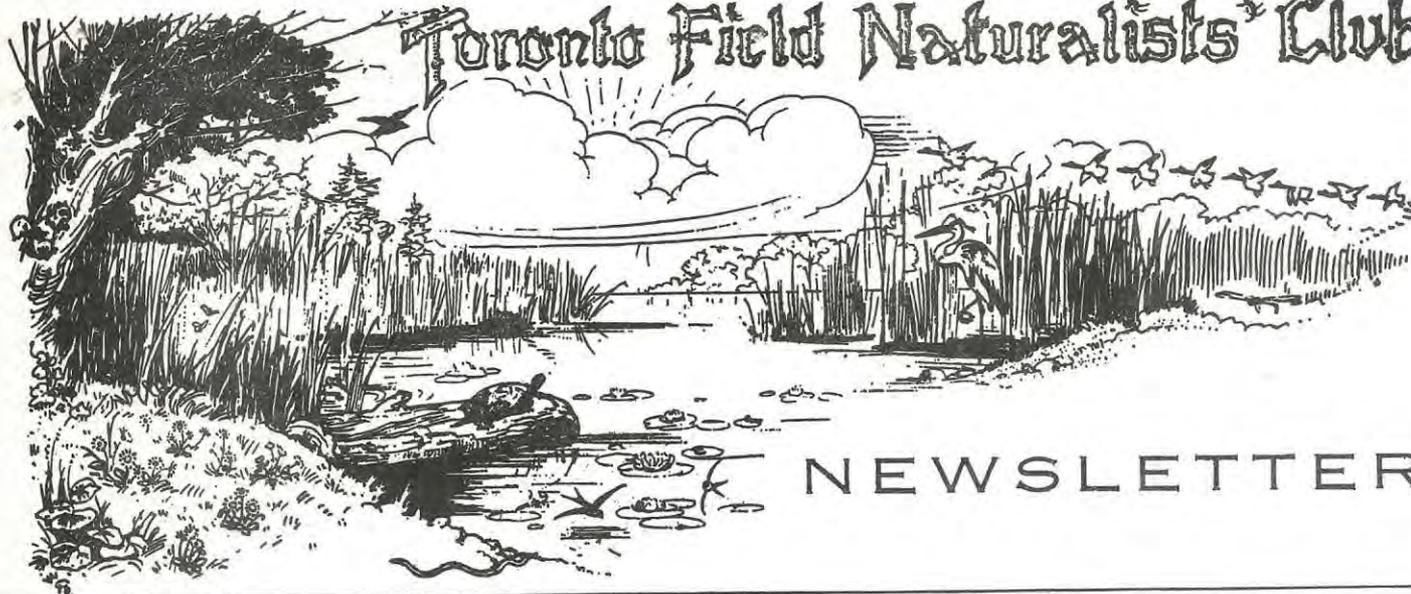
AUDUBON LECTURE FOR SCHOOL CHILDREN

Sounds of the Sage Land at the Royal Ontario Museum Theatre, Wednesday April 6th at 4 p.m. Admission 15¢

Suitable for Grade 7 and 8 and High School children.

: : : :

Toronto Field Naturalists' Club.



Number 83 - March 1949.

In spite of the foot of snow which that jokester, Old Man Winter, dumped on us yesterday, spring projects to aid and to attract summer birds should be under way now, or undertaken immediately. For as soon as this snowfall disappears, as it will with the first balmy days, there will come an abrupt influx of spring arrivals in the bird world. All the newcomers will be looking for homes. Those people who wish to lure avian settlers to their gardens or to the neighborhood of their places in the country should be ready.

Of all the birds which people like to attract, the bluebird is easily the most popular. D deservedly so, for quite apart from its appealing beauty and its scnt carolling song it does no harm to the interests of man but works much good. Moreover, the bluebird is in great need of help, having suffered badly in years of competition with the bellicose and gangsterly starling. The substitution of metal fence posts for wooden ones, and the efficient tree surgeon, closing up holes in orchard trees have also wreaked havoc in the bluebird ranks.

Unfortunately this beautiful bird cannot be drawn into the midst of the city. But to those who live on the edge of the city, and especially to everyone who has some place in the rural area where there are fields and orchards and open country, it should be pointed out that the bluebird is easily attracted by the erection of proper nesting-boxes.

What more delightful project for a group of naturalists, old or young, could be thought of than the establishment of a bluebird trail. I mean by this that such a group might select a pleasant country lane, a concession block, a stream valley in the farm country, or some such appropriate situation. Along the chosen route they would then place bluebird houses in proper places. Almost any farmer would be willing to give permission for this, perhaps some to co-operate in the project. When completed the route would soon develop

into a bluebird trail in which the creating group could take much pride and pleasure. How successfully this may be done is evident from the results of a single man's efforts in Illinois. Near the town of Quincy, this man set up 102 bluebird boxes along 43 miles of country road, and later found 88 of these houses to be occupied. If such projects were multiplied, the bluebird would no longer be a declining species, and one of our native beauties would be restored to the countryside.

Bluebirds are not difficult to please. A house of suitable proportions is likely to be accepted. The measurements are as follows: floor 5 x 6 inches; ceiling height 8 inches; hole $1\frac{1}{2}$ inches in diameter, set 6 inches above the floor. Such a house should be placed on a fence, low down in an orchard tree, or in some similar place. Houses should not be nearer than one hundred yards apart, since bluebirds have strong territorial instincts. This entrance hole is slightly small for starlings. It is very important that it should be kept so, in order that the bluebird may be protected from competition. Also it is well to avoid having house wren boxes near to bluebirds, since the wrens are very much given to egg-puncturing habits and to war on bird neighbours.

Another bird which uses a box of the same proportions as the bluebird is the striking steel-blue and white tree swallow. It too is easily attracted, but it is even more insistent that the box be placed in the open. A telephone pole, a fence post, or a post deliberately placed in garden or field will do. The box should be from five to fifteen feet above the ground. The tree swallow arrives early and stays late. It is beautiful and altogether beneficial, a highly desirable addition to the life of any community. Swallows of any sort are more likely to take up residence in the vicinity of water. Consequently, those whose property adjoins stream or pond will have an advantage in attracting such birds.

For anyone contemplating the attraction of birds to their homes the matter of water should be given serious attention. If a natural body of water does not exist nearby, then a bird bath should be provided. Even if a stream or lake is sufficiently near to answer the birds' needs, the provision of a bath in the garden or near the house will nearly always draw birds to it. However, the bath must be shallow, holding from one to three inches of water, otherwise small birds can make no use of it for bathing. It should be placed in the open, but not far away from shrubbery so that the bathers may take to cover easily at the slightest need. Next to the erection of nesting sites, the providing of a bath is most important and the chances of nesting boxes being occupied will certainly be enhanced by the presence of the bath.

Gardens with dense shrubbery and evergreens will be favoured above others. A feeding tray kept in operation even during the summer will also increase the attraction of a garden to many birds.

The requirements for attracting birds both in city and country are admirably discussed in two books that should be in the libraries of gardeners and field naturalists alike. These books are:

The Audubon Guide to Attracting Birds, Edited by John H. Baker, Executive Director of the National Audubon Society, and Birds in the Garden and How to Attract Them, by Margaret McKenney. These books contain all the necessary information about building nesting boxes, planting bird-attracting shrubs and setting up bird baths.

: : : : : : : : :

After the last Newsletter, I received a valuable indication from one of the members of the club, Mr. John E. Humphries of York Mills, as to what happens to birds of a winter's afternoon. I take great pleasure in recording Mr. Humphries' observations here. He writes:

"...I was interested in your explanation of the scarcity of bird life at this time of day in winter. You say, 'What happens to them is still an unsolved mystery'. At my home here in York Mills I have been making a little study of juncos that visit our feeding stations every year from September to May, and my observations over the past four winters have led me into the private lives of these birds. They seem to have set feeding periods, beginning at dawn and spaced roughly an hour apart until 1:30 p.m. when there is more or less a break until the final visit at about four o'clock. This is the routine for an average winter day; extremely cold, snowy weather brings them to the stations more often. But I was puzzled about where they remained from 1:30 p.m. until 4:00 p.m. I would beat up and down the Don Valley without detecting any sign of my guests. Then one afternoon, at about four o'clock, I took up a position under some hemlocks on the valley slopes near our garden to watch for the juncos coming in for their last meal. There wasn't a sound. I was gazing vacantly up into the thick, lacy hemlock boughs, thinking about crossbills and siskins and wondering if any birds ever visited these fine, old trees. Suddenly, the branches parted and in a whirl of wings over fifty juncos streamed out with excited titterings, one after another, in a hungry beeline for the feeding trays. They took me completely by surprise. I am sure I had stared right at more than one bird without picking it out from its surroundings. The "walking stick" insect with its uncanny camouflage has nothing on a junco when it makes itself scarce. I have since spotted juncos in this pose, crouched in a dense spray of needles well up in an evergreen, perfectly motionless except for the occasional slow, mechanical turn of the head. The afternoon is the warmest part of the day, and they seem to take advantage of it for a little nap. One bird almost allowed me to touch it before it snapped to its senses and fluttered off. Of course they give themselves away on particularly mild days when they can't resist the urge to bubble into their tinkling spring songs. But let old Sharp-shin the hawk come near and - presto! they simply vanish into thin air."

"May I suggest that this is possibly how other wintering finches spend the early afternoon. In good-sized woods like those at Purpleville it would be easy enough to miss a handful of finches, even the more brilliantly-hued grosbeaks, that are determined to play 'possum. Even that flashing red dandy, the cardinal, daily performs black magic in our garden, disappearing behind some dead hemlock spray or blending with the tangled stalks of the lilac bush..."

For those owners of feeding stations who have found this winter a thin season, I should point out that it has not been so for everyone. Mr. Humphries also writes:

"...I have had some interesting species visit my feeding station this winter, among them a female purple finch, a pine siskin, two redpolls, a winter wren and a hairy woodpecker."

:::

:::

:::

Another recent communication comes from Dr. E.L. Brereton of Barrie. It contains a very interesting observation of a northern shrike. Dr. Brereton says:

"...Your mention of the northern shrike in today's newsletter leads me to tell you of an interesting experience I had this morning (March 2). About 8:30 I took a walk along the tracks (C.N.R.) toward Allandale. Near Allandale I spotted a northern shrike perched on the top of a small willow. As I approached slowly within 50 yards of it, I noticed that it was flipping its tail more than usual and moving its body as though excited about something. I looked over the ground, into the shrubbery and up into the air, but could see no sign of friend, foe or possible shrike breakfast, so I just stood still and watched. After a minute or two more of agitated movements the shrike suddenly dropped almost straight down into some long grasses that the sun's rays had exposed, lying flat. A battle at once followed, but what the shrike was attacking I at first could not see. However, the shrike soon overcame the other, and I could then see that it was a meadow mouse -- and a large one. After several unsuccessful attempts to get under way, the shrike finally got up a few inches above the ground and flew with the mouse about six feet to some thick shrubbery. Here on a low branch about six inches above ground the bird pulled the mouse in between two small branches that were only one-half an inch apart where they joined the main branch. This shrike then proceeded to pick and pull and eat. After about ten minutes I walked over and the bird flew away about 100 yards and watched me. I found the mouse securely fastened or held against the main branch, with the two smaller branches one under each fore leg and shoulder. The head of the mouse was all eaten. I moved the mouse, and was surprised to find how snugly it was held. I put it back and left, hoping the waiting shrike would return and fill himself (or herself) so full of mouse that the local redpolls and chickadees would not be molested."

Dr. Brereton followed up his observations on the next day (March 3) and was again rewarded. He writes:

"Just returned from a visit to the shrike; went over to see if he had finished the mouse. As I approached the area, could see no sign of the bird, so turned in toward the shrubbery. Got within ten feet of the shrub I wanted when to my surprise the shrike flew out, circled around me not more than five feet away, scolding continuously. I stood and watched it putting on a performance that you would only expect to see in the spring when near a nest. Finally it settled down about twenty feet away, and I moved in to see how much mouse was left. I found no trace of the mouse, but quite near on another branch I discovered an English sparrow. It was impaled on a $1\frac{1}{8}$ inch spike, about the thickness of a lead pencil and blunt on the point. The spike was completely buried in the bird, and one wonders how they make such a complete job of it; they must be strong. The head of the sparrow was all gone, and a start had been made on the contents of the abdominal cavity. I will keep tab on this lad. I hope he sticks to mice and English sparrows."

(Ed. Note: I believe that Dr. Brereton will not mind if I point out that he acted the part of a good naturalist and did not molest the shrike. This predator was acting according to instinct, and in so doing was playing an important role in keeping the balance of nature. It should be accepted upon that basis. Man is slowly learning that it pays him best to interfere as little as possible with the balance of nature.

:::

:::

:::

The club members will remember that last year the club voted to award two scholarships to enable two of the younger naturalists to enjoy the benefits of the Federation of Ontario Naturalists' Summer Nature School. At a recent meeting of the T.F.N.C. executive council, it was decided to publish in the Newsletter a letter of appreciation, addressed to the secretary of the club, from George Francis, one of the young men who was given a scholarship. Mr. Francis writes as follows:

"I want you to know how much I enjoyed my two weeks stay at ~~Camp~~ Billie Bear this summer, which was made possible through the scholarship awarded me by the Toronto Field Naturalists Club. The summer school was certainly a great experience for me, and I was able to learn first hand a great many new things about natural science.

"I liked the informal way in which the school was conducted and I believe this helped make it so enjoyable.

"The hikes were most interesting and I know that I gained a lot of valuable information from the lectures and discussions which followed.

"I have a series of records taken from the notes I made while there, and I expect to find these very useful for future reference. Please convey my thanks to the T.F.N.C. for making this trip possible for me."

RICHARD M. SAUNDERS,

Editor.