

Toronto Field Naturalists' Club.



NEWSLETTER

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One of the greatest sights that bird-watchers may see in Canada is the spring and fall massing of the snow geese at Cap Tourmente on the north bank of the St. Lawrence River below Quebec. All the greater snow geese in existence come to this resting spot on their migration to and from the Arctic Ocean. They have done this from the earliest days of settlement, as the records of discoverers and pioneers show. It is the only place in Canada where these birds congregate, though their relatives, the lesser snow geese, may be seen in large numbers farther west. In the fall, when shooting is permitted, is not the time to go to see them. But in the spring, about mid-April, any bird-watcher who has a chance to visit the Cap Tourmente sanctuary should not miss the opportunity.

Last year (1948) I had such a chance, and it stands out as one of the peaks of my birding experience^s. Since many readers of the Newsletter find themselves travelling to Quebec on business or pleasure, I think it is worthwhile to record here my impressions of my own visit last year. As my account suggests, and as all bird-watchers know, other experiences than the seeing of birds often accompany this fascinating pursuit.

At 9:00 on the morning of April 19th, 1948, the day chosen for the trip, we headed out along the North Shore road. This road, winding and turning through one village after another, villages so closely packed along the highway as to make nearly one continuous settlement, is difficult to drive over but most picturesque. More of the old-type houses are preserved in this region than elsewhere. Slant-roofed and gabled, they are attractive because of their beautiful lines, and because of their simplicity. A large number of them were freshly painted in the

gay hues which are preferred hereabouts, the Latin touch in this northern land. Though these houses and villages lack the pleasing lawns and greens of New England, they are nonetheless charming and were especially so today with their air of neatness and color in the yet bare landscape of early spring.

We reached Cap Tourmente about 11:00. At a farm nestling below the Cap my friend stopped to enquire for the hunting club. We were told to go straight ahead along the farm lane. This we found ended at the clubhouse. Recent rain made it slippery but we arrived with a few skids and no mishaps.

The warden, an old man of the region, was expecting us. We soon changed to boots and were ready to go. The old man guided us carefully across the tidal marsh which stretched in front of the camp. Planks enabled us to cross the channels, and soon we were approaching the edge of the river. The geese were there. I need not have feared. As soon as we reached the plain in front of Cap Tourmente I had looked eagerly through my binoculars and had seen the white forms along the icestrewn shore. It was only a question of how close we could get to them, and how many we might see.

Knowing the wariness of Canada geese I was more than astonished as our guide kept casually on and on, and without rousing the geese. True, there were some 30 odd Canada geese which swam away, then flew, at our approach. But the snows merely raised their heads and watched. At last the warden called a halt. We were then about one to two hundred feet from the nearest birds! And there were at least 1000 snow geese feeding along the shore, a thin line reaching north and south from the group in front of us.

Almost as we arrived a new V came flying in from the river, all the birds calling loudly. At the head of the V I saw a goose that was certainly not a snow though all the other members of the flock were. This stranger led his V straight towards us and called it to settle with the group we were nearest to. Most kind of it, I thought, because the strange leader was no other than a blue goose. Since the leader settled with the others, and swam or stood in their midst, we were treated to a magnificent opportunity to study the two types of geese at close range. The dark-bodied blue stood out in sharp contrast to the white snows. And the white neck and head of the blue was in marked contrast to its body. In flight, as the V came in the dark wings and body were most prominent. As it stood or swam the white neck and head were emphasized. But when, in a little while, it chose to spread its wings and fly so little above the water that we on the marsh could look down at it, then the delicate sky-blue tint of the upper wing surface struck us as a mark of surpassing beauty. Following the blue in flight I noted when it settled again that there was another of the same kind nearby -- two blues amongst a thousand snows. I had not expected to see blue geese at all. And the warden assured me that they are, indeed, very rare at this point. Only the odd individual ever shows up, and that infrequently.

The warden was a likeable old fellow, and very ready to talk. No doubt it is a lonely post here, and he is ready to have company. He told us that he and his wife are the last inhabitants of Ile Marguerite, an island visible from the camp. He spends six months at the camp, two in the spring and four in the fall, some time in winter in Quebec, and the rest of the year on the island. His children have all settled on the mainland, finding the island too isolated. He said, "Of course I'm used to it."

The geese arrive about the beginning of April. This time the first ones came on the fourth of April. They do not all come at once, but arrive in flocks over a period of several weeks. They depart in a similar way, the last leaving about May 25th. I had had no idea they stayed so long. Nor indeed had my informants who first told me about this place. When they arrive they concentrate near Cap Tourmente but as the concentration increases they spread out, and at the height of the season -- about this time -- they are scattered over an area of many square miles, i.e., downstream towards Baie St. Paul for several miles, around Grosse Ile, Ile Marguerite, Ile des Pelerins, and upstream to Ile d'Orleans. The warden says that the area utilized has been gradually expanding with the slow increase in the number of geese since he has been there. Cap Tourmente remains the chief centre of concentration, but the number present varies with the winds and the tides. He assured us that from ten to twelve thousand birds were around though we saw only two thousand in all. The rest were scattered over the area mentioned.

No shooting is allowed in spring, of course, though there is some trouble with poachers. In the fall the hunting club, a small, very select group, has this favored area for its members and friends. We were shown one of the shooting boxes -- really a dugout, with a bench to kneel on. There is no cover of any sort, the shooters merely hiding in the dugout until the birds fly near enough to shoot at. The warden said that very few birds are shot, so few that each one is very costly where membership fees, equipment, supplies are all counted in the cost. But the rarity of the game shot will compensate shooters who have money for any lack of big bags. Also to be able to say one has shot a snowgoose at Cap Tourmente Club is probably a highly-prized privilege amongst hunters. At any rate, short of having a completely-closed government refuge, to have such a club in control is the best protection the birds can have. Government figures bear out the warden's assertion that the geese are slowly increasing under the present regime. The total number of greater snow geese is now estimated at twenty-five to thirty thousand. At their lowest point before protection was provided there were only about two thousand. The value of the protection provided is thus clearly shown.

At one o'clock we said good-bye to the warden and drove back to the farmhouse where my friend had made his enquiries. He had arranged at that time for us to have lunch there.

Though large and rambling, this farmhouse was in no way prepossessing from the outside. Once inside the doorway, however, you entered into an entirely unexpected world. In contrast to the dingy, unkept exterior everything here was freshly-painted, bright, clear, yes -- spotlessly immaculate. The rooms were on the grand scale, assuming a sort of grandeur despite their plain furnishings. These plain chairs, tables, and chests, would have made an antique collector's eyes glisten, for nearly all were clearly hand-made, authentic old specimens of the craftsman's art.

Our greeting was hearty. When it was known that my friend, Abbé Maheux, was a member of the Grand Séminaire de Québec, -- and, indeed, all knew him as a very famous member of that body -- then nothing too much could be done for us. The ordinary well-known hospitality of these simple people was intensified to a degree of rollicking jollification. Georges Maheux, brother of Abbé Maheux, and a retired priest who lives at the farm were a great pair together, singing, cracking jokes, and carrying on a steady rapid-fire repartee which drew in all the rest. There was Mme. Bouchard, the priest's sister and head of the family here, her two sons, and three daughters.

We were ushered through the enormous sitting-room-kitchen, across a hallway where fresh-made maple-sugar blocks still rested in their ancient wooden forms, and into an equally large kitchen-dining room. This I was told was the "summer kitchen", very smart in a new coat of green paint. There at a trestle table we were served a splendid dinner, one characteristic of season and place. Beginning with time-honored pea soup -- how different it is in its native surroundings from what masquerades under the name in Toronto, or in tins?-- we went to roast pork, grilled salt pork, roast potatoes, and turnip with home-made bread and butter. The grand finale was dish I had never eaten before, an exquisite crepe -- large and round, the shape of the frying pan in which it was made, but thin and tender so that it melted in your mouth. This delicacy was placed on a plate, then new made maple sugar was shredded over it, and the whole was rolled up. When the roll was finished it was sliced into pieces suitable for eating! And each one of us was given an entire crepe!! And after that half another, the second with maple syrup!!! Do you wonder that we drank our tea slowly, that we sat for nearly an hour in the living room chatting, and settling our meal?

When we did leave our friends at last we drove up to nearby Petit Cap where the summer resort for students of the Séminaire is. As it overlooks the plains towards Cap Tourmente, I hoped to get a birdseye look at the geese from there. I was not disappointed. By no means, for no sooner had I reached the lookout spot than I heard geese calling. Looking riverward I saw fully 500 snow geese, flying in lines and V's across a leaden sky from the Ile d'Orléans towards Cap Tourmente. It was a vividly dramatic sight, far more

breathtaking than seeing them near at hand along the shore. There is an indescribable majesty about flocks of such great birds, sweeping across the sky in perfect formation that never fails to fill me with awe. The wonderful procession passed on, reaching the feeding flocks, and deployed to settle amongst them. Before I quit my observation post at least another 500 geese had flown by, a line or a V at a time, all coming from the south side of Ile d'Orleans. Though I appreciated, and would not have missed the sight of geese near at hand nevertheless I cannot but feel that the panoramic view and the flying hundreds seen from Petit Cap were the finest sights of the trip. I had been vouchsafed such a view of the snow geese I had come so far to see as I shall never forget.

This year, (1949), though I had to be in Quebec in the latter part of March and the first few days of April, I did not find it possible to get to Cap Tourmente. However, I had the pleasure of staying at Abbé Maheux's cottage on the bank of the St. Lawrence near St. Augustin. There about four o'clock on the afternoon of March 31 he and I were walking up and down in front of the cottage chatting. It was a beautifully warm and sunny day. In the midst of our conversation we both heard the excited gabbling of geese. I looked towards the river at once and could see no geese at all. Suddenly Maurice came rushing around the side of the camp shouting, "Les oies blanches, les oies blanches!" and pointing overhead. We both gazed upward, and there against the sparkling blue sky were two magnificent V's of snow geese, shimmering white birds with black-tipped wings. Calling unceasingly they passed directly over our heads, over the camp, and disappeared over the cote towards Cap Tourmente, their destination. It was a glorious sight.

The snows were not the first geese to arrive in the Quebec region this season. On Monday morning, March 29, a raw and blustery day after a heavy rain, I was walking towards the bus stop along the road on top of the river bank when I heard that sound which is always electrifying, the honking of flying geese. I swung around quickly for the migrants were obviously up stream behind me. Sweeping the sky rapidly I could get no hint of their whereabouts. Then, remembering from last year, how the geese ordinarily fly low over the river here, I turned to study the ice-crammed stream. Still it was several long moments before I descried the long line of honkers, speeding along, just above the ice cakes, and proclaiming in loud confidence that spring is here. The long line was followed by a shorter line, the two together making 78 birds. This was the arrival of the geese at Quebec. And this very morning long lanes of open water appeared in the river. Despite temporary jams of ice, floating downstream, there was from now on always some clear water where geese and ducks could rest and feed.

Each day saw more Canada geese arrive, until on April 2, my last day at the camp, there were at least 500 in the river near St. Augustin. At any hour of day or night you could hear honking

from the birds on the water or ice. I discovered that both the crows and the geese have a wonderful habit of riding the ice cakes. By carefully scanning the river you could always find some of each species scattered about, enjoying this game. Any number from a single bird to more than a score might be riding a single ice cake. Sometimes a lone bird held lordly possession of its icy conveyance. Sometimes a group were huddled together like a sleighing party on a hay pile. The honking or cawing which went on during such ventures seemed to me to be just sociable outbursts, the merriment of a party. These birds were not going anywhere, for they would often quit their "magic carpet" to join the brethren on other ice cakes, or to fly upstream a bit, there to alight on another cake and to repeat the performance. They were simply playing a game, enjoying themselves, or resting. The geese often took their time to preen and clean their feathers.

Perhaps, too, both crows and geese found the feeding good amongst the floating ice cakes. It would be most likely for much to be swept down the river with the outgoing ice that would interest scavengers like crows. As for the geese, when feeding they swam up stream, keeping usually close to the edge of the yet unbroken ice at the side of the channel. Their feeding was a matter of picking tidbits from the surface of the water, or, less often, from a little below the surface. What this food was I could never determine from the shore. Frequently the geese would swim directly into masses of floating crushed ice. This never seemed to trouble them. They did, however, avoid the larger, more solid pieces of ice, and if they could not they climbed up onto these, walking over them to the next open bit of water. The most favored haunt was along the rocks which border the entrance to the "bay" at St. Augustin. This is always a favored spot for waterfowl, presumably because of the presence of both food and shelter.

Not all my encounters with birds this spring in St. Augustin were limited to geese. On Sunday, March 27, I walked up the cote and along the St. Augustin road towards the village. The road, I soon discovered, was ploughed open only as far as the Hamel farm where the bus turns around. Beyond that a "winter route", "une piste d'hiver", continued.

I had seen these winter routes depicted in paintings, and I had read about them, but I had never before encountered one. Hence, I was much attracted by this novel experience, though I embarked on the venture with some trepidation, not knowing how far I could go on the rotten snow. On this occasion I had no snowshoes. The route was as direct as possible. Wherever the permanent road took a bend the winter route kept straight. In order to do this openings had been made in fences, and the track cut directly across fields and pastures. The route was marked

by slender evergreens, ten to fifteen feet in height, whose branches had been lopped except for a tuft at the top. They were placed at irregular intervals, and looked like decorative channel markers which indeed they were. A recent set of furrows showed where a light sleigh had passed this morning, no doubt bearing its riders to church. Between the furrows I found the snow so well packed from prolonged use that I could walk without difficulty. But a step or two beyond on either side sent me plunging to my hips. When standing on the packed surface my feet were well above the fence tops! Nearly all the ordinary road signs were covered by snow. .

Once I wallowed through the deep snow to the bank overlooking the river. Melting had cleared the edge of the cliff at this spot, and I had a fine lookout. What interested me most was to see the unbelievable drifts and accumulations of snow just below the cliff edge. Here there was from twenty to fifty feet of snow, a winter's amassing. One step into that and a man might well disappear from sight. I avoided the crumbling overhang with much caution. I remembered, too, the drifts I had seen in this very area one year in June, and I realized why they had hung on so long.

Snow buntings had flown over while I was crossing the fields, some flying eastward, some going south across the river. Crows were noisy and common. A chickadee called from the Lac St. Augustin wood. But the highlight of this walk came when I saw a large hawk gliding across the fields.

It was a redtail, and I thought little about it for the moment. As I drew near to the wood, however, a loud screaming commenced, coming from the south end of the lake where the hawk had vanished. I directed my binoculars towards the sound and in a moment the hawk soared once again into view. Its vibrant peals of Quee-err, Quee-eir rent the air overhead. The wild notes quivered and hummed as they smote the ears, seeming more a twanging chord than clear notes, as though produced (with savage vigor and elan) by some demoniac fiddler's double-stringing. Circling by the redtail silenced its eerie calls for a moment when it broke the circling to slide through the air, towards the farther bank of the St. Augustin stream, but as soon as it had alighted the defiant screams recommenced. This performance attracted several of the crows but, curiously enough, they made no attempt to attack the hawk, contenting themselves merely with congregating in a neighboring tree and cawing mildly. After a few minutes the redtail went quiet. It stayed on its perch several minutes longer, then quit it to fly silently up stream to the lake. The crows offered no chase or comment. Once on the edge of the lake the screams started again. This time they sounded more like Kee-arr Kee-arr, probably as a result of the different angle from which I was hearing them. A brief silence was followed next by different notes. First a single Kip, delivered at intervals of several seconds, at a much lower pitch than the screams. Then came

Kwip-kwip-kwip, rapidly repeated, again much higher in pitch. A variation of the scream then ensued; pee-plur, pee-ur, several times given, though not with the abandon of the first utterances. At this juncture I tried an imitation. There was a brief pause, during which the bird was quiet, perhaps listening, then it offered, Kwa, Kèrr, rather soft, the first note guttural, the whole almost enquiring. Was I being asked, Are you a mate? If so, the enquirer soon came to an answer, for as I continued my imitations the great hawk ceased any possible amorous proposals, sailed out from the lake side perch, and, protesting to high heaven its full and complete right to all the territory hereabouts, came circling over my head. If I were not a potential mate then I must be a rival. And no other male redtail was going to be allowed to settle on this choice spot. "Get out, get out," he screamed.

Seeing no other hawk, he mounted higher and higher into the air, then started to dive and roll like an acrobat. All the tricks of the airman were his. It was a short display but a wonderful one such as I had never seen before. It ended when, plunging down from these heights, the redtail alighted once more on the tree near the St. Augustin stream. What I had seen was, without question, a male bird proclaiming occupation of territory. When I got back to the camp I found that this was the first redtail I had ever seen in this vicinity.

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A little known but very valuable habit of town-dwelling screech owls has been reported to me by Dr. E.L.Brereton of Barrie. He writes (February 12):

"Returning about 12 p.m. from an emergency call to my office last week, I stopped suddenly as I heard a bird chip, following the direction of the continued notes of a disturbed bird or birds. I looked up at one of the store's rolled-up awnings, and as my vision became adjusted could see a screech owl reaching with one foot into the loosely folded awning. In a few seconds an English sparrow came out and fluttered down onto the snow right in front of me. The owl, noting the woody fibre of my head, no doubt thought I was just a post, and followed the bird, almost touching my face with its wings. Not having time to think or consider the merits of the case -- owl or sparrow, the natural instinct to protect the weak from the strong moved me to lead with a Joe Louis right uppercut, and I sent the owl sprawling to the ground. By this time the sparrow became fully awake and flew away, and before I could count ten the owl did likewise!

Last spring, I believe it was in June, Mr. W.A.Bell, principal of one of our Public Schools, telephoned to say that they were finding small owl pellets on the back porch of the school and they were made up of starling feathers. I asked him if there were any starlings around the school -- yes, they were roosting up under the eaves. I advised him to hang around there about dark and he would probably soon solve the mystery. The first night he was there, a screech owl flew over the nearby ravine, lit in a maple tree, then soon after proceeded to hunt around the eaves; and shortly after, came out with a starling. They watched it different nights, when it would light either in the maple or on the backporch. And after regurgitating one or two pellets, it would start searching the eaves for starlings. This probably is a habit the town and city screech owls have developed because of the roosting habits, in numbers, of the starlings and sparrows."

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Richard M.Saunders, Editor.