

Toronto Field Naturalists' Club

87

December Meetings

Monday, December 5, 1949 at 8.15 p.m.

at the

R O Y A L O N T A R I O M U S E U M

The meeting will be in charge of the

Toronto Intermediate Naturalists

Chairman - Mr. D. Smith

Speaker - Mr. A. Gordon

Movies on Loons, Yellow Bellied Sapsuckers  
and Pileated Woodpeckers - by Mr. Wm. Carrick.

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

Suggestions for the Naturalist's Bookshelf

A display of recent natural history books.

December Hike

Saturday - December 10th, 1949.

Hogg's Hollow - Don Mills Drive

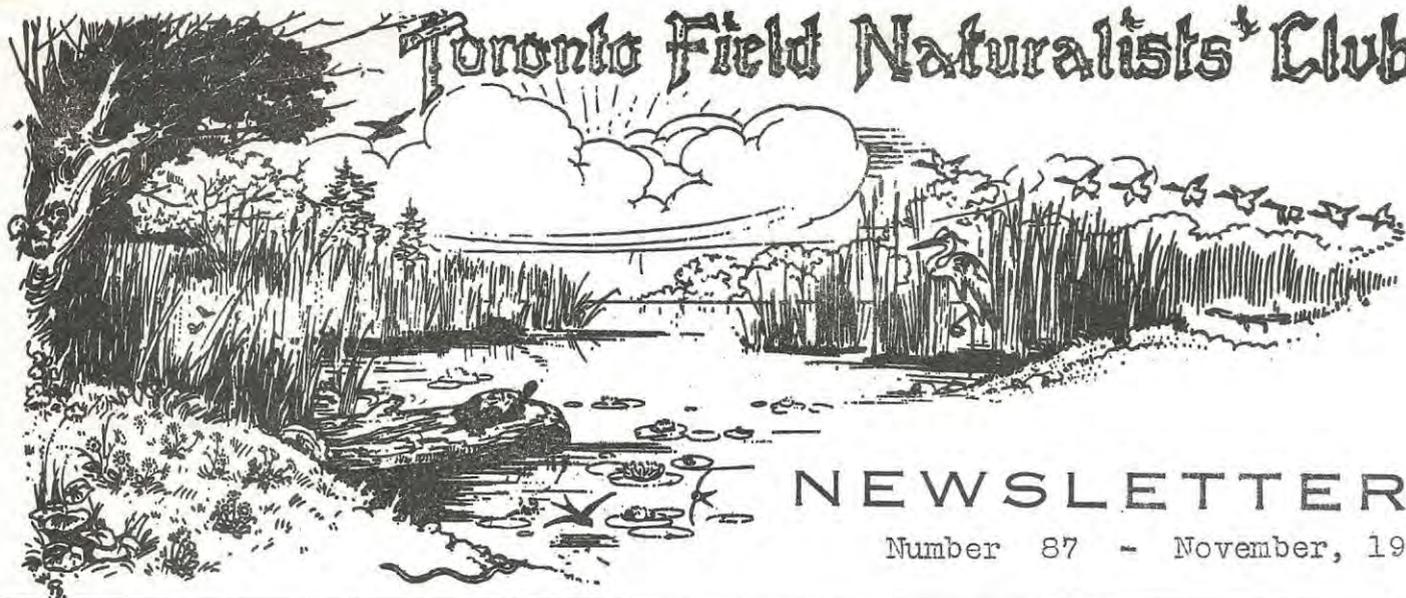
Meet at the end of the Yonge St. car line at 2 p.m.

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After this the Newsletter will be sent to paid-up  
members only. Have YOU paid your fee? It is  
\$2. per year, and may be sent to the Treasurer,  
Mrs. J.B. Stewart, 21 Millwood Road, Toronto.

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# Toronto Field Naturalists' Club.



## NEWSLETTER

Number 87 - November, 1949

As readers of the Newsletter will remember, Mrs. Vivian G. Wilcox, one of the enthusiastic Aurora members of this club, was so fortunate as to have a long visit in South Africa last year. During this time she sent us several much appreciated communications concerning her bird observations there. Recently Mrs. Wilcox was asked to write an account comparing bird watching in Canada and in South Africa for the Bokmakierie, the publication of the Witwatersrand Bird Club of Johannesburg. Mrs. Wilcox has graciously given permission for this article to appear in the Newsletter as well. I am sure that our readers will find this comparative study of bird observation in two of the member states of the British Commonwealth of very great interest.

### Birding on Two Continents and in Two Hemispheres

(By Vivian G. Wilcox)

I meant to do my work today -  
But a brown bird sang in the apple tree,  
And a butterfly flitted across the field,  
And all the leaves were calling me.

And the wind went sighing over the land,  
Tossing the grasses to and fro,  
And a rainbow held out its shining hand  
So what could I do but go?

Richard Le Gallienne.

After such an introduction you will not expect this article to be a scientific treatise on Ornithology. Rather, you will expect, and rightly so, that it deals with the impressions of an enthusiastic amateur who finds in bird watching a delightful and rewarding hobby.

During a six months sojourn in South Africa, I, a Canadian, had the good fortune to see something of the bird life of the Union under the friendly guidance of no less an expert than Dr. Gilges. It was a delightful experience, my only regret being that time did not permit more prolonged study and observation. It did, however, provide an opportunity for comparison of birding conditions in the two

Dominions and it may be that some of my impressions will be of interest to readers of The Bokmakierie.

South Africa has a much richer and more abundant bird life than we have in Canada. This may be due in part to the difference in the geography of the two countries. A glance at a world map will make clear my point. Canada lies in the northern half of the North American continent; the Union in the Southern hemisphere at the tip of the continent of Africa. Our migrants from South America, after crossing Central America and the Gulf of Mexico, fan out in their northern range over an area 4000 miles in extent from Newfoundland to Alaska, and from the U.S. - Canadian border 1600 miles northward in Canada. In South Africa you have the very opposite conditions. You are at the small end of the funnel. European migrants and birds from Northern and tropical Africa which reach the Union are concentrated into a much smaller area as the continent tapers to a point at its southern extremity.

Water is another factor which greatly affects the bird life of any region. Scattered across Canada are literally thousands of lakes --- large and small. This tends to a fairly even and widespread distribution, whereas, you, in South Africa, who depend largely on dams for your water supply, have only to go to Melrose, Haartebeestpoort, Benoni or Rondevlei to see countless numbers and varieties of birds.

Because Canada is so large, for the purposes of this article it would be fairer to compare conditions in Ontario, second largest of our 10 provinces and nearly equal in size to the Union of South Africa and to narrow it down still more to note likenesses and differences in birding conditions in the environs of Toronto and Johannesburg.

My first observation is to note that you have more birds and we have more bird watchers. South Africa has 1,000 species, Canada has about 500 and only some 350 of them can be seen in Ontario. Not only have you twice as many species but you may have a half dozen to a score of kinds in each genus whereas we, in Ontario, must be content with 1 robin (13) (and it not a true robin), 1 pipit (11), 1 swift (7), 1 starling (13) (in the case of the last -- the English starling -- it is one too many), 2 eagles (16), 2 cuckoos (12), 2 shrikes (6), 5 swallows (12), 9 flycatchers (24), etc.\* We have no babblers nor barbets, no hoopoes nor hornbills. No secretary birds stalk across our fields with stride sedate and stately -- that is a South African scene I will never forget. Nor will I forget the beauty of a jacaranda tree in full bloom beside my rondoval at Mont-aux-Sources where dozens of double-collared sunbirds, flashing like jewels, gathered nectar from the delicate mauve blossoms. And while I am reminiscing I must mention another very thrilling and dramatic memory-picture. Twenty-five sacred ibises in V-formation were etched against the sunset. At first only black dots along the horizon, they became more and more distinct, at length passed directly overhead and settled for the night in the bluegum trees at the edge of Melrose Dam.

Although for the most part they are less brightly coloured, we, too, have many beautiful birds. A bit of heaven's own blue is our bluebird. We hear his soft, sweet warble in early spring when the

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\* Figures in parentheses indicate the number of species in each South African genus.

snow is still on the ground and he stays with us until late fall. The cedar waxwing, sleek and elegant, in shades of browns and touches of black, yellow and red, is the Beau Brummel of our bird world. The rose-breasted grosbeak is a joy to behold; the cardinal, once considered exclusively a bird of the southern United States, has extended its range and is now a year-round resident in the Toronto area. Like a live coal is the scarlet tanager, with contrasting black wings and tail. He seems to belong in the tropics yet he spends his summers with us. The warbler group - we have some 35 varieties during migration - are bright-colored, restless little birds, at once the delight and despair of the ardent observer. They often prefer the tops of the tallest trees amid dense green foliage, making identification extremely difficult at times.

However, the expert will identify a bird by its song or call note before he sees the singer. We are told that 75% of bird watching is done with the ears. We have many lovely song birds. To sit at evening beside a quiet lake, the white trunks and bright green foliage of the birches and darker green of pointed firs mirrored in its waters, to watch the pageant of a flaming sunset, its colors changing from pink to gold, to orange and deep purple, and then, through the lingering twilight, to listen to the ethereal song of the hermit thrush or the a-o-lee of the wood thrush, that is an experience to cherish in the memory. Opinions vary as to which of our thrushes is the sweetest singer. Some prefer the spiral flute-like notes of the veery. I often wonder if there is anything more hauntingly lovely than the plaintive "Sweet Canada, Canada, Canada" of the white-throated sparrow.

To sum it up, it would seem that the birds of field and forest differ greatly from those of veld and bush. Your birds are more spectacular; ours have the sweeter songs. There is a similarity in our water birds. Coots and gallinules, herons and bitterns inhabit our marshes. Toronto is situated on one of our great inland lakes -- Lake Ontario -- and we therefore see many gulls and terns, plovers and sandpipers and myriads of ducks. At the coasts we have our sea birds of the Atlantic and Pacific oceans. Some 28,000 gannets are known to nest on the cliffs of Bonaventure Island in the Gulf of St. Lawrence and off the shores of Newfoundland.

Bird watching in Canada is a year-round activity which reaches its climax of almost frenzied excitement during the second and third weeks in May when the spring migration is at its height. It is then that the keen observer seizes every opportunity to be afield from dawn till dusk hoping for a "century run" --- a list of a hundred or more species in a single day's count. More often than not it turns out to be a grim grind as one covers the countryside for miles seeking the avian habitants of fields and hedgerows, woods and reedy marshes, shallow ponds and sandy lake shores.

It was August when I arrived in South Africa so my first field trip came at the end of your winter. The morning air was crisp and clear as we started out at about 7 a.m. for Zwartkoppies Picnic Paradise 22 miles northwest of Johannesburg. The drive along a rough and dusty road across open treeless country, except for one or two stands of Australian Bluegums, was nevertheless full of interest as my guides pointed out the many birds, all new to me. Presently two high

hills rose up sheer from the plain ahead of us. Hills of red rock on which there was little vegetation save for Protea bushes and spiky aloes rising to heights of 8 or 10 feet. The Crocodile river tumbled over its rocky bed and wound its way between the steep crags. No doubt a raging torrent in the rainy season, the stream was at this time a mere babbling brook by Canadian standards. Still, the wet stones looked very slippery and the banks too far apart for me to jump across. The youthful Tarzan in our party made it in one leap. Seeing my hesitation, he quickly removed his shoes and socks, came back and carried me in two giant strides, safely to the other side. Another day, at the Hennops River, this gallant Sir Walter Raleigh, bridged a deep narrow trench with a fallen log and once again piloted me across in safety. Very definitely I was a hindrance but if he minded the delay he gave no sign. A pleasanter or better informed companion for a bird outing it would be difficult to find.

Across the river there were birds all around us, mostly at eye level and easily seen in the small leafless trees and shrubs. There were black and Malachite and Double-collared Sunbirds, Bokmakieries, barbets -- pied and crested, so many names that sounded strange and fascinating to my Canadian ears. I could not keep track of them all. We followed the river through its narrow valley and scrambled up the jagged, perpendicular face of the Zwartkop, adding the half-collared kingfisher, masked weavers, mocking, chat and red-winged starlings to our steadily growing list. After we had enjoyed our picnic lunch in the warm noonday sunshine I asked Dr. Gilges to write in my notebook the names of the 44 species we had seen. They were as follows:

44 species seen at Zwartkop between 9.30 and 12.30

Fiscal Shrike, Glossy Starling, Red-winged Starling, Pied Starling, Crested Barbet, Pied Barbet, Kiwiki (crowned plover), Capped Wheatear, Cape Sparrow, Long-tailed Widow-bird, Cape Longclaw, Tawny Pipit, Spike-heeled Lark, Ant-eating Chat, Mountain Chat, Stone Chat, Mocking Chat, Cape Wagtail, Laughing Dove, Turtle Dove, Tawny-flanked Prinia, Black-eyed Bulbul, Cape White-eye, Green White-eye, Amethyst Sunbird, Malachite Sunbird, Double-collared Sunbird, Bokmakierie, Cape Weaver, Masked Weaver, White-throated Swallow, Namaqua Thrush, Natal Francolin, Brubru Shrike, Half-collared Kingfisher, Cape Robin, Bar-throated Apolis, Sand Martin, Vulture, Fairy Flycatcher, Fiscal Flycatcher, Marsh Sandpiper, Cattle Egret, Kestrel (sp.?).

A winter field trip in Ontario is quite a different story. One day in February, shortly after I returned home, three of us drove to the Maple Woods, a distance of 20 miles. It was clear and cold, the temperature somewhere in the 20's. Highways were bare but fields lay white under their blanket of new-fallen snow. We were warmly dressed in heavy slacks and hooded parkas, thick woollen socks, highcut or rubber boots, warm scarves and gloves. Leaving our car by the highway, we entered the woods. A friendly little chickadee called out his name in cheery greeting. In the top of a lofty tree, 7 pine grosbeaks were quietly feeding. There was no other sounds, nor tracks of any woodland creature on the path ahead of us. We came to the spot where an Arctic three-toed woodpecker had been seen but this day there was no sign of the bird, so we climbed a fence and crossed the corner of a farmer's field to

another section of the bush. Suddenly, from a hollow tree, a red fox darted out and in a flash disappeared in the woods. We enjoyed the tramp and revelled in the still white beauty of the winter day. Fingers and toes began to tingle so we were glad to turn back to the warmth of our heated car, there to sit in comfort and enjoy the sandwiches and steaming hot coffee from the thermos bottles we had brought with us. On our homeward trip we saw a flock of perhaps a hundred snow buntings in a windswept field. They would feed quietly and then, as if moved by a single impulse, rise into the air, wheeling and turning like whirling snowflakes, then alight on the ground again a few yards off. 15 species is a good average winter list so results were a bit disappointing on that occasion.

In mid-winter when the snow is deep and food is scarce, bird-lovers put up feeding stations about their homes. I have a tray on the sill outside my bedroom window. In the comfort of my warm room I can watch my avian boarders even though the temperature outdoors may drop to zero. Chickadees and nuthatches like crushed peanuts (ground nuts); bluejays and evening grosbeaks come for sunflower seeds and cracked corn; downy and hairy woodpeckers are attracted to a holder filled with suet.

The visitor to your country from overseas feels greatly handicapped by the lack of reference material. During the greater part of my stay in the Union, it was impossible to buy a copy of either Gill or Roberts. A friend loaned me the beginner's book and I was able to borrow Dr. Roberts' Birds of South Africa from the public library where it was kept in a glass cabinet under lock and key. Happily, new editions of both these books were available before I returned home and in a second-hand book shop in Durban I found copies of that trio of books on South African Flora, Birds and National Parks which was published during the war.

One realizes that the demand for nature books is very limited in a country with a population of only two to three million Europeans and that there are few people who can give full time to the study and solution of the problems of African wild life. Much has already been accomplished and the work seems to be going ahead at an astonishing rate. Your teeming bird world offers a challenge to scientist and amateur alike and the rapidly increasing membership of the Witwatersrand Bird Club augurs well for the future.

There are many ornithologists among the 4,297,000 people in Ontario. Add to their number the experts throughout the rest of Canada and the United States and you have some idea of the fund of knowledge we amateurs have to draw upon.

Every Canadian birder carries Peterson's Field Guide, a pocket-size book designed for quick identification in the field and considered as necessary a part of his equipment as his binoculars. After a day of bird-watching he may spend the evening making notes and "reading up" in any one of a dozen authoritative and well-illustrated volumes, detailed descriptions of the birds he had seen -- their size, color, nesting habits, habitat and range. Or leafing through these same volumes he may perhaps discover the identity of the "mystery bird" on his list.

There are many books of general interest to the amateur. Nature articles appear in popular magazines nearly every month. The Saturday edition of each of Toronto's three daily papers carries a timely bird article. Corresponding somewhat to African Wild Life is our Canadian Nature, a little magazine published five times a year, devoted to nature lore. Sylva is a small magazine published by the Department of Lands and Forests of Ontario, and issued in the interest of forest protection and management and fish and wild life conservation. The Canadian Geographical Journal contains many fine articles about birds.

Besides the works of our Canadian authorities there is available to us the accumulated knowledge of many noted American ornithologists, bird artists and outdoor photographers and a vast and varied literature on the subject.

With the celebration this year of its 45th anniversary, the National Audubon Society (USA) became international. A Canadian Audubon Society was formed and a unified continent-wide program for nature study and conservation is under way. The Society's wardens patrol sanctuaries covering some 2,000,000 acres of wilderness for the protection of wild life.

Bird banding -- ringing, as it is called in South Africa -- is superintended jointly by the United States and Canadian governments. The numbered aluminum bands are issued from Washington. Licences permitting the capture and banding of birds are issued only to individuals with a proven wide knowledge of bird life in their territory. When a banded bird is found in Canada the number is forwarded to the National Parks Bureau in Ottawa. In the United States the information is sent to the Fish and Wild Life Service, Washington. In his 20' x 40' garden one Toronto man has banded more than 5000 birds in the past 5 years.

In each of Canada's 10 provinces, in every state in the United States, in Alaska and in Mexico there are Audubon Junior Clubs sponsored by the National Audubon Society. Over 8,000,000 boys and girls have been members. Ten or more children in elementary and secondary schools with an adult advisor constitute a club. The annual fee of 15¢ entitles each member to a pin, 6 4-page bird leaflets with separate color plates and outline drawings for coloring. The club receives Audubon Junior Club News and a Teacher's Guide outlines bird and nature study projects and activities. It is not surprising, therefore, that the vast company of bird watchers in this country is growing by leaps and bounds. There are some 300 bird clubs in United States and Canada registered with the Audubon Society. In Toronto 2000 people belong to its bird and nature clubs and, throughout the province, clubs in 18 localities are affiliated in the Federation of Ontario Naturalists.

Audubon Screen Tours, a series of 5 lectures illustrated by colored moving pictures, began 4 years ago by showing pictures in a half dozen American cities. Since then their popularity has reached such heights that the tour now covers a circuit of 125 cities in the United States and Canada. In Toronto each lecture is given on two successive nights in an auditorium with a seating capacity of 1200 in order to accommodate the great number of people who subscribe to the series.

Birds may differ greatly on the two continents but I find that the folk who watch them are very much alike. They are friendly and cooperative, willing to give freely of their time, ready to share their knowledge to help and encourage the beginner. There isn't a snob nor a social climber in the lot. Wealth or the lack of it is no barrier. There is no class distinction. One autumn day in Toronto a veteran newspaper man who has been watching birds since his boyhood days, saw a mockingbird in his garden. He phoned a friend. The news spread and in 20 minutes there arrived 2 bank managers (though it was early afternoon), a furrier, a professional ornithologist from the museum, a man who feeds the animals in the nearby park, a professor of history at the University and a locomotive engineer -- all eager to see the very rare visitor from the south.

To the uninitiated, bird watchers are usually considered queer but harmless. Occasionally they have been apprehended as suspicious characters and possible spies. During the war an ardent bird man of my acquaintance was standing on a railroad right-of-way near a factory, with binoculars focused upon the flight of a bald eagle. Suddenly he was brought to earth by the rough summons of a policeman, whisked into a patrol car and taken to headquarters. Since he was not in the habit of carrying identification papers in his outing clothes, he had difficulty convincing the officer in charge that he was an innocent professor looking at birds.

Family and friends may have their jokes about our enthusiasm for our feathered friends. Cartoonists may make capital of it. But do we care? We have much more fun watching birds than they do poking fun at us.

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Two particularly noteworthy observations have come to hand recently, one from Dr. E.L.Brereton of Barrie, the other from Mrs. H.H.Marsh, a well-known member of the club.

Dr. Brereton writes, "...I heard of an interesting incident the other day. You will be interested as it is one that prompts some questions and discussion. Frank Munro, formerly of Alberta, now at Camp Borden, was showing me some 'snaps' he had taken. One picture was a cabin in the woods, in front of which on a small table was a box about two feet square, and on one side of the box was a Hairy Woodpecker. This box contained some meat put out there to freeze. Frank left the cabin in the morning for a hike. Returning in about two hours, he noticed a hole in one side of the box, and, approaching quietly he heard something moving in the box. He stole up and blocked the hole, then carefully opening the lid discovered the Hairy Woodpecker, which he caught. He soon set it free, removed the block from the hole, and kept watch to see if the bird would come back. It did not return that day, but next day he heard it hammering, and coming out he watched it make another hole on the opposite side of the box, then took the picture of it. How did the bird know there was meat there? Sense of smell? Did fear of being caught keep it away from the first hole? Was there no feeling of fear associated with another hole in the same box? Did it think two holes would make escape easier? Not likely the last..."

As Dr. Brereton suggests, this episode raises some very interesting questions. Birds are not supposed to have a sense of smell. And unless that meat was older than indicated, there could have been no movement in the box to prompt the woodpecker's action. I can only suppose that there may have been traces of fat or meat juice on the table which led the woodpecker to suspect the existence of additional delicacies inside the box. With that I will leave the reader to worry over the puzzle.

Mrs. Marsh's communication concerns a very different bird, but one following an equally curious course of action. She writes, "On the morning after Hallowe'en the school children spotted a 'great big brown bird - with no neck and a long yellow beak' on top of a peaked roof on our street. They phoned us and we dashed over! From the driveway we could see the bird - an American bittern. Having learned in earlier days that a 'bittern which landed in a tree' was probably an immature black-crowned heron, at first I pronounced it such, but I had finally to come to a different identification. This bird had black edgings to a white throat, and stood in the characteristic pose of a bittern (sometimes on one foot), head extended up in the air. We were conjecturing whether it thought it was camouflaging itself as a weather vane, or if it thought the children had not had the benefit of modern education and believed in storks. The bittern rested on the roof until about three in the afternoon - when, I believe, Mr. Bunker arrived on the scene, and banded it."

The sight of a bittern standing on top of a house in the midst of the city is certainly a startling one. Again there seems to be no very satisfactory explanation of such action. This bird was of course a migrant. It seems most likely that it became exhausted during its travels and picked on the nearest perch when the will to rest came upon it. Other members of the heron family, to which the bittern belongs, would, as Mrs. Marsh mentions in connection with the black-crowned night heron, have probably selected a perch in a tree, since that is customary with them. The bittern, however, though it will perch in trees, is far more used to standing on open ground in the marsh. Thus a rooftop would perhaps be preferable for it to a tree. Some years ago a bittern was seen standing on the steps of the Museum! Not waiting to enter the collection, I fancy, but probably fooled in that case by the shine of water on the steps - it was a wet night - into thinking it was descending into a marsh. On another occasion I was startled myself to see a lost bittern perched in a tree on Bedford Road. These are strange actions for the birds, another enigma for your consideration.

(Having made these speculations, I received a later report on Mrs. Marsh's bittern, stating that it had been taken to the Rivereale Zoo where it was found to be diseased. This would explain why this individual was liable to exhaustion. It does not remove the enigma from other cases, though it gives us a clue to follow.)

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During the past month bird watchers in the Toronto region have been astounded by the addition of two new species to the Toronto list. The first of these was the European teal (*Anas crecca*). A male of this species was seen by R. A. (Art) Smith at Marsh #3 on the Humber

on October 23. The second addition was the vermilion flycatcher (*Pyrocephalus rubinus mexicanus*), first seen by Tom Swift at Harcroft on October 29. This brings the Toronto list to 330 species.

The adding of the teal was not unexpected. In fact it has long been regarded as one of the additions that was most likely to be made. The flycatcher, however, was a tremendous surprise. It is a largely non-migratory species whose centre of abundance is Central and South America, and which reaches normally only into the South-western fringe of the United States. Occasionally birds appear along the Gulf Coast as far as Florida during winter. How this particular individual should have travelled so far, even from the species' usual wandering range, was (and is) a real puzzle. It was suggested that it might be an escape from some aviary. As this sort of escape occurs not infrequently, this possibility was investigated. A careful check has, however, revealed no such bird as "lost". Moreover, flycatchers are rarely kept in captivity, as it is virtually impossible to keep them alive. We are driven then to a meteorological explanation for the bird's appearance here. Just previous to its arrival a "strong flow of air", narrowly defined between "two cold fronts", took place from the region of New Mexico to the Great Lakes. This would have greatly facilitated the bird's wandering in our direction, though it was not the same kind of storm which picked up hooded warblers in Oklahoma a few years ago and brought them up to Toronto snowbanks. The flycatcher probably came on this wind, but it may have been storm-carried at an earlier date and have been roaming our region unseen for some time. This latter supposition seems less likely in view of the bird's highly coloured plumage. On the other hand this bird proved to be a young male of the year, and it would not have been as bright at an earlier date. The flycatcher, which could not have survived the cold weather, and which almost certainly, being of a non-migratory species, would not have returned southward, was collected by a Museum official, and now resides in the Museum collection as the first specimen not only for Toronto but for Canada. "First birds" are always collected, if possible, by the proper authorities, to establish an indisputable scientific record. Those birds whose occurrence here is not supported by such a record appear on the check list in parentheses.

Richard M. Saunders,

Editor.