

Toronto Field Naturalists' Club.



NEWSLETTER

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"Seeing Through Snakes" is the title of an article published recently by Mr. Percy Ghent in the Canadian X-Ray News Letter. Mr. Ghent is one of our best known members, who has done, and is doing, an admirable job in building up interest in nature study in Canada through his able nature news stories which are printed in newspapers from coast to coast. Since the present article appeared in a publication that is available to scarcely any of our members, I thought it would be worth while to reprint it here. Mr. Ghent has kindly given his consent. I would like to give here as well the astonishing radiograph of a garter snake which had swallowed a fair sized frog that accompanies the story originally, but that is impossible. It gives a wierd impression to see a picture of the snake with the skeleton of the frog lodged inside. Mr. Ghent's account is as follows:

"In the far-off days of youth we spent a whole winter on the Florida Everglades - growing tomatoes. It was so long ago that Miami was then a quiet seaside town, Coconut Grove a quieter suburb, and the United States government was still giving away 100-acre homesteads in one of the richest citrus-growing regions of South Florida. During interludes of leisure we sailed on the St. John's River, saw alligators waddling on its banks; admired the fantastic, moon-cast shadows from Spanish moss festooned from tree to tree along the river's winding ways, and gazed upon the azure beauty of water-hyacinths growing in such profusion on the stream that navigation even by steamer was difficult.

And we saw snakes. lots of snakes. Diamond-back rattlesnakes, moccasins, racers, blow-adders, and some other species were all encountered at intervals. Once, at the fringe of the Everglades, we found an adder with a prominent bulge at its middle. Dr. Sam Shields of Detroit, Mich., curing his arthritis by growing tomatoes on the 'Glades, was with us. He killed the snake. and did a neat dissection with his penknife. That bulge was a full-grown mocking-bird. It was hardly cold and scarce a feather was ruffled.

One week end we floundered through the watery miles and cypress swamps of the Everglades to Royal Palm Hummock with its stately tropical trees. A professional snake-hunter from Miami was with us, his quest, a big rattler to make a belt he had on order. An alligator nest with three-score eggs we found, a wandering band of Seminole Indians encountered, and every kind of snake but a decent-sized rattlesnake crossed the trail. Almost at the door of the shanty in the settlement whence we started, a magnificent diamond-back rattler, more than four feet long, was coiled to welcome us home. We never saw the belt it made, but it must have been a beauty.

Snake's Inner Mechanism. Equipped by nature for its special way of life - as all other creatures are - the inner mechanism of the snake has interesting features. In long snakes the number of vertebrae sometimes reaches 400. Rib ration is equally generous. Ribs make the lateral loops of the body and their backward pressure on the ground motivated by muscles exceedingly slender and numerous, make the snake's progress graceful, silent and sinuous. Food is neither chewed nor torn but swallowed whole. Prey greater in diameter than their own bodies is swallowed with ease because snake mandibles are joined by ligaments of such elastic quality that any required stretch occurs on the instant to embrace oversize lunches. Connecting the multiple scales of the reptile too, there's a soft, elastic skin permitting wide distention. Hence, when a frog or other animal twice the diameter of the snake is swallowed, the process is not painful for the snake, no matter how acute the momentary suffering of its victim. Slender, backward pointing teeth on jaws and palate prevent such victims from wriggling out to liberty once seized.

Snakes have neither shoulders nor hips; no legs, feet, knees or sternum. But they can take care of themselves and get along nicely, thank you, without such accessories in their anatomical architecture."

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Winter begins officially for birdwatchers in Toronto on December 1, and lasts until the end of February. When the first of December is reached therefore the observers are thereafter constantly on the lookout to discover possible additions to their winter list of birds.

It was with great interest consequently that I heard a fortnight ago that a Myrtle warbler had been seen at a feeding station north of the city. Warbler records in winter are extremely rare. My nearest to a winter record till now was a yellowthroat seen on November 26, 1939 at Holland Marsh. In thirty years of observation Mr. J. L. Baillie had seen a warbler, also a yellowthroat, but once in winter in this region. There are a very few other scattered records. The presence of the myrtle warbler was confirmed on December 11, by Miss Northcott of 37 John Avenue, York Mills, whose feeding station the bird had been frequenting for some time. Miss Northcott told me at the same time that a ruby-crowned kinglet was also a regular attendant, and that both birds were feeding on suet, placed in a suet log hung on a clothes line! With this assurance Jim Baillie, Jack Satterly and I drove up at the lunch hour on December 13, full of eagerness to get a look at these two birds, for no one of us had ever seen them in winter before.

When we arrived around 12.30 we were confronted with the usual situation on such ventures. Both the birds had been seen only ten minutes before. However, to-day it did not mean we would miss them, or even have to wait for hours. In another ten minutes, after a flock of chickadees had made themselves very busy on the feeding logs, first the kinglet then the warbler both appeared. The kinglet was quite fearless, coming onto the suet log which was suspended on the clothes line, as soon as the chickadees left. When one of the chickadees returned, the kinglet immediately gave way, dipping to the ground and finding there plenty to pick up, perhaps crumbs of suet that had fallen from the chickadees pecking. The warbler announced its presence with the usual chup alarm note, made as if to land on the suet log, but saw us and flew on. Twice it returned, but could not muster courage to face us, so made off up the valley, flying a hundred yards or more before coming down. I would have thought that a bird which has been visiting a feeding station for a month would be tamer than this. Before leaving we spoke to Mrs. Buck, Miss Northcott's cousin, who lives here, and told her that on Sunday December 18, birders making the Christmas census would be around early in the morning to have a look for the rare winterers, for the warbler has never been on the census list, and the kinglet only twice.

The addition of these two birds brought my winter list to an even 120 species. I give the list here as a guide to those who would like to have some indication of the birds that may be seen here in winter. A more complete list of possibilities is to be found on the Brodie Club's Christmas census count, the results of which for the period 1925-1945 are published as an appendix in my book, Flashing Wings. My winter list is the following: Loon, red-throated loon, Holboell's grebe, horned grebe, pied-billed grebe, great blue heron, black-crowned night heron, Canada goose, lesser snow goose, blue goose, mallard, black duck, European widgeon, baldpate, American pintail, green-winged teal, shoveller, redhead, ring-necked duck, canvas-back, greater scaup duck, lesser scaup duck, American golden-eye, bufflehead, old squaw, king elder, white-winged scoter, American scoter, ruddy duck, hooded merganser, American merganser, red-breasted merganser, goshawk, sharp-shinned hawk, Cooper's hawk, red-tailed hawk, red-shouldered hawk, American rough-legged hawk, bald eagle, marsh hawk, duck hawk pigeon hawk, sparrow hawk, ruffed grouse, ring-necked pheasant, American coot, Wilson's snipe, glaucous gull, Iceland gull, great black-backed gull, herring gull, ring-billed gull, Bonaparte's gull, kittiwake, rock dove, mourning dove, screech owl, horned owl, snowy owl, barred owl, great grey owl, long eared owl, short eared owl, saw-whet owl, belted king-fisher, flicker, pileated woodpecker, red-headed woodpecker, hairy woodpecker, downy woodpecker, Arctic three-toes woodpecker, horned lark, Canada jay, blue jay, crow, black-capped chickadee, tufted titmouse, white-breasted nuthatch, red-breasted nuthatch, brown creeper, winter wren, Carolina wren, short-billed marsh wren, mockingbird, Robin, hermit thrush, golden-crowned kinglet, ruby-crowned kinglet, Bohemian waxwing, cedar waxwing, northern shrike, starling, myrtle warbler, English sparrow, meadowlark, red-wing, rusty blackbird, grackle, cowbird, cardinal, evening grosbeak, purple finch, pine grosbeak, hoary redpoll, redpoll, pine siskin, goldfinch, red crossbill, white-winged crossbill, towhee, Savannah sparrow, vesper sparrow, slate-coloured junco, tree sparrow, field sparrow, white-throated sparrow, swamp sparrow, song sparrow, lapland longspur, snow bunting.

A winter time project that club members might well undertake on their own or collectively is the erection of nesting boxes for wood ducks in suitable spots. The wood duck is now on the increase, thanks to the beneficent effect of protective legislation. But if the pressure from shooting is reduced, the elimination of proper nesting sites through the draining of marshes, swamps, ponds, and sloughs, and the cutting of trees, is seriously checking its recovery, and in many places putting this most beautiful of our ducks in renewed danger of elimination. Naturalists can help greatly by increasing the number of nesting sites available in the remaining swamps and other proper areas.

Since the wood-duck is one of the few tree nesting ducks which frequently uses abandoned woodpecker holes, it can be attracted to nesting boxes of the proper construction in its natural breeding places. Jack Miner, and others in this country have had marked success in attracting this lovely bird to their neighbourhood. Members of the Club who have access to woodland pools, swamps and the like, could do no better service to our wood ducks, and to themselves, - for who would not enjoy life the more for having some of these handsome birds bear them all the summer - than by making nest boxes available.

Specifications for wood duck nesting boxes may be found in J.H. Baker (ed.) The Audubon Guide to Attracting Birds 115. They may also be had from the Department of Lands and Forests, Wild Life Management Service, Ottawa. For convenience of the members, I give the information as supplied by Ottawa, here.

BOX: The nest box (see drawing for dimensions) should be made of rough, unplanned lumber, preferably 1 inch thick. Use galvanized nails, toe-nailed into boards to prevent drawing. A round hole 4" in diameter should be cut in the face of the box about 6" from the top. DO NOT stain, creosote or paint; leave natural wood finish. Make covers tight to prevent leakage. Fasten top to both sides of box with wire or hook fasteners to facilitate inspection. Fill box with not more than 3-4 inches of clean pine shavings.

POLES: Cedar poles about 4-6 inches in diameter should be driven firmly into the marsh bottom, so that they project 6-8 feet above water level. Suitable lengths of 2 inch pipe may also be used.

ERECTION: Place box on pole so that top is about 5 to 6 feet above water. Attach back of box at top and bottom to pole with two 50 or 60-penny spikes (drill small lead holes to avoid splitting board.) Another method is to wire box to pole. Wrap box securely to pole with soft No.9 wire at top and bottom; then staple wire on box to prevent slipping or turning. If pipe is used, attach box with 2 U-bolts. Boxes and poles may be more easily placed in the marshes during winter when there is ice. Holes are chopped in the ice, poles erected and boxes attached without the need of boats to work from and carry equipment.

LOCATION: Be sure boxes are located some distance from the shore so that they will be completely surrounded by water during nesting season. Boxes can be erected on marshes as close together as 30 feet and there may be 12 boxes on a 30-acre marsh. This includes both tree and pole boxes. The maximum nesting density has not yet been determined.

Boxes should be erected and ready for occupancy prior to the wood duck nesting season, which occurs shortly after the ice melts in the swamps. Unnecessary disturbance of boxes should be avoided during the height of the nesting season.

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This winter there is an unusual influx of northern shrikes. They have been reported from all parts of the Toronto region. The shrike, despite the fact that it lives very largely on other birds, is a beautiful bird itself, a songster of note on occasion, and a valuable member of the avian community, one necessary to the balance of life in nature.

During the past week I received from Mr. Alan Telfer, one of our members, an interesting account of a recent observation of a shrike, which I take pleasure in bringing to your attention. Mr. Telfer writes: "I thought that you, and perhaps your readers, might be interested in an observation of a shrike's eating habits, made last Saturday, December 10. Having missed the T.F.N.C. field group by going to the wrong location, I returned home, and headed up that branch of the Rosedale Ravine which crosses the Clifton Road. Just before the sun set I was immediately below the St. Clair bridge, in a private estate which extends into the ravine. I spotted a northern shrike at the top of a willow, and had been watching it for five minutes when it suddenly swooped downwards and landed in a tangle of thickets where I could not observe its actions. I heard nothing because of some garrulous skiers behind me, and after a few minutes I proceeded into the thick bushes. I had not gone far when I came upon what I had half expected, a field of combat. It was merely a scattering of feathers and a small spot of blood. Thirty feet away I observed the shrike, pecking industriously at its meal, which I could not see. When I approached at first it picked up the bird in its beak and flew laboriously to a new perch. When I approached the second time, it seemed extremely loathe to leave its week-end banquet, and let me come within six feet, while it kept on eating voraciously. This time when it flew it left the bird stuck on the end of a jagged branch, and watched me with a malignant eye from a nearby tree while I examined the carcass. This was an English sparrow, decapitated, and with the top part of the breast eaten away. It was a hungry shrike indeed, for as soon as I had replaced the morsel and retreated a distance, it flew back and recommenced its meal with much élan."

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On December 3, Marshall Bartman and I made a morning trip to Whitby Harbor, one of the best winter spots in the Toronto area. When we arrived about eleven, we went at once to Hospital Point, only to find duck hunters with decoys and a blind in occupation. I had thought the shooting season over, but learned later it did not end until the 10th.

The marsh and harbour were frozen, hence the attention of the hunters to the lake. On the ice, however, was a mass of gulls, the regular wintering concentration at this point. While Marshall drove the car back to the hospitak gate, I walked through the marsh beside the harbor. As I drew near the hospital dump, I saw some of the gulls

standing apart on the ice nearby, and amongst them I could detect a "white gull". When I came within hailing distance, I called him over. We advanced across the dump cautiously toward these gulls. Happily, though all the others took off the Iceland remained, regarding us with curiosity, until satisfied with watching its standing foe. I rushed in its direction, forcing it into flight so that we could see the wings and the appearance of the bird in the air. It flew over the ice to the massed flock and settled in their midst. Once there we could see how it stood out among the herring gulls which made up the greatest part of the flock. A great black-back which took wing shortly afterwards gave us a chance to compare size, for it could then be seen how much smaller the Iceland was, it being almost exactly of a size with the herrings. Marshall noted the curious elongated and humped look that distinguishes the Iceland's head. It was his first sight of this species.

We drove around to the other side of the harbour, and started to go into the city dump, but were forestalled by a dump truck; went on to the beach, expecting to have a snack there, but found the harbor entrance and beach occupied by more duck hunters. They had decoys placed just off the harbor mouth, and one man, whom we didn't at first notice, was lying beneath a tarpaulin at the lake edge of the eastern breakwall. So closely the color of cement was the tarpaulin with the man beneath, that the whole resembled a roughness in the top of the wall. Disgusted we drove up the road through the summer cottages to the concession road which comes out to the lake just east of the beach, and which marks the eastern boundary of the Toronto region. There we had our snack in the car. While we were eating two of the duck hunters appeared on the lake in a punt with an out-board motor. After making a brief circle they spied a goldeneye asleep on the water not far off the beach. Toward this wretched duck they directed their boat, and when near enough, banged away. Two shots were fired. Then, though we were up on the bluff, perhaps 300 yards distant, we could hear one distinctly say "The - - - of a duck isn't dead yet." This was followed by a blind shot. They then drew along side, picked up the duck and made off toward the harbor. Here was a perfect demonstration of what happens to countless ducks. Had that wounded bird been near enough to the marsh reeds to have floundered into them before the men got to it, they would very likely never have found it, and it would have died there. Three shots to kill a sleeping duck was certainly remarkable marksmanship. The callous action of this pair and their unsportmanlike action disgusted us completely. Nor did they know what they were shooting at, for as they picked the dead duck up I heard one say "Aw-- it's a sawbill" which most certainly it was not. He had shot merely at a sleeping duck, without regard to the fact that it might be a protected species, and did not know even when he had it in his hands what he had shot.

After our snack I stepped out of the car to have another look around. Peering momentarily up into the blue sky, I saw a group of three birds flashing white. So high were they that I had no idea at first what they might be. My initial feeling was that they were pigeons, so high as to seem very small, but when I had my binoculars on them I could see that they were snow buntings. Round and round they circled, directly overhead, in a small circumference, several times. Vaguely we could hear their soft rolling whistles. They

acted very much like a flock of geese which had broken formation, and is obviously puzzled what to do next. My feeling was that they were debating whether to come down in the broad field that tops this point. Finally the decision went against descent, and they flew off to the west along the shore. I had difficulty estimating their height above us. Knowing their size I realised it could not be as much as when I supposed them to be pigeons, yet on a clear day like this it must be considerable. I decided it must be at least 500 feet, and may have been as much as 1,000 feet.

Returning to the city dump, we found it free of people, and occupied by the usual great flock of starlings and house sparrows. Indeed the latter were massed so thickly at one spot that they seemed like an animated mat. When my coming had ousted them most reluctantly from this particular point, I saw that someone had dumped a huge amount of seeds, thus forming, without design, I suppose, a wonderful "feeding tray", fully appreciated by the sparrow horde. I should have gathered some of the seeds so as to find what it was the crowd was devouring so greedily. Unfortunately I did not think of this until too late. The seeds were a little smaller than those of the sunflower, were black and triangular in shape, the sections of the triangle being depressed and set into each other like the vanes of a windmill.

Along the edges of the dump, tree sparrows and a song sparrow revelled in the dense growth of weeds which are well laden with seed this season. Further away in the cattails, we saw two swamp sparrows chasing each other. A single pheasant track showed still another bird to be in the neighborhood. This spot is in prime condition to serve its usual function as a haven in winter.

As we watched, the whole crowd of starlings and sparrows suddenly shot into the air, dividing into smaller flocks and flying off in all directions. We were so intent upon determining if any redwings or other unseen straggler were amongst these birds that we did not think to ask ourselves why the entire body had so abruptly taken off. We were reminded of the question when I caught sight of a robin-sized bird, obviously a stranger, speeding after one of the small flocks. This was a shrike. The sudden explosion was now explained, though we hadn't seen the shrike arrive at all. It pursued the chosen flock into the trees near the houses that border the marsh to the north and then we lost sight of it. Getting into the car we followed and tried to locate the shrike. Failing to the west of the road, we finally found it on the other side, perched characteristically on top of a large spruce tree. No victim dangled from its talons, so it had evidently failed in its chase. Several of the small flocks of starlings and sparrows were now perched in neighboring trees. They and the shrike observed each other for a few moments, then the hunter dipped down into the gardens and made off. Try as we would we could not find it again. I was reminded that either a sparrow hawk or a shrike makes this area its winter hunting ground every year. Why not, with such easy and numerous prey always at hand.

On the way back we glimpsed a sparrow hawk plunge swiftly to a stop from its perch alongside the Queen Elizabeth Way, to cross the highway and shoot down into a little valley. Marshall stopped, but we could not find the hawk, though it had little place to go. Marshall

remarked that it was after a "grey bird" possibly a house sparrow, but the end of the story will in this case never be written by us for we saw it not. The tremendous speed of the little falcon was a dramatic sight.

We made one further stop down the east road at Frenchman's Bay by Gallinule Bridge. The pool and channel, extremely low with the falling lake level, were both frozen, though not yet solid enough to walk on. We walked westward along the channel, seeking winterers amongst the cattails and shrubs. Another than we was on the same quest, for as we were standing in the field a hundred feet or so from the gate a car came down the road, flushing a bird we had not seen (from the fence row). It was again a shrike, a fine grey bird this one as compared with the other a brown immature. This fellow alighted in a hawthorn near the bridge and gave us an excellent view, more than making up for the bird we could not see well at Whitby Harbor. After a while it left this perch, and flew with a dipping flight low over the field to the east of the road. It kept on as far as the farm a quarter of a mile towards the lake, where we lost sight of it. Later, upon our return to the car, Marshall once more had it in view when it came dashing back from the farm along the fence row on the same side of the road, in hot pursuit of a small bird. The two disappeared in a flash across the pool and into the wood on the knoll beyond. The intended victim was probably a tree sparrow, but the outcome of the chase was again uncertain. Our last view of the shrike was of it perched high in an elm tree from which vantage point it was again surveying the countryside for sign of life interesting to it.

It would be interesting to know if each of the shrikes here this winter sets up a hunting territory. I suspect that this is the case. The one at Frenchman's Bay almost certainly was patrolling his ground. However, one could only verify this by prolonged and careful observation. I would have liked to have seen a second shrike appear. If my hypothesis is true, a fight would have ensued, probably of a noteworthy intensity, for hunters of this sort do not easily suffer competition in their chosen region. This is a question for bird watchers to study.

A well-fluffed sparrow hawk watching the railway embankment near the Guild Road, a traditional perch, was our last bird sight. It brought our count of that species to four for the trip. As usual, a jaunt to this eastern quarter of our region had proven worth while.

R. M. Saunders,

Editor.