

THE NEWSLETTER

of the Toronto Field Naturalists' Club

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Mid-March and the Humber is flowing free! Full and strong it thrusts along to Ontario and the sea, bearing in its murky bosom the freight of a thousand fields, the tribute of a subject land. All along its banks lies the wreckage of February's bonds, shattered and cast aside, the battle litter of the last great struggle between ageing Winter and the stream, bursting with new-found power. Above the countless masses of relic ice the newly-arrived redwings shout joyous conk-a-rees, and display brilliantly flashing epaulets to the triumphant sun.

Among the marshes and the ponds, the fingers of Spring have got hold of the ice. They are pressing it down, dragging it away from the shore, letting in the warm sunlight to the dark waiting water beneath. Out in the middle they are poking holes in the rotten, old, grey blanket of winter. In some places they have torn away a whole section of the tattered covering, and revealed a stretch of dancing, liberated water.

Here the water fowl have come to share in the celebration of the advent of the season of new life. Here smart-looking golden-eyes flock. All winter they have endured the boreal blasts, the silencing, friendless ice, the brutal, floe-filled waves of the vast lake. Now the beloved ponds and marshes are opening their hearts anew. The day of vernal reunion has come. How those zestful black-and-white males snap back their heads, and utter the buzzing calls of love! How they dash at each other, chase madly about, dive under the water and emerge in a commotion of splashing wings, throwing a spray of jewelled drops into the air. The ruddy-headed, white-striped, brownish females paddle around, calmly eyeing this extraordinary show. Once in a while some over-ardent male cannot stand such indifference any longer, and dashes head on at one of the unmoved. She, and her neighbors, certainly get going then - scattering wildly and diving in all directions to escape the mad swain. But then too sometimes you see a female coyly laying her head out full length on the water, gazing most languorously up at a proud, disdainful male. Two fine male ring-necks, lustrous in new spring dress, drift sedately a little way off, untouched by the whole display. But they have no lady friends near. A few days from now they won't be so detached and serene by half.

Down at the great lake itself, there where the Humber is pouring its turgid flood into the vaster waters, the wasting of winter, the prelude of spring is as evident as up the river valley. Over the wide brown expanse beyond, the river mouth and the breakwalls hangs an impenetrable grey mist, the breath of the frigid lake, loyal yet to its hivernal lord, - a vain protestation of faith for a lost cause. Far, far above the insistent sun smiles down, amused if it can be, surely victorious. In and out of the mist plunge the laughing ringbills, fresh from the south. At the landward edge of the mist a thousand old squaws disport themselves, the advance guard of the great host that is foregathering for the long flight to the Arctic summer home. A passing plover shrieks, "kill-deer, kill-deer," as if winter's dying gasps were a huge joke to be told far and wide. But he senses the truth, the wintry monarch's reign is well-nigh over.

Out in the fields and along the country roads the heralds of the great change are at work spreading the wonderful news. Acre after acre, the brown and yellow grasses, recumbent still in their beds, but with the heavy covers thrown off, rested after the long winter's sleep, are ready for the stirring message. The uncovered earth

in ploughed fields is dark with a watery burden, the metamorphosed blanket of snow, water that will provide the sustenance of a summer's crop for a hungry world. In the hollows of the fields gleaming pools tell how short a while it is since the snow gave up its wintry aspect. And on shady north and east-facing banks we may discover rather shabby remnants of the once-elegant robe. In the darker corners of the woods almost pristine bits may be seen, but even there the probing fingers of spring are deftly fraying the surface. Above the lingering snow the pussy-willows mock with gentle humor, and softly announce the gay new time.

Along the country lanes men are burning off dead grass and weeds to make way for vital new vegetation. They are repairing fences, testing the soil for ploughing. Overhead passes flock after flock of migrant birds. There are blackbirds of all sorts, redwings and cowbirds, grackles and rusties, all mixed up together, talking to each other in low chucks as they press on northeastward over the country, towards their nesting grounds. Crows, singly and in flocks, follow the same route; some are silent, some caw loudly, full of themselves and their message. Great hawks circle overhead, or flash along in hurried impatience, retracing their fall travels.

Many of the birds have already found the homeland for which they sought. Through all our fields ring the cheery whistles of the meadow-larks. Scarcely a shrub rising above the dun grasses but is being tested by some exuberant song-sparrow as a boundary marker for his newly-acquired territory. Here and there a grackle is fanning his tail atop some high tree and creaking in a most earnest manner. Saucy cowbirds whistle their bad intentions, and robins clamor a good deal without bursting much into song. Their ladies haven't arrived yet either, but will soon.

Not far west of Lambton there is a long, wet field that is a treasure spot in early spring. On this mid-March day a clamorous flock of ring-billed gulls is standing right in the middle of this field on old ice and gleaming mud. That is, many of them are standing at any one time - but there is a constant coming and going. The sky is always dotted with soaring, dashing, circling gulls, all full of wild spirits and raucous noise. The gulls seemed to be in a playful mood. When on the ground they all of a sudden let out the most alarming screams, sounding like, "Help, Help, Help." Then, from overhead, as if gratified by one's alarm, comes a series of deep-throated "Haw-Haw-Haws!" This merriment goes on and on. Perhaps they are a bit previous in their timing, and think it April Fool's Day!

Along with the gulls are many ducks. Most of these doubtless, from their tell-tale markings, are onetime members of the overfed flock of blacks and mallards at Sunnyside. But who is to say how many are more respectable birds of the same species from other places? Respectable or not beauty speaks from the velvet-green heads of the male mallards, and from the royal blue speculum of the blacks. Far off to one side, and apart, there appears a graceful pair. The delicate white stripe on the male's neck raised above the grass to watch for danger, betokens the pintail. Not far from them a white capped head is bobbing about, seen for a moment, then vanishing as the bird feeds. This is a baldpate, another newcomer. One might well turn away, satisfied that all the ducks have been seen, did not a last look reveal a tiny duck, so small it seems to be nestling under a huge black that is preening itself. Though breast on it can not at first be made out for its head is turned back under its wing. Finally a suspicion of a white crescent along each foreflank gives a clue. And then, fortunately, the black moves so as to disturb the little one. Immediately as it turns side to and shows its dark green head there is a wonderful view of a male green-winged teal.

This field, like all the countryside is vibrant with life these days. But yet it is not the full tide. Spring is not here. This is the announcement, the proclamation.

Ah, but that is too pretentious a word. It is a whispering in the fields. There is still an air of waiting, and expectant hush, seen in the gentle haze, felt in the caressing breeze, as all living things listen for the rustle of the skirts of Spring across the hopeful land.

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This issue of the Newsletter appears to be an appropriate number in which to include another migration chart. This one refers to the grosbeak, finch, and sparrow group of birds. Mr. Baillie has kindly co-operated as on previous charts, and again his figures are for a twenty-five year period while mine are for a twelve year period. Since the same plan and abbreviations are used as before no further explanation is needed for the use of the chart. It is of interest to note how many of this group of seed-eaters stay with us over the winter, or come to us only in the winter. The specifically "winter birds" in the group have been included on a previous chart, but it seemed worthwhile to have the entire group here, as it comes on the checking cards in its relation to the spring migrational movement.

GROSBEAK, FINCH, AND SPARROW CHART.

SPRING MIGRATION

TORONTO REGION

<u>Name of Bird</u>		<u>Average Arrival Date</u>	<u>Average Departure Date</u>	<u>Earliest Spring Date</u>	<u>Latest Spring Date</u>	<u>No. of Years Recorded</u>
Cardinal	S	Res.	Su.	Res.	Su.	12
	B	"	"	"	"	17
Rose-breasted Grosbeak	S	May 11	"	May 3	"	11
	B	May 12	"	May 2	"	22
(Blue Grosbeak)	S	----	----	----	----	0
	B	----	----	----	----	0
Indigo Bunting	S	May 15	Su.	May 6	Su.	10
	B	May 24	"	May 12	"	17
Evening Grosbeak	S	Win.	Feb.10	Win.	Mar.29	6
	B	"	Feb. 7	"	Mar.29	5
Common Purple Finch	S	Res.	Su.	Res.	Su.	11
	B	"	"	"	"	24
Pine Grosbeak	S	Win.	Feb.23	Win.	Apr.12	8
	B	"	Jan.25	"	Apr. 8	10
Arctic Redpoll	S	"	Mar.16	"	Apr. 3	9
	B	"	Feb. 1	"	Feb. 1	1
Redpollled Linnet	S	"	Apr. 7	"	Apr.23	10
	B	"	Feb.11	"	May 1	18
Pine Siskin	S	"	Mar.27	"	May 5	10
	B	"	Mar.13	"	May 22	14
American Goldfinch	S	"	Su.	"	Su.	12
	B	"	"	"	"	25
Red Crossbill	S	"	Feb. 4	"	Feb. 4	3
	B	"	Feb.26	"	Mar.27	2
White-winged Crossbill	S	"	Mar. 6	"	Apr. 9	5
	B	"	Jan.19	"	Apr. 17	4
Eastern Towhee	S	Apr.21	Su.	Occ.Win.	Su.	12
	B	Apr.21	"	" "	"	24
(Lark Bunting)	S	----	----	----	----	0
	B	----	----	----	----	0

<u>Name of Bird</u>		<u>Average Arrival Date</u>	<u>Average Departure Date</u>	<u>Earliest Spring Date</u>	<u>Latest Spring Date</u>	<u>No. of Years Recorded</u>
Savannah Sparrow	S	Apr. 17	Su.	Mar.30	Su.	12
	B	Apr. 14	"	Mar.29	"	25
Grasshopper Sparrow	S	May 26	"	May 12	"	6
	B	May 13	"	Apr.25	"	3
Leconte's Sparrow	S	June 11	"	May 29	"	6
	B	May 27	"	May 22	"	3
Henslow's Sparrow	S	May 20	"	Mar.24	"	4
	B	May 20	"	May 12	"	2
Sharp-tailed Sparrow	S	May 31	May 31	May 31	May 31	1
	B	June 3	June 3	May 29	June 8	2
Vesper Sparrow	S	Apr. 15	Su.	Mar.25	Su.	12
	B	Apr. 17	"	Apr. 3	"	25
Lark Sparrow	S	---	---	---	---	0
	B	---	---	---	---	0
Slate-coloured Junco	S	Win.	May 9	Win.	May 30(Su.)	12
	B	"	May 6	"	Su.	25
Red-backed Junco	S	"	Feb.6	"	Mar.14	3
	B	---	---	---	---	0
Tree Sparrow	S	"	May 2	"	May 15	12
	B	"	Apr. 25	"	May 5	25
Chipping Sparrow	S	Apr. 24	Su.	Mar.30	Su.	12
	B	Apr. 23	"	Apr. 6	"	25
(Clay-coloured Sparrow)	S	May 14	May 29	May 14	May 29	1
	B	May 29	May 30	May 28	May 30	2
Field Sparrow	S	May 4	Su.	Apr. 9	Su.	11
	B	Apr. 26	"	Apr. 6	"	20
(Harris's Sparrow)	S	---	---	---	---	0
	B	---	---	---	---	0
White-crowned Sparrow	S	May 6	May 20	May 1	May 26	12
	B	May 12	May 18	May 4	May 25	24
White-throated Sparrow	S	Apr.23	May 24	Occ.Win.	Occ.Su.	12
	B	Apr.25	May 22	" "	" "	24
Fox Sparrow	S	Apr.14	Apr.23	Apr. 5	May 2	10
	B	Apr.17	Apr.23	Mar. 13	May 3	19
Lincoln's Sparrow	S	May 10	May 20	May 3	May 26	8
	B	May 16	May 16	May 4	Occ.Su.	14
Swamp Sparrow	S	Apr.12	Su.	Occ.Win.	Su.	12
	B	Apr.17	"	" "	"	25
Song Sparrow	S	Win.	"	Win.	"	12
	B	"	"	"	"	25
Lapland Longspur	S	"	Mar. 7	"	Apr.26	8
	B	"	Jan.30	"	May 16	10
Snow Bunting	S	"	Mar. 4	"	Apr.26	11
	B	"	Jan.21	"	Apr. 6	15

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Many people are seeking advice these days on the proper kind of binoculars to purchase for use in the observation of birds. For that reason I set down here a few remarks on that subject. That any serious bird student must eventually obtain a pair of binoculars is so obvious to all who have had the slightest experience in this field, that there is no need to take up space laboring that point. The real question is what sort of binoculars are best for this purpose.

The first requirement is without doubt a clear glass, having a high light-giving power. Many, if not all of the poorer, and cheaper, glasses have a more or less beclouded and blurred effect. Often there is only a clear centre in the lenses, with a progressively blurred effect to the edges. This cuts down the effective field of vision drastically. In good binoculars the lenses are clear, i.e. give a sharp definition of the observed object right to the edge of the glass.

The second requirement is a large field of vision. This is necessary especially in the observation of moving creatures like birds. If the focussed binoculars allow you to watch only a very limited area, then obviously it is going to be much more difficult to keep a moving bird in the line of observation. The watching of hawks, gulls, swallows, swifts, and other birds so often seen high in the sky is made much easier with binoculars having a large field. So too is the observation of ducks and other water fowl seen at a distance on a body of water. Moreover a large field of vision means an increase of light absorption, granted a good set of lenses, and this greater light absorption is of real value in dark woods, at early dawn, in the late afternoon, and on dull days. What it means in the identification of color patterns can only be seen when an average glass is compared with a good glass on the same object under the same conditions.

The third requirement is the degree of magnification. This is placed third advisedly. Many people think that they are getting better binoculars if the power of magnification is high. For birding purposes this is a fallacy. Except for very special work no observer needs more than 8x binoculars. To sacrifice the first two requirements for the sake of getting more "power" is a very serious mistake for the observer. My own experience, and that of many others, would lead me to believe that no real increase of efficiency results from such increase of "power", but that conversely there is real loss especially if the field is reduced. Also almost all people find it impossible to hold binoculars of greater magnification than 8x with enough steadiness to prevent unpleasant vibration of the image seen. The greater the "power" the more difficult this becomes. High-power binoculars have to be rested on some fixed stand to be really effective. This requires carrying around a tripod arrangement as a rule.

There is a fourth requirement that will be of greatest importance of children and ladies, that is weight. Most new binoculars are of light weight, their frame being of aluminum or some light composite material such as plastic. Older binoculars are usually considerably heavier. Some of the types with the largest fields are still both weighty and bulky.

A fifth requirement that is not so important but which should be taken into consideration is central focussing. Most military binoculars, and many of the larger field varieties have separate eye-piece focussing. This necessitates setting each eye-piece separately. Clearly this is not as convenient as working a central focussing wheel which controls both eye-pieces, and might at times handicap one in keeping in touch with some swift-moving bird. However, those who use separate focus binoculars state that there is really little difficulty in making adjustments, and that adjustments are not as frequent as one might think. Separate-focus binoculars are less likely to get dirty from the entrance of dust, etc. in the lens tubes.

With these requirements in mind we may say, I believe, that for all-round bird observation the most suitable binoculars are the following sizes: 6x30, 8x40 or 42, 7x50. The first two sizes may usually be had with central focussing. The third size is almost always found with separate focussing. The third size is also considerably more bulky. On the other hand it has the largest field and the greatest light-giving power. Without doubt a good 6x30 will serve all the ordinary needs of the bird observer. Sizes with a smaller field than these are much less desirable.

There are now many German binoculars on the second-hand market. For the most part these are excellent binoculars, but one should be very careful in purchasing second-hand glasses of any make. Unless you know the seller very well, you should take the precaution of having an expert examine the binoculars before making the purchase. If you cannot do this then, besides looking for the requirements noted above, you should turn the binoculars upside down and look through the large ends. In this way you can detect cracked or broken lenses, dirt, and out-of-line lenses.

There is no doubt that before the war German lenses were the best. A good pair of Zeiss, Leitz, Hensolt, or other German binoculars was the dream of every observer. Even today no one would be wise to turn down hastily the chance to get such a glass.

Nevertheless, it should be remembered that, whereas, before the war German glasses, if broken, could be easily and quickly replaced or repaired, that nowadays those German factories and that trade are destroyed. Parts and repairs for such glasses may be very difficult to have for a long time to come, if not forever.

Moreover, one of the war developments was the making of very fine binoculars in both the United States and Canada. Unfortunately the products of Research Enterprise Ltd., are not available on the Canadian market at the present time. A great many of the excellent binoculars made by that company are in existence, but when and if they will be for sale I cannot say. Should they come on the market they will be very much worth while getting. I have seen one pair of 6x30's made by this company and can vouch for its excellence.

Barring the appearance of these binoculars on the market there remain the American glasses. Of these the products of Bausch and Lomb are of first-class excellence, and will rank with any German glass. There are other good American binoculars, but these are the best. The great drawback is their expense.

I might say, however, that good binoculars are all expensive, though not all to the same degree. In my own opinion the bird observer should regard his purchase of binoculars as a life-time investment. Considered in this light the expense may be thought of as spread over a great many years. My own binoculars, which many of you have seen and looked through, were an expensive investment some years before the war - but with each passing year the amount they have cost becomes divided by one more year, and soon it will be a nominal sum indeed that I am paying for a year's maximum pleasure!

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