

Tufted Titmouse

TORONTO FIELD NATURALISTS' CLUB

ANNUAL MEETING

Royal Ontario Museum, Monday, May 6, 1946 at 8.15 p.m.

ONTARIO WILD FLOWERS MONTH BY MONTH

By: Mr. Ralph Presgrave

Mr. Presgrave is by profession a textile engineer. For the last four years his hobby has been nature photography. He has specialized in photographing plants, although the odd insect or reptile has had some claim on his attention.

He will show us some 150 pictures of wild flowers, a few of them slides which were accepted by the Toronto Camera Club for showing at their recent International Salon.

ROTUNDA DISPLAY

Illustrations of the work of the Junior Club.

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SUNDAY, MAY 19, 1946. Outing to Pefferlaw Creek.

Meet $1\frac{1}{2}$ miles west of Sandford at the bridge over Pefferlaw Creek about 10 a.m. Morning at the creek, noon at Vivian schoolhouse for lunch and review of the morning's observations, afternoon at Vivian Forest (county reforestation).

There is no way of getting to Pefferlaw Creek except by car so car owners are **urgently** asked to volunteer to take passengers. Those who will do so, and those desiring transportation are asked to telephone Mr. Greer Roberts in the evening at MOhawk 5327. Those for whom arrangements have been made will meet in front of the Museum at 9 a.m.

For those who arrange their own carloads - go north from Markham to second concession road north of Vivian Forest (yellow marker at this corner) then east to the bridge over the creek, about $2\frac{1}{2}$ miles.

THE NEWSLETTER

of the Toronto Field Naturalists' Club

Number 60

April, 1946

The pilgrimages of Toronto bird-watchers to the Hamilton area, which the war brought almost to a standstill, have been resumed this spring with pre-war frequency and vigor. Not a weekend has passed during the past month but has seen at least one Toronto party covering this route.

Outside the customary lure of distant pastures the great attraction of the Hamilton region is the number and variety of waterfowl that resort to Hamilton Bay and the Dundas Marsh during the spring and fall migrations. Waterfowl may, of course, be observed in the Toronto area in many places: the marshes of the Humber valley, the island lagoons, behind the breakwalls from Sunnyside to the Western Gap, in the Harbor and the Bay and at Frenchman's Bay. But since the almost complete ruin of Ashbridge's Bay as a natural resting and feeding place for migrating waterfowl there has been no single spot in the Toronto area that attracts the numbers which occur at Hamilton Bay and Dundas Marsh. It is true that at times great concentrations of ducks occur in the Toronto area but usually in the open lake beyond the breakwalls. These are not easily observed, and must as a rule be passed up by the observers as being too remote to be satisfactorily watched. A second advantage of the Hamilton region is that the concentrations are more likely to occur there at places where they can be easily seen and studied.

There is a third attraction in this quarter as well. Frequently some unusual avian straggler from the south or west finds its way to the head of the lake. When this happens some one of the Hamilton observers discovers it-- usually the indefatigable George North - and the report reaches Toronto. Immediately an expedition is organized for the earliest possible occasion, and the services of Mr. North enlisted. Even though several days often elapse before the trip can be made, George rarely fails to produce the bird.

Yet withal there can be no certain guarantee of seeing what you go to see in this area any more than in other quarters of the birding world. The observers must take their chances. This fact was clearly demonstrated by the first trip to this region in which I participated this year.

The customary date for the first annual spring visit to Hamilton is the last weekend of March. But this season, moved by the prolonged warm weather during last month, we decided to advance the occurrence of the trip by a week. Hence on March 24th three carloads set out. It was a fine sunny morning, and our hopes were high. Our special objective was to find whistling swans which were in migration at that time. You may well imagine our chagrin, therefore, when at 10 a.m. we found ourselves at Westdale Park, having covered all the favored spots along the north and west sides of the Bay, looking out over a Dundas Marsh almost empty of birds! This was unheard-of bad luck. Clearly we were too early despite the weather. There had been only a few ducks on the Bay

and the lake, and these belonged mostly to wintering flocks. Since we were out for the day, and determined to find swans, we held a conference and decided to go on to Niagara Falls where a Toronto newspaper had reported the swans to be.

We spent but little time gazing at the Falls, just long enough to note that the ice bridge had gone out, though its "abutments" remained, cliffs of rotten grey ice, up which a number of exceedingly foolish people were clambering to get photographs of the Falls. Beginning at the Honeymoon Bridge we commenced a thorough search, proceeding up stream, for the swans.

To our astonishment the river was crowded with ice-cakes from bank to bank. But in the openings and gaps between the ice cakes were hundreds of ducks, mostly golden-eye, American and red-breasted mergansers, with a scattering of others. There were numerous herring gulls, and at least two great black backs. In other words the aspect of both the scene and the bird life was still markedly wintry.

Not far below Chippewa we were accosted by a game warden in uniform. When he found out who we were and what we were doing he was very cordial. He told us that there had been some 400 swans on the river a little over a week before but that they had departed several days ago. He also stated that comparatively few swans had appeared in this region this season, though ordinarily the Niagara River is a regular stopping place for the swan flocks in migration. He suggested that we follow the river to Fort Erie, as there were many ducks all along, and there might be birds of interest to be seen. Whilst we were talking the warden pointed out the weir, erected by the government to keep ducks, swans and geese from going over the Falls as they have done in the past in considerable numbers. Now the birds float downstream until they strike the weir. This upsets and startles them so that they flush and fly back upstream out of danger. We were mightily pleased to hear of this innovation which will mean much in conserving valuable bird life.

Following the warden's suggestion we kept on upstream. Opposite the north end of Navy Island, Bill Smith spotted a large nest in a tall tree towards the north end of the island. When we got out to investigate with our binoculars we were astounded to see a bald eagle working on the nest. The eagle was obviously fashioning the nest by placing sticks and moving material about. In a few moments it took off through the woods and was lost to view, but soon after re-appeared carrying a good-sized stick which it proceeded to fix into the structure. Meanwhile Tom Russell, another of the party, had discovered the eagle's mate perched motionless in another high tree some fifty or more yards from the nest, almost at the island's northern tip. The mate's white head was quite visible but its huge body from our angle merged nearly completely with the tree trunk against which we saw it. The bird working on the nest made two more trips for sticks whilst we watched. The nest, a huge but new construction, was placed some 80 to 90 feet above the ground in a high deciduous tree that we could not identify from across the stream. Just as we decided to go on, the worker at the nest quit the nest again, but this time flew over and perched near its mate.

To be able to watch a pair of bald eagles setting up in a new nesting site is a privilege that comes to few observers in this part of the world.

We realized that we had been looking at what might be the sight of a lifetime. What concerned us most, however, was that adequate steps might be taken to protect these birds. Consequently, we were pleased when we once more met the warden a little further along the road and were able to let him about the nest. He was much interested, and told us that there had not been a nest of bald eagles along the Niagara River, which used to be one of their favored nesting areas, for many years. We did not learn until two weeks later that it has been a full score years since an eagle's nest existed along the river. With the protective laws now in force there may be some hope for a permanent return of the eagles to this suitable region. However, such large birds are remarkable temptations to ever loose trigger fingers. Protection is not always easy to enforce. It is up to every field naturalist and ornithologist to keep a watchful eye for infringements of the protective laws.

For the while our desire to see swans had been temporarily in abeyance but we were not minded to give up the search so we kept on up the river despite the onset of rain. We reached Fort Erie, and persisted, going on further to Crystal Beach and Point Abino. Our hopes were still intact until we laid eyes on the ice-jammed beaches and water of Lake Erie! This phenomenon was another source of surprise, for the ice had been gone from the Toronto beaches and Lake Ontario for a fortnight. Yet here was this more southern lake looking like a Toronto beach scene in February. I was reminded of another spring when I had seen Point Pelee with ice massed against its shores at the end of March, when the Toronto lake front had been clear since the middle of the month. The scene was repeated that spring at Erieau, Rondeau, and Long Point. In thinking about an explanation for this curious phenomenon we decided that most of this ice must be floe ice from the upper Great Lakes, coming down through the St. Clair River into Lake Erie and getting jammed there. Perhaps Lake Ontario's southern shore and outlet exhibits the same picture of ice-clogged shore at this time of year, whilst Toronto, being away from the main lake currents is freed earlier of its wintery burden.

The total result for us was that we found no swans. We had perforce to be satisfied with bald eagles. Indeed this was no poor substitute, and the sight of these proved once again that even though the bird observer may miss what he sets out especially to see he nearly always sees something of real interest.

I cannot close the account of this trip, however, without appending to it the ironic anti-climax. Two days later I learned from Miss Hutchinson, another member of this club, that she had been at Long Point on Lake Erie, this same Sunday, and had seen a huge flock of whistling swans there, perhaps 900 of them in all! Had we gone from Dundas Marsh directly to Long Point, instead of to Niagara Falls and Point Abino we would have found the swans, and would have had to travel but a few miles further than we actually did. But how were we to know? The uncertainty of birding is one of its attractions.

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Having told you of a trip in which the observers scored zero on their main objective, I will now give you an account of my second trip to

the Hamilton region this spring in which the observers marked a perfect score for their chief hopes. Of course I should hasten to qualify this assertion, at least the zero part, by pointing out that there is really no such thing as scoring zero on a birding trip, however much one may be disappointed. On this second trip, which took place on April 7th, there was no element of disappointment.

We were at Brant Inn, Burlington, by nine o'clock, standing in the park there looking down at two lovely Holboell's (red-necked) grebes just inside the breakwall. The red necks shone like burnished copper in the morning sun. One of the great surprises for the birders of our region in the last two years has been the discovery (by George North) that these lovely birds were breeding at this very spot (Burlington Harbor). Their normal breeding area as given in the A.O.U. check list is "from north-eastern Siberia, northwestern Alaska, and northern Canada south to northern Washington, North Dakota, and southern Minnesota". This will explain the surprise of the local ornithologists at finding a bird breeding so far out of its normal range. But the breeding has been successful so that apparently a local stock is being developed, acclimatized to this area. This means a very welcome addition to our summer residents. Incidentally, there has also been a considerable flock of non-breeding Holboell's grebes resident off Lorne Park during the past few summers.

To return to our trip - the party worked quickly along the Aldershot shore of the Bay towards Dundas Marsh, finding horned grebes at Indian Point, a striking pair of shovellers at Burlington Golf Club marsh, a group of redheads off Lasalle Park, and an Iceland gull at the submerged Longwood Road Gardens. The observations were piling up in a characteristic way for a Hamilton trip. We were pleased, but our main objectives today were none of the birds we had so far seen but two others: a tufted titmouse, reported from Ancaster, and a western meadowlark in Barton township atop the Mountain. We pressed on straight to Ancaster, giving Dundas Marsh the go by until the return trip.

Since Jim Baillie had been to see the distinguished southern visitor, the titmouse, before, we had no difficulty finding our way to Mr. and Mrs. Hutchison's feeding station on Church Street, a mile and a half from the village, where it had been seen. When we arrived we found ourselves preceded by two well-known Toronto bird photographers. Such is the lure of a rare bird! They had their cameras set up in the garden, focussed on the feeding tray and were waiting. The main function of a bird photographer, I have decided, is "waiting". We discovered that this was the sixth trip one of the photographers had made to this spot in order to get a good "shot" of the titmouse!

Today the bird had been seen early in the morning, but had not presented itself for a picture. Meanwhile it had vanished. So we now prepared ourselves to join the expectants. We were determined to see the bird if we had to wait all day. A lovelier place in which to wait we could not have found. The warm spring sun poured down on the old stone cottage, sitting there beside the woods, with a pleasant, brawling little brook tumbling noisily down the banks under its windows. Loving care over many years has turned that bank into a garden so natural and pleasing that it

seems to have grown from the ground of its own accord, to bind the mellow old house and the tumbling brook and the bank all together in one of Nature's own vignettes. How fitting it was that in a quiet corner of the garden there should be masses of dark purple English violets filling the warm spring air with the rich fragrance that must have reminded many a wanderer of the homeland to which he would never return. Yet these flowers are at home now in this land. Like those homeseekers who brought them with such tender care they have taken root in the soil of Canada. Today their fragrance is more than a reminder of a land across the seas, it is a symbol of the English spirit living still, born anew in the New World.

With such agreeable thoughts and still with attentive eyes and ears we roamed the woods and fields looking for the titmouse. Returning to the vicinity of the house we settled down across the brook on a well-placed lookout ledge to eat our lunch. Still no sign when lunch was over so we made another tour in a new direction. It was upon our return from this jaunt that we found the two photographers disgustedly assembling their apparatus and packing up. Just as the last camera was being disposed of we all heard suddenly loud musical calls. There just over our heads was the perky little titmouse! Where had it been? How had it come? No one could say, but there it was, loudly proclaiming its presence, smart and vivacious as could be. The two photographers were completely nonplussed. I have never seen anyone more disgusted than they.

But now we concentrated on the bird we had come so far, and waited so long - a full two hours - to see. Once it was about there was no trouble at all. Its common call was a loud pee-urr, pee-urr or tee-urr, tee-urr, endlessly repeated, and easily imitated. When I did try imitating it the bird immediately became intensely curious; and stage by stage, from tree to tree approached to a distance of not more than six feet at the nearest. The chic crest, very prominent for this small bird, reminded one of a cardinal's. This crest played a large part in the bird's responses for it was raised and lowered, fluffed out and restricted, and tossed about with great animation. Perhaps it was the crest more than anything else that gave the observer the illusion that the bird was much larger than it is. In fact it is not a great deal bigger than the chickadees with which it seemed to be associating. Mouse-grey for the most part in color there were relieving and enlivening hues of yellow grading to rusty-red along the mid-flanks and under tail part. Intense activity and vivacity, not color, were the real attraction of this dancing mite. Finally it became so excited by my imitations of its calls that it stretched and lowered its head, and trembled its half-extended wings for moments of evident violent emotion. This action was repeated again and again for ten minutes or more. During this time the bird changed its call to a phrase that sounded like ca-hé-o, or even come-hére. At last it tired of this, and, still calling, though not so frequently and less vigorously, resorted to the higher parts of the trees. Another call was now heard, something like t-whee, not dissimilar from a phrase sometimes heard from the hermit thrush.

Having now watched the titmouse for a good while we were ready to go. As we prepared to leave we found the photographers had spent all this time discussing whether or not they would set up their apparatus again, and

they had just reached the decision to do so. By this time we could hear the bird off down in the woods beyond the house! Did the photographers get their pictures? I do not know - for we left them at this point, deciding once again for our part that bird observing and bird photography are two different hobbies, and you cannot mix the two.

Three of our party - Mr. and Mrs. Eric McNeillie and Doug Miller - had never seen this southern bird before. Jim and I had not seen one for several years. It is an infrequent straggler in southern Ontario. There is no certain breeding record in Canada though there is a probable record for Hamilton, held by George North. He saw, some years past, a pair of adult birds with well-developed young out of the nest.

The long wait for the titmouse had not made us forget the other noteworthy bird we hoped to see. Hence we now set out from Ancaster for Barton. En route we put up a couple of great blue herons from a wet spot beside a country road. Again Jim, who had been down the week before, guided us to the spot, a crossroads farm. Generally speaking it was a most unlikely looking place for birding - heavily cultivated farms all about with the fringe of the city, little cottages and houses, not far away. Still George North had found a western meadowlark in the northwest field all last summer, and now it (presumably the same bird) had returned.

We parked the car and set out to tramp the roads and fields about. At first we went in directions other than the northwestern field for children and dogs were romping there, and we estimated that the bird would have been frightened away. However, as we were off down the south-running road some way both Jim and I heard the song we were listening for, and it came from the direction of the neglected field. Back we went. Another short burst of song hastened our steps. The song of this bird is its most distinctive characteristic, for it differs completely from that of its cousin, the eastern meadowlark. The western's song is much more like a rollicking outburst from a mockingbird than like our familiar eastern's effort. It is full, rich and musical; it seems to bubble forth gleefully. To me it is one of the most attractive of all bird songs. I remember sitting one afternoon on a railway embankment at Tofield, Alberta, listening to several of these birds vieing with each other. I sat for half an hour, waiting for a train, being entertained by this superb concert as the sun went down behind Edmonton. No human choral effort has ever impressed me as did those western meadowlarks.

The bird we sought was nowhere to be seen when we reached the field again. We waited and watched to catch sight of the singer - but we were vouchsafed no further evidence of his presence. Finally Jim and I climbed the fence, though the children and the dogs were cavorting not far off. Carefully we skirted along the western fence then separated and began to work eastward through the longer grass. This field was the one uncultivated one at the cross roads. Almost at once our bird shot up ahead of us, and perched on an old post in the middle of the field. We stopped, levelled our binoculars, and watched carefully. We hoped for song but the bird was apparently too nervous of us to sing. Instead he kept up a steady alarm call, all the while holding up its tail, and flicking it nervously like a wren. Both the posture and the call were markedly different from anything any of us had ever seen or heard from the eastern bird. The alarm note might be given as: churk, there was both a burr and a liquid sound in it. Apparently these characteristics are as much marks of the species as the song. Upon nearer approach the bird

dropped into the grass. We left the field for fear of drawing the attention of the children and dogs to the bird, when it might be frightened away permanently. Back at the car we waited a little while longer to hear another song from the bird but beyond a brief snatch we heard no more. Deeply satisfied we headed back for Dundas Marsh and the road to home.

True it was that at Dundas Marsh we discovered a pair of gadwalls and other ducks, and at Woodlawn Cemetery we found George North and a companion scanning the duck flocks in the Bay with binoculars and telescope. While we were there a ruddy duck was spotted behind a large flock of scaup. And further on the way home we spied a rough-legged hawk near Oakville. All or any of these might have made another trip - but after the titmouse and the meadowlark they seemed only like so many other birds. We needed no other birds to make us feel that this trip to Hamilton had been one of the most successful ever.

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Recently I have come into possession of a copy of The Loghouse Nest by Louise de Kiriline. (Published by S. J. Reynald Saunders, Toronto, Pp. 173). It is a fascinating story of how a human being, living alone in a log cabin in the northern woods whilst her husband was overseas on active service, made friends with the birds about her, and found in their company a sustaining and rewarding association.

Her experiences and observations are interwoven with the life history of a friendly chickadee whom she calls Peet. There is much accurate observation of nature and bird life brought into the story of Peet's existence. There is something more, perhaps; one senses a mystic identification on the author's part of herself with the "Old Pine", "left standing when everything else fell". With her own background of tragic experiences in the Russian Revolution such an identification might well be made.

Certainly out of her experiences with nature in the Canadian woods has come a happy philosophy of life. The author is convinced of the "essential sanity of life". She has discovered that "in this world of nature nothing happens haphazardly. All has a fundamental meaning rooted in the basic law of proportion and balance. Everything - beauty, force, growth, development, happiness, tragedy, death, redundancy - is inter-dependent, neither to be avoided nor enforced, but properly balanced to achieve the greatest fullness of life." True contact with nature has brought serenity and understanding to many. Louise de Kiriline is one of those. If she can, through this book give a hint to others how to find the road to that true relationship she will have accomplished a great service.

The book is admirably illustrated with pleasing black-and-white studies of bird life and the woods by Thoreau Macdonald.

R. M. Saunders,

E d i t o r.