

Toronto Field Naturalists' Club

NOVEMBER MEETINGS

ROYAL ONTARIO MUSEUM, MONDAY, NOVEMBER 4th, 1946 at 8:15 p.m.

BIRDS ON THE HOME FRONT

By Dr. Oliver H. Hewitt, Chief Federal
Migratory Bird Officer for Ontario and Quebec

ROTUNDA DISPLAY

"NATURE AS I SEE IT, SOMETIMES"

Water colours by Mrs. Carol Proctor.

These pictures show how an artist, in a puckish mood,
can use natural history themes

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SATURDAY AFTERNOON HIKE

Sunnyside, Saturday November 9th, 2:30 p.m.

Meet at the Bathing Pavilion

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The Membership Fee for the year is \$2.00

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NEWSLETTER

of the Toronto Field Naturalists' Club

Number 62

October, 1946.

Four miles west of Maple on a mid-October morning you come to a wall of dark green pine trees which at first glance is solid and massive. Yet in a moment you realize that it has been breached in many places, and torrents of tawny red, shimmering bronze and lemon yellow are pouring through the openings. Only with fortune on its side, it seems, can the evergreen breakwall continue to hold back the sea of color that now you see surging against the barrier. As if to raise your anticipation one pitch higher in intensity a vagrant breeze whirls across the crest of the flood and snatches up a swirl of orange spray which it sends flying over the evergreens to splash in wild disarray on the pale tan fields beyond. Scarcely knowing how, you are suddenly within the barrier yourself, and riding along a mysteriously cleared channel through walls of saffron and gold, of scarlet and flame. Were it not for the fact that you soon come to a solid little old church you might well think that some wizard engineer had introduced you into the rainbow and cleared a lane therein to lure you on and on. But the church, when you draw up and stop, reminds you that it is not the rainbow, but Purpleville Woods, resplendent in autumnal glory.

So it was on the morning of October 11th when Greer Roberts and I made our first visit of the season to this lovely spot. The morning had been launched dark and threatening with long, lowering clouds rolling across the sky. The threat became a reality when raindrops splattered down on our heads as we stood in a field gazing at a large flock of migrating sparrows. But by the time we came to the charmed woods the sky had been swept well nigh clear, the blue firmament rising unmarred from horizon to horizon, save for a few tattered fragments of flying white scud. The sunlight poured down upon the trees with the numberless hues and set the whole wood aglow.

To seek birds here -- indeed, to desire to add anything additional to such glory -- might well appear to be an ungrateful trespassing upon the bounty of Providence. Yet that cannot be, for all those who seek deeply the beauty and understanding of Nature know that there are no bounds, no limits to what we may learn, not to the depths of our understanding save only the measure of our own humility and our own effort.

Birds there were in numbers this morning at Purpleville Woods, and the normal pleasure of seeing them was enhanced a hundred-fold in such surroundings. The birds too seemed stirred to unusual liveliness and activity by the exciting world about them. Their calls and snatches of song filled the air; their mad dashings and dartings through scurries of bright tinted leaves, sent showering down by passing gusts of wind, added a hectic gaiety to the scene. Greer and I were soon frantically busy trying to discern elusive kinglets, trying to tell flocks of chickadees from a myriad of falling leaves.

Our eager search led us after a while to the edge of a tiny pond, now bereft of water. The grey skeletons of many fallen trees lay naked and exposed on a dark, murky bed. As we peered across this opening, seeking what might be on the farther shore, we became suddenly aware of a great commotion off to our right. All other sounds gave way before what seemed the frenzied dec-decing of a thousand chickadees. The first perception over, it needed but a momentary reflection to imagine the reason for so great a din. There must be an owl, and the chickadees had found it. Off we went, as fast as

fallen trees and grasping undergrowth would allow. We had not far to go, for as we rounded the southern end of the pond we caught sight of the wild chickadee band.

There may have been only three dozen of them - indeed, that is the number we finally put down - but their ceaseless frenzy of activity made them seem like a host. And their numbers were swelled by sundry red-breasted and white-breasted nuthatches, and by both ruby-crowned and golden-crowned kinglets. The focus of all this mad movement was an ancient hollow stub which was set in a little opening and which rose to a height of some ten to twelve feet. It was open at the top, but the shielding walls of its sides prevented us from seeing anything but the opening. The frantic little birds, however, had discovered some detested occupant in this haven, and in a steady procession chickadees, nuthatches, and kinglets were dashing out by ones and twos, from nearby trees to perch for a moment on the brink of the opening, there to peer excitedly down inside, jabbering all the while, then to dart away. This woodland drama went on for several minutes as we paused a few yards away to watch. Indeed there was no abatement until we had cautiously approached almost to the base of the stub. Even then a few brave chickadees kept up the ritualistic cursing of the foe.

As yet we could only conjecture as to the identity of the object of such avian wrath. That it must be a screech owl we felt pretty sure, but there were other possibilities, and we stood debating in low voices just what might be the best way of getting a look at the secreted one. Evidently the sound of our voices effected what the storm of avian curses had not been able to accomplish. It forced the hider to appear. In the midst of our conjectures we were amazed to see the screech owl - for such it was - appear abruptly on the edge of the opening. There it perched on top of the stub, just as its persecutors had done, and gazed down at us out of eyes big with fear. It was a striking bird of an extraordinary light ashy-grey hue. After surveying us for a moment it sprang into the air and flew a short distance to a hemlock tree. Upon sight of their hated enemy the flock of small birds, which had been dispersing, immediately reassembled and swept in upon the poor owl with renewed vigor. The owl stood it briefly but soon took off, alighting in another tree momentarily, and then flying well away through the wood. As soon as it was really off the little birds gave up the chase, and fell to the ordinary business of feeding and bickering with each other.

Greer and I pursued our walk, starting a cottontail from one dense tangle, plunging into the darker depths of the wood where the evergreens are massed together, and emerging from these into the fields to the north. It was as we were crossing these fields that we came upon a perky group of white-crowned sparrows along a hedge-row. This stateliest of our sparrows is not easily alarmed. Hence we were able to study closely the noble black and white crowns of the male birds, and the brown and tawny striped heads and velvety pinkish-brown rumps of the females. This last mark, seen when the bird allows its wings to droop a little, as it often does while perched, is one of the best field marks for the species. The male bird has the same sort of smooth, unmarked rump patch but it is greyish in hue.

Out in the fields, too, where we had a wider command of the sky we sighted several hawks - a fine grey marsh hawk, three redtails - all hunting, though probably on migration at the same time. The redtails at least, kept a course that took them down stream. Just as we plunged down the steep slope into the upper valley a huge accipiter came over swiftly from the east. Its large size and extremely long, well-rounded tail marked it as a goshawk, the first we have seen this year. This hawk was flying high, and was certainly not hunting, but bound for some unknown destination, at which it was in a great hurry to arrive.

One more hawk attracted our attention as we arrived at the stream. A small sharpshin floundered out of a cedar tree near us, flew heavily a little way, alighting for a moment on a bare limb where it looked carefully at us, then dropping rapidly into another cedar and vanishing. Not long after we chanced upon a small pile of feathers in the woods, probably plucked from a hapless hermit thrush, and we thought at once of that sly villain of a sharpshin. He had flown so heavily, had seemed so unduly lethargic, that he may well have just finished off the thrush. The feathers, at any rate, were freshly plucked, There was no sign of the carcass,

We followed the stream, cutting across its sharpest meanders, back to the road. Its waters mirrored the glory of scarlet maple, bronze beech, and claret-toned oak. Every eddy was etched by lines of many-hued leaves borne upon its surface. Every quiet pool was bedecked with a rich mosaic of color upon its bosom. Again we were captured by the spirit of gaiety from which the little death, whose evidence we had seen, had deflected us a bit. We were privileged guests at a party this morning, at Nature's thanksgiving, the grand farewell to the passing year, the merriment before the long winter's sleep.

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From Mr. R. Knights, a fellow member of this club, I have received the following interesting account of the manner in which birding was conducted in England when he was a boy. He writes:

Ever since I was a young boy, as a matter of fact, as far back as my memory can go, I always had a soft spot for the birds. The faintest glimpse of any rare bird always gave me, and still gives me, a thrill. To this day, in the Spring or Fall when seeing the V-shaped migrating flocks of ducks or geese, I get a feeling inside which I cannot explain.

Until the age of seventeen, at which time I emigrated to Canada, I lived in the eastern part of England, approximately seven miles from Cambridge, in a small hamlet by the name of Sawston, at which place I first saw the light of day. In our younger days, all our spring and summer romps were taken up mostly by searching for bird nests. Of course, when we arrived in our teens, we did not do as much of this, as it was considered "sissy stuff" by the older boys. On occasions, about five or six of us would have what we termed "bird nesting parties". The first boy discovering the nest would holler "First part!" the next boy "Second part!" and so on, which meant that he who called out first got first pick of the eggs in the nest. For example, if five boys were in the party and only four eggs were discovered in the nest, the last boy to call out did not get an egg, besides which it was his misfortune to have to climb the tree up to the nest, to bring the "spoils" down to the rest of us!

When I was around twelve years old, I had what was considered in the village and surrounding district, the finest collection of birds' eggs. I even went so far as to charge a pin to those boys who expressed a desire to view my particularly rare specimens! My collection was made up of more than a hundred eggs, some of which took weeks to collect. I went through many hardships to procure many of these - some having been taken from very high trees, overhanging cliffs, or even from some Squire's private estate, in the latter case often being chased by a game-keeper. One swallow's egg was even taken from the bird's mud nest deep down in a deserted well.

To preserve the egg-shells, we used to prick both ends and blow the yolks out. I kept my collection in a large flat wooden box, about two inches high, and with cotton batting at the bottom of the case. Each egg was numbered with ink, and an index was kept on the undercover of the lid, giving the name, place and

time discovered of each individual egg. Many of the eggs were from birds never seen in Canada, such as the Chaffinch, Bull Finch, Butcher Bird, Nightingale, Linnet, Moor Hen, Black Bird (jet black with a yellow beak), Golden Plover, # Yellow Hammer, Stone Chat. Here I would just like to mention that the Linnet is a plain, small bird, quite a songster, which when tamed and caged is a better singer than the canary. The Butcher Bird is very similar to the American Shrike.

The largest egg in my collection was that of a Wild Swan - all white - which we discovered on Main River. I remember the first time we saw this bird, on account of its enormous size. It took a distance of at least one hundred feet of wing-flapping before the bird finally rose from the water. I remember, too, this bird's egg. It had a large hole at one end, due to the fact that when being blown it was "settin' on", a term we used for partly hatched eggs.

English Poplar Trees made our best hunting grounds. I have never seen the like of these trees in Canada. Some are a hundred feet high, with branches starting out a few feet from the ground. These trees are mostly covered with English Ivy, twining around till it reaches almost to the top of the tree. Most of the branches of this tree are from two to three inches thick, thus making good nesting grounds to often as many as ten different species of birds in one tree.

The little Wren-Tit, or Golden Crested Wren, liked this tree, its nest being as big as a football, having a tiny entrance hole hardly big enough to get a finger into, and sometimes containing as many as fifteen eggs. I have often wondered how the birds hatched these eggs, as there must have been two or three layers of eggs in the one nest. The Maverling also liked to nest in the English Poplar. The Maverling is a bird somewhat larger than our Robin, belonging to the Thrush species, its nest being lined with mud.

Having had no Field Guide Books in those days, we had to get our knowledge and information about birds' nests and eggs the practical way. Those were wonderful days, the days of my childhood. My interest in our feathered friends has gradually increased through the years, and today, forty-five years later, I am pursuing my childhood hobby, namely, BIRDS:

[The Golden Plover is a regular migrant, though rare, at Toronto. Ed.]

Also from the same observer are the following accounts of observations made this year, since Mr. Knights became a member of this club. The difference in point of view towards birds seen in these two items is an evidence not merely of a changed attitude in one observer, but of a profound change that has occurred for great numbers of people in their attitude towards birds and nature as a whole, during the generation and a half that has elapsed between 1900 and 1946. It is only during this period, and mostly in the latter half of it, that field observation of birds has become the widespread pursuit that it is, and that clubs such as ours have grown and flourished. We may all rightly feel grateful for this new spirit.

Mr. Knights reports from Penetanquishone --

PENETANG - Weekend 24th May. The overgreens and foliage were very backward, thereby giving the woods a bare appearance, which retarded the birds in their nest-building. One nest discovered was that of a cat-bird, and upon flushing it from the nest, one egg was found. After several visits, neither gender was to be seen about, but upon looking day after day, an extra egg was there each time. Consequently I believe the hen bird must lay during the night.

Other cat birds were seen, and upon closely studying same with glasses found them to be a wonderful streamlined bird, with delicate neck - not unlike the Mourning

Dove, the only difference being their molelike colour and jet-black eyes, and the prominent red patch beneath the tail, and of course, their cat-like call which can be heard at quite a distance.

By stealthy stalking I came across the male and female cuckoo. I believe these are the two from the nest I found last spring. However, they were some distance from their former habitat. After several visits I discovered them in exactly the same spot, in a dense first-growth underbrush. These birds are so silent and timid in their movements, they remind me of some ghost-like creatures, as they seem to fade and not fly or move from their position when disturbed.

While studying these birds for some time, a farmer creoped up and wanted to know what monkey business was going on. I told him I was observing a cuckoo. He looked at me, and I think he thought I was some sort of screwball. Upon asking the man if he had seen any cuckoos around, he retorted: "No, only on a clock!"

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Sept. 8/46. Being an ardent fisherman for the past twenty-five years I never like to let a summer pass without wetting a line. Up at Penetang for a few days this July I wanted to go, but fishing near the town docks is poor so I drove a few miles up the Bay to back of the Mental Hospital. The shore line looked good for fishing but there were no boat facilities. I saw a chap fooling around with a motor boat engine and he promised to rent me a boat for the following morning. His camp was away up the Bay and could not be reached by land so he said he would send one of his boys down with a boat at 6 a.m. the next morning. He was there on time next morning and I rowed out to a point in the Bay where a lighthouse marked the channel for the big boats. After casting for a while I noticed Lunge were jumping all around me. Big fellows by the splashes. After each jump I would cast a different type of plug or spoon but could not get a strike, not even by casting a live minnow which I caught under the lighthouse.

I noticed when rowing over to spots where Lunge has jumped there were about a hundred dead small fish floating on the top water about one inch long and all partly digested. These fish must have come out of the Lunge's mouth when he was chasing the larger fish.

Getting disgusted I then noticed a white Tern with a fish in its mouth perched on an old log near the lighthouse. Forgetting the fishing, as Bird Study is my meat, I dropped anchor and patiently watched for the bird to lead me to its nest. I had my miniature camera with me and would have traded all the fish in the lake for a picture of the bird feeding its young. After a while the bird flew away and I followed him with my binoculars right out into the lake for about a mile. He circled around and came back and settled on the same place again. I figured he was waiting for me to clear out before going to the nest which must be nearby, so I rowed out a piece and watched it with the glass, and he just sat and I just sat. It must have been for nearly half an hour. The Tern won out as it was getting good and hot. I rowed the boat to shore and at that time got a glimpse of the bird leaving its post and watched it fly right out into the lake until it was a small speck and then lost to view.

If I had been more experienced in Bird Lore I would have saved myself the useless hide and seek business as I have since looked up Bird Habits and find they only nest in colonies on sandy beaches on islands far into the lake, away from predators.

R. M. SAUNDERS
Editor.