

Toronto Field Naturalists' Club

DECEMBER MEETING

Royal Ontario Museum, Monday, December 2, 1946

at 8.15 p.m.

MAMMALS OF THE NATIONAL PARKS

By Mr. Frank Banfield, Mammalogist of the National Parks Bureau. This talk will include coloured movies taken by Mr. Banfield during the Summer of 1946.

ROTUNDA DISPLAY

Through the kindness of the publishing houses of the city, Mrs. Jaquith has arranged a display of books on Natural History. This will provide gift suggestions for all ages.

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SATURDAY AFTERNOON HIKE

York Mills, Saturday, December 14th, 1946 at 2.30 p.m.

Meet on Donwoods Drive at the end of the pavement

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The next number of the NEWSLETTER will be sent to those members only, who have paid their fees for 1946-1947.

The membership fee is Two Dollars.

THE NEWSLETTER

of the Toronto Field Naturalists' Club

Number 63

November - 1946

In a recent letter Mrs. L.M.Sisman, one of the Club's members in Aurora, remarks upon a noteworthy feature of the season's bird life. She writes: "I have never seen the food supply (of the wild birds) so plentiful as this autumn. The bittersweet is heavy with orange berries, the sumach heads appear larger than usual. I walked past one old apple tree that had been completely covered by a Virginia Creeper, the vines of which were a solid mass of blue berries and pretty red stems. Along another old lane the wild grapes had grown over the fences and well up into the trees. These vines were so laden with fruit that one could easily have picked a bushel in a very short time. The robins and hermit thrushes, however, were doing it for us."

Similar observations are being made repeatedly by other members of the club who are afield these lovely autumn days. For instance several of us visited Dr. and Mrs. L.E.Jaquith's new woodland retreat at Terra Cotta recently. During the visit the Jaquiths very kindly guided us about the countryside. On this survey we went along a quiet road near Cheltenham where, for nearly a half a mile, the thickets along the road were covered so densely with wild grapes and Virginia creeper berries as to constitute so it seemed, almost solid walls of blue. That this luxuriant crop was being appreciated there was no doubt for our progress along this road was heralded by a host of clamorous robins, rising reluctantly from the rich feast and protesting, as only the complaining robin can, at this unwanted intrusion. While many of the robins flew off over the fields to safer hedgerows, those that were more courageous or hungrier clung stubbornly to the dark interior of the thickets waiting for the intruders to leave them in peace. Nor were the robins the only participants at the banquet for the bluebirds and cedar waxwings were represented too.

All through the summer, from the first appearance of wild fruits, this abundance has been generally evident. The only such fruit that does not seem to have been so favorably affected by the optimum weather conditions - I assume that we must attribute the abundance to this cause - was the blueberry. However, even there, the relative scarcity on the city markets of this fruit was due, I suspect, more to scarcity of pickers than of berries. Otherwise wild fruits have been not only unusually common but also of excellent quality. Although there will have been necessarily some local variations this conditions appears to have prevailed from the Ottawa valley south.

Most of this great fruit harvest will have served as a food supply for wild birds, animals and insects. This will be so even where business has to a certain extent taken notice of wild fruits as in the case of blueberries, blackberries, and strawberries. Private diligence will have gathered in what may have seemed to the pickers at the time a vast amount of the crop, but what in reality was an infinitesimal part of this abundance. Moreover, the gatherers of wild fruit, even amongst the members of this club, are remarkably few according to my information. And those who do permit themselves that pleasure stick pretty closely to the more orthodox fruits - the three mentioned above, as noticed by business, and raspberries. Those who know the tart tang of fox grape jelly, the voluptuous appeal of a luscious elderberry pie, and who provide themselves with the means of such enjoyments are rare indeed.

Nature's bounty this year has by no means been limited to wild fruit. All those who have scanned the evergreens, even in a casual manner, must have been struck with the crowded festoon of cones decorating the white pines, the spruces, the cedars almost everywhere. My own observations have extended from Algonquin Park to Lake Ontario, and all along the line the same opulence in the cone crop has been evident. Reports of a similar condition prevailing very much further to the north, east and west have come in. The wild nut trees and shrubs - the beechnuts, hickories, butternuts, hazelnuts and others - have borne as lavishly as the evergreens. And as for weed seed, anyone who has seen the serried ranks of lush, heavy-headed pigweed, goldenrod, chicory, wild lettuce, and countless "pests" of the farmer that line the country roads and fill many a field will be sure all his rural friends are going to have a busy time next spring keeping the descendants of this mighty army from marching across the land.

Yet what to the farmer may well seem an unpleasant, even a grave menace, will to the bird watcher offer an exciting hope, for he will see at once that every hedgerow, the woods and fields are full of food of just the kind that is attractive and necessary to winter birds. He will hope for a great incursion of finches and grosbeaks, of buntings and longspurs, and many others from the north. In fact that is the question that has been asking itself in all the bird watchers' minds for a month or more - "Will they come; will these irregular, erratic, and supremely alluring winter birds come down to us this winter?" Of course the bird watcher knows that if the redpolls, the siskins, the purple finches, the buntings come in great flocks they will do the farmer a great service for they will sweep into the fields and settle on the massed clusters of weeds - feeding, feeding, feeding - until if they have not removed every threatening seed they will have reduced the great threat to a manageable pest again. But, of course, however glad he may be that the birds are doing a service to the community the bird observer's first concern will be the pure enjoyment of seeing once more these lovely winged creatures that come to us only with the snow and the frost. Again the question arises, "Will they come?"

The very bounty that offers hope may well counsel caution too. Since it is known this year that the plentiful food supply extends very far to the north, and for a long distance all about us, it may well be asked if northern birds, that are unaffected by cold and snow and other discomforts of winter provided they can get food, are not so well supplied in their northern homes as to prefer to remain there without venturing upon any hazardous wanderings to the south. That indeed has been the restraining consideration which has caused many of the observers to believe that it was very doubtful if any southward migration of northern birds would take place this winter. Consequently when the reports of the coming of redpolls, snow buntings, and other winter birds began to pour in during the last fortnight they were met with incredulity at first, and then as they were confirmed, with a warm feeling of pleased surprised.

The first record of winter finches, other than pine siskins, so far as I know, was made at the Field Day of the Intermediate Field Naturalists at Pottsgrove on October 27th. A flock was flying overhead which was - judging by the call notes - either redpolls or white-winged crossbills, most likely the former. Jim Baillie, who made the observation, did not care finally to put a name to the birds. I mention the observation here because they were undoubtedly winter finches. A flock of redpolls was seen for certain at Meaford on October 30th by Dr. and Mrs. Murray Speirs. On the same trip they also observed a flock of snow buntings. Redpolls were seen by Mr. and Mrs. Eric McNeillie and myself near West Franklin on November 9th. Again on November 3rd Mr. and Mrs. O.E. Devitt found white-winged cross-bills at Wasago Beach. This species was noted at Vivian

Forest on November 5th by R. Ussher. Pine siskins have been unusually common all through October, and have been seen throughout the Toronto region.

Most unexpected of all has been the arrival of brown-capped chickadees. This species belongs among the most uncertain of winter migrants. Three years ago there were a few seen at about this time of year but they disappeared soon after and were not seen again. This season observations are being made in so many different places that something like a "wave" appears to be coming south. This movement would seem to be of larger proportions than the last such invasion during the winter of 1937-1938.

When I heard a chickadee calling in the nasal drawl characteristic of the brown-cap at Gentian Woods, Scarboro Bluffs, on October 27th Bob and Mrs. Trowern and I immediately gave chase, only to abandon the hunt when a little flock of chickadees ahead of us took off some distance through the woods. At the time I was prepared to say that the bird was most likely only a peculiar black-cap and let it go at that. When a few days later I learned that Mr. and Mrs. Devitt had seen a brown-cap at the Main Bluffs on the same day I was very chagrined for now I feel fairly sure that if the other bird had been pursued to identification it would have proven to be also a brown-cap - possibly the same bird. I became the more convinced of this when the next week-end (Nov. 3) brown-caps were being seen all over the area. Jim Baillie, Bob Trowern and others saw one at Cherry Beach. Chris Helleiner and others saw two in Cedarvale. Greer Roberts and I came upon no less than four at Pefferlaw Brook. In addition I received a note from Mrs. R.S. Carman of Angus to say that R. Ussher (a member of the Toronto Ornithological Club) and she had seen a brown-cap at the Forest Station at Angus. Moreover when they reported this to Dr. Brereton at Barrie they received the reply, "Yes, I saw one yesterday!" Mr. Ussher has since informed me that he saw or heard no less than 12 or 13 at Angus, Dufferin Forest and Barrie between October 23-4 and November 2nd. In view of those reports it will be well for all observers to be on the lookout for brown-capped (Hudsonian) chickadees.

This bird is similar in shape, size, and general habits to the black-cap. The black cap is replaced by a brown or greyish-brown cap. This gives a black chin and throat contrasting with a brown cap. There is less white on the sides of the face than in the case of the black-cap, much of the white on that bird being replaced by grey on this one. On the flanks the yellow-brown of the ordinary chickadee becomes red-brown on the Hudsonian. In my experience the brown-cap is less likely to be attracted by squeaking or other inducement to curiosity than is our familiar bird. It seems to keep more on the move from tree to tree, and not to longer a long time in any one spot. It does not appear to be afraid of people but restless. The husky nasal calls are really quite dissimilar from its cousin's chick-a-dee-dee-dee. The more one hears them the less does it seem possible to confuse one with the other. The process of learning the difference, though easier, is of the same order as distinguishing between the calls of downy and hairy woodpeckers. The common call of the brown-cap might be set down as tsick-za-zay-zay. It is lower pitched and drawlier than the black-cap's notes. So far as habitat is concerned it is said to prefer evergreens but in the experience of observers in this region it can be seen in areas where no evergreens exist at all, as, for instance, the willow scrub at Cherry Street. However there is doubtless a larger chance of finding the bird if evergreen areas are searched. Unless you summer in Algonquin Park or further north your only opportunity of seeing this bird will be during an invasion of this sort.

Other winter birds are also appearing. The snowy owl, which came last winter in an unparalleled invasion, was not expected to come again for four years, according to its normal cycle. However, it is not without precedent for odd stragglers to come down in off years, and this fall has already brought reports of several of these owls. The first report was most dramatic - a snowy owl plunged down the chimney of a Toronto church, was rescued alive from the unlit furnace, and turned over to the zoo. The story is authenticated but the explanation of the occurrence I will leave to the soothsayers. So far I have heard no reason for the owl's adventure that sounded convincing. Last week came another report, also in the press, - the more customary newspaper story about this species - one had been shot in the vicinity of Toronto. On November 1st R. Ussher saw a snowy owl at Camp Borden; and on November 2nd Dr. and Mrs. Murray Speirs say another perched on the breakwall at Sunnyside, a favorite spot. On November 4th Mr. W. Martin saw two of the owls at Sunnyside. Mr. Ussher reports that one of these owls was seen in King Township on November 6th, and the same or another on November 9th. On the last date he saw a snowy owl also at De Haviland airport.

Northern shrikes are appearing too. The first showed up at Ashbridge's Bay on October 20th and has been there ever since. It was first listed by Gordon Lambert. Greer Roberts and I saw one near Sandford and a second at Blackwater Creek on November 3rd. On the same weekend Tom Russell saw a northern shrike in the Don Valley above Don Mills Road. This same observer has had the good fortune recently to see a pileated woodpecker at work in the same area of the Don Valley. Again on November 3rd an Arctic three-toed woodpecker was observed at Donalds Farm by G. Lambert, F. M. Smith and others. On November 2nd I was shown a barred owl at 12 Mossom Place by Mrs. Waldron. A second owl of this species was seen on Jane Street the same day. All told everything promises an exciting winter for the bird watchers.

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Mrs. Elma F. Williams, another Aurora member, writes on October 30th that: "This October we have had so many thrush visitors in our back yard. On September 25th the grey-cheeked arrived along with many, many warblers and white-throats. The great attraction to the thrushes was the Virginia Creeper vine on a corner of the upper balcony. It was loaded with berries and it was absolutely stripped of them by the time the last thrush left. From October 11th to 14th a hermit, a wood thrush and an olive-backed fairly gorged themselves, sometimes only three feet away from a window where we could observe them closely. They would feed on the lawn for a while then take turns flying up to the balcony, the hermit always alone, the wood thrush and the olive-backed often flying up together. They drank at the pool but did not bathe as the purple finche, warblers and whitethroats did. On Thanksgiving morning suddenly the wood thrush appeared in a lilac by the dining-room window, looked in as much as to say, "Thank you," and was gone with the others for this year. You can imagine how we anticipate their return in the spring.

We have been up to Lake Simcoe several times this fall where we have seen red-backed sandpipers, one pectoral sandpiper, some semipalmated plovers and eight snipe. On October 20th we also observed tree sparrows and song sparrows there. On October 27th we saw five horned grebes in winter plumage close to shore, also two loons. On October 29th the snipe, red-backed sandpipers, semipalmated plovers were still on the mud flats feeding; the horned grebes were also at the same point farther up the lake; and we had the usual mystery bird to make things interesting - - -."

R. M. SAUNDERS,

Editor.