

Toronto Field Naturalists' Club

174

NOVEMBER MEETING

Monday, November 7, 1960, at 8.15 p.m.
at the
ROYAL ONTARIO MUSEUM

Speaker: Dr. Geo. M. Stirrett,
Chief Parks Naturalist, National Parks of Canada

Subject: NATURAL HISTORY WORK IN CANADA'S NATIONAL PARKS, with color slides.

The rotunda display, which will include some live material, will be in charge of members of the Toronto Field Biologists' Club. Copies of the T.F.B. magazine, "The Field Biologist", will be on sale for 50¢ per copy.

November Outings

Saturday - Greenwood Conservation Area (Birds and Botany)

Nov. 5 Take old highway No. 2 to the eastern outskirts of Pickering. Turn north
9.30 a.m. at "Greenwood Conservation Area" sign. Drive north approximately 4 miles.
Meet at the entrance. If going by bus, take the Oshawa bus which leaves
Toronto at 8.30 a.m. (Check with Gray Coach Lines, HU 7-2121). We will meet
this bus to provide transportation to the Conservation Area. Lunch optional.
Leader - Mr. Fred Bodsworth.

Saturday - Birds at the Island

Nov. 19 Meet at the City Ferry dock to catch the ferry which leaves for Hanlan's
Point at 8.30 a.m.
Leader - Mr. James L. Baillie.

Botany Group

The Botany Group will meet on Thursday, November 17, at 8 p.m. sharp, in the library of Eglinton Public School, Eglinton & Mt. Pleasant. This will be Members' Night. Visitors welcome.

Secretary - Miss F. Preston, HU 3-9530

Junior Club

The Toronto Junior Field Naturalists' Club, for children 8 to 16 years, will meet on Saturday, November 5, at 10 a.m., in the theatre, Royal Ontario Museum. The Bird Group will be in charge. There is still room for some new members in all groups except the Mineral Group, which is now closed.

Director - Mr. R. MacLellan - HU 8-9346

F.O.N. Christmas Cards

Now is the time to purchase these attractive cards, available in two designs - "Tree Sparrow" or "Red Fox". Be sure to see them at the meeting. Price \$1.50 per doz.

HAVE YOU PAID YOUR \$2.00 FEE FOR 1960-61?

President - Mr. Fred Bodsworth

Secretary - Mrs. H. Robson,
49 Craighurst Ave.,
HU 1-0260.

Toronto Field Naturalists' Club.



Number 174

October 1960

We are delighted to be able to present to the readers of the Newsletter this time contributions from three of our members:

- 1) an article on an interesting trip to Churchill by Helen Lawrence;
- 2) an amusing poem with a fitting naturalistic moral by Gerry Bennett;
- 3) an account of an uncommon, fascinating Ontario wild creature, too little known, by Alan Outram.

Trip to Churchill by Helen Lawrence

On a golden August morning, I stood on the station platform in Winnipeg and gazed expectantly along the railway tracks which would be my highway to Churchill, some 1000 miles distant. It is a roundabout route which goes north-west at first, crosses into Saskatchewan, then turns north-east until the Nelson River is reached, before leading straight north to the important port of Churchill on Hudson's Bay.

Soon, the train was rhythmically clackety-clacking along the ribbons of steel, leaving the city behind, and passing through the immense fields of grain lying ripe under the summer sky. In such a vast expanse of prairie, the combines and the men manipulating them looked like toys as they harvested the crop. Here and there, typical western grain elevators broke the flatness of the distant horizon, or loomed up momentarily beside the tracks. A marsh hawk displayed his white rump as he manoeuvred skilfully over the fields, then the sunlight caught the brick colour of a red-tail's fan as he circled above. But best of all for us from the east, was the sight of a Swainson's hawk soaring with his wings slightly above the horizontal, and as he came nearer, his dark chest showed plainly. From time to time, flocks of blackbirds, including handsome yellow-heads, red-wings, Brewer's and grackles, flew over the countryside, but nowhere on our journey did we see starlings in the numbers they would be in Ontario.

After leaving Portage la Prairie, the flatness of the land was broken by the ridge of the Riding Mountains towards the north-west and we paralleled these hills all the way to Dauphin. Here we transferred to cars for a trip to the Riding Mountain National Park, a biological island characterized by the presence of a mixed forest, yet surrounded by the comparatively treeless prairie. After crossing a shallow river, where greater yellow-legs were feeding, we climbed the steep escarpment to a height of 1100 feet above the fertile plains. Now there was a forest of trembling aspen, balsam poplar, willow, paper birch and alder. Then we entered a coniferous region with white and black spruce and tamarack. There are lakes in the valleys which were scooped out by glaciers in the past, and there are hills and knolls of clay, sand, gravel and boulders. Camping sites, nature trails and a well-planned resort town are there for human pleasure, yet herds of elk roam freely, and may be seen by visitors more fortunate than we. But we did manage to catch sight of a cow moose before she lumbered off into the woods. The season of song being past, small birds were hard to find, but loon, herring gull, black tern, crow, grackle, purple martin and house sparrow were seen.

Rejoining the train towards evening, we travelled on towards Saskatchewan, and at Sunset time, began to pass extensive marshes with blackbirds, hawks and many ducks silhouetted against the crimson sky. We had to resign ourselves to the fact that it was going to be impossible to track down some of the birds passing by the train, but the experience was good training in watching for size, shape, silhouette and flight pattern. It was also interesting to notice our improvement in recognizing plants from a swiftly moving vehicle. As well as recognizing large and spectacular plants such as phragmites, cow parsnip, sweet clover, fireweed, and Canada goldenrod, we soon were able to spot alsike clover, blueberry, bunchberry, water smartweed, wild sarsaparilla, and even grass of Parnassus which was blooming profusely at this season. Right beside the tracks grew the prickly rose, the bushes now covered with rather large, oblong, red fruit. Whenever the train stopped, I seized the opportunity to explore along the right of way or in nearby woods. Other plants found, included twinflower, bearberry, wild spiraea, common plantain, dandelion, pineapple weed, starflower, Canada mayflower, pipsissewah, Potentilla tridentata, Lycopodium tristachyum, and the little polypody fern. Labrador tea, sphagnum and reindeer lichen became increasingly abundant as we travelled northwards, as did the most attractive Arctic cotton.

The Saskatchewan River was crossed at The Pas, latitude 54 degrees. Here, a lone Franklin's gull was fighting his way against the strong wind. This is the common gull of the prairies, and is often named "the prairie dove."

Now we were almost half way to Churchill, and just coming into the Muskeg country. From The Pas on, the telegraph poles were set in tripod fashion due to the impossibility of digging through the permafrost. In this region, we were fortunate to see two sandhill cranes rise up, and with necks extended, flap away into the distance. Now the country became really wild and beautifully desolate. For miles and miles, as far as the eye could see, dark cathedral spires of black spruce rose against the sky, with the feathery green of tamaracks relieving the scene. Sometimes there would be a stand of jackpine, but then the main theme of black spruce would dominate again. Ponds and lakes were legion, and each seemed to have ducks or loons. Once we saw a bittern. Although many of the little

stations were named after men prominent in the opening of this area, some have been given Cree Indian names such as Pipun (Winter), Wekusko (Herb Lake), and Sipiwesk (Beautiful Vista). Still others are identifiable only by the mile-posts. Here and there, we would see tiny shacks from which Indians would emerge to wave or just to look as the train roared by.

At mile 334, the train slowed down to cross the Nelson River by a bridge 1003 feet long. The beautiful Kettle Rapids may be seen from both sides of the train. There are seven rapids here, a total drop of 200 feet, as the Nelson River descends from the Laurentian Plateau to the level of the coastal plain. Now it was plainly evident that the trees were having more difficulty in growing. There was a noticeable change in height, and the branching was much more sparse. Vast expanses of country would have no trees at all, just flat tundra with hundreds of irregularly-shaped pools, each with abrupt mossy edges, and fringed with Arctic cotton blowing in the wind. The closer we came to Hudson's Bay, the more stunted the trees became. Now there was branching only on the south side of each tree, a grim reminder of the fierce gales these spruces must stand.

Our first view of Churchill came at mile 503. The immense grain elevator dominated everything, but we could pick out the Eskimo village with its rows of new houses, the dilapidated tents, tar paper and packing box houses of the Indians, and the townsite itself. Mile 510, and we had arrived!

Churchill, latitude 58.45, is an extremely busy port during the short shipping season from mid-July until mid-October. Ships are lined up waiting to be loaded, and freight trains arrive continually with their produce to be sent to distant lands. Then, too, there is the army base, the defence construction company, the whaling station and all the business thus entailed. But just imagine a large slough not five minutes away from the heart of "downtown"! Just imagine the shores of Hudson's Bay immediately behind the post office! Yes, in spite of being in a frontier type town, one is close to wonderful birding. White-crowned and savannah sparrows were busily feeding in the shrubby areas near the square, shorebirds, gulls and ducks flew overhead from river to bay or from bay to river. This is the nesting region of horned larks and redpolls, and they too were about their business. It was a wonderful experience to walk along the rocky shores of Hudson's Bay. The rocks are well-weathered, but one must climb up and down and around the strange formation. We seemed to be the only humans so inclined, and spent a completely happy morning so doing. Even the pipits looked surprised to see us, but were most obliging and wagged their tails, turned this way and that, and gave their thin notes. White whales, in all stages of maturity from grey young, through heather coloured, to pure white adult, were feeding at low tide quite close to shore. Arctic terns were flying past with fish in their bills and feeding their young perched on a boulder. One adult, taking a dim view of our approach, came over us threateningly, but decided that two humans were too many to dive bomb at once. However, it gave us a good chance to see the completely red bill. Having felt the force of a tern's bill on my skull on a former occasion, I didn't press my luck by going too close to the young, but rather stood at a safe distance and admired the flight of the adults, their long tails and their typical tern voices. Bonaparte's gulls were also over the bay, both adults and the young flying back and forth. As we stood silently enjoying all of these displays, the only sounds from the town were the howling cries of the huskies tethered securely at the Indian encampment over the ridge.

Later in the day, on a motor trip out from town, we passed the garbage dump which was well patronized by herring gulls and ravens. It was very interesting to walk on the tundra where the cranberries were ripening in the summer sunshine. Both red and black crowberry were common, and of course Arctic cotton was everywhere. Shrubs of buffaloberry or Shepherdia were here as well as the dwarf birch which I had first learned in the Bruce peninsula. Right on the shore of the bay, there were some splendid specimens of dwarf birch almost prostrate, but with very gnarled trunks about two inches thick. It would be interesting to find out the age of these storm-buffed shrubs. Out on the barrens we caught glimpses of Lapland longspurs which also nest in this region, but we did not manage to find any Smith's. It was an extremely windy day and most birds seemed to be keeping under cover. In one tundra pond, a few pintail ducks were swimming, while others were resting close to the edge. In another pond, eight northern phalarope were spinning about in a little group, gradually working their way close to where we were watching. Then they would spread their wings, showing the white stripe, and move to the far side again to repeat the performance. A lone scaup flew over, a flock of ringed plover, and later some sanderlings. Towards evening, two dowitchers flew over the town towards the mud flats of the river. There is plenty of good birding in the busy town of Churchill! And at night, under a clear, starry sky, with the Aurora borealis spreading curtains of light, we gazed upwards to watch the satellite move across the heavens, a reminder of the civilization to which we must soon return.

How Much Wood Would a Woodpecker Peck?

by Gerald Bennett

This is a story about a scheme where man and nature as a team
Combined their brain and brawn as one, to get an artful project done.
The intention was sound, the aims were high, but unfortunately it went awry.

A man, the hero of this strange plot, had acquired a peaceful country lot.
Away from the bustle of city and town, he was looking forward to settling down.
The grounds were rich in trees and plants, and, of course, the usual mob of ants.

Being a human, he couldn't wait to rearrange the whole estate.
Whatever was there he wanted here and the wooded part he wanted clear;
When it was calm he wished for a breeze and where there was meadow he wanted trees.

The existing landscape didn't suit him. As for the trees he planned to uproot
em.

The place where they stood he wanted in lawn, so he made up his mind they would
soon be gone.

This very common human quirk gets us all involved in a lot of work.

One day, as he thought of the work involved in getting the front lawn problem
solved,

He'd decided the job was too big for him, when a woodpecker lit on a maple limb.
And then, by a lucky stroke of chance, he remembered the mob of hungry ants.

He devised a plan that couldn't fail and he grabbed the woodpecker by the tail.
He said, "Don't make such a noisy fuss. There's something for you and I to
discuss.

Now ants like wood and you like ants. So I'm giving you and your friends a
chance

To hold a succession of tasty feasts by fattening up on these little beasts. I'll capture the ants and put them to work, so in every one of these trees they'll lurk. You drill on the trees 'till you find them all and very soon the trees will fall."

The woodpecker said, "If we can dine on every oak and elm and pine, Sounds very good, I'll grant you that, and we'll likely grow both sleek and fat. We'll be doing your work too, you know, so I won't agree and I won't say no.

We drillers are highly organized, in fact we've recently unionized. We don't do work now just for grub. We work by plan - a tree, a shrub, Perhaps a melon and then a gourd. I'll have to talk to our union steward."

The steward considered the man's suggestion - (and also thought of his own digestion). He ruled the birds would supply the tools. He said it was not against union rules, Explaining although they received no pay, they'd be able to work a shorter day.

So the man was advised the job was on as long as the food was not withdrawn. The woodpeckers were, in fact, elated - the hairies, the downies and pileated. Their leaders divided them into sections and issued a formal set of directions.

The woodpeckers soon developed a taste for pulp with formic acid paste, And very soon they'd reduced to ruins the ANTIQUATED trees and new 'uns. They ate the limbs, the trunks and stumps and then devoured the tiny lumps.

Now while all this was taking place, the ants, who are a crafty race, Could see that soon their worldly goods would vanish along with the plot of woods, So they hunted up a neighbouring louse who had lived all his life in our hero's house.

"Dear louse," they said, "(or maybe lice) we thought it would be extremely nice If you as a neighbour would note our plight and ask us over for tea some night." The louse agreed and said, "Come on," and this is where some of the ants had gone

When the final stick of wood was eaten and the plot of woods was soundly beaten. The visiting ants had wasted no time and, although they hated the taste of lime, They had colonized the plaster and walls, the roof, the floor, the porch and halls.

Now the woodpeckers said, "The job is done, we've levelled your forest one by one. We like the work and we like the board. We really think we can ill afford To stop our work and revert to type. In fact some members have started to gripe.

What else do you have for us to do? We're putting it plainly up to you. We need more work. We want more ants, shorter hours and bigger grants. You've sold us out for a mess of pottage. To-morrow we start to eat your cottage."

Our hero started to weep and wail. He pleaded and begged to no avail. The birds were hungry and eager as well. They reduced the house to an empty shell. And now the fellow was very sorry that he'd ever moved to this territory.

In seven days from roof to floor - the birds devoured it all and more. They ate up every board and lath - as well as the little house down the path. Every last crumb was gobbled down and the man was forced to move back to town.

Although some readers may want to quarrel, we think this story has a moral. Balanced nature as it stands needs not the help of human hands. Always remember the man in the poem who was eaten out of house and home.

Blue-tailed Skink
(Eumeces fasciatus)
By Alan Outram

Perhaps not many of our members are familiar with this animal, which is Ontario's only lizard. While it is found in Eastern North America, from the Gulf of Mexico, north to Lake Superior in Michigan, it has not a wide range in our province. It misses the Toronto region entirely. Furthermore, the visitor to peninsular Florida will not see it, although other kinds of lizard, including other species of skink, are there.

In Ontario it lives in Frontenac County through to parts of Peterborough County and on north-westerly to Parry Sound District. It is located also in the vicinity of Lake Erie, Lake St. Clair and the southerly part of Lake Huron. It is reasonably common in these areas and is diurnal, and so the observant naturalist may hope to see it on field trips not too far from Toronto.

There are about 20 species of skink in the United States and Canada and none of them is large. The adult of our species is about 6 to 7 inches in overall length. The body is covered with scales, the tongue is protrusible, and there are 5 fingers or toes on each limb.

Colour varies, with age and sex. The young are more brilliantly coloured, with the body varying from olive to black, above, and with 5 yellow, or greenish yellow stripes extending from the mouth, well on to the tail. The tail is really a bright blue. As the skink ages its colours become duller and the blue of the tail fades to grey. In some old specimens the head is coppery, the yellow stripes are gone and the tail no longer flashes a brilliant blue in the sunlight.

Our skink's habitat ranges from dense woods to bare rock almost devoid of vegetation, but dryness may be a requisite. It may be found under bark of old logs, or under loose rock. Or it may be seen basking in the blazing sun. The writer has found it under old boards and on sawdust piles of an abandoned sawmill on his summer property in Dummer Township in Peterborough County, as well as on the summits of bare granite on other portions of his land. One frequented his tool shed in the summer of 1957 and did not seem to be much disturbed by the frequent taking of axes, shovels and paint cans, to and from the building. Its presence was not discouraged. The skink is quite harmless, except to insects on which it feeds.

Eggs are laid, up to 14 in a clutch, generally during July. The female broods with the eggs, a condition not always found with reptiles by any means. Although the habitat is generally dry, as previously mentioned, the eggs are deposited in damp locations, not in swamps, but in moist, decaying logs or similar places.

One of the most remarkable features of this animal is its speed of locomotion. It will be seen either motionless, or darting with almost incredible speed. When disturbed it may not make for cover, but may simply dart a few feet or yards and "freeze" again. It is almost impossible to collect a specimen by hand.

If by chance one seizes the end of the tail, the skink immediately disappears, leaving one gazing at a section of caudal appendage. The lizard does not mope about and do nothing, (quoting Watson Kirkconnell), "lamenting like a flower in frost the tail-piece that he'd loved and lost," but proceeds to grow another. The new tail is not likely to attain the length of the original.

The writer has found the Blue-tailed Skink to be called "Swift" by the residents of sections of Frontenac County. This is a good descriptive name but is confusing as there is an entirely different group of lizards known as Swift, having about 30 forms, found in the United States. A better name is one in use elsewhere, the Five-lined Skink.

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We are pleased once again to offer to our members a chance to become co-operators in the continental migrational study that is being conducted from the Patuxent Wildlife Research Center at Laurel, Maryland. For satisfactory coverage it is desirable that as many as feel able should take part in this worthwhile scientific study. We recommend it strongly to your attention.

U. S. DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR, FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE
 PATUXENT WILDLIFE RESEARCH CENTER, LAUREL, MARYLAND

COOPERATIVE MIGRATION STUDY - FALL OF 1960

Thank you for your migration reports of past seasons. The present list contains the same species as in the fall of 1959. We do not expect anyone to provide arrival and departure dates for all 22 species on the list. Dates and counts (or careful numerical estimates) for even one species will be appreciated. Avoid using terms such as "common". In the "Peak" columns please include any dates when migratory movement was detected. The "Last Noted" column is for the last fall date on which migrating individuals were seen or heard. Please do not include any wintering individuals on this form. Use a separate form for each locality.

Observations submitted on this form will be put on punch cards and a machine listing will be sent to you for verification.

We should like to have fall records by January 10. Late reports, as well as records for these same species from prior years (1953-59) can still be used.

We shall appreciate your cooperation in soliciting reports from other active observers. Additional forms will be sent on request, either to you or to lists of people you send us.

Please keep one copy of your report and mail the other to Chandler S. Robbins, Patuxent Wildlife Research Center, Laurel, Maryland. If your report is completed by November 30 it may be sent through your Audubon Field Notes Regional Editor. If this is your first report, kindly put a large star (*) in the top right corner so we will be sure to add your name to our mailing list.

 STATE: _____ . COUNTY: _____ . LOCALITY: _____ . LAT: _____ . LONG: _____

OBSERVER: _____ . ADDRESS: _____

Species	Code	First Migrant		Peak		Peak		Peak		Last Noted	
		No.	Date	No.	Date	No.	Date	No.	Date	No.	Date
Canada Goose	172	60									
Mallard	132	60									
Broad-winged Hawk	343	60									
Common Snipe	230	60									
Mourning Dove	316	60									
Common Nighthawk	420	60									
Chimney Swift	423	60									
Gt. Crest. Flycatcher	452	60									
Catbird	704	60									
Hermit Thrush	759	60									
Golden-cr. Kinglet	748	60									
Myrtle Warbler	655	60									
Redwinged Black ird	498	60									
Baltimore Oriole	507	60									
Common Grackle	511	60									
Rose-br. Grosbeak	595	60									
Evening Grosbeak	514	60									
Slate-col. Junco	567	60									
Tree Sparrow	559	60									
White-crown. Sparrow	554	60									
White-thrtd. Sparrow	558	60									
Fox Sparrow	585	60									

Chandler S. Robbins, James H. Zimmerman