

T O R O N T O \_ \_ F I E L D \_ \_ N A T U R A L I S T S ' \_ \_ C L U B

MARCH MEETING

Monday, March 6th, 1961, at 8.15 p.m.  
at the  
ROYAL ONTARIO MUSEUM

Speaker: MR. SELWYN DEWDNEY, of London, Ontario - writer, teacher, artist.

Subject: NATURE THROUGH A STONE AGE INDIAN'S EYES.  
Speculations about the prehistoric Indian's attitude to his environment, with colour slides of Indian rock paintings recorded by the speaker in the Shield country, portraying animals, birds and men.

In the rotunda - Selections from the Museum's collection of Mr. Dewdney's reproductions of prehistoric Indian art, will be on display.

On sale at the secretary's desk: R.O.M. field checking lists, 5¢ each; migration table (Dec. 1960 Newsletter) 25¢ each; R.O.M. booklet on Quetico pictographs (pertaining to the subject of this meeting), 15¢ each.

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MARCH  
OUTINGS Sunday, March 12th, 9.30 a.m. - Birds of Glendon Hall. Meet at the entrance gates, 1275 Bayview Ave. Take Davisville bus to Sunnybrook Hospital, then walk north on Bayview, OR take Lawrence bus east to the corner of Bayview and St. Leonard's Avenue, right at the Glendon Hall gates.  
Leader: Mr. B. B. Geale.

Saturday, March 18th, 9.00 a.m. - Humber Valley, Old Mill to Dundas. Birds. Meet at lower parking lot of Old Mill, west of the bridge. From the end of the Bloor St. car line, take Kingsway or Anglesea bus direct to Old Mill.  
Leader: Dr. R. M. Saunders.

We suggest a trip to Long Point to see the whistling swans on their spring migration, on the weekend March 25-26, April 1-2, or April 8-9, depending on weather conditions and the amount of open water. For latest reports on progress of the migration, you may call the secretary, HU 1-0260.

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BOTANY  
GROUP Meet on Thursday, March 16th, in the library, Eglinton Public School, Eglinton & Mt. Pleasant, at 8.00 p.m. Speaker: Mr. Ken Strasser, of the Wildlife Section, Metropolitan Toronto & Region Conservation Authority.  
Subject: "Some Projects of the M.T.R.C.A." - illustrated. All welcome.  
Secretary - Miss F. Preston, HU 3-9530

JUNIOR  
CLUB The Junior Field Naturalists will meet on Saturday, March 4th, at 10.00 a.m. in the Museum theatre. Mammal group in charge.  
Director - Mr. R. MacLellan, HU 8-9356

SCREEN  
TOURS Wednesday & Thursday, March 22nd and 23rd, Eaton Auditorium, at 8.15 p.m. "Pika Country", by Emerson Scott. Trumpeter swans, magpies, elk, moose, black bear, and other denizens of the majestic northwest. This is the last film-lecture of the season. Let us give it all the publicity we can, and put this year's Screen Tours "over the top"! Single tickets \$1.25.

President - Mr. Fred Bodsworth. Secretary - Mrs. H. Robson,  
49 Craighurst Ave.  
HU 1-0260.

# Toronto Field Naturalists' Club.



## NEWSLETTER

Number 178

February 1961

Early on the afternoon of December 30, David Hoeniger and I stepped from his car on Bexhill Road west of Lorne Park at the point where a tiny stream flows out of a little marsh, the latter being on golf course property. As we stood on the road two small boys carrying a toboggan began to angle across the marsh ice towards the golf course slopes where a noisy crowd of children were having a wonderful time sliding. Suddenly, as the boys reached the middle part where the stream flows David shouted, "I see the bird." Looking to where he indicated, I too saw--and could hardly believe that I was really seeing--a king rail racing over the ice, disappearing into the cattails beyond. But seeing is believing and the big chicken-like, long-legged rail was unmistakable, incredible though it might be to see it here in winter under such conditions. All summer long I had searched appropriate marshes for sight or sound of this rare cattail dweller without ever being quite sure that I had detected its presence. Now, on the next to last day of the year, in the midst of winter's ice and snow, here it was. Surely anything can happen in the realm of watching birds.

David and I, anxious for another sight, tramped along the north side of the marsh, and out amongst the tightly-packed cattail clumps. The ice held safely except in a few spots where the water was shallow and did not overtop rubber boots. Not until we had made a complete circuit of the marsh and come back to a spot not far from where the rail was first seen did we again catch a hint of its presence, so cleverly had it made its way from cluster to cluster of cattails. Amazing it was to see how this large bird could so easily keep hidden in this restricted area and under these circumstances when so much of its normal cover had gone with the falling leaves and the decline of low plant foliage. Finally, when I was coming out from the north edge through a tangle not yet explored, David, who was standing in the cattails on the other side of the open ice, called, "There it is, right in front of you." And so it was, a mere fifteen feet of where I stood. But could I see it? Not at all; the dense marsh growth in between made a thoroughly impenetrable shield. While I was edging forward as cautiously as may be--how difficult it is to be quiet in a crunching mass of dry cattails and reeds!--the rail sped off, managing to keep out of my sight entirely though David, looking across the open ice, was able to chart its scuttling course yard by yard. When I emerged onto the ice it had, of course, once more disappeared.

We then returned to the road and the car, where we found that Mrs. Lucy McDougall of Port Credit had just arrived, intent on the same quest as ourselves. When told that we had already seen the bird she was astonished and wondered if it would come into view again. This, we assured her, appeared very likely as the rail seemed to be moving around a good deal, to judge by tracks, not only when alarmed by intruders but also, doubtless, in the necessary search for food. Sooner or later it would reappear in the open. However, in order to hasten its coming I walked up the side of the marsh once more and came back down through the middle, proceeding slowly so that the bird should not be too frightened. The dodge worked, for when I was two-thirds of the way back through the cattails both David and Lucy waved from the road to signal that the rail was in view. Again, because of the mass of cattails in between, I failed to see the bird. The others had an excellent sight as it walked unhurriedly over the bare ice from one sheltering tangle to another. Quite clearly this marsh dweller had become accustomed to rather close contact with people, as well it might given the shouting children on the adjoining golf course, an over-looking house on the opposite side and the road. Obviously it could not afford to be too upset by such human nearness as this marsh looked to be where it must seek food and shelter if it was to survive.

The way we found out about this bird is an example of the grapevine's operation par excellence. A member of the Quinte Nature Club (Belleville), Irwin Knight, was visiting the Toronto area over Christmas. On December 26 he and others were out birding and in the course of their jaunt stopped beside the golf course marsh. There was the king rail walking on the ice! This was duly reported by Knight in a letter to David Webster at the F.O.N. office in Edwards Gardens. Webster in turn sent the letter on to Lucy McDougall who placed the information on the local circuit. When she called me I happened to be free and so immediately got in touch with David Hoeniger who found he could get away shortly. Thus we arrived early that afternoon to have a look at the rarest bird reported in the Toronto region this winter, the report having come to us in this roundabout manner from Belleville!!

The news of the rail's discovery set up a parade of observers, beginning with ourselves, so that the rail had far more intimate acquaintance with humanity than its avian nature could easily endure, the requirements of food and shelter notwithstanding. Hence, the next time we went to visit it, we found that it had quit the little marsh beside the golf course and had crossed the road to the swampy woodland downstream towards the lake. Naturally, all the bird watchers for miles around wanted to get a sight of this remarkable bird, a desire no doubt unappreciated by the bird itself. By the time we arrived on January 2 we found observers strung through the woods and all along the banks. We were told where it had been an hour ago, a half-hour ago, a few minutes ago--"Right in that thicket there." But was it there when we marched across the ice to the thicket? No. So we all spread out, tramping the ice beneath the swamp trees, following the prints of those who had searched before us. After much fruitless looking--not quite without result for we put up a winter wren--our party went back to the car for refreshment and renewal.

There wasn't much time left, as I had to be back for a committee meeting at 2.00, so while the others were finishing their repast I slipped down into the swamp again for another quick look. As soon as I reached the favored thicket, I saw Mrs. John Keenleyside standing there. As soon as she saw me approaching she gestured and called, "It is here! It is here!" I went over, walking to the designated thicket and put out nothing. She was baffled. Then suddenly she spied the rail dart from an adjoining tangle. We followed, soon having the elusive creature in view as it padded rapidly from bush to bush, reed patch to thicket over the ice. Assured that Mrs. K.

had the bird under close observation I ran to the road, waved my arms frantically in signal that the rail was found, and had the satisfaction of seeing my companions debouch from the car, coming towards me on the run. Meanwhile I returned, finding Mrs. K. who had succeeded in keeping the rail in sight, and so was able to point it out when the others came up.

To our surprise the rail was carrying a frog which it paused every so often to nibble at. Where did it get this from? There was precious little water that was not tightly frozen. A small stretch of open water gleamed in the culvert under the road, an unlikely--indeed, presumably--an impossible place to find a frog. In fact, so far as we could see only a few springy spots along the banks where oozy mud showed seemed at all probable for the rail must have probed in the muck to uncover this choice food.

The fact that it had been successful answered in part the query, how can such a bird survive the winter in our region? At first it seems unbelievable that a bird which in the Toronto region is at the northern edge of its range could live through the winter, especially as its normal food consists of insects, worms, tiny crustaceans, small snakes, frogs, etc. Its survival would seem to depend upon the winter remaining sufficiently open and mild for it still to be able to discover a modicum of such food. The capture of the frog suggested that this bird had lived through to this date on those conditions, our present winter having been relatively open up to that time and not cold enough to freeze every last spot. On the other hand king rails are known to eat seeds and berries of a wide variety. This opens up a much wider range of possible foods and so a much greater chance of survival. Indeed, so far as this particular individual is concerned, Dr. Donald Gunn found it eating nightshade berries in the little marsh where it was first seen. Several richly fruited clusters of Solanum Dulcamara were dotted through both marsh and swamp. Combined with the occasional frog, worm and crustacean from the mud these nightshade berries could make a quite acceptable survival diet. With the masses of seeded reeds, grasses and weeds along the banks the food supply could be indefinitely expanded. The rail, we conclude, could survive, provided that the springy spots did not freeze, the snow did not cover the seed and fruit supply. It could also move out when the hunting became profitless but, it appears to be a well-established fact that individual birds of migratory species which for some reason or other do not go south when their fellows leave, after a short time lose the migratory urge. Then, if they cannot survive they perish.

We trust that the much-observed king rail, which has added such excitement to this winter's birding, will live through to call and cackle again in its favorite marsh this coming spring. The fact that at this date (February 4) it has not been seen for two weeks does not prove that it has perished. It may only have succeeded better in keeping out of the way of even the most strenuous bird watchers. That its favorite, and probably its home, marsh is the one in which it was first found seems highly likely though this cannot be stated with full assurance. The man who lives in the house overlooking the marsh told me that he had seen the big rails there all summer, and at least four at one time. He didn't know what they were but he certainly knew what they looked like. He also said that he had been putting out food--seed of some kind--which this last individual used. We may feel fairly sure that a family of king rails was raised in this marsh, and that the remaining one belonged to that family. It is not strange that they should have been overlooked by those who know them. How many observers go systematically around all the little marshy spots of this area to see if perchance there may be a king rail family therein? And of those who do how many find them? Having watched a similar spot all the summer, where we

found a king rail family last year, and where we feel practically certain that another such family was brought off this year, yet of which we have no final proof, we can understand how other rail families could go unnoticed. This realization, however, places a first-rate challenge before us. Are our bird watchers going to continue to let such possibilities escape them?

The other query raised about this rail should have as much answer as can be made; why does a single bird like this stay behind? The plain fact is, nobody knows. There are several possibilities. The bird might be injured or ill. In this case there was no evidence of any such condition. The rail was in fine color; it ran and raced in a way no injured bird could its wings appeared intact and functioning. The whole impression was of a bird in excellent health. An examination might have revealed internal parasites or some disease. If so, the bird showed remarkable vigor. When I heard that food was being put out I wondered if such an easily available supply might not have enticed this bird to stay on. This would be possible. On the other hand there would appear to be eccentric individuals among birds as among humans, and such individuals may disregard the rules, be non-conformists for no known reason. Failure to comply with the migrational pattern normal to other rails could have any of these reasons behind it. Once the migratory season is over, and the usual physiological changes have taken place, an individual such as this becomes an over-wintering bird without any desire to move on, being now only concerned with living as best it can. Should it survive it will have at least the advantage of being first on the home ground when the others come back. And first come may be first served.

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Curiously enough another rail, a Virginia rail, has been discovered this winter. This bird has been seen into early January along the banks of the Humber near Weston. It was first reported to us by Helen Lawrence, and has been seen by many observers though we haven't had that good fortune ourself. We did, however, see one on a Christmas census trip to Whitby Harbor some years ago. The chances of survival for the Virginia rail would be much the same as for the king rail, depending upon a similar food supply, open water and good shelter. The occasional report of such birds makes one wonder how many other such individuals sneak about cattail marshes or secluded riverside tangles and escape our recording attention. Here's another challenge!

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Some of the readers of the Newsletter seem puzzled when we mention places like Whitby Harbor, Lorne Park, etc., as being in the "Toronto region." Perhaps it is well to repeat in these pages what has been stated before in that regard. The Toronto region for the purpose of the maintenance of scientific records is officially designated by the Royal Ontario Museum as a circle of thirty miles radius centering upon the Museum building in Toronto. Those of you who have R.O.M. bird-checking cards will see that this region is so designated on them. All records of birds, mammals, insects, plants, etc., are kept on this basis. To clarify the extent of the region a little further I list here some of the outside or border points, proceeding around the circle from west to east: Port Nelson, Mount Nemo, Milton Heights, Speyside, Terra Cotta, Inglewood, Palgrave, Schomberg, Holland Landing, Sharon, Vivian, Dagmar, Brooklin, Gold Point. All these places are inside the Toronto region. The key map of the region may be seen at the Royal Ontario Museum. Observations made within this circle are acceptable as Toronto records.

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The Newsletter notes with pleasure, and welcomes to the growing fraternity of naturalists' groups in this area, the new Toronto branch of the Canadian Amphibian and Reptile Conservation Society. Organized this fall, and now a going concern, this group has the distinguished services of E. B. S. Logier as President, and A. R. Findlay as Secretary-Treasurer.

A group devoted to the proper study of those misunderstood and irrationally maligned creatures--snakes, frogs, toads, etc.--is bound to make a valuable contribution not only to knowledge but to a healthy attitude among people hereabouts, even among naturalists where misinformation should not be, but is often spread about this part of nature.

The group will welcome new members and support. News of its meetings and other activities may be secured by addressing the secretary at 27 Letchworth Crescent, Downsview, Ontario. His telephone number is CH 1-4002.

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We are informed by a news release from the Royal Ontario Museum that a Museum expedition left for the jungles of British Guiana during the week of January 12th. It will search for tropical animals, first reported by explorers a century ago, about which next to nothing is known. In charge of the expedition is Dr. R. L. Peterson of the Museum staff who made a name for himself in Ontario with his masterly study of moose.

Among the mammals which the party hopes to find are jaguars, cougars, ocelots, monkeys, ant-eaters, armadillos, sloths, tapirs, various rodents, deer, peccarys and bats. Over 100 species of bats, including vampires and the 44-inch wing-spread giant fruit bat are reported from British Guiana. The manatee, an unusual aquatic mammal, is also found in the rivers there.

Preparations for the expedition have been under way for almost a year, including elaborate precautions against such hazards as tropical disease and poisonous reptiles. A time-consuming study of existing knowledge of British Guiana's wildlife has been necessary to prepare for the new that may be found. It is expected that significant additions to knowledge of value both to British Guiana and to scientists around the world will be made.

This will be the Royal Ontario Museum's third expedition to the tropics in recent years. A team was in Trinidad in 1957 collecting reptiles and in 1958 R.O.M. scientists excavated fossil animals from tarpits in Peru.

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On two recent Club field trips 57 members were in attendance, 35 at Sunnyside-High Park on January 14, 22 at Glendon Hall on January 21. The first party had little luck with small land birds but was fortunate to see a beautiful glaucous gull at Sunnyside, along with a pintail, four green-winged teal, and the group of semi-feral Canada geese that has been clinging nearby the past two winters. The Glendon Hall party studied trees on a crisp, cold afternoon, finding out that in winter it is quite possible to have a very effective botanical expedition. Miss Helen Smith was in charge of the first group; Professor K. A. Armson of the second.

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As a footnote to the last Newsletter (No. 177) it should be reported that the last blooming specimen of Erysimum inconspicuum, Inconspicuous Treacle Mustard, was seen at the site mentioned on January 14. It was covered by leaves and snow. Since that time all the plants have ceased to have either bloom or leaves. I would point out again that these plants are in no way artificially sheltered or heated, being as exposed as if they were in an open field but near to a bush. The only shelter or warmth was provided by the bush and by the leaves and snow. Survival for so long under these conditions is remarkable, suggestive of vigor and toughness not perhaps previously realized.

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NOTE: The bird migration chart figured in Newsletter No. 176 has gone into a second printing because of the demand. It is available at 25¢ a copy from Mrs. Mary Robson, 49 Craighurst Avenue, the secretary of the Toronto Field Naturalists' Club.

NOTE: Do not forget that those newly-manured fields in March are the places where you have the best chance of seeing the snow buntings and the Lapland longspurs you missed during the rest of the winter. Hundreds of the first and a number of the latter have already been reported. Horned larks, meadowlarks, and mourning doves also frequent such manured fields. Horned larks may be looked for along the edges of highways at this time of year. They are picking up grit and possibly errant weed seed. Both meadowlarks and mourning doves have been seen in quantity this winter. I have a vivid picture of sixteen mourning doves drinking and bathing in the lake to the accompaniment of crunching ice on Shoal Point Beach (Ajax) in mid-January this year. Pine siskins and northern shrikes have been plentiful since early January, crossbills not so much so though they are around. All northern species tend to increase in March as the ones that went through to the south in November return. Keep on the watch!

R. M. Saunders, Editor.