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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

MAY MEETING

Monday, May 1, 1961, at 8.15 p.m.
at the
ROYAL ONTARIO MUSEUM

MEMBERS' NIGHT. Speakers will be as follows:

1. Miss Helen Lawrence - "Exploring Bonaventure Island" - illustrated.
2. From our Junior Club - we are pleased to present the two best speakers of the current season:
 - a. Glen Reid - "The Care of Tropical Fish"
 - b. Howard Sherkin - "The Armadillo"
3. Dr. Donald R. Gunn - "Photographing Birds Through a Telescope" - illustrated.
4. Mr. Paul Hahn - "My Search for Specimens of Extinct and Vanishing Birds" - illustrated by courtesy of Mr. Jas. L. Baillie.
5. Mrs. J. B. Stewart - "F.O.N. Camp, Billie Bear" - illustrated by courtesy of Miss Ruth Marshall and Mr. Jim Simon.

This will also be our annual business meeting.

In the rotunda - Members are invited to bring slides or prints of nature subjects or groups on T.F.N. outings, etc., for display in the rotunda. These need not be masterpieces to be of interest. There will be someone to assist in putting the pictures up for display, but the Club cannot be responsible for them and therefore it is recommended that pictures bear the name of their owner. Those bringing pictures are asked to come as soon after 7.30 as possible.

Outings - Details in your Spring Outings folder. A weekend at Craigleith, near Collingwood, will be held in September under the auspices of the Federation of Ontario Naturalists. Watch for details in September!

Junior Club - The Junior Field Naturalists will meet on Saturday, May 6, at 10 a.m. in the Museum theatre. There will be election of officers, and "Flight" magazine will be distributed to all members present. Film - Walt Disney's "Bear Country." - The annual Junior Club outing will be held on Saturday, May 27, at the Albion Hills Conservation Area.

Director - Mr. Bob MacLellan, HU. 8-9346.

Victoria Weekend Outing - Friday evening, May 19th, to Monday afternoon, May 22nd, at Ryerson Beach Summer Camp, Normandale, on Lake Erie, sponsored by the Hamilton Naturalists' Club. For details write to Mrs. Joan Allingham, 1067 Oneida Place, Burlington, Ont.

Changing your address? If you move during the summer, please do not forget to let us know.

President - Mr. Fred Bodsworth

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



Number 180

April 1961

How long does it take any one of us, no matter how observant, to become well acquainted with any wild creature? I will not say fully acquainted because this we manifestly never do. We all, in the consequence of limited experience, tend to catalogue wild creatures in our minds, and in our hearts too, according to our own restricted contacts with them, or perhaps according to some idea of them that someone else has conjured up for us. Thus are we surprised, even shocked, when some creature of which we have a fixed idea does something out of character as we see it. The next time this happens ought we not to say to ourselves, How much do we really know?

These queries came to mind recently as I was leafing through my field notes and came across two experiences occurring a few days apart with raccoons. The raccoon is, presumably, one of the better-known local animals. Frequently appearing in the city, and common in the adjacent countryside as well as in all the usual summer cottage areas, it is one wild creature that almost everyone has some contact with occasionally. But how is this animal regarded by various people? And what does each person who sees a raccoon know about it? To many, no doubt, the raccoon is first and only an attractive, easily tamed pet, a mask-faced little bandit with a most alluring mien. To others, the bandit is just an annoying scavenger, a shrewd garbage-can raider that can lift almost any cover and strew the container's contents far and wide. To a knowing few, the 'coon is a fierce predator playing an important role in the maintenance of the balance of nature. In fact, the raccoon is no one of these alone but all of them together and much more besides. It is, indeed, one of the most adaptable, intelligent and attractive animals in Ontario.

The several sides of the raccoon's character were illustrated by the two experiences mentioned already. One of these occurred when my wife and I went to visit friends at their cabin, which sets in a countryside of woodland and pasture. We had been invited to a show, the main actor being a raccoon. Scarcely were we seated inside the cabin when the raccoon appeared. Making straight for the picnic fireplace outside, it clambered onto the heating ledge, then began to probe underneath the grate for edible refuse in the ashes. Our friends had deliberately left out bones with scraps of meat on them, slices of bread and orange peels. Soon the

'coon, a moderate-sized female, had found a bone which it deftly retrieved. Sitting back on its haunches, much like a squirrel, it ate the meat off the bone. I have seen people deal with a turkey drumstick in just such a manner. Meanwhile a powerful spotlight had been focussed upon the animal's face. There were we sitting by a picture window in a lighted cabin, only a few feet distant, watching spectators almost within handshaking reach, while a wild animal consumed its meal.

At first we kept silent, fearing to frighten our visitor. Then we found that talking in low tones caused no alarm. Even when someone opened the screen door a little later the 'coon only looked up curiously and turned quickly to push amongst the ashes for other morsels. One by one all the bones and slices of bread were found and consumed, usually with the animal sitting face to us. The orange peels this time were ignored though, we were told, on other occasions they were eagerly taken, perhaps when preferred fare was lacking. Everything desirable having been disposed of the raccoon began to prowl around the grounds in search of something else. Twice it made a tour encircling the cabin, we being able to chart its course by shining the spotlight out of the several windows. Then, when an attempt was made to toss out another crust of bread it did take fright, ambling hurriedly away down the path to the wooded dell, its customary line of departure.

The whole show had lasted a little more than half an hour, and could doubtless have been prolonged had more food been put out, though how that creature could have held more than it had already stuffed in I failed to see. Coming every evening for some time it was clear that the 'coon was being gradually accustomed to human nearness and handouts. Here was proof, if any be needed, that raccoons are not very timid animals, and are quite easily tamed. But then, feeding is a common way of taming wild animals, including husbands. Our friends told us later that on the next evening the 'coon accepted bread from the hand! Here also, of course, was an example of the scavenging habits of this animal being turned to a good means of making its acquaintance.

The next year these same friends had a raccoon that lived in a box built for its accommodation and placed in a tree near the cabin. A little ladder facilitated its climbing up and down from its man-made home. And this 'coon learned to open the screen door by running up one side and using its weight to swing the door! Adaptable? Yes, indeed!

There is, as we have suggested, another side to the raccoon's nature. They may be tamable and adaptable to humans but they are nonetheless really wild animals. Anyone who has heard the trilling, rolling calls of 'coons in spring--calls so like some of those of the screech owl as occasionally to cause one to pause and ask himself, Which is it?--has felt the mystery of wild life pulsating in the dark of night when humans cannot see. Anyone who has heard the rending screams and screeches that sometimes tear the dark night air to shreds when two raccoon males fight for the right to mate has known the shivers run up and down his spine. I could well understand once, when I cautiously approached along a black woods path the scene of such a combat, why our little Irish terrier refused to stir one foot from behind me. I was protection in a terrifying world. Nor is it all sound and fury for the raccoons themselves; these are fights in deadly earnest which sometimes end in a piercing yell followed by a breathless silence that is punctuated by sharp crashes and a dull thud as one of the rivals is forced off the end of a branch into thin air. Literally, it has been made to walk the plank.

Not only can raccoons be fierce with each other; they also at times serve as predators in the scheme of nature. This was demonstrated one June evening when we

drove alongside a large alder swamp. Although this was a paved highway and traffic was fairly steady we had heard what seemed to be the alarm notes of a rail as we came abreast of the swamp. This was what had caused us to halt. The cries continued though our car stood on the road shoulder. At first we saw neither the bird nor the danger of which its high-pitched and shrill cries spoke so emphatically. The hik-hik-hik notes kept on insistently, in tone and quality suggesting that a Virginia rail might be the author. And, in fact, we had only just got out of the car when an adult Virginia rail ran into view, coming right into the open part of the swamp near the road, immediately being followed by three tiny chicks, coal black and fuzzy. Once well away from the dark depths of the willow and alder thickets and amongst the grass tussocks of the open part the adult rail ceased its alarm calls. Now it was content to wander with its chicks amid the tussocks.

We wondered at the rail's readiness to lead its family into so open an area, particularly when we stood near overlooking it and when passing cars whizzed by every few minutes. A splashing movement in the thickets caught our attention, and soon provided the answer to our query, for as we turned to see what was making this sound we found ourselves gazing at perhaps the largest raccoon any of us had ever seen. This huge beast was rising from its watery hiding place and turning away, casting a malevolent look at us as it did so; indeed, never have I seen a 'coon look so nasty. In evident disgust it splashed off into the impenetrable dark of the deeper swamp. Obviously we had arrived at the precise moment when the Virginia rail had discovered the raccoon in the act of stalking its young. No wonder it preferred the open marsh and the nearness of man to the menace in the darkening thickets.

Here, indeed, was the struggle for existence in all its stark reality. Mostly, it goes on without our knowledge or notice; often, in truth, we close our eyes and will not face it. In this case, it had been forced upon our heed; unwittingly, we had interfered. A hunter had been deprived of a meal, and had withdrawn in sullen distaste, being afraid of that greater hunter, man. A rail's family had been saved to live another day. So always is man interfering, upsetting the balance, whether he wishes or no; perhaps we should say man, too, is in the struggle for existence and cannot do anything, even drive a car along a road, without affecting the relations of animal to animal, as well as of animal to man. This little adventure had given us a good deal to think about, showing us, as it did, a new phase of raccoon life we had not met before, giving us an intimate picture of a rail's means of defense, and at the same time providing us with deeper insights into the larger realm of the relations of one creature to another and of our own to the whole realm of nature.

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The following article, "Our Wild Flowers Forever," was written by us for the first Annual Number of the South Peel Naturalist (April, 1961), and it is with the kind permission of the executive of the South Peel Naturalists' Club that we reprint it in this issue of the T.F.N. Newsletter.

Our Wild Flowers Forever

Wildflowers grow in certain places under certain conditions. Each type and species has its own requirements of soil, light, and ecological relations, its own habitat. In recent years it has become a recognized fact that one of the most effective ways of destroying a species of bird or animal in any region is to eliminate its habitat. It is equally evident that this applies as fully to flowers

as to animals. Destroy the habitat and you destroy the flowers. Cut down a woodlot, away go hepaticas, spring beauty, trilliums. Drain a marsh and lose the blue flag, the pond lily, the meadow sweet. Clear a bog and the lady-slippers and other orchids will never grow there again. Yes, indeed, if we are to continue to enjoy our native wildflowers and to hand on our natural heritage of beauty and enjoyment to our children we must look at once to the preservation of suitable habitats before "progress" has taken them all away, and left an urban desert behind.

Along with preservation and protection of suitable habitats must go an appropriate attitude of mind. All of us have on occasion been shocked at the sight of bucketsful of lady-slipper orchids for sale in local stores, at farmers' markets, or similar places. It occurred in a Yonge Street store and at a local market last year. Once I was shown a garden full of various kinds of native orchids that were advertised for sale. The lady owner was quite proud of her business, and apparently gave no thought to the fact that she was denuding the whole neighborhood of orchids for generations to come. We also have seen both children and adults with armsful of trilliums, lilies and other ephemeral blooms, flowers they soon tire of and cast away before they get home, or throw out because the flowers have faded as soon as they arrive. I have even heard of so-called naturalists who, when shown certain rare plants, stripped the place bare. These are all examples of either ignorance or a careless and selfish disregard for other people's interests. They are equally evidence of a failure to respect the plants themselves.

Clearly, there can be no hard-and-fast rule about picking plants. Some plants can stand widespread picking. Some are completely ruined; picking the bloom destroying the plant. In places where plants are very numerous selective picking may do no harm, and even sometimes do good as pruning or weeding. In other cases where plants exist in small colonies, in especially exposed situations, in isolation, they should be left untouched. It is necessary to know the particular plants and their reactions to picking, their special requirements, before deciding whether to pick or not. One of the best ways to interest children in plants is to let them pick flowers but to encourage them in indiscriminate picking is to foster a negligent and unthinking attitude. They should be taught about the particular plants, and be led to see the need to leave this one untouched whereas the other one they may carry home and cherish as a thing of beauty. Here guidance and knowledge are necessary for both adult and child. If people will learn that plants are living things, each with a life and an individuality of its own, they will find it easier to respect that life and that individuality. With respect begins a protective interest, and a willingness to curb one's own self-centered desires. If with this growing respect for flowers and plants in their own right we consider that other people than ourselves will certainly hope to enjoy the beauty we may be destroying we will be more selective still in that which we choose to pick and take away. The golden rule applies here as well as elsewhere in life.

These then are the two most essential elements in the conservation of wild flowers: A realization of the need to save and to guard natural habitats; an attitude of mind that embodies both respect for plants in themselves and a willingness to admit that other people than ourselves will want to enjoy the beauty of the wild as we do. If these two principles are truly lived Ontario will never lack ample places where her people may refresh their souls amidst the beauties of flowering blooms.

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We are pleased to receive from Miss Ethel Bunker, of Happy Nook, Pickering (Cherrywood), the following account of an interesting territorial encounter which took place last spring at Happy Nook between two species of birds (red-headed woodpecker and crested flycatcher) that require similar nesting accommodations. Miss Bunker writes:

"Last spring a pair of crested flycatchers finished building their nest in a bird-box on the hydro pole to the south of our house where it can easily be seen from the living room. Then one morning while we were having breakfast, a red-headed woodpecker came to one of the bird-feeders but was not very interested in the food. While we were watching another one appeared and they followed one another around from one feeder to another just looking things over. Next we saw one looking into the hole of a bird-box where the hole was too small for it to go inside. At last we saw them fly over to the box on the hydro pole, one landing on the perch while the other sat on the top of the box. At the same time the male flycatcher was sitting on a tree quite near while the female flycatcher was in the box. So the fight was started.

"Down came the flycatcher off the tree straight at the woodpecker on the box, but the woodpecker just sat there and the flycatcher flew back to the tree screeching at the top of his voice. As he flew back to the tree out came the female flycatcher's head from the hole in the box to peck the woodpecker sitting on the perch but the woodpecker dodged and missed the peck and still sat there. After several attempts by the male flycatcher to chase them off the female came out of the box to help, and with a lot of screeching they both bombarded the woodpeckers who did not seem to mind at all but just kept sitting there.

"This went on for about an hour when the flycatchers disappeared and soon afterwards the woodpeckers left this box and looked over some of the other boxes. We thought we had lost our crested flycatchers as a result of the fight.

"However, the flycatchers did not give up quite so easily. They were back at the box at tea-time while the woodpeckers seemed to be interested in one at the back of the house with a larger hole. Next morning they were all four around but not on speaking terms. We were pleased to think we were going to have both red-headed woodpeckers and crested flycatchers nesting here where we could see them raising their young. It did not, though, work out quite like that. In the evening we saw the woodpeckers fly into the trees across the road but next morning they were back on the feeders and at some of the boxes. This went on for over a week when the woodpeckers finally disappeared, and the flycatchers were left to raise their family in peace in the box on the hydro pole."

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The most recent number of the Nature Bulletin of the Forest Preserve District of Cook County, Illinois, again contains an essay of real interest to us in Toronto. Horsetails and club mosses are among our most interesting plants though they are little known by most naturalists. The club mosses which the author finds "rare or extinct" in the Chicago region are abundant with us, especially in well-forested areas like Algonquin Park. They are attractive at all times of year, but especially so in their fruiting season.

Nature Bulletin No. 634 (March 25, 1961).

Horsetails and Club Mosses

Just for fun, sometime, lie on your stomach in a patch of long grass or weeds and remain perfectly still, but watchful. Pretend that you are a tiny person--like Alice in Wonderland--lost in a jungle of towering trees. It is easy to imagine that an ant is a terrible dinosaur, that a worm is a huge snake, and that grasshoppers are gigantic flying dragons.

If you try that stunt in a patch of those queer flowerless plants called Horsetails, or in a bed of the equally primitive Club Mosses, you may get some idea of how the landscape appeared during the Coal Age, 300 million years ago.

Then this earth had a warm humid tropical climate, and vast portions of it were swamps choked with fantastic types of luxuriant vegetation. There were tree horsetails, 60 feet tall and almost identical--except in size--with their small descendants we see today. There were treelike club mosses, one of them attaining a height of 100 feet. There were great seed ferns--now extinct, tree ferns, and an understory of true ferns among which there were some kinds 15 or 20 feet tall.

During millions of years, as that vegetation lived and died and fell into the swamps, it accumulated and gradually changed to peat. Eventually, with tremendous pressure exerted by layers of rock poured or folded on it, the peat became coal. The fossil remains of giant horsetails, club mosses and ferns are frequently found in thick veins of coal deep underground in Illinois.

Our modern horsetails are easily recognized by their jointed hollow stems, each section fitting snugly into the one beneath it in much the same way as lengths of sewer pipe fit into each other. The species most common here occurs in damp sandy places, on worn-out clay or gravelly soils, and especially on railroad embankments. It is an annual plant--it comes up anew, completes its growth, and the stems above ground die back each year. It sends up two kinds of stems; one that bears spores and another that is sterile.

One of the first signs of spring is when the tan-colored fruiting stems appear. They grow rapidly to a height of from 6 to 12 inches. On a stem, at each joint, there is a sheath of small pointed scale-like leaves, black or dark brown, that lie flat against it. At the tip there is a yellow cone crowded with scales which soon open and release clouds of dust-like spores.

When a fertile stem begins to wither, the roots send up a green, jointed sterile stem that lives until autumn. At each joint there is a whorl of small needle-like stems, also green and jointed. It looks like a little pine tree but when one droops downward it reminds you of a horse's tail. Muskrats and deer are said to relish the horsetails that grow in and around swamps but the chief value of these plants is that they develop branching nets of roots at or just beneath the surface of the ground. They anchor the soil, preventing wind or water erosion.

Scouring Rushes, closely related to the horsetails, altho very similar in most respects, are evergreen perennials--they live from year to year. A common species, which grows in clumps along streams and the borders of swamps, has dark-green jointed stems from 3 to 8 feet tall, with longitudinal ridges. The sterile and fertile stems are alike but the latter bear cones. They are strengthened with

bands of gritty material--fine particles of silica--and in pioneer times were used to scour pots and pans.

Club Mosses are little evergreen plants with trailing stems from which grow erect shoots that, on some kinds, resemble tiny trees. Covered with moss-like leaves and reproducing from spores, they prefer cool deep forests and are rare or extinct in this region.

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Field Trips

Sunday, March 12, at Glendon Hall. Mr. Bev. Geale led some twenty field naturalists in an exploration of the Glendon Hall valley. Their best results were along the damp slope on the east side of the river, south of the Glendon Hall property. Red crossbills flying over and Carolina wren, song sparrow, cardinal and chickadee in song were the outstanding finds.

Saturday, March 18, Humber Valley, Old Mill to Dundas St. Forty some members and friends turned out for a very pleasant hike up one side of the Humber and down the other, with Dr. R. M. Saunders. Walking was good on crusted snow, and the sunny spring air was full of song--redwings, grackles, song sparrows, cardinals, purple finches all performing. The sight of the trip was a group of six male purple finches, their raspberry-hued heads and bodies dotting a bit of brown slope like fallen flowers. Looking down from Dundas Bridge onto pine siskins feeding in the weeds below was another good sight. The most productive area was the better-covered bank along Baby Point. Twenty-three kinds of birds were seen on the trip.

Note: There is word from Port Credit that the king rail has been seen again at the Golf Course Marsh on Bexhill Road. This would seem to mean that this bird did survive the winter for it is too early for any newcomer to have arrived.

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NOTICE

At the December 1960 meeting the motion regarding increase in fees, which was published in the November Newsletter ($\frac{1}{4}$ 175), was proposed and passed practically unanimously. Effective May 1st, 1961, therefore, fees for the Toronto Field Naturalists' Club will be as follows:

Ordinary membership - \$4.00 per annum

Family membership - \$6.00 per annum

Corresponding membership, available to persons residing more than twenty miles from the Royal Ontario Museum
- \$2.00 per annum.

A \$100.00 fee for Life membership became effective with the passing of the motion.

R. M. Saunders,

Editor.