

TORONTO FIELD NATURALISTS' CLUB NEWSLETTER

February Meeting

Monday, February 5, 1962, at 8.15 p.m.
at the
ROYAL ONTARIO MUSEUM

Speaker: DR. DAVID FOWLE, associate professor of biology at York University,
president of the Federation of Ontario Naturalists.

Subject: BRITISH COLUMBIA'S FIRST NATURE PARK. An illustrated account of a natural
history survey on a small island off the west coast.

In the rotunda - an exhibition of flower paintings by Miss Mary Cumming.

February Outings

Saturday Sunnyside and points west to Clarkson - Birds
Feb. 24 Meet at the west end of Sunnyside parking lot (west of the bathing
9.30 a.m. pavilion). Those using public transportation take the Queen car west to
Ellis Ave., then walk to the car park.
Drivers please note: We will be travelling some distance, so we would
appreciate as many cars as possible. Your cooperation will be needed in
accommodating those who have come by street car. Bring lunch.
Leaders: Mr. Ralph McCleary and Mr. Jack Sherrin.

Sunday Wilket Creek Park - Birds
Feb. 11 Meet at park entrance on Leslie St. just north of Eglinton Ave. Those
9.30 a.m. using public transportation catch Eglinton East bus at Yonge & Eglinton
subway station. Buses run every 1/4 hour. Please check with the T.T.C.,
HU 7-2424.
Leader: Mrs. Eve Cobb.

Botany Group

Meet on Thursday, February 15, at 8.00 p.m. in the library, Eglinton Public School,
Eglinton & Mt. Pleasant. Speaker: Mr. Ken Strasser, of the Metropolitan Toronto &
Region Conservation Authority. Subject: "Conservation of Wild Flowers."

Secretary - Mrs. Esther Carin, HU 8-7134

Junior Club

Meet on Saturday, February 3, at 10.00 a.m. in the Museum theatre. The Insect Group
will be in charge, providing junior speakers and three films: "Introducing Insects,"
"The Monarch Butterfly," and "God's Wonders in Your Own Backyard."

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

You may be interested to know that a 10-week University Extension course on Shade
Tree Diseases and Insects will commence February 1. For information, telephone
WA 3-6611, local 301.

President - Mr. Fred Bodsworth

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

Toronto Field Naturalists' Club.



THE SILENT SEASON

Now we are in the palm of winter's grip. The warmth of our homes cheers us as we take refuge from the biting cold. We look languidly at heavy snowflakes swirling in the gloomy air and hope this storm will be the season's last. The snow we greeted joyfully on Christmas Eve has outstayed its welcome and its presence palls. Our complicated lives go on but the effort seems greater. Each activity has to be planned with Winter's restraining influences in mind.

Some days the sun is bright but it has little warmth. Ragged purple clouds line the horizon and tear the sun's lowering rays into tattered shreds of gold and crimson. The sunset fades like an untrimmed wick that has burned itself out.

The land around us looks forsaken and void of life. It is dawn but no chorus sings. It is evening but the vespers are silent. The bustle of summer in fields and forests is quieted as the Earth slumbers.

Yet this impression of lifelessness is untrue. It is an appearance that deceives the careless observer. For, even in the depth of winter, life abounds. One must look a little more closely for Nature reveals many secrets grudgingly. But life is everywhere. Though stark and wind-chilled trees look ghostly and wan, they are vibrant with life. In their roots, protected from the chilly winds, life-giving sap stirs with the lengthening days. Winter buds, alive but dormant, folded tightly in close defiance of the season's cold, await the coming of Spring's comforting warmth. Quickly they will become living leaves and flowers. The forest will again swell with the senses of Spring. Already, the willows' golden bark glistens in the sparkling sunlight and contrasts vividly with gray-black shadows on softening snow.

Hidden in crevices of ragged bark on every tree and shrub are eggs, larvae and pupae of insects. Their life-cycles are arranged for maximum chances of survival, as these three phases are hardier and less vulnerable to ravages of weather than the winged adult stage. Here again, though life is dormant, it is real. Industrious brown creepers and inquisitive nuthatches patrol each trunk and limb

dining on this insect life. From energies derived from their wintry bill of fare, these tiny birds remain warm and active in the face of the season's severest hardships. Some winged insects do survive the cold in adult form. Folded closely in protective crannies are mourning cloak butterflies waiting only for a few warm days to send them airborne again on velvet wings.

The very earth is full of life. Confined in the soil itself are snakes and turtles, frogs and toads, and a thousand other creatures whose revival will herald Spring's awakening warmth. Chipmunks pass away the dreary days asleep and safe in burrows below the forest floor. In his silent state of torpor, the groundhog is warm and dry in his den deep beneath the snow. His breathing is barely perceptible; his body has absorbed its autumn layer of fat and is now thin and gaunt; his grizzled coat is flabby and loose. Ever so gradually, his sleep is becoming less torpid. Soon, as the snow vanishes, and the earth slowly grows warmer, he will awake and greet the disturbing sun sleepily.

To our north where herds of deer have stripped their winter browse, a serious fight for survival goes on. Their food supply is depleted; competition for life is now all that matters; some of the herd will starve and die. Nature is bountiful but she is also cruel and ruthless. Only the strongest of the species survive; only the most vigorous will supply offspring to populate next winter's herds. While deer struggle desperately to live, the black bear chooses a more peaceful way to combat Winter's attack. Huddled in a sheltered cave, or perhaps shielded only by a covering of leaves and snow, the bear passes the days in quiet hibernal slumber. During the winter, cubs are born, the mother barely waking to greet their arrival and arrange their first instinctive nursings. By the time they first greet the warming days, her cubs will be partly grown. So, in winter, life not only continues, but multiplies.

Along Lake Ontario's ice-bound edges, there is much animated activity afloat, as the ducks begin their seasonal courting rites. Drake buffleheads and golden-eyes engage in ambitious courting displays which, though senseless and ludicrous to human eyes, are serious instinctive expressions of the urge to reproduce. Drakes bob their heads in convulsive fits of exaggerated expression, and circle the quiet females who, though appearing demure and aloof, undoubtedly are well aware of their suitors' advances. Now the males rise high out of the water, flap their wings in rapid beats, then fall back, extend the neck and head along the surface, and repeat the nodding and bobbing again. This is a sign of the season, a symbol that the end of Winter and its inhibiting influences, is close at hand. Nothing can stop the advent of Spring.

Even now, horned owls are nesting. High in her bulky nest, the female broods her eggs. Her back is covered with last night's snow but, beneath her, the eggs are living and warm. In belfries and eaves of city buildings, pigeons are already incubating their precious eggs, faint flickering life-beats in their embryos being fanned into living flame by the warmth of the parent's feathered body.

Horned larks have returned from the south. Crows rend the morning air with raucous cries. The cardinal whistles from his lofty perch. In cedar swamps, the ruffed grouse struts with collar erect and drums his message from a shadowy glade.

So, we reflect on these signs of the season and become assured that cold and snow, biting wind and binding ice will soon be no more. We shall cheer the first mild day when dripping water from icicles above, makes merry music on the

frozen earth below. We shall thrill to the message of the first robin's song and pause to enjoy choruses of spring peepers from soggy marshland. And, next August, when Summer's torrid heat makes us cranky and oppressed, we shall think back longingly to the fresh, delightful days of Winter.

G. Bennett,
Acting Editor.

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A BIRDING TRIP TO ARIZONA AND MEXICO
(cont'd from last month's Newsletter)

Although Lordsburg, N.M., is in the desert, where a minimum of traffic might be expected, such was not the case. During the night, an endless chain of trucks roared past our motel and we had our only poor night's sleep of the trip. It seemed that every vehicle from San Francisco to New York went past our room, or rather, through it.

Our first objective to-day (Wednesday) was the San Simon marsh where we hoped to find the New Mexican duck. Mourning doves, house sparrows and loggerhead shrikes were the commonest birds along the highway. At one desolate spot, we stopped to investigate a loud thrasher-like song. Soon the songster was found, perched atop a clump of creosote bush, and was identified as a Bendire's thrasher. In shape of body and bill it was clearly a thrasher but there the resemblance to our big Ontario species ended. This desert-dweller was a dull grayish shade, modest and drab, compared to its clownish and colourful brown cousin of our fencerows and thickets.

The San Simon marsh was a desert oasis where a flow of water had been transformed artificially into a shallow pond. A few marsh plants crowned its edges and a finger of water trickling from the outlet caused the surrounding soil to produce green vegetation. The whole general area was ringed with large cottonwoods not yet in leaf. We had quickly learned that any stand of cottonwoods meant moisture, hence good birding. To reach this pond we had to drive along an obscure trail, threading our way through a thousand thorny thickets. Our car's approach frightened our birds and we saw them only in the air - six New Mexican ducks which look very much like black ducks with a mallard speculum. This little oasis was alive with birds. We found several vermilion flycatchers, a killdeer, a ferruginous rough-legged hawk, a singing long-billed marsh wren, ruby-crowned kinglets, a marsh hawk, a pair of red-shafted flickers and an eastern meadowlark. Totally new to us were a flock of Cassin's purple finches, a black phoebe, a ladder-backed woodpecker, and a few Audubon's warblers. The black phoebe is a smartly clad fellow, with the upright perch and tail-wagging habit of our eastern species. The Cassin's finches were in song, performing like a typical finch flock, tumbling in mass from one tree-top to another, constantly active, feeding, calling, singing. The ladder-backed woodpecker, although appearing only vaguely like our downy, sounds exactly like one, giving the same rolling call-sequence. Throughout the trip, almost every wooded oasis we visited would harbour one of these ladder-backs. The Audubon's warblers were easy to identify as they look like our myrtle warblers, except that the throat is yellow, not white.

Our next objective was the Chiricahua National Monument. At 10 A.M. we entered the State of Arizona, a land of wonderment, a region of endless entertainment for the sightseeing naturalist. Its varied topography forms a mosaic of ecological

life-zones. To the observer, visiting this area for the first time, it appears as a crazy quiltwork of unlike habitats with no plan, no reason, no design. The impression is that Nature, in one of her capricious moods, has tossed a hodge-podge of geography into this part of the continent, stirred it whimsically, and then abandoned the whole project. However, a closer look at its patterns of life, reveals that for every puzzle there is an answer. In a half-hour's driving, it is possible to proceed from desert to wooded mountains, from uncomfortable heat to chilling cold, and from flat table-lands studded with spiralling dust-devils to calm, lush canyons. To help unravel these mysteries, one must constantly be aware of the elevation of his surroundings. Variations in altitude play such a prominent role in dictating the composition of one's environment that elevation becomes as important a topic as temperature and time of day. An ascent from 4,000 to 10,000 feet offers the same transition in scenery and native wildlife as would a trip from the temperate zone to the sub-Arctic. Other microclimatic factors such as directional exposure to sun and wind, existence or lack of shade, and the volume of spring rains, make up an effective combination of elements, each playing its part in shaping the ecology of this vast and variegated landscape.

Our intended approach to the Chiricahua Monument was plugged with snow. This required a change in plans so we adopted a roundabout route, whereby we drove to Douglas, then north, finally entering the area from the west.

At Apache, we stopped to read the inscription on a marker where Geronimo surrendered in 1886, thus ending Indian warfare in the West.

At Douglas we were very close to the Mexican border and could look into Mexico where high black hills rose in the hazy distance. Now our first century plants, or agaves, started to appear commonly. At a picnic site where we paused for refreshment, we made the acquaintance of the black-throated sparrow, also called the desert sparrow. This dapper little desert bird sings a dry but pleasant song which seems to fit perfectly with its arid, sun-baked surroundings. Wherever the creosote bush abounded, we were likely to find this songster skulking in its stingy shade.

In Douglas, cultivated palm trees lined the streets. Sturdy, dark-skinned urchins played in the school-yard and frequently, we heard snatches of Spanish in their spirited conversations. Mockingbirds sang loud, improvised melodies. At one street-corner, where two of them seemed to compete for musical supremacy, we stopped to listen to their impromptu concert. Here we met another proficient chorister, the house finch. These door-yard finches fill the same role as the house sparrow, occurring in small flocks in gardens and lawns, preferring human company to the more remote life of the rural regions. Being accomplished vocalists and quite colourfully plumaged, they are undoubtedly more welcome than house sparrows, a species sadly lacking in aesthetic values.

In this section of Arizona we started to see our first ocotillos. This is one of the commonest plants of the Sonoran desert. To the Eastern stranger's eyes, it is truly an exotic item. Each ocotillo (pronounced o-ko-tee-o) grows in a clump from a central base. The clump looks like a bundle of green sticks pushed into the ground at an angle, each leaning outward, resembling the skeletal framework of a giant, inverted umbrella. In spring the bark (?) which contains the plant's chlorophyll turns bright green and later, red pendant flowers appear. These showy flowers, blending in complementary harmony with the vivid green, make the ocotillo one of the desert's most colourful sights. A clump may grow from six to twenty feet in height. A live faggot, when stuck in the ground, will take root and grow, similar to our poplars and willows. Mexicans take advantage of this and use the plant in

fence-building. By sticking a row of these in the ground, and waiting a few years, a decorative and impenetrable fence-row is attained with a minimum of effort and expense.

Just north of Douglas, an American rough-legged hawk was seen. Considering how close we were to Mexico, this seemed noteworthy as Blake's, "Birds of Mexico" does not include this species in its index of Mexican birds. Here we also found our only Wied's crested flycatcher, a southern species resembling our great crested flycatcher, except for a slimmer silhouette and a whiter throat.

At a picnic site we found a roadrunner right on the table. Ousted by our unwelcome intrusion, it flopped to the ground and sped to the opposite side of the highway. Here it looked back, giving us a spiteful stare, translated tersely as, "Foreigners!" and then scurried into the creosote bush.

Farther on we passed through a prairie-dog town which extended for miles on both sides of the road. Approaching the Chiricahuas, we began to climb sharply, and soon were in wooded country, where we found another entirely new assortment of vegetation. Arizona sycamores, similar to our south-western Ontario species, but with a more open and spreading crown, were quite common. Impressive in both height and bulk was the Arizona cypress growing along the mountainous incline. Even larger, was the alligator juniper whose sombre, evergreen foliage added a dark and softening tint to the harsher hues of rock and scrub. These junipers were easily distinguished from the other evergreens by the fact they produce berries instead of cones. The bark of their thick trunks, often several feet in diameter, has a checkered pattern, resembling an alligator's skin. Adding to the colour of the landscape were two more new trees - the Spanish madrone and the manzanita - both of which have scarlet-coloured bark. The madrone grows to full tree size; the manzanita, as we saw it, did not exceed the status of a shrub. The Ranger told us that, in midwinter, the effect of the bright red leafless limbs against a background of sparkling snow is quite striking.

The Chiricahua Mountains (pronounced cheery-cow-ah) formed a rugged, rocky range, well-wooded and of great interest to the naturalist. The mountains are remnants of an eroded lava flow. Many have split and are now narrow pinnacles of artistic shapes. Balanced rocks perch precariously, waiting for further centuries of erosion to send them plunging into deep chasms below. One could spend days enjoying this geological artistry alone, without regard to birds or other phases of Nature. Unfortunately, with our inflexible schedule, we had to absorb this stimulating scenery in quick doses, promising ourselves that some day we would revisit the Monument when lack of time would not be such a limiting factor.

Although our list of birds was but a meagre sample of this vast area's population, it included several totally new to us such as plumbeous gnatcatcher, Arizona jay, acorn woodpecker, Hutton's vireo, mountain chickadee, gray-headed junco, and Coues' flycatcher. Old acquaintances were present too - myrtle warblers, robins and hermit thrush. A Mexican goshawk flew from peak to pinnacle and, as we watched its aerial acrobatics, we discovered that it was being dive-bombed by white-throated swifts. Later we noted more of these colourful swifts going in and out of crevices in the craggy brow of the mountain-side high above us.

In this forested country we were surprised to find cactus and other plants normally associated with the desert growing profusely. Even at the highest peak (7,000 ft.) we found hedgehog cactus and opuntias. The latter, often called prickly

pears, were as tall as a man in contrast to the stunted, ground-hugging representatives of this species we see at Point Pelee in Ontario. Along the rim of each cliff spindly stalks of century plants competed with oak and pine for living space. Around our camp-site, in the cool shade of the forest canopy, yucca and catclaw were numerous.

We learned three new species of pine. One was the Mexican pinyon pine whose cones contain edible seeds, once a staple food item among certain Indian tribes and still a favourite tidbit of squirrels and birds. The Chihuahua pine was represented here by small, scrawny stands growing at the northern fringe of their range. The Apache pine produces needles 8 to 18 inches long and has fat, giant cones attractive to tourists as souvenirs of the south-west. Two other common trees were the Arizona white oak and the silverleaf oak. The first is a deciduous tree, the old leaves persisting through the winter, then dropping just before the new foliage unfolds. The silverleaf is an evergreen.

We had asked the Ranger what mammals we were likely to see and were told that coatimundis were often seen in the Monument. These were animals we really wanted to see so, after dark, we baited bread with tuna fish and set it in front of the station-wagon. Soon we heard something eating it. Turning on the headlights we found it to be only a common striped skunk. We never did see a coati. As we were going to bed, an owl called several times. Although we wanted to hear some of the south-western specialties such as the spotted owl or the flammulated screech owl, this one seemed to be the same ordinary screech owl we have back home.

It would make a better story if I could say that we awoke to greet a glorious mountain sunrise and revel in splendid Alpine beauty of sun-spangled spires of balsam and fir. However, to be truthful, we rose sleepily and breakfasted in a chilly, uninspiring sleet storm. This impudent inclemency was the only foul weather we had encountered. It hampered us somewhat but we still made a few new acquaintances - painted redstart, bridled titmouse and a new mammal, the cliff chipmunk.

Leaving the Chiricahuas in mid-morning (Thursday) we descended into desert habitat. Here the sky was clear and the warmer temperature was noticeable. At a dry river-bed, where browsing cattle eyed us sullenly, we found our first brown towhees, also chipping sparrows, vermilion flycatchers and mourning doves. Along the highway, a roadside census of loggerhead shrikes revealed that they averaged one per mile over a thirty mile stretch. We spotted our first pyrrhuloxia, a big crested finch, resembling a heavy-billed cardinal.

Now we headed for the Huachuca Mountains (Hwah-choo-kah) north of Nogales, via the old copper-mining town of Bisbee. The south-west is heavily wrinkled with winging creek-beds lying barren and dry most of the year. When rain occurs they become gushing streams whisking away the precious water quickly from their parched surroundings. Vegetation is thicker along their banks making them attractive areas for bird-finding. At one of these we found a pair of giant-sized cactus wrens, closer in size to thrashers than wrens. An obscure little skulker was identified as a Botteri's sparrow but another small brown wren puzzled us and escaped unnamed. We also found the rufous-crowned sparrow, an Arizona specialty looking something like a chipping sparrow with black whisker marks on the sides of the face. A kingbird caught our attention and puzzled us as to its identity. We had memorized the field marks of western, Cassin's and Couch's kingbirds which we expected to find, but this bird did not fit any of these. In "Birds of Mexico" we found that the description of the thick-billed kingbird (*Tyrannus Crassirostris*) fitted our bird, but, as there

was no record in our literature of this bird occurring in U.S.A. we were hesitant to consider it properly identified.

Continuing, we made our last stop of the day in a quiet canyon where we found the manzanitas filled with small migrating birds. In quick succession we listed gray vireo, common bush tit, black-throated gray warbler and ruby-crowned kinglets. Here we found our first canyon wren, a fairly large species with a conspicuous white throat.

Just before dark we headed for Nogales, where we planned to meet Bill Harrison, the most active bird student of this area. We had corresponded with him and arranged a week-end trip into Mexico. Nogales, therefore, was to be our headquarters for the next few days. It is a small city right on the Mexican border with only a high fence and a Customs office separating it from the border city of Nogales, Sonora.

We contacted Bill and confirmed all previous arrangements. We were to meet him tomorrow evening. Warren Winslow, a Spanish-speaking birder would join us for our trip to the Gulf of California at Kino Bay, Sonora.

For to-morrow's birding Bill suggested an area near Patagonia along the Sonoita Creek bed. We had passed through this lush valley this afternoon and had been impressed with its green vegetation. Bill also confirmed our identification of the thick-billed kingbird, advising us that, in the past few years, this species had become established in south-eastern Arizona as a breeding bird.

We retired for the night looking forward to an eventful day.

(continued in next month's Newsletter).

G. Bennett,
Acting Editor.

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OLD BELT LINE RAVINE TO BE PRESERVED

Recently it was drawn to our attention by Mrs. B. F. LeVay, one of our members, that the south-east corner of Moore Avenue and the abandoned right-of-way of the old Belt Line, which had been acquired previously by the Metropolitan Toronto Department of Roads for possible use as a connection from the Don Valley to Mt. Pleasant Road, had been rendered surplus to their needs by the building of the connection to Bayview Avenue and that it was to be disposed of either by sale to other Metropolitan Departments and the local municipality, or by public tender.

We wrote to Mr. T. Thompson, Metropolitan Parks Commissioner, pointing out the value of this area for nature study and the uses which have been made of it by our Club and other natural history groups, and recommending that it be taken over by the Metropolitan Parks Department for preservation in a natural state.

We received the following reply, dated December 7th, just too late to be reported in our last Newsletter:

"Your letter of November 30th has been received and may I assure you that the appropriate steps are being taken to make sure that the south-east corner of Moore Avenue and the Old Belt Line will not be disposed of to private enterprise even though it has been listed as land in excess of the needs of the Metropolitan Roads Department.

"The appropriate steps are now being taken to assure that this land is vested in the appropriate department of Metropolitan Toronto, East York or the City of Toronto, whichever municipality may be deemed the proper one in connection with the maintenance and development of the Old Belt Line.

"I have long been aware of the value of this area to such organizations as the Toronto Field Naturalists and I assure you if this Department should become the administrating agency, it will be retained as an area consistent with its present use and interest."

We therefore have every reason to expect that this excellent birding spot will remain available to us as individuals and as a Club in the future as it has been since the earliest days of the T.F.N.

Your Executive Committee

WHAT'S AROUND?

by Slim Pickins

Some people would get lost in a phone booth. Last month I suggested a drive to Wildfield to count hawks and thought I'd spelled out every turn right down to the last quarter of a mile. One guy phoned complaining he was lost for two hours and another one said he ended up in Caledon East. Oh well, Caledon East's not such a bad place. A little quiet on Sunday.

February's another good month to do your birding from the car so let's drive along the lakeshore and identify ducks and gulls. We'll start at the Humber mouth at Sunnyside and drive to Oakville stopping every once in a while to look over the lake. Go by No. 2, not the Queen E. A balscope is handy otherwise you'll only be able to identify ducks in fairly close.

I can't spell out all the places to stop along the way but, working west, some of the best spots are: Palace Pier; behind the Apartments at the foot of Church St. in Mimico; foot of 23rd St.; lake's edge of Marie Curtis Park in Long Branch at the mouth of Etobicoke Creek; foot of Aviation Rd., Lakeview; St. Lawrence Starch Plant and harbour in Port Credit; St. Lawrence Cement Works pier just past Clarkson; foot of Howard St. in Oakville; and the west side of the Creek mouth in the center of Oakville.

Commonest ducks will be greater scaup, old-squaw, common golden-eyes, blacks and mallards. The scaup are in big rafts of 50 to 2000 ducks in each. The males are gray in the middle and black at both ends and the females are dull brownish all over with white at the base of the bill. Old-squaw are usually quite a ways out and do a lot of flying around. The males are black and white with long flowing tail feathers. The females are mostly brownish with white spots on the head. Golden-eye drakes have a big white spot on the head and are black on the back with white on the sides. Big king-size ducks with black backs, white sides and red bills are common mergansers. Other ducks you'll likely see are buffleheads (at Palace Pier), red-breasted mergansers, canvasback, redheads and goodness knows what else. Take your best Guide books with you and use them often.

Now, the gulls are mostly herrings and ring-billed. The ring-bills are the smallest and have yellowish legs. There'll be some great black-backed gulls too. Also watch for gulls that are creamy-buff or pure white all over, with no black showing in the wing-tips in flight. These will be either Iceland gulls or glaucous gulls. Again, check your Guide books.

This can be an all-day outing or a few hours only depending on how long you make each stop. Be sure to take a generous lunch and don't forget a few scraps for the ducks. Of course the diving ducks (scaup, squaw, etc.) don't care for table scraps but the blacks, mallards and gulls do. If you're in a hurry to get home you can get on either the Queen E. or $\frac{1}{2}$ 401 north from Oakville. Hope you don't get lost!

Yours truly,

Slim Pickins.