

DECEMBER MEETING

Monday, December 3rd, 1962, at 8.15 p.m.  
at the  
ROYAL ONTARIO MUSEUM

Speaker: DR. WALTER TOVELL, Curator of Geology, Earth Sciences Division,  
Royal Ontario Museum.

Subject: WHAT IS THE PRECAMBRIAN SHIELD?

The Precambrian, or Canadian Shield is identified in the minds of many people as being the vacation lands of Muskoka, Haliburton and Georgian Bay, but with the opening of new highways such as the Trans-Canada other portions are now becoming available to naturalists. Evidence for the fascinating 2500 million year history of the Canadian Shield will be reviewed by Dr. Tovell with the aid of coloured slides and the relationships of the Precambrian Shield of Ontario to other parts of Canada will be discussed.

- In the rotunda:
- (1) A display of rocks and minerals from the Canadian Shield.
  - (2) Supplies for birders by Reg. James--from books to feeders.
  - (3) F.O.N. Christmas cards--Downy Woodpecker and Red Squirrel designs by Robert Bateman--at \$1.55 per dozen including 3% sales tax. Also hasti-notes, calendars and reminders.

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DECEMBER Botany walks on Saturdays at 10.00 a.m. at least until snow flies. For  
OUTINGS locations please contact Miss Llewella Mann, HU 1-2008.

Birds - Saturday, December 1st, at 9.30 a.m.  
South side of Coote's Paradise Marsh, Hamilton  
Leader: John Miles

Meet at parking lot at Princess Point. Follow highway #2 into Hamilton to Longwood Road and the low level bridge, which is north of and below the high level bridge. Continue on for about half a mile over small concrete bridge at south-east corner of marsh. Turn right into road leading into Princess Point parking lot. Morning only, but bring lunch and continue unled in the afternoon if you wish.

JUNIOR CLUB The Junior Field Naturalists' Club will meet on Saturday, December 1st, at 10.00 A.M. in the Museum theatre. The Mineral Group will present the program. Most study groups are now filled but there is room for more members in the Insect and Botany Groups.

Director - Mr. Robert MacLellan, HU 8-9346

BOTANY CLUB There will be no meeting of the Botany Club in December.

FEES-- IF YOU PLEASE! Fees are now overdue. If you have not yet renewed your membership for 1962-63 we urge that you do so without delay, as we will be removing delinquent members from our mailing list before the next Newsletter is sent out.

President - Dr. David Hoeniger

Secretary - Mrs. H. Robson  
49 Craighurst Ave.  
Toronto 12  
HU 1-0260

# Toronto Field Naturalists' Club.



## NEWSLETTER

Number 191

November, 1962

### A November Day in Algonquin Park

Crystalline snow crunched underfoot and clear black ice turned all the smaller ponds into motionless quietude. In the larger lakes the water lay equally still, a faithful mirror of all that was on shore; another night of frost and winter would lay its hush from beach to beach. In the grey drifting smoke of the village dump a last fox sparrow chipped querulously as if wondering where his fellows had gone. Along the village streets fat yellow and black evening grosbeaks busily plucked the seeds from Manitoba maples whilst wine-hued purple finches sat on shrubs watching us pass by. The third of November it might be but the touch of winter was upon the land as we made our way towards the eastern entrance of Algonquin Park that morn.\*

The rays of a watery sun came faintly through the grey filmy clouds giving a pleasant illusion of warmth and stimulating light, belying the snow that greyed the bracken and spruce. But the cry of "Winter's here" was taken up again and again as chattering flocks of dark little siskins rose from trees and bustled across the road, as a whirl of snow buntings flashed above our heads, as a line of great, heavy-winged Canada geese beat steadily southward over the forest, winging their way toward sparkling waters that never freeze, fleeing the hunters and the snow. And the hunters were everywhere, rushing to their destinations in cars, unloading at woodland cabins, red-capped, portentously busy, foregathering for the opening of the deer shoot on the fifth. This weekend we were just ahead of the barrage that like the bunting and the siskin betokens the onset of winter. Little wonder that the warden at the Park entrance asked with greater emphasis if we had any guns, and looked with particular care to see that we really hadn't.

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\*The four members of the party were: R. W. Trowern, E. V. Stark, D. E. Scovell, R. M. Saunders.

As soon as we passed into the park we were greeted by a grey jay, a Canada jay, a whiskey-jack. Whatever you wish to call that curiously lumpish imp of a bird that always makes me think of an overgrown chickadee, we hadn't seen a one outside the boundary of the park. Now we were to see them every little while until we had counted a total of twenty-nine. Are they really so canny that they know it's wiser to stay in non-shooting territory with all those guns about? Or have they found such a good thing in the handouts that come from so many of the passersby that they choose to stay by the source of supply? Certainly we found we couldn't pause anywhere in the park without two or three or more of these crafty beggars coming to look over the prospects.

Near Lake of Two Rivers we passed by a sad yet fascinating sight. A deer,--no doubt like the whisky-jacks looking for tourist largesse--, had been hit by a car and killed. The body lay just off the road on a fern-covered bank. We could easily have passed it by had not an explosion of black wings betrayed its presence as we drew close--ravens rising from the feast. Fourteen there were as we went by in the morning, and sixteen when we came back after noon. Had the carcass not been removed that afternoon by the park authorities these black scavengers would have made short work of it. One of the most useful functions of this bird from a human viewpoint consists of helping to clear the countryside of carrion. Possibly one of the reasons why these big black fellows foregather along the park road in winter is to watch for roadside casualties just as vultures and crows patrol roads in other sections of Ontario during the summer, reaping the too abundant harvest offered them by the ever more numerous speeding cars.

We were bound for Mile Two and the Oxtongue River picnic ground where less than a month ago some of the South Peel naturalists had had trouble getting pictures of a spruce grouse because it persisted in walking through the legs of the camera tripod whilst others of the same species paraded up and down the path. Would we be as fortunate? The answer came quickly enough when we arrived. We would not. Grouse tracks there were criss-crossing the snow beneath the evergreens. Of the birds we saw no other sign. Fresh footprints made by men suggested that someone else had been looking too. Only when we got back to Toronto did we discover that two of the Toronto birders had preceded us, and that they had seen the grouse. For us this objective was not achieved though three Canada jays came to enquire about our doings and to ask for a tidbit. One of the whiskey-jacks set up a most annoyed chatter when we appeared to be leaving without shelling out but both he and his two brethren were quickly mollified when we spread a few cracker crumbs and some peanuts on the snow. You should have seen the camera shutters clicking then.

As noontime had come we drove back east along the road a way, then drew into a side road and had our picnic lunch. We ate this in the car but before we were through an enquiring whiskey-jack was on hand to see if he could cadge just a little offering from the crew. Earl opened the door and tossed a cracker onto the hood of the car. In a flash the jay was swooping down, landing with such force that he skidded half across the hood like a duck coming down on ice. The cracker was quickly snatched up and consumed. On the next occasion the jay perched on the radio aerial before descending more sedately onto the hood. Soon there were two others getting in on the free meal. Then Doug got out and walked up the side road. When he returned we saw him gesticulating as if beckoning to someone to come towards the car from the woods. Several times we saw him gesture before we saw that in fact not a person but a bird was following. Another whiskey-jack! Once around the bend this fourth jay needed no further encouragement for it saw the others and made a straight glide to the bounty now spread on the snow beside the car. Again the cameras clicked.

It was while Bob and Doug were busy at this game that Earl and I noticed a

mounting crescendo of sound arising in the hemlock grove across the road. A lot of birds were evidently creating quite a row about something. Then two of our whiskey-jacks decided to join in the fun and flew over the road. The din increased. Could it be anything else than an owl? Earl and I decided to investigate; the other two stayed with their picture-taking. Earl headed directly into the grove while I chose its edge along an alder swale. Moving in cautiously we had gone only twenty yards or so when I found myself confronted by several Canada jays and a blue jay. As they were arranged roughly in a circular pattern I concluded at once that the object of their ire must be somewhere in that circle so I stood still and looked. What I expected to see was a long-eared or possibly a great horned owl. What I did see as I gazed straight ahead was not one of these common birds at all but a plump little owl with a dark face from which yellow eyes gazed warily at me. The dark rounded head, bitter chocolate brown in color, was dotted with roundish white spots, while from a fluffy white "nose patch" a light yellow bill protruded. It couldn't be true but it was; I was looking at one of the rarest owls in the land, the little boreal owl, or Richardson's as it used to be called, a dweller of the far northern woods that only occasionally ventures into southern Ontario in winter. Signalling to Earl I found he also had the owl in view. We hoped to summon our companions but before we could get around to that the little bird took alarm either at us or at the strenuous attentions being bestowed on it by the annoyed jays. Suddenly it rose and flitted silently away, plunging into a deeper and darker grove farther in the wood. The jay band, unlike crows on a similar job, did not set up a tremendous clamor as their victim fled but simply departed in silence now that they had driven off the foe. Earl and I followed after the owl only to have to come back to the road without seeing it again.

Bob and Doug looked up as we recrossed the road. A grey and white bird flashed overhead and settled on a spruce spire, a northern shrike, our first this year. Did they think that we were going to say that this was the bird we'd seen? No, apparently not. They thought as we had that it would be one of the common owls. When we said, "A Richardson's owl," they had the usual reaction to the jester. "Ha, ha, you're kidding." But when we convinced them that we were not fooling then it was all different. "But I've never seen one of those in my life." "Well, you should have come." Nothing to do but return, all four of us, to the wood. We fanned out and proceeded to reconnoiter. In to the same dark grove where the owl had disappeared, step by step we advanced. Not a word for yards then Bob said quietly, "Here it is." And so it was, sitting on a low branch right in the dark heart of the grove. Now all four of us had a good look once again though it took fright and flew, but as before only a short way, this time coming to rest on a quite open perch some twelve feet from the ground. In this place all its delicate markings were in full view, so much so that despite poor lighting for photography a picture was taken. Again the owl flew, but now we had all seen it to perfection. Let it rest in peace.

We departed from the wood knowing that we had been allowed one of the most fortunate birding sights we could possibly hope for in these parts. At the spruce grouse grove we had failed but had we not looked for the grouse there and so chosen this spot in which to eat our lunch we would never have heard the jays' commotion and so would have missed this rare sight. How often is it so in the world of watching birds.

Back along the road we went, past the dead deer with its living shroud of black ravens, and on to another spruce grove where spruce grouse are known to dwell. Doug and I tramped the grove through crunching snow, while the other two wandered up a sideroad. Again we saw fresh tracks of grouse but all we raised was a ruffed grouse. The odd raven flew over heading in the direction of the deer. Then in the trees ahead of us a nasal chickadee call told us that a brown-cap was there. As soon as we made contact with

our companions again we heard that they had seen and heard seven of these northern chickadees, once known as Hudsonian chickadees. Again a spruce grouse search that missed the grouse had produced a rare sight for the birder from southern Ontario.

One last visit in the park this day was up the Opeongo road to the big lake, and there, though ice filmed all the bays and coves we spotted two loons still lingering in their summer haunts, staying literally until they are frozen out. Here too we found the only blooming flower we could discover on that wintry day, a mouse-eared chickweed in a lawn right at the edge of the lake. Golden-hued tamaracks gave a last touch of autumn color to the scene along the road, making vivid islands of yellow in the grey and tan scene. Our birds had been the birds of winter, yet here was one last flower, one last autumnal tree. Winter's fingers were closing fast upon the land but the hivernal fist had not yet a full frigid hold.

On our way back to the cottage that evening the sunset painted flamboyant frescoes on a darkening sky, a fitting end to a richly successful birding day.

After such a day the next day could well have been a letdown. So often that is what happens. So far as finding the special bird we were after, a black-backed woodpecker this time, it was as fruitless as the quest for the spruce grouse of the previous day. But the sight of a pileated woodpecker bounding across a field toward a dark spruce bog when we were going for breakfast promised something good, it seemed.

The promise was reinforced when we saw a second of the big logcocks plunging into a wood. What did it promise? Was it the huge accipiter, the goshawk, that dashed out of some trees and disappeared almost as fast as it appeared? Or was it the wonderful little flock of white-winged crossbills that passed over as we walked amongst leatherleaf and Labrador tea and golden yellow tamaracks? Perhaps it was that remarkable botanical find we came to as tramping along a backwoods lane we saw a glint of red on an overgrown heap of sand. Upon investigation we were amazed to see three luxuriant plants of that most distinguished member of the goosefoot family, the strawberry blite, in full bloom, its deep strawberry-hued boutons and yellow-green leaves decorating the dun pile on which they grew as if this were not grey November with a shake of snow all around but lusty July or August. But no, a bird must surely promise a bird not a flower. Of course, it could be the loon we heard calling as if he thought a mate would respond, and this on a half-iced lake! What a mixed-up bird. Yet for us what a thrilling and unexpected sound. None of us had ever heard such before at this time of year or under these conditions. Still, when we came back to dinner, however gratified we were at what we had seen that morning none of us, I think, were quite sure that that promise had been fulfilled.

The dinner at a friend's house was so substantial that it dulled any further expectations; at least it did on my part. I fear that when we were packed and started on our way back to Toronto I was half dozing. The miles rolled by and semi-somnolence settled steadily in, the rhythm of the car rocking me nearer and nearer to sleep. Crashing into my half-sleep came a sudden shouted exclamation, "Hey, there's a hawk owl!" Doug had shouted; he, to be sure, was wide awake. Earl braked the car and we slid to an abrupt halt. One glance with four pairs of binoculars showed everyone that Doug was quite correct in his diagnosis. A very alert hawk owl was actively surveying the pasture fields, twisting its head about so vigorously that its yellow eyes flashed at every turn. This bird, a diurnal hunter, was quite clearly in a hungry frame of mind and intent upon making a catch. As we watched it spread its sharp-pointed wings, so like those of a falcon, and glided over the field for a hundred yards to another and lower perch. We followed along the road, stopping opposite its new position. Though

the owl cast occasional glances in our direction it was obvious that neither we nor the steady traffic on the road bothered it at all. There was no sign of fear, only an evident fierce desire for food. Again it flew, and this time alighted on a telephone pole in the field, still nearer the road than before. Here was a superb opportunity, and three of us, all camera-laden, took it. How close could we get? Fifty yards? Yes. Twenty yards? Yes. Twenty-five feet? Yes! Good heavens--here we are right at the foot of the pole! And the owl is merely watching us, goggling down as we gaze up, as we focus cameras and click away. But then we're not very good owl food. Indeed, we are just a nuisance to a hungry owl. So once more away it goes: not far for there is still no fear. However, this time the hunter comes to rest on the top of a great green spruce. Here is a perfect picture of a northern owl in a typical pose, and Doug, with his telescopic lens, goes to get it. He returns triumphant after the owl has flown anew, on this occasion pausing in midflight to circle a bit of the pasture, then to plunge swiftly to the ground. The hunter had found his food.

Now were we all triumphant. The promise of the morn had been fulfilled magnificently. A yesterday that had reached a peak with one rare northern owl had been succeeded by a today that climaxed with a second rare northern owl. How many birding trips have we ever had, or are any of us ever likely to have, that will include both a boreal owl and a hawk owl?

We are at the dawn of winter. Could any birder's winter be better begun?

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Life Cycle of the Dog-toothed Violet

By Dr. Fletcher Sharp

The dog-toothed violet or trout lily takes about seven years to complete its cycle from seed to flower, during which time it will appear each spring showing one leaf only. About the seventh or flowering year two leaves will signal the arrival of a yellow flower on a scape. If fertilized a capsule full of small seed is produced. Later in the summer the capsule splits, spilling the seeds on the ground. The fall rains cause these tiny seeds to germinate. Next spring a single leaf scarcely larger than a blade of grass appears above ground. Below ground, at the end of the rootlet, a small bulb is formed, out of the side of which a "runner" that buries itself at least an inch lower grows a new bulb at its tip. This is repeated each year with each succeeding bulb getting larger and deeper. When the bulb has stored enough food two leaves will appear accompanied by a yellow flower on a scape. So the next time you see a patch of dog-toothed violet leaves with nary a flower don't worry, they are just going through the growing stage of gathering enough food and strength to reproduce themselves.

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One of the interesting local natural history societies of which our Club members know too little is the Canadian Amphibian and Reptile Conservation Society. As its name indicates, its members are concerned with a realm of nature that is a closed book to most field naturalists. Yet it is one that has an integral interest of its own and one that is well worthy of study by all people if only that they may relieve their minds of unnecessary fears. Once they start being interested I suspect that they will find something far more than that; perhaps they will see another facet of the never-ending

beauty and variety of nature.

For the information of our members, therefore, a reprint of the content of this Society's information folder, and of an informative article by the Society's President, Mr. R. V. Lindsay, which appears in their bulletin, follow.

#### Information Folder

The Canadian Amphibian and Reptile Conservation Society came into being because of the threat to the continued existence of some of these interesting and useful animals. We hope, by informing the public of the truth about these creatures, and their place in the economy of nature, to dispel ignorance and prejudice, and diminish their slaughter.

A society for the protection of amphibians and reptiles may sound like a strange idea, and that it should include in its interests the protection of such unpopular creatures as snakes may sound stranger still. Protect snakes--you ask--whatever for? We will try to answer that question.

The economic importance to man of amphibians, and many reptiles including all snakes, inheres in the fact that they are carnivores, i.e., they eat other animals. Carnivores are nature's agents in the control of the number of many fast-breeding animals, notably certain insects and rodents. Since many of these animals over-breed rapidly, they would, without such natural controls as snakes and other small carnivores, soon increase to devastating hordes.

The numbers of mice, cutworms, slugs, etc., devoured by amphibians and reptiles in a single country in a single season would add up to astronomical figures. Most of our larger snakes feed chiefly upon rodents, which indeed, form seventy per cent of the food of the milk snake.

The common fear of snakes stems from the fact that some kinds are dangerous, but most people are unable to distinguish these from harmless kinds, while many believe that all snakes are dangerous. The truth is that relatively few snakes are dangerous: in Canada only four out of the thirty-five varieties found are dangerous, and these are rattlesnakes which are easily recognized by their lance-shaped heads, thin necks, and tails ending in rattles. Any Canadian snake with a pointed tail is harmless. There are no copperheads or water moccasins in Canada.

Fear of harmless snakes is freely communicated to children by their elders, both intentionally and unintentionally, by word and example. With their minds so contaminated in early childhood, many otherwise rational people carry the burden of this senseless fear to the end of their lives.

Amphibians and reptiles are cold-blooded, which simply means that they do not manufacture their own internal heat as do birds and mammals, which are known as warm-blooded, but this does not mean that they always feel cold to the touch.

Snakes are not slimy: their skin is dry, and silky or glossy to the touch.

A snake's tongue is not a stinger: it is a soft, fleshy, sensory organ which assists them in smelling.

## The Black Rat Snake

By R. V. Lindsay

Perhaps the earliest recorded reference to the rat snake (Elaphe o. obsoleta) in Ontario is to be found in Charles Fothergill's notes on the natural history of Eastern Ontario, 1816-1837, wherein the author reports having killed a snake answering the description of this species, in the area between Rice Lake and Port Hope. At the present time, the species appears to be restricted to Addington (Enterprise), Frontenac, and Leeds Counties in the east, and along the north shore of Lake Erie west to Lincoln County. Below the border, its range extends south to North Carolina and west to Kansas.

Widely known as the pilot black snake, the name originating in early colonial days when it was believed this snake convoyed rattlesnakes and other poisonous snakes to safety in time of danger. Like many other ridiculous beliefs about serpents, this myth is still perpetuated in many places in the south.

The black rat snake bears a superficial resemblance, but is in reality unrelated to the black racer (Coluber c. constrictor), represented in Ontario by the race flaviventris, which is not black but bluish or greenish, and is known only from Essex and Huron Counties.

The mid-dorsal scales of the black rat snake are slightly keeled while the lateral scales are smooth. Moreover, this snake presents a polished appearance whereas the racer's perfectly smooth scales have a gun metal gloss.

There are of course additional morphological characters separating the two species, such as differences in shape of head and body, scale arrangement, etc. Both are snake eaters to quite a degree, though small mammals generally form an important item in their diet. Birds and their eggs are also quite acceptable when available.

The black rat snake is a member of the constrictor group, whereas the black racer, notwithstanding its misleading specific name, is not.

Obsoleta is the largest species of snake to be found in Ontario, and has been known to attain a length in excess of seven feet though most specimens seem to average considerably smaller, within the four to five feet range.

The genus Elaphe has representatives in Europe and the East and is not confined to North America as one might suspect.

In Frontenac County the black rat snake is frequently referred to as the land black snake to distinguish it from the common water snake (Natrix sipedon), which appears to be black while submerged, but actually is dark brown with darker dorsal blotchings.

We have found Obsoleta occupying open woodlands in rocky, scrubby country in Frontenac, often a considerable distance from a body of water. These snakes usually become active late in the afternoons, and all too often unwisely crawl out on the warm dirt roadways where passing traffic quickly terminates a useful career.

Newly captured specimens will frequently display an irritable and highly nervous temperament, biting freely and giving every indication of extreme displeasure at being held captive. However, with few exceptions these snakes will in time settle down and be amenable to handling, readily accepting mice or other food offered them.

Reproduction is by eggs and these may number up to twenty or more. They may be found in decayed logs or old sawdust heaps. June and July are the months selected for this very important function, the female sometimes brooding the eggs.

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Those who may be interested in knowing more about this Society should get in touch with Miss Barbara Froom, 8 Preston Place, Toronto 12.

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#### Going to Florida?

An artist friend of the F.O.N., resident in Florida for the winter, has offered to donate a painting to be used in support of their work. If any T.F.N. member intending to visit Florida this winter would be willing to pick up and bring back this painting, he or she is asked to telephone Jim Woodford at the F.O.N. office, HI 7-7421. This co-operation would be greatly appreciated.

Richard M. Saunders,

Editor.