

OCTOBER MEETING

Monday, October 5th, 1964, at 8.15 p.m.  
at the  
ROYAL ONTARIO MUSEUM

Topic: "THE FOUR CORNERS" (Illustrated), by Mr. Frederick W. Lewis.

The "Four Corners" has the distinction of being the only spot in the United States where four states meet (Arizona, New Mexico, Utah, and Colorado), and it constitutes an interesting segment of the American Southwest.

Mr. and Mrs. Lewis, both members of the St. Thomas Field Naturalist Club, have spent the past several summers exploring and photographing the scenery, geology, and natural history of this colourful area, as well as visiting the Hopi and Navajo Indians in their own environment.

In the Rotunda, there will be a special display (for this meeting only) of underwater photographs in colour by Mr. Ario Gatti, Royal Ontario Museum.

F.O.N. Christmas cards and hasti-notes will be on sale. The 1964 card, by Mr. T. M. Shortt, shows a pair of Redpolls in a natural setting, and for the first time is printed in full colour. Price \$1.50 per dozen. Your purchase will support both our own Club and the Federation of Ontario Naturalists.

Visitors welcome.

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Please see next page for October outings

BOTANY GROUP - Thursday, October 15th, 8.00 p.m. sharp. Mr. Jim Simon will speak on plant identification, illustrating his topic with actual specimens. All those interested are welcome. Meet at Hodgson School, Davisville Ave. just east of Mt. Pleasant. The Parking lot is reached from Millwood Rd., one block north. Secretary - Miss Erna Lewis, HO 5-3422.

THANKSGIVING WEEKEND - October 9th-12th. Toronto Field Naturalists are invited to attend the annual Thanksgiving Weekend in Algonquin Park, held by the Hamilton Naturalists' Club. Full information may be obtained from Mrs. Robson (HU 1-0260). A bus is being chartered this year. Those wishing to go must register promptly upon receipt of this Newsletter!

FEES FOR 1964-5 ARE NOW DUE! (A T.F.N.C. membership makes a fine gift, too!)

To: Mrs. H. C. Robson, Secretary,  
Toronto Field Naturalists' Club,  
49 Craighurst Ave., Toronto 12, Ont. Date \_\_\_\_\_

I (we) wish to renew membership and enclose 1964-65 fee as indicated.

\_\_\_\_\_ Single \$4.00      \_\_\_\_\_ Family (adults) \$6.00      \_\_\_\_\_ Life \$100.00  
\_\_\_\_\_ Corresponding \$2.00 (for those living outside  
a 20-mile radius from the Royal Ontario Museum) Donation \$ \_\_\_\_\_

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_





## NEWSLETTER

Number 205

Authorized as 2nd Class Mail by  
The Post Office Department, Ottawa  
and for payment of postage in cash.

September 1964

### Cattle Egrets at Presqu'ile, Ontario

For several years now the birdwatchers of Southern Ontario have been keeping their eyes, binoculars and telescopes trained on all white spots in farm fields for they might be cattle egrets. In truth, a number of these elegant newcomers have been sighted near the shores of Lake Erie and Lake Ontario, at Luther Marsh and elsewhere. The question repeatedly posed by these exciting but spasmodic observations has been, Will this immigrant from halfway round the world and from southern climes be able to establish itself in our far northern land?

The story of the cattle egret's worldwide wanderings is now well known but I remind our readers that it is considered that a sufficient number of these birds flew on their own across the South Atlantic from Africa to northern South America where they established themselves successfully as a resident species. From there they quickly moved northward as their numbers increased, crossing the Caribbean probably by hedgehopping the islands, founding breeding colonies in Florida and spreading out from there both northward along the Atlantic coast and westward along the Gulf of Mexico shore. Soon there was a colony at Cape May, New Jersey, which has been visited by a considerable number of Ontario birders, and individual birds were being seen at widely diverse places from off Newfoundland to Texas and many spots in between. Even more than most herons this egret seems to be a great wanderer and prospecting for new home territories is evidently one of its main objectives. In North America it found a wide-open natural niche for itself and it has so prospered in the past generation that its numbers now reach tens of thousands in the South and it is pushing ever outward in search of still more territory. Though originally a bird of the warm lands of Africa and India this species has shown an extraordinary capacity for adapting itself to other habitats and climatic conditions. However, there is still a question of how far north it can really prosper. This is evident in Europe and Asia as well as in America so that the query, Can it succeed in Canada?, has been a serious and interesting ornithological problem.

That the egrets would make the attempt became clear two years ago when nests were built at Luther Marsh and at Presqu'ile in Ontario. The nests in the Luther Marsh heronry were not successful and the effort there, so far as we know, has not been repeated. The nesting, though, at Presqu'ile was more fortunate and last year a pair of the egrets again raised a family. This year they returned for the third time and now there were three pairs. They have been carefully protected by the provincial park authorities, this being facilitated by their wise choice of the sanctuary area as their nesting ground. All summer long they have been busy raising families and have been visible to those who knew their feeding area which was quite some distance from the nesting site.

Having never seen this bird in Canada, when we were made aware of the situation at Presqu'ile by our friend, Jim Baillie, we decided to go and have a look for ourselves. So on the morning of July 31 Mrs. Saunders and I picked up Marshall Bartman at his house at 8.00 and set out eastward.

Ordinarily we would have made directly for Presqu'ile, an easy run now that No. 401 highway is through to Brighton and beyond, but this morning we felt compelled to make a detour to the west end of the Hospital Marsh at Whitby for Jim had told us of seeing a king rail there on three different occasions recently and king rails in Ontario always command respectful attention from birders. True it is that morning, unless one is up at dawn, is not a very good time to look for rails but it was not far off our road so we went to try our luck. The view up and down the little channel where the big rail had been seen was pleasingly quiet and green but quite devoid of visible birds. A sora gave its ka-ree note amongst the cattails thus giving us our first real evidence of the presence of rails in the local region this year. We have looked repeatedly in favorable spots but rails of all sorts have been very scarce in our experience this year. The big cousin of the sora, however, made no sign, either visible or oral, and we had to be satisfied with the sora's cry. A glance at young wood ducks and gallinules feeding amongst the lily pads and at a few remaining black terns still foraging for minnows to satisfy their young, then we were on our way.

The directions for finding the egrets had been quite specific. We were to turn sharply left just before we reached the marsh channel bridge on the way down from Brighton to the park. This turn we negotiated successfully, thereby turning to the east. Thereafter we were to take every right turn at each intersection. This we did, too, and promptly landed at the end of a dead-end road dotted with cottages and curious cottagers. As we were looking for cattle egrets and the only cattle visible hereabouts had two legs, a kind not favored by the birds, we withdrew. When we got back to where we had made the false turn we discovered that there were three alternative routes, not two. This time we chose the middle route since this would take us still further eastward and we had been advised to keep around the head of the bay going in that direction where there are a succession of farms. It is to these farms and their herds of cattle that the egrets have been coming all summer to feed, flying from their protected nesting area where, of course, there are no cattle or other large animals, to this favorable foraging area some miles to the east of the sanctuary.

As we rolled slowly along the eastward road we began to see groups of cattle in the fields. Each lot we scanned with earnest care for sight of possible white birds in the grass at the animals' feet. After two or three blank tries we drew up alongside an old orchard where there were half-a-dozen cows. As they were quite near the road, the nearest being right beside the fence, it seemed unlikely that any of the egrets would be with them but we were being as thorough in our search as possible. Now it paid off, for in a moment Anne said, "There's one", and pointed to the farthest cow, about a hundred feet from where we stood. Swinging our binoculars to focus upon this cow both Marshall and I immediately saw not one but two egrets near the cow's head and then a third at its hind feet.

The birds cast a few wary glances in our direction but otherwise showed no particular alarm at our presence. They paid no heed at all to passing cars, proof that they are well accustomed to traffic along the road. What a pleasant surprise to have found them so close at hand in a place where we could study them at ease for they could just as well have been fields away, identifiable but frustratingly seen.

Two of the egrets had the rich orange coloring on head, back and lower chest that marks the adult breeding bird. The third lacked any orange except a slight tinge on the upper breast; otherwise it was white all over. A few minutes later we discovered a fourth egret near one of the other cows and this one, too, was in the very white or immature plumage. Undoubtedly what we were looking at was a family group, two adults and two young. One of the three nestings had certainly been successful.

Watching them feed was most instructive. It was difficult to believe that they could go so close to the large animals with such impunity. Obviously there was no fear on their part,--though the young birds exhibited somewhat more caution in their movements than their elders--, and no annoyance on the part of the cattle. The adult egrets kept within inches of the cow's feet or head. In fact, at one instance I saw one of them pick an insect either off a cow's ear or within an inch of it without causing the cow to even flick its ear. Usually the birds kept alongside their chosen animal as it grazed, watching intently as its head or feet moved in the long grass and darting fearlessly forward at any insect that was forced to move by the animal's progress. In their rapid forward dashes the egrets frequently nearly collided with hooves, legs, head or tail yet not once did a cow show the slightest irritation. As we watched we saw that the birds were catching not merely numbers of insects stirred up by the cows but also at least two small frogs, each one of the latter being large enough to give its captor a bit of trouble in swallowing. It seemed to us, also, that a frog of this size would provide a good-sized meal for a small egret but in each case the bird went right on with its hunting and eating. Evidently their capacity for food, like that of other herons, is much greater than we would at first think.

Watching this amicable and fruitful relationship of egret and cow raised some puzzling queries in our minds. How have such friendly symbiotic relations grown up so quickly between creatures utterly unknown to each other hitherto? Though the cattle egrets are total newcomers to our region they appear to have no trouble at all in persuading local cattle to accept them as intimate associates. What is the answer? Do the beasts find these birds of assistance in relieving them of annoying insects? Have the cattle become accustomed to the presence of attendant birds through the efforts of cowbirds, starlings and blackbirds, all of which do follow cows in a similar way and for a similar purpose, that they see no difference in the association with these white egrets? Is it possible that the cows enjoy the presence of the harmless birds? If the answer is a little hard to puzzle out the relationship is an obvious fact.

Moreover, if we look at the picture of the cattle egret's existence the world over we find that it has been able to establish a like relationship not merely with cattle but with a great variety of other large animals as well; with, for instance, buffalo, elephant, hippopotamus, giraffe and many others. I have myself seen them attending horses in Texas. It is to be noted that the one thing all these host animals have in common is that they are large herbivores. From this it is clear that the ability of these very successful birds to make use of the food-revealing activities of large animals,--of peaceful, unthreatening, herbaceous animals, that is, for they must distinguish between large predators that would be dangerous companions and large herbivores that are no menace and whose activities will be helpful--, goes a long way to explain the immense success of this species in spreading across the world.

The cattle egret has shown an adaptability, a flexibility as well as a drive to explore and to find new lands for occupation matched by few, if by any other birds in our present age. Those who offer the house sparrow or the starling as competitors should remember that each of these birds had to be transported across the sea by man; the cattle egret came on its own. And in North America it has found a natural niche where there is no competition from any bird of its own sort--no other heron follows cattle--and where it can successfully compete with small fry like cowbirds and starlings. Such ideas as these came naturally to mind as we watched.

Now we saw that if a cow chose to move a few yards farther down field from the road the egrets would fly up and follow. Evidently, although they showed but little nervousness of us they were happier to choose hunting posts just a little farther away. That they were little afraid was made quite clear when Marshall got out with camera and telephoto lens and began taking pictures from the fence line. I joined him with my own camera. In spite of our movements and camera noises the egrets kept right on with their feeding at distances varying from 200 - 250 feet. They would seemingly not have left on our account at all but, unfortunately, several cars came roaring by in quick succession and one of these backfired. This tipped the balance for loud noises and quick movements are anathema to most birds. Up they went, all four, white and immaculate, circling about for a moment as if unable to decide whether or not to resettle, then swinging away to the east to come down amongst another herd of cattle in a farther field.

We drove on for another two miles along this road, noting again our four egrets in the farther distance. How grateful we were that in the first instance they had been so close. Then in a different field we spotted a fifth egret and possibly another. And on our return trip when we were able to get a different perspective we sighted yet another group of cattle on the north side of the road where we couldn't see them before and they also were attended by "white spots". These were different birds for we could still see the others in the far distance on the other side of the road. There were three egrets here, possibly another but distance and tall grass made us uncertain of the fourth. Here, presumably, was another family group. We did not try to get out and walk in closer for this field was in behind a large garden and a house, the owner of which was sitting in his window, clearly wondering what we were up to. We decided that since we had had so good a look at the other egrets we would not try to explain to this man just what our concern was. Long experience has taught me that it is usually hard to make most farmers and uninterested people understand that one is really and truly interested in birds, especially when there is a large garden that has to be negotiated. Also, we could scarcely hope to get better looks than we had already had. We drove on.

Along the two-mile stretch of road we had seen a dozen herds of cattle, evidently a favourable area for the egrets. We had counted at least eight and possibly more of the birds. A few days later John Dales was along this same road and saw eleven of the egrets. Evidently they have had a highly successful breeding season at Presqu'ile. All three pairs reported by the park authorities must have brought off young.

With this success the cattle egret would appear to be well established in Ontario. Best luck to it for here is a beautiful bird and a highly useful one that interferes with no others, lest it be cowbirds and starlings, so far as is known, and if that is so may it succeed in the competition. If they are permanently established at Presqu'ile we may expect them to spread out and set up family life in many spots in Southern Ontario. If we provide them elsewhere with as competent protection as they have received at Presqu'ile Park we may expect generally a most welcome addition to our avifauna.

That on the way home we stopped again at the marsh near Whitby and this time had a perfect look at the king rail seemed only a fitting finish to a stirring day of birding.

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T.F.N.C. members who visited Alaska this summer and others who propose to do so at a later time will be interested in the following account which appeared in The Christian Science Monitor on April 22 last, as a Family Feature.

### Bird Watching in Alaska

By Wilma Knox

Anchorage, Alaska

Long before I was aware there were bird watchers, I was watching birds. However, my bird watching when I was a child on a farm in north central Washington was not calculated but rather a natural observance aided by a desire to identify things about me. Certainly, my pleasure in the birds of Alaska, where I now live, dates back to days when I sat on the front steps of our farmhouse and watched brilliant orange and black orioles building their distinctive sack-shaped nests in the old unpruned pear tree at the edge of our fruit orchard.

Though I recall the appearance of many of the birds, such as orioles, my recollection of bird songs from that era are even more distinct. If I shut my eyes I can still hear a bright bluebird that perched on the roof peak above my bedroom window and woke me morning after spring morning just minutes before my mother called. (Quite recently I discovered in Peterson's "Field Guide" this was not a bluebird as I have thought all these years, but was actually a lazuli bunting. The Guide describes bunting songs as "sweet-sweet, chew-chew" with a sharp tsip note--the exact song of my roof-peak "bluebird"!)

From country days I also recall flute-like caroling of meadowlarks as I went on early morning horseback rides; hauntingly sad echoes of mourning doves on hazy, fragrant summer afternoons; and silvery honking of northbound geese whose stirring springtime calls made me vow to follow them some day.

When I finally followed the geese to Alaska I found their remote wilderness nesting places fully as fascinating as my early visions promised. The thrill of seeing the big birds at close range has never vanished, though geese are fairly common sights on hikes my husband and I take into Alaska's back country.

An even greater thrill comes from our rare sightings of swans that nest along the creeks beyond Cook Inlet. Once we saw what we thought were white caps on Turnagain Arm. Through our glasses the moving white ribbon turned out to be a long line of swans winging westward, almost touching the muddy waters of the arm. Another time we saw a single, snowy swan gliding on the dark, green-brown waters of Mud Lake near Moose Pass on the Seward Highway.

Of the birds that were familiar to me in Washington few are found in the Anchorage area where we live. Doves are seen only in southeastern Alaska; while meadowlarks are not residents.

There are chickadees, robins, sparrows, woodpeckers, and swallows. When we lived in an apartment overlooking a small swamp, we often watched violet-green swallows darting like dark, iridescent streaks of lightning past our window in pursuit of mosquitoes. From that same window we saw a long-beaked lesser yellowlegs; varied thrushes, which resemble robins; and, one day in March, six snowy ptarmigan that came to town to visit.

Recently, a friend remarked on the lack in Alaska of those smallest of our feathered friends, the hummingbirds. However, we assured her there are hummingbirds here. We have never seen a ruby-throated, whose presence is accidental, but we have seen the rufous, which is found as far north as Prince William Sound. For the last three mornings of our hike near Skagway a few years ago, we were visited by a single hummer that came just at breakfast time and buzzed around our camp, seeming particularly interested in the syrup on our hotcakes. Each camp was different so the bird obviously followed us--a source of wonder to us to this day.

Another small bird we delight in seeing is the dipper, or water ouzel. Though very widespread in mountain regions of the Northern Hemisphere, even as far south as the Andes, ouzels are described as representing "a remarkable group of birds that have no very near allies."

Naturalist John Muir wrote, "He (the ouzel) is the mountain stream's own darling, the hummingbird of blooming waters, loving rocky ripple-slopes and sheets of foam as a bee loves flowers, as a lark loves sunshine and meadows." Watching this tiny, slate-gray bird near the streams he frequents, it isn't hard to see how he came to be called a "dipper" since he bobs and dips constantly. His most startling habit is to land near a stream and simply submerge. If the water is clear he can be seen walking along the bed, probing for food under rocks and pebbles. Since the dipper doesn't resemble a water bird in the least this performance is indeed amazing.

Around Anchorage, the most familiar large birds are several varieties of gulls and the northern ravens. Ravens, resembling out-sized crows, are intelligent, playful birds and provide never-ending entertainment for us as we watch them turn cartwheels in a windstorm, or listen to their varied talk--one sound of which is like the slow, measured ticking of a huge clock.

Outside town the list of large birds inhabiting the 49th State is long, from the majestic American bald eagle, who has made this his last stronghold, to the mighty flocks of water birds of various kinds found in the Aleutian Islands and other coastal areas. One especially interesting fact about birds in Alaska is pointed out by Gabrielson and Lincoln, who note that ". . . nowhere else in North America is there such a large element of the avifauna of the Old World."

Despite the interesting profusion of birds we see here, I sometimes long for sounds of those I once knew. Even the caw-caw of a common crow would be welcome. Another I miss is the rolling, pleasantly haunting "who-who" of hoot owls--the only owls we've heard on camping trips have been of the screeching variety.

But just last summer I did meet one of my earliest winged friends. Though both Bob and I have become more serious about bird watching than we were, I still do not pursue the hobby as diligently as he does. For months he watched carefully on camping trips for a Steller's jay--not a common bird in our part of Alaska. At length he saw one but it flew before I saw it. Intent on other pursuits, I listened with only one ear to Bob's enthusiastic description of the elusive jay, forming no mental picture of the bird at all.

Finally, on a trip to Southeastern Alaska, Bob excitedly pointed out his second jay. I looked--and couldn't help smiling. To me that Steller's jay, despite his brilliant blue-black coat and handsome topknot, was no more than the common "blue jay" (as we mistakenly called him in Washington), who used to perch in the willow tree outside the kitchen door and scold our farmhouse cats!

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We were pleased to hear from our secretary, Mrs. Mary Robson, that she had been so fortunate as to find a blooming plant of Water Marigold at Paudash Lake this summer. So far I have not come across this plant and I know few people who have.

Water Marigold (called Bidens Beckii in Britton and Brown, Illustrated Flora of the Northeastern U.S. and adjacent Canada (1958, rev. ed.), and Megalodonta Beckii in Gray's Manual of Botany (1950, 8th ed.)), is a curious plant. It grows in water, both in ponds and streams, and has a distribution from Cape Breton west to Minnesota and south to New Jersey, Ohio and Missouri. Nonetheless, it is not commonly seen. No doubt, one reason is that above water it looks like an ordinary Bur-Marigold (Bidens) and must be passed by many people as just another example of that too common genus, the source of those troublesome "beggar's ticks" that snag the clothes and legs of most autumn hikers. If the passerby, however, would wonder why this plant was growing in water, lift it up and examine it, he would see that the lower or submersed leaves are so different as to make one wonder if he is looking at the same plant. They are thread-like in form and occur in bundles, a characteristic of several common water plants. When realizing that top and bottom of this plant are really attached to each other the finder will wonder what sort of a queer crossbreed has been turned up. The curious combination of characteristics in this plant is the reason for arguments amongst botanists as to whether it should be included in the genus Bidens or should be placed in a genus all its own, Megalodonta. Incidentally, these two genera bracket the genus Cosmos in Gray's Manual, showing that they both closely resemble a well-known garden flower. Doubtless another reason why it is none too common is that its achenes rarely mature.

This was a good find, and one that many other botanically-minded members will hope to make for themselves some day.

R. M. Saunders,

Editor.

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Executive, 1964-65

President - Mr. Ronald F. Norman  
Vice-president - Dr. Peter Peach  
Secretary-treasurer - Mrs. Mary Robson  
Assistant Secretary - Miss Ruth Marshall  
Editor - Dr. R. M. Saunders  
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Mr. Joseph Millman  
Mr. Kenneth Strasser  
Mr. James Woodford

TORONTO FIELD NATURALISTS' CLUB

STATEMENT OF RECEIPTS AND DISBURSEMENTS

For the year ending April 30, 1964

Receipts

Membership fees	\$ 2,242.00	
Donations	85.00	
F.O.N. Christmas cards, etc.	737.50	
R.O.M. check lists	13.85	
Interest on stocks and bonds	135.20	
Sale of rights, Bell Telephone Co.	5.90	
Refund re F.O.N. camp scholarship	54.50	
Exchange on cheques	.90	
Cheque redeposited	4.00	
Change redeposited	27.75	
Audubon Wildlife Films	<u>3,117.85</u>	
Total receipts	6,424.45	
Add balance on hand April 30, 1963	<u>1,891.92</u>	\$ 8,316.37

Disbursements

Printing		\$ 996.00
Postage		129.78
Office supplies		106.61
Theatre rental		350.00
Salaries, honoraria, etc.		683.60
F.O.N. Christmas cards, etc.		629.95
F.O.N. Camp scholarships		405.00
Purchase 3 shares, Bell Telephone Co.		114.00
Martin house		64.00
Affiliation fees - F.O.N.	\$63.70	
Ottawa F.-Nat. Club	<u>7.50</u>	71.20
Donations - Junior Club	\$100.00	
Bruce Trail	50.00	
Rattray Estate	<u>1,000.00</u>	1,150.00
Sundries -		
Flowers	7.21	
Card	.15	
Telephone calls	6.75	
Entertainment (out-of-town speakers)	<u>21.32</u>	35.43
Exchange on cheques		1.25
Bank safekeeping charge		3.40
Cheque returned by bank		4.00
Change re meeting		27.75
Audubon Wildlife Films		<u>1,477.03</u>
Total disbursements		6,249.00
BALANCE April 30, 1964		<u>2,067.37</u> \$ 8,316.37

Mrs. H. Robson, Treasurer.

May 25, 1964

We have checked all entries, additions and vouchers with certain exceptions where vouchers were not available and found the books in good order and in accord from the period May 1, 1963 to April 30, 1964 and we confirm to the best of our knowledge, the balance sheet to be correct.

(signed) R. W. Trowern