

## TORONTO FIELD NATURALISTS' CLUB NEWSLETTER

FEBRUARY MEETINGVisitors  
welcome!Monday, February 1st, 1965, at 8:15 PM  
at the  
ROYAL ONTARIO MUSEUMVisitors  
welcome!

SPEAKER: Dr. Walter M. Tovell

SUBJECT: "Five Sketches of a Far-off Land" (Illustrated)

South America - Peru, Bolivia - where Dr. Tovell was visiting at this time last year. Our speaker will include in his five sketches a visual version of his account of the "Bird Islands of Peru", which was published in the January issue of the Newsletter.

February Outings

Saturday      Morningside Park - Birds      Leader - Mr. Jack Gingrich  
 Feb. 13      From stop 34 on Kingston Road, go north on Morningside Avenue  
 9:30 AM      0.7 miles and turn left at the park entrance on the north side of  
                   the new bridge across Highland Creek. Meet in the parking lot.

Note: The road is not maintained in winter; if it is impassable, park on the road and walk in (0.1 mile). Morning only.

Sunday      Toronto Waterfront - Birds      Leader - Mr. Don Burton  
 Feb. 28      Meet at the parking lot just west of the Palais Royal on the  
 9:00 AM      waterfront, just south of Lakeshore Blvd. There is a footbridge  
                   across the Gardiner Expressway and Lakeshore Blvd. from the  
                   Sunnyside Station (Roncesvalles & Queen) to the north-east end of  
                   this parking lot. Morning only.

BOTANY GROUP      Dr. J. H. Sparling will speak on "Man and Vegetation in the British Isles". All T.F.N.C. members are welcome. Meet in the library, Hodgson School, Davisville Ave. near Mt. Pleasant. Parking entrance from Millwood Road, one block north.

Secretary - Miss Erna Lewis, HO 5-3422

JUNIOR CLUB      The Insect Group will be in charge of the February Meeting of the Toronto Junior Field Naturalists' Club, in the theatre of the Royal Ontario Museum. Films and talks will be presented. Visitors are welcome. Come and see our juniors in action!

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

ONTARIO FIELD BIOLOGIST      The 1964 edition of The Ontario Field Biologist, publication of the Toronto Field Biologists' Club, will be on sale at our February meeting. There has been a reduction in size, but not in quality, and the price is now only 25¢, so be sure to get your copy of this very interesting magazine.

F.O.N. NATURALISTS' GUIDE      This long-awaited and invaluable book will be available in the paperback edition at our meeting, price only \$1.95. Or order in paperback or regular form direct from the Federation of Ontario Naturalists at their new address: Shoreacres House, Suite 18A, 1262 Don Mills Road, Don Mills. (Phone 444-8419 or 444-8410).

President - Mr. R. F. Norman

Secretary - Mrs. H. Robson,  
 49 Craighurst Avenue  
 Toronto 12, Ontario.  
 Hudson 1-0260



## NEWSLETTER

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January 1965

You couldn't believe it, of course. Especially as it was the morning after New Year's Eve. Nonetheless there it was, a large white and black bird gazing blandly down at us from the telephone wires overhead. A sparrow hawk and a crow had been there too but they had flown away and my companion following them in his binoculars had not yet seen this curious creature that stayed behind. When I called his attention to this bird he could see it too. And neither he nor I had been out on the town the night before; indeed, we hadn't been out at all.

At least it could not be an apparition, this great black and white bird, for the crow and the sparrow hawk had been settled on the wires close beside it when we came along. Evidently they thought it queer also and had been having a careful look. I wish we could have known their opinions. At first glance I thought it might be a great black-backed gull, this being the nearest guess that I could make that seemed to have any reason. Then we saw that this bird had a sort of tufted head and a fat, waddly body, much larger than a gull. Puzzlement descended for a long moment of watching until suddenly there was a rift of enlightenment. This was a duck, a huge duck; indeed, a Muscovy duck!

Now what in the name of all creation was a Muscovy duck doing standing on telephone wires? True there was a rather run-down looking farm not far away but farm ducks don't usually take to the telephone lines. And, in fact, there was no sight or sound of any other ducks in the neighborhood. Offhand I would have said that this farm was abandoned. No amount of queries addressed to the duck elicited the slightest response; it merely continued to gaze down at us as if we were the curiosity in question, not it. Since neither of us had the New Year's handicap of having been out the night before we could only conclude that this wire-straddling duck was a friend of Mary Poppins and stood on that fascinating young lady's principle of, "I want it clearly understood that I never explain!" You could really detect the glint of amused satisfaction in that duck's eye as we drove away still baffled.

And, indeed, there was something Mary Poppinesque about what we had seen and what we were going to see this day. For had we not just driven down the main road at Frenchman's Bay to the beach only to see nothing but a lone goldeneye and a single oldsquaw on the lake, then to turn back to the bridge and find far out on the bay ice a lone ice cake? Now lone goldeneyes or oldsquaws on wintry Lake Ontario are natural enough and require no explanation but a lone ice cake on a wide sweep of smooth ice that is otherwise devoid of such humps is a phenomenon worth investigation. It might be something rare. So it proved today for when the glass was levelled on it this ice cake had eyes. An ice cake that is rounded on top and which has eyes that look at you across the width of Frenchman's Bay can only be one thing, a snowy owl.

Not another bird, neither gull nor duck, not an animal or a human marred the icy expanse. The snowy reigned in solitary grandeur. We had thought to find white gulls since there had been four glaucous on this ice only a few days before at the Christmas census. Indeed, there had then been a crowd of gulls and in the open water at the mouth of the bay many ducks. This morning, His Majesty, Nyctea scandica, held sway along; the emptiness was a tribute to fierce and lordly power.

For my companion it was a decisive moment. Though an ardent birdwatcher in many places over many years he had never before made the acquaintance of a snowy owl. This was his first. Naturally he wanted a closer look. So we made our way from the Dunbarton shore around to the Fairport side of the bay. There we were near enough to see the magnificent bird, in full detail, to note that he--it was almost immaculately white--was eating his breakfast out there on the ice. He regarded us momentarily, then, sensing that we were not going to come any closer or interfere, went on with his meal. For any birdwatcher it was a noteworthy observation: for a first look it was hardly to be bettered, or so it seemed. No wonder the Mary Poppins duck brooded benevolently over the scene.

As on most New Year's Days we were going from one place to another where special birds had been seen on the Christmas census. So as we left Fairport we sped towards Ajax and the dump. Still, no birdwatchers worth their salt could fail to stop when interesting birds other than the special ones flash past their eyes. Halt we must then when a slim grey, black and white bird shot along beside the car and plunged precipitately into a shrub. By the time we had stopped it had disappeared but a little looking through binoculars into the depth of the shrub revealed it peering eagerly towards the ground beneath another shrub. All at once a grey bird rose through the bushes and our shrike, for that is what it was, took off in hot pursuit. Hunter and hunted crossed the road and dashed immediately into dense cover, there to be lost to view. The whole performance was over too fast for us to know what the "grey bird" was. Its dexterity in taking to cover, however, led us to suppose that the pursuing hunter on this occasion failed of a capture. Before the day was over we would have seen three more of these northern shrikes.

On then to Ajax dump where on the census day two rusty blackbirds--the only ones on the count--had been seen. They were then associating with starlings. Hence today when the starling flock was discovered producing a squeaky chorus from the branches of trees at the edge of the dump we looked with care for the blackbirds. There was no sign of them at all; proof again that because a special bird was seen at a certain place four days ago or even four hours ago is no indication that it's going to be there when you arrive. We had just had a demonstration of that at Frenchman's Bay where there had been no white gulls. Of this we could scarcely complain, having seen a snowy owl instead, but it is nonetheless an example of an experience that should be expected by all watchers of birds. For this reason they should be content to take what they find without being too much disturbed by what they do not find.

The Ajax dump road leads to the lakeshore, dividing on the ridge above Pickering Marsh so that if you take the right fork you come to the lake at the mouth of Duffin's Creek and if you take the left fork you wander through the main Ajax fields coming to the lake in front of where these fields are widest. We took first the right fork and at the mouth of the creek found an assemblage of common winter ducks--goldeneye, oldsquaw and merganser. In the windblown weeds by the beach we put up tree sparrows. These are not special birds but regular, normal winter birds, yet welcome as old friends. Our New Year's list was building up. Back at the ridge we now took the left fork. Even as we turned into the fields a redtailed hawk, coppery red tail glowing in the air, sailed down over the yellowed grasses. Moments later came a huge roughleg, its white rump and black-banded tail, black badges at the shoulder joints and black tummy making it conspicuously different to look up at than its rival hunter, the redtail. Both were after fieldmice with which these fields abound. Farther down this road, near where it swings to avoid the lakeshore cliff, is the field where on the census we had eighteen meadow larks rise from the grass and sweep by our car as we ate lunch on the bluff. With them was a lone snow bunting. So today we had these birds--these special ones--on our list of objectives. Yet when we arrived we neither saw any birds nor had our usual place to park by the cliff since this was already occupied by a car containing a young couple whose concern was certainly not with birds. We went on a little and stopped. If the meadowlarks wouldn't rise for us, perhaps by walking the field we could put them up. This we now tried to do.

With a little persistence we might well have roused the larks though in all those acres of fields the task looks a little like the proverbial needle in the haystack. The truth is our attention was almost at once diverted from the larks for as I swept the fields eastward with my binoculars I came abruptly to a white globe resting on the head of the bluff that juts into the lake at this point. Even if it is true that in these fields one may expect to find almost anything I had never seen a white globe on that bluff before and it seemed a very unlikely place for someone to drop one. About as unlikely, in fact, as to find a single rounded ice cake on Frenchman's Bay. Quickly I stopped my surveying sweep and swung back to focus on the globe. Like the ice cake this globe had eyes, another snowy owl and one perched in as Arctic-like a spot as had been its relative on the ice. A bluff overlooking an icy shore against which sullen grey waves crashed on rocks could have been in Baffin Land as easily as on Lake Ontario. It is interesting how these northern travellers like to choose hunting and resting sites so like the ones they know at home.

How fortunate we were to see two snowy owls on one trip. With this comfortable thought in mind we were watching our new find when suddenly it stretched up, obviously peering intently at something to the east that we could not see as the bluff intervened. In a moment we were no longer in doubt for still another snowy owl swept up over the bluff from that direction. In a second there was wild commotion for the owl on the bluff launched into the air and made a fierce, diving dash at the newcomer. Stopped in mid-air by this onslaught the oncomer turned to do battle. A flailing of white wings, a merging of bodies, a breakaway and another rush. Again it happened and again, like a snow devil whirling great white flakes across a wintry field. Then they broke free--and each one came gliding, a few yards apart, over the brown grass and directly above our heads. Impassively unconcerned with us, eyes gleaming out of faces, they surged on, nearer and nearer until we were staring them in the face, seeing every mottled feather on the one, the smooth, silky white of the other. Silently they swept over and on. For a moment the whiter one broke the progress to alight in the only tree, two hundred yards away. Again it was a-wing and the two passed out of sight to the west, visitors from an unknown home bound for an unknown bourne, leaving with us the memory-picture of a drama we had never seen before and may never see again.

Curiously enough my companion had within the past few days been looking at Gordon Aymar's book on Bird Flight. In this there is a wonderful photograph of two snowy owls, gliding face on towards the photographer and taken apparently somewhere in the Arctic. Just now we had seen that photograph come to life for anyone with a camera where we stood could virtually have duplicated it. And of all places, not in the Arctic homeland of the owls but on the shore of Lake Ontario within less than thirty miles of Toronto. Truly the unexpected is repeatedly occurring in the watching of birds.

For the moment lesser birds were forgotten. We could only get into the car and go on. As soon as we had caught our breath we began to look again. The car ground to a halt and my companion called out, "What in name's sake is that?" I looked and found myself gazing at a tremendous bird standing in a ploughed field. The size suggested eagle as did the golden-brown head and mantle but as my eyes slipped downward to the lower front I found jet black. Then I knew that we were watching a richly-decked roughleg in the black phase. As it saw us looking the tremendous hawk rose and flew a few yards where it alighted on top of a hawthorn tree. We had gone on only the length of the field when once more we halted and for exactly the same sight, a beautiful black-phased roughleg so like the other that we had to look at the one on the hawthorn--it was still there--before we could be sure that there were two of them. I have known some winters when this would have been the sight of the day, but not today, however appreciated it was.

We turned now down into the middle of the fields, along a side road, a bit south of the new hospital, which runs to a little wood, known as the Cricket Ground wood because of an adjoining playground to the west. Here for some weeks there has been a small group of long-eared owls frequenting the few evergreens that are dotted about the wood. Despite the fact that we had failed to find them on the census we knew that they were probably still around because of the number of pellets that had been deposited beneath one tree. To this tree we went. The pellets were still there but no owls. In the next evergreen the branches were similarly blank. Then I was moved to swing my binoculars in an arc of exploration as I had on the fields. Only this time I was stopped in mid-swing by finding myself staring straight into the malevolent yellow eyes of a thumping big owl. Big-bodied, big-eared, sitting out in the open on the branch of a deciduous tree this was no long-eared slim "stick". This was an angry, alarmed great horned owl. There was just time for us both to have a good look before it spread its broad wings and soundlessly left us behind.

Once more we had gone to find one bird and had, in fact, found another. That's why it doesn't pay to be too disappointed at what you miss for what you find may more than take its place. And some of the birds you miss in one place you may pick up at some later halt. This happened to us this morning for when we had driven on to Whitby there in the grounds at the back of the hospital, where fresh manure had been recently spread, was a large flock of gulls. In their midst were two glaucous gulls, perhaps the very individuals we missed at Frenchman's Bay. And when we reached the lakeshore in front of the hospital another flock of gulls arose from the water; in this company was another glaucous and an Iceland, the slimmer relative of the first. Down here, too, where there is a warm water outlet into the lake we found two other birders working the boulder beach by this outlet. One of these, Tom Hassall, gave us the exciting news that he had just discovered a pipit. Eagerly we followed amongst the boulders until we saw the little pipit teetering on top of one of the rocks. It flew back towards the outlet and dropped out of sight. That was only the second time in more than thirty years of bird-watching I had seen this species as a winter bird in the Toronto region.

We drove on to Whitby Harbour, and then to Greenwood Conservation Area and home by way of Whitevale. We saw other birds, other interesting and noteworthy birds, but for us both New Year's Day, 1965, will always remain owl day. Above all, snowy owl day. How else could it be?

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The following list of birds is a record of dates of first appearance of spring arrivals during a two-year period made in Yukon Territory, mostly in or near Whitehorse, by Mrs. Margaret Marsh, a member of this club and wife of the Right Reverend Henry Marsh, Bishop of Yukon. The list was given to the Bunkers, "Dorothy and Alf", when they were in the Yukon last June. Through their kindness it has been passed on to the Newsletter and now makes its appearance in our pages. It is a very interesting and revealing record and we are pleased to be able to publish it here. Our thanks are extended both to the Marshes and to the Bunkers for their cooperation with the club in this as in so many other respects.

<u>Name of Bird</u>	<u>1963</u>	<u>1964</u>
Common Loon	May 23	May 26
Arctic Loon		May 22
Red-throated Loon		May 23
Red-necked Grebe	May 2	May 20
Horned Grebe	May 2	May 16
Great Blue Heron		May 29
Whistling Swan	April 28	April 24
Canada Goose	April 23	April 24
White-fronted Goose		May 18 (Mile 802)
Snow Goose		May 11
Ross' Goose		May 18
Mallard	April 23	April 24
Pintail	May 2	April 24
Green-winged Teal	May 4	May 5
Blue-winged Teal	May 5	
American Widgeon	April 28	May 4
Shoveler	May 4	May 4
Ringnecked Duck	May 2	
Canvasback	May 2	May 4
Greater Scaup	May 4	
Lesser Scaup		May 8
Common Goldeneye	April 23	April 24
Barrow's Goldeneye	May 2	May 4
Bufflehead	April 25	May 4
Oldsquaw	May 27	May 23
Harlequin Duck	May 17	May 20
White-winged Scoter		May 21
Surf Scoter	May 13	May 16
Common Scoter		May 20
American Merganser	June 20	June 2
Red-breasted Merganser	May 17	May 4

<u>Name of Bird</u>	<u>1963</u>	<u>1964</u>
Goshawk	March 29	
Sharp-shinned Hawk		
Red-tailed Hawk	May 4	May 9
Harlan's Hawk		May 9
Rough-legged Hawk	April 18	April 22
Golden Eagle	April 18	April 24
Bald Eagle	April 25	May 4
Osprey		May 4
Gyrfalcon		May 4
Peregrine Falcon	April 23	May 23
Pigeon Hawk	April 23	April 24
Sparrow Hawk	April 19	April 4
Spruce Grouse		Feb. 12
Ruffed Grouse		May 24
Willow Ptarmigan	April 1	
Sharp-tailed Grouse		May 8
American Coot		May 8
Semipalmated Plover	May 21	May 9
Killdeer	May 18	May 28
American Golden Plover		May 12
Common Snipe	May 22	May 9
Hudsonian Curlew	May 22	May 24
Spotted Sandpiper	May 17	May 13
Wandering Tattler	July 12	
Greater Yellowlegs		May 24
Lesser Yellowlegs	May 4	May 9
Pectoral Sandpiper	May 21	May 20
Baird's Sandpiper		May 23
Least Sandpiper	May 21	May 18
Dowitcher		May 18
Semipalmated Sandpiper	May 21	May 18
Northern Phalarope	May 5	May 13
Herring Gull	April 23	April 24
Short-billed Gull	April 23	April 20
Bonaparte's Gull	May 14	May 14
Arctic Tern	May 19	May 18
Great Horned Owl		May 24
Snowy Owl	April	
Hawk Owl	April 23	
Short-eared Owl	April 23	May 9

<u>Name of Bird</u>	<u>1963</u>	<u>1964</u>
Rufous Hummingbird	July (Haines R.)	
Belted Kingfisher	April 25	May 16
Northern Flicker	May 4	May 7
Hairy Woodpecker		
Black-backed Three-toed Woodpecker	Feb.	
Say's Phoebe	May 17	May 13
Hammond's Flycatcher		May 8
Olivaceous Flycatcher	May 17	May 8
Western Wood Pewee		May 17
Olive-sided Flycatcher	June 8	
Horned Lark	April 25	April 25
Violet-green Swallow	April 25	May 4
Tree Swallow	April 29	May 4
Bank Swallow	April 29	May 4
Barn Swallow	May 17	
Cliff Swallow	May 4	May 4
Gray Jay	Resident	
American Magpie		
Common Raven		
Black-capped Chickadee	April 1	May 17
Boreal Chickadee	April 22	
Dipper	July (Otter Falls)	
Robin	April 22	May 4
Varied Thrush	April 25	May 14
Hermit Thrush		May 23
Swainson's Thrush	May 23	May 8
Gray-cheeked Thrush	May 23	May 20
Mountain Bluebird	May 17	May 5
Wheatear	July 1 (Mile 160)	
Townsend's Solitaire	June 1	
Ruby-crowned Kinglet	May 4	
Water Pipit	May 2	May 4

<u>Name of Bird</u>	<u>1963</u>	<u>1964</u>
Bohemian Waxwing	April 1	May 18
Northwestern Shrike	April 25	April 25
Orange-crowned Warbler		
Yellow Warbler	May 21	May 23
Myrtle Warbler	May 4	May 7
Blackpoll Warbler		June 3
Northern Waterthrush	May 18	May 20
Wilson's Warbler	May 24	May 18
American Redstart		
Red-winged Blackbird	May 18	May 4
Rusty Blackbird	April 28	May 13
Brown-headed Cowbird		May 23
Pine Grosbeak	Resident	
Gray-crowned Rosy Finch	July (Keno Hill)	April 25
Common Redpoll		
Pine Siskin	Resident	
Savannah Sparrow	April 29	May 4
Slate-coloured Junco	April 18	May 4
Tree Sparrow	April 25	May 4
Chipping Sparrow	May 21	May 17
White-crowned Sparrow	April 22	May 4
Golden-crowned Sparrow	May 7	May 7
Fox Sparrow	May 4	May 5
Lincoln's Sparrow		May 19
Alaska Longspur	May 2	May 4
Snow Bunting	March 21	March 26

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Note: How quickly plants respond to weather! Though flowers were wiped out by the heavy frosts of early December, on December 26 after several days of relatively warm weather three species, Chickweed (Stellaria media), Mouse-eared Chickweed (Cerastium vulgatum), and Dandelion (Taraxacum officiale) were coming into bloom in Toronto.

R. M. Saunders,

Editor.