

TORONTO FIELD NATURALISTS' CLUB NEWSLETTER

NOVEMBER MEETING

Visitors welcome!

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Monday, November 7, 1966, at 8.15 p.m.
at the
ROYAL ONTARIO MUSEUM

Speaker: DOUGLAS SADLER

Subject: NOW YOU SEE IT -- NOW YOU DON'T! (Illustrated with coloured slides)

Welcome to the Toronto Field Naturalists' Club, Mr. FON President!

IMPORTANT NOTICE! -- At the November meeting, members will be asked to ratify the appointment to the executive of Miss Edith Cosens and Prof. J. Cranmer-Byng, to fill vacancies left by the appointment of Mr. Elmer Talvila as editor, and by the sad death of Mr. J. Millman.

In the rotunda: A display by the Toronto Junior Field Naturalists' Club, including live specimens. "FLIGHT" magazine on sale. Price 50 cents.

- Also: (1) FON Christmas cards, hasti-notes, calendars, daily reminders.
- (2) TFNC History & Constitution (a 32-page booklet), 50 cents.
- (3) TFNC Arm-badge, \$1.00. Wear one and publicize your Club!

NOVEMBER OUTINGS

Saturday - CLAIRVILLE DAM - Waterfowl
Nov. 12 Meet on the west side of Indian Line, just north of the CNR tracks. This is
9:30 a.m. about 1/2 mile south of the intersection of Hwy 50 (Albion Road) and Steeles Ave.
From 401, the airport expressway (Interchange 44) leads directly onto Indian Line.
The meeting place is about 6 miles north on Indian Line. Morning only.

Saturday WILKET CREEK PARK - Botany Leader: Miss Erna Lewis
Nov. 19 Meet at the parking lot at the entrance on Leslie Street just north of Eglinton
10:00 a.m. Avenue East. Morning only.

Sunday WILKET CREEK PARK - Birds Leader: Mrs. Eve Damude
November 27 9:30 a.m. See previous outing for instructions. Morning only.

BOTANY GROUP - Meet on Thursday, Nov. 17, at 8:00 p.m., at Hodgson School, on Davisville Ave. just east of Mt. Pleasant Road. Dr. Peter Peach will address the group on "Geology and Ecology". Welcome to all interested in botany.

Chairman: Miss Edith Cosens, 481-5013

BIRD STUDY GROUP - Meet on Monday, Nov. 21, at 8:00 p.m., at St. James-Bond United Church on the west side of Avenue Road, two blocks north of Eglinton.

Secretary: Mr. Gerald McKeating, 293-8643

JUNIOR CLUB - Meet in the Museum theatre on Saturday, Nov. 5, at 10:00 a.m. Registrations still open for children 8 - 16. Fee \$1.00.

Director: Mr. Robt. MacLellan, 488-9346

FEES PLEASE: Single \$4.00; Family \$6.00; Full-time Student \$1.50.

President - Dr. Peter A. Peach

Secretary - Mrs. H. C. Robson
49 Craighurst Avenue
Toronto 12 (481-0260)

Toronto Field Naturalists' Club.



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October 1966

Just One of Those October Days

It was one of those inviting fall days when it is tempting to escape the drudgery of household chores by going out for a hike. Since it was also time to give my wife another driving lesson the decision was quickly made to make this a family hike--in the car.

"Not so fast!!," I explained carefully, as Anja was backing out of the garage. That should do for the day's driving lesson, I thought; and now I can devote myself to bird-watching for the rest of the trip. When she's driving I'm too scared to watch where we're going anyway, so it's best to divert oneself with birds.

First we drove slowly by a circuitous route to the St. Lawrence Starch Co. works, at the foot of Highway 10, where we enjoyed the colourfully polluted water and the fresh oily breeze from the lake. The girls walked to the end of the pier, climbed the lighthouse ladder and returned while I vainly sought bird life. Erik found the first of many sticks before we left for our next stop, a nearby nursery. Here, besides many lovely flowers and shrubs, we discovered flocks of white-throated sparrows, warblers, and some very tame golden-crowned kinglets. In fact I was able to pick up one sick-looking kinglet in my hands. My wife urged me to bring it home where I could carefully nurse it back to health, feeding it beetles and bugs obtained from the Museum--or the University. Wives are so altruistic--always willing to sacrifice their husbands for a good cause.

I explained authoritatively and impressively that the poor bird was dying--it closed its eyes; that its days were numbered--it curled up one toe; that it was no doubt a victim of insecticides--it gave a slight twitch. Everyone was impressed, including two strangers who insisted on petting the unfortunate creature. Then the ungrateful wretch of a bird opened its eyes, flipped its tail, and flew smartly over a firethorn-covered wall. Is there no recognition of authority in these troubled times!? I explained nimbly that this flight was probably the bird's swan song but

this mixed metaphor didn't go over too well and I lost some more prestige. Well, we left also, and after a slight diversion of hamburgers and milk shakes reached our destination--the Clairville Reservoir area.

It's always pleasant to explore the little spruce-lined road just west of the Reservoir. That's where I had my little adventure with the long-eared owls last winter. Today, however, there were no owls to be seen--just kinglets and white-throats and a little warbler wave (one black-throated green warbler). Erik tried to stir up some action by poking one of his sticks into a beehive but the bees were fairly torpid so we didn't witness his reactions to honeybees. We know hornets cause a large swelling.

At the end of the path we began to hear the cry of shorebirds. A flock of black-bellied plover flew over. On the railway bridge we could see a covey of bird-watchers gathered around a balscope. We could hear their cries. It was a good sign. Quickly we made our way around to Indian Road, parked, barely taking time to look at a rough-legged hawk hovering overhead, and slithered down the path to the mud flats below from whence came the "queedling" of many plover. The water has fallen very low this fall, exposing some delightfully muddy patches which at this moment were covered with shorebirds.

The first careless rapture showed us a mixed flock of about 30 black-bellied plover and even more, about 50, golden plover. It was the most golden plover I had seen in Toronto in many a year and I felt a thrill at the sight. These birds were a real golden colour--easy to distinguish from the nearby black-bellied plover. I took time now to pick out some details of the tableau--an immature black-crowned heron, killdeer, some probable pectorals, a nice flock of ringed plover, a kingfisher, and here and there little "peeps"--probably semipalmated sandpiper. Nearby was a large shorebird swashing back and forth with its bill--upturned yet--good heavens! a Hudsonian godwit, and only my second Toronto record. It stayed in full view all the time I was there and seemed very tame.

Now unexpectedly we witnessed one of the little "dramas of nature". A lovely scaly-backed sandpiper with black legs landed close by--this was easy--a Baird's sandpiper and a very nicely marked one. Not like that tough one seen through a glass darkly at Point Pelee years ago. It had just settled down to a grubby meal and I had just settled in for a nice bit of Baird watching when--swoosh!--the eater suddenly became the eaten--almost! A flash of gray and a sharp-shinned hawk came swooping down from the hills, made a brilliant stab at the Baird's--missed--tried again. Pandemonium!! Terrified screams everywhere, and Baird's and sharp-shinned vanished quickly from sight. I never did see where the sandpiper went--it happened so quickly--but it didn't go into this sharpshin's stomach this time.

I thought that episode must be the climax of the day, barring some unforeseen driving adventure on the way home. I rarely see the Baird's sandpiper and have never seen it attacked by a hawk before. We left for home after chatting with another birdwatcher who had shared our experience and after hunting in a desultory manner for a buff-breasted sandpiper which had been found here last week-end.

It had been a good day. Several unusual sights; over 30 species of birds seen; Erik got two new sticks to add to his woodpile; Anja got a driving lesson; and we all had got a little closer to the lives of the wild creatures around us. And that after all is one reason we are naturalists.

To strive, to seek, and sometimes find--that's our motto!

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An Ornithological Quiz

1. What kind of bird said the following?
 - a) "Nevermore."
 - b) "Everybody has won and all must have prizes."
 - c) "What a beautiful pussy you are!"
2. What is the first species of bird to be mentioned in the Bible?
3. The following famous persons, all British, have ornithological names:
 - a) an architect
 - b) a divine who wrote satires
 - c) a circumnavigator
4. Name two symphonies which contain bird calls.
5. What bird is referred to, and who wrote the passage?
 - a) The _____ eats between his meals,
And that's the reason why
He very, very rarely feels
As well as you or I.
His eye is dull, his head is bald,
His neck is growing thinner.
O what a lesson for us all
To only eat at dinner.
 - b) Shall I call thee bird,
Or but a wandering voice?
6. What bird species never sets foot on land during the whole of its life?
7. What poet was killed by a bird?
8. Who wrote the following passage? (He discovered the bird in question 9.)
"After five years' work, I allowed myself to speculate on the subject and drew up some short notes."
9. What bird regularly uses tools to get its food?
10. Name two birds which are completely fabulous.

Answers are on page 9.

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The editor is grateful that there was some response from Club members to his plea for contributions to the Newsletter. Not a great deluge of letters, mind you--more like a ripple--but at least a beginning to making this Newsletter a co-operative effort of all the members.

Why don't you sit down right now and pen a few lines for the Newsletter?

The editor is still at the same place--11 Hartfield Court, Islington--and will be thrilled to hear from you!

Following are some contributions from members.

Mr. A. A. Outram, well known to most of us, and a former president of the Club, has some interesting things to say about ferns.

Fern-seed

Because of its very small size, fern-seed has given rise to many superstitions throughout the ages. One widely-held belief was that a person carrying such seed could become invisible.

We find the idea expressed by Shakespeare in "Henry IV", Part 1, where Gadshill says to the chamberlain, "We steal as in a castle, cock sure: we have the receipt of fern seed, we walk invisible." This was probably written in 1597. That one who could write "The Tempest" believed this is rather doubtful, but it is quite acceptable to his public.

Ben Jonson in his play, "New Inn", performed by the King's Men at The Blackfriars in 1629, has as follows: "I had no medicine, sir, to go invisible, no fern-seed in my pocket."

Samuel Butler writes about 1670 in "Hudibras", in the Argument of Canto III:

Who would believe what strange bugbears
Mankind creates itself, of fears,
That spring, like fern, that insect weed,
Equivocally, without seed?
And have no possible foundation,
But merely in the imagination.

Dr. Samuel Johnson, who, it is said, put an "h" in his name to avoid confusion with the earlier Ben Jonson, defines "fern" fairly well in his great dictionary of 1755.

Fern. A plant. The leaves are formed of a number of small pinnules, dentated on the edges, and set close by one another on slender ribs. On the back of these pinnules are produced the seeds, small and extremely numerous. The country people esteem it a sovereign remedy decocted for the rickets in children.

The word "fern-seed" could be found in dictionaries up to fairly recent times. Of course ferns have no true seeds, but spores contained in cases. When ripe a case explodes and gives off a cloud of very fine spores, invisible, or nearly so, to the naked eye.

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Mr. Gordon Bellerby's account of "pot-hunting" or bird-listing in England will bring back nostalgic memories to any of our members who have been lucky enough to birdwatch on both sides of the Atlantic.

Autumn Shorebirding

A visit to England in September provided an opportunity for a week-end in East Anglia at shorebird migration time. Arriving at Cley-next-the-Sea in north Norfolk, at dusk, we were overtaken by 30 Canada geese, flying low back to their marsh; it seemed an auspicious beginning. It was 30 years since my last visit, but all seemed unchanged, even to the village sweet shop I knew as a child.

The Bank at Cley (as in Cly) is part of the Norfolk Naturalists' Trust property and consists of wet meadows and salt marsh, running down to a high shingle beach. As we started out at seven o'clock next morning the weather was gloriously clear. Lapwings were flying over in fair numbers, but the first real excitement was a good view of a curlew (the largest European wader, similar to our long-billed curlew). A fleeting glimpse of a water rail was perhaps a better find, as this bird is much rarer than our Virginia rail, which it closely resembles.

Cley is one of the few homes of the bearded tit--a delightful member of this colourful family. The male has an orange-brown body, blue-grey head with twin black "moustaches", and a long tail. They nest low in the reeds (cattails) and are more often heard (a scolding, squeaky twang) than seen. Visitors to Cley leave happily if they see even one bearded tit. We were more fortunate; a group of 12 on the edge of some reeds, and then later some 20 in the air at once.

Our best fun came on the shingle beach as we watched a dozen gannets fishing close inshore. Here also we had good looks at an arctic skua (parasitic jaeger), and Sandwich terns. As we turned back along the Bank, a skylark got up and circled higher and higher, singing all the time. Quite a morning it had been.

An afternoon trip to Brancaster (further along the coast) with Richard, the uncrowned king of Cley, produced oystercatchers in their thousands and small flocks of grey plovers (black-bellied). Nearby in Lincolnshire at Wisbech, the local sewage farm gave us golden plovers, ruffs, reeves, knots, and curlew sandpipers, all at close range in good numbers. While shorebirds were our primary interest, we avidly listed smaller birds such as wheatear, whinchat, redstart, three varieties of wagtails, and four tits, together with the more familiar gulls and ducks.

Next day we drove south into Suffolk, to visit one of the reserves belonging to the Royal Society for the Preservation of Birds at Minsmere. The RSPB was founded in 1889 as a protest against the barbarous trade in plumes for women's hats, which was responsible for the destruction of thousands of egrets, herons, and birds of paradise. The Society has been protesting since then to any and all who interfere with or destroy the birds and their nesting and feeding sites. In particular, the worst of today's menaces--oil pollution and the indiscriminate use of toxic chemicals in agriculture, which not only threatens birds, but humans as well.

The RSPB, with some 30,000 members, now administers 25 Reserves covering 7,000 acres, where people may see birds (some of them very rare) in their natural surroundings with the minimum of disturbance. Each Reserve has its own warden who is an experienced ornithologist and conservationist.

While driving in to Minsmere we put up common and red-legged partridges and a colourful jay. Our thoughts, however, were on the brackish marsh area, or Scrape as it is known. The reserve is mostly marsh, edged on one side by deciduous woods, and on the other by the sea. Through sluices and drainage ditches water levels are controlled, to provide ideal conditions for nesting species. While bearded tits nest here too, as well as a few pairs of avocets, Minsmere's specialty is perhaps the marsh harrier. This bird is larger than a marsh hawk and lacks the white rump, and is today one of the rarest birds in Britain. We were fortunate to see three of these fine birds quartering low over the marsh, all in the air at once.

At these reserves, birds can be watched under ideal conditions. Wooden hides are built at strategic locations, and each one has a screened approach so that it is possible to enter the hide without disturbing the birds. Inside the hide are wooden

benches and narrow plank tables at elbow height, which act as armrests while holding binoculars.

Our first view from the Scrape hide was tremendous. All around were hundreds of shorebirds feeding in the mud--some just feet away. The variety was bewildering, but soon we noticed some familiar friends: dunlin, sanderling, and black terns wheeling overhead. Most of the sandpipers were strangers, though often similar to North American species. For instance, instead of yellowlegs there were redshanks, greenshanks, and spotted redshanks. A common sandpiper was an old friend, but a wood sandpiper made us think of a smaller lesser yellowlegs. Little stints (wonderful name!) were clearly "peeps", and two small plovers brought exclamations of "semi-pal" and "look, a snowy", only to be correctly translated by our kind host into ringed and Kentish plover.

At this point the other occupants of the hide, realizing we were Canadians, told us they were searching for a pair of pectoral sandpipers, which are great rarities on England's east coast. Could we help them? Clearly we were expected to produce our North American bird, so we searched the marsh for the more familiar outline of the pectorals which we had seen but a few days earlier at Whitby. We located them across the marsh, then returned to studying the less familiar birds, leaving our English friends to enjoy the pectorals.

Later we covered other hides around the marsh, seeing a good variety of ducks, and once more a group of bearded tits. At dusk, teal, mallard, shovelers, gadwalls, and widgeon (European) flighted in as we returned to our comfortable country inn.

It had been a memorable week-end and a fine example of good conservation. And to think there are 24 other reserves spread from the Outer Hebrides to Southern England. Now what a holiday that would be!

Members visiting the U.K. who may wish to get in touch with the RSPB can write to The Lodge, Sandy, Bedfordshire. Annual dues are less than \$5.00, and include a subscription to "Birds", the society's excellent bi-monthly journal.

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A big thanks to the Littoral Society of Toronto for putting on that interesting display in the rotunda at our October meeting. The Society promotes the science, study, and conservation of water life, and for the last three years has been collecting data and specimens in the fields of zoology, botany, limnology, and geology. Any serious-minded divers may join: Box 1094, Adelaide St. P.O., Toronto.

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It's always a pleasure to hear from our more distant friends. Here is some news from Deidre Clark, whom many knew as an active member, and who is now a corresponding member. She's gone about as far as she can go from us and now lives in the Antipodes--New Zealand, that is. Deirdre says,

"I was interested in your new programme and noticed that you were having a lot of bus trips. That is what we do much more in New Zealand. At first I thought it was rather a bore and that I would rather take my own car, but I must say, when we are going away for a long weekend it is nice to relax in the bus on a Friday evening after a day's work, and let the driver do it. We sometimes go about 250 miles, having a pre-arranged meal on the way, and arriving about midnight or even later.

"When I left Canada I vowed that I wouldn't go on any more committees, but now I am on the committee of the Wellington Branch of the Royal N.Z. Forest and Bird Protection Society--something like the TFN--and also the WEA (Workers' Educational Association) Rambling Group. So you see I am right back in up to my neck! I must admit I haven't done very much for either of them so far. The Forest and Bird have been presented with a nice little native bush reserve about 20 miles out, so we go out there splashing gorse etc. We have now got to the stage where we want to plant some native berry - and flower-producing trees to attract more birds. There are really very few native N.Z. birds compared to Canada, and as more and more forest is going I am afraid what birds are left are getting rapidly scarcer. Of course there are quite a lot of European birds, mostly finches, and millions of the inevitable sparrow (house). The seabirds are the most interesting. Penguins come and nest under your house if you live down near the sea in Wellington--and make a terrible row and smell I believe. Albatrosses come right into the harbour and swim about amongst the ships, although I can't say that I have seen them there. If you go outside in a boat you see hundreds of fluttering shearwaters, and a very sinister-looking but graceful bird which they call a "Nellie", which is actually a giant petrel. There are several fairly small but very pretty native cuckoos, particularly the shining cuckoo, which is a lovely little bird but very hard to see. None of them say "cuckoo". I think I have seen a kiwi but it was really too dark to be sure. They are completely nocturnal so very rarely seen. The native parrots--the keas and the kakas--are really the most amusing birds. The keas frequent the mountain-tops, but get very cheeky and tame and you see a lot of them round the huts on the Milford Track, which I walked in March.

"Kind regards to everybody."

We are glad to hear from you, Deirdre. Incidentally, there is a lovely little film on New Zealand presently showing in some of our local theatres. It includes shots of the takahe, the long "extinct" rail, and of penguins; it is being shown with "Born Free", which isn't a bad film either, especially for children.

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Book Reviews

Birds of North America. A Guide to Field Identification. By Chandler S. Robbins, Bertel Bruun, Herbert S. Zim. Illustrated by Arthur Singer. Golden Press, N.Y. 340 pp. Obtainable at the FON Bookshop, 1262 Don Mills Rd., Don Mills, Ont. \$3.55 (FON members); \$3.95 others.

It's been a long time since a book has come our way which can challenge Peterson's Field Guide for first place in the birdwatcher's pocket and pocket-book. This is the book.

For the first time you can find all the species of North America under the covers of one inexpensive field guide--from the arctic tundras of Alaska to the subtropics of the Mexican border--from the arctic warbler and bluethroat to the blue-gray tanager and bulbul. The book covers all breeding birds, regular visitors, and casual visitors north of Mexico for a total of 700 species. Almost all the species are illustrated with a coloured painting, and accompanied by a complete range map and often an audio spectrogram of the voice. Where significantly different, paintings of the immatures, juvenal, summer and winter plumages are shown.

The text, which describes behaviour, abundance, songs, and similar species, is always found beside the picture of the bird. The range map which is on the same page as the text, is very complete although somewhat small (one inch square). It shows (for the keen-sighted) winter range, summer or breeding range, migration areas for

spring and fall, and isochronal lines for Mar. 1, Apr. 1, May 1, and June 1.

An interesting extra are the family portraits--coloured plates showing all the members of a family together. For example, plates showing the heads of warblers or sparrows, hawks, and female ducks in flight.

My only real complaints concern the sonograms, which are unreadable to the novice, and the small size of some of the figures. When you try to put 19 grouse or 16 shore-birds and 12 silhouettes on one page things get a bit crowded. Also, the colour reproduction has lost a little of the finer detail in some of the smaller paintings. However, physically the book is about the same size as Peterson's Guide, and being clothbound and flexible is not as likely to tear out your pockets when you're making a quick draw.

This book offers a lot for a little. Heartily recommended!

Birds of the Northern Forest. Text by John A. Livingston. Paintings by J. F. Lansdowne. McClelland & Stewart Ltd., 247 pp. 56 plates and 56 drawings. Pre-publication cost \$17.50, increasing to \$20.00 later.

This is an "arty" book--portraits of 56 typical birds of Canada's evergreen forests with an accompanying text pointing out a few interesting facts about each bird. Each portrait and each text story occupies a full page. The portraits show the bird perched on some typical vegetation, usually evergreen, against a cream or white background. None of the birds are shown flying, probably because the paintings and drawings were made from skins in the Royal Ontario Museum. The paintings are skilfully done in the usual Lansdowne style but often doubly dull--in the bird's lack of movement and in its colour which seems to resemble a museum skin rather than a live bird. I remember particularly the fox sparrow and the winter wren, which seemed too dull to be real birds. The 56 drawings are study sketches made before painting, and except for the art lover, expendable.

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Answers to "An Ornithological Quiz"

1. a) Raven ("The Raven" by Edgar Allen Poe)
b) Dodo ("Alice in Wonderland")
c) Owl ("The Owl and the Pussycat" by Edward Lear)
2. Raven (Genesis 8:7)
3. a) Wren b) Swift c) Drake
4. Hayden's Toy Symphony; Beethoven's Sixth Symphony
5. a) Vulture (Belloc) b) Cuckoo (Wordsworth)
6. Emperor Penguin. It breeds on the Antarctic sea-ice.
7. Aeschylus. A large bird called a Lammergeyer dropped a tortoise on his bald head, mistaking it for a rock on which it normally broke up its food.
8. Charles Darwin in the "Origin of Species" (Introduction).
9. One of the Galapagos finches discovered by Charles Darwin. It regularly uses a cactus spine or small stick to extract insects from holes it has chipped in bark.
10. Roc and Phoenix.

Elmer Talvila,

Editor

