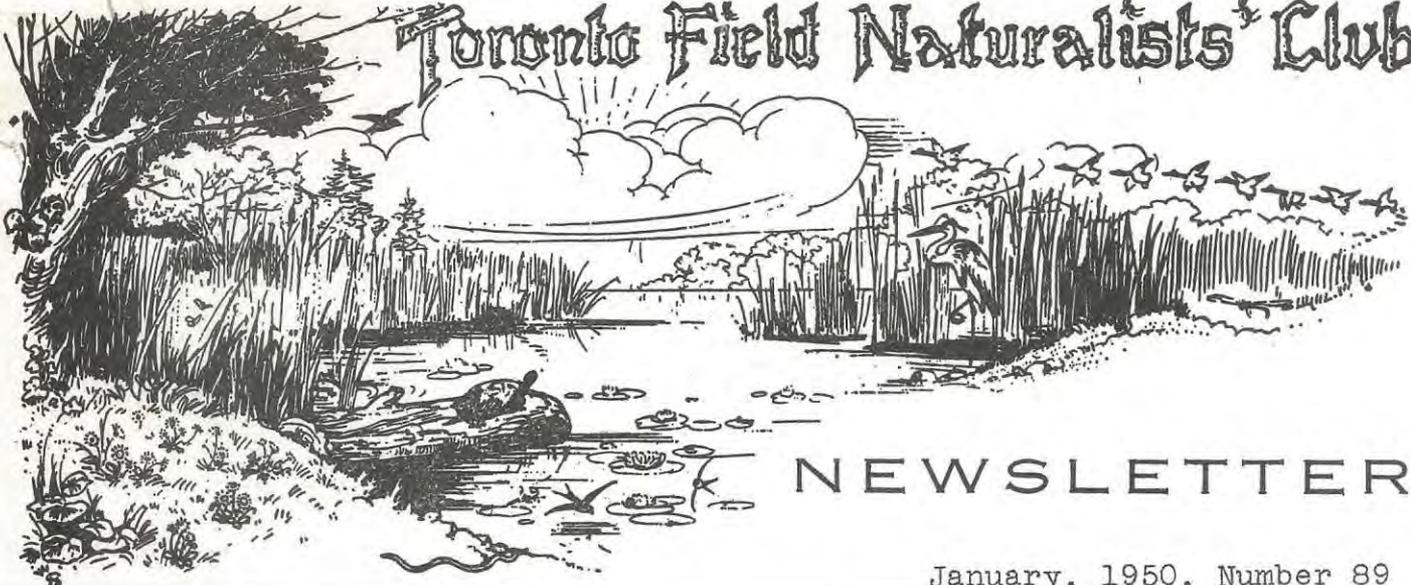


Toronto Field Naturalists' Club.



NEWSLETTER

January, 1950, Number 89

When midnight falls on December 31st of each year, no bird watcher has seen a bird. His list is now blank, fresh and unmarked. With dawn on January 1st he must go out and start all over again. Every New Year's Day is an opportunity and a challenge. I am told that some bird watchers even stay home on New Year's Eve so as to be ready to start with a rush the next day. Others, however, don't carry things that far. Nonetheless, for all dyed-in-the-wool observers the New Year's Day run is a major event in the birding year.

In 1950 the New Year began wet and grey. A drizzle prevailed until eleven o'clock. Soon after that the fog which had clung low over the lake extended its sway across the land.

In spite of such unfavorable weather the party I was with ran up an excellent list of birds with which to commence the year's observations. Our route began at Bob Trowern's house, took us to the lower marshes on the Humber, thence to Sunnyside and eastward along the water front to Stanley Barracks. We then retraced our course, stopping briefly for coffee, then going on to the north end of Grenadier Pond and Harvie's Glen. From there we proceeded westward on the Lakeshore Road to Bronte, stopping at the Long Branch Rifle Range, Port Credit, and Oakville Harbor. On the way back to town we came via the Queen Elizabeth Way, stopping at Wings Haven on the Port Credit byroad. The while run took from 8.30 to 3.00, and when it was finished we had seen 34 species.

Three snowy owls along the lakeshore from Sunnyside to the Barracks was the largest number of any of us had seen on one trip during the present incursion. One was on top of the Bathing Pavilion; one was on the breakwall in front of the Barracks, a very large and darkly mottled owl, probably a female; one was on top of a telephone pole in back of the Wonderbar. This fellow, much the whitest of the three, was probably killed not very long after we saw him, for Art Smith phoned in the evening to tell me of his son Doug's finding the body of a freshly killed snowy owl, a quite white bird, in the field near the Wonderbar around 2 p.m. It is an unhappy fact that almost everyone who sees one of these beautiful owls immediately wants to kill it.

The marshes on the Humber and Grenadier Pond showed signs of breaking open so mild had the weather been during the previous fortnight. Ducks from the Sunnyside congregation were immediately occupying the bits of open water along the edges and in the channels. Near the opening to Marsh Number three, there was a great blue heron, always a surprise on New Year's Day. This was an adult bird with a white forehead. At the north end of Grenadier Pond the marsh was mostly open and in the water here were some eight shovellers -- a mature male, an immature male and 6 females. On the Christmas census this same group (probably), was seen on the Humber above the Old Mill, but they have moved over to this marsh which is certainly more fitting for shovellers than the tumbling water of the rapids on the river. I had never seen this duck in the Toronto area during the dead of winter.

In Harvie's Glen our observations for the day reached their climax for there we not only found a considerable group of small birds, and a great horned owl, but we also put up three unusual winter visitors. The discovery of two of these was heralded by a low-pitched, husky, rolling call that ended in an excited chattering. We all puzzled over the origin of these sounds, and were inclined to attribute them to a northern shrike. Several of us were scanning the bush tops and other appropriate places for one of these birds when another of the party, Jack Satterly, shouted that he had a Carolina wren. We all quit our own looking and converged on the spot he pointed out, a narrow gully filled with old stumps, weeds, and refuse which cuts into the face of the dump at the head of the glen. The chattering ceased but in a moment the wren appeared, flew up into a tree, and there (in full view), to our delight repeated the chattering call. Then it made off down stream. No sooner had it gone than a second wren darted out of the gully, and cavorted over our heads! Not many minutes later we had them both together in the tree, then chasing each other about in the tangles at the foot of the dump. When we had withdrawn downstream a few yards we heard behind us the full, rich, lilting song of this wren. How strange it sounds on New Year's Day in Toronto, when ordinarily you are used to hearing it from the depths of Post Woods, Point Pelee, or along the dark water lanes of Rondeau Park in mid-May. But Carolina wrens have wintered in this glen before. Why they favor this spot over others is a mystery; at least it is now with so much clearing and building going on all about and through the area.

It was during the search for the wren that we flushed a flock of juncoes from the dump tangles. As several of them flew, and alighted momentarily ahead of us, I found myself looking directly at a fine male red-backed junco, as brilliant a specimen as I have ever laid eyes upon. It had a jet-black head, and a mantle which ended abruptly along the flanks, giving way to a russet-brown there, and on the back to a rich fox-toned hue. I called to the others but only David West had a fleeting glimpse of the bird. We followed the junco flock back and forth along the north bank for some time trying to get another sight but to no avail. (Later in the day it was learned that Don Perks had seen the bird during the morning in the same place before we arrived. He was all excited about it, naturally. It was seen again on the 2nd by Art Smith; and on Friday, Jan. 6, by Jim Baillie. It seems to be spending the winter in that region.)

At the Rifle Range we were looking for a pipit and some meadow larks that had been seen on the Christmas census. It is one of the features of the New Year's Day hunt that we try to re-find as many of the unusual birds seen on the census as possible. In the case of these birds we failed for the Rifle Range is a prohibited area, and it is difficult to make satisfactory observations merely by watching over the fences.

Port Credit Harbor was supposed to produce a glaucous gull but fog and people on the shore made observation difficult there. However, a white gull finally flew over as we were finishing our looking; it was an Iceland. And as we were having lunch in the cars another white gull flew by, different from the first individual which was rather grey by being quite white with brownish flecking, another Iceland.

At Oakville there was little. And at Bronte, where he had high hopes of seeing the gannet which Jim and others had spotted the previous Monday, the fog was so dense that hardly a bird could be seen.

On the way back from Bronte we stopped a short while at Mrs. Lucy McDougall's home, Wings Haven, on the Port Credit side road. At her very successful feeding station we added three names to our growing list; red-breasted and white-breasted nuthatches, and golden-crowned kinglet.

Jack Satterly, David West, and I drove up along the Humber to Dundas Street on the way home. We were prompted to do this by the report of a pintail having been seen along the rapids at Baby Point. This we did not find but David's keen eyes spotted a kingfisher perched in a willow beside the stream; again a bird that had been seen on the census. There is almost always one along this stretch of the river during the winter. With this observation our New Year's trip came to an end. Despite rain and fog, we had made a very good start for 1950, having recorded 34 kinds of birds during the day.

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I am pleased to report that the Myrtle Warbler at Miss Northcott's feeding station in York Mills is very much still alive and flourishing. Bill Smith and I saw it again on January 7th. If a Myrtle Warbler seemed strange in December, it appeared doubly exotic in the midst of fresh-fallen snow, when gusty little breezes were sending the new snow in puffs from off all the cedar trees around the station. A Myrtle Warbler, its yellow head and rump glinting through a film of powdery January snow -- what a sight! As previously, the warbler was feeding on suet at a suet log. Apparently this diet is a satisfactory substitute for its summer fare of insects. To all appearances, it seems likely to survive the winter.

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One of the most rewarding kinds of observation for bird watchers, and one full of surprises, is to see how many and what kinds of birds appear in or about your home. Most people think that a city garden has few birds, and that those which do come will merely be the most ordinary ones. Neither assumption is true. Just start keeping a careful list and see what happens. A good example of the

first-class surprise that is in store for anyone who does so comes to me in a letter from Marshall Bartman, who writes:

"We have been keeping a record of the birds seen and heard in or in the vicinity of our garden. Last summer we had a rather unusual visitor. On the morning of July 5th just before leaving for the office, I went into the garden. The sight of a chunky bird walking from the shadows of a large honeysuckle bush at the rear of the garden caught my eye. A second glance showed me a Woodcock in the sunlit grass near the bush. I immediately called to my wife and told her what I was watching. While I kept my eye on the bird she got the binoculars. I then saw it standing behind a clump of Iris to which it had moved, and visibly watching me. Later in the morning my wife saw it on the lawn quite near the house. During the next few days it was seen also by neighbours. I again saw it on July 8th late in the afternoon. These extended observations lead me to assume that it remained in the neighbourhood for several interesting, presence of this woodland bird in a city garden was interesting, and gave us a good addition to our list."

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During the past month three new books of marked interest to field naturalists have been brought to my attention by members of the Club. All three have been published in Great Britain and are examples of the great and successful effort being made since the war to restore Britain to her former high place in the world of publication.

One of the most exciting is Birds in Action by Eric Hosking and Cyril Newberry (Collins, London, 1949). Since the development of the electronic flash by Professor Harold Edgerton and his associates of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in 1931, there has been an increasing number of studies of birds through the medium of high-speed photography. One of the best of these was Bird Flight, by Gordon C. Aymar (Dodd, Mead, New York, 1936). Member of the T.F.N.C. have seen the startling results of this same technique at many of the illustrated nature lectures in Toronto during the last ten years. In the nearly twenty years it has been available, bird photographers have learned much about the use of the new method. This new book, applying the method to the study of birds in Britain, shows clearly to what a degree of perfection the use of high-speed photography has been brought. Except for an introduction on the method, entitled fittingly, A Revolution in Bird Photography, this book is wholly made up of superb pictures of birds in action. I do not think the excellence of these bird portraits can be surpassed. When you see the nightjar yawning -- yes, indeed, caught in the act! -- you'll just want to go to sleep! And when you look at the barn owl with the vole, you'll jump, for he's coming straight at you. But don't let me anticipate your pleasure. Get the book and enjoy it, for no true naturalist could fail to be excited and pleased with such a work as this.

No less attractive a book is the second, Sketches and Notes from a Bird Painter's Journal, by Philip Rickman (Eyre and Spottiswoode, London, 1949) Like the preceding, though there is more text in this book, this is a collection of illustrations, again of birds in Britain. Unlike the other, which records in bold photographs the novel results of a new discovery in science, this is a quiet book

wherein an artist portrays with sensitive understanding and unbelievable delicacy his impressions of many of the best-known British birds. Having made the acquaintance of most of these birds last summer, and having their attitudes and mannerisms fresh in mind, I am struck by the faithfulness with which Mr. Rickman has been able to capture them in his drawings. These are far more than mere illustrations. These are living records of living birds. The publishers, too, should be congratulated for the superb excellence of the reproduction. Too often, fine artistic work has been ruined in publication, but in this book it is set forth with impeccable artistry, making this a magnificent example of the bookmaker's art.

The third book, City of the Bees, by Frank S. Stuart (George Allen and Unwin, London, 1947) is one which will arouse much controversy amongst naturalists. The author, who has previously published a work on Beekeeping Practice, has devoted a lifetime to the study of bees, both wild and domesticated. But he is much more than a beekeeper. He is a man with a deep sense of the poetry of nature, with a high creative imagination. In this book, poetic feeling and imagination predominate, though a great deal of the author's knowledge of bees fills the pages. Nonetheless it is the dramatic and hurrying story of the life, the loves, the hates, the fierce struggles and successful survival of the city of the bees which holds the reader. This is a vivid story of adventure, romantic yet realistic. As the author says in his brief foreword,

"I could lead you to the hillside and take you through the wood to the oak tree. Bee colonies really do establish themselves in trees. Badgers attack them, and so do hordes of robber bees. Diseases decimate them. Ants steal honey from bees' tongues, wasps paralyze bees, and store the living, helpless victims in wasp larders.

"High romance always deals with realities. The events recorded here really do happen to bees and birds and animals, in the same world where, so pitifully unheeding, 'civilized' man stamps and frets along his little rut into his grave, never looking round at the beauty, savagery, emotion and wonder that he rushes blindly past."

There will be those who will deplore the "humanizing" of the bees, even though it is done with none of the crudity employed by some authors. Others will question the bee-lore of the author in many places. Some will think that whereas in much of the book he has written with telling effect, in other places he has striven too much, he has over-written. Whatever criticism there may be, this is a book by a man who still knows that in the ways of nature there is mystery. He senses the wonder of it all. There are too few in the world today who see that side of reality. That is the prime reason why this book should find a place in any field-naturalists library.

To many, the most interesting, as well as the most tantalizing part of this book will be the hints of philosophy and religion that slip in. Never obtrusive, never disturbing the story, nonetheless they are there. Mr. Stuart has thought much about the implications of the life of bees, the relation of bees to the whole system of nature and to men. It is hard to say just what the author's beliefs in these matters really are, but one cannot avoid giving serious thought to many of the

life of bees, the relation of bees to the whole system of nature and to men. It is hard to say just what the author's beliefs in these matters really are, but one cannot avoid giving serious thought to many of the meditations he allows to sprinkle his pages. One considers, for instance if he is not holding up a warning to those many people who in recent years have seen in the "efficiency" and "perfection" of the communal life of bees a model for human society. For despite the beauty, and the stirring drama of the city of the bees, he comes to the conclusion that this "city" is a "mechanically perfect community", "selfless, loveless, and undying", "always and in everything the community's health and fitness must come first; there is neither food nor shelter for anything less than the perfect." This is a book that will make you think, as well as stir your feelings.

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Mrs. Barbara Jaquith has very kindly consented to review two books of interest to all field naturalists. She states,

THE NEW ILLUSTRATED NATURALIST is a series of books, written by recognized authorities in each subject, planned to deal with the principal aspects of the Natural History of the North American region north of Mexico. The editorial board of the series includes William Beebe, New York Zoological Society; Austin H. Clark, Smithsonian Institution; Robert Cushman Murphy, American Museum of Natural History; and Fairfield Osborne, New York Zoological Society.

Two books of this series have been published by the D. Van Nostrand Co. Reviews of the books are given below.

AMERICAN WILD FLOWERS by Harold N. Moldenke
D. Van Nostrand Co. \$9.50 (Canada)
453 pp. 88 color photographs, 67 black and white gravure.

"To instill into the reader a desire to go out for himself and become a friend on intimate terms -- not merely a passing acquaintance -- with the plants" has been the purpose of the author of "American Wild Flowers", - - - Dr. Harold N. Moldenke, curator of the Herbarium of the New York Botanical Garden.

"American Wild Flowers deals with the showiest and most interesting herbaceous flowering plants of the North American continent -- those most likely to attract the attention of the travel-

er." Indeed, the book is good also for "armchair travel" It is most interesting to follow your favorite plants across the continent. Historical notes, folk-lore and quotations of poetry make this book good background reading for the field naturalists.

The author, however, presupposes quite a knowledge of plants on the part of the reader. An amateur confronted with an entirely unknown plant would have to consult the regional manuals to identify his specimen. It would be necessary to know if the plant were a bedstraw, a borage or a mint in order to find it in this book.

Common names of plants are given according to the rules of the American Joint Committee on Horticultural Nomenclature as set forth in "Standardized Plant Names" (1924) This produces some puzzling letter combinations that take study to resolve into words as prairiemimosas, falsesolomonseals. The reason given is "a compound name that might be misleading in that it indicates a genus to which the plant does not belong is written as a solid or hyphenated word, for instance Douglasfir which is not a fir or trailing-arbutus which is not an arbutus."

On the whole the illustrations in this book are not as satisfactory as the excellent ones in "American Spiders" in the same series of books.

The scope of "American Wild Flowers" is a wide one: to give a general picture in a compact form has been a task that required a wide knowledge and discrimination. The reader will agree with Dr. Moldenke that "we here in North America are blessed with a glorious floral treasurehouse. It is up to us and our descendants to preserve and protect this heritage."

AMERICAN SPIDERS

by Willis J. Gertsch

D. Van Nostrand Co.

\$9.50 (Canada)

272 pp. 44 color photographs, 67 black and white gravures

Dr Willis J. Gertsch, associate curator in the Department of Insects and Spiders at the American Museum of Natural History, in this book deals chiefly with the life and habits of the spiders of the United States and Canada rather than with the identification of species. However, many of the commonest spiders will be recognized in the text and illustrations.

There are chapters on "The Life of the Spiders", on "Silk Spinning and Handiwork", "Courtship and Mating" and on "Economic and Medical Importance". The chapter on "The Evolution of Spiders" is followed by chapters on "The Tarantulas," "The Cribellate Spiders", "The Aerial Web Spinners" and "The Hunting Spiders". Chapter XII deals with the North American Spider Fauna"; a Glossary and a Bibliography aid the more serious student in further study. The illustrations in this book are of exceptional merit. They have taken great skill and patience and are very well produced. Much can be learned from a careful study of the photographs alone.

"By means of size and also of sound, birds, mammals and vertebrate animals monopolize the stage and divert attention. Yet only a slight change in perspective will bring into view a microcosm of tiny creatures that, hidden away in leafy jungles or unseen in miniature forests under foot, live lives of unbelievable

strangeness and complexity. To bring this microcosm into sharp focus for the general reader is the prime purpose of this book."

"Deeply impressed in the minds of most people is the conviction that spiders of any kind are poisonous and that many are deadly." "Spiders are shy animals that run away from pursuers whenever they can. Almost without exception they will walk over the skin of man and make no effort to bite, regarding his body merely as a substratum" "The average person's chances of dying from snakebite are about the same as being struck by lightning. The chance of dying from a spider bite is considerably less."

Spiders, predatory creatures that they are, play an important part in the life of every habitat, by acting as a check on the number of other invertebrates. Spiders are known to have aided in the checking of cotton worms, gypsy moths and pea aphids. There is much more still to be learned about the feeding habits of spiders. Dr. Gertsch hopes that this book will stimulate other students to further observations and study.

"American Spiders" by Dr. Willis J. Gertsch fills a real need in the field naturalists' library.

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I wish to thank Miss Etta H. Weinert for sending in a copy of the annual program of the Wissahickon Nature Club of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. A number of Trailside Talk, this club's newsletter, was also sent. It is of great interest to see how the enjoyment and study of nature is taking hold all over the continent. This club is apparently a young organization, and still small -- but a most vigorous and healthy group carrying on a full and stimulating programme of activities all through the year. From this literature it seems that this club is associated with the Wissahickon Trailside Museum in Riverview Park, and is sponsored by the Department of Parks and recreation, Bureau of Recreational Activities, of the city of Pittsburgh. This prompts me to remind the readers of the Newsletter once again of the important part that the Royal Ontario Museum has taken in helping and encouraging the development of this club and of all the various nature study activities in this region. Without the aid of such an institution, the T.F.N.C. would have been a small, struggling body for many more years than it was. Without the generous support given by members of the Museum staff, and the use of Museum facilities, this club might never have been able to embark upon many of the activities, especially in connection with the Junior Club, which it regards as of such great importance. The T.F.N.C. owes the Royal Ontario Museum and its staff a very real debt of gratitude. Through the association of the two, the T.F.N.C. has grown from an insignificant if pleasant little club to a public service, making a real and important contribution to community life. Through the association, the Museum has been able to reach a large segment of the public which might otherwise have been closed to it. This is a fruitful co-operation of which both parties and Toronto may well be proud.

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Over the year, the Club has held field trips in many parts of the Toronto region, and members have become acquainted with beauty spots, good birding areas, interesting botanical regions, woods, marshes, ponds and streams that they had not known of before. This has been one of the benefits that the club has brought to its members.

Nonetheless, as one looks over the map of the Toronto region it is easy to see that there are many places that have never been visited by the club on its field trips or outings. Now unquestionably many of these spots are known to some members of the club, and known favourably as worthy of investigation by all field naturalists. Therefore, it would be of great value to the club if members would suggest such "new" areas as possible sites for future club outings. In other words, we want bright new ideas of places to go on field trips. Please send new suggestions either to the Secretary, Mrs. Ruth Stewart, 21 Millwood Road, or to the Editor of the Newsletter, R.M.Saunders, 9 McMaster Avenue.

R. M. Saunders.