

Toronto Field Naturalists' Club

March Meetings

Monday, March 6th, at 8.15 p.m.

at the

R O Y A L O N T A R I O M U S E U M

Speaker: Mr. Robert C. Hermes of Buffalo

Subject "The Grass Forest" Illustrated

Due to the fact that Mr. Hermes is an exceedingly popular speaker, and our accommodation is limited, it is suggested that members will be well advised to come early.

R O T U N D A D I S P L A Y

The Rotunda Display will be in charge of the Junior Field Naturalists Club. There will be sketches, clay modelling and other projects done by the juniors.

M A R C H O U T I N G

The March outing will be a combined outing of the Federation of Ontario Naturalists and the Toronto Field Naturalists' Club, and will be held on Sunday, March 5th, Meeting at the Sunnyside bathing pavilion at 9 a.m.

Leader: Mr. Stuart L. Thompson.

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Mrs. J.B. Stewart - 21 Millwood Road, HY.5052

Secretary-Treasurer.

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Toronto Field Naturalists' Club.



NEWSLETTER

February - 1950 #90

On the morning of February 3, the grapevine buzzed with news that caused me to prick up my ears. Mrs. Margaret Marsh called to say that she and her husband, Rev. Henry Marsh, had just driven in from Bolton, and had seen both horned larks and snow buntings on the way. This news of incoming migrants and of winter visitors that have been none too common this season was heightened in its impact upon me by the sight of brilliant sunshine pouring in the windows -- we have had so many drab days this grey winter -- and by the fact that I had few free hours. By good fortune, a friend was also free, so we agreed at once to follow up the "hot tip" from Mrs. Marsh with all despatch.

Once under way, a red-tailed hawk sailing along the Wells Hill ridge was a good omen of success. We followed the Marshes' route exactly, going up Dufferin Street to Route No. 7, thence westward. At the crossing of the new northern highway, where there is a detour around an overpass that is building, two birds flew up from a bit of bare earth. They were unmistakably horned larks by their flight, and my friend brought the car to a stop. Having to favour an injured leg, he could not chase after the birds. I followed them in an effort to discover if they were the yellow-faced northern larks that sometimes appear in the early flocks, or the paler prairie larks that stay with us all summer. Before I could satisfy myself I had to manoeuvre in their wake around most of the open area near the approaches to the overpass. A workman, attracted by my activities, came out from the construction job to look at me with great care; whether prompted by pure curiosity or by some other motives I cannot say. Eventually I was able to determine that the birds were in fact the sort familiar to all local birders, the prairie variety.

At the junction of Routes No. 7 and 27, our attention was temporarily switched from larks as we caught sight of a hawk shooting across the fields. We debated as to its identity, being unable to decide as between a small falcon or a small accipiter. The hawk alighted, fortunately for us, in a planting of old apple trees near a farmhouse. Turning towards this spot we drove as close to it as we could. For a few moments we could not make out the hawk at all, but while we were trying to find it the predator quit its perch and flew. It took a course away from us in the direction of another farmhouse, but we were near enough this time so that we could see the rounded wings and elongated

tail of an accipiter. It was in fact a Cooper's hawk. Probably it paused in the vicinity of the farmhouse in search of house sparrows and starlings. Not spying any, it went on to a neighbouring farm where another flock resides. Very likely it has a regular route for such visitations.

Returning to our projected route, we turned up the Bolton road, No. 50, and soon came to more larks. Mostly this was a bird here and there along the side of the road. A few miles from the meeting of the two routes we saw a good-sized flock of birds circling and dipping over the fields. They soon came to earth, and we approached as near as we could. Since the flock had come down quite 150 yards from the highway, and the field sloped slightly away from us, we could make out only the odd bird fluttering up from the ground for a moment and settling back. Our first impression had been that they were snow buntings. Thinking that there might be a few longspurs with the flock, I climbed the fence and walked slowly across the field. My friend, who had to be careful of his leg, stayed by the car, watching to see what might fly up. I proceeded cautiously, for unless a bird rose from the ground I discovered it was impossible to tell exactly where they were. As soon as one of the birds settled it merged so completely with the clods of earth as to vanish, even though it was but a short distance in front of me. This seemed rather astonishing for snow buntings which have much white plumage, but the camouflaging was soon explained when I swept the clouds with my binoculars and found the flock to be made up almost wholly of horned larks, not buntings. There were over a hundred birds ahead of me and not more than three or four were buntings. The larks being a brownish-grey in hue, naturally resembled earth as long as they stayed still; and most of them did, freezing to immobility as they viewed my approach with closest attention. As I came on, the nearer birds withdrew, flying ahead a short distance above the heads of their fellows and realighting. To my delight I got close enough to see that five at least of this flock were brightly-coloured northernns, bearing very yellow eye-stripes and throats, and with the brownish-green colouration on the back that marks this variety. There was much calling amongst them, but none of the larks burst into song. The Marshes had heard quite a little singing earlier on, but we were not favoured with a single song.

When I was returning across the field, I saw my friend pointing vigorously back along the road. Guided by his directing, I realized that he had discovered a flock of snow buntings in the adjoining field that we had driven by. This flock was now in the air. After wheeling over the field several times, the entire group came down at the side of the road, where the birds began to feed on weed seeds, perhaps also to pick up gravel. As soon as I got back over the fence, we tried for a better view. My friend drove the car slowly while I walked. Manifestly the feeding was peculiarly attractive by the side of the road, for though the flock was three times ousted by passing it returned as a whole each time. This gave us a good chance to get several excellent sights of them before they finally, with the passing of a fourth car, took off over the fields. It is noteworthy that nearly all the buntings appeared very brown when on the ground, and seemed not to show as much white as usual when in the air. There were about 125 birds in the flock.

We met with another small group of some 25 buntings and a few larks a little farther on. After that we saw no more of either species, though we covered many miles. Why buntings and larks should have been concentrated along a relatively short stretch on this particular route remains an unsolved puzzle.

When these two birds meet in our fields in February, we know that the back of winter is broken, that spring is not far away. Horned larks are the first migrants to return to us. They come regularly in the second or third week of this month, so that these birds were only slightly early. Often larks are seen in January, as in fact they have been this year, some having been seen by Arnold Dawe at Thistletown quite early last month. There seems to have been no sizeable movement, however, until the first week of February, a normal time for their appearance. With the open winter, we could have expected a few larks to have stayed with us, but so far as I know there were no reports of their presence from the end of November until Mr. Dawe's observation in January.

Few people realize how abundant is the horned lark throughout the world. Though regular and relatively common with us in appropriate places, it is only sparsely represented in our area when we compare its numbers here with the swarms that occur elsewhere. As Peterson points out in Birds Over America, "...by all odds the most numerous bird of the Great Plains is the horned lark. It might well be the most abundant songbird in the world, for countless numbers range across the grassy plains of Europe and the steppes of Asia, thereby encircling the globe."

The greater number of horned larks on the prairies is the result of the existence of a vast area of more suitable habitat. This species must have bare land on which to nest. Only with the clearing of the forests in the eastern part of North America did such habitats appear in sufficient extent to attract this bird. When the land was opened up to agriculture the larks came in, advancing eastward from the prairies. Much of the east has only recently been penetrated by them, and parts of it are not yet occupied. Farm fields are not the only territory the horned larks will occupy. In recent years the creation of golf courses with sand bunkers, airstrips, large parking areas, and dumps have all proved attractive to them, and so have facilitated their expansion as a species. Their occupation of new territory is an example of the fact that where some birds are driven out, in this case by the destruction of the forests, others will move in. Nature abhors a vacuum.

The horned larks are true larks, not like the meadow larks which are really blackbirds. They are close relatives of the skylark of Europe. Like their relative, so beloved of poets, they mount into the sky, singing their way up and up and up until you see but a speck against celestial blue. Then suddenly they plunge madly earthward, seemingly desirous of breaking themselves to bits, only to save you from the shock of watching their destruction at the last moment, when, a few feet above the ground, they glide out of their mad plunge and alight gracefully. In a few moments they will be at it again, climbing the sky, calling to you in tinkling tones to witness the gay performance. Be sure you do, for no other of our birds can tell you

more of grace or gayety, or of their joy of being alive in the spring of the year. Any day now you may see this wonderful show for no greater price than the cost of looking.

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At the instance of a member of this club, whose identity I do not know but who is much to be thanked, Miss Mary A. Secord of Brantford sent in on January 31st an account of her birding experiences on the prairie in southern Alberta last summer; an account which is a truly enlightening revelation of the wealth of bird life that occurs in a part of Canada where many people might think that few birds would exist. The numbers of such birds as horned larks, the hawks and the ducks, that exist in the prairie region is beyond the ken of easterners. It must be seen to be appreciated fully. What the prairies lack in variety of birds they make up for in numbers. Miss Secord's portrayal will be very welcome to our readers.

BIRDING ON THE PRAIRIES

"Last summer I had the interesting experience of 'birding' in what was to me an altogether new environment as I spent nearly two months in Southern Alberta about thirty miles west of Medicine Hat in the semi-desert country. Naturally I expected to see birds but the reality far exceeded my expectations. The country is a regular paradise for birders. Westerners think nothing of driving a couple of hundred miles on a 'little trip' so I saw much of the surrounding country but most of my birding was done within two miles of the village.

Next to the presence of horned larks everywhere, the first thing that struck me was the number and variety of waterfowl. It was strange to have ducks fly overhead or to see a great blue heron flapping its wings over the land, when as far as the eye could see, which was probably fifteen or twenty miles, there was nothing but the short dry prairie grass, sage bush or small clumps of cactus. There were neither trees nor shrubs in the landscape but a little dip in the land hid a slough and towards that the heron and ducks were flying.

There was a small slough about half a mile from the house. It was perhaps a short city block long and thirty feet across at its widest. Around the water grew rushes and coarse green grass. This slough had water all summer but a larger slough about a mile away dried up completely in the middle of August. I visited the small slough and another about the same size many times. At first the ducks which seemed to be mostly immature pintails took flight as soon as I appeared but as they grew accustomed to my presence they allowed me to approach very close. As the ducks were in their eclipse plumage or young ones it was very confusing, but I managed to identify mallards and immature baldpates. A couple of shovellers were always in evidence and very tame. One day a dozen green-winged teal appeared. They were very restless and kept leaving the water, wheeling around and returning to the small pond. Late in August I saw two birds which I imagined were young coots from their shape and actions but their bills were grey

not white. Certainly there had been many baby coots with orange-red bills, in the district early in the summer.

When I first discovered the slough in the middle of July it was the home of a score of red-winged blackbirds and almost the same number of killdeer. These all disappeared before the middle of August but there were still huge flocks of red-wings in the irrigated areas of Alberta. Late in August there was one yellow-headed blackbird in the little slough. There had been scores of them in the larger sloughs in the district earlier in the summer. Four or five solitary sandpipers, presumably a family, were always busy in or near the water of the little slough. Other shore birds which I saw there were greater and lesser yellowlegs, a sora rail, two willets and a Wilson's phalarope which was always swimming when I saw it. Before the nearby big slough dried up I was fortunate enough to see some eared-grebes and best of all an avocet.

Besides water-fowl the prairie birds came to drink at the slough. There were usually dozens of horned larks sipping the water. Western meadow larks, chestnut-collared longspurs and kingbirds came to drink. Barn swallows swooped over its surface. Although the common swallow along the South Saskatchewan River seems to be the cliff swallow I only saw one at the slough.

Often there would be a commotion among the birds and a hawk would swoop down. It was usually a marsh hawk but once I watched a prairie falcon fly across while the birds crouched and screeched in evident terror. Whenever we went out, in the car or on foot, there were always hawks to be seen. Best of all they liked to perch on the telegraph poles. Often they were soaring against the wide blue Alberta sky. Many times I came across them on the ground. One day I disturbed a very dark Swainson's hawk in the long grass of a big slough. It rose from the ground only to settle down again about two hundred yards away. When I followed it, it repeated the manoeuvre again. It had some feathers missing in one wing which possibly hampered its flight. Another day we came across four huge ferruginous rough-leg hawks in the ditch beside the Trans-Canada Highway. We could not discover what had attracted them.

In the irrigated country of Southern Alberta the marbled godwits, grebes and ducks seem to nest in the ditches, while the lush vegetation bordering these ditches hides prairie chickens, ring-necked pheasants as well as thousands of red-wings.

We made a couple of trips to Lake Newell, a large artificial lake, which must be the home of thousands of water-fowl. There I had the thrill of seeing the huge white pelicans both in flight and on the water but not, unfortunately, at very close range. I saw about a hundred Canada geese, a few double-crested cormorants and a bird which I took to be a white-faced glossy ibis. However, as Taverner says only two have been seen in Canada and they, not exactly in this region, I suppose I was mistaken. It was disappointing that most of the ducks were much too far out on the lake to identify.

When I first went to the Prairie ring-billed gulls came to feed

at the garbage dump and presumably lived on the nearby big slough. Farther west Franklin's gulls flocked to the fields in hundreds. One day while driving we came on a flock of about ten long-billed curlews. Another interesting bird was the burrowing owl. It was very amusing to watch one bowing and nodding at the car but on foot it was hard to approach near enough to see one perform.

Road fences, as in other parts of the country, were productive of birds but it was very difficult to 'bird' on the road as the whole local Department of National Defence always wanted to give me a lift. Kingbirds, both eastern and western, Brewer's blackbirds, cowbirds, western meadow larks, Say's phoebes, falcons, and chipping sparrows and in some sections mourning doves, as well as the ever present horned larks, all liked the fences. In the heat of the day the shadow of each fence post usually sheltered one or more birds. One morning I was fortunate to be within six feet of a loggerhead shrike. He was hiding in some thin bushes which grew by the roadside. All the little sparrows had their mouths open gasping with the heat and drought but he looked quite comfortable.

Nighthawks flew in the sky and strangely enough we saw one perched on a telephone wire. At one time a magpie haunted the buildings but he was judged guilty of sabotage and met a traitor's death.

It is hard to express just how much my interest in nature added to the pleasure of my stay in a part of Canada which many people consider barren and even forbidding. Possibly it was the illusion of a complete amateur that there were more birds than in Southern Ontario. It was, however, the belief of the local people that their part of Alberta was particularly rich in bird and animal life, a belief which I share."

The evidence that there has been an unusual incursion of northern shrikes into the Toronto region this winter continues to mount. Since the last issue of the Newsletter, two members have written in to tell of their experiences with these winter visitors from the north. Mrs. Bertrand le Vay, in a letter of January 21, says,

"I was very interested in your remarks and those of Mr. Telfer in this month's Newsletter on the subject of shrikes, as I also have made some observations on the subject this winter. The first evidence of the presence of shrikes in this vicinity was when Mrs. Hugh Halliday pointed out to me a shrew dangling limply from the branch of a low-growing bush in the ravine between Heath Street E. and Moore Avenue on November 29th. A few moments later, we saw a robin-sized bird winging its way high over the tree tops to the east, but it was too far away for definite identification. However, the next day at lunch time from my kitchen window I observed a shrike perched high in a tree on Hudson Drive and was able to distinguish with binoculars the black mask, hooked beak, and grey and white plumage, as it sat preening its feathers in the bright sunshine.

"On December 6th, while watching chickadees in the ravine north of Moore Avenue, I heard an unfamiliar cry and turned to see a robin-sized bird skimming through the trees. A few moments later a brownish bird alighted in a tree to the east and in spite of the fading light I

could just discern the lightly barred breast of the immature northern shrike.

"On December 10th I saw two shrikes in gray plumage flying over the trees just east of Hudson Drive; one bird was apparently pursuing the other. It seems certain that there were at least three different shrikes in this small area at that time.

"On December 15th I found two barred owls in the trees of the ravine just north of the Heath St. bridge, one of which came to perch in a high branch just over my head. Not many minutes later I heard harsh raucous cries -- like the sound of a wooden rattle or the unmusical sounds that can be heard coming from the parrot cage at the zoo -- and a gray and black bird began diving and screaming at my owl, a northern shrike! After a minute or two it tired of the game and flew to a tree-top at the opposite side of the valley, but the barred owl was in the same spot forty minutes later when I brought a friend to admire it. I saw another shrike later the same day north of Moore Avenue. Others were observed on December 16th, 23rd and on January 15th and 17th, all in the same area.

"I have had other experiences with owls in this bit of valley, having seen a great horned owl, long-eared owls and a screech owl as well as the barred owls referred to above, all since November, as well as with various hawks and among the warblers and other song birds at migration time.

"On checking my list for 1949, I find that I have seen one hundred and thirteen species in the past year, between the Heath Street bridge and the cemetery bridge, a distance of not more than four city blocks. In view of the fact that the hitherto undisturbed bit of valley north of Moore Avenue is at this moment being surveyed for a 72 ft. highway to be put through this summer, it would seem that this haven is all but doomed and that we will never again enjoy a season as rich in bird life as those that are past."

Ed. Note: Not only are Mrs. Le Vay's observations of shrikes and owls of great interest, but her list of 113 species seen in one ravine, and a short stretch of that ravine, in one year, is most impressive. Once again it shows what observant eyes and ears can discover, and how rich in nature's bounty are those ravines of the Toronto region which are disappearing so rapidly under the urges of urbanization.

The second letter concerning shrikes comes from Mr. R. Knights, and is dated January 22. He writes,

"Coming back to shrikes, in the last issue of the Newsletter you mentioned that it is quite possible that these solitary winter visitors may have a set territory picked out for themselves. Several weeks ago while hiking along the east Don Valley I saw a shrike flying towards me during a snow storm, and made a mental note to revisit the same place later on when the weather was more convenient for observations. On my second trip in the same territory, quite near the place I saw the previous bird, I caught a glimpse of a grey bird flying across the

open valley into scattered trees on the hillside. Picking it up through my glasses I saw it chasing small birds in a tall evergreen tree. The hunted birds were chickadees. The shrike, for such it was, seemed to be having quite a time catching one, as they were too smart for him and would not leave the protection of the tree, but kept flying up and down, keeping near the trunk. After a while they all disappeared farther into the trees along the bank and were lost to view.

"Yesterday, Jan. 21, I made another trip to this spot, but after staying around for about two hours without any luck, I was just climbing the bank to the highway to return home when, glancing back, I saw a shrike perched on the tip of a sapling elm."

From Mr. Knights' letter it is clear that shrikes are ranging the upper Don Valley as well as the Moore Park ravine, which is a tributary valley of the lower Don. Indeed, the shrikes are all over our region. They will soon be moving northward, but there is perhaps a month left in which observers may hope to make their acquaintance.

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Miss Mary Marshall has suggested that members of this club might be interested in some extracts from a recent letter written to her by Mr. John Couper from Scotland. With this suggestion I wholly concur, for I know full well that a note from the hills of Loch Lomond will come as a particularly poignant reminder to many members, and will be of interest to all. Mr. Couper was in Canada on vacation about two and a half years ago, and besides attending the meetings of the club he was an enthusiastic attender of most of the outings. He writes,

"I can't recall a season in Scotland when the leaves remained so long on the trees-actually till the end of November, and even last Saturday (December 10th) we saw one or two oaks (lucomde oak) still fully clothed and that in spite of a keen frost.

"On Saturday last another Naturalist and I arranged a ramble for the afternoon and on reaching the highest point above the town, a lovely sight met our gaze - the "Lomond Hills" covered with snow. The distance, as the crow flies, would be about 9 miles and the intervening space was black (where ploughed) and green, and seemed to show up the snow clad peaks in the grand manner. The visibility was exceptionally good with keen frost. It was a wonderful walking-day. My friend took two pictures of the scene which may possibly appear in some magazine. He always carries a camera on his hikes and will often halt to take a picture of a tree, or trees, which occupy a good position. If the distance lends enchantment to the view, we certainly saw the hills under the best possible conditions.

"A robin followed us for quite a distance, but we had nothing in the food line to offer him as I had stupidly left my wee bag of eats behind which was a pity for at this time of year with the exercise of a little patience one can get them to feed from the hand.

"Some years ago I had about 14 robins that fed from my hand during my walks round Raith Lake. There was one outstanding among that lot

that gave great fun with his little mannerisms and habits. Another one landed on my hand one day rather awkwardly and I noticed he had a broken leg. In a short time it seemed to have mended, but the little claws were turned in although this did not seem to inconvenience him at all.

"On a recent Sunday while walking in Raith I heard a rustling of leaves and looked to the side where I saw a rabbit on the run and a weasel, not far behind in hot pursuit. They both disappeared among the trees then the rabbit reappeared with the "killer" a little way behind. Bunny crossed the road and I moved and halted the weasel. He ran down the road a bit and I followed. We kept this up for quite a time but eventually I lost sight of him. In the meantime Bunny took full advantage of the break."

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One of the most appreciated of my Christmas presents is the snowy owl which now eyes me from the top of my bookcase with all the intense defiance of his brethren whom I sometimes see when afield. The artist who created him worked with such understanding and with such a sure touch that the spirit of reality breathes through every inch of his being. The artist is Miss Gloria Jeffries, youngest member of the Sculptors' Society of Canada, and member of the Royal Ontario Museum staff, one of whose tasks is to make faithful reproductions of the delicate Chinese figurines which form so valuable a part of the Museum's collections. Miss Jeffries, who works with outstanding skill in wood and clay, has gone as far afield as Mexico to study the primitive art of the natives there, and to develop her own talent. She teaches at Northern Vocational School at nights, as well as working for the Museum. Miss Jeffries is now creating a representative collection of Canadian mammals, game and other birds. Examples of her work are on display and for sale in the lobby of the Museum. Members of this club will find them fascinating for their lively artistry and penetrative portrayal of the creatures represented.

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Our members will also be interested to know that Mr. John Crosby, who has several times had his work displayed at the evening meetings, will be having a showing of some of his most recent bird paintings at Jack McKay's Picture Framing Store, 2721 Yonge Street. This show will begin towards the middle of February and continue for three or four weeks.

R. M. Saunders, Editor.