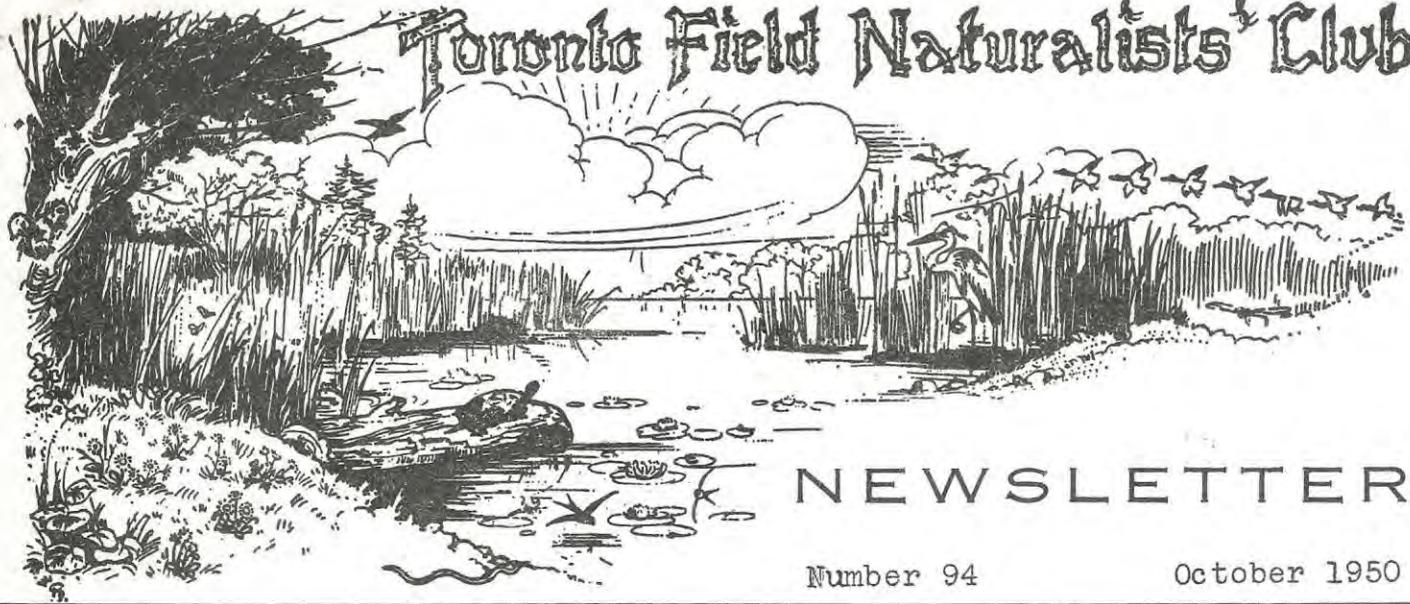


Toronto Field Naturalists' Club.



NEWSLETTER

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Last summer in the latter part of June, I had the pleasure of spending ten days at Laurel Hill Farm near Tunkhannock, Pennsylvania. This visit gave me a very good chance of sampling the bird life in that neighborhood. As many members of the club have visited that region or may intend to do so it would seem to be worthwhile to give you some of my impressions and observations.

The farm, a large one, stands on the slope of Miller Mountain and along Bowman's Creek about a mile from where the creek flows into the Susquehanna River. More than a hundred years ago the fine old rambling house that watches beside the road was a stagecoach inn. Coaches stayed here to let passengers spend an easy night before venturing upon the exhausting pull over the mountains to Wilkes-Barre, or to rest after having made it. Nowadays the ancient house is used only in the summer or on vacations. Perhaps on these occasions, when songs ring once more through the huge rooms, and flames leap high in the vast fireplaces, the hoary, hand-hewn timbers that form the skeleton of the house muse nostalgically upon the days when travellers crossed the threshold every day, and the rafters vibrated to the shouts of good cheer and merriment, or listened in hushed horror to tales of tragedy told below. The old stage road over the mountain is now gone. With diligence one may trace its course. Even that will soon become impossible so quickly does Nature obliterate the abandoned works of man. The new auto road, cut along easier grades, has no need of a stopping-place here. The cars sweep by, their occupants giving not even a passing thought to the great old house that dreams alone.

The whole region hereabouts is picturesquely mountainous, unexpectedly wild and wooded. In the valley, especially along the Susquehanna, and on the slopes a good deal of farm land exists. Many farms have been abandoned, as has most of Laurel Hill Farm, and there the forest is quietly reassuming possession. Habitat conditions consequently range from well-cultivated fields through territory that has gone back to second growth to long stretches of continuous forest, the last being mostly on the higher slopes of the mountains and in the narrower vales. Along the streams there are wet woods and swamps. Though ponds, lakes, and marshes are not common near Laurel Hill Farm the area is sufficiently varied so that a considerable variety of breeding birds can be expected.

Before going down to the farm I had vaguely hoped that there would be a goodly number of Southern birds near at hand. When on the day of our arrival I was greeted with the tooting of yellow-breasted chats and the buzzing of golden-winged warblers close to the house I was convinced that my nebulous anticipations were going to be realized. It did not take me long, however, to discover that the chats and the golden-winged warblers were almost the only birds of a southern complexion to be seen. The unusually large number of wood thrushes, whose carols were fluted from every slope, and a family of Louisiana waterthrushes that greeted us whenever we went swimming in Bowman's Creek also gave a southern flavor to the region. But the prothonotaries I sought so eagerly in the swampy woods, the hooded warblers, the tufted titmice, and the others that had flitted amongst my hopes simply were not to be found. Those of you who know the Lake Erie region will realize that in the upper part of Susquehanna valley I was no further south, ornithologically speaking, in some ways not even as far, than I would have been at Rondeau or Point Pelee. It would seem that I had not counted upon the mountains sufficiently as a bar to the presence of southern birds in that area.

On the other hand the mountainous character of the country did not guarantee a distribution of northern birds. What existed in fact was a curious mixture of northern and southern species with lacks and presences that I find it hard to explain. Why, for instance, should chats be there, and plentifully, whilst gnatcatchers, Carolina wrens, and orchard orioles were not? Why in the farm fields did I find not a single vesper or savannah sparrow, and only two bobolinks? On Miller Mountain, near the top which is well over 2000 feet high, we found blackthroated blue warblers but none of their associates as we know them in the Muskoka region, birds such as winter wrens, hermit and olive-backed thrushes, Blackburnian and myrtle warblers. Neither nighthawk nor whippoorwill was to be seen or heard yet all the swallows were present.

Still, if some birds were lacking that it appeared reasonable to expect, the region was well-endowed with avian inhabitants. During the ten days of our stay my nephew, David West, and I compiled a list of 83 species. All of these were resident birds. Some of them were to be found in large numbers such as the red-eyed vireo, wood pewee, towhee, catbird, chestnut-sided warbler, and chimney swift. Almost every day we were visited by a pair of bald eagles as they sailed across the valley from one mountain to another. I was told that there has been a pair of eagles nesting on Miller Mountain for many years. I was happy to find that they are well protected by the local people. Occasionally we saw a turkey vulture, though here again was a southern bird I had expected to be common and found it not to be so.

Most remarkable of the birds David and I discovered were three peregrine falcons. We were so fortunate, indeed, as to witness a remarkable encounter between one of these fierce falcons and a red-tailed hawk. We were standing on top of a lofty mountain ridge, admiring the silver ribbon of the Susquehanna winding through the green valley far below, when suddenly the Buteo came gliding out of the blue. Though a thousand feet above the stream the great hawk was almost an equal distance below where we were standing. We could see the sun glinting brightly on its copper-red tail. It ceased to glide, stopping to circle and soar in the manner of its kind, riding some

mounting current of air to new heights from whence it could glide once more. Had the Buteo sped upon its way it might have passed unchallenged. Pausing it was abruptly assailed. From some unseen perch on the hidden cliffs below us a magnificent peregrine falcon launched forth, attacking the redtail with savage earnestness. Again and again the falcon rose high in the air above the intruder, plunging with whistling ferocity upon Buteo's back, talons lowered and striking with full force. The redtail veered and dodged but made no real effort to engage in combat, being concerned evidently merely to ward off its attacker's blows. It had clearly, probably unwittingly, entered onto the falcon's territory. Like a dog beyond its own gate the Buteo turned tail and made off. The one-sided encounter went on for the space of more than a mile when the intruder passed beyond the falcon's territorial range. Satisfied, the peregrine, having successfully defended his home, returned and sped down to a spot where perpendicular cliffs formed a bastion of the valley. There it vanished but a moment later its mate appeared. She flew upstream, rising higher and higher, so that she could see the whole countryside for miles around. Presumably she had left her victorious defender in charge of the family on the cliff whilst she set out to look over the scene herself, making sure that the obnoxious redtail was really out of the way. It came to me as a surprise that these falcons, lovers of wild, remote crags, should be able to survive in this region. I had failed to appreciate the wild character of these mountains, so congenial to such creatures. These falcons were dwelling near Mehoopany. Later I saw another peregrine over Miller Mountain, indicating that more than one family of the large falcons was probably located in the region.

David and I watched far and wide for the famous wild turkeys which we were told have so far prospered under careful protection that an open season on them was being contemplated for this autumn. There is no doubt that they are there, and are relatively plentiful. The reports were too numerous, too specific, and too authoritative to be denied. Nonetheless we did not have the good fortune to find any of the turkeys ourselves, though I feel reasonably sure that twice I may have frightened turkeys from their hiding places in impenetrable thickets of thorn. Large birds floundered away, making flight noises that denoted a lumbering departure like that of some huge, awkward grouse. If they were turkeys--I never did see or catch up with these birds because of the nature of the thickets--their getaways confirmed completely this bird's repute for cunning and wile.

There is no doubt that the State of Pennsylvania's system of protection for wild life has been remarkably successful, not only with the turkeys but with all sorts of creatures. Wherever we went we found that deer were extremely common. The wet banks of Bowman's Creek, and the wet spots in the swamps were dotted with their tracks. My daughter Sally met a doe on the road a few yards from the house, and I put up a fawn near the creek. Matted spots in the grass where deer had slept were all through the old orchard and elsewhere. Nor were deer tracks the only ones recorded along the edge of the creek. We saw numbers of raccoon and opossum trails. At one place we came on large, padded prints ending in long, curving claw marks that could hardly be anything but the signature of a wild cat. Enquiries amongst the local people brought quick assurance that there were, in fact, a few bobcats around.

We had been warned to be on the lookout for both copperheads and rattlesnakes. Tales of both were related to us at the slightest hint of interest. We were informed that the smell of "old cucumber" in the grass meant that a copperhead was near. A demonstration of a rattlesnake's "rattle"--really a heavy buzzing--was given to us with the aid of a rattler's tail that had been captured near the farmhouse some years ago. Local tradition had it that the copperheads all stay on one side of Bowman's Creek, and the rattlers on the other. No adequate reason was advanced for this however, so we let it pass as a local tall tale. All this talk made David and me very nervous. We did not cease to plough through tall grass and thick tangles but we did so with much trepidation. We rolled stones off the tops of stone walls before ascending or descending so as to scare away snakes because, according to our informants, such walls are especially snaky places. But days passed and we found no poisonous snakes. There were garter snakes aplenty, fox snakes, and one whopper of a black snake. This last was run over by a hay binder just as it was trying to cross the road in front of the house. When held up and measured it was 6 feet, 6 inches long, and was as thick through as a large man's wrist. I must say this fellow certainly would have given us a start had we met it underfoot in the deep grass. But we did not. Finally David became so anxious to see either a copperhead or a rattler that the day we climbed Mt. Miller we started poking in crevassed ledges and stone slides, all the favorite haunts of these snakes, in an endeavor to rouse one of these creatures. 'Twas all in vain. We had to admit complete failure. All we had were rumors and stories. That the snakes exist in the neighborhood I do not doubt but they are slyer and harder to find than we had been led to believe. Still it would not pay to be incautious; of that I am sure.

A magnificent beaver dam provided us with another noteworthy sight. This is on a small stream that empties into Lake Carey about four miles from Tunkhannock. The dam is a large one, and is being rapidly increased. It is four to nine feet along the central part, and extends from 200 to 250 feet across the stream valley. A smaller, and possibly older dam, exists a little way downstream from the main dam. This smaller dam impounds a small pond that doubtless has the effect of relieving pressure on the larger dam by slowing the flow of water at the point of greatest pressure. Scores of trees, freshly cut, some with leaves yet unwilted on them, littered the banks of the stream for some hundred feet below the dams. Others had been felled well up the slopes of the valley and were being dragged by stages towards the pond. Several canals had been engineered through swampy parts to facilitate such operations. The labor and engineering ingenuity involved in the cutting and moving of these trees to the pond were extraordinary, at least to human eyes. Most of the trees cut were aspens. Only one beaver house could be seen. It was in the middle of the large pond, built up amongst a stand of dead trees that had been killed by the flooding behind the dam. We saw none of the beaver for it was midday when we were there. What impressed us most were the signs placed on trees all along the dam informing us that this area was under the protection of a well-known detective agency in Philadelphia. A statement of the penalties for interfering with the beaver dam followed. It would seem that the excellent state laws and game warden service were not thought adequate to protect so alluring a lot as a colony of beavers from marauders. I would think myself that

the surest protection those beaver have is an enlightened and favorable public opinion in the neighborhood. We were told of this colony by local people for miles around; and they always mentioned it with marked pride as having been there for several years. They want to see it prosper and grow. Where people have such a view as that laws and protective agencies are superfluous. We were only too glad to cooperate, and to admire a public opinion which makes it possible to have a flourishing beaver colony a short distance from a main highway in twentieth-century Pennsylvania, one of the most populous states in the Union. It shows what is possible when good laws, a proper protective system, and most of all an educated public opinion are combined.

One final natural glory of this state is the mountain laurel. We were there at the height of its blooming, and whole mountain sides were laden with tender pink and white blossoms. The laurel grows often into great shrubs, some being of tremendous girth, rising ten to twenty feet high, the whole a mass of blooms. In places these shrubs form dense thickets so that to push through them is like pressing across a delicately-tinted field of snow. Laurel Hill Farm was itself named for the masses of laurel that riot over its slopes. Sometimes the laurel loses out in the battle for survival. Thus it was that for two days several of us worked at hewing down thornapple trees, ^{haw-thorn} sumachs and scrub birches from one slope so that one wide sweep of laurel might not have its glory hidden from the house and the road. When we were through we all had a picnic in the midst of the laurel flowers. The sun went down in a swirl of flame and rose behind the mountains across the Susquehanna as we sat amidst the laurel, setting all the blossoms softly glowing. It was as if the sun were setting a mark of approval upon the labor that had for a time freed such lovely plants from the competition of those of coarser stock. No one who visits these mountains in June will wonder why the mountain laurel has been chosen as the state flower of Pennsylvania.

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Our president, Mr. A.A. Outram, wrote on September 20th to make the following report to the club members regarding the question of dumping in the Don Valley. He states, "The contractor, for the T.T.C. Subway started dumping excavated material into the Don valley, from the end of Hallowell Avenue, in East York Township.

"The Don Valley Conservation Association and the Don Valley Authority have been working strenuously on the matter, aided by the council of E. York Township. Dumping has been stopped on Hallowell, for the time being at least, and every effort is being made to have protection for this and other beauty spots in the Valley.

"On September 5th, 1950, your president, vice-president and Mr. A. Walkinshaw attended a meeting in the Board of Trade rooms at the King Edward. We represented the T.F.N. and met with representatives of many other societies, such as, Don Valley School of Art,

Don valley Conservation Association, Don Valley Conservation Authority, Youth Hostels Association, East York Kiwanis, North Rosedale Rate Payers Association and South Rosedale Rate Payers Association.

"This meeting was for the discussion of the formation of a Coordinating Council to act collectively in taking steps to protect the Don Valley. We are not sure yet as to whether such a Council will be formed.

"The writer, with other interested parties attended the Board of Control of the City of Toronto today, appealing to them for support.

"Regardless of the final outcome, the members may be assured that everything possible is being done by the Executive to protect the Don Valley."

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Mrs. L.E.Jaquith has contributed this interesting review of Louis Bromfield's significant new book, OUT OF THE EARTH. (Musson Book Co. Ltd., pp.305, 40 illustrations. ~~\$4.50~~).

To those interested in health, the food we eat and the soil that produces that food, "Out of The Earth" by Louis Bromfield will be fascinating reading. Chapter headings such as "The New World in Agriculture" "Farming from Three to Twenty Feet Down" "Water and the Farm" "Poor Land, Makes Poor Hunting" "The World Can Feed Itself If It Wants To" entice one to read on and on gaining a glimpse of old and new ways of working with nature to improve soil, plants, animals and in turn the human beings who depend upon these for their daily food.

The role of trace elements (manganese, magnesium, boron, iodine, fluorine, bromine, copper, sulphur, cobalt, molybdenum and many others) in producing healthy plants and animals is particularly startling.

Louis Bromfield quotes William Albrecht, Professor of soils at Missouri University College of Agriculture, who "has urged for years that the measure of yield on an acre of land should not be that of bulk production but of the pounds of meat or milk produced by the feed grown on that acre."

"There are areas in Florida and along the Gulf Coast where one can see cattle walking about in rich looking grass up to their knees with their ribs and hip bones sticking out. These wretched animals are a notable example of the results of unbalance in soils and the deceptiveness of lush growth which appears to be nutritive, but is not because of deficiencies of almost everything but nitrogene, carbon and water ... The cattle simply cannot eat, contain and digest enough of the abundant but deficient vegetation to supply their nutritional needs and keep them in good flesh."

"Soil Conservation Chief, Hugh H. Bennett, is responsible for the saying that "Poor Land makes poor people." He might as well have added that "Poor land makes poor hunting and fishing", for one will not find good fishing in eroded country where the streams are filled with silt." ... All kinds of game from the humble cottontail to the noble deer abhor worn-out and abandoned land where the soil has been depleted or the level of agriculture has become so low that the mineral fertility is no longer available to the vegetation and finally to the people living in that area.

This is an important book for all city dwellers, for those who live in the country and for all naturalists who love the countryside and the more abundant life that could be found there. It is a stimulus to further observation and thought.

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R. M. SAUNDERS

Editor