

# Toronto Field Naturalists' Club

## JANUARY MEETINGS

Monday, January 8, 1951 at 8.15 p.m.

(Please note change of date)

at the

ROYAL ONTARIO MUSEUM

The Toronto Branch of the Colour Photographic Association of Canada will show nature slides in colour, with commentary by Mr. Ralph Presgrave, Chairman of the Nature Section. This will be a meeting of unusual interest, as many of the slides to be shown have been exhibited in salons all over America. It is also of interest to note that many of our own members are also members of the Colour Photographic Association.

## ROTUNDA DISPLAY

Sketches by Eric Thorne

President, Toronto Intermediate Naturalists.

## JANUARY HIKE

Saturday, January 13th - Sherwood Park and Strathgowan Wood.

2 p.m. Meet at Sherwood Avenue entrance of Sherwood Park.

Leader - Prof. T.F. McIlwraith

Secretary - Mrs. J.B. Stewart - 21 Millwood Rd., Toronto.

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Number 96

December, 1950

A film of ice, frigid remnant of high-reaching waves, had solidified the sand on Sunnyside Beach into a slippery uncertain pavement, across which sporadic snowflakes whirled and twisted. The tossing lake sent breakers crashing over the breakwalls, upsetting the few hardy gulls that chose to brave the onslaught. A cold grey sky hung over all. This was the first day of December, for birdwatchers the commencement of winter.

Toward the beginning of the winter season it is sometimes possible to find lingering birds from the ranks of migrant flocks, and thus to get new winter records. It was not this hope, however, which had brought Henry and Margaret Marsh and myself to the shore of the lake this wintry day. No lingerer from the summer was the goal of our search, but rather, storm-borne visitors from the Maritime regions. Reports of the arrival of a considerable influx of Brunnich's or thick-billed murre in Lake Ontario, evidently brought in by the great storm that swept inland from the Atlantic coast, had reached our ears two days before. George North and Bill Gunn had seen 140 of the murre in a trip from Toronto to Hamilton on Tuesday, November 28. Jim Baillie and others had found eight along the lakefront from Port Credit to Van Wagner's Beach the next day. Our hopes were high.

At Sunnyside, ducks and gulls were plentiful behind the breakwaters, but amongst them were no smartly-dressed black and white murre. Incidentally, the chic appearance of the members of the Alcid family to which the murre belongs often impresses observers. I noted that in newspaper reports of the effects of the same storm in New England mention was made of birds being blown inland in Maine. When seen on land, they had the look of "little men in dress suits". These were dovebies, members of the same family as the murre, which, if they are forced to proceed on foot, resemble small penguins. Unlike penguins, they are awkward and ill at ease on land. The sea is their chosen element.

We saw no murrees at Mimico Creek nor at the St. Lawrence Starch plant outlet in Port Credit, a favourite gathering place for winter waterfowl. When we reached the harbour of Port Credit our anticipation intensified, for Jim had seen murrees close to shore here. But again, though we saw hundreds of gulls on the offshore breakwater, and a large raft of old squaws and golden-eyes in the lake, an inquisitive red-breasted merganser in the harbour mouth and another flock of gulls on the harbour ice, we encountered no murrees. Before quitting this area for farther points, we decided to have a closer look at the gulls on the ice, thinking to find a "white" gull among them. But as they went up, no Iceland or glaucous showed up. We were about to turn back to the car when I raked the upstream section with my binoculars in one final effort. Just as the arc of observation was being completed, my line of watching passing under the piles that hold up the landing pier of the Port Credit Yacht Club, I caught sight of a black and white bird on the ice near one of the piles. Instantly I fixed on this bird. It was a murre, no doubt, only it was dead, frozen into the ice.

Shouting to the others, who had moved off a little, I hurried away to the Yacht Club grounds. Finding a sign on the gate warning against trespassing, I assumed the gate to be locked, so made my way around the fence to the icy shore, and thence over the ice to the landing pier. Soon the three of us were standing gazing down at a beautiful specimen of a dead Brunnich's murre. It was frozen into the ice for certain, but not under the pier, as I had thought when viewing it from a distance, rather, several feet away from the pier. The pile beside which it was lying was one of a line that stands a little north of the Yacht Club stage, serving no obvious purpose, being perhaps the remains of an older pier. This was awkward, for, having seen the excellent condition of the murre, I was determined if possible to have the specimen for the Museum. Now the question was, How do we get it?

This far from shore the ice was seamed with sinister cracks, and water was welling up beside the piles. I abandoned any idea of walking across to the bird. Next we tried sundry poles, a long double-bladed paddle, a heavy beam, a boat gaff. None of them was long enough, for the bird was a good twenty feet from the nearest part of the pier. Moreover, it was frozen onto the ice and could not be dislodged with a pole without ruining it. Out in midstream there was still open water. If we could get hold of a boat it might be possible to approach from this quarter, break through the weak outer reaches of the ice, and thus secure the murre. But where to get a boat?

There was none to be seen around the Yacht Club. Indeed, why should there be? The boating season was over, and as a cursory glance showed, all the boats were either taken into shelter or placed on supports outside for the winter. No help here. We contemplated a rowboat frozen into the edge of the marsh near the highway, but decided it could not be freed and probably would not hold water anyway. Our thoughts turned to the fishermen who use this harbour all winter, and whose fishing scow was moored to the shore near their sheds. Retracing our steps, this time through the Yacht Club gate which was unlocked after all, we set

out in search of the fishermen. Only one man was near the sheds, and he proved to have nothing to do with fishing. He was interested in our quest, but allowed that the fishermen would never take their scow up where we wanted, because the water was too shallow. He said he knew nothing of a rowboat and walked off. Most frustrating, this.

Still there was another possibility. Across the harbour we could see the yard of the boatworks where many dories and rowboats were visible; drawn up for the winter, it is true, but possibly one might be available. We decided to go over. Driving around, we parked beside the yards and started our search anew. Henry and I entered the yard while Margaret set off towards some men who were doing carpentry work on a nearby house. Henry and I found none at all; exasperating, for we could wander among the boats, go onto a pier where another fishing boat was moored, ready to leave, yet discover no sign of a person. Margaret did better. She, at any rate, was able to talk to the workmen. They were very polite, quite sympathetic, but told her no boats were to be had on this side. We must go back to the fish sheds and find the fishermen there. They had the only dory now afloat. So back we went.

As far as we could tell there was still none around. We wandered somewhat disconsolately among the sheds, wondering what to do. Then we heard someone making a noise in one of the sheds. We approached. This shed had no windows and no doors, or so it seemed at first glance. How the deuce did one get in? A more careful survey showed a locked door and a shuttered window partly raised. Stooping down under the shutter I peered into the dark interior and saw a large, burly man at work. I yelled at him, for he was making a good deal of noise. He looked up, and I explained what we wanted. His only answer was to bellow that he knew nothing about the fishermen or their boats. This unfriendly response dampened still further our flagging hopes.

I wandered away to the post office, thinking to call up the Museum and tell Jim of the specimen in the harbour, but found I had no change for phoning, so turned back. Meanwhile, a boy on a bicycle had ridden up, and Margaret was talking to him. He, it seemed, had heard of murre, was willing to help us get the bird, and suggested getting a boat from a boathouse up the river above the highway. This sounded feasible for a moment, but one look upstream with the binoculars showed solid ice beyond the bridge. We really were at the end of our ideas, wholly non-plussed, when down the road came two men, the missing fishermen.

Going up to them, once again I told our story and asked their help. In contrast to the surly fellow in the shed they were very friendly and quite ready to do all they could. The younger man said, "Sure, we can go over in the scow". This surprised me a little but we all piled into the scow without demur. The strong smell of fish and motor oil that hung about the interior was an ineradicable sign of the use to which this boat was ordinarily put. The motor was started. We backed out, then headed up towards the Yacht Club pier. Rounding this, the scow was headed into the ice. The crunching that followed reminded me of trips in

the small tugs that ply between Toronto and the Filtration Plant on the Island in winter. A few plunges into the ice, and then came an ominous grinding, a cessation of movement, and clouds of muck in the water, which told us we were aground. The skipper, to my relief, showed no dismay. Backing off, he nosed the scow in between the pier and the line of piles and tried again, unhappily with the same result. With a shrug he backed out somehow and returned to his mooring. He had done his best, and we were grateful, but it left us just where we were.

The other fisherman, however, owned a little flat-bottomed punt, used, he told us, for muskrat hunting. We had seen this drawn up on a dock, and had considered carrying it over to the ice, pushing it across the ice and standing in it while getting the murre. This scheme, when broached to the fisherman, did not appeal. He proposed rather to take the punt to open water, paddle up and break through the ice from the outer edge. We agreed. The punt had quite a bit of ice inside it, but when placed in the water it floated. Taking a paddle from the shed, our friend got in and set off. When he reached the edge of the ice he began to beat it with the paddle. Little by little he cracked off pieces and edged nearer and nearer to the bird. Only a few yards to go, then he broke the paddle. The ice was thicker than I had supposed. The man was game and would not give up. Henry got hold of the six-by-four beam we had been using as a pole, and slid it across the ice from the pier. With this the fisherman was able to pole his punt onto the ice. By teetering up and down on the edge with the boat, he smashed a channel and ultimately reached the murre. Then, using the beam as a hammer he broke the bird free. With every blow I held my breath for fear he would miss his aim, or the beam would slip, and he would wreck the specimen at the last moment. Fortunately this did not happen. At last he was able to lean over the side of the punt and pick up our murre, unharmed. Using the beam as a push-pole, he manoeuvred his way back to the fish sheds where we helped him ashore and took possession of the prize we had almost despaired of getting.

Henry and I gave our friend, who had shown a remarkably good temper throughout, what we hoped was adequate recompense for his labour and his broken oar. He seemed satisfied, and exhibited much interest in the bird.

For the next two hours, except for lunch, we searched the lake waters as far as Bronte Harbour for sight of live murre. None did we see. This seemed a little strange, as so many had been seen only a few days past. Did the dead bird at Port Credit give a clue as to what had happened? The next day, when I took the specimen in to the Museum, I discussed this question with members of the staff. We came to the conclusion that it is quite probable that the murre all perish in our waters for lack of suitable food. Exhausted by the long flight under storm conditions, this fate would be hastened. It is possible that few if any of these birds are still alive. This unhappy conclusion seems to be supported by the fact that the specimen I brought in was the sixth that had found its way to the Museum as a result of their flight. On Sunday, December 3rd, Stuart Thompson found another dead murre near Exhibition Park. Since then the number of specimens turned

into the Museum has risen to 34, including 11 from Niagara Falls. All these birds are young of this year, and all have been found with empty stomachs. On December 10, I had the pleasure of seeing a live murre near Oshawa. It was clearly in a weakened condition. At the same time our party saw two dead murrens picked up on Oshawa Beach, bringing the known dead to 37.

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One of our very active younger observers in Toronto is Fred Helleiner. Fred has kindly consented to give an account of his most interesting observations this fall to the readers of the Newsletter, and I take great pleasure in presenting it here. He writes:

"Every year the first hawk flight of the season is to me the surest indication that summer has come to an end. The fronts of cooler air which usually bring on these hawk flights add to the impression of autumn which comes over the land early in September. This year, although a few migrating hawks had been seen by others on September 2, the first flight observed by me came the following day. A strong northwesterly wind, blowing for the second successive day, prompted me to take up a position on the verandah of the house, from which I had an unobstructed view of a reasonably large expanse of sky. Before ten minutes had passed, three accipiters had crossed my field of vision. I summoned my brother, Chris, and together we watched several more hawks pass to the west. Presently the editor of "Newsletter", Dr. R. M. Saunders, came along. We managed to spot a few more while he remained with us. He had not been gone five minutes when a fine specimen of an adult bald eagle favoured us with its appearance. It, too, was speeding westwards. As we watched it go behind a house out of sight, the telephone rang. It was Dr. Saunders, calling from his home on the next street, asking whether we had seen it!

"The afternoon of the 3rd of September was spent at Glendon Hall, the E. R. Wood estate on Bayview Avenue. The woods and valleys of these grounds have been made a veritable sanctuary for birds by the head gardener, naturalist J. R. Mackintosh, who, together with Mrs. Mackintosh, runs a very successful feeding station there in winter. After giving the property a 'quick once-over' and finding nothing beyond a great blue heron standing in the Don River, I came across Ian Halliday and George Francis. They were keeping a systematic count of migrating hawks, recording each half-hour's observations separately. By this they hoped to obtain an accurate picture of the time of day at which migration was most pronounced. Soon, however, the hawks stopped coming, and we set off to make a less hurried tour of the grounds than I had made earlier. The prize bird came onto our list, as do so many birds, as a result of its vocal efforts. The notes, those of a red crossbill, were quite familiar to me, for I had observed the species in considerable numbers daily for three or more weeks previously, in Haliburton County and the surrounding area.

"September 16 was another perfect hawk day. A cold front had moved in the night before, and, although the skies had cleared, a stiff wind was still bringing cool air out of the north-north-west. While pedalling up University Avenue and Queen's Park during the morning, I stopped at remarkably frequent intervals to watch

single hawks or flocks of them go over heading west. I became aware that others had noticed the birds too and were watching the great flocks of broadwings wheeling about the taller buildings. Twice my attention was drawn to such flocks by the sight of other people gazing up at the sky.

"After lunch I contacted George Gibson on the telephone and made arrangements to meet him at the St. Clair-Spadina reservoir, one of our favourite lookouts during a hawk flight. Arriving some twenty minutes later, I found five bird-watchers there already. They had amassed an astounding total of hawks. Among the birds which passed subsequent to my arrival was an adult bald eagle.

"In conversation I mentioned the shorebirds I had seen the previous day along Eglinton Avenue East, near Dawes Rd. Among them had been seven golden plover which had been found there in smaller numbers on September 3, by other observers. This news interested them greatly, and we decided to drive out there immediately. We almost forgot that George Gibson would be expecting me here when he arrived. We waited for him, and he came with us. The first bird I saw when I stepped out of the car was a golden plover. When all had seen it, their previous skepticism disappeared. Although we could find only five of the birds on this trip, the lack was more than compensated for by the presence of two white-rumped sandpipers and a Stilt Sandpiper. The latter was particularly welcome as it represented my first record for the species in two years. We were able to approach quite close to the bird as it fed alone in a muddy pool of water near the road. Fortunately it remained until the next day, when many members of the Toronto Ornithological Club on the way to their fall field day at Cherrywood were able to see it and verify its identity. This field, however, was doomed. A mammoth plant of General Motors Frigidaire is now replacing the mud flats and ponds which harboured so many shorebirds and gulls for almost two months this fall.

"Since meteorological conditions were suitable for a hawk migration on the morning of October 5, I kept one eye on the sky during a volley-ball game at school. I was not too surprised, then, to see five hawks go over, which I had to record merely as three accipiters and two buteos. However, when three much larger hawks came over, which could not be placed in either of these categories, my zeal overcame my self-control. I called for a substitution and ran for my binoculars. When I returned half a minute later, they were still close enough for me to see clearly the upturned wings, small head and two-toned wing pattern of the turkey vulture. I was reminded that twice I had seen this species from the school (in West Toronto) which I formerly attended, though I had never before seen as many as three together in the Toronto region.

"Thanksgiving weekend was spent by Frank Mueller and myself in Haliburton County, at Camp Kandalore for boys. The camp is situated near Hall's Lake on Highway #35, twenty miles north of Minden and thirteen miles south of Dorset.

"Neither of us had ever seen this part of the country during the 'leaf season'. Hence it was with much anticipation that we set out on Saturday morning. Nor were we disappointed as we drove north

from Lindsay. Once we had passed Coboconk, the vivid panorama of colour enthralled us beyond our wildest expectations. The crimson and gold hardwoods and the deep green hemlocks and pines created a technicolour scene which has no equal within the Toronto region. Its beauty defies description.

"North of Minden the scenery began to take on a different appearance. The paint on the landscape had here been washed away by the frigid blasts of the previous weeks. Only a few scattered trees still retained their colourful coats of leaves. This would have passed for November.

"Surely this could not be the camp road, which only a month and a half previously had harboured indigo buntings and vireos, singing from the leafy crowns of the sugar maples and red oaks! Now the titter of juncoes and the chinks of whitethroats greeted us. But all was not changed. Out on the lake a pair of loons called, bringing back the spirit of the summer evenings we enjoyed here.

"We spent the remaining daylight hours looking over the camp, ambling down the portage, retracing our steps of last summer on the rocky shores of Lake Kushog. The sweet aroma of wood smoke mingled with the crisp autumn air around the cottage on Windy Pine Point, to which our ears were slowly becoming accustomed. We flushed a grouse and wondered whether it would survive the barrage of guns which would be levelled at its tribe during the weekend. We watched a great blue heron take off into the sunset.

"Having heard reports of several jaegers, including at least one pomarine, at Hamilton, Mr. Alf Mitchener and I set out for that area on the morning of October 29. Stopping only twice en route we got to Burlington in good time despite the fog. We made a quick tour of the Burlington cutoff, seeing very little between the town and Van Wagner's beach. Arriving at the High Level bridge, we met Ronald Scovell, who had pedalled from Toronto this morning, and Frank Mueller. While we were talking to them, George North, George Holland and Robert Elstone appeared. By this time the fog had lifted. The three last named pointed out a jaeger sitting on the water far off, which they had observed flying close at hand and had identified as an adult parasitic. Three of us decided to drive around to where it was and make it fly, but by the time we got there it was gone. Later we heard that the others had seen it fly off into the bay. While there we saw a number of bluebirds migrating west overhead, and several ducks, including a white-winged scoter. A late common tern was a pleasant surprise. It would likely leave as soon as the warm spell was broken.

"At the Dundas Marsh, George North spotted an adult bald eagle sitting atop a dead pine across the marsh. It had been in this area for some time, according to Mr. North. A red-shouldered hawk sailed overhead, showing us the banded tail. The usual aggregation of ducks, coots and great blues was to be found, our estimate of the last two species being 300 and 50 respectively. Farther west, near Dundas, we saw a female Shoveller. The whirring of the wings of this species as it leaves the water is much louder than that of any other duck that I know.

"We had intended to stop at various points on the return trip, but this last stop took too much of our time, and we had to hurry back to Toronto, perfectly satisfied with the results of a splendid day.

"Since Bristol Foster and I had seen the Arctic three-toed woodpecker (found by Mr. Bud Knapp) in Strathgowan Wood on the previous Friday, Frank Keim and John Dignam were particularly anxious to see it on November 5, despite that day's driving snow. We entered the wood from the northwest path, but the bird was not on its favourite tree. While we were standing there, waiting vainly for the bird to appear, we became aware of a soft, rather low-pitched, finch-like series of five or six notes. I suggested that it might be a purple finch, but no sign of it could be seen in the trees around us. Then I completely reversed my opinion and called it a Carolina wren, though I had never heard anything like these notes from that species. Investigation in the thick underbrush proved, to my surprise as much as to the others', that I was right. We watched it for some time as it cavorted about in the bushes. Almost every time I see a bird of this species I hear a note from it that I never heard before. This individual certainly lived up to that reputation. In addition to the note already described, two other new calls were heard from this bird:

- (a) a very hard, loud chip - 'tsick'
- (b) a note resembling house wren's scolding, but slightly louder.

"Going on to Ashbridge's Bay we met Aarne Lamsa there. He had seen many birds migrating along the shore. While we were there, many flocks of blackbirds and pipits went past. Shortly after Dr. Murray Speirs appeared, two flocks of Canada geese flew over (48 and 60). Before the end of the day local observers had seen over twelve flocks of geese! A long-eared owl and a roughlegged hawk were other additions to our list during the course of the day.

"While looking for a shorteared owl seen by Ian Halladay at Scarborough, we came upon a mixed flock of starlings, redwings, and rusty blackbirds. Over five hundred of the last mentioned were included.

"Back at Strathgowan again late in the afternoon, we found several naturalists in quest of the woodpecker. Since they had had no success in their search, we headed for the eastern half of the wood with Roy Wallace. Here we found no less than seventeen white-winged crossbills. The sun, which had now come out, shone brightly on their pink feathers as they fed in the dark green hemlocks with a blue sky for a background, a scene which we will not soon forget.

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In an account of a trip to Purpleville Wood on November 19th, Mr. Ralph Knights writes an interesting description of a meeting with a flock of siskins. He says, "At about 3 p.m. we ran into quite a pocket of pine siskins, with a scattering of gold finches. We heard them first up on the hillside among the tops of the evergreens kicking up a racket like a swarm of buzzing insects. While lingering below along the banks of the creek among the hawthorns, searching for last summer's nests, these active little fellows were darting all around us. I did not find any reason for such

activity until we crossed the creek and noticed some birds dropping down to the water's edge under the canopy of a large shrub, six or eight at a time, drinking their fill, being joined by others as soon as they flew away. They all seemed to be using the same spot and took little notice of us who were standing a few yards away. There must have been two hundred active birds here and all the time their call notes were coming to us from far up at the top of the pines. Afterwards I climbed the steep bank and had a very good view of them feeding on tiny cones, hanging in all kinds of positions, even upside down out along the tips of the branches..."

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Mr. R. W. Trowern, formerly an executive member of the club, now stationed in New Liskeard, writes me from there that he has seen two great gray owls this fall, and has heard of nine others. Seven of these were seen by one man, "more or less grouped in a clump of trees' near the road between Sudbury and Espanola. There also have been many redpolls in his region recently. He suggests that observers in Toronto keep their eyes open for these two species. (Indeed we will, Bob. Thanks for the tip. We remember the excitement when the last great gray owl appeared at Centre Island. One of our local photographers got so excited trying to photograph the owl that he ran through a whole role of film before he realized he had his shutter closed).

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The following review has been written for the Newsletter by Mr. J. W. Barfoot, member of the Club and successful amateur beekeeper.

Beekeeping: Craft and Hobby. By A. R. Cumming and Margaret Logan. Oliver and Boyd, Edinburgh. (In Canada, Clarke, Irwin and Co. Ltd., Toronto) 1950, Pp.x, 157.

This is an interesting description on 150 pages of Beekeeping as a hobby in Scotland. The information contained is accurate and well written insofar as I have the ability to judge. This is of course, as you would expect for it is written by A. R. Cumming, M.A., author of the Northern Beekeeper and Margaret Logan who was Assistant Lecturer in Beekeeping in the North of Scotland College of Agriculture.

The book covers not only the social life of the bee, but carries on with the trials and errors of the amateur beekeeper for an entire season.

The authors' discussion of the dance language of the bees credits them with an intelligence and a means of communication that I find hard to credit. We have long since known that bees coming into the hive from a new source of nectar, dance and fan their wings. That this dance can be carried to such detail that they can communicate the source to within fifty feet sounds fantastic to me, but I leave it to you who read the book to decide.

Heather honey seems in Scotland to be the most valuable of

all the products of the hive and at the same time the greatest bugbear. Due to its jelly-like quality, great difficulty is experienced in extracting it. Different devices, such as tools for making tiny holes through the comb to admit air, have been devised but the method most in use is to squeeze it in a press, somewhat similar to a cider press. It sounds like a very messy method and I think it would be preferable to use this as comb honey.

The chapter on wax rendering suggests knowledge in theory only. Dr. Miller's article on wax rendering that I read years ago said "The first rendering of wax results in a quarrel between Mr. and Mrs. Beekeeper". It did in my case and I didn't try rendering it in the oven either.

This book is intended to arouse the enthusiasm of the amateur for beekeeping and it does that in an interesting way. As a text book, however, it varies so far from practices in this country that one would do well to overlook it until he has advanced far enough to make due allowances for the differences due to climate and local conditions.

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