

Toronto Field Naturalists' Club

MARCH MEETING

Monday, March 5th, 1951, at 8.15 p.m.

at the

ROYAL ONTARIO MUSEUM

- Report on February outing - - - - Dr.R.M.Saunders
- Swallows - - (Illustrated) - - - Sylvia Hahn
- The King Rail of Catfish Pond - (Movie) - Alfred Bunker
- Camping with the Boy Scouts in Haliburton -
- Illustrated Talk - - F.C. Hurst
- Interesting Bird Occurrences During the Past Winter
- Illustrated Talk - James L.Baillie

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ROTUNDA DISPLAY

The Rotunda Display will consist of contributions by the members of the Toronto Field Naturalists' Club and the Junior Field Naturalists' Club.

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MARCH OUTING

Saturday March 10th, 1951, Sunnyside and High Park
at 2 p.m.

Meet at the Sunnyside bathing pavilion.

Leader: Mr. Stuart L.Thompson

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Secretary: Mrs. J.B.Stewart, 21 Millwood Road,
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Toronto Field Naturalists' Club.



Number 98

February 1951

For nearly a month Margaret and Henry Marsh and I planned to go to Pefferlaw Brook. On January 19th we finally made the trip. At the outset the weather seemed to augur ill for low clouds and fog hung over the land reducing visibility to a minimum. Nonetheless we set out, and it was during this doubtful period that we made one of our best observations. While we were driving along No. 7 highway, a few miles west of Unionville, I caught sight of a huge flock of birds rising from a cornfield. The murky air prevented me from seeing more than a vague mass of birds but their manner of flight suggested buntings. This in fact is what they were. When we got out of the car they had settled once more but were very restless and kept flying up and moving from one part of the field to another. The corn in this field had never been more than half-harvested. Some of it was standing erect; mostly it was broken and tangled upon the ground. The buntings worked through the cornstalks like an army advancing on the double-quick. When the speed was not great enough, or the food used up by those in front, the rear ranks of the army took to the air and flew to the head of the line of march, there to settle, thus producing the rolling snowball effect I have noted often before. Occasionally, for unknown reasons, the whole flock would rise when it seemed as though a sudden snow squall of intensest density had struck the field, for in the flock were at least 3,000 birds. In the air together, whirling and twisting, they were snowflakes indeed, and illusion made all the more real by the obscure flashing of black and white wings in the murky atmosphere. Once the flock was down the squall ended, and calm resumed, a quiet filled with a soft chorus of mellow whistles and a low, chattering obligato. What could the imagination and talent of a Beethoven have done with this sombre scene, shot through with mysterious beauty, both of sound and color?

With the buntings was one longspur, a lone, dark bird, not easy to spot. We had to be sure it was not just another bunting, closing dark wings as it plunged to earth. In the plunging of the flock I

noted that some individuals almost "tumbled" -- they slipped and banked, twisted and turned, all the while shooting downward head foremost so that they seemed nearly to be out of control, falling rather than flying; still, no mishaps ensued. It was an example of the marvellous precision and control with which such a mass of birds can conduct their group movements without any of the birds interfering with others.

After leaving the buntings we took the road from Markham through Vivian to keep on pavement as long as possible since the prolonged mild spell had made the dirt roads very soft. Indeed, the countryside looked more like March and the spring breakup than like January. Even towards Pefferlaw valley where there was more snow most of the fields were showing extensive open areas, and in several places both cattle and horses were in the pastures. Henry was able to navigate on the concession roads but only with great caution. As the day advanced and the sun came out the mud deepened and progress was barely possible. However, we got back to pavement before we were mired.

At Pefferlaw we were shocked to see that the lumbering that Greer Roberts and I first noticed in December has proceeded so far that all the fine trees of the sugar bush at the west end of the area have been cut. The men were working when we drove up, and while we were on the nearby trails we could hear the last of the great old beeches by the edge of the road crashing to earth. The slash that is left looks as ugly as sin. The cutting may not, it is true, reduce the bird life in the region for the increase of "edge" areas will, up to a point, provide better habitat. But the beauty of the spot has been dealt a deadly blow. I suppose we cannot complain. The owner, a local farmer, is entitled to use his land as he sees fit. At present the price he can get for hardwood logs must be enormously high. One can only hope that he has some idea of "farming" the wood, of leaving sufficient trees to act as seeders, and of clearing up the mess so as to remove fire hazards. Treated properly this is the sort of wood that can yield an endless harvest of trees. We hope it is not just another case of murdering the wood to get the highest price at the moment without regard to the future.

Thoughts like this somewhat dimmed our appreciation of the birds here. Siskins, chickadees, juncos, and jays did not wholly satisfy us for we had come to see crossbills. The cutting, and the lack of crossbills, left us all a little glum. Not until we had left the western trail, and come onto the Grouse path did a rejuvenation of spirit begin. It started when we turned the right angle in that path, and looked along the snowy trail towards the clearing, for there at the edge of the clearing, a hundred feet ahead, stood a lovely deer, gazing straight into our eyes. We halted, but three humans was too much; the deer leaped into the air, sending its white flag up over its back, and bounded away in graceful arcs into the cover of the densest trees. With each bound our spirits rose. By the time we reached the clearing we were restored in mind and heart. An examination of the deer's track showed the very first bounds to be more than eight feet long. What power this creature has to make such a prodigious start. We followed its track backwards a bit; it had been wandering around quietly, apparently in search of food. As we stood in the opening the sound of a baying hound and a yapping mongrel

arose. In a few moments the two dogs appeared, the mongrel in the lead. They were hot upon some trail, a rabbit's I think, not the deer's. Each dog rushing into the clearing in full voice but as soon as they saw us they retired in subdued silence. I barked at them to complete their subsidence. Though they were not seemingly running the deer they might easily have taken up the fresh track if they had come onto it in the opening. We wanted to give the deer a chance. What with men cutting wood not far away, the highway with its passing cars, and the dogs, the deer's chance of survival seemed very much in question. Though Greer Roberts and I saw tracks of deer in this wood some years ago I had never seen one of the animals here before.

As if with spirits restored we could see more than hitherto, when we arrived at the brook we found a flock of white-winged crossbills eating the seeds from spruce cones on a tree just beside the road. They stayed for many minutes so that we had every chance to see how they managed their bills, how they opened the cones, and the beauty of their plumage. Repeatedly we had as many as three or four males in our glasses at once. Even after they left this tree they kept flying from spruce to spruce in the neighborhood thus giving us many opportunities to watch. In addition a very large goshawk came flying up the valley, choosing this spot to circle in quest of food. Perhaps the great grey accipiter was attracted by the crossbills. If so, happily, it did not get any for though it continued to circle overhead it made no plunge to earth.

As we had to be home early in the afternoon we decided upon one more stop. The place selected was the eastern end of Vivian School wood where Greer and I had found so many birds on our December visit. Before taking our walk there we ate our lunches in the car. Then we started down into the valley along the north-south concession road. I was ahead. Halfway down the hill I heard crossbills, and scrambling along the snowy slope I ploughed my way eastward until I emerged beneath a wide-spreading, tall beech tree. No less than two dozen red crossbills were calling and preening as I looked up! And others were in a nearby hemlock feeding with siskins. I called to my companions who hurried over. We had several minutes in which to scan the birds before they took off, then we headed again down into the valley.

As we came out onto the road, once more I heard red crossbills. Looking up I saw them flying across the valley. They passed out of sight then emerged again over the farm fields atop the northern bank. To my astonishment they did not disappear but abruptly came to rest in some maple trees alongside the road. This seemed an unusual action but I was very ready to seize the opportunity offered by it, for in such a position they could be seen to utmost advantage. Urging the others forward I hastened up the hill. Several of the crossbills dropped from the trees before I arrived but a dozen were still there. They remained until we were all standing directly under them, ten to fifteen feet from the nearest bird. There they calmly cleaned their feathers, or sat quietly while we looked on in admiration. Then in a moment they were gone.

We followed them across the open field with our eyes. They did not go far. Again we were startled for they came to a halt on top of a manure pile! Indeed the others that had gone before were

there too. Red crossbills feeding on a manure heap was a new experience. What were they getting? Seeds? Saltiness in the droppings? Both seemed likely, especially the latter for crossbills are inordinately fond of salt. Many lose their lives nowadays because of this as they come down onto busy highways to feed on the salt spread on the roads to remove ice, and automobiles speeding along the roads take a heavy toll. The farmer today was riding the field in a pung, doing some chores. He looked at us, no doubt wondering why we had binoculars turned on his manure heap; perhaps he thought we were looking at him, but he was too busy to bother. After a while the crossbills were satisfied. To our delight they returned -- this time 26 of them -- to the maple trees overhead. Once again we could study them to our hearts' content. How the males shone in the sun. Had we possessed cameras we could have taken perfect pictures with no trouble at all. As it was we drank in the beauty of the birds, and listened to their gentle conversation with deep-felt gratitude. At last it was we who had to turn away in order to get back to town. Quite clearly the manure heap was the great attraction hereabouts, and once the crossbills had rested and cleaned themselves up they began to go back. Some were already returning before we left. Incidentally the cleaning process not only took the form of rubbing their bills in the usual way against twigs but on several occasions one of the birds would grasp a twig towards the bottom then run its bill up the twig and off the bud at the end. I thought at first they were eating buds but it finally became obvious that they did not take anything. It was a way of cleaning the inside edges of their bills, somewhat after the fashion of human use of dental floss. This I had not seen before. In fact I never have been able to watch a group of crossbills to such advantage as today. In all we estimated that at least 50 red crossbills were in this wood and along its edges. Why should we not call the little vale, Crossbill Wood?

For a day that had begun in fog and murk, this one had ended in a blaze of sunlight, beauty, and inspiration. No wonder we came home in a happy frame of mind.

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Readers of the Newsletter who look out their windows into snow and ice, who see no birds save possibly sparrows and pigeons and starlings, will be stirred by the wealth of bird life that dwells in the gardens and waters of Florida at this time of year, and is revealed in the following letter from Mrs. Lois Sisman, well-known Aurora member of the club. Of course many of these birds are our own old friends whom we shall soon see back with us in a few weeks' time. Indeed, the robins Mrs. Sisman mentions as suddenly disappearing have probably begun their northward trek which in the robin's case is a leisurely process taking from one to two months from Florida to Canada. Mrs. Sisman writes thus:

"...Florida is a bird lover's paradise; it offers varied locations for bird life with its swamps, scrub land, cultivated fields, everglades, salt marshes and beaches. What more could the birds ask?

"As I sit in the garden today the birds are abundant. The cardinal is sitting on a large double poinsettia flower, whistling to his mate; cardinals are everywhere just as common as our robins in the spring.

A pair of mocking birds are on the wire overhead, singing their rich varied song. I understand that when the Florida Federation of Women's Clubs requested the school children to select a state bird, the majority of students chose the mocking bird, so this songster became the state bird April 23, 1927, and a law protecting the species was then enacted. The myrtle and palm warblers are flitting about on the ground and in the hibiscus shrubs; meanwhile the blue-gray gnatcatchers are lisping their thin warble as they dart in jerky flights in and out of the mango trees.

"The red-bellied woodpecker just came to a grapefruit tree near my chair, selected a large ripe fruit and proceeded to drill a hole in it. I wondered if he was really hungry or just wanting a drink of tree-ripened juice.

"Across the street in some palmettos a pair of Florida jays are enjoying a great exchange of conversation; they are quite different from our blue jays with their blue wings and tails and brownish drab shoulders. They are friendly birds, and with a little coaxing come to eat peanuts from my hand.

"Phoebe is here too, along with catbirds, Florida wrens, white-eyed towhees, yellow-bellied sapsuckers, white-eyed vireos, ruby-crowned kinglets, robins, mourning doves and sparrow hawks, right at our back door, all to be seen within twenty minutes.

"The canal is a short distance from the house, and I walked over this morning to watch a large lazy alligator sleeping on a log. On the bank a lovely snowy egret was daintily picking her way with feet encased in golden slippers. Several Louisiana herons were feeding in the shallow water. They are graceful purple-hued birds and seem much tamer than other herons. The people here call them Lady-of-the-Waters. The water turkey or snakebird was sitting with his wings spread out to dry the feathers. On both sides of the canal a dense growth of water hyacinth was teeming with Florida and purple gallinules and coots.

"Five minutes more walking brings one to Lake Worth, which is an inlet from the ocean. The tide is out and on the mud flats are dozens of great blue herons, little blue herons and white herons. Numerous Florida cormorants are swimming around the sand bar which is covered with brown pelicans, black skimmers, common terns, ring-billed gulls, Bonaparte's and laughing gulls. Overhead are numerous black and turkey vultures, a pair of ospreys and three bald eagles. The eagles come so close for food I can almost count their feathers.

"I walked along the shore to watch a flock of sanderlings and was attracted by the movement of more birds in the distance. You can imagine my surprise and amazement at seeing easily one hundred or more semi-palmated plovers, just as many Wilson's and piping plovers, a few black-bellieds and endless killdeer. In another group were least and semi-palmated sandpipers, numerous spotted and several turnstones.

"The laughing gulls can be seen hovering over schools of small fish; they seem to delight in taking fish away from the pelicans. Their call or note is a harsh ha-ha-ha resembling a loud laugh.

"The black skimmers intrigued me with their black and red bills, flying in perfect unison or standing in ranks on the sand bars facing into the wind. Their cry sounds a little like a dog's bark.

"The robin during its winter residence in Florida is neither as brilliantly dressed nor as friendly as when in its northern summer home. Even his melodious song is replaced by an unmusical chatter, and he retires to the timbered swamps and burned-over pine lands, and is seldom seen in cities and towns. This week I saw hundreds of them in town, feasting on the black berries of the cabbage palms and the red berries of the Florida holly trees. I watched them for about five days, and now they have disappeared. There is not a robin to be found anywhere.

"Today I had a pleasant surprise -- a pair of painted buntings came to the Australian pine trees. The male is one of the most beautifully appavelled birds I have ever seen in its shining, violet-blue, yellow-green and scarlet colourings, while the female basks only in reflected glory.

"Not having a car, I walked many miles each day to watch the birds and really feel I am well rewarded for my effort. I have seen seventy-five species within a short distance of my residence.

"Florida also boasts many beautiful flowering trees and brilliant flowers that revel in the hot sunshine. Many of the tropic vines climb rampant over porches and walls, and fling their clusters of gorgeous blossoms high into the trees..."

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From our home area comes this observation sent in by Stuart Thompson. He says, "While on a long tramp on Sunday, January 7th, at Highland Creek, I came upon a flock of seven mourning doves. It just happens that we were passing an orchard where there was one tree on which were many frozen apples. I had just remarked to my companion that such winter birds as pine and evening grosbeaks feed on the seeds of such apples, their stout bills being able to cut away the tough substance of the frozen fruit so as to expose the seeds. The next minute we saw a single mourning dove in the tree, and several more flew up from the ground below. The doves, of course, were not feeding on the fruit or seeds as grosbeaks would, but it was fortunate we looked at the tree carefully, for mourning doves are not a common sight in the Toronto region in midwinter."

(Ed. Note: Until the last few years, i.e., since 1945, mourning doves were unknown in our area in winter. They are still rare, but one of the most interesting local ornithological developments recently has been the increasing number of these doves to be found hereabouts during the winter. This increase appears to coincide with a general increase in the number of mourning doves throughout their range, and also with a northward extension of their range. A careful study of the present status of this species has been launched by ornithologists, and is going on all over the continent. If it is established, as appears to be the case, that the mourning dove is extending its range to the north, this will prove to be another example of the northward movement of southern species, and will be comparable to the earlier northerly advance of the cardinal. The largest group of mourning doves

seen so far this winter in this region is a flock of 56 birds that have been living around a field just east of Whitby C.P.R. Station, where a crop of buckwheat was cut but not harvested. This flock has been present there since November, and was originally discovered by Mr. Alf. Bunker of our club. Inasmuch as mourning doves tend to congregate in large numbers in winter, we may expect that even larger flocks will be seen here in the future if the doves succeed in finding enough food and adequate shelter to maintain themselves during the cold season. Such observations as Mr. Thompson's and Mr. Bunker's help much to build up the picture of the doves' changing status in our region.)

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The Art of Botanical Illustration: by Wilfred Blunt, with the assistance of William T. Stearn. (Collins, London, 1950) Pp. xxxi, 304. (In Canada, Wm. Collins and Sons, 53 Avenue Road, Toronto). Price \$4.75.

I open the pages of this book, and everywhere it is full of wonders. Is it possible to paint grass and plantain, and dandelions gone to seed, so that the onlooker realizes he is seeing for the first time a new world of feathery delicacy, of gentle beauty unknown to him before? It is indeed. Here is such a one, a plate made from a painting by the great Dürer in 1503, all done in tender greens and browns; painted nearly five centuries ago, but no one today could convey better than Dürer has done the secret beauty of this "common-place" plot of grass.

I turn the pages and discover a haughty hyacinth, bearing the name, Gloria mundi (Glory of the World), staring at me in inspiring magnitude out of a plate that was based on an original hand-coloured engraving of the eighteenth century. Then here is a fascinating picture of the page of an Indian illuminated manuscript of about 1620, where a dainty tulip is sympathetically depicted with a butterfly overhead. On to another page, and before me now is a rose so fresh, so exquisitely drawn, so real, it seems to start from the page. I almost arise to get a vase to put this lovely flower in.

What is this book? It is a history of human efforts to paint, generally to picture flowers and plants accurately down through the ages. The first figure is a little black and white drawing of a plant form scratched on a piece of bone by some paleolithic man, thousands of years ago. The illustrations come to a climax in a series of magnificent colour reproductions, one of the loveliest being a plate of the Cuckoo-Pint, a relative of our Jack-in-the-Pulpit, the original of which is a watercolour drawing done in 1948. In other words, from the days of the old stone age to the present time, men and women have been entranced by the beauty of flowering plants, and have striven to place their impressions of this beauty on record. They have also tried to depict what they saw with utmost accuracy, so that others might learn from their pictures. It is this combination of accuracy and beauty which has been the objective of botanical illustration as distinct from painting in general. The story of the remarkable success of men's efforts in this age-old task is here told in a scholarly, comprehensive, yet for the most part in a readable and attractive way. If there are some pages crowded with names, it is because this is both an historical narrative and a work of reference.

To all those who love flowers, this book will be not only a mine of knowledge but well worth owning for the excellent illustrations alone. There are 47 colour plates, 32 black and white plates, and 75 figures in the text; moreover, they are excellently reproduced, clear, with faithful colours. For this the publishers should be highly praised. Mr. Blunt, who is himself both artist and scholar, is the first person to make such an historical study of the development of botanical illustrations. He has done a remarkably fine job. Both as an historian and as a naturalist I would commend this work to the attention of all our readers.

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Birds: A guide to the most familiar American birds. By H.S. Zim and I.N. Gabrielson. (Simon and Schuster, New York, 1949). In Canada: The Musson Book Company, 103-107 Vanderhoof Avenue, Toronto. Pp. 155. Price \$1.50

If you want a first class little guide to our common birds, this is it. For the beginner who has no knowledge at all of the subject, this is as good an introduction as I have seen.

It is a small-sized book which will fit easily into anyone's pocket. The plates are clear, well-drawn, nicely-coloured, and for most of the birds give a thoroughly realistic suggestion of the habitat where the bird is most likely to be seen. The most familiar birds, 112 in number, have been selected, and each one of these is shown in full colour. But with each of the chosen species clues are given that will help the reader to identify related species, so that some 260 species of birds are referred to in all.

A very helpful inclusion is a series of maps, one map to each pictured species, showing the distribution of the species. The maps are of the United States, but may be used by Canadians well enough since it may be taken for granted that all the birds shown as reaching the boundary also range into Canada. Also useful is a chart at the end of the book which gives migrational, nesting and food data for all the chosen species.

The authors' advice on the proper equipment needed by birdwatchers, on the types of places to look for birds, and on the ways in which to do this, is straightforward and sound. So too are the hints on how the birdwatcher who has got well started can broaden his experience with the bird, and can contribute to the steadily growing mass of knowledge about these fascinating creatures. Valuable to any beginner, this little book is just the thing to catch a youngster's eye and interest. All who have or who know young people they would like to see interested in watching birds should consider this book seriously.

Editor,
Richard M. Saunders.