

Toronto Field Naturalists' Club

NOVEMBER MEETINGS

Monday, November 5, 1951 at 8.15 p.m.

at the

ROYAL ONTARIO MUSEUM

Speaker: Dr. Walter M. Tovell - Curator of Geology
Royal Ontario Museum, Lecturer in Department of Geological Sciences, University of Toronto.

Subject: Oil in Canada - Illustrated.

There will also be a short report on the geological outing held in the Don Valley on October 13th by Dr. P.A. Peach, Department of Geological Sciences, University of Toronto, who led the group.

ROTUNDA DISPLAY

An exhibition of material from the Alberta oil fields

Arranged by: Dr. Walter M. Tovell

NOVEMBER HIKE

Saturday, November 10th - Hanlan's Point - Centre Island.

Meet at Hanlan's Point dock on arrival of boat leaving the city at approximately 2 p.m. As we have been unable to obtain the exact time of departure of this boat owing to the winter schedule not being made up, please check with the T.T.C. at Tr. 4545 before setting out.

Yearly fee of \$2.00 now due. Secretary - Mrs. J.B. Stewart,
21 Millwood Rd.

Toronto Field Naturalists' Club.



NEWSLETTER

Number 102, October 1951

On a lovely warm and sunny afternoon at the end of September Earl Stark and I were revelling in the hordes of warblers, vireos and sparrows that were working their way southward through Don Alda Wood. Bordering the eastern edge of the wood is a series of fields. Some of these had been recently plowed.

As we came abreast of one of these fields I raked its grey clods with my binoculars. My impression was dry and dull, made up of a wide expanse of barren mud. Doubtless I would not have paid any further attention to such bleakness had Earl not spied several small birds flying over the field which disappeared suddenly down amongst the furrows. My second survey did finally detect two obscure birds walking across the tumbled clay. These were in truth the birds we sought, American pipits. As we watched three more walked into our line of vision, then two more. Intrigued by this procession, the first inkling of the presence of other birds on the field, we crawled under the fence and through the tangled hedgerow, to step out into the field where we could get an unhindered panoramic view. Now when we swung our binoculars slowly in an arc we could see that here, there, and everywhere among the grey-brown clods pipits were walking! At a clap of our hands at least fifty flew into the air, fluttered around a few moments, calling plaintively, then settled again amid the clods. Instantaneously, as each bird touched the ground, it vanished from view. Only the most careful looking would thereafter determine its whereabouts. How many pipits were present over the whole surface of this large field we did not ascertain, but we certainly saw a hundred in the section nearest to hand. How easy to pass them by! We nearly did so. Yet in reality what seemed but a bare field, to all appearances empty of life, was teeming with birds.

This experience of almost missing a field full of pipits is a characteristic one with this bird. The pipit is one of our common fall migrants, passing through our region in thousands every autumn, and having a long migration period from mid-September to late November. Nevertheless no other common migrant is so frequently missed by many observers as this one. The superb camouflage which enables it to vanish into the earth is no doubt one of the reasons why this is so. Yet by the same token the watcher of birds is offered a challenge. Why should he know so little about a native bird that, if only sought out, gives him every chance to know much?

Indeed this pipit is a very characteristic bird of this country. Its summer homeland, except for mountain tops further south, is the Canadian north where it frequents the Arctic tundra from Alaska to Greenland, and the moss-covered rocky hills of the Labrador coast. A member of the large family of wagtails, it has numerous relatives all over the world, many of them well-known to people from Britain and Europe. Perhaps it will seem more familiar to readers of English literature if I call it the titlark of America. Indeed, titlark is one of its common names, less used now than formerly. Like its European relatives, and like the horned lark, it has an impressive song flight in the breeding season, but if you wish to hear this you must journey to the far north or climb the mountain tops in the Rocky Mountains. Though common in the fall, pipits are rare, indeed very rare, with us in the spring. The sight of one or two in May is a real event. It is in the fall that you will have your chance to study this bird. Why miss it?

Pipits are primarily ground birds, spending most of their time in fields, meadows, marshes, on mud flats, beaches, or stretches of bare rock. It is unusual to see them alight on fences or trees, but occasionally this happens. I remember last year seeing pipits, roused from a plowed field near Green River, settling on telephone wires until we had passed. For all their obscurity, if examined closely, they will be seen to be coloured in delicate hues of green and brown and buff. The white outer tail feathers, flashing in flight, remind one of a vesper sparrow, but the slender bill and the more graceful proportions of the bird give it away. As too does the practice of walking rather than hopping, and the frequent tail-wagging, from which comes its family name. Not only is this somewhat retiring and mysterious bird worth your investigation for its own sake, it is also a highly useful associate of man, since its enormous flocks consume vast quantities of noxious weed seeds and harmful insects. They spend the winter chiefly in the middle and southern states though some go as far as Guatemala. But they will be with us until the frosts and snows of late November drive them on. Any bird that can claim modesty, delicate beauty and usefulness among its qualities certainly deserves to be better known than it is. Why not look it up?

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Early in September three members of the club, Mr. and Mrs. Hugh Halliday and Mrs. Naomi LeVay, made a trip to the exciting coast of Maine, near the border of New Brunswick. Mrs. LeVay has written an account of their interesting trip for the Newsletter. She says:

"On September 5th, Mae and Hugh Halliday and I, set out by fishing boat from near Cutler, Maine, for the lighthouse island of Machias Seal. It was a cloudless morning with a fresh breeze blowing and the sea was moved by a long, rolling swell. Several cormorants crossed our path, both the European and the double crested varieties, flying low over the water. For some time it seemed that before us lay only the endless ocean, while the mainland dwindled to a faint blue line as we left it far behind us. Then, first vaguely and gradually more and more clearly we distinguished the outline of the island. Twelve miles off the coast of Northern Maine, one hour and a half by motor boat, it appears from a distance as a rather flat-topped rock in an otherwise empty sea. The tall lighthouse and the other stark, white buildings stand out clearly on a bright morning. Not a tree, not the smallest bush or shrub softens the contour of the eighteen acre island or offers shelter to migrating land birds. We scanned the rocks anxiously with binoculars as we approached, but only a few herring gulls rose lazily from the windward side of the island. The surf was foaming and splashing around the rocky ledges when we landed in a small skiff on the leeward shore.

As I mounted the slope among the long, coarse grass that grows on this side of the island, I was surrounded to my surprise, by a small flock of purple finches. There were no rosy males among them.

A short cog railway ran up from the east shore to a large shed and up these tracks a car was towed with our baggage and provisions. Behind this was the "whistle house" containing the rather formidable machinery necessary to operating a fog-horn. From here a long plank walk across the highest part of the island led to the lighthouse and the two dwellings. One of these, a hundred year old, deserted habitation containing a pot-bellied stove and some rough furniture, was to be our headquarters. To the north the island stretched away to a low, narrow point and to the northeast, a few hundred yards from shore, lay a rocky islet, inhabited at this time by herring and black-backed gulls. Common and Arctic terns were seen in flight between the islands.

On the plank walk between the buildings a bird ran and hopped along about fifteen feet ahead of us. It was sparrow-like in colouring, lark-like in behaviour, and showed some white in the outline of the tail. It was obviously a longspur and considering the range there can be no doubt that it was of the Lapland variety. A young oriole was perched on a wire near the door of our house, and an immature redstart was fluttering in the long grass behind

the buildings. On this island hundreds of birds are killed every year during migration by flying into the lighthouse. Dozens of small bodies are picked up after stormy nights, when the birds are blown off their course and blinded by the glare of the light. We saw the remains of several warblers and a bobolink that met their end in this way. A large number of sparrows were feeding in the long grasses near the house and we identified several Savannahs and an immature white-throat, but it was obvious that many more were present. A pair of flickers were spotted on the point of land to the north and later two sharp-shinned hawks were seen hunting over the heath.

In the meantime, the lighthouse keeper and his wife being absent, we were welcomed by the only two remaining inhabitants, the assistant keeper and the keeper's sixteen year old son. The former, a colourful old sea salt and a great talker, broke to us, in the most casual tones the shattering news that the puffins, which we had come so far to see, had left the island four days earlier. Once flown out to sea, they never return until the following spring. June, July and August are the months to observe the four hundred pairs of puffins and the two thousand Artic terns that have been known to nest in the rocky crevices, but they often linger until September 10th. It was unfortunate that circumstances did not permit us to make an earlier visit.

The only bird to be found on the rocks on the western side of the island, where the puffins and terns nest in such numbers, was a Baird's sandpiper, a cheerful enough little bird to be found in that desolate space. Here, the tossed rocks and boulders already smoothed and whitened by the pounding of the sea, were lime-washed by countless numbers of departed birds. Acres of this rock extended along the windward side and the only signs of life were some small sparrows peering at us from the highest ridge, and a few slate coloured juncos slipping in and out of the crannies. Below the tide line the boulders took on a sombre colour, accentuated by the masses of dark brown kelp, which clung to their sides. In the tidal pools sea anemones, mussels, winkles, limpets and others were discovered and eagerly examined by Mae, and specimens collected.

On the east a thatch of coarse grass and wild flowers ran nearly the length of the island. Wild aster, yarrow and red-seeded dandelion were in bloom here and a dainty sand-wort three inches high bore minature white blossoms. Clumps of the larger blue flag, with bright green seed pods, were found in low places on the point and tall stalks of brick red dock were raised among the grasses.

At dusk a nighthawk wheeled low over our heads and two small bats came out and fluttered around. It was about midnight when I went out into the night, made bright by the beams of the light which towered above me. The air was full of song, a rich trilling which seemed to rise from everywhere, so that I could not

locate its source. A bird no bigger than a thrush flew through the rays high above my head.

Dawn found me on the rocks, but I saw only herring gulls and terns fishing out from the shore. Later, however, Hugh reported a razor-billed auk on the sea, two gannets were seen in flight and two small flocks of cormorants filed by against a blue sky. White-rumped and pectoral sandpipers were spotted on the rocky side and about the buildings we noted a yellow warbler, a yellow-breasted chat, and purple finches in song. The surprise of the morning was a saw-whet owl, flying at its reflection in a window, and it was easily captured and photographed. Many sparrows were busy in the long grass and I was happy to identify the unfamiliar seaside and sharp-tailed species. A least (or alder) flycatcher was found in the whistle house, where it had taken refuge, and was photographed by Mae in colour, with its orange-lined bill wide open.

In the afternoon a real drama of the air was enacted high over the sea to the west. A flock of screaming terns was attacked by that sea robber, the parasitic jaeger. The dark form of the larger bird was sharply outlined in contrast to the silvery white of the terns, as it swooped and dived at them from above. They had passed from sight, before the outcome was determined. At the same time we were investigating the burrows of the Leach's petrels, dug into the stretch of soil near the northern tip of the island. From two of the burrows we drew young petrels covered with a thick coat of dark gray down. We held the youngsters in our hands and admired the strange two-tiered bills and the tiny black webbed feet. Many more young birds might have been found if we had been of a mind to disturb them, as two thousand petrels are estimated to nest on the island. We presumed that the songs heard at night were those of either the young or the parents, who come in from the sea to feed them only after dark. A little later a marsh hawk swept over the point.

On our return trip to the mainland, in a heavy sea, five or six razor-billed auks crossed our wake, all on solitary and mysterious errands."

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Our able secretary, Mrs. Ruth Stewart, recently had a most exciting experience with birds in the Don Valley of which she has sent me the following account:

"Last Saturday (October 6) I went for my usual weekend expedition through the woods behind Sunnybrook Hospital, hoping to get another good look at the great blue heron which has been frequenting these parts for some weeks. His most favoured resting place, a large fallen tree across the stream was empty, but just as I came to another preferred log my dog evidently disturbed him, and he sailed up over my head and made off north-westward across the meadow. "That is

probably all I shall see of him to-day" I thought, and turned my attention to the numerous song and field sparrows which were popping up among the weeds almost under my feet. Suddenly high above my head I heard the most extraordinary noise. The best description I can give of it is that it sounded like all the pots and pans in my kitchen cupboard falling out at once. The dog, who was some distance from me, came running to my side, her tail tucked between her legs. I looked up, almost fearfully, expecting to witness a disastrous collision between two planes. There was no such thing, but high up on the top of a large pine tree, standing on goodness knows what, for the topmost branches were small, was the great blue heron, while towards him there swooped a rough-legged hawk. The heron seemed to brace himself, draw himself up to his full height, and then proceeded to tell the hawk just exactly what he thought of him, and I can assure you that I needed no interpreter to realize that the language he was using was by no means suitable for polite drawing room conversation! Three times the hawk advanced, circled over the tree and retired. The heron made no attempt to chase him, but contented himself with his exceedingly noisy reminders that this was his tree and the hawk was requested to remain at a respectful distance. After a bit the hawk apparently tired of the game and flew off, but for some minutes the heron remained poised in the treetop, then he too flew away."

(Ed. Note: Mrs. Stewart uses the word "game" in describing this encounter between hawk and heron, and this is probably exactly the right term to employ, for it is now widely held among ornithologists that the larger hawks, perhaps all predators, at times take great pleasure in harrying large birds, often birds larger than themselves as in this case, whom they cannot expect to capture or harm. This is done apparently in a spirit of savage fun and as part of a game. On this occasion if the rough-leg hoped to get some response from the heron it certainly succeeded. The account would indicate that the hawk scared the daylights out of the heron. Sometimes the game aspect of such an engagement is even more apparent and the two birds will chase each other about until tired of the sport.)

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Last winter we were honoured in the Toronto region by a great visitation of crossbills and siskins. Much speculation amongst bird watchers has been going on about the birds that may appear this coming winter. That is one of the great excitements of bird observation. No one can tell for sure what's coming next. Some indication though of what is going to happen may have been given yesterday (October 10) when the attractive garden of Professor and Mrs. Harold Humphreys, 112 Briar Hill Avenue, was visited by a small flock of evening grosbeaks. As usual with these birds the lure was a well laden Manitoba Maple tree. I

did not get around till late in the afternoon, but there were still two grosbeaks shelling out seeds, and the garage roof was littered with seed wings from the flock's feeding. Three grosbeaks were back again this morning when Jim Baillie found them at work in the same tree. Since we had no evening grosbeaks last winter, and this is a very early arrival date - my earliest by three weeks, and Jim's by a month - it is hoped that their appearance presages a great southward movement such as we had two winters past.

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Since the last Newsletter Mr. Roy Ivor has written to inform me of an interesting interchange of correspondence between Dr. Allen of Cornell University and himself regarding the question of the existence of a "peck order" among birds. He has kindly given permission for the quotation of the following paragraph from Dr. Allen's letter:

"I have been much interested in reading your letter to Dr. Saunders regarding the peck order amongst birds, and I think perhaps you are right, that we should differentiate between mixed flocks and flocks all of one species. Even in flocks of fowls, however, I do not think that the peck order is permanent, but changes from time to time. I know it did with my grouse, and certainly it does in flocks of mallards and other waterfowl. In flocks of juncos at the feeding station I think Mrs. Sabin showed rather conclusively that there was a definite peck order among the juncos as well as a certain dominance by other species. When I maintained a waterfowl pond I always thought I could recognize a certain peck order among the mallards, but they were all dominated by a snow goose during the winter months. When the breeding season came on, however, the mallards came into their mating cycle ahead of the goose and immediately the tables were turned and the goose was driven off the pond by one mallard. You certainly have a unique opportunity for studying inter-specific dominance and peck order, if there is any, and I hope you will put all your observations together in an article for us before too long."

Dr. Allen's comment emphasises again the scope for study in this fascinating and debatable aspect of bird life. We too hope that Mr. Ivor and others particularly favoured to observe this phenomenon would make their findings available to the large public that is interested in seeing deeper into the mysteries of nature.

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For more than six years Mrs. Lucy McDougall, one of our members and proprietor of a very successful feeding and banding station at Wings Haven, Cocksville, has been working with girl

guides and brownies to arouse among them a growing interest in nature and the out-of-doors. Her work has been carried on in the Kingsway, Cooksville, Burnamthorpe and Dixie area. As Mrs. McDougall's efforts have been successful she is now faced with an urgent need for assistance as local interest expands. In consequence she would be most grateful if any other members of the club could find time to aid her in this work. Mrs. McDougall is also anxious to bring nature-minded people anywhere in Ontario in touch with the girl guide organization. She points out that none need hesitate because of a personal lack of knowledge, since in this case they will be dealing with children who know little or nothing. Such work with children can in fact be a most effective way of learning for oneself at the same time as helping to enrich the lives of the young. Efforts to extend knowledge of nature in local communities and through established organizations is certainly a praiseworthy undertaking. We commend this plea to the attention of our readers. Mrs. McDougall's address is: Wings Haven, Port Credit, Ontario.

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A Guide to Bird Finding East of the Mississippi by Olin Sewall Pettingill, Jr., with illustrations by George Miksch Sutton. Oxford University Press. Toronto Pp xxi, 659. Price \$5.75.

When one has waited a long time for the appearance of a book which he hopes will be a major addition to the sport of bird watching, he opens the first copy he sees with some apprehension. Maybe it will not measure up. Such was my first reaction to Pettingill's long-promised Guide to Bird Finding. I need not have feared. This is a superb piece of work whose great usefulness becomes immediately apparent to the reader. For all bird watchers living in or travelling in eastern United States this book is going to be as essential as Petersen's Field Guide to the Birds. Henceforth Canadian bird watchers visiting the States anywhere east of the Mississippi should not go without this book.

Here is a book that tells you where to find the birds. How often have you gone to places hoping to find birds of interest and have been disappointed, only to get back home and discover from someone else that you missed the right spot by a few miles because you didn't have adequate information? Mr. Pettingill - well known in Toronto to Audubon Screen Tour audiences - decided to write a book which would save people from disappointments like that.

By enlisting the co-operation of the best observers in every state, he gathered together a full knowledge of all the best birding spots. His guide book is arranged by states, a chapter being given to each of 26 states. Every chapter has an introductory section in which the general character of the state's

topography is discussed and an indication of its natural regions is given along with lists of birds native to each region. A table of dates for the chief periods of bird migration in the state, and a statement of winter birding conditions close this general section. Then follows the body of the chapter which is made up of a list of all the best birding sites in that state. They are noted in alphabetical order according to the name of the nearest town. National parks and national wildlife refuges, many state and municipal parks and refuges, and numerous private sanctuaries and estates are included in the list. Mention, with addresses, is also made of museums, research stations, state and local ornithological societies and other institutions that may be of interest to the travelling bird watcher, and where he may get help. For each site careful directions are given, in some cases even to which path to follow from the spot where you park, as to how to get to the proper place. In those areas with which I am well acquainted I have been able to check the directions and indications given. They are excellent, being trustworthy, clear and succinct. I only wish that I had had this book in years past when I was doing more travelling in the United States than I am now.

At the end of the book is a bibliography of suggested reference material. In this are lists of regional publications of great value to anyone who intends to spend any time in some one region. All these books are now in print or easily available. There is also a very good index arranged according to place names and bird names, so that you may look up both the birds you want to see or the place you want to go to. In the case of the birds you will be referred to the places where they may be seen.

Throughout the book George Miksch Sutton's attractive black and white drawings of birds enliven the pages and catch the eye.

On the jacket of this book it is suggested that "Dr. Pettin-gill's thorough coverage of bird haunts will bring students to think of this book as the ornithologist's Duncan Hines". With this bold assertion I have no quarrel. To the birdwatcher traveling in eastern United States, this book is certainly an absolute requirement. He'll certainly kick himself if he doesn't have it.

The Sea Around Us By Rachel L. Carson. Oxford University Press, Toronto, 1951. Pp. vi, 230.

Did you know that underneath the surface of the sea, unseen by man yet playing a mighty part in the destiny of men, roll waves a hundred or two hundred feet high? Or that some of the highest mountains in the world rise from the bottom of the sea yet never reach the water's surface? Or that in a cubic mile of sea water there is about \$93,000,000 in gold and \$8,500,000 in silver? These

and a thousand other mysteries of the ocean are discussed in this fascinating book.

Written in a beautifully sensitive style, The Sea Around Us brings to the reader an absorbing account of the life and wealth, of the power and vitality, of the enormous and decisive influence of the ocean. All who have lived on the shore of the sea, or who have sailed upon its waters, have a profound respect and awe for the world of the endless waves. Inlanders will scarcely understand the magic hold which the sea can take upon those who know it well. Yet even those who have never seen the sea will have dreamed of it, wondered about it, looked forward to the time when they too would know it. To all those who know and those who dream, this study of the sea will bring inspiration and insight and satisfaction. Few sciences in recent years have advanced as rapidly in knowledge as oceanography, and this work by an expert oceanographer is popular science at its very best.

Here is a chance to expand your horizon, stimulate your imagination, learn much about the earth on which you dwell, and enjoy yourself immensely whilst doing so. Already a best seller The Sea Around Us is likely to remain so for a long time to come.

R. M. Saunders,

Editor.