

# Toronto Field Naturalists' Club.



## NEWSLETTER

Number 103, November, 1951.

Midmorning on the tenth of November saw the sunlight lying warm and persuasive on the lawns and gardens of Glendon Hall. The snows of the part week were melting fast revealing dark roadways and green grass. Indian summer it was laying a warning hand upon overhasty winter.

Everywhere as I entered the grounds engineering students seemed to be driving stakes, hauling chains, and shouting numbers at each other. Such activity augured ill to the prospective bird watcher so it seemed to me. However, after a chat with Mr. Mackintosh, the amiable guardian of the estate who is an esteemed gardener and naturalist, I discovered from him the probable haunts of the birds away from the noisy drivers of stakes. Chickadees calling in trees about Mackintosh's house cheered me on my way across the snowy lawns.

Despite both engineers and snow five robins were making themselves thoroughly at home beneath a pair of ornamental spruces near the main drive. Under the close-needled spreading branches of the spruce trees no snow covered the ground so that the robins had no trouble in finding both shelter and food. A few bare spots like this and a number of well-laden berry-bearing bushes and trees, of which there are many at Glendon Hall, will provide a living for a small group of robins through many snowy weeks, possibly during the entire winter. Mr. Mackintosh told me that there were several bluebirds around as well as robins, and that these close relatives were usually to be seen together. I was not so fortunate this morning as to find the bluebirds, but I remembered that a few of these birds stayed at Glendon Hall last winter right up until Christmas. There is no reason why this should not happen again this year for the neighbourhood is most suitable for bluebirds. Quantities of staghorn sumach dot the slopes of the Don valley all through the estate. The maroon-coloured seed heads of these shrubs alone would provide ample food for the bluebirds.

Once past the main house I quickly descended into the valley. There, happily, peace and quiet reigned, broken only by the occasional roar of passing planes and the barking of dogs off towards Bayview Viaduct. Near the river I met George Francis. This area is one of his regular beats. Like myself he had been attracted today by reports of a pileated woodpecker seen here a few days ago. He had not found the bird but that is not strange since it could range for miles up and down the Don Valley and yet be in the neighbourhood. Indeed during the past two years at least two of the huge logcocks have been seen hereabouts, and have carved their calling cards on dozens of trees from Strathgowan Wood and Sherwood Park to Sunnybrook Wood, Glendon Hall and Hoggs Hollow. To be able to report the presence of pileated woodpeckers from time to time within the limits of the city of Toronto is a happy reminder of the wonderful comeback that this outstanding bird, once almost extinct in our region, has made. To have them survive so near to crowded traffic and apartment houses is also a tribute to the protection offered by such men as Mr. Mackintosh, who by every means seeks to preserve the birds and animals that visit or dwell around him. That birds like this can be around at all near the city is likewise due to the sort of refuge and food that is provided in our wild or semi-wild parks, ravines, estates and golf courses. The breathing spaces of the city are also the dwelling places of birds.

George told me of seeing a great blue heron near the south end of the estate. This bird has been around for weeks; almost certainly it is the one seen by Mrs. Stewart a little further downstream having the amusing encounter with a rough-legged hawk. As long as the Don remains open the gangly-legged heron will probably stay. Either this or another heron was in the valley all last winter. Indeed the section of the river from Sunnybrook to Rosedale golf course is a favourite winter haunt of blue herons. I remember being amazed one snowy New Year's day to see a great blue heron standing on top of an apple tree about where the rear of the Sunnybrook Hospital now rests. No doubt it was roosting after having fished the river for breakfast. I did not know then that it is not very unusual to find a great blue heron near open water in the Toronto region during winter. But even when I do know that, I am startled to find a great blue topping an orchard tree in a snowstorm.

Having exchanged bird gossip, George and I parted company, he homeward bound, I to try my fortune in the woods and along the river. Right here I may say that I did not find either pileated or great blue. Each one may have been but a few hundred feet away, but I never saw or heard one or the other. Do not think for that reason though that the walk was either unpleasant or a disappointment.

True, after I had followed the drive up the farther bank and into the woods, I found myself in a lovely but momentarily birdless world. Warm sunlight falling upon black-barked trees, the steady drip of water from branches losing their snowy cover, the chuckling of smiling rivulets coursing beside the drive, these all made a pleasing and friendly scene. That there should be no birds in this scene for the

moment was natural enough. All bird watchers are well acquainted with the "blank spots" of fall and winter woods. So too do they know that sooner or later they will come suddenly to some spot that is dancing with birds. Thus it was to-day. The driveway had taken me on a curving route through the woods well up the bank and was now leading down again towards the river, when as I paused on a good lookout knoll, I was immediately surrounded by a lively flock of birds. Chickadees called and darted, bounced into trees over my head, flashed into twigs close to my face, and peered at me most curiously. A golden-crowned kinglet leaned over backwards to show me his crown and a brown creeper whistled nearby. Upside down on a beech trunk a white-breasted nuthatch yanked loudly, alternately eyeing me and picking up tidbits from the bark. Juncos, spreading white-edged tails sped up the bank, scattering among the trees around me like a barrage of arrows. Down the bank a sombre-colored white throat followed the crowd but took his own path along a sheltering line of bushes. For five minutes all was life. Then they were gone - no, not quite, here is a laggard, trying hard to catch up. Who is this? - A sharp cheep and a gleam of yellow on the rump tell the name. It is a myrtle warbler; his relatives gone, he has joined the chickadees and their friends. Does he mean to stay the winter? Hard to say, but remember the one that tried without success last year. With the myrtle gone, silence once more descended.

Not for long this time. At the foot of the slope where the drive curves out to the river again, lies a little marsh, fed by springs on a south-facing bank. The marsh, except for a pool or two, was covered with snow, but the spring-filled bank sported a dress of tawny brown autumn leaves glowing in the sun. Here, I was sure, must be the place where George had seen a winter wren. No bird was in sight but knowing the ways of this fellow, I began to squeak. Just a few squeaks and I had my response, a sharp chinking complaint that informed me certainly the winter wren was about. Seeing it was another matter. I had to wade through the marsh close to the edge of the open slope, then to stand several moments before the pert little reddish mite popped out of the brown leaves onto a fallen birch log. A black-mouthed knothole lured the wren into its interior, but seemingly it found nothing of merit therein for it came right out again, and jumped off into the leaves. Once there it could no more be seen than a blue-bird against a blue sky. A reddish-brown wren amongst reddish-brown leaves was safe from any detection. I left.

From Nannus to the next bird was quite a hike. Once more I was bound upon a special quest for George had mentioned seeing two brown-headed chickadees near the bridge when we met. But they weren't anywhere around the bridge either when I was going or coming. Nor could I find them in the thickets along the bank downstream, nor with the blackcaps already cited. I had more or less abandoned them with the pileated woodpecker and the great blue heron. This I should not have done for some 150 yards upstream from the bridge I heard the unmistakable nasal calls of a brown-headed chickadee. What a difference five

minutes time or a little space makes. Had I been with George a few minutes before I met him, I would have seen the brownheads at the bridge. As it was I missed them there. Had I gone straight back up the road again I would have missed them also. But a little side jaunt upstream brought success.

When first heard the chickadee was across the stream in a low spruce tree. A few imitations of its call aroused its curiosity sufficiently so that it left the dark interior of the spruce where I could not see it and flew across the water, landing on some goldenrod not far in front of where I was standing. Almost at once a second brownhead joined the first one. Together they worked over the goldenrod tops while I gazed in delight. Were this any other year such a sight in Toronto would be most astounding. As it is since the advent of unprecedented numbers of Hudsonian chickadees on the week-end of October 20-21, the brownheads have been seen all over our region and beyond, even as far as Point Pelee, Owen Sound and Kincardine. All the active bird observers seem to have seen them, sometimes even in the heart of the city. On several occasions I and others have noted them on the University campus. They have appeared along McMaster Avenue near my house. Once I thought I was hearing things for I was waiting for a street car at College and Bay when the nasal tsick-a-day-day struck my ears. Automatically I began to look around. Believe it or not my ears were not deceiving me. There were two Hudsonian chickadees examining the cornice of Eaton's College Street store! They soon quit this barren stone, flying away towards the Sick Children's Hospital. When they went, three others, unseen before followed them. Evidently this whole flock was making its way westward across the city and stopping to look for sustenance en route. Of all the individuals I have seen, the two today gave me the best chance yet for close study.

As they foraged among the goldenrods I was able to see them from every angle. Each of these birds had a bright brownish head of a shade close to dark khaki, but with a polish in certain lights like pottery enamel. On many Hudsonians the heads are dull colored, in some verging on a sooty hue. With all brownheads there is no contrasting head and back as in the black-capped chickadee. The brown of the head merges with the brown back and wings, no break in color can be seen. This uniformity of coloring is one of the marks of the species. Another is the darker and brighter brown or russet on the flanks of the brownhead as compared with the blackcap. In general a brownhead is a less strikingly-colored bird than its common relative.

Its notes and calls are highly distinctive; once distinguished the nasal quality of this bird's vocal efforts becomes an unmistakable field mark. Of the sixty individuals I have seen since October 21 all but two or three have been detected in the first instance by hearing the calls. As with all sounds it is difficult to give an approximation in words or syllables. Still, I will try. Our ordinary

chickadee says its name clearly - chick-a-dee-dee or simply dee-dee-dee. The brownhead's equivalent calls are buzzy, twanging, nasal, and drawled - it says tsick-a-day-day, or day-day-day. The two today called repeatedly, using these two calls and also these: tsick-a-dray weseeee-tsick-a-dray-dray; dnee-dnee-dnee; nyee-nyee. Several times one or other offered still another call: si-oo which I take to be the equivalent of the black-cap's fee-bee. This does not exhaust the list of sounds made by either species but they are the notes or calls most frequently heard. The brownhead is said to have a twittering song as well, but I doubt if this is ever heard off the breeding ground. Since the visitors from the north associate freely with our own chickadees, many chances of comparison arise.

One to-day's brownheads pulled off one of the neatest bits of avian acrobatics I have ever seen. Having worked out to the top of a goldenrod rather hastily, he had just commenced to eat something on the very top when his weight overbalanced the plant. Thus sinking suddenly the chickadee was hurled into a complete somersault. Over it went, but did it let go? Not on your life. When the goldenrod stopped lowering there was the chickadee, upside down, but still holding on from underneath and still feeding on the same bit as when it started. I wish I knew how you do that.

Eventually the brownheads departed in company with some black-caps that came along. In following them along a spruce hedge I surprised a hermit thrush skulking under the evergreens. When at last I left the chickadees and climbed out of the valley I was given still another sight when a flock of eighteen pipits flew over the grounds, calling si-pit, si-pit as they went. All in all Glendon Hall had done very well by me. For every bird I did not see there was one of at least equal interest to take its place. Twenty kinds of birds seen in a two-hour trip in an inland spot at this time of year around this region is an excellent count. Cedarvale Ravine is the only other place in our area where it is at all likely.

\* \* \* \* \*

The editor of the Newsletter is pleased to present the following account of what was evidently a very interesting week spent by Mrs. Mae Halliday in the Kawartha Lakes district during October. Mrs. Halliday writes:

"With a friend I spent the second week of October in a cottage at Four Mile Lake northeast of Burnt River in the Kawartha Lakes district. Since I hadn't been there for fifteen years I yearned for another visit.

The weather in the daytime was almost like summer. At daybreak the first birds encountered were two Canada jays. Their unhurried flight from tree to tree was suggestive of a

large moth. Showing no fear they came close to me, and before the morning was over I met eight others. It felt good to have them follow me; a sort of friendly curiosity sprung up between us.

On a road into a wood juncos seemed everywhere. Their voices reminded me of the song "Old Macdonald had a farm", because they ticked, ticked sharply here and ticked ticked sharply there, here a tick, there a tick, etc.

Pine siskins, myrtle warblers, bluebirds, robins, downy and hairy woodpeckers, brown creepers, purple finches, and noisy flickers were very common. Since I could not possibly watch everything I turned my attention to the bluebirds and myrtle warblers which were snatching insects from the air like flycatchers, and just as expertly. They were on the edge of a tree-fringed meadow where they also found canker-worm moths on the bark of the trees. The bluebirds hunted leisurely uttering soft warblings; the myrtle warblers were more businesslike, fluttering energetically between the branches, emitting emphatic "check checks". Aerial encounters occurred when the myrtle warblers encroached on the bluebirds' territory. The bluebirds chased the warblers off through the trees, then quietly resumed their search for food.

In the afternoon I drove to an old sawmill. Climbing to the top of some logs piled there I sat down to look over a beaver meadow and pond. On the north side of the pond a dozen black ducks fed and quacked; others rested on the ground in the sunshine, with their heads turned backwards over their shoulders.

Overhead strings of wild geese kept coming down the skyways. No hunters were in the vicinity and there was no wired enclosure waiting for them. I was entranced by their rhythmic flight with its feeling of freedom.

I heard meadowlarks singing, and discovered them sitting on the topmost branches of a leafless elm. Never before had I seen meadowlarks perched so high. Song sparrows nervously ducked in and out of the cattails as if flirting with me. Red-winged blackbirds flew back and forth to low marshy places. As they perched in the alders and dogwood they preened and occasionally emitted an "o-ka-lee".

As I returned to the cottage in the late afternoon I encountered ruffed grouse crossing the road in their slow measured peculiar manner. One was also perched on an old snake fence. Then as I walked quietly into the woods,

several grouse exploded almost from under my feet and winged off to vanish before my eyes.

In the same woods, flock after flock of robins moved about "tut-tutting". The red on their breasts almost out-colored the red of the maples. It was hard to tell a maple leaf from a robin's breast, as the robins sat in the branches or hopped around on the colorful leaf-strewn ground.

A little brown bat, with large stiff ears sticking up, came weaving in and out toward me. It sought some gnats that were rising and falling in thin columns in an open sunlit patch between the trees. It almost touched my head as I stood still but each time as it weaved toward me, it swerved around.

Every day grosbeaks were feeding in the Manitoba maples. They were travelling in flocks of fifty or more. Their low sweet warble drew my attention to them. Several pileated woodpeckers crossed the roadways in their long dipping flight. Noisy bluejays appeared in amazingly large flocks of sixty and seventy.

A harvest moon rose in the sky, flooding everything with a soft yellow glow. Once again I watched birds crossing in front of its round friendly face. And the hoar frost produced a scene of silvery enchantment. Loons, passing from one lake to another called in long-drawn "ha-hoos". Canada geese in "V" formation or long serpentine strings honked through the night.

Someone mentioned that a mother bear had been seen at a dump about two miles away. I saw bears there on my second trip and I was glad I went back. At Miners Bay on the way home we saw a male cardinal on a roadside wire. Sparrow hawks perched on top of telephone posts, red-tailed hawks circled high in the sky, and marsh hawks flew low over the fields rising easily on air currents which were caused by a noticeable breeze from the southwest."

\* \* \* \* \*

It has been brought to the attention of the editor of the Newsletter that many members of the club who are interested in the study of birds are not members of the American Ornithologists Union, nor subscribers to any of the ornithological journals. For this reason I would like to present some of the facts about the A. O. U. and the journals.

The American Ornithologists Union is in fact a continental organization including both Canadian and American members. It is the foremost society in North America interested in the study of

birds. Any person seriously concerned with this study would do well to associate himself with the A.O.U. The annual meetings this year were held in Montreal, as a few years ago they were held in Toronto. The placing of these meetings, and the fact that a Canadian, Mr. Hoyes Lloyd, has been president of the A.O.U. will indicate the strong Canadian participation in this society. That there are many others in this country who would benefit by participation in the A.O.U. is certain. All those interested in membership in the A.O.U. may apply to Mr. D. S. Miller, 122 Lawrence Ave., E., Toronto. A card of application will be sent to each applicant who should fill this out and send it with the annual fee of \$4.00 to Mr. Hoyes Lloyd, 582 Mariposa Avenue, Rockcliffe Park, Ottawa.

The official journal of the A.O.U. is "The Auk", a quarterly, the most important ornithological journal in America. The Auk will assist in keeping a person up to date on all ornithological events. Two of the articles which appeared in the last number (vol. 68, No. 3, July, 1951) will be of special interest to local readers. One is entitled "On the Juvenal Plumage of North American Pipits" and is by T.M. Shortt, official artist of the Royal Ontario Museum. The article is beautifully illustrated by a reproduction of Mr. Shortt's painting of two juvenile pipits. The other article, "New Light on the Cahow, Pterodroma Cahow" is a captivating story by Robert Cushman Murphy and Louis S. Mowbray of the rediscovery of living Bermuda petrels or cahows after they were believed to be extinct for over 300 years. These articles are sufficient in themselves, I believe, to indicate the worthiness of this journal.

Another organization dealing with ornithology which makes a somewhat different appeal, is the Wilson Ornithological Club. This society stresses field ornithology and ecology. Many excellent "life histories" of birds have appeared in "The Wilson Bulletin", the official journal of this club. Like the Auk the Wilson Bulletin is a quarterly. Applications for membership in this club should be sent to Mrs. J. Murray Speirs, Cobble Hill, Route 2, Pickering, Ont. Annual dues (\$3.00) may be paid to Dr. W.W.H. Gunn, 178 Glenview Avenue, Toronto. It is of interest that Mr. Shortt's work has also appeared in the Wilson Club since he illustrated an important article on "The Family Anatidae" by Jean Delacour and Ernst Mayr with a fine painting of a Baikal Teal in the issue of March, 1945.

The Canadian Field Naturalist, the chief Canadian scientific journal in Natural history, will be of interest to all serious students of nature. All those interested should apply to Dr. R.J. Moore, Division of Botany, Dept. of Agriculture, Ottawa, Ont. The subscription is \$3.00 yearly.

R. M. Saunders  
Editor