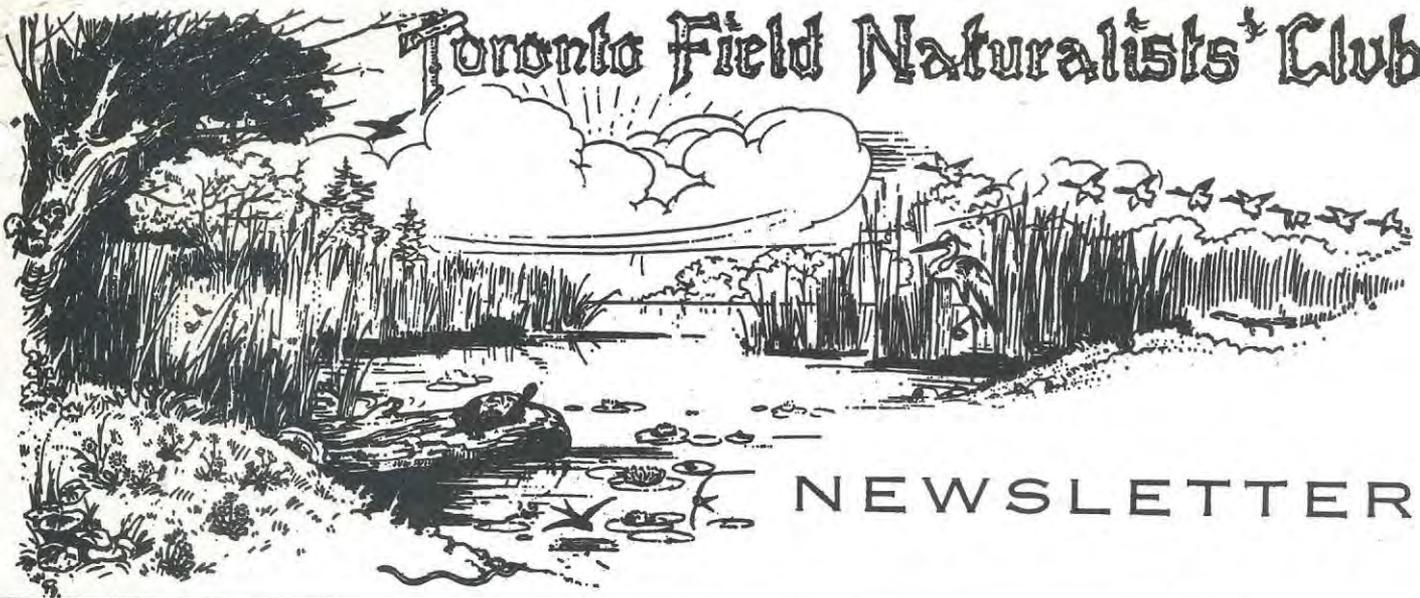


Toronto Field Naturalists' Club.



NEWSLETTER

Bird hike near London, Ont.

Number 104, December 1951

All the way to London last Saturday (December 8) I kept watch on brown fields and bare woods hoping to spot some interesting bird. The C.P.R. line through Guelph Junction and Galt covers very favorable country. So my hopes were high. But anticipation waned as mile after mile of lifeless, empty landscape slipped by. A few sparrows, some pigeons, two or three solitary crows, these were all I could spy. Hope rushed up again as a bulbous shape on a limb told me an owl was sitting there, only to be dashed immediately when the train rushed around a curve leaving me wondering just what owl it had been. I shall never know. Frustration deepened further as we swept by two unnameable hawks. Still I persisted in looking. Finally as the train began to slow for London we came alongside a hedgerow of low bushes. Atop the tallest bush in the line was perched a large, brownish northern shrike. Oblivious of the train, the hunter maintained an unflinching gaze on the field beyond the hedge, searching, no doubt, for sign of some hapless mouse. No satisfaction for eighty miles. Then, at the very end of the journey, the sight of a new bird for the year. Again it was shown me that it never pays to give up.

I had made the trip to give a talk at the sixtieth anniversary dinner of the McIlwraith Ornithological Club. Since the days of its founding when W. E. Saunders was the first president this club has been one of the most active field groups in the province. Hence it was natural that my talk on Saturday evening should be followed by an outing the next morning.

After a rainy night the day dawned grey and raw with spattering rain still daubing the window panes. Happily by the time the hardy observers had assembled the rain had ceased. The wind was veering to the west and the still rolling clouds threatened snow. All day it

was much the same. A few flakes did fall now and then but what is that when there are birds to see. When we gathered on the banks of the Thames river, the company included Don Sutton, Keith Reynolds, Bill Girling, Gord Cummings and others, enough to fill three cars. Down through Delaware and off to Melbourne we went in search of a rare bird I had been promised.

Bird hills Two roads west of Melbourne on Number Two Highway where a little cemetery borders the highway we turned south. Our instructions said to follow this road to the fourth crossroad. This led us through a cattle farming region where cultivated fields are rare. Instead pastures of coarse brown grass stretch away to woodlots. Tall weeds and sparse bushes dot the fields, with infrequent trees adding variety to the landscape. In these trees we saw as many as nine redtailed hawks before we had reached our turning. Later we saw other hawks in similar country. The rough pasture fields must harbor a teeming population of field mice and other small rodents, a plentiful food supply for the numerous hawks. In the closely cultivated farm country around Toronto hawks have almost entirely disappeared weeks since. I have wondered where they went. Now I know, at least in part. When during the afternoon we drove through miles of cleanly cultivated farmland near Lake Erie we found that as devoid of hawks as the farms around Toronto. Clearly unkempt pasture fields are much more suitable for the support of predators.

At the fourth crossroad we turned west again. Almost at once we were hailed by two men in a cornfield. One was Don Murray, whose farm was our destination, the other Harold Lancaster, another ardent farmer-birder, from Aldborough. They had been out for hours combing the woods in search of the bird or birds, for Murray had reported there were several around. Indeed they now told us they had seen one, about an hour ago. Most exasperating that. Such a remark always gives me a shiver, so many times have I been twenty minutes late, an hour late, for some much-desired bird. Lancaster left after a little chat as he had some engagement, whilst Murray guided us up the road that ends at his farm. We asked him if he thought we would see our bird. He was cautious, saying only, "Well, I don't know. But just follow me". We did, and very soon paused before a prairie type field gate, behind which a herd of bouncy young steers cavorted.

Now afoot we entered the gate, slithered along a muddy lane, while the steers reared and pranced on either side. They raised a flock of tree sparrows that filled the air with musical tu-lit calls. Then we were through the cattle and at the edge of a wood. Tall, old trees, rank on rank, reached away to the edge of the Thames. Elms, maples, beeches, hackberries and sycamores soared skyward from hug-based trunks. Here, indeed, was a "southern" type wood, relative of Post Woods at Point Pelee, and of the woods of Rondeau Park. At one time unbroken woodland of this kind covered all the area in south western Ontario near Lake Erie. Such woods as these are remnants of that ancient forest.

Scarcely had we entered the first tier of trees when we all heard low-pitched calls, cherr, cherrr, with a bit of a roll on the r's. Murray shouted, "Hear that? That's the bird!" So it was, for in a moment we were looking with admiration at a beautiful red-bellied woodpecker. Once in view we had no trouble keeping our bird in sight for it was very unheeding of us, though it did keep fairly well up in the trees, a common practice of this woodpecker.

What a lovely bird it is. An unusually long and slender bill (for a woodpecker) led back to a shapely head which looked as though it had been dipped in strawberry juice. The whole top of the head and nape were a brilliant scarlet hue. Where the scarlet ended there commenced a "ladder back", a smart set of sharply contrasting black and white "rungs" that reached across back and wings, and which ran down to a striking white rump. On the tail was a little auxiliary ladder of black and white. All in all it looked as though this fellow was decked out in his best dress clothes for our visit, an impression enhanced by the delicate pink flush on the breast and underparts, such an elegant "dress shirt". Still, these are his regular everyday clothes. He has no others. And his lady is very much like him, save that she doesn't have quite so much strawberry on the head. No wonder they are regarded as among the best-dressed birds in our avian society.

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We were all greatly excited, congratulated ourselves and Don Murray. Our luck was in. This wasn't going to be one of those days when you almost see some rarity. The woodpecker flew off, and we wandered on coming to the edge of the river, a brown stream here, heavy with silt and full of little eddies. Murray showed us an old tree stub where the red-bellieds had nested last spring for the bird we had seen was no accidental visitor. Apparently these woodpeckers have been frequenting this wood for years. There was not one nest but three here this year! Hence there should be ten or a dozen or more such birds in the vicinity. And indeed there seem to be. We had a chance of seeing others. With that information we began to look among the trees even more earnestly. Even the sight of pawpaw trees, a botanical rarity in Ontario as remarkable as red-bellied woodpeckers, and similarly southern, did not long deflect us from the search.

Following the river bank upstream, we went perhaps a third of a mile before we once again heard the soft cherr -cherr notes. This time they came from across the river. For awhile we could see no bird, then suddenly it quit the woods over there and came flying across. I noted that the flight was different from that of our ordinary woodpeckers, being in long shallow dips rather than in brief deep ones. When it swerved upward to alight on a tree trunk I realized that its shape is much more like that of the flicker than the hairy, it appearing broader across the back than the latter bird. This individual was not as brightly colored on the head and was either a female or an immature.

Hardly had it disappeared when a flock of small birds swirled in and out among the trees across the stream. Even at our distance we could hear the gentle cha cha calls of the flock. They were redpolls. In a little while they too paraded across the river in a long line, reassembling in a tree near at hand where we could see them to good advantage. Thus were the north and the south brought together, redpolls from the Arctic in the same wood with southern redbellies. But that merely means that the northerners have come south for the winter. They have reached the northernmost extension of the south, the edge that reaches over into Canada along Ontario's Lake Erie hinterland. The red-bellied woodpeckers don't have to move out, they are at home. They stay here all winter, at least many or most of them do, though some wander away for awhile to the southward.

Our walk continued. Once we saw a large dark-colored bird swoop silently among the trees across the river, a great horned owl. Once we heard the pit-pit notes of a purple finch. Then we turned into the woods on our own side. Within a hundred yards Keith Reynolds yelled "Here's another woodpecker!" Sure enough, another male was tapping on a tree just ahead, and in a twinkling a second one came into view. Four red-bellied woodpeckers for our walk! Four times as many as I have ever seen in Canada before! My only other record was made at Point Pelee seven years ago.

Are these birds coming back? Fifty or sixty years ago they were regarded as reasonably common in south western Ontario. For years now they have been a great rarity. No doubt the cutting off of the forest has had much to do with their decline. Are they now, like the pileated woodpecker, adapting themselves to smaller woods, and recovering lost territory? Or have they always been in these "remnant" woods and been overlooked? This is something we may never know. If they are making a comeback what a happy event that is. At least we do know that here at Melbourne on Don Murray's farm there are several pairs that are well protected and which may be seen at any time of year. For any bird-watcher travelling into western Ontario in the future here is an opportunity that should not be missed.

The sight of the red-bellied woodpeckers did not close the story of our jaunt which, before the day was out, included the sight of two brown-headed chickadees. But as far as I was concerned, the woodpeckers were the trip. My London friends had, with some trepidation, promised me one. They had shown me four. I congratulate them. I thank them. It is not often we can make good on birding promises four hundred fold!

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Out of the north comes this admirable account of what happens when one of our local bird watchers moves into an area entirely new to him. This is from Mr. Fred Helleiner who is now living in Kirkland Lake. He writes:

"Exploring an unknown woods, ravine, or marsh is an adventurous experiment. Ignoring the fact that little or no activity on the part of field naturalists has been centred in the "new" area, one

is apt to be discouraged by the dearth of records from the locality. A fairly accurate list of expected occurrences of both plants and animals can, however, be drawn up if one is familiar with the surrounding territory.

The point of this is that it was my good fortune this fall to embark on a venture which would enable me to investigate the faunal and floral possibilities of a section of the province hitherto quite unknown to me. I had not been able even with much questioning and searching to uncover anything beyond very sketchy information about the wildlife or naturalists to be found in the immediate vicinity of Kirkland Lake. The nearest centre from which I was able to secure a list of birds was New Liskeard, 59 miles to the south, where Mr. and Mrs. R.W. Trowern have been actively engaged in birding since early in 1950. Thus when I arrived here on the morning of August 31, my records at once took on a new value (to my own eyes), since they would henceforth become the basis for comparison of any future records. The lowly English sparrow, of which I saw six that day, vaulted to a position of importance equal to that of the brown-headed chickadee I saw three days later. Both were new to the area as far as written records were concerned. With this bit of philosophy in mind, I was able to overcome all apathy and even the discouragement brought on by the meagre results of one or two inevitable "poor days". Hopefully I began a new chapter in my birding adventures.

It took me just two days to discover a route from my residence to the suburb of Chaput Hughes, where I am employed, which would enable me to travel through an area ideally suited for birds. Here I could watch birds in several different types of habitat; cattail marsh, town, birch-poplar woods about 20 feet in height, an open field, blueberry-willow scrub thickets, and lastly "slimes".

Slimes are a man-made habitat, characteristic of a mining community and found nowhere else. Since it was entirely new to me, I shall briefly explain its nature. When gold is brought out from the ground, the milling process crushes it into a fine dust. The mineral is extracted by means of a cyanide solution, leaving large quantities of powdered rock mixed with water and any remaining cyanide. Lime is added to this residue to neutralize the cyanide, and the mixture is pumped through pipe-lines to the nearest body of water. Over a period of years all the lakes within five to ten miles of town (including Kirkland Lake itself) have been filled with this entirely inorganic matter, leaving gray mud flats reminiscent in appearance of the Centre Island "marsh" and just as treacherous underfoot. As each lake is filled in, pipe-lines are pushed farther into the wilderness, thus incidentally providing a handy means of access to the bush, although many beautiful lakes have been obliterated as a result. After many years, some organic matter settles on the slimes and germinates, particularly where a pool has been formed in a low-lying area. Consequently parts of the older slimes are covered with cattails.

Significant changes in bird life can be expected when a slimes is created. A comparison of a typical local lake with a slimes would show the former to harbour fish-eating ducks (mergansers) and loons, whereas the latter has produced shore-birds, surface-feeding ducks and geese. What minute life can these birds possibly find on such a barren desert?

On September 14, my students pointed out two "sea gulls" flying southwest over the school. These proved to be Caspian terns. The probable starting point of their southward journey leaves much room for conjecture. They were not recorded on Lake Abitibi by members of a Royal Ontario Museum expedition there some years ago. Here is an invitation for an inquisitive ornithologist to do some investigating. Let those who are blind to the possibilities of new discovery in ornithology open their eyes! Thousands of similar observations await explanation.

The next day was a continuous drizzle (as were so many this fall) but I put in my first complete day of birding, and had such good results that I was prompted to phone Mr. Trowern. I had seen ten birds that day which he had not seen at New Lisheard in his eighteen months there. The Trowerns came up the following day, September 16, although the weather had not improved at all. Quite pleased they seemed with birding possibilities in this vicinity. Little wonder! An Arctic three-toed woodpecker had obliged by letting us watch him work on a dead spruce tree at a distance of fifteen feet for ten minutes. A hairy woodpecker stopped briefly on the same tree during that period. Earlier a snipe had flown up from a marshy slimes below us at the foot of a bank, while we were watching two solitary sandpipers. Warblers, sparrows, kinglets, and other small birds were omnipresent. One exuberant little mite of a ruby-crowned kinglet even gave us a prolonged rendition of the well-known lilting spring song, and followed it up with much chattering to itself. Twice we were to see a bittern fly past. Sharp-shinned and sparrow hawks sped fleetingly overhead. We stopped by a dripping, black tamarack-spruce bog to hear a whiskey-jack (Canada jay) complain, while a pileated woodpecker's "song" rang out from among the gaunt and gangling jack pines on the hillside beyond. While crossing a wind-swept slimes we stopped to watch two Lapland longspurs feeding quite unconcernedly at our feet. The migration dates for this species seem to be very erratic. Our search for the golden and black-bellied plovers seen the preceding day proved fruitless, though we did find the greater yellow-legs which flew toward Mr. Trowern, ostensibly in response to his imitation. The real reason, however, on this occasion was that I chased it in his direction. These were the highlights of the most profitable weekend from a birding standpoint that I have spent here.

Since then most of our birds have departed, including the starlings, though I saw one on Saturday (November 10). The first real touch of winter came on October 19. The night was frosty and a chill wind scattered the snowflakes as the voices

of many clamouring geese floated out of the dark. Then this flock of waveys (blue or snow geese) sped southward leaving me with a lonesome feeling. A chill ran down my spine as I thought of the cold months ahead. No more warblers. No more sparrows. It was like a tragic ending to a happy story. I went back into the house.

There has been up to a foot of snow in the bush, and the temperature went down to 8 below zero early this month (November). Days have passed with no birds being seen. The commonest birds now are the chickadees (chiefly black-capped), whiskey-jacks, pine grosbeaks and redpolls. Some of these have found a bird feeder erected by my class as an Audubon Club activity. It was not put to use until all those birds had left which might have been induced to linger farther north than their usual winter range. The only bird I have seen during the past week which cannot be expected to stay throughout the winter was a Canada goose. It flew past the school window in a driving snowstorm, when all water nearby was frozen. There will not be a great variety or number of birds here now, but the gay colour of the finches and grosbeaks, and the cheery friendliness of the chickadees and whiskey-jacks will ensure that no enthusiasm is lost during the long hard months to come."

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A recent letter from Mr. James R. Mackintosh of Glendon Hall contains some interesting remarks and queries which I include here. Perhaps some of the club members can answer the queries. Mr. Mackintosh writes:

"Our valley, if one just hits it right is really good; but I have roamed from Bayview to Sunnybrook and was rewarded with the sight of one jack rabbit, that and nothing more. Again, along the river banks, I have seen every warbler reported in this area except the hooded warbler which you located in the bush near Blythwood.

Our blue heron is still with us. I saw him to-day. No sight or sound of the pileated. We have, however, an abundance of hairy and downy woodpeckers and dozens of chickadees, mostly black, also brown-capped. A pair of kinglets are making a thorough search of the walls of Glendon Hall among the Boston ivy stems. They have been here for some days now and it is a grand location for viewing them close up, as, if the hunting is good they will come within a foot of you. Robins are still with me, and to-day were interested in some berries on a honeysuckle bush; they have cleared up most of the other berries including several bushels of mountain ash or rowans.

I wonder if some one could tell me why birds do not eat the berries of the Privet (*Ligustrum Amurensis*) or *Kerria Japonica*? Also few birds eat *Berberis* seeds, pheasants being

the only species I have seen do so. The mock orange (*Philadelphus*) on the other hand is an excellent source of food for most finches.

The pine grosbeak goes to work on the snowberry and coral berry (*Symphoricarpos albus* and *S. ruber*). I have seen no other bird touch them. The pods of the locust provide food for the junco and tree sparrow in my backyard; I save a pound or two each year. By way of variety in his diet the nuthatch will accept orange pips which he opens without difficulty. I am in hopes that your fine article on Glendon Hall will cause a lot more bird watchers to visit Glendon Hall.

A raccoon paid us a visit lately and tried hard but vainly to reach the suet which is slung on two very thin wires stretched between two elms. He is quite a tightwire artist, but needing all four paws to hold his balance he could not reach the suet with his teeth. My wife, sympathetic soul, has placed a little tidbit for him every night since, and my chow dog goes a little short on her rations in consequence."

Book Reviews

Fall of The Sparrow By Jay Williams, Illustrated by Richard Taylor. New York, Oxford University Press. Pp. 156. Price \$3.50

Man's abuse of the earth and of his fellow creatures is a grim story. Perhaps never before has the record of destruction and annihilation been set forth in so succinct a manner as in this book. It is a story that needs to be told and retold again and again. In that sense this work is a contribution.

It is unfortunate, however, that the effort was made to tell this grim history in a humorous vein. There are certain things about which one cannot be funny with success. This, I think, is one of them. At any rate the "humour" does not win the reader in this book. It merely adds a sense of macabre to the ugly record. The impression one gets is that man, the fool, is leading all creatures, himself included, down the halls of history, in a mad dance of death. The illustrations only enhance this feeling.

Nonetheless at the end the author sees a wee bit of reason creeping into the picture, which, most inappropriately, he calls "saving grace". Men, he suggests, are becoming conscious of their record of destruction, and of its import for all of them. They are beginning to try to change their course, to "conserve", to "use wisely". This, of course, is true. But having read the record one wonders if man can so mend his ways in the light of "reason" and without the aid of a very different "saving grace" than that to which Mr. Williams refers. Does Mr. Williams himself believe this? His conclusion leaves that query unanswered for he says:

"In the course of learning how to protect himself, man has learned how to destroy. He has, in the past, made good tries at depopulating the planet; he may yet succeed in wiping out at least his own species. If he is to survive in fact, if he is to qualify as the most adaptable of animals, the man must learn first of all to adapt himself. The rest comes easy."

(R.M.S.)

John Burrough's America Selections from the writings of the Hudson River Naturalist. Edited by Farida A. Wiley. Illustrated by Francis Lee Jaques. Pp. 304 The Devin-Adair Company.

"The most precious things of life are near at hand, without money and without price. Each of you has the whole wealth of the universe at your very door. All that I ever had, and still have, may be yours by stretching forth your hand and taking it."

This is the opening quotation in this splendid book of selections made from the writings of John Burroughs by Miss Farida Wiley, Secretary-Treasurer of the John Burroughs Association. As Julian Burroughs says in the foreword Miss Wiley is well fitted to be editor of this most readable book. She knew John Burroughs and the Hudson River Country; she has a wide knowledge of natural history. Miss Wiley has taught botany at the Audubon Nature Camp in Maine for several years most successfully.

Miss Wiley tells us that "Burroughs' field of study was among the so-called commonplace things of life. They cease to be commonplace when they left the tip of his pen". The following quotations illustrate this gift of expressive writing. "One spring morning five swans flew above my barn in single file, going northward...They made a breeze in my mind, like a noble passage in a poem." The drumming of the ruffed grouse was "as if the solitude itself had at last found a voice". The oven-bird John Burroughs called "the wood accentor". The cardinal flower was "not so much something colored as it is color itself".

And yet John Burroughs appreciated that "Nature does nothing merely for beauty; beauty follows as the inevitable result ... Indeed when I go to the woods or fields or ascend to the hill top, I do not seem to be gazing upon beauty at all, but to be breathing it like the air ... I would not have the litter and debris removed or the banks trimmed or the ground painted. What I enjoy is commensurate with the earth and the sky itself. It clings to the rocks and trees; it rises from every tangle and chasm; it perches on the dry oak stubs with the hawks and buzzards...I am not a spectator of, but a participant in it. It is not adornment; its roots strike to the centre of the earth."

One feels John Burroughs sense of unity in all nature all through

this book. Another selection that Miss Wiley has chosen says, "Nature comes home to one most when he is at home, the stranger and traveller finds her a stranger and traveller also. One's own landscape comes in time to be a sort of outlying part of himself broadcast upon it and it reflects his own moods and feelings; ... cut those trees and he bleeds; mar those hills, and he suffers."

John Burroughs' search for truth was unending. "The power to see straight is the rarest of gifts; to see no more and no less than is actually before you, to be able to detach yourself and see the thing as it actually is, uncolored or unmodified by your own sentiments or prepossessions. In short to see with your reason as well as with your perceptions that is to be an observer and to read the book of nature aright". "We all see about the same; to me it means much, to another little."

The illustrations of this book are something to treasure also. The black and white drawings by a master of this art, Francis Lee Jaques, illustrate the text with sympathy and authenticity. May I call your attention particularly to the full page illustrations "Eagles and Crows in Spring", "Bobolink in Flight Song" and "The Maple Sugar Bush"? At the ends of several chapters are several smaller, equally delightful sketches.

This charming book is one to be read and kept near at hand to refer to often for the pictures that it conjures up, and for the restful spirit of serenity that it imparts.

B. E. Jaquith

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Jokes about bird watchers and bird banders are beginning to appear in many places, proof of the widespread interest. Here is one Mrs. Harvey Agnew, one of our members, sent in for the amusement of readers of the Newsletter.

"The Washington Biological Survey puts metal bands on wild birds to study their migratory habits. The bands say simply, "Wash. Biol, Surv."

An irate taxpayer complained, "Sirs: I shot one of your pet crows and followed instructions. I washed it, I boiled it, and I surved it. It was terrible. Stop fooling the people!"

R. M. Saunders,
Editor.