

# Toronto Field Naturalist's Club

## A P R I L M E E T I N G S

Monday, April 7th, 1952, at 8.15 p.m., at the

ROYAL ONTARIO MUSEUM

Speaker: Mr. R.D. Ussher,  
Biologist, Fish & Wild Life Division,  
Department of Lands & Forests.

Subject: The Park Naturalist Program in Algonquin Park.

Movies by Mr. Wm. Carrick.

## R O T U N D A D I S P L A Y

Photographs pertaining to Naturalist work in Algonquin Park  
- - through courtesy of Mr. R.D.Ussher.

## A P R I L O U T I N G S

Saturday, April 12, Purpleville Woods. 2 p.m.

Meet at the church. Purpleville is four miles  
west of Maple. Where the road branches at  
west end of the woods turn right to the church.

In charge of hike: Mrs. Chas. Davies and others of Aurora.

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In connection with the annual meeting of the Federation of  
Ontario Naturalists there will be two outings which may be  
of interest to our members. These will both be held on  
Sunday, April 6, and are as follows:

9.30 a.m. Tour through the Department of Lands & Forests  
Research Station, Maple. Leader, Mr. C. David  
Fowle, Biologist in charge of Wildlife Research,  
Division of Research, Department of Lands and  
Forests.

9.00 a.m. Bird Hike along Toronto Waterfront.  
Meet at Sunnyside (Foot of Parkside Drive on  
Lakeshore Blvd.)

Leader: Mr. James L. Baillie, Division of  
Ornithology, Royal Ontario Museum of Zoology.

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

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## NEWSLETTER

Number 107

March 1952.

Nestling in a pleasant forested dale a concession and a half west of Ballantrae is the farm of Percy and Frances Wright. Thanks to the tinkling of the grapevine, birdwatchers were converging upon this attractive spot this weekend (March 15), for it was reported that a distinguished avian visitor was lingering in the vicinity to partake of the rich fare provided by the Wrights for such travellers. Marshall Bartman and I went along to investigate.

When we drew up outside the farm drive this sunny Saturday morning there was another car standing near the back of the house. Thinking that the Wrights were about to depart to town, we hurried in to ask about the bird before they should go. But it wasn't the Wrights at all. It was Jim Baillie and Gerry Bennett sitting in Gerry's car, patiently watching the feeding station and hoping to see the bird. Like myself Jim had benefitted by grapevine cooperation.

Marshall and I joined them in their car for awhile. Two large pieces of suet fixed above the porch behind the house were the focus of our vigil. Chickadees (black caps) kept flitting in and out repeatedly. Once we saw a rather dingy red-breasted nuthatch getting a share of the suet. Dark and dirty though this fellow was, he was a welcome sight, being the first of his kind any of us has seen this year. Still, he was not the real object of our search.

Becoming a little restless, I volunteered to walk up the hill through the long rows of tall planted evergreens whence we were told our bird usually came. It was pleasant under the pines. Mounds of russet chanklings showed where red squirrels had banquetted during the winter. The sparkling warm sun set the chickadees to singing about my head, and the air was filled with clear whistled fee-bees. I replied, and soon had them looking me over at close range. Down the bank a tiny pool of water gleamed in the middle of a frost-etched

goblet of ice, the headwater of a tributary of the Holland River. A blue jay slipped silently across an open glade, vanishing into the impenetrable depths of a large spruce. That blue jay gave me quite a start. But when I got back to the car I had had no sign of the bird we wanted. Nor had my companions. A tour of the farm buildings was equally fruitless. Jim and Gerry, who had been around quite a while, decided to give up the hunt and go elsewhere. They backed out and drove away.

Not more than three minutes later as Marshall and I were standing behind the house, wondering what to do, there was a sudden movement, a swish of wings, and there a few feet from where we stood, was the bird. A pert, saudy Canada jay, looking us over with just as much curiosity as we bestowed in return. From round the corner of the house appeared Miss Wright who called to us "there's your bird". So it was, and were we ever gratified! There had been several whiskey jacks seen in the Toronto region this winter, but this is the first one either of us had been able to catch up with. Since this bird is always a rarity in our area - I have seen it on only two other occasions in this region in twenty years - I was all the more stirred to have a sight of this one.

As if conscious of its importance to us, the jay put on quite a show. Cocking up its long grey white-edged tail until it resembled an enormous wren, and always keeping a beady black eye on us, it hopped along the fence top for several yards, quite an acrobatic strut. Then it paraded across a shed roof, pitched down to the ground, only to fly up immediately to the ridge of a log cabin that ends the yard. From this point it launched into a glide on widespread wings, every flight feather fanned out and separately visible, which brought it to the largest piece of suet. Three good bites were enough, either that or it was nervous of us, for with another quick look it quit the suet, flying directly over our heads, three or four feet away, to a huge spruce tree beside the drive. Safely ensconced high in the middle of the tree the great grey jay cleaned its feathers and scraped its bill. Save for a low mewling sound, twice repeated, we heard nothing at all from this bird. At last it disappeared up toward the evergreen grove where I had been walking, leaving us tremendously elated.

We owed our good fortune, indeed, to Mrs. Charles Davies of Aurora, to whom Miss Wright first reported the jay, and who passed the news on to me.

Though the whiskey jack was the highlight of our trip, it was by no means the only good sight. Continuing north from Ballantrae we drove straight on through Vivian and past the West Franklin road, resisting an urge to turn off to our usual haunts on Pefferlaw Brook. We would explore today.

Wandering the roads is always a good practice for birders, especially in late winter. And despite the crows migrating over the

bare fields, the conditions in this area were still those of the tag end of winter. Not much was needed to give the wheel of nature a little turn and bring in spring. With the snow piles reduced to dirty old drifts, shadowing under snow fences and on north-facing slopes, and the streams cracking along their edges, only a slight further touch of the warm hand of the March sun will free the frozen soil and let the green shoulder of the vernal maid show through.

Nonetheless it was winter birds, not yet departed for northern homes, that we sought. The Canada jay, one of these, promised well, and as it proved, promised faithfully. On the road we were traveling, there is a hill just west of Zephyr Crossing. As we came abreast of the crown of this hill and were admiring the wide sweep of swamp land ahead, a number of small birds flew up from the roadbank. Fortunately they did not take off for good, but alighted in some trees near by. Once out of the car we could hear them calling, the soft cha-cha notes, that told us they were redpolls. Some even burst into trills that hinted at springtime urges. Though they left the trees, wheeled about, separated, and seemed to be going away, they all came back to the same bank and settled to feed. As is not seldom the case in flocks of redpolls, one of the number was a conspicuously light-coloured bird with a pure white rump, in other words, a hoary or Arctic redpoll. This is the first of its kind I have heard of this winter, and my first in two years.

The swamp west of Brown Hill is a likely-looking place for birds, but it was empty today. Our next bird encounter took place near Baldwin, where a single bird of good size dove off of telephone wires from view as we passed. A roaring troop of farm dogs greeted us with vociferous belligerence as we tried to drive in a lane to re-discover the bird. Even so we managed to spot our bird, and were delighted to see that it was a shrike. However, it was too far away to know whether it was a northern or a migrant shrike. Driving back a bit we got closer, but still not close enough. Obviously the bird was a light-coloured specimen, an adult. Then, as I was considering venturing up a very muddy bank, the shrike left its perch on the wires, dipped down out of sight only to reappear at once flying right over our heads. It seemed as though it knew we wanted to examine it with intimate scrutiny. Or was it because it had a clear new spring dress and wanted to show off! For it was certainly a migrant shrike, immaculately devoid of vermiculations on the breast. Here then was a spring arrival. The way this jaunty hunter sat on tops of cedar trees and looked around suggested a survey of the countryside for a suitable home site. This record, made well north of the Toronto area, is earlier than my earliest previous record for Toronto by five days.

Where the northbound road joined the highway along the shore of Lake Simcoe we were stopped again by small birds flying. This time they were only house sparrows but in following them in our glasses we were led to look into an old apple tree. Therein I spied only

several dozen frozen apples but Marshall had better luck. In a crotch of the tree, resting quietly, glistening like a golden ball, was a wonderful male evening grosbeak. Why this ordinarily sociable bird should be there all alone was a mystery. Are there melancholics among birds? Or do flocks ostracize some of their members?

We drove on turning towards Virginia Beach. Not far from the beach a large new manure pile we discovered was serving as a watch-tower and singing perch for a horned lark! Is this additional proof that birds do not smell? However that may be this fellow didn't seem to mind. From his oderiferous vantage point he sent tinkling music heavenward with as much abandon as if he had a rosebush beneath his feet.

We ate our lunches sitting in the car overlooking the wind-scoured surface of ice-bound Lake Simcoe. The scene here was wintry enough. A long line of evergreen trees led out across the ice to the island far off shore, marking the trail for walkers. A dozen or more little fishing huts were dotted over the ice mostly to the east of Virginia Beach. No one was to be seen on the ice anywhere, though we were assured it was still safe. An ominous cracking sound along the shore made us wonder just what the value of that assurance was. The only bird anywhere to be seen was a crow, hastily bound for other parts.

So far as bird observations went our trip ended at Sutton where we were brought to a halt by the sight of thirty evening grosbeaks picking up Manitoba maple seeds from a lawn in the village. The trees themselves were stripped, probably some time past. These seeds had been buried under snow drifts that were now melting off. The birds were gleaning at the edges of the retreating snow and ice, and could be seen pulling half-exposed seeds out of the snow as well as picking others up from already cleared grass. As with other flocks of this species I have seen this winter well over half the birds were males. At one time we had 17 brilliant males in view at once on the ground from ten to twenty feet in front of us. It was a lovely sight, a fitting close to our day's observations.

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To those of you who are looking eagerly for signs of spring, the following remarkable record sent in by a member of the club will make an instant appeal. She writes, "On Thursday evening, March 13, a few minutes before six o'clock, Robbie Manson returned to his summer home on Avenue Road. No, Robbie Manson is not a little boy or a young man; he is a robin and since the spring of 1944 when he was first noticed, he has returned to the same window-sill. Usually he has come in March; but once it was February 26, and one year he appeared on February 19, in the midst of a snow-storm, on the sheltered back step, where he sang a little song until the door opened. Thereupon, he promptly flew around to his usual window-sill. This is the first year he has not arrived in early morning. As he must

now be, at least, nine years old, one was by no means sure he would return this year, although Bent gives an instance where a robin raised and kept in captivity, lived for seventeen years.

The first year he was seen it was after a great deal of perseverance that he was persuaded to come to the sill to be fed. Robins, in spite of living so close to man, do not readily become familiar; and it was more to prove that it could be done than for any other reason, that he was coaxed to eat out of the hand. However, it proved to have been a wise move, because each year, upon his return he invariably comes at once and eats raisins from the opened hand. No strange robin would do this. Generally, he comes for a supply about once an hour; when there is no other food, oftener than that. However, no precise record has been kept of this. The last two years he has had no mate, so, instead of leaving the garden at the end of July as formerly, he has left about the middle of May, probably to spend the rest of the summer with other males who have found themselves in the same position. The autumn routine is always the same - a return in late August or early September, and the departure for the south in late October. One year, he remained a little while into November.

How is one to be sure it is the same robin? Besides the fact that just any robin will not come and be fed by hand and the fact that, early in his career, he lost two claws from the left foot, there is as much difference between two robins as between two children. It is only a matter of becoming acquainted."

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From Mrs. Lois Sisman, well-known Aurora member of the club, who has been spending some time at Lake of Bays this winter, comes the following interesting account. Mrs. Sisman writes, "One evening last week I was driving home from Bayside at six o'clock and stopped my car to let what I thought was a dog pass on the highway, and much to my surprise it was a beautiful red fox. He was eating his evening meal which looked very much like a red squirrel, picked it up quickly and ran to the nearby cliff. After making sure I was harmless he continued his meal in peace and I watched until the light failed. Two days later I drove past about the same time and was delighted to see a pair of foxes romping and playing in the same bank just like a couple of school youngsters. I pulled my car to one side to enjoy the play. They came to the back end, and seemed to be fascinated with the exhaust pipe, then scampered across the highway into the woods, apparently searching for food, looking back at me every little while with perky upright ears.

I have a feeding box outside my kitchen window, and each day feed two flying squirrels. They come just at dusk to eat bread crumbs from my hand. Yesterday I had five chickadees, one hairy woodpecker, one downy woodpecker, two white-breasted nuthatches and one red-breasted nuthatch all at one time. The pileated woodpecker

has only come once to the box, but he is here almost every day working on my hemlock tree. A flock of pine grosbeaks were feeding on sumac in the gully on Sunday, while several Canada jays quietly slipped through the trees nearby, and about twelve white-winged cross bills flew up from a sand pile left by the Department of Highways. I have seen numerous gold finches, purple finches, evening grosbeaks and only one flock of snow buntings, also picked up a dead barred owl that had just been hit by a passing car."

(Ed. Note: Though I have heard of screech owls being hit by cars, and have even found a screech owl victim on the road, this is the first time I have ever known of a barred owl being killed in this way. Any other instance of this fate occurring to owls should be reported for the sake of the record. If you know of any such occurrences, please send them in with the details of date and place.)

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Mr. Roy Wallace sends an interesting description of a sparrow hawk hunting in the city. He writes, "Today an outcry among the starlings and house sparrows in the backyard attracted my attention, and I looked out in time to see a female sparrow hawk alight on the fence. A group of sparrows scolded from the lilac bush, and one hid behind a verandah post, motionless, feathers tightly pressed against the body, looking strangely thin and stiff. Others must have been 'frozen' in the same way at the base of the verandah, for the hawk dropped out of sight, then flew back to the fence with one in its talons.

It took the hawk twenty-five minutes to finish its meal, none of which was wasted, its tail rising and falling all the while in characteristic fashion. The last portion from which no more flesh could be torn was bolted down with somewhat of an effort.

Then followed a period of fluffing her feathers, wiping her bill on the fence, and stretching her wings above her back. Again she turned her attention to the still scolding sparrows, two of which hid behind verandah posts. The hawk flew to the same place as before. It did not reappear for two minutes, and when it did, flew off in a different direction. The glimpse was too brief to be sure, but it probably had another sparrow, for when I went out three sparrows were still 'frozen' on this bit of ground. No attempt on either occasion was made by the hawk to catch the scolding birds in the tree.

Within minutes the sparrows were in a grand uproar of 'courtship squabbles', all danger apparently forgotten."

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As an addendum to the January issue of the Newsletter on brown-headed chickadees the following two reports from Collingwood are of

great interest. One is from Mr. John L. Smart, who says (February 8) that "Mr. Porteous has seen the Hudsonian chickadees several times and reports they will eat peanuts from the hand like the black-cap. I tried to see them but was not successful till today. On the shore near Craigleith, about a mile east of Gilbert Patterson's we saw about fifteen. Mr. Porteous had educated them to eat peanuts out of the hand, so as soon as we arrived with the peanuts they came right out of the cedars to get some food. We were there about three-quarters of an hour, and both kinds were continually coming out of the bush for peanuts. About one third were Hudsonians. We tried holding a peanut in our lips and they would come and take it so quick that one would wonder where it had gone." To this Mr. H. M. Porteous adds (March 5) "I thought I would give you a report on the Hudsonian chickadees which have been around my cottage which is located close to the Camp for crippled children. I first noticed these birds, about 20 of them, in January although they might have been around before then. They stayed on in this number for some time and a few are still at the cottage. I go to the cottage at least twice a week, good and bad weather and feed the birds. At first the Hudsonians were wild and would not eat out of my hand, the same as the black-capped chickadees, but after spending about half an hour with them, I managed to tame them. Now they are very tame and boss the black-capped ones. I believe only a pair or so are left but there are dozens of the black-capped ones around."

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Mr. H. Roy Ivor, of Erindale, whose studies of birds living at his aviary are well-known, makes the following valuable observation in support of the view that certain birds find their food by hearing. He writes, "I was particularly glad to read of your comments upon the method by which the pileated woodpecker locates his food for it confirms my contention that, contrary to the belief of many authorities, the robin, when he holds his head sideways, is listening for earthworms. These worms do make a sound while drawing vegetation into a hole.

I base my contention on the fact that a bird on top of sacking in a mealworm box turns his head to one side exactly as does the robin. Mealworms make a decided rustling sound and, while no worm is in sight, a bird will, after listening, peck at the spot under which is a worm or worms. In addition to this, several shingles on the side of my cottage have holes bored through the centre by the hairy woodpecker. Undoubtedly this bird has heard some insect behind the shingle which certainly could not be seen.

I cannot add anything to what you say about the destroyers of owls."

R. M. Saunders,

Editor.