

Toronto Field Naturalists' Club

M A Y M E E T I N G S

Monday, May 5th, 1952, at 8.00 p.m.

(Please note change of time)

at the

ROYAL ONTARIO MUSEUM

Annual Meeting

Dr. W. W. Hughes of Embro, Ontario will show his colour movie, entitled "Bird Behavior". To the majority of our members Dr. Hughes will be no stranger, as we have had the pleasure of seeing his pictures several times before. To those who have not yet seen his films, we can promise a most pleasing and artistically satisfying experience.

ROTUNDA DISPLAY

Exhibition of the work of Mr. Herbert Milne, well-known member of the Woodstock Natural History Society.

SPRING OUTINGS

For details of the spring outings to be held in May and early June, please consult the Spring Outings Program which was enclosed with the last Newsletter.

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

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Dilatory as this season has been in its progress toward violets and swallows it has not failed to bring its rewards. To the watchful no season, certainly no springtime, however dark or dull, snowy, rainy or gust-ridden can be a failure. Under dark clouds, through rain-spattered gloom, fly the white swans, speeding calmly north to their summer homes on the Arctic tundra, creating their own sunlight and uttering a paean of praise as they go. Snowflakes whirl from a grey sky in mid-April and we mutter; yet out of the white-flecked dusk comes the thrilling nuptial song of the woodcock. Risen from his dancing floor of brown and sodden grass he pours out his heart amid the dark and the cold. At the edge of a black woodland pool from which grey old ice has only half released its grip, a spring peeper flutes triumphantly. Beside a snow-drift a hepatica boldly thrusts out a tender green leaf. Here then is the true spirit of spring, unflinching faith in the endless miracle of rebirth.

Throughout the long season when the northland of the earth is beginning to throb with excitement of creative living once again what is more thrilling than the passage of the geese heading for their northern nesting grounds. Their honking music, falling from the dark sky of a yet unlit dawn, will draw one from bed quicker far than the clarion call of the bugler. Listening beside an open window we try in vain to pierce the lessening gloom, but only our ears tell us, as the victorious chorus recedes in the distance that overhead has passed a long V of courageous birds, shouting "onward, onward, to the north and new life!"

Sometimes we are more favoured. We are allowed to gaze upon the flocks as they rest, recuperating, energies spent upon some arduous northward spur. So it was this year for me when I was privileged to visit the watery miles of Oak Orchard Swamp with birding friends from Buffalo.

Early on Sunday morning (March 23) we started out from North Buffalo. A raw wind with a spit of rain in it slashed across our windshields and stung our faces when we opened the windows for better looking, but no one's spirits were dampened. Mile after mile the birders' procession by a most intricate and devious route wound through the country side, visiting one "sink" after another. A sink is a low flooded field or the edge of a swamp overflowing from wooded copses into an expanse of treeless open water. This slightly rolling area is full of sinks whose expanses of shallow water provide a great attraction to waterfowl seeking rest and refuge in migration. From Clarence to Alabama we found our way, the trip reaching a climax at the Alabama sinks, Oak Orchard swamp and Stafford's Pond. In this latter stretch it is possible to ride for several miles along roads that keep on top of low ridges where observers can gaze down on open water almost the whole while at this time of year.

Everywhere there were ducks, redwings, meadowlarks, killdeer, countless birds, but above all geese, geese, geese. At one flooded cornfield we drove up alongside a flock of 900 Canada geese that stood and stared at us, all honking uproariously, less than 200 feet distant. We were astonished when they did not depart. Every one of the flooded fields and swamps that we surveyed from the ridge road had its quota of geese. Some were jammed. Some had a sparse company. In all there was life and movement and wild wonderful music. Where the geese were massed together choruses rose to the sky. Even those that were feeding were never quiet for very long. Those that were flying, and there were always V's and lines, flocks and single birds on the wing, kept the air ringing with their clamour.

Once we spied a strange goose amongst the Canadas, too far away for us to be sure at first glance, though the whitish neck made us suspicious. All binoculars were promptly levelled on this unsuspecting stranger. Telescopes appeared on fence posts or were steadied on peoples' backs. All argument ceased when, as though thinking to please so intent an audience, this goose sprang into the air, displaying to perfection the white and pastel blue wing pattern of the blue goose. How fortunate! One among thousands, showing off to visiting admirers. Nor was the blue the only bird to command everyone's attention. Indeed it was the blue that should us the second stranger, for in following the blue goose in flight, someone picked up a large white bird in his glasses. In an instant all binoculars were centered upon the new find. First of all it was not a swan, though we had seen a few whistling swans at a previous sink, and this could easily have been one. Every observer

was trying hard to make a snow goose out of it just for the sake of the record, you know. It would look very fine to have three species of geese in the swamp together. But no, this goose was too large for a snow. Moreover, it was all white save for a dusky-hued neck, and did not have the black wing tips of a snow goose. At last, after much cogitation, puzzlement and observation, we came to the only conclusion possible. This was a much rarer goose than any we had tried to metamorphose it into, no less in truth, than an albino Canada goose, an almost completely albino bird. That such oddities occur in most if not all species of birds and animals is a well-known fact but to have a chance to see one alive and associating with its ordinary brethren does not often come our way. It was interesting to note that though this bird seemed to keep rather to itself, we saw no signs of unfriendliness towards it on the part of its more conventionally clothed kin.

At Stafford's Pond, where the largest single lot of geese was seen, something or someone frightened the flock. With a roar like a rushing wind 2,000 geese sprang into the air at once. Up they swept in one vast assemblage, all calling protest, until the whole sky was filled with flying bodies and musical shouting. Round and round they circled until finally satisfied to have demonstrated their opinion of disturbance, they slid down the breeze to the farther end of the pond to join other hundreds of their kind in the serious business of finding a meal. Such a dramatic episode was fitting climax to our morning with the geese.

What a wonderful spot this Oak Orchard Swamp is at the time of the goose migration. Undoubtedly this is the greatest concentration of geese to occur in our region. Indeed, it would appear to be the greatest amassing of Canada geese to occur anywhere in the east between inaccessible Hannah Bay at the south end of James Bay and the Atlantic coast wintering grounds in the southern states. Today we saw 15,000 Canada geese, three times as many as I have ever seen together in any one place. Such a concentration is small, according to Mississippi Valley standards, but anyone who watched the massed flocks today would hardly have noticed that he was seeing 15,000 instead of 25,000 or 50,000.

All these birds are to be seen not so very far from Toronto. If one draws a straight line from Toronto to Oak Orchard Swamp it will be found that the Swamp is only a little way outside the "Toronto region" as defined by the Royal Ontario Museum. True, that means going straight across the lake and not many bird watchers proceed by plane or helicopter as yet. Nor would most of us tackle Lake Ontario in a boat in March. But there is an easier way. By the Queen Elizabeth Way we can reach Niagara Falls very expeditiously, and Oak Orchard Swamp is only 35 or 40 miles east of Niagara Falls, New York. This means that it is about 120 or 125 miles from Toronto, not much further than Long Point where so many of us go every year. Why then should Toronto observers deprive themselves of one of the greatest birding experiences available to them? Next year when the season of goose migration rolls around again don't forget Oak Orchard

Swamp. This area will grow in favour with the geese for most of it has become a government-controlled refuge. Your chances of seeing thousands of geese here should grow better every year.

A few days after I was there Rev. Henry and Margaret Marsh drove down. When they returned Mrs. Marsh wrote enthusiastically to me "Henry and I drove over to Oak Orchard Swamp. We had a day we'll never forget - 10,000 geese, 20 swans, 400 pintails, 2 turkey vultures and so many others.

Just beyond Wolcottsville we heard the glorious contralto honking, and overhead we saw hundreds and hundreds of geese. It was music in the air for they formed lines that intermeshed, even as a symphony of sound and sight. Then they settled and we were aware of hundreds more reaching away as far as we could see. It was near a barn and a road went right through the sink ... We walked out there, and oh, we got to within 300 yards and really saw the pattern of the feathers, the tipping as they fed, the flight pattern and listened awestruck to the glorious sound..." Surely Oak Orchard Swamp is a spot not to be neglected in the future.

On my own trip on March 23rd I was taken on beyond Oak Orchard Swamp to the banks of the Genesee River where we spent the afternoon looking for eagles and red-bellied woodpeckers. Our efforts were unavailing until near Avon we got permission to enter a farm in whose woods we were assured we could not fail.

As for the eagles they were easy. Even from the edge of the highway we could see two huge nests, one in a group of isolated tall trees in a pasture, the other at the edge of an extensive wood. One of these, I was told, was abandoned last year for unknown reasons, and the second is a new nest. To confirm occupancy a full-plumaged bald eagle soared up over the wood, head and tail gleaming in the sun, for now the weather had cleared and we were in the middle of a lovely spring afternoon. Several times we saw the eagle high in the sky keeping watch over his domain, as we made our way through the realm of the king of birds. Our interest was centered henceforth upon red-bellied woodpeckers.

A long muddy trek brought us to a seemingly impassable marsh beyond which rose the desired wood. Several of the younger fellows tried hopping from clump to clump of reeds, and two managed to get across with a little wetting. Everyone else gave up save Win Brockner and myself, who had wandered along the edge of the marsh well to the east. From here we discovered a path leading around the marsh. The two who had hopped the clumps were, in fact, on an island. The route we had chanced upon proved to be the only way to get to the wood by the river. Having set our hearts upon finding the woodpeckers we kept on alone. By a long detour through pastures, over fences, and alongside flooded meadows we came at last to the wood, on the banks of the Genesee.

As we reached the broad, brown flood, a small flock of geese flew up honking. They circled about and resettled behind the wood across the stream. From that quarter we could hear a large number of geese calling. Several flocks, flying in from the south, arriving presumably from Lake Cayuga, another stopping place, landed in the same spot where we could see nothing of them once they were down.

Against this background chorus of honking geese, distant enough to be a mellow accompaniment of other sounds, we heard after a little the churr-churr calls of a red-bellied woodpecker. But like the geese it was across the river, and there was no means of crossing that swirling spate. We must content ourselves with diligent scanning of the tall trees on the opposite bank to see if we could detect some sign of the caller. With no amount of earnest looking, however, could we detect the red-belly's whereabouts. Only its tantalizing calls told us at intervals that it had not left. To add to our frustration a red-headed woodpecker started making ripping retorts to the red-belly from a patch of trees on the same bank but a little further upstream. Then another redhead responded from a wood on our side, just to our rear. We rushed hither and yon, tapped on fence posts, imitated the callers, all we gained was a repetition of churrs and rips from our unseen tappers. Almost it seemed that this was a little game and the hidden trio was having fun at our expense - birds mocking the too sage humans! A rich voiced bluebird sang from near at hand, adding his carol to the scene. And he too remained invisible!

We were reduced to leaning on a fence and gazing contemplatively across the stream. We had been so engaged for some minutes when a slender dog - no, a fox, came trotting along the other bank, making from one wood to the other. Oblivious of us the fox ambled beside the water until he was directly opposite where we stood. Still unaware of us he was suddenly startled at a series of shots. Someone neither we nor the fox could see was shooting on the far side of the woods. Immediately our fox turned on his track, darted to the tall weeds so that there was good cover between him and the shooter, though he was still in full view for us. Following his cautious course with our binoculars we saw him finally sit down after he had regained the shelter of the farther wood. There he was rigidly quiet, framed for us between two stout trunks with a shaft of sunlight falling full upon him. How I would like to have had a painting of him so! There he sat unmoving, until a new barrage of shots sent a huge concourse of geese honking into the sky. As the geese surged up the fox vanished. Assembling above the trees, the geese, a thousand strong, took a course straight over our heads, calling loudly to each other as they sped away. A noble sight this for which we could thank the shooter across the river. We can only hope that it was rabbit and not geese that he was aiming at when they went up.

We had now spent a long time on the river bank. The others would be getting restive, wondering where we were. So we turned to go,

satisfied that if we had not seen our red-bellied woodpeckers we had at least seen and heard wonderful things. Then as we set our faces to the return trip all of a sudden we heard churr churr once again. Looking around, we saw, bounding across the pasture in which we stood, two red-bellied woodpeckers, crossing from the wood on our side to the wood across the stream whence had come the other calls. Now that we had ceased to strive to see, we were permitted to look upon them. We watched them until they disappeared among the trees where their relative dwells. Thus was rounded off a perfect birding day.

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Stuart Thompson writes to tell me that the Carolina wren is still in residence in the Moore Park ravine and can be heard singing there. It might pay to walk down to the Don from Moore Avenue some morning. Even with the present half-destroyed character of this ravine, the chance of hearing the rolling song of this southerner is well worth the effort.

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For both the beginner and the more experienced bird watcher and nature enthusiast, there comes each summer an opportunity to learn and to observe, which is very much worth while, namely the Nature Camp, which is held by the Federation of Ontario Naturalists. The camp is being held this year at Camp Billie Bear, on Bella Lake seventeen miles north east of Huntsville. For the purposes of such a camp we know of no more ideal surroundings, forest, lake, bog and field being all within walking distance of the lodge. The staff, headed as in former years by Professor A.F. Coventry, includes our own president-elect Mr. Jas. L. Baillie; Mr. W.D.Sutton of the McIlwraith Club of London, Ont.; Dr. Jas. H. Soper of the University of Toronto, Department of Botany, and Mrs. C.C.Heimbürger. The camp opens on Saturday 28th June and runs through to Saturday 12th July. The fee is \$75.00 which includes board, tuition and gratuities to the hotel personnel. Application forms may be obtained from The Federation of Ontario Naturalists, Marine Building, 85 King Street East, Toronto.

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UNDER THE SEA-WIND. A naturalist's picture of ocean life. By Rachel L. Carson (Toronto. Oxford University Press 1952 Pp.314, Price \$4.00)

As the now justly famous The Sea Around Us told of the great forces that move and make the seas of the world, so this second work by Miss Carson tells of the life that teems in and over the waters of the sea. She describes how wings flash and gleam over rolling waves as sanderlings make their way northward to their summer homes in the Arctic. On their journey the sanderlings encounter all

manner of creatures living, dying, journeying like themselves to fulfill the great urges of life. In their Arctic summerland we watch them building their nests and surveying the life around them - the lemmings, the jaegers, snowy owls, Arctic foxes and so many others. Then comes "summer's end" and the return migration with all its adventures. We are introduced to "migrants of the spring sea", to the mackerel running to spawn, and we follow the life of the mackerel from birth near the shore out through the shallows to the seaways, seeing them in relation to all their fellows of the ocean wave. Most dramatic perhaps is the story of the eels, which we start with at "Bittern Pond", a little pond under the hill, where "cattails, bur reeds, spike rushes and pickerel weeds stand rooted in the soft mud around its shores and on the side under the hill, wade out halfway into its waters". There the eels are "life pieces of slender glass rods shorter than a man's finger". We see them grow and prosper, then making their long mysterious journey to the deep Atlantic basin where congregate the spawning eels of "almost every river and stream of the whole Atlantic coast from Greenland to Central America."

This "second book" of Miss Carson's is really a first book, published in 1942, but lost then to public attention in the midst of the war. Though not as mature or as powerful a work as The Sea Around Us it is well worth reviving for it gives to readers a true sense of the incredibly rich life of the seas. Accompanying the text is a very useful glossary of terms - names of birds, fish and other creatures - very useful to all, but especially to those who know little about the ocean. This is an excellent introduction to a knowledge of sea dwellers.

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WILD WINGS By Frank S. Stuart (Toronto. McGraw-Hill Book Company Inc. 1951 Pp. 222. Price \$4.50)

Some time ago I had the pleasure of reviewing Mr. Stuart's City of the Bees, and was very enthusiastic about the vivid way in which the author managed to bring to life the communal existence of these insects. Now I am even more enthusiastic about this story of the migration of the waterfowl, focussed for interest's sake upon the history of a pair of pintail ducks. From some hidden refuge in the south we follow them stage by stage, through happiness and hazard to their home in the far, far north, dwell with them as they raise a family, warding off menaces from the young and themselves until they are ready to venture again upon the dangerous business of migration.

Mr. Stuart says he has made "an attempt to show one facet of the beauty of the world". How well he has succeeded! This is a book where every page is touched with the pen of an artist. His word pictures are compelling. You cannot fail to see the smiling marshes, the dashing birds, the threatening attackers, the peaceful haven of safety. Drama as well as beauty crowd the pages. This is

a thrilling, moving book as well as a beautiful one. For the pin-tails as for all creatures life is a great adventure. Life and death, love and hate, hazard and serenity, they are all here. You cannot fail to be carried from beginning to end of this fine book by the very sweep of life that fills this work from cover to cover.

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WINTER BOUQUETS WITH COLOR. The art of arranging dried flowers. By Ruth Gannon. (New York and London. The Studio Publications. 1949 Pp.72)

Although this book has been out for some time I think it is worth while to bring it to the attention of the members of the club, for I suspect that few have made its acquaintance. It may seem to be a little strange to be speaking of a book on Winter Bouquets at the start of spring. Not so, for as the author of this charming little book points out, those who desire to collect the best materials for next winter's bouquets must do so all through the growing season. "When flowers have reached their prime," she says "pick them immediately". In other words, if you want colourful bouquets in the winter, you must pick your plants and flowers when they are at their best, during spring, summer and fall. If properly dried at that time most flowers retain their rich colours. There are many hints and ideas in this book showing how various unexpected materials may be combined in delightfully attractive ways to enliven winter rooms. Lavishly illustrated with portraits of lovely bouquets, some in colour, some in black and white, this book should prove a stimulating guide to everyone who loves flowers and beauty in the home.

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Members of the Club will be interested in an article appearing in the May 1 number of Maclean's Magazine by Mr. Fred Bodsworth, one of our well-known members. It is on the controversial subject of Jack Miner and his work with Canada geese, and is written in a provocative yet sympathetic way.

R. M. SAUNDERS

Editor.