

Toronto Field Naturalists Club

JANUARY MEETINGS

Monday, January 5th, 1953, at 8.15 p.m.

at the

ROYAL ONTARIO MUSEUM

Speaker: Mr. Tom Lee
Archaeologist, National Museum, Ottawa.

Subject: "The Shequindah Prehistoric Indian Site
on Manitoulin Island."

The remarkable discovery of this ancient and fabulous Indian quarry and workshop has been feature news in our local papers and magazines this year. Mr. Lee is the archaeologist credited with its locating, and is in charge of the excavation work. He will tell of these early Indians, their environment, and workings. The lecture is illustrated.

Tickets for the two lectures by Mr. Dick Bird, on British Guiana and Newfoundland, to be held in the auditorium of Bloor Collegiate on February 24 and 26, are still available, and will be on sale in the rotunda. Tickets may also be obtained through the Club secretary, or from the Federation of Ontario Naturalists, 85 King Street East, Toronto. Price \$1.00 each.

JANUARY OUTING

Saturday, January 10, 1953 at 2.00 p.m.

at

Glendon Hall - 1275 Bayview Avenue

Take the Sunnybrook bus to the Hospital, then walk north to the gate of Glendon Hall.

Leader - Mr. Bristol Foster - Vice President, Toronto
Intermediate Naturalists Club.

Fee \$2.00 per year

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

Toronto Field Naturalists' Club.



NEWSLETTER

Number 112

December, 1952.

The unusually good birding this fall has enabled me to count this as one of those gala years in which all three scoters appear on my annual list. These massive dark ducks are far more common, and better known, along the north Atlantic coast of this continent than inland on the Great Lakes. The white-winged scoter occurs with us in considerable numbers, especially in the spring migration in May, but the other two species - the American scoter, and the surf scoter - are far less frequent visitors. No doubt the last two pass through this region every year but as they tend to keep well out in the lake and are never in any great numbers, they easily escape detection. Certain spots along the lake, however, serve as resting and feeding places, and it is there that one has the best chance of spying one of these rare travellers. Simcoe Point at the mouth of Duffin's Creek in Pickering is one of the favoured spots.

You may imagine my delight then when on November 13th Dr. Murray Speirs announced at the Toronto Ornithological Club that he and Mrs. Speirs had, with the help of their trusty telescope, seen two surf scoters several times off Simcoe Point. Since the surf scoter had not figured in my Toronto records for a full decade, my last being during the fall of 1942, I was very anxious to get out to Simcoe Point and try my luck. The chance came on the 15th when Earl Stark and I drove out in quest of the scoters.

It was a mild pleasant afternoon with no wind, offering little prospect of bird movement, for such days are likely to be very quiet ones in the bird world at this time of year. Indeed such was the case on this occasion. We saw scarcely a bird in flight over the land, and few over the lake. The birds everywhere were quiet and hard to find.

At Frenchman's Bay the lake off the end of the last road was nearly empty, save for a lone duck, a scoter but a white-winged not a

surf, flying towards Simcoe Point, some gulls, and a flock of strange waterfowl riding the water near the beach some rods to the east. The puzzlers were resolved at last into a setting of decoys. As soon as we realized what they were we noticed a hunter lying in a pile of rocks and scrub just behind them. When he saw us looking in his direction with binoculars he showed every sign of nervousness, as if he thought we were going to investigate him or warn him off. Perhaps he was only afraid we would spoil his shooting. We watched him follow the course of the white-winged scoter with half-raised gun, and could imagine his comments as the scoter veering slightly to look at the decoys, 'proved too wary to be taken in. The hunter settled back on his rocks, and we left, wishing him a continuation of the same sort of luck.

At Pickering Marsh another flock of decoys floated leadenly in front of the cattails midway along the north shore of the marsh. Here no hunter was to be seen. He must be in the cattails. I was reminded of a recent cartoon which showed two fellows in a helicopter flying over just such a spot, and yelling down to the supposedly hidden hunter "Hey, Jack, they can see you from up here!" Perhaps that was the situation here for not a living duck was to be seen anywhere in the vicinity; only a kingfisher, rattling away in fright from our approach, gave a touch of life to the scene.

Off Simcoe Point we had the good fortune of finding the two surf scoters straight away. Though a good distance off shore we could see the white patches on their heads - they were males - flashing in the sun as they turned from side to side while swimming. The "skunkheads", as they are popularly called, refused to come nearer, indeed swam away from shore, so that the sight was one of those records that may be put in the books, but which are miserably frustrating for the lack of good seeing. None the less a ten-year drought had come to an end and I was satisfied.

On November 23rd, though, the story was quite different. Marshall Bartman had never seen a surf scoter, so, with many misgivings as to the likelihood of being able to produce them, I agreed to go to Simcoe Point for a look. This time a sullen sky hung low over a grey pitching lake, and a raw wind sent white caps spurting in white spume. My first survey of the lake confirmed my low anticipation for it registered emptiness. But on a more careful return sweep, I picked up a little group of three scoters in the glasses. Several minutes passed before I could be sure of the species, for only close watching as the birds rose and fell on the waves revealed the telltale white patches on two of the heads. These were surf scoters and males, no doubt, while the third bird was apparently a female of the same kind. Needless to say both Marshall and I were delighted.

Having looked awhile he walked back to the car to get something he had forgotten. While he was away, up from the west suddenly came a long string of new scoters. Seeing the three surf scoters, they broke formation, milled around, trying obviously to decide whether or

not to settle nearby. I yelled to Marshall whilst this was going on, and he came trotting. By the time he had returned to the cliff edge the scoters had decided, and the decision was to go on. So the long line reformed and the flock beat low over the tumbling lake in proper scoter fashion. Now we could see that all the birds in this flock, there were forty of them, were white-winged scoters for from every wing came signals of flashing white. They did not go far, 3 or 400 yards, when once more the line dissolved into a formless mass: the reason? They had spied what we had failed to see, still another group of scoters riding the waves. This time they did settle, so that for ten minutes or so we had a wonderful chance to look them over. For some reason the newcomers were restless or did not find the place to their taste, for at the end of this period they again took to the air, their long black line disappearing at last around the point in the direction of Whitby Harbour.

But the flock they had discovered to us did not go. It contained twelve birds, every one of which was a surf scoter, and eight of them, all in a line together (!) were highly-plumaged males whose heads shone out on this grey day, every time a wave lifted them into view, in as fine a demonstration of the skunkhead pattern as could be desired. These birds were much closer to shore than the others, and than the pair Earl Stark and I had seen a week before. I have never seen so many surf scoters together, nor any to greater advantage. To go for two scoters, and in a very dubious frame of mind about finding any, and to come upon fifteen, all to be seen so beautifully, was in truth a remarkably stirring experience.

Inasmuch as some scoters of all three species do winter along Lake Ontario it may be worthwhile for those who have never had much experience with these ducks to keep a watch at Simcoe Point this season.

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While out east of the city, it might be a good idea to make the acquaintance of the little ravine that cuts the upper bluff along Chine Drive, Scarboro. It is most easily approached by going down the road that runs directly towards the lake from Stop 14, Scarboro Centre stoplight, turning to the east at the foot of the inner bluff and following the eastward road to its end which is at the mouth of the little ravine.

It was here that Dr. Barnett of neighbouring St. Augustine's Seminary had the great good fortune of finding a yellow-breasted chat several times towards the middle of November, an astonishingly late date. Near this same ravine T.F. McIlwraith and I chanced upon a mockingbird some years ago. It is also one of the ports of call on the regular Christmas census route that runs east to Whitby. Even so it is one of the least known of the good birding spots in this region. Small though it be it has often harboured some bird of unusual interest.

On November 15th Earl Stark and I stopped off here to have a look for the chat. True we didn't find the chat, though we did find twelve ladies in hot search of it. Mostly members of this club, they had tuned in on the grapevine and come out here post-haste when it vibrated "chat" in their ears. Still, if none of us laid eyes on the chat, the missing bird was replaced, as so often happens, by one of equal or greater interest. In this case it was by a red-throated loon which was discovered below the shore bluff, swimming not too far off shore near the place where the tiny stream from the ravine plunges over the cliff. The little loon, with its upturned bill, so petite and delicate as compared to its big, coarse cousin, the common loon, stayed well in view, permitting all of us to have an excellent sight. When last seen it was heading out towards a flock of gulls that was resting on the water, as if it hankered after company. Since most of those present had never seen a red-throated loon, this was a noteworthy occasion. Off Scarboro Bluffs is an area often selected by this species.

Marshall Bartman and I looked in on Chine Drive Ravine again on November 23rd. Rain had set in, a dark afternoon was drawing to a premature close. I held out no hope of finding the chat or much else. Nonetheless we gave the little ravine a good going over, and if we didn't turn up a chat we did discover a delightfully whimsical sawwhet owl.

This pretty fellow blinked at us musingly as we gazed at him, not a dozen feet distant. Perched in a hemlock tree a little above our heads he was right beside the main path where only a few moments before three strollers, arm in arm, chatting noisily, had just gone by. They, of course, had had no idea that the little bump out towards the end of one of the hemlock branches, too far out to be an authentic bump on the tree, was in fact an owl. Cryptoglaux, quite aware of his relative invisibility, relied on his camouflage to face us out too. No doubt he had deluded many a passerby today, so he did no more than blink slightly through narrowly slitted eyes, and permitted us to gaze for as long as we wished. Though this has been an unusually rich year for me in the matter of seeing and hearing sawwhet owls, this bird was Marshall's first for the year; and no matter how often one sees one of these beautiful little owls, the sight of a sawwhet is something of an event for the bird watcher. Hence our visit to Chine Drive Ravine was counted very much a success.

At the December meeting of the Club, Dr. Barnett reported that he had seen a very late black-throated green warbler in the latter part of November, and on the day of the meeting a lingering hermit thrush in this ravine. It is certainly a spot to keep in mind.

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From Dr. Fletcher Sharp, one of the Club's botany leaders, comes the following pertinent reminder to the botanically-minded members of the Club that they need not, and should not, go into their cocoons

and hibernate when the leaves fall and the snow descends.

Dr. Sharp writes, "To the person with organic sensibility who has an awareness of the subdued, quiescent beauties of nature, a winter's walk in the woods can bring as much joy and satisfaction as one in the height of our brilliant summer or autumn.

The herbaceous plants die but their interesting skeletons form weird outlines against the blue sky. Here is a brown cluster of goldenrod, a gray patch of asters, dead mullen stalks standing erect like walking sticks left by ghosts in the fields, the milkweed stems with open pods emitting seeds with silken threads, the evening primrose with its knobby capsules along the stem. They have lost their bloom and colour, but each is easily identified although in this sombre, mellow sepia-like form.

On the brown earth in patches of fresh green, one sees the basal leaves of next year's plants. Here they will rest beneath the snow until the lengthening rays of the sun and April showers set them to growing anew.

Then there are the woody plants or shrubs which are not dead but have merely lost their foliage. The chokecherry and the pincherry, shadbush, wild plum, elderberry and viburnum line the fences and skirt the edges of the woods. Across old pasture fields one sees briars and hawthorns (hips and haws) holding their deserted birds' nests. These so-called "weeds" of the forest have greatly increased since man has made clearings for them. Lilac bushes and old apple trees are evidence that a house has at one time stood nearby. The greenish white berries of the poison ivy stand up most attractively, but how dangerous they are.

Near the marsh one sees the feathery willows, the alders and elders, the green and red dogwoods, and if lucky, a bush of winterberry, red with fruit. There is a stand of white cedars and beyond some black spruce with their small cones at the top, and probably some tamarack.

Entering the hardwoods one encounters the sugar maple - its rugged coarse bark contrasting with the smooth unwrinkled gray of the beeches. The paper birch stands out surprisingly against the snow. The yellow birch growing from old stumps makes one wonder what it used as a starting point before men cut the trees and made stumps for it to grow on. One tastes the twigs and, sure enough, it has the identifying flavour of wintergreen. The bare limbs and perfectly designed braches of the ash remind us of candelabra. Over there is an isolated black cherry with its black curled bark, leading its typical lone-wolf existence. The prolific basswood has as usual her offspring grouped about her.

In another bush are the evergreens. The white pine is recognized by its dark trunk and its cluster of five needles, the red pine

by its reddish bark and its two needles. The hemlocks, spruce and firs beckon us on into the woods and challenge us to identify them.

These mysteries of nature are only some of the pleasures given to anyone who will take a winter's walk in the country."

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Mr. R. Knights tells us of a pleasant little episode at his cottage last summer. He says, "During a visit to Manitoulin Island, while staying at a private resort in Gore Bay, I had the following experience - not a timely one - but it is nice in the winter to look back upon some of our summer adventures with the birds. My memory is prompted by the fact that on my desk is a hummingbird recently skinned by Mr. Stuart Thompson, which I found last summer on the window sill of our summer cottage way up on Thunder Bay.

One morning while sitting on the verandah looking west into the garden, I noticed quite a number of hummingbirds darting among a large clump of delphiniums, tall healthy plants in full bloom. I decided that if I could conceal myself among them, and try keeping perfectly still; I might have opportunity to study these beautiful midgets closely, so I took up a position right in the centre of the flowers. At my first approach they all quickly disappeared but after a while the birds gradually returned in ones and twos, until I actually counted twenty-three at one time all around me busily digging into the flowers for the nectar. They had no time to bother about me close by. They would dart from bloom to bloom, sometimes remaining stationary in the air right in front of a pair of eyes greedily taking in their most minute details. Hearing the different drumming sounds produced by the beating of so many tiny wings was music to the ears, a Symphony among the Flowers. The ones that had their fill would dart away like bullets, probably to their nests. Others would take their place so that there would be plenty of birds among the flowers at the same time. At noon they all disappeared to return again at dusk, but not in such large numbers, and the next day they disappeared altogether."

R. M. Saunders,
Editor.