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# TORONTO FIELD NATURALISTS' CLUB

## OCTOBER MEETINGS

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

at the

ROYAL ONTARIO MUSEUM

Speaker: W.W.H. Gunn, Ph.D.,  
Executive Director, Federation of Ontario Naturalists.

Subject: "Sounds of a Summer's Day."  
Illustrated with slides, movies, and sound recordings.

## OCTOBER OUTING

Saturday, October 10, 1953.

Dr. Walter Tovell, of the Department of Geological Sciences, University of Toronto, will lead a geology outing to Hanlan's Point.

Meet at the Ferry Dock, city side, at the foot of Bay Street in time to take the 2.00 p.m. boat to Hanlan's Point.

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A Course in Nature Study, consisting of 20 lectures embracing the whole subject, the first 10 lectures being on phases of bird life alone, will be given by Mr. Stuart L. Thompson on Wednesday evening at 8 p.m. beginning October 7th at University College. Fee for the entire 6 months course \$15.00. Further information and descriptive folder may be obtained from Miss Hargraves, at the University Extension Office, Simcoe Hall, Toronto. Midway 6611.

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The annual fee of \$2.00 is now due. It will greatly facilitate matters if members will kindly send their fees by mail to the secretary. Unless it is absolutely necessary, please do not pay them at meetings. Your co-operation in this respect will be greatly appreciated.

Secretary - Mrs. J.B. Stewart,  
21 Millwood Road,  
Toronto.  
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Number 117

September 1953

Algonquin Park, like any other spot of high repute, can present a front of seeming emptiness to the observer of wildlife. True, the wild landscape, the pleasant lakes embedded in banks of green trees, are always there. The Park is not without interest even when birds and animals are invisible. Yet, when the observer has only one day to devote to these woods and lakes, so much lauded for the wildlife that dwells hereabouts, there comes an inescapable disappointment to find that all the creatures, winged or four-footed, that one craves to see, are upon this day hiding in undiscoverable parts. Not all the pleasing scenery the Park provides will then quite overbalance the thwarting emptiness.

In 1951, and again in 1952, Greer Roberts and I spent one day in July in the Park of the sort I have described. Hence, when we set out this year on July 12th for our annual jaunt, we took care not to expect too much, or should I say we were resigned to a repetition of past experience. Still, there is always hope.

The weather, bright yet not too hot, the one perfect day of that week, was in our favor. We arrived at the Park Museum about 10.30, and were pleasantly surprised to see John Nettleton, with his wife and daughter, all members of the T.F.N.C. I believe, just coming out. We discovered that they were commencing a week's stay in the Park, stopping at Killarney Lodge. Later in the day we got in touch with them there. The museum we found was much developed since last year. It now has excellent live exhibits of frogs, turtles, fish and snakes, cases of stuffed birds, and a well-equipped lecture hall where nature talks are given each week during the summer. The building and its surroundings have been most tastefully arranged.

Indeed, this museum is an architectural triumph in fitting a building to specific needs and to a particular neighborhood. Those who have been responsible for its creation are strongly to be commended for their remarkably good taste and foresight.

Driving on to the centre of the Park we left the car and took to a trail that leads to a sizeable beaver pond where, in the spruce groves that nudge the pond and its meadows, we have been repeatedly told over the years, the spruce grouse dwells. Today we meant to concentrate on a hunt for that bird above everything else. We had failed so many times to find the elusive "fool hen", and sometimes so narrowly - "Oh yes, it was here just five minutes ago!" Twice that remark has been hurled at us, - that it was becoming a matter of pride to find this bird.

As we reached the shore of the pond an augury of portending success soared into the blue over the western hills. Two large darkish birds circled above the forest in wide arcs. I hazarded a guess that they were ravens, but Greer, who had never seen a raven, was not to be satisfied with that. Happily the pair drifted in great circles away from the hills, riding the air currents over the meadow at the far end of the beaver pond and on over the water until they were almost above us. There was no difficulty now in seeing the coal black wings and bodies, the broad wings, primaries spread so that they appeared "finger-tipped", and the characteristic wedge tails. From the moment they sailed out above the meadow they were hotly pursued by a pair of belligerent kingbirds till they were well past the first ranks of trees to the south. The huge ravens were wholly imperturable in the face of the flycatchers' assaults, giving no sign that they noticed the kingbirds at all. During the last few moments that they were in view, one raven began to make spectacular dives, plunging vertically 50 to 100 feet at a time, rising after each dive to repeat the performance. We were reminded strongly of the nuptial display of the marsh hawk. Then they passed from sight, leaving us excited and ready for any exploit.

On the north side of the beaver pond a point heavily wooded with spruce trees juts out. Towards this point, having deposited lunches and jackets at the start of the path, we now picked our way. Fallen trees and tangled undergrowth made the following of a series of obscure paths - onetime logging trails I suppose - somewhat of a puzzle. But the point had been indicated as the "most likely spot" for the grouse, so there we would go.

In order better to cover the territory, Greer and I took different paths. By my route I had passed through the densest part of the spruce grove and had emerged into a glade on the other side without seeing or hearing a bird of any kind when suddenly two grey shapes slipped out of the bracken ahead. Rising silently, they took divergent courses, one going to one side of the path, one to the other, both vanishing into the midst of thick spruces. From my brief

glimpse of their size, shape, color and actions I had no doubt that I had seen spruce grouse, but their quick disappearance was so disappointing that I was more annoyed than pleased. Catching a frustrating glimpse of a special bird one has ached for a long time to see is even worse than not seeing it at all. During the next half-hour I tried in vain by circling through the spruce trees, by squeaking and "pishing", to raise just one of those birds. The very best I could do was to arouse several golden-crowned kinglets which displayed their yellow crowns to perfection as they bounced excitedly along the spruce fronds. At another time I could have been sensitive to such life and beauty, but now I was frustrated and exasperated. I turned back towards our starting place in a low mood after this vexatious experience.

Emerging into the open by the pond I found Greer waiting. As soon as I appeared he started waving, making signs for me to come. He, it soon became clear, had found another spruce grouse, a most accommodating female, a true "fool hen", that stayed in close view for fully 15-20 minutes. He had shouted and called to me as loudly as he could, but all his hails had been so deadened by the dense screen of trees that I had heard not a sound though we were separated by no great distance.

Taking me to the spot where he had last seen his bird he had no difficulty in starting it once more from beneath a stand of tall bracken where it seemed to be hunting for food. Showing no special alarm it flew up to the lower branches of a nearby spruce tree where, perched in full view, it regarded us with utmost calm, making no move until we had walked slowly to within 12 feet, then merely clambering slowly into a denser part of the same spruce. Even now it was more than half in view. Little by little it edged into the midst of the denser fronds, where only its head and part of its tail could be seen. In this position it merged so well with the general pattern of shadows in the tree that, even standing as close as we were, had we not watched it take up this post, had we been mere passers-by, this bird and a dozen others similarly placed could easily have escaped notice. But if the bird thought we had failed to see it creep into this hiding hole and would henceforth forget its presence, it certainly did deserve the unflattering name of "fool hen" with which men have dubbed its kind for centuries. Now that it was so well camouflaged our spruce hen remained quiet and unmoving, save for the blinking of her eyes whilst I eased ahead step by step until my hand was only a foot and a half from her body. Had I been so minded I could have clubbed it over the head as the men who named the spruce grouse a "fool hen" so often used to do. Only when I got so near did she fly, even then to go only a few yards into another spruce tree.

Needless to say we were able to see every marking on this bird, almost to count her feathers one by one. The heavy barring in rust, white, and dark brown that covered most of the bird contrasts strongly with the subtle mottling of our common ruffed grouse. There was much

white about the throat, and on the tail the absence of the ruffed's dark band was noticeable. Most conspicuously different to our eyes was the under-tail, which when raised, showed large bright orange patches at the outer corners and an expanse of white where tail and body join. Its flight, as with the two birds I saw, was noiseless, and it made no vocal sound.

Thanks to Greer, all my frustration, every ounce, was entirely dispersed. Here was a spruce grouse acting as all report and tradition would have it do, not scaling away into the woods like gray shadows. After so many years of looking, and so many failures, it was immensely gratifying so to add a new bird to my life list. Nor was it less satisfying to Greer. Indeed it was the second new bird for him within an hour!

With such an aperitif it may be imagined that we ate our lunches, lying on the shore of the glistening pond, with the greatest of relish. Indeed we now could anticipate any discovery. Before we had finished our repast Greer added yet another find to the day's list. He discovered that both minnows and crayfish will eat the crumbs of Digestive Biscuits avidly, the minnows darting to the surface of the water to seize this manna, the crayfish waiting in the shadows of sunken logs until the descending crumbs fell to their level, when they would reach out, grab a morsel and retreat with it to their lair. Thus at the beaver pond we had carried our observations from the sky above to life below the water. It was time to go.

So, lunch over, we drove on to Killarney Lodge, and found the Nettletons in the dining room with help of a young lad who proved to be interested in birds, whose father had been a lifelong associate of Roger Tory Peterson. The Nettletons agreed to join us for the afternoon. We were soon en route again, bound this time for Lake Opeongo.

Save for the sight of a broad-winged hawk, hotly pursued by kingbirds and barn swallows, and crying loudly, that flew over the car our trip along the Opeongo road was not enlivened by bird adventures. We did, however, have the pleasure of watching a mink cross the road. It ran out from a bog on one side, wandered along the road for a few yards, started back, then changed its mind and veered over to the other side of the road. Just before vanishing into the bog on that side it stopped, reared up on its haunches like a squirrel, peered sharply in our direction, then darted down the road bank into cover. None of us had ever seen a mink sitting so before, but then not one of us can claim more than a passing acquaintance with this aristocratic weasel.

On our way back to Killarney Lodge we carefully scanned both sides of the road for Canada jays. After a number of false alarms I finally did catch sight of a dark-hued bird of the right size diving down into the midst of a cedar thicket. The driver was skeptical when I shouted, grumbling that I only called when he got

up speed. He was going up a hill, but he stopped nonetheless. No sooner had we got out of the car and begun to walk back towards the cedars when not one but four unquestioned whisky jacks streamed across the road to cedars on the other side. All four plunged into the green depths, but one, as if relenting, immediately rose from oblivion to the top of a tree, there to sit in full view for several minutes. To us from Toronto to whom the Canada jay is no common sight this was a real delight.

To top off the expedition as we drove into the Killarney grounds we were greeted by evening grosbeaks feeding in trees beside the drive. They were consuming small green fruit, mostly seed so far as I could see, on a tree the identity of which I was unable to discover. Two of the grosbeaks dropped to the ground, and one began to flutter its wings in the frantic manner used by so many young birds when begging for food. The adult, a female, began at once to disgorge green fruit from its crop into the open beak of the youngster. It was our first sight of an evening grosbeak feeding young. We were struck by the curiously big-headed appearance of the youngster, which looked for all the world as if it badly needed a haircut. The reason for this unkempt look was that all the while it was begging and being fed the young bird kept its crown elevated into a semi-crest. Once its hunger was satisfied, and the feeding ceased, this crown was lowered, and the youngster was as flat-topped as its parent.

Thus ended our 1953 day in Algonquin Park, the most successful trip Greer and I have ever made there. We had hoped for four birds especially; spruce grouse, raven, Canada jay and Arctic three-toed woodpecker. Three of these we had succeeded in seeing, or should I say we had been granted the privilege of finding. That is a remarkably high proportion of good fortune. No wonder we were pleased and thankful as we drove back over the hills to Bona Vista and Lake of Bays. We got back in time for a dip in the lake before supper, a refreshing finish to a perfect day.

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Greer Roberts tells me that the barred owls have been very vocal all summer long at Bona Vista, continuing from late June to early September. Although these owls are always present they do not usually make their presence known so vigorously. Certainly while I was there in early July they performed nicely. I arrived on July 6th and Greer informed me that he had heard them every night during the past week. Their period of calling was very regular he said, beginning just about 10.00 every evening, and continuing for approximately two hours at intervals of varying extent. Occasionally they were to be heard in early hours of the morning before dawn.

On my first evening the owls commenced exactly on schedule, a few minutes before 10.00. There appeared to be two birds, one somewhere to the west, behind the Littles' cottage, the other at a

greater distance west, possibly near Needler's Point. On this occasion the calls were quite uniform in character, consisting of eight notes, given in pairs; e.g: wow-wow, wow-wow, wow-wow, wow-wahh. The second note in each pair was stressed in every case, but the final note was much more explosive and prolonged though it did not fit the traditional pattern, "Who cooks, who cooks, who cooks for you-all?" But it was obviously only a variation of that, an abbreviation. I tried to decoy the birds by imitation, but had no success. After an hour the nearer owl seemed to go away in the direction of the other. Then both became silent or went too far away for us to hear.

Tuesday evening Greer and I walked along the new road that is being built around the north shore of Lake of Bays, to a spot close behind the Littles' cottage, hoping to get a closer acquaintance with Strix. Greer said that the owls began to hoot every evening in this neighborhood. For some reason, possibly the abrupt arrival of a cold wave from the north, this proved to be the one evening when no owl was heard. No amount of hooting on our part, even the most luring of hoots, could elicit a response. Indeed the whole world of wild creatures was unduly silent this night, the only sounds we were able to detect being a few frogs croaking on Little Lake, and a couple of porcupines scrambling in the trees near where we stood.

This was disappointing, but the next evening one owl was again hooting, beginning as before near 10.00. To compensate for Tuesday's blank, after we had gone to bed this owl (I assume it to have been the same one) came right onto Greer's point, where it proceeded to carry on Strixine converse of the purest sort. A flow of low throaty growls and chortles, interspersed with gasping chuckles and sighs that would have made a hearer's hair stand on end had he not known the author's name, tumbled down from the tree tops. But at the end of each such series, lasting a minute or two, there would come an identifying wow-wow, wow-wahh. I have heard horned owls, screech and sawwhet owls put on similar performances, but like the barred, somewhere during such a rendition, each owl offers some specifically indicative sounds. In a way this performance may be compared to the night song of the oven bird, mysterious to many listeners until they hear the punctuating teacher, teacher notes that almost invariably appear at some point in the midst of the enigmatic, beautiful caroling. After several such offerings Strix was heard no more that night. Presumably he moved on to try the hunting elsewhere.

Thursday evening's procedure was like Monday's, but on Friday we had a repetition of the closer show again. It was around midnight, shortly after we had retired, that the owl came onto the point. Fortunately for me Strix chose a perch directly over the boat house where I slept. The growlings and chortlings were much as before, but at this close range I became aware that they were accompanied by a persistent high-pitched shrill whistling. This came at brief intervals, short repeated whistles, sometimes with a quaver in the middle,

and kept up steadily during the growling comment and after. The whistles reminded me strangely of the insistent food calls of several birds, most of all, I think, of the young rose-breasted grosbeak. There can be little doubt, I believe, that what I heard was an adult barred owl attended by a young owl. Since returning home I find that the whistled notes I heard are well described in Bent's "Life Histories of North American Birds of Prey", Part 2, Bull 170, p. 188, as those of the young barred owl. What I heard seemed almost like an interchange between parent and young, the youngster keeping up its ceaseless piping whilst the affectionate but slightly exasperated parent tried to tell it just how it really should talk. The growls and chuckles and low hoots appeared to be directed at some near companion, not at any distant associate or rival, or even at other creatures of the night that might be stirred into action so that they could be caught. This was a very private affair, a lesson in conduct in the barred owl family, and I happened to be a delighted, if unseen, eavesdropper.

We heard the hooting again on Saturday and Sunday evenings, but from a distance. It seems likely that a barred owl family with its centre of operations somewhere near the Littles' cottage, was using the lakeshore area from Needler's Point to perhaps Garnett Beach, a matter of two miles, as its hunting preserve. Possible they ranged one way one night, the other the next. More likely, judging from the hooting, the family split for the purpose of hunting, with one adult and young going one way, the others in the opposite direction, with all reassembling at the home roost during the daytime. Whatever the case, this was another and highly interesting chapter in my acquaintance with that fascinating bird, the barred owl.

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From Mrs. Helen Waldron of the Tudor Bird Sanctuary on Mossom Place, we recently received the following query. "Who ever heard of a shore bird, a sandpiper, in a kitchen, sitting on the top of a refrigerator?" I will let Mrs. Waldron answer this extraordinary question with her own description of a very unusual bird adventure. She writes: "It was the last day of August, the 31st, 1953. It had been 90° in the shade, very hot and humid. Darkness had just fallen. Light from the kitchen streamed forth across the 'Look Out', a screened porch. Suddenly the silence was broken by something that crashed against the screen and then fell with a thud upon the sill below. I opened one of the screen windows and peered out, but could see nothing. Then I got the flashlight, and turned it upon the ground. There stood a bird in the circular pool of light, apparently attracted by the flashlight. It rose, flew past me, hitting my head, and following the bright light, flew on into the kitchen, where it perched on the top of the refrigerator. For a few seconds it seemed stunned, but recovering from its crash, it made a few steps on the shiny white surface. Alas! this wasn't as sticky and reliable as pond mud, so off it slipped and fell down behind the refrigerator, some of the metal rods catching it and serving as a perch. This would never do. Up struggled the sandpiper

with wings and feet, and with the help of a gentle human hand. Looking all about it in a calm and dignified manner I am sure it thought "How on earth am I standing on a refrigerator?" Our visitor seemed strong and healthy, and was of gentle and elegant appearance, with lovely colouring; brownish back, white belly, mottled sides, dark legs, a solitary sandpiper in fact. Gently we put it on the open window sill, whence it flew away into the night only to come back and sit on the stone window-sill for some time. Then it flew away again and was gone.

I hated to see it go - the beautiful gentle bird that came to us like a celestial spirit out of the night. My rarest experience in the bird world! What a guest! Indeed all this makes the sanctuary more sacred than ever."

(Ed. note: Shorebirds and other migrants are often killed by flying into lighthouses, beacons, and similar lights that seem to attract them, but this is the first time I have ever heard of a sandpiper, or any other migrant, entering a lighted house.)

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Any member of the Club who has ever been pursued by an irate tern will appreciate Mr. Ralph Knight's feelings, who tells us of an encounter with a black tern at Ashbridge's Bay. He says, "While watching shorebirds over one of the few remaining mud flats overlooked by the city in their present development of a new highway through Ashbridge's Marsh, I saw the majority of the smaller "pipers" together with the greater and lesser yellow legs.

I was just about to investigate a large buff colored sandpiper when I heard a shrill warning coming towards me from overhead, and something really brushed the top of my head and went screaming by. Looking I saw it was a black tern with a fish in its mouth about to make a turn for another dive at me. This continued several times, and even the waving of my hands did not seem to terminate its efforts to reach me. Afterwards I noticed the tern had lost the fish, and then it really was mad. It continued to harass me then more viciously; nothing faint about its tactics now. Only by swinging my empty binocular case previous to its attacks could I really keep it at a distance, although it still continued to dive at me. Leaving the vicinity, as I was really scared, about half an hour later, while poking round at the far end of the marsh, I heard the shrill note of my aggressor again coming towards me. Taking one more dive it disappeared in the distance. This was the only tern I saw in the marshes this morning. In the past I have experienced similar tactics used by red wings in the marshes, but with far less determination. Also I have seen barn swallows divebomb a cat in the farmyard, but I never have experienced such determined assaults as these from any

other bird in the protection of its young. This tern actually spoiled my morning's observations, as its nest must have been in the vicinity where the majority of the shorebirds were congregating."

(Ed. note: Alf. Bunker, another member of the Club, tells me that he and Gord. Lambert were so severely attacked by common terns this summer while on a bird-banding trip that Gord was made dizzy and half knocked out by the terns' blows. He had to sit down to recover.)

R. M. Saunders,

Editor.