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# Toronto Field Naturalists' Club

## February Meetings

Monday, February 1st, 1954 at 8.15 p.m.

at the

ROYAL ONTARIO MUSEUM

What local naturalists are doing:

Juniors: Ian Ferguson - The Geology of Niagara Falls -  
Illustrated.  
Heather MacDonald - The Museum Explorers.

The Bluebird Project near Purpleville:

Mr. Jim Woodford  
Illustrated with slides and a film.

Photographing Ontario Wildflowers

Mr. John Clayson  
Illustrated with kodachrome slides.

Christmas Bird Censuses in the Toronto Region

Mr. James L. Baillie  
Illustrated with lantern slides.

## ROTUNDA DISPLAY

A display of projects by members of the Club.

## FEBRUARY OUTINGS

Saturday, February 13th. Cedarvale Ravine 2.00 p.m.  
Meet at Boulton Drive entrance to ravine. Look  
for winter wings with Dr. R.M. Saunders.

Saturday, February 20th - Conservatory, Botanical Department,  
University of Toronto, Northwest Corner College &  
University Ave. 2.00 p.m.  
The Botanical Department of the University of  
Toronto has offered to give our members a conducted  
tour through their greenhouses. This is a rare  
opportunity for those interested in plants.

## DICK BIRD LECTURES

A limited number of tickets for these lectures are still  
available. They may be obtained at the meeting or by mail  
from the Secretary -- Mrs. J.R. Stewart,  
21 Millwood Rd., Toronto.

# Toronto Field Naturalists' Club.



Number 121

January, 1954.

## Memories From A Birdwatcher's Trip To Great Britain

By Mrs. Margaret Marsh\*

We left home at dawn on May 6th, 1953, driving to Quebec City through springtime Ontario and Quebec. Early spring migrants winged us on our way; soft maple catkins fell with a clicking sound.

On the following morning, before we embarked from Quebec, we drove along the St. Lawrence River, stopping to observe some 600 Canada Geese which were feeding in the tidal marshland which fringes that great river. Beyond St. Joachim at Cap Tourmente we found our way to the Priests' Farm. There we heard, even before we saw, what we estimated as 10,000 Snow Geese, resting in this favourite rendez-vous before winging their way to the Arctic. As we walked out on the tidal flats they lifted with strength and grace, wave upon wave. We listened to their glorious honking, followed their flight pattern, watched them settle in a living foam. Later, as we sailed down the river, two V's

\*Ed. Note: During the past summer the Rev. and Mrs. Henry Marsh, well-known members of our club, had the pleasure of spending some weeks in Great Britain. As ardent birdwatchers they naturally spent much time in pursuit of their favourite hobby. Mrs. Marsh has been kind enough to prepare an account of their birding adventures for the Newsletter. At the end of her account Mrs. Marsh has added certain very helpful suggestions for other birders who may be contemplating a trip to Britain. I am sure that the readers will be as grateful as the editor for her generous readiness to share exciting experiences with us.

of Canada Geese gave us an ornithological fly past - a fitting ending to one of our most memorable Canadian birdwatching days - an omen of a wonderful springtime of observing in Great Britain.

As we neared the Straits of Belle Isle I added gannets to my life-list, as we saw them flying with quick wing beat very near to the ship. On May 9th it was foggy and damp, with very poor visibility, but we noticed a group of low-flying, black-backed, black-headed stubby birds within 100 yards of the liner. They had great difficulty rising from the water to fly, but dove easily. We searched Fitter's Guide to British Birds, and satisfied ourselves at least, that they were little Auks.

We enjoyed the sea birds on both our trips, but perhaps the most delightful encounter was when a whimbrel landed on the ship as we neared the English Channel. Although passengers and high wind agitated the migrant, it stayed with us until we were within sight of land.

Although I had poured over English bird books, and listened to the records of their bird songs, I went first of all to Regent Park Zoo, to the Aviary. There you may see English birds in the flesh, labelled, before looking for them in their natural habitat. Alas, the birds I sought were now all jumbled together with amazing avians from the Amazon or India, so I approached the Keeper of the Zoo, to ask him to point out to me English birds. "Come right in", he said, and I found myself behind the bars, being looked at - as well as looking. It was like visiting an English "Mr. Ivor's", but it was a great help to later sure identification. Uncaged birds were attracted to those which were on display behind the wire of the aviary. It was disconcerting to watch the futile efforts of a free green finch trying to mate with a caged creature.

Now for the fool's folly! I had read in Country-Side, the organ of the British Empire Naturalists Association, of an all-night walk to hear nightingales and the dawn chorus. In anticipation this was the most cherished of my plans, for the Dawn Chorus sounded to me as thrilling as an Avian Hallelujah Chorus. The organizer of the walk wrote "The route is to be over typical Surrey fine beach country - not a long walk - with a period by some small lakes at dawn - then along the lanes at the foot of a chalk ridge (the Hog Back) and via footpaths to breakfast". Well - to begin with - an English ornithologist's idea of a short walk, and mine, are radically different. We strode for 20 miles! The first four or five miles were ecstatic; we walked through the soft half light of English spring and breathed in the fragrance of the blossoming May trees, and along the curving lanes, edged with high hedges, we caught the dim outlines of thatched cottages and manor houses. Our fellow birdwatchers were but forms with fascinating English voices, telling us of how the nightingales had sung at this or that point during their last all-night ramble. Finally, after three hours, the nightingales did sing. Across the lane other nightingales took up the call, and as we walked on and on we became familiar with the voice of that much poeticized bird. I found it varied in tone and volume from richness to harsh cha-cha's not unlike the song and calls of our catbird.

Tawny Owls and Little Owls were identified for us by their call, which sounded at surprisingly regular intervals. Nightjars (a relative of our whip-poor-will) were heard several times before the dawn, which came at 4.13 a.m. In our bird field note book I have written: Nightingales - 4.13 a.m., robins - 4.15 a.m., blackbirds - 4.18, roosters - 4.20, willow warbler 4.24, cuckoo - 4.28.

By this time I had perceived that the walk was but little more than half over. Only the English Wren sounded remotely like any bird song I had heard before, and as one song interwove with the other, I became most thoroughly confused. We recorded 42 new species, but drunk with fatigue, I couldn't have cared less. I lay down flat on my back whenever the group stopped to observe, then jog trotted to keep up with these untiring ornithologists. On one such stop I stored away a lovely memory of wood larks which frequent this heath-covered chalk ridge. They were soaring in circular song flight until they disappeared in the heavens. When I became aware that nightingales can be heard as often by day as by night - when I understood that you could arise at dawn and hear such a chorus after a night's rest I wondered why I had taken my pleasure so strenuously. I do not recommend all night rambles with Dawn Chorus as a side dish!

On leaving England we had a list of eleven English villages where we should like to retire permanently. But in retrospect Selbourne in Hampshire tops the list. Here, the Rev. Gilbert White (1720-1793), an Anglican clergyman, recorded in field book diaries the changing patterns of the seasons, making careful comparative observations of birds and botany and insects. The National Trust protects his beech woods and nature trail lookout, from which you may overlook miles of Hampshire countryside. The thatched cottaged village is some miles from any trunk road. We became familiar with the commoner birds of the English lanes and hedgerows as we lingered in the ancient churchyard, or walked by the mere, watching dapper pied wagtails, chaffinches, robins, blue tits and nightingales - listening to their song at full noon.

We arrived in Ilfracombe in Devon for the British Empire Naturalists' Field Week. On May 20th we observed birds at the Spreacombe Chapel Woods Sanctuary. This turned out to be the restored and excavated foundations of a secular chantry listed in the Domesday Book. The sanctuary was part of the estate of one of the famous family of Cecils. It had been given to the R.S.P.B. and the National Trust. There we walked through fields of yellow primroses, and became acquainted with valerian growing from the rock walls, a plant that delighted us all summer long. The chief interest here for us was the constant war between mewing buzzards and croaking rooks, both of which nested in this immediate area. We visited a variety of terrains, during the following days. Sauntons and dunes yielded few birds, but was most interesting to the botanists present. Taw Estuary, with great tidal mud flats, was outstandingly good for shore birds. We observed nesting Sheld Duck and swans with their cygnets, thrilled to our first flight of lapwings and whimbrels, heard the rasping of the sedge warblers, which are much like

our short-billed marsh wrens. Oyster catchers, dunlins, redshanks, etc., were closely observed and were entirely unperturbed, although each half minute a jet screamed into the air from the adjacent R.A.F. defense and training station. The highlight of the week was a walk along the North Cornish coast to the breeding site of puffins, fulmars, razor-billed auks and guillemots. Beneath us was the pounding sea, pounding on the jagged rockbound coast. The wind howled and the rain poured, but we stood in a field of bluebells, in King Arthur's country, looking at the same sort of birds that had probably nested there in those ancient days. The fog that clouded past us in gusts was itself history, natural and historical.

Dick Wolfendale is the guide at the Suffolk Sanctuary, Minsmere. It is approached through a remote moor along unlabelled roads. Even the local residents appear to have never heard of the place. Finally you arrive at one of the invasion training areas which had been bombed and mined and flooded during the last war. It is a bit of Holland within England in appearance, even to the windmill and the dyked roads. All this area is protected bird sanctuary. There are hides which are approached silently while crouching as low as possible. But once inside you may relax and observe the birds with great ease. Surprisingly, the English observers were thrilling to the call and flight of bitterns, a rare bird in England. That day I stored up enough loveliness to last for many a birdless day.

The marsh country, in itself, was full of a charming mystery, but added to this we saw spoonbills lift in a legendary pattern and alight within 100 yards of our hide; bearded tits spat out their nervous song, and were life-listed on both Canadian and English watchers' records. There was a constantly renewed pattern of the more usual water and shore birds. As we left the marsh we followed a trail through woodland and lanes, and with the marvelous guidance of our leader, recognized the English goldfinch and linnet, wheatear and green woodpecker. I learned that a student or serious lay observer might come to Minsmere for a fortnight and assist in the recording and observations. Henry and I saw 49 species on that wonderful day.

Dr. E.A.R. Ennion is director of the Field Study Station at Monk's House near Seahouses in Northumberland. He has the ability to give the clues that facilitate field identification, and carries you along with his buoyant enthusiasm to pursue scientific standards in your hobby. He guided us through Northumberland up into the Cheviot Hills where the bell heather was in bloom, black-faced sheep were pasturing in the moors, and farmers were piling dried peat for fuel. Four days before, a party of birdwatchers from Seahouses had flushed breeding stone, tree and meadow pipits as well as wheatears and ousel. Now the observers returned and "ringed", or as we say "banded", the fledglings. The sureness with which Dr. Ennion led us from nest to nest in that moorland, and his natural teaching ability set the day apart.

Next day we went by fishing boat to the Farne Islands. This was the best day's birding we had in Great Britain. It was good to share

it with six of England's top-rating ornithologists, one of whom was Eric Hosking, the famed photographer. There were countless Arctic terns at the island where we landed, one of which divebombed Henry most successfully. On the island is the church where the bones of St. Cuthbert rested before they found final interment at Dunham. Our headquarters, Monk's House, was where the monks had stored their impedimenta on the mainland. In the churchyard on the Farne Islands hundreds of eiders had been nesting, though only about 10 were seen brooding on June 23rd when I managed to get a fair Kodachrome of a nesting bird. On the same island, but separated as if there were a line drawn, puffins and razorbills performed for us. The Hon. Rosemary Russell had a special snare with which to capture the puffins for ringing, rather similar to the one Frank Smith uses to secure the Sawwhet owl. We could get within 4 feet before the puffins tumbled over the ledge into the sea below. Kittiwakes and fulmars nested on the sheer edge of nothing, each in their own colony. Shags regurgitated at us when we came too near for their comfort, or ours. This day could have gone on and on forever, but we took a tour of the Islands of the Farnes, coasting very close to the rocks. Roseate terns revealed soft, coral breasts, as they preened, which gave them a fragile perfection. Our intense looking at so many birds almost pulled our eyes from their sockets. Seals had fun in the rolling sea. The sight of graylag geese made Dr. Ennion explode with the joy which only we who follow this mad hobby can understand.

On the way back to Seahouses we drove through the moors, to a small lake. There we saw a family of lapwings feeding before dark really settled over the land, and as we walked toward the water, 2,000 black-headed gulls lifted and slowly settled again. Just to finish off the day we purposely disturbed a family of tawny owls to see them fly. Baby rabbits made driving a hazard. We saw literally hundreds that night. Last of all, soft as a ghost, a barn owl "dreamed" by the hedge where we parked. In the morning we awoke to the call of the quail.

We "birdwatched" on these special occasions. But wherever we travelled it was all England and birding too. Our binoculars and Fitter's The Pocket Guide to British Birds were constantly with us. As we walked through St. James Park on Coronation Day we saw hens, coots and tufted ducks nesting, or with young. After the Queen left the garden party at Buckingham Palace we lingered by the pathways and bridges watching blackbirds and song thrush. At the Derby since we were observers rather than "betters", we were intrigued to watch a nesting pair of skylarks on the runway hurl themselves into the air each time a race thundered by. Then they settled quietly, feeding their young, until Sir Gordon Richard ran against Her Majesty's filly, which disturbed them once more. In Beverly Minster, while admiring the stone tracery of the Percy Tomb, we were delighted to see a blue tit fly out, catch a spider and return to its nesting place. This tit was a famous bird, written up in The Times no less. It keeps its part of the great edifice insectless. By Loch Lomond we spent an afternoon, feeding chaffinches from our hands, and saw English white-

throats, wrens, sandpipers, mergansers and, dare I say it - nightingales. In the Hebrides carrion crows seemed to emphasize their lonely beauty.

My husband and I are bird watchers and bird lovers, but by no means full time ornithologists. Cathedrals, history, the coronation, as well as work for our church and a retreat at Lee Abbey in Devon, were also among our summer's experiences. But we are grateful for the living beauty of birds that brought us from the highways into the byways, enriching this once in a lifetime interlude.

#### Hints to Birdwatchers expecting to visit Great Britain

1. Go to Regent Park Zoo to the aviary and see labelled British birds before looking for them in their regular habitat.
2. Before you leave for England, write to the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, 25 Ecclestone Square, London, and make arrangements to visit two Suffolk Coast refuges, Minsmere and Havergate. Both are open to visitors on Sunday, Monday, Wednesday and Thursday. It is wise to give a specific date, with alternatives, to the R.S.P.B. as only six people per day are allowed to accompany the guide. The fee is five shillings. To visit these refuges, we stayed with Miss Marjory Van Oostveen, Hill Cottage, Westleton, Saxmunham, Suffolk, (Phone Westleton 245). She operates a hostelry for birdwatchers in this charming East Anglian village. Miss Van Oostveen is a keen ornithologist and can show you birds around there as well as those in the refuges.

At Minsmere on one day, we saw coot, pheasant, green-crested grebe, common whitethroat, nightingale, yellow wagtail, garganey, spotted redshank, little tern, starling, sedge warbler, swift, reed warbler, spotted flycatcher, turtle dove, spoonbill, moorhen, herring gull, blackheaded gull, lapwing, ringed plover, redshank, wood pigeon, little grebe, heron, shoveller, teal, gadwall, mallard, sheld duck, mute swan, bittern, marsh harrier, green woodpecker, sand marten, swallow, wheatear, song thrush, willow warbler, bearded tit, meadow pipit, skylark, woodlark, reed bunting, chaffinch, linnet, goldfinch and carrion crow.

We didn't visit Havergate, which you visit by boat to see the avocets nesting. Three days is all too short a time to allot for these two trips.

Along the East Anglian Coast between Norwich and Kings Lynn, there are three sanctuaries to visit: Blakeney, Scolt Head and Cley. We chose Cley, largely because we would lose a whole day waiting for transportation by boat. The expeditions leave at full tide for Scolt Head or Blakeney. It is wise to check on the tide beforehand, giving yourself overnight as well as a full day to observe Blakeney or Scolt Head. (Scolt Head Bird Sanctuary, Robert Chestney, Dial House, Bramcaster, Norfolk, telephone Bramcaster 330 - arrange to go in his boat - the hour depends on the tide.)

At Cley we walked out 200 yards onto the dyked sea marshes with

Billy Bishop, the warden, who lives in a farm house right on the road-side. We leisurely watched Little Sandwich and Common terns swoop and glide over the water. Sheld ducks, very common but colourful birds, were looking after their young. Shore birds were mirrored in the still waters. Over the ridge the sea of the English Channel pounded, but all was sublime in the protected area.

SEAHOUSES: Address - Dr. E. A. Ennion, Monk's House, Seahouses, North-umberland. A wonderful place. This is a bird research station, emphasizing field work. The place itself is delightful, right on the sea facing the Farne Islands. From the common room window you can observe enough birds to make the visit worthwhile. Trips are made to the Farne Islands, where we observed eider ducks, were dive-bombed by Arctic terns, saw puffins and razorbills at very close range, and really did see roseate terns and graylag geese. Trips are arranged to various terrains, such as Alnick Castle for park and pasture land birds, and into the Cheviots for ousels. This place is a MUST but book well in advance, as it is very busy and popular as well as limited as to accommodation.

North of Seahouses, we stopped at North Berwick and hired a boat to take us to Bass Rock. If you want to do it for 2/6 be there before 11.00 a.m. Nesting shags, puffins, guillemots, razor-billed auks are there in great numbers. An interesting observation was that some of the razor-billed auks at this latitude had white spectacles, while some miles south at Seahouses none had this marking.

THE BRITISH EMPIRE NATURALISTS' ASSOCIATION - Hon. Secretary, Mr. G.A. Hebditch, 92 Rydes Hill Road, Guilford, Surrey. The B.E.N.A.'s object is to bring naturalists and nature lovers in all parts in helpful communication with one another. They publish each season, a list of outings and meetings that are scheduled to be held throughout the country, as well as the periodical Country Side. In May or June they have a field week, with excursions from a central point. Mr. Hebditch was most gracious to us, in helping us plan our birding expeditions. The B.E.N.A. seemed to us, more of a general interest club than the more assured and scientific R.S.P.B.

Mr. Cutcliffe, proprietor of the Tramere Hotel, St. James Place, Ilfracombe, is an enthusiastic member of B.E.N.A. and would direct an observer to Lundy Island and through Devon countryside. He is a specialist in the study of swifts.

SEVERN WILDFOWL TRUST: Peter Scott has a collection of living waterfowl from all over the world. It is a laboratory for comparison of species and specialized study. But to the visitor it is like a bird zoo. However, at migration season in February, it is comparable to Jack Miner's Sanctuary during the tremendous flights of the Canada geese. It is interesting, but in the summer season, disappointing and crowded with tourists.

Dungeness Bird Observatory in Kent was highly recommended to us, especially for shore birds. We were sorry to miss the experience of

observing there. Accommodation for five or six observers is provided at No. 1 Quarter, Royal Naval Shore Signal Station. In summer, the Romney, Hythe and Dymchurch Light Railway runs to the Lighthouse. Visits can only be made with the permission of the Hon. Sec. Mr. H.A.R. Cawkell, 6 Canute Road, Hasting, Sussex, from whom full details can be obtained.

In Scotland, Aviemore in the Cairngorms is suggested. It lies between Inverness and Edinburgh. It is best to stay at the Dell Hotel in Rochemurchus, a village two miles from Aviemore, where I am told there are almost always birdwatchers. Here may be found such mountain birds as dotterel, crested tit, ptarmigan, capercaillie, etc. if you don't mind a climb. Without climbing, crossbills, goldcrests, and several others may be readily observed.

In addition, may I list, for keen ornithologists only, these addresses which I had given to me:

OXFORD: Dr. Bruce Campbell of the British Trust for Ornithology,  
2 King Edward Street, Oxford.

NEWFOREST: Edwin Cohen, Hazelhurst Sway Hants - a retired textile  
manufacturer and top notch birdwatcher.

EDINBURGH, SCOTLAND: Dr. John Berry, 15 Cluny Drive, Edinburgh, Scotland.

Mr. George Edwards, a professional organizer of the R.S.P.B. offered to show us where to see rare birds and illusive ones like the tiny kingfisher in London, also to prepare the way for birdwatching experiences of our club members while visiting in Great Britain. If I were going again, I would most certainly contact him first of all. Dr. E.A.R. Ennion of Seahouses also offered to give advice about places to go and people to contact both in England and in Scotland. He had been formerly in charge of the R.S.P.B. Sanctuary at Flatford Mills in Suffolk, famous Constable as well as birdwatching country.

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Recently Mr. Ralph Knights wrote in to say that "Last Saturday, while walking along the concrete breakwater towards the lighthouse just east of the foot of Cherry Street, accompanied by Mary Foy, another member of the T.F.N.C., we noticed an odd looking duck just on the shoreline underneath the breakwater. By the size and build of the bird it should have been a male old squaw, but the markings, especially on the head, confused us, so that we were flipping the pages of Peterson's Guide, trying to identify this bird. We all know that old squaws are dark and white. This bird, however, had orange markings from the head down. At our approach the bird waded to the water's edge and swam out towards the lake.

Following the shoreline east we soon saw another old squaw, a

female this time, waddling along the sandy beach. Almost every step it took, it fell over on its side. This bird was disfigured similarly to the male we had just seen, a discoloration as we now determined which came from oil on the plumage. Wondering if she would be able to manoeuvre on the water, we steered her toward the shore, where, upon entering the water, she became immersed in the approaching breakers. It was quite some time before we saw her head reappear far out on the lake."

The experience of which Mr. Knights writes is one that has become only too common along our beaches and shores. On December 22, a few days ago, my nephew David West and I, while walking along the public bathing beach at Sunnyside, chanced on the body of a female squaw, recently dead, and heavily oiled. Many of our observers have made similar finds, or have seen ducks incapacitated like those mentioned in the above account. Ducks of several species, as well as different kinds of gulls and other waterfowl, have been known to be victims of this hazard, but for some reason, old squaws seem to be the commonest sufferers in this region.

Oiling comes from contact with surface oil on the water in which these birds swim. Harbours like Toronto Bay where there is much ship traffic are particularly likely to have a heavy film of oil. I have myself on occasion seen almost the entire surface of Toronto Bay iridescent with oil film. When one adds to the possible source in ship traffic the industrial offluvia that not only enter the lake directly at various points but also float down our streams, all of which in this area are heavily polluted, it is easy to understand why both harbour and lake offer death traps to waterfowl in the form of patches of oil scum.

This question of water pollution by oil, industrial waste, sewage and other filth is one of the major problems being considered by conservation bodies everywhere. Until it is solved, and some reasonable controls established, part of the price that will be paid for such ugly abuse of our natural resources will be sickness and death amongst a great number of our waterfowl.

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BOOK REVIEW:

A GUIDE TO BIRD FINDING WEST OF THE MISSISSIPPI by Olin Sewall Pettingill, Jr. with illustrations of George Miksch Sutton, Oxford University Press, Toronto, pp xxiv, 709. Price \$6.50.

This second volume of Pettingill's Guide to Bird Finding, dealing with the United States west of the Mississippi River, lives up in every respect to the high standard established in the first or Eastern volume. Since that book has already become known as "America's first Baedeker for birdwatchers", as essential to the seeker after birds as Peterson's Field Guides, no higher praise can be offered.

My chief regret is that I did not have this Western volume - it had

not yet appeared - in my hands when I travelled to California last summer. Now as I read through its pages, covering the route we took, and learn that from such and such a bridge, which I remember very well, I might have seen trumpeter swans, and from another lookout I probably could have spied lazuli buntings - but why go on? It is only tantalizing. The plain fact is I missed a whole lot of birds that possession of this guide would have given me a very good chance of finding. Now that so helpful a guide is available, no one interested in birds should make the mistake of travelling west through the States without it. If you want to make the best of your birdwatching opportunities Pettingill's Guide is indispensable.

Organized like the first volume according to States, it gives a general statement of each state's topography, indicating its natural regions, and giving lists of birds native to each region, along with a table of dates for migration in the state. The body of each chapter consists of a list of the best birding sites in the state, given in alphabetical order according to the name of the nearest town. Careful, detailed road directions as to how to get to these places is given in each case. National parks and wildlife refuges, state and municipal parks and refuges, and numerous private sanctuaries and estates are included in the list, as are also the locations of museums, research stations, state and local ornithological societies and other institutions that may be of interest and help to the travelling birdwatcher. The bibliography of regional bird books and journals at the end of the volume will be very useful to anyone making a prolonged stay in the west.

There is no question that any birdwatcher who goes to the western States without this book in his pocket will be very foolish.

R. M. Saunders,  
Editor.