

# Toronto Field Naturalists' Club

## March Meetings

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

at the

ROYAL ONTARIO MUSEUM

Title - Plans for Parks and Open Spaces in the Metropolitan Area of Toronto.

Speaker - Tracy D. leMay, O.L.S., P.Eng.  
Commissioner of City Planning and City Surveyor, and,  
Planning Director, Metropolitan Toronto Planning Board.

### ROTUNDA DISPLAY

Ceramic Sculpture and Pottery by Mr. and Mrs. Joseph Barfoot.

## MARCH OUTINGS

Saturday, March 13th. Pickering Marsh and Frenchman's Bay, 2.00 p.m.

Meet at Pickering station on C.N.R. just south of double line highway, about one mile east of Liverpool (Frenchman's Bay) overpass. Look for returning ducks and other spring migrants with Dr. Bill Gunn.

Saturday, March 27th, Dale Nurseries, Brampton. (Bring a lunch)

We have been invited by the Dale Nurseries of Brampton to inspect their greenhouses and plants. A bus will leave from the front of the Royal Ontario Museum at 9.30 a.m. for Brampton, returning about 2.00 p.m. Return trip \$1.00. Members who wish to avail themselves of this transportation will kindly notify Mrs. J.D.Ketchum, HU 8-8914 by Wednesday March 24th.

Sunday, March 28th, Regional Gathering, Federation of Ontario Naturalists.

Trip to Long Point, on Lake Erie, to watch whistling swans. Meet at the Causeway west of Port Rowan at 9.00 a.m. A very limited amount of over-night accommodation may be obtained at St. Williams or Port Rowan.

## DICK BIRD LECTURES

This is the last meeting at which tickets for these lectures may be obtained. They will, however, still be available by mail from the Secretary, Mrs. J.B. Stewart, 21 Millwood Road, Toronto. Last year we were obliged to turn people away when they tried to obtain tickets on the night of the lecture. We therefore strongly recommend that you get yours now. To refresh your minds we are reprinting the synopsis of the two lectures on the following page.

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

At the request of several of our members, we are reprinting here additional information about the two lectures to be given by Mr. Dick Bird on March 10th and 11th next.

March 10

CAMERA TRAILS ALONG NATURE TRAILS

From the opening scenes around the Bird's log cabin in the mountains, through picture stories of poker faced owls, dew drenched spider webs, colourful insects, large and small animals and birds in their natural environment, seemingly unaware of the fact that their intimate life routines were being recorded on colour film by an expert craftsman with motion picture cameras and an understanding and sympathetic naturalist whose "interpretation of wildlife is both entertaining and highly informative."

A few of the many colourful creatures appearing in this ever changing panorama of nature are: marmots, ground squirrels, moose, elk, deer, mountain sheep and goats. Bears, grebes, cormorants, bluebirds, shrikes, hawks, owls and the comic antics of the great white pelican on its breeding grounds in Northern Saskatchewan.

One of the highlights of the film is the fantastic activity of the dancing grebes. These sequences have been cited as the most astonishing example of bird behaviour ever filmed in colour.

March 11

THE ALPHABET OF THE OUTDOORS

From, Auks, Anemonies, Anacondas and Ant Eaters,  
Badgers, Bats, Bisons and Buzzards,  
Caracaras, Caimen, Cactus and coots,

to

Xanthocephalus (Yellow Headed Blackbird),  
Yellow Warblers and Yarrow.  
Zygoptera (Damsel flys) Zalophus (.Sea-Lions)  
and Zeckeh-zechehs (Jacanas)

(from A-B-C to X-Y-Z)

the film is packed with birds, mammals, insects, flowers, invertebrates, reptiles and fishes - all photographed in their natural habitat; linked together with humorous sequences and transitions.

The viewer travels outdoor adventure trails across tundras and in the high Rockies of Canada North; through the deserts of Texas and Arizona; the highlands and lowlands of California, the swamps and beaches of Florida; the jungles of Central and South America, the mesas of Mexico and the tropical lagoons of the Caribbean Islands.

Can you afford to miss either of these lectures? We think not. Tickets may be obtained at the meetings of the Club or by mail from the Secretary, Mrs. J. B. Stewart, 21 Millwood Road, Toronto. Price \$1.00 per lecture.

# Toronto Field Naturalists' Club.



Number 122

February, 1954

The proper approach to Don River Boulevard for the well-tempered birdwatcher is down a little brook that runs nameless alongside Sheppard Avenue to the Don. On a pleasant February morn, such as we had on the 5th, one slides down the steep snowy bank with abandon ending up in the bed of the brook. If the preceding days have been very cold you may proceed along the stream in Indian file since the narrow gorge does not permit walkers to travel side by side. It is wise, however, to be ready to plunge through airpockets in the ice, or to slip upon some snow-hidden boulder. Such surprises, if half anticipated, provide one with a series of little dangers that are the spicy sauce of any ramble.

After a short while the vale widens somewhat, and mounting slopes, clothed in green hemlock, rise above our heads. There it is that we may expect to find some bird of more than ordinary interest. Once, years ago, it was a great horned owl sitting on a lower branch of a hemlock tree that glared down at me as I rounded the corner into the wider vale. This morning David and I heard a telltale shreeing and, looking up, spied a flock of pine siskins swarming amidst the green fronds and brown cones of a tall hemlock that reared its crest far above into the morning sun, calling our eyes to the distant blue sky.

Though only one of the secrets of this mysterious little vale was to be unfolded to us this morning, another was spread tantalizingly before our eyes. All the way down to the mouth of the ravine decaying hemlock stubs were etched with the designs that only the three-toed woodpecker makes. The marks were innumerable and everywhere. Where was the bird? We stopped to listen a dozen times, ears tensed at the sounds of snow falling from twigs, at the knockings of breeze-twisted branches. But no woodpecker could we detect. We emerged at last into the open valley of the Don with the picture of a bustle of siskins and an enticing

mystery in our memory.

From vale to valley was to step from shadow into sunlight. Tracks of night wandering creatures patterned the snow ahead - squirrels, rabbits, skunks, a fox - all these and perhaps others had travelled the snow before us. We took a hint from them, and followed their most favoured paths to the Don, arriving at a spot where a firmly frozen pool gave us a secure bridge to the opposite bank and Don River Boulevard.

Those who name streets are a curious lot. Boulevard is a term that conjures up pictures of Paris, of shrieking taxicabs, and the breathless moments when one, taking his life in his hands, tries frantically to beat the traffic across the Champs Elysees or the Boulevard des Italiens. Or nearer home we think of broad highways with many lanes of rushing cars and an ornamental greensward separating one direction from the other. Should any such vision flash into your mind as you draw near to Don River Boulevard, pray dispatch it at once. Who gave the name, what was in their mind, I know not. Here, indeed, we have no great artery of speeding traffic, no wide urban street, but a pleasant little lane wandering away from Sheppard Avenue at the Don to cross the opening of a little ravine, then hug the northern slope of the valley till it comes to an abrupt end in a field. All told it is no more than two or three minutes long as most men walk, and one end may easily be seen from the other; a lovely secluded spot this for anyone who in the city wants to hide from the city. The several attractive houses along its brief length are delightfully situated. One of these, Number 35, was our destination.

Nestling in the lee of the northerly slope, yet facing the long down valley reach, Number 35 is the pleasing home of Mr. and Mrs. Hugh Halliday, longtime members of the T.F.N.C. My nephew, Dave West and I arrived on the hospitable Halliday threshold on this particular morning our ears full of the report of a distinguished avian visitor seen the day before at the Halliday feeding station. We knocked and were greeted at once by May Halliday, who ushered us into the house with the information that the bird had been very much in evidence earlier when she and Hugh were having breakfast. Now it had disappeared. As seasoned bird-watchers Dave and I are well inured to such reports, so we were not at all perturbed. Having divested ourselves of goloshes, heavy coats and other winter equipment we seated ourselves at the dining table that stands beside a lovely picture window.

From this window the watcher commands the wooded approach to another mysterious ravine, companion to the one we had descended across the valley. Anyone gazing from our lookout could well anticipate almost any bird or animal to appear from that hidden vale. Today the whole scene was splashed by warm sunlight that set dark cedars and grey tree trunks in sharp contrast to gleaming snow. Among the nearest trees, close by the house, we saw that a variety of feeders had been placed: a good sized suet log, its cavity filled with chickadee pudding; two half coconut shells, suspended on wire and each covered a foot or more above the shell by two broad pieces of metal, one over the other, the shell being filled with bread, suet crumbs and seeds; a largish tray feeder of the winged variety set up

on a stand about four feet high and laden with mixed seed and grain; a spread of bread and seed on hard-packed snow under a cedar tree. I believe there were pieces of suet in other spots that we did not see well through the trees.

With such a bounteous offering you may imagine that we looked out upon a scene of intense activity. A crowd of juncos kept rushing from one feeder to another so rapidly that it was hard to keep tabs on them. Time and again a pair would do battle with each other for some choice tidbit, rushing head-on with half-raised wings, or opening beaks wide and thrusting their heads close together. To my great astonishment many of the juncos fed from the chickadee pudding in the suet-holder. There were seeds in the mixture which doubtless they were taking, but it was quite evident that they were taking suet too, by the mouthful. This is the first time I have ever seen juncos so feeding, and I have not been able to find any mention of such an item of diet in any of the books I have since consulted. The Halliday chickadee pudding must be a particularly enticing variety. After a few minutes of hectic activity, the juncos suddenly dispersed. We could see them sifting away through the trees and up the slope.

Their place was immediately taken by chickadees. Several of these lively mites dashed in now from the direction of the ravine. Their attention was focussed on the coconut shells, a liking that they were soon forced to share with two white-breasted nuthatches. If the junco feeding had been a melee, this was a parade, for each bird rushed to get a bite, almost at once giving way to a newcomer, who was likewise ousted in turn. How much the paraders ate, and what they cached in nearby crevices we could not say. Two or three house sparrows joined the parade. Seeing these May told us that other than a few of these sparrows they were not troubled by the avian urbanites - house sparrow, starling, pigeon. There are a few pigeons in the vicinity, but they do not come down into the yard at all, possibly because it is so wooded. Starlings are quite absent.

The parade was finally interrupted by the arrival of a red squirrel. Racing down the hill this red streak shot into the opening, tail raised and head down, as if it were determined to take all the feeders at once by assault. But it was like some people, for no sooner was it arrived than obviously it could not make up its mind. Pausing, the squirrel wavered, reared on haunches, looking this way and that; then, running to the little cedars where the coconuts hung, it again hesitated, sniffed under each one, ran back and forth, and finally made up its mind. Once more it was all action. Rushing up into one of the cedars it got above one of the coconuts. Ready to leap it halted, for how, in Heaven's name, did a hungry squirrel get past those metal lids. Highly puzzling that! We'll try the other. So down the tree, up the other. No, that won't do. Try the other again. No. NO, NO! Down and over to a third cedar. Perhaps we can jump from that; up into the topmost branches, but it's too far to jump. Back and forth, back and forth. Finally in desperation the squirrel made a jump and landed on one of the metal lids which promptly

tipped, sending the animal skidding earthward. As if that weren't enough at this juncture a big, lumbering black squirrel appeared trying to get in on the bounty. The frustrated red might have failed ignominiously to get anything but at least it wasn't going to permit any competition from this black fellow. Like a maddened wasp the little red flash went after its big black cousin. Through the trees and up the hill, they raced, the black putting on a surprising burst of speed, but the red was determined. Fast as the black went, the little red went faster, until a few yards up the slope it caught up, giving the big one a couple of nips on the rump that really sent it into an explosion of speed. Satisfied at last the red returned to resume its vain quest, only to be halted again by the same or another black, whereupon the previous drama was repeated, only this time the two squirrels fought each other through the mazes of a large brush pile before the black again retreated up the hill, receiving assisting encouragement in the rear as before.

In the midst of the latter encounter May, who had been busy making tea for us, looked out and called "There it is, I think. Yes, Yes. There on the seed feeder!" Dave and I turned in one quick move to center our attention on the big tray. Sure enough there in the midst of the seeds, busily partaking, was the bird we had come to see, a large reddish wren, a Carolina wren, no less. Not since the fall of 1951 have I seen one in the Toronto region - though a number have been seen by others in that time. Only once before have I watched one at a Toronto feeding station, and that, curiously enough, was in this same region, but further down the valley, just across Yonge Street on Donwoods Drive.

Paying no heed to other birds, or to us peering from the window, the wren fed greedily on the seed. Some of the juncos had returned now, and one got onto the tray too but neither wren nor junco made any belligerent move. Each bird kept to its corner, and fed eagerly. When the junco left so too did the wren. It dropped down on the ground, flying in under the cedar tree where bread and seed had been scattered. There it fed for a few minutes, again with juncos nearby. Having sampled this fare it flew up to the coconut shells, stopping briefly in the one with bread, but dipping avidly into the other with the mixed offering. While busy here the wren was suddenly and viciously attacked by a chickadee which divebombed it with the obvious intent of driving it away. The wren, however, refused to be ousted for, spreading its wings so as to cover almost the whole of the coconut's contents, it quivered in the shell till the chickadee withdrew defeated, not to return. Victorious, the wren ate to its heart's content. When sated with this dish it flew to the suet stick and the chickadee pudding, but here it had been anticipated by a downy woodpecker. The woodpecker paid not the slightest heed to the wren, knowing full well that size alone would protect it from any wren's attack. The Carolina capered about on top of the stick, peering over the top at the woodpecker several times until it decided it was no use waiting longer. Flying then to the brush heap it vanished into the pile. We thought it had gone for good, but as we watched we could see the busy wren popping in and out of the brush, no doubt in search of its common fare, dormant insect life. Quitting the pile finally, it darted up the sunny slope stopping at tufts of grass that leaned over inviting hollows

seemingly worthy of investigation. From tuft to tuft it went until we lost it to view. This was not to be our last sight of one of Toronto's most distinguished winter residents, for after a wait of perhaps twenty minutes back again came the wren, once more to enthral us with its presence. No wonder when we left we thanked May Halliday for having given us such a chance to see a bird we see so seldom, and so flittingly then.

The Halliday feeding station is in fact one of the most successful I have seen anywhere. Anyone who wants to see how successful such a station can be should pay it a visit.

Just up the hill from the Halliday station is another feeding station at the home of Mr. and Mrs. W. Wasserfall, 22 Roycrest Avenue. As the two properties nearly abut it is clear that the two stations help each other, no doubt together keeping a larger group of birds in the vicinity than would be likely with only one station. Dave and I paid a visit to the Wasserfall station too, and found it very busy with nuthatches and chickadees the chief patrons at the time. The Wasserfalls are ardent banders of birds as well as feeders, and the traps are set up near the feeding trays and suet sticks. That birds visit both stations is established by the fact that birds banded by the Wasserfalls appear at the Hallidays' station. Mrs. Wasserfall told us that one of the most popular feeders is a suet stick which is kept filled with peanut butter rather than suet. A visit to one station should include the other as each place has its own individuality.

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A recent letter from Wishart Campbell, well-known radio producer, who seeks relaxation from radio production in birdwatching, tells of a very exciting experience. He writes: "Sunday (January 16) I had quite a unique experience with two great horned owls. At Ajax I heard them hooting around 3.45 p.m., and after firmly planting myself against a hemlock tree, though clothed in a red coat, I began to answer them. In no time they were both twenty-five yards above me, and later twenty feet from my head - very vociferous and too close for comfort. A fox passed within ten feet of me, glanced up at them but did not see me. He went seventy-five yards farther into the brush then, but when I squeaked he rushed back at full gallop, presumably to get in on the kill. He sat on his haunches three feet from me, and looked into my face. I thought he was going to spring at my hand, but suddenly he changed his mind, his fur bristled, and with a sharp bark he vanished. The owls, which had also become very intent upon my squeaking, stayed on for twenty wonderful minutes, or until sub-zero weather forced me carwards."\*

\*(Ed. Note: This remarkable observation is an excellent sample of what may on occasion be accomplished by the imitation of birds or animals, or even by squeaking. All birdwatchers should cultivate these arts to the best of their abilities. They will find the results well worthwhile, though they mustn't expect to have experiences like this every day.)

From Alan Outram, Past President of the Club, the Newsletter has received a very interesting item concerning the use of a Geiger counter in mammalogical research. Mr. Outram writes, "Now that we read and hear so much about modern methods of prospecting, it is interesting to find a Geiger counter used other than for searching for minerals, according to the Journal of Mammalogy, Vol. XXXIV, No. 4.

At the Oxford University estate at Wytham, Berkshire, England a study was made of the nesting habits, etc. of meadow mice, (Microtus agrestis L) during 1951. The mammals were live-trapped and pregnant females were released, after having a hind leg fitted with a leg ring containing radioactive Cobalt (Co 60). After release, a daily search was made with a portable Geiger-Muller counter unit.

Eighty-five nests were found between May and September, of which thirty-two contained young. When nests with young were examined, the female usually transferred their litters to other nests. Their reaction varied, however, and some moved young as many as three times in twelve days, while some did not move them at all. One female shifted her nest three times in eight days. It had been previously reported (Hamilton 1937) that Microtus pennsylvanicus (this is the species of meadow mouse found in Ontario) invariably moves young to another nest when disturbed.

The young were capable of leaving their nest when a week old and generally did so when it was disturbed. There was no evidence that the young went far from their birthplace. A female, ringed when twelve days old was located eighteen times during the next two months, and was never found more than twenty yards from the nest in which it was born. Thirteen mice, first trapped when very small, were recaptured when mature, not over twenty-five yards from their original position."

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Dr. Fletcher Sharp has kindly sent in the following article on Trees With Catkins.

When you see catkins hanging from a branch, you will naturally think of one of several catkin bearing trees. Probably the first two trees to enter your mind will be the willow and the poplar. These trees are diecious which means that the trees are either male or female, the male trees bearing the male catkins, and the female trees the female catkins.

The birches are monecious, that is their flowers are uni-sexual and on different parts of the same tree. Both catkins may be observed on the yellow birch during the winter months. The male catkins are much larger and drooping; the female are smaller and erect. After fertilization, the female catkin develops into an upright cone which remains on the tree during the following winter and makes excellent food for the birds.

The hazel nut has a short male catkin during the winter. This elongates in the spring. It is then that the small red female flower

may be found at the base of the male catkin. The alders usually bear their male catkins in threes with a small female one just below.

The drooping male catkins of the hickory and walnut trees are very noticeable in the spring. The pistillate or female flowers, borne at the tips of the twigs, are less snowy and do not flower until the male catkins have lost their pollen. The oaks also have many fine male catkins hanging from their branches.

One way of identifying the hop hornbeam is by the catkins hanging from their very fine twigs. The little female catkins develop only during the leafing time.

The blue beech which is also called "ironwood", like the hop hornbeam, has male catkins. They are enclosed in a bud during the winter, which becomes more evident in the spring.

That old "living fossil" the gincko tree, is also a catkin bearer. Only the male trees bear catkins. So if you see catkins hanging from a gincko you know it is a male tree.

A catkin is an inflorescence in the nature of a spike which produces male or female flowers, and at maturity the whole structure usually falls away. Male catkins are larger and usually hang from the branches. They develop about two weeks earlier than the female catkins which are much smaller and at first erect. Try your memory on the catkins this spring."

R. M. Saunders,  
Editor.