

Toronto Field Naturalists' Club

ANNUAL MEETING

Monday, May 3rd, 1954

at 8.15 p.m.

at

THE ROYAL ONTARIO MUSEUM

The President will give a brief report on the activities of the Club during the year.

- - - - -

Report of the nominating committee.

- - - - -

Election of officers.

ADDRESS OF THE EVENING

"Using Canadian Animals and Birds in Design"

by

Thor Hansen - Art Director of the Public Relations Department of The British American Oil Company.

Illustrated with Kodachrome lantern slides.

- - - - -

May Outings

Your attention is drawn to the following changes in the programme of spring outings.

Page 5. - The outing to Purpleville Woods will be held on Saturday, May 8, instead of Sunday May 9.

Page 5. - The outing to the Gundy Estate will be held on Sunday, May 9, instead of Saturday May 8.

Page 7. - The outing to Purpleville Woods will be held on Saturday May 8, instead of Sunday May 9.

Page 7. - The outing to Lambton Woods will be held on Sunday May 9th instead of Saturday May 8.

- - - - -

Toronto Field Naturalists' Club.



NEWSLETTER

Number 124

April, 1954.

Great white wings rhythmically beating, long white throats mellowly tooting, music in empty skies fore and aft, moments of wondrous beauty so soon past, the wild swans came sweeping by, majesty and mystery incarnate, rising from the death of winter, guided by a vision of the beyond where life begins anew.

Thus, along the northern bastion bluffs of Long Point Bay, above wind-tossed sparkling water, over tree-lined, arrow-straight causeway and waving marsh phragmites, passed hundreds and hundreds of whistling swans on the last weekend of March. On Saturday the flocks sped by in brilliant sunlight that set everything aflash. On Sunday the rushing V8s and lines were soft glowing white etched upon sombre grey rain-pregnant skies. Always they were vivid, vital beauty.

Some lines were so far away as to be hardly more than waving serpentines of white, their individual members difficult to distinguish. Others passed overhead so close that it was possible to watch the leader cock his head earthward, the better to survey the battery of upraised binoculars along the causeway. Nearly every flock raced on without a pause. Only two or three hesitated as they reached the western end of the bay. One broke formation, the swans milling about for several moments before forming a V and going on. With every group there was the music of the flight, so like the rich gentle note of French horns in a symphony orchestra.

Saturday we saw no swans on the water at Long Point, though we did sight one small group descending at Turkey Point, but these we could not see once they were down, for we were watching from the northern bluff near Forestville, and the swans alighted on the lake shore side of Turkey Point, perhaps three miles away. We had, however, already had a good look at two flocks feeding on Hamilton Bay, one to the north, one to the south of the pier at Lasalle Park. Even birds were in the northerly group, fifty-two in the other. We had the pleasure of eating lunch in the car, parked on the pier, with swans as mealtime companions. Both flocks were close to shore, dabbling along the marshy edge. As we resumed our trip towards Long Point we drove along Longwood Road, and the

embankment overlooking Dundas Marsh. Far up the marsh we could make out a third flock of a dozen swans hard by the canal at the McMaster University end. On Sunday, just as we were leaving Long Point towards noon, we caught sight of nearly a hundred swans riding the waves beside a long finger of marsh that extends northwards into the bay east of the south part of the causeway. These birds were about a mile distant, but easily seen through binoculars and telescopes. Other than these birds all the swans, more than 1400 all told, that we saw during the two days were in flight, earnestly bent upon migration, not just flying around.

The direction was generally westward. From the angle at which nearly every flock left the bay they could have taken a course overland directly towards Lake St. Clair, very likely their next destination, as this is one of the main way stations in the long route from their winter homes on the Carolina coast to their summer abodes on the Mackenzie River Basin and the Alaskan tundra. They could, however, have veered after we lost sight of them, and have followed the lake shore, so passing by Rondeau and Point Pelee, a regular line of flight for the swans. By this route likewise they would come eventually to Lake St. Clair, but it would offer more resting and feeding places on the way.

Of the many people who drove from various centres to Long Point for this occasion - this was the F.O.N. weekend - there were some, unfortunately, who saw very few swans. We were told of one man on Saturday afternoon who had seen none at all! Though at first surprised by this we realized how easily possible such an experience can be when we saw how relatively narrow was the width of the area over which a passing flock might be visible. This was even more true on Sunday, when the clouds were heavy. Also the speed at which swans travel when on migration is really very fast. The great white birds appear to be going along at a leisurely pace on slowly beating wings, yet before the observer realizes, he has heard the music that heralds their coming, seen the flock come over the eastern horizon, watched it sweep on and past, leaving behind the tell-tale music falling from the clouds, where it has disappeared, all this in a matter of moments. Only when a long line has raced by, is the deceptive leisureliness revealed as the power and speed of a high-powered car. Hence it would be quite easy for someone to spend an hour or two crossing the causeway to the Point and back and miss the swans, for if flocks passed along the north side of the bay while he was on the point, or contrariwise, he would probably never see them.

It is also true that people who are inexperienced in knowing where to look for passing flocks, and especially those who do not recognize their notes, are seriously handicapped when the birds are in the air and not on the water. In contrast to some previous years' experiences, this weekend's sights of swans depended for us almost wholly upon hearing as a guide. With the exception of the swans at Hamilton Bay every flock we saw on Saturday was detected first by ear. On Sunday it was nearly the same story. The importance of the detection of birds by the sounds they make cannot be overestimated, especially in a case like this. Anyone who could not

or did not hear the swans calling might very well not have been impelled to look up often enough, thereby letting flock after flock pass overhead unseen.

Though it is for the swans that we always go to Long Point Bay this last weekend of March each year, there are many other attractions for the bird watchers in that neighborhood at this time. In addition to the swans we saw, for instance, thousands of ducks. Canvasbacks, redheads and greater scaup were in the majority, together far outnumbering all the others, but fourteen other kinds of ducks were present. Large numbers of ducks, especially greater scaup, were heading westward along with the swans on Saturday afternoon, but on Sunday most ducks seemed to be satisfied to feed on the bay or in the marsh pools. In one of the latter, the last open water on the west side of the causeway before reaching the Point, we were delighted on Saturday afternoon to spot a brant goose, associating with a large group of baldpates, ringnecks and redheads. This bird was reported by the observers who were down the previous week, when Dr. Trevor Owen got pictures of it. We scarcely hoped to find it still around, yet there it was, easily seen, and showing no inclination to depart. Still about on Sunday, it was viewed by scores of people, and photographed repeatedly. Everyone was very excited by the brant, since this species is of rare occurrence in these parts at any time, and in March is earlier than normal anticipation by several weeks.

One of the outstanding observations of the weekend was the incredible number of blackbirds roosting in the cattails on the bay shore of the point east of the causeway. Saturday evening flock after flock flew into this area from the mainland. Many of the flocks contained several thousand birds each. The full effect was seen, however, when disturbance or restiveness caused the accumulating crowd of birds to rise from their cattail roost. Several times this happened, and on each occasion the rising mass was like a billowing cloud of black smoke, swirling and eddying, vanishing into the reeds, only to puff upward again as if it were the plaything of every vagrant breeze. What the total number was I cannot say. I have suggested 250,000 in my records, but I feel that this is a very conservative figure, a certain underestimate. I have watched the fall starling roost at Goat Island in the Niagara River, when it was known to contain in the neighbourhood of a million birds, and the blackbird mass here seemed comparable to the starling crowd in appearance, so that I would not have been surprised to have heard that fully a million birds were spending the night in these cattails. The next day the huge aggregation had become largely dispersed over the adjoining countryside by the time we arrived on the scene. Then every field, every pasture, particularly all wet meadows, were possessed by large contingents of redwings, accompanied by some grackles, cowbirds and starlings. The overwhelming majority of all the blackbirds were redwings. I doubt if I have ever seen so large a concentration of this species before. It would seem that the northbound flocks had advanced this far and were awaiting favourable weather in this propitious haven - the Long Point Bay region - before pushing on

further. Doubtless the accumulation had been growing for some time, with new flocks arriving all the while to swell the numbers. Only when we see something of this sort do we realize the huge number involved in the population of our common birds.

Another place to visit on a trip to the Long Point area is Backus Woods. We never miss this spot, though some of my companions have sometimes grumbled about tramping miles and seeing nothing there. A place for hiking it certainly is, but as for seeing nothing you may judge by our minds this time. We walked through the woods for an hour or more, and out of the dark mysterious pools that mottle the leafy floor of the wood we raised three pairs of wood duck that went whistling away in shrill protest. We saw a turkey vulture soaring and circling above the trees, keeping to the edge of the wood where forest joins farmland, no doubt seeking some toothsome tidbit in the open. There was a red-shouldered hawk screaming out his proclamations of ownership over some wooded glen, against whom crows cawed and cursed. A tuneful flock of tree sparrows made music in an impenetrable mantle of shrubbery that decked a tiny watercourse, while a ruffed grouse drummed somewhere off in the depths of the wood. Possibly we heard a barred owl hooting, but since there were also dogs barking in the distance and we could not trace the owl down, we decided against counting it, though we have little doubt as to its presence. As a matter of fact Backus Woods are well suited as a residence for barred owls, and they are very likely to be there. The possibility of seeing a barred owl adds still another attraction to these pleasant always beckoning woods.

A spring trip to the Long Point area should also include a look at the large heronry north of Port Dover on the Jarvis road. This colony of great blue herons has been growing of recent years and now includes fifty nests or more. It is situated east of the road in an extensive wood that stretches parallel to the road and may be seen on the other side of some fields that border the road. The huge nests are easily visible from the highway as large dark masses in the trees. We saw several of the great blues standing on nests. One bird seemed to be trying one nest after another as if making up his mind which to claim. The herons must have arrived during the week, as the party of observers who came down on the previous weekend made a special effort to see these herons and found none.

By the time we got home to Toronto on Sunday afternoon, we has seen a total of 62 species on the trip, a jaunt that ended triumphantly with sight of a flock of nineteen Canada geese honking their way northward over the traffic jam on the Humber bridge!

: : : : : : : :

That we may always learn something new about even our most common birds and animals is a fact that all observers need constantly to remember. An example of the truth of this assertion was borne in upon me last Saturday morning (April 3).

My nephew, Dave West, and I were just descending the slope to Reid's pasture when we heard a blue jay making a peculiar noise. Glancing around we located the bird on top of a small hawthorn near the edge of the pasture. At intervals of a few seconds, possibly three to five times a minute, the jay uttered a rough, rolling call that sounded to our ears like purrrrl, or currrrl, even gurrrl. On each occasion that the call was given the jay stretched its neck full length, or bobbed its whole body, the entire performance reminding us strongly of the manner in which many shorebirds bob when slightly alarmed or nervous. At first we could see no possible explanation for the jay's behaviour. We speculated about the possibility of its being some sort of pre-nuptial display, but the fact of the bird's being alone seemed to preclude this. While we were talking Dave chanced to look along the border of the pasture, and there, a hundred feet or so away, was a large red fox. The reason for the jay's peculiar behaviour now was clear for we could see that the bird kept a close watch in the fox's direction, and seemed urged to make its harsh remarks in response to what it saw. As for the fox it paid no attention to the agitated bird, and since it was oblivious of us, the wind blowing from it to us, it busied itself trying to catch some small animal, probably a field-mouse, in the pasture. For some moments it watched one spot, body tensed, then stamping its hind feet several times in rapid succession, it leaped. The try was unsuccessful, but the fox took the failure with great calm, merely turning away from the spot and idly ambling toward the pasture fence. This move, however was too much for the blue jay since the fox was now headed in its direction. With one final prrrl, the jay quit the hawthorn and shot up the hill into the dense wood. So far as we could tell the fox neither saw nor heard the jay, or if it did there was no sign that it was in any way interested. Lying down near the fence Renard busied himself with making his toilette, licking and chewing at himself like any dog. Finished with such homely matters, he got up, wandered aimlessly in our direction, turned back for another sniff at the mouse's run. Then, in a twinkling, a swirling gust of wind sent our smell to his nostrils. Instantly he went rigid, head raised, his nose twitched, then he whirled, and seeming to flatten out, he started to race away. Seeing that he was going anyway, I gave a bark. The effect was electric, for Renard shot into the air in a great bound, and tore away down the pasture with such speed that any greyhound would have paled in envy. The unknown note of the blue jay which had been our introduction to this episode, had opened the door for us upon another of nature's wild life dramas.

A similar, or the same note, I find, is mentioned in Bent's Life Histories of North American Jays, Crows and Titmice, p.46. where it says "Quite different from the shouted or whistled notes is a dry, wooden rattle, almost a growl. A lone jay may give it,

or one or more in a large company. The notes are often accompanied by an odd rising up and down on the perch." Francis H. Allen (MS.) speaks of it as "a grating, pebbly r-r-r-t, generally given twice, but sometimes three times. The repetition is in the manner of most of the calls of the species. The grating quality I express by the r, but of course the t sound ran all through the note. Pebbly seems to express it rather well." In our observation the general effect was similar to that recorded by Mr. Allen, but only a single note was given each time, and for a t I would substitute an l as the accompanying sound with the rolling r. Doubtless there are variations of the note given by different individual birds, as well as somewhat varying effects upon the listeners. The note and the performance are certainly not very commonly heard or seen. Neither Allen, nor W.M.Tyler, the author of the article on the Northern Blue-jay, offer any explanation of the action. In view of our experience I would suggest that whenever observers happen on this performance, it would be well to see if a predator, fox or otherwise, is in the vicinity. There may, of course, be several stimuli that set off this response but the presence of a fox would certainly appear to be one.

: : : : : : : :

BOOK REVIEW

A Field Guide to the Birds of Britain and Europe by Roger Peterson, Guy Mountfort, and P.A.D. Hollom (Collins, London 1954). In Canada Thomas Allen Ltd. Toronto, pp. xxxiv 318. Price \$4.00

Long awaited and highly anticipated, this book meets and surpasses all expectation. To those who have followed Roger Peterson's work closely, this can be no surprise for one of Roger Peterson's best characteristics is his willingness and his ability to listen to constructive criticism and to benefit by it. Because of this, each succeeding Peterson guide has been an improvement upon its predecessors. Now in cooperation with two of Great Britain's leading ornithologists, Guy Mountfort, Secretary of the British Ornithologists' Union, and P.A.D. Hollom, editor of The Popular Handbook of British Birds, Peterson has turned out the finest of all the guides with which his name has been associated.

Arranged in the manner so familiar to the many users of Peterson's Field Guide to the Birds, the "bible" of the North American bird watchers, this book has all the familiar compactness, the fine illustrations with their helpful "pointers" showing diagnostic field marks for each species, the indication of the bird's voice, habitat and range. There is, in fact, exact field identification provided for every species occurring in Europe as far east as Western Russia along with 1200 illustrations, 650 of which are in colour. In addition to Peterson's illustrations, there are 380 distribution maps in black and white, the work of Mr. P.A.D. Hollom. These maps, which show both summer and winter range,

are a wonderful contribution. In many cases it is the first time that the range of a species has been mapped, and doubtless many maps are subject to revision, as further information is acquired. Indeed the authors ask for such information. But no new feature could have added so much to the usefulness of such a field guide as this one. When new editions of the American guides are made, I am sure that similar maps will be a part of them. They are tremendously helpful. At the end of the book is also a very useful reference list of the leading ornithological handbooks and checklists of European birds.

Having myself, like all other birdwatchers who have travelled to Britain and Europe, struggled with incomplete and inadequate field guides, I can only say with the others, "Oh, if we only had had a book like this when we were over there!" For my own part I remember lugging around English, French, Swiss and German Guides. Sometimes I had to pursue my search through three languages and end up in Latin before I could pin an identification on a particular bird. What a pleasure it will be to travel with this clear, simple, beautiful and effective little book. For anyone going to Britain or Europe, and who hopes to look at birds, this is a must. It is without a rival in any language, and is in fact the only such book that makes any attempt to deal with all the birds of western Europe. Since there are to be foreign language editions, as well as the English edition, this book will become available to all European birdwatchers. I predict that like the North American guides, it will become their "bible" for the identification of birds.

: : : : : : : : : :

A significant cooperative study of bird migration through the use of spring arrival dates is being undertaken throughout North America. Dr. Chandler S. Robbins of the Patuxent Research Refuge, Laurel, Maryland, is in charge of this project. It is necessary in order that the findings be really important that a great number of observers contribute their observations. Consequently we publish here a copy of the form that is being sent out to all contributors this spring so that all who can do so will be able to use this copy on which to send in their data. Last year Ontario stood high in the list of contributing areas. We hope that it will stand even higher this year. Please take this sheet from the Newsletter and send it to Dr. Robbins when you have made the observations asked for. Your cooperation will be highly appreciated.

R. M. SAUNDERS

Editor.

COOPERATIVE STUDY OF BIRD MIGRATION THROUGH THE USE OF SPRING ARRIVAL DATES

The reports received for the spring of 1953 were very encouraging. About 7,500 observations were reported, representing 47 states and provinces. Cooperators in New York State supplied the largest number of records, followed by Wisconsin, Ontario, Illinois and Pennsylvania in that order. The arrival dates for the 28 species on the 1953 list have been put on IBM punch cards, which are on file at the Patuxent Research Refuge. These cards enable the data to be sorted and arranged in any desired order, and then listed by electric tabulating machine. Copies of the 1953 material are already being used by several research workers.

Nine additional species have been added to the list for 1954.

The success of the various studies involved depends directly upon the number of records received. Preliminary analysis of some of the 1953 data indicates that we need several times as many reports in subsequent years as were received in 1953, if we are to reach our objectives in correlating migratory movement with specific weather conditions. We urge you, therefore, to encourage others in your community to report their arrival dates, either direct, or through you.

Birds that are not seen until several days after they have arrived (due to the observer's absence from that particular area during the intervening time) should not be reported; nor do we wish 25 reports on the same individual bird from 25 people who saw it on the same bird club trip. But if 25 or 50 people in the same town recorded the date on which their House Wrens returned to their gardens, each and every report would be welcome. This study is scheduled to continue for four more years.

No one is expected to be able to provide arrival dates for every species on the list. Several of the species probably wintered in your area; do not report the first date you observed these unless you were able to detect the arrival of migrating individuals. Departure dates may be listed if known, provided they are marked as departures. Otherwise only arrival dates are requested except for the Canada Goose and White-throated Sparrow; for these two species please also state any dates of increases or decreases, dates of main flights, or daily counts.

PROVINCE: _____ COUNTY: _____ LOCALITY: _____

OBSERVER: _____ ADDRESS: _____

Canada Goose	172	_____	Wood Thrush	755	_____
Marsh Hawk	331	_____	E. Bluebird (male)	7664	_____
Killdeer	273	_____	E. Bluebird (fem.)	7665	_____
Wilson's Snipe	230	_____	Red-eyed Vireo	624	_____
Mourning Dove	316	_____	Black & White Warb.	636	_____
Common Nighthawk	420	_____	Yellow Warbler	652	_____
Chimney Swift	423	_____	Myrtle Warbler	655	_____
Ruby-thr. Hummingbird	428	_____	Oven-bird	674	_____
Yel.-shaft Flicker	412	_____	American Redstart	687	_____
Eastern Kingbird	444	_____	Red-wing Blackbird	498	_____
Crested Flycatcher	452	_____	Baltimore Oriole	507	_____
Eastern Phoebe	456	_____	Scarlet Tanager	608	_____
E. Wood Pewee	461	_____	Rose-br. Grosbeak	595	_____
Barn Swallow	613	_____	Indigo Bunting	598	_____
Purple Martin	611	_____	American Goldfinch	529	_____
Common Crow	488	_____	Slate-colored Junco	567	_____
House Wren	721	_____	Chipping Sparrow	560	_____
Catbird	704	_____	White-crowned Spar.	554	_____
Brown Thrasher	705	_____	White-thr. Sparrow	558	_____

Please send reports to Chandler S. Robbins, Patuxent Research Refuge, Laurel, Maryland, or to your Audubon Field Notes Editor. Use this sheet or just a postcard.

John V. Dennis, Gilbert S. Raynor, Chandler S. Robbins, James H. Zimmerman.