

# Toronto Field Naturalists' Club

## MARCH MEETING

Monday, March 7th, 1955 at 8.15 p.m.

at the

ROYAL ONTARIO MUSEUM

Speaker: Mr. Bristol Foster

Subject: Plants and Animals of Timberline and Tundra

Mr. Foster was in Churchill during the summer of 1954 as biologist for the Descent Research Northern Laboratory. He is in his fourth year of honour biology at the University of Toronto, and an active member of the Toronto Field Biological Club, and also of this Club. Mr. Foster will have on display in the rotunda some of the rare type of mice. Heather Vole or Phenacomys, which he caught and brought back from Churchill. These mice have been given to the Royal Ontario Museum, and are under observation there. The lecture will be illustrated by Mr. Foster's own excellent collection of slides.

## ROTUNDA DISPLAY

A collection of carved birds by Mr. Frank Smith

A set of paintings of the emblems and flowers of the nine provinces of Canada by Sylvia Hahn.

## MARCH OUTING

Birds: Saturday, March 26th - 9.00 a.m.  
Old Mill - Humber River. Meet at the east end of the old bridge, Old Mill.  
Leaders - Mr. Clive E. Goodwin Mr. Don Burton

When subscriptions to the Club have been duly paid, it is in the interest of all concerned that the members should receive their literature regularly. If, for any reason, you are not receiving your Newsletter, will you please contact the Secretary? Perhaps you moved. Have you notified the Secretary of your new address? Your co-operation will lead to better service to you, and greater satisfaction to us. Thank you!

THE MARCH MEETING of the Junior Field Naturalists will be held in the Museum Theatre on Saturday, March 5th. The Bird Group will be in charge. Two films will be shown:-

"Yours To Protect" and "Birdland Calling"

The commentary on the films will be given by Mr. Jim Baillie  
President - Mr. F.W.Darroch Secretary, Mrs. J.B.Stewart,  
21 Millwood Road, Toronto  
HU.9-5052

# Toronto Field Naturalists' Club.



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Blowing snow sweeping past the windows on the morning of January 30th was incongruously out of harmony with the "clear and cold" prophecy the previous night's paper flaunted upon its front page. But when I checked in the detailed weather information inside, I found that the more official announcement called for "Mostly sunny and cold with snowflurries". At that I took heart. When Bob Trowern and Jack Livingstone with Bill Dobson drove up at 9.00 I reassured them on the basis of the official report. And on this occasion our weatherman was absolutely right. Today was one of the finest winter days I have ever been out - crisp, excitingly diverse with alternating swirling flurries and a brilliant sun setting all the fresh snow asparkle beneath a cerulean sky.

To fit the day the birds were equally exhilarating. Spurred on by a letter from Mrs. Charles Davies of Aurora, we turned northward from Jim Baillie's house, where we were joined by Jim, Earl Stark and T.F. McIlwraith in T.F.'s car. Gormley was our first scheduled stop. We did not find the redpolls reported in the cornfield at the corner of Don Mills Road and the Stouffville Road, nor the pine grosbeaks along the next line north. Small wonder, as it was two weeks since the Davies had seen them. We were in the likely neighbourhood though, and so we pushed on, eyes intent on every field, tree and fence post.

Soon we were pulled up short by a middling-sized bird dipping away from the road towards a grove of trees near a farm. We had stopped for a sparrow hawk already, but this was not one of that ilk, so plentiful this winter. We hoped it was a pine grosbeak, and when we got out we tried to imagine several starling whistles into grosbeak utterings - with no success. The bird, when finally located in the middle of one of the largest trees, showed the piratical face marks of a northern shrike, one of the many that are

wintering with us. Unfortunately it slipped away and disappeared before all the party had collected to see it, an event which evoked a rude remark from one member who was keen on seeing a shrike. Contrary to our previous experience this season this was to be the only shrike of the day, to the continued disgruntlement of the one who didn't get there fast enough to see it.

Not far up this road, just beyond Bethesda, Bill Dobson spied movement in a stubble field, movement that quickly resolved itself into a lovely flock of snow buntings. Nervous, lively, the buntings some 200 strong, worked rapidly across the field, flying up and resettling several times, thus enabling us to see that there were no longspurs amongst the flock. Seen against the blue sky they displayed all the flashing beauty that makes them always a joy to see. Dobson, who found them, had never seen buntings before, as he has been birding in North America for less than a year. So it was a very special treat for him.

For some reason the second car was delayed in getting started from the bunting stop, so that we were several hundred yards ahead. Suddenly, on topping a low rise, we saw a dense flock of small birds on the road before us. Bob tried to stop gradually, but the icy surface sent us sliding towards the ditch. Bob saved us from being snowbound, but his manoeuvres alarmed the feeding flock. We had but a moment to see that they were redpolls before all of the birds, about 250, flew up and away. We thought they might circle over the fields and return or settle nearby as such flocks so often do, but not this one. Up and down, up and down the flock bounded above the field, over the farther line of trees, another field and off. By the time our friends arrived no redpolls were visible, nor did they come back. It was a great disappointment to them, as redpolls are scarce this winter. None of us had seen any before. And this was one of the birds to be seen, according to Mrs. Davies' letter. Whether or not this was the flock she had seen in the cornfield along the Stouffville Road was impossible to say. Certainly it was the only lot of redpolls we were to encounter today.

To make up for this, perhaps, it was we who rolled by the next discovery and had to be beckoned back by the occupants of the second car. As we got back to them Earl shouted, "Pine grosbeaks". Look as we might we could not see any birds at all where he was pointing. Everybody was confused, too, because someone else shouted, "Hawk"; and almost in the same breath came a cry of "Pileated woodpecker". Trying to focus on three finds at once, without missing any, especially when all sorts of directions are flying about is worse than trying to spot three different people at separate points in a crowd. For me it was the hawk that came first - another sparrow hawk sliding through the air above a rise at the far end of a long field, away to a neighbouring barn - and forgotten. Then the pileated. With him I had a deuce of a time. Everyone was shouting "In that tree!" But with nineteen trees in a line on the rise, which one? The woodpecker yelled that emphatic, ringing call which names

it any time, so I knew it was really there. Yet, not until we had tramped across the long snowy field did I really see that bird. Even so I heard it tapping a good 200 yards distant, before I brought my associates' "helpful" directions down to the bird. Then I started, for, far as it was, this logcock was obviously of an enormous size, to all appearances the largest I ever saw. Maybe it merely had its feathers fluffed out against the cold. Whatever the reason, its silhouette was extraordinarily impressive. We went no nearer, being intent on the grosbeaks, so that though it was working well out in the open along a thin hedgerow the pileated kept on with its labours until we had returned to the cars. Only then did we see it quit its tree and fly into a nearby woodlot. The grosbeaks that had drawn us across the field finally materialized for me in a tall spruce tree, just where Earl said they were, close beside a farmer's house. Twenty at least were partaking of spruce seeds, shelling them out of the cones on the tree with easy dexterity. One male was the first roseate individual I have seen in years. They were quite tame, offering no objection to our near presence and moving on to other spruces in the long shelter line that marked the farm lane only when they seemed to fancy a new taste in seeds.

Our wanderings brought us eventually to Vivian. The plantings of the forestry station there are of little interest. Like all such artificial woods they harbour few birds and animals. We scarcely paused as we passed by, though we lowered the windows to catch any bird notes that might be in the air. None came to our ears. Rather it was a sight, after we had got by the main entrance of the forestry station, that brought us oncemore to a halt. I fancied that I had seen a bird in the midst of a small sumach clump. No fancy! When I walked back to see, no less than ten pine grosbeaks launched themselves out of the sumachs near the road. They did not go far, and soon I had in my binoculars the most resplendent grosbeak imaginable; a rich claret on head and rump, his wings were so barred and edged with dark and white as to appear a dramatic border to the roseate head and body, the whole an imperial dress. In the sun it was a striking beauty. Flanked by two others in green and yellow, it seemed as though we were looking at royalty, a prince with his attendants. Like me the others were tremendously moved by this sight.

We decided to eat our lunches in Vivian Wood, that is, the natural wood beyond Vivian school. Before settling down to that pleasant task, however, we explored some of the wood. Ruffed grouse, four of them flying along the edge of the wood, enticed us into their part of the trees. Some of the others came upon one of the grouse standing in a cedar, and, unlike the usual reaction of grouse to humans, instead of roaring off on wildly beating wings it stayed to be looked at, had almost to be pushed out of the tree before it would go. I guess this one had some of the "fool hen" blood in it that belongs more rightfully to its cousin, the spruce partridge. While my associates were enjoying this grouse I wandered away, and made the acquaintance very briefly of a brown creeper. Happily it whistled several times before departing so if the others did not

see it most of them at least heard it before they came to find it gone.

Lunch over, and some adroit backing and turning of cars accomplished, we headed back along the road to Vivian. Yet another lot of pine grosbeaks, a dozen this time, flying in across fields from the north and settling in tall trees near the crossroads, caused us to stop. But the light was bad for seeing at this point. Before we could alter our position the grosbeaks went on, and our attention was drawn to another flock of smaller birds way up across the fields to the north. They settled in some jack pines in the distance, so we hurried into the cars and up the road. Clambering up a snow-covered icy bank we paced along the jack pine grove until at the very end we found both the local dump and a flock of tree sparrows. They were sitting quietly, like so much fruit, on the bare branches of a dead pine, taking a siesta in the early afternoon just as sparrows and starlings do in the shrubs in my garden. We had hoped for redpolls, but you can't always conjure commoners into rarities, and when the tree sparrows, disturbed by us, replied with merry tinkling song, we were glad we had happened on such cheery company.

For our return route we chose the road from Ballantrae to Aurora, because we could visit the Wright feeding station, somewhat over a mile west of Ballantrae along this road. Once we saw a Canada jay here, and though no such outstanding client is patronizing their fare this winter, the Wrights have a fascinating company of avian visitors just the same. To prove this we no sooner had started down the way to their house when Bob called, "There's a red-breasted nuthatch!" If some of us had a good deal of difficulty seeing that bird where Bob had noticed it first we did find it a little later in the spruces behind the house. By then Mr. Wright had put on his coat and came out. He told us there were two of the red-breasted nuthatches at this station, and that one of them is tame enough to eat out of his hand. Chickadees and juncoes were much in evidence, a jay screamed from the swamp, and atop a tree across the road sat another magnificent male pine grosbeak. Mr. Wright said that a flock of the grosbeaks had been around for some time. Quite a successful feeding station, I'd say.

After turning through Aurora, we drove quickly to Richmond Hill, there to make our final stop of the trip. We were after a sight of the Wilson's snipe that, as in the past four winters, has been staying along the little brook that runs between the two large greenhouses just east of the village. I tried the northern greenhouse where there is usually a wet spot, only to find it snow-covered and frozen. Meanwhile the others had gone downstream. I heard T.F. bawling at me in the distance, and turned back, thinking they had got the snipe. But it was a Cooper's hawk, a young bird sitting quietly in a willow tree which was the cause of the hail. Glad I was to see this fellow, new for the year and none too common

in winter. It was very kind of the others to wait until I got back before rousing the hawk. When flushed it sped off across the marshy bit and over the railroad tracks. We feared that its presence meant the end of the snipe, and some of the party went over to the willow to see if any remains could be seen. I went on, however, to the open part of the brook where in previous winters I had found this bird, or another snipe. Scarcely had I set foot at the edge of the bank than, glancing down, I saw my bird sneaking quickly behind a bulge in the mucky slope. Backing off, I called the others who had returned to the road. As soon as they were assembled we approached the spot where I had seen the snipe. I said, "Are you ready?", and then marched along the bank, expecting the bird to fly up, only to have my hopes and the confidence of my companions fall flat. I stared. Where the dickens was the bird? In a stream a foot wide, no more than two feet from bank to bank, including the mud, it couldn't go far. Had it slipped out the brief moment I was calling? Then, abruptly, when I was quite non-plussed, up shot the snipe. In spite of all appearances it had managed to camouflage itself so well against the bank that none of us a few feet away could make it out. Had it not lost its nerve we would have perhaps gone away - ah no, we wouldn't have done that. That snipe had only a fragment of territory in which to hide. We would have found it. But doubtless such clever hiding is the secret of how our snipe has managed to save itself from such fierce hunters as the hawk we had driven away. May it continue to do so. May it come back another winter to enliven the snowy scene with the sight of a summertime bird! In its second haven, a few feet of open stream near the road, we did not disturb it. After such a demonstration this bird had earned a right to privacy.

When we got back to the city there were only seventeen birds on our day's list - but what a list. Its not always the number that counts but the quality, and the satisfactory looks at the birds. And both of these we had had in full today. It will go down in our annals as a red letter day. \*

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Roy Wallace, a member of this club, brought the following very unusual observation to my attention in a letter of January 13th. He writes: "The shrill calling of a sparrow hawk attracted the attention of my brother Ed and myself, and looking up we saw a snowy owl perched on the roof of the Tip Top Tailors' building. The sparrow hawk was diving at it, but only occasionally coming fairly

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\*Ed. Note: In looking for pine grosbeaks keep an eye on the many tall Norway Spruces that are planted in windbreaks and along lanes; also watch groves of sumach and apple trees with apples still hanging. All these trees offer favourite food for these birds. The ridge country from King to Aurora and Uxbridge has produced a good many of these birds recently.

close, when the owl would lower its head and partially raise its wings as though it were going to spring. This would still further excite the little hawk. Finally the owl seemingly lost patience. With head and wings held in the position mentioned above, it uttered a rather shrill, somewhat harsh scream, descending in scale. This was the first time we have ever heard a sound from a snowy owl. The hawk stopped calling right away and flew off. We saw it some minutes later perched quietly on another section of the roof, a good distance from the owl."\*\*

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Jim Mackintosh at Glendon Hall is having another successful winter with his feeding station. Besides the usual chickadees, nuthatches, woodpeckers, bluejays, juncoes and cardinals he has been having purple finches, a hermit thrush, a robin, and a flicker. In the neighbourhood are pine grosbeaks and a pileated woodpecker. As to the purple finches Mr. Mackintosh writes (Jan. 16th), "For the past week I have had a good opportunity of studying certain habits of the purple finch. Last Monday a flock descended on my trays of peanuts and sunflower seeds. They have been around during daylight hours ever since. The females are somewhat belligerent towards their own kind, and especially so towards juncoes, sparrows and chickadees. The cardinal, however, usually gets them off the trays. Victor Crich informed me that they liked a little salt in their diet, which I find is true. The original flock of about 12 has increased to about 30, so I guess the news got around that there was a supply of salted peanuts at Glendon Hall. Their feeding hours are approximately from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. There are usually four to eight on each tray, while the other birds have to grab and get out."

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\*\*Ed. Note: This is the first record, so far as I know, of any observer in this region hearing a snowy owl utter a note. They are usually quite silent birds with us. In their northern tundra homeland they are vocal enough. Dr. George Sutton who observed snowy owls at their courtship time on Southampton Island, says that ". . . I heard snowy owls hooting, especially in the morning on the brightest days. The deep booming notes floated across the rosy white snow plains from far and near, sometimes from dozens of birds at the same time. The notes had a decidedly ventriloquial quality, so that they seemed sometimes, to come from high in the air, or from the ground. The air fairly throbbled with dull thick sounds. On May 25, a beautiful day, at about ten o'clock in the morning I counted at least twenty booming birds (probably all males) in the region about the Post. So far-carrying were the cries that I could hear also the birds across the harbor, seven miles away." The snowy owl has also ". . . when disturbed or angry . . . a sound like a watchman's rattle, very loud and harsh, or they whistle with intense shrillness, like a human being." It must have been a variation of this petulant angry note that Mr. Wallace heard; and very fortunate he was to do so. (For a fuller discussion of the snowy owl's notes see A.C. Bent, Life Histories of North American Birds of Prey. Part 2.)

Mr. Mackintosh asks about the economic status of the purple finch. Its proper name, Carpodacus purpureus means Purple Fruit-biter, thus indicating a reputation for damaging fruit. This name was given in earlier days, before much was known about the bird's food habits. It does eat at times a good many fruit buds, but recent study of that habit in this and other species indicates convincingly that such "budding" is actually a beneficial pruning process on fruit trees, which usually results in larger and better fruit. A certain amount of damage may occasionally be done to developed fruit by "biting" or "pecking". The considered judgment of expert scientific opinion is that "from all available evidence the Purple Finch seems virtually harmless, except for its fondness for the seeds of a few garden plants, and its destruction of weed seeds and injurious insects should prejudice us in its favour, to say nothing of its song and beauty". (See Forbush, Birds of Massachusetts and other New England States, Vol. III.)

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If we believed all the English we see used in the papers we'd have some funny observations of nature. Here is an example sent in by Mr. Alan Outram, who says "Newspapers often report natural history news in weird and wonderful terms. In the Toronto Globe and Mail of January 5, 1955, there appeared a Canadian Press article on the Christmas bird census, entitled "Bird Survey" and it contained the following -

'At Port Arthur a mourning dove was spotted for the first time. The unusual visitor was munching grain near a water-front elevator.'

The Concise Oxford Dictionary defines munch thus 'eat with much action of jaws, as cattle chew fodder.'

When one considers that no modern bird has teeth, and that a dove has a particularly weak set of mandibles, the thought of munching is rather amusing. 'Munch' is said to be an imitative word, parallel to mumble."

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Recently I have received a new type of neat and very convenient feeding device for use in attracting the fat-eating type of bird; chickadees, nuthatches, woodpeckers, creepers, etc. It is a birch bark disc containing a mixture of fat and seeds. It may be hung up on a branch of a tree or shrub, or even on a string or wire from an apartment window. Shaped like a large flattened doughnut it may be slipped onto a twig or branch. Snow does not cling to it; rain cannot hurt it, and the birds can feed on it at any time. Mr. W.G. Brunner, the inventor of this bird feeding ring tells me that he has found this ring "superior to any other method" of feeding birds at his feeding station. Mr. Brunner is selling the rings for \$2.00 a dozen, all made up, plus postage. His address is Box 75, Rosseau, Ontario.

R. M. Saunders,  
Editor.