

Toronto Field Naturalists' Club

MAY MEETING

Monday, May 2nd, 1955, at 8.15 p.m.

at the

ROYAL ONTARIO MUSEUM

Speaker: Mr. Reginald V. Corlett

Subject: Approaches to Nature Photography - Illustrated.

Mr. Corlett will show coloured slides of birds, mushrooms, wild flowers, etc. Mr. Corlett is head of the Photographic Department of deHaviland Aircraft of Canada, and is a member of the Commercial and Press Photographic Association of Canada, and past president of the Colour Photographic Association of Canada, and also a member of this Club.

ROTUNDA DISPLAY

Mr. Corlett will show typical arrangements for "close-up photography". A blind for bird photography will be on display, as will also black and white nature prints.

In order to keep our records up to date, the Secretary would appreciate it if any member who changes his address would notify her in writing as soon as possible. It is in our interest as well as yours that you should receive your notices of club activities.

President - Mr. F. W. Darroch

Secretary - Mrs. J.B. Stewart
21 Millwood Road
Toronto, HU 9-5052

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Number 132 - April, 1955

Somewhere among the trees, not far from where the road to Turkey Point plunges over the bluff down to that lakeshore resort, stands a curious obelisk-like monument. Some day I must stop and find out what it commemorates. Up to this moment I have somehow been unable to bring myself to do so. Perhaps I am allergic to monuments when in quest of birds, or is it because this Nilotic memento in an Ontario glade is to me a beckoning finger, pointing me down the little dirt road that slips silently through the trees to the west. Many years ago I discovered that this quiet way is one of those magic roads, of which there are more than you think hidden in the fields and forests of this province. I learned, then I forgot. In the past two or three years I have come to know the magic of this road again, and now I shall not forget. That is how it is that whenever I come to the obelisk in the trees I heed its pointing finger at once, lest by my unheeding the magic should vanish from my ken once more, and never, never return.

So it was last Saturday afternoon (April 2nd) that when Greer Roberts, John Nettleton and I drove up to the obelisk we turned immediately along the road to the west. Forestry Station Number Two the black and white sign tells you is the destination of this byroad, and unless you are persistent - or one of the initiates, you do not realize that once you have passed through the forestry plantings and across the pleasant glen by the station, the little brown road climbs onto the top of the bluff and soon presents you with the finest views of Turkey Point Marsh anywhere to be seen. This is in fact the bayshore road from Turkey Point to Saint Williams, though I do not suppose the local dwellers would recognize their cliffside lane under so pretentious a title.

On this first Saturday of April our minds were intent upon swans for this was our annual jaunt to see the whistlers on their northward trek. As we rolled up to the edge of the

bluff whence the water-dappled green marsh stretches away to the blue waves of Long Point Bay, we sought intently for signs of white. Then for some moments our attention was quite diverted from swans for, as we came to a halt, our ears picked up sounds near at hand that puzzled us immensely. Was it a swinging gate, or was it some piece of farm machinery? We were close by a house and a barn, and those sounds reminded me strongly of the melodious squeaking made by a neighbour's clothes reel near my home. I don't know how many times I've tried to identify that woman's washing as a fine new bird! But this offering on the bayshore road suddenly became very musical, like a tuneful catbird or thrasher. Mystified, we got out of the car and looked around, discovering to our delight that the singer, for singer it was, was none other than a northern shrike in a tree by the farmer's gate. After several more renditions of its queer pot-pourri of squeaks, squeals, and lovely melodies, the shrike departed. Not more than two or three times in twenty years have I been so favoured; my companions never.

No wonder we returned to our reconnaissance of marsh and bay with renewed zest. Nor was our hope denied for once the shrike's music had ceased to fill our ears, we soon picked up the mellow horn tones of swans. Softened by distance, the gentle "wow - wows, rising and falling in volume, told us as surely as eyes that many swans were in the neighbourhood. Guided by previous experience we turned our binoculars on the outer water lanes where at once long lines of snow white swans sprang into view. Even at a mile's distance they were as impressive as ever, hundreds of our finest waterfowl bound on the adventure of northward migration. How many hundreds were massed in the far white lines took us some time to calculate, but sitting on the bluff edge in the warm sun was comfortably relaxing so we did not begrudge the effort of counting. After several counts we calculated that about 2,000 swans were there. Mostly they were at rest, asleep or sitting on the water, though some were feeding in the shallower parts. Occasionally a few birds would rise and fly along the marsh channels, but they did not leave the flock. Ever the ceaseless companionship of communal music that reached our ears betokened the vernal vitality throbbing through these great white birds.

While listening to the swans we became aware of other calls, especially the flute-like whistles of baldpates. So dissimilar are these notes to the quacking ordinarily associated with ducks, that many people find it hard to believe they are really made by waterfowl. Some time elapsed before we made out where the baldpates were for most of the marsh was empty of birds, or those that were visible were mere undecipherable dots. Finally we comprehended that these calls were coming from close at hand, and looking down we saw that our mysterious whistlers were right at the foot of the bluff. Intervening trees made observation

downward none too easy. Some shifting of position gave us eventually points of vantage, where we saw not the few white-pollled widgeon we had expected, but more than 300. And with them we soon discerned half-a-dozen elegant male shovellers and five gadwall. Sunlight glinting from the white heads of the baldpates led me to seek carefully for that other widgeon, the European, whose drake sports a fine orange poll instead of the widgeon's white. Back and front, over and across, time and again, my binoculars coursed above the scores of heads. Fooled a dozen times by female brown tops I found my orange-headed drake at last, leading a rush of his departing cousins, raised from the water by our too vigorous motions atop the bluff. One of my companions saw, the other missed this rare visitor, which last we saw here in 1953.

Singing shrike, snowy swans, shovellers, gadwalls, baldpates, European widgeon - how our sights were mounting. Bluebirds were warbling somewhere nearby as we walked back to the car. Birds were all around. No sooner had we settled in, ready to drive on, when a small bird whipped across the road in front of the car. Nasal notes, vaguely familiar, floated in its wake. I was prompted to say, "Was that a chickadee?" Before we could puzzle out the first bird's identity a second, making similar notes, and obviously the same sort, appeared in a small tree right off the hood of the car. One look at its angularly tufted head told the story - we were in the company of two tufted titmice! In a moment the second arrival sped after its companion, and we after them. Once more to the edge of the bluff for they vanished into the matted tangles on the slope facing the marsh. There we had fleeting glimpses, and brief hearings of the nasal notes, but not again could we entice them into full view. Still we had seen them, and well, for one long precious moment. Surprise upon surprise, yet on second thought for all their rarity tufted titmice are common just across the lake in Ohio and Pennsylvania. Why shouldn't they fly the few miles across the lake? Or, for that matter, set themselves up as nesting dwellers in these sun-warmed thickets, so suitable for their kind, into which this pair had disappeared. I wonder if the tufted titmouse will not soon be added to the Ontario list as a regularly breeding bird, another southern arrival like the cardinal.

Raised to such a pitch of anticipation by this succession of encounters we were not at all astonished when John called out, "What is that big bird?" before we had gone a mile, to find that the "big bird" was a bald eagle in full plumage, white tail and head gleaming as it sailed over the road, bound, it seemed, for the nest out on Turkey Point across the marsh. This huge structure has been a landmark for years. We always look to see if the birds are on or near the nest. Today it had been empty. Now it looked as if one of the pair was heading home. Not many yards farther along John called again, and this time it was a V of fifteen Canada geese making for the bay. Surely the bayshore

road had shown us a degree of magic today such as we had never known before. We drew up at the hotel at Saint Williams quite in a daze.

Stopping only long enough to make arrangements for supper and for the night we hurried on to Long Point Causeway. There we found the road barred, and we had to show credentials before we could pass the barrier. Happily the Federation of Ontario Naturalists had arranged with the Provincial Police for their members to go through. We showed our membership sticker and the barrier was swung back. The reason for the block was that in the late March gale many of the cottages on the Point were severely damaged and some people took advantage of this to carry on looting.

Close by the start of the marsh we ran into a naturalists' old home week, for a company of many well-known friends were waiting there for swans. We couldn't qualify as swans and the loud shushing that greeted us indicated that there was something generally lacking in our demeanor. Obtuse puzzlement gave way to enlightenment when we saw Bill Gunn's recording apparatus set up preparatory to capturing swan music. Just at this moment swans arrived, a serpentine of white out of the blue east. Muting our voices to the appropriate sotto voce we gazed in appreciative wonder as glorious white birds beat their way into the brilliant western sky where the sun lay fiery on the treetops along the horizon. Another and another and another flock came by. Rest was over for the swans, a night of travel now begun.

We too proceeded on our way, but whatever we saw along the causeway and back to the hotel scarcely registered. We had had about as much as we could take in on this wonderful afternoon. Not until we had fortified ourselves with a very substantial meal were we in a mood to finish off the birding day with a walk along the road near Backus Woods, where we listened to a throbbing spring chorus of frogs: peepers, swamp tree, leopard and wood frogs. Only when we had got beyond the wet spots a little could we distinguish those buzzing beeps that spell "love" to amorous woodcocks. Two of the rasping swains were defying each other from opposite sides of the road, as a silvery moon rode the sky above. Night life is alright for those who may sleep by day. We had our minds set on an early rising, so we bade farewell to frogs and woodcock, and went back to bed.

In the past we have usually got up about 5.00 or 5.30. But the years do tell, and we had had such a full and exciting day we decided to sleep in till 7.00. That is why Greer and I were only standing on the hotel porch when some of our more ambitious birding friends, who had stayed in Simcoe drove by, pausing to shout jeering remarks at us late ones.

When we did get going we found the weather cold and raw and

drizzly, a sharp contrast to yesterday's bland warmth. Weather notwithstanding, the world was awlirl with birds. A deafening chorus of redwings and grackles greeted us. Every swale, every meadow seemed alive with them. In a farm pond that lies beside and below the road like a reflecting mirror, we watched two pairs of hooded mergansers making their morning meals. What drake in all the community of waterfowl is more elegant than this black and white Beau Brummell with an up-to-date brush cut?

By the time we reached the causeway the drizzle had ceased save for an occasional spit. The dark purple-grey rain clouds folded in long rolls and piled in towering mounds, made a perfect setting for the flocks of swans starting off for the west; against the purplish clouds their white wings shone with an intensity that made them flash like beacons, signals of courage to their brethern heading for a far, far land.

Along the causeway and on the point we marvelled at the huge amount of damage done by the great storm of two weeks before. Sodden, ruined pieces of furniture, detached stairs, and other debris littered the sides of the Causeway, the detritus left by high water. Out in the marsh one whole cottage floated upright and apparently whole, its colourful shutters absurdly intact. To the west on the sand ridge an eloquent gap in the line of trees and cottages spoke of sweeping waves and destruction. The motel at the corner, where the causeway joins the point, had been under water, and the owner was now trying to dry out rugs, drapes and other contents. Across the road the restaurant-store, where we had eaten last May, had completely disappeared, only a great pile of sand and some lonely signs remaining. Everywhere we saw cottages upheaved with roofs, chimneys, foundations askew. So high was the lake that the once broad beach was scarcely a third of its former width. The sand dunes where the piping plover nested have been so eaten away that countless tons of sand have been carried off by wave and current to be laid down again in some new formation on the farther point. These were deeply moving and frightening sights, reminders of the incredible power of wind and water in fury.

Our friends who had passed Saint Williams before our breakfast hour we met again out on the point. There we exchanged information on our "finds", each party taking down the "addresses" of birds to be looked up. Indeed we met a whole series of birders in the next hour or two. One group of Toronto observers had seen the swans at Turkey Point the previous afternoon, and had estimated their number to be 2,000, just as we had done, thus providing a useful check on each other's calculations. At another spot we came on Bill Gunn, who had braved the night in a tent on the point, and who was now surrounded with a company of birders anxious to hear his recording of the swans. Bill very graciously set the tape going, and amazed us all with his success in capturing swan sounds from out the skies.

Up in a quiet corner of the Saint Williams Forestry Station wood we ate our lunch, then turned homeward through Simcoe and Jarvis. One of the bird addresses we had taken down told us to go to the junction of Highways No. 6 and No. 53, turn east, go one mile to Wentworth Avenue, turn north, and by the field north of the Hamilton Cattle Breeders' barn stop and listen. When we stepped out of the car to listen, silence prevailed. We waited. We paced up and down. We jumped the ditch and looked expectantly over the fence. Five minutes passed. Then a meadowlark sang; nicely, to be sure, but it wasn't the bird we were after. Another five minutes passed. We muttered to ourselves. A rich liquid note dropped faintly upon our ears. It was the bird! Electrified into tensest listening we strained to catch further sounds. Yes, again, away to the north. We jumped into the car, drove on a hundred yards, listened. Clear and ringing this time it came. We jumped out again. At intervals the lovely notes told us the direction of the singer. We scoured the ground ahead, picked up two killdeer in our glasses. They wouldn't do. We tried fence posts, wires, trees - finally in the middle of a pasture elm tree we spied our bird, a western meadowlark, singer extraordinary, and ever welcome visitor from prairie land.

The second address Jim Baillie had given us led us to the campus of McMaster University. Go up Forsythe Avenue northward, we were told, and around the circle until you come to the Japanese crab trees that have fruit still hanging on. This we did, but when we arrived we found not only Sunday afternoon strollers, traffic and dogs, but a soccer game in progress! Find a bird here, what a chance! However, we made a try. Walking up the line of Japanese crabtrees and other ornamental plantings I got ahead of my companions and came to the end without seeing another bird than robins and grackles. But no sooner had I turned round than I saw Greer signalling wildly, and pointing across the parkway. Obviously he and John had seen the bird. I hustled back only to learn that it had flown over into the hedge of a pretentious residence. When we got to this spot no bird was to be seen other than chortling sparrows. In birding clothes I hardly looked like a Sunday stroller; and strollers don't go tramping through the grounds of fine residences anyway. Still, this bird was too good to lose, so I did. Across the lawn into the shrubbery down into a ravine behind; frustration prevailed. I climbed back, tried the shrubs beside a feeding station that I found behind the house. No better luck here. Standing baffled, and a little grumpy, I said to myself, "To heck with it". Yet even as I said it I looked up and there was the bird on a telephone wire over my head. Sleek and grey with just a dash of white in the wings, it eyed me - or did I imagine it? - with just a touch of irony, that mockingbird. Then, with spreading wings and flaring tail both now flashing white very noticeably, it slipped back towards the grove of Japanese crabs where

finally it came to rest, not to be dislodged again even when a man and a dog passed within feet of its chosen tree.

Thanks, Jim, Bob and Earl, Bill and Jack, for the addresses. They certainly led us straight to the birds. With these sights came the end of the most successful early spring trip to Long Point we have ever had, or could ask for.

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When one stands beside a pool on the beach at Sunnyside on March 31st, and sees a golden plover on the farther side of the pool, what should one think? That was the problem that faced Gordon Giles and myself on that date this year. There was no doubt about the plover, even though we had seen a killdeer fly past this pool a little while before. There was the bird alright, but what was it doing here six to eight weeks earlier than it should be? That is if it comes at all to Toronto in the spring, for this individual is the first one of its kind I have ever seen in Toronto in spring in twenty-four years of watching. Ridiculous that it should turn up in March!

After I got home I called Jim Baillie to tell him about our find, only to discover that Roy Wallace had reported seeing two golden plovers near the Humber mouth on Saturday, March 26th. I had met Mr. Barrett on the street car on the way home, and he reported seeing a bird of the plover's description on Sunday, and David Hoeniger, it turned out, had seen one on Monday by the same pool where we found it. A much seen bird it seems, though where its companion went is a mystery. Jim and I felt that both plovers must have been picked up by that week's gale somewhere on the Texas coast, where they could normally be expected at this season, and blown up here. In other words this would be a repetition of the kind of experience that brought us hooded warblers when snowdrifts were still around a few years ago. After a blow from the south in spring is always a good time to be on the watch, it would seem.

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F.O.N. Summer Nature Camp:

Pursuing your hobby in the company of equally avid and congenial folk is one of the pleasantest ways to spend a vacation. Friendly companions, lots to see and hear and do, instruction, play and pleasure in a beautiful situation - all these are yours if you will again this summer come to the ever popular Federation of Ontario Naturalists' Summer Nature Camp, to be held this year

at Billie Bear, the well-known summer resort in the wooded lake country between Huntsville and Algonquin Park.

Provision for beginners will be made in the Junior section, for the more experienced in the Senior section. Instruction will be under the general supervision of Frank S. Cook, of the Department of Botany, University of Western Ontario. Dr. Bruce Falls, Dr. Margaret Heimbürger and Miss Helen Lawrence will be his associates. Mrs. J.B. Stewart, secretary of the T.F.N.C. will be in charge of all general management for the camp. Fees are \$90.00 for two weeks; this includes accommodation, meals, tuition, and incidentals. For details apply to the Federation of Ontario Naturalists, 187 Highbourne Road, Toronto 7, Telephone HU 9-4694.

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APOLOGY We regret that in the March issue of the Newsletter the interesting article on the weight of mammals appeared without acknowledgment to its author, Mr. Alan Outram. During the process of publication this was lost.

R. M. Saunders,
Editor.