

# Toronto Field Naturalists' Club

135

## DECEMBER MEETING

Monday, December 5th, 1955 at 8.15 p.m.

at the

ROYAL ONTARIO MUSEUM

Speaker: Mr. Charles E.G. Molony

Subject: "Florida Wildlife"

In coloured motion pictures Mr. Molony will show much of the teeming bird life in Florida, which persons who have never seen it can scarcely visualize. Views of wild turkeys, egrets, herons, ibises, gallinules, anhingas and the vanishing Everglades Kite will be seen. To make a true representation of the wildlife of Florida the film will include shots of tropical fish, sea turtles, alligators, tropical flowers and a variety of general features related to this part of the south.

Much of the beauty of the wildlife in Georgia's Okefenokee Swamp and Florida Everglades and prairies will be shown.

### December Outing

The December Outing will be held on Saturday, December 10, at 9.00 a.m. at Cedarvale Ravine. Meet at the entrance to the ravine at the north end of Boulton Drive. The leaders will be Mr. R.E. Pannell and Mr. Don Burton. Both these gentlemen have made frequent visits to Cedarvale while studying the winter birds to be found in that part of the city, and are eminently qualified for the leadership of this outing.

### Junior Field Naturalists Club

The December meeting of the Junior Field Naturalists' Club will be held on Saturday, December 3rd, at 10.00 a.m. in the Museum Theatre. The meeting will be in charge of the Mammals Group. Two films will be shown "Mammals of the Countryside" and "Mammals of the Rocky Mountains".

### Botany Outings

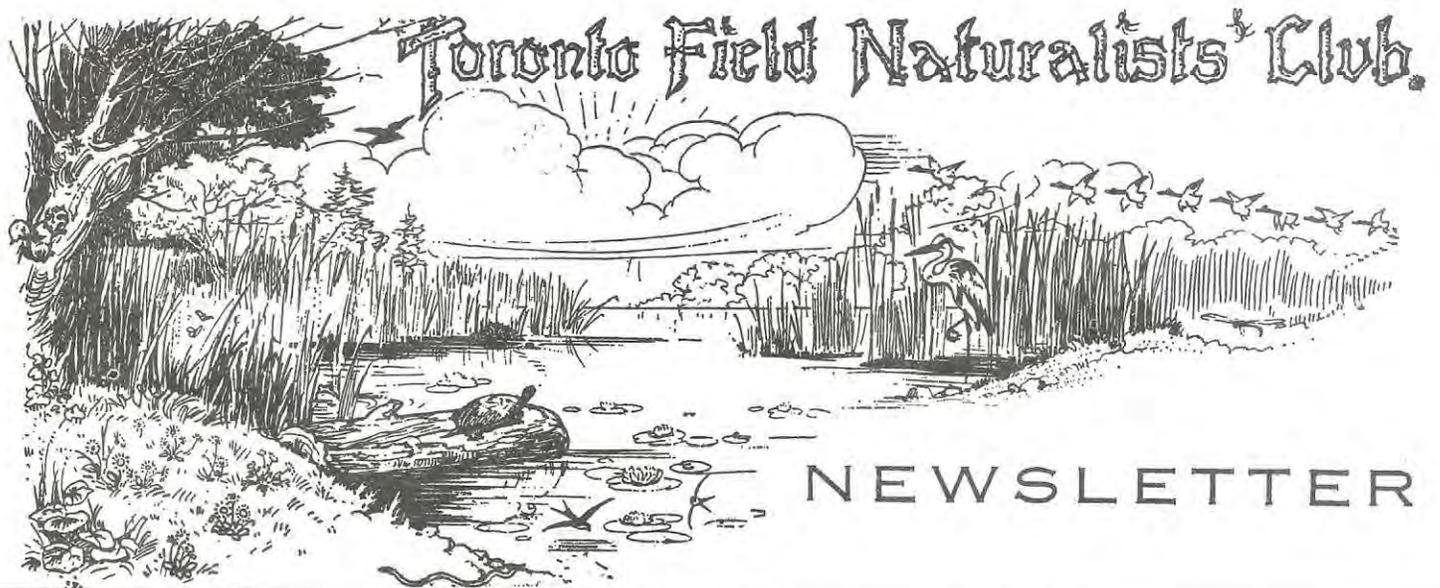
Beginning on Saturday, November 19, the Botany Club will hold outings every Saturday afternoon throughout the winter, at 2.00 p.m. at Glendon Hall, to study winter buds, trees, etc. Anyone interested is cordially invited to attend.

### Fees

It has never been the policy of this Club to do more than tell its members through the Newsletter that fees are due as of September 1st each season. We do not send out bills. If you wish to continue your membership please send \$2.00 to the Secretary, otherwise your Newsletter will be discontinued with the next issue.

President - Mr. John Mitchele

Secretary - Mrs. J.B. Stewart  
21 Millwood Rd.



## NEWSLETTER

Number 135

November 1955

### OPERATION KEEWATIN

by Mrs. Margaret Marsh\*

This summer I had the unique opportunity of tagging along with the official party of "Operation Keewatin" - an entirely new development in deputation work in the Anglican Communion. As representative of the women of our church, I went into a part of one of the lonely and isolated missionary areas - namely the Diocese of Keewatin in Northern Manitoba. On my return I was to have the privilege of telling the story of the problems and opportunities of our work in that part of Canada, "where the north wind blows", from a woman's point-of-view. I must admit that from a birdwatcher's point of view, I was equally pleased to make the trip, for Fort Churchill where the first Chipewagan Indian, the Reverend Sandy Clipping, was to be ordained, was to be the high-light of the episcopal tour of Bishop Hives, and Churchill (to me) spelt out B I R D S - in capital letters.

After our northern journey, my husband was a delegate to the general Synod of the Anglican Church of Canada, held during the first week of September in Edmonton. In the intervening three weeks we had our annual vacation, when we travelled from Delta to Victoria "birdwatching". As always it was not a "one thing I do" preoccupation but a constant delight, "All this and bird-watching too". The following observations are from our birdwatching notes of this trip.

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\* Ed. Note: Mrs. Margaret Marsh has kindly set down for the enjoyment of the members of the Club some of her impressions of birds and nature as seen on a trip to Churchill and to the Pacific Coast this past summer. We are very grateful to Mrs. Marsh for this contribution.

August 1 - 1955 -

Gillan, Manitoba, is two days and one night of travel north of Winnipeg. Beyond Dauphin the prairie sky seemed very high indeed with the horizon miles away. The clouds formed endlessly-changing patterns of cumulous clouds over the fields of ash-blond grain. Before dark, however, grainfields gave way to other scenes, and we sped by millions and millions of diminishing evergreens, a forest dotted everywhere by small ponds and rivers. It was past midnight when we arrived and the heavens were lit by glorious northern lights, shimmering glacial-green canopies overhead. We followed the native Cree catechist along the trail to the mission house. As we opened the door a pair of owls glided by, which I later tentatively identified as hawk-owls.

The most common birds at this railroad section base were cliff swallows. Under the eaves of the station I counted 76 nests with young. These earthen pottery nests were the third attempt of the swallows this year. They had been destroyed by idle loafers, both Indian and white, with no better activity to claim their time and attention. Also the railway personnel had hosed them down because of the mess. As I approached the birds were very alarmed and within a moment, the station agent's wife appeared. She was the self-appointed committee of one, to prevent further vandalism.

The common flower in bloom at this time was grass-of-Parnassus. while the commonest bird was the white-crowned sparrow.

August 4 -

The first ten days of August, with the breeding season about over, are not the best time to watch birds in Churchill. At least I did not have to watch where my foot landed for fear of stepping on a nestling. It had its compensations though, for there were almost no mosquitoes.

One morning I walked beyond the great grain elevator where the "Rupertsland" was docked, past the tents of the Chipewegans, along the rocks to the last little home on the outskirts of Churchill. There I met Mrs. Eva Beckett, a keen and competent field naturalist. We walked all morning over the folded grey rocks that line Hudson Bay, around the little pools fringed with tundra plants, until we came to the mouth of the Churchill River. There was a stark and lonely loveliness to the morning, and although the birds were much fewer than I had anticipated, I enjoyed the whole experience. Underfoot the bearberries and cranberries formed a dense mat. Arctic Avens and drifts of cotton grass, round-leafed orchids and Alpine bistort are the plants I recall with most pleasure. The birding life-listers that morning were Hudsonian curlew, parasitic jaeger, Arctic and red-throated loon.

Mrs. Beckett invited me to lunch in her charming cottage. While she prepared our meal, I enjoyed her unique collection of native Eskimo and Indian crafts, as well as the fox sparrow which came to the window sill for his meal. Mrs. Beckett has no trouble keeping food for the refrigerator is the ground itself, where two feet down there is permafrost. The greens for the salad came from the one garden in Churchill, made by Mrs. Beckett, who has been gleaning earth and compost for years, until she has now a little patch two or three yards square. We had a meal which was a gourmet's delight - Arctic Char (salmon) salad, tundra cranberry pie and Permafrosted fruit juice.

A second morning, Bris Foster, well-known Toronto birder, who was spending a second summer at the National Defense Research Laboratory, took me out on his "trap-line". As he collected mice, I collected new birds for my list, and further impressions of the haunting beauty of the tundra. We stood in a spongy meadow, alight with hundreds of salmon-pink baked apple berries, so named because they taste just like baked apples. The sky above was sullen grey, the few trees were twisted and stunted by the weather, but the cariboo moss, gray-green and brittle, held little pockets of surprisingly beautiful Arctic flora. Again the birding was thin. The young birds were out of their nests and almost all song was over. Without Bristol Foster's knowledge of the terrain and his field identifications my morning's observations would have been impossible. A Pacific loon rested in a small pool, and I was able to observe it at very close range. A northern phalarope bobbed along the edge of the shore; and we had the good fortune to flush a Harris' sparrow. We saw the nest of a Bonaparte's gull in a spruce tree. On another occasion, when Henry was with me, in an army jeep, parked on one of the roads of the Army Base, we were thrilled to see a family of willow ptarmigans. There were always Arctic terns, Bonaparte's and glaucous gulls; and believe it or not one became quite bored with white-crowned sparrows.

The other birdwatching highlight was the morning I went with Mr. and Mrs. Angus McIvor in their sturdy boat across the Churchill River to the old Fort. En route, with my own two eyes, I saw Eskimoes "whaling". We beached our boat at an Indian encampment a couple of miles from the Fort, and saw the name of Samuel Hearne and the date 1741 scratched in the rock. We were amazed to know that Churchill had been a shipping port since 1619. At the mouth of the river is the old Fort Prince of Wales with its spiked guns which never fought a real engagement, but which still look out over the Arctic. The whole approach to the Fort was a carpet of fire-weed. Hard by the Fort was a natural freshwater pool where the early settlers kept their ducks alive so that they might have fresh meat. In this one pool I saw godwits, semipalmated plover and sandpipers, stilt sandpipers and both yellowlegs. When we got back to the McIvors I saw a great shipping case full of lemmings that they had trapped for the Walt Disney Studios.

August 12 -

Delta, Manitoba, was first known to me when I read "Canadian Spring" by Florence Lee Jaques. After reading this account I was delighted to find myself driving north of Portage La Prairie for a one day's visit to Delta. Having "birdwatched" mostly around Toronto, I hadn't realized that there were so many ducks and shorebirds in the world. The flat prairie marshland was alive with them. It certainly was the time for shorebirds. We just opened our "Roger Tory Peterson" at shorebirds, then looked out across the flooded fields and there they were in the flesh. Towards evening one of the students doing post-graduate research at the station there helped us to make sure of our identifications. The ducks were discouraging though numerous, for the males were in moult and the females frustratingly unidentifiable. The research laboratories, the hatchery and the homes of the scientists surround the main lodge of the Delta Wildlife Refuge. From the watchtower you can look for miles over the golden rushes beyond the brilliant chartreuse green duckweed out to Lake Winnipeg. I can think of no lovelier place to birdwatch, either when watching the banding of the birds after they have been lured into the rush decoy trap, or when canoeing through the marshland, or when watching the lilt and lift of the shorebirds on the flats. My husband especially enjoyed the flocks of yellow-headed blackbirds and the song of the western meadowlarks.

August 14 -

Travelling across Canada by train in a glass-domed observation car is a great joy for the lover of nature. We kept our binoculars always beside us. From the train we got an evening grosbeak record for Mrs. Murray Speirs, identified a ferruginous rough-legged hawk, and saw an antelope bound out of sight as we approached Alberta.

August 15 -

In Calgary we borrowed a cousin's car and drove south to Waterton Park. In the afterglow of sunset we motored on toward Pincher Creek, always on the alert for the unexpected. In a small roadside prairie slough we saw a group of birds that caused us to slow down abruptly. There were seven avocets and one knot, and they never ruffled a feather as we approached nearer and nearer.

So it was for each of the days that we travelled, for each day there was some one birdwatching delight that crystalized our experience; and held in the memory of that bird is the very feel of the day and the place. A varied thrush disappearing into the woodland holds for us the wonder of Waterton Lake; a Clark's

nutcracker reminds us of our walk around Cameron Lake to the shelter by the glacier; a harlequin duck with her family floating on turquoise blue Moraine Lake brings back the hour we spent watching one of the glaciers of the Valley of the Ten Peaks as it slowly melted to form a mist-like cascade down the mountain-side.

August 21 -

We had four glorious days on Vancouver Island a few miles from Sydney. We were guests of Mrs. Walker Taylor, a former member of the Toronto Field Naturalists Club, who lives right by the sea in a parkland of Douglas firs and arbutus trees. From her own place we could observe rufous humming birds, chestnut-sided chickadees, Oregon juncos, redshafted flickers, hairy woodpecker, Bewick's wren, California quail, spotted towhee, pileated woodpeckers as well as the gulls and cormorants on the bay. A pair of screech owls haunted the adjacent woodlot, and in the open fields behind the house were finches, sparrows, flycatchers, Hungarian partridge and killdeer. Although we were always glad to come back to Towner Park, and sometimes wondered why we ever left such a sanctuary, we birded all around with complete fanaticism for those four days. We chased hither and yon until we had a count of 82 species although we were assured that this was an off season ornithologically speaking. One long day of loveliness was spent on a boat trip to the Salt Spring Islands, where we saw marbled murrelets and pigeon guillemots (lovely sounding words, aren't they?) as well as surf scoters and one majestic bald eagle. Near the airport there was a large field from which we flushed English skylarks. They were imported to this area about the year 1913 and can always be found in a small flock in this vicinity.

Mrs. Taylor had arranged with Mr. A. R. Davidson to accompany us on a day's expedition along the seashore and countryside near Victoria. It was utterly fascinating to watch surf-birds and black turnstones, feeding at low tide on the exposed rocks. Black oyster catchers with their bright red beaks were a prize for anyone's bird list. The payoff was a California murre, which performed like a circus seal to our extreme delight, standing up like a tiny penguin and swimming off in the swift tidal current so that we were able really to savor its versatility.

We birdwatched without any interruptions until even I was completely satisfied. For once I had had enough, not too much, but enough. And I was absolutely content to return home and to my work with my husband for Christ and His Church.

Contrary to the usual course of events sawwhet owls have been scarce in the Toronto region this fall. Ordinarily they migrate through our area in fair numbers; and last year when the local bird banders managed to band more than a hundred of these little owls the annual fall migration reached a peak. Consequently it is somewhat surprising to have to record that up to this date (November 7) no more than three or four have been banded, so far as my information goes.

Three possible explanations of this situation occur to me. The species may have been hit by some disease and have suffered widespread mortality. Although this does happen to birds and other animals, unless some evidence is forthcoming to support the theory it can only be regarded as a bare possibility. On the other hand this southward movement of sawwhets may have been delayed. This is perhaps more likely and we shall see them coming through this month. \* If there is an abundance of mice on the sawwhet's nesting grounds the owl could well be held in the neighborhood of their breeding until snow fall makes hunting difficult. A third possibility is that in passing through the Toronto region the sawwhets have altered their route of travel. In view of the steady cutting away of their preferred willow scrub along the lakeshore, and its present restricted state, it seems to me that there may be a good deal in this line of thought.

Two experiences this last Saturday (November 5) tend to bear out the idea that the owls may be changing their route. In the middle of the morning, as I was earnestly reading student essays the telephone rang. Over the line came the voice of Miss Freya Hahn, saying that she had just been looking at a "strange owl" in a tree beside her house. It was one she had not seen before. Her description was intriguing so I said I would be over as soon as I could make it. The essays could wait. On the way I debated with myself whether I was going to see a peculiar screech owl, or something else. At this time of year when many owls are on the move there was a very good chance that it might be a traveller, and in particular, a sawwhet; and I was especially desirous of seeing a sawwhet since I had failed to find one at all this year.

When I arrived we discussed owls for awhile, comparing and contrasting the various ones, then went out and saw the one in question. Perched high, some twenty-five feet up in a horse chestnut tree that still had most of its leaves now a haze of golden yellow, the owl was sound asleep with its head tucked under. So fluffed out was its plumage that in apparent size it was certainly deceptive. Before putting up my binoculars my first impression was that here, indeed, was a screech owl. The place of perching suggested this too. Yet as soon as I had the aid of

Ed. Note: Later information reveals that a considerable number of sawwhets went through on this first weekend of November, thereby supporting the delay explanation. They were seen on the Island and along the lakeshore eastward to Whitby.

the binoculars there was no doubt that what we were really looking at was a "very fat" sawwhet, a migrant taking a snooze. The "fatness" was, of course, complete illusion, being all feathers. This, though, is hard to tell unless one has seen a good many of these little owls, and knows how widely they can vary in seeming size.

After noticing the markings from this angle we walked around the house and crashed through the shrubbery on the other side of the tree so as to try to get a look at the owl's back. Only when we appeared in this quarter did the sawwhet deign to raise its head; even then it peered down with half open eyes in a sleepy half-interested manner. But with head raised we could see the thin elongated white marks on the head, and the whitish V on the face and forehead which, with the fox-colored stripes on the abdomen, form the best marks of identification for this owl, bearing in mind also its small size. The "apparent size", resulting from fluffing out the feathers as protection against cold, was not the only interesting fact about this individual, however. Ordinarily the sawwhet is inclined to spend the day in a shrub or a low tree, preferably one that is dense and dark in the interior, where it stands on a branch three to five feet above the ground. This one's high perch, and choice of a tall tree for roosting is merely another example of its being always wise to be met with the unexpected in dealing with birds. As it was Miss Hahn's first encounter with this owl, and my first this year, we were both delighted to see it.

As may be imagined, I made good use of the telephone, as had Miss Hahn, to let others know of the presence of the sawwhet, and in the afternoon I accompanied Earl Stark to see the bird. He too had missed seeing one earlier in the year. When we had had our look, the owl being still in the same spot, and still asleep, we greeted Miss Hahn, warning her that others besides would be coming for a view.

We then went up the Don Valley for the rest of the afternoon. Starting up the railroad tracks from the Don Mills Road bridge, we soon transferred our attention to the woods on the west bank, this being a favourite haunt of my companion. As the day had come off sunny and mild we had a pleasant time tramping woods and fields. At one wooded glen we put up quite a collection of birds, including a great horned owl. The big fellow flapped away, making heavy progress through the trees, without, curiously enough, arousing any protest from the many small birds that were about. For a moment I lost it as it flew up the high bank, then I caught sight of it again as it quit one tree and pitched into another. As I stood watching, it decided to move again. When it did it flew along the rim of the bank to take up a position in a bare tree at a point where it could watch both the fields above and the valley below. I noticed that although we had disturbed the owl from below, it alighted so that it faced the fields above; and even when it must have heard us talking and crashing through the undergrowth

in the valley it still kept its eyes over the fields. Yet no bird or person disturbed Bubo from above. And when we reached the upper fields ourselves, some distance beyond the owl's tree, we would see no reason for its steady vigilance. Perhaps Bubo from long experience has come to consider that danger is more likely to arrive from that direction, or possibly the owl was merely thinking of a possible meal, keeping an eye out for a wandering rabbit or squirrel or mouse. Certainly it was very much on the alert.

Our own attention, after reaching the fields was soon taken up with a crowd of small birds in a birch grove that stood alone in the open. At first we thought them to be goldfinches, as we had already seen several in the valley, but on closer approach we realized that whereas some goldfinches were in the flock, the bulk of the birds were pine siskins. Avidly shelling out catkins on the birches they were loath to be disturbed so that we were able to walk straight up to their trees and to stand watching them for some time. I think it was Wags (Earl's dog) cavorting through the field rather than our presence that made them nervous, and finally sent them shree-ing away. Even then they only swirled down to nearby birches on the valley bank. As we descended the bank and wandered through the wood below we saw them again repeatedly. Indeed, each time we tried to squeak other birds into view we always succeeded in attracting a band of these siskins as well. There were at least two hundred in the flock, the finest group I have seen in a long time. Quite a variation in coloring was noticeable in the flock, some individuals being so light as to suggest redpolls, some being extremely dark. A good many showed yellow wing patches to perfection. All in all, it was a very satisfactory observation of siskins.

On the way back down the track we passed Charles Sauriol's cottage. As we did we could see Sauriol, Tom Russell, and another man. They waved to us and shouted, "Come on over. We've got something you'd like to see." So we made our way down stream to where Sauriol's slender suspension bridge hangs above the river. On its swaying planks we crossed over and took the path up to the cottage. In the thickets alongside this path we saw several sparrows, one of which was a whitecrown in immature plumage. This I found out later in my records was my first November record for the species. Still, it was not the whitecrown that we had been called over to see.

Introductions over, the third man, who was in uniform, turned out to be Bob Speakman, Warden for the Don Valley Conservation Association, - Tom Russell told us to follow him up behind the cottage. Tom took us along a row of small evergreens and there almost at the end of the row showed us our second sawwhet owl of the day. They must be on the move. This one was perched in a much more usual place, three feet from the ground in one of the little pines. It was very much awake, drawn up thin and erect, looking scarcely larger than a bluebird,

as, indeed, it is not. Here, in the two different individuals, was a perfect demonstration of how far a sawwhet, or for that matter most owls, can vary in apparent size. Tame and approachable, as is the wont of this bird, the sawwhet in the pine let us come to within three or four feet, nearly to reaching distance, without doing more than opening its eyes a little wider. We did not disturb it further, and Tom was hoping that it would stay around a few days. With a migrant bird, however, unless weather conditions force it, or abundance of food lures it into doing so, the chances are slight of its lingering more than one day.

Two sawwhet owls in one day is by no means an unusual sight during the period of their migration which is now on. But this year when they have been so scarce it was not only a welcome but an extraordinary experience. The fact that one was seen in a tree in Rosedale, and the second north of Don Mills Road is what suggests to me that the sawwhet owls may be altering their usual route of travel, which is along the lakeshore, and be spreading out more widely as they go through. At any rate it may be worthwhile to scour your ornamental evergreens, your shrubs and your trees from now on in the hope of finding *Crytoglaux* roosting there.

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During the month of December you may find it interesting to comb the city ravines for lingering summer residents; the odd robin, catbird, hermit thrush, flicker, yellowthroat, whitethroat, towhee. When the snow comes don't forget to keep an eye on weed patches, especially good stands of pigweed out in the country fields. Tree sparrows, juncos, redpolls, goldfinches, and other seed eaters are very enamoured of these. Watch the birch groves, and the hemlocks too. They are always good host trees in winter. Open water along the lakeshore in brooks and creeks, or in bits of unfrozen marsh is an unfailing attraction to birds. If you know of a local wet spot that stays open all winter, as many spring-fed parts do, watch it carefully. You may be surprised at what you see.

R. M. Saunders,

Editor.