

# Toronto Field Naturalists' Club

## JANUARY MEETING

Tuesday, January 3rd, 1956, at 8:15 p.m.

(N.B. Please note change of day, due to the New Year's holiday)

at the  
ROYAL ONTARIO MUSEUM

Speaker: Mrs. J.K.W. Ferguson

Subject: "Six-legged Models"

Mrs. Ferguson, a Director of the Color Photographic Association of Canada, Toronto Branch, has been a successful exhibitor and award winner in many recent International Photographic Salons, and combines technical skill with the patience and insight of the naturalist to bring us an evening of fine color slides. Through the lens of her camera frogs and snakes can be appealing, caterpillars glamorous and moths miracles of beauty.

### ROTUNDA DISPLAY

A group of lampshades, made by several members of the Club, will be shown. A translucent plastic material is used to display collections of native plants.

### JANUARY OUTINGS

There will be two bird outings in January. The first will be on Sunday, January 8th at Sunnyside, to look for winter water fowl. Meet at the Sunnyside Bathing Pavilion at 9:30 a.m. Leader - Mr. George Francis.

The second outing will be on Saturday, January 21st, at York Downs Ravine, to look for owls and winter finches. Meet at Bathurst Street and York Downs Road at 2:00 p.m. Leader - Mr. Don Burton.

### BOTANY GROUP

The January meeting of the Botany Group will be held in Eglinton School, Eglinton Avenue and Mt. Pleasant Road on January 19th at 8 o'clock. Mrs. C.C. Heimburger will speak on "Corn Through the Ages" Illustrated. Chairman - Mr. G. Marshall Bartman.

### JUNIORS

The Junior Field Naturalists will meet on Saturday, Jan. 7th. The meeting will be in charge of the Insect Group and two excellent films will be shown. They are entitled "Insect Zoo" and "The Life History of the Monarch Butterfly".

President - Mr. John Mitchele

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

Yearly fee - \$2.00

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Number 136

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In spite of the encroachments of new houses and apartments on its borders, the destruction caused by Hurricane Hazel, and steadily growing dumps, Cedarvale Ravine still offers a haven to the birds. Twice within a fortnight has its continuing attraction been proven to me; once on November 19th and again on December 3rd.

The afternoon of the November day found all the trees and shrubs in the ravine etched in white by the first staying snow of the fall. The occasion of the advent of snow always sends me out, and nearly always I find a plentiful array of birds. Somehow the two seem to go together.

So it was this afternoon in November. At the very beginning of the ravine I met a little mixed flock, working from one side of the valley to the other through weeds and bushes. A loudly chipping cardinal announced the presence of the flock, whilst a downy woodpecker, flying away from a swinging suet log, told of one of the destinations of the flock, namely, Miss Betty Stupart's feeding station. White-breasted nuthatches, a brown creeper and several chickadees were in the company which was for the most part made up of juncos. I had just about decided that I had seen them all when something prompted me to step towards the tangle on the west bank, there to give a few squeaks. Immediately one more junco, still lingering behind the others, sprang out of some dense weeds, and, flying up, alighted for a moment on a small tree, staying long enough to give me a chance to notice the jet black bib and russet flanks of the most striking male Oregon junco that I have ever seen. I was certainly glad that I had stayed the extra moment, and had made the extra effort. How true it so often is that there is one more bird hidden away!

As a matter of fact I found scarcely another bird from this point to beyond the reservoir. Around Springs Corner, where the brook makes a double right angle turn above Spadina Road Viaduct, a second little flock came into view. Much of the cut-over area on the east bank below the apartment house has grown up to new scrub and tangle, thus restoring this spot to a good deal of its attractiveness for wintering birds. Chickadees and juncoes composed this group but nearby, bouncing from cover to cover beneath overhanging tree roots, was a perky little winter wren. If one of these little fellows choose to stay the winter in this neighbourhood it is usually to be found at this corner.

A very dingy song sparrow was started from a weedy rill near the wooden bridge just below St. Clair Avenue, and as I began climbing the bank to the road I heard two crows faintly cawing. This pair flew ahead of me up Tweedsmuir Avenue, so that eventually I came up with them in the ravine above the dump.

Navigating the surface of the semi-frozen dump was rather a tricky and mucky business, the snow giving a surer footing only here and there. When I got to the stream again at the foot of the dump it was to find myself in an empty dell. The two crows, now cawing lustily from a half buried and dying pine on the face of the dump, appeared to be giving me the jeer. However, I soon heard cardinals chipping along the opposite bank to the west. Following the sound brought me quickly into the midst of a real company of redbirds, such as is to be met with only in winter, and only in the ravines of which Cedarvale is still the most favoured. Soon they were streaming in front of me as I pushed through the bushes. At least a dozen, possibly as many as fourteen, were in the parade. Keeping a little ahead they led me in the direction of the feeding station on Apartment House Rise, but before we arrived there my own progress was abruptly arrested by an even more entrancing sight, seven evening grosbeaks feeding in a richly laden Manitoba maple that was bent down across the Forest Hill path! As I was a little up the western bank I was on eye level or a little above these birds, so that I could see them - they were only 15-20 feet distant - to perfect advantage in all their startlingly dramatic beauty. Three of the seven were males, brilliantly accoutred in black and yellow and white. My, how the dark caps and yellow foreheads stand out when seen from such a vantage. Welcome at any time, these were my first in the Toronto region in two years, hence doubly welcome.

As I was standing admiring the grosbeaks, blue jays broke into a loud, and it seemed to me, protesting clamour among the white pines near the northern edge of the Pine Knoll. Thinking they had an owl I tore myself away from the grosbeaks and hurried in their direction, setting again into flight in my rush the red line of cardinals, raising juncoes, chickadees, golden-crowned kinglets and another creeper. When I did arrive at the pines the wretched jays merely went quiet and slipped away. Peer as I would, I could spy no owl; then from somewhere near a slim sparrow hawk

shot into view, scaling swiftly across the valley. Was he the cause of the jays' protesting? If so it was a rare occurrence, for I don't remember having noticed jays go after one of these little falcons before. Certainly I found no other reason for their annoyance.

On the Pine Knoll I went from pine to pine searching for a possible owl, finding none. What I did discover was the snow besprinkled with many brown husks of yellow birch seeds. No birds occupied the birches above, so it was only possible to guess at the name of the feeders that had left the traces of their partaking. The solution of the mystery came quickly enough, however, when I retraced my steps to the other side of the ravine, for looking up into some birches in that quarter I detected a little group of eighteen seed eaters busily shelling out yellow birch catkins. Pine siskins they were; and when I clapped my hands most of them burst into the air with loud shreeing calls. Not much alarmed they settled at once in a tree only a few feet off, their fellows keeping on with their feeding, unperturbed.

When I repassed the Manitoba maple, its thickly hanging seed clumps had been deserted by the evening grosbeaks. As it was getting on toward four o'clock they probably had gone off to their chosen nighttime roost. Indeed all the birds were quieting down and disappearing. Bedtime comes early for them these days. In trying to find the grosbeaks again I squeaked two whitethroats out of dense willow scrub on the dump at the edge of Forest Hill. The weeds were full of still another flock of juncoes. Birds were plentiful indeed. It was really an exciting walk; both in quantity and quality the birds had done well by me.

My walk in Cedarvale on the morning of December 3rd was by no means as successful as that of two weeks before. Nonetheless it was not without interest, and if I managed to turn up only fifteen species as compared with the twenty-four of the earlier trip, there was the satisfaction of knowing that the smaller count is still a good one for this ravine in winter, and that it was made against handicapping weather.

When I started into the ravine around 9.00 the sky was heavy with cloud, and soon a gentle drip began that continued all the time I was out. Under these conditions birds were very quiet, keeping out of view, and unresponsive to squeaking most of the time.

My first encounter at the Boulton Drive entrance promised more than the rest of the jaunt fulfilled, for, being greeted as usual in this part by clamorous cardinals, I set to squeaking to see what else they and I together could raise. Not much in numbers, as it turned out, a few house sparrows and one other bird. Ah yes! but that one other bird, a dark shape rising from the lawn of a house on Russell Hill Road to settle in a

hawthorn, was revealed in my binoculars to be a bronzed grackle. And this is only the second time that I have had the good fortune of seeing a grackle in December.

Between here and the reservoir, my confidence enhanced by this observation, I peered and squeaked assiduously, hoping particularly to arouse one or both of the two Carolina wrens that have been haunting this part of the ravine since August 15th when the first one was discovered by Ray Pannell. Thanks to his kindness in letting me know about the wren I was able to see it at that time, but since then it has eluded me though one or both of the wrens have been repeatedly observed during the fall, the most recent observations being by Mrs. W. G. McIntosh (November 24) and Mr. and Mrs. David Hoeniger (November 27). The fact that I missed them on December 3 means merely, I would think, that they, like so many other birds were keeping out of sight for they are likely, having stayed so long, to spend the winter in the neighbourhood. All my efforts, however, produced no more than a couple of starlings by the time I was climbing the steps to the reservoir. Nor did the next stage from Spadina Viaduct past Springs Corner to St. Clair Avenue offer much more, so that I reached the upper part of the ravine somewhat deflated.

That most of the birds were loath to come into view was demonstrated again and again, especially near the Pine Knoll where I managed to squeak several juncos very briefly into sight, only to have them drop back under the dripping weeds almost at once; theirs was really a Jack-in-the-box appearance. Still the exceptions always happen, as I was reminded at the upper end of the same knoll when my squeaking soon brought me the picture of eleven cardinals sitting in one haw tree, and eyeing me with intensely curious stares. Redbirds are like chickadees in this matter, very gratifying in that they nearly always respond to squeaks and pishes even when their avian neighbours ignore one completely.

Pursuing my way along Bathurst Field and feeling somewhat like a goldfish on exhibit with that overwhelming new apartment house overlooking all, I reached Bathurst Viaduct. There I was joined for a little by two small boys, who told me they had been chasing a pheasant because it was good to eat! I did not see this fellow, though pheasant tracks, fresh and clear, decorated every path. The boys' antics did force two skulking song sparrows into sight that otherwise I would likely have missed. Above the viaduct were two crows, probably the pair of a fortnight past. One of them rent the air with raucous or-r-r-uck calls, closely resembling the ordinary call of the raven, though slightly lighter in volume and higher in tone. The reason for the noise appeared when one crow left their sheltering hemlock with something white in its beak, and was hotly pursued by the other. From my quick look the white object seemed to be a chunk of suet, picked up presumably at someone's feeding station. How the prize was disposed of I could not tell, but a little later the two were cawing together amicably in a tree farther up the ravine.

My walk came to a watery climax when, having told the small boys to stay off the ice on the brook, as the stream was deep there, I tried myself to cross, only to have the ice give under me, and to feel myself sitting in very cold water as it rushed icily into my rubber boots! Fortunately for my feelings the boys had left; even more fortunately the temperature was not as frigid as had been promised by the weatherman. After emptying out my boots, and wringing out my socks I headed for home and a warm bath as quickly as possible. One never knows what is going to happen on a birding trip. Even a city ravine has its adventures.

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Birds around the house as well as in the ravine have given us an interesting time this past month. For three weeks we have once more had house sparrows taking up nightly residence on top of the pillars of our front porch. The first one appeared during the third week of November, choosing for himself the pillar in the northwest corner, the most sheltered spot available. Well under the porch eaves a bird in this roost is protected from wind or precipitation coming from any direction. Several days later another sparrow arrived to occupy the pillar in the northeasterly corner of the porch; a less desirable roost this, since it stands at the head of the stairs, and is therefore liable to disturbance from people going in and out of the house. The sparrow roosting here was noticeably wakeful, becoming nervously alert whenever people came or went, eyeing them anxiously, and occasionally quitting his roost until the disturbers departed. The other bird, on the other hand, seems to feel quite safe in the farther corner; it pays no attention to people, even when the porch light is on and the bird, a fluffy round ball hard against the corner is fully visible. The northeasterly pillar is also, I would think, more subject to drafts from northwesterly and westerly winds. The less desirable characteristics of this site make it, presumably, a second choice. On the evening of the 27th when a number of students were leaving the house, two or three at a time, the northeast sparrow flew off twice, sitting in the syringa bush at the end of the porch. When disturbed again it tried to get onto the northwest pillar with the other sparrow. This one, however, was permitting no horning in, and the intruder was quickly ousted. Finally when the students had all gone it returned to its pillar, and spent the night. The experience was, it would seem, too much for this bird, for it has not reappeared since.

In the latter part of November Mrs. Saunders saw an interesting exhibition of intelligence on the part of one of the blue jays that visits our feeding station. A slight frost had skimmed the water in the old upturned lid we use as a bird bath. The jay obviously realized that the ice was of no great thickness for it pecked vigorously along the edge until it had broken away a small bit, thereupon it proceeded to drink all it wished through

the tiny hole. Mrs. Saunders went out to check after the jay had flown, and found the hole with the open water that had been exposed. To us this was a new experience, though it may well occur commonly. Some days later we did see starlings pecking at ice in this same bath, but they did not succeed in penetrating to the water, the ice being thicker than before.

On November 27th we discovered a cardinal eating seed from our swinging basket. Last winter we had a pair of cardinals that patronized a similar container regularly, but this season no cardinal had ventured onto it before this date, in spite of the basket having been in place for over six weeks, and well supplied with enticing sunflower seeds. The blue jays did not hesitate to fill themselves at this offering, but the cardinals were shy. The jays learned quickly to land on its edge, sit there safely and gobble down seeds which they swallowed whole, several in succession, before going away. The cardinals spotted this basket quickly enough, sitting on the branch from which it swings, and eyeing the seeds with evident desire, but being incapable apparently of mustering the courage to alight on the moving feeder. Thus for six weeks they continued to do battle with the house sparrows for the seeds spread on the ledge of the kitchen window, very often getting the worst of the competition since the much more numerous sparrow clan frequently cleaned out the provender before the cardinals could get a chance at it. This was frustrating for us as well as for the redbirds for we had put up the swinging basket just in order to defeat the sparrows and starlings since these aggressive birds show a real dislike for moving feeders as a rule. Now all is changed, or almost all, since Sally called me to the window to see a male cardinal on the edge of the basket. It was busily shelling out seeds and letting the husks fall back into the container, quite unlike the jays that swallow the seeds whole. This bird had considerable trouble getting onto the basket the first time, maneouvering all around before making a successful landing, but once it learned the way it returned repeatedly, and each time with greater assurance, until it was flying from quite across the garden, as the jays do and landing directly on the basket. While we watched, a second cardinal, another male, a bird of the year apparently, joined the first. It tried once or twice but failed to get on the basket, resorting finally to the window ledge instead. The next day, however, both birds were using the basket. A second pair of cardinals, male and female, which also come to us, have not yet learned to use this feeder, and are still using the ledge. Doubtless they too will learn in time. Then we can feed our cardinals and jays on sunflower seed and dispense cheaper fare such as breadcrumbs to the more plebeian sparrows and starlings.

A downy woodpecker has been the only partaker, other than starlings, of our suet so far. We had suet out earlier in the season, but the starlings tore it to pieces right through the wire mesh which holds it to the tree trunk. Consequently we left the mesh empty for several weeks, hoping that these over-energetic

starlings would go south, or at least elsewhere. Whether they did or not the suet we placed out again last week (third week of November) has been fixed so that they or their brethren have not been able to do more than peck it through the mesh. This is all right as the piece will last a good while at that rate, and will serve other birds than starlings.

One further observation of interest in our garden this month came on the morning of November 21st when upon looking out of an upstairs window I was attracted by unusual movement in our snowball bush, at this date largely bare of leaves. A largish bird was vigorously raising its head up and down, assisting itself by an occasional half arching of wings. Craning to see I could see at last even through the window, sufficient of the back pattern to tell that I was watching a large shrike. Rushing downstairs I gathered my binoculars from their hook in the hall, and hurried back, accompanied by Ann who had heard the commotion. When we got to a place where we could gain a good view the shrike was still hard at work. It had caught a house sparrow and it was consuming it with such speed and avidity that it seemed as if it must have been half-starved. I had to leave before the shrike finished its meal, but Ann later went out into the garden and found under the snowball bush only two small feathers. Where did the rest go? Possibly the shrike was disturbed in the midst of its eating, and flew off, carrying the remainder with it. *Lanius* was a large bird, brownish on the head and nape, but grey, white and black lower on the back, possibly a second-year bird, half way between the usual brownish first-year plumage and the grey, white and black mature dress. This is the first time that any shrike has appeared in our garden, thereby raising the garden list to 118 species seen in or from the garden since 1940.

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Members of the T.F.N.C. who concern themselves with the preservation of valuable natural sites, so many of which are disappearing before our eyes every day, should use every effort they can to arrest and to stop this sort of destruction. Another particular case has come recently to our attention and we urge strongly that any of our readers who have personal connections or influence in the area concerned should exert themselves to see that this situation is remedied. We refer to Smith Lake in Bosanquet Township, for information concerning which we are indebted to Mr. H.G. Hooke, Secretary-Treasurer of the Ausable River Conservation Authority, with headquarters at Exeter, Ontario.

Mr. Hooke writes, "The following is a description of Smith Lake and its importance from the Ausable River Conservation Report of 1949 and based on a survey made by members of the Conservation Branch of the Department of Planning and Development. The lake belonged originally to the Canada Land Company who in turn sold it to Dr. L. G. Hagmeier.

'Smith Lake, a one-thousand acre remnant of a former extensive lake and marsh area, lies in an important section of the Great Lakes bird migration flyway. It is the only marsh providing excellent cover and food for large numbers of wild-fowl in the 150 miles of flyway between the Port Elgin-Arran Lake marshes in Bruce County and the Walpole Island marshes on Lake St. Clair. As many as 10,000 ducks at a time formerly used the marsh and thousands still come in. There is nearby alternative cover, and Lake Huron is only a mile away. The importance of the marsh is therefore out of all proportion to its size. It is doubtful whether an area so strategic should remain in private hands, as it is by no means certain that any future owner would appreciate the importance of the marsh to wildlife. Inroads into the marsh for increasing the cultivated area are still being made.

It is recommended that all large and strategically placed wildfowl marshes which are now threatened, as Smith Lake is, should be examined by both the Provincial and Dominion Wildlife Services with a view to strong action to safeguard their future.'

In the spring of 1955 the owner had an open ditch dug from the lake to an existing municipal drain in order to drain the lake, and by August of this year, the lake was completely dry and almost all the aquatic vegetation was dead.

The greater part of the land around the lake shore is at present under intensive cultivation and it is assumed that the lake was drained in order to extend this cultivated area.

Because of regular spring floods which cover the whole area at times, it is possible that Smith Lake would automatically refill each year when the nearby Ausable River was in flood condition and if this was the case the blocking of drains from the lake would presumably restore a permanent body of water in the lake bed.

Sportsman's groups and individuals in the area have voiced strong opposition to draining of Smith Lake but to date no action has been taken toward restoring the lake."\*

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\* Ed. Note: The deterioration of the situation in southern Ontario so far as suitable natural reserves for the accommodation of birds and other animals as well as for the survival of native trees, flowers and shrubs, has been so rapid and so drastic in recent years that Ontario naturalists should bestir themselves to see that some halt is made to this process. If they do not, they and their children will soon find themselves living in a desert so far as the things which matter so much to them are concerned.

In January with winter conditions still prevailing the advice given in the last Newsletter about birds to look for will still hold true. Of winter birds several species have been already reported in the Toronto area, namely northern shrike (for the third winter in a row), both crossbills, red and white-winged, pine and evening grosbeaks, pine siskin, redpoll, Oregon junco, snow bunting, Lapland longspur. But if winter still holds remember that in January, towards the end of the month, you may look with good expectance for horned larks, the first birds to come back to us from the south. Farm fields, especially if freshly manured, are the best place to look for them; next to such fields are the beaches and sand barrens along the lake shore. Snow buntings, longspurs and horned larks commonly associate together late in the winter.

R. M. Saunders,

Editor.