

# Toronto Field Naturalists' Club

## FEBRUARY MEETING

Monday, February 6th, 1956, at 8.15 p.m.

at the  
ROYAL ONTARIO MUSEUM

Speaker: Theodore Allen Heinrich

Subject: "Art and the Natural World" illustrated with coloured slides

Mr. Heinrich was appointed Director of the Royal Ontario Museum on July 1, 1955. He grew up in California, and was educated in America and Europe. During the war he served on the Intelligence staff of the Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Forces in Europe under General Eisenhower, and afterwards remained with the government in Germany for six years where he was engaged with the recovery and restitution of looted works of art, reconstruction of museums, libraries, archives, etc. Among other appointments held by Mr. Heinrich, before taking up his work in Canada, was that of Assistant Curator of Paintings at the Metropolitan Museum in New York. His writing has been principally in the fields of 18th and 19th century paintings and old master drawings.

## FEBRUARY OUTINGS

Sunday, February 5th. Purpleville Woods. Meet one mile west of the Barrie Highway, at the Maple intersection at 11.00 a.m. Winter finches. Leader - Mr. Bristol Foster.

Saturday, February 18th. Upper Humber Valley. Meet at the Old Mill at 2.00 p.m. Wintering ducks. Leader - Mr. Clive Goodwin.

## BOTANY GROUP

The February meeting of the Botany Group will be held in Eglinton School Eglinton Avenue and Mt. Pleasant Road on Thursday, February 16th, at 8.00 p.m. Mr. James Mackintosh will speak on "Origin of Botanical Names." Mr. Bristol Foster on "Plants of the Tundra" with pictures. Mr. Bartman and Mr. Myland will also show flower pictures. Chairman - Mr. Bristol Foster.

## JUNIORS

The February meeting of the Junior Field Naturalists will be held on Saturday, February 4th at 10.00 a.m. in the Museum Theatre. The meeting will be in charge of the Fish, Reptiles and Amphibians Group. Mr. F. W. Darroch will give an illustrated talk, and a film entitled "Life In A Pond" will be shown.

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It has been brought to the attention of the executive that certain members of the Club have formed the habit of "saving" seats in the Museum Theatre for their friends, while they either look at the Rotunda display or arrive later. This, as you will realize, is unfair to those who have taken the trouble to be in the theatre in good time, in order to secure the best seats. We will therefore be obliged if members will discontinue this practice.

President - Mr. John Mitchele

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

Yearly fee - \$2.00



Number 137

January, 1956

In the cold grey hour before dawn on Christmas Census day (December 26th) we could sympathize yet scarcely agree with the shivering newspaper reporter who had come to take pictures of our census party. He muttered feelingly that it was an ungodly hour to be getting up. To him of course this was only a rum bit of routine work whereas to us it was the start of a day of exciting opportunity and uncharted privilege, one of the most eagerly anticipated birding days of the year. Having flashed his bulbs and snapped his pictures the disgruntled reporter went away to look up another census party, all a part of the day's job. We hastily turned the car's hood toward Scarboro and soon rolled down the hill to our first scheduled stop at Chine Drive ravine just at 8.00, right on time.

What with low hanging clouds and sifting snow the ravine was rather dark at this hour. We had almost found the birds in bed; they were in fact barely commencing to be active. While Dave West and I turned up the ravine the other three members of the party - T.F. McIlwraith, Wishart Campbell and Frank Lovesy - made a round of the bluff and the field. What was my astonishment when the very first bird I laid eyes upon, squeaked out of a tangle on the bank, was an Oregon junco. Heigh-ho! Our census trip was off to a good start.

The field and bluff party turned up a first class starter of their own in a great northern shrike which they pointed out to Dave and me when we met again. Though much of the underbrush in the ravine has recently been cut, and a row of new houses has been erected along the foot of the inner bluff, thereby reducing the attraction of the area for birds, we noted several species at this stop.

Memories of past unproductive visits at this time of year to Gentian Wood (Scarboro Bluffs, Stop 25A) and the chance of being stuck on an icy road down the inner bluff made me wonder seriously about the advisability of making a stop at that point. This, however, was a census trip and all the regular places must be checked if at all possible. So down we went. When we got to the dubious decline in the road we discovered that thanks to new house building (it's everywhere around Toronto) on the field below, this road has been straightened and widened, and was well sanded too. "Progress" in this case was aiding the birders as well as the new dwellers in the "field", but such "improvements" so often mean additional "developments" that we could only wonder apprehensively how much longer Gentian Wood was going to be available to us.

Postponing such fears we turned to the matter of searching the lake and the wood. Dave and T.F. had scarcely set forth on the inner route when Dave shouted, "Finches". A flock was flying overhead, head to the west, but as the birds were silent no identification was possible before they passed from view. No sooner though, than Wishart, Frank and I reached the bluff but another flock, then another, came past. The first was a group of a hundred snow buntings, the second half again as many redpolls. These flocks were the first of a series that went by all through the day along the lakeshore. Except for the one lot of snow buntings all the flocks that we saw were redpolls. There must have been a tremendous movement. Had we been in a position to count only these flocks all day I am sure that we could have seen many thousand redpolls go by. As it was we counted 1050, spread over fifteen small flocks. This movement was a typical migration, taking the same route and following the same pattern as the regular fall "waves". All flocks were going westward, and most of them were travelling right along or close to the lakeshore, though some were as much as two miles inland. Only one of the redpoll flocks settled; typically, it chose a heavy-fruited yellow birch. During the brief feeding pause we hastily looked over the company for a hoary. There was none, but had we been able to stop the hundreds that we saw long enough for a real look, it is likely we would have found several of the white species. In such an influx as this the two are almost always mixed together.

We got our first ducks off Gentian Wood for the lake had been empty off Chine Drive Ravine. Riding the swells a long way beyond the pan ice that was crunching at the foot of the bluff were a number of goldeneyes and old squaw, hardy winter inhabitants of Lake Ontario. Wishart and Frank, taking a swing through the wood ousted Bubo, the great horned owl that haunts this neighbourhood, from his chosen daytime perch. For once Gentian Wood had been good to us, unprecedently good to us in a Christmas census trip. You just never can tell.

When we turned off the highway onto Old Kingston Road it seemed unnatural not to hear the church at that corner inundating the countryside with recorded carols, for the census is usually taken on a Sunday, and we arrived at this point just in time for the carol serenade. Of recent years we have counted on a feeding station across the road from the church to provide some addition to our list. To-day it was silent and empty; perhaps it has been given up. The churchyard at least gave us our first chickadees of the day. While we were trying to whistle up more birds from these unexpectedly barren slopes a passing police patrol slowed to give us a very hard stare; they drove on without enquiry. "Peculiar but harmless" seems to have been their decision.

Golden Wing Swamp road was sheathed in ice, so Wishart parked on top of the hill. We walked and slithered down into the Highland Creek valley. While Dave and I took the Cattail Slope the others did the Cedar Path and the Grouse Wood, but before we parted Dave gave the signal that things were going to happen here when he shouted, "Evening grosbeaks". Following his lead I soon had a bright male atop a birch tree in view, and five others were quickly sighted in a second birch across the lane. All six soon flew, while we began our respective circuits. As it turned out the augury of the evening grosbeaks appears to have been for the Cedar Path party, since the Cattail Slope, so full of birds on last year's census, today was enlivened only by a flock of tinkling tree sparrows. When Dave and I had finished our exploring and had again reached the head of Cedar Path, we saw Wishart standing alone some way down it. There we joined him, finding that he had put up not only the grouse we annually anticipate here, but a pileated woodpecker, which had been hammering on a log, and a long-eared owl as well. Dave and I left Wishart to wait on his companions who had gone on to the river. We turned up the hill through the snowy woods, and in the climb put up a pheasant from a cedar thicket. The others, on their return told of seeing siskins; while Wishart, shortly after we left him, had a goshawk fly over his head. This bird, it seems, had been around the valley for some weeks.

Now it was on to the Murray Speirs' cottage on the Altona Road. Murray was out doing his own round, his findings being included in the route count for which we were responsible. Doris Speirs was keeping an eye on their feeding station visitors for her part. She kindly gave us tea, a warmer much needed, as the temperature was dropping steadily. When we started the thermometer stood at 26 degrees at my house; now at Cobble Cottage it registered 10 above zero, and the strengthening northerly breezes were cutting. While we had our tea a male evening grosbeak joined the house sparrows in the feeding table outside the kitchen window, cracking seeds quite unperturbedly as we watched from the window.

After a brief venture along icy roads to a wood west of Fairport Beach, and to the east side of Frenchman's Bay,

neither very productive, we rolled on, slowly, because of treacherous road surfaces, to Pickering Marsh and the mouth of Duffin's Creek. Again little.

Black Alder Wood was a different story. When Frank Lovesy and I were let off to plunge through the cedar thickets at the south end of the wood I had long-eared owls, winter wren and white-throat in mind. Needless to relate there's little use filling one's mind with such specific anticipations, though it is difficult to forget to fall into the trap. Making for the thickest of all the cedar tangles, a tumble of fallen trees overgrown with vines and weeds, I poked my head cautiously into the dark interior, peering as best I could in the dim light. A good-sized bird immediately took off, and I said to myself automatically, "An owl". Then came a melodious whistle. For a moment I couldn't think what this meant even if it did sound familiar. When fixed expectations curtail the observer's seeing and hearing quick readjustments are not always easily made. I had withdrawn my head and was looking a pine grosbeak, barely beyond arm's reach, full in the face before I realized what sort of bird I had put up and who was the whistler. As the grosbeak, quite unalarmed by my near proximity, continued to whistle, three others of its kind detached themselves from the dark depths of the tangle I had been exploring. All four were obviously more hungry than anxious for, after brief glances, they set to work to consume nightshade berries that hung in brilliant red clusters amongst the green cedars in every direction. Cover and food combined, an ideal situation for this foursome of winter visitors. Frank by now come over and we had an intimate look at these trusting birds of whose existence we would have been wholly unaware had we not ploughed through the middle of the tangled thickets.

By the time we reached the Ajax fields, our next objective, the north wind had chased most of the clouds away, and we were in the midst of a sparkling winter's day, cold but exhilarating. Our progress during the morning had been slower than usual, and we were late for lunch, but we decided nonetheless to visit Ajax dump before eating. Dumps are commonly choice spots for winter birding, and the dumps on this census route usually provide the high points of the hunt. If there are going to be any "odd birds" discovered these, and the feeding stations, are where they are most likely to appear. T.F. and I concentrated on the bushes along the gully that flanks the dump near the road. Here my binoculars were no sooner levelled upon a resting flock of house sparrows than I saw in their midst seven redwinged blackbirds huddled closely together, and right in the center of this septet, in the warmest spot of all, a cowbird. Even in winter, Molothrus appears to be somewhat of a chiseller. These finds in themselves would have made the Ajax dump outstanding on our day's run but when Wishart and Frank had completed their combing of the little marsh in front of the dump they came up with a swamp sparrow, a whitethroat, and a Carolina wren.

Our list was growing in spurts. As it now turned out Wishart and Frank had made reconnoitering expeditions to this section a few days before and this foresight was now paying off.

The nearest thing to a calamity on the trip arrived when Wishart tried to open the trunk of his car, where all our lunches were, and found the key-hole frozen up! There were several apprehensive stomachs, you may be sure, whilst he was blowing and manoeuvring to get our meals into view. At last he managed, praise be, and we ate in the car on the high ridge overlooking Pickering Marsh from the east.

Lunch over I was all for getting on to Whitby Harbour, one of our best spots, but Wishart held back and Frank with him. They wanted to walk along the southern edge of Bubo wood. After some discussion we finally compromised on a quick look. Quick it was, for as soon as we had got the westerly edge of the cornfield that stretches between the road and the wood, up flew a mourning dove. I should have known, after the previous visit to the dump, that those two had something up their sleeves, but it didn't occur to me, thinking so intently of Whitby Harbour as I was, until I saw the dove in the air. It was what they were after alright, for on several visits during the fall they had located a flock of six or seven doves clinging to this quarter. To-day we saw only the one bird, though presumably the others were not far away. This bird seen, we headed at once for Whitby.

There I had the "address" of four rusty blackbirds, at least I had been informed that I should look for them at the main dump. They were soon discovered, only now there were eight not four, consorting with the horde of starlings and house sparrows that spend the winter at this rich lunch counter which so conveniently adjoins the warm cover of the cattail marsh. Two redwings were also in the crowd, a crowd which numbered several hundred all told. A second bird I had been asked to look for here at Whitby Harbour was a "white gull" among the gulls that rest on the ice beyond the new drydock. White gulls are likely to be found in this flock any year, so we approached our lookout point with some assurance. The flock, it soon was clear, was a good deal smaller than usual, and at first survey seemed to contain mostly herring gulls, with a smaller group of ringbills, and a sprinkling of blackbacks. Finally we had to raise the flock. At once the "white gull", hitherto lost amongst the others, came into view, its unmarked whitish flight feathers causing it to stand out from all the others. A trim slender bird it turned out to be an Iceland gull, the smaller of the two white species, usually to be expected. At the mouth of the harbour we stayed only long enough to make a quick coverage of the lake for ducks, since the north wind was now really biting.

What caused us to make a return visit to the dump was the hope of finding a killdeer that had been seen in the vicinity a

fortnight previous. This bird we did not find, but in the search for it we paid close attention to a narrow channel of open water that cut through the ice on the west side of the road; on the east side many children were skating. Frank and I worked along this lane of water, I in the cattails trying to get nearer to the inner, more sheltered part of the open area, he along the ice at the edge of the water, where I was afraid he was going to crash through. Indeed, I warned him against going that way. Still he persisted and the first thing I knew, he was rushing back to the car, his jaws working up and down, his mouth opening and shutting, and no sounds coming out. At last he got out a name, "Rail!" Some eyebrows may have been raised, but we all under his direction focussed upon the point where the open water channel emerged from the cattails. There, without the least doubt, was a very busy Virginia Rail, flanked on each side by a rusty blackbird. What a picture on a late December afternoon! A rail avidly gobbling sustenance out of an ice-edged narrow strip of water with a crowd of people skating just across the road. It was unbelievable, but there it was; and with this sight our census trip came to its astounding climax, for this rail now entered the Toronto Christmas census list for the first time in thirty-one years of looking. What it was eating I have no idea, though it certainly looked fat and prosperous. If the water channel remains open, such a bird will have a good chance of surviving the winter. Some of the skaters became curious about our excitement, but we did not point out the rail for fear they would interfere with it; its existence seemed too precarious already to add the hazard of curious youngsters as well.

Still, if this was the climax of our trip it was not the end, for we returned to the Ajax fields on the way home where, after assiduous tramping across several snowy fields, we succeeded finally in bringing a meadow lark out of its grassy retreat along a little brook. We worked harder for that bird than for any other all day. Once found, a bonus was added, when two others flew up from another field as we drove along. The species that so completely eluded us last year almost did it again this year, but not quite.

The larks were the last birds of the trip. When we counted up the whole list we had seen 45 species, and had broken our previous high of 37 for the route. Later we found that Murray and Doris Speirs for their part had added six species that we had not seen, so that the final count for our route was 51 species. As Jim Baillie commented, "Fantastic". And so it was. We had worked hard but we had been extremely fortunate too, happening upon all the unusual lingerers that so often we miss. The combination had made it possible for us to break our own previous record for the route, and, as it turned out, to amass the largest count ever gathered by one party during a Christmas census in the Toronto region. How fortunate we were may be seen by the fact that the total count for all Toronto parties this year was 78 species; of these we had seen almost exactly two-thirds. When again will we have a Christmas trip like that? Who knows - this we do know, that this census day we will never forget.

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Jim Mackintosh of Glendon Hall sends the following account of a rare bird at his feeding station. He writes:

"For months at a stretch Glendon Hall produces no ornithological rarity. Birdwatchers come and birdwatchers go with nothing to report but the usual juncos, sparrows, chickadees and woodpeckers. Then one day my wife, who keeps a close eye on the clients that frequent our feeding station, will call excitedly to inform me of a new bird. This happened recently when she spotted a brown-capped chickadee. I wasn't very sure of it at first as it looked like a very dirty blackcap, but its voice was unmistakable, that little dose of laryngitis inherited from its forefathers being quite distinctive. A phone call to Jim Baillie and the birdwatching fraternity of Toronto all bent their steps in the direction of Glendon Hall. Jim advised us to treat Hudsonicus right so that he would be here for the Christmas census. Whether it was the soothing voice of the "General Superintendent" or the quality and quantity of the suet which persuaded him to stay, he was duly recorded on the census list; and bless his little heart, he is still with us.

Christmas day my wife again spotted two strangers making merry on the sunflower tray. "Purple finches", said she. "Sparrows", said I. After a little discussion (there should never be "argument" with your wife, "Discussion" is the word; you'll lose anyhow) and a look at Peterson, we reported two purple finches; to-day (January 3) our count is 5, three adults and two young.

Our cup overfloweth. Ted Waltho came in to-day to report a flock of pine grosbeaks and a flicker. This with observations of a great blue heron, kingfishers, white-winged crossbills, tree sparrows, raises Glendon Hall once more to its customary popular place as a Bird Sanctuary".

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Many of our readers who have noticed and have been troubled by the number of casualties caused to migrating birds by large picture windows will be interested to know that Mr. Roy Ivor of Erindale has been experimenting with the use of a fine nylon mesh netting with great success. Three years ago he found that 27 birds were killed in a period of three weeks at one large window. A net was tried and there have been no casualties at this window since.

Mr. Ivor sent the Newsletter a clipping from the Ottawa Journal of December 5, 1955, in which Mr. John Bird, under the heading, Bird's Eye View, writes of the successful use of one of Mr. Ivor's nets by Madame Youssuf Karsh, at her home, Little Wings, on the Rideau. Mme. Karsh states that the using of the net did not disturb the view from the window, and that as a result of its use no birds were killed at this window either during

the spring or the fall migrations, whereas at other windows that were not covered by netting there were casualties. In consequence the Karshes are ordering five more of these nets.

It would seem from these experiences that here is something well worth trying if your picture windows are inclined to be death traps to migrating birds as so often they are.

Mr. Ivor will sell the nets at cost. He procures them through the Federation of Ontario Naturalists at a cost of \$1.85 a net, each net being large enough to cover the largest picture window.

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Also from Mr. Ivor comes some interesting comments upon blue jays, arising from our article in the last Newsletter. Mr. Ivor writes:

"I wonder if you would object to my relating my experiences with blue jays and sunflower seeds. I have kept jays off and on for about 25 years and have come to know them rather well. I have found that when the jay seems to be swallowing these seeds whole, they do not actually do so. Their gullet is sufficiently elastic to allow them to hold up to ten or twelve of these seeds. Often I have seen them filling the gullet, and perhaps finding some seeds not fitting comfortably, eject all of them and then place them again in the gullet. Usually when the gullet is filled they do so for the reason that they intend hiding the seeds. I have never seen a jay swallow a whole sunflower seed, not that they cannot do so, but because I believe, passerine birds do not swallow seeds with the husks on as do such birds as hens, doves, etc.

At any window feeding sill a jay will take off the husk of each seed until he has satisfied his hunger and will then, time after time, fill his gullet and hide the seeds, usually, perhaps always when he can, covering them with leaves.

Incidentally, you might like to know of something about the jay that is quite new to me.

Other than the imitation of the red-shouldered hawk, I have never known a jay to imitate another bird. The jay I have at present, about seven months old, imitates one of the cardinal's whistle series so perfectly that, except for it usually being louder, it cannot readily be told from that of the cardinal. He also has some of the Baltimore oriole's notes; he has the chatter of the evening grosbeaks so perfect that I cannot tell without seeing, whether it is he or they. At times I think he may be trying to imitate my voice but nothing plain has as yet developed."

BOOK REVIEW: North American Moose: By Randolph L. Peterson  
(University of Toronto Press, Toronto 1955)  
Pp. 280. Price \$12.50.

When the early French explorers first saw the moose they were astonished. They were familiar with the deer, at home, but likely unaware of the existence of the moose in Northern Europe and considered this huge browsing mammal to be the original species from which all the smaller cervidae has sprung. For this reason they called it "The Original One". Today the French for moose is "L'original".

The author is Curator, Division of Mammalogy, Royal Ontario Museum of Zoology and Palaeontology at Toronto and is well known to many readers of the Newsletter. His pleasant friendly manner has gained him many friends. His extensive knowledge of mammalogy has created their respect for him. Dr. Peterson started his work on the moose about 1946 and during the ensuing years has spent a considerable portion of his time on research in both field and laboratory. From the immense amount of material accumulated, North American Moose emerged and was published in March 1955.

The author begins with the history of the moose from pre-historic times and through nineteen well illustrated chapters discusses distribution, deprecation, diseases, life history, food habits, hunting, migration and very many other phases. It is interesting to note that all is not lost with the passing of virgin forests. The moose, in common with deer and some other mammals, has been favoured, in general, by logging and forest fire.

This species of mammal is treated as one race throughout its entire range, in and out of North America. The author found the difference less striking between our Ontario moose and that of Europe than between the Alaska and the local groups. When one considers that the Grizzly Bear was once divided into over eighty races or subspecies, it is a relief to find the taxonomy of the moose so simple.

North American Moose has had a number of reviews and it seems unusual and significant that through its various and lengthy recommendations, no word of adverse criticism is to be found. The first review to appear was in German, in the publication in Germany corresponding to the American Journal of Mammalogy.

This book will prove most valuable to the professional biologist. One might be so bold as to say it is indispensable. It should also be of great use and interest to naturalists, conservationists, hunters, game managers, etc. In spite of its scientific treatment it will make clear and profitable reading (with the possible exception of the chapter on parasites) to any amateur naturalist. It is well worth space on the "nature shelf" of many members of the T.F.N.C. (Reviewed by A.A. Outram)

R. M. Saunders,  
Editor.