

Toronto Field Naturalists' Club

April Meeting

Monday, April 2nd, 1956, at 8:15 p.m.

at the

ROYAL ONTARIO MUSEUM

Speaker: Mr. George T. Bell

Subject: Toronto Parks - present and future. Illustrated

As Commissioner of Parks and Recreation of the City of Toronto, Mr. Bell has submitted a detailed plan for the development of Toronto parks. Since appointment to his present position in 1954, Mr. Bell has already initiated major developments of interest to all field naturalists. All members of the T.F.N. are concerned with parks problems, and a full attendance is expected at this meeting.

ROTUNDA DISPLAY

Preview of an exhibit "Creative Photography - 1955", selected work of sixteen distinguished American photographers. This exhibit will be open to the public from April 3 to April 30.

SPRING OUTINGS

For details of outings from now until June please consult the Spring Outing folder enclosed herewith.

BOTANY GROUP

The April meeting of the Botany Group will be held in Eglinton School, Mt. Pleasant Road and Eglinton Avenue, on Thursday, April 19th at 8.00 p.m. The President, Dr. Fletcher Sharp, will be in the chair. Speaker - Mr. Leslie Garay. Subject: "Orchids" - Illustrated.

JUNIORS

The April meeting of the Junior Field Naturalists will be held on Saturday, April 7th, at 10.00 a.m. in the Museum Theatre. The meeting will be in charge of the Botany Group. Mrs. J. Goodwin will show a number of her very excellent slides of botanical subjects, a five minute talk will be given by four members of the group: Susan Williams, Janet Manktelow, Ruth Lister, and Ian Gunn, and a film entitled "Birth of the Soil" will be shown.

NATURE STUDY CAMP

Will those of you who have already received a circular regarding this camp please pass this copy on to a friend who might be interested.

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Number 139

March 1956

Across hastening clouds black emissaries of spring were cawing the annunciation of a new season on the morn of March the fourth. One by one, in single file, by twos or threes, and in little flocks they streamed across the horizon from the southwest. Some of their kind have been with us all winter; a few others were slipping in, hardly noticed, the last few days of February. Here now was a real detachment of the springtime army, planing above our fields and ridges, lusty, confident, robust in their onward sweep, occupying Ontario in the name of spring.

Armies of occupation are not usually welcome; but every year as the sable corvine forces move in to reassert traditional territorial rights, regardless of man, men, seeing the black hordes pass overhead, feel a stirring in their breast, and out of their hearts shout, "Hosanna, Come into our Land!" Invaders these; no, no, this is the return of travelling friends, come back to tell us that spring follows in their wake, bringing with her the annual gift of freedom, freedom from the grey bonds of ice and snow. Welcome then ye noisy black invaders. Caw loudly. Occupy the land. Tell us in unmistakable tones that the touch of spring is come.

Such was our mood as we hurried towards Niagara Falls and the Niagara River on our annual pilgrimage to grasp the hand of spring, to hasten her arrival.

A red-winged blackbird, red epaulets flashing brilliantly,

told us near Oakville that other than crows were on the move. Spring's heralds are varied and many. Was the blue-backed kingfisher that sped along the front of the breakwall at Burlington Harbour such another? That, I fear, is hard to tell, for like the crows a few of these rattling fishers abide with us through every winter month. Still, birds were on the move today - newcomers and over-winterers all. Even those that had stayed the winter were showing the stirrings of vernal vigor; their manner, their new-found ways betokened a new time and new feelings.

Particularly was this true of the ducks, the first substantial contingent of which were found at Jordan Marsh. There, beside the busy Queen Elizabeth Way, where grey ice, succumbing to the sun, had left a cove of brown water, a mixed company of canvasbacks and buffleheads were feeding and playing. How the fat little male butterballs puffed out their chests, arched their heads and dashed madly at each other. Springtime urges moving here alright! The canvasbacks were quieter, but on the heads of the drakes glowed that coppery-red hue that tells of spring and breeding display and nesting as surely as the antics of their less dignified associates. It was a moving sight this company of wild ducks, hugging the inner edge of the cove, where brown water and grey ice adjoined. Squatting on the ice was a great crowd of gulls, a wall of wings ornamenting the growing cove. As we drew to a stop, the better to look over this assembly, all the gulls and most of the ducks went up in a burst of wings and cries. Passing traffic was not worth noticing; a stopping car, so close, could mean deadly danger. They were off. It is always so. Yet, as they went, we were treated to the sight of first one white-winged gull, then another; the first a slender, slight bird, was an Iceland gull, the second heavy-built with broad, almost burdensome bill, a glaucous gull. When we stepped out of the car the remaining ducks took off, and we were left looking at little groups of crows, standing here and there upon the rotten ice. They were farther from the highway, so, less disturbed. Perhaps, too, Corvus is a little more contemptuous of man than are the ducks, for the latter have not come off nearly as well in the endless battle of man and bird, as have the black brethren. Or does the crow recognize a little better when man is a hunter, and when he is the unarmed observer? They're canny, those black fellows; no doubt about that. One of the crows was making a meal of a small fish, while three of his companions regarded him enviously. We left this little drama still going on, wondering whether the feeder managed to complete his breakfast before the others moved in and snatched it away. If he was top bird in the vicinity he probably did.

Not very far east of Jordan marsh and close to St. Catharines, the Queen Elizabeth Way passes over a deep valley, in which river and marsh form an ideal refuge for waterfowl. It is known locally as the Henley Course Marsh. Though one would see much more by touring the edges of this valley, it is not necessary to do so

in order to take a sampling survey; this can be done nicely from the high level bridge or nearby. This then was our next stop. No sooner had we got out onto the bridge than we were greeted by two horned larks flying a little out of arm's reach. As a harbinger of spring the larks really antedate the crows, but they are so much less noticeable that most people do not realize they have come. With this new reminder of the changing of the season we peered down into the protected vale. To the north towards Lake Ontario all, or nearly all, the ice had gone, and everywhere across the dark water ducks and gulls were bobbing, diving, resting, living in peace and content. Names of the several kinds were soon flying from all our tongues, as first one of us, then another spotted some "new" bird. Swinging our binoculars so as to look into a long finger of water that points to the west not far from the bridge, we suddenly picked up the long graceful necks and snowy white bodies of a quartet of whistling swans; lovely as ever, and what a surprise this early in the season, feeding so calmly, so serenely amidst the coppery-headed canvasbacks, the bouncy buffleheads, the bustling scaup and others; always somewhat aloof, a little to themselves, even in a crowd, these elegant artisocrats of the waterfowl fraternity.

Niagara Falls, for all its wonder, could offer us, we knew, no lovelier sight than this. Yet on to the Falls we went, knowing full well that other beauty, other loveliness, awaited us there, and along the river and the gorge. These many beauties are not to be compared, certainly not to be assessed one against the other. They are each and everyone, aspects of the endless treasures of this world's beauty, most of which are never noticed at all.

When we reached the Falls we found the American Falls, almost wholly encased in a sheath of ice. So much so that the plunging water disappeared at the top to rush out in frothy freshets from various dark caverns at the bottom, there to tumble into a long seething pool, only to vanish once more beneath a heavy bridge of ice which stretched from shore to shore. Of all the vistas that came to our eyes today this was the wintriest. Carefully we scanned those cavernous outlets at the foot of the falls for sign of a harlequin duck. Each winter this is the favored haunt of one or more of these rare ducks. And indeed they have been reported this season. Our most earnest looking could not, however, discover more than a few goldeneyes, and a lone female common merganser. In a pool near the Canadian side were others of the same species, whilst asleep on a rock above this pool was a dark little waterfowl that excited our curiosity enormously. There was much speculation about that bird. Binoculars, balscope, and all eyes were levelled on it for some time before it came awake, whether because of the battery of enquiring eyes or for some other reason, and showed us the white face marks of a coot. Well, it could have been a harlequin! The Canadian Falls were a mass of falling green water shrouded most of the time in

a curtain of spray like drifting snow. Honeymooners and others were only beginning to gather at this shrine as we set out up river to Fort Erie.

As soon as we reached the rapids above the Canadian Falls we could see the new diversion works, designed to spread the flow of water more evenly and so to reduce the rate of erosion as well as to enhance the beauty of the falls. The alteration on Goat Island gave the side nearest the Canadian Falls the look of a smooth toboggan run leading straight to the brink! What a temptation that could be to some daredevil! The long bridge-like mole reaching out from the Canadian shore appealed to us birdwatchers as an ideal way of getting out right amongst the myriad of ducks and gulls that dotted the rocks and channels of the rapids. Whether we will ever be allowed to use it so remains to be seen. Certainly we would have liked to have been able to get closer to those many birds. The rapids is always a favoured spot for gulls that want to rest on the rocks, for ducks seeking food in the jumping water.

Above the rapids all the way to Fort Erie, we found, to our great surprise, that the river was almost entirely free of ice. Usually at this time of year it is crammed with masses of ice-cakes all rushing towards the falls. The reason for the lack we found, was that the ice in Lake Erie had not yet broken up. Until it should, the river would keep its deceptively late spring appearance. Because of the open water ducks were everywhere. Time and time again we halted to look. That is the great virtue of the river road; for eighteen miles from the Falls to Fort Erie, it is possible to see ducks, gulls, and other birds almost anywhere, a vast panorama of water, land and birds with ever renewing possibilities. Today we saw nearly two thousand canvasbacks, scattered in many flocks, riding the water, feeding along shore, flying. There were hundreds of mergansers, common and red-breasted; buffleheads, gold-eyes, old squaw; in an endless procession they were moving, resting and settling, forming and re-forming their flocks, shifting from one feeding spot to another. It was a lively, ever-changing scene.

When we drew up to have our lunch near a marshy stretch of river bank about halfway to Fort Erie we almost immediately had our eating interrupted by the appearance of a bald eagle. The nest at the north end of Navy Island had been devoid of life. Now here was a possible owner and occupant. Soaring high over the river its white head and tail gleamed against blue sky every time it wheeled. Then, from nowhere came its mate, another adult bird. Together they circled, free, untrammelled masters of the sky. Drawing close the pair dove and dipped in unison, riding the air currents like the best of aeronauts; and who is better? The air is their element, and this was their homeland. Like the other birds spring and springtime urges were upon them. Let us hope that this year they may nest successfully, that Navy Island will

have its eaglets undisturbed, unmolested by anyone, be it hunter, tourist, birdbander or photographer. Eagles are too scarce. They should not be endangered by anyone. If these noble birds are to be saved they should be protected even from their friends.

A red-shouldered hawk swung into view, riding the air not far from the eagles, the "holes" in its wings showing sharply against the cloud. These exciting birds lost themselves in the sky, but ducks kept on the move along the river. Eating lunch in such a locality is really a very punctuated procedure. It may even become peripatetic for, when jumping in and out of the car seems annoying to some members of the party, one is inclined to wander off, sandwich or cake in hand - possibly forgetting to eat at all - in search of the enticing bird. That's how some of us strolled into the little marsh where yellow straw-like rushes rose above ashen ice and blue water, and there heard our first song sparrow song of the spring. How moving that "common" ditty is when heard as winter is giving way to spring. We found other birds too, but exciting and exhilarating as all these were they were no more so than the play of colour upon the river. Across a wide reach here the hurrying clouds, racing after each other in a deep blue sky, sent a ceaseless pattern of hues running over the surface of the water from bank to bank, a most fascinating, ever-changing, impressionistic painting. For a moment the clouds would bunch, the sun disappear, the river go grey and bleak. Then new gaps would be torn in the cloud cover, the sun come through, and all the water turn vivid blue. A new but lonely cloud would ride into a position where its shadow fell upon the water, and from our bank a grey-blue would start; as the cloud advanced the grey-blue gave way to steel-blue, to ultramarine, to sea-green, to indigo, to purple; by then other clouds had joined the race to offer variant shadows and shades. It was hypnotising. One dared not turn away for fear of losing some unheard-of combination of colors, too wonderful to be missed, too unbelievable not to give one a start.

Fort Erie, though, was still ahead. So at last on we went. At the park near the Peace Bridge we found some of the ice that has not come down river. A huge jam had this winter piled up against the supporting walls where the park abuts on the river, and in many places the ice, like some remorseless monster, had smashed the thick stone abutments to pieces, the shattered rocks and concrete lying in disarray on the lawns, with the victorious ice rearing up beyond. A grim but striking demonstration of the power of moving ice this, a very tiny reminder of what must have happened on a grand scale when the glaciers swept across this land. Perhaps it was fitting in this setting that the only bird that caught our attention was a falcon, a sparrow hawk that was eagerly rending a meal from a starling it had captured and taken down to the park lawn to consume.

Our return trip from Fort Erie to the Falls gave us new

opportunities to see. On the way we noted other birders going up to the head of the river. When we got to the Canadian Falls, the honeymooners and Sunday afternooners had gathered in crowds. How suitable that the spray rising over the falls should be the backdrop for one rainbow after another. Seen through this bright tinted veil the Rainbow Bridge became most aptly named indeed.

With birds in our blood we made no attempt to join the crowds overlooking the falls, but quickly left that part behind, making now for the region of the gorge. Our first halt there, not far below the Whirlpool Bridge, proved fruitless for birds, but gave us a sight of rushing apple green water in the river, and above, on the opposite grey cliffs spouting plumes of white, shooting out of hydro outlets there.

Below Queenston the Gorge widens considerably and once more the birds find it to their liking. Wherever the river road draws near to the edge of the cliff, one can get good outlook points. At one of these we drew off, got out and walked over to the edge. What we saw this time as we looked down was not an empty rushing river, but rather a broad stream covered with untold hundreds of gulls and ducks. The gulls it was on this occasion that held us, for right below where we stood no less than three hundred Bonaparte's gulls were massed in a raft, all headed upstream. Our sudden emergence at the edge of the cliff, or some other reason, sent the flock abruptly into the air, and, in a moment Bill Smith shouted "There's a Little Gull". What a whirl of binoculars was levelled at the spot he indicated. He was certainly right; one by one we caught the gleam of coal-black underwings. That is, all but two of us did before the birds again settled. Now the balscope was brought into play. Assiduously we combed the flock, watching every move. "There it is", "over there", "near the front", rang out as one or another observer saw the black wings raised. One of the two who hadn't seen the bird in flight saw it this way. Finally, a Little Gull was spotted floating near the head of the flock, told by its unmarked wing tips from the neighbouring Bonaparte's, and the last member of our group saw this much-desired bird. Simultaneously Bill discovered a Little Gull near the middle of the flock; there were, in fact, two of these rare gulls in the lot. For us of Toronto it was a great sight, since we almost never see a Little Gull except in the fall migration, and then but rarely. They are more common along the Niagara River, especially during the fall and winter, so that the Buffalo observers see them much more frequently than we do.

In a trip that had already included whistling swans, bald eagles, and Little Gulls, it might be considered that we had had our full share of the unusual, and more. But have you ever noticed that the unusual tends to come in job lots so far as birds are concerned; a big day has a tendency to get bigger and bigger. Anyway, that's what happened today.

From this unexpected encounter with the Little Gulls we turned to make a detour off the road we were following on the speculation that some other birds we had heard about for years might just possibly be home from their winter wanderings. At the first place we tried we asked information, and received a flatly negative response. The second enquiry, however, elicited a decided affirmative; only now we had to hunt them out. For this purpose somebody had to climb a long ladder to the top of a high silo; this Bill Smith volunteered to do. The rest of us stationed ourselves outside the solo so that all quarters were covered. Only a few moments were required for this adventure. The birds were at home. Suddenly someone cried, "There's one", and a second or two later, "There's the other". And there they were, two fawn and cream-coloured barn owls, turned golden with the sun shining through their wings, rocking and wavering over our heads, trying to get to some new dark refuge. Before they did several crows found them, and began raising the usual fuss. Not many minutes passed before they both had vanished again, one into the broken window of a second silo, one, I know not where. The one at the window stood still long enough on the sill for us to gaze admiringly at the "monkey face" before it vanished inside. For three in the company this was a first sight, an addition to the lifelist of birds. For the rest of us it was a magnificent sight of one of Ontario's rarest birds.

This for sure was the climax of our trip. Yet, I am not certain that when we were on our way home, and near again to St. Catharines, we did not come close to the spirit of the whole day when we heard for the first time this year the conk-a-ree of a red-winged blackbird. That familiar song said to us as had the crows this morning, and other birds and the whole countryside all day long, "Farewell to Winter. Hail to Spring".

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The following curious and highly interesting bit of nature news was sent in by A.A. Outram.

The Bone Market

"When we hear of an excavation for unearthing bones of departed animals, we expect to find archaeologists, or other scientists, busy with a "dig", and we suppose that their finds will be carefully transported to some museum, for study or exhibition. Today, this is not always the case.

The processing of uranium ores requires the use of glue. This has made a greater demand for bones than heretofore. There is a considerable uranium production in the South African gold fields, which has resulted in a wholesale search for bones of any origin, or age, and in the Transvaal and Limpopo valley this search is "big business". The controlled price is seven pounds per ton at present.

Many of the natives now are scratching and digging for bones of elephants, hippos, crocodiles and many smaller species of mammals and reptiles. How many valuable remains of extinct species will go into the great cauldron from which the world will get its supply of atomic energy and bombs, will never be known."

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BOOK REVIEW: The Ontario Field Biologist. No. 10. May 1956

The current number of the annual publication of the Toronto Field Biologists' Club is strongly recommended to the attention of members of the T.F.N.C. Its attractive format is enhanced this year by a very fine cover drawing of a short-tailed weasel by Robert M. Bateman. The artist has contrived to get both life and drama into this picture as well as faithful depiction, and is to be congratulated upon the result. The articles in this issue are: "Breeding Behaviour of the Red-spotted Newt" by J. Woodford; "Black Duck and Mallard Population in the Toronto Area" by C.E. Goodwin; "The Phenacomys Vole in Eastern Canada" by J.B. Foster; "Key to the Eggs of the Known Species of Fishes of Passamaquoddy Bay, New Brunswick" by J. Stenger; "The Reptiles of Georgian Bay" by D. R. Lord. The article on the Toronto blacks and mallards is especially noteworthy as an imaginative and valuable treatment of a neglected topic. We are all too inclined to disregard the commonplace. Mr. Goodwin has been led to some very interesting ideas by his careful contemplation of the ridiculed "Sunnyside" ducks. General notes and a list of meetings, members and subscribers complete the issue. It is an excellent Fifty Cents worth, that being the price of subscription. For copies, apply to the editor, Mr. D. M. Wood, 7 Dale Avenue, Toronto 5, Ontario.

R. M. Saunders,
Editor.