

Toronto Field Naturalists' Club

November Meeting

Monday, November 5, 1956, at 8.15 p.m.

at the
ROYAL ONTARIO MUSEUM

Lecturer: Munroe Landon, of Simcoe, Ontario.

Subject: A Naturalist on Lake Erie Shore.

Mr. Landon is a well known naturalist, who has lived his life on the north shore of Lake Erie, and is recognized for his knowledge of the flora of that area. Highly regarded as a horticulturist, colour photographer and popular lecturer, he finds time to successfully operate his large farm, "Blythebrae", where he specializes in accredited Jerseys, and raises nursery stock. He will show us many pictures of flowers, including orchids, trees and shrubs, with a smattering of fungi, snakes, turtles and butterflies. Some of the flowers and shrubs are indigenous to his area, and will no doubt be seen for the first time by many of our members.

OUTINGS

Please consult your autumn and winter outing programme. The outing listed for Saturday, October 27 to the Island will meet at the ferry dock for the 9.30 a.m. boat. The leader will be Mr. Frank Lovesy.

Correction: The outing in Cedarvale Ravine, led by Dr. R.M. Saunders, has been incorrectly listed as on November 8. The correct date is December 8.

CHRISTMAS CARDS

The Federation of Ontario Naturalists is once more producing Christmas cards. This year's card pictures a chickadee on the front cover, done in four colours, with a suitable greeting inside. It has been designed by Robert Bateman, who is well known to many of our members. We will have a supply of these cards at the November meeting, when you may place your orders, or you may send them direct to the secretary. The price of the cards is \$1.50 per dozen, and we would urge you to send in your orders early, as the supply is limited.

BOTANY GROUP

The November meeting of the Botany Group will be held in Eglinton Public School, Mount Pleasant Rd. and Eglinton Ave. on November 15 at 8 p.m. sharp. Speaker - Mrs. Mary Ferguson. Topic "What I have found on Beausoleil Island". Illustrated by coloured slides. Chairman - Dr. Fletcher Sharp.

Junior Field Naturalists

The November meeting of the Junior Field Naturalists Club will be held on Saturday, November 3, 1956, at 10.00 a.m. in the Museum Theatre. The bird group will be in charge, and two films will be shown - "Attracting birds in Winter" and "The Bobolink and the Bluejay". All children from 8 to 16 will be welcome.

FEES

The annual fee of \$2.00 is now past due. Please send your fees by mail to the Secretary, to avoid lining up at meetings.

John Mitchele - President

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

Toronto Field Naturalists' Club.



NEWSLETTER

Number 142

October 1956.

BIRDING IN SWEDEN*

Two springs I have experienced this year. On May 15th I left behind me a familiarly lovely early spring in Canada, on our 46th parallel, a beginning blossom time. To this came the "Lawrence" Hummingbird, a ruby-throated male, which is now with us at Rutherglen for the third summer. He arrived on the all-time record early date of May 6th and searched for the accustomed sugar-water fountain in our window. He did not need it really because, himself like a tiny winged flower, he had crept northwards across the continent with the blossoms; and, as he appeared at his summer home at Pimisi Bay, there were a thousand honeysuckles ready for him in the pansies, the honeysuckles, the red columbines, and many other flowers.

It was not that I flew northwards 13 full degrees to the 59th parallel which was altogether responsible for the second spring. Sweden is a country with a coastal climate highly influenced by the surrounding seas and the Americas' best gift to Europe, the Gulfstream, which washes up against Norway's back. But this year spring was very tardy in these northern parts, owing to the way the weather systems marched across the Scandinavian Peninsula during practically all of April and May, drawing in Polar air, without letting through a single wisp of balmy breezes. When I arrived, therefore, none of the trees were yet in leaf. But I saw what I had always dreamt of as one of the loveliest memories from my young days. And it was such a wonderful thing that I was not too late for it.

I do not know if I shall be able to give you an adequate picture of the blossoming of the white anemones. The plant itself is a perennial

*Ed. Note: This is the second of Mrs. Louise de Kiriline Lawrence's letters on her trip home to Sweden in June 1955. The enthusiastic reception of her first letter in the last number of the Newsletter is a sure guarantee of the pleasure you will have in reading this further account of her experiences.

which grows in leafmould under the trees in every woodland. A ballet skirt of fringy leaves surrounds the middle of the stalk. Above it nods the lovely flower head, rounded petals of virginal white with faint rosy tints on their undersides. The height of modesty and discretion both in looks and fragrance, the white anemone overwhelms by its profusion. Like snowdrifts it covers the Swedish land under the leafless trees, pouring its indescribably subtle vernal essence upon the air.

Thus beautiful with their white carpets of anemones stood the woods that first early morning when I sauntered forth to look at Swedish birds.

The first bird I saw was a Jackdaw, Corvix monedula, of the crow family. Those of you who have read Dr. Lorenz' chapter, "The Perennial Retainers", in his book King Solomon's Ring will understand the special delight I had in meeting these birds. I did not remember much about them. Apparently they live mostly in steeples, about tall houses, trees, and cliffs. But now, as I recalled Dr. Lorenz's description of their courtship and caresses, their jaunty look, their grey fluffy nape spot had acquired special vivid meaning. If their English name, "Jackdaw", is derived from their notes, it is far less descriptive than the Swedish name, "Kaja", which, uttered with a slight stridor, is an accurate rendition of them.

A crow bird's walk always reminds me of Mae West, a sedate swaying of plumes and body, consciously seductive in the lady, but enchantingly unaffected in the bird. The Jackdaw has it but entirely unaided by such magnificent attributes in form and colour as are displayed by the Magpie, Pica pica, which there in the sunshine also walked on the greening lawn, in a way very similar to our western bird, resplendent to behold with its black feet broad upon the ground, its flowing black tail, large white wing-patches and the white belly under a generous half-circular black bib; and, withal, every black feather shining with an astonishingly rich iridescence.

I heard a song, and I knew it from the spring-times of 45 years ago for it is impossible to mistake it. It had neither the spring-water quality of the Winter Wren nor the canary-like sequence of notes of the Purple Finch; rather was it like the brief splashing of a brook over wet rocks, a rippling short cascade of joyful notes. I did not see the bird that time. But the Chaffinch, Fringilla coelebs, is one of the most common birds here, a lovely finch with slate-blue head, chestnut back, pinkish-brown front and underside, greenish rump, and broad white bars and edgings on the black wings. The Chaffinch loves the rich foliage and puts its nest mostly in some sheltered crotch in mature deciduous trees, a little masterpiece of avian architecture, soft and grey from all the plant down that goes into its making. Later as I walked along the boulevards after the linden trees sprang into leaf, I passed through one Chaffinch territory after another, proclaimed in the sweet joyous melody of their respective owners, unseen amid the verdure of the tree-tops.

No sooner had I got into the woods before I was accosted by a small boy, about eleven years of age. He had seen my glasses and notebook and became vastly interested. When I explained that I had just

come from Canada and that I had forgotten all about the birds here, which I used to know when I was his age, he then and there became my gallant guide.

It was a great companionship. We discussed the Great Tits, Parus major, their notes, their choice of habitat. There we saw a female, her cap a little grayer than the shining black one of the male. Surprisingly, she too twittered in a hoarse voice in spring, as our own Black-capped Chickadee females do during courting time. My Junior Guide pointed out the male with the black band running down his yellow breast and belly. We heard him give his whistled notes, whit-tee, whit-tee, whit-tee, as if on the first note he drew in his breath and on the second expelled it.

In a rustic nestbox attached to the trunk of a tree (and, by the way, there are nestboxes in trees all over Stockholm, in private gardens and public parks, often even in trees standing stark alone in the midst of the traffic), we encountered a pair of Pied Flycatchers, Muscicapa hypoleuca. The male is black and white and sings a pleasant little ditty. The female looks like our Least Flycatcher, all green, all shy, catches flies from a twig, and both of them flick their tails. This female was building her nest in the box and she came with her bill full of stuff. But she became timid about us standing there, teetered her tail, and would not approach. The male gave a soft trill, flew to the nestbox, looked in, flicked his tail, and by movement and behaviour, so it seemed to me, he conveyed the idea: "Come, little wife, get on with the work! There's nothing to be afraid of!" Which she did.

The birches in Sweden are not like ours in Canada. These are the true white birches, Betula alba, with pendulous branches and smooth white trunks, not "paper"-fringed as in our kind. But the Fieldfare, Turdus pilaris, likes his birches just as well as his counterpart, our Robin, likes our kind. Junior Guide discovered the nest in a crotch about twenty feet from the ground. I could have sworn it was that of our Robin, mud and all.

The Fieldfare is a large thrush with chestnut back and slate-blue head and tail; but no red breast, only brown spots down the front, much as our young Robins. For the rest it has all the thrushy attributes, the weird notes, the wing drooping and the tail-lift, that we are used to finding in our own thrushes. At the time of our visit, it was chasing Magpies from the territory, for they are notorious egg-robbers and nestling killers. And I am sure that there were eggs in that nest. Two weeks later the Fieldfare was feeding yellow-gaped young, no less than 5 days old, in the same nest. It was nice to know that the Magpie did not get them that time.

A little farther on we heard loud fluted notes. Oriole, I thought; where is this Oriole? Junior Guide informed me that this was not an Oriole but the famous European Blackbird which is not a blackbird but a thrush. In Sweden the bird is called "Coal Thrush", for the plumage of the male is black like coal without iridescence, while the female is brownish. It is large like our Robin and has a yellow bill and eye-rings, conspicuous against the black.

We listened to the song, serene in measure and pure of tone. Deep down in my mind stirred a forgotten memory of these very notes, impressions long ago etched fast, ineradicably. And as the bird sang and impregnated the woods with its aloof tranquillity, I knew that from this repeat performance hereafter I would always know the Coal Thrush whenever I heard it, and never again forget.

Beyond a fence two birds were flying around amongst the white anemones. The male was blue-grey on the head and back with white forehead, black throat, red breast, and crangy flashes on the tail, like our Redstart, a striking apparition. The female was greenish with rust-coloured tail which she shivered in a peculiar way all the time.

Junior Guide and I had a long discussion about the identity of this bird. We looked through the whole of Peterson's Field Guide. Finally we found it. It was a Redstart, Phoenicurus phoenicurus, the European species after which, indeed, our American Redstart got its name, a bird which is not a warbler but a thrush. We were perfectly agreed upon this conclusion.

For a long time we watched the birds. They were courting, going through the beginning of the first phase of their courtship as the unattached female entered the premises possessed by the male. It was such a gracious play, the birds flying apart, coming together again at the foot of a trunk, in the midst of the anemones. The male sang, beautifully long-drawn strings of rather sweet notes. And all the time there were these odd pretty shivering movements of the reddish tails.

Junior Guide and I walked homewards. We said goodbye as if we had known each other all our lives and were to meet soon again. Neither of us knew the name of the other. We had not seen a great many species, nor any but the most common, nor had we heard so much birdsong. But because of our chance encounter we had trod together on common ground and shared in an understanding of what we had seen, which lent reality and substance to the experience.

These are the "White Nights". The sun rises a few minutes past 2 a.m. and sets after a long day of brilliance soon after 9 p.m. During the remaining five hours there is twilight, a shimmering translucent night that holds no darkness.

The birds have a long day too, because they cannot sleep with the sun in the sky. The Swedish ornithologist and nature lover gets the white nights in his blood, for he knows how brief the time is and how much he would miss did he not keep up with the sun and his birds.

The Stockholm group of the Swedish Ornithological Society works out and prints a programme of excursions and field trips for spring and summer. I was amazed to note that nearly all of these, of which there were 4 in May and 3 in June, began at the "ungodly" hour of 2 a.m. with adjournment not before 7 p.m. By boat, train, cars and motorcycles, these ardent naturalists range into a variety of habitats, timing with exactitude the right moment for maximum reward.

Unfortunately, I was unable to join one of these remarkable field trips. But one early morning I got up at 4 a.m. and walked out to the meeting place of a lesser SOF excursion.

On the way thither I listed 15 species. These included one Mallard delightedly splashing about under the water cascade of a fountain in the midst of the city; two White Wagtails, Motacilla alba, in a heated altercation about territory, which belied their dainty look of perennial amiability; a Mute Swan, Cygnus olor, floating with curved neck under a bridge; Black-headed Gulls, Larus ridibundus, Stockholm's most common gull which comes in flocks of thousands to feed and frolic in grassy places, sailing across the sky, giving their laughter notes with a comical expression in their black faces. I saw a Greenfinch, Chloris chloris, too, for the first time, an all-green finch with yellow flashes on the tail, a little larger than the Purple Finch. And along the whole route Blackbirds gave their flute notes from the treetops.

Ungodly hour! As I arrived at the meeting place I was still all alone. But were not this, and yet many hours earlier in this northern latitude, the most godly hours of the day? Budding trees, birdsong, and spring flowers!

The park, which juts out into the Stockholm archipelago and is surrounded by water on three sides, is renowned for its trees, the oaks especially. Some of these remarkable trees date back to the seventeenth century, like many of the lovely old houses nestling in their shades. Often their enormous trunks are circled by iron bands to hold them together, their mighty crowns rising gnarled, twisted and dead, strange and beautiful silhouettes. Each of these ancients are nursed and cared for, trimmed and pruned, until they can no longer sprout a single green leaf. Then, but only then, decay is allowed to take over and crumble them to earth and soil.

Many birds were singing this crisp morning. A pair of Great Tits came and took crumbs from my hand. Hooded Crows, Corvus cornix, with grey backs and bellies, called from the bare tops of the old oaks. A Greenfinch mixed its notes with the Chaffinch chorus. Four Barnacle Geese, Branta leucopsis, with white faces and the black "stocking" drawn well down over the breast, flew over. These belonged to a flock liberated from Skansen, a zoological garden on top of the knoll.

By the time I had observed all these things, the members of the club began to arrive. Glasses, brogues, leather jackets, everybody was suitably uniformed, without mistake to embody their label - naturalist. When we finally set out through the woods carpeted with white anemones, I counted 25 heads in this eager group. A few of them, including the youthful leader, were well versed in natural history. But most of the others, men and women, middle-aged to young, even including a schoolboy, with jobs and school to attend to later on in the day, were ordinary people who had travelled for hours on buses and streetcars to put a bit of nature's reality, sunshine and beauty into their lives.

The birds were singing. A Stock Dove, Columba oenas, gave its soft

guttural note from the woods. A pair of Nuthatches, Sitta europea, crept about branches and trunks, giving their chwit - chwit - chwit in unison and looking far fluffier and paler in colour than our Red-breasted Nuthatch. Over our heads sailed an old friend, the Common Tern, Sterna hirundo, on set wings, looking down upon us from under its black cap with mild curiosity.

On a small pond there was a female Mallard feeding. These ducks are very common, but not tamed. We were told that they nest in all kinds of places, even in suitable nooks on the balconies of tall apartment buildings in mid-city. If there is nothing to hinder them from walking right out into space, the ducklings can safely plane down upon spread webbed feet and tiny wings from the elevated birthplace. All traffic stops. A dammed-up wall of cars stand guard on each side, as mother Mallard sedately conducts her waddling brood to water.

Just below Skansen there is a large colony of Grey Herons, Ardea cinerea. In size and looks they are alike to our Great Blues with the exception that their colour is more grey than blue. These particular birds are breeding several hundred miles north of their natural range. Their forefathers were liberated from Skansen some 20 years ago, settled and bred in the tall Scotch Pines below the Gardens. Some of the progeny migrate south in winter and return to breed, regularly passing across and beyond the range of their brethren to this northern dot upon the map. Others, depending for their survival upon the generous fish dinners thrown on top of the ancestral cage, winter successfully amid snow and ice.

The European warblers, which belong to a different family, Sylviidae, than ours, have this notable divergence from our Parulidae, that they are always confusing. There are quite a number of them; they are all greenish or brownish or yellowish, with or without wing-bars and streaks on the back. To my eyes they looked like small vireos flitting about the foliage, and it became clear that the Swedish ornithologist far more often relies on ear than eye for identification. We heard three of them that morning. And while I finally acquired a temporary idea of the characteristic songs of the Willow and Wood Warblers, Phylloscopus trochilus and P. sibilatrix, (note the Latin name of the latter), for the life of me I would never again recognize that of the Garden Warbler, Sylvia borin, which apparently gave us our one first-seen date that day.

The highlight of the morning for the group was the finding of a Goldcrest, Regulus regulus, a bird almost identical to our Golden-crowned Kinglet. It sang amid a dense stand of voluminous spruces, a high thin string of notes ending with a little trill.

To me the highlight was seeing the true Robin, Erithacus rubecula. This small brownish thrush with its rusty red breast, apparently had just arrived and was searching for food on a southern slope amid the dead leaves. There was this, too, to walk along amongst the drifts of anemones and the budding trees, with wet turf under foot and sunshine from on high, in the company of this assembly of strangers whose

enthusiasm was contagious and whose willingness to accept the effort required for these rewarding early morning hours was in itself immensely inspiring.

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BIRD BANDING*

By John A. Livingston

Banding is a method of marking birds so as to record and follow their behaviour from season to season. There is more to it than following their migratory movements. This is the most obvious result, however, and you can understand that when a dead, banded bird is found it is possible through the number on the band to ascertain when and where it was originally recorded. On this continent, bird banding is jointly controlled by the Canadian Wildlife Service and the United States Fish and Wildlife Service, and duplicate records are kept in Ottawa and Washington. This is because so many of the birds breed in Canada and winter in the United States and south. A banded bird shot or picked up anywhere can be quickly checked through either of these agencies.

You can imagine that in the last few decades we have learned an immense amount about bird migration through banding. There is a great deal more to it than that, however, for bird banding gives us an opportunity to examine wild birds in the hand and to check them for points of interest not related necessarily to migration. Expert bird banders, for example, usually weigh their bird before banding, gradually building up a stock of information on regional variations, sexual characteristics and so on. Many prominent banders also examine the captive bird for parasites and for plumage differences. They study them for moulting patterns, and many other things we won't go into here. The point I would make is that it involves more than merely attaching a ring to the leg of a bird and waiting for somebody in some part of the world to return it.

The reason I bring this up is that recently we seem to have a great many more bird banders in the field than ever before. The scientific possibilities presented by this increased population of field participants

*Ed. Note: The editor of the Newsletter was present when the request was made to Mr. Livingston to do something about the heavy casualties in the gull and tern colonies in question, and, in fact, the request was addressed to him as well. He realized that the T.F.N.C. is as much concerned to foster conservation as is the Audubon Society, and that in these matters the interests of all naturalists are one. Consequently after hearing Mr. Livingston's talk on the subject (Audubon Outdoors, Sunday, August 26, 1956) he asked him if he would permit the main part of the talk to be reprinted in the Newsletter. To this Mr. Livingston graciously consented. It is here presented, therefore, for the earnest consideration of the members of the Club.

are enormous, and I think it is a wonderful thing that a great many people who have spent years making up daily lists of birds and filing them away are turning to more constructive activity. Many of our friends are turning to bird banding and doing a remarkably fine job. After all, the scientists in the museums and government services have to depend, really, on the amateur for the bulk of their field records. There just aren't enough trained ornithologists and biologists to go around, and the amateur bird-bander is an immensely important part of the continuing job of procuring and compiling facts and figures on the still very mysterious patterns of bird behaviour.

But. And this is a rather big "but". As in any other popular field, I fear that the stampede toward bird-banding in recent times has perhaps been a little precipitate. By this I mean that possibly with this greatly-swollen population of keen bird-banders, there are among them a minority who lack the experience and the training to properly conduct this type of field work. This is no condemnation of the neophyte who is sincere in his desire to learn, because as I have said the study of natural history depends to a very substantial degree on the amateur, unpaid worker. The point is, however, that there are in the ranks of any segment of the population those who may be less well-equipped or less well-informed, and who may with all good intentions do things which could be detrimental in this instance to the whole cause of conservation.

I have a reason for saying this, and I think it is important that you be told about it. Recently I was approached by two ladies who evidenced a great deal of distress about some bird banding activity which had been going on in their neighbourhood. They happen to have summer cottages near some very interesting nesting islands on which are substantial colonies of Caspian and common terns, and gulls. These ladies told me that banders are frequently seen working there among the young terns and gulls. I said to them that this was an eminently praiseworthy and constructive occupation, and certainly no reason for concern.

They understood, however, all about the theory of banding and why it is done. They are keen naturalists, and quite in sympathy with the field work which our provincial and national governments undertake, and which is supplemented so widely by the efforts of private individuals. Their complaint was that in every instance following the visits of the banders, they would find substantial numbers of dead, newly banded birds laying about the beaches. To prove their point, they gave me approximately fifty assorted bands which they themselves had removed from dead terns and gulls. This was only a small fraction of the total mortality, however, but these kind people could not bring themselves to count the full number. On checking, I found that some additional fifty bands had been gathered from the same place shortly before, and that we could probably estimate from a rough count of dead banded birds approximately a hundred more casualties during the past few weeks. This was not, apparently, an isolated occurrence.

Now, this is a serious thing, and it needs to be brought to your attention. The Audubon Society of Canada represents not the experts but the general public - the people of Canada who have a respect and love for our natural out-of-doors heritage and its inhabitants. These

friends of ours felt that this Society would be the best place to report their findings. This has been taken care of, and the Canadian Wildlife Service now has the bands in Ottawa.

It is necessary, however, to look at this thing from many angles. Many people who spoke to me about this mortality among the terns and gulls thought it must have been occasioned by some rough handling or callous treatment of the birds. This may well have been so, but not necessarily so. What our informants did not know, and what possibly the banders themselves did not know is that the terns in particular are extraordinarily sensitive to handling and disturbance. Many birds do not seem to mind your presence in their colonies at all, whereas others, and notably the terns, show an extremely sensitive aversion to any ripple or disturbance, however slight. They have been known to desert colonies just because they have been visited, much less handled. It is quite possible that whoever banded these young terns just didn't know how remarkably sensitive they are.

Another factor enters into the banding of colonial birds. When you undertake to band them, the idea must be to remain on their island for as brief a period as possible, in order first to render the disturbance minimal, and secondly to expose the young birds to the sun and the elements for as short a time as possible. As a result, one has to work quickly, and having finished, get off the island. I would suspect that frequently a degree of haste enters in here, and that wholesale banding toward a competitive "quota" under a time restriction could result in an improper job being done, without sufficient consideration of the birds' unfortunate potential reaction to sudden shock.

I don't speak as an expert here at all, because I have never banded a bird in my life. I don't expect I ever will, at least not until such time as I know a lot more than I do about the physiology and psychology of the particular species being handled. It's a highly specialized business. The expert bander not only knows and acts upon the peculiar character of the bird involved, such as the terrible shyness of the terns, but he must be as accurate as a surgeon in performing the incredibly delicate operation of ringing the tiny, fragile leg of a living bird with a circlet of metal. The bird's nervousness and the bird's physical well-being must both be taken into account. Shock is a very dangerous thing to a small bird.

At the beginning of this past week, I wrote to the Canadian Wildlife Service and passed on both the bands which had been given to me and the story of the manner in which they were collected. It is quite possible that some good may come of it, because the Service not only knows the date the band was placed on the bird, but who did the banding, and their officials will be in a position to perhaps help that person learn a little more of the very real and very serious responsibility anyone assumes when he undertakes to become involved in active participation in field study with live animals.

I deeply and sincerely hope that the action of the people who drew this whole matter to our attention will result in tangible good.

You see, it is impossible to conserve and protect and perpetuate our natural scene without scientific facts to guide us. Continuing research is one of the aims of the Audubon Society of Canada, because we know that only the facts accruing to such activity can provide us with the answers to questions involving the welfare of our resources.

Banding is a vital and essential cog in the machinery for gathering information about our birds. It is not a game and it is not a place for tyros, unless they have expert guidance. There is no room for tampering with living creatures by casual or ill-equipped hobbyists. There are plenty of expert professional and amateur banders who are doing magnificent work, and I would think that in the best interest of conservation a measure of stronger control might be exercised on those few who either through lack of experience or lack of knowledge might be in a position to undo the fine accomplishments of the many.

R. M. Saunders,
Editor.