

Toronto Field Naturalists' Club

143

1956 Complete

December Meeting

Monday, December 3, 1956 at 8.15 p.m.
at the
ROYAL ONTARIO MUSEUM

Lecturer: Anthony de Vos
Associate Professor of Wildlife Management,
Ontario Agricultural College, Guelph, Ont.
At present Biologist, Fish and Wildlife Division,
Department of Lands and Forests, Ontario.

Subject - "Let's Save Some of Our Wet Land".

Dr. de Vos was formerly curator, Museum of Zoology, Bogor, Indonesia, and also Technical Assistant, Department of Economic Affairs, Netherlands Indies Government.

He has a Bachelor's Degree standing of Dutch Agricultural College, and Dutch Civil Affairs College; an M.Sc. in Wildlife Management, University of Wisconsin, and a Ph.D. in Zoology also at Wisconsin.

He is a member of the Wildlife Society, Director of Society of Mammalogists, member Nature Conservancy, Sigma XI, member Netherlands International Commission for Nature Protection, and a member of the Committee for Conservation of Land Mammals.

On the same programme a film entitled

"Wild Life Of A Marsh"

by William Carrick, will be shown. Mr. Carrick, whose excellent films have often been enjoyed by his fellow members of this Club, needs no further introduction.

OUTING

Saturday, December 8. 9.00 a.m. Lingering migrants in Cedarvale. Meet at the Ravine entrance at the north end of Boulton Drive. Leader - Dr. R.M. Saunders.

CHRISTMAS CARDS

The last opportunity to purchase F.O.N. Christmas cards will be at the meeting on December 3. They will also be on sale at the Audubon Screen Tours on November 26 and 27, or orders may be sent direct to the Secretary. These cards are priced at \$1.50 per dozen, and are most attractive. Don't delay until there are none left. They are going fast.

BOTANY GROUP

There will be no meeting of the Botany Group in December. The next meeting will be on the third Thursday in January '57.

JUNIOR FIELD NATURALISTS

The December meeting of the Junior Field Naturalists' Club will be held on Saturday, December 1, at 10.00 a.m. in the Museum Theatre. The meeting will be in charge of the Minerals Group.

FEEES

According to our records, there are a good many members who have not yet paid their current fees. If we do not hear from these members by Christmas time, we shall assume that they are no longer interested, and discontinue sending the Newsletter.

John Mitchele - President.

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

Toronto Field Naturalists' Club.



NEWSLETTER

Number 143

November 1956

At the southermost tip of New Jersey where Atlantic rollers crash against long yellow sands, where mile after mile of tide-threaded salt marshes reach between mainland and outer beaches, there is Cape May. Visited and lauded by generations of birdwatchers as one of the finest places in America to watch migration, spring and fall, the Cape remains a mecca to all who seek the acquaintance of birds, especially shorebirds and waterfowl. In his famous Guide to Bird Watching Olin Pettingill echoes the praises of countless birders when he opens his discussion of this area with the words, "No place on the Atlantic Coast has, through the years, given bird finders greater satisfaction than ... Cape May." To such plaudits the four of us from Toronto who last spring made the trip to Cape May for the first time can only say, "We agree. It's all you say and more".

Looking at the map makes it seem a long way from Toronto to the southern end of New Jersey. So it is. More than seven hundred miles. Yet when we came to make the trip driving proved so easy and straightforward that we were able to leave one morning at 11.00 and be in Cape May for lunch the next day. The secret, of course, is that except for two gaps of about thirty miles all told (between Niagara Falls and the N.Y. thruway, and between Suffern, N.Y. and the Garden State Parkway) the whole route was by way of modern divided highways. Both gaps are being closed, so that soon it will be possible to go the whole distance on such roads. One of our drivers, who has done a great deal of long distance driving remarked that it was the easiest long drive he had ever known.

We had made arrangements to stay at a motel in the village of Cape May Court House. This is the most central spot on the Cape, one from which all parts are easily reached. When we

arrived we had only to book in, deposit our bags, eat a bite and get going. Where to go and what to look for had already been planned, since we had the advice of other Toronto observers who had been to the Cape before, and we had detailed topographic maps for the whole region. On these maps Jim Baillie had kindly marked the spots where he and others had seen special birds the year previously. A year ago; what good is that? I hear someone say. Let us see.

The most special of all the special birds was the cattle egret, that new and exciting avian invader from Africa via South America. We decided that this bird should be our first objective; so after studying the maps, we made directly for the spot on the Higbee Beach Road that Jim had marked. We scarcely noticed mockingbirds crossing from garden to garden in front of the car, and only stopped once to look at orchard orioles and flitting warblers, so intent were we on the egret. Perhaps this was because one had been seen at Port Rowan on Lake Erie just before we left and we had been prevented from going to see that bird; or perhaps it was that of the four of us only Barney Barnett had ever seen this species, and even he had not seen one since his boyhood in India. Whatever the reason we were all intensely eager to see a cattle egret. None of us, for all that, anticipated doing so in the way we did. What did we do? We simply drove to the spot indicated where Jim had seen them a year ago, and there they were, two cattle egrets, standing preening, as if they had been notified of our arrival and were there to greet us. What's more they were in a singularly unlikely place, beside a brook that meandered across a lawn between a house and the road. Barney recognized them at once, and the rest of us saw easily all the identifying marks we had been careful to learn. We were struck by the peculiar squat or stooped position, the small size, the orange plumes and feathers on head, breast and back, and the pink legs. The real birds surpassed in elegance and distinction all the pictures we had seen, all the descriptions we had heard. As we stood watching, the lady of the house came out her front door; she took up a lawn mower and started rolling this noisy machine down the lane towards the road. There go the egrets, we thought. Not at all. They continued calmly to preen, paying no attention. Obviously they were quite used to human activities. When she got up to us we spoke to her, Barney asking permission to go into the grounds to take some pictures. She readily consented being, it turned out, thoroughly accustomed to birdwatchers. So too were the egrets, she told us, for they have come now for four years to this farm, and the birders said she "bring bus loads to see those birds. I think I ought to start charging admission"! There were fourteen of the egrets at the end of the last season (1955) though no nest has yet been found at Cape May. The two we were looking at were the first to arrive this spring. With this information dispensed the lady trundled her lawn mower down the road, leaving us to admire the birds.

Of these there were many besides the cattle egrets; and a curious assemblage it was, since wild birds and tame were indiscriminately intermingled. Blue geese, Canada geese, mute swans and many ducks, some with clipped wings, some wild, were all there together. There was a pair of Canada geese that the owner assured us were wild birds which had dropped in amongst the others during the spring flight, and now were nesting beside the little brook not far from where the egrets were standing. Directly behind the house began a large wooded swamp with many dead trees rising above the water. In two of these trees ospreys had constructed huge nests. By careful alignment it was possible from our point of vantage to see a Canada goose on its nest, a cattle egret, and an osprey on the nest in our binoculars at one and the same time! Quite a spot this farm on the Highbee Beach Road. In came a green heron to alight by the stream, a few feet from the egret. The Canada gander didn't like this too close approach to its nest; it hissed with outstretched neck until the heron withdrew a few feet, there to feed quietly at the brookside. Bobwhite called repeatedly from the grass near the house, whilst shorebirds - solitaires, spotties and peeps - probed the mud around a pool a few feet from the road. What a place for a birder to have a home. Finally, one of the cattle egrets took wing, and went away across the fields, the second still remaining when we left, but two hours later as we came by for another look it too had gone. We saw no more of them. The Toronto party that went down a few weeks later saw none at all. We had been very, very fortunate.

The rest of the afternoon was spent tramping over sand dunes covered with thickets, and along the edges of woodlands, looking at warblers - the commonest of which was the prairie, a resident bird here - at migrant sparrows, vireos and flycatchers. With such birds we were on familiar ground and could well have been at Point Pelee, so similar is the look of the countryside in many parts.

In the evening we drove across the marshes to Stone Harbor, to visit a heronry near the coast guard station. Despite the pressure for beach space in this heavily-populated resort area, a section of the wooded dunes have been left in their natural condition, and set aside as a sanctuary. Here the herons congregate and nest in hundreds even though the refuge abuts upon the beach highway. Commonest birds in the colony are the American and snowy egrets, the little blue herons and the black-crowned night herons. There are several yellow-crowned night herons, some Louisiana herons and a few glossy ibis. We saw all except the last during our visit. They arrived later and were seen by the party that went from Toronto in June. At dusk, the best time for viewing the birds, the winged traffic in and out of the colony is tremendous, egrets and little blues coming in to roost, while night herons are going out onto the marshes to feed.

To Barney and me, who had been further south, this sight was a reminder of other great heronries. To the other two, Greer Roberts and John Nettleton, it was a revelation of the numbers to which herons can come under favorable conditions. We watched until dark, the movement still going on when it was impossible to make out the birds except by their guttural salutes as they passed overhead.

Saturday morning (May 12th) we were driving along the causeway to Stone Harbor a little before eight. One of our party, who had never seen salt marshes before, was astounded at their extent, for they stretched away north and south as far as one could see, and for miles east and west. We were all astonished at the clouds of shorebirds we now found upon the marshes. As soon as we came to the first open bit we saw flocks swirling in the air in every direction. Countless birds were alighting in the brown salt grass whilst myriads pattered along the muddy tidal channels. With the tide at half-ebb conditions were ideal for the concentration of shorebird feeders. However, the first bird which really rivetted our attention was no shorebird, but a very noisy clapper rail; its calls of "jack, jack, jack" and incessant jabbering, demanded that everyone pay heed. We soon saw the big grey fellow standing on a pile of grass shouting to all and sundry. Answers came from every quarter. Following these leads we quickly had in view two of the big rails engaged in a violent fight; they pranced around madly, waving their wings which were arched above their backs, and dashed at each other savagely. It was a great show though neither bird appeared to get hurt. We were to see such territorial battles on several occasions. So common in fact were the clappers that along the salt marshes we were never without sound of them. By day or by night their "jacking" was always to be heard. At the end of our trip we entered 300 as the number we had seen or heard; certainly no overestimate for the huge marshes must have thousands of these noisy birds in residence.

Even more common, or at least more evident, were the laughing gulls. It was literally impossible to find any place on Cape May, be it beach, marsh, wood or field, where one did not hear the plaintive cries of these black-headed gulls. They were fewest at Cape May Point and most numerous in the marshes near Stone Harbor, but there were some everywhere. Why they are called "laughing gulls" is a mystery to us, for all the cries and calls we heard were more like mewings or squeals than laughter. We felt they might better be named the "crying gulls"; surely the "haw-haw-haw" calls of the herring or ring-billed gulls are much worthier of the label "laughing" if comparison to human laughter is what is implied. Some laughing gulls seemed always to be on the move. In the evening great numbers flew out to sea; during the day many were continually crossing back and forth over the middle of the Cape between the ocean and the bayside.

Thousands rested in the marshes, usually bunched in dense masses, their clamor being audible for a long distance. The favorite massing spots were west and south of Stone Harbor, where, we were informed, the main nesting site is to be found.

Clapper rails and laughing gulls may be taken as general accompaniments to the salt marsh scene. As soon on Saturday morning as we could divert our attention from these two birds, we saw again that everywhere, as far as we could see, there were shorebirds, more shorebirds, and more shorebirds, in such numbers as we could scarcely credit, and had never imagined. Hudsonian curlew, strutting through the brown grass or gliding in long lines, filling the air with their liquid "cur-lew - lew-lew" calls, were most conspicuous; scarcely less so were the swarms of peeps that circled and manoeuvred like crowds of starlings coming into some vast roost. So densely were the sandpipers and plovers gathered all along both sides of the causeway that we moved ahead but a few feet at a time. We could have spent the whole day watching the fascinating and unbelievable scene, to our eyes so novel. For every shorebird we could see in Toronto in a year here was a thousand. We had hit the shorebird migration right at the peak. Variety as well as numbers met our eyes; by the time we reached Stone Harbor Beach we had seen no less than twenty species of shorebirds. In the past we had read or heard of "millions of shorebirds". Here it was possible to give credence to such estimates, for when we remembered the hundreds of miles of such marshes along the Atlantic coast, and that much of this area must now be covered with migrating shorebirds, it was easy to calculate that the total shorebird population must be astronomical. We counted them in hundreds and thousands ourselves, and felt very conservative in doing so. What surprised us as much as anything else was that there were so few birdwatchers to be met with hereabouts. - anything remotely resembling such a show would have brought out scores of birders in the Toronto region - ; and, also, that when we mentioned our wonder at so great a display, the local birders hardly seemed interested. Apparently anything can become or seem "commonplace".

After lunch on Saturday we drove to the Cape May Audubon Centre, located not far from our motel. There we made the acquaintance of Mr. Quickmire, the curator-warden, a young man whose duties include the leading of hikes, keeping up the Centre - this is housed in an old colonial house; meetings are held here, and books, cards and other nature materials are sold - watching over a large nature reserve (700 acres) that ranges from salt marsh across a great extent of fields and woods, so providing a wide variety of habitat. The warden could not come with us, but very helpfully showed us where we might see certain birds, and directed us to the Nature Trail that runs through the wooded part of the reserve. No sooner had we started along the path than we were greeted by the chuckling salute of a white-eyed vireo,

which, curiosity satisfied, dashed into the bushes, leaving us to our stroll. Every so often songs and calls enticed us off the trail. Several such diversions led us to hooded warblers, until we could tell from the song - how like the chestnut-sided warbler's it is - that there were hoodeds all through this wood. A tufted titmouse gave us quite a chase, but in the end we had him a few feet from our faces. A pine warbler, a blue-winged warbler and two more white-eyed vireos all required attention. One of the vireos obviously was carrying food. When it flew into the top of a white pine it showed us where, in almost the topmost tuft of needles, it had placed its nest. Forty or more feet above our heads this nest was safe from human interference, and from discovery save for the chance that had revealed it to our eyes. The warden was much interested in this find, telling us that two or three nests of this species are located in the reserve each year. The white-eyed may be a deceiver as well as a revealer; this I knew from experience in South Carolina years ago, but I had forgotten. After all when you hear a bird calling loudly, "Quick, three beers!", what are you to think but that you are listening to an olive-sided flycatcher? That certainly is what Greer Roberts and I thought until I went across the field to get a better look at the bird, and, when I did, found it to be a white-eyed jokester. Only when I came within a few yards of the sound did it sound in any way peculiar to the regular flycatcher call. Only at that moment did I remember how many white-eyed vireos Tom Murray and I chased in Carolina thinking they were some other bird. The imitative capabilities of this species appear to be extensive.

By the time we had made the round of the Nature Trail we knew for the first time this spring the sensation of feeling hot. At the Centre we discovered that the temperature registered 85 in the shade, a degree of heat we hadn't experienced since the previous summer. After Toronto's dilatory and frigid spring we had come prepared for more of the same and were now plunged into a heat wave. The transition was quite a shock though I must say we were glad enough to enjoy the feel of warm sunlight after the cold grey months we had just lived through.

Following Quickmire's hint we spent the evening walking the Stone Harbor beach, a magnificent stretch of fine sand, bounded on one side by the pounding Atlantic breakers and on the other by high rolling dunes. No place is more entrancing to the naturalist than an ocean beach, for it is never the same, and never can one tell what is going to show up there. This evening there were sandpipers all along the sand; sanderlings beetling through the outwash of the waves, snatching at marine insects, warms and other tidbits, accompanied by peeps, ruddy turnstones and black-bellied plovers. Towards the dunes piping plovers, those inconspicuous sand-colored runners, were

whistling and racing about. What a pleasure it was to see them after the many years we have looked for them on Long Point in vain. Out over the tumbling waves a long line of cormorants was beating northward, bound for their summer home, whilst bobbing on the waves was a lone American scoter. Coming in to the great night roost we were approaching was a steady company of herring gulls, all immatures, with whom was one great blackback. Over and around us dashed screaming terns: common, roseate, and the swallow-like least. This point is a favorite nesting site for terns, though at this date the nesting had not yet begun. When we did get to the end of the point dusk was gathering fast and we had only a short time to gaze in wonder at the enormous cloud of birds that thundered up from the ground. So far as we could tell the shrieking crowd that circled overhead was composed about equally of herring gulls and common terns. In the end we decided that there were no less than one hundred thousand birds in this flock. It was a stunning mass of winged creatures; all the more surprising that though the huge flock swung repeatedly over us in its deafening manoeuvres not once were we compelled to duck because of droppings, as often happens when one visits gull or tern colonies. We did not keep them long in the air but turned towards the inner shore where in the growing gloom we could just see the massed bodies of thousands of shorebirds tucked in for the night - or at least until high tide - on the edge of the mudflats. We had not gone far in this direction when amidst screaming least terns came four black skimmers. So close did they pass that even in the dusk we could see the striking black and white pattern and the extraordinary bills with which they carry on their customary skimming. The sight of the skimmers meant "objective achieved" for us, so we turned back to the beach, making our way to the car alongside frothy breakers lit dim by the pale glow of a rising new moon.

That night we boiled; restlessness prevailed, and the next day the temperature registered 90 in the shade. Still the night's wakefulness gave us one very exciting bird for our trip's list, for when, sometime about dawn, several whippoorwills began calling in the woods behind the motel, they were at once joined by one of their big cousins. He announced his name in no uncertain terms, throatily, slowly, and with an emphasis upon each syllable: "Chuck-will's widow, chuck-will's widow". Not since Carolina had I heard that call, and it was all the more exciting here since Cape May is probably the northern limit of this bird's breeding, at least along the Atlantic coast.

Crossing the marsh to Stone Harbor the next morning was a quite different experience than on Saturday. With the tide lower than before the deep-cut mucky channels were dotted with sandpipers, especially peeps and dowitchers - there were scores of the latter - but the grassy flats above the channels were almost empty. Where were yesterday's curlews and clouds of peeps? All the way to Stone Harbor it was the same. We concluded that, save for those

we saw on the mud, the crowds were gone. But we were wrong. No sooner had we taken the Sea Shore Road and passed over the high bridge south of Stone Harbor than we began to see shorebirds in masses just as the day before. Stopping the car we had no need to get out at all for on each side of the road, many of them scarcely out of arm's reach, turnstones, black-bellied plover, dunlin, peeps of several kinds, and others ran, fed, preened and played. Why they preferred this part of the marshes to the other was for us an unanswerable enigma; to our eyes one section of marsh seemed as attractive, indeed in every way the same as any other section. However, we offered no complaints; rather we enjoyed our feast of shorebirds with unabated gusto.

It was some elusive sparrows that finally enticed me out of the car. After a little stalking I was able to force several of them out into an open space where I could see the markings that told me that they were seaside sparrows, natives of the salt marsh. Saturday I had had a similar encounter with equally retiring sharptailed sparrows behind the sand dunes at Stone Harbor Beach. To get a good look at both of these inveterate skulkers was a great satisfaction to me, though my companions, more intent upon shorebirds, barely gave them a glance. Indeed, there were so many sights to be seen this morning; a Louisiana heron poised above a pool far out on the marsh, a large V of brant geese flying along a wide tidal channel, dowitchers parading past our feet, and how many others? that it was hard to stay on one line of observation for any length of time. For Barney's sake - he was our picture taker - we drove close up to a feeding flock of brant; he sneaked out on the far side of the car then around in front to get a picture. Not until he had walked to within 50-60 feet did the flock move, even then merely waddling away in a smart goose-step.

On over a second bridge, one of the several toll bridges in the region, brought us near to the huge resort of Wildwood. Just as we turned to drive into that urbanized settlement a portion of the brown marsh seemed to come aglow with red flashes. We stopped, backed up, focussed our glasses on this part, and were confronted with the gleaming ruddy breasts of scores of dowitchers and knots. Standing in the grass they had been invisible when seen from the rear, since their brownish backs merged with the surrounding brown grass; then, as we made the turn, the sunbeams fell upon their breasts, causing each to gleam, presenting us with a revelation. Never before had any of us seen such a wonderful display of shorebird color, or seen a dun brown marsh come alive with vivid living hues.

Wildwood we passed through with all haste. How can so many people bear to live so crowded together in such a resort? We had been told to look out over the western channel from Wildwood for signs of the glossy ibis, since they had nested last year on a little island in this channel. All we succeeded in

doing in this matter, I fear, was to attract the attention of several local residents, one of whom at least knew that we were looking for birds.

Cape May Point was our destination this morning. So far as the town goes it is even more crowded and unattractive than Wildwood. We drove right through and on to the shore. There we saw at once that other birders had similar ideas to our own, for a small group was assembled around a balscope on a tripod which was trained on the end of one of the long stone jetties. Quickmire had told us what might be on the jetties, so we were not surprised, after making ourselves known, to be invited to look at a group of "shorebirds" that were huddled together near the outer end of the rocks. The view, even through the balscope, was not satisfactory at this distance so, picking it up, we made our way little by little out onto the jetty, stopping every so often to have a look in case the birds should fly. Fortunately they did not, and we were at last not more than 30 - 40 feet distant with the balscope set on the group. At this range we could count the feathers, detecting every dot and mark including the orange legs of 63 purple sandpipers! What a find was this; of all the shorebirds we had seen these were the most astonishing for though they spend the winter hereabouts, to see so many so late in the season was extremely unusual. For once the local birders (these people were from Pennsylvania) were as excited as we were. To me it was an incredible sight, since I had seen but three individuals of this species before, and these one by one over many years. At Toronto it is a very rare bird.

The Pennsylvanians, who were helping to take the annual spring bird count at Cape May, - this is sponsored by the Delaware Valley Ornithological Club - left us to go on with their census taking. They told us first how to get to the "Rips", the place where the Delaware River meets the ocean, and a favorite spot for exciting fishing birds, a fact which our informants emphasized by telling us that they had seen both gannets and red-throated loons there earlier in the morning. On the way to the "Rips" we were halted once at the sight of three more birders looking into some trees beside a field. When we got to them we had another surprise; they were puzzling over a flock of little brown and yellow birds quite unfamiliar to them but old acquaintances to us. We were able to tell these observers that they were looking at pine siskins! Normal winter birds in Toronto, what were they doing in the latitude of Washington in mid-May? At the Rips we found that our gannets and loons had moved far out. Nonetheless by dint of hard looking we did finally discover several gannets flying; as we watched they paused to dive for fish, sending up spurts of water as they went under, and reminding me of the similar sights I had last seen at Bonaventure Island and Perce. The loons were nearer in, easier to see. We were lying on warm soft sand in the sun whilst making these observations. It was comfortable with our backs against the dune,

obvious curses at us. Then, for a brief moment both ospreys settled on the nest together. It was the big moment, and Barney took his picture. What a sight that was, ospreys nesting upon a telephone pole beside a busy highway, and only a stone's throw from summer cottages. This is not a strange sight here along this shore. Indeed the osprey is a conspicuous and common bird at Cape May. This is only possible because the people who live here have come to love it and to appreciate it and so to protect it. Otherwise it could not exist in such a situation. During our stay we saw several nests and at least thirty of these tremendous hawks.

When the next day we took our leave of Cape May, and headed home across Delaware and Pennsylvania, we were all agreed that the Cape had given us far more than we had hoped for. This trip had been one of the finest, one of the most rewarding in all our many years of watching birds. Cape May was and is a place not to forget. It is certainly a spot to visit again some day.

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BOOK REVIEW

The Last Passenger By J. R. Johnson (New York, The Macmillan Co.
In Canada Brett-Macmillan Ltd. Toronto, 1956)
pp. 116. Price \$2.75

This is a grimly earnest little tale, an imaginative account of the possible career of the "last" of the passenger pigeons. The last recorded pigeon actually died in the Cincinnati Zoo in 1914, but the author of this story likes to think the last survivor of that lost species died in the wild, and has fashioned his story to that end. It gives him a chance to depict all the ugly circumstances surrounding the destruction of this beautiful bird. It is a sad revelation of human greed and stupidity, and though restraint marks each page, one feels the author's own disgust at what happened, and his desire to arouse the reader's revulsion. He could have succeeded better in his purpose had he not tried to educate so much. He brings in most of the other birds that men have destroyed in North America; he introduces us to the life habits of each. At the same time, he brings in all the natural enemies these creatures have to face as well as man. Had he stuck to the story of one species, and tried to be more artistic than didactic, he would have made his point more effectively. In that respect this account of the last of the passenger pigeons is less attractive, and leaves a less solid impact than Bodsworth's story of "the last of the curlews", which may have been the model for the present book. The author's own black and white drawings illustrate the story.

R. M. Saunders,

Editor.