

Toronto Field Naturalists' Club

March Meeting

Monday, March 4, 1957, at 8.15 p.m.
at the
ROYAL ONTARIO MUSEUM

Members' Night

Speakers:

Jeri Shortt - Research Assistant in the Department of Zoology,
University of Toronto. Instructor in the Junior Club
Subject: "Collecting Forest Insects" - Illustrated
15 minutes

Shereen Cohen: - Member of the Junior Club
Subject: "Reptiles". 5 minutes

Robert Lamb - Member of the Junior Club
Subject: "Insects and Diseases". 5 minutes

Dr. Walter Tevell - Vice President. Curator of the Museum of Geology.
Subject: "Helicoptering in the Mackenzie Mountains"
Illustrated with colour slides. 15 minutes

Janet Goodwin (Mrs. J.E.) - representing the Botany Group
Subject: "Some Ferns of Ontario" illustrated
with colour slides. 15 minutes

Sherb and Eileen Drake - Members of the Toronto Guild for Colour
Photography
Subject: "Double Take" Illustrated with
colour slides. 15 minutes

Owing to the uncertainty of March weather, no outing has been arranged
for this month. Watch for our Spring Outing Folder which will be going
out shortly.

BOTANY GROUP

The March meeting of the Botany Group will be held on Thursday March 21,
at Eglinton Public School at 8.00 p.m. Speaker - Dr. Margaret Heimburger,
Subject "Origin of Cultivated Flowers". Chairman, Mr. Marshall Bartman.

JUNIOR FIELD NATURALISTS

The March meeting will be held in the Museum Theatre on Saturday
March 2, at 10.00 a.m. The Mammals Group will be in charge. Two films,
"Deer Live in Danger" and "Mammals are Interesting" will be shown.

Fees \$2.00 per year.
John Mitchele - President

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

List of Officers of the
Toronto Field Naturalists' Club.

1956-57

President - John Mitchele.
Vice-President - Dr. Walter Tovell
Secretary-Treasurer - Mrs. J.B. Stewart
Ass't. Secretary - Mrs. Richard Lewis
Director, Junior Field Naturalists' Club - Mrs. M. Robson

Executive Council: - John Barnett; Rev. L.F. Barnett,
F. Bodsworth; Mrs. N. Brown; Dr. B. Falls,
Warner Higgins; Dr. M. Heimburger; G.C. Mark; Dr. R.M. Saunders;
Miss E. Price; Dr. F. Sharp; Miss H. Lawrence; A. Bunker.

Ex-Officio: F.W. Darroch; T.F. McIlwraith; J.L. Baillie.

Committees:

Parks: Walter Tovell (chairman); J. Barnett, W. Higgins

Audubon Screen Tours: F. Darroch (Chairman) L.E. Jaquith
John Mitchele, T. F. McIlwraith, Rev. L.F. Barnett;
John L. Livingstone.

Rotunda Display: M. Cumming; M. Easto; P. Dunbar; G. Myland
(viewing box)

Nature Camp Scholarships: F. Darroch; T. F. McIlwraith;
J. L. Baillie

Programme: Mrs. N. Brown (Chairman) W. Tovell; F. Bodsworth;
John Mitchele

Outings: Miss H. Lawrence; Miss E. Price; Ray Pannell (Chairman)
Miss H. Smith; Mr. J. MacIntosh



NEWSLETTER

Number 146

February 1957

Christmas presents are of many kinds: some greatly desired, some puzzling white elephants, some anticipated and some wholly unexpected. For this particular birdwatcher the last category entered the picture when, on leaning down to pick up a present from under the tree, he was presented with a slipped cartilage in the knee. To a birdwatcher this was certainly a baffling donation, especially with the beginning of an exciting new birding year only a week away. The week passed. The dawn of the New Year was only a night away, and the birdwatcher was still a cross between a half-walking infant and an ancient cripple. What to do?

The bright idea came. Call up those who know and ask them. Are there any birds that I might see from a car? So this was done, with the result that Jim Baillie kindly provided the "addresses" of several very interesting birds that "might be seen from the road", and Marshall Bartman generously agreed to take the injured around.

Clear and cold, a sparkling morning with the temperature clutching at the zero mark, arrived the year 1957 at Toronto. Already, before Marshall appeared, five kinds of birds coming to our feeding station helped get the new birding year on its way. First to appear were the house sparrows, and along with them the first cardinal. A few starlings passed through the garden, not stopping as they usually do for a few nibbles at our suet. However, on looking to see if the starlings would stop I spied a hairy woodpecker clinging rigidly to the trunk of a neighbor's maple tree. Such a stance ordinarily portends the presence of some predator, so I looked earnestly for the source of "fear", running my eyes over bush tops for a shrike, over the tree tops, the T.V. aerials and the power line towers for hawks. None came to view. Then I noticed that the sparrows were moving freely; if a hawk is in the vicinity, they take to the shrubbery. By now, too,

the woodpecker had begun to move its head a bit; next it fluffed up its plumage, and then it started to preen. This cleaning up took several minutes, and was carried on whilst the bird was in full sunshine, and against a blackish tree trunk, probably a perceptibly warmer spot than many. Had the hairy just emerged from its night roost? Was it only now (8.30) getting going for the day? I think that this may well have been the case, for as soon as it finished its tidying up the woodpecker went to our suet, had a few bites, then flew off. Our fifth bird to put in an appearance was the inevitable pigeon.

With Marshall's arrival I was bundled up and helped out to the car, there to be ensconced in the front seat with a plentiful supply of blankets. Thus ready, we headed for Agincourt, since Jim had seen a male American 3-toed woodpecker in a wood north of that village two days before, and he thought it might be visible from the road if we stopped in the middle of the wood. Indeed, two birds of this species, a male and female, had been seen in this wood recently, so we went with high hope.

On the way two sparrow hawks, each one on a shrub near a house, gave us another New Year's bird.

When we got to the wood two cars parked on the road ahead, and fellows with binoculars, told us that we had been preceded by others on the same quest as ourselves. One of them informed us that the male 3-toed was here all right, and that various watchers had been looking at it for the better part of an hour. At the moment two photographers were busy trying to get pictures of it. The bird had been near the road and visible from it, but now it had moved a little to the south, about a hundred yards into the trees. Marshall, to whom the sight of this bird would be the first ever, hurried off along the well-marked trail that led to the woodpecker. While waiting for him to return I was informed by the others that there were long-eared owls, a short-eared and a sawhet in the wood as well as the 3-toed. Before I had too many minutes to brood over the birds that might be seen "if", I saw the two photographers returning. They had their pictures, and were well pleased. When they heard about my knee one of them suggested that they try to carry me in, it being "only a hundred yards or so". I wasn't too keen on this idea, nor, I think, was the other potential bearer, since he had himself only just got up from a severe illness. One exploratory hoist was sufficient to settle the affair; as several weight guessers at the C.N.E. over past years have learned to their cost, there is more to me than meets the eye. By now, however, knowing that the 3-toed was barely out of sight, - I could in fact see people in among the trees looking at the bird, but not the bird itself - I was extremely anxious to get in to the woods. One of my would-be helpers being a doctor, I asked his advice, and when he said he thought it could be done without too much risk if they helped, I

decided to go. With a husky helper on each side each one having me under the arm and nearly lifting me off the snowy ground, I began my wobbly progress toward the 3-toed woodpecker. We almost made the tree when Marshall reappeared to say that the bird had just flown. All efforts to find it again were in vain. The whole experience was very frustrating. Still, before we all left the area the boys managed to put up two meadow larks from a neighboring field in such a way that I caught sight of them flying across the road, thereby giving me not only a new bird for the year, but one that have never graced my New Year's list before.

The others left the Agincourt wood before Marshall and me, we pausing longer to try to get a glimpse of the woodpecker, but eventually we followed them to Ashbridge's Bay. Here a snowy owl that had been seen on the dump was our first objective. We failed to find it, though with so many piles and humps of earth and debris, each one snowcapped, it was quite possible for a dozen snowy owls to hide without being found unless we tramped across the dump. This we could not do. Going on to the Sewage Plant, along the lakeshore lane we soon found the other birders, now reinforced by new additions. They were at the Coatsworth Cut end of the grounds, and were obviously looking at or for our second desired bird, a brant goose. Marshall was able to drive to within a few feet of the breakwall at its western end, and I hobbled the last few feet to look over the edge. We looked along the wall towards the Cut, but saw no goose. Out on the lake, which was steaming like a cauldron in the zero air, few birds could be made out, since visibility was limited to a few score yards. As the others came back they told us that the brant was near the rocks at the Cut. Therefore, after they left we drove on as far as we could go and tried once more. Marshall, leaving me in the car, went on to the Cut to reconnoitre. For some time he could make out nothing but water and rocks; finally he turned and came back to tell me that there seemed to be a bird right in amongst the rocks at the inner end. Again I got out, did my hobbling act for the few feet to the wall, looked, and saw that he was right. There was one bird in among the rocks and looking so much like a rock itself that I fully appreciated Marshall's difficulty in making it out. It was the brant. Again a newcomer to my New Year's list; not surprising that, for this species is not a normal winterer in this region.

On the way out we could see that the others must be over in the willow scrub to the west of Leslie Street, probably looking for owls. Since I could not follow there we did not stop. A stop at the harbor near the foot of Jarvis Street, in the hope of seeing another snowy owl that had been frequenting that area, produced only a negative result. Nonetheless we drove back to my house in no unhappy frame of mind. Marshall had seen a new bird for his life, while I had seen 12 species for my New Year's list, two of them birds I had never had before on that day. Though by now I was cold and rather worn, I was pleased that I had gone out, pleased especially that the cooperation of so many

friends had made it possible for me to see what I had.

The injury to my knee being slow to mend, the conditions of observation already described for the first day of January have prevailed in gradually diminishing degree to the end of the month. Thanks again to the help of many other birders and friends, this has not proven the handicap it could have been.

On January 9th, after hearing several reports of interesting wintering ducks in Toronto harbor, my wife and I decided to take lunches and eat beside the water while looking for the ducks. Jim Baillie, who knew the likely places, and had seen the birds in question, came along in another car to show us where to look. Jim had thought we would be able to see the ducks while parked on the dock, but when we arrived a large freighter had been recently berthed in the slip, so that only the water directly in front of us was visible. Most of the ducks that commonly frequent this slip had moved far out, many being but massed dots over near the island. Without a balscope they were largely undecipherable. The remaining scaup, a hundred approximately, seemed to be unaccompanied by any "specials". Scanning the flock several times failed to bring us sight of anything different, though since they were continually diving and popping up like some underwater relay team, it was hard to know if every bird had been accounted for. At last Jim detected a scaup with "a bump on the head", which at first was thought to be one of the ringnecks we had been on the lookout for, but further examination made it into the lesser scaup it really was. This species had not been seen before, either having been overlooked, a very easy thing to do, or it was not there. So things change from day to day. With this find Jim and his associate from the Museum left us, going off on a quest of their own.

My wife and I, equipped with sandwiches and tea, sat in the front seat of the car, and watched the harbor whilst we partook of our lunches. As I had not been out since the first, there were several common birds that, as we watched, I could see for the first time this year - a ringbill flying along the edge of the dock; common mergansers beating across the water towards the Western Gap; a mallard or two rising up from a neighboring dock where they had been eating waste grain. When we had finished our meal and I hobbled the few steps to the water's edge, there were others of the usual winter waterfowl to be seen - old squaw, bufflehead, goldeneye. With the scaup flock now, arrived since we had first looked, was a new bird, a canvasback, one of the "specials" we had come to see. Our expedition to the waterfront had proven pleasant and profitable, even though we had not seen all the particular birds we had come for.

The plan had been to come directly home after eating. On the way, however, we went along the harbor to Jarvis Street to see if the snowy owl was perchance in residence. Not today. There was too much disturbance from workmen at the new pier.

Having got this far east the idea of going on to Agincourt to have another look for the American 3-toed woodpecker proved irresistible.

At the Agincourt wood we found intense quiet predominant. Two pauses for listening and looking produced only the creaking of trees. Soon we were at the spot where my friends had tried to carry me in. Ample evidence of the visits of birdwatchers was written in the snow. The most heavily trodden track wound away to the south towards the place where the bird had been on New Year's day. Anna, who was getting all the hard labor of this jaunt, since she was driving, agreed to go in by herself along this trail, trusting that it might still lead to the bird, or possibly to one or more owls that were known to be in the wood. I remained at the car, keeping a sharp eye on the southern sector in the hope of seeing a bird fly away from the part where Anna was going. None flew. I did hear a series of notes that I tried without success to make into 3-toed utterances. Too many trees were scraping and squeaking. Then Anna was coming back. As soon as she got to the road she quickly told me, "I'm sure the bird is there!" She had had no binoculars with her, but had seen a dark woodpecker with a "charcoal-grey" back, looking "very different from a hairy nearby". This was quite enough to convince me. Since the trail was free of serious obstacles I said that I would try to get in. Thus we went slowly and cautiously, my limping gait leaving curious new imprints in the snow. After my experience on New Year's, I was afraid that the woodpecker would be gone by the time we arrived; but since it had been preening there was a good chance it might still be on hand. The trail ended in a circular opening where several trees showing extensive flaking, the work of 3-toeds, were dotted about the circle. Both hairy and 3-toed had in fact left the tree where Anna had seen them. Before we had a chance to let our spirits sink Anna saw a bird flit from one tree to another. Under her direction I put up my binoculars - it was a hairy. My spirits came down a little. We listened. Yes, there were other woodpeckers. Tapping could be detected in three or four directions. All at once a flake of bark fluttered to the snow at our feet. I looked up. Immediately the flaker quit his perch, and now, no doubt at all, here was our bird. We followed its flight, a dipping glide, for a few yards to another tree. Coming to rest it began once more picking at bark, sending flakes right and left, and peeking into the exposed area. With binoculars on the worker, every detail stood out plainly - the soft-toned grey-white and black barred back, the dusky barred flanks, the solid dark wings, above all the brilliant gleaming gold coin on its head. Really a beautiful, an aristocratic bird, elegantly distinguished, this fellow from the north. We had a long opportunity to watch before it left this tree and flew to one just out of view. Once while we were looking every woodpecker - there were five nearby - went silent and froze. A glance skyward told the cause, for a large round-winged, long-tailed hawk sailed slowly over the trees, a Cooper's hawk, seeking prey. Deceived by the quiet wood, or seeing us, it circled on rather like a buteo,

disappearing, whereupon all our avain neighbors again came to life, the woodpeckers tapping and flying about, the tree sparrows calling in the shrubs at the edge of the wood. With a last look round we turned back; the effort had been well worth expending. Not only was this male American 3-toed a beautiful bird to see at any time, it was the first male I had ever seen, and only the third of the species for me.

Jack Satterly contributed the "address" of the next birds that might be seen from the car or with a very few steps. Hence on the afternoon of January 13, a sparkling but frigid afternoon with zero breezes dusting the snow off the fence tops, Mr. and Mrs. Greer Roberts drove Anna and me out into the country beyond Wildfield. It seemed remarkable that we saw not a single bird all the way from Toronto to Wildfield, especially as we passed through Purpleville en route. Still, that can happen readily enough on a winter's afternoon. We had nearly reached the cedar thicket that was our destination before we found any bird life. Then it was a small flock of tree sparrows flying up from beside the road and settling amidst old hay piles in a weedy field. They made a pretty picture bustling beneath the forest-darkened weeds or hopping onto the abandoned hay blocks to peer around. A blue jay flew over a farmhouse ahead as we were looking at the sparrows. The cedar thicket, though, was our real objective, and we pressed on. Since it is a quite restricted grove, I decided to risk the little walking that a visit would involve. Navigating a convenient hole in the fence, I found far more trying than walking, but it was done, and we approached the trees. Fanning out so as to cover the grove as quickly and as efficiently as possible, we each took a section to explore, mine being at the northern edge. The first trees had no owls, nor the next, but the remaining rank in the corner I had chosen suddenly came alive with shadowy shapes, with falling snow shaken from cedar fronds by the threshing wings of four large owls. As soon as they got free of the trees and came into view in the clear air overhead we could see that they were short-eareds, as Jack Satterly had promised me. The owls did not stay in the air for long, rather quickly taking refuge in another clump of cedars. Seeing where they went we followed, hoping to get a sight of them while perched. No such luck; as soon as we neared the trees out they came again, and two more as well. The six of them rocked and wavered over our heads for a few moments then again dove out of sight in the cedars; that is, all but one bird, which went careering away across the road. I thought it had gone away to some farther grove, but a little later I saw it coming back. Quietly gliding towards the very tree from which I had ousted it, the owl plunged therein. No other owls were to be found in the grove today. I suppose that this grove is favored by owls because similar cover is not too easy to find in this clear, cultivated farm country. The nearest other evergreen groves appear to be about three-quarters to a mile away. Another reason for favoring this site is its position

in the midst of weedy fields, which must provide a wealth of tasty mice. Short-eared owls are wonderful mousers, and highly beneficial birds. I hope the neighboring farmers appreciate this fact.

Our way home took us through Malton to Highway 401, and in the fields along that route we saw several fine mousing hawks - a redtail and four roughlegs. Of these we had also been informed. That they should cling to these fields so persistently is again evidence of the number of mice that must be present, for these hawks are almost entirely mousers. The hawks were our last birds. We had not seen many birds, but what we had seen were of the highest quality, and were well observed. For this we were very grateful, especially to those who had told us where to look.

On January 17th came another chance to see a bird that "might be observed from the car". This was a king eider that had been found at Burlington during the Hamilton Christmas census. Since its discovery, a stream of birdwatchers had had a look at this rare duck. As it seemed rather "reliable" the Henry Marshes and I decided to have a try for it.

Cold again - what a cold month this has been - but also bright and clear, this morning was a good time to observe birds from inside a car. However, other than an especially good chance to watch a redtailed hawk in a tree near the highway, we got to Burlington Harbour without seeing any birds save the usual sparrows, starlings and pigeons. The harbor, we rapidly discovered, was chock full of crunching ice blocks without so much as a square inch of free water for a duck. The lake outside the breakwall, though, was all clear, clear of everything that is, save dancing waves and a few goldeneye dotted here and there. This did not dismay us, for the eider, we had been told, tended to favor the area east of the harbor. Directing our binoculars in that direction, we could make out quite a number of ducks well to the east. Turning the car at the Brant Inn we drove eastward past the end of Brant Street until we came to a lane that reached the lake shore beside a factory, a cannery, I believe. We were now in a position to see a goodly company of ducks and we spent quite a while - we had stepped out of the car so the zero winds made the time seem longer than it was - spotting goldeneye and bufflehead in all directions. We had almost given up when in a final sweep of the water my eyes caught sight of a large brownish duck, head thrown back on its shoulder, asleep, bobbing up and down unconcernedly about 150 yards directly in front of us. This was the eider, and Margaret, who had retired to the car, came scurrying out to see it. Not much of a sight to be sure, since the eider refused to wake up. Still the general size and shape, the banding on the flanks, and the dull whitish front were visible, and identifiable as a king eider in immature male plumage. This is one occasion when a balscope would

have been a great help. Still, we had seen our bird, even if for the most part it was only a large brownish blob bobbing blithely on the waves. Considering the ease with which this bird could have been missed, and almost was, this observation was indeed something to be grateful for. The trip was a success.

The last jaunt in January was for me much like the others, my knee still dictating what could or could not be done. On the afternoon of the 27th, Anna again at the wheel, we drove to Glendon Hall with Mr. and Mrs. Ray Pannell, to look over Mac's feeding station. When we arrived, a good many other birders had been before us, and their reports were not too encouraging. For ourselves we had to confirm their experience, for only a crowd of house sparrows was to be found at this usually very productive feeding station. Rather than standing around in the cold we decided to drive on to Agincourt wood, once more to try our fortune there.

At the wood we again found many birders, three carloads being there when we arrived. They were mostly out of sight except for three boys with binoculars, who were working through the tangles on the north side. To this quarter we likewise turned in search of the sawwhet owl which has been the most sure of all the birds in this wood since the first of the month. Of necessity I let the others do most of the hunting, only directing them to where I had been told the owl was likely to be. No sawwhet was found, and we put that down to the fact that so many people had been there before us, though later I was informed that this owl had been captured and taken away. To offset this disappointment the three boys who had been in front of us told us that there had been a long-eared owl in the first cedars to the south of the road an hour before. We turned to that quarter.

As in the other part there was no trouble finding out where to go. Hard-packed trails led away from the road into all the spots where birds had been seen. Such evidence of the number and activity of birdwatchers was a revelation of the way in which the interest in this hobby has developed around Toronto in recent years. When we reached the nearest cedars Ray followed the trail into their midst and immediately called out that he had the owl in view. All four of us were quickly in position to see Asio. Secreted in the uppermost fronds of a cedar, this long thin owl was well concealed from all save prowling birdwatchers that know the habits of such creatures. Clearly not alarmed - after a long day of repeated disturbance it must certainly have been a calm bird to stay - it peered down, slightly curious, as we gazed up. We admired its beautifully bright plumage from two vantage points, then returned to the road.

As we arrived by the road more birdwatchers hove into view, a group of our most active lady-naturalists, Dr. Langstaff,

Helen Lawrence and others, several armed with cameras as well as binoculars. They asked us about owls, and we told them of the long-eared. In return they pointed out the male American 3-toed woodpecker, which was working high up in an elm tree a few yards in from the north side of the road. After Ray had taken the ladies in to the longeared owl, we set out for home.

For me this brought the month's birding to a close. In view of my handicapped condition the thirty-six birds that had their names written on my list by this date were valued far more highly than the larger number with which I am accustomed to end this month. In the several trips altogether I had "walked" not more than a total of three or four hundred yards. If it had not been for the kindness and generosity of my wife and my friends, other naturalists, such a list could have been quite impossible. Thanks to one and all who made it a reality.

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We are pleased to receive from Mrs. L.E. Jaquith the following account of the finding of one of last fall's most unusual bird visitors to the Toronto region. Mrs. Jaquith writes:

"On Saturday morning, Nov. 24th 1956, Dr. L.E. Jaquith found an unusual bird in his garage at Terra Cotta.

Mrs. Jaquith captured the bird and put it into a cage to identify it. It was a slim gray bird with a mouse-like desire to hide under things and slip into corners. It had a gleaming white throat and a chestnut colored crown. Glints of yellow-green on the outer wing edges and on the tail showed in a good light. The size, the shape and the markings identified it as a Green-tailed Towhee.

Green-tailed Towhees in November should be in southern Arizona or Mexico. They nest in Oregon. How did it find its way into Dr. Jaquith's garage?

There were strong winds on Friday Nov. 16th, and on Wednesday the 21st gusts of wind up to 90 miles per hour were reported at Malton. It was probably blown into the Toronto region on the storm and took shelter from the cold in the garage at dusk on Friday evening.

The bird was in good condition and accepted millet to eat. Dr. and Mrs. Jaquith took their find to the aviary of Mr. Roy Ivor at Erindale.

This is the third record for the Green-tailed Towhee

in Ontario. Mr. James L. Baillie of the Royal Ontario Museum said that the first one recorded appeared at the feeding station at Dr. Aitkens' residence in London, Ont. in March 1954. A second bird was reported that same month at Welland by Mr. John Young."

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CORRECTION: In Newsletter, Number 144, it was mentioned that the American 3-toed woodpecker at Glendon Hall on November 17th was discovered by Ed. Waltho and Dryden Bryant. It should have been pointed out that the woodpecker was found by each of these observers independently, on the same day, at different times. Mr. Waltho's companion on this occasion was Mr. Lloyd Hughes.

BIRDS TO SEE: One of the most rewarding trips in March is that to the Niagara River, where the river road, all the way from Port Erie to Niagara-on-the-Lake gives one numerous opportunities for the sight of waterfowl - ducks, grebes, gulls, and possibly geese and swans. On this same trip have a look at the marsh at Jordan, and the old Regatta lagoon just to the west of St. Catharines; each of these places may be seen or approached from the Q.E. Way.

At the end of the month, and in early April, don't forget Turkey Point, Long Point Bay, and the swan flight.

R.M. Saunders,

Editor.