

Toronto Field Naturalists' Club

May Meeting.

Monday, May 6, 1957 at 8.15 p.m.

at the

ROYAL ONTARIO MUSEUM

Speaker: A. F. Helmsley - Chief, Division of Parks, Department of Lands and Forests, Ontario.

Title: "The Naturalist and our Provincial Parks".
Illustrated with coloured slides. A movie will also be shown, entitled "The Bob White Quail throughout the year".

The provincial parks have been greatly increased in number within the last two years, and we now have over one hundred parks.

SPRING OUTINGS

For details of the spring outings please consult your Spring Outing Programme.

JUNIOR FIELD NATURALISTS

The May meeting of the Junior Field Naturalists Club will be held in the Museum Theatre on Saturday, May 4 at 10.00 a.m. The programme will be under the direction of the General Group, and the main theme will be conservation. Two movies will be shown - "Animals in Spring", and "This Vital Earth".

Have you sent in your application for Nature Study Camp? If not, better do so now.

If any members change their address during the summer months will they please notify the Secretary? We are anxious that all our members should receive all club notices.

John Mitchele - President

Mrs. J.B. Stewart, Sect'y.
21 Millwood Road, Toronto.

Fees - \$2.00 per year.

The new club year begins in September.

Toronto Field Naturalists' Club.



Number 148

April 1957.

The many birdwatchers who made the annual trek to Long Point on the last weekend of March this year were treated to two days of perfect weather in contrast to last season's whirling snow. Cloudless skies and cool crisp temperatures prevailed throughout the entire weekend, a stimulating setting for the springtime pilgrimage to the swans.

The swans, however, like other birds do not always fit their goings and comings to the wants of humans, not even those of appreciative bird observers. Indeed the reports from birders who had been down to Lake Erie on the previous weekend or earlier, along with grapevine hints received during the week, suggested that the main flight of the swans had already gone through the Long Point area in a very early move. We were sufficiently impressed in our party of observers by these reports - and I heard of others who did similarly - that we made a point of stopping just after crossing the High Level Bridge in Hamilton so as to have a look up Dundas Marsh where we had been told there might be a few swans. A mass of white birds there was, far up the canal, but they turned into gulls when we turned our binoculars upon them. The survey of the marsh was fruitless until we finally picked up a large white dot far along the west shore. This was, in fact, a swan; all alone, away from ducks or gulls, feeding at the edge of a cove. This bird would, if we saw no others, save us from being "skunked" in our search.

On to Port Dover with a pause at the Grand River for non-existent swallows. One of our party has an obsession for seeing swallows on the Grand in March. There is a large colony of cliff swallows that lives under the bridge at Caledonia, and which is

much in evidence in May; perhaps that sight has inspired him. At any rate we always stop and we never see swallows though it is nice to have a look up and down the river, to hear the grackles creaking in the trees on the river bank, the redwings singing on the islets and the song sparrow that always appears, to announce over our heads that this is his, his own territory we are standing on. After the pause at the unswallowed Grand we made a quick run to Port Dover, hardly slowing to see the three cowbirds and two or three killdeers along the road. The trio of cowbirds turned out to be the only ones we saw on the weekend - everyone we met was asking, "Where are the cowbirds?" - but we could hardly anticipate that birds which usually arrive in numbers with the grackles and redwings could be delayed this year and not seen in numbers until a week or more later.

At Port Dover the fishing fleet was out, the boats being visible, dotted in a wide arc along the lake horizon. As a result, only a corporal's guard of gulls was to be found near the docks. Even ducks were few and far between, a scattering of goldeneye and mergansers being all we could see save for one tight little group of large dark ducks a long way out. By dint of prolonged peering through my binoculars, steadied on the inner end of the pier, I was able to see one of these ducks raise its wings and so to recognize it as a white-winged scoter. Presumably the rest of this group of a dozen ducks were all of the same sort - they were certainly scoters - but we only marked down one as safely determined. Satisfied on this score, we went on to Turkey Point Marsh.

We had a shock, for we found the marsh largely empty of water. Here and there pools gleamed amidst dark shiny muck. The edge of the unbroken water, however, was hundreds of yards from the edge of the bluff where we stood, whereas in past years it has lapped against its edge and we have been able to look down upon ducks dabbling almost directly below our feet. Today not a duck could we see except far out where the full lagoons began. Even the pools were devoid of birds, neither duck nor redwing finding them of interest. Yet so mindful were we of the hordes seen here in other years that we parked the car in a convenient spot where we could overlook the marsh, and there ate our lunches, hoping that if we stayed long enough some of the birds we anticipated might appear. They did not, and we had to leave, greatly disappointed in the unproductiveness of a once favoured spot. Could it be that the extensive burning of the marsh as well as the low water, has something to do with this avian lack?

This year we drove through St. Williams and on to Port Rowan; since the hotel in the former place, where we have stayed in the past, is now closed and shuttered. Fortunately there was still some accommodation at the St. Charles Hotel where the Federation of Ontario Naturalists had set up headquarters. We were soon installed there and had inscribed our names on the F.O.N. register.

The afternoon we spent touring Long Point Bay, starting with

a round of Port Rowan Cemetery. This is on a tongue of land which stretches into the marsh a little before one reaches the Causeway to Long Point. Again our swallow-minded associate remembered that several years ago someone saw a tree swallow at the cemetery; he was determined to repeat the performance. Our round brought no sight of swallows - some year it may - but we did have a beautiful look at two mourning doves, one with a particularly intense coral-pink flush on its breast. Sitting close together in a many-branched shrub, this was presumably a mated pair, probably in occupation of their chosen territory. Mourning doves we were to find unusually common on this trip, and the air was often filled with their plaintive calls. This pair, though, remained silent, resting securely in a well-selected haven, a dense shrub amongst many in the middle of a black-water swamp. Little did they know that we, from our vantage on the cemetery knoll, could look down into their hiding place, and so discover and enjoy their beauty without disturbing the peace of their refuge.

As at Turkey Point so along the Long Point Causeway we found the water level so low that long reaches of the marsh were exposed mud. Gone were the pools that harbored so many swans and ducks two years ago; in their place were areas fit only for foraging rails and shorebirds, which this afternoon were being searched, so far as we could see, only by a small company of redwinged blackbirds. Not until we crossed over Big Creek on a temporary bridge and came to the open bay did we see any ducks. Then we did find hundreds, largely massed together well over toward the eastern edge of the inlet, away from the heavy traffic and gesticulating humans on the Causeway. In the crowd of waterfowl there were no swans.

Of these we saw nothing, either at Turkey Point or along the Causeway. Only when we got to Cut-Off Point did we find the remaining flock of twenty-five swans that everyone was solacing themselves with now that the main lot, as the reports had stated, had gone on. We were informed that on Thursday evening (March 20) a flight of swans more than a mile long left the bay on their next westward hop. Since then only small flocks had been seen. The twenty-five we finally saw were feeding and resting in a cattail-ringed cove, possibly half a mile from the nearest approach by land. There the great white birds were as safely protected from disturbance, and yet visible to observers, as could be. They did not need to fly from us, nor were there boats to put them up. We had to admire them from a distance, and be glad we had a chance to see any at all. This was more like those earlier years when we had not known properly where to look for swans, and swans were less plentiful anyway; then we had been content to have seen a dozen or two on a trip. That the bulk of the swans should have travelled past this point so early this year - they were at Kingsville and the west end of Lake Erie ten days or two weeks before this date - is very unusual, but it only goes to show how one season's movements may differ from another.

Perhaps it was the relative lack of swans, or maybe it is because imagination gets going at high speed on these birding trips, at any rate before we quit Cut-Off Point we spent a good ten minutes trying to convert a grey and white bird that was darting amongst the cattails into a mockingbird. No luck there; when it went down on the record it was a migrant shrike, a regular spring arrival. Oh well, it's what goes onto the card that counts, not what one imagines in between first sight and final recording: and though caution is a virtue, especially for the birdwatcher, it is equally true that if one never thinks to see a bird it will probably go unseen.

A demonstration of this fact was quickly brought home to us, for when we turned into the Causeway on the way back to Port Rowan, we had scarcely gone a hundred yards when a halt was called. This part of the marsh was bare mud with thick tussocks of grass dotting the mud. Beside one of these tussocks was a "round grey ball". It could, of course, be a ball, lost by some careless child, but it could also be a bird, fluffed up, hiding itself on the open mud in this sort of camouflage. We backed up slowly for a better look, coming to a stop not more than fifteen feet from the "ball". Not a quiver showed, but it was no ball, for in the midst of the grey an eye gleamed, watching the car. We made no move to get out, looking through the open windows from well inside. In a few moments the "ball" took shape as a bird. Rising on legs hidden beneath before, extending a long down-pointing bill, our "ball" became a snipe. The overall greyness vanished, a remarkable transition, for now in the beams of the low westering sun, we were looking at a bird with beautifully mottled back, fox-red, tan, black and white. It began to probe for food in the soft brown mud, and in a second or two had a wriggling black worm for a prize. So intent were we on this performance that we never did find out where from or when the second snipe appeared. Suddenly, there it was beside the other, probing. And this one was even more brilliant than the first, its back positively gleaming. Then it spread its tail, and all the rest of the bird was forgotten, for here was such a stunning combination of burnished copper, barred black at the lower part and tipped in white, as we had never seen. The second bird seemed to be displaying to the first, which kept calmly at work probing the mud, though it too spread its tail enough for us to see that unlike its companion it had no bar of black on the tail, nor nearly as much reddish. Instead it showed an elongated patch of white down through the center of the tail, with mottled copper and white over the rest. As if not satisfied with the response it was getting, the more highly-coloured bird now raised its wings in just the way that an upland plover so often does when it alights on a post, holding them straight up above the body for a long moment. What a surprise! If the companion snipe was not moved by this, we certainly were, for the entire underpart of the wings was decorated with a vivid pattern of close zigzags of black and white lines that flashed and glinted in the sun. Nor was the companion as inattentive as appeared - just female coyness I suspect - for

shortly after this wonderful display the two wandered off amongst the tussocks together, and we lost them to view. What a glorious encounter this had been. What a revelation about a "common bird"; there is really no end to what one may learn about such "common birds" even after years of intensive looking. What a proof, too, of the wisdom of using the car as a "blind"; had we tried to get out of the car we would never have seen this drama at all. And how much poorer we'd have been for that.

Dinner at the hotel was a jolly affair, for the dining room was filled with naturalists gathered here for the F.O.N. weekend; and naturalists have a great deal to share with each other, and nearly always are eager to share. At the next table to ours Mrs. McKay, a T.F.N. member, produced a small dandelion-like flower, yellow head on a leafless pale green stem. It was a colt's foot - first flower of the season, save for the skunk cabbage, and an advent from Europe that is making its way throughout North America. She had found it growing on a sunny bank near the fish hatchery at Normandale. Frank Lovesey told us of a creeper that had been scanning the trunks of trees just outside the window all afternoon, while he had been busy registering F.O.N. visitors. We told of a shoveller we had seen near the swan flock. And so it went. As the news went the round we pricked up our ears - especially my swallow-minded friend - when the Aurora party announced the sight of a tree swallow on the wires along the Causeway. I could see the "I told you so" sign coming out in my companion's eyes. Nothing to do about it for the night, though I knew what we were going to look for next morning, no fail.

For the evening we turned away to the road that cuts through the Backus Wood, there to listen for woodcock. A cold wind did not make for favourable listening, and we tried in several places without hearing the telltale rasping beeps. Every pool had a squadron of frogs, mostly swamp tree frogs and surprisingly few peepers, but each place had a few snoring leopard frogs, and one pool was almost wholly inhabited by barking wood frogs. It was a delight to hear this woodland spring chorus - even if it did make hearing the woodcock more difficult still. At last Greer picked up our desired "song", away across an open field and not easy to hear. When the performer, going up in its nuptial flight, broke into the usual finch-like chattering these tones came clearer to our ears penetrating all the other sounds. Two or three flights were all we could ascertain but our mission was achieved and more than achieved, for in addition to the chorus of frogs and the woodcock we had heard at least two foxes, one yapping, one baughing, in the nearby fields.

In the morning, contrary to all precedent, and much good advice in years past to other birders, we slept in till breakfast hour, 8.00. We had, of course, to suffer the comments of those who had risen at 6.00, and rushed over to the point. We heard about two flocks of swans that flew over about 6.30 that we

regretted missing, but for the rest we felt we had calculated correctly. Or is it that we're beginning to show our age? The swallow we were told was still on the wire, and this news, as I had foreseen, stirred our party into action more effectively than any other. When we did finally reach the old gun club property and found the tree swallow just where it was reported, my companion had such gratification as seldom comes his way. He has been waiting years for his March swallow. Now here it was. For the directions as to its whereabouts we were thankful to Mr. and Mrs. Charles Davies, who found it in the first place.

Another survey of the ducks on the bay showed the same hundreds as the day before, only this morning they were rather nearer at hand and easier to see. Redheads, scaup and canvasbacks made up the majority, though there were several other kinds as well. Ducks were, (as a matter of fact) the most conspicuous sort of birds on this weekend. The shoveller we had mentioned was an object of search by many as we discovered when we stopped to have a look for it and immediately found ourselves accompanied by three carloads of observers. Located far out towards the mouth of the inlet, it could not be suitably seen because of heat haze over the water, so we all decided to troop out to Cut-Off Point in hope of getting a better vantage there. When we arrived we found more carloads of birders; indeed, you couldn't go anywhere on this very successful F.O.N. weekend without finding birders. Not a road, not a lane, not a point but had its allotment. With the announcement of the presence of a shoveller everyone joined forces, and soon Lucy McDougall's balscope was mounted on fresh-turned earth by a new channel and pointed towards the place where the shoveller might be. Really accommodating was that colourful duck, for in a moment it swam into view, stayed long enough for almost everyone to see its striking beauty, and then swam back into the concealing reeds. The swan flock of yesterday was just off this point, in the same cove as before, but really it was the ducks that were commanding attention. Hardly had the shoveller disappeared when Greer called us to look at a couple of nondescript ducks way across the widest channel and hard against the cattail-bordered shore. Impossible to see even with binoculars, here is where Lucy's balscope really paid off, for when we turned the scope on the ducks we found ourselves looking at a pair of gadwall, first and only for the day. It was a good spot, that point, not only for ducks and swans; Did not a bittern take off from one side of the channel and cross directly in front of us to the reeds beyond, first bittern of this year? Did not two bluebirds pause in the trees behind and sing for us? And one of the Woodstock observers caught three garter snakes and loosed them in the channel beside our feet, another sign of breaking spring; not to speak of the two lesser yellow legs standing in the pool across the road. Oh yes, things were really popping at Cut-Off Point.

And not only here. As we were driving away we saw the Aurora party again. Stopping, we exchanged news. They were delighted to hear we had seen the swallow, and now they gave us a new tip that sent us hurrying back to the Causeway. There we discovered many cars full of observers, a whole parade of them from Guelph, under the direction of Alec Cringan. Eight swans had come over to feed along the nearer side of the inlet, not far off the Causeway, a great sight for many who had never seen wild swans before. These and the ducks were the cynosure of all binoculars and balscopes, but it was not they we were intent on seeing. No, we kept on till we came to the exposed mud at the inner end of the Causeway. Then began a meticulous search of the mud, hardly interrupted by the presence of a bald eagle in a tree beyond the marsh, or by a soaring pair of red-shouldered hawks over the nearest trees. We were busy on birds amidst the tussocks and hummocks again, and having little success. A bird flew up momentarily and resettled. It was one of the ones we sought; yet, how hard to see, for as soon as it resettled it vanished, lost in the mud. Not until Harry and Lucy McDougall came along and rescued us with their balscope again did we know for certain that we were looking at two pectoral sandpipers. Brown, keeping close to the muddy hummocks, a good distance away, they were extremely hard to keep in view even with the balscope. But finally we were all satisfied. March pectorals are rarer than March swallows; it is a bird almost never seen in Toronto in spring though common in the fall. Curiously enough on the same date (March 31) four of this same species were seen at Frenchman's Bay by J. M. Barnett and others, making, I believe, the first Toronto spring observation of the species for several of those who saw them.

It was a fitting sight this with which to close our looking at Long Point Bay. We had come for swans and we had seen them, but the highlights of our trip had been not the swans but the snipe, the swallow, the shoveller and the gadwall and seventeen other kinds of ducks, and now, as we were leaving, the pectoral sandpipers. Go for one thing and see a score of others. It is always so.

As we left the bay, we had not, naturally, ceased looking. If we had we would have missed the beauty of the red-tailed hawk which again and again circled over our heads as we sat eating our lunches by the shore of Backus Pond. With every circle its burnished copper tail shone with an intensity against the blue sky that took one's breath away. Whoever has ever seen such beauty and grace, how can he think of taking the life of such a creature? To me it would be unthinkable. Colour was with us all along the road as we drove to St. Williams Forestry Station: in a little valley where countless thousands of maroon-stemmed osier filled the whole vale with a wave of richest red, in the throats of swamp tree frogs made golden in the sun as they piped their vernal

roundelay, in the vermilion-suffused tan bark of the red pines at the Forestry Station. Oh yes, if we had closed our eyes after we left Long Point Bay we would have lost some of the loveliest experiences of our whole trip.

A quick look at Port Dover showed us that there was little change in that quarter. Quickly we made for a certain field on top of Hamilton Mountain where for several years past we have had the pleasure of listening to the bubbling song of the Western meadow lark. We got to the field late in the afternoon. It is a concession block long. We stopped at intervals, listening. Sunday traffic, a mounting wind, did not help. How many times we made false starts with "There it is", I do not know. But there came a time when we were right. Far across the field came faintly to our ears the wonderful thrush-like burst of music - then silence. An Eastern meadowlark fluted thinly nearby. Silence again. Then both at once, and both in the air. To our delight the Western flew over the field towards us, alighted on a post and poured forth his song in all its luxuriant sound. Several times he uttered his refrain, a challenge, no doubt, to the Easterner, his rival, but to us warmly welcome music, of the sort to send us on our homeward way happy and pleased with all we'd seen and heard.

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BIRDS OF THE FOREST (Sounds of Nature. Vol 3. Published by the Federation of Ontario Naturalists, Toronto, 1957) Price \$5.95.

The third record in the Sounds of Nature series, recorded by Dr. W.W.H. (Bill) Gunn and issued under the aegis of the F.O.N. is certainly the best yet to appear. That it could be a fine production was guaranteed in so far as it originated as a special broadcast of the C.B.C., and as such won the famous Italia prize in world wide competition. The transfer from tape to record has been superbly done, preserving the faithful reproduction of the bird songs, as well as the informative and lively commentary. This latter is supplied by Mr. Thom Benson, the well-known C.B.C. director of the original broadcast. The combination of Thom Benson's remarks and Bill Gunn's magnificent recording make this a very valuable teaching record, a means of learning the bird songs at the same time that one enjoys the listening. There will, of course, be some variations in the way in which the sound comes out on different record players, the latest Hi-Fi equipment giving the full value, but the differences are not nearly as great

as in the previous two records. For this I think the producers should be congratulated. This is a record that will be a pleasure to all who are interested in birds, and will be a chance for many to learn songs they never heard before.

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For those who wish to continue their cooperation with the continental migrational studies, or who wish to begin at this stage - new contributors of records are always welcome - we publish here the spring migration blank. It may be filled and sent in as directed below.

R. M. Saunders,

Editor.

COOPERATIVE MIGRATION STUDY - SPRING OF 1957

As this cooperative venture enters its fifth year on a continent-wide scale we wish to thank again all who have contributed migration dates in the past.

This is a migration study rather than just a list of dates "first seen." So please report only those birds which are believed to have actually arrived (or departed) on the date when seen or heard. A count or estimate of the number of birds noted on the first, last and peak migration dates would be appreciated. "Last Noted" applies to spring migration; a separate sheet will be sent for the fall migration.

STATE: _____ COUNTY: _____ LOCALITY: _____ LAT: _____ LONG: _____
 OBSERVER: _____ ADDRESS: _____

Species	Code	First Migrant		Peak		Peak		Peak		Last Noted	
		No.	Date	No.	Date	No.	Date	No.	Date	No.	Date
Whistling Swan	180	57									
Canada Goose	172	57									
Mallard	132	57									
Pintail	143	57									
Marsh Hawk	331	57									
Killdeer	273	57									
Wilson's Snipe	230	57									
Mourning Dove	316	57									
Common Nighthawk	420	57									
Chimney Swift	423	57									
Ruby-t. Hummingbd	428	57									
Yel-shaft Flicker	412	57									
Eastern Kingbird	444	57									
Crested Flycatcher	452	57									
Eastern Phoebe	456	57									
E. Wood Pewee	461	57									
Barn Swallow	613	57									
Purple Martin	611	57									
Common Crow	488	57									
House Wren	721	57									
Catbird	704	57									
Brown Thrasher	705	57									
Wood Thrush	755	57									
E. Bluebird (male)	7664	57									
E. Bluebird (fem.)	7665	57									
Red-eyed Vireo	624	57									
Black & Wht. Warb.	636	57									
Yellow Warbler	652	57									
Myrtle Warbler	655	57									
Oven-bird	674	57									
American Redstart	687	57									
Red-wing Blackbrd.	498	57									
Baltimore Oriole	507	57									
Scarlet Tanager	608	57									
Rose-br. Grosbeak	595	57									
Indigo Bunting	598	57									
Am. Goldfinch	529	57									
Slate-col. Junco	567	57									
Chipping Sparrow	560	57									
White-crowned Sp	554	57									
White-thrtd. Sp.	558	57									

Please send reports to Chandler S. Robbins, Patuxent Research Refuge, Laurel, Maryland, or to your Audubon Field Notes Regional Editor.

John V. Dennis, Chandler S. Robbins, James H. Zimmerman.