

# Toronto Field Naturalists' Club

## February Meeting

Monday, February 3, 1958 at 8.15 p.m.  
at the  
ROYAL ONTARIO MUSEUM

Speaker: Lister Sinclair, author, playwright and widely known radio and television panelist and commentator.

Subject: "Desert Adaptations."

Though constantly busy with radio, TV and lecturing engagements, Mr. Sinclair is a widely informed naturalist who finds time to be a keen and active observer of outdoor happenings. One of his favorite studies is animal adaptations to meet conditions of the environment in which they live.

On trips through southwestern United States Mr. Sinclair has been intrigued by unusual and dramatic adaptations of animals to the extreme environmental challenge of desert conditions. A colorful and entertaining speaker, he will describe the drama of desert survival where life goes on despite the fact that water, life's first essential, is practically non-existent.

## FEBRUARY OUTING

As the December outing to Cedarvale Ravine was literally rained out, we are going to try again on Saturday, February 8. Meet at the north end of Boulton Drive, at the entrance to the ravine at 9.00 a.m. to look for winter migrants.  
Leader - Dr. R.M. Saunders.

Boulton Drive is one short block west of Poplar Plains Road, running north from Cottingham Road.

Fees \$2.00 per year.

Secretary - Mrs. J.B. Stewart  
21 Millwood Rd. HU 9-5052

President - Dr. Walter Tovell

Ass't Secretary - Mrs. H. Robson  
49 Craighurst Avenue  
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What excitement and what joy one bird can provide! Several birds could legitimately lay claim to being the most looked at bird in the Toronto region in December -- the red-bellied woodpecker at Long Branch, the Barrow's goldeneye at Oakville, the harlequin duo at Bronte, the western tanager at Cooksville -- that is, they could until that most distinguished northerner, the hawk owl, came to pay us a visit. The attendance upon this attractive owl outranks all the others. Discovered in mid-December by Gerry Bennett, it has been the cynosure of Toronto birdwatchers ever since.

Gerry, whose interesting article on birdwatching in the Cobourg-Port Hope-Presqu'ile area appeared in the last number of the Newsletter, has now moved back to Toronto. And it was when he went to take possession of his new house in Rexdale that he walked out behind the house to look around and was immediately greeted by a bird charging up from the little ravine beyond his property; the hawk owl, no less! What a bird to welcome a Toronto birder to his new home! And Gerry, of all people, for it was he who had seen a similar owl in Cobourg a year ago this fall. Most birdwatchers in this region rarely ever see one, certainly not around Toronto.

The news went quickly around, and many observers began to converge upon the little Rexdale ravine. For most of them it was the chance of a lifetime. Then the owl was captured, banded, and kept in captivity overnight. Many of those who had not yet seen this unusual visitor, living freely in its chosen winter haunt, were anxious to know if it would stay around, once released. I was myself one of that number, and saw the owl for the first time only, at the moment of its release.

This took place at 7.30 on December 23 when dawn was reddening the sky beyond the Rexdale shopping centre. A more unlikely spot to find a rare owl of the northern forest I cannot imagine, but this was where it had first been seen, where it had chosen to settle temporarily, so this was where it was to be released.

Once freed, the owl made a beeline across the empty field that occupies the block south of the ravine, and those of us who had been watching from other cars and who remained after the releasing thought it likely that the bird was making as quick a getaway as possible. This, however, did not prove to be the case, for the owl pitched upward into a tree as soon as it reached the far side of the field near the ravine. Rapidly two balscopes were focussed upon the bird, and we took turns viewing Surnia. The fiery red dawn gave way to normal light of day and we were able to make out details of marking.

As we watched we could see that it was picking at something, soon identified as the band on its leg. One of the observers present was convinced that it caught something, or found some bit of food previously cached, and we did think for a few minutes that it was eating, but distance and poor light made complete assurance on this point impossible. Soon it was flying from tree to tree, scanning the ground as it went with intense interest, and twisting and turning its head continually when perched, as if in search of more breakfast. When it had come out to a tree on the edge of Kipling Avenue we walked to within 150 feet and again had the balscope in action. At this distance, thanks to Dr. Donald Gunn and Prof. John Dales, whose 'scopes were in operation, we were able to study the owl carefully before it took off over Kipling Avenue and down behind some houses to the east.

Clearly, in spite of its capture and captivity, it was not intending to abandon its winter hunting territory, nor even the neighborhood of humans, for though it showed some nervousness as we walked toward it the passing traffic -- it was in a tree right beside the road -- and people on the sidewalk across the street did not seem to alarm it at all. And it chose to fly amongst the houses rather than away across the field. In all this the owl was living up to a reputation for "tameness" which its kin have established over the years in their infrequent visits south from their northern homeland. The "tameness" is, presumably, simply lack of acquaintance with humankind.

As soon as the news of the owl's release got around others wanted to go and see it; the convergence of observers began again.

A little after noon I was on the road once more with Marshall Bartman and Ray Pannell to guide them to the spot. We parked by the field on Kipling Avenue in the same place, and began to study all the trees around for a sign of the owl. In a few minutes I was sure that I had it on a tree away over on the northwesterly corner; we began a trek across an extremely muddy

field. Halfway across, the bird in view still looked like the hawk owl. Not until we came to the edge of the little ravine and much closer to the tree where the bird was perched could I tell that what we were stalking was no owl but rather a sparrow hawk. This was a disappointment, of course; yet, for me, it emphasized the fact that the hawk owl, as we had seen it earlier in the morning, had so resembled a small hawk in the way it sat -- across a limb -- and with its proportionately long tail that, when the head could not be noted clearly -- as, for instance, when turned away and lowered -- the owl could scarcely be distinguished from such a bird as the sparrow hawk. No wonder it is called a hawk owl. And the resemblance is enhanced further when the bird flies, for then its sharp-pointed wings, beating rapidly, certainly are far more falcon-like than owl-like in appearance.

Marshall and I walked back towards Kipling Avenue along the ravine bank. Another sparrow hawk on a small tree a little below the crest of the slope quickened our hopes momentarily, the more so as this was the part where the owl had first been found. While Marshall kept a watch on the ravine I stopped now and again to sweep the trees to the east of Kipling Avenue, remembering that it was there that we had left it before. At last came reward, for at the bend of an easterly marching street, in a gap between two houses, my binoculars showed me the owl, sitting now on an upright broken branch of a tree very near one of the houses. Shouting to Ray, who had gone across the field, Marshall and I headed for the new position; no doubt this time, since I had seen the rounded head and the general coloration.

With the three of us together we edged nearer and nearer, stopping every few yards for a look in case the owl should fly. No fear; it was as "tame" as we had supposed, so that finally we stood within 20 paces of our bird. Now every detail could be seen to full advantage. As this morning, what struck one first was the white throat, and the sharply-defined dark and white markings around the face. Then the heavy, close, horizontal barring across the whole of the underparts stood out, like a series of brown and white tapes. The wind was blowing in fierce gusts, so that the head plumage was alternately being pushed up and flattened. When a gust struck, ripples of black and white rolled across the head, completely altering the pattern and giving the owl a wildly harlequinish look. When the feathers were at rest we could see the white-dotted crown and forehead, bordered by a triangle of dark lines, the whole giving the owl a severe mien, rather like a capped Victorian dowager supremely able to peer down upon mere mortals. That, in fact, is what our rare northern visitor seemed constantly to be doing, frowning at us or gazing down with utmost hauteur, sometimes hurling malevolent gleams from out its bright yellow eyes, as if blaming us for a bad night and for disturbing its peace now.

Several people looked at us as they went by on the sidewalk, and children in the nearest house stood in the window

to see what we were doing. We did not elucidate for fear of drawing unfavorable attention to the owl. We were surprised that it would choose to sit so close to a house, no more, indeed, than a dozen feet from the hood of a parked car. Clearly this wanderer from the wilds had not yet learned the kind of caution a bird must have in dealing with humans. Though it might mean ill for the bird, this lack of fear, for us, and especially for my two companions, who had never had a chance to see such a bird before, the approachability of the owl was a godsend.

Occasionally the bird would pick at its band, trying to work the thing loose. At last, whether because of our nearness or because of the too windy perch -- it had hard work holding on at times -- our owl took off, gliding down low across the ravine, then rising to an elm tree on the other side, where it came to a halt on the outer twigs. For a moment it appeared to be having difficulties. When we looked to see what was the trouble, we found to our amazement that the owl was clinging upside down, like a huge chickadee, to one of the twigs. There it swung for a long moment before breaking away and taking up a more normal position on a large branch. What could have caused this most unowlish act, (perhaps the wind), we could not say. Is this a trick of the species?

When last seen the owl was placed very much like the sparrow hawk we had originally mistaken for it, across a branch with its long tail protruding, and occasionally pumping or jerking. Again we were convinced that, from a distance, it would be only too easy to do just what we might have done, pass this bird by for a small falcon. Also, now that it was securely hidden, down behind the houses, it could not possibly be seen from a distance. Only the most meticulous search along the ravine and in back of the houses could turn it up. How very privileged we had been!

On December 28th I tried twice to show Surnia to my wife and some friends, each time drawing a blank. On January 1st, several of us, out to begin the New Year right, tried again, and again came away defeated. Had we not known that other observers had seen the owl in the meantime, even on the days when we missed it, we would have thought that it had really decided to clear out.

Today, January 4th, things worked out much better. My wife and I drove out to Rexdale, only to find Kipling Avenue closed because of construction, and the part of the field usually frequented by the owl loud with disturbance. Our hopes sank. We had trouble with the car and had to be pushed. But we persisted, because I had seen far across the field to the southwest a bird that might, just might, be the owl. When we got to this point it was Anne who spotted the bird on top of a hawthorn behind a factory. I took one look, and said, "Yes," then "No," for again, was it owl or falcon? A closer look and I could be sure; this was indeed the owl. We got out and started toward the spot, only to see a man materialize in the field near the owl. The latter flew; the man turned out to be Ott Devitt,

I hastened around the front of the factory to see where the owl had gone; and, wonder of wonders, there it was on top of another hawthorn tree, right off the end of the factory, with Charlie Moloney taking its picture, a few feet away! Charlie ground away until he had all he wanted. Ott came up chuckling at this extraordinary photographic opportunity, and hurried to his car to get a box camera, just to be able to say he had walked near enough to a hawk owl to take its picture with an ordinary box camera. The owl flew again while he was away, but only to a nearby tree, where Ott really did walk up and take its picture! Meanwhile Anne, seeing a hawk owl for the first time, and I enjoyed the beauty of this accommodating owl to the full.

What a wonderful experience the sight of this owl has been, and will be for countless observers; an experience that many of them may never have again. How stimulating it is to have a bird like this, free and approachable, in our region. Few things in nature arouse as much interest as a rare visitor like this owl. Few experiences do as much to spread favorable concern for nature and for the preservation of wild creatures as the close sight of so fine a bird. The visit of a rare bird to our region is one of the very best chances to introduce all sorts of people, both naturalists and would-be naturalists, to the joy and the great possibilities of the study of nature. Let us, all of us, see to it that the visit of such a bird as the hawk owl of Rexdale, is made an opportunity for all.

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For some time now the question of the evaluation and recognition of bird records has been under discussion amongst Ontario naturalists. It has been thought, therefore, that it would be helpful to republish the decisions adopted concerning this matter by the State Bird Book Committee of New York in 1954. These were first published in Ontario in the Newsletter of the Thunder Bay Field Naturalists' Club (Vol. IX, No. 3, May, 1955), with the permission of the State Bird Book Committee of the Federation of New York State Bird Clubs. Inasmuch as they clearly represent the sort of discussion that is going on here, it seems worthwhile to make them more widely known.

#### CRITERIA FOR THE VALIDITY OF RECORDS

##### OCCURRENCE RECORDS

Adopted by State Bird Book Committee, February 20, 1954

Of all the subjects which must be considered in the planning of a regional ornithology, none is as delicate, controversial, and yet necessary, as the determination of which

records shall be deemed valid and which shall not. The State Book Committee, therefore, has considered it important to set up certain criteria for the acceptance of records, for the guidance not only of the eventual editor of the book, but of present Regional Editors and member clubs now engaged in amassing local data.

Fifty years ago the setting up of such standards would not have been necessary, for there was only a single form of acceptable record -- the collected specimen. There are many reasons why this single standard is no longer applicable. Enormous strides have been made in the art of bird identification; simple, diagnostic characteristics have been learned for most bird forms; the use of the binocular and telescope have become universal; the camera and the sound recorder have added new methods of positive identification; the very numbers of observers has multiplied a thousand fold, and these observers are able, through modern means of transportation, to cover vastly more ground than their predecessors. All these factors have been accompanied by the natural decline in the use of the shotgun; it is indeed the rare rarity that today gives its life for science. To arbitrarily discard all but the specimen records today would be simply to invalidate virtually all field work of the 20th century -- and the Committee rejects this principle.

All this is to the good, but it has increased the task of the conscientious editor enormously. In some Elysian future it might be possible that all bird observers will be utterly competent, and utterly honest; but in our less perfect world, while the theory of noblesse oblige prevails, we are obliged to consider our fellow birdwatchers to be utterly honest, but prudence demands that we sometimes doubt their competence. Or at least look carefully into the conditions and circumstances of each unusual report.

The criteria listed below cannot be taken as an absolute standard. Since every editor has his own standards of validity, the Committee's scale can be at best a considered recommendation.

It can serve, too, as a useful guide of present Kingbird Regional Editors, and for all bird club "censorship" committees of record. The State Book Committee further recommends that clubs not now having a committee charged with the review and validation of records consider without delay the importance of such work. A State Bird Book can be no better than the reliability of its records, and no one is better qualified to pass on the reliability of those records than the observers' own fellow club-members. An editor working perhaps years after the fact, is severely handicapped when he is called upon to judge records by observers unknown to him, unverified at time, and unannotated. Because he must be conservative, many perfectly valid records of this type must surely be lost.

Criteria for Validity of Records

In the following listing of criteria, order of acceptability is in the order of rank.

Records meeting the following criteria are deemed WHOLLY ACCEPTABLE:

1. A record supported by a fully-documented, available specimen.
2. A record supported by an unquestionable and documented photograph or motion picture.
3. A record supported by an unquestionable and documented sound recording.
4. A record supported by a specimen no longer available, but previously verified by a competent authority.
5. A record supported by a captured live specimen, verified by a competent authority, and later released.
6. A record supported by conclusive and unquestionable circumstantial evidence in lieu of a specimen, such as a readily-identifiable footprint, nest, egg or part of a specimen.
7. A sight record of an easily-identified species, supported by multiple observation of competent observers, and appropriate as to date and place.

Records meeting the following criteria are deemed ACCEPTABLE when accompanied by supporting documentation:

8. A sight record of a species easy to identify, appropriate as to date and place, for which there are previous comparable records, by a single competent observer.
9. A sight record of a species easy to identify, inappropriate as to date or place but for which there are previous comparable records, by multiple competent observers.
10. A sight record of a species easy to identify, inappropriate as to date or place, but for which there are previous comparable records, by a single competent observer.

Records which do not meet any of the above criteria are deemed QUESTIONABLE, and particularly subject to scrutiny, and should not be considered ACCEPTABLE without strong supporting evidence.

Records meeting the following criteria are deemed UNACCEPTABLE under any circumstances:

11. A sight record of a species difficult to identify, inappropriate as to date or place, for which no previous records

Criteria for Validity of Records - continued

exist, by a single observer,

12. A sight record of a species difficult to identify, regardless of date, place, or previous records, by an observer or observers of unknown competence, or known incompetence.
13. A record of any kind for which there is no documentation or supporting evidence.
14. A record of a species for which the possibility exists of it being an escaped or released caged bird.

In considering the validity of sight records, the following factors, in addition to ease of identification, appropriateness of date and place, and number of observers, should be weighed: Length of time under observation, distance of observation, weather and lighting conditions, observable habits, size comparison with other nearby birds, whether in flight or at rest, whether song or note was heard, optical instruments used, previous experience with the species by the observer(s).

For the purpose of this classification, the term sight record includes both appearance and voice. Thus certain species may be unmistakable both as to appearance and voice, and a record be acceptable on either or on both counts. Other species may be easily identified by either appearance or voice, but not by both, and the determining factor would be which observation was claimed. Contrarily, the term difficult to identify is deemed to refer to a species difficult to identify by both voice and appearance.

BREEDING RECORDS

The following classification, in diminishing order of acceptability, applies to evidence of breeding.

Breeding records meeting the following criteria are considered ACCEPTABLE:

1. Pair of birds seen, with nest discovered, and young flying or ready to fly. (Evidence of success and location).
2. Nest and flying young discovered. (Evidence of location but not complete success).
3. Young fledged, just on wing, not capable of prolonged flight. (Evidence of success but not exact location).
4. Nest with young unquestionably identified. (Evidence of location and incomplete success).

Breeding Records - continued

5. Nest with eggs unquestionably identified. (Evidence of location and incomplete success).
6. Occupied nest, or nest with incubating bird and evidence of actual incubation. (Evidence of location and incomplete success).
7. Identifiable nest of the year with evidence of breeding use. (Evidence of attempt, known location).
8. Identifiable dead nestlings -- no nest or parent birds found. (Evidence of failure, general location).
9. Parent birds repeatedly seen carrying food, in restricted areas. (Incomplete evidence of success, general location).
10. Identifiable eggs, or eggshells, (no nest). (Evidence of attempt, unknown location).
11. Parent or parent birds building nest (evidence of attempt, known location).
12. Pair in courtship activity during breeding season. (Presumed attempt).
13. Pair present during normal breeding season (possibility of breeding)
14. Singing male on territory (possibility).
15. Single bird present during nesting season.

CRITERIA FOR BREEDING ABUNDANCE

ABSOLUTE SCALE

<u>DENSITY OF BREEDING*</u>	<u>BIRDS LARGER THAN FLICKER</u>	<u>BIRDS FLICKER SIZE OR SMALLER</u>
1 pair per 1-5 acres	abundant**	abundant
1 pair per 5-20 acres	abundant	very common
1 pair per 20-100 acres	very common	common
1 pair per 100-250 acres	common	fairly common
1 pair per 250 acres, 1 sq. mile	fairly common	uncommon
1 pair per 1-25 sq. mile	uncommon	rare
1 pair per 25-250 sq. miles	rare	very rare
1 pair per 250 sq. miles or more	very rare	very rare

\* Takes no account of available habitat. Based entirely on land area.

\*\*These terms, when used to describe breeding density for larger land areas, as groups of counties, or the entire state, may be modified by the word "generally" or "locally" to denote uniformity or non-uniformity.

CRITERIA OF ABUNDANCE, FREQUENCY AND SEASONAL OCCURRENCE

Adopted by State Bird Book Committee, February 20, 1954

There are three distinct areas of meaning concerned in these criteria. The first area is that of frequency -- concerned with occurrence on a year-to-year basis, and used as a modifier of the second area, which is numerical abundance. The third area is the descriptive noun which describes the seasonal (or non-seasonal) occurrence of the species.

FREQUENCY

1. Regular -- recorded every year.
2. Irregular -- recorded less than every year, but more than one year in every four, on an average.
3. Occasional -- recorded between one year in every four and one year in every nine, on an average.
4. Sporadic -- recorded between one year in every ten and one year in every twenty, on an average.
5. Casual -- recorded less than once in twenty years, on an average.
6. Exotic -- recorded, and because of its range not expected to occur again (This word replaces the word "accidental", which is disliked because it has a connotation of casuality).

ABUNDANCE

1. Abundant -- occurring in such numbers that a competent observer at the proper time and place might see 500 or more in a single day.
2. Very common -- occurring in such numbers that a competent observer at the proper time and place might see 100-500 during a single day.
3. Common - occurring in such numbers that a competent observer at the proper time and place might see 25-100 during a single day.
4. Fairly common -- occurring in such numbers that a competent observer might at the proper time and place see 5-25 during a single day.
5. Uncommon -- occurring in such numbers that a competent observer at the proper time and place might see 1-5 a day, or no more than 25 per season.
6. Rare -- occurring in such numbers that a competent observer, at the proper time and place, would see no more than 5 in a season.
7. Very rare -- occurring in such numbers that a competent observer, at the proper time and place, would see no more than 1 in a season.

SEASONAL OCCURRENCE

Transients -- Birds of passage which occur in spring and/or fall but do not breed; may occur as spring transients or fall transients.

Visitants -- Nonbreeding birds which occur as temporary visitors; may occur as summer visitants, winter visitants, or vagrant visitants.

Residents -- Breeding species; may occur as summer residents or permanent residents.

Thus all species will fit into one of the above seven classifications of spring transient, fall transient, summer visitant, winter visitant, vagrant visitant, summer resident or permanent resident. All classifications carry a sense of regularity except that of vagrant visitant. The term resident carries the sense of breeding.

APPLICATION OF CRITERIA -- Examples of this triad of classification for New York State species are as follows:

Canada Goose -- Regular abundant spring and fall transient; regular common winter visitant.

Dovekie -- Irregular rare winter visitant; sporadically abundant.

White-winged Crossbill -- Regular fairly common permanent resident (Adirondack area); casual common winter visitant (New York area).

American Egret -- Regular uncommon to common summer visitant.

Yellow Rail -- Regular very rare spring and fall transient.

Burrowing Owl -- Exotic vagrant visitant.

Great Gray Owl -- Casual very rare winter visitant.

Oregon Junco -- Occasional very rare vagrant visitant.

It may be that the words describing frequency should end in "ly" for further clarity. Thus for White-winged Crossbill, "casually common winter visitant" would seem to be more precise than "casual common winter visitant".

It may also be that we might need to add the term "presumed" in cases where we are fairly certain of a status but it is not backed by records. For example, Yellow Rail might be classified as "presumed regular very rare transient", since it is not seen every year but undoubtedly is a regular transient.

Recently the Hamilton Nature Club published a new check list of the birds of the Hamilton Region. Since the Toronto and Hamilton regions overlap (the question might well be raised whether they should not be considered one region) we take pleasure in presenting here the announcement of this publication prepared by R.O. Elstone, President of the Hamilton Club. Mr. Elstone states:

"The Directors of the Hamilton Nature Club announce the completion of one of the Club's most painstaking ventures, the compiling and printing of a 'Check List' of all the birds that have been recorded in the Hamilton area. The list comprises 338 species of native birds, from the very common, such as robins and cardinals, to the very rare and in one case now extinct passenger pigeon which at one time was so common they migrated in clouds. The field Check List is laid out in ornithological order with diving birds, such as loons and grebes, at the beginning and ending with the warblers and sparrows with highly developed voices. Believe it or not, there have been 36 different species of warblers and 18 different species of native sparrows recorded in the Hamilton district. The introduced English or house sparrow is not a true sparrow but a finch.

"The area included is a 25 mile radius of Dundurn Castle, York and Dundurn Streets, Hamilton, Ontario. To help beginners in the art of bird identification the names of common birds are in large print and rare or accidental are in small print. Heavy black vertical lines separate the families of birds, making it easier and quicker to use in the field. People who are familiar with birds in Europe, the Southern States, or Western Provinces, will be amazed at the number of birds, common in those parts, that have also been recorded in the Hamilton area. The Check List could also be used in other parts of Ontario or adjoining New York State.

"The Check List has the latest nomenclature as published by the American Ornithological Union, the organization that has set themselves up as the authority on North American birds. Some of the latest changes will be welcomed by old time 'birders', the return of the use of names like upland plover, short-billed marsh wren, semipalmated plover and others.

"One thing might seem confusing. In the families of ducks under 'teal' there is the common teal, green-winged teal and blue-winged teal. The word 'common' is in small print, meaning that this duck is rare or accidental. Up until recently this bird was called European teal, but the species is the most common teal throughout the world. However, it is rare in the Hamilton, Canada, district. That is why the word 'common' is in small print.

"Holes have been drilled into the folded edge of the Check List to fit a standard size pocket loose leaf note book four by seven inches.

"Of all the people interested in nature more seen to be interested in the study and identification of birds. Is this because birds are nearly always on the move? Is it because of their varied plumage? Is it because some are such excellent singers, or is it because most by far are of benefit to man?

"Check Lists of the birds of Hamilton Area are available at 10¢ each or 35 for \$1.00 from the Secretary, Hamilton Nature Club, Main Post Office, Box 384, Hamilton, Ontario.

"The sincere appreciation of the Club goes to David K. Powell for the many, many hours he spent checking, revising and correcting the Check List of our birds. In this he was guided by George W. North.

"A check list of mammals, fish, trees, ferns, reptiles and amphibians of the Hamilton district is also being compiled."

R.M. Saunders

Editor.