

Toronto Field Naturalists' Club

154

MARCH MEETING

Monday, March 3, 1958 at 8.15 p.m.

at the
ROYAL ONTARIO MUSEUM

MEMBERS' NIGHT

Speakers:

Paul Hietala (age 12)	A member of our Junior Club	
	Subject - "Bird Migration"	5 minutes
Bruce McBride (age 15)	Also a member of our Junior Club	
	Subject - "Are Snakes Necessary?"	5 minutes
F.T. Lovesy	Subject - "The Activities of the Ontario Bird Banders' Association" illustrated with colour slides	20 minutes
Miss Margaret McGregor	- a member of the staff of the Toronto Board of Education	
	Subject - "Raising Junior" illustrated,	20 minutes
Dr. Everett Jaquith	- "Florida Adventure" Coloured motion picture	20 minutes
James Macintosh	- representing our Botany Group	
	Subject "Wild Flowers and their Cultivated Relatives", illustrated with colour slides	20 minutes

Due to the stormy weather which we usually have during March, it has been decided not to hold an outing this month. An attractive programme of spring outings will be published shortly.

BOTANY GROUP

The March meeting of the Botany Group will be held on Wednesday, March 12, at 7.30 p.m. in Room 203, Botany Building, University of Toronto. Use north-west door. The speaker will be Dr. Margaret Heimburger, and the subject "The Pollination and Fertilization of Flowering Plants." Please note change of day and hour of meeting.

A cordial invitation is extended to YOU, to attend the DON VALLEY CONSERVATION ASSOCIATION Annual Dinner at Fantasy Farm, Pottery Road, at 5.30 p.m. on Sunday March 16, 1958, in honour of Stuart L. Thompson Toronto's Dean of Naturalists. The guest speaker will be Charles Sauriol, Chairman Conservation Areas Advisory Board; the Metropolitan Toronto and Region Conservation Authority. Tickets \$2.50 each. Reservations through Herbert McCauley, 12 Ozark Crescent, Toronto. Tel. HO 5-3758. Persons wishing to participate in the purchase of a gift for Mr. Thompson are requested to send in their donation (not exceeding \$5.00) to Mr. McCauley.

President - Dr. Walter Tovell

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

Ass't Secretary - Mrs. H. Robson, 49 Craighurst Ave. HU 1-0260

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NEWSLETTER

Number 154

March, 1958

On the last Sunday morning of January a grey sky, darkened every few minutes by black clouds that sent huge wet snowflakes spattering against the windshield, hung low above a sombre landscape as Greer Roberts and I set out upon our search for winter birds. Passing cars, each and all spraying us with murky slush, added to the hazards of driving and to the obstacles to observation. A forbidding day this, and one that appeared to promise little to searchers after birds.

Still, even in the worst of weather birds must find sustenance. They have to be around somewhere. And long ago I learned from one who had had a lifetime association with birds and nature to follow the principle of, Don't let the weather fool you. Like him who told it to me I have found it to be an excellent working principle.

The birds for which we were mainly looking -- snow buntings -- occur commonly, in seasons when they are down, along the Bolton road north of No. 7 highway, and we were heading for this likely area. Why this region should be so favoured is something of a puzzle, though the frequent occurrence of the buntings hereabouts seems to be associated with miles of open fields, many of which are freshly manured at this time of year, whilst others are richly weedy; the whole countryside, therefore, seems to offer a great deal to attract the field type of bird.

On this dark morning the attraction proved as certain as it has so often in the past. Three cars, loaded with

skiers and all their apparatus, had roared past us in rapid succession, causing Greer to slow down to avoid too blinding a rain of slush, when all at once I caught sight of eight dark shapes winging their way over the roadside fence. They had been raised up by the hurrying skiers' cars, and were getting out of the way of danger. Their flattened shapes and stolid manner of flight betrayed their identity, not snow buntings these but horned larks. They did not come back to the road as is usual for them whenever the fields are covered with snow; possibly they had been frightened up so many times by passing cars, since traffic was fairly heavy, that they now decided to seek quieter quarters elsewhere.

Not more than half a mile farther on a whirl of hardly visible flickerings in the midst of a flurry of snow brought us again to a halt and sent us scurrying from the car. Now fortune was more favorable for the suggestive shimmerings took clearer form, became white and brown birds, a burst of color and life -- our buntings, five hundred strong. Momentarily they came to earth, setting the edge of the road alive with their ceaseless moves; then another car swished by, throwing up slop and raising the buntings all in one great swirl. Like the larks before them they swept off over the fields, pitched down again for a moment, then were up and speeding away, heading off to the west, quickly vanishing in the gloom.

Horned larks and snow buntings feeding along the side of the same road, circling across the same fields -- a sign this that the turn of the season has arrived. For all the snow and slush and flake-filled mark we are in these latter days of January on the vernal side of winter; the outlook is towards spring.

True as this may be, our next sight on this morning hardly seemed to bear out that assertion. On such a day, -- indeed, on most winter days --, birds are often far apart, so that one can drive for miles without so much as a glimpse of even sparrow, starling or pigeon. So now did we, for from snow buntings to Bolton and thence to Sand Hill not a bird did we see. Even then it was only a tree dotted with chattering dark bodies that we knew were house sparrows from their jabbering. They were at Sand Hill, huddling close to a sheltering dwelling, and really they didn't count, not very much. Not until we reached the little Anglican church one line east of Victoria did we once more have sufficient cause to stop. Beyond the parked cars at the church, -- service was being held --, stood a line of Manitoba maples, all heavily fruited, all ashen grey with clinging ice, for in this section an ice storm had left its mark. In the midst of these grey-hooded trees there was movement, and with each move flashes of light spurted forth. We stopped; then, even without our binoculars being raised, the flashes were resolved into gleaming golden grosbeaks. Fifty of them, we soon discovered, were avidly garnering sustenance from beneath the icy cover, and fully two-thirds of the company were males, brilliantly dressed in gold

and black and white. The crop of keys was luxuriant so that each bird could stand beside a cluster all its own, where one by one it would knock the ice from each seed, pluck and eat, keeping this up without having to move for minutes at a time. Indeed, there was remarkably little fluttering or moving, as is usually the case with such a feeding flock. Clearly it was not necessary. Thus the effect was more that of a painting than of a movie, a painting in which the icy tree's grey mass was dotted with yellow lights. One individual seen in the depths of an inner tree through an opening was so glowing a yellow that he seemed like a beacon set in the dark to guide wanderers home to the flock. A trio of black starlings atop a farther tree, silent, glumly unmoving, added a touch of satiric humour to the elegant beauty of the grosbeaks. You didn't know whether to be sorry for the black outcasts -- so they seemed -- or amused at their apparently sour aloofness. Whatever one's reaction it was hard to keep eyes for long from the assured beauty of the grosbeaks, enlivening and living in a merciless wintry scene.

We had hoped to eat our lunch up one of the hills at Terra Cotta but when we arrived at the road we wanted to take we had to give up after an unsuccessful effort to make the grade. It was too slipperty to be passable. Retracing our route so as to get up out of the Credit valley by the sanded road we turned south on the road at the top of this rise, going as far as the nearest patch of woods and stopping there to dispose of our sandwiches and coffee. While we sat here only one car, that of the local farmer, and no birds came into view. Anyone fixed in this spot could easily have said, there is no life here today, certainly no birds. But remembering what we had seen already we were not deceived.

Since we wanted to get around to Norval to investigate some reported avian possibilities near that village, we worked our way in that direction, choosing as hill-free a route as possible. And how happy it was for us that the condition of the roads forced us to take this roundabout route, for as we were proceeding cautiously along a crossroad in the north end of Esquesing township Greer called out that there was something in the southerly field. We both looked and saw what appeared to be an elliptical mat spread upon the snow; and we both decided upon first glance that perhaps it was only grass after all. But no, this diagnosis for some reason didn't seem quite right, so Greer braked, then backed. Now we saw why the "mat" had been "wrong" as a patch of grass. Here was really a compact crowd of birds, and though there had been no distinctly perceptible sense of movement when we first looked there must have been a subconsciously registered quivering, enough to cause us to hesitate to pass the mat as merely dead grass. At any rate, now we could see that whereas many birds were standing quite still, even sleeping, many others were preening, whilst a good number were "snow-dusting", that is, bathing by beating their wings against the snow until a

fine white film spurted up around each bather. Yet, all the movement tended to merge, thus to give the group as a whole that appearance of a broad brown mat which had almost had us fooled. Inasmuch as there were many "mats" or "carpets" of brown grass scattered amidst the snowfields this massed formation, where the white of the buntings -- for such they were -- mingled with the white of the snow, and the remaining brown parts of the birds gave an impression so like that of matted tufts or blades of grass, was a remarkably fine sample of camouflage. Whether this was accidental, or whether the birds have learned to take advantage of such protection, is hard to say. What was quite sure was that the watchers had to be keeping a very sharp lookout indeed not to pass such a company by.

All at once the entire flock decided that the rest period was finished. With one great rush they all went up together, and, as they did so, the air was filled with a sound of sonorous buzzing, making us think of a huge swarm of bees. This startling sound lasted only a few seconds, until the flock was well launched into the air. Then, as silence returned and the flock planed over a neighbouring fence, a new burst of white blew up from the ground, and a flock of equal size -- one we had missed entirely -- rose to join the first. Together they made a company of fully a thousand birds.

Like a wonderful flurry of snow that had suddenly found itself freed of all physical controls so that now it could wander where it willed, the company of buntings swirled up and over the fields, rolling and turning, circling and swooping, flowing down the air as if this were the greatest of fun. Alighting amidst the tufts of grass and brown weeds for a few nips of seed, piling over each other in great bounds, then rising again to mount the air and laugh at the wind in joyful aerobatics. It was a great show, and it went on and on all around their favorite field. And not without a spectator from their own world, for in a tall elm tree, high in the leafless crest, sat a tremendous red-tailed hawk. Every moment we could spare from watching the entrancing performance we turned to look at the redtail, wondering what this great predator would do. Each time we found the hawk seemingly as entranced as we were ourselves, eyes fixed upon the manoeuvring flock. Sometimes the buntings were far across the field, sometimes they fed and flew, spiralled and whirled right past the foot of the tree from which the redtail looked down. Then they did a striking thing for, though it is not in the customary usage of snow buntings to land in trees -- they come from the treeless barrens -- nonetheless the entire thousand poured down into two elm trees, neighbors of the redtail's perch, so filling the branches as to make the trees seem laden with a lush burden of winter fruit. The hawk watched it all, and never once was a move made that was in the least threatening. At last Buteo found the fascination wearing thin; mice were his serious concern, not these enchanting birds. For him the show

was over, hence, plunging from his treetop he glided away over the fields seeking more substantial sustenance than could be found in watching snow buntings at play. Yet for us, who must also leave, there was food in this show, this drama in the country gloom, upon which we could feed for days; yes, even for years to come, and which would sustain us in a way that nothing more material we could eat would ever do.

Home we went through Norval and by a route that took us past the east end of the Malton airport. It was as we were passing the airport fence that we saw another fine bird, for sitting on top of a slender post just outside the high wire barricade was a plump white owl. In this snowy landscape it was only another pile of snow, I suppose, to most people --and there were many -- who were passing along the road. To us it was a snowy owl, since we have learned from many past observations that a white pile of snow doesn't balance so neatly on top of a stake not much thicker than the kind used for stringing up garden beans, unless there are feet to help it stay. A good thing it is that few but birdwatchers should be able to notice such a bird for, otherwise, idling Sunday afternoon strollers and drivers would soon bring an end to the owl's peace, if not worse. As it was we could not stop, nor even slow down, so many cars were right behind, but once again we had had a demonstration of natural camouflage (not so "natural" to a birdwatcher's eyes) or adaptability, well-suited to enable the white owl to get by without detection in this snow-covered scene, as was being amply shown by all the people who were whizzing past without so much as a look in the owl's direction.

The sighting of the snowy owl was a satisfying finish to an exciting and deeply rewarding day. How right it had been to follow that guiding principle, Don't let the weather fool you.

Exactly what effect the weather does have upon the chances of finding birds is in truth rather difficult to determine. The next time that I was out, on February 1st, was with Greer and Torchy Roberts, and it was one of those limpid, clear blue and white days, the perfect product of winter weather when all the world is clean and fresh and lovely. In answer to the poet's query, "What is so rare as a day in June?", the reply could certainly be, "A winter's day like this." We drove miles and miles, a hundred miles in all, up through Bolton and on towards Palgrave, across the hills of King and back by Purpleville Wood. Everywhere we enjoyed continually new views of rolling, snow-covered hills, bathed in ever-changing colors from glistening white to sea-green and ultramarine. Often we rode alongside lines of cedar or hemlock that were all frosted on the north side where a moist boreal breeze had breathed upon them during the night.

The peak of our trip that day was reached at Hammertown

Wood, where we found a winter scene so unblemished, so immaculate that one scarcely dared to enter it. Towering green hemlocks rose above the pristine white snow, mingling their dark pyramids with grey, smooth-armed beeches and crusty-barked yellow birches. Blue shadows lay in long-reaching fingers upon the sparkling snow whilst overhead one looked up through the interlacing fretwork of branches to the lambent, unflecked sky. Once in the wood it could be seen that signs of life were written upon the snow in a myriad of patterns; squirrel and rabbit, racoon and porcupine, fox and weasel had all left their marks. Yet, save for one big jack that we started from a raspberry tangle, and which went dashing across an opening in a mad zig-zag of speed, we saw no four-footed creature. As for birds, there were three: a white-breasted nuthatch, yanking when the rabbit was disturbed, a golden-crowned kinglet, sissing in our ears as we pushed past its evergreen hide, and a hairy woodpecker that kept in front of us, travelling from one barked elm to another. These three in the wood, and a breathtaking flock of two hundred snow buntings that passed silently overhead as we were crossing a glade, were the birds at Hammertown. It was good to see them, these birds, few as they may have been, but it is the uncorrupted wood with its peaceful, vivid beauty that we will not forget. On this day the scene was greater than the birds.

And so it was everywhere. In all our hundred miles of driving, and even though we covered much of the route we had been over a few days previous, we did not put up a single flock of birds along the road. Passing wood after wood we listened and heard only the whispering of trees. At Purpleville Wood we got out, walked around, again revelling in the beauty of our surroundings, and finding one single bird, a white-breasted nuthatch.

Since we had gone in fact upon a birding trip it would be rather less than the truth to say that we were not somewhat disappointed. Yet it was one of the most attractive days that one could be out of doors, it was winter in its finest garb, and we had enjoyed immensely the beauty that was all around us. Consequently we were rather more puzzled than disappointed. If weather has any effects at all upon what one is likely to see in the bird world, how are we to interpret this experience? Here was winter in perfection. Where were the birds? The answer is made all the more difficult by the fact that on the same day, and particularly on the next day, others found flocks of hundreds and thousands of winter finches and other birds only a few miles away from where we had been. Is the explanation that we were travelling all the time in one of those gaps, often miles in extent, that seem to mark the bird world around here, especially outside the reach of the lake, during wintertime? A mystery this, and one well worth a thought.

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The question of what to do about the starlings is one that goes on and on and never finds an answer. A new and rather amusing chapter in this discussion was brought to my attention by a reader of the Newsletter who was in New York at Christmas. He sent up a clipping from the New York Times which contains an account of events so similar to some that occurred not so far from Toronto two or three years ago that I reprint it here for the refreshment of our readers' memory.

STARLINGS AGAIN STOP STAMFORD'S CLOCK;

IRATE CITIZENS PUT CITY HALL IN A DITHER

Special to The New York Times

STAMFORD, Conn., Dec. 27 -- Like the swallows of capistrano, the starlings of Stamford have returned on schedule. And again this year they have stopped the Stamford City Hall clock.

The pesky birds forsake the open fields when the winter chill grips the city and wing in at nightfall for warmer roosts on the clock's giant hands.

The clock stops running and agitated citizens complain to everyone at City Hall, from Mayor Webster C. Givens to Gus Rasile, the building custodian.

Last year the birds were routed by the raucous din of a mechanical device -- a tape recorder and two amplifiers -- set up in the City Hall attic and turned on at dusk. During the summer the machine was removed.

"We may get it back," said Mayor Givens today. "I am talking over the problem with Walter Maguire, Public Works Commissioner, and you can be sure we will come up with something."

Mayor Givens, who took office this month, regards starlings as an inherited problem. He said his plans for a new City Hall would include a starling-proof clock.

Mr. Rasile has been coping with the birds in previous administrations and always at holiday time. Last year he hit on a strategem that he is again employing temporarily.

This is to set the hands permanently at 6 o'clock. They are thus in a vertical position and present, to a starling, a reasonably unsatisfactory perch.

The 6 o'clock approach is used when the custodian tires of resetting the clock each morning. He has done that four times in recent days.

We would like to bring to the attention of the members of the Club, and especially to all those who have a wet spot -- a bit of marsh, a pool some swampy part -- which they would like to make more attractive to birds, the pamphlet on Aquatic Plants for Fish and Wildlife, prepared by W. John Lamoureux, Conservationist at the Royal Botanical Gardens, Hamilton, and sponsored by the Toronto Anglers' and Hunters' Association. As a result of careful investigation and experiment in the Cootes Paradise Marsh Project (in the area known to most local birders as Dundas Marsh) the botanists of the Royal Botanical Gardens have acquired valuable knowledge of the kind of plants that will grow under marsh conditions, and of the care which they need to make them thrive. They have been chiefly concerned with such plants as will be beneficial to fish and birds. A good part of their findings are now presented in this excellently illustrated pamphlet which is strongly recommended. It would be even more to the point to get hold of a copy of the pamphlet, and then to go to Hamilton to see the planting projects it describes in actual operation. This should give many people a very good idea of how to improve their own properties in a similar manner.

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When this Newsletter reaches you it will be March. Remember that in this month you are most likely to see the largest concentration of winter finches if they are down from the north, and this year they are in considerable numbers, particularly redpolls, snow buntings, pine and evening grosbeaks. For the first two the best chances of finding them will be gained by touring the country, looking particularly for really weedy fields and freshly-manured fields. Redpolls also favor woods that have a high percentage of birch, notably yellow birch. Fine grosbeaks like wild fruit, and also will often frequent orchards that have frozen apples. They are likely, too, to feed on evergreen cones, particularly spruce cones. Evening grosbeaks are almost always to be found on Manitoba maple trees, though they will come readily to feeding stations when sunflower seed is offered. (A recent report came in from a man in Midland who said he was going broke -- in a nice way -- because of the huge number of these grosbeaks he was having to feed this winter!) The Bolton road north of Number 7 highway, as mentioned in this Newsletter, is almost always a good bet for buntings. Purpleville Wood, like all winter woods, can be almost empty at times, but is at other times one of the best for finches. Other good woods are scattered throughout King Township, in the area east of Aurora towards Ballantrae, and along the south edge of Holland Marsh north of Holland Landing.

With the advent of spring the return of the waterfowl is one of the first great waves in the world of birds. In addition to

the local marshes such as Frenchman's Bay, Whitby Harbour, Fudger's Marsh, and Dundas Marsh, readers should remember that one of the most rewarding waterfowl observation trips is along the Niagara River from Fort Erie to Niagara-on-the-Lake. On the way to Niagara the marshes at Jordan and the Henley Course at St. Catherines should be taken in. The whole route is full of interesting possibilities. The premier trip for the end of March and beginning of April is, of course, to Long Point where one has the chance of seeing the wonderful flight of the whistling swans as well as the assurance of seeing hundreds and thousands of ducks along the Causeway and the marshes. Since Port Rowan is almost exactly 100 miles from Toronto this trip can be made in one day, but for real enjoyment and a reasonable chance to see the early morning and late afternoon movements of the waterfowl it is better to stay overnight. Good looking, everyone.

R. M. Saunders

Editor.