

Toronto Field Naturalists' Club

156

May Meeting

Monday, May 4, 1958, at 8.15 p.m.

at the
ROYAL ONTARIO MUSEUM

Speaker: Dr. John Oughton
Subject: "In Search of the Very Small"

Dr. Oughton teaches zoology in the Department of Entomology and Zoology at the Ontario Agricultural College, Guelph. He was formerly with the Royal Ontario Museum of Zoology. Dr. Oughton's sense of humour makes him a particularly sought-after speaker.

"In Search of the Very Small" will cover the history of the microscope, something of the lives of two microscopists, and something of the significance, in a general way, of their theories.

F.O.N. Regional Gathering Willow Beach, May 25

For the benefit of our newer members, who may be making their first trip to Willow Beach, may we point out a slight inaccuracy in the directions for the May 25th outing. The distance east of Newcastle is approximately 10 miles, and it is 5 miles east of Newtonville. The sign on the Morrish Church has recently been removed, but it is the only small red brick church answering that description in the vicinity. Mrs. Reeve's telephone number is Clark 17-14, not 15 as printed.

Change of Address

If any of our members change their address during the summer, will they please notify the Secretary.

F.O.N. Camp

For a holiday that is different, why not come to the F.O.N. Camp, at Billie Bear Lodge, near Huntsville, from June 28 to July 12? Here a holiday in Muskoka is combined with interesting instruction in natural history. It isn't all work either - picnics, swimming, bon fires, sing-songs are all part of the programme. Information may be obtained from Mrs. J.B. Stewart, 21 Millwood Road, HU 9-5052 or the F.O.N. Office, 187 Highbourne Road, HU 9-4694.

Change of Secretary

May we introduce our new Secretary, Mrs. Hilton Robson. Mrs. Robson has previously been the Directress of the Junior Field Naturalists' Club, and is taking over the duties of the Secretary of this Club from Mrs. J.B. Stewart, as of this date. Mrs. Robson's address is 49 Craighurst Avenue, telephone Hu 1-0260. We bespeak for her your full cooperation and assistance in her new office.



Number 156

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Our annual spring trip to Long Point Bay to see the swan and duck migration was set a week earlier (March 22-23) than usual this year. In part this was done because of personal reasons; in part, however, it was because a year ago we had on the last weekend of the month missed the main swan concentration by two days. Really, of course, any date would be a gamble for the movements of birds and the vagaries of the weather cannot be anticipated with such nice precision. The earlier weekend might prove as good as the customary later date.

After a phenomenally long stretch of gray weather, this weekend was perfectly sunny, thus giving us an ideal setting for observation. Moreover, before leaving Toronto we had reliable reports of the presence of some hundreds of swans at Long Point. The prospect appeared auspicious.

However, the further south we travelled the less promising became the picture. At Dundas Marsh there was barely a rim of open water. Before we reached Brantford drifts of snow grew higher and higher alongside the road. The nearer we approached to Lake Erie the wintrier grew the scene. When we finally got to Port Rowan and gazed out across the bay we were faced with a vast expanse of gray ice, cut in only a few places by lanes of open water. How ironic! We had come from ice-free Lake Ontario and a snowless countryside around Toronto to winter by going south!

This was disappointing. Far more so was the look we got when we entered the St. Charles Hotel, met the F.O.N. members already there, and asked about the swans. Their answer to our "reports" was a stare of complete incredulity and amazement. So far as they

knew no more than eight swans had been seen. Even these had now vanished. What a letdown.

Having made our arrangements at the hotel nonetheless we headed for the causeway across the marsh. Most of the ponds were frozen, though, being shallow, they were showing signs of coming open under the impact of the brilliant sun. But even where bits of open water were showing in the ponds there were as yet no ducks. We ate our lunches in the car beside one of the half-open ponds, hoping for something to fly in; nothing did. When we drove on we could see that all the ducks that were to be found in that quarter were concentrated -- packed would be more correct -- into a narrow lane of open water in the bay about half-a-mile off shore. Most of the pack were canvasbacks, hundreds of the red and silver birds being jammed together in tight dark masses along the edges of the ice.

The lakefront was no less wintry in look than the bay, the lake itself being crammed with icefloes whilst on the beach piles of ice stood in places as high as 12-15 feet. Such a scene as this we did not see in the Toronto area all winter. It is one, in fact, we could expect only in February as a rule, not in late March. Here on Lake Erie with goldeneyes, mergansers and herring gulls riding the swells amongst the icefloes we were looking at a strictly winter bird population amidst a pure winter water vista.

Cut-off Point presented us with another hampering factor -- low water level -- for great stretches of muck faced us where ordinarily we see coves and lagoons. Later in the season this condition will be excellent for shorebirds; now it meant that ducks would be forced much further out than usual. Such low water prevails in both Lake Ontario and Lake Erie. In one remnant pool near the point we did have the good fortune to find three shovellers feeding. Inasmuch as this was almost the identical spot where we saw shovellers last year we concluded that some food favored by this species is to be found there. As long as this last pool remains they will be able to feed on it; at the present rate of water level decline this may not be for long.

To the north of Cut-off Point over bay and marsh quite a bit of activity was taking place. Gulls in quantities were flying back and forth. We tried to discover some reason for their restlessness but found nothing more alarming than a marsh hawk quartering the cattails. In the midst of the repeated sorties we did catch sight of a glaucous gull, resplendently white and very conspicuous. White gulls are rare along Lake Erie, even in mid-winter, so we were pleased with this observation, wintry as it might be.

Activity was by no means confined to gulls for overhead waterfowl kept up a constant parade. Amongst the flocks of ducks

we soon saw larger birds -- geese -- another sight none too common in our experience at Long Point Bay. We were to see several groups of honkers during the afternoon, some circling round and round, perhaps seeking suitable landing spots in the midst of the expanse of ice, some passing on along the shore to the west. Both Canadas and blue geese were to be seen, sometimes mixed, sometimes separately. With sights like this matters began to assume a rosier hue. Wintry conditions were not preventing us from seeing interesting birds.

In the evening after dinner we made our usual run to the Backus Woods, an area which has recently been acquired for preservation by the local conservation authority. Here we had to park the car a short way along the east-west road since mud prevented further going. The northerly lane into the wood was still completely blocked by snow. Walking westward we listened intently. Presently a low whistling sound, not unlike the winnowing of a snipe, yet not coming to a crescendo like that, told us that a bird was in flight. The sound was familiar but after a long winter one's reactions to such familiar sounds are likely to be rusty, so it was some moments before it occurred to us that this was probably a woodcock in the air. Before long we heard another, and this one uttered one or two notes that settled the matter for they were certainly notes from a woodcock's song. Probably it was this bird that came hurtling down in the dusk, a quickly vanishing silhouette, a dark shape in the deepening gloom, glimpsed then gone, dropping into a wet field. No beeping occurred so I decided to offer my own variety. At once came the answer, two or three beeps followed by the same whistling of wings as the bird again flew up. The performance was not repeated, and the bird did not break into song in its flight. Our feeling was that the birds had just arrived, probably no females were present, and on this cool night they had little reason to get excited. We were fortunate to hear them at all.

But these were not the only sounds that evening. A fox barked repeatedly over towards the wood. Occasionally a swamp tree frog trilled, first of their kind to break the winter's spell. Once the night sky was alive with the exciting clamor of geese. Northward bound, they called to each other as they passed overhead, filling our minds with imagined yet true though unseen pictures of living creatures migrating through the dark. Perhaps these were the very birds we had seen over the bay in the afternoon, taking off now for a long trek underneath the stars towards their home in the Canadian north.

The next morning John Nettleton and I were out by 7.15, having been preceded by most of the other naturalists in the hotel, and down on the causeway. A line of cars a mile or so along this road told us before we arrived that something special was to be seen; and what could it most likely be on this weekend but swans? So it was; twenty-eight had arrived. They were in

the lane of water where we had seen the ducks the day before, twenty-one in one group, seven in another, widely separated. All were calling loudly, that soft, mellow tooting that is one of the most appealing of all bird sounds. Suddenly the tooting increased in volume, became more intense; such an outburst almost always portends flight so we were not surprised when the smaller flock rose in the air. Majestically the great white birds circled low over the old grey ice, then swept gracefully up the water lane to their fellows, settling again. The flight of these wonderful birds and their music, this is what we had come to see and hear more than anything else. They did not fly more but they kept up their calling, and we stood listening, entranced, enriched. With whistling swans chorussing in the bay and redwings exchanging greetings in the cattails all around there could be no doubt; the icy view notwithstanding, that spring was in the air, and in the hearts and spirits of birds and humans alike.

Returning to the hotel for breakfast we set out again for the causeway and the swans as soon as we could. On the way we went down onto the main Port Rowan dock where we could get a closer look at hundreds of ducks. It was not the ducks, though, that really held our attention here, for at the end of the dock were two swans, not whistlers this time but mutes. Four of this species appeared on the bay last fall, and remained for the winter. Two were seen or thought to be too weak to survive, so were captured and taken elsewhere to be cared for. The other two could not be caught. They did survive the winter, being fed corn, thrown from the dock by local people. Indeed feeding was going on when we got to the dock; a man was casting corn into the water, the swans eagerly snapping up what they could retrieve. When he stopped the swans swam out a little. I did not have any corn, but I did have some sunflower seed in my pocket so I threw this out, and in came the swans to investigate. Whether it was this deception -- they evidently did not care for the seed -- or springtime urges one of the swans uttered a long-drawn-out cry. Not loud, it was easily heard by all of us on the dock, at 25-30 feet distance. It sounded like a bass clarinet tone, and in the middle of the performance occurred a bubbling or gargling crescendo, giving way again to the same clarinetlike tone, this finally fading out. Though not repeated it was quite startling since never before had any of us ever heard a note from a mute swan.

What about these mute swans? Are they wild or not? My own feeling is that these birds were very likely so. It is now established, as the new edition of the checklist of the American Ornithologists' Union indicates, that this species has gone wild at Pymatuning in Pennsylvania, and at Cleveland, Ohio. Both areas are in the Lake Erie region, the first being directly across the lake from Long Point Bay and less than a hundred miles away; the second is not much if any further in a southwesterly direction. There is no reason why swans from

either area should not wander across Lake Erie, even set up nesting on the Ontario side. Indeed, this is to be expected. Evidently the mute swan, having already gone wild in the southern New England region, is spreading as a wild species in North America. Unless in the case of particular birds it can be proven otherwise, I think that the time has come to count these birds as wild in our area.

The other swans, the whistlers, were still to be seen when we got back to the causeway. Now, however, they had gone quiet to the disappointment of Greer and the rest of us; for all their grace and beauty the swans are not as exciting so as when flying and calling.

A tour of the point gave us much the same picture as on the previous afternoon, except that now there were no signs of geese. They had gone. Most striking to all the many observers on the point that day was the nearly complete lack of small birds in the pine groves that ordinarily at this season are full of migrants. Not a robin nor a flicker, only one song sparrow, one meadowlark, two juncos, two tree sparrows -- so it went. The whole migration was late, a laggard season in truth.

Fortunately compensation was to be found right next door to the hotel since a Carolina wren had been heard singing there repeatedly. When we returned from the point we had a try for this bird. Following Charlie Davies' instructions we walked across the street, through an empty lot and on to the bayside bluff, here heavily covered with shrubby tangles, and decorated by a dump. No wren was to be seen or heard so I tried pishing. Without a moment's hesitation I got response. From somewhere in the tangle the wren appeared, flew up to a prominent perch, and broke into loud rollicking song. I kept up my part, the wren went on and on. Was it defying me to intrude, or reacting to my pishing as an alarm and notifying the world that everything was all right and safe really? But was it the "world" that was being notified? After a while a heavy buzzing sound intruded upon my ears. It took a time to register as there was competition close by from a young lady who was striding up and down a garden playing the bagpipes! When it did register I realized that the buzzing was being made by another wren. It had to be another since it occurred when the first was singing. Pretty soon I could be sure as the second wren darted out of a hole in an old apple tree, and plunged into the tangle on the slope. As soon as this happened the singer stopped and did likewise. After they both became quiet no amount of pishing or squeaking could bring them into sight again. Were the wrens nesting so early?; or were they merely taking up territory?; or possibly househunting was going on and the lady didn't like being disturbed whilst she was trying to make up her mind. Whatever it may have been Carolina wrens are not yet common in

Ontario so that this sight provided a pleasing antidote for the lack of land birds elsewhere.

Again thanks to Charlie Davies of Aurora we learned that the "Front Road" that we have followed in past years from Turkey Point to Saint Williams continues from that place to Port Rowan. What we have always taken to be a local lane is in fact its outlet into that town. How foolish of us not to have found this out before; yet, perhaps it was better to have had it left till now -- not through any planning on our part -- for a "discovery" like that always adds drama to any trip. Along this unknown road we found several spots where we could look down the bay bluff onto feeding ducks, excellent lookouts not to be forgotten again. In the midst of ploughed fields near St. Williams we saw another of spring's exhilarating sights, heard once again the stirring sounds of a tremendous flock of redwinged blackbirds giving expression to all their wild vernal emotions. First they sat in trees along the fields until the branches seemed laden with black fruit. Then they swung and swirled above the furrows, flashing thousands of red epaulets in the sun and shouting their delight in life and living and springtime to the skies. Settling on brown clods they turned mud into living earth, then up again they sprang singing for joy. It was a mystery-laden, thrilling experience, an insight into the zest for life that throbs through all Nature, and a glimpse of the beauty that always accompanies such feeling.

We drove on to the Forestry Station, there to park the car behind the barns since the roads in the woods were impassable. We carried our lunches to the pond where, just as we came to the shore, a pair of wood duck sprang into flight and went rushing away up along the brook into the sheltering trees. The pond was half-open with ice still on the lower end. Snow yet lay in many places beneath the trees. But the sun was warm and comfortable so we ensconced ourselves on logs from the woodpile and munched sandwiches whilst keeping eyes on the pond and the woods. Here, now that the wood ducks had gone, all was profoundly quiet. Peace and beauty reigned; the sun falling on the long, clean boles of the red pines brought out all their color, turning them into green-topped roseate pillars. The tamaracks, as tall as the pines, were draped in cascades of silvery-blue sheen whilst willows and osiers splashed the scene with vivid orange and red. We walked the icy road to the bridge over the brook, and everywhere the serene loveliness held sway, so impressive that man and bird both kept quiet. Jays aroused from some hidden haunt slipped away without a sound, blue flashes above a mirroring brown brook; chickadees eyeing us curiously, emitted scarcely a whisper. In such surroundings as these a deep peacefulness covered all, and everyone and everything knew that this peace must not be disturbed. We came away refreshed, ready for the long ride home, and feeling a fitting finis to another Marchtime trip to Long Point Bay.

A letter recently received by Mr. Jack Livingston from Mrs. G. H. Fairbrother of Pefferlaw, and passed on by him to the Newsletter, will awaken memories in many readers and be of interest to all who know Toronto. Mrs. Fairbrother writes,

"Your prediction of High Park denuded of trees brought me up with a jolt, for that was well-known ground to me even before the turn of the century. Being non-resident in the City for some years, and driven quickly through High Park last summer, my first reaction was, 'too well-manicured', secondly, the excellent facilities for a great number of picnickers - but a far cry from my first experience of a picnic van, horse-drawn, and having arrived - a bee-line for the row of swings.

"All through the Park was in early days a dense ground-cover, flowers, shrubs, young trees. And what a field-day the present bird-watchers would have had! And no shortage of Red-headed Woodpeckers. Many flowers - or might I say nearly all flowers - have disappeared. Where, for instance, may one find a Sassafras bush - the fragrance of crushed leaf or the pungent taste of the stems?

"At the head of Howard Pond was a glorious bed of Water Cress, fed from the cedar-lined fish ponds in the Kennedy Estate. At that point on Bloor Street, the sand hill rose sharply - the banks covered with the delicate Harebell.

"At what is now Runnymede, the fields to the south would be covered with wild roses, and later, a sweeping stretch of blue lupin.

"On the north - a steady stretch of bush, stopped by a farm on the northeast corner. Another farm on the southwest. As a matter of fact, with the exception of a few frame cottages close to Dundas Street, there were but four dwellings between that point and the Humber.

"The Humber valleys were sheer joy - great tall Tiger Lilies and ferns almost reaching my shoulders - a child at that time. On the drier land - shorter-stemmed Tiger Lilies.

"In spring we came for Hepaticas, Trailing Arbutus, Trillium, Bloodroot, Jack-in-the Pulpit, coming and going by foot from the Bloor-Delaware area.

"During summer we carried baskets and went fruiting - Raspberries and Blackberries - toward the Humber and many a quart of blueberries were gathered in the northern section of High Park. I could dream on - for I knew almost every foot of that country from Dundas to the Humber ..."

To those who like to travel far afield and who wish to plan their trips well ahead, the following article from the New York Times of March 23, 1958, written by Ernest P. Edwards, Associate Director, the Houston (Texas) Museum of Natural History, will be of considerable interest. A number of our members have already found their way to Mexico, and have discovered what a rich land it is for the observers of birds. It is none the less so for botanists and other field naturalists.

Mr. Edwards writes, "To the south of us, in Mexico, there are almost a thousand different kinds of birds, many of them of great beauty and curiosity. Since a large proportion of these kinds are unknown in the United States, Mexico is of great interest to birdwatchers -- a rapidly growing army all over our own country, a number of whom are also being attracted southward, because of the rare character of the tropical species to be found there.

"The Museum of Natural History here recently announced the third annual series of birdwatching tours in Mexico which I have organized and conducted, and has given me a two-months' leave in the spring to carry it out. So, in April and May three successive groups of us will travel from mountain top to tropical lowland, across the backbone of Mexico from the Gulf of Mexico to the Pacific Ocean. We will stop in pre-selected localities where the most exciting tropical birds are to be seen. The tours this spring will be of eleven, eight and thirteen days, starting in each case from Mexico City.

What and Where

"For birders in general, anxious to view Mexico's remarkable varieties, here are some details on what may be found -- and where.

"Although inaccessible barrancas, impenetrable rain forests and steaming swamps are traditionally considered the havens of the most unusual birds, these are not essential handicaps of Mexican birdwatching. Much can be accomplished in a short time by visiting readily accessible places where accommodations are good. We have come up with a total list of nearly 300 kinds of birds in two weeks, some of them among the world's rarest species. Even birders experienced in both the eastern and western United States have found 150 to 175 birds entirely new to them.

"Cuernavaca, Acapulco, Oaxaca, Mexico City, some of the country's famous resorts, furnish unique birding experiences. For example, the rare white-naped swift is found within the city limits of Cuernavaca. Related to our chimney swift, but as large as a small hawk, it is still almost unknown even to professional ornithologists. Yet from a vantage point in a garden on the rim of the canyon one can look down on it and

see plainly the white splash across the back of its neck from which comes its name. Just at sunset, while the small chestnut-collared swifts streak through the sky above, the big white-naped swifts wheel up the canyon below, probably coming to roost in the steep rocky cliffs.

Another Rarity

"Of a morning, a trip out to the Canon de Lobos reveals another of Mexico's rarest birds, the ragged-crested little pileated flycatcher. On one tour, realizing that this bird's nest had never been reported, we searched for and found an unusual semi-pendant nest and then stood back a few rods and watched as a pileated flycatcher came to the nest and covered its young -- not fifteen miles from the Cortez Palace in Cuernavaca.

"A big surprise is bird watching at Acapulco. Good places near there are the fields and woodlands near Playa Revolcadero, the woodlands above the Naval Base, Pie de la Cuesta and the Laguna Coyuca. Two of the birds seen most frequently are as spectacular as almost any birds of the tropics. The flaming streaked-backed oriole and the crested, yellow and black yellow-winged cacique never fail to thrill visiting birdwatchers.

Nesting Herons

"From Acapulco can be visited a colony of nesting boat-billed herons, a rare and bizarre species characterized by an extremely broad bill. It has been supposed to be a solitary nester, but there near Acapulco dozens of nests are placed only a few feet apart in the mangrove branches. The nests, with two white eggs in each, are beset constantly by marauding San Blas jays, big black and blue birds ready to break and eat an egg if the owner of the nest moves very far away.

"In the nearest approach to a rugged mountain trip, we have driven about twenty-five miles in four-wheel drive vehicles to a cloud forest called El Suspiro, there to hear what has been called the most beautiful bird voice in the world, the song of the slate-colored solitaire. On this trip, high points are finding other tropical birds like the bananaquit, the striped-tailed hummingbird feeding among the surprisingly fragrant yellow orchids, the collared trogon, the crimson-collared tanager, and the blue-black grosbeak.

"On the broad plains north of Mexico City and east through open pine woodlands, sometimes Mexican trogons and American robins, red warblers and red crossbills, slate-throated redstarts and white-breasted nuthatches can be seen. Then one can descend precipitously to the 4,000-foot level on the eastern slopes of the Sierra Madre Oriental.

"Small tree ferns along the highway give the first hint of a dramatic change, and then larger ones are joined by sweet gum trees and finally by all the varied plant species which make up the scattered cloud forests of eastern Mexico.

Pre-Supper Viewing

"In late afternoon and before supper at a hotel in Villa Juarez, one can view twenty or thirty new birds in the surrounding azalea and camellia gardens, citrus groves and park-like woodlands.

"A morning trip brings the birder to the modified rain forests of the coastal plain not far from the rich oil fields of Poza Rica. More than any other type of habitat these tangled lowland forests convey the feeling of the tropics.

"The keel-billed toucan is there, almost as big as a crow, black with touches of white and red, with a bill almost banana size and banana color.

"On the edge of that dense woodland parrots are found -- the yellow-cheeked, the red-crowned, or the white-crowned -- usually flying overhead in pairs or feeding in the tops of the trees. Brilliantly colored trogons are there, with bright red or yellow underparts and iridescent green head and back. The blue-crowned motmot is one of the most unusual birds because its elongated central tail feathers have been stripped to the shafts for part of their length, giving the appearance of a pendulum or a tennis racket. The pendulum effect is heightened when the bird perches upright on a branch and swings its tail from side to side; and for just that reason the Mexicans sometimes call it pajaro reloj, the clock bird.

"Shy tinamous, brown-streaked woodcreepers, cotingas and honey creepers add to the list of new groups of birds that await the birdwatcher there.

Dense Vegetation

"Back in the cloud forests and coffee plantations around Villa Juarez the trails are narrow and lined with dense vegetation. This is the misty home of the azure-hooded jay, the gray-breasted wood wren, the green jay, and the emerald toucanet, a small delicate green cousin of the keel-billed toucan of the rain forest.

"To encompass all of these experiences within a few days might seem largely a matter of luck, but when the transportation, accommodations and field trips are carefully planned, the tropical birds will be there on arrival. Since a hard rain could ruin a field trip, tours should take place before the rainy season begins in earnest, that is, before June. Insects are of minor concern, and when mosquitoes or other flying insects become annoying,

repellents and long sleeves are effective. A protective sun lotion is useful in some areas. Provided with the customary smallpox vaccination and typhoid immunization, and exercising a little extra care with the food, most people should find a birdwatching tour no more strenuous than an ordinary sight-seeing tour."

DON'T FORGET THE F.O.N. SUMMER NATURE CAMP AT BILLIE BEAR LODGE NEAR HUNTSVILLE, JUNE 28 - JULY 12. NOW IS THE TIME TO REGISTER. ADDRESS F.O.N., 187 HIGHBOURNE ROAD, TORONTO 7, ONTARIO.

R.M. Saunders

Editor.