

Toronto Field Naturalists' Club

166

November Meeting

Monday, November 2, 1959, at 8.15 p.m.
at the
ROYAL ONTARIO MUSEUM

Speaker: Mr. Charles E. G. Molony
Subject: Springtime in the Rockies

Mr. Molony, an able naturalist and photographer, is a member of the Federation of Ontario Naturalists, and one of its recommended speakers. This film depicts the heritage of beauty to be seen in the mountain parks, Banff, Jasper and Kootenay, with close-up views of wildlife of the region.

NOVEMBER OUTING Saturday, November 21, at 9.30 a.m. Greenwood Conservation Area. Take the old Highway #2 to the eastern outskirts of Pickering; turn north at the "Greenwood Conservation Area" sign; drive north approximately 4 miles; the entrance to the area is well marked; meet at the entrance. Lunch optional. Leader: Mr. Fred Bodsworth, birds.

BOTANY CLUB Meet on Thursday, November 19, at 8.00 p.m. sharp, in the library, Eglinton Public School, Eglinton Ave and Mt. Pleasant Rd. Speaker: Dr. Kathleen L. Hull, Department of Botany, University of Toronto. Title: "Our Natural Fibres," illustrated with motion pictures. New members welcome. Secretary, Miss Florence Preston, HU 3-9530

JUNIOR CLUB The Junior Field Naturalists' Club will meet on Saturday, November 7, at 10.00 a.m., in the Museum theatre. The Bird Group will be in charge. Registration at the October meeting was heavy and this may be the last chance for children between the ages of 8 and 16 to join the Club this season. Director, Mr. Don Burton, RU 2-2155.

F.O.N. CHRISTMAS CARDS When you see these lovely Christmas cards on sale at the November meeting we are sure you will want to order a plentiful supply. The proceeds will help the good work of the Federation of Ontario Naturalists and of our own Club. Price \$1.50 per dozen.

SORRY! The Secretary regrets that due to an oversight the names of Mr. Don Burton and Mr. George Fairfield were omitted from the list of members of the Outings Committee given in the last Bulletin.

FEEES NOW OVERDUE Fees for the 1959-60 season were due in September. If you have not yet renewed your membership the secretary will be pleased to receive your \$2.00 fee by mail (preferably) or at November meeting.

President - Mr. A. A. Outram

Secretary - Mrs. H. Robson,
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Toronto Field Naturalists' Club.

NEWSLETTER

Number 166

October, 1959

Our knowledge of the personalities of birds grows through repeated encounter. Without such chances for close contact we can have hardly any idea of the character of the flitting bodies we see travelling through our region every spring and fall, or of the shadows we discover skulking in summer thickets without ever getting a satisfying look. Some indeed, are only sounds heard in the wood, identifiable, but scarcely known. It is all the more satisfactory, therefore, when we do obtain an opportunity to gain insight into the ways in which some birds live and do things.

Such a chance occurred for Greer Roberts and me at the end of the first week of July this past summer, when we made a day's birding trip to Algonquin Park. This we have done many times in other years, and on each occasion we have visited a certain spruce grove where the spruce grouse live. Usually we find them at home; hence, year by year we have added to our knowledge of their reactions and ways. This time we added a new chapter to that growing book.

The grove is flanked by beaver ponds, the innermost being a very secluded spot. Our quest this time took us past the first pond and through the main grove to the shore of the hidden inner pond without bringing us sight or sound of grouse. Disappointment loomed. Then, as I was standing looking out over the water, Greer, who was behind, hissed for me to come back. Thinking he was fooling, as it is not unknown for birders to play tricks on each other, I hesitated. But when he insisted emphatically I did retrace my steps to discover that he was in fact looking at a spruce grouse, and the bird was right at eye level, standing, appropriately enough, in a spruce tree. To my chagrin I now realized that I had passed along the path within four or five feet of this bird without noticing it at all. And this when I thought I was looking carefully. Still, I could not feel too badly about such an oversight for, motionless, the grouse appeared no more than one of many dark blobs in this tree, like another mass of needles or another shadow. This masking similarity, this blending into its natural surroundings is what the grouse was instinctively

counting upon. Had Greer's sharp eyes not discerned something slightly different about this particular shadow the bird could easily have made good on its normal protective device, acting like a shadow amongst shadows.

What was especially interesting was that this manner of camouflage, of motionless mergence, was being exhibited by a young bird. Such performances we had seen before on the part of adult birds but here was a youngster no more than three-quarters grown, still with an incomplete tail and fragments of down around the head, putting on the characteristic defensive act of the species.

The "tameness" or unwariness of the spruce grouse is well known, and has earned for it the disdainful sobriquet of "fool hen". This has always seemed to me more of a reflexion on the humans that use it than on the trusting bird to which it is applied. However that may be, the young grouse under observation also showed this family trait for once it knew that it was detected it offered little sign of fear and showed no urgency to leave. Indeed, while we were discussing this reaction Greer, glancing around, found that a second young grouse was peering at us from the top of a great green log, a few feet off in another direction. So far as we could see this bird was a replica of the first, and we concluded that both must be birds of the same nest.

Greer wanted to see one of the birds fly so I tried to get as close as I could, thinking that would set them off. As for the first bird I was able to reach within two feet, almost touching distance, before it became nervous. Then it merely made a dropping and walked sedately across the spruce branches out of my way. When approached again from the other side of the tree it repeated the procedure, only this time stepping down from branch to branch until it touched the ground, where it vanished, still quite unhurriedly, beneath the tall bracken. The second bird, as I drew near its log, did not wait as long as its companion before moving. After all it had watched me oust that bird and could be expected to be alarmed. Even so I was within six or seven feet before it started to leave its perch. Like the other, it walked down into the bracken, and unquestionably would have slipped away quietly had I not rushed in. Startled, it burst into flight, a noisy, throbbing escape, typically grousiform, for a few yards, when it dropped again into the green underworld of the bracken and was seen no more.

Greer had quite some fun with me for walking by both these birds "blind." Hence was it a face-saving comfort for me on our return trip to find first a freshly-used dusting spot--dust baths are a grouse delight--and to see, a moment later, the "duster" come sauntering out from under the bracken. She, for it was an adult female, possibly the mother of the two youngsters already seen, gave us a highly suspicious and questioning look. This look was enough, it seems, for she quickly revanished into the bracken wilderness. We did not attempt to force her into further view. Three spruce grouse on one trip was a triumph. We were content to leave it at that, all the more so since our book of knowledge about this bird had received so illuminating an addition.

Greer and I had a second encounter in early July which threw a lot of light on the way some birds behave. This also occurred at a beaver pond, this pond being in the neighbourhood of Lake of Bays. We had been in by canoe ten days before this event without seeing or hearing very much. We were amazed to find that in ten days a carpet of white blooms had been drawn

over large areas of the pond, white pond lilies. Thousands of blossoms lay open to the sun, their perfume filling the air so that we glided across a scented sea. In some parts islands of floating sphagnum rose green above the lilled water supporting gardens of sweet gale, pink-flecked with countless rose pogonias. Green frogs leaped from lily pads as we edged near whilst unseen bull frogs drew echoes from the shores with booming bass salutes.

Beyond the larger outer pond lies a secreted inner pool, to be reached only by a narrow opening across a submerged and overgrown beaver dam. Many pleasant surprises have awaited us in this hidden pool during the passing years. Might it be that another was to come our way this day? Certainly a most peculiar squalling was going on there, through which the sharp pip-pip-pip complaints of an olive-backed flycatcher could be heard. Lured by this curious commotion we turned more quickly than planned into the channel that leads in. As we came up to the submerged dam another note, a squealing grunt, half-familiar, half strange, added itself to the increasing uproar. Peering ahead I tried to get a sight of the squealer and soon had a waterfowl of some sort in view. Obviously it was tremendously agitated, was keeping a close watch on us and squealing. Momentarily it got behind some dense growth. When again it appeared it shrilled in a manner unmistakable to anyone who has heard a wood duck in alarm. We speeded up, paddling hard, and as we cleared the brush-dotted dam we saw before us a female wood duck with eight fluffy young. Urging her brood on with grunts and squeals she swam before us as fast as we could paddle, the downy ducklings bustling furiously to keep pace with the mother. Suddenly the swimming was too arduous for them and all with one accord took to the top of the water, racing over the surface as if it were solid land. Drops of water splattered and gleamed behind the pattering feet, and we were not gaining an inch. Straight for a forest of sweet gale ahead they went with us hard behind. Then our eyes were briefly diverted when with a final piercing squeal and a swish of wings the mother duck beat up into the air, veering off towards a remote pool in the midst of the sweet gale. Down she dipped, and was gone, silent, unseen, safe. And when we looked to see where the young were now, what they were doing in the face of desertion, they too were gone. Not a sign of a single one could we see, all vanished as if they had never been. Doubtless all were safe and sound, hidden in the impenetrable tangles of gale, making their way to the wily mother. Duped we had been, tricked most successfully by a wood duck in defense of her young.

And were we the only ones so fooled? What was all that squalling that had first brought us in here, which had been going on all the time though we had paid little heed during our pursuit of the ducks. Now it reached our ears in raucous bursts. What could it be? Others besides ourselves noticed it too, for all around us birds were crying out their alarms. No less than four olive-sided flycatchers were pipping clamorously from high lookout spires. A scarlet tanager, a wood thrush, several vireos and peewees sounded from the wood, whilst swamp sparrows and whitethroats, kingbirds and yellowthroats called from the open bog. All at once a large hawk glided from a leafy tree where it had been perched, unbeknownst to us, surveying the pond. Its squalls reached a spitting crescendo as it took wing and kept up until it had gone from sight far over the bog. Why so angry? The tone of utter exasperation could not be mistaken; nor could it be doubted that we were the objects of displeasure. One answer there could be, one only. By our entry into the inner pond we had interfered with the hawk's intended hunting, with its

meal. What more certain to cause angry outburst than that! And what was the hoped-for prey? The little ducks it must have been, for should they come out of the water anywhere--on an islet, on lily pads, on shore--they would be easy catches. We had caused them to disappear, to take shelter from human and hawk alike. We had deprived the hawk of his proposed dinner, causing him to leave in disgust. Good! Ordinarily I wouldn't say that. Hawks have as much right to live as other creatures. But on this occasion I could not feel the same. I was glad the wood ducks were safe, and that we unwittingly had been the means of driving them to safety. Perhaps there will be a few more of these beauties to gladden the eyes of the bird watchers this fall and winter because of our experience. May they escape hunters as well as hawks and return next spring to raise another family or more on this secret pond.

If these two little adventures in bird psychology concerned protection and predation my third is as clearly a matter of curiosity. It occurred only a few days ago towards the end of September at Terra Cotta. My wife and I were walking into the woods in the early evening, pausing here and there while I made imitations of screech owl calls, hoping to get a response from somewhere. All summer, contrary to our usual experience, there has been no screech owls so I was not too hopeful. Still, one can never tell; always worth a try. For the first few steps the only answering sounds were the annoyed mutterings and chatter of disturbed robins. If robins are around you can always be sure of arousing a response to screech owl quavering. Finally near the blueberry rock I heard the reply I was trying to elicit; a screech owl was calling somewhere up the brook near the pasture. After several repetitions silence prevailed. My further efforts went unanswered. At least, I thought they did until Ann, feeling tired, sat down on the rock. In doing so she faced away from where I was looking, and immediately whispered, "Here's an owl now. It has just flown into a tree."

For a few moments I kept on calling without trying to see for fear of scaring the owl. Then, since it had not moved I turned cautiously around, sat down and looked. It took quite a little peering, following Ann's directions, before I could make out through the deep dusk that dark, round-headed form. Once located it was possible to discern the owl's plumage vaguely--grey, spotted heavily with white on the wings--and to see the "ears", or I should say one "ear", sticking out at an angle when it turned its head. My calling obviously caused the owl to stretch and crane, to turn and peer but not a sound did it make in reply, not a vocal query did it offer. After five minutes of this I put on a more vigorous series of calls which raised sufficient excitement so that the curious owl ventured several feet nearer into a small tree at the edge of the rock. It was now about ten feet from where we sat. Another five minutes passed and every time I called the owl's head rose and twisted earnestly as the puzzled bird tried to discover what this other queer fellow was. At last Ann got so stiff she had to stand up. Even this movement so near did not send the owl into flight. Then as Ann walked a few steps toward his perch Otus did take wing but only to glide a few feet and alight again. As Ann stood on the path I made one more effort of vigorous calling. This so moved the owl that it left its perch, flew straight for me and only veered off when it was two feet from my head. And despite such a close view Otus still came to rest in a tree on the other side of the rock, only a few feet away. Unfortunately we had to go as darkness was nearly upon us and we had no lights to see what might go on. Would that we had not forgotten them for it would have been an experiment worth trying to see how long we could hold the attention of our attendant owl.

Excursions such as these into the reactions of birds spur the bird watcher to seek ever more that through them he may enter more fully into an understanding of the world of wings. Experience extends, comprehension deepens, but the end is never in sight. There is an endless appeal, for who can know all?

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It has often seemed to me strange that so many field naturalists obviously relied upon only one sense, that of sight, in their experiencing of nature. Why they should neglect all the other channels to observation and knowledge is a puzzle I have never solved.

Consequently I was much interested to see in a recent issue of the Nature Bulletin (No. 568, May 23, 1959), of the Forest Preserve District of Cook County, Illinois, an article on Plant Odors in which is the suggestion that "you can take a smelling tour any month in the year". The idea was so intriguing that I decided that readers of the Newsletter would like to see how this idea is put forth. They may not agree with the opinions expressed but I hope their disagreement will prove a nose-opener for all that and a revelation of a new way of enjoying nature.

Plant Odors

A lawn being mowed, hay curing in the sun, the faint elusive scent of freshly turned soil, the woody aroma of the out-of-doors after a summer shower, or the drifting smoke from burning autumn leaves--these make almost anyone want to stop, shut his eyes and inhale the fragrances that come on the breeze.

Smells are difficult to express in language. Compared with the wealth of words, symbols and other methods for recording sensations of sight, sound and touch, there are only a few which graphically describe odors.

Odors are detected by special sense cells in two patches, about the size of postage stamps, in the uppermost parts of the nasal chambers. Each sense cell is connected with the brain. With ordinary breathing, scents often go unnoticed. Once alerted, however, we sniff, the sensitive patches are ventilated, and odors seem much stronger. Volatile oils such as those of peppermint and flower essences give our most characteristic scents. Most other odoriferous substances are also soluble in oil. The human nose, although much less sensitive than a dog's can detect unbelievably small quantities of such substances--often, in a single sniff, as little as one part in billions.

The woods, meadows and wetlands of our forest preserves offer a delightful variety of wild fragrances. Some are friendly and soothing, others exhilarating, and many call up memories of scenes and happenings from the distant past. Some of us have strange likes or dislikes among odors for reasons that lie buried in our subconscious minds.

A few of our local wild flowers have characteristic scents but the great majority are either lacking in distinctive odors or else our noses are too crude and untrained to distinguish differences. Wild rose have a

delicate sweet fragrance. So do the opening flowers of wild crabapples. But the beautiful white blossoms of the hawthorn smell like canned sardines. The basswood, black locust, elderberry and buttonbush blooms have rich, rather strong perfumes which attract multitudes of honeybees. The grayish-purple flowers of the common milkweed smell sickish and nauseating. Mayapples, when ripe, were dried by our grandmothers to give a pleasant odor to stored clothing and bedding, but the perfume of their flowers is heavy and cloying. For pure enjoyment, nothing can excel the clean refreshing fragrance of the inconspicuous flowers of the wild grape.

Aside from flowers, some of our most interesting odors come from the leaves and other parts of wild plants. Take the mints, for example. A sprig of catnip reminds us of the tea father used to brew on picnics but it makes a cat do flip-flops and purr with ecstasy. Strolling down a woodland trail, a sudden pungent aroma of pennyroyal makes us hunt for the little mint plant we have stepped on. Peppermint and spearmint smell like chewing gum or candy but much fresher and stronger. Crushed leaves of bergamot or horsemint are highly aromatic but a trifle rank.

An unripe walnut makes a fine pocket piece for sniffing purposes. A tangy root of wild ginger makes spicy nibbling. Nearby, in the moist woodland, the leaves and fruit of the sweet cicely smell like licorice. The buds and twigs of the spicebush are really spicy. All parts of a sassafras are as aromatic as root beer. The feathery leaves of yarrow are strongly pungent, something like sage. You can take a smelling tour any month in the year.

We already have audio-visual education. Let's have nasal education, too.

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The king rails in Chinguacousy, mentioned in the last issue of the Newsletter, were last seen, I am informed by Dr. Donald Gunn, on September 11. No later observation is known. The interest in them after the publication of J. L. Baillie's article in The Telegram was even greater than I had supposed. Jim tells me that he was told that on one occasion, "There were 40 cars parked bumper to bumper" extending along the road almost from No. 27 side road to the wet place! Who says people aren't interested in birds?

The egret on the Credit (also mentioned in the last issue), between Huttonville and Norval, was last seen about the middle of the first week of September, according to A. F. Coventry, President of the South Peel Nature Club. This means that it stayed in that vicinity for over a month, an interesting sidelight on the habits of a distinguished bird visitor and on the good pickings for such birds in the Credit River.

The members of the Toronto Ornithological Club, holding their annual Fall Field Day in the Cherrywood-Whitby-Pickering area on September 13, amassed the amazing total of 147 species of birds seen. This is believed to be the highest count ever made by any group in the Toronto region in either spring or fall. That it should have been made in September instead of May is remarkable for local observers seldom get more than 100 species

in a daily count after the end of August. On this occasion several were doing so for the first time. It is also interesting that in the long list no real rarity was found. Somehow it happened--no doubt weather conditions had most to do with it--that a flood of regular migrants was flowing through the countryside at the time that the Club .hose to hold its field day. They'll have a hard time breaking that record in years to come. But it certainly was exciting taking part in such a count.

We are entering now into the latter stage of the migration in which sparrows, the larger hawks, ducks and geese predominate. On the whole this means that the lake front and the larger bodies of water will be the most profitable places in which to do your birdwatching.

With the coming of November winter visitors may be expected. What they will be, outside of certain faithfuls like tree sparrows, juncos, golden-crowned kinglets, etc., is impossible to say. And the fact that it is so is one of the attractions of all winter birdwatching. The answer to the question, what will this winter bring?, is always a surprise. Last year the big surprise was the incursion of the Bohemian waxwings. What will this winter bring? No one knows, but keep an eye open and find out.

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For several years it has been a privilege of the Newsletter and of the members of the T.F.N.C. to share in the continental cooperative migration study which is being conducted from the Patuxent Research Refuge in Laurel, Maryland, as a center. We, therefore, again print the return forms and instructions for the current migration, and urge all who feel able or desirous of doing so to send in filled returns to the research center.

