

Toronto Field Naturalists' Club

168

January Meeting

Monday, January ~~4~~ 1960, at 8:15 p.m.
at the
ROYAL ONTARIO MUSEUM

Speaker: Mr. Kenneth Armsom, of the Department of Botany, University of Toronto.

Subject: SOILS, FORESTS AND MAN (illustrated with colour slides)

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OUTINGS: Saturday, January 16, at 9 a.m.: To visit likely spots for owls. Meet at Wilson Ave. and Avenue Rd. Take Wilson bus from Glen Echo loop at 8:30 a.m. Leader: Mr. Bob Taylor.

Sunday, January 24, at 9 a.m.: The waterfront for ducks. Meet at Woodbine Beach car park, south of Old Woodbine race track. Those using public transportation will take streetcar to Queen and Coxwell and walk south. Leaders: Mr. George Fairfield and Mr. Don Burton.

Drivers please note: On both of the above outings we will be travelling some distance, so we would appreciate as many cars as possible. Your co-operation will be needed in accommodating those who have come by bus or streetcar.

BOTANY GROUP: Meet on Thursday, January 21, at 8 p.m. sharp, in the library, Eglinton Public School, Eglinton and Mt. Pleasant.
Speaker: Dr. Jas. H. Soper.
Subject: The Distribution of Wild Plants in Southern Ontario (illustrated with specimens, maps and colour slides) - an outline of the main patterns of distribution shown by the native plants of southern Ontario with reference to the climatic, geological and historical factors which influence their spread.
New members welcome. Secretary - Miss Florence Preston,
HU. 3-9530.

JUNIOR CLUB: The Junior Field Naturalists' Club will meet at 10 a.m. on Saturday, January 9, at the Museum Theatre. The Insect Group will be in charge, and films will be shown. No further registrations of new members will be made this season.
Director - Mr. Don Burton, RU. 2-2155.

IF YOU DID NOT RECEIVE A NEWSLETTER with this announcement you will know that according to our records your membership fee has not been paid. This is just a friendly reminder, and upon receipt of your fee we shall be glad to send you the missing Newsletter. If you think there has been an error, kindly notify the Secretary, as with 800 members to look after mistakes do sometimes occur.

President - Mr. A. A. Outram

Secretary - Mrs. H. Robson, 49 Craighurst Ave.,
Toronto 12. HU. 1-0260.

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Number 168

December 1959.

When the gay holly decks the Christmas halls, red of berry, spiny-tipped and glossy green, when the precious piles appear in stores, brought so far the cost mounts high and the jolly greens are weighed out leaf by leaf, twig by twig, I often wonder how many people know that holly, a true holly, grows all around us in places most of them never go.

Enquiries among my non-naturalist friends indicate that none of them are aware of this fact. And even among field naturalists I find that less than half seem to know of the existence of a native holly in Ontario. Indeed, to raise the point is to invite arch looks of skepticism and polite rejoinders. Holly is something esoteric, a memory of old England, a reminder of Virginia and Florida and Texas, or a Christmas sprig from British Columbia, but certainly nothing of our own countryside.

Now, it is true, of course, that no one in Ontario woods has to negotiate the thickets of holly thorn that are so plentiful in the southern States, and which provide such wonderful cover for wild birds and fourfooted creatures. This is Ilex opaca, the holly of most of the Christmas trade on this continent. A wonderful plant, it is often a magnificent tree, dominating whole stretches of woods. No, this does not reach Ontario, although along the Atlantic coast it does grow as far north as Maine, quite as far as southern Ontario in latitude. But if the thorny Ilex opaca does not appear in Ontario another member of the distinguished holly family certainly does, and it belongs to the very same genus. It too is an Ilex, Ilex verticillata being its name.

It grows, as we suggested, in places where people -- most people, that is -- never go. And those who do have other things upon their minds. They are likely to be hunters, fishermen, perhaps even watchers of birds, to whom the pleasant green plant world all around is a hardly noticed framework for activities all their own. I can say this with emphasis about myself, for this was my own experience as it is apparently that of so many others. Then there came a day, many years ago now, when Bill Smith and I were going up a long blue lake in the Haliburton hills at Thanksgiving time. The leaves were mostly down, vistas were far and stark save where the perennial green of pine and hemlock clothed the slopes. Bill was driving his outboard, taking me to a secluded bay

where there might be special birds to see. We entered a narrow channel, cautiously nosing along as the banks closed steadily in upon us, until at last it seemed we could go no farther. Suddenly, as if a gate had swung open before us, the closing ceased and in front of us lay the open water of the secluded bay, and across the nearest arm, mirrored in the dark water, blazing against the dark green of the pines, rose a wall of flaming red. For hundreds of feet it flanked the shore of the bay. It took one's breath away, and diverted attention from everything else. Only when we drew near did I realize that the wall was a mass of bushes, whose silver-grey branches were lined with vivid vermilion berries. Not even the most unmindful of passersby could fail to be impressed. This was Ilex verticillata. It insisted upon being known, and the introduction has never been forgotten.

Since that memorable occasion I have come to know this holly far and wide. It is amazing how often it is demonstrated that if one has one's eyes opened then it is possible to see; one moment blind, the next awakened. Now I realize that Ilex verticillata grows all over southern Ontario in suitable places. Indeed, it is to be found within fifteen miles of Toronto City Hall, and possibly much closer. True, it likes its feet wet all the time, scarcely tolerating any other condition, thereby placing itself in what most people regard as inaccessible spots. Yet for all that it is possible to drive along paved roads in the Toronto area and to see flecks of gleaming orange amidst the unfallen green leaves in September as one passes certain swales, the berries of the holly coming into color. Then when the fall winds have stripped the leaves from bush and tree you can see the fully reddened berries glowing like little coals in the dark November woods, or if the day is bright and sharp the Ilex branches are like fiery fingers pointing upward into the blue autumnal sky. The best effects are for those who wade in and forget the road but even for the ones that whirl by there is beauty there to see.

One of the reasons, no doubt, why this holly is unknown as such, even to many who recognize the plant, is the fact that it goes by misleading common names. In Ontario it is often called Black Alder, whereas in Quebec it is named Aulne Blanche or Apalanche (White Alder). It is not an alder at all, the alder being a genus (Alnus) of the Hazel family (Corylaceae) whereas this is an Ilex of the Holly family (Aquifoliaceae). Another, and more appropriate, common name is Winterberry, though it is hardly very exact since so many other plants bear berries in winter. The berries, incidentally, are highly prized by many birds, thrushes, catbirds, towhees, finches and some sparrows being among the number. To save confusion, and often argument, it is best to call this Ilex by its proper botanical name, Ilex verticillata. In English this could be translated as Whorled Holly, the adjective referring to the arrangement of the flowers. Such a name would certainly be more fitting than any common name now in use.

Whatever we call it let us not forget that in Ontario, close at hand, there thrives a true holly, as striking, as beautiful as any that may be brought from afar. Look for and enjoy the Whorled Holly of your native swales.

An astonishing birding experience came my way on the afternoon of November 7th at Pickering Marsh. I had gone down the bank of the marsh and was trying to manoeuvre in such a way as to get a better look at some ducks far up the inlet when I disturbed a wren. Pishing and squeaking brought it into view briefly several times, enough to show me that it was a long-billed marsh wren. This was pleasing and surprising in itself for only once before have I seen one of this species so late in the year.

I had gone back up the bank and was readjusting the balscope for a better look at the ducks when I heard the most lively singing rising out of the cattails. I could hardly believe my ears as on and on it went. Several minutes I listened, thinking the bird would stop any moment, but it did not, the song just keeping on bubbling forth. Realizing how extraordinary this was I rushed to the road, hailed my wife, who was sitting in the car, beckoning her to come. When I got back the singer was still at his melody, as he was when Ann arrived. He kept on and on so that we were treated to such an outburst of song as had never come our way before even in the midst of avian spring fervor. At the end of the first week in November the performance was incredible and all the more wonderful for being so.

The wren, for it was this little fellow, was certainly a long-billed marsh wren, an especially bright-coloured individual. And the song which continued with barely perceptible pauses for fifteen minutes was quite recognizable as a song of this species. Nonetheless it partook of some of the wild vigor, even of some of the tones and phrases and character of the winter wren. This was particularly true of the way in which the song was poured out, rising and falling but rippling ever on as if it would never cease. Harsher than the winter wren's usual offering, it was yet much more musical than the customary clattering of the marsh wren. Indeed, had I not seen the singer repeatedly, though for the most part it kept concealed in a dense cattail clump, I would have found this song most mystifying. Even so, the mystery is not removed by identifying the singer. Why was he singing in November? And why so lustily? Here was none of the whisper-singing so many fall birds indulge in but a full-bodied effort that put to shame any marsh wren I ever heard anywhere at any time.

To make the mystery deeper this bold November songster had an alarm tchuk that sounded more like a redwing than a marsh wren. Really an individualist this character!; one of those surprises that turns up every so often along the birder's path. A marsh wren singing like a springtime Romeo at the end of a cold November afternoon; figure that one out please, and send me the answer.

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Miss Ethel Bunker, whose article on "Elvis, the Happy Nook Owl" in the May 1959 issue of the Newsletter was so favorably received, has kindly written for us a description of her experiences with another birdland waif. This time it is a young robin, rescued from destruction by a friend and raised to maturity by Miss Bunker. Here is how it was done.

Robby

by Miss Ethel Bunker.

At Frenchman's Bay when Dave was cutting his lawn one day early last June, he stopped suddenly to see what was moving in the grass. It was a baby robin which evidently had fallen out of its nest, as so many baby

robins do. He picked it up and looked about for the nest it had fallen out of but could not find one, so he took the little bird to his wife to see if she would like it for a pet, and she said she would.

Marion had an old canary cage so she built a nest with a few pieces of Kleenex and made Robby, as she called him, very comfortable. He was so small his feathers were just beginning to show through his coat of down.

To feed him she mixed some pablum and milk and gave it to him with an eyedropper which was not an easy thing to do as some always got spilled down his breast, as he would not hold his head still.

After about a week of feeding Robby both night and day, and protecting him from two pet cats, Marion found that birds and cats don't agree, so phoned and asked if I would care for Robby at Happy Nook. The result was he came to us that evening in the canary cage.

When Robby arrived I did as Marion had, and fed him with an eyedropper, getting about half the food in his mouth and the rest on his feathers. Poor little fellow, he looked dreadful with his feathers stuck together with dry pablum and his breast almost naked. I had to find another way to feed him. I thought to myself, a mother robin pushes the food down the little one's throat and so must I. A match stick was the handiest thing so I flattened one end then mixed up some pablum, hard-boiled egg yolk, a little coarse sand and a little water, mixing about 1/2 teaspoon in all.

I took Robby in my hand, scooped up a little food on the match stick, and Robby said, "yap, yap", opening his mouth wide. I pushed the food down, he closed his mouth, and I pulled out the stick. No food was spilt, and he yapped for more.

After about half-a-dozen times he was satisfied and would not open his mouth but just cuddled down in my hand. I put him in his cage and he slept for over an hour. I also gave him water by dropping it off the stick into his mouth.

Now my work had started, about every two hours he would call, "yap, yap" as if saying, "Food please", and he would stand on his perch and open his mouth wide so I would feed him through the bars.

A few days after he came as soon as I got up in the morning he yapped for food and I fed him. But when I put the stick into his mouth he took hold of the stick with his beak and before I could think of what had happened he had swallowed the stick. Now what was I to do?

I could not think of anything I could do and there he sat for over an hour without moving. I passed his cage and he saw me and yapped for food but I took no notice. He kept on yapping so at last I gave him some food and he had a good meal and went to sleep. While he was sleeping I looked at him and under the skin near his beak I could see the shape of the end of the stick poking up.

That made me hopeful but I needed help to get it out and Alf would not be home for another two hours, so Robby had to wait.

When Alf came home I took Robby in one hand and wiggled the stick about and in a little while he opened his mouth wide and there was the end of the stick which Alf pulled out with a pair of tweezers. As soon as it was out I put Robby on the grass and he asked for food and had another good meal, but not with a match stick for a spoon.

I took a six inch stick this time and flattened the end, and that was his spoon until he could feed himself.

It was spring and weeds were growing fast in the vegetables. Robby just had to learn to feed himself. When I was going weeding I took him with me in his cage then took the bottom out and put him on the ground. Robby liked it and hopped about while I worked. We always have lots of cutworms, white grubs, beetles, etc., as well as weeds, so when I found a cutworm or caterpillar I would drop it in his cage. At first he took no notice of anything I dropped in, which puzzled me so I put a cutworm on a stick and he opened his mouth and I pushed it in. After that if I dropped anything that crawled he would eat it. That started him looking on the ground for food. I tipped the cage and he walked out and when I started digging he came over and soon found cutworms for himself. He liked his freedom but I had to be very careful where I trod.

Robby was flying and I was afraid of losing him. He did not like you taking hold of him, but he would come on my hands or shoulders and even on my back when I was bending down weeding. I need not have been afraid because as soon as I picked up the cage he would come onto the ground in front of me and I would put the cage over him and he would sit on the perch while I carried him anywhere without the bottom in it.

I tried to get the pablum off his feathers without much success, when Robby did it himself. His water dish was a very small saucer and I had been trying to teach him how to drink by putting his bill into the water and then lifting his head up and was very pleased how quickly he got the idea and started drinking by himself. A day or two afterwards I saw him putting his head into the water and then shaking it and before long he was trying to get right into it, so of course I got a larger one and in a few days he had bathed so much the pablum was all gone, and his feathers looked very nice.

The weather was too nice now to stay indoors. We often had our meals out on the picnic table. Robby liked this and would fly up on the table to join in the picnic. At first we were all very hard-hearted and would not give him anything. Then Alf offered him a piece of dry bread; he would not eat it but if there was butter or jam on it he would take a small piece.

Robby's down was now all covered with feathers and he was flying nicely and was very good about coming to you when called; he would follow me to the garden and fly into the trees up there. He would be so noisy yapping at everything I would know just where he was. No other robin was as noisy as he was although there were plenty about.

Alf had been fishing one day and brought back about a dozen large dew worms in a tin. He threw one on the grass in front of Robby to see what would happen. Robby looked at it for a long time then when the worm started crawling away Robby pecked it and stood back and watched it squirm. He did this several times and then decided to swallow it. He took it by the tail and with a lot of stretching and struggling he swallowed about half the worm and took a long rest, then tried again. After trying several times he got it all down. It was a good while before he yapped for more food.

The tin with the rest of the worms was near the back door and it was not long before we saw Robby tip it over and hunt for worms in the dirt.

When we took boxes to the back garden for strawberries Robby always followed. To stop him picking too, we would throw any berries that had been pecked to him, and we were always surprised how many he would eat. It worked well until one very hot day Robby went under a large strawberry leaf for shade and discovered berries there and helped himself.

With the weather so nice we let Robby out on the grass by himself; he was very good and stayed near the house. He would fly onto the perch at the kitchen window and look to see what we were doing, or, if he was hungry, he would yap for food. He would watch me get it ready and as soon as I went out he would fly onto my hand or arm and sit there while I fed him. Sometimes he could not wait to be fed but would help himself from the dish.

One day we were watering the vegetables and one of the sprinklers leaked and made a puddle. Robby discovered it and had a bath in it but when he came out he could not fly because of the mud on his wings. He got under a fine spray next and it washed all the mud off and after a good shake he could fly into the tree and sit in the sun until dry.

Early in July Robby was feeling all grown up. He did not want to go in his cage so we let him out and he found a lot of food for himself, went to the bird baths, and had a grand time. At sunset he would come to the kitchen window and ask for food, so I would fill his dish and put it on the ground and he would come for it. Then I would put the cage over him and bring him in for the night.

One night after he had a feed he flew onto the electric wires at the front of the house. He answered me with his "yap, yap" and then flew up into the top of the poplar tree. I called, "Goodbye", but next morning he was sitting at the kitchen window waiting for breakfast. He did the same thing every night until he went away.

Joe, a school boy, one day brought me a young robin smaller than Robby that was just learning to fly but could not feed itself, so I put it in Robby's cage.

In the afternoon I was weeding and Robby was watching for worms, so I had the cage with the little one in on the ground nearby and I noticed Robby picking up dry grass and taking it to a small pile of weeds near the

cage. He would sit on the weeds then keep turning around and arranging the grass in a circle. It looked as if he was trying to build a nest; so I think we made a mistake and should have called him Roberta, not Robby.

The next day Joe brought me another young robin, perhaps from the same nest as the first one.

Robby was very busy now, not with the nest but trying to feed these two young ones without much success. Two adult robins came along and were feeding the little ones through the bars of the cage. I don't think they were the parents, as Joe lives about five miles from us.

After tea that day I let the little ones loose and the adults made such a fuss over them. One could fly a little and the other not at all. One adult took the young that could fly to some pine trees and got it onto a low branch and then hopped from branch to branch with it about half-way up the tree and as the sun was setting I could see them sitting side by side on the branch. The other adult was trying to get the little one on the branches of an apple tree but it could not fly, so I lifted it and put it on a branch as high as I could reach and the last I could see of them they were cuddled together and that was the last I saw of them all.

Where was Robby? He was calling, "Goodnight", from the Hydro wires so I went to answer him and he flew into the poplar tree as usual. The next morning he was waiting for breakfast. A few nights afterwards he went to bed in the poplar tree, and we have not seen him since.

Alf put a leg band on his left leg before he left in hopes we might hear of him again. The number is 502-89523. Be sure and let us know if you ever see our Robby.

It is well known that some spring flowers have second blooming in the fall under favorable conditions, and that many late summer and fall flowers keep on blossoming until heavy frosts call a halt. In spite of this how many people think of looking for flowers in this region in November?

Considering that it might be of some interest to see actually what could be found at this time of year, I have kept a list of those flowers which I have been able to observe in the Toronto region this November. The last wild plant in bloom seen by this observer was on Sunday, November 22nd, at Terra Cotta. It was a buttercup, still intact after several heavy frosts and temperatures as low as 10 above zero. It was growing a few inches from an iced pool!

This is obviously an incomplete list. Other observers can no doubt add a good many species to it, but even as it stands it will, I think, emphasize the fact that far more flowers bloom in late fall than is ordinarily supposed.

This is the list. All the species on it were in bloom during the first two weeks of November. -

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| 1. Dock-leaved Smartweed | (<u>Polygonum lapathifolium</u>) |
| 2. Lamb's Quarters | (<u>Chenopodium album</u>) |
| 3. Bladder Campion | (<u>Silene cucubalus</u>) |
| 4. White Campion | (<u>Lychnis alba</u>) |
| 5. Marsh Buttercup | (<u>Ranunculus septentrionalis</u>) |
| 6. Indian Mustard | (<u>Brassica juncea</u>) |
| 7. Charlock | (<u>Brassica kaber</u>) |
| 8. Winter Cress | (<u>Barbarea vulgaris</u>) |
| 9. Marsh Cress | (<u>Rorippa islandica</u> var
Fernaldiana) |
| 10. Shepherd's Purse | (<u>Capsella Bursa-pastoris</u>) |
| 11. Small-flowered Treacle Mustard | (<u>Erysimum inconspicuum</u>) |
| 12. Black Medick | (<u>Medicago lupulina</u>) |
| 13. White Melilot | (<u>Melilotus alba</u>) |
| 14. Red Clover | (<u>Trifolium pratense</u>) |
| 15. Evening Primrose | (<u>Oenothera biennis</u>) |
| 16. Queen Anne's Lace | (<u>Daucus carota</u>) |
| 17. Viper's Bugloss | (<u>Echium vulgare</u>) |
| 18. Common Mullein | (<u>Verbascum Thapsus</u>) |
| 19. Butter and Eggs | (<u>Linaria vulgaris</u>) |
| 20. Blue-stemmed Goldenrod | (<u>Solidago caesia</u>) |
| 21. Canada Goldenrod | (<u>Solidago canadensis</u>) |
| 22. Zig-zag Goldenrod | (<u>Solidago flexicaulis</u>) |
| 23. Large-leaved Aster | (<u>Aster macrophyllus</u>) |
| 24. New England Aster | (<u>Aster Nova-angliae</u>) |
| 25. Purple-stemmed Aster | (<u>Aster puniceus</u>) |
| 26. Daisy Fleabane | (<u>Erigeron annuus</u>) |
| 27. Ragweed | (<u>Ambrosia artemisiaefolia</u>) |
| 28. Bur Marigold | (<u>Bidens sp.?</u>) |
| 29. Yarrow | (<u>Achillea millefolium</u>) |
| 30. Costmary | (<u>Chrysanthemum Balsamita</u>
var. <u>tanacetoides</u>) |
| 31. White Daisy | (<u>Chrysanthemum leucanthemum</u>) |
| 32. Tansy | (<u>Tanacetum vulgare</u>) |
| 33. Common Thistle | (<u>Cirsium vulgare</u>) |
| 34. Yellow Goatsbeard | (<u>Tragopogon pratensis</u>) |
| 35. Dandelion | (<u>Taraxacum officinale</u>) |
| 36. Field Sow Thistle | (<u>Sonchus arvensis</u>) |

Also reported to me (by D. Scovell) were: Self-Heal (Brunella vulgaris), Common Mallor or Cheeses (Malva neglecta), Chicory (Cichorium intybus).

Book Review: Adventures among Birds, by Hugh M. Halliday, (Toronto, Thomas Allen Ltd., 1959). Pages 179. Price -

This is the third volume of nature essays published by Hugh Halliday, well-known nature columnist of the Toronto Daily Star and a longtime friend, member and executive of the Toronto Field Naturalists' Club. Beautifully printed, richly illustrated with some of the author's best photographs, this is certainly the most attractive of Halliday's works.

The essays range over a wide variety of birds, familiar and exotic, and they exhibit that persistent pursuit of nature's secrets, even to the tundra, the desert, and the distant sea islands as well as in the fields and woods of County York, which we always associate with the author's name. The secrets unmasked, the knowledge built up, the experiences savoured -- they are all here, set forth in the pleasant, friendly style known already to so many readers. Any naturalist would enjoy this book. The pictures alone would be enough to start an interest among those who know nothing of birds. To those who do they will be a continual source of reminder and enjoyment.

R. M. Saunders, Editor.