

BLOMIDON NATURALISTS' SOCIETY NEWSLETTER



Vol. 8, No. 1

March 1981

The BNS Newsletter is published on the equinoxes and solstices.

Editors: Jean Timpa and Larry Bogan

Art/Production: Larry Bogan

Typist: Barbara Gerritse

The primary objective of the Society shall be to encourage and develop in its members an understanding and appreciation of nature. For the purpose of the Society, the word "nature" will be interpreted broadly and shall include the rocks, plants, animals, waters, air and stars.

From the BNS Constitution

SPRING LECTURE SERIES

Evening Meetings of the Blomidon Naturalists

8 p.m., Room 241 Beveridge Arts Center
Acadian University, Wolfville, N. S.

April 13th

Subject: Natural History Impressions of Barbados (West Indies)

By: Jim WOLFORD

- illustrated with slides

May 11th

Subject: The Monitoring of Orchard Insects as a Basis for
Information to Orchardists and Management of Orchards

By: Dick Rodgers, CDA Research Station, Kentville

- illustrated with slides

June 15th - (Tentatively it will be:)

Subject: An Ocean Canoe Trip All Around Nova Scotia

By: Scott Cunningham and Paul Potter

- illustrated with slides

These two young men made a historic first trip around the entire coast of Nova Scotia during the summer of 1980 in a canoe.

We have not been able to finalize this date with Scott yet, so the program may have to wait until Fall. If this becomes the case we will arrange for something else, so near June 15 watch for our program publicity (cable TV, radio, posters, Kentville Advertiser) to see what we finally come up with!



FIELD TRIPS

April 3 (April 4th if weather is poor on the 3rd)

Subject: Star Observing
Leader: Larry Bogan
Time: 8:00 p.m.
Place: Rotary Park on the Ridge, Wolfville
Please wear warm clothes

April ??? (Sometime after the April 3-4 trip)

Subject: Owl Hooting Trip
Leader: Bernie Forsythe
Time & Place: If you want to go and do not have your name on the telephone list, call now before you forget, 542-5678, and I will put your name on a list of people to be called (about 2 days beforehand we hope) to let you know final details about which evening it will be and where to meet.

April 26 - a field trip with the Nova Scotia Bird Society

Subject: Birds
Leader: Jim Wolford
Time: 9:00 a.m.
Place: Wade's Foodliner, Wolfville Parking Lot

April 27th

Subject: Amphibian Trip
Leader: Jim Wolford
Time: 9:00 p.m.
Place: Gym Parking Lot
- wear warm clothes, rubber boots; bring flashlight

May 16 - a bicycling trip over the scenic back roads of the Valley

Subject: Scenery, Nature, Farming, etc. plus exercise!
Leader: Larry Bogan
Time: 10:00 a.m.
Place: Central Kings High Parking Lot in Cambridge
- Bring a light lunch - cancelled if rain

May 24

Subject: Half-Way River - Its Spring Birds and Flowers
Leader: Bernie Forsythe
Time: 7:45 a.m.
Place: Gas Station in Gaspereau by the bridge
- Bring rubber boots, binoculars if possible - we hope to see many of the warblers, thrushes, lady slippers, trillium, etc.

June - watch our publicity for definite decision as to whether this trip can be arranged; time, place to meet, etc.

Subject: Botany. Unique to the Gypsum Soils at Sweet's Corner, Hants County
Leader: Rachel Erskine and possibly others
- We need to scout the area out first - hope to show you yellow lady slippers among other things.

July - watch for date in next newsletter.

Subject: Mud Lake (Bog) - its botany and whatever else appears!
Leader: Jim Wolford, possibly others
Time: 10:00 a.m.
Place: Acadia University Gym Parking Lot
- rubber boots! A squishy but very interesting trip.

N O W !

Before you read on, please go mark all this on your calendar and don't forget to read your calendar (as I do!) and bring a friend.

Meetings and Trips are open to ALL !

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Our January, February and March meetings saw some of the most stimulating, well-illustrated presentations ever. Thanks to Reg Newell, Tom Herman and Dr. Tony Lock for these enjoyable and interesting evenings.

Our one field trip on January 25 was planned perfectly by Jim Wolford, and Cyril Coldwell to coincide with an all-time record count of 52 Bald Eagles in the Gaspereau Valley - our gratitude to them.

To the many people who have made another BNS Newsletter possible, spring bouquets, too!

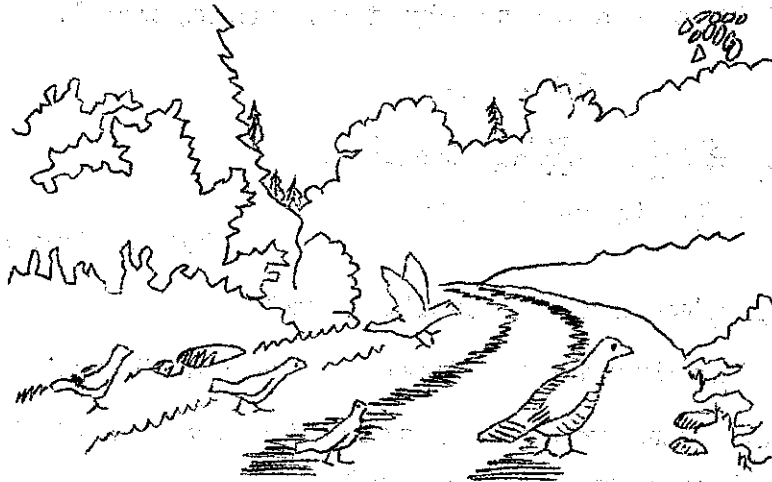
D U E S

This Newsletter will be sent to those members who are in good standing; New members, or those wishing to rejoin, should send their name and address and \$4.00 (\$1.00 for members under 16 years of age) to Roy Bishop, Avonport, N. S. BOP 1B0

B N S D E A D L I N E

June 21

HELP WANTED - Interested persons who wish to see the BNS Newsletter grow and flourish please take 10-20 minutes between now and June 21 to find a piece of pertinent poetry or write out an observation, past or present on a natural history topic. Qualifications: Interest in sharing with friends and neighbours the wonderful world of nature. Renumeration: Survival of the BNS Newsletter and its editors who cannot turn copy out of thin air! Please send to or give to at meetings and field trips: Jean Timpa, Box 1382, Wolfville, N. S. BOP 1X0, or to Larry Bogan; Call 542-5678 for last minute observations. We particularly need more non-bird articles.



N E W S A N D N O T E S

ACADIA PROFESSOR - NEW ASTRONOMY EDITOR

The Athenaeum
February 12, 1981

At a recent meeting of the Royal Astronomical Society of Canada, Dr. Roy Bishop of Acadia University's Department of Physics was appointed Editor of the Society's "Observer's Handbook." Dr. Bishop becomes the fourth editor since 1907, succeeding Dr. John Percy of the Department of Astronomy, University of Toronto. "The Observer's Handbook" has been published annually for the past 73 years by the University of Toronto Press. Currently it has a circulation of 17,000 and is used in Canada and the United States by professional and amateur astronomers, educators and students. The Handbook contains predictions of astronomical phenomena for the year, together with tables of data and charts.

This marks the first occasion that the Handbook editor has not been a professional astronomer connected with the University of Toronto.

Dr. Bishop, although a physicist by profession, has had a love for astronomy since his student days. He used to spend hours in the Acadia Observatory as a student and in 1971 made a major addition to his home which included an observatory complex with 20 cm telescope.

Acadia Professor - New Astronomy Editor, cont.

A member of the R. A. S. C. for 15 years, Dr. Bishop is also currently its second Vice-President.

OUR CONGRATULATIONS TO A LONG-TIME AND VALUED MEMBER OF THE BNS.

WE'VE APPLIED AGAIN !

For a third time we have applied to our Federal Government for a Student Summer Employment Grant. If successful, we plan to set up a roving naturalists service for Kings County which would employ two full-time naturalists and one part-time manager, part-time naturalist to oversee the project. It is envisioned that during May and June the naturalists would do interpretive work primarily in the county schools and school camps. During the busier months of July and August they would be more involved with scout, church and day camps, bus tours, motorcades, such as Air Stream trailer caravans, and tourists who request natural history information about our area at the tourist bureaus.

Why O' Why and When O' When Did Our Little Skunks Go?

And why are they so slow to return to this part of Nova Scotia? Once all mainland Nova Scotia had skunks. At some point they began to disappear until there were none left. Now they are very gradually moving back into our province again. This was just one of the interesting points brought out during the February 16th meeting with ecologist-mammologist, Tom Herman. Tom is looking for the answers to the above questions and is very interested in the recollections of older people who remember seeing skunks in Nova Scotia, and theories as to why they disappeared.

SO

THE BEST (TRUE!) SKUNK STORY CONTEST

Sponsored by the BNS is declared!

Judge: Tom Herman

Prizes: Surprises! Skunks always are, aren't they?

Answer all or any of the following to the best of your ability!

1. When was the last time you saw a skunk in Nova Scotia?
2. Where was it that you saw this animal?
3. Why did the skunk disappear? Theories will be appreciated, backed up by facts wherever possible!
4. Have you seen any skunks (dead or alive) recently in Nova Scotia? When? Where?

If every member of BNS would contribute at least one skunk story some useful and interesting patterns might well emerge. Youthfulness, and never having been a skunk in Nova Scotia, is no excuse! Older people love to be asked about the good old days! Write a letter to Uncle Charlie in Liverpool or interview Grampy who lived in Tusket as a boy! Please indicate if possible how dates were remembered (see following examples) and be as specific as possible about geographic locations. Send to Jean Timpa, Box 1382, Wolfville, N. S. I'll certainly print the contest winners and hopefully there will be room for all entries eventually. Please keep ears open for Woodchuck stories too. They almost but not quite disappeared ten years later and are still not very plentiful.

"The only skunk, of the four-legged kind, I can recall in Nova Scotia, is easy to place and date. I was on my only moose hunting trip with Chauncey Parker and Ernest Peck. We went to Rocky Brook, Sept. 15, 1917. In those days the season opened Sept. 15, so we drove by horse and buggy to Tom Wallis Corner - I think Uncle Levi drove us in.

Skunk Contest, cont.

And then we walked the next 7 miles to the camp. Near the head of Second Chub Lake a very small spring brook crosses the toæ road, and it was there we saw the skunk caught in a trap. Chauncey didn't know who was trapping the area, but we left the skunk there, and it had been taken out when we came out of the woods 5 days later."

Edgar B. McKay
Orono, Maine & Bear River, N.S.
March 16, 1981

(Rocky Brook, Tom Wallis Corner and Second Chub Lake are near Bear River, approximately 10-12 miles south, southwest of the Annapolis-Digby County border.)

Cyril Coldwell of Gaspereau reports last seeing skunks in that area when he was 10 or 11 years old in the late 1920's. The woodchuck decline occurred between 1937 and 1945.

HAWK OBSERVERS WANTED

The Hawk Migration Association of North America wants volunteers in Atlantic Canada. Anytime you could devote to watching and reporting migrating raptors would be useful but the week-ends of April 25-26, May 2-3, August 29-30, September 12-13 and October 3-4 are suggested for special attention so we can obtain simultaneous reports from a number of sites. For full details and hawk watch forms write to David Christie, R.R. 2, Albert, N. B. EOA 1A0.

The Hawk Migration Association was formed in 1974 to promote and coordinate studies of raptor migration in North America. The Association's Newsletters contain summaries of spring and fall migration in 13 regions of the continent, news of special projects and recent publications, notes on hawk watching techniques, etc. To join send \$8.00 U.S. (\$5.00 students) to the treasurer, Nancy Clayton, 95 Martha's Point Rd., Concord, Mass. 01742, but you don't have to belong to participate; what we need most in this region is observers.



B. N. S. R E P O R T S

Wolfville Christmas Bird Count

Peter Smith
Wolfville, N. S.

On Dec. 21, 1980, 44 dauntless persons braved very cold (8-9°F. of frost), windy conditions, and at times poor visibility to count 20,818 individual birds of 60 species. Weather considered, it was a productive and certainly an invigorating day. Those who dared venture onto the dyke roads were happy and thankful to receive warmth and excellent nourishment at the Gibson's during the evening.

It is always tempting to contrast the counts of different years. We had the same number of species this year as in 1979 but less than one-half of the total number of individuals. This may be attributed to the crow count, as this year, due to a series of poorly timed snow squalls, we were unable to complete the census of these birds as they flew to roost on Boot Island. In January, there were in excess of 30,000 crows at the roost.

Wolfville Christmas Bird Count, cont.

The raptors are worthy of note as I don't believe we have had as many species before. This year's count is greatly enhanced by the Long-eared Owls which were found initially by Bernard Forsythe at a roost-site at Canard. In fact, they were in the same tree as during visits to the site last winter! The Barred Owl is also a very useful addition, and a species which we ought to get each year. It just means an earlier start to the day!

Another aspect of interest is the unusually high number of pheasants, and it is gratifying to have 90 Gray Partridge, a notable improvement in their numbers over 1979. The finches are represented reasonably well. Of relevance here is the abundance of Tree and White-throated Sparrows.

Everyone looks for the particularly unusual bird, and this year the Pied-billed Grebe (White Rock) takes the honor. It should be noted that we just missed having 2 Rufous-sided Towhees (east Wolfville).

To all, my sincere thanks for your participation and keen interest.

Great Blue Heron	1	Pied-billed Grebe	1	Canada Goose	183
Mallard	25	Black Duck	588	Pintail	2
Common Goldeneye	10	Common Merganser	35	Goshawk	3
Sharp-shinned Hawk	4	Red-tailed Hawk	37	Rough-legged Hawk	17
Bald Eagle adult	3	Marsh Hawk	3	Merlin	1
immature	7	American Kestrel	1	Ruffed Grouse	1
Ring-necked Pheasant	632	Gray Partridge	90	Common Snipe	1
Great Black b.G.	505	Herring Gull	1135	Rock Dove	541
Mourning Dove	261	Barred Owl	1	Short-eared Owl	3
Long-eared Owl	6	Common Flicker	1	Hairy Woodpecker	14
Downy Woodpecker	35	Horned Lark	157	Blue Jay	366
Common Raven	392	Common Crow	8600	Black-c. Chickadee	158
Boreal Chickadee	6	White-br. Nuthatch	7	Brown Creeper	2
Mockingbird	2	American Robin	116	Golden-cr. Kinglet	16
Bohemian Waxwing	8	Starling	2351	House Sparrow	1588
Common Grackle	10	Brown-hd. Cowbird	1285	Evening Grosbeak	98
Purple Finch	20	Pine Grosbeak	48	Common Redpoll	53
Pine Siskin	2	American Goldfinch	31	Savannah Sparrow	1
Dark-eyed Junco	678	Tree Sparrow	118	White-thr. Sparrow	105
Fox Sparrow	2	Song Sparrow	39	Lapland Longspur	14
Snow Bunting	278	Ruby-Cr. Kinglet	1	Cedar Waxwing	1
2 Ruby-wng. Blackbird	2	Rufous-sided Towhee	2	White-crowned Sparrow	1

A DECK OF EAGLES !

(Field Trip Report - Jan. 25/81)

Jim Wolford
Wolfville, N.S.

Yes, folks, that's right - 52 Bald Eagles, all in one record day at Cyril Coldwell's farm about 1 mile east of Gaspereau. Any time such a spectacular assemblage of any objects are seen, one seeks a proper collective term for the particular example. I searched in my bible of such terminology, a book called An Exaltation of Larks by James Lipton. Here one finds endless lists of entertaining expressions, such as (note also the book's title) a knot of toads, a bale of turtles, a pace of asses, a sloth of bears, a murder of crows, etc., etc., etc. But a "cast of hawks" was the closest I could come for eagles; therefore I was forced to invent one of my own, hence this article's heading. This subject of historically correct collective terms, and invented ones, deserves a separate article and perhaps even a club competition in the future.

Back to the subject at hand - Cyril had been seeing about 10-16 eagles daily until Jan. 22. Suddenly the numbers went up, to 24, then 31, then 41, and finally to 52, 20 more than the old record set last year. Usually our wintering eagles (which breed in Cape Breton?) reach peak numbers here in late February; who knows how many more we might see? Some of these eagles are definitely from the wintering population along the Shubenacadie River.

The morning was overcast and chilly and about fifteen people were on hand for our field trip. When we reached Cyril's farm at about 10:15 a.m., the number of eagles was down to about 33. All varieties of plumages were noted, including several 4 to 5 year-old sub-adults that were just acquiring white heads and tails (20 of the 52 eagles were adults).

A Deck of Eagles, cont.

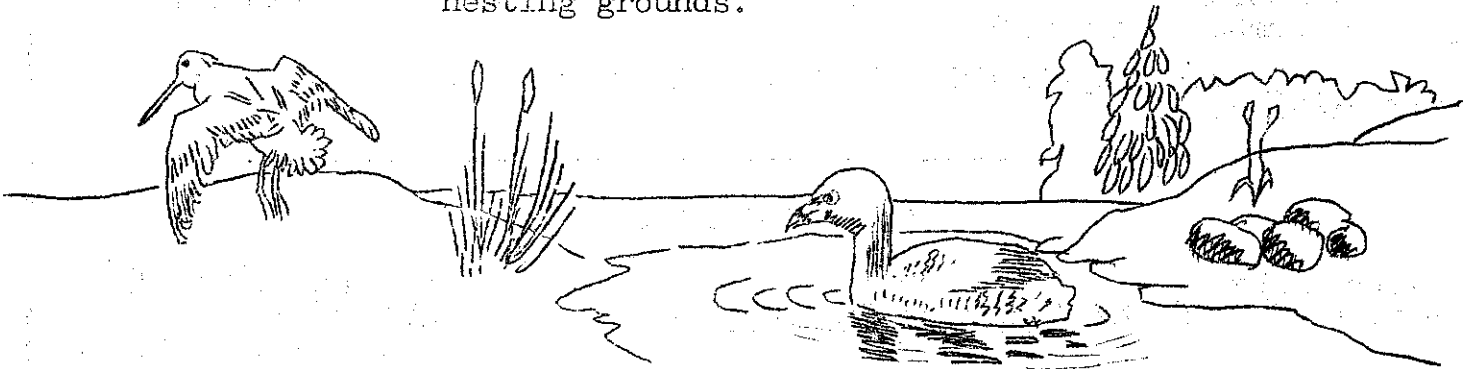
Shortly after our arrival several of the eagles treated us to soaring displays as the skies were clearing; their awesome size (wingspread up to $2\frac{1}{2}$ meters, or 80 inches) was particularly evident when we noticed how small the ravens appeared next to them.

For those who may not know, Cyril has been trapping and banding ravens there for many years. The carcasses put out for the ravens also attract the eagles, crows, gulls, red-tailed hawks and others. On our field trip even two chickadees were seen picking away at frozen meat. Over the past few years, P.C. Smith has had several students working on behaviour and interactions of the ravens and eagles.

Cyril also has a well-attended set of feeders around his house, where we saw a variety of small birds including a genuine rarity for this area, an immature white-crowned sparrow. My list for the morning had 14 species.

Our morning was finished off with a tour of Cyril's various caged birds. Many of these are birds that were shot or otherwise injured and turned in to Cyril or to the Wild Life Division, N. S. Dept. of Lands and Forests. Some of these can be rehabilitated and released later on, while others are permanent cripples; but some of the latter are being used for studies of plumage sequences and other changes with age, and Cyril is even hoping for some breeding activity. These caged birds include immature bald eagles, great winged owls, ravens and temporarily, red-tailed and rough-legged hawks. Keep alert for eagles that have colorful markers on their wings or legs. These have been tagged by the Wild Life Division N.S. Dept. of Lands & Forests, and will provide information on movements and possibly on breeding locations.

Editor's Postscript: By the end of February when the numbers of Eagles are usually at their peak, there were 7-8 daily. On March 20, Cyril saw 3 birds, on March 21, only 2. The eagles wintering in the Shubenacadie River Valley have exhibited a similar pattern, i.e. the birds have dispersed much earlier than usual to their nesting grounds.



A WINTER TO REMEMBER FOR WEATHER AND BIRDS

Jean Timpa
Wolfville, N.S.

1980-81 will certainly be remembered for its extremes in weather - cool, rainy fall snow catching most of us by surprise by mid-November, and winter conditions continuing to deepen rapidly with constant cold and frequent snow storms and squalls off the Bay in December. January topped it all by producing six major storms, one right after the other, until there was more snow on the ground than most of us could remember for some years. February did a complete turn-around and several thaws later the snow was gone. Temperatures continued very mild, until some very real concern began to be expressed as to whether plant life could remain dormant much longer. One record high day of 14°C toward the end of the month saw many people outside in shirtsleeves! March turned a bit cooler, gave us several minor "Robin" snows, but has really been quite gentle to us considering what March can be like here in Nova Scotia.

The cooler, stormier weather brought the birds to feeders in droves, and some interesting rarities were sighted in our area. I have kept a list of birds seen from the first mid-November snowstorm, and I counted 21 species at my feeder plus 9 more on or over my property. That is more than I could have expected and one half the total species count of the Christmas Bird Count. At the feeder were American Goldfinch, House Sparrows, Dark-eyed Junco, Evening Grosbeak, Black-capped Chickadee, Downy and Hairy Woodpeckers, Robin, White-throated Sparrow, Red-Winged

A Winter to Remember for Weather and Birds, cont.

Blackbird, Tree Sparrow, Song Sparrow, Common Crow, Yellow-headed Blackbird, Common Grackle, Pine Siskin, and an immature white-crowned Sparrow. On or flying over the property were Sharp-shinned Hawk, White-breasted Nuthatch, American Redstart, Rock Dove, Raven, Red-tailed Hawk, Herring Gull, Great Black-backed Gull and Canada Geese.

As for the rarities, they probably started in late October when Brenda Thexton discovered a Western Tanager in her yard. She also had a Mockingbird at her feeder most of the winter. The nomadic Bohemian Waxwings arrived at the Merritt Gibson's (Canning) in November; two Rufous-sided Towhees visited the Roger's feeder on Main St. in Wolfville just before Christmas Bird Count; and Bernie Forsythe sighted the Pied-billed Grebe at White Rock on the Count, and Cyril Coldwell discovered an immature White-crowned Sparrow during the Count period. When the snow was on the ground, Common Snipe were sighted at an open spring in back of the Acadia University Heating Plant by Jim Wolford and two more immature White-crowned Sparrows appeared at feeders in Wolfville (Jim Wolford, Paul Elderkin, Jean Timpa) in January. An immature male Yellow-headed Blackbird first appeared in New Minas, then came to Wolfville (Bernie Forsythe, Fred Kelly on Front St., Jean Timpa, Jim Wolford) It was seen on several occasions at the Shur-Gain feed mill, and nearby feeder in Port Williams, and Mrs. Walter Urban also had it in Avonport on Jan. 21, and Feb. 3. She also recorded a lone Pine Warbler on Jan. 25th.

By far the most unexpected visitor was seen in January by Reg Newell and George Boyd in the Port Williams - Sheffield Mills area. It wasn't until Feb. 1, however when Bernie Forsythe and Reg finally had a really good look at the bird that they dared to say we had a mature Peregrine Falcon in the area. On Feb. 16 at the Shur-Gain plant, Port Williams, it flew over Peter Austin-Smith's head twice at about 30 ft., and on Feb. 22 several more people observed it in the same area. To make matters even more interesting, an immature Peregrin was identified in early March by Dr. Merritt Gibson at Cyril Coldwell's in Gaspereau. To have Peregrines here at all is most unusual, but to think that we have two and in the winter time adds to the surprise.

Bald Eagles and Red-tailed Hawks are certainly not rarities here, but both species will be remembered this winter for being present in much greater numbers than usual.

Recently Cyril Coldwell had a flock of 18-20 Redpolls visit his yard briefly.

A R T I C L E S

Outdoor Chat
(Reprinted from the Shelburne Coastguard)

Dr. Harrison F. Lewis
Sable River
Shelburne Co., N. S.

April 1961

"Coltsfoot is reported by Mrs. Donald Robertson to have been flowering on April 9 along the railway near Roseway Hospital. Coltsfoot is a European weed introduced into this province. It was probably brought here because of its supposed medicinal value. The ancient Greeks and Romans believed that smoke from its burning leaves relieved coughing and such ideas linger on it some places....."

May 1957

"The interesting report furnished by Mrs. Hamilton includes a record of the blossoming of goldthread or canker-root on May 10th. This lowly plant, which is abundant in our woodlands, produces attractive white blossoms on short upright stems. The Indians used it for dyeing hides, but among white settlers it became better known as a household medicine. There is believed to be good ground for its use to prevent or cure scurvy, to aid digestion, to cure minor infections of the mouth, and as a general tonic. Its bitter taste has been held to be an indication that it must surely be a very effective remedy of some sort! The bitter taste is due to berberine, which is probably responsible for whatever tonic effect the plant may have....."

June 1957

" Near Shelburne Town Mrs. Donald Robertson noted the blossoming of Clintonia on May 31st and of Labrador tea on June 2nd. Clintonia, which is common in shady woods, is a lily with broad, smooth leaves, springing from the ground, and a rather small yellow flower. It is named after DeWitt Clinton, a former governor of New York State. Indians claim that the odor of this plant's rootstock is very attractive to bears and consequently they are accustomed to rub it on their bear-traps....."

A LOOK AT THE SPRING SKIES

by Larry Bogan

The days are now longer than the nights and during the Spring the amount of time available for observing the stars will diminish to a minimum (On June 21st the dark sky is not available until 11:30 p.m. ADT and morning twilight begins at 2:45 a.m. ADT.) My theory is that because of the desire of most persons to observe in comfort, they wait until summer to look up at the sky; then it is too late because the nights are short. Spring is at a disadvantage because the nights are shortening and the weather is still cool while late Summer and early Fall have the advantage of warm weather and lengthening nights. As a result, I believe that most of us are not as aware of the Spring stars.

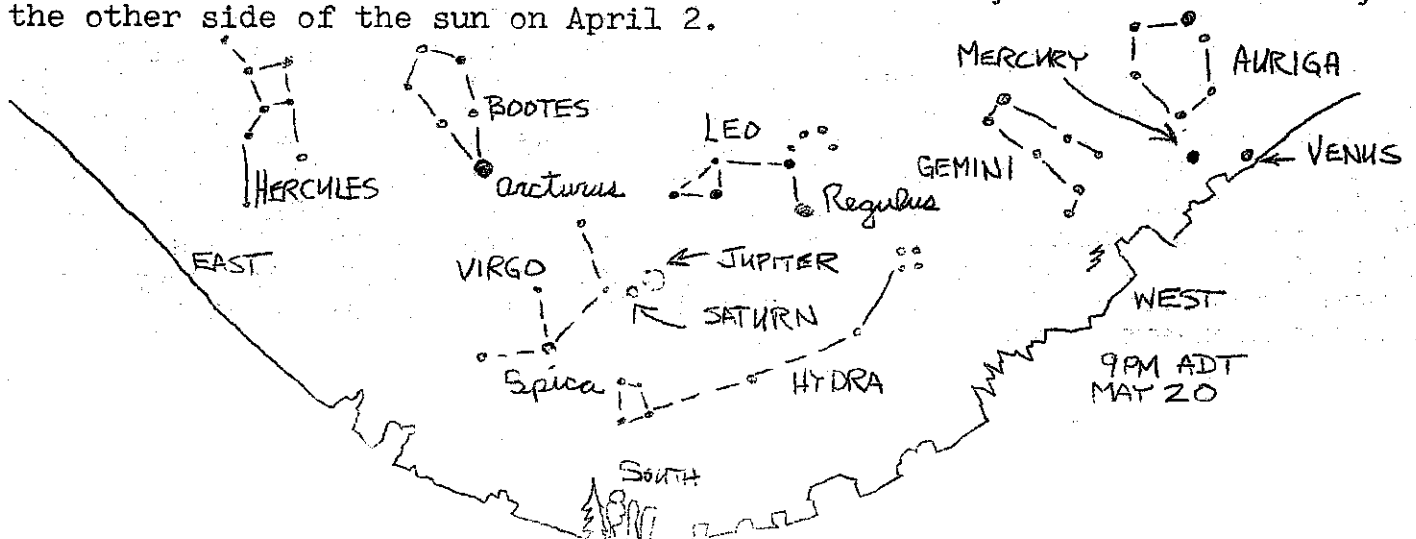
In early April, the Winter constellations such as Orion, Canis Major and Taurus are setting while the Summer constellations like Lyra, Cygnus and Scorpius are rising. High in the southern sky are the less brilliant constellations of spring, most prominent of which are Leo, Bootes and Virgo. There are far fewer bright stars present than in Summer or Winter. Acturus in Bootes stands out in the east while Spica, in Virgo, is in the south east. Almost straight overhead but a little to the north is the best known object in the sky, the Big Dipper.

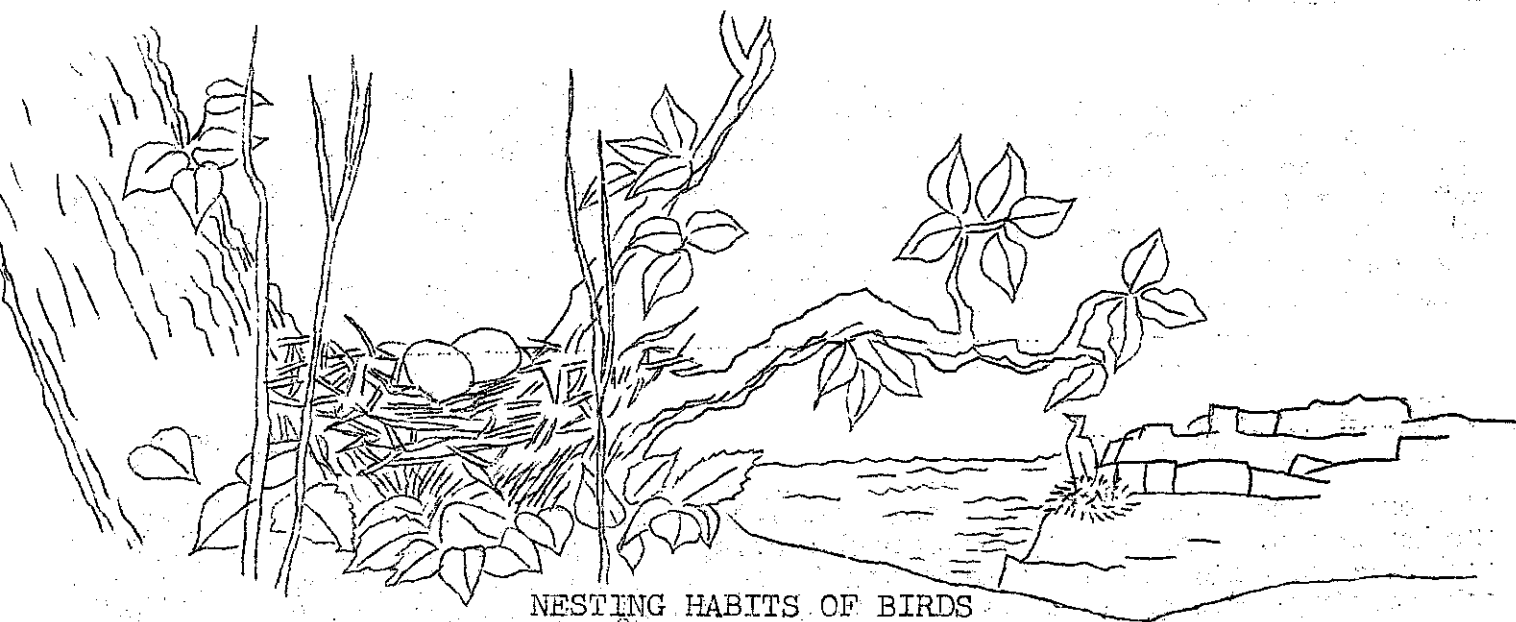
The Milky Way is no where to be seen except faintly above the northern horizon in the circumpolar constellations of Cassiopeia. At this time of year you are most nearly standing "up right" in our galaxy, if "up right" means that the North Pole of the Galaxy is overhead.

Planets are usually of great interest to most observers. Jupiter and Saturn are the two that dominate the sky this season and they are close together in the sky this year, making them easy to pick out. Jupiter is the brightest "star" in the eastern sky during the evenings of early Spring. By May it will be more in the south and by June it will move westerly. The next brightest "star" that forms a pair with it is Saturn. With good binoculars you should be able to note that Jupiter is a small disk with moons (starlike) near it. Saturn will be a smaller elongated disk. Last year Saturn's rings were turned edgewise and invisible but this year you can see them in a small telescope since they have tilted up by 5°.

Venus and Mercury will be visible later in the Spring but only during evening twilight in the western sky. Venus is slowly moving out from behind the sun (it is directly behind the sun on April 7) and will be setting an hour and a half after the sun by the end of June. Mercury is doing the same thing as Venus, but since it moves faster it will be away from the sun (in the sky) for a briefer period. The best time to see it is during the week of May 18-25 when it will set two hours after the sun and at the end of astronomical twilight. Mercury will not be as bright as Venus (being 40 times dimmer) and will be more difficult to pick out in the brighter twilight hours even though it is higher above the horizon than Venus.

Mars will not be visible until late in this year and is directly on the other side of the sun on April 2.





NESTING HABITS OF BIRDS

(Part 1 of 3 parts)

Robie Tufts
Wolfville, N.S.

During my many years of studying birds in the field I have found the nesting habits of these whimsical creatures to be of special interest. The "top brass" tell us that the behaviour pattern birds display during the process of choosing nest sites, constructing their homes, and caring for their offspring is instinctive. Be that as it may, instinctive or otherwise, that assertion does not detract from the ever-present expectancy of new discoveries which are always rewarding.

Aspects of this broad subject are varied. They embrace, for instance, such topics as TIME OF YEAR, NEST LOCATIONS, MATERIALS USED, BEHAVIOUR OF PARENTS, COLOURATION OF EGGS, TERRITORIAL CLAIMS, to mention a few, along with some instances of eccentric behaviour of the parent birds which defy all efforts when seeking an explanation thereof.

Time of Year

Perhaps it may cause some eye-brow raising when I state that some nesting activity by our wild birds occurs during every month of the year in Nova Scotia. I have to admit, however, that evidence in support of this statement is a bit sketchy for November and December. November activity is based on the record of a Rock Dove seen carrying a twig to a nest on October 20 (1970). Completion of that nest, would, obviously, include most if not all of November. For December I am relying on the finding of the nest of a Red Crossbill on January 31 (1906) in which the female was brooding four half-grown young. Considering the time required to build the cold-proof, compact nest, incubate the eggs, and care for the young, presents a strong probability that this pair began nesting in December.

Aside from the nomadic and unpredictable crossbills, the Great-horned Owl is our earliest breeder. Though it builds no nest of its own, using the old nest of some large bird, they begin showing an active interest in same early in February. They are followed in some such order by Gray Jays, Ravens, Saw-whet Owls, Crows and Woodcock before the rank and file begin to get busy with their domestic affairs.

Aside from the Rock Dove, above cited, the American Goldfinch merits top place for late nesting as evidenced by a record for September 24 (1948) when the last of four youngsters was seen to leave a nest in Wolfville. Now let's give some thought to the varied nesting locations birds choose.

Nest Location

In choosing nest sites birds are influenced by a desire to select ones that are safest from natural predators. Here is a case where a pair of Robins appear to have learned to do so the hard way. I was walking across a railway trestle when a Robin flushed from under my feet. Glancing down between the ties I saw the nest. It was placed on the surface of a huge supporting beam within about three feet of the track over which trains thundered daily. Why had the pair chosen such a bizzare site for their home? While cogitating I happened to notice a small evergreen bush about 30-40 feet from the trestle in which was a recently constructed Robin's nest, half tipped over, with the grass lining hanging in obvious disarray. Too remote from squirrel habitat, the culprit in this case was probably a passing keen-eyed crow.

Nesting Habits of Birds, cont.

Individuals of a species sometimes depart from the customary habits of their kind at nesting time for reasons which are obvious. Ospreys, for instance, commonly nest singly, high up in tall trees. But on Gardiners Island, near Long Island, New York these birds have, since unrecorded times, been not only nesting in colonial style but many of them are forced to nest on the ground because the conventional tree sites are in short supply. The explanation for their tenacity for Gardiners Island is of course the bountiful supply of food in the surrounding waters.

Some species, mainly sea-birds, find security by nesting in colonies, their numbers sometimes being counted in the hundreds of thousands. The oft-repeated expression - "safety in numbers" - is appropriate here.

In seeking safety, woodpeckers invariably bore holes in trees for their domestic use, while a Belted Kingfisher must find a suitable earthen bank in which to excavate a tunnel, often several feet in depth, in which to lay her eggs. Vireos and orioles always build elaborate pensile nests apparently hoping the surrounding foliage will provide protection. All but two of our hawks and owls normally nest in trees, sometimes concealed in natural cavities. The exceptions are the Marsh Hawk and the Short-eared Owl, both of which are ground nesters.

Now I would like to take my readers to any one of the several white sand beaches which occur along our South Shore where they face, unobstructed, the broad and moody Atlantic ocean. Such is the retreat of the Piping Plover. Highly territorial in habit, only one pair will occupy an area of several acres. Camouflage is the impelling factor here, their overall light grey plumage, as well as that of their eggs, blends so well with their surroundings as to make them next to invisible.

While nest loss is largely due to natural predators, as above cited, there is another danger with which birds have to cope, and it is one whose occurrence they are unable to foretell. I refer to adverse weather conditions such as gale-force winds and flooding. Here is a good example of the latter. A Black Duck built her conventional nest on a low-lying ground area which, incidentally, was near some large trees. A heavy and prolonged period of rain destroyed her nest but not her determination to try again. For, as though profiting by her first experience, she located the second nest in the main crotch of a nearby tree some eight or ten feet above the ground. In so doing this bird seemed to exhibit reasoning power, or what might be described as budding intelligence, which rates a bit higher than mere instinctive behaviour.

In closing this chapter let's consider what has happened to the Purple Martin. Before man entered the scene these birds were not colonial nesters. Individual pairs at nesting time must have had to search far and wide to find a suitable site in hollow tree or some other available anchorage. But latterly man, activated by a desire to have these lovely creatures close by, erected 'houses' on his own premises in an attempt to attract them. The Martins' response has been notable. Here it would appear that man, quite wittingly in this case, is wholly responsible for having induced these birds to forsake a long-established custom for another more pleasing to him.

SABLE ISLAND

(Part 3 of 3 parts)

John S. Erskine
(From the Journal of
Education, March 1955)

Near the ponds cranberries make a thin lace over the sand, and *Eleocharis Parvula* and *Myriophyllum tenellum* grow into a turf grazed by the ponies. *Limosella subulata* reaches three inches in height, and *Tillaea aquatica* grows both as compact tufts and as erect reddish plants with pedicelled lower flowers.

Brackish ponds have waterweeds, *Potamogeton bupleuroides* and *Potamogeton oblongus* and *Ruppia maritima*. On the salt flats *Ranunculus Cymbalaria* creeps in wide rosettes, while greater plantain and *Chenopodium rubrum* are thinly scattered. Wallace Lake is said by St. John to be full of eel-grass and to have a lush beach growth on the inner shore. I had time to follow only the western side of the lake and I saw no trace of eel-grass, either growing or as wrack, though I had come in search of it.

Sable Island, cont.

The shores seemed to be bare of life, and the lake was silting up rapidly. Perhaps St. John was referring to the western section of the lake which has now silted up completely, but which was still four miles long in the 1899 survey.

The last category includes the neighbourhood of buildings, where there is the usual shifting population of weeds, grasses and clovers.

My own additions to the native vascular flora are small. I found one patch of *Triglochin palustris* which is never very common nor easy to see. *Poa subcaerulea* is new to the list but was probably included in *Poa pratensis* which St. John classed as a native species. It should be borne in mind, however, that natural introductions of new species are probably still going on, so that the finding of a new plant may not mean that previous collectors missed it.

I made separate lists of (a) native and (b) introduced vascular plants, because I had not at first intended to collect the latter, owing to lack of space in my presses. Gussow's list is similarly incomplete in the field of introduced plants, but St. John had not only much leisure in which to pick over the weeds of garden and midden but also the great afforestation scheme of 1901 to eulogize. Very few plants have spread widely. *Rumex Acetosella* is everywhere, but I consider this doubtfully an introduction. *Agropyron repens pilosum* and *Plantago minor* have spread along the southern beach, but St. John considers them native and I do not. Of the afforestation I found only one fifteen-inch shrub of buckthorn, *Rhamnus Frangula*, of which I collected half, quite unconscious of the fact that it must have cost ten thousand dollars to establish this plant.

My third list is of mosses and my fourth of lichens. I have found no previous records of these except in Macoun's Catalogue. No fungi were observed and only floating fragments of seaweeds. Lichens were fairly frequent but of few species. *Cladonia rangiferina* and *Cladonia uncialis* grew in thin patches; *Cetraria aculeata* was occasional as on most mainland sandhills; *Parmelia physodes* frilled the six-inch stems of shrubs or crept over the sand. Mosses, too, were infrequent, and, after the dry July, none were in fruit or with gemmae. *Sphagnum subsecundum* grew in small white patches on wet sand, growing upward as it was buried, and harboring *Aulacomnium palustre*. *Sphagnum papillosum* grew in more robust but rarer patches. *Drepanocladus aduncus*, a form with plicate leaves, grew among the rushes at the edge of ponds, and this may be the same species as Macoun's *Drepanocladus fluitans*. *Leucobryum glaucum* and sterile *Pohlia* and *Bryum* grew along the edges of low bluffs near the ponds.

Fauna

I had too little time and no equipment to investigate the fauna. Patterson has a list of molluscs found on the island, but I know nothing of this group, and, perhaps for that reason, observed none. I noticed a freshwater sponge abundant in the ponds, and I suppose this to be *Heteromeyenia Macounii*, an endemic species said by Dr. MacKay to have affinities with New England sponges. Insects were not observed, but insect-eating birds were present.



Birds observed were: Double-crested Cormorant, at sea; Black Duck, abundant in ponds; Semipalmated Plover, at sea and on beaches; Ruddy Turnstone, on beaches; Spotted Sandpiper, by ponds; Least Sandpiper, on beaches and by ponds; Sanderling, on beach; Greater Shearwater, at sea, hunting with porpoises; Black-backed Gull, common; Herring Gull, commoner; Common Tern, very common; Barn Swallow, around buildings; Yellow Warbler, seen in distance and rather uncertainly confirmed by residents; Wilson's Snipe, rare; Ipswich Sparrow, abundant everywhere. Macoun saw "Canadian Nuthatches", and the history of the island mentions snowy owls. The Ipswich sparrows were tame and easily watched. They are large grey Savannah sparrows which breed, as far as is known, only on Sable Island. I heard none

Sable Island, cont.

singing, although at that time the Savannahs of the mainland were still in good song, and the residents say that the "greybirds" do not sing at any season. Some remain all winter. During my second visit in 1953, schools of small fish were observed in the ponds, and some additional birds were: Pied-billed Grebe; Leach's Petrel; Heron; Bluewinged Teal (with young); Blackbellied Plover; Golden Plover; Dowitcher; Knot; Solitary Sandpiper; White-rumped Sandpiper; Semipalmated Sandpiper; Greater Yellowlegs; Lesser Yellowlegs; Hudsonian Curlew; Bonaparte's Bull; Blackbilled Cuckoo; Night-hawk; Bank Swallow; Crow (flock of nine); Mockingbird; Cedar Waxwing.

It is said that foxes, red and black, were native to the island in early days and were later exterminated. Rats from wrecked ships are said to be common but I saw no trace of them. There is said to be one rabbit, probably a tame one and not descended from any of the frequent introductions. Seals haunt the beaches in thousands. Porpoises were once seen at sea, and many were found stranded on the south beach.

The ponies are a most attractive feature of the island. Their origin is lost in the hearsay of island history. Horses and cattle were introduced by the Portuguese in the sixteenth century and became abundant, but both are said to have been killed out in the eighteenth century. In 1738 Le Mercier is said to have stocked the island with cattle, and it is presumed that he brought horses from New England at the same time. Certainly they are mentioned frequently thereafter, for the island was never again uninhabited for long periods. Today ponies are almost always in sight, grazing in family groups called "gangs" which consist of a stallion, two or three mares and some young ones. They seemed in excellent condition, but the mares were rearing, by my estimate, a foal to every three and one-third years, not a high birth-rate. There were no old or sickly animals about, and frequent skeletons left over from the winter explained why. I kept a rough count of ponies seen and estimated that I had observed 140 in two-thirds of the island, which would give a total of about 200 for a whole. Ponies were much more abundant in the east end, which suggests that an averaging estimate may be very inaccurate. These ponies are, of course, descended from horses of normal domestic size and have in forty generations reverted almost to the size of their wild ancestors.

The flora of Sable Island remains much as in previous reports. A few new species have been added to the lists for the island, but many, chiefly woodland species, were not observed, while the abandonment of all farming has reduced the variety of weeds. The pony population is only half what earlier records claimed, yet the grass seems badly overgrazed. The author saw no evidence of antiquity in the plants named as endemics by Fernald and St. John and considers them rather to be inbred and depauperate mainland species. Geologically, date uncertain, the island can scarcely be older than the peak of the Wisconsin glaciation, and may be as recent as the last confirmed lowering of sea-level associated with the regrowth of northern glaciers in the twelfth century, A.D.

The End