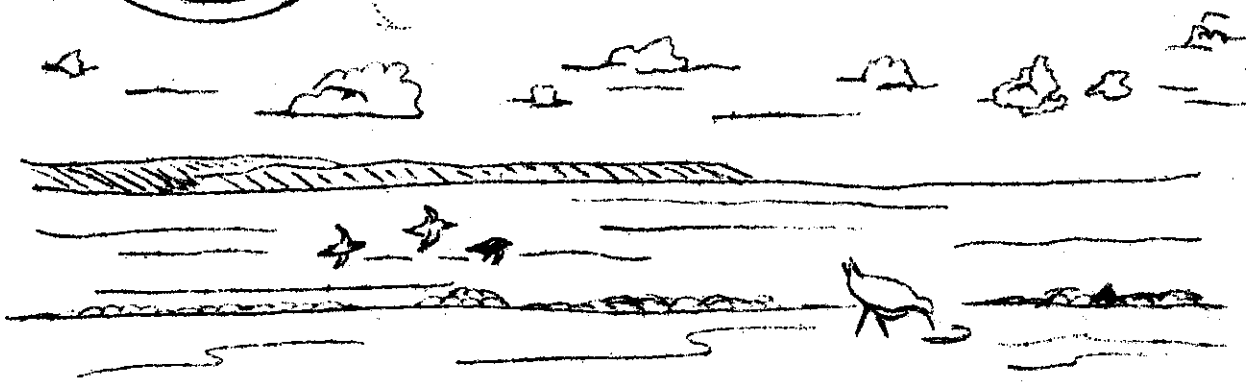


BLOMIDON NATURALISTS' SOCIETY



Vol. 8, No. 2 & 3

June and September, 1981

The BNS Newsletter is published on the equinoxes and solstices.

Editors: Jean Timpa and Lynn Coldwell(Dixson)

Art Production: Lynn Coldwell

Typist: Lynn Coldwell

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

- FALL PROGRAM -

Monday, October 19 (8 p.m., Room 52, basement Huggins Science Hall) Members' Night. Bring your favourite slides, about a dozen, collections, and other natural history memorabilia to share with the group. Last year we even had a live tarantula. Lets' see someone top that!

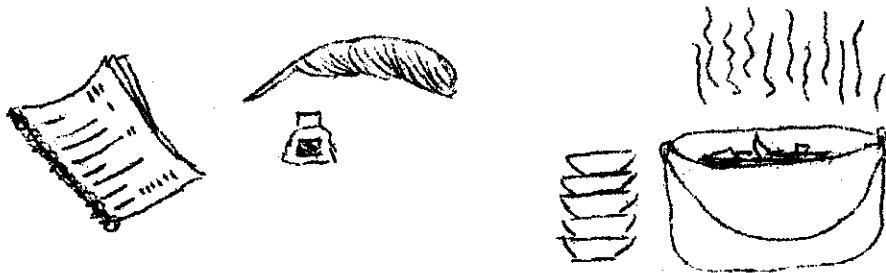
Monday, November 2 (7:45 p.m., Acadia Gym Parking Lot; or 8 p.m., Grand Pre Park). Dr. Roy Bishop: "The Autumn Sky", a field trip. Dress warmly (!) and bring your binoculars and telescopes for a guided tour to nebulous and far away places. Cancelled if cloudy!

Monday, November 16 (8 p.m., Room 241, Beveridge Arts Centre). Dr. Daryl Grund: "Mountain Climbing". Dr. Grund has scaled at least 70 Cascade peaks, including the infamous Mt. St. Helens. Illustrated with slides, this is one program to mark on your calendar right this minute!

ANNUAL CHRISTMAS BIRD COUNT

DATE: TBA Call Jean Timpa at 542-5678 or Dr. Peter Smith at 542-2201 or 542-5998, after December 10. We need lots of helpers(not necessarily experienced birdwatchers) to act as recording secretaries as we "man" our binoculars and scopes. The bird populations are near their lowest levels near Christmas time. This count has been ongoing in this area since 1920. As far as Robie Tufts knows, it was the first in the province.

Come be our companions as we freeze our noses and toes doing our thing, along with thousands of other birders from across the continent and in Europe. Substantial rewards often occur, especially at the end of the day!!



Please record these important events on your calendar and think about bringing along a friend or two, to introduce them to BNS.

Attendance has been quite poor for several of the field trips(May 24) and (August 22 - cancelled). Watch for Cable TV notices, Kentville Advertiser announcements, and listen for BNS coverage on CKENS' "Bulletin Board". Rachel Erskine does a marvelous job with publicity. Call Jean Timpa at 542-5678 for up to date information on BNS events.

Suggestions for field trips and lectures or volunteers to do such programs would be greatly appreciated. Please contact:

Jean Timpa - 542-5678
Jim Wolford - 542-2201
Bill Thexton - 542-2201
Peter Austin-Smith - 542-2109
- 678-8921

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

To all our fine lecturers this past season - Jim Wolford, Dick Rodgers, Scott Cunningham, Paul Potter, Andy Dean, and to our field trip leaders - Larry Bogan, Bernie Forsythe, Jim Wolford, and Sam Vander Kloet, and to those who provided refreshments at our meetings--thanks for keeping BNS so alive and well!!! Thanks too, to those who have made this Newsletter possible.

DUES

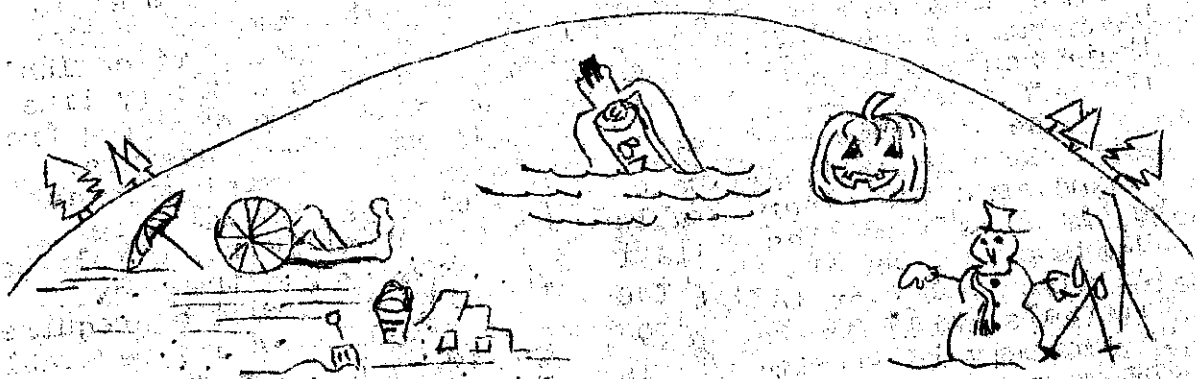
Dues were voted on at the September meeting. Those wishing copies of the Newsletter please contact Roy Bishop at 542-3992 or Jean Timpa at 542-5678. All interested non-members please feel free to attend our field trips and meetings.

BNS DEADLINE - December 21

There is much of interest to all of us out there in the world of natural history this season. Please keep us in mind during your outings. Share your findings by sending a note to Jean Timpa, Box 1382, Wolfville, N.S. BOP 1X0, or give them to her at field trips and meetings.

BON VOYAGE AND WELCOME

Our very best wishes go to Larry, Allison, Jeffrey, and Laurel Bogan as they adjust to Spring time in New Zealand. Mom Bogan is on a year of sabbatical leave from Acadia University. We will certainly miss Larry's help with the Newsletter, but actually he only obtained his sabbatical from BNS by promising to send back reports to the Newsletter and to take many slides for an evening lecture upon their return!



Welcome to Lynn Coldwell (Dixon) who so cheerfully and quickly agreed to step in. Coming originally from Alberta, Lynn has diverse interests in biology, geology, education, and photography. Not only did Lynn produce the basic design for our logo, but most importantly was twice our Project Manager when we received federal grants to survey and document the natural history of Kings County.

No Grant This Summer

Our third application to hire three students for the summer to conduct natural history tours of our area did not meet with approval. But the executive felt it was a good idea, so if at all possible we will try to finance such a venture next summer, and this time we will be a little wiser and apply for financial backing through several sources. In the meantime if there are any people among us who are willing to escort interested parties around, please contact Jean Timpa at 542-5678 or Peter Austin-Smith at 542-2109.

WHERE ARE THE SKUNK STORIES???

They are coming...

in the meantime, here is another bird article of interest....

see next page...



In the latest issue of our Newsletter I dealt with the nesting habits of birds relating to the time of year they are so engaged as well as to the locations they choose for their home sites. This writing will deal with two other aspects of their nesting activities. One will be the choice of materials the respective nest-builders gather during the process, and the other will be the behaviour pattern which the parents sometimes exhibit when raising their offspring.

The materials birds select for nest construction vary from none at all to a great diversity. For instance, an enterprising raven in seeking a lining for its nest was seen to pluck such exotic material as wool from the rump of a live sheep. Incidentally the animal behaved as though it couldn't have cared less during the operation. Ravens commonly line their nests with such material. They find it protruding from the barbs of a wire fence which encloses a sheep pasture.

The Nighthawk is a notable example of several species which make no nest, merely laying their eggs on the bare ground. On the other hand, the Northern (Baltimore) Oriole can be cited as a species which goes to the other extreme by building such an elaborate nest that its construction requires ten days or longer to complete. The female uses dry vegetable materials which are fastened to the twigs of a hanging branch. So securely is it attached that the nest will often withstand the ravages of the gales of several winters before it is obliterated...

One of our woodland warblers, the Northern Parula, is unique in its nest construction. In her quest for a nest site she must find a tree which is heavily laden with the hanging "moss" which is popularly or commonly known as Old Man's Beard. Many dead trees are clustered with it. The warbler selects one of the thickest or most dense masses and using sharp bill, opens up a hole in its side, then she presses the sides of the interior until a small chamber is formed. This space is then lined profusely with no other material than wisps of the "moss" which she brings in from outside. I once watched a female Parula bring in a beakful of this "moss" and noted with particular interest that she had gathered it from a source well removed from her own nest tree. Whether this is usual procedure I do not know.

In the case of the Great-crested Flycatcher, which nests sparingly in Nova Scotia an intriguing phenomenon occurs with regard to an exotic item she uses in lining her cavity-in-a-tree nest. For in addition to a normal supply of dry vegetable matter she adds an outgrown and discarded skin of a snake. Where she is able to locate such is a question for which she alone has the answer. It has been theorized that her motive in placing the snake skin is to scare off would-be intruders, which on seeing it, would suspect that its original owner was lurking inside and ready to strike.

Another strange and inexplicable nesting habit is one common only to the Red-breasted Nuthatch. Like many other birds she makes her nest in a tree cavity often using an excavation made by a woodpecker and long since abandoned. Invariably the surface about the entrance is plastered with gobs of sticky balsam. It is brought in by the birds' beak, not by her feet.

Nesting Habits of Birds)Part 2) cont'd

I have been able to examine at close range, the bill of a female and noted that the feathers nearest to the beak were dark stained and in evident disarray, evidence of how the stuff had been transported. Why they resort to this practice has not even been theorized. To add further to the mystery I might mention that this birds' close cousin, the White-breasted Nuthatch, as well as our two chickadees all use nests that are typical of the one under review and not one of them has ever been recorded as having used balsam about its nest.

As for the behaviour of birds about their nests when danger threatens the pattern is more or less standard but sometimes unusual situations develop. Here is an example. My brother owned a small female spaniel named "Timmie". She was nervous, the scared-of-her-own-shadow type. One warm day in June she had followed her master to the woodlot and was browsing around while he was at work. Suddenly he was startled by her yelping cries of distress and suspecting a porcupine might be involved, he ran to her assistance. But he couldn't have gone far when he met her racing toward him still crying piteously with her pursuer close on her heels, and it was no porcupine. In her rambling Timmie had apparently blundered into a brood of Ruffed Grouse chicks, and mother was on hand to defend them. Following the age old ruse of feigning an injury to draw the attention of the dog to herself, she had rushed at it with feathers fluffed and hissed menacingly. Instead of Timmie trying to catch her, as expected, the dog fled in terror, and the bird had no objections. A sound film of this drama - bird chases dog - would have been priceless.



One could pursue this subject of bird behaviour endlessly, but I propose to conclude this writing with an instance which has intrigued me ever since it was brought to my attention. It concerns a pair of Peregrines that nested in Newfoundland and was related to me by a federal migratory bird officer who had been studying a colony of Common Murres whose numbers were estimated in the hundreds of thousands of pairs and which covered a large area. Strange as it may seem, the falcons persisted, year after year, to place their aerie in the midst of the dense colony and within a few feet of nesting Murres which were clustered about it. Obviously the falcons were preying on the Murres, one a day for each of them but in doing so - with a curious sense of sagacity - they did not molest their neighbours. To have done so would have so greatly alarmed the 'city fathers' that the colony would disband. So, to meet their requirements, they preyed on the stragglers which were nesting along the far off perimeter of the colony with the result that peace and tranquility prevailed throughout.

Nesting Habits of Birds (Part 2) cont'd

But how did the falcons know that the practice they were following was the wise one? It strikes me that there had to be a store of reasoning power upon which to draw their conclusions. In other words, they betrayed a glimmering in intelligence.

On the other hand, on reviewing the foregoing, and admitting that the sole interest the falcons had in the Murre colony was its unfailing source of food, one might well ask - why the falcons did not follow the traditional custom of their kind and build their aerie in the nearest cliff side where it would be safer from human and furred predators. Surely distance would not be the answer for what is a few miles to a bird that is said to be the swiftest of them all.

Owl Hooting Trip April 7, 1981

Bernard Forsythe
Wolfville, N.S.

Most owls have a series of calls that is part of their courtship ritual. The Short-eared Owl also has a courtship flight. There is not really any way of predicting the best evening to observe this behaviour other than it occurs in late winter and spring. A large group of interested people, filling thirteen cars, made an attempt to do so on the chilly but clear evening of April 7. One half hour before sunset found us on the Grand Pre dyke looking for Short-eared Owls. It wasn't long before we saw one going into a few short dives, however it was too far away to hear the clapping of the wing tips as it dived against a colourful sunset. Also seen were a Pheasant, several ducks, and two late Rough-legged Hawks.

By now it was dark, and we headed towards Lumsden Dam to try for Saw-whet and Barred Owls. The tape recorded call of a Saw-whet Owl was played in an area where one was heard calling the previous week, however we got no results. Next came a short hike down a wet woods road to an area where Barred Owls were known to be nesting. I tried my impersonation of a Barred Owl call as well as played the tape but got no answer. After a short while, however, a Barred Owl flew over our heads and lit in a poplar tree to look us over. As we made our way back to the cars the owl uttered several loud single notes that most of our group had not previously heard from a Barred Owl.

Another night performer in April is the Woodcock. Most of the group continued on to Peck Meadow where 2 had been heard on April 6 but not so on this evening. After some comments on the stars and planets visible, the outing ended. In order to hear owls at their best, it is necessary to go out on several evenings.

Nova Scotia Bird Society Field Trip April 26, 1981

Jim Wolford
Wolfville, N.S.

This was officially an event of the Nova Scotia Bird Society, but the attendance was greatly increased by BNS members. An exact count was never taken, but we had 14 cars at one point, and roughly 35 people for most of the day.

where
you guys
going?

- 6 -

To the
Boat!!

Nova Scotia Bird Society Field Trip cont'd

Before we started, several people remarked that they had seen a few tree swallows that morning, and during the day we saw additional occasional individuals. Like last year, we began by 'caravanning' out to the Grand Pre dykelands and to a view of Boot Island. Also like last year, it was a bit too cold and windy for good viewing in any open surroundings. Perhaps that's why we didn't see a gyrfalcon (known to be present then, for 4+ days) nor a short-eared owl (a nest was found the next day): but we did spot about 35 Brant distantly and there was also a snowy owl on the dykelands in the afternoon.

Then we drove past Cyril Coldwells' raven trap at Gaspereau where we saw a late immature bald eagle, and to the west Bernard Forsythe took us to a nest box occupied by an incubating barred owl. On the trail we were very surprised to see a new nest with one very blue egg of a robin! Also on this early date we observed two snowshoe hares*** and a flowering Daphne shrub.

At a small shallow pond northeast of Port Williams, we were surprised to see a pair of oldsquaws in breeding plumage plus other ducks and a few Canada geese, etc.

Near Pereau northeast of Canning, Jamie Gibson showed us an area at the foot of the North Mountain where he was hoping that pileated woodpeckers would eventually nest. We saw their roosting cavities and recent signs of excavation and distantly heard a couple of calls (the same was true west of Gaspereau).

Then it was time for lunch, and again this year we sampled the hospitality of Merritt and Wilma Gibson in Canning. Their big house was filled up with birders who demolished the big pot of fish chowder plus assorted other goodies and pies for dessert. It was with a big degree of reluctance that we hurriedly pushed onward and left all those dishes and spoons to the Gibson daughters!

First we went to a small boggy swamp just northeast of Canning, where my black duck nest had been destroyed (by a raccoon?), and also where I failed miserably at calling in swamp sparrows (one was faintly heard singing, though).

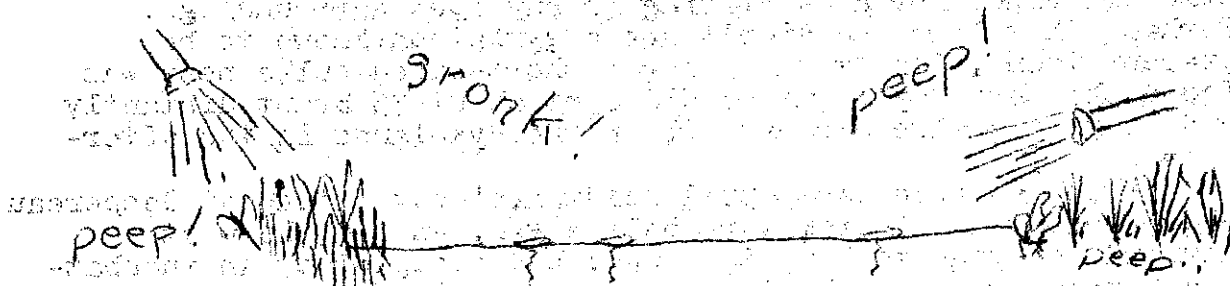
Then Jamie and Merritt Gibson led us into the nearby forest where they had a nest of goshawks. While the parents scolded us, Bernard Forsythe climbed a neighbouring tree to let us know that the nest held three eggs; one parent flew over us, but only once. Near the goshawk nest we also heard a brown creeper singing and saw a red-breasted nuthatch. The small group of people who went after these diversions, "led" by me, became completely turned around and hopelessly lost. We exited from the woods at the opposite end from where we entered!

When everyone finally regrouped, the caravan was halted briefly by an immature Iceland gull (seen only by yours truly, who also saw one in Wolfville before the trip started that day). Then the few people who were left went to the Canard Poultry pond, south of Canning, where we saw American wigeons and ring-necked ducks, etc.

In the early evening I went back to Grand Pre in fruitless pursuit of the snowy owl, but I did see the grayish-brown gyrfalcon. My species list for the day was 45, but I believe the number seen by the entire party was well over 50. Not bad for a chilly day in early spring.

Our hearty thanks go to the entire Gibson family for housing and feeding 30+ people, and also to Bernard Forsythe.

*** The sighting of hares is ironic in a year in which Bernard has been unable to locate any calling or nesting great horned owls. The density of prey is one factor known to affect the breeding behaviour of several owl species.



Field Trip for Amphibians April 27, 1981

Jim Wolford
Wolfville, N.S.

We were fortunate that this was a warm day of a rather chilly and dry spring. After the switch to Daylight Savings Time, our departure at 9:00 ADT was just after darkness had fallen. Our caravan included seven cars and roughly two dozen people, mostly rather enthusiastic youngsters (I often wish my students were this keen --- sigh). We went first to what I call "Toad Dugout", just east of Gaspereau. With flashlights we were able to see several red-spotted newts, and we all closely examined a male with his springtime characteristics of a huge tail fin and very strongly developed hind legs and toes. A few people also saw a pair of newts in amplexus, which is an early and forceful stage of their courtship (the male uses his hind legs like a vise to hold the female just behind her head). Also seen was one silent adult American toad, but nobody spotted any eels that are known to reside there.

Then we caravanned about two miles to the west to some breeding ponds of spotted salamanders. At the first one we were delighted to find and catch an adult predaceous diving beetle (Dytiscus). These are rather rare, adults being seen only in spring; they are impressively large, about 4 cm. or 1½ in. long. Other invertebrates noted in the water were backswimmers, water boatmen, small beetles, nymphs of mayflies, and leeches.

Everyone saw masses of spotted salamander eggs and gilled larvae that had overwintered; we only saw one adult salamander and one adult green frog. However, at the next pond (both of these are springfed and occur along the same roadside creek), we saw several adult spotted salamanders. Two males were caught and closely examined. Likewise an adult female green frog as well as a large tadpole with growing hind legs were caught.

Our last stop was at a roadside ditch, less than a mile west of Gaspereau (springfed, but the water level there is disastrously low this year, so low that many of the salamander eggs were frozen and killed a couple of weeks earlier; those embryos all turned ghostly white). In the ditch we saw eggs of wood frogs that had been laid three weeks earlier and were very close to the hatching stage. Also present were good numbers of adult spring peepers that were calling occasionally. The calling was severely inhibited by our flashlight beams.

Clear skies on our night meant decreasing temperatures as the night progressed, so that amphibians were relatively inactive. But two days later we had rain all afternoon and then a warm drizzly night, and WOW -- viva le difference! "Toad Dugout" now had a chorus of toads (the first ones heard since a few called on March 30!). One of the salamander ponds was literally full of swarming spotted salamanders depositing their white spermatophores on sticks and laying fresh eggs. In the ditch the numerous peepers were calling like mad. Usually on those rainy nights, I am the only one to see all this activity.

Sequel on Amphibians

At the BNS meeting on May 11th, attended by very few members, we announced another nocturnal field trip for May 13th. At 9:30 ADT we met (about 10 people) and went to "Toad Dugout" east of Gaspereau to see how the toads were doing. When we arrived there was a fair chorus of trilling toads plus a few spring peepers. Around the periphery of the pond, as well as swimming across it, were perhaps 20 or 25 toads. All those examined were males. Also lots of long strings of toad eggs, silt covered but clearly developing, were seen in one spot. Like the spotted salamander and wood frog, the toad is often communal in its egg deposition.

In the water along the edges we also found numerous adult newts (females still swollen with eggs and males still showing enlarged tail fins and modified hind legs), overwintered tadpoles of green frogs, adult nine-spined sticklebacks swollen with eggs, a large adult predaceous diving beetle, a large larva of a fish fly (Order Megaloptera), and assorted other insects plus snails and their eggs. Again the eels were not seen. Also our flashlights showed us a bat hunting back and forth over the pond.

Springtime Birds and Flowers by the Halfway River Jean Timpa Wolfville, N.S.

The greatest disappointment of this trip (May 24) was that virtually no one showed up for it other than our leader Bernard Forsythe and family, Brenda Thexton, Sean and myself. Whether it was the early hour or the very gray skies (the day before had been a torrential "nor'easter") and cool temperatures, you missed one of the more interesting and informative field trips for some time.

The Halfway River was a turbulence of muddied, foaming waters, so we were unable to cross it as Bernie had hoped to do in several places to see some nesting birds including a Brown Creeper. However we did enjoy a leisurely two hour drive and stop-to-see-whatever down part of the road which runs fairly close to the river. Shortly after our journey along the gravel road began, two lovely white tailed deer bounded off the road and into the woods.

Our list of flowering plants included the following: Nodding Trillium, Clintonia, False Solomon Seal, American Fly Honeysuckle, Ginseng, Shadbush or Wild Pear, Canada Mayflower, Purple Violet, White Violet, Pussytoes, Partridgeberry, Red Maple buds, Wild Strawberry, Dandelion, Jill-Over-the-Ground, Teaberries which soon disappeared into the kids' tummies, Viburnum, Elderberry, and Painted Trillium just before the rain came down and drove us homeward and 10:30.

To me, however, the highlight of the trip was seeing about an acre or two which had been burned over a number of years ago. Very little plant life had come back into this area except lichens, particularly the bright red "British soldiers" which not only carpeted the ground, but also encased all the burned stubs and boulders.

It is not that often in Nova Scotia that a person can see as large an area covered with so nearly a homogeneous group of the non-flowering plants.

As for the birds, Bernie felt the damp, cool weather prevented us from seeing some we might otherwise have listed, especially the flycatching varieties, but I still think he gave us a great tour. So, seen or heard were: Ovenbird, Redstart, Yellow-bellied Sapsucker, Ruffed Grouse, Ruby-crowned Kinglet, Magnolia Warbler, American Robin, Chestnut-sided Warbler, Raven, Crow, Yellow-shafted Flicker, Blue Jay, Nashville Warbler, Black-throated Green Warbler, White-throated Sparrow, Least Flycatcher, Black and White Warbler, Ruby-throated Hummingbird, Parula Warbler, Purple Finch, Waterthrush, Solitary Vireo, and Dark-eyed Junco.



Not to be discouraged by the onset of the rain mid-morning, Brenda, Sean and I drove over to the Lumsden Dam area and in doing so picked up ten more species of birds, Common Snipe, Tree Swallow, Bank Swallow, Evening Grosbeak, Rock Dove, Chimney Swift, and Bronzed Grackle.

Really now, how could you have missed such a lovely springtime excursion??

Mud Lake Bog July 19, 1981

Jim Wolford
Wolfville, N.S.

About a dozen people caravanned up to Black River Lake in four cars. Then we all walked a mile or so into this very inappropriately named "Mud Lake", which in fact is a quaking bog (sphagnum). Along the trail we climbed to a lichen-covered outcrop of granite which overlooks the bog, and there we all saw a couple of basking garter snakes --- one of these, when caught, was quite aggressive, not in the usual manner with smelly secretions from the anus, but by repeatedly biting my fingers (very ineffectually).

Then we went into the bog itself, and Sam Vander Kloet, our leader, gave us a tour of the many fascinating plants to be found. The highlight was the good numbers of orchids: white and green species of Habenaria, plus the pink Pogonia and Calopogon. Also seen in abundance were the animal-eating plants (pitcher plant, sundew, and bladderwort), bog cranberries, huckleberries, Labrador tea, etc.

Animal highlights in the bog included green frogs (occasionally gronking), and a leopard frog, plus large numbers of recently transformed wood frogs (the ones whose black face masks make them look like little bandits or raccoons).

Evangeline Beach Shorebird Migration August 2, 1981

Jim Wolford
Wolfville, N.S.

I reread my report of last years' field trip for shorebirds(August 21, 1980), and two of its suggestions were heeded this year. First, early August was chosen for maximal numbers of "peeps"(or semi's or "nits" or "sandpeeps" etc.--- mainly semipalmated sandpipers), but the predicted penalty was less diversity(best in early to mid September). Secondly, the article suggested a visit to Mary's Point, New Brunswick east of Fundy National Park, for really huge numbers of "semi's".

I took my own advice and, instead of scouting out Grand Pre as perhaps I should have been doing, I drove up to N.B. on August 1 for a Nova Scotia Bird Society excursion. And Mary's Point really lived up to its billing --- we all sat in one spot for four hours, watching the numbers of flying and roosting peeps gradually build up to an estimated 85,000 in one roost. That area has five prime roosting sites, with up to 100,000 semi's at each, for a grand total of something in the order of half a million birds at one time (who knows how many over the course of the two months they are present?).

August 2 at Evangeline Beach, then, was understandably a bit anticlimactic for me. When we all assembled at the beach cottages, just east of the public beach, the tide was at its highest. That was planned, but this was a spring tide(much higher than average), so that there was no beach on which the peeps could roost!

So we waited patiently(and I worried) on the bluff, seeing occasional small flocks of up to 250 peeps. Then, about 70 minutes after the highest water, a spectacular flight of roughly 3500 semi's suddenly came over us(presumably from open fields on the dykelands) to land on the now available beach.

Later some of us walked along the beach toward Boot Island and found a larger flock of perhaps 5500 peeps. Also identified were about 200 semipalmated plovers, 25 black-bellied plovers, 12 ruddy turnstones, 2 dunlins(red-backed sandpipers), and our species list was short(no least sandpipers or dowitchers) and no colour marked or banded birds were spotted.

Peeps have been painted in three different localities this year: James Bay (NWT), Upper Chignecto Bay (NB), and Eastport (Maine) areas. And a few of these from all three spots have been seen locally from at least August 1 through August 16. If you have any personal sightings, let me know so that the information can get through to the banders.

Last years' report contained information on migration routes and feeding and fattening of the peeps. Here are a couple more tidbits recently gleaned from various sources.

First, the earliest semi's back from the arctic in mid-July are mainly adult females; they leave the care of their newly hatched chicks to the males; the adult males later desert their independent adolescents, many of whom must migrate without guidance from any veterans(the last birds here are mainly juveniles).

Second, the approximately 2300 miles (3700 km) from here to northern South America is estimated to require about 86 hours for a songbird such as a blackpoll warbler(at 25-30 mph). However, shorebirds are much more rapid in transit --- their 2700 miles(4300 km) at 50 mph would take 54 hours. Could it be a coincidence that a semi that was banded in Maine turned up in Guyana two days later?

SHORELINES

Sandpipers shimmer
in - to sift through summers' sand
to sort out flight plans.

LEC

WHENCE AND WHITHER

Robie Tufts
Wolfville, N.S.

Late in the day on May 1st, my wife called my attention to a large cat-sized animal that she saw from the kitchen window. It was squatted up in our big spruce tree, close to the trunk about thirty feet up. I said "It's a cat", to which she replied "No, too big". "Just an oversized Tom" I replied and went on with what I was doing. Not satisfied, she went out to check at closer quarters, but the thick limbs obstructed her view. When she returned she reported that she thought it was a porcupine. It was still there at dark but gone by next morning, and the incident was all but forgotten. That day a phone call from a neighbour, living about 150 yards away, informed me that a porcupine was seated in a maple tree in their garden busily engaged in munching the buds, not the bark, as would have seemed more to a porcupine's taste. It was there all day but gone the next morning and has not been reported since.

One wonders where this wanderer came from, and for where it was heading. During all the many years I have lived in Wolfville this was a "first" for one of these forest dwellers.

Black Rock Shore Trip August 22, 1981

Jim Wolford
Wolfville, N.S.

This trip for intertidal life was CANCELLED when only two and a half members showed up. Perhaps we can blame the mail strike partially. Remind us to try this again in the spring.



Entertaining Observations of Pigeons-Then a Moral

Jim Wolford
Wolfville, N.S.

Recently I was twice entertained by the nesting activities of pigeons (rock doves) on sills and ledges of buildings at Acadia University. Here they are sometimes easily viewed through conveniently placed windows, and of course the birds are accustomed to seeing people all the time, although few of them are peeping toms like me.

Anyway, one day by chance, I peeked at just the right time to see an interesting interaction at a nest. One bird was peacefully incubating the normal two white eggs, when a second bird (the presumed male) landed nearby and walked to the nest.

He had apparently decided that it was his turn to sit and her turn for a break. After a few seconds of gesticulating motions toward the female (the glass prevented me from hearing their accompanying vocalizations), he literally pushed his way onto the nest by shoving her off. Here are excerpts of my field notes for April 10:

"... the mate(?) approached...and simply acted as if it wanted either to see the nest contents or to move the sitting bird off. The former repeatedly used its head and beak to poke the sitting bird from the side, appearing to try to lift her(?) off the nest. Several times he(?) prodded her, and she settled back down, finally, though, he succeeded in pushing her(?) off the nest, whereupon he immediately settled on the eggs (turning the eggs a bit first). His mate flew off. Do pigeons always use such a crude nest relief ceremony?"

The latter comment is in reference to the fact that many bird groups have elaborate behavioural displays associated with the changeover of incubation duties. From this isolated observation, apparently the rock dove has almost no ceremony or subtlety at all. I can't help wondering whether this feral species is not a good representative of the behaviour of normal wild species of doves or pigeons. ("Feral" means wild or untamed but usually refers to any population that was once domesticated or captive and then escaped and was able to fend for itself. Examples include feral cats and dogs, various feral flowering plants such as garden escapes).

I don't know the answer to my question above, but one of my ornithology texts says that it is not unusual in birds for an incubating bird to be so dutiful as to necessitate forceful tactics on the part of its mate for nest relief purposes.

Another amusing observation occurred, again by chance, on June 13. At another nest on campus I had been periodically watching a pair in which the male and female had very different plumages and were therefore easily distinguishable. Before they had eggs, the presumed female spent a lot of time sitting in the unfinished nest while the male gathered twigs, one at a time. He would place the twig in the nest or next to it, and she would make occasional rearrangements of the materials (both with his help and in his absence).

As a couple of days passed then, the nest became more bulky, and the eggs were laid, so that incubation began in earnest. The female was attentively sitting when I chanced to see the male bring in a twig (he went on and on with his gathering). She sat there unmovingly and, in order to place that twig, he walked right up onto her back and reached to drop it behind her into the part of the nest against the building wall... So both parents were very single minded here, and the result was very comical. For a few minutes I lingered to watch "instant replays" of the same performance.

The moral or message of this essay has to do with the distinction that is frequently made by naturalists between "natural" and "unnatural" parts of our surroundings. The so-called "natural" beings apparently "belong" there and therefore should command more of our respect (and conservation energies) than the others. Most "purists" (I'm still one but fading fast---read on) equate "natural" with "native", meaning those species that are here without the aid of humans.

The adjectives used for the ones that don't belong here are "non-native" or "introduced" (whether or not the introduction was premeditated). And these terms often have a disparaging connotation, as if these creatures are somehow not worthy of our attentions.

Entertaining Observations of Pigeons cont'd

What the remaining die-hards and I must face is the fact that these creatures are here; they are frequently very prominent, as in the case of roadside weeds. They often have interesting histories and their natural histories are sure to have fascinating aspects to be studied and appreciated, or laughed at.

Therefore, kick yourself the next time you hear or think up an outwardly prejudicial comment or idea concerning an INTRODUCED species. I still believe it is a useful and interesting item of trivia (native vs. non-native), but the accompanying connotation (good vs. not-so-good or worse) is silly and destructive. How many of you can name the non-native birds of Nova Scotia? (at least five species). I think that even this question is prejudicial and should therefore be ignored.

My overall impressions of our local pigeons, based on very limited observations, are: 1) that their "nesting season" is nearly any time of year when the weather is not too bad, and 2) that their nesting habits are rather sloppy. They seem to frequently dump or break their eggs and also abandon them or their helpless nestlings. How much of this may be related to their past history of domestication? Use of the homing pigeon goes back at least as far as the ancient Romans, but their real history in North America is, of course, relatively short.

P.S. Here is an advertisement: A Guide to the Behaviour of Common Birds (1979): Little, Brown, and Company) by Donald Stokes. He describes the behavioural repertoires for each of 25 common species, including the good old pigeon. I hope Merritt Gibson won't mind me mentioning that Stokes is also the author of another excellent field guide, A Guide to Nature in Winter.

If you have been thinking there is something fishy about this Newsletter not having all the SKUNK STORIES in it you have made a slight mistake. It isn't over yet. Still, all the critters didn't make it for this issue. Due to the number of field trip reports and upcoming events, as well as to the assortment of articles which were received, not to mention the lumping of two Newsletters into one, most of the SKUNK stories will appear in the next issue. We apologize for the inconvenience. The following are excerpts from a few of the smelly letters we received.

From G.M. Trueman and A.M. Kernahan in Parrsboro came this offer:

"We can see them (skunks) daily! ...even on our doorsteps! We wish it would disappear; ..they are very numerous. We would be pleased to share them with anyone!"

And from Karen Leigh Casselman of Cheverie:

"Saw one crossing the road yesterday (June 23), 9:35 p.m., at Kempt (main route 215, three miles from Chevarie...I see skunks at least weekly - either when commuting or at evening, near or on our land."

The Skunk Returns To Western N.S. appeared in the November 1980 issue of the N.S. Trapper's Newsletter. The following is a short history of the species in this province, taken from that article.

"Skunks were prevalent in mainland Nova Scotia during the early part of this century, but began to decline (possibly due to distemper) after 1930, apparently becoming absent entirely from western Nova Scotia between 1953 and 1969. Skunks apparently have never occupied Cape Breton Island, but may soon find their way there via the Canso Causeway.

It seems that a small residual population in Cumberland County began spreading and building up in the eastern mainland counties during the 1950's and 60's. A province wide survey done by Dr. Don Dodds in 1969 indicated no skunks in any of the seven western counties at that time."

Reports have been filtering in since 1973 of skunk sightings in western Nova Scotia. The remainder of those reports we received in response to our Skunk Contest are from a wide area, and are variable in content.

Status of BNS Publication

I wonder if some of you gave any thought to the BNS publication over the summer? The second project dealing with the publication on the natural history of Kings County concluded on May 1. Ten copies of the manuscript are available for members to peruse in order to aid the effort of editing. We have it in our hands, but we're not doing much with it. The sooner this work is on the market, the sooner the BNS will reap the benefits of a job well done. This product will expand our message and our membership. A BIG THANK YOU to all persons who have given time and effort to the cause thus far.

PLEASE remember the Dec. 21 deadline for the next newsletter.

There will be no December meeting.

JANUARY MEETING: Monday, Jan. 18, 1982, 8:00 pm. Room 241, Beveridge Arts Centre. Dr. Roy Bishop will present a program on Astronomy and the Observers' Handbook. He will have a number of slides to illustrate his presentation at the regular meeting.



HAPPY HALLOWE'EN TO ALL, FROM THE BNS EXECUTIVE!!!