

BLOMIDON NATURALISTS' SOCIETY NEWSLETTER



Vol. 9 No. 4

December, 1982

The BNS Newsletter is published on the equinoxes and solstices.

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ART:

PRODUCTION: Larry Bogan

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 PROGRAMME

- All meetings will be held in Room 244 of the Beveridge Arts Centre, Acadia University at 7:30 p.m. unless otherwise stated. Please note carefully this new starting time. We're trying to get you home at a more reasonable hour.
- For last minute changes consult local Cable TV announcements, CKEN radio, the Kentville Advertiser, Hants Journal, or call Jean Timpa at 542-5678.

- April 18 Evening Meeting: Dr. Barry Moody will give an illustrated talk on "Early Forms of Housing in the Annapolis Valley".
- April 19 Field Trip: Listen to and see owls with Bernard Forsythe. Meet at the Acadia Gym Parking Lot at 6:30 p.m. If it is windy this trip will take place on April 20. On this night if Bernard's is cancelled, Jim Wolford, will lead an amphibian field trip (bring boots and flashlight).
- April 20 See April 19.
- April 24 Field Trip: Come birding with the Nova Scotia Bird Society being lead by Jim Wolford. Meet at the Acadia Gym Parking Lot at 9:30 a.m.
- April 30 Field Trip: The Chignecto Naturalists Society have invited us to the Amherst Point Bird Sanctuary. Final arrangements have not been finalized at this printing. More details at April Evening Meeting or call one of the board of B.N.S.

- May 16 Evening Meeting: Barry Sabean of the Nova Scotia Dept. of Lands and Forest will tell us of fresh water fish in Nova Scotia and their Habitats.
- June 18 Field Trip: A trip to Hants Co. to seek the Yellow and Ramshead Lady Slipper lead by Jim Wolford. Meet at the Acadia Gym Parking Lot at 9:00 a.m.
- June 20 Evening Meeting: Reid Dexter will tell us of the Jet Stream and Gulf Stream and their effects on our weather. Illustrated.
- June 26 Field Trip: We will visit Bishop's Pond with Bernard Forsythe and/or Jim Wolford. The pond is rich in aquatic animals and has many wild-flowers around the edge. Meet at the Acadia Gym Parking Lot at 1:30 p.m.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Again many people have contributed their time, talents, and knowledge over the past few months without which BNS simply could not exist: to them our deepest gratitude. They include speakers Andy Dean, Ian MacLaren, and John and Frances Nicholls; field trip leaders Peter Smith, Larry Bogan, and Richard Stern; for the sumptuous Christmas Bird Count Party, Merritt and Wilma Gibson; the 61 participants on the Count; and all of our contributors to this issue of the BNS Newsletter.

BNS NEWSLETTER DEADLINE - MARCH 21

Please don't forget the "humorous or AMAZING" natural history story contest. Some have already come in, but we need more to make it a proper contest. We would also like more short observations of recent sightings of interest.

Apologies that the last several newsletters have been so late due to pneumonia and flus; promise we'll try to catch up, but please help out by sending or giving articles to Jean Timpa, Box 1382, Wolfville, N.S., BOP 1X0.

As this will be coming out so close to March 21st, the "real" deadline will probably be closer to April 21!

We still need a co-editor of this newsletter. Any volunteers, please?!



WOLFVILLE CHRISTMAS BIRD COUNT

The count this year took place on a sunny, mild December 27. Sixty-one people participated, some of them young people; more youngsters should be encouraged to participate.

The count of 42,757 birds represent only 63 species. 27,400 common crows were counted by four observers as the birds flew to roost on Boot Island in the late afternoon and evening. Overall, the finch count was poor and only one covey of Gray Partridge was seen. The 89 Red-tailed Hawks and 31 Bald Eagles have not been adjusted for movement of the birds during the count, but certainly there were very high numbers of Red-tails around. In addition to the birds listed below there were Great Blue Heron, American Bittern, and Northern Skrike seen during the count period.

All in the count wish to thank Merritt and Wilma Gibson for their hospitality after the count.

Canada Goose	134	Barred Owl	1	Yellow-rumped Warbler	6
Mallard	2	Long-eared Owl	4	House Sparrow	1353
Black Duck	1696	Belted Kingfisher	1	Red-winged Blackbird	1
Pintal	1	Hairy Woodpecker	11	Common Grackle	53
Wood Duck	1	Downy Woodpecker	21	Brown-headed Cowbird	877
White Winged Scoter	34	Horned Lark	87	Evening Grosbeak	214
Common Merganser	13	Blue Jay	375	Purple Finch	2
Goshawk	3	Common Raven	355	Pine Grosbeak	2
Sharp-skinned Hawk	9	Common Crow	27,400	American Goldfinch	190
Red-tailed Hawk	89	Black-capped Chickadee	217	Red Crossbill	1
Rough-legged Hawk	5	Boreal Chickadee	8	Savannah Sparrow	3
Bald Eagle, adult	20	White-breasted Nut hatch	3	Dark-eyed Junco	167
immature	11	Brown Creeper	4	Tree Sparrow	11
Marsh Hawk	1	Red-breasted Nut hatch	10	Chipping Sparrow	3
Merlin	1	Mockingbird	1	White-throated Sparrow	35
Ruffed Grouse	4	American Robin	9	Swamp Sparrow	3
Ring-necked Pheasant	166	Long-billed March Wren	1	Song Sparrow	62
Gray Partridge	7	Golden-crowned Kinglet	14	White-crowned Sparrow	1
Great Black-backed	778	Bohemian Waxwing	9	Lapland Longspur	1
Herring Gull	1889	Cedar Waxwing	15	Snow Bunting	2
Ring-billed Gull	48	Starling	5310		
Rock Dove	884			Total	42,757
Mourning Dove	83			Species	63

Unusual Sightings

At our recent meeting (Feb. 21) the following were mentioned in or about our area:

- 1) A forty foot whale was seen spouting in the Kingsport area for about half an hour - species unknown.
- 2) A splendid grey phase, gyrfalcon was seen on the Grand Pré dykes by several members January 22 and 23.
- 3) A black-backed three-toed woodpecker was seen in the spruce woods at the top of University Avenue, Wolfville.
- 4) A single Bohemian Waxwing was observed in the flock of Cedar Waxwings which has been here in Wolfville this winter.
- 5) A flock of nine grackles have been enjoying the hospitality of the feeders at the east end of town recently.
- 6) An unusually large number of evening grosbeaks have been in the area during the past few weeks, probably numbering several hundred individuals.
- 7) A so-far unidentified immature hawk was seen haunting the chimneys and roof tops in Wolfville and Greenwich since December. Current opinion has swung from a peregrine to a broad-winged hawk, which still others feel cannot be correct either. So final identification is confidently anticipated before the next meeting. Ho! Ho!
- 8) A flicker has been frequenting a feeder for several weeks, and another one was seen in East Wolfville several days after the Feb. 21 meeting by Brenda Thexton & Jean Timpa.
- 9) A female wood duck has also been sighted near the Gaspereau River Bridge.
- 10) Purple finches have finally appeared in goodly numbers. Brenda saw 18 or so at Acadia one day. The Gibsons have had a flock in their yard, too, in Canning. I have had 1!
- 11) I won't have that if the sharp-shin literally doesn't quit picking on my birds! I stood ten feet from him yesterday (Mar. 2) for 5 minutes as he finished off something he had just snatched from my feeder. Obviously I was in the house, and he was outside, but nervously aware of my proximity. No film in the camera, either!



Another Lesson in Skepticism
or Saga of Wolfville's "Chimney-bird"

Jim Wolford
Wolfville
Feb. 7, 1983

Here am I, one of Wolfville's "experienced birders", and I can't even tell a hawk (buteo) from a falcon! How I know this began on Sunday morning, January 23, at 9:15, when Merritt Gibson and Bill Thexton called on me and mumbled something about there being a gyrfalcon on the dykelands and a peregrine next-door! (The gyr' turned out to be a beautifully marked light-gray-phase, but non-controversial, and this blurb concerns the other bird.)

Yes, sitting on a chimney perhaps a hundred meters from my door was a medium-sized raptor (Jean Timpa first noticed it and spread the word), and five of us stared at it from close range (but in poor light). The bird looked to me like a merlin (pigeon hawk) in immature or female plumage but was clearly too large. The prevailing opinion as the bird was perched was that, by elimination, it probably was a peregrine falcon. (But the face was generally dark and the "mustache" marks not prominent.) Therefore, when it finally did fly, we all noted that the wings were long and decided that yes, indeed, it was a falcon. I followed it around, from chimney to chimney and other exposed perches, watching it fly several more times, and never questioned that early diagnosis (falcon).

During later observations (Jan. 25-28), a few of us worked to eliminate the possibility of a grossly misplaced prairie falcon; but again its status as a falcon was unquestioned (even though we knew that the head-shape and dark face and long bill and small eye all looked "weird" and the legs were colored yellow (unusual for an immature)).

Subsequently I found a reference (by Beebe) that showed the northern race of the peregrine to have narrow mustache marks, and immature peregrines to have variably colored legs (including yellow) these seemed to corroborate the possibility of our bird being a peregrine.

Next, on Jan. 28, Bob Simmons and Phoebe Barnard reported seeing an immature broad-winged hawk on Main Street (Wolfville), on a chimney. I was "Very Skeptical" about that, especially when I investigated that area and found "our friend", the same "chimney-bird"! By now I had convinced myself that it was a falcon; therefore Bob and Phoebe (both "experienced" on raptors) either had seen some other bird (unlikely) or had misdiagnosed it! (This time I didn't even stay there long enough to see the bird fly.)

The plot really thickened on Feb. 3, when my pictures of our "mystery-falcon" arrived in the mail. I showed them around the Acadia biology department, and a lively discussion ensued. We all agreed that, when perched, it didn't "look" like a falcon, particularly the head. Then Cyril showed me Peterson's most recent painting of an immature broad-winged hawk, the head of which was a dead ringer for our bird. "Bah, humbug!", I thought, since I was afraid the bird would never be seen again and we'd never know its identity (as was the case in Dec. '79 with "Bleakney's warbler" (pine vs. prairie)).

But then, thanks to the alert and sharp eyes of Jean Timpa again, presumably the same bird was seen just west of Wolfville, still along Highway 1, on Feb. 4. Bob and Phoebe and Reg Newell checked it out and were satisfied that it was a broad-wing. Then it only remained for me, who was still wondering about "falcon" vs. "buteo", to see it the next day - yes, when I looked for broadness of the wings, it was immediately obvious that indeed our bird was a small buteo (in other words, a hawk with the same proportions as a red-tailed hawk but decidedly smaller). Therefore, it must be a broad-winged hawk.

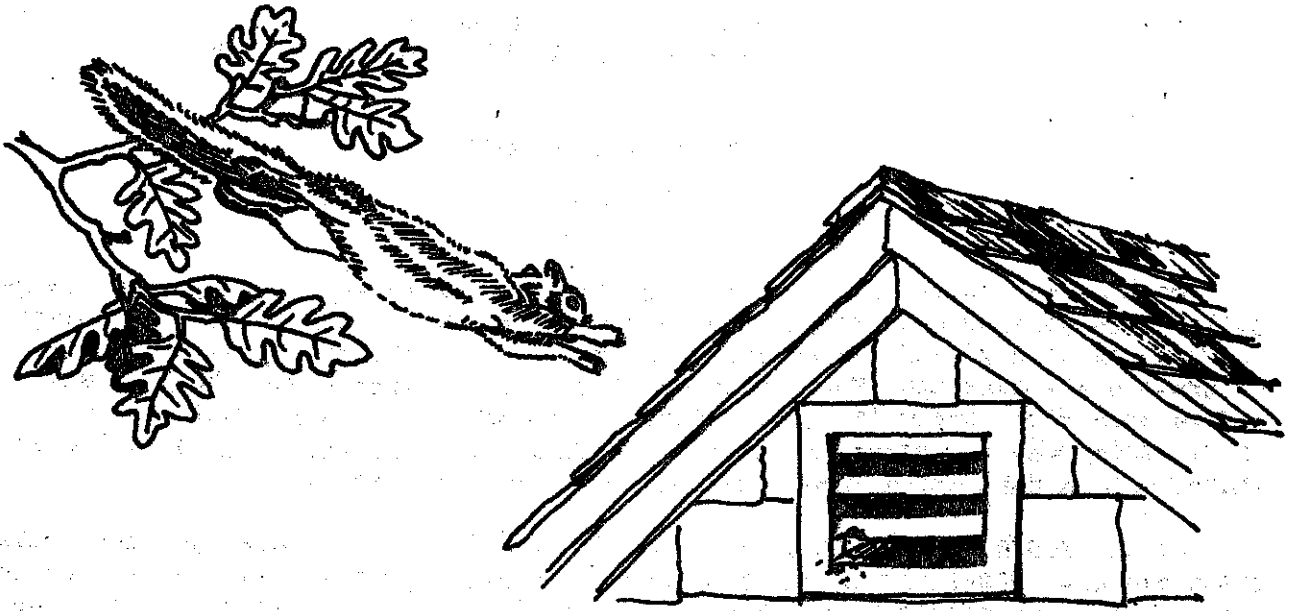
I've written this for several reasons, aside from the entertainment value. Birds of prey are notoriously difficult to identify, even to group, and here is a case in point where we had much more than the usual fleeting glimpse. Also, what we see is very much influenced by what we are seeking, so that all of us should program ourselves with an alarm, on the hour every hour, to ask, "What do I know?" or some such foolishness! Seriously, thanks to Jean's alertness, I've been severely embarrassed, and hopefully I'm a better and more "experienced" observer now. Having to "eat crow" occasionally is a sure-fire cure for anyone's overconfidence or pedantry!

I offer a public apology to Bob and Phoebe for my lack of objectivity. We all have a natural tendency to be more skeptical of others' reports than of our own senses, but perhaps this anecdote should make us wonder. Sight-records have to be treated with some degree of skepticism, but please do not misconstrue this article into a plea for bagging those rareties! (That's really a separate subject that perhaps deserves an article. Who out there will write it?)

February 7, 1983

P.S. Tune in next week for what our broad-wing is thought to be then!

P.P.S. The recipe for "being objective" in thought is really not at all mysterious. Just keep repeating, at frequent intervals, "OK, but what if I'm wrong?"



Finding Flying Squirrels

Bernard Forsythe
Wolfville

The Northern Flying Squirrel is a nocturnal animal; therefore it is unusual for one to be seen on a stroll through the woods. Several people that I have talked to about Flying Squirrels were surprised to learn that they are actually common in Nova Scotia. The following is an account of two occasions that I have discovered this interesting woodland creature.

Being an avid birder whenever I come to a tree with a cavity or old woodpecker hole in it I take a stick and tap the trunk in the hope of finding a woodpecker roost, or if I am really lucky maybe even a Saw Whet Owl. January 28, 1977, a sunny but cool day, found me beside a long dead poplar tree in a farm woodlot of mixed trees on Wolfville Ridge. The tall stump was riddled with flicker nest cavities and other holes dug by feeding woodpeckers. At the first tap there was a round furry face with large dark bulging eyes looking at me from one of the cavities. At the second tap another head squeezed out beside the first. At the third tap a third squirrel appeared at a lower cavity. Soon there were six Flying Squirrels glaring at me for so rudely interrupting their sleep. The old flicker tree had become a squirrel apartment house. One left its cavity and after a short trip around the stump joined the two in the first cavity. Quite a sight for a winter day.

In the spring of 1976 a pair of Black-capped Chickadees had raised a brood in a cavity 4 feet from the ground in a rotten poplar stump in another woodlot on Wolfville Ridge. On May 11, 1977 I looked into this cavity and found it full of dead grass and leaves that were moving slightly. When I tapped the stump out came a very pregnant Flying Squirrel that soon disappeared up a nearby tree. A few days later on a return visit I found the cavity still occupied, but this time the squirrel did not come out. Carefully I pulled back the grass and leaves, and there she was with several pink, hairless young.

Over the years I have had several other encounters with Flying Squirrels. So the next time you notice an old deserted looking cavity in the woods don't pass it by but stop for a minute or two. You might be pleasantly surprised.

Halley's Comet

Sean Timpa
Age 10

My head is a snowball,
My legs are a tail,
But all I am really
Is a big ball of hail.

They call me Halley's,
But I don't know why,
Because all I am really
Is a comet streaking through the sky.

White-Winged Gulls

Richard Stern
Kentville

Most of the gulls seen in the Kings County area at any time of year are herring gulls, with smaller numbers of great black-backed gulls thrown in. The numbers increase in winter, and, as everyone can see, large numbers of herring gulls congregate all over the area. Most herring gulls acquire a dark head in winter, and in some birds there is a very distinct demarcation between that and the white neck. This does not occur in European herring gulls, so any herring gull seen in winter with a pure white face could be a transatlantic traveller.

On the South Shore, and in and around the Halifax area, glaucous and Iceland gulls are seen regularly in small numbers, and although they are less common in Kings County, we should keep a look out here, too. I have seen one Iceland gull in a field near Sunken Lake this winter, and one very confusing bird (see below) at Lumsden.

All glaucous and Iceland gulls can be distinguished from herring gulls by the complete lack of any black on the wingtips. The plumage of herring gulls can be quite variable but they always have at least some black on the primaries (unless they are albinos!). The immatures, more frequently seen, are also paler than herring gulls, and the second winter birds often look, at a distance, pure white. Unfortunately, if seen at close range, most of the Iceland gulls seen in Eastern Canada are of the sub-species L. glaucoides kumlieni, which have pale grey streaks in the wing tips but never as extensive as the markings in herring gulls' wingtips. Another confusing issue would be the possibility of Thayer's gull, a very rare visitor from the Arctic, again with greyish markings in the wingtips.

The bills of both glaucous and Iceland gulls are pale with black tip in first and second winter birds, and by the adult stage they resemble the bills of herring gulls.

Both gulls vary in size, and while the largest glaucous gulls are as big as, or even bigger than, great black-backs, and most Iceland gulls are slightly smaller than herring gulls, some glaucous are quite small, and any "white" gull that is the same size as a herring gull could be either. When seen on the ground, however, the wingtips of the Iceland gull, when folded, extend beyond the tip of the tail, which is usually not the case in the glaucous. The bill of the glaucous is relatively longer in relation to the head than that of the Iceland, and the forehead is also more sloping, whereas that of the Iceland is more rounded. These two effects combine to make the Iceland gull appear relatively more friendly or benign than the herring gull, while the glaucous looks more fierce or aggressive.

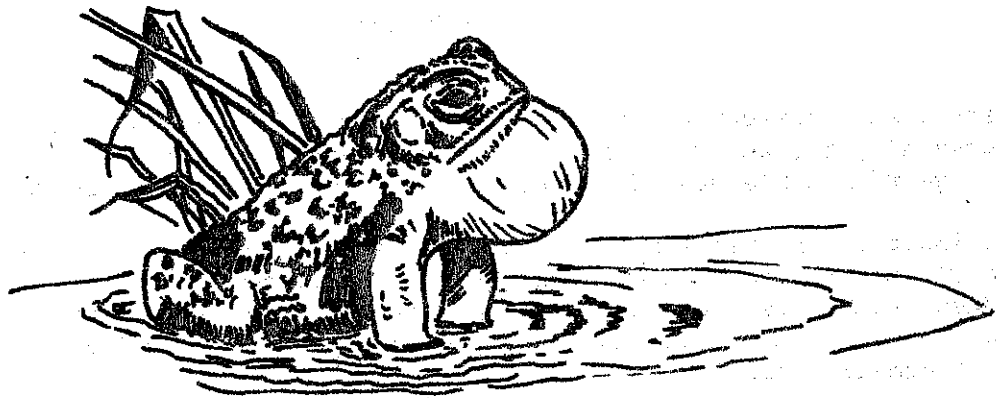
If seen at really close range, the glaucous gull has a yellowish eye-ring, whereas the Iceland gull's is reddish. The iris of Thayer's gull is dark, whereas that of the herring gull is yellow. Unfortunately in young birds all these species have dark eyes.

Finally to really confuse the issue, partially albino herring gulls occur, and so do hybrids between herring and glaucous, and herring and Iceland!

The bird seen by Bernard Forsythe and myself near Sunken Lake this winter was slightly smaller and slimmer than the adjacent herring gulls; it had a small bill, a rounded head, and the wingtips protruded beyond the tail - identifying it as a first winter Iceland gull.

The bird seen at Lumsden looked like a second year Iceland gull, but the bill was longer, there was some greyish pigmentation on the face, the wingtips did extend beyond the tail, but the head was not rounded. There was no dark coloration on the wingtips, and the legs were very pale. I pondered this bird at length, hit the books, and finally decided it was either an Iceland, or an albinistic herring gull.

Unfortunately the descriptions and pictures in the commonly used field guides to the birds are often inadequate to properly distinguish "white gulls" from one another, but if you see one, it is certainly an exercise in both fun and frustration, to try and decide what species you are seeing. In many cases, for the sake of accuracy, it may be necessary to call it just a "white-winged gull". Good luck!



A Fishy Fox Story? A Foxy Fish Story?

Edgar B. McKay
Bear River, N. S.

Fish stories, unlike bird and animal yarns, sometimes have a flexibility built into them that makes them worth telling and re-telling during cold winter nights. It is said that a trout that cannot grow an inch or two during the winter is hardly worth catching. That may all be true of some fishermen but not of Bert Mayo, a friend of mine in Bear River. Bert is a modest man, an expert salmon fisherman, one who ties his own flies and has more than ordinary success on the LaHave and Medway Rivers. When Bert returns to Bear River in the late forenoon after working his choice pools on the LaHave he proudly shows off his eight or ten pound salmon to the local critics. We know Bert tells the truth.

When the salmon season has ended Bert devotes his attention to the striped sea bass that run in the tidal areas of the Bear River. This last summer he was fishing off Raymond's Point, just above the Bear River bridges. His daughter, visiting from England, was there as was one of the Indians from the Bear River Reserve and his wife.

Bert said he was using an 8 lb. test line and a very light rod that evening. After a few casts he hooked on to a heavy fish which ran out most of the line on the reel. It was nearly a half hour before he beached the fish, a 15 pounder. The Indian was having no luck. Bert cast out again and was soon on to another large fish. While he was playing this one the Indian exclaimed excitedly, "Look here right behind you," pointing to his wife. There trotting in close circles was a silvertip black fox, a bit more than half grown. The fox came quite close several times, then trotted about the area as if searching for food. It made no effort to go away.

Finally Bert beached his second fish, one that weighed 17 pounds, and the group decided to climb the short, steep hill to the roadside where the cars were parked. The Indian helped Bert by carrying one of the fish.

Bert said when he got to his half-ton truck he laid the big fish down while he stowed his rod and tackle box. When he looked down to pick up the fish there was the fox with his teeth sunk into the fishes' tail, feet braced trying to drag the fish away. Bert grasped the fish by the gills and pulled. The fox kept hold and tried harder. The on-lookers could hardly believe what they were seeing. The fox finally gave up the obviously unequal contest and went down over the bank in the gathering gloom.

Are there any experts who can rationalize this kind of animal behavior? Used to humans? Hunger? What?

Only once, in the Chub Brook country, did I nearly lose a trout to a land habitant. I had landed a nice ten-inch trout and tossed it near my fish basket in the long meadow grass. As I made the next few casts I noticed the grass near the basket moving in a rather disordered way. I stepped over to look and there saw a large, probably three foot long, brown snake with my trout by the tail trying to drag it away. Persuading the snake to desist was easy. The trout went into the basket!

Metropolitan Oasis

Jim Wolford
Wolfville

There I was, surrounded on all sides by variously shaped high-rise buildings and a very busy airport, and yet also viewing thousands of waterfowl of assorted kinds. This is a weird but pleasant feeling, so I thought our membership might be interested.

The location in question is the western end of Long Island in New York. My sister lives there, and I have visited there several times now in different seasons of the year. Just west of Kennedy Airport, and just south and east from various boroughs of New York City, is a sanctuary called Jamaica Bay Wildlife Refuge (part of Gateway National Recreation Area).

This refuge is partly man-made and consists of a 40-acre (27-hectare) freshwater pond surrounded by a circular gravel path on a dyke. Outside the dyke is an extensive salt-marsh (just like our local salt-marshes). The circular path is about one and three-quarter miles (2.8 km) long, which is a nice length for a casual stroll.

Most of the obvious waterfowl are concentrated in the freshwater pond, although the surrounding salt-marsh is heavily used for foraging. Also, as in National Parks, the birds seem to "know" they are protected, so that observing them is very easy.

There is a Visitors' Center which contains exhibits plus a bookstore with available check-lists and other interpretive materials, and park naturalists are there to aid us "tourists" and conduct organized walks.

After one leaves the Center and gets to the pond edge, the surprising numbers of geese and ducks are immediately obvious. On my most recent visit (December 28, the day after the Wolfville Christmas Bird Count), I first noticed a raft of about 150 shovelers and then 35 hooded mergansers; and in winter most flocks of ducks contain males in breeding plumage, which esthetically enhances the observations. Then I spotted Canada geese, brant, snow geese, coots, various gulls, mallards, black ducks, wigeons (baldpates), gadwalls, lesser scaups, buffleheads, and ruddy ducks. And on the far side of the pond, up against the tall border of reed-grass, was a huge textbook raft of densely packed diving ducks perhaps a thousand canvasbacks and redheads.

On that winter day, birds other than waterfowl were not abundant - a marsh hawk, a few mourning doves, a few flickers, a few cardinals, a mockingbird, a few white-throated sparrows, but there was one major exception: along the path the bushes were very heavily laden with whitish-gray berries, and in those shrubs were dozens of warblers. The plant in question was bayberry, which is sometimes called myrtle, and (along with the tree swallow) for its ability to switch from insect food to berries and therefore to be a late fall laggard as well as an early spring arriver in its breeding range. In addition, to the bayberry, there were also many other shrubs that had fruited profusely (introduced "olive" bushes - Eleggnus, plus rose-hips of Rosa spp.)

If any of you should get a chance to visit this refuge in the summer, large numbers of glossy ibises and snowy egrets plus other herons nest colonially in the freshwater reed-grass (Phragmites) marsh. Also it's a good spot for migrant sandpipers and plovers, marsh-birds such as clapper rails, and various songbirds such as house finches. And horseshoe crabs plus diamondback terrapins come out of the salt-water to lay their eggs in spring or early summer.

New York City is a metropolis that most naturalists would otherwise avoid, but Jamacica Bay certainly shows that some degree of coexistence of wildlife and humanity is possible everywhere. I can heartily recommend a visit there, and at any time of year, even in mid-winter.

BLOMIDON NATURALISTS SOCIETY: 1982/83 DUES

DUES ENCLOSED: \$5.00 Regular
 \$1.00 Youth (Under 16)

NAME: _____

MAILING
ADDRESS: _____

MAIL TO: Dr. Norman McGuinness
 o/o School of Business
 Acadia University
 Wolfville, NS
 BOP 1X0

To date we have approximately 60 members. Some years we have as many as 100 members. We hope we haven't "lost" you.

If you have a red ✓ on this Newsletter you are remiss in your 1982-83 dues, and this will be the last Newsletter you will receive, unless the money is sent to Dr. McGuinness before the next mailing.