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JUNE 1984

# BLOMIDON NATURALISTS' SOCIETY NEWSLETTER

The BNS Newsletter is published on the equinoxes and the solstices

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ART AND PRODUCTION: Larry Bogan  
DISTRIBUTION: Lana Churchill and Brenda Thexton

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

## SUMMER- EARLY AUTUMN PROGRAMMES

1. MUD LAKE FLOWERS, Sunday, July 15, 9 a.m. Acadia University Parking Lot-Leader: Jim Wolford. A trip to see various orchids, other bog plants, and associated wildlife. Rubber boots and fly repellent are a must; lunches for those who wish to picnic after the walk is over (about noon).
2. EARLY SHOREBIRDS, Sunday, July 29, 1:15 p.m. at the Acadia Gym Parking Lot or at Grand Pre' Park at 1:30 p.m. Led by Jim Wolford. The Halifax Field Naturalists will join us to observe the numerous migratory shore birds on the mud flats this time of year.
3. WOODLAND BIRDS, Wednesday evening, August 1, 6:00 p.m. at the Acadia Gym Parking Lot. Led by Richard Stern
4. SHOREBIRDS, Saturday, August 4, 8:45 a.m. at the Acadia Gym Parking lot or 9:00 a.m. at the Grand Pre' Park Parking Lot. Leader, Ralph Connor with the Nova Scotia Bird Society. Bring a brown bag lunch.
5. MID-SUMMER INSECTS, Sunday, August 12, Acadia Gym Parking Lot at 1:30 p.m.-Led by Richard Rogers.
6. LIFE IN THE MINAS BASIN SALT MARSH, Sunday, August 19, 1:30 p.m. at the Acadia Parking Lot. Led by Sherman Bleakney. By popular demand we repeat this excellent trip of last summer. Rubber boots and fly dope are musts for this trip!
7. SHOREBIRDS OF EVANGALINE BEACH AND DYKELANDS, Sunday, September 9, 12:45 p.m. at the Acadia Gym Parking Lot or 1:00 p.m. at Grand Pre' Park. Led by Jim Wolford. This trip will feature a greater variety of birds but probably few numbers than the earlier trips.
8. RAINBOWS, Roy Bishop, Monday, September 17 at 7:30 p.m. at the Beveridge Arts Center, Room 244. A description and explanation, with slides, of these beautiful, natural optical phenomena.

9. MUSHROOMS, Saturday, September 22, (Sunday, Sept. 23 if Saturday's weather is dreadful) 1:15 p.m. at the Acadia Gym Parking Lot or at the Kentville Agricultural Research Station Ravine Parking Lot at 1:30 p.m. Led by Dr. Kenneth Harrison. This is an excellent trip to begin to learn to recognize the huge variety of mushrooms. A popular trip.

10. CAVES AND BATS, Late September. This is a tentative outing to the caves in the Maitland area watch for announcements at the September meeting, or on the Cable T.V. events calendar.

11. OCTOBER EVENING MEETING, Monday, October 15, at 7:30 p.m. Beveridge Arts Center, Room 244. The speaker is yet to be arranged, details in next Newsletter.

12. SEA BIRDS, Monday, November 19, at 7:30 p.m., Beveridge Arts Center, Room 244. Richard Brown of the Bedford Institute will describe the lives of and show slides of seabirds. Mr. Brown is the author of "Voyage of the Iceberg" and has travelled extensively in the arctic.

13. MEMBERS NIGHT, Monday, December 10, 7:30 p.m. Meet in the basement of Huggins Science Hall at Acadia, in room 52. (direction signs will be posted). Bring your favorite collection, slides (limit of 10), natural history book to share with other members.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Blomidon Naturalists Society has recorded another successful quarter due, as usual, to time and talents cheerfully volunteered by: Jim Wolford, Bernie Forsythe, the Merritt Gibsons, Roy Bishop, Larry Bogan, Ruth and Reg Newell, Scott Cunningham, the Halifax Field Naturalists, Mike Dadswell, Rachel Erskine, and to all those too numerous to name who have, in one way or another, contributed to another Newsletter. Our sincere thanks to all of you.

#### BNS NEWSLETTER DEADLINE - SEPTEMBER 21

The Newsletter needs your constant support. Please contribute if only a few short lines for the "Trivia Column" which Jim is trying his best to establish. Many will be travelling and seeing "things" of interest this summer. Please share with us these moments. Give contributions to Jim or Jean at field trips or send to Jim Wolford, c/o Acadia University, Wolfville, N.S., BOP 1X0, or to Jean Timpa, P.O. Box 1382, Wolfville, N.S., BOP 1X0. Or, if you prefer, call Jim at 542-2201 Ext.391, or Jean at 542-5678.

#### ROBIE TUFTS AWARD

This years BNS award to a young naturalist with the best essay on natural history goes to Tammi Ashby, age 11, RRI Wolfville. She will be presented with her award at the September meeting of the Society.

#### FIELD TRIP REPORTS

##### Night Excursions by Flashlight

April 18, April 25, May 9, 1984

by Jim Wolford  
Wolfville

On April 18, five of us really saw that "cold-blooded" does not mean inactive at low temperatures. In fact, although we were very uncomfortably cold (especially our hands), the wood frogs and peepers were calling and moving about actively, as were the aquatic insects. We visited a temporary pond on the Wolfville Ridge, a

roadside ditch, and a permanent spring-fed pond west of Gaspereau. In the ditch there were two swarms of yellow-spotted salamanders, one of which showed a white spermatophore (package of sperm) in her vent when captured and examined; she had probably picked it up only a little earlier. Eggs of salamanders and wood frogs were present in that ditch.

On April 25, another cold night, there were only three of us to do the same tour as above. At the spring-fed pond, fresh salamander eggs and wood frog eggs were now common. We netted some aquatic insects and found mayfly nymphs and water boatmen in abundance.

On May 9 nine of us visited the Ridge pond first and there saw spring peepers (including an amplexed pair that was undoubtedly laying eggs). We heard peepers, wood frogs, a "snoring" leopard frog and some trilling toads. We saw a big diving beetle, smaller beetles, mosquito larvae, etc.

Then we went to a roadside ditch west of Gaspereau and were entertained by American toads. We watched males trilling and saw a pair in amplexus. One calling male, when presented with my hand, promptly jumped on it and amplexed my thumb! Also, we caught a green frog and saw and heard a snipe winnowing overhead.



Nova Scotia Bird Society/ B.N.S. Birding  
April 29, 1984

by Jim Wolford  
Wolfville

A beautifully, sunny, cloudless, warm day encouraged an impressive procession of 22 cars (at least 60 persons) toward Grand Pre'. There we enjoyed a rough-legged hawk, a bald eagle, 22 brant, and 4 or 5 short-eared owls. At Van Nostrand's pond near Starr's Point we saw 2 shovelers, blue-winged and green-winged teal, and a few tree swallows. Along the Canard River there were a couple dozen Canadian Geese, some mallards and black ducks plus a double-crested cormorant looking rather ludicrous as it repeatedly dove in the river's very narrow, shallow, and muddy channel. A hawk or owl pellet was found containing bones and hair of a field vole and a kernel of corn!

Again Wilma and Merritt Gibson hosted the birders in their home and yard with delicious chowder, pies, etc. for our lunch. In addition we got a bonus in seeing a mockingbird and a very sooty, downy woodpecker.

At the Canard Poultry pond, a male wood duck was present but uncooperative and therefore only seen by a few. There were also ring-necked ducks, a greater yellowlegs, an osprey, and several basking painted turtles.

On the way back to Wolfville, four carloads of birders were entertained by the Church-Street-corner kestrels, which copulated under our gaze for the second year in a row. Then we wrapped up the trip with brief stops for ice cream and basking turtles at Hennigar's Market, caged raptors and ravens at Cyril Coldwell's farm and smelt-jiggers along the Gaspereau River.

Thanks again to the Gibsons!

Owl and Woodcock Field Trip  
May 1, 1984

by Bernard Forsythe  
Wolfville

This outing started with a drive across the Grand Pre' dyke at 8:00 P.M. Stop were made to look at a Rough-legged hawk, a Northern Harrier, and Savannah Sparrows singing in the short grass. As the sun was setting in a beautiful orange sky, we were fortunate enough to see at least 6 short-eared owls in various fields. The males were performing their courtship dives and wing clapping; however, we were not able to hear the low call notes usually made between dives.

Then the caravan of about 20 people in five cars headed for Greenfield. Although the frogs were loud at each stop, the snipe and woodcock failed to put on a show. Near Lumsden a stop was made at one of my Barred Owl boxes. Flashlights were trained at the nest opening as I climbed to it. Out came the adult owl and perched nearby for all to see. The nest contained a newly hatched young, plus a pipped egg. Next to them was a robin, a bat, and a spotted salamander ready to vbe eaten when required. We left the site after a minute or two, so as not to cause too much disturbance, and had a chat about these fascinating birds. Unfortunately a Saw-whet Owl that was heard calling near this site in mid-April had not been heard since. Even though all the species we were after did not cooperate, what we did see proved interesting to everyone, so we ended a successful outing.

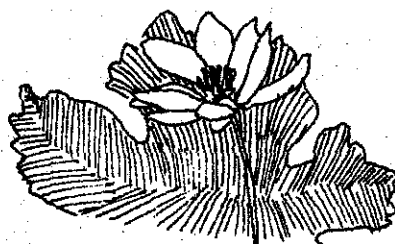
Walk to Cape Split  
May 13, 1984

by Bernard Forsythe

It was raining so hard early in the morning that I was all for cancelling the trip. However, when I arrived at the gym parking lot there were six members eager to go, so off we started for Cape Split. It turned out to be a good day for walking with only a light shower on the way in. The birding was not very impressive as the few birds that were around were not moving and gave only an occasional song. A bird would be heard, everyone would stop to listen and all would be quiet. This led to a lot of good natured kidding as to whether anything was actually heard. Only four species of warblers were identified along with a Solitary Vireo, and several Ruffed Grouse were drumming along the trail. Purple Finches were singing and a Woodcock was flushed from a small stream. By the time we arrived at the Split, fog had rolled in blocking most of the view. It was not possible to look for sea birds other than the Greater Black-backed and Herring Gulls and one Cormorant with a stick in its beak over the first pinnacle. The only raptor was a Sharp-shinned Hawk on the return trip.

Mammals put in an appearance with two snowshoe hares, four porcupines, several red squirrels and a flying squirrel. Jim Wolford produced a red-backed salamander from an old log. Our quest for the elusive blood root turned into a game with lots of jokes and was great fun. Wait until next year, we will find the blood root yet!

Ruth Newell kept track of some of the plants seen during the walk. Those that were in full bloom were: Spring Beauty, Dutchmans Breeches, and Golden Saxifrage. Red Tillium and American Fly Honeysuckle were just beginning to flower. Others that were in bud but not flowering were: Rose Twisted Stalk, Clintonia, Toothwort, Rose-root, Baneberry, Wild Sarsaparilla, and Red-berried Elderberry. In addition we saw Goldthread, Ostrich fern fiddleheads, and hazelnut bushes.



BLOODROOT

Amherst Point Bird Sanctuary (APBS)

May 27, 1984

by Jim Wolford  
Wolfville, N.S.

Six cars with about a dozen birders met at the APBS on this beautifully sunny but windy Sunday. On the way Bernard and Harold Forsythe saw a family of nine weasels on the highway and several people stopped at Oxford to look at the colonies of purple martins.

We had two pleasant walks in the APBS with the following highlights: sora rails calling frequently; one Virginia rail heard well; a common gallinule (now officially known as the common moorhen) was a supreme skulker and would show us only the top of its head; one black tern seen well by everyone; an occupied osprey nest on a distant power pole; one pair of gadwalls and a single pintail (but no ruddy ducks nor shovelers); lots of American wigeons, blue-winged teal, and ring-necked ducks; a close look at a couple of common loons; not many pied-billed grebes seen (but their weird calls were occasional); two separate bitterns in the open and one showed very conspicuous ruffs of white feathers that later research revealed is normal for courting bitterns; a flock of about 25 subadult ring-billed gulls diving for eel-like objects on the water surface. At a water-control structure we saw lots of young eels, banded killifish, and 9-spined sticklebacks.

Star and Planet Gazing

June 4 and 5

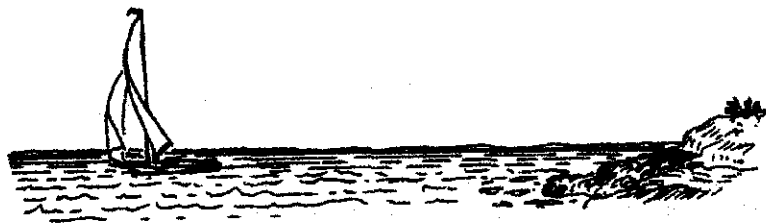
by Larry Bogan  
Cambridge Stn.

On June 4 at 9:45 p.m. a group about 10 individuals gathered at the Grand Pre' parking lot in hopes that the clouds overhead would go away. We glimpsed the Moon and its surface structure through the telescopes and gaps in the clouds. However, the clouds stayed and the group left to return the next night.

On the 5th the sky was crystal clear with the quarter Moon, Saturn, and Mars most prominent. Roy Bishop showed members celestial objects through a 20 cm Celestron telescope while I offered views in my 15 cm Newtonian. Objects of interest were Saturn with its rings and moon, Titan; Mars and its orange disc; the craters, maria, and mountains of the Moon; the double star systems of Mizar and Albireo; the globular star cluster in Hercules and the open star cluster in Scorpius.

Although the sky was not dark due to the fading twilight and light from the Moon, the brighter stars could be seen and allowed us to point out the Constellations. In this early summer sky we could see the Big Dipper high over head. Scorpius was rising in the southwest while Gemini was setting with only Pollux and Castor were visible. In the East, the Milky Way was invisible due to the bright sky but the constellations Cygnus and Aquila stood out prominently. Vega, the brightest star up, twinkled brightly above these constellations. Roy pointed out some contrasting facts about various bright stars, Deneb bright and far away while Altair is bright and nearby the Sun.

About 11 p.m. the sky observers returned to their homes and appropriately the clouds moved in over Grand Pre'.



Halifax Field Naturalist/ B.N.S. at Peggy's Cove

June 10, 1984

by Jim Wolford  
Wolfville

Chris Corkett and Filip Volckaert led this excursion for the Halifax Field Naturalists and a total of about 15 people looked at the intertidal life at Cranberry Cove just north of the Peggy's Cove light. It was a perfect hot, sunny day to be on the Atlantic shore.

The most impressive part of the trip was the beauty and variety of the seaweeds and the clear, distinct zonation of the life based on the amount of exposure by the tides. Incidentally, the average tidal range is only two metres (pretty paltry by our Minas Basin standards).

The zones noted were:

- \*terrestrial "barrens" plants (e.g. crowberry)
- \*bare rock with black rock-tripes (Umbilicaria and Lasallia) and orange Xantheria lichens (This is the spray-zone above the highest tide)
- \*"rockweed" zone of Fucus and Ascophyllum (brown algae) and hidden by them, barnacles and three species of periwinkles.
- \*zone of "Irish moss" (Chondrus, a red algae) with lots of other colorful algae including dulse.
- \*finally the subtidal "kelps" (3 species of brown algae, Alaria and two Laminaria's)

Also noted were amphipod and isopod crustaceans, green crabs, shore anemones and tiny fuzzy colonies of hydroids, mussels, limpets, Lacuna snails and their egg-cases and a big living specimen of Beroe comb-jelly; its red, moving comb plates of cilia, reflecting iridescent colors from the sunlight, were very beautiful.

We had a distant view of the last of the Tall Ships sailing toward Halifax and then some of us went into Dartmouth and Halifax for a closer look of the Tall Ships and all the other scores of private sailing rigs (from wind surfers to schooners).

Thank you, H.F.N. and we vowed to have return engagement for intertidal life of the Bay of Fundy or Minas Basin.

#### Poplar Grove Lady's Slippers

Jim Wolford  
Wolfville, N.S.

About 20 people enjoyed this pleasant sunny morning together. Usually these reports detail trip highlights, but this time there was a "lowlight". We encountered a loud motorcyclist who had a bouquet of at least two dozen lady's slippers on his handlebars! Then we knew that we were on the right trail. We were pleased to see that this year's crop of yellow lady's slippers is many times as abundant as last year's. In our target-site the orchids were in countless bunches, very prettily perched on edges and slopes of hillsides.

Other plants noted included fly agaric mushrooms, witches' brooms on firs (caused by a rust fungus), pretty reddish cones on larches, a heavy cone-production by white spruces, and a variety of flowers. Among the animals were a variety of caterpillars (including spruce budworms dangling on single threads), butterflies (tiger swallowtails were especially common), skippers, an impressive black, long-horned, wood-boring beetle (sawyer beetle), deer and raccoon tracks, an adult bald eagle, an agitated red-breasted nuthatch at a nest cavity, and numerous other bird species.

On our way back to Wolfville, four of us visited a population of poison ivy which was in flower along the railroad tracks at Avonport.

The following report by Bernard Forsythe tells of another find during the trip.

#### An Unexpected Find

Bernard Forsythe  
Wolfville, N.S.

On June 17, 1984 I joined the B.N.S. for a field trip to Poplar Grove in Hants County to look for yellow lady's slippers. After a pleasant walk into a woodlot we found this beautiful orchid growing in large numbers on all sides. An area off to the side of a wood road caught my eye. The ground was covered with sphagnum moss with many yellow orchids glowing in the sun through the scattered trees of this small area, a sight I will long remember.

Looking down I found a plastic bag containing a note attached by a string to what was left of a balloon. The balloon had been released by Nicole Pedrick from a school in Macungie, Pennsylvania.

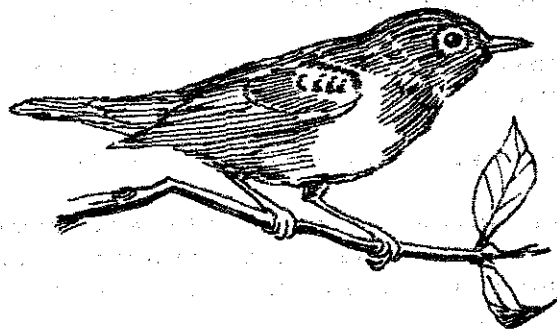
She wrote: "Hello! My name is Nicole. Where did my balloon land? Please write back to me. Tell me things like: where my balloon landed and what your home is. The address of the school is on the back. I hope you like the color of my balloon!" As she did not say when the balloon was released I asked in my letter to her and will report her reply later. By the way, her balloon was yellow, and matched the color of the lady's slippers.

#### Evening Bird Songs- June 21, 1984

Bernard Forsythe  
Wolfville, N.S.

Six cars with about 25 people visited various habitats from Wallbrook to Peck Meadow to enjoy and learn some of our bird songs. It was a beautiful evening with hardly any flies to bother us. Identifying birds by their songs takes a lot of field work, and I find the best way is to follow an unknown song until one sees the bird singing. Even then some will have to be relearned every season, especially some of the warblers with high pitched songs.

A few of the songs we were trying to pick out were almost lost behind the songs of species with louder voices; however everyone was able to pick out some of them. Our thrushes (Robin, Hermit, Swainson's and Veery) all put on a great show of both song and call notes. Others recognized were Wood Pewee, Solitary and Red-eyed Vireo, Parula and Blackburnian Warblers and Purple Finch. A few birds were seen but not heard such as a female Northern Oriole at the top of a large oak. The outing ended at Peck Meadow at dusk, where a Nighthawk was calling in the background, a bull frog was heard and fire-flies were in the bushes along the edge of the meadow. These plus 3 planets overhead made a pleasant ending to a successful outing. My own bird list for the trip totaled 52 species.



#### TRIVIAL TIDBITS of Local Natural History

compiled by Jim Wolford  
Wolfville, N.S.

Early April, 1984-Bernard Forsythe reports an early and unusually large clutch of four barred owl eggs.

April 7-five willets heard calling in Wolfville by Sherman Bleakney and seen flying northward over Port Williams by Lana Churchill. No further willet reports until April 21.

April 12-flocks of robins are seen on lawns covered with snow and actively catching earthworms. Do the earthworms come to the surface to escape the snow melt-water or are they attracted to the wet sites? (JW)

April 15-Two pairs of red-breasted mergansers seen at the Canard Poultry Pond by Brenda Thexton. These birds are usually not on fresh water.

April 17-A male wood frog is seen at night in tightly clasped amplexus to the back of a struggling yellow-spotted salamander. (JW)

April 18-Brenda Thexton and Richard Stern see a hermit Thrush on Grand Pre' dykeland!

April 21-A female purple martin flying with 30 tree swallows. (JW)

April 25-One early barn swallow at Canard Poultry pond.

April 29-A male wood duck at Canard Poultry pond (BNS/NSBS).

April 30-An immature golden eagle seen at Brier Island by Edgar Spalding and Lance Laviolette.

May -Bernard Forsythe and Cyril Colwell find two red-tailed hawk nests only a half-mile apart.

MAY 1-A spotted salamander, a bat, and a headless robin found in a barred owl nest box. (BNS)

May 9-A pair of courting evening grosbeak seen in Wolfville by Sherman Bleakney.

May 13,14-Several people see a pair of Wilson phalaropes at Port Williams sewage ponds---One seen later (May 26) at Canard Poultry pond. (JW)

May 21-A male indigo bunting seen at Crosby's bird feeder in Cambridge by Larry Bogan.

May 30-The weather was cooperative to enable many people in the Valley to see the partial eclipse of the sun.

May 30,31-A great crested flycatcher seen at the Kentville Agricultural Station by Richard Stern and JW.---One seen in Wolfville on June 16 by Sherman Bleakney.

June 2-Jean Timpa had an American dagger moth emerge from a cocoon made last fall by a hairy, yellow caterpillar with black markings.---One adult horsehair worm seen in Hardwood Lake. (JW)

June 3-"Sea gooseberries" (comb-jellies) are seen on Kingsport tidal flats by Peter Comeau.

June 10-A black-billed cuckoo heard calling by Edgar Spalding.

mid-June-One mockingbird in Wolfville and another in Coldbrook (Sherman Bleakney and JW). Bernard Forsythe found a palm warbler nest with feathered young and a singing indigo bunting south of Wolfville.

June 17-Two cattle egrets are seen near Port Williams by Jim and Debbie Daigle. A partial albino, male robin seen at Grand Pre' Park (white patches on face, breast, and lower back) (JW).

June 18-Merritt Gibson reports a willet nest with four eggs in the uppermost zone of Kingsport salt-marsh, and a hummingbird nest in a mountain ash tree in his yard in Canning. He had one there last year also.

June 20-Bill and Brenda Thexton saw a mother skunk with a litter of four youngsters on the Grand Pre' dykelands.

June 21-A partial fairy ring of mushrooms (*Marasmius oreades*) seen around an elm tree on Acadia campus lawn (JW).

#### UNRELATED OBSERVATIONS OF MEXICO

Ellis Gertridge

Gaspereau

(Editor Note: This is a continuation from last issue of Ellis's comments on his tour of Mexico during the 1963 Christmas season)

Mango trees produce a red-yellow, oblong tropical fruit with a thick rind and a stone pit. Eaten when ripe or preserved, it has a pleasing flavor. The tree is very symmetrical and of a domed shape. Many large orchards are cultivated.

Papaya is a native palm-type tree that yields a squash-like fruit on the sides of the tree! Wild ones are small, about four inches. Cultivated varieties have large orange-yellow fruits up to ten inches long. They are eaten raw like watermelons or citron, or



cooked or squeezed into juice. It is quite sweet and of a softer texture than a melon. Papayas are popular fruit.

Cocoa is native to Mexico. It grows in dense jungle on the side of the trunk. The Cocoa pod looks like an acorn squash and its beans were used as a type of money. Cocoa beans are roasted and ground to make cocoa and chocolate.

Chichen Itza, a Maya city of the Yucatan, was larger than any European city of the 16th century. It had a population of 250,000 and an area of 150 square miles.

Birds migrate, generally south, at about the same time as in our area. Red-wing black birds were noted in December. In some mountain areas Oriole nests were very noticeable, even hanging from wires. Buzzards were a common bird. Road Runners lived up to their name, running along road sides. The snake was considered sacred by the Maya, probably because Mother Earth was worshipped, and the snake had more contact with earth than any animal. The likeness was incorporated in stone buildings and pyramids. The Eagle was worshipped by the Aztec since it flew near the Sun. Later in pre-columbian history the Ancient People combined the worship of both along with the Jaguar, a common jungle animal.

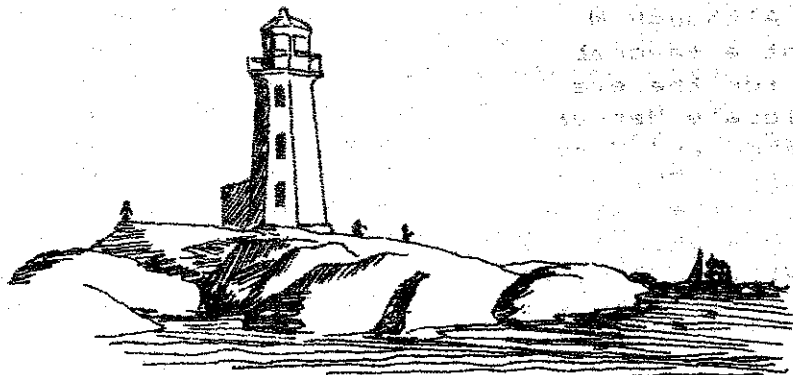
Most cutting of trees, grasses and bushes is done with a machete; most workers on the highway carry this long, straight knife. Cutting thorns and cacti is done with the machete and a short crotched stick to push the thorns away. Much of the jungle has been cut and burned to produce land for crops.

Corn is grown on mountain slopes, some so steep that the fields are dug by hand. Corn is gathered and carried in large baskets on a persons back or in two strapped to the back of a burro. The dried corn stalks are used for animal feed. Corn, the main food of the common people, is mostly eaten as corn tortillas. It is also eaten as Corn-on-the-cob and is sold from streets and markets ready-to-eat in both forms.

The worlds "fattest" tree and one of the oldest is alive and growing between Mitla and Aaxaca. It is the Tule tree. Its age is 2000 years and has a circumference that would require 36 people with outstretched arms to encircle it. (Ed. note: Circumference is 115 feet and height is 140 feet; it is a taxodium mucronatum, a close relative of the bald cypress that grows in Florida. It is given the name El Gigante.)

Citrus fruits are grown in Mexico but are not native. Limes seem to a favorite as nearly every house has one tree in the yard. Limes are served with about every meal to garnish or to flavor drink and food. All the citrus fruits were introduced by the spanish and are now quite popular. Pinapple is native to Mexico and has since become an important crop in many other tropical countries.

When walking through a jungle park at Villahermosa, the guide called attention to a branch of a shrub moving about. There was no wind and no reason for it to move. It was called a talking bush and apparently has some means of motion. All the other branches were perfectly still. The motion lasted about a minute and then became still.



#### A VISIT TO P.E.I. NATIONAL PARK

Bill and Brenda Thexton  
Wolfville

No doubt many of you have your have favorite "birding" areas. One we particularly enjoy whenever we are in P.E.I. is the drive between Dalvay and Rustico Island, with the sand dunes on the north and Covehead Bay and Rustico Bay on the south side of the road. The weekend of April 20-22nd we were visiting there so spent Saturday afternoon "out with our binocs".

After counting dozens of Showshoe Hares in their "winter-to-summer" coats, a Short-eared Owl flew into view at Covehead. Fortunately we had a field check list of birds for P.E.I. and were interested to note Short-eared Owls are listed as uncommon in Spring, but have been known to nest there. Brant were fairly plentiful (175-200), Red-breasted Mergansers (50-75), Pintails, Black Ducks, Kestrels, Northern Harriers (3 males), hundreds of Robins, Grackles, Red-winged Blackbirds, Juncos, Song Sparrows, four Tree Sparrows which are rare to uncommon for Spring. Great Blue Herons were not too plentiful; we saw only eight or ten in the bays, and one roosting on the top of a Spruce tree.

As in many outings, there is usually one bird we cannot be sure of. This time it was a Shrike seen at close range. (One of us would like to think we saw a Loggerhead!) Northern Shrike are listed as rare in Spring, Loggerhead Shrike hypothetical.

Gulls were plentiful - Greater Black-backed, Herring and an occasional Iceland. Many of the Herring Gulls were on the paved road feasting on Mussels which they had dropped to break open. We were forewarned not to drive over these shells, as they can be sharp enough to puncture a tire.

We might mention the weather and ice. On the north side of the road, from the sand dunes to the horizon, the gulf was packed with ice floes. Late in the afternoon it was very cool, with a strong wind and swirling snow. We thought we were the only ones on the road until an oncoming vehicle stopped beside us and the driver asked if we had seen anything interesting. After comparing notes, we wished each other a Happy Easter. It was Tony Erskine and party!

On our return to Wolfville the following day, we made a brief stop at Amherst Point Bird Sanctuary where we saw a couple of American Coots, a Pied-billed Grebe, eight Pintails and more Black Ducks.

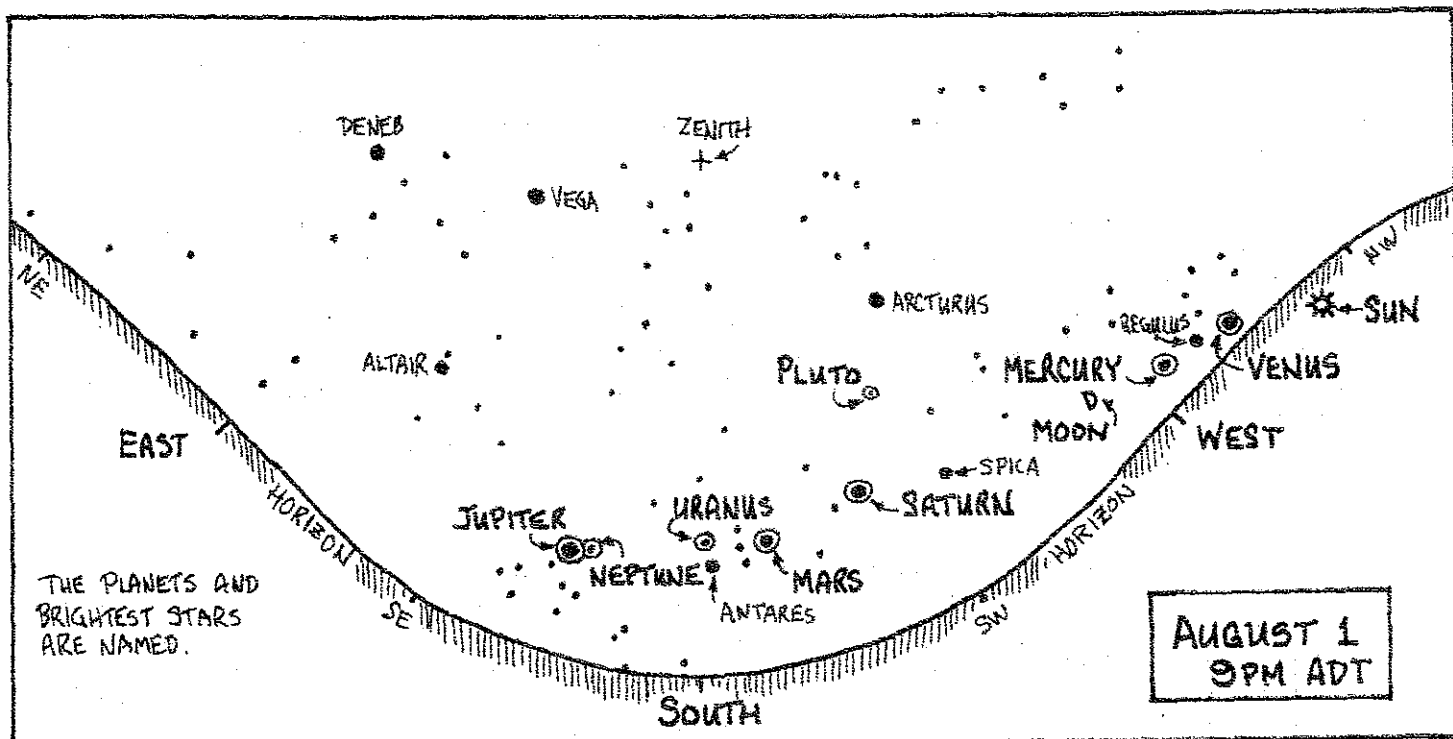
#### THE PLANETS, ALL TOGETHER, IN JULY AND AUGUST by Larry Bogan

As the other planets travel in their orbits about the sun, they appear in our skies as wandering "stars". Generally, they are distributed all around the sky but located near the path the sun follows through the sky (the ecliptic). Mercury and Venus are never very far from the Sun because they are nearer the Sun than the Earth. Only rarely do all the planets become visible in the evening sky all at one time. In late July and early August such an occurrence will take place.

This is the situation. Although all the planets will be there in the sky shortly after sunset near August 1, they will be distributed over 125 degrees of the sky and they will not be visible all at one time. The reason for this is that Mercury will set an hour after the sun while Venus disappears below the horizon only a half-hour after the sun. This places them in the bright evening twilight, making them difficult to observe without optical aid, exact knowledge where they are and a clear, low horizon. During that time only the very brightest other planets will be visible, such as Jupiter and Mars. Uranus, Neptune, and Pluto always require optical aids to be seen, even in darker skies.

The accompanying drawing shows the sky for August 1, at 9 p.m. ADT, about a half-hour after sunset. It will be a challenge to see all the planets and be able to say that you have seen them all in one evening. It will be impossible to see them all while they are all still above the horizon.

Although Mercury is at its maximum elongation from the sun it is not a favorable one; the best ones occur in the spring of the year for the evening sky. A pair of binoculars will help you see and locate Mercury and Venus. They will be the brightest "stars" in the area and Venus will be brighter, lower and more northerly than Mercury. The only bright star in the area is Regulus half way between the two and slightly dimmer than Mercury. Venus will be rising higher and higher into the evening sky as we approach Autumn and will be dominating the evening sky by Christmas. Mercury will move toward the sun after August 1 and become even more difficult to see.



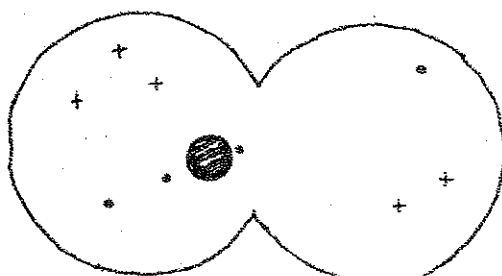
The easy planets to see are Jupiter, Mars and Saturn, in order of decreasing brightness. This is also their order in the sky from East to West. The only bright star that might cause some confusion is Antares near Mars and is of a similar reddish color. Mars is brighter and to the West.

Jupiter is just above the "tea pot" in Saggitarius and in the Milky Way at the time. This will make a beautiful view in darker skies after twilight and after the Moon sets (at midnight on Aug. 1). However, the presence of the Milky Way will make it more difficult to locate Neptune and Uranus which are also in the same area of the sky. Uranus is a 6th magnitude "star" while Neptune is even dimmer at 8th magnitude. They can be seen with a good pair of binoculars and detailed star maps, plus the planets celestial coordinates for the date. If you have access to the "Observer's Handbook" they are already plotted on detailed maps by Roy Bishop on pages 104 and 106. Neptune will be in the same field of view as the beautiful Trifid and Lagoon nebulae and a challenge to find among all the stars of the region. A small astronomical telescope will make it easier to find and allow you to see the disk of the planet.

Pluto is one planet most of us will not see. It is 250 times dimmer than Neptune and an object only seen in the larger amateur astronomical telescopes. At almost 14th magnitude a 30 cm. diameter telescope is needed to see it well. Refer to the "Observers Handbook" page 106-7 for details to locate this planet. During this period it is about half way between Saturn and the bright star Arcturus, higher in the sky than all the other planets and least visible.

This grouping of the planets is interesting but does not really provide any real convenience in seeing all the planets. As already pointed out Venus and Mercury will be seen better at other times of the year. The group of planets Jupiter, Saturn, Uranus, Neptune, and Pluto will not change their positions very much by this time next year and will all be seen together in the night sky of August 1985. Jupiter will have moved about 30 degrees further East and will have moved the most of this outer planet group. Mars, on the other hand, will not be easily seen at all next year and is only observable every other year.

Good observing and look for a notice, the BNS will probably have a sky observing session during this period to help you look at the planets.



## WILDLIFE NOTES

(The following are excerpted from various sources and we thought the subjects would be of interest, Eds.)

The last couple of years has seen a dramatic rise in the population of voles in Nova Scotia; in the past there have been plagues of these rodents.

The Plague of Mice in Nova Scotia and Prince Edward Island. Story of the disastrous ravages of 1775 and 1815 told by Rev. George Patterson, D.D.

From the "Nova Scotian", 21  
Jan. 1888

In the early settlement of Nova Scotia and Prince Edward Island, there are frequent mentions of mice appearing in such swarms as to become a real plague. Diereville (a French writer) says in 1699 "The Island of St. John (P.E.I.) was visited every seven years by swarms of field mice and locusts alternately - never together. After they ravage the land they precipitate themselves into the sea." There is no evidence of such regularity but later writers speak of it as occurring at longer and shorter intervals and it has not been unknown on the mainland.

The Rev. Hugh Graham, minister in Stewiacke, wrote on July 21st, 1815, to a friend in Scotland: "This last winter was the coldest that ever I saw. The spring was also very cold and late. Appearances are now promising, only the field mice have become so numerous as to threaten the destruction of a great part of the crop. We have not had such a visitation for more than 40 years past. They began to multiply last year and did some damage." The next year on Aug. 1, he writes: "The plague of the mice is so far removed that there is scarcely a mouse to be seen in house or field or the woods, where they swarmed. But we feel the effects of it still. The grass, as well as the grain, being greatly cut off, the farmers had to sell off a great part of their stock at low prices before winter, to bring their stock to their poverder. But the winter was severe and the spring uncommonly cold and late, which occasioned a great mortality in the remainder of their stock. And now breadstuffs have to be brought from afar, and at a high price, and many are straightened as to means."

**Areas of ravages:** The whole of the counties of Antigonish, Pictou and Colchester, and part of Cumberland along the north shore to the northwest, and some small portions of Guysborough and Halifax Counties to the south - a district of about 80 x 50 miles (4000 square miles).

**The Species:** All contemporary accounts agree that the field mouse was the species by which the real damage was done but others say that other species were more abundant than usual. Mr Roderick McKay of St. Mary's says that having set a large pot trap, partially filled with water, he found it in the morning filled with all the species known in the county. Mr. Samuel Waugh, Tatamagouche, says that there the jumping mouse was also numerous and destructive but not nearly to the extent of the field mouse.

**Rise and Progress of the Plague:** The mice began to multiply the previous year and did some damage but in Pictou County, they did not appear in such such numbers as to excite notice. Probably in such places as Stewiacke (in the midst of large hardwood forest) they appeared sooner than in others.

Toward end of winter in 1815 they began to be troublesome. The troughs for making maple sugar were fouled by them and 2-3 inches of snow was soon packed by their feet. Before planting was over the woods and fields alike swarmed with them. Generally, their appearance in the clearings was sudden. Seed grain, sown early, generally escaped them but later sowings and seed potatoes suffered from them. A story is told of a man who made a clearing in the woods and took a quart of oats to sow on it, but the mice appeared as soon as he began and ate the grain as he sowed it so that soon he gave up in disgust and threw the whole to them.

**Their Numbers and Ravages:** By midsummer they swarmed everywhere. In mowing, a cut of the scyth could not be made without killing some. They were bold and fierce and would show their teeth

and squeal when cornered. The males fought among themselves and their squeaks could be heard when passing a field.

They readily take to water and swim small streams. Cats, dogs, martens and foxes gorged on them. One cat caught and brought home 60 in one night. Wild animals seemed to become plentiful. One man saw as many as 12 foxes in an interval at one time. In Stewiacke cats went feral and multiplied so that the next year they became a nuisance -they were so wild that they were a terror to children and were hunted and killed in great numbers.

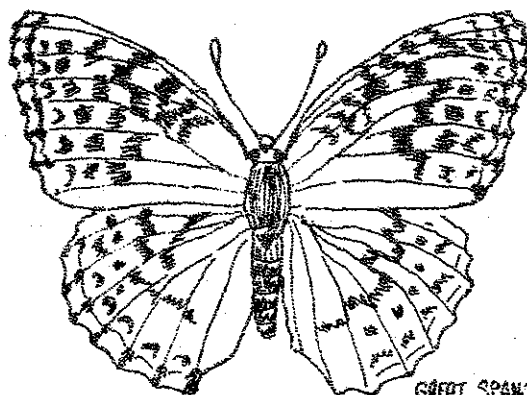
The hay crop was much damaged but the mice were most destructive to ripening grain. They have been known to cut down an acre in 3 days. The jumping mice would spring at an ear to bring it down but the others would (as the country people put it) junk it, by cutting the stalk at the ground. If the remainder dropped but remained upright, they would cut it again until it fell or could be dragged down. They ate it on the ground or dragged it to their nests, which were commonly under the roots of stumps. When the grain was consumed they burrowed into the ground to attack potatoes.

In older settlements where clearings were large, people by great effort managed to save a small part of their crops, but in the back settlements and in clearings near the woods, all crops were destroyed, with the exception of hay which was badly damaged.

The Departure: In the autumn as weather became cold they became languid and slow and could be trampled underfoot. In some places their putrefying carcasses tainted the air. Dr. McDonald says that after haying millions of fleas could be seen upon them and that they rushed into rivers and ponds to rid themselves of their tormentors and were drowned in great numbers.

In Tatamagouche area the cause of their decline was thought to be an unusual and severe sleet storm which came exceptionally early and which also killed geese and ducks. Nearly the whole district of the plague was mouse-free in the following year (1816), with the exception of the east river of the St. Mary's; here Mr. Roderick McKay said that for several years they were numerous enough to be troublesome. But there were not more than five families there, which only arrived in the year of mice and made the first breach in the magnificent hardwood forests of that region.

Causes: In 1813 production of wild nuts, mast and berries was very abundant and in the late fall a heavy snowfall covered this food supply before frost set in. The snow cover remained till spring 1814. That summer was not so favorable, but populations kept rising till the spring of 1815 when the food apparently was no longer sufficient and drove the mice to seek it in fields and away from their normal haunts.



GREAT SPANGLED FRITILLARY

#### ATTRACTING EXTRA BUTTERFLIES TO YOUR GARDEN

by Edwin F. Steffek  
Old Farmer's Almanac 1984

Who would ever connect Winston Churchill, the man who by his doggedness pulled Britain through its "darkest hours" in World War II, with butterflies? The truth is that Winston Churchill was an avid butterfly fancier. He is said to have set aside a sizable portion of his gardens at Chartwell for their attraction, and he converted a summer house into an "emerging" area where he could sit and watch the chrysalises open and the butterflies come out. He even tried to introduce swallowtails into his garden, but stubbed

his toe when his gardener innocently cut a bed of fennel he had planted as a breeding place for the caterpillars. But even such a setback didn't stop him. For garden parties he was known to purchase extra butterflies from a breeder and release them.

If Winston Churchill could go to such lengths to have butterflies in his garden, perhaps we, too, can be excused if we take a few steps to attract extra butterflies to our properties. The best way to encourage them to come and to stay is to plant the kinds of flowers that attract them with their nectar -and for the longer pull, to acquire the kinds of plants that they prefer as food for their caterpillars.

For attracting the adults two of the most effective flowers are those of the buddleia or butterfly bush and the orange milkweed. The first is a tender shrub sold by nursery men over the country (USA). In most of New England and similar climates it kills back to the ground each winter, but every spring it throws up new four- and six-foot stems capped with intensely fragrant slender cones of blue, lavender, pink, or white blooms from July until fall. The one- to three-foot orange milkweed is one of the hardiest perennials. A native, it has made itself at home in the cinders of railroad embankments and the dry gravel of roadside cuts. While it is extremely hard to dig up, it grows easily from seeds collected in the wild or from pieces of root cut into three-inch lengths and planted either vertically or horizontally in pots of sandy loam and kept only moderately moist. Do not overfeed milkweed or overwater it. Keep this in mind and the plants will last for years, drawing butterflies galore with each passing season.

If you're lucky enough to have a meadow or can create even a small one, daisies, fall asters, yarrow, Queen Anne's lace, thistles, milkweed, bouncing Bet or soapweed, black-eyed Susans, Joe-Pye weed and the various goldenrods will attract butterflies, as will the liatris or Kansas gayfeathers of our prairie states. Crown vetch, which has been so widely sold for planting steep banks, will keep you well supplied with the little orange and yellow sulfur butterflies.

Mud puddles, too, are favorite haunts of the dainty sulfurs and various other species. Perhaps you can make a small damp spot somewhere in the garden -even an old garbage can lid just barely covered with soil will hold enough water to make a nice muddy little puddle.

Butterfly season opens -and "opens" is certainly the right word -with the mourning cloaks for, believe it or not, these large, creamy-edged brown butterflies can often be seen flitting around the edges of woods on warm days in January. They winter as adults, hiding under bits of bark or in other protected places, and a few warm days can stir them into activity. When spring comes they lay their eggs upon the unfolding leaves of elms, willows, and poplars, or in rarer cases upon hackberries, pear trees, or birches. Early in the season they seem to favor the sweet sap oozing from bruised trees and later that of rotting fruits.

Another early butterfly is the tiny spring azure. Walk down a quiet country road some sunny day when the leaves are just beginning to come out and you are likely to see these little pale-blue butterflies, scarcely an inch across, flying up from the road in front of you, going a short distance and then setting down again. They go for the early spring flowers, upon the buds of which they also lay their eggs.

Best known of all the butterflies are the large and spectacular orange and black monarchs, whose favorite plant is the common milkweed. If you want monarchs and plenty of them to grace your garden, make sure you have plenty of milkweeds around, if not in the garden, at least near it. (Ed. note: Milkweed is classed as a noxious weed in Nova Scotia and there is a program to eradicate it in Kings Co.)

You will certainly want some of the large, showy swallowtails. The green clouded, a handsome species, mostly black shading to pale green on the lower wings and with creamy spots along the outer edges, lays its eggs upon the sassafras and spice bush, while the black swallowtail prefers members of the carrot family, including parsnip, parsley, celery, and Queen Anne's lace.

The handsome black and yellow tiger swallowtail lays its eggs upon a wide variety of trees and shrubs, including birches, wild cherries, tulip trees, poplar, apple, and ash. If you live in the

south, you may see its relative, the zebra swallowtail, which chooses the pawpaw, passion vine, spicebush, or upland huckleberry to feed its young.

In July and August and usually into September look for the white-spotted brown regal fritillary around goldenrods, Joe-Pye weed, and swamp milkweeds. Folks living in the Midwest wherever ironweed is plentiful are also likely to be treated to the Diana fritillary, the males of which are two-toned brown and the females black with blue spots. If you go up into the White Mountains of New Hampshire, look for the White Mountain fritillary on the upper reaches, where you will find it around the alpine sandworts.

All of these butterfly-pleasing plants scattered around your yard and garden will create a carpet of color and will provide, if not nectar for the gods, at least nectar to nourish a Churchillian number of butterflies.

Roy Bishop is President of The Royal Astronomical Society of Canada

As mentioned in the article on the Planets, we know Roy Bishop is the Editor of the R.A.S.C.'s "Observers Handbook". He has been on the executive of the B.N.S. and has co-edited as well as produced this Newsletter. Roy has been an enthusiastic amateur astronomer for many years and has his own observatory at his home. In the near future he plans to have a 44.4 cm telescope in his observatory to make it the largest in the Maritimes. He teaches an astronomy course at Acadia University and has done research on the history of astronomy in the Maritimes. He is active in the Halifax Centre of the R.A.S.C. and has been president of the Centre. Roy's national office will be for two years. Congratulations, Roy, from the B.N.S.

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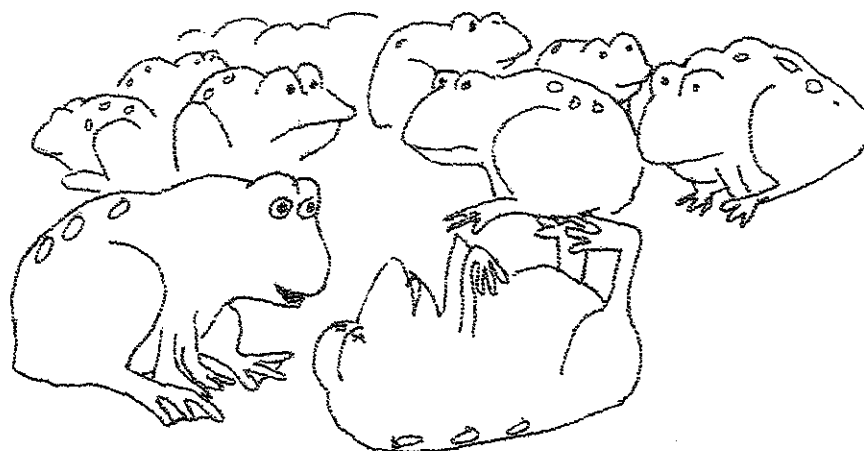
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"HEY EVERYBODY! I THINK CHARLIE JUST CROAKED!"