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ROYAL ONTARIO MUSEUM OF ZOOLOGY
TORONTO
LEAFLET No. 1

WINTER BIRDS*

WHEN fall days have come and gone and the straggling rear-guard of greened, greyed, and buffed bird migrants has left our woods and fields for the winter, it may appear that the bird student's year has ended. The out-of-doors will be bleak and



JUNCO

cold and, compared with spring, the trail will seem utterly abandoned by wild life. Nowhere will one hear a constant flood of song, such as is so evident in spring when the mating impulse brings birds into full chorus.

The few birds that are still with us have their activities reduced to a minimum. The pulse of nature is slowed to a sleeping tempo.

However, the bird student need not wait for spring and its host of colourful migrants. There are plenty of things to see in winter. In and about Toronto from fifteen to twenty species of birds may be seen on a winter day during a two-or three-hour hike. In fact, if a notebook is kept, as should be done, one may find that forty different kinds of birds have been seen during a single winter. Considerably more than that number appear on the records of winter birds in the files of the Museum but, of course, these cover a period of more than forty winters.



TREE SPARROW

For the beginner the winter may be the best season for the reason that there are fewer species to learn to recognize. Also, the bare condition of trees and thickets with the resultant increase of visibility is ideal for viewing the characteristic markings of birds and acquiring the deftness necessary in keeping such spirited objects as birds within the field of the binoculars.

In the study of ornithology the first requirement is to be capable of recognizing the various species of birds and to de-

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signate them by a generally accepted name. This knowledge



HORNED LARK

is best obtained in the field and from books, although these sources may be supplemented by visits to the Museum. Additional information about birds—where and how they live—will come through increased familiarity with them in the field, one's powers of observation and deduction increasing through experience.

The segregation of the various kinds of birds by habitat boundaries will be noted early in the beginner's experience. The winter birds of Toronto may be divided into four groups based on the type of habitat in which they are found.

Birds of the City Streets. The House or English Sparrow, is the only species which appears regularly and in numbers about the city streets in winter. It is a foreign bird which was introduced into North America in 1851, subsequently spreading to nearly every inhabited part of the continent. The Starling, another importation which was brought to the new world in 1890, is spreading rapidly and may be seen about certain sections of Toronto in winter and is almost certain to be a common bird of the city streets in the near future. It is larger than the sparrow and its yellow bill is longer and pointed. Moreover, its plumage is glossy black, flecked with whitish and buff.



BROWN CREEPER

Birds of the Roadside and Scrubby Fields. Surrounding the city are many open plots and unpaved roads where weeds, bushes, and stunted trees afford protection and food to some kinds of



DOWNY WOODPECKER

winter birds. The Slate-coloured Junco may be seen there in flocks, feeding upon the ground and rising like wind-blown leaves to give their flash-signal—an instantaneous spreading of the tail exposing the pure white outer tail feathers. Here, too, may be found a flock of Tree Sparrows feeding among the bushes. The indistinct but ever-present dark dot on the centre of the grey breast is a convenient mark of identity. The Northern Shrike and the



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Horned Lark are other species which frequent such situations. The former appears as a black-and-white bird as it flies from one shrub to another. It is of especial interest since it kills and eats mice, although related structurally to the song birds. The Horned Lark, although a migrant, returns to our fields and waste lands before winter is over, and in February may be seen running over bare spots in the road or fields. Perhaps you may be favoured with its tinkling, musical song if the day is sunny and it feels so inclined.

Birds of the Woods. In the many wooded parks and ravines in and about Toronto one is certain of seeing or hearing several kinds of winter birds. The diminutive Brown Creeper may be found probing with its sharp, curved bill into the bark-crevices of tree, from base to bough, for insect eggs or "sleeping" pupae. Two species of woodpeckers, marked with black and white, may be found searching dead and infected trees and branches for grubs. The smaller, the Downy



BLUE JAY

Woodpecker, is almost an exact replica of the larger, the Hairy Woodpecker; even their notes are similar except in volume. If you note a patch of red feathers on the back of the head of any individual it is the male of the species, the female having this colourful note omitted from her plumage. You may hear the boisterous cry of the Blue Jay, a bird which needs no description other than its name, except to add that the feathers of its head form a crest. Another species which may be met with is the White-breasted Nuthatch. Its position, as it makes its jerky, zig-zag course, head foremost, down a tree trunk, may hide



OLD SQUAW

its white breast, but you will note the blue-gray back and the black top of its head. The Black-capped Chickadee may himself announce his name, "Chickadee-dee-dee" but, if you would solicit his intimacy, imitate his high-pitched whistle, "Peweede", and he will leave his business of food-hunting and come down to see you.

Birds of the Water Front. At Ashbridge's Bay, Toronto Bay, Exhibition Park, and at Sunnyside, open water is usually to

be found in winter. Gulls and ducks find these places suitable winter resorts and consequently the bird student may add to his list by visiting the water-front. Herring Gulls, which are usually the most numerous birds in such places, are white with light, blue-grey backs



GOLDEN-EYE

and black outer wing feathers. Immature birds are dark greyish brown. Flocks of Old Squaw ducks, a long-tailed species which summers in the Arctic, may be seen swimming and diving in the icy water. The males are conspicuous with their white heads and necks marked with a dusky spot on each side. The females are less strikingly marked, but are usually associated with the males. Two other species of ducks may be noted quite commonly, the Merganser and the Golden-eye. The general coloration of the males of these two species may appear very similar at a distance, both being patterned with black and white, but the Merganser's dark head is unmarked and his bill is narrow, while the Golden-eye has a rounded white spot at the base of his typical broad duck bill on both sides of his proportionately large



MERGANSER

head. The females of these species, although both coloured with grey and brown, are not likely to be confused if you see the bill.

L. L. S.

COLOURED BIRD PICTURES

Excellent coloured reproductions of bird paintings by the Canadian artist, Allan Brooks, are sold by the Royal Ontario Museum of Zoology. These pictures, which are 9 by 11 inches in size, are beautifully reproduced and are suitable for framing for home or school. They are sold in sets of twelve at \$1.00 per set.

First series includes Baltimore oriole, ruby-throated hummingbird, goldfinch, blue jay, loon, ruffed grouse, screech owl, flicker, chickadee and white-breasted nuthatch, belted kingfisher, scarlet tanager, bluebird.

Second series includes horned grebe, herring gull and common tern, great blue heron, mourning dove, osprey, downy woodpecker, nighthawk, kingbird, purple finch, barn swallow and cliff swallow, redstart, house wren and winter wren.

