

The
**VICTORIA
NATURALIST**

Vol. 12, No. 2

May, 1955



Lewis woodpecker.

(Victoria Colonist.)

Published by the
VICTORIA NATURAL HISTORY SOCIETY
Victoria, B.C.

Published by
THE VICTORIA NATURAL HISTORY SOCIETY

 Vol.12, No.2

 MAY, 1955

OUR COVER - THE LEWIS WOODPECKER

The colour and habits of this bird are unusual amongst the species of the woodpecker tribe. In plumage the parts above are black with a greenish lustre. A narrow collar of grey surrounds the neck and extends to the breast. The face and chin are a dull crimson. The abdomen is a hairy mixture of rose and grey - mostly a warm suffusion of rose. The size is about that of a robin but appearing larger, especially in flight with the ample wing-spread.

Habits are unusual; flicker-like he feeds on the ground; sparrowhawk-like he takes beetles and large insects, often at a good height; jay-like he loves fruit of various kinds; creeper-like he examines tree bark for the wealth of small insects; bluebird-like he and his mate choose old woodpecker holes for their nest of many white eggs.

Latterly, and before the building boom in Victoria, the species was seen in many places extending from Ross Bay through the oak-covered districts in town. The locality of the Jubilee Hospital was a favourite. Here they might be seen close to buildings and on roofs looking for spiders and insects. No doubt they take their need of cherries, bees, and berries.

They love the lofty cotton-woods, and between these the crow-like flight of quick wing-beats can be observed.

In the southern Interior the species is well distributed. The Provinces of Alberta and British Columbia comprise their most northerly range, which is extended eastward to Kansas. Migration is south in winter to California.

- J. O. Clay.

- - - - -

A COMPARISON: The Victoria 1954 Christmas Bird Count located 90 species and 10706 individuals, while the Christmas count of the Vancouver Natural History Society totalled 82 species and 19354 birds; some interesting items being 2741 European starlings, 21 mynahs, 74 evening grosbeaks, 191 house finches and 8147 glaucous-winged gulls.

B. Pattenden.

HAVERGATE ISLAND - ENGLAND

by Theed Pearse, Comox

Havergate Island on the East Coast of England will, today, bring to the mind of the British ornithologist the avocet (*Recurvirostra avosetta*) but only in recent years. It is in one of the numerous estuaries that make this coast such a happy hunting ground for the ornithologist.

The avocet is a marsh lover and was a common nester in England a century and a half ago, then with the draining of the marshes it, like some other marsh birds, disappeared only appearing as a quite regular migrant though a common nester in other parts of Europe.

Soon after the close of the second world war a pair of avocets nested on Minsmere some twenty miles away; during the war this marsh was inundated from the sea and, in the process of recovering, provided a satisfactory habitat, but not for long and, today, it is huge reed-bed excellent for bearded tits (*Panurus biarmicus*) bitterns (*Botaurus stellaris*) and ducks but not for waders.

It was fortunate the birds moved to Havergate as this provides ideal conditions as it has water, marshy ground and dry ridges for nesting. Both Havergate and Minsmere are sanctuaries maintained by the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds and all bird lovers owe the Society a debt of gratitude for what it has done, by keeping these places in a natural state, to preserve some of the rarest birds in the country and, in the case of the avocet, by assuring its return as a nesting species.

Both Havergate and Minsmere are closely guarded by the Society with a watcher on duty all the nesting season; nobody can land without a special permit and then only accompanied by some representative of the Society. In British Columbia it is difficult to realize what a pest the oologist can be especially the one whose mania is for "British taken" eggs. To understand this read "The Awl Bird", by J. K. Stanford, which may be fiction but is the truth.

I enjoyed the great pleasure of spending a day on the island the latter part of last June and, which was something last summer, had good weather. Being dyked is of great help for seeing the birds as one can move along outside without disturbing them; blinds have been erected on the dyke which are entered from the back, a small hut with a bench to sit on and an open slit in front to watch the birds.

Plenty of avocets were there; some could be seen sitting on their nests, rather easy objects to pick out with their black and white plumage which does not give the impression of protection; others had young and it was interesting to see how the parent bird would drive away other birds even as large as shell ducks (*Tadorna tadorna*) which were quite numerous. Others were flying around calling their distinctive note 'cluit-cluit' which gives the bird its name in Holland.

The time of year was not when migrants could be expected even in such ideal conditions for waders; of course the noisy redshank (*Tringa totanus*) was there, nesting, but we did see as well black godwits (*Limosa limosa*), a knot (*Calidris canutus*) and two turnstones (*Arenaria interpres*). Common terns (*Sterna hirundo*), little tern (*Sterna albifrons*), and once a Sandwich tern (*Sterna sandvicensis*), were seen. A marsh harrier (*Circus aeruginosus*), another of the birds that, thanks to the efforts of the Society, still nest in the district, took in the marsh on its round. To complete the picture inland, as a background to the colourful marsh, was a typical English setting of low hills, some woodland and cultivated fields with to one side a distant view of an old Norman Keep. For music there were the skylarks (*Alauda arvensis*) singing all the time.

Last spring avocets attempted to colonize a small marsh not far from Minsmere and were incubating when two of the disturbers of bird life put a stop to the effort; small boys wantonly destroyed one nest and the other was believed "collected", and the birds left. However the mere fact of the attempt at forming a new colony, is encouraging.

The European avocet is similar to the American (*R. americana*) but retains the black and white plumage in summer; according to Munro and Cowan there are only three records of the latter in British Columbia.

Reading in a past issue of The Victoria Naturalist an account of seagulls destroying young water fowl reminded me of a similar incident which happened some years ago.

We were bound in for Vancouver and while passing through English Bay a small brown bird came on board. Seagulls were following the ship and every time this small bird took a flight it was chased back again. On one of these flights it landed in the water and a seagull immediately swooped down and swallowed it.

W. R.

THE SONG OF THE OREGON TOWHEE

by Morris Jackson
Fanny Bay, B.C.

A few years ago when a possibility of selecting a bird to represent British Columbia was being discussed the towhee was rejected as being "unmusical." It seems to me that such characterization could have been made only by inadvertence, since few birds on Vancouver Island sing so industriously as Pipilo maculatus oregonus. True, his song lacks the exquisite quality of that of a robin, and he has not the repertoire of a western meadow lark; but he will continue to sing until late summer, very late, while robins sing little beyond midsummer: a wet evening, a dead mate, perhaps, may bring a few moments of song, but mostly they complete their family tasks without melody.

Oregon towhees have, in most cases, two songs: one is a burbling, blissful whistle that with some individuals becomes an insectlike 'buzz'. The other song can be syllabized and each bird will be found to use such syllables to form an individualistic pattern which may be in combination with the whistle. Thus the towhee we raised in 1949 has two separate songs, the whistle and these syllables, "Chick, chick, chick,--see, see." A neighbour bird sings, "Chick, chick, chick", but omits the "see, see." A bird we raised in 1948 sang a clear and pretty whistle but would sometimes add "see, see." Could this addition have been a completion of an identifying song?

These songs, the No.2 songs, are part and parcel of the individual singer; they are unchanged each successive year and so may be used to identify a particular bird. This, of course, is equally true of some other passerines (can it be said of all songbirds?); but the notes of such a performer as a robin, for instance, are too complicated and too rapid in some of their vibrations for us to distinguish more than one, or perhaps two birds. The towhee, however, has a simple-sounding little song which should lend itself admirably to song research, much of which is now being done with electronic aid. Evidently there exists a vast field for such work.

Writers usually, I believe, rather stress bird song as a warning to other birds to "keep off the grass!" Next,

they say, its function is to assure the female of her lord's presence. Not that she needs to be told by song if he be near, since she will recognize his every note and murmur. But it may be that the considerable carrying power of bird song fills a need that cannot be met by everyday common note. And yet I have heard two towhees calling back and forth to each other in their ordinary tone, at 300 or 400 feet. But towhees also use their song as a summons to me, and it is quite common to my wife and me to be greeted with the personal call of some bird with a nesting wife. Apparently we are to recognize him and give him food, and pay no attention to Mr. See, see, so-and-so! But so long as we can hear "Chick, chick, chick,--See, See!" each spring we shall know our orphan bird has been spared from his many enemies.

SPRING MIGRANTS

The cold weather this year seems to have had the effect of delaying the arrival of some of our migrating birds. The following are the dates they were first observed this year:-

Violet Green Swallow	March 12th
Audubon Warbler	March 20th
Marsh Wren	March 20th
White Cr. Sparrow	April 2nd
American Pipit	April 2nd
Band-tailed Pigeon	April 3rd
Townsend's Warbler	April 6th
Rufous Hummingbird (m)	April 11th
Solitary Vireo	April 14th
Chipping Sparrow	April 16th
Warbling Vireo	"
Lutescent Warbler	"
Savannah Sparrow	"
Western Flycatcher	April 17th

THE EPISODE OF THE OLD SQUAW DUCK

One day early in February, an odd looking duck was seen by Mrs. Frank Waring on the beach in front of her home at Cadboro Bay. On examination it proved to be very sick and also appeared to have its eyes infected, although there was no sign of oiling. The crows were hovering around, but as the duck showed some signs of life, they hesitated to attack it.

The duck was then put into a basket and brought up to the lawn, and, a little later on, John Waring, who is just eleven years old and has a wonderful way with birds, took charge. He improvised a cage, lined it with peat moss, put in some water and fresh fish, and lifted the duck into it. This seemed to be what was required, as it ate the fish and drank some of the water. Then, as the duck showed more life, it was brought into the house and placed in the sink which had been filled with water. Thereupon it got very excited and splashed the water all over the floor; so the bath was filled with water, and the duck put in it, and its obvious pleasure at being in its natural element again was really something to see.

Mr. Guiguet, the Museum Biologist, was given a description of the bird and he identified it as a female old squaw. During the four days it was at the house it became quite tame and improved so much in health that John took it down to the beach, waded into the water, having put on high gum boots, and put the duck down.

Strangely enough, it was reluctant to leave the boy, and just swam round and round him, but as John had to go to school he came back on the beach, and the duck finally swam off into the bay and disappeared.

A. R. D.

AN INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY OF BIRDS

The study of birds is becoming increasingly popular, and it is interesting to note some of the reasons why people take to this hobby. Sometimes I ask my bird loving friends what started them on this particular phase of nature study, and get some good answers. One lady told me that one day a small bird flew up against a window and was stunned. She

picked the bird up and brought it inside to recover, and the mere holding of that half ounce of vibrant life in her hands gave her an interest in birds that has never waned.

Another friend, who had been induced to put some crumbs on his outside windowsill during a cold spell, was so fascinated by the many birds which came to be fed that he immediately purchased a pair of binoculars and a field guide and made bird study his chief interest.

An article by Mr. Theed Pearse in a recent issue of 'The Naturalist' entitled 'Herring Provide a Feast for Birds', reminded me of my own introduction to birds, which was made on an early spring day in Comox Harbour a few years ago. On this particular day the harbour was a teeming mass of spawning herring, and apparently the sea birds had been following this immense school of fish up the coast for some time. Mr. Pearse had phoned me that he had something remarkable to show me, so I met him at Comox and we procured a rowboat and went on a tour of the little harbour, and were soon in the midst of a huge bird congregation. There must have been not less than a hundred thousand individuals, and the noise of the screeching gulls was quite overwhelming. My diary records rather incredible numbers:-

90,000 gulls, mainly glaucous-wing and short-bill
 2,000 cormorants, Baird, and a small number of double-crested.
 2,000 red-breasted mergansers
 1,000 American mergansers
 500 loons, common and Pacific.

The balance being mostly made up of surf and white-winged scoters, greater scaup, horned, western and Holboell grebe and murre.

There was something else in the harbour too, as while rowing the boat I heard a prodigious splash close behind, and turning round saw the great bulk of some enormous animal rise above the water. I nearly fell out of the boat, but Mr. Pearse, with his usual imperturbability, merely said "sea lion - quite harmless", and resumed his more important observations. It did not look harmless to me, but what could I do? But as an introduction to wild life on Vancouver Island, all this certainly left nothing to be desired, and I found a new interest there and then,

which has steadily increased each succeeding year.

A. R. D.

BIRD GROUP FIELD MEETING - NORTH SAANICH

On Saturday, March 19th, 28 members of the Society met at Patricia Bay at 10:30 a.m. The day was fine and sunny, without wind, which added considerably to the pleasure of the outing. The territory covered included Mills Road, Wilson Road and Shoal Harbour. The party then proceeded to Towner Park, and had their lunch in the beautiful sea-front garden surrounding the home of Mrs. Walker L. Taylor.

Birds were rather scarce; a total of 30 were identified, and no new migrants were seen. Some of the party returned via Martindale Road, where they saw 11 greater yellowlegs and a large flock of violet-green swallows flying low over the flooded fields. Also in this area are many skylarks, at this time of year in full song.

J. O. C.

BIRDS SEEN AND HEARD AT ROYAL OAK,
January and February, 1955

- COOPER'S HAWK - - Comes almost daily and terrifies the quail and other small birds.
- CALIFORNIA QUAIL - Many, about 30, running back and forth, but exploding into shelter when the Hawk appears.
- R. N. PHEASANT - A few specimens sedately stalking through the meadow or orchard.
- FLICKER - Several, arguing who is going to sleep over the attic window.
- DOWNY WOODPECKER - Occasionally noticed in the woods.
- PILEATED WOODPECKER - Heard occasionally but not seen during the month.
- C. B. CHICKADEE - A flock seen almost daily.
- RED-BREASTED NUTHATCH -
Seen occasionally, its "yank yank" note heard frequently.
- BROWN CREEPER - Commonly noted.
- WINTER WREN - This mite of a bird is very tame and very vocal.
- BEWICK WREN - Two noted.
- ROBIN - Beginning to "chirrup" about Jan. 25th.
- GOLDEN CR. KINGLET -
In flocks with the chickadees.
- OREGON TOWHEE - About 4 are regular visitors to the feeding station. Two others demolished by hawk.
- OREGON JUNCO - Very many of these friendly little birds.
- FOX SPARROW - A few steady boarders busily scratching.
- SONG SPARROW - One, which waits under suet feeder to catch the crumbs.
- CAL. PURPLE FINCH - One male and two female eating snowberries, others reported by neighbours.
- PINE SISKINS -- A large flock noted Feb. 10, also on Feb. 13, making a tremendous noise in a tree.

- Mrs. J. A. Berry.

A TRIP TO COURTENAY

During the Easter vacation a small party of us took a trip to Courtenay. The weather was not exactly ideal, raining as it did all Good Friday, and the balance of the holiday being cold, windy and showery. However, we kept a good look-out for birds, and found one definite fact anyway; that the bird population in the Victoria area is much larger than any of the up-Island districts that we visited.

From Parksville north however, we did see many very large flocks of brant feeding along the water's edge. An official count made on Saturday of Easter week, covering a fair proportion of the shore line between Parksville and Courtenay, totalled 17,400. There were also large numbers of scaup, particularly in Nanoose Bay, our estimate being not less than 10,000 birds, and there were possibly double that number.

At Comox we were advised that a flock of evening grosbeaks, about 40 in number, had wintered there, and we were fortunate in being able to see some of this flock while there. It is not often that these beautiful birds honor Victoria with a visit. There were also a fair number of Audubon warblers, but we saw no other species of warblers, and, in fact, very few migrants at all, save violet-green swallows. Just above Merville we did catch sight of a mountain bluebird which flew across the road just ahead of the car. We also saw five sparrowhawks, and a fair number of ravens, but no eagles. Birds were indeed scarce.

Anyone going up the Island should certainly try to visit Miracle Beach, at Black Creek, about 12 miles north of Courtenay. At this Provincial Park there are one hundred and fifty-six camp sites for cars, trailers and tents, all complete with tables, fireplaces and water. It would indeed be difficult to find a better place to spend a holiday at little cost save that of food. There are miles of beach there, backed up by woodland and forest.

L. G. R.

JUNIOR NATURAL HISTORY PAGE

Gerry Skinner, --- Editor

May, 1955.

'My Pet Robin' by Sharlene Lindley.

Once in early spring there were two robins that built their nest in the tree next door to us. They had a family of three, and they were old enough to leave the nest, when one day two boys went into the yard and began poking the nest with sticks. Finally they made a hole in it. The three little robins fell out.

The mother bird kept feeding the two stronger robins, but the third one was younger and could not hop away with the other two. When I saw him, he was hungry and weak, so I took him into the house and fed him bread dipped in egg yolk and pablum. I made a little nest for him of shredded paper and cotton batting in a box, then I put him in my bedroom.

Soon he was strong enough to hop out of the box, so after school I went out and dug up some worms for him. Every morning he would hop up onto the bedstead and chirp until he woke me up. I had him for about three or four weeks, and he became quite strong for he was even flying around in the house. Then one Sunday I had him outside sitting on the fence, when a seagull took off from the roof of the house and swooped down. It must have scared the robin for he flew over into the yard at the back of us. Before I could get him, he had flown away.

The next week I saw him again in our yard but I thought that it would be better to leave him on his own now. I didn't see him very much after that; but I see him every spring, and it seems that he gets bigger every year.

Hi! Everyone. Please send us some more stories or news for this page. Thanks Sharlene for the one about your pet robin.

THE EDITOR.

NOTICES OF MEETINGS

1955

- Saturday
May 7th BIRD GROUP: Field trip to Metchosin. Meet at Monterey Cafe at 9:45 or St. Mary's Church, Metchosin at 10:30 as in 1953. Come well shod and with lunch. Mr. J. O. Clay, Leader.
- Tuesday
May 10th: GENERAL MEETING: Annual Social in Provincial Museum. Colour pictures, Competition. Coffee and refreshments 25¢
- Friday
May 13th: TECHNICAL TALK
"Species Formation"
Charles Guiguet, Biologist. Provincial Museum at 8 p.m.
- Saturday
May 21st: MARINE BIOLOGY: Meet at breakwater at 9:15 a.m. Outer Wharf bus. Mr. J. A. Cunningham, Leader.
- Saturday
May 28th: BOTANY GROUP: Field trip to Thetis Lake. Meet at Monterey Cafe at 1:30 p.m. Miss M.C. Melburn, Leader.
- Saturday
June 4th: GEOLOGY GROUP:
Field trip to Goldstream. Meet at Monterey Cafe at 1:30 p.m. Mr. A.H. Marrion, Leader.
- Saturday
June 18th: BOTANY GROUP: Field trip to John Dean Park. Meet at Monterey Cafe at 1:30 p.m. Miss M. C. Melburn, Leader.
- Monday
June 20th: MARINE BIOLOGY: Trip to Island View Beach. Meet at Monterey Cafe at 9:15 a.m. Mr. J. A. Cunningham, Leader.
- Saturday
July 2nd: BIRD GROUP: Boat trip. Bare and Imrie Islands. Meet at Government Wharf, Deep Cove at 9:45 a.m. Mr. J. O. Clay, Leader.
- Tuesday
July 5th: MARINE BIOLOGY: Meet at Chinese Cemetery at 10 a.m. Gonzales Crescent Road bus to terminus. Mr. J. A. Cunningham, Leader.

Victoria Natural History Society

OFFICERS, 1955-56

Honorary Presidents:

HON. RAY WILLISTON,
Minister of Education.

J. W. EASTHAM,
Former Provincial Plant Pathologist.

J. A. MUNRO,
Former Dominion Wildlife Officer.

President:

C. W. LOWE,
1826 Hollywood Crescent,
Telephone 3-7037.

Editors:

A. R. DAVIDSON,
2545 Killarney Road, Telephone 7-2404.

G. CLIFFORD CARL,
Telephone 3-8524.

Secretary:

MISS HELEN BAIRD,
754 Richmond Avenue,
Telephone 3-4791.

Past Presidents:

ARCHDEACON ROBERT CONNELL.

G. CLIFFORD CARL.

GEORGE A. HARDY.

MRS. JAMES HOBSON.

JEFFREE A. CUNNINGHAM.

Vice-President:

MRS. KENNETH C. DRURY,
524 Island Road,
Telephone 4-7410.

Chairmen of Groups:

Programme: MRS. J. R. PARRIS,
592 Island Road, Telephone 3-0572.

Botany: MISS M. C. MELBURN (summer)
Telephone 4-9052.

WM. A. HUBBARD (winter),
Telephone 3-0802.

Zoology: G. CLIFFORD CARL,
Telephone 3-8524.

Conservation: DAVID B. TURNER,
Telephone 2-4975.

Ornithology: J. O. CLAY,
Telephone 3-3101.

Marine: J. A. CUNNINGHAM,
Telephone 4-3897.

Geology: A. H. MARRION,
Telephone 4-1983.

Audubon: MR. AND MRS. J. A. BERRY,
Telephone 9-3900.

Juniors:

Chairman: JACK WOOD.
Vice-Chairman: RALPH GUSTAFSON.

Secretary: DANNY HAYES.
Editor: GERRY SKINNER.

Annual dues, including subscription: Single, \$2; Family, \$3; Junior, \$1.

To