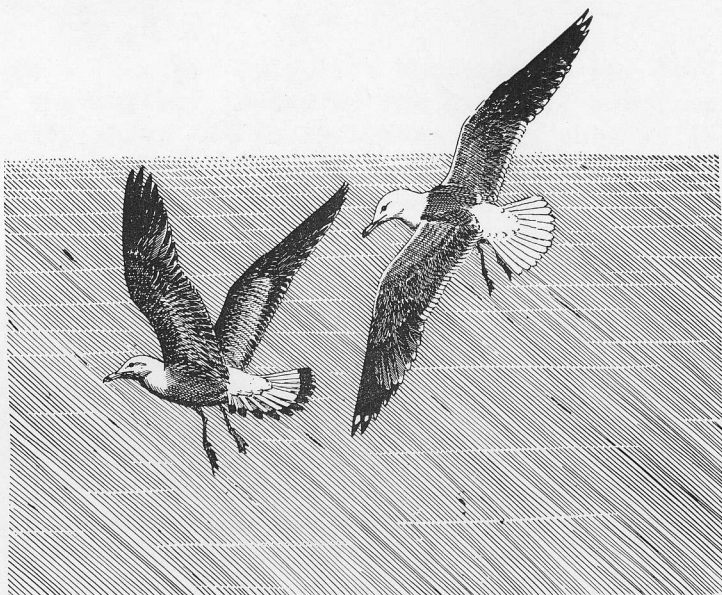


The
**VICTORIA
NATURALIST**

Vol. 15, No. 3

November, 1958



(F. L. Beebe)

Ring-billed Gull

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

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Vol. 15, No.3NOVEMBER 1958

OUR COVER

The ring-billed gull, as pictured by F. L. Beebe, is an unusual bird to be seen on this coast, but on October 24th last year Ralph Fryer identified two of them in Beacon Hill Park. This was confirmed by Mr. Charles Guiguet. Again on October 4th this year one of our members, David Stirling, saw one of these gulls in the park, exactly where it had been seen the previous year, which was in the pool opposite the deer enclosure.

To quote from Mr. Guiguet's Handbook on the Gulls, (No.13 of the series, issued by the Museum), the ring-bill measures only about 18½ to 19 inches long, thus it is much smaller than the herring gull, and in addition has yellow rather than flesh-coloured legs and feet. It is smaller, too than the California, but the difference is not so apparent. As both California and ring-billed gulls have yellowish-coloured feet and legs, the ring on the bill and the absence of a red spot is the only sure criterion in identifying the latter. It is a white bird with a greyish mantle and black wing-tips. The chief distinguishing feature in adult plumage is a dark spot on both upper and lower mandibles, which gives the impression of a distinct dark ring around the bill.

At the time of writing (October 19th) two or more of these unusual gulls are still in the park. As a matter of fact Beacon Hill Park and the adjacent shore line to Clover Point is possibly the best place in the Victoria district to observe birds. At the present time, in the pools, are canvasbacks, hooded mergansers, green-winged teal, pintail, greater scaup, wood duck, mandarins, mallard and widgeon. Many species of gulls can be seen there at close quarters, while most of the small birds of the woodlands and the fields can also be found at their proper seasons.

SALAMANDER SALLIES

G. Clifford Carl

Provincial Museum, Victoria, B.C.

The most common tailed amphibian on the southern end of Vancouver Island is probably the Northwest salamander (Ambystoma gracile). True, it is seldom seen which accounts for its being so little known. Both the adults and the larvae are secretive, hiding by day and foraging mainly by night, so that the average person never catches a glimpse of this abundant animal.

The egg masses, however, are fairly conspicuous and the presence of these gives some idea of the abundance and distribution of the salamander. In April and May at sea level these masses may be found in ponds and pools throughout its range; at higher altitudes the egg-laying season may be much later since water temperature probably influences their activity.

The eggs of this salamander are easily recognized. They are enclosed in a mass of transparent jelly about the size of a small grape-fruit but more elongated in shape. The egg itself is more or less spherical when first laid and about the size of a buck-shot but it soon becomes canoe-shaped as development takes place. Each lies in a spherical cavity within the jelly, pretty well equally spread throughout the mass. The number of eggs in each mass varies considerably but averages about twenty-five. The whole jelly-clump is laid around a twig or stout grass-stem for support.

Another most unusual feature of these egg-masses is that they become green after the first week or so of development. The colour is produced by the presence of a species of alga which develops within each cavity occupied by an egg. The algal cells apparently multiply as development of the eggs proceeds with the result that each jelly-mass becomes a vivid green by the time the larvae hatch.

It is very possible that the algae and the egg are symbiotic in their relationship. It seems logical to suppose that the plant supplies some oxygen for the developing animal, at least during the day, and that the by-products of the embryo are in turn utilized by the plant. At any rate no egg-masses of this salamander are ever found

without the alga and it is doubtful if the alga can survive alone. How the plant finds its way into the egg-mass is a puzzle as yet unsolved. Possibly there are mobile spores which penetrate the jelly.

On a visit to the Jordan River-Port Renfrew section of the West Coast road in early May this year egg-masses of the Northwest salamander were found in numerous pools along the way particularly in the wooded or recently logged-off sections. Usually they were found in non-running water but occasionally they were in back-waters of streams in a slight current. In most cases the water was at least 6 inches deep but in one instance part of the egg-mass projected above the surface, presumably because the water level had dropped since the eggs were laid.

The three basic requirements for egg-laying seem to be as follows:

Fresh water: Like almost all amphibians this salamander is intolerant of salt; it apparently never lays its eggs in brackish water. (One notable exception is the maritime toad of South America which breeds in tide pools).

Adequate depth: Eggs are nearly always laid in water at least six inches deep regardless of size of the pool. This is probably to assure some permanency of habitat, at least until the larvae can develop into the adult form.

Some support: Jelly-masses are always attached to some support presumably so they will not become carried away by current or wind. Attachment also holds them free of the bottom which prevents them from becoming silted over.

The larvae hatch after some weeks, the length of the developmental period depending upon the water temperature. Each is about one-half inch long and provided with rather prominent external gills. In this respect and in the presence of front limbs they differ from frog and toad tadpoles in which the gills are covered and legs are lacking. The young salamanders bury themselves in the bottom silt by day coming forth mostly at night to forage for food. They are carnivorous, feeding upon small waterfleas, insects, tiny clams and similar fare for a starter then, as they increase in size, they capture larger creatures even including their own kind. The best time to observe them or to collect them is at night when they may be stalked by flashlight or lantern in the shallow water.

Hind legs appear shortly, first as buds, then as

well-developed limbs. The four legs enable the salamander to creep actively over the bottom but swimming is accomplished by the powerful tail which can drive the animal at surprising speed, at least for short distances.

In time the larva begins to undergo changes which eventually enable it to leave the water for life on land. The gills shrink in size, lungs take over part of the job of respiration (assisted by the skin), the legs become strengthened, the tail fin gradually disappears, and the animal becomes restless. After some days it leaves the water and seeks shelter in a moist spot probably under a rotting log; it returns to the pond only to breed, possibly the following season.

A number of interesting features have been discovered regarding the life history of this salamander. For one, the time of metamorphosing to the adult form is extremely variable. It may occur at the end of the first summer, as it does with most amphibians that develop in water, or it may be delayed until the second season, or it may be put off indefinitely. The change-over is probably dependent upon temperature and food. Thus, at sea level most larvae probably transform to the adult stage by early fall while those at higher elevations (for example on the Forbidden Plateau at 3800 feet) wait until the following summer.

Under certain conditions larval characteristics (gills, and an aquatic existence) may be retained permanently and the animal may even breed while still in the larval stage! This phenomenon is known as neoteny and is found occasionally among certain insects as well. It is not known if any British Columbia salamanders have this most unusual habit but it is very possible. Here is a field of research with much promise of reward.

THE HUDSONIAN CURLEW

On October 20th, 1955, two Hudsonian Curlews appeared at Oak Bay Park. A year later, on the 21st of October two were seen here again. The following year 1957, they were not seen until November 10th. On October 18th of the present year we again saw two of them on the rocks close to the Oak Bay Park. It is certainly rather remarkable that for four successive years they should turn up at the same place and about the same time. Whether they are the same birds or not it is impossible to say.

BIRD NOTES FROM SAANICH

by George A. Hardy.

BLACK-THROATED GREY WARBLER:

This bird has twice come to my notice. Once on August 29th, 1951, in the Lost Lake district, and again this year on August 17th, when a lone bird gave me a fine view of itself as it preened its feathers on a willow bough after a hasty dip in the bird pool near the house.

VIOLET-GREEN SWALLOW:

A pair that brought up their young in a nest box near the house gave an insight into the manner of development of its brood, which in this case was protracted over a considerable period. As the young grow stronger one or more wait at the entrance of the nest box where they are fed by the parents, which do not now enter the box. This means the strongest bird gets the food. It is therefore able to fly before its companions, when the next strongest gets all the attention, until only one is left, but the parent birds keep at it until they have all been reared. Thus there was no general exodus of the whole brood, but a gradual and prolonged period of feeding to maturity. The first flying young never returned to the nest. Unless this sequence had been observed, one could have thought that only one young, the last, was successfully reared.

DOWNY WOODPECKER:

A pair of these birds has frequented our garden on and off for the past three years, attracted in the first place by a continuous supply of fat and rolled oats. They have developed a habit of pecking away at the bark of certain saplings of healthy Douglas firs nearby, evidently with the object of feeding on the exuding sap. Quite extensive irregular patches of bark-denuded areas now occur on a couple of saplings, about two to three inches in diameter and about thirty feet high. I counted at least nine patches in one tree, each three to four inches wide and eight to ten inches long, and many smaller ones in between. One of the saplings is now in a dying condition, due to too much work on the part of the downy. Usually these birds devote their debarking activities to dead or dying branches of various trees.

(continued over)

TREE CREEPER:

A tree creeper nested near our house this season(1958). The nest was built between the loose bark and trunk of a large cedar tree. The bark was attached above and hanging quite free at the lower end, and could easily be lifted away from the trunk sufficiently wide for a person to stand under it. Nevertheless the creeper built its nest near the lower end, and despite the movement of the bark by the wind or by other means, the nest was in no way endangered. After the brood was successfully reared, the nest was closely examined and found to be made of coarse pieces of scaly cedar from the outer part of the bark and these were attached together and to the inside of the bark and trunk with the unravelled silken cocoons of spiders. These gave to the whole an elasticity and resilience of a loose sponge, stretching and retracting with the movement of the bark. The nest was lined with the fine inner bark of the same tree.

The creepers were first observed building on April 26, the brood being fully fledged by May 16. Before they could fly though well developed, the young would dash up from the nest and climb between the bark and the tree high up out of sight, remaining there until all signs of danger had passed.

SONG SPARROW:

That a male bird of several species will attack its reflection in a window is well known, but what about a female? This action by a female song sparrow was barely noticed until it had kept at it persistently over a period of ten days or more. Various theories were advanced by us as to this unusual action of the bird. A day or two after the first attack on the window it was noticed that the bird behaved rather differently at times. Instead of ceaselessly pecking at the window and getting all out of breath over it, it would sidle up to the window fluttering its wings as if begging for food. It was this action that decided us that this was the female, apparently mistaking her own reflection for her mate and no doubt wondering why he did not respond.

The sex of the bird was verified later by observing the male and female together nearby.

AMERICAN MERGANSERS

by Philip Symons

In late May and early June many of the large streams of Vancouver Island and the nearby mainland become the fishing grounds for families of American Mergansers. Mother and ducklings can be seen going about their daily affairs from spring until September. The males seem to take no part in family life, leaving the rearing of the young to the mother. She is most often seen following along behind her busy youngsters, except in times of danger or supposed danger, when she takes the lead in a hurry and the whole family moves out fast, their feet working at a furious rate. They rise right out of the water and bounce along the surface, like a group of outboard racers. They have no trouble scuttling up and down rapids, which one would think impossible for such young navigators. They rarely take to the shore, except for short resting periods and preening parties.

They are truly marvellous swimmers. There is a dam across the outlet of Great Central Lake near Alberni; the river below the dam is churned into a cauldren of waves, whirl-pools and air bubbles by an eight-foot water fall, that forms the overflow. At one time I was amazed to see five or six juvenile, but fully grown mergansers suddenly appear in the swirling water a little below the water fall. They had swum upstream, under water. How they could see where they were going when below the surface in the midst of that maelstrom is a mystery.

During most of the daylight hours the ducklings spend their time searching for food. Breakfast, lunch and supper, it is always the same; salmon fry, young trout and other fish. They are continually bobbing up and down in their quest for fish. I once saw four young mergansers swimming swiftly downstream, every few minutes putting their heads under water without pausing in their journey. Presumably they were looking for dinner. The river must have been empty that day for they never stopped or dived, but hurried on round the bend downstream still searching diligently.

There is one little routine these birds go through for which I can find no explanation. I was watching a group of ten full-grown youngsters coming downstream and, as they

approached the rapids, down which they bounced one at a time, nearly every bird would quickly tip his bill up and down. The movement was just a quick flip of the bill. If there is any significance in this gesture, the mergansers and perhaps the occasional naturalist, are the only ones to appreciate it.

HAWK "SHADOW-BOXES" CROWS
by M. Jackson, Fanny Bay

For many months we have at times been aware of a peculiar growling note--"gr-r-r-r"--uttered by members of a band of fish-crows which visits us daily. This sound we have for some time learnt, means that one of the band is being pursued by a sharp-shinned hawk. We have puzzled over this, since accipiters do not normally attempt to seize prey in the air. It appears that it is all a game, at least, for the hawk.

Today we were afforded a good view of the entire performance. The young crows have now learned to counter-attack, and one was seen to be pursued by a sharp-shinned hawk as usual when he suddenly turned and now it was the hawk's time to be pursued. He flew into a tall, bare tree, and the crow settled within a few inches of him. Other eyes had seen the hawk, and re-inforcements arrived from north and south. A crow lit on the same branch as the hawk, and "growled". There was a brief pause, and then the hawk dived downward from his perch.

We could clearly detect the exultant glee in the growl that followed the hawk's retreat as the little band of crows flew in hot pursuit. No harm was done, but a good time was had by all.

BIRD GROUP MEETING

SATURDAY OCTOBER 4th, 1958

The group met at Macdonald Provincial Park Campsite near Sidney, and spent an hour walking through several of the campsites, seeing only a few birds in the dense underbrush. In all 28 persons turned out, including several new and very welcome members.

The tide was high in the early morning, but the call made at Randle's Boat Landing proved to be very worth while. Pintail and baldpate were quite numerous, and three green-winged teal flew in to feed. Also black turnstone, western sandpiper and greater yellowlegs were feeding on a small sandbar, together with several species of gulls and two very stately herons.

Mrs. Sherman was kind enough to invite us to lunch on their property on Canoe Cove, and also showed us over a neighbouring property where we had a good look at golden-crowned kinglets, brown creepers, nuthatches and a very condescending hermit thrush.

The 'Quiet Please' sign at the Resthaven Hospital was being completely ignored by a flock of about eight hundred redwing and Brewer's blackbirds upon our arrival, and the birds held our attention for a while as we found that a number of starlings were mixed in with them.

We also listed numerous waterbirds including the ruddy duck, double-crested cormorant, common tern, marbled murrelet and common loon.

Several of the group ended the trip by calling at Oystercatcher Bay, naturally to see the black oyster catchers, nineteen of which were on the rocks a short distance from the beach. Only fifteen minutes at this choice spot turned up the parasitic jaeger, two fox sparrows, one eared grebe and a unique sight in four surf scoters, one white-winged scoter and four American scoters crossing the bay in single file (The American scoter is by no means a common bird in this area).

In all a total of 69 species was listed. I will not attempt to pick a highlight for the day, as together with the beautiful weather, the very pleasant company and an abundance of birds, the outing was more than satisfying.

Alan Poynter.

THE GENERAL MEETING

The monthly meeting for October took place in the Museum on the 14th.

Dr. A. O. Hayes announced that Mr. P. M. Monckton had resigned from the presidency of the Society, on account of the fact that his work would take him away from Victoria for most of the winter. Mrs. Soulsby, the vice-president, was proposed as president for the balance of the year, and this was approved by a vote of the members present.

A nomination committee was formed to submit names for the vacant post of vice-president, to be voted on at the next general meeting on November 11th.

The speaker for the evening was Mr. A.E. Collins, of the British Columbia Forest Service, who gave an illustrated talk on the history of forestry, and some details of forestry practice in British Columbia.

THE JOY OF LIVING

Near the Resthaven Hospital on Saturday, October 11, there was a flock of about two hundred mixed red-winged and Brewer's blackbirds. They appeared to be excited and were making an indescribable variety of noises. Suddenly they all swooped over the bay close to the surface, some of them actually dipping into the water. It was apparent they were up to some mischief, and as we watched they flew over the flocks of scaup and scoters, making them all dive. Tiring of this, they harried the flying gulls, closing in on them in a mass, chasing them individually and collectively. The gulls were all bewildered, and flew from the area. Then they had a go at the killdeer, yellowlegs and gulls on the mud flats, forcing them to fly. For a while there was pandemonium on the bay, the blackbirds evidently enjoying the commotion they were making. They continued their play for some time, finally flying off to the tops of the tall fir trees near the hospital, where they resumed their chorus of whistles, squeaks and comments.

As an exhibition of birds having a good time, it was worth seeing.

A.R.D.

THE JUNIOR PAGE

by Freeman King

On Saturday, September 27th, a cavalcade of six cars left the Monterey Cafe parking lot about 10:30 a.m. for a trip to Leechtown. Going over the Malahat was good, and the wonderful scenery looking over the Saanich Arm was worth the trip. We went via the Shawnigan Lake cut-off, and then turned back down the road to Sooke Lake which, while it was O.K. in spots, was pretty rough, and so winding that in a couple of places you almost met yourself coming back.

The trip through the virgin timbers of the Greater Victoria Watershed was well worth seeing, even if one cannot leave the road.

On arrival at the old townsite of Leechtown we parked the cars and explored the surroundings. The little shack that is the post office is unique, an unpainted board shack, yet flowers and plants were growing with a riot of colour and the building was well looked after.

Since the fire which burned the sawmill down a few years ago only a few of the loggers stay and batch in one of the old bunk-houses, most of them coming in from the outside. We looked over the old site and then went down to the Sooke river for lunch, afterwards going to see the monument which has been built in memory of the gold rush days when the site was a hive of activities.

The children explored the different reaches of the river and panned for gold. Some small flecks were found, but it was mostly fool's gold or mica, but they all got a thrill out of trying their luck. The boulders and stones in the creeks were wet and slippery and wet feet seemed to be the order of the day for most everyone. The pool over the logging bridge looked inviting enough for a swim and many wished they had brought their bathing suits.

The start for home came, and after loading the cars with samples of rocks "full of gold and other precious metals" we were on our way.

A real adventure and a wonderful time, thanks to those parents who so kindly provided their cars for transportation.

We are looking forward to our next month's all day trip and further adventures far afield.

NOTICE OF MEETINGS

1958

Saturday
November 8:

FUNGUS FORAY: Thetis Lake Park, under leadership of Miss M. C. Melburn. Meet at Monterey Cafe, 2703 Douglas Street, at 1:30 p.m. Bring tea.

Tuesday
November
11th

GENERAL MEETING of the month for all members and prospective members. Mr. Jack Todd, well-known out-of-doors enthusiast, will show moving pictures of nature subjects. The Museum at 8 p.m.

Saturday
November
15th

BIRD GROUP FIELD DAY: Leader: Mr. J. O. Clay, to Island View Beach. Meet at Monterey Cafe at 9:30 a.m. or Island View Beach at 10 o'clock. Bring lunch.

Tuesday
November
18th

GEOLOGY: Speaker: Mr. W. G. Milne, seismologist at the Astrophysical Observatory, on the subject of earthquakes; cause; effects; measurement of and disastrous ones of the past. The Museum at 8 p.m.

Saturday
November
22nd

GEOLOGY FIELD TRIP: Goldstream - for sediments and volcanics. Leader: Mr. A. H. Marrison. Meet at 1:30 p.m. at the Monterey Cafe.

Tuesday
November
25th

AUDUBON SCREEN TOUR: Mr. Robert C. Hermes, "Ranch of the Purple Flowers", 'wildlife in colour and action.' At the Oak Bay Junior High School on Cadboro Bay Road at 8 p.m.

JUNIORS:

Mr. Freeman King, Conservation Chairman, goes out every Saturday with an enterprising band of followers. Join in, older members, if you can, and watch or take part in activities.

Telephone him at GRanite 9-2966.

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