

SOME NOTES ON WINTER BIRDS.

By C. W. G. EIFRIG.

By our Canadian winter birds are meant certain birds of several different families, which in their coming and going show marked inexplicable anomalies or eccentricities, so to speak. To them belong primarily birds like the pine grosbeak, the Bohemian waxwing, the evening grosbeak, and secondarily birds like the hawk, snowy and Richardson's owls, the Canada jay, and to some extent the redpoll, pine siskin, snowflake and goshawk. These birds are not real migrants, *i. e.*, birds that come and go to and from their breeding places at nearly the same time each season, and in the same general direction and to the same general destination, so that their winter habitat is well known; nor are these Canadian winter birds real permanent residents at their breeding localities. They indulge in, what seems to us to be more or less of an aimless wandering about the country, most of them not going much farther south than our southern boundary, if that far, at all. What induces them to wander over the country in this way, showing up here in numbers one winter and then not coming again for several seasons? Is it the low temperature prevailing in their northern habitat? No, because other seasons, severer than the present one here, they remain in their higher latitudes. That also does away with the idea that some people have, that these birds have a certain premonition of an impending serious winter, a certain vague premonitory-barometric sense, allowing them to diagnose the weather in advance, and escape coming hardships! Is it on account of a failure in their food supply? Although this is undoubtedly a better reason than the first, it does not explain all. They indulge in such wanderings when their food supply is not short in their homes to the north. When the Canada jay came here two winters ago, and went in great numbers as far south as Toronto—a thing that had not occurred for about fifty years—their usual food supply, the kitchens of the lumber camps, the offal from the farm-houses, were there as usual. Neither can it be assumed that when the snowy owls make their phenomenal periodical incursions into southern territory in such vast numbers, that

their usual food supply, *i. e.*, small mammals and birds, have in those seasons been swept off the face of the earth or at least of their habitat—so, what is the reason for their wandering? No one seems to know. Ernest Thompson Seton in one of his books says that the little chickadees on certain days in the year get “crazy” spells, during which they act very queer, as though they had lost their “birdsense.” And the same has been observed of other birds, *e. g.*, the capercailzie and the blackcock in Germany, etc. Perhaps some of this queer, eccentric feeling on the part of these birds is responsible for some of their wanderings too!

Neither does the appearance of some of these birds at Ottawa this winter make the matter any clearer. A hawk owl (*Surnia ulula caparoch*) which breeds in Newfoundland, Labrador and the Hudson Bay country, was shot here on Oct. 9 last, and another seen at that time. Mr. Henry the taxidermist had two more. Usually they come later, if at all. At that time it was very mild here.

A very unusual migration of the American goshawk (*Accipiter atricapillus*) took place last October and beginning of November. While a few birds are seen here most winters, they are nearly always in the immature plumage, and rather rare at that, but at this time a regular migration of them took place, mostly composed of adult birds in the finest plumage. That is certainly remarkable. On Oct. 18 a fine large female was shot by a farmer near East Templeton in the act of carrying away a good-sized plymouth rock rooster. On Nov. 3, a boy shot a nice male near the rifle range, which had just put himself on the outside of a ruffed grouse (partridge.) Mr. E. G. White noticed a pair together near Pembroke, one also in the act of devouring a grouse. The taxidermist got several more from this vicinity, and all save one in the finest blue plumage. At Kingston this flight was still more noticeable. Mr. E. Beaupré of that city writes me, that he never saw so many goshawks together as this year, *i. e.*, fall of 1906. There were regular flights of them passing over the city. He saw them almost every day in October, but during the first week in November they were most abundant. He saw seven flying at one time. One he approached quite closely while tearing up a hairy woodpecker.

Another tried to make a meal of a wooden decoy duck. Many were brought to local taxidermists.

The pretty pine grosbeak (*Pinicola enucleator lencurus*) is repeating his performance of three winters ago and is paying us a visit in numbers. They put in an earlier appearance than usual. The first ones were seen Nov. 3rd near the rifle range and on Nov. 5th one was found dead on the Experimental Farm. At the same time and before, they were extremely abundant near Pembroke, and from then until now they have remained with us, right in the city. They frequent the many mountain ash trees, upon which they gorge themselves on the berries. They do not, however, eat the pulp so much as the seed. The old males are of a gorgeous rose-red, the female and young are ashy gray, with greenish yellow on the crown and rump; the wings are crossed by a white bar. The females and young greatly predominate in numbers. They are, as a rule, very unsuspicious of man, and allow a very close approach, and this unsuspiciousness is often their undoing at the hands of boys, who should be restrained. On Jan. 21st, I noticed a flock of ten on a mountain ash tree near the corner of Bank and Queen sts. Some of these would fly down on the sidewalk and street to eat the fallen berries and would hardly move away for the passers-by. They should be protected, and, if necessary, fed to keep them here. Other articles of food of which they are fond are sumac berries and the buds and tips of twigs of evergreen trees. Broken nuts and suet will attract most birds to the house in winter.

The snowflake (*Plectrophenax nivalis*) also put in an early appearance. The first were seen Oct. 27th on Kettle Island. Great flocks of them were common for several weeks around the city, when they just as suddenly disappeared.

A single specimen of the beautiful Bohemian waxwing or chatterer (*Ampelis garrulus*) found its way into the city on Dec. 2. It took up its stand in a little mountain ash tree on Russell Avenue, right over the sidewalk, and if passers-by became too numerous would shift its headquarters to another tree of the same kind across the street. Here it remained, all alone, save the pesky sparrows, for six days. At first it would almost allow itself to be

touched, later on it became a little shyer. It would utter a soft musical twitter, much like the "beady" song of its congener, the cedarbird.

The snowy owl (*Nyctea nyctea*) seems again to have given Ottawa a wide berth, whereas further south many are reported. I have seen one only, which had been shot about Nov. 15th near Farrellton.

Of the rare great grey owl (*Scotiaptex cinereum*) another inhabitant of the fur countries of the far north, I have seen and heard of four so far this winter, all of which found their way into the hands of Henry the taxidermist. •

At the same place I found a specimen of the rare Richardson's owl (*Cryptoglaux tengmalimi richardsoni*) which had been shot here on Nov. 16th.

The beautiful evening grosbeak (*Coccoth-thraustes vespertinus*) has not put in an appearance so far, much as his presence is desired. He is one of the most irregular birds in his movements. He may come at any time in winter, beginning or end, and stay for a day or a month at a place, and then not be seen there again for years, or perhaps come for several years in succession.

Neither has the comical Canada jay (*Perisoreus canadensis*), the clown amongst our northern birds, deigned us worthy of his visit this winter. Instead he prefers to steal meat from the shanty-kitchens in our northern words. Redpolls (*Acanthis linaria*) and pine siskins (*Pinus spinus*) may be seen in favorable localities all winter. They come and go without pretense to any regularity.

Who can solve the riddle of the coming and going of these birds?

THIS YEAR'S AWARD OF THE LYELL MEDAL.

The many friends of Dr. J. F. Whiteaves, palæontologist and zoologist to the Geological Survey of Canada and one of its assistant directors, will be pleased to learn that he has been awarded the "Lyell Medal" by the Geological Society of London. The presentation of this medal is made at a most appropriate time, as Dr. Whiteaves has just completed the fiftieth year of his scientific work.



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