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CENTRAL PARK BIRDING IN THE THIRTIES

Irving Cantor

The birding world, of which Central Park is a microcosm that I entered into in May 1932, is incomparable to today's world. Of the several factors involved, the most obvious is that today there are more birders than birds. In 1932, there were very few birders but many more birds. You have waves of water today. We had waves too, but of birds, lots of birds.

In referring to my notebooks of the thirties, I found a good example of one such day. I lived at that time on the upper West Side, one block from the Central Park West and 100th street park entrance. On the morning of May 6, 1934, I walked through that entrance to witness a tremendous wave in progress to be immediately surrounded by all manners of passerines and others. My species list for that day, a child's list, was 66 species, all sight identifications, none by ear. The rationale for the sight identifications is simply explained. I did not learn songs for several years, not that I lacked the natural ability to do so. But, on any good day, there was such a welter of songs that it was extremely difficult to filter out the songs of individual species so you could concentrate your attention enough to learn them.

There are many more examples from my records of the abundance of birds in those times: forty Canada Warblers on May 26, 1935; twenty-five Black-and-white Warblers and forty-five American Redstarts on August 11, 1936; thirty-five Blackpoll Warblers on September 9, 1936; eight Bay-breasted Warblers on September 25,

1936; May 11, 1938, 103 warblers of sixteen species; Sept 2, 1938 sixty American Redstarts; March 14, 1939 seventy-one Purple Finches; April 22, 1940 five hundred White-throated Sparrows; March 18, 1940 sixty Fox and fifty-five Song Sparrows; one hundred Song Sparrows on April 1, 1940.

We are all familiar with the usual reasons for the huge decline in bird numbers – population growth and urbanization resulting in destruction of habitat, both here and on the tropical wintering grounds, acid rain and pesticides. But there is one factor that affects Central Park birding that you may not be aware of. Eighty years ago, there were still open spaces nearby. I went to DeWitt Clinton High School in the Bronx. One day during lunch hour, I found four Spotted Sandpiper nests with eggs in the open lots around the school. In nearby Van Cortland Park, there were breeding warblers and Eastern Bluebirds. The suburbs around the city were much less developed. Breeding bird counts in Greenbrook Sanctuary in the adjacent Palisades have documented the decline in woodland birds. These reservoirs of birds no longer contribute to the migrants in Central Park.

Eight decades are time enough for some major changes to occur that effect our Central Park birding today. It was much colder then. One day in February 1934 I attended high school in fourteen degree below zero weather, the coldest day in New York City history. Piles of snow would remain in the streets of Manhattan

until the spring thaw, because they would freeze so hard the plows could not budge them. Of course this had an effect on the common wintering birds we see today. American Robins did not winter then. I saw my first robin of 1935 on March 1st. I took a Xmas count in the Park in 1935 and had a total of fifteen species. Northern Cardinals and Northern Mockingbirds were rare; Mourning Doves and Tufted Titmouse were very rare; Red-bellied Woodpeckers, an accidental with one record.

Some birds have adjusted to life in the big city. It was four years before I saw my first American Crow in the Park and almost six years before the first Red-tailed Hawk. The Park also bore witness to population shifts in our common water birds over those eight decades. Some examples: Buffleheads unknown; Ruddy Ducks and Northern Shovelers very rare; Great and Snowy Egrets unknown; Double-crested Cormorants accidental; Great Black-backed and Ring-billed Gulls rare, but Laughing Gulls were common transients.

In conclusion, I repeat my opening remarks – the Central Park birding world of the Thirties is incomparable to today’s world.

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**WILLIAM J. NORSE:  
A REMINISCENCE**

Irving Cantor

I have been remiss in writing this remembrance of my friend and life member of the Linnaean, William J. Norse always known as Billy. I guess one does not like to face the death of someone you’ve known since childhood, in this case seventy-two years. That’s why I remember his date of birth July 31, 1919 and not the date he died in June 2006.

I met Billy along the swamp in Van Cortlandt Park in those halcyon days before Robert Moses, sometime in 1934. He was ten months older than I and we shared two passions, birding and baseball. We soon began birding together, weekends during the school year and

throughout the summer vacations. In those pre-World War II days, the weather was much more dramatic than at present. The summers were very hot and the winters were very cold and snow-filled. We would dutifully slog through both till we dropped.

We were a good team. Billy had the keenest ears of any birder I have known. He could identify not only all the passerine’s songs but their call notes as well. My super eyesight made up for Billy’s who had worn glasses since childhood.

We were indefatigable. We would get up in the middle of the night, meet on some subway platform, Billy lived in Inwood and I on the upper West Side, ride to the end of the line in Brooklyn, hitchhike to the Jones Beach strip, out to Oak Beach then tramp up the marsh there to flush the Black Rail. Another trip would be in the dead of winter, riding the subway to Brooklyn and taking the bus to the Brooklyn side of the Marine Parkway Bridge. Then walk across the bridge and west to Breezy Point and out to the end of the breakwater to see the Purple Sandpipers, scoters and the occasional alcid. I also remember a trip to Troy Meadows one Easter morning – the PATH ride to Newark and hitchhiking to the Meadows and the boardwalk resounding with the calls of various rails, both bitterns and a host of passerines.

Due to our man hours in the field, we saw and reported many good birds. Our best record for the period was a Green-tailed Towhee at Overpeck Creek in the winter of 1939/40 which may have been the first record for New Jersey.

It wasn’t all birding. We were both Yankee fans and could afford the fifty cent bleacher seats at the Stadium where we saw Gehrig, DiMaggio, et al.

We regularly attended the Linnaean meetings. In those days, the reporting of field notes was a highlight. I remember once reporting Chipping Sparrows in winter in Central Park. Upon my identification being questioned by Joe Hickey, the then Linnaean president, I replied with my fifteen year old authority “I think I ought to know a Chipping Sparrow.” We both became Linnaean members; Billy was proposed by Jeff Carleton and me by Allan Cruickshank, if

my memory serves me right. Billy successfully served as Recording Secretary for a couple of years but being somewhat shy, did not pursue any further ambition.

We early in our birding careers became participants in the Bronx-Westchester Christmas Bird Count which was started by the Bronx County Bird Club famous for its membership of Peterson, Cruickshank, Hickey, et al. Billy and I were both there at the infamous incident when a decoy Dovekie was planted in Lake Agassiz in the Bronx Zoo on census day. Our group led by Peterson and Cruickshank reported a live Dovekie at the count – up at the old *Unter Den Linden* followed by huge guffaws from the renegade perpetrators.

After our World War II Army service, we resumed our joint birding, made much easier by being car-owning adults. But it was certainly not at our early fanatical pace. We continued on the Bronx Xmas count and became co-compilers when John Bull, the successor to the Bronx County boys stepped down as compiler. One memorable incident occurred in 1969 when we found a lingering White-rumped Sandpiper amid the flotsam and jetsam in Baxter Creek. Baxter Creek was in the South Bronx which nobody else but Billy and I wanted to cover. There was no question about the record. The bird was close and tame, Billy and I were very familiar with the species and we even showed the bird to Paul Buckley and Walter Sedwitz.

However, there was an interim compiler at the time who sent in the record without any explanation or highlight or anything. Our buddy Allan Cruickshank, the then Audubon Xmas count editor deleted it from the count. It was the kind of calamity that any decent birdwatcher would take to the grave.

After a modest career on Wall Street, Billy retired early to his ancestral home in Vermont. Our relationship drifted into occasional visits and telephone calls. One day in June of 2006, I received a call from Billy's cousin Kermit who had found him dead of natural causes. A short while thereafter, Kermit called to ask whether I wanted Billy's bird record books. Upon my acceptance, a large cardboard box arrived with many hard-covered journals of his records from

1931 to his end, often writing down every bird he saw when he looked out the window of his Inwood apartment. It put me to shame who cut his college classes only when the wind was right during migration.



## NELSON A. ROCKEFELLER AND TEARDROP PARKS

Irving Cantor

Nelson A. Rockefeller Park and Teardrop Park are adjacent to each other and are the areas I bird regularly. I usually spend about an hour or two in coverage depending on the season. Twenty to twenty-five species would be a good day list and the usual year list is about eighty species.

Nelson A. Rockefeller Park is a 7.5 acre Hudson River waterfront area at the north end of Battery Park City in lower Manhattan. Battery Park City was created in the 1980's by land reclamation using soil and rock excavated during the construction of the World Trade Center, the New York Water Tunnel and other construction projects as well as sand dredged from New York Harbor off Staten Island.

All of the trees, shrubs, understory planting, bulbs and meadows have been planted and the majority of them are of recent vintage. There are groups of trees in the eastern edges of the Park. There are also a scattering of trees along every footpath. The tree list includes Shadbush, River Birch, Katsura Tree, Gingko, Shademaster Honey Locust, Golden-Rain Tree, Sweet Gum, Sweet Bay Magnolia, Donald Wyman Crabapple, Black Gum, Cork Tree, Lace-bark Pine, Japanese Black Pine, Willow Oak, Red Oak, Japanese Scholar Tree, Japanese Tree Lilac, and Japanese Zelkova.

The majority of trees here are exotics. As is well established, our native insects have not learned to feed in these exotic trees. This accounts for the scarcity of woodland birds in the Park. Since August 2010, no records of common birds like Red-eyed Vireo, Black-capped Chickadee and several common warblers.

Another facet to this story – birds do not stay overnight here as there is not enough shelter.

There is a children’s garden in the northeast corner of the park which consists of about ten planting areas and a large bushy area of Black-eyed Susans, Plantation Lilies, Switch Grass and other understory plantings. This area can be very productive especially after the gardening season. I have seen as many as ten species in this small area in one visit. Sparrows are common here and warblers are seen on the ground. My only records of Blue-headed Vireo, Pine Siskin and Yellow-breasted Chat were seen here – a must area in the fall.

This area is not good for water birds despite the river shore, except for the winter population of Brant. Flocks numbering up to about 200 feed on the meadow grass during their wintering season here. Feral Canada Geese and Mallards are common plus a few American Black Ducks, Gadwall and the occasional Bufflehead. Red-breasted Merganser is an uncommon migrant and has wintered here. The same could be said for the Red-throated Loon. There is also an occasional Laughing Gull and Common Tern.

The best time to visit is late-March to April 15. The meadows are fenced in for the winter and are opened mid-April. During this period, you can get good looks on the ground at Eastern Phoebe, both kinglets, Hermit Thrush, Palm and Pine warblers and several sparrow species. The first year female Pine Warbler rare elsewhere has occurred every spring. Another good time to visit is late-September to late-October, especially in the morning before the crowd arrives.

Teardrop Park is a 1.8 acre public park that sits midblock near the corner of Warren Street and River Terrace in Battery Park City. It is completely manmade and designed to coordinate with four surrounding high-rise apartment buildings. There are two sections to the Park. The North area which is my main birding area is about an acre in size. Fifty-five percent of this area is lawn and the rest plant beds of various small trees, shrubs and herbaceous plants. These trees and shrubs are mostly native such as Eastern Rosebud, White Fringe Tree, Witch Hazel, American Holly, Swamp Azalea, Black

Tupelo, Japanese Silverbush, River Birch and Oak-leaved Hydrangea.

This area is much better than nearby Nelson A. Rockefeller Park for woodland species. All the thrushes occur. Ovenbird, American Redstart and Common Yellowthroat are common. Winter Wren is seen every spring and fall. There are several records of Lincoln’s and White-crowned sparrow. Altogether different from the adjacent Nelson A. Rockefeller Park.



**PORTENTS\***

Irving Cantor

I’s hard to break a habit over seven decades long so  
I took a walk in the Park on a recent fall day  
As I walked through the empty Ramble  
I sang softly to myself a variant of a childhood ditty  
“There aint no birds no more no more,  
there aint no birds no more  
So, how the heck can I watch my birds when  
there aint no birds no more”

I disregarded the starlings, sparrows and pigeons  
Traitorous camp followers, collaborators to the holocaust  
Soon I heard a reprise of the song of the White-throats  
Truly wild birds, visitors from the north  
I came upon their little flock and stared hungrily  
At the last vestiges of our soon to be gone  
Civilization

\* Written in 2009 amid the renovation of the Ramble when I was so frustrated by not seeing a Blackpoll Warbler all that fall.



[EDITOR’S NOTE: Irving Cantor, Fellow of the Linnaean Society, has been a member of the Society for 75 years. Next month Irv will celebrate his 83<sup>rd</sup> year of birding.]



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