

# THE ELLIOTT NEWSLETTER

## Nature Notes from Central Park

Vol. 11, No. 1

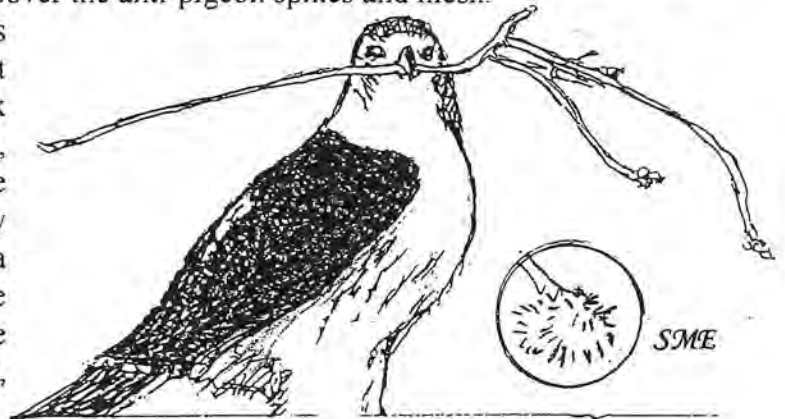
January~ February 2005

### Hooray for the Hawks!

The front page of the "New York Post" for Thursday, February 17, says it all. "LOVE NEST" reads a 2-inch banner. In smaller print they add, "5<sup>th</sup> Ave. Hawks back home -making babies." Most of the front page is devoted to a spectacular photo of Pale Male soaring over his reconstructed nest. It was taken by Steven Hirsch. On page 3 there is another picture by Hirsch of Pale Male in the nest chest-high in twigs. There is also a head shot of Lola by Helayne Seidman. I hope these pictures and the story of the hawks have circulated through all the newspapers of Murdoch's empire around the world. That way they will reach my friend, Don Knowler. He wrote "The Falconer of Central Park" in 1984 when he lived in New York and birded in Central Park. Now he writes a nature column for a Murdoch paper in Tasmania. His book is out of print but you can find it on interlibrary loan and maybe on the web. Two people just read it and called to ask if I was the Sarah in his book. Yes. Lambert Pohner, the hero of the book was my partner in bird walks and nature discoveries until he died. Many of us think Don's book should be reprinted.

I have visited the hawk watch at the Model Boat Pond where people gather to hear about the pair and maybe catch a glimpse of one of them in a scope. I ask everyone what kinds of trees are being selected for the nest. Rick Davis said he saw Pale Male stripping bark off Sycamores and London Plain trees. Well, those trees shed their bark in thin, flat disks and it comes off easily. The birds may use these strips as a mattress to cover the anti-pigeon spikes and mesh.

Rick Davis photographs the hawks and sells his beautiful pictures as he sits at the benches by the Pond. I saw one he took Jan. 31 and bought it. Pale Male, looking fit, is holding a twig in his bill. I studied the twig buds with a loop. Then I turned my binoculars upside down and used them as a magnifying glass. The buds look sort of like pussy willows. Only, pussy willows are longer with white hairs and these are fuzzy, round and pink. (See insert.)



I haven't seen this kind of twig in the park. Could it come from someone's rooftop garden? My thanks to Rick for letting me sketch from his photo. You can see the original at the benches.

In his book, "Bird's Nests" Hal H. Harrison says red-tail nests are flat and shallow, only 4 to 6 inches deep. The nests are made thicker with years of use. Right now the newly rebuilt nest is thinner than it has been in years. It's made of sticks and twigs and lined with the (smooth), inner bark of trees. The outside diameter of the nest is 28 to 30 inches across. Sibley's guide says the bird's body is 19 inches long, which makes the nest 1/3 bigger. The diameter of the inside of the nest is 14-15 inches across. I measured and found that's the size of 2 bird guides placed end to end. Harrison's guide covers all 26 states East of the Mississippi River. Red-tails are found from coast to coast and the vegetation in Western nests would differ. Probably most twigs are selected because they are flexible enough for shaping and fairly easy to snap off the tree.

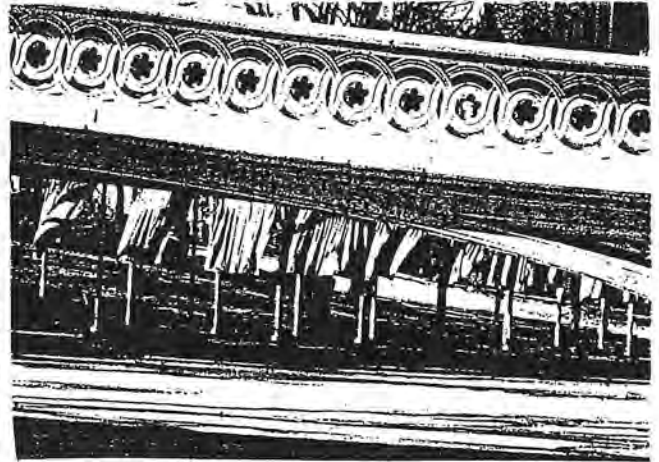
Both sexes build the nest. During incubation, the female sits on her eggs to keep them warm. The pair frequently add green sprigs to the nest.

Our red-tail nest is new and squeaky clean. But nests that are reused for years can harbor parasites that withstand cold winter weather and are ready to jump on new chicks the following spring. "The Birder's Handbook" by Ehrlich, Dobkin and Wheye lists fly maggots, fleas, ticks, mites, bacteria and fungi that harm young birds and must be discouraged. Green leaves and cedar bark are added to the nest and constantly renewed. They contain chemicals that act as natural insecticides on the parasites. If you can, try to identify what greens are being put in the nest. Although we can't see them, Harrison says the eggs will be oval or long oval, dirty white or bluish white, with spots or blotches. They will take about 30 days to hatch. I'm hoping the hawks stop at 2; less work for the parents and less crowding for the park.

Right now Pale Male and Lola are twirling in the sky and mating on buildings every day. I am so glad they are displaying **site tenacity**. Although the nest was destroyed, the site on the building is stable, and, we hope, predictable for years to come. The birds know the neighborhood, they have a history of breeding success here with lots of prey to eat. All hail the hawks for staying!

### The Gates Project

In 1979, Christo and Jeanne-Claude presented their Gates Project to Central Park. The plan was rejected, modified and approved in 2004. In the new plan, the steel bases stand on pavement and don't make millions of holes in the soil. Also, the Ramble and North Woods are exempt from installation as are pathways with shrubs and low-hung trees. The original Plan featured 15000 gates. Now there are 7,500 gates lining 23 miles of pathway in Central Park. Each gate is 16 feet tall and the flags fall to 7 feet from the ground. At the base of each gate is a support hinge that can be adjusted to allow the gate to stand upright, even when the land beneath rises or falls. When they are taken down, all the materials of the gates will be recycled: the steel braces, the vinyl frames and flags, and the aluminum corners that hold the frames together.



Art LeMoine took this digital photo of the "Gates" seen between Bow Bridge and the ice-covered Lake.

How has the weather affected the park and the project? After the Feb.21 blizzard, which dropped 10 inches on the park, snow removal was slower than usual because of limited access. The Gates organization provided manpower and snow blowers to help clear the walks. Wind has also been a problem. In windy weather the flags wrap around the frames and Gates workers must unwrap them. February 18 and 19 were very windy days and kept the Gates workers busy.

At vending sites around the park such as the Chess and Checkers House, Gates staff have been very busy. They sell T-shirts, sweat shirts, special maps, key chains and refrigerator magnets. The proceeds go to "Nurture New York's Nature," a nonprofit organization that supports arts in the environment of New York City. Some of the proceeds also go to the Central Park Conservancy and the Parks Dept.

In the Arts Section of "The New York Times" for Feb. 11, There was a page-length map to various Gates locations in Central Park. The map showed circled viewing areas to see the flags at

Sheep Meadow, Bethesda Fountain, Summit Rock and Great Hill. On the following day, people came streaming into the park.

The "Times" ran another story five days later on Feb. 16, about visitors selling or trying to sell 170 Gates "relics" on eBay. On the front page above the crease was a picture of Mrs. Bush strolling through orange drapery. She looked cheerful and trim in a tan pantsuit. But at her shoulder, a frowning guard, his hand at the ready, spoke to a female Gate crasher at the edge of the sidewalk. She was short, slender, wore pink shoes and tugged at her purse. Clearly, the First Lady's visit and the clamor on eBay, signaled it would be a mega event.

Art LeMoine called and reported on what it was like being there. He was with a group of birders on Sunday, Feb. 13. They retreated to the Ramble, a refuge for birds and now for bird watchers. But Gates gawkers followed them in, unaware the area was off their beaten track. The Ramble became so crowded the birders decided to leave. At the Castle they found people lined up for an orange aerial view. Art said the line was out the door and down the steps. It curved toward the weather station then turned east and down the hill toward the King of Poland statue. He returned to the Castle on Thursday where he found John, a worker with a clicker counting the people as they mounted the stairs for the view. When asked, John said the number so far was one million, two thousand.

At Bow Bridge a couple asked Art to take their picture with the Gates behind them. Where were they from? Sweden. Art noticed that the cops were all wearing special tags. On the tags were lists of the languages each man could speak to tourists. Art said there were LOTS of tourists. Every hotel on the West Side was bulging with them. And long lines of people stood out on the street for hours, waiting to get into the restaurants on Central Park South.

On Sunday, Feb. 19, Art and friends went to the north end of the park. They were stunned by the crush. Gates literature encouraged people to visit the North Meadow for the highest concentration of flags. The concentration of people was much greater so they moved off. For an uncluttered view of nature they visited the Meer, Conservatory Garden and the Loch. I asked him what he thought of the Gates Project. "Well." He said, "It's not art but it certainly is an event." I asked a number of other people who frequent the park what they thought of the Gates Project and this is what they told me:

"I like them because they are different and temporary--opposite to what the park is. They Lift my spirits--Yellow bandages-- It looks like laundry hanging in the park--With the Gates, our park looks smaller and without the vistas we love--I saw it in the light and at night and it's growing on me--Christo's "The Gates" is intrusive, oppressive, and all-consuming. It makes me feel claustrophobic and disoriented. I want my park back--After the rain, as the sun was setting, the reflections of flags on the wet walk looked like a great splash of orange--The Gates projects is a garish usurpation of the park and an insult to the lovely winter trees. Even when you try to visit the tiny "free" areas to enjoy nature, you can't get to them without being affronted by this travesty. In the past I have been a generous supporter of the Central Park Conservancy but now I am considering my options--I was against the project until I saw it as people coming together around art--They call that art? Looks like putting out wet curtains--Like a man who bangs his head against the wall because it feels so good when he stops, we're going to love Central Park even better when these shower curtains are gone--I flew over it in an airplane and was underwhelmed."

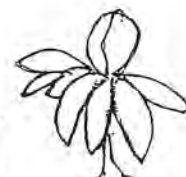
Workers began removing the Gates on Monday, Feb. 28. They will start at the south end of the park and work north. If there are no problems to create delays, the workers are scheduled to finish the cleanup March 16, just in time for St. Patrick's Day.

## Harbingers of Spring



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It's wonderful to see flowers making a few bright spots around the park. Winter aconites are up in England. So, on Feb. 20, I looked and found them at Shakespeare Garden. They are beside the wide walk nearest to the 79<sup>th</sup> St. Transverse. Look at the ground under the wooden rail fence as you climb. If you see a spot of yellow, look twice. It's not a crocus (although they are up), it's aconite. They wear a shiny green ruff of leaves around their necks. When the buds open, the 6-petal flower with a yellow center looks like a buttercup "springing," says the O.E.D., "from a whorl of leaves." Our winter aconites are having a grand year because it has been so cold and snowy.



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At the extreme north tip of Shakespeare Garden, nearest to the Men's room, are stinking hellebore *Helleborus foetidus*. These plants get their name because of the smell of the leaves when you crush them. Right now both leaves and flowers are green. But when these bell-shaped flowers open, their petals will be tipped with maroon. As far as I know, these plants are new. Lenten rose, another hellebore, is blooming in many park locations.

Witch hazels are popular bushes because they bloom when the leaves are gone. Our native ones are *Hamamelis virginiana* and flower in November and December. Blooming now are hybrids of *Hamamelis japonica* and *Hamamelis mollis*, the 2 most popular species of witch hazel. They have been crossed with each other to produce a large variety of new plants. The ones at Cedar Hill just across the East Drive and south of the 79<sup>th</sup> St. Transverse are 'Diane' and 'Jelena', says Regina Alvarez. 'Diane' flowers look **darker**, with 3/4" copper-red petals and a purple-red calyx at the base. 'Jelena' blooms are **lighter** with 1" petals that change from red at the base, to orange midway and end with yellow tips. Horticulturist Jane Gil pointed out that they keep some of their leaves. The Readers Digest Book, "A Garden for All Seasons" describes 'Jelena' as having "coppery-yellow blooms" with "long, ragged, twisted petals, like witch's fingers . . . able to withstand the worst of the winter weather without flinching." Beneath the ones at Cedar Hill, the snow drops do, too.

Regina planted another kind of witch hazel called 'Arnold Promise.' It is blooming at the Rustic Overlook, which I found with her instructions. Go to the NW corner of Central Park West and 72 St. Enter the park and walk east, curve north, pass under 2 arbors and down a flight of steps. At your left you will see a wooden rail fence and a rustic bench behind it. This is Rustic Overlook. Downhill from the bench you will see a bush with light yellow flowers on its bare branches. Here's a sketch of an emerging flower head of 'Arnold Promise.' There are 3 others west of Tanner Spring, beside the walk that leads up to Summit Rock. Leaning toward the nearest bush and using the measure in the Peterson guide, we found the



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slender, yellow petals are 3/4" long. The calyx at their base is maroon. February gave us more storms on the 24<sup>th</sup> and the 28<sup>th</sup>. We ended the month with enough snow to drape the branches and give white caps to all the flowering witch hazels in the park.



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*My Spring Classes begin Wednesday, April 13, 9 A.M. at 76 St. and Fifth Ave. Send \$35.00 for five sessions. Sunday classes begin April 17, 9 A.M. at the Boathouse. For five sessions send \$35.00. My address and the correct spelling of my name (for checks) are in the copyright below.*

# THE ELLIOTT NEWSLETTER

## Nature Notes from Central Park

Vol. 11, No. 2

March~ April 2005

### Thawing Out for Spring

I don't remember a recent winter with so much cold and snowy weather. We looked for a change in March but on the 8<sup>th</sup> there were heavy snow and high winds. Standing at a bus stop to go to the Linnaean dinner, I was almost blown off the curb and into the path of a bus. Later I learned the winds took down 10 trees in the park. The weather continued cold all month and there were even snow flakes falling in early April. But at last we slipped winter's grip and the trees in Central Park sprang into flower.

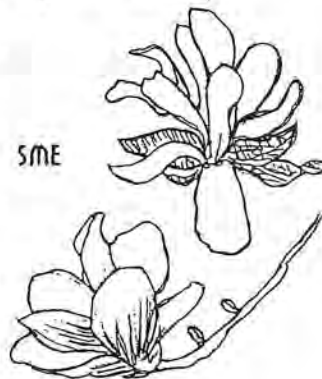


There were pink-tipped red maples everywhere and one of them beside the northeast corner of 100<sup>th</sup> St. Pool put forth a family of screech owls—2 adults and 3 fuzzy young. They ignored a stream of staring bird watchers, then moved into a cluster of pine trees beside the West Drive. As birders stood on the Drive and stared into the pines they attracted passing New Yorkers. Bird watchers? Yes. Watching the hawks? No, screech owls. Binoculars were passed around and the group attracted a posse of blue jays who landed to yell at the owls. But the young owls, who are now the size of their parents, glared so fiercely the jays flew off. Just south of the pines I sketched this tough old beech tree, showing no hint of spring. Fierce as a dragon, its scarred trunk and rock-twisted roots are a testament to its determination to survive.

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Yellow is a favorite color for spring. First came the cornelian cherry or *Cornus mas*, a Eurasian dogwood with inch-wide bouquets of tiny, greenish-yellow flowers spaced along its bare branches. A week later the forsythia bushes put out golden yellow flowers, each with 4 petals. The *Cornus mas* flowers have withered but the forsythia is still blooming.

I have never seen the magnolias more beautiful than they are this year. Some winters are mild enough to tempt them out. Then icy winds zap them and they turn brown. This prolonged cold winter meant that they did not unfold until it was safe. The star magnolias are white with 6 loose-limbed petals. This year they were out a week before the saucer magnolias. Saucers also have 6 petals but they are more compact and the outside petals are striped pink at the base. Inside, the petals are a touch-me luscious white. We have many saucer magnolias all over the park. There's one behind the Alice-in-Wonderland Statue which houses nesting robins each spring. Three enormous saucer magnolias stand in front of the Frick Museum facing Fifth Ave. They were completely covered in pink but now only a few late blooms remain.



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On the west side of the Reservoir at the water's edge, we admired 2 clumps of pussy willows. And beside the Castle steps, winter honeysuckle was putting out late flowers. Huge carpenter bees, jumbo queens with shiny patent leather behinds, were visiting all these flowers in early April. Smaller, brown, honey bees were in the pussy willows. The honey bees and carpenter bees ignored each other. They each worked with a will and there was plenty of pollen for all. Now I see smaller carpenter bees everywhere there are flowers, but I don't see honey bees.

## Early Birds

In March we watched the goldfinches at the winter bird feeders turn yellow for spring. Now the feeders are down and only the thistle bags are still up. A common loon came and stayed a week in the Reservoir. Loons are heavy birds and, like jumbo jets, need a long runway. They must start at one end, beat their wings, rise in the water to run on the surface, get in the air and clear the trees at the far end. No other body of water in the park is large enough for visiting loons. So if you hear someone say common loon, you will know where to go look.

Large flocks of woodpeckers moved through the park in early April. People reported there were red-bellies and sapsuckers everywhere. A day or so later I saw enormous numbers of hermit thrushes. Many flickers and hermits were still there on April 6, when we saw the owls and I sketched the old beech. We saw brown creeper, both golden and ruby-crowned kinglets, swamp sparrow, and mockingbird. I met Tom Fiore and Jim Dames on the Great Hill. They were looking for a flock of birds that contained a blue bird. We searched the ground, found the flock and saw chipping sparrow, junco, palm warbler, but no blue bird.

But for me that day was magic because I got to see a pine warbler in a pine tree. The bird was too swift for much of a look so it came out and perched on a bare branch in full sunlight. I was thrilled. Years ago I was with my mother in Colonial Williamsburg. As we strolled over the grounds, I heard a high trill in a pine tree. Peering in, I discovered the warbler and have yearned to see both pines together again. We walked down from Great Hill to 100 St. Pool and on the way saw a winter wren bouncing on and beside some downed logs. All the birders love to see this bird. It is so tiny and so perky with its stubby tail carried straight up. This bird crossed the Atlantic to live in Europe. We call it winter wren because we have so many kinds. They have one and call it wren.

On Sunday, April 10, I was struggling with my taxes when I the phone rang. A yellow-throated warbler was in Central Park. I groaned and tried to work, but soon was out in the sunshine. I stopped at the Boat Pond where a huge crowd watched the hawk nest. I peered at Pale Male through a telescope and continued walking toward Turtle Pond. A crowd of birders were at the southeast corner near the King of Poland statue. I put up my binoculars and there, sure enough, was the bird in all its glory. When I could tear my eyes away, I also saw palms, pines in bright color and dull drab, yellow-rumps, and a cedar waxwing. But the yellow-throated was the bird of the day.

Yellow-throated warblers are not rare. In Florida they are abundant. But they are rare here. I remember one that was here in the '70's. The bird discovered insects that were hatching on the walls of the Castle. He spent the day gleaning the walls and never left. Every birder in the park came and saw. This year, one fed at Castle walls again. On the way to meet my Wednesday class, I saw a yellow-throated warbler east of the Castle in branches over the walk. When we arrived later, the bird was gone. But a prairie warbler was there. I could see him throw back his head, see his throat vibrate and his body shake. What a pity I could not hear the song! I have been going to the League for the Hard of Hearing (which sounds like a story by Conan Doyle) and hope to get the use of my right ear again.

Other rare warblers have been seen this April including a hooded, a Swainson's at Forest Park, a prothonotary, one of a cluster in the area. Our prothonotary has been spending his time between the Point and the west shore of the Lake. All my Sunday class got to see this bird April 10 and 17. The bird ate or rested unconcerned by the gasping giants staring at him. With golden head and breast, violet-gray wings, black bill and eyes, the bird is wonderful to see. With it on April 17 was a male yellow warbler. They traveled together near the water and we could see the yellow's bright yellow head, breast and back and his orange breast stripes. An eye-popping duo.

## The Promise of Nests

Birds are building nests all over the park. Near the tip of the Point we saw a pair of cardinals in a low bush. The bush is leafy and gives cover but the lack of height may cost them their young. Cardinals nest twice and the second nest is usually more successful. Grackles are also nesting at the tip of the Point. Last year they were on the west side. This year they are on the east.

Last April, a pair of tree swallows tried to nest in a duck box at Turtle Pond. The box was entirely too big and the birds didn't stay. This year, at a Woodlands Meeting, birders asked for new nest boxes suitable for swallows and Park staff agreed. Deborah Allen asked Chuck McAlexander to make 2 boxes which he did to specifications. One stands on the island at Turtle Pond, and the other on the south shore. On April 27 we saw several male tree swallows zipping over the water. I saw a female dive into the box on the island. Later we discovered a male sitting in a tree directly behind the nest box, guarding it.

Over at the southwest shore of Azalea Pond is a wreck of an old tree. It is a corkscrew willow, one of several planted there in 1974 as part of a memorial to Bert Hale, a much-loved birder. The others have rotted and bit the dust. But this one hangs on and now the wood is soft enough for woodpecker holes. This April, a pair of red-bellies slip in and out of 2 holes. If one leaves, the other guards the nest from starlings. Starling bills aren't strong enough to drill wood. So they wait for a pair of woodpeckers to do the digging and shaping. When the woodpeckers start a family, the starlings attack. They strike repeatedly aiming for the base of the woodpecker skull. When they have driven out the residents, the starlings take over the hole and raise a family. Some woodpeckers have learned to wait. When the starlings are well into family mode, the woodpeckers start digging again. Their second nest is usually successful.

Owls are also cavity nesters. I don't think the nest of the uptown screech owls was ever found before they emerged. Another pair of screech owls has been discovered at a downtown nest beside the West Drive and lamppost #7501. The nest faces west and you have to cross the West Drive and look back to see it. Both adults are deep inside the tree, a London Plane. Art Le Moine sent me wonderful pictures of a screech owl at the entrance. I am sorry his photo looks so dark here.

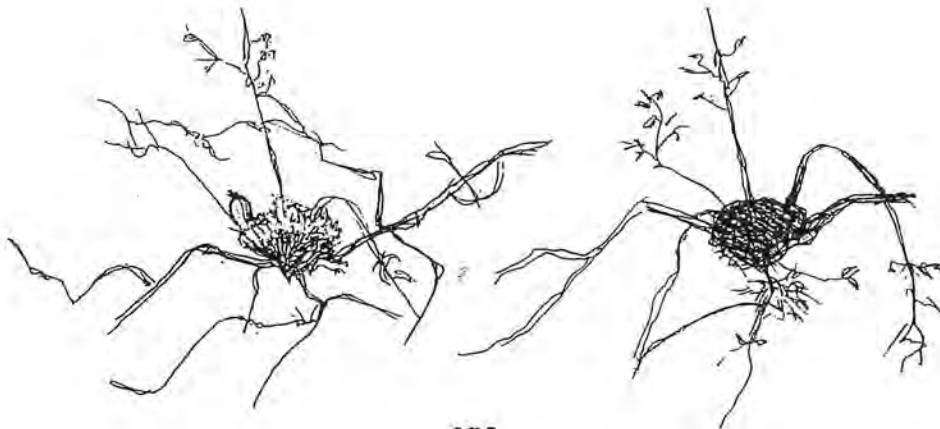
There's another London Plane that stands at the southeast corner of the horse carriage circle at Cherry Hill. In its west side branches, a male house sparrow is building a nest. These birds are really African weaver finches and occasionally one of them reverts to traditional construction. I've seen their globe nests with a side entrance, but never as they were being built.



On April 18, this nest had a floor and wispy sides. By April 20, the sides looked thick, muddy and shaped. A green ribbon is loosely attached to the bottom and flutters invitingly. It was recycled from ones I put out last spring for oriole nests. They like color and so does this sparrow!



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## Ah! The Sweet Flowers of Spring!

1. Regina Alvarez, the Woodlands Manager of Central Park Conservancy has been working with her crew around the Azalea Pond, Evodia Field and Maintenance Meadow. They have planted lots of ferns, flowers and shrubs which are spreading and growing. They put out signs beside some of the plants so you can learn both the common name and the scientific one. The cold winter means these flowers did not rush to bloom and you will be able to see and enjoy them in May.

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Stand on the sidewalk looking north to the source of the stream and you will see **1. marsh marigold** on both sides of the stream. They have golden yellow flowers and shiny leaves and look gorgeous in the sunlight. On the other side of the sidewalk are young bushes about 2 feet high. They are **swamp azalea** *Rhododendron viscosum* and may be blooming by the time you read this.

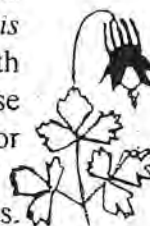


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Walk east along the fence and you will see lots of trillium. They all grow three leaves that join to form a continuous whorl around the flower. The **2. large-flowered trillium** *Trillium grandiflorum* are pinched into a funnel at the flower base and flare out at mid-petal. The flowers are white but turn pink as they age. The **3. toadshade** *Trillium sessile* has maroon flowers, erect petals and mottled leaves. Near the trillium is a large patch of **4. wild columbine** *Aquilegia canadensis* which have leaves that grow in threes but don't form a whorl. The nodding flower is orange with a yellow center and dangling stamens. Each petal has a long spur at the back and together they rise to form a five-pronged crown. **Garden columbine** *Aquilegia vulgaris* may have blue, purple or white flowers. They are as wide as they are long and the stamens don't show.

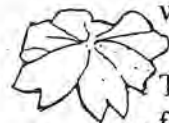


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Look deep inside the fence and into the shade and you will see clusters of green umbrellas. These are **5. mayapple** or **mandrake** *Podophyllum peltatum*. The plants will put out a single flower attached below the crotch of 2 umbrella leaves. It will ripen to a yellow-white fruit shaped like a lemon. I've never tasted mayapple pie but I hear it is good.



5.

Walk along the fence to the corner and you will see long, horizontal stalks of **6. Solomon's seal** *Polygonatum biflorum*. Leaves grow alternately on the stalk and pairs of pale green-white flowers hang like tiny bells from the underside. The flowers ripen into blue-black fruit.



6.

Turn right and walk along the fence until you get to **downy yellow violet** *Viola pubescens*. The flowers are big and bright. The stems are fuzzy with soft hairs and so are the undersides of the broad leaves. Have you ever seen yellow violets before? Return to the corner and stand under the big old mulberry tree. Look across the sidewalk at the high, round hill covered with **Labrador violet**. Their small dark purple flowers rise above dark purple leaves. The leaves turn green but keep their purple veins. There are more of these violets on the west border of Maintenance Meadow.

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Cross the path and walk uptown, toward the Maintenance Building. The fence of Evodia Field will be on your right. When you are just beyond the evodia tree (newly pruned), and near the cork trees, you will see more violets. These are **7. Canada violet** *Viola canadensis*. The leaves are heart-shaped and the flowers are white with yellow throats. The backs of the petals are tinged with violet. On the opposite side of Evodia Field are more violets, also white but tiny. They are **8. sweet white violet** *Viola blanda*. The stalks of their leaves and stems are reddish and smooth. The top 2 petals of the flower are narrow and bend backwards. The center bottom petal has bold purple stripes, a well-marked runway for any passing pollinator. **9. Virginia bluebell** *Mertensia virginica* is growing everywhere. The buds and new flowers are pink but they grow into sky-blue, nodding trumpets. The leaves are egg-shaped. These plants are gorgeous to look at but hell to sketch.



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8.

There are many more plants but no more space for them here. Take this page and go. Look. Read the signs and look for skunk cabbage, jack-in-the pulpit and many others. Enjoy!



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# THE ELLIOTT NEWSLETTER

## Nature Notes from Central Park

Vol.11, No. 3

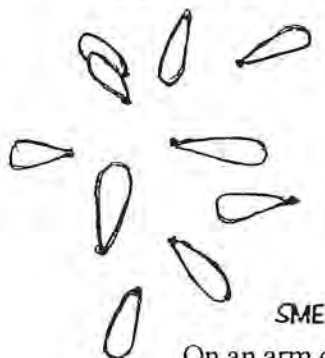
April-May 2005

### Some Spring!

May clung to winter and felt like early March. Dark rainy weather delayed many nest builders. The house sparrow I pictured in the last issue saw heavy rains knock out the bottom of his nest. He tried to hold it together with long plastic fish line, but then gave it up. I think the fish line and green ribbon came from an old oriole nest. Robins, cardinals and grackles built nests, some of which survived.

Then the winds shifted and warm air came in from the south bringing hundreds of birds. Birders greeted each other with news of warblers, indigo buntings, rose-breasted grosbeaks, scarlet tanagers and a glorious glut of Baltimore orioles. When we gave a one-note whistle to the orioles, they answered from trees along the West drive, Shakespeare theater, Maintenance Meadow and Evodia Field. We found an oriole nest in a plane tree beside the Bowls and Croquet Courts. It was big and sturdy and thick enough to outline the shape of a good-sized family. A nighthawk sat in locust trees south of the Falconer Statue for a week. When I returned the nighthawk was gone and the oriole nest looked thin. I learned it was empty because the orioles had fledged.

The weather turned around and migrating birds streamed through the park. I got there at the end of the week and it was special. People think that Friday the 13<sup>th</sup> is unlucky, but the one in May was spectacular. At Turtle Pond near the King of Poland Statue, we were delighted to see birds come down from the tops of trees and feed near our heads. We were pleased to see a cedar waxwing and thrilled to see a bay-breasted warbler feeding all around us, unconcerned by our proximity.



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Jeff Nulle says the French consider le vendredi le treizième lucky, and that afternoon was a French fête for sure. The termites staged hatch outs all over the Ramble. At 4 or 5 locations, new reproductive termites the size of small ants emerged from their nests on long wings and twirled in the air like maple seeds. They were hotly pursued by birds who swooped, snatched, knocked off the wings and swallowed the meat. Among the revelers at these flying banquets were catbird, robin, hermit thrush, blue jay, starling, red-eyed vireo, and many warblers including Wilson's, Canada, black-throated blue, magnolia, chestnut-sided, common yellowthroat and American redstart.

On an arm of Laupot Bridge, a large cluster of winged termites crawled over a square metal cap, some of them mating and none of them able to bury themselves in the earth. Many crawled over the edge and down to the ground. As I sketched the remainders, a grackle appeared near me and darted after prey. He sported a thick ruff of wings all around his bill-- too ravenous to wipe them off. For years I thought that termites must taste wonderful, since they are popular with all sorts of birds. Now, I realize the draw is not haute cuisine, but a place to get all the grub you can eat.

On Memorial Day, with out-of-town friends, I saw an olive-sided flycatcher and a black-billed cuckoo. The weather turned hot, humid and horrid and continued that way right into June. We watched the green herons at the Upper Lobe look out of their nest then get out and crawl over the branches. A yellow-crowned night-heron, rare in our park, appeared near Balcony Bridge. We were all glad to see the bird but its markings were dull, and we decided it was a young bird. I saw a handsome adult black-crowned night-heron in a leaning mulberry near the Ladies Pavilion.

### Nest Magic

Another pair of Baltimore Orioles made a nest on the east side of Shakespeare Theater. This nest is also low to see but by now the birds have fledged. I saw several female orchard orioles and heard rumors of a nest but never saw one this season.

Over in the southwest corner of Maintenance Meadow a pair of wood thrush have nested. They are teaching their young to fend for themselves and the pair may find a new spot for a second nest. It's worth coming in early or lingering at dusk to hear their lovely call. He will sing again before they start the second family. On the east side of Maintenance Meadow a pair of house wrens chatter away, even as they feed their young. We followed the calls to a short tree at the edge of the parking lot. The tree has a dead limb with a hole in it and we watched both parents go in and out with food.

These nests are fun to watch but the stellar attraction this year is a white-breasted nuthatch nest south of the Gill-side rock outcrop and facing the Swampy Pin Oak area. The nest is in a dead cherry tree with cut off arms and a large hole 4 to 5 feet off the ground. In all the years I have been coming to Central Park, I've never heard of nuthatches nesting here so this one may be a park first.

When we arrived, both parents were bringing food to the nest. The male (with black cap), landed on the east side of the tree and rushed diagonally down into the nest hole. The female (with gray cap) landed on the west side of the tree. Her approach was cautious, slower and zig-zagged. I asked Art LeMoine to take pictures of the birds and their nest. In his photo, the male is alert and on guard. While making a drawing of the bird without background, I learned his left wing is on top. It folds over the back and right wing. I found that her wing position is reversed; the right wing is on top and folds over the left. Now I am checking out other birds for sexual preference in wing-wrap. Please look around, see what you think and let me know.

The next time I visited the nest, both parents were coming in from both sides. They took food inside and brought out fecal sacs. A fecal sac is a white, bouncy bag that holds the baby's poop. The arriving parents shove food in at one end and grab off the poop bag at the other. We saw both parents come to the entrance with fecal sacs. They paused, looked about, then flew off to drop the sac well away from the nest. Pre-packaged poop bags help to keep the nest clean.

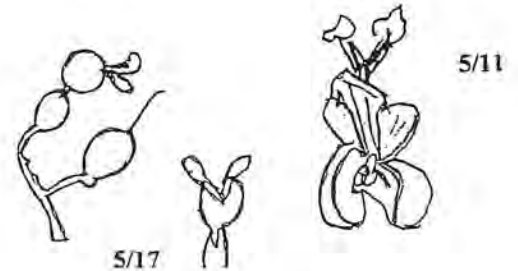
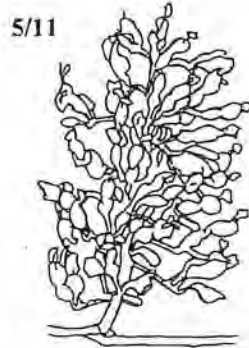
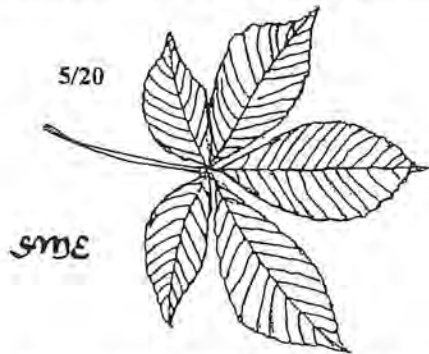
When we arrived at the nest we saw the male picking tiny insects from the tree bark. He carried a few inside, but rubbed most of them over the bark of the tree. As we watched, he began to slowly rotate his body 180 degrees. Presently, he raised his wings until they curved above his shoulders. Head down, he continued to rotate quite slowly, like a ballerina. I talked to Deborah Allen who told us about what we had seen. While doing 180 degree turns, the bird was picking up small insects on the bark that contain substances that would repel predators. Deb says this behavior is called Bill Sweeping. We watched him rubbing the insects on the bark where he stood, though he may have taken some of them to smear inside the entrance.

Then the nuthatch raised his wings. That behavior is called Nest Defense Posture. When really aroused, he faces a squirrel, the wings extend. They are curved, tips down. The tail is cocked, the feathers spread. Feathers rise like hackles on the back. The threat display lasts until the squirrel moves away. Deb says we can read about this behavior in a scientific paper by Lawrence Kilham, in "Ornithological Journal." In Art's photo, the nuthatch at his nest looks fierce. Deb feared he resented our presence. To placate him, she put out a peanut. He took it. I put one in my palm. He landed on my fingers, looked me over, took it and broke it in bits for his young. What a thrill!

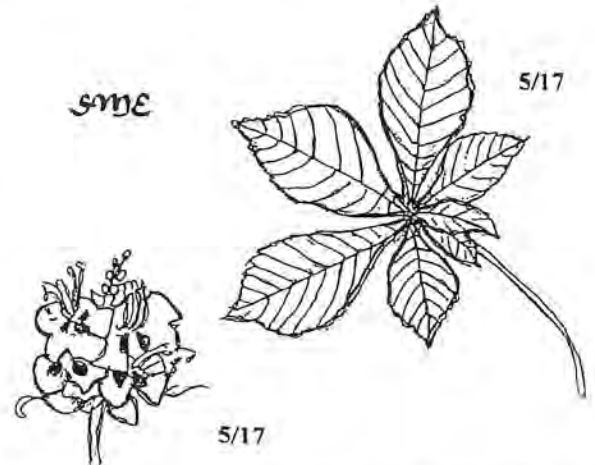


## Lovely As A Tree

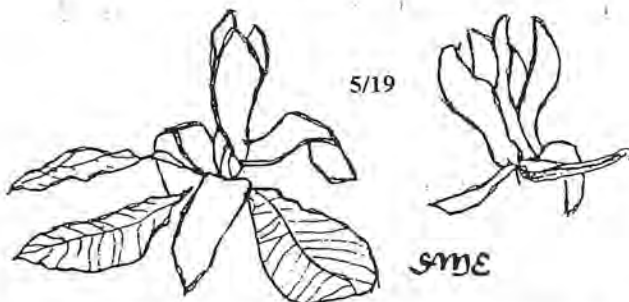
Just east of the Maintenance Building, near the East Drive there's a tree I've been calling a horsechestnut. Wrong, it's a buckeye. The trees are cousins and both belong to the *Aesculus* family. This is yellow (or sweet) buckeye *Aesculus octandra*. It has opposite palmately compound leaves with mostly 5 leaflets to the palm. The yellow-green flowers branch in clusters of 3 from a central stalk. The buds look like short strings of beads and when the flowers open they wear dull red horns. In fall, the tree produces large nuts wrapped in smooth yellow husks.



Across the sidewalk from the buckeye is a white horsechestnut *A. hippocastanum*. It also has palmately compound leaves but most of the palms have 7 leaflets. The flowers have white petals that curve back to display their bright centers. Young flowers have pale yellow centers, older flowers have gold centers and fully mature flowers have alizarin crimson centers. I like the ones with red centers. But bees see red as black and go to the new flowers with pale yellow centers which have nectar. In fall horsechestnuts bear glossy brown nuts with thorny husks.

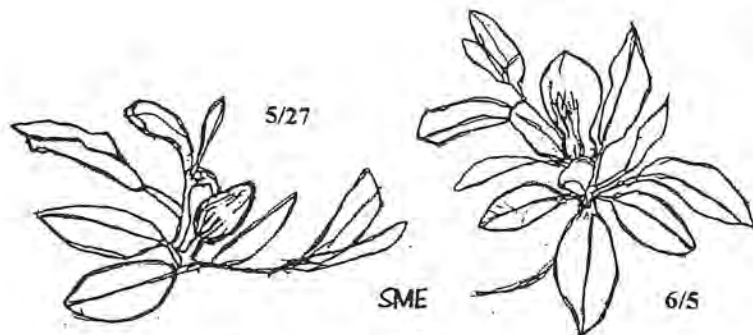


In the last issue of this newsletter I wrote about our 2 most common magnolia trees in Central Park. We have 4 others that bloom in May and June. I have included the date of each sketch to help you time and see next year's flowers. Magnolia is both the common and the scientific name for these trees. There are only one or two examples of each in the park so I am giving you their locations and hope you will visit them.



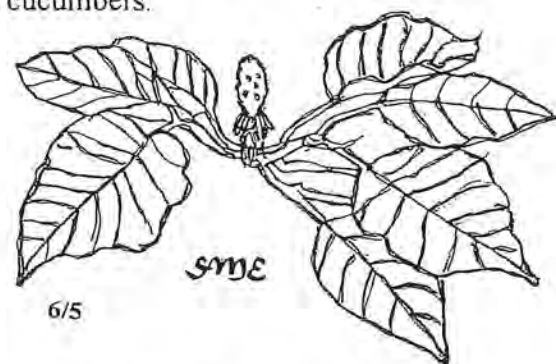
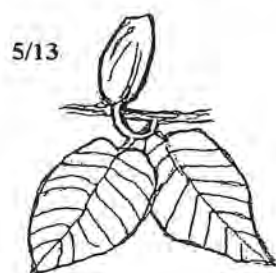
The first magnolia, *M. tripetala*, is on the west side of the park between Shakespeare Theater and the West Drive. As you walk downhill toward the hot dog stand, look over the fence on your left and you will see a tall clump of huge, bright, green leaves. These shoots are umbrella magnolias. Each leaf is 10 to 24" long and they cluster at the end of branches, rather like umbrellas. The flowers are white with long petals. The leaves will turn darker green in summer and in fall, look for seeds arranged in rose-red cones.

You can find all the other magnolias on the east side of Central Park between the Reservoir and the Zoo near the East Drive. The northernmost tree is near 84<sup>th</sup> St. Look north and you will see the roof of the Pumping Station. Look east across the drive and you will see an ice cream stand. Turn your back on the stand and you are walking west. On your right is a fence at the edge of the sidewalk. Almost immediately you will come to a bench and behind it is your quarry. It is slender and not very tall but has smooth, bright, green leaves.

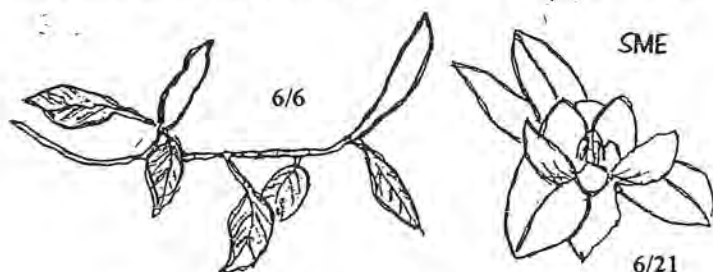


You are looking at a sweetbay tree *M. virginiana*. The tree kept some of its leaves over the winter and replaced them all this spring. I went to sketch it several times. I wanted to discover the creamy white flowers that look like gardenias in the tree guides. I saw only buds or wilted remains. Hot weather rushed each flower through its cycle. Yesterday's bud became today's has-been. This fall we can see red-brown fruit 2" long and 1/2" wide.

Walk south along the East Drive until you come to a stop light at 79<sup>th</sup> St. Turn right, step inside and continue walking south. The East Drive will be on your left, the parking lot and Maintenance Meadow will be on your right. Keep walking until you see some benches with a long strip of grass behind them. Walk onto the grass strip. At the far end of the meadow is a cucumbertree *M. acuminata* magnolia. The trunk is almost 4 ft. across and the tree is 82 ft. high. This big tree is old enough to have been in the first tree census of Central Park. It puts out greenish-white flowers and when the flowers turn to fruit, they look like small cucumbers.



Return to the East Drive and walk to 68<sup>th</sup> St. Turn to your left and face 5<sup>th</sup> Ave. Check for traffic then dive across the intersection. When you reach the grass strip, you will probably see one or two people sleeping. Look for a tree with shiny, dark-green leaves. Peer closer and you'll see that the undersides are rust-brown.



This is a southern magnolia *M. grandiflora*. I sketched the green leaves and the white buds wrapped so tightly they looked like upthrust daggers. There is another southern magnolia nearby. Step to the fence behind this tree and look down the slope. The tree is near the walk to the Children's Zoo. It is older, bigger, but harder to visit. On the summer solstice, I returned to these trees. I was thrilled to find full, fat, white flowers.

The Asian long-horned beetle struck our park again this spring and 2 Fifth Ave. elms were cut down and destroyed. In June, crews of people began treating at-risk trees south of 86<sup>th</sup> St. They have been injecting poison into the roots of the beetles' favorite trees: maples, willows, elms, ashes, and poplars. Workers also treat the beetles' less favorite trees: sycamores, London planes, mimosas, horsechestnuts, buckeyes, mountain-ashes and hackberries. Fortunately, some trees are not popular and will not be treated. These include oaks, lindens, beeches, magnolias, tuliptrees, corks and mulberries. All conifers and fruit trees will be spared. We don't know what will happen to other insects who summer in our park and fly to injected trees. How will the injections affect the trees with Dutch elm disease? Keep looking.

There are big celestial events taking place in late June. I will try to report on sky-watching in the next newsletter. If you want to join me for a **summer day or evening nature walk** in the park in **August**, call me after **July 15** at the **number below**.

# THE ELLIOTT NEWSLETTER

## Nature Notes from Central Park

Vol.11, No. 4

August-September 2005

### Stars on a Summer Night

At the end of June, some of the birders told me about a night-time show to see above Central Park. The orbits of three planets would be close together for a few nights and they would not be this close again for another 30 years. Since I won't be around in 30 years it seemed a good reason to join gazers at the Great Lawn.

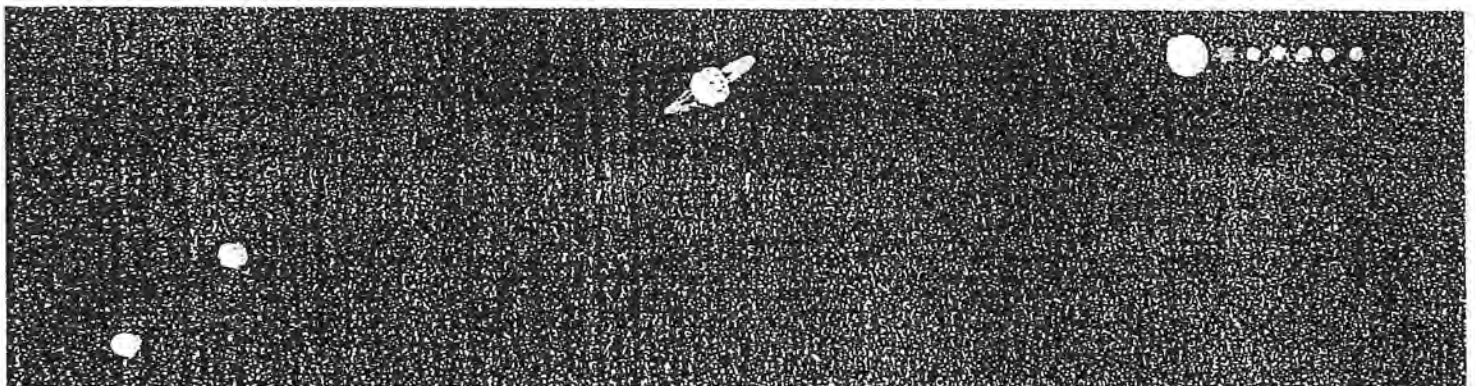
When I arrived, families were finishing picnics, singles were playing frisbee, and a group of children with one adult were gripping and shaking a round blanket of many colors. Two teams finished a soft ball game with cheers. I watched the players of both teams line up and stroll past each other; arms raised, palms flat in a moving salute of high-fives.

Beyond the ball field at the northwest corner of the lawn, I found a group of people with a cluster of telescopes, all facing west. I greeted Rik Davis and he let me look through his scope at Mercury sinking toward the trees in the last light of day. I studied the tree shapes so that I could find the planet through my own binoculars. It's odd to look at a planet after you have spent your days looking at birds. The way you look is the same, but your quest is totally different. It hangs in the sky, a solid, small shape that doesn't dip or flutter or disappear. It stays, and stays which makes the viewing process seem stately. You turn away and talk to someone and when you turn back, there it is again!

Next we saw Venus. Later I was told it was particularly bright that night. Young couples came by and wanted to know what we were looking at. They were invited to view and seemed really pleased with what they saw. I think so many New Yorkers have looked at the red-tailed hawks that now when they see a cluster of scopes, they stop, ask, and look. Chattering voices made me turn around and suddenly I saw what for me were the stars of this summer night. They were beyond the lawn and sidewalk low over the ground under the trees. As I watched, they flashed on and off, making a profusion of twinkling lights. What is a summer night without fireflies? Presently I returned to star gazing. When I turned back, all the fireflies were gone.

People around me said " Saturn" and when I looked, there was the orange-red planet with a tilting ring around it. I was told that in two nights' time, they would all be together: Venus directly above Saturn, with Mercury slightly left of them both. If you missed this show you can look again in 2035.

Jupiter was the last planet spectacular of the night. It was high overhead and not a part of the cluster of 3. When I looked in Rik's scope I could see its 6 moons in a line on the left side. On my way out of the park I stopped to speak with Tom McIntyre. In his scope, Jupiter's moons were aligned vertically over the planet. He said the arrangement depends on the optics of the scope. He can see it both ways but prefers the moons vertical. Tom gave me his hand-drawn star maps. They all looked backward until I realized that in star scopes the image is reversed! Here's Tom's map as you would see with your bare eyes. I added big Jupiter and its moons.



## The Everything Walk

On July 31, I led a walk for New York City Audubon at the north end of the park in Conservatory Garden. We began in the English Garden and admired the buddleia or butterfly bush, flowering tobacco, Rose of Sharon, Japanese anemone, lantana, phlox, lobelia, sun flowers, cone flowers, hollyhocks, hosta, water lilies, false indigo, magnolia, Japanese lilac and LOTS MORE.

Annette Fry and I were in the garden on Thursday and saw the top of a dark brown skipper in flower bed six. On Sunday, Lenore Swenson said she and Anne Lazarus saw a dun skipper. I thought it might be the same critter. But my butterfly guides show only side views and were not helpful. Then I looked at an old photo taken by Lambert Pohner of a dun on top of a daisy, and there it was!

On Thursday we also saw a large insect with blotchy wings. Steve Baldonado of the garden staff said these insects had been around sipping nectar from flowers. They liked to bask in the sun with wings spread out and had no objection to basking on people. By Sunday, I knew this insect was a progressive bee fly because I found a photo of it taken by Jim Trehey in Shakespeare Garden. We both found it there in 1987.

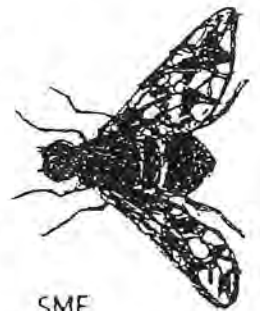
On Sunday in the English Garden it hovered in the air and landed on many people including Virginie Olson. She had the wit to look closely at the fly and said it had a square of white on each side of its body. These flies are an inch long. Their wings spread two inches and are smoky gray, blotched with black. The abdomen, thorax and head are black and round. The antennae are short.

At the Science Library I looked for bee flies on the internet and in Alexander and Elsie Klots's book, "Insects of North America." They say there are 500 species of bee fly in North America. The adults sip nectar from flowers but the young are meat-eaters. They prey on the larvae of robber flies or the larvae of some bees, wasps or ants that make their nests in holes or burrows.

In high summer, a female progressive bee fly will follow an insect of choice from flower to nest. She waits until the insect lays her eggs and departs. Then the bee fly goes to the entrance tunnel and lays her egg. The egg hatches and the larva will eat all the larvae in the tunnel.

Before we left this garden we looked at blameless butterflies: silver-spotted skipper, red admiral, cabbage white and Eastern tiger swallowtail. We crossed the central grass strip at the front gates and stepped into the Italian Garden. This garden was surrounded by a newly trimmed hedge of Japanese holly. Outside this tight circle are soft, frothy spirea bushes. All the banked sides of the garden are full of 2,000 new plants. They are Korean chrysanthemums and will bloom in many colors for the annual fall show. At the center of the garden is a fountain of 3 dancing maidens. Their metal has just been cleaned and on Thursday, the figures were being waxed to protect them from hard weather in the year ahead.

Below the fountain on the floor of the garden is an intricate scroll design made of short green plants; a herb called germander. We searched the germander and began to see handsome, large wasps zooming over them. The wasps have black and yellow bodies and rust-red thorax, head, wings and legs. They sip nectar from flowers and then they mate. The females look for a nest site in sandy soil or light clay. Using spurs on their back legs, each female begins digging a tunnel. She starts with the main tunnel then digs about 16 branch chambers. She works quickly and can complete all the digging in one night. Off she goes in daylight to hunt meat for her young. Now she does her part to deserve her name. She hunts by sight and captures cicadas.



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SME

Usually she snatches a cicada in flight and stings it, not to kill but to paralyze. A paralyzed cicada is bigger than she is, weighs more and is bulky to carry. Using her middle set of legs, she clasps it to her, belly to belly. Using the other two pairs of legs, she crawls up a tree. Then, still holding the cicada, she flies out and makes a bumpy landing. She puts her paralyzed prey flat on the ground and hauls it through the grass to the next tree. The wasp climbs the trunk clutching her captive close. When she is high enough to fly, they repeat the process. It's climb, swoop, crash and drag until they reach her nest. Turning her back to the entrance, she hauls her cicada into the dark.

She pulls her cicada through a branch tunnel to a chamber. When she has arranged her prey, she lays one egg on it and leaves to hunt again. She will provision all the chambers with cicadas. When the eggs hatch, they eat the cicadas alive. The female wasps control the sex of their offspring. Using the sperm stored in her body, she may fertilize the egg. The fertilized egg will be female and the larva will receive 2 cicadas to eat. If she does not fertilize the egg, it will be male and receive only 1 cicada to eat. The cicada killer wasp must dig her nest, stock each chamber, and lay her eggs as fast as possible. Her life span is only about 2 weeks so she hasn't much time.

Most of this information comes from an article by Joe Coelho in the July-August 2002 issue of "Natural History." Although he opened wasp burrows and could count the number of cicadas in each chamber, he did not remark on the ratio of males to females or the possible reasons.

Back to the walk. We left the Garden and crossed to the Meer. We looked at pickerel weed at the shore and saw dragonflies perched on grass stems and twigs. A pair of mating black saddle bags flew by in tandem. Soon she began dipping her tail in the water to disperse her eggs. Nearer to us were amber wings and blue dashers. Perched at eye-level was a gorgeous 2-inch dragonfly. His body, wings and legs were all sparkling red. He sat quietly as we gathered to admire him. I fished in my bag for my camera. Not there! Lenore called it a golden-winged skimmer *Libellula auripennis*. I thought it might be a Needham's skimmer *Libellula needhami*. Both of these dragonflies are red and the same size. Their differences on face and wing change with age. I've seen Needham's fairly often pacing the 100 St. Pool. I never saw it perch. I have seen the golden-winged skimmer only once, about 15 years ago at Turtle Pond. It sat and sat. Now I think Lenore may be right. She says there have been many sightings of golden-wings in our area this summer. I returned with a camera a few days later. The dragonfly was gone.

Our Sunday group continued along the Meer to see more dragonflies: Carolina saddlebags, 12-spotted skimmer and green darner. We crossed the East Drive and at the edge of the meadow saw a small gray butterfly--not a summer azure, but an Eastern-tailed blue. It sat near the ground displaying the undersides of its wings. We could see the tiny orange spots at the margin of its hind wings and its tails the size of threads. It turned slowly in the sun so all could see it clearly.

Halfway down the sloping meadow, we stopped to inspect the raspberry bushes near a wren house. Many berries had been picked, leaving only the shells. Others were unripe pink. Only one or two were black and they were snatched immediately. I vowed to return to eat and sketch without so many people. Regina Alvarez has planted lots of raspberry canes in woody sections of the park. The berries are delicious but their prickles are sharp.

At the bottom of the slope, we turned left and walked along the Loch. We crossed the bridge, and worked our way south. In the grass along the stream we saw an Eastern pondhawk dragonfly. Why wasn't it a blue dasher? It's bigger. Pondhawks have blue abdomens and wide clear wings. This one's wings caught the sunlight and glittered gold. Dasher wings are tinted brown and they stretch them forward. The stream water looked clear but clusters of duck weed drifted on the surface.



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When we reached the 100 St. Pool, we rested on shady benches. We watched amberwing dragonflies and a monarch butterfly. To end this walk, I said I would show them a tree with fruit to eat. We walked to a black cherry tree beside the West Drive and north of 100 St. The tallest person in the group reached up and pulled down a branch. I told them to pick the blackest berries and warned they are not sweet. To my surprise, everyone liked the taste and nobody had tried them before. Lambert Pohner taught me about these trees. He told park personnel not to get rid of them. Cherries are vital to birds because they provide food from July into September. They are great for birders, too. Eat half a dozen of them and it will slake your thirst for at least half an hour. That's good to know if you are far from a drinking fountain.

### Thrushes at Twilight

After work, Ben Cacace leaves his office and goes to Belvedere Castle. Recently, he noticed lots of grackles were flying south and lots of robins were flying north. He believes they are not migrating, just moving around the park. On August 23 he began counting robins. He logs the time he started and the time he stopped and he counts the birds in batches. On August 29, he began at 6:11 PM and stopped at 7:30, finishing sooner than usual because a storm was coming. That night he counted 530 robins, all going to roost. They congregate in a linden tree at the northwest corner of the Great Lawn. He says it's very noisy when they land. There's lots of commotion and fights.

There are several more lindens around the Great Lawn. Did these birds roost in them? No. Only the one at the far end of the Great Lawn. He said he doesn't know where the grackles roost. It makes you wonder if, now that the nesting season is over, other park birds-- starlings, blue jays, cedar waxwings-- spend the night with their own kind, and if so, where? I know that mourning doves roost in pines beside a bridle path and the West Drive. If you see a tree with roosting birds please let me know. I will tell about your find.



### Fall Bird and Tree Walks

Come spend cool fall mornings in Central Park watching the birds fly south and the trees turn to gold and flame.

**5 Wednesdays at 9 AM** starting Sept. 14. We meet at 76 St. And 5<sup>th</sup> Ave. on the benches just inside the park.

**5 Sundays at 9 AM** starting Sept. 18. We meet in front of Loeb Boathouse at 74 St., beside the East Drive.

To register, send \$35 check immediately to Sarah Elliott, 333 East 34 St. #17 D, NYC 10016

Single sessions \$10 each. Bring exact change and binoculars.

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# THE ELLIOTT NEWSLETTER

## Nature Notes from Central Park

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Vol.11, No. 5

September~ October 2005

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### Under the Weather

Regina Alvarez and I were reviewing the weather of 2005 and agreed there has been too much of everything. It was cool and wet into May. June and half of July were normal. But from July through September horrid heat put a lid on our city and on many days the temperature reached 90 degrees. Not only hot but dry. There was no, or almost no, rain making it the driest or second driest summer since we've had weather records.

On Oct. 7, we finally had rain. It rained for a week. It was good for grass, flowers and bushes. The park turned green again. The rain was vital for trees. They have endured 4 years of drought and this soaking rain seeped 4 ft down to needy tree roots. The rains came too late for the ash trees. They have been in trouble and the hot drought of summer finished them off. Regina said half a dozen ash trees at the Block House gave up the ghost. Work crews took out the crowns of these trees leaving the "standing dead." The remaining tree trunks can be used by woodpeckers and other creatures as their wood softens and rots.

### Weather and Feather

So how did the weather affect the fall migration? It began well with big flocks of grackles and robins gathering and ready to fly south. This was followed by a lull. Tom Fiore said that 6 weeks of drought and record heat meant there were fewer insects to eat. Probably the hungrier birds just kept going. The Ramble seemed empty and most of the migrating birds were seen in the North end and around the edges of the park. The hot spot was at the Lower Lobe or Wagner Cove due to a Norway maple. It was full of birds and surrounded by excited bird watchers. A woman stepped back quickly and narrowly avoided being struck by a huge limb that fell from the maple. A work crew came to cut up the limb and take it away. They discovered both the branch and the rest of the tree was diseased and took the whole tree down. Safer for pedestrians and nearby trees, but a calamity for the birders.

For a short time, another tree over on the East side put on a show that drew birds in. On Sept. 21 my Wednesday group visited this tree. It is west of the Children's playground at Fifth Ave. and 76 St. The tree is surrounded by a fence to keep children away from sharp spikes on its limbs. The prickles give it the name Hercules's club. Among the pinnately compound leaves were cartwheels of fuchsia branches and stems. Stepping closer, we could see black seeds, tiny as buckshot, attached to the pink clusters. Thrushes stood on the clusters pecking up the seeds as fast as possible. We saw robins, a veery, a Swainson's and 2 gray-cheeked thrush. A passing black-throated blue warbler noticed the crowd and came over to snack. This tree would be ideal for all the bird photographers. Our view was not much above eye-level and the eats were so good the birds mostly ignored our presence.

The skies darkened, the heavens opened and we had rain. Tom Fiore thinks 10 days of bad weather kept the birds back. The rain stopped, the skies cleared and the winds shifted on Thursday night. On Friday, Oct. 14, a glut of new birds flew into the park.

On Oct. 16, our very jolly group ended the Sunday walk in Maintenance Meadow. The birds in trees launched themselves into the air, lunging at invisible insects. Suddenly yellow-rumped warblers were all around us twirling and diving. Some of the group had never seen areal bugging

and were startled when birds swooped close, barely missing our heads and shoulders. Later I learned from Roger Pasquier that zillions of yellow-rumps passed through Cape May, NJ. So what we were seeing may have been the back end of a mob large enough to span several states.

A week later, Oct. 24, was a day to remember. It was cool and dark and we saw no other birding groups in the Ramble. At a new feeder south of Willow Rock we saw white-throated sparrows, white-breasted nuthatch, chickadees, a brown creeper, a winter wren and several towhees. As we moved away from the trees and out into the meadows we saw more and more birds. It had rained in the night and a carpet of brown leaves covered the grass. The carpet seemed to undulate like a brown mirage. When we put up our glasses we could see hundreds of birds. All were pecking frantically at the leaves. White-throated sparrows, hermit thrushes, winter wrens and both kinglets raced over the ground snatching insects off leaves. They came quite close, paying no attention to us. There must have been 2 thousand white-throats in the park. I have seen them in good numbers before but not like this. And I have never seen so many winter wrens in my life. They were everywhere. Not only were they all over the park, they had spread out over the city.

Art Le Moine saw 3 winter wrens on the Median strip of Broadway at 75<sup>th</sup> St. A birder saw one on the street in Chinatown. As he watched a shop keeper came out of his shop and scooped up the tiny bird. He took it inside and pushed it into a cage with 30 others! All the birders that hear this story immediately say, "That's illegal."

That same Sunday we saw a rusty blackbird in the Gill near Laupot Bridge. His head and back were deep rusty brown, the wings and tail black, the face dark with white eyes that looked perfectly mad. As we turned to walk along Iron bridge, something plopped down, barely missing Doug Greuneau. When he picked it up we saw a tiny kinglet-headless. One tiny yellow feather at the nape told us it had been a golden-crowned kinglet. We looked up but could see no bird who took the head but dropped the rest. Farther north, above Tanner Spring I saw a long-eared owl. Jays had been mobbing it which led birders to the spot. I left the park certain I had seen more birds that one day than I've seen in 45 years of birding here.

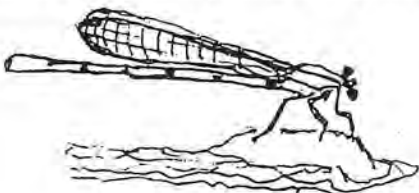
I think it was that day, or the day after I saw many, many song sparrows on the grass. They looked odd. They all wore stick pins on their chests which were dark. The mutton-chop whiskers on each side of their throats were so dark they looked like black daggers. I read about song sparrows in the "Sibley Guide to Bird Life & Behavior" and learned that 31 subspecies of song sparrows have been identified from coast to coast. Wow! I asked members of Joe DiCostanzo's Wednesday group to check them out. They saw light song sparrows and dark ones. Joe was reported to say he thought there were 3 subspecies on the ground and he thought the darkest ones were Western. If so, there must have been powerful cross continent winds to move those birds here.



sme

### Weather, Insects and Trees

Because of the heat I stayed out of the park but looked for fall insects on Oct. 3. At the Reservoir I found a cabbage white and a monarch butterfly working through grasses. All along the east shore there were floating roots of phragmites. Where the woody stems rose above water level I could see gorgeous blue damselflies. They were familiar bluet *Enallagma civile*. The head, thorax and back tip are brilliant blue. Black lines mark off blue segments along the abdomen. I must have seen 30 of them, more than I have ever seen before. They were all near the shore; all males, all guarding their tiny turf, all fighting off other males and all waiting for a female to come and mate.



sme



Farther south I stopped at the obelisk The steps west of the platform lead down to lamppost 8120. Behind the lamppost and a fence is an oak tree badly rotted around the roots. Lambert Pohner showed me this rotting oak some 20 years ago. It oozed sap and attracted butterflies.

SME

Until this year I have not seen them there. Hot dry weather seems to make the sap ooze and butterflies are attracted to minerals in the sap. The day I was there I saw a very old and battered red admiral. Then I saw 3 others, one brand new and in mint condition. With them was a mourning cloak. They all sipped from the trunk. One braced its legs and worked so hard I could see the sides of its thorax move in and out like a squeeze box.



I've been so interested in the roots of this tree, I never looked up. But this year I took leaves as long as this page to study. It is a bur oak. If you hold the leaf upright it is narrow at the stem, wide and round at the other end and nipped in on both sides near the middle. One source says it looks like an acoustic bass which may help you remember it. Another name for this oak is mossy cup, which describes the acorn. A very deep cup covers half or more of the acorn. It is scored with raised scales that look like a quilted cap trimmed with a fringe. You'll find caps but not acorns near the tree. The acorns are sweet to eat and all were snapped up.

SME



Bur oaks are one of the largest of American oaks but this one is not very large. Chuck McAlexander and I measured it. The trunk is 5 ft around at chest height. The diameter is 2 feet 7 inches or 31 inches across. It is 69 feet tall. Oaks are slow growers and average 15 to 20 feet of growth every 20 years We think this tree is slower than average and may be about 80 years old. There's a really big bur oak south of Willow Rock and down at the waterside. It has a sign. Wet roots made big acorns and those are more than a third larger than the ones near the obelisk.

### New Mammal in the Park

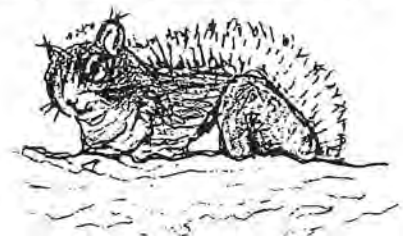
A red squirrel appeared in Central Park this summer, put here by persons unknown. It has a thinner coat and tail than the gray squirrel and is just 13 inches long. Only about 2/3 the size of a gray, says Anita Stillman. Anita and Howard Stillman have been feeding squirrels in Central and Riverside Parks for 16 years. This is the first red squirrel they have seen here. Usually, red squirrels live in evergreen forests and mountains. They have red backs, sides and tails with white bellies and eye rings. In winter they wear a black line between red side and white belly. And they grow tufts at the tips of their ears. They are feisty, noisy, territorial and chase off intruders.



Ours took possession of a black walnut tree at the north end of the Locust Grove. It gathered many black walnuts which it stored in a long opening in the trunk. Soon the nuts began to roll out and drop on the ground. Now the squirrel has moved its cache to surrounding trees and guards them all. It is fierce and fast. When a gray squirrel wanders near, Red flies over the ground, overtakes the gray and bites. I saw a dead gray squirrel near the black walnut tree. It was on its side and all the back and sides bore many bites. Red squirrels have extremely sharp teeth that may be tough enough to break black walnut shells. It also accepts peanuts and regular walnuts, from Anita and friends. Red extended its territory and is now seen on the Great Lawn. I think Red is a male. But so far, no one has seen enough to tell. We wish it well but we are very glad there is only one. A pair can produce 3 to 7 young in spring and sometimes a second litter in summer. Some of the birders think this red squirrel could be taken out by a red-tailed hawk. Anita kindly sent 2 grand photos by a friend, Alexandra Citnelli. I used both for this drawing.

SME

Thank you Alexandra, and thank you Anita.





### Mysterious Mushrooms

I've learned that red squirrels eat fruit, seeds and mushrooms. They can even eat mushrooms poisonous to people. I yearn to learn, not snack, and have been pestering Alice Barner for years to go mushrooming with me. On Oct. 25, she met me on her lunch hour and kindly gave me computer printouts of mushrooms that grow in Central Park. Together we explored the Ramble. What we found were old and shriveled specimens growing on dead branches. Soon Alice had to race back to work, but called me to say that on her way out of the park, she had seen fresh mushrooms growing in grass. They were under an evergreen beside the 79<sup>th</sup> St. Transverse, near the top of Cedar Hill. Several days later I found the tree, a Norway spruce, with new soil on its roots. I saw many small holes where mushrooms had been..



SME



I found one specimen left and sketched it and took it home to sketch some more. Next morning when I looked, the cap had opened like an umbrella and turned dark brown. Underneath, I could see it had split into sections that curled upward to reveal pink, tightly-packed gills. Alice thought her specimen was yellow foot *Agaricus Agaricus xanthodermus*. I cut the stem but saw no yellow skin. Perhaps this was a family relative, meadow mushroom *Agaricus campestris*.



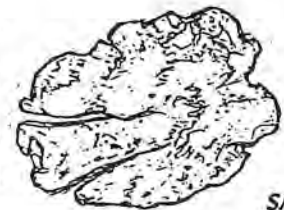
SME



Alice told me about a Central Park mushroom walk to be led by Gary Lincoff on Oct. 30 in the north end of the park. Two friends, Ellis Gellhorn and Connie Wiley, took down Gary's pearls of wisdom. He said this year was a wipe-out for mushrooms because there has been no rain. Normally we could see 25 to 50 mushrooms growing in the lawns and woods along the Loch and beside the Wild Flower Meadow. The cold weather will put a stop to the ones that are growing now. He told the group they should look for mushrooms growing at the roots of white oaks. The acorns of white oaks are sweet. Birds and squirrels eat them right up. Turkey oak acorns are bitter with tannic acid. They stay on the ground all winter. If birds and squirrels shun bitter acorns, do mushrooms shun bitter tree roots? We should start to check.

The group found and Gary showed many mushrooms, including an *Agaricus*. He thought it might be *Agaricus campestris* or meadow mushroom. Like Alice, he felt certain of the genus but not the species. It couldn't be *A. xanthodermus*, because when he cut the stem it did not show bright yellow. He warned that *A. placomyces* is inedible and may be poisonous.

Gary held up a large, old, rubbery piece of Sulphur or Chicken mushroom *Laetiporous sulphureous*. I sketched one of them in the Locust Grove on Sept. 19. It was bright yellow with thin orange crease lines and emerged from a black locust at 4 feet off the ground. It looked like a yellow hand with many fingers, all beckoning. When young, these are edible. This slab was only sketched.



SME



We were shown another large slab, an artist's conk *Ganoderma applanatum*, which grows on logs and stumps. It is semicircular, thick, furrowed and dark gray-brown. The underside is smooth and white. If you scratch it, you can draw a permanent picture on the surface. Gary said it is used in tea that sells in Chinatown and tastes awful.



SME

I wish I could tell about other mushrooms we saw that day but my samples crumbled in my plastic bag and became sweepings of nothing. Gary says fall is best for mushrooms but spring can be good. Next year I will try to report on more of them.

# THE ELLIOTT NEWSLETTER

## Nature Notes from Central Park

Vol. 11, No. 6

November~December 2005

### 106<sup>th</sup> Christmas Bird Count in Central Park

On the morning of Dec. 18, I woke and looked at the clock. It was exactly six. I smiled and turned over with a happy sigh. It was the day of the Christmas bird count and for the first time in over 30 years, I didn't have to get up. This year the count would be run by E.J. McAdams and I planned to stay out of his way but appear for the party and listen to the full Central Park count.

When I arrived at the Arsenal the room was full of people. They gave me a cheer when they saw me. I grinned, curtsied and headed for the food. Jill Mainelli gave me some red wine and I got the last of a tasty meat stew. As I ate I was glad to see the counters were calmly chatting as they waited to begin.

E.J. stepped to the podium, smiled and welcomed us to the 106th count in Central Park. He explained how the count had come about and in 1899 was tested here. E.J. listed the 7 sections of the park and said we would take the birds in order but save the red-tailed hawk for last. Knowing laughter from the crowd. That bird's numbers have proved contentious.

As we worked our way through 7 reports for each bird, I was glad to hear good numbers for some birds that have been scarce in recent years. Not only were there more of them but they were scattered throughout the park. Red-bellied woodpeckers, yellow-bellied sapsuckers, blue jays, black-capped chickadees (except in the Southwest), tufted titmice and white-breasted nuthatches were there in every section of the park. That may be a park first. Later, Dick Gershon told me he was surprised by certain birds missing from this year's list: double-crested cormorant, pied-billed grebe, red-winged blackbird and no kinglets. Yes, but all 3 mimic thrushes were there: catbird, mockingbird and brown thrasher. And in many years we see no cedar waxwings, but this year they were seen in 3 different sections for a total of 33!

Most of the section reporters were loud enough to hear, but some were muffled. E. J. repeated each number into the microphone which helped a lot. Someone was working the computer and numbers flashed up on the screen for all to see. Unfortunately, there wasn't a column for totals which would have helped for the birds seen in large numbers: Canada goose, mallard, ruddy duck, ring-billed gull, pigeon, starling, white-throated sparrow, grackle (this year) and house sparrow.

When we got to the red-tails we found they were seen in every section of the park for a total of 13 reports. Some of these birds were seen flying in various directions and could have been counted twice over. E.J. suggested a smaller number and I think we finally settled for a total of 9.

Then, with the list of possible and probable birds completed, we turned to unusual and rare birds. E.J. said we would take them by sections and begin with the Northeast. They reported a saw-whet owl and 2 American tree sparrows in the Wild Flower Meadow. The sparrows are easy to see in New York State in the winter. But they don't hang out in our park or Manhattan. Tom Fiore says our exceptions are still there.

In the Northwest a merlin and a brown creeper were seen, though not together. The hot find of the day was a Northern shrike at the Blockhouse. I said I thought it was a first for our park count. Peter Post said he's seen 3 or 4 in Central Park. But no, not on the Christmas Count.

Tom Fiore saw a birder he trusts who said he'd seen a yellow-rumped warbler in the Ramble early in the morning. Later the Ramble group saw a brown creeper, making a total of 2 for the park,

a chipping sparrow, and a rusty blackbird that's been around for more than a month. Best of all, they found a great horned owl in the Oven and Willow Rock area. Many people went to see it when the party was over. That owl may also be a first for our count.

Some Christmas counts that cover large areas last all day. Ours, which covers less land, starts at 8 and ends at noon. But birders come to the park in the afternoon and find birds that are not listed. They need a phone number to call with their reports. E.J. gave out the telephone number of New York City Audubon Society (212-691-7483).

Another feature of this national count is to list birds seen in the Count Period, which is 3 days before the count and 3 days after it. Let's hope that people who saw rare and unlisted birds on December 15, 16, 17, or December 19, 20, 21 phoned in their reports to NYCAS (same number). It would be great if someone saw a long-eared owl, the park monk parakeet, or any of Dick's list.

After the party was over, a jolly group of birders went over to Willow Rock to see the big owl. I have seen great horned owls flying through the park but not sitting or hanging around. Through the leaves I admired the large, tawny, belly of tightly-packed feathers separated by thin black lines.

Deborah Allen photographed the owl through leaves and told me about her tunnel view of a part of the wing. All the feathers were the same length, the same tan color, and looked equally fresh. She thinks it is a young bird. If the owl were a year older and had just gone through molt, the length of the feathers would not be uniform and some of them would look worn. Tom Fiore also thinks it's a young bird. He says it has been around a month and was seen catching a pigeon. Art LeMoine told me about looking at its fierce yellow eyes and yellow claws.

As we admired this owl on count day, a great blue heron flew over and the birders called it species 62. Later I learned a hairy woodpecker was seen in the North end of the park for species number 63.

Dick Gershon said he was surprised by the chipping sparrow in the Ramble because of the American tree sparrows in the north end of the park. Usually these birds don't overlap. Chippies are seen spring and fall and trees in winter. But both sparrows are still being seen in the park. The tree sparrows are in the Wild Flower Meadow and the chipping sparrow in the Ramble at the feeders.

## **The Tale of the Mockingshrike**

On the afternoon of the count I tried to get some of the birders to go north with me to search for the shrike. I was told not to bother because the bird had flown. That morning a large group of birders was in the Northwest. Some of them approached the Block House at 108 St. and 7 Ave. It is the oldest building in the park and sits on a large, rocky edifice with views north, east and west. The fort was built by Americans to repel an invasion by the British during the War of 1812. On Dec. 18, 2005 a group of bird watchers climbed the rock face and stood on the west side of the building looking toward Harlem. They saw a bird in a tree at the northeast corner of the building, said Junko Suzuki. The tree was quite tall but its base was on ground far below the fort. The bird they watched was in one of its branches and then another above them, but not so high as to strain their necks and become uncomfortable, said Rebekah Creshkoff.

At first they thought it was a mockingbird, a bird they could expect to see. It was the right size for a mockingbird but soon they became sure it wasn't. The day was overcast and they studied the bird's silhouette. The body was too "pudgy" for a mocker, said Rebekah. And the head was too "chunky." The bill was visibly heavy and hooked. They could make out a "sooty" mask on the face.

Rebekah said she could see a drab rusty mark in the crook of the bird's black wing. Sibley shows this spot at the leading edge of the wing on his Juvenile bird. When the bird flew, Rebekah saw that the tail was shorter than a mocker's and the wings were "stubby." Junko also studied the Sibley guide. She said this bird looked more mature than Sibley's Juvenile Northern Shrike-- a slightly older first year bird. There's a good picture of an older juvenile in the National Geographic Society's "Birds of North America" (p.335 the middle bird in a cluster of 3).

The group had perhaps five minutes to see the bird. They were joined by other members of their group who had climbed up the steps to the Block House, not up the rock face. Unfortunately, they arrived in time to see a disappearing bird.

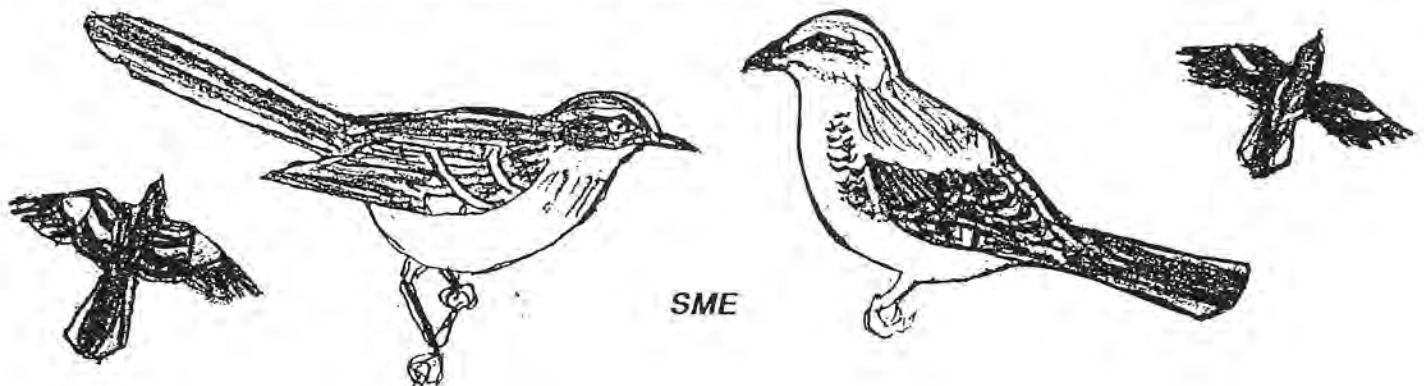
Tom Fiore was counting house sparrows beside the park wall at 110 St. He turned and saw the Block House and a large group of birders. He joined them and asked what they had seen. He said the description of the bird had all the right field marks, including the hooked bill, heavy body, short tail and even buff barring on the side of the breast. Sibley calls the barring "scaley," and the Geo guide says they keep the barring until spring. Mockers lean forward when they sit. The group told Tom this bird was upright (like a white-crowned sparrow). Steve Baldwin photographed the bird with his digital camera just before it flew. The picture was small and dark. Tom had Steve hold up the camera. Reversing his binoculars, Tom leaned in to the picture. He saw an enlarged silhouette of a bird with a thick bill and a hook at the tip. No mocker.

I told Dick Gershon I've never seen a shrike in Central Park but saw them in 1960 at Cape May around a field on Sunset Blvd. We had stopped there to look at cattle egrets among the cows. Raising our binoculars to the wire fence, we saw a huge crowd of birds, all of them shrikes. They lined the fence at a tolerable distance from each other, hunting large insects in the field. Each bird was perched beside a metal spike on which it could impale every catch. I was there for Labor Day so the birds must have been migrating south. I have never seen so many shrikes in my life as on that fall day. In 1968, members of the Linnaean Society celebrated our centennial with a trip to Churchill, Canada. The birding was spectacular and we were lucky enough to get close looks at both Northern and loggerhead shrikes.

Dick has seen shrikes in winter. He says they were all around the lower half of New York State in 1995-6. That year the vole and lemming population crashed in Canada. Shrikes and other birds eat small mammals in winter and, without food, the birds came south. If the same thing is happening again, we could see other birds here this winter, including snowy owls.

The scientific name for Northern Shrike is *Lanius excubitor* and it also lives in Europe, Asia and North Africa. In all of its range the bird has the same scientific name. In parts of its range it is called the great grey shrike. The pictures of this bird in various guides look similar to ours but not quite like it. All of them show strong bills and a hooked beak to tear apart their food.

When I finally get this issue of the newsletter finished, I will go to the Wild Flower Meadow and search for the American tree sparrows. They are not common in our park or in Manhattan although many are seen in the lower half of New York State.



## Remembering Donen

I can't remember when I met Donen Gleick but it was probably in Central Park. He was an enthusiastic birder and a good spotter. He was also cheery and told funny stories. When he was in full flow, his voice would rise and I could hear the high twang of the Mid-West buzzing through it. Through his cadences and pitches I could hear the voices of my grandfather and uncle.

In those jaunty days we called him Don, for at least a decade. Then, looking serious, he began using his full name. He was a lawyer and a number of the bird watchers went to consult him about their wills. He and Bob Krinsky were very steady birding companions and it was fun to be with them both in the park and at Jamaica Bay.

We all participated in the Central Park Christmas Count and when we gathered in 1980, I made plans to cover the Southeast section with them. A troubled-looking man appeared. He had no binoculars and was dressed in a thin cotton raincoat and sneakers though the day was bitterly cold. He looked so miserable I told him he'd better come along with us. He said he was a reporter from The New York Times. As we were walking south, Donen took me aside and introduced me to his son, Steve Gleick, who was in from California. Donen explained that the reporter traveling with us had been given this assignment as a Christmas gift from his son, James Gleick. James was then managing editor of the Magazine Section of the Sunday New York Times. Don told me that he and Steve could not socialize with a Times reporter hired by James. He felt it would be unethical.

They moved away taking Bob Krinsky with them and I was left with the reporter. I explained the reason for their reluctance which I hadn't known when I asked him to join us. We worked our way over winding paths seeing chickadees and titmice and house sparrows. I wore a pair of gloves and wool mittens and pressed a small sheet of paper between thumb and palm. After a pause, I looked down to find my mitten clamped but my paper gone! It had slipped away without my knowing it. We retraced our steps looking in vain for a precious scrap of white paper. I was in despair. Then, to my amazement, this reporter was able to reconstruct the list of about six birds we had seen and their numbers. I told him I was VERY grateful and begged him to tell on me. He kindly refrained. As we worked our way north to the Boat House, a camera man appeared and took pictures of Dorothy Borg and me bundled up and hidden by binoculars. We appeared next day on the front page of the Times with as well story in the B Section. This was the first news story about the Central Park Christmas Bird Count. It only lacked some of Donen's pithy remarks.

That day the reporter said he was Paul Montgomery and could I help him get an owl story? Sure. I called when a long-eared owl appeared in the park about 2 weeks later. Paul wrote a jolly account and Bill Sauro took a wonderful picture. The owl was on the front page, the Times ran its picture 4 times that week and most of the Times editors put up its photograph in their offices. James Gleick went on to write "Chaos", a world-wide best seller, followed by "Genius." Steve Gleick did such useful work for the environment, he received a MacArthur Genius Award. Paul Montgomery left the Times, moved to Europe and lives in Switzerland. I am grateful to say he takes this newsletter. So did Donen. He made it clear my writing skills are not a patch on his daughter's but he enjoyed the park news which cheered and distracted him in declining health. He died of cancer. The Times obit said he was 81 and that he and Beth were married 52 years. The funeral was at 81 St. And Madison, Dec. 21— smack in the middle of the transit strike. I thumbed and hiked about half way there but gave it up when I thought of the 100+ block round trip. I felt very glum as I walked home. Then I thought that if Don's spirit were about, the sight of mourners more breathless and flustered than solemn, might give him a chuckle. So I poured a stiff drink and hoisted it to him.