

THE ELLIOTT NEWSLETTER

Nature Notes from Central Park

Vol. 12, No.1

January~February, 2006

The Big Snowstorm

Late Saturday night it began to snow and continued into Sunday for Lincoln's birthday. In the morning, we were told the storm was gaining on the record set in 1947. Except for the snow plows the streets of Gotham were deserted, and our world was enveloped in a soft gray cocoon. By midday the snow stopped and the city reappeared. Some of us were sorry to think we had missed the weather record.

Then feathery flakes appeared. In minutes, what fell was smaller, thicker and fierce. Great curtains of white whipped past dull-eyed traffic lights, rattled signs and slammed into buildings. It was wonderful to watch – from inside. Late in the day we were told this hullabaloo had become the greatest storm since weather records were first kept in New York. The snow had reached a depth of 26.9 inches.

Our Mayor had said there was equipment ready to handle a storm and there certainly was. Streets were being cleared on Sunday by noon before the snow stopped. On Monday Chuck McAlexander went to the park at dawn, put on his snow shoes and at 77th St. walked down the hill to the West Drive. The roads were slick but his shoes have 3 pairs of cleats on the ball of each foot to grip icy surfaces. In deep snow they keep him aloft. With the shoes, snow came up to his ankle. Without the shoes, it would have been shin-high. Even so, he didn't think he was walking over a 2 foot layer of snow.

Chuck met the gray screech owl at 75th St. and the drive, just as the bird was returning to its burrow in a London plane tree. Jeff Kimball arrived with camera equipment. The two walked south along the Lake. They saw 6 to 12 ring-billed gulls out on the ice. Near Hershhead they saw a catbird searching for food in a bush. Further on, a wood thrush was sitting on the snowy crown of another bush. At the north end of Strawberry Fields was a Cooper's hawk sitting in a dawn redwood tree. Jeff filmed white-throated sparrows, a cardinal and a mockingbird. At the south end of Strawberry Fields they saw a male Eastern towhee. Chuck said the snow was everywhere, on fields, topping bushes and etching the branches of trees. Several joggers were out running along the drive in the slick. But their numbers were few compared to the usual Monday morning crowd.

Several weeks after the storm I got reports from the park staff who were out in the park clearing snow. When I talked to Bill Berliner he told me "The biggest storm, ever—wasn't." He measured snow in the East Meadow and the North Meadow and found the blanket of white was only 16 and 18 inches thick. Regina Alvarez and Maria Hernandez measured the Great Lawn, Pinetum, Hershhead and Cedar Hill. The levels in all these places were between 16 and 18 inches. What could account for such different statistics? Well, if the weather was warm enough for the snow to begin to melt. As it condensed the snow level would drop. Could the level sink 6 inches from Sunday to Monday or were people using different units of measure? We don't know.

Bill Berliner said that right after the storm they were out with a full complement of snow plows with about 15 drivers, plus crews to shovel steps, crosswalks, and bus stops. They cleared roads and main paths Monday and Tuesday. By Wednesday they shoveled foot paths in the Ramble and other parts of the park. Because temperatures were moderate during the week, park crews only had to sprinkle salt in isolated spots such as slopes, steep paths, and steps. Did the storm do much damage to trees? No. It was nothing compared to the storm in the winter of '96-'97. That storm shut down the whole city and damaged lots of trees in the park.

Secret Signs of Spring

Presidents Day fell on Feb. 20 this year and it was a wonderful day to be in the park. I put on many layers of clothes against the cold and met Chuck McAlexander at the Boat House. The day was cold enough for his mighty fur hat. We crossed 72nd St. stopping at a group of pines in Strawberry Fields. Chuck reached for a branch and counted the needles in a cluster. Needles in 5's. That makes it white pine, he said. And what was the warty, gray tree with them? Yes, a beech. And the one in the field? A cut-leaf beech. We looked at another cut-leaf beech near the Lake. Chuck threw seeds on the sidewalk which drew a crowd of house sparrows. White-throated sparrows watched, but hung back. He moved from the throng and threw more seed for the white-throats. They were slow to pounce and the house sparrows got most. Down at the shore of the Lower Lobe, a large group of grackles was poking in the mud. My first spring red-winged blackbird was in the group.

We crossed the West Drive at 72nd St. and stared at bright green grass and brilliant yellow bushes with no leaves. Could they be yellow twig dogwood? We don't know. The daffodil shoots were about 4 inches high. We looked for snowdrops near the "Imagine" circle, and there they were! All out in force with their white globes bending toward the ground. We ducked around a group of tourists and slipped into the wood chip path. At the cluster of hollies we looked at dark green leaves trimmed with spikes which we think are American holly trees. The ones with red berries are female trees. We saw a mockingbird, but not the brown thrasher or Eastern towhee we had come to find.

We crossed the West Drive, passed Henshead and looked for crocuses in the grassy bank. Their spikes were taller and darker green than the surrounding lawn. I told Chuck the yellow, white, and purple flowers would be out for my birthday in early March. Chuck said the daffodils would be out for his birthday at the end of March. We saw Lenten rose in the garden near the Lady's Pavilion. Their drooping puce flowers were bent so low to the ground they must have been crushed by the snow. We stepped out on the rocks to watch the shovelers in the Lake. They looked gorgeous: the long, dull-black bills, shiny-black heads, the chests so white and the sides so rust. The females looked good, too.

Near Bank Rock Bridge I was surprised to see a hazel nut tree in tassel. How could I have missed seeing it all these years? I took a picture but it may come out a blur because the wind made all the tassels dance. We crossed the bridge and went to the Azalea Pond. I searched the ground for early spring flowers and was amazed to see a bright green horn sticking out of the ground. The sign beside it said "skunk cabbage." Wow! I immediately took its picture. I have never seen skunk cabbage growing. There are not many to see in New York City and I'm not there in time.

I returned to sketch the plant on March 1 and found the horn unfurling. Did you know that skunk cabbages give off so much heat that they can melt the snow around them? All the snow from the big storm was gone so we couldn't see a ring of melt around this plant.

We went to the winter bird feeding station and saw titmice, chickadees, a white-breasted nuthatch and a downy woodpecker. A male house finch posed at the door of a feeder looking strawberry-gorgeous in the sun. On the socks of niger thistle, I counted 13 dull goldfinch gobbling. It was time for Chuck to leave.

I walked north and bumped into Bob Krinsky at the Reservoir. We watched a large group of ruddy ducks with their tails up. They all looked so dull, how could they ever put on their finery in time for spring? Bob and I walked east along the Reservoir and admired the coot and a dashing hooded merganser traveling with a harem of five females. They were all in fine feather but it's still a little too early for the mating season.

Bob and I visited the territory of the red squirrel which we didn't see. I looked for a young female downy woodpecker. I told Bob I'd visited this spot and was startled to see a downy watch me from the ground. She ran toward me, paused, ran some more, and paused again. Without turning



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her head she fixed me with a very steady eye. I told her to wait, I was looking for a peanut. As I was patting my pockets, I felt a thump-on my calf and scratchy sound of climbing up the back of my jeans. I have never played tree before and we were both surprised. She hopped to the ground and came around to look at me. Eventually I found a nut and tossed it to her. The second time I visited her, many other birds were trying to grab nuts. So I put a shelled peanut on my fingers and my hand very near the ground. She came, she looked up at me and down at the nut. She tried a head-on capture, but couldn't grasp the prize. Then, tipping her head to one side and not quite scraping my fingers, she seized the nut and flew. Bird books show downy woodpeckers with short bills. But when this bird stretched her neck for the nut, she showed a long and slender bill. She is young, large, enterprising, hungry and confiding. I have not seen her recently and I worry for her.

When Bob and I reached the feeders a young woman passed by. I asked her if she had seen anything that day. "Yes. A woodcock." Where! "On the west side of Maintenance Meadow. I'll take you there," she said. We were following her when I saw Doug Gruenau and Brad Richardson.. who joined us immediately. She led us to the spot and without pointing, gave us instructions to find a bird that looked like a lump of wood. Only the eye moved as it watched us. Eventually we all saw what she described. Some of us circled the field while another woodcock dropped in and then flew out again. From the meadow side I moved near and heard my companions making noises. The woodcock was up and walking. It would pause between steps and rock fore and aft in a silent rhumba. With its eye on me it rounded a tree trunk and disappeared. I turned to the young woman and asked her name. "Liz Karp," she said. A name to remember.

Bob said good-by and I joined Doug and Brad to watch a red-tailed hawk in the sky. We went to the Point to look for a rusty blackbird. No luck, but they found us just what I wanted, a fox sparrow! On my way out I stopped at the hemlock tree high above the Boathouse. It looks great. The short, flat needles are dark-green. For the first time in years, I saw no fuzzy white covering of adelgid, the aphids that have been sucking the life from the tree. I'm told the adelgid population has crashed and hemlocks all over the Northeast are making a comeback. Small branches littered the ground beneath the tree. Who was harvesting the hemlock? At Conservatory Pond I met Lincoln with his telescope/camera. He looked at my hemlock branch and said it was exactly what he has been seeing Pale Male take to the nest. He's fumigating with hemlock to protect his young from nest parasites.

Art Le Moine called to wish me happy birthday and say the gray screech owl at 75th and the West Drive has fuzzy-headed young. A woodcock has been staying in Indian Cave. It feeds on the ground but when disturbed flies to its perch, a niche in the rock where it is well hidden. On March 5, Art said, Lola spent the day sitting on her nest at 5th Ave. The birders believe she is brooding an egg. That day they watched Pale Male bring in a small rat and give it to her. Yum.

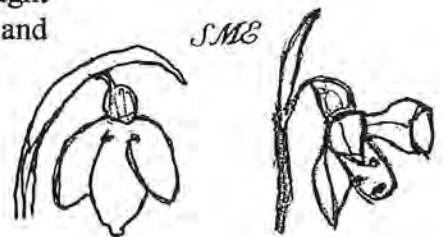
Spring Flowers in Winter

The day I sketched the skunk cabbage I also made drawings of early flowering plants. I visited the witch hazel near the East Drive at the top of Cedar Hill. I think what I saw was 'Jelena.' They have coppery-yellow blooms with skinny twisted petals. At the center were purple-red buttons; or calyx, at the base of the petals. I may have seen 'Diane' blooming, too. When you check these flowers, the dark ones are 'Diane', the lighter ones are 'Jelena.'

Below the witch hazel bushes are snow drops in full bloom. I brought one home to sketch in its prime and decline. The white petals shriveled and drew back to reveal a spotted green center which must attract in

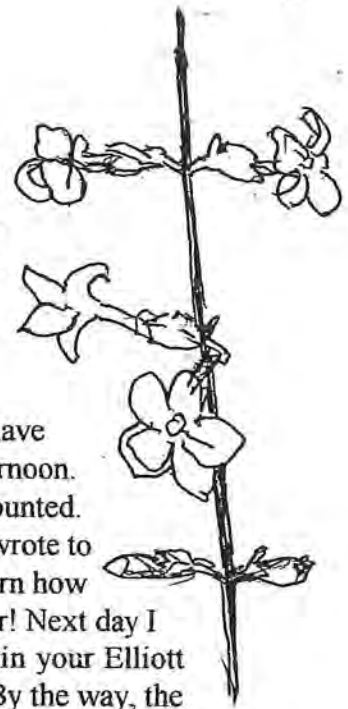


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If you stand at the Reservoir with your back to the South Pumping Station, you are looking south. Go down the first flight of steps. You'll be above the 86th St. Transverse. Look at the iron railings and you will see a bushy vine with yellow flowers. This is winter jasmine. There is more of it bordering the viaduct under the West Drive near Tanner Spring. What a welcome froth of green and yellow!



Old Business, and New

Last month I gave you the species of birds seen on the Christmas Count. I have added (many times) Eve Levine's numbers plus the 2 individuals seen on that afternoon. The total comes to **6,843** individuals-- a lot of birds to drop into our park and be counted.

Also, last month I wrote a remembrance of Donen Gleick. His second son wrote to say his name is Peter, not Steve. I felt terrible. Peter said it was "interesting" to learn how others saw his father. I felt worse. I had insulted Peter and the memory of his father! Next day I got a note from darling Beth, Donen's widow. "I loved your write up of Donen in your Elliott Newsletter. Your description of Donen hit the mark. I sent copies to the children. By the way, the son from CA is Peter, not Steve, but all the rest was accurate. He loved birding, the Xmas bird counts, and your newsletter." Beth's kind words brought tears to a rumpled heart. I wrote an apology to them both and Peter answered, explaining Donen's modesty. He was a good birder and valued seeing birds, not listing them. Peter constructed his Dad's life list after Donen died.

I would rather watch crow than eat it. So I will be careful as I tell you that Bill Van Dyke died at home on Feb. 23 of a heart attack. Bill and Lee became members of my Wednesday bird classes in the 1980's. He was tall and erect, about 6 feet, and some years I asked him to stand in front of an American chestnut tree beside the Gill in the Ramble. The class would measure the tree in units of Bill, then estimate the new height of the tree. In January 1996, Bill was struck by macular degeneration. The center of his vision was gone and only the periphery was left. He went to a Veterans Rehab Center in CT for 13 weeks. He returned with new skills and a long red-and-white cane with a roller on the tip. He used it to roll around the park, and with his wife's aid, over some very rough paths. He loved being out in spring seeing some green, and catching the movement of a bird. Bill was a great reader and, later, listener to Talking Books. In his mind, he carried scraps of poetry, left over from the influence of a school teacher and his mother. On sunny mornings he would gently declaim in a Memphis accent, "Though every prospect pleases, and only man is vile." We didn't know the source and I've just learned it's a hymn, "From Greenland's Icy Mountains" by Bishop Reginald Heber (1783-1826).

Bill was an Army captain in Italy during World War II. He was wounded but managed to get all his men out. He spent a year in hospital where he received a Silver Star and the Medal of Honor. He spent his working life in Advertising and Public Relations. Lee says he was brave about his ten years of blindness and wasted no time feeling sorry for himself. They were a devoted couple and spent many days in the Ramble or at 59th St. Pond. He will be missed by our Wednesday group.



Spring classes begin Wednesday, April 12, 9 AM at 76 St. and Fifth Ave. Send \$35.00 for five sessions. Sunday classes begin April 16, 9 AM at the Boathouse. For five sessions send \$35.00. For the address and correct spelling of my name see the copyright below. I'll be doing 3 May walks at Battery Park City on Thursdays at 9:30.

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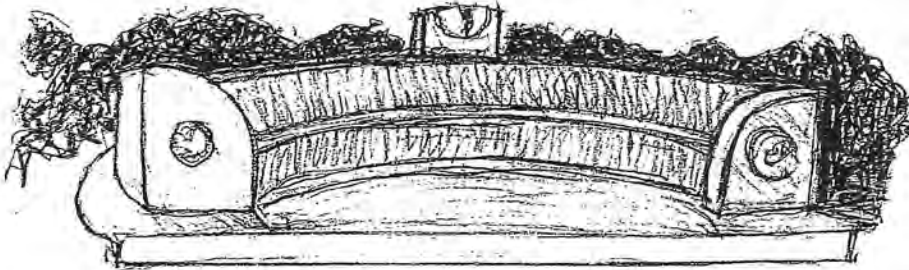
THE ELLIOTT NEWSLETTER

Nature Notes from Central Park

Vol. 12, No.2

March~April, 2006

Vernal Equinox at an Astronomical Calendar



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I asked John and Mary Brown, Art LeMoine and Jeff Nulle to join us at the bench of Waldo Hutchins (1822-91) which is just inside the park at the northwest corner of 72 St. and Fifth Ave. Hutchins served on the Board of Commissioners of Central Park for a dozen years, from 1857 to '69. The commissioners oversaw the design, construction and management of the new park. He became President of the Board of Commissioners from 1889 to 1890. Between Central Park duties, he served in the U.S. Congress from 1879 to 1885. His monument was erected in 1932, a gift of August Hutchins. It's an exedra or semicircular outdoor bench with a high, solid back. Made of white marble, it is almost 4 feet high and 27 feet long. At the center back of the bench is a stone box with lines on the curved bowl of its inner walls. In the center of the bowl is a bronze woman racing with a zig-zag ribbon to pass the time, which is marked in Roman Numerals around the border.

If you sit on the bench you become aware of 3 semicircular lines in the paving at your feet. They match the bench's shadow lines at 10 AM, noon and 2 PM on the vernal and autumnal equinoxes. Tom says that in the spring when the trees are bare, the sun falls directly on the bench which casts a shadow on the pavement. But the shadow lines are obscured in the fall when leafy trees obstruct the sun's rays.

As we stood watching a semicircle of shadow move across the pavement, a large group of teenagers marched up and sat down on the bench. Some of them looked exhausted. Their teacher or guide told us they were all from Ohio. Tom told them about the bench and why this day was special. We asked if they wanted to stand back and watch with us. No. They were off to see more of the park and the city. John Hiser, the zone gardener for the area, arrived in his cart. He said he had wanted to see this bench at the equinox, but this was the first time he was there at the right time. He must have made a call because two young workmen arrived and began cleaning graffiti off the back of the bench. We learned that it is easy to remove markings from a smooth surface like this one. Sandstone is more difficult because it absorbs the paint. All the park workers disappeared and we continued to watch as the shadow crept to and matched the curved outline for 2PM. Spring began on a chilly day. We marveled but we didn't linger.

The sun cast a shadow on the bench to match the curved shadow line with the words, "Two PM On The Vernal Equinox." photo by Art Le Moine



Celebrity Visitors

On Sunday evening, March 19, a person in a cab on the 65th St. Transverse saw a wolf-like creature and sent an e-mail to the park. "It was a heads up," said Neil Calvanese. More reports reached the Borough Office on Monday, and the staff were told. On Tuesday the coyote was seen going after ducks at the 59th St. Pond from inside Hallett Sanctuary. Parks Commissioner Adrian Benepe and Doug Blonsky, president of the Central Park Conservancy, called in park workers plus Central Park Police and PEP. When they had gathered, the group entered Hallett. One or two people stood on a high knoll while others moved through the underbrush down below. Something ran past them which they thought was a German shepherd, but realized was the coyote. The police couldn't get a clear shot at it with rifles or pistols to tranquilize it. As they began to close in on their prey, the coyote ran up a hill and leapt. It landed on and scrambled up the side of an 8 ft fence, jumped from the top and disappeared. It was 4:30 PM and the park people decided to stop for the day. The police continued hunting. They fanned out over the park, searching with the help of an overhead helicopter. They shot at the coyote but it avoided capture and they stopped at 9:30 P.M. Park personnel made sure the public kept their dogs on leashes.

The hunters regrouped on Wednesday. They found the coyote in the ball fields at Heckscher Playground. A posse of 25-30 people chased it into Hallett Sanctuary and tried to close in on it. This time the coyote escaped by water. Dog paddling out on 59th St. Pond, it turned left and went under Gapstow Bridge. It surfaced at Wollman Rink, where ice skaters were making a movie. Wolf and posse all headed north. By now the hunters were joined by plenty of people from the news media. Except for a few people in cop cars, most of the crowd were on foot. They rushed to the Ramble where they found a tired coyote resting in the rocks south of the Tupelo tree.

Wolf and hunters began to run. The humans spread out along the 79th St. Transverse to prevent their quarry from escaping to freedom in the North end of the park. The coyote ran behind a chain link fence and along its perimeter to the Fire House near Maintenance Meadow. There it was cornered and shot with an anesthetizing dart from a rifle and collapsed. Its captors said it was a light tan, year-old male. They named it Hal for Hallett Sanctuary. They put the unconscious coyote into a cage in a Ranger truck with plans to take it in care. Much of this account was given to me by Neil Calvanese. When I asked him to sum it all up he said, "It was one wild chase." He told me that there were more press and TV people for this coyote than any park event except the president. "It was fun!" one of the chasers told me. Well, not for the coyote. The press had a field day. I have never seen news stories with the names of 2 reporters at the top and a string more at the bottom. Everyone wanted to get into the act.

Adrian Benepe was quoted extensively in the press. I was with my Sunday bird class at the winter bird feeders when he called my name. He wanted to know what bird was singing. A tufted titmouse. I wanted to know about the coyote. He told me to call the office on Monday. I did and learned the commissioner was in a meeting to be followed by a ground-breaking ceremony. I asked that he call me on Tuesday. Soon my phone rang and the Commissioner was giving me an interview from his car as he circled the park. I asked where the coyote had been hit. It was darted in the haunch by a cop with a rifle. Had he seen that? Yes. Had it been struck in the heart or lungs? No. The Coyote, which is a small wolf, was taken to the 79th St. Yard where it was examined by a veterinarian from Animal Care and Control. As it was beginning to come around, it was taken away to Long Island and kept there. Later it was turned over to the State Department of Environmental Conservation and died. What did he know about the death? Only what he read in the newspapers.

This was not the first coyote to enter Central Park. They chased and successfully captured a coyote 7 years ago. It had also been in Hallett Sanctuary, perhaps because the place is fenced and fewer humans leave their scent there. That coyote also swam to escape. It was shot and darted as it crossed 59th St. Pond. The coyote pulled itself out of the water and collapsed. It was taken to a zoo in Flushing Meadows and has been there ever since. Did he think the capture of Hal was handled well? Yes. They will get better with practice. The coyote population is growing. They are now a problem in Chicago (none in my time there) and a big problem in Los Angeles. As more of them find their way to Central Park, coyote catchers will start by looking in Hallett.

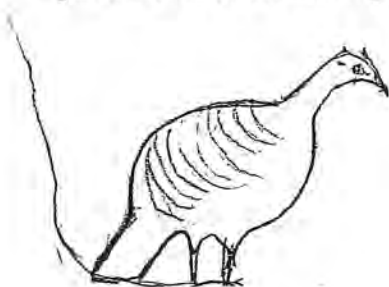
On April 26, I was leaving Central Park by way of the hawk watch. I learned that Lola had been in their nest sitting on eggs and that Pale Male brought her food. But the eggs haven't hatched. Watchers think there will be no young this year.

I found Lincoln Karim on the hawk-watching benches and we began talking about the coyote. He'd called Ward Stone, a pathologist with the State Department of Conservation about a red screech owl he found dead in the park and sent to Stone. Stone said he got the owl but had been too busy to work on it yet. In fact, he was doing a necropsy on the coyote as they talked. He had already tested and found rat poison which caused internal hemorrhaging in the body. He said that Hal had been given drugs either for ear mites or tics, which was unnecessary because the coyote would have picked up these pests again as soon as it was released. Stone also found heart worm in the body, caused by mosquito-borne parasites. Both rat poison and heartworm were serious but didn't kill the coyote.

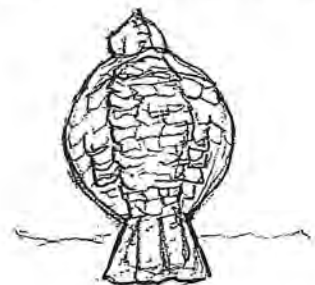
On the day of his release, Hal was hauled from his box and held down. He was gripped behind the ears with a catchpole, a long metal pole with a plastic-coated wire loop at one end. In lieu of a muzzle, they wrapped Hal's face and jaws with a bandage so that he couldn't snap or bite them. Then they punctured him to attach tags, including a radio tag. When they unhandled him they found that Hal was dead. The cause of death, said Ward Stone, was suffocation. He also told Lincoln he would have to smooth this report over for publication. In the report he said the coyote's body was infested with 35 heartworms which seriously compromised his ability to breathe.

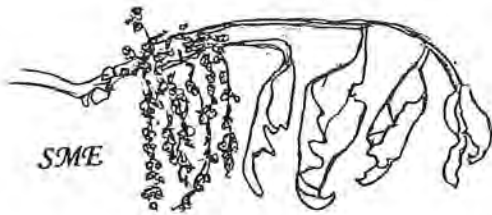
There was plenty of finger pointing about this death. Coyote advocates said they are docile and don't need such aggressive handling. Stone said to Lincoln that they had spent 9 days from capture to release when all they needed to do was capture in a day, put the coyote in a box and release it upstate. Lincoln said to me that the problem was all the people who wanted to get their names in the news and helped stress the coyote to death.

I was told about another surprise visitor to Central Park on March 27 and joined Chuck McAlexander near the 77th St. Exit on the West Drive. Down the bank beside a stream I saw a female wild turkey. In the dim light she looked quite a lot like a dark gray dust mop. Later that day she climbed the bank and I sketched her in better light near West Drive. In the days that followed she was seen at the north end of the park, roosting up in a tree, near the obelisk and even on the lawn of the Natural History Museum. She has not been seen recently but is said to be living and being fed in a courtyard on 24th St. between 9th and 10th Ave. I've seen turkeys in other parts of the country, but never in Central Park. I checked Geoffrey Carleton's bird records of the 1920s to the 1960s and found no sightings. Their population is making a comeback and they have been seen in parks north of us. We'll probably see more in Central Park.



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In Praise of Trees

On Saturday, March 22, it was drizzly with showers. Overnight the weather grew worse. Torrents of rain and fierce winds battered the park. Some time in the night a blast of wind hit the swamp white oak beside the Maintenance Meadow and toppled it. Birders told each other how sorry they were to see it down. This tree was on the west side of Maintenance Meadow. You could stand in the meadow with the sun at your back and see shy birds or ones in bright colors work through the tree. I remember a black-billed cuckoo. Others spoke of yellow-billed cuckoos, great-crested flycatchers, orioles, scarlet tanagers and rose-breasted grosbeaks flouncing in the oak's leafy arms.

The trunk was cracked and I called Neil Calvanese to ask if the oak was hit by lightning. No. He says the tree was not in very healthy condition. He found the new-shoot growth was short. The slim green shoots were about 4 inches and should have been 8 to 12 inches long. But the branches held masses of catkins. A hand full of these male flowers is feather light. But not a tree full. Swamp white oaks are said to grow 50 to 70 feet high with a spread of branches more than double that size. "The weight of catkins was incredible," said Neil. A high wind on this top-heavy tree pushed it right over.

Two years ago, Chuck McAlexander and I measured this oak. At breast height, 4 ½ to 5 feet above the ground, we circled the trunk with a tape measure. The circumference was 112 inches or 9 ft. 4 in. The diameter measured 36.5 inches, about 3 feet across. Then I held the end of a tape measure to the tree and Chuck payed it out 90 feet into the meadow. Using a height gage at that distance he aimed for the top of the crown. The tree measured 110 feet, 40 to 60 feet taller than the tree heights in the guides. I asked Neil if anyone had counted tree rings so we could learn the age of this venerable oak. No, but they have slices of the trunk and the rings will be counted. The wood is of good quality and will probably be used to repair rustic benches and shelters. Neil said that when they were cutting up the wood, many birds were swarming over the downed branches, eating. Perhaps hot weather caused an aphid hatch which brought in the birds for a last banquet.

To dispel glum thoughts of the oak I visited the young trees at Evodia New Forest. All the saplings are doing well. They look frisky. Some of them hang branches of leaves over the fence and wave. I smile at them and give them a pat on their leaves as I go by. These were not landscaped and planted by gardeners. Birds that ate the fruit from the mother tree in Evodia Field donated seeds to this segment of the Ramble. The saplings are too young to bear fruit as yet but we live in hope.

I led a tree-lover to visit the mother tree because he had never seen an evodia. The trunk was in full, afternoon sunlight. He said the bark reminded him of an elephant's hide: thick, dark gray with blotches and bumps. The tree looked vigorous and I suddenly noticed why. All the dead branches have been removed and it has emerged looking graceful and kempt. Regina Alvarez said it was pruned in the winter. Thank you, Regina, and the tree crew! I think the cut has given this tree a new lease on life. I have seen hundreds of birds feed in this tree on their way south in the fall, but I never saw one nesting there in summer.



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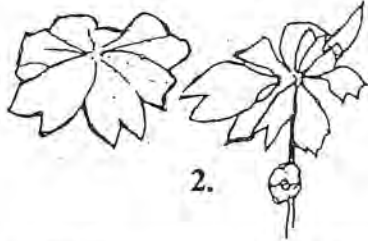


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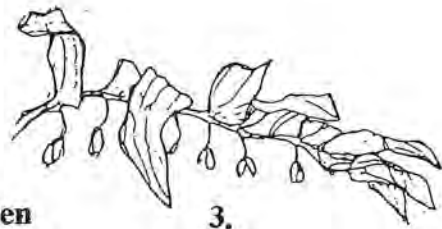
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Secret Garden



3.

The wild flowers around Azalea Pond are a spring tonic. Many of the ones I wrote about in '04 planted that year have come up in larger numbers. The **1. marsh marigold** or **cowslip** *Caltha palustris* lines the shore of the Upper Gill. The giddy yellow flowers have wilted in places but some remain on the plants. The green umbrellas of **2. mayapple** or **mandrake** *Podophyllum peltatum* are dotted about under the trees. Under the leaves one white flower clings to the stalk. The many **3. Solomon's seal** *Polygonatum pubescens*, with greenish white bells dangling from stalks under long leaves, are especially thick on the East side of the garden. The **4. columbine** *Aquilegia canadensis* are putting out orange flowers. Each flower has petals with spurs that rise overhead to form a crown. The leaves are arranged in 3's. Dotted about in deep shade are **5. Virginia bluebells** or **Virginia Cowslip** *Mertensia virginica*. They have nodding, trumpet-shaped flowers that are pink when young and turn brilliant blue with age. The **6. trillium** *Trillium* are doing very well all over the garden. Several kinds are planted including **6a. large-flowered T. grandiflorum** which is white, turning pink with age and **6b. toadshade T. sessile** with maroon flowers and splotched leaves. Tri means 3 and that's what these plants have. Three petals make up the flower and the leaves are a single whorl of 3.



6 a.



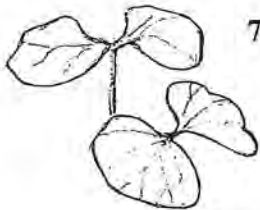
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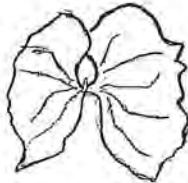
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5.

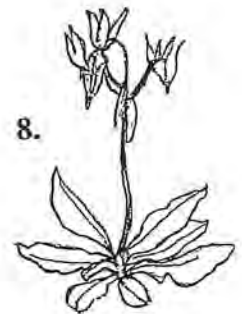


7.



If you stand on the sidewalk that spans the water at the top of the Gill, you will see 2 new plants. Look toward Azalea Pond and you will see **7. twinleaf** *Jeffersonia diphylla*. The shiny leaves look like butterfly wings. The man who found this plant named it *Jeffersonia* for his botanist friend, Thomas Jefferson.

Turn around and look along the fence to the rocks and you will see white, nodding flowers with swept-back petals. They are called **8. shooting star** *Dodecatheon meadia*. According to legend, whenever a star falls to earth these flowers appear. The shape looks daunting for even a tiny bee. Not to worry. These plants can produce seeds without being pollinated by insects, so there will be more next year.



8.

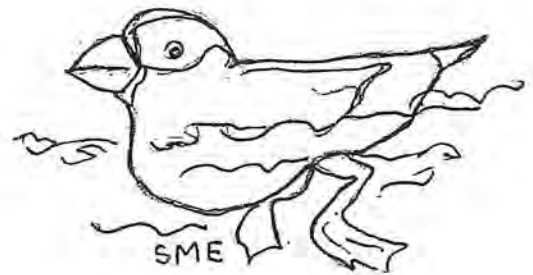
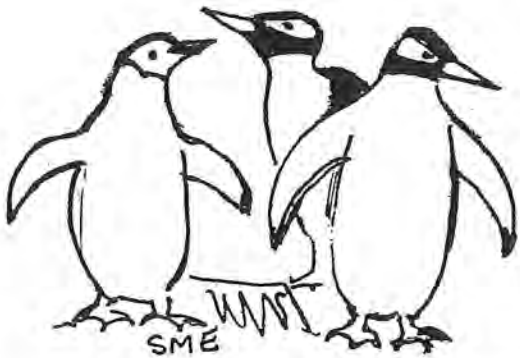
The **9. skunk cabbage** *Symplocarpus foetidus* is looking tired and wilted, with leaves flat on the ground. John Brown kindly took pictures for this sketch when the leaves were flourishing. I hoped to see the knob of tiny flowers inside a thick hood but that appears in February or March before the large cabbage leaves come out.

SME



9.

I never saw many wild flowers as a child in suburbia. Now I can hop a subway, lope into the park and find a secret garden in the heart of New York City. I can stroll, sketch and study the metal name plates beside the flowers. The name tags give both the common name and the scientific one. It's a joy to share them with you. But it's hell to print out scientific names in Latin and Greek. I do it for flower-loving readers in other parts of the US, Iceland, England and Switzerland. Wild flowers have many common names in many languages. But thanks to Linnaeus, their scientific names are the same world wide. If the first name in *italics* is the same as your local flower but the second name is different, they are cousins and part of the same family. If any of my drawings look like your local ones, I'm glad!



Avian Clerihews

Edmond Clerihew Bentley (1875-1956) was an English newspaperman. In 1912 as E.C. Bentley, he published "Trent's Last Case," a detective novel that became a best-seller and then a classic. As a student at Oxford and for much of his life, he wrote a sort of poetry called clerihews after his middle name and his mother's maiden name. Clerihews are short, benignly satirical, biographical verse. They consist of two rhymed couplets, using free meters and ridiculous rhymes in which the name of the person is part of the rhyme. Here's an example:

**Edgar Allen Poe
Was passionately fond of roe.
He always liked to chew some
When writing anything gruesome.**

After some thought, it occurred to me that the world needs similar verse for birds, or avian clerihews. In a conversation with Dr. R. J. Mynott, a Cambridge scholar. Linnaean Society member and wit, I suggested he try his hand at an avian clerihew. We had talked about wrens: his English wren, our winter wren *Troglodytes troglodytes*. Why was this bird mostly monogamous in the US but polygynous in the UK? Did British weather make life easier for male wrens to build multiple nests, attract multiple mates and father multiple families? Putting one and one together Dr. Mynott sent me this cheerful display of priapic pride and jingoism:

**The Bold British Wren
Is a man among men.
He can service a dozen
Unlike his Yankee cousin.**

I admire this clerihew and hope to collect many more. Try your hand at a few and send me a Clerihew for the newsletter. Include your name and address. Your verse should be gently satirical, have two rhymed couplets (AA, BB) with the name of the bird as part of the rhyme. The meter can be rump-bump and the rhymes fairly atrocious. I look forward to hearing from you!

You can find the correct spelling of my name and my address in the copyright below.



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THE ELLIOTT NEWSLETTER

Nature Notes from Central Park

Vol. 12, No.3

May~June, 2006

Nest Watching

Hundreds of birds arrived in our park this spring. Some of them stayed to build nests and raise young. A few, mostly starlings, captured the nests of other birds. But not all the woodpeckers lost their nests. Some starlings made do with crevices to raise their nasty young. Our most famous nesters on 5th Ave. mated, used the nest, tended eggs, but did not bring forth young. When they finally gave up nest-sitting, the eggs were collected. They are being examined and tested to see what can be wrong. The adult birds have been seen mating and sitting side by side in late spring. With no young to feed, many park birds in the area won't become dinner for red-tailed hawks.

House sparrows use city lampposts for nests. But they can revert to their African weaver finch ways and build round basket nests, about the size of a volley ball with the entrance on the side. This year I have seen many of these male-made nests near meadows around the middle of the park. These nests seem to be used despite a very rainy spring. One of them is in an elm east of the East Drive and north of the Boathouse. It is right beside a smaller nest, maybe robin, in the same tree. In 1997 a robin and house sparrow built their nests right beside each other. They bickered as they arrived and departed and stood about jeering. But both raised young successfully. Makes you wonder who crowded whom in the first place.

Chuck McAlexander told me of a west side sparrow nest on a sign in a triangle of grass near the 72 St. Exit. I found the signpost and saw a female house sparrow leave the area. Straw is stuffed between the sign and the pole support. In this mess I saw several holes. Chuck saw sparrows going in and out. He found the remains of a house wren box uptown, near the wild flower meadow. He replaced it with a new model. It has a roll of screen 3-4" long sticking out the entrance. Wrens fly through the screen tube easily. But sparrows or raccoons can't reach in and snatch eggs or young birds. He built 2 boxes. Both are being used.

Further south I have heard singing wrens at Tanner Spring and seen them at Shakespeare Garden. The garden family was nesting in a lamppost north of the hollyhocks. The top of the lamppost had tipped over leaving a just-right opening to the globe nest. The male sang vigorously from surrounding trees and even on top of his home. The female quietly slipped in with food. If you missed these nests there will be others. Many birds nest twice: robins, cardinals, blue jays, wrens, wood thrushes and catbirds. Happy watching!



SME

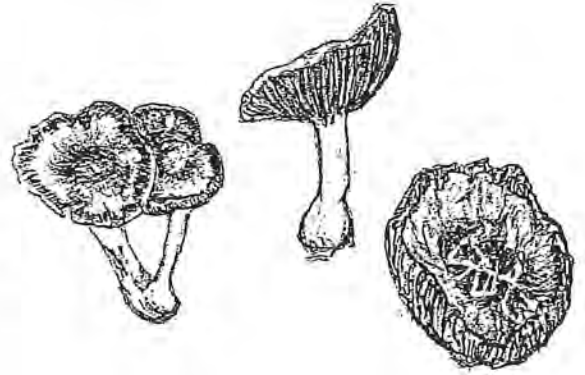
Late Spring Mushrooms

In late June after heavy rain, Gary Lincoff collected mushrooms in Central Park. He started at 90th St. and worked north, looking in grass, wood chips and under trees. He wrapped his finds in wax paper and labeled each. When we met, we looked at trees while Chuck scanned the ground and found more mushrooms. One was a fresher duplicate. The other was a Japanese Umbrella. I liked them all but this parasol is my favorite. Later, I led Gary to a dead tree beside a stream near the entrance at 77th St. and Central Park West. Chuck found mushrooms on this tree and Gary said they are Dryad's Saddle. I sketched them from a bridge with the help of binoculars. Gary kindly gave me his precious collection of mushrooms. I took them home and stored them overnight in the fridge. Next dawn, I began sketching and finished them all for this newsletter by 5PM. To learn more, get Gary's "National Audubon Society Field Guide to North American Mushrooms." The 8 mushrooms on my page are in the same order as they appear in his book.

1. Dryad's Saddle *Polyporus squamosus*
The yellow-brown cap is large, fleshy, tough, spotted and grows on a short stalk.

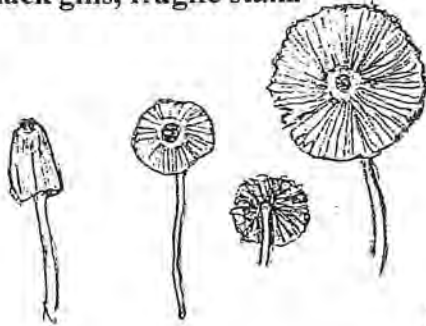


2. Spring Agaricus *Agaricus bitorquis*
The cap is large, flat and brown. The stalk has a double-edged ring. They can grow in hard ground.



3. Wood-chip Agrocybe *Agrocybe dura*
Tan cap turns brown with age. Cracks appear in the center, edges curl to show a margin of brown gills.

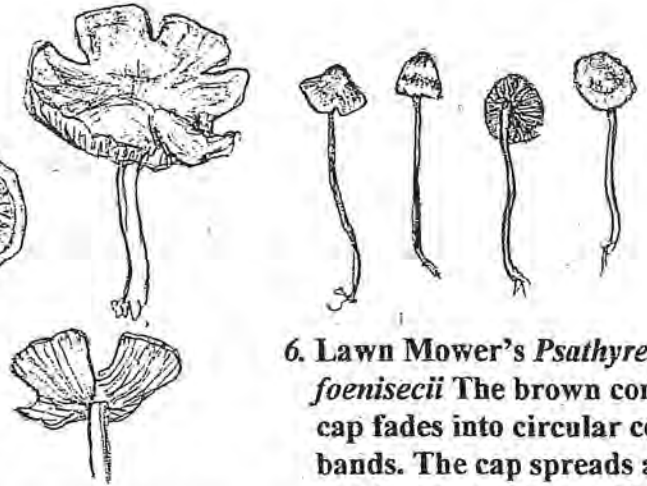
4. Japanese Umbrella, Ink-Cap *Coprinus plicatilis*
Deep furrows on gray-brown cap radiate from a round dip in the center. Has black gills, fragile stalk.



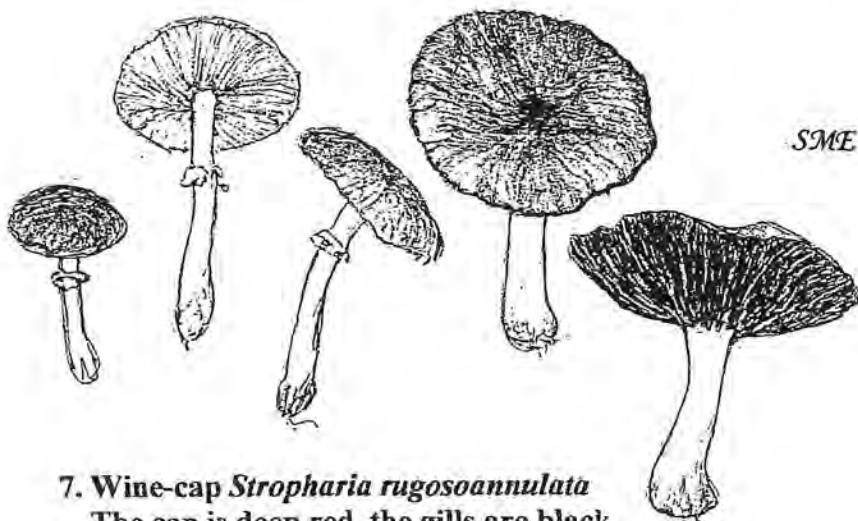
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5. Common Psathyrella *Psathyrella candolleana*
The cap is gray with dark gills. With age, the center sinks, cracks, shows rich tan-brown gills. Has hollow stem, grows in wood chips.

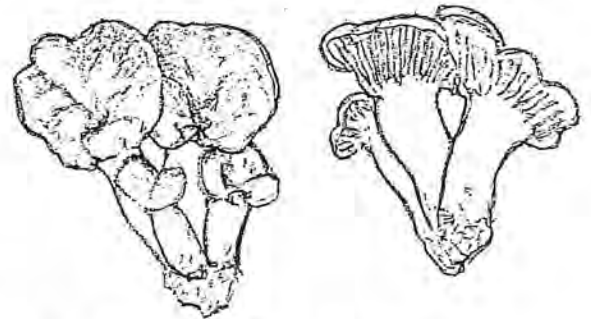


6. Lawn Mower's *Psathyrella foenicicii*
The brown cone cap fades into circular color bands. The cap spreads and cracks, dark brown gills. Found in grass.



SME

7. Wine-cap *Stropharia rugosoannulata*
The cap is deep red, the gills are black. Young stems wear a pleated ring. Old stems are thick and the ring wears off.



8. Oyster *Pleurotus ostreatus*
The white, gray or brown cap is fleshy. The descending stems are attached to wood.

Late Spring Mushrooms

BioBlitz II

On June 23 and 4, Central Park was host to a second BioBlitz. We gathered at the Dana Center at 110 St. Near Fifth Ave. Lots of important people welcomed us to this event which would last 24 hours and survey zillions of living things in our park. Participants were invited to join one of the many survey groups on offer: Diving at the Meer for Aquatic Organisms, Trees, Invasive Plants, Mammals, Insects, Birds, Microbes, Fungi, Wild Flowers, Amphibians, Bats and Nocturnal Animals, Wetland Organisms, and Tardigrades.

Jeff Nulle and I decided to join the tree group that would circle the Meer. We began at the front door with a weeping willow then moved east. Between the sidewalk and the 110 St. Wall we saw a ginkgo, American elm, Chinese philosopher tree, red maple and London plane. At the corner of 110 th and 5th, we saw a Kentucky coffee tree with a wavy trunk. We turned right or south and saw American holly, English hawthorn, horsechestnut and a huge European beech.

Chuck and I measured the big beech a week later. It is 18' 1" around the trunk, and the diameter at breast height or DBH is 69". This tree is not only fat, it's 114' tall and at 10 feet off the ground it splits into 4 huge branches. Nearby are 2 dramatic bald cypress trees. Cypress East (nearer 5th Ave.) is 32" DBH and 98' tall. Cypress West (nearer the water) is not so big. The DBH is 29" and it is 81' high.



Across the sidewalk were small trees we didn't know. One behind benches next to a playground looked like blueberry to some of the group, but with red berries.. Jeff and I each ate 1 and found them tasty. Our leader, Bob Muller, said the tree is Juneberry, right for month and fruit. It's also known as Shadbush because it flowers in April when the shad swim upriver to spawn. I've sketched the flowers but never saw the fruit before.

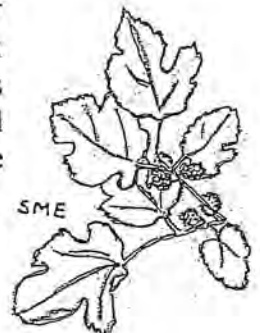
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At the 106 St. Entrance were red oaks, one on each side to welcome you. They were joined by Turkey oaks, including one at the north entrance to Conservatory Garden. Across the sidewalk beside the Meer we found bayberry, barberry and oak leaf hydrangea. West of the Garden and behind a water hydrant is a glorious scarlet oak which is spectacular in fall. Up the hill we saw Norway maple and paper mulberry. We turned right and continued along the waterside. We admired a frisky little black willow planted to replace the huge old one that came down. Beyond it was a tree Bob called a butternut. That turns out to be a white walnut. I have never seen it before. I took a snapshot of Bob and the tree. But the branches are too high to bring home samples to sketch.

As we walked along the curving path, we were startled to see a black-crowned night-heron. It was standing on the ground, paying no attention to the people passing by. His attention was focused on a woman fishing quite near him. From time to time she pulled up her line and both of them examined the end of it. The bird seemed hopeful and confident. Just beyond them we looked at a Meer-side garden that faces Dana Center across the water. I looked at butterfly weed in full flower and Joe-pye-weed just coming up. I looked at a magnolia tree in the garden and looked again. It is a sweet bay tree which I have been trying to find. It was full of white flowers just coming out.

We left the water, climbed steps, admired the view and descended toward Lasker swimming pool. On the steps down we saw a white mulberry tree with white and pink tinged fruit on the ground. The berries taste bland, but they are the ones silk worms prefer. The climate was wrong and the imported worms didn't thrive. But the imported tree has spread with help from birds who eat the bland berries. The leaves vary. Some are round or appear with 1 or 2 lobes.

At the bottom of the steps we passed the swimming pool and an ironwood tree



SME



SME



full of seed tassels. We turned right and walked along the west shore of the Meer to an American Elm. A few steps beyond it is a Scotch or Wych elm. The lopsided leaf has a short stem at one end and wispy teeth at the other. We passed through a grove of black locust and headed back toward Dana Center. Jeff pointed to a kingbird on a fence who must be nesting near the water. The day was hot and humid and when the walk was over, I was glad to slip into a nice cool bus and go home.

SME

Saturday morning I went to BioBlitz Headquarters at the Recreation Center in the middle of the park. People were feeding data into computers before the 12 noon deadline. I saw the bee collection being displayed for a camera crew. I learned they collected more species than 2 years ago.

I tried to find out about the Friday night bat hunt. Eventually, I talked to a young woman who had been there. She said they recorded bats at the shore of the Meer with a machine that lowers the pitch of bat cries to frequencies humans can hear and puts a picture of their call on a screen. There were 4 species of bat recorded that night: brown bat, little brown bat, red bat and long-eared bat. I have seen the first 3 and long to see the long-eared. I was told what the bat sounds look like on screen. She saw 1. a high, continuous line of sound, 2. A lower, continuous line of sound, 3. a pulsating, broken-dash pattern of sound and 4. a pattern of curved diagonals—like the first part of a parenthesis reclining or tipped backwards: ((((. I am sorry to say my informant didn't remember which bat made which pattern of sound. She urged me to go out and find the bat leader. When I looked, I found only an empty truck. It's grand that bat hunters use this machine to tabulate bats without touching them. Much better than using mist nets to capture bat females with young.

Shortly after noon we were given a show of a tracking device presented on a large screen. Groups of counters were tagged, traced and mapped as they moved about their designated areas. Color coded circles on a park map showed which groups covered what parts of the park.

But there were no tally lists for the public. As I was complaining for lack of results, Richard Wiese, Master of Ceremonies and former Explorers Club President sat down and asked what group I had been with. Trees on Friday afternoon. Did we see a Kentucky coffee tree? Yes, in the NE corner of the park. In colonial times, the tough pods of this tree were collected and the hard seeds extracted, ground and brewed, with disappointing results. The name lingers but the brew never became a beverage of choice.

Richard Wiese said that one year he picked a thousand bean pods off the ground in the Ramble. He roasted them in the oven for 3 hours at 350 degrees. He put them in a blender, brewed the grounds and served the brew to 50 journalists who said it wasn't bad. They thought it had a chocolate smell to it. And as Richard said, it was naturally decaffeinated. The tree and the event were featured on WCBS.

This was our second BioBlitz but there have been others. The first, said Dr. Edward O. Wilson was on July 4, 1998 at Waldon Pond, MA. Schools and the public participated. Since then they have been held around the U.S. and in 18 other countries. But this was the first microbial BioBlitz. It is sponsored by the newly formed E O Wilson Biodiversity Foundation. I've been told there are 6 thousand microbes in a handful of soil and 3 million in a ton. We know about just a few of them and most of what we know is the names we have given them. Some 10 to 30 million have yet to be discovered: naming, describing, learning behavior, how they interact, how they affect the earth and us. That's years of work. Some quicker results are possible from this 24 hour snap-shot of wildlife in Central Park. I'm told the results will be made available from the Explorers Club in July. I will visit them and report to you. Meanwhile,

KEEP THOSE AVIAN CLERIHEWS COMING. THEY'RE NIFTY!

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THE ELLIOTT NEWSLETTER

Nature Notes from Central Park

Vol. 12, No. 4

July~August, 2006

Counting the Plants

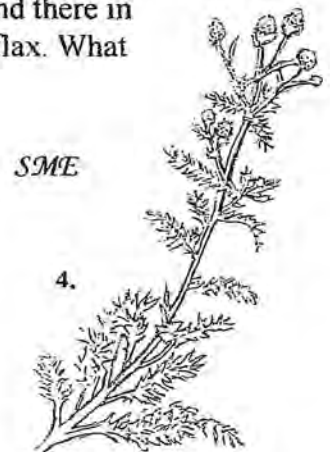
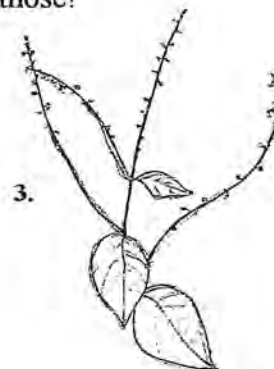
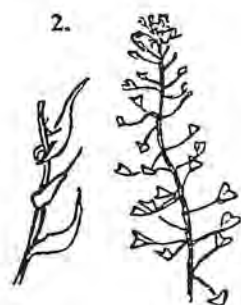
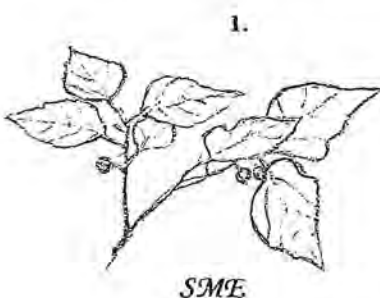
Bob DeCandido is doing a plant survey for the Central Park Conservancy. It's something he's been thinking about for about 5 years. He took his Ph. D. in Ecology and between 1998 and 2003 he did scientific studies of Pelham Bay Park in the Bronx and for all of New York City. Then he published the results as scientific papers.

Now he is doing something that has never been done before-- a complete list of ALL the plants growing wild in Central Park. Bob is working with Neil Calvanese and Regina Alvarez. Neil has provided a list of 150 deciduous trees in Central Park, which is a big help for the count. "But," says Bob, "no one has looked at what was planted in the 19th century, compared it with what is here today and tried to understand the changes that occurred over time."

The original park had marshes, woods and streams. A list of 300 plants was published in 1857. Some of the plants on the list indicate there were low wetlands areas in the park. These include swamp candles, winged monkey flower, Canada lily and 2 orchids: slender ladies' tresses and downy rattlesnake plantain. None of these plants are found in Central Park today. Over time, the land was drained and large areas were developed for public use. Today these include the ball fields, Sheep Meadow and the Great Lawn. A few wet strips remain in the park such as Harlem Meer, the Loch, Tanner Spring, the Gill and the 59th St. Pond. But most of the rest is dry, rocky land. And that, says Bob, is what the plants tell us. In today's park you can see 1. hackberry tree, 2. shepherd's purse, 3. Virginia knotweed or jumpseed and 4. pineapple weed. All of them can withstand dry weather and hard ground to grow in.

Woody plants (trees and shrubs) can survive over time. But herbaceous plants (wild flowers, grasses, sedges, rushes and ferns) have not done well. Most species of violets, asters and goldenrods have been wiped out in Central Park and New York City. But with help, some herbaceous plants are reappearing in the park. Regina Alvarez looks over Bob's old plant lists and selects species for new plantings. She and her crew have planted delights at Henshead, around Azalea Pond, Maintenance Meadow, Tanner Spring and sprinkled over Wild Flower Meadow. They have been a treat for plant lovers and birders, too. But in order to have a more interesting park we need to increase the diversity of herbaceous plants.

Besides Neil and Regina, Bob says many people have been helpful to the project, especially Eve Levine and Nick Wagerik. They have told him of plants in various places around the park and handed him samples. Bob says he now has a list of 320 species and it's growing. He began this project in spring and hopes to have it finished by Dec. 31. I asked him what has surprised him most about this count. He thought and said, "to find native plants growing here and there in the park." When I asked for examples he said Indian tobacco and blue toadflax. What fun it will be to search for plants with names like those!



The Mulberry in Shakespeare Garden

For years I looked in passing at a gnarly old tree in Shakespeare Garden. I was told it had begun as a cutting, a slip of a thing from an old tree at Stratford-on-Avon, where Shakespeare lived and where he was buried.

I visited this icon on fair days in summer and winter. On windy days I watched its three great arms fling threats to the sky and feared the bark would crack. The Friends of Central Park also worried. In the late 1970's they had the tree's heavy branches cross-wired to each other. Like cuffed drunks, the branches could weave and bounce but not fall asunder.



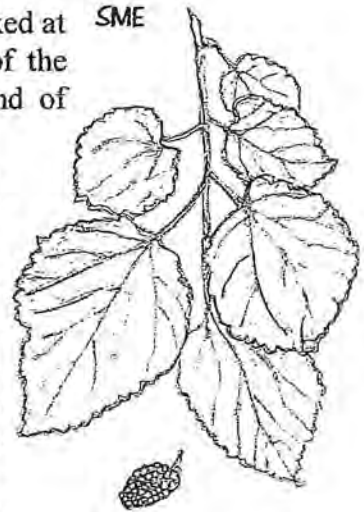
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In the 1980's the garden was overhauled. A dry cement sluiceway was removed and a snaking pathway of flowering plants went in. If you crossed the West Drive, passed the Swedish Cottage and climbed the steps, you'd enter the garden. Sitting down on the benches, you could admire the old timer standing in a froth of ferns. On June 11, 1987, I sketched the tree from inside the garden looking southwest. I did not draw the wires that connected all the tree's branches.

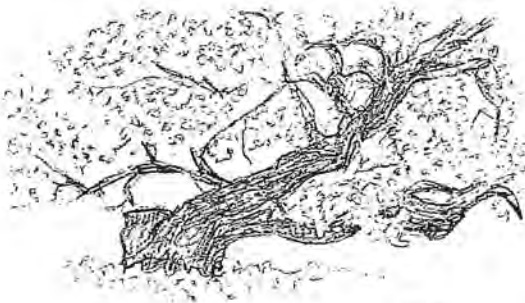
This June on the BioBlitz, I looked at the lobed leaves and off-white fruit of the white mulberry. I wondered what kind of mulberry was in Shakespeare Garden.

In his book "Nature Walks in Central Park" Dennis Burton called it a black mulberry. The Collins Field Guide "Trees of Britain & Northern Europe" shows leaves that are toothy, heart-shaped with pointed tips. Some of them have a dent in the margin, but most of the leaves have no lobes. Red and white mulberries make lots of lobes. Black mulberry gets its name for the color of its ripe fruit. The Collins guide also shows an unripe mulberry which is bright red.

On July 3, I went to the garden to study the tree. Most of its leaves were smooth, heart-shaped, toothy, with hardly a dent in the margins. I looked up into the leaves and bong! There was a cardinal red berry. Above it were several more. On the sidewalk I found a black one and picked it up. It was shriveled, and I took it home to plant.



SME



SME

I stepped out of the garden and sat on a bench across from the Swedish Cottage. Looking toward the Castle, I sketched the tree. In the 19 years since I first sketched it, the tree had lost one of its mighty branches. The remaining two looked well and full of leaves. But despite a tidy amputation, the trunk revealed a major loss. I hadn't planned to sketch the tree that day. But as things turned out, I am very glad I did because of what happened exactly one month later.

On August 7, Chuck McAlexander and I were looking at park trees when we met Regina Alvarez. She told us the mulberry tree in Shakespeare Garden was dead. It fell over Wednesday night and was found early Thursday morning, August 3, a month after I'd sketched it.

The tree was found on its side, its roots ripped out. The huge branches in their fall towards the Transverse below had crushed ferns, flowers and fencing. Regina said a tree-ring count had been

done and this tree was 85 years old. A good age for a mulberry.

Chuck and I went to Shakespeare Garden to pay our last respects. Yellow tapes enclosed the space where late the old tree stood. We stared at the bare ruined mound made smooth as a new grave. The sun beat down on dazed plants that formerly knew safe shelter. To one side, slices of trunk were standing on edge. When I asked if I might look at them, a young man opened the barrier to allow me in. I touched them gently and we spoke solemn words of loss.

I called Sara Cedar Miller, Historian for the Central Park Conservancy. Sara said a white mulberry was a gift from King James I to Shakespeare for his new home in Stratford. That would have been in the early 1600's. The royal gift probably included silkworms. In 1623, King James sent white mulberries and silkworms to the Virginia Colony in Jamestown. The silk industry did not thrive. The trees probably did well but cold weather would have killed off silkworms in both Jamestown and Stratford.

I called Scott Sendrow, the Historian of Art and Antiquities for the Parks Dept. I told him the tree was 85 and was probably planted when it was about 10, around 1930. Scott looked into his computer and kindly sent me several accounts from the New York Times of mulberry gifts to our park. The first, in April 1912, was "a grafting from the mulberry tree that shades the grave of Shakespeare in Stratford-on-Avon." At a luncheon in 1926, Mr. Archibald Flower presented "the gift of a cutting from the old mulberry tree planted by Shakespeare in Stratford." Dr. Apelson Morgan expressed thanks for the gift and said he would offer the young tree to Mayor Walker for planting in Central Park. Mayor Jimmy Walker was known for his interest in graft, but not for trees. I've never seen a list or map that included either of these trees.

On April 22, 1931, a mulberry tree was dedicated at noon by Mrs. S. William Blood in memory of William Shakespeare. It was planted in the Ramble near the new Shakespeare Garden adjacent to the 79th St. Transverse. Mrs. Blood "also donated" a sun-dial to the National Shakespeare Garden in Washington DC. I am glad Mrs. Blood didn't claim her tree was a cutting from the one Shakespeare planted over 300 years before. I think she got it from a local nursery. Michael A. Dirr in "Manual of Woody Landscape Plants" says black mulberry was grown in New York for its fruit and hardiness. The sale of a young mulberry tree would have been appreciated in the Great Depression. Thank you, Mrs. Blood, for the tree that gave pleasure to many park visitors, no matter what its ancestry.

I said I would tell more about the results of the BioBlitz. Some of the records were sent to me from the Explorer's Club including a **spectacular** report on the mushrooms in Central Park by Gary Lincoff. His lists and remarks should be published. I will tell more when more reports of the count come in.

While struggling along with this newsletter I learned that in mid-August we had a glut of warblers. A Lawrence's and a golden-winged warbler were seen in the north end of the park. By now I'm sure lots of other birds are moving through the park. Soon I can finish this newsletter and go see them.

Those of you who wish to join my **FALL BIRD WALKS**, here's the information:

5 Wednesday morning walks beginning **Sept. 13**. We meet **9 AM** at **76th and Fifth Ave.**
5 Sunday morning walks beginning **Sept. 17** at **9AM**. We meet at **Loeb Boathouse**. The cost is **\$35** for either series. Send your **check** to **Sarah Elliott, 333 East 34 St. #PHD, NYC 10016**. If you wish to drop in for a **single walk**, the cost is **\$10 -- exact change**.

My thanks to the people who sent in **AVIAN CLERIHIEWS**. I hope the samples on page 4 will encourage you to **SEND IN SOME OF YOUR OWN**. Just remember the name of the **bird** should be in the **first line**. There are **4 lines** of any length and the rhyme scheme is **AA, BB**. It's fun! Send your clerihews to me at the address above. Happy Rhyming!

4.
Avian Clerihews

In springtime remember the wood thrush
when in the Ramble you go to flush,
Because the female's a mover and a draper
making her nest out of toilet paper.

In summer we gather to watch the Black Skimmer
as with Klieg lights Turtle Pond's all a-shimmer.
Is it lured here as a nocturnal fish-eater
or by a fondness for open-air theater?

Eve Levine

The American Mallard
cannot sing a ballad.
With musical lack
he utters a quack.

The Chimney Swift
will give bugs a lift
so long as they ride
on the inside.

Chuck McAlexander

The Titmouse is a squirt
He just loves to flirt
As he begs for some food
But of course, he's not rude.

The Cardinal's not cool
He's frightened, a fool
But he struts when he can
Shows his crest on demand—he's a ham.

Anita Stillman

The Baltimore Oriole
is quite territorial.

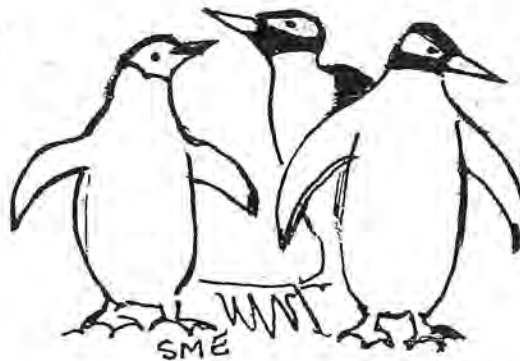
The Bullock's once shared his identity
but he knew that was just never meant to be.

Felicia Waynesboro

Upon reaching the pump the Willet
Usually said "Fill it."
But with prices so high
He can't afford to fly.

If only the Dowitcher
Could be trained as a pitcher.
What a wicked curve
That long bill would serve.
Bill Valentine

Polly-wally-andry



Flashing her feathers, the long-toed jacana
Cackles and mates in wet flora and fauna.
She donates her eggs without fuss or bother,
Then chases new mates while he's left a father.

I am a modest male, a tundra-dwelling phalarope.
She was big and gorgeous and took me for a dope.
She pursued me and wooed me, said I was her dude.
Then she left to trick others, now I sit here to brood.

It's swell to be female if you're a spotted sandpiper.
But a shortage of males could make you a griper.
You battle with dames to mate with a nerd
Or help raise the young, which of course is absurd.
Sarah Elliott

THE ELLIOTT NEWSLETTER

Nature Notes from Central Park

Vol. 12, No. 5

September~October, 2006

Glorious Trees

Neil Calvanese, Vice President of Central Park Conservancy, doesn't believe the mulberry tree I described in Shakespeare Garden is a black, or if you're British, common mulberry. I brought in my Collins "Trees of Britain and Northern Europe" and showed him a grand illustration of *Morus nigra* with dark green, unlobed leaves and 2 berries: a bright red, unripe one and a black, ripe one. Neil looked at it and said no. I thought he would tell me it was our only native, the red mulberry. But he surprised me and said white. Well, there's a lot of park history about white mulberries and Shakespeare. But I think Mrs. Blood put paid to that in 1931, for the reasons I wrote about in the last newsletter. Neil and I have agreed to disagree. And next summer we will examine the mulberry at 79 St. Yard, which is like the tree that came down in Shakespeare Garden, and one of the white mulberries from around the park. We can examine their leaves for shape, color, texture (above and below) and see which has the finer and the coarser teeth. I hope we can do this leaf-off together. That would be more fun.

After talk of mulberries, Neil gave me a treat. We climbed into his van to look at park trees. He told me that when he was about 30, he decided to get out of his father's business in Brooklyn. Every day he walked to work, he paused to admire the Camperdown Elm in Prospect Park. Watching that elm he decided he wanted to work with trees. He was hired by the Central Park Conservancy and spent the first 2 years climbing up into trees to prune them. He said he was a rather advanced age for that job. Now others clamber in the branches but Neil still enjoys looking at them.

As we passed Sheep Meadow I pointed to a tree I thought was an American chestnut. No, said Neil, a saw-tooth oak. He described ones that had been planted along the 79th St. Transverse near the Metropolitan Museum of Art. I suddenly realized he was right. I sketched them there! He told me they have been planting chestnut hybrids uptown, ones that can resist chestnut blight. I'm glad they thrive, but would you want hybrid chestnuts roasting in an open fire?

We zipped south to Heckscher Playground. Light tan diamonds of sand are surrounded by a field of green. They look as well-kept as the ones on the Great Lawn. South and West of the playing fields, strips of grass curve and flow around the rocks. Gone are the dreary gray ruts of an unloved place. We got out of the car to see the downtown evodia. It's a tall tree, about 60 feet high, and stands near a rock outcrop. This evodia is clearly a different species. The Ramble evodia is half the height and looks older.

Back in the van we drove north on the East Drive and stopped at the bridge over the 68 St. Transverse. We walked to the west side and looked at the traffic below. We searched the trees for Bur and Swamp White Oaks. I thought we found both, one at each end of the railing. Neil found a third oak and thinks they may all be the same kind. We picked up acorns, noting that some of them grew on very long stems. Bur acorns have short stems, round faces that peep out a quilted cap with a fringe trim around the nut. Swamp whites show more nut, have no trim and very long stems. I think we saw both. We can look at bark and twigs this winter.

We stopped at Cherry Hill to admire the cut-leaf beech which he told me is a subspecies of the European beech. Neil searched and gave me 2 husks and a seed under the tree. Earlier this summer clusters of stinkhorn mushroom, *Mutinus caninus*, or dog dick, were growing there.

Somewhere north of Turtle Pond, Neil gestured to a golden larch tree. All our larches lose

their needles in the fall. Golden larch is not a true larch because it doesn't produce small, woody cones that last. The golden larch puts out fleshy fruit that disintegrates and falls to the ground. I will try to learn about it over the winter. On the West Drive north of Sparrow Rock, I pointed out a scarlet oak. We stopped and Neil examined a leaf. He thinks it's a pin oak but the sinuses (wonderful word) have a handsome, smooth curve to them and they thrust their arms out horizontally. I told him to return when the leaves are aflame. No pin oak turns that color. It was a wonderful tour for which I am grateful and glad to remember and write about.

Birds and Mammals

It's been a fall full of surprising sights. Low in a crushed crab apple we saw a white bellied bird that turned into a young, black-billed cuckoo. Also in that place where the swamp white oak came down, we saw a yellow-breasted chat and drab, young indigo bunting with too little brown on the back and too little blue on wing or tail. A blue grosbeak was discovered uptown in the Wild Flower or Sloping Meadow. I was sorry to learn I had missed it by 5 minutes and waited around for another 45. Not so heartbreaking when I learned it is a young bird without much color.

Starr Saphir saw a goshawk in October. It is hanging out near Evodia Field where it may nab little birds on their way to the winter feeders. She called to tell me she and her group saw a Henslow's sparrow at the north end of the elm circle, which frames the Pinetum. She wondered when I saw it first. According to old records, I first saw the bird with Helene Tetreau in Ries Park, Oct. 12, 1976. My Sunday group saw it in Central Park November 4, 1992. It was in Tupelo Meadow and a class member took pictures. Starr said her bird was very confiding. How true! Ours stayed all afternoon paying little attention to the birders that ringed it round. At the end of the day as it neared Mugger's Woods beside the Humming Tombstone, a few watchers were still there, about a foot from it. The bird looked up at us so reproachfully we felt ashamed and backed off. It hopped into the woods and was never seen again.

The most frustrating sight this fall has been the Cape May warbler. I followed instructions and on Oct. 15, found a Siberian elm at 78 St., near Central Park West. In it were yellow-bellied sapsuckers drilling small holes and getting sap from the tree. Following the woodpeckers were 2 Cape May warblers, one with a bright yellow breast, one dull. They were after the sap and maybe small insects coming to the holes. My view of the warblers was poor. I saw them pecking as they moved horizontally along the top of a branch. I could see the movement, a few stripes on yellowish breasts, but that was all. Not enough to make a call. Next they were seen in willows east of Willow Rock. Each time I aimed for the bird I was blinded by morning sunlight. These birds also followed yellow-bellies. Finally, on Monday, October 30, I saw a Cape May. It was in a willow with woodpeckers but we stood at the top of the Point looking west. The sun was on the warbler who sat on a branch resting. We could see the yellow wash on the rump, the greenish back, and the light mark on the side of the neck. The belly was dim yellow and striped. Starr reported one or two more in a Siberian elm at the north end of the Pinetum. I am delighted to hear the words, "Siberian elm" on the lips of many birders. But not many observers have realized that seeing this behavior is new for our park. I have read about drilling sapsuckers followed by hummingbirds but this is the first time I've seen the tag-along action with warblers.

Mammals have been big news this fall. Star called to give me a full account of a bat she and her group saw on Oct. 13. It was on open ground near the south edge of Azalea Pond. The head and back were black but the hairs on the back and shoulders were tipped with white. As they watched, it walked across the clearing and climbed up a tree. I have never seen a silver-haired bat, nor a hoary bat, which is similar, but without the white tips, and a different pattern of tan at the throat. I want



to see both! On Sunday, Oct. 22, two young women came up and said they thought they heard a snake hissing. (No snakes survive in the park more than 24 hours.) They watched a cardinal move toward a brown blob in the leaves. They heard the hiss and saw a claw come out. The cardinal left. The women observed the hisser. It had reddish hair on its body and long dark fingers in a web of skin. How long ago? Just now. They took me to it and sure enough there was a red bat hanging upside down in the leaves. Red bats migrate and we get to see them spring and fall. An hour or so later, I led Bob Di Candido and his group to the Point. But the bat had moved, probably to get the sun out of its eyes and away from pesky birds.

My friend Jeremy Mynott ("The Bold British Wren") came to town and we had a grand reunion in the park. Since he retired he has been writing 1. a book about birds and 2. a book on the Peloponnesian War. Translating old Greek into modern English, he says, is teaching him a great deal about the many shades of meaning there are in English! Jeremy used to run the New York Marathon but now he walks. He says he recently walked the coast of Cornwall, about 160 miles.

We went to the top of the Point where Jeremy's quiet directions and a resting bird allowed me to see the Cape May at last. We walked north through the Locust Grove to the clearing at the end. I told him about our red squirrel which I haven't seen for months. "There it is!" he said. We watched her chase off 2 grey squirrels on the branch, lose her balance, tip over and twist, as she fell about 20 feet to the ground. I thought she was a goner but she landed on all 4's, paused, then climbed up the black walnut tree once more. Jeremy thinks we need another to start a family. He's pro-red squirrels. They were once common in England. Then grays were introduced. They are bigger and reproduce faster. They have pushed the reds to one small corner of the country. Our gray squirrels are for Brits like their starlings are for us.

We were near my mystery oak and Jeremy said "let's go see it." He leaped up and captured a sample to take home. He will give it to a tree man he knows in the UK. I told him the only I.D. for this tree so far calls it a hybrid of sessile and English oak. How WONDERFUL it would be to learn its identity after all these years! He did solve another mystery for me. The Adam Mynott of BBC TV and radio, is kin to him. A cousin.

Brits and Yanks on the BBC

One sunny day as I sat on the couch, my phone rang. When I said hello a voice told me he was Joe Hassell, calling from the BBC. Many junk calls make me guarded. "Yes?" "From London." he added. "Wow!" Joe is in charge of researches. He explained a crew was coming to the States to film bird locations with Bill Oddie, BBC presenter and star of a wildly popular TV show in England. Bill had been in a Broadway comedy in the 1960's and spent early mornings birding in Central Park. Was I here in the '60's and could I talk to him about it? "You bet!"

When Joe asked what birds would be around I explained the migration would be over but there would be sparrows and ducks. Then I said I would get some bird feeders up so his crew could get close-up shots of birds that would winter over. That pleased him. Also they wanted shots of birders watching. I invited about a dozen people. Bill remembered American birders being very talky. True. Brits come here, are very quiet and seem to know damn-all about our birds. So I tried to pick people who were less talky. We would show them! (We talked like mad.) I scoured my records of birds and old timers, now gone. I talked to Chuck McAlexander, who made 3 bird feeders from plastic jugs. Each feeder was topped with a clear, plastic, turquoise disk to repel squirrels. Chuck filled the feeders with seed and had them up for the camera crew on October 25.

We met Joe at the Boathouse with wildlife cameraman John Aitchison and our own still photographer, Rik Davis. I led them to Chuck's feeders, which look wonderful. We watched

nuthatches, titmice, and downy woodpeckers feed on the seed. James McCollough was excused from school and was filmed trying to get a titmouse to come to his hand. James started coming to my classes when he was 5. Now he knows lots of birds and their scientific names.

At Evodia Field I showed Joe the tree for which the field is named. The bright fuchsia flower clusters had withered to tan but some still contained a few tiny seeds. How can anything so small attract a stream of thrushes, woodpeckers, vireos, grosbeaks, and tanagers? We see birds stand on the clusters in the leaves and gobble seeds as fast as they can. Joe took tight shots of seeds this size
 → ● One day we may learn how fall trees entice ravenous birds to stop on their marathon south. The birds eat and digest the fruit, then disperse the seeds for a new generation of trees. Pretty nifty.

At Azalea Pond we came across 2 Rangers with a steel cage containing a woodcock. The bird had been picked up at Broadway and 51 St. and brought to the park for release. These birds are high on the list of casualties for migrants. They can easily ram their long bills into buildings. The eyes are set back on the head and help them focus on predators beside or behind them, but less well on lit-up buildings in front of them. Ranger Sheridan Roberts climbed the fence, lifted the cage and put it into the bushy area at the top of the Gill. She tipped the cage and the bird scrambled out. If it makes the cut British viewers should recognize it right away. The remarkable shape is the same. Our woodcocks have a clear belly, theirs wear belly stripes. When ours take off their wings make a "sharp twittering sound," says my guide. When European woodcocks rise, their wings make a "swishing noise." This released bird hid and made no noise at all.

I met Bill Oddie, the star of the show the next day. He looked trim in an attractive dark green outfit. We walked toward Strawberry Field but stopped on the Lake shore because producer, Nigel Pope, thought the background was good. We tried to talk about the change in the park since the '60's. It's greener, and much restored. We tried to talk about safety and muggers. They are still a threat, but perhaps less so now. Our conversation was interrupted repeatedly by overhead choppers and planes. When their noise blotted out what we said, Bill searched the skies and found a red-tail, Cooper's and a skein of geese. We also looked at the Canada geese nearby and a song sparrow in the grass. We were told to go over Bow Bridge and stop at the far side. Then we returned and walked back toward camera man Scott Tibbles and the crew. We tried once more to be heard despite the noise from above.

Over lunch at the Boat House I told Bill I would love to see 2 European birds: a hoopoe and a corn crake. I told the story of my friend Reggie Denham, who found a corn crake nest as he was walking through a European field in World War I. Chris Watson, the sound man, pulled out a microphone they used on us. It is black, flat, fuzzy and perhaps an inch or so square. Chris and Bill agreed it was the size and color of a corn crake chick with a light bill at the front. These crakes live in Ireland. Bill says they're making a comeback in England. Good!

After lunch we went over to the Model Boat Pond for shots of Bill in front of the red-tail hawk nest. I asked for an autograph but confessed I'd left my copy of his book, "Bill Oddie's Little Black Bird Book" at home. He wrote me a very nice inscription which I showed to a few friends. One of them advises me to make a xerox copy and put that in the book. And the original? Frame it! Everyone liked Bill's flying birds which I xeroxed so YOU can enjoy them, too.
 ↗ Left to right, my snapshot shows Oddie, Watson, Pope and Tibbles.



Keep sending me your Avian Clerihews. More will be published!

THE ELLIOTT NEWSLETTER

Nature Notes from Central Park

Vol. 12, No. 6

November~December, 2006

The Christmas Count

We had good weather for the 107th year Christmas Count in Central Park. Cheerful counters gathered at the South Pumping Station of the Reservoir where section leaders assembled their troops and squads of birders spread out to all the 7 sections of the park. As people counted the birds in their sections, they kept track of the time in order to complete the counts by noon. Many of the counters were having refreshments at the Arsenal by 12:30.

Adrian Benepe, Commissioner of Parks, welcomed us as we ate our thick soup and crusty bread. He said what he knows about birds he learned from me and my partner, Lambert Pohner. In those days he was working as an Urban Park Ranger and we did walks for the public together. It was nice he mentioned me and even nicer that he mentioned Lambert whom he described as an elf of a man. He was, and magical. Most of the people in the room didn't have the pleasure of knowing Lambert so I was grateful they got to learn a little about him. And I was pleased that Adrian's address was filmed by two camera men who covered this count for the Audubon Society.

Then it was time to get down to the count numbers. Yigal Gelb from New York City Audubon Society was the year's Count Compiler. He stepped to the podium and explained the procedure. We would go down the list of bird species, one at a time, and when he named the bird, receive reports for that bird, from the north end to the south. When Yigal called "Northeast, Northwest, Reservoir, Great Lawn, Ramble, Southeast and Southwest" section spokesmen shouted their numbers for the bird. Listeners could fill in the numbers across their all-park count sheets.

Regina Alvarez was working at the computer. As she typed, all the numbers flashed up on a large screen. People could hear and write section numbers as we went along. They could jot down small totals in the last column. But we all looked up to see the total for birds in big numbers. We went through the bird list rapidly and let the machine do the math. For those of us who toiled through totals in former counts, Regina's numbers are a Big Help!

Every year we expect big numbers for three non-native birds. This year they totaled 878 pigeons, 335 starlings and 923 house sparrows. These birds bulk up the count locally and across North America. So do mallards, the most common duck on our continent, and, I'm told, worldwide. There were 368 mallards counted in 6 sections of the park. Other birds who appear in less predictable numbers were here in force. There were 201 Blue Jays scattered over every section of the park. We think a big flock came in for a late migration on their way south. If it is true that female Canada geese determine migration, more and more of them are staying put. Over a hundred of the 119 Canada geese on this year's count, were found in the Northeast and Ramble sections—near human handout stations.

Late migration may have boosted the numbers of white-throated sparrows. We always have noticeable numbers of white-throated sparrows on the Christmas Count. But this year they were in every park section and the flocks were all in 2 and 3-digit numbers: 38, 167, 62, 45, 122, 65, 49, for a total of 548 white-throated sparrows. I think this may be the largest glut of white-throats ever tabulated in our park. A flock of grackles may have just arrived. There were a whopping 516 of them and all but 2 were jammed into the north end of the park. More than half of them, 264, were hanging out around the Reservoir.

Most of the birds with hefty numbers were in the Reservoir and counted by David Krauss.

This year he tabulated 424 ruddy ducks, 203 ring-billed gulls, 831 herring gulls, 68 great black-backed gulls. Toss in his 32 mallards, that's 1558 birds in the water. David arrives early to count the gulls. They sleep at the Reservoir and he counts them before they wake and fly off for breakfast.

David never misses a count. He said he began showing up in 1981 when he was a freshman in high school. That year he went to the north end with Dick Sichel, who was then in charge of the count. The following year he counted at the Reservoir with Lambert Pohner. On his daily lunchtime hikes around the Reservoir, David had met Lambert and wanted to know what he was doing. Lambert got him looking at birds and it changed his life. Lambert is gone but David continues doing the Reservoir count every year. I tell him he has seen and counted more birds in the Central Park count than any other birder. That got us to remembering all the other birds a counter used to see there. There were thousands of ducks: greater and lesser scaup, canvasbacks, mergansers, buffleheads, ring-necked duck, and with Lambert's determination, a rare tufted duck that birders from adjacent states would come to see. Until recently David has been seeing another Reservoir treat: an Icelandic gull. But this rare gull has not been seen in the past few years.

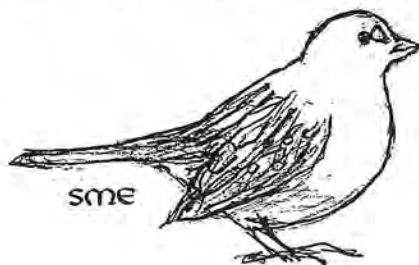
I asked David why the duck population crashed in the mid 1980's. Because the city built a new sewage outlet somewhere in the 90's, on the East River. The eats are so good there, the ducks never came back. It sounds like a place to visit this winter.

Birds in low numbers are prized in our count. This year we saw 1 rusty blackbird, 1 palm warbler, 2 great-blue herons and 1 kingfisher. I was glad we had 4 hermit thrushes, 3 mockingbirds, 1 brown thrasher, 3 eastern towhees, 4 fox sparrows, 14 juncos, 19 goldfinch, 1 winter wren, 3 Carolina wrens, 35 white-breasted nuthatch, and 92 tufted titmice. But I am sorry we had no ruby kinglet or brown creeper. We always get 1 creeper for status in the Lower Hudson Count, but not this year. There were only 3 black-capped chickadees. In years past, we had hundreds, all eating peanuts from your hand. We hoped for a red-headed woodpecker but none appeared here for the winter. However, there is an immature red-head at the edge of Riverside Park at 93 St. The bird is in a tree over some flowers in a planter.

Back in the park I learned of one white-throated sparrow flaunting more white than that. All the head, neck and throat are white and only the yellow lores between the bill and the eye give any color to the upper half of the bird. The lower half looks like a regular sparrow. About a decade ago we had another white-throat like this drawing.

I ran into Irv Cantor in our neighborhood. He was in the park during the count period and saw a swan standing on the divide at the Reservoir. It was too far away to determine whether it was a tundra or trumpeter. He ran into Peter Post and asked him to check it out. That was the trumpeter swan reported on the computer sheet. Also, a common loon with terrible timing arrived at the Reservoir one day after the count and count period were over. It was still there frisking about on New Year's Eve day.

Aside from the swan, there were 58 species of birds tabulated on the 107th Count. It's not the biggest number but then, the weather has been warm as everyone tells me. The number of individual birds seen on this count is 6384, a very respectable number. Remember that number and say it to people who tell you there are no birds in New York City. Hats off to Yigel Gelb, Regina Alvarez, Garry Rodman and Jill Mainelli for their combined efforts to make this Christmas Count a success.





6. We drove to the Zoo and parked. Circling around toward Fifth Ave., we came to the entrance steps to the Arsenal, the park's oldest building. On each side of the front steps are hybrid hollies. They are **San Jose' *Ilex x aquipernyi* (a-kwi-per-nee-I)**. To produce these plants, **English** holly was crossed with **Pernyi** holly. They have dark green leaves and red berries. They are more upright than other hollies and taper to a point, like Christmas trees.

SME

7. Next we went north to Bethesda Fountain where Bill took a sample of a cultivar of Japanese holly called **Convexa**. The small leaves are dark green and curved: convex above, concave below. Another name for Japanese holly is **Box-leaved holly**. This variety takes pruning for hedges and the thick dense bushes look very much like box. But box leaves grow opposite each other along the stem. Hollies grow alternately. These holly hedges have black berries. They are beside the top of the east and west stairs that lead down to the Terrace and Fountain.



SME

We drove north to the bridge over the 79th St. Transverse. It is south of the Metropolitan Museum of Art and west of Fifth Ave. At the northwest end of the bridge and just behind a fence is a tree Bill planted himself.

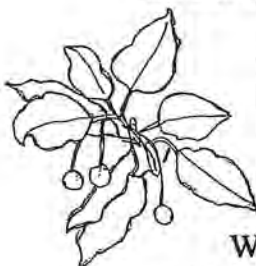
8. It is a **Meserve Hybrid Holly *Ilex x meserveae* (me-serv-I-ee)**, a cross of **Prostrate holly *I. rugosa* (roo-go-sa)** and **English holly *I. aquifolium***. The name honors Mrs. Meserve for her work in American Horticulture. Prostrate holly in the mix ensures the plants will do well in cold northern climates. The holly leaves are thick and bright green. The red berries are large and grow in clusters. Of all our specimens, this one had the most berries. More Meserve holly trees are planted in Three Bears Playground on the south side of the Metropolitan Museum just west of Fifth Ave. They are right behind the curve of the stone bench.



SME

9. As we stood at the bridge Bill pointed out a cluster of new English holly trees just north of the Meserve holly he planted. I think more of those are in Three Bears Playground at the edge of Fifth Ave. My sample of real **English Holly *Ilex aquifolia*** has shiny, wavy-edged leaves that undulate like the ruffles on a curtain. The spikes on leaf margins are small, needle-thin and thrust forward toward the leaf tip, not outward to catch you. They grow on green stems. In "Tree Trails of Central Park" Mrs. M.M. Graff declared that English holly is more handsome than American but American holly is "hardier and more tree-like."

SME



10. Our last stop was down a slope from another playground at Central Park West, south of 85th St. This tree is **Longstalk holly *Ilex pedunculosa* (pe-dunk-you-low-sa)**. The leaves are smooth, dark green and without spikes. The fruit hangs singly, on long stems. The tree is adaptable. It is planted where no park sprinklers reach it and has proved it can survive drought. Bill says it was planted in Central Park in the early 80's, just before he arrived.

We looked at another holly in the Ramble at the south curve of Azalea Pond. We don't know what it is. It could be **Yaupon *Ilex vomitoria***. This holly, *I. vomitoria*, gets its charming name because American Indians used it as a purgative for internal spring cleaning. I will try to learn the identity of this unknown holly. In the mean time, you have lots of holly trees to visit over the winter. Take this newsletter with you and ENJOY!