

THE ELLIOTT NEWSLETTER

Nature Notes from Central Park

Vol. 13, No.1

January~February, 2007

Topsy--Turvy Winter Weather

It was a balmy 62 degrees Fahrenheit in Central Park on January 6, 2007. I arrived at the Reservoir two days later to maybe see a common loon. The skies were overcast, there were no birders about and I decided not to venture farther north. I walked along the south shore and saw mallard, shoveler, gadwall, bufflehead and 150 ruddy duck. Walking south through the Pinetum I whistled back to a red-bellied woodpecker. At Turtle Pond a shaggy looking black-crowned night heron slouched by the shore. There had been a lot of rain and the water level was high.

At Shakespeare Theater I happened to look down and began to notice there were lots of earthworms. Some were small and thin, others were fat and long. Some bore dent marks along their bodies, as if pressed by bird bills and found wanting. Some were swimming through shallow puddles on the sidewalk. Some were creeping slowly over the pavement. Lots of them were dead. There were so many I began to count them as I walked toward the King of Poland statue. I continued counting as I walked downhill to the East Drive and turned toward the Maintenance Building. At the bathrooms I had counted over 300 earthworms, the most I have ever seen in Central Park. Rains brought them to the surface. But why were they rejected by hungry birds? Did they taste bad? I don't know.

February began with overcast skies on Groundhog Day. Designated groundhogs didn't see their shadows and prognosticators talked of an early spring. Just a few days later, the mercury dropped to a bracing 19 degrees and winter was here with a vengeance. Despite the cold, we had no snow until Valentine's Day when a soft layer covered the ground and turned to crunchy ice. Birds stood on the crust and drilled holes through it for scattered seeds beneath.

The common loon I missed arrived at the Reservoir December 24, 2006, too late to be counted in the Christmas Bird Count. Loons usually drop in and stay for a day or three but this bird stayed, and stayed and stayed. Birders could watch it dive for food and remain down a long time before rising again. Some of the birders said it was eating shrimp. Two of them thought it was eating crayfish, which surprised me. I have seen crayfish being collected by young boys in the Loch on hot summer days. I never knew they lived in the Reservoir but if that was the menu of choice, mighty few crayfish are still there. Ben Cacase (Keh-kase) tells me the loon stayed more than 2 weeks and left on Jan. 9. As far as we know, no other loon has lingered so long in Central Park—certainly not in the past half century.

Loons are heavy birds and, like jumbo jets, need a long runway to become airborne. They start at the south end of the Reservoir and rise to run on the water. Flapping their big wings like mad, they slowly escape into air and manage to clear the trees at the north end of the Reservoir. Loons avoid other bodies of water in the park. They could drop in but couldn't fly out.



On February 24, Ben Cacase was at the Reservoir with another bird watcher. It was 8:30 AM and cold. The water was completely frozen over except for one open spot from which he saw a group of ring-billed gulls rise and fly away. Looking around he suddenly saw a bald eagle with a ring-billed gull in its talons about 100 feet in the air. Eagle and prey dropped to the ice. Ben said it was a juvenile bald eagle. He writes that you can see it at <http://tinyurl.com/3xa6qr>

The head and tail of adult bald eagles are white. You can see them on our national emblem, adopted in 1782, and on a dollar bill. The size difference between eagle and gull is awesome. The eagle can be 3 feet long with a wing spread of 7 feet. The gull is 1½ feet long with a 4 ft. wingspread.

As soon as the Central Park eagle dropped, it was joined by 3 crows. One came close but was ignored by the eagle. After a while 2 of the crows flew off but one of them stayed for leftover scraps. In Ben's picture, that crow is standing on ice watching the eagle eat the white mound of gull under its feet. I have seen bald eagles dine on fish but never on waterfowl or rabbits. I think fish would be easier to eat. They don't require plucking feathers or fur, but their scales would have to be pulled aside. The birders watched this eagle from 8:30 until it flew off at 9:20. People have been listing bald eagles seen flying over Central Park since the 1960's. This is the first record of one that has touched ground... well, ice. Others may have landed but nobody reported seeing it happen. Ben made this photocopy of his picture for my newsletter. How wonderful that he got the shot and is willing to share it with all of us. THANK YOU, BEN!

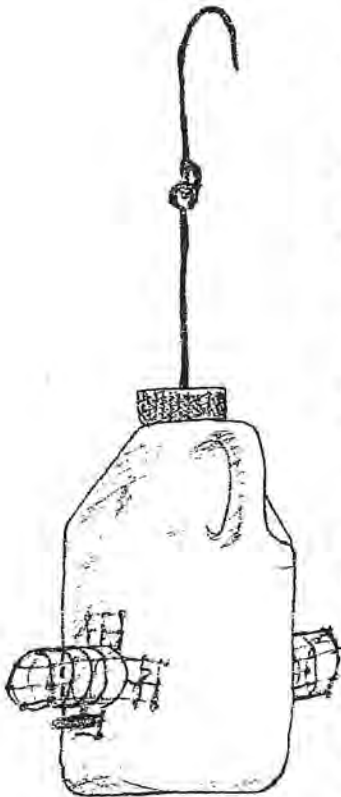
Changes at the Winter Feeders

Last November, Lloyd Spitalnik said he would no longer be in charge of the feeders at the Evodia Field. He would continue to drive out of the city to buy seed in bulk for lower prices. He would deliver to the Maintenance Building where the seeds are stored. But hauling seed to the field, filling plastic jugs, hoisting jugs up on a pole and hooking them over tree branches, those jobs were now for others. He told Dan Weaver, "You are in charge." Dan said O.K. and began planning some changes.

Dan looked over the feeding area with Chuck McAlexander. A large flock of grackles remained in the park this winter. When the feeders were hung in clusters, the grackles would collect and dominate access. Dan spread the feeders farther apart to give smaller birds a chance. He hung some feeders nearer the ground so that people could see the birds with ease.

Chuck made new feeders and attached wire guards to the entrance, as you can see in his sketch. The guards are rolled tubes about 1 ½ to 2 inches in diameter; too narrow for a grackle to shove his head and shoulders through the opening. The tubes are 2 to 4 inches long. At first, birds would come to the entrance and poke about the metal funnel.

Then one of the house finches got it and soon other house finches were pushing each other aside to get in. A titmouse watched and also made its way in to the seed. Now many little birds fly in and out. Chuck made more feeders with stronger plastic bottles. They replace and rotate with feeders that need a wash. We hope they are strong enough so that squirrels can't reach in and grab seed.



☞ Beside sunflower seeds in the plastic bottles, there are black thistle seeds in long thin bags or socks. Because of the thistle seeds, we have daily visits from goldfinches who try to feed when grackles don't take over. The goldfinches are still in winter drab, but some of them now wear pale yellow throats. Bags of suet or meat fat bring in downy and red-bellied woodpeckers and a white-breasted nuthatch. The feeders are filled once a week. Birders gather on Tuesdays at noon to watch and help. Dan hopes they will stay home and call him for a rain date if the weather is terrible. If you want to help with supply costs for next year, send a check marked "for bird feeders" to Dan Weaver, 205 East 88 St. Apt. 3B, NYC 10128.

More Avian Clerihews

Clerihews were verses about people dreamed up in the last century by Edmond Clerihew Bentley, an English newspaperman. They were short, benignly satirical and biographical. They consisted of 2 rhymed couplets using free meters, silly rhymes, with the name of the person in the first line. Last year I asked readers to write and send in avian clerihews with the name of their bird in the first line. Line 2 would end with a word that rhymed with the bird's name. Lines 3 and 4 would end in words that rhymed with each other. I have been getting jolly samples and some of them make me laugh. I hope you enjoy these clerihews from 3 poet lariats and you decide to send some of your own.

Pity the awkward Coot.	The Great Blue Heron
A committee designed his foot.	Spends little time carin'
Swims like a chicken and walks like a duck.	Whether or not
Could any bird have more miserable luck?	Fish want to be caught.
Chuck McAlexander	

The famous bald eagle	The American coot
May try to inveigle,	is rather a hoot,
But don't let him near us	when he tries to sing
Since he's really quite fierce.	he can only go "ping."
Jeremy Mynott with British point of view	

Lanius ludovicianus

The Loggerhead Shrike
Stores his kill on a spike.
Had he matches and so wished,
His kebob could be shished.

Sturnus vulgaris

The European Starling
Is nobody's darling
But please don't blame Shakespeare
For the mess that it makes here.

Aegolius funereus

A certain Boreal Owl
Often says with a scowl,
"The biggest collection of wackos
I've ever seen
Was one winter just outside
Tavern on the Green."

Buteo jamaicensis

His majesty Pale Male
Says, "Me 'in love'?—what a tale!
I'm instinctually hawkish
So let's not get mawkish."

Jeff Nulle's "Suite for Carolus Linnaeus"

Remembering Ben

I have been rummaging in old records and learn I first met Ben Rockmore in the spring of 1988. I think he'd read about my spring bird walks in "Good Times," published by The Central Park Conservancy, and decided to give bird walks a try. The weather was chilly and Ben arrived for the Wednesday class in a heavy tweed overcoat, a felt hat and leather-soled shoes. He looked serious, listened attentively and ignored the chatter around him. As time passed and the days grew warmer, Ben began to appear in sportier attire, including a windbreaker and rubber-soled shoes. He looked cheery, exchanged remarks with class members and was pleased to see through his binoculars nearby birds such as ruby-crowned kinglets, warblers, cardinals and swans.

When I asked the class to look up a bird in their field guides, many confessed they had left their books at home. Not Ben. He had been given a Peterson Field Guide to the birds of western North America and always brought it to class. He would look up birds as I talked and would show them to the class. Most of the illustrations were of birds we were seeing. But sometimes we ogled exotic birds from beyond the Rockies.

When Ben met Bill Van Dyke, both men were glad to learn the other was a reader. They would walk along at the back of the class and discuss books, not birds. But both men really enjoyed being out in the park with nature. In time, Ben found his way around the Ramble and braved winter weather to participate at the bird feeding station, which was then at Azalea Pond.

Eventually Ben brought his wife, Mimi, to class for occasional visits. We thought she was charming and they made a handsome couple. It was from Mimi I learned Ben died, age 94 on March 8. He was born in New York, grew up in Washington Heights and graduated from NYU Law School. Ben went into entertainment law and eventually worked with Joseph Levine before Levine went to Hollywood. Ben stayed in New York and represented various businesses. He made contracts between the company he worked for and all the employees in a movie: actors, cameramen, makeup, costume, light, sound and scenery people, stunt men, music and special effects-- anyone and everyone who would be used on the film.

When Mimi met Ben for a dinner arranged by a friend, she lived on the West Side of Manhattan and had been a widow for 3 years. Ben lived on Long Island and had been a widower for a year. Both had 2 grown children. The dinner was a success. In a year they married and bought their apartment near the Guggenheim Museum. Their children got along and there are now 6 grandchildren, "3 each," says Mimi. Ben and Mimi were married for 35 years.

Ben was a valued friend to me. Over the years he gave me his good will and good advice. In 1995, I was starting this newsletter and needed help with my copyright. Copyright laws had changed since I published 3 children's books, and the internet had revolutionized publishing. Ben thought, then dictated the copyright warning that has appeared on the bottom of page 4 ever since. I miss him. I'm grateful he was in my life and am comforted to see his words still here.

Spring Bird Classes

Sunday classes begin April 15 at 9 AM. We meet in front of Loeb Boathouse. Five sessions cost \$35.00.

Wednesday classes begin April 18 at 9 AM. We meet at 76 St. and Fifth Ave. on the benches inside the park. Five sessions are \$35.00.

Please send checks to me by April 5. For the address and correct spelling of my name see the copyright below.

If you wish to drop in for one walk only, the cost is \$10 exact. I can't change big bills.

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Vol. 13, No. 2 and 3

March~ June, 2007

A Sorry Sarah Saga

In the dark of winter, I struggled mightily with a crazed computer. I managed to wrest enough mangled paragraphs out of its gnashing jaws for one issue of this newsletter. It kept telling me I had no right to what I had just typed. It devoured hours of work, leaving nothing but a blank screen. Finally, the screen blanked for the last time, and computer parts were carted away to the recycle center. My friend Peter gave me the loan of a laptop with many bells and whistles. Little by little I am learning to creep around the keyboard.

Spring arrived, still bundled in dark winter weather. I was looking forward to celebrating the season with 19 bird and plant walks. Then on Earth Day, at the bottom of some steps at Belvedere Castle, I stepped down on rubble. Loose rock rolled under my foot. I screamed, fell and cracked my right ankle and head. John and Mary Brown helped me out of the park and into a cab. They came home with me to see that my foot was elevated with ice on the swelling. Susan Fischer gave me a ride to the recycling center to get rid of 2 busted computers. She also gave me rides to and from Central Park in May. Regina Alvarez drove me to Azalea Pond and the Boathouse May 9. Trixie Treat and my neighbor Mickie Egeth each brought me delicious groceries. When I could hobble, Mickie and I, armed with backpack and suitcase, went to Jack's 99 cent store and brought back a month's supply of groceries.

Stalwart Chuck McAlexander took over my Wednesday classes. Class members were impressed with his speed at spotting and naming birds and thought him a nice person. True! Gallant and reliable class members rescued the Sunday classes. Ed Fagan and Joan Simpson Klavan took charge of spotting and showing birds. Robin Villa pointed out birds and named plants. My sincere thanks to all these people for their generous and valuable help. Without them, I would have cancelled the classes and returned the money. I was scheduled to do 5 Thursday bird walks in May for the Battery Park City Parks Conservancy. They allowed me to do the walks from the seat of an open-top electric truck. Their bird walks are free and they will loan you bird books and binoculars. In the fall, I am scheduled to do morning walks at 9:30 for the last 2 Thursdays in September and the first 2 Thursdays in October. To learn of other events and public transportation, call them at 212-267-9701.

This saga of Sarah explains why you haven't heard from me and why this double issue covers 4 months, not two. In 2007, the world is celebrating the 300th birthday of Carl Linnaeus. I planned to write about him in the May news. Now, with more space, he's become the perfect tribute for a laid-up reporter unable to cover her park beat.

Vivat Linnaeus!

When Adam named the plants in the Garden of Eden, what happened to them after he left? Were they tossed out after the unhappy couple? We have no lists or drawings to tell us what they were like. After the Fall, plants and animals appeared all over the earth. People wandered about, naming what they found and used. Later, when folk converged into nations and acquired safety via overcrowding, free spirits went forth to explore. They brought back wild tales and strange artifacts which caused as much amazement and speculation then as rocks from space cause now.

In Europe, more and more of nature's souvenirs arrived from the back of beyond. They piled up and produced a massive clutter of trophies to study. How could you know if this new exotic plant or animal was the same or similar to a local one? Was it safe to eat? Would it cure disease? Would it grow well, taste good and become a new food fad? How did people in far-off places use plants and animals? Why were living things found in some places and not others? Soon there was an urgent need for answers and for a system to sort out the mess.

Carl Linnaeus, born in Rashault, Sweden in 1707, thought of himself as the new Adam. It was his life-long task (with the help of a Lutheran God) to discover and name plants and animals. There were other European men of learning who tried to classify nature. But Linnaeus had the energy, showmanship and single-minded determination to collect zillions of samples, draw them, describe them and give them scientific names in Latin. He invented a structure in which to file his nature specimens and filled neat boxes with plants, animals and minerals. God created, he said; Linnaeus ordered.

Everything collected was given a 2-part Latin name that described something about the plant or animal. The first name, the **genus**, was and is capitalized and displays what large group the sample belongs to. In the beginning, birds in different parts of the world with, say, green backs, were all grouped together. As differences were discovered, the huge group was split into smaller parts and new genus names were published. The second name for every sample, the **species**, was and is a smaller part of the genus group. Species names are printed without a capital letter. They are descriptive of individual birds or flowers and their names haven't changed nearly as much over time. Usually, these scientific names are *italicized*. The letters slant up to the right to catch your attention. (Italics were first used in an Italian edition of Virgil, printed in 1501. The style caught on.)

Linnaeus' system of classification was immediately successful because it was easy to use. The news spread to other countries with speed, considering how slow travel was then. As early as 1737, botanists were searching the American frontier in New York and applying the new Linnaean system. They used it then to name plants, but soon it was used to name animals as well. This system is like a bridge that works forward and backward. In the 18th century it was used to name new discoveries. Today it can be used to work backwards from the scientific name of something to its common name. Here's an example.

If you were lucky enough to be traveling over Europe, you might see a small bird rise high in the air and sing, as it hovered, a song that is high-pitched, musical and sustained. The birders with you might call it "Veldleeuwerik," "Feldlerche," "Alouette des champs," or, "Sånglärka," depending on whether they were Dutch, German, French or Swedish. If they couldn't name the bird in English, they could show you the scientific name in their guide. Look up the scientific name in your English guide index, find the page and *voilà!* There's your skylark. This bird has many common names because it is found in many countries. But it has only one scientific name with 2 parts—*Alauda arvensis*. It was classified by Linnaeus and was imported to New York in the late 1890s but didn't take. Pity.

Americans call birds by their common names. These names occasionally change when birds are split or lumped at 10-year intervals. The changes are few but pesky. Plant names are more complicated. People who putter around in the garden call plants by common names. But many different plants have the same common name. Some North

American plants grow far and wide and have many local names. Some plants share the same common name though they don't look anything like each other and aren't related. So it's easy to talk about one plant and find you are talking about several. People like Diane Schaub, the Curator of Conservatory Garden, must be extremely careful when they order plants from a nursery. Diane uses scientific names and checks them very carefully to avoid costly mistakes. She is using the Linnaeus system.

How did Linnaeus and his work become so well known in his lifetime? First, he wrote. He corresponded with more than 400 foreign scientists, which put his name and Uppsala University on the map. Also, he published, both early and often. He began in 1735 with *Systema naturae*, a statement of his system. It was an 11-page tabulation of plants, animals and minerals in a 30" high double folio volume. The frontispiece showed a young Linnaeus in the Garden of Eden applying his names to new discoveries. Over the years he revised his system and named more samples. His 13th edition, published in 1770, was 3 thousand pages long! More than 180 of his works were published in his lifetime.

As a young man, he journeyed to Lapland in the Arctic north of Sweden. He took notes, made sketches, collected samples and wrote about his travels. He was amazed to learn how the Lapps used local plants and animals. Later, he described his work in the gardens of the university and for the nobility. The publicity about celebrity gardens produced a gardening craze all over Europe.

Second, he was a spectacular teacher. He taught at the University of Uppsala to a packed audience of students. Young men who reached class early got the rush seats or stood around the walls of the lecture hall. Late-comers stood on the stairs outside. Their teacher had a gift for organization and detail. He lectured, keeping his place on a long thin paper strip of notes. He amazed them when he brought a monkey or raccoon to class. He was witty and the students laughed. He shocked university and town elders with references to the sexual parts of plants and animals. They deemed his slyly lyrical descriptions of flowers unsuitable for his students and totally unfit for the ears of young maidens.

To earn extra money and promote natural history, Linnaeus turned to the great outdoors and gave guided nature walks for more than 20 years. To accommodate the public, he laid out 8 nature routes from the university to the surrounding countryside. Everyone came. As many as 300 men and upper-class ladies showed up in loose-fitting garments with butterfly nets and paid what they could in coin, clothing or books. He assigned designated note takers, specimen collectors and bird shooters. When a rare species was found, a bugle would sound. The summer walks could last as long as 12 hours in the land of the midnight sun. The jolly crowd would troop back to town, blowing horns, beating kettledrums, waving banners. As they marched to the Botanic Garden they all would shout "Vivat Linnaeus!" Long live Linnaeus!

This year, in celebration of his tercentenary, the nature paths in Uppsala have been revived and replenished and trained guides lead the tours. The Botanic Garden is restored and former groupings have been reinstated. More than 3 thousand species were grown there, though not all at once. One successful transplant was rhubarb. Yum! The climate was too cold for tropical plants so a greenhouse was built. A successful banana tree grew and bore fruit-- the first bananas in Europe.

This spring I had the great pleasure of meeting Joan Haavie (Hovie) who lives in Stockholm, about 45 miles southeast of Uppsala. Joan says that people with garden

allotments in the city and elsewhere have been given soil, and a list of Linnaean seeds and bulbs to plant. She gave me two plant lists with Swedish and scientific names. One plant on the list is hops. (Think beer!) All over the capital and around the countryside, gardens are blooming with a huge variety of the plants Linnaeus classified. What a splendid sight that must be!

I tried to think of an American who might have been living in the time of Linnaeus and suddenly thought of Ben Franklin. He was born a year earlier, in 1706. He had to leave school at 10, but became a scientist, inventor, writer and statesman. Why was he never a US president? Simple. He was too old. He died at 84 in 1790, when George Washington was just a year into office. Linnaeus died at 71 in 1778.



I'm sorry these men didn't know each other. But I'm amused they were honored in the same way: Franklin's face appears on the 100 dollar bill, Linnaeus' face is on the 100 kronor note. "Carl von Linné" appears beside his head. It is the name he took in 1757, when the King elevated him to the Swedish nobility. On his coat of arms he put a sweet little honeysuckle with paired pink flowers. It is *Linnaeus borealis* or twin flower. How I wish we had some of it in our park to celebrate his year.

Linnaean Delights in Central Park

The Birds

In honor of the tercentenary, I have been looking over lists of birds, trees and flowers, trying to learn which of the ones we see were named by Linnaeus some 250 or 260 years ago. How could he name so many specimens when he was never here? Because he inspired 19 of his students--those note takers, plant sketchers, bird shooters and sample collectors--to undertake voyages of discovery to the remotest places on earth. He called them his apostles and sent them forth to find and bring back treasures.

This winter I worked through my North American bird books. I found that current bird guides give the common and scientific names of birds but not the names of the people who classified them. Then I turned to "Birds of America," edited by John Borroughs and Edward Forbush among others, with 106 color plates by Louis Agassiz Fuertes. This treasure was first published in 1917 by the University Society, Inc. and republished by Doubleday & Company in 1936. Behind a bird's common and scientific names, "Linnaeus" is written out in full when he was the classifier. (In some of my tree and plant books, his name is shortened to "Linn." and even "L"-- a sure indication of fame.) Working my way through "Birds of America" I found more than 80 birds that are still here and were classified by Linnaeus long ago. I began pointing them out to people in the park. The list is surprising for what is there and what is missing.

All year long you can see such successful imports as starlings and house sparrows, plus native cardinals, blue jays, mourning doves, mallards and Canada geese. Tourists who visit the Reservoir and Turtle Pond can see, in various seasons, such water birds as great black-backed gull, laughing gull, black skimmer, red-breasted and hooded mergansers, gadwall, blue-winged teal, shoveler, pintail, bufflehead, and wood duck. Spotted sandpipers and belted kingfishers work the shore, and green herons, Canada geese and Eastern kingbirds nest nearby. Our celebrity red-tailed hawks were not named

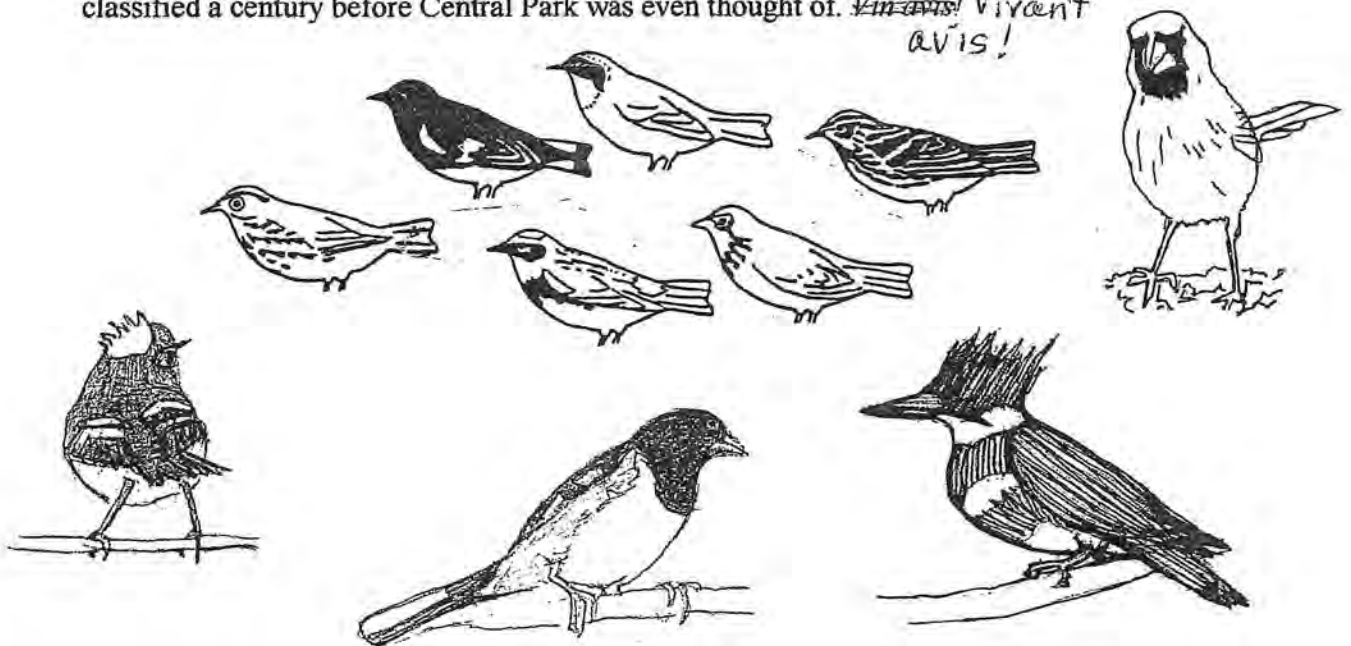
by Linnaeus. But scan the skies for raptors and you sometimes see marsh hawk, bald eagle, merlin, kestrel and gyrfalcon. They bear his names, but they don't nest in the park.

Screech owls do, and so do some of our 6 woodpeckers: hairy, red-bellied and flicker. Downy, our most common nesting woodpecker, was not named by Linnaeus. Our sapsuckers wear Linnaean names. Last year a pair nested here. House wrens nest here but none of the wren family was classified by Linnaeus. We host such named and nesting birds as grackle, red-winged blackbird, orchard oriole and Baltimore oriole. (I think the orioles are the classiest nesters in the park.) Other Linnaean classified beauties that just migrate through are: rose-breasted grosbeak, blue grosbeak, indigo bunting, bobolink, eastern meadowlark, eastern towhee, and summer tanager. Why was the summer tanager classified by Linnaeus while the scarlet tanager was classified by someone named Vieillot? Perhaps a sample was destroyed in transit. Or perhaps it was collected by an apostle in the fall, when the male's brilliant red coat and jet-black wings become dull yellow and gray. All three of the mimic thrushes, catbird, mockingbird and brown thrasher were classified. They nest in our park and enrich the spring chorus.

If you like brown, lots of brown sparrows and thrushes migrate through here spring and fall. But Linnaeus classified no true sparrows and just 2 of the thrushes: the largest, smallest and most colorful—our robin and bluebird.

I do not understand how the little birds were successfully killed, collected and shipped to Sweden in any condition to be studied. Binoculars, in wide use today, were unknown then. You studied what you shot. Yet such small treasures as red-breasted nuthatch, tufted titmouse, black-capped chickadee, American goldfinch, ruby-crowned kinglet, blue-gray gnatcatcher and ruby-throated hummingbird were all successfully identified and classified. The first 4 birds of that list cheer us in the dark of winter.

Central Park is famous for its migrating spring warblers, though none of them stay and nest. A dozen of these beauties were classified by Linnaeus and are listed in the order of the Sibley guide: blue-winged, golden-winged, northern parula, chestnut-sided, yellow-rumped, yellow-throated, black and white, American redstart, common yellowthroat, ovenbird, Canada, yellow-breasted chat. Here are 6 of them clustered in the space below. How many warblers and other birds you can identify from my drawings? All the Linnaean birds discussed in this section were collected in colonial America and classified a century before Central Park was even thought of. ~~Vincent~~ ^{Vincent} AVIS!



The Trees

In 1738, Linnaeus sent Peter Kalm, also of Sweden, to the New World to inventory the plant life. Kalm visited New York City and found his walks through the town's planted trees exceedingly pleasant. He reported that Linnaeus' water beech or *Platanus occidentalis* was the most numerous. He also saw linden (or lime) and elm trees but they were by far less common. I learned this history nugget in Edward Sibley Barnard's excellent and compact guide "New York City Trees." Barnard states that most of the trees in his guide were classified by Linnaeus.

Gary Lincoff sent me a list of 102 woody plants named by Linnaeus that occur in Central Park. Over time some of the names were changed. Thirteen of Linnaeus' woody plants on the list were reclassified by others. Not bad. That's just 13% of the total. Gary's list includes tall and short trees, shrubs and ground cover. I've decided to list some of our big trees only. They are hard to miss and I'm short on space.

Some guides list trees by genus in alphabetical order. I will list them here by common names in, mostly, alphabetical order. To learn more about these trees, you can look them up in the index of your tree guide. Take it with you when you go.

Beech trees grow large and spread wide. Their soft, elephant-gray bark is easily scarred and marred by graffiti vandals. Linnaeus named the European beech *Fagus sylvatica*. My favorite beech in the park was attacked by a huge truck when Turtle Pond was relandscaped. It still lives, now badly scarred, and is part of a beech group north of the King of Poland statue. The leaves have smooth edges. The bristly husks contain triangular nuts.



River birch *Betula nigra* has dark, scaly-shaggy bark on the trunk and all the way up to the young branches. The dark green leaves are oval and toothy. River birches grow on the south side of Turtle Pond. Warblers visit and Baltimore orioles nest in them.



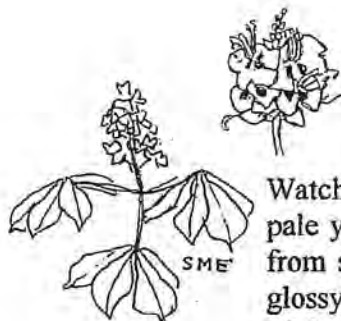
American elm *Ulmus americana* has been struggling for years to withstand Dutch elm disease. The elm trees that line 5th Ave and the Mall or Literary Walk are old. They are ministered to by park staff, but they look like the wounded of war. If a limb becomes diseased, it is cut off. In spring, tiny elm seeds cover the ground. The ½ inch samaras are round, notched and hairy.

Siberian elm *Ulmus pumila* circles the Pinetum, south of 86th St. It's easy to identify the branches in winter. The buds on alternate sides of the stem are exactly an inch apart. The leaves are narrow. The samaras are round, ½" or more across, and notched on top.



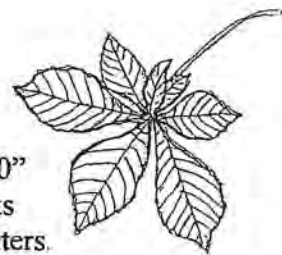
Ginkgo *Ginkgo biloba* is so old, that impressions of its fan-shaped leaves are found in fossils. The tree should be extinct, but was saved by Chinese and Japanese monks who planted the seeds and sent off samples, which Linnaeus named. The female trees put out a powerful perfume—ginkgo stinko. In fall when the ground is covered with fruit, Chinese women in plastic gloves gather the fruit and strip off the smelly flesh. Later, the hard shells are cracked and the white nut inside is cooked for soup. Ginkgo leaves turn gold in fall. You can see many in the park and more out on the streets. Street trees are male and odorless.





Horsechestnuts *Aesculus hippocastanum* are big trees with big 10" leaves surrounded by 7 finger-like leaflets. In spring, the tree puts out upright cones of white flowers with yellow, gold and red centers.

Watch a bee working the flowers and you learn they select by color. Flowers with pale yellow centers have nectar. In summer, the leaves curl up and turn brown from sunburn. In fall, large spiky fruit drop and split open. Inside the husks are glossy, brown and poisonous fruit. There are several horsechestnuts between the Maintenance Building and East Drive. Our oldest horsechestnut, north of the Pool near the 100th St. entrance, was planted by Frederick Olmsted.



American linden *Tilia americana* is the only linden in the park that was named by Linnaeus. It has big, heart-shaped, toothy leaves with a sharp tip and a lopsided base. Bracts stick out like long, saucy tongues and hold flowers and seeds. They remind me of New Year's noise makers. Other lindens have smaller leaves and can tolerate pollution much better.



There are lots of oak trees in Central Park. Pin oaks *Quercus palustris* outnumber all the others and must have been a real buy. Many were planted in military rows by the CCC in the mid 1930's and are now in their 70's. You can see a tree lineup of them on Cherry Hill. Though pin oaks are everywhere, they were not categorized by Linnaeus. So let's skip on to the oaks that were. After you have named one *Quercus*, you can list the others by *Q.*



Turkey oak *Q. cerris* was named by Linnaeus and is the second most numerous oak in the park. Lots of them may also have been planted during the Depression. There's a grove of them west of the Reservoir at 90th St. The bark is dark gray and deeply fissured. The leaves are shiny green above and fuzzy below. The acorns are long with wildly shaggy caps. They contain plenty of tannin and are so bitter, the birds and squirrels don't eat them.



Red oaks *Q. rubra* grow huge. The leaves can be 9" long with 7 to 11 lobes tipped with bristles. They put out the biggest acorns with flat caps and pointed tips. There's a lofty red oak in the north end of Shakespeare Garden near the men's restroom.

White oaks *Q. alba* grow in a few park locations, but we need more. There's a handsome young one beside the walk to Turtle Pond Pier. It is beside the hot dog stand and across the sidewalk from a lamppost. Every few years these trees put out bumper crops of acorns. The nuts are sweet and very popular.

Willow oaks *Q. phellos* are well-named. The leaves are long and thin, like a willow. But the trunk is strong and straight like an oak. There are several in the median strip of the Boathouse parking lot and 2 huge ones beside the walk behind Willow Rock.



Chestnut oak *Q. prinus* is the last oak on my list. The tree is north and downhill from the Pilgrim statue at 72 St. The leaves are long and oval with rounded teeth. This may be the only chestnut oak in the park. I have been told this tree may be a hybrid, in which case, it would not have been named by Linnaeus. If we study this tree, we can argue about it for years to come.



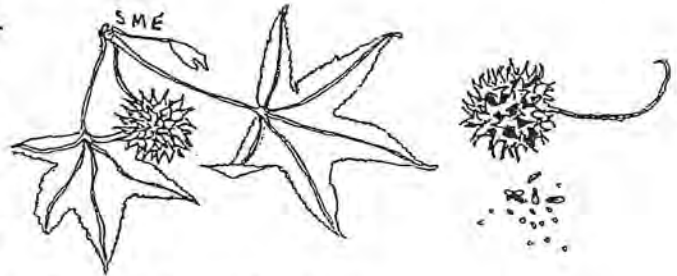


Hackberry *Celtis occidentalis* has small leaves with pointed tips. The bark is light gray and in fall the hard fruit turns brown and tastes nutty. The tree is attractive to insects, birds and bird watchers in spring and fall. You can see a group of these trees at the northwest corner of the Boathouse parking lot beside the fence. Walk up the incline from the Boathouse and turn left on the path that curves toward the Point.

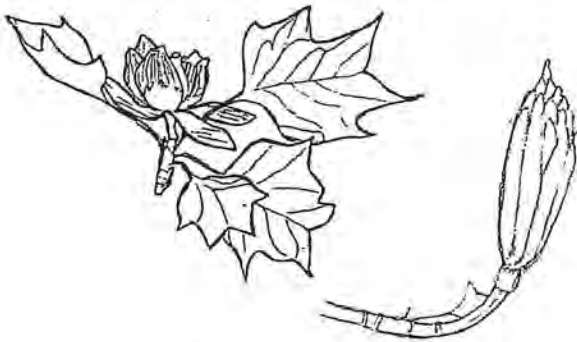
Look at the Point entrance, then turn and face the walk at your back. Climb the short steep path up a hill to a bench at the top. Sit down on the bench and you will see gray-bark trees with small leaves. Yes, hackberries. So many surround the bench, I named the place Hackberry Hill. This fall you will see birds here and you can sample the fruit.

At Tupelo Meadow you can see the famous tree for which it is named. Black Gum and Sour Gum are other common names for *Nyssa sylvatica*. The tree turns scarlet in the fall and is a shrine for leaf lovers and photographers. This tree was not classified by Linnaeus, but this well-known location is a good place to see some others that were.

Sweet Gum *Liquidambar styraciflua* stands to the left near the sidewalk. It has star-shaped leaves and prickly fruit. In fall, the green leaves turn many colors and become a patchwork of yellow and brown. The fruit is round and green with many spikes. It turns brown in fall and holes appear on the surface below the spikes. Small birds poke their bills into the holes and pull out hundreds of seeds.



To the left of the sweet gum, also near the sidewalk, is another ginkgo to see.



Tuliptree *Liriodendron tulipifera* grows so tall and straight it was used for ship masts. The leaves have 4 points with a dent at the top. The tricolor tulip-like flowers put out sap which attracts insects and orioles. A tall tuliptree stands behind Shakespeare Theater. It is 2 trees due east from the red oak in Shakespeare Garden. A sidewalk leads you to it. One spring, I saw a gorgeous Baltimore oriole dipping his head into a tulip flower of this very tree for a sweet sip and a sticky bug. A sight to remember.

This census of 75 birds and 15 trees has been absorbing but exhausting. Imagine what it would take to identify all these specimens and classify them from scratch. Kennedy Warne, writing in the May '07 issue of "Smithsonian," said he spent 2 years in the 1970's trying to classify 43 species of New Zealand sponge. He abandoned his efforts but retains his appreciation for the towering achievement of Carl Linnaeus whose system we still use today. In his lifetime, Linnaeus classified and named over 4,000 animals and 8,000 plants, far more than anyone else. Those world specimen numbers won't change much until microbiologists make enough discoveries to double the figure.

THE ELLIOTT NEWSLETTER

Nature Notes from Central Park

Vol.13, No. 4

July--August, 2007

Mending Mother Goose

My favorite statue in the Central Park is of Mother Goose. She presides serenely in front of noisy Rumsey Playground, riding her goose on a cloud. The goose's head and neck extend toward Fifth Ave. Its wings arch up, around, down and forward in a glorious art nouveau curve. Below the smooth wing coverts, primary feathers, each decorated with a shaft, fan towards the wing tip and lead you to the end of the curve.

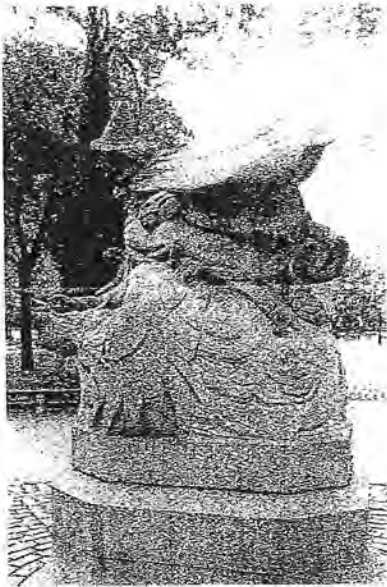
The good dame rides her mount side-saddle, and her sensible shoes with great, square buckles rest on the uptown side of the goose. She wears a heavy shoulder bag. Her hat, with brim and conical crown covers her shoulder-length curls. She wears granny glasses that hide her thoughts and she smiles wisely but needs dentures. Around her neck she wears a Rembrandt ruff. Her right hand grasps her cape near the collar. Her left hand holds the reins. The wide-eyed goose grips the other end.

A cat rides on the goose's neck. It emerges from the folds of her cape – back arched, ears flat, teeth bared – to hurl a feline curse. One clawed foot imbedded in the goose's neck completes the pose. Over cat, goose, and Mother rides her wonderful cape. Like a mighty sail, it lifts, crests, and drops to a convolution of twirls and rolls.

Beneath them a supporting cloud with flat, tight curls is imbedded with figures from Mother Goose rhymes. On the downtown side near the goose's bill is Little Bo-Peep with shepherd's crook, arranged horizontally. Behind the wing is Humpty-Dumpty resting on his side, looking cheerful and entire. At the back, under a canopy of dazzling folds of cape and gown, are the cook and the king staring at a pie of singing blackbirds. Around the corner, under Mother's shoe is Little Jack Horner jabbing a thumb into his Christmas pie. Near the front of the statue is a bearded man with a bone and a dog at his feet looking up. I have no idea who these characters are. Mother Hubbard didn't wear a beard and didn't have a bone for the dog.

I visit this statue often. I enjoy it all except that Mother's nose was smashed, perhaps in the 1960's by some lout with a ball peen hammer. I told Regina Alvarez how grand it would be if repairs were made. On August 1, I was walking near Rumsey Playground and stopped to watch a robin anting. It was panting in hot sunlight and tilting with a wing extended to the grass. I could not see ants crawling through feathers for mites, but the bird looked relieved to be groomed. Presently the robin shook itself, snaffled up some of its benefactors and moved into the shade. I rounded the corner to admire Mother Goose from a distance. I started to pass and did a double take. Mother had a new nose! And what a nose! The shape seemed to be in perfect agreement with the wings, cape and Mother's face. I called Regina to thank her for passing on my request and learn who I could interview about it. She told me to see Matt Reiley.

M.C. Reiley told me he studied sculpture in college. He worked for Johnson Atelier specializing in mold making. He began his own fabrication business in Trenton which he still runs. In May 2003, he joined the staff of the Central Park Conservancy, where he serves as Acting Supervisor of Monuments Conservation. He has a life-long passion to create his own sculptures.



Here's what he did for Mother Goose: 1. He made a "surround," a mold of Mother's battered nose and the area around it, for use as a template. 2. Using historical photographs, he made a clay nose. 3. Using the new clay nose as a pattern, he made a rubber mold of it. 4. He filled the rubber mold with mineral-based casting compound and let it dry before pulling it off. 5. He made several "pulls" using different compound mixtures to match the granite face. Then he picked the best match for color and texture. 6. He filled his rubber nose mold with the preferred compound and while the compound was wet, pressed it against the surround. 7. He waited 3 or 4 days for the compound to dry before demolding. 8. What came out was a new nose on the front and a close fit to the pitted statue on the back. He attached the new nose to the statue in mid or late July and I discovered it a week later.

And what does this new nose look like? It reminds me of the nose of Cyrano de Bergerac as brilliantly played by José Ferrer in the flicks. That nose was longer with an upward flip to the tip. M.C. said he studied pictures of noses in "The New York Times," from which Plácido Domingo chose his nose to sing the part of Cyrano at the Met. Did M.C. use the Times pictures to create his? He enjoyed them, but no. For a model he chose the nose of his girlfriend. His creation is asymmetrical. It twists slightly and complements the turn of Mother's head.

F.G.R Roth (1872-1944) made the statue of Mother Goose in 1938. It is close to the East Drive and south of 72nd St. Transverse. There's more work to be done to Mother's arm and the cat. But the new nose looks swell. Go take a look. My thanks to M. C. Reiley for taking these pictures and to Tom Rinaldi for making prints and sending them to me.



Ahead of the Crowd

When the days are hot and humid and fall is only a coming event, birds are already migrating south. Birders have been seeing flycatchers, warblers and vireos. The selection is varied but not plentiful.

A flock of shore birds came in when part of Rowboat Lake was drained and mudflats appeared. As Chuck McAlexander said, the event was "outstanding." Happy birders were calling out the names: spotted, solitary, least and semipalmated sandpipers, plus lesser yellowlegs. Wow! Usually we get a spotty and a solitary and visit Jamaica Bay for the others.



A young pied-billed grebe appeared on August 20. Grebes are not rare but the place it chose is not common. The bird hung out with mallards twice its size at the Model Boat Pond. The pickings must have been good because the grebe stayed for 25 days. It sank from sight, hunting under water. In a minute it reappeared somewhere else. Some observers thought it was eating crayfish and mallard scraps.

Pied-billed chicks look like little zebras. As they grow older, their feathers become dull brown. We saw the last white stripes quickly fade from the face of this bird. Adult pied-bills wear only 1 stripe--around the middle of the bill. Rik Davis kindly turned his scope and camera on the bird. His picture, large and in color is wonderful. The water behind the grebe is green.

On August 28, Tony Lance and Deborah Allen saw a lark sparrow at the Lower Lobe. The Peterson Guide says it is a "rare fall transient on coast." Boy, I'll say! The only one I've seen in the East was September 6, 1962. My husband and I saw it on a sandy road near the Lighthouse at Cape May, NJ. It was a life bird for each of us and very cooperative.

I called Roger Pasquier and left a message. Peter Post told me he had seen it in the park a couple of times, but 30 or 40 years ago and didn't have the records to hand. He said one was seen in the past 5 years by many people. It was in the ball fields at the North End of the park. Although Peter missed that one, he says he sees lark sparrows in the fall at the outer islands of New York City. Roger left me a phone message to say that the first lark sparrow in Central Park was seen and noted August 16, 1956 by Peter Post and Pauline Messing.

The bird has a rust cap, split in two by a white stripe. The cheeks are also rust. There is a long, white stripe over the eye and a short curved, white line under the eye, (like bags.) A black line starts at the bill, and branches before the eye. The lower branch grips the cheek. The upper branch goes through the eye and clings along the edge of the rusty cheek. The throat and breast of the bird are white. There are black marks on each side of the throat and in the center of the breast. The outer corners of the bird's tail are white like a towhee, useful, if you see it fly. To make this sketch, I consulted 10 bird guides. But no two lark sparrow pictures look alike. Some of the variation is due to the age of the bird, body position, or molt. Each of my field marks looks like one or more of my sources and multiple plagiarism becomes research, as Tom Lehrer taught us.



Linnaeus's Legacy

I spent this summer sketching flowers around the park in order to learn their names and whether Linnaeus classified them 300 years ago. People tell me to take photos, which are much quicker. No. Sketching teaches you to see. Does the flower have a hood? Do the petals roll back? Are the leaves alternate, opposite, smooth, toothy, divided as fine as a fern, clasp the stalk? It's easy to discover your mistakes half way through the sketch.

I have been grumbling my way through some 60 sketches either made in the park or from samples I took home. If I know the flower, I look it up in a guide to learn how Peterson, Newcomb and others dealt with it. Sometimes this is like getting good advice and saves a lot of false starts. Draw the plant from this angle and it will make more sense to the viewer. Don't try to render every tiny little flower. Give the over-all impression. If I don't know the plant, I sketch it and then look for it in the guides. The detective work is fun and to find a plant's common and scientific name is a victory. But few flower guides give the names of the people who identified and classified each plant. It's frustrating not to know whose name should appear with the plant. I have been given 3 precious lists totaling more than 160 plants, every one identified by Linnaeus.

I am indebted to Joan Haavie who gave me 2 lists of Linnaean plants with Swedish and scientific names. The Stockholm list was of plants that would decorate the capitol to celebrate his 300th birthday. Joan's local allotment list was one of many planned for community gardens all over the country. Some of the plants were assigned to each local garden to insure that a huge variety of plants were displayed. Each local club could also pick some of their favorites. The Flower Power of Sweden must be awesome. Joan's lists included more than 100 plants. It took me 2 months to find the American names and see if some were in the park. Diane Schaub, Curator of Conservatory Garden made me a wonderful list of the Linnaean plants and their 2007 location in the garden. Again, it took me lots of time to find the American names to match her scientific ones. Stephen Baldonado, a Zone Gardener who works with volunteers, took me

through the garden and pointed out some late summer Linnaean plants to sketch. My sincere thanks to all these people for their help. Here are a few samples from Linnaeus's larder. There's more to come: ferns, insects and a zillion flowers.



Goldenrod *Solidago* blooms in Wild Flower Meadow and Shakespeare Garden.



Giant Sunflower *Helianthus giganteus* has gold flowers with seedy centers. Big leaves on long stems circle around tall, hairy stalk. In South Garden of Conservatory Garden.



Tansey *Tanacetum vulgare* has flat, yellow flowers & fine-cut leaves. A big clump grows by Bowling Green fence at West Drive, south of 72 St.



Phlox *Phlox vulgaris* has clusters of pink flowers and dark pink centers. In South Garden of Conservatory Garden. White flox bloom in Shakespeare Garden.



Cardinal Flower *Lobelia cardinalis* has scarlet-red flowers. Fall hummingbirds visit it at Azalea Pond, Boat House Parking Lot Garden, and Maintenance Meadow.



Sweet Pepperbush *Clethra alnifolia* grows by Hallett Sanctuary, around meadow of Strawberry Field, and by Swampy Pin Oak benches. Fragrant spikes of tiny, white flowers lure butterflies, bees, and humans.

→ Fall Bird and Tree Walks: Sundays, 9 AM at the Boathouse, Starting Sept. 16. Wednesdays, 9 AM at 76 St. and Fifth Ave. (just inside on the benches), Starting Sept. 19. A set of five walks \$35. A single walk \$10 exact.

THE ELLIOTT NEWSLETTER

Nature Notes from Central Park

Vol. 13, No.5

September~~October, 2007

Tardy Autumn Strolls the Land

It's been a strange fall. Very cool weather was followed by hot weather and no rain, which was followed by overcast, humid weather with small showers. None of this weather brought in great flocks of birds. Little birds arrived and stayed mostly in the tree tops, pursuing bugs. A tall ginkgo at the south edge of Strawberry Field was buggy enough to attract a yellow-bellied sapsucker or two. These woodpeckers circled the trunk drilling horizontal lines of tiny holes in the bark. The holes are just deep enough to let sap escape. Sap holes attract passing insects that discover they are sipping but sticking. Returning sapsuckers visit each hole and enjoy a sweetmeat snack. Some little birds, especially Cape May Warblers, watch the process and get into the act. They visit the holes, are chased off by the woodpeckers, but return. Standing beneath the tree, birders watched adult and confusing fall Cape Mays repeatedly shooed away by irate woodpeckers. When the warblers flew to a nearby pine, they would rest on an open branch and birders got fine looks at their field marks. A week later the warblers were still filching sap. It must taste sweet because hummingbirds also follow sapsuckers about to get free sips. The sap wells dry up but tiny scars leave a dotted line on the trunk where the sapsucker has been.

My first Wednesday class visited the Hercules club tree near the 77th St. Playground. All the fuchsia flower-and-seed holders looked very handsome. But we were about a week late. The tree had been picked clean. We went to Evodia Field to visit the other member of the Yew family. The old evodia tree bore plenty of fuchsia clusters but the seeds were not yet ripe. A week later, birds were standing on top of each cluster pecking away at tiny seeds the size of BBs.

Swainson's and wood thrush looked out at us briefly and went right on with their meal. It's messy eating. Grab some seeds and others rain down to the ground.



In Tupelo Meadow, great flocks of flickers flew in and out of the mighty tree. They would dive in and disappear, then fly out flashing yellow wing shafts and white rumps. They were joined by starlings and robins who sometimes looked out as they ate. A week later, this tree with thousands of seeds had been picked clean. When the green fruit on long stalks turns black, the pulp is thin, oily, acidic and very popular with many birds. This year the fruit was really plump—fatter than I ever remember.

The tupelo tree is a feast for birds at the end of September. It became a feast for our eyes a month later. Starting at the crown orange color outlines then fills the dark green leaves as it spreads toward the base of the tree. Leaves turn from orange to red in a day or so and when the lowest branches are aflame, the crown is covered in heart-piercing scarlet. People enter the field to photograph or stand and gaze in silence. Just as the conflagration is complete, rain and wind arrive to whisk live sparks to the ground.

October is a month to see enormous flocks of robins. Some of them have flown in from coastal Quebec, Labrador and Newfoundland. These birds do not look like our local ones. Their backs and heads are darker and the breast is deep rich rust. They are a subspecies of *Turdus migratorius* named *nigrideus*. The males are particularly easy to notice and admire.

Another fall visitor seen on the ground is a western palm warbler. Unlike the *nigrideus* robins, this bird has much less color than our local palms. It's a brownish bird with a whitish belly. The only yellow on it is under the tail. But the bird's tail constantly pumps up and down, giving away its identity. This fall there have been lots of western palm warblers in the park.

A rare Connecticut warbler appeared on September 19. Sibley describes the bird as "uncommon, secretive and difficult to spot." I learned the bird was at Sparrow Ridge north of Tanner Spring and east of the West Drive. As I hustled my group along, some of them said they were leaving. Wait, I commanded, so they did. We had no trouble finding the location. When we arrived, a large crowd was intently looking at the ground. Each of us was instructed where to look by members of the crowd. And there, in splendid nonchalance, was the Connecticut warbler. Photographers were so close they all but stepped on it. The bird paid no attention to any of us. It went right on working through the grass eating seeds. We could see its gray-brown hood, the white eye-ring, the color cut-off between hood and belly and yellow under the tail. There was a white dot halfway down the leading edge of the wing which owners of a new guide confidently told us showed it was an immature bird. Well, it looked young; surprised by the world and trusting. Every member of my group got good looks at this bird and went away pleased.

One Sunday John O'Hara and his daughter came into the Maintenance Meadow with a brown paper bag. Inside was a brown creeper. They found it on the sidewalk at 85th St. What should they do with it? I suggested they find a tree with a crotch low enough to reach and lay the bird there. They did and stepped back. The bird came to and began climbing up the trunk.

On Saturday, October 13, Sheila Darnborough and I were in the park and heard of rusty blackbirds on the mudflats. The mudflats are a new birding area caused by draining the Rowboat Lake for landscape improvements. Sure enough when we arrived at the rocky outcrop in front of the Ladies Pavilion, we saw 2 dark birds and 1 in brown winter color. I got to see one black and one brown rusty blackbird in the same glass, which was a birding first for me. Another first was shared with Chuck McAlexander and the Wednesday class. We came upon a birding hot spot in Muggers Woods. There were Swainson's and hermit thrushes and best of all, 3 brown thrashers in one glass. When I gave this 3-in-1 account to Dan Weaver, he topped it. On October 20 they looked into a crabapple tree at the northwest corner of Belvedere Castle and saw all 3 mimic thrushes; thrasher, cat bird and mockingbird eating the fruit.

Dan put up bird feeders made by Chuck McAlexander early this fall and filled them with safflower seeds. I looked safflower up in my dictionaries and learned its scientific name is *Carthamus tinctorious*, a thistle-like plant from Asia with large, orange flowers. Word experts trace the name through Old Dutch, French and Italian and think it originally was a mistranslation from old Arabic. The plant's dried flower petals were used to dye cloth. Seeds were used for cooking oil, cosmetics, paints, and medicines. In Central Park, the safflower seeds are a treat for the little birds and some of the bullies don't like them. As you can see in my true-size sketch, the seeds are small and white. Dan added black sunflower seeds for comparison. Safflower seeds attract chickadees, goldfinch, titmice and white breasted nuthatch. Our bird class watched in amazement as a chickadee, titmouse, and nuthatch waited impatiently to get into a feeder being clogged by a Carolina wren. We have never seen a wren inside a feeder before but this one clearly had no plans to give way to others.

This fall I saw woodpeckers sticking their heads into a feeder hole. "What a pity," I said to Chuck. "The hole is too small to enter and they can't reach the seed." "Yes they can," he replied. "They grab seeds with their tongues." I know that woodpeckers have long tongues that are coiled inside their skulls. They extend the tongue for food, then retract and roll it up, like a window shade. I learned how long a woodpecker tongue can be when I saw a speaker at a Linnaean Society meeting hold a poor downy by its tongue. But I never saw one in action. Chuck says he's seen a downy and a red-bellied tongue up seeds when he was close to the feeder in bright light. What a great picture that would make for this newsletter!



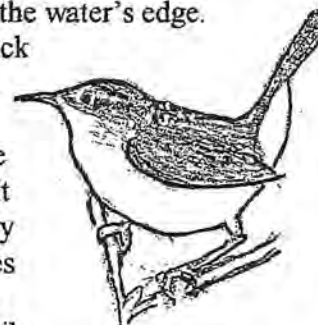


Birders complain about the decline in the numbers of birds to see in our park. This fall, the migration seemed really meager. But some birds such as chickadees and red-breasted nuthatches arrived early in surprising numbers. They swept through the trees and were soon gone.

Other birds arrived in large numbers and stayed. There were many more indigo buntings, not in glorious blue, but rich brown with a dark bluish tail. We saw many white-crowned sparrows, both young and adult. These sparrows are very common in the Mid-West and West and seem to be spreading east. My Sunday group saw a young white-crown hop out of the garden at the Boathouse parking lot and peck for food under a car. Behind the garden fence we saw pale young goldfinches yanking out seedy centers from 10 foot high Jerusalem artichokes. Squirrels were doing the same thing!

Lots of wrens have been through the park this fall: house, Carolina, winter, and on October 17, marsh wrens in 2 locations. I saw pine warblers (common but not colorful) and just one yellow-rumped warbler in the grass with chipping and field sparrows. On the fence were phoebes and many purple finches were in crabapples. Sparrows vacuumed the grass for seeds and with them were black-capped chickadees leaping about like jumping jacks after insects. On the 17th, I strolled to Willow Rock where I found Jeff Kimball. He was joyfully excited because he had been photographing a marsh wren in the phragmites below the rocks at the water's edge.

I sat down on a rock to wait and watch. My first look was of the dark back sprinkled with tiny white dots between the wings. I was joined by Sylvia Cohn and we saw the wren tail and body shape. Sylvia left and I continued to watch. Eventually the bird came out and paused in an opening long enough to show the white line over its eye. The line was not long and smooth as it is in the guides. It was short, thick in the middle, and sketchy at both ends. Remembering the starry back, I realized the dots I saw were scattered, not arranged in white vertical lines from shoulder to shoulder-- like a cape. It must have been young. What a gift it was to see this little bird. I haven't seen a marsh wren in years, and in such detail.



The weather changed October 28-29. Cold winds blew in and the temperature dropped to 40 degrees. Chuck was at the Reservoir early Monday morning and saw huge flocks of robins flying, not in a stream but in bunches. They clearly felt it was time to go but they were flying northeast! Flocks of juncos and titmice were migrating closer to the ground. They made short hops through the trees, feeding as they went. Later at the Great Hill Nels Erickson and I saw grackles doing the same thing. Calling and eating as they worked through the leaves.

Late Blooms and Seeds in Wildflower Meadow

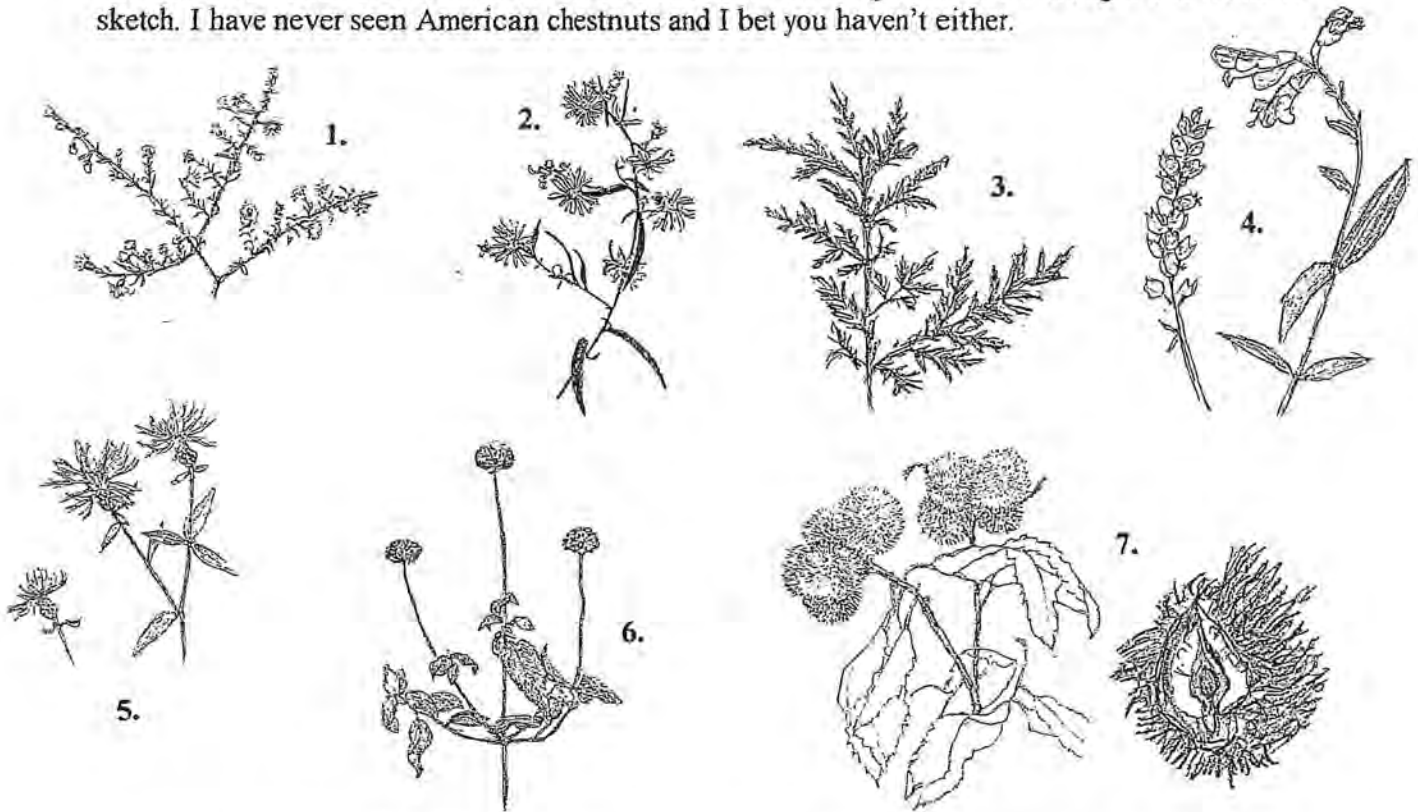
On October 3, I met Regina Alvarez who is now the Director of Horticulture for Woodlands Section 3, 5, and 6. Together we visited the Wild Flower Meadow and collected specimens for this newsletter. There were 2 asters: heath and smooth. Heath aster *A. ericoides* 1. is very bushy having tiny leaves and many small, white flowers with yellow centers. Smooth aster *A. laevis* 2. has white flowers and smooth, thick, stiff leaves, mostly toothless that clasp the stem. Both of these plants were classified by Linnaeus. Regina cut me a bit of ragweed *Ambrosia artemisifolia* 3. which she considers a pest with an inappropriate scientific name. The yellow flowers scatter seed that causes hay fever.

We were both delighted to see False Dragonhead or obedient plant *Physostegia virginiana* 4. The rosy, 3-lobed horn flowers look like snapdragons. They are arranged in spikes and the leaves are lance-shaped and toothy. I found this plant near Cleopatra's Needle this

and the leaves are lance-shaped and toothy. I found this plant near Cleopatra's Needle this summer and had no idea what it was until I saw Newcomb's illustration and read the text. If you push one of the dragon's heads in a new direction, it will obediently remain there for a while. I explained how I found the plant via its behavior and demonstrated. We both laughed. There was only one bloom left so Regina gave me a strand of seeds.

We left the Wild Flower Meadow with our samples and went to Regina's uptown office. Over lunch, she labeled the plants with common and scientific names and an L. if they were classified by Linnaeus. Most were, including knapweed, which seemed to be a problem. The flowers look like thistles but they are soft and the base looks like a pineapple. Was it a black or brown knapweed? At the window, Regina and I peered at the base and thought the dots or bracts looked brown. The outer flower petals were gracefully fringed. So this had to be brown knapweed *Centaurea jacea* 5. Bee Balm or Oswego Tea *Monarda didyma* 6. is a plant with wonderful names to roll around in your mouth. All of them. In summer the flowers are whorls of bright red spikes. In fall, when the petals are gone, the dense, dry, flower head remains. A group of 3 looked like a fancy candelabra to me.

Regina identified the samples with lightning speed before she was called to 2 meetings. She gave me a branch with leaves and lots of itchy-ball fruit. It turned out to be American chestnut *Castanea dentate* 7. from the Great Hill. Millions of these trees were wiped out by chestnut blight, a fungal disease brought here a century ago. Efforts have been made to cross survivors with European chestnuts to withstand the blight. A group of chestnuts that had been crossed for disease protection and backcrossed for looks, were planted on the Great Hill for Arbor Day, on April 28, 2000. Nels and I found them at the southeast edge of the hilltop. Only one and a half trees are left. We found cracked shells on the ground and I brought one home to sketch. I have never seen American chestnuts and I bet you haven't either.



THE ELLIOTT NEWSLETTER

Nature Notes from Central Park

Vol. 13, No. 6

November~December, 2007

A Glut of Finches

Flocks of finches arrived in the park and the surrounding New York area in October and November. Birders speculated that the irruption was due to lack of food farther north caused by bud worm on the evergreen trees. My friend Dora in Iceland sent me a clipping from a Reykjavik newspaper. It showed a human hand holding 2 siskins *Cardulis spinus*. She explained the siskin is a rare bird in Iceland but at the end of October there were suddenly hundreds of them, maybe due to lack of food in Europe. The paper said that 63 had been tagged (or banded) before October 29. Eurasian siskins look similar to our North American pine siskins *Cardulis pinus*. Both wear yellow wing markings but male European siskins in breeding plumage have more yellow-green on the back and a yellow hoop that extends from the eye, around the cheek and forward to join the yellow breast. In winter they look as bright as ours do in summer. Not only do they have more color, they have an extra "s" in their scientific name. As with Iceland, siskins are not common here.

Dan Weaver put up long, mesh bags full of small, black thistle seeds. These hanging "socks" were immediately covered with American goldfinch in winter drab. They were joined by—you guessed it—pine siskins. I heard of 3 pine siskins in the park and managed to see 2 of them on a sock with plenty of goldfinch. The sock was hung over the sundial in Shakespeare Garden and under tree branches that gave them protection from hungry hawks. All the birds looked drab but the siskins were the only ones with stripes on their backs. Chuck said one of the two had a yellow wing bar.

At the feeders in the Evodia Field there have been chickadees, tufted titmice, and white and red-breasted nuthatch. Numbers of purple finch including plenty of gorgeous males went through the park this fall. We saw them feeding in crabapple trees and at the feeders. Surprisingly, house finch came later. They stay. One house finch visits orange slices that are nailed to a post. So far he seems to be the only bird to visit the fruit. Chuck McAlexander made wide, round entrance holes in 2 cocoanuts and drained out the milk. He drilled a 1 ½" hole on the side, a little above center for the entrance. He drilled holes in 2 of the 3 dark dents on the top of the cocoanut and threaded a stainless steel wire through them and made a loop to hang the feeder. Through the entrance hole Chuck filled the cavity with peanut butter, raw peanuts and seeds such as millet and cornmeal. For a while no birds visited the cocoanuts. Then a titmouse discovered the food. Now many copycat birds patronize the shells.

All fall I visited the sour gum or black tupelo tree in Tupelo Meadow. The weather was mild which encouraged the tree to go for a leaf-cling record. It turned brilliant scarlet in October. The skies darkened, the rain fell and the winds blew. But the leaves did NOT blow away. The skies cleared and in succeeding days the leaves began to fall sedately and slowly. In early November there were still plenty of orange leaves in the boughs and a thin carpet of leaves on the ground.

I visited the tree with Chuck and Dan on November 19, expecting to see bare limbs raised in surrender to the sky. But to my utter amazement, I saw a freckling of dull orange leaves. They dotted every branch and sketched the full shape of the crown. By then, the leaf carpet under the tree was noticeably thicker, but the layered leaves were still orange.

Chuck named some birds in the nearby sweet gum. From memory and without looking, I said I thought he would find they were cedar waxwings. He looked again and was startled to

agree. We watched a flock of them leave the sweet gum and fly to the tupelo. Instantly and simultaneously, we saw a bird contesting with a waxwing. It was a bluebird! While I watched the standoff, Chuck did a quick census of the flock. He counted 8 bluebirds before they rose and worked their way through the trees heading south. No, he said, they were moving too fast for us to follow them on the ground. I thought the one I watched in detail was young. The back was blue enough but the orange breast seemed high and short. A lot of white belly showed underneath. I checked the Sibley Guide and realized it really was an adult. Standing under the bird I had a larger view of its underpants than its vest. In all the years I have been birding in Central Park, this is only the second time I have ever seen bluebirds. Usually, when these birds are seen by a lucky few, it is very early or late in the day and the birds are eating berries in trees on the west side of the Great Lawn. I asked my companions what time it was. About 10:20, an unusual hour for bluebirds. Well the day was overcast, cool and damp and the park was mostly empty. We left the Tupelo Meadow and went to Shakespeare Garden. It was there I saw a sock full of goldfinch and 2 pine siskins. On a perfect morning, it's wise to quit the park when your cup of gratitude is full.

Three days later, on Thanksgiving Day, Dan had plenty to be grateful for. He was in the park with Heydi Lopes and Liz Karp. It was 40 degrees and the sky was overcast. At 10:40 AM they were at the Oven when Liz drew their attention to a strange bird. Heydi looked and suddenly said it was a WHITE-WINGED CROSSBILL!! The bird was in a tree at eye level some 8 to 15 feet away. As they watched it dropped down to the stream below and took a bath. Then it flew up to eye level and preened. Unfortunately a red-tailed hawk flew over and scattered all the birds. The birders consulted a National Geographic guide and confirmed that the bird was a male white-winged crossbill. They reported their find but it was dismissed because their names were not known and respected. One of them called Starr Saphir who urged them to write a detailed report and submit it. The bird was far too important for Central Park records to ignore. Each of them wrote, signed and sent a separate report. Their sighting was accepted and put on the Rare Bird Alert. There had been a surprising irruption of crossbills on Long Island. Most of them were red crossbills. A flock of about 100 were seen heading South and out to sea. There were also several sightings of white-winged crossbills.

I got out my guides and found that red crossbills vary greatly in appearance. Some are small. Some are quite large. There are 9 forms of North American red crossbills and fights among bird experts take place over whether to split them up into a group of sub-species.

The white-winged crossbill, on the other hand, is singular. It is smaller, more slender, with longer tail and a slimmer bill. In every appearance---as stripy young, stripy adult females or rose-pink adult males---the birds wear 2 large, white bars on each wing. All over the northern part of our continent these birds look alike. And they are circumpolar so they really get around. I don't know what their local names are in Finland, Russia or China, but their scientific name in those places as well as Canada and Alaska is *Loxia leucoptera*. European bird guides call them two-barred crossbills. Lars Jonsson, in "Birds of Europe" published by Princeton University Press, made **spectacular** portraits of many finches including the white-winged and various red crossbills.

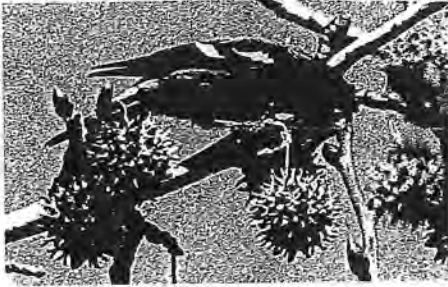
I learned that red and white-winged crossbills are the only birds in the world with the peculiar bill arrangement for which they are named. I have been told or else read somewhere that these birds are born with a perfectly straight upper and lower bill. In "The Sibley Guide to Bird Life & Behavior," I learned that crossbills depend almost entirely on seeds for their food. They often live in dense forests and inhabit the canopy eating seeds. Partially digested seed is regurgitated and poured down the throats of their young. After the young fledge, they continue to be fed seed porridge by their parents for 15 to 30 days. During that time the female may find another mate and start a new family---leaving the male to continue feeding his young alone. So



what happens after a month? Are the young taught to endure disfigurement, twist their bills and feed themselves? It's a mystery, but the bills do twist.

Why is twisting one bill over the other an advantage? I think it's because if you open the scales of tough woody cones for the seeds inside, you need a lot of strength. "The Smithsonian Handbook of North American Birds, Eastern Region" says the birds use the tips of their bills to "spread" cone scales while removing the seed with their tongues. Wow. To find out more we need to see crossbills feeding in slow motion on film.

I began searching for Central Park records of crossbills. A male white-winged was seen by Peter Post Nov. 17, 1957. That makes 2 park records exactly 50 years apart. I asked for others and was told Deborah Allen had seen and photographed the bird in the north end of the park.



I talked to Deb who saw the bird with Bob DiCandido Dec. 4, 2001. It was with a flock of finches, high in a tree near Lasker Rink. She said she only got one photo and kindly sent me a print for this newsletter. The bird is turned from the camera so you can't see the head and bill. But you can clearly see the large, white wing bars on black wings. The smooth belly without streaks tells you it's a male, easier to identify than a streaked female. Thanks Deb! Yours may be the only photo of a crossbill in Central Park.

The most surprising thing about this picture is that it shows the bird is eating seed, not from a cone, but from the spiky balls of a sweet gum tree. The seeds inside the woody spikes are very tiny. It's like licking up dust! Although I saw a red crossbill in Alaska, I have never seen a white-winged. Lucky Lenore Swenson once listed it by sight and by sound. She saw the bird from a Long Island parking lot and heard it crunching food. She says they are really noisy eaters!

I was hoping the irruption would produce a crossbill, or a siskin, or an evening grosbeak on our Christmas Count. We haven't listed an evening grosbeak in about 30 years. It was not to be. Jeff Nulle correctly named this year's count as

Christmas Count Dracula

I awoke on Dec. 16, 2007 at 8 AM. I smiled, rolled over and went back to sleep. It is delicious to see rain splattering the window and know you don't have to go out in it. For twenty years I organized and tabulated that count in all kinds of weather. Now I am retired and released from duty, without guilt. My only job is to report on the count in this newsletter. So I went to the party at the Arsenal, imbibed and ate and talked to bird watchers before the count began.

When I asked how it had gone, I was told the day was dark and it was hard to see. They knew certain birds were right there but it was too dark to identify them. The skies kept drizzling and they had to keep wiping splats off their binoculars. They would spot a bird and by the time they cleaned the glass, the bird had flown away.

The room at the Arsenal was not crowded. The bird watchers who stayed to report and hear the section totals looked subdued and the noise level was low. We were greeted by Parks Commissioner Adrian Benepe, who said appreciative things to the birders and kind things about me. Glenn Phillips, Executive Director of New York City Audubon stood at the podium to receive the count for each bird in the 7 sections of the park. As he repeated each number Regina Alvarez typed it into the computer and numbers were flashed up on the screen. There were high numbers for many of the usual suspects and some were remarkably high. When we gave section numbers for white-throated sparrows they seemed so high I asked for a total. The machine couldn't give totals but some mathematician in the room said it was over a thousand. That, I said, it the biggest count of white-throats we've ever had. The observation was picked up by the press. There were other even greater surprises, as I learned later.

I went through my files and fished out the count totals for 1999, the Centennial Year in Central Park. For that important date, the weather was suitable. It was bright at 8 and sunny by 10 AM. I picked 14 birds that were here in big numbers for one or both counts. A look at the totals will show you how wildly the populations can vary. Pigeon numbers may be down because more hawks are eating them or they are being poisoned. Cedar Waxings follow the food. This year it's plentiful due to warm/wet weather. Chickadees and Titmice are around, just not here.

	1999	2007
Canada Goose	170	197
Mallard	656	491
Ruddy Duck	209	157
Ring-billed Gull	774	538
Herring Gull.....	319	663
Rock Pigeon.....	1157	603
Blue Jay	148	106
Black-capped Chickadee.....	169	25
Tufted Titmouse.....	155	91
European Starling.....	370	799
Cedar Waxwing.....	0	219
White-throated Sparrow.....	199	1423
Common Grackle.....	68	1491
House Sparrow.....	1013	441

There were 62 species on the day of the Centennial Count. With birds seen in the count period, we had a total of 68 bird species, and 6469 individuals. This year there were 57 species on count day and with birds in the count period, a total of only 61 species. But the total number of individuals counted is 7770, an increase of 1301 birds. I'm told it's the biggest population count ever recorded in the park. Some of the birds listed above did their part. And so did all the wonderful birders who slogged around in the dark and counted them. Hats off to you all!

Fabulous Farewell

There was one more finch to round out the bird records this year. On December 30, a few birders were at the Evodia Field feeders. Down in the grass near the ground by the fence, Pat Pollock noticed a bird and called Jack Meyers attention to it. The bird flew up to a tree. It was a streaked bird the size of a goldfinch. As Jack watched, the bird turned to face him. He could see the red cap and black throat of a redpoll. Something flew over (probably a hawk) and scattered all the birds before the people with Jack could see the finch.

Jack says there were redpolls at the feeders 2 or 3 years ago, that came and stayed. The word spread and lots of birders came in to see them. I'm so glad Jack saw this bird at year's end. But I'm sorry no evening grosbeaks, pine siskins, crossbills or redpolls came to this year's count.