

THE ELLIOTT NEWSLETTER

Nature Notes from Central Park

Vol. 3 No. 1

January 1997

Not So Many but Select

Hopes for this year's Christmas Count were not high. As David Krauss said, the fall was warm, the drought over, the food plentiful and the season's winds were from the southwest. All of these things would encourage birds to remain north of us, not with us. For the day of the count, Mother Nature was kind. No rain. No sleet. Cold but without high winds.

A crowd of counters gathered at the Pumping Station beside the southeast corner of the Reservoir and we divided into 7 teams for the 7 sections of the park. At noontime we reassembled at the corner room of the Boathouse to announce the totals for each section and mark sheets for the total count. Late that day I heard from people who were out in the afternoon. They added a winter wren, another catbird, a double-crested cormorant and a sharp-shinned hawk. The most dramatic bird of the day was an immature Nashville warbler. It was seen by a number of birders in the sloping meadow just east of the Loch. The warbler was traveling with sparrows but foraging above the ground, working the goldenrod. We have had a number of warblers on the Christmas Bird Count over the years but this is probably the first Nashville.

Central Park's totals are part of a much larger tabulation called the Lower Hudson Count. The center of this count area is the middle of the Hudson River at 60th St. As with other count areas across the country, it describes a 15-mile radius-- more or less. Norman Stotz of New York City Audubon tabulated all of the Lower Hudson count this year. He says people counted birds in Inwood Park, Riverside Park, Central Park and Battery Park. Part of the Harbor area and a bit of Staten Island were counted via the Staten Island Ferry. This year birders called Norman and arranged to count in Tompkins Square Park. In the East River birds were counted on Wards and Randalls Island. In New Jersey people counted birds along the Palisades, in Liberty State Park, the Hackensack Meadows, plus other areas including a cemetery. Norman says all the park totals were down from last year but because new areas were counted in New Jersey, the area total didn't drop.

This year's avian delights included a scarlet tanager at Inwood Park. These birds have been loitering late in that park and it was only a matter of time before bird and count day coincided. A dickcissel was seen somewhere in New Jersey. The only peregrine falcon of the count was seen at Riverside Park soaring near Riverside Church where they nest.

Central Park usually provides many species and large populations of birds for the Lower Hudson count. In the heart of the city, it is large, mostly contiguous, noticeable to birds from the air, and sufficiently habitat-friendly to keep them through some or all of the winter. I knew that Central Park contributes to the Lower Hudson Count but I never realized how generously. This year Norman was so prompt in mailing the Lower Hudson results I can give you some comparisons.

Aside from the Nashville warbler, Central Park produced a Richardson's (small) Canada goose, the only (2) ring-necked ducks, the only sharp-shinned hawk, the only American kestrels, and most of the woodpeckers. We usually find a brown creeper working the trees which turns out to be the only one for the entire count. This year they and we surpassed ourselves with a total of 4.

Central Park hosted 1 of the 2 winter wrens, 126 of the 138 robins, all the gray catbirds, Eastern towhees and common grackles. Half the fox sparrows, 40 of the 73 red-wings, more than half of the white-throated sparrows and over a third of the American goldfinches also graced our park. And what of the best-known city birds? In Central Park birders tabulated more than a third of the rock doves and starlings, more than half of the house finches and house sparrows. Abundant birds are dismissed as "junk birds" by some watchers and I suspect all of these, except perhaps the house finches, were undercounted everywhere. A long-eared owl that has been in Central Park this fall was rediscovered in pines on Cedar Hill the day after the count. It was probably there on count day but hidden and overlooked.

I am startled to tell you that Central Park reported 49 of the 82 birds in this year's total. That's more than one half of the species listed for the Greater Hudson Count. The total population of birds seems less surprising. Of the 24,505 birds in the Lower Hudson Count, 4777 were counted in our park, or between one sixth and one fifth of the total. Here's the park list arranged in Norman's and National Audubon's sequence.

Central Park Christmas Count December 22, 1996

double-crested cormorant	1	American crow	38
mute swan	5	black-capped chickadee	4
Canada goose	1	tufted titmouse	15
American black duck	25	white-breasted nuthatch	3
mallard	340	brown creeper	4
Northern shoveler	23	winter wren	1
ring-necked duck	2	hermit thrush	3
bufflehead	15	American robin	126
red-breasted merganser	8	gray catbird	2
ruddy duck	45	Northern mockingbird	4
sharp-shinned hawk	1	European starling	572
red-tailed hawk	11	Nashville warbler	1
American kestrel	2	Northern cardinal	41
ring-necked pheasant	3	Eastern towhee	3
ring-billed gull	380	fox sparrow	4
herring gull	385	song sparrow	25
great black-backed gull	33	white-throated sparrow	342
rock dove	998	dark-eyed junco	42
mourning dove	28	red-winged blackbird	40
red-bellied woodpecker	17	common grackle	25
yellow-bellied sapsucker	8	brown-headed cowbird	1
downy woodpecker	34	house finch	72
hairy woodpecker	2	American goldfinch	19
Northern flicker	2	house sparrow	946
blue jay	68	TOTAL	4777

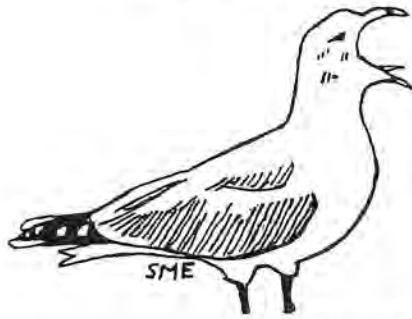
Birds seen in Count period: Dec. 23, long-eared owl 1; Dec. 24, great blue heron 1. The next count will be Dec. 21, 1997. WINTER WALK Feb. 8; weather date Feb. 9.

Tried and True

David Krauss says he's been doing the Christmas Count in Central Park every December since 1981 or 82. During his first year of serious birding he was a high school freshman at Hunter. The school, at 94th and Park Ave., was close enough for David to circle the Reservoir almost daily on his lunch hour. That is how he met Lambert Pohner and Edna Thompson and began watching with them. Lambert showed him the rare tufted duck and the bird gave him lots of teen-age pleasure. He would stroll in at noon and see birders from as far away as PA who had been standing about for maybe 2 hours. David would ask what they were looking for. They would complain and explain. "There it is," he'd say, pointing. The game was even better when they realized he wore no binoculars.

He was standing at the Reservoir one Sunday when Dick Sichel grabbed him and said, "Come to the Northwest with us." "O.K.," said David. That is how he learned about the Christmas Count. The following year he joined Lambert Pohner at the Reservoir and they did the count annually. He continued doing this count after Lambert died.

On count mornings, David arrives in the park for a 7:15 sunrise. He begins counting birds in first light as they sit on the water. The Reservoir is a night roost for gulls that fly around Manhattan. In about a half hour, they start to rise and fly around before they turn east and leave. David thinks they spend their days foraging in the East River and perhaps they go to the Hudson as well.



He sets up his telescope near the South Pump House. From there he can scan all the Reservoir except the southwest corner. He makes one pass across the water to count herring gulls with the help of his clicker-counter. As he works the clicker with his fingers, he counts the great black-backed gulls in his head. I said it sounded difficult, but apparently timing helps. There are hundreds of herring gulls but only 30 to 40 black-backs, so the count rhythms are distinct: **bb**,h,h,h,h,h,**bb**,h,h,h,h,h,h,**bb**. On his return sweep, he counts the ring-billed gulls, whose numbers may rise or fall, but are always less than the herring gulls'. This one comes to you via a nifty photo by Bob Woods.

Unfortunately, says David, the Parks Department has not lowered the water level in the Reservoir for the past 2 years. High water makes counting birds more difficult. In winters when the water is low, a north-south dyke is exposed. The dyke extends across the Reservoir and gulls stand on it, closely packed for body warmth. Floating in water, they move about. Also, on the dyke rare birds stand out and are easier to discover. What rare birds has he seen there?

Some years the laughing gulls of summer linger late into fall if it's mild, but never as late as the count. He has also seen glaucous, black-headed, and Bonaparte's gulls but before the Christmas Count. With Lambert he saw Thayer's gull, hard to identify. Since Lambert's been gone, nobody considers it worth putting in the time and effort. But birders see Thayer's in western New York State, and, says David, if the gulls are seen there, we should see them here.

For many years he reported one Iceland gull. Did it die of old age? Not it, them. David has seen several second-year birds. One year Martin Sohmer and Berry Baker joined David at the Reservoir. In the water they found a rare lesser black-backed gull. It was a little smaller than the other black-backs, with a differently shaped head. Greats have a dome head, lessers have a sloping, flatter head. This bird also had streaking on its head, which lessers wear in winter but greats don't. Eventually, the bird flew up and they could see its yellow, not pink, legs.

I am very grateful that he does the Reservoir every Christmas Count. When I asked why, he said he likes gulls. Actually, he likes sea birds, thinks their soaring, graceful flight is neat, and enjoys going out on the ocean to look for them. Also, he likes doing the same thing every year. A large

reason for doing yearly Christmas Counts, he explains, is to revisit the same areas. You see what happens and how things change. It was sad, we agreed, when all the ducks disappeared from the Reservoir and the waters around Manhattan. Now they seem to be making a comeback.

Counting Waterfowl

About a month after the Christmas Count, Jeff Nulle and I entered Central Park to count waterfowl for the Federation of New York State Bird Clubs and, as of this year, the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation. In the past, these two organizations have made separate censuses of wintering waterfowl. I was interested to learn that pilots make aerial surveys for the DEC and this year will survey the Finger Lakes, Hudson River and Long Island, where, says Bryan L. Swift, DEC's Waterfowl Specialist, "most waterfowl usually occur".

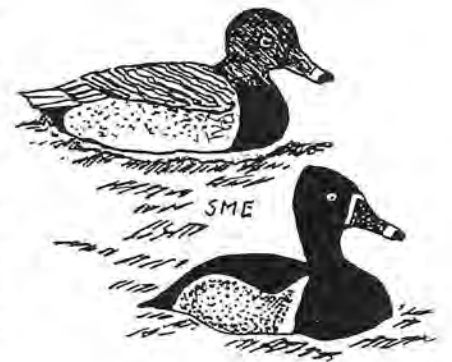
The weather has been bitterly cold with high winds and, in upstate New York, heavy snow. Local weather reports were accompanied with warnings about the wind-chill and announcers urged listeners to stay indoors if possible. So I did--for days. I told Jeff that the day of our count should not begin early-- late morning or noon would be better for the counters, and perhaps for the birds. When I stepped out, heavily layered, the day seemed almost mild with little wind. A good day to count our section of Region 10.

Jeff called at 10:30 to report he had already covered the ice of the Meer and an open patch of water at the 100 St. Pool. He knew I was anxious because I could not reach Nate Burkins who has made the count for Inwood Park in other years. Jeff kindly suggested he check for birds at the Boat Basin at 79 St. and the Hudson. What was missed at Inwood might be offset farther south.

When we met at noon he dazzled me with the birds he had seen. Off we rushed to the 59St. Pond where ducks clustered in open water while humans walked and skated on the ice. We counted 43 mallards and 5 black ducks. Walking north through the Mall, I showed Jeff where clumps of snowdrops had been flowering for the Christmas Count. Now they were dead and gone.

At the West side of Rowboat Lake we counted 70 mallards and 2 black ducks. Then 19 graceful shovelers glided into view and circled collectively to stir up lunch. At Bankrock Bridge we scanned the old hickory tree. Inside the top hole we could see the furry back of a sleeping raccoon. We moved north to the Reservoir, scanned gulls and crows on the ice, then walked to the open water east of the North Pump House. There we saw only 29 mallards, 4 black ducks, one cross of mallard and black, 3 mute swans, 81 (dingy) ruddy ducks, and 13 coots.

Looking nearer to shore, we suddenly saw the frosting on the cake. Bouncing on the water were 4 male ring-necked ducks. We could see all their handsome black, white and gray field marks, including those remarkable bills. With them was a female red-headed duck ignoring 2 gorgeous males nearby. Their russet heads and golden eyes flashed fire in low sunlight. The sun disappeared, clouds thickened, the wind arose, and tiny intermittent snowflakes began to fall again. It was time to leave. Near the park I met the Cohens and told them the good news. "Redheads!" said Sylvia, and Moe smiled. Later she called to tell me they found a canvasback while they were at the Reservoir. Oh handsome ducks of our delight, welcome back!



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Vol. 3 No. 2

February 1997

Hail and Farewell



At the end of January I was wakened from a sound sleep to hear that Michael Braun, a man in my Wednesday bird class, had died of a heart attack. He was a producer of "Titanic", now in production. I was asked to attend his funeral and wear my birding cap. Many people spoke and I explained that my occupation led to our friendship and the yellow cap was to please Michael's memory.

On spring walks I became aware of his resonant baritone voice. I asked if he were an actor, and he admitted he had been. Another day I told some birders I had been thinking of the theme song for the Firestone Hour. "Victor Herbert," said Michael, and he produced words to many old sweet songs. I've learned since that the song "If I Could Tell You" is attributed to Mrs. Firestone.

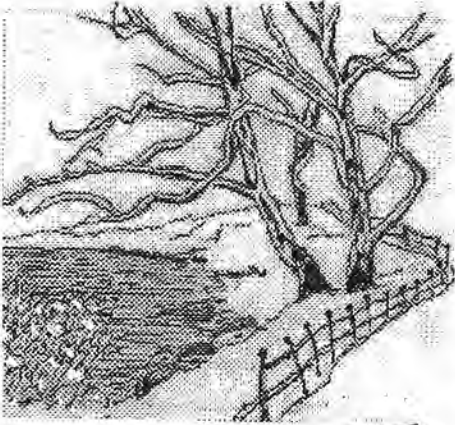
In the summer, when I had agreed to appear and whistle bird songs on TV camera for a commercial, I got cold feet and called Michael. He was soothing, explained what would happen, offered to be my agent, and told me to adopt the "persona" of a birdwatcher. I arrived ready for an adventure rather than a trial and found a roomfull of elderly actors and agents. It looked like a George Price cartoon and sounded like a cage of canaries. On camera I could deliver bird calls but could only whistle in, not out. My account of it amused Michael and the event bonded our friendship.

Michael was a private person with a compartmentalized life. From his obituary I learned he was 60, born in NYC, graduated from Harvard, worked in London for The Observer and The Sunday Times, and wrote "Love Me Do", a diary of the Beatles' first British tour. He worked for Stanley Kubrick and Roman Polanski, moved to L.A. and produced "Secret Life of Plants" by Waylon Green. He became a producer of "Titanic", said filmmaker Ed Pressman, because he knew about the skills of all sorts of people who didn't know each other.

My last view of him came on a spring morning when he lagged behind the group to talk to his friend Annie Pressman. I urged him to stop talking and smell the honeysuckle. He stepped forward, leaned down, sniffed deeply, looking as solemn as any wine taster, and pronounced it good. At Michael's post-funeral gathering in the San Remo, our host said he had watched a peregrine falcon from his window. This must have been one or the other of the pair that stayed there late into 1995 but moved away to nest somewhere else.

If the peregrines are gone the red-tailed hawks are very much here. Since Valentines Day they have been seen copulating frequently. They gather new nest material and add it to last year's pile. The nest is now quite thick on the south side of the curved window ledge but thin on the north side. The other day I saw them resting on a balcony at 73 St. and Fifth Ave., a short block south of their nest.

Early in February I met birders for a winter walk on a day that promised afternoon snow. We ended at the north end of the Reservoir and saw the coots, ring-necks, and redheads that were part of the January waterfowl count. We also saw a male bufflehead and over 100 ruddy ducks. The ruddys are still in winter drab, but what they lack in looks they make up for in numbers. I am told about 500 of them were counted in February.



SME

That day it began snowing and, as we left, Howie Moskowitz came in to take pictures of a snow-dusted world. Unlike much of the country, we've had almost no snow this year. I put several of Howie's photos together for this sketch and have struggled to push it through the scanner--a tooth-gnashing procedure.

Howie gave me his pictures Feb. 19. Neither of us had been in the park for most of the month. Weeks inside with flu made me eager to get out and it was a marvelous day. The temperature soared into the 60's and broke weather records. At Azalea Pond we admired a gaudy red-bellied woodpecker at the feeders and a pair of white-breasted nuthatches. We visited Cedar Hill to see the long-eared owl and carefully scanned evergreens for half an hour without success. Turns out the owl flapped away on the evening of the 12th and has not been seen since.

Late winter is a time to be grateful for plants. They don't fly away and they are beginning to dress themselves for spring. Along the north edge of Cedar Hill beside the 79 St. Transverse, we admired Asian witch hazel and snowdrops. The witch hazel flowers are orange with wine-red centers. The snowdrops are sparse. They grow on widely-spaced single stalks with white unopened blooms that hang like globed gas lamps. These plants have plenty of spreading room.

SME



It was a short walk from Cedar Hill to the area north of the Alice in Wonderland statue. Behind the benches we studied a pawpaw tree with the aid of Howie's winter tree book. The trunk of the pawpaw *Asimina triloba* is smooth and gray. The buds are protected by a rich brown cover that feels like flocking or velvet. Across the sidewalk we admired a triangular tree as round as a linden and covered with clusters of dangling catkins. In late light the tree's scaly bark was a patchwork of dark gray, light gray, rust, and peach. We studied Howie's guide and thought it might be an alder. I picked some catkins to bring home and sketch. They got a little crumpled in my bag and don't hang as gracefully as the ones on the tree. Howie and I nodded to the red-tailed hawks as we left the park.

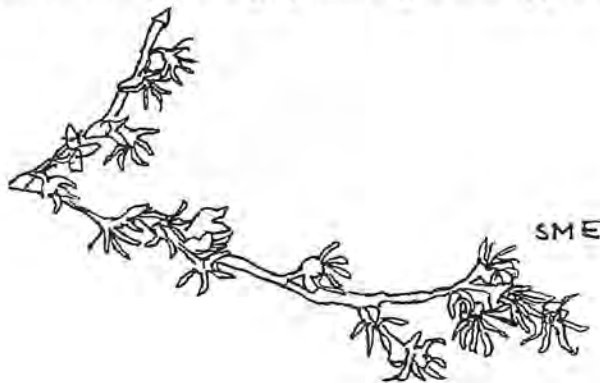


SME

Next day I called Nick Wagerik to find out if he's seen any early butterflies. No. But in Strawberry Fields he saw massive clumps of snowdrops and an American species of witch hazel with tiny, fragrant flowers. This species, says Nick, is *Hamamelis vernalis* and grows in the South. Nick reported he saw honeybees working over the flowers. I had searched in vain for them the day before, looking at trees where bee hives had been in the past. Nick's good news could not go unnoticed, so I went to Strawberry Fields in hopes of bees.

There the snowdrops are thick on the ground and sufficiently open for bees to reach pollen. But no bees buzzed. Next I studied the witch hazel. Our local species bring forth bright yellow flowers in November. These gray bushes bear dime-sized flowers. On some bushes the flowers are orange. Others bushes have red flowers. Still others are yellow. Some bushes have mixed flowers with red centers and orange petals edged and tipped in yellow.

SME



SME

I looked for bees but the sun had slipped under a cloud and the wind was cold. Probably all the bees were safe but hungry in their hive. I sniffed flowers, made sketches and moved north.

At the Ladies Pavillion, the daffodils are up 3 to 6 inches, depending on whether they grow in windswept areas or sunny, protected ones. Lenten roses are almost in bloom, but without petals they look like hang-down maroon blobs.

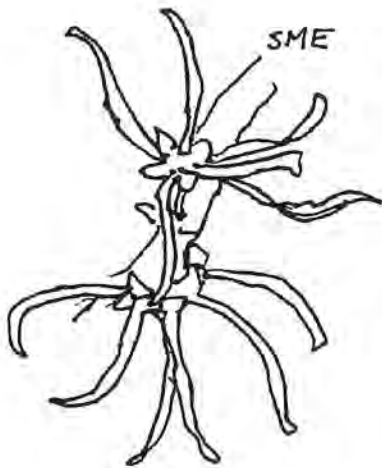
Across the sidewalk and a little north, I found a jet bead bush. It is completely bare except for the shiny black fruit in clusters of 2,3, and 4 on each branch. Jet beads must taste terrible to birds and squirrels because this fruit has had all winter to freeze and sweeten, and it is still spurned.



Out on Rowboat Lake the shovelers have split up and changed their eating habits. Some still twirl singly or in pairs, but many tip up for underwater food. Heads submerged and tails exposed, the ducks present a surprising sight. Bright orange legs and feet blend with male's rusty flanks. His belly is also rust-colored. In fact, wrap-around rust covers three sides of the body. The tail is very white and fluffy and reminds me of cottontail rabbits. When the head comes up, it gleams deep green, even in overcast light.

At the north end of Upper Lobe the willow is turning yellow. The phragmites are bright tan and red-winged blackbirds call and perch in them. Lesser celandine puts forth green leaves in Indian Cave, and under the boulders the ground looks swept. The path is long and noticable, probably the work of humans, not a woodchuck.

I returned to Cedar Hill and was sketching witch hazel blooms when Nick came along. He's right. These Asian flowers are much larger and have fewer petals than the American ones in Strawberry Fields. We visited the pawpaw, which Nick thinks is the only one in Central Park. The tree has male and female flowers and one year he tried to pollinate it. Nothing happened because the flowers ripen at different times and so prevent self-pollination. He asked if I have seen the flowers in May. I said no but now think I did and thought they were fruit. The flowers are maroon, leathery and wrinkled. This tree will continue to flower but not fruit unless another pawpaw is planted near it.



We crossed the sidewalk to the mystery tree of many catkins. Is it some kind of alder? No. Nick says it is Turkish Hazel *Corylus colurna* a native of Southeastern Europe and Asia. We admired the tassels and the bark and I suddenly realized that scaly plates completely cover the tree. Not just the lower trunk but the crown and all the branches. I don't ever remember seeing tree bark that grows this way.

I took Nick to the north end of the Boathouse to see a large abandoned wasp nest that hangs high in a tree beside the flower garden. The outer shell is disintegrating and you can see the comb inside. Nick thinks it could have been made by European wasps and I wonder if any other insect will try to use it for a home this year.

Nick said he had seen honeybees that day, but before the sun disappeared. Later I talked to Patricia Miller, who said she had been at the boat house beside Conservatory Pond late in the day. She ordered something sweet, and guess what joined her. That's right, bees.

If you are lucky enough to see a bee, don't shriek and dance about. Sudden movement alarms them. Stand or sit quietly and watch what it does. If you are close enough or have powerful binoculars, see if there are any mites clinging to the back or chest. I read about mites doing in our honeybees but perhaps not in Central Park. Bitter winter also kills many of them. Tree holes can be

drafty.

Perhaps honeybees in the wild pick the location of tree holes based on weather conditions. I have seen bees at the holes of cherry, sycamore, horse chestnut and European beech trees. In all cases the holes were on the east side of the trunk. Morning sun could warm the tree, the hive and the bees, giving them an early start on spring days. An east-side opening could give needed shade in summer. South-facing holes might be zapped by afternoon sunlight and overheat the hive. Then there's the problem of wind. In this continent, the prevailing winds are southwest. No bee would choose to fight its way out through a wind tunnel, or return to smack into guards, workers or the back wall. Wind carries rain. Blowing rain would fly through the entrance and could harm bees and their nest.

My theory of tree-hole selection is totally unencumbered by fact or statistics. It does not deal with how hives are placed inside the tree. Hive placement would be great to learn about but I don't plan to stick my arm or head into a tree hole to find out. You shouldn't either.

But if you discover bees issuing from a tree in the park, please let me know the tree's location and which side of the trunk the hole is on. If you are any good at heights, try to figure the altitude of the hole. Readers who live in other places, I would be delighted to hear about your honeybees. Originally, honeybees were imported from Europe. If you live or visit there this summer and see bees, please don't keep it to yourself. To those of you who don't feel you could pick out a honeybee in a crowd, try bumblebees. Bumblebees visit flowers but nest in the ground. If you discover a bumblebee nest you deserve praise and fame. I will be writing about bumblebees and honeybees in future issues. While ill, I read and read about bees. It has given me mental indigestion and I need some time to sort out what I've learned.

I wish to thank all of you who renewed your subscriptions to this newsletter and those of you who gave it as a gift to others. Now at the end of February I have more subscribers than I did a year ago at this time and 2/3 of the total number of subscribers for all of 1996. In addition, many people were very generous. Twenty-one readers gave me extra donations ranging from \$5 to \$40 for a total of \$220. Thank you very much!

Your largess means I have started looking at home-office photocopy machines. The best photocopy rate I have found so far is at Kinko's, where it costs \$30 an issue and the results can be sloppy for printing, collating, and stapling. My costs and headaches would be less if I could print the newsletter at home.

Machines that can print one side of letter paper and can enlarge and reduce the size of an illustration are \$700 to \$800 new. I don't know what electrical outlets they need or how much space they require. I have heard one can buy "floor samples" but don't know if the reduced cost means more repairs. If I can learn to use my scanner, I could buy a more simple copy machine for \$300. My scanner and I staggered through the illustrations for this news issue. I am not pleased with the results. I hope with practice to become more adept but the process is difficult and frustrating. If you know about copy machines or have a friend who does, or know where to get them for less, please let me know.

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March 1997

Darling Buds of March

Winter was fickle during the first two months of this year. Days of deep cold were followed by torrid temperatures that broke all weather records. Our roller-coaster climate confused us all, including the plants of Central Park. Then in March the weather settled into winter. But as the days grow longer, shrubs and trees burst winter's chrysalis and flaunt glad tidings of returning life.

In the first week of March I entered the park on a botanical quest-- to find a new planting of winter jasmine *Jasminum nudiflorum*. Nick Wagerik discovered it and showed it to Norma Collin. Good news travels well, and the day I arrived, Charles Kennedy led me to the east bank of the underpass at 81 St. and the West Drive. There it was, trailing down the bank beside the bridge path. From a distance you might think it is a forsythia because of the many small, yellow flowers. But this plant was in full flower and forsythia was not yet out.

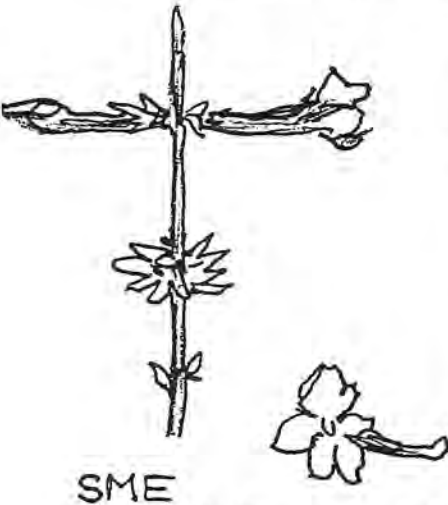
A closer look reveals the differences. Forsythia bushes display four-petaled yellow flowers strung like tolling bells along gracefully arching gray branches. The double blooms of winter jasmine, arranged in pairs, dot the length of skinny, green branches. The flowers look like double trumpets, blaring in opposite directions. If one pair blares east and west, the next pair blares north and south.

Charles cut me a small sample with 2 buds that opened the next day. Each flower produces a tube 5/8" long which opens flat to five round lobes the size of a nickle. They were bright butter-gold with a wash of rust on the tube and the underside of some of the petals. Winter jasmine can be tied to stakes, lean against walls, or cascade down banks, but it does not stand upright. If the branches seem limp, the arrangement of flowers and stems looks curiously angular and stiff.

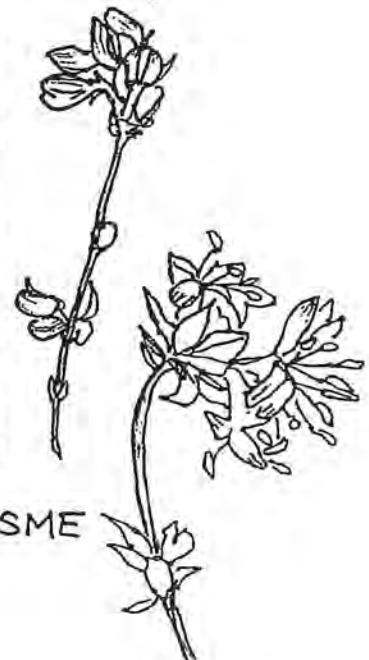
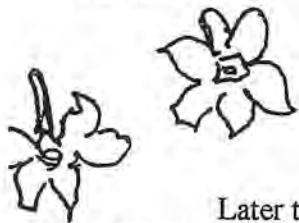
Before we visited the jasmine, Charles led me to a honeysuckle bush east of the Maintenance Building and a few steps west of East Drive. It was decked with tiny flowers braving the cold winds. They smelled delicious. Fat white buds were streaked with pale pink over most of their hunched backs.

Later that afternoon I found more honeysuckle at the northeast corner of the Weather Station and on both sides of the cut-rock steps leading to the Castle. All were in bloom, including the one that Michael Braun smelled on his last bird walk in the park. Unfurled, these pink-white flowers were arranged unevenly, with some petals curving forward and others curving backward.

Each flower is festooned with 5 male stamens. Their white filaments are topped by big anthers loaded with bright yellow pollen. The stamens remind me of dancers with thin legs and big feet, kicking out in all directions. Honeysuckles know



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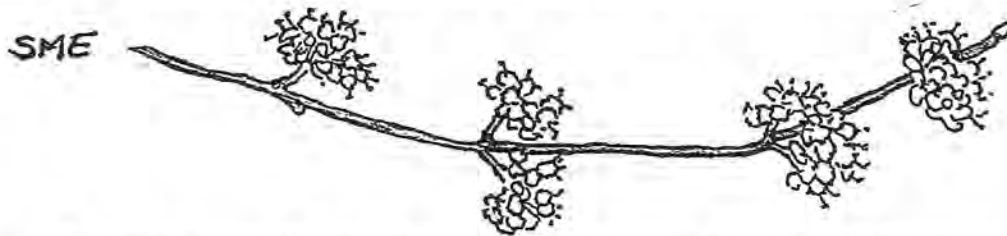


SME

it pays to advertise. Their glorious fragrance and gaudy display of pollen make them attractive to many passing insects.

The genus name for honeysuckle is *Lonicera*. They come as bushes and vines and there are hundreds of them. What's more they come as hybrids as well. I've looked through several sources but so far haven't a clue as to what species these are. I returned to take a sample of leaves. The emerging ones look like green spikes and the grown ones are round, toothless, with pointed tips. The underside is gray-green and may be fuzzy.

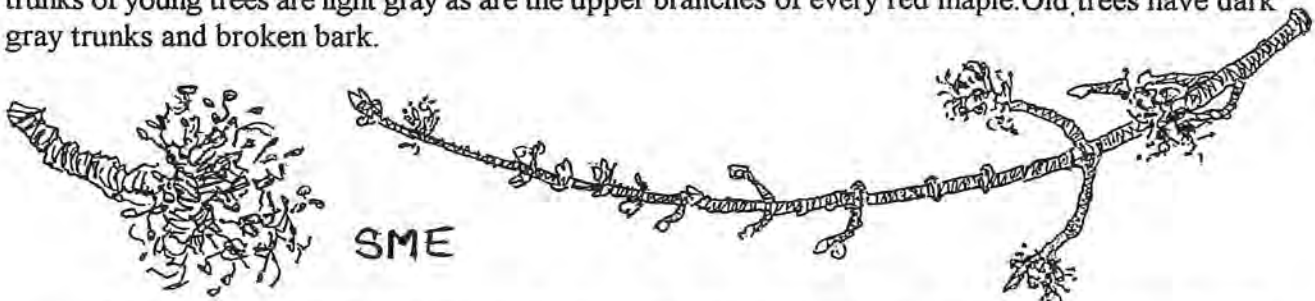
In February, a few blooms of cornelian cherry *Cornus mas* were beginning to appear. Now these tall shrubs of European dogwood are in full flower all over the park. People confuse cornus mas with forsythia but the flower arrangements differ: not single bells upon the bough, but double clusters of perky little bouquets. Each cluster looks like exploding stars. *Cornus mas* bursts into bloom before forsythia, usually by a week or more. In fall, the scarlet berries attract birds and jelly makers.



In Shakespeare Garden the scilla are up around the old mulberry tree. Their ghostly ultraviolet color is a beacon to pollinators. But this year it's been too chill for masses of bees. The Lenten roses nearby look weather-worn. Their drooping maroon flowers look healthy but many of the leaves are brown from frostbite. I checked a church calendar for Easter and found it usually comes in April. This Easter is the twenty-second and the last in March for the century. The preceding Lenten season, which began Feb. 12, has been cold and hard on the roses. Farther east, on higher garden ground, the rich blue faces of winter pansies smile out at visitors longing for spring.

Northwest of the garden in the long meadow, I found a red maple *Acer rubrum* in bloom. The flowers appear in March. Flowers decorate the branches before the leaves emerge. The clusters of wine red flowers are arranged in pairs like the yellow bouquets of cornus mas. But the maple wood is bumpier and the flowers stand out on long stalks. Only a few flower clusters decorate the base of this twig. The buds above--green with pink tips-- have yet to reveal their purpose. Some red maples produce male flowers, some bear female flowers, and some have both.

This tree wears something red for every season. In summer, the key fruits will be streaked with red; in fall, the three-lobed leaves turn to flame; and in winter, red buds tip the bare branches. The trunks of young trees are light gray as are the upper branches of every red maple. Old trees have dark gray trunks and broken bark.



My friend Mary Doherty tells me she has seen patches of crocuses in bloom by the road at the north end of the park. They bloom, too, in Shakespeare Garden, around the Castle, in front of the Maintenance Building, and near Loeb Boathouse. Over the park, daffodils nod their yellow heads.

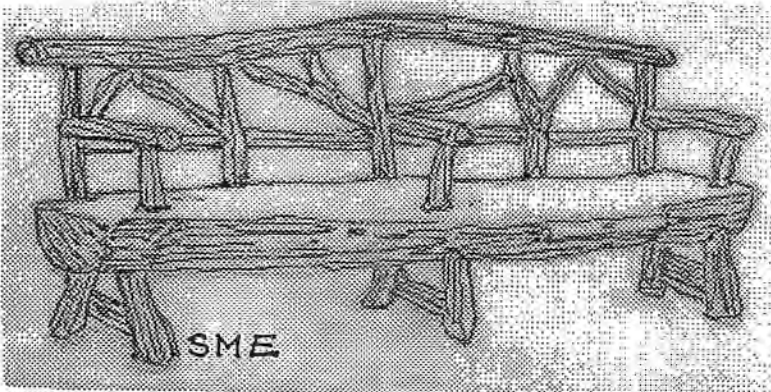
Spring arrived about 9 in the morning on March 20. After 2 hours of intermittent effort, I got an egg (chicken) to stand on end, in honor of the day and to insure good luck for the year. Why do eggs defy gravity at the equinox? I don't know. Research proved unhelpful because all explanations confine themselves to light. They tell of the sun's rays falling directly on the belly of the earth (equator), bequeathing equal hours of light and dark all over the world. I asked some friendly librarians and was told there's a gravitational pull at this time between sun, earth and moon. The moon was equidistant between first quarter and full, but I still don't know how this three-way power struggle affects the egg. I will try to report something useful by the fall equinox, September 23. On that day you have a second chance to try the egg trick for luck.

Return of Wandering Wings

The day after spring equinox, it was a pleasure to greet the new and not so new birds in Central Park. Red-winged blackbirds called from the phragmites. Birders tell me they think the female mute swan could be nesting in a group of phrags near Bow Bridge. This is where the swan nest was built in 1995.

At the bridge I heard a complaint of crows in the distance. Looking out over Rowboat Lake I saw what I thought was a large piece of white plastic. It moved, the head came up, and the plastic turned into a mute swan. Down it went again and resurfaced grinding something between its jaws, then dipped again. From legs to tail tip, there's a great spire of white feathers to a swan.

North of the swan were 33 ruddy ducks. The males are beginning to change feathers for spring. They are less drab but still not handsome enough to attract a mate. A few shovelers were with them, mostly males in good color. I'm told all 13 coots are still at the Reservoir.



Over at the Azalea Pond a new fence circles the bushes and shore. It is a preamble to improvements there. The fence is metal and open enough to see the ground birds beyond. Across the walk, Lambert Pohner's crumbling memorial bench was removed and replaced with a new one more comfortable to sit on. The seat is now a smoothed half log, shorter from knee to back. This year's birders and Lambert's ghost should enjoy sitting there. My sketch comes from Anne Shanahan's photos.

House finches twittered from nearby trees, and a goldfinch just sat and sat. The belly looked very full and a birder beside me said the head was beginning to turn yellow. Beside us, a brown creeper trundled upwards searching the bark. By comparison, an upwardly mobile white-breasted nuthatch, in the next tree, looked noticeably larger and zig-zag random. A flock of juncos foraged on the ground. Two mallards, both males, looked at us from Azalea Pond. As they turned, their heads flashed now green, now blue in the sun. Downy woodpeckers with bright red patches worked the suet feeders and in the distance we heard a red-belly call.

At Willow Rock we looked down into the Oven and saw a number of fox sparrows flashing their feathers beside a rippling stream. They were active, intent, and silent. A nearby white-throated sparrow looked scruffy by comparison. A song sparrow flew and landed near the bamboo. It turned

and displayed its stickpin. Above the trees a silent posse of grackles glided by, wings and tails spread out and motionless. I was admiring a rich-red robin when along came Dave Leal, carrying a bag of nuts. He stood by some rocks and immediately 3 cardinals appeared. "Ow!" said Dave as he tossed a nut. Dave has a bad back so I helped spread his wealth to the birds and a gray squirrel.

While warming up at Loeb Boathouse I studied the bird book and learned Starr Sapphire saw a pine warbler in the Pinetum on the last day of winter. All the Fiores saw an adult female Cooper's hawk on the first day of spring. Over at Conservatory Pond there were few hawk-watchers braving the cold but the female red-tailed hawk has been sitting on eggs for half a week. This year's layer of twigs and branches makes a deep nest but you can see her head above it. On March 22 at Conservatory Pond, Merrill Higgins saw the winter fences lined with a flock of golden-crowned kinglets. They would fly out and return, catching gnats or midges in the air. That day a turkey vulture flew over the area so slowly he was able to get several pictures before it sailed off.

There's a report of another pair of red-tails making a thin nest at 102 St. and the West Drive. I received an account of a West Side battle between a red-tailed hawk and a peregrine falcon. They were seen circling in the air and clashing with talons locked, until the red-tail slipped away. Perhaps the falcons are also nesting in the area and the boundary line of territory is in the 80's.

Correction: Last month, somewhere between a sneeze and a cough, I knocked out a vital word in the first sentence of paragraph 4 on page 3 of the Feb. '97 issue. The word is "shovelers" or Northern shovelers *Anas clypeata*, to give the full name. The omission gives me a chance to say a little more about these ducks. They are named for their large, shovel-shaped bills which are longer than their heads. Around the margins of their upper and lower bills are plates of comb-like "teeth" that strain small food from the surface of the water. Shovelers are able to capture tiny organisms and are the best filter feeders among the ducks.

Circling as a group, the ducks stir up dinner. But even in pairs or alone these birds get more to eat from the surface than other ducks and forage without digging most of the time. That's a good thing in rivers and lakes where pesticides and other pollution coat the bottom.

About 1/3 of their diet is meat: mollusks, freshwater snails, young carp and other small fish, and aquatic insects such as water boatmen. About 2/3 of their diet is vegetable, such as algae, duckweed and the seeds of sedges, bulrushes, rice, and saw grass. Usually you see them speeding along skimming the water's surface with their heads half submerged. They also "tip up" to find food in deeper water. I have no idea what they were pulling at in February but the bottoms-up view was colorful and it looked like a mighty tussle.

I will be leading **Bird walks for Beginners** on Sunday afternoons (**Apr. 6, 13, 20, 27 at 2 PM**) from The **New-York Historical Society** as part of their exhibit of John James Audubon's watercolors from *The Birds of America*. If you or a friend wish to learn the rudiments of watching birds in Central Park and get a guided tour of the exhibit, call the Historical Society to register. The number to call is **212-873-3400**.

Spring Bird Classes

Wednesdays. 5 sessions beginning **April 16 at 9AM**. Meet at **76th St. and 5th Ave.**

Sundays. 5 sessions beginning **April 20 at 9 AM**. Meet at **Loeb Boathouse**.

To register, send **\$35 check** to **Sarah Elliott, 333 E. 34 St., NYC 10016** by **April 5**.

THE ELLIOTT NEWSLETTER

Nature Notes from Central Park

Vol.3 No.4

April 1997

Cloudy April

"The Great Dance of the Seasons has begun again", wrote Ed Fagan, a man in my Sunday class. "Please pencil me in on your card." When I repeated these felicitous phrases to a birder, he said nobody under 50 would understand. Ed looks about 35 to me, but for readers under 20, let me explain that in another part of this century, young ladies at a dance wore a numbered card attached to their wrists and young gentlemen asked for a dances, exchanging their name for a number.

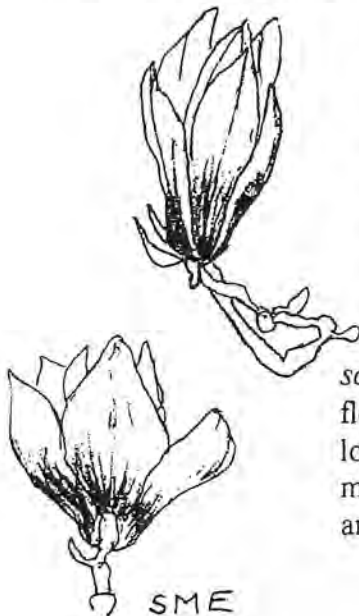
Unfortunately for birders, too much of this April has seemed a dim and dull dance. On April 10, before the great dirge of taxes, I entered the park in search of the Southern magnolia *Magnolia grandiflora*. I was afraid it might have bloomed, but I needn't have worried. The tree stands on a hill beyond the zoo underpass and beside the 66St. Transverse. This single specimen was overlooked by M.M. Graff in her "Tree Trails of Central Park". The tree stays green all winter and the leaves are big, shiny and fuzzy-rust on the underside. In early April there was hardly a nib of new bud on it.

I moved north to sketch 2 smaller species of magnolias in the meadows southeast of Rumsey Playground. The smallest of these is the star magnolia. It is low with many wide-spreading gray arms. Small white flowers with petals like streamers appear before the leaves do. Doris Heitmeyer looked it up in "Flowering Trees" by Robert B. Clark and told me its scientific name is *Magnolia Kobus* var. *stellata*. *Stellata*, explained Doris, means star. The magnolias flanking the entrance to the 42 St. Library are star magnolias. So are the ones just north of the Obelisk, west of the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the East Drive. Star magnolias are popular with landscape architects.



The larger of the magnolias dotting our park are *Magnolia x soulangeana*. They also have light gray bark, the branches more upward curving. The flowers emerge after the star magnolias are out. They are bigger, the outer petals deep pink at the base. The blooms open wide to reveal creamy white throats. Green leaves emerge when all the petals are a carpet on the ground. A robin is currently nesting in one of these magnolias just north of the Alice in Wonderland statue. That tree is not very large but you can see some that are huge. Three of them stand in the garden at the Frick Museum facing Fifth Ave.

We have a giant magnolia in Central Park as well but it is not *soulangeana*. It grows to 90 feet, has 8-inch leaves and pale yellow-green flowers. This tree is *Magnolia acuminata* or cucumber tree, named for the look of its unripe fruit. Our mighty specimen is very old. It stands on a flat meadow west of the East Drive behind a panther statue. More on *acumulata* and *grandiflora* later this spring when they may be in bloom.



How Doth the Busy Bumblebee

The day I searched for magnolias I also found a group of azalea bushes across the road from the south end of the Mall where the East Drive curves north. It was a chilly and overcast day, making the large fuchsia flowers look more intense. If beauty drew me to these bushes, insects kept me there. Hovering and working over hundreds of flowers were 3 enormous bumblebees. On the thorax they wore black-and-yellow striped hair shirts and their black abdomens looked like patent leather. When they landed at the center of an inch-wide flower their big bodies and tawny wings covered the petals from rim to rim. They must have been young queens newly emerged from a long winter nap.

I watched them hover and explore flower after flower. If the flower was empty they moved immediately. If the flower was full of nectar they stood with black legs braced, body curved and head down. I could see the bee's black tongue thrust deep into the nectar well and her whole body shake as she sucked up food for herself and her future progeny. Like Sleeping Beauty, these mated queens have slept a long time. But they wake alone, the only ones left of their kind.

Right now you can see queens searching undisturbed ground under tussocks and brown leaves, beside dead branches and rock fissures. They are looking for a good place to dig down a foot and build their nest. When the cavity is dug they will collect pollen, mix it with a wax secretion from their bodies, and mold it into a kind of dough. Nearby they build a honeypot to hold a thimbleful of nectar. When the "bread and wine" are prepared, the queen mounts her pollen dough and lays the first eggs. If successful, she will raise a generation of worker-daughters. They mature quickly and leave the nest to forage for food to feed the next generation. The queen turns to housekeeping and laying more eggs. As the population grows there are workers to forage, tend young, guard the entrance.

Chilly spring is a precarious time for bumblebees. Like other insects, they only fly if their flight muscles are warm enough. If the temperature drops they grow sluggish and crawl. But bumblebees have ways to warm themselves enough to become airborne. They unhook their flight muscles from their wings and shiver. When the contraction and expansion of flight muscles generates enough heat, they hook up their wings and fly. Bees can stay warm on cloudy days if they keep zooming about. If they find a sunny spot they can bask and keep warm enough to take off quickly.

On April 20 the Sunday group was in Maintenance Meadow looking for birds in the crabapple trees. Ed Fagan said there was a blue jay on the ground with a bee. We watched as the jay lifted a large bumblebee. The jay hopped to a dead branch on the ground and began rubbing the bee against wood. The operation looked like stropping a razor. Jay rubbed bee on the right side of its bill, then rubbed bee on the left side, back and forth many times. I think this was to remove the bee's stinger.

Finally the jay pierced bee body for a juicy meal. Up hopped another jay and bits of meat and honey were rammed down its bill. When jay 2 tried to take the bee, jay 1 held on. Charity is all very well but begins and ends at home. Since jays don't usually share food this was probably courtship feeding. I've seen male cardinals feed mates but this was a first for jays. Thanks to Charlie Heinz and the memory of Milton Gold for their bumblebee photographs. Bees move too quickly to sketch.



Phasing Out the Feeders

The bird feeders, which have been up since November, are about to come down. The last of the seed, black sunflower-wild bird mix and most of the Niger thistle, will be poured into the feeders on April 30. Norma Collin and Murray Liebman, who have been tending the feeders for the past five or six years, began with 2 teams of people that appeared on Sundays and Wednesdays. In those days there were fewer containers, most of them made by Joe Richner. Others, with frisbees for squirrel guards, were made and donated by George Muller. Now there are many feeders and they are filled only on Wednesdays unless the weather is severe and the feeders empty out.

Murray and Norma tell me that every year is different. The winter of '94-'95 was glacial. Many people slipped and fell on the ice and few birders reached the Azalea Pond to help the birds. New Yorkers skirted the park on salt and sanded sidewalks. They threw bread and seed over the wall to starving birds. When Murray could reach the feeding station, he found 8 squirrels living in the plastic feeders. That spring, gray squirrels looked like war veterans, with bald patches in their coats, nips from their ears and one with a damaged eye.

The winter of '95-'96 was dramatic in a different way. A very dry summer meant that there was not enough fruit, seed, and grubs for the wintering birds that normally live north of us. They all flew south in the fall and many of them stayed. There were so many tufted titmice, black-capped chickadees, finches and nuthatches that the feeders had to be filled twice a week. Titmice were constantly at the feeders, and nuthatches, which had been absent the year before, were now so abundant that Norma could see 5 at one time. Because of the drought drop-ins, they dispensed more seed than in any other winter.

That year Charles Kennedy joined the Backyard Bird Feeder Census sponsored by Cornell University. His back yard was Central Park. He was asked to observe and tabulate birds at the feeders between November and March on 2 adjacent days every fortnight. The drought may have produced meager counts upstate, but in the park the activity was so great he spent many happy hours there. That year there were 3 times the usual number of birds. He was delighted to see 22 species of feeder birds in one day. He says he counted 37 goldfinches on the thistle bags at one time. Charles works with Norma and Murray on Wednesdays. He says that year the bird population was so great they put out over 600 pounds of seed.

The winter of '96-'97 has been less active. There are far fewer titmice, says Norma, no chickadees and few nuthatches. There are plenty of red-winged blackbirds and house finches. The finches, she adds, maintain a pretty steady population every year. This year there are 16 feeders at Azalea Pond. The amount of sunflower-wild bird seed has dropped, the amount of thistle has increased. The birders, says Charles, supplied 6 feeders with sunflower-wild bird seed mix and put up 5 thistle bags.

Murray tells me the Wednesday noon stalwarts are aided by other birders including Elliott Zichlinsky. Merrill Higgins donated a long pole to lift empty plastic feeders from the branches and hoist them up again when they are filled. Bruce Funk, who knew Joe Richner, is a sales manager for the Long Island Beef Co. He donates superior suet. Annabella Cannarella got 60 pounds of thistle seed at reduced price via her sister in New Jersey. This year redwings and house finches try to monopolize the thistle bags. They were put up to attract American goldfinches who manage to get to the bags some of the time. Because of Niger thistle we have been able to enjoy the company of goldfinches all winter.

Bill Degraphenreid had a feeding station near Bow Bridge. It was a delight until the pigeons

took it over. These days he feeds peanuts to the ducks, raisins to a robin and cornmeal mix to many birds. Birders have asked me about the mix and here is what Bill told me. He buys a 12 oz. package of Goya cornmeal because it is ground exceedingly fine. He puts 4 cups of cold water into a big skillet and measures 1 ½ sticks of margarine. He adds all but 3 tablespoons of margarine to the heating water. Bill pours in the package of cornmeal and stirs often until it is thick, about 10 minutes. When the mixture cools he adds the rest of the margarine. Bill puts his mix in a container and takes it to the park, where he slaps it on tree trunks. In the winter you can see downys, nuthatches, and even brown creepers enjoying Bill's mix. This spring, complain some of the birders, breeding starlings have taken their place at the trees for Bill's mix.

Many Happy Returns

These days a large crowd and a forest of telescopes has gathered near the Hans Christian Andersen statue. People look across Conservatory Pond and Fifth Ave. to the building with the hawk nest facing the park. This year the red-tailed hawks collected and arranged a new layer of twigs. The fresh layer gives them separation from nest parasites. Higher nest sides screen the parents when they sit on the nest. In the third week of April, the female stood up frequently to peer at her eggs. Perhaps her chicks were peeping at her from inside their eggs. On Thursday, April 24, the hawks began bringing food to the nest. The following Sunday we watched her fly off, return, bend and press her head deep into the nest. We don't know how many young she is feeding or whether all the eggs have hatched. In May, we will begin to see fluffy white heads rise above the nest line, then fall from view.

The mute swans returned to Rowboat Lake this year and began nesting about the same time as the hawks did. She has built a nest in the phragmites near Bow Bridge. The nest is on the west side of the grasses and cannot be seen by people on the bridge. A buoy has been placed in front of the nest to keep out intruders.

Marc Siegel tells me that one day he watched a rower out for exercise with his dog in a rowboat. The man sped under Bow Bridge, returned again and turned south toward the Lower Lobe. Suddenly the male swan flung out his wings and rose to the surface of the lake. Using his feet as paddles he ran across the lake and landed a foot from man and dog, surprising both. The rower traveled up the west shore of the lake and was escorted by the swan, who placed himself between boat and nest. When the rowboat was north of the nest the swan turned and went back to his mate. Marc says he has seen loons splash the water with their feet when they try to get up speed for a takeoff but had never seen a swan do it for rapid attack.

On the flat meadow east of the sour gum tree, I heard vigorous tapping near the sidewalk. I looked around for a downy woodpecker but could see none. Was the bird inside a tree? "There", said a passing pedestrian. "I just saw the head come out." We stared at a skinny tree with a V of forked branches festooned with fungi. There was a flash of movement at the base of the V. A head appeared, and leaning out, spat forth sawdust. She disappeared and returned to disperse more wood chips and dust, ignoring our admiration. It's so gratifying to know her industry will not be in vain. Downy holes are too small for starlings to enter and rob. Sadly, the red-bellied woodpeckers that are drilling out nests in locust trees on the Point and near the Gill will soon be under starling attack.

THE ELLIOTT NEWSLETTER

Nature Notes from Central Park

Vol 3 No. 5

May 1997

Diversity But Not Numbers

As one of the birders said, it's been one of the coldest springs he can remember. How true. Bad weather held the migrating birds south of us. Once that weather jam cleared, it was uninviting here. What bird chooses to fly into cold temperatures, high winds, lightning, heavy rains, or hail? May has featured all of these plus plenty of clouds on most of the sunny days. Some birders think the migration was at least a week behind schedule because of the weather.

May 10 and 11 brought joy to weekend watchers. A yellow-throated warbler and a yellow-throated vireo appeared, disappeared, and reappeared at the Swampy Pin Oak most of the day. We were delighted to see a scarlet tanager, then not one but two summer tanagers working the trees in Evodia Field. Observers happily argued about which tanager was the prettiest.

Monday May 12, I was in the park before 7 AM to enjoy birds at the south end with my friend Jeremy. He says that spring has been chilly in the UK as well. We found warblers and a singing wood thrush who may be nesting. On the 59 th St. Pond we watched a male and female mallard conveying 10 very new ducklings and a pair of black-crowned night herons leaping along the shoreline. The place seemed bucolic-- verdant, silent and deserted. Nature fortified, Jeremy rushed away for a sales meeting and I strolled north to the Falconer statue. The day before, relays of bird watchers visited that area to see 2 white-crowned sparrows and 2 indigo buntings. A day later these birds were replaced by a gorgeous male Blackburnian warbler feeding low in the trees.

Over in Strawberry Fields I was startled to see a gray-cheeked thrush and, high in an elm, a rose-breasted grosbeak. There was a hooded warbler near the ground and a red-eyed vireo in trees. At Cherry Hill, Starr Saphir was directing her group's attention to a yellow-throated vireo, for which I thanked her. It's a favorite. At Bow Bridge, she pointed out a Wilson's warbler and explained that this bird's under-tail feathers are dark, while the yellow warbler's under-tail is light. Later, when I looked up this large and useful field mark, none of my guides described it. But the National Geographic guide illustration shows a clear difference.

Inside the Ramble the Evodia Field was the birding hot spot for the day. A blackpoll and a male golden-winged warbler, a red-eyed vireo and a Philadelphia vireo were flinging themselves at bugs in the pin oaks. Out in the open, a Kentucky warbler, hidden in low cover of mugwort and Virginia knotweed, would fly up and land on sapling or bush to dazzle the crowd that lined the sidewalks. There were reports of cerulean warbler and blue grosbeak, but for most they were just rumors. John Suggs arrived for the golden-winged warbler, looking dazed. He had begun the day at the north end and had seen trees full of birds, more than in all his years in the park. He thought he might have seen 29 or 30 warbler species between 5:30 AM and late morning. It was a beautiful sunny day, and I spent almost 12 hours in the park.

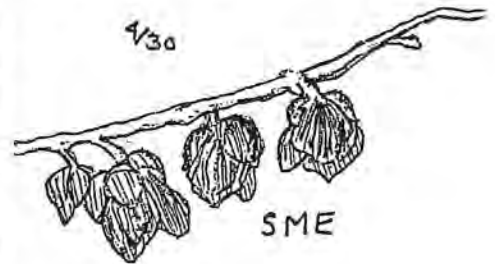
Tuesday, May 13 it was rainy and dark, too dark to see birds in color. Overnight rain was promised but didn't happen and I felt sure many birds had come into the park. Lloyd and Sandy Spitalnik were there, and Lloyd said there were more birds to watch than the day before but fewer species. He said he had trees full of birds, one with 3 chestnut-sided warblers, and all the birds were

lower so they could be seen better. He reports that May 20 was the best day of this year's migration. Sandy and he were in the park from 7 AM to 6 PM in the rain. They saw many flycatchers including pewees, yellow-bellied, least, great-crested and olive-sided. Their 20 species of warblers included Nashville, Tennessee and several mourning warblers, maybe 4 or 5. He saw a pair of wood ducks fly into a tree at Evodia Field, then fly out again. Overhead many swifts crossed the sky. There were red-eyed and white-eyed vireos, a gray-cheeked thrush, a scarlet tanager, and between Belvedere Castle and Shakespeare Garden, they saw 1 Lincoln and 2 white-crowned sparrows. Tom Fiore saw several Lincoln's sparrows on May 24, the day the whip-poor-will was seen. But he saw them in various locations and none of us have seen more than one Lincoln sparrow at a time. Lloyd began by telling me this year's migration "was not up to snuff," but his lists and accounts of May 12, 13 and 20 are nothing to sniff at.

The Flourishing Trees of May

The magnolias that rushed into April bloom scattered and squandered every petal. The dogwoods were more thrifty. One tree, in the shade of pines near the Alice statue, bloomed all month. Its young blossoms were pale green for weeks before slowly turning a dazzling white.

The pawpaw *Asimina triloba* that we visited in late winter put forth maroon flower buds in late April. In mid May, the buds began to uncurl and leaf tips emerge. By May 21, the flowers opened to reveal lime green centers. As leaves grew larger, blossoms fell and few remained by Memorial Day. When they are gone there will be no fruit or saplings to follow. No other pawpaw tree is near to pollinate on spring winds for new life. Pawpaws are the most northern representative of a large family of mostly tropical trees called custard-apple. Squirrels, raccoons and humans eat the fruit.



As a child I played a skipping circle game about pawpaws. I remember the tune and snatches of words and have finally found it in Alan Lomax's The Folk Songs of North America. "The Paw-Paw Patch" seems to be about a gang of young men out for some rough and tumble with "pretty little Susie". The second chorus is the one I remembered, being about food. "Pickin' up paw-paws put um in her pockets (3 times) Way down yonder in the paw-paw patch." I remember singing "basket", which would certainly hold more pawpaws. Besides stooping and picking movements, I now remember skipping and cheerful arm-flinging for the last chorus of "Come on, boys, let's go find her". Ignorant of the adult world and the fruit, I circuitously learned to name this tree.



Last month I mentioned the cucumbertree *Magnolia acuminata* that stands alone in the flat meadow behind the cat statue at the East Drive. This venerable tree was probably one of the original plantings in Central Park. Not only is it old, it is big.

Jeremy and I measured the girth of its upright trunk on May 11. At about 4 feet from the ground we found the trunk was almost 12 feet around. This circumference is 2 and 1/4 feet larger than when M.M. Graff measured it in 1969 and told us the tree was once hit by lightning, the trunk too rotten to support the branches, and its days were numbered. Repair must have been done, either by a park organization, the tree or both.

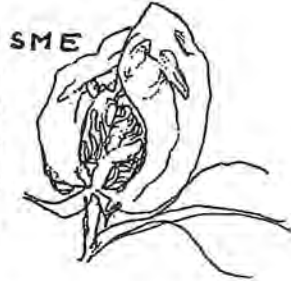




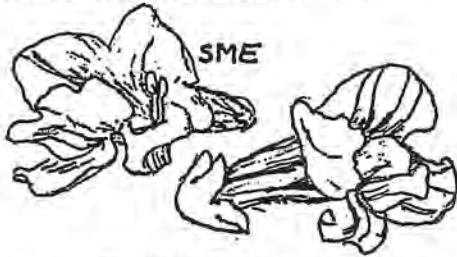
The leaves and branches of this largest of the magnolias form a dense pyramid. But when does it bloom? I made many visits and on May 6 discovered dark, green, squirrel-chewed buds.

When the bell-shaped flowers begin to unfold, their 6-pointed petals are 2 to 3 ½ inches long, light green and don't stand out against the leaves. The petals wither away and reveal the yellow and green center which will become the fruit.

The leaves are 6 to 10 inches long, 3 to 5 inches wide, dark green above, light green below, paper thin, with smooth, wavy margins. The tree is named for its knobby fruit, which is green and 2 or 3 inches long. As it ripens it turns from green to pink to purplish-red with scarlet seeds, scattered like kernels on a corn cob. Long ago when I flashed by these trees on the Skyline Drive, I thought the place was alive with bright red cardinals. I will report in July if this tree is in fruit.



The royal paulownia *Paulownia tomentosa* came to this country from China and Japan. It escaped cultivation in gardens and green houses to fling its seed over towns and waste places and even around our park. The tree is low, wide-spreading with a thick trunk and a few stout branches. The heart-shaped leaves are 5 to 15 inches long. Some of ours have grown up cramped in crowded places, but a glorious free-standing tree adorns a grassy mound south of the horse-cab circle near the Lower Lobe. In May it wears a royal crown of purple flowers before leaves appear.



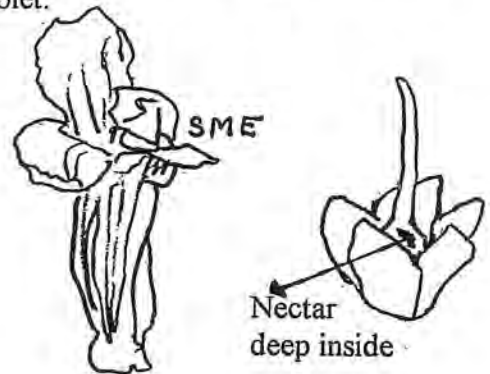
Paulownias are hard to ignore in spring. The flowers are large and showy, grow in thick clusters and their perfume is powerful. Even people with a poor sense of smell find the fragrance somewhat overwhelming. Soon the 2-inch flowers litter the ground. Pick them up and the smell is still insistent. Turn one in your fingers and you are amazed by the velvet beauty of pale and paler violet.

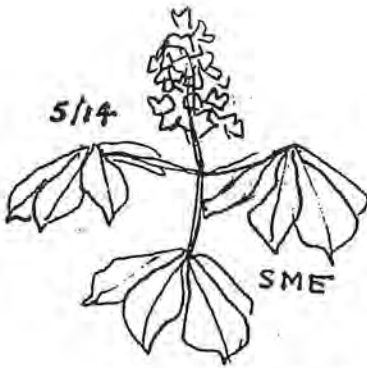
Try sketching one and you are lost in the convolutions of flower lip. This is a flower to challenge any spelunking bug. Flowers with throats this deep are bitten at the base by bees who chew a hole to reach the nectar. Once an entrance hole is made, other insects will use it, too. I've not seen these holes on paulownia, but look for them on other long-tubed flowers this summer.

The seeds pods are round, 2-celled capsules. They mature and split lengthwise, releasing many winged seeds. Open pods remain on the tree all winter.

The tree is named in honor of the Russian princess Anna Paulowna, daughter of Czar Paul I. Paulownias require winters that are not so bitter they kill the flower buds, and usually they do not grow north of New York City.

Without their flowers or seeds, paulownia and catalpa trees look alike because they have large heart-shaped leaves. Both trees are popular with fall birds. They keep their leaves longer than other trees, giving cover to resting owls. Insects congregate under the leaves and you will see kinglets and warblers fluttering beneath these green umbrellas to snaffle insects.





In the meadow of the cucumbertree there is a thin paulownia near the sidewalk and a bench. If you walk north along the sidewalk toward the maintenance parking lot, you will bump into a white horsechestnut *Aesculus hippocastanum*. This one is crowded, fairly large, but not jumbo. They reach 60 feet with massive trunks and branches. In summer their compound leaves look like huge limp-wristed hands 6 to 15 inches wide with 5 to 7 drooping, wedge-shaped fingers. These leaflets are dark green above, paler green below, and 4" to 8" long. In May horsechestnuts put forth huge flower clusters. They are shaped like upright pyramids and can grow a foot high.

The flowers are white with 5 petals. From each flower center sprout long, curved, yellow stamens that extend far beyond the petals. If you look closely you will see that every flower wears a spot. The youngest flowers, near the tip of a cluster, have yellow spots. They change color with age from pale yellow, to deep yellow, to light orange, to pink, to deep rose. This variation turns out to be functional.

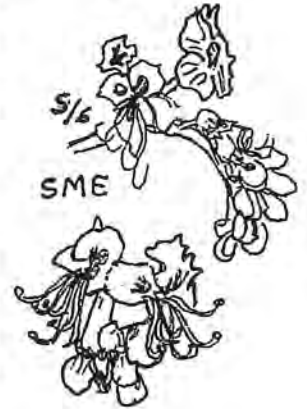
Many flowers attract insects by smell, and flowers full of nectar smell stronger than ones recently emptied. Even at a distance, horsechestnut clusters smell good. Some flowers guide insects by color changes, and up close, every horsechestnut flower gives a message— go for the yellow. Bees see red as black, which facilitates the choice and speeds the harvest. Unlike honeybees, who can drink water, bumblebees must get all their liquid from nectar. Color-coded horsechestnut flowers make the choices fast and efficient.

This spring I was lucky enough to watch a queen bumblebee in action. She landed near yellow-spotted flowers and supped. But crawling past red-spotted flowers with long stamens, she picked up pollen. As I watched, she repeatedly combed down the sides of her body with her middle legs and stuffed pollen into the bulging pockets on her back legs. The pollen baskets looked pink, not yellow. She probably consumed some of the nectar and pollen and stored the rest for her young deep in her underground nest.

On May 12, I saw a queen bumblebee trundling over the ground. Suddenly she dipped into a small hole and then came out again. She did this several times and may have selected that spot to build her nest. Our bumblebees are generalists, not specialists. They will go to many flowers for nectar and pollen. The other day I saw several high in the top of a tulip tree working over all the orange-tipped tulip cups. Later this summer, you could see them at red clover.

It is amazing what you can see once you start learning about bees. In late June or July, I will lead a bee walk and garden sit-in. Maybe by that time I can learn enough to construct a quiz sheet, not for correct answers so much as for directing our attention to their behavior. Please let me know if you are interested.

Pamphlets: As some of you know, I sell bird and dragonfly pamphlets. The bird pamphlet gives a map of the Ramble and lists birds to see there in 4 seasons. The dragonfly pamphlet illustrates and describes 17 species seen in Central Park, plus the dragonfly's life cycle. If you want either one, state which and send \$1 plus a stamped, self-addressed envelope to me at the address below. If you want both, send \$2. I will mail one or both of them to you.



THE ELLIOTT NEWSLETTER

Nature Notes from Central Park

Vol. 3 No. 6

June 1979

Hawks Abroad

On June 12, a band of 5 humans assembled at Conservatory Waters to watch the activities at the hawk nest on Fifth Ave. At 5:58 AM one of the young leapt into the air, landed on its sibling's head and sprang into space. It flapped across the avenue and into a tree near the small brick food stand at the south end of the pond. The bird landed 1/4 of the way from the crown of a pin oak, on branches too thin for its weight. As it bounced up and down in the branches, its father flew in with breakfast. But the young bird had trouble getting the food, due in part to tricky footing and to poor receiving skills. Also, the young bird was being screamed at by jays, robins and kestrels.

That same day, the second young red-tail left the nest at 7:35 PM. It flew south along Fifth Ave, then turned right at 72 St. and flew into a tree near Rumsey Playground. This bird was also greeted by an unwelcome committee of blue jays, robins and kestrels. The mother red-tail had instantly followed her young down Fifth and west to the tree. When her bird landed safely and the mobbing started, she flew by overhead and drew off the attackers. They followed her, diving and hitting her tail until she had led them back to Fifth Ave. When they returned to her young for renewed hostilities, she flew by and drew them off again. One of my informants says she did this 3 times. Apparently, she distracted the mobbers until dark.

Next day, Friday the 13th, each parent guarded one fledgling in a tree. They sat facing their young, prepared to ward off attackers. On Saturday when I saw them at about 3 in the afternoon, they were all perched on separate buildings, facing the western sun. Since that time the birds have been spending most of their time on buildings, where they get some peace and quiet. But their mobbers continue to be vigilant.

Late on June 23, I watched the pale male parent soaring over buildings and park. His gliding circles looked effortless. Suddenly he was attacked from behind by a bird smaller than the length of his tail. The attacker was a kestrel. It repeatedly struck the tail. It also struck the trailing edge of the hawk's right wing where there's a gap in the feathers. The wing strike was seldom repeated as it put the kestrel dangerously close to red-tail talons and beak. The two birds continued their charade, the kestrel pretending to be fearless hunter, the red-tail pretending not to notice. But occasionally a peck produced pique. The red-tailed turned sharply to retaliate and the kestrel had to scramble in air to get out of harm's way.

I am told the young hawks took 50 days to develop and leave the nest. That is longer than much of the literature describes and the long duration may have something to do with a cold spring or perhaps the loss of an egg or chick. Last year these parent red-tails produced 3 young. This year, they may have lost a middle one. There seemed to be a large age gap when number one and number two looked out of the nest.

It would be intrusive but interesting to put up a closed-circuit television on a building south of the nest with viewing screen down in the park, perhaps on the small brick building at the south end of Conservatory Waters. New Yorkers could watch the screen and see chicks come out of the eggs, see them fed by parents, see the removal of fecal sacks or dud eggs, see the young learn to hold up

their heads, sit up, take food, poop out the side of the nest, move their wings, and scratch at parasites. In short, we could see all the daily life in the nest. How do red-tails react to thunder, lightning, and even hail-- all of which they received this spring? I am not sure this project could be done but it would be like watching "Nature" on public television, except that it would have much greater immediacy. Here is a project for the wealthy donors to The Central Park Conservancy, the Parks Department and The Raptor Trust. As far as I can see there is something in it for all--except the hawks.

I make this television suggestion with trepidation because it is the thin edge of the wedge. Today's curiosity could become tomorrow's technical snooper and next century's wildlife management. The other night at a business gathering, out jumped my worst end-of-century fear in words. I heard myself describe a future Central Park as "a zoo without bars".

As more and more bird habitat is destroyed and the world gets warmer, more birds move north and find Central Park. It is nice that we are the 14th hotspot for bird watchers on this continent, but at what cost to the birds? Already big birds are crowding the smaller ones for our blocks of real estate. So I am glad the red-tails had 2 young instead of 3 and I am grateful the swans have not produced cygnets. Big is not the only problem. Imagine Central "Ark" with more crows and starlings, both highly adaptive birds and fierce enough for any future fight. There is a cynic's joke which goes "The optimist believes the future is uncertain". But after the sneer, the phrase contains past truth and future hope. Here in the present are some uncertain and some unexpected pleasures of the park this June.

Nest Eggs

The robins completed their spring nesting and now young robins are seen on the ground. The males were singing again, announcing plans for a summer nest. The cardinals are also singing and courting and are engaged on their second nests. The catbirds look you over speculatively for a possible handout. This could mean their young are old enough for small peanut pieces and the parents need to stoke up for their second family. They build in thick bushes off the ground and like to add cellophane, string, and other man-made objects to their nest. They are said to be able to spot a cowbird egg and toss it over the side. The song sparrows are singing their heads off from low trees. but soon will be busy with more young. Unlike most park nesters, they build on the ground or in bushes. With all the rats, you know the nest must be in deep thickets. Red-bellied woodpeckers called and called this month. Now that the starlings are busy with their young, the woodpeckers can dig new holes and start their families without forcible eviction. Starlings produce 2 broods, red-bellies and other woodpeckers, only one. Downys, who make holes too small for starling shoulders to enter, had a successful nest near the top of the Gill where water from the pipe makes it a favorite bathing spot.

We were delighted to greet the flood of orioles that came in late this spring. We heard the males calling over the park and some of us put out nest material to be woven into their sacks. But the number of oriole nests seems smaller than usual. Birders report seeing many males but few females. Males usually arrive about a week before females so they don't travel together. Could the females have taken a different turning? Did orioles overproduce males last year? Whatever the cause, the result is fewer park nests.

I have been told about 4 oriole nests and visited 2 of them. The one in an elm near Bethesda Fountain is fairly low and on June 14 we watched a male gleaning branches at great speed. From the large quantity he gathered and the seeming small size of bug, I guessed the young were small but very hungry. I returned to watch the nest on June 23. The male was there, occasionally taking a bug for

personal consumption. He sat, looked about and watched us. We decided he would leave the area if the nest were empty. Still he wasn't feeding. I never saw a female at this nest, but she built it well.

Over on the East Drive behind the Metropolitan Museum of Art is another oriole nest. The construction is marvelous. There is plastic fish line, pink party ribbons and plant material woven into the sides and the nest looks fat and bulging. I visited it several times but have never seen a parent bird arrive or depart with food or fecal sacs. I will visit it again but I think the nest was abandoned.

There have been exciting reports of rare park nesters. Birders tell me a family of warbling vireos nested in a large pin oak south of Willow Rock where the path makes a right turn for Bow Bridge. I was told to sit on the bench and keep looking. We arrived and looked. Arthur Berland, who has ears like microphones, said he heard the vireo in an adjacent tree. Then he heard it on the Point. But we never had good looks. Most birds shut up once the nest is built. Not the warbling vireo. He continues to warble vigorously, which is how many humans find the nest. The male is both active and useful. Both sexes build the nest and share the egg sitting as well as young feeding. With so much to do, why does the male continue to sing? Perhaps for the joy of it. Yes, I know many behaviorists would say pure pleasure is pure nonsense, but what do they know? How many behaviorists are super singers and know the pleasures of belting it out?

Like orioles, where only the female does the weaving, the vireo parents build superior nests. They start by wrapping plant stems or plastic around several branches and build the rim. The nest hangs from the rim. Unlike the oriole pouch, vireos build a cup nest with a wide neck and short sides. Perhaps when winter comes and the leaves have fallen, I will be able to see this vireo nest.

Birders reported seeing cedar waxwings in the pines at the south end of Cherry Hill. We went to the pines and searched but saw no waxwings, nesting or otherwise. Then late in the day on June 23, I came across a pair working the ground of the Maintenance Meadow parking lot. I was trying to see what they were picking up when a biker whizzed by. Up flew the birds into a tree, then moved west into the meadow. They certainly seemed like a mated pair and may build a nest yet.

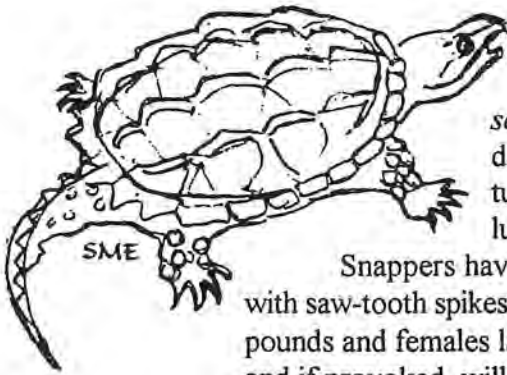
Cedar waxwings like to nest in open woods, in shade trees and near water. Both sexes build a cup nest of loosely woven grasses, twigs, stems, cloth and yarn, lined with fine grasses, plant down and perhaps lint from the washer-dryer. With the American goldfinch, cedar waxwings are the latest breeding birds in our area. The female incubates the eggs for almost half a month while the male feeds her at the nest. They stay mated for the season, frequently producing 2 broods between June 5 and Sept. 25.



Eggs With A Difference

On the evening of June 19, Henry J. Stern, Commissioner of Parks for New York City, told of seeing a turtle lay eggs that very morning. He said she expelled 60 + eggs on the ground and then covered them over by kicking dirt with her back legs. The eggs, he said, looked just like ping pong balls. The Commissioner was clearly bemused and interested by the sight, and pleased to report it.

Few of us get to see a turtle lay eggs, cover them with dirt or touch a leathery tough egg. Even fewer people get to see the hatchlings break from their eggs and scuttle down to the water.



This mother must have been a snapping turtle *Chelydra serpentina* because these turtles lumber out on land, dig out a bowl depression and lay eggs. They lay more eggs than any other park turtles. I'm told this nest is on the west bank of the Upper Lobe. With luck, the young turtles will emerge in late summer or September.

Snappers have a 3-ridged shell, big head, warts on legs and neck, and a long tail with saw-tooth spikes down the center. They reach a foot and a half in size, can weigh 85 pounds and females lay 11 to 100 eggs in June. They are named for their powerful jaws, and if provoked, will lunge at humans.

During the day they rest with their eyes and nostrils out of water. At night and early morning they actively seek prey and eat everything. They dine on earthworms, crayfish, clams, fish fry and eggs, frogs and tadpoles, salamanders, small turtles, ducklings and cygnets, water boatmen and dragonflies, carrion, and algae such as duckweed. Some food they swallow, some they tear with jaws and claws, and some they drown before eating. They are caught for soup, but contain pollution. The ones in the Hudson River have PCB's in their fat tissue.

The Upper Lobe is crowded with turtles, many of whom were put there when Turtle Pond was drained. Any time now, some of them could be put back. The new Turtle Pond is a mighty construction of pipes, 2-tiered banks, a massive island, an army of new plants, some in the ground, others lined up and ready. On June 22 or 23, the pond was half filled with water and the volume looked as great as the old pond at full capacity.

When I saw it in late daylight on June 23, breezes rippled and sparkled the surface. A female grackle repeatedly leaned from the bank for a drink and leapt back as she was smacked in the face by tiny waves. This never happened to her when the bottom was mud and the water was leftover rain. Higher up on grassy flatland, a male ring-necked pheasant out for an evening stroll looked like the lord of all he surveyed until some movement had him scurrying for the underbrush. I searched in vain for the family of killdeer that spent the spring in a dry Turtle Pond.

July Walks

I will give 2 July nature walks in Central Park: If you wish to join, call several days or a week early. Phone 212-689-2763.

Monday Evening, July 14 at 6 PM. (Rain or extreme heat date, Wednesday, July 16.) We will explore the Ramble and Reservoir.

Saturday Morning, July 26 at 10 AM. (Rain date, Sunday, July 27.) We will look at plants, insects and birds at the North End.



THE ELLIOTT NEWSLETTER

Nature Notes from Central Park

Vol. 3 No. 7

July-August, 1997

Counting Butterflies

The last weekend in June is the time when the Xerces Society of North America holds its annual butterfly count. Lambert Pohner, my former partner, began these counts for the NYC area in 1980. He strolled over Central, Inwood, Prospect Parks, and Great Kills in Staten Island. He tabulated his counts for each park and sent them in. Now teams of people count in many areas in the city and suburbs.

Since Lambert's death, I count the butterflies of Central Park in his memory. This year I was aided by many counters. My thanks to Ilenne Goldstein, Merrill Higgins, Marcia Lowe, Anne Shanahan and Trixie Treat, who covered specific sections of the park. Gaye Fugate and Dorothy Poole joined me to cover areas in the south end, west side and north of the Castle to 110 St. I was grateful as I have been in other years for their cheerful company and good spotting skills. We started the count at 59th St. about 10 AM. Dorothy called to report a last butterfly seen at Great Hill about 3:30 PM. A 5- to- 6 hour count is much shorter than in recent years. Many counters cover more ground and quicker.

Over the years the weather for these counts has varied. In 1981, it was dark, cool and damp. A single cabbage white was counted that day. This year the weather was sunny, warm with a cooling breeze. We had a record number of butterfly species for the count. Here are 11 of them:

tiger swallowtail 20, cabbage white 195, orange sulphur 7, clouded sulphur 2, spring azure 1, question mark 5, red admiral 4, mourning cloak 3, monarch 2, silver spotted skipper 7, zabulon skipper 1.

The number of cabbage white butterflies, always large, was enormous this year. They eat mustard plants and taste terrible to birds. Monarch butterflies do, too, because of their milkweed diet. But monarchs won't be here in numbers until September.

Aside from more butterflies, this count had an amazing finale. As Merrill Higgins was leaving the park, he passed the flagpole near 69 St. and Fifth Ave. South of the benches he saw a carpet of new wood chips just behind the 5 linden trees that line the park walk. There on the ground he saw at least 30 American painted ladies. Many of the butterflies were on the ground, moving over the wood chips and fluttering their wings. Others were circling each other in pairs, ready to mate. He saw one pair land on a tree together.

Merrill called me to add this 12th species to our count. He also called Marcia Lowe. The next evening she went to the wood chips about an hour earlier than Merrill's visit. Late day sunlight slanting through the trees struck the ground, heating the chips and air. The aroma must have been irresistible. Marcia saw many American ladies, just as active but in smaller numbers than Merrill had seen. On Monday afternoon I went to the area. The wood chips were in deep shadow and without butterflies. Out in the grass in patches of white clover I found bumblebees, several honeybees, an orange sulphur and a battered American lady. I returned to the chips to find 2 red admirals jousting

in air. Near the wall a female flicker rapidly probed the ground for food. She worked with speed and, with food in her bill, flew into a tree. The area was dark and cool, the sky was clouding up, and it was time to leave.

On July 20, Marcia returned to the area, taking Tom McIntyre with her. They found more butterflies on wood chips, in the air, on trees and both sides of the walk. Tom took pictures and kindly sent me 2. Not American ladies, as he discovered from a Ranger and by checking his web site, but red admirals. I put his photo into my scanner and reduced it to the usual postage stamp size for this newsletter. As if by magic, both the butterfly and the wood chips disappeared. That's camouflage! If you want to try for butterflies at this spot, the time to watch is from 5 to 7 PM.

Minimorphosis

In the first week of July, as I waded through high plants in Evodia Field, I saw a colorful creature on a mugwort leaf. It was pink, longer than wide and splashed with black marks. It seemed to be eating or gripping the mugwort when I touched it, and didn't fly or crawl away. I wrapped it up and took it home to study. The pale body seemed ribbed and wearing a cape over the top. The pinkish-red insects in the insect guides didn't look like the one on the leaf. I put this mystery specimen in a plastic container and forgot about it. A week later, as I was clearing the mess on my desk, I saw a small shape circling under the lid. When I cautiously opened the container I was amazed. My mystery specimen had turned into a round, orange-gold ladybug.



Ladybugs are not ladies, nor bugs, but beetles. They lay clusters of gold eggs on plant stems or the underside of leaves. The eggs are tiny, about 1/25 of an inch. Attached at one end, they look like a set up of bowling pins. Several days after they are laid, the eggs turn white. They split and out come beetle larvae.

SME The larvae are pale with long legs. As they grow they turn from white to black. The body is long, thin and spiky with small patches of red, yellow or white. They have a suction disc at their back end to hold them as they eat. They search for aphids, crush them and suck out the juices. As they suck, they grow. Their covering becomes tight and splits. The new cover underneath is larger and roomy for a while. But as the larvae grow that cover will split and be replaced by a larger one. In about 20 days, when the larvae have completed several changes or molts, they are 4 times larger.



They stop eating, molt and reveal the pupa. At first the pupa looks soft and pale but in a few hours it hardens and black marks appear. For the next 5 days the ladybug will rest and transform itself from a worm to a beetle. Unlike moths and butterflies, ladybugs have no cocoons. Tentless, the pupa is exposed to the elements with only a sleeping bag. It is firmly attached to a leaf by its back end, as mine was, and can twitch if disturbed, as mine did. Inside its sleeping bag the pupa rests and mysteriously transforms itself into a totally new shape.

SME The shell splits along the back and out comes the beetle's head. In a little more than 10 minutes it has wiggled clear of the shell. It looks round and pale, body and wings too soft to crawl or fly. The shell hardens and gains color. The beetle puts out its wings to dry and harden. Then, with origami skill, it folds the wings under its shell. After several hours, the ladybug is ready to crawl, fly, eat and mate. Ladybugs find a mate by scent. Each species has a distinct smell and they use their antenna to find their own kind.



SME



SME

My beetle was orange-gold with 2 mini black dots on either side at the outer edge. The spots were so tiny I couldn't see them without a magnifying glass. There were 2 dents at the base of the shell, one golden, one dark. The dark dent turned out to be dirt. The underside was flat, the body and 6 legs also orange-gold. There are 350 kinds of ladybug in North America. One of the 5 most common is a spotless ladybug, and I think that is what I brought home. Most lady beetles wear orange shells with black polka dots. Their colors are a warning to predators: eating me will be hazardous to your health.

A beetle's shell is really a pair of hard forewings. When lady beetles crawl on stems and leaves, the wings are zipped up the center to make a hard, shiny shell. To fly, the shell unzips and each hard wing spreads out. The hind wings unfold, beat the air, and the beetle flies--sort of.



Ladybugs are near-sighted, clumsy flyers and usually go short distances. They land, fold up the hind wings, zip up the forewings and look for food. They crunch up aphids, scale and red spider. My house ladybug had to make do with the mealy bugs and spider mites on my plants.

I named my beetle Mini for its 1/4 inch size, and the microdots on the sides. One day when the building superintendent fixed the radiators, Mini disappeared. Later, discovered climbing up the window, there were black marks on the shell and legs. Was this ladybug changing color? No. It was a dusting of dirt, probably from under the radiators. I brushed dirt from the shell and watched Mini clean off face and head with the front legs. I did not see the back leg cleaning but later, on another window, Mini reappeared spotless and golden-orange. The collar above Mini's head was black and white and tough to sketch. I could not tell if the collar covered the head. I have not seen Mini for quite a while and fear the worst. Lady beetles live only 3-4 weeks so Mini may have bit the dust.

A Bottle Brush for Butterflies and Bees

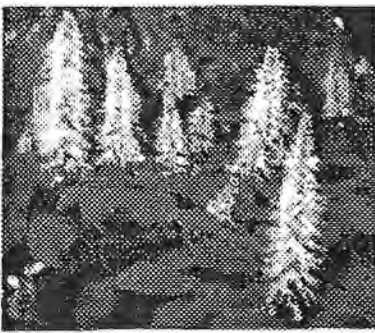


There is a head-high plant across the sidewalk from the northeast corner of Bow Bridge that looks terrific in July. Birders told me it was a buckeye, and so it is. But not the horse chestnut which is Ohio's state tree. In Nature Walks of Central Park, Dennis Burton explains this is "bottle brush buckeye, *Aesculus parviflora*, a four-to-six-foot shrub with palmate leaves". A British text gives the same scientific name, accompanied by an English name, "shrubby chestnut", which is easier to say. It grows 8-10 ft. high, 10 to 15 ft. wide.

When I saw this shrub in July, the flowers were blooming. They were arranged in upstanding, foot-high panicles (the brush) of white flowers and fringed with long stamen (the bristles) tipped with bright pink anthers. The fragrance was attractive, not only to me but to a number of insects as well. While I sketched, a tiger swallowtail appeared, searching for nectar. When this large butterfly landed, it was only about 1/6 the length of a bottle brush. It was joined by a summer azure butterfly, bumblebees and honeybees. They all worked the flowers for nectar.



Flowers full of nectar produce a powerful scent. Scent is the plant's come-on to attract visitors. As insects probe for nectar, they transfer pollen from flower to flower. Pollination is the plant's way of mating. This trade-off seems tidy in the abstract but as I watched there was plenty of wasted effort. Butterflies and bees ignored the buds but often revisited empty flowers. Heads thrust into tired blooms were pulled right out again. A lucky strike was less common, and sucking up the juice took only a few seconds. What confuses the probers? Do flowers with a trace of nectar smell as attractive as those that are full?



The small butterfly left, tiny flies appeared and disappeared, but the swallowtail and the bees were steadfast, still probing when I left. I ran into Bob Woods, who had just photographed the shrub and graciously allowed me to use it here.

Mysterious Bees

In early July, Noreen O'Rourke called about bees she had seen at Bankrock Bridge. They were big with yellow stripes like bumblebees. They were going into holes under the bridge. Noreen, armed with a flashlight, saw what looked like a wiggling worm near the entrance. I went to the bridge but saw no bees. I returned with Bob Woods and we found a small rectangular hole under the bridge. We had no flashlight and I could see nothing except the flash of Bob's camera. "There," he said, "did you see the bee? It came to the entrance with the flash." I did not see, and unfortunately, neither did Bob's camera. He said it was an impossible shot, but he was very nice to try.

A week later, I was on top of the bridge with Ilene Goldstein. We saw insects in some purple loosetrife. Two of them were large, the size of bumblebees. But their back ends were black, bald and shiny. These were great carpenter bees *Xylocopa virginica*. They may have been living under the bridge. Later we saw more of them working the flowers in Shakespeare Garden. At the end of July, a group of us had excellent looks at lots of them in Conservatory Gardens. They were more than an inch long, the hair on the thorax was dull yellow, the abdomen shiny and black and there was a shiny, black bald spot between the wings.



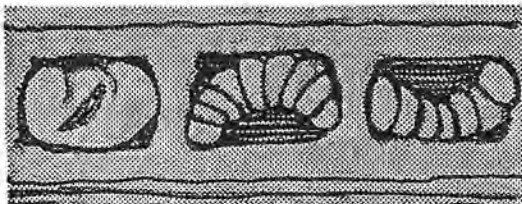
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Carpenter bees have very powerful jaws. They bore inch deep holes into wood, then make a right angle turn to follow the wood grain. The female chews out a tunnel, gathers pollen and stores it at the far end. She regurgitates nectar, moistens the pollen and forms a loaf of beebread. She attaches the loaf to the wall, turns to the entrance, rests her abdomen on the loaf, and lays a very large egg. The bee scrapes wood fibers from the wall, adds saliva and arranges the mix in concentric circles. This is the partition that seals off the first cell. She repeats the process to lay 8 to a dozen eggs.



SHE

When the eggs hatch, the larvae look like grubs and begin eating beebread. As they grow they molt and by the end of summer they are fat and plump. Before autumn the oldest larvae, that were laid first, shed their skins and become pupae. The eggs laid last, nearest the entrance, are the last to develop. The pupae look like adults but have no wings. All of them rest in their cells facing the entrance. They look like knights in a crypt.



sme



Then one by one they shed their skins to become adult bees but remain quietly in their cells. There is enough cell room to move wings and legs and turn around. In May, male and female bees in the back cells gnaw through their partitions to leave the tunnel. They shove and push younger bees in line and in a week all are out in the sun. They will find food, mate, and the males will die. Females live longer.

The founder of a nest is a female in her second year. She is joined by helpers, usually her nieces, who guard the tunnel while she forages. A year later these helpers will butt each other, fighting to get the tunnel for their eggs. The winner lays the eggs and may have a helper or two. The losers build new nests but without guards. It is easier and quicker to claim last year's tunnel, if you can, and give it a spring cleaning. It is safer to have one or two guards who will kick out intruders.

Duplicitous Duplex



I have read about birds of different species who share a nest, but have never seen that arrangement in Central Park. So when Merrill called me in mid-July and told me about a double nest near the park entrance at 76th St. and Fifth Ave., I rushed right in. He not only showed me the nest, he took pictures. I used several of his shots to make this compilation.

It seems a house sparrow, reverting to his weaver finch ways, built a round twig nest with an entrance hole on the side. He attracted a mate and they set up housekeeping. Along came a pair of robins and spying the twiggy roof, treated it as a platform for their nest.

As I watched, both species seemed to be feeding their young. The timing of their arrival seemed staggered so as not to disturb each other's access. Apparently I didn't watch long enough. Merrill said the robin would fly in to feed her young, threaten the sparrows and chase them off. Both sparrows would fly. Then when the coast was clear, they would sneak back. She would slip in, and feeling safe, look out the entrance. We heard the young cry as soon as a food-bearing parent came to the nest. Robin nestlings raised their heads and opened their mouths to have food rammed down their throats. When the sparrow entered her chamber we could hear the clamor inside. Now all the young have fledged and this avian duplex is silent.

Photo Fiasco

In the spring of '96 I received a call from Steve Quinn. They were planning a photo show of the birds in Central Park at the American Museum of Natural History. Would I get in touch with photographers and ask them to submit their work? I spread the good word and learned about the 4 people who put that show together. I went to the exhibit a year later and was turned away. The show was up but a 3-day conference had taken the space, said a guard, I'd made the trip for nothing.

I returned a month later and the show, called "Up in Central Park", was a delight. To welcome you, there was Arthur Swoger's window-sized photo of bird watchers in rain and bright colors. A jolly life-sized free-standing reproduction of Farida Wily greeted you. On the wall were park bird lists and information about Geoffrey Carleton. The mostly bird photos were arranged by topics. In the center of the room was a cupola with seats where children and adults rested and watched Frederic Lilien's compelling video on the birds, mammals and people in the park at all seasons. I took notes but decided to come back for a second look.

In July I found the show had been crunched and bunched to the back of the room. In the front section huge black-and-white photos promoted a dinosaur show to hustle the paying public. Gone were Arthur Swoger's birders, Farida Wily and information about Jeff Carleton. Frederic's video was delightful but the sound boomed in an abandoned room. Bird photos still adorned the walls. But many track lights had been donated to dinosaur promotion, skimping the birds. Some birds basked in

limelight, others endured semi-oblivion. Gaps in the show were filled with black-and-white publicity photos of Steve Quinn with birders at various park locations. The museum was credited for these photos, the photographer anonymous. At the very back of the room, 8 Audubon watercolors hung in the gloom. Despite the wreckage, I took notes again. Here are some photos I particularly enjoyed. I give their photographers in alphabetical order.

Deborah Allen; ring-necked pheasant, young starling, red-breasted nuthatch, veery, Swainson's and hermit thrushes, common yellowthroat (f), gray catbird, palm warbler. **Barry Belgorod**; green-winged teal, budgerigar, white-throated sparrow, tufted titmouse on a hand, black-and-white warbler. **Ralph Ginzburg**; areal view of park with skyline. **Charles Kennedy**; great egret with tossing feathers. **Anne Shanahan**; chickadee on Ilenne's hand, blue jay at drinking fountain, woodcock, flicker, house and Carolina wrens. **Arthur Swoger**; Azalea Pond in spring, common yellowthroat (m), Blackburnian warbler, black-throated blue warbler. **Robert Woods**; mute swan and cygnets, long-eared owl, prothonotary warbler. There was plenty of nature to enjoy in **Frederic Lilien's** video; dawn birds bathing and preening, raccoons, a rabbit and woodchuck, a great egret catching and swallowing a fish, young children watching young hawks, the park in a snowstorm.

If you wish to see this show, hurry. It closes in mid-August. The 77St. entrance is the easiest.

I planned to review the Audubon watercolor show at The New-York Historical Society, but there simply isn't room. Rather than skimp, I will put it in the September issue. I urge you to go now. Take a friend who is a birder or an artist, whatever you aren't. When you finish a gallery, talk to each other (quietly, the sound carries well). If your observations surprise each other, look at the painting again. For years we have been bombarded with Audubon artifacts--postcards, calendars, mini-books, etc. So will yourself to be an investigator, to see it all as if for the first time. You will be glad you did. August is a perfect month to visit. It's a great way to beat the heat, to shape up your sagging mind and enjoy the air-conditioning. The New-York Historical Society is at 77St. just off Central Park West. They open at noon.

For the last weekend of August I invite you to attend a **Bee-In**. We will gather **August 30, rain date, Aug. 31, at 10 AM**. You can choose either **Conservatory Gardens** or **Shakespeare Garden**. You may wish to bring a folding seat, a sun umbrella and water. When you find a busy spot, you will be there for an hour. Bring binoculars, a pencil or a pen. You will be given a quiz sheet to fill out. The sheet is not to test what you know, but what you see. The sheets will be collected and compiled for the newsletter and our amusement. If you feel you must study bees beforehand, study the little ones. I know nothing about them and can use the help. If you want to practice watching, go to any lawn and watch a clover patch. If you plan to attend, **please call 212-689-2763** a few days ahead so that I have enough quiz sheets. Bring a friend if you like. Or bring a camera. Or both.

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THE ELLIOTT NEWSLETTER

Nature Notes from Central Park

Vol. 3, No. 8

September 1997

Awesome Audubon

What must it have been like to be John James Audubon? Born 1785 in Haiti, the illegitimate son of a French sea captain and a chamber maid, orphaned, taken to France and raised in his father's home, adopted, sent to America at 18 to avoid Napoleon's war and run his father's farm in Pennsylvania. Marrying an English-born neighbor, he moved to Kentucky, begot two sons, and tried his hand at a variety of business ventures. He went bankrupt and was jailed for debt and upon his release turned from business to painting nature. At age 35 he worked his passage down the Ohio and Mississippi River to New Orleans. He stepped into the wilderness and began painting the birds he found in the deep South north to New York and both east and west of the Mississippi River. Over the years he was helped by local guides, bird watchers, collectors and scientists.

How did Audubon capture the likeness of a bird in the field? He shot it with his rifle. Lightweight binoculars and cameras were unknown, and he disliked using stuffed birds. Freshly killed birds were wired to a frame in lifelike positions, their feathers spread with pins, and each species was drawn at life size. He sketched in pencil, ink, watercolor and pastel, working quickly before the eyes and feet changed color and the birds decomposed. Later, when he recast field sketches into finished compositions, many of the birds were surrounded by blank paper. When he had the time, he painted in some scenery. Audubon also got others to fill in the background.

There were plants from a talented teenager, countryside from a Swiss landscape artist, plants and insects from a woman. She was the sister-in-law and later, second wife of the Rev. John Bachman, a naturalist and Audubon's close friend. Bachman's two daughters married Audubon's sons, and Bachman's name was given to an oystercatcher, a warbler and a sparrow. Bachman advised Audubon on birds. Later they began a book of American mammals.

Audubon secured wealthy patrons in America, made trips to Europe to solicit more. He found printers in Scotland, then in London and recruited the aid of his wife and sons in the family business. He realized some of his early work was inferior and returned to America several times to find and paint more birds. It took 20 years, but eventually 435 of his watercolor paintings were published as as hand-colored prints in The Birds of America.

Today our foremost birding organization is named for him and his birds appear on postcards, prints and postage stamps. These reproductions don't convey Audubon's power, his passion to see and render birds. As paintings on the wall they come direct from his hand to your eye.

When Audubon died at 65 in 1851, his widow was in great need of money and sold the watercolors to The New-York Historical Society. There you can see large birds from exotic places. But many paintings now on view were selected in part by the New York City Audubon Society and are of birds that can be seen locally. For those who love shore birds there are snowy and great egrets, little blue and great blue herons, black-crowned night heron, clapper rail, snipe, willet and osprey. Land birds include phoebe, chimney swift, tree and barn swallows, black-capped and chestnut-backed chickadees, tufted titmouse, white- and red-breasted nuthatches, house and marsh wrens. Eastern bluebirds seem to be the only thrushes on display, but warblers are plentiful and include golden-

winged, Bachman's, orange-crowned, parula, magnolia, Cape May, black-throated green, cerulean, Canada and redstart. There are somewhat larger, colorful birds such as Baltimore oriole, scarlet, summer and western tanagers and northern cardinal. Most birds are in bright spring plumage.

If you are an artist, it is amazing to view Audubon up close. Take a magnifying glass and you will see that many of the birds are outlined, perhaps to give them a sharp edge for printing. Audubon has a sure and steady hand and the line does not wiggle or vary in width.

Delight is in detail. Study the goshawk's legs and you'll find they are fine-edged, crosshatched, in good color. The whiskers on a tree swallow and a barred owl are incredibly fine and look as if Audubon used a one-haired brush. Use your magnifying glass to study the tiger swallowtail butterfly being eaten by a yellow-billed cuckoo. The intricate wings, antennae, proboscis and legs are stunning.

Audubon's feathers are fabulous. The subtle, mothlike patterns on the wings of the great gray owl and chuck-will's-widow are astonishing. Audubon's barred owl anticipates a shallow-focus camera and a poem. The sharp-edged stripes on the back become whisper-fuzzy as they twist toward the wing tips. Brown and tan paint floats a marsh wren in mid-air, and white brushstrokes proclaim the filaments of a snowy egret's tail.

It's hard to know how much the color has dimmed in the 160 to 175 years since Audubon painted birds but some colors still sing. Notice the peachy underwing of the yellow-billed cuckoo. The back of the blue jay in watercolor and pastel captures the mantle of blue. And though he painted the black-billed magpie from a stuffed bird in England, Audubon used watercolor, graphite, gouache and pastel to produce the metallic green and iridescence of that European and our western bird.

If you stand a foot or two from the paintings, they seem less than the sum of their parts. Some of the birds look stiff and lumpen. Others are twisted into unlikely shapes. Still others suffer from melodramatic placement and foreshortening.

Stand ten feet back and the power of Audubon's compositions becomes clear. He repeats graceful shapes such as the long, parallel necks of anhingas, the horizontal bill and the back of long-billed curlews. Often, paired birds perform like dancers. They execute the same movement facing each other, facing the same way, back to back, or back and front to you. Groups of birds form a circle to carry your eye around a flat rectangle. You see this circle effect in a group of chickadees and bushtits, blue jays, kestrels, ivory-billed woodpeckers and Carolina parakeets.

Bird shapes converge to a point, like the hands of a clock, though the collision point is always off-center. Eastern bluebirds, boat-tailed grackles, chuck-will's-widow, crested caracara and clapper rails all gain impact because of the clock-hand layout. Sometimes Audubon doubles the clock hands. The painting of a common tern forms a W, a tanager group become an angular S or backward Z.

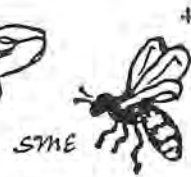
In his portraits of jumbo birds such as whooping crane, turkey vulture and trumpeter swan, Audubon's compositions are the most ingenious, his bird postures least believable. That's because the largest paper he could obtain measured 39 ½ by 26 ½ inches and Audubon was determined to portray life-sized birds even if he had to cram them into this space.

Go see for yourself. The Historical Society is on 77 St. off Central Park West. It is open from 11 A.M. to 5 P.M., Tuesday--Sunday, phone (212) 873-3400. The show ends Oct. 15.

A French TV crew was here in September to see the show, film Audubon's grave at 155 St., interview me about our birds and Audubon's importance, visit Audubon locations in Pennsylvania and New Orleans. Traveling with the crew was a man who is a grand-great nephew of Audubon's. They all told me Audubon is completely unknown in France. But not for long!



Beeing There



The First Central Park Bee-in was a modest affair but exciting to participants. We watched bees at Conservatory Garden uptown and Shakespeare Garden mid-park. Observers looked at (1) ½-inch brown-and-tawny honeybees, (2) inch-long black-and-yellow bumblebees, (3) inch-long carpenter bees with bald, black abdomens and (4) less-than-½-inch halictid bees. Some halictids have metallic green bodies while their cousins have green fronts with black-and-white striped abdomens. Since few of us knew the names of garden flowers, we described them by color and shape.

In Conservatory South Garden blue and white orchid flowers were visited by halictids and bumblebees. What looked like onion plants with hundreds of tiny flowers arranged as white globes made their nectar so available that they were very popular with all the bees and other insects. Humans and bees were drawn to vibrant red zinnias. Again, the open-flower arrangement meant easy access to pollen and nectar. Apparently what we see as red, bees see as black.

Most of the bees in the garden were bumblebees, followed in decreasing numbers by carpenter bees, honeybees, and fewest of all, halictids. Most of the bees were drinking nectar. Unlike honeybees who can drink water, bumblebees must get all their liquid from nectar.

Some flowers put out powerful come-hither fragrance but their structure defeats most insect suitors. Only a few heroes and heroines fight their way past waiting pollen to the nectar. When these bees move to the next flower of the same kind, they carry the pollen from site A to site B and pollination takes place. But some flowers are built so that the nectar is too hard to get. We saw white deep-throated flowers arranged on spikes attracting great attention from insects. A bumblebee landed. It looked briefly down the long tunnel, then clambered over the outside to the base of the petals. It reared, bit down with great force and drilled its way inside. The bee's bent head, strained shoulders and heaving thorax showed it was taking up nectar. A few minutes later we saw a honeybee inspecting these flowers for holes and a chance of nectar leftovers.

Not every bee was drinking nectar. We saw worker bees collecting pollen on the spikes of their back legs. We saw two bumblebees with bulging pollen baskets. The pollen was orange. We saw a heavy-laden honeybee carrying the more common yellow pollen. This back-end view shows a worker's pollen pockets and her stinger.

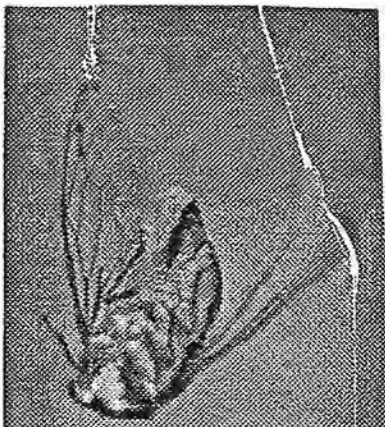


We saw a bee chase a cabbage white butterfly from a flower, and over the sidewalk we saw two bumblebees having a fight. They came at each other butting their heads four or five times. They could have been males fighting for territory and a chance to mate.

In Shakespeare Garden carpenter bees were everywhere, probably coming from nearby nests. They were joined by half as many bumblebees and smaller numbers of honeybees and halictid bees of both kinds. Bumblebees, carpenter bees and honeybees were collecting pollen in lavender, yellow, purple, pink and white flowers. All the bees visited open flowers with easy access such as daisies. But only carpenters and bumblebees were strong enough to fight their way in and out of orchid flowers. No bees visited the pink phlox, pink orchid lily, red roses or impatiens of any color.

Observers were distracted by small bee flies, a yellow-jacket, European hornet, monarch butterfly and a pair of mating dragonflies called black saddlebags or black-mantled gliders. One of these dragonflies was chased by a carpenter bee, and there was a fight between two carpenter bees.

Bee observation stopped when a cicada flew into a rose bush and a spider's web. As the cicada struggled the spider hurried to it and began wrapping it up for dinner. She put out more struts to support the weight. A cicada is a heavy prize.



She moved to a secluded corner to watch, then flew out and over the cicada, trailing her banner of silk. She rested. Then, hoisting her strand, she raced back to strike and bind her captive. Probably this silk was sticky as well as strong. Between attacks the spider rested at the web edge. The cicada thrashed furiously. They battled for more than an hour. Then the cicada managed to touch and grasp a branch and with mighty efforts was able to pull itself free.

Observers watched the action through binoculars, telescope and camera. Tourists trailed through the garden and asked, "What do you watch?" Eager explanations followed, and a chance to look through the scope. A group of 20 young Italians arrived in time to witness the finale of the battle. Fascinating! They knew a "spider" but what was a "cicada"? Observers pointed to the sound. "Ah! Si, si!" Their word is quite similar.

One bee observer told another she had come that day out of friendship for me but was amazed to find watching bees is FUN. He said he made the same discovery. My thanks to Bob DeCandido, Susan Fischer, Ellis Gellhorn, Merrill Higgins, Patricia Miller, Noreen O'Rourke and Alice Thompson for making this first bee-in a success. My thanks to Merrill for his picture of the captured cicada. My gratitude to Mother Nature, the goddess of bees, butterflies, dragonflies, spiders and cicadas, who provided a beautiful day to see them.

Resurrection

On Aug. 20, Ruben Vargas of Parks Enforcement was patrolling on his scooter when he saw a large bird at the bottom of a tree 50 yards east of the East Drive at 73 St. The bird was vomiting on the ground. It seemed paralyzed, only able to slowly move its head. Vargas phoned the Rangers, who arrived with a container and gloves. The bird seemed too far gone to resist capture and was taken to the Bronx Zoo. There technicians administered bloodstream detox and aviary-IV and declared that the bird, a young red-tailed hawk, had ingested Avitrol. Avitrol is a toxin used to kill pigeons and rats, but not sanctioned for the work force of Central Park. The bird was taken to the Raptor Trust by Dr. Len Soucy for weeks of rehabilitation. When the bird seemed fit and able to hunt, Soucy brought it to Central Park's Sheep Meadow.

Commissioner Henry J. Stern welcomed the crowd and explained the bird's history. Dr. Soucy pulled the bird from its box and before TV cameras, commented on its big feet. He put a size 7B aluminum identification band on its right leg and told us the band number is 1387-82239. "Ouch!" said Soucy between explanations as the bird bit him. He shoved its head inside his shirt where it calmed down while he used pliers to wrap the band securely. The bird was held aloft, its 3½-foot wing span large enough to suggest that it was a young female. Her weight, said Soucy was 2½ pounds. This female is probably one of the two raised this spring on Fifth Ave.

The bird was released. She flew northeast, straight to a group of trees, landed and shook out her feathers. The crowd stared at her, but she paid little attention to her public or the press.

Someone shouted my name and told me to look high in the sky. "It's a bald eagle, Sarah, an adult BALD EAGLE." I searched the sky and found a large dot. The bird looked big but I could not see the white head. Several people assured me that they did and that it really was an eagle. I console myself that a semi-eagle sighting is better than no sighting at all.

THE ELLIOTT NEWSLETTER

Nature Notes from Central Park

Vol. 3 No. 9

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Murder Most Foul



On Sunday afternoon, October 12, a passerby strolling along Fifth Ave. happened to look along the south side of the Metropolitan Museum of Art and saw a bird flopping on the ground. This person went into the Met to tell a guard about the bird. Guards noted the bird in their log book and late Sunday afternoon called the Parks Dept. Sunday was the middle of the long Columbus Day weekend.

The following Tuesday, the Parks Dept. received a call from the Met, telling them to come and pick up a dead hawk. The bird was taken to the Bronx Zoo, where it was pronounced dead but refused a toxicology autopsy because of the expense. It was sent to Ward Stone, a state wildlife pathologist who did the work on two red-tailed hawks found in Riverside Park. He suspects they were poisoned by avitrol, a pesticide which causes convulsions, vomiting, paralysis and death.

The numbered leg band of the Central Park hawk confirmed it was the female who nested at 74 St. and Fifth Ave. for the past two years. Earlier this summer her young daughter nearly died of poisoning but was saved by emergency treatment and released last month. Mother wasn't so fortunate.

On the day of her death, bird watchers reported seeing the adult female with her mate until 3 in the afternoon. That same day some 20 pigeons were found dead at 82 St. and Third Ave. When this poor hawk was discovered, she had a pigeon in her talons and feathers in her bill.

Red-tailed hawks mate for life or the life of the mate. The unlucky male has learned to replace mates more and more quickly. In less than a week he was seen on window ledges with a new mate. Together they brought green shoots and twigs to the nest. I am told she is very attractive-- dark brown wings and back, a deep red tail, a white throat, broken white eye-rings, and a blue bill. She is smaller than her predecessors and, let's hope, a picky eater.

I learned that in Europe they control pigeon populations by sterilizing the birds. That avoids poisoning the birds and the larger creatures that feed on them farther up the food chain. On Oct. 19 in Central Park, we saw a dog playing with a dead rat. His owner tried desperately to make him release it, which he thought a good game. The dog was off the leash, and one wonders whether the leash is all that now remains.

On the weekend of Oct. 25 and 26, more dead pigeons were found on Lexington Ave. A dozen each were discovered at 83 St. and Lex, 84 St. and Lex, 86 St. between Lex and Third Ave. In addition, 4 dead and 1 dying pigeon were found in front of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Some of these 40+ birds may have become a toy or a feast for dogs, cats, crows and hawks. What a good thing New York's homeless haven't been reduced to sustaining themselves with pigeon pies!

My sincere thanks to Merrill Higgins for making this memorial photo possible. The hawk is gone but not forgotten by some 20,000 people who watched her with her family in Central Park.

View from the Castle

If hawks are endangered on the upper East Side, migrants seem to be doing well over Belvedere Castle. So far some 7,000 hawks have been counted this fall migration. About 4,500 of the total number are broad-wings and 1,300 are sharp-shinned hawks. Between 450 and 500 are osprey. The other 700 fly-bys are kestrel, merlin, peregrine, Cooper's, red-tailed, red-shouldered, Northern harrier, turkey vulture, black vulture and bald eagle. The big surprise is the numbers of sharp-shinned hawks, 30% more than in previous years.

Out in the North Woods

On Oct. 23, I joined 25 third-graders from P.S. 110 at the Dana Discovery Center. Lynn Rappaport, a Park Educator for the City Birding Program, had the children sit in a circle on the floor. In their first session they had talked about how birds look. This day the topic was how birds sound, the purpose of bird calls and bird songs. The children played a game with bird names and words to describe their sounds. Next they were given slender bird guides to find their bird in the guide. Binoculars were distributed and demonstrated. Children with glasses learned to roll back the rubber eye caps and all of us put binoculars around our necks before we left the building.

In the cold fresh air, we circled the Meer, looking at ring-billed gulls, mallards, 2 ruddy ducks and several shovelers. "Why does that little bird have such a big bill?" asked a child. "To shovel his food with!" We passed a man feeding mallards, gulls, Canada geese and mute swans. They were hungry and crowded right up to him. Soon all our group had walked and skipped around the lake, down the steps and under Huddleston Arch. We walked along a path beside the Loch, a stream enclosed by shrubs and trees. Most of the leaves were still green but we saw a few splashes of gold and crimson to announce the season.

The class was separated into small groups of five and urged to find birds. I had the pleasure of bringing up the rear so as to listen to any remarks. "I love birds!" said a boy beside me. "Me too!" said the boy next to him. Someone ahead of us said "cardinal" and a child near me said, "I saw red." "There it is," said A.J. He told me his Mom is a bird watcher but when they come to the park he sees most of the cardinals. Watching A.J. in action I could see why. He saw most of the birds darting near us. So did others in the class. It's a shock to be surrounded by watchers with young eyes and mercurial reflexes. Many of us got to see blue jays, black-capped chickadees, white-throated sparrows, a tufted titmouse and a brown creeper. It was a treat to be with a group of children that were really enjoying the birds.

On our return trip along the west side of the stream, Lynn introduced the children to David Chadwick, the gardener for the area through which we were wandering. I reluctantly said good-bye to the class and stayed to interview David about zone #47. David said Central Park is divided into 6 large sections with 49 zones in all. He has been working in the park for 5 years, 3 of them in the woods and meadow surrounding the Loch. Earlier this summer we studied a hickory whose name we did not know. He tells me now that it is a pignut hickory, easy to spot for its yellow growing tips.

I was beginning to ask him about the oaks in his area when we were joined by Dennis Burton, his boss. Dennis pointed to the very tall oaks, one on each side of the Loch, south of Huddleston Arch. They frame your view of the arch, a favorite device of Olmstead, and Dennis thinks the great man planted them there. That would make these red oaks about 130 years old.

We turned our backs to the arch and saw 2 more oaks, one red and one black. How do you

tell them apart? The red oak has a gray bark; black oak bark is even darker. The bud tips tell the difference more clearly. If they are fuzzy or hairy, they are black. If they are smooth and hairless, they are red. Oaks are hardwood trees and grow slowly--6 inches or less a year. Maples, I think, are medium-hardwood trees and grow 6 inches to a foot a year. Pines and ailanthus trees are softwood trees and grow more than a foot a year.

I asked about my favorite cluster of oaks in the park. They tower above a circular walk east of a cascade of water that tumbles into the Loch below. There are 2 red oaks with very tall trunks and mighty branches. Over the years they have had enough space around them to thrust up and out and to be seen well from below. With these oaks is the snag of a black oak which died of old age 2 years ago. It stands now, a venerable home for birds and squirrels. These trees may have been here so long the park may have been built around them. They may also be 130 years old, perhaps more. We were surrounded by other large trees with tall trunks, including tulip trees. These are faster-growing, and so, not so old as the oaks.

David and Dennis pointed to a light tan tree with no outer bark. It is also dead and is used as a raccoon home. David says he sometimes sees raccoon footprints beside the stream early in the morning. He mostly sees and hears them in spring. So far, there are no groundhogs in this part of the park. But all the boulders along the stream look like perfect future homes.

Spring and fall are David's busiest times. He likes reclaiming land-- fencing it, planting it, returning it to what it was. In winter there is cleaning, clearing snow and ice from the steps, and making plant lists with Dennis for the coming spring. Is there a large seasonal variation in the number of visitors he sees in his area? No. There are 10 to 15 regulars whom he sees frequently and greets. There are local visitors and very few tourists. He may see 30 people in a day. If he sees 40, that's a lot. Are litter and dogs a problem? Not really. People have littered before they get to his area and dogs off the leash are tired and walk along with their owners. His biggest problem are people who don't stay on the walks and make wish paths through the area.

We circled the stream and climbed the slope to the wildflower meadow. The asters and goldenrod have gone to pale gray fluff and seed but do not float on fall winds as yet. Dark seed heads of black-eyed susans dot the area and we saw large patches of glowing pink smartweed. There were a few cone flowers still in bloom and some tall dry grasses in intricate shades of brown, but mostly the area was blanketed with thick, green grass. This area has been a lawn for many years. Wildflower seeds do not do well here because of grass root competition. Plants that put out runners do better. They can tunnel along until they come to an empty spot and put up a new plant. David turned back some sod to show me why seeds can't reach the soil. Grass roots were tightly packed in a layer 2 or 3 inches thick. Daunting to any tender bloom. Looking up, I realized it was growing cloudy, cold and late-- more than time for David's lunch, and so we said good-bye.

Walking south, I warmed and snacked at the Tennis House, then circled the Reservoir. The wind was raw and clouds covered the sun. I saw 16 ruddy ducks bobbing in the water like corks. Four coots came out of some grasses and moved west. My heart leapt up when I beheld the strange profile of a pied-billed grebe. We circled three sides of the Reservoir together and eventually it watched me carefully. A mallard made a half-hearted pass, and it neatly darted out of reach. When the grebe wove its way through the flotilla of indifferent coots, they seemed small but it seemed much smaller. Occasionally it would leap, its legs clearing the water, then dive straight down with a cheerful splash. When it tipped, I could see its fluffy white undertail feathers-- an avian cottontail.

This fall has been marvelous for fruit but disappointing for tree color. Deep into October most

of the trees are either green or blah tan. The sour gum in the flat meadow fights redness. The lower branches and the west side were still quite green. On the other hand, tree fruits are the best I remember. In the year of the drought, black cherries were all skin and pit. This year's generous rains in spring and summer have made them large, luscious and full of pulp. The tart red berries of autumn olive are double their usual size and grow mellow with age. Robins wait while I snaffle them up. The great hemlock above the Boathouse has put out a bumper crop of cones, and little birds have been feasting there for weeks. Chickadees, titmice, a RED red-breasted nuthatch, ruby-crowned and golden-crowned kinglets fly in and out. The chickadees clutch a small cone, hang by their feet beneath it, and peck out tiny seeds from the crevices. The abundance of hawthorn fruit has attracted large flocks of cedar waxwings, more than we've seen in years. Hermit and Swainson's thrushes filled the evodia tree but there are still plenty of seeds left.

One cool Wednesday morning after a cold night, Maintenance Meadow was filled with birds. A flock of juncoes and white-throated sparrows devoured grass seeds, and yellow-rumped warblers flung themselves through the air after insects. Two palm warblers, one dull and one bright yellow, shouldered their way through the grass, leaping up to capture bugs. That day a female towhee landed in the green, which set off her colors. She flew and was replaced by a male who was just as obliging. Under the crabapple trees that line this meadow, we saw a flock of pigeons pecking in the grass. What could they be eating? Crabapples, ripe and soft enough to be peckable and edible.

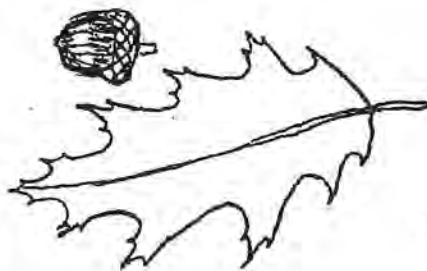
When I stepped into the Boathouse the other day, there was Tom Fiore writing his notes in the bird book. What did he think of the fall migration? Odd. It was so warm for so long he thinks many birds waited, then passed us by. Weeks without rain didn't help. A rainy weekend helped the plants at least.

While talking to Tom I mentioned palm warblers, which reminded him of seeing a palm in the rocks at the Castle. As he watched, it leaned forward and snapped up a small red dragonfly, perhaps an autumn toper or *Sympetrum*. I asked about the temperature. If the dragonfly's flight muscles were not warm enough, it couldn't escape. I've only seen Eastern kingbirds take dragonflies.

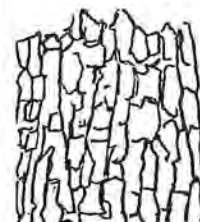
After Dennis Burton told me about red and black oaks, I came home and looked them up in some tree books. Both reach 70 or 80 feet, with trunks 3 feet in diameter, and leaves 4 to 10 inches long with bristle tips. The bark of both trees is grooved vertically, and black oaks are grooved horizontally as well. Their acorns take 2 years to mature. Reds are an inch long, nearly as wide, and have shallow caps. Black oak acorns are ½ inch, have bowl caps and almost no stems. Reds are the fastest-growing of the oaks; black oaks can live to be 150 to 200 years old. *Quercus* is a Latin-Celtic for "beautiful tree", *rubra* is red, *velutina* comes from *vellus*, meaning fleece, or soft and fuzzy.

Red Oak *Quercus rubra*

Black Oak *Quercus velutina*



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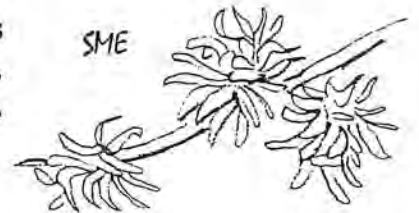
November-December, 1997

Sighing Leaves, Bewitching Blooms

It was a strange fall. We waited for the trees to put out glory and waited in vain. The phenomenon was not local. A friend wrote from northeast Iowa to say that warm days and warm nights produced poor color. Finally, our night temperatures began to dip toward freezing, and the world turned from dingy tan to splashes of bright yellow and salmon. The color change seemed to be about two weeks late, but helped by cooler nights, it gained momentum and some of the park landmarks were only a week late by the end of November. In the flat meadow south of the Castle, the great sourgum put out a bumper crop of fat fruit. In the year of the drought the seeds were sparse, small and shriveled, the skin just covering the pits. This year's spring and summer rains meant a huge yield. Hard purple fruit covered every twig and branch, each with a layer of pulp between seed and skin. Thrushes, woodpeckers, catbirds and starlings gobbled silently under the canopy of green. They stripped the crown by the time flame freckled its leaves, and even the lowest branches were harvested before the tree put on its scarlet cloak.

Garrison Keillor told us that the folks in his hometown, Lake Wobegon, Minnesota, were amazed to see leaves still on the oaks and green grass on the ground in the first week of December. The same was true in Central Park. Here and there in protected pockets we could see the mingled glory of ginkgos and maples. Beech trees held their brassy-gold leaves even longer, as did the wine-dark oaks. But by mid-month the beeches were bare. Grudgingly, the oaks release corpse-brown hostages, and oak leaves still fly on December winds.

While all these leaves were fluttering farewell, the witch hazels *Hamamelis virginiana* have put out yellow flowers. Great clusters of spidery, breathy blooms grace shrubby trees all over the park. Try to see them now, before they wilt. This sketch comes by way of Howie Moskowitz photos.



Raptor Report

On December 15 there was a party at Belvedere Castle to celebrate the end of this year's hawk census there. We dined on cheese, crackers, pasta, salad, cider, cookies and rum balls. I invited the crowd to come to the Christmas Bird Count and some people said they would be there. I planned to copy out the raptor totals but was forestalled by Linda, a cheerful young woman who came to count every Monday this fall. Here is the list for 8-15-'97 to 12-15-'97.

Black Vulture-3, Turkey Vulture-137, Osprey-459, Bald Eagle-17, Northern Harrier-33, Sharp-shinned Hawk-1212, Cooper's Hawk-109, Northern Goshawk-2, Red-shouldered Hawk-30, Broad-winged Hawk-4646, Red-tailed Hawk-117, Golden Eagle-1, American Kestrel-215, Merlin-23, Peregrine Falcon-15. There were a number of unidentified birds--dots big enough to show family group but not big enough to show other field marks. These included Accipiters-31, Buteos-14, Falcons-13, Eagle-1, and more generally (really small dots) Raptor-94. The total was 7172.

Apparently this year's totals are lower than for other years in Central Park. I was told that with few exceptions they are lower throughout the region.

After the party, Howie Moskowitz and I moved north for a reported saw-whet owl in the Pinetum. Sure enough, there it was, veiled in a cluster of pines inside a new curving wood fence near the 79 St. transverse. Small, striped and chubby, it watched capering birders below. We hoped the owl would hang around for the Christmas Count, but it left before the week was out.

Census Saga

During that week I was as busy as one of Santa's elves. I made tally sheets of some 46 birds-- a round-up of the usual suspects plus recent visitors to the park. These were printed for each section to use in the field. I made a full park count sheet with the same sequence of birds plus columns for every section of the park and 1 column for totals. Both sheets had a space marked Other, for any bonus birds. On the tally sheets I added instructions: Count pigeons on ground, in tree but not in air. Count all house sparrows and starlings. Count large flying birds, noting time and direction of flight, possible field marks for hawks. Check berry trees for birds and under bushes at the park walls. I printed separate maps for each section of the park to show all the territory to be covered. I printed large announcements for use in buildings over the park. When the printing was completed, I called some 50 people who have participated in past counts and might not know the date, time, and location for this year's count. Some of these people complain I neglect them. This year all were invited.

I called the manager of the Boathouse and reserved the southwest room for 12:30, Sunday afternoon. In mid-week a birder went in and spoke to staff, reminding them of their promise. I called people at the Zoo and obtained a permit to come in on Sunday morning and count wild birds in grassy open areas at the back near the East Drive. I visited the 79 St. Yard, spoke to Bill Berliner and got a replacement key for the new lock to Hallett Sanctuary. I cut pink name/address cards for people to sign and hand in with their money for Audubon. I dug out 10 pencils for people who forgot theirs.

As I was bagging count sheets, permits, maps, key, name cards, calculator, pencils, a Bird Count sign for the Boathouse gathering, plus a pharmacy of cold pills, the phone rang. It was Gersh of the New York Post, for an interview.

We talked about the history of this count, ours being one of the first locations to be counted almost a century ago. I told him of Donen Gleick, a long-time park birder whose son, James Gleick, when he was editor of the New York Times weekend edition, had sent a reporter to cover the count as a holiday gift for his father. We made the front page. From that time on other publications and television had come to cover our activities. I explained we counted everything, even starling and pigeons. I told him I dislike starlings. They watch woodpeckers dig out nest holes in trees, then attack and take over the nest. Did we have loons? Yes, for spring and fall migrations, but not in winter.

This interview was due to the suggestion of Ralph Ginzburg, a Post photographer. He called on Friday night to say Saturday's paper had just come off the press and we had been given a full page. He thought many people would read the Saturday paper and come to the count. He even offered to drop off copies of the newspaper with my doorman.

There was a large picture of birders in binoculars over a headline, "Early birds catch the census." The copy began, "They're not crazy, but they are looking for a bunch of loons." I am quoted as saying starlings "wait until hummingbirds burrow into a tree and build a nest, and then they hit the hummingbirds over the head and move into the nest themselves." I was amazed to learn this new development in Ornithology and reflected that human communication is fragile at best. Gersh

Kuntzman got our last year's total right and gave some good information about count history. He kindly told people where and when to meet and how much to bring for Audubon if they wanted to join. I was told a woman in Albany found the account jolly and wished she was close enough to join. The picture, from the photograph morgue, was taken some years ago by Ralph Ginsburg but he was not credited. Ralph was out covering a basketball game for a later run of Saturday's paper and sent me a photo of a short man sailing through air past a tall guard to make a basket. Great shot.

Sunday morning I was called at 6:30 by wonderful Bob Krinsky to make sure I was up and tell me he would be at the door in a cab at 7:35. Bob, like most New Yorkers, had the flu. He would count for a while but might leave early, he said. Bob had never said this in the years and years we have been doing the count. We arrived at Fifth Ave and joined birders waiting at the park entrance at 85 St. Almost all were new, both to the park and to birding. How did they learn of it? They had read Peter Joost's article in the New York City Audubon newsletter and called for instructions. We entered the park and walked to the Pumping Station. I was startled to see so small a crowd of people.

David Krauss was there with his scope and had already counted the gulls. Paul Osenbough with scope said he would cover the castle for hawks and geese. Merrill Higgins was there with scope for anything that was perched. Karen Asakawa and Irene Warshauer said they would be co-captains of the northwest section, Bob Anderson said he would go anywhere and took the southwest section with a new birder.

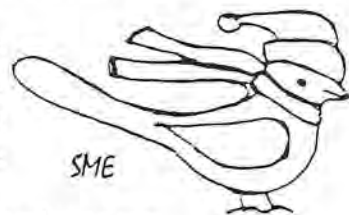
People filled out their pink cards and handed cards and money to Ellen Kornhauser and Anne Lazarus. I passed out tally sheets, referred to the information about pigeons, large birds, berries, and park walls. I gave Sharon O'Connell the key to Hallett and what I thought was the Zoo permit. I handed out maps to each section. I urged the people going to the North End to time themselves and finish around 12 and meet us at the Boathouse by 12:30. Birders spread out over the park. It was a pleasure to cover a territory I didn't know, the part of the Great Lawn all the way to Central Park West between 86 and 81 St. Mary Kelly is a good spotter and we saw many juncos and white-throats on the ground, white-breasted nuthatches and tufted titmice in trees, a flock of crows on the Lawn and 2 immature red-headed woodpeckers in the Locust Grove. Merrill put his scope on the one nearest the Shakespeare Theater and we saw the red feathers coming into the head and a line of red across the throat. Later, I heard this bird trill-rattling and saw it chase off a downy and red-bellied woodpecker. It sounded like a fight over stored nuts.

We finished our section in plenty of time and went to see 2 long-eared owls who have taken up residence in a pine on Cedar Hill south of the 79 St. transverse. They stay together and we hope they are a pair.

Back at the Boathouse I hung up the Bird Logo sign to show new birders where to meet. Then I noticed most of them in the main room eating and working on their section totals. When I tried to enter the southwest room, I was told it was engaged. Yes-- by the birders. No--by a woman dressing for her wedding in the pricey party section of the Boathouse.

I joined the others eating. Bob Krinsky entered to check a guide and confirm an immature Cooper's hawk. He was about to leave when we learned that James Gleick had gone flying with his son and the plane had crashed in New Jersey. Our friend Donen had lost a grandson and his son was in critical condition. We were appalled.

At one o'clock I urged birders to begin entering the corner room. The bride eventually sauntered out, looking sullen. We entered and filled the room. Chairs were unstacked and all-park count sheets were passed around. We were joined by many observers who had not participated in



the count. Some of these people are very loyal but no longer have the stamina to hike over the park.

Ed Fagan volunteered to tabulate species totals on my calculator. This helped a great deal, especially for species with large populations. All but 5 birds on the list were seen that morning, and 8 birds were added to the "Other" list. We hoped for a saw-whet owl, which didn't materialize, and cedar waxwings which have been all over the park. When we came to long-eared owls, the Ramble counters said "zero." Corrections flew. "Whaddaya mean?" "There are 2 of them in your section." Turns out they had covered the center of their map, but not the land east or west of it. Luckily, others found birds in that area later in the day. I was glad Paul Osenbough had tracked a flock of Canada geese at the Castle, our only geese for the count. He also saw a red-shouldered hawk. On his way to the Castle he saw a ruby-crowned kinglet, a bird we haven't listed in years. The overall count was much larger than last year because of an amazingly high count of ruddy ducks. There were 12 in the Ramble and 1,832 on the Reservoir.

As we were dispersing I asked Sharon about Hallett and the Zoo. It was the first time she'd ever been inside Hallett. And the Zoo? They didn't go in. What! Didn't they use the permit? She didn't have a permit. This turned out to be true. Later when we emptied our bags, she found a paper I had given her. I found the permit. Zounds! When I left I asked a cluster of birders if they had a Zoo card. David Monk said yes and we walked south together. He got in and the woman at the door looked at me and said, "Don't tell me what happened. I don't want to hear. Just go in with him." There were birds at the feeder near East Drive. We saw black-capped chickadees, white-throats, nuthatches, jays and the bouncy red panda. But no catbird or towhee to add to the list.

Later, talking to Bob Krinsky about section maps, he said he marks what he covers. He gets others to cover their sub-sections and marks those on the map as well. No land goes uncovered or unmarked. Sharon O'Connell called to unravel the Zoo mystery. She said that because so few of the male hotshot birders came to count, female birders took their place and had a much better time. Women are more democratic, she stated. Instead of being ordered about, we consulted each other for the best results. It was fun. Karen Asakawa and Irene Warshauer said the same. Neither wanted to be a section leader but they had a good time being co-leaders.

Here are park results for the day of the count. Norma Collin called with an update on red-wings and mourning doves, plus news of a wood duck seen in the Ramble. They are included here: Pied-billed Grebe -3, Great Blue Heron -1, Mute Swan -2, Canada Goose -11, American Black Duck -39, Mallard, -407, Northern Shoveler -14, Bufflehead -11, Ruddy Duck -1844, Wood Duck -1, Red-tailed Hawk -8, Red-shouldered Hawk, -1, Cooper's Hawk -1, American Kestrel -2, Peregrine Falcon -1, Ring-necked Pheasant, -1, American Coot -15, Ring-billed Gull -897, Herring Gull -429, Great Black-backed Gull -17, Rock Dove -794, Mourning Dove -15, Long-eared Owl -2, Red-bellied Woodpecker -26, Red-headed Woodpecker -3, Yellow-bellied Sapsucker -8, Downy Woodpecker 20, Hairy Woodpecker -3, Northern Flicker -7, Blue Jay -127, American Crow -57 Black-capped Chickadee -37, Tufted Titmouse -182, White-breasted Nuthatch -36, Brown Creeper -4, Ruby-crowned Kinglet -1, Hermit Thrush -2, American Robin -17, Northern Mockingbird -4, European Starling -481, Northern Cardinal -33, Song Sparrow -6, White-throated Sparrow -373, Dark-eyed Junco -25, Red-winged Blackbird -12, Rusty Blackbird -1, Common Grackle -3, House Finch -74, American Goldfinch -7, House Sparrow -816. Total Species: 50. Total Numbers: 6,879

Despite many mishaps, it was a sunny day and a good count. During the count period, Norma and the Fiories saw 1 swamp sparrow, and Sharon Freedman called to report 3 red crossbills and 1 white-winged crossbill. She was alone when she saw these rare birds, but she met and told Tom Fiore who, apparently, was not so lucky. Happy and Healthy New Year to you all!