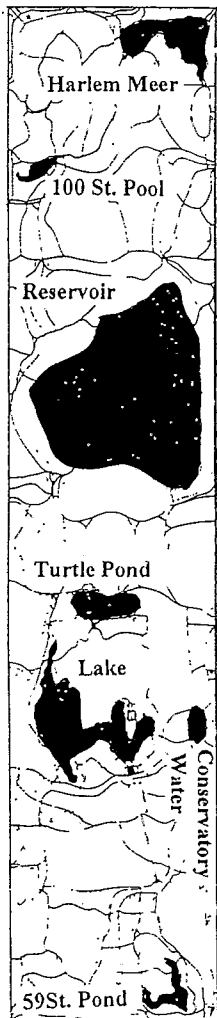


THE ELLIOTT NEWSLETTER

Nature Notes for Central Park

Vol. 4 No. 1

January - February 1998



Winter Waterfowl

Jan. 12 was sunny, not too windy, but cold to very cold in some pockets. I met Jeff Nulle for the New York State Waterfowl Count. Jeff is as good a bird spotter as he is a word and comma spotter, which makes working with him a treat, not a treatment. I benefit, you benefit, and the NY State Waterfowlers benefit.

There are 7 bodies of water in Central Park, and this count began in the north at the Meer and worked south. This is the wrong way to travel because the sun is always in your eyes. Next year, we vow to reverse direction. Looking at this map you would probably assume that most of the waterfowl were on the Reservoir. You would be right. You would not assume many waterfowl would be at the 59 St. Pond, but the place is crowded with ducks because many New Yorkers come to feed them. In cold weather, park personnel smash a large hole in the ice so that the birds can bathe.

This year there were waterfowl on every water surface, especially the Reservoir, where flocks of birds rest and sleep. Mallards were actively splashing and swimming throughout the park. The males and females don't look alike and we could sex mallards as we counted them. We discovered the males outnumbered females 3 or 4 to 1. This difference was true of the other ducks we could sex by appearance. Why do more female ducks fly farther and more males remain here until frozen ponds force them south to open water? I don't know. I am sure our changed climate affects duck migration. We've had a decade of warm weather, and last winter was the warmest on record.

The second most abundant waterfowl was the ruddy duck. There were less than 1/3 of the number counted for December's National Audubon Christmas Count. Even so, 557 Ruddy ducks is a formidable increase over the 81 we counted last year. Most wore dingy winter coats, their heads tucked under their wings.

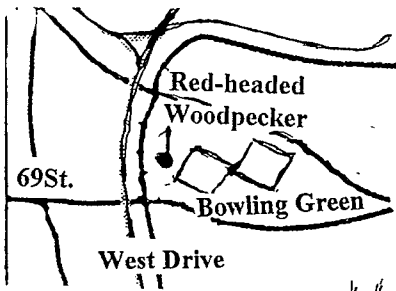
We counted 18 black ducks and 17 hybrids of black and mallard. There were 10 bufflehead on Harlem Meer and the Reservoir; 6 males, 4 females. Most of the shovelers had gone from the Lake. Five males and only 1 female remained in the park.

We saw one pied-billed grebe and one ring-necked duck in the Reservoir. We found 16 coot there, and Jeff found one more at the Meer. Also at the Meer were 31 Canada geese, one a small form. Our pair of mute swans glided over the Lake and were fed at the shore. It took longer to count the waterfowl on the 7 bodies of water in our park this year because there were so many birds. Our totals were 1 pied-billed grebe, 2 mute swan, 31 Canada geese, 18 Am. black duck, 659 mallard, 17 mallard x black, 6 no. shoveler, 1 ring-necked duck, 10 bufflehead, 557 ruddy duck, 17 coot, 1 unknown, perhaps a zoo escape. Our total waterfowl count, including the unknown, was 1320.

Red-heads and Long-ears

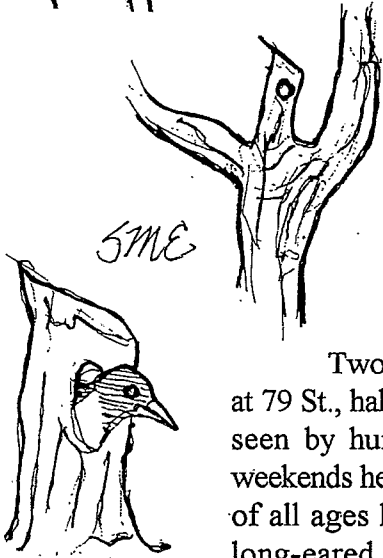
Since November, birders have peered from the walks and fences into the Black Locust Grove

on the west side of the Great Lawn. This year we can see 4 woodpeckers perching, flying and calling. One of them has a dull gray head, one is dull red, and one wears a red band across the throat. One is a new arrival I haven't yet seen.



There is a fifth red-headed woodpecker wintering south of the 72 St. Transverse. On the second day of the year I strolled south and met Ben Cacace, who told me he watched this gray-headed young bird and discovered its roosting hole. The hole is in a Norway maple just west of the Bowling Green and near the sidewalk that edges the West Drive. If you enter the park from Central Park West and cross the drive at 69 St., it's just a few grassy steps north to the tree. Come as the day ends and you will see bird watchers lining the fence, looking at the bird.

The evening of my pilgrimage, the red-head gave a number of chirpy trills and entered its roost hole at 4:13 PM. It came right out again to chase titmice and nuthatches from its caches of nuts in nearby trees. At 4:17 it was back beside the entrance, vigorously preening its breast feathers and wing-pits. The bird dove into its hole at 4:36. At 4:44 it stuck its head out again, then disappeared for the night. Park regulars who watch this fly-in say it is not the same every night. When I returned to sketch the tree, I noticed there is a hole right through to the other side--making a breezeway above the roost.



Two long-eared owls have been roosting in a stand of evergreens at 79 St., halfway between Fifth Ave. and the East Drive. They have been seen by hundreds of New Yorkers because of Merrill Higgins. Most weekends he brings in his telescope, sets it up and aims it. Cheerful people of all ages line up to peer into his scope for views of one or both of the long-eared owls. The birds sit side by side on a horizontal branch of a Norway pine and try to ignore the humans.



Long-eared owls *Asio otus* live in Europe, Asia and all over North America. The scientific name of our long-eared owl is *Asio otus wilsonianis* and it's a darker race than the Eurasian owls. Their eyes are orange, our owls have lemon yellow eyes; in both cases, the bill is black and the female is slightly larger than the male. They are 13 inches long but look less than a foot when they hunch down. When they fly the wing spread is more than a yard across, all of it silent.

In winter, long-ears are gregarious. Half a dozen or more may roost together in a stand of trees. In March they pair off and mate. During the mating season they are said to yap like a dog, mew like a kitten, snap their beaks and hiss at intruders. So far we have heard no sound from our owls but many park birders have their fingers crossed, hoping for any sounds of courtship.

According to John Bull in Birds of New York State, the female could lay 3, 4, or 5 eggs between March 21 and May 23. The eggs crack and out come nestlings between May 5 and June 24. Young owls leave the nest between June 1 and August 8. They are fed and taught by their parents until they can fend for themselves and hunt on their own. These dates suggest a wide window of opportunity. But if they mate, my guess is that the owls will not stay in the park to nest. All the rains of 1997 may have produced a large crop of fruits and seeds but I do not believe that crop promoted a mouse and small bird population large enough for a growing family of owls. If the owls feel crowded now, warm weather, crowds of New Yorkers and a nest of red-tails may force them out.

At sunset, when the crowds have gone, the owls fly out to hunt for dinner. People who have

examined their pellets say they are eating white-footed mice. Once they were seen hunting together, flying a parallel course over opposite sides of a field, which certainly sounds like chummy cooperation. I have read that their flight is wavering, uncertain, like the flight of a whip-poor-will.

At the end of January I came in to see the owls fly, if possible. I ran into Hanna Eshel, an artist who lives in the Village. We toured the Ramble, repaired to the Boathouse for hot chocolate and warm cider, then strolled to the owl encampment at 5:15. We stood below the stand of trees with a view of the long meadow just south of the owls. It was not windy but it was nippy and neither Hanna nor I was warm enough. We watched the sun turn the sky orange behind black silhouettes of bare trees. The streetlights came on, blue-white below, duller red above. Hanna began to dance, waving her arms in the air to keep warm. We watched the pines from below; another group stood vigil from the sidewalk up above. When the last color was gone from the sky, I saw a branch dip and bounce. One of the owls departed, but, alas, not in our direction. The owl flew west, not south. The upper sidewalk group raced after it, but they did not find it again.

I was sorry to miss the owls, but we had a grand view of the heavens. Up rose the Tiger Year moon, a dim golden globe, trailing her sliver crescent skirt. Directly beneath the moon and just clearing the skyscrapers we saw Jupiter, looking atmospherically red. Hanna pointed out Mars, above and to our left. She reads the astronomy column every Sunday in "The New York Times."

We turned toward Fifth Ave. Shading our eyes from park streetlights we gazed up at Orion. Usually I see Orion upright, higher and alone in mid-heaven. At 6 PM he lay on his side, levitating above the buildings. The 3 stars of his belt were in vertical alignment. Hanna pointed to a red star left of the belt, which is the brightest in this constellation, named Betelgeaux or Betelgeuse (Bet-I-jooz). Both names come from the Arabic word for shoulder.

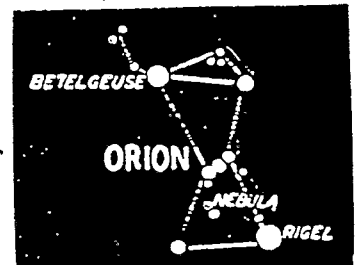
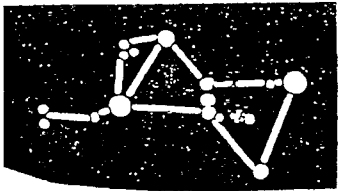
She pointed to a bright star to the right of the belt, calling it Rigel (Ri-jel or Ri-gel), which comes from the Arabic word for foot. Actually Rigel is a double star, bright enough to pierce city skies. Hanna pointed out the nebula, a Latin word for cloud, near Orion's belt. With binoculars I could just make out the cloudy patch of stars and dust. It was a first. I have never seen a star through birding binoculars in Central Park.

Orion, studied by ancient Arabs, Romans, and Greeks, has acquired a rich patina of history. In Greek mythology, he was a huge and handsome hunter who made a deal with a potential father-in-law to rid the land of large mammals in exchange for that man's desirable daughter in marriage. Orion kept his part of this environmentally incorrect bargain. But when he returned for his reward, his potential father-in-law had him drugged and put out his eyes. Orion traveled east, where Dawn's rays restored his eyesight. He returned home seeking vengeance, but, unable to find his enemy, he became a huntsman for Artemis in Crete. She shot him, either out of jealousy or by mistake, and, in remorse, she had this mortal flung into the sky to be honored as a constellation.

I once saw a Chinese chart of the heavens. None of the constellations looked familiar. There were different clusters and, no doubt, different stories to remember them by. My star charts come from Star Maps for Beginners by I.M. Levitt and R.K. Marshall, 1942, and belonged to my mother. If you look south about 8 PM on or near March 1, you will see Orion, provided it's not cloudy.

Spring Flowers in Winter

Our mild, rainy but snowless winter brings very early spring flowers. The snowdrops are in



bloom and the daffodils were 3-4" high by mid February. There are plantings of Asian witch hazel above the owls near the East Drive and below the owls on the path that leads to the Metropolitan Museum of Art. They bloom in January, later than our native shrubs. The ribbon-like petals are longer and instead of bright yellow, these blooms are deep gold or dull rust-orange. They all have wine-red centers, and the day I saw them, they were attracting flies to something oozing from the centers. Over in Shakespeare Garden you can see purple-blue pansies, Christmas or Lenten Rose, yellow, white and purple crocuses, and under the old mulberry tree, ultraviolet squill.

Texas Treat

In the third week of February I joined a group of birders organized by Richard Rabkin, Vice-President of the New York Linnaean Society, for a trip to Texas. We flew to Corpus Christie and traveled along the curve of the Rio Grande from Brownsville through McAllen, and as far west as Zapata, looking for rare birds from Mexico as well as local attractions. The biggest local attractions were the whooping cranes that towered above the grasses of Aransas National Wildlife Refuge. At the trailer park in Bentsen State Park we saw clay-colored and white-throated robins, blue bunting, black-throated gray warbler, green jay, and chachalaca, but missed hook-billed kite.

Other exciting birds of the trip included least and eared grebe, both pelicans, neotropic cormorant, anhinga, bittern, little blue heron, reddish egret, white-faced ibis, roseate spoonbill, fulvous and black-bellied whistling ducks, greater white-fronted goose, cinnamon teal, Harris's hawk, crested caracara, sandhill crane, snowy plover, avocet, long-billed curlew, marbled godwit, snipe, white-winged, Inca, common, ground and white-tipped doves, green parakeet, red-crowned parrot, roadrunner, ferruginous pygmy-owl, buff-bellied and rufous hummingbirds, ringed and green kingfishers, golden-fronted and ladder-backed woodpeckers, northern beardless-tyrannulet, Say's phoebe, vermilion flycatcher, great kiskadee, tropical and Couch's kingbird, cave swallow, brown jay, long-billed and curved-billed thrasher, Sprague's pipit, tropical parula, black-headed grosbeak, pyrrhuloxia, olive sparrow, white-collared seedeater, lark bunting, black-throated and lark sparrow, meadowlark, Brewer's blackbird, bronzed cowbird, Altamira and Audubon's orioles, lesser goldfinch. All of these birds have their pictures in the National Geographic's Birds of North America.

One warm evening at Bentsen-Rio Grande Park, we stood in the road listening to giant toads while hoping to see the common pauraque (puh-RAH-kee). These birds look like nighthawks but with rounded tails. After sunset, they sit on the warm refuge roads. Using a large flashlight, Kim Eckert, our skilled local guide, told us to stand directly behind him. Suddenly, we could see the bright orange shine of their eyes in his light. When they flew up, the white of their wing bands flashed in the light. That night we found at least 20 pauraque in grass, ditches and on the road. Their call, rising in pitch and volume, sounded like "heh-heh-heh-heh-heh-SCREE`oh" on my tape machine. The sky was filled with stars: clear, bright, large and close. Looming over us was Orion, so vivid we could see all 4 stars of his limbs and his dagger. We found Cassiopeia, looking like an M not a W, and Richard Rabkin pointed out the Pleiades. Star shine above, eye shine below-- a magic night to remember.

I will lead a winter/spring nature walk, Saturday, March 28. Rain date, Sunday, March 29. Meet 10 AM at Boathouse. Bring \$7 exact.

Spring Classes: Five Sunday classes begin April 12. Meet 9 AM at Boathouse. Five Wednesday classes begin April 15. Meet 9AM at 76 St. near Fifth Ave., on or at benches inside the park. To register, send \$35 check by April 1. Late fee, \$5 extra.

THE ELLIOTT NEWSLETTER

Nature Notes from Central Park

Vol. 4 No. 2

March-April 1998

The Hunter Home from the Hill

On April 19, I was standing with 10 stalwarts from the Sunday bird class, trying to see half a handful of birds high in a pin oak. It was raining and the visibility was lousy. I lowered my head and binoculars and there, strolling through the mist, was Tom Fiore. I stepped forward and kissed him, trying not to weep, though in that weather it wouldn't have been noticed. He looked thin and serious but seemed willing to talk to us about his ordeal.

Tom and 3 others were on an ill-starred bird trip to Colombia where they were kidnaped. If you are a geographical illiterate like me, Colombia hangs from Central America by the umbilicus of Panama and is tucked into the northwest corner of South America. Three lines of mountains cross the western part of the country. They are part of the Andes, a wall of high peaks that snakes down the western edge of the continent and is the world's longest mountain range.

The captured were moved from place to place in the mountains. Their guards were members of FARC, a political group crusading for redistribution of wealth and power in Colombia. They were armed, businesslike, and teenagers. Tom said his group were treated well, allowed to keep most of their possessions except the binoculars and allowed to stay together. When it became clear that the four really were in Colombia to see birds, the youngest guard pointed to a nearby spot and said, "There's a bird." They looked and saw a rare Andean Cock-of-the-Rock. Though brilliant orange with black wing and tail feathers, the bird was hard to spot in the green leaves. Tom seemed surprised it was the guard who found the bird. But the captives scanned birds for pleasure; their captor scanned everything for survival.

What birding skills did Tom use to walk to safety? He watched where the sun rose and set. He knew the mountains ran north and south. At about 5,000 feet, he knew he should get to lower ground and move south. One night the four were allowed to stand out and look at stars. Tom saw the lights of a town in the distance and decided to aim for that if he could. As we all saw on TV, he was successful and the birding community is relieved and grateful to have him back. As of April 25 the other three were released and will be returned safe home. Give thanks for their lives.

This capture has shocked many people but so far birders aren't talking about ways to get to and from a foreign land safely. I decided that Bob Immerman was exactly the right person to call about this growing concern. Bob is a birder, a former member of the State Department and, as a political science professor, knows about lots of countries.

"If you travel with a large professional group," says Bob, "you can feel safe." These organizations deal with travel agencies who regularly check bird locations with the State Department. Sometimes flights are canceled at the last minute. If you are going to a risky location, take out flight cancellation insurance, says Patricia Miller. You will pay less than \$100 but you could save thousands for transportation, accommodations and other reservations that are part of your deposit.

The State Dept. issues a travel advisory of what Bob calls "red lights and yellow lights," by which he means "stop, too dangerous," or "proceed with caution." Why haven't some countries been

put on the advisory list more quickly? "Because it helps wreck the travel industry for that country." Some countries such as Bosnia and Afghanistan are clearly "off limits." Bob also advises people to stay away from Moscow, Congo, Algeria, southern Mexico and Colombia.

He suggests you check The New York Times Index for about 6 months to learn if the country you want to visit has political trouble. The NYT Index is on the 2nd floor of the Mid-Manhattan Library. The reference tables are at the Fifth Ave. windows near 41 St.. Old decades of topic summaries are bound in red, last year is bound in large white paperbacks and this year is in black loose-leaf notebooks. Take a magnifying glass. The print is too small to read.

You can call the passport office to learn the safety status of your destination. Or you can call the State Department switchboard in Washington, DC and ask to be connected to the desk officer for the country you plan to visit. As Lee Stinchcomb says, "I wouldn't go to many of the places I was lucky enough to see years ago."

If you plan a bird trip with a small group of friends you need to be much more vigilant. It's not enough to know the pictures and names of birds you want to see and the geography of the country and have stamina. Every member of the group is part of a team. All of you should have a medical check-up, shots against disease, lose extra weight, have a strong heart, and be able to live without any pills indefinitely. You should be sure-footed-- able to hike through rough terrain without falls. There may be no doctor for sprains, breaks, or wounds. You should speak the local language well. If you get amoebic dysentery from the water, you need the local word for "yogurt." You should be willing and able to eat most of the local food, not a specialized New York diet.

Plan to take time out. Your group should schedule parts of several days for free-time activity such as resting, shopping, doing laundry, seeing a museum or local sights. It's the pause that refreshes and diversity spices a trip. Also, a choice of activity can free group members from the stress of unending togetherness. Above all, try not to go on a trip with birding crazies so determined to augment their life list with "target birds" that they could make you a target, too.

Many of us have met bird watchers whose birding skills far exceed their good sense. Some are risk junkies. They forgo rest and regular meals to pursue exotic birds. Days of discomfort and deprivation give them a "high" while "living on the edge." A bird trip is turned into a test of grit and surviving the test becomes, as Bob says, "an addiction as surely as any drug."

Whether you see yourself as an intrepid birder or a sober sojourner, the capture in Colombia is a wake-up call. From now on bird watchers will be seen as "rich Americans" and/ or "spies" to would-be abductors in other lands. "When you take a trip," as Bob Immerman says, "you want to forget your normal cares. You want to let your defenses down--not raise them higher." So choose your location and companions carefully. It's hard to hunt for a bird if you become the hunted.

Red-Tails in Nest

Crowds line Conservatory Pond not to watch the model boats but the new family of red-tailed hawks on Fifth Ave. Pale Male and Blue-bill, his new mate, continue to carry sticks to the ever-growing nest. Both parents land in the nest and he chases crows and other red-tails from his territory. Merrill Higgins says that the eggs have hatched. Holly Holden tells me they see Blue-bill tear food apart and ram it into 2 specific nest locations below eye level.

When you join weekend strollers at the benches south of the Hans Christian Andersen statue, you may step up to the viewing scopes for a clear look at the nest. Bob DiCandido will give you a free fact sheet about the hawks. This spring he has distributed 4 reams of them. Some people visit the hawkwatch because they have read and enjoyed Marie Winn's new book "Red-Tails in Love."

Even so, there are plenty of people in need of further education. If you have watched New Yorkers learn to use the new bus cards, you know that mass education takes time. Here's a sample of remarks made to Merrill: Are the hawks yours? Are they real? How did the birds get up there? Oh, the elevator. Are the parents male and female? Is that a Pelican Falcon? I can't see the nest because of the sticks. I saw a double-breasted cormorant on the water. Did the eggs hatch? Why can't I see the chicks? They are below the nest line? Oh. Well how many are there? One woman held up her Chihuahua to "see" the hawk nest. Hoping to please, the dog dutifully licked the scope eyepiece. My thanks to Merrill, Holly and Darcia Weiss for sharing these comments with me and you.

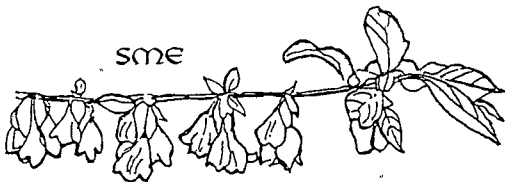
Lovely as a Tree

The warm winter, followed by a strange spring, has produced an abundance of blooming shrubs and trees. Species that usually follow one another in stately succession have all popped out at once. All except the magnolias. Coaxed by days of torrid temperatures, they trustingly opened their buds and were zapped by freezing nights. Brown and shriveled buds dropped to the ground and only a few scraggly flowers appeared in the trees. Since then the weather has been mostly cool and rainy. The park looks glorious. Birders keep asking each other why the birds seem so late. They are not. It's just that the trees, shrubs and flowers are 2 to 3 weeks early.

On April 25, I had the pleasure of leading a tree walk for the American Craft Museum. They are on 53 St. next to Donnell Library and across from MOMA. "Expressions in Wood" is a current show at the ACM and is wonderful. You owe it to yourself to see it before May 10 when it closes. The variety of wood colors and shapes is extraordinary. You want to caress, even embrace them. Since one cannot touch the exhibits, touching trees in Central Park seemed a cheerful substitute.

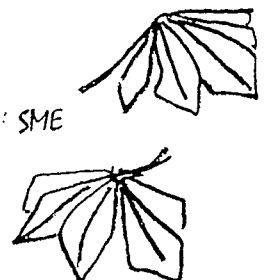
Until this spring I have been pointing out trees in relation to birds. Pin oaks, willow oaks, tulip trees, sweet gums, beeches and willows all sprout a crop of spring bugs just in time for migrating birds to devour. But there are plenty of trees not known for being fast-food stations. They are intricate, interesting, and worth attention even without an avian function.

Searching for trees completely changes your walk through the Ramble. You step to locations for a full view of the tree's shape and mass. You can walk right up to peer at leaves and sniff the flowers, including the dung smell of hawthorns. You can examine the fruit and feel the trunk and branches. You do not have to lower your voice or move cautiously. The tree will not fly away, although some of them seem to mislay themselves.



Right now, hawthorns, redbuds, dogwoods and lilacs are flowering in the park. So are the silver bell *Halesia carolina*. A large silverbell tree, covered in white, stands on a rolling carpet of green near the 72St. Transverse. Turn your back to Bethesda Fountain and stand on the sidewalk looking toward the Mall and Bandshell. Look to your left and you'll discover the tree at the edge of the lawn. If you hurry, you will see bell flowers hanging from every branch and shoot.

All the horsechestnuts are just coming into flower. We examined the white and pink ones and I pointed to a tree relative I've just noticed because of Doris Heitmeyer. It stands just west of the Morse statue, on the south side of the 72 St. Transverse near Fifth Ave. The 5-finger leaves are smaller than the horsechestnuts. When the flowers come out, they could be yellow and the tree may be a yellow buckeye. To see this tree, walk west from the ice cream stand past the statue and look behind the benches.



Mysterious White-Throats

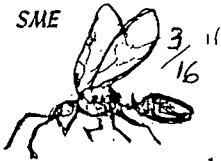
Early this spring the arriving white-throated sparrows looked terrible. They had large gray patches and I wondered if they had been polluted. Looking closer I decided they were molting. I asked Starr Saphir if she had ever seen molting white-throats before. Yes. On the head and neck.

Starr went to New Jersey, did research and kindly called me about it. White-throats complete a partial molt of head and neck feathers just before breeding. Could this be putting on their top hats, white ties but not tails? Besides improved appearance there could be another reason. The head and neck are difficult places to clean. A bird can dunk in water and shake out feathers but parasites are tenacious. Perhaps they are pushed out by molting feathers.

Starr also said that almost all pairs of white-throats consist of one white-striped morph and one tan-striped morph. That's because all sparrows with white stripes on their heads sing. Male white-stripes chase off other singers, including their own females. They mate with quiet tan-stripe females. Tan-stripe males have to make do with female white-stripes. Starr did not report her source or the people who did the study, but you don't have to be a feminist to think it sounds peculiar. So do your own research. Do white-stripes sing longer, louder? Do they pick fights? Do tan-stripes sing at, fight with other tans, with whites? Of course, migrating sparrows would rather eat than fight.

Learning by Sketching

Jane Creel, a woman in my bird classes, took a trip to Chile and on her return visited a friend in California. The friend made a sketch and I was asked to identify it. My first thought was of a long-eared owl in a high wind. But the projection was marked "horn." There was a wattle under the beak and the word "turkey" near the back. I began searching through illustrations in the Readers Digest book "Birds ; Their Life, Their Ways, Their World." I discovered it was a helmeted guineafowl, found in Africa. Sure enough, Jane's friend lives near a zoo and this backyard bird was probably an escapee.



Sketching is a wonderful way to focus your gaze and notice details. I have old sketches, some identified, some not, of birds, bees, ants and wild flowers. Sketches are a portable way to bring home enough information for further research. And they are fun to do.

This summer I will be offering "Sketching to See" classes in Central Park. These will be for people who want to make working studies, not deathless art. If you are here in June, July or August this may be an outing for you. You will need to bring a sketch pad, soft pencil, a sun hat, a stool to sit on and \$10 exact. I hope to keep each class small so that we can all discuss our efforts and make useful suggestions at the end of each session. If this seems a pleasant way to spend your summer, send me a post card with your name, address, phone, and if you want weekdays and/or weekends.

The Birds of Central Park

About a decade ago, I published a pamphlet with a checklist of birds for 4 seasons and a map of good birding places in the park. I had more than a thousand of them printed in order to reduce the cost of each pamphlet. I have sold most of them but time brings changes, including in the names of birds. So I decided to send your news with the pamphlet and the changes. Happy spring birding!

Column 3, line 11. Change SOLITARY VIREO to **Blue-headed Vireo**

Column 4, line 13. Change NORTHERN ORIOLE to **Baltimore Oriole**

Column 4, line 18. Change RUFOUS-SIDED TOWHEE to **Eastern Towhee**

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THE ELLIOTT NEWSLETTER

Nature Notes from Central Park

Vol. 4 No. 3

May-June 1998

Who Leaves the Well-built Nest

The Fifth Ave. Hawk family continue to make news. At a celebration on Sunday, June 1, Commissioner Henry J. Stern told press and public of the hawks and the generosity of Dr. Alexander Fisher. For several springs Dr. Fisher has made the balcony of his next-door high-rise apartment available to bird watchers and photographers for nest-side views. As thanks for his continuing good will, Commissioner Stern awarded Dr. Fisher the official park name of The Kingfisher. Dr. Fisher, with great-granddaughters on lap and at elbow, said a few words to the crowd. He invited his listeners to visit his apartment and see the hawks. I was delighted.

On June 4, I spoke to Charles Kennedy and went with him to see the nest at almost eye-level. We entered the good doctor's apartment and went directly to the balcony. The view below was stunning. A bumpy carpet of green trees jostled each other, shouldering their way to the sun. Farther west, park trees seemed to press back the city skyline. Directly below, hawk watchers lined the shore of the Model Boat Pond, and out in the water, sailing craft heeled in the wind.

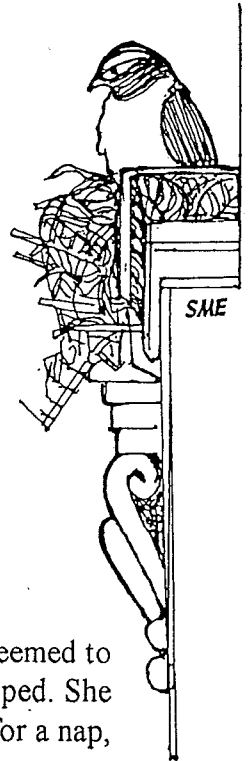
Just north of us we saw Chick # 3 trampolining in the nest. Between jumps it seemed to be poking at its food. Mom flew in and inspected the food as Chick # 3 hopped and flapped. She turned and pressed her chick to the wall. Unable to move, it settled down out of sight for a nap, and I made a sketch of Mom.

Both parents, but especially the male, soared just above us, looking us over as they passed. Charles said they hadn't been so attentive to balcony watchers since early spring. He attributed the fly-bys to my red hair. A dog barked at me from the balcony above. The dog's hair is red, too. The dog and male red-tailed hawk taunt and fight.

When a young hawk flew below us, it seemed to be flying too low and Charles went after it. The day before he picked up a grounded young hawk between cars on Fifth Ave. and took it to the balcony. He put it in a box and, on advice from Vivienne Sokol, he opened the lid and watched the hawk from inside the apartment. The bird hopped out of the box to a planter, from there to an air conditioner, from there to the railing, where it took off. In the days that followed, we saw this bird flop down on balconies either side of the doctor's, work its way to railings, and fly off again. Flying is easy but landing is tough.

On June 10 there was another hawk celebration with good food, good wine, and delicious cake. We were honored by the presence of Margot Adler of NPR, who interviewed us about the hawks. I had a chance to thank Dr. Fisher again for my visit and admired pictures of his great-granddaughters. As dusk descended, I thought I saw a young hawk in the nest with Chick # 3.

Patricia Miller arrived next morning at 6 to see Chick # 3 alone in the nest, but not for long. Soon all 5 birds were crammed in the nest or on the ledge. Pop took off and returned with a pigeon the size of his youngest. Mom prepared breakfast and hawk #1 ate with a will, while fighting off hawk



2. Presently Mom interposed herself between them so that # 2 could eat. When both young hawks had eaten and left the nest, Mom fed a few bites to Chick # 3 until it began feeding itself.

Patricia says a friend and West Coast expert explains that the parents feed in the nest to keep the young together. They are not abandoning Chick # 3 and when it is ready to fly, they will teach their young how to hunt. On June 12, Chick # 3 jumped high enough to land on the ledge above the nest, but lost its balance and dropped back again. Then, at 12:31 PM it leaped into the air, flew well in the rain and landed in a tree at 76 St. and Fifth Ave. Fledge completed.

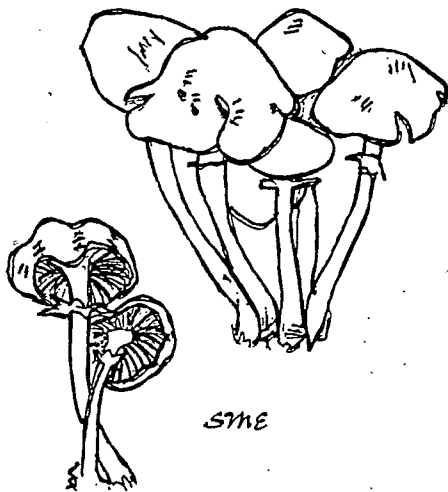
Transposed Seasons, Mysterious Mushrooms

The spring was baffling to flowers, trees, people and birds due to weather beyond our control. The season began like summer, then turned cool and rainy. After Easter, it rained 4 Sundays in a row, the rain beginning just as people were heading for the park. I put on my rain gear and the rain seeped right through. I put away 2 checks in my waterproof pocket which emerged limp and wet. They dried on the stove and one with indelible ink was processed. The other was washed blank and had to be replaced. That day, 8 stalwart people braved the worst downpour I remember and were rewarded with a red-breasted nuthatch, and 2 gadwall on Belvedere Lake. Could the large, fuzzy-brown ducklings be theirs? No. A birder reported seeing two people come to the lake, open a box and let out the ducklings.

The warm winter and hot early spring made plants bloom in speed time. Then a front with cold winds and rain forced birds into stop time. Finally, when late birds arrived, the trees had put out leaves and flowers and wintering tree aphids had hatched and dispersed for summer plants. The birds gleaned what they could but there were no "hot" (really buggy) trees to draw the crowds.

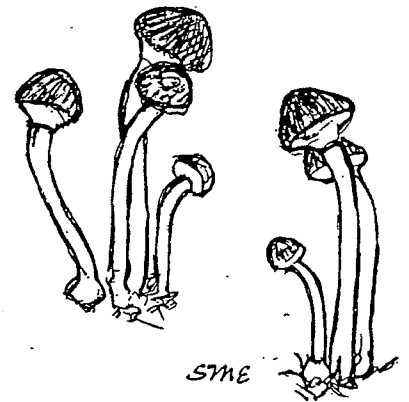
On Mother's Day, the sun appeared and our bedazzled group ended on the west side of the park near the 79 St. Yard. There in a white ash tree, we saw Canada, yellow, Wilson's, chestnut-sided, bay-breasted, yellow-rumped, magnolia, black-throated green, black-throated blue, black-and-white, blackpoll and redstart warblers, plus a red-eyed vireo, all flinging themselves through the leaves. I have never seen these birds in a white ash before, probably because its bugs emerge late, after the migrants have come and gone.

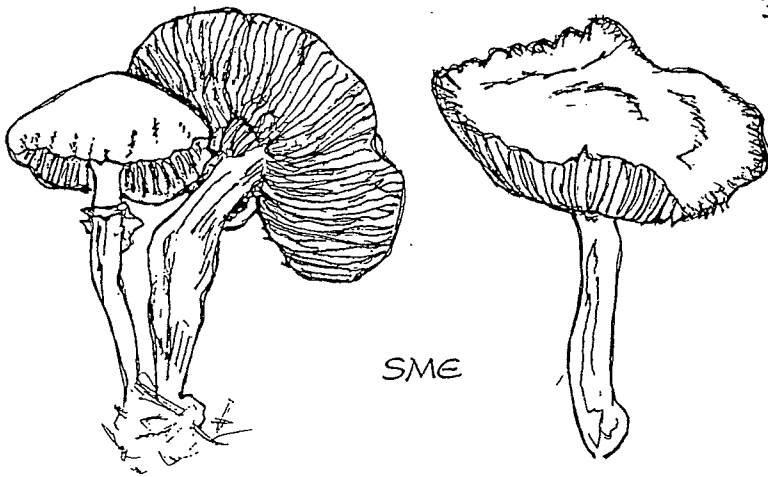
The most amazing result of all the rain was a bumper crop of mushrooms. They carpeted the ground under the trees east of the Castle and were pulled out in big piles near the men's room at Shakespeare Theatre. On May 7, I took home samples wrapped in wax paper, put them in the refrigerator, and sketched them next day. Then I spent a month pursuing 5 mushroom experts who were rich in advice. They told me I needed 30 guides, a telescope for spores and 20 years of study.



A. These mushrooms have a pale white cap and slender white stem with ruffled collar. The cap is thick and undulates, then splits upwards from the edges. The gills are darker gray. No one I talked to would guess what this was.

B. These mushrooms have tan-brown caps. The slender stem swells from line to cap edge (veil) and swells at the base. Sara Friedman says this may be a *Pholiota*. (Fo-lee-oh-tuh)

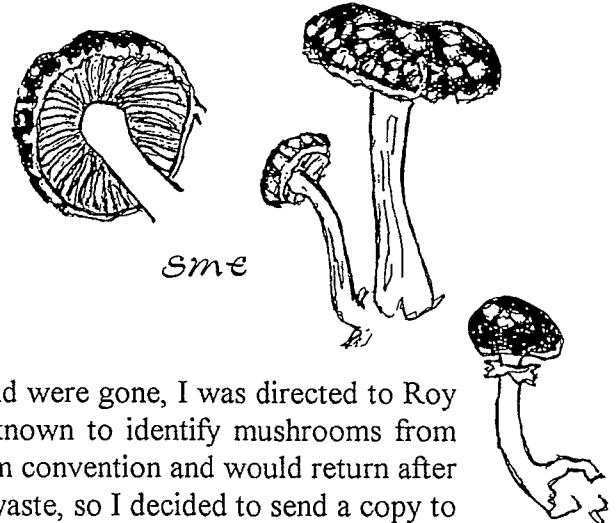




C. These large mushrooms are light golden tan and became darker brown and bigger with age. When caps are full-grown and flat, they are the size of small pancakes. As they age, the cap edge turns up, the stem turns lumpy and looks woody. My spore print was red-brown. Jean Held thinks this is *Agrocybe praecox*. (Ag-ro-cy-be pray-cox)



D. I thought these maroon-capped mushrooms with white spots were *Amanita muscaria*. All experts told me that was wrong. Look at the gills, said Sara Friedman. They are not white but medium gray with a tinge of purple. And young ones wear a ruffle around the stem. Sara, by sight, and Roy Holling, by phone, say this is *Stropharia rugosoannulata*. (Stro-far-ee-uh roo-go-so-an-you-lay-tuh) Nice when 2 people agree.



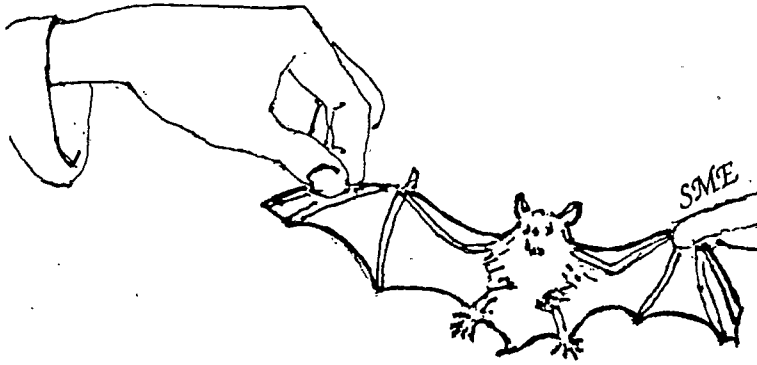
On June 10, when the mushrooms had grown mold and were gone, I was directed to Roy Halling of The New York Botanical Garden. He has been known to identify mushrooms from sketches. Unfortunately, he was just leaving town for a mushroom convention and would return after this newsletter goes to press. A month's effort shouldn't go to waste, so I decided to send a copy to him and reduce the drawings and print them here. If you are an expert, and can recognize A., B. or C., send in any mushroom names plus your own for a little glory.

Although the rains brought forth mushrooms, that's not the reason we saw so many this spring. The parks staff bought rich soil to spread around near the castle. The soil came from a mushroom farm! Despite the source, I did not eat any of my samples.

Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Bat

One evening as we were coming out of the park, we met Noreen O'Rourke, who had found and showed us a dead bat. We admired the bat and then as Bob Woods took its picture, Noreen and I held it up by the wings. "Oh, little brown bat," said Bob DeCandido. "No," said I, "big brown bat." Noreen gave the bat to Marie Winn, who took it to the American Museum of Natural History. She was told it was a little brown bat *Myotis lucifugus*. How could that be? When I talked with bat expert, Karl Koopman before he died, he said the big brown bat *Eptesicus fuscus* was common in the park. I mumbled through my bat file. Both bats are found from the Atlantic to the Pacific, including cities, and look alike except for size.

On the night of the hawk party, I asked Marie if the bat's wingspread was 10 to 12 inches. Oh no, not that big. Folded up, did it fit into the palm of her hand? Yes. Was it the same color on the front and the back, or lighter on one side? Lighter on the underside. Sure sounded like a little brown bat. No sooner did we have this conversation than someone shouted, "Sarah, BAT!" Marie and I ran to the water's edge and there was a little brown bat, fluttering over the water. It was joined by another, both trembling in twilight. As I left the park I walked through clouds of midges, which must have been good eats. How nice to be wrong and discover another bat for the park.



As you can see in my sketch from Bob's photograph, this bat could fit into the palm of a hand. In one of his photos the bat looks pale tan with gray wings of skin. In a second shot, taken of the other side in more shade, the bat's ears, elbows, knees and toes are black and the back fur looks rich red-brown and rather curly.

Nest News

The area just south of Bow Bridge has been very busy this spring. In the barberry bushes there are a family of brown thrashers. Two spotty young have hopped out to see the world and are pecked back to safety under the bushes. There is one and maybe 2 families of catbirds in the same area. There must have been many contests before they all settled down. Now they hop up on the fence or up into the lowest branches of the swamp white oak. If you sit on the long row of benches to watch them, you will be visited by a family of red-winged blackbirds. They come side-stepping along the back of the bench to within a foot or so of your face and look you over expectantly. That's because George Muller feeds them. The adult male is saucy but wary. Two young males, who are streaked like their mother but are growing red shoulder feathers like their father, are less pushy and more trusting. My guess is that their mother is in the phragmites tending a new nest.

Across the walk and nearer the bridge are two Baltimore oriole nests. They hang from a low branch in the elm tree. The lowest nest is squashed and about 2 years old. The one 2 feet above it is round, full and was made this year. The lower nest contains thin, flat, green plastic strips. They are popular and have been recycled in this year's oriole nest and a robin nest just a few trees away.

When the oriole eggs hatched we could see both parents come to the nest with food and leave the nest with fecal sacs. But on June 13 as we arrived at Bow Bridge we were told that the male oriole just flew over the water and dropped a dead chick. We stood at the railing searching for the corpse. There it was, fully extended with dark markings on head and wing and pale legs. We can only hope that this was the only fatality in that nest.

Counting Butterflies

On **Saturday, June 27** we will do a **Butterfly Count** of Central Park. For this event I have drawn and captioned 18 of the butterflies that can be seen in the park. If you want to be part of this count, study your sheet and, get a butterfly guide with full color. We will meet at **Bethesda Fountain at 10 AM**. Bring your sheet, guide, binoculars, a pad, a pencil, and sun hat. I will pass out maps of park areas to avoid overlapping and omitting locations. If it is raining and is supposed to rain all day, we will go out on **Sunday, June 28, same time and place**. Butterflies hide under leaves in the rain and don't fly in foggy, cool weather. Hot weather makes them frisky.

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THE ELLIOTT NEWSLETTER

Nature Notes from Central Park

Vol. 4, No. 4

July- August, 1998

Birds That Breed in the Park

On May 23, the New York City Audubon and the Linnaean Society of NY began a census of breeding birds throughout Central Park. Singly or in teams, 50 people observed birds in 20 areas at dawn, dusk, and mid-day. We listed birds using 4-letter codes and tabulated bird populations every week for 8 weeks. We also noted the weather and described bird behavior.

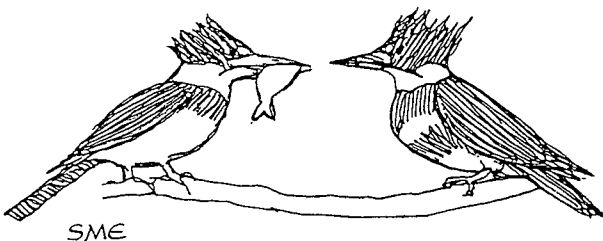
I covered Hallett Sanctuary with Teresa Marrero and am grateful for her help and for her car which got us there easily. In May and June we were thrilled to hear 2 wood thrushes. We watched one of them sing and Teresa saw another listen silently. I've read that both sexes sing but the female's song has shorter phrases and isn't heard as often. The male's song was rapid, varied, high-pitched and frequent. The other song was seldom heard, the phrases shorter, the voice deeper. Compared to the male, she sounded calm and calming. As the season progressed he sounded hysterical. We worked hard to find their nest but were not successful. We saw robins, house sparrows, European starlings, grackles and catbirds with their young. We found catbirds starting a second nest, abandoned by our next visit. Later we found a parent with new young in a new location. We saw cardinals frantically collecting small insects for their young but never found the nest. In July we heard him sing.

Watching Hallett from the benches across 59th St. Pond was more rewarding. One day we saw 6 black-crowned night herons in grass and trees. On the water we saw an armada of mallards plus geese and ducks in unlikely combinations. Red-winged blackbirds swooped out of the phragmites, and into the trees. An eastern kingbird swooped from a branch to the water, catching food we couldn't see.

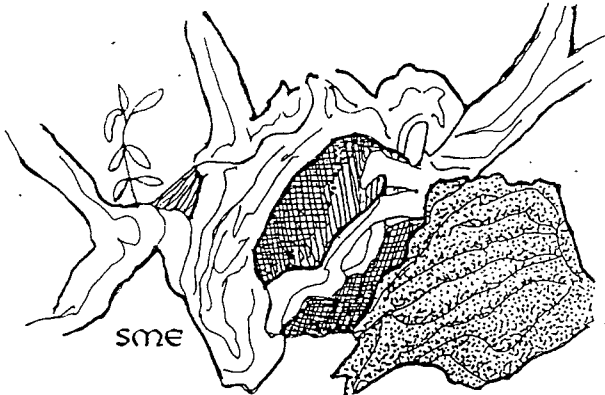
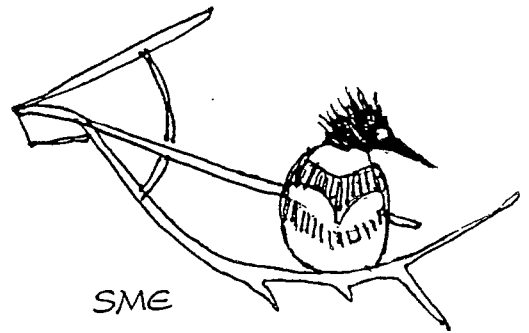
One day I discovered a male kingfisher on a long branch over the water. When I looked again, the male had turned into a female, displaying her rust belly-band. Next we saw both kingfishers. They dove into the water repeatedly, not fishing but bathing. They returned to their perch and preened vigorously. Their crests and back feathers looked quite ruffled.

Male and female kingfishers dig 3 to 6 foot long tunnels in the ground and scoop out a large chamber at the end for eggs and young. Were this pair building a nest at Hallett? Looking at the south bank of the sanctuary we saw many holes above the water line. Perhaps they were made by kingfishers in other years.

One morning we saw the male dive, catch a small fish and fly to the branch. He arranged the fish in his bill and began cautiously side-stepping along the branch toward the female. Leaning far forward he presented his gift. She grabbed it and ate. He dove again and returned with a second fish. She took it, turned her back and mantled her meal. She was noticeably bigger than the male. No wonder his courtship seemed nervous.



The next time I saw the female she was alone, looking out from a birch tree. She neither preened nor fished. For about 10 minutes she simply sat and looked around, long enough for me to make this sketch. Suddenly she became alert, listening. She flew off, rounding the sanctuary shore and disappeared from sight. Soon she came flying back and dove with sure aim into the greenery behind the birch tree. Was she going to this year's nest?



On July 5, I clambered around trees, over rocks and past prickly rose bushes to reach the eastern shore of Hallett. There behind the birch tree I found a rock and a twisting tree trunk. Between them was a deep hole that looked newly swept. I made a quick sketch and left.

When next I visited Hallett, there were newspapers and plastic bags arranged like doormats near the hole. They looked like markers for photographers and their friends to come and shoot. Perhaps the scrape of tripods, the whine, click and flash of cameras upset the kingfisher and attracted the notice of rats. The plastic and paper litter was removed, but alas, the kingfishers disappeared.

On July 13, there was a breakfast party for the counters at Belvedere Castle. We wolfed down Marcia Fowle's delicious spread. We were greeted and thanked by Commissioner Henry J. Stern. Dr. Paul Kerlinger, the count supervisor, and NYCAS President Peter Mott. Many observers told of interesting birds and rare sightings in their areas.

Teresa and I left the party by way of the Ramble. In Mugger's Woods we found 2 stag beetles, dead on the sidewalk. I took one of them home to study. We crossed the small wooden bridge at Azalea Pond. Looking back we saw a young wood thrush on the railing, looking rumped and curious. A second young wood thrush was on a nearby branch and Teresa found an adult near the second bird. We think this is the family from the nest between boulders, across from the big hemlock above and behind the Boat House. Worried observers are delighted to see the young.

Since early July, Evelyn Sanford has been working away at NY Audubon entering all our bird records into a computer. She kindly sent me results in time for this newsletter. There were 29 bird species whose park nests were confirmed. They included barn swallow, brown thrasher, cedar waxwing, common yellowthroat, fish crow, great-crested flycatcher, house wren, rough-winged swallow, tufted titmouse, warbling vireo and wood thrush. Some potential breeders are black-capped chickadee, belted kingfisher, chimney swift, eastern wood pewee, green heron and red-eyed vireo.

Clash by Night

The stag beetle I brought home is battered. It is mahogany, hard, shiny and covered with intricate armor plating that would make a Medieval craftsman moan with delight. It is 1 3/8 inches long and wears large curving jaws with an inside tooth near each tip. In death the jaws are locked together like sugar tongs. Between them there is a small hairy tuft which feels soft to touch. A large hole in the back shows how this beetle died. The power of impact may have spread the hard wing covers. They open like drapes to reveal a ribbed abdomen and thin wings for flight.



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When I turned it over, bulging eyes glared up at me. In death the antennae were pressed to the face. They line the inside of each eye like zig-zag black beads with a club at the end. The carved, wide, solemn face looks very like West African masks. The tops of its six legs nearest the beetle's body are hard, shiny and light golden-brown. My guides call this the Reddish-brown Stag Beetle *Pseudolucanus capreolus*, which lives in Eastern North America. Some species of stag beetles have jaws like huge antlers, which explains how they got the name.



I went to the library to learn more about the beetle's life and what the jaws are for. The male's jaws are much bigger than the female's so perhaps it's to attract a mate. Are jaws used for eating? No. Stag beetles spend their days in or under decaying logs and eat little. Deborah Allen has seen them crawling through wood chips in the park. At night they come out to mate. The males use their jaws for jousting. They battle for a female's favor and rivals ram to kill. The victor may also use his mighty fork-lifts to hold her during mating. smc

I went back to the place I found these beetles. Stag beetles are attracted to lights, but there was no lamppost in the area. There may have been moonlight and certainly males would have followed a female's scent. Perhaps these males were bested by a third beetle who then mated with the female. If so, she laid her eggs in the crevices of a dead tree where they will grow into C-shaped grubs that eat decayed wood full of bacteria and fungi. They will pupate over the winter and emerge next year dressed in their armor, ready to battle and mate.

Counting Butterflies

Every year near the 4th of July, people count butterflies around New York and in Central Park. This year a dozen people met at Bethesda Fountain on June 27. We were joined by a camera team from Turner Television who are doing a documentary on Central Park wildlife. Counters were given the butterfly sheet you received with your last newsletter and a map for a section of the park. We spread out and began searching. Shortly after noon we regrouped at Belvedere Castle to hear the numbers for the south and mid sections of the park. Some of the counters looked sheepish until the totals were read out. Then people laughed with relief because no one had many butterflies to report. Later we learned the count was low all over the area, not just in the park.

Half the counters left for lunch and a chance to cool off. The rest of us pushed north, to snack at the Tennis House, search the north ball fields and end in Conservatory Garden. Our cameraman got down on his knees and elbows to photograph a coy monarch in the grass. Each time he moved closer the butterfly fluttered a little farther. I hope he got something for all his efforts. In South Garden Dorothy Pool, Gaye Fugate and I studied a dark skipper in phlox. I came up with an ID but none of us liked it much. We went home and studied our guides. Next day when I called them I found that each of us had decided on the little glassy wing. Grand we came to it separately and all agreed!

Park totals for 1998 are **8 tiger swallowtail, 25 cabbage white, 3 orange sulphur, 2 clouded sulphur, 3 spring azure, 3 silver-spotted skipper, 1 little glassy wing.**

A week before this count 100 painted lady butterflies were released in Central Park to celebrate the 100 birthday of New York City. NONE of them appeared for our count. The number of cabbage white butterflies is so low it amounts to a population crash. They feed on mustard plants which make them taste bad to birds. I expected 3 times as many for this count.

In July I was lucky enough to see 2 black swallowtails in the park. Teresa and I saw a spicebush swallowtail just north of Hallett.

High Summer in the Garden

Conservatory Garden has been at its location beside Fifth Ave for almost a century and is named for huge glass greenhouses built there in 1899. It attracted thousands, was expensive to run and fell into decline. In 1934 Commissioner Robert Moses had the conservatory torn down and a garden built in its place. His workforce was supplied by the WPA (Works Progress Administration), which gave employment to thousands during the Great Depression. The gardens opened in 1937. In the 1980's the gardens were improved and are managed by Conservancy staff and volunteers.

Entering Vanderbilt Gate you gaze out at the Italian Garden with a green lawn, jetting fountain and a pergola beyond. The lawn is flanked by 2 walkways shaded by 70 year-old Siberian crabapple trees. Compacted soil is being dug up to give their roots relief but they are also under stress due to tree fungus.

Paul Serra, the Conservatory's Assistant Curator, led us into the North Garden, which is laid out in the formal French manner. Flower beds circle a splashing fountain of 3 dancing maidens. The floral carpet surrounding them consists of wine-red *Alternanthera* from South America and pale green scrolls of Germander *Teucrium chamaedrys*. They are surrounded by sloping beds with 2,000 Korean chrysanthemums which will bloom in the fall. The hooped entrances to the garden support Silver Moon, climbing roses planted in the 1930's.

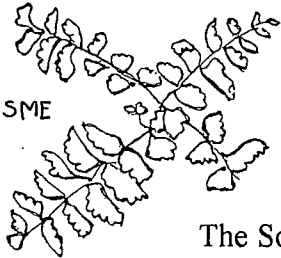
The tan brick building at the back of the garden was built on the foundation of the original greenhouses. We passed it, admiring large, old wisteria vines growing from cracks in the sidewalk. I scanned the buddleia at the pergola but saw no butterflies.

At the back of the South Garden we admired many shade-seeking plants including maidenhair and New York ferns. 1. Maidenhairs are named for their dark, thin, shiny and springy stems. Their leaflets are scalloped on one side, but not on the other. 2. New York ferns flare in the middle and taper at both ends. The leaflets point forward at the top, out in the middle and down at the bottom.

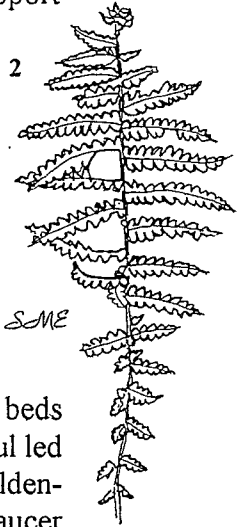
The South garden looks casual but is carefully planned in the English manner. Flower beds surround a statue of 2 children from "The Secret Garden" who guard a pool of water lilies. Paul led us past Margarita, or sweet potato vine, artichoke, ornamental okra, bronze fennel, dahlias, golden-orange daylilies, flowering tobacco, and salvia. In summer, visitors seek the shade of a saucer magnolia and 2 Japanese tree lilacs. I went back August 6, and made sketches of 3. hosta, which grow shin-high and have white flowers and wide leaves with deep veins, 4. Japanese anemone which grow chest-high and produce pale pink flowers on tall stalks, and 5. rose mallow, a head-high hibiscus whose flowers are as big as salad plates. Each bloom lasts only one day. You can join a free tour Saturday mornings at 11.



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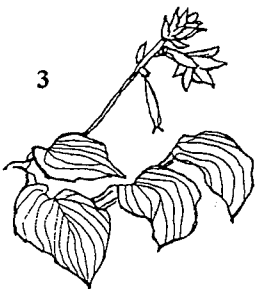


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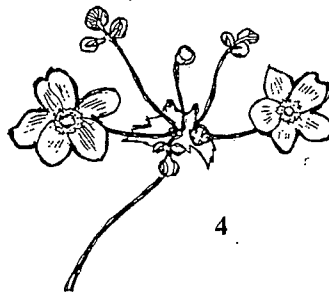


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THE ELLIOT NEWSLETTER

Nature Notes from Central Park

Vol. 4 No. 5

September-October, 1998

El Niño

The weather, like all other aspects of nature, is mysterious. We pride ourselves on taking its measure but cannot control it, nor predict it accurately. This past year we have blamed all climate variations near and far on El Niño. Certainly this is the year when most of the plants in the park were out of sync with the spring and fall bird migration. Spring came early and lured out trusting flowers. Many were killed by a freezing counterattack from winter. When spring reappeared the heavens wept. It rained so much that flood water in the Lake spilled over Bethesda Terrace.

Many plants did not flower. There were few bees to pollinate what flowers survived. Usually I see some honeybees and an army of bumblebees, but not this year. The honeybee population has shrunk since the Great March Ice Storm of '76. In spring, bumblebees nest underground but not under water. Carpenter bees nest inside woody branches and fences. They survived the rains and we saw them on the flowers of horsechestnut trees.

This fall in mid-October, my Sunday bird class sat on a bench in Shakespeare Garden and marveled at the hundreds of bees around us. There were plenty of bumblebees, but a different variety. (Instead of a yellow abdomens, their back sides were ridged in stripes of short black hairs.) And there were more honeybees than we've seen in 2 years. We watched both species collecting nectar and pollen from nearby asters. A few feet beyond was an ivy-clad tree trunk. All the ivy was in bloom--thousands of tiny green balls arranged in hundreds of exploding bouquets. Bees covered each bouquet, working side by side, ignoring each other in their feeding frenzy.

There was less food for the birds. We and they looked in vain for wild black cherries. This is the first year I have not enjoyed their musty-sour taste since Lambert Pohner first offered me some in the 1970's. There were none for warblers to pierce and suck, none to ferment and make the robins drunk. Torrents of robins came through, but had less fruit to delay their departure. Female cork trees put out a bumper crop of green balls. When the green ripened to black, thrushes filled the trees. The sour gums (or tupelos) attracted thrushes, starlings and flickers. The evodia lured all of these plus red-eyed vireos, scarlet tanagers (in fall drab), rose-breasted grosbeaks and Baltimore orioles. The insect-eaters were in trees, on meadows and along streams, hotly pursuing invisible food. Little birds such as warblers and kinglets flocked to the catalpas, where insects covered the large leaves. This fall was so late that most migrants passed through before the trees put on the first fall colors.

And how was this fall migration? Medium and mixed, were the remarks. Starr Saphir found plenty of regulars early, such as redstart, black-and-white and magnolia warblers. Besides robins there were plenty of veerys early and hermit thrushes late. But she saw fewer Swainson's, wood and gray-cheeked thrushes than usual. Most of the flycatchers were in short supply except for lots of phoebes. There were early waxwings gobbling the berries on the mountain-ash in Shakespeare Garden. She saw many sapsuckers the third week of September but found there were fewer flickers. She noted a few white-breasted nuthatches, no red-breasts, several chickadees and a short influx of tufted titmice during the first half of October. Winter wrens were here in force and Starr saw a marsh wren near Bow Bridge. There were a few ruby-crowned kinglets early, replaced by many golden-crowns, followed by late flocks of ruby-crowns. There were good numbers of tanagers, fewer Eastern towhee

than usual and the rose-breasted grosbeaks were late. The white-throated sparrows were here in numbers and Starr saw several young white-crowns as well. There were lots of juncos to enjoy but few goldfinches and the chipping sparrows were here as individuals, not flocks. In the air the numbers of chimney swifts were low and Starr was surprised to find only 1 barn swallow to represent the family. At the water she saw few black-crowned night herons and just 1 green heron. On the water she found 2 male wood ducks, black ducks, gadwalls, buffleheads and pied-billed grebes. We were amazed by huge flocks of Canada geese passing overhead.

Oct. 4 was the best day for the the Sunday group. According to Cheryl Weber, who made a list, we saw over 40 species of birds. Marty Sohmer showed us a yellow-throated vireo among many red-eyed vireos. We found small pockets of warblers including ovenbirds, black-throated blues, prairie, bay-breasted and magnolias. We also enjoyed a great-crested flycatcher, Eastern towhees, scarlet tanager, rose-breasted grosbeak, catbird, brown thrasher, mockingbird, belted kingfisher, great blue heron, pied-billed grebe, shoveler and wood duck. We surprised a nervous young red-headed woodpecker in Strawberry Fields. At the castle, while hawk watchers scanned the skies, we watched a palm warbler below them. It clutched the stony walls, pecking rapidly. We saw it traverse 3 sides of the castle for insects. Years ago in spring, a yellow-throated warbler did the same thing.

The Wednesday group thought Oct. 21 was their best birding day. We saw golden-crowned kinglets in front of our faces, brown creepers creeping, hermit thrushes everywhere and at the Black Locust Grove a gorgeous adult red-headed woodpecker. Now there are 4 red-heads reported in the grove, 2 adults and 2 juveniles. We hope they'll stay the winter. You will encourage them if you visit them and scatter some unshelled nuts under the locusts on the west side of the Great Lawn. Squirrels and blue jays can grab the nuts and break the shells if they are quick. But pigeons and starlings cannot. That becomes focused feeding.

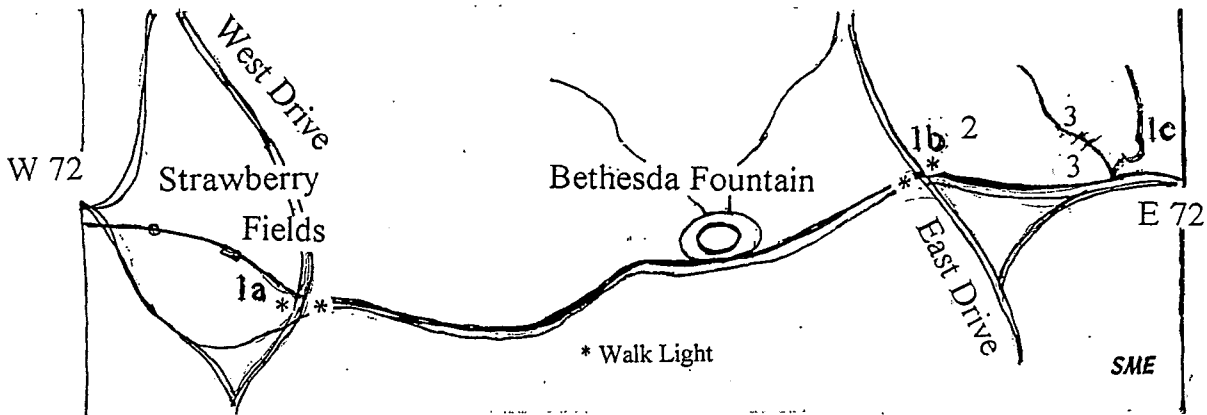
For almost a month, I've been unwell and housebound with shingles or chicken pox for adults. Shingles can cause you shooting pains, make you break out in a rash, sap your energy and blank your mind. I was unable to get to the park or write anything for this newsletter. I lay in bed yearning to see the fall color and the glory of the sour gum or tupelo. So on Nov. 5 I tottered into the park. The pin oak near the Boathouse is a glorious wine brown. The green and yellow world I left was now green and rich gold, with touches of salmon and splashes of red and rust.

When I walked onto the flat plane south of the Castle, I beheld the sour gum and smiled. The covering was a little thin near the crown but there were still plenty of leaves from top to bottom. This was the latest I have ever seen this great tree in leaf. Leaves at the top were curled and brown. Clusters in the middle were deep red and those at the base were golden orange where they caught the sun. Usually, high winds and rain strip the tree by October's end but this year warm, dry weather prolonged the glory. An elderly man sat making a very competent chalk sketch of the scene.

As I walked to the tree the little birds became suddenly still. I heard strange high crying noises. A man coming out of the woods made these cries to attract birds with food. Above him a young accipiter watched the man and looked about expectantly. A pigeon came out of the woods and the hawk struck but the pigeon managed a hairpin turn and got away. The hawk, a Cooper's, was head and shoulders bigger than the pigeon. Up at the Castle I was amazed to see 7 Canada Geese in the water. Migrant geese rest on grass in our park and I've only seen floating geese in winter at the Meer. On my way south to Strawberry Fields I ran into Regina Alvarez and together we admired a house wren working the rocks around the Ladies' Pavilion. Regina told me that birders had seen the long-eared owl that very day at Cedar Hill, we hope for the winter. As we talked, late sun blazed over the trees on the opposite shore, igniting their colors. A poignant farewell.

Trees Across the Transverse

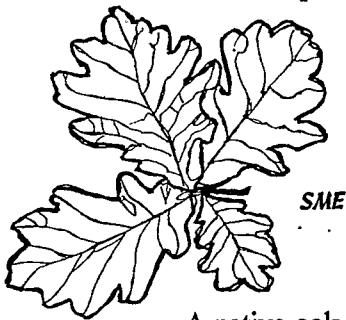
On Friday, Oct. 9 an English oak was planted in Central Park. The tree was a gift from the city of Liverpool. It was presented by Lord Mayor Herryty of that city to commemorate what would have been the 58th birthday of John Lennon. The Lord Mayor also presented a Freedom of the City Scroll, given to Lennon in 1984, to Yoko Ono, John Lennon's widow. Joining them in Strawberry Fields was Commissioner Henry J. Stern, who named that section of Central Park for my favorite Beatles song. Restoration on Strawberry Fields began in 1985 and now this area contains 161 plants and trees. I went to see this tree about a month after the dedication.



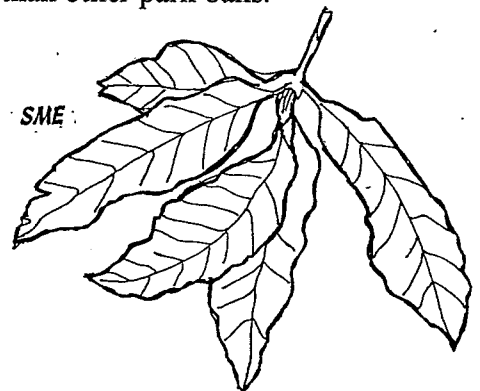
If you enter the park at 72 St. and Central Park West you will come upon the famous mosaic in the sidewalk with the word "Imagine." Most days the mosaic is strewn with flowers from fans to commemorate Lennon's untimely death. Continue along the walkway and you will see a plaque set in a large rock on your right. Beyond the plaque and also on the right is an opening and there you will see the new young oak (1a on map). It is staked and held in place with rubber hosing around the trunk. There were just a few brown leaves on the top of it the day I saw it.

I descended to the roadway, crossed at the light, passed the statue of Daniel Webster and enjoyed the view at Bethesda Fountain. I continued east on the 72nd St. Transverse to the intersection at the East Drive and crossed at the traffic light. On the far sidewalk I turned left and walked a few steps until I came to another English oak *Quercus robur* (1b).

This one is labeled. It is larger and older and still has green leaves. I stepped over the iron fence and found this sample at eye level. In summer this tree oozes sap and attracts butterflies and dramatically-marked wasps. Now the oozing has stopped and the insects are gone. The leaves are scalloped and small. They have 3 to 6 lobes on each side and vary in length from 2 to 4 inches. The leafstalks are so short they seem to grow directly from the twig. Small ruffles at the base of each leaf curl toward each other like ears and cover the stumpy stem. The leaves feel thicker than other park oaks.



A native oak stands on the lawn behind this one. It is massive, very old and the name plate informs you it is a shingle oak *Quercus imbricaria* (2). It was named for the ease its logs could be split into shingles with an axe. The leaves of this tree are long, shiny green, thin and without lobes. They resemble willow oak leaves but are longer, wider and have wavy edges. This great oak is one of the park's oldest.





Return to the sidewalk and curve east past the Pilgrim statue. Continue east until you are almost at the entrance to Conservatory Pond and in sight of Fifth Ave. Look at the trees behind the benches just west of the entrance. The second tree west of the entrance has a branch that droops to the ground and curves upward to the bench. The branch is low enough to reach over and touch. You will feel corky blades that knife the air in 4 directions. This remarkable tree (3) is *Euonymus alatus* or winged euonymus (you-on-ee-mus). In fall the egg-shaped leaves with pointed tips turn a glorious scarlet red to justify its other name, burning bush. If you turn in at the entrance and descend the steps, you will find burning bush on both sides of you. They are trimmed and so don't grow into trees. But on Nov. 10, they were in full flame.

Come back up the steps and face the large, curving stone bench, dedicated to the memory of Waldo Hutchins, who was president of the Central Park Board of Commissioners almost 110 years ago. Directly behind the bench is a large old pin oak with a sign on the trunk to tell you so. To your left is an equally old tree. It is about 25 feet behind the bench and much nearer Fifth Ave. Believe it or not, this is another English oak (1c), although it wears no sign. Standing beside this tree, surrounded by others, gives the feeling of being in deep woods. But if you look out you can see people walking on Fifth Ave. just a few yards away with the traffic beyond. It's an odd juxtaposition of country and city. Turning back to the tree, I studied the mature trunk. The bark is gray and is deeply fissured with narrow ridges. The stout trunk rises perhaps 15 feet before the first thick branch juts from it. Resting on that branch was a gray squirrel eating an acorn.

I looked around under the tree but could find no acorns left. They are said to be about 1½ inches long, round, with a cap that covers 1/3 of the nut. I am told the acorns grow out on stalks as long or longer than the nut. I guess that arrangement compensates for the oak's stubby-stemmed leaves. My thanks to Doris Heitmeyer and Barbara Stonecipher for research on this European tree. How amazing to see 3 of these oaks at 72 St. increasing in age as one strolls from west to east.

Shingles can't last forever and I will lead a walk for New York City Audubon, **Sun., Dec. 6 at 9 AM**. To reserve a space, learn cost and location, call the City Audubon Office, **212-691-7483 on Mon., Nov. 23** or thereafter. Please bring **singles**, not tens or twenties. First come, first served.

The annual National Audubon **Christmas Count** will take place in Central Park on **Sunday, December 20**. This year will be our 99th bird count. To be part of the celebration come to the **South Pumping Station at the Reservoir at 8 AM**. People coming from the East Side, gather at **85 St. and Fifth Ave. at 7:50 AM** and we will walk in together. Those coming from the west side, walk along the south shore of the Reservoir until you reach the crowd. Be on time because birders, eager to get into groups and move out, won't wait. You will miss a group and important counting instructions.

New counters, you should wear plenty of layers including long johns, 2 pairs of socks, 2 pairs of mittens/ gloves, a muffler and hat. You may feel warm as you enter but 4 hours in the open will make you notice the cold. Bring **binoculars**, a **guide** (you might have to decide whether you are looking at a chipping sparrow or tree sparrow) a **pad, pen** or pencil. **Bring \$5 Exact** for National Audubon. We encourage new counters and we need veterans as well.

If you wish to renew this **newsletter**, please **send check after Christmas for '99 taxes**.

THE ELLIOTT NEWSLETTER

Nature Notes from Central Park

Vol. 4 No. 6

November-December 1998

99 Years and Counting

If you are going to celebrate a major milestone it's nice if the weather cooperates. We were lucky. Dec. 20, 1998 was warm, bright and the rain held off. Stalwart Bob Krinsky phoned me at 6:30 AM (one year my alarm didn't go off), picked me up in his cab at 7:30 AM and we reached Fifth Ave. and 85 St. by 7:45 AM, calm and collected. Bob has been doing the Lower Hudson Christmas Count since 1974, all of it in Central Park except '77 when he was with Lambert Pohner in Inwood and '78 with Helene Tetrault in N.Y. Harbor. That's 24 years through thick and thin.

A cheerful group of birders joined us on the street and at 7:50 AM we entered the park and strode to the South Pumping Station at the Reservoir. Many birders were already there and more arrived to fill out name-address cards and get out their money for National Audubon. I am grateful to Ellen Kornhauser, who took in the cards with the money. She did it faultlessly.

When most of the counters were ready, I explained the ground rules. I urged them to count every bird but they should count gulls, pigeons or rock doves, starlings and house sparrows only in branches or on the ground. Other birds such as cardinals could be counted in the air. In the case of flying hawks, they should try to notice anything about individual birds. Was the bird juvenile, adult, light, dark, missing feathers in the tail or wing, and in the case of kestrels, could they sex the birds by color? They should jot down the time they saw the bird and the direction of its flight. If they saw a rare or unusual bird not in their section, they should list it and if the counters of that section didn't name the bird, they could claim it. I cautioned them to keep track of their time, stop at 12 noon and get to the Boathouse by 12:30 for the full count. Then we divided up into groups.

Central Park consists of 7 sections: Northeast, Northwest, Reservoir, Great Lawn, Ramble, Southeast and Southwest. I gave each group a map of their section and a tally sheet of birds to count in taxonomic sequence. It mostly follows the sequence for the Lower Hudson Count of which we are part. When all the birders had departed I rushed after David Krauss, Bob Krinsky, and Peter Mott, President of New York City Audubon, and asked to join them. The Reservoir was the only area of Central Park I had never counted. David Krauss covers this section of the park each year. He arrives at 7:30 AM with his scope to count the hundreds of gulls before 8:15 AM when many of them begin to depart. David said he has been doing the Reservoir for 12 years. Bob tells me I began the count in '72. I missed '73 and '79 but have been there for 25 counts. Dick Sichel was the coordinator-compiler for a decade in Central Park. In '86 I inherited the job.

Our group circled the water and saw many mallards and ruddy ducks, 7 gadwalls, 1 canvasback, a great-crested cormorant, 2 pied-billed grebes and lots of coots. We all were glad to see a pair of fish crows fly over us and call out "uh-uh". I think fish crows are new for the count. We covered the grassy areas of our section, then strolled to the Boathouse for totals of all 7 sections.

Some park bird populations were enormous, including the numbers of mallard, ruddy duck, ring-billed gull, rock dove, American crow, starling, blue jay, grackle, white-throated sparrow, and house sparrow. Guess which 2 species each topped 1000 birds, which one topped 900, 800, and which two exceeded 600. Jot down your choices before you turn the page.

Here is the Dec. 20, 1998 count. How well did you guess? As you can see there were 1,616 rock doves or pigeons, 20% of the birds we counted. The 1,181 house sparrows represent almost 15% of the total and the 907 starlings came in 3rd with 11%. It is startling to realize that these 3 species constitute 46%, almost half the total number of birds we counted. Ring-billed gulls may surprise you with 839, over 10%, but before 8:30 AM. I have learned that nearby count areas do not count flying gulls because they assume these birds have all come from the Central Park Reservoir! Mallards, our most ubiquitous water birds, numbered 678, over 8% of the total. The number of ruddy ducks has been growing but usually peaks in January. The 649 white-throated sparrows were a surprise, as were 488 grackles. I think we caught flocks of both in suspended migration. Now cold weather has probably pushed them farther south. We often get large numbers of blue jays but the number of American crows seems to have jumped. All these big populations boosted the count to a total of 8,066 birds. That is a record and an awesome number of birds in our 840 acres of park.

| | | | |
|------------------------------|------|-----------------------------|------|
| Pied-billed Grebe | 6 | Red-bellied Woodpecker | 47 |
| Double-crested Cormorant | 1 | Red-headed Woodpecker | 7 |
| * Great Blue Heron (12/21) | 1 | Yellow-bellied Sapsucker | 22 |
| Mute Swan | 2 | Downy Woodpecker | 25 |
| Canada Goose | 84 | Northern Flicker | 10 |
| Snow Goose (immature) | 1 | Blue Jay | 275 |
| American Black Duck | 81 | American Crow | 272 |
| Mallard | 678 | Fish Crow | 2 |
| Wood Duck 3m, 1f | 4 | Black-capped Chickadee | 1 |
| Northern Shoveler | 18 | Tufted Titmouse | 48 |
| Gadwall | 7 | White-breasted Nuthatch | 5 |
| Canvasback | 1 | Brown Creeper | 6 |
| Bufflehead | 8 | Ruby-crowned Kinglet | 2 |
| * Hooded Merganser f (12/19) | 1 | Hermit Thrush | 4 |
| Ruddy Duck | 229 | American Robin | 46 |
| Sharp-shinned Hawk | 2 | Gray Catbird | 1 |
| Cooper's Hawk 1im., 1 a., | 2 | Northern Mockingbird | 3 |
| Red-tailed Hawk | 9 | Cedar Waxwing | 3 |
| American Kestrel | 2 | European Starling | 907 |
| Peregrine Falcon | 1 | Northern Cardinal | 30 |
| Ring-necked Pheasant | 2 | Eastern Towhee | 1 |
| American Coot | 36 | Song Sparrow | 14 |
| Ring-billed Gull | 839 | White-throated Sparrow | 649 |
| Herring Gull | 187 | Dark-eyed Junco | 4 |
| Great Black-backed Gull | 77 | Red-winged Blackbird | 69 |
| Rock Dove | 1616 | Common Grackle | 488 |
| Mourning Dove | 4 | House Finch | 42 |
| Long-eared Owl | 1 | American Goldfinch | 1 |
| Belted Kingfisher | 1 | House Sparrow | 1181 |

We counted 56 bird species this year and added 2 more (great blue heron and hooded merganser) within the count period for a total of 58. It is not our best record but very near it. Other

pleasant surprises beside the fish crows were 2 ruby-crowned kinglets, 7 red-headed woodpeckers, 3 cedar waxwings, an Eastern towhee, and a belted kingfisher seen by David Krauss when he entered the Boathouse. There were other park birds that really exist but will not be counted. We have a Chinese goose who has lost its mate, 2 Peking or domestic ducks, a mallard and Peking crossbreed, 2 mallard and black hybrids, and a "jungle fowl" described as black with a gold crown. Birders speculate that the fowl was put over the wall. Voodoo or the loser in a cock fight? Ring-necked pheasants are deemed countable and we tabulated a male and female. The male pheasant was found dead a week or so after the count, its tail feathers plucked out. Now birders report seeing another male ring-necked pheasant in the same place. Speculations abound.

It was exciting to hear birders piece together a park picture of hawk observations. Based on appearance, time and flight direction, counters in the Northeast and Northwest shared 2 red-tails. Birders in the Southeast and Southwest did the same. Difference in age proved we had 2 Cooper's hawks and sexual color variation assured us of 2 kestrels. Collective effort pays off in believability. One foggy Christmas Count we were visited by half dozen great blue herons. They flew in and out of the mist, landing all over the park. Later, comparing notes and times, we cheerfully settled for a total of 6, not 42. How I wish the same could be said for pigeons.

I think this year's high species count and population explosion was due to the warmest fall on record. It was so warm that there were flowers all over the park. On the count day Lee Stinchcomb listed 6 plants in bloom. She saw roses, geraniums, salvia, snowdrops, azaleas and forsythia. That all changed the very next day. Dec. 21, the first day of winter, lived up to its name. Temperatures dropped and it's been chilly ever since.

Next year we will celebrate our 100th Christmas Bird Count in Central Park. Plans for a gala are already underway. Central Park is one of a handful of original locations where people first went out to count birds instead of killing them for Christmas. (Put them on a list, not in the pot!) This enormously popular census takes place all over North America and has spread to other locations around the world. How grand that the numbers and variety of birds in our park are growing, as are the number of people who come to count them. Next Dec. 19, the last count of the century, we will march forth and do it all again, sunshine, snow, sleet, rain, balmy breezes or bitter winds. I invite you all to come and count. You will be part of history, known to posterity, and you might see a really nice bird.

Acorns Again

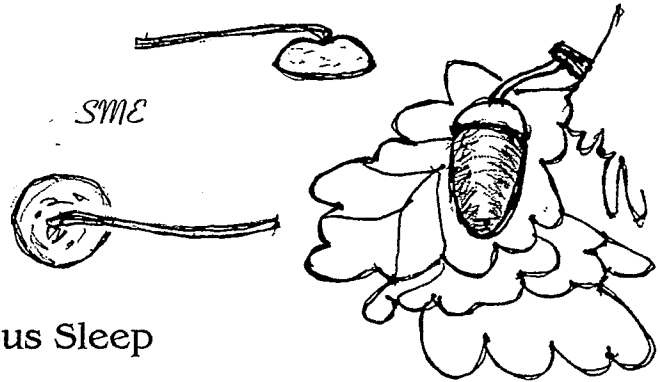
Last month I told you about 3 English oak trees planted across the park at the 72nd St. Transverse. I had no trouble showing you the wonderful scalloped leaves of this tree but could find none of its acorns. Later, I searched the ground near Fifth Ave and 72 St. and brought home acorn caps, some of them still attached to the acorn. The acorns are small and round and came from the pin oak tree. Each shallow cap had a short, stout stem. Brown bumps circled the stem like the center of a flower. A magnifying glass revealed that the rest of the cap looked like hundreds of overlapping petals flowing down to the edges. It makes you wonder if early humans studied this natural pattern to make waterproof roofs.

Among all the caps was one with a long, threadlike stem. I think it came from the English oak which stands at Fifth Ave. near the pin oak. The slender stem lies on its side and extends an inch from a dip in the center of the cap. There's a petal pattern over the crown but the pattern is much less distinct. More samples will tell if this is typical.



Last month, for lack of a European tree guide, I fudged my description of the English oak acorn. I thought I had no picture of it but I did. Generous Merrill Higgins took a picture of a long, ripening acorn surrounded by scalloped leaves. When photocopied, this lovely picture becomes confusing. So I used parts of Merrill's photo for this drawing, which I hope is clear. Here also are 2 views of the cap I brought home from the park.

It would be fascinating to learn how squirrels select acorns. Clearly not by national origin. Do they choose by shape? Do they choose by smell? How do the acorns they bury differ from the ones they eat? If I learn more about squirrel choice, you will, too.



Mysterious Sleep

During the New York City Audubon walk on Dec. 6, we were lucky to see a raccoon high in a tulip tree southwest of the Summer House. The raccoon looked young, not fully adult. It was draped along a branch trying to nap and take a sun bath on both sides. Its head was tucked down and an arm was flung over the eyes to keep the sun out. In fall, raccoons grow a coat of dense short hairs for insulation next to the body and their outer guard hairs grow longer.

Raccoons are the second largest mammals in our park. Like the larger woodchucks, they fatten up in the fall, then settle down for a long winter's nap. Woodchucks make dens on the ground in the rocks and boulders. Raccoons make dens in the trunk or a large branch of old trees such as hickory, oak and ash. They choose a deep hole with an entrance on the lee side, out of the wind, rain and snow. They scratch and shape the hole so it fits warm and snug around the fatty cushion on their body. They are restless sleepers. Normal body temperature is 106 degrees. When it drops below 96, the raccoon stirs and moves to warm itself. In cold weather they sleep, and live off the fat of their bodies. They do not urinate or defecate but they do grow thinner. As winter continues, there are drafty inches to spare between the raccoon and the den wall. So they curl up toward the den floor, nose and feet together, and expose only the fat-padded back and rump. If the temperature rises above freezing they may go out and forage at night. They are sensitive to changes in barometric pressure. When the barometer drops and a storm is due, they feel the pressure change and eat hearty before returning to the den. They dislike being out in rain, may stay home in a snow shower, but will leave a leaking den. In March, when the weather is warmer, a raccoon may remain in her den and use it as a nursery. There is so much more to tell about raccoon reproduction and lifestyle that I will save it for a newsletter in 1999.

In this season, I think of raccoons coiled in sleep, high in the gnarled embrace of old trees. I lie in bed carefully rearranging my blankets to block icy drafts and imagine the raccoon wearing its thick fur cover. Does its blubber blanket of fat give enough padding for comfort in the hard wooden cradle? I shiver and burrow down, feeling a kind of kinship. Innocent sleep seems a deeply satisfying way to pass through the cold and dark of winter.