

# THE ELLIOTT NEWSLETTER

## Nature Notes from Central Park

Vol. 5, No. 1

January~~February, 1999

### Waterfowl in Weather Foul



The church clock was striking 10 as I crossed Fifth Ave and entered the park at 90 St. A fine rain was falling on melting puddles of ice and gray birds were floating in the gray Reservoir. I was met by Rick Friesen visiting from CA and Jeff Nulle, who joins me each January to do the waterfowl count for The Federation of NY State Bird Clubs. Jeff had been out early checking birds on the Meer, at the 100 St. Pool and at the 79 St. Boat Basin on the Hudson River.

We moved south along the running path peering through the mesh fence at mallards, gadwalls and coots. Then we moved north, moving with the joggers in a counterclockwise circle of the Reservoir. There were hundreds of birds to count. We soon discovered that 3 people counting a group of birds can come to 3 different totals. If the cluster numbered 50 birds we would recount. If there were over 100 birds, we found an average. Sometimes the count by one of us was a lot higher than the others because that counter saw birds not in view for the other two. Resting birds were easy to count. Others glided past each other and some seemed to be following us to be recounted many times. Two pied-billed grebes and a female bufflehead dove for food and traveled far before they reemerged. We were impressed but not fooled. They were not double counted.

On the east side we saw a duck we decided was a ring-neck. We tried to see more of them west of the North Pumping Station. But hard rain pelted our glasses and binoculars and boisterous winds made it hard to hold, let alone peer around, umbrellas. My umbrella turned inside out several times and I urged my fellow counters to move on and find a place out of the wind. The view was easier along the west side and near the fence we saw a gorgeous male ring-necked duck displaying all its markings except the neck. It was then Rick told us he felt sure the so-called ring-necked we saw on the east side was really a scaup. He remembered the hundreds of scaup he used to see 14 years ago when he lived here and studied them in the Reservoir. Jeff and I explained that in his absence, the population had crashed and scaup simply were not around any more. But Rick planted the seeds of doubt about our ring-neck count.

Near and far, there were many parties of mallards and huge groups of ruddy ducks. One assemblage contained more than 600 ruddies. We told Rick that during the past 14 years, farmers drained and tilled all their land, leaving no pot-hole puddles for migrating ducks and geese. I think duck hunters had enough clout to get after the farmers. Watering holes have reappeared and the ducks that migrate down the Mississippi and along the Atlantic coast, are making a comeback. Ruddies seem to be the first to return in strength. Canvasbacks are still in single digit numbers but creeping up. Coots had a banner year, or else they all came to our park. I never saw so many.

We strolled south to the Locust Grove to show Rick one of the resident red-headed woodpeckers. Beyond the trees we saw a flock of Canada geese out on the Great Lawn. For our

second try, we all counted 37 geese. At Sheep Meadow, we found 184 of them pulling at the grass. Rick left us there and Jeff and I continued to the 59 St. Pond where we counted mallards, black ducks, a female shoveler, a wood duck and noted a muscovy. As we were finishing the count a wall of fog rolled in and we went to the Zoo cafe for hot chocolate. We left the park thinking we had seen 2 pied-billed grebe, 4 double-crested cormorant, 221 Canada goose, 3 wood duck, 3 gadwall, 29 American black duck, 830 mallard, 9 mallard X black duck, 12 Northern shoveler, 2 canvasback, 6 ring-necked duck, 1 bufflehead, 1780 ruddy duck and 33 American coot.

Ralph Ginsberg discovered the geese on Sheep Meadow, took their picture and called Parks Commissioner Henry Stern. Mr. Stern's outrage made local TV and the NY Post. It was hard enough to get rid of dogs. To have to contend with goose poop was too much. I was called by the Post and asked to comment. I gave the goose results of our count and said that for geese as for all of us, what goes in one end comes out the other. If the park workers collected the droppings and took them to the uptown compost heap, goose guano would eventually enrich plants and trees around the park. Later I realized that collecting goose droppings seems labor intensive and unpleasant. I thought about building a giant pooper scooper, wide as the leaf vacuums. The giant goose-poop-scoop would have handles and travel low to the ground on small wheels. I envisioned the mouth with a fixed front edge and rake teeth. Behind the mouth a revolving flat escalator, built like moving walkways for airport passengers, would carry the detritus backward to a removable plastic container. When plastic bags were filled they could be trucked to the park compost heap. I consider this a new kind of recycling. Parks and golf clubs around the country might build big pooper-scoops as well. Recycling is better than revenge, but scoop operators should wear protective masks.

Following our waterfowl count in Central Park, Rick, Jeff and I went home to study our guides. When I talked to Rick he drew my attention to the pictures of scaup in the Peterson guide. The small illustrations of sitting birds show one that has dull gray sides, with lighter areas at both ends of the gray. The white line in front was difficult to see, not nearly so prominent as on the ring-necked duck. Rick was describing the small picture of the lesser scaup. I remembered the gray sides and the thin white shoulder line. Rick convinced me it was a scaup. Jeff believes in scaup, too. He returned to the Reservoir and looked at the ducks in bright sunlight. On his first return he saw greater and lesser scaup. On his second trip he saw only greater scaup. He now thinks we saw 3 greater in the southeast quadrant near the South Pumping Station, and 1 by itself north of them on the east side of the Reservoir. He thinks we saw one ring-necked duck at the north end and one on the west side for a total of 4 greater scaup plus a total of 2 ring-necked ducks.

How do you pronounce scaup, asked a new birder. I have heard many pronunciations and decided to look it up. The sound symbols and rhyming words in my dictionaries seemed contradictory. Then I consulted "The Birdwatcher's Companion; An Encyclopedic Handbook of North American Birdlife." They say "skawp," which is clear and what I first heard in the Midwest. I also found a comforting sentence. "The greater and lesser scaups are impossible to distinguish in the field except under the most favorable circumstances, most of the standard field marks proving unreliable by themselves." I also learned that scaup comes from an old English word for scalp, meaning the beds of mud and grasses on which muscles and other shellfish grow. So the enormous population of scaup may have disappeared because their food did. If aquatic plants and animals are coming back, maybe the scaup will, too.

### To Sleep, To Wake, Perchance to Prophecy

Last month while writing about raccoons I mentioned groundhogs in passing. Groundhogs

or woodchucks, the biggest members of the squirrel family, eat steadily in summer and by fall have put on a thick layer of fat to last through the winter. In October, they retire to their underground burrows for the big sleep.

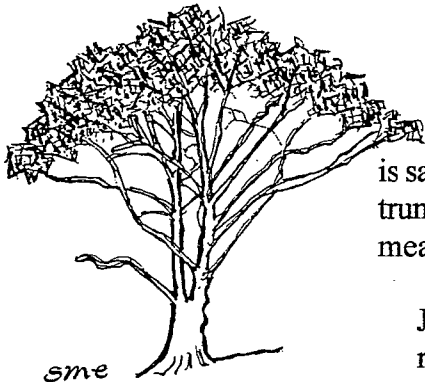
According to Steven Garber, their body temperature drops from 99 degrees F. to slide between 57 and 37 degrees F. Their heartbeat drops from 100 to 4 per minute and they may breathe only once every six minutes! No wonder they can live off their fat layer all winter. If the weather turns mild, they may stir and emerge briefly. But they do not leave home until the end of February or beginning of March.



One year a group of bird watchers decided to have a groundhog party in Central Park on Feb. 2. We had good things to eat and people recited hopeful poems, but we saw no groundhogs. The day was chilly, and after we searched, we dispersed.

If groundhogs don't normally emerge until the end of February, why is this national holiday at the beginning of the month? I have just learned from Stephen D. Garber's fascinating book, The Urban Naturalist, it is all due to cultural borrowing. There were these Celts, see, who called Feb. 2, "Imbolg," meaning "sheep's milk," the beginning of the lambing season. Celtic tribes thought that if the day were sunny it would be a long winter. If the day were cloudy they could rejoice in an early spring. The Romans spread this date and custom over Europe. The medieval church called Feb. 2 Candlemas, the Feast of Purification, but merged the two celebrations. European peasants claimed that when the hedgehog emerged from its burrow, it looked for its shadow to see how much longer winter would be.

Popular pastimes die hard. The custom was brought to North America. Finding no hedgehog, folk made do with the groundhog, who became not just an observer but a predictor of the weather. This year groundhogs and prairie dogs were used on Feb. 2. None saw a shadow in our territory so it should be an early spring. Why would all these people affix local celebrations to the same date? It has to do with the sun. The first day of winter is the shortest day of the year. The first day of spring has equal hours of light and dark. Guess where Feb. 2. lies? That's right. Just half way between the two dates. Many of our celebrations are based on movements of sun and moon. This February, what with fixed and moveable feasts and fasts, we have celebrated 6 in less than a week.

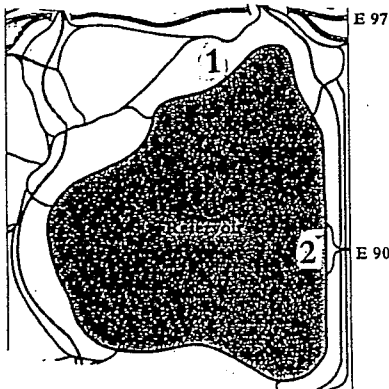


### Bigger is Older

Last Summer, Signe Hammer and I measured the trunks of 2 old trees: a London plane and an English elm, both in the north end. The plane is said to be the oldest tree in Central Park. We circled its smooth and massive trunk with a tape measure and it came to 17 ft. 8 in., or almost 18 ft. We also measured the English elm but somehow, I lost the figures.

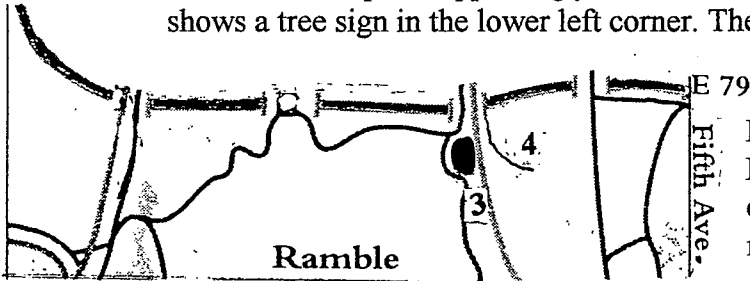
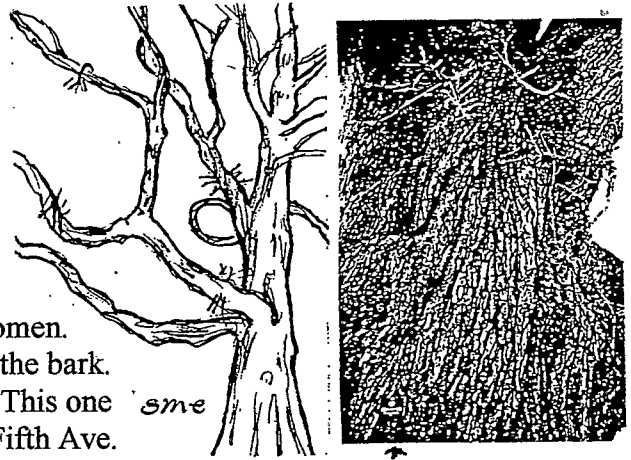
When Hannah Mitchell, a student at the Columbia School of Journalism, called for an interview, I agreed to gab if she would help me remeasure. We found a vine at the roots of the elm tree and wound it round the trunk, then added a bit for where the ends didn't meet. This elm measures 16½ ft. — very thick at the base but not so tall as the plane tree.

For photographs, I met Howie Moskowitz at the north Reservoir. We walked east on the running path to the London plane, which is a cross of American and Asian sycamores 1. Howie took shots from above, then down at trunk level. The tree stands tall and wide, so had space to grow in the 1800s. Winter sun touched its tan, green, gray and white splotches.



We walked south along the Reservoir to the platform and ramp at 90 St. overlooking Fifth Ave. Howie took pictures of the English elm 2. from above, then at street and trunk level. His photos show this tree is very warty and bumpy, even in the high branches.

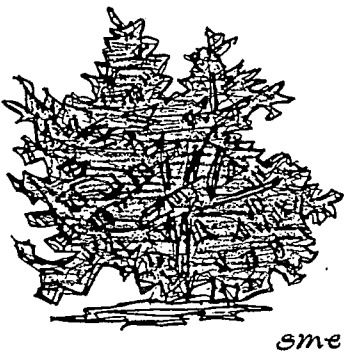
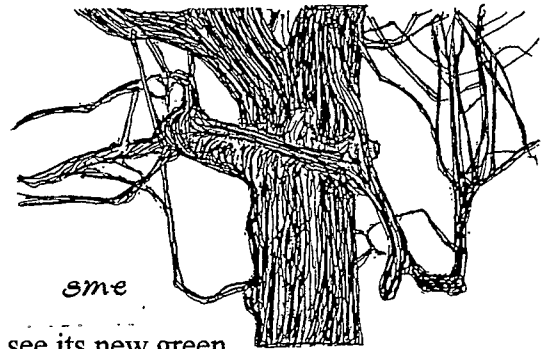
Many suckers sprout all over the trunk and lower banches. They remind me of whiskers on seals and old women. As you can see from his photo, fine, narrow grooves cover the bark. Howie smiled up at it approvingly as he as he took pictures. This one shows a tree sign in the lower left corner. The sign faces Fifth Ave.



On our way to the Boathouse, we passed the Maintenance Parking Lot ( black blob on map) at the East Drive and 79th St. Just south of the trucks we entered a flat meadow to see the old cucumbertree magnolia, 3. first written about some 100 years ago.

There is a gap in the crown of this tree. Perhaps it was struck by lightning or suffered tree rot. But the trunk is strong and thick and was measured at about 13 feet in circumference. In sunlight, you can see long streaks of pinkish rust and gray flowing down the bark. The lowest branches twist and bend and are decorated with thick clusters of long, vertical shoots that look like upended witch brooms. Perhaps the tree put out all these shoots to assure its life after an attack of lightning or rot.

If you stand near the sidewalk, west of the tree, you will see its new green sign. Behind the tree at the drive you can see the top of a tall, shiny, silver street light. This is light # 7701 and stands next to the crouching cat statue.



Go back to the parking lot and cross the East Drive. Climb the hill to the orange winter fence. Move along the fence until you come to a green sign with a red stripe which says "Cedar Hill." Just to the right of the sign is a large, thick cedar of Lebanon 4. Many pilgrims visit this tree, though it is not old. They peer into the center and describe the forking branches and various openings in the dark green. Why all the aborial interest? This is the latest winter perch for not one but two long-eared owls, discovered in this roost by Merrill Higgins. On President's Day, I visited the cedar with the Turner TV crew. Frederic Lilien filmed one of the owls and the crew raced away to complete the finishing touches on their documentary. I sketched the tree and looked in vain for the second owl until Barbara Ward helped me to find it above but near the one Frederic filmed.

Long-ears weren't the only owls the crew saw that day. After dinner the phone rang. Did I have a screech owl call on cassett? On record, but not on cassett. Next day, I learned they found a cassett and used it in the north end of the park near the compost heap. Isabella Rossellini, the host of the show, saw the bird but was doubted. They replayed the tape. The owl flew out and perched. Everyone rejoiced. In the 1960s we had a pair of nesting screech owls that were listed on Christmas Counts. Who knows, they may be here again for our 100th Central Park count, next December.

# THE ELLIOTT NEWSLETTER

## Nature Notes from Central Park

---

Vol. 5, No. 2

March~~April, 1999

---

### Rock of Ages

As you walk over Central Park you become aware of massive rocky outcrops. They look like petrified giants thrusting their armored backs and shoulders through the greensward, bringing us flinty messages from the past. What you are looking at are the stumps of an ancient mountain range. It was formed millions of years ago.

Perhaps about 550 million years ago, what is now New York City had only a sliver of bedrock. The eastern edge of North America was flooded by a tropical sea. An offshore arc of volcanic islands, like the islands of Japan, was being shoved toward the east coast. Colliding continents formed and reformed the coast until about 360 million years ago when North America, Europe and Africa merged to form a supercontinent called Pangea. The land that became New York City began to buckle. Limestone, mud and clay buried offshore were cooked and recrystallized and recycled. Rock layers were folded over each other and shoved up into mountains as high as the Alps to make a mountain range that extended from eastern Newfoundland south and west to Georgia.

About 220 million years ago the crust plates reversed and the continents began to separate again. The splits made huge rifts, earthquakes and volcanic eruptions. North America and New York City floated from the subtropics north to temperate latitudes. Slowly, the high mountains were worn down 5 or 6 miles by storms, high seas, waves and ice. The remaining stumps are the foundation of our city.

There are 3 layers of rock under Central Park: a bedrock of gneiss (nice), a layer of marble, and an eroded top layer of schist (shist). All these layers began as something else but were changed by great heat, under great pressure, to form new rock.

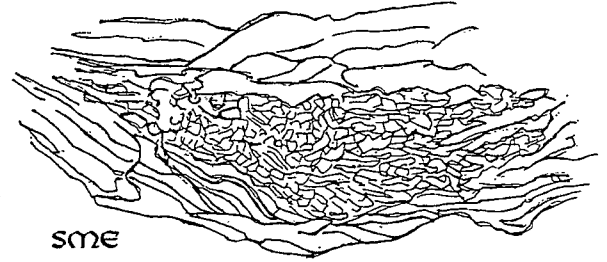
The gneiss layer is more than a billion years old. When an unknown land mass bashed into North America, sandstone lay under rock, 15 miles below sea level. Heated and squashed, it melted and became granite. More heat and pressure allowed lighter minerals to rise, cool, harden and form black and white layers of gneiss. Next, layers of sand covered the gneiss. When the sand was heated and greatly compressed, it became marble. A top layer of mud was added and subjected to change 9 miles below the surface of the sea. Heat and pressure changed its molecules and appearance to flat, thin sheets of schist. Reorganized molecules became such minerals as quartz, feldspar, hornblende, lava and mica. Schist is very hard, but gneiss is harder. It is older and was formed deeper in the belly of the earth. Marble is not so hard and will erode in air or water to disappear. In our park it remains because it is protected as the filling in a rock sandwich.

Grinning through the grass of Central Park are young rocks. They predate the park by only 400 million years. These outcrops are not one type of rock, but a mixed group including schists and gneisses, called the Hartland Formation. During the time of Pangea, the offshore volcanic islands were surrounded with sea floor deposits. As the Atlantic Ocean closed, the islands and sea deposits were shoved towards North America. Islands and cooked seabed folded over and merged with the land. North of 96St., this top layer of the Hartland Formation looks like gneiss. From 96th to Houston St., the Hartland Formation looks like schist.



One richly varied rock amalgam flows out of the lawn beside the 79th St. path east of the East Drive. I chose this rock, not for its many minerals but because I admire its appearance. Parallel lines and blotches of varied colors cascade down its face. I have been told the light ones are harder, made of quartz (melted sand grains) and feldspar. The black bands look smooth and shiny. They may be hornblende, lava, black tourmaline, pegmatite or basalt, but as yet I don't know. Deborah Allen made beautiful photos of this rock. But when shrunk 90% to fit this space and turned to black and white, they become too faint to see. I've rendered one of them in ink to give you an idea.

On the west side of the rock, quartz pebbles are contained in a stone pod. A few tiny garnets are nearby. Small rust stains show the presence of iron, and there are green stains from moss. The rock glitters with a silvery dusting of mica.



sme

Umpire Rock overlooks the ballfields near 61 St and 7th Ave. It is very large and somehow ominous.. Unconcerned, New Yorkers stand, sit, run and play over its rolling surface. On the northwest edge of the rock there are 5 parallel grooves which look like a giant's paw print. The grooves were formed by a glacier during one of the great weather glitches of the Ice Age.

Some 28 thousand years ago the earth suddenly turned colder and ice piled up at the North Pole. In time the ice sheet grew to cover all of Canada, and made a wavy border from Montana to Massachusetts. As it advanced the glacier gouged out the Great Lakes and Finger Lakes and dug a deep bed for the Hudson River. Moving south and east from New Jersey, it picked up boulders from the Palisades and dumped them in Central Park. The slowly moving ice sheet was a mile thick and very heavy. It carried rocks and sand along on its underside, and scored, gouged and polished all the rocks in its path. When the weather changed and ice melted, rushing water formed a river from Chicago to New York. Ice receding north left the land strewn with rocks and boulders, enough to make landfill for Brooklyn, Queens and Long Island.

Today in central Park you can see the direction of the glacier's path. Like arrows, scratch-lines cross rock surfaces, moving southeast. Our rocks faced the glaciers on their northwest sides and took the full brunt on impact. They were ground low. Very slowly, ice moved up and over the rock, scouring its surface with a circular motion, which, in ways I don't understand, undercut rock on the backside. The outcrop rock acquired a steep side on its southeast face and the glacier carried quarried (chopped off) rock away. The southeast sides of our rocks stand higher today, the northwest sides are lower. Most of the park rock surfaces are smooth and rounded from the polishing they took. When you visit the 79th St. rock, notice how much lower the north side is than the south side, and marvel that a megapaw printed by boulders on Umpire Rock so long ago is still visible today.

### Glorious Spring Weather

This spring has been as wonderful as last spring was dreadful. There were no killing frosts so all the magnolias spread their pink and white finery over the park. Great patches of daffodils, tulips and grape hyacinths edge green lawns. Crab apples put forth double blooms of deep fuchsia

so intense you wonder what was in the morning coffee. The days are cool, breezy, the sun shines, and puffy little clouds dot blue skies. My Sunday and Wednesday classes walk along saying the names of mugwort, dead nettle, dock, lesser celandine, wild garlic, Virginia knotweed, Virginia bluebells, and of trout lily and shad bush, which bloom when the fish in their names swim upstream. Some class members take notes, tell other birders and remember the names a week later. We are making progress with names in our Garden of Eden. God and Adam would be proud of us.

Now the willows are waving sheets of spring green. In the upper stories, squirrels chew on buds and gnaw branch tips, seeking some mysterious spring vitamin for their diet. They chew, discard and airmail the leftovers down to us. On the walk you can pick up the seed clusters of Siberian elm: big ( $\frac{1}{2}$ - $\frac{3}{4}$ "), bright green, with wine-red centers. Tree tips from pin and willow oaks show neat clusters of flowers and very new leaves that give a hint of their future shapes.

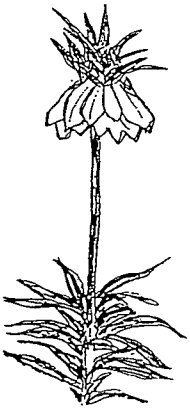
On the south shore of Turtle Pond near the King of Poland statue, little birds dance in and out of the willow and through the catkins of river birch and ironwood. They dart after invisible winged insects while happy birders call them names: ruby-crowned kinglet, palm, pine, black-and-white and yellow-rumped warblers. We walk west, pointing out old oriole nests, telling each other that soon the orioles will return to make new ones. We look at the double-crested cormorants snaffling up goldfish in the water. With powerful glasses you can see their double crests like Groucho's eyebrows. Whoever tossed 100 goldfish into Turtle Pond did the cormorants a favor. Good news spreads and more birds arrive. On April 21, a passing young bald eagle noticed the crowd and came down to investigate. The eagle circled low, to delight some lucky observers, before it flew off. Elsewhere, black-crowned night herons eye goldfish as large as they are, but do not strike.

West of the Castle, down in the OK Corral, there are new white flowers in the grass. Snowdrops? Too late. Lilly-of-the-Valley? Too early. Some of them are growing beside deep blue squill. The leaves, stalks and flowers look the same, so these may be white squill.

We pass tulips of startling colors and turn north to descend the wide, flat steps carved in prehistoric rock. Their waterfall pattern is particularly handsome when the rock is wet. Looking into Shakespeare Garden, we stare in disbelief at the fritillaria. The flowers grow on tall stalks with an umbrella of bell-shaped flowers, crowned with green spikes. These 2-3 foot plants share their name with beautiful butterflies. Fritillaria comes from a Latin word for dice box. It describes a checkered pattern on dice box, flower petals and butterfly wings. *Fritillaria imperialis* is a spotless member of the family. It is named for the topknot of green above orange or yellow blooms.

We leave the garden, pass the bathrooms and enter the locust grove. In a month these old trees will be covered in white flowers like sweet peas whose perfume will fill the air. Locust roots give needed nitrogen to the soil and bees make honey from the flowers. In the grove, many birders are looking up. We have all come to admire the red-headed woodpeckers and say goodbye. On the last day of April or first day of May they will leave the park and fly north to nest. We hope they find starling-free locations. The red-bellied woodpeckers that stay are not so lucky. A pair that took up housekeeping in a dead ailanthus south of the Summer House have already been ousted from their home. Starlings fly in and out of it and when one of them sings his triumph, I tell him to shut up. I saw the dislocated red-belly pair fluttering around Willow Rock. If they can wait to nest until the starlings are rearing their nasty young, the woodpeckers can dig out another hole and settle down in peace.

In late winter, Howie Moskowitz and I took the image and measure of old trees for the newsletter. We returned in late March just to check on the park. It was clear, bright and chilly. We



SME

were stunned to hear about a flock of pine warblers, 3 males and a female seen at various locations. We saw 2 of the males, one of them in a pine tree at Willow Rock. Two males were at the Azalea Pond. On the weekend, I saw one bouncing about and flaunting his brilliant lime-yellow coat high in the red maple tree. Another was pecking away at the suet feeder. He was joined by a downy woodpecker. They were too busy eating to fight, and there was space for both. Someone should be photographing this sight, I said. I turned and there standing beside me peering and clicking behind her tripod was Deborah Allen. I don't think either of us had ever seen a warbler at a feeding station before. I worried that the new mini-flock of pines had overshot their food supply. But the one in the maple seemed to be catching little flying somethings.

The day Howie and I saw the pine warbler at Willow Rock, George Muller said "bat." He pointed to a tree trunk directly in front of him. We circled round the dead oak and there was a little brown bat, clinging upside down to the bark. The thick fur on its back and head gleamed brown, red and gold in the sun. A crowd gathered and the bat trembled slightly. Howie was disgusted. His camera was at home and he was out of film. Merrill Higgins took pictures of the bat on the weekend. He told me he didn't have his flash with him so the bat's face and front remained in deep shadow. His photos capture the bat's color and I have removed the shadow from the face to show its pointed muzzle. This bat was as big as the palm of my hand. The skin on its ears and folded wings, legs, and toes was pink-purple shading to smoky gray-black. Its tiny toes gripped the tree. Its tail was wrapped over a bit of bark for extra purchase and the front bend of its folded wings was supported on bark ridge.

SME



The bat spent most of a week in this location and then died. Howie never returned to take its picture. He died in his sleep on the night of April 11- 12. Howie was my friend of 25 years, in good times and in bad. He could always make people chuckle, and the park is less jolly without him. There will be a memorial on a Saturday in mid-May, I hope in our park. As soon as something is settled, I will put a notice in the bird book at Loeb Boathouse. For those who wish to attend, bring a memory of him you can share with others.

This April I have been living an old German saying: "Shared sorrow is half sorrow, shared joy is double joy." On April 8, New York City Audubon Society paid me the honor of giving me their 1999 Grassroots and Media Award. The grassroots part of this award is for exposing thousands of people to the beauties of nature through classes and walks of my own and for National Audubon, NYC Audubon, Linnaean Society, Central Park Conservancy and New York Public Library. The publication part covers a children's book on snails and 3 on pollution, plus bird, butterfly and dragonfly pamphlets, and five years of this newsletter. Marcia Fowle, who received a well-deserved Major Achievement award that night, graciously told the audience that this newsletter has featured and illustrated such topics as mushrooms, stars, waterfowl, bees, turtles, aphids, crayfish, spiders, ferns, warbler crossbreeds, rabbits and fireflies. Friends from the Wednesday and Sunday classes, and birders from the Park who came to share my pleasure, made the evening very special. I am very grateful to New York City Audubon for this honor. In all my 40 years as a naturalist, this is the first award I have ever received. How nice it wasn't posthumous!

The crew from Turner Television have completed filming the wildlife and people in Central Park. It is called "Wild City," a co-production of the National Wildlife Federation and Turner Original Productions. Beautiful Isabella Rossellini is host. It airs Wednesday, May 19, 10:05 P.M. Eastern time on TBS Superstation. Unless edited out, I will be doing nature things in a lot of it.



# THE ELLIOTT NEWSLETTER

## Nature Notes from Central Park

Vol. 5 No 3

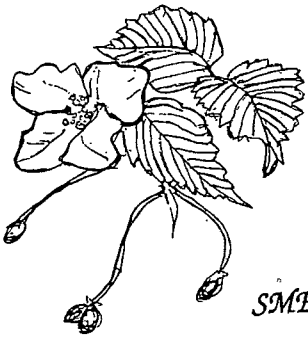
May~~June, 1999

### Variety But Not Numbers

This past spring migration was odd. The pine warblers came early but then it was quiet. Starr Saphir said her first day with plenty of birds was Monday, April 26. After the big push there was a hiatus. The weather was mostly sunny and cool, but storms south of us held up the birds. Then on Thursday, May 6, there was a wave. Tom Fiore reported that birders had seen a total of 100 species in the park. Mother's Day, May 9, was a treat for everyone. We saw a variety of warblers, scarlet tanagers, rose-breasted grosbeaks and both cuckoos. In a tree at the corner of the Evodia Field were 5 indigo buntings, but too high to show off their color. Starr said this spring migration was average for species, but not in the usual numbers. Maybe in their haste after the delay they overshot the city? Maybe, she said, or moved inland to migrate along the mountains.

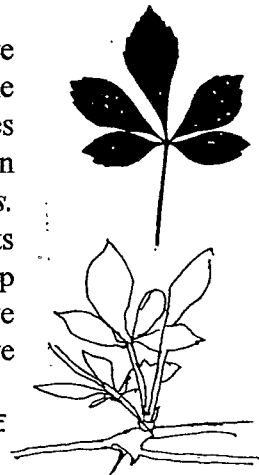
One sunny morning we all admired the white-crowned sparrow eating and bathing at Azalea Pond. A scarlet tanager came down to the Gill to drink then bathe, flashing water over brilliant cut-velvet feathers. All the insects and so the birds spent their time high in the trees making visibility difficult. One morning we identified a Brewster's warbler by committee. We all saw the pale belly and gold wings. Some of us saw the black mask and one of us saw the gold cap. By the end of this migration there were enough low-flying insects and many birders were thrilled to see a male mourning warbler.

### Spring Bushes and Trees

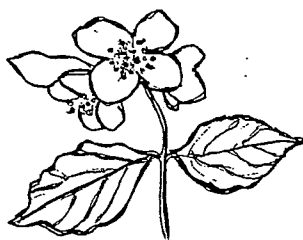


On the newly paved road that rises from the Boathouse past the parking lot were green bushes with single white flowers in early May. The cuplike flowers had yellow centers but no smell. The leaves were deeply scored with parallel veins and toothy edges. In May, last year's fruit clung to the ends of branches. The berries were small, black and shiny and because of them, the shrub is named jetbead *Rhodotypos scandens*. Jetbead, which comes from Japan, was popular with American gardeners. It was planted extensively in the park in the 20's and 30's. But it has fallen out of favor and what you see today are old shrubs.

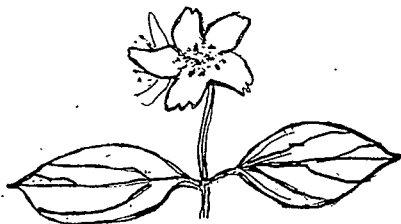
If you returned to this spot a month later in early June, you would have seen more white flowering bushes. They are mock orange *Philadelphus*. Turning left at the top of the rise you walk along the fence; past the dying hemlock there are more mock orange bushes on your right. Continue along the curving path and on your left you will pass dense green bushes. David Liboff taught me their name is five-leaf aralia *Acanthopanax sieboldianus*. In "Nature Walks of Central Park" Dennis Burton describes them as having five leaflets and small thorns. As he says, this Japanese bush was planted in the 1980s, a barrier to keep people from trampling the slope below the walk. Until this year, the bushes were effective as barrier and as nest site for catbirds. Now, despite the thorns, human bush-bashers have made two wide paths through the stand and no birds nest there.



Before you reach the Point there is a path on your right. Climb to the top and it opens out to a paved clearing with a bench. You are surrounded by mock orange bushes and by June the smell was wonderful. The flowers are arranged in 2's, on either side of the stem with a single flower at the end. The smooth, opposite leaves are egg-shaped with pointed tips. But the bushes here and opposite the hemlock are not all the same. Some have flowers with 4 very round petals and yellow centers, and the leaf edges were wavy. Others have flowers of narrow petals arranged in 5's with toothy tips. The oval leaves have flat, not wavy edges. Both kinds have the same distinctive scent, but how could they vary so?

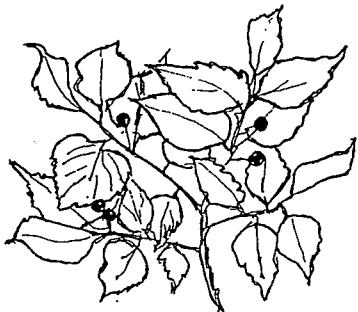


SME



Mock orange comes from Asia. The smell is so attractive the plant was introduced into European gardens in the 16th century. In the 1890's the French produced a variety of popular hybrids. Mock orange became popular here and was planted throughout the park in the early part of this century but, like jetbead, not in recent decades. To tell them apart remember that jetbead flowers first with scentless, single blooms, toothy leaves, black fruit. A month later, bushes with smooth leaves, double blooms and an agreeable smell are the mock orange.

Above the bushes and around the bench, are trees with pale gray bark and small leaves. One rainy morning Doris Heitmeyer and I met Brian McPhillips who said he had just seen cedar waxwings eating green berries in gray trees. He led us to this spot and pointed to the hackberry trees. We saw no waxwings but looked at the green fruit of the hackberry trees. On the underside of some of the leaves we discovered fuzzy white spots. They are hackberry nipple galls *Pachypsylla celtidis-mamma*. The young are protected inside their waxy casing. They come out as tiny adult insects just 3-5mm long, with a short stout body, long front wings held over the body like a roof. They don't fly well and get around by jumping and bouncing along on enlarged back legs. Regina Alvarez has seen them magnified and enlarged. She says they are funny to watch.

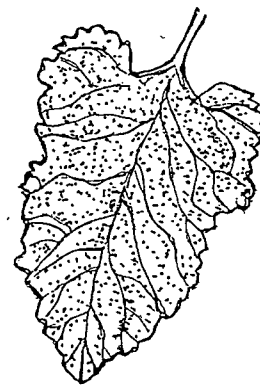


SME



Other insects are attracted to hackberry leaves. Hackberry, question mark and snout caterpillars dine on them before turning into butterflies.

By the first half of June the dock plants have grown very large. Some of the leaves are 3 times the size of this paper. Long and broad, they remind you of rhubarb. Right now they taste delicious to hundreds of black aphids, vegetarians that cover the undersides of the leaves. They are not alone at this banquet. On June 12, we found more ladybugs, or ladybird beetles, than any of us had ever seen. While the black aphids were devouring the dock the ladybugs (meat eaters all) were devouring the aphids. We all recognized the round ladybugs but what were those long caterpillars? Orange-and-black, long and skinny, fierce and spiky, these young ladybug larvae looked like tiny alligators. They were also gobbling black aphids like mini vacuum cleaners.



SME

I brought home a dock leaf with aphids and several ladybug larvae to study and sketch. The larvae have many segments, topped with black and orange spikes and a white collar. The slender legs look dark until sunlight shows the legs are orange. The young larvae have a lean and hungry look. But as they grow they look larger and rounder.



SME



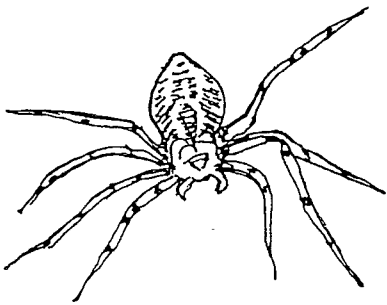
The largest larva really changed shape overnight. When I looked again it had attached its tail to the side of the plastic bug box and built a shell that was smooth, shiny and hard. I sketched this orange and black shell from the top. Then I noticed another ladybug larva crawling over my table so I put it in with the pupa. Ladybugs are nearsighted but it didn't take the larva long to find the pupa. Clinging the pupa dome with several legs, the larva rocked the structure back and forth. But a suction-foot at the base of shell held it fast and the shiny case was too hard to penetrate. The commotion woke an irate resident inside its changing room. It began punching out at its attacker from inside the case, rather like a kitten in a paper bag. The larva blundered away, but the pupa continued to punch and bend vigorously.

When it subsided, I tried to sketch a side view, but the shape kept changing. The case split and a new round adult began backing out. It was glossy, lumpy and spotless. The case lost its shine and looked like a ruffled old shawl. Half of the ladybug remained under its protective mantle. On the visible half the lumps smoothed over and black dots began to appear. The dots were arranged in 2's on the back, each side, and the end, for a total of 8.

SME



The number and pattern of orange spikes on a black ladybug larva vary by species. Species determines the black marks on the washboard ridges of the orange pupa. And adult ladybugs are named for the number of dots they wear on their wing cases. Not all ladybugs are black and orange but those colors are a warning: Don't eat me-- I taste bad. My pupa disappeared so I got another in the park. When it was half in and half out it did some headstands but couldn't escape. After a few days I scraped the pupa case and out came the ladybug. Not stillborn, untimely ripped. It groomed its orange front legs. The orange wing case was spread wide and 2 black withered wings extended from the sides. They did not smooth out before hardening so the ladybug can run but not fly.



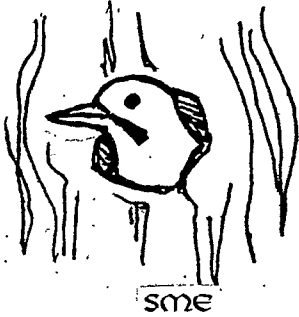
SME

I brought home another house guest, a spider that came sliding down on its silk to land on Merrill Higgins. My light tan guest had a 5 mm or .02" long body on long slender legs with dark stripes at the joints. The second pair of legs were the longest and the distance across the back from tip to tip was about 1/2 inch. Eventually, I found Kefyn Catley, a spider expert at the Museum of Natural History. He told me to give it water. Spiders can live some time without food but not water. He warned me not to put a drop in the container as the spider could drown. Instead I should dampen a cotton ball and put it beside the spider. I think my spider took some moisture but I was too late. I found it crumpled and not moving before I could learn its name.



Merrill Higgins says that since it landed on him I must name it *Higginus merrillus*. Kefyn Catley told me to put my spider in a bottle with alcohol and cotton and leave it at the museum. He called to say it was a female crab spider, and she was full of eggs. This spider does not make webs but lives in trees and runs over leaves after prey. Kefyn says the spider's family is *Philodromidae* and the genus is *Philodromus*. Some 50 to 60 species of them live in our area. Experts classify spiders by their genitalia, seen with the aid of a super-powerful microscope. If Kefyn Catley can tell me the species of this spider, I will let you know.

## Watching Nests



June is a month for nests and the cheery news this year is that more woodpeckers have learned how to succeed against starlings. They wait until starling families are underway, then begin new woodpecker nests. The second try seems to be in trees with many old holes. Flickers are feisty. I have been watching 2 flicker nests, one in a dead plane tree, one in a black locust. The trees look like battlegrounds; with dead branches, stripped bark and many holes. Male flickers sit in each opening guarding the nest and looking out for starlings and flicker mates out gathering food. Now in the locust, a young male appears. His mustache is in place but there is fuzz, not feathers on the top of his head. There is a red-bellied woodpecker nest in a locust southwest of Azalea Pond, and we see the male adult go in and out of it.

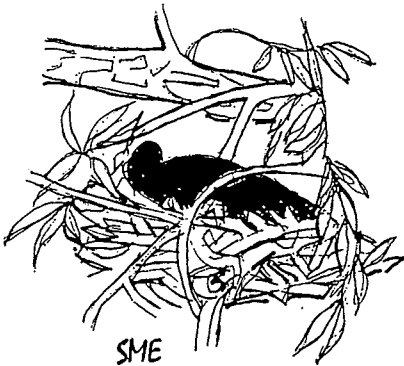
At the Boat House Parking Lot there are a line of willow oaks on the median strip. The one nearest a dumpster contains an oriole nest. The nest was a dark ball when I sketched it. Now it is heavy and sagging with the weight of young birds. Strong plastic fishline wraps the nest to the branches above it. The branches may not have seemed strong enough to support a hanging nest. So the female oriole attached the bottom to a branch beneath it. Struts of fishline hold the nest to other branches for extra grip. Now, in late June, the nest bulges and sags, but holds. I have never seen an upper and under attachment for an oriole nest nor all the guide wires around it. This one shows that orioles can adopt new materials and alter structure for nesting success.

SME



In early June both parents fed young. The male's visits were quick. Then he moved to a nearby tree and sang. The female was silent at the nest and fed longer. Another Baltimore oriole nest is in the leaning tulip tree on Cherry Hill. It is in a branch that bends east toward the row of benches that face the Point. When the sun shines you can see clear plastic line wrapped thick and tight around the branches that grip the hanging nest. The sides are woven with green plastic line that holds grasses for the nest lining. Now the nest is heavy and full, a nursery inside a fortress.

In a black willow at the west shore of the Point birders watch a green heron nest that is large, open and wide. When I sketched this nest the heron rested, raising its head occasionally. Now with the aid of telescopes, you can see a parent's beak and yellow eye and the gray fluffy heads of the young. Some of the birders say there are 3 young, some say 4 and we will know more when they are bigger. Grackles sneak along the branch toward the nest and are chased off by a large parent. There are 2 black-crowned night herons in nearby willows. So far, I have seen them eyeing fish, not young green herons.



As for our biggest nesters, the swans had two cygnets this year. All of them look well.

The red-tailed hawks had 2 young, but one fell from the nest. The dead chick was taken to the Natural History Museum and is now with Ward Stone, a wildlife pathologist with the New York State DEC. He found lesions in the mouth and throat and infection from Frounce (Frowns) *Trichomonas*, which is a common infection for pigeons, doves and raptors. The remaining young red-tailed hawk fledged on June 4 and seems to be doing well

# The Elliott Newsletter

## Nature Notes from Central Park

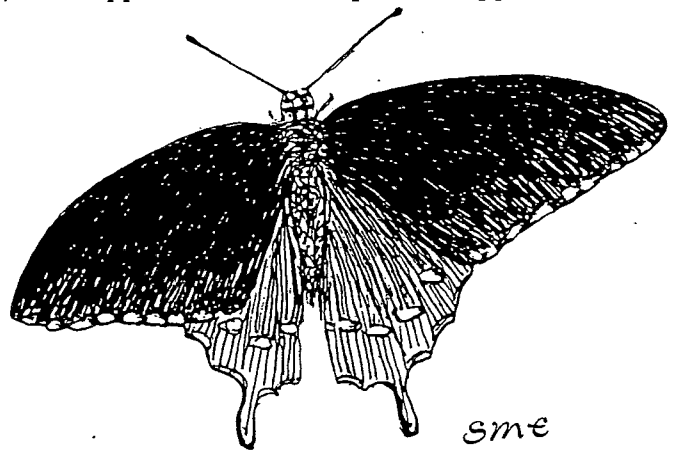
Vol. 5, No. 4.

July-August, 1999

### Bountiful Butterflies for a Broiling Count

The butterfly count on the last Saturday in June was a great success but hard on the counters. Heat and humidity had all of us sweating and some of us reeling. More people came to count so we were able to divide the park in four sections. If this trend continues, we will eventually have enough people to thoroughly cover all sections of the park. This year's count produced 15 species of butterfly, a record high. Not only were there more species, in one case there were more than double the number. Last year the cabbage whites numbered less than 100. This year their total was 281. There were 3 orange sulfurs, 6 clouded sulfurs, 15 tiger swallowtails, 1 pipevine swallowtail, 1 question mark, 2 mourning cloaks, 8 summer azures, 5 eastern tailed blues, 3 American ladies, 1 cosmopolitan lady, 1 least skipper, 1 dun skipper, 1 zabulon skipper, and 4 silver-spotted skippers.

There were 3 species new to the Central Park butterfly count: pipevine swallowtail, dun skipper, and least skipper. I asked the counters to tell me where they saw each and what it looked like. Merrill Higgins told me his group was on the top of Cherry Hill when a black butterfly flew over. Despite the heat, they chased it towards Bethesda Fountain. It was a dark purplish color with no marks on the forewing but a tiny row of dots across the light (iridescent) hind wings. While drawing this swallowtail I realized it wears a necklace of large red dots on the under side of the hind wing.



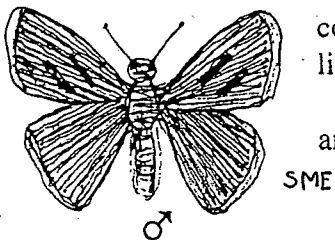
Norma Collin and Charles Kennedy were walking toward the Weather Station. Something flitted by and landed on a small (2 ft.) oak seedling in a sunny clearing. Norma said it was a dark, orangy brown. They began going through skippers in the Glassberg guide. This one lacked markings and Charles said "dun." Nothing else in the guide looked like it. Charles said they saw another dun skipper in his butterfly garden days later. That one was bigger and fresher, less battered than the one of the count, with a light collar line between head and thorax. But the rest was a blah color.

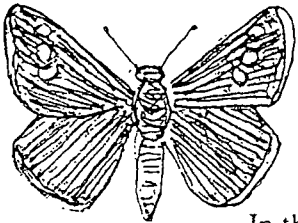


The Oxford English Dictionary defines "dun" as a dull, dingy, gray-brown color. Dun describes the hair of a mouse, cow, deer, ass, and horse. The word is Celtic in origin and appeared in print back in 953 and again in 1000. How nice that this ancient word will be kept alive in the next millennium by people watching the butterfly.

My photos of dun skippers are murky and shady. Only paintings in an old compendium made the markings intelligible. The male dun skipper has black scent lines on top of his forewings, perhaps more sniffable than seeable to other duns.

The female has a few tiny spots on the surface of her forewings. Unless you are very close, these markings disappear and you see, as Norma and Charles did, a





SME

brown skipper distinctive for its dullness.

In the north end of the park I saw Gaye Fugate and Dorothy Pool staring intently at the edge of the 100 St. Pool. I circled the Pool and found it was a least skipper. Gaye said it was skipping through the waterside plants and right out over the water. It was so tiny and yellowish she thought it was a least right away.

Dorothy Pool discovered it fluttering low to the ground through grasses. She said it looked orange in flight and small enough so that if you had a floater in your eye you might have missed it. Dorothy doesn't know why people say least skippers have a "weak" flight. The flight is strong enough for their size, and, she adds, they are good at getting away.

We watched as it flew and sat, flew and sat. When skippers land, their wing arrangements look like a stick-up in a by-plane. The forewings rise vertically above the body. The hind wings spread out horizontally to reveal the pattern on the top side. This little skipper displayed a vivid orange hind wing with a black border. When skippers fold up all their wings you see the underside of the hind wing. It slides over and covers the forewing. In this position, the least skipper looks bright yellow.

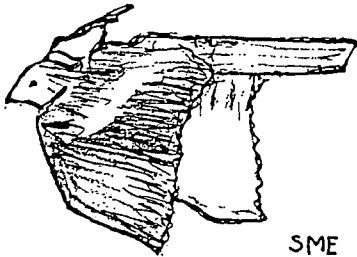
Thanks to everyone who braved the heat and humidity, searched their sections diligently, listed carefully and gave me their results. You made this butterfly count the most successful ever. Come back next year and bring your friends. For those of you just starting to learn the butterflies, look at this year's list, check the field marks in the guide and you will be prepared for most of what you will see next year.



SME



## Sunday Surprises



SME

On July 25, Merrill Higgins saw Pale Male fly over Conservatory Pond with an eastern kingbird in pursuit. When it landed on the hawk's back, Merrill lifted his binoculars and discovered another eastern kingbird riding on the hawk's neck, pulling out feathers. Merrill called the birds to the attention of other watchers and they saw the hawk and kingbirds make 4 passes over the pond. They all checked the field marks and most saw the white band at the end of the eastern kingbird's tail.

A week later, August 1, Merrill was photographing insects when he saw this year's young red-tail land on the rocks below the Castle. Then it flew to the dock very near a kingbird nest. Sure enough, out came the eastern kingbird, landed on the startled hawk's back, moved to its neck and, said Merrill, "tattooed his noggin." They flew across the pond and disappeared into trees. Kingbirds live up to their scientific name, *Tyrannus tyrannus*. They are fearless and feisty to their enemies. Merrill got 2 pictures with his close-up camera and loaned them to me for this approximate drawing.

The following Sunday, August 8, I was up in the North End with a group from N.Y. City Audubon. We went to the meadow, where Naomi Dicker showed us more than a dozen grasses. Then we noticed insects were zooming all around us. Near our feet 2 were fighting for a captive. The owner dropped to sandy ground and turned into a cicada killer with cicada.



Cicada killers are solitary wasps who lead blameless lives sipping nectar until the females are ready to lay eggs. Each female digs a right-angled tunnel about a foot long where she deposits 1 or 2 eggs. Off she goes to catch and paralyze a cicada and tuck it in with her eggs. When the eggs hatch their first meal is the cicada. How amazing to see part of this drama unfold at our feet. This wasp seemed to be digging in to hide her prize from others. I bent down and pulled them out by the cicada's black wings. I raised them both and we looked at the wasp on one side. We saw orange on her thorax and legs, and a black shiny abdomen with 3 wavy yellow bands across it that don't quite meet in the middle. Then I turned the pair over and we saw the cicada's hairy, blue-black back between the smoky wings I held in my fingers. We could see part of the cicada's pale white underside, which seemed flat and smooth. Surprisingly, the wasp and cicada were belly-to-belly. Probably by pressing against the flat side and grasping her victim by its fuzzy back, she got more grip and she could wrap her legs farther around an insect as big as she was.

As I carried the pair to a nearby tree, I could hear the wasp buzzing and feel the vibration of her wings as she fought to wrest her prize from my grasp. To hear and feel a wasp was astonishing. I placed them on top of a cut-off branch in the tree. The wasp immediately stopped buzzing and rotated her prey, feeling for a good grip. Then off she flew, dipping slowly with the dead weight she carried. Meanwhile other cicada killers continued to swarm and search in the grasses. As we moved from the meadow to the Loch, we heard a loud chorus of cicadas in the trees.

Members of the group thought I was foolish to risk a wasp sting. Too curious for caution, why wasn't I badly stung? Because the wasp couldn't grip and sting at the same time. An hour later when I told my adventure to Merrill Higgins, he loaned me his cicada killer photo, printed here.

## The Kennedy Center

Every decade, people take over small sections of the park to make minor improvements. Usually they work quietly, not revealing their purpose so as to avoid confrontations with authority. In the 1980's one of these secret gardeners began adding flowering plants to the shores beside the stream that flows under the West Drive at 77St. We became aware of the changes when a hooded warbler showed up one May and stayed a week. Birders lined the railing next to the drive, peering down for a sight of the bird. We noticed the stream was lined with what looked like yellow buttercups, iris, and other new plantings. Soon the same plants appeared on the floor of Indian Cave.

Eventually I came across the secret planter in his new garden beside the Boat House Parking Lot. I told him how glad I was to have his gifts in our park. With a little time and trust, he told me his name was Andrew Whitiker. He was a large, middle-aged man of flamboyantly shabby attire, who spoke well-bred English with a soft Virginia accent. Birders and park regulars began stopping by his garden to visit. He would pause from cultivating his plants, straighten up and name them. I made lists by common name and somewhat imaginary scientific ones--almost all of them findable in wild flower guides. He said he discovered many plants along an abandoned railway. He thinned them, put them in shopping bags and brought them to the park. We admired yellow iris, lesser and greater cellendine, and orange day lilies. In spring, water flowed from the rocks above the garden and made a large bird bath. Andrew dug a long trench below the rocks and pool, snaking it toward the East Drive. The trench filled with water to make a thin stream and Andrew lined it with flowers.

In the early 1990's Andrew disappeared from the park. Charles Kennedy and I would swap Andrew Whitiker stories and wonder if he was still alive. Soon his garden was littered with detritus and menaced by criminals selling sex for drugs.

In 1996, Charles Kennedy offered to take over the space and make a butterfly garden. With staff from Parks and Central Park Conservancy, saplings were removed to make new space. The land was immediately usurped by Jerusalem artichokes and cup plants, which look like sunflowers. They were thinned back and 25 Joe-Pye weed were put in. Currently, their crowns of small pink flowers adorn plants that are 7 ft. tall.

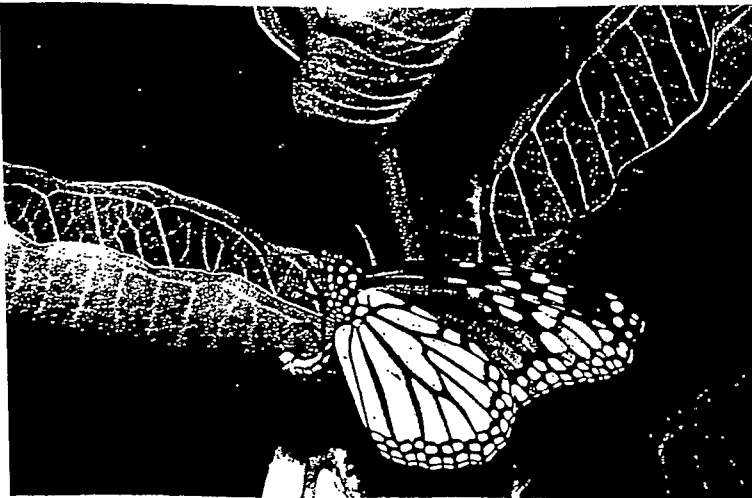


Charles has added 3 species of violets; turtle-head, a dark green plant named for the shape of the flower; boneset, with clusters of small white flowers and opposite leaves that unite around the stem; ironweed, whose deep purple flowers currently stand 8 feet high; and coneflower, which look like big pink daisies with high-rise centers. There is pearly everlasting, with flat clusters of small white flowers, a cottony stem, and long, thin leaves gray-green above, white-wooly below; and blue lobelia and its red cousin, cardinal flower. To further attract butterflies they put in 5 buddleia bushes, 3 kinds of milkweed, and butterfly weed, which looks like milkweed but isn't and has clusters of small orange flowers. Whitiker's legacy is still in the garden: asters, goldenrod, iris, day lilies, bee balm, lesser celandine and maybe, says Charles, gill-over-the-ground. Many plants in the garden are enormous this year, some 2 feet above average. That's because the place has good soil, lots of sun and gets watered frequently by a sprinkler to stave off drought.

So, what comes to the garden? Plenty of bees, first bumble, then carpenter and now honey bees. It has been visited by 38 or 39 species of butterfly so far. Cabbage whites, silver-spotted skippers, and spring-summer azures are the most common visitors. The whites flutter everywhere, the skippers land on the fence in front of you and show off their wings. I've seen summer azures flutter in the back of the garden. They go to the buddleia as do monarchs and this tiger swallowtail in Charles's photo. Joe-Pye weed is popular with azures and orange sulfurs, and the azures also go to boneset. All these butterflies come to sip nectar. Others lay eggs on their favorite host plants.

While taking this photo of a monarch on milkweed, Charles saw her grab a leaf by the surface then curl her abdomen down and around to lay one tiny egg. If you look carefully, you may see a dot of an egg on the leaf above her.

Besides bees and butterflies, Charles has seen cicada killers, sphinx moths, and an assassin bug which killed a cabbage white before it or Charles realized. Sitting at the edge of his 30' x 20' garden, he watches spiders build their complex webs at lightning speed. You should ask to see his photos. Uncropped, they are the size of this page and in glorious color. These days, every park regular knows where you mean when you speak of Charles's Garden.



© 1999 by Sarah McCann Elliott. All rights reserved. No part of this newsletter may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission. To subscribe for all of 1999 send a \$20 check to Sarah M. Elliott, 333 East 34 St., New York, NY 10016. Nature walks for individuals, groups or organizations, call 212-689-2763.

*14 thanks to Ben Cacace, Bob Mello, and Lee Polydore. This newsletter could not have been printed without their help!*



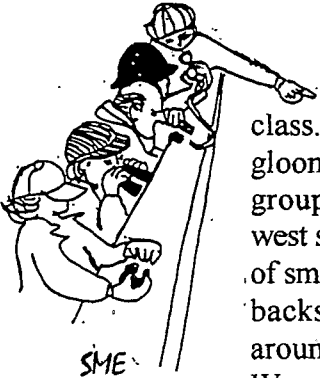
# THE ELLIOTT NEWSLETTER

## Nature Notes from Central Park

Vol. 5 No. 5

September-October, 1999

### Seeing Soras

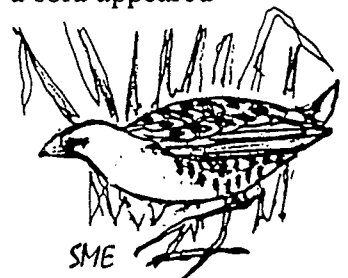


It rained the morning of Sept. 22. Even so, 8 people turned up for my Wednesday class. When we reached Willow Rock we saw something avian flitting through the leafy gloom and heard Bob DeCandido say it was a cuckoo. Almost immediately, our birding groups were joined by Starr Saphir and hers. She told us they had seen 2 sora rails on the west side at Balcony Bridge. I whipped out my guide and showed the class the sora on a page of small rails. Starr pointed to the sora picture and said these birds have much richer brown backs, the white marking more distinct. Both birds, she said, wore some black feathers around the bill, but not as much as in the picture and were probably immature males.

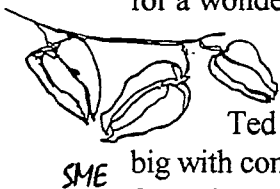
We raced to Balcony Bridge, faced east and stood with our backs to the West Drive at 77 St. We peered over the railing, searching the stream, reeds and muddy banks below. "There!" said Bob, and I saw something duck under reeds. Not seeing it clearly made me crazy. So I was grateful and relieved when Nadia Griffin spotted a sora on the other bank and helped me to see this chicken-like bird move out into the stream. It stepped along thigh-deep in water, lifting enormous pale feet and putting them down without splashing. With its short, thick bill it picked many newly-sprayed insects from the stream surface. Perhaps Malathion spraying, which kills mosquitoes and many other insects, makes for a large, tasty, but chancy food supply. The rail disappeared into reeds but soon the sora on the other bank appeared. Both wiggled their stubby tails, flashing white undersides.

Within a day or so, one of the 2 soras was spotted moving down the shore of Rowboat Lake. That bird disappeared, but one remained beside the stream for over a week. As the word spread, more birders arrived at the bridge and the bird was spotted by many people. Although soras summer over most of North America and are the most common of our rails, they are not often seen. Tom Fiore saw one about 7 years ago in the north end of the park. Some 20 years ago a sora appeared beside Bow Bridge and many birders rushed to see it.

Arlette Chensee took photos of the Wednesday class at a second-time sighting of the sora, Sept. 29. She kindly gave me copies and I used them to aid a very rough sketch of the Sunday class at the railing for the rail. Thanks to Starr for a wonderful find that gave so much pleasure to so many.



### Downed Trees

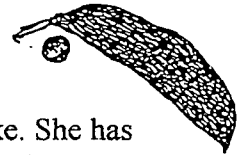
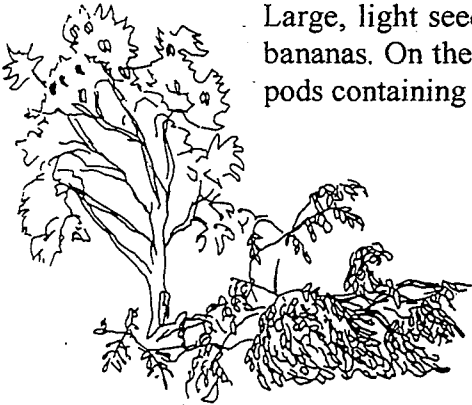


Ted Zinn called me to ask the name of a fallen tree at 90 St. and Central Park West. It was big with compound leaves and strange fruit. A golden rain tree? I told him of one behind a drinking fountain at 72 St. just a few steps inside the park from Central Park West. It was covered with seed pods like Chinese lanterns. There are still plenty of pods to see on the ground. No, said Ted. He sees those trees beside the running path around the Reservoir. How about a Kentucky coffee tree? He got his guide and looked. Not like the picture, he said. I suggested he look at a beautiful KY coffee tree on Cedar Hill across the East Drive from the Cat Statue. Ted planned a full park run and said he would check it out and let me know. He called to say the tree had split and only half of it was still standing. Oh, and yes it was the same kind as the downed tree at 90 St.

My Sunday class visited Cedar Hill next day and examined the broken beauty. The trunk was wedged apart by a growing root and weakened by wood rot. Large, light seed pods hung from the upright half of the tree. They looked like bananas. On the ground lay roots, exposed trunk, branches, leaves and smashed pods containing large seeds. The pods and seeds were pale green.

Squirrels and mockingbirds pried soft, green seeds out of opened pods and watched us carefully. We were too close for comfort but the banquet was too good to leave.

This tree was named by early Americans who harvested flat, leathery, brown pods. They opened the pods and extracted hard black seeds from the sticky interior. They ground the seeds to make coffee. Was it good? The brew tasted so bad they gave up the crop. Only the name lingers on.



On Oct. 6, I all but bumped into wonderful Lorraine Konopka on her motor bike. She has worked for 20 years with people and plants in Central Park. Lorraine told me that the winds and rains from Hurricane Floyd hit the park on Sept. 16, and took out 40 big trees-- trees with trunks more than 10 inches across. Eight of these were specimen trees-- trees with all the features of their species. They were typical, large, handsome and in good health before the storm.

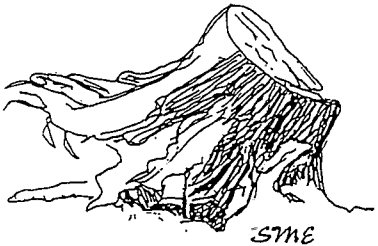
The Kentucky coffee tree at West 90 St. was 27 inches DBH. Lorraine explained that DBH stands for Diameter at Breast Height or 4 ft off the ground. The split one on Cedar Hill, now completely removed, measured 22 inches. A huge weeping willow at the Lower Lobe of Rowboat Lake was 3 feet across and a stately horse chestnut at 74 St and the bridal path near the west wall of the park measured 2 feet DBH. In the Ramble southeast of the Azalea Pond, a downed sweet gum, measured 28 inches. On the east side, a precious elm at Fifth Ave and 74 St. came down.

Farther north the news of tree destruction was even more tragic. A cucumbertree magnolia on a ramp near the south shore of the Meer fell across that ramp and was removed. A slice of trunk was examined and the growth rings counted. Lorraine says she counted 112 rings, one for each year of life. Some of the rings were so closely packed, she believes New York endured a prolonged drought around the turn of the century. Also down was an ancient black oak at the 100 St. Pool. Four stalwart folks from the Sunday class came out in the rain on Oct. 10. Susan Fischer generously gave us a ride to 105 St. and we went to the Meer. We searched, but all the cucumbertree was gone.

We walked to the southeast corner of the 100 Street Pool where a waterfall splashes down many boulders into the Pool below. There we found the stump of the black oak between 2 rocky outcrops and above stone steps leading to the water.

Writing on the stump proclaimed this "The Lincoln Tree" whose rings show it was "138 years old." That means the tree was alive during the Civil War.

At the center of the stump, showing the earliest years of the tree, there were two small circles surrounded by their rings. The main growing shoot of a tree is called a leader. Lorraine said this tree had a double leader. Two shoots grew inside the trunk and rose 25 feet before spreading out as large branches.



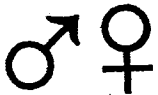
The following Tuesday, I took the sixth grade from The East Harlem School at Exodus House to see the stump. They were amazed to learn that some park trees are really old. They were thrilled to see a black-capped chickadee nearby. The bird was close enough for everyone to see well without binoculars. Instead of flying off, it worked the bushes for food in front of the crowd.

That afternoon I sketched the stump and noticed 3 or 4 small stumps across the waterfall. They must have been young trees knocked down in the path of the giant. Searching the ground for oak leaves and acorns, I found 2 soggy leaves, one 5 inches long, the other almost 8 inches. But I found no acorns. Probably squirrels had eaten some and buried others. Let's hope one or two of the burials will become new oaks near the old stump.

The following day, October 13, people gathered at Bethesda Fountain to honor the memory of Frederick Law Olmsted. On October 13, 1857, Olmsted, a landscape architect and Calvert Vaux, an engineer, won the contest and received the prize for their design of Central Park. They began work immediately. Olmsted, who was park superintendent, spent years to make Central Park beautiful, functional and the first landscaped park in the nation. Commissioner Henry Stern stood beside the Fountain 142 years later and led us in a recitation of Joyce Kilmer's poem "Trees." I thought I heard a ghostly sigh rise from all the new-fallen by-blows of Floyd. That day, the U.S. Post Office issued a new stamp to honor Olmsted. Lorraine believes that he may have touched the black oak on his park perambulations. If so, the sapling was just beginning a long life, the man a new career in the park.



SME



### Sex Symbols

If you came into a windfall, how would you spend the money? Kathleen Ward decided to spend some on family pleasures and some on good works. Her son Jacques, the sixth grade of The East Harlem School, and I as a bird, tree, plant teacher were all recipients of her generosity. Their math and science teacher, Miss Ko, asked me to give a talk to the class the day I met them at the school. I took along bird pictures and a list of common birds to see, some of them imported.

"These," I said, "are the signs for male and female." Beside a bird sketch on the blackboard, I made a circle with a diagonal arrow above it and a circle with a cross centered beneath it. "Why?" asked Richard Washington. The question stopped me cold. I had no idea. I suggested we both try to learn something in the coming week. I called most of the best birders in Central Park. No one knew. Then I called David Saunders who said he had seen the signs in horoscopes. I checked and learned the sign with an arrow stands for Mars, the sign with a cross stands for Venus. David was kind enough to give me information from his Internet.

Of the two, Venus is older. Counting BC and AD, she's about 3 millennia and was worshiped by ancient people living around the Mediterranean Sea and east of it between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers. Using various names, she was the goddess of beauty, love, fertility and war. In time, her warrior ways were given to Mars. Ancient Greeks called her Aphrodite. They were conquered by ancient Romans who kept the goddess but changed her name to Venus. Ancient wise men gave her name to the month of April, the bright metal, copper, and a bright star in the heavens. Later, we learned the star was a planet, the second rock from the sun.

To ancient Greeks, Ares was the name of their god of war, and a red star in the heavens. Both were renamed Mars after the Romans conquered the Greeks. Mars was associated with iron--a strong metal for spears. The first month of the Roman year, a time to plant crops and wage war, was named March for this god. Today we know that the red star is a planet, fourth from the sun and our nearest neighbor. This year NASA sent off a rocket to orbit the planet and send back pictures of the surface. Instead, on Sept 23 the orbiter crashed into Mars and was lost.

That day the sixth graders were discovering birds in Central Park. In Conservatory Gardens Semei Jenkins spotted a robin's nest with a bird going in and out of it. Donovan Woodley and many others found catbirds. We traveled along the sloping path beside the wild flower meadow and were

almost at the Loch when Laurelle Hammonds spotted a downy woodpecker. It was hammering away at a tree for all it was worth. Every child with or without binoculars got to see the bird. Did it have red on its head? No. So it was a female. Children crowded around the bird guide to study the woodpecker page. "Hey," said one of the group, "here's those signs teacher talked about."

Two weeks later, the children spotted a neat round hole where the woodpecker had been pecking. A nest? No, a roost hole for winter made on the lee side of the tree. There the downy can be safe and warm--protected from rain, snow, north winds, and predators.

The bird and tree classes are over but Richard Washington's question is still unanswered. Because of him, I've learned that the sign for Mars is a shield and spear, the sign for Venus is a looking glass. Since these symbols were first used, astronomy separated from astrology, chemistry split from alchemy, and the study of plants and animals has flourished. So how did 2 gods of ancient myth survive the changes and become the sex symbols of modern science? I still don't know, but if you do, please write!

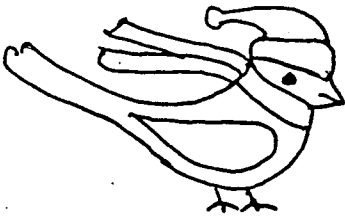


### Remembering Moe

Moses Cohen met Sylvia at a summer camp in 1941. They were not interested in birds, but they were interested in each other. A year later they married. Moe was drafted, and spent most of World War II in the states. After the war he returned to being a jeweler, working to order. At Sylvia's urging, Moe entered a sketch class, did well, gained courage, and began his own business. His sketches helped show what a new piece of jewelry would look like. At age 52 he became a teacher and found he loved it. He taught jewelry in vocational school, then to disabled students.

The Cohens loved camping. Moe took photos of glaciers and flowers. They watched indigo buntings, bluebirds, and meadowlarks that came to their tent. In the 1960's, Sylvia would leave her New York office and slip into Central Park for a nature fix. Moe began park visits a decade later. Their son went to an Audubon camp, learned birds and they all began watching. A Blackburnian warbler was the turning point for Sylvia. Zillions of ducks on the Reservoir did the same for Moe. Despite illness for the last decade of his life, Moe enjoyed walking in the park and seeing birds. He courageously did so up to a week before his death Sept. 8, 1999. Our hearts go out to Sylvia, a good birder and a valiant widow.

### Christmas Count Centennial



STME

On **Sunday, December 19**, we will celebrate our **100th Christmas Count** in Central Park. We meet at **8 AM** by the **South Pumping Station** at the southeast corner of the **Reservoir**, rain or shine. East-siders can gather at **75 St. and Fifth Ave.** at **7:50**. With plenty of people, we can finish the count by noon, start the tally at **12:30** and then get on with the **CELEBRATION**.

If you are not a super birder, never fear. Hundreds and hundreds of pigeons, house sparrows and starlings must be counted and you can contribute. Dress warmly, wear layers and plastic if necessary. Carry binoculars, guide, pad and pen. Bring **\$5 exact** for National Audubon. Many ages welcome. After all, when Charles Rogers made the first park count in 1900, he was 12 years old!

© 1999 by Sarah McCarn Elliott. All rights reserved. No part of this newsletter may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission. To subscribe for all of 1999 send a \$20 check to Sarah M. Elliott, 333 East 34 St., NY, NY 10016. To subscribe to 2000 news, **DON'T SEND CHECK UNTIL END OF DEC. '99**. For Christmas Count information, call me at 212-689-2763 or New York City Audubon, 212-691-7483.

# THE ELLIOTT NEWSLETTER

## Nature Notes from Central Park

Vol.5 No.6

November-December, 1999

### One Hundred and Still Counting

Never have so many people come to count the birds in Central Park. And never have so many species of Christmas birds been there to be counted. It was a perfect equation for success. The day was cold but not bitter and nothing fell from the skies, which were bright at 8 and sunny by 10. Birders entering from Fifth Ave. were greeted by Ranger Dan Kane, who pointed the way to the Reservoir. When we arrived at the South Pumping Station of the Reservoir, David Krauss had already counted all the gulls before they woke up and flew away.

As more and more bird watchers appeared, so did Ralph Ginzburg. He was carrying a step ladder, a megaphone and a camera. He led us down to the bridal path, climbed on his ladder, and using the megaphone, told us to press together for the centenary group shot. He had me come forward to stand next to Parks Commissioner Henry J. Stern. We were instructed to raise our binoculars to our eyes and look at the light in the lamppost behind him. As Ralph arranged people in the crowd, I watched late-comers arrive, search for birders, then flutter down the steps to join the flock. There was plenty of time to enjoy Ralph's instructions.

"The gentleman at the back," said Ralph, "please step closer to your neighbor or step away. You are half in and half out of the picture. Madame, do you have binoculars with you? Then will you please step aside." After Ralph had arranged birders of various shapes and sizes to fill the space, and we again raised our binoculars to the lamppost, its light had just gone out. Ralph took many shots, then moved his ladder a foot or two for a better angle. Next, he took a picture of the 5 specially invited children. Then he rushed away, kindly loaning me his megaphone.

When everyone had swarmed back to the pumping station, I passed out name/address cards: pink for adults, green for children. Soon the adults used up all pinks, then the leftover greens. That's when I knew we had one mighty crowd. The adults handed in their cards with \$5. The children came in free, thanks to National Audubon, but I asked them to give their ages--9 to 14. Two adults making do with green cards put down 43 and 65 yrs.. When all the cards were gone, birders put their names on scraps of paper. One woman, lacking a paper scrap, autographed her five dollar bill. Luckily, she thought to mention it a day later!

Eventually, with many repeats on the megaphone, the birders handed in their cards and scraps of paper with their money to heroic Ellen Kornhauser and Sandra Reynolds. These two birders have done this chore **expertly** for three years and are the only reason the names of counters equal the amount of money taken in. Both names and money are sent to National Audubon.

I passed out a stack of blue sheets marked "Rules and Tips." They were to count all perched and ground birds including pigeons, starlings and house sparrows. They should count the big birds in the air as well, noting their number, the time, and the direction they were flying. Big birds can and do soar with the greatest of ease over several park sections and we try not to overcount them. Birders were urged to check evergreens, berry trees and in the leaves along all the park walls. They should plan to stop by noon to get to the Arsenal by 12:30. If they were tired or pressed for time, they should get out on the East or West Drives and Park Rangers in vans would pick them up and

give them a ride south to the Zoo.

I passed out yellow tally sheets with names of birds and spaces to mark their numbers. We picked leaders for each of the seven sections of the park and I passed out green section maps to each group. They whooped and trooped off to scour the park.

When most of the crowd had departed, I joined the children with mothers and Peter Mott, who teaches at Fieldstone School. We were joined by John Bianchi, who handles public relations for National Audubon and proved to be a quiet but very good birder. Also with us was Angelique Bell, John's charming and beautiful assistant who came in from Connecticut. We went down the East Drive to the Ramble and turned in at Maintenance Meadow. Peter pointed out a white-throated sparrow in a bush and told the children to look for the yellow spots near the bill. Next we walked to the winter feeding station at Azalea Pond. I pulled out a bag of peanuts and we held out shelled nuts to any confiding birds. A titmouse came to me and was about to land when a child's swinging arm scared it off. Eventually it went to Laurelle Hammonds. She wasn't sure the bird had taken anything until she saw only half a peanut in her palm. She complained that the bird hurt her, but gave her secret smile when I protested. Little birds have claws sharp enough to feel when they clasp your finger but the grip isn't hard enough to break the skin. No other birds came to our hands, so the children fed peanuts to very tubby squirrels.

We looked up at the feeders and the hanging bags of thistle seed. We tabulated winter-drab goldfinches, a male and female downy coming to the suet, several chickadees, more tufted titmice, 2 white-breasted nuthatches and even a red-breasted nuthatch. On the ground we saw a handsome fox sparrow, more white-throats, a junco and on a tree by the stream my count favorite, a brown creeper. With help from the group, Emmanuel Saldana (age 11), wrote everything down on our yellow tally sheet. He took the job seriously and did it well.

At Willow Rock a flotilla of mallards streamed toward us for a handout. "Should I toss them a peanut?" asked one of the children. "No, it will sink." Peter Mott focused the children's attention on the mallard tails. He explained that mallards are the only ducks in the world with curly tail feathers, and only the males have them.

We went to the Point and saw a hermit thrush. Doug Wells, from National Audubon and upstate New York, confirmed it was a hermit because he saw the bird cock and drop its rust-red tail. When Doug started to describe the color and structure of the birds's wing feathers, I said, "These guys from Ithaca, they don't fool around!" Everyone laughed.

Since our group was "floating free," I suggested we go to Cedar Hill and look for the owl. We stood on the flat viewing rock, looked at the cluster of pines and studied the one on the right. No owl. Luckily, I walked downhill a few steps and there, well out on a limb surrounded by space, was the long-eared owl. Everyone could see the ears clearly. It was a first-ever owl for all of the children and some of the adults.

At Turtle Pond Peter asked, "Which one of those ducks is the black duck?" Silence. He explained that only one duck before us had no white in the tail and they followed the clue to the bird. When we reached the Castle, two mystery ducks on the far shore awoke, came near and turned into female hooded mergansers. Near the slatted birder's blind we saw a female wood duck.

Back on the East Drive we flagged a van and Ranger Duncan Blair gave most of us a ride to the Zoo. Our route was uptown to the Reservoir, across the bridal path to the west side, and down the West Drive. It's a regal experience, riding in a park van. The pace is smooth and stately and you get to see the park from a completely different perspective. Rangers do not slam on their breaks or honk at strollers, skaters and runners. They wait patiently to be noticed, then just glide by. Soon we

were at the Zoo. I greeted lots of cheerful birders, especially the ones who had seen rare birds and were keeping the news for later.

Rangers greeted us at the Arsenal and suggested we take our coats with us because all the coat racks were bulging. When we walked into the conference room on the third floor the place was packed. Joyful birders were eating soup in a sandwich and drinking cocoa or cider. I managed to get 2 or 3 bites before being called forward.

Commissioner Henry J. Stern stepped to the podium, adjusted the microphone slightly and began a gracious speech honoring the bird watchers assembled and the history of the count. The speech, set in headline sized type, was prepared by Lauren Dwyer. But the commissioner is a pro. He departed from and returned to the text easily and frequently, crafting it to his own use. He introduced his dog, Boomer, a gentle golden retriever. As Boomer passed through the crowd we were encouraged to pet the dog. Patting Boomer was the highlight of a thrilling day for one young member of our group. As I stood next to the Commissioner, I couldn't help noticing his handsome three-quarter profile and how easily he worked his way through the event. Near the end of his remarks he rang a large bell and praised me for my 25 years of participating in the count, 15 years of organizing and compiling it. Malcolm Pinckney took pictures of us and of birders in the room.

It was delightful to step to the microphone and speak without having to SHOUT. I thanked the Commissioner and Alex Brash, Head of all the Rangers, and I gave heartfelt thanks to Jill Mainelli for all she had done to organize me, along with the event. It was she who called an early meeting in November to meet people and sort out tasks. I was told the meeting room in the Arsenal would cost us \$1500. Because Henry Stern and Alex Brash jointly sponsored our 100 year celebration, we got the room as a gift. I tell you this so that YOU can WRITE or CALL in your THANKS to each of these men. Central Park birders are famous for their complaints, so your pleasant remarks will come as a welcome surprise. I am grateful that Alex Brash looked at my invitation and glanced through my mailing list to over 100 people who have participated in former counts. He scooped my papers up and took them away to his office, where they sent out the mailing in plenty of time for RSVPs.

It was Jill Mainelli's smart idea at a second meeting to take away all my sheets and print each of them in a different color. She captured the last of the orange-red paper and gave it to Terry Jackson, who took it to the Ranger office. They printed my park-wide count sheet on this gorgeous color and decorated it with the Christmas bird plus the logos of the 5 participating organizations, including the Linnaean Society. Jill took my enlarged Christmas bird on dark green sheets to Pui Yu, who laminated them for park signs. Rangers put them up near the Reservoir and the Arsenal to help birders find the beginning and end of the count. It was Jill's idea to use my bird logo for cookies. Terry Jackson took the logo to a baker friend and the result pleased everyone. The Rangers, Duncan Blair, Elizabeth Carrozza, Mary Giannusa, Dan. Kane, E.J.McAdams, Linda Rurak and Matt Symons were specially picked from all five burroughs. They were gracious and helpful to us all the morning and at the party, they stood against the wall watching with pleasure. When I told the crowd that the board of New York City Audubon had put up the money for the food they were eating, a great cheer went up. Later I learned that NYCAS paid almost half the \$1000 tab. Parks Dept. paid for the rest. Another reason for us to **THANK** them all. About 50 people said they were coming but 3 times that many showed up. Meredith Caccese, Terry Jackson and Jill Mainelli worked like troopers to see that everyone had food, drink, a place to sit and an orange tally sheet to mark.

After my thanks to only some of people who helped to make this event a success, it was time to start the numbers. I had asked for one person from each section to announce each bird total in a

clear, loud and distinct voice. It worked. Only a few numbers had to be repeated in that very crowded room.

This year, Alex Brash suggested, we could flash the birds and their numbers on a big screen. (Wow.) Unfortunately, the screen wasn't high enough for everyone to see but Brian Carlson, the man at the computer attached to the screen, could give us instant park totals for any bird when I asked for them. We hit a snag with the red-tailed hawks. They were seen in every section of the park in varying numbers traveling in all directions and at differing times. Unraveling all the sightings seemed so daunting, I asked what we should do to arrive at a fair number. Peter Post said to take the total and divide by 3. The crowd went along with that. Brian Carlson gave us the total for seven sections and the fraction of it. The crowd wrote down 9 red tails on their tally sheets.

American crows were also a problem. Why? Because the Dept. of Health wanted crow numbers from all the groups in the Lower Hudson Count. Crows were seen everywhere in our park. When I wondered aloud about the '98 crow total, someone supplied it immediately. In 1998 we had a high of 272 crows. In 1999, the number was reduced to 104. We counted them all. Crow counts were down all over Manhattan, but huge in Staten Island, where they are counted when they come in to roost for the night.

We were very pleased with our downy, hairy, flicker, red-bellied and yellow-bellied sapsucker counts. The room was silent when we got to red-headed woodpecker. After all seven sections reported "zero" a sad "awww" went up from the crowd. The high counts of tufted titmice, chickadees, white-breasted nuthatches and even red-breasted nuthatches were a delight. Perhaps because of the summer drought, these birds are wintering farther south in greater numbers than they have for about a decade. We are honored to be the only area in Manhattan to be graced by brown creepers. Thank you, brown creepers. When Niger thistle feeder-bags were added to the Azalea Pond feeding station a few years ago, we began to see several winter goldfinches. This year their numbers jumped to 49.

Experienced counters marked their sheets as we worked our way through the list of expected winter birds. But when we got to the blank section marked "Other", everyone sat up and listened carefully to each section report. There were 2 pied-billed grebes, 25 American coots, a double-crested cormorant, gadwall, green-winged teal, ruby-crowned kinglets, a winter wren, Carolina wrens, a white-crowned sparrow, a peregrine falcon, a woodcock and a Cape May warbler. "Who saw the warbler?" asked someone in the crowd. Gretta Lee leapt to her feet, flung out her arms and shouted, "I did!" The room exploded in cheers and applause.

Gretta is a new birder. She was with Joe DiCostanzo in the northwest section of the park. The birders split into 2 groups and walked south from 110 to 97 St. It was slim pickings for the counters near the wall but much better for those nearest the Loch. When all the counters arrived at 97 St., Ranger Linda Rurak offered to walk back to 110 St., get her van and pick them up. No, said Joe, we will all go with you. A good move. Suddenly, Gretta saw a "yellow bird" and Sean Sime said it was a "warbler." They chased it from tree to tree until it landed on a fence where everyone could study it. As Joe said when he wrote up the report, the bird had fairly bright yellow underparts, heavily streaked with black, and white under the tail. The "upperparts" were gray-green except for the yellow rump. There were prominent white wing bars and the face was yellow with a yellow eyeline. The sides of the neck were yellowish, slightly outlining a somewhat darker cheek. The legs were black. We believe this is the first Cape May warbler ever seen on our Christmas count.

The group moved north. As they approached the Block House they saw a woodcock, which may be another first for our Christmas Count. (Recently, a woodcock, perhaps this one, has been



seen in the Oven where it might spend the winter as one did in the 1980's.) When the northwest counters reached the van, they noticed a crow dive-bombing something. They raised their binoculars and discovered a perched Cooper's hawk at Central Park West and 110 St. How nice all these birds appeared in time to be counted before the counters left the area.

Down in the southeast section birders were looking across 59th St. to Essex House. Merrill Higgins had seen hawk activity there the day before and for the Christmas Count he returned with his scope on a monopod for a detailed look. Ben Cacase called a peregrine falcon as they gathered at the north side of Wollman Rink. They watched it dive-bombing an immature red-tailed hawk perched on the first E of the Essex House sign. They could see the red-tail through the scope, but catching its attacker in flight proved more difficult. The falcon climbed the sky, circling over 59th St. and the park. High above, it would fold its wings and stoop. Aiming straight for the red-tail it swooped down, missing its victim by inches. The falcon rose and plummeted again, repeating this threat more than 10 times, says Merrill. But the young red-tail would not be driven off.

Thirty years ago peregrines had disappeared from the East due to poisonous spraying. In the 1970's they were brought back from extinction via a breeding program begun at Cornell University in Ithaca, NY. Young birds were released and some of them survived and nested on buildings and bridges. New York City hosts the most peregrine nesters but none of the falcons were put on the Christmas Count until '98. That bird was seen just before it disappeared into the blackness of a building, says Merrill. As they watched the '99 display, the group saw the falcon above the park.

The white-crowned sparrow may be a Christmas Count first. They are not common here and certainly not in winter. How nice the bird feeder at the Zoo keeps a white-crown snaffling up the spilled seeds under it. You will be able to see this sparrow through the fence at the East Drive. And look up. You could see the peregrine circling over our park.

On the night of the count, I was getting ready for a long winter's nap when Tom Fiore called. He and Mike Freeman were out watching birds while we were in the Arsenal and saw a red-shouldered hawk to add to the day's list. My thanks to Pat Pollock, who called to report many birds for this count. She saw the Cape May warbler at the end of the count day, and again on New Year's Eve in the Wildflower Meadow. Brad Klein saw it there on New Year's day. Why was it still here and what was it eating? Birders saw it travelling with a yellow-bellied sapsucker. Perhaps, after the woodpecker drilled a hole in a pine and sucked sap, the warbler went to the hole for the leftovers.

Within the count period other birds were seen and reported. An indigo bunting at the feeders, a catbird seen in Shakespeare Garden before and just after the count, a canvasback seen on the Reservoir by Pat Pollock, a chipping sparrow seen in the Pinetum Dec.16 by Tom Fiore, 2 pine siskins seen by Jack Meyer and Brian McPhillips at a thistle feeder Dec.18 and a screech owl discovered by Bob DeCandido's owl prowl group on the night before the count. Since 1999 was a year of superlatives for the Christmas Count, here is another. This year we broke the record of bird species for **the day AND the count period**. And we celebrated our 100th year with a new beginning. As we filled our count sheets in pen and pencil, the birds were being tabulated by not one but two computers. I recieved Brian Carlson's printout, "Prepared by El Exigente", before I even left the Arsenal! Ben Cacase put his report on the internet for eBird.NYC and Norman Stotz had it at the NYCAS office the next day. Both compilations showed the same totals for the birds they listed. That makes preparing my list **MUCH EASIER**. But the final count was larger because so many birds were reported later. Thanks to all the people who came to participate in this count and all the **BIRDS** who allowed themselves to be counted.

Why is this newsletter so late? Let me count the ways. Several people are trying to help with

photographs, some are floppy disks, some black and white prints, and some as slides that have not come back from the shop. I have spent many hours on this saga, trying to verify the names of birds and people. The birds seem to be complete, but some of the people may be missing. I began working on this Christmas Count last summer and I YEARN to complete it. There is one other hinderance. I got up to see the full moon at the Solstice. Dec. 23. I hit my foot on a planter and broke my toe. These days I hobble, but not far. So fact-checking must be done by phone. I wish for YOU a year of mobility and a lack of tedium.

My thanks to all of you who did NOT write checks to subscribe to The Elliott Newsletter for 2000. I have thought long and hard, and finally decided I will try to put out the news for one more year. If you have not sent your check, please delay it until the end of January when I can struggle to a bank. If you have already sent a check, I promise to process it. If you wish to send **cash**, wrap a twenty in paper with your **name, address, zip** and write "**paid cash in full.**" I hope you enjoy this last issue of 1999.

### The Central Park Christmas Bird Count~1999

pied-billed grebe 2	rock dove (pigeon) 1157	white-throated sparrow 199
double-crested cormorant 1	mourning dove 21	<b>white-crowned sparrow 1</b>
great blue heron 5	<b>long-eared owl 1</b>	dark-eyed junco 73
mute swan 4	northern flicker 7	red-winged blackbird 40
Canada goose 170	red-bellied woodpecker 46	common grackle 68
mallard 656	yellow-bellied sapsucker 18	house finch 150
American black duck 57	hairy woodpecker 4	American goldfinch 49
gadwall 4	downy woodpecker 59	house sparrow 1013
green-winged teal 1	blue jay 148	
northern shoveler 73	American crow 104	<b>Total species 62</b>
wood duck 3	black-capped chickadee 169	Total individuals 6,462
<b>lesser scaup 3</b>	tufted titmouse 155	
bufflehead 17	white-breasted nuthatch 49	<b>Birds seen in Count</b>
ruddy duck 209	red-breasted nuthatch 8	<b>period:</b>
hooded merganser 2	brown creeper 3	<b>canvasback 12/16/99</b>
red-breasted merganser 1	winter wren 1	<b>indigo bunting 12/16/99</b>
American coot 25	Carolina wren 3	chipping sparrow 12/16/99
<b>American woodcock 1</b>	ruby-crowned kinglet 3	catbird 12/17&20/99
ring-billed gull 774	hermit thrush 2	(Shakespeare garden)
herring gull 319	American robin 70	<b>2 pine siskins 12/18/99</b>
great black-backed gull 40	northern mockingbird 6	<b>screech owl (introduced)</b>
sharp-shinned hawk 2	European starling 370	12/18/99
Cooper's hawk 2	<b>Cape May warbler 1</b>	<b>6 species and 7 birds</b>
red-tailed hawk 9	northern cardinal 42	
<b>red-shouldered hawk 1</b>	fox sparrow 10	<b>GRAND TOTAL</b>
American kestrel 3	song sparrow 26	<b>68 species,</b>
<b>peregrine falcon 1</b>	swamp sparrow 1	<b>6469 individuals</b>