

THE ELLIOTT NEWSLETTER

Nature Notes from Central Park

Vol. 6, No.1

January~February, 2000



Real Winter Weather

If you are housebound with a busted toe, what better season to endure it than the winter. You aren't forced to miss the bird migration or the world coming into bloom. Even so, when I stand at the window watching a curtain of falling snow fill the city with silence, it is hard to return to the computer. Thick white snow covers rooftops, blankets vines, flower pots and a pink flamingo in my neighbor's balcony garden. I yearn to go to the park and watch dogs and children shout, bark, frisk, slide and roll in fresh snow. I would cross the 72nd St. Transverse to visit the weather-clad falconer and his bird, and think of Don Knowler, who used this statue for the title of his book about the park. I would stand at the picture windows of Dana Discovery Center to see the wide sweep of the ice-bound Meer frosted smooth with snow. I would study the far shore, where etched trees hold up their limbs and perhaps conceal a young red-tailed hawk. My thanks to Terri Carta, Facility Coordinator at the Dana Center. She stepped to the windows to photograph the Meer in snow. I used her photos to make this drawing.

Fierce Weather for Fowl Count

Every year, because of Peter Tozzi, I participate in the winter waterfowl count for the Federation of New York State Bird Clubs. Peter was a wonderful birder and dragonfly enthusiast. In the '80's he counted winter waterfowl for the Federation at the East River, Hudson River and Liberty Island. He asked me to do the count in Central Park. I have been doing it ever since but no longer have the pleasure of talking to Peter about the birds we saw.

Last year, we counted waterfowl in mild weather and heavy rain. This January, nothing was dumping from the skies, but a broken toe, not yet mended, meant that my participation was minuscule. No bad thing, as it turned out.

It was sunny but bitterly cold on January 17, Martin Luther King Day. I've been on counts in all kinds of weather but that Monday was certainly the coldest. The temperature was 8 degrees Fahrenheit but the wind chill made it 20 below. I met Jeff Nulle at the Boat House where he was trying to warm up after counting the northern half of the park and the west side of Rowboat Lake. We talked to Bob DeCandido while Jeff tried to restore feeling in his fingers and I rested my foot.

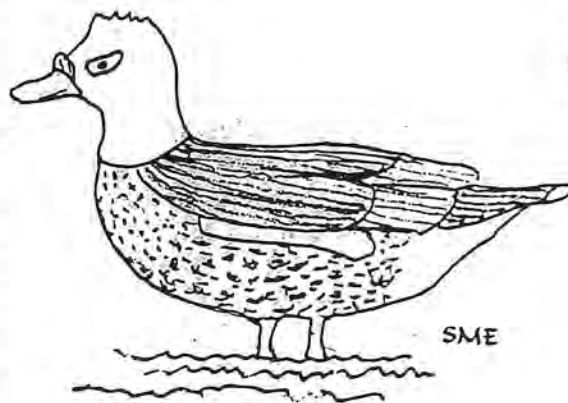
Then we buckled up and limped down to the 59th St. Pond. The pond was a wasteland of ice except in the northeast corner where folks bash the ice to maintain open water for the birds. Ducks come to bathe, swim and beg for crumbs and crusts from New Yorkers. Some duck feeders come with large bags of bread. They look experienced, shabby and maybe homeless.

But this day, no one was out feeding the birds. The winds cut like knives. Looking into the blast to count birds brought tears to our eyes. Our eyeglasses gave some protection, but not enough. Most of the birds were mallards and were close enough to identify without binoculars. There were a few black ducks and a few crossbreeds of mallard and black ducks. Unlike National Audubon, the NY Federation tabulates these crosses.

Other more exotic crosses go unrecorded. The most arresting that day was a big black duck the size of a goose. It sported bumpy red skin above its beak and around its eyes, like a muscovy. Muscovys are native to Central and South America. They are domesticated in North America and are not considered wild. Only my Peterson guide has pictures: a black muscovy in the wild and a white domestic variation. Our bird had a patch of white at the throat but most of the body was covered by shiny, black feathers. On back and wing, the feathers were so long and loose they flapped in the wind. I studied the tail feathers and thought of Peter Mott's mallard description: Only male mallards have curling tail feathers. This male's tail curled up, revealing his father.

Mallards are rapers and opportunists. They often mate with female black ducks. But it amazes me that they jump a female much larger than they are, such as our white domestic Peking ducks or muscovys. It's a leap of faith that proves to be successful. Perhaps years of domestication may make Pekings and muscovys easy targets for wild birds.

Rooting through old waterfowl counts I found a muscovy seen in 1993. The day was warm enough to make this sketch. The head and neck were very white. The bill, topped with an orange-red knob, faded to horn-pink at the tip. The dark eye was surrounded by an eye ring of puffy orange skin. The bird had a bumpy crown with a scraggly crest which rose when it was alarmed. The back and wing coverts and upper tail feathers were medium tan. The wings were light tan. Breast and belly were light, stippled and mottled. At the sides, there were large white wing patches and underwing coverts. The bird had a white tail band and its legs were yellow-gold. Old notes can be as mysterious as new sightings. This one claims the creature is a muscovy X shelduck. Shelducks live in Europe but some of them escaped from the zoo that year and were seen around the park. The males wear bill knobs.



We might have stayed to study some of the other oddities but bitter weather made the Zoo cafeteria seem like a much better location. We searched out the warmest spot, sat and Jeff gave me his counts for avian ice walkers on the Meer plus floating birds in open water at the 100 St. Pool, the Reservoir, the West side of the Rowboat Lake and the area we had just counted together. I thanked Jeff for all the hard work he had done. This year's count could not have been done without him. We left the park together and I went home for a cozy nap.

Later that day I got a call from Ben Cacace who had gone to the Reservoir that afternoon to count the birds. He wisely stood on the west side with his back to the wind. His numbers showed some interesting shifts in the morning and afternoon populations. Some extra birds arrived in the afternoon. There were 3 more pied-billed grebes; 4 more mute swans, buffleheads and American coots; 1 more Canada goose. Two double-crested cormorants made their appearance in the afternoon.

Other birds got up and left after Jeff counted them. By mid-afternoon there were 6 fewer black ducks, 16 less ruddies and only 45 of the morning's 387 mallards. Of the rarities, only the canvasback was not on the afternoon list. I considered the terrible weather, the nobility of the counters doing their best for state, country and nature, and I decided to go for all the high numbers of this count. I also decided that next year, we should begin the count at mid-morning when the weather might be warmer. Here are the totals for all the icy and open-water areas of this year's Central Park Waterfowl Count.

4 pied-billed grebes, 2 double-crested cormorants, 20 Canada geese, 4 mute swans, 11 American black ducks, 387 mallards, 2 mallard X blacks, 75 northern shovelers, 1 canvasback, 1 ring-necked duck, 6 buffleheads, 1 hooded merganser, 328 ruddy ducks, 20 American coots. On the count form there is a slot marked "unknown." I crossed out the prefix and put in "great blue heron." The bird was not on the list but it has been in our park. Ben saw it at Balcony Bridge that Monday.

Nate Burkins did the waterfowl count for Inwood Park, January 16, with Sarah Williams. He called in his results, which were 122 Canada geese, 1 mute swan, 2 black ducks, 117 mallards, 1 mallard X black, 2 northern shovelers and 6 canvasbacks.

It would be interesting if we kept track of waterfowl in February to see which birds stay and which ones leave. What's your guess about grebes, coots, buffleheads, canvasbacks, ring-necks, cormorants and mergansers? Did you see buffleheads and shovelers? Wood ducks were not counted in Central or Inwood Parks in mid-January but they are in Central Park now.

Writing About Nature

This winter I am doing three workshops for the Central Park Conservancy at Charles A. Dana Discovery Center. Billed as the Winter Naturalists Club, folks are supposed to hike over the north end of the park, notice birds and come back to the Dana Center to write their observations in a journal. On January 22, my foot was still taped and not very mobile. Snow and ice covered the park walks. A small group of nature-lovers of many ages and backgrounds braved the weather to come. We circled the Dana Center where the walk had been cleared. I pointed to birds and asked them to describe what they saw. After about a half hour we returned to the Center to warm up. One participant looked out the window and drew our attention to footprints in the snow. What made them, we wondered. Well the prints were big and close together. Not a big dog because the space between prints would be much wider. Studying individual prints we discovered the narrow back part was deep--where the creature put its weight. The front of the print was shallow and shaped like a fan. Perhaps these fans were made by the webbed feet of the Peking ducks we had seen pressed to the ice on the other side of the building.

We settled down to write our birds in the sequence we saw them. This required a whispered conversation between a five-year-old and his mother. His printed words were strong and clear and he read his entry on house sparrows with confidence and a little help with some of the words. His journal finished, it was time for them to go.

The rest of the group read their observations one by one, bird by bird. It was magic. All the birds came alive. The sparrows eating tossed bread, starlings gobbling food under the sophora japonica, circling ring-billed gulls trying to land on the roof, streams of pigeons pursued by a young red-tailed hawk. The observations were as varied as the people reading them. Some accounts were cautious, giving facts without emotion. Others were couched in elegant English, getting the facts just wrong. When one young woman produced 2 floating lines, I told her it sounded like the beginning of a haiku, which pleased her greatly. She is Japanese. We stayed half an hour extra so that all the journal entries could be read. When I limped to the Fifth Ave. bus stop, I felt wonderful. Now my foot has mended and is itching to hike. I hope both skies and walks are clear for the second meeting of the Naturalists Club.

Melting into Chilly-Fingered Spring

At the end of February, grim winter has loosened her grip. Snow still covers much of the park but the walkways are mostly free of ice. At the winter feeding station we saw rosy house finches and goldfinches beginning to turn color at the eyebrows. Titmice, chickadees and even nuthatches flew into feeders for single sunflower seeds. They brace the seed between their feet and hammer it with their beaks to split the hard shell and extract the kernel. I watched one white-breasted nuthatch take a seed to a vertical branch above the feeder. The nuthatch placed its seed behind a bump in the branch and straddled the prize with its feet to make a three-pronged vise. Standing on its head, the bird gave a mighty whack, split the shell and grabbed the kernel before it fell. The nuthatch collected another seed and returned to the same spot to repeat the process. This time the seed slipped from behind the bump and fell from the bird's grasp. The nuthatch fluttered down in a zig-zag way, looking in vain for its food. Then it rose to a horizontal branch and suddenly began running in short steps along the branch. Next it traced the sides and bottom of nearby branches. Each branch looked scuffed and frayed, made shaggy by repeated pecking and gouging. Seen in profile, the nuthatch beak looks like a tilted saber and the angle of the upturned blade may explain why the bird attacked its seed in that strange position.

On Presidents Day I ran into Ed Fagan and together we went to the Feeding Station. The branches near the feeder looked brittle and broken as well as frayed. But all the birds were around, including a female downy woodpecker who went to a plastic feeder and tapped at a former entrance sealed with plastic and fastened by neat studs. She inched higher, and finding a pleasing spot, hammered away. No other bird arrived and presently she returned to the suet. We admired a robin in the red buds and gray branches of the red maple. We were just leaving when a deafening flap of wings and a cloud of rising pigeons told us a hawk had arrived. But a posse of young bikers came rushing by and the hawk flew, showing a narrow tail. We followed it to the Willow Rock area and in good light saw it was a young Cooper's hawk.

On our way north Ed found a sleeping raccoon on a high horizontal branch near the humming tombstone. It was curled up and from one side the thick fur flashed golden red in the sun. We rounded the tree and looking up, saw the raccoon-- a sandwich of pale gray, white and deep gray fur. If you wear a thick winter coat, how nice to get out in the fresh air for a sunbath.

At Shakespeare Garden we peered at the Lenten roses lying limp on the ground. Ed said each time they tried to rise and grow, winter smacked them again. Next to them under the old mulberry tree, small green points were beginning to pierce the earth and one or two clusters of them showed the first squill, pale *Scilla* flowers peeping out. These white squill washed with pale purple look ultraviolet. In a few weeks, as their flowers emerge on periscope stalks, the area should be alive with bees.

We walked south to Balcony Bridge, saw and heard a red-winged blackbird and admired a wood duck before saying goodby. I walked to the lower end of the Mall and admired gleaming white snowdrops in late light. Along the East Drive I found two men peering through the fence at the back of the Zoo. They were searching the feeders and the ground beneath them for a white-crowned sparrow and an indigo bunting that have been visiting the area this winter. The birds were not in residence this afternoon, so I crossed the drive and checked the ducks at the 59th St. Pool. The small Canada goose and the Chinese goose were looking companionable on top of a rock. Hundreds of mallards and some black ducks rushed over the ice. Pecked, pitted and cracked, it should give way soon. The black muscovy X mallard which I'd come to sketch was missing and chilly air made me glad to step into a warm bus at Grand Army Plaza.

THE ELLIOTT NEWSLETTER

Nature Notes from Central Park

Vol. 6, No. 2

March~April, 2000

Raccoon Carnage

On February 1, Parks personnel discovered a dead raccoon in Central Park. It was to be the first of many. As the number of dead increased, they were sent to Ward Stone, Chief Pathologist of the Department of Environmental Conservation, New York State. The raccoon bodies were examined and showed no sign of rabies, distemper or poisoning, but did show signs of dog attacks. The bodies bore punctured teeth marks, crushed rib cages and broken pelvic bones. None were eaten.

A pair of feral dogs were seen in various parts of the park. Borough Commissioner Adrian Benepe told me his wife had seen the dogs and said they looked well-fed. She said they looked like German shepherds with mixes of other breeds. She thought the male was part Rottweiler. Alex Brash, Chief of Urban Park Services, called them mutts. He thought the male was part Doberman pinscher because of his black color. The female, he said, was lighter and perhaps a mix of German shepherd and collie. The pair traveled together as a unit and were wary of humans. They had been seen near the Shakespeare Theater. Their den was found at this location with a dead raccoon in it.

As the death toll increased, a posse of police planned a nighttime stakeout to intercept the dogs, dart them with a tranquilizer and capture them. Alex Brash told me that on some nights the police were called away by more pressing crimes. It must have been frustrating to run after wild dogs at 2 and 3 AM on rainy March nights. It was even more frustrating to watch the dogs evade their pursuers, leave the park and return to hunt again. Brash and staff purchased better equipment, began training to chase and dart, and asked a veterinarian to come and advise them.

Why were raccoons the victims of wild dogs but not woodchucks? In fall both mammals eat steadily to put on a thick layer of winter fat. Then they climb into their dens and fall asleep. Woodchucks sleep the winter away. Raccoons sleep if the weather is cold and snowy. But when the temperature rises, they wake, emerge and forage for food in the safety of the dark. This winter was certainly snowy but it was also the warmest on record. Raccoons were out finding food and they were unsafe in the dark. When chased, raccoons lumber for dear life. But they are no match for streaking dogs that work in unison for the kill. When alarmed, a raccoon emits a piercing scream--something they probably did as they died.

At a press conference, Commissioner Henry Stern said they thought the vicious dogs had human trainers whom he rightly called "criminals." A person out chasing with people from Parks and AmeriCorps said the dogs escaped, festooned with dangling darts. Perhaps the dogs were collected in getaway cars. On separate nights they saw cars of differing makes speed out of the park. Others told me they thought the killers were not wild dogs but pit bulls whose trainers were keeping them fighting fit.

Efforts of the Brash Brigade proved successful. The male dog was chased, darted and brought down. He was collected and sent to the Animal Care Center. Since then the female has not been seen in the park and no new deaths have been reported.

Raccoon females are said to give birth 63 days after mating and most cubs are born in April and May. But if the winter is mild, and this one was the mildest on record, there would have been a number of March births. At first, the blind and helpless cubs are suckled by their mother. But soon their diet must be augmented with more solid fare. Mothers go forth in the dark to forage and bring back food. If the mother is killed, her cubs will starve.

One night the patrol found what they thought was a den of orphaned cubs. As they collected the cubs, mother raccoon returned. That must have been memorable for all. The official raccoon death count stands at a stunning 28, but hidden dens of orphaned cubs could increase the death toll considerably.

On an April 2 bird walk for New York City Audubon, I discovered a scruffy looking raccoon circling the top of a dead tree. It paused and peered intently into the opening. Elise Mogensen and her father, who had a camera, were part of the group enjoying the birds that morning. I begged him to snap a photo of this living raccoon. He got the picture just as the animal disappeared head first inside the trunk. Elise had her sister develop the print and brought it to my Sunday class. My thanks to all the Mogensens for use of the print from which I made this sketch. It wasn't a raccoon den because later 2 young squirrels came out to clamber around the top of their home.



Arbor Day

April 28 was Arbor Day. To celebrate the event, we assembled on the Great Hill at 105 St. and Central Park West. We were greeted by Parks Commissioner Henry Stern, who introduced an Under Secretary from the US Dept. of Agriculture, the Executive Director from The American Chestnut Foundation and the Director of the New York chapter of that foundation. They spoke to us about trees in general and chestnuts in particular.

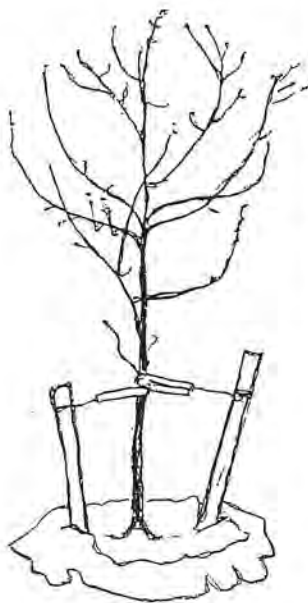
We learned that a fungus, detected in New York City in 1904, could kill American chestnut trees. The fungus spread through hardwood forests and in 50 years our most abundant trees east of the Mississippi River were destroyed by chestnut blight.

In 1983, The American Chestnut Foundation was established and began using backcross breeding to produce blight resistant trees. American chestnuts were crossed with Asian chestnuts, which did not succumb to blight. The hybrid trees grew and, in time, were recrossed with American chestnuts to produce trees that looked American but were as blight-resistant as Asian chestnuts. Trees grow slowly, and backcross breeding takes a long time. So the New York chapter of the foundation has been planting new chestnut trees from a few old survivors. They hope to see that these carefully reared American chestnuts are healthy enough to survive the blight and grow to maturity.

I told Commissioner Stern that there is one chestnut tree in the Ramble beside the gill which is now 3 flagpoles high. So far, it looks healthy. I learned from Neal Calvanese that this tree was 1 of 5 that were planted in the mid 1980's. He thinks it is the only survivor. Saplings were planted last year in the north end of the park but did not survive the drought.

When the speeches were over and we had recited Joyce Kilmer's "Trees," it was time for the dignitaries to line up around a new chestnut sapling. Each of them filled a shovel with dirt and together they tossed earth on the tree roots. Two men from the ground crew finished covering the roots and packed the earth around them. I sketched this young tree as they planted another chestnut nearby. Let's hope these Americans are successful.

I left the new plantings and walked east to the Loch. In the woods I was dazzled by a veery in full sunlight, posing on a rock. I met David Chadwick, the area gardener, coming along the path. I told him I had been peering up at the giant old oaks in his area. Their small, new leaves were hard to see high up in the canopy. I asked him to help me identify the oaks by their trunks, which we could see and touch.



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There were many red oaks with medium gray trunks, marked with ski trails up and down the bark. These giants grow on the east, west, and south side of the Loch. We discovered about 8 black oaks. Their trunks were noticeably darker and the bark is broken into small rectangles. We found black oaks at the southeast end of the Loch and along the west side. David told me there were 2 white oaks west of the Loch on higher ground and took me to see them. They rise majestically on either side of a path near a set of stone steps. These trees have silver-gray trunks and the bark is fissured in small rectangles like the black oak. Some of these oaks are so old they were here before there was a Central Park. As we were walking towards the white oaks, I saw a black- and- white warbler. He was marked like a zebra and was spiraling round and round a branch pursuing insects.

I thanked David for the wonderful trunk lesson and moved along to the Dana Center. As I rounded the Meer there were a pair of gadwalls resting and preening near the shore. I admired the male's black tail feathers. He was preening with his wing in the air, displaying a large patch of rust feathers and the sharp white rectangle of his speculum. I moved on to find and see a new mammal house in the park.

Boxes for Bats

On April 4, a program about saving bats was on the Today Show. We learned that bats are losing habitat and are being injured by their biggest predator--humans. They get a bad press but are not dangerous to humans and kill insects.

Later that morning I joined a class of young children at the Dana Center to see the TV bats up close in the hands of Kim Williams and Rob Mies, a wife and husband team who represent the Organization for Bat Conservation. They explained that bats are feared because they are believed to carry rabies. Actually, only 20 rabies cases have been related to bats nationwide in half a century. Only 1 case has been reported in New York State--ever. On the other hand, 99 per cent of rabies cases are linked to dogs.

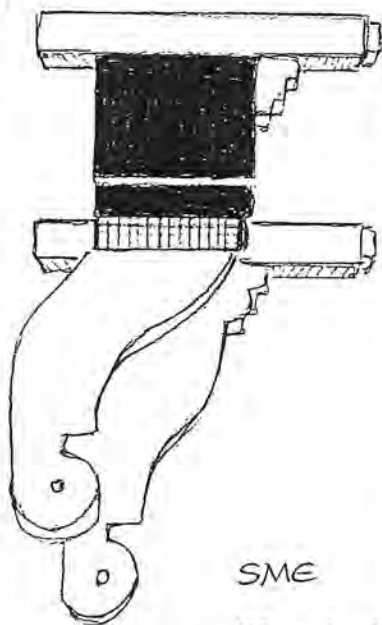
The three common bats that are seen in Central Park are big brown bat, little brown bat and red bat. The body of a big brown is 3 ½ -5 inches long, the wingspan 10-13 inches. The little brown bat's body is 3-4 ½ inches long, the wingspan 8-10 inches. The red bat is half-way between these two.

We see little brown and red bats sound asleep on trees and I have watched big browns and little browns out hunting at dusk. The big browns score a path on the surface of a lake, rather like black skimmers. They rise, circle and repeat the same path several times, catching the insects they disturb. Little brown bats feed at higher elevations. They flutter in random directions as they hunt.

When I asked Kim about this she said that when they mist net bats, the big browns are snagged in the base of the net. The little browns are caught higher up. The bats are pulled from the net, weighed, sexed, aged, and some are given radio bands to track their movements.

Alex Brash showed us a large slender bat house and told us of plans to put them up in all 5 boroughs. A colony of bats could catch millions of insects each night-- especially mosquitoes. What of the mosquitoes that carry West Nile virus? If hunting bats were bitten by these mosquitoes, what would happen to the bats? Rob Mies said that bats have been studied worldwide and seem to resist a number of deadly virus diseases, including AIDS. How wonderful if bats could be used to control our mosquitoes. New Yorkers could be spared toxic chemical sprays that endanger public health and threaten our environment.

On Arbor Day, I returned to Dana Center to find and sketch the new bat house. It is attached to the southeast side of Dana under the roof next to the Meer. This structure was built to plans in the "The Bat House Builder's Handbook" by M. Tuttle and D. Hensley. The back wall of plywood



is 24 inches wide, 26 ½ inches long, and covered with plastic netting. The front has two parts, both 2 feet wide. The large part at the top is 16 ½ inches long. The narrow strip under it is 5 inches long. Builders are instructed to leave ¾ inch between top and bottom for ventilation. Front and back walls are separated by pine strips 2 inches wide and only 1 inch deep, which seems like mighty narrow crawl space. Strips line the top and sides of the box. Bats enter their dormitory from the bottom, clasping the mesh to move up into the dark.

This house is painted black to capture the sun's heat and seems well placed for safe exit. It is near the water and there are no trees or bushes for bats to bump into when they fly out. May the bats thrive in their new home. My thanks to Jacob Masenior of Parks for sending me plans of the bachelor bat house.

Birds Aloft and Along

On Palm Sunday Pale Male flew down to a tree top and from there to the empty Conservatory Pond. He landed in a shallow puddle, bowed and shuffled forward, cooling his feet. A foolish pigeon landed nearby and drank. The hawk paid no attention. Next he flew to tree tops circling the pond and finally up near the nest. Hawk watchers saw Blue, the female red-tail, strip a piece of meat and poke it down, below the rim of the nest. "We have chicks," announced Merrill Higgins. When next I inquired, I learned that Charles Kennedy had visited Dr. Fisher's apartment and counted 3 chicks in the nest.

Over in the phragmites near Bow Bridge, the female swan sits on her nest. Nearby there is a sign warning rowers not to disturb the nest. Across the Lake at Balcony Bridge a sora was seen on mud flats. And on the last day of the month excited birders streamed out of the park to Fifth Ave. and 73 St. There we searched an elm whose trunk was helpfully tied with an orange ribbon. One by one we located a whip-poor-will in the branches. Back in the park we saw lots of yellow-rumped warblers, a blue-winged and black-throated green warbler and the thrill of the day, a prothonotary warbler. This beautiful male was gleaning insects from low trees at the upper end of Azalea Pond and perhaps 60 or 70 people stood quite near, pointing it out to each other. The hungry bird ignored a forest of fingers. We "ah"ed over the brilliant gold of his head and chest and the violet-gray of his wings. Only then did we notice the large black bill, black eyes and black legs. As eager new birders arrived, the sated and deeply satisfied moved on to discover new spring wonders.

Fish and Flowers

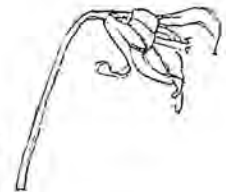
At the turn of the last century, many Americans lived on the fish they caught. So they knew when fish began to arrive in their local rivers and streams. Some folks noticed and named certain plants that burst into bloom just as the fish were running up stream. This spring I sketched two fishy plants-- shad bush and trout lily. A beautiful shad bush put forth a crown of white flowers in mid April beside the northwest edge of Bow Bridge. At the southeast corner of the Swampy Pin Oak area in the Ramble, trout lilies put out a carpet of gray-green leaves speckled like their namesake. Their gold horn flowers with rust stripes shyly hung their heads. By the third week of April there were few blooms to sketch but I did my best to honor both beauties.



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THE ELLIOTT NEWSLETTER

Nature Notes from Central Park

Vol.6, No.3

May~June, 2000

Bountiful Butterflies

Each year the North American Butterfly Association, or NABA, sponsors a coast-to-coast count near the Fourth of July. This year the annual butterfly count in Central Park was held June 24.

It was a beautiful Saturday, sunny and warm but not humid. Hot and humid days don't bother butterflies but do fatigue their counters.

I met Sylvia Cohen at 9:30 on Fifth Ave. and 96 St. We stepped into the park and found Gaye Fugate and Dorothy Poole having a picnic breakfast in a pocket area decorated by cabbage whites, a tiger swallowtail, an American lady and a silver-spotted skipper. Moving north over meadows and among trees we saw several orange sulphurs and many, many more cabbage whites. Beside the Meer we discovered another American lady patrolling its territory on a rocky outcrop.

We entered Conservatory Garden, often the best location for park butterflies, hoping for something special. Cabbage whites were everywhere. There was a swarming frenzy of them that completely covered a sprawling mint. The swarm seemed to be feeding and/or laying eggs. I jostled a false wild indigo bush to shake out a wild indigo dusky-wing, but no butterflies emerged from the light green leaves. We looked in vain through budless buddleia or butterfly bush. Nothing.

The wildflower meadow that slopes down to the Loch raised our spirits. We saw a summer azure fluttering through tall grasses. Low to the ground amid wildflowers were 2 pearl crescents and 1 eastern tailed blue. For me, it was like greeting old friends. The Loch was cool and green but not productive. We crossed the West Drive to the Great Hill where Dorothy Poole saw something fluttering through trees. It was dark with light spots and she was unsure if it was a mourning cloak or a black swallowtail. We searched but the butterfly had disappeared. We circled the shores of the 100 St. Pool hoping in vain for a skipper. Then we climbed the bank and collapsed on a bench.

When we started out, I told the team that the lower park would not be counted. The person who was in charge of that section called to cancel so late there was not enough time to find replacements. Dorothy and Gaye offered to count the 59 St. to 72 St. area after we finished the north end. That was at 9.30 AM. At 3 PM counting another large section looked much less appealing. But after a rest we walked south. At 72 St. Dorothy said her feet hurt and bid us good-bye. Gaye and I searched around the Falconer Statue and the Bowling Green. There was nothing to count. We headed east, passing skaters and amplified shouts and rumbles at Rumsey Playground. Crossing the East Drive we searched through the grassy meadow, carpeted with sun bathers. We found some clover, 3 black and orange moths, and 4 cabbage whites. It was time to leave.

As we passed the flagpole Gaye said, "There's a mourning cloak!" Something dark circled through dappled light then landed on bare earth and spread itself to catch the late-day sun. We could see the warm brown wings edged with bright yellow. I suggested we circle round the bushes for a closer look. With a wider view we saw that the mourning cloak was not alone. It was joined by a butterfly with bright orange wings and black spots. This one looked particularly orange because it lacked an extra black mark on each forewing. Less "punctuation" made it an Eastern comma rather than its spottier cousin (with more ink), the question mark butterfly. Mourning cloak and comma

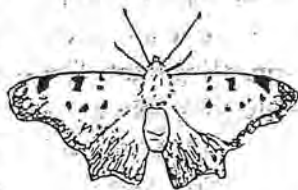
were side by side, basking in full sunlight and both in mint condition. A female house sparrow flew at them and they were forced to rise and circle before returning to their spot of choice. We left the park thanking Mother Nature for this last reward-- two new butterflies for the day.

My thanks (alphabetically) to the people who came to count: Ben Cacace, Sylvia Cohen, Gaye Fugate, Marianne Girards, Signe Hammer, Charles Kennedy, Noreen O'Rourke, Dorothy Poole and Starr Saphir. Their efforts made this the best count we have ever had in Central Park. My thanks also to the wonderful butterflies who showed up to be counted. Here are 14 species of butterfly seen by 10 counters:

eastern tiger swallowtail 9, cabbage white 519, orange sulphur 14, clouded sulphur 3, eastern tailed blue 1, summer azure 8, American snout 1, pearl crescent 2, question mark 3, eastern comma 1, mourning cloak 3, red admiral 7, American lady 8, silver-spotted skipper 2.

Cabbage whites are always the most abundant butterfly, probably because they taste bad and birds avoid them. Some years their numbers top 100 but this year's 500% increase represents a population explosion. It will be interesting to see if other counts show the same high numbers. The pearl crescent is a first for our count as are the comma and the snout. The snout was seen on a hackberry tree between the Belvedere Castle entrance and the Weather Station. It may have been laying eggs, so check out these trees this summer.

We need more people to help with this count and to cover all the areas of our park. If you like butterflies please use this list to practice with right now and call me for next year. The butterfly count is usually held on the last Saturday in June. In 2001 that will be June 30. Keep the date!



SME



Starling Strategy

In the 1800's some Shakespeare lovers decided to import all the birds mentioned in his works. That is why European goldfinch and chaffinch were listed in early Central Park Christmas Bird Counts. The imports did not thrive. A more determined effort was made in the case of European starlings. The first two attempts failed, but in 1890, 60 of them were released in Central Park. They did well and began to spread... and spread. In the next 60 years, they moved across the continent to reach the Pacific Ocean. Within a century their numbers increased from 60 to 200,000,000 and are still growing. Their astounding success threatens the future of other birds-- especially woodpeckers.

Starlings and woodpeckers nest in cavities. Starlings use what they find but woodpeckers make their nests. They drill a tree hole and dig a deep cavity inside. This daunting feat takes a week and the parents take turns digging. Woodpeckers produce one brood a year. Starlings produce two.

Red-bellied woodpeckers are southern birds that moved north and reached Central Park in the mid-1970's. Soon there were enough of them to dig out nests but not to keep them. We watched both parents excavate black locust trees, appearing at the entrance to spew out sawdust. When the excavation was complete, the female laid eggs. We heard the birds chirrup to each other. But soon the woodpeckers were gone and starlings were using the hole. One afternoon in the 1980's, I watched a heist at Strawberry Fields. A red-bellied woodpecker was perched at his hole. His head and neck feathers bristled and he looked upset. A pair of starlings sat in the bushes below. A starling flew from behind and struck the woodpecker at the base of his skull. I waved and shouted but the starling

was unconcerned. I began flinging stones, which deflected his attacks but didn't drive him away. After more than an hour, I had to leave. When I returned next day, starlings were in the nest.

Since then, birders see this battle repeated every spring. Even so, a few woodpeckers manage to raise their young. Some of them build, lose and try again. Their second nest is safe because starlings are busy with their first family and have not yet begun a second brood. Over time, our woodpeckers have developed a real New York attitude, especially the females. When a starling nears the nest hole the peckers face it, attack and drive it off. This year we saw a starling dive into a hole and dive right out again. A red-belly came to the door to see it off. The parents took turns guarding and gathering food for their young. If they could guard less, the young would be better fed.

I have tried to design something that would let woodpeckers in but keep starlings out. I got as far as a long, smoky, plastic cover, open at both ends, to fit over the hole. Then I learned of John Potente, who makes nest boxes with a plastic shields. He sent me a brochure with pictures of his box being used by flickers. One of his pictures shows a flicker under the shield at the nest hole. Standing on the roof is a stymied starling. Just the thing for Central Park! I made inquiries but foundation funding seemed problematical. So one Sunday I began begging for money from birders in the park. Eventually, more than 60 people donated a dollar or five or more and in no time there was enough money for a box and for John Potente's trip into NYC to put it up.

He collected me and we drove to the Summer House in the Ramble. John took photos of a successful pair of red-bellies in a decayed Ailanthus or tree of heaven. We looked at nearby trees for his bird box. He liked a dead pin oak at the Willow Rock area. Neal Calvanese came along and picked that tree as well.

The box was hoisted up and stands in quiet splendor. The shield is curved and closed at the top, with two ventilation holes to let in air. Creases are scored into the wood under the hole to give woodpeckers a firm grip and toe-hold up. And there is plenty of sawdust at the bottom of the box. John explained young birds should not stand on bare wood. They become flat-footed and don't develop the muscles to curl their toes. Under the box is a plastic shield that fits around the trunk. The sheeting is wide enough to prevent squirrels from climbing and entering the box. It's too late for this year but the box is ready for next year.

One problem remains: how to teach woodpeckers to climb under the shield to their nest hole. John has taught flickers to do so by attaching a plastic shield to a working nest when the young are almost old enough to fledge. Young flickers call to their parents for food, and necessity speeds learning.

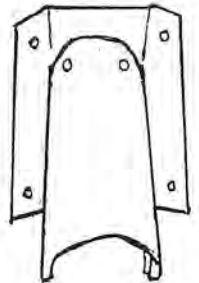
John says that within 15 minutes the parents learn how to climb under the shield and into the nest. He says that flickers who have produced 4 young with starling battles can produce 10 inside the nest box, because they spend their time searching for food, not guarding, battling, and protecting the young. So how can we teach woodpeckers to use the shield? One plan was to attach a shield to the red-bellies' nest in the tree of heaven. The young were large and calling for food. Their parents would have learned how to use the shield in order to reach them.

We attended a meeting of the Woodland Committee where John presented the shield and his plan. If red-bellies used the tree shield this year, he explained, they would use the bird house next year. The committee rejected the idea. Now the red-bellies have fledged and dispersed. John says there is another way to teach woodpeckers to use the shield-- lure them with food this winter.

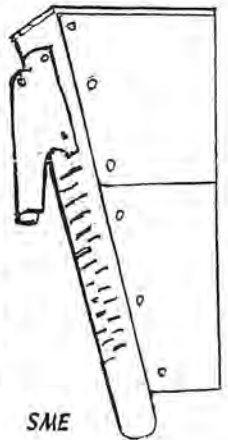
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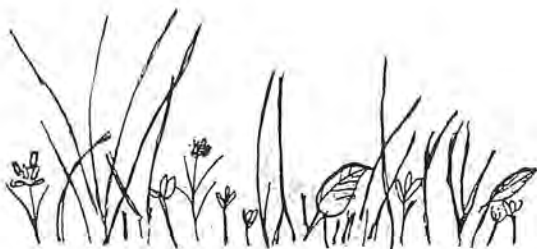
box and
shield on
dead
Pin Oak



Starling
Shield



Woodpecker
nest box
with shield



Sketching to See

In the 6 years I have been making sketches for this newsletter I've learned that the more you sketch the more you see. At first you add dots to a ladybug's shell. For the second sketch you count the dots. There's a leaf with a toothy margin and the veins go from the center to the edge. But are the veins opposite or alternate? Or sketch a flower. You may get the petals just right. But is the stem very long or does the flower have no neck? Do it again. Try to draw what you see but keep it simple. If your drawing is too complicated it means you are still trying to explain it to yourself.

There is something mysterious about sketching. You are making images of nature without using words. As you move from sketch to sketch, you become aware of many different plants and creatures in a semi-conscious way. The words come to mind later as you correct your sketch with a second one.



Often you can use your sketch as a reference. What is that bird? Sketch it and write in the colors or the behavior. Later you can consult a bird guide to find the name of the bird you saw. When you can name it, the bird, tree, bug, becomes vivid for you. At least some of the time. There are certain wildflowers I sketch every year and still can't remember. They remain abstract. If I saw a butterfly on one of them, I would remember the name.

This year the Central Park Conservancy is letting me give 3 nature sketching workshops for children and adults. The first one was at the Dairy on June 25. We sat on rocks and sketched 2 trees and clumps of grass. We started with 5-minute sketches. I told them to fill the page, top to bottom, and work fast.

Before the second sketch, I demonstrated how to make a single continuous line, looking more at the object than at my page. The trick was to suspend judgement and self-criticism. Let your line flow and avoid lots of little strokes. The group's next set of short sketches were very much freer and they seemed pleased. All except one little girl who marked, erased, made a black scribble and finally wept in frustration. Barbara Nowak sat down beside her and suggested they do a picture together. Barbara pointed to the plant in front of them and made a line. The girl made a parallel line to complete a stem. Barbara drew a leaf on one side. The child drew a leaf on the other side. She smiled as she gained confidence and soon finished the picture and started another. I told Barbara I was dazzled by her creative solution to the problem. With a step-by-step path, this 10-year-old found a way to learn the world around her and put it down on paper.

Two men and a little girl of 8 gave me their sketches to put here. As I began reducing the size, the sketches became too faint to see. I inked the photocopies and reduced some more. I dislike inking over someone's sketch. It feels like usurpation. But now the drawings are too tiny to tell.

I'll give 2 more classes this summer: at Dana Center July 15, and Belvedere Castle August 19. Both begin at 10:30. We will be outdoors if it's sunny, indoors if it's rainy. The workshops are free, but call the Conservancy if you plan to come. Bring a sun hat and a pillow or stool to sit on.



THE ELLIOTT NEWSLETTER

Nature Notes from Central Park

Vol. 6 No. 4

July~ August, 2000

Green Fields and Gardens in Summer Rain

On Tuesday, Aug. 22, I entered the park at 79 St., stepped off the bus and climbed the wall steps to the castle. To the north, the newly mowed Great Lawn looked green and lush enough to be a golf course. Below me, the water level at Turtle Pond was so high that the shore was gone and the surrounding plants seemed to rise from the deep. Many turtles were swimming about in water the color of pea soup. They surfaced to snaffle flotsam, nip at each other's face and sink from sight. Males are smaller than females and I watched one small turtle circle around to the back end of a succession of larger ones. He would swim within a few inches of each, then move away without touching. I was surprised to see how quickly he could determine that each turtle was not ready to mate. Turtles have poor hearing but good sight and smell. Perhaps willing females give off an alluring cloud of scent, the lack of which made it easy for this male to keep moving.

On the island at the west end of the pond, a cormorant stood looking out on a log very near the water. Suddenly something flew towards that spot and became a kingfisher. It hovered looking down on the much bigger cormorant, then flew back to a tree half way along the south shore of Turtle Pond. Despite all this activity, the air above Turtle Pond was wrapped in the thick silence of late summer.

In Shakespeare Garden I was delighted to run into Chris Seita, looking fresh and rested after a summer vacation. We both said it was the wettest and coolest summer we could remember. Everything in the garden, said Chris, is very lush and green. She pointed to lady ferns under the old mulberry tree. Normally in late August they would be burnt and brown, but this year they are green and vigorous. The ostrich ferns, just north of the facing-benches, have somewhat scorched heads. But they receive no shade because a branch of the old mulberry came down and was removed.

I told Chris I had recently seen and sketched a black swallowtail caterpillar nibbling on the greenest shoots of Queen Anne's lace. She said a number of black swallowtails have been seen in the garden this summer, appearing every day between 1:30 and 2 PM. I had just seen 2 damselflies fluttering in the same Queen Ann's lace. One was an inch long, a black line with green at the front and blue at the back. I think this is a common forktail. The other damselfly was longer, with black stripes on the thorax separated by areas of light puce--purple brown with a touch of pink. The abdomen was light across the top. Along the sides were black bands the size of dots--each dot bracketed by white. Under magnification the entire creature glittered a metallic gold in the light. I thought this damselfly might be a female or a young male. When I got home to a guide, the orange bluet and violet dancer looked faintly like what I had seen.

Regina Alvarez came to the garden to photograph flowers. She took pictures of black-eyed susans and white phlox, then climbed higher for closeup shots of a tall fennel *Foeniculum vulgare*. It has hair-thin feathery leaves. In August it puts out tiny yellow flowers arranged in umbrella-shaped clusters, like another member of the carrot family, Queen Anne's's lace. Fennel comes from Eurasia and its seeds are used in Indian curry, English fish sauce and American laxatives.

Just west of the fennel is another large member of the carrot family. It is anise *Pimpinella anisum*. Anise comes from the Mediterranean and was used to season meat and cure gas in the Middle Ages. Now it is used to flavor liquor and is baked in bread, rolls and cookies. The small yellow flowers of the anise plant were covered with insects, especially bees and hornets. Regina crushed a leaf and I could smell the licorice aroma, which is preserved in the seeds.

Nearby was a smaller plant with long, thin stalks bearing tiny blue flowers and attracting a variety of insects. There was more of it down by the sidewalk and I was told it is great blue lobelia *Lobelia siphilitica*. Long, toothy, lance-shaped leaves grow along the stem. Above each leaf, tube flowers divide into 2 lips: the upper one with 2 lobes, the lower with 3 lobes. These look like someone in a bonnet sticking out a 3-part tongue. Lobelias smell so attractive that many insects come for the nectar and as they move in and out of the flowers spread the pollen to fertilize plants.

Regina has been planting flowers to attract butterflies and we went south to see her garden at Hershhead. We saw a monarch caterpillar on milkweed and an adult monarch on the butterfly bush, both of which she photographed. There are large clusters of cardinal flowers *Lobelia cardinalis*, which looks like its cousin, the great blue lobelia. Cardinal flowers do not attract butterflies or other insects. They look gorgeous but have no scent. However, flaming clusters of them dotted along the shore of Rowboat Lake are sure to attract passing hummingbirds this fall.

Seeing Skimmers

In June and July this year, birders were amazed to see black skimmers over the waters of our park. These remarkable black and white birds are large with long, narrow wings and a bill like a sword. Skimmers summer and move along our Atlantic, Pacific and Gulf coasts but not inland. We see them at Jamaica Bay, but who thought they would stray as far as our park? They came to Turtle Pond and the Lake for small fish that rise to the surface at dawn and dusk when poor light protects them from predators. Fish hide in the watery depths during the day. Skimmers don't dive and poor light is no problem because they hunt by touch, not by sight. As they fly along, they close their eyes to vertical slits--the only birds to do so. If eyes are closed, beaks are wide open. When the lower bill touches food, the upper bill snaps down to hold it. The birds swallow their catch and continue knifing through the water. Then they rise, circle and descend to slice the same path again. Working in groups helps to excite fish and make them easier to catch. The long, blade-like lower bill is worn down by friction and grows twice as fast as the upper bill. Captive birds in zoos are fed and can't skim. Their lower bills continue to grow and become much longer than the upper ones. In Florida I once saw a parking lot full of resting skimmers in afternoon light. They seemed to be keeping warm on the cement waiting for the light to fail. This July, I went twice to see the birds in Central Park, but unfortunately they were elsewhere both evenings. I thought of going before dawn but didn't make it. If I had been there July 31, I could have seen skimmers between 7 and 8 AM.

Marvelous Migrants

As soon as the young are fledged the adult birds meander, feeding for the long migration ahead. A female rose-breasted grosbeak came to our park July 22 and stayed 2 to 3 weeks, feeding on jewelweed seeds in Indian Cave. A blue-gray gnatcatcher was here August 3 and an orchard oriole was seen August 6. Canada, black- and- white and chestnut-sided warblers and redstarts have

been seen in numbers. An early Blackburnian warbler was reported August 15, and a rare prothonotary warbler was spotted August 18. The big birds were also passing through.

On August 11, a northern harrier flew low over the Lake east of Balcony Bridge. It landed briefly in a tree before taking off again. A few days later Brian McPhillips was at the blind on Turtle Pond. He looked up and saw clouds of gulls in the air around him. Suddenly an immature bald eagle cruised over the Pond, causing the ducks to take cover. The eagle circled up and up, then moved off to the west.

The hawk watch at the Castle began August 15. On August 20 an adult male northern harrier was seen. This date is early as adult northern harriers are usually seen in October and November. On August 24, another immature bald eagle was seen high in the sky at the hawk watch.

Insects are migrating, too. Bob DeCandido tells me that on August 22, the first movement of 10-spot dragonflies began and continued through the week. On August 25, he said, swarms of green darner dragonflies were seen all over the park and at all elevations. It must have been an enormous migration because they were seen throughout Manhattan and the Bronx.

Butterflies are moving as well. In a first cluster, about a dozen monarchs were seen from Belvedere Castle. May they pass through our city safely and winter in spray-free ease. On August 26, I saw ducks snaffling duckweed at the Upper Lobe. Not green slime, I told various tourists, but tiny green plants which will be vacuumed up by mallards this fall. I saw a blue pirate *Pachydiplax longipennis* on a twig in the water. On the other side of Bank Rock Bridge was a young male redstart and a glorious red sympetrum. I moved on to the rock garden at Strawberry Fields and there I saw another sympetrum of the same size and brilliance and finally saw the black triangles along its sides. Both were ruby meadowhawks *Sympetrum rubicundulum*, redder than a cardinal on the rocks.

Silent Fall

I tell you about these insects in loving detail because they are endangered. The scare is West Nile virus, carried by mosquitoes and said to be a cause of encephalitis in humans. Mosquitoes bite birds and humans and must be wiped out with sprays. Check any fallen crow, rush to the place where it fell and spray the hell out of the borough with Anvil. This seems less a scientific plan than joyful overkill and pesticide spraying goes on and on. So I am grimly delighted to give you some observations on one of the many sprayings in Central Park.

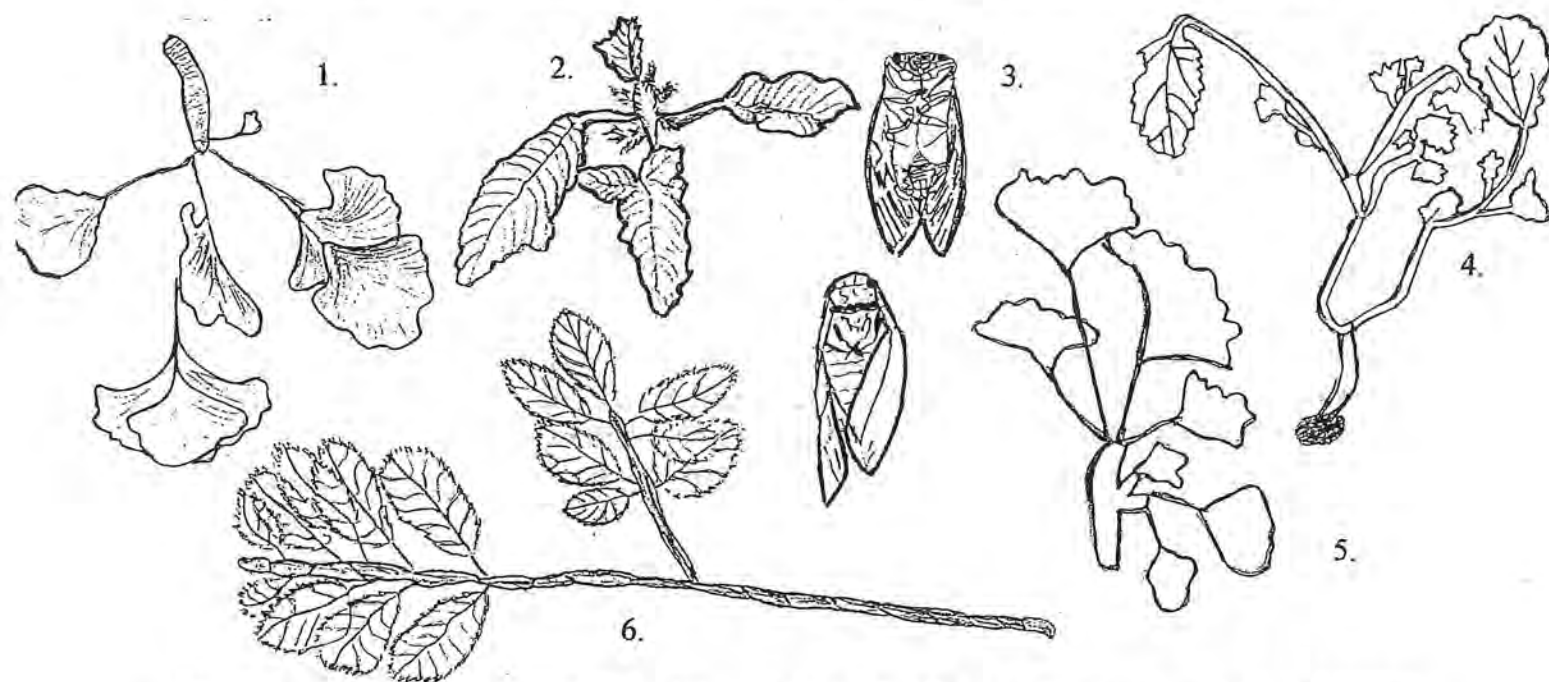
On Tuesday, August 1, after a night of chemical drenching, a group of nature lovers were in the park and happy to see several monarchs and a red-spotted purple butterfly. But as they walked along they happened to look down and were stunned. They saw **clusters** of dead insects along the paths--usually under trees and near water. Within the heaps of corpses they identified the remains of ants, lacewings, beetles such as fireflies and ladybugs plus many small flies. Not one mosquito was seen dead on the walks. But when this group got to the Boat House, the place was **full of mosquitoes** and people who used the restrooms ran the gauntlet.

How did mosquitoes escape while useful insects were wiped out? Told that mosquitoes like water, the crew circled the waters of Central Park spraying the edges. They stood under waterside trees and zapped everything in the canopy. It was slaughter of the innocents while mosquitoes went to the Boat House for a bite. Usually August rings with the sound of crickets and cicadas. This year I've heard just 2 soloists. We're told this summer's silence is due to heavy rain and cool weather. Tell it to the mosquitoes! In one spray-free city park, the insects are in full chorus. Next year we can replace kitch cows with memorials of all the web-of-life creatures killed for West Nile virus.

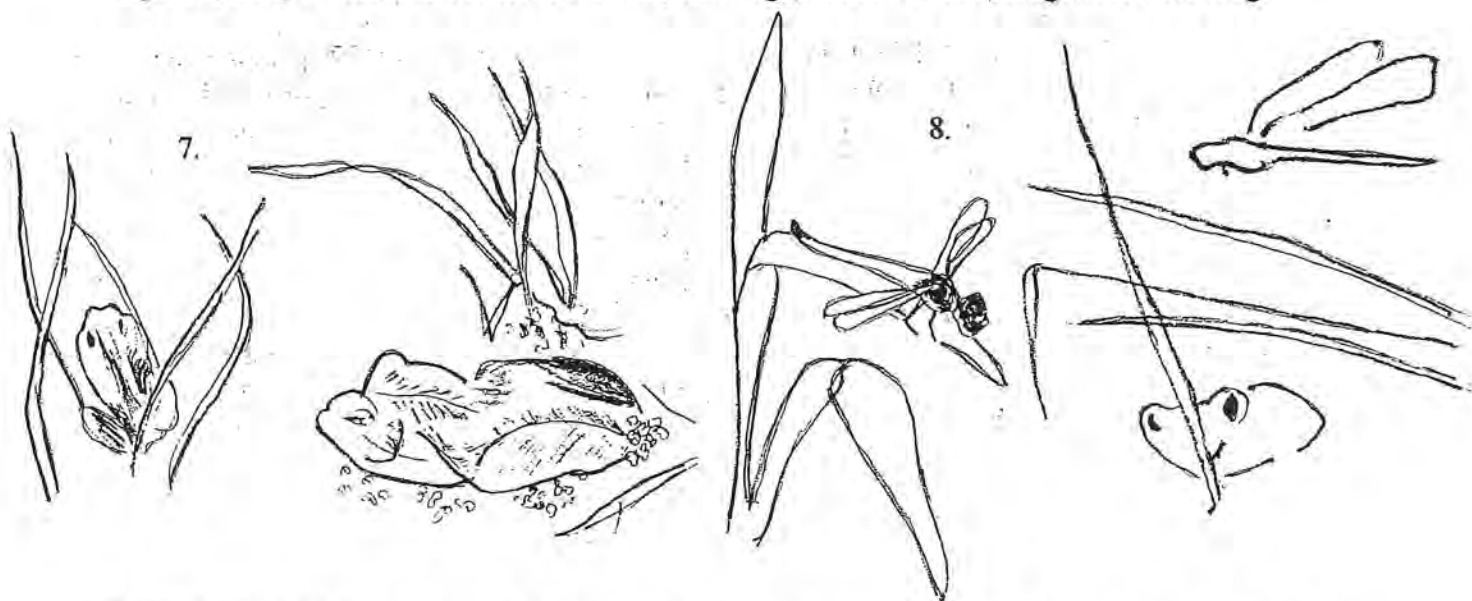
More Sketching to See

It rained for the second nature sketch class so we drew inside Dana Center. I brought 2 cicada shells in a box and collected elm and ginkgo branches from the sidewalk. Kam brought lamb's quarters and a sprig of clover. Antonio, age 12, and his father each did a drawing, then collaborated on a drawing of ginkgo--the first joint effort I've seen.

There was bright sunshine for the third sketch class. We began in Shakespeare Garden, where people drew flowers. Then we moved to Turtle Pond and found plants, frogs and dragonflies to sketch. There's not enough space to show both areas, so I picked the rarely sketched pond life.



The artists are: 1. Jonathan Zelkind, ginkgo; 2. Kam Holifield, lamb's quarters; 3. Josh Kranjec, cicadas; 4. Antonio Stephens, lamb's quarters; 5. James and Antonio Stephens, ginkgo; 6. James Stephens, elm; 7. Marlene Stokes-Gonzalez, bullfrogs; 8. Joan Weiss, dragonflies and frog.



THE ELLIOTT NEWSLETTER

Nature Notes from Central Park

Vol.6 No.5

September~October 2000

Traveling Birds in a New Century

When I asked Roger Pasquier what he thought of this fall migration he quoted Sue Raises, a wonderful birder we knew. When asked in about 1960, she replied that each migration is different but also like every other migration. Roger said he saw few warblers early in the morning before going to work. Other birders reported more sightings later in the morning. Bob DeCandido reported seeing lots of warblers in mid-August. But most of the people I talked to said September was disappointing. In the first week Starr Saphir reported 4 warbler species one morning, 20 the next and 6 the next. Usually fall birds arrive and stay several days. This year they came and left, perhaps because the food supply had been sprayed away. At the other end of the month, Tom Fiore reported Monday, Sept. 25 as his biggest day in the park, both for numbers and species. That night it rained and birders who braved the weather on Tuesday reported many birds were still around. (soaked in by weather). By Wednesday most of the birds were gone.

If September was disappointing, October was not. All this year's rain brought bumper crops of fruit for some trees. The evodia put forth seed, but late in the season. Thrushes and woodpeckers worked it over in deep shade -- poor visibility for the birder below. A treefull of thrushes vacuumed the sour gum or tupelo tree in the meadow below the Castle. Birds would dive in and completely disappear in the leaves. Each fall this tree turns to glory about October 22. This year on October 28 it looked confused--not a deep red crown with orange red leaves below, but sections of green, orange, red and bare patches. Hackberries in sunny locations provided late insects for kinglets and warblers to delight the birders.

Perhaps because of the food to eat, rain, warm weather and wrong winds (south, not north) birds held back. When they came, they arrived as huge conventions. Park trees and grass were suddenly filled with yellow-rumped warblers, yellow-bellied sapsuckers and phoebes. People reported plenty of winter wrens, golden-crowned kinglets and late black-throated blue warblers. Most surprising of all were the accounts of white-crowned sparrows. They are common in the Midwest and far west but not common here. This year rivers of them are flowing down the Atlantic coast. Joe DiCostanzo was out at Jones Beach, where he saw 10 of them at once. Then he went to the Coast Guard Station, where he saw 30! Most of them were young birds. Some of this crowd spilled into our park and birders reported 3 juveniles and my Sunday group saw a gorgeous adult. Starr said they are moving south. She saw plenty of them around Cape May, NJ. What winds and weather caused these birds to migrate to the east coast? How super it would be if we had spy-in-the-sky equipment, powerful enough to differentiate birds by species and high enough to map their migration over large areas. Just think what that would do for ornithology!

Naming and Discovering Trees

On Sept. 15, after showing the new woodpecker box and denouncing starlings to a TV crew from the Netherlands, I met Lorraine Konopka and Bill Selezniow for a treat. They were going to

put up more name plaques on trees and invited me to join them. Commissioner Henry Stern believes the plaques inform the public and get us to notice and value our trees. It's a nifty project and one that pleases even the grumpiest of bird watchers. The original goal was 500 tagged trees but that number has been revised upward to 636. Some plaques must be redone because they get taken but most are left in place.

The plaques are 2 ½ by 3 ½ inches. They are green plastic with white letters that give the common and scientific name of the tree. The plaques are nailed top and bottom with aluminum nails which don't rust to cause damage. The nails are cut down so that they penetrate the tree less deeply. This reduces the harm to the growing layer underneath the bark.

We left the Boathouse and started up the walk into the Ramble. We stopped halfway up the walk and I asked for a plaque on the red maple. Bill stepped to the tree and raised his arms. He is so tall they can dispense with a step stool for the job. Lorraine called right or left to center the sign for the best visibility. The nail was threaded through a hole in the plaque and a plastic washer and tapped into place. The bottom nail went through a second hole and washer and both were tapped tight. Slightly higher up the path they kindly put a plaque on a hackberry tree, one of many in the area. We passed the Point and Willow Rock to pause at the benches just before the path turns toward Bow Bridge. At my request, Bill stepped down to the water and put a plaque on the mighty bur oak. Now people who walk along the path can learn the name of this oak and admire it in all seasons.

As a last kindness, Lorraine and Bill walked across Bow Bridge to a hickory beside the path to Bethesda Fountain. I told them I had sketched it and originally thought it was a pignut hickory but the only hickory with wide leaves in my guides is the shagbark. The upper trunk is shaggy even if it is too smooth near the ground. Lorraine took a quick look and said it was a pignut. She opened the tree bible, a manual the size of a phone book. She flipped to the pignut hickory page and there was a line drawing with fat wide leaves just like the one in front of us. What a relief to learn its name! Lorraine and Bill gave me a ride to Conservatory Pond. I left them putting up some tree plaques in time for Commissioner Stern's public gathering that evening. We owe him our thanks.

In 1969, when she wrote "Tree Trails in Central Park," M.M. Graff came upon an oak near Central Park West and 85 St. At first she took it for an English oak but the leaves didn't seem quite right. She submitted a sample to an expert, George Kalmbacher. He studied leaves and leaf hairs and said it came from a hybrid of 2 English oak trees.

I tried to follow her path to this tree but 30 years later I got lost. Then one day after watching fall birds at Tanner's Springs, I walked north and found a mysterious oak beside the children's playground near the West Drive south of the 86 St. Transverse. The tree stands with its back to the playground fence trying to peep out between competing oaks. If you stand beside it you see, from west (right) to east (left), benches, a drinking fountain, a rocky outcrop behind a park path that forks just before reaching the drive. Forward and to your left is a Turkey oak with a name tag on it. Two pin oaks guard the fence on either side of the mystery tree.

I have returned to this tree many times and now think it is a cross of the English oak *Quercus robur* and sessile oak *Q. petraea*. Both oaks live in southwest England where they carelessly and easily interbreed to become *Q. x rosacea*, which the Collins tree guide calls "a rather ill-defined hybrid." It certainly is. Take the acorns.



Richard Lau photo

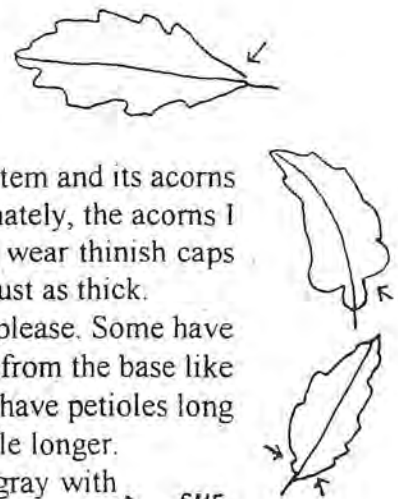


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English oaks grow acorns along a long, thorn-like stem. "Sessile" means no stem and its acorns are jammed right down on stout shoots at the tips of the branches. Unfortunately, the acorns I found for this oak were on the ground. The ones I collected are small and wear thinish caps topped with a thick pompon. The stem is longer than sessile stems, but it's just as thick.

The 3-inch leaves are even less defined and seem to do whatever they please. Some have clumps at the leaf base. Others have slight bumps on one side. Still others rise from the base like an elegant vase. English oaks have very short petioles (leaf stems). Sessiles have petioles long enough to see. All my leaf samples have petioles a quarter inch long or a little longer.

When I sketched a bit of the bark it looked gray with black crevices and a thin gray-white frosting on some of the plates. But best of all, unlike King Lear, this tree survived one of Shakespeare's "oak-cleaving thunderbolts." Step to the back side of the tree nearest the playground fence and you will see the wound. The scar tissue is an angry ridge extending from forked branches right down to the roots. No other tree along the fence wears such a scar so you will be able to find it. These hybrid oaks are fairly common in England but so rare in North America that you should visit this one-of-a-kind in our park. My thanks--I think-- to Mrs. Graff and to George Kalmbacher for *Quercus x rosacea*. My thanks to Richard Lau for photographing this and other trees in Central Park.



SME



I visited another challenging tree with Naomi Dicker. I told her I thought it was an ash because of its compound leaves and Naomi dazzled me by figuring out which one. The tree stands west of East Drive and south of 97 St. Transverse and faces lamppost # 9626. The leaning trunk of this ash supports large wide branches. Some of them lean across the path to touch a ginkgo beside the lamppost. The path continues west, forks, and circles the tennis courts.

Ashes have long compound leaves. Their leaflets have toothy edges and stems. The leaflets are arranged in pairs with a big one at the tip. Hickories are arranged the same way but with smooth edges and no leaflet stems and are stuck to the leaf stalk directly. This ash had 7-11 leaflets and some of the compound leaves were a foot long. I searched the ground for ash seeds but couldn't find any. Even without fruit Naomi identified this tree as a blue ash. She found a branch and had me feel the stem.

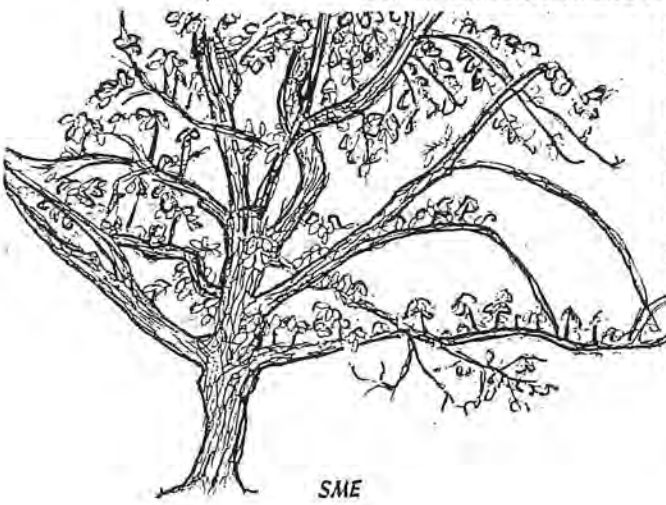
It felt angular and looked square in cross-section. Then she pointed to the twigs growing off the stem. They were arranged in 4-angled pairs. Two extend north and south followed by two pointing east and west, rather like a signpost. This field mark makes the tree identifiable, even in winter. Why blue? The tree was named by pioneers who boiled the inner bark to dye their cloth.



SME



Side View of paired twigs, 4 directions



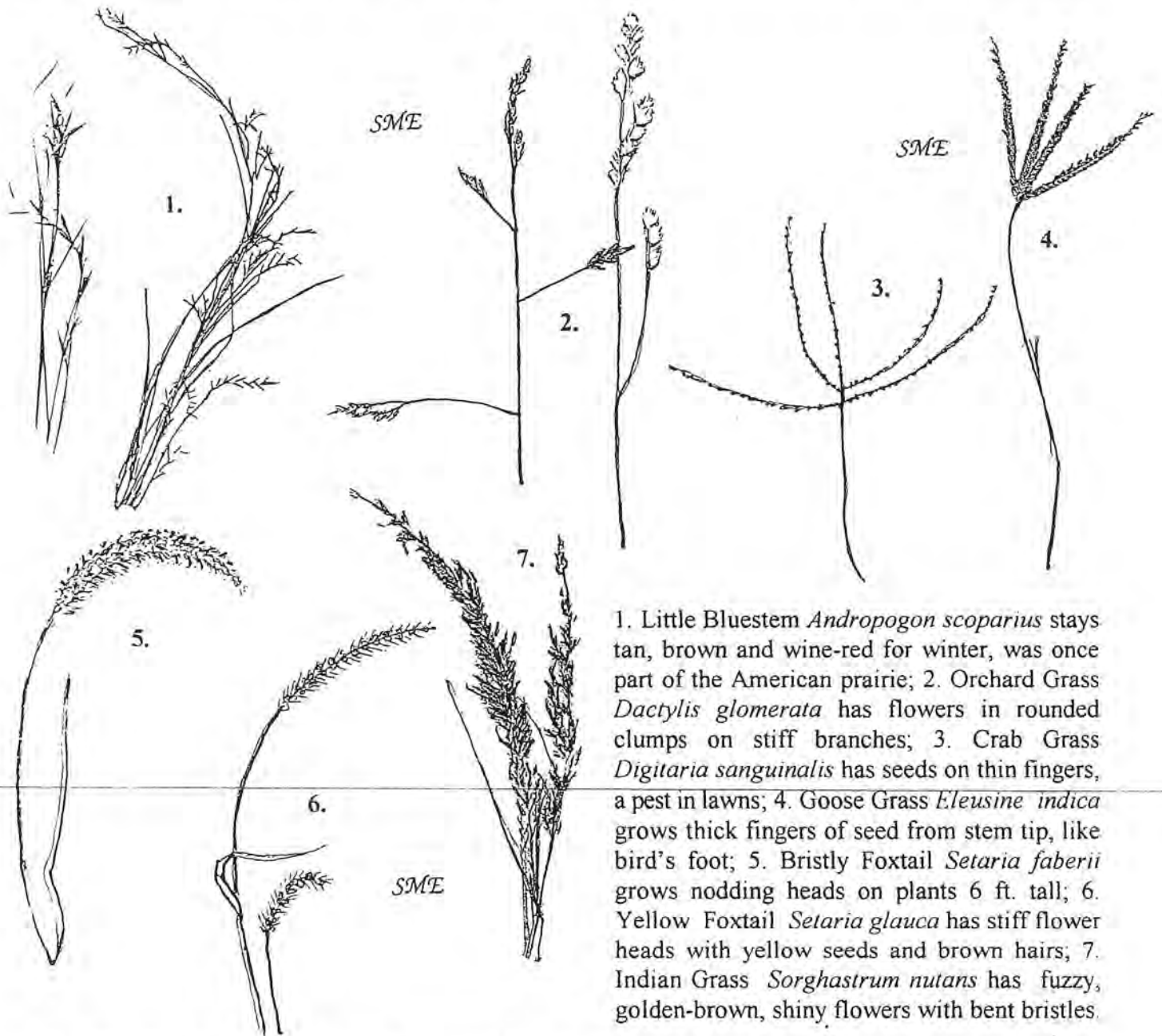
SME

Top View of Square branch



Whispering Field of Fall Grasses

It's a pleasure to visit the Wild Flower Meadow in the north end of the park and admire tan waves of grass. On October 7, I joined Naomi Dicker and followed her through the meadow. She found and explained some of the grass species growing there. Naomi is a generous and enthusiastic teacher and I came home with a dozen specimens-- more than enough to fill this space. Some grasses are arranged in such delicate patterns they cannot be reduced by photocopy and pen to this size. So with enforced concision here are 7 grasses you can still see on the page and find in late fall. Some of them live in many parts of America.



1. Little Bluestem *Andropogon scoparius* stays tan, brown and wine-red for winter, was once part of the American prairie; 2. Orchard Grass *Dactylis glomerata* has flowers in rounded clumps on stiff branches; 3. Crab Grass *Digitaria sanguinalis* has seeds on thin fingers, a pest in lawns; 4. Goose Grass *Eleusine indica* grows thick fingers of seed from stem tip, like bird's foot; 5. Bristly Foxtail *Setaria faberii* grows nodding heads on plants 6 ft. tall; 6. Yellow Foxtail *Setaria glauca* has stiff flower heads with yellow seeds and brown hairs; 7. Indian Grass *Sorghastrum nutans* has fuzzy, golden-brown, shiny flowers with bent bristles.

© 2000 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 2001 send \$20 check in DECEMBER or JANUARY to Sarah M. Elliott, 333 East 34 St. NY, NY 10016. This year's CHRISTMAS BIRD COUNT meets DECEMBER 17 at 8 AM, South Pumping Station of Reservoir. We will meet in Arsenal, 3rd floor, at 12:30 PM to tabulate bird count and party.

THE ELLIOTT NEWSLETTER

Nature Notes from Central Park

Vol. 6 No. 6

November~ December 2000



101 and Still Counting!

First of all there was the weather. I have never seen such weather in all my 32 years of participating in the National Audubon Christmas Bird Count. The day turned out to be as fair as a Florida election.

A small group of birders gathered at Fifth Ave. and 85 St. We were joined by a reporter, camera crew, Peter Mott and the children he recruited from Fieldstone School. They told me they would do a short count, long enough to provide footage for the children's TV program Nickelodeon.

At about 8, the rest of us strolled to the Pumping Station at the southeast corner of the Reservoir. David Krauss said he had been counting gulls through his scope since 7:30. He finished just in time. As he spoke, huge flocks of gulls awoke, rose in the air and flew off.

The people who had come to count looked cheerful and determined to prove their stamina. While wonderful Ellen Kornhauser and Sandra Reynolds took in name/ address cards and money, more people arrived. There were enough, perhaps, to cover the park by noon. I handed out information packs to the 7 leaders of the 7 sections of the park. I skimmed on the numbers going to the land around the Reservoir, the Great Lawn, Southeast and Southwest. I packed the groups for the Northeast, Northwest and Ramble, the woody and birdy sections that take time to cover.

Each leader was given one or more light green Maps of their section and blue sheets of Rules and Tips (count small birds and pigeons on the ground or in trees, count big birds flying or standing, check park walls and evergreens for sheltering birds, keep track of your time and stop at 12, etc.). Almost everyone got a yellow Section Tally Sheet to mark their birds in the order they would be called out when we totaled all the birds in all sections of the park at the tally party. As the crews of birders spread out to count every bird in the park, the sky looked ominous and overcast.

I joined a group going to the Northwest section in a van provided by the Rangers. It was grand to ride north to 110 St. At about 9 AM, when we reached the top of the West Drive, the heavens opened. A sheet of rain covered the windshield and visibility disappeared. We parked just beyond a cop car and waited. Soon there were flashes of lightning and crackles of thunder. Although we were eager to get started, we were all very glad to sit tight and dry inside the van during the deluge. Out the side windows we saw more than half a dozen solitary runners. As each of them passed we could see they were soaked to the skin and looked bravely cheerful, defiant or determined. When I thought about it later, I was surprised to realize that they all seemed to be trotting along at the same speed. Some of them carried umbrellas over their heads, which looked like good lightning conductors to me.

When the rain abated somewhat and the thunder and lightning moved off, we climbed out of the van and began our count. Slipping over mud and wet rocks we discovered white-throated sparrows, juncos, tufted titmice and a chickadee busily foraging in the rain. Our big finds of the morning were fox sparrows and a singing Carolina wren. We circled the Great Hill and then went

down to the 100 St. Pool to count mallards and black ducks. We also saw what I thought was a cross-breed traveling with the crowd. It was slightly smaller than the mallards and blacks. The head was round and brown and that color stopped at the chin. But what caught the eye was the color on the rest of this bird-- sections of white and pale apricot that shone out on the gray day. Looking over the Sibley Guide selection, what I remember seems, in part, like his illustration of a young widgeon. If the bird is still around, please tell me what You think it is.

We circled the Pool and moved to the Loch. As we walked along its west shore we saw the group from the Northeast across the stream. Traveling with them was a wet but cheery Jeff Nulle. He had begun the day doing a count of his section of Riverside Park before coming in to help count in Central Park. When he reached 107 St. the heavens opened. He sidled up to the largest tree he could find, sheltering with a small umbrella on its lee side.

Jeff joined our group, which split into two sections to cover the rest of the territory in the remaining time. He heard and saw a titmouse, a downy, jays and a cardinal. We counted 5 crows enough times to decide they were following us. Earlier, they were seen twice chasing hawks. We looked at stands of evergreens but found no owls. We reached the Pep/ Conservancy building and I checked the trees surrounding the building in memory of a red-headed woodpecker that wintered there one year. No redhead. But we were picked up by a van and collected the rest of our group at the West Drive. Michele Lariviere was at the wheel and we enjoyed an elegantly sedate ride south. I have never experienced a ride that slow and smooth. She threaded her way through walkers and horse-drawn carriages, startling neither man nor beast, and parked on the East Drive behind the Zoo. We walked past the Zoo and around the Arsenal to the Fifth Ave. entrance. Up on the 3rd floor, the Conference Room was filling up with bird watchers. Some of them were eating, some talking and some were totaling their section counts.

The food was grand. I had Soup in a Bun, a large round bun scooped out to make space for the thick and spicy bean soup ladled into it. YUM. Others had a thinner chicken soup or the cheese and arugula sandwich. There was coffee and wine. There were cookies in the shape of the Christmas Bird logo and decorated with a curling muffler in pink frosting. YUM, YUM.

At about 1 PM the Ramble group arrived, looking bedraggled but cheerful. They had survived all kinds of trouble. When I was picking leaders of groups, no old-timer was there to take charge. So I assigned one counter as co-leader because he said he knew birds and another counter as co-leader because he said he knew the Ramble. I don't think they looked at their maps because they covered the Castle and Shakespeare Garden which were part of the Great Lawn Area. Duplicating the count for that section probably helped to make them late. Birders who had finished their counts early were not pleased at the delay.

Parks Commissioner Henry Stern greeted us and said some graceful and informational things about the count. I was given a chance to thank Commissioner Stern for his welcome and for kindly making the Arsenal available to us. I thanked wonderful Jill Mainelli for organizing me and for her enormous help to make things run smoothly. I thanked Sara Hobel and Alex Brash of the Urban Park Rangers for printing and mailing a notice and invitation to well over 100 people--something I couldn't have done on my own. I thanked Michele Lariviere and Kate Mini for their work on the event. I thanked Doug Blonsky of the Central Park Conservancy, who helped to make a large park map available. Kate Mini marked the map with the 7 Christmas Count sections and they put it up as a wall hanging. Kate also used a lap top computer to tabulate the numbers for each bird seen (or not) in all 7 sections of the park. I thanked the board of New York Audubon for putting up half the money for the food and John Bianchi of National Audubon for putting up the other half out of his publicity budget. I also thanked the Urban Park Rangers for adding to that sum so there was enough

money to wine and dine everyone. My thanks completed, it was time to begin the count.

We passed out gorgeous hot reddish-pink tally sheets. As birders took hold of their sheets, it looked like a flock of exotic birds coming to rest. The talking subsided. We marked our sheets as we listened to shouted numbers from a spokesman for each group. One lady, who has been gently reared, thought she was shouting but we had trouble hearing her. We put down 7 zeros or numbers for every bird and the total for the day. Small numbers were easy to add. Jeff Nulle supplied the big totals for birds such as pigeons, house sparrows, starlings and gulls.

A pied-billed grebe was seen by many in the afternoon so it has been added to the list. Sadly, 2 hairy woodpeckers were scratched and became 2 more downys. Sadder still, 2 people reported an American tree sparrow at opposite ends of the park. Both birders called their bird but no one in their groups saw the bird. No identification photos were taken of either bird and though people were out looking, no one reported seeing a tree sparrow in the days after the count. Here's an amended list for Dec. 17, 2000, plus ~~4~~ new bird species and 3 extra individuals found in the count period. I have given the dates for all, ~~six~~. Unusual birds and/or numbers are in bold face type.

Pied-billed Grebe 1	Black-capped Chickadee 2
Double-crested Cormorant 1 ~ Dec, 18	Tufted Titmouse 35
Great Blue Heron 5	White-breasted Nuthatch 2
Mute Swan 6	Brown Creeper 1
Canada Goose 41	Carolina Wren 2 +1, Dec. 19
Wood Duck 4 + 1, Dec. 20	Winter Wren 1
Green-winged Teal ~ 1, Dec. 18	Ruby-crowned Kinglet 3
American Black Duck 33	Hermit Thrush 1
Mallard 437	American Robin 38
Northern Shoveler 63	Wood Thrush 1
Canvasback 3	Gray Catbird 1
Bufflehead 42	Northern Mockingbird 5
Hooded Merganser 4 +1, Dec. 20	Brown Thrasher 1
Ruddy Duck 1,152	Cedar Waxwing ~ 1, Dec. 20
Accipiter Species 1	European Starling 1,035
Red-tailed Hawk 12	Northern Cardinal 34
Ring-necked Pheasant 1	Eastern Towhee 2
American Coot 8	Fox Sparrow 4
Ring-billed Gull 487	Song Sparrow 7
Herring Gull 771	Swamp Sparrow ~ 1, Dec. 19
Iceland Gull 1	White-throated Sparrow 313
Great Black-backed Gull 68	Dark-eyed Junco 52
Rock Dove (Pigeon) 1,056	Red-winged Blackbird 17
Mourning Dove 71	Common Grackle 13
Red-bellied Woodpecker 12	House Finch 16
Yellow-bellied Sapsucker 2	American Goldfinch 2
Downy Woodpecker 13	House Sparrow 641
Northern Flicker 4	
Blue Jay 113	Total Species 57
American Crow 54	Total Individuals 6,703

It's surprising to learn that despite the lousy weather and poor visibility, we saw a lot. Last year the weather on the count day was grand and the weeks leading up to it were mild. That year we found 68 bird species, the highest count ever for Central Park. This year the number was down 11. But this year's high of 6703 individual birds bested the 1999 count by 234. A record. Crowds of mallards, ruddy ducks, starlings and white-throated sparrows helped to boost the total. But black-capped chickadee numbers dropped from 169 to 2, tufted titmice dropped from 155 to 35, and white-breasted nuthatches slipped from 49 to 2. Glum news.

As Jeff pointed out, the most surprising thing about this count is that more than 30 people showed up and stayed to count, even after the downpour. People who counted in the Southeast sheltered in a viaduct between the Zoo and the 59 St. Pond. Others went to the Castle and stood under the structure overlooking Turtle Pond. It was still misting when David Krauss saw the Iceland gull come in and land on the Reservoir. He yelled to Ted Zinn and they both gawked at the all white bird just before the heavens opened and they raced to the North Pumping Station for shelter.

Congratulations to all the intrepid birders who completed this foul-weather count. My thanks to Urban Park Rangers Richard Simon, Michele Lariviere, Gary Rozman, Linda Miller, Trish Auro, Perry Wargo and Julie Berman. I also want to thank AmeriCorps Members Jonah Misterka, Katiria Irvera, Nick Molinari, Adrian Romanski and Erin Copeland. All these people helped birders find the starting place, reach their count sections and help returning groups find the Arsenal for the party.



Mimi Rockmore called me on Dec. 19. Ben, she said, was downstairs conferring with the doorman. When the house staff unwrapped a Christmas tree, they found a bird inside. A baby owl, they thought. Not a baby at this time of year, I explained, but small. I suggested they look at a saw-whet owl in their bird guide. What should they do with the bird? Put it in a cardboard box and release it in the park. Ben called a little later. They tried to get the owl into the box but it was having none of that. When asked, Ben said the bird was shorter than the distance between wrist and elbow, with a lot of white. The night grew darker, the bird grew restless and flew off. Owl incarceration is not uncommon. When workmen unfurl giant trees at Rockefeller Center they are sometimes startled by an irate owl.

I told Norma Collin about the Rockmore owl. She loved it. She knows Ben because they have filled the winter bird feeders at the Azalea Pond. Norma went into the park, told the story and got people to look for the owl on the last day of the Christmas Count period. Birders searched evergreens in Shakespeare Garden and the Pinetum without success. Maybe the bird flew to Carl Schurz Park and is hanging out at the mayor's mansion.

The year ended with an amazing snowstorm and New York City got a foot of snow. I yearned to slip and slide through the park, watch children sledding, dogs frisking and frosted trees waving and sparkling in dazzling light. But the virus that is going around had other plans.

This year's Christmas Count was written up for the "Daily Plant" and it appeared in print with a picture of Commissioner Stern in the New York Times. It was carried online and was broadcast on WINS and Steve Post's mid-morning news. In fact, he ended his newscast with "and speaking of tufted titmouse, you are listening to WNYC-FM." That's fame, folks.

Recently, Steve invited listeners to produce a conundrum and send it to him about an oddly named shoe store he passes on the way to work. My Webster's dictionary says a "conundrum is a riddle whose answer is a pun." As an example they give: "What's the difference between a bird with one wing and one with two? Answer: It's a matter of a pinion." HAPPY NEW MILLENNIUM!