

THE ELLIOTT NEWSLETTER

Nature Notes from Central Park

Vol.7 No. 1

January ~ February - 2001

Fowl, But Not Foul for a Change

January 16, 2001 was sunny, blustery and cold. All the bodies of water in Central Park were covered with ice and much of the land still bore the snows of late December. At 9:30 AM, 3 of us— Jeff Nulle, Joy Hornung and I— met at the northeast corner of the Meer to participate in the annual New York State Waterfowl Count. As we walked along the icy shore east of the Dana Center, Jeff Nulle drew our attention to a great blue heron looking scruffy and hunkered down in brown grasses. The bird looked us over in a way that made us think he's been accepting handouts. Shortly after our count, I received a call from a sometime park birder who was worried that the heron would not survive the winter. I told her if the weather made hunting impossible, the bird would mosey south to a better venue. Many people noticed the great blue this winter and news about it appeared in the January 29 issue of the New York Times Metropolitan Section. People who spoke to the Times reporter seemed to think the bird's appearance was unique, but in a mild winter we can see several of them around the park. The Times included a dandy picture of the bird by Merrill Higgins. Congratulations, Merrill!

On the day of our count we had lots of park to cover and herons were not on the list, so we acknowledged it and moved on. On the west side of Dana Center the ice had been bashed to make an area of open water. We began counting mallards when suddenly there was an eruption of ducks. They flew out of the water and rushed up the lawn to a person throwing feed. The feast was short and soon most of the birds were back in the water. We began to count again and tabulated 120 mallards, 2 Canada geese, and a black and white Muscovy. We didn't list the Muscovy because they are raised commercially and are not considered wild. In the flock was the pale apricot bird I saw on the Christmas Count. The bird's feathers seemed a little duller but its ebony-black beak was noticeable. We all stared at this hybrid, but none of us could identify its parents. I was surprised to see a hybrid duck I had studied in 1998. This bird had a white back sprinkled with brown streaks and dots of feathers. I thought one of its parents may have been a gadwall. This bird also sported a completely dull black bill, wide as a mallard's but with no trace of yellow. The hybrids took no interest in each other and since the count each of them has teamed up with a male mallard.

We circled the Meer and the skating rink and cautiously moved along the slippery path beside the Loch. There, on trees and in snow we counted 4 male and 4 female cardinals— more than any of us had ever seen together. We also saw white-throated sparrows, tufted titmice, song sparrows and blue jays. Someone keeps a bird feeding station at this spot, hanging some of the feed and scattering the rest. We saw birds plunge headfirst into the carpet of snow to pick out each precious seed. Birds are wonderful to watch even when you can't list them.

We continued along the slippery path through the underpass and out to the 110th Street Pool. Ice covered most of it but in the southwest corner the force of an underground stream assured an open area large enough for wintering ducks. There we counted 137 mallards, 2 black ducks and 3 cross-breeds of mallards and blacks. Most counts don't bother with hybrids, but mallards and blacks interbreed regularly and so are counted in New York State.

When we reached the Reservoir, all the west side was a vast expanse of ice. Jeff saw a red-tailed hawk fly to the fence and land. A man walking along the runner's track passed the hawk without seeing it perched on the fence just above his head. The bird continued hopping along the fence after the man, perhaps in hopes of a handout. Deep in thought or lacking peripheral vision, the man never saw his traveling companion. Out on the jetty there were gulls and ducks. Jeff counted 38 mallards, he and Joy saw a coot, and I wrote down the totals. The sun was blinding. Should we move to the east side of the Reservoir to check the open water there? Jeff thought his view was clear enough to see that there was nothing there to count.

We walked south on the West Drive and made a short detour to the mystery oak at 86 St. beside the playground. With the leaves off, this bare tree looks hemmed in by its 3 oak neighbors. Since I wrote about this oak last fall, I have received names for it from about 9 experts, none of which seems right. Although the size of its fall leaves varied, most of them were more slender than the English and sessile oaks I thought might be its hybrid parents. In fact, the leaves are as narrow as a nearby Turkey oak's. But English, sessile and Turkey oaks have large, long acorns and the mystery oak has small, round ones, the size of nearby pin oaks. The pattern on the trunk looks very like the Turkey oak. We walked to the playground fence and looked at the long red scar of the mystery oak's wound by lightning. I gave the trunk a few encouraging pats before we moved on. In February, I showed this tree to Bill Berliner, Director of Horticulture for Central Park. He advised me to come back in spring and study the flowers. Good idea.

On the day of the count, we walked south through the Locust Grove, where we saw the red-tailed hawk again. Now it was high in a tree looking over the Great Lawn and indifferent to humans. As we walked through the trees, we discovered several circles containing young black locusts. They were planted last fall to replace old ones. I learned from Bill Berliner that black locusts belong to the pea family (note their small pods on the bare branches). As legumes, they can fix the surrounding soil with nitrogen and improve it. However, black locusts have shallow roots and fall over in high winds. Heavy storms in recent years weakened and then uprooted the locusts. In past years, red-headed woodpeckers have wintered in this grove, but this year we look for them in vain. Maybe the best roost holes went down with the old trees.

When we reached the Shakespeare Theater, Joy and I used the Ladies Room while Jeff checked Turtle Pond. All ice--no birds, he reported. We walked south to Rowboat Lake and counted 38 mallards from Balcony Bridge. Looking east, we noticed a huge gathering of ducks. How to get to them? We crossed Bankrock Bridge and climbed the newly shoveled steps to Stone Arch Bridge. At the top of the steps a man was bashing an inch-thick layer of ice and grunting with each attack. We told him the steps looked wonderful and felt safe to climb because of him. He seemed gratified and slightly less miserable. We crossed the arch, crept down some icy steps and turned right. Gripping the railing, we walked down the long path to the Lake. Parts of this path had been scraped clear and icy patches were dusted with sand. We rounded the bend at the water and there were the ducks. I was told not to get too close because I might spook them. No fear of that! On the ice at the foot of Indian Cave was a woman scattering feed. Hundreds of ducks were at her feet. The ice beyond the shore had been smashed to make a large area of clear water, but not large enough to accommodate all the ducks that were there.

Shovelers were standing around the rim of ice around the open water, some of them watching the feeding frenzy going on at the shore. The males looked gorgeous with dark green heads, white breasts and rust sides. We studied a female duck on the rim. Her bill was tucked into her feathers but she was wearing an emerald green speculum. Could this be the female green-

winged teal we had been told about? In the water was a group of 8 shovelers circling round and round to stir up dinner. When we looked back at the female on the rim, she was preparing to waddle into the water. Although she bore a spot of green on her side, Joy remarked on her very large bill, both long and wide. And, we noticed, she had been standing close to a male shoveler. Then I saw a much smaller duck with a petite bill. It looked very dark in the shade of a tree. But when it turned and caught the light, there was the green speculum. This one really was a green-winged teal.

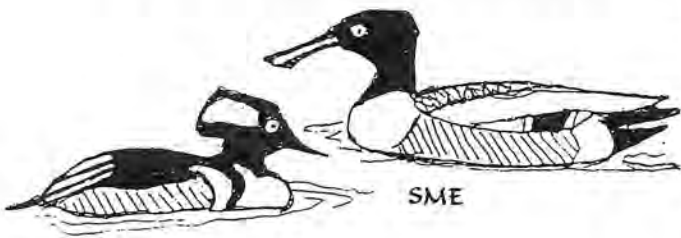
A speculum, in the 16th and 17th century, meant a mirror or reflector made of glass or metal used as a surgical instrument or as part of a telescope. In the 1800s the word began to be used for the lustrous mark on the wings of birds such as ducks. When the wing is folded, you see what Thomas Bewick, the English engraver, called a "beauty spot"---a rectangular patch of blue, green or purple on the side of the bird. When the wings are outstretched you see what Charles Darwin called a "bright bar" -- color on the trailing edge of the wing near the body. I don't think Jeff, Joy or I realized that both shovelers and green-winged teals have green specula. That's because we see the ducks floating at a distance and look for more obvious field marks. Joy returned to this spa the following day on her way to work and got to see the male green-winged teal. He wears a the green beauty spot on his wing and on the sides of his rust head are great green ear- and- neck stripes. This male has been around, but was not with the female when we were counting.

Jeff gave a joyful shout when he saw a male merganser. When it passed a large shoveler, they looked like 2 ships of the line, both with white sails at the breast, rust sides at the water line. Shared insignias on very different shapes. The noticeably smaller hooded merganser has a black and white hood which he can furl out or wear at half mast. His black back is decorated with long white slashes. They start at mid-back and stop at the tail. We counted 3 on each side and the same number on the females. When Joy returned next day, she saw a merganser showing 4 slashes on its side so perhaps some white feathers are usually covered by the wings. Having never been close enough to see this field mark before, I studied guide illustrations. Numbers and locations differ. Eckelberry, Singer and Peterson show the white lines as a fringe on the wing. Of the 3, only Peterson shows marks on the female. Cynthia House (Geographic) and David Sibley put 3 feathers on the sides and one over the spine. It's a good thing these birds are easily identified by their crests.

The females we watched were a dingy brown but carried full, smoky-russet heads, rather like soft bouffants, large enough for the court of Versailles. We counted 1 male and 4 female mergansers. I knew that merganser bills are long with bumpy edges but I have just learned that the bill is cylindrical, edged with serrations, or hook-like structures, which provide a good grip on small slippery fish. What a pity we didn't see the mergansers eating fish!

We saw 2 pair of wood ducks. The males have large round heads. They wear sleek crests of dark green-black outlined in white over a green-black face. The short neck is white with white fingers that extend up the cheeks toward the red eyes. The breast is rust, edged on each side with white. The flanks are yellowish tan and the tail is black, long and square. The female is suitably drab for nesting safety, but she wears a large white teardrop across each eye like an Egyptian queen.

A Peking duck, looking large, white and clumsy waddled along snaffling food with its bright yellow bill. It was noticeable but is not listed because it's a domestic duck. We counted 8 black ducks plus one that flew off. After counting the crowd twice over, Jeff said there were 321 mallards. We were glad to take his word for it.



Clutching the railing, we circled the Indian Cave, descended the path on the east side and entered Mugger's Woods because the paths were clear. When we reached the Azalea Pond, house finches and a titmouse were at the feeders. At the suet were a red-bellied woodpecker, a downy and above them a starling that never stopped eating. On the ground were white-throated sparrows and a song sparrow pecking for seeds in the snow. On the sidewalk we saw Tom Fiore, who told us he had just seen a bufflehead and 2 pairs of gadwalls in the open water at the northeast corner of the Reservoir. Drat! We should have covered it. We all agreed to deputize Tom for those birds on this day of the count.

We accompanied Tom to look for owls at the Hill of Pines just south of the Boathouse. On the previous Saturday I met Merrill Higgins and learned there were 3 long-eared owls in those trees. I bumped into Bob Mello and we immediately rushed to the spot. We saw one owl, stretched tall as a stick, glaring down at us. On the day of the count we saw no owls, but I think they may be moving around the park.

We retraced our steps to the Boathouse to warm up and eat lunch. After a chat with various birders we walked south to the 59th St Pond. By now the sun was gone, the clouds were heavy and it was both cold and damp. The Pond had been fenced and drained. It was covered with snow bisected by meandering small streams. It looked deserted but we found 13 more mallards. The count was over and it was time to go. We said good-bye to Joy and told her she had been a great help. Joy said she planned to cover the Hudson River shore from 23 St. to Battery Park, and the East River shore from 23 St. to Battery Park. A week later she called in her results and I wrote them up for the NY State count. I am positive they will want her to count next year. We do!

Jeff and I walked north briskly along the East Drive. We clambered up to the east side of the Reservoir and wished we had a telescope. With great difficulty and Jeff's help I saw the bufflehead when it floated, not to our left or right, but directly opposite where we stood. Though we scanned the area for canvasbacks we saw none. Nor did we see Tom's great find of the day, an Iceland gull. We suspect it's the same bird that was seen on the Christmas count. We said good-bye and I left the park at 90 St. and Fifth Ave. It was 3:30. Time flies when you're counting birds.

Our totals for the day were: 2+99 Canada geese, 4 wood ducks, 4 gadwalls, 11 American black ducks, 629 mallards, 3 mallard X black, 14 Northern shovelers, 2 green-winged teal, 1 bufflehead, 5 hooded mergansers and 1 American coot. Small populations, excepting the mallards but some classy ducks.



On Feb. 22, my friend Mary Doherty called to say she had entered the park that morning and, looking at the roadside, saw a grassy meadow full of snow drops just north of the 100th St. Pool. That night we had a heavy snowfall, and by morning, the flowers were living up to their name.

My thanks to all of you who renewed your newsletter subscriptions and my special thanks to the people who sent extra money over and above the subscription price. It will be used for office supplies such as print packs for the photocopy machine. In my renewal form I invited you to make up a nature conundrum. The response was nil until Felicia Waynesboro renewed her subscription and enclosed TWO conundrums. The first she says she heard on a show called "Masquerade Party." Q: What was the oyster's theme song? A: "A Gritty Pearl is Like a Malady" Felicia created the second conundrum herself. Q: How did the arachnids come to hire Charlotte as their Internet consultant? A: Spied'er on the web. Thank You, Felicia, for taking the challenge! Now let's hear from some of the rest of you.

THE ELLIOTT NEWSLETTER

Nature Notes from Central Park

Vol.7 No. 2

March~ April, 2001

Chilly Spring

This year winter was really wintery and spring was chilly and cool. So when we entered the park to see spring's great reprieve, it came as a welcome surprise. Flowers carpeted the lawns and some of the bushes. On March 20, I wandered through Shakespeare Garden admiring the winter pansies, snowdrops and crocuses and came to rest beside the great old mulberry. There at its roots was a thick carpet of ultraviolet scilla or squill. Working over the flowers were more honeybees than I have seen in years. I counted two dozen with difficulty because they were buzzing every flower for nectar. Then squill blossoms were shoved apart and an anglewing butterfly shouldered its way up out of the ground. It rested on bumpy blooms, slowly opening and almost closing its orange and brown wings. Suddenly the wings clapped together over the back and on the underside I saw a silver crescent but not a silver dot, so I think it was a comma. This was not the first butterfly of the season or even of the day. Mourning cloaks were in the garden, at the Azalea Pond and zipping through many other locations. I have never seen so many in March. Behind the sour gum or tupelo tree were several fox sparrows. One was ten feet up in a tree. His chest and tail shook as his song floated over the chilly air.

On April 9, during taxes, I talked with a reporter from the Post. He asked me how I had begun watching birds and I described a scarlet tanager. He said he had seen one that morning with Starr Saphir's group. I suggested cardinal. No, no. All the birders around him were talking about it. As scarlet tanagers show up in our park the last days of April and well into May, I was skeptical but it seemed a good excuse to get away from the desk and out into the park. I spoke to a number of birders who spoke to others. None of us had seen a scarlet tanager. But there were swamp sparrows, song sparrows and plenty of white-throats. There were sapsuckers and more phoebes than I have ever seen on one day. At Turtle Pond we saw a palm warbler, a great egret and a kingfisher. Enough good sights to go home refreshed.

When Starr heard about the "scarlet tanager" she called the young man from the Post. To correct him. He described the woman who had pointed out the bird and Starr explained she was a new bird watcher. He was amazed. He assumed that people who go out to watch birds early in the morning are all experts!

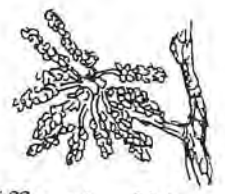
On Easter Sunday, all the park was in sunlight. My first class saw brown creepers, ruby-crowned kinglets, phoebes, Louisiana water thrush, palm, yellow-rumped warbler and more pine warblers than I have ever seen at once in Central Park. An Eastern towhee was scuffling in leaves, a blue jay was sitting on her nest, so near to the sidewalk. Later she moved to build a new nest. It is higher but still perilously close to the sidewalk. Problems with nest #1 have worked up the male and now he guards her. My group agreed it was the best first spring Sunday class they remember.

On April 19, my Wednesday group was joined by Sharon Edry, a reporter for the "Daily News." As we searched for birds she quietly interviewed members of the class for an article which is serious, interesting, devoid of sneering jokes and illustrated with wonderful photos of birds. That day, at a giant pin oak between the Rustic Bridge and the Gorge, we saw a flabby female racoon. One class member thought she was carrying a rat but it was a kit. She was moving her new family from a huge hole in the tree trunk to a small hole in a branch. This sight was a first for all of us.

Some Early Arrival Dates for April Birds in Central Park

Bird	'76	'81	'86	'91	'96	'01
Whip-poor-will	4/23	4/29			4/25	4/20
Chimney Swift				4/28	4/17	4/18
Belted Kingfisher			4/25	4/28	4/14	4/9
Eastern Phoebe		4/7	4/6		4/9	4/1
Great-crested Flycatcher		4/29			4/24	
N. Rough-winged Swallow		4/23	4/23	4/19	4/13	4/6
Barn Swallow	4/26			4/19	4/19	4/7
Blue-gray Gnatcatcher	4/11	4/9		4/9	4/19	4/5
White-eyed Vireo		4/8		4/18	4/22	4/22
Blue-headed Vireo	4/17	4/17		4/17	4/19	4/5
Yellow-throated Vireo				4/27	4/29	4/29
Warbling Vireo					4/29	4/24
Blue-winged Warbler	4/19	4/29		4/27	4/23	4/5
Nashville Warbler	4/23	4/29		4/27	4/25	4/21
Northern Parula		4/24		4/18	4/22	4/18
Yellow Warbler	4/22	4/28		4/27	4/22	4/20
Chestnut-sided Warbler	4/20			4/28	4/29	4/29
Black-throated Blue Warbler				4/28	4/29	4/20
Yellow-rumped Warbler	4/14	4/4	4/8	4/8	4/10	4/5
Black-throated Green Warbler	4/23	4/22		4/25	4/19	4/20
Pine Warbler	4/6	4/4	4/8	4/5	4/2	4/5
Prairie Warbler	4/18	4/28		4/25	4/20	4/20
Palm Warbler	4/6	4/4	4/20	4/5	4/9	4/5
Black-and-white Warbler	4/16	4/23	4/23	4/6	4/21	4/5
American Redstart				4/27	4/21	4/29
Worm-eating Warbler	4/18	4/29		4/28	4/29	4/20
Ovenbird	4/30	4/27		4/25	4/7	4/15
Northern Waterthrush	4/20	4/27		4/24	4/19	4/15
Louisiana Waterthrush	4/17	4/3	4/18	4/9	4/12	4/5
Common Yellowthroat	4/30	4/26		4/25	4/22	4/18
Hooded Warbler	4/29	4/30		4/28	4/19	4/16
Prothonotary Warbler				4/28	4/20	4/27
Baltimore Oriole	4/20	4/29		4/28	4/22	4/23
Indigo Bunting	4/23	4/30		4/28	4/22	4/20
Eastern Towhee	4/29	4/7	4/27	4/9	4/9	4/1

This spring, I was distracted with a new computer, confusing taxes and an extracted tooth. As soon as the tooth was out I got my hearing back, which is wonderful. But I saw less than usual of the park and when I did, thought Spring must be early. Actually, I was tardy. Other birders seemed to think everything was about on time so I looked up old records to check. I began with 1976, the first full year we had a bird book in the park. Then I added records at five-year intervals to the present. As you can see, early records were sparse, in part because birders didn't think to look for certain species. In 1986 the records were especially skimpy. Perhaps that was the year the bird book was kept at the Castle. Many of the most recent dates seem very early. I don't think this is due to global warming but because more birders want to be the first human scout to see the first avian scouts. Often, a week later, many birds of a species are much easier to see. I hope this list helps you decide when you can expect to greet familiar birds and bird watchers.



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Arbor Day

Arbor comes from the Latin word for tree and Arbor Day is a holiday observed on different dates in different states. It was begun in Nebraska, by J. Sterling Morton in 1872. In those days trees lined the rivers but most of the land was treeless. Morton got people to plant trees around their homes. Where trees are scarce, people appreciate them and slowly the idea caught on. Even New York City has been gradually greening its parks and streets to relieve us from the burden of all that cement and glass. Many New Yorkers still have no feeling for trees, but in summer you can see people cluster under trees at bus stops and park benches, unaware of the gift of shade.

This year to celebrate Arbor Day, I went to Central Park to meet Lorraine Konopka, Tree Care Coordinator for Central Park, and Khol Sok, who trims and cuts park trees. We gathered at Spector Playground just south of the 86 St. Transverse, west of the Pinetum and near the West Drive. We looked at the playground entrance and I pointed to a pin oak just east of the gates. Then I pointed out the Mystery oak just east of that and a Turkey oak in front of the Mystery oak. We agreed the pattern of the bark on Mystery and Turkey are similar. But the bark of the Turkey oak is quite dark and the Mystery oak is lighter gray. Both Turkey and Mystery oaks were just putting out tiny leaves and catkins.

The pin oaks were well ahead of them with 1 ½ inch leaves on 1 ½ inch stems and clusters of hanging catkins, some of them 2 inches long. For now these male flowers look like green beads on a green thread. In May, they will become longer and thicker and fuzzy with pollen. Fluttering and flaunting their maleness, they attract insects and migrating birds. The pollen is released and floats away on the spring winds to fertilize female flowers. Pollen from oaks and other trees fills the air. Coughing, sneezing, runny eyes and noses-- all proclaim the season of arboreal reproduction.

And where are the female oak flowers that must receive oak pollen? They grow at the base of oak leaves and are inconspicuous. When these blooms are fertilized, acorns will begin to grow. Many trees produce catkins, including willows, poplars and birches. But only oaks produce acorns.

Lorraine kindly directed Khol to cut down 3 samples of buds from pin, Turkey and Mystery, oak. We examined the Turkey and Mystery which were at the same stage of growth and looked surprisingly similar. But as Lorraine pointed out, the arrangement was slightly different. Turkey oaks spread their twiggy fingers wider than the more compact twigs on the Mystery oak. I sketched the Mystery oak sample but the growth is too new to give much of an idea how future leaves and catkins will look. Still, what I get is what you get.

Khol left us to work uptown and Lorraine and I walked south to the stand of black oak. When we saw them on Arbor Day, Lorraine gasped at the delicate rust-pink leaves. We managed to pull down a branch and take a sample for me and for Neil Calvanese, Vice-President of Operations for Central Park. When I got my specimens home, some of them were drooping badly. I put them in water and by nightfall their leafy heads were up and had regained their growing shape.

Beetle Juice

The newest threat to north American trees that has received extensive press coverage in the US is from the Asian longhorn beetle *Anoplophora glabripennis*. It lives in Japan, Korea and China where it is a pest and they probably came here inside the wood of pallets-- huge crates used to ship goods from China.

The adult beetle has an inch-long body which is glossy black with white spots. It is named for its black-and-white striped antenna or feelers which are longer than the body. The female bites



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a hole in the bark of a tree to the cadmium layer just inside. Then she turns around, lays an egg and covers it with a hard layer of "frosting" to protect it from predators and weather. She repeats this process nearby and can lay up to 50 eggs. Each egg hatches to produce the tiny first stage of the pupa. It eats its way into the heartwood and grows as it eats until it is an inch-long white worm. It metamorphoses and emerges as an adult to eat green leaves, mate and start the cycle again.

The beetles select tree branches 3 to 6 inches in diameter in the upper third of the tree. In time with enough chewing, the branches become riddled with holes and weak enough to come down in the high winds of fall or the snow and ice of winter. When weakened branches fall from 60 feet, they can damage cars and harm people.

The US Department of Agriculture has been developing plans to kill the beetles and the Lewis Tree Service has been selected to carry out this federal program. On May 9, a botanical Maginot Line will be set up along Fifth Ave. between 89 and 96 St. Twenty-one elms, on both sides of the sidewalk (but not behind the park wall), will be injected with the insecticide imadicloprid or "Merit," to give the trade name. The tree injectors will be using something called the "Mauget system" which has been used elsewhere for half a century and is considered "safe." Workers use bits 11/64ths of an inch to drill minuscule holes in trees at 2 inch intervals. They circle the tree with pinholes at ground level, put in a plastic cylinder and squeeze the contents into the growing layer of the trunk where it rises to the branches.

The spring injection is timed to precede any newly emerged adult long-horns that arrive on the trees to feed on young growth. They ingest green leaves containing "Merit" and die before mating. The imadicloprid poison remains viable inside the tree for 8 to 9 months. It will only affect adult beetles at the cambrian layer and the pupae can go right on chewing away at the hardwood inside. Sadly, this treatment will not help trees with Dutch Elm disease. Lorraine says "Merit" does not contain a fungicide and it is the, fungus, not the beetles that carry it, which has caused Dutch elm disease.



I am not sure why this Fifth Ave. location was selected. It is near the Rupert Housing Development at 93 St. and Third Ave. A few years ago beetles were found in trees there. All the trees were cut down and removed. I don't think more beetles have been reported in the area. The Fifth Ave. elms may be a pilot project for a much larger program. In time, the USDA plans to inject the trees of New York and many other cities in New England, the Midwest and South.

Promoters of imadicloprid say it is used in flea/tick collars for dogs and cats and as a lawn spray. They claim that it will not interfere with the application of other insecticides sprayed on the ground or in the air over the city. Now that spraying our skies for West Nile Virus has been declared useless, and efforts to control the threat will be confined to spraying mosquito eggs, we may endure less air pollution this summer. Lovers of Central Park MUST be grateful that, so far, our trees won't be injected. But as the program spreads, what will happen to the leaf and bark munching insects who must live on trees, the honey bees that live in them? If grubs, moth eggs and aphids die, what will nesting birds feed their young? Will woodpeckers, titmice and chickadees, who build cavity nests in trees, produce healthy chicks? If "Merit" is concentrated in tree seeds and fruits, will birds feed on them as they fly south for the winter? One of the fears for the future is what this beetle could do to commercial orchards. Would the buying public wish to sample maple syrup, cherries and apples containing concentrations of "Merit"? If the buying public shuns these products, could growers sustain the business loss? Can they find a non-chemical way to stop the beetle? World trade opens world ports to new viruses and insects. We will need new and better ways to meet the threat.

THE ELLIOTT NEWSLETTER

Nature Notes from Central Park

Vol. 7 No. 3

May~~June 2001

Wonders in the Air

Two young red-tailed hawks fledged on June 4, before most New Yorkers were up and doing. The first flew from the Fifth Ave. nest at 6:09 AM. The second fledged at 7:52 AM. The third young hawk flapped and paced but remained in the nest. Day after day, hawk watchers sat on the benches or pavement at the shore of the model boat pond aka Conservatory Waters, watching the parents and young through telescopes, binoculars and cameras. Then, on June 9 at 5:21 AM, just 4 minutes before sunrise, the third chick flew from the nest and landed on a balcony very near it. As first flights go, it was short. But long enough to reveal that much of its new life would be in air.

Hawks mate for life—or the life of the mate—and Pale Male has had 3 mates since 1993. Over the past 8 years, despite mate loss, he has fathered 19 young. Bluebill, his current mate of several years, looks healthy and seems much more experienced than she was at first. In fact, both birds are more relaxed about the parenting process. So are the observers. I hear fewer wails of anxiety and see less hand-wringing.

In former years, first flights were usually into a park tree, where the young hawk was harassed by other birds. Then a parent would come by and lure the attackers far from its young before circling back to feed it. This year, the young hawks are sitting on buildings, or flying from building to building along Fifth Ave. The parents bring them food which they must tear apart themselves. It's hard to grip a tree limb and dine with only one foot. A flat roof is a much easier hacking station. Balance is not a problem and the hawk can use both feet to grip and tear its meat.

The young hawks have been to park trees, but not often, possibly, because this year the unwelcome committee contains a pair of Eastern kingbirds. What these birds lack in size they more than make up for in feistiness. They were seen following one of the hawk parents striking from behind and, I was told, trying to pull out the tail feathers. These feathers are as long as the kingbirds!

Deborah Allen discovered the kingbird nest. It is at the southwest corner of the model boat pond in the branch of a London Plane tree that reaches out over the water. Look for a strand of twine hanging under the nest. This string is part of the kingbird nest.

In early June, dragonflies were dancing over Conservatory Waters. A mated pair flew by in tandem. He held her as she dipped her abdomen (tail) to lay eggs in the water. I saw 12-spots and a green darner zooming about, near enough to identify. A week later the dragonflies were gone, probably taken out by kingbirds. Now it is their turn. Deborah saw pale male cross the water, land on the kingbird nest and spread his great wings and tail over the sides. He ignored the screaming parents, studied the contents then flew off. Deb thinks this means the parents have eggs, but when they hatch, the hawk will have hors d'oeuvres.

On June 7, while we waited for young hawk #3 to fledge, Ken Taurian pointed to wispy, high-flying cirrus clouds passing over us, which he said contained ice crystals. When the sun was above and behind the clouds, the ice crystals acted like a prism, bending the light into separate colors. Ken said that if the cloud were big enough, high enough and icy enough we could see a **parhelic circle**, or halo around the sun.

Between 12:55 and 1PM a large cirrus cloud floated by. Ken told us to look up. Half a dozen

of us put up our hands to see the cloud and block the sun. With hands together and arms raised to the heavens, we looked like a cult of true believers. We saw a gray ring round the sun. Sunlight struck the bottom of the curve and revealed bands of color; red outside and violet nearest the sun. This celestial event was a first for most of us.

Life and Death in the Upper Lobe

In the afternoon of May 16, I was at Bank Rock Bridge with a TV crew, trying to show them the family of swans. As if on cue, the swans waddled under to bridge and launched themselves into the Upper Lobe. As the parents guided their 7 cygnets through the water, they parted a green carpet of duckweed and left a trail of their passing. At the far end one parent kept guard while all the others snaffled hundreds of tiny duckweed plants the size of confetti. As the swans were being photographed, along came a female mallard with 9 little ducklings. She paused as they searched for things to eat in the muddy shore. I began throwing out crushed egg shells I'd brought from home. The ducklings scrambled for them as the adult looked me over. When a large piece of shell fell down, she grabbed it and ate it all. Female birds seem to fancy a little calcium replacement after laying eggs. So do growing ducklings. Blue jays gorged on the shells and carried more to their nests.

On June 7, Noreen O'Rourke gave me bad news about the swan family. Birders were watching swans in the Upper Lobe when suddenly they heard a snap and watched in horror as one of the cygnets was pulled under water, feet last. The frantic parents thrashed about, but the cygnet did not rise. Later the corpse was found dead on the shore, the neck chewed. Within a few days 2 more cygnets disappeared. Birders saw a large, dark circle in the duckweed, perhaps the telltale print of a big snapping turtle which lives in the Upper Lobe. By now the 4 cygnets are quite large, and perhaps too large to snatch.

Mysterious Nests

Deep in Mugger's Woods I visited a flicker nest several times in May, glad that it remained successful. Starlings were nesting nearby, each with a hole to tend and no time to torture woodpeckers. One afternoon I watched a young bird come to the entrance and look out. It was visible to its ragged black chest marks. The view of its neck was startling. Long, gray mustaches ran down each side of the throat—like Foo Manchu and then some. I made a sketch then talked to Charles Kennedy and Debby Allen about the bird. Both have photographed flicker nestlings and say they all have mustaches. They cited A. C. Bent (Life Histories of North American Birds) for further information. Perhaps the marks are a guide. When the young open wide, their parents aim between the brackets before regurgitating. More food in baby, less mess in the nest. On June 20, 2 days after watching the flicker, the nest was empty.



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The most amazing Central Park nest this year is at the west end of Turtle Pond. The nest is over the water in a low branch of a willow oak, near Shakespeare Theater. It is the nest of orchard orioles. Most of us thought this was a nesting first but they seem to have graced the park before our time-- once at the beginning of last century and once at the end of the century before.

These birds are the smallest of all orioles (7 inches) with short bills and short tails. The female is a greener yellow than the female Baltimore oriole. The male is a first summer bird. He has a black bib above a yellow-green breast, not the black head and brick-red breast of a fully mature male. As their name implies, they like to nest in fruit trees, or shade trees, or beside ponds. Both parents brood the eggs and often divide the hatchlings (his and hers) and care for them separately. The family stays together until the fall, when they disperse. Visit the wharf, look over the blind and you'll see the birds fly in and out of their busy nest. With a scope, you can watch from the Castle.

Trees and Beetles

On Tuesday, May 29, I bumped into Steve Chang in the Ramble and we agreed to look for birds at Tanner's Springs. On the way, we admired the new shoots from the former umbrella magnolia *Magnolia tripetala* which came down at century's end.

Merrill Higgins kindly took pictures when it was covered in white, skinny-fingered blossoms. My sketch comes from his photos of the tree's last blooming. When I returned in the fall, there was no tree.

I searched the ground and found the flat remains of the trunk, looking like a termite banquet. At the edge of this crumbly circle was a yard-high cluster of new shoots. I sketched them as a farewell to our park's only umbrella magnolia. But these trees are hardy and this one is circling the old trunk with new spring shoots!

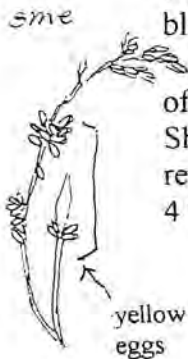
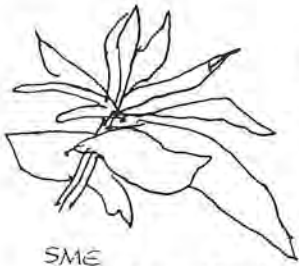
The leaves are enormous-- a foot and a half long and more than half a foot wide. The tip ends and flowers are supposed to smell bad. If you want to see and sniff for yourself, the shoots are behind the end of a fence, down the hill from Shakespeare Theater but east of the West Drive and hot dog stand. Look around for a clump of 5 ft shoots with bright green leaves. You should be able to pick out this mini umbrella because nothing else has leaves that big and green.

Over at Tanner's Springs there were resident birds but nothing exotic. I suggested to Steve we visit the Mystery oak. He was disinclined until I said it was about a block or two north. When we got to the Stockton Playground we compared the bark of the Mystery and the Turkey oak. I noticed a lady bug crawling over the bark. Steve found another and another. Ruby-red beetles with plenty of black spots were crawling over the hills of bumpy bark and down into deep crevices where they would stop. They were females laying tiny golden-yellow eggs. When one beetle came up behind another we thought it might be to mate, but instead, it seemed to be eating the eggs as she laid them. No lady bugs were on the trunk of the pin oak. As Steve pointed out, the pin oak bark was flat with no crevices to hold and protect the eggs.

Returning to Tanner's Springs we saw a gray-cheeked thrush and both a female and male mourning warbler-- probably the best look I've ever had. Next day, I learned that lady bugs mate in May. A week later, the female lays clusters of 10 to 90 eggs. In 3 to 6 days the eggs hatch and out come larva which remind me of tiny dragons. The larva eat voraciously and molt 3 times while eating. In 15 to 18 days they get to the pupa stage and build a protective pink, black and white tower. If the tower is disturbed, the creature inside strikes back. You can see the bulge of bangs on the walls and the tower rocks back and forth on its base. This is a warning to predators. After a week or so, the tower opens and out comes the new round and glossy lady bug.

00000000 I went back to see the eggs. They really were spindle-shaped and about the size of these zeroes. They were attached only at one end and stand, hang or lean to suit the egg-layer. Perhaps the on-end arrangement makes it easier for the larva to get out from the free end of the egg, and for the lady bug to push out of the pupa case. All the lady bugs were 12-spots. Some of them wore tiny ink dots while others looked as if the ink had spread and the dots joined together. Orange or red and black usually means potentially poisonous and these beetles are not preferred eating.

Down at the roots of the Turkey oak I found a sprig of blue grass *Poa pratensis* with clusters of tiny yellow eggs attached to the stem. I took this sample to sketch and showed it to Chris Seita. She said she needed lady bugs to eat the aphids on her roses in the Shakespeare Garden. When I returned a week later there were only dark stains on the bark where the eggs had been. I collected 4 lady bugs and put them on the roses in the garden. Let's hope they stayed.



Butterflies

In 1980 or '81, Lambert Pohner began doing annual butterfly counts in half a dozen city parks, for the Xerces Society. After his death I continued the Central Park count in his memory on the last Saturday in June. I would beg people to come and count. But despite such stalwarts as Gaye Fugate and Dorothy Poole, there were never enough of us to cover all the park, so it took all day. In the evening I would phone in my results to Nick Wagerik. At some time over the decades, the count sponsor was changed from Xerces to NABA, The North American Butterfly Association.

This year I began calling people for a count on June 30. Then Gaye Fugate told me the count was listed for June 23, a week earlier. I began recalling people with the news. Many had other plans. Two days before the count Kristine Wellstrom, President of the New York City chapter of NABA, called to say the weather prediction for Saturday was bad. If it was raining we could use Sunday as the rain date. By that time I had shot my wad. I made some third-time calls but decided it was mostly in the lap of the gods. Remember the weather for the Christmas Count? Saturday, June 23, was like that. We had thunder and lightning and it rained ALL day. We assembled at Bethesda Fountain, collected some people sheltering at Conservatory Waters and adjourned to the Boathouse. As we sat over coffee the heavens opened. We agreed to meet the following day and try again.

It was cool and the skies were overcast when 9 of us gathered on Sunday morning. We searched in the gloom but it was too cool for the butterflies to flutter by. There were brief intervals of sunshine by noon and immediately we could see butterflies until the next cloud stopped the action. The count numbers improved as the afternoon progressed. We ended with 10 species of butterfly, a total to be proud of because we worked so hard for it. Here's our list:

Eastern Tiger Swallowtail 2, Cabbage White 140, Clouded Sulphur 3, Orange Sulphur 3, Eastern Tailed Blue 1, Summer Azure 9, Question Mark 4, Mourning Cloak 5, Red Admiral 12, Painted Lady 1.

This count was memorable for another reason. Chilly butterflies in need of warmth landed on people all day. 1. A question mark landed on Karen's head and as she was trying to get Art to describe what he saw, the butterfly leapt off her head and landed on the butterfly pamphlet, right at the picture of itself. 2. A red admiral landed on the pink shirt of a little girl in a playground. The children noticed it fluttering and told her. When she turned round to see it, the butterfly flew off. 3. On the grass at the sloping meadow an eastern tailed blue landed on Dorothy's shoe. She aimed her camera, then twisted her foot for a better angle. The joggled butterfly flew away and returned for a better shot. 4. In the wood and meadow area between the East Drive and the Meer we saw mourning cloaks twirling about. Two of them took turns landing on Gaye's pale blue cap. Dorothy closed in for pictures of a fresh and a battered mourning cloak. 5. As she snapped away one of the mourning cloaks landed on her tan cap. We needed another camera for the gathering. A third mourning cloak basked nearby in a warm spot on the sidewalk. Later, when I talked to Debby and Signe about what they had seen below 72 St., I learned that 6. a red admiral had landed on Signe's pale blue slacks below the knee. Six butterfly landings on people in one day is a park record.

On Friday, June 29, there were zillions of butterflies all over the park. It figures.

My thanks to Deborah Allen, Karen Asakawa, Murray Brettschneider, Gaye Fugate, Signe Hammer, Arthur Le Moine and Dorothy Poole for making this count a success. My thanks to Judy Katz for finding a third orange sulphur in the Boathouse garden. My thanks to Charles Kennedy and Joan Weiss for coming to count on Saturday.

THE ELLIOTT NEWSLETTER

Nature Notes from Central Park

Vol.7 No. 4

July ~ August - 2001

Life at the Meer

When August heat gripped most of our continent, New York sweltered and Central Park surpassed all records. On Thursday, August 9 the temperature reached 102 degrees Fahrenheit. Jeff Nulle, who is a smart cookie, computed that our hell measured 39 degrees Centigrade. Whew! Then, thank heavens, the rains came on Friday to wash and cool off the city.

On Saturday morning, a small but alert group assembled at the Dana Center to study the flora and fauna around the Meer. Just east of Dana we saw 2 male Eastern amberwing dragonflies. Karen Asakawa found us a blue dasher, formerly called blue pirate, resting on a leaf. It looked at us with green eyes and a white face, a bright blue abdomen with a black tip. Just below it on the same leaf was a familiar bluet damselfly (blue and black from end to end). Nearby we saw three other damselflies: Eastern forktail (green eyes at one end and blue tip at the other), orange bluet (orange), and variable dancer (violet). Out on the water we saw our big dragonfly, a green darner. It was racing over the water without pause.

Along the shore we looked at the water plants. Pickerelweed has put out many purple-blue flowers. Beside these plants was a small cluster of arrow arum, without its greenish flowers. Even if these plants are not in flower, you can tell them apart if you look at the base of the leaves. Pickerelweed leaves have round margins, like ①. Arrow arum have points at the base, like ②. We also saw cattails and a rush we couldn't name. Lanore Swenson felt the round stem of this plant and recited "rushes are round and sedges have edges." Later, when I called her, we compared illustrations in several plant guides, none of which looked like the plant we remembered.

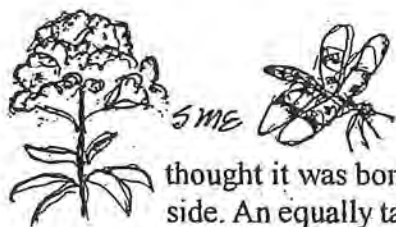
On the eastern shore of the Meer we saw cattails in bloom, brown flowers close to the stem surrounded by flat slender leaves 6-8ft. tall. At an opening in the plants, we looked down to see mallards nibbling at the surface of the water. It was duckweed—tiny green plants the size of confetti. Some of these plants were so near the shore that Annett Fry could reach down and scoop them up. She told us these are the smallest plants in the world, and we examined them closely. Every plant has 2 leaves that float on the water attached to a single stem and tiny roots.

Nearby, Anne Lazarus spied something in the water. When we fished it out, it still struggled to live. Looking closer, I saw that it was a Black Saddlebags. The front wings were in good shape. The left hind wing had an extensive black pattern near the body. But the right hindwing was broken and twisted. On the black abdomen were 4 yellow rectangles, like 4 gold bricks, 2 each side. When this dragonfly is a mature female, the yellow bricks merge, I think, but the yellow band doesn't meet over the center back. This saddlebags could be a female or a young male. The creature flew to the leg of a pair of blue jeans. I suggested someone pick it up by each front wing and place it on my shoulder where it could warm up. As we strolled along, it warmed and began to crawl onto my neck and into my hair. That tickled so I asked that it be put in my hand. We watched as it washed its yellow-brown face, grooming with its front legs. The eyes looked cloudy gray, not black so perhaps it was young. "What are you going to call it?" asked Mary Morse. "Cassandra," I answered, wondering what I could feed it. The problem was solved when the dragonfly's muscles were warm enough to fly. It zipped off my palm and into the grass.

We studied a large plant topped with clusters of small white flowers. Anne Lazarus said she



SME



thought it was boneset. The coarse leaves grew right across the stem to grasp the leaf on the other side. An equally tall plant with clusters of pink flowers and whorls of leaves around the stem grew nearby-- Joe-Pye weed. Several people whipped out Newcomb's Wildflower Guide. Both names were right. In July, I learned Joe-Pye by sketching it in Charles's Boathouse Garden. As I sketched, a dragonfly landed on my pad, seeking late-day warmth. The 4 dark wing marks showed she was a female amberwing. I studied her dark eyes, brown thorax and cocoa-brown abdomen with pale bands across it. She posed on tiptoe long enough for a quick sketch.

Our August group entered Conservatory Garden and saw a zooming tan-orange dragonfly-- either a Wandering or a Spot-winged Glider. We climbed the Pergola steps and scanned the butterfly bushes. There were battered red admirals, bouncy monarchs and one painted lady. We paused at the drinking fountain and ogled a plant with leaves the size of small umbrellas and many insect holes; *Pedacides* or *Petacides japonica*. I sketched it in July when the leaves were less holy.



In the South Garden were a cabbage white, more monarchs and red admirals, 2 silver-spotted skippers and a zabulon skipper. Dark clouds were gathering when Anne Lazarus made us look at something small. It ducked inside a bush but returned and landed in good view, the tiny summer azure. The rain was about to fall so it was a perfect way to end the outing.

Summer Specials

This summer the young red-tailed hawks finally came in off the roof tops of Fifth Ave. and perched in the trees. We saw 1 and sometimes 2 with full crops or crying for food. They perch near Azalea Pond, where there's a good supply of rats. I sketched their father, Pale Male, at the Swampy Pin Oak area. He stood well out on a short dead branch, body still, eyes alert. Birds barked short alarm calls and swooped over him to strike, trying to drive him off. He pretended not to notice, but as they struck we could see tensing body language. Both of the young now have more dark feathers across the belly band than their father. They fly early, learn to hunt much later.



The hawks brought out many birds to scold and peck, including a noisy Carolina wren. It came and went several times, but not when I was there. Anne Shanahan told me she had recently seen a family of titmice drinking and bathing at the top of the gill. She said there were at least 4, maybe 5 young. The last time I saw a nest of titmice in Central Park was the day of a huge demonstration in NYC against American involvement in the Vietnam War. That day we assembled at the UN, walked across 42 St. and up Central Park West to fill the Great Lawn in Central Park. I left the singers, speakers and pot smokers to slip into the Ramble. Moving along the walk beside the sloping meadow southwest of the Castle, I stopped to inspect a nest of titmice a yard from the pavement. The parents were concerned about me, but too busy finding food for their young to pause for long. That day they were a symbol of beauty, hope, and a respite from humans.

As Anne was telling me of this year's family, a birder said he had just seen a titmouse nearby. I raced toward the Tupelo Meadow to a rock outcrop near the tupelo tree. In small, nearby trees I spied very active movement in total silence. A closer view showed an adult female frantically gleaning the branches. Nearby, a young bird well out on an open branch free of leaves seemed to be pecking at things. Suddenly an adult titmouse landed beside the youngster, who fluttered its wings appealingly. Briefly, the parent rammed bill into bill and flew off. Next I saw a titmouse with a large black smudge over his bill, the father. Lastly, I saw a fluffy-plummy young bird with no peach wash on its flanks. It gripped a well-exposed limb and fluttered its wings. Nobody came. Well, it's not easy to feed 4 or 5. How wonderful it was to see a titmouse family again, after all these years.

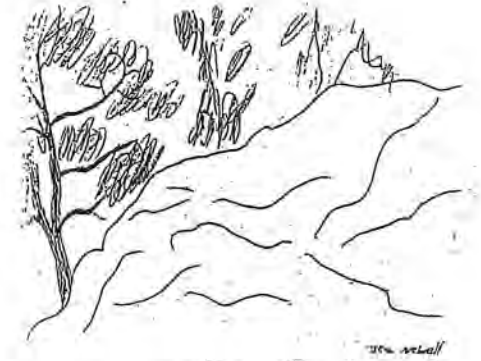
Sketching to See-4

My 4th nature sketching class met at Dana Center on Bastille Day. I was glad to see four people who returned from last year's classes. They were joined by quite a few adults and lots of children. I explained that we would circle the Meer looking for nature to sketch. Then I demonstrated how to do a line drawing with a dark crayon. Taking clipboards, paper, and crayons, we went forth to peer at arrow arum, pickerelweed, cattails, Peking ducks, roses and rose hips, rocks and buildings. Most of the children made pictures, played in the sand, and went away with their teachers. The rest of us returned to the Dana Center classroom.

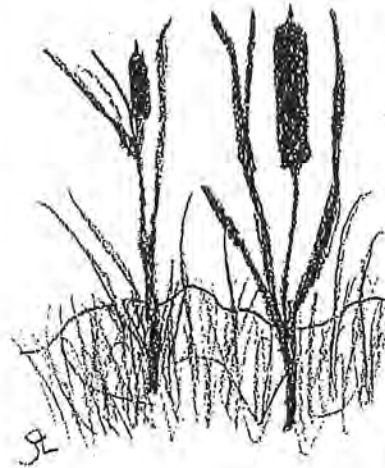
Wonderful Richard Kerzanski, the park's soil and water expert, collected pond life for us to see. He prepared slides for Dana's splendid new microscopes that once belonged to Avery Fisher. They are a recent gift from his son, Chip. Thank you, Chip! Everyone lined up to peer at mini water life through both microscopes. Richard put one of the water weeds *Najas minor* on the counter. We photocopied *Najas minor* and here it is greatly reduced. Ducks eat all parts of it.

I asked the class to tell about what they drew and how their perception of it changed in the process. My thanks to Marlene Gonzalez who took down comments in shorthand, transcribed them and sent them to me in English. We photocopied and reduced the sketches to fit them on these pages.

Arthur Le Moine drew cattails and was surprised to see them growing on the bank in grass, not in the water. "It's not easy, drawing," he said.



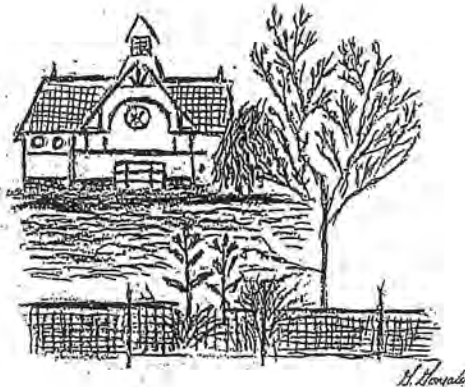
Joe Newell sketched glacial rocks south of the Meer and the nearby trees. Most rocks are round, he says, so he was surprised to see this one was vertical. He found sketching is hard.



Brandy Holman chose a beebalm flower with bumblebees on it. She discovered the florets went in all directions—very chaotic. She was afraid of all the bees but they were too busy getting nectar to notice her.



Gilbert Gonzalez climbed rocks across the Meer from Dana Center to include the building, a willow and fence at the near shore, and reflections on the water.



Melanie Lauder, age 8, drew a resting Peking duck near Dana Center. Her sister Madeline, age 4, watched a butterfly land on her foot.





Elsie Moncion drew the Dana Center and a willow tree. She liked the flow of the tree but found it difficult to draw tiny little leaves.

Kam Holifield drew a Black-eyed Susan and pickerefwed with blossoms sprouting on the top joint.



Kam

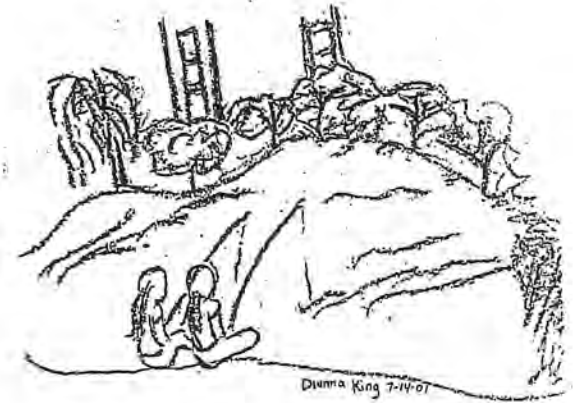


Jeanne Robinson drew a tree. She put in a trunk, branches, and some of the leaves. Then she decided to render the mass of top leaves as circles.

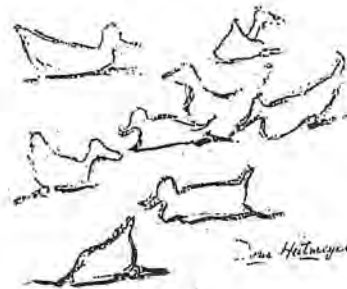


Marlene Stokes-Gonzalez drew Turkey oak leaves, roses and rose hips, and this sketch of daisies and cattails with dragonflies. She has never tried dragonflies before and learned they have 4 wings.

Dianna King drew 2 girls fishing at the Meer, with high-rise buildings at 110th St. and 5th Ave. in the background.



Doris Heitmeyer dusted off her sketchpad and made this study of Peking ducks from many angles.

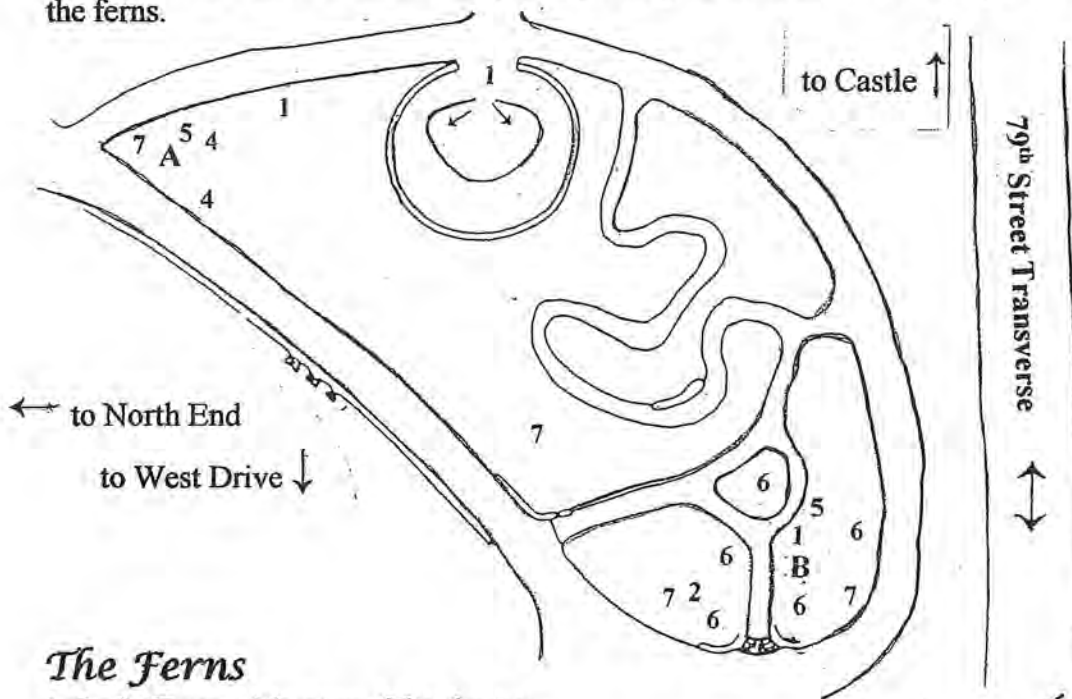


Anne Lazarus said she didn't know how to draw. But once she stared, she found there was a lot of grace to it.

Finding Ferns in Shakespeare Garden

Shakespeare's chief gardener, Chris Seita, named 7 ferns that flourish there. She kindly gave me a map revealing the garden's tear-drop shape and wrote fern names on the map. I have added labels to help locate you in Central Park and mapped the numbered ferns listed below.

Most of the ferns cluster in the protective shade of **A.** a tall red oak, and/or **B.** the aged mulberry, which Chris says came to us as a mere slip of itself in 1938, from a tree in Shakespeare's Stratford garden. Each illustration comes from a real fern frond reduced many times. The descriptions are from several texts, plus my thoughts. Take this sheet with you to help find and name the ferns.



The Ferns

1. Lady Fern *Athyrium felix-femina*

1-3 ft. tall. Fern leaves or fronds are delicate with drooping tip and a smooth stalk that is easily broken. Each leaflet has many subleaflets that are minutely toothed. Fertile subleaflets have double strands of spore cases arranged in pairs between the subleaf vein and the outer edge. Spore cases look like rusty, round buttons and you can see them on the underside of the fern right now. Spores July-August.



2. New York Fern *Thelypteris noveboracensis*

1-3 ft. tall. Yellow-green stalks are broadest in the middle and taper at each end. Leaflets grow opposite each other in pairs with small leaflets near the roots. Each leaflet is divided into many subleaflets which are stemless and alternate. Fertile leaves are larger, narrower and more upright. (This one was over 3 ft.) Spore cases grow along subleaf margins and look like round dots. Spores June-September.



3. Sensitive Fern *Onoclea sensibilis*

15-30 in. tall. At the top of the sterile frond, leaflets are welded to each other across and along the stalk. As they descend, leaflet pairs cut deeper and deeper toward the stalk and the webbing disappears. Lowest leaflets hang down on slender stems. Fertile fronds are separate, brown and beaded. Spores March-May.



4. Cinnamon Fern *Osmunda cinnamomea*

2-3 ft. tall. Large clumps grow from a root ball. Spore cases grow in clusters along erect stalks and ripen from dark green to cinnamon brown. Sterile green fronds surround the cinnamon center. Green leaflets are joined to the stalk by pale nodes, visible on the underside. As the frond matures, the nodes become brown, woolly tufts. Spores April-June.



5. Royal Fern *Osmunda regalis*

Size 2-4 ft. tall. Grows in large clumps from a root ball. Subleaflets are large and crowned with clusters of spore cases. The crowns look like this in April-June. In high summer only a few spore strands remain.



6. Ostrich Fern *Matteuccia struthiopteris*

Size 2-6 ft. tall. This fern grows up and out in the shape of a vase. Sterile fronds look like plumes, widest above midpoint and nipped in at the tip. The leaflets are deeply lobed. Fertile fronds are shorter, hard, erect and brown. Spores April-June.

7. Christmas Fern *Polystichum acrostichoides*

1-2 ½ ft. tall. Dark green fronds are thick with scaly stalks. The leaflets are pointed with tiny sharp teeth. At the inside edge of each leaflet is a "thumb" giving the thumbs-up. Fertile leaflets are smaller, and grow spores at the top of the frond on the underside of leaflets. Spore cases begin as 2 neat rows along the vein. By July, the underside of the leaflet is covered with spore cases. Spores June-October.



THE ELLIOTT NEWSLETTER

Nature Notes from Central Park

Vol. 7 No. 5

September~October, 2001

A Surfeit of Screech Owls

In 1998, Commissioner Henry Stern decided that 1 plant and 1 animal should be introduced into each of the 5 boroughs of New York City. Two times 5 equals ten and so the plan was called Project X. Six screech owls were introduced into the park by the Central Park Rangers. The owls came from rehabilitator Len Soucy in New Jersey. One of those owls seems to have survived and remained.

In May 2001 the Urban Park Rangers decided to try again and made a partnership with Professor William Giuliano of Fordham University. The professor, who has studied screech owls in Kentucky, felt they had a good chance for survival and success in Central Park. A study this past summer found there were "quite a few" small mammals for the owls, mostly mice. This time around Len Soucy did not supply the Rangers with owls because of the extensive spraying for West Nile virus. The sprays would have poisoned insects and the small mammals who dine on them. With each dinner the poison would become more concentrated and, as it moved up the food chain, could prove lethal to his screech owls.

Between September 17 and October 8, 18 screech owls were put into the park. They came from Long Island, Rochester, NY and Michigan and were released at night into the park's North Woods and the Ramble. Some of the owls have moved south and 2 of them have been seen at Hallett Sanctuary near 59 St. Many of the owls were fitted with transmitters to track their movements. These radio backpacks could weigh no more than 3% of the owls' body weight. One male owl was too small and too light to carry the pack. The owls shipped from Michigan were marked with pink and blue fingernail polish to show their sex and that they were siblings.

Now, one owl is confirmed dead from starvation. Five of the owl transmitters are not working, it's presumed, because their owners have left the park and are out of range. Two owls bit off their backpacks and 2 owls shimmied out of them. Smart birds!

Most of the owls wear gray feathers but 2 of them are red-phased birds. Birders have been seeing grays in the ramble. On October 10, Lloyd Spitalnik led me to a gray owl he thought was starving to death. I was leaving the park for a lunch date but returned that afternoon to watch and sketch the bird. I found the owl in the exact same spot: sitting on a wooden stump beside the east fence of the Parking Lot Garden. The bird looked wary when I sat on the ground in front of it and began sketching. I was a little too far to see and used my binoculars, each movement watched by my subject. After the first sketch I moved forward a foot or two. On its forehead were patches of pink and blue. The bird stared at me warily, but presently closed its eyes and hunched over. The back curved, the chest sank and breast feathers touched its belly-- a very small and vulnerable owl.

I was joined by a birder who photographed the bird as I circled around to look at it from behind. I saw smooth gray feathers undisturbed by a radio backpack. But we both thought the owl did not look robust. Was it really starving? The birder went to the Boat House for some food and returned with raw pressed hamburger on a bun. The meat was broken in pieces and tossed on the stump at the owl. The owl took one look and flew into a tree on the other side of the fence, which



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set off a chorus of scolds as smaller birds mobbed it. The owl ignored the commotion, but looked very alert. Not sick, we realized, but napping. It's what owls do when they hunt at night.

I left the garden and walked to the top of the Point to view the back side of a mockernut hickory. This holey tree was home to generations of raccoons in the 1970's and 80's. But gradually the hickory healed itself, growing new bark to shrink old holes. In time, raccoon families could not squeeze in and out. But there are plenty of holes large enough to shelter smaller creatures and raccoons can get hands and arms into most of them.

That morning a gray screech owl was discovered in one of the holes. Crowds of bird watchers came to find and point it out to each other. The owl watched us from the dark of its lair. When I returned in late afternoon, the bird was out on a branch near its den. It glanced my way briefly and turned its head to savor the view from its new homestead. Small birds mobbed it and a blue jay flew right up its chest! Unfazed, the owl gave me its profile, which I sketched. There's a rumor that a raccoon was seen working over the hickory holes, and reaching into one of them, pulled out a mass of gray feathers. But this gray owl continues to appear so it must dwell deep enough to be out of harm's way.

Most young owls do not survive their first year of life. They are preyed upon by mammals and large birds. Owls fly low and near highways; many are hit by cars. Our new owls are banded and some of them may survive the coming winter and live to mate in March. There are now 3 owls still transmitting continuous signals from their backpacks. Locating them is difficult because buildings that surround the park deflect and augment the sound, and make the birds seem nearer or farther than they really are.

I visited Hallett Sanctuary, and, with great difficulty, found the red screech owl living there. It was not in any of the owl boxes, but near the ground in a tangle of branches. The eyes were closed, the body feathers were compressed and the ear tufts stood straight up. There were brown markings on the white breast which looked like three vertical branches festooned with stubs. The feathers on the ears and each side of the facial disc were ginger red. I clambered around behind the bird and saw a red shoulder but could not see if it was wearing a transmitter. As I thrashed about, the bird turned its head but hardly stirred inside its woody retreat.

I returned the next day with Ben Cacace and Bill Berliner. As we scuffed through leaves, a bird round enough to be a screech owl flew up in front of us and disappeared over some rocks. It looked like a darkish silhouette as it rose on wide silent wings, gliding forward in a long low arc. This may have been the gray screech owl. It's former resting place seemed exposed and near the ground. Neither bird is using the owl boxes at Hallett Sanctuary. When winter comes, all the owls will seek roosts, either in the boxes or in tree crevices.

Autumn Delights

A young red-headed woodpecker was seen at Tanner Spring in late October. I looked for it there without success and decided to try the Locust Grove. As I walked south through old locusts and plantings of new locusts, I heard a woodpecker yuck-yucking like the red-bellieds, but the pitch was higher. A sapsucker? When I reached the southern end of the grove, near the Shakespeare Theatre, I suddenly saw the flash of large white wing patches. Oh joy, the red-head! Well, actually it's young, and topped with that funny brown color, which will freckle into tiny red feathers this winter. I felt so pleased to see it I decided to go put it in the bird book. I heard voices and was joined by Bob DeCandido and Brian McPhillips who said they had seen it the day before and that everyone



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had been putting this bird in the bird book. They saved me a trip to the Boat House and I had the pleasure of finding the bird on my own.

Why do woodpeckers like black locust trees to stash nuts in and make winter homes? I guessed because the wood is softer to hammer with beak and head. Lorraine Knopka, Assistant Director of Horticulture, corrected me. She says locust trees are one of the hardest woods to cut. So why do woodpeckers favor them? Well, the bark is deeply furrowed and thick. Acorns and other nuts can be placed between 2 ridges and hammered too deep for birds with shorter bills to pry out. The old locusts are full of nest holes, so if the center of the tree is hard, the circumference is peckable.

Other birds are appearing this fall to delight the bird watchers. On October 30, groups of birders were thrilled to see a male hooded warbler decked out in fancy spring duds. The bird was so bright you could pick him out hopping on grass and low tree limbs between the rock outcrop and the Meer just north of the Conservatory Garden. Lenore Swenson kindly led me to it and when I returned later, there was Bob DeCandido with some of his group. We all admired the warbler and then a pair of late dragonflies, *Sympetrum vicinum* or yellow-legged meadowhawk. These lovebugs landed on at least 2 of the bird watchers so everyone could have a close look. It was a cool day and I think the attraction to humans was for heat. Dragonflies must keep warm enough to fly— especially for a quick escape during mating. These late dragonflies are the last to be seen in our park, and even stay into November if the weather is mild. The males have lovely red bodies, just right for fall. On Marathon Day I was at the Dana Center and heard about a chat that was seen on the island of Turtle Pond. By the time I got there, police had cordoned off much of the park. We saw a kingfisher fishing, but no chat. Farther north I saw another yellow-legged meadowhawk, sunning, not mating and 2 orange sulphur butterflies.

Flowers to See and to Plant

The chrysanthemums in the North Garden of Conservatory Garden looked wonderful in late October, a great circular splash of pink, pale purple, gold and salmon. Their pastel colors lift the spirits and I stopped to sketch a few, but what they deserved was homage from an impressionist painter. I returned to see them again on Sunday. They were covered with bumblebees and honey bees. Many of the bees wore bulging orange pockets on their thighs, that afternoon's pollen harvest. Around the fountain of capering maidens, the carpet of twisting green plants is dotted with the bright blue flowers of winter pansies. When the chrysanthemums are replaced with spring bulbs, the pansy-carpet will still be there to brighten winter days.



On October 30, I visited the South Garden of Conservatory Garden and saw Tuesday volunteers planting hundreds of bulbs for spring. I hugged my friend Barbara Stonecipher, who has been a volunteer in that garden and in Riverside Park for decades. She is knowledgeable and generous and has answered many questions about flowers for this newsletter in the past 7 years. Thank you, Barbara!

I also got a chance to interview Lynden Miller, who plans and directs gardeners in Central Park and designs gardens over the city. She said the day after the bombing of the World Trade Center, she got a call from Hans Van Waardenberg of the B&K Bulb Co. in the Netherlands. He has been selling thousands of bulbs to the Central Park Conservancy for years and he feels an affection for our once-Dutch city, New Amsterdam. What could he do to make New Yorkers feel better? Lynden asked if he had any extra bulbs. He did. They settled on yellow daffodils and tulips,

because yellow is the traditional color for remembrance. Mr. Van Waardenberg shipped half a million daffodil bulbs and 90 thousand yellow tulip bulbs to New York Harbor. The City of Rotterdam and the Rotterdam Port Authority donated another half-million daffodils and 40 thousand tulip bulbs. The Netherlands Chamber of Commerce joined the gift-giving and donated 40 thousand tulip bulbs for Battery Park. How grateful we are to the Dutch for their unexpected kindness and largess. What do we do with a million daffodils and 170 thousand tulips? We plant them— in parks, community gardens, along highways and around public plazas and recruit volunteers from 3,000 organizations to help with the planting.

Alice Lichtenstein, who works for the Central Park Conservancy, said she visited the Dairy as a volunteer on Saturday, October 27. She said she signed the memorial book as did Chris Seita and they planted bulbs in a small lawn north of the Dairy and south of the highway. The soil had been dug, tilled and marked out with small plots. Alice and Chris each planted a bulb and watched children do the same. Each child was given small gloves and little trowels and shown where to dig, how deep, which end of the bulb to put at the bottom, how to cover the bulb and how to tamp down the soil. There was a Halloween event that day and one woman dressed as a butterfly watched what the children were doing. She went to the Dairy to sign the remembrance book and returned to plant a bulb, too. Alice said this was a low-key endeavor, they didn't recruit the people passing by.

Another plot was dug near the Dana Center, south of 110 St and beside the wall along Fifth Ave. I called Anne McCollough, told her about the planting and asked her to take her son, James, and a camera to Dana. On Saturday, October 27, the whole family went and Anne sent me charming pictures of James. I picked one that looked like real digging and made this sketch from it.

On Tuesday, I dug deep holes and planted 4 bulbs, under the direction of Stephanie Watters who is in charge of this memorial effort at Dana Center. On Marathon Sunday, she gave me an interview that cheered me up. The garden has been visited by many people. On October 31, 232 people came, registered, wrote comments and planted bulbs. On the first of November, 475 people did the same. There were 190 planters Nov. 2 and 150 Nov. 3. It's nifty that more than 1050 people planted memorial bulbs in less than a week.

Lots of school kids as young as first graders and as old as fifth graders came to plant. One woman said she came to celebrate her 71st birthday. Although these people were invited, parks didn't turn the public away. Passers-by planted, too. Stephanie said one man planted a bulb in memory of his brother. They were both working in one of the towers and he left his brother there. Quite a few families came, she added, and every member planted a bulb.

I looked at the comments in the book. People said it was a chance of rebirth, a chance to make something positive, or, it was in memory of all the loved-ones lost. One person wrote, Hope all is peace when these flowers bloom. I was delighted to see one entry with a name and long comment beside it, all in Chinese. I went back to my own name which had no comment and added, Thanks to the Dutch! If you also want to thank them, you can write to: **Annelies Boogaardt, Consulate General of the Netherlands, 1 Rockefeller Plaza ~ 11th floor, New York, NY 10020.** She will send your words on to the Dutch government. You can also call the Parks Dept. at **212-360-1357** to learn if volunteers are still needed in the 200 parks across New York before the ground freezes. There are lots of New Yorkers that need the solace of a garden, and gardens that need attention now and a burst of yellow next spring. To paraphrase Eleanor Roosevelt, it is better to plant a bulb than to nurse gloom and doom in the dark.



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THE ELLIOTT NEWSLETTER

Nature Notes from Central Park

Vol. 7 No. 6

November~ December 2001

Christmas Count Saga

The weather cooperated. It was cold and overcast but not windy and nothing was falling from the skies. As we assembled at the South Pumping Station of the Reservoir, Parks Commissioner Henry Stern and his dog arrived to greet us and wish us god-speed in front of the cameras of Mag/Rack "a new video-on-demand television service." I was glad to have a chance to thank him on record for allowing us to use the Arsenal Gallery to tally birds and have a party at the end of the count. Henry Stern has extended this kindness to us for 3 years in a row. Having struggled for space at the Boat House for the previous 13 years, I am VERY grateful for a warm and cozy room on the third floor. The Commissioner looked pleased and called me by my park name—Ovenbird. Then mentioning his park name, he turned and to cheers flashed white letters on his blue blazer—STARQUEST. I will miss him.

It was time to fill out name-address cards and take in money. We told people to print their names clearly to appear correctly in "American Birds." This year, for the first time, each paid counter will receive a copy of that magazine. Over 60 people signed cards and paid the \$5 fee to National Audubon. We make them hand in money with the cards to make counters and cash come out even. My thanks go to Gaye Fugate, Bob Mello and Anne Lazarus for handling the cards and the money. Gaye took in more cards and money from late counters at the end of the count. And bless her, she typed up all the counters in alphabetical order and gave me the totaled money. That is a LOT of WORK and I am very grateful. Every year more people count than register. Some come late, some do small areas of park and some don't care to see their names in print. My guess is that about 70 people (others guess 80) participated in this count.

After the cards and cash were collected, we divided into teams to count birds in the 7 sections of the park. Most of the experienced counters wanted sections 1 and 2, the North End of the park, or 5, the Ramble, all woody areas where they expected to see lots of birds. Some of these people are grimly determined to get to their section of choice. One man called the evening before to say that if he couldn't count the feeders he was not coming. I had been working on details of this count for a month and was so exhausted all I could do was laugh helplessly.

New counters tried to listen to my instructions, while others tried to leave immediately or talk loudly to each other in order to drown out my megaphone. Despite the hubbub I passed out yellow tally sheets to use as they walked, blue sheets with a set of rules and tips for the count, and light green sheets with maps of each park section. I assigned section leaders, and the crowd split up in groups. We were lucky enough to have Steve Chang, an excellent and modest birder. I tried to get someone to take the Southwest or Section 7, but counters pretended not to hear. Eventually Steve came forward and quietly said he would do it with one or two others. Next year, if he comes back, he will have first choice of the park.

At last we dispersed, I with 5-year-old James McCollough and his parents, Anne and David. With us was James Nicoloro, the producer of "A Walk Through Central Park." I'd invited him to (1.) film the Christmas Count and (2.) interview young James, who was in my fall bird classes. The McColloughs had been to see the "Nutcracker" the night before and as we walked south to the Ramble, young James looked tired and chilly. At the Point I gave him some seeds to throw. In came a cardinal, matching the red of James' jacket. James knows proximity is the magic part about birds and looked joyful. I saw a bit of the film a little later and both James and the cardinal look terrific.

JAMES ANDREW SCOTT McCOLLOUGH

Dear Ms Boogaardt,
 THANK YOU for
 the Bulbs your Country
 SENT to New York City.
 I Will Be happy to
 see All the yellow
 FLOWERS in the SPRING.
 We Will ALWAYS remember
 the People who died in
 the World Trade
 Center ON SEPTEMBER
 11, 2001.
 Please Tell ALL The
 People in The NETHERLANDS
 THANKS!

LOVE,

JAMES

P.S. I turned 5 on Sept. 6 2001.

We stopped at the Boat House and young James warmed up at the fire and had a hot chocolate. He told the camera of planting a bulb from the Netherlands government in memory of the people lost at the World Trade Center. Then he read his thank you letter to Ms. Boogaardt. The letter was 4 sentences long, contained some hard words besides her name, and James had just written it that morning. He read all the words with concentration but without much volume. He was asked to do it again. The first sentence was a little louder but the rest sank away. He was asked to do it again. By now we could hear more of the letter. When James was asked to do it a 4th time he began to cry in frustration. But he pulled himself together and did it for the last time. We were glad to leave the Boathouse and look for more birds.

As we moved south past Wollman Rink, Anne said she and James go skating there every Wednesday morning and James has a skating teacher. We admired the newly restored 59 St. Pond from the bridge and James pointed out the mallards in the water.

We entered Hallett Sanctuary and counted red-bellied woodpeckers, a downy, house finches and jays. I looked up in time to see the red screech owl flying west along the pond and trees that line 59 St. It was carrying a large mouse or small rat and we could see the tail streaming out behind. Good sight but we couldn't count the bird because it had been introduced into the park earlier this year. As we left Hallett Sanctuary we met the young man who was counting the Southeast Section and gave him our bird list.

James and his parents said good-bye and left for a party in Staten Island. Big James and I went to the zoo. He interviewed me about the history of the Christmas Count and my part in it. He wanted me to look directly into the camera, but I was exhausted and needed to look at a face-his. We went to the party in the Arsenal Gallery. James saw the other camera crew and decided to leave.

The room was filling up and bustling with activity. Soon 100 people filled the place. I was amazed to see the elevators open up and mothers with rafts of children step out. None of them were at the beginning of this count and I wondered where and what they had counted. People helped themselves to Soup-in-a-Sandwich and a beverage. There was a big cake decorated with my bird logo and "102 Christmas Bird Count." I asked a nice young man to take a picture of the cake and he did. People said they missed the bird-logo sugar cookies of the 2 previous parties. I did too, but the cookies cost a dollar apiece and the cake, made by a local high school cooking class, cost less.

I greeted Alex Brash, and his staff proudly showed me their printed program of events adorned with a handsome black crow. All sorts of people from all sorts of organizations were going to speak, which seemed like a Russian Banquet without the vodka. I looked over the program. "Where's my name," I asked. "What?" "My name. I don't see it here." "Oh my God," said Alex Brash, "I'll introduce you." He did. After telling us about the activities of the Urban Park Rangers, he spoke of me with lavish praise, calling me the "Queen" of Central Park. Jeff Nulle taught me to listen to applause and I did. It was steady and sustained. Soothing balm, after all the gruntwork.

Dick Gershon, Vice President of NYC Audubon Society, told us about his organization and about having been part of a 1947 Christmas Count— in snow. Later he wrote that count was held Dec. 26, with only 8 people to cover all of Manhattan. There were 3 people to count Central Park, 1 rode the Staten Island Ferry, 3 were in Inwood and Ft. Tryon Parks and he was alone in Riverside

Park. He trudged from 79th St. to the 125th St. Viaduct, where he counted blackbirds, partially shielded from the weather. The snow was falling when they began but they were convinced it would stop. By noon it was impossible to go on. Their grand totals were 33 species of birds, 10,730 individuals and 27 inches of snow. It was the Blizzard of 47, the snowiest day in NYC history.

The film crew of Mag/Rack, who never tested their grit in a blizzard, set up a screen to show a mercifully short sample of their work for Bird Sight called Urban Birder. The film was on the red-tailed hawk and contained remarks by me which I had forgotten about and wish they had, too. There was a short talk on screen by Kenn Kaufman, Editorial Advisor to Bird Sight/Mag Rack. Kenn Kaufman also talked to us in person, telling us how pleased he was to be with us that day. Coming from a Southern state, they are used to counting many more species but he was sure we enjoyed the birds we saw. We learned that bird enthusiasts can now pay and view the company product on Long Island but not in Manhattan.

In return for filming us, each counter was given a small gift bag containing a ballpoint pen, the January issue of Audubon magazine with an article on screech owl boxes by Kenn Kaufman and a Press Release: "102nd Annual 'Christmas Bird Count in Central Park' Sponsored by National and New York City Audubon Society, Urban Park Rangers, Mag Rack's BirdSight Video Magazine." Added to each gift bag was a video tape titled: "BirdSight TV December 2001 Special Edition Featuring 'Birding the Everglades', 'Watchlist: Swallow tailed Kite', 'Scrub Jay Report'".

When the speeches and promotions were over, we were ready to think about the real stars of the day—the birds—and the count of their numbers in our park. Green all-park tally sheets were distributed. I explained I would name each bird and call for numbers of that bird seen in each park section: 1- Northeast, 2- Northwest, 3- Reservoir, 4- Great Lawn, 5- Ramble, 6- Southeast and 7- Southwest. I would begin by calling each section by name but would then switch to the section numbers to save time.

The camera crew swooped about for close-ups of each section reporter and of me. I'd been suffering from a bad cold and had a nose to match Rudolph. Soon I thought, if that guy zooms his camera up my nostrils one more time, I will HIT him. He whispered in my ear, couldn't you call on them by section name? No, I said firmly, and we went right on.

We began with 43 "probables", the birds that show up most years. There were 3 great-blue heron for elegance, the mute swan family of 5, only 6 black duck but 414 mallard and a high of 218 Northern shoveler. We sighted 1 kestrel, and 8 red-tailed hawk, more ring-billed (377) than herring gull (246), 1046 pigeon and no owls except the introduced screech. We had all six woodpeckers; 47 red-bellied, 36 downy, 15 yellow-bellied sapsucker (!), 4 hairy (1 of them a female so we may have a nest next spring), 3 flicker, and this year 2 young red-headed woodpecker. (You can see the red-heads at the Locust Grove and at Tanner Spring.) We counted 225 jay and 20 crow.

There was a cornucopia of black-capped chickadees and tufted titmice—over 100 of each to augment our count and jolly up the winter. They are probably here in such delightful numbers due to a drought north of us which brought them down for food. The same reason may be why we counted 54 white-breasted nuthatch. We listed 89 robin, 52 northern cardinal and (yuk) 560 European starling. On a classier note, we saw 5 hermit thrush, 8 mockingbird, 2 eastern towhee, 13 fox sparrow, 18 song sparrow, 697 white-throated sparrow, 49 dark-eyed junco, 157 house finch, 59 goldfinch (the Niger thistle-seed feeders must be pulling them in) and 840 house sparrow.

Having completed the "probable birds," it was time for the "other." Birders sat up straighter and listened carefully. There were 2 pied-billed grebe, 1 double-crested cormorant, 15 snow goose (flying over), 2 mallard x black duck (hybrids listed on our count for the first time), 4 hooded merganser, 1 red-shouldered hawk, 1 coot, 1 fish crow, 6 Carolina wren (!), 1 catbird, 1 ruby-crowned kinglet, 2 golden-crowned kinglet (usually we get none or one—to have both species is amazing), 5 cedar waxwing and 1 Baltimore oriole.

There were several birds rare enough here to require a written description. I thought the Baltimore Oriole was one but was talked out of it because that bird has been seen frequently in recent Inwood Counts just north of us. Richard Lieberman wrote up the documentation of a Northern parula warbler, with the help and comments of Louise Frazz, Miriam Rakowski, Anne Lazarus, Wendy Paulson, Julie Craven, Alan Brenner and Gail Breeze, who had also seen the bird. The other required documentation was for an empidonax flycatcher, found by Kenn Kaufman and seen by his troops. Kenn said he thought it was a least flycatcher but wanted to see it again to check one mark that might make it a dusky. He would send me his report after checking the bird again.

Before we left, Bob DeCandido announced that his Sunday group had seen 2 red-breasted nuthatch. Later he called and put a message on my machine to say that he and Debby left the Arsenal to get a bite at the Zoo. They looked up and there were 2 peregrine falcon circling overhead. They made our 60th species for the day, a record high count. Ben Cacace has been watching one falcon for several years. In the past few months there seem to be 2. Oh joy! A nest near the Plaza!

People continue looking for birds during the count period, which is 3 days before and 3 days after the count day. After the count people saw 2 gadwall, 1 pintail, 1 brown creeper (the one that should have surfaced on count day), 1 brown thrasher (seen only as a flash on the 16th by restrained and virtuous Irene Warshauer who didn't feel she could count it), 1 rusty blackbird, 1 cowbird, 1 Cooper's hawk and 1 ring-necked pheasant. These reports have been problematical but I think the count period total, seen Dec. 17, 18, and 19, is 8 extra species. This Christmas Count broke all previous records for numbers of counters, count birds on the day and count period. A warm fall helped to keep birds around and MANY EYES searching the park helped to find and count them.

Kenn Kaufman sent me his documentation for the flycatcher, probably a least, unusual for the date. He alone had a brief glimpse of it in flight at 8:30 AM. He, Rich Guthrie, Lloyd Spitalnik and others saw it at 10:15 for about 5 minutes in the Maintenance Meadow of the Ramble, from a distance of 20-50 yards. Viewing conditions were fair to poor because the bird was mostly high in the trees. It would perch for 15-45 seconds, then fly to another tree as much as 100 yards away, making it hard to follow. The bird was quite small, sat very upright, tail down, wings slightly drooped. The tail, with distinctly notched tip, was average or shorter than average length for an empid. The bird's bill seemed fairly small-- not the large, wide bill of big empids like willow, alder or Acadian. Rich Guthrie got a good look at the bill from below and said it was small and stubby like a least flycatcher. The lower mandible was mostly pale with, perhaps, a dark tip. The wings were short, gray, and darker than the upper parts, the wing bars visible even at a distance. The eye ring was white, round and complete. The bird had a whitish throat, a gray wash on the breast and a yellow wash on the belly. When it landed it would quick-flick its tail up and down. It called at least 2 dozen times in 2 minutes, then stopped. The call, a thin "whit" or "pit" sounded to Kenn like a least, but similar to dusky or gray flycatchers. Finally, he ruled out all the flycatchers but least and dusky, not because they look alike but because both are variable. Western empids can show up here in late fall (as did western hummingbirds this fall). Kenn returned to the Ramble after the count but the bird didn't reappear. It goes into the records as "Empid. sp., probably least" These are his delightful sketches of the bird. Enjoy.

SHAPE AS
SEEN
OVERHEAD



DISTANT
SIDE VIEW
- POSTURE