

BIRDING WITH NOAH

BY **William C. Mansell**

Muttered imprecations wreathed my head like the mists swirling around Mount Robson. My feet, encased in footwear guaranteed to keep out both frost and moisture, thudded on the pavement of Parkside Drive, lonely at 7:30 a.m. of a Sunday. My thoughts returned again and yet again to the coziness of my bed.

It was the morning of December 26, 1936, the day of the Big Count, when Toronto's birders were out scouring the City's ravines and parks and lakesides in an attempt to eclipse all previous efforts in bird censusing. And, although I had been walking for an hour, all I could contribute was a staggering total of Starlings and House Sparrows and a pair of pedal extremities already complaining of fatigue.

I ran a finger around the inside of a damp collar and brushed away beads of perspiration from my brow with a rough sleeve. Past experience dictated warm clothing for protection against the frigid air of an early morn in December. And, as the day would be long, with no opportunity to run home for another sweater in event the mercury dipped still farther, garments had to be more than ample, bordering, if anything, on the superfluous. I had dressed for near zero temperatures, and the thermometer, as I discovered later, tapped fifty degrees during the day.

"We'll put you on your usual beat," Jim Baillie had said a few days before, when we met in his office in the R.O.M. to discuss preliminary plans. "You know, High Park, Sunnyside and the Humber north to Lambton."

This, the longest and possibly the most productive route, was an eagerly sought one. Years later, in the interests of humanity, it was chopped up. But, as it stood in 1936 and earlier years, it was not only a tiring route; its starting point seemed always to be as far removed from my home as possible. Which was the reason behind my caustic comment, "And we'll start, I suppose, somewhere in High Park?"

Jim nodded in confirmation, the vinegary tone of my question lost upon him. "I think that's best, don't you?"

Living at the tip of the Baby Point promontory, I didn't. A resume of my itinerary will explain why.

There was no point in using my car, as the beginning and end of the route were so far apart that a long walk back to the car was in store for me in any case. So, the starting point would be reached on foot with, I hoped, some assistance from public transportation. In order to make the rendezvous on time, I was obliged to leave the house at 6:30 a.m., reaching Jane Street while drivers of Sunday buses were still rubbing sleep from their eyes. By the time I had walked down Jane Street to Bloor and the next stage of public conveyances, I had covered about a mile and a half.

My first blasphemous outburst of the day erupted when I saw the tail end of a tram completing the loop. Remember, this was 1936, B. S. (Before Subway). I knew the habits of Toronto's street cars well. They operated with the malicious intent of frustrating weary, cold or late travelers -- and also to prevent pedestrians from reaching objectives on time.

I could have elected to stand around the terminus, suffering through impatience and the tedium of idleness. Instead, knowing that the infrequent night service offered by the Toronto Transit Commission continued just as infrequently through the early hours of Sunday morning, I carried on in the wake of the car, as it grew inexorably smaller and smaller.

Predictably, the next one and I reached Parkside Drive about the same instant.

There remained only the final leg down Parkside to the southeast corner of High Park where my party, if they had not wearied, would be waiting.

The generation or two which is following mine will wonder why an angled thumb was not used with good effect. In 1936, the practice of hitch-hiking, while not unknown, was frowned upon, even by birders. In addition, about the only vehicles abroad were milk carts, horse-drawn at that. The alternative was to continue to hoof it.

Only a distantly calling jay relieved the monotony of the walk now. Even Starlings and sparrows had disappeared. For obvious reasons, Kipling's "Boots" began running through my heed.

I saw the party, wandering aimlessly through the trees below Catfish Pond and said to my weary feet, "Take me to their leader." This person was Jim himself, cool, composed, fresh as the daisies that could have been blooming in the temperature of the day.

"See anything on your travels?" he asked, pencil poised over checking-card.

"One hundred and ninety-seven Starlings marching up and down again, sparrows, *sparrows*, SPARROWS, SPARROWS two hundred and fourteen and there's no discharge in the war?"

"Wow!" cried Jim. "That'll be a record, for this route anyway." Then, more or less incuriously, he added, "And what war are you talking about?"

"The War of the Roses."

Jim looked at me blankly.

"I rose early this morning," I explained, dropping the other way to squat on my heels.

"Well, rise again," ordered Jim.

"For now that you're here and have had a bit of a rest, we'll be off."

A rest! All of nineteen seconds? Looking up at him from my position near the ground, I inquired, "Where to?" "Bloor and Parkside, first."

Bloor and Parkside yet!

I had just come from there! But, like a marathoner entering his tenth mile, I tapped hidden reserves and followed the straggling group consisting of George Kennedy, Roy Russell, Frank Cook, the three Boissonneaus. Duke, Edna and Marie, and Jim Baillie, its leader.

The skins seen up the east road of High Park revived me somewhat and flogged failing spirits and lagging feet as we crossed the top of High Park. At Harcroft we split, Jim, Roy, Frank and I covering the east side of Grenadier Pond while the others, ignoring "No Trespassing" signs as is the wont of birders then and now, worked down the west side of the lake.

At Sunnyside, I began worrying about pneumonia. A light but chilly breeze was blowing in off the lake, heading straight for my uncovered neck, dipping down to my damp chest and bringing about an uncomfortable separation of flesh and saturated garments. Concern about health quickly dissipated when I spotted a Pintail, putting it on the Census list for the first time.

"It was nothing," I muttered, with becoming modesty, "I just..."

"How many Black-backs did you say, George?"

"... with the Mallards, and..."

"Three, Jim."

"...couple of steps to the left and..."

"I made it four."

"... and the neck stripe..."

"With Roy's, we'll say four Black-backs."

"... graceful form..."

"And a female Bufflehead with twenty scaups?"

"...didn't expect..."

"Bufflehead and scaups by Frank."

"... my first in winter..."

"There was a Coot, too."

"... very high male..."

"Oh, yes. Edna and Marie saw a Coot."

"Say, what about my Pintail?" I hollered, snatching the checking card from Jim's hand. Opposite Pintail I read, in his characteristically neat writing, "1, SS, BM," which I interpreted as "Pintail, 1, at Sunnyside, by B. Mansell." Rarely could you confuse that master statistician.

In tackling the Humber Valley, Jim deployed his forces again, sending George, Frank, Duke and me up the west side. Almost immediately the width of the terrain suggested we spread out, with George and I working about the second marsh which, now, is one of the three remaining of the original eight and possibly the only one to retain some semblance of its pristine appearance for this day.

It was a pleasure to work with George ("One of the best," Jim had said at one time), as he was a careful, conscientious observer, quick, but not hasty. Thus, when a sparrow, disturbed by our presence, dived into reedy cover, I, who had seen little of it, turned to George, who had been in a position to get a better view and asked, "Song?"

George, whose slight accent still betrayed his English birth, shook his head, correcting me with a single word that sounded like "scamp."

I walked on a dozen puzzling steps. The entire list of North American birds flashed by on my mental screen, yet nowhere did I see a bird of that name. Finally, as I had been appointed assistant tally-keeper, I made a big production of searching the checking card for the species in question.

"Where is that on the card?" I muttered, petulantly, as if to myself but actually trying to enlist George's cooperation and therefore elucidation.

He peered over my shoulder and pointed an English-born finger to the name preceding "Song Sparrow." I knew the English butchered "Cholmondeley" to come up with something like "Chumley," but never before did I know that at least one section of England rhymed scamp, damp, tramp and Swamp!

We were now well away from the lake and its cool on-shore breeze. Perhaps that had dropped altogether, contributing still further to the steady rise in temperature which, now, in sheltered spots, must have been close to sixty degrees. The morose clouds, sulkily scudding by all morning, suddenly darkened, and triggered by one muffled, rumbling clap of thunder, released a hard, driving rain which, had it continued indefinitely in that intensity, would have produced a second Great Flood in half the time of the first. In the brief spell of thirty minutes, it penetrated winter clothing, trickled down collars, left an aqueous coating on binoculars and converted the ground to a boggy moor (which George would have called a "more").

There were no buildings on the river's banks to offer shelter, not even a tumble-down boathouse. (There was one on the east side, at the third marsh, while the "Wanita" the boat livery, was still some distance to the north.) The trees, flaunting their nudity, offered not the slightest hope as potential umbrellas. We tucked binoculars inside jackets and hunched down into; upturned collars, aware that eyes, bleary from water-laden lashes, were going to have trouble identifying birds, if any were still abroad.

We reached the fourth marsh, impassable at the water's edge, and were forced to climb to the rim of the valley in order to circumvent it. None of the several paths upward was easily negotiated, even in dry weather, being close to vertical, with the only steps, for want of a better word, being the occasional tree-root, exposed through erosion. Now all paths were a mixture of mud, heavy snow and slushy ice. And with all the garments worn to combat the expected low temperature of December, the exertion left us as wet inside as out.

We were unable to continue on the rim for long, as fences and private property aggravatingly intervened, so, as better birding seemed indicated in and near the marshes anyway, we decided to return to the lower levels. Progress up had been two steps forward and one back. Progress down was much speedier, accomplished much in the fashion of a recumbent skier using a single ski where nature never intended one. While our skiing lacked many elements of grace, we were eminently successful in sweeping the paths free of mud and other unsightly debris.

Up and down we went again at the sixth marsh, surpassing the swabbing efforts at the fourth. And again, we saw-toothed at the eighth, although here we were not required to

climb right to the rim as a path around the point clung to the hillside about halfway up. This trail, no Yonge Street at any time, was now a soupy, sloping mixture best traversed wearing football cleats. And the slipperiest parts were invariably far removed from a tree or shrub that could be held to assist progress and prevent a fall into the river below.

We swept around the eighth marsh at the waters level, to rise again and emerge at the Bloor Street bridge on which stood our erstwhile leader, an ornithological Horatius, defying birders of any qualification to pass without first divulging a bird count.

For an appreciable length of time he regarded us without recognition, wondering, no doubt, if such disreputable people could possibly make some contribution to the Census. Not until I began an elaborate ceremony of introduction did he realize we were the errant ones he had been anxiously awaiting for some time.

"Why," he exclaimed, "We had no trouble at all! We Just..."

"...walked along the path by the river's edge, which is level all the way," I completed for him, continuing with, "And where were you during the cloudburst, and how come you're so dry?"

"It needed a bit of a sprint, but we made the shelter of the bridge on time," explained Jim.

At this point, the Boissoneaus and George called it quits, heading for the nearest transportation. The rest of us left the valley and proceeded soggly to my home for a belated lunch, which we were obliged to eat standing up, since to sit would have left damp impressions on the furniture. An hour after we had arrived and exactly eight hours after I had decamped on the worst birding ordeal of my life, we set out again, in a body, to cover the Humber between the Old Mill and Lambton.

A fine drizzle began to cover it at the same time. It was one of those misleading rains. Face or hold out your hand, and you were barely conscious of precipitation. Only when you had been exposed to it for a while did you realize how dampness was permeating your entire being. And, of course, once again binoculars were carried, for the most part, under jackets, requiring their constant transfer between there and the outside world.

It was scarcely worth the effort. The only find of interest was a small flock of four (questionably, five) blackbirds which launched a lengthy debate. Some were for calling them grackles, others contended they were Rustys. Consensus favoured the latter. Rust was beginning to cover everything.

All other birds seen were veritable water birds.

Mr. Mansell is a frequent contributor to the Ontario Naturalist.