

THE BRODIE CLUB

Minutes of the 859th Meeting

The 859th Meeting of the Brodie Club was held on Tuesday 15th May 1990 in the Faunal Laboratory, South Borden Building, U. of T., commencing at 8.05 p.m., with Paul Aird in the chair and Keith Reynolds acting as Secretary.

Fourteen members and six guests (Jennifer Young, guest of Young; Margaret Bodsworth, guest of Bodsworth; Maudie Reynolds, guest of Reynolds; Ann Logan and Kevin Scanlon, guests of Carrick, and Malcolm Corkill, guest of Auger) were present.

The Minutes of the 858th Meeting were read and adopted with minor corrections.

Announcements

Norman Martin reported on activities of the F.O.N. and commented upon recent brochures and pamphlets, copies of which were made available to members. An innovative course, "Women and the Environment" was brought to the attention of members.

McNicholl gave a report on the distribution of monies from the James L. Baillie Fund. Included among a total of some \$10,000 disbursed was \$2,200 in travel grants, funding assistance for the Rare Breeding Bird Project, a new project in support of an out-standing individual selected by the Society of Canadian Ornithologists, and other commendable undertakings.

Savage drew attention to a recent article by Paul Aird in the U. of T. BULLETIN of 7 May 1990. In a prominent, full-page article he expressed concern about the lack of adequate sensitivity and effort on the part of the university to include adequate weight to the maintenance of the historic and biological environment of the campus as development proceeds.

Surely the university administrative and academic communities' widespread concern for the environment should give high priority to its campus, where trees, lawns, brooks, and general environment have suffered irreparably under the impact of increasing pressures in the name of development.

Speaker of the Evening

Martin McNicholl, freelance naturalist and member of the Club, addressed the meeting on "The Cuban Connection: Training Bird Banders". He represented the Canadian Section of the International Council for Bird Preservation on a Canadian Wildlife Service-Long Point Bird Observatory project during 1988 and 1989 to teach the Cubans how to band resident and wintering birds.

Initial bureaucratic and logistic problems were formidable but eventually largely overcome, thanks in part to a number of high-profile Canadians, including Graeme Gibson, a prominent Canadian experienced in dealing with Cubans and their government. His company, "The Great Auk", arranges visits to Cuba for birders. He enthusiastically lobbied for Canadians to enter Cuba for the purpose of furthering knowledge of Cuban and Canadian ornithology. Cuba's outstanding ornithologist, Orlando Garrido, was an enthusiastic supporter of the project.

In recent years, Garrido has published, mostly in Spanish, a number of articles and books on birds and birding in Cuba. In the 1930's Thomas Barbou, an American botanist, visited Cuba and published on its botany and natural history. But his accounts are somewhat out of date and not generally available.

Although the log-jams were never totally breached, progress was made and the Canadian Wildlife Service sent experienced banders to Cuba to develop programs and train Cubans to carry on. The long-term goal was to learn more about the winter habits, movements, and migrations routes of birds wintering in Cuba. This included both residents and species which winter there but nest in Canada and the United States.

Geographically, Cuba is a strategic location for birds which migrate between Canada, the United States and South America, and winter in Cuba. Because, in the eyes of the Government of Cuba, the United States does not exist (and vice versa), Canadians are well positioned to pursue such studies.

After arriving in Havana, McNicholl and his compatriots initially found themselves with time on their hands. In the first year, three weeks of birding consisted of two weeks of banding and one of "scientific tourism". In 1989, the team spent three weeks banding and one working on publications in Havana.

That city and its environs were described as a land of contrasts. For example, there are few cars, mostly ancient, kept going by ingenuity and cannibalism. The rest are mainly Russian Ladas. Not only are the cars and their maintenance curious to Canadians, so are Cubans' driving habits and operating logistics.

McNicholl noted many cattle egrets - fairly recent carrivals, as they are in the rest of North America. Turkey vultures were everywhere; on one occasion they entered a resort area to feed on a dead dog. There were unconfirmed reports that they have become predators.

Among the interesting members of the team was Paul Hamel, from Tennessee, who may be the "world expert" on Bachman's warbler, which reportedly winters in Cuba but has yet to be seen by Hamel.

After developing a rapport with the Cuban National Academy of Science, it provided some potential banders from various branches of the government, one of whom was suspected by one team member of being a spy.

Some of the Cuban banders now carrying on the project received further training at Long Point Bird Observatory.

In the field stations, many formalities had to be observed, including a requirement of securing permits to be in the forests and the constant presence of "Forest Guards", who at least had the merit of familiarity with their assigned areas.

Mist nets were used to catch the birds. These were brought to the banding positions where the standard data were recorded in English and Spanish. U.S. Fish and Wildlife bands were used on one leg for Cuban endemics and, for AOU check-list migrants, U.S. Fish and Wildlife bands plus Museum of Canada supplementary address bands on the other leg. Banding was carried on at a variety of sites, including wet areas, dry savannahs, and thick and open forests.

Many endemics were banded in addition to the various Canada/U.S. migrants. It was tempting to concentrate on banding large numbers of birds, but the key objectives were to carry out scientific banding studies and teach the Cubans how to carry on the program after the Canadians left.

Banding in the first year was marked by a visit to Cienfuegos, where Barbou had studied in the 1930's. Shorebirds were banded in wet areas near La Salinas in the second year.

McNicholl's talk was well illustrated by coloured slides depicting the varied sites where he and his co-workers operated and the banded birds. The large number of species, many unknown to most of his audience, were of particular interest.

Continuance of the program is uncertain. Not surprisingly, given the many frustrations inherent in finding a path through the bureaucracy to get the show on the road, the agreements for the on-going project have not yet been signed.

Question Period

McNicholl had covered his subject so thoroughly that most of the questions were essentially commentaries and up-dates by members who had visited Cuba and found it an intriguing location for birding. The rest were from envious members who would like to go.

David Hussell, who had met some of the Cubans while they were at the LPBO, thanked the speaker, commenting favourably on the value of the project already attained and its potential contributions to North American ornithology.

Notes and Observations

Bodsworth: Two turkey vultures over eastern Toronto two weeks ago.

McNicholl: Waves of juncos, white-throats, white-crowns and other migrants recently, and an ovenbird today, in a small island of vegetation beside the Whitney Building (Queen's Park).

Hussel: Early waves of migrants during the early spring-like weather last month with subsequent intermittent starts, stops and delays with the return of alternately colder and warmer weather.

Carrick: Recent hatching of this year's first wood ducks.

Savage: Displayed pellets, presumed to have been of great horned owls, from a farm woodlot west of Toronto, contained remains of brown rats. This is unusual and may reflect an invasion from adjacent new sub-divisions.

He also displayed and commented on the skull of a 47-year-old hippopotamus from the Metropolitan Toronto Zoo.

The meeting concluded at approximately 10.30 p.m.

J.K. Reynolds