

THE 948th MEETING OF THE BRODIE CLUB

MINUTES

The 948th meeting of the Brodie Club was held on Apr. 18, 2000 in the Ramsay Wright building of the University of Toronto.

Chairman: Bill Crins

Recording Secretary: Oliver Bertin

Attendance: 24 members and four guests

Helen Parry Jones, guest of Jean Iron

Henri Selles & Joyce Peterson, guests of Bernard and
Claire Muller

Kyle Ferguson, guest of Don Huff

ANNOUNCEMENTS:

- Iron was elected as a member of the Club.
- The members discussed a petition to Hon. Michael Harris, Premier of Ontario, and Tony Clement, Minister of the Environment, written by Michael Boyer on behalf of the Club. The petition is attached. It requested a complete freeze on further development of the Oak Ridges Moraine until adequate planning processes are in place. The petition was signed by 23 members.
- Member Dr. William Rapley DVM, executive director of biology and conservation at the Toronto Zoo, invited members to spend their annual field day behind the scenes at the zoo starting at 10 am on Sunday, June 11. Members were asked to meet in the atrium. To get there, take Meadowvale Road north from Hwy 401. Turn left on Old Finch Ave. and left into the service complex on the north side of the zoo. The guard at the control station will direct members to the atrium.
- The Club donated \$100 in surplus funds to the Toronto Zoo. The tax receipt was awarded to Jennifer Young in a lottery of the members in attendance.
- Subsequent to the meeting, the volunteer-run Ontario Archaeological Society decided it had neither the staff nor the resources to produce "Birds from the Ground: The Record of Archaeology in Ontario." Executive director Jo Holden said the society will instead try to pursue publication through the Brodie Club or like organizations. She returned cheques that had been donated by Brodie Club members to help finance publication of the book.

Minutes of the previous meeting were approved with minor amendments.

SPEAKER:

As a member, Mary Boswell needs no introduction. She gave a slide presentation on her recent travels to Tierra del Fuego and Antarctica.

Antarctica 2000

Boswell journeyed south to Antarctica between Jan. 16 and Jan. 24 on an expedition organized by Toronto's Marine Expeditions and led by adventurer Laurie Dexter, a resident of Fort Smith, NWT. Dexter has skied from Russia to Canada via the North Pole and is planning to ski across Antarctica. He has been awarded the Order of Canada.

She flew overnight to Buenos Aires, where she spent 36 hours touring this lovely European city with its Spanish-style architecture, wide avenues, abundant tree-shaded parks and a vibrant street life. She flew on to Ushuaia at 54 degrees 49' south, an Argentinean city on the north side of the Beagle Channel near the tip of Tierra del Fuego where she joined the 'Akademik Ioffe,' a former Russian oceanographic survey vessel converted for tourists. Boswell travelled a total of 1,490 nautical miles or 2,760 km. on this ship, a voyage which earned this epitaph from one of her fellow travellers: "An Antarctic expedition is the worst way to have the best time of your life."

The ship left port at about 10 pm and headed across the Drake Passage to the Antarctic Peninsula, a rough 48-hour voyage marked by strong winds and tempestuous waves up to 40 feet high. Of the 100 passengers, only about 25 per cent joined Boswell for breakfast.

The true boundary of the continent is the Antarctic Convergence, a sharply defined zone where the cold polar waters meet the warmer waters from the north. The boundary is so distinct that the waters around Antarctica are known as the Southern Ocean.

The first glance of Antarctica was, as Capt. Sunter once said: "An unparalleled combination of grandeur, beauty, vastness, loneliness and malevolence." There were huge icebergs, glistening white, bare black mountains and a complete absence of any vegetation except for lichens on the rocks. The icebergs reached 60 feet high with "a wonderful blue colour" in the older ice. The travellers saw a huge mushroom-shaped iceberg that had turned turtle several times, and they heard ice falling in the distance, the only sound in this desolate landscape.

The first continental landfall was on the Antarctic Peninsula, a region of broad straits, mountainous islands, protected bays and narrow channels. The ship anchored in Neko Harbour at 64 degrees 50' south/62 degrees 33' west and at the abandoned Almirante Brown research station, and then moved on to nearby Paradise Bay.

Boswell saw large numbers of Gentoo Penguins, birds which are about 27 inches high and weigh 12 pounds. The penguins live a hard life on the rocky shores and cold seas of the continent. They build nests using small pebbles and can be seen standing completely erect with their beaks pointed skyward, making loud noises.

Boswell also saw Leopard Seals in the nearby waters, patiently waiting for a penguin to come close enough to eat.

She noted that penguins have the densest feathers of any bird, perhaps 70 per square inch. They are more likely to suffer from overheating than from the cold because heat can escape from only three parts of their anatomy, the base of their bills, their feet and the underside of their wings.

Kelp Gulls and Imperial Shags were also quite common on the nearby rocks.

The next day, Boswell travelled south to the Ukrainian Vernatski Research Station at 65 degrees 15' south and through very thick ice to the nearby Petermann Island. This area was populated by Adelie Penguins, which are smaller than the Gentoo Penguins and have a stubby beak and wonderful blue and white eyes. They were eating krill as evidenced by the pink stain on their chests.

Boswell found the Ukrainian station suited the environment because it was fully functional. But she was not impressed by the man-made remains at the Almirante Brown research station or the horrors of the whaling station on Deception Island. "Man-made remains are an insult to the pristine beauty of Antarctica," she said.

Globe & Mail travel writer Doug McArthur has an amusing story about the nearby Ukrainian Vernadsky research station, which was built by the British and operated as the famous Faraday station for many years. When the Ukrainian scientists took over the station in 1996, they were overjoyed to find boxes of luxury Western foods. But their glee turned to horror when they found the boxes contained dozens of bottles of Marmite, Bovril and hot mustard!

McArthur, by the way, took the same cruise in 1996 and he had the same reaction as Boswell. It was a fascinating but sometimes dreadful trip.

The Lemaire Channel, also known as Kodak Alley, was noteworthy for its snow, icebergs and lovely reflections of the mountains on the surface of the pristine clear waters.

About 40 Humpback whales swam by as the ship sailed to the South Shetland Islands, a 335-mile string of 11 main islands just off the Antarctic Peninsula. The whales were difficult to photograph and were at times identified only by the circle of froth that was left behind on the surface of the water when they dove.

An interesting part of the South Shetlands was Deception Island, a sunken but still active volcano. The wall of the volcano, the caldera, has collapsed at one spot allowing ships to sail through the gap into a sheltered bay, 13 kilometers across. There is still enough volcanic activity in the island to melt the snow and to heat pools of water warm enough to swim in. The volcano last erupted in the 1960s.

Because of its relatively warm climate and good harbour, Deception Island was adopted by whalers in the late 1800s. Many traces of that industry remain -- rotting buildings, blubber boilers and rusting whale oil tanks. There is even an abandoned airport and hangar, and the hulk of a wingless de Havilland Otter aircraft that was built in Toronto.

Bertin telephoned a friend at de Havilland after the meeting, and he was most interested in the moldering Otter. The de Havilland official said it could have been one of many that were sold to the Chilean air force in the early 1950s or one of a fleet that was bought by the U.S. Navy in 1955 for survey work in Antarctica during the International Geophysical Year.

Boswell saw abundant wildlife on Deception Island, including albatrosses and Cape Petrels (Pintados), a huge colony of tame Chinstrap Penguins, a species that has a thin black line under its white chin. South Polar Skuas hung around waiting to pounce on baby penguins and unprotected eggs. But, as in the Antarctic Peninsula, the vegetation was extremely limited. Boswell saw only mosses and lichens.

A short distance away at Hannah Point, the voyagers spied Elephant seals, more Chinstrap Penguins and the only bird in the Antarctic without webbed feet, the American Sheathbill. Boswell was also lucky enough to see a Macaroni Penguin. This elegant species was given that name by 19th-century explorers who were impressed by a demeanour and colouring that resembled a society dandy or macaroni.

The ship returned to Tierra del Fuego via Cape Horn, the southernmost point of South America at 55 degrees, 59' south, and then through the Beagle Channel to its home port of Ushuaia. The Horn is 1,300 miles south of the Cape of Good Hope and 600 miles below New Zealand's southernmost island.

Boswell stayed in Tierra del Fuego for several more days, touring the cold but gorgeous islands, the Beagle Channel and the huge national park. It is a fascinating area and very different from Antarctica. There were lots of mountains and salt-water channels, abundant wildlife and flora that included five species of deciduous trees, west-coast mosses, parasitic plants that resembled mistletoe, peat in the valley bottoms and lots of European lupins.

The wildlife included Austral Parakeets, Imperial Shags, steamer ducks, Black-browed Albatrosses, terns, Magellanic Penguins and colonies of sea lions.

QUESTIONS:

- The famed - and nearly naked - Yamana Indians of Tierra del Fuego are virtually extinct, wiped out by European immigrants and their diseases. Bertin said they were described by Charles Darwin in the 1830s and Joshua Slocum in the 1890s. Slocum described the Indians as wild men who would swim out to passing ships in the dark, climb aboard, kill the sailors and ransack the boat. Slocum found the perfect defence -- he threw carpet tacks onto the deck of his boat before he went to bed. The shoeless Indians stepped onto these tacks and promptly jumped overboard, shrieking in pain.

- Tierra del Fuego was given that name -- Land of Fire-- by Ferdinand Magellan in 1519 because of the many campfires used by the naked Indians to keep warm. They even lit fires in the bottom of their canoes. There are no volcanoes in the area.

- Boswell did not see any Canadian beavers but she heard a lot about them. William Carrick said 40 beavers were imported from Manitoba in 1947. They have since multiplied to 20,000 and have spread into Chile where they are causing considerable damage. The beavers are not suitable for the fur-trade because the weather is not cold enough to produce a good pelt.

- About 100 tourists travelled to Antarctica on the trip. This group was too large for much one-on-one, individual attention.

- The skies over Antarctica were cloudy most of the time with little brilliant sunshine. The mid-summer days were longer than the endurance of the travellers. The sun rose before 6 am and set after 10 pm.

- The Lemaire Channel - Kodak Alley - has cliffs that are too steep for glaciers to build up.

- Boswell would like to return to Antarctica to see it in its many moods. "You need more than one trip to fully appreciate it."

The speaker was thanked by Falls.

NOTES & OBSERVATIONS:

- Ron Tasker reported seeing a Clarke's Grebe and a California Towhee on a recent trip to San Francisco;

- George Bryant found an old log in his toolshed that was covered in two kinds of silky material. He checked with an entomologist and found the silk was spun by small microlepidoptera moths about one inch across. These are sometimes referred to as ghost moths because of their three-minute flights;

- Claire Muller spied a war between sparrows and Chickadees over a hollow Tree of Heaven that had a five-inch opening near the top and a perfect nesting spot inside. The Chickadees were first on the scene, and they promptly started to build a nest inside the tree. A group of jealous sparrows soon appeared and tried to drive the Chickadees away so they could take the nest as their own. But Bernard Muller came to the Chickadees' rescue and built a cover over the opening with a hole that was big enough for the Chickadees but too small for the sparrows. The Chickadees soon got used to the cover and darted in and out building their nest, leaving a very angry group of sparrows chattering outside.

The meeting adjourned at 10:08 pm.

THE NEXT MEETING:

The next meeting will be held on May 16 at 8:00 pm in Room 432 of the Ramsay Wright Zoological Laboratories when Carrick will talk on "The History of Wildlife Filming."

The annual field day will be held on June 11 at 10 am when Rapley will offer a behind-the-scenes tour of Toronto Zoo.