

THE BRODIE CLUB



ROYAL ONTARIO
MUSEUM OF ZOOLOGY
BLOOR ST. AND AVENUE RD.
TOR. ONTO 5.

The 951st MEETING OF THE BRODIE CLUB MINUTES

The 951st meeting of the Brodie Club was held on Oct. 17, 2000 in the Ramsay Wright Zoological Laboratories of the University of Toronto.

Chairman: Jim Rising
Recording Secretary: Oliver Bertin
Attendance: 21 members and six guests

GUESTS:

Marc Johnson, guest of Jock McAndrews
George Fairfield, guest of David Hussell
Warren Clements and Roy Smith, guests of Sandra Eadie
Eleonora Bertin, wife of late member Leonard Bertin and guest of Oliver Bertin
Vicky Draper, guest of Michael Boyer

The December meeting was moved to Dec. 12, the second Tuesday in the month, to avoid a conflict with Christmas. Minutes of the previous meeting were approved with minor changes.

ANNOUNCEMENTS:

Harry Lumsden reported that a regional meeting of the Federation of Ontario Naturalists will be held in Oshawa on Nov. 18. Fund-raising will be discussed. The FON is selling cards illustrated by wildlife artist Robert Bateman. The cards depict a moose and are suitable for Christmas or other occasions.

McAndrews reported that several discount bookstores, including Book City in the Beaches area of Toronto, are selling 1980 editions of Peterson's Field Guide to the Birds of Eastern North America for \$8.95. He suggested that they would make good Christmas presents.

Bill Carrick said he was accepting membership fees, \$10 for regular members, \$15 for families and \$5 for corresponding members.

He offered members greetings cards illustrated by a photograph of Canada geese flying alongside his motorboat. The photographs were taken by a staffer from Equinox magazine, who was preparing a story on induced migration.

Carrick has gone through many boxes of Brodie Club correspondence, assisted by Claire Muller. They have filed the material chronologically and are now working on a bibliography assisted by Alexandra Eadie. Much of the material is irreplaceable. It will be offered to the library of the Royal Ontario Museum.

Carrick and Muller found that Brodie Club meetings were very formal in the early days, with detailed reports and professionally printed minutes. There were also many amusing items. Muller said she found a letter from the ROM authorities saying visiting privileges would be removed if members continued to smoke in the museum elevator.

Carrick came across a comedy written by invertebrate zoologist Jack Oughton in 1930 that foretold the minutes of a Brodie Club meeting in the year 2000 A.D. Oughton predicted an invasion of Martian demi-men in the year 1970 A.D., the annihilation of the earth-people and the subsequent death of the Martians from lack of their essential intra-planetary nutrients. A few Brodie Club members survived the invasion and met aboard the houseboat Gehenna for the 1600th meeting of the Brodie Club. The members reported a variety of zoological observations, including a 15-foot catfish, banding experiments with angels, a Barbary unicorn, the finding of the spawn of the Greater Spotted Dragon and the discovery of two specimens of louse and one species of flea in the chairman's beard. The members were unsuccessful, however, in their search for the three-headed dog Cerebus.

SPEAKER:

Eadie was introduced by Bertin, a co-worker at The Globe & Mail. Eadie has had a long history of foreign travel including summers in Turkey, where her father was a Canadian engineer setting up a Northern Electric telephone cable factory. She grew up in Montreal, attended universities in Canada, England and Germany, and has lived and worked in Ontario, New Brunswick and British Columbia. She has traveled to New Mexico, Bermuda, East Africa and all over Ontario, and spends her spare time chasing obscure birds.

She was hired by The Globe as a financial analyst in 1986 after a stint at I.P. Sharp where she developed on-line economic and financial data bases. She has also worked as an information officer for the New Brunswick and B.C. governments. At The Globe, she writes a four-day-a-week column which uses charts to illustrate statistical trends in the financial world. An avid birdwatcher, she has proved to be an invaluable resource for reporters who need a species identified. Among her most determined projects is a one-woman campaign to replace Peter Whelan, The Globe's late bird columnist. She has been a member of the Brodie Club since September 1999.

French Polynesia, the Cook Islands and northern Queensland
through the eyes of a naturalist

The Eadie family consists of five siblings, parents, children, spouses and friends who meet every two years for a reunion, usually in a location close to one of the family. This year, a brother living in Australia chose Rarotonga in the Cook Islands as an appropriate meeting place, giving Eadie a good reason to visit French Polynesia, other islands in the Cooks, the Great Barrier Reef and Cape York at the north-eastern extremity of Australia.

The South Pacific islands seem remote because they are usually found at the far edge of the world map, surrounded by blue ocean. However, they are part of a series of islands which are connected culturally, albeit tenuously, back to Asia. The Cook Islands lie west of French Polynesia, about 4,000 km north-east of New Zealand and just north of the Tropic of Capricorn.

Polynesia consists of islands in various stages of geological development, all formed by volcanic action. Over time, the Pacific tectonic plate under the volcanoes moved, taking the mountains away from their original hot spot. The mountains slowly eroded, and their weight caused them to sink back into the plate.

Meanwhile, coral grew at the edge of the mountains, at their preferred spot just below the surface of the water. As the mountains sank, the coral grew higher and higher to stay just below the surface. Eventually, a shallow lagoon formed around the tip of the sinking mountain, encircled by a coral reef, extending hundreds of meters deep. Sometimes, the coral could not build fast enough, and the island became an underwater seamount, consisting of fossilized coral and volcanic soil. Sometimes, earthquakes buckled the plate and the seamount would rise above the surface again, creating yet another kind of island.

Bora Bora in French Polynesia is a volcanic island remnant, an "almost atoll", characterized by a sharp and craggy central lava peak from which most of the softer soil has been eroded. It is surrounded by a lagoon and coral reef. Eadie stayed with her sisters in a beach-front hut, standing on stilts in the water. They could fall out of their rooms into the water below and snorkel after green moray eels and other coral fish. Brown Noddies flew above. Breadfruit, mangoes and flowers are so plentiful on the island that they have become a key element of the local culture.

Rarotonga is a fairly young extinct volcano, a mountain island, covered in forest. The central area is uninhabited, with farming on the edges of the highlands along the shore. Eadie saw many flowers on Rarotonga. A highlight was the Neinei, a species of Polynesian sunflower, which has adapted on that one island to become a flowering tree. Fauna included monarch flycatchers, tropicbirds, hermit crabs living in shells of many sizes and shapes, as well as geckoes, shrimp, octopus and sea urchins. The flying fox or fruit bat has also reached Rarotonga, probably by itself. Many other species have been introduced, including the Polynesian rat, cats, dogs and roosters, all of which are ubiquitous.

Rarotonga has set aside the Takitumu Conservation Area, a wonderful reserve for native plants and home of two of the world's rarest birds: the Rarotonga Monarch and the Rarotonga Starling. Local authorities have reduced the number of predatory cats and rats in the park, allowing the number of Monarchs to double to more than 200. It is also a wonderful reserve for native plants.

The Cook Islanders have so-called taboo areas where plants, coral animals and fish are left undisturbed. This has allowed a wide variety of flora and fauna to survive on the island, despite the needs of the local population. Dancing is an important part of the Polynesian culture. Eadie attended a performance and found that dance followed a dramatic story-line, akin to a Chinese opera.

After Rarotonga, Eadie traveled to Aitutaki, a much older island where the central volcano has sunk almost to sea level. The lagoon on this island rivals that of Bora Bora with its beautiful white sands. Birds here include three phases or morphs of the Pacific Reef-heron, white, pied and dark. The blue live mostly on the rocky shore and the white mostly on the blazing white beaches of the outer coral reef.

The nearby island of Atiu is a fossilized coral (makatea) reef that was pushed back to the surface by earthquakes. It is the home of the Chattering Kingfisher, unique to Polynesia, and of the Atiu Swiftlet, a strange cave bird which uses echo-location to find its way through the crevices of its pitch-black home. Eadie distinctly heard the bird change its tune from song to click as it entered its cave.

After Polynesia, Eadie flew to Cairns on the Australian mainland north of Brisbane and drove all the way north to Cape York, the extreme northern extremity of Australia, only 150 km from Papua-New Guinea. Cape York Peninsula has never been glaciated and there are many ancient species of plant and animal. The region is lovely, rocky and mainly forested around the edge, with cane fields and cattle ranches in the inhabited areas. The road to the Cape is impassable in the wet season and navigable with great difficulty for the rest of the year. Her tour group used four-wheel drive trucks to pass over huge boulders, deep rivulets and narrow roads on the way north. On the way, Eadie visited Black Mountain National Park, an area marked by granite scree slopes covered with a black fungus. The rocks are very loose and locals are periodically buried when they dig into the scree.

Eadie also found a wide variety of termite mounds in the area, some six metres tall. Some termite species glue leaves together to form a home, while others cover trees with mud. There was a huge variety of trees in the areas, including frangipani, white gum or ghost trees and paper bark trees. Mangrove swamps were common at the north end of the continent, in tidal salt-marshes populated by sea-water crocodiles. The crocodiles are reputedly very dangerous but the ones Eadie saw on the Daintree River were asleep. Other animal species included giant green frogs, crabs, green snakes, several kinds of kangaroo, crayfish-like yabi and two very well camouflaged Tawny Frogmouth birds. Parrots were everywhere, especially Sulphur-crested Cockatoos, which are so noisy many Australians dislike them intensely. Kookaburras and Rainbow Lorikeets are also common.

One of the highlights of Eadie's trip was her experience with Southern Casowarries, primitive dinosaur-like animals two metres tall, that she encountered at a guesthouse called Cassowary House, near Kuranda one hour north-west of Cairns. These birds, usually a cock and six-month-old chick, would walk up to the house door late every afternoon looking for food, like giant turkeys with a blue neck and a bony comb.

"It was a wonderful place," she said.

The speaker was thanked by Rising, who commented on the strange birds that he has seen in Australia. "It's as close to another planet as you're going to get," he said.

NOTES & OBSERVATIONS: "David Hussell banded a probable Bicknell's Thrush at Innis Point (west of Ottawa) on 30 September. To try to confirm the identification he examined 16 specimens labelled as Bicknell's Thrush in the Royal Ontario Museum, but he thought that none of them was [were] correctly identified." Rising noted that birds are sometimes identified incorrectly in museum collections.

Jean Iron has found melanistic garter snakes on the Leslie Street spit and Toronto island. In one group, 10 of the 30 snakes were dark-hued. She suspects that they head back to their hibernaculum in October. She said after the meeting that the Heermann's Gull appears to have left its year-long home on Polson Street on the Toronto waterfront and flown south for the winter. It appeared agitated one day, and was later seen flying over the spit. It hasn't been seen since.

Harry Lumsden reported that 303 Trumpeter Swans appear to be living in southern Ontario, between lakes Ontario and Huron. Another group appears to be living near Kenora and between nine and 12 in the Rideau area. Fourteen of these birds have successfully nested in the wild, and produced 42 cygnets.

The meeting adjourned at 10: 1 0 pm.

NEXT MEETING:

The next meeting will be held on Nov. 21 in Room 432 of the Ramsay Wright Zoological Laboratories when George Bryant will speak on his recent rip around the world: "Around the world in 180 days: Natural History on Seven Continents."

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BILL CARRICK'S CANADA GEESE

For three decades, Canadian naturalist and filmmaker Bill Carrick has conducted imprinting experiments with Canada geese, training them to fly with boats for photographic purposes and in a room-sized wind tunnel for scientific study. His ambition is to fly an ultralight airplane south with a flock of Trumpeter Swans to help reestablish their traditional wintering sites on the east coast of the United States.

Photo by Kevin Scanlon