

THE BRODIE CLUB
Minutes of the 872nd meeting

The meeting took place at the Faunal Lab in the Borden Building on 17 December 1991 at 8 pm. Norman Martin was in the chair and Bruce Falls took the minutes. The roll call was answered by members. Guests were Mary Tasker, guest of Tasker, Yvonne Bendell, guest of Bendell, Frank de Matteis, guest of Carrick, Jennifer Young, guest of Young, and Nadine Litwin, guest of B. Falls.

Minutes of the 871st meeting, written by Riley were read by Savage. A few corrections were made to the minutes, which were approved as corrected.

Norman Martin reported on FON affairs and distributed literature dealing with a variety of issues.

The speaker, Dr. David Russell, being a member of the club, needed no introduction. His subject was, "Declines in Neotropical Migrant Birds: How Good is the Evidence?" His talk dealt with birds that breed in the Nearctic Region and migrate to the Neotropics. The speaker began by showing and quoting a number of articles that suggested clearing of Neotropical forests was resulting in declines of North American birds. O'Connor also referred to the breakup of woodlands in North America as a factor in declines. Terborgh's book "Where have all the birds gone?" was cited as being a balanced account, despite its sensational title. One of the major studies raising these issues was by Robbins et al. based on the Breeding Bird Survey (BBS). Their data showed major declines in birds that migrate to the tropics between 1978 and 1987, while species that stay in North America showed no such trend.

Based on these perceived declines, a number of programs are underway to publicize and hopefully reverse them. One such program is Partners in Flight, funded by the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation in the USA, which was established to solicit private funds to match government money. This program enlisted federal and state agencies and NGO's. (Recently the Canadian Wildlife Service consulted other agencies and NGO's regarding possible Canadian efforts to parallel Partners in Flight).

Literature released by action programs seemed to accept declines in North American songbirds as well established. Partners in Flight brochures depicted downward trends in selected species from 1966 to 1987. Their maps showed most declines in the Northeast. The National Audubon Society's kit, "Birds over Troubled Forests" stated that songbirds had declined by more than 70% due to forest fragmentation in the US and Latin America. The speaker could find no basis for this claim but thought it might have been mistakenly transferred from another statement - that 70% of species were declining.

Was there evidence to support these claims of general decline? The speaker commented critically on a number of sources. Robbins et al. had tried to determine area requirements of birds in the

middle Atlantic states. Area sensitive species, requiring substantial forest tracts, included Wood Thrush, Red-eyed Vireo and Canada Warbler. Woodlot fragmentation reduced the probability of finding suitable habitat for such species. A recent review by Askins et al. in *Current Ornithology* gathered together data from woodlots. Only seven long term studies were found. Woodlots that were small and isolated showed declines but larger areas or those that remained the same (eg Trelease Woods, Hubbard Brook, Cheat Mountains) showed mixed results with some species increasing while others declined. In general, forested areas had decreased in early years but were increasing in size more recently.

The claim that 70% of Neotropical migrants were decreasing from 1978 to 1987, made by Robbins et al. was considered. They also showed, with respect to winter habitat, more forest dwellers than scrub dwellers declining. Both these trends were opposite in the earlier period 1966 to 1978, based on similar data. Russell concluded that species wintering in forests had changed more synchronously than those wintering in scrub, thus influencing the overall picture.

The speaker then turned to migration monitoring at Long Point from 1961 to 1988. These data had been analysed and compared with results from other sources to see if they were a useful measure of population changes. Various trends had been observed. Several species, including the Magnolia Warbler, showed declines in the 60's, increases in the 70's and declines in the 80's. Other species showing these trends were the "budworm warblers", Cape May, Bay-breasted and Tennessee. This pattern was not unlike that noted by Robbins et al. In general, Long Point data showed a good correlation with Ontario results of the BBS. The - + - pattern was strongest in tropical migrants while temperate migrants tended to show a + - + pattern over recent decades. Over the whole period, tropical migrants showed more decreases than increases, while temperate migrants showed little change. Nine tropical and three temperate migrants showed persistent decreases, e.g. Catbird, Brown Thrasher, Wood, Grey-cheeked and Swainson's Thrushes, Veery, Nashville Warbler, Northern Waterthrush, Ovenbird, Rose-breasted Grosbeak, White-throated Sparrow and Rufous-sided Towhee. Thrushes and thrush-like warblers seemed to show the most decreases. The Yellow-rumped Warbler showed continuous increase.

Overall, the speaker left the impression that neither the existence of general long-term declines of Neotropical migrants nor their causes were well substantiated. He drew attention to a symposium, "Bring Back the Birds", to be held in Toronto on March 28 and invited members to attend.

In a lively discussion that followed, a number of questions were raised and answered by the speaker. Tasker asked if migrants could concentrate in suitable habitat such as Long Point as landscape was altered. Russell hoped not. He also explained that BBS data were stratified to take broad habitat regions into account. Martin said that many observers complained of fewer birds in spring migration at Pelee. Russell thought they remembered particularly good days in the past and forgot the poor

ones. Bendell noted that the BBS did not extend far north. Russell felt this was a good reason to use migration data. He spoke of efforts to establish more migration stations, for example, at Thunder Cape. He thought there was a need to study the trend in each species and where it wintered. The idea that Central American habitat limited breeding populations of tropical migrants did not account for fluctuations in budworm species in the 1970s. Other questions dealt with British experience, winter birds and birds hitting buildings. Asked by Savage for a forecast, Russell supposed that a variety of fluctuations would continue.

McNicholl thanked the speaker for awakening our scepticism regarding a complex situation.

Members notes and observations followed:

Savage noted that the recently publicized handprint (he had a hand in it) had been dated 28,000 years BP, earlier than man had previously been known in the Americas.

B. Falls said that 112 species were recorded on the recent Christmas Bird Census at Long Point.

Young reminded us that Hugh Currie is running a birding "Hotline" via the Toronto Star.

Carrick fired another volley in the lead shot controversy. It has been reported that bismuth has the same specific gravity as lead and may be adopted as a substitute less harmful to waterfowl.

Bendell has a large square-tailed accipiter in his garden.

McNicholl on a recent visit to Ladner, BC had seen Golden-crowned Sparrow and Trumpeter Swan.

Tasker reported Screech Owl (Dec 12), Barred Owl (Dec 9) and Horned Owl (first week in Nov) in Rosedale.

Churcher advised that an update of the Naturalists' Guide to Ontario was about to be published. He had seen a dead Opossum near New York City.

The meeting adjourned at 10:30 pm for a round of Christmas refreshments.