

SMITH AND HARRIS

JUNIATA VALLEY AUDUBON SOCIETY

Vol. 3 No. 1 January 1971

January Thaw

Each year, after the midwinter blizzards, there comes a night of thaw when the tinkle of dripping water is heard in the land. It brings strange stirrings, not only to creatures abed for the night, but to some who have been asleep for the winter. The hibernating skunk, curled up in his deep den, uncurls himself and ventures forth to prowls the wet world, dragging his belly in the snow. His track marks one of the earliest datable events in that cycle of beginnings and endings which we call a year.

The track is likely to display an indifference to mundane affairs uncommon at other seasons; it leads straight across-country, as if its maker had hitched his wagon to a star and dropped the reins. I follow, curious to deduce his state of mind and appetite, and destination if any.

The months of the year, from January up to June, are a geometric progression in the abundance of distractions. In January one man follows a skunk track, or search for hands on the chickadees, or see what young pines the deer have browsed, or what muskrat houses the mink have dug, with only an occasional and mild digression into other doings. January observation can be almost as simple and peaceful as snow, and almost as continuous as cold. There is time not only to see who has done what, but to speculate why.

A meadow mouse, startled by my approach, darts dapperly across the skunk track. Why is he abroad in daylight? Probably because he feels grieved about the thaw. Today his maze of secret tunnels, laboriously chewed through the matted grass under the snow, are tunnels no more, but only paths exposed to public view and ridicule. Indeed the thawing sun has mocked the basic premises of the microtine economic system!

The mouse is a sober citizen who knows that grass grows in order that mice may store it as underground haystacks, and that snow falls in order that mice may build subways from stack to stack; supply, demand, and transport all neatly organized. To the mouse, snow means freedom from want and fear.

A rough-legged hawk comes sailing over the meadow ahead. Now he stops, hovers like a kingfisher, and then drops like a feathered bomb into the marsh. He does not rise again, so I am sure he has caught, and is now eating, some worried mouse-engineer who could not wait until night to inspect the damage to his well-ordered world.

The rough-leg has no opinion why grass grows, but he is well aware that snow melts in order that hawks may again catch mice. He came down out of the Arctic in the hope of thaws, for to him a thaw means freedom from want and fear.

- From A Sand County Almanac
By Aldo Leopold

The January Meeting

TIME: 7:30 p.m.
DATE: Tuesday, January 26th
PLACE: Childrens' Theater, Altoona Area Public Library

Our first meeting of the new year will feature a color film - "Operation Scarlift", a work dealing with the strip mine restoration efforts in Pennsylvania.

At this month's meeting film-lecture tickets will be distributed. Also, posters and brochures. Plan to attend - both for a good film and for our general sharing of interests. There seems to plenty of good parking now, especially up the hill from the library where three new tiers of space have been put in.

The Second Christmas Bird Count

From a cold year past with its deep snow our second count came into milder weather. The day was not too bright, not more than 25° or so in temperature. Snow flurries darkened the sky on and off during the day. The weather, then, was questionable. The effort of our parties was not. Thirteen people went out on December 27th, some of them for the entire day. Five different parties covered Sinking Valley, Canoe Valley, Point View, Scotch Valley and Turkey Valley. Also, Earl Higgins covered Spruce Creek. The day gave up 35 different species and 2,033 individuals. (Last year was 31 plus 1,400). 5 extra birds were seen this year in the count period but not on count day: the great blue heron, wood duck, pied-billed grebe, snow bunting and cedar waxwing. The great birds of last year - the common redpolls, pine siskins and the more to be expected evening grosbeaks, were not seen at all. (See attachment to Gnatcatcher for more complete listings). The great blue heron had been spotted by Sinking Valley residents earlier in December and is a good find for a winter count. Also quite notable were the rough-legged hawks seen for the first time by our group. (See note on up-coming field trip) The marsh hawk, too, is a new species - as is the red-shouldered hawk, belted kingfisher, field sparrow and vesper sparrow.

Of course, everybody is looking forward to next year. The count can be made for efficient. More feeders can be located and watched. More people can take part. The Bellwood reservoir, for example, has to produce something some year. The participants met afterwards at the Skelp Grange Hall for dinner and a tallying of counts. The large field map gave all a good view of our territorial imperative. A good time was had by everybody.

January Field Trip #1

On January 10th, a party of 18 met at the Country Dairy Store in Sinking Valley for the start of a field trip after the snow buntings, horned larks and rough-legged hawks. Four snowbuntings were seen near the Furrer Farm with a flock of 50 or so horned larks. The hawks were seen nearly into Water St. on #450.

January Field Trip #2

Combining a rough-legged hawk search (to a great spot) with an historical tour of Mt. Etha add a general familiarization factor as a follow-up to our bird count, and you have another good trip set for 1:30 p.m. Sunday, January 31st, meeting place being Sackle's Corner at the Country Dairy Store.

Juniata Valley Audubon Society
Box 188 RD #3, Altoona, Pa. 16601