

# Junior Naturalists

Edited by **Joyce Deutscher**, Saskatchewan Museum of Natural History

## WINTER EXPLORATIONS

by **Joyce Deutscher**,

Sask. Mus. of Nat. History

Who said winter is for the bears? Perhaps bears have nothing better to do than hibernate but Junior Naturalists have plenty to do so button your coat up high, pull down your cap and take a look at some of those things you can't see well in summer—the trunks of trees, bird nests, and animal tracks—especially those in freshly fallen snow.

Be a trail detective. All you need is a notebook, pencil, and a pair of wide open eyes and an inquiring mind. Take your dog along if you have one and he will help you find things with his nose. Your nose, I'm afraid, is not much good at smelling out a rabbit track, but your dog is an expert.

You've found a rabbit track? Then follow it and don't forget to use that pencil and paper you brought along. Sketch the tracks and measure the distance between prints (if you didn't bring a ruler along, perhaps you know how wide your hand is and use it as a measuring stick). Note down the size of the tracks and the distance between them. Now follow the trail.

Your notes may read something like this: "January 21, 2 p.m.: Found rabbit track beside poplar tree behind house, followed it to currant bush, several fresh twigs cut off six inches from ground, lost trail on bare ground. Looked for insects underneath bark of birch tree, saw sap-sucker drilling ten feet up, orange colored lichen growing on lower branches."

Do you get the idea? Your school teacher won't be looking at your notes unless you show them to her so you don't have to worry about writing proper sentences. The main thing is that you jot down some of your observations. This will help you remember what you saw and also will come in handy if you decide to write about it later on.

Winter is a good time to adopt a tree. Choose one close by. Make a

scrap book or keep a note book on your tree's "Activities." Note down some of your tree's vital statistics; how high it is, how big around it is. These can be used for later comparison.

Make a sketch of your tree. You don't have to be an artist to do this but you do have to observe carefully. For example, do the branches grow opposite each other or are they alternate, is the general outline of the tree tall and thin or short and dumpy?

Examine the buds of your tree and make a note of when the first buds begin to swell in the spring. Once again make a sketch (sketching is an excellent way to increase your powers of observation). Are the buds round, long, thick, flat? How many scales are there on them?

What animals (birds, mammals, insects, etc.) make use of your tree? Can you find any insects under the bark? Are there any birds nests in the tree? How high up are they? Does the same bird nest there each year?

Make a bark rubbing and place it in your scrap book. To make a bark rubbing hold a piece of paper against the bark of a tree and rub lightly with a wax crayon. If you press too hard your crayon will go through the paper.

Does your tree have flowers in the spring? What are they like? Wind pollinated trees such as poplar and willow have flowers which come out in the spring before the leaves. Press some of the flowers and leaves of your tree and continue your observations throughout the summer. Don't forget to look up all the information you can find in books and compare it with what you can observe.

Watch for the plant study contest in the next **Blue Jay**. You will want to have your powers of observation well sharpened up by then so that you are all ready for the contest.

In the meantime why not enter the bird study contest and let us hear about your winter adventures.

Happy adventuring!

## PRIZE WINNER

It was difficult to decide which entry deserved the prize this issue. We finally decided to award it to Bernice Capusten for her delightful poem "At Dusk."

## OUR MARSH TRIP

Note: Mrs. Ruth Tempel sends us the following stories which were written by her grade three students following a visit to the Wascana Bird Sanctuary (Regina Waterfowl Park) on a museum sponsored field trip.

### Debra Doering—8 years old

Today we went to a marsh. There we saw lots of ducks and geese. We even saw swans. There are tall weeds and plants. Some a limish-green. The water was dark blue. The wind was pushing the water towards the shore. There were thousands of minnows and many gulls. The color of the coots was light black and white. Near the shore the water was all sorts of colors.

### Sherry Wallace—8 years old

Today our whole class went to a marsh. We saw some goatsbeard, sage and wild licorice. I brought a whole bunch of licorice burrs back on my sweater. We saw a big frog sitting in between two bulrushes. We saw a swan, too, and lots of mud hens, Canada Geese and a muskrat. We had a good time at the marsh.

### Daryl Schaffer—8 years old

We just came back from the marsh trip. It was very much fun. We saw Canada Geese and gulls. But most of all we saw lots and lots of seeds.

We saw a muskrat dive in the water. I like watching the muskrat.

### Shawn Wallace—8 years old

We went to the marsh today. It was a short walk.

We saw some Canada Geese. They were flying around the marsh and honking. The gulls flew overhead.

There were lots of damsel flies at the marsh.

We saw a muskrat, too. He was eating some nice water plants.

There were lots of snowberries around the marsh.

## BIRD STUDY CONTEST

Would you like something new in contests? Then try this one. All boys and girls successfully completing this contest will be mentioned in the September Honor Roll. The children sending in the best entries will be awarded a year's subscription to the **Blue Jay** as well. You will not have to wait until spring to start this contest but can start right now by collecting pictures and information. You may put your material on separate sheets, in a loose leaf book, or in a scrap book. All entries will be returned to the sender.

### Contest Rules:

All entries must be accompanied by the sender's name, age and address. Send entries to Mrs. Joyce Deutscher, Blue Jay Contest, Saskatchewan Museum of Natural History, Regina, to arrive not later than June 15. Judging will be done according to age in two age groups—Group A, Age 9-11; Group B, age 12-15. Children in Group A need do only assignments Number 1-4.

Here is what you have to send in:

1. Collection of 20 pictures or drawings of birds found in the province where you live.
2. Drawings of 5 birds in your area not included in No. 1 with a short description of each.
3. Investigation of a local bird known to you: diet, nest, migration dates.
4. Spring migration list—list the first seen date for at least 10 birds in your area.
5. A study of 3 different bird habitats with examples of 5 birds found in each habitat. For example you could choose to do marsh birds, prairie birds, and woodland birds. List five birds found in each of these habitats and tell something about them, particularly how they are adapted to live in their particular habitat.

That's all there is to it. Successful entrants will be listed in the September issue of the **Blue Jay**, but remember to have your entries in by June 15.

## LETTER WRITING CONTEST

Any boy or girl may enter the letter writing contest. Entries must be first-hand observations and not something copied from a book or other source. All entries must be accompanied by the name, age, and address of the sender. Send entries to Blue Jay Contest, Mrs. Joyce Deutscher, Saskatchewan Museum of Natural History, Regina, to arrive not later than January 15. Sketches and photographs may be sent in as well. The prize is a year's subscription to the **Blue Jay**, plus the honour of seeing your item printed in the **Blue Jay**.

## 1963 REPORT OF THE BRANDON BIRD CLUB'S BIRDNEST PROJECT

by David Plews, Brandon

Encouraged by a successful year in 1962 (**Blue Jay** Vol. XXI, No. 1) for our birdbox project, adults and juniors redoubled their efforts to build and set out another 375 nests during the winter and spring of 1963. It took 20 trips between January and June to get them set out, and it brought our total to 749. Most of the new boxes were built by adults but the setting out was left to the juniors.

We had hoped for at least 500 pairs of Tree Swallows during this season, but because of inroads by House Sparrows and House Wrens our objective fell short. We noted that the House Wrens are more frequently leaving the shelter of the woodlands to occupy the nests. In some instances, they ventured at least 100 yards from the nearest cover, to nest in one of our boxes. The House Sparrows are becoming a real nuisance in many cases taking over nests at least  $\frac{1}{2}$  mile from the closest farm buildings, and even killing or driving out the occupant Tree Swallows.

Again, the Bluebirds proved to be the stars of the season. The most important feature was the significant increase in the Eastern Bluebird population. We discovered that often a pair of Mountain Bluebirds occupy a box, then when they have vacated a pair of Eastern Bluebirds move in, the Mountains having moved to another box for their second brood. Another familiar pattern was first a pair of Bluebirds, then a pair of

House Wrens, this sequence occurring at least 14 times.

More care was used in setting out the nests, and as a result we lost only 20 nests to vandals. The following are the totals for 1963:

Tree Swallows .....	423
Mountain Bluebirds .....	36
Eastern Bluebirds .....	34
House Wrens .....	48
House Sparrows .....	22
Vandalized .....	20
Vacant .....	92
Not checked .....	90

It should be noted that some of the Bluebirds moved to new locations for their second brood, consequently the totals for these species do not accurately reflect the number of birds present. We estimate that the Mountain Bluebirds totalled 28 pairs, the Easterns, 22 pairs. All boxes occupied by Sparrows were moved to new localities and all that had House Wrens will be moved before next nesting season. Since many of the boxes not checked undoubtedly housed Tree Swallows, our objective of 500 pairs may have been reached after all. By next spring we hope to have 1000 boxes out.

## MICE IN BIRDBOXES

by Dale Robinson, age 13, Brandon

While checking and cleaning out some bird boxes in the spring of 1962 some of our Junior Club birders found one nest filled with a soft brownish material. We had no idea what bird or other animal had done this, but the nest was emptied and later used by Tree Swallows.

This past spring we found three more nests filled with the brown stuff and the mystery was solved when two of them contained partly-grown White-footed Mice, *Peromyscus maniculatus bairdii*, and they were sufficiently developed that they could slip away when ejected from their homes.

The four infested nests, had several things in common: all were located near marshy areas; all were mounted on rough posts, all were constructed of rough wood, so that the parents could easily scale the front wall and enter the box through the nest hole.

## AT DUSK

by **Bernice Capusten**, age 10,  
Prince Albert

At dusk, when I am sitting on top of  
Humber Hill,  
I stop to watch the geese fly by,  
And feel the tranquil still.

At evening when the poppies droop,  
And butterflies are sleeping;  
I hear the poplars as they laugh,  
And willows that are weeping.

To me the world is just a play,  
With actors, you and me.  
But I'd rather sit on Humber Hill,  
And watch a willow tree.

## A CATERPILLAR NAMED GEORGE

by **Dawn Brodie**, age 11,  
St. James, Manitoba

When my family was picking hazel nuts out by our cottage near Warren, Manitoba, my mother accidentally put her hand on a light green caterpillar about 2½ inches long and ¾ inch wide. We took it home and found out it was a Luna moth caterpillar. We phoned the Museum and they told how to keep it alive by giving it hazel leaves or cabbage and lettuce leaves. I put it in a bottle with leaves and some twigs. It soon ate up the hazel leaves, its main food. On the third day it started to build a cocoon in a cabbage leaf. We hope the caterpillar will live through the winter and emerge as a moth. We named it "George".

## NOTES FROM JUNIOR NATURALISTS

**Susan Pegg** of Holbein, Saskatchewan, sends us a drawing of a racoon and tells us that they wash their food before they eat. How many Junior Naturalists have seen raccons? They are not too common in Saskatchewan.

On the other hand, the American Coot is quite common. **Brian Evans**, Torch River, tells of catching a coot and keeping it for a few weeks. Brian adds, "I fed him little bits of bread and wheat. He was a gray color all over except for his breast—it was a whitish gray. But this fall he wanted to fly south so I let him go." How many of you boys and girls agree

with Brian's description of a coot? Did he miss telling you about some white feathers?

From Fleet, Alberta, **Stanley Checkel** reports having seen a White-tailed Deer dash across a ditch. Stanley continues, "After it had gone about 45 yards across the field, a coyote ran out of the ditch and started after it. Our neighbor saw three coyotes after the same deer just before it passed our place." Stanley wondered if coyotes could kill an adult deer.

**Debby Ninowski**, Kamsack, Saskatchewan, reports observing some Red Fox kittens. "They were grey in color with darker legs and almost black paws. We thought they were quite pretty with their slender pointed noses and pointed ears. Their tails were not bushy at all as we had expected. In size they were smaller than a grown cat and much slimmer. During the time we were observing them, they kept trying to hide under one another, so terrified they were of us humans."

**Dawn Brodie**, St. James, Manitoba, found an American Goldfinch nest on August 25 and tells us, "I was surprised to find five hatchlings with their eyes closed. September 2, three could fly quite well and two could only flutter."

Dawn would like to know what their chances for survival and migration are.

From Yellow Creek, **Iris Shermata**, tells about an unfortunate Mallard which lost her nest when a tractor ran over it, and **Alan Boon** from South Allan wonders why a coyote would come into a farmyard where there was no poultry.

Our two steady contributors, **Brian Irving** from Kelvington and **Bohdan Pylypec** from Yellow Creek, have again sent in excellent reports of their activities which we hope to be able to publish at a later date. Bohdan reports on a bird house project at his school. Winter is an excellent time to get such an activity started so that you'll be ready for spring. A reprint from the **Blue Jay**, Vol. 17, No. 1, Page 14, is available from the Extension Division, Saskatchewan Museum of Natural History, Regina. It deals with bird houses.