

Junior Naturalists

SPRING ACTIVITIES AND ADVENTURES

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

Bothered by spring fever? Good! Now is the time to start looking for signs of spring in earnest and one of the first of these is that case of spring fever you have. Another early sign of spring is the tanned and freckled faces that are appearing by now on you and your friends.

My note book tells me that on March 22, 1963, children coming into the Museum for tours were taking on a definite tanned appearance. The next day sage and strawberry plants were growing profusely, bluebirds, Marsh Hawks, and crows were back and only one lone ice fisherman remained off Swanston's Point on Last Mountain Lake.

Are you ready then with pencil, paper, a sharp eye and an enquiring mind? Then outside you go, sniff the fresh spring air and start your explorations.

1. Look for winter rosettes—

Some plants produce a small circlet of leaves which stays green all winter long and is attached to the stem close to the ground. The first leaves to start growing in the spring frequently have quite a different appearance from those in this winter rosette. Look for these as well. Make a note of what you see.

2. Check your adopted tree—

Did you adopt a tree last winter? (See **Blue Jay**, December, 1963) If not, do so now and watch carefully for the first signs of new growth. Press leaves and flowers. Remember that all tree flowers do not have bright showy petals. Some do not even have petals, and are frequently mistaken for new leaves when seen from a distance. Don't think your tree doesn't have flowers. All mature trees have.

3. Start a plant list—

Many of you keep a spring bird migration list but how many of you keep a plant list? See if you can recognize a plant when its leaves first appear above ground. If you can't, watch it until it blooms. Keep your

notes for comparison next year. You can learn to recognize many plants by their leaves alone with a little practice.

Quick sketches of early spring plants help you remember them. Make notes as to the shade of green the leaves are, when they are first seen and when the bloom appears. Sometimes our early spring plants surprise us and bloom again in the fall. I see in my note book that an Early Yellow Loco-weed bloomed on September 15, 1963, and is one of our earliest spring flowers!

4. Make a table top arrangement of spring plants—

Use only the common ones here and don't be afraid to experiment. See if you can have a "spring bouquet" before the spring crocus anemone blooms. Use tree buds and green leaves. You don't need to know their names. Use stink weed if you wish, providing no one objects to your bringing "that weed" inside. Add a branch of bright red rose hips from last year's roses, and moss, too, if you can find some. Mostly use your imagination. Now arrange your plants in a bowl, or on a tray using plasticine if need be to hold the branches upright.

These are a few suggestions of what you can do with plants. You will get more ideas as you work.

I have been talking mostly about plants. If you look at the contest which is announced this issue you will see why. The contest sounds like fun too, doesn't it, so why don't you enter it? You may not win first prize but you can have a lot of fun trying and will learn a great deal and that, after all, is the important thing. Don't forget to use your notebook. Notice how I used my notebook several times in writing this article.

PLANT STUDY CONTEST

How are you coming with your Bird Study Contest (**Blue Jay**, December, 1963)? You are, I hope, ready to start working on another contest as well. All boys and girls successfully completing the Plant Study Contest will be mentioned in the December Honor Roll. Prizes will be

awarded for the best entries. All entries will be returned to the sender after judging is complete.

Contest Rules:

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 October 1. Judging will be done according to age. Children 11 and under need do only No. 1. Children 12 and over do both No. 1 and No. 2.

1. Collect and identify 10 different wild flowers from your locality. Include the following information with each—the date collected, the name of the flower, the place collected (name the nearest town) and the habitat (marsh, prairie, woodland, disturbed area, etc.).

2. Make a study of a common wild flower. Keep the following information on it—date leaves first seen, date of flowering, date seeds ripen, method of seed dispersal, any signs of animals using the plant (leaves eaten by insects, seeds eaten by birds, etc.), any other information you can add about the plant.

Note: A mimeographed leaflet "Collecting and Pressing Plants," may be obtained free of charge by writing to The Extension Division, Museum of Natural History, Regina.

GIANT WEED

by **Glenn Fairweather**, age 8, Piapot

One day I brought a prostrate pigweed to Petain school. It had 39 branches, each about 24 inches long. This was a total of 78 feet. It was full of small black shiny seeds. It had grown in a pig pen where the soil was fertilized with manure. It covered the floor like a mat.

JULY'S FLOWERS

by **Elisabeth Wagner**, age 9, Regina

During July my cousin from Toronto and I made a book of July prairie wild flowers. The book was called "July's Flowers" and was made so that my cousin could take the flower book back to Toronto to show her friends what prairie wild flowers are like.

We had to keep the book out of the hands of my little brother and if we forgot where we had put it we could locate it again by the smell of the two-grooved milk-vetch. We enjoyed pressing the flowers and placing them in the book very much.

This spring I think I shall make a book of June flowers because I think the flowers are prettiest at that time of year.

MARSH HAWK ATTACKS COOT

by **Wayne Miller**, age 12, Regina

In the latter part of last summer, September 17, to be exact, part of our bird group was out to Ashbury Marsh, behind Griswold. Our main objective was to bring in and renew some of our bird nesting boxes.

It was a lovely day, hawks were circling above us, the marsh was covered with coots, and ducks, and a few smaller wading birds were scattered here and there. At lunch we lock up just in time to see a Goshawk whiz past us.

Then we noted a juvenile Marsh Hawk skimming over the marsh. We decided to watch him through our field glasses for a while. To our amazement, the hawk singled out a coot and attempted grabbing it. After trying this several times it changed tactics, trying to force the coot to stay under water and grab it as soon as it ascended to breathe. Meanwhile, everyone was surveying this sight very carefully. The coot was exhausted. Realizing the futility of trying to be evasive, it lay limp and helpless on the water. Taking advantage of such an opportune moment, the hawk lifted the coot clear of the water. It slipped. Instead of resuming the fight, the hawk turned and went away empty handed. As for the coot, it lay on the water and got up after a few minutes.

We didn't get as many boxes down as we would have liked to, but we all agreed with our leader, Mr. Lane, when he stated that viewing this performance would make up for our loss. Don't you?

Mr. ISINGER'S STUDENTS BUILD BIRDHOUSES

by **Bohdan Pylypec**, age 13,
Yellow Creek

This last spring, Mr. Isinger, our teacher, encouraged his Grade Seven and Eight students to build birdhouses and set a prize for the best one. Six boys entered, building one martin house, one chickadee house, and four wren houses. Steve Tokarchik won the prize for his martin house.

I built the wren house decorated with maple and oak leaves but had no luck because the house was not occupied by House Wrens. Maybe it was too late when I put it up or perhaps wrens prefer houses that look quite natural. I first made holes too big in these houses so the House Sparrows interfered. To settle this I made smaller holes in some fibre board and then attached this over the bigger holes. I then emptied the houses with sparrow nests inside.

A pair of House Wrens nested in an unpainted wren house near our house. Two other pairs nested in pieces of hollowed tree trunks which were given a top and bottom. Another pair of wrens nested in a birdhouse intended for a bluebird. The pair of House Wrens which last year nested in a cow skull set on a fence post and hatched one albino (**Blue Jay**, XX; 170, Dec., 1962), this year again occupied the skull. I saw this albino again this spring, but could not locate its home.

BURIED ALIVE

by **Bill Grasnick**, age 13,
Thorsby, Alberta

Last winter we had a blizzard. The weather turned mild for a very short time and then it became very cold again.

I noticed that the partridges which used to come to our green feed stacks, no longer did so. But a lone, scrawny coyote did. I saw him when I was doing chores. He was sniffing in and around the stacks. Then he began to dig. To my surprise he dug out a partridge. He saw me and trotted

away with a partridge in his mouth. About two hours later my father who came back from a neighbor's reported seeing a coyote digging around the stacks and coming up with a partridge.

Next morning when Dad and I went out to do the chores, we saw two coyotes near the stacks. One was digging while the other was sniffing the snow here and there. They were so intent on their work that they did not seem to notice us until we were close to them. The digging one came up with a partridge when we were a mere fourteen or fifteen yards away from him.

It dawned on me why I couldn't see partridges. They were buried alive under the hard snow.

OUR PORCUPINE

by **Sheila Purvis**, age 12, Redvers

Two years ago in February we found a porcupine beside our bale stack, behind the barn. It was about three-quarters grown.

When my father would go near it, it would bury its head in the bale stack and only show its quills. The quills of the porcupine would go into my father's rubber boot. The only way it could be picked up was by slipping his hand under its stomach.

In the house it would hide under my father's chair or behind his legs. The only sound it made was when it whimpered like a puppy. The only time we could touch it without mitts on our hands was to pat it on the head. When my father was carrying it to the house and when he went to open the door, he held it too close to his body. Then he got quills in his overalls. In the house it would eat cabbage by holding the food in its paws and nibbling at it.

It would eat the bark off our Manitoba maple trees. It went over to our neighbour's place and their dog got quills in his nose, and dad worried about the cows when the porcupine was around the barn. So he took our porcupine about 3 miles north of our place and let it go in a slough full of willow trees.

Editor's Note: The preceding story was sent to us by Marion Nixon who writes: "If Sheila's contribution is used, she will be a third generation contributor. A sketch of 'Shooting-stars' which her mother made when young, and I sent to Mrs. Priestly was used in the **Blue Jay** a few years ago. (sketch by Jay Nixon). I wonder if there are any others?"

RUN RABBIT RUN

by Jack Endall, Brandon

The Saturday following the first snowfall of the year I was with my family returning to Brandon by car. It was a bright sunny winter's day and we travelled the roads rather than the highway in hopes we might see winter birds.

About one mile north of Rapid City I saw an eagle swoop down in a field beside the road. He missed whatever he was trying to catch and then flew along the fence line searching for something for his lunch. Twice he flew across the road and Dad stopped the car so we could get out and have a better view of the Eagle. We wondered if it could be a golden eagle as the bright sunshine showed yellowish feathers under his wings and tail. His wing span must have been about seven feet.

Suddenly he spied a small rabbit and dived down to try to catch him. The rabbit leaped into the air; perhaps one of those long talons scraped his back, but I think that leap saved his life, for as he fell to the ground he rushed with leaps and bounds across the field. At this point in the road there is another road almost parallel to the one on which we were parked. The rabbit must have known where he was going for he scuttled across the road and into a culvert. Mr. Eagle must have known the country too for he flew to the other end of the culvert to wait; hovering in the air. We waited ten minutes, but could wait no longer and drove off. I wonder what happened to the rabbit?

HUMMINGBIRD VISITOR

by Carolyn Johnson, age 13, Parkman

One afternoon during the summer holidays, I took a glance out the window and saw a queer sort of a bird. It was near the flowers and went from flower to flower putting its long

bill in the flower. Its bill was about 1½ inches long and about as round as a needle. It seemed to be sucking out nectar from the flower. Its wings seemed to go around and around. At first my thought was a butterfly but it was larger and just stayed in the air when putting its bill in the flower. And a butterfly sits on the flower. Its colour was reddish and greenish and the bird was bigger than a butterfly but about the size of a small mouse.

Later I looked in a bird book to find out what it was and found it was a hummingbird.

A HORNED LARK IN WINTER

by Phillip Olszewski, age 9, Kamsack

Last Friday night (November 15, 1963) a Horned Lark came and sat on the window sill. It kept flying on the window because we had the lights on. We gave it some crumbs but it didn't eat them. Then my big brother went outside and caught the bird. He brought it into the house. It was a beautiful bird. Then my brother went outside and let it go.

Note: Do you know that a few Horned Larks usually winter over in Saskatchewan, especially in the extreme south? This has been a mild winter so perhaps some of you have seen Horned Larks wintering.

BEST LETTER CONTEST AND RESULTS

Two prizes are awarded this issue—one to the youngest contributor Glenn Fairweather of Piapot, who was curious about a large pig weed, and the other to Bill Grasnick who observed activities around a feed stack.

Several entries deserve honorable mention but this would include almost all those sent in. The one by Jack Endall, although well written, could not be considered for a prize because no age was given.

Be sure to put your name, age and address on all letters so they can be entered in the letter writing contest. Send entries to **Blue Jay Contest**, Mrs. Joyce Deutscher, Saskatchewan Museum of Natural History, Regina. Deadline for next issue April 15.