

## NOT A HOUSE SPARROW

January 23, 1971 was a beautiful, bright winter day ideal for an escape from the frustrations and noise of city life. My escape that day was to the Moose Mountain Provincial Park and the excuse for the trip was threefold: to give tired nerves a rest; to see the winter birds there in view of Dr. Nero's preparation of a special publication on the birds of the park for the society; and a desire to see for myself how serious the deterioration of the environment in the park really was.

We arrived in the park shortly after dawn and did not leave till it was dark. In the course of the day we drove the main roads and wandered into the woods in search of birds. This was our tally: eleven Black-billed Magpie, twelve Black-capped Chickadee, five Hairy Woodpecker, three White-breasted Nuthatch, nine Ruffed Grouse, four Blue Jay, one Great Horned Owl and finally just outside the park on an open slope of the mountain in the lights of the car, twelve Snow Bunting. The Ruffed Grouse were particularly cooperative. They fed in the brush along the roadside and so close that we needed no field glasses. Occasionally one flew a few feet and landed about a foot from the top of a six-to-eight foot slender shrub. The shrub would immediately bend with the weight but with perfect balance the bird would keep its place and then reach to feed on buds near by.

There are some other birds that we expected to see (Bohemian Waxwing, grosbeaks, crossbills and redpolls among others) but examination of this winter's Christmas Bird Counts shows how rare these species are in southern Saskatchewan this year. We noticed one other thing. In a dawn-to-dusk search for birds, even while we munched our sandwiches, we did not see a House Sparrow. Nor did we catch sight of Starling, Rock Dove, Gray Partridge or Ring-necked Pheasant—all introduced species. Evidently this park is still performing one of its functions. It is a natural place where wild things *native* to Saskatchewan may live and it is a place where man can retreat temporarily from the artificial environment of the city.

Some people may think it unbecoming or unmanly to enjoy birds. Many are completely unstirred by the form of a shrub or tree. They have no curiosity about the identity or life-history of plants or animals and are especially unresponsive to the natural scene during the winter. To me the Moose Mountain Provincial Park is particularly attractive in winter for one can look through the woods and clearly see the form of the land with all its different habitats; the few roads through the park follow the contour of the landscape.

There were mammals in the park, too, and on this day we saw twelve White-tailed Deer, two or three Porcupine, two Red Squirrel, one Snowshoe Hare and several snow-covered lodges of the Beaver. There was evidence of the Coyote and we felt it important to know that in this park there are coyotes and deer.

I could stop here and give nothing but praise for the park for it is a good retreat. Yet it could be better. For a large part of our day we heard the hideous noise of the snowmobile. True, there were remoter parts where we did not hear the sound, but track marks testified to their presence and we dreaded the moment when one would appear to frighten the birds and mammals. One wide, ugly road within the park boundary led to a huge, cleared area given over to storage tanks, construction equipment and gas or oil wells. It was obviously impossible to escape for long the grim reminder of the rapid depletion of our natural resources.

The snow was white, the woods were beautiful and the environment seemed nearly natural but many questions nagged at me. Are we giving enough protection to our wildlife and our natural areas? Do we know how to appreciate these natural resources? Do we understand what damage the snowmobile can do as it disturbs animals, breaks down plants and compacts the snow over mice and grass? Certainly, we should use our parks in winter just as we do in summer but it is essential that large areas be kept quiet and unexploited.