

MONTREAL NATURE NOTES; I.

By M. GLADDING (H.O.E).

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“We are the pensioners of Beauty;—little care  
Have we for the red-wheeled market and the fair;  
The dust-stained and voice thick air.

We are the pensioners of Beauty;—her voice low  
And lovely calls us, her garments sweetly slow  
Over the pale wide grasses go.”  
*Aeldryn Sadler.*

WE landed at Montreal on September 5th, and lost no time in exploring “The Mountain,” the volcanic hill which protects the city from the north, and proved a veritable mine for nature study, covered as it is over so much of its area by rich woods. Most of the birds had already gone south, and although we were told that there were so few Canadian birds at all, we identified the following before the winter set in: American crow, song-sparrow, red-breasted nuthatch, downy woodpecker, a buzzard, house-sparrow, black-throated blue warbler, slate-coloured junco, purple finch, white-breasted nuthatch, blue-bird, and chickadee.

The following notes were made during October:—

The month has been one of rapid change. The trees on the mountain have shown wonderful colours, flaming orange on the maple trees, and so many kinds of berries. But the most wonderful sight I have seen was on a week-end visit to Lac Echo, on the fringe of the Laurentian Mountains. The lake was like blue glass, and the lovely wooded hills all round it ablaze with colour; every shade of green, gold, orange, rose and deep red, all interwoven like a beautiful tapestry, broken here and there by dark patches of pine, and all repeated in reflection at their feet.

The woods were full of fruits of countless plants: one had dead-white berries standing out at the end of bright scarlet stalks in a cluster at the top of a slender red stem (since identified as white baneberry). Most of the fruits left no doubt as to the manner of their dispersion, as we were soon covered with them on our way through the undergrowth. The colours of

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maple and oak leaves were almost unbelievable, so brilliant were they. The trees seemed to flame with incandescent light, from within. Few birds were seen.

On October 18th, on Montreal Mountain, we saw slate-coloured juncos, red-breasted nuthatches, and a pair of purple finches—such a lovely sight. There were three males and a female, eating “keys” on an ash tree. The late autumn sunlight made the whole tree rosy, and lit up the rose-coloured head and breast of the male birds so vividly. The female had little colour, but was speckled brown.

*November 10th.* To-day on the mountain we came upon a patch of birch and pine, alive with chickadees and juncos, and we saw quite closely a downy woodpecker, very busy on the

bark of the birches. Later we saw more chickadees and a new nuthatch, with a black head, white cheeks and belly, and slate-coloured back. He proves to be the white-breasted nuthatch.

The chickadee is something like both the great tit and the long-tailed tit of home, only he has a rosy tinge on his breast. And such a cheery song: "Chick-a-dee-dee-dee-dee!"

I found bittersweet berries; such a lovely shape and colour, an orange berry, with three parts of the red fruit wall turned back from it, and a purplish bloom on the twigs.

The birch trees are so beautiful now without their leaves, silver blue in the misty light with almost lavender-blue markings.

[The snow lasted from December to the middle of March, and although we were told that no birds stayed north during the snow, we saw chickadees, juncos, downy woodpeckers, white and red-breasted nuthatches and crows at different times. The thaw began in the middle of March, and suddenly the birds re-appeared as if by magic.]

*March 18th.* I saw a robin on St. Mark St. on my way to school this morning—a fine big fellow who looks and behaves like our blackbird. He has a grey-brown back, black head with a white ring round the eye, speckled chin, bright russet-red breast and belly, and a flash of white under a dark-brown tail. He is tame and frequents gardens, chattering as he flies off just as our blackbirds do, and his song is rather like a poor edition of their more mellow notes, which may be interpreted thus: "Cheer up, cheerily, cheerily, cheer up," etc., all sung on variations of three notes only.

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*March 19th.* A good "bag" on the outer slope of the mountain beyond the cemetery. We saw many robins, blue-birds, grackles and song-sparrows. The bluebird flashes an indescribable colour as he turns in the sunlight; as he flies away from you he seems only to shine with a soft blue haze. The song-sparrow is rather like a yellow-hammer in build, and so is the timbre of his song. He has a beautifully speckled breast, with one large mark in the centre. His song is exquisite—he throws back his head, and flings out a succession of rapid bubbling notes, beginning with three slurred whistles and then tinkling through a melody. The grackle looks a quarrelsome fellow, like a large starling, but shining black with an iridescent bronzy-green shine on his head, and a curious boat-shaped tail.

*March 29th.* Brought in some promising twigs yesterday. Some white maple has come out in water, long red pistils protruding like little tentacles from the tight clusters of orange buds. Sumac twigs are very odd-looking, sooty black with scarcely any visible bud, and all covered with sooty down.

*April 2nd.* Took four children on the mountain. We saw crows, robins, song-sparrows, a flock of juncos, heard a jay and a phoebe, but did not see them. We found the blood-root poking up under the swampy dead leaves, and took the roots home to plant. Very little trace of snow left.

*April 4th.* Took six children on Westmount Mountain. We found the old hepatica leaves, with shining silver buds just coming up. The wet woods have many green shoots coming up already. We met a white rabbit, rather untidy looking, as he was beginning to turn brown. He sat so still against a rock while I took his photograph.

*April 7th.* Took train across the river and out to St. Hilaire. The trees seem to be stirring up to life again. The birches are lovely, most delicate shades of pink and lavender on their bark, with a bloom like that of a peach, and so soft and warm to touch. There is a great deal of a low

poplar among the birches which has an eau-de-nil green bark and twigs, and already has fat pussy-catkins out of their sheaths. We came across a sugar camp, where the cans hung low down on the tree trunks, and the sugar was being made in a hut. I drank some fresh sap—like clear sweetened water, some hot syrup, and ate the sugar. It takes forty-five gallons of sap to make one gallon of syrup!

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On the way back, through an orchard, we saw and heard a pair of blue-birds—a lovely twittering song, rather like the swallow's. Then we saw a tree sparrow. He has much more rufous colouring in his back and wings than the song-sparrow has, a rufous crown, and one spot low on the breast. We also heard the phoebe, and after much patience, tracked him down and saw him. He looks so like the English spotted fly-catcher, and behaves exactly like him, but he is bigger, and has a sooty head and no spots.

The joy of the day was the unexpected discovery of hepaticas out, on a wayside track. Such a beautiful delicate flower, of the anemone family, the three bracts looking like small sepals, green under white petals or soft dark red under lavender or lilac petals. I am so glad to have found them out before they opened in my pot indoors. The ice has all cleared above the bridge over the St. Lawrence, and below it between the island and Montreal, but not the other side of the island yet.

*April 8th.* My hepaticas are almost out, and the bloodroots are opening, each single folded-up leaf gradually unclasping its sheltered bud.

*April 9th.* A great day. We went out to St. Anne's by train, and going down the lane towards the river we saw many robins and grackles, and *then*—several cedar waxwings, flying about in such a friendly fashion, catching flies round the houses. The lemon-yellow bar at the end of the tail, and the lovely crest were most conspicuous, and we saw the little red "wax" spots quite clearly. We spent the afternoon at MacDonald College, going round the trees on the Campus, and the library with Mr. H—. Then we crossed by the ferry to "Ile Perrot," and went into the alder swamp. There we were startled by a chorus of harsh squawks which we concluded were frogs, and further on, another chorus of shrill trills. We were watching what we thought was a grackle when we realized he hadn't got a long tail. Then we used glasses and were overjoyed to see he was a red-winged blackbird—such brilliant scarlet and yellow epaulets. Then we saw about a dozen on the top of a tree, and heard the song, if it could be called one, a cheery "Guouk-chee-wee!" accompanied every time by a bow and a spread tail. While we were watching them we saw a pair of swallows or martins flying very high; the evening light made identification very difficult, but the flight was unmistakable. We are told that it is the earliest

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record of them in this district. From the train I saw what must be a bittern standing in the tall swamp grass.

*April 13th.* We broke our journey to Morin Heights (in the Laurentian Mountains) at St. Jerome, and walked some miles up the river. There were many birds about, and we put up several pairs of song-sparrows, who fluttered up stream a bit, and then back to their starting point, so they must have been nesting. We saw a large hawk being chased by a crow, who swooped upon him again and again. The woods higher up the river were lovely—the pines smelling delicious in the warm sunshine, and brilliant patches of snow still left here and there.

*April 14th.* MORIN HEIGHTS. A delightful spot high up in the Laurentians. The hills all round seem quite low and very friendly, covered to the tops with tall pines and birches, with a great deal of brushwood in the swamps below. Quantities of birds all round the little hotel this morning in heavy rain—pine siskins, juncos, song-sparrows and purple finches. Plant and tree life very backward as yet. The grass looks so dead, one wonders if it will ever be green again.

*April 15th.* Woke to thick mist and heavy rain. Walk in the afternoon. We came to a beautiful waterfall, and above it a perfect lake, still frozen over, with wooded rocky hills rising all round it. The effect of the woods now is all straight vertical lines, almost as if the slender white birch and green poplar stems had been combed upwards, or as if they are all stretching up to the coming spring after the long cold winter. There is a warm purple haze over the woods which promises life. We went on miles beyond the lake, a winding track among woods and huge granite boulders, but a storm turned us back. We saw the red-tailed hawk again, and many siskins. There are quantities of song-sparrows here, with surprising variations in song. On the way back, in sunshine, we watched a little warbler feeding all over some willows, and we cannot identify him, although we saw his pale buff breast and throat, olive back and wings, and conspicuous brown and white wing bars so clearly. [This was seen later on April 25th, on a Quebec Bird Protection Society field day, and identified as the ruby-crowned kinglet. The crown is often concealed.]

*April 16th.* Snow fell in the night, but this morning was brilliant, though very cold. Out for an hour before breakfast, and saw a pair of purple finches. Later we walked to Echo [p 322]

Lake, very beautiful, and still half over ice. We saw a blue jay in the woods by the roadside; he is so brilliantly blue all over, and his almost lavender crest and black collar and cheek markings give him such a pert look. We rested by the lake near a summer bungalow, and found a phoebe's nest on a ledge of the verandah, made of moss, horse hair and cobwebs. There were no eggs yet. On the way back we again saw a bird with a white rump that we had noticed before, and thought must be a species of thrush. This time he rose from the ground, but settled on a dead tree in a woodpecker attitude, and we caught sight of a red head, barred olive wings and short tail. We saw him fly to a stump, and pop his head in and out of a hole very high up; then he flew down over the lane on to the swampy ground again and we lost sight of him. We have identified him as a flicker.

Chapman says: "The Northern Flicker is a bird of character. Although a woodpecker, he is too original to follow in the footsteps of others of his tribe. *They* do not frequent the ground, but that is no reason why he should not humour his own terrestrial propensities and a fondness for ants, and we may therefore frequently flush him from the earth, when, with a low chuckle, he goes bounding off through the air, his white rump showing conspicuously as he flies." The flicker has many aliases, one of which is "the High-hole."

*Afternoon.* We went down the valley and cut through fields, making for the only hill that was clear of trees. We saw a pair of bluebirds, and hoped to find their nest, but were not successful. They were sitting on stumps of a fence, about a hundred yards apart, and as I stalked the male bird, he sat there so still in the sunshine, uttering his very sweet, low twitter, as if talking to himself, much as our English robin will sometimes do. Then we saw a flock of small black birds fluttering by, and landing on the top of a bare tree. At first we thought they were starlings, but soon realized they were cowbirds. The russet-bronze head and black bill

were very apparent in the sunshine, and they amused us very much by bowing and scraping to each other with outspread wings and tail, uttering a peculiarly ugly squawk and almost falling off the tree in the act. On the way back we saw them again with some grackles among the flock.

Four little black lambs were in a field above, and a pair of redwings in the swamp below, and then further on we had the

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day's best find—a yellow-bellied sap-sucker, at very close quarters. We disturbed him, but he returned to the birch tree close to us, and went out on to a branch after eyeing us suspiciously once or twice, and began hammering and tearing at the bark. [They make a series of small deep holes in the bark, in regular rows, which they return to feed from when the sap has oozed into them.] Then he came back and worked up the tree trunk, peeping at us all the while. Finally he went lower and jerked himself down backwards, calling "Yauk! Yauk!" all the while. His colouring is superb—a scarlet crest, and a scarlet throat just under the long black bill; black line from the eye to the back of the head, and coming down to make a collar under the red "chin"; white cheeks and back of the neck; black and white bars and patches on the wings, back and tail, with a long white patch the outer length of the wing; and a yellowish breast and belly.

*April 17th.* Another perfect day. We wandered through woods and saw brown creepers, a downy and a hairy woodpecker conveniently close together so that we could recognize their difference in size, a winter wren, siskins and juncos, and a flicker.

In the afternoon, scrambling up through woods, we noticed that every here and there up an old track the bark of young shoots of a smooth grey kind of maple had been nibbled, the bark being eaten off for inches at a time. The teeth marks were quite small, and only that one kind of tree was touched. The buds were all nipped off as if cut with a knife.

*April 25th.* Expedition with some members of the Quebec Bird Protection Society, a few miles the other side of the St. Lawrence. We left the train apparently in the middle of a swamp, and walked along a disused railroad track, and saw and heard many new birds in the thickets and swamps on each side. The first was a yellow palm warbler, and we had a fine view of his yellow-spotted breast, cinnamon cap, brownish tail with white spots at the end of it. We heard a long-billed marsh wren and a swamp sparrow in the marshes, among the chorus of frogs, and further on we saw a tree-swallow hovering round an old tree, and a hermit thrush in the bushes. The latter looked very much like our English thrush, but his back and tail were more rufous, and the speckles on the breast larger and darker. We watched a ruby-crowned kinglet (almost identical with the English "gold-crested wren") and he flitted

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from bush to bush until he was almost within touching distance, so tame and friendly was he. The ruby crest was concealed, and only shewed when he half-began his lovely little song, or when the wind caught his wee feathers. We found the sad remains of either a woodcock or a bittern, probably caught by a water rat. As we were crossing a field we heard savannah sparrows, and saw their brown and white speckled backs and beautifully marked heads, as they ran through the grasses. Above us flew a flock of northern horned larks, though we could see little against the light; unfortunately, the nest of a prairie lark which we were shown was empty, the young having already gone. We failed to find a killdeer's nest known to be in the field, but heard and saw a meadow lark, perched low on a tree—a quaint top-heavy-looking

bird, with a large head and neck, short tail, yellow throat and breast with a V-shaped collar of dark brown.

Found spring beauty out (*Claytonia virginica*) and pistillate and staminate willows.

*April 28th.* Went up the Westmount to photograph bloodroots, and found them already beginning to drop. They looked so beautiful—a starry carpet, each pure white flower protected by its sage-green leaf, with the rich background of last year's dead leaves, pressed flat under the winter's snow. Trilliums are almost out, and we found wild ginger and yellow dog-tooth violet (really a small yellow lily).

*April 30th.* Found downy yellow violet, and a small blue one. The trilliums still only in bud. A daphne bush was found; so few left now on the mountain. Blue cohosh is out (*Carilophyllum thalictroides*) a curious purplish-green flower, and purplish leaves not yet uncurled. The blue bloom over the whole plant comes off at a touch.

*May 2nd.* I explored another wooded part of the mountain and found, in a very marshy spot, horsetails and many ferns, and Canada Mayflower (*Maianthemum Canadense*) almost out. It has two green leaves, growing alternately and a cluster of small white buds above them, and grows in carpets under the trees. On a dry rockery I found early everlasting, so like the English Mountain E., but the Latin name (*Antennaria plantaginifolia*) differs, as we so often find when the flowers or birds seem identical.

Heard the complete song of a ruby-crowned kinglet, such a beautifully careless one.  
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*May 5th.* There has been a bird round the school all the morning, uttering a whirring sort of note, something like the first note of the English wood-wren, but I could not catch a glimpse of it.

An evening walk on the mountain. Trilliums still holding back, and we only found two quite out; a lily with three white petals over a whorl of three green leaves. Bloodroots are almost over; ginger-root is just at its best. (The flower has a wonderful arrangement for pollination. The cup-shaped corolla opens above into three long reddish-purple petals, but inside the cup are many dark red stamens, all held flat by the shape of the cup, and each one ending in a little claw. When the pistil is fertilized (presumably) the stamens are set free, and jump up to enclose the pistil, their claws meeting over its head, and their anthers opening outwards. I wonder if the release is made by insects walking on the stamens, as the flowers all hide under the dead leaves, and turn downwards.)

We found crinkleroot almost out, also mitre-wort. We noticed that there are pistillate and staminate plants of early meadow rue. On the edge of the meadow we found a great deal of blue violet, and among the downy yellow ones in the wood, a Canada white violet with a faint sweet scent. The sugar maple (and another which looks like Norway maple) seems to be the last to blossom, quite differently from the others, having long chains of greenish flowers. The others are now in tiny leaf. Birch catkins swing in the wind and their small leaves hang like jewels suspended in the air. The chestnut at the corner of St. Mark St. has opened small green hands in two days, and all this even though it is still chilly.

*May 9th and 10th.* Week-end at the island in Lac Echo. The trees are just thinking of coming out and looking so warm and alive. We have found such quantities of wake-robins (a beautiful but evil smelling dark red trillium) and yellow adder's tongue in the woods, and two kinds of bellwort, a slender hanging corn-yellow kind of lily. We also found Dutchman's

breeches, and looked for its near relation squirrel-corn (which has smaller flowers and a sweet smell), but could find none.

On Sunday we could almost watch the poplars coming out. The chorus of frogs started about 6 o'clock and went on all night, and very early the song birds woke us up. We put up a Mr. and Mrs. Redwing from a tiny bush-island, but could find no nest. In a warm spot near a small lake up in the hills we

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found columbine nearly out on a rocky ledge, and quite near the water the bees showed us where a patch of trailing arbutus lay hidden under dead leaves. The pale pink flowers had such a delicious scent, and so hidden under their own dark evergreen leaves that we should never have noticed them but for the bees. We saw a bittern fly over the lake, with a very full crop, and later a large bird that looked almost like a black-backed gull, but may have been a fish hawk or osprey. Down by the little stream which is the lake's outlet, we saw a flock of myrtle warblers, and watched them hunting flies. Such beautiful birds, with slatey backs marked with black, heavily spotted black-and-white breast, white throat, black head with a yellow line in the centre, and yellow patches on the sides and rump. We found a phoebe's nest, but no eggs.

*May 11th.* Went up Montreal Mountain at 7.30 p.m. to examine the bluebird's nest-hole. I saw a pair near a post with a hole in it some weeks ago, and on Friday when I was there with the Brownies, both Mr. and Mrs. came out of the hole. To-night they were both feeding on the ground nearby, and then Mrs. went in while Mr. perched above and sang his sweet, intimate song. I climbed up the post, and Mrs. came out, sat on a nearby branch, and both birds seemed quite unperturbed as I felt inside the hole, and found a grassy nest at the bottom containing four lovely warm eggs. I took one out to look at. It was about the size of a sparrow's, perhaps a little larger, and was a pure sky-blue. I put it back and climbed down, and almost at once the mother flew straight in with a friendly chirrup.

*May 14th.* Took a small Nature walk in Westmount woods. I found crinkleroot out, and one Jack-in-the-pulpit, rather a green one, and the white trilliums were just perfect. Such big blooms, and every one facing the sun. There were one or two wake-robins among them. Blue cohosh flowers are almost over, and the leaves now fully out, very much cut up and of a dark olive-green colour with a purplish tinge. The poplars and birches are so lovely now, their young leaves opening out, so brilliant in colour. The paper-birch staminate catkins are sometimes four inches long, and the upright pistillate ones over an inch.

[*To be continued.*]