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Bruce W. Duncan and Janet E. Snaith, 10 Chateau Court, Hamilton, Ontario L9C 5P2

Book Reviews

Nothing Gold Can Stay; The Wildlife of Upper Canada. By *W. Fraser Sandercombe.* The Boston Mills Press, Erin, Ontario. 188pp. ($19.95)

A while ago I was reading the diary of Elizabeth Simcoe, wife of Ontario's first Lieutenant-Governor (1792–1796), and was fascinated by the numerous, interesting natural history references. I thought it would be interesting to go through her diary and other similar sources and try to compose a picture of what the landscape of Upper Canada looked like, before development so fundamentally changed it. Accordingly, I was delighted soon after to hear that a new book, *Nothing Gold Can Stay,* had precisely that as its purpose. To quote from the introduction, it "is about how the land was when the settlers arrived, how they used it and abused it, added to it, took away from it". Sounds great, eh? Unfortunately, the book falls considerably short of the mark.

It is sub-divided into a variety of thematic chapters such as birds, hunting, fish and fishing, etc. Many are given evocative and/or poetic titles ("None Gets Out Alive" for the chapter on squirrels and hares; "Trophy Meat" for the chapter on ungulates, etc.). In each the author selects passages from a variety of well-known pioneer writers and observers, including Catharine Parr Traill, Phillip H. Goss (who wrote about *Lower* Canada, by the way), Henry Scadding, Suzanna Moodie, etc. With each subject area there is an editorial by the author, summarizing the situation or expounding his views on the matter. Many beautifully executed pen and ink sketches of the animals and situations discussed are distributed through the text.

It is, ironically, the graphic and artistic success of *Nothing Gold Can Stay* — and it is a truly beautifully illustrated and crafted package — that points towards its major failing. Not nearly enough attention was paid to what went *into* this pretty

package. The relatively few bits of hard fact kind of rattle around in an attractive but rather empty space. Here are a few general examples of the problems with this book.

First, relatively few sources are used and those tend to be the famous Rice Lake naturalists (the Traills, Moodies, Jamesons, etc.) or Toronto area correspondents. Where are the eastern Ontario people (E. Billings, W. P. Lett, W. Goldie, for example) and why so few from W. Pope of southwestern Ontario? Very few newspaper references are apparent and *not one* citation of the many important articles and papers in early journals such as the *Canadian Naturalist and Geologist* (1856 and on) or the *Canadian Journal* (1852 and on) could be found, let alone any of John Richardson's observations in Upper Canada in the 1820s published in *Fauna Boreali — Americana* in 1831. Surely these are at least as important as the subjective opinions of untrained settlers? After all, the author wants to find out what the natural landscape was like, not just what settlers thought it was like.

Secondly, while the author's passion for the natural world and its creatures is clearly and sincerely expressed in his editorials and his lovely and, at times, haunting sketches, his grasp of the larger natural history picture (past and present) seems less secure. His statements that the Common Loon will become extirpated in Ontario because of industrial pollution, that Northern Bobwhite were once numerous over most of Upper Canada, that the Fisher is extinct in southern Ontario, and that the only breeding Bald Eagles in (southern?) Ontario "may be a few up on the Bruce Peninsula" shakes one's confidence in the factual foundation of the book.

Thirdly, I really get steamed when I see someone referring to the natural environment as "the ecology", as author Sandercombe does on page 10. It's a pet peeve, I acknowledge, but such a fundamental misunderstanding of such a basic term would surely bother someone reading a book discussing "the physics" or "the medicine" [sic].

In a nutshell, this book is visually magnificent but is disappointing as a source of solid, dependable information on the early landscape of southern Ontario. The passion and conviction of the author's editorials are not sufficient to balance the factual errors, misunderstandings, and omissions. So it is that a fine concept remains unfulfilled.

If you like artistic, impressionistic sketches of the natural world and natural creatures, you will enjoy the visual feast offered by *Nothing Gold Can Stay.* The factual offering is rather meagre, however, and will leave those expecting a hearty feed of facts with grumbling innards.

Daniel F. Brunton, 2704 Marie Street, Ottawa, Ontario K2B 7E4

The Tanagers; Natural History, Distribution and Identification. By *Morton L. Isler* and *Phyllis R. Isler.* Smithsonian Institution Press, Washington, D. C. 404pp, 32 colour plates.

Alas for the unfortunate Ontario Field Ornithologists! Poor, impoverished, deprived souls, they operate in an almost tanager-less environment. No wave of spring warblers can really compensate them for the fact that, at the very most, they have to make do with three species of one genus. But out there, south of them, the other 239 species of the most varied, fascinating, and colourful group of birds in the world awaits anybody with the time, finance, and determination to seek them out. The present book can only intensify the resolve of any red-blooded birdwatcher to do just that.

The first problem confronting any author writing about tanagers is to decide what, in fact, is a tanager. There exists a whole crowd of anomalous, puzzling species, ranging from the unique thrasher-like Thrush-Tanager to the mysterious Pardusco, an enigmatic little bird resembling a scruffy fall Common Yellowthroat, found only in a few upland woodlots in central Peru. In fact, about 20 years ago R. W. Storer wrote an excellent little review entitled "What is a Tanager?", coming to the conclusion, as I recollect, that it was not an easy question. Fortunately, in recent years, biochemistry has resolved a lot of these taxonomic problems. The present authors take a broad viewpoint, and the book covers not only the conventional tanagers, ant-tanagers, shrike-tanagers, bush-tanagers, hemispinguses, chlorophonias, and euphonias, but also the Swallow-tanager, flower-piercers, dacnises, and honeycreepers. The bizarre Giant Conebill is included, but all the other conebills and the Bananaquit are not.

Apart from a brief but informative essay on the nature of tanagers, the book is almost entirely taken up with individual species accounts. These consist of notes on geographic and elevational range, habitat and behaviour, vocalizations, a range map, and a list of literature sources (an 18-page bibliography is given at the end). In some cases, such as the polytypic Stripe-headed Tanager, different subspecies groups are dealt with separately. No detailed plumage descriptions are given; instead, the plates are allowed to speak for themselves. Some of the larger genera, such as *Euphonia* and *Tangara*, are the subjects of brief essays located before the species accounts.

The authors have not attempted to generate new information; instead, they have collected, very comprehensively as far as I can see, just about everything worthwhile that has been written about

tanagers, and then presented it in an ordered, accessible, and readable fashion. This is of itself valuable; but especially worthwhile is the fact that they have gathered a large amount of hitherto unpublished observations from the note-books of some of the great virtuosi of present-day Neotropical field ornithology. By itself this justifies the book.

All the 242 species are illustrated in colour, and in many cases several races are depicted if they are sufficiently different to warrant it. The quality of the colour plates is adequate, but certainly not outstanding; for somebody who has been spoilt by the incomparable artistry of a Guy Tudor, they are a little disappointing. Nevertheless they are workmanlike, generally accurate, and entirely usable.

The book is, as far as I can see, pretty well free of trivial errors. The only obvious omission is the Black-throated Euphonia, a very dubious species known from one specimen only of obscure provenance, which is in any case probably a hybrid. The references at the back of the book go up to 1985, and the Green-capped Tanager, just described in the *Wilson Bulletin* in that year, was obviously added at the last minute to the colour plates.

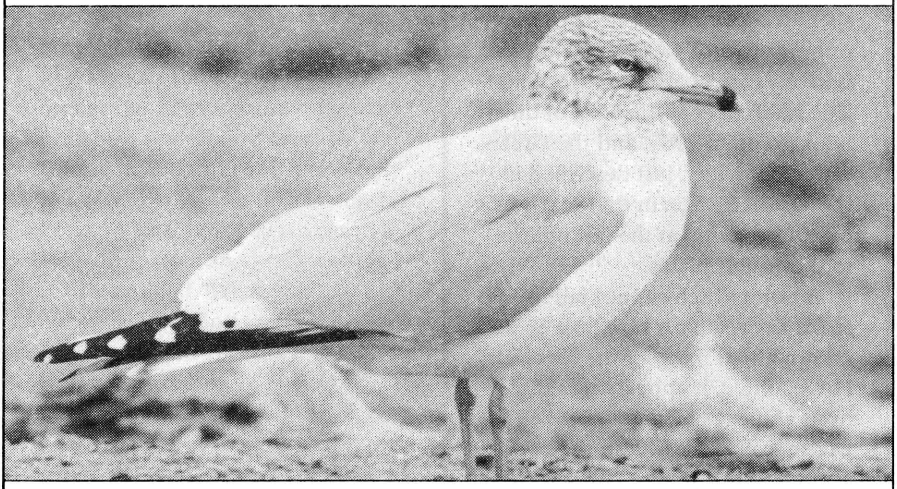
A point which cannot fail to strike any reader is how little is known about many of the species. For example, it appears that the nests and eggs of almost 100 of the 242 species dealt with in the book have never been described. These are not all obscure species found only in remote places, but include birds such as the Hooded Mountain-tanager, Spangle-cheeked Tanager, and Fulvous-headed Tanager, which are perfectly common in their ranges. Equal gaps occur in basic knowledge of behaviour and habits of a large number of species, an unbearable challenge which should send any birdwatchers worth their salt scurrying off to see their Bank Managers to borrow the price of an airplane ticket to Lima. If the Islers' excellent book stimulates tanager-deficient Ontarians to wing their way southwards, it will have served a good purpose; but in any case I recommend it as an enjoyable, valuable, and comprehensive account of a fascinating group of birds, and a worthwhile addition to the literature of Neotropical ornithology.

David Brewer, R. R. #1, Puslinch, Ontario N0B 2J0

Colonial waterbirds nesting in Canadian Lake Huron in 1980. By *D. V. Weseloh, P. Mineau, S. M. Teeple, H. Blokpoel,* and *B. Ratcliff.* 1986. Canadian Wildlife Service Progress Note No. 165. 28pp. Free.

This report summarizes data on the nesting populations of colonial waterbirds in the Canadian part of Lake Huron, including Georgian Bay and the North Channel. The species included in this study are Double-crested Cormorant (*Phalacrocorax auritus*), Great Blue Heron (*Ardea herodias*), Black-crowned Night-Heron (*Nycticorax nycticorax*), Herring Gull (*Larus argentatus*), Ring-billed Gull (*L. delawarensis*), Caspian Tern (*Sterna caspia*), and Common Tern (*S. hirundo*). The methodology employed during the survey is well outlined, so that direct comparisons of nesting populations at these sites (427 of them!) will be facilitated in the future. Several maps and tables summarize the locations and numbers of these species in Lake Huron. Where data on former breeding populations were available, changes are noted. Only Common Tern has decreased in numbers on its historical colonies in the study area. This report also provides interesting notes on habitat preferences and on patterns of co-occurrence of these species in the breeding colonies in Lake Huron. It also documents the first nesting record of Black-crowned Night-Heron in Manitoulin District (now known from several sites in the District — see *Atlas of the Breeding Birds of Ontario*).

W. J. Crins, P. O. Box 62, Alcove, New York 12007



Ring-bulled Gull / photo by *R. D. McRae*