

NOTES FROM A NATURALIST'S DIARIES

For *Toronto Field Naturalist*, fall 2001

by Pleasance Crawford

Dorothy Shaver Ashbridge (later Dorothy Shaver Bullen) was 14 in 1919 when her family moved into the brick house with frame verandah that still stands at 1444 Queen Street East in Toronto. Even then she was keeping diaries: a habit she would maintain almost until her death in 1997.

By 1921 Dorothy was recording the wildflowers--white and yellow violets, dogtooth violets, hepaticas, trilliums, gentians, wild roses--that she had planted in her garden behind the house. She was also learning about wildlife: "Saw two baby robins on the lilacs," she wrote in June 1921 and then, the following April, "The robins are eating my garden."

Gardening and birdwatching became lifelong passions, and the diaries that chronicle them are part of the wealth of family papers that Dorothy and her sister Elizabeth gave in 1972, along with the house and its 2.3-acre grounds, to the Ontario Heritage Foundation.

Recently, in researching the history of this unique landscape for the Foundation, I have had access to Dorothy's diaries. Although she often went birding outside the city, she made observations such as the following while watching the trees, shrubs, and lawns of the home grounds at Queen and Woodfield. Torontonians are indeed fortunate that this lush green space still exists opposite the pavement surrounding the TTC's Connaught car barns.

1949, April 15th: "There has been a pair of cardinals around for a week now, eating from our feeding house and using the bird bath. Hope to goodness they stay--they are so beautiful."

1950, May 21st: "Gorgeous day. Sat near the shrubbery this morning & part of the afternoon. Birds seen (or heard): Eng. Sparrow, white-thr. Sparrow, Chipping sp; Olive backed thrush, Wilson's thrush, oven bird; Magnolia warbler, Nashville w., Northern yellow-thr., Empidonax flycatcher; Red start; Catbirds, Robin, Flicker, Duck, Sp. Hawk, grackle[,] starling. (18)"

1951, Oct. 21st, looking east towards Woodfield: "I saw a huge bird in the elms. We all went out to look & I came home for binoculars. It was an eagle & I think a golden eagle. There was a crowd all along Queen before it flew off towards the lake."

1952, May 15th: "Rained in the night. Saw a brown thrasher & white crowned sparrow in the garden this morning. Also thrushes & a warbler, kinglet & white-throated sparrow."

1954, Feb. 22nd: "Heard a crow this morning."

1955, May 23rd: "Catbird sang almost all day."

1956, May 14th: "This morning was a wonderful birding time in our garden. Scarlet tanager, Rose-breasted grosbeak, Oriole, Humming bird, 4 kinds warblers, 2 fly catchers, Red-eyed vireo, Wilson thrush, etc."

1957, Dec. 15th: "Having a wonderful time watching birds. This year we have a tray at the pantry window & a log with suet & seeds in holes, hanging in the black birch. This morning we have been seeing cardinals, nuthatch, bluejays, downy woodpecker, ruby-cr. kinglet, & sparrow hawk as well as sparrows, starlings & squirrels."

1959, Nov. 8th: "Saw the Cardinal twice today. Hasn't been here since summer. Quite a flock of Goldfinches eating the flower seeds."

1965, Mar. 26th: "Snowed again today. Betty heard a red-winged blackbird."

1967, Jan. 25th, after a heavy snow: "The birds ate a quart of sunflower seed this morn & I had to take out another one at lunch time."

1969, April 11th: "Saw a Blue-gray gnatcatcher!!"

1969, Dec. 24th: "This morning a sparrow hawk perched on old feeder then moved over to new one. Examined seeds well before flying off. Then at noon there was a robin in the flowering crab. Wish it would go south. The pair of chickadees are feeding regularly here."

1971, Jan. 15th: "Red letter day. Saw a pair of long-eared Owls arrive. They have stayed in the spruce tree near the shrubs & black birch all day. Think now [written the next day] they may be great horned."

1972, May 13th: "Many birds around to-day, and this spring in general."