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BIRD-HUNTING IN CENTRAL PARK

BY LUDLOW GRISCOM

Assistant Curator, Department of Ornithology

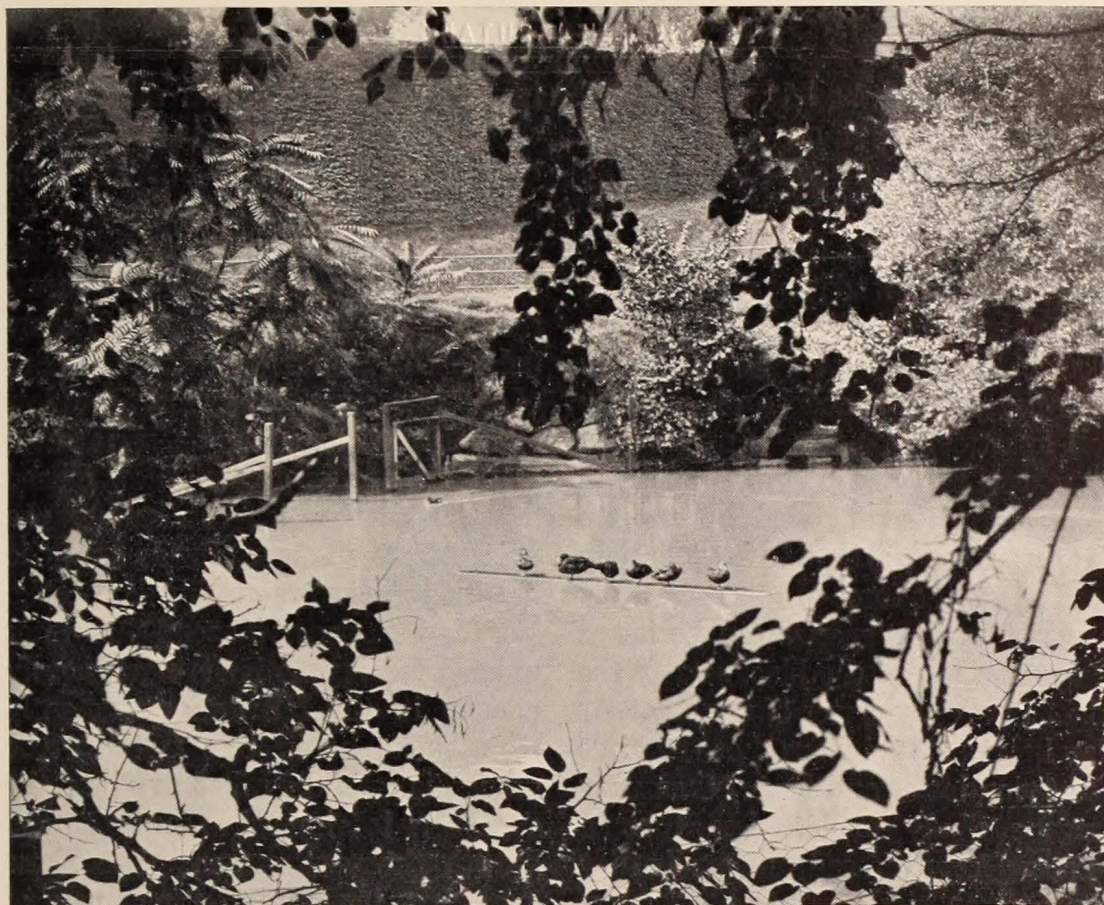
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Photographed by Edmund O. Hovey

Swallows skim over its surface, the kingfisher watches in the overhanging trees, and the water-thrush trips along the bank



Black ducks on one of the smaller ponds. They are descended from wild birds

Bird-Hunting in Central Park

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FEW people without experience, would suppose that a park in the heart of a great city was an excellent station for the study of birds during the migration period. Bradford Torrey, years ago, used to tell the story of a friend who inquired of a distinguished ornithologist where he should go to obtain a sight of certain rare warblers. Much to his surprise, the advice was, "Go to Central Park, New York," though an undistinguished friend had already recommended precisely the same place! The writer has visited the Ramble in Central Park daily in spring and fall during the past eighteen years and can fully endorse

the excellence of this advice. It is, indeed, an ideal place for a close study of migration. The reason is comparatively simple. The greater number of our local birds migrate at night. The electric lights of the city have a certain fascination for these little travelers, just as lighthouses are well known to have, and they fly lower, particularly on foggy nights. Secondly, the Park is a haven of refuge, a veritable oasis in a vast desert of city roofs. As day breaks, the tired hosts must alight to rest and eat. How gloomy those individuals must feel who see nothing but the roofs of Newark or Hoboken beneath them by the dawn's early light,

and how inviting the lakes, lawns, and verdure of the Park must seem in the distance. Many indeed are forced by fatigue to alight almost anywhere. Washington Square has a notable list of birds, and a friend has recorded more than thirty species in a back yard on Tenth Street, which boasts one sickly little tree, surrounded on all sides by tall apartment houses. Anyone who stands on the bridge over the lake in Central Park at daybreak on a warm May morning will be able to appreciate for himself the force of this attraction. Calls of various species can be heard showering out of the blackness of the night in every quarter of the sky. As day breaks it is obvious that the birds are flying lower and lower, then they become dimly visible, less than a hundred feet overhead, and finally they can be seen pitching into the nearest trees. During the next half hour the chorus of song gradually swells as the travelers find food and rest, and the observer can set about recording the extent of the flight, and the new species which have arrived from the south. It also follows, parenthetically, that once having alighted, there is no special inducement to move on, as there is no suitable adjoining territory to go to. The smaller birds at least are caught until nightfall at the earliest, or until the instinct of migration inspires them to proceed another lap on the return journey to their breeding grounds. It frequently happens, therefore, that individuals of rare or uncommon species will remain for several days, or even a week, and give the student a real opportunity to cement a chance acquaintance.

It must not be supposed, however, that Central Park is an Eden for all the species of birds in the New York City region. The causes which attract night-flying birds do not apply, for

instance, to those which migrate by day, and their one desire is to leave the dust and noise of the city behind them as rapidly as possible. As there are no marshes or feeding grounds for water birds, these are of purely casual occurrence. Similarly the absence of grassy fields and pastures deprives the park of any attraction for birds like meadow larks and vesper sparrows, which consequently are very rare. Few indeed are the birds which can endure the noise of the summer crowds, and the breeding species are steadily decreasing. Very few species now spend the winter unless a feeding station is started early enough in the fall and consistently maintained, as in late October the ground is carefully raked over and the shrubbery is trimmed to insure a good growth the next season. But these operations inevitably destroy part of the food supply and eliminate shelter and cover, so that the Park has no attractions as a winter resort. But the Park does offer a suitable habitat to the great majority of woodland and thicket-loving species which migrate by night, and they are as common, or even more common, than anywhere in the vicinity of the city.

Some figures might be of interest. Fifty years ago, when the park was on the outskirts of the city, nearly sixty species nested and many were common all winter. In 1908, eighteen species nested and twenty-two spent the winter. Last year, but eight species nested and a very few individuals of three native species spent the winter. This decrease was inevitable and was to have been expected, though bird lovers regret the disappearance of the cardinal and warbling vireo, and miss the friendly chickadees which used to snatch peanuts from between their lips in the winter time. The regular tran-

sient species have not been affected, however, and a daily visit from April 1 to May 30, and from August 10 to the end of October is certain to repay the student. The average list for such a series of visits is about 110 species per year. At the end of this article will be found a list of all the birds recorded from the Park, divided into two categories, (a) those of more or less regular or normal occurrence (116), and (b) those of very rare or casual occurrence (75). What usually happens is that some of the species belonging in list *a* are missed in any given year, and these are compensated for to a certain extent by two or three species belonging in list *b*. May is the star month, when the maximum number of species and individuals is present. There is always the possibility that a great "wave" of migrants will arrive overnight with favorable weather conditions. Such an occasion took place on May 10, 1922, when 66 species and thousands of individuals were observed in the Ramble. This is the record, but fifty species at least can usually be counted on, one or two days each season. Conditions are somewhat different in the fall, when the migration is protracted over a far longer period, and the birds move south in a more leisurely manner. The record list in fall is only 52 species on October 4, 1907, when a sudden cold snap, after a mild September, forced many laggards to rush south pell-mell. Indeed, it is exceptional to record more than 40 species in any one day. When we consider the absence of song and the change to a more obscure plumage, it is small wonder that the average bird lover is discouraged, and the swarm of observers in May is conspicuously absent in fall. Nevertheless, at least twenty-five of the rarer species are far more likely to be seen in fall than in

spring, and a few are beyond the bounds of reasonable hope in May. During the past eighteen years, the writer has seen 160 out of the 191 species recorded since 1875.

How do these figures compare with the country outside the city limits? They are, of course, very much lower. If Sunday and holiday trips are intelligently planned, it is quite possible to see 225 species in a year in this vicinity, and I have seen 280 species in all, in the same eighteen-year period. A good May-day list will exceed 100 species and a good day in fall will yield 70 species or better. Why then, it may be asked, go to Central Park, where the variety is so small and the number of species so relatively few. The main answer has already been given. More of the rarer transients will be found in Central Park during May than anywhere else. There is another purely practical reason. The average dweller in Manhattan can only look for birds in the country on Sundays, and on week days it is Central Park or nothing. When we consider that only one or two individuals of the rarer species will occur a season, the chances against their being obliging enough to be present on a Sunday are at least seven to one. These two factors combined demonstrate excellently the advisability of visiting the Ramble at least six mornings a week. Next to Central Park the best place for warblers in this region is Englewood, where I have been going every Sunday during May, year after year. I have seen the Cape May warbler there only six times in twelve years, and the mourning warbler never. In Central Park during the same period I have seen the Cape May warbler more than twenty times, and the mourning warbler twice. But it is a general law of life that it is almost impossible to get



A splendid covert for warblers, thrushes, and sparrows. The swans are a domesticated European variety

something for nothing. Hunting rare warblers in Central Park is no exception to this rule. He who, yawning portentously, lurches into the Ramble two or three times before breakfast some May, expecting to see all the rare transients, will be very rapidly and completely undeceived. The prizes come only to the energetic and the persistent, and what is fairly earned is the more thoroughly enjoyed.

Bird lovers may be divided roughly into three classes. The beginner, to whom all species are new and strange, is advised to begin in Central Park. The difficulties of identification are greatly reduced, when the number of possible species is also greatly reduced. With a hundred species learned the country outside will yield its greater wealth of

treasures with less confusion and fewer errors. The next stage in progress is marked by the desire to wander farther afield and gain an acquaintance with as many species as possible, and field trips to special places are undertaken with the main hope of seeing some new rarity, or obtaining a large list. This stage is a necessary and valuable experience, and must be passed before the amateur ornithologist really becomes capable of contributing to local ornithology. The Park has little appeal for such people. But when the making of large lists palls, and the chances of seeing a new species locally have become exceedingly remote the opportunities of the Park as a station for studying that most fascinating phenomenon, the migration of birds, is

urged upon those desiring to make something constructive out of their hobby. Every individual bird can be determined with certainty as a transient, or can be definitely known not to be one, something which is utterly impossible in the country, where there are large numbers of permanent, summer, or winter residents to obscure the issue. Consequently the migration periods of species which nest in this vicinity or which are found throughout the year can be determined with more certainty in the Park.

But there is also an element of sport and enjoyment which no account of bird-hunting in a city park should omit. After all, the satisfaction to be derived from a given course of action is directly in proportion to the expectation preceding it. It is possible to see one hundred species in a day in winter in southern California, and it is practically impossible to see more than forty in the vicinity of New York. Yet I never heard of a local bird lover who abandoned his observations during the winter on the ground that bird life was comparatively meager, or who failed to be delighted at seeing thirty species. His expectations were reasonable and controlled by the known facts. The same philosophy can be applied to advantage in Central Park, and many delightful week-day hours each spring and fall are shared by a band of fellow enthusiasts and friendly rivals. We are as pleased with fifty species in the Ramble as we would be with one hundred in the country. There the crow is utterly despised and ignored; here it is a rare visitor to be greeted with enthusiasm. The morning hours are as cool, the songs are just as sweet.

And then one can never tell exactly what is going to happen next. No two spring or fall seasons are exactly alike.

There are lean years like 1924, and very good years like May, 1925, when birds were present almost daily in unusual variety and abundance. There are lean days when almost nothing can be found, and good days, when the Ramble is crowded with multitudes. We have never yet learned how to predict a big flight with absolute certainty. They fail to materialize when the weather conditions seem just right, or they arrive quite unexpectedly. One can never tell just which ones of the rarer species will appear, or when. Once in a great while there are the red-letter days when some bird of extraordinary rarity is detected. I well remember the glowing orange prothonotary warbler which was detected on the "Point" in the lake on May 3, 1908, a wanderer from the cypress swamps of the south. It remained a whole week, sang freely and was absurdly tame, so that it could literally be surrounded by enthusiastic nature study classes, without turning a hair, or more correctly, ruffling a feather. Quite a number of people began to study birds, thanks to the general atmosphere of excitement over this warbler.

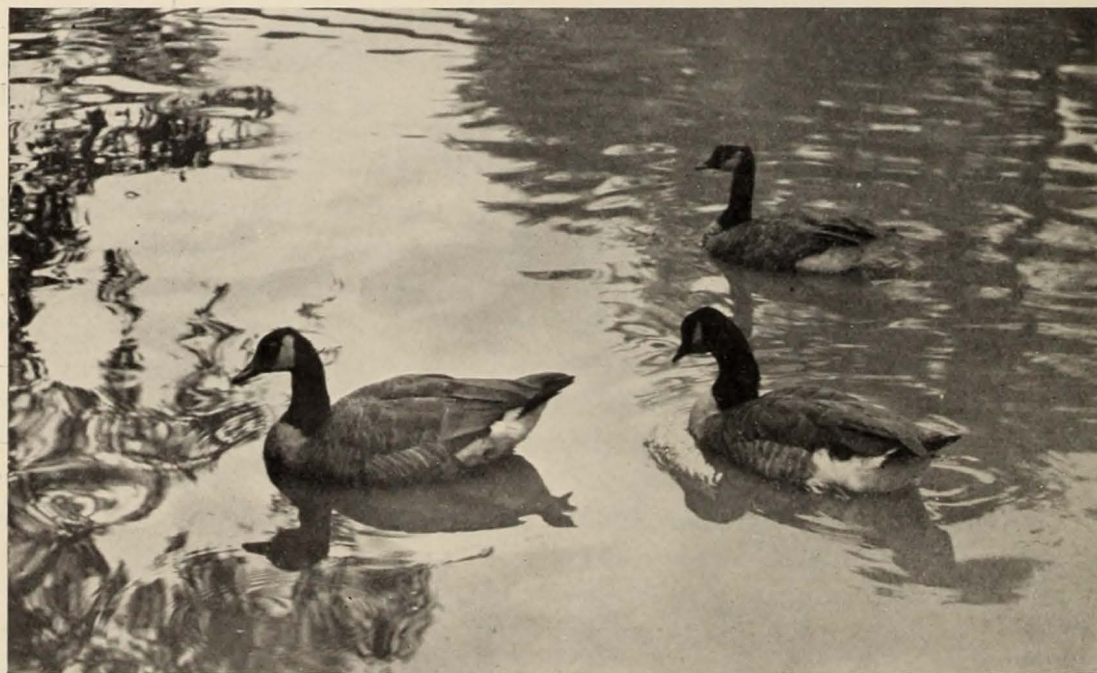
Surprising as it may seem for so small an area, nobody ever saw all the species present in the Ramble on any one day, when birds were at all common. The writer, among others, has made repeated and earnest endeavors, but has never succeeded. One pair of eyes cannot hope to equal the combined results of ten or twenty other pairs, as keen or even keener. The following incident is a generalized picture of this state of affairs. I have spent two hours in the Ramble before breakfast entirely alone, and have had a very successful morning. Several new species have arrived over night and one or two rarities have

fallen to my glasses. I return at noon knowing that a group of sharp-eyed friends have spent the entire morning in the Ramble, and I wish to check up on the extent of the flight. We meet and compare notes. I find that they have not seen one or two of my best discoveries. I listen with a certain discreditable satisfaction to their yelps of disappointment, but the situation is immediately reversed, as they reel off so long a string of species, that it seems almost incredible that anyone really interested could have overlooked all of them. Sometimes we scatter in a frantic search for the species missing on our respective lists. Again, if nothing of special note has been reported, we combine forces and go around together. This nearly always results in the discovery of a third group of species, which nobody had seen previously.

I cannot forbear to say a few words in closing about the bird hunter, in relation to his environment, as well as the

birds, and more particularly respecting his relations with his fellow citizens, who use the Park for other purposes. It makes me happy to report that in the last twenty years we have gradually become more sane and normal, and we are now almost like ordinary people. Nowadays everybody understands what the bird hunter is about, and is tolerant, or even sympathetic. People will now often stop and ask intelligent questions, or they will try and see the bird for themselves, and even the Park policeman is becoming an enthusiast, the hours on his beat passing more pleasantly than before.

So I can the more cheerfully recommend pleasant and instructive hours of fresh air to city dwellers. Doctors are now advising overworked and nervously fatigued patients to study birds in Central Park. It is a healthy hobby, and with a little skill and experience, the time spent on it can be made of constructive scientific value. The lists



Canada geese on the Park lake. They are domesticated birds but perfectly able to fly resulting in numerous reports of wild geese alighting in the Park. Real wild geese are seen about once in ten years flying over at a great height

at the end of this article give a good idea of the possibilities as regards the variety of species. With modifications depending upon the size of the Park and the extent to which its grounds imitate the country, these lists apply fairly well to any park in the northeastern states. The more general reasons for the excellence of a park as an aviary for migratory birds hold true for every city in the United States. The reader is cordially invited to make the experiment for himself.

ANNOTATED LIST OF THE BIRDS OF CENTRAL PARK

A.—Species of Regular or Normal Occurrence (116)

- Pied-billed Grebe.—Rare on the park lakes, chiefly in April and October.
 Herring Gull.—Common in winter on the reservoirs.
 Black Duck.—Descendants of wild birds are resident on the lakes.
 Green Heron.—Uncommon, but regular in May, August, and September.
 Night Heron.—Seen annually between late April and October.
 Solitary Sandpiper.—Rare in May, August, and September.
 Spotted Sandpiper.—Common around the lakes and reservoirs in May and August.
 Sharp-shinned Hawk.—Every year in late spring and early fall.
 Duck Hawk.—A possibility throughout the year on pigeon hunting excursions.
 Pigeon Hawk.—Recorded almost every year in late April or early May.
 Sparrow Hawk.—Found throughout the year.
 Fish Hawk.—Recorded almost every year, chiefly in May.
 Screech Owl.—Several resident pairs.
 Yellow-billed Cuckoo.—Once or twice a year in late May or early fall.
 Black-billed Cuckoo.—Once or twice a year in late May or early fall.
 Kingfisher.—Common around the lakes, chiefly in May and August.
 Hairy Woodpecker.—Rare in fall, sometimes spending the winter.
 Downy Woodpecker.—Permanent resident.
 Sapsucker.—Uncommon in spring (April); common late September and early October.
 Red-headed Woodpecker.—Rare in May and September.
 Flicker.—Common summer resident.
 Whippoorwill.—Occasionally found in May.
 Nighthawk.—Common all summer, roosting on dead branches.
 Swift.—Common all summer.
 Hummingbird.—Seen every year in late May and August.
 Kingbird.—Seen every year in May and August.
 Crested Flycatcher.—Seen every year in May and August.
 Phoebe.—Common in early spring and late fall.
 Olive-sided Flycatcher.—Rare in late May and August.
 Wood Pewee.—Regular in May and early September; one or two pairs breed.
 Yellow-bellied Flycatcher.—Every year in late May and August.
 Least Flycatcher.—Common in May and August.
 Blue Jay.—Uncommon in early May and October.
 Crow.—Occurs every year, chiefly in late April and August.
 Fish Crow.—Occurs nearly every year, chiefly in May and August.
 Starling.—Common permanent resident.
 Red-winged Blackbird.—Seen every year in spring and fall.
 Baltimore Oriole.—Regular summer resident.
 Rusty Blackbird.—Seen annually in April or May, sometimes in October.
 Purple Grackle.—Common summer resident, late February to November.
 Bronzed Grackle.—Occasional in early spring or late fall.
 House Sparrow.—Common permanent resident.
 Purple Finch.—Uncommon in spring, common in fall.
 Goldfinch.—Common both spring and fall.
 Pine Siskin.—Irregular, chiefly in May and October.
 Savannah Sparrow.—A few nearly every spring and fall.
 White-crowned Sparrow.—Seen nearly every year in May or October.
 White-throated Sparrow.—Very common both spring and fall, sometimes wintering.
 Chipping sparrow.—Regular in April and October.
 Field sparrow.—Common both spring and fall.
 Junco.—Abundant on migration, sometimes wintering.

- Song Sparrow.—Common on migration; sometimes nesting and wintering.
- Lincoln's Sparrow.—Seen every year in May.
- Swamp Sparrow.—Common both spring and fall.
- Fox Sparrow.—Usually common in early spring and late fall.
- Towhee.—Very common, spring and fall.
- Rose-breasted Grosbeak.—Common in May, rare in fall.
- Indigo Bunting.—Regular in late May, rare in fall.
- Scarlet Tanager.—Common every spring and fall.
- Barn Swallow.—Common both spring and fall.
- Tree Swallow.—Seen every spring; common in August.
- Bank Swallow.—Seen nearly every year in May.
- Cedar Waxwing.—Irregular in spring, often common in fall.
- Red-eyed Vireo.—A few pairs nest; common on migration in May and September.
- Yellow-throated Vireo.—About one a year in May.
- Solitary Vireo.—Common both spring and fall.
- White-eyed Vireo.—Uncommon in May.
- Black and White Warbler.—Abundant in May, August and September.
- Worm-eating Warbler.—Seen almost every year in May and August.
- Blue-winged Warbler.—Uncommon May, common August.
- Golden-winged Warbler.—Rare in May and August.
- Nashville Warbler.—Common in May and September.
- Tennessee Warbler.—Irregular in May; common in August and September.
- Parula Warbler.—Abundant in May, common in fall.
- Cape May Warbler.—Seen annually in May, August and September in varying numbers.
- Yellow Warbler.—Common in May and August, a pair usually nesting.
- Black-throated Blue Warbler.—Common both spring and fall.
- Myrtle Warbler.—Abundant both spring and fall.
- Magnolia Warbler.—Very common in May, common in early fall.
- Chestnut-sided Warbler.—Common in May and early September.
- Bay-breasted Warbler.—Common in late May and August.
- Blackpoll Warbler.—Common in May, abundant in fall.
- Blackburnian Warbler.—Common in May, uncommon in early fall.
- Black-throated Green Warbler.—Abundant in May, common in fall.
- Pine Warbler.—Common in April; very rare in fall.
- Palm Warbler.—Rare* in spring, regular in fall.
- Yellow Palm Warbler.—Common both spring and fall.
- Prairie Warbler.—Common in May and September.
- Ovenbird.—Abundant in May, rare in fall.
- Water Thrush.—Common in May, August and September.
- Louisiana Water-thrush.—Rare both spring and fall.
- Mourning Warbler.—Rare in May and August.
- Maryland Yellow Throat.—Abundant both spring and fall.
- Yellow-breasted Chat.—Seen every year in May; very rare in fall.
- Hooded Warbler.—Uncommon in May and August.
- Wilson's Warbler.—Common in late May, rare in fall.
- Canadian Warbler.—Very common in May, August and September.
- Redstart.—Abundant both spring and fall.
- Catbird.—Very common both spring and fall.
- Brown Thrasher.—Very common both spring and fall.
- House Wren.—Seen every spring in late April and May; rare in fall.
- Winter Wren.—Rare in May and October.
- Brown Creeper.—Common both spring and fall.
- White-breasted Nuthatch.—Uncommon in fall, rare in spring.
- Red-breasted Nuthatch.—Irregularly common in fall, rare in spring.
- Chickadee.—Uncommon in October, sometimes wintering.
- Golden-crowned Kinglet.—Uncommon in April, common in October.
- Ruby-crowned Kinglet.—Very common both spring and fall.
- Gnatcatcher.—Rare in spring, very rare in fall.
- Wood Thrush.—Seen annually in May, and sometimes in fall.
- Veery.—Fairly common in May, rare in fall.
- Gray-cheeked Thrush.—Common in May and September.
- Olive-backed Thrush.—Very common in May and September.

Hermit-thrush.—Common in April, early May and October.
 Robin.—Common summer resident.
 Bluebird.—Uncommon in early spring and late fall.

B.—Species of Very Rare or Casual Occurrence (75)

Holboëll's Grebe.—Casual on the reservoir; twice.
 Horned Grebe.—Casual on the reservoir; three times.
 Loon.—Occasionally noted flying over; once on the reservoir.
 Iceland Gull.—Once on the reservoir in winter.
 Great Black-backed Gull.—Once on the reservoir in winter.
 Laughing Gull.—Casual on the reservoir in late summer.
 Common Tern.—Once in late summer.
 American Merganser.—Four winter records on the reservoir.
 Red-breasted Merganser.—Twice on the reservoir, April and October.
 Hooded Merganser.—Once in late November.
 Green-winged Teal.—Once in fall.
 Wood Duck.—Formerly rare in spring and fall; only one record in the last ten years.
 Redhead.—Casual; once.
 Scaup Duck.—Casual; twice.
 Ruddy Duck.—Casual; twice.
 Canada Goose.—Tame birds are resident; wild birds on migration are seen flying over about once every ten years.
 American Bittern.—Very rare in spring; five records.
 Great Blue Heron.—Casual; three times.
 Coot.—Once many years ago.
 Woodcock.—Now casual; three times in the last twenty-five years.
 Least Sandpiper.—Once in May.
 Greater Yellowlegs.—Twice.
 Killdeer.—Once many years ago.
 Bob-white.—Formerly resident; long since extirpated.
 Ruffed Grouse.—Formerly resident; long since extirpated.
 Mourning Dove.—Very rare on migration.
 Turkey Vulture.—Once.
 Marsh Hawk.—Casual; no record in twenty years.
 Cooper's Hawk.—Very rare; five times in past eighteen years.
 Red-tailed Hawk.—Casual, no recent records.

Red-shouldered Hawk.—Casual, no recent records.
 Broad-winged Hawk.—Very rare, only once in past twelve years.
 Rough-legged Hawk.—Once.
 Bald Eagle.—Twice.
 Long-eared Owl.—Four times in winter.
 Barred Owl.—Formerly resident; extirpated years ago.
 Saw-whet Owl.—Three times in winter.
 Snowy Owl.—Once in winter.
 Red-bellied Woodpecker.—Once.
 Acadian Flycatcher.—Rarely identified in spring.
 Alder Flycatcher.—Rarely identified in spring.
 Bobolink.—Very rare in May and August.
 Cowbird.—Very rare in April and October.
 Meadowlark.—Casual.
 Orchard Oriole.—Very rare in May.
 Pine Grosbeak.—Two winter records.
 American Crossbill.—Very rare and erratic visitant.
 White-winged Crossbill.—Twice in winter.
 Redpoll.—Very rare and irregular in winter.
 Snowflake.—Twice in winter.
 Vesper Sparrow.—Casual; twice in last twenty years.
 Grasshopper Sparrow.—Once.
 Seaside Sparrow.—Once.
 Tree Sparrow.—Very rare in winter.
 Cardinal.—Formerly resident, now extirpated.
 Dickcissel.—Once.
 Purple Martin.—Only five records.
 Cliff Swallow.—About once in five years in May.
 Rough-winged Swallow.—Once.
 Northern Shrike.—Very rare in winter.
 Migrant Shrike.—Once.
 Philadelphia Vireo.—Twice in September.
 Warbling Vireo.—Now very rare in May.
 Prothonotary Warbler.—Three records in spring.
 Orange-crowned Warbler.—Once in September.
 Cerulean Warbler.—Once in May, once in September.
 Yellow-throated Warbler.—Once in spring.
 Kentucky Warbler.—Very rare in May.
 Connecticut Warbler.—Twice in May; four times in September.
 Pipit.—Casual on migration; four records.
 Mockingbird.—Casual; five times.
 Carolina Wren.—Rare and irregular visitant.
 Long-billed Marsh Wren.—Threetimes in May.
 Tufted Titmouse.—Once in May.

If you wish to identify the birds you have seen you will find the BIRDS OF THE VICINITY in the West Corridor, Second Floor, of the Museum.

If you wish to know more about our birds, their haunts and habits, when and where they are to be found you will find the information in the illustrated Handbook of 400 pages, by Ludlow Griscom, entitled "BIRDS OF THE NEW YORK CITY REGION." This may be purchased at the Museum for only a dollar.