

The

# Young Naturalist



VOL. 8 — NO. 5

PUBLISHED BY THE FEDERATION OF ONTARIO NATURALISTS

MAY, 1966

## The Last Great Auk



Photo from a drawing by T. M. Shortt

Once killed by thousands, the Great Auk disappeared forever in 1844. A mounted specimen may be seen in a case at the Royal Ontario Museum.



Dark, grey and mysterious, shrouded day after day in fog lies Funk Island, the one-time home of the Great Auk. Some thirty miles off a remote corner of Canada's easternmost province of Newfoundland, it is difficult of approach by small boats that rise and fall on heaving seas, harder still to make a landing on. It would seem a perfect refuge for creatures of the wild, secure from disturbance by marauding man. Nevertheless, as soon as our ancestors found this remote rock, they visited it with persistent frequency and with slaughter in their minds. Today there are still large numbers of birds on the mist-grey island of the Great Auk, but of that magnificent bird which once dwelt there in untold thousands not one remains alive. And not only not on Funk but nowhere in the world. The Great Auk is gone from the list of living creatures.

Why did men do it? Partly out of ignorance. In the old days men believed that the resources of Nature were endless and so could be exploited without heed. You could, as they did on Funk Island when the water was calm, lay gangplanks from boat to rocks and drive as many of the flightless Auks aboard as the boat would hold. You could, as Cartier's men did, kill a thousand in a morning without a qualm. There were numberless more, so it was thought, where these came



# The Woodcock—Bird With A Beep

## PART II



*Ontario Department of Lands and Forests*

Listen for the “beep” of the woodcock during early May evenings. Select a damp shrubby area with short poplars, willows, and little clearings.

Woodcock come back from Louisiana when it is still quite cool; they arrive in Toronto before the end of March. At once they drop into their chosen thickets of low trees. At this season the male has to have something else as well—a little clear space in the woods where he can strut about. Thither, when the sun goes down, he runs and announces his presence by a rasping call—“beep”—which reminds some people of a nighthawk, and others of a Bronx cheer—take your choice. As he “beeps” you can notice that the sound varies, and, if you can see, it becomes obvious that he is walking a bit, facing different ways, and perhaps strutting. A few minutes later, when the light is right and everything else is according to Hoyle, he takes off in twittering flight, climbing rapidly to 200 or 250 feet, and then flies in a big circle, uttering a sort of “bleep, blip” song, possibly getting as far as several hundred yards away. Very

shortly he pitches abruptly down, usually right where he took off, beeps again for a while, and then repeats until it gets too dark.

It used to be thought that this was a territorial display of a mated pair. Now it is known that a male may have more than one stand, and more than one male may use one spot, though not simultaneously. One female may come, or none, or a procession—papa seemingly couldn’t care less. Early in April, in our area, the mamas are sitting on four eggs, on the ground, near the edge of the woods. By mid-May the young are flying, but through it all papa keeps on beeping. When it gets really warm he stops, but sometimes young males beep in autumn.

Woodcock have few enemies. Many cats and dogs won’t touch them, sometimes even when they are cooked. Mammal predators are probably the same. Some people don’t like them also but others think woodcock are wonder-

ful. Owls and hawks pack their food in without asking questions, and the long-eared owl may pick up a few woodcock, especially displaying males. It doesn’t matter to the species; woodcock are polygamous.

Biologists can tell the sex and age of any woodcock they handle, and if they handle enough they can tell a lot about populations. They have done so recently, and it becomes clear that individual woodcock survive longer than most birds their size, and, even with only four eggs, the survival of young is very good. Nature works that way. If they had as big broods as grouse we would be knee-deep in woodcock. The only thing that seems to harm them is an occasional blast of severe winter weather in Louisiana. Spraying of D.D.T. as in New Brunswick, cuts down on the production of young, but it seems to have done them less harm than once was feared. The same is true for heptachlor spraying in Louisiana.

There is not the slightest sign that hunting has ever done woodcock any harm. A bird which is highly palatable, and has, as biologists say, good natural recruitment and survival, is a good game bird. In this case also the erratic flight makes it hard to shoot, and you will not even see many unless you have a dog both bred and trained for woodcock. In consequence the shooting of a woodcock by most hunters is as accidental as the seeing of one by most other people.

You should, though, make a point of seeing one this spring. I know that juniors don’t drive around woody roads in the cool of the spring evening, but, around May 1st, you won’t have to be up so late that an adult couldn’t take you, say, a Friday or Saturday before exams. Pick a place such as I have described—a damp area with short poplars and little clearings—and, when the sun goes down, listen for the beep—or the Bronx cheer.

C. H. D. CLARKE



# How To Test Seeds

With the warmth and moisture of spring, seeds are bursting open, soon to cover the landscape with new plant life.

The germination of seeds is a remarkable process that must be observed to be understood and appreciated. A good observation case can be made by lining a glass tumbler with blotting paper, filling the container with sand or sawdust, pressing seeds down the side of the glass, and keeping the contents moist for a few days. Be sure to include several different kinds of seeds, and notice how the germination process differs. Which ones grow a root that pushes the seed up out of the tumbler? Which seeds remain in place, growing a stem upward and a root downward?

Many gardeners and farmers, and all people involved in selling seeds, test the germinating strength of seeds. We have shown here how to make two

germination testers. The plate type uses two large plates, two pieces of blotting paper, and a certain number of seeds to be tested. Keep the blotter moist by adding water several times each day.

The other tester uses a long strip of cloth, such as a flour sack or an old tea towel. A certain number of seeds is placed in each of several sections marked out on the cloth. Then the cloth is rolled up, tied or fastened with string or elastic bands, and placed in a jar with an inch of water. Open the germinator each day to count and record the number of seeds that have germinated. For most plants, the seed is considered good if you have 80% germination in a week.

Here is a useful hint: when counting the seeds, use numbers such as 10, 20, 25 or 50, to make it easy to determine the percentage of seeds that have germinated.

H. G. HEDGES

GREAT AUK — From Page 1  
from.

Partly it was ruthless greed: we're going to get as much as we can right now and who cares what other people think or want; as for the future, that can look after itself. Such was the attitude with which fishermen would surround the flightless Auks on the sea and drive them ashore into prepared pens to be killed, often using the plucked bodies of the first caught to keep fires going under kettles where they scalded others in order to remove feathers.

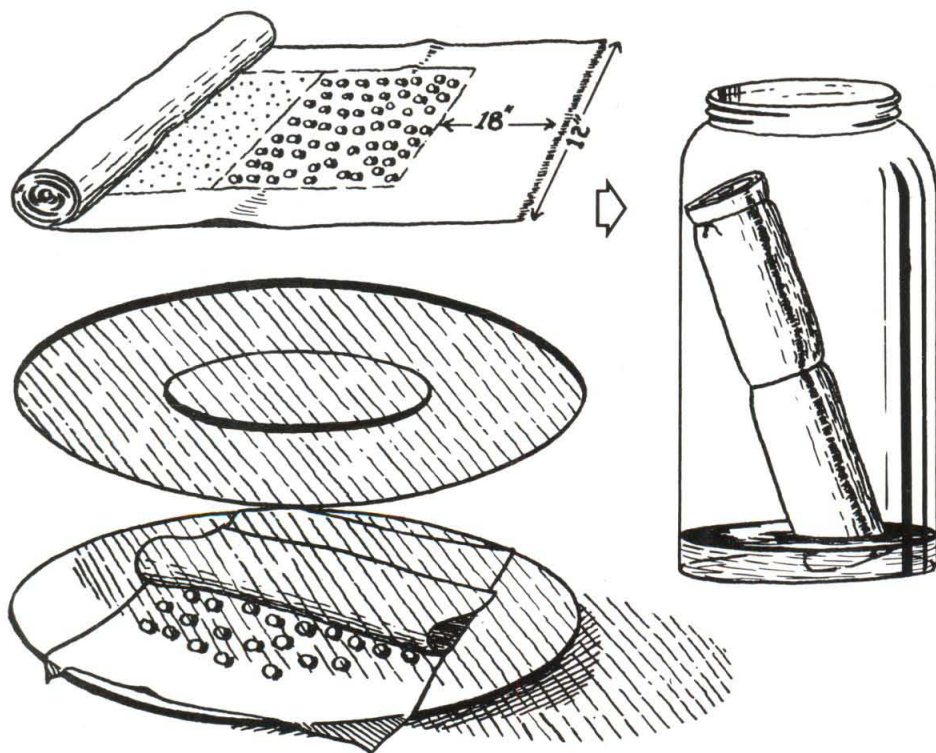
In part, it was need for food amongst an extremely poor people, and for variety of food in an area where kinds of food were terribly limited.

Unhappily, it was mostly indifference, for most men simply did not care what was happening if only they satisfied their own immediate ends.

The last act in the tragedy, so far as we know, took place in 1844 on another rocky islet, this one off the coast of Iceland. Two Great Auks were sighted amongst other birds in a breeding colony. Men landed and gave chase. The Auks made no fight, merely running along the cliff in an effort to escape. Since they were able to move only about as fast as a man can walk, one was soon driven into a corner and captured; the other nearly got into the sea but didn't quite make it. One egg was found, the last nest of the last Great Auk. Thus it is that, except in museums, the like of these great birds will never be seen again.

Today we know that Nature's resources are by no means unlimited. We must manage them correctly and take our own place reasonably in the realm of Nature or very possibly our own existence will be at stake. Man must lessen ignorance, counter indifference and check greed with respect to Nature. He may and indeed must do this to save himself, but any present endeavour to get on reasonable living terms with Nature must bear within it some sense of atonement for the errors and evil of the past.

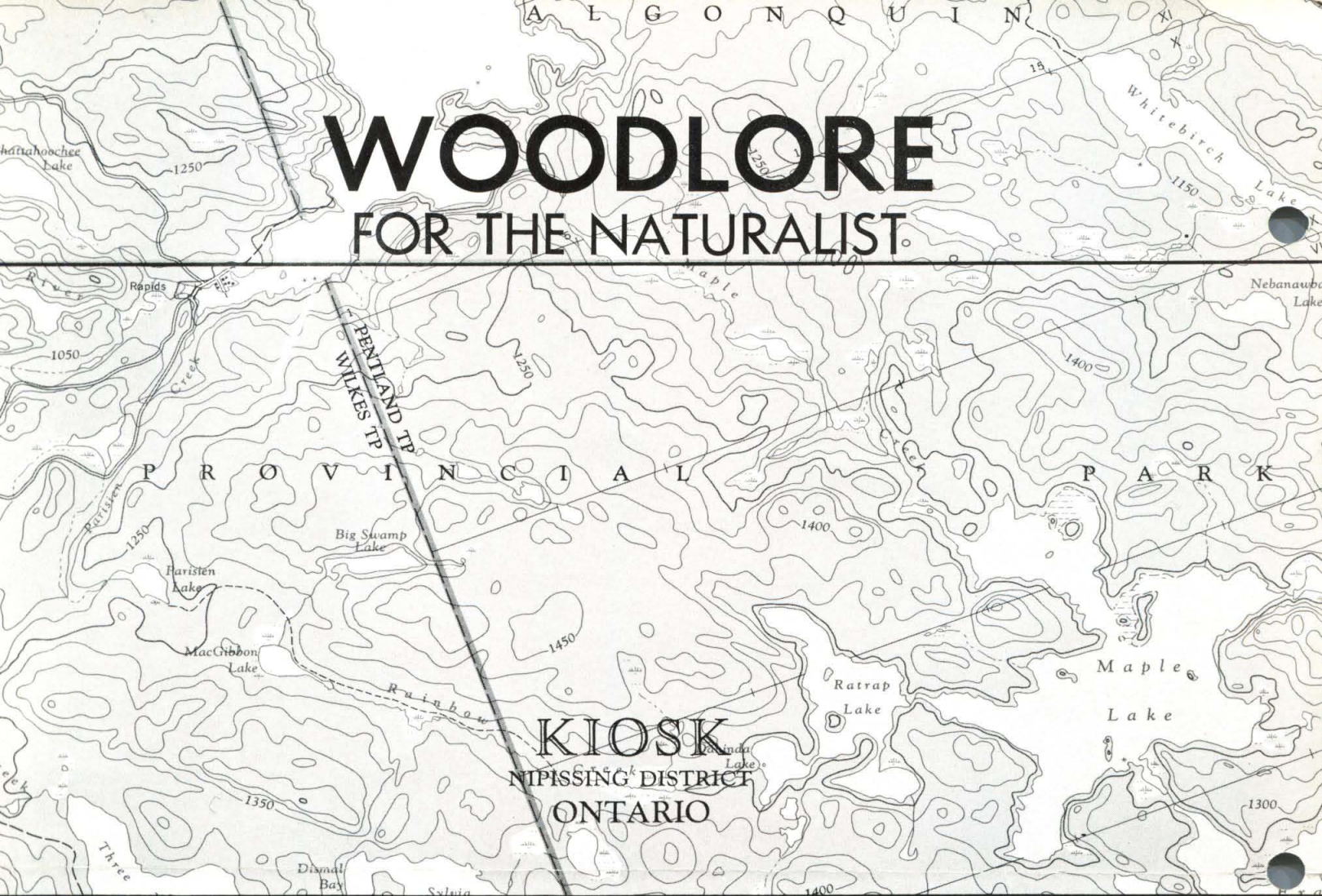
RICHARD M. SAUNDERS



The plate seed tester uses two large dinner plates and blotting paper. A second tester may be made from coarse cloth, then rolled and placed in a jar.



# WOODLORE FOR THE NATURALIST



## THE TOPOGRAPHICAL MAP

For bush travel or canoe-tripping, you need a topographical map. Road maps are useless in the bush. Modern topographical maps are made from aerial photographs. They depict accurately such geographical features as lakes and streams, rapids, roads and, in the larger-scale editions, such useful detail as trails, portages, hill contours, and even buildings.

Look for the following items in studying a topographical map:

- (1) *Locality covered:* a general description is contained in the title at the bottom of the map. When writing for a map, be sure to pinpoint accurately the part of Ontario that you want it to cover.
- (2) *Scale:* for example, 2 miles to 1

inch. A good map for bush travel is the 1:50,000 series (scale about  $\frac{3}{4}$  mile to 1 inch), and for canoe travel, the 1:125,000 series (scale about 2 miles to 1 inch).

- (3) *Degrees of latitude:* (north of the equator), and degrees of longitude (west of Greenwich, England), printed on the side margins and top and bottom margins, respectively.
- (4) *Magnetic declination:* a correction factor to be applied to compass courses, shown in the lower margin or imprinted in lines joining points of similar declination on the face of the map.
- (5) *True north-south lines:* the sides of

the map point due north and south; the top of the map is always north.

- (6) *Reference:* a table in the margin explaining map symbols for various features.

When you use a map, always "orient" it first, that is, position it so that the top of the map points toward the north.

To protect your map from wear and dampness, give it a coat of clear plastic spray, or carry it in a clear plastic envelope, folded so that the part in use is visible.

Topographical maps may be purchased for twenty-five cents each from: Map Distribution Office, Department of Mines and Technical Surveys, Ottawa, Ontario.

John Macfie

THE YOUNG NATURALIST is published ten times a year by the Federation of Ontario Naturalists for the Young Naturalists Club. Reprinting of text only is permitted provided credit is given to *The Young Naturalist*. Editor: Donald Young; Chairman of Committee: R. V. Whelan.

SUBSCRIPTION (one year) to *The Young Naturalist* and membership in The Young Naturalists Club may be obtained by sending your name, address, and a cheque or money order for \$1.00 payable to the Federation of Ontario Naturalists, 1262 Don Mills Road, Don Mills, Ontario.