

The Bulletin of the Great Lakes Ornithological Club, 1905-1909

by
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The Great Lakes Ornithological Club (GLOC) was the name chosen by a few naturalists living in the region between Toronto and Detroit for a 'club' which they started in 1905. An account of the origin and early years of this club has appeared in *Ontario Birds*¹. The object of the present paper is to throw more light on the nature of the 'Bulletin' which members wrote and circulated among themselves.

The need for closer co-operation among a small group of ornithologists living in the Great Lakes region had been recognized from the first years of the twentieth century. This need was expressed in correspondence between J.H. Fleming and P.A. Taverner in 1904 concerning the possibility of making a survey of the birds of the Great Lakes region and the need to have a meeting with those who would be interested in taking part in such a survey. As Fleming wrote on 3 December:

"There is a lot I very much want to talk over, particularly before I go to any meeting or commit myself in any way. A survey of

the Great Lakes has been present in my mind for a very long time. I feel it is a matter that one man alone must revise. A number of observers is absolutely necessary but the whole thing must be edited by one man who can judge of the identifications, know his men and be able to fill in the gaps. For instance it frequently occurs that a collector is only in a position to record the smaller birds and has no facilities for getting the hawks and water birds on which a very great depends and the records of which are poor and often wrong."²

Taverner replied at length on 7 December:

"You speak of the lack of material for a survey of the Great Lakes. Now it is just to gather such material that we want to start a new club. . . . The object of the club would not be so much the final work of a survey at first as the gathering of material and the keeping up of interest."³

The problem of keeping in touch with each other regularly and thus of keeping up interest in the work of observation and record-keeping

was crucial, because those actively engaged in ornithology were very few and lived scattered over a large area (Table 1).

In the same letter Taverner proposed a tentative solution:

“An organization of a correspondence type covering the ground from the maritime provinces to the prairie land and confined to the Provinces and States bordering on the Great Lakes. Active membership to be strictly confined to workers of known ability and governed on much the same lines as the A.O.U. (American Ornithological Union) that the policy can be guided along strict scientific lines.”

Taverner continued his suggestions for another four pages in

considerable detail, giving reasons why the Michigan Ornithological Club would not be suitable as a medium for their project (“the club is a club of boys”), but raising the possibility of publishing material in the *Wilson Bulletin*.⁴

Fleming responded to these suggestions with a number of reservations, among which was a query about A.B. Klugh's reliability as an ornithologist.⁵ Taverner met some of Fleming's points, including his own assessment of Klugh's ability and personality, and also discussed the need to get ideas from all who might be involved before deciding how to organize such a “correspondence club”. He summarized his own position at

Table 1. Members of the GLOC, 1905-1909

Name	Location	Profession
James H. Fleming	Toronto	Businessman and ornithologist
Dr. Lynds Jones	Oberlin College, Ohio	Associate Professor of Zoology
J.E. Keays	London	Businessman and birding companion of Saunders
A. Brooker Klugh	Guelph	Instructor at Agricultural College (moved to Queen's University in 1906)
William E. Saunders	London	Businessman and all round naturalist
Bradshaw H. Swales	Detroit	Lawyer and ornithologist
James S. Wallace	Toronto	Businessman and naturalist (member from 1907)
Percy A. Taverner	Detroit	Architectural draughtsman and ornithologist
Dr. William Brodie	Toronto	Corresponding member (d. 1909)

that point when he wrote:

“Perhaps the best thing to do is to form a club without officers or organization.”⁶

During January and February 1905 there was a regular exchange of letters between Taverner and Fleming about the projected “club”. Eventually Taverner, Swales and Klugh had a weekend meeting with Saunders at his home in London at the end of February. The only thing decided was to start a bird club with the name “The Great Lakes Ornithological Club” with Saunders as secretary – the only officer at that point. However, the club could not function without some regulations and Klugh undertook to write the first draft of a constitution. This was set out, in seven clauses, in the first issue of the club’s organ, the *Bulletin*, dated 22 March 1905.⁷ Only one clause caused any dissent and this concerned the method by which the *Bulletin* should be conducted. The gist of Klugh’s suggestion was as follows:

Any member who had a contribution for the *Bulletin* should send it to the Secretary, Saunders. When enough material had been received the Secretary should send out a *Bulletin* for circulation. Each member had the right to add comments, under his initials, on any of the contributions, after which he should forward the *Bulletin* to the next member on the list. Eventually, when a member’s contribution, together with various comments, reached him again he should detach it from the *Bulletin*, add any further comments, and then send it to the secretary to keep. All contributions, together

with the comments they generated, would be available for members to refer to at any time on request.

This system was favoured by Saunders, who commented on the value of preserving all the contributions as a complete record of each issue. He argued as follows:

“For example suppose I send out a query on a certain species, it goes around the circuit, is annotated with each member experiences, is it not a complete record for that species in the localities in which we have members? In case the growth of the Club demands an Annual there will be good material at hand to insert. In case each member detaches his contributions the record will be destroyed.”

The idea of having a circulating bulletin composed of brief ‘papers’, notes and queries, and comments on contributions in order to keep members informed on each other’s observations in matters such as migration, breeding records, range extensions and other topics was an excellent one in theory, but in practice it ran into difficulties.

Early in 1906 Fleming, who distrusted leaving his own contributions permanently among the Club’s records, put forward the following amendment to the Constitution:

“I propose that the Constitution of the Great Lakes Ornithological Club be amended so that the member who originates a paper can retain it, instead of leaving it in the hands of the Secretary and that each member if he so wishes can detach his contribution from the bulletin after it has been circulated once.”

He justified it by the following arguments:

"I think it is unwise and unfair to the individual to have his opinions of today lying in manuscript where they can be quoted, ten years hence, as his opinions by others who have had ten years advance of knowledge to help them. On the other hand if any opinions of today are published today they are judged by what has been printed up to today, and will be so judged ten years hence. . . . A freedom of expression that is the useful part of our bulletin must be lessened by a knowledge that the written word has gone beyond recall."

Taverner felt that the greatest value of the Bulletin was its informality:

"One can advance tentative ideas without the scrupulous care necessary to a . . . paper for publication. Things can be discussed pro and con without fear that some day some ghost of our past work will rise up and smite us. It is a medium for gathering material and not for the publication of final work."

Saunders made another attempt to persuade members to let their papers, with the comments attached to them, remain in the keeping of the Club. He pointed out that often the person who wrote the original paper did not contribute the most important part; this derived from the comments of others on the topic. The paper without the comments on it would be of little value. Saunders moved an amendment to annul Fleming's amendment. When a vote was taken in the December 1906 issue of the Bulletin, Saunders' amendment was defeated by a vote of four to three. Fleming, Taverner,

Swales and Klugh voted against the amendment; Saunders, Jones and Keays in favour of it.

In retrospect we may feel that this was unfortunate because it deprived us of a full record of what several outstanding ornithologists were discussing among themselves in relation to the Great Lakes region during the decade 1900-1910. But the Bulletin was never intended to be a scientific journal of natural science. The issues were circulated at irregular intervals (between three and five per year), some contributions were typed, others were not. The contributions, referred to as 'papers', were actually short statements on an interesting problem or an observation, but usually not more than a few pages in length. Many contributions were in the form of brief notes, or comments and criticisms of the 'papers' which had originated a discussion (Figure 1). This was long before the days of photocopying, and none of the members had secretarial help, so almost no copies of contributions were made. For instance, the only 'paper' in the first issue of the Bulletin of March 1905 was by W.E. Saunders on "The winter occurrence and spring migrations of the Goldfinch at London". While it circulated among members, Fleming attached the following comment:

"The Goldfinch paper is one of the most important things I have read for a long time. It exactly illustrates the need of such an exchange of ideas as is going on and the importance of overlooking nothing. I have birds taken at Emsdale in Parry Sound District, Ont. in January . . . There is not enough

SNOWY OWLS

Look out for Snowy owls: Ruthven Beane writes me from Chicago that it looks like another big flight this winter. He saw one Nov. 17 th. and has word from a Boston taxidermist that he so far has received about twenty. Campion got one in to mount the first week in Nov. Since then in his and Appingers shops there have been about half a dozen brought in up to Dec. 3rd.

E. L. Mosely tells me that between Nov. 21 and 25 there have been about eight shot in the vicinity of Sandusky.

P. A. Laverney

I have reports from Thos. M. Earl, a taxidermist of Columbus, Ohio, to the effect that six of these owls have been brought to him to be mounted, all from localities south of Columbus. I have been unable to find any in this vicinity, and no reports of them have come in.

L. J.

*The Toronto records are as follows
1905 Nov 13-18-23 Dec 5th-12th There has been no
unusual flight here or elsewhere in Ontario as far as
I can judge J. H. F.*

*I have a report of 1 Snowy Owl from Mt
Forest, Ont. Jan. 1906.*

*One at Hyde Park in December seen by J. A. Saunders
J. E. R.*

*2 or 3 stuffed locally by taxidermists
this winter. The great numbers heard of was
a Wisconsin taxidermist has mounted 15
specimens this winter all taken in the vicinity.
H. B. Bordin*

Figure 1. An example of a discussion page from an issue of the Bulletin.

attention paid to resident birds.”

One might hope to find this contribution among the records of the club but, ironically, it is not there because Fleming's amendment to the constitution resulted in members removing nearly all of

the ‘papers’ they wrote for the Bulletin. If Saunders had had his way they would have all been preserved – his own Goldfinch paper among them.⁸

In spite of the removal of material from the secretary's file,

enough has survived to provide a sampling of the kind of topics they were discussing, the quality of their observations and the state of their ornithological knowledge as it relates to the Great Lakes. Some of the 'papers' first discussed in the Bulletin were written up with notes and references and eventually published in journals (See Table 2).

As an example of the way in which a typical piece of information was quickly circulated in the Bulletin, we can take the report by Saunders of a large bird kill which took place in October 1906. In the December issue, he explained what had happened

under the title "A Migration Disaster". There was a sudden drop in temperature on the night of 10 October to freezing, and on the night of 11 October it was down to 28°F. Between Goderich and Sarnia more than a foot of snow fell. A heavy migration of birds across Lake Huron must have taken place on those nights since hundreds of dead birds were found on the lakeshore. Saunders went to Grand Bend and saw the devastation for himself. In a letter to B.H. Swales in Detroit, he wrote:

"Had a great walk (20 miles) sorry you weren't there. Birds

Table 2. Topics discussed in the GLOC Bulletin and articles subsequently published elsewhere.

Topic in Bulletin	Author	Title of Publication	Journal
Ornithology of Lake Erie Islands. Jan. 1906.	Lynds Jones	A study of the avifauna of the Lake Erie islands	<i>Wilson Bulletin</i> , 24:6-18, 95-108, 142-153, 171-186 (1912)
A migration disaster. Dec. 1906.	W.E. Saunders	A migration disaster in Western Ontario	<i>Auk</i> , 24:108-110 (Jan. 1907)
Ring-billed Gull. June 1906	W.E. Saunders	Ring-billed Gull	<i>Wilson Bulletin</i> , 19:73-74 (1907)
Tagging of Birds. May 1905	P.A. Taverner	Tagging Migrants	<i>Auk</i> , 23:232 (1906)
Tagging of Birds. Jan. 1906	P.A. Taverner	A Tagged Flicker	<i>Wilson Bulletin</i> , 18:21-22 (1906)
Subspecies. March 1906	P.A. Taverner	Trinomials	<i>Ontario Natural Science Bulletin</i> , 2:16-17 (1906)
Point Pelee Birds. (various dates)	P.A. Taverner and B.H. Swales	The Birds of Point Pelee	<i>Wilson Bulletin</i> , 19(2):37-54 (June 1907), 19(3): 82-99 (Sept. 1907), 19(4): 133-153 (Dec. 1907) 20(2): 79-129 (June 1908)

appeared on the beach three or four miles below Grand Bend, and I began my census. They were usually much too far gone for specimens, but it tells you exactly what was migrating then. I counted for two miles (2½ hours) and then left nearly a mile uncounted. Beyond the river there were miles more!"

Saunders then listed the numbers of birds, by species, that he had found, among which were: 22 Brown Creepers, 24 Saw-whet Owls, 100 Winter Wrens, 131 Golden-crowned Kinglets and 1 Yellow Rail. The grand total was 1,484 birds. He finished his letter with a dig at Swales for not joining him when notified:

"This was a unique experience that ones [sic] lifetime may not expect. Moral - learn to make up your mind quickly and *let business slide* - (When necessary)"⁹.

While the above account was circulating, Dr. William Brodie added his comment, congratulating Saunders on his valuable contribution to the literature of bird migration in Ontario, and saying it was fortunate that he was prepared to visit the locality in time to make identification certain. Brodie, however, was sorry that a more extensive search was not continued for a greater distance along the shoreline north and south of the area covered by Saunders, as this might have determined the direction and extent of the flight more fully. A revised version of Saunders' paper was published in *The Auk*.¹⁰

A different kind of topic was introduced by Taverner who reported what to him was a new

phenomenon, witnessed at Point Pelee in October, 1906:

"Near the base of the Point I saw a Coot in the ditch that runs along the dyke. When I first noticed it it was swimming high but as soon as it saw that it was discovered it gradually sank to the water's level, and then lower until only its head was out and then even that disappeared and all that could be seen was its white outstretched bill sticking up and cutting the water like a knife leaving but the faintest ripple behind it."

He called to Swales to come and look, but by then even the tip of the bill had gone. In reporting the incident in the October Bulletin, Taverner suggested that a bird such as a coot or grebe must sink or rise through altering its specific gravity. While this issue was circulating, Fleming, Brodie, Klugh, Saunders and Lynds Jones offered explanations or observations. Lynds Jones' was particularly interesting:

"I want to add a bit of observation to the question of the birds' gradual sinking in the water. Klugh states that the birds are not *completely* submerged, and that therefore they can sufficiently decrease their specific gravity by the inhalation of air. I have stood upon an overhanging tree trunk directly over a pied-billed grebe which had so sunk. It was perfectly clear water so that everything could be plainly seen to the bottom of the five foot pond. When I first saw the bird it was riding in the water as grebes will when undisturbed. Upon my approaching it it gradually sank, and when I reached the tree it was resting on the bottom. It was clearly watching me, as the movements

of the head and eyes proved [sic]. I stood perfectly still leaning against the perpendicular branch, and had the satisfaction of seeing the bird (rise) slowly to the surface just beneath where I stood. I could see no motion of the feet or wings, neither did the water seem disturbed either at the bottom or in the course of the rising bird. Arriving at the surface and apparently seeing me more clearly, the bird sank again and again rose. Clearly this bird could not have obtained air when it began to rise from the bottom. With Saunders, I give it up."

Taverner then summarized the explanations put forward and pointed to the conclusion that both body and plumage cavities are used in the process, but that plumage cavities are of the greater importance.¹¹

Sufficient material has survived from quite a number of other discussions to give an idea of the wide range of topics included in the Bulletin. For example:

A note by Taverner on "The tagging of birds and the use of a bird trap" appeared in the May 1905 issue. This is interesting because the banding of birds in North America had only just begun, and Taverner was one of the first to use bands in a systematic way. This note encouraged members of the Club to use some of Taverner's bands themselves. Fleming was the first person to band a Toronto bird, an American Robin, which he caught in the garden of his home at 267 Rusholme Road in September, 1905.¹² A further note by Taverner in the Bulletin in January 1906 announced his first successful

return of a banded bird. This was a Northern Flicker which had been banded in Iowa and recovered about 650 miles away in Louisiana.

A series of notes appeared on chickadees in relation to migration. Saunders initiated debate with the observation:

"We suppose (do we?) that this bird is more or less migratory. Possibly it may be. Last winter (1905-06) it did not appear in London - why? All the other migrants to whom the city offers a suitable route appeared. It usually - perhaps I should say often - roams to town in winter and feeds at my chickadee table, but not last winter."

Lynds Jones at Oberlin and Taverner in Detroit responded that the population appeared to remain the same throughout the year. Fleming in Toronto and Swales from his experience in south-eastern Michigan regarded it as a common migrant and winter resident; Klugh in Guelph considered it a permanent resident. Since opinion seemed divided Taverner made a practical proposal, namely that members of the Club should band young chickadees in order to see if any firm proof of migration could be obtained.¹³

The Bulletin of the GLOC petered out in the period 1910-1911, although no explanation for this can be found in the Club's records. Members still continued to visit Point Pelee and to keep ornithological notes, but by 1910 some members were committed to other concerns. Taverner was in the running for an appointment at the Victoria Memorial Museum being completed in Ottawa (in

1927 officially named the National Museum of Canada). Fleming was also involved during this period in the setting up of a new museum in Toronto which was to become the Royal Ontario Museum. Klugh was established at Queen's University and had turned his research towards botany. Saunders appears to have written most of the contributions between 1910 and 1911, but even his enthusiasm could not sustain the Bulletin.

The GLOC was a grandiose name for eight active ornithologists and one corresponding member. The only meetings they held were in the field whenever two or three members arranged to meet at Point Pelee for a few days or weeks. Otherwise, they kept in touch through circulating a Bulletin, issued at irregular intervals. Contributions were usually brief and handwritten, in a "colloquial" style suited more to verbal discussion than scientific exposition, and were not weighed down by notes and references. By agreement, these contributions were intended to be rather ephemeral; first thoughts to test an hypothesis or put forward a question. They were not intended for publication as they stood, but were the raw material out of which a member might develop a note or article for publication in *Auk*, *Wilson Bulletin*, *Ottawa Naturalist*, *Bulletin of the Michigan Ornithological Club*, or *Ontario Natural Science Bulletin*. From today's perspective it is a great pity that all the material written for the Bulletin was not copied and preserved permanently. W.E. Saunders, who acted as compiler

for the Bulletin, strongly urged that this should be done but was outvoted. Perhaps it was too much to expect members to contribute their first, uninhibited thoughts if they knew that these would be preserved for posterity. Instead, what we see is a small but very active and dedicated group of ornithologists educating each other by their interchange of ornithological information and ideas for a brief but exciting period. Saunders, Fleming, Jones, Taverner and Swales published useful notes and articles during these years, and continued to publish more in volume and maturity in the future. Although shortlived, the Bulletin of GLOC provided them with an excellent forum in which to develop as ornithologists at an important juncture in their careers.

Note

Fleming used very few punctuation marks in his correspondence, while Taverner's spelling was very erratic. To make quotations from their writings easier to understand at first reading punctuation marks have been added and spelling has been standardized.

End Notes

- ¹ *Cranmer-Byng, J.L.* 1984. The Great Lakes Ornithological Club: the origin and early years, 1905-1911. *Ontario Birds* 2:4-12.
- ² Letter from J.H. Fleming to P.A. Taverner, 3 December 1904. Fleming Papers, Royal Ontario Museum (ROM).
- ³ Letter from P.A. Taverner to J.H. Fleming, 7 December 1904. Taverner Papers, ROM.

- ⁴ Edited from Oberlin College, Ohio, by Lynds Jones.
- ⁵ Alfred Brooker Klugh had recently emigrated to Canada from Britain and was studying natural science at the Agricultural College, Guelph. Fleming had reservations about Klugh, believing him to be too cocksure for a man of only 22.
- ⁶ Letter from P.A. Taverner to J.H. Fleming, 29 December 1904. Taverner, at the age of 29, was very much the pragmatist, a trait which remained with him throughout his life. See also letter from J.H. Fleming to P.A. Taverner, 2 February 1905, and P.A. Taverner to J.H. Fleming, 10 February 1905.
- ⁷ Great Lakes Ornithological Club records, ROM.
- ⁸ Even the contents of issues are sometimes uncertain. George M. Stirrett, when he was gathering material in the 1960s for a history of the GLOC, attempted to "reconstruct" hypothetical contents lists from "internal" evidence where it existed, and even compiled a typed "Index to the Circulating Bulletin". Unfortunately, his lists do not always agree with the material currently preserved in the ROM archives. I have been unable to find any reference to Saunders' Goldfinch paper as a publication in any journal. The full title of the paper was only preserved in Taverner's "Journal of Bird Observations", 22 March 1905, Taverner Papers, ROM.
- ⁹ Letter from W.E. Saunders to B.H. Swales, 22 October 1906. Taverner Papers, "Journal of Bird Observations", ROM.
- ¹⁰ Saunders, W.E. 1907. *Auk* 24:108-110.
- ¹¹ Taverner preserved the full discussion on "The sinking of birds without visible effort" in his "Journal of Bird Observations" for October, 1906. Taverner Papers, ROM.
- ¹² J.H. Fleming, "Journal", 24 September 1905, Fleming Papers, ROM Fleming recorded using band number 1 on a young American Robin. The major problem that prospective banders faced at this time was 'how to capture your bird', so Taverner suggested that young birds should be used.
- ¹³ Bulletin, January 1906. Great Lakes Ornithological Club records, ROM.



Try a different kind of field trip. See p. 79.