February birds beat the blahs

By MARION STREBIG Federation of Ontario

- ---- Naturalists Although the weather can't make up its mind whether to commit itself to winter or spring, birds have already decided.

For them, the silly season has arrived.

Again, the male cardinal is using the forsythia bush to launch attacks against the garage window.

There, he flutters for 30 seconds or so, then returns to the bushes to preen. Possibly, seeing his own reflection in the window, he imagines he's driving off battalions of rival males. Birders also suffer.

: I'm not a lister. A lister is a birder who abandons everything including his family and job if he hears of a rare bird anywhere within a day's drive.

But I confess to responding to call we received at the Federation of Ontario Naturalists. It related to a Rock Wren that appeared to have settled, at least temporarily, on a lakefront in Etobicoke.

The Rock Wren is a western bird that should have been happily wintering in Arizona. We wondered what strange twist of fate had prompted it to land on the shores of Lake Ontario, thousands of miles from home.

When we heard about the wren, it was a bright day in Pebruary. The sun was warm and the sky was blue — a perfect time to play hooky. Several of us drove down to the

The location it had selected was, in many respects, an ironic one. It was a man-made spit in the process of being created by truckloads of fill.

Looking for a bird as tiny as a wren among piles of rock was

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like searching for the proverbial needle in a haystack except wrens, like small dogs, are given to noisily scolding intruders.

While we never did see or hear this elusive fellow, we did catch the sound of a horned lark tinkling scmewhere on that muddy expanse of raw earth.

Also, among the rocks, we startled a small flock of snow buntings that rose on rapid wing and whirled away like driven snow.

On a small tree near the entrance to the spit, a handsome male evening grosebeak sat long enough to be admired.

It was a good day for hawks

On our way back, we spotted two Red-Tailed Hawks floating over the Don Valley. One had something dangling from its talons.

Lately, there seem to be Red-Tailed Hawks wherever there is open ground.

Since this hawk's diet consists largely of rodents, it hunts like most owls, from a perch. But it also appears to enjoy the intoxication of rising in spirals, its broad wings motionless. I saw it again later in the day, escorted by three noisy crows. It came to rest in a pine tree within view of my window.

It was there the crows really began to have some fun.

Although the Red-Tailed Hawk is too ponderous in motion to be a threat to any bird, these crows were not about to tolerate its presence on their territory. They proceeded to buzz the hawk and I could tell through my binoculars they

were actually making contact. Finally, the hawk turned its head, like a horse shaking off a fly: rose on broad strong wings and sailed out over the ravine.

His tormentors, already losing interest, only followed a short distance.

I'll be watching for its return, next time possibly with a mate.

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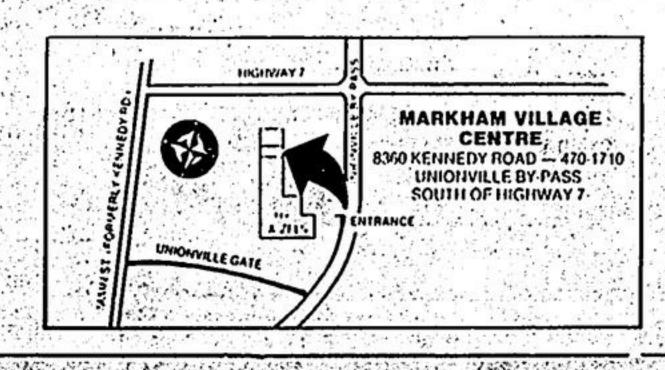
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