

Distinguished Ornithologist Award

Jean Iron



Figure 1: Bruce Di Labio (left) presenting the Distinguished Ornithologist Award to Earl Godfrey at his home in Ottawa, 20 October 1997. Photo by *Daniel F. Brunton*

The Board of Directors of the Ontario Field Ornithologists created the Distinguished Ornithologist Award at its meeting of 23 April 1997. The idea for the award came from Ron Pittaway. This award will be granted from time to time to individuals who have made outstanding contributions to the scientific study of birds in Ontario and Canada. The award recognizes a person whose research on birds has led to many publications and a significant increase in new knowledge

of birds. Award winners will be ornithologists whose work is acknowledged as authoritative and who have been a resource to OFO and the Ontario birding community. The award will be granted at the Annual General Meeting held in October. The recipient of the award receives a beautifully engraved plaque and an Honourary Life Membership in OFO.

The first Distinguished Ornithologist Award was granted to W. Earl Godfrey, author of *The*

Birds of Canada, and dean of Canadian ornithologists. The award was presented to Earl Godfrey on 18 October 1997 at the OFO Annual General Meeting held in Burlington. Bruce Di Labio accept-

ed the award on behalf of Earl Godfrey, who was unable to attend. Bruce and Dan Brunton presented the award to Earl on 20 October at his home in Ottawa.

Jean Iron, OFO President, 9 Lichen Place, Don Mills, Ontario M3A 1X3

W. Earl Godfrey: Distinguished Ornithologist

Bruce M. Di Labio and Daniel F. Brunton

With the publication of *The Birds of Canada* in 1966, the name W. Earl Godfrey became synonymous with a new standard of excellence in the study of Canadian birds. Up to that point, birders had only Percy Taverner's much earlier description of Canadian birds to go by. That earlier treatment was a remarkable study in its own right (Cranmer-Byng 1996). It reflected its period, however, and thus relied heavily on the relatively limited specimen-based ornithological data available in the 1930s. Godfrey's later volume, illustrated by John Crosby's beautiful and perceptive illustrations and Stewart MacDonald's precise pen and ink sketches, incorporated the additions and advances in that traditional data base and also reflected the rich contribution now possible from observation-based field ornithology. This was an historic achievement and blended some of the best elements of ornithological treatise and birder's

field guide. The publication of Godfrey's *The Birds of Canada* can fairly be seen as marking the point where observation-based field ornithology came into its own in Canada.

Our original copies are now somewhat yellowed and have been tattered and torn from years of heavy use. The excitement of finding our own *The Birds of Canada* under the Christmas tree, however, remains a vivid memory, as it does for so many birders of that generation. This book opened up a whole new dimension to our understanding of Canadian birds, their field identification and their distribution... and it was devoured from cover to cover.

The Birds of Canada was an immediate success and quickly became the best selling publication of the National Museum. It was a hit with more than Canadian birders, of course. In his review of the book, field guide author Roger Tory

Peterson correctly identified it as both an inspiration to field ornithologists and an historic benchmark for modern Canadian distributional and taxonomic studies (Peterson 1967).

The success of *The Birds of Canada* was the result of what, even to that point, had been a full career of scientific achievement. Earl Godfrey's achievements are founded on first-rate scholarship built upon a firm foundation of first-rate field-based knowledge. The value of that realistic foundation is seen time and again in Godfrey's work and in the advice and assistance he gives to others. What an important example in this age of molecularly-driven taxonomic investigation!

Godfrey's commitment to maintaining an expert and current knowledge of birds in the field likely goes back to the inspiration and guidance he received as a boy in Nova Scotia from that remarkable biologist and conservationist, Robie W. Tufts. The beginning of their relationship is best described by Earl himself:

"It was in April and there were birds in the bare branches of a Wolfville apple orchard. Another boy and I were taking practice shots at the birds with our homemade slingshots when suddenly an impressive figure dashed up, seemingly out of nowhere. He introduced himself as Robie Tufts, promptly confiscated our sling-

shots, and severely reprimanded us. Just when we were contemplating the prospect of a lengthy period in some reformatory, his voice softened and he instructed us to appear at his office at a later date. In that enchanted setting, the Robie Tufts enthusiasm and charm quickly converted two misguided boys into life-long conservationists" (Godfrey 1984).

Earl obviously received even more than "a never-failing source of inspiration, guidance and freely-given help of all kinds" from Robie Tufts. Many birders and ornithologists alike, particularly those living in the Ottawa area, know first hand of Earl's willingness to listen to any question regarding birds. It is remarkable, really, to consider that anyone could simply walk in off the street to the wonderful old Victoria Museum Building or in later years, the Zoology Research Centre on Holly Lane, and he would always stop whatever he was doing and attend fully and patiently to the unannounced visitor. No matter how small an issue they might wish to discuss or how big a matter he had just put aside in order to deal with them, Earl always made time. For many of us, he instilled a strong sense that the pursuit of ornithological knowledge was a legitimate and important endeavour — and an exciting one to boot. Those of us fortunate enough to experience those remarkable gifts are forever in his debt.



Figure 1: Earl Godfrey examining specimens at the National Museum of Canada, May 1953. Photo courtesy of *Canadian Museum of Nature, Ottawa*.

Godfrey is currently Curator Emeritus of Ornithology at the Canadian Museum of Nature, a position he has held since retiring in 1977. He began his professional career close to home, however, undertaking a Master of Science degree at Acadia University in his native Wolfville, Nova Scotia. (He returned there in 1969 to receive an Honourary Doctorate for his contributions to Canadian science.) Following graduation, he took a position as a Research Assistant and then Assistant Curator of Birds in Ohio at the Cleveland Museum of Natural History. He returned to

Canada in 1947 to take up the position of Curator of Ornithology at the National Museum of Canada, later becoming Chief of the Division of Vertebrate Zoology.

In addition to substantial contributions to the scientific literature, Earl Godfrey conducted important field investigations in many areas of Canada. Much of his field work was conducted in western Canada; Ontario was being relatively well-covered by the Royal Ontario Museum, and the Maritimes, well... they had Robie Tufts and his associates! The success of these field efforts can be

immediately recognized in his major contribution to the Museum's extensive research collection and in the documentation of his first-hand analysis of bird populations in virtually all regions of Canada.

Godfrey's impact on the study of birds, particularly Canadian birds, has been far-reaching, with publications now extending back through 60 years. He published his first paper in the late 1930s, on the occurrence of Yellow-crowned Night-Heron in Nova Scotia (Godfrey 1938). Fifty years later one could still hear the excitement in his voice when he talked of that first achievement ("I was really proud of that" — pers. comm., 1987). Since then he has produced more than 200 works. Of these, 75 were new research contributions on geographic variation, distribution, behaviour, plumages and molts. His work also encompasses over 100 reviews of major papers and books. His major popular and scientific publications include digests of regional field investigations, taxonomic revisions and chapters on selected aspects of birds in encyclopedias and handbooks. He also contributed to the publications and research of other ornithologists by serving on the A.O.U. Check-list Committee and as the ornithological editor for the *Canadian Field-Naturalist* for some 30 years.

In retirement, Earl Godfrey continues an active involvement in

ornithological pursuits. He has recently published, for example, a book review in *The Auk* and is in the final stages of completing a major paper on the taxonomy of the Swamp Sparrow. And although he would never profess to be a lister, we have it on good authority that he recently added Barred Owl as the 144th species to his yard list!

At the end of the day, though, it all comes back to *The Birds of Canada*, the "bible" of Canadian ornithologists and birders for over 30 years now. The two editions of that book (Godfrey 1966; 1986) are enduring testaments to the skill and enthusiasm of Earl Godfrey and his associates and to the huge network of contacts he developed with field ornithologists from sea to sea to sea. His life-long passion for the study of Canadian bird life and his enthusiastic encouragement of others has also played a large role in launching the careers of numerous natural science specialists throughout Canada.

Earl Godfrey is indeed a most Distinguished Ornithologist. Robie Tufts would be proud!

Acknowledgements

We wish to thank Michel Gosselin of the Canadian Museum of Nature for his assistance in securing the use of the Museum's archival photograph (J 2036 B).

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