

In Memoriam

Jean Marianne Niskanen (1943-2003)

Mark Cranford

It was 30 August 1997, and I was not feeling too well; about to succumb again to the woes of *mal de mer*. Our party of four Ontario birders had boarded a Gulf Stream pelagic five hours earlier out of Brielle, New Jersey, and had yet to see a seabird. To make matters worse, an incredible Broad-billed Sandpiper, just 90 miles away at Jamaica Bay NWR in New York City, had been reported to us after we left the pier. That and dreams of rare storm-petrels were becoming nightmares. It wasn't just me; everyone on board was suffering except Jean Niskanen. In typical fashion for Jean, she refused to suffer anything. "Come on you guys, we need your eyes. You can't see birds looking at your feet." Forcing a grin, I straightened up and persevered. Jean was not going to let us lose the moment ... that was the way she was.

Jean Niskanen passed away on 19 March 2003, after an eleven-year struggle with cancer. The Ontario birding community lost one of its more active volunteers. It would surprise me greatly if I could find a field project in the Oakville or Parry Sound areas with which Jean had not been involved. For more than a decade, she accomplished

this under the constant threat of terminal illness.

Jean was born in Toronto on 15 March 1943. She had been involved in organized birding and conservation for some thirty years, starting in the early seventies with the South Peel Naturalists. In addition to being a long time member of OFO, she was also a member of the American Birding Association, the Federation of Ontario Naturalists, the Toronto Ornithological Club, the Parry Sound Nature Club, the Friends of Killbear, and the Georgian Bay Osprey Society. She had served as President of the South Peel Naturalists' Club.

While she found time for overseas travel, Jean did a lot of her birding based out of her cottage on Georgian Bay at Dillon Cove. She took great satisfaction out of her compilation of bird checklists for Killbear Provincial Park and Carling Township. A Band-tailed Pigeon that visited Dillon Cove was an event.

Her bird studies were wide and varied and included Christmas Bird Counts in Oakville, work on both the first and second Breeding Bird Atlas projects in Parry Sound, Forest Bird Monitoring, Breeding

Bird Survey routes, Osprey monitoring, Red-shouldered Hawk Surveys and monitoring of Prairie Warbler colonies.

Her travels took her across Canada, including every province and the High Arctic. She spent a number of extended periods in Texas and Mexico. Jean had a fairly impressive life list of 2352 species, with highlights from Costa Rica, Peru, Ecuador, Chile, Brazil, Venezuela, Trinidad and Tobago, Belize, England, South Africa and Cuba. Her North American list (including Central America) was an impressive 1144.

I first met Jean on a South Peel Naturalists' Club field trip. It was one of my first glimpses into a lister's eye. I may have laughed when she talked about vagrant flycatchers and it took me a while to appreciate her enthusiasm, but it was there and I saw it. Everyone who met Jean knew she had a passion for the birds and that she wanted to share it with them.

Last April, Janet Robinson and I continued on with one of Jean's ongoing projects—the Killbear Provincial Park route for the Red-shouldered Hawk and Spring Woodpecker Survey. We left Toronto at three in the morning and were greeted by American Bitterns and Yellow-bellied Sapsuckers to begin the 20 survey stations at day-break. It was a wonderful day. There may have been fewer Red-shouldered Hawks than previous years (construction in Killbear likely had something to do with it). But, with a complete suite of woodpeckers everywhere, Ruffed Grouse drumming, an irate Broad-winged Hawk and early Pine and Black-throated Green Warblers, the day and survey made for an exhilarating experience. I sensed Jean's appreciation, respect and love for the park and district. While Jean would be grateful to know that the birds of the forest will carry on, her presence will be missed.

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