

# Distinguished Ornithologist Jim Richards

*By Glenn Coady*

IT IS ALWAYS A HIGH POINT in any Ontario Field Ornithologists Annual Convention to honour one of our members with the Distinguished Ornithologist Award. This year (2012) the award is presented to James M. Richards. Given that it was Jim who wrote the guest editorial (“Once upon a time ...”) in the inaugural issue of Ontario Birds, outlining the genesis of OFO with an idea that sprung from a conversation with James L. Baillie at the Royal Ontario Museum (ROM) in 1968, this award feels like an appropriate culmination of a fairy tale for a life’s pursuit of field ornithology in Ontario.

Jim was born and raised in Oshawa, and he first took an interest in nature at age 7, when he found a Red Eft while on a fishing trip with

his father. At age 10, he took up the then popular schoolboy hobby of collecting birds’ eggs. By his early teens, Jim was hooked on birding and he was issued a collecting permit by the Canadian Wildlife Service in 1964 and a banding permit in 1968. During the 1960s, Jim teamed up with Dennis Barry in building and maintaining a 400 box Eastern Bluebird trail on the Oak Ridges Moraine, and eventually in the banding of several hundred bluebirds.

Jim Richards (left) accepts the 2012 OFO Distinguished Ornithologist Award from Glenn Coady at the OFO Annual Convention in Cobourg on 15 September 2012.

*Photo: Kim Gunn*



From the mid-1950s, Jim's birding interests were influenced by his association with members of the Oshawa Naturalists Club, including Murray Speirs, Edge Pegg, Margaret Bain, Ora Sands, Esther Allin, Al Wood and George Scott. It was during this time that Jim met another young member, Ron Tozer, with whom he has struck a life-long friendship. During the 1960s, the two joined forces to research the birds of the Oshawa area. This research led to their 1974 publication of *Birds of the Oshawa-Lake Scugog Region, Ontario*, one of the most well-respected regional bird monographs ever produced in Ontario. Jon Dunn, one of the principal authors and editors of the *National Geographic Field Guide to the Birds of North America* and *The Birds of Southern California*, has often referred to this as "one of the finest regional bird books in North America."

Through the considerable time he spent in the division of ornithology at the ROM, first as a volunteer, and then while researching the book, Jim soon became good friends with Jim Baillie. As Assistant Curator at the ROM, Baillie introduced Jim to many others who were doing research there, such as Charlie Long, Helen Quilliam, Ott Devitt, Ross James, George Peck and many others.

It is perhaps Jim's work in the realm of conservation for which his ornithological legacy is best known. It is no exaggeration to suggest that we likely would not have retained an undeveloped Oshawa Second Marsh, one of the finest marshes on Lake Ontario, were it not for

his efforts. It was during the late 1960's that Jim undertook what proved to be a long and often bitter political battle to save the Oshawa Second Marsh from being turned into a deep water port. In doing so, he fought with the City of Oshawa and the provincial and federal governments for over twenty years. The organization he founded (Second Marsh Defence Association, later to become Friends of Second Marsh) had a membership of about 450 people as well as many partner conservation organizations. Finally, in 1983, Jim and the Friends of Second Marsh won the prolonged battle and the wetland remains today for all to enjoy. Jim stayed on as the Executive Director of the Friends of Second Marsh until 2003 to spearhead a \$3.5 million habitat restoration plan.

Jim, who was employed by General Motors of Canada at the time, approached them in 1990 with the idea of converting the adjacent fallow fields of their new corporate headquarters into an area for wildlife and passive recreation. Given that this land linked Darlington Provincial Park to the east and Oshawa Second Marsh to the west, it was a perfect fit, and fortunately General Motors accepted the idea. They formed a one-person department with Jim as Manager tasked with creating the McLaughlin Bay Wildlife Reserve and overseeing the development of the area. This included walking trails, ponds for waterfowl and shorebirds, a trail for the visually impaired, and the creation of habitat by planting 35,000 trees and shrubs. Jim held this position from 1990

until the plan was completed in 2006, at which time Jim retired.

Jim is also well-known for being one of the finest nature photographers in Ontario with an impressive body of work spanning across six decades with over two thousand of his images published. His photos adorn the covers of *A Nature Guide to Ontario*, *The Birds of Presqu'île Provincial Park*, *Ontario Birds at Risk – Status and Conservation*, *Oak Ridges Moraine* and *Birds Worth Watching* among others. His photographic documentation of the nesting Little Gulls in Durham Region in the early 1970s has been published countless times and represents the best work on this species in North America. He has worked for over thirty-five years with photography partner Bruno Kern as well as with George and Mark Peck in documenting breeding birds at the nest. In conjunction with his photography, he has been one of the most prolific contributors of nest record cards to the Ontario Nest Records Scheme since its inception. Jim Baillie used to laud Jim to others by saying that Jim was second in nest-finding in Ontario only to the Brown-headed Cowbird!

In addition to his work on the Birds of Oshawa-Lake Scugog and on Little Gull breeding in Ontario, he has documented the first Durham Region nestings of Ruddy Duck, Black-crowned Night-Heron, Northern Goshawk and Brewer's Blackbird and wrote the Ruddy Duck account in the first Ontario Breeding Bird Atlas. He co-authored a chapter on the era of egg collecting in *Ornithology in Ontario*, Special Publication No. 1

of the Ontario Field Ornithologists. Jim is a Founding Life Member of the Ontario Field Ornithologists and a former President of the Durham Region Naturalists.

Since the 1980s, Jim has developed a strong passion for Arctic birds and has made eight trips to Churchill, Manitoba and twelve trips to his favourite location in Cambridge Bay, Nunavut to photograph and observe Arctic birds at the nest, on adventures he has shared with Bob Taylor, Bruno Kern, George Peck, Mark Peck, Glenn Coady, Mike McEvoy, Tyler Hoar, Dan Strickland and Glen Fox. In 2002, Jim co-authored the first authoritative checklist to the birds of Nunavut. He produced a second edition of this list in 2008, and is now in the process of producing bird checklists for most of the individual hamlets in Nunavut.

Jim's bird photography has taken him to many places, including much of Canada and the United States, Costa Rica, the Caribbean, Galapagos, Kenya and Tanzania.

He has always been diligent to acknowledge that much of what he has accomplished in six decades of involvement with field ornithology and conservation would not have been possible without the support and understanding of his wife of over fifty years, Sherri, his children Kim and Scott, and granddaughters Mackenzie and Jennifer-Lyn.

It is my distinct pleasure to present the 2012 OFO Distinguished Ornithologist Award to my good friend Jim Richards.

## Selected Publications

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- Richards, J.M.** and **R.G. Tozer.** 2002. In Memoriam: George A. Scott (1916 - 2001). *Ontario Birds* 20:21-24.
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