

## *In Memoriam*

### **Remembering Clifford J. MacFayden (1925–1999)**

Christopher G. Harris

Whatever the ebb and flow of bird life will be over the coming months and years, it will not be seen by one of Simcoe County's greatest bird chroniclers; Clifford James MacFayden died on 28 August 1999. I wish to tell you about his life as a birdwatcher, naturalist, mentor and friend.

Cliff, born in Toronto on 28 April 1925, was the oldest of four children. At a very early age, Cliff became interested in birds at a time when birdwatching was considered odd. Cliff's interests were fostered by fortuitous circumstances. At his high school, North Toronto Collegiate, Cliff became friends with John Crosby and Yorke Edwards, who shared his passion for birds. Both would have prominent roles in biological circles. Crosby is best known for his illustrations in *The Birds of Canada*, but worked for many years at the Canadian Museum of Nature producing natural history illustrations. Edwards started the public interpretation programs for both the Canadian Wildlife Service and B.C. Parks and was the director of the Royal British Columbia Museum.

Armed with Crosby's World War I monocular, the trio explored

by bicycle some of the natural spots of Toronto. Looking at the megapolis of today, it is difficult to remember that Cliff's Toronto was small, with many natural areas. Says Edwards: "It was a time of freedom for great birding and acres of bird lists and diary notes". Crosby remembers some of young Cliff's firsts: one of the first Oregon Juncos sighted in Toronto, and a rare Cory's Least Bittern at Ashbridge's Bay. Other young birdwatchers would join this group, like George Fairfield, later prominent in Toronto Ornithological Club activities, and Bruce Falls, who became a prominent University of Toronto zoology professor specializing in bird behaviour. Cliff, along with Crosby, Edwards and Falls, recorded an accidental Lark Bunting for Toronto in 1941 [*Canadian Field-Naturalist* 60: 132 (1946)].

Cliff came under the influence of several well-known birdwatchers and naturalists of the period, including Jim Baillie and Stuart Thompson. It was likely Stuart Thompson, the nephew of writer and naturalist, Ernest Thompson Seton, who first brought Cliff to Simcoe County in May, 1941. On

this first trip to Minesing Swamp, Cliff acquired rich memories which he recorded in his diary, including the following account: "...then a series of quick, high whistles and I could clearly see the bird flapping violently across the sunset sky where it was beautifully silhouetted. It circled around; then as it tumbled to the ground, we could hear a series of queer warbles and jerky whistles. These sounds were made by the bird's wings as it tumbled. It repeated its performance several more times and each time we crept closer. This is called the Woodcock's sky dance" (*Toronto Ornithological Club Newsletter*, December, 1990).

During his high school years, Cliff and his birdwatching friends sometimes went farther afield. Yorke Edwards describes one very memorable trip that he and Cliff conducted from 18–22 August 1942 to Rondeau Provincial Park. In four and a half days of constant walking "through swamplands", Cliff and Yorke endured "trousers stiff and green with burs", "countless mosquitoes in clouds" and "spider webs with sticky strands on our faces". In that time, they tallied 113 species of birds, 8 species of mammals, 5 reptiles and 2 amphibians; "but it was worth every bur, mosquito and spider". Cliff returned again to southwestern Ontario in 1943 and discovered the first Western Kingbird nest for Ontario near Port Alma, Kent County [*Canadian Field-Naturalist*

59: 67 (1945)]. Although this record lacked conclusive documenting evidence, knowing Cliff, I am sure the record is a valid one.

Shortly after this trip, Cliff joined the merchant navy and spent two years overseas in Asia and Australia. Being wartime, letters back home were censored, so Cliff wrote about the birds he saw. His birdwatching friends deciphered Cliff's whereabouts by the range of the birds mentioned!

Cliff married his wife, Swede (Eva), on 13 August 1951. They had three children: Dan, Laurie and Jamie. Cliff and his family moved to Barrie in 1966 when he was hired to work at the Canadian General Electric plant.

As a young teenage birdwatcher who had recently moved to Barrie, I first met Cliff on a blustery day in September 1970 at Centennial Park, Barrie. I was looking for birds along the shoreline of Kempenfeldt Bay. The man with the binoculars and a telescope introduced himself as Cliff MacFayden. He was searching for a pair of Buff-breasted Sandpipers observed earlier that week. Within 10 minutes, Cliff found these Arctic migrants and pointed out one of my many avian firsts. Thus began our relationship, which stretched nearly 30 years.

Nearly every Sunday, Cliff would invite me and several other teenage boys to join him in his ornithological wanderings around Simcoe County. Stuffed in the back of his white

Buick, we explored from Hockley to Hawkin's Corners and Swift Rapids to Singhampton. Cliff gave most generously to teenagers thirsty for more knowledge. There were June expeditions to Minesing Swamp to record Carolinian birds like Blue-Gray Gnatcatchers and Cerulean Warblers, September hawk watches at Horseshoe Valley, November trips to Nottawasaga Bay to view diving ducks, and February trips in search of Snowy Owls. I also remember two overnight trips to Long Point to view the great spring waterfowl congregations. Cliff bore the expenses of all these trips himself.

A day with Cliff in the field was a day of intense avian learning. One day, I heard the sweet liquid song of a bird I thought was a warbler, but Cliff correctly said it was a Brown Creeper song. He would patiently point out, using the telescope, the difference between an Iceland and a Glaucous Gull. One early June night, I excitedly called to tell him of some Grasshopper Sparrows singing in an old field close to my house. This sent Cliff racing over. As we walked through the field, Cliff suddenly said "Listen to that!". An insect-like noise: "tsi-slick" came from the grasses. Cliff immediately recognized this as a Henslow's Sparrow's song. This was the famous Letitia Street field where one June, Cliff and I recorded over 20 Henslow's Sparrows....a field now a subdivision!

All outings were documented in

Cliff's meticulously kept journals. Everything was carefully recorded from the common *Empidonax* flycatcher to the rare eider duck. When we "missed" a certain bird, Cliff would point out that negative data is just as important as positive data. This comment now rings very true when I think about the decline of Loggerhead Shrikes, Wood Thrushes and other species in the last few decades. Much of my note-taking ability stems from this time. I have been working with his family to ensure that Cliff's journals will be housed at the Royal Ontario Museum, where they can be viewed by future generations. Many of Cliff's Simcoe County records (over 8,500) form an important backbone of data for the revision of *The Birds of Simcoe County*, currently underway.

Cliff's interest in recording and documenting birdlife involved him in several long-running bird monitoring programs. From 1969 to 1993, Cliff conducted the Mattawa Breeding Bird Survey (BBS) route in northeastern Algonquin Park, and from 1970 to 1993, he conducted the Port Carling BBS route in Muskoka. Cliff never missed one year, making his data extremely valuable. For many years, Cliff summarized all Simcoe County observations for the Ontario report in *American Birds*. When the first Ontario Breeding Bird Atlas was undertaken in the early 1980s, Cliff was astonished to learn that nobody had signed up for his beloved

Minesing Swamp. He immediately took on three squares in the middle of Minesing. Later, Cliff contributed data on several Simcoe County sites to the Forest Bird Monitoring Program. Surveys for Red-shouldered Hawks and woodpeckers, and detailed censuses of gull, tern and heron colonies such as those at Nottawasaga Island off Collingwood were some of the many other projects Cliff undertook. Even in his final days, he continued to participate in two other long-running projects at his Lake Simcoe property near Hawkstone: Project FeederWatch and the Toronto Ornithological Club's Spring Warbler Count.

Cliff could be shy in a crowd, but once you got to know him, he had a wonderful sense of humour. During those many days in the field with him, we always had lots of laughter, often accompanied with silly songs. Even in his declining years, Cliff retained this sense of humour. When writing to Mike Cadman, saying he was no longer

able to do his forest bird monitoring plots, Cliff explained that his get-up-and-go energy had got up and left!

Cliff was a great supporter of the Brereton Field Naturalists' Club and especially the younger generation. As I worked across Canada, Cliff always enjoyed hearing of my exploits and encouraged my career. Other younger people were similarly blessed by Cliff's encouragement. His two years as President of the Brereton Field Naturalists' Club saw positive improvements in club activities and in the club newsletter, *The Blue Heron*.

I will personally miss Cliff's gravelly voice, his wry sense of humour and his life-long knowledge of birds and natural history. Cliff set a very high standard for observation, documentation and support of others, that few of us will ever attain, but it is surely a goal worth striving for. Cliff, the naturalist, birdwatcher, landscape artist, guitar player, family man and friend will be missed by many people.

Christopher G. Harris, 61 Hutchison Avenue, Ottawa, Ontario K1Y 4A4



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