

In Memoriam

The Gerry Bennett I Knew: A Eulogy

Ron Scovell

Gerry Bennett was unique. When Gerry passed away on Sunday, 10 January 1999, he left a void in the birding world that will never be filled. In 1933, Frank Chapman, Curator of Birds in the American Museum of Natural History, wrote his autobiography which he entitled *Autobiography of a Bird-Lover*. If Gerry had written his own biography, this would have been a perfect title for his book as well. Birds were Gerry's life. It is almost fitting that he died while filling the bird feeders in his own backyard for the very last time.

I first met Gerry in the early 1950s. My brother Doug, who passed away only fifteen months before Gerry, introduced me to birding while I was a teenager. Doug birded a lot with Gerry, and it was inevitable that sooner or later I would meet him. The three of us had two things in common. We loved birding, and we loved a good laugh. The Scovells were a perfect audience for Gerry. He was an absolute master at the instantaneous pun, and although there were too many to remember, there were two that I have never forgotten.

On a TOC Field Day, which was held the first Sunday in September

(and still is), Doug and I were just leaving Whitby Hospital Marsh as Gerry arrived. "What did you see?", asked Gerry. I told him that we had seen a Sora Rail and that, uncharacteristically, it had been walking around out in the open on some lily pads. Gerry's instantaneous reply was "classic Gerry". "God, there's nothing more painful than an open Sora!"

The second occasion took place at the Corner Marsh in Ajax. While the three of us were looking over the ducks in the pond, Doug suddenly exclaimed, "Hey what's that?" as he looked skyward at a bird flying over. We both looked up, asking excitedly, "Where?". "Oh never mind, it's just a gull", Doug said rather sheepishly. Again, the response from Gerry, in a split second. "Aha! Up to your Doug-gullery again, eh?"

On another occasion when the three of us were birding together at the aforementioned Whitby Hospital Marsh, Gerry gave us an example of his spontaneous humour. As we approached the bay pond on the marsh side, Gerry very suddenly walked to the edge of the water where there were several "park" ducks and a family of Mute



Figure 1: (Left to right) Jim Baillie, Gerry Bennett and Helen Baillie, c. 1955. Photo by Ron Scovell.

Swans (two adults and two young). The swans were about fifty yards out from the shore. Gerry began waving his arms in the air while exclaiming in a loud voice, "Come ye, come ye. Hear the word of the Lord and thou shalt be saved". The birds, of course, thought that Gerry had food and proceeded to splash their way towards him in a great hurry. As he continued with his sermon, extolling on their sins and promising them eternal life for repentance, the swans joined the group of ducks, with the exception of one of the cygnets. This opened the door for chastisement from "Reverend" Bennett. He berated the youngster for his wayward ways and damned him to hell if he didn't

join in the worship. Unbelievably, the wayward swan joined the group. Vintage Gerry!

Gerry was a man of lists. Most of us keep lists, particularly of birds seen (e.g., Toronto; Ontario; Canada; North America; World; house, etc.). So did Gerry, but to an extreme I am sure unsurpassed by any living man. Not only did he keep the bird lists that most of us keep, he invented others. When he edited *Birdfinding in Canada*, (which I liked to refer to as *Birdfunding in Canada*, in Gerry's presence), he invented ATPAT (All Territories And Provinces Added Together), and a spinoff, Son of ATPAT, which I never did figure out. He had lists for his yard, his

township block, the county, the Maple dump, and each individual woodlot near his house. When I rewrote the Toronto section for the recent FON update of Murray Speirs' *Naturalist's Guide to Ontario*, I leaned heavily on Gerry's lists for updates. One of his favourite lists was of people with "bird" surnames. I had the honour of adding several names to this list, the last of which had Gerry chuckling in disbelief. While supply teaching at an Etobicoke Secondary School, I noticed the surname of a young girl, "Redhead", which I quickly relayed to Gerry for his list.

But his lists did not stop at birding. One of his more exotic lists, and one that he insisted on adding to while we were birding, was "Ontario Pubs that I've had a glass of ale in". I've often wondered how many birds we missed while Gerry was adding to this list!

Gerry did not talk much about his religious faith, so I really don't know how deeply involved he was

with religion and a belief in the hereafter. I somehow like to think that if there is indeed a heaven, there is a special room for those that appreciated God's greatest creation — birds. And if there is, Gerry will certainly have a place there. I can envision Gerry walking into the room and seeing Doug sitting beside Dick and Norm, and I know exactly what he would say. "Think you're pretty smart don't you Doug, sitting there on Norm's Chesterfield."

At the interment, in a small cemetery where Gerry often birded, across from Purpleville Woods not far from Gerry's house, it was strangely silent. Only the voice of the minister laying Gerry to rest broke the cold air. At the conclusion of the ceremony as we walked out to our cars, a chickadee sang once. I feel certain that it was one of the birds that fed daily at Gerry's feeders saying a last thank you, and a sorrowful goodbye.

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Editors' Note: Gerry Bennett was born on 20 August 1921 in Foresters Falls, Renfrew County, the son of a "gospel preacher". He wrote and published three outrageous books: *Wild Birdwatchers I Have Known* (1977), *More About Birdwatchers* (1978), and *Laughing Matter* (1978). The latter book was described by Gerry, in typical fashion, as "an anthology of poems and prose. Not a serious line in the whole book."

Memories of Gerry Bennett (1921-1999)

David F. Fidler and Rolph A. Davis

The short obituary in the *Globe and Mail* stated that Gerry Bennett died “suddenly, while feeding the birds at his Purpleville home on Sunday, January 10, 1999 in his 78th year”. This cryptic note marked the end of the career of one of Ontario’s most colourful field naturalists. Gerry was a naturalist in the best sense of the word, with a broad knowledge of all aspects of the natural environment gained through 64 years of field experience in Ontario. However, Gerry was most interested in birds and is best known as a birder.

We first met Gerry in May or June 1965 on the Green Lane in King Township, where he was watching a colony of Henslow’s Sparrows that we had previously found. We birded with Gerry on many occasions over the subsequent 34 years. Birding with Gerry was always enjoyable because of his wealth of stories, anecdotes and his ever present wit, sometimes subtle and sometimes sharp.

We had many memorable winter birding trips. These included a January trip for an unidentified rare bird that had been visiting a non-birder’s feeder in Delhi. After spending the entire day in the living room of the unsuspecting, but ever gracious family, we left without having any idea what the bird was that

they thought they had coming to their feeder. On the way back to King City, we were overtaken by a horrendous blizzard that delayed our arrival home until next morning.

One bitterly cold and windy morning in January, we were walking the Toronto Island leg of the Toronto Waterfowl census. Gerry informed us that he had concocted a libation that would take the sting out of the air. This he called a “bomb-blast”. The innocent looking thermos was filled with the remains from every liquor bottle in Gerry’s house. He was correct that the drink did seem to take the bite out of the wind, although it may not have helped our identifications. We were quite fortunate that he never served this drink again!

Dave and Gerry made regular winter trips to Algonquin Park over a period of approximately ten years. One year they stayed overnight in Huntsville, and found that the temperature was -40° F when they got up. The red wine that they had brought for lunch had frozen solid in the bottle. Not to be deterred, come lunch time, they fired up the Coleman stove and “fried” the wine in the frying pan. Gerry asked, “Do you like your wine rare or well done?”

Gerry knew most of the birders

in the province. At the congregations of birders that were attracted to rare birds, Gerry was in his element greeting and talking to almost everyone in the assembled horde. Whenever we chased a bird from the "Hotline", Gerry would keep a list of the birders that we met at the bird's location.

One could easily tell that Gerry was not exactly a "fashion plate". His birding coat and his cardigan sweater were exceeded in age only by his vintage binoculars, that were over 40 years old. Gerry never took advantage of the greatly improved optics available to modern birders.

Gerry always had birding projects that he was working on. One of the best was his Centennial project in 1967. That summer, he walked and birded every kilometre of every road in Vaughan Township at least once, and he visited the interior of each concession block at least twice. He generated lists of species, the frequency of times observed, and he listed all species from the most numerous to the least numerous for the entire Township.

Gerry kept innumerable bird lists for almost every area and occasion. He kept life bird and nest lists for every County and District in Ontario. When birding, he always noted the change from one county into the next. He was very exasperated with governments that arbitrarily changed Counties into Regions, and fiddled with boundaries for crass political purposes

without considering the implications for serious bird listers! In 1979, Gerry decided to focus on finding as many bird nests as possible in a single year in Ontario. He visited every County and Regional Municipality to find and record bird nests. According to George Peck, Gerry Bennett turned in over 800 nest record cards for approximately 120 species, a record that has not been approached in any one year.

In 1970, we conducted a "Big Day" in King Township. We discussed this with Gerry, and the next year he started doing a simultaneous Big Day in Vaughan Township along the southern boundary of King. Thus was born a long-standing contest that continued for the next 25 years. Originally, Arne Dawe accompanied Gerry on these Big Days, and in later years Jim Macey was his main birding companion.

After Dave Fidler moved to Owen Sound in 1983, Gerry suggested that they do an annual October bird list for their respective properties. Up until 1991, Gerry would appear at Dave's house near Owen Sound in early November for a few days birding and to compare the "lies lists" for October. The fact that Dave's property was about ten times the size of Gerry's did not spoil the contest; it just meant that Gerry had to work harder, which he enjoyed doing.

Gerry Bennett and Jim Baillie were long-time friends. Jim kept very detailed notes describing every

birding trip that he took. These diaries are of great interest in providing a history of birds and birders in Ontario. In the last few years of his life, Jim got far behind in his record keeping. After Jim died, Gerry laboriously completed Jim's diaries using the notes taken by Jim during each trip. These diaries now reside in the Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library of the University of Toronto. Undoubtedly, Gerry's own daily field notes will provide a thesis or two for future students of Ontario birds.

Perhaps Gerry's most remarkable achievement as a birder was his creation and publication of *Birdfinding in Canada*. Gerry began this venture from scratch in January 1981, and published an issue every two months for the next nine years. *Birdfinding in Canada* became the definitive journal for Canadian bird listers, with many bird-finding articles, Big Day reports, and life lists for every conceivable area in each issue. Gerry produced each issue single-handedly! Every issue was delivered to the Post Office on time, although he used to rail that this issue had taken 31 days to arrive in Saskatoon and that one had taken 13 days to reach Toronto, about 12

miles away. He kept up an extensive correspondence with birders across the country. All of this was done without the use of modern word processors and well before e-mail appeared. A truly remarkable achievement by an incredibly well-organized individual!

Gerry was a tremendous sports fan. Every day he would read all the box scores for every sport listed in the daily papers. The sports he most enjoyed were baseball and hockey. He attended the first Blue Jays game at Exhibition Stadium and continued going to the games at Skydome. He never missed a Jays game on the radio. After retirement, he even wrote to various ball teams and offered his services as a "scout". His knowledge of hockey was also very extensive. He was a Maple Leaf fan from a young age, and enjoyed listening to Foster Hewitt on the radio. In his younger days, Gerry was a championship-calibre bowler. He was rumoured to have won a few dollars at the game.

We will miss Gerry and his refreshing wit, but we take pleasure in remembering him and in knowing that he has undoubtedly already started several new lists in the great beyond.

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Henri Roger Ouellet (1938-1999)

Ron Pittaway

Dr. Henri Ouellet suffered an embolism and passed away suddenly on 9 January 1999, at his home in Hull, Quebec. He was 60 years of age. Henri Roger Ouellet was born in Rivière-du-Loup, Quebec on 29 January 1938. He is survived by his wife Yvette and son Alain.

I first met Henri Ouellet in 1962 at the National Museum in Ottawa, shortly after he began there as Research Assistant in Ornithology. His mentor was W. Earl Godfrey. I often visited the museum as a teenager to ask questions of Earl Godfrey, Henri Ouellet, S.D. (Stu) MacDonald and Tom Manning. It was amazing to hear their stories of field trips to remote parts of Canada, and to go through the collections with these museum men.

In 1965, Henri Ouellet served as Chief Naturalist at Point Pelee National Park. He was Assistant Curator (1965-1966) and Associate Curator (1967-1970) of Vertebrate Zoology at McGill University's Redpath Museum in Montreal. Henri returned to the National Museum in 1970, and was appointed Assistant Curator of Ornithology. In December 1976, he became Chief of Vertebrate Zoology and Curator of Birds when Earl Godfrey retired. In 1977, Henri

Ouellet obtained his doctorate in zoology from McGill University; his thesis concerned the biosystematics and ecology of Hairy and Downy Woodpeckers.

Henri Ouellet's research included the speciation, systematics and taxonomy of nearctic birds, particularly of the subfamily Emberizinae (buntings, sparrows, and allies). He travelled widely, especially to the Neotropics. While attending the 18th Ornithological Congress in August 1982 in Moscow, Henri gave a talk about Canadian birds on Russian television that was seen by 20 million viewers! Between 1970 and 1985, Henri led or directed over 20 field surveys across Canada, from Newfoundland to the Yukon and from Ellesmere Island to southern Quebec. During his career at the National Museum, he greatly expanded the ornithological collections through collecting, exchanges, gifts and purchases.

In 1991, all the curatorships at the Canadian Museum of Nature were abolished. Ouellet became a research scientist. Then in 1993, the museum again reorganized and all the research scientists dealing with terrestrial vertebrates were terminated. Unfortunately, under these misguided managerial decisions,

Henri Ouellet was the last ornithologist of an era that included P.A. Taverner, A.L. Rand, W.E. Godfrey and S.D. MacDonald. After leaving the Canadian Museum of Nature in 1993, Henri's lifelong passion remained the evolution and zoogeography of the birds of Quebec and Labrador.

Henri Ouellet co-authored with Dan Strickland the account of the Gray Jay in *The Birds of North America* series (Strickland and Ouellet 1993). Along with Michel Gosselin, he established a French nomenclature for North American birds (Ouellet and Gosselin 1983). From 1982 to 1986, as Secretary General, Henri organized the 19th International Ornithological Congress held in Ottawa in 1986. He later edited the massive two volumes of Congress proceedings (Ouellet 1988).

Henri served on various committees and organizations. For example, he was a member of the Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada (COSEWIC) from 1976 to 1986, and served on the Scientific Advisory Committee of the World Wildlife Fund (Canada) from 1981 to 1988. From 1983 until his death, Henri was a member of the Committee on Classification and Nomenclature of the American Ornithologists' Union. In the recently published AOU Check-list (1998), Henri was responsible for the preparation of approximately

350 species accounts, and revisions to the species known to occur in Canada.

In recent times, Henri Ouellet was best known for his research on the Bicknell's Thrush, leading to its recognition as a full species (AOU 1995). Ouellet's (1993b) studies showed that Bicknell's differed from Gray-cheeked Thrush in morphology, vocalizations, breeding habitat, behaviour, ecology and migration routes, and biochemical analysis showed a strong divergence in mitochondrial DNA. See Ouellet's article on Bicknell's Thrush in the August 1993 issue of *Ontario Birds* 11(2): 41-45. OFO members will remember meeting Henri at the October 1996 Annual General Meeting when he spoke about Bicknell's Thrush. After that meeting, Henri wrote a site guide to finding Bicknell's Thrush in Quebec in the February 1997 *OFO News* 15(1): 6-7. One of the last correspondences I had with Henri was in October 1998, about postings on the Internet's ID-Frontiers. There were several posts questioning the species status of Bicknell's Thrush because it is so similar to the Newfoundland *minimus* subspecies of the Gray-cheeked Thrush, and migrants are hard to identify. Henri's e-mail to me said: "I found the information on Bicknell's Thrush interesting, but some people have a knack for commenting on topics about which they know very little." Regarding Bicknell's and

other difficult identifications, there is no rule in ornithology that says a species must be recognizable at all times in the field by humans!

In preparing this tribute, I appreciate the help of Dan Brunton, Earl Godfrey, Michel Gosselin and Richard Poulin. Henri Ouellet will be greatly missed by his many friends and associates, and by Canadian ornithology. Henri published widely in refereed and popular journals. Some of his publications relating to birds in Ontario are included in the list below.

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