

Stuart Houston: 75 Years of Bird Banding in Saskatchewan

For his 12th birthday in September 1939, Stuart Houston was given Taverner's "*Birds of Canada*" by two aunts who thought the \$3.50 price was too much for each of them to spend on him. This birthday gift led to a meeting with local naturalist, Isabel Priestly, who identified the juvenile American Goldfinches (not described in Taverner) that were eating dandelion seed on the Houston lawn and who invited Stuart to go on weekly bird walks with her. Later when he was 15, Bert Cartwright, Ducks Unlimited Canada chief naturalist, approached Stuart about banding ducks since World War II had conscripted many of the individuals who had been banding for Ducks Unlimited Canada. Cartwright contacted Hoyes Lloyd at the Canadian Banding Office who, after consultation with the US Bird Banding Lab, said Stuart should leave his age blank on the banding application. Banding permit 00460 was issued knowingly to an underage Stuart Houston. Stuart banded ducks for Ducks Unlimited Canada under their permit 0077 for which he got \$0.10 per banded duck for 556 ducks in 1943, 3 years later the rate was \$0.20 per duck for 2135 ducks in 1946. He became a rich high school student. Band recoveries came back from the Caribbean and northern South America, and each was marked in his atlas. Banding ducks for Ducks Unlimited Canada had sparked an interest in nature, birds and banding. In 1945, Ducks Unlimited Canada offered Stuart a full university scholarship to study either wildlife management at University of Wisconsin under Aldo Leopold or ornithology at Cornell University under Arthur Allen. Stuart declined, saying, "If I take that offer, what would I do for a hobby?" His parents were medical doctors, Stuart graduated with an MD in 1951.

Seth Low, the second chief of the BBL, in 1954 came to visit Stuart and Mary in Yorkton bringing with him, at his own expense, a newly invented mist net. A quick early morning lesson on set up and bird removal along a country trail caught a Yellow Warbler and a Gray Catbird. Banding became a

hobby and obsession for the husband and wife team. Stuart persisted with banding privately and unpaid for 75 years, a record for Canada. Stuart with the aid of Mary and 28 subpermittees banded 212 species totaling 151,882 birds during the 75 years. The last birds, Dark-eyed Juncos and migrant sparrows, were banded by Stuart in June 2017 at their backyard banding site as the family home was being prepared for sale.

The following are some banding highlights: Great Horned Owl – 7776; Northern Saw-whet Owl – 1439; Ferruginous Hawk – 4239; Swainson Hawk – 4864; Ring-billed Gull – 20448; Turkey Vulture – 1448. As Stuart's subpermittee, Mary banded: Bohemian Waxwing – 5392, with 46 recoveries, both North American records. Mary's waxwing totals surpasses the 700 banded in total by all the other banders combined since banding began in 1921, the greatest monopolization of a single species by one person. Her totals for Mountain Bluebird, 8028 and Tree Swallow, 20914, have been surpassed by other banders.

Researchgate.com, a cataloguing research service, credits Stuart with 262 research items and 2118 citations. Stuart and Mary published 108 banding articles about 55 Saskatchewan species; four of these species were "firsts" for Saskatchewan: Caspian Tern, Common Tern, Eastern Screech-Owl and Barred Owl.

References for additional information on the Houstons and their banding careers. Houston, C. S., and M. I. Houston. 1992. Banding recoveries: a 48-year experience or: "It's really Mrs Priestly's fault." *Blue Jay* 50:182-194.

Houston, C. S. 2016. Mary Houston: North America's pre-eminent Bohemian Waxwing bander. *Blue Jay* 74: 25-27.

Jenson, R. 2018. The Houstons, banding dynamos, retire permit 00460. *Blue Jay* 76: 8-18.

Ron Jensen
1027 King Crescent
Saskatoon, SK S7K 0N9