

News and Comment

Sixth Annual Meeting of the Alliance of Natural History Museums of Canada, 26 and 27 October 2009

Leaders of Canada's major natural history museums convened in Ottawa on 26 and 27 October 2009 for the sixth annual meeting of the Alliance of Natural History Museums of Canada (ANHMC). The network was created in 2003 to enhance collaborative work in the areas of research, collections development, and education about the natural environment. Pauline Rafferty, CEO of the Alliance and Director of the Royal British Columbia Museum, stressed the continuing national strategy for developing a collection that will represent all of Canada's biodiversity.

The Alliance's 16 members from west to north to east are the Royal British Columbia Museum, the Vancouver Aquarium, the Royal Alberta Museum, the Royal Tyrrell Museum of Palaeontology, the Yukon Beringia Interpretive Centre, the Prince of Wales Northern Heritage Centre, the Royal Saskatchewan Museum, the Manitoba Museum, the Royal Ontario Museum, the Canadian Museum of Nature, the Toronto Zoo, Montreal's nature museums (Biodôme, Insectarium, Botanical Gardens, and Planetarium), the Redpath Museum (Montreal), the New Brunswick Museum, the Nova Scotia Museum of Natural History, and The Rooms Provincial Museum, Newfoundland and Labrador. These institutions are responsible for preserving the record of Canada's natural history through time. Together, member museums safeguard more than 19 million catalogued specimens of plants, animals, minerals, and fossils collected over 150 years. The purpose of the national collections strategy is to ensure that this crucial record is complete and is preserved in perpetuity.

At a special reception held the evening of 27 October on Parliament Hill, the third annual Bruce Naylor Award was presented. This honour recognizes significant contributions to the study of museum-based natural history in Canada. The 2009 recipient was Dr. Robert Cannings, a notable entomologist from British Columbia. Dr. Cannings' contributions as a biologist go back decades, from his early days as a naturalist and nature interpreter to his 29 years as Curator of Entomology at the Royal British Columbia Museum in Victoria. He has authored several books, published more than 100 peer-reviewed scientific articles, and written over 100 popular articles. Under his curatorship, the Museum's entomology collection has grown from a few thousand specimens to the present collection of over 250 000. He has also written text for, and contributed to the planning of, a wide range of museum

exhibits. While he publishes on many kinds of insects, his research focuses on the diversity and evolution of dragonflies and robber flies. Books that he has authored or co-authored include *The Dragonflies of British Columbia* (1977), *The World of Fresh Water* (1998), *Introducing the Dragonflies of British Columbia and the Yukon* (2002), and *The Systematics of Lasiopogon (Diptera: Asilidae)* (2002). He joined forces with his brothers, biologists Sydney and Richard, to produce *Birds of the Okanagan Valley* (1987), and his artistic talents were put to use illustrating the White-headed Woodpeckers on the book's cover. For many years he has served on the executive of the Entomological Society of British Columbia and he was editor of the Society's newsletter *Boreus* (which he started in 1981) until 1991. He is a member of the Arthropods Subcommittee of COSEWIC (Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada) and the British Columbia Invertebrate Recovery Team. He has also been active on the Scientific Committee of the Biological Survey of Canada (Terrestrial Arthropods).

"The thing that I've always tried to do is be broad in my interests, rather than always simply focusing on particular research and collections projects," says Dr. Cannings. "I've tried to be a bit of everything. I like to think this award recognizes that versatility."

Periodically he teaches at the University of Victoria and he has brought fourth-year students into the Museum's labs to give them direct exposure to the kind of work done by museum biologists.

"I have never known anyone so well-rounded and devoted," says Mr. Kelly Sendall, Manager of Natural History at the Royal British Columbia Museum. "In my mind he is the epitome of what a curator in a natural history museum should be."

Cannings grew up in Penticton in the Okanagan Valley. His father was the photographer for the Agriculture Canada research station in Summerland. The young Cannings frequently hung around with the scientists. An amateur biologist, his father often took the family to the Penticton museum, and at times they would donate things they found in nature to the museum.

"I was a museum kid long before I ever came here," says Cannings. "Natural history and collecting were part of our life."

Cannings recalls that his family had a long shelf of natural history books, including handbooks produced by the Royal British Columbia Museum (formerly the

British Columbia Provincial Museum). Even when he was young, one of his ambitions was to write a museum handbook. His goal was realized with *The Dragonflies of British Columbia*, which was published before he joined the Royal British Columbia Museum

in 1980. In 2008, Okanagan University College named Dr. Cannings and his two brothers as honorary fellows for their contributions to the appreciation of nature through their writings, professional activities, and dedication.

Canadian Association of Herpetologists Bulletin Association Canadienne des Herpétologistes 16(2) Spring 2009

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