

## OTHER

**More Than Birds: Adventurous Lives of North American Naturalists**

By Val Shushkewich. 2013. Dundern Press, 500-3 Church Street, Toronto, ON, Canada, M5E 1M2. 296 pages, 27.99 CAD, Paper.

This is a book about some people I know, some I know of and many who are part of ornithological history. It covers 22 naturalists, four of whom are still alive and well. Each person gets a compact biography of a dozen pages. This allows the author to capture the essence of a naturalist's life and give a sense of their contribution to ornithology.

I was one of a multitude of birders to go into the field with Murray Speirs. Even an hour with Murray was an enlightening experience that changed your perspective. My own resolution following a day with Murray was to take far better daily notes. Although I saw Doris Speirs many times I only went out with her once. This was an expedition to see an Ivory Gull that became an unforgettable Keystone-cops farce.

Bob Nero is a legend in the prairies. He spent much of his life promoting conservation with his partner Lady Grayl, a Great Grey Owl. When he introduced me to this lovely bird he insisted I tickle its tummy. I was amazed to see my index finger disappear into the thick layer of feathers. It was as memorable as Ruth's hospitality.

Although I never met Robert Bateman, I did spend time on a board with his brother Ross. From him I learned of Robert's change from an art teacher to a full-time professional.

The remaining 19 people are people I have known about for many years, some more intimately than others. For all these naturalists the author provides a good summary of their lives.

The early naturalists are represented by Alexander Wilson, John James Audubon and Thomas Nuttall. These amateurs became the founders of ornithology in North America. From humble beginnings these three men overcame major obstacles to bring North American birds to the world. It is hard to imagine Audubon giving dance lessons to finance his art or Nuttall living from hand to mouth as he worked on both plants and birds. Incidentally Nuttall's great bird book – *Manual of the Ornithology of the United States and Canada* – is available on line at <http://www.archive.org/stream/manualofornitho100nutt#page/124/mode/2up>. Audubon's monumental folio did bring him wealth before he died, but you will need more than \$10 million to buy a copy today.

The Smithsonian has had an enormous influence on natural science on this continent and has provided us with great scientists. These include Spencer Baird, Robert Kennicott and Robert Ridgeway. All three were brilliant innovative men, each of whom made some special contributions to ornithology.

The next group of four includes the first two women who became famous as ornithologists. This was at a time when women were not always taken seriously and travel and exploration was tough going for everyone.

When I read the chapter on Jack Miner I wondered how he would handle Miner's controversial traits. His conservation philosophy was very selective. He believed God put birds on earth for man's control and use. With this religious viewpoint he considered non-monomamous and predatory birds (hawks, owls and crows) morally bad, and took measures to eliminate them. The author downplays this aspect of Miner's life. He also infers that Miner in North America was the first to band birds and this is incorrect (this technique had been introduced by Leon Cole some years earlier than Miner's first trial.)

For reasons I do not understand I knew little about James Henry Fleming until I read this book. He was a Canadian pioneer who gave his extensive collection to the Royal Ontario Museums of Zoology (now the ROM). He was also an influence on Canada's first professional ornithologist, Percy Taverner. This is a man I do know, having bought two of his three major books. Margaret Morse Nice was a legend when I arrived in Canada. This delightful lady showed us all the importance of patient, detailed study. Her studies on the Song Sparrow gave her justifiable fame that she used to promote bird conservation. Joseph Dewey Soper was a Canadian Arctic explorer and productive author. He opened our eyes to the magic of the Arctic, renowned for his studies on the Blue (Snow) Goose. Louise de Kiriline Lawrence survived the Russian Revolution to become first a Canadian nurse and then a naturalist. Her prolific writings were the backbone of the *National Audubon Society* magazine.

The author has chosen some of the key figures in Natural History in North America. His book would be wonderful to read on an aeroplane or at a cottage. It is written in a smooth flowing style that is effortless to read. Because each of the chapters is a complete story it is easy to pick up and put down, despite interruptions. I do have a few quibbles, apart from my comments on Miner's dark side. Some biographies end abruptly – most notably Audubon's. I would like to have seen Earl Godfrey added to the book. Overall it was fun to read and enlightening to be reminded of the tremendous contribution each of these people made to the study of wildlife in North America.

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