

For the Birds – Recollections and Rambles

By Fred Helleiner. 2013. Willow Printing and Publishing, Brighton, ON, Canada. Obtain from the author at fhelleiner@trentu.ca 20.00 CAD plus 2.50 CAD for postage and handling or the lighthouse gift shop at Presqu'île Provincial Park. All profits will be donated to the Friends of Presqu'île 25th Anniversary Environmental Fund.

Anyone who has visited Presqu'île Provincial Park in the last few years will know Fred Helleiner. He is the gent who roams the park on his (t)rusty bike carrying a telescope. Everyone who visits the park should stop at Fred's house near the lighthouse and read his bulletin board of daily bird sightings or stop for a chat.

Fred's book chronicles his early start with his interest in, then passion for birds. He details his story along with places and people who influenced his progress. I was only a few pages into the book before I became nostalgic. His tale is, I am sure, similar to many in the same age bracket. I am about 10 years younger than Fred and went through the same stages. I halted at "scorn and derision that were heaped on early birders." This was an age when children who were different were persecuted. In my pre-teen and teen years I kept my interests (I was interested in flowers too – not a respected pursuit for a teenage boy) to myself. Fred says "we tended not to advertise ... being birdwatchers ... hid our binoculars under our jackets." This sounds so familiar.

We also share similar losses too. Fred saw his Barn Owls in Blenheim's clock tower which has now been destroyed. I saw my Canadian Barn Owls at Bradley's Marsh, which Fred states was drained for market gardening. Like me, he was also an early visitor and bander at Point Pelee. This was in the days when there

were a thousand birds for every birder, rather than the ratio on my last visit when it was a thousand birders for every bird (at least it seemed that way!). He trots through all the hot birding locales in his travels.

Fred names the many people who influenced his passion for birds. This reads like a who's who of Ontario's birders. He was additionally responsible for inspiring numerous young birders. In his work as a teacher, Fred came into contact with many young people and he used this position wisely. What is odd is that there are two people who are not mentioned – Dennis Rupert, a fixture at Pelee for many years and Harold Axtell, the most respected birder in the Niagara Region.

This was a book for wistful reminiscing when birdwatching went from an obscure obsession practised by a few to a popular pastime of many. Fred started when there were few field guides, while now there are many along with a plethora of DVDs, iPods and iPads, sound recordings and other computer resources. It is a fairly short book and would be an ideal companion on a trip, or at the cottage or simply because it is raining. I think Richard Pope in the Foreword was right when he wrote "more of the old-timers ... (should) write similar reminiscences."

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