

# In Memoriam: George Webster North (1910–1983)

by  
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For most of this century the field ornithology of Hamilton, Ontario, has been dominated by George W. North. His death on 27 November 1983 represents a great loss to the Ontario birdwatching community.

Born in Hamilton on 13 January 1910, he was introduced to birds by his parents who gave him a copy of Taverner's, *Birds of Canada* on or about his eighth birthday. From that point on, birds dominated his life. As was fashionable at the time, the North family had a summer cottage at Van Wagner's Beach where he spent over 25 years and as he put it (North 1983b),

"Many a time in the old days before the engineers befouled and destroyed our beautiful marshes, I used to wake up in the middle of the night. . . . and listen to the songs of the Marsh Wrens and hear the calls of the Virginia Rails and Gallinules."

We were treated to such evocative writing only in the last few years of his life. George, ignoring the entreaties of his friends, chose to spend all his waking hours afield, rather than put pen to paper. It is tragic that his consummate skill at identifying

birds and unmatched knowledge could not have taken book form. Certainly it was not from a lack of scholarly ability; he earned a degree in Semitic languages from the University of Toronto (but the Depression Years prevented his putting it to use) and he eventually became an accountant/book-keeper in Hamilton.

In his prime, George's birding skills were legendary. Or, as he put it (North 1983a):

" . . . if one has keen artistic eyesight, a good musical ear, and goes out watching birds morning, noon, evenings and week-ends for years and years in fair weather and foul, often cycling 60 or 80 miles a day. . . one is bound to have a rare experience from time to time."

His acute auditory perception was no accident; he was an accomplished clarinet player and for many years was a member of the Royal Hamilton Light Infantry and other bands. He developed and honed his birding skills without benefit of the sophisticated field guides we have today and with very few contemporaries with whom to converse and compare observations. He had an incredible

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memory for the details of date, directions and past observations of not only his own but of any person who casually mentioned a sighting to him. Now, alas, much of that knowledge is lost.

George North was justly famous for being able to produce birds for others. Richard M. Saunders wrote of a 1946 experience (Saunders 1947: 72):

“Frequently some unusual avian straggler from the south or west finds its way to the head of the lake. When this happens some one of the Hamilton observers discovers it – usually the indefatigable George North – and the report reaches Toronto. Immediately an expedition is organized for the earliest possible occasion, and the services of Mr. North enlisted. Even though several days often elapse before the trip can be made, George rarely fails to produce the bird.”

President of the Hamilton Naturalists' Club in 1946 and 1947, George North was awarded an honorary life membership in 1974 for his many years of devoted service. He compiled the “Noteworthy Bird Records” for 10 issues of *The Wood Duck* every year from 1951 until the time of his death. This represents an invaluable record of the seasonal status of birds at the west end of Lake Ontario. He was compiler of the Hamilton Christmas Bird Count for 35 or more years. He was a member of the American Ornithologists' Union, Wilson Ornithological Society, Buffalo Ornithological Society and, we are honoured to say, a founding life member of the Ontario Field Ornithologists.



*George Webster North*

Although George did not publish a great deal, he co-authored with J. Murray Speirs and John A. Crosby, *Holboell's Grebe Nesting in Southern Ontario* (Speirs, et al 1944). The nestings at Burlington were unprecedented this far south and east. He spent two months in Labrador (28 July – 24 September 1950) and received an acknowledgement in Todd's *Birds of the Labrador Peninsula*. His observations are noted under many species in this volume.

But he was first and foremost a locality birder. Just a very few of the rare sightings he had at Hamilton were: Brown Pelican, Tufted Duck (March 1956), Black Vulture, Swainson's Hawk, Prairie Falcon, Willow Ptarmigan, Black Rail, Wilson's Plover, Mew Gull, Ivory Gull, Thick-billed Murre, Burrowing Owl, Bell's Vireo, and nesting Prothonotary Warbler. On

23 March 1958 he and the late Dr. Robert MacLaren found and identified in one flock four subspecies of Redpolls including the almost legendary *Carduelis h. hornemanni*.

However, George's greatest legacy is his tremendous influence on other birders, whether they spent just a few years in Hamilton or grew up there. Always willing to go out on weekends, he invariably would have two or three passengers. The teen-aged boys in his entourage always tripped along a respectful pace or two behind, hanging on every word, absorbing the master's technique and hoping just once to be able to point out and identify something before the great man. Those boys and other companions of earlier years are today spread all across the country

and continue to convey the love, enthusiasm and keen perception of birds and things natural to those whom they meet. In this way many benefit unknowingly from George although they will not miss him as do we, his friends and field companions. George is survived by his wife, Laurel Williams of Hamilton, whom he married in 1951.

#### Literature Cited

*North, G.W.* 1983a. Greenland Redpoll. *Wood Duck* 36: 118

*North, G.W.* 1983b. Unusual behaviour in birds. *Wood Duck* 36: 135.

*Saunders, R.M.* 1947. *Flashing Wings*. McClelland and Stewart. Toronto.

