



IN MEMORIAM  
George K. Peck

*Jim Richards and Bob Montgomerie*

George Peck,  
June 2011 in  
Nome, Alaska.

*Photo: Mark Peck*

**GEORGE KELDAY PECK** passed away in Toronto, Ontario, on 20 June 2020 after a brief illness. George was 94 and was our friend, mentor and field companion for almost 60 of those well-lived years. We begin this remembrance with a brief bio of George followed by some personal anecdotes that capture, we think, the essence of the man and the breadth of his interests and accomplishments.

When George was a boy his family had a cottage near Gananoque, Ontario, where his outdoor adventures in the local marshes and woodlands would shape his passions both for natural history and for collecting stamps, cowrie shells, wildflowers, ferns and birds' eggs. After graduating from Ontario Veterinary College in 1950, George set up a small-animal clinic in Oakville and began a family with Sheila Wilson. George retired from that veterinary practice in 1982 and moved to Thornbury with his second wife, Diane Schwartz, to pursue his avocations full time. He fell in love with the Bruce Peninsula and made many lifelong friends in the local naturalist communities where he often lectured and guided nature walks.

For 48 years beginning in 1966, George coordinated the Ontario Nest Records Scheme (ONRS) at the Royal Ontario Museum (ROM), where he was appointed Research Associate in 1976. The ONRS was started at the ROM in 1956 to provide a permanent record, on file cards, of data on bird nests and eggs found during the ROM expeditions to remote parts of Ontario. When George first volunteered to help with ONRS in the mid-1960s, there were already 1,800 nest record cards on file. By the time the ONRS went digital and was turned over to Birds Canada in the early 2000s, George was curating more than 150,000 cards documenting more than 3 million nests of 283 species breeding in Ontario. This made the ONRS one of the largest databases on bird nests worldwide and a shining early example of the success of what we now call citizen science.

For more than 40 years, George went to the ROM several days a month to curate incoming records and transcribe data from old field notes. He encouraged naturalists and birders from around the province to contribute their records, and wrote a comprehensive annual report summarizing the state of the collection, as well as new species added to the ONRS and the province. George's work at the ROM brought him into contact with many ornithologists — James L. Baillie, Ross James, Rev. Charles Long, Mac Kirk — and wildlife artists — Paul Geraghty, Terry Shortt, George MacLean and Barry Kent MacKay — who shared his passion for natural history and became treasured friends and colleagues.

George was also a prolific writer and photographer, penning numerous articles in journals, magazines, nature club newsletters and government reports. He published more than 3,000 photos and 120 articles and books, including being author/illustrator of eight children's books on birds. In 1966, he was awarded a silver medal as Wildlife Photographer of the Year from *Birds of the World* magazine. With his friend, Ross James, he wrote the first comprehensive book on the breeding birds of Ontario, based on records in ONRS, and contributed species accounts to the first two editions of the *Atlas of the Breeding Birds of Ontario*.

To photograph birds and wildlife, George travelled throughout North America north of Mexico. He decided early on that one of his life's goals would be to photograph in colour the nest and eggs of all species breeding regularly in the 1957 American Ornithologists' Union's (AOU) checklist region. This was an admirable goal as most egg photographs had so far been taken in black-and-white, and a high-quality colour film (Kodachrome II) had just come on the

market. That pursuit and his curating of the ONRS made him an expert on the breeding biology of North American birds, and by the time he finally hung up his cameras he had photographed the nest and eggs of almost 500 species. In addition to his published works, George excelled in public outreach, teaching courses in ornithology and photography at Georgian College and the L. E. Shore Library in Thornbury. Almost every year, he gave illustrated lectures to nature and garden clubs in Ontario and beyond, and often led birding tours to Florida, Louisiana, South Carolina, Texas and Virginia.

George was presented with the Federation of Ontario Naturalists' (now Ontario Nature) Conservation Achievement Award in 1988 and was made an Elective Member of the American Ornithologists' Union (AOU, now American Ornithological Society) in 1991. He was a long-time member of the AOU, National Audubon Society, Wilson Ornithological Society, Ontario Field Biologists, South Peel Naturalists Club, Long Point Bird Observatory, Brodie Club, Owen Sound Field Naturalists, Toronto Ornithological Club and Ontario Field Ornithologists (OFO). In 2001, he received OFO's Distinguished Ornithologist Award.



Nest and eggs of a Red Knot, 7 July 2000. Cambridge Bay, Nunavut.

Photo: George K. Peck

#### Jim Richards remembers....

In the early 1960s, I read a piece in the old *Toronto Star Weekly* about a bird photographer from Oakville, Dr. George Peck, interested in birds' nests and eggs. I was just getting into photography and had been a keen nest-finder for about 15 years. I thought perhaps I should get to know him. In those days, I was a frequent visitor to the 'Bird Room' at the ROM, doing research for *Birds of the Oshawa Lake-Scugog Region, Ontario* (Tozer and Richards 1974). I asked Jim Baillie about George and Jim arranged for us to meet during one of George's weekly visits to work on the Ontario Nest Records Scheme. We became fast friends and that friendship has endured ever since.

Over the years, we enjoyed weekend trips during the nesting season to Speyside, Luther Marsh and Bradley's Marsh as well as days in the field near our homes in the Durham Region or Halton County, and later near Thornbury. We often talked about the places we had visited to watch and photograph birds. By 1990, it seemed as if George had visited almost all states and provinces north of Mexico, except Nunavut and Alaska.

I had already been to Nunavut several times and loved the density and variety of both birds and wildflowers and the wealth of photo opportunities. I convinced George to join me on a trip to Cambridge Bay, Nunavut, in June/July 1990 with Bruno Kern and George's son, Mark. George thought this was "the birdiest place he had ever seen." In all, we found 141 nests of 27 species and George was delighted to add the nests of many species to his long North American list: Tundra Swan, Brant, White-fronted Goose, Long-tailed Duck, King Eider, Rough-legged Hawk, Rock Ptarmigan, Ruddy Turnstone, Black-bellied Plover, Pectoral Sandpiper, Baird's Sandpiper, Long-tailed Jaeger, Glaucous Gull, Sabine's Gull, Snowy Owl, American Pipit and Snow Bunting. Needless to say, he was thrilled.



In June/July 2000, we made another trip to Cambridge Bay, this time with George, Glenn Coady and Tyler Hoar. New nests for George included Red Knot, Yellow-billed Loon, Red-throated Loon and Common Eider, among the 81 nests of 23 species that we found. A nest of the Red Knot with four eggs was the highlight of the trip for both of us.

**Least Auklets, June 2011 St. Paul Island, Alaska.**

*Photo: George K. Peck*

In 2011, George's son, Mark, had planned a June trip to Alaska, the last place on George's 'bucket-list', and they invited me to join them. We first went to St. Paul Island in the Bering Sea for five days observing and photographing nesting Gray-crowned Rosy-Finch, Steller's and Common Eiders, Red-faced Cormorants, Rock Sandpipers, Parakeet, Least and Crested Auklets, Horned and Tufted Puffins, both murrelets, Northern Fulmars, Black- and Red-legged Kittiwakes. Next, we made our way to Bethel on the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta where we found (as expected) the highest density of breeding birds we had ever experienced. For years George had identified the Y-K Delta as probably the most exciting place that he could visit to photograph birds. He was not disappointed, and we photographed nests (and adults) of Emperor Goose, Spectacled Eider, Western Sandpiper, Sandhill Crane, Black Turnstone and Yellow Wagtail. After three amazing days there, we went to Nome to add a few more species to our list of breeding birds: Aleutian Tern, Bluethroat, Arctic Warbler, Golden-crowned Sparrow and Northern Wheatear. In all, we tallied 121 species including several 'lifers' and recorded 132 nests of 56 species, as well as hundreds of nests of the colonial seabirds.

This trip to Alaska was George's last major field outing as his eyesight was failing. Diane passed away in 2008 and in 2014 George moved from Thornbury to a retirement complex in Toronto where he could be closer to his children (Leslie, Mark, Cameron and Erin), nine grandchildren and his beloved corner of the bird room at the ROM.

George was still talking about Nunavut and Alaska the last time we spoke in May 2020. Good times make for good memories.

### **Bob Montgomerie remembers....**

Like Jim, I met George at the ROM. Unlike Jim, though, I was still in high school and my interest in birds was just beginning to blossom. I had been volunteering in the ROM's basement prep room after school and on holidays, and often went up to the third floor bird range to chat with Jim Baillie and Lester Snyder. One afternoon George was present, and we immediately hit it off. My interests were more in field natural history than taxonomy, and George's enthusiasm for collecting information from the field during the breeding season was infectious. Over the next decade, we spent many weekends and holidays searching for nests and taking pictures in the counties along the north shore of Lake Ontario from Hamilton to Oshawa.

A typical day out with George would start with a plan to find some species that he wanted to photograph. He had collected eggs as a boy but transitioned to photography when told that such collecting was illegal. Not content simply to collect photos like stamps, George was keen to learn as much as he could about the breeding biology of each species. I think he was amazed that we often saw things not recorded in Bent's *Life Histories*, which he considered to be the authority on the breeding biology of North American birds. We often set up blinds near nests and spent many hours just watching and photographing the parents and making notes about their behaviour. While many of my friends were what we now call birders, George was the only bird 'watcher' that I knew, as content to watch American Robins as to search out the rarer species nesting in our region. We once built a blind high in a maple tree where we spent days watching a pair of Red-shouldered Hawks incubate their eggs and raise their young. One hot day, when not much was happening, both of us nodded off and could well have fallen to our death had the flimsy canvas sides of our blind given way.

Many days in the field ended up back at George's home in Oakville where, after a gourmet meal conjured up by Sheila, we would retire to George's den to write up that day's field notes and, of course, nest

record cards. George was adamant about writing up our notes every day no matter how beat we were, a lesson I found hard to learn but eventually invaluable when I began my own career as a scientist. Those evenings would inevitably turn to talk about photography, art, bird books and the latest papers on birds in one of the many journals he subscribed to. Like so many 'amateur' ornithologists, George's knowledge and interests blurred the lines between amateur and professional, much to the benefit of ornithology. Once I began university studies at the University of Toronto in 1965, I would spend most Wednesdays with George at the ROM, organizing nest record cards that had come in from people all over the province, and transcribing field notes in their archives. Many of those days would end with a walk across Bloor Street to the lounge at the Park Plaza to enjoy a beer and the many great jazz artists who played there. Jazz still isn't my favourite music but George's deep knowledge and appreciation of it was infectious and carried him through the last decade of his life when he could no longer see well enough to do field work and take pictures.

While most of our time together was spent within short driving distance of our homes in Toronto and Oakville, some of our best adventures, like Jim's, took place farther afield, at Long Point, Rondeau and Algonquin Park, where I was employed as a naturalist in the late 1960s, and then at Churchill, Manitoba, when I was studying shorebirds there in 1972. On each of those occasions, George's knowledge, humour and enthusiasm made the days in the field unforgettable. One of the joys of doing field work with George was that every day was full of adventure, discovery and the joy of experiencing the natural world.



George and Mark Peck at Point Pelee, May 2009.

*Photo: Doug McRae*

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