

Remembering Dennis Rupert (1933-1996)

Sarah Rupert

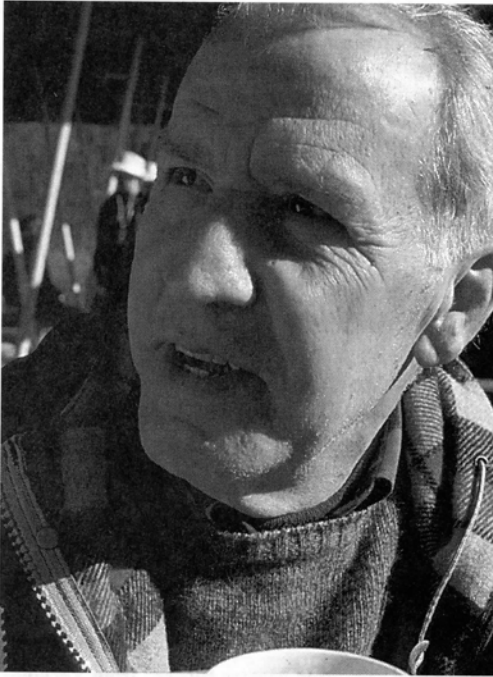


Figure 1: Dennis Rupert at Point Pelee in May 1988.
Photo by *Jim Wilson*.

Though it has been more than a year since the passing on 8 August 1996 of my father, Dennis Rupert, I had little trouble finding people willing to help me put together this tribute. My father was an exceptional man, one of the best birders around and my very dear friend. Though he was an engineer by trade, his true passions lay in his hobbies: birdwatching and botany. He characterized himself as an “orchid chaser” and could be found looking to the ground as often as he

was looking to the skies. In the months since his death, I have learned the impact that he had on so many lives; what better tribute could you have. I would like to turn you over to the words of my sister and give you a little more insight about the person Dennis Rupert was.

“Dennis Franklin Rupert was born in Leamington, Ontario on 15 December 1933. He went to the University of Toronto and obtained a degree in chemical engineering

which landed him a job at Polysar (now Bayer) Rubber Corporation where he stayed for 40 years, writing the financial programs for the company's computer system. Along with a passion for technology, my father was a brilliant naturalist. He knew bird plumages, songs and all the regional variations; he could identify thousands of wildflowers, hundreds of trees, dozens of mushrooms, lichens, mosses, butterflies, all by Latin genus and species. He was never trained in biology or botany; he simply learned it because he loved it.

In a similar way, my father learned to paint and sketch, mostly diagrams and illustrations of birds and plants he'd seen in the field. But every leaf of paper carried a startlingly realistic image. Years ago he even painted a copy of a Lawren Harris painting that hangs in the AGO. A few years ago I was wandering through the gallery and exclaimed to a friend, "Hey that painting's over my mantle." His reproduction was that close to the original.

My father also played the piano by ear. He excelled with Scott Joplin rags; they are not easy! I envied his ability when I worked at my grade ten Royal Conservatory of Music exam, knowing he had only attained a grade one level and that was in the 1940s. In the fifties, my dad played saxophone in dance hall bands. He always backed away from dancing with me at family

weddings because he "was always moving his fingers and blowing his horn" rather than cutting a rug."

Lucy (Martha) Rupert

Dad started the Sarnia Nature Club (now known as Lambton Wildlife Incorporated) in 1966, with my mother and five other local naturalists. One of his pet projects within the Club was to take some of the younger people under his wings and take them out to experience nature. Ross Snider of Ingersoll and Dave Martin of Aylmer were two of these youngsters and have offered these memories:

"My association with Dennis began in 1966, when I was 13 years old. It was the first meeting of the Sarnia Nature Club and it ended with the taking of a phone number to call with any future bird sightings. Just a "rookie", I found a Snowy Owl the next week and reached home to phone the number. It was Dennis Rupert. That call changed my life forever. I was invited to go the following Saturday with Dennis to the Sarnia Waterfront to look for waterbirds; thus began 30 years of tutelage and friendship with a very extraordinary man. Many outings followed over the years to Pelee, Rondeau, Kettle Point and even week-long trips (missing school!) banding raptors at Point Pelee and Whitefish Point. Dennis and his wife Sue were wonderful; how fortunate I was." *Ross Snider*

"Dennis was my mentor and

inspiration. It's as simple as that. Although I spent some time birding with other proteges of Dennis, it was during the 10 years between the time I was 18 and 28 that I honed my birding skills and note keeping habits by spending countless hours with Dennis. Dennis preferred to explore birding spots close to home in Lambton County but we made occasional trips to hotspots such as Rondeau and Pelee.

I remember a remarkable trip in the aftermath of one Kettle Point Christmas Bird Count when Hoary Redpoll and Boreal Owl had been reported. We returned the next day to relocate these two species which would have been lifers for me. At the Boreal location Dennis persuaded me to check the interior of a dense cedar grove while he patrolled the perimeter. At one point the foliage was so thick that I had to crawl on my hands and knees. I can still picture the scene vividly because at one point I looked up and was staring face-to-face with a Long-eared Owl, an acceptable alternative lifer to the Boreal Owl that we never found. On the same trip I remember walking through an abandoned, weedy gravel pit with huge snowflakes floating slowly groundward and, all of a sudden, finding ourselves in the midst of a huge flock of 200 or so redpolls. Curiously, despite the fact that we were in an almost white-out, we immediately spotted

the Hoary which stood out like a sore thumb with its brilliant frosty appearance in comparison to the browner Commons." *Dave Martin*

My father took such joy in teaching others about nature. I was taken on many evening frog hunts and encouraged to rear Monarch caterpillars in the back bathroom. One of the most vivid of my memories as a youngster was the fall of 1973. I was three years old and had the great privilege of spending the night in the banding trailer at Point Pelee National Park. Dad had to check the nets frequently through the night for owls and to my great wonder, brought owls into the trailer to show me. I was awakened with an owl shoved in my face, and that was just about when I became hooked on birdwatching. He helped many others along the way and always strove to have every person see the bird in question.

"My first encounter with Dennis was on a cold December day at Kettle Point in 1969. He had found a Glaucous Gull sitting on a rocky offshore island, but when I looked the bird was hidden behind a group of Herring Gulls. I was anxious to see the bird but the island was far enough offshore that a few people along the shoreline or traffic along the road weren't going to flush the flock. Dennis just reached out with both arms and flapped a few times. It looked pretty odd but all the birds immediately flew up in the air for a moment and then set-

tled back onto the island. We had a nice view of the Glaucous Gull and I was greatly impressed, both with this trick and Dennis's assistance that day.

I never learned how he picked up that bit of magic but I like to think that it was Dennis who discovered gull reaction to waving arms. For the next 27 years I was always happy to partake of his encouragement, friendship and great birding skills." *Paul Pratt*

Dad's sense of humour was legendary. You could see the twinkle in his eyes and knew that he was up to something. Ross Snider was one of his early victims. They had come across a Black-crowned Night-Heron nesting colony and Dad convinced Ross to climb up and look into one of the nests, knowing full well that the young would regurgitate their food over the side at the sound of an intruder. Ross learned a valuable lesson about heron behaviour that day and after cleaning off even managed to forgive my Dad. I can remember another occasion while looking for a Harris's Sparrow when my birding companion had the unfortunate luck to dunk one leg in liquid pig manure. The sight gave both of us a good laugh and Dad turned to me and said "I don't know what you're laughing for — he's riding home in your car". He loved to tease and joke around, but he would only poke fun at those he liked. It really was a show of affection on his part.

Dennis loved to learn about his local area, and rarely strayed too far from home. He was not a "chaser", actually much the opposite when it came to rare birds. He would often scoff at those youngsters who would drive hundreds of kilometres for the life bird. Dad was patient; he figured that most things he wanted to see would end up in Sarnia eventually. Luckily for him, he was right. Before his death he did see two of the gulls that he often told me "would show up; it's just a matter of time". I would like to share the story of the Ross's Gull with you. I was home from university for reading week and was relaxing when I received a cryptic phone call. It was Dad and he was out of breath. The first thing that entered my head was that he was having another heart attack and for some reason was calling me instead of an ambulance. Then the words sunk in: "Ross's Gull, government docks, get camera, call people, click". I raced around in a panic and got the camera and managed to see the bird in the fading daylight. Boy, was Dad ever happy!

Botany was another of his lesser-known passions. Dad would trek yearly to the Bruce Peninsula for orchids and was an accomplished photographer. He tried to learn a new group of plants yearly and could often be found evenings in summer pouring over Britton and Brown. He volunteered his time to vegetative studies in local parks and

we would debate identification, though he was most often correct. He rescued many plants from bulldozers; I have the wildflower garden to prove it. He cared deeply for the environment and was so supportive when I decided to pursue Environmental Studies at university. In January of 1996, we started our own business and became partners. He was finally going to pursue a field of work relating to his true passions and this made me so happy. It was just unfortunate that he wasn't able to work at this for longer.

Dennis Rupert was truly a great man and parent. His support of both me and my sister was unrelenting. He was a patron and great fan of my sister's dancing and would go to great lengths to make sure that he didn't miss a perfor-

mance. He spent a summer mucking around a forest with the highest mosquito population in the area, helping me update a plant list for the management plan that I was working on. Dad and I spent countless hours birdwatching and botanizing over the years and forged a great friendship. I have so many other great memories that I could share with you, but there is just not room for them here. If you knew Dennis, I hope that this tribute has brought back some fond memories. For those of you who did not have the great pleasure of knowing him, I hope that you will take part of his spirit with you and enjoy all the aspects of nature and share them with others. This is the greatest tribute that I could ever hope for, and it would make Dad smile.

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