

Ronald G. Tozer

Distinguished Ornithologist

Margaret Bain

IT WAS MY VERY GREAT PLEASURE TO present the 2009 OFO Distinguished Ornithologist Award to Ron Tozer at the October OFO convention at Point Pelee. The Distinguished Ornithologist Award is “granted to individuals who have made outstanding and authoritative contributions to the scientific study of birds in Ontario and Canada; who have been a resource to OFO and the Ontario birding community; and whose research on

birds has resulted in many publications and a significant increase in new ornithological knowledge.”

I first met Ron Tozer back in 1974. Suddenly, one May morning that year, I was astonished to find my backyard in Whitby taken over by a multitude of tiny, brightly-coloured birds, flitting from hedge to bush to tree and back again — a warbler fallout in retrospect. I had never realized such birds existed, rushed



out to buy a North American bird book, and phoned the public library to see if there was a local natural history club that could help me sort all of this out. There was, of course, and at the first fall meeting of the Oshawa Naturalists' Club that September, there were Ron Tozer and Jim Richards, signing their just published book, *Birds of the Oshawa-Lake Scugog Region*.

This splendid book gave me and many other beginning, and more experienced birders, specific information on the best birding areas in the Region and the best times and locations for finding specific birds, but it was much more than this. It analyzed changes in the status of species over time, documented habitat change, and gave an extensive overview of previous ornithological work in the Region. Special detailed emphasis was placed on the breeding biology of the birds of the area: A magnum opus. Not surprisingly, it garnered rave reviews as the best regional ornithological account of its day. The copy I bought that night is now battered and tattered, the text massively underlined, notes scribbled in the margins, the spine held together with duct tape — and even the duct tape is splitting. Sadly, the book is out of print, and the very occasional copy that turns up on the market can now command a formidable price!

Ron has gone on to contribute many articles and papers to numerous publications, including the *Ontario Field Biologist*, *Ontario Birds*, *OFO News*, the *Durham Region Annual Bird Report* and

others. In 1990, he put together the *Checklist and Seasonal Status of the Birds of Algonquin Provincial Park*, and this checklist has been revised and reprinted four times since then. He is currently at work on another major publication, the much-anticipated *Birds of Algonquin Park*, due out in 2011, and certain to be a valued addition to every Ontario birder's bookcase.

As well as these publishing achievements, Ron is a great field-birder, with the huge advantage that he has been birding more or less since his days in the cradle. Family tradition has it that with his first steps he chased robins across the lawn. His father, a botanist and photographer, loved the outdoors, and Ron was always glad to accompany him. By the age of eleven, Ron was making notes of his observations, but it was when the Oshawa Naturalists' Club was formed in 1955, that he first met other like-minded people and his interest in birds really took off. One of his earliest mentors was the brilliant but irascible George Scott, the finder of the first breeding Little Gulls in North America, in Oshawa Second Marsh in 1962. At the University of Toronto, Ron majored in biology and philosophy, graduating in 1965, and spending much of his time at the Royal Ontario Museum, where James L. Baillie encouraged his now serious interest in ornithology. In 1966, he began graduate work at the University of Michigan, while finding summer employment as an interpretive naturalist in Ontario, mainly in Algonquin Provincial Park. Ron served as a

Teaching Fellow and Lecturer in Natural Resources Ecology at the University of Michigan, but in 1972 accepted the full-time post of Park Naturalist in Algonquin, which he held until 1996. During this time, he amassed a mountain of data and a deep understanding of the birdlife of Algonquin, and has been a wonderful educator to countless summer students and visitors. And it's not over yet — from 1996 to the present he has held the title of Natural and Human History Interpretation Consultant at Algonquin Park, making him almost busier in retirement than he was before.

Ron is a charter member of OFO. One of his major contributions to the organization was co-editing, with Ron Pittaway and Bill Crins, the OFO journal *Ontario Birds* for a mind-boggling 16 years, from 1991 to 2006, during which time the journal grew and prospered. Ron has led countless trips for OFO and other birding organizations; he has been an OFO Trip leader at Algonquin Park since 1990, at the Carden Alvar (with Ron Pittaway) since 1992, and at the Niagara River (with Jean Iron) since the year 2000.

Ron has contributed hugely to the work of OFO's Ontario Bird Records Committee, as a voting member for 13 years between 1988 and the present, and as Chair of the Committee for five of these years. His clear-headed common sense and integrity is often invaluable in the somewhat heated "discussions" (let's call them that politely) that not infrequently arise in the OBRC!

In both the first and second Ontario Breeding Bird Atlases, Ron was Regional Coordinator for Algonquin, a huge region, much of it difficult of access and attracting only a limited number of atlasers. A daunting task, but one very well accomplished. For the second Breeding Bird Atlas, he was a member of the Atlas Volunteer Committee and Scientific Editor of 26 species accounts, from Common Nighthawk to Eastern Kingbird. He has also been the sub-regional editor for Algonquin Park observations in *North American Birds* and its predecessors for 35 years. Ron's involvement in Marsh surveys and Urban Bird surveys in Ontario County, for Dr. J. Murray Speirs in the late 1960s, was followed by years of Forest Bird Monitoring, Marsh Monitoring, Nocturnal Owl Monitoring and many other important data-gathering projects.

The foundation for all this data gathering is, of course, Ron's superlative ability in the field. As well as being very experienced, Ron is a very careful birder, as anyone who has been with him looking for a Le Conte's Sparrow in Algonquin Park or 'scoping an Acadian Flycatcher at Pelee will attest — every minute field mark has to be meticulously confirmed before the ID is given the Tozer seal of approval. Ron does have a competitive side to his character too, though he will strenuously deny this — Christmas Counts and Big Days may be his secret vice. Ron has an unbroken record of an unprecedented 53 years participation in the Oshawa CBC, in the Algonquin

Count for 34 years, and the Huntsville Count for a mere 14 years.

Big Days may not qualify as “authoritative contributions to the scientific study of birds,” but they are most certainly a great deal of fun with Ron Tozer in the team. Ron, as most of you reading this already know, is the master of the quirky quip, the truly horrible pun, the wicked one-liner, and a Big Day with him can lead to complete exhaustion, as much from laughing so hard most of the time as to the inherent manic craziness of the 24-hour enterprise. In the early 1990s, Ron and his team-mates, with their combination of identification skills and in-depth knowledge of what could be found when and where, hit one-day species totals in the 180s entirely within Durham Region — sadly, unlikely to be repeated since the subsequent unbridled residential and industrial development there.

Last, but not at all least, I must mention Ron’s mainstay, his family. They all go birding together! Amazing, but true. They are the envy of most of the rest of us, whose spouses and offspring often regard birding as an inexplicable mental aberration. Ron’s wonderful wife of 40 years, Pat, and his cheerful son and daughter, Doug and Laura, have accompanied Ron on camping trips across Canada, a yearly pilgrimage to Point Pelee, and to several of the United States, including Florida, Texas, Arizona and Maine — all to see birds, of course. As Pat has said, “While most fathers were taking their kids to hockey practices and

snowmobiling on weekends, our kids went birding in Algonquin with their Dad.” May this continue for many more years to come.

This long list of achievements confirms that Ron has fulfilled all the criteria for OFO’s Distinguished Ornithologist Award, and then some. He has made outstanding contributions to our knowledge of the birdlife of Ontario, has been a huge resource to OFO and the Ontario birding community, has produced many authoritative and useful publications, and has done all this while remaining a much-respected and well-loved friend of so many of us in the birding world.

Selected Publications

Speirs, J.M., G. Markle and R.G. Tozer.

1970. Populations of birds in urban habitats, Ontario County, 1969. *Ontario Field Biologist* 24:1-12.

Tozer, R. and R. Pittaway. 1990. Finding the phantom Spruce Grouse. *Ontario Birds* 8:42-54.

Tozer, R. 1992. American Kestrel preys on Killdeer. *Ontario Birds* 10:11-15.

Tozer, R. 1992. The Nonquon sewage lagoons. Pp. 82-86 in *Annual Bird Report, Durham Region, Ontario: 1991*. M. Bain and B. Henshaw, editors. Published by the editors, Pickering, Ontario.

Forbes, G., M. Runtz and R. Tozer. 1992. New breeding record for Great Gray Owl: Most southerly in Canada. *Ontario Birds* 10:117-118.

Tozer, R. 1993. Interspecific aggression by Common Loons. *Ontario Birds* 11:2-5.

Tozer, R. 1994. Mourning Doves wintering in Ontario. *Ontario Birds* 12:29-32.

- Tozer, R.** 1994. Red Crossbills feeding at mineral sources. *Ontario Birds* 12:102-108.
- Tozer, R.** 1994. Favourite birding hotspots: Algonquin Park's "East Side". *OFO News* 12(3):2.
- Tozer, R.** 1996. Unusual nestings of the Winter Wren. *Ontario Birds* 14: 78-79.
- Tozer, R., D. Strickland and D. Tozer.** 1996. Unusual nesting of the Swainson's Thrush. *Ontario Birds* 14:117-119.
- Tozer, R.** 1997. Algonquin Park birds in winter. *The Lady's-Slipper* 14(1):4-6.
- Tozer, R.** 1997. House Finch population trends in Ontario. *Ontario Birds* 15:89-94.
- Tozer, R.** 1999. White-winged Crossbills eating wood ash. *Ontario Birds* 17:27-29.
- Tozer, R.** 1999. The Nonquon sewage lagoons (1992-1998). *The Naturalist* (Spring 1999):6-8.
- Tozer R.** 2000. Anhinga status in Ontario. *Ontario Birds* 18:106-108.
- Tozer, R.** 2001. Favourite birding hotspot: Mizzy Lake Trail in Algonquin Provincial Park. *OFO News* 19(1):12-14.
- Foster, J. and R. Tozer.** 2001. Chipping Sparrow feeds young of Eastern Kingbird. *Ontario Birds* 19:79-83.
- Richards, J. and R. Tozer.** 2002. In memoriam: George A. Scott (1916-2001). *Ontario Birds* 20:21-24.
- Tozer, R.** 2002. Tough Dove. *OFO News* 20(2):10.
- Irwin, K., B. Irwin and R. Tozer.** 2003. Common Ravens kill a Common Loon. *Ontario Birds* 21:31-33.
- Steinberg, B. and R. Tozer.** 2003. White-winged Crossbill predation by Blue Jay. *Ontario Birds* 21:34-37.
- Tozer, R.** 2003. Late winter Red-necked Grebes: A mystery. *OFO News* 21(3):1-4.
- Tozer, R.** 2004. Do some survive? *OFO News* 22(1):14.
- Tozer, R.G. and D.J. Milsom.** 2006. Neotropic Cormorant: New to Ontario and Canada. *Ontario Birds* 24:84-87.
- Tozer, R.** 2007. Additions to Ontario bird checklist: 1982 to 2006. *OFO News* 25(3): 2-13.

Margaret Bain, 219 Albert Street, Cobourg, Ontario K9A 2R6