

IN MEMORIAM

Marshall H. Field (1919-2007)

Remembering a St. Thomas Force of Nature

Winifred Wake





Marshall Field holds a Golden Eagle in October 1995 at his banding station near Union, Ontario.

Photo: Don Fowler

Marshall Howard Field was born on 27 June 1919 at St. Thomas, and died there on 10 November 2007, at the age of 88. His passing marks the end of a very full life as a naturalist and active, hands-on volunteer in numerous monitoring and conservation causes. Examples of groups or initiatives he founded, or helped found, include the Elgin Nature Club (1941), St. Thomas Christmas Bird Count (1948), St. Thomas Field Naturalist Club (1950), Ontario Bird Banding Association (1956), Long Point Bird Observatory (1960), Hawk Cliff Raptor Banding Station (1969), and Elgin County Heritage Tree Committee (1990).

In 1941, Marshall was among a group of people interested in birds and nature (including Fred Bods-worth, Ronald Brooman, Bill Stewart and Donald Young) who joined together to form the Elgin Nature Club in St. Thomas. This group worked closely with the Federation of Ontario Naturalists, an organization in which Marshall was to hold lifelong membership.

During World War II, while serving in the Royal Canadian Air Force in Bagotville, Québec, Marshall honed his skills as an observer of birds. Possessing neither bird book nor binoculars, he taught himself to recognize the various species by their songs and habits.

Although the Elgin Nature Club had lapsed during the later years of the war, in early 1946 Marshall and other local naturalists began amassing bird records from the county, an undertaking that culminated in the 1954 publication of *Birds of Elgin County*, by Ronald C. Brooman. In 1948, Marshall organized the first St. Thomas Christmas Bird Count. The late 1940s also saw Marshall arranging the first of many field trips and campouts that introduced young boys to nature. In 1950, the St. Thomas Field Naturalist Club was founded, with Marshall Field serving as the first president. He continued his involvement with their Christmas Bird Count for the next half century, and also served as the club's Migration Secretary for many years.



Marshall Field with other long-time members of the Ontario Bird Banding Association at the association's 50th anniversary banquet at Bird Studies Canada headquarters on 24 March 2006. Left to right: Bill Ansley, Bill Wasserfall, David Hussell, Pat Woodford, Jim Woodford and Marshall Field.

Photo courtesy of the Ontario Bird Banding Association

An active bird bander for 63 years (the longest tenure of any bander in Ontario history), Marshall initially focussed his attention on waterfowl and passerines. He first obtained his own federal bird-banding permit in 1946, and banded many thousands of birds over a career spanning seven decades. He was a member of the Ontario Bird Banding Association since its formation in 1956, and was also a founding member of the Long Point Bird Observatory in 1960. He organized Long Point's first Christmas Bird Count in 1961. In 1998, the Ontario Bird Banding Association awarded him their Janette Dean Award in honour of a lifetime of outstanding contributions to bird banding in Ontario.

During the early 1950s, Marshall became increasingly interested in raptor migration. Along with John Roberts and Bill Wasserfall, he was the driving force and guiding spirit behind the establish-

ment of the Hawk Cliff Raptor Banding Station in 1969. By 1975, this station was banding more raptors than any other in North America. Marshall continued to band hawks actively at Hawk Cliff right up until his death in the fall of 2007. In later decades, his efforts became more concentrated on raptors, and most specifically on eagles. He considered the banding of a Golden Eagle in the fall of 1995 to be the highlight of his banding career.

It was probably inevitable that such an experienced observer, active in the field for so many decades, would have many other memorable experiences. He found three separate Bewick's Wrens in Elgin County — at Pinafore Park in St. Thomas on 15 May 1950, near Port Bruce on 20 April 1952, and again in St. Thomas on 2 April 1953. On 15 October 1953, a co-worker at Pinafore Park called Marshall out from the greenhouse to look at a "large hawk", which he soon recognized

as a Black Vulture. On 16 March 1966, he found a female Varied Thrush at Pinafore Park. On 27 December 1975, Reinhold Pokraka, Lloyd Auckland and Marshall made an incredible discovery when they found a male Phainopepla at Duttona Beach in Elgin County. Marshall was able to photograph this bird and had the photo published in *American Birds*. This bird remained until 21 January 1976, to the delight of many observers. On another occasion, while he was capturing lure birds for the Hawk Cliff Raptor Banding Station at the farm property of the St. Thomas Psychiatric Hospital, he found an immature Northern Wheatear on 20 September 1990, while checking one of the lure bird traps.

When Bald Eagles were reintroduced into Elgin County in the 1980s, Marshall became their local champion, taking on the task of monitoring their nesting activities. It was with great pride that he later reported annually in *The Cardinal*, the quarterly publication of the McIlwraith Field Naturalists (MFN), on their gradually growing numbers in the county.

Marshall was a person who liked to work with his hands, whether constructing banding shacks, bird blinds or nesting platforms, or figuring out ways to make practical improvements to such structures. In earlier years, Marshall made it a priority to mentor youth and encourage their interest in nature. More recently he had expressed concern over the small numbers of the younger generation who were developing naturalist skills.

Although Marshall lived in St. Thomas all of his life, he maintained membership in the McIlwraith Field Naturalists in London for more than 55 years, and his complete set of *The Cardinal* (first published in 1951) was a prized possession. In recognition of his lifetime as an outstanding naturalist and conservationist, MFN presented him with its W.E. Saunders Award in 2002.

Marshall was always very generous in sharing his acquired natural history knowledge, whether in person or through his prolific writing for publications such as *The Cardinal* and *Ontario Bird Banding*. Beginning with the very first issue of *The Cardinal* in 1951, he contributed numerous articles on topics such as hawk migration, Cliff Swallows, Wood Ducks, bird banding, Elgin County bird records and regular updates on the comeback of Bald Eagles along the shore of Lake Erie.

Fifty years after participating in the compilation of records for R.C. Brooman's *Birds of Elgin County* in 1954, Marshall had the satisfaction of seeing his lifetime's worth of ornithological observations included in a comprehensive new 2004 publication *Birds of Elgin County: A Century of Change*.

In addition to being interested in birds, Marshall was an accomplished gardener. He had a successful 45-year career with the St. Thomas Parks Department, during which he rose from gardener to park superintendent. Along the way, he established a waterfowl sanctuary in Pinafore Park, where he was also a pioneer in bird rehabilitation efforts.

In retirement, he was a founding member of Elgin County's Heritage Tree Committee in 1990. He spent much of his time in the later years of his life scouring Elgin County for examples of the largest, oldest, tallest and rarest trees. He helped arrange for the placement of identification markers on hundreds of such trees and the publication of lively and informative brochures showing their whereabouts.

In summarizing Marshall's more than seventy years as an active field naturalist in Ontario, one characteristic stands out — his ability to come up with innovative ideas and then engage others to help make them happen. Other significant traits included his dedication to mentoring others, honing skills in the field and undertaking projects that had practical benefits for wildlife. Besides his many contributions, Marshall will be remembered for his energy, enthusiasm, outgoing personality and unflinching curiosity about the natural world. In addition to being an able administrator, leader and mentor, Marshall was a hands-on person, whether sleuthing the countryside for outstanding trees or sitting for hours in a chilly blind awaiting the arrival of a hawk. He also possessed a warm, outgoing friendliness and a contagious enthusiasm for sharing his love of nature.

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Editors' Note: This contribution has been adapted from the following articles:

Wake, W. 2003. W.E. Saunders Award: Marshall Field. *Cardinal* 190:14-15.

Wake, W. 2008. Remembering Marshall Field. *Cardinal* 210:8.