

Distinguished Ornithologist Alan Wormington

Bill Lamond



Figure 1. Alan at the Tip of Point Pelee on 12 May 2016. *Photo: Jean Iron*

Introduction

It was my great honour to present the 2018 Distinguished Ornithologist Award (DOA) posthumously to Alan Wormington at the Annual General Meeting of the Ontario Field Ornithologists (OFO) in Leamington on 29 September 2018. Although I dearly wished he could have been there to accept it in person, I am sure almost all of you know that he died a little over two years ago of cancer at the age of 62.

Alan was, simply put, one of the finest birders in Ontario and for that matter all of North America (Figure 1). He combined skilled field identification of birds with research and writing as few birders have ever done. Upon Alan's death, Jim Richards of Orono, Ontario, himself a Distinguished Ornithologist Award recipient, remarked that Ontario ornithology had lost its single most important figure since James L. Baillie died in 1970. I could not have said it better. Alan's birding skills were renowned across the continent. As an example, I remember one amusing anecdote from about 20 years ago when a visiting American birder, obviously a novice and obviously mis-hearing the name "Worm-eating Warbler", was impressed that Alan had a warbler named after him.

I also remember Alan saying to me several years ago that he was better than anyone else in Ontario at spotting and identifying birds (Figure 2). This sounds like boasting but Alan was matter of fact about his skills; he was simply making an assessment. He also stated his hearing was second to none in the province for bird identification — although he did mention a couple of other birders who could keep up with him in this regard.

Normally in these DOA articles for *Ontario Birds*, a detailed account of that person's accomplishments follows. However, for Alan this was essentially done shortly after his death on 3 September 2016. There was a tribute piece to Alan in *Ontario Birds* (Lamond 2016a), another one in *Ontario Insects* (Lamond 2016b), two tribute articles in the *Wood Duck* (Curry 2016, Lamond 2016c), an extended article on Alan in the *Windsor Star* (Sacheli 2016), a lengthy obituary in *The Globe and Mail* (MacKay 2016) and another obituary in the *National Post* and the *Hamilton Spectator* (Anonymous 2016). Nonetheless, I will highlight some of Alan's most noted accomplishments below.

The Early Years

Alan Wormington was born in west Hamilton, Ontario, on 20 June 1954. His first love was butterflies and he amassed quite a collection at a tender age. Of course, those were different times from today and Alan remembered his mother dropping him off in the “wilds” of rural Ancaster to pursue butterflies when he was only 12 years old. A friend of Alan's sister remembers that his bedroom was an absolute disaster, covered in butterfly boards and



Figure 2. Alan at the tip of Point Pelee at the OFO Convention on 10 Sept 2005. Photo: Jean Iron

books. Alan wrote his first article when he was 16, entitled “Butterflies of the Hamilton area and other interesting areas” (Wormington 1970) which was published in the *Wood Duck*, the journal of the Hamilton Naturalists' Club.

It was soon after this that he got into birds. Alan, as a young teenager, was able to explore the nearby Cootes Paradise daily. In fact, he birded so much that it was interfering with his schooling and by Grade 10 he was a major-league truant. Alan and his parents were summoned to the principal's office at Westdale High School where he was told in no uncertain terms that if he did not shape up he would be expelled. Alan vividly remembers how upset his parents were when he exclaimed, “I can live with that.” Well, it was not long after that that his wish came true as he never did complete Grade 10.

Even at the age of 15, Alan was a formidable bird finder. For example, on 6 May 1970 at Cootes Paradise, Alan showed several long-time birders their first Hamilton area Summer Tanager

(*Piranga rubra*). Alan was largely self-taught although he did go birding quite a bit with very talented birders in his early years such as Alf Epp and then later with George North and Bob Curry. According to Bob, “Alan was a wunderkind who almost immediately could find more birds and better birds than any of us.” As an example, he found Hamilton’s second record of Kirtland’s Warbler (*Setophaga kirtlandii*) on 1 September 1969 at Cootes Paradise. At the time, no one believed Alan about this incredible sighting and dismissed it. Alan went back to the same location the next day and saw the bird again. But still, no one believed him until later when people realized how talented he was, and although it sounds like a hyperbole, his talent became legendary in Ontario. For example, most of us would consider ourselves exceptionally fortunate to add one new bird species to the Ontario checklist. Alan added seven: Fish Crow (*Corvus ossifragus*) (James 1983), Royal Tern (*Thalasseus maximus*) (James 1984), Cave Swallow (*Petrochelidon fulva*) (Wormington and Curry 1990), Plumbeous Vireo (*Vireo plumbeus*) (Dobos 1998), Lesser Nighthawk (*Chordeiles acutipennis*) (Roy 2002), Sooty/Short-tailed Shearwater (*Puffinus griseus/tenuirostris*) (Wormington and Cranford 2011) and Kelp Gull (*Larus dominicanus*) (Burrell and Charlton 2016). Of course, he also found so many other rare birds, as designated by the Ontario Bird Records Committee.

Documenting and Publishing

You do not get the Distinguished Ornithologist Award by just being a birder, even an exceptionally gifted one. There

was much more to Alan than just watching birds. He was a well-published author with dozens of notes and articles on birds, this despite not finishing Grade 10! His first ornithological publication was entitled “The big May day” (Wormington 1976). More articles followed such as “Nesting of Acadian Flycatcher in Hamilton” (Wormington 1977), “Concentrations of migrant diving ducks at Point Pelee National Park, Ontario in response to invasion of Zebra Mussels” (Wormington and Leach 1992), “The status and distribution of Mississippi Kite in Ontario” (Wormington 1993), “Point Pelee Little Gull banded in Finland!” (Wormington 2001a); “Brown Pelicans on the Great Lakes” (Wormington 2003), and “Historical overview, seasonal timing and abundance of Bonaparte’s Gull at Point Pelee” (Wormington 2013). For several years, Alan was also the compiler for the Ontario spring seasonal summary in *North American Birds* (e.g., Wormington 2010) and he was tireless in his desire to get this as comprehensive and correct as it could be.

In the “In Memoriam” article in *Ontario Birds* (Lamond 2016a), I listed 48 publications in the selected bibliography that he authored or co-authored; the majority of these he wrote as the sole author.

The most important of Alan’s traits was, I think, his hunger to meticulously record all bird records, be that at Hamilton, Point Pelee or anywhere in Ontario. When Alan was documenting a record it had to be complete and correct. He had to know who found the bird, the exact location, the first date and the last date and the observers had to be listed accurately. For example, it would not be correct to list me as Bill Lamond, it had to be

William G. Lamond, or it had to be Robert Z. Dobos or Robert H. Curry or Kevin A. McLaughlin, which was ironic as Alan never used his own full name. He used just "Alan Wormington" but the name on his birth certificate is "Laurie Alan Wormington." Alan completely ignored the Laurie part of his name for his whole adult life.

A Legacy of Initiatives

Alan also started things; he initiated significant projects, many of which still operate. For instance, at the age of 20, in 1974, he started the Hamilton Fall Bird Count, a count which is going stronger than it has ever been with upwards of 140 participants annually. This bird census, which was renamed the Alan Wormington Fall Bird Count in his honour following his death, has amassed an incredible amount of data on the migration of birds through the Hamilton area in the first week of November. These data were of great importance for many species accounts in Bob Curry's *Birds of Hamilton* (Curry and the Hamilton Naturalists' Club 2006).

Alan started the Point Pelee Annual Spring Migration report (Wormington 1978a) which was published by the Park until 1987; he continued producing the report privately until 2015 (G. Coady pers. comm.). Another contribution was that in 1978, Alan began a sixteen month stint of writing a weekly birding column in *The Globe and Mail* newspaper (e.g., Wormington 1978b, 1979) which Peter Whelan had initiated the year prior and which Alan assumed until Peter resumed writing it in late 1979. The column ran until shortly before Peter's death in August 1999.

Alan also got people birding into new areas of the province. He was a pioneer in the pursuit of migrants along the north shore of Lake Superior and the south end of James Bay. He understood that these areas concentrated migrants, including vagrants. One only needs to look at some of his publications to see how successful this search for vagrants was: "Fall Vagrancy of the Indigo Bunting in Northern Ontario" (Wormington 1986); "White-eyed Vireo: New to Northern Ontario" (Wormington 1987a); "Orchard Oriole: New to Northern Ontario" (Wormington and Lamond 1987); and "Inca Dove: New to Ontario and Canada" (Graham and Wormington 1993). Alan promoted the Moosonee area on southern James Bay as a great place to bird and he also repeatedly visited Netitishi Point (Figure 3) in southern James Bay beginning in the 1980s. Many vagrants have been recorded at Netitishi by Alan and others such as Sooty/ Short-tailed Shearwater (Wormington and Cranford 2011), Dovekie (*Alle alle*) (Wormington and Cranford 2011), Northern Fulmar (*Fulmarus glacialis*) (Cranford 2013) and Western Kingbird (*Tyrannus verticalis*) (Burrell and Charlton 2016), to name but a few. Alan, along with a few other keen birders, started the Ontario Bird Records Committee in 1982. He served on this committee for 19 years and for six years he wrote or co-authored the OBRC annual report (e.g., Wormington 1987b). I remember that Alan was so meticulous with having the report correct, that before sending it out for review, he would introduce six errors into the report and exhort the reviewers to find the six errors. In this manner, he assumed they would also find errors that



Figure 3. Alan Wornington (right) and Doug McRae at Netitishi Point, Ontario in October 1981.

he had overlooked, all in an intense desire to produce a flawless report. Alan also started a natural history publication about Point Pelee entitled *Point Pelee Natural History News* (e.g., Wornington 2001b). This was an excellent publication that was packed full of pure natural history articles. Alas, the publication only lasted three years and Alan gave it up as it was just too much work to do by himself.

Point Pelee: Alan's Special Place

Despite these many contributions to the ornithology of Ontario, Alan will be known by most as Mr. Point Pelee. He would have hated this term but Alan was synonymous with Point Pelee. He moved there permanently in 1979 and lived in the same residence just north of the park for over 35 years. During that period, no one spent the amount of time birding at the park that Alan did; not even close. He was a fixture at the "Tip" on good migration days whether it be the spring, summer, fall or winter. Alan amassed an incredible amount of data on the birdlife

in the park beginning with the aforementioned seasonal summaries. He maintained the park checklists for several years and he had files for every species that had occurred at Point Pelee. He added to these files whenever a notable record came to light. Of course, this was all in preparation for his eventual book, *Birds of Point Pelee*. Alan wrote accounts for every species that had ever occurred at Point Pelee. The knowledge of ornithology in Ontario is diminished in that he did not finish this book after he became ill as I am convinced it would have been an excellent book—as good as or better than any regional bird book that has been published and on such an important birding area in North America. No one knows why he did not get it finished. I have to assume that he thought he had more time to live after his initial cancer diagnosis. When we tried to encourage him to work on the book, he always demurred—“there’s lots of time for that” he would say.

When his illness progressed markedly in the summer of 2016, he finally took

action. He formed a publications committee of Bob Curry, Glenn Coady and Phil Holder; he and they were to have their first meeting in October 2016. Of course, that first meeting never happened. After Alan's death the publication committee endeavoured to see his project through to the book stage. However, although there is a manuscript, it cannot be published in its current form. It is hoped that funding can be made available such that a suitable person can bring this book, this life's work, to fruition.

Conclusion

Some readers may wonder why Alan had not been offered the Distinguished Ornithologist Award before he died. Truth be told, it was, twice, but Alan refused it both times. I would not say it was modesty that prevented Alan from accepting this award. Not at all. Alan was actually a rather shy person. He was not an introvert but he was not outgoing and he shunned crowds to a large degree. I think he likely refused because he just was not a fan of this type of award. Perhaps he thought they were frivolous and he would not take part. It is hard to know for certain. One could ask if it is proper to bestow this award on him in death when he refused to accept it in life. I can never know for sure, but I think he would be fine with getting this award now. I can more or less hear him say, "Yeah, go ahead. Now's a good time."

At the OFO meeting, Sarah Rupert, a fellow OFO birder, and a good friend of Alan's and an employee of Parks Canada at Point Pelee National Park, accepted the Distinguished Ornithologist Award on Alan's behalf. Alan is survived by his sister

Janne Hackl and nephew Jonathan. Although it would have been proper for Janne to accept the award, she realized that its proper place to be displayed was at Point Pelee and she agreed that Parks Canada should be the keeper of the award on Alan's behalf. The Distinguished Ornithologist Award plaque is to be mounted in the Point Pelee Visitor Centre, which will include an interpretive panel reflecting Alan Wormington's place in Ontario ornithology and his contributions to Point Pelee National Park with the likes of Jack Miner, William Saunders and Percy Taverner. A fitting tribute indeed.

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