

Notes

Circumstantial Evidence for Golden Eagle Predation of a Red Fox

Al Sandilands

On 3 February 2005, I completed a winter wildlife survey on a site above the Niagara Escarpment in the Town of the Blue Mountains (Grey County) near Collingwood, Ontario. I noticed tracks of a Red Fox (*Vulpes vulpes*) that ended abruptly in a meadow, about 10 m outside a small copse of trees that it had walked through after crossing another old field.

Upon closer examination, I observed that there were two very large wing prints in the snow, one about a metre in advance of the fox's last front footprint, and the other that would have been over the broadside of the fox. There was no evidence of blood or a struggle. The tracks were relatively fresh, having been made in the last one or two days, and were still very clear.

Approximately half an hour before this, I had seen a Common Raven (*Corvus corax*) harassing a low-flying adult Golden Eagle (*Aquila chrysaetos*). The logical explanation appeared to be that the eagle had struck the fox and carried it off as prey.

The Golden Eagle has a highly variable diet and usually eats animals that weigh 10-5,800 g, but

occasionally larger items are eaten; about 75% of prey consists of mammals weighing 500-2,000 g (Snyder and Wiley 1976, Kochert et al. 2002). Lumsden (1964) reported remains of two Snowshoe Hares (*Lepus americanus*) at a nest in the gorge between Sutton and Hawley Lakes, Ontario. The Snowshoe Hare, other large rabbit (Leporidae) species, and squirrels (Sciuridae) are staples of the Golden Eagle's diet. It has occasionally been documented killing larger prey such as young ungulates (rarely adults) and domestic pets (Kochert et al. 2002). Carrion is frequently consumed, so that it is often difficult to determine if the food item was killed or scavenged.

There are few references to members of the dog family (Canidae) being taken as prey by the Golden Eagle. In Ontario, Snyder (1947) reported that Red Fox carrion was found among the contents of four stomachs he examined, but Kochert et al. (2002) stated that groups of Golden Eagles occasionally hunted cooperatively in winter for large prey, including Red Foxes and ungulates. They also mentioned that Domestic Dogs

(*Canis familiaris*) occasionally are consumed.

This observation suggests that

live Red Foxes occasionally may fall victim to the Golden Eagle in Ontario.

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Ron Pittaway: Distinguished Ornithologist

Bob Curry

This note is based on remarks by Bob Curry at the presentation of the Distinguished Ornithologist Award to Ron Pittaway at the OFO Annual Convention in Leamington, Ontario, on 10 September 2005.

Surely every member of Ontario Field Ornithologists (OFO) is familiar with the impact of this year's distinguished ornithologist. Whether you are reading *OFO News*, *Ontario Birds*, ONTBIRDS on the net, or attending OFO field trips or annual conventions like this, you will know that Ron Pittaway is an integral part of what this organization is about. But while it is tempting to conclude that Ron's contributions have only been to OFO, this is far from true. Ron's sphere of influence in the scientific, naturalist and conservation community is much wider. Let me give you some background into Ron's life with birds, his passion, his achievements and impact, and his goals.

As a very young boy in the 1950s during the first three or four school grades, Ron began by collecting bird eggs. He, his brother Rick and several school friends were in fierce competition to find birds' nests. They identified the eggs using the big old *Birds of America*, edited by T. Gilbert Pearson (1936),

which had several plates illustrating eggs of about 110 species. Then, Ron had an epiphany. Why don't we identify the adult birds and then we'll know the eggs for sure! This is how Ron became a birder at a very early age.

Ron's contemporaries as a teenager were people like Monty Brigham, Dan Brunton, Don LaFontaine, Brian Morin and Ken Ross, all of whom are prominent professional biologists or naturalists today. Distinguished Canadian journalist John Bird wrote a weekly Saturday column in the *Ottawa Journal* that featured local bird sightings. The boys delighted in seeing their names in print. This made them famous and impressed their teachers, their parents and other adults.

Ron's father managed a photography store in Ottawa habituated by professional Ottawa scientists and naturalists. His Dad asked famed Canadian Arctic biologist and explorer-photographer Stewart Macdonald of the National Museum if Ron could accompany him on the 1964 Ottawa Christmas Bird Count (CBC). In the late 1950s, Ron first met National Museum Curator and *The Birds of Canada* author W. Earl Godfrey at the Victoria Museum. In later years at the museum, Earl and Henri



Figure 1: Ron Pittaway (right) receives the Distinguished Ornithologist Award, presented by Bob Curry during the OFO Annual Convention in Leamington, Ontario, on 10 September 2005. Photo by Jean Iron.

Ouellet would look at study skins and talk birds with Ron. With them, he studied the collections and began to learn the intricacies of taxonomy, subspecies, morphs, plumages and molts. Godfrey impressed on him the importance of critical, careful examination and identification of birds. What a group of mentors to help mould Ron into what he is today!

On another Ottawa CBC in December 1970, Ron met Dan Strickland, the world Gray Jay expert and Chief Naturalist of Algonquin Park at the time. By the summer of 1971, Ron was a seasonal naturalist at Algonquin and worked there until 1980. He earned a diploma in forestry at Algonquin

College in 1972. During this period, he also worked with Paul Pratt at Rondeau Provincial Park. Ron hitchhiked across Canada in 1968 and travelled the continent in the 1970s, learning much about North America's birds.

Ron also participated in ornithological studies in the Canadian North with Queen's University on Snow Geese at Churchill, Manitoba in 1970, and with the Canadian Wildlife Service on Red Knots and Ruddy Turnstones on Ellesmere and Axel Heiberg Islands in 1975.

When Ron lectured at Algonquin Park, academics asked him where he had earned his Master's degree! The upshot was

that he was accepted into third year at The University of Waterloo where he graduated with an Honours Bachelor of Environmental Studies degree in 1979.

From January 1981 until retiring as education coordinator in July 2003, Ron taught resource management at the Leslie M. Frost Natural Resources Centre, Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources, near Dorset. There, he influenced countless young people and mentored other instructors.

He has been a teacher at every level. Ron is extremely proud that members of the very accomplished Ottawa birding gang that followed a few years behind him—people like Bruce Di Labio, Tom Hince, Bruce Mactavish and Michael Runtz to mention just some—often gave tribute to him when they made presentations or received awards.

And now we come to OFO. Ron was a founding life member of OFO in 1982, and has been a leader on the Ontario Bird Records Committee, serving as a member, as secretary and as chair for a total of 12 years. His contributions to our organization really took off in 1993. It was then that he met Jean Iron. The resulting synergy has been a boon to us all.

Ron is most proud of pulling OFO out of the deep dive that it was in at the time. He, Bill Crins and Ron Tozer became editors of *Ontario Birds* in 1991, and still are. The journal needed writers, so “Pitt” set an example with a fast-

paced production of learned papers. So successful were these writings that Jean and Ron launched *OFO News* in 1994.

He has authored more than 140 articles in journals such as *Trail & Landscape*, *The Canadian Field-Naturalist*, *Ontario Field Biologist*, *The Blue Jay* (Saskatchewan), *Birders Journal*, and of course, *Ontario Birds* and *OFO News*. His papers include recognizable forms, identification, behaviour, taxonomy, plumage and molt, conservation and preservation, book and product reviews, bird quizzes, and memorials.

Ron’s publications encompass a great variety of aspects of bird study. In some, he has advanced our understanding of the identification of difficult species pairs. Read, for example, the brilliant paper in *Birders Journal* titled “The identification and migration of breeding plumaged dowitchers in southern Ontario”, which he co-authored with Alvaro Jaramillo and Peter Burke in 1991. Ron has produced many more identification pieces covering small grebes, loons, shrikes, crows and ravens and others.

Plumage and molt terminology has been a particular passionate project of Ron’s for many years. Remember Peter Burke’s gray, bronze, cinnamon and purple illustrations and Ron’s explication of the Humphrey and Parkes system to describe and categorize plumages and molts? I believe that no clearer explanation of terms such as first prebasic molt, definitive prealternate molt, supplemental plumages and so



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Other papers deal with recognizable forms, such as Cory's Least Bittern, redpolls, Horned Larks, Red-tailed Hawks, jaegers, and Iceland Gull. These articles encourage and compel us really to look closely at birds.

Taxonomy is most often the purview of professional ornithologists. Undaunted, Ron waded right into the morass of the Thayer's Gull controversy in a 1999 *Ontario Birds* article, and elicited a detailed and bristly response from Richard C. Banks, the chair of the American Ornithologists' Union Committee on Classification and Nomenclature.

Ron is a true student of birds. He is a recognized bird identification expert in North America and con-

sultant to the British Bird Records Committee. He contributes learned opinions regularly to BirdChat, ID-FRONTIERS, and of course, to ONTBIRDS. What is most impressive is that Ron doesn't just name and describe birds. He always asks questions and then hypothesizes in true scientific tradition. Consider northern owls, for example. In one note, Ron debunked the widely held view that the boreal forest owls came south as a result of deep snow in the north woods. In a recent note, he asks why don't Great Gray Owls breed east across the boreal forests of Quebec, and why is it that last winter's Great Gray irruption comprised many two-year olds? His answers may be found in his June 2005 paper in *OFO News*.

But Ron's passion extends beyond the intellectual and sporting aspects of birding. He loves birds in a meaningful and productive way. For example, he has taken a particular interest in Loggerhead Shrikes and their habitats. From 1991 to 1995, he was the Ontario Government's representative on the Loggerhead Shrike National Recovery Team. Subsequent to his 1991 study of these shrikes on the Carden Alvar, his *Birder's Guide to the Carden Alvar* created widespread international interest and encouraged financial contributions that helped in the preservation of the Cameron and Windmill Ranches there. Few birders will leave such a legacy of preservation.

But, of course, we expect and want a lot more from Ron in the years to come. We'll continue to learn from Ron because he will ask the questions that we never thought of and he will either answer them or encourage us to seek those solutions.

Ron has a goal. He wants to write a guide to field recognizable subspecies and morphs of Canadian birds. We wish him every

success in this endeavour, as it will enrich our understanding of and pleasure in birds.

We are all privileged to benefit from Ron's passion, experience, intelligence and insight into the lives of our birds. He is a most worthy recipient of the Ontario Field Ornithologists' Distinguished Ornithologist Award for 2005.

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