

## Ross D. James: Distinguished Ornithologist

George K. Peck



Figure 1: Ross James (left) receives Distinguished Ornithologist Award, presented by OFO President Jean Iron (centre) and George Peck (right).

*Ross D. James was the second recipient of the Distinguished Ornithologist Award of the Ontario Field Ornithologists. Established in 1997, this award is granted from time to time to ornithologists whose research on birds has resulted in many publications and a significant increase in new knowledge. Award winners have also been an important resource to OFO and the Ontario birding community.*

*The first Distinguished Ornithologist Award was granted in 1997 to W. Earl Godfrey, Curator Emeritus of Ornithology at the Canadian Museum of Nature.*

*The award to Ross James was presented at the OFO Annual General Meeting held in Burlington on 17 October 1998. The following note is based on the comments of George Peck during the presentation ceremony.*

It is both a privilege and a real pleasure to talk to you about Ross James, who has been a colleague and friend for more than 30 years.

Ross graduated in biology from the University of Guelph in 1966, and joined the Department of Ornithology at the Royal Ontario Museum as a technician in 1967. While earning his Masters and later his PhD involving studies with vireos, he moved up the ladder in the department to the position of Associate Curator. In 1985, he also assumed the post of Adjunct Professor of Forest Ecology and Wildlife in the Faculty of Forestry, University of Toronto. After 30 years of service, he recently retired from the ROM in 1997, and has been sorely missed since.

He served on many committees and worked with many organizations both inside and outside the ROM, and to name a few, we could include the Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada, the Society of Canadian Ornithologists, the Ontario Breeding Bird Atlas, the Ontario Bird Records Committee, the Ontario Nest Records Scheme, and the Nature Conservancy of Canada. Ross is an Elective Member of the American Ornithologists' Union, and has delivered papers at their annual meetings, as well as to the International Ornithological Congress.

Ross is a prodigious worker with a knack for bearing down and

getting things done. He has written numerous scientific papers as well as popular articles on birds. He authored the *Annotated Checklist of the Birds of Ontario* (James 1991), in its second and revised edition; co-authored the two volume *Breeding Birds of Ontario* (Peck and James 1983, 1987), on which we worked together for 20 years in remarkable harmony; co-authored *Ontario Birds at Risk* (Austen et al. 1994) for the Federation of Ontario Naturalists and Long Point Bird Observatory; and has written the text of other books, probably more than I know about, due to his natural modesty. He is an accomplished photographer and artist, as his pen and ink sketches in *Breeding Birds of Ontario* bear witness.

After all of the above has been said, Ross's true forte, and I expect his own greatest pleasure, lies in his field work which has led him everywhere in Ontario and to many places in Canada and the United States, as well as to Mexico, Belize, Costa Rica, and even Hawaii. However, his constant focus over the years has been Ontario. If more people knew about it, his endurance, his bird identification by sight and sound, and his tree-climbing ability would be legendary! The first published record of a Great Gray Owl's nest was the result of a find made by Ross at Pickle Lake, 200 miles north of Thunder Bay in Kenora District. The owl was nesting in a large aspen near a beaver

pond. With only the aid of climbing spurs, Ross went up a bare trunk to the first branch at 55 feet, and then up another 10 feet to a final height of 65 feet in order to photograph and document that nest. Try that if you're not in shape or have been out too late the night before!

On behalf of the ROM and the ONRS, Ross and my son Mark and I made several field trips together to Hastings County and to the districts of Manitoulin, Parry Sound, and Sudbury. On these occasions, I learned of another of Ross's many attributes, and that was his mysterious ability to stay neat and tidy after a gruelling day in the field! Both Mark and I have long marvelled at that one. Over the years, I greatly enjoyed this field collabora-

tion with Ross, but on one occasion in 1977, I was equally pleased to have had to leave camp on Manitoulin Island four days ahead of Ross, who, on his final night, was asleep in his pup tent when it was struck by lightning during a severe thunderstorm. Ross was rendered unconscious for several hours, his tent and sleeping bag zippers were fused, a hole was burnt in his sleeping bag, and the topper was the wondrous tracery of the strike outlined in burns on his back! Remarkably, no permanent damage was done, as far as we know.

I can think of no greater compliment than to say that, since Jim Baillie, no professional has been a better disciple of Ontario ornithology than Ross James.

### Literature Cited

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