

David Brewer

Distinguished Ornithologist

Bob Curry



David Brewer (right) receiving the 2011 Distinguished Ornithologist Award from Bob Curry at the OFO Annual Convention at Point Pelee on 17 September 2011. *Photo by Jean Iron*

Always one of the highlights of the Ontario Field Ornithologists Annual General Meeting is the presentation of the Distinguished Ornithologist Award. This year (2011) the award goes to A. David Brewer.

David is a trifle enigmatic I think as far as the general membership of our organization is concerned. On the one hand it seems that he has always been around; in fact, this is true as he is a charter member having been at the first meeting back in 1982. On the other hand he has kept a low profile in recent years, beavering away at many writing projects from his home office in Puslinch Township, south of Guelph or traveling across the world to study birds.

So let me tell you about Dave's passion, skills, experience, and major contributions to the study of birds in Ontario, for OFO, and in the world at large.

Dave was born in Evesham, Worcester, England and grew up in Surrey, near London. He started bird watching at age 11, when he got his first bicycle. At his high school there were two bird clubs, one a general club and a second group, the “elite”, with a maximum of 15 members, to which one was elected. Of course, Dave was a member of both.

In the UK, bird-banding or ringing has always played a larger part in the training of ornithologists, both professional and amateur, than on this continent. Dave got into bird-banding at the age of 14 and earned a Master Permit when he was 17. In fact, his high school had five master banders including Dave, and from this group of his contemporaries has come an amazing number of leaders in the field of biology, bird study and bird conservation.

After a BA and MA in Natural Sciences at Cambridge, Dave earned a PhD in heterocyclic chemistry at Strathclyde University in Glasgow. He did all of this whilst banding Northern Gannets and other seabirds in Scotland, and birding across all of Europe and North Africa in his trademark ramshackle vehicles.

David cleverly planned his education to fit with great birding places. He took a post-doctoral fellowship in chemistry at University of Arizona, made many trips to Mexico and Central America and taught himself Spanish.

In August 1968, he emigrated to Canada to do research in agricultural-chemistry for two years but, much to our advantage, he never left. For his

professional work in Guelph, Dave produced about 20 papers in chemistry and about 32 US and Canadian patents, mostly in agricultural chemistry or anti-cancer chemotherapy, before retiring in 2004.

Once in Ontario, Dave soon became an active participant in the Ontario Bird Banding Association (OBBA). He obtained his Canadian Master Banding Permit in 1973 under which the banding operation at Mountsberg Conservation Area was run for 20 years. At its height this was the largest non-institutional banding operation in Canada. At one point, Dave, the master teacher, had 12 sub-permittees working under his direction and tutelage. He also established the Ausable Bird Observatory at Pinery Provincial Park that ran for three years. He is an OBBA Life Member having served as editor of *Ontario Bird Banding* (1970 – 73) and president (1979 – 80). He co-authored eight papers in *Ontario Bird Banding*. Dave received the Janette Dean Award from the Ontario Bird Banding Association in 2001, an award presented annually for outstanding contributions to bird banding in Ontario.

Dave has also nurtured a long and close association with Long Point Bird Observatory (LPBO); he is a Life Member, and served on the LPBO Board of Directors for several years.

Dave’s writing has been truly prodigious. He has produced close to 100 papers, chapters, species accounts, book reviews and books.

In no small part due to a lifetime of handling and banding birds, Dave is an expert at identification.

A few members here may remember the John Gooders series on Birds of the World that appeared in magazine form every month from 1969-1973. Dave wrote 36 of those accounts. More recently, he has co-authored three chapters in the *Handbook of the Birds of the World*, Lynx Edicions, writing many accounts of wrens, vireos and Cardinalidae.

He wrote *Birds of Wellington County, Ontario* and co-authored *Where to watch birds in Central America, Mexico and the Caribbean*, and four volumes of *The Canadian Atlas of Bird Banding*.

Dave's contributions to Ontario ornithology are extensive. In addition to the Wellington book, he has written a chapter on bird banding in the Hamilton area in *Birds of Hamilton*, five species accounts for the two Ontario Breeding Bird Atlas publications, and 17 articles in *Ontario Birds* or *OFO News*. These papers include book reviews, behavioral notes, accounts of new species to Ontario and bird quizzes.

In no small part due to a lifetime of handling and banding birds, Dave is an expert at identification. Usually only a piece of a bird is necessary for the identification to be clinched. It follows that, David was a founding member of the Ontario Bird Records Committee (OBRC) from 1982 to 1985, served as its Chair in 1985 and was a voting member again from 1996 to 1998.

During the first few years of OFO, Dave was quizmaster at our AGMs. These invariably had twists — the classical allusions fooled most birders — and he has been known as “Diabolical Dave”.

Beginning with those early road trips in the UK, Dave's wanderlust and bird lust continue to this day. He has traveled and watched birds on all seven continents and has led tours to Costa Rica, Panama, Trinidad and, since retiring, now is a guide and lecturer on Antarctic tours. It is the multiple trips to some countries and continents that are so impressive: Antarctica (25 trips!), Ecuador (10), Costa Rica (6), Peru (3) and so on.

These are not all just bird ticking junkets. He sometimes takes his mist nests, has detected secretive and difficult-to-find species and has advanced our knowledge of these birds in several countries. Most notably, he was involved, along with well-known American ornithologist Robert Ridgley, in the collection and naming of the Jocotoco Antpitta, that is found only in southeastern Ecuador. Also involved with this discovery were Ontario's own David J. Agro, originally of Hamilton (and whom David mentored) and one of those old UK high school friends of Dave's, Nigel Simpson. Dave plans to work with Ridgley on the last two volumes of the four-volume *Birds of South America*.

Dave's memberships include: Ontario Field Ornithologists (charter, life); Bird Studies Canada (life), Ontario Bird Banding Association (life), Bruce Peninsula Bird Observatory (life), Hamilton Naturalists' Club, Guelph Field Naturalists, Wilson Ornithological Society, Gibraltar Ornithological and Natural History Society and the Neotropical Bird Club.

A. David Brewer has made and continues to make major contributions to the knowledge and scientific study of birds not only in Ontario and Canada but at the world level. He is a most worthy recipient of the OFO Distinguished Ornithologist Award.

Representative Publications

Journal articles

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