

Distinguished Ornithologist Jon McCracken

Erica Dunn



Jon McCracken receiving the Distinguished Ornithologist Award at the OFO 2013 Annual Convention at Leamington on 28 September. Robert Maciver on left and Erica (Ricky) Dunn on right. *Photo: Jean Iron.*

Jon McCracken is a modest, low-key kind of person, who surely does not think of himself as a “Distinguished Ornithologist.” Yet, there is scarcely a person more immersed in learning about Ontario and Canada’s birds, or more deeply involved in working for their welfare. People who don’t know Jon personally are nonetheless very likely to know about the programs he has helped organize and the

conservation issues he has brought to the forefront of the birding and ornithological world.

After graduating from the University of Western Ontario (UWO) in 1977, Jon took on what may be a record number of biology contract positions. Over a period of 12 years, he worked on encephalitis incidence in birds, ran the banding program at Long Point Bird Observatory,

monitored paper mill effluent, studied lead-shot poisoning of waterfowl, evaluated wetland quality, examined the impact of logging on heronries and undertook a slew of floral, faunal and habitat surveys. Jon's employers included non-governmental organizations (Norfolk Field Naturalists, Long Point Bird Observatory), business and academic institutions (Eurocan Pulp and Paper, LGL Ltd., Western University [WU]) and government (Canadian Wildlife Service, Transport Canada, Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources, Ontario Ministry of Health, Grand River Conservation Authority).

While many biologists do contract work while looking for a "real" job, they often bail out of biology altogether, or go back to school if one of those doesn't come along. Jon did consider returning to university for a graduate degree, but he was a good biologist and other opportunities kept arising, and he loved what he was doing. Although he admits to having some regrets about not pursuing another degree, it's not for the reason you might think — that it might have led him on a different career path. Rather, like a true scientist, he regrets the lost learning opportunities.

Indeed, life-long learning is one of Jon's main satisfactions, and certainly one of his greatest assets. When he told me about his mentors, who included David Hussell and Michael Bradstreet at Long Point, Dave Ankney and Dave Scott at WU, and later on, Don Sutherland and Mary Gartshore, Jon noted that he learned "a ton" from these people and from many others along the way.

When many of us think of mentors, we generally consider the ones that influence us as adults, but those people and incidents that fan the early spark are equally, if not more, important. Jon spent his early years in the Prairies, where he was fascinated by flight, both of birds and airplanes. There was a cage in his backyard where, as in many Prairie homes of the era, wild birds were sometimes kept. Jon remembers that cage at various times holding a Black-billed Magpie (*Pica hudsonia*), a Northern Harrier (*Circus cyaneus*) and a Short-eared Owl (*Asio flammeus*). An older brother who liked to draw birds introduced Jon to more formal ornithology. After the family moved to Ottawa, this brother took Jon, then in Grade 3, to look at bird skins at the Museum of Nature. Jon was awed at meeting real professionals—Earl Godfrey and Stu MacDonald — and was greatly impressed. (Indeed, he suspects he was also impressed by his brother surreptitiously whacking him to curb his enthusiasm.) Another seminal experience was receiving a gift of Fred Bodworth's classic book *The Last of the Curlews*. Later, Jon was thrilled to meet and get to know the author. Many of us in the Ontario Field Ornithologists have opportunities to provide such experiences to a young person who is showing interest, and we sometimes need to remind ourselves how important a little encouragement can be.

Jon advanced steadily during his long period of contract work. Starting as an assistant, he rose to the person in charge of study design, training, project management and preparation of reports —

all skills he has used daily in the full-time positions he has held at Bird Studies Canada since 1989: first as Manager for the Migration Monitoring Program, then Ontario Programs Manager, and now National Programs Manager.

Jon's career at Bird Studies Canada, as with his earlier contract work, has been incredibly varied. He has been responsible for special surveys of loons, marsh birds, Red-shouldered Hawks (*Buteo lineatus*), nocturnal owls, certain woodpeckers, and programs such as migration monitoring, the Ontario Breeding Bird Atlas, Great Backyard Bird Count, training of Latin American biologists, and a variety of species-at-risk assessment and recovery programs. While the job at Bird Studies Canada (BSC) is more than full time, it is far from everything that Jon does. He is also a valuable member of innumerable committees, boards and panels. His curriculum vitae lists 28 committees, including many species-at-risk recovery teams, the North American Banding Council and the North American Ornithological Atlas Committee. Jon is also a subject editor for the journal *Avian Conservation and Ecology*.

Not even included in this list of 28 is perhaps the most influential group with which Jon serves, the Bird Species Specialist Subcommittee of COSEWIC (the Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada). As co-chair of this subcommittee, Jon shares the lead in identifying candidate species for assessment, tendering contracts for status reports of those candidates, evaluating subsequent reports and making appropriate recommendations for official COSEWIC status. The work involves

many time-consuming administrative duties, and Jon gets the job done — but I suspect his most important contribution is clear-headed thinking about the kinds and quality of evidence needed to confidently assign an appropriate conservation status.

On top of his job at BSC and his committee service to the ornithological community, Jon is also a prolific writer. While he has relatively few research papers published in peer-reviewed scientific journals, his bibliography of about 160 articles is replete with technical reports, species status assessments, recovery plans, training manuals and data-rich articles that raise awareness of the informed public about bird study and avian conservation issues (including several in *Ontario Birds*). His publications not only reflect the great variety of programs and projects in which he has been involved (see sample below), but also demonstrate a most enviable facility for clear communication.

One might think that Jon's administrative responsibilities, committee work and writing would be sufficient to keep him busy, but he refuses to be cut off from doing field work. Jon is out nearly every morning during the field season, keeping in touch with the birds that his work is really about.

To summarize Jon's contributions to ornithology in Ontario and Canada, then, I would say that he is a well-rounded birder and field man, a talented administrator and designer of field programs, an excellent writer and a hands-on conservation biologist — altogether a combination that makes him more than worthy of the title of "Distinguished Ornithologist."

Jon's publications since 2010 illustrate the breadth of his writing:

McCracken, J.D. 2013. The mysterious decline of aerial insectivores. pp. 6-9 in M. Bull (ed.), Connecticut State of the Birds: 2013. The Seventh Habitat and the Decline of our Aerial Insectivores. Connecticut Audubon Society, Fairfield, CT. 34 pp.

McCracken, J.D., R.A. Reid, R.B. Renfrew, B. Frei, J.V. Jalava, A. Cowie and A.R. Couturier. 2013. Recovery Strategy for the Bobolink (*Dolichonyx oryzivorus*) and Eastern Meadowlark (*Sturnella magna*) in Ontario. Ontario Recovery Strategy Series. Prepared for the Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources, Peterborough, Ontario. viii + 88 pp.

Environment Canada. 2011. Recovery Strategy for the Prothonotary Warbler (*Protonotaria citrea*) in Canada [Proposed]. Species at Risk Act Recovery Strategy Series. Environment Canada, Ottawa. v + 26 pp.

McCracken, J.D. 2010. Long Point Bird Observatory and Bird Studies Canada 50th Anniversary Report: Celebrating half a century of research, conservation, and education. Bird Studies Canada, Port Rowan, ON. 82 pp.

McCracken, J.D. 2010. Long Point Bird Observatory and Bird Studies Canada 50th Anniversary Report: Celebrating half a century of research, conservation, and education. Bird Studies Canada, Port Rowan, ON. 82 pp.

McCracken, J.D. 2010. The plight of the Prothonotary. Ontario Field Ornithologists (OFO) News 28(2):1-3.

Calvert, A.M., J. Woodcock and J.D. McCracken. 2010. Contrasting seasonal survivorship of two migratory songbirds wintering in threatened mangrove forests. Avian Conservation and Ecology 5(1): 2. [online] URL: <http://www.ace-eco.org/vol5/iss1/art2/>

Moore, D.J., D.V. Weseloh, J. McCracken and C.A. Friis. 2010. Forster's Terns breeding in Ontario: historical trends and recent surveys of eastern Lake St. Clair and Long Point, Lake Erie. Ontario Birds 28:2-18.

Nebel, S., A. Mills, J.D. McCracken and P.D. Taylor. 2010. Declines of aerial insectivores follow a geographic gradient. Avian Conservation and Ecology 5(2):1. [online] URL: <http://www.aceeco.org/vol5/iss2/art1/>

Ontario Barn Owl Recovery Team. 2010. Recovery strategy for the Barn Owl (*Tyto alba*) in Ontario. Ontario Recovery Strategy Series. Prepared for the Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources, Peterborough, Ontario. vi + 31 pp.

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