

## *In Memoriam*

### **George A. Scott (1916–2001)**

Jim Richards and Ron Tozer

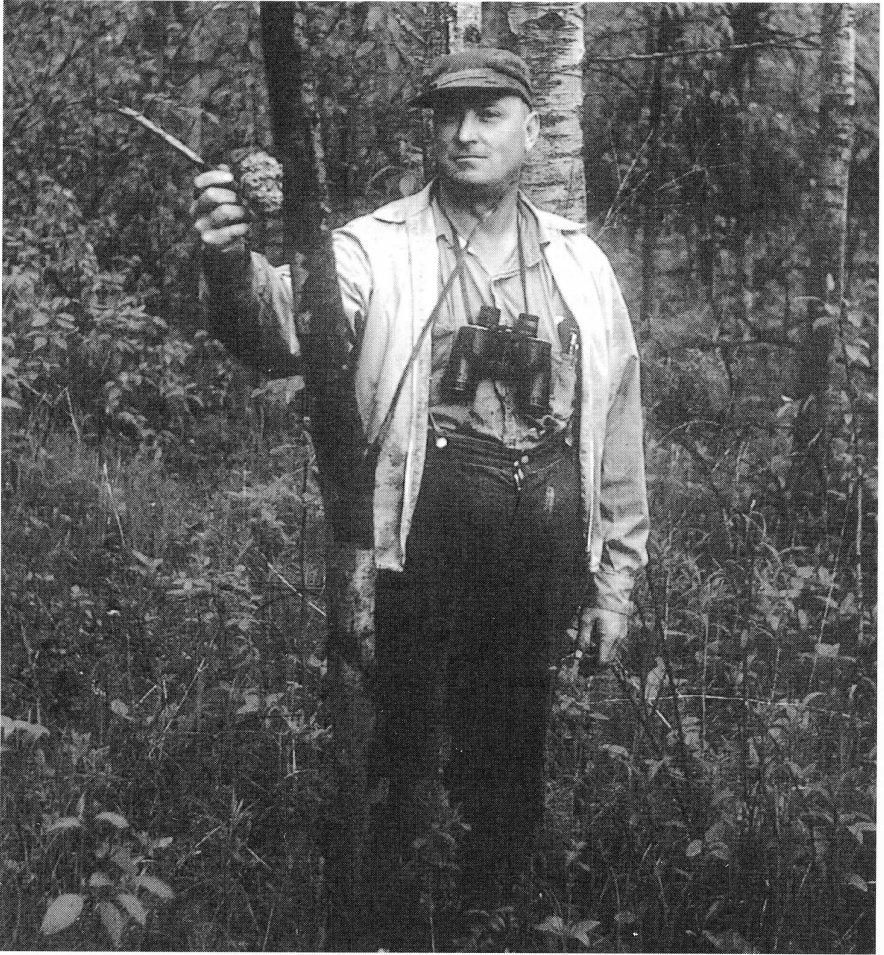
George Alton Scott was born in Adolphustown, Lennox and Addington County, Ontario, on 31 May 1916. He passed away at Oshawa on 28 April 2001, at the age of 84 (just one month short of his 85th birthday). George lived and birded in Oshawa for more than half a century, beginning in 1944. During this time, he recorded in meticulous detail the species he observed, the number of individuals, dates and locations, and behaviour. His observations are a major contribution to the documented knowledge of the birds of Durham Region (see Speirs 1973–1979, Tozer and Richards 1974).

We know relatively little about George Scott before he moved to Oshawa. He was a very quiet, private man, bordering on reclusive, and little given to speaking about himself — even among those of us who frequently birded with him. However, George once opened up briefly to Dennis Barry concerning his early years (Carney 2002). His father died when George was four years old, and his mother later moved to Toronto, leaving George at Adolphustown with a woman who needed a boy to help around

her farm. George remained on the farm into his late teens, and never went to high school. It was apparently during these years on the farm that George's interest in nature, and particularly birds, was kindled.

As a teenager during the Depression, George travelled northward in Ontario to work on the railway and in the mines, “jumping on freight trains to get from place to place” (Carney 2002). His knowledge and skill in bird identification continued to develop in this period of his life. It was during his time in northern Ontario that he observed a Northern Wheatear along the rail line at Ferland, north of Lake Nipigon, on 6 June 1941, which he later reported to Jim Baillie at the Royal Ontario Museum (Barlow 1966). This was only the fifth Ontario record of this species, and the first in spring, according to Barlow (1966).

By 1944, George had settled in Oshawa. He operated his own sign painting business, which made use of his considerable artistic talent. And, perhaps most importantly, it allowed George to work outdoors and be his own boss. He could take off to see some rare bird whenever



**Figure 1: George Scott with a Blue-gray Gnatcatcher nest in Ghost Road Woods, Oshawa, on 28 May 1965. Photo by Jim Richards.**

he wanted, and he often did. George lived alone his entire adult life, and nature was his sole passion. He travelled extensively in North America in pursuit of birds, and also undertook birding trips to more remote locations, including the arctic, Papua New Guinea, Madagascar and Patagonia (Carney 2002).

However, George Scott was primarily a “locality birder”. From 1944 to the early 1990s, he birded the same route nearly every week, visiting sites such as Beaton’s Point, Second Marsh, Ghost Road Woods, Oshawa Harbour, Harbour Road Woods, Oshawa Creek Woods (at Thomas Street and Ritson Road),

Bonnibrae Point, and Pumphouse Marsh. His itinerary was so repetitive that we could usually locate his familiar blue Volkswagen van just by knowing where he would be at a given time of day during the 1960s. His detailed notes of these weekly birding trips provide an incredibly valuable chronicle of bird numbers and species during five decades at one location, with fairly standardized birding effort and observational skills. Today, we can trace changes in bird numbers and diversity through his unique records. Such long term databases are extremely rare.

He observed a long list of rare and unusual species during his half century of birding in the Oshawa area, including Pacific Loon, Western Grebe, Northern Gannet, Yellow-crowned Night-Heron, King Rail, Ruff, Franklin's Gull, Ivory Gull, Dovekie, Thick-billed Murre, Razorbill, Dickcissel and nesting Brewer's Blackbirds. On 1 June 1962, George found three Little Gull nests with eggs in Oshawa Second Marsh, documenting the first breeding record for the species in North America. He later published a note about this unprecedented occurrence in *The Auk* (Scott 1963).

George was a birding mentor for several young people in the Oshawa area over the years, including Dennis Barry, Paul Bridges, Charles Christy, James Kamstra, Jim Mountjoy, Bill Neal, Todd Norris, Glenn Owen, Mark

Saunders, John Theberge, and the authors. He provided expertise and inspiration, showing us the value of making detailed notes in the field, and later recording these observations in our journals. His vital confirmation of the identifications made by less experienced observers who accompanied him was extremely helpful in developing their birding skills. Although extremely shy and quiet by nature, George was often eager to have birding companions and generous in his attempts to help others see the many rare birds he found.

George was a founding member of the Oshawa Naturalists' Club in 1955 (which became the Durham Region Field Naturalists in 1976). His line drawings adorned the



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newsletter of the Oshawa Naturalists' Club for many years, and later that of the Pickering Naturalists, as well. He had a broad interest in natural history, and developed considerable botanical expertise, in particular. In 1996, he was awarded the Pickering Naturalists' Conservation Award for "his contribution to the understanding of the natural history of Thickson's Woods, Pumphouse Marsh and Oshawa Second Marsh, and most especially for his diligence in preserving and recording an extensive record of plants and animals in Durham Region" (Leadbeater 2002). George was named an Honorary Life Member of Friends of Second Marsh on 27 April 1996, in recognition of his valuable contributions to the faunal and floral knowledge of Oshawa Second Marsh. Durham Region Field Naturalists published a special memorial edition of *The Naturalist* which celebrated George's influence on his fellow naturalists and documented his many natural history accomplishments (Richards and Tozer 2002).

With the death of George Scott, another of the province's diminishing group of veteran naturalists is gone. His contributions to

ornithology and botany in Durham Region, and Ontario, were significant, and will continue to be appreciated and consulted in the years to come. For those of us who were fortunate to be his friends and spend some time with George in the field, he will always be remembered fondly. We are all diminished by his passing.

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