



Jean Iron accepting the Distinguished Ornithologist Award from Ken Abraham. *Ron Pittaway*

Distinguished Ornithologist Jean Iron

Kenneth F. Abraham

The Ontario Field Ornithologists' (OFO) 2016 Distinguished Ornithologist Award was presented to Jean Iron. Jean has been a constant presence and leading figure in OFO for almost 25 years. She's been at the head of the line when something needed doing and she seems to always have been present when things were happening. From her service on the OFO Board and her presidency, to her role on OFO's publications, to representing OFO on provincial committees, to being among the first to acknowledge and thank our partners and patrons, Jean is someone we have come to depend upon. Although

Jean needs little introduction to OFO, her life and her contributions to OFO, ornithology in Ontario and beyond deserve elaboration here.

Jean was born in Wales into a family who loved nature and the countryside, giving her a foundation for her life to come. She emigrated to Canada in 1967 where she obtained a Masters of Education at the University of Toronto. She put her education to work as a teacher, consultant and school principal for the Toronto Catholic School Board from 1967 to 1999 when she retired from the teaching profession. Despite her family's

love of the outdoors, Jean's interest in birds did not begin until the latter stages of her teaching career. In about 1989, she met Dave Milsom and Jim Coey, who owned Flora and Fauna Field Tours. They took Jean on birding excursions in Ontario and to Churchill, Manitoba, which were then followed by trips to Costa Rica and Argentina. Jim and Dave also introduced Jean to the Ontario Field Ornithologists. She became a member in 1991 and quite quickly became a part of OFO activities, taking part in the publication project that culminated in *Ornithology in Ontario* in 1994 and was elected President immediately thereafter.

During Jean's presidency of OFO (1995-2004), the organization developed substantially and her roles in annual conventions set a benchmark for that task. She also excelled as the "unofficial" OFO convention photographer. During and after Jean's presidency, she served OFO in numerous external capacities as well, including representing our interests on many birding and conservation committees. Jean represented OFO on the Ontario Shorebird Conservation Plan committee from 2000-2003, on the Ontario Landbird Conservation Plan team in 2008 and as a member of the Ontario Breeding Bird Atlas Management Committee from 2000 to 2007. Following her departure from the President's position, Jean stepped directly into a position serving on the Ontario Bird Records Committee (OBRC) as a voting member from 2005 to 2009 and chaired the OBRC in 2008. Here she applied her extensive expertise in identification of and knowledge about shorebirds, gulls, geese and other bird groups.

Jean proudly lists her special interest in a number of bird families, but those which draw the greatest amount of her attention are gulls, shorebirds, geese, finches and grassland birds. Her love of gulls is apparent to all who know her. One of her notable contributions was the documentation of Ontario's first Heermann's Gull and an article about its molts and plumages, co-authored with Ron Pittaway. She has introduced countless people to the joys (and pitfalls!) of gull watching and plumage cycle identification, and shared her knowledge about gulls in other ways, one of the most significant being her leadership of annual Niagara Gull Watch field trips which she has co-led from 2000 to 2016. She also organized and presented pre-field trip gull identification workshops in 2014, 2015 and 2016.

Jean's special interest in shorebirds is also well known and it has kept her busy in both southern and northern Ontario. One of her most impressive and well-used publications is her *Shorebirds of Southern Ontario* photographic identification guide. Her expertise in photography as well as on molts and plumages shines through in the images throughout the book. During spring migration season, she gives identification workshops at the Point Pelee National Park Visitor Centre timed to coordinate with the OFO shorebird trips at Hillman Marsh. In northern Ontario, she has volunteered on a variety of research and monitoring projects since 2002, many specifically aimed at gaining better information and knowledge about shorebird migration ecology. She assisted with Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources (OMNR) shorebird monitoring and climate change studies at Shegogau,

northwest of Moosonee, in 2005, with shorebird surveys in spring and late summer at Akimiski Island in 2008, and with shorebird and climate change surveys at Burntpoint Creek in Polar Bear Provincial Park in 2012. She's been in the field in all eight years of the Southern James Bay Shorebird project (2009-2016) at one or sometimes two month-long sessions, contributing substantially to data gathered for this, a multi-organization program whose aim is to document the critical importance of James Bay to migrating shorebirds which may eventually lead to habitat protection. A highly valued spinoff of this annual participation has been her weekly postings to OntBirds via remote communications methods in partnership with Ron Pittaway. These postings have allowed Ontario birders and those beyond its borders to experience in near-real-time the phenomenal migration of shorebirds in James Bay. Participating in OMNR goose research at Burntpoint in 2002, 2003 and 2006 caused Jean to fall in love with the Hudson Bay Lowlands.

One of Jean's most enduring and significant accomplishments for bird conservation in Ontario has been her work on the initiative to protect the Carden Alvar for its value to this rare habitat and the grasslands and wetlands bird communities it supports. She served on the committee with Nature Conservancy of Canada, Toronto Ornithological Club and Couchiching Conservancy to plan land purchases and raise funds which eventually led to the establishment of Carden Alvar Provincial Park in 2014. Jean continues to advocate for protection of the Carden Alvar's grassland bird

habitat, including that of the endangered Loggerhead Shrike (*Lanius ludovicianus*). She took a hands-on approach to the task in 2012 serving as the Celebrity Birder for the Couchiching Conservancy's Carden Challenge fund-raising effort for Carden Alvar. In 2016, she accepted a position on the Advisory Council of the Couchiching Conservancy, a land trust in the Lake Simcoe and Carden area.

Jean is an author or co-author of over 50 articles and notes about birds and bird conservation (See Selected Publications). She is a regular (almost annual) contributor to OFO's two publication outlets, *OFO News* and *Ontario Birds*. She was editor of *OFO News* from 1994-2007 and continues to serve as an editorial assistant. In addition, she has published many articles in the Toronto Ornithological Club Newsletter and *Toronto Birds* and was a co-author of the *Ontario Shorebird Conservation Plan*.

Jean seems never to be idle and that energy is often directed at things to do with birds. In addition to all of the above-noted projects, she also participated in field work for the Ontario Breeding Bird Atlas (2001-2005), was a surveyor of Red Knots and other shorebirds on the Mingan Archipelago, Quebec, for the Royal Ontario Museum in 2007, has been a Lake Ontario Winter Waterfowl Survey participant every January for over 20 years, a Whimbrel Watch participant at Colonel Sam Smith Park in Toronto annually since 2007, a Cranberry Marsh Hawkwatch participant from September to November since 1999 (including as official counter one day per week), a Plover Guardian for the Piping Plovers nesting on Toronto Islands in June 2015

and sometimes she even gets paid (e.g., she had contract bird survey positions with the Toronto and Region Conservation Authority from 2001 to 2004). She is also an active member of the Toronto Ornithological Club, the American Birding Association, the Nature Conservancy of Canada and the Brodie Club.

Jean has introduced or influenced the birding habits of hundreds of people through her workshops and annual OFO trips and as a mentor throughout her eight years of volunteering on the James Bay shorebird project, particularly to young Moose Cree First Nations participants. She has informed and delighted thousands through her superb photography by sharing it on her website which is wonderfully informational and educational. Prominently featured are her annual trip photo essays which have recently been enhanced with videos. The content she provides on research and monitoring programs is worth its weight in helicopter fuel; I have personally highlighted this unique contribution to a succession of Ontario government senior managers and communications officers. It is an innovative means of communicating what OMNR does with taxpayers' money in support of the conservation of migratory bird populations and habitats through research and monitoring.

She is also a regular presenter at birding and nature clubs and other organizations throughout Ontario. She has been invited to be keynote speaker at several festivals of birds, including Point Pelee Festival of Birds (2009), Ruthven Park National Historic Park Festival (2010), Huron Fringe Festival of Birds (2011), Rondeau Provincial Park Festival of Birds

(2011) and has traveled to give similar presentations in Buffalo, New York, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania and to the Roger Tory Peterson Institute of Natural History in Jamestown, New York. Her presentation topics include Arctic Wildlife of Canada, Iceland and Greenland, gull watching in Ontario, shorebird migration, Hudson Bay and James Bay shorebirds and wetlands, Akimiski Island natural history, the Carden Alvar, the Northwest Passage, High Arctic expeditions from Greenland to Nunavut, and the birds and natural history of Costa Rica, Panama, Peru and the Galapagos.

Another way Jean has contributed to the public's awareness and knowledge has been as a naturalist tour leader. She has led tours since 1999 to locations in Ontario including: Point Pelee and Georgian Bay (a cruise) as well as beyond Ontario's borders to Cuba, Honduras, Belize, Guatemala, Costa Rica, Panama, the Canadian Arctic, Greenland, Svalbard (in the Norwegian Arctic), Japan, French Polynesia, Iceland, Ecuador and Peru.

It is safe to assume that Jean's list of special interest birds will only grow longer as she is introduced to new groups through her travels, because it is characteristic of Jean to dive deeply into subjects that pique her interest, and we all benefit from that inner drive. She is an integral part of the success story of Ontario Field Ornithologists and is greatly deserving of this award. She is now a life member of OFO and for many of us, "OFO" and "Jean Iron" have become nearly synonymous.

Selected Publications

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- Iron, J.** and **R. Pittaway.** 2010. Who was Mrs. Gordon Mills? The life of artist and ornithologist Doris Huestis Speirs. *Toronto Ornithological Club Newsletter* 201:2-3.
- Iron, J.** and **R. Pittaway.** 2011. Willow Ptarmigan at Darlington Nuclear. *OFO News* 29(2):6-7.
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