

IN MEMORIAM

John Keith Reynolds (1919–2006)

John D. Reynolds and Ronald G. Tozer

J. KEITH REYNOLDS was a strong supporter of OFO, whose varied career ranged from prominent amateur naturalist in London, Ontario, to Secretary to the Ontario Cabinet and Deputy Minister of Natural Resources. As he scaled the ladder of his career, he never lost his passion for birding, and used his connections to inspire those around him to work toward effective conservation of birds and their habitats. He passed away in Toronto on 8 January 2006.

Keith was born in London, Ontario, on 29 September 1919, the son of English immigrants. His father put in 12-hour days shovelling coal at an enamel factory before eventually teaching himself refrigeration technology and working as an engineer for Labatts. Keith's grade 3 teacher, W. D. Sutton, happened to be the leader of the local Boy Scout troop, and he encouraged Keith to identify trees, plants, insects and birds. When Keith decided to aim for a Bird Warden Badge, Don Sutton called in one of Canada's foremost birders and naturalists, W. E. Saunders, to test him! Keith



Keith Reynolds during an ice fishing trip near Haliburton

dutifully identified a set of study skins in Saunders' home, and aside from mispronouncing "Blackburnian Warbler", passed with flying colours.

Saunders brought Keith into London's McIlwraith Ornithological Club (now McIlwraith Field Naturalists), and introduced him to a wider circle of prominent naturalists, including staff at the Royal Ontario Museum, who became lifelong acquaintances and mentors: Jim Baillie, L. L. Snyder, Terry Shortt, Cliff Hope, and J. R. Dymond. Keith's book collection from his teenage years in the 1930s includes

many volumes on mammals, birds and plants, with inscriptions from his parents, as well as Saunders and Baillie. Keith saved up his money to buy an entire collection of Bent's seminal "Life Histories" of North American birds.

Those were the days when birding was done with a shotgun. Accordingly, an online search today of Canadian museum holdings reveals 337 birds collected by Keith from the London area, as well as a number of bats and rodents. The bird specimens include a Yellow Rail from Denfield, Middlesex County, on 6 September 1937; single Piping Plovers from Ipperwash Beach, Lambton County, on 23 May 1936 and 24 May 1937; and single Baird's Sandpipers from Denfield on 6 September 1937 and Ipperwash Beach on 20 September 1937. There is even a specimen of a Swainson's Thrush from Long Point credited to his sister Ruth.

When it came time to consider university, Keith stuck to his local London roots and chose the University of Western Ontario, where he enrolled in Biology. However, World War II put an end to that almost immediately, as Keith and his brother George volunteered for the Canadian Air Force in 1940. Keith hadn't told his parents beforehand of his intentions. He simply signed up one day, and told them about it over dinner. In due course, he was sent overseas with the 418 Squadron, where he flew numerous missions from bases in East Anglia, serving as navigator and Squadron Leader. Few of

his friends survived, and Keith himself had a night-time crash into the North Sea in which his pilot was killed. Keith couldn't climb into his life-raft because his back was broken, but he attracted the attention of fishing boats by blowing a whistle. He was surprised anyone heard him over the appalling weather, and wondered why the masts on their boats were broken. He was informed that they'd lost their masts when his plane had flown through them! Fifty years later, nerve damage sustained during that crash would put an increasing limp into Keith's gait as he marched along the trails of Pelee or Thickson's Woods in search of his first warblers of the spring.

At the end of the war, Keith met his future wife Maudie while she was a military nurse stationed in Nova Scotia. They returned to London, where contemporaries recall the sense of relief felt by the old-timers in the McIlwraith Club that Keith had survived. W. E. Saunders had died while Keith was overseas, and Keith was asked in 1946 to take over the weekly column that Saunders had written in the London Free Press, which Keith turned into *Mostly Birds*. He continued to write this column until 1963.

In the meantime, Keith was back into his undergraduate degree at Western. One summer he worked for Harold E. Hitchcock, one of the founding fathers of scientific studies of bats. They explored numerous caves in southern Ontario, collecting specimens

and tagging individuals for studies of roosting site fidelity. Keith went on to obtain his MSc in one year, followed immediately by a PhD in only two years. This was while Keith and Maudie were raising their first two children, Jane and Brian! Both of Keith's theses concerned the population biology of European hares. To say that Keith brought his work home with him would be an understatement. His children recall batteries of cages in the yard, a constant stream of baby hares bouncing around the house, and a rather unfortunate incident involving a botched attempt to remove the scent gland from an anaesthetized skunk, with disastrously odoriferous consequences.

After graduation, Keith went to work for the Ontario government all his life. His early days were with Lands and Forests (now Natural Resources), where he was both a district biologist and a qualified enforcement officer — a rare combination.

His mentors were C. H. D. Clarke, the distinguished wildlife biologist and administrator, and Frank MacDougall, the famous "flying superintendent" of Algonquin Park (1931-1941), nicknamed for his introduction of bush planes for detecting forest fires. MacDougall, who by then had become Deputy Minister of Lands and Forests, encouraged Keith to consider succeeding him some day. This seemed a far-off pipe dream to a young district biologist, whose postings took his family

to Maple, Sault Ste. Marie, and Aylmer, where their third child John was born.

In 1963, a position with the Fish and Wildlife Branch at Queen's Park brought the family to Toronto. The following year Keith was appointed by Premier John Robarts as Chief Executive Officer in the Department of the Premier, and in 1969 he became Secretary to the Cabinet. We are not sure how, in one year, Keith managed to jump from Fish and Wildlife Branch to becoming the most senior civil servant in the provincial government. But this was followed by an appointment as Deputy Provincial Secretary for Resources Development from 1972-1974, then Directorship of the Committee on Government Productivity and of Task Force Hydro. John Robarts and Keith became very close friends, never missing an excuse to fly off to remote northern Ontario lakes to go fishing. Their pretext was that they needed to bring the full attention of the Ontario government to the local people — who just happened to be guides and outfitters.

In 1974, Keith became Deputy Minister of Natural Resources under Premier Bill Davis, thereby returning to the department in which he had begun his career 25 years earlier. When his appointment was announced in the MNR newsletter *Aski*, the article featured a photograph of Keith as a teenager wearing a Lands and Forests uniform, weighing Ring-necked Pheasants

on Pelee Island. This was indeed a homecoming, which led to family vacations travelling to parks throughout the province, re-connecting with old friends. Of course, he always had his binoculars and fishing rod.

Although Keith's natural history hobbies mixed deeply with his professional commitments, he also displayed an amazing ability to compartmentalize. On one holiday at a cottage at Long Point, Keith was fishing from the dock when he was called to the phone. It was forest fire season, and he needed frequent updates. Twenty minutes later he returned, mentioned casually that he'd just gotten \$10 million from the Ontario Cabinet to fight a fire, and then switched his focus

entirely to trying to catch a large-mouth bass.

Long-time friends Bruce and Ann Falls recalled that "in his administrative positions, Keith often got results through his many contacts within and outside the government. Although he remained in the background, he had a powerful influence in defusing difficult situations and encouraging positive results for conservation. For example, as the premier's right-hand man, he was able to defuse local opposition to wolf research in Algonquin Park. On another occasion, his discussions with executives at General Motors helped to pave the way for preservation of the Second Marsh in Oshawa."

Keith's retirement in 1980 kept him



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busier than ever. He formed Alafin Consultants with close friends and served on numerous committees and boards, including a consultancy with the World Health Organization in Greece and Turkey, and chairmanship of the Metropolitan Toronto and Region Conservation Authority. He was awarded an honorary Doctor of Laws from York University in 1982. Most importantly, his “retirement” years gave him time to do a lot more birding, and also to contribute his time and political savvy to various conservation organizations. He was a founding life member of OFO, a member of the Brodie Club, and chaired the finance committee of Long Point Bird Observatory. The latter position was another return to his roots, as he had also served as treasurer for London’s McIlwraith Club 50 years earlier.

Maudie passed away in 1997, 52 years after they had been married. Keith remained active and independent well into his 80s before Alzheimer’s disease confined him to a veterans’ home, where his cheerful nature and wry sense of humour stayed with him until the end.

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