

In Memoriam

William Earl Godfrey (1910–2002)

Ron Pittaway

W. Earl Godfrey died at the age of 92 on 8 June 2002 in Ottawa, Ontario. Godfrey was born on 18 March 1910 in Wolfville, Nova Scotia. He is survived by his first wife and daughter of Cleveland, Ohio, and was predeceased by his second wife.

Earl Godfrey came to Ottawa as Curator of Ornithology at the National Museum of Canada in February 1947, the same year that I was born in Ottawa. By the time I was 10 years old, Godfrey's name was well known to me. He was often mentioned or quoted in "Birds Eye View", a weekly Saturday column on birds in *The Ottawa Journal* newspaper by John Bird (real name).

Before coming to Ottawa, a young Godfrey roamed the shores, marshes and woods of Nova Scotia, and was mentored by Robie Tufts who was Chief Federal Migratory Bird Officer for the Maritime Provinces. Godfrey obtained a Bachelor of Science degree in 1934 from Acadia University in Nova Scotia during the difficult times of the Great Depression. On the recommendation of Robie Tufts, Godfrey was drawn to Ohio in the United States by Cyrus Eaton, a

wealthy Cleveland industrialist and native of Nova Scotia. After working as a tutor for Eaton's son, Godfrey joined the Cleveland Museum of Natural History, later becoming Assistant Curator of Ornithology. It was at the Cleveland museum that Godfrey worked with the legendary taxonomist, Harry Oberholser. Godfrey told me that Oberholser had the most acute eyesight of any ornithologist, which allowed him to see subtle plumage differences in museum study skins. Oberholser clearly influenced Godfrey as a museum ornithologist.

Godfrey was an active birder who was in the field every weekend. He was a very competitive birder also, who enjoyed doing Big Days (called Century Runs when I was a boy) in May and Christmas Bird Counts with his good friend, botanist Doug Savile of the federal Department of Agriculture. During the 1950s and early 1960s, Earl led early morning bird walks in May for the Ottawa Field-Naturalists' Club at the Central Experimental Farm's Arboretum. Imagine birding with Canada's top birdman; I marvelled at his field skills and insights.

Although a private person, Earl

was always approachable when I visited him many times at his office in the old Victoria Museum in downtown Ottawa. I would often arrive at his desk without notice and he always welcomed me. He loved hearing about bird sightings and he would tell me about his birding adventures as a boy in Nova Scotia. His desk was beside the trays of bird skins and cupboards full of nests and eggs. He taught me (and others) to make careful identifications and to confirm my observations with reference to specimens and the literature. Whenever I needed to verify a tricky identification, he was just a phone call away. Today's young birders do not have easy access to professional museum ornithologists such as Earl Godfrey and the late Jim Baillie of the Royal Ontario Museum.

One of the many excellent pieces of advice Godfrey gave me was to read all the back issues of *The Auk*, *Condor*, *Wilson's Bulletin*, *Canadian Field-Naturalist* and other natural science journals. This provided me with an excellent historical context of what was known and unknown about birds and ornithology at that time. In that regard, I was particularly pleased a few years ago when he gave me his complete set of *The Auk*.

Perhaps surprising to many was Godfrey's strong knowledge and interest in mammals. Earl told me that he could have become a mammalogist instead of an ornithologist.

Earl Godfrey's main ornitho-

logical interests were taxonomy, distribution and identification. He described several subspecies, including a pale western race of the Long-eared Owl, *Asio otus tuftsi*, named for his own mentor, Robie Tufts. Godfrey started my own interest in geographical variation, which inspired a series of articles on Recognizable Forms (field identifiable subspecies and morphs) in *Ontario Birds*.

The Birds of Canada was Godfrey's greatest professional achievement. It was an immediate bestseller and eventually sold over 250,000 copies. The late Peter Whelan wrote on 18 October 1997 in his *Globe and Mail* bird column, "Godfrey's 1966 book *The Birds of Canada*, updated in 1986, remains the national standard. His text and artist John Crosby's paintings stand out among the least criticized of bird writing and art, in a field where errors are pursued with joy". I vividly recall my anticipation in waiting for the publication of the first edition of *The Birds of Canada* in 1966, which he signed in December of that year at an Ottawa Field-Naturalists' Club meeting held at the National Museum. The 1966 edition was the culmination of more than 15 summer field seasons of observation and specimen collection led by Godfrey across Canada. This activity resulted in the addition of 20,000 specimens to the national collection. Earl told me that he wrote the first edition of *The Birds of Canada*



Figure 1: This photograph of W. Earl Godfrey was taken in 1986. It first appeared on the dust cover of the revised edition of *The Birds of Canada* (1986). Photo reproduced with permission, *Canadian Museum of Nature, Ottawa, Canada*.

mainly after working hours because he was too busy during the day. Perhaps he was too occupied during office hours with inquisitive visitors to get much writing done! He prepared the revised edition in 1986.

One aspect I particularly like about *The Birds of Canada* is that it includes a complete list of Canadian subspecies, not otherwise available unless you have the 1957 edition of the American Ornithologists' Union's *Check-list of North American Birds*. Also, Godfrey's book is rich in normally obscure but useful information that is rarely included in such reference works. For example, *The Birds of Canada* notes that the Great Cormorant has

14 tail feathers whereas the Double-crested Cormorant has only 12. This seemingly arcane bit of information once helped to identify a vagrant Great Cormorant (perched, not swimming!) at the west end of Lake Ontario.

Earl Godfrey retired in 1977 from the position of Chief of the Division of Vertebrate Zoology at the National Museum of Natural Sciences. He remained active as Curator Emeritus. He was physically active until his last year, birding, riding his bike and driving his car. He loved ONTBIRDS (OFO's birding listserv) and was signed on at the time of his death.

What I and others will remember

most fondly about Earl Godfrey is not the exceptional and inspirational ornithologist, but that he was such a generous person who gave so freely

of his personal time and knowledge to those who were fortunate to know him. He is greatly missed by his many friends and colleagues.

Awards, Memberships, Positions and Honorary Degrees

1942–2002: Member of the American Ornithologists' Union in 1942; Elective Member in 1949; Fellow in 1955.

1947: Appointed to the position of Curator of Ornithology at the National Museum of Canada.

1947–1976, 1990–2002: Associate Editor of *The Canadian Field-Naturalist*.

1969: Honorary Doctorate of Science degree from Acadia University in Nova Scotia in recognition of his first edition of *The Birds of Canada* (1966).

1973: Honorary Member of the Ottawa Field-Naturalists' Club.

1977: Upon retirement from the position of Chief of Division of Vertebrate Zoology at the National Museum of Natural Sciences, he became Curator Emeritus and continued his work as a Research Associate.

1986: The first recipient of the Doris Heustis Speirs Award given by the Society of Canadian Ornithologists in recognition of *The Birds of Canada* and his unique contribution to ornithology, and for encouraging an interest in birds among young people from across Canada.

1997: The first recipient of OFO's Distinguished Ornithologist Award for his outstanding contributions to the study of ornithology in Ontario and Canada.

1999–2002: Ornithology Consultant to *Ontario Birds*.

2000: The Ludlow Griscom Award of the American Birding Association for advancing a high level of ornithological knowledge.

Selected Publications

Earl Godfrey produced more than 200 publications, of which 75 contained new information on distribution, nomenclature and taxonomy. A selection of his works indicating the breadth of his ornithological interests is presented below.

Godfrey, W.E. 1938. Yellow-crowned Night Herons in Nova Scotia. *Canadian Field-Naturalist* 52:109. Godfrey's first ornithological publication.

Godfrey, W.E. 1947. A new Long-eared Owl. *Canadian Field-Naturalist* 61: 196–197.

Godfrey, W.E. 1949. Birds of Lake Mistassini and Lake Albanel, Quebec. *National Museum of Canada Bulletin* 114: 1–43.

- Godfrey, W.E.** 1950. Birds of the Cypress Hills and Flotten Lakes regions, Saskatchewan. National Museum of Canada Bulletin 120: 1–96.
- Godfrey, W.E.** 1951. Notes on the birds of southern Yukon Territory. National Museum of Canada Bulletin 123: 88–115.
- Godfrey, W.E.** 1952. Birds of the Lesser Slave Lake–Peace River areas, Alberta. National Museum of Canada Bulletin 126: 142–175.
- Godfrey, W.E.** 1953. Notes on the birds of the area of intergradation between eastern prairie and forest in Canada. National Museum of Canada Bulletin 128: 189–240.
- Godfrey, W.E.** 1954. Birds of Prince Edward Island. National Museum of Canada Bulletin 132: 155–213.
- Godfrey, W.E.** 1958. Birds of Cape Breton Island, Nova Scotia. Canadian Field-Naturalist 73: 7–27.
- Godfrey, W.E.** 1962. Order Gaviiformes. Pp. 20–61 *in* Handbook of North American Birds. Volume 1: Loons through Flamingos (R.S.Palmer, editor). Yale University Press, New Haven, Connecticut. Godfrey authored the detailed plumage and molt sections of the loon accounts.
- Godfrey, W.E.** 1966. Some Canadian Birds. Revised Edition. National Museum of Canada, Ottawa.
- Godfrey, W.E.** 1966. The Birds of Canada. National Museum of Canada Bulletin 203, Queen's Printer, Ottawa.
- Godfrey, W.E.** 1967. Some winter aspects of the Great Gray Owl. Canadian Field-Naturalist 81: 99–101.
- Godfrey, W.E.** 1973. A possible shortcut spring migration route of the Arctic Tern to James Bay, Canada. Canadian Field-Naturalist 87: 51–52.
- Godfrey, W.E.** 1973. More presumed hybrid gulls: *Larus argentatus* x *L. marinus* Canadian Field-Naturalist 87: 171–172.
- Godfrey, W.E.** 1986. The Birds of Canada. Revised Edition. National Museum of Canada, Ottawa.

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