

In Memoriam

Tom Murray, 1916–2003

Peter Middleton

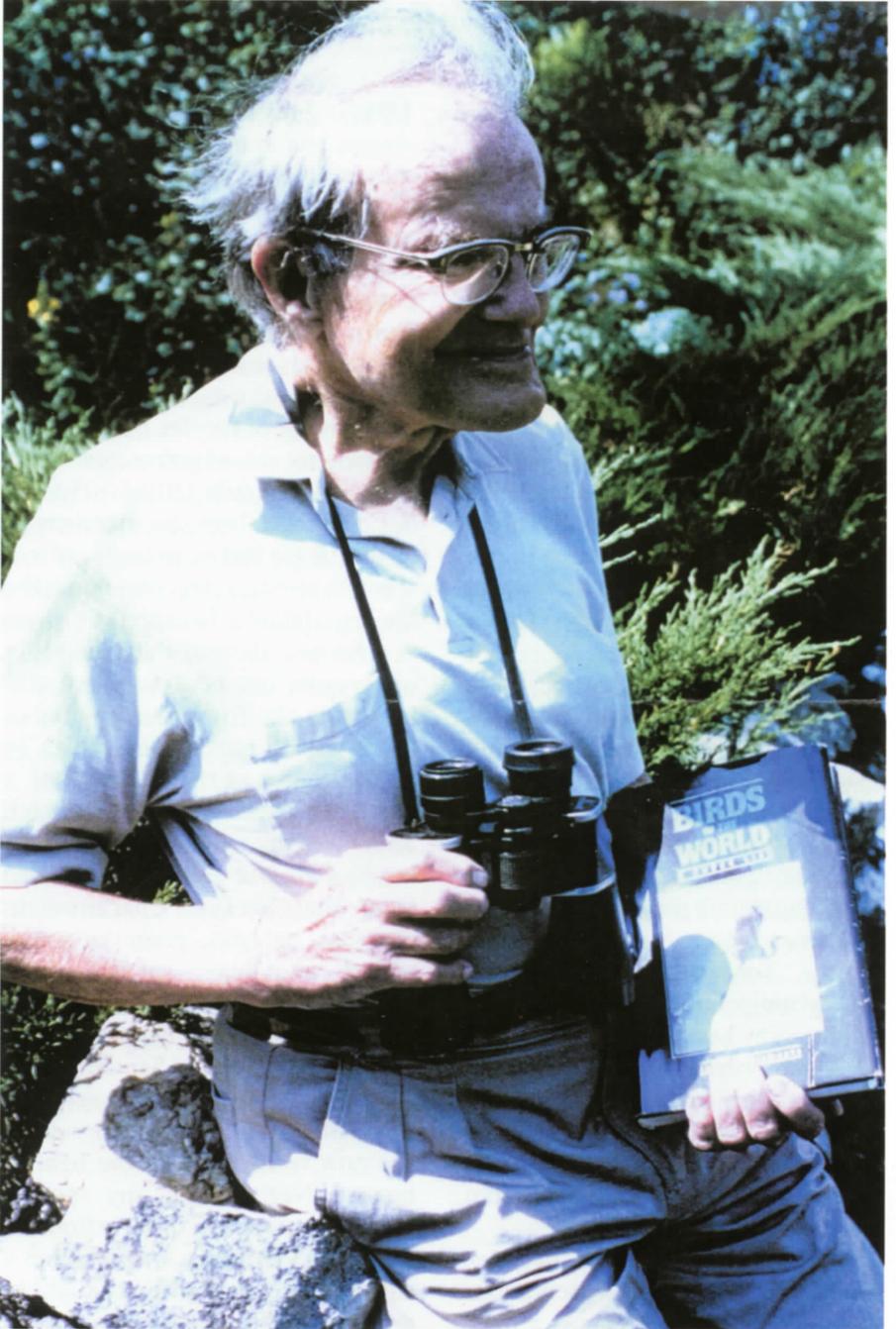
On the ninth of March 2003, one of the elder statesmen of Ontario's birdwatching community died in Owen Sound. Tom Murray was eighty-six. Tom was born in Owen Sound on 24 July 1916, but due to the untimely death of his father, two months before Tom's birth, his mother and he moved to Toronto, where he grew up. Upon completing his university studies at Toronto and Oxford, Tom returned to Owen Sound to work and live.

Tom's interest in birds began as a school assignment which required him to observe and identify thirty species. With little knowledge and no experience, he sought out a friend who did and undertook his first birding field trips in the area of High Park and the Humber River in Toronto. They were memorable outings. Tom would fondly recall the sighting of his first ever warbler. A blue-grey back and striking black necklace were set off against a bright yellow breast that shone in early morning light. The date was 20 May 1930, and the bird, a Magnolia Warbler. The die was cast and Tom was hooked.

Over the next seven decades, Tom's experiences and observations were legion. Starting out as a bird-

watcher in the 1930s, when it was not a well known or respected activity, Tom would, in later years, jet off to watch birds around the world. His goal was not to establish a record setting number of species, but rather to attempt to see a representative of every avian family. Of the 195 families described, Tom saw members of all but 18. He had plans for those too, if health and time had permitted. His life list totalled 2,788 species.

As a student at the University of Toronto, Tom became active with birders in the Toronto area. One of these was Richard M. Saunders. In 1932, the two of them undertook a trip to South Carolina which Saunders later recorded in his book, *Carolina Quest*. They sailed from New York to Charleston to pick up pelagics, something few would countenance in this age of cars. Most of their time was spent exploring the lowlands surrounding Charleston and the Santee River. The trip provided 48 life species for Tom, but two of the observations are now remarkable in the light of history. Not gaining any specific mention were the observations of Bachman's Warbler, at that time a still not uncommon bird of southern river bottomlands. The decade



of the thirties saw the great river forests of the south suffer devastating logging and clearing. With the forests went the Bachman's. The other bird of note, and already on the verge of extinction when Tom and Richard visited, was the Ivory-billed Woodpecker. Following up on rumours, they tracked down a young man who had been successful in locating the woodpecker for a group only a few weeks earlier. Arrangements were made and, on 12 June 1936, their search began in a dugout canoe. Threading narrow channels, they probed far into the recesses of the cypress bottomlands along the Santee River. Finally, landing on a tiny island, they heard "a low, wheezing, nasal cry". They soon had the vocalists in view—a pair of magnificent Ivory-billed Woodpeckers. Tom would later comment: "I've done a lot of birding ... my world list is around 2,800, but that [Ivory-billed Woodpecker] was most certainly the crown jewel". He was among a very select group of people who, at the end of the millennium, could recount seeing these two now-vanished North American species.

Tom was a member and Secretary of the Toronto Ornithological Club. He was a founding and Life Member of OFO. He conducted two Breeding Bird Survey routes in Grey County for over a quarter of a century. He was a regional coordinator for the initial Ontario Breeding Bird Atlas. He was also a founding member of the

Grey-Bruce Records Committee and compiler of the annual Owen Sound Christmas Bird Count for fifteen years. Tom brought a wealth of knowledge and experience to all these groups and projects. In recognition of his contributions to birding, Tom was awarded an honorary life membership in the Owen Sound Field Naturalists Club.

It was as Tom's partner on the Breeding Bird Surveys that I came to fully appreciate one of the most finely attuned ears which I have ever encountered. Its acuity was demonstrated one morning, when Tom picked up the faint "rattle" of a Sedge Wren at a distance of about 100 metres; it was even more remarkable as the marsh behind the bird resonated with a cacophony of awakening Red-winged Blackbirds. On one of the last outings which we shared, his hearing remained undimmed, despite declining health. As he sat in the car, he easily picked up the wispy calls of unseen kinglets and creepers as they moved through a grove of hemlocks close by.

In 1983, Tom undertook the challenge of seeing 300 species in Ontario in one year. He was successful, ending up with a final count of 306. But in the later years, Tom's birding would be focussed more sharply upon his interest in observing at least one species in each family of birds found in the world. Major trips were planned specifically with that quest in mind: Costa Rica in 1987, Australia in 1989, Kenya in

1991, Indonesia (Java and Sulawesi) in 1992, and Argentina in 1993. Two major pelagic trips were also undertaken as part of the exercise—one from Charleston, South Carolina, was a month-long passage south through the Caribbean and the Panama Canal to the Pacific and west via the Galapagos Islands and New Zealand to Australia. This immediately preceded his three and a half month solo journey around the Australian continent by car, at the age of seventy-three. The second major Pacific transect took him north from New Zealand to Alaska, via Hawaii. He was nothing if not intrepid and indefatigable in his birding travels.

Yet, he always kept the pursuit

of new species in balance with the simple joy of birdwatching. Outings with Tom were always filled with appreciation for the everyday around him. He knew and appreciated the delight of birding in its simplest form; the return of the first larks, the first loon on the lake, or the song of the first Pine Warbler behind his home in Leith each spring, were always noted and commented on with genuine pleasure.

Tom was a man of gentle demeanor, quick wit, and inextinguishable enthusiasm. His company and the sight of his slight, water-proof-clad figure at birding venues around the province will be missed greatly by all who knew him.

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