

In Memoriam:

Otto Edmund Devitt (1904-1992)

by Gerry Bennett

One of Ontario's best informed and most respected naturalists passed away in Richmond Hill's York Central Hospital, 20 January 1992, after a lengthy illness.

Ott, as he was best known to his colleagues and friends, grew up in the Stayner/Wasaga sector of Ontario's Simcoe County. Here, as a boy of 10, he began studying and recording the various phases of Natural History. Although he lived most of his life in the Toronto/Richmond Hill area, he always maintained a prime interest in his original surroundings. He became an acknowledged expert on the ecology of Simcoe County, both botanically and zoologically.

Ott was a Pharmacist by profession. For years, he was on staff at the T. Eaton Co., Ltd. store in downtown Toronto as a dispensing chemist. But, his desire to be constantly involved in the milieu of Biology resulted in a switch in vocations. In the early 1950's, Ott traded his Pharmacy career for a position with Ontario's Department of Lands and Forests -- now known as the Ministry of Natural Resources. His new duties found him in charge of the Fish and Wildlife library at the Ministry's District Office in Maple, Ontario. He performed these duties with dedication and efficiency until his retirement in the 1970's.

Ott married Mary MacKay who was also a self-taught expert on the flora and fauna of the Peel/York sector of Ontario. Throughout their active lives, "The Devitts", as they were widely known, were held in high regard by other naturalists who admired their ardour, and envied their wide and profound ranges of knowledge. Mary died 20 January 1991, exactly one year prior to Ott's passing.

Limited space prevents us from a complete review of Ott's many interests and achievements. His observations extended over a span of seven decades. His activities included those of diarist, collector, photographer, speaker, ornithologist, and botanist. He produced more than 70 articles embracing a wide range of topics. One of these was *The Birds of Simcoe County*, originally published in 1943, with a revised edition sponsored by the Brereton Field Naturalists in 1967. He had a special interest in Michigan's Kirtland's Warbler, and presented a paper on this species to the Toronto Ornithological Club. He was the first local naturalist to find and photograph the nest of the Yellow Rail. He had found the nest himself in the Holland Marsh, just east of Bradford. He photographed almost every species of fern and orchid in Ontario.

Somehow, in addition to time and energy devoted to field studies relating to Biology, he was able to indulge a strong interest in Archaeology, constantly exploring eroded hillsides and newly-ploughed fields in search of relics. He built up a fine collection of flints and other artifacts. This avocation included an intense interest in the petroglyphs of Petroglyphs Provincial Park in Peterborough County.

Ott was a founding member of the Toronto Ornithological Club. Various other associations included membership in the Toronto Field Naturalists, the Brodie Club, and the Richmond Hill Naturalists.

Following a brief service at Richmond Hill's Marshall Funeral Home on 22 January, Ott's remains were returned to his native corner of Simcoe County for interment in the Stayner Cemetery.

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