

Distinguished Ornithologist D.V. “Chip” Weseloh

Chris Risley



D.V. (Chip) Weseloh receiving the Distinguished Ornithologist Award at the OFO 2015 Annual Convention at Leamington on 4 October. Presenting the award is Dave Moore, Environment Canada (right). *Photo: Jean Iron*

This year's recipient of the Distinguished Ornithologist Award is D.V. “Chip” Weseloh. Chip is well known to many Ontario birders but some highlights of his background will be important to those who may not know him or know why he was given this award. His contributions include: outstanding scientific research, long-term service to Ontario Field Ornithologists (OFO), his ability to communicate science, and his passion for birds, especially colonial waterbirds.

Chip is an emeritus wildlife biologist who worked for the Canadian Wildlife Service (CWS), part of Environment Canada, in Burlington and Downsview for over 35 years. Prior to his CWS position, he completed graduate studies on colonial waterbirds, worked as a bird tour leader, a museum curator in Alberta and an environmental consultant.

Chip grew up in a small town in south-central Minnesota where his initial interest in birds developed during duck hunting trips with his father and younger brother. Driving country roads, scouting feeding areas and figuring out where the ducks would be the next morning, spurred his interests in birds and their behaviour.

During his undergraduate years at Gustavus Adolphus College in St. Peter, Minnesota, Chip's ecology professor happened to mention that repeated defecation from Great Blue Herons (*Ardea herodias*) over the edge of their arboreal nests, over time, changed the herbaceous vegetation growing beneath their nests. He undertook a class project on this topic and then continued the research for his MSc. degree from Michigan Technological University (Weseloh and Brown 1972). Intrigued by the roosting and feeding flights he had seen of the herons during that research, Chip went on to complete a PhD. at the University of Calgary on the local movements and urban ecology of Ring-billed Gulls (*Larus delawarensis*) (Weseloh 1976). He became hooked on colonial waterbirds and when asked why, he notes, "Usually when you find one or two of them nesting, you find hundreds. They're easy to find, easy to count, easy to catch and easy to work with...and they're fun!"

Starting employment with the CWS in 1978, Chip was the lead field biologist with the Great Lakes Herring Gull Annual Egg Monitoring Project where his duties involved collecting Herring Gull (*Larus argentatus*) eggs for contaminant analysis and monitoring reproductive success along with super normal

clutches and skeletal deformities at select colonies in each of the Great Lakes. He also periodically investigated contaminant levels in other colonial waterbirds: Common Terns (*Sterna hirundo*), Caspian Terns (*Hyropogone caspia*), Black Terns (*Chlidonias niger*), Double-crested Cormorants (*Phalacrocorax auritus*), Great Black-backed Gulls (*Larus marinus*) and Black-crowned Night-Herons (*Nycticorax nycticorax*). This was all part of the Great Lakes Wildlife Toxic Chemical Surveillance Program. He maintained that position throughout his 35 years with CWS; the project is now the longest continuous annual wildlife toxicology sampling program in the world.

In 1998, with the retirement of Dr. Hans Blokpoel from CWS, Chip inherited the responsibility for the conservation of Great Lakes colonial waterbirds along with his usual role of monitoring contaminant levels and population effects in Herring Gulls and other waterbirds.

With this new responsibility, his field research expanded to include the decadal censuses of colonial waterbirds on all of the Canadian Great Lakes (a three year undertaking every ten years), annual monitoring of the expanding population of the Double-crested Cormorants on the four Canadian Great Lakes, and satellite tagging and tracking of Herring and Great Black-backed Gulls on the upper Great Lakes and Lake Ontario. He also began monitoring numbers of Little Gulls (*Larus minutus*) at Oshawa Second Marsh (their most predictable and populous gathering site in North America) and developing the Little Gull Viewing Weekend (assisted by Tyler Hoar and



Counting Caspian Tern nests on Mohawk Island, Lake Erie, 2007. Photo: Tania Havelka, CWS.



Banding Great Blue Herons on Howland Rocks, North Channel, Lake Huron, 9 June 2008.

CWS, file photo

Richard Joos). He was also able to start extensive colour-marking of Great Egrets (*Ardea alba*) at their colonies and recruit citizen scientists to assist in reporting re-sightings, as well as censusing their roosting sites during spring and fall (more than 70 sites have been identified so far).

Chip, with his co-workers, have published over 200 peer-reviewed journal articles, government reports, technical reports, book chapters and progress reports. Likewise, he has given dozens of presentations. His list of co-authors on these publications and presentations is impressive and speaks to Chip's ability to collaborate effectively with a wide variety of scientists and citizen scientists, both within Ontario and Canada as well as internationally.

For his efforts, he received the Queen's Golden Jubilee Medal in 2003 for contributions to ornithological science and

bird conservation. The value of his research was recognized in 2012 by his co-workers when they formally proposed to Geographic Naming Canada that a set of rocks (and the gull, night-heron, cormorant and egret colonies on them) in the rapids just above Niagara Falls be officially named “Weseloh Rocks”. In 2014, his research was also recognized when he received the Lifetime Achievement Award from the International Association of Great Lakes Research.

Chip first became interested in birding as a hobby while attending graduate school at the University of Calgary. His supervisor, who was also president of the local naturalist club, required all his students to take part in club activities and lead field trips. Chip obliged and immersed himself in birds other than waterbirds. His interest drew him into the birding world in short order.

In the late 1970s, he and his wife, Linda, were two of the founding executive of OFO and he remembers the heady planning meetings of the day: “Those were exciting meetings. Figuring out who was going to do what, what we were going to call ourselves, how we were going to get started with a big bang and what our logo was to be....” He not only served as President in those early days (1986-87) but also, due to his interest in writing, he and Linda were the first editors of the new journal, *Ontario Birds*, from 1982 to 1984.

Chip and Linda live in Toronto but their favorite birding haunts are on the eastern edge of the city, so naturally they became active in the Pickering Field Naturalists and Chip served as its President from 1980 to 1982. Nationally and



A Mute Swan nest on Nottawasaga Island, Collingwood, 1 May 2008. *CWS, file photo*

internationally, he is active in the Waterbird Society, acting as its President during 2010-2011 and, before that, organizing its meeting in Niagara Falls in 2001. He has also been a board member of the Long Point Bird Observatory and the Ontario Bird Banding Association. He spends his summers, with his family, on Garden Island, a 26 ha island in Kingstons harbour.

Chip is always interested in field work and is known to remark, “A bad day in the field is better than a good day in the office.” One of his ongoing projects has been to band and wing-tag young Great

Egrets at their nests and then track their post-fledging movements. His use of volunteer birders to report sightings is an excellent example of a “citizen science” research project that the public has bought into enthusiastically. He maintains a network of volunteers across the province and continent for reporting tagged egrets. He also enjoys watching and documenting egrets and other birds (e.g. American Crows, *Corvus brachyrhynchos*), going to roost, a time when most birders are winding down from their day, and has taken many birders for a dusk watch that is never forgotten.

Chip has been an enthusiastic mentor for numerous young scientists, technicians, students and volunteers. Always one to encourage and support others, Chip has this advice for those looking for a career in biology or conservation: “I can’t overestimate the value of volunteerism. In this day and age, it seems like the competition for bird jobs is very high and there are fewer and fewer of them. Do whatever you have to do to get your foot in the door. Make yourself indispensable to whomever you can do volunteer work for. Several of the people I’ve hired over the years at CWS started out as volunteers for us.”

Chip is a recognized scientist, a keen birder and an active supporter and contributor to OFO and *Ontario Birds*, who enjoys sharing his knowledge. He is well deserving of the OFO Distinguished Ornithologist Award.

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