

Distinguished Ornithologist Margaret Bain

Glenn Coady

MARGARET JEAN CHRISTINE BAIN came to what was seen around the world as a very desirable Canada, flush with promise and optimism in the immediate aftermath of hosting the world at the very successful Expo '67, and one still freshly caught up in the excitement of 'Trudeaumania'. She was part of the tail end of the great post-war British 'brain drain' that was to see many highly educated and adventurous ex-patriots seek out opportunities spanning across the globe.

As with Charles Fothergill, William Pope, Thomas McIlwraith, William Loane and William Brodie in previous eras of immigration in the 19th century, the loss to the British Isles was to prove to be a source of great benefit to ornithology in Ontario.

From an early age, Margaret was clearly set on a course of achievement and pushing through established 'glass ceilings'. Between 1956 and 1961 she studied medicine on scholarship at the University of Edinburgh in Scotland, and after residency in London hospitals she specialized in obstetrics. By the end of the decade she had emigrated to Canada, where she initially worked in Toronto in

the country's two busiest obstetrical departments at Women's College Hospital and Mount Sinai Hospital. In 1971, she moved to Durham Region to raise her family and begin a private practice in obstetrics and accepted a staff position in the obstetrical department at Oshawa General Hospital, where over the next two-and-a-half decades she would rise through the ranks to become Chief of the Department of Obstetrics and Gynecology, and eventually Vice-Chair of the hospital's entire Department of Surgery.

One day in the early 1970s, an initial lifelong casual interest in birds was to provide one of those pivotal 'spark moments' that most birders can instantly relate to, and it was to transform the remainder of Margaret's life. During the peak of spring migration, she went out into her garden at 210 Byron Street North in Whitby to find a very heavy grounding of warblers and other passerines literally filling every tree and bush with a blaze of colour and activity. She was stricken with awe at the wonder and joy of bird migration and soon joined the local natural history club, the Oshawa Naturalists (later the Durham Region

Field Naturalists), where she met many fine early mentors like Murray and Doris Speirs, Edge and Betty Pegg, George Scott, Naomi Le Vay, Ron Tozer, Jim Richards, Dennis Barry and Dave Calvert. She soon learned all the wonderful birding hotspots available in Durham and dove into learning and mastering Ontario's birds and in no time at all there was no stopping her. Despite a very demanding career and a young family, she seemed to effortlessly be everywhere and always in tune with where the birding was the most productive. It was not very long before she was regularly turning up rare birds and she was soon considered one of the leading local birders in Durham, and inevitably in Ontario as a whole.

This brings me to the dilemma I first considered when I proposed Margaret for the Distinguished Ornithologist Award. I knew that all of the longtime OFO members and birders in Ontario were well acquainted with Margaret, but I was trying to figure out a way make her relatable to the young generation of new birders, many of whom would not be familiar with her history. After thinking about it for some time, I think I found the perfect way to make her experience relatable to this new generation. It was crystallized in a simple analogy – Margaret Bain was Jean Iron *before* Jean Iron was Jean Iron! Judging by the response that line got at the OFO banquet where I presented Margaret with the Distinguished Ornithologist Award, I believe it achieved the desired effect.

Much like Clarence Decatur Howe, the war-time Liberal government Cabinet minister who worked on so many important files that he was nicknamed the



Margaret Bain at the Point Pelee National Park Visitor Centre on 14 May 2007. *Photo: Jean Iron*

'Minister of Everything', Margaret soon had her finger in so many pies that in retrospect it is very hard to believe it left much time for either birding or delivering babies!

In 1980, she took over summarizing the monthly notable bird sightings in the newsletter of the Durham Region Field Naturalists, a task which she continued to perform for more than two decades. One of the most interesting records for which she had uncovered the details and found material evidence was the sighting by two non-birders of Ontario's first ever Black Skimmer at Whitby Harbour in the fall of 1977. She also served on the Durham Region Field Naturalists' executive for many years, culminating in service as its President and past President.

During the first Ontario Breeding Bird Atlas from 1981 to 1985, she stepped in to serve as Regional Coordinator for Durham Region and recruited and organized atlasers and a series of square bashes to ensure that all of the region's squares achieved the desired coverage targets. During the second Ontario Breeding Bird Atlas, from 2001 to 2005, she served as Regional Coordinator for Northumberland County.

One of the most celebrated parts of her legacy involved a conservation initiative forced on her by events. In the inaugural issue of OFO's journal, *Ontario Birds*, Margaret wrote the first OFO birding site guide to one of her most cherished Durham Region birding sites, Whitby's Thickson's Woods, which she brought to the popular consciousness of the entire Ontario birding community as one of the finest bird migration traps on the north shore of Lake Ontario. Many did not realize, however, how close this site had recently come to being lost forever.

In 1982, the developer who owned the woods, frustrated by an inability to obtain permits to develop the site for lucrative condominiums, decided to sell the logging rights to the two hundred year-old eastern white pines. Work crews came in and felled 66 of the old growth pines from the woods before much could be done to stop them. Local birders and the residents of the Thickson Point community were dismayed with the pace of the destruction of this vital migratory bird stopover, and receiving little help in effectively thwarting this via government agencies, had to spring into action and come up with their own solution.

Into the breach stepped Margaret Bain and a group of other influential birders and local residents. After literally standing in the way of the chainsaws in protest and employing cheque-book bribes to send work crews away without felling any trees, they bought the time to organize that solution. In addition to frustrating the developer, Margaret had the time to organize the Thickson's Woods Heritage Trust, a land trust which would serve as the model by which she and a few key supporters could make a serious effort to outright negotiate an offer to purchase the woods from the developer. In dipping into her children's education funds and convincing other friends to make similar large donations to the cause, they were able to come up with a down payment on that purchase and to secure a mortgage for the balance of the funding. Disaster was averted and by 1984 it was clear that the woods had been saved. Margaret went on to become the long-time Chair of the Thickson's Woods Land Trust and served on its Board of Directors for more than twenty-five years, during which time countless successful donor campaigns, bake sales, wildlife art auctions and fall fairs were organized to see to it that the mortgages on the woods, as well as the addition of the adjacent meadow and a couple of privately held woodlots, were all duly paid off, thus saving the resultant Thickson's Wood Nature Reserve in perpetuity.

On 13 April 1985, Margaret discovered a new bird species for Ontario a little north of the woods on Thickson Road South when she found a Eurasian Jackdaw on a hydro pole near the railway line.



Glenn Coady presents Margaret Bain with OFO's Distinguished Ornithologist Award at the 2019 Annual Convention in Hamilton.

Photo: Jean Iron

This record was accepted by the Ontario Bird Records Committee and she documented the occurrence in a paper in *Ontario Birds*.

Perhaps Margaret's greatest contribution to ornithology in Ontario has been her trailblazing ways and her stellar example as a role model for other women in birding and ornithology. In 1982, she became only the fourth female member of the formerly all-male Toronto Ornithological Club (after Phyllis MacKay, Joy Goodwin and Linda Weseloh were accepted as members in 1980). In 1988, she became the first female President of the Ontario Field Ornithologists. The rapid succession of successful and effective female presidents in Margaret Bain, Gerry Shemilt and Jean Iron, during OFO's greatest period of growth, definitely had a transformative effect on the role of women in field ornithology in Ontario. Talented female birders like Mary Gartshore, Sarah Rupert, Barbara Charlton, Cheryl Edgcombe, Seabrooke

Leckie, Sarah Lamond and Amanda Guercio now garner a respect from their male counterparts that was reflexively denied to an earlier generation like Margaret Mitchell, Doris Speirs, Naomi LeVay and Phyllis MacKay.

Continuing on the same theme, Margaret was elected as the first female voting member of the Ontario Bird Records Committee and served as both Secretary and Chair in her time on the committee. She has also served OFO as an editorial assistant for *Ontario Birds* in the past.

Between 1990 and 1994, she teamed with Brian Henshaw to produce a series of excellent annual Durham Region Bird Reports summarizing the years 1989 through 1993 in the region.

Between 1991 and 2004, she teamed with Phill Holder as the co-founder and co-editor of the magazine *Birders Journal*, a highly respected print journal that had many exceptional articles on identification and status of birds, and she co-wrote a Cross-Canada Roundup each issue, first with Matt Holder and then with Don Shanahan. In November 2000, *Birders Journal* sponsored and organized a hugely successful North American Gull Conference at Niagara Falls that was attended by birders from all across North America.

As if this wasn't enough to fill her time, Margaret also served terms as Chair of the Board of the Long Point Bird Observatory and as a board member of the American Birding Association. For many years beginning in 2000, she wrote the fall seasonal summary for the Ontario Region in the journal *North American Birds*.

In starting a draft manuscript on the Birds of the Greater Toronto Area, it quickly became obvious to me that Margaret was involved in so many of the significant bird records in Durham Region over the past 45 years, that an important consideration in staving off carpal tunnel syndrome for me, was to create a hot-key shortcut on the keyboard, so as not to have to type out her name so frequently!

Durham Region has been blessed over the years with an abundance of excellent leaders in ornithology: Charles Fothergill, George Gwynne Bird, Earl Calvert, Albert Ellis Allin, Doris and Murray Speirs, Betty and Edge Pegg, Naomi and Bert Le Vay, George Scott, Alf Bunker, Ron Tozer, Jim Richards, Dennis Barry, Ross James, Rob Nisbet, Jim Mountjoy and James Kamstra, to name but a few. All of them have one thing in common — none are any more distinguished than Margaret.

Although she has moved to Cobourg and now shares her brand of magic in Northumberland County, rest assured that many of us will always view her as the 'Grand Dame' of Durham birding.

Congratulations on a long overdue honour Margaret!

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