

HOW THE BLUE JAY GOT ITS NAME

The beginnings of the *Blue Jay* read like a fairy story. Let me tell it from the vantage point of a boy who was there.

More than half a century ago, World War I interrupted a young woman's botanical studies in England, Germany and Switzerland. Instead of completing her research studies after the war, Isabel M. Adams married a young Canadian soldier, Robert J. Priestly, on New Year's eve of 1918, and came to live in Canada. After residence in Calgary and Victoria, the young couple moved to Winnipeg in 1929, where Bob was desk editor with the *Winnipeg Free Press*. Isabel joined the botany section of the Manitoba Natural History Society, but discovered on society outings that members of the ornithology section, led by A. G. Lawrence, seemed to be having more fun. Mrs. Priestly began the study of birds as well as flowers, and continued both after moving to Yorkton in July 1935.

The following year, a nine-year-old boy in Yorkton received a copy of *Birds of Canada* by P. A. Taverner for his birthday. Two aunts had joined together to buy it, for three dollars was an unheard-of amount to spend on one book in depression times. Three years later, the boy encountered some birds he could not identify from the book. His father suggested that the boy go to see Mrs. Priestly, now co-author of the weekly "Wild Life Corner" column in the *Yorkton Enterprise*. Mrs. Priestly at once recognized that he was describing immature American Goldfinches, which in fall look very different from the adults depicted in the Allan Brooks' painting in Taverner.

The next spring, the boy and several of his friends began regular weekly hikes around the "muskeg" on the western outskirts of Yorkton with Mrs. Priestly. After two years, Mrs. Priestly suggested that they type up a list of the species they had seen on these walks. The boy

enthusiastically offered instead mimeograph the list, for he had learned to type while immobilized with fractured ankle in grade 5, and now grade 9 was the operator of a small mimeographing business that printed the Rotary Club's weekly bulletin.

Mrs. Priestly decided to include additional records of interest within thirty-mile radius, with some historical notes from John Gunn Spirit Lake and from Frank Baines Crescent Lake. The list was mimeographed in July 1942, with "run" of 75 copies, thought by Mrs. Priestly to be three times as many were needed. But she hadn't counted on her old friend, A. G. Lawrence of Winnipeg, who received a courteous copy of the rather pathetic little five-page list of 193 possible and hypothetical species. "Chickadee Notes" #1,114 on July 31 featured the Yorkton list and advised readers to send 10¢ for a copy, "a model for other clubs and for isolated observers."

Since Mr. Priestly was justly proud of his wife, and also happened to be the Yorkton representative for the *Regina Leader-Post* and the *Saskatoon Star-Phoenix*, a long news story in both papers told of the project, showered on Mrs. Priestly by the press from Winnipeg. Further requests for the list poured in and a reprint became necessary.

Many purchasers of the list wrote back to Mrs. Priestly. Judge Louis McKim of Melville sent a substantial list of additional species; and William Niven of Sheho, also at the edge of the Yorkton area, sent other comments. Maurice G. Street of Nipawin and Steve A. Mann of Skull Creek wrote long letters to discuss differences between the birdlife of the north and southwest, respectively, and that of the Yorkton area.

Mrs. Priestly decided that these observations, too, should be distributed. She considered first a round-robin mailing of such let



s. Isabel M. Priestly, born July 23, 1893, Wbury, Berks., England. Died April 23, 1966, Yorkton, Saskatchewan. Named as one of 23 outstanding Canadian women biologists by Lorraine C. Smith, "Canadian Women Natural Scientists — Why Not?", *Can. Field-Nat.* 90: 1-4, March 1976.

the boy suggested that these, too, should be mimeographed. Mrs. Priestly then conceived the idea of an annual birdwatchers' newsletter and decided that such a project would require a society to back it.

The organization meeting to discuss the formation of a new society was held September 11, 1942 at a private home with eight people present. There were only four adults — Mrs. J. Foreman, Miss Ethel Lloyd, J. Tepas and Mrs. Priestly. Harvey Beck, a high school student just entering Grade 10, was elected temporary chairman. A 19 student, Vernon Barnes, made the motion that a Natural History Society be formed. The boy named secretary-treasurer. The

only student not elected to office was Ray Adams, then in grade 7. Harvey Beck and Vernon Barnes became directors, together with Ethel Lloyd, and Mrs. Priestly was President of the new society.

The first proposal was to name the society the Northeastern Saskatchewan Natural History Society, for the *Yorkton Enterprise* referred to Yorkton as the hub of "Northeastern Saskatchewan", the most northeasterly settled area of the province. Mr. Jack Tepas strongly insisted that Yorkton was in the southern third of the province. Others wanted to call it the Saskatchewan Natural History Society, but Mrs. Priestly was sensitive to the fact that a Regina Natural History Society had been in existence for many years. By exclusion, the society became the Yorkton Natural History Society.

No time was lost in holding an executive meeting on September 15, to draft a circular which was mailed on September 17 to 63 prospective out-of-town members. The membership fee was quoted at 25¢ per year and a first issue was promised in two weeks time! The minutes of that first executive meeting noted that "as the allotted time was up, the meeting adjourned." In those days, high school students had to get to bed early!

The minutes of both meetings and the circular itself all failed to mention the name of this projected quarterly bulletin. However, the first issue in October carried the name *Blue Jay* on the masthead. Only in the fifth issue (Vol. 2, No. 1), did Mrs. Priestly explain that the name was chosen because "'Sammy Jay' was the 'roving reporter' of the Burgess Bedtime Stories world." It was her hope that the *Blue Jay* magazine would carry nature's message throughout Saskatchewan even as the blue jay in the Burgess stories carried news to all the birds and animals of the Green Forest and the Green Meadows.

Not surprisingly, the second annual meeting of September 24, 1943, showed a deficit of \$9.40 on expenditures of \$59.50 during the first year of

operation. The minutes of that meeting noted that "a rather heated discussion then took place on the matter of raising the membership fee. It was pointed out that they could not be raised this year, as members had been informed in the *Blue Jay* that the fees would remain the same for the coming year." The membership fee was raised to 50¢ one year later, even though the society had a balance on hand of \$12.71 after voting a \$10 honorarium to the secretary-treasurer, and purchasing a \$4.75 book as a token of their appreciation for Mrs. Priestly's work as president and editor. The benefits of an enlarging membership were becoming evident.

The *Blue Jay* made contact with people from all over Saskatchewan, most of whom didn't realize how many shared their interests. In addition to the names already mentioned, out-of-Yorkton contributors to volume 1 of the *Blue Jay* were: Dick Bird of Regina, Mrs. C. W. Cates of McLean, E. P. Coe of Wawota, H. Downing of Moosomin, R. M. Ferrie of North Battleford, John R. Garden of Wolseley, Mrs. John Hubbard of Grenfell, Miss E. Jones of Raymore, Dr. R. W. Kirkby of Prince Albert, Mrs. Marion Nixon of Wauchope, W. J. Orchard of Regina, Laurence B. Potter of Eastend, Dr. D. S. Rawson of Saskatoon, H. M. Rayner of Ituna, F. Rouse of Scott, J. Frank Roy of Tullis, LeRoy Simmons of Maymont, Arthur Ward of Burnham and J. H. Yerex of Clair.

Mrs. Priestly died April 23, 1946, soon after completing the 15th issue of the *Blue Jay*. The very last note in

her diary was for April 8, 1946, follows: "Lovely morning. Walked out along the tracks to pond on west road. Meadowlarks singing, juncos everywhere, blue jays around the trees. Ponds frozen over, no ducks or red-wings, just one Brewer's. On way home, heard a Blue Jay singing."*

Who would have predicted, from its shaky start depending on a concatenation of improbable circumstances, that the *Blue Jay* would develop quickly into a respected and widely circulated regional publication, the envy of many other areas of this continent? Its ability to report scientific data of importance, while maintaining popular interest, is a heritage from Mrs. Priestly, and this tradition has been continued by her successors, Cliff Shaw, Lloyd Camichael, George Ledingham, Bob Nero, and Bernie Gollop. A few people of unusual talent and dedication have thus made the *Blue Jay* a success. Our best wishes go forward to the new editor, Gary Seib, to carry on the tradition.

*As A. C. Bent says: "Comparatively few observers are familiar with the song of the blue jay . . . his quiet solo . . . is a potpourri of faint whistles and various low, sweet notes, some in phrasing and pitch suggesting a robin's song — a mockingbird might be singing, sotto voice." What an appropriate last entry! May the "song" of the *Blue Jay* long continue in Mrs. Priestly's memory — C.S.H.

EDITOR'S NOTE: Most readers will have recognized at once that "the boy", now with greying sideburns and two married children, is none other than the long-time chairman of our Special Publications Committee, C. Stuart Houston.



Fred Lahrn