

# RIPPLES

DAVID G. MILLER, RR #5, Saskatoon, Saskatchewan. S7K 3J8

Ripples spreading in a pond: the inter-connectedness of things becomes a little more obvious to me now that I am past forty and sporting a few well-earned grey hairs. I'd never heard of Mrs. Priestly until 1986, but clearly this almost-mythical lady had a profound effect on my life. It was she, I am told, who introduced Pauline Summers to the joys and challenges of bird-watching, and in 1958 it was Miss Summers who passed on the sense of adventure and secret knowledge to me and a select group of Grade Four students in Simpson School in Yorkton.

Miss Summers told me in later years that she had a policy of not calling for the attention of a child who was staring out the window, unless there was something more interesting to offer in the confines of the classroom. At the time I thought this was a profound understanding of the value of education, but I have come to suspect my teacher's attitude stemmed from the fact that she herself often found the world outside the window to be as fascinating and worthwhile as the books and blackboards within.

Miss Summers often took her students on "outings" during school hours, but only a privileged handful were invited to accompany her on Saturday mornings to the magical environs of "The Muskeg" on the west edge of town or even, occasionally, to York Lake. There we peered through her binoculars, identified frog's eggs, heard bitterns, pursued dragonflies, discussed gulls,

gazed at myriad different ducks, and rarely escaped without soaked feet. I could not understand why *everyone* didn't spend all their spare time in such pursuits, and I wondered what made my teacher so exceptional among adults — why she hadn't lost the understanding of what is important in life, the way most grown-ups seemed to.

My family moved away from Yorkton to other towns with other lake shores. I begged for and received a pair of used binoculars when I was twelve. At fifteen I got an after-school job in the darkroom of the local weekly newspaper in Rosethorn. I learned about photography, and later earned enough money with a camera to help put myself through the National Theatre School in Montreal. Not for years did I realize who taught me to take pictures: the Grade Four teacher who taught me to look, simply look, at the world around me.

I went on looking at birds, never in a very organized fashion, always with awe and delight. I bought new binoculars when the old ones disintegrated; I bought a copy of *Peterson's Field Guide*; I married a city girl who moved to the country with me and started to see the birds. I didn't think much about bird-watching or even think of myself as a birder; I lost track of Miss Summers when she retired. Looking at the world and the birds was just a natural part of life. So it seemed quite natural in 1986 to attend a Saskatoon Natural History Society meet-

ing to hear Stuart Houston talk about bird-banding — and *almost* natural to overlook my fear of heights and volunteer to help with banding owls the following year.

I've been an enthusiastic banding assistant ever since. The sense of "privilege" has returned — how many people have the opportunity to see so much of this wonderful province, to meet so many nice farmers, and to extract a Bald Eagle's talons from one's thigh while sitting in a nest 70 feet above the ground?

Pauline Summers has returned to my life, too. Stuart had known her as part of the circle of bird-watchers in the Yorkton of his boyhood. Hers, for instance, was the only Yorkton area sighting of a Steller's Jay. In addition to telling me stories of Mrs. Priestly and the early days of the *Blue Jay*, Stuart gave me a very special gift: Miss Summers' address in Victoria. Cathryn and I went to visit her there last year. We took her bird-watching. She still has the same binoculars. She still doesn't think or act much like a grown-up.

I have my own sub-permit to band

birds now, and have introduced my "surrogate nephew" Dylan Von Kuster into the ranks of Houston's Raiders. His years of experience as a climber and bander while in high school has led to employment by a University of Saskatchewan research team, to climb trees and band merlins. Employed. Paid! Not a thing that could be said of Mrs. Priestly or Stuart Houston or Pauline Summers or me. But Dylan is still having fun, so I guess it's okay.

And the ripples keep spreading. I suppose that Mrs. Priestly in her turn was infected by someone else to steer her interest into botany. Stuart tells me that her interest in ornithology was fostered by A.G. Lawrence and others during Manitoba Natural History Society outings near Winnipeg: she noticed that the birders seemed to be having more fun.

I am certain that the ripples won't end with me or with Dylan. We are the privileged ones: we've learned to look. My parents taught me that privilege and responsibility go hand-in-hand: it is up to us to keep Mrs. Priestly's ripples spreading far into the future.

