

TRIBUTE TO MAURICE STREET

HONOURABLE MR. JUSTICE DAVID H. WRIGHT, 1601 - 415 Heritage Crescent, Saskatoon, Saskatchewan. S7H 5N3

This issue of the *Blue Jay* contains a tribute to the late Isabel Priestly. Although I never met Mrs. Priestly, I knew her through the profound influence she had on another outstanding naturalist, Maurice G. Street, and he in turn had a profound influence on me.

Some of my earlier reminiscences, "Strictly for the Birds — An Interview with Nipawin's Noted Ornithologist," appeared in *The Blue Jay* some years ago (15: 99-101, September 1957). They were prepared while I was at University.

I first met Maurice Street at my parents' home in Nipawin, Saskatchewan, in the early 1940s. My father, a family physician, enjoyed people enormously. Following his usual evening visit to the hospital he would frequently stop at the post office, the local pharmacy, the local printing plant or wherever he saw an opportunity to find out what was going on, to visit and to gather new information. One evening he ran into Maurice Street, with an injured Boreal Owl. He asked Maurice to bring it to our home so we boys could see it. I have an ancient and almost indistinguishable photograph of the event.

Maurice was well known in the district as a birder. He was also a warm, sincere, down-to-earth individual with an infectious grin and a laugh to match. He enjoyed life and people.

He translated his enthusiasm for ornithology into descriptions and explanations which interested everyone and influenced people throughout the district. I am sure Billy Matthews, his bird-banding protégé, would agree. Because of his warmth and generosity, I soon developed an interest in birds. My parents, especially my mother, encouraged me.

Maurice had a small home across from the post office on Centre Street in Nipawin. He and his wife, Rose, were unerringly patient and kind. I can remember half a dozen field trips with Maurice and wish to share them with *Blue Jay* readers nearly 40 years later. Some elaborate on the observations he recorded in the publication he co-authored with Stuart Houston, *Birds of the Saskatchewan River, Carlton to Cumberland*.

Maurice loved the outdoors and had a keen sense of every part of it. The area below the Nipawin Union Hospital is marshy and boggy. On one of the first trips I made with Maurice he pointed to the Pitcher Plants, so common there. He used his pocket knife to cut back the plant to show me all the insect skeletons in the bottom of the flower, all reminders of that carnivorous plant's interesting diet.

One of the most remarkable experiences of my young life occurred in June 1945. Maurice had located the nest of a Pileated Woodpecker in



Opening of Maurice Street Wildlife Sanctuary.

Gary W. Seib

a stand of dead timber not far from the Nipawin Union Hospital. He was certain that the female was incubating. He wanted to band her. As we went towards the site I looked over and saw, under some large spruce trees, a small mossy pool in which a single Mallard drake was floating silently. Off to one side was a bank of marsh marigolds. The picture was stunning. When I pointed it out to Maurice, he simply nodded his head and grinned in that crinkly-eyed way of his and pressed on towards the nest. It was not that he wasn't interested, it was just that a Mallard duck was hardly an attraction when he was going to band something as exotic as a Pileated Woodpecker. The woodpecker nest was about 40 feet high in a dead tree and as I recall it was a tamarack. Maurice had tied a dip net of the sort used to scoop up jackfish and other large game fish to the end of the tamarack

pole. His plan was to place the net over the tree hole and to have me pound the tree trunk so that the female would dart out the hole and be caught. It was a bit precarious. Because the pole was so long, it was extremely difficult for Maurice to maintain control over it. However, he managed to get it up to the hole. I pounded the trunk. Almost instantly a startled female Pileated darted out. We both struggled with the pole to get her safely down to ground. The net was large enough, however, to contain her quite adequately and there was no injury to her other than her pride. It was an extraordinary opportunity to see this magnificent bird at very close range.

I was astounded by her claws, perfectly adapted for grasping bark. Maurice warned me to keep my hands away from the claws and from her enormous bill. Maurice subdued

and banded the female while she was still in the net. It was relatively easy afterwards to peel the net back and let her escape. The account of this experience appears on page 114 in the Houston/Street book.

Maurice was undoubtedly the least intrusive observer I have ever seen. He could walk through any kind of terrain with an absolute minimum of noise and disturbance. He chose his steps carefully; he walked around branches instead of through them; and consistently kept his level of activity to the absolute minimum. He made no unnecessary gestures, he never talked unless he had to tell you something important. I have tried to follow his practices. He also stopped regularly and for extended periods of time to look and listen, a technique that I have found extremely useful.

Too many people, including some birders I have met, tend to press on from one end of the forest — or the pond — to the other. It is quite astonishing the number of things that you can see and hear if you stop for three or four minutes and look and listen. In coniferous forests that is often the way you discover the presence of the tree climbers, the nuthatches, the woodpeckers. I find that the only way I can ever locate crossbills is by listening for their characteristic call. During migration, there is no reason why a well-positioned observer should not let the birds come to him or her. If you are seated, it is easier to write your notes.

I was never concerned about being lost in the woods, even in mid-winter, as Maurice had an unerring instinct for direction and was familiar with the terrain on both sides of the river in the Nipawin district. Late one winter, I believe it was February,

Maurice called to say that he was going out to confirm the location of a Gray Jay nest. I was astounded that any bird would ever be nest-building at that time of the year. I was delighted. We went some distance into a heavy spruce forest full of fresh snow. Earlier, Maurice had seen several adults gathering nesting material. It was not long before he located the nest and pointed it out to me, about 30 feet above the ground in a large spruce. Once he drew my attention to it, it was quite easy to see. The nest appeared complete. He concluded — correctly as it turned out — that the female was laying eggs.

I also remember a visit by Stuart Houston and others to Nipawin (Houston/Street, page 104). The plan was to go northeast of Nipawin in search of a Bald Eagle's nest. I went along. We did not locate any eagles. However, Maurice pointed out a Northern Hawk Owl, sitting about 20 feet from the ground on a spruce branch. He explained that it was one of the few owls that hunt effectively during the daytime and described with some relish how much consternation a hawk owl can produce among a group of crows.

When I got back home I was drawn particularly to Allan Brooks' portrait in *Taverner* of the hawk owl in the boreal forest — a wonderful representation of a rarely seen species. My other recollection of that trip concerns a large number of mosquitoes!

Maurice was an extremely successful bird bander. When he later moved to the outskirts of Nipawin, he built a small home and left a large area of brush undisturbed at the back of the property. In close proximity to other wooded areas on

the edge of the town, there was a steady procession of birds through the Street yard all year long. He had traps and nets of various kinds. He banded over 13,000 birds. Several times my brother and I assisted him by setting out small traps for species such as Bohemian Waxwings and grosbeaks. Once or twice we were able to catch a Blue Jay. On one or two occasions we banded these birds ourselves under his careful instructions; on other occasions he would come by our home and band the birds while they were trapped. My mother's intense and continuing interest was a great encouragement to both my brother and me in this respect.

My parents maintained a feeding station throughout all the years that they lived in Nipawin and some amazing specimens came to feed. I noted in reviewing the Street/Houston publication that on one occasion my brother and I observed a Common Grackle during the Christmas Bird Count. It is something frankly I had forgotten but Maurice had dutifully recorded it and given us credit for it.

As the years unfolded, Maurice continued to assist me. Much of what I learned had to do with developing my skills as an observer rather than learning about individual species. Even now I find it difficult to go anywhere, particularly on foot, without looking around to see what bird life is in the area. In the years we lived in the centre of Saskatoon, close to the river, these could be very rewarding experiences. The many years I spent walking back and forth to my old law office gave me an opportunity to see all sorts of species at different times of the year. It was always a thrill to see a Western

Grebe on the water, a Belted Kingfisher perched on a small tree by the edge of the river, and a Blackburnian Warbler darting through a small bush beside a walkway near 19th Street.

Maurice and I made a trip along the Saskatchewan River in late May of 1947. I recall making our way through the heavy aspen woods some distance from the river when Maurice pointed out, quite excitedly, a small and extremely active bird which he identified as a Winter Wren (Houston/Street, page 140). I have never heard or seen another one. I didn't fully appreciate the significance of this sighting until I later read the Houston/Street book.

As Maurice and I were out driving one late spring, he pointed to a grassy field, a nesting area for Brewer's Blackbirds. I was surprised to see how many nests he located in fairly close proximity. We walked from one to the other and observed with great ease the nests and eggs. It seemed to me there were dozens but I am sure there were less than 12 nests. This seemed almost too easy and I have since wondered whether I would ever make a similar find again. It was old stuff for Maurice but a thrill for me.

My life has been enriched enormously by the influence and friendship of Maurice Street. The interest he instilled in me has lasted a lifetime and has prompted me to take my binoculars to places as diverse as Cambridge, England; St. John's, Newfoundland; Fredericton, New Brunswick; Scottsdale, Arizona; and Maui, Hawaii. I will always be grateful to Maurice directly, and for the influence Mrs. Priestly had on him.