
IN MEMORIUM

MARGARET BELCHER, 1920 - 2003

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Respected teacher, devoted member of Nature Saskatchewan from its inception in 1949, author, and mentor to dozens of budding naturalists, Margaret Belcher died in Regina, June 29, 2003.

Born at Dilke, SK, December 19, 1920, Margaret graduated from Luther College, Regina, received her B.A. from the University of Saskatchewan, an M.A. from the University of Toronto and continued post-graduate studies in France. For years she taught French at Regina College, where she was also Dean of Women. When Regina College became part of the new University of Regina, she taught in the French Department until her retirement in 1988.

Raised on a farm, Margaret loved the prairies and its people. Throughout her teaching career she maintained a home in Regina, but the family farm near Dilke was her retreat, to which she returned as often as she could and for a number of years, actually commuted from the farm to work. Until illness made a return to Regina necessary, Margaret lived in the farm home after retiring in 1988.



Margaret was a member of the executive of the Saskatchewan Natural History Society for 21 years, serving one term as president and 15 years as recording secretary. During those years she carried on the Society's extensive correspondence, marshalled background information to support the numerous resolutions passed at annual meetings, and helped prepare agendas for annual meetings with the provincial cabinet. Those of us who worked with her quickly recognized her quiet effectiveness. She was highly

organized, practical, persuasive, but never confrontational. In addition to her work on the executive, she was also associate editor of *Blue Jay* for 21 years. Never one to seek the limelight, Margaret was one of most outstanding contributors to the vitality and growth of the Saskatchewan Natural History Society in its first 50 years. Her contributions were recognized officially in 1989 when she was made a Fellow of the Society.

Despite her busy teaching career and the countless hours she devoted to the work of the Natural History Society, Margaret found time for her many friends and for community. One of her friends speaks for many: "Whenever I met her, she never failed to offer encouragement and support, not to mention solid, practical advice. Her friendly calmness of spirit invited confidence." She often led field trips for the Regina society, participated in the annual Christmas Bird Counts and, assisted by George Ledingham, conducted the Lumsden Breeding Bird Survey for 26 continuous years. She inspired many young people to develop an interest in nature and was a fond aunt to four nephews and a niece. She was always interested in farm life and a loyal supporter of the Saskatchewan Wheat Pool. She helped maintain St. Lucy's Anglican Church in Dilke and was actively involved in the local branch of the Red Cross. Her many contributions were recognized by the Regina Soroptomist Club which named her International Woman of the Year in 1988. In 1997 she was invested with the Saskatchewan Order of Merit and in 2003, a few weeks before her death, she

received the Queen's Golden Jubilee Medal.

Margaret's *Birds of Regina* (1961), Special Publication No. 3, following Houston and Street's *Birds of the Saskatchewan River, Carlton to Cumberland* (1959), was the second annotated regional bird list published by the Saskatchewan Natural History Society. Illustrated with the sketches and photographs of Fred Lahrman, another distinguished member of the Society who, sadly, died the same day that Margaret did, *The Birds of Regina* established the pattern for the many regional publications that have followed it. A revised edition (Special Publication No. 12), significantly expanded, followed in 1980. In 1996 Margaret completed *The Isabel Priestly Legacy*, a history of the Saskatchewan Natural History Society, 1949-1990, and of its predecessor, the Yorkton Natural Society, founded by Isabel Priestly. Carefully researched, immensely readable, it ranks as a major historical document. In her introduction, Margaret admits the possibility that her long service on the executive (1954 to 1975) "has undoubtedly coloured my view of the Society's activities" but, she continues, "I have attempted to give a considered and objective view of events." Reading it, and knowing many of the personalities involved, I can only marvel at her objectivity and balance. Every member of the Society and anyone else interested in the ongoing struggle to preserve what is left of our natural heritage should read it. The title speaks of the Isabel Priestly legacy; the book confirms the continuation of that legacy in Margaret Belcher.

FRED W. LAHRMAN, 1921 - 2003

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Fred Lahrman was born at Mortlach on September 4, 1921. He grew up on the family farm south of Mortlach in the Missouri Coteau with his sister, Louisa, and his brother, George. This home “out in the hills,” as the coteau is referred to locally, provided Fred with the love and knowledge of the outdoors which was his life. Interestingly, the Missouri Coteau remains one of the



- Photo courtesy of Regina Leader-Post

most intact and productive ecosystems in southern Saskatchewan and the Lahrman family has turned over much of their native prairie land to the Saskatchewan Wildlife Federation and Ducks Unlimited.

Fred developed an interest in wildlife at an early age. His artistic talents were also evident when, as a small child, he would draw images of birds on the porch walls. At first his mother scolded him for this, but as she realized her son's talent, she encouraged him in his sketching.

In the 1940s, Fred moved to Regina to work and in 1946, he enrolled in the Balfour Technical School in Regina. He soon discovered the Natural History

Museum which, at the time, was housed in the Normal School at College Avenue and Broad Street. Fred spent his spare time there sketching mounted birds and mammals. His artistic ability was noted by the museum's director, Fred Bard, who in 1947 hired him to do paintings for the museum exhibits.

For Saskatchewan's Diamond Jubilee celebration in 1955, the province chose a new museum building at College and Albert Street as one of their major projects. Working with Bob Symons, Fred designed, constructed and painted the diorama displays. The museum was ready on schedule and officially opened by Governor General Vincent Massey in 1955.

Fred worked for the museum from 1947 to 2002. Many of the original exhibits were destroyed in a fire in 1990 and were re-done after the fire. Fred completed the last one, on Last Mountain Lake, in 2002.

Fred's contribution to wildlife conservation extended beyond the museum. Drought in the 1930s and unregulated hunting had all but wiped out the Canada Goose in Saskatchewan. In 1952, he and Fred Bard obtained a pair of geese from Abernethy naturalist Ralph Stueck. They also obtained a few eggs from wild goose nests in the Cypress Hills and hatched them under domestic chickens. Fred often described the frantic hens pacing along the shoreline, squawking, when the goslings went swimming! By the mid-1950s, the first offspring of the captive geese were allowed to fly free around Wascana. News of the success with geese soon spread and there was a continent-wide demand for Canada Goose goslings from Wascana. In fact, goslings were shipped as far as Quebec, Florida, New Mexico and British Columbia.

Fred was also involved for over 50 years with Whooping Crane conservation. In 1953, he received the National Newspaper Award for one of his Whooping Crane photos and in 1955, a Whooping Crane stamp based on Fred's art was issued by Canada Post. Through continent-wide conservation efforts initiated by the two Freds, the Whooping Crane has made a remarkable recovery from 21 birds in 1941 to around 400 today.

Some of Fred's other activities were taxidermy, bird banding, setting up the first nature trails and interpretive displays in our provincial parks, and illustrating

books. He was a generous supporter of the *Blue Jay*; he wrote or co-authored 43 articles, and provided 7 illustrations and 178 photographs to the magazine. These photographs showed 72 species of birds, 9 of mammals and 14 of insects. He also provided photographs, drawings and cover illustrations for several of Nature Saskatchewan's special publications.

Fred was an avid photographer, amassing thousands of colour slides of all aspects of nature; his photographs received awards and appeared in books and calendars. His first camera was a one dollar box camera, which he purchased in the 1930s.

Whereas some wildlife artists have chosen a career to market their paintings commercially, Fred chose to devote his life to public service at the museum. A number of years ago, Fred told me that the last thing he wanted was to be publicly recognized; he said he wanted to promote an understanding and appreciation of wildlife through art. The museum exhibits provide tens of thousands of people annually with the opportunity to see and enjoy nature. Fred said that what mattered to him was if some of these people were to go home and say, "I saw this at the museum and I am going to do something to help conserve wildlife."

One of Fred's major contributions was his untiring support, sharing of knowledge and patience with dozens of young people who came to work at the museum. He was always available and willing to answer questions and assist fellow employees.

Though relatively healthy throughout

his 81 years, Fred's health began to deteriorate in February of this year and he died on June 29. My last outing with him was on June 13 when we banded a nest full of young bluebirds. Fred held one of the young ones as he sat in the van. We also observed a nesting pair of

Red-necked Grebes and Fred got to see Yellow Lady's-slippers in full bloom.

This humble and compassionate man has left us with cherished memories and a legacy that most of us can only dream about.



BILL HORSEMAN, 1942 - 2003

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Bill Horseman holding a Goldeneye Duck, 1 June 1958.

Bill Horseman, born in Saltcoats on 21 January 1942, was a gifted lad: a good student, with unusual observational skills in the out-of-doors. While in grades 9 and 10 at Saltcoats he earned good pocket money on his trapline, skinning weasels and muskrats that he caught. Billy, as he then signed himself, at age fifteen, submitted an attractive black-and-white sketch of a Black-capped Chickadee to the Boys' and Girls' section of *Blue Jay*. When it appeared in the March 1958 issue, I phoned Bill. He told me of the

Great Horned Owl nests he had found while on his trapline. On 19 May 1958, I picked up Bill and Don Swaby and we went to seven owl nests that day, banding 16 young.

Bill was a natural tree climber. Wearing flexible running-shoes and imitating the boys who climb tropical trees for coconuts, he placed the bottom of each foot in turn against the trunk and literally ran up the tree, particularly if there were no branches to impede him. My wife, Mary, watched Bill

climb partway up a tree, then climb across to the adjacent tree containing the owl nest. When she cautioned him about the possibility of trees breaking, Bill tried to relieve her worries by showing her how pliable aspen trees are in a wet year. He demonstrated this by climbing to the top of a twenty-foot aspen sapling, then leaning out to one side, so the tree bent like a bow, the top bending towards the ground, leaving him hanging about six feet above terra firma. Bill let go and dropped; the tree sprang upright. "See, Mrs. Houston, there is no danger of an aspen breaking."

With Bill as my chief nest-finder and tree climber, we banded an unprecedented one-day total of 40 owl nestlings in 17 nests on 17 May 1959. In the next two weeks we went to another six late nests found by Horseman, two nests found by farmers near Yorkton, and four nests north of Stornoway found by a new recruit, Stanley Zazelenchuk. That ran our second year's total up to 67 young in 29 nests. It was, in fact, Bill's efforts that launched my lifetime Great Horned Owl banding program.

Bill used his pocket money that year to attend the American Ornithologists' Union meeting in Regina, the first AOU meeting

in western Canada. There he met Roger Tory Peterson, the author of his treasured field guide, as well as other teen-age birders including Spencer Sealy of Battleford, Glen Fox of Kindersley, Gary Anweiler of Melville, Ralph Ostoforoff of Kamsack and Frank Switzer of Rokeby.

Bill drove a long succession of 1951 Chevrolets. After he learned that this vintage vehicle had only one major flaw, he would offer cash on the spot to owners he met, checking first to see that the one weak component had not yet deteriorated. He proudly told me that he bought one such vehicle for \$90, drove it for an additional 20,000 miles, and then sold it for \$110, without spending a cent on repairs. Later, he kept an extra 1951 Chev handy to cannibalize for needed parts.

Bill kept his reprint of the "Birds of Yorkton", published in the *Canadian Field-Naturalist* in 1949. For the next fifty years, whenever he saw a species new to the Yorkton district, or something as noteworthy as the first nest of the Common Raven, he would phone me.

Bill died a tragic death on 19 June 2003. I treasure his memory; he was the greatest.



*Bill Horseman,
Stuart Houston
and Great
Horned Owl,
May 1958*