

REMEMBERING AN ICONIC VISIT FROM PRINCE PHILIP

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As people from around the world mourned the passing of The Duke of Edinburgh, who passed away April 9, 2021 at the age of 99, many from the local area also reminisced about a visit Prince Philip took to Last Mountain Lake Migratory Bird Sanctuary more than 30 years ago.

An advocate for wildlife and wetlands as the President of the World Wildlife Fund, The Duke of Edinburgh's visit to Saskatchewan in June of 1987 left a lasting impact. Along with attending an international conference in Regina, Prince Philip visited a Burrowing Owl site east of Regina and flew to Last Mountain Lake Migratory Bird Sanctuary to celebrate the sanctuary's centennial while witnessing the signing of establishing the north end of the lake as a National Wildlife Area (NWA).

The history of the bird sanctuary east of Simpson runs deep, as land was set aside by Canada's first Prime Minister, Sir John A. Macdonald, after learning waterfowl, shorebirds, and waterbirds were incredibly plentiful at the north end of Last Mountain Lake. In 1887, those lands were set aside from settlement and development to protect this special place for birds — the first in Canada and North America. Once the Migratory Birds Convention Act was passed in Canada, these lands were officially designated as a Migratory Bird Sanctuary in 1921.

Commemorating the sanctuary's centennial in 1987, and viewing the historic NWA signing, Habitat



Photo credit: Environment and Climate Change Canada, 1987.

Biologist for Canadian Wildlife Service between 1978 and 2009, Philip Taylor, remembers the day Prince Philip arrived to the area by helicopter. In fact, Taylor —

who was in charge of managing Saskatchewan's habitat program and sanctuaries — was instrumental in planning the ceremony that included the Duke of Edinburgh.

As the centennial approached, Taylor — along with then Canadian Wildlife Service area manager Clint Jorgenson — began thinking about what they could do to commemorate it. Planning to establish nature trails, a driving tour, a viewing tower and information kiosk, Taylor said, “We were working on having it designated as a national historic site, which it now is, but that still didn’t tie together our ideas and thoughts about recognizing the centennial of establishing the bird sanctuary.”

As work progressed and one thing led to another, Taylor connected with the World Wildlife Fund’s Monte Hummel who mentioned Prince Philip was very interested in global conservation. With a special interest in Canada and being President of the World Wildlife Fund, a request was made to seek Prince Philip’s attendance for the centennial and NWA signing. “Buckingham Palace came back and said, ‘Yes the Prince is available and yes, the Prince is interested in coming.’”

Along with the opportunity to have Prince Philip attend the ceremony at Last Mountain Lake, a Ramsar Convention on Wetlands of International Importance was scheduled to be held in Saskatchewan at the same time. “This conference proposed for being held in Regina was agreed to and it was another reason for Prince Philip to come in his role as President of the World Wildlife Fund. That year Canada nominated 12.8 million hectares of wetland toward the Ramsar Convention. At that time it was the largest commitment to wetland conservation of any of the members.”

With a firm commitment by Buckingham Palace that Prince Philip would attend part of the two-week convention, Taylor was thrilled he would also visit Last

Mountain Lake and make a stop at a farm east of Regina to see a Burrowing Owl nesting site.

However, before anything could take place, there were a number of rigorous meetings about Prince Philip’s itinerary. Taylor said a planned itinerary had to be agreed upon between Buckingham Palace, the World Wildlife Fund and Canadian Wildlife Service at Last Mountain Lake. “We developed an itinerary and of course had to learn protocol as to what we did, when to shake hands and what to call him. Then we had to discuss things like security. Things like what we were responsible for, like ensuring the trails were safe and what route we would take. Then between the RCMP and Buckingham Palace, they took care of the security.”

Considered as a working visit in his official role as President of the World Wildlife Fund, once the itinerary was approved for Prince Philip, then work began to design the June 5 ceremony itself. An open invitation was sent

out to the public — including dignitaries, nearby neighbours, and students — to attend this ceremony commemorating the centennial and observing the signing of the NWA east of Simpson. Federal Environment Minister Tom McMillan and Provincial Minister of Parks, Recreation and Culture, Colin Maxwell, were also invited as signatories to the agreement to establish the NWA, while Prince Philip acted as the official witness.

In the June 10, 1987 edition of *The Watrous Manitou*, publisher Frank Wilson was one of the many members of the media who covered the event. With hundreds of people on hand during that Friday morning to catch a glimpse of Prince Philip, Wilson said The Duke of Edinburgh travelled to the site by military helicopter.

After touring a Burrowing Owl site 24 kilometres east of Regina and delivering an address at the Ramsar Conference Thursday evening, the following morning Wilson noted in



Photo credit: Environment and Climate Change Canada, 1987.

his article, "The Duke's arrival by helicopter was right on schedule at 9:30 a.m. at a landing area set aside near the speakers' dias. He appeared, as always, to be enjoying himself and walked along the edge of the waiting crowd, stopping here and there to chat and say hello. Applause and greetings accompanied him and cameras by the dozen received a good workout. As with any Royal Visit, there was an atmosphere of excitement and satisfaction at being able to see Prince Philip and, in some cases, to have a brief word."

After the Duke of Edinburgh's informal walk to the podium, Regional Director of the Canadian Wildlife Service Gordon Kerr welcomed those in attendance and introduced the official dignitaries, which included Prince Philip, the Honourable Tom McMillan, Minister of Environment Canada, Colin Maxwell, Minister of Saskatchewan Parks, Recreation and Culture, Ed Crawford, President of Canada Life Assurance Company, and Robert Bateman, a world renowned nature artist.

As part of the event, Wilson said McMillan announced an agreement had been reached between the federal and provincial authorities to bring an additional 3,000 hectares of land under federal protection, encompassing the bird sanctuary with a National Wildlife Area. With Prince Philip witnessing the signing, McMillan and Maxwell endorsed the document.

"What he did that day was he put his signature on an agreement that Saskatchewan and the Government of Canada, the two governments, committed to contribute all of the Crown lands at the north end of the lake towards making the Last Mountain Lake National Wildlife Area," said Taylor.

Following that, McMillan also announced that the Government of



Photo credit: Environment and Climate Change Canada, 1987.

Canada presented \$1 million toward the World Wildlife Fund, of which Prince Philip was President. Maxwell, who originally came from Edinburgh, noted during the ceremony how pleased he was to be attending with The Duke of Edinburgh and that the coincidence of being from Edinburgh formed a happy association between himself and Prince Philip. He also emphasized the importance of the sanctuary at Last Mountain Lake and was thrilled with the new National Wildlife Area.

Also during the Friday morning event, Wilson stated Prince Philip was presented with an original painting by artist Robert Bateman depicting White Pelicans at Last Mountain Lake and also helped with the unveiling of a commemorative plaque, marking the centenary of the bird sanctuary.

Reflecting back on that day, Wilson remarked the lasting impression he retained was the huge turnout The Duke of Edinburgh attracted. "To my mind that was a tribute to his popularity and stature

wherever he went. The media presence was absolutely huge and members of the public were bused in from various parts of Saskatchewan. Even the weatherman co-operated!"

As the official ceremony came to a conclusion, the Prince joined Philip Taylor, Clint Jorgenson, the RCMP driver and both provincial and federal ministers in a van as they drove through the bird sanctuary and newly created NWA to a pick-up point where a helicopter was waiting.

During the drive with Prince Philip, Taylor said, "We talked about the conservation programs, some of the rare birds coming through like the Whooping Cranes, the Peregrine Falcons and Burrowing Owls. He was very interested in the rare birds but he was also very interested in the common birds. We talked about some of the shorebirds that nested there in the summer. He asked very good questions, he was very polite and had a good sense of humour."

Taylor also shared a funny moment as he was chatting along with



Photo credit: Environment and Climate Change Canada, 1987.

Jorgenson and talking about the sanctuary's programs to Prince Philip. "I pointed over toward the horizon and said, 'If you look just beside that little hill.' The Prince looked at me and he said, 'Hill?' We both started to laugh because I then said, 'A Saskatchewan hill is a little bit smaller than the ones you are used to in Scotland.' He was very engaged and had a good sense of humour and he enjoyed it very much."

Even prior to the ceremony, Taylor noted how relaxed Prince Philip seemed to be, deviating from the official itinerary. "It was fairly typical of him that he had his own idea of how he wanted to do it. He left the helicopter, walked past some of the audience on either side who were cordoned off and waved to them. In front of the main platform where he was going to be seated, he went right down to the audience and shook hands with the students, school teachers and others. He spent a lot of time doing that which they loved. We didn't know how many people were going to come and they had been waiting a while to see him. When he was shaking hands and talking with the audience you could tell his security was a bit nervous."

Already a remarkable day in his mind, Taylor said Prince Philip's participation and witnessing the

signatures and agreement to establish the NWA ended up becoming the pinnacle of the program of wildlife conservation activities across Canada that year.

"His signing and witnessing of the agreement was crucial. It elevated the whole program to Canada-wide importance. Without the Prince coming, many things would have happened with the centennial but it would not have struck a chord across Canada in the same way. There are so many impressions people have about Prince Philip when he is working as a consort to the Queen.

On this trip he was engaged, really interested in the wildlife and the questions he was asking were right down to why we were managing, what we were doing, working with our partners like Ducks Unlimited, the Wildlife Federation, Nature Saskatchewan and the community members around who were able to put cattle on to graze certain areas. He was really right into that and that impressed me."

As the van reached the designated pick-up point and Prince Philip concluded his tour of the area, Taylor said, "He got in the helicopter and apparently he flew the helicopter part way back."

Following the successful June 5, 1987 event, a thank you letter

was received from Brigadier Clive Robertson on behalf of Buckingham Palace:

The Duke of Edinburgh has asked me to write to thank you for the most successful and interesting morning at The Last Mountain Bird Sanctuary last week. His Royal Highness was very pleased to unveil the plaque and to tour the area with its fascinating bird life.

Prince Philip was delighted to receive the picture from Robert Bateman and would be grateful if you could pass on his sincere thanks to the artist for the magnificent work which he is very pleased to have.

Thank you again for arranging such an interesting visit which was clearly very much enjoyed by all of us.

Reflecting back on that morning over 30 years ago, while the event took a tremendous amount of planning, Taylor, the now retired Habitat Biologist for Canadian Wildlife Service, remarked it was a highlight he would not soon forget.

"We set out a number of objectives for ourselves and the centennial was obviously a big one. Some of these things just fell into place. It was very exciting and even today thinking about it, it was like, wow that was pretty impressive. Even over the years of me coming down from Saskatoon virtually every week and spending a few days at Last Mountain Lake over that 30 year period, I met a lot of local people and so many remember that day. Either they had gone to it or their kids had gone to that event. It was for so many people a landmark day."

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