

IN MEMORIAM: ROBERT W. NERO (1922-2023)

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Robert (Bob) William Nero, naturalist, ornithologist, conservationist, archaeologist, educator, and poet, died in Winnipeg, Manitoba on January 23, 2023, at the age of 100. His passionate influence touched many professionals and non-professionals over many decades.

Born on December 26, 1922, in Racine, Wisconsin, Bob spent his early years in an orphanage. It was there that he discovered his first arrowhead, sparking a lifelong interest in North American archeological sites. At the age of 11, he moved to the home of foster parents on the outskirts of Milwaukee where he roamed the farm fields, searching for artifacts and watching birds. He explored the Milwaukee Public Museum where he was encouraged to pursue his interests by ornithologist Owen J. Gromme, taxidermist Warren Dettman, and archeologist W. C. McKern.

Bob dropped out of university in 1942 and enlisted in the Army, training in the southern USA and serving in New Guinea and the Philippine Islands. Honorably discharged at the end of the War, he returned to university in Milwaukee, supported by the G. I. Bill. It was there that he met his future wife, Ruth Hoenecke, whom he married in 1948. Ruth was Bob's best friend, field assistant, and muse until her death in 2010.

Bob continued his studies at the University of Wisconsin in Madison in 1946. Enrolling in graduate school in 1947, he was forced to choose between his two major interests: zoology and anthropology. In a letter to Ruth, he explained that his choice of zoology was based on better prospects of employment, perhaps in game management, and by the students



Bob Nero holding adult female Great Gray Owl and young, southeastern Manitoba, May 24, 2007.
Photo credit: Christian Artuso.

and professors he had met. He wrote that “they usually hunted, wore field clothing, and had an outdoor look — just my style. Anthropology types . . . were more likely to wear coats and ties, even cuff links”.

Bob earned his M.A. in 1950 and his Ph.D. in 1955, both under the supervision of John T. Emlen, Jr. He was also influenced by interactions with ornithologist Joseph J. Hickey and ecologist Aldo Leopold. His research focused on the territorial and reproductive behaviour of the Red-winged Blackbird (*Agelaius phoeniceus*) and resulted in two major publications. At the University, he interacted with fellow student Gordon H. Orians, who went on to a Ph.D. study of blackbird social systems at the University of California. Their findings provided the starting points for many dozens of subsequent studies and theses and hundreds of papers dealing with the biology of Red-winged Blackbirds. In 1984,

Bob published *Redwings*, a beautifully illustrated book summarizing his own work and that of other researchers. This very readable account of the biology of this widespread species also gives a glimpse of the joys and trials that Bob faced in his fieldwork.

In July 1955, Bob and Ruth packed up their three (at that time) children and drove to Regina, Saskatchewan, where he had accepted the position of Assistant Director of the new Saskatchewan Museum of Natural History (now the Royal Saskatchewan Museum). His first impression of Saskatchewan was that “things looked a little grim when we went through Estevan where there was extensive highway reconstruction and a lot of dust.” The ornithologist and naturalist prevailed — he continued that “just past that location, a bird came flying towards the highway, a large black and white

bird. Excitedly, I pulled over and stopped, reveling in the sight of my first black-billed magpie, and trying to convey my elation to the family.”

The announcement of his appointment in *Blue Jay* stated that “In addition to assisting the director with the administration of the museum, Dr. Nero will be directly responsible for supervising and directing the museum’s education and extension program. He will also organize field activities for the collection of specimens for displays, supervise preparation of these displays and help with designing displays.”

Bob plunged into this long list of responsibilities with enthusiasm. He met many of the province’s ornithologists, birders, and naturalists at the Annual Meeting of the Saskatchewan Natural History Society (SNHS, now Nature Saskatchewan) held at the Museum in October 1955. This began an involvement with the Society that lasted for six decades. In his first year at the Museum, Bob published seven notes on distribution of Saskatchewan birds and mammals in *Blue Jay* and he went on to publish more than 200 papers, notes, reviews, and poems there between 1956 and 2014. Bob served the Society as Vice-President and President (1957-1961) and Director (1963-1968). He inaugurated a “Museum Notes” section in *Blue Jay* in 1956 and served as Editor and Assistant Editor of the journal (1963-1976). For his far-reaching contributions to the Society, he was made a Fellow of the SNHS twice, in 1988 and in 1999.

Bob offered encouragement and support to all the naturalists, birders, and ornithologists that he met in Saskatchewan, perhaps reflecting his own experience as a teenager and student. This was especially true for a group of teenaged birders (including two of the authors of this memorial), whom he involved in research projects and stimulated to pursue careers in various aspects of biology.

Bob was the driving force behind an invitation from the Museum, the SNHS, the Regina Natural History Society, and Regina College of the University of Saskatchewan to the American Ornithologists’ Union (AOU, now part of the American Ornithological Society) to hold their 77th Stated Meeting at the Museum, August 25-30, 1959. He served

as Local Chair of the meeting, attended by 391 individuals from seven provinces, 34 U.S. states and the District of Columbia, England, India, and the Republic of the Philippines. It was the first time the AOU had met in western Canada. In addition to paper sessions and symposia, the meeting featured a banquet sponsored by the Government of Saskatchewan and hosted by Premier T. C. Douglas. This was the first time that a state or provincial government had entertained the AOU. A field trip on August 29 took attendees to the north end of Last Mountain Lake to view the spectacle of 8,000 Sandhill Cranes (*Antigone canadensis*) at rest and in flight. Several participants later commented that this was one of their most impressive ornithological experiences.

While at the Museum, Bob continued his field studies of blackbird behaviour, now concentrating on the Yellow-headed Blackbird (*Xanthocephalus xanthocephalus*) in marshes in the city. In 1960, Fred. W. Lahrman and Ralph D. Carson, artists and preparators at the Museum, accompanied Bob on a three-month field trip to the Lake Athabasca region of extreme northwestern Saskatchewan. Bob’s primary goal was to study the behaviour of the poorly known Rusty Blackbird (*Euphagus carolinus*). His blackbird studies in Saskatchewan contributed to a major paper on the comparative behaviour of icterids. The trip also sparked his interest in the avifauna of northern Saskatchewan, almost unstudied at that time.

Bob left the Museum in 1961 to accept a position at the University of Saskatchewan, Regina Campus (now the University of Regina). He made additional trips to Lake Athabasca in 1961 and 1962, accompanied by colleagues from the University working in botany, mammalogy, and geology, including botanist George F. Ledingham, one of the founders of the SNHS and long-time editor of *Blue Jay*. In July 1962, Bob and University of Saskatchewan botanist George W. Argus flew to Hasbala Lake in the extreme northeastern corner of the province. Spending a week there, Bob discovered a subarctic element in the unstudied avifauna of the region that was absent in the Lake Athabasca area. This discovery led him to initiate a series of expeditions to areas in northeastern Saskatchewan between 1963 and 1965.

Bob spent some time at Stony Rapids and Hasbala Lake in 1963. However, most of the field work was conducted by university students Gary Anweiler, Glen Fox, Ross Lein, and Richard Sanderson, and high school student Bohdan Pylypeck, all experienced birders who had met Bob through the SNHS. This work resulted in two SNHS Special Publications, *Birds of Lake Athabasca Region, Saskatchewan* (1963) and *The Birds of Northeastern Saskatchewan* (1967), which remain the definitive treatments of the avifauna of northern Saskatchewan. In 1965, Bob again used students (Lein, Sanderson, and Spencer Sealy) to survey the poorly known avifauna of the Moose Mountain region of southeastern Saskatchewan, producing another SNHS Special Publication, *Birds of Moose Mountain Saskatchewan* (1971).

In 1966, Bob moved his family (now five children) to Winnipeg, Manitoba, where he had accepted the position of Chief of the Natural History Division of the new Manitoba Museum of Man and Nature. As the lead scientist, he was instrumental in developing the first of several galleries at the Museum.

Bob joined the Manitoba Government in 1970, serving as Writer-Naturalist in the Conservation Extension Division (1970-1971), Wetlands Development Specialist (1971-1979), and Nongame Wildlife Specialist in the Wildlife Branch (1980-1991). As he had done in Saskatchewan, Bob continued to bring information on Manitoba’s wild plants and animals to the scientific community and the public through his accessible writings.

In 1968, Bob received news of an active Great Gray Owl (*Strix nebulosa*) nest near The Pas, MB. He and photographer Robert R. Taylor made the 800-km trip to study and photograph a bird then considered to be an irregular winter visitor to Manitoba. A decades-long study followed, supported by grants secured from conservation organizations, businesses, and industry. Working with Herbert W. R. Copland of the Manitoba Museum of Man and Nature, and students and associates at the University of Manitoba, Bob showed that this owl was a rare but regular breeding bird in southeastern Manitoba, with more than 450 adult and young birds banded by 1984. Under Bob’s supervision as an adjunct professor at the University of Manitoba,

Jim Duncan built upon Bob's ongoing research and banding of Great Gray Owls during his Ph.D. study. In recognition, Bob received the SNHS Conservation Award (1981) for studies of the Great Gray Owl and the SNHS Cliff Shaw Memorial Award (1984) for publication in *Blue Jay* of a summary of his "untiring study of the Great Gray Owl in Manitoba". The work produced an engaging book *The Great Gray Owl – Phantom of the Boreal Forest* (1980) lavishly illustrated by Robert R. Taylor, renowned wildlife photographer and Bob's long-time field companion.

On Bob's initiative, the first international gathering of owl researchers convened in Winnipeg in 1987, attended by 150 delegates from 10 countries and resulting in a published Proceedings. This would be followed by five "World Owl Symposia", held in Canada, Australia, Netherlands, Portugal, and India.

In 1984, Bob rescued an injured nestling Great Gray Owl. Although restored to health at the Manitoba Wildlife Rehabilitation Centre, the bird could not be released. For the next 23 years, Bob and "Lady Gray!" visited hundreds of schools and organizations, bringing his knowledge of owls, nature, and conservation to the public through entertaining and educational programs. He documented these experiences in another book, *Lady Gray!: An Owl with a Mission* (1994). Bob spearheaded the eventual selection of the Great Gray Owl as the official bird emblem for Manitoba in 1987.

Throughout his career, Bob promoted government programs and legislation dealing with endangered and threatened species. While at the SMNH he worked with the SNHS and the Saskatchewan Falconry Association to push for legal protection of birds of prey, which was achieved through amendments to the Game Act in March 1960. In Manitoba, he pushed for the establishment of a monitoring program for the Cougar (*Puma concolor*) and for recovery programs for urban Peregrine Falcons (*Falco peregrinus*) in Winnipeg and in Brandon.

In addition to his SNHS awards, Bob was honoured by many other organizations. He was awarded Honorary Membership (1980) and the Ernest Thompson Seton Medal (1981) from the Manitoba Naturalists Society, the

Annual Award (1983) from the Manitoba Chapter of the Wildlife Society, the Professional Award (1985) from the Central Mountain and Plains Section of the Wildlife Society, a Certificate of Merit (1985) from Environment Canada, and Honorary Membership (1987) from the Ottawa Field-Naturalist Club. He was an Elective Member (1955) and a Fellow (1994) of the American Ornithological Society. For his many contributions to Canadian ornithology, Bob received the Doris Huestis Speirs Award (1995) from the Society of Canadian Ornithologists/Société des Ornithologistes du Canada.

Bob's childhood interest in North American indigenous archaeology continued throughout his life. He searched for artifacts everywhere he went, including military bases in the southern USA during his training, and in the jungles of New Guinea. He worked as a volunteer in several excavations during his university years in Wisconsin, and several of his earliest publications deal with the artifacts that he found.

Within a year of his arrival in Saskatchewan, he joined SMNH paleontologist Bruce A. McCorquodale in the excavation of a site on the Souris River just south of Oxbow, SK. Dated at over 5,000 years B.P., the site was, at the time, the oldest in Saskatchewan and one of the oldest in the northern Great Plains. The distinctive, side-notched projectile points that they described became known as Oxbow points and defined the Oxbow Culture. During his time in Saskatchewan, Bob participated in several other excavations in southern Saskatchewan. On his ornithological trips to Lake Athabasca (1960-1963) he discovered artifacts at sites in the sand dunes on the southern shore of the lake, including points related to the Oxbow Culture.

Bob's association with the Oxbow Culture continued in Manitoba. In 1992, on an autumn grouse-hunting trip to the Portage Sandhills west of Winnipeg, Bob discovered bone fragments and artifacts in a blowout. Named after the landowners, the Hacault Site was dated at over 3000 years B.P. Between 1992 and 1997, Bob returned to this site whenever he could get away from other duties. He collected hundreds of stone

tools and thousands of flakes that resulted from tool making, including projectile points characteristic of the Oxbow Culture. The artifacts are now in the research collection of the Anthropology Department of the University of Winnipeg.

Many who knew Bob are aware of another life-long interest — poetry. His first publication was of four poems in the Literary Review of the University of Wisconsin in 1947. In his later life Bob turned to poetry in a major way. He published four books of poems between 1990 and 2005 and dozens more poems in *Blue Jay* and other natural history publications. Many of his short poems are sensitive and insightful observations of the natural world around him. Those who knew him will recognize in these poems the gentle, caring, curious, and observant individual that was Bob.

Bob was predeceased by Ruth, his wife of 62 years, in 2010. He is survived by his partner Nenita Barrientos, daughters Tamera Brant and Lorrell Onosson, and sons Birch, Redwood, and Brook, along with nine grandchildren. We thank Glen A. Fox for comments on this memorial.

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TURNAROUND

One cold day in September
and we were already thinking winter
listing chores to perform in readiness
for the long cold days and nights,
but now it's November and we're
still enjoying autumn sun
with not a bit of snow to see;
so we affect the good days
worrying about the future
though I am glad the work is done.

Bob Nero's last published poem
(*Blue Jay* 66:188, 2008)