

# NATURE SASKATCHEWAN MEMBER SPOTLIGHT: A Q&A WITH ALAN (AL) SMITH

**Jordan Rustad**

Bander in Charge

Last Mountain Bird Observatory

The following is a question and answer between Jordan and Al Smith, who has been a member of Nature Saskatchewan since 1965.

## **How has being a member of Nature Saskatchewan impacted your life?**

It has made me aware of the importance of an organization like NS in promoting the conservation of wildlife. It brought into focus the conservation issues in the province. In the early days it was the killing of hawks and owls. It was an issue that needed to be tackled — it was tackled and raptors were protected. More recently it's been habitat conservation.

## **What are some of your fondest memories from your time as a part of Nature Saskatchewan?**

Sharing field trips with people like Frank Roy and Dr. Stuart Houston, and the many other people who mentored me. My first May Day bird count was in the spring of 1963 with Frank Roy. I saw the joy that Frank had for seeing new birds for the year. This rubbed off on me, and that was the beginning of my addiction to birding. Going out bird banding with Dr. Houston inspired my passion for bird banding.

## **How have you seen the organization evolve and change over the years?**

It has shifted from a natural history society that passively documented wildlife to an organization that has become more aggressive in advocating for wildlife. It has become much more of a political organization. It has been able to promote conservation of wildlife without, in most cases, provoking the ire of provincial and federal governments. This has required courage on the part of the Society in taking on governments (where and when needed) to champion



Alan Smith.

the protection of wildlife and important wildlife areas.

## **Can you speak to the sense of community and friendship within the organization?**

It is a great place to learn firsthand about wildlife. There are so many different people that have things to offer, whether it be about bird banding or someone who with knowledge of flowers, to specialists who know mushrooms or

lichens. This is important, as we have to represent all living things. We can get caught up in vertebrate bias, but Nature Saskatchewan has always had a broad interest in all forms of wildlife.

## **How do you think Nature Saskatchewan can continue to grow and thrive?**

I think they have to continue on the track they are on. No matter the government in power, no matter the prevailing political situation. A good example is our support



of the Duncairn Reservoir Migratory Bird Sanctuary Stakeholders, who are fighting and advocating for the people and wildlife of the reservoir, an area which could be negatively impacted by current irrigation plans.

**What do you think has been the biggest accomplishment of Nature Saskatchewan in its 75 years?**

The establishment of Grasslands National Park. It is large enough to be a viable tract of grassland, as it has the potential to have the full suite of grassland wildlife (as far as is practical in this day and age). It can support Bison, Swift Fox, Prairie Dogs and Burrowing Owls, and hopefully Black-footed Ferrets someday again.

**What do you think is the biggest environmental challenge facing Saskatchewan, and how can we address it?**

Water: we have to quit draining wetlands in the province. We have to maintain as much water on the land as possible. Water begets water. I've always had a saying "if you want it to act like a desert, make it look like a desert". We have to be more assertive in our promotion of an approach that would encourage landowners to maintain wetlands on their property. I'm not sure the best way to do it, whether it be a wetland policy or tax incentives. We need to be far more aggressive about preventing illegal draining of wetlands.

**What are you most looking forward to in the future of Nature Saskatchewan?**

There are some really interesting publications coming out soon on a wide spectrum of topics from butterflies to plants. Currently there are publications available on history of conservation, shelterbelts, plants, lichen, insects, and of course birds.

**What advice would you give to someone who is interested in getting involved with Nature Saskatchewan?**

Go to Last Mountain Bird Observatory and learn about migration. It's not just about banding, but about all aspects of

migration. As much as I like the science, I am at the point where I believe it is just as important to get people involved and tuned into the miracle of migration. We have records of Yellow Warblers going to Central America at least seven times (a round trip of about 12,000 km); it is absolutely amazing.

**When it comes to the Last Mountain Bird Observatory (LMBO), why did you choose Nature Saskatchewan to help take over the station after retiring from Canadian Wildlife Service (CWS)?**

When I was working for CWS, I always had financial assistance for hiring assistants from Nature Saskatchewan. When I retired, NS broadened their support to include me. The support the Regional Park and NS have given the Observatory has been amazing and has been solidified due everyone's strong commitment to LMBO.

**Where do you see the station going in the future?**

There is room to broaden programs. The location is perfect as it is in the geographic center of the population of Saskatchewan. We have a good potential to bring in urban, rural, and First Nation peoples. I think that all three sectors of our population need to be indoctrinated in the importance of wildlife. I believe, through the Observatory, Nature Saskatchewan has the opportunity do that. We need people to do policy, but Last Mountain Bird Observatory allows people to see day-to-day what we're doing and why it's important. We could do more summer activities, and more targeted projects looking at bird movements in and out of the area.

*As part of our 75th anniversary celebrations, we are interviewing and writing articles that highlight active members who have had a significant impact on Nature Saskatchewan, as nominated by fellow members. 🐦*

