

NATURE SASKATCHEWAN MEMBER SPOTLIGHT: SPENCER SEALY

Annie McLeod

Editor, Blue Jay

In celebrating the 75th anniversary of Nature Saskatchewan, and members who have had a significant impact on the society, it is only fitting to acknowledge the contributions of a Saskatchewan-born ornithologist who has been a regular contributor to the *Blue Jay* for nearly 65 years.

Born in Esterhazy, Spencer Sealy lived in various Saskatchewan towns as a child, as was typical for a child of a country preacher. Growing up in different hamlets and villages, nature was always close at hand and, for a family with little extra money, experiences in the natural world were essentially unlimited and free of cost.

“When I was five years old, living in Wiseton, I discovered a cocoon attached to the branch of a small tree,” says Spencer. “I carried it home and placed it on the corner of a shelf in my bedroom. Several days later, my parents called me to my room to look at a large *Cecreopia* moth that was spreading its wings after emerging from the cocoon. With its wings dried, we released the moth outside and it flew away. That experience was forever etched in my memory.”

From discovering duck and hawk nests and finding a red bat roosting in a willow to collecting insects in a jar and finding his first cowbird egg in a blackbird’s nest, it was these early experiences in nature that cemented Spencer’s fate in science.

On the first day of Grade 8, then living in Kindersley, Spencer and his classmates were asked to write a short piece on what they wanted to be when they grew up. Spencer knew then that he wanted to be an ornithologist, and that is what he wrote about. While forest ranger and wildlife manager were options later considered, the scientific study of birds on a full-time basis was what stuck with him.

By the time he began Grade 10, Spencer’s family had moved to Battleford — the place that he fondly refers to as his



Looking for signs of voles during a field trip in the Qu'Appelle Valley, which took place after an Inland Bird Banding Association meeting in August 2013. Photo credit: Harold Fisher.

home town. It was during his high school years there that he met his Saskatchewan mentors — Robert (Bob) W. Nero and C. Stuart Houston. Spencer corresponded frequently with Bob, who was then a curator at the Saskatchewan Museum of Natural History (now the Royal Saskatchewan Museum) in Regina.

“Bob always took the time to comment and provide additional explanations for my observations, as well as offering general encouragement,” says Spencer, noting that Bob would question some of his statements, always in a constructive way, knowing that Spencer wanted to go into ornithology, as it was important to be able to see other points of view or other ways of expressing something. “He was correct, and I owe him so much for that guidance.”

It was Stuart Houston who introduced Spencer to bird banding, and Spencer banded raptors for Stuart as a sub-permittee. Stuart later wrote a letter in

support of the application for Spencer’s first banding permit and the two maintained contact until Stuart’s passing in 2021.

Spencer first heard about Nature Saskatchewan, then known as the Saskatchewan Natural History Society (SNHS), during high school when Harvey Beck’s *A Guide to Saskatchewan Mammals* was published in 1958. It was the first special publication of the SNHS. Additional exposure to the society emerged when Spencer attended the 1959 American Ornithologists’ Union meeting, which was held at the Saskatchewan Natural History Museum. The meeting was supported by the SNHS and, indeed, the society’s presence was everywhere during the event.

With the SNHS on his radar, Spencer’s first contribution to the *Blue Jay* was published in 1960 — a note on Big Brown Bats wintering in the attic of his high school. Spencer had summarized his

observations in a letter to Bob Nero, who felt them worthy of publication and compiled the observations into a short note.

“Soon after, he did the same for a record of a flying squirrel near Battleford. From that point, I prepared the notes but Nero edited them before publication,” says Spencer. “Bob’s confidence in me spurred me to write my own notes for publication, and I’ve never looked back.”

Spencer knew that a career in ornithology would require advanced post-secondary education and, upon graduating high school, he completed a Bachelor of Science at the University of Alberta. He then attended the University of British Columbia (UBC) to complete a Master of Science (MSc). In 1967, during his first year of graduate studies at UBC, Spencer published his results of a six-year study of Northern Harrier breeding biology — spurred by several harrier nests that he had found in 1960 — in the *Blue Jay*. And, for his efforts and contributions to the documentation of natural history, he received the Cliff Shaw Award from the SNHS.

“What an honour, and a boost in the knowledge that a career in ornithology was possible for me,” says Spencer.

Following the completion of his MSc in 1968, and a thesis based on a study of nesting auklets on an island in the Bering Sea, Spencer attended the University of Michigan to acquire a PhD, this time travelling to Haida Gwaii for further work on seabirds. Upon completion of his PhD, Spencer began his career in the zoology (later biological sciences) department at the University of Manitoba, where he remained until his retirement in 2011.

Along with graduate students, Spencer’s research focused on songbird breeding ecology and banding, as well as a long-term study of interactions between cowbirds and hosts at Delta Marsh, MB. Work was also conducted on seabird monitoring and Marbled Murrelet foraging in BC, cloud forest birds and cowbird hosts in Costa Rica, and cowbirds in southern Texas and Argentina.

Throughout his studies, and during his career, Spencer continued to contribute articles to *Blue Jay*. In fact, he’s had dozens of articles published so far! Topics have

ranged from insect, bird and mammal records to the breeding biology of birds, banding and recoveries, cowbird host records, and historical accounts of the contributions of early naturalists.

As an academic researcher, Spencer’s contributions to the study of natural history have not been limited to the *Blue Jay*. He’s had articles and papers published in numerous refereed national and international scientific journals. The work he did with seabirds remained a constant throughout his career as well. Just this year, a paper he co-authored with a colleague in BC — on the seasonal use of a freshwater lake by Marbled Murrelets — was published in *Marine Ornithology*.

Spencer stresses the importance of natural history journals such as the *Blue Jay*, too, however, as he feels that the general public needs to hear more from researchers and naturalists alike, particularly when so many environmental issues — such as habitat degradation and climate change — are at play today.

He also encourages all scientists and naturalists to contribute their writing to the *Blue Jay*.

“*Blue Jay* stands alone on the prairies as a journal and outlet for articles that is accessible to people of all walks of life and backgrounds,” says Spencer, noting that articles can be technical in nature, written in prose, share opinions, or even be poems.

“In my biased opinion, *Blue Jay* is the voice of Nature Saskatchewan.”

Personal note from the author:

Since I became the *Blue Jay* editor in 2016, Spencer has been contributing more than just articles to the journal — he also acts as one of my trusted reviewers of scientific articles that are submitted for publication. With his vast knowledge and extensive experience, Spencer provides suggestions to make articles stronger, flags instances in which additional details or further research or observations are required, and — just like Bob Nero did for him — asks questions, in a constructive way, to highlight a topic or issue that could be looked at from another perspective or expressed in a different way.

In addition to Spencer’s numerous



Looking toward the edge of the receding Galbraith’s marsh south of Battleford, 28 May 2024. Photo credit: Noreen Sealy.

contributions to Nature Saskatchewan and the *Blue Jay*, he has had a marked impact on me as the *Blue Jay* editor. He provides valuable knowledge and insight, congratulations for completed issues, empathy in the challenges that can come with being an editor, and an openness to discuss thoughts and ideas. Spencer’s encouragement and insights assist me in doing the best job I can, in continually striving for the highest quality of production, in asking tough questions and making editorial decisions, and to ensuring the *Blue Jay* remains an important part of Nature Saskatchewan’s efforts, outreach and sense of community. On top of that, he inspires me and has made me confident that I, too, could write scientific articles for publication in the *Blue Jay*.

In the words of someone who I consider a mentor and am proud to call a friend, “I owe him so much for that guidance.”

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. 🐦