

Bird Man of Bancroft



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By Chris Drost

A love of birds and natural history was instilled in local resident Bruce Collins from the time he was a young child. Now 86, Collins

says he has been birding for almost 80 of those years. That is one of the things he likes best about watching birds, it can be done pretty well anywhere and at any age.

Collins studied biology at the University of Toronto in his early days and then took a position with the Lands and Forests, as it was known in 1960. After a long career with Lands and Forests, he retired early and then began travels worldwide to add to his own personal bird list, and also to carry out bird related research projects on behalf of various universities. His travels took him to faraway places such as Mexico, Costa Rica, Peru and Africa, to name a few.

While his lifetime list of North American bird species sighted currently stands at 561, he has also viewed many other species in tropical rainforests and deserts throughout the world.

His favourite birds are tropical ones because of their beautiful plumage. Among those on his list is the world's largest bird, the ostrich, which he viewed in its natural habitat, as well as the smallest bird, the bee hummingbird, found in Cuba.

Collins says North Hastings is a fairly good area for bird watching. The rarest species he has seen here is the cattle egret. Last year a tropical turquoise bluebird gallinule (a water bird) was found hit by a car on Hwy 62 south. It was taken to a rehabilitation centre, but he is unsure of its outcome. Warblers are essentially tropical birds, but a number of varieties can be spotted in the Bancroft area in the summer months. Presqu'île Park is probably the best place in the region to watch waterfowl.

A number of years ago Collins worked in cooperation with the Cornell Lab of Ornithology in New York to publish a book called Birders Life List & Diary. This book which is currently still available, is a place to record species and where you sighted them. In terms of the best book to buy for someone starting out in birding, Collins says, if you only buy one book, choose National Geographic's Field Guide to Birds of North America. It is available through most book stores.

A web review reveals that in some places, particularly in the U.S., the U.K., and parts of Canada, birding has become a trendy pastime. ?Hipster birders? as they are sometimes called, use a number of different apps and websites for identifying birds and recording their location. One website, ebird.ca tracks birds by county and location sighted. Hastings County for example, has over 17,000 reports listed. While Collins steers away from the internet recording methods, with a preference for his book of lists, he recognizes their value in terms of research. As individuals record where and what birds they have seen, data is gathered about such things as migratory patterns.

Individuals interested in birding should be prepared to head out early in the morning during spring and summer, especially during the nesting season. The Bruce Collins Trail on Eagles Nest is an excellent place to start.

During the month of December there is a local Christmas Bird Count. This year about 12 to 20 people participated in a wide circle area with Bancroft at its centre. While the results for this year have not yet been compiled, Collins noted that the information is provided to Bird Studies Canada and the Audubon Society.

Collins hopes to continue watching birds for the rest of his life. His biggest concern however, is that it is estimated that almost 40 per cent of the bird population has declined in recent years as a result of degradation of natural habitat on migratory routes.

Anyone interested in local birding is encouraged to contact the Bancroft Field Naturalists' Club through its president, Terry Bradt at hayton_bradt@sympatico.ca.