

Tribute to George F. Ledingham (1911–2006), a Conservation Leader for Western Canada

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“Society ... must take a strong stand for conservation. In a democracy, we cannot expect to have the problems of conservation and wildlife management solved intelligently without an informed public”.

Readers will be forgiven if they think this is a new challenge to Canadians from an expert body that believes the present federal government is on a path of unconscionable suppression of nationally important environmental research and monitoring programs. It is actually a clarion call from the past to the Saskatchewan Natural History Society (SNHS – now Nature Saskatchewan) to refocus itself as an advocate of the protection of natural environmental values in western Canada. And far from being a contemporary challenge, it was written in 1956, over half a century ago.

Saskatchewan native George Filson Ledingham (31 January 1911 – 18 October 2006, Figure 1) wrote that in his capacity as incoming editor of *The Blue Jay*, the excellent natural sciences journal of the SNHS (Ledingham 1956). He was editor for 16 years, reshaping the journal into the premier publication of its kind in the prairie provinces. In the course of his editorship, as in numerous public presentations, deputations to provincial and federal governments, co-operative ventures with various non-governmental conservation organizations, and one-on-one dealings with innumerable fellow naturalists, he was a consistently strong advocate of the need to conserve natural areas and wildlife. It’s tempting to say George Ledingham was ahead of his time. It’s probably more accurate to suggest that he was very much *of* his time but at the front of the pack.

As noted in the reviews of Ledingham’s life and career by Fahselt (2007) and Houston and Nero (2006), conservation action was not his “day job.” His career as a biology professor and well-respected teacher at Regina College (later the University of Regina) extended from 1946 until 1976, continuing with part-time teaching until 1983 (Houston and Nero 2006). He was an authority on the cytology of *Oxytropis* and *Astragalus*, both agriculturally and ecologically important plant genera in the bean (Fabaceae) family that are well represented in prairie landscapes. Fieldwork for his investigation of these plants likely contributed to

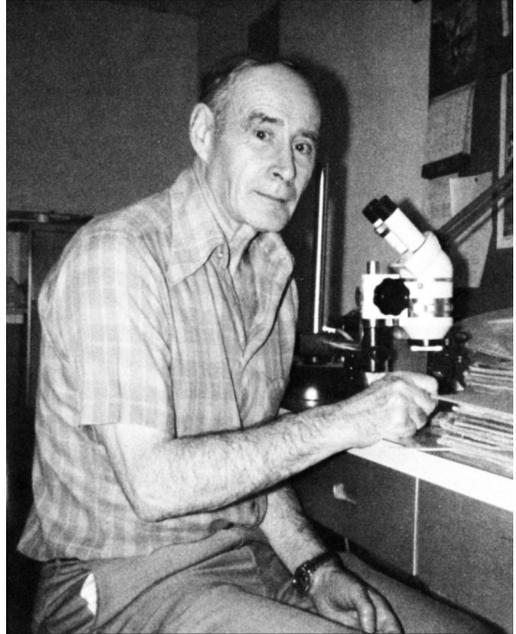


FIGURE 1. George Ledingham in 1982. Photo: Gary Seib.

his lifelong love of native prairie and to his tireless efforts to conserve and protect native examples of it.

The prairie was in his blood. George Ledingham was born into a large family with five siblings on a farm west of Moose Jaw, Saskatchewan. Initially trained as a public school teacher, he later obtained a B.Sc. (1934) and M.Sc. (1936) from the University of Saskatchewan, venturing beyond the province to earn a Ph.D. from the University of Wisconsin in 1939. He married University of Saskatchewan graduate (B.A., 1939) Marjorie Clare Beattie in June 1942. He was predeceased by Marjorie in March 2000 but was survived by their son, Beattie, three grandsons, and four great-granddaughters (see Houston and Nero 2006 for further details of his personal background).



FIGURE 2. Native prairie in the Frenchman River valley, Grasslands National Park, Saskatchewan, 1 July 2008. Photo: D. F. Brunton.

Ledingham's notable scientific contributions include his role in the founding and development of the 70 000-specimen herbarium of the University of Regina (USAS) (herbarium acronym follows Thiers 2012). He was also widely credited as being a major influence in developing the careers of his students (Fahselt 2007). His proudest legacy, however, is undoubtedly his success in obtaining protection for important examples of native grasslands. More than that of any other individual, his persistence in conducting research and public education and in lobbying for over 30 years was responsible for the creation in 1989 of Grasslands National Park in southwestern Saskatchewan (Houston and Nero 2006) (Figure 2).

Ledingham's efforts on behalf of the naturalist community in Saskatchewan were exceptional. It is difficult, for example, to overstate his importance in the establishment and early success of the SNHS. In August 1948, when he was President of the Regina Natural History Society, he received a letter from the Yorkton Natural History Society (drafted by C. Stuart Houston) exploring the possibility of provincial co-operation in the publication of their local Yorkton journal, *The Blue Jay*. Ledingham responded positively but went further by suggesting the formation of a province-wide naturalists' federation that would be more than just the publisher of the journal (Belcher 1996). This, the Saskatchewan Natural History Society,

would provide improved communications and support within the provincial naturalist community and offer greater opportunities for both public educational and effective wildlife conservation measures.

Ledingham was appointed provisional president of the SNHS at the 24 January 1949 formative gathering of local natural society representatives in Regina. The following year he became the first president elected by the membership, thus presiding over the crucial early days of the organization and initiating decades of service in various administrative and organizational capacities. A dramatic illustration of the importance and endurance of his involvement is evident in Figure 3. Each coloured page marker indicates a page in Margaret Belcher's comprehensive history of the SNHS where mention of one or more of George Ledingham's contributions to the Society appears.

It is a remarkable record. Throughout his lengthy history of action and concern, however, George Ledingham never lost focus on the need for Saskatchewan naturalists to be well informed about their landscape, to share that knowledge in the pages of *The Blue Jay* and elsewhere, and to be persistent in ensuring that important prairie landscapes were protected.

Amongst the many accolades he received for his long and productive professional and community career was the naming of the University of Regina herbarium in his honour (Anonymous 2006). He continued to con-

duct curatorial and taxonomic work there well into his 90s. The University of Regina also conferred an honorary doctorate on him in November 1986 (Anonymous 1986).

In 1981 he received the J. B. Harkin Medal from the National and Provincial Parks Association of Canada (now Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society) for his contribution to the conservation of native grasslands in the prairie provinces (Belcher 1982).

Ledingham was awarded an Honorary Membership by the Ottawa Field-Naturalists' Club in 1992. The citation includes the following:

"There is a rich and special connection between prairie people and the land. This productive and often eloquent relationship has produced remarkable interpreters of western grasslands, be they writers like W. O. Mitchell, painters like William Kurelek, or scientists like George Ledingham. ... If Black-footed Ferrets once again hunt prairie-dogs on the open Canadian prairie it will happen here and only because of the effort and dedication of Ledingham and his associates" (Brunton 1993).

That the once almost extinct Black-footed Ferret (*Mustela nigripes*) is indeed now hunting Black-tailed Prairie Dogs (*Cynomys ludovicianus*) on the native prairie of Grasslands National Park underscores the importance of that vision and his perseverance.

Like the man himself, one especially important legacy of George Ledingham is understated and subtle. That is his role from the late 1950s into the 1980s as a spokesperson for and interpreter of the conservation ethic that was developing in western Canada and across North America. His well-expressed, science-based writings – especially his editorials in *The Blue Jay* (see appended bibliography) – influenced a generation of western Canadian naturalists.

Here was a man who was totally at home on the prairie, who knew it well, who communicated that knowledge with credibility and respect, and who made a lasting and important contribution to the protection of its native biodiversity. His inspiration continues to pay conservation dividends, in both the work of organizations like Nature Saskatchewan and the initiatives of individual prairie naturalists.

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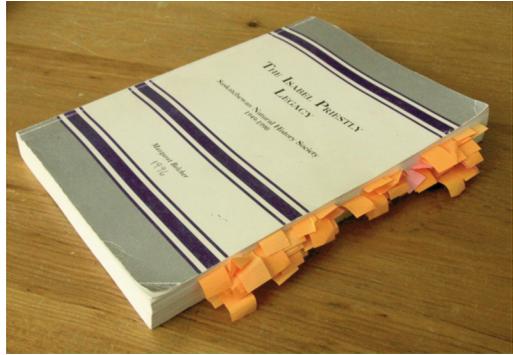


FIGURE 3. Pages marked with numerous Ledingham references in the history of the Saskatchewan Natural History Society (Belcher 1996).

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