

# The Canadian Field-Naturalist

## A tribute to George W. Scotter, 1933–2021

JOHN B. THEBERGE

2061 Cowichan Bay Road, Cowichan Bay, British Columbia V0R 1N1 Canada; email: theberge.jm@gmail.com

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Describing George Scotter is not easy. Many words come to mind, like curious naturalist, scientist, research director, teacher, conservationist, advocate for parks and wild places, wildflower fancier, and writer. All of them applied at different stages of his life.

George was born and raised in the shadows of the Rockies in southwestern Alberta and credited frequent family visits to the mountains of Waterton/Glacier National Parks with stimulating an insatiable appetite for natural history that developed into a lifelong vocation. He lived and worked in or near the Rockies and northern Canada throughout his life, probing into the lives of native plants, mammals, and birds.

Trained in ecology, botany (Figure 1), taxonomy, and wildlife management, George worked for more than 30 years for Environment Canada's Canadian Wildlife Service based in Edmonton. There, he served as a wildlife biologist, parks research program leader, research scientist, and research director. He also was



**FIGURE 1.** George on a botanical survey in northern Saskatchewan, 1960. Photo: unknown.

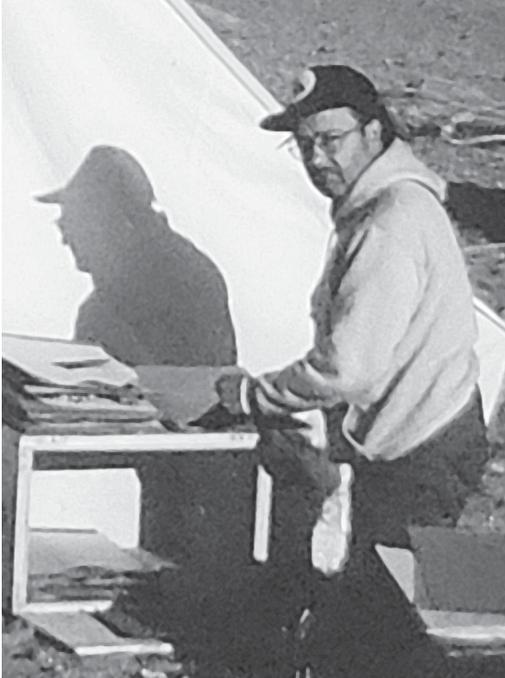
a professor at Utah State University and directed research for the Utah Division of Wildlife Resources under the Federal Aid in Wildlife Restoration Program. He was a professor in the Department of Recreation Administration and lectured in the Department of Geography and the Faculty of Science at the University of Alberta. He also served as an adjunct professor in Forest Science at the University of Alberta and at the Natural Resources Institute, University of Manitoba.

The Far North called him early in his career (Figures 2, 3). George worked on the forage and range requirements of Barren-ground Caribou (*Rangifer tarandus*), an important food source for residents of northern Canada. Following that he studied the potential of the Reindeer (*Rangifer tarandus*) industry in the Mackenzie Delta.

George's emphasis changed in 1968 when he began studies of alpine ecology in the Sunshine area of Banff National Park and trail use by visitors in Waterton Lakes National Park. He was instrumental in introducing controlled burning into the grasslands of Prince Albert and Waterton Lakes National Parks, a practice that is now common. He and associates carried out pioneering studies on visitor impacts on sensitive landscapes in such places as Lake O'Hara in Yoho National Park, the summit area of Mount Revelstoke National Park, Lake Louise and Egypt Lake in Banff National Park, Tonquin Valley in Jasper National Park, and Waterton Lakes National Park. These studies emphasized environmental restoration, use limits, and promoted the use of native plants.

Although reluctant to leave field research, George served as Research Director of the Canadian Wildlife Service from 1978 until his retirement in 1991 but was still involved in some field work, including the first release of Swift Fox (*Vulpes velox*) in Saskatchewan and Alberta, which occurred on private land and in Grasslands National Park from 1983 to 1977 (Figure 4). He was known for his research management ability and especially as a mentor, encouraging and

supporting younger scientists within the organization. With never enough money to adequately support ongoing research, one colleague remarked that “Scotter could find money even on the branches of trees”.



**FIGURE 2.** George in a field camp at Wager Bay, Northwest Territories. Photo: Geoff Holroyd.

During the 1984 political decimation of the Canadian Wildlife Service, George moved to Ottawa where he found employment for 82 laid-off staff members.

To compensate for the reduced research capabilities caused by the layoffs, George proposed, at a Colloquium on Wildlife Conservation, the establishment of wildlife research institutes at Canadian universities. Although the proposal was considered at the Federal-Provincial/Territorial Wildlife Conference in 1987, only a modified version was ever implemented.

For many years George served as the Canadian Wildlife Service representative on the Beverly-Kaminuriak Caribou Management Board and its successor organizations. The board emerged as a ground-breaking model of cooperation for the successful amalgamation of scientific and traditional knowledge for game management.

George participated as the team leader in preparing planning documents for ten potential national park reserves in northern Canada and southern British Columbia. The first area documented was the South Nahanni. Not content with only preparing a detailed report, he realized the critical importance of public awareness about the iconic Nahanni's potential as a national park. Through both a lecture series that extended from Victoria to Montreal and articles in various magazines, he informed Canadians about its heritage resources. Consequently, the Honourable Jean Chrétien and Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau received many letters supporting the park proposal, leading to its eventual establishment as the Nahanni National



**FIGURE 3.** George with a Polar Bear (*Ursus maritimus*) immobilized on the west coast of Hudson's Bay as part of a Canadian Wildlife Service long-term study of population dynamics. Photo: unknown.



**FIGURE 4.** George releasing a Swift Fox (*Vulpes velox*) in 1983 in extreme southwest Saskatchewan as part of the first release of what eventually would total 932 animals and be a significant conservation success story. Photo: unknown; caption information courtesy of Lu Carbyn (CWS, retired).

Park Reserve. George recalled that the initial report was criticized for recommending too large of an area, and the size that gained protection was much smaller. However, by 2009, Nahanni National Park Reserve had been increased by about nine-fold to include nearly the entire watershed. George's role in the establishment of Nahanni is documented in *The Magnificent Nahanni, the Struggle to Protect a Wild Place*

by Dr. Gordon Nelson (2017).

Together with an interdisciplinary group of associates, George continued working on establishing national parks in the North. They evaluated many potential sites: Horton/Anderson rivers (1979), Banks Island (1980), Bathurst Inlet (1980), Axel Heiberg Island (1981), Bylot Island (1983), Wager Bay (1987), Melville Hills (1992), and the Western High Arctic (1992).

Retiring from the Canadian Wildlife Service in 1991, George and his wife, Etta, moved to Kelowna, British Columbia. From there he continued to do research on the recovery of a subalpine meadow from visitor impact at Lake O'Hara (Figure 5) and conducted a regional analysis of the Western High Arctic for Parks Canada. In 1998 he studied the British Columbia Interior Dry Plateau for Parks Canada, recommending that part of southern Okanagan, with its host of endangered species and habitats, be considered for national park status. He promoted the concept through presentations to the public, writing, and meetings with politicians.

George maintained his interest in the flora of the Rockies and revised his popular book (Scotter and Flygare 2011) on wildflowers of the Rockies. On a few occasions he was the keynote speaker and field



**FIGURE 5.** Revisiting Lake O'Hara in Yoho National Park in 2010, one of George's favourite places, where in the early 1970s he studied visitor impacts on the fragile alpine meadows. Photo: Troy Scotter.

trip leader at the North American Rock Garden Society conference in Banff and at the Waterton Wildflower Festival. He also taught classes on wildflowers and led field trips for the Society for Learning in Retirement at Kelowna.

George served as a member or chairman of several committees including Canadian Committee for the International Biological Program, Matador project, University of Saskatchewan (1968–1972); co-chair, with Dr. Valerius Geist, on the Canadian Committee for the International Biological Program, Conservation of Terrestrial Communities, Subcommittee for the forested and montane zones of the Yukon and Northwest Territories (1969–1972); chairman of the big game technical session, Northwest Section of the Wildlife Society (1971); chairman, range ecology session, First International Reindeer/Caribou (1972); member of workshop on Panel 6, Impact of Man on Mountain Ecosystems, Program on Man and the Biosphere (MAB), United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (1973); president of the International Mountain Section, Society for Range Management (1979–1980); member of the Beverly-Kaminuriak Caribou Management Board (1983–1988); co-chair of Special Session 6, Cooperating with Indigenous People to Manage Fish and Wildlife at the North American Wildlife Conference (1991); member and/or chairman of the TD Friends of the Environment Foundation for southeastern British Columbia (5 years); and director of the Central Okanagan Parks and Wildlife Trust, now the Central Okanagan Land Trust (1993–1996).

George served as a national director and Vice-President of the Canadian Nature Federation from 1972 to 1975 and as President during 1975–1976. During that time, he was instrumental in identifying land and financial support that led to the establishment of the Clifford E. Lee Nature Sanctuary near Edmonton. He was an active member of several other conservation groups and professional societies.

He was the 1985 winner of the J.B. Harkin Award from the Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society. The citation (reproduced in Courtney 2021: 5) reads:

For his long-term, effective and dedicated role as a Canadian Wildlife Service scientist and as a citizen conservationist in advancing wildlife studies and national park identification, planning and management, notably in northern Canada.

Nature Canada also honoured him with the Douglas H. Pimlott Award in 2016, its highest honour, for his lifetime contributions to conservation.

He was the recipient of other awards including the Queen's Silver Jubilee Medal in 1977. He received the Public Service Merit Awards in both 1985 and

1987. He was also presented with a Pendleton Creation Turtle blanket at the Wildflower Festival for his contributions to Waterton Lakes National Park.

Over a period of more than 55 years, George wrote four books and published more than 185 articles in scientific journals, popular magazines, and newsletters (see Bibliography). In addition, he authored or coauthored 56 unpublished reports.

George dedicated much of his life to the preservation of nature and embraced all creatures within it. His passion for nature went beyond merely observing its splendour. He felt that in a world where habitat continues to vanish and the list of endangered species grows longer each year, the only real hope for conservation lies in an informed and concerned public. Through more than 250 presentations, field trips, and writing George endeavoured to educate and encourage awareness and appreciation of the natural world. Audiences for those activities ranged from girl guides and senior citizens to naturalist and professional groups. He was a popular speaker and engaging communicator.

An inveterate collector, eight months before George died a Yukon botanical curator, Bruce Bennett, contacted him asking how many plants he had collected during his career. George answered him with a quip: "I never thought about numbers, but I'm glad you asked that question because it gave me something to do during isolation imposed on me by COVID-19". By contacting upwards of 19 herbaria across North America and Europe where he sent specimens, he ended up replying "I'm confident that my total number of collected plants exceeds 35 000", which may place him among top Canadian botanists. He later revised that total to 36 149 consisting principally of his specialties: 17 231 lichens and 10 236 bryophytes, noting that numbers will increase as "several herbaria have yet to complete digitizing their collections". His numerous collections are a testament to his enthusiasm for field studies. For his many contributions, four species have been named in his honour: Scotter's Lichen (*Cladonia scotteri* Ahti & E.S. Hansen), Scotter's Draba (*Draba scotteri* G.A. Mulligan), *Erigeron scotteri* Boivin (synonymized with Snow Fleabane [*Erigeron nivalis* Nuttall]), and Scotter's Tortula Moss (*Tortula scotteri* Zander & Steere; synonymized with *Hilpertia velenovskyi* (Schiffn.) R.H. Zander).

George considered himself lucky; he seldom distinguished between his vocation and his avocation. Long hours and personal expenditures on projects of interest were part of the game. He considered himself to be a generalist, a polymath, living in a specialists' world. He was a voracious reader and life-long learner. His passion for the natural world has run throughout his life's work. Even as an octogenarian, his knowledge

and love for nature remained unbounded as did his advocacy for parks and wilderness.

George valued his relationship with family and close friends with whom he faithfully kept in regular contact. His wife, Etta, and their two children were taken to the field and involved in research to the extent possible. Etta spent many days editing drafts of his numerous reports and publications. George and Etta travelled extensively during retirement and enjoyed an active life. Time for hobbies was limited, but George was an avid dahlia grower, and he enjoyed a game of duplicate bridge.

George died on 14 July 2021 at Kelowna, British Columbia, leaving a natural world a bit better known and better protected from his years of work. As requested, his ashes were scattered on an alpine meadow straddling the Alberta and British Columbia border. He left this world with the belief that there would be more natural history to be studied and more mountains to be climbed.

### Acknowledgements

I am grateful to George, a valued friend for many years, for background material that he passed on to me about his career, accomplishments, and life. He had requested that I submit a tribute to *The Canadian Field-Naturalist* a couple of years before he died, so I am carrying out his wishes. Thanks to Troy Scotter, George's son, for providing most of the bibliographer's DOIs.

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