

A Tribute to Dr. David Hussell (1934 - 2015)

by J.D. McCracken

David Hussell was one of the original “band of banders” – a spirited team that ventured out to the tip of Long Point in fall 1959 to investigate the site’s potential as a banding station. A wise visionary from the outset, David soon had it in his mind that migration monitoring would prove as a useful tool for tracking bird population changes. Shortly thereafter, the Long Point Bird Observatory (LPBO) operation was born.

LPBO is the oldest research station of its type in the Western Hemisphere, and it’s impossible to overlook David’s extraordinary contributions. He was not only one of the Observatory’s founders, he served as the Chair of the Board and then as the first Executive Director from 1974-1982. David continued to be involved in LPBO and Bird Studies Canada research activities during his subsequent employment as a Research Scientist for the Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources, and later throughout his retirement. For more than five decades, he maintained a close involvement in the Observatory’s programs, especially in the field of migration monitoring and Tree Swallow research.

David is widely regarded as a founding father of migration monitoring in North America. Not only was he instrumental in developing LPBO and its programs, he played major roles in developing the Thunder Cape, Innis Point and Prince Edward Point bird observatories, as well as helping champion the development of the Canadian Migration Monitoring Network (CMMN). He developed the first analytical approaches to calculating population trend estimates of migrating birds, and developed guidance documents that we still use today for establishing migration monitoring stations. Most recently, he had a big hand in developing the ‘Raptor Population Index’ for hawk monitoring stations across the continent. Indeed, when you think about trickle-down effects, David played some sort of pioneering role in the development of all migration monitoring stations in North America.

David was also among one of the first to recognize, promote and celebrate the exceptional contributions that volunteers can make as “citizen scientists” to the study of birds, whether it was at migration monitoring stations or through other types of surveys like breeding bird atlas projects, the Canadian Lakes Loon Survey, Project FeederWatch, heronry inventories, or surveys of beached birds. He figured that volunteers could be motivated in other ways too, including fund-raising. He proved it by creating the Baillie Birdathon in 1976. To date, Birdathon participants have raised over \$5 million for over 600 worthy bird conservation and research projects across the country.

In the process of all this, David served as a trainer and mentor for dozens of young biologists – many of whom have since gone on to pursue distinguished professional careers. In the mid 1970s, together with his wife Erica Dunn, he created the Young Ornithologists’ Workshop (YOW) at Long Point, which I think is one of his most important legacies. Most of the teens who have graduated from the YOW program have gone on to obtain degrees in biology and are making strong contributions to science and conservation. And more are on the horizon.

Last but not least, David also enriched the lives of lots of 'grown-up' professional colleagues. They've awarded him with many official accolades, including lifetime achievement awards from the Society of Canadian Ornithologists, Hawk Migration Association of North America, Ontario Field Ornithologists, Ontario Bird Banding Association, Nuttall Ornithological Society, and the Linnaean Society of New York.

On his way to becoming a biologist, David first trained as a civil engineer. I can't help but think that this engineering mindset helped shape his natural ability to design and tinker with things – big and small – contributing to elements that showed up later in his distinguished career as a scientist.

Like all trail-blazers, David's path is a tough act to follow. But once you've taken up the road map, you'll find that the sign posts he laid down serve as clear stepping stones to the future.