

## **C. Stuart Houston 1927–2021 and Mary Isabel Houston 1924–2019**

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IN MEMORIAM  
C. STUART HOUSTON  
1927–2021  
AND  
MARY ISABEL HOUSTON  
1924–2019



Mary and Stuart Houston, September 2007, Fogelsville, PA, USA; RRF meeting, © Dan Varland

Stuart and Mary Houston were among the best-known husband and wife bird-banding teams in Canada, and regular Raptor Research Foundation (RRF) conference attendees. We find it impossible to write a memorial for either separately. Mary Isabel Houston died on 19 July 2019 following complications from a fall, and C. Stuart Houston died of a stroke two years later on 22 July 2021.

Mary came from a farm in Dilke, Saskatchewan, while Stuart was born in North Dakota and moved with his parents to Yorkton, Saskatchewan, within 3 months of his birth. Stuart's budding interest in ornithology was stimulated at the age of thirteen by a birthday gift of *Birds of Canada* (Taverner 1934), presented to him by two of his aunts. Stuart also was mentored by Isabel Priestley, whose weekly "muskeg walks" became a regular feature in his life. While in grade nine, Stuart began a project which would soon evolve into the *Blue Jay* (<https://bluejayjournal.ca>), a quarterly publication covering the natural history of the northern plains. He typed out, mimeographed and sold (for ten cents) Mrs. Priestley's *List of Birds Identified in the Yorkton District*.

Mary and Stuart met in Yorkton; Mary had taken a job as a high school teacher at Yorkton Collegiate Institute, and Stuart, having just obtained his M.D. from the University of Manitoba, had returned to join his parents in their medical practice. Mary and Stuart married in 1951 and moved to Saskatoon in 1960, where Stuart took a position at the University of Saskatchewan Medical College (USMC), specializing in Radiology.

While Stuart was working at USMC, he simultaneously specialized on birds of prey, especially Great Horned Owls (*Bubo virginianus*) and later Turkey Vultures (*Cathartes aura*), but never passed up an opportunity to put a band on anything with feathers. Mary was the constant organizer and provider for banding expeditions, ensuring jugs of cold drinks, sandwiches, and cookies as well as the bands and notebooks were packed for their trips. Mary was no slouch at banding herself and is unique in North America in having banded more Bohemian Waxwings (*Bombycilla garrulus*; 5385) than all other banders combined, trapping them in her backyard during winter months. She also banded over 7500 Mountain Bluebirds (*Sialia currucoides*) and 18,000 Tree Swallows (*Tachycineta bicolor*) in nest boxes along a 241-km bluebird trail, as well as many other species.

Stuart and Mary's interest in birds always revolved around banding. Stuart obtained the only underage Canadian bird-banding permit ever knowingly issued when he started banding with Ducks Unlimited in 1943. Together, Stuart and Mary banded 151,888 individual birds of 211 species, with 3945 recoveries of 84 species by 2014 (the highest number of species recovered of any Canadian bander). Stuart was a messianic figure, driven and obsessive, and in over 77 years of banding he acquired all manner of disciples or, as he sometimes called them "gaboons" (similar to the Hammerstroms' parlance for raptor field workers). Only Stuart knew all those who participated in his 77 years of banding, but a partial list we are aware of contains the names of over 70 people, mostly men and boys but also some women and girls, who climbed trees and precarious ladders, rappelled down cliffs to eagle, falcon, and raven eyries, and ran after fledged raptors of all kinds. Many landowners and nest finders also often came along to watch. Mary was also always busy—assisting Stuart or banding songbirds. These banding forays were like military operations from start to finish. Even though one of us (AS) lived only 2 blocks from 22nd Street, the main artery leading west out of town, Stuart never said "I'll come by your place around 6:30 and pick you up"; no, Stuart said "be on 22nd Street at 0630 H." On cue his Land Rover would swoop in like an eagle and pick me up. I (AS) never missed an outing, but I got the feeling that if I was late there would be no waiting for me! PG may have had it a little better. When I (PG) was 9 or 10, my brother Jon and I would sleep over at Stuart and Mary's house. They would wake us at 3:00 AM, we would have a light breakfast, and off we would go to Redberry Lake, to motor to the islands by boat. We went early in the morning because we knew that we would be disturbing the flightless young waterbirds and this way they would settle down before the heat of the day set in. The young pelicans gather in creches at this age, and Jon and I caught them and took them to Stuart or Mary, who banded them and let them go. We probably banded more than 100 young pelicans each year.

Stuart was an enthusiastic and frequently unorthodox teacher in several fields, on occasion combining ornithology and radiology in a legendary medical lecture entitled *Sexual Dimorphism among the Owls, or How to Tell the Girls from the Boys*. The talk, which was liberally illustrated with radiological images and slides from bird banding expeditions, set out by describing survival strategies of the Great Horned Owl, progressed via circuitous routes through fat distribution in human anatomy and the frequency of tall stature and blonde hair among Swedish girls, arriving finally at an explanation for women's knees being shapely and attractive while men's are usually bony and ugly. The final point concerning the comparative aesthetic appeal of female versus male knees was substantiated with formally posed anterior and posterior photographs of Mary and Stuart standing side by side wearing shorts.

It didn't matter who you were—doctor, janitor, engineer, student, or farmer—Stuart would infect you with his passion and recruit you to spend gruelling days opening gates, slogging and stumbling over fields or through community pasture, climbing tall trees, wading through swamps or rappelling down cliffs. The expeditions were legendary for their early starts, long nonstop days, eating on the go, and midnight returns. Stuart would conclude most public talks with an invitation to would-be banders to join his expeditions, promising us all the peanut-butter and raisin sandwiches we could eat, along with "the opportunity to meet the nicest and most observant people in Saskatchewan—most observant because they see the owls' nests, and nicest because they take the trouble to tell me about them." "Bird-banding," Stuart observed with certainty, "is the greatest field sport known to man." More than one park ranger or professional naturalist owes their career to falling under Stuart's spell at an early age.

For many of the climbers/banders, those trips began their lifelong love affair with raptors. "Every bird needs a band" was his mantra, and over the years he did his best to fulfill it. He banded every species of raptor that either nested regularly in Saskatchewan or migrated through, including eight species for which he banded over 1000 individuals each. The Great Horned Owl topped the list with 7776 individuals. Because of my (AS) interest in birds, my parents had encouraged participation in the annual Christmas Bird Count in Saskatoon. After the count, the birders adjourned to the home of the compilers, the Houstons, in their grand old two-story house on University Drive, Saskatoon. Here we compiled the results of bird observations in the count circle. After a hearty supper of hamburger soup with cocoa, I (AS) lingered and wondered at Stuart Houston's library. Without exaggeration, it probably held almost all the ornithological knowledge for the province at that time. This trove ranged from nineteenth century texts that predated the formation of the province (in 1905) to maps and notes from Houston's most-recent banding expedition.

The Houstons' topographical maps saw decades of hard use. In tatters from countless consultations and re-foldings, they bore multiple layers of jottings, notations, lines, and circles whose legibility had faded over the years, though Stuart remembered the circumstances of every mark. When asked if there was any danger of getting lost in the trackless community pastures or among the ravines and coulees that snaked among the loops of the South Saskatchewan River, Stuart declared with confidence that he followed the example of Daniel Boone, who was supposedly asked if he ever got lost in the wilderness. "No," Boone reportedly replied, "I was never lost . . . but one time I was mightily confused for three days." "Stuck?" Stuart would respond when arriving somewhere two hours overdue in a  $4 \times 4$  caked in mud from the wheel wells to the ladders on the roof rack, "No, we weren't stuck—we were temporarily immobilized." Extrication from a bog when temporarily immobilized often required the services of a farm tractor, and on at least one occasion, a second farm tractor to pull out the first farm tractor before the banders' vehicle could be dislodged. Stuart and Mary often headed home in the darkness, generally several hours late due to capitalizing on the unexpected opportunity to band "just one more nest" and after being "mightily confused" and "temporarily immobilized" more than once during a weekend of banding, Stuart summed it up best with his oft-repeated maxim: "You don't have to be crazy to band birds . . . but it certainly helps."

Stuart and Mary both liked to band new birds; at one point they had never banded a Gyrfalcon (*Falco rusticolus*). Jim Kroshus and I (LO) had trapped a male and released it after simply putting on a leather band with our initials on it. When Stuart heard this, he was incensed and promised us that if we trapped another and brought it to him to band properly, then he would make a \$100 donation to a charity of our choice as it was a species he had never banded. A few weeks later, I met Mary by chance and told her I thought Gyrfalcons should be worth more than \$100, and also that Jim and I planned to go trapping again that weekend. Unbelievably, I came across a large female Gyrfalcon on my way to meet Jim and managed to catch it. We called Stuart and asked if he wanted to band it. He was very excited until we told him it would cost him \$1000, \$500 each to the Saskatchewan Environmental Society and the Saskatchewan Wildlife Federation. He hesitated a few moments until we suggested that we could just let it go, whereupon he quickly agreed to our terms. When we arrived back in Saskatoon, he was ready with a crowd to watch. His hands were shaking as he approached the huge 2000-g falcon, but we still made him sign the donation checks first!

One of us (LO) caught a Northern Shrike (*Lanius borealis*), and almost let the shrike go but instead put it in the pocket of a parka and drove the short way to the Houstons' home. Mary answered the door and I asked if Stuart would like to band the shrike. Mary got very excited, saying "Yes, yes please. We have only ever caught one Northern Shrike and it bit me as I held it while Stuart got the band out and I let it go. Stuart has never forgiven me!"

Stuart was recognized not only for his efforts in ornithology, but also in his profession as a radiologist and as an author of several books that dealt with the early explorations of Canada. He was the author or coauthor of over 250 articles on medicine, and over 500 publications on ornithology and natural history. Stuart was awarded D.Litt and D.CNL degrees and the Saskatchewan Order of Merit, made an Officer of the Order of Canada, received the prestigious RRF Hamerstrom Award in 2003, and was granted innumerable other local, national, and international awards. Mary likewise was highly active and the recipient of many awards. She was one of the first of four elected Fellows of the provincial Saskatchewan Natural History Society in 1987, and served as its vice-president from 1979 to 1981. She received the Douglas H. Pimlott Conservation Award from the Canadian Nature Federation in 1988, the Distinguished Canadian Award from the University of Regina Seniors' University Group in 1992, the Meewasin Conservation Award in 1996, the Saskatchewan Volunteer Medal, and the Saskatchewan Centennial Medal in 2005, and was inducted into the Saskatoon Women's Hall of Fame in 2011. Both lived to see the publication of the major 765-page tome, *Birds of Saskatchewan*, published in early 2019 (Smith et al. 2019). This publication, edited by Stuart, Alan R. Smith, and J. Frank Roy, was Mary and Stuart's final legacy to ornithology. Mary wrote up seven species accounts but also, according to the Acknowledgements, provided "behind the scenes work over many years involving mountains of records and many pots of tea... valuable checking, proofreading and some of the best criticism offered" (Smith et al. 2019, pp. 6–7).

Canada and the RRF are poorer after the loss of Mary and Stuart Houston, a wonderful partnership that lasted 68 years. No memorial can begin to recount the many people whose lives they touched or the uncountable events that occurred in the field. Mary and Stuart Houston are survived by their four children,

nine grandchildren, and two great-grandchildren, and will be missed by their family, and the many colleagues and friends they made in the field and throughout the many annual RRF meetings they attended during their vibrant lives.—**Peter Gerrard, Saskatoon, SK, Canada; David G. Miller, Grasswood, SK, Canada; Lynn Oliphant, Saskatoon, SK, Canada; Alan R. Smith, Nature Saskatchewan, Avonlea, SK, Canada; and Dan Zazelenchuk, Kyle, SK, Canada.**

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In Memoriam Editor: Joel E. (Jeep) Pagel