

In Memoriam: Gary Bortolotti, 1954–2011

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IN MEMORIAM: GARY BORTOLOTTI, 1954–2011

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Gary Bortolotti, 1954–2011. (Photograph by Marten J. Stoffel.)

Gary Bortolotti, AOU member since 1978, Elective Member (1993) and Fellow (2006), was born on 17 August 1954 in Smith's Falls, Ontario. Gary was stricken with acute myelogenous leukemia late in May 2011, which, with the subsequent chemotherapy, left him severely immunocompromised. Further complications from a severe respiratory infection led to his sudden death on 3 July 2011.

Gary grew up in Toronto, where he attended Northview Heights Collegiate in North York. He obtained a BSc. in forestry

at the University of Toronto (1977). While working on his forestry degree, he became more interested in birds than in the trees. He switched to zoology and, with the support of a series of fellowships and grants from Hawk Mountain Sanctuary, the National Wildlife Federation, the World Wildlife Fund, the Eagle Foundation, and the Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada (NSERC), became a doctoral student. Gary worked under Jon C. Barlow on evolution of the growth rate and nestling sex ratio

in Bald Eagles for the doctorate. He received the Ramsay Wright Award in Zoology at the University of Toronto. For his postdoctoral work at the University of Toronto, Gary examined the feather chemistry of the Spruce Grouse. As a University Research Fellow, he was appointed to assistant professor in biology at the University of Saskatchewan in 1987. He rose quickly through the ranks to become a full professor on 1 July 1996. He was named the Stuart and Mary Houston Professor of Ornithology, 2002–2012, and the Rawson Professor of Biology in 2008.

Although it is almost disconcertingly monotonous to many people, I somehow found comfort in the simplicity of the boreal forest. Perhaps it was an illusion of a landscape untouched by the ravages of humankind. My mind was free from the distractions of the hard-sell billboards and pit stops of the south. The monotony of the boreal forest was a verdant backdrop to my accelerating imagination as we neared Besnard Lake. Today, at long last, I would see my first Bald Eagle.

My emotions were strong and strangely polarized. On the one hand I saw myself as an intruder, an unwelcome tourist in a foreign land. This wild and beautiful country was so different from the metropolis of Toronto where I grew up that it might as well have been on the other side of the globe. On the other hand I had never felt such a sense of satisfaction, or perhaps relief, the way one feels when finally starting on the journey home after an extended absence. (from *The Bald Eagle: Haunts and Habits of a Wilderness Monarch*, by Gerrard and Bortolotti, 1988).

The above were Gary's reflections on his first visit to Besnard Lake in the spring of 1976. Gary and Kandyd Szuba, two forestry students at the University of Toronto, had volunteered to spend the summer at this remote lake in northern Saskatchewan to aid Jon Gerrard's ninth year of Bald Eagle research. First-class observers, Gary and Kandyd went slowly around half the 8-km segments of Besnard Lake's 400-km shoreline, meticulously counting and ageing each eagle. It was a magical summer and Gary, an enthusiastic, energetic, environmentally conscious student, became hooked for the rest of his life on raptors and on Besnard Lake.

From 1979 to 1982, Gary conducted field work at Besnard Lake for his Ph.D. dissertation. He developed a simple and accurate approach to sexing Bald Eagles on the basis of their morphology, but it was his pioneering research on facultative sex-ratio manipulation that received most acclaim. He found that male-first, female-second broods are rare in Bald Eagles because they lead to greater sibling conflict. In 1987, as a University Research Fellow at the University of Saskatchewan, Gary resumed his research at Besnard Lake each summer, often assisted by his wife, Heather Trueman.

In 1988, Gary collaborated with Jon Gerrard to write *The Bald Eagle: Haunts and Habits of a Wilderness Monarch*, published by the Smithsonian Press. Later, Gary and his students conducted research on American Kestrels, building and placing about 375 kestrel nest boxes near Besnard Lake. This work produced several graduate theses, including a prize winner by Karen Wiebe, who later joined the biology faculty at the University of Saskatchewan. Karen also collaborated with Gerrard and Bortolotti to write *Birds of the Besnard Lake Area, North-Central Saskatchewan 1968–1994*. Russ Dawson, another student who participated in the kestrel research project, went on to become the Canada Research Chair in Avian Ecology at the University of Northern British Columbia.

At the University of Saskatchewan, Gary was an inspiring teacher and dedicated scientist. His broad and extensive research program had a wide-ranging influence on many fields, including behavior, physiology, ecology, and evolutionary biology, because it integrated topics such as the elemental composition of feathers, avian immunocompetence, ecotoxicology (PCBs and PBDEs), carotenoids and coloration, and the ecophysiology of stress. He also acted as assistant head of the Department of Biology at the University of Saskatchewan from 2000 through 2005.

Gary made friends with many collaborators around the world, but particularly in Sevilla and at the Doñana Biological Station in Spain. He received a Government of Spain Award to spend a sabbatical in Spain in 1999. Subsequently, a steady stream of postdocs visited his lab and Gary made many trips to Spain. Gary is remembered by his students and collaborators as an unusually thoughtful, challenging, and encouraging mentor. As a mark of the esteem in which he was held, five of his Spanish collaborators came on short notice to attend Gary's memorial service, joining Canadians from British Columbia to Ontario who attended.

An avid and talented photographer, Gary recorded his passion for nature for all to share. He was an assistant editor of *The Wilson Bulletin* (1979–1984) and an associate editor of *The Journal of Raptor Research* (1993–2000), *Functional Ecology* (2005–2010), and *The Auk* (2005–2008). He received substantial long-term annual research grants from NSERC.

He leaves behind his wife of 27 years, Heather Trueman; a daughter, Lauren, already a promising biologist working toward her doctorate; and a son, Eric, an undergraduate student at the University of Saskatchewan. His memory will be commemorated in the Gary Bortolotti Award in Biology at the University of Saskatchewan; donations are solicited. Gary's friendly warmth, great enthusiasm, and passions will be sorely missed.

We thank Karen Wiebe and Russ Dawson for advice, and Heather Trueman for help in preparing this memorial.