

Renaissance Man

By Rod Silver

When Andy Stewart, a wildlife biologist with the BC Conservation Data Centre went looking for historical information to include in the final volume of The Birds of British Columbia, he found a letter written by Dr. Rudolph M. Anderson of the Canadian National Museum to naturalist/writer/collector Hamilton M. Laing. The date was December 26, 1929. In part, it read:

There is another factor that enters into the plans. You are now about the only freelance collector in the West who is competent to do museum collecting, and is familiar with the technique, and, as an old apostle, we want you to help pass on some of the tradition to a disciple. We have a young man in view that has been recommended to me from several different sources. His name is **Ian McTaggart-Cowan** of North Vancouver, now a third year student at the University of BC. I met him at Winson's place in Huntingdon last Fall, and Kenneth Racey and Allan Brooks spoke highly of him, also Professors Spencer and MacLean Fraser of the department of zoology at the University.

They say his forebears were naturalists, and he has camped and hunted all his life. Spencer says he... is a go-getter in the field. I had only a short conversation with him last fall and was much taken by him.

I think that Cowan is the real thing.....

Ian McTaggart -Cowan was born in Edinburgh, Scotland in 1910, and immigrated to Canada at age 3. The eldest of four, his mother encouraged an early interest in natural history, an interest that grew as he did. At age 12, he completed a one year diary of all the birds he had seen around his North Vancouver home as a requirement for a proficiency badge in the Boy Scouts. While a first-year student at UBC, he attended a lecture by Vancouver Natural History Society life member Kenneth Racey, hosted by the Burrard Field Naturalists. The topic was small mammals of the Lower Mainland. Ian was fascinated by Racey's knowledge of wildlife, his understanding of the rapidly changing natural world and his expertise in the use of techniques to study small mammals. Racey invited him to his house to see his collection, and he sensed Ian's enthusiasm and thereafter included him in many of the Racey family field trips including outings to their summer home at Alta Lake. Racey and Cowan would publish "The Mammals of the Alta Lake Region of Southwestern BC" in 1935.

For Ian, 1930 saw the beginning of total immersion in the adventures of becoming a vertebrate zoologist. He was appointed as field assistant to Mack Laing, first for a month on the little known Tobacco Plains near Elko B.C., then for 3 months to the Rocky Mountain National Parks of Jasper and Banff. It is here that his initial biological studies of the fauna of the parks were begun.

The following year, Laing's expedition was cancelled as the depths of the Great Depression took hold and research monies vanished. Kenneth Racey was seriously ill in the winter of 1930-31, and in the spring, decided to take a few months away from his business to recuperate. He asked Ian to accompany

him on an extended field trip. They spent May 1931 studying the birds and mammals in the Tofino area including the fascinating near shore fauna, then the alpine assembly of creatures at the head of the Nanaimo River. The most important contribution of the Nanaimo River work was the rediscovery of the Vancouver Island Marmot, an animal not seen since it had been trapped-once- on the mountains above Alberni. June was spent with the entire Racey family on Anarchist Mountain and in the southern Okanagan where a new mammal for BC was discovered: the Pacific Pallid Bat. The expedition continued in July and August in the western Chilcotin and included a side trip by Racey into the unique "northern" habitats of the Itcha Mountains to see caribou. Ian acknowledges the extraordinary contribution that Racey made to his growth and understanding of wild landscapes and their vertebrates. Though a generation apart, they became life-long friends.

After graduating from the University of British Columbia with an undergraduate degree in 1932, Ian took a teaching fellowship at the University of California at Berkley to work on his doctorate. Here he had the opportunity to work under the guidance of noted ecologist Joseph Grinnell. While at home in B.C. during the summer of 1933, a broken leg almost ended his doctoral studies because he was unable to report for his duties as a teaching assistant. He found himself without an income to pay for fees and books for the autumn term. His year was saved by the generosity of Grinnell who accompanied his gift with some scholarly advice to Ian: "Now, no more foolishness about dropping out of your program because of a small shortfall. I don't want the money back-give it to some worthy student somewhere down your path. There will be many of them." Ian fondly remembers Grinnell for his kindness, and for providing a first glimpse of the dedication that good thesis advisors require in order to ensure the success of their graduate students.

After completing his doctorate at Berkley in 1935, Ian returned to British Columbia to work as a biologist at the Provincial Museum in Victoria, then directed by Francis Kermode. He left the Museum in 1940 for an appointment as Assistant Professor in the Department of Zoology, University of British Columbia, in Vancouver.

Ian appeared on the university scene at a most fortuitous time. The great graduate schools in the United States had discovered "ecology", and the graduates, of whom Ian was one, were making waves. The "field" sciences were in ferment. Ian's first publication came in 1930, "The Mammals of Point Grey"- a modest introduction to the 300 titles and several thousand pages of contributions to knowledge that followed in the subsequent 70 years.

In 1943, Ian was contracted by Parks Canada to undertake the first extensive field studies of the fauna of the Rocky Mountain Parks of Canada. He was a natural choice for the work because, through his 3-month stint in the parks with Mack Laing 13 years earlier, he was immediately at home in the landscape. His first guide was the legendary mountain man, James "Jimmy" Simpson, who provided safe passage to the most remote areas of the Rockies.

Promoted to Professor of Zoology in 1945, he served as head of the department from 1953 to 1964 where he continued to develop and teach courses in vertebrate zoology. The vertebrate zoology

program at UBC was established around the personal specimen collections belonging to Ian and Kenneth Racey. It was the first academic program in Canada to study the biological basis of wildlife conservation. As well, Cowan was largely responsible for convincing Canadian governments to recruit trained wildlife biologists to staff their wildlife management agencies.

Ian became Dean of Graduate Studies at UBC in 1964. Even with expanded responsibilities, he continued to teach a course in wildlife biology, supervise directed studies and guide the research of zoology doctoral candidates. The 60s and early 70s were exciting times for students in the field sciences at UBC. In addition to Cowan and Mary Taylor in the zoology department, his students often drew on the vast knowledge and guidance of top notch leaders in other disciplines such as Bert Brink in plant science, A. J. Wood in animal science, D. J. Laird in soil science, Vladimir Krajina and Kay Beamish in botany, Bill Matthews in geology, a young Fred Bunnell in forestry/wildlife and Peter Larkin and Bill Hoar in fisheries.

In all, Ian supervised the research of some 100 graduate students and was an invaluable member of advisory committees on countless other graduate projects. Perhaps Carl Linnaeus, the father of taxonomy said it best -"a professor can never better distinguish himself in his work than by encouraging a clever pupil, for the true discoverers are among them, as comets amongst the stars."

Some of his graduate students were indeed the new "comets" in the wildlife field. Names like Maurice Hornocker (cougar), Val Geist (Stone's sheep) and C.S Holling (predation) quickly became associated with excellence in wildlife science. It is difficult to imagine any areas of terrestrial vertebrate zoology and wildlife conservation that have not been influenced by Ian's work. Long time UBC colleague Bert Brink agrees: "More than any others, Ian and his students have fostered knowledge of the fauna of the land and sea. I would stand by this choice from the multitude of his accomplishments as the most far reaching and significant: his field work is outstanding and global."

Few know of the pivotal role that Ian played in the elimination of the bounty system in Canada. Beginning in the 1920s, the provinces had systems to reward those who would rid the land of "undesirable" animals or so-called vermin. Some rewards involved cash-some gun cartridges, and the systems were costly, inefficient and open to widespread abuse. Wolves, cougars, coyotes, Bald Eagles, Golden Eagles, crows, jays and magpies were among the wildlife on the bounty lists. Together with J.R Dymond, a top Canadian fisheries biologist at the University of Toronto, and armed with good data from both Canada and the United States, they lectured on the folly of the bounty system to hundreds of audiences over nearly 10 years. In the end, they prevailed, obtaining strong support from the hunting community. Ian would later recall this victory as "an important step in trying to put scientific management of wildlife into play." By 1973, all Canadian jurisdictions but the Northwest Territories had eliminated the bounty system on wildlife.

Cowan's interests in large mammals and ecology led him to extensive field studies in the Canadian Arctic, the Rocky Mountain National Parks, western Mexico, Scotland, Finland, Africa, several Pacific Islands and throughout British Columbia. He was highly sought after as an advisor on a variety of nature and educational issues. In all, his 36 years of conservation studies took him to 6 continents and resulted

in more than 260 publications, 12 teaching films and 110 television programs.

Ian is recognized as a pioneer in the use of television as a medium to provide information to educate the public about conservation and the wonders of the natural world. The Fur and Feathers series and The Living Sea series, both produced by the CBC, went to air live. Only The Web of Life series, also a CBC production, was taped. In the popular Fur and Feathers series of 52 episodes in 1955-56, the approach was to confront a youngster with a natural history object that had never been seen before, and provide facts by responding to the child's questions. The award-winning Web of Life was aired during 1960-63 and used footage shot in B.C., Uganda, southern United States, the Arctic, the Caribbean and the Gulf of Mexico.

Ian has a simply remarkable memory for facts, names and locations. I have experienced this talent, first hand, on many occasions. Once we were writing an educational booklet on wild sheep and I remarked to Ian that I had some unusual personal observations about California bighorn sheep and escape terrain in the Ashnola. I asked him if he knew of anything in the scientific literature about wild sheep that could support my observations. He paused for a moment and then suggested I look at "around page 80 of Gordon Haber's thesis on Dall's sheep in the 1960s." So I tracked down a copy of Haber's thesis and sure enough, the description was within 5 pages of where Ian said it would be. Remarkably, this was some 25 years after Ian had supervised Haber's research.

Few people realize Ian's exceptional contribution to the project that became The Birds of British Columbia. His efforts to help initiate the B.C. Nest Record Scheme that provided vital data for the work, and his role as one of the authors is well chronicled in the four-volume set. What is not well known is that, in addition to his authorial duties, at the request of the federal and provincial governments, Ian served for ten years as the volunteer Chair and project manager for the production of Volumes III and IV, the Passerines. Managing the activities of the six other authors plus reporting to the federal and provincial wildlife Directors was a complex and sometimes thankless task. But his leadership paid handsome dividends. Not only were Volumes III and IV produced in a timely fashion, they provided the same type of comprehensive data that made the first two volumes so popular.

Neil Dawe, a co-author of The Birds of British Columbia, made the following observations about the inner workings of the author team: "What amazed me the most about working with Ian was his seemingly constant grounding and never-get-flusteredness no matter what the crises. He is one of those rare individuals who listens, encourages and respects other people's ideas and viewpoints, while not necessarily agreeing with them, and treats everyone with equity and fairness, no matter their position in life. Plus he weaves extraordinarily colorful yarns, which always made the monthly authors' meetings a joy to attend."

Ian admits to being a dedicated collector, and museums in several parts of the world house treasures of his collecting. Earlier, it was mammal, bird and plant specimens and the literature of wildlife in the northwest, and later kodachrome transparencies, alpine plants, rhododendrons, special ground orchids and award-winning revenue stamps and their legal documents. Always the collections were in search of

more information on a topic of interest. The search continues today. The learning never stops.

Ian and his wife Joyce were devoted companions for over 70 years until her passing in 2002. They raised two children, Gary and Ann. There are 3 grand children and 4 great grand children. Together, Ian and Joyce savored many of the treasured wild spots of six continents including some 30 trips as naturalist hosts educating guests on special ecotourism expeditions outfitted by Lindblad Cruises. On early field trips, Joyce paid special attention to data on the occurrence of vegetation. A keen and knowledgeable bird observer, for all of her life she kept daily diaries of the visitors to her feeders at their Victoria home. She was, after all, Kenneth Racey's daughter, and natural history was a big part of daily life. Back in the early 1930s, there was more than a small mammal collection that caught Ian's eye in the Racey household.

Looking back, it was naturalists like Racey and Laing who fed and encouraged Ian's seemingly insatiable curiosity about the natural world. It was the foundation of an exceptional career in conservation and post secondary education. His lengthy record of awards, distinctions and public service reflects a broad spectrum of interests, and is a testament to his outstanding contributions to Canada. In his own words, "Evolution is never finished and this applies equally to ideas and to organisms." He himself has never ceased to evolve, as a naturalist and as a human being. Ian has spent his entire life as a learner and educator-the true mark of a Renaissance Man. Yes, Cowan is indeed "the real thing."

Awards and Distinctions

Officer of the Order of Canada, Officer of the Order of British Columbia, Fellow of the Royal Society of Canada, Leopold Medal of the Wildlife Society, Fry Medal of the Canadian Society of Zoologists, Einarsen Award in Conservation by the Northwest Section of the Wildlife Society, and the J. Dewey Soper Award by the Alberta Society of Professional Biologists. He is also Honorary President of the Federation of BC Naturalists.

In recognition of his outstanding achievements, he has also been awarded honorary D.Sc. degrees by the University of British Columbia, the University of Victoria and the University of Northern British Columbia; LLD degrees by the University of Alberta and Simon Fraser University; and a Doctor of Environmental Studies by the University of Waterloo.

Ian's name is associated with three permanent post-secondary scholarships to assist students in his discipline: The Ian and Joyce McTaggart-Cowan Scholarship at the University of Victoria for outstanding students proceeding to year 3 or 4 of an Honours program in Biology, the Dr. **Ian McTaggart-Cowan** Scholarship In Environmental Studies for UVIC graduate students in the School of Environmental Studies who are focusing on Endangered Species Recovery and/or Ecological Restoration, and the **Ian McTaggart-Cowan** Scholarship in wildlife management at the University of Northern British Columbia.

In addition, UNBC has created the **Ian McTaggart-Cowan** Muskwa-Kechika Research Chair (2000), and UVic has given his name to a student residence at the Commonwealth Village (1998).

An Outstanding Record of Public Service

As a founding member, he served for 7 years on the National Research Council of Canada where he was the first Chairman of the Advisory Committee on Wildlife Research. He also served as Chair of the Environment Council of Canada, inaugural and 19-year Chair of the Public Advisory Board of the B.C. Habitat Conservation Trust Fund, Chair of the Board of Governors of the Arctic Institute of North America, Chair of the Canadian Committee on Whales and Whaling, and Vice President of the International Union for the Conservation of Nature. In addition, he was a member of the Select Committee on National Parks for the United States Secretary of the Interior and a long- serving director of The Nature Trust of British Columbia. He served as Chancellor of the University of Victoria from 1979 to 1984. He was also the first Chair of the College Council of B.C. for 7 years.

He donated over 2000 titles from his natural history library to UNBC in 1992. Libraries have been another of his passions; he served as Chair of the UBC Senate Library Committee for 20 years.

Rod Silver (M.Sc, UBC) retired as manager of the Habitat Conservation Trust Fund in 2004. He first met Ian in 1971, and has worked closely with him since 1980 at the Trust Fund and on the Birds of British Columbia project. He is currently working with representatives of the University of Victoria and The Nature Trust of BC to establish a professorship in Biodiversity Conservation and Restoration in Ian's name. He would like to acknowledge the contributions in conversation of Bert Brink, Neil Dawe, Ron Erickson, Andrew MacDonald and Andy Stewart, and particularly of **Ian McTaggart-Cowan** himself.