3RD ANNUAL NEWSLETTER

The Snow Bunting Report

Canadian Snow Bunting Network

Highlights

- At-Sea snow bunting observations in Davis Strait *(page 4)*
- Winter banding is part of the curriculum in Temiskaming *(page 7)*
- Banding opportunities in Iqaluit (*page 9*)

Dressed for the occasion - ideal layers for a winter bird bander.

Another great year of snow bunting banding!

Three years after the Canadian Snow Bunting Network (CSBN) became "official" winter banding activities are continuing to spread all across the country (and continent!). With this third annual newsletter, we present examples of the continued success of this winter banding network, and look forward to seeing what another year will bring!

- Don't forget to send your banding updates to Rick Ludkin to post on the CSBN blog, hosted by the Ruthven Park Nature Blog: www.ruthvenparknatureblog.com/
- Questions about current Snow Bunting research in Canada? Contact Oliver Love at the University of Windsor olove[AT]uwindsor.ca
- For participating in bird banding in Iqaluit or other northern communities, contact nunavutbirdbanding[AT]gmail.com

Welcoming Back the Snow Buntings

Christie Macdonald – Editor of the Snow Bunting Report

As the first winter flurries begin to appear in the air each fall, they are often accompanied by the earliest southern migrating snow buntings. While this is a sure sign of cold weather to come, these early appearances are somewhat comforting to an Arctic field biologist. For several years now, I have been lucky to travel to several research sites in Nunavut and northern Quebec to study the breeding biology of snow buntings, as well as sea ducks and other marine birds. So unlike many other biologists and "birders" who anxiously await the spring arrival of warblers, thrushes and other migrants from the south, I look forward to reuniting with my old friends, the snow buntings, each fall.

This past summer while I was conducting field research on Thick-billed Murres near Ivujivik, in northern Quebec, our boat guide, Jimmy Audlaluk, told me a story about Inuit hunters lost out on the open water in the thick fog. The hunters could no longer find their way back to town, having lost sight of the shoreline when the weather suddenly turned bad. Their GPS had run low on batteries and was no longer working. To their surprise, and despite the howling winter and crashing waves, a small bird, a snow bunting, appeared at the bow of their boat. It landed there for a minute to catch its breath before taking off the port side of their boat – indicating the direction of land! Somehow that small bird could find its way through the fog, and the hunters, following the Snow Bunting's lead, eventually made it back to the coast where they could safely navigate back home.

Ivujivik boat guide, Jimmy Audlaluk, showing us the murre colony at Cape Wolstenholme. Navigating on the water is no problem in weather like this!

Snow buntings are a welcome sign to people all across the country – indicating the changing of the seasons, be it spring or fall, and guiding us to safety.

I have heard many times from the various banders of the Canadian Snow Bunting Network, that "I am not really a winter person", "I hate being cold" or that "I go to great lengths to avoid the typical Northern Ontario activities such as snowmobiling, ice fishing or even walking a few feet in the snow". So it continues to amaze me how many generous and enthusiastic people will devote their time throughout the winter trying to catch, band, and monitor this previously little-studied species.

What's more amazing, is the results of this enthusiasm, which has been gaining momentum since the official formation of this network in 2010. Collectively, we have contributed to many new discoveries including migratory connections between southern Ontario and Nuuk, Greenland, a snow bunting x Lapland longspur hybrid in Labrador, an enormous 62g Snow Bunting in Newfoundland which was clearly preparing for a long migration,

and patterns of wintering distribution linked with body size and the timing of spring migration.

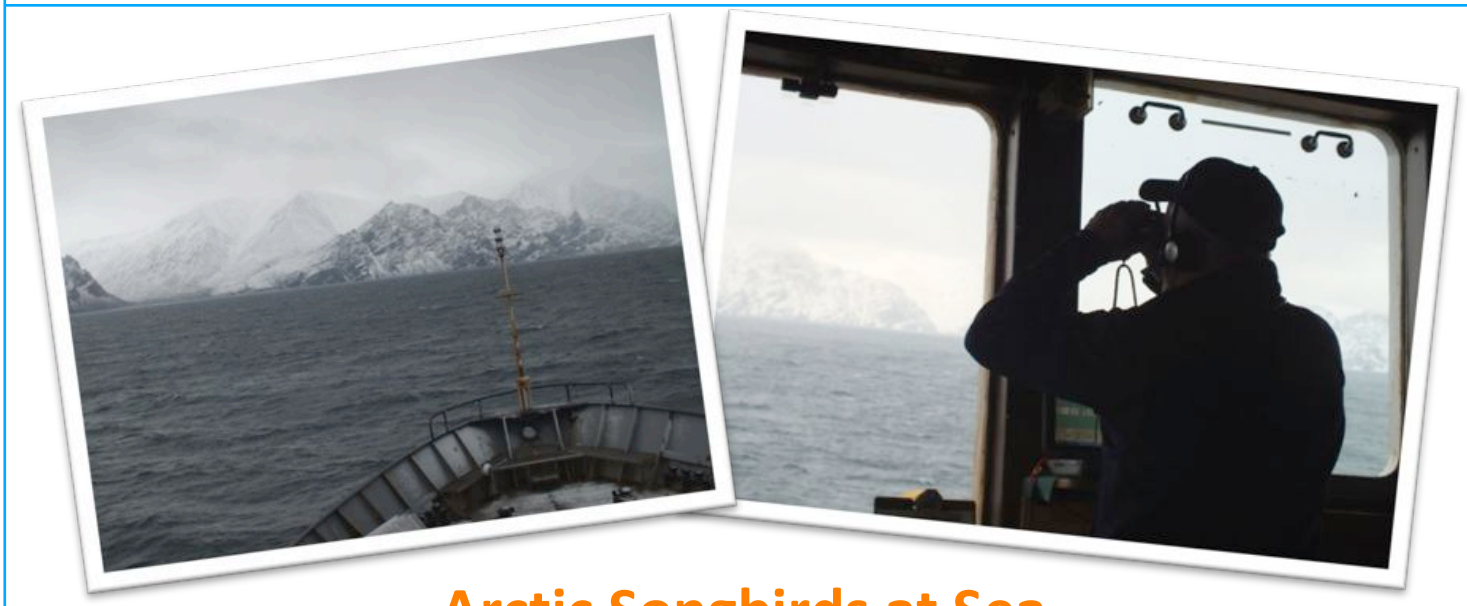
Snow buntings are a truly Canadian species. They work together - searching of food in large flocks throughout the winter. They also do not shy away from harsh conditions or cold temperatures, but will continue to call and sing to bring energy to otherwise cold and barren landscapes. Snow buntings are determined to arrive back home to the northern breeding grounds or southern wintering range, as long as their friends are there to greet them and encourage them along the way.

And with that, I would like to thank everyone for helping to make this banding network what it is today - for your hard work and enthusiasm, for getting "out there" and contributing to a better understanding the full life cycle of these birds, and for helping to ensure Snow Buntings will continue to announce the changing of the seasons all across Canada.

The winters may be cold, but the buntings keep us warm! …A true story – if your hands are cold, grab a couple of buntings!

Discovering the thermal benefits of Snow Buntings in cold climates.

A beautiful sight! We are all looking forward to another productive winter banding season!



Arctic Songbirds at Sea

Rick Ludkin – Head Bander and Bunting Blog Master, Ruthven Park

September 20th – Recounting A Sea Voyage

I have been away for 35 days on a research vessel, which was studying the bottom of Baffin Bay. My "job" was simply to count seabirds following a strict protocol. Since things have been pretty slow at Ruthven (e.g., we banded only 7 birds today), I've decided to give you a glimpse of another migration that I ran into in the far north.

[September 10th] – When Things Go Bad

We just started the last leg of the journey. One week to go on a 5-week trip into some of Canada's most scenic – but least known and appreciated – country: the east side of Baffin Island. I'm on a coast guard/research vessel with scientists intent on studying the deep-water geology and biology of Baffin Bay. I'm just an add-on, an afterthought if you will, whose job is to systematically count seabirds as the ship is underway. I have the best seat in the house: the left hand side of the bridge with big windows in front and on the portside. Unless spray from pounding waves or sleet and snow cover these windows (and I've had my share this trip), I can look out on the sea through a sweeping 180 degrees. Magnificent.

When I got to the bridge at first light this morning, we had already been steaming for 18 hours, heading due south and about 80 nautical miles out from the nearest point of land on east Baffin Island (Cape Dyer which is the west side boundary of Davis Strait). Today it was Northern Fulmars. Everywhere you looked that's all you could take in. You see...it was windy – 25 to 30 knots howling out of the north – and fulmars are true wind birds. Like their cousins the albatrosses, they ride it effortlessly in their perpetual search for food, their eye trained on the surface for tidbits and on their conspecifics in case one should hit a jackpot that all could get a piece of. And while fulmars are wonderfully interesting (the first thousand anyway), they weren't what I was on the lookout for.

From banding studies, we know that many Snow Buntings, that spend their winters in southern Canada, nest in Greenland. Well, the breeding season is well over and these birds should be making their way back to Canada. To do that they have to cross Baffin Bay or the North Atlantic south of Davis Strait. And this is the time, with the temperatures dropping precipitously and snow falling, that they should be on the move. So I was on the lookout.

From my perch on the bridge, looking south, here's what I was seeing: heavy overcast skies blanketing a sea, also gray, gone wild – 4 meter waves with a 30-knot north wind blowing the spray off the many whitecaps. Shortly before 7:00 I saw my first passerines: a pair of American

Pipits; they flew around the front of the ship and, I think, took refuge on it although I couldn't find them. At this point we were a little more than 80 nautical miles off Cape Murchison. These birds had come from the East! It's not just Snow Buntings that nest in Greenland and spend their winters in North America! An hour later another 3 passerines went by – couldn't get my binoculars on them fast enough but I think they

were also pipits. And then, in about another hour, two male Snow Buntings and a pipit went by! They paid no attention to the ship but just kept on heading west. Of course with a north wind their actual course would be southwest, making their landfall even further away. At about 11:00 a small flock, made up of 9 Snow Buntings and 2 American Pipits, went winging by. I had picked this flock up early and was able to watch them for a while. They were moving from the east and headed due west. They were low down to the sea, taking shelter from the wind as they worked their way, powerfully, along the trough, a mere few feet about the surface. By the most optimistic reckoning they still had 200 kilometers to go; they had already come an estimated 500 kilometers!! At 30 km/hour they would have left 16 hours before – around 7:00 PM, just as it was starting to get dark on the rugged, barren Greenland coast.

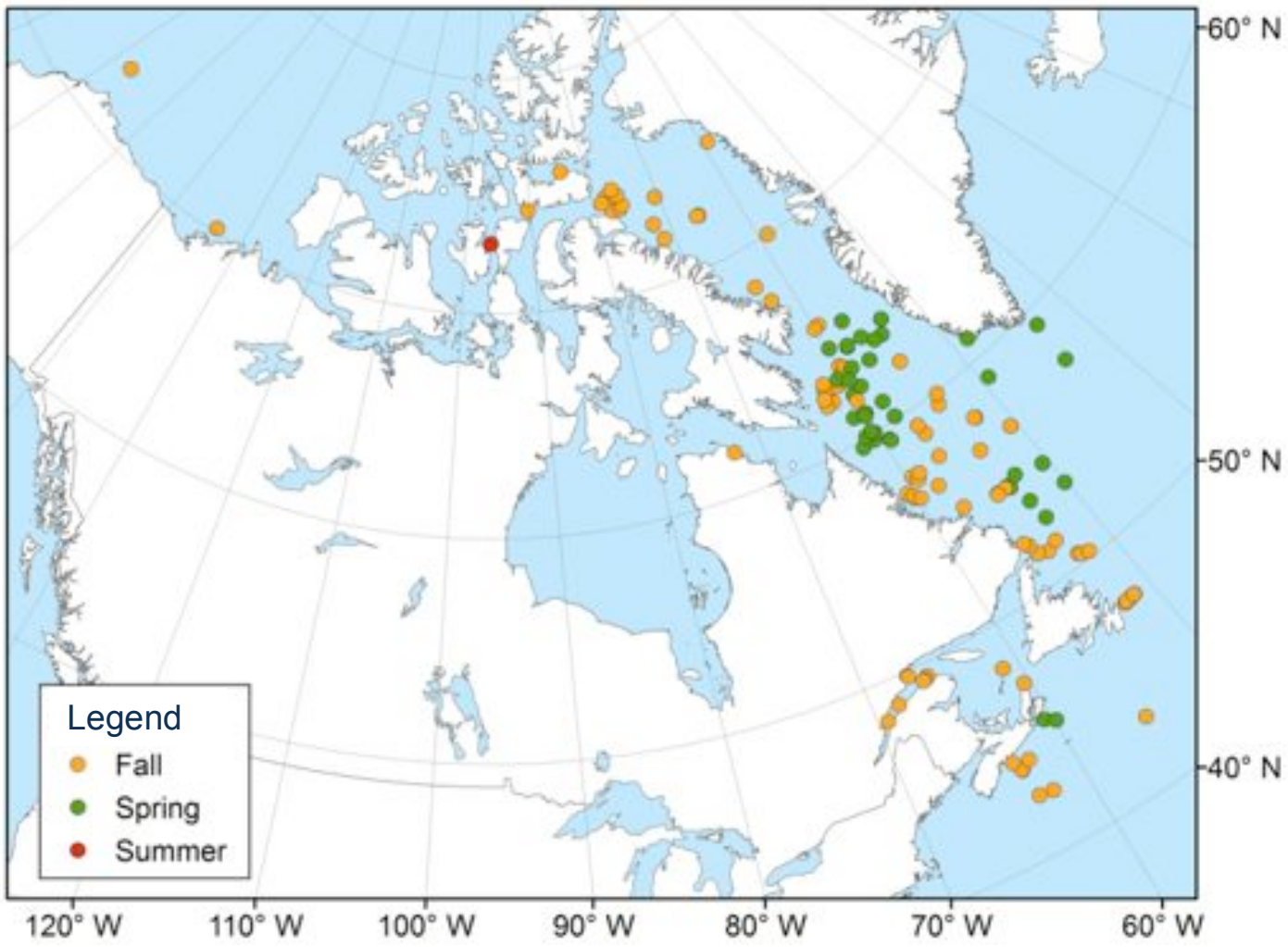
We continued to push south and as we did something changed...for the worse: the wind backed into the northwest and picked up a couple of knots. Now it would be more in the face of migrants heading west.

I watched a pipit trying to make its way west. It was flying hard but wasn't making headway to the west; instead it was moving sideways – essentially south – at the same speed as the ship, 13 knots. A fulmar saw its struggles and decided to investigate. Now the bird had two problems. To evade being eaten it swung around the front of the ship and, I think, found shelter somewhere on it.

One of the reasons passerines migrate at night is to avoid avian predators. This would be especially important travelling over water – there's absolutely nowhere to hide! I saw this played out. Flying seemingly lazily, a young Pomarine Jaeger appeared way off to my left. Usually when I've seen these kleptoparasites they've been harassing kittiwakes, trying to make them regurgitate a meal that they will drop down and scoop off the sea surface. But there weren't any kittiwakes around. Suddenly the jaeger reverted from its easy back and forth searching to a focused direct flight picking up speed with each wing beat. It was on the hunt. But for what? I couldn't see anything. And then it swooped and, four hundred meters ahead of me, I saw a small flock of passerines, that had been down in a trough, fly up high and scatter with the jaeger giving chase to a particular individual. I never saw the outcome but I don't think it went well for the passerine. And the others? Probably reassembled, got down in a trough, and kept pushing, pushing....there was no alternative.

The last passerine I saw was a female Snow Bunting. I don't know where she had come from – I hadn't seen a flock go by – but there she was taking some shelter from the ship, evading the interest of a fulmar. I never saw what happened, whether she hunkered down on the boat or, when the fulmar had been fooled, headed out again. At this point we were east of Resolution Island, which is between Baffin Island and Cape Chidley, at the north tip of Labrador. For this little bird it would be 220 kilometers to the island and 270 to the cape – 7 to 9 hours yet to go. So many miles, so many predators, such a strong wind....such a cold, unrelenting sea. I could only hope.

I don't think I'll ever be able to look at a Snow Bunting again without thinking of that little flock, hunkered down in a 4-meter trough, heading west. Everything gambled on the single toss of the dice.



At-Sea Snow Bunting Observations from
Environment Canada pelagic ship-based bird surveys (1966-2012)

Data courtesy of the Canadian Wildlife Service Seabirds at Sea database. The Canadian Wildlife Service of Environment Canada collects observational data of bird distribution and abundance in order to identify and minimize impacts of human activities and disturbance of the marine environment. These surveys were designed primarily for seabirds, which are most likely to be impacted by changes to the marine environment. However, other species including Snow Buntings are also commonly detected. Since just 2006, almost 100,000km of ocean tracks have been surveyed in Atlantic Canada and the Gulf of St. Lawrence, and over 120,000 birds have been sighted.

Winter Bird Banding is Part of the Curriculum in Temiskaming

Joanne Goddard – Teacher at Kerns Public School, Temiskaming, Ontario

A few years year ago, I attended the Ontario Bird Banding Association Conference at Long Point Bird Observatory in Port Rowan with fellow bird bander, outdoor educator, and partner Bruce Murphy or as he is more famously referred to, 'Murph'. It was there that I learned about the concern over the snow bunting population. Apparently their 64% decline in numbers had caught the attention of researchers and a study of wintering flocks was introduced across the country. As I listened to the presenter, I could not help but let my mind wander to the small Northern Ontario rural school, located about 20km north of Temiskaming Shores, tucked between several neighbouring farms that I had grown so fond of over the past six months. What a refreshing change it was to be teaching in a school where I was greeted every morning by the baying of sheep across road and the earthy smell of farmland in the air. It was here at Kern's Public school that I was teaching a group of intermediate students the traditional readin', writin', and arithmetic, as I got my bearings in a new school community. As the presentation progressed, I realized that the students at Kern's Public school were in the perfect location to get involved with this snow bunting project.

Now, after just a few banding seasons, this group in Temiskaming have become among the busiest winter banders in Canada. This region also represents the most northern winter banding location in Ontario. Through their efforts, banded bird recoveries have suggested there may be an important linkage between Temiskaming and southern Ontario.

The grade 7 & 8 students of Kerns Public School, near Temiskaming Shores are getting excited as reports of Snow Buntings near the school have been coming in. They are determined to beat their banding totals from last year. Here are a few reflections and highlights written by the students involved in the project last year.

Getting started…

January 9th was an exciting day for our grade 6,7,8 class. It was a day that we began an educational and fun journey helping researchers all over Canada. For many students including myself it was an amazing experience, where we learned about snow buntings; a small snow bird that migrates north to the arctic or Greenland for breeding. We accomplished more than you could imagine, including finding a future path for some of us (Justine La blanc, grade 7)

What we do…

Every day before we arrived at school, Ms. Goddard would set the traps in Mr. Cooke's field. Then we would walk down together to check the traps. We would carefully remove the buntings and place them in bird bags. We then returned to the school where we would band the birds at our makeshift banding station; a picnic table in the playground. Often the Junior grades would come out to watch. Our class would show them how to put a band on a tiny leg, how to tell the males from the females and we would answer their questions. We explained that on each band there are numbers. These numbers are recorded onto a data sheet along with the bird's species code, sex, age and wing length. Later this information is sent to Bird Studies Canada so if another bander gets our bird, they can track down where it was banded. These records also help researchers track the migration route of our bird. As the project went on, and we became more knowledgeable, some of us even got to learn how to band. (Lea Gahwiler, grade 9)

Reflections by students about why bird banding is important and how the Snow Bunting project has affected them:

Banding birds is an important responsibility, and Kerns Public School is the only school in Ontario that are banding snow buntings, so I am very grateful (Patrick Sadler, grade 6)

I am banding birds for scientific research, so we band birds to provide scientists with helpful information. (Steven Vandenboggard, grade 7)

One Saturday I had the opportunity to band with Mr. Murphy and Mrs. Goddard and to our surprise, we caught a Horned Lark! Mr. Murphy had never banded a Horned Lark in Temiskaming so when he saw it in the trap, he nearly jumped out of his pants! (Steven Vandenboggard, grade 7)

When we were getting the Horned lark out of the trap, Mr. Murphy kept saying, "Don't let it go boys!" He was so excited. He said to us, " It took me 50 years to catch a Horned Lark, and you guys catch one on your first day of banding!" (Brodie Neill, grade 7)

The very first bird I banded was a snow bunting. It was an after-second-year male. It was a great feeling when I banded it, like on Christmas, opening up your presents and you are so excited. It is something like that feeling, being happy for banding. (Connor Briand, grade 8)

Today I banded for the first time. I was so happy!..... In that same morning, we caught our first ***foreign bird!*** *It was banded by David Lamble in Arthur Ontario! When other bird researchers heard this news they were excited! It made them re-think their theory of the migration routes of these little birds. (Lea Gahwiler, grade 9)*

2012-2013 Winter Banding Totals:

- *1700 snow buntings (900 banded by Kerns students)*
- *20 Lapland Longspurs (18 banded by Kerns students)*
- *6 Horned Larks (2 banded by Kerns students)*

So there you have it! Some musing by a bunch of Elementary Bird Nerds! Bring on the Snow!!

Migration Monitoring Potential for Northern Communities

In June 2013 Rick Ludkin, with support from the University of Windsor, Environment Canada, and the Nunavut Research Institute, led a bird banding workshop in Iqaluit, Nunavut, capturing, banding and tagging Snow Buntings with geolocators. Here are some photos documenting this work.

After making a few birding enthusiasts in town, it seems like there is huge potential to run a spring banding program here as migrating flocks begin passing through the area in late April and early May. Rick plans to return to Iqaluit in 2014 to recapture tagged birds and to encourage "up and coming" banders to practice their birding and banding skills, with hopes of initiating Iqaluit as another long-term banding and monitoring site for migrating Arctic passerines.

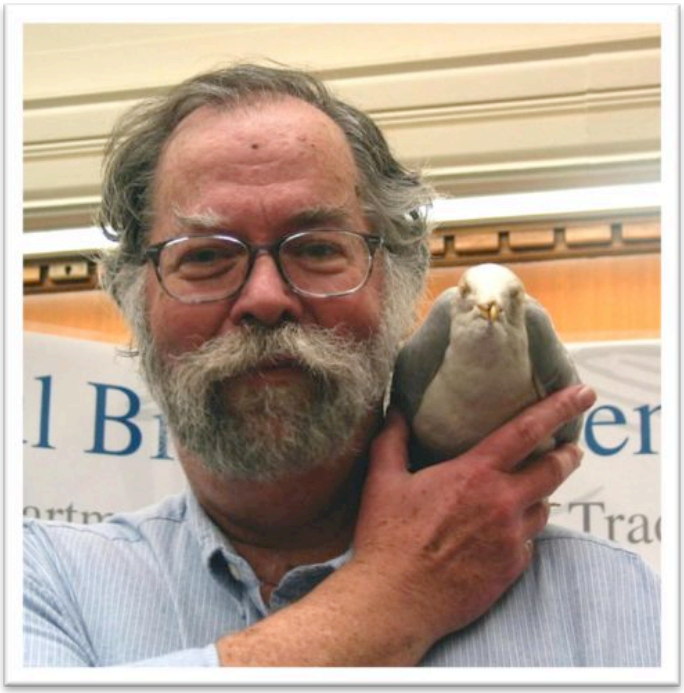
Thanks to Enooyaq Sudlovenick for assistance in the field, and thanks to David Hussell, Jeremy Hussell and Erica Dunn for their assistance finding nests and attaching geolocators in the later half of the season. Our fingers are all crossed that some birds will return to Iqaluit and be recaptured next summer!

Male Snow Bunting outfitted with a geolocator (above). Enooyaq Sudlovenick (right) studies biology at the University of Guelph, but learned about Snow Buntings in her hometown of Iqaluit with Rick this past summer.

If you are interested in participating in Snow Bunting banding and geolocator recovery in Iqaluit, contact nunavutbirdbanding@gmail.com for more information.

Ecologist Combined Passion for Birds with Conservation

Noel J. Cutright, 69, of Saukville, WI died November 10, 2013. A well-known and beloved Wisconsin ornithologist, he devoted his life to bird conservation and citizen science. Twice president of the Wisconsin Society for Ornithology (WSO), he was the founder of the Riveredge Bird Club and the Western Great Lakes Bird and Bat Observatory. He was instrumental in the creation of Bird City Wisconsin and the Wisconsin Bird Conservation Initiative. He was co-author and senior editor of the Wisconsin Breeding Bird Atlas, published in 2006.



Noel worked for WE Energies as senior terrestrial ecologist for 29 years and after retiring in 2006, continued to serve in an emeritus position. He served on the boards of many non-profit environmental organizations. Noel received numerous awards for his tireless work on bird conservation projects, including a Lifetime Award and Special Recognition Award from the WI Department of Natural Resources, a Lifetime Achievement Award from the Gathering Waters Conservancy, several achievement awards from the WSO and the first Lorrie Otto Memorial Award.

Noel attended Miami University in Ohio and was awarded Master's and PhD. degrees from Cornell University. He was an avid birder who loved introducing newcomers to the wonders of birding. Noel had expertise in many topics, but was very approachable and happy to answer questions. He was a mentor to both students and professionals. He gave programs about bird and environmental issues, participated in hundreds of CBCs and BBS and served as WI coordinator of the Great Backyard Bird Count. He was best-known to many as one of the voices on Wisconsin Public Radio's holiday call-in show about birds.

Noel is survived by his wife, Kate Redmond; daughters Robyn Cutright and Laurel Cutright, son Seth Cutright, other relatives and many friends in the birding community.

Submitted by Vicki Piaskowski of Hartland, WI, whom Noel recruited to participate in the Canadian Snow Bunting Banding Network.
More at:
http://www.jsonline.com/news/obituaries/noel-cutright-combined-environmental-conscience-with-passion-for-birds-b99139745z1-

And for making all this possible….

Thanks to all the banders that have contributed observations and data to this ongoing research and collaborative conservation program. A special thanks goes out to banders whose programs are aimed at educating the future generations of bird lovers and environmental stewards. Thanks also to the James L. Baillie Memorial Fund of Bird Studies Canada, the Ontario Bird Banding Association, the Wasserfall Fund, Environment Canada, the University of Windsor, the Nunavut Research Institute, and the Nunavut Arctic College for their funding and logistical support.

Good luck to everyone this winter! Have a great bunting banding season!

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