

# LIVING

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## Doug Sadler tribute

Photo courtesy of Heather Watson  
Columnist Drew Monkman says Doug Sadler (pictured) was an excellent field naturalist with an encyclopedic knowledge of Canada's flora and fauna.



# Remembering a man of vision

As many readers will be aware, Peterborough lost a wonderful man this summer.

Doug Sadler, a distinguished naturalist, educator and writer passed away in late August. Reflecting back on the 45 years I knew Doug, the two things that immediately come to mind were his enthusiasm and intellectual rigor.

I recall quite vividly how I first met him. I was 11 years old and my father had just built me a bird feeder. I remember marveling at the large flocks of evening grosbeaks that almost immediately started coming and soon began learning all of the common feeder birds. However, one day something quite different showed up.

After consulting my brand-new Peterson's Field Guide to the Birds, I concluded we had a dickcissel at our feeder.

Unbeknownst to me at the time, the dickcissel was and still is quite a rare bird in Ontario. So, when my father told Doug about it, he probably thought the whole thing was a false alarm. However, he graciously agreed to come over just the same.

As it turned out, the bird was indeed a dickcissel, and Doug made such a fuss over the fact that this kid had correctly identified it, that I was literally bursting with pride. The cherry on the cake was that he even put my name in his column. The experience was enough to cement an interest in birds for life.

Over the years, Doug's passion for nature never faded. Whenever you would tell him about a sighting, he was always attentive and curious. However, just reporting that you had seen a given species was rarely enough. A flurry of questions almost always followed, some of which could be quite intimidating!

How can you be sure that it wasn't actually a ...? Why did you assume it was doing this and not doing that?

Suffice it to say that the former army officer and school teacher were never far below the surface. Doug always wanted to delve deeper. He was never happy to simply label or list a species. He was consistently drawn to the wonder of the underlying truths of nature.

One of these truths was the importance of making personal connections. I will be forever grateful to Doug for the wonderful foreword he wrote for my book, *Nature's Year in the Kawarthas*. I think it goes a long way to revealing some of Doug's core beliefs. To paraphrase, he wrote: "If, like me, you have ever opened the door on a party, to be met by a sea of unknown faces, you will have felt quite daunted. A quick round of introductions does not help. You know you will al-



OUR CHANGING SEASONS  
Drew Monkman

most never remember most of the people another time when you run across them in a different context. In any case, there isn't much point, unless you can establish some kind of meaningful relationship. In an alienated world, few things can be more enjoyable or more deeply rewarding than a real understanding of, and intimacy with, the natural world. It will knit up the broken connection so urgently needed in our lives – and by our world. This is essential is the Earth's innate riches are to be saved."

Also, in one of his own books, *Reading Nature's Clues*, Doug wrote: "This book is for all those who like to enjoy the outdoors, rather than dominate it or have it rush past them; those willing to take their time to observe it, understand it, feel empathy with it."

Like all true naturalists, he brought his entire being to his understanding and appreciation of nature.

Doug was, of course, an excellent field naturalist with an encyclopedic knowledge of Canada's flora and fauna. He also kept impeccable records. Amongst many other projects, he played a key role in documenting the various great gray owl invasions into Peterborough County. He was also very involved with the Atlas of Breeding Birds of Ont. Project 1981-86.

Doug often talked about the importance of the huge network of contacts he had who would call him up with their sightings.

Much of the time, however, a phone conversation didn't suffice. Camera in hand, he would be out the door, into the car and off to check out whatever sighting had been made.

Doug was also a very accomplished writer. I think it's fair to say that he gave new meaning to the word prolific. As a weekly columnist with the Peterborough Examiner, he wrote no fewer than the 2,390 columns over a period of 47 years. I only have to write 2,200 more to equal that! He was the author of five books – more, if you include the unpublished manuscripts that he was still fine-tuning until this past year. Doug also co-authored several school texts, wrote numerous magazine articles, poems, and even several plays. He also presented countless public talks, illustrated by his huge collection of over 10,000 colour slides.

Even as an adolescent, I was a great fan of Doug's column. I was particularly taken by the name of the column, "Come with me Qui-

etly." I thought it captured perfectly both the man himself and the purpose of his writing. His deft turn of phrase, use of metaphor, and sense of humour are all present in the introductory paragraph to a column from October, 1963. He wrote: "Last winter it was the hawk owls. The winter before, we had bohemian waxwings and a Harris's sparrow. Each season has its highlights, even rarities. Though this is not the solid meat of nature study, it sure adds sauce to it. It seems possible that this will be a winter remarkable for an influx of Three-toed Woodpeckers. These are not frost-bitten cripples, but by nature have only three toes on each foot."

Over the years, his writing and his thinking changed, however. On the positive side, Doug was pleased with how mainstream an interest in birds and nature has become. Gone are the days when people would relate their bird sightings to him almost with a sense of embarrassment that someone might overhear. At the same time, however, there was also a certain sense of despair at the ever-increasing destruction of the natural world and inaction on the part of government, especially with climate change.

Doug became increasingly concerned with the values, attitudes and beliefs that explain man's tortured relationship with nature. He became increasingly critical of what he correctly saw as rampant consumerism, unbridled and irresponsible economic growth and, especially, the absence of any meaningful effort to protect the natural environment.

He was among the first people in our community to understand that a respectful, sustainable relationship with the natural world is essential to a healthy society and a sustainable economy.

The development of a belief system for today – a belief system that would place a reverence for the natural world at its centre – really took command of his thinking and energies. And, from his early evangelical leanings (Doug actually spent two years at an evangelical college preparing to become a missionary), his spirituality moved in an increasingly earth-centered direction.

In an essay he wrote in 2005, Doug said: "No doubt there is today an underlying mood of pessimism."

The future is in our hands. Few would rely on some divine intervention. But, we must be sure that what we do is in accord with the underlying truth or reality. It will be a hard road to travel. Our global life systems are based on the ecocommunity and on the interdependence of a multitude of elements including clean air, water, soil and climate. Together, they serve to make Nature work

with all its diversities of life forms from the submicroscopic through a dazzling infinity of plants and animals – of which we are one. As humans we naturally see ourselves as not only the dominant life form but the one with a monopoly on needs and urges. Here is where the danger lies, but we are reluctant to acknowledge it. The answer to our dilemma is that we have to admit our togetherness with the rest of the natural world, rather than something superior and apart. We find that too often priority is given to so-called needs that, with the tacit agreement of most of us, are really little more than selfishness."

When asked about his own religion, Doug would say that he was one who looked for ultimate truths in the real world. He felt that a true understanding of our planet's ecological community with its essential principles of cooperation and interdependence is the most important guidepost for mankind's continued survival into the future.

Despite his moments of despondency for the future, Doug always exuded an unabashed joy at the wonder of life and the wonder of ideas. His poem *A Canadian Vision*, sums up quite succinctly many of his core beliefs and especially the importance of protecting our natural heritage.

### A Canadian Vision (1995)

The great Life Force from ancient days  
Has spelled its passage round the world;  
Unrolled rich patterns to our gaze;  
Each banner in its turn unfurled.

And thus the countenance divine  
Shone forth in forest, mountain, plain  
Till Megalopolis said, It's mine!  
And spread its lethal threats amain.

Bring me my coat of green and gold  
Embroidered fair with nature's scheme!  
A vision bold! O clouds unfold!  
Inspire me with your precious gleam!

I will not cease from mortal fight  
Nor shall my pen drop from my hand  
Till we maintain Creation's right  
Across our wide and wondrous land.

Doug Sadler

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