

GEORGE F. LEDINGHAM, 1911-2006.

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George Ledingham at the herbarium in his later years

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George Filson Ledingham was born on the family farm, on section 4, township 17, range 27 w2, near Boharm, on 31 January 1911. He attended Normal School, taught for a

year in a rural school near Keeler, and obtained a B.Sc. in 1934 and M.Sc. in 1936 from the University of Saskatchewan. His research on the phylogenetics of alfalfa earned him a

Ph.D. from the University of Wisconsin in 1939. He married Marjorie Beattie from Carr's Brook, Nova Scotia on June 6, 1942. They had one son, Beattie. George taught biology at Regina College, where he was named Assistant Professor in 1946 and Associate Professor in 1957. He was promoted to Professor, University of Saskatchewan, Regina Campus, in 1967 and was chair of the department from 1969 to 1971. From 1974 he participated in the department's growth within the newly designated University of Regina. He taught full-time until 1976 and part-time until 1983.

George collected 50,000 specimens of vascular plants, mosses and lichens, and until two months before his death worked almost daily in the biology department's herbarium, named for him by the University in 1990. He was an inspiration to thousands of students, some of whom took up careers in biology and medicine. In 1965-1966 he traveled the world collecting specimens of *Astragalus*; a new species he found in Iran bears the name of *Astragalus ledinghamii*. Bernard Boivin named a species in the mint family occurring in Saskatchewan, *Physostegia ledinghamii*, after him. It is known as Ledingham's False Dragonhead.

Following the unexpected death of Isabel M. Priestly in 1946, George saw the need for a provincial society to carry on the *Blue Jay*. As president of the Regina Natural History Society, he organized the founding meeting of the Saskatchewan Natural History Society (SNHS, now Nature Saskatchewan) in January 1949 and became its first president. Four times a year, a working party met in George's biology lab to collate, staple and address by hand each copy of the *Blue Jay* for mailing. Six years later, he began the longest

term, 16 years, as editor of *Blue Jay* (Bob Nero filled in during George's sabbatical in 1965-66). During his years as editor of *Blue Jay*, George regularly provided good, informative pages under the heading "Blue Jay Chatter," a title initiated by the preceding editor, Lloyd Carmichael. As George said in the December 1962 issue, "The amateur naturalists of Saskatchewan have produced a journal which is accepted by people of professional competence, including scientists from the staffs of universities and government wildlife departments, who both contribute to it and use its records."

In 1957, George began his tireless mission of working towards the creation of a national grasslands park. That year, he had encouraging discussions with Winston Mair, Chief of the Canadian Wildlife Service, guest speaker at the SNHS annual meeting. In 1959, Canada was host to the International Botanical Congress; George helped lead the tour of the potential grasslands park area. In 1960, in *Canadian Audubon*, he called for a protected area for some of the remaining grasslands. In 1963, the SNHS passed a resolution asking for a national grasslands park and George became chair of its National Grasslands Park Committee.

On Leap Year's Day, 29 February 1964, George proposed to the SNHS executive a 2250- square mile national park in the Val Marie - Frenchman River area. The society made a formal proposal to the Deputy Minister of Northern Affairs and Natural Resources on 26 June that year. In 1966, Parks Canada visited the area and found it impressive. In 1973, the Hon. Jean Chrétien, Minister responsible for Parks Canada, was the guest speaker at the annual SNHS meeting, where he spoke highly of the grassland park proposal. A number of

public hearings were held in 1976. Only in 1981 was the park “formally announced.” In September 1988, the provincial and federal governments signed an agreement and finally, in September 1989, a parks information center opened at Val Marie. Land acquisition has continued since on a willing seller/willing buyer basis.

For his persistence and eventual success, George was given the J.B. Harkin Medal from the National and Provincial Parks Association (NPPAC) in 1981. The citation stated that George Ledingham led the “long, tedious, often discouraging, and certainly exhausting undertaking ... [and] played a pivotal role in all of this. He travelled extensively in southern Saskatchewan; he lectured to anyone interested enough to listen; he led delegations; he wrote and encouraged others to do likewise; and he stimulated other groups, including the NPPAC, to join him.”

George received other honors. For his role in founding the provincial society, his terms as Society president and *Blue Jay* editor, his botanical collecting and work toward the formation of a grasslands national park, he was made a ‘Fellow of the Saskatchewan Natural History Society’ in 1987. He was honored with a special Environment Award from Environment Canada in 1985; the Douglas Pimlott Award from the Canadian Nature Federation in 1985; an honorary LL.D. degree from the University of Regina on November 1, 1986; and the Heritage Award from the Canadian Parks Service in 1992. In 1994, he received the Saskatchewan Order of Merit, the province’s highest honor. A George F. Ledingham Book Prize is presented annually at the University of Regina.

In 1962, after George had enjoyed a birding outing in the southwestern

United States with three professional Ontario birders – Jack Livingston, Bill Smith, and Jim Baillie – he joined botanist George W. Argus and RWN for a week (June 26 to July 4) at a field camp at Little Gull Lake on the south shore of Lake Athabasca. He provided enthusiastic assistance and good company and recorded 66 species of birds in that week. On his return, he wrote an article, “From southern deserts to northern sand dunes,” describing both trips (*Blue Jay* 20:98-102, 1962). Included is an amusing and enlightening sketch, by Ruth Bennett, of George trekking in the dunes, loaded down with plant presses, binoculars and bedroll, surrounded by blackflies, and almost stepping on a plant labelled *Astragalus athabascii*. George wrote, “I have not mentioned the Grand Canyon nor the Pacific Ocean. Actually these are not much more startling nor beautiful than the sand dunes and bogs which we visited in northern Saskatchewan.”

Marjorie died in March 2000 and George lived independently at home on Athol Street until his last month, which he spent in a special care home. He died on October 18, 2006, less than two days after admission to hospital. In a letter dated mid-August 2006, George seemed almost gleeful about heading off to the University each day to work in the herbarium. He sounded as energetic and enthusiastic as when RWN first met him 50 years earlier.

George was a quiet, modest man, gifted with stubborn tenacity and a winning smile. No matter how discouraging the prospects, he persisted. We consider ourselves fortunate to have known and worked with this warm, kind, thoughtful man for many years.