



Hopes of Manitoba's Liberal leader soar like an eagle

David Square

I caught this morning's minion,
kingdom of daylight's dauphin,
dapple-dawn-drawn Falcon.
— Gerard Manley Hopkins

Gerard Manley Hopkins was so inspired by the flight of a falcon that he wrote a poem to the rapture of the bird, comparing it "To Christ Our Lord." As a young man in Saskatoon, Dr. Jon Gerrard was similarly inspired by the flight of 2 great raptors, the bald eagle and the great horned owl. Although he didn't pen a poem to the birds, he did devote many summers to preserving natural habitats and to banding young birds in northern Saskatchewan and Manitoba.

Gerrard, a Winnipeg pediatrician, former federal cabinet minister and current leader of Manitoba's Liberal party, was about 10 when he got involved with the Saskatoon Natural History Society. At the time, radiologist Stuart Houston, an avid birder who banded ducks with Ducks Unlimited in Yorkton, had located a number of great horned owl nests in northeastern Saskatchewan.

"Great horned owls were prevalent in Eastern Canada, but the nests tended to be high off the ground in large trees, making it difficult to band young birds," says Gerrard. But the nests Houston discovered near Saskatoon and Yorkton in the 1950s were low to the ground in small poplar trees, making it easy to locate and band the owls. "It caused quite a stir in the birding community," he recalls.

He became enamoured of the beautiful owls and accompanied Houston on many spring field trips near Saskatoon, where the 2 amateur ornithologists banded hundreds of great horned owls.

While taking a bachelor of arts degree at the University of Saskatchewan in the mid-1960s, Gerrard became aware of mounting evidence that raptors such as peregrine falcons and bald eagles were becoming scarce in eastern North America. "A Manitoba banker who retired to live in Florida, where he banded eagles, reported decreasing numbers of young birds as early as 1946. Then, in 1962, Rachel Carson's book, *Silent Spring*, linked the problem to DDT and provided a real basis for concern."

It was during a 1966 canoe trip that Gerrard noticed a significant number of bald eagles in northern Saskatchewan. The following year, with help from local guides and fishermen, Gerrard and his friend found 18 nests and banded 27 young bald eagles. "On the basis of finding so many eagles in an area where few were thought to exist, we wrote an application to the Canadian Wildlife Service suggesting more work was needed in northern Saskatchewan, especially in light of the declining raptor populations in eastern North America."

Gerrard and his partner, Doug Whitfield, received a grant for 2 summers — 1968 and 1969 — to locate bald eagle nests in northern Saskatchewan and Manitoba. It was an unusual summer job for Gerrard, who was by then a medical student at McGill. "Eagles primarily feed on fish in summer, so their 6-foot-diameter nests are built in trees that overlook water," explains Gerrard. "They're easy to spot from an airplane."

The 2 men recorded 250 eagle nests in northern Saskatchewan and Manitoba. "In many cases, we would land the plane on a lake and walk to the site of an eagle's nest. Doug or myself would climb the tree and band the young birds." At the time DDT had not had a significant effect on the eagle population there because the chemical had not been used in Saskatchewan and Manitoba to control the spruce bud worm; it had been used in Northern Ontario and New Brunswick. "DDT interferes with the metabolism of calcium and as a result eggs break when they are incubated by the parent eagle."

In the summer of 1970, Gerrard returned to northern Saskatchewan for a 6-week study of bald eagles. "The study on Besnard Lake has continued yearly since 1970," says Gerrard, whose family is also fascinated with eagles and other raptors. His 3 children — Pauline, Charles and Tom — and his wife Naomi try to spend every second summer at Besnard Lake, locating nests and banding birds.

"Unfortunately, it looks as if politics may interfere with this summer's trip," said Gerrard who, as leader of the Manitoba Liberals, is hoping his party will fly rapturously high this fall when an election is called in Manitoba. ?



Gerrard: banding birds since 1966