

Don't ask Stuart Houston if he's a bird lover. "A bird lover is someone who thinks birds sing because they're happy," he says.

No, this retired 72-year-old Saskatoon radiologist is an ornithologist. His passion for birds is based on scientific study, active publishing and an unexpected link to his medical career, and it has earned him the Order of Canada and the Saskatchewan Order of Merit.

But he does agree that retirement is for the birds. On a fresh June morning, you might find Houston strapping an aluminum ladder to the roof of his 4X4 as he prepares for yet more bird-banding. The ladder lets him climb trees; he then reaches into a nest, lifts out a young bird and snaps a silver band around its leg. On one recent trip he banded 2 golden eagles; the next day's take was 33 ferruginous hawks, a killdeer and a shrike.

The reward is not in the banding, but in the scientific information the bands eventually provide. When the bird dies, the band number tells Houston its age, migration route and nesting ground. He and his wife, Mary, have banded 117 000 birds, and the 3100 bands that have been recovered are a Canadian record. "My motto is that every bird needs a band," says Houston.

His 2 passions — medicine and birds — were inspired by his parents. Sigga and Clarence Houston were both physicians, with a family practice in Yorkton, Sask. (Before her death in 1996 at age 102, his mother was Canada's oldest female physician.)

When Houston was a lad, 2 fortunate events brought him into the avian world: he broke his leg, and then received a copy of *Birds in Canada* as a birthday present. Sitting idle with his leg in a cast was not his parents' prescription for recovery; they gave him a typewriter and he learned to use it. Before long, the young Houston was typing the newsletter of the Yorkton Nature Society, *The Blue Jay*.

As a teenager, he was hired by a conservation group, Ducks Unlimited, to band waterfowl, and soon he was receiving reports of his bands from exotic places. "For a child to get results from Cuba and Jamaica and the Dominican Republic was phenomenally exciting," he says. "I was hooked."

But when Ducks Unlimited offered him a scholarship to study biology, Houston hesitated: "If I was a full-time biologist, what would I do for a hobby?"

He enrolled in the University of Manitoba medical school, and after graduating in 1951 he joined his parents' practice in Yorkton. In 1960 he went to the University of Saskatchewan in Saskatoon to pursue postgraduate training in diagnostic radiology, and he didn't leave until he retired in 1996. In the interim, he served as a professor, researcher and department head.

The Houstons have 4 children, three of whom are doctors. Stan teaches medicine in Zimbabwe, while Don is a hematologist in Winnipeg and Margaret practises at the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota. The fourth child, David, is a computer programmer.

As a doctor, Houston is recognized for his work involving congenital diseases in aboriginal children, and as an environmentalist he is respected for his battles on behalf of his birds. He and his children led a successful fight to prevent the damming of the Churchill River system in northern Saskatchewan, which would have ruined the summer habitat of millions of birds.

But he's also saving birds one at a time. The osprey likes to nest on a high point, but a perch at the top of a power pole can prove dangerous: the nest may catch fire, or the young birds

may be electrocuted on their first flight. Houston responds by arranging for the power company to erect a dummy pole nearby. He then moves the nest — birds and all — to safety. Houston's dual passions came together recently after West Nile fever, which is caused by a flavivirus that was previously unknown in North America, killed 7 people in New York. The fever is transmitted predominantly by *Culex* mosquitoes, which feed mainly on birds. Scientists who knew of Houston's ornithologic background invited him to an international conference in Toronto, where his knowledge of medicine and bird migration could be useful in helping fight the disease.

"None of the things I've ever done were because I set out to do them," Houston says. "All my life, things fell into my lap. I capitalized on opportunity." — *Amy Jo Ehnman*, Saskatoon



Amy Jo Ehnman

Dr. Stuart Houston: have ladder, will travel